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Oral History and Urban Renewal: Creating Richer Histories

BY BEN HIMMELFARB

Introduction and Background

When I started as the local history librarian at the White Plains Public Library in October 2014, I needed to grow my knowledge of the city and its people. Over and over, discussions about local history led to mentions of “urban renewal,” as one of the defining features of the city. Even though I knew the general outline nationally of city planning history in the mid-20th century, I didn’t have great answers or resources for people about the particular experience of folks in White Plains during that time. Since the words “urban renewal” are never far from the lips of anyone familiar with White Plains’ history over the past 60 years, I needed to find out what urban renewal really was and how people experienced it. The White Plains Collection (our local history collection) contained plenty of administrative records and published materials on urban renewal, but they almost all originated with planners, developers, or government officials. After learning about NYPL’s community oral history project, I decided that an oral history project was the perfect way to strengthen my ability to answer library patrons’ queries while also documenting and sharing new narratives about the city’s past.

What exactly do people mean when they say “urban renewal?” Most people use the

words to describe the transformation of the downtown area bordered on the east and west by Mamaroneck Avenue and the train tracks, and on the north and south by Barker Avenue and Post Road, respectively. I knew from the library’s collection of city documents, newspaper clippings, and project proposals that urban renewal had reshaped the downtown area. Those records also laid out the bureaucratic nature of urban renewal from the 1960s onward. To learn about the roots of what we call “urban renewal,” I consulted newspapers from the 1930s, when residents of the city began a public discourse about the conditions of its central area. The term itself came from the mid-1950s when the language of policy, legislation, and city planning took on a progressive tone, leaving behind the moralizing sensationalism that drove urban public policy in the earlier 20th century.

Those administrative, rather dry sources, however, rarely offer a vivid, human-scale picture of what life was like for the people most affected by urban renewal: people whose homes and businesses were literally destroyed, people who left and never came back, people who had the landscape of their childhood reshaped, people who felt powerless in the face of “progress,” and people who supported the changes brought by urban renewal, even if their support was tempered by some

regret. In this article, I weave together the bureaucratic and documentary history of urban renewal with transcribed passages of oral histories from *People & Stories: The White Plains Library Oral History Project* to show the power of oral history to contextualize historical records. I also hope to show how oral history is a necessary addition to historical collections that exclude personal experiences.

Records of Urban Renewal

By the late 1930s, there was a vibrant public discussion of slums and how to improve living conditions in the city of White Plains. A series of articles in the *Daily Reporter*, written by Norton Mockridge, presented a version of living conditions in White Plains’ worst homes. Mockridge used photographs and lurid descriptive passages to lobby for action by the city government. He, along with William O’Donovan, the editor of the *Daily Reporter*, continued the Progressive Era tradition of conflating the physical conditions of urban areas with the characters of the people who lived there, a problematic idea later dubbed “environmental determinism” by scholars.

In a December 29, 1937, newspaper article, William O’Donovan offered the following assessment of White Plains at a public meeting on the topic:



Image of the 1960 Thanksgiving Parade in White Plains, part of the Peter Kanze Collection in the White Plains Collection. The parade route ran along Main Street, Martine Avenue, and Mamaroneck Avenue, which was once the heart of the business district in White Plains, where many small, local businesses were interspersed between larger, national concerns like Woolworth's and Sears. All photos courtesy of White Plains Collection, White Plains Public Library.

Previously families of means established themselves within easy walking distance of the railroad station and marketplaces and built substantial homes in a concentrated neighborhood.... Removing these families from the center of the old village has left blighted areas, which have gradually turned into slums or into sections bordering on slums. (O'Donovan 1937)

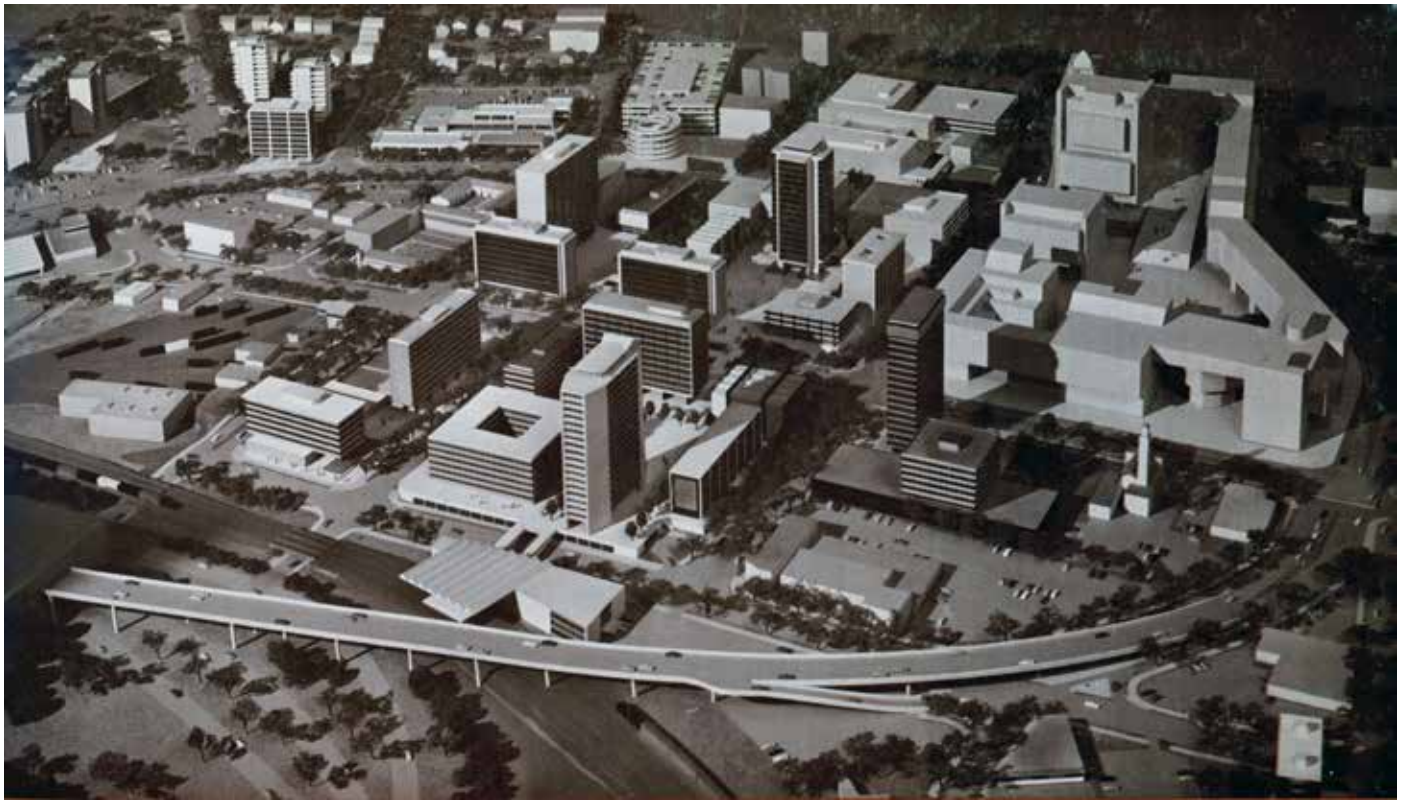
Mockridge, in a series of articles on slum clearance in the *White Plains Daily Reporter*, from November 1937, described slums as “dirty, dank breeding places

of vice, crime, and disease” that would “spread like festering sores unless corrective measures are promptly taken.”

Mockridge and O'Donovan's views are classic examples of environmental determinism. Overt and subtle expressions of classism and racism are also present. Economic and racial prejudice is an important part of the context for many stories of change in America's cities, and White Plains is no exception. People closer to the “slums” and, especially, the people who lived in them were often better at separating the physical conditions from the

character of the people. One hears sympathy and a desire to better the conditions for people living in the “slums,” rather than florid condemnation from people like Milton Hoffman, a longtime resident of White Plains, as well as a reporter and editor at the *Reporter Dispatch* newspaper for over 50 years:

I had a ringside seat because my dad was a carpenter and he would get jobs along Main Street in White Plains and Brookfield Street.... These were slum apartments and I would go with him on his jobs...and I saw these deplorable



In 1962, Raymond & May Associates prepared plans for the City of White Plains' Urban Renewal Project. While some elements of their plan were eventually realized, the city never completely razed all of the older buildings in the downtown area and never built the "feeder route" that would have turned Tarrytown Road in a high speed overpass.

conditions for the people...I didn't see any rats or anything like that. But they had one bathroom for everybody on a floor and it was real bad. My dad had to go and fix up some of these places. Repair windows and doors and things of that nature. I saw it at an early age. Something that affected me later when I was on the newspaper and the editorial board. We wrote stories to clean up the mess. (Hoffman 2014)

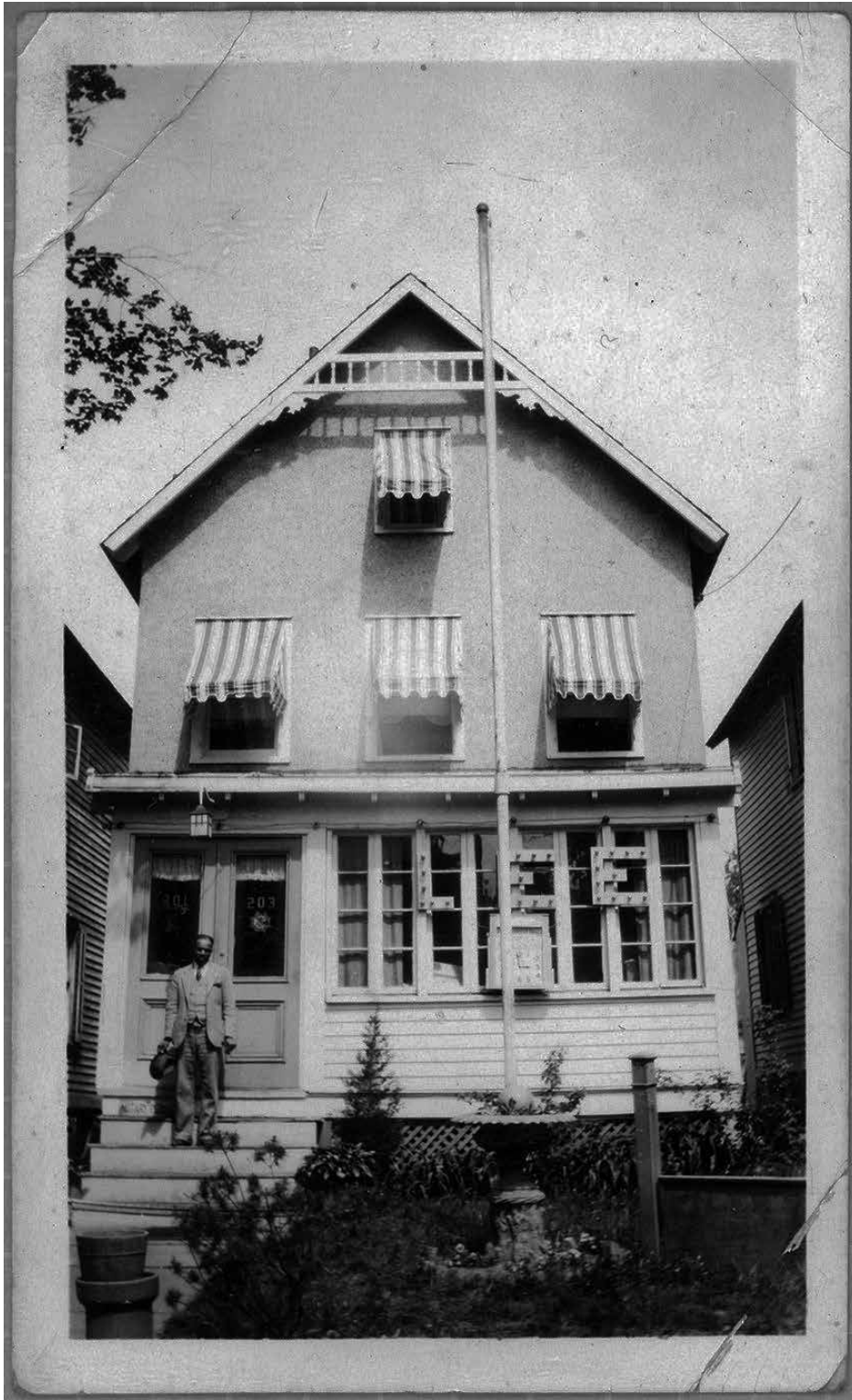
The Second World War put a pause on federal and local efforts to improve conditions in urban areas. Broad societal mobilization and an improving economy relieved the pressure on local governments to do something about "slums." In White Plains, however, there was a steady call for affordable, higher quality housing in the downtown neighborhood. Political will and public support coalesced after the Second World War, and the Winbrook complex was built, largely because of mainstream support to create housing for veterans returning from the war.

The "success" of Winbrook (it increased modern housing stock and eliminated part of the "slums," including half of Brookfield Street) emboldened city officials. In 1955, the City Planning Board began a study of areas and uses for an urban renewal project in White Plains. Politicians and people across America began using words like "renewal," "redevelopment," and "revitalization" to convey their optimism about the improvements that could be realized from federally funded projects. Their progressive, democratic tone belied a more autocratic reality. Cities and their residents, especially mayors and other officials, found it hard to look away from the prospect of funding projects with ample state and federal funds. Urban renewal was a very top-down process, conducted with little regard for the consent of those most affected by it.

Thanks to a former mayor, Ed Michaelian, who became a county executive, and Dick Hendey, the current

mayor—they were Republicans and they wanted to take advantage of some federal money to tear down the central business area of White Plains.... There were two influential Democrats who had connections to President Johnson—Bill Luddy who was later County Chairman and Sam Friedman who later became a State Supreme Court judge—they were White Plains residents, and they contacted people in Washington to get to Johnson to free the money. So, White Plains was one of the few places that was able to tap into this money and started urban renewal in the '60s and '70s, and so on. (Hoffman 2014)

Many projects progressed without the sort of consensus support one might expect for projects that included generous use of eminent domain by the government and forced many people to leave their homes. In White Plains, urban renewal progressed at a typically slow bureaucratic pace, delaying any sense of imminent change until it was too late for



Theodore Jay Lee, Sr., father of Ted Lee, quoted in this article, in front of Lee's Funeral Home when it was located at 203 Brookfield Street. The funeral home was relocated numerous times as the business grew and urban renewal began eliminating the neighborhood where it was started. Lee's Funeral Home continues to operate today on Fisher Avenue in White Plains.

projects or if they remember voices raised in protest, people said things like, "A lot of people had to move," or "It was just what was happening." And while some, like the congregants of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church, were able to find new homes, others simply left.

Ted Lee, Jr., did not leave. His family has continuously operated Lee's Funeral Home since 1915, and you can chart the course of urban renewal by tracking the location of his family's business. His father started on Brookfield Street in the heart of the downtown area, and they relocated numerous times due to urban renewal projects until reaching their current location on Fisher Avenue.

Ted Lee, Jr., recalled those forced from their homes:

Brookfield Street was paved. It was a two-way street. And there was, basically, I would say, wood frame houses on Brookfield Street. And there was quite a few businesses. It was a mixed neighborhood to an extent. We had Italians, Jewish people, we had Blacks, maybe a few Asians—Chinese, I remember Charlie Lee's Hand Laundry on Orawaupum Street. A lot of families, a lot of people to a certain extent, owned their own homes. And there were a lot of people who lived in apartment buildings.... They lost their homes and they either had to move away from White Plains—like a lot of people moved to Yonkers or Mount Vernon or maybe Ossining, and with the businesses—a lot of people who had businesses just went out of business; they didn't reopen. And some people were able to move into White Plains Housing Authority buildings. But, again, a lot of people had to move away, and they never came back to White Plains. Or if they did, they would come back in later years. Because this was the place they were more familiar with and they liked. (Lee 2015)

Milton Hoffman also commented on the relocations:

We [the *Reporter Dispatch* newspaper editorial board] were very strong on

people opposed to the project to leverage residents' urgent concerns into any form of effective political resistance. For all the differences in how people recall their ex-

perience of urban renewal in White Plains, there was one common thread: a sense of inevitability. When asked whether there was a chance to influence the course of

supporting [urban renewal]. There was a controversy though, because first of all, in order to tear these [homes and businesses] down you have to provide places for people to live while you're tearing them down and getting rid of the slums. Sometimes you're getting rid of the slums, you're getting rid of the people. Just before World War II, White Plains was progressive in getting to build what is now Winbrook Apartments.... Some of these people ended up in Yonkers and Mount Vernon, and there was a big controversy over that. People say it was done deliberately to get rid of the African American community—I don't think so. I think that they had good intentions, and there just wasn't enough housing. (Hoffman 2014)

The Mayor's Reports of 1956 and 1957 record that committees were created and surveys were "made quietly" while the Common Council "informally" authorized the hiring of a consultant to determine how White Plains could take full advantage of the federal money on offer. In June 1959, it was announced that the official Urban Renewal Area would comprise everything between Mamaroneck Avenue and the train station, and between Fisher Avenue and Mott Street. In 1961, six years after beginning to seek funds for a project, a preliminary plan was made public. Many of these plans and maps are available in the library's collection. In 1966, the first major demolitions and buying of properties began. With this activity came the biggest effects on White Plains' lower-cost housing stock. Swaths of the downtown area between Winbrook and Main Streets were purchased by the city. To offset the loss of a good portion of the city's lower-cost housing, the city initiated the building of affordable housing at other sites.

It wasn't just housing and businesses that were important to city residents. Jack Harrington spent his nearly 70 years in White Plains, dedicated to historical preservation and environmental conservation, serving on numerous committees and boards, as well as with the White Plains Historical Society.

Harrington recalls efforts to preserve historic buildings:

So, politics played a real important part. But remember, it was federal money, the cities that got it. White Plains was one of the ones that got it. White Plains was one of the fortunate ones. Oh yeah, everybody was anxious, "We'll change this." But there was a courthouse downtown [built in 1915 in the neoclassical style]. Pretty nice building. Stood right out. It was built well. It was a classy place. And then behind it were the surrogate's court in old marble. And the one behind that was part of the jail system. All the way up to Martine Avenue. That's what we had there. So, obviously when things started to change and the buildings on the other side of Main Street or Railroad Avenue...they were two-story buildings and had the shops on the ground floor? Depends on what they were doing. But there were a lot of 'em. There were some Italians, some Irish, Jews that owned some of these buildings. And those are the buildings that came down first. First! Because, "Oh we got this grand scheme." (Harrington 2015)

Experiences of Urban Renewal

People who lived through urban renewal and remember the city before large-scale displacement often cite the diversity of the downtown area as one of the victims of urban renewal. A motley collection of buildings was replaced with monolithic government offices and shopping centers. Concentrated ethnic neighborhoods were disbanded, and most were never wholly reconstituted elsewhere.

Aurelio Saiz came to White Plains from Cuba in the mid-1950s and joined relatives who had emigrated earlier. He recalls moving from a rural village with limited electricity to a bedroom on Main Street that was directly across from White Plains' biggest, brightest marquee that hung in front of RKO Keith's Theater.

I didn't grow up in what you'd call a neighborhood. The nearest neighborhoods were Mitchell Place and the projects. And Grove Street was sort

of part of the projects pre-urban renewal. There were a lot of tenements there. And then a little further down I had friends who lived on Lexington Avenue because I had a lot of relatives there. But there was this sense of space in White Plains. Those blocks, I know that architecturally when the Galleria [mall that now occupies large part of downtown] went up, it shrunk the town visually. The effect, for me, you would think otherwise with the scale and length of these surfaces. What it did was give you nothing to see. It basically shielded itself off from any exterior awareness. It went from dozens and dozens of shops, Woolworth's, another five-and-dime up the hill toward Lexington. There were bakeries, there was a hearing aid factory—a company called Sonotone on this side of Main Street; [on] the south side of Main Street, a gas station, [and] there was the clam bar across from the gas station. If you turned the corner and headed toward Main Street, there was the Roger Smith Hotel, which had become a pretty derelict place when I was a kid. And in the two places across from it were, we had one, two, three, four families of my relatives who lived in those apartments. (Saiz 2016)

Three things strike me about this period of time in White Plains' history. First, time itself. It took over 10 years for urban renewal, as we understand it, to go from idea to execution. It was an incredibly long process that, nonetheless, proceeded effectively. Second, the fact that early decisions about whether or not White Plains would undertake urban renewal projects were made, in the mayor's own words, "quietly" and "informally," is significant. Such large projects that affected literally every single resident would seem to require the knowledge and consent of a majority of people, but no effort to obtain popular consent seems to have been made by the city's officials in these early days. It was enough that they had been elected, and even if they had been elected before urban renewal was a phrase that held meaning for most people, elected officials and civil servants pushing for urban renewal assumed their actions would do



Charlotte Szabo, a former White Plains Public Library employee, recorded the construction of the Galleria Mall in 1979–1980, which took place across the street from the new White Plains Public Library that opened in 1974. This photo shows the site of the former courthouse, looking east and north along Main Street. The Galleria is a large enclosed mall in downtown White Plains. It was opened in August 1980 and built by Cadillac Fairview, a Canadian developer, on two large city blocks of land appropriated by the city for urban renewal.

the most good for the most people. Some residents, like Leola Bryant, knew people who worked in relevant city agencies. She knew a secretary in the Urban Renewal Agency office who helped ensure people received fair relocation settlements. Some of Bryant's family had to relocate to a nearby town. The length of time since the changes of urban renewal and the permanence of demolition and relocation have tempered people's regrets or frustrations.

Leola Bryant recalls who stayed and who moved away from White Plains:

A lot of people had to move to other towns where they had availability for housing. Other than that, we didn't have to move because—and Ted [Lee]

also, Ted's father owned his house—and where I lived was the house my grandfather owned. We stayed there for years. During the urban renewal process, they had to move, my mother and my aunt they had to eventually move. They had to move to Greenburgh. But they got paid for their property. (Bryant 2015)

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, the human and physical geography of White Plains was permanently changed. The historical downtown was demolished, graded, dug out, drained, pile-driven, and rebuilt—first, into towering concrete and rebar skeletons, then into imposing manifestations of a modernist, urban aesthetic at odds with the previous character of the city. The architecture of urban renewal and

public housing was not concerned with creating mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly spaces. Plans for the city were often grandiose (though, they almost always became more modest) and focused on creating buildings for government offices, courts, and, it was hoped, private businesses.

Brian Wallach grew up in pre-urban renewal White Plains and lived through each round of proposals and construction. He, like others, has many vivid recollections of how dramatic the process was:

There wasn't a thing [in the urban renewal area] in 1976, except for the telephone company. I don't remember anything... It looked exactly like it must've looked in 1776—open prairie! Because what was built was built

on either side of the Civil War [and] was built out of wood [referring to the pre-urban renewal buildings]. It was a tinderbox! Martine Avenue, for example, was lumberyard, live chicken markets, barbershop. There was a tailor, taverns with very naughty women, with soliciting on the street. Gambling everywhere. It was very colorful. Colorful, interesting people were about. But that's all been replaced with a magnificent new library and that's a wonderful thing. For example, on that spot, on Martine, was Yazzo's gas station and somebody's kosher chicken market. That was a good thing. You could always tell where you were in White Plains because on a rainy day, live chickens take on a special odor. They get damp. And you knew where you were. You knew where you were. (Wallach 2014)

Aurelio Saiz described exploring vacant buildings in the area before urban renewal razed much of the downtown area:

In the middle of that block [that he grew up on] was a building that was landlocked effectively and that was vacant. It had been vacant for many years. And it was separated by just narrow—really, alley—spaces that were inaccessible from the street. So, no one that didn't live [in his apartment building] had any awareness of this building. By the time I was nine or ten, we had begun to explore it. We got to it through windows in our building that led out to an alley that ordinarily were nailed shut. But we, of course, found ways to pry them. The building itself had phenomenal collection of, on two floors or one floor, circus posters and event posters. It must've been a promoter who operated out of that building...We found all sorts of odd paraphernalia. One of the more interesting explorations we did through that building actually, I believe it was either through the basement, or yeah, it had to be through the basement. Because it was this exploratory that was very much underground. We made our way to a sub-basement door that led out to a tunnel and *um*, this is very vague, because the first time we went through there we did it with a box of matches

and had to abandon the search when the matches were running low. But then we came back with a flashlight. And this was really a fascinating bit of archeology. Underground we were able to cross Court Street. We came to a doorway and kind of an open area with a doorway that led into the courthouse building, but it was really subterranean. We had descended a level beyond where we started after crossing Court Street. So, we were two levels, at least two levels, under the street. What we found, we pieced all of this together, were jails that were with Civil War era artifacts. Now if we had any brains, we would've collected some of this stuff—at a minimum, hoarded some of it ourselves! Best I could piece together was that these were used. There were ledgers that had names and had some information. There were people there from the south. Whether they shipped them up as prisoners of high value, whatever reason, I have no idea, but it was certainly stuff that dated to the Civil War. That was one of the cooler discoveries that we made. (Saiz 2016).

By offering this extremely brief overview (and I assure you there are details, nuances, and exceptions to be found in all that I have described), we come to roughly the 1980s. What happened at this point is a different story, characterized primarily by large-scale retail construction and private residential developments.

All of the buildings and streetscapes in White Plains today belie a complex, eclectic past when immigrants, residents, tenants, landlords, business people, politicians, and bureaucrats, with problematic ideas, met and shaped substantial changes to the built environment and people's everyday lives. As with so many topics, when we add previously absent voices to historical collections about urban renewal, we create a richer, truer, more instructive set of materials for people to consult.

Aurelio Saiz has the last words here:

I can understand some of those motivations [for urban renewal, like substandard housing and building

hazards], what I never appreciated was the net result. There were communities of people where I had a lot of friends—Grove Street on this side of Main Street—there was an extension on that side, Fisher Avenue, there were these Civil War era buildings that were pretty claptrap. But people lived in them. Kids grew up in them. (Saiz 2016) ▼

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