

Route 34 connector: Don't repeat sins of the past

AFTER a century as a location for tanneries and tenements, the Oak Street neighborhood of the 1950s was the picture of what made the post-World War II urban renewal movement seem virtuous. Dubbed by the estimable local architectural historian Elizabeth Mills Brown "the city's major slum," its obvious hellacious decay and civic toxicity merged with



DUO DICKINSON

In the mid-1960s, a 12-lane highway named for Mayor Richard C. Lee was envisioned zooming west off to Derby from this dank place. The

effort was scaled down to six lanes, zipping along the edge of Yale-New Haven Hospital. It was roughed in as a split surface roadway dying at Ella T. Grasso Boulevard. Like so many acts of human hubris, the runaway desire for progress managed to gloss over the complete absence of need. High-speed automobile connection to the economically imploding rust belt of the Naugatuck Valley was simply unnecessary. The Route 34 connector was fated to a 30-year limbo — until now.

The ungainly titled South Central Connecticut Regional Council of Governments spent hundreds of thousands of dollars to make sense of the aborted project, publishing the "Route 34 Corridor Study" in October 2007. It was a thorough effort that rec-

ommended a huge mixed-use project to fill the sad void in New Haven's streetscape.

Despite advocating the reconnection of many of the severed cross streets, healing a bifurcated neighborhood, the report's recommendation buys into the split one-way road system creating islands of square blocks dedicated to housing, commercial use and mixed use "opportunities."

Onto the scene has come another proposal that feeds off the economic engine that is Yale-New Haven Hospital. The Downtown Crossing project that has the full-throated support of city government. Developer Carter Winstanley dangles the carrot of 400,000 square feet of privately financed new office and laboratory space and 800 more parking spaces — all facilitated by federal government investment.

Whereas the 1960s scheme inflicted a scorched-earth "renewal" of a neighborhood and the subsequent benign neglect of unthinking parking/building creep, these two overarching plans — one east, one west of the Air Rights Garage that straddles Route 34 — seem tone deaf to the obvious errors of the previous 50 years.

Five million dollars is in hand to decommission Exits 2 and 3 off Route 34, and \$40 million is envisioned coming from stimulus funding. One might ask, for what?

Whereas the 1960s scheme inflicted a scorched-earth "renewal" of a neighborhood and the subsequent benign neglect of unthinking parking/building creep, these two overarching plans — one east, one west of the Air Rights Garage that straddles Route 34 — seem tone deaf to the

obvious errors of the previous 50 years.

The outscaled super-roads of the COG scheme would make islands of buildings surrounded by extremely frustrated, stop-and-go mega traffic. Even more incredibly, the Downtown Crossing proposal for the east end of



Yale University

ABOVE: The original Oak Street neighborhood and downtown New Haven in the early 1960s as urban renewal efforts get underway.

LEFT: The Oak Street dwellings have been demolished and the Route 34 connector construction is complete.



the Air Rights Garage perversely splits the split roadway — sending two lanes in each direction underground while creating four lanes above ground in both directions for "efficient access to the developments," according to the 2009 federal grant application.

Out of sight/out of mind may work for unpleasant relatives, but it is exquisitely problematic

for the tens of thousands of cars that daily use this awkwardly shifting condensation of traffic. Think of spending millions and millions of dollars to create a nether world of halide-lit concrete auto troughs under the Air Rights Garage and into a new 800-car garage.

Unlike the Big Dig in Boston or the Cross Bronx Expressway, this road would not be a

highway zooming through and bypassing neighborhoods. The Downtown Crossing proposal shunts cars underground into "service driveways" that sort cars into huge parking garages and for "future developments to the east" on 10 acres of land by turning Route 34 into a boulevard from a highway. Part subterranean, part surface, all cars, all the time. Think miniaturized underground Q-bridge interchanges. How can that be a good thing, no matter how much federal and private funding flows into town to create it?

The tiny, underfunded New Haven Urban Design League has coordinated other community groups to work with Yale's Urban Design Workshop to create a competing vision for the

west side. The basis of this plan is to undo the central, critical error of the 1960s repeated in the COG and Downtown Crossing proposals: the one way/each way road split.

Instead, the alternative design proposes bringing the roads together to one southerly boulevard, Legion Avenue, west of the hospital. This allows a service road system to access parking to accommodate a variety of mixed-use sites. The buildings could thus be sized to the scale of the neighborhood to the north and formed to make an urban-edge wall for the new road to the south.

The street grid is reintroduced, parking is hidden within blocks and most importantly those going through the site will be in the light of day and open to the air. In contrast to the brain-dead, open mouth greeting of the Air Rights Garage gateway to the east, the Urban Design League scheme offers a kinetic park to the Legion Avenue/ Ella T. Grasso Boulevard intersection to the west.

Beyond the self-inflicted problems of dealing with underground traffic accidents, building massive retaining walls, and the underground ugliness that can never be overcome with precast concrete decoration, the net effect of creating a site for private development from "surplus highway rights of way" will be more cars, more densely packed together deeply injected into downtown New Haven.

It's bad enough when the ego of a Mayor Lee or Robert Moses overcomes common sense, but when that all-too-human impulse to build first and ask questions later is combined with a profit motive the results can defy any justification other than economic gain — whether it be political pork or privateering.

Duo Dickinson, an architect, writes about architecture and urban design for the Register. Readers may write him at 94 Bradley Road, Madison 06443. E-mail: duo.dickinson@snet.net. The address of his blog is <http://savedbydesign.wordpress.com>.