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Neighborhood Commerce Was City's Lifeblood

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Oped: Cities needs business districts

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In pre-car cities such as Hartford, there was a natural synergistic relationship between commercial areas and their residential districts. We still can see a vivid example of this synergy elsewhere, even in a struggling city like Buffalo, where the vibrant neighborhood of Elmwood Village boasts beautiful residential streets along with a lively commercial thoroughfare on Elmwood Avenue. It is this combination of active street life and quiet living that make traditional cities so compelling and once again so attractive to so many people.

Hartford suffers in this regard because its commercial centers have been greatly degraded over the years. The residential neighborhoods in Hartford are still largely intact, but they are not supported by small business districts of the type that put everyday needs within proximity of people's homes. In contrast, Buffalo's Elmwood Avenue is bustling with small, local enterprises. In Elmwood Village, people out for an evening stroll naturally gravitate to Elmwood Avenue because that is where neighborhood life is to be found.

In contrast, Hartford's West Enders, to take just one example, often go out of their way to avoid Farmington Avenue.

Hartford was built around an intricate network of commercial districts, but that pattern is now so disrupted that it is hard to discern that the city once had such a coherent structure. The larger commercial districts in Hartford were built on the tram lines that once crisscrossed the city. There is an irony in the fact that one kind of transportation built these commercial districts and another kind of transportation bled them of life. The damage that was done to downtown by the highways and by parking has been widely documented, but the slow-motion degradation of the neighborhood commercial centers that came with the removal of the tram lines is a story that is still largely untold.

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The commercial streets and avenues of Hartford have fallen victims to some familiar woes — street widening, building demolition, parking facilities and the failure to enforce existing codes. The grand streets and avenues of Hartford, which once were stages for city life, have been reduced to a shell of themselves — largely highways for getting people in and out of the city. Some, like the once magnificent Washington Street, are now lined with parking lots and garages.

Cities of all types flourish when there is diversity in size and types of businesses. The lower rents and the small and varied building footprints of healthy city neighborhoods are the lifeblood of small operations. Unwittingly, Hartford has done a poor job nurturing its neighborhoods, neglecting an important foundation of the city's economic health. The city often seems to favor suburban-style developments, complete with drive-in facilities that erode the character of the neighborhoods.

This neglect comes out of a misunderstanding of the basic structure of the city and of the importance of having healthy commercial districts. Bringing back the life of the neighborhood commercial districts will require re-envisioning the grand streets and avenues primarily as places to be — walkable, lively and attractive. It makes no sense to continue to treat them primarily as corridors of movement that funnel people and money away.

Farmington Avenue in the West End is the perfect test case — the sidewalks are narrow and unattractive; the street is hard to cross because of fast-moving traffic. The remaining beautiful architecture is hard to notice because it is obscured by a landscape dominated by excessive and inefficiently managed parking. Judging from Farmington Avenue, few would guess that just a half a block away lies one of the most beautiful residential neighborhoods in the state.

Farmington Avenue should be the heart of Hartford's West End. It can be fixed so that it becomes a source of pride to the city rather than a symbol of neglect. There are many ways to do this, but probably the most effective is to restore streetcars to the avenue.

Our research at UConn suggests that the decline of Hartford's commercial centers started with the removal of the streetcars. But now some cities around the country are reversing that trend — showing that streetcars can be a cost-effective catalyst for the restoration of neighborhood life. Look to Providence, which is well on the way to re-introducing streetcars — not simply as a transportation project, but as a way of spurring economic development and street life.

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