

The Great Malle

One city's never-ending search for urban revival

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In 1646, New Haven's civic leaders had an idea. The Connecticut coastline community was a colony then, and its leaders were Puritans, but their thinking mirrored the economic approach of their cosmopolitan non-Puritan successors some three centuries later.

Their idea was to find a big project to transform New Haven's economy overnight—and fight an ominous regional economic trend, the emergence of Boston and what was then New Amsterdam as dominant commercial ports. The idea involved a big ship, or, as it would come to be known, a Great Shippe. The civic leaders dreamed of the fledgling colony becoming a center of international trade. They dreamed of getting rich. So leading merchants formed the Shippe Fellowship Company. As one historian, David E. Philips, would later write, they “engaged a Rhode Island builder to construct a ship which they hoped would reverse the colony's trade decline. By January, 1647, the 150-ton cargo vessel had been loaded heavily with about all the tradeable goods the people of New Haven could scrape together.”

The civic leaders' transformative vision never materialized; in fact, the Puritans never heard from the Great Shippe's crew again. They did get one more look at the ship and at their vision: one day, according to the lore surrounding New Haven's history, the Great Shippe appeared in the sky. Once. Then the apparition vanished, never to be seen again.

Even if the ship hadn't disappeared into a New Haven version of the Bermuda Triangle, it probably would not have transformed New Haven's economy, according to historian Gaddis Smith. As Smith observes in a chapter of *New Haven: An Illustrated History*, New Haven Harbor lacked the depth or breadth to become a world port, especially with New York and Boston so close by. “The incident,” Gaddis writes, “symbolizes maritime New Haven's habit, persisting to the present, of embracing great expectations only to see

them founder on the rocks of geographic reality.”

That has never stopped New Haven from dreaming, from thinking big. The Great Shippe may have survived as little more than a legend and a painting, but another vision of economic greatness came to preoccupy more modern generations of civic leaders in New Haven: the Great Malle. The vision is not necessarily a legend worthy of history books or a painting for the walls of the local historical society, but its tale is illustrative nonetheless, full of dreams, surprise twists, and lessons about how today’s cities can and can’t compete—with their suburbs or each other—to establish an economic base.

By the 1960s, New Haven was thinking big again. It was planning, in the words of its renowned mayor, Richard C. Lee, to become the first city to eradicate poverty. It sought to do so in many ways. The city tore down slums and rundown neighborhoods, more property per capita than any other city during the heyday of urban renewal. It launched prototypes of antipoverty programs the likes of which would become centerpieces of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, such as Head Start and Legal Aid. It organized nonprofit-sponsored cooperative housing for families of mixed income and race. And, starting in 1957, it raced to beat the suburbs in building the region’s central shopping mall.

Chapel Square

Why a mall? Like other northern cities, New Haven was watching its manufacturing base decline just as it received an influx of new black residents from the South looking for factory jobs. It was also battling flight: of jobs to the suburbs and below the Mason-Dixon line, of middle-class families to North Haven, East Haven, Hamden, West Haven. And with the first ominous signs of strip malls over its northern border on Dixwell Avenue, it was battling the flight of shoppers to new, spread-out suburban retail complexes with easy parking and no fear of crime.

Malls were beginning to be built in communities across the

country. Mayor Lee spent years assembling the land—including a protracted legal battle against a jeweler who didn’t want to sell his property—to build one of the first enclosed air-conditioned shopping malls in the downtown of a city. In 1967, near the end of Mayor Lee’s celebrated 16-year reign in city hall, the mall finally opened directly across the street from the New Haven Green, on Chapel Street. It was dubbed the Chapel Square Mall. It featured two stories of 165,000 enclosed square feet of small shops, connected by above-ground walkways to two department stores, Macy’s and Malley’s, on the two blocks directly south.

For some years Chapel Square did brisk business. Then strip malls started appearing in the suburbs. Eventually a mall sprang up in neighboring Milford. Larger forces—racial prejudice, the economics of buying homes and building and running factories outside the city, crime, general urban decay—continued to send families out of town and keep shoppers away from the central city, especially after a young woman named Penny Serra was killed in the Temple Street parking garage attached to Macy’s and Malley’s. It didn’t matter that her murder was apparently a crime of passion involving an assailant Serra may have known, unrelated to the safety of urban parking garages. The public-relations damage was done. Then, as the nineteen-eighties approached, North Haven, a sleepy town racing to build its own tax base by selling off pristine acres to make way for new factories, was drawing up plans to build a next-generation mall that promised to dwarf and render obsolete the one-block box at Chapel Square.

A New Chapel Square

New Haven’s city hall launched a campaign to stop the North Haven mall. Hearing of North Haven’s plan to drain wetlands to build the mall, the city hired a D.C. lawyer to gum up the process for regulatory approval by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. It organized environmentalist and NIMBY North Havenites to keep the mall out of their town. It enlisted citizen-action groups; it defined

stopping the big mall as a cause. Remarkably, it worked: New Haven killed the North Haven mall.

But back home, Chapel Square had lost a crucial appendage: Malley's closed in 1982. Chapel Square itself was growing drabber; Macy's was suffering from a lack of attention from its corporate owners, who ignored city officials' pleas to scrub and brighten the building. The mall's crowds turned younger and blacker, as high-school students started hanging out there after their buses dropped them off at a central transfer point on the Green.

City Hall and civic leaders decided that they needed to prop up their mall to keep the suburban mall beast at bay. They convinced the mall's owner, the Rouse Corporation, to spend \$28.7 million—\$4.85 million of that in government support—modernizing the building. In came skylights, a water fountain, and a food court, as well as a security force to keep tabs on the kids, who were prone to get into fights.

City Hall's efforts kept the mall humming for a while. But the planners missed one detail: Suburban shoppers weren't the only ones who would find a spiffed-up mall more attractive. So would the same black kids the planners wanted to keep out of the mall. Mall merchants, politicians, and business leaders repeatedly referred to the "problem" of buses dropping off high schoolers at the Green as the central challenge facing Chapel Square. As crack hit New Haven in the late nineteen-eighties and drug-dealing gangs competed for turf (collecting more cash than their members could spend), fights became more common in the mall. A prime anchor spot of the mall saw a Conran's, then the Yale Co-op, come and go.

Chapel Square was becoming a problem that New Haven's government needed to fix. Their solution: build another mall. A bigger one.

University Place vs. Ceasar's

New Haven's planned new mall, dubbed University Place, would rise just a few blocks south of Chapel Square and stretch west

to cover the old Malley's department store block. To make room for it, City Hall planned to tear down the New Haven Coliseum, an archetype of New Brutalist architecture that glowered menacingly by the cross-hatch of highways that formed the gateway to the city, bleeding money, surviving only through assistance from the cash-strapped government. Hockey teams came and went. Monster-truck and Jehovah's Witnesses conventions brought in some money, but rock concerts were generally gravitating to other venues.

City Hall and business boosters spent 1987 and 1988 trying to pull the deal for University Place together. But they counted on two unknown would-be dealmakers from New York, and the developers could not find the money or the anchors. Meanwhile, prime downtown land was sitting vacant, including the home of the former Malley's. A scruffy New York developer named Mordecai Lipkis bought the run-down Malley's building. He wanted to put in a carpet store, and ABC Carpets agreed to move in. But Lipkis's plan was interfering with City Hall's plans to tear down the building to build University Place. So City Hall fought Lipkis. Delays in permitting drove away ABC. Then Lipkis tried to put in a flea market of sorts with vendors selling goods from carts. He called it Ceasar's [sic] Bazaar. He didn't ask for any subsidies, but City Hall fought him again, as planners considered it too downscale for the new luxury shopping district they imagined.

Lipkis proved more successful at public relations than at development: he drew an alliance of Yale-type and Green Party activists, liberal Democratic politicians, and seniors from a nearby apartment complex to rise up in outrage against City Hall for blocking a new shopping spot on abandoned downtown land. Eventually Lipkis won the right in court to proceed with Ceasar's Bazaar. But the market was a dud, sloppy, largely barren. It closed within months.

The Long Wharf Mall

City Hall tried to recruit the Taubman company in 1991 and 1992 to build a downtown luxury mall. That plan failed in 1993.

Macy's shut its doors. Then Rouse left town, closing Chapel Square. The Chamber of Commerce tried to keep the mall open and pumped classical music through outdoor speakers by the mall's entrance to keep the black kids away. But somehow the recorded strains of Vivaldi didn't lure Chevy minivans from Cheshire or Honda Accords from Hamden.

But New Haven wasn't giving up on the mall dream. Like the Puritans of the Great Shippe era, they looked to Long Wharf, a stretch of land away from downtown that border New Haven Harbor. A mall situated there, at the confluence of two major interstates, civic leaders reasoned, could certainly dominate the region. The city's monopoly daily newspaper, the *New Haven Register*, supported the idea. Not only did it champion bringing in a lucrative new advertiser, but editors received a publisher's memo ordering the newsroom to play down any negative news about the planned mall. If an approval process was newly delayed or set back, that news was not allowed in the headline or first paragraph of a story.

The mall promoters didn't count on two political impediments. One was the strategy New Haven itself had pioneered to fight North Haven's mall. The other was the ability of liberals and lefties in a college town to make sudden 180-degree philosophical turns in the name of stopping big development projects.

Planners could be excused for not anticipating the latter, because the idea for the Long Wharf mall originally came from opponents of a downtown mall. Some of the same activists who had supported Lipkis's Ceasar's Bazaar and denounced a downtown mall embraced the Long Wharf idea in 1993. At that time, the idea was coming from Wally Grigo, a sneaker-store owner turned gadfly candidate for mayor. Grigo suggested building a mall on Long Wharf because, he reasoned, there was more land to build there than there was downtown, so downtown merchants wouldn't be driven out of business. Plus, shoppers could pull right on and off the highway without clogging and polluting downtown streets.

Grigo didn't get far in the 1993 election, as Democratic candi-

date John DeStefano won that race. Once in office, however, DeStefano co-opted Grigo's idea and proposed building the Long Wharf Mall. And the activists clobbered him. They feared the mall would kill downtown business and they worried about the pollution caused by the thousands of cars that shoppers would drive to the mall each day.

The activists alone probably couldn't have killed the plans for the mall, but they had a more cynical, self-interested, and well-endowed ally. The Westfield Corporation owned the Connecticut Post Mall, a large mall 15 minutes down the highway in Milford that Westfield was in the process of expanding into the undisputed retail giant of south central Connecticut. Westfield tore a page from New Haven's playbook in the North Haven mall era, funding and championing the cause of local environmental and anti-development forces.

City Hall's own corrupt behavior was an added cause of death. Developers from around the world competed to build the mall, but DeStefano insisted that the winning developer use a local construction family, the Fuscus, who happened to be major political fund-raisers for the mayor. That angered critics who were already uncomfortable with the patronage, cronyism and ethical lapses in City Hall. A string of further outrages would eventually lead the FBI to the mayor's office and force a house-cleaning of top officials, though DeStefano himself survived it: he fired his top aides, brought in smart young aides without connections to the local machine, and embraced a progressive agenda.

In the end, however, another mall plan was buried in New Haven's ever-expanding planning graveyard.

A Renewed Downtown

While the planning fracas over malls raged on, a quiet transformation was taking place in and around the Chapel Square Mall and the surrounding central business district. Block by block, storefront by storefront, New Haven's downtown was being reborn. The Omni hotel chain renovated and upgraded a hotel next to Chapel

Square. Another developer converted the mall itself into offices and new apartments, as the downtown housing market heated up. Young professionals and empty-nesters were drawn to the district's theaters, galleries, and panoply of ethnic restaurants. A successful community policing program, meanwhile, was making New Haven safer in reality as well as perception. And Yale University, the city's largest employer in its post-industrial era, decided to start investing heavily in New Haven, as it realized that the city's decline had driven top students and professors to Stanford and Princeton. Today, New Haven's downtown has reemerged as the most interesting urban spot in Connecticut to live, work, eat, play—and shop. Without a mall or a plan for one in sight.

That doesn't mean New Haven ever eradicated poverty, as Richard Lee claimed he would. The city actually emerged from the urban- and human-renewal experiments of the nineteen-fifties and nineteen-sixties poorer than before, as those programs could not overcome the powerful economic and demographic forces working against older cities throughout the Northeast and Midwest. And New Haven continues to struggle with low-performing schools and, in some of its neighborhoods, violent crime perpetrated by a younger-than-ever generation of gun-wielding, disaffected kids.

But the city's renaissance is unmistakable, especially in the very precincts where the great mall plans so grandly failed. Downtown is packed with both local and suburban people going to shows, eating out, walking around, and shopping, and it has the highest concentration of downtown apartment- and condominium-dwellers of any Connecticut city. Long Wharf, meanwhile, has become a regional shopping draw, as IKEA built a store there with no government subsidies, to considerable success.

Therein lie lessons for cities. One lesson: malls do better in suburbs, and they should. Safe, generic, chain commerce and retail experiences belong in communities developed largely by and for people escaping diverse, unpredictable, challenging urban life. New Haven succeeded by playing to its strengths: it had creative entrepreneurs and artists, immigrant small-business owners and work-

ers, a compact environment, and people from different walks of life mixing together. That core strength is enough to draw visitors from suburbs and surrounding towns who come to New Haven to sample, say, Martha Graham or *Cats* at the restored Shubert, the George Stubbs paintings at the British Art Center, or *tsibi ah'melmti* at Caffe Adulis, which *The New York Times* called the most authentic Eritrean food found anywhere in the United States.

Another lesson: planners, however well intentioned, too often aim for the huge project—the Great Shippe, the Great Malle—that will magically transform their economies. They look for salvation from beyond their borders rather than nurturing the organic decisions that individuals are already making to invest in their city, by buying homes, starting businesses, or organizing community or social groups. Those decisions make cities strong on their own terms, rather than forcing them to compete with suburbs—or become thin imitations of them.

That doesn't mean New Haven can, or should, stop dreaming. It just means that the best civic dreams may not be about ships or malls, but about a community that welcomes and encourages people from all backgrounds to pursue their own individual dreams, together.