

Urban Renewal in American Cities and Responses of the White Working-Class Ethnic Groups: A Preliminary Exploration

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Abstract: In the post-World War II decades, urban renewal became a part of the larger vision for the revitalization of American cities. Between 1949 and 1974, federal legislation provided a legal and economic framework for demolition of so-called blighted areas and replacing them with new modern housing, infrastructure, and facilities for services and commerce. It was a response to the perceived urban crisis: a move of city residents to the suburbs and collapse of the tax base, congestion of urban areas, and aging urban infrastructure. The areas slated for demolition or highway construction belonged often to communities of color and to older urban working-class white ethnic communities. This article examines the responses of various white ethnic groups, including American Polonia, to the local plans of urban renewal, which ranged from apathy, to acceptance and support, to internal mobilization and protest, to coalition building and political action.

Key words: urban renewal, ethnic communities, American Polonia, American working-class ethnics

On May 28, 1975, the Windham County Deputy Sheriff waited patiently, while Frank Klosowski, seventy years-old at the time, and his wife, packed up their car with the customer clothing remaining from their dry cleaning and tailoring business. The Klosowskis won several extensions to their eviction, but finally the keys had to be turned over. The business on Jackson Street in Willimantic, Connecticut, was established by the Klosowski family in 1911, and Frank Klosowski worked in it since 1921, when he was fourteen years old. It was quite clear that once closed in its old location, the business

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would not re-open. A short time later, the building was demolished to make space for elderly housing – a part of an ambitious urban redevelopment project in Willimantic.² All in all, between 1973 and 1976, as a result of the urban renewal in that small New England mill town, close to seven hundred people were displaced from downtown Willimantic; over a hundred businesses were also dislocated.³ Frank Klosowski's story, as well as that of other Willimantic downtown residents: working-class Poles, French Canadians, Italians, Jews, the Irish, Ukrainians, and Puerto Ricans, reflected a larger trend of changes in towns and cities in post-World War II United States.

The Klosowski episode came at the very end of a few decades-long period of urban renewal, which significantly transformed American urban areas, and yet its impact remains largely unexplored within the history of white ethnic groups, who, next to the African American and Latino communities, bore the brunt of urban renewal projects. In 2017, I posted a request for information about the impact of urban renewal and highway construction on the Polish American Historical Association's Facebook page, which at that time enjoyed a membership of about five thousand. Responses came quickly, pointing out consequences of clearing portions of Polish American neighborhoods and new highways dividing communities and parishes, for example in Buffalo, Niagara Falls, and Binghamton, NY; Cleveland, OH; Grand Rapids and Detroit, MI; Milwaukee, WI; Worcester, MA; Chicago, IL; Baltimore, MD; and San Antonio, TX. Despite both the physical evidence of urban renewal in traditional Polonia communities and its persistence in collective memory, we know little about responses of Polish Americans as well as other white working-class ethnics to urban redevelopment in the 1950s–1960s.

Urban renewal was designed as a panacea for the perceived negative changes which affected urban areas in the post war period. For one, younger families, often of war veterans aided by the GI Act of 1944, were moving out of the old neighborhoods and into the new suburbs, where they could purchase larger houses for their growing families. The housing stock in urban areas was also inadequate in other ways: buildings were often old and dilapidated, and lacked modern plumbing and heating. As the residents left, they took with them taxes, which depleted resources for services, schools and internal improvements. The deindustrialization of urban areas progressed and employment opportunities in the cities were either disappearing or also moving to the suburbs. What was left behind was frequently a contaminated postindustrial environment, which required costly clean up. Additionally, centers of American cities suffered from congestion, including lack of parking space and access to throughways

² "Shop Closes After 62 Years as Sheriff Collects the Key," *Hartford Courant*, May 28, 1975, p. 40C. Frank Klosowski describes his and his family's early years in Willimantic and in the business in an interview in Thomas R. Beardsley, ed., *Willimantic: Industry and Community, the Rise and Decline of a Connecticut Textile City* (Willimantic, Conn.: Windham Textile and History Museum, 1993), 144–151.

³ Baber, Richard. "Vacant Lots and Broken Dreams: Urban Renewal in Willimantic, Connecticut." *Connecticut History* 34 no. 2 (1993): 87.

Phot. 1.

Klosowski Cleaners and Tailors on Jackson Street, Willimantic, prior to urban renewal. Photo courtesy of Thomas Klosowski, The Polish Collection, Windham Textile and History Museum, Willimantic, CT.



and other transportation options. Finally, some urban areas were perceived as dangerous, since growing poverty engendered an increase in crime.

Urban reformers and urban planners had been calling for slum clearance and investment in adequate housing since the 1930s, but World War II diverted both the attention and funds of municipal governments away from those issues. In the aftermath of the war, the conditions in the urban cores came to be perceived as a crisis, which required immediate and forceful intervention. Local governments, businessmen, concerned citizens and community activists, all searched for economic solutions and a new image. Encouraged by innovative city planners and architects inspired by modernist trends, the federal government began to consider reorganized, strengthened and well-functioning cities as a necessity in the postwar decades.⁴

⁴ Much has already been written on this aspect of urban history and specifically on various facets of the renewal and highway construction projects. See for example Jon C. Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance: Urban Revitalization in America, 1940–1985* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); Christopher Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse of Urban Renewal: Postwar Urbanism from New York to Berlin* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011); Mark H. Rose and Raymond A. Mohl, *Interstate: Highway Politics and Policy since 1939*, 3rd ed. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2012); Samuel

The Housing Act of 1949, following the 1937 Housing Act, had all good intentions: the federal government was going to finance slum clearance in neglected urban areas and build close to a million low-rent public housing units within the next six years in order to address the national housing shortage. It also was to build farm housing, fund housing research, and strengthen the Federal Housing Authority (FHA). Using a legal concept of “eminent domain” the government could purchase “blighted” land from private owners for the purpose of “public good.” In return, the private property owners were to receive a fair market price, and the government had the right to sell purchased property to private developers, who would carry out “urban redevelopment” projects, vaguely defined as “predominantly residential” in character. The Housing Act of 1954 further expanded the government’s role in the physical revitalization of American cities, promised more public housing, and allowed for federal funds to be used to not only clear “blighted” areas, but also to upgrade them. The term “redevelopment” was replaced with “renewal,” and the specification of the “predominantly residential” character was dropped.⁵ The third piece of legislation which impacted the urban areas, although separate from the housing issue, became often intrinsically tied to the renewal plans in American cities and towns. The 1956 National Interstate and Federal Highway Act assigned 26 million dollars to the project of highway building: 41 thousand miles were projected to be completed by 1969, when the original act was to expire; in 1970, Congress extended its life for another seven years.⁶ By the mid-1970s, that period of unprecedented federal investment in the revitalization of the American urban areas was over. The Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 provided “Community Development Block Grants,” which consolidated some previous urban programs under Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Municipalities could now compete for block grants to fund smaller improvement projects, which rarely involved slum clearance or large redevelopment projects.⁷

The first decade of the urban renewal period – the 1950s – was marked by optimism and enthusiasm. Without any doubt, in numerous places urban renewal modernized American cities, connected them into a badly needed transportation

Zipp, *Manhattan Projects: The Rise and Fall of Urban Renewal in Cold War New York* (Oxford University Press, 2010). In 2012, *Journal of Urban History* hosted a forum on the intellectual forces behind the concept of the renewal, which offers a useful review of the directions of scholarship on the renewal: Samuel Zipp and Michael Carriere, “Introduction: Thinking through Urban Renewal,” *Journal of Urban History* 39, no. 3 (2012): 359–365; responses from Jon Teaford and Samuel Zipp; a follow up by Samuel Zipp, “Rip It Up and Start Again? Response to Forum on “The Roots and Routes of Urban Renewal,” *Journal of Urban History* 40, no. 4 (2012): 644–647. See also Eric Avila and Mark H. Rose, “Race, Culture, Politics, and Urban Renewal: An Introduction,” *Journal of Urban History* 35, no. 3 (2009): 335–347.

⁵ Howard P. Chudacoff, Judith E. Smith, and Peter Baldwin, *The Evolution of American Urban Society*, eighth edition (Boston: Pearson, 2015), 203–4; David R. Goldfield, Blaine A. Brownell, *Urban America: A History*, 2nd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 349–50.

⁶ Steven Conn, *Americans Against the City: Anti-Urbanism in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 175–179. For the full story see Rose and Mohl, *Interstate*.

⁷ *The Evolution*, 214.

network, and produced some stunning architecture and urban design. Low-income housing was constructed, and pollution and industrial blight left over from the times of unbridled industrialization were cleaned up. The social costs were, however, high. The so-called bulldozer approach to renewal promoted redevelopment schemes based on the whole-sale clearance of some neighborhoods arbitrarily defined as blighted. As the second decade of urban renewal neared, the criticism of this approach grew, and the activism of local communities intensified.

One aspect in particular called for concern: urban communities of African Americans and Latinos, especially Puerto Ricans, were the most often targeted for slum and blight clearance or for highway projects. In 1963, writer and activist James Baldwin famously expressed his disapproval by saying that “urban renewal” meant really “Negro removal.” His metaphor proved well-founded; according to statistics, by 1963, two thirds of those displaced by the renewal schemes were non-white, and the housing assistance to the dislocated populations was woefully insufficient.⁸ As historian Steven Conn concluded, “In American cities in the 1950s and ‘60s, the color of blight was black.”⁹

The last third of those displaced by urban renewal were white working-class ethnics, especially from the groups strongly attached to their neighborhoods and religious organizations: Italians, Poles and other Slavs, Jews, and the Irish. Financially often unable to afford a move to the suburbs, and unwilling to abandon their churches and synagogues, small businesses, and social and familial networks, these ethnics watched how their communities were changing and disappearing under the pressure of the renewal projects. Urban historian Jon Teaford states that in the postwar period “still-viable white working-class areas” were affected by the “trinity of evils: highway construction, urban renewal, and redlining by financial institutions.” He explains: “The first and second would kill the neighborhoods through a quick blow from the bulldozer. The third would slowly cut off the financial lifeblood of the community by denying mortgages and home improvement and business loans in neighborhoods that bankers deemed undesirable. Either way public and private policymakers seemed ready to commit uricide if neighborhood activists did not rise to their defense.”¹⁰

The process of urban renewal encountered contemporaneous scrutiny and often criticism from many directions, initiating a rush of studies located within different

⁸ Conn, 157.

⁹ Conn, 158. Some scholars pitched the image of an angry and racist white ethnic violently fighting back against the incursion (“invasion”) into the white neighborhoods of African Americans or, more rarely, Latinos, often themselves displaced by the redevelopment projects in other communities. Arnold Hirsch highlighted such reactions in Chicago in the 1950s, although his understanding was much more nuanced than approaches of many others who summarily portrayed working-class ethnics as violent racists. Arnold A. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). For the mid-1970s, an Irish Southie in Boston reacting to busing became a symbol of white working-class racism.

¹⁰ Teaford, *The Rough Road to Renaissance*, 245.

disciplines: urban planning and architecture, political science, economics, and a variety of social sciences. The critics pointed to conceptual design flaws, corruption and political manipulation, disregard for economic realities, and the impact of urban renewal on various urban populations. Historian of urban renewal Christopher Klemek claims that already by the mid-1960s, the concept of urban renewal and government officials who represented it were "assailed on dual fronts: by citizens in the streets and by intellectuals in the lecture hall."¹¹ An example of economic and political critique became Martin Anderson's book published in 1964, *The Federal Bulldozer*. Anderson questioned the federal authority to intervene so deeply into municipal affairs, and maintained that huge federal expenditures were not bringing predicted economic benefits.¹² Looking at the issue from the legal point of view, Richard H. Leach criticized the complexity of the legislation, which caused delays and confusion in its implementation.¹³

No doubt the most influential critic of postwar urban planning became Jane Jacobs, whose book *The Death and Life of American Cities* was published in 1961. Jacobs was a journalist, activist and observer of urban life, who lived in Greenwich Village, New York. After considering changes brought on by the early years of the renewal in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, Jacobs became highly critical of the very concept of urban planning. Not mincing words, in the opening sentence of her book she declared: "This book is an attack on current planning and rebuilding."¹⁴ Jacobs strongly criticized the vision of a soul-less, sterile and segregated modern city advanced by city planners. Instead, she encouraged a look at the city life from the vintage point of a sidewalk, praising the interconnectedness of neighborhoods, street life, and the mixed use of space. She claimed that the diversity and density offered by the organically developed city was not its weakness, but the source of its strength, both social and economic.¹⁵

Neighborhoods as distinct urban units were since the turn of the 19th and 20th century foci of social workers and reformers connected to the settlement house movement, by the scholars from the Chicago School of Sociology, and later by geographers, historians as well as urban planners. In the 1940s, British sociologist Ruth Glass put the foundation for the understanding of a neighborhood as "a distinct territorial group, distinct by virtue of specific physical characteristics of the area and the specific

¹¹ Klemek, 179.

¹² Klemek, 180–1. Martin Anderson, *The Federal Bulldozer: A Critical Analysis of Urban Renewal, 1949–1962* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1964). Conn, 159–163.

¹³ Richard H. Leach, "The Federal Urban Renewal Program: A Ten-Year Critique," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 25 (Autumn 1960), reprinted by permission in *Major Problems in American Urban History: Documents and Essays*, ed. By Howard P. Chudacoff (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1994), 359–367.

¹⁴ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 3.

¹⁵ Klemek, 109–127. See also Christopher Klemek, "From Political Outsider to Power Broker in Two 'Great American Cities': Jane Jacobs and the Fall of the Urban Renewal Order in New York and Toronto," *Journal of Urban History* 34, no. 2 (January 2008): 309–332. Conn, 189–194.

social characteristics of the inhabitants.”¹⁶ Two decades later, American sociologist Suzanne Keller further stressed the distinctiveness of the spatial unit of a neighborhood as stemming from “geographical boundaries, ethnic or cultural characteristics of the inhabitants, psychological unity among people who feel that they belong together, or concentrated use of the area’s facilities for shopping, leisure, and learning.”¹⁷ To simplify Glass and Keller’s definitions, an urban neighborhood includes places where people live, work, and interact face-to-face, and combines distinctive spatial and social characteristics.¹⁸

Historians of immigration and ethnicity are well-familiar with working-class immigrant neighborhoods: Little Italys, Petite Canadas, Chinatowns, Polonias or mixed “urban villages,” saturated with religious and lay immigrant institutions, small businesses, schools, cemeteries, charitable organizations, historical monuments, and a variety of visual characteristics creating specific urban landscape. Residents of such well-defined neighborhoods often developed a strong neighborhood attachment; according to Keller, it might have been “a special feeling for a given place, a special sort of pride in living there, a sense of attachment transcending physical inconvenience or social undesirability.”¹⁹ In memoirs, autobiographies and oral histories, as well as some literary representations, nostalgic descriptions of white European ethnic neighborhoods feature memories of happy and safe childhoods amidst extended family, friends and neighbors. As these might indeed be accurate recollections in many cases, they nevertheless must be considered with caution as a general image of neighborhood life. Poverty and crime, violence and abuse, as well as physical deterioration and neglect in the substandard housing structures also existed and are widely documented.²⁰

¹⁶ As quoted in Suzanne Keller, “The Neighborhood,” in *Neighborhoods in Urban America*, ed. by Ronald H. Bayor (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1982), 8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁸ For examples of other definitions, often of contested meaning, see Andrew M. Greeley, *Neighborhood* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1977); Kathleen Neils Conzen, “Immigrants, Immigrant Neighborhoods, and Ethnic Identity: Historical Issues,” *The Journal of American History* 66, no. 3 (December 1979): 97–109; Kenneth A. Scherzer, “Neighborhood,” in *Encyclopedia of Urban America: The Cities and Suburbs*, vol. 2, ed. by Neil Larry Shumsky (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC Clio, 1998): 518–19; Robert V. Kemper, “Ethnic Neighborhoods,” in *Encyclopedia of American Urban History*, ed. by David Goldfield (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publ., 2007): 248–251; Larry Bennett, “Neighborhood,” *ibid.*, 527–30; Amanda I. Seligman, “Neighborhoods, Immigrants, and Ethnic Americans, in *American Immigration and Ethnicity*, ed. by Ronald H. Bayor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 286–301; John A. Kromkowski, and John David Kromkowski, “An American Catholic Perspective on Urban Neighborhoods: The Lens of Monsignor Geno C. Baroni and the Legacy of the Neighborhood Movement,” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 71, no. 4 (October 2012): 1095–1141.

¹⁹ Keller, 21.

²⁰ Benjamin Looker, who studied the concept and image of cities and their communities in postwar America suggests a politically motivated and cultural evolution of the concept of neighborhood, which with time included a juxtaposition between positive (white) and negative (black) neighborhoods or ghettos. Looker notes that already in 1965, Robert Weaver, since 1966 the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development and a distinguished African American economist, drew attention to this growing distinction in his publicized lecture at Harvard. Benjamin Looker, *A Nation of Neighborhoods: Imagining Cities, Com-*

Some white ethnic groups identified their urban neighborhoods with an area of a parish or a synagogue membership.²¹ The special attachment to the church and parish, as some scholars suggest, might have been an important reason why some ethnics decided to remain in city centers while others found it easier to leave for the suburbs.²² Polish Americans, whose communities were affected by urban renewal and highway construction in a significant way, had both traditionally high home ownership rate, and were attached to their Roman Catholic churches, built with great effort and sacrifice. They invested in the parishes and their infrastructure, including parish schools, as well as in the facilities of fraternal and other organizations. American Polonia maintained social and familial networks within their neighborhoods which sustained their social needs, and often provided jobs either in small businesses or in local industries. Despite increased social mobility experienced by the second and third generation in the postwar decades, average economic standing of Polonia families hardly allowed them to consider a move to the suburbs.²³ How strong the attachment to traditionally Polish neighborhoods had been, is often demonstrated by the documented opposition to the neighborhood succession and influx of racial minorities, an aspect of Polonia's postwar urban experience which still requires further study. However, while the race relations did attract the attention of scholars, the reaction to the impact of the "federal bulldozer" has not.²⁴

munities, and Democracy in Postwar America (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 135–8. For the full text of Weaver's Harvard lecture, see Robert C. Weaver, *Dilemmas of Urban America* (New York: Atheneum, 1969).

²¹ See for example Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 349–454; John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

²² Gerald Gamm, *Urban Exodus: Why the Jews Left Boston and the Catholics Stayed* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999).

²³ The best general treatments of the social and economic trends in American Polonia in the post World War II decades can be found in James S. Pula, *Polish Americans: An Ethnic Community* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1995), John J. Bukowczyk, *And My Children Did Not Know Me: A History of the Polish-Americans* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Theresita Polzin, *The Polish Americans: Whence and Whither* (Pulaski, WI: Franciscan Publishers, 1973); Dominic Pacyga, "Polish America in Transition: Social Change and the Chicago Polonia, 1945–1980," *Polish American Studies* 44, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 38–55. Several sociological and anthropological Ph.D. dissertations reflect their authors' field studies: Ewa Teresa Morawska, "The Maintenance of Ethnicity: A Case Study of the Polish-American Community in Greater Boston," a Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University, 1976; Eugene E. Obidinski, "Ethnic to Status Group: A Study of Polish Americans in Buffalo," Ph.D. dissertation, State University of New York at Buffalo, 1968; Robert F. Hill, "Exploring the Dimensions of Ethnicity: A Study of Status, Culture and Identity Among Polish Americans," Ph. D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 1975; Paul Wrobel, *Our Way: Family, Parish, and Neighborhood in a Polish-American Community* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979).

²⁴ The two issues are in some cases related, as African Americans and Latinos were moving into white ethnic neighborhood in search of affordable housing because, among other reasons, they had been displaced by the urban renewal projects in their own communities; see for example Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*. On Polish American – Black relations see James S. Pula, "Polish-Black Relations: Ethnic Tensions during the Civil Rights Movement," Fiedorczyk Lecture in Polish American Studies, Central Connecticut State University, April 23, 1992; Thaddeus C. Radzialowski, "Historia stosunków pomiędzy Murzynami

Perhaps the best-known example of the white ethnic responses, which might be characterized as stunned inertia is the story of the demise of the West End of Boston in the early years of urban renewal. Since the second half of the 19th century, the West End, initially an African American enclave, became dominated by the Irish immigrants, followed by waves of Southern and Eastern Europeans. By the 1950s, that working-class neighborhood was mostly inhabited by the descendants of working-class Italians and Jews, and smaller groups of other ethnics, including Poles. The plans to redevelop the West End with the help of federal money commenced already in 1953; the 46-acre area was considered a slum and the goal became to level it, displacing close to 3,000 families, and make room for several upscale high-rises, connecting the area to the downtown and the medical facilities. The community and its reaction as well as the process leading to the evictions became well-documented by sociologist Herbert Gans, who in 1962 published the now classic *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class Life of Italian Americans*, a study based on his two-years-long participatory observation (1957–8) of the impending neighborhood destruction, which then proceeded in 1958–9. In his study, Gans questioned the designation of a “slum” as applied to the West End, interpreting it as a “reflection of middle-class standards – and middle-class incomes.”²⁵ Instead, he described the West End as a working-class ethnic neighborhood of low-income housing, but with strong family and community ties. Gans reported on sporadic and not well-organized attempts at mobilization against the redevelopment, led by outsiders, but the local effort proved both limited and ultimately unsuccessful. According to Gans, one of the main reasons for that outcome was that most residents appeared too stunned to believe that the destruction of their neighborhood would be so complete and failed to react in any forceful and unified way.²⁶

An Italian American community in New Haven, Connecticut, is another example of the impact of the early redevelopment project. The neighborhood of Wooster Square became the site of the large-scale renewal scheme led by the energetic and ambitious New Haven mayor Richard C. Lee, who supported building of highway I-91 through Wooster Square. Historian Anthony Ricci, who conducted interviews with the former

i polską grupą etniczną w Stanach Zjednoczonych Ameryki,” in *Polonia amerykańska: przeszłość i współczesność*, ed. by Hieronim Kubiak, Eugeniusz Kusielewicz and Tadeusz Gromada (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1988), 673–704.

²⁵ Herbert J. Gans, *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans* (New York: The Free Press, 1962), 310. Further investigation into the psychological impact of the West End’s demise and relocation on the residents was continued by Marc Fried et al., *The World of the Urban Working Class* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1973); it was commissioned by the Psychiatric Services at the Massachusetts General Hospital to study “the wide spectrum of responses to a crisis like relocation” for the working-class residents.

²⁶ Gans, 288–298. Gans’ critique eventually contributed to the changes in the practice of bulldozer-style projects, but it came too late for the West End. The West End Museum attests to the drama of displacement as well as strong bonds of its former residents to the West End community, <https://thewestendmuseum.org/>.

Phot. 2

St. Stanislaus Kostka Church, Chicago, Ill., during the construction of the Kennedy Expressway. Justin Breen, "The Story Behind the Kennedy Expy, and How this Church Impacted its Route," Feb. 2016 <https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/20160120/west-town/story-behind-kennedy-expy-how-this-church-impacted-its-route/>



residents of Wooster Square found out that Italian American residents of the area blamed for the scheme selfish politicians, including the mayor, greedy and influential business people, and indifferent and condescending Yale scholars and administrators. In the end, however, they felt outgunned and overwhelmed by the political forces in the city, over which they felt they had no control, and put up no effective resistance. Even after its demise, they remembered their neighborhood as a good place to live and expressed pride in their modest accommodations.²⁷

Sometimes, a particular ethnic group mobilized in defense of a religious shrine or a religious community. For example, in the 1950s construction of the Kennedy

²⁷ Anthony V. Riccio, *The Italian American Experience in New Haven* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 404–434. For more on New Haven's urban renewal and mayor Lee, see for example Neal R. Peirce, *The New England States: People, Politics, and Power in the Six New England States* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972); Herbert F. Janick, Jr., *A Diverse People: Connecticut 1914 to the Present* (Chester, CT: The Pequot Press, 1975); Douglas W. Rae, *City Urbanism and Its End* (New Haven: Yale, 2003), Allan R. Talbot, *The Mayor's Game: Richard Lee of New Haven and the Politics of Change* (New York: Praeger, 1970).

Expressway in Chicago dislocated large numbers of residents in the mostly Polish area in the eastern part of the so-called Polish Downtown. The initial plan envisioned running the highway through the middle of St. Stanislaus Kostka Church, necessitating its total destruction. The church was founded by the Resurrectionists in 1867, and is considered the first Polish parish in Chicago, with the current building completed in 1881 in a Renaissance Revival style. The prospect of the destruction of the church mobilized Chicago Polonia, who put pressure on Polish American politicians and the City Hall. One observer called this mobilization a “spontaneous uprising” and a “crusade” in defense of the historic shrine. Although this part of the highway is now commonly known as Rostenkowski Curve, it was State Representative Bernard Prusinski, a civil engineer by profession, who suggested moving the highway to the east to accommodate the structure of the church. The route was altered, and the church was saved.²⁸ In a similar example, the Italian American community in St. Louis, Missouri, led by Father Salvatore Polizzi mobilized to halt two undesirable redevelopment projects in their neighborhood. In 1971, Fr. Polizzi took the fight for an overpass to connect two parts of the traditionally Italian neighborhood divided by the highway all the way to Washington D.C., where he activated Italian American politicians and media in support of the cause. After an energetic and well-publicized lobby effort, the Transportation Department promised the funds for an overpass.²⁹

Victories or at least partial victories like those in defense of religious shrines or access to them were, however, exceedingly rare. More often than not, even the best organized neighborhood movements were no match for the political and economic forces of the cities shored by the federal money. As Arnold R. Hirsch demonstrated for the University of Chicago, and Lilia Fernandez for the University of Illinois at Chicago, higher education institutions were frequently among those benefitting the most from the redevelopment schemes. Fernandez examined the Near West Side, an old ethnic working-class neighborhood located near downtown Chicago, whose residents in the 1950s included Italians, Greeks, Mexicans and Puerto Ricans as well as a growing number of African Americans.

Since the 1950s, the area residents acknowledged that the neighborhood suffered from deterioration and formed a grassroots organization called the Near West Side Planning Board (NWSPD). It developed practical plans for civic improvements that would fight blight, preserve certain areas, and provide more adequate and affordable housing. The NWSPD solicited support of many local institutions, such as churches, schools, ethnic organizations, and social services agencies, including the famous Hull House, which was located within that community since 1889. Fernandez notes that the

²⁸ Ed Marciniak, *Reviving an Inner City Community: The Drama of Urban Change in East Humboldt Park in Chicago* (Loyola University, 1977), 18–19. See also <https://www.dnainfo.com/chicago/2016/01/20/west-town/story-behind-kennedy-expy-how-this-church-impacted-its-route/>, accessed 11/4/2018.”

²⁹ Gary Ross Mormino, *Immigrants on the Hill: Italian-Americans in St. Louis, 1882–1982* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 240–243. See also Teaford, 247.

Phot. 3

Barbara Mikulski at Fells Point, January 1979, Baltimore Sun photo by Weyman Swagger, <http://retrobaltimore.tumblr.com/post/80687270614/barbara-mikulski-making-history>



activities of NWSPD gained praise as an example of “community-controlled development long before such approaches gained wider popularity,” and the organization’s membership and leadership reflected the mixed character of the neighborhood, with Italian Americans as the largest group, as well as Mexicans, African Americans, Greeks, and others.³⁰

By the early 1960s, the Near West Side was being transformed in major ways by the highway construction which displaced thousands, and the clearing of slum areas and construction of six major public housing projects. The biggest challenge came, however, after the Harrison-Halstead section of the area was selected as a site for the new campus of the University of Illinois at Chicago, which required clearance of a large part of the neighborhood. The community mobilized once again and led by Italian and Mexican residents, it readied for a protracted fight against the city and a public university. The Near West Side residents exerted pressure on their political representatives to protect their interests, participated in numerous public meetings, picketed and protested outside of the city hall and mayor Daley’s private residence,

³⁰ Lilia Fernandez, *Brown in the Windy City: Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Postwar Chicago* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), 105.

testified at the city council's meetings, put up signs, organized sit-ins, as well as initiated lawsuits. Italian American women, often with their children in tow, were the most active and vocal leaders in this action, but their activism was in vain. Eventually, the Harrison-Halsted neighborhood was bulldozed to make space for the new campus. Even the historic Hull House was not spared and only one building, now housing a museum, was saved from the complex.³¹

In some cases, multi-ethnic coalitions of residents more effectively used political pressure to halt redevelopment and highway construction threatening local neighborhoods. One of the most publicized examples is the strong opposition encountered by Robert Moses, a "master builder" of modern New York, to his plans to run a street extension that would cut through the neighborhood of Washington Square. The local residents led by Jane Jacobs succeeded in defeating that project in 1958, when Jacobs' coalition in the West Village brought together representatives of the bohemian and artistic circles as well as working-class Irish, Italians and Jews who in the mid-1950s and early 1960s lived in the area. In the early 1960s, another Jacobs-led political coalition pushed back on the construction of the Lower Manhattan Expressway (LOMEX), which threatened to obliterate, among others, Little Italy. Although the bruising fight against LOMEX lasted several years and echoed in mayoral elections in New York, plans for LOMEX were eventually discontinued.³²

In Baltimore, Maryland, the South East Community Organization (SECO) formed in 1971, became an umbrella organization for over ninety neighborhood groups. SECO grew out of a smaller organization, called SCAR – Southeast Community Against the Road, led by Barbara Mikulski, which opposed the construction of a six-lane expressway through the Fell's Point neighborhood of Baltimore. Both organizations were multi-ethnic in character and represented Poles, Ukrainians, Italians, Greeks, Germans, Czechs, Finns and others, who were working-class residents of the areas threatened by the highway construction.³³ Barbara Mikulski, born in Baltimore, Maryland, in a Polish American family, was a social worker and community organizer before she became engaged in the Democratic party politics, serving on the Baltimore City Council, and then in the U.S. House (1977–1987) and Senate (1987–2017). Throughout her political career, Mikulski became a strong voice for the interests of the white ethnic working-class voters.

Residents of different ethnic backgrounds mobilized in defense of their neighborhoods also in smaller towns, for example in Easton, Pennsylvania. Easton's close-knit, integrated working-class community known as "Lebanese Town" was populated

³¹ Fernandez, *Brown in the Windy City*, 91–129.

³² Klemek, *The Transatlantic Collapse*, 136–138; 143–160; 2018–212; Teaford, 164. For more on neighborhood revolts against renewal, see John H. Mollenkopf, *The Contested City* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1983), 180–212.

³³ Teaford, 245–7; Bob Kuttner, "Ethnic Revival," in *Neighborhoods in Urban America*, ed. by Ronald H. Bayor (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1982), 209–238.

mostly by Italians, Lebanese, and African Americans, with smaller groups of the Irish, Greeks, Pennsylvania Dutch and Anglos. When the Lebanese Town was designated for demolition and redevelopment, the residents, led by Fr. Norman Peters of Our Lady of Lebanon Church, organized themselves as the Citizens Home Preservation Committee, which included representatives of all resident and ethnic groups. The committee hired a lawyer to challenge the claims of “blight” in the neighborhood and its meetings attracted audiences of several hundred protesting the renewal plans. Despite that effort, the Lebanese Town was leveled in the urban renewal project in 1963.³⁴

An example of yet another response to renewal takes us back to Willimantic, Connecticut, where despite cases of individual opposition such as from Frank Klosowski, the residents largely supported urban renewal, believing that it would bring future economic prosperity. Willimantic has been a typical small New England town dependent on the textile industry for most of the 19th century and throughout World War II. In the 1950s and two subsequent decades, the textile industry started to experience an economic downturn and deindustrialization became a serious challenge to the local population. The so-called Central Business District (CBD) or downtown Willimantic was a mix of residential units and small businesses and services. It was also a location of religious institutions, and several national homes. The downtown residents included ethnically mixed working-class descendants of French Canadians, Poles, Ukrainians, Jews, Italians, the Irish, and Syrian Lebanese. Puerto Rican community also formed in rental units within downtown, as Puerto Rican workers were recruited to fill labor needs in the 1950s. The planning and application process for the federal money lasted throughout the 1960s and finally in 1971 the town residents voted in a referendum to demolish much of the CBD. A subsequent addendum to the referendum called for clearing even a larger area to make space for a modern shopping mall, which, it was believed, would bring traffic to downtown and assure its economic viability. This idea was from the outset compromised by the fact that right at the same time in the neighboring town private investors began construction of a large shopping center. The demolition nevertheless was carried out and the area, which used to be Willimantic’s downtown, remained an empty grassy knoll for five decades. Willimantic’s economy suffered an additional blow in 1985, when the textile mill which was the largest employer in town relocated to the South.³⁵

Once the federal government terminated urban renewal (although advanced projects, such as the one in Willimantic were still being completed), and the decade of

³⁴ Andrea Smith and Rachel Scarpato, “The Language of ‘Blight’ and Easton’s ‘Lebanese Town’: Understanding a Neighborhood’s Loss to Urban Renewal,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 134, no. 2 (April 2010): 127–164.

³⁵ See Baber; Anna D. Jaroszyńska-Kirchmann, “Urban Renewal in a New England Mill Town: Willimantic’s Puerto Rican Community and Redevelopment,” *Connecticut History Review*, 60, no. 1 (Spring 2021): 82–119.

“The Major Parcel” before the 2020 construction, photo by the author.



the 1970s progressed, the stronger focus on issues of urban neighborhoods emerged, but it concentrated less on large scale urban planning and design, and more on social improvements. In 1977, the Congress passed the National Neighborhood Policy Act and subsequently President Carter appointed the National Commission of Neighborhoods. A year later the Neighborhood Self Help Development Act was passed, giving a greater voice to neighborhood associations in revitalization efforts.³⁶ Additionally, building on the ideas of the 1965 Model Cities Program and initiatives of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, several new task forces were established, including the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs, led by the activist Catholic priest Geno Baroni and subsequently by John Kromkowski, and supported by politicians Barbara Mikulski and Marcy Kaptur. A political lobby organization founded by Michael Novak in 1972, the Ethnic Millions Political Action Committee or EMPAC! also attempted to mobilize white ethnics, including Polish Americans, to claim a stronger position within the Democratic party. Both organizations highlighted the needs of ethnic urban neighborhoods and communities.³⁷

³⁶ Rachel G. Bratt, “The Neighborhood Movement,” *Community Development Journal* 20, no. 2 (April 1985): 80.

³⁷ Donald E. Pienkos, “The New Ethnicity Movement and Polish Americans: Its Coming, Going, Significance, and Consequences,” *Polish American Studies* 76, no. 2 (Autumn 2019): 65–80.

The 1970s and early 1980s also brought more examples of Polonia's effort to take a greater control of its communities, but with varying results. For example, Ed Marciniak, president of the Institute of Urban Life, reported on the internal organization of the residents of East Humboldt Park in Chicago to oppose the forces of the city planners and politicians, and to themselves design and lead the revitalization of their neighborhood. Since the early 1960s, in Chicago's East Humboldt Park (also known as the Polish Downtown), where the largest population was Polish and Ukrainian, the pastors of twenty-two large Catholic parishes became instrumental in the creation of the Northwest Community Organization (NCO), which eventually claimed membership of close to two hundred local groups and was supported by Saul Alinsky himself. The NCO successfully resisted the city hall's urban renewal plans for close to fifteen years, and by the mid-1970s collaborated with a new neighborhood organization to create a grounds-up plan of the neighborhood improvements.³⁸

While East Humboldt Park can be considered a limited success story for the post-renewal urban Polonia, the so-called Poletown affair in Detroit in 1980–81, ended up in the demolition of a portion of that working-class neighborhood. Although it did not come as part of urban renewal, but rather through an arrangement between the city and the corporation, it nevertheless obliterated a viable residential and business area. As historian John J. Bukowczyk reports, the Poletown area developed since the 1880s, when it attracted diverse immigrant population from East Central Europe to Detroit's industries. In the early decades of the 20th century, an automobile factory Dodge Main Works offered employment to many residents of Poletown; others found jobs in several other auto and cigar industries in the area. In the 1950s and 60s, however, at the same time as deindustrialization began to affect Detroit's economy, the suburban exodus diminished the work force in the city. Additionally, construction of two highways cut off portions of Poletown dividing and displacing its population with "a catastrophic effect on the life-chances of the district."³⁹ Amidst social and economic problems, which plagued the city, Dodge Main closed in 1980. At roughly the same time, General Motors offered to build a new plant in Dodge Main's old location if an additional parcel of the Poletown neighborhood could also be cleared for the construction. The plan was supported by the city hall and eventually by the Detroit Archdiocese, and despite the protests of the Poletown Neighborhood Council, the so-called Central Industrial Park or CIP, a large tract including about 4,000 residents, thirty to fifty percent Polish, had been acquired and cleared for the new construction.⁴⁰

³⁸ For more see Marciniak; Marcia C. Kaptur, "East Humboldt Park Copes with the Chicago 21 Plan," *Planning* 43, no. 7 (August 1977): 14–16.

³⁹ John J. Bukowczyk, "The Decline and Fall of a Detroit Neighborhood: Poletown vs. G.M. and the City of Detroit," *Washington and Lee Law Review* 41, no. 1 (Winter 1984), 58–9.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 60–65. For the Poletown's story see also June Manning Thomas, "Neighborhood Response to Redevelopment in Detroit," *Community Development Journal* 20, no. 2 (April 1985): 89–98.

Back in Willimantic, after being refused yet another extension to his eviction notice Frank Klosowski was asked why he hadn't prepared better for the inevitable. He answered: "Somehow we didn't believe it would come down to this."⁴¹ Outplayed by powers of economy and politics, with his neighborhood and his small business gone, Klosowski joined the ranks of many other white ethnics in American urban areas for whom urban renewal meant the end of the traditional spatial community. Those neighborhoods that survived bulldozers and highways, kept changing, nevertheless, and since the 1980s faced new challenges, including controversial forces of gentrification.⁴² Although the urban renewal era left behind a scant and problematic archival and documentary footprint, it generated a complicated and contentious legacy. For ethnic neighborhoods it often meant physical scars in the landscape at the very least, or a total physical destruction at its worst. As this necessarily brief overview suggests, it also left many unanswered questions about its full impact on the transformations of ethnic identity and racial relations, as well as new forms of community structure and engagement in the more recent decades. In this context, the words of Ed Marciniak that "a neighborhood is a state of mind as well as a designated piece of urban terrain" ring particularly true.⁴³

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⁴¹ "Firm Owner Still Resisting Relocation," *Hartford Courant*, May 25, 1975, p. 11C2.

⁴² The next chapter of the Polonia neighborhood experience, that of progressing gentrification in the older ethnic neighborhoods in more recent decades also deserves further study. For the transformations in the Polonia's urban areas see for example Anna D. Jaroszyńska-Kirchmann, "Szukanie Polonii w przestrzeni miasta amerykańskiego," in *Inteligencja polska w świecie*, ed. by Zygmunt Kolenda, Hubert Chudzio, and Dorota Prasałowicz (Kraków: Polska Akademia Umiejętności, 2019), 297–312; Anna Sosnowska, *Polski Greenpoint a Nowy Jork: Gentryfikacja, stosunki etniczne i imigrancki rynek pracy na przełomie XX i XXI wieku* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR, 2016); as well as a special issue of *Polish American Studies* 76, no. 1 (Spring 2019) on the Polish Greenpoint, with articles by Jerome Krase; Judith N. DeSena; and Karolina Łukasiewicz, Ewa Dżurak, Ewa Maliga, Izabela J. Barry, and Marta Pawlaczek.

⁴³ Marciniak, *Reviving an Inner City*, 40.

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