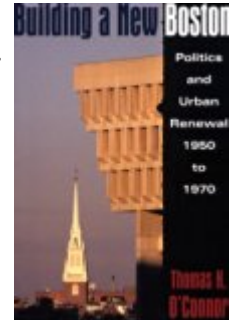




Thomas H. O'Connor. *Building A New Boston: Politics and Urban Renewal, 1950-1970.* Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995. \$30.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-55553-246-8.



Reviewed by J. Charles Swift

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The legacy of urban planning decisions made in Boston in the 1950s and 1960s is still being felt today. The Central Artery, an elevated cross town highway that Mayor John Hynes promised would "tremendously accelerate traffic movement in and out of the city" (O'Connor, p. 86) is being taken down and a \$10 billion tunnel is being constructed in its place. Charles River Park, the residential community that replaced Boston's West End, never fulfilled its goal of drawing suburban residents back into the city. Roxbury still suffers from economic stagnation despite numerous public housing projects and revitalization efforts, and it is now being considered as a site for a new convention center megaplex. Yet at the same time, Boston's prospects appear bright. The Freedom Trail, Faneuil Hall, and Quincy Market, which were either created or refurbished in the 1950s and 1960s, draw millions of visitors to Boston each year. The Prudential Center complex, which replaced the Back Bay train yards, has helped to link downtown Boston to sites farther west. Historic preservation efforts that began in the 1960s have made Boston's historic neighborhoods more liv-

able by helping to reclaim formerly marginal areas like the South End.

After many years of scholarship critical of the planning decisions made by Boston's civic leaders, Thomas J. O'Connor's *Building a New Boston* presents a predominantly positive analysis of the urban revitalization programs initiated by Boston in the 1950s and 1960s. *Building a New Boston* differs from the literature on urban renewal produced in the 1960s by focusing on the politics behind urban renewal, rather than the effects of urban renewal on individuals or the economics of urban renewal. From the outset, O'Connor warns the reader that "studies of architectural designs....demographic details....[and] the intricacies of urban economics" will be left for other scholars to explore. (O'Connor, xv) *Building a New Boston* seeks a more general audience than planners, economists, and urban ecologists. O'Connor offers the reader a cogent and interesting analysis of the motivations and desires of Boston's political and financial leaders, who created a program of urban development that transformed Boston "into a rebuilt and refurbished city of the future" (p. xii).

Urban revitalization in Boston between 1950 and 1970 succeeded because it served to unite economic, political, and religious interests in a way that was inconceivable prior to 1950. O'Connor buttresses this argument in his conclusion by outlining the decline of this unified group after 1970 as mayors Kevin White and Ray Flynn struggled to solve new problems facing Boston.

Rehabilitating the reputation of urban renewal is not a simple task. O'Connor has to come to terms with a rich, varied, and often highly critical body of literature examining urban renewal programs in Boston. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, several researchers affiliated with Massachusetts General Hospital -- among them Herbert Gans, a sociologist; Marc Fried, a psychologist; and Chester Hartman, an urban planner -- began to study the effects of urban renewal on the residents of Boston's West End, a working-class ethnic neighborhood that was razed to make way for luxury apartment buildings. The West End project represented Boston's initial foray into urban renewal using funds provided under the Housing Act of 1949. It also represented, according to its critics, a perfect example of how not to execute an urban renewal program.

Herbert Gans's *The Urban Villagers* (1962) described an urban renewal process that functioned by keeping West Enders uninformed about decisions made by city planners, thus creating widespread distrust of Boston's slum clearance program. In 1963 Marc Fried published an influential study of the effects of relocation, "Grieving for a Lost Home," which found that the "affective reaction to the loss of the West End can be quite precisely described as a grief response showing most of the characteristics of grief and mourning for a lost person" (Fried, p. 167) Fried extended his findings in a 1973 monograph, *The World of the Urban Working Class*. Hartman, in his 1964 article "The Housing of Relocated Families," demonstrated how the Boston Redevelopment Authority (BRA) lied about the effects of relocation on for-

mer West Enders. In an earlier, unpublished study, Hartman had called into question the city's method for judging the quality of housing in the West End. In conjunction with other literature produced in the 1960s, these early studies helped change the way governments made urban planning decisions and also provided powerful evidence of the unanticipated side effects of urban renewal in Boston.

Historians have been latecomers to the debate. *Building a New Boston* represents the latest and most comprehensive reassessment of the subject. Unlike many scholarly debates, the history of urban renewal has also recently been in the public eye: the Bostonian Society mounted an exhibition, *The Last Tenement: Confronting Community and Urban Renewal in Boston's West End* (1992), and published an exhibition catalog with the same title that included essays by Gans, Fried, O'Connor, and myself, among others.

O'Connor seeks to fit his narrative onto concepts developed by Jon Teaford in *The Rough Road to Renaissance* and John Mollenkopf in *The Contested City*. The influence of Mollenkopf's "pro growth coalitions," which drive urban revitalization efforts by creating bridges between "widely different, competing, and even conflicting political actors and interests" (Mollenkopf, p. 4) can be found throughout *Building a New Boston*. In a similar manner, O'Connor follows Teaford's tripartite view of urban revitalization programs, which suggests that urban renewal programs started with a wave of optimism in the late 1940s and early 1950s, faced skepticism in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and gradually changed their focus in the late 1960s and early 1970s by allowing cities to build "on their own traditional strengths" rather than attempting to remake the city in the image of the suburb (Teaford, pp. 7-8).

O'Connor begins by describing a post-World War II Boston that faced an uncertain future. At the national level, a sense of optimism about the future prevailed, created by the United States's

potential for technological and economic advancement, a view strengthened by the successful prosecution of the Second World War. At the same time, Boston itself was burdened by the legacy of fractious party politics, a declining downtown, and, most important according to O'Connor, the presence of one James Michael Curley. O'Connor lays much of the blame for the decline of Boston's downtown on Curley, who "developed a consistent pattern of fiscal support that favored the interests of ethnic neighborhoods...while virtually ignoring the needs of the downtown area of the city..."(O'Connor, p. 11) The election of John Hynes as mayor in 1949 heralded the gradual breakdown of the old-style ward politics based on ethnicity and religion. As the old political tensions that had been sustained by Hynes's predecessor James Michael Curley began to dissipate, an atmosphere in which the Catholic church, downtown business leaders, developers, and middle-class Bostonians could find common ground for redeveloping Boston's downtown began to develop.

Saving downtown Boston required the development of new mechanisms for investment, planning, and changing the city's image nationwide. The federal government provided some tools, like the Housing Act of 1949, while others were the inventions of local political and civic leaders. The Housing Act of 1949 allowed Boston to create one of the largest public housing programs in the country, but flaws in both the act and its execution in Boston led to some disastrous results, including the razing of the West End. The reluctance of the business elite to invest in Boston proved more difficult to surmount.

The high tax rates of the Curley era continued to plague the city, and the city's inability to develop other revenue streams circumscribed Hynes's ambitions. In the ten years of Hynes's leadership the city's population declined 13% and the tax base had shrunk 25% from 1929. While this might not appear to qualify as the saving of the down-

town, O'Connor argues that Hynes, despite his failures, laid the necessary groundwork for the successes of the 1960s. For example, Hynes's legacy included the creation of the Freedom Trail in the early years of his administration and the initiation of a series of "Citizen Seminars" at Boston College in 1954. Edward J. Logue, head of the Boston Redevelopment Authority in the 1960s, said these seminars "were crucial in combining the political and business communities" (O'Connor, p. 111). Kane Simonian, another BRA director, concurred with this assessment, adding, "Building bridges with the local business community was one area where Hynes really made a contribution to the city's future development" (O'Connor, p. 47).

Hynes's successor as mayor in 1959, John Collins, proved to be more politically astute and perhaps luckier, for he could learn from the mistakes of the 1950s. While continuing the projects initiated by Hynes, like the new Government Center and the Prudential Center, Collins hired Edward J. Logue, who had previously managed New Haven's urban renewal program, to head the Boston Redevelopment Authority. Collins gave the BRA a considerable degree of latitude in developing and implementing new projects. Logue instituted several new policies, the most important of which were increasing public input into the redevelopment process and a more comprehensive planning policy. Logue and Collins expanded the scale and scope of urban planning in Boston by looking not only at the downtown area, but also into residential areas like Charlestown, Roxbury, and the Parker Hill-Fenway area. The Boston Redevelopment Authority also began to investigate alternatives to the wholesale razing of urban neighborhoods, including rehabilitating the existing physical fabric of the city. The emphasis on rehabilitation had the effect of providing a boost to historic preservation efforts and led to the very successful collaboration between the Rouse Corporation and the city to redevelop Faneuil Hall

and Quincy Market, which began to draw suburbanites back into the city, at least for the day.

Despite their desire to institute a new type of urban renewal/redevelopment, Collins and Logue soon ran into problems, especially in the South End. Their enlarged vision of Boston's future engendered more opposition to and suspicion of city planning efforts. O'Connor believes that Collins and many others "saw the economic development of the South End not only in terms of immediate financial profit but also as a practical way in which long-term social progress and upward mobility could be measured" (O'Connor, p. 233). But the achievement of social progress would mean the displacement of many South Enders, who had seen the experiences of Boston's West Enders and were determined to fight city plans for their neighborhood. O'Connor's descriptions of the development of numerous grass-roots neighborhood movements and coalitions help to balance a story that until this point had focused predominantly on downtown civic leaders.

Although he does an admirable job of describing the machinations of Boston politicians, financial leaders, and city agencies, O'Connor never offers a clear sense of what *exactly* they are trying to fix other than a declining downtown and an outflow of the middle-class population to the suburbs. Here, O'Connor's decision not to look more closely at architecture and the planning literature produced by various city agencies hurts his narrative. In these plans one can discern the motivations for actions taken by city agencies. A brief tour through planning documents like the *1948 Highway Plan* and the various permutations of the *General Plan for Boston* would provide a deeper sense of the problems seen (and not seen) by city planners. Planners recognized the need for improved transportation routes and affordable new housing in Boston, but they also appear to have assumed that, everything being equal, people would prefer to live in the city rather than in Boston's burgeoning suburbs. O'Connor leaves un-

challenged Ed Logue's assertion that in the 1950s there existed "no overall plan or program to change the city, and certainly no public or civic organization equipped to do it" (O'Connor, p. 174). In fact, the 1950 General Plan for Boston anticipated several of the projects eventually begun in the 1960s, and introduced a set of interrelated goals for developing business and industry, residential areas, schools and recreation, and transportation that would carry Boston toward the year 1975.

An architectural analysis of Charles River Park, which sits on the razed West End, would bring into sharper focus the challenges faced by those who wished to stem the population flow to the suburbs. The designer of Charles River Park, Victor Gruen, known at the time primarily as a developer of shopping malls, attempted to recreate suburban living in an urban location by providing park-like settings, guaranteeing parking for residents, and supplying amenities like a baby-sitting service and a wine cellar. Gruen (and many others) apparently misread the desires of suburbanites, because Charles River Park never really achieved its goals, and it is widely regarded now as an architectural and planning mistake.

O'Connor's use of oral histories for the bulk of his source material, one of the narrative's greatest strengths, becomes its most debilitating flaw because of an overall lack of balance that favors Boston's civic officials and leaders. The interviews provide unmatched insight into the urban revitalization process and replace the impersonal forces of economics with human faces. It is unfortunate, however, that O'Connor keeps showing us the same faces. His interviews are primarily with individuals like Ed Logue, Jerome Rappaport, and Kane Simonian, all of whom were "insiders" in the revitalization process. Though the ends might justify the means for these city officials, politicians, and civic leaders, O'Connor often leaves those means unexamined. The people affected by urban renewal programs are often left voiceless, although O'Connor does describe their resistance

in some cases. For example, inclusion of interviews with civil rights leaders in Boston who helped organize neighborhood resistance to BRA efforts would make O'Connor's strong chapters on the 1960s even stronger. In another case, O'Connor includes several interviews with those who agreed with Kane Simonian's statement that "Everyone thought it [the redevelopment of the West End] was right. All the Boston newspapers backed the idea -- the *Post*, the *Globe*, the *Herald*, the *Record* -- they all supported it" (O'Connor, p. 134). But where are the interviews with those who opposed the project, like West End residents or Herbert Gans? In the interest of fairness, the opponents of the project deserve more than a few paragraphs.

A closer look at the literature critical of urban renewal would also help provide a more balanced account. For example, in the data gathered to "prove" that Boston's West End represented a sub-standard area, city agencies grafted Scollay Square onto the West End. Although few Bostonians would confuse the two areas, as city planner Kevin Lynch demonstrated in 1959 (Lynch, pp. 173-181), this combination had the effect of skewing statistics on public health (because Scollay Square had many of the city's tuberculosis cases) and transiency in an unfavorable direction. Along similar lines, O'Connor neglects Chester Hartman's reassessment of the city's findings on sub-standard housing in the West End. Hartman makes the important point that much of the deterioration in West End housing stock took place in the six years between the announcement of the redevelopment plans and the time when the city actually took title to the land in the West End (Hartman, p. 270). And ironically, the worst housing in the West End was left outside the area to be redeveloped, a fact that underscores the economic nature of redevelopment in Boston and its focus on the use of land after clearance rather than on improving the lot of the people who lived in sub-standard housing.

O'Connor concludes that, although the ethnic and religious divisions that had impeded Boston's modernization under James Michael Curley, may have dissipated between 1950 and 1970, the period saw the rise of "two Bostons" split along racial and class lines. He believes, I think correctly, that urban renewal offered the possibility of bringing together downtown and the ethnic neighborhoods, but that it ultimately served to divide the city further along these new fault lines. Still, O'Connor argues that the city of Boston at least had a clear sense of purpose between 1950 and 1970, a purpose that has all but disappeared since 1970, weakened by the school busing crisis and the struggle over urban renewal. As Boston moves toward the planning and approval of a downtown convention center, a new ball park, and new programs to revitalize urban neighborhoods, city planners and scholars would do well to look to O'Connor's book to see how solutions were reached in the past. At the same time, though I highly recommend *Building a New Boston* as a readable and informative survey of Boston's urban renewal efforts, I would remind readers of the tremendous human costs that have accompanied urban revitalization.

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