Introduction

The View from State House Square

Filled with the honking of horns and the smell of exhaust, Hartford’s State House Square in 1930 was both the traffic-choked heart of a modern city and a public space rich in history. It had been the city’s symbolic and functional center for nearly three hundred years, ever since the Puritans had arrived from Massachusetts, built their meeting house, and held their markets there. A few blocks to the east of the square flowed the Connecticut River, which for the city’s first two centuries carried trading ships bound for distant seaports. To the north and west—along Main, Asylum, and Pratt streets—sparkled the display windows of the department stores and specialty shops that made downtown Hartford a metropolitan retail center. Theaters, restaurants, shops, banks, and office buildings lined the sides of the square, and over its southern edge loomed some of the insurance towers that were so crucial to the city’s modern economy.

The Old State House stood inside the square overlooking the adjoining post office. An elegant brick and brownstone building topped with a
cupola and a small gilded dome, the Old State House had housed Connecticut's legislature for most of the first century of statehood, had heard New Englanders debate disunion in 1814, and had served as city hall from 1879 to 1915. It survived as a visible link to the past in a city enthusiastically striving to be up-to-date. The Old State House owed its continued existence in part to the efforts of early twentieth-century reformers, who fought to block demolition after the building ceased to be useful for city offices. The reformers argued that the Old State House was a monument to the history of the city and the state by virtue of its having witnessed many important events, and because of its position "on a spot where the public have congregated since the very beginning of the colony." 

The symbolic building had been saved, yet the function of the square had been radically transformed in the decades leading up to 1930. Though the square remained the center of the city's business district, it had lost much of its importance as an all-purpose public space—while becoming ever more vital as a transportation node. In the late nineteenth century, when it was known as City Hall Square, swarms of noisy children cried the day's headlines there as they thrust newspapers at passersby. Expressmen parked their horse-drawn wagons and passed the time quarreling with each other and loudly admiring female pedestrians. Farmers flocked to the square before holidays to sell their turkeys and geese. Prostitutes loitered there at night and escorted their customers to the otherwise respectable hotels nearby.

Thanks in part to the same reformers who had saved the Old State House, the square by 1930 had become a more orderly, though no less busy, place. Responding to reformers' demands, the city government sharply restricted who could sell newspapers (and how they could sell them), forced the expressmen out of the square and then off the streets entirely, limited peddling and set up public markets to rid the streets of peddlers, and cracked down on prostitutes, forcing them to operate more covertly and scattering them to far-flung sections of town. City officials set up playgrounds to keep children occupied in their own neighborhoods and even arrested some children who insisted on roller-skating in the square. By the late 1920s the square was dominated by motorized vehicles. At rush hour, more than a hundred streetcars an hour shuttled through Central Row (on the south side of the square), while nearly as many clattered in each direction along Main Street (on the west side); typically, several streetcars could be seen waiting for a berth at the trolley stops. Only a mechanical system of traffic lights—and the near absence of competing street activities—kept the trolleys, cars, and trucks flowing through the square and allowed disciplined herds of pedestrians to cross the streets safely.
The transformation of State House Square in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries may seem to suggest an early example of what urban critics have called "the death of the street" as a multifunctional public space. Critics like Jane Jacobs, William H. Whyte, James Holston, James Howard Kunstler, and Mike Davis have placed much of the blame for the decline of street life on the automobile-oriented urban redevelopment following World War II. This development, they argue, has disregarded the value of lingering in the spaces that connect home and work. "To reduce contact with untouchables, urban redevelopment has converted once vital pedestrian streets into traffic sewers," Davis has written. Several historical studies of street life reflect this sense of decline, generally pinpointing the change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Historians have argued that changes in pavements and public policy allowed the streets to become overwhelmed with traffic to the exclusion of other activities.

Yet by examining the history of public space in Hartford, we can see that these arguments, which focus on the transformation of downtown streets in metropolitan centers, may not apply to American urban streets in general. It is true that automobile traffic overwhelmed Hartford's major thoroughfares, but social and commercial activities survived and evolved in certain other streets, both in slums and in residential neighborhoods. It would be a mistake to dismiss the persistence of these activities as a sign that the transformation of public space was initially incomplete: The activities are still present as we near the end of the first century of the automobile age. "The street" has not died—but streets have changed, some more than others.

Throughout the fifty-year period ending in 1930 the streets around State House Square were far from typical of those in Hartford. Their changing function is scarcely proof of any citywide triumph of vehicular traffic. We can understand the transformation of public space only by considering these streets in their relation to the rest of the city. The reason that State House Square attracted so much traffic is that it served as the hub of the metropolitan transportation system that developed in the late nineteenth century. Trolley lines and later automobile routes converged on the square from all over Hartford and the surrounding suburbs. The transportation system introduced striking differences in the functions of different streets and stimulated a differentiation of private land use by neighborhood, which in turn produced further changes in the streets. The efficient operation of the transportation system depended in part on the relocation of competing activities to other streets or to new spaces designed for specific purposes. Peddling was forced off the thoroughfares and into the slums and the Hucksters' Market. Recreational activities were pushed into parks, playgrounds, and side streets. City officials increasingly viewed the streets as forming a branching system of arteries and trunk lines, using terms drawn from anatomy and railroads. They made physical improvements in some streets that further concentrated traffic along certain routes and further displaced competing uses. Side streets, however, were kept relatively quiet; they were neither transformed into transportation routes nor annihilated as public spaces.

The development of the transportation system was part of a larger trend toward segregating the use of urban space. Public space lost its original status as undifferentiated land that was free from the restrictions accompanying private ownership and relatively open to all people and activities. The reforms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries produced instead a by-product of transportation technology. Even before mass use of the automobile, Hartford reformers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had worked both to create alternative spaces for social and commercial activities and to regulate activities in the streets. The reformers were guided not so much by a conscious desire to clear the way for traffic as by a belief that a proper urban environment nurtured individual refinement and social harmony. The roots of this belief lay deep in the city's past. The Hartford theologian Horace Bushnell had theorized in the 1840s that the female-dominated, middle-class home had a powerful influence on character, an influence he sought to extend to exterior, public space in the 1850s as he created a landscaped park and recommended
objectives for city planning. Reformers in the 1890s and 1900s, including Bushnell's daughter, Ditha Hillyer, revived such ideas as they attempted to spread the interrelated concepts of femininity and gentility to the disorderly and male-dominated downtown. They fought with some success, for example, to clean up the streets and to suppress public advertising. The greatest victory in this crusade to purify the city came when radical suffragists, trumpeting their womanly duty to defend the health and morals of their families, put an end to the city's vice district.

The fight against the vice district revealed a philosophical schism among Hartford reformers. One strain of reform sought to purify the entire city in order to spread gentility to everyone. Another conceded that such universal reform was impossible, trying instead to preserve or create the desired atmosphere in certain carefully segregated spaces. A controversy among reformers over whether the street could be made safe enough for young girls to sell newspapers, or whether the dangers to feminine virtue were irrepressible, demonstrated this split. In this case the more pessimistic side prevailed, the newgirls were ordered off the streets, and the trend in Hartford reform turned toward segregating rather than purifying public space. Segregating space was easier than trying to purify it. Instead of fighting to impose a single vision on the entire city, reformers could focus their efforts where they had the greatest chance for success—and beat a strategic retreat where they faced determined opposition or insurmountable obstacles.

This latter reform tendency evolved in symbiotic relation with the development of the transportation system. Reformers seeking to beautify certain streets or other public spaces, for example, increasingly justified their efforts on the grounds of efficiency, while motorists learned to couch their arguments for efficient traffic flow in terms of public safety. In the 1920s, just as the reform impulse was fading away, the power of the automobile began gathering momentum on its own. Schemes for major street improvements were based almost exclusively on efficient transportation, which was understood to benefit the city economically. Appropriating the reformists' concept of dividing urban space and turning that concept to nonreformist ends, business-minded city officials openly defended zoning as a way to protect real estate investments.

Given that the local reform tradition was rooted in values associated with women and the home, it is not surprising that the conflicts among reformers reflected tensions within that cluster of values. On the one hand, reformers who sought to purify public space drew on a cultural understanding of "woman's sphere" as a set of concerns that could be extended throughout society. These reformers tended to be women, particularly women with at least some desire for a broader female role in society; through their reform campaigns, they created a new feminine role in politics. On the other hand, the reformers who settled for protecting morality and refinement within specific places defined woman's sphere as a space physically removed from a threatening outside world. Such reformers, usually men, extended this idea of separation to the segregation of public space. The distinction, however, was never clear-cut; the competing impulses to purify and to segregate space were two broad philosophical persuasions, not the gender-based ideologies of rival camps of reformers. Women and men could be found on each side of the divide; some individuals even supported both types of reform.4

In seeking to explain the evolution of a new system of public space, I emphasize the ideas and efforts of conscious human actors. My study traces a local tradition of environmental reform from its origins in theology through its elaboration and division in the early twentieth century to its perversion into economic utilitarianism in the 1920s. The reformers' efforts, together with the growth in traffic, produced an interwoven system of public and private space whose numerous parts took on specific functions. As the impulse to purify space was superseded in the 1910s by the competing impulse to segregate space, altruistic reform campaigns increasingly complemented practical-minded efforts to clear major routes for traffic. Ultimately the quest for traffic efficiency subordinated environmental reform altogether.

In tracing these reform campaigns, I argue that ideas have a powerful role in shaping cities, a role comparable to—perhaps even exceeding—the effects of technology. I do not ignore technological change, mass immigration, industrialization, or other factors whose effects on public space have been incontrovertibly documented by decades of historical research. As Hartford reformers well knew, technological, demographic, and economic change presented city dwellers with new problems and new possibilities, but these changes did not dictate a single urban form.
Human beings had to determine how to respond to the changes, and their choices were shaped not merely by the logic of necessity, but by their beliefs and by their morals.

In any discussion of reform politics, it is important to look beneath the rhetoric to discern how the proposed reforms might advance the reformers' selfish interests. Campaigns to reform the use of public space were seldom examples of pure altruism. Competing interest groups struggled for power over this highly visible and symbolic terrain, and their struggle had an important effect on the resulting system of public space. In Hartford the result was not a simple triumph of one group over another. Working-class resistance to middle-class reform campaigns had a major influence in strengthening the trend toward segregation.

Nevertheless, Hartford's streets were more than just a battleground in a war for social and political power. Though the reform campaigns were rooted in middle-class, Protestant values, particularly values associated with women, they were not intended as mere assertions of class or gender interests. Guided by a sense of Christian stewardship and of personal responsibility for the public good, the reformers sought to mold a city where harmony meant more than the exercise of one group's hegemony. Even the exception proves the rule: Suffragists, who in their fight to cleanse Hartford explicitly demanded greater power for women, sincerely defended their effort as a way to reunite the city around a shared morality. The suffragists were inspired by an evangelical urge to universalize women's culture and an eagerness to participate in creating a politics of selflessness, more than by an ambition to build the power of women as an antagonistic interest group. Other reformers acknowledged the durability of competing group interests and needs. Nevertheless, while they proposed reforms that accommodated and even encouraged the segregation of public space, reformers hoped that their measures would help society transcend its conflicts and balance diversity with unity. The city and its people would be held together by orderly systems of public space that would preserve a sense of shared public interest. That these reforms accelerated the slide toward a deeply divided city was an unintended consequence of a reform impulse rooted in very different hopes. In particular, the reformers never intended their innovations to be commandeered for the purposes of private wealth, as they were in the 1920s.

From Horace Bushnell to Dotha Hillyer and George Parker, Hartford's reformers believed that public space could be a nurturing home rather than a social battleground. In the face of powerful countervailing trends toward conflict, they hoped to make the city a place that shaped and reproduced harmonious social relations. "The city," wrote Parker, "should mother its children." We need to listen to these reformers carefully and to take their words seriously, without losing sight of the unfortunate trends to which their reforms ultimately contributed.