Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Urban Development in the City of the Traveler: The Story of New Brunswick and Why It May Never Resolve Its Identity Crisis

An honors thesis submitted to the History Department, Written under the supervision of Professor Alison Isenberg

Department of History

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To my uncle, Roy Rosenzweig
# Table of Contents

*Acknowledgements*  
vii  

*Introduction*  
1  

*Chapter One: 1950’s – 1970’s*  
7  
Middlesex County (and New Brunswick): The Place to Be (Avoided)  

*Chapter Two: 1970's*  
13  
Coalition Formation and the Dawn of Revitalization  

*Chapter Three: 1978 – mid 1980's*  
23  
Revitalization Actualizes  

*Chapter Four*  
33  
Transferable Model?  
Unique Success Story?  

*Bibliography*  
41
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To many I owe thanks. This thesis would be nothing if not for the many generous people who offered their time, words and thoughts and helped me push this project forward.

A little about the path to this thesis: In 2007 as a freshman at Rutgers I was clueless as to what I wanted to “do.” Two years later, that feeling had hardly changed. My interests were many and it seemed daunting to choose just one to focus on as a major. Toward the end of my sophomore year when the deadline for declaring my major was drawing near I chose History figuring that it would allow me to continue studying a variety of subjects.

In the summer of 2009, going into my junior year, a twist of fate occurred. A literature course that I was set to take in the Fall had been canceled and I needed to find a substitute. I came across the course “Designing Cities” in the Planning and Public Policy department; it fit in my schedule and the professor, Anton Nelessen, seemed interesting, so I registered. The first day of class that Fall was my Eureka moment. I stumbled upon a field of study that united many of what I had thought to be my unconnected interests: design, architecture, economics, public health, history, the environment, and sociology. I came home after class with the feeling that city planning was my calling. As it turned out, that semester, I was also registered for the course “Cities and Suburbs in American History” with Professor Alison Isenberg, which introduced me to the broader context of planning and the evolution of the built environment and its social implications.

Speaking with Professor Isenberg one day she mentioned a project that two Rutgers faculty from the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, Thea Berkhout and David Listokin, were working on: interviewing twenty individuals who had been influential in the redevelopment of New Brunswick. One of those people interviewed was Anton Nelessen and Alison Isenberg had been involved in conducting some of the interviews. The oral histories were basically untouched, waiting to be analyzed and distilled into a thesis. The History department offered the option to write a senior honors thesis and this project seemed the perfect topic to study. It fused my interest in history to my budding fascination with city planning. This thesis is the product of that collaboration. I am grateful to Rutgers University for making these opportunities possible.

I extend my deep gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Alison Isenberg. She provided the link between the source materials and me and was instrumental in helping me develop those interviews into a narrative. Her positive attitude and enthusiasm made collaboration pleasing and her comments were critical to the progress of the thesis. Under her guidance I learned how to think and question like a historian. She will be missed at Rutgers as she settles into her new position at Princeton University.

I owe many thanks to Thea Berkhout and Dr. David Listokin of the Bloustein School for allowing me to collaborate with them on their research and oral history project and for their helpful comments. Thea directed me to useful events, helpful people, and David’s “big box of stuff,” an incredible trove of periodicals, reports and information about New Brunswick. I appreciate both serving as second readers of the thesis.

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I am grateful to the many people who took time out of their day to talk to me about New Brunswick. These conversations provided me with new ways to think about the city and I would like to thank the following: Dr. Robert Belvin of the New Brunswick Public Library met with me and helped me understand the city with numerous stories ‘not for attribution.’ Dr. Chris Rasmussen was kind enough to speak with me on a few occasions and allowed me to read drafts of his forthcoming papers about New Brunswick. Dr. Briavel Holcomb met with me and her website Old New Brunswick is a great resource for anybody who is interested in the history of the city. Photographs from that website helped me visually understand the physical changes that have occurred over the last few decades.

I appreciate John J. Heldrich, the ‘Man Who Saved New Brunswick,’ meeting me in his office in
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I offer many thanks to my housemates, Ben Major and Jacob Kafka. Our walks and ruminations about New Brunswick helped to shape much of this thesis. I direct many thanks to my other home in Jersey City, where my parents Robin and Alex and brother David provide much appreciated support.

Lastly, I am deeply grateful to the city of New Brunswick. I am fortunate to be living in the city that is the subject of my thesis. It is thrilling to learn about your local surroundings; peeling back the layers of history is a perfect way to do so. I encourage everybody to explore that which is around you.

While this thesis is made up of the contributions of many, all errors are my own.

Eric Schkrutz
New Brunswick, New Jersey
11 April 2011
Introduction

The Northeast Corridor railroad cuts diagonally through New Brunswick above street level atop a massive stone embankment; to cross the tracks one must travel beneath it. The embankment in some areas makes neighborhood connectivity inconvenient, while in other areas crossing legally from one side to the other legally is impossible.

The railroad is not the only physical barrier. Many of the regional and institutional draws of New Brunswick – the hospitals, Johnson & Johnson, Rutgers University, the Hyatt Regency Hotel – take on the physical form of the “superblock.” Some of these fit the definition of how urban scholar William H. Whyte described “Megastructures:” “huge, multi-purpose complexes…The megastructures are wholly internalized environments, with their own life-support systems and with no obeisance to the streets— one of which, most likely, was de-mapped so the structure could be as big as it is. Their enclosing walls are windowless, and to the city they turn a blank face.”

Saint Peter’s Hospital is three city blocks long; Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital is four. Skyways position RWJ employees and patients above, and off, the street.

The Johnson & Johnson international headquarters is, in the words of the architects I. M. Pei & Partners, an “office in a park, a park in a city” – with a subsidized cafeteria no less. To make space for the headquarters, Catherine Street, as well as parts of Peace, Washington and Water Streets, were “de-mapped.” In altering the historic grid, by removing streets and instituting Johnson & Johnson as the single landowner of a large downtown plot, those public thoroughfares became private property. This became another physical barrier not to be traversed. The other half of Peace Street, along with part of Dennis Street, disappeared during the construction of the Hyatt, Johnson & Johnson’s neighbor to the south and a product of the same architectural firm, I. M. Pei & Partners. Parts of the College Avenue campus of Rutgers University occupy large swaths of land too. This helps to create an appropriate campus setting within the city just as much as it works to divide.

Perhaps most dispiriting is the disconnect between New Brunswick and the Raritan River, caused by what might as well be a ten-foot wall: Route 18. On one side of the highway exists a compact shiny downtown; on the other, a picturesque linear park that has become a home to the homeless.

Such is the nature of New Brunswick. In terms of physical geography, the city has a disjointed feel. The aura of the city has been tarnished by this geographic disjointedness and also pervasive exclusivity. The only downtown public park, Joyce Kilmer Park on the southeast corner of George and Albany streets, has a fence around it and is locked for many hours of the day.

This thesis will explore how New Brunswick transformed from a declining, post-industrial city to a so-called “model” of urban redevelopment. The story is important because New Brunswick achieved success through a comprehensive public-private partnership – a “unity of purpose,” in the words of New Brunswick Tomorrow chairman John Heldrich – that remains to be seen in many other cities. New Brunswick is a unique case study in exploring how places change, which individuals and institutions assert power, and how the many complex dynamics of planning function below the surface as old buildings are demolished and new ones rise up.

The narrative framework of this thesis is derived from the synthesis and analysis of twenty oral history interviews conducted by Dorothea Berkhout and Dr. David Listokin of the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy. The storytellers are twenty key individuals who experienced, and in many ways shaped, the growth of New Brunswick in the second half of the twentieth century. Like any story there are gaps and inaccuracies, half-truths and omissions. I try as often as possible to match up oral histories with existing scholarship, newspapers and publications.

The City of the Traveler

In September, freshmen arrive at Rutgers University in search of a diploma. Later, diploma in hand, most leave. Day and night, patients arrive at Robert Wood Johnson Hospital and Saint Peters for medical treatment. Later, they drive out one of New Brunswick’s many parking lots and go home. On weekdays employees of Johnson & Johnson disembark from the Northeast corridor train or drive into the company parking lot and, except for the occasional cigarette or lunch break, they do not venture out into New Brunswick again until, of course, they must leave. Theatergoers come and go as well, some stop to dine.

This is nothing new. Some have dubbed New Brunswick the “Hub City” or the “Healthcare City;” what about the “City of the Traveler?” Travelers have been passing through New Brunswick since it was called “The River” and traversing the Raritan required the service of Inian’s Ferry. Well situated for a few reasons – on a navigable waterway, at that waterways a crossing point and surrounded by rich agricultural country – the settlement developed early on into a great center of agricultural trade in Colonial America: “Every stream that could turn a wheel had its mill. Warehouses and inns were erected, and the river front was lined with vessels.” In the 18th and early 19th centuries, as the surrounding region grew, New Brunswick matured into a regional hub for commerce and trade. The author of New Brunswick and its Industries observed with fascination in 1873 that, “In these fast days it is almost impossible to conceive of a little city like ours being the entrepot for the products of nearly all the fruitful sections of New Jersey and for a goodly stretch of Pennsylvania territory.”

Technological advances in transportation would alter this relationship. The first blow to the city came in 1833 when the Delaware & Raritan Canal opened to traffic, slashing the travel distance between Pennsylvania and New York. Then, three years later the New Jersey Railroad reached East New Brunswick (present-day Highland Park) as no railroad bridge yet crossed the Raritan River. These new forms of transportation “were blessings in a disguise which lasted for some time, for they gradually affected our trade by permitting the farmers themselves to ship their grain near their own doors in many cases, and at our depot without the intervention of our middlemen, in other cases.” The new forms of transportation, which increased travel speeds and cut distances, eroded the locational advantages of New Brunswick. In 1852, when the Central Railroad was extended to link Somerville and Elizabeth, New Brunswick was bypassed out of commerce. Products from Somerville and surrounding agricultural Somerset County could be transported to northern markets without ever stopping in Hub City. This change manifested itself visibly: “grass literally came to grow in Church street. The town was dull and seemed dead.”

Fast-forward more than a century, after subsequent periods of industrialization and de-industrialization, some made similar remarks in the years before New Brunswick’s recent and much-heralded redevelopment. New Brunswick, like many other American cities during the late 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s, experienced economic and social problems engendered by larger, economic and demographic changes in America. Just as New Brunswick was bypassed by the Central Railroad in the mid-19th century, the city was again bypassed by new and nearby shopping malls, anti-urban Federal housing policies and highway construction in the second half of the 20th century. Travel became directed less and less to New Brunswick, and more and more around or through it. Robert Campbell, former Chief

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5 Ibid., 14
6 Ibid., 14
Financial Officer for Johnson & Johnson, described that time in New Brunswick succinctly: “In the 60’s here, you could shoot a cannon down the street at night here and not hit anyone.”

So what then changed by 1988, when in a feature article about New Brunswick in New Jersey Business, James T. Prior likened the city to “the Phoenix risen from the ashes of urban decay”? Why, in 1984, did New Jersey Governor Kean regard the redevelopment of New Brunswick as “a nationally recognized model of how a true partnership of the private and public sectors can revitalize an urban center?” And what to make of the 1979 comment by William B. Shore, vice president of the Regional Plan Association, in the New York Times that the public-private partnership should serve as a model for other urban areas?

About New Brunswick

New Brunswick is small. The population barely reaches over fifty thousand people and the total land area is just over five square miles. Looking out from the highest floor of the Johnson & Johnson headquarters tower it is possible to see the entire city. In this sense, the size of the city is manageable. “You could do a project and make a difference because it’s meaningful within a 5-1/2 square mile radius [sic], physically,” Thomas Kelso, campaign manager for Mayor John Lynch (1979 to 1991) and later general counsel to the New Brunswick Development Corporation, said. “We weren’t so big that you couldn’t see positive results.” Within this small city there are large, substantial institutions that employ thousands, bring visitors, and both constitute and stimulate the local economy of New Brunswick. For these reasons the institutions have considerable leverage over the fate of the city, the main argument being “Without us, the city will suffer.”

In a way, these institutions are larger than the city itself. Rutgers University infuses close to thirty thousand undergraduate students and over ten thousand graduate students into New Brunswick each year and employs over five thousand workers. Nearly one-fifth of New Brunswick residents are Rutgers students. For many people, the State University is the reason they know where the city is. Two major hospitals, Robert Wood Johnson and Saint Peter’s, merit New Brunswick the white-on-red letters painted on the railroad trestle that pronounce “Healthcare City,” and together with the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, employ well over nine thousand workers. New Brunswick is also the governmental center – the “Seat” – of Middlesex County. On Bayard Street, administrative offices and courthouses draw politicians, bureaucrats and lawyers downtown daily. There is the hundred-acre Bristol-Myers Squibb research and development facility on the fringes of the city, and then there is the Johnson & Johnson twenty-acre international headquarters in the central business district.

The juxtaposition of large powerful institutions within a small city creates a unique environment in which those institutions can dominate the discourse of change. Perhaps most important to this environment is how the private institutions were able to partner with local government. The New Brunswick Development Corporation (Devco) and New Brunswick Tomorrow (NB), two private organizations, were created amid talks of urban revitalization in the mid-1970s as a way to bridge the public and private sectors. Devco – then and now, a Who’s Who of local leaders including bank presidents, Johnson & Johnson executives, Rutgers officials, community activists – plans, develops and initiates large scale construction projects. Devco has been tremendously successful at

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7 Interview with Robert Campbell, 15
8 Prior, James T. "New Brunswick Focuses on Improved Quality of Life." New Jersey Business. Apr. 1988, 1
9 One city planner I spoke to, Claire Davis, called New Brunswick ‘a suburb trying to be a city.’
10 Interview with Andy Baglivo, 24; Interview with James Cahill, 26
11 Interview with Thomas Kelso, 13. He most likely meant “5-1/2 square miles,” roughly the land area of New Brunswick.
12 The numbers of employees is for the 2009/2010 academic year. More information about employment can be found at http://oirap.rutgers.edu/instchar/factpdf/facstf09.pdf
attracting private investment. Looking at the past major developments in New Brunswick, chances are Devco was involved.

Whereas Devco is the “hard” side (construction and real estate investment) of the redevelopment strategy, New Brunswick Tomorrow is the “soft” side. New Brunswick Tomorrow began with a focus on planning, but then transitioned its focus to city beautification projects and then to improving local quality of life on a social level. Every two years, NBT and the Eagleton Institute of Politics’ Center for Public Interest Polling surveyed one thousand New Brunswick residents about the city. A core set of questions such as, “How would you rate New Brunswick as a place to live?” have remained unchanged since the survey began in 1978. The results of the survey provide Devco and New Brunswick Tomorrow with valuable feedback about their efforts and, in the late 1970s, proved to city leaders that residents were receptive to change. “It suddenly made the opinion-makers and the money-providers at Johnson & Johnson aware that this was not a lost cause;” said Andy Baglivo, a public relations consultant hired by Johnson & Johnson who helped develop the idea for a poll.

Devco and New Brunswick Tomorrow were created following the recommendations of The American Cities Corporation which, in a study regarding the potential for redevelopment in New Brunswick, determined that the city could reverse years of neglect and disinvestment if there were two “thrusts”: redevelopment and social services. That study was funded by Johnson & Johnson, the health care giant whose reach extends not only to the sixty countries where its subsidiaries operate, but also on a more micro level into the workings of the New Brunswick economy and political sphere. Johnson & Johnson can trace its New Brunswick roots to 1886 when three Johnson brothers – Robert Wood, James Wood and Edward Mead – began manufacturing sterile medical supplies. Though the company’s manufacturing operations grew and globalized, Johnson & Johnson maintained its headquarters in New Brunswick. Its local presence became uncertain in the 1970s when the company had outgrown its existing headquarters and was considering relocating to a suburban location, like so many other corporations that fled from cities. This temptation to leave was challenged by local executives, namely John J. Heldrich and Richard Sellars, and by the company Credo which declared, “We are responsible to the communities in which we live and work.” In the mid 1970s, in a supposedly tense board meeting decided by one vote, Johnson & Johnson committed to expanding its headquarters within New Brunswick – the city sullied by recent riots, a declining tax base, and the perception of crime and violence – under the condition that a comprehensive effort be made at revitalization and investment. So naturally, Johnson & Johnson led this effort. However, with such leverage some critics questioned whether municipal decisions were being made at City Hall or in a corporate boardroom. That Johnson & Johnson employees were also mayors of New Brunswick and chairmen of New Brunswick Tomorrow and Devco did not help that perception. The subsequent transformation of downtown, historic New Brunswick that resulted from Johnson & Johnson building its international headquarters and a Hyatt Regency hotel and conference center reinforced the idea that the small city was dependent on the allure and prestige of its powerful institutions, and while municipal legal power lay in City Hall, the leverage that actually developed change was somewhere else.

The history of the central business district – its ups and downs, demolitions and investments, and comprehensive transformation – constitutes a unique narrative about the dynamics of change in New Brunswick. That transformation continues to this day. In 2011, while many cities sit on their hands waiting for better economic conditions for development, a huge red crane towers over the base of what will be the tallest building in New Brunswick. And as construction workers scurry about the Gateway Project, the New Brunswick Development Corporation is already focusing on its next project, the twelve-story Wellness Plaza, a partnership with the New Brunswick Parking Authority and Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital. This is rather typical of the development in New Brunswick, characterized by partnerships among major institutions, large-scale redevelopment projects, and

13 Interview with Andy Baglivo, 21
insistence on momentum. “Cities are very fragile places,” Christopher Paladino, president of Devco said. “You're never done, and if you're not moving forward you're definitely moving backwards.”

What transpired on top of these streets and within the buildings, homes and stores is the story of New Brunswick. The physical history of New Brunswick has been bulldozed in some places and paved over in others. While pursuing new construction and increased investment, the goal being to ‘move the city forward,’ New Brunswick and developers have failed to integrate the rich history of the city into the current process of growth which involves much more tearing down and rebuilding than preservation. Integration of the past does not mean that New Brunswick should be a museum or another version of Colonial Williamsburg – although, according to a local myth, the city did have enough historic significance for John D. Rockefeller, Jr. to consider it before settling on the Virginia site.\textsuperscript{14} Rather, the past can be used to create a mosaic of the old and the new. The tavern where the \textit{Declaration of Independence} was read for the third time in 1776 \textit{could}, for example, neighbor the modern Johnson & Johnson headquarters, and this would give the city a sense of depth, of identity. Instead that tavern was demolished, lost to obscurity, like nearly all of New Brunswick’s historical buildings. Those that remain are the rare exceptions.

Chapter One: 1950’s – 1970’s

Middlesex County (and New Brunswick): The Place to Be (Avoided)

New Brunswick is no stranger to change. Whereas in the second half of the nineteenth century, industries crowded the Raritan canal waterfront and a small company named Johnson & Johnson was just beginning to manufacture surgical bandages, by the second half of the twentieth century, many of those industries had withdrawn from the city, seeking cheaper land and labor in the nationwide trend of deindustrialization. Hub City retained importance in the 1950s and 1960s as a Middlesex County shopping center, but that, too, changed when shoppers began favoring nearby shopping malls. The entire region was reorganizing itself. This chapter explores that reorganization, changes to the school system, race relations and the overarching de-regionalization that hollowed out New Brunswick.

Between 1950 and 1970, Middlesex County experienced tremendous population growth. In 1960, the population increased by 63.8% to 433,856 people and then in 1970 by another 34.6% to 583,813 people. In the midst of the Baby Boom, Middlesex County schools felt the strain, announcing in 1963 the record enrollment of 105,000 children. The New Brunswick high school, which also admitted students from Milltown and North Brunswick, was so crowded that the school was forced to operate in three shifts. With the overcrowding was the pervasive racial strife of the Civil Rights period.

On 23 September 1969 the *New York Times* reported that New Brunswick’s eleven public schools would not open the next day: the liability insurance had expired and no insurance company would provide a new policy, “because it is too great a risk.” In addition to the insurance issue, the *Times* reported that 175 white students had boycotted classes “to support their demand for more police protection inside the school.” The article explained, “The boycott followed the beating of three white students last week and demonstrations by black students who are demanding free busing, the lifting of a no-smoking ban at the school and the removal of security patrols.”

In the summer of 1973, North Brunswick Township completed construction of its own high school, ostensibly to accommodate its growing population. In 1970 the township’s population jumped 65.3% from the previous decade. “Primarily it was the population growth that [North Brunswick Township] could then now support their own high school,” Anthony Marchetta remembers, “but the subtext was we were going to be in a safer environment, we’re not going to have the minorities, we’re not going to have the poor people there, we’re going to create our own little suburban community, enclave.” This added conflict to what had become a protracted dispute over busing and racial integration in regional schools. White parents sued so that their children could attend newer, local schools, while New Brunswick school officials pleaded that “the loss of the out-of-town students, virtually all of them white, would make the city’s high school virtually all black.”

Looking at the schools is another way to understand how the social nature of New Brunswick had changed in a few years. Anthony Marchetta, who had graduated from New Brunswick High School in 1967, returned in 1971 to substitute teach and “was really somewhat shocked by what I had seen.” When he was a student, wearing blue jeans resulted in suspension for the day. However, as a substitute teacher he noticed, “everybody including the teachers were wearing blue jeans. I went up to the assistant principal at the time I was there, and said what happened?...the whole attitude in the

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2 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Interview with Anthony Marchetta, 6
7 Interview with Anthony Marchetta, 7
school system had changed dramatically. It became less formal, more casual, and less in control.”8 The schools were dangerous: “My apartment mate at the time had almost a full-time job because the teacher that he was substituting for had been pushed down the stairs. Twice!” Marchetta remarked—and so families with children that could leave New Brunswick did.

The late 1960’s were troublesome years in New Brunswick. Middlesex County exploded in population while New Brunswick lost almost all of its department stores and much of its middle class, and it watched its tax revenues dwindle. Adding to this loss was the impending secession of North Brunswick from the public high school system. This would later prove to destabilize the schools: when Anthony Marchetta graduated in 1967, New Brunswick high school sent students to “all the Ivy’s;” a little more than a decade later a New York Times article noted that the school system was “criticized as among the worst in the state.”9 The schools were not the only problem, but rather they were indicative of more widespread decline afflicting New Brunswick.

Who could have foreseen the seeds of destruction sown in 1956? “Saturdays you would go downtown in New Brunswick, and it was so crowded you could barely walk the streets…There must have been a dozen men’s clothing stores...four movie theatres, the State, the Rivoli, the Strand, and the Albany,” recalled Anthony Marchetta—the assistant city administrator to Mayor John A. Lynch, Jr.—thinking about the 1950s.10 New Brunswick enjoyed a strong regional pull and the downtown business district was vibrant. Christopher Paladino, current president of the New Brunswick Development Corporation, commented, “You came here to go to church. You came to New Brunswick to buy your school shoes. You went to the doctor. If you were lucky, you got to...eat at the lunch counter at...Arnold Constable or P.J. Young’s.”11 However, by 1975 those two department stores and five others had all abandoned downtown New Brunswick.12 John A. Lynch, Jr., mayor of New Brunswick from 1979 to 1991, said, “stores were empty and crime was rampant. Had all the symptoms of an aging urban community as we’ve seen in so many in New Jersey [cities].”13

The year 1956 was a beginning of sorts to the ill-fated decline of New Brunswick. That summer, on 29 June, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act into law, calling for the construction of a 41,000-mile highway system.14 The increasingly auto-oriented nature of America would both clog New Brunswick with cars trying to travel through the downtown and facilitate a withdrawal to newer, safer towns. In December of that same year, the Bamberger department store announced plans to build a new store that would serve as the hub of the proposed Menlo Park Shopping Center in Edison Township, New Jersey, only nine miles away from downtown New Brunswick.15 When the department store opened in 1959, “Bamberger’s officials released 1,000 doves to symbolize the company’s feeling of goodwill toward residents of Middlesex County.”16

Residents seemed to follow the goodwill out to the suburbs. “Until 1950, New Brunswick and Perth Amboy were home to one-third of Middlesex County residents,” Chris Rasmussen writes in his forthcoming article New Brunswick in the Aftermath of the 1967 Newark Riot: “By 1960, they were home to 18 percent.”17 Again, federal policy assisted in the change. The G.I. Bill facilitated suburban home ownership while simultaneously discouraging similar investment in cities. Former New

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8 Ibid.
10 Interview with Anthony Marchetta, 4
11 Interview with Christopher Paladino, 12
13 Interview with John A. Lynch, Jr., 5
Brunswick mayor Patricia Sheehan recalled that her husband could not obtain a mortgage in New Brunswick because the housing stock was too old to qualify. In a time where the new – new shopping malls, new houses, new roads – was endorsed by federal policy, New Brunswick did its own clearing of the old to make room for the new: the city earned the unique distinction of having the only site on the historic register to be removed from that list years later, the Hiram Market Historic District. The New Jersey Register of Historic Places offers a few clues about the site: it was added on 25 June 1980 but was “largely demolished, deregistration pending.” The addendum to that register noted that the Hiram district had been removed on 6 December 1995, many years after demolition had already removed nearly all of its history.

Memorial Homes: “Designed for Failure”

In 1958, on a large swath of land wiped clean under the auspices of Urban Renewal, the Memorial Homes were built. These four towers contained 246 units and rose eight stories over the footprint of what had once been an African-American neighborhood. Importantly, the Memorial Homes bordered the fringes of the central business district and Memorial Parkway, which, as far as New Brunswick goes, is waterfront property. David Harris, President of the New Brunswick chapter of the Urban League and director of the Greater New Brunswick Day Care, recognized that the apartments carried an element of “built-in failure.” “You cannot have those four buildings and over 1,000 people, eight floors with one elevator in each building. So when the elevator was down, you had to lug it up to the seventh floor. There were no laundry facilities,” he remarked. To him, that the buildings had a “density that was greater than Central Harlem” and a lack of essential amenities indicated that “this was a temporary, a transitional stroke.”

Indeed, the Memorial Homes were later considered one of two main impediments to downtown revitalization, the other being Route 18. “Everyone believed that there was no way that [the River Watch Commons apartments] would get off the ground unless you could tear Memorial Homes down,” said Christiana Foglio, President of Devco during the 1980s. “So for probably 50 percent of my time here we were working on strategies to tear the public housing down.” They were finally demolished – importantly, to facilitate downtown market-rate residential construction, not for reasons relating to the welfare of the residents – but not until August 2001. This should not discredit Harris’ notion that the public housing was temporary. Rather it indicates how slowly some developments in New Brunswick took to materialize. Despite Memorial Homes implicit design for failure, the apartments remained just outside of the central business district for over four decades.

The 1960s

During the 1960s New Brunswick faced the continuing issues associated with deindustrialization and suburbanization as well as newer issues related to its waning role as a regional hub. A significant rift unfolded with the city’s neighbor across the Raritan River; “Highland Park and New Brunswick were always one community. Through the ‘50’s, they were really one community,” Eric Krebs recalls. However, “With the crime and the drugs which came to New Brunswick but not Highland Park, it just sort of evolved into two very different worlds.” The trend of de-regionalization involved education too. New Brunswick High School lost hundreds of students when North Brunswick
broke off and built its own high school. This move – prompted by racial tensions, safety issues and North Brunswick’s ballooning population – greatly diminished the size of the New Brunswick High School student body and at the same time made it overwhelmingly composed of minority students. After the de-regionalization of the New Brunswick High School, the school became more dangerous, and many remaining families who could afford to leave the city did.

In the late 1960s, the city was “where your parents told you, like, “you're in New Brunswick, lock the doors when we would drive through.” I mean it had changed that quickly,” Christopher Paladino remembers. Looking back on the “chaos” of the 1960s, Patricia Sheehan – mayor of New Brunswick from 1967 to 1974 – elaborated on the state of decay:

So now you have New Brunswick in 1967 where more than a third of the land area is tax exempt. More than a third of the residents are over 65, and more than third of the residents are school age. The school age population primarily was in public housing, and the over 65 was primarily in grandma's house, 25-foot lot, you know, cheek to jowl over on the side streets of New Brunswick, and so much of the “racial crisis” was really a generational thing. You know momma and poppa or maybe just momma is now living in this 25-foot lot house that raised two or six children. They're all educated, and they're all living in Kendall Park or North Brunswick or South Brunswick. A lot of them didn't go very far away, but they were out of New Brunswick. Who wouldn't want a new house and a car and a driveway, the American dream? 

Events in the summer of 1967 would reinforce the reality and perception that for many middle class white families, New Brunswick was to be avoided.

“A Little Riot”

“I vividly remember, you know, the picture of Pat Sheehan in The Home News,” Chris Paladino said, “standing on the hood on the front end of a car with a megaphone, you know, talking to a crowd

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24 Interview with Christopher Paladino, 12
25 Interview with Patricia Sheehan, 9
of people.”

That crowd represented the coalescence of the myriad of issues relating to the urban plight of New Brunswick’s black youth. In the summer of 1967 New Brunswick experienced episodes of unrest – not quite riots – that had erupted in Detroit and Newark in much more dramatic and violent fashion. Hundreds of disgruntled black youths spilled into the streets of downtown New Brunswick on 17 and 18 July. “Sparks from the ugly fires of hate that have swept Newark and Plainfield since Thursday burst into flames here last night,” Reginald Kavanugh reported in the Daily Home News the day after the first riot. He wrote that the protesters were “small bands of rampaging Negro teen-agers and their prime targets were downtown stores, shops in the Remsen Avenue neighborhood and scattered dwellings.”

At midnight on the second night of the disturbances, in a preventative measure police set up road blocks at the Albany Street Bridge, Route 27 and Route 18 in case the movement intensified and attempted to spread to surrounding towns. This did not happen in what the Daily Home News reporter Noel J. Lipson called “a little riot.” There was minor property damage. Megaphone in hand, Mayor Sheehan was able to quell to crowds and avert greater destruction that summer. However, more trouble awaited New Brunswick.

Three years later in the summer of 1970, disgruntled black youths and chaos returned to the streets of downtown New Brunswick. A New York Times headline proclaimed: “Fire Bombs Hurl in Business Area of New Brunswick.” Chris Rasmussen writes, “Their protest was triggered when the city canceled a dance scheduled to be held at the Memorial Homes housing complex in response to violence that had ensued after a dance there the previous week. But the youths’ complaints ran deeper, and echoed the frustrations of young black residents of the city in 1967: no jobs, poor housing, and lack of recreation.” The overwhelming response was not a rush to help the frustrated young black residents. But rather, there was a move in the other direction, out of the city: “While deindustrialization and suburbanization doubtless would have reshaped New Brunswick even if race relations had not become so tense, the near-riot led some whites and businesses to leave the city. In 1960, blacks comprised 15.4 percent of the city’s population. In 1970, that percentage had risen to 22.7 percent; in 1980, it was 28.5 percent.

The fate of New Brunswick was unknown in the 1970s as demographics shifted, marked by an increasing minority population and the infiltration and disruption of neighborhoods by a growing Rutgers student body. “The community became a daytime community and less and less of a full-time community for residents,” Anthony Marchetta said. “The neighborhoods started to get broken up a little bit. In part because Rutgers had students and was growing and a lot of the neighborhoods started having more students living in them.” These students, coming and going with the changing semesters, constituted a part of the city’s transient population and contributed to the demographic flux in New Brunswick as other residents, shaken by the near-riots, left. That New Brunswick housing is about seventy percent rentals today – compared to the national average of about thirty percent – allows that the city has still not shaken off that transient nature.

In a city whose history followed the unpredictable ebbs and flows of economic cycles, from where local farmers brought their crops to where North Brunswick children bought their shoes, New Brunswick – a city of covered up and bulldozed history – would ironically find its reluctant savior in perhaps its eldest resident, an international medical supplies company by the name of Johnson & Johnson.

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26 Interview with Christopher Paladino, 12
32 Interview with Anthony Marchetta, 4
Chapter Two: 1970’s
Coalition Formation and the Dawn of Revitalization

To help understand the degree of decline that New Brunswick experienced, in 1943 the central business district collected $1.8 million in municipal taxes and by the early 1970s the taxes for that same area had dwindled to $300,000. The New Jersey Turnpike and the Garden State Parkway – local symbols of the postwar “Freeway Era” – bled population and commerce from downtown New Brunswick and supplied escape routes into surrounding suburban developments and shopping centers. Jason Hackworth writes in The Neoliberal City that, “the regional profitability landscape was grossly uneven by the mid-1970s, so there were significant barriers to real estate investment in New Brunswick. The city had rent control, high taxes, and relatively expensive labor.” With a diminished tax base, it became increasingly difficult for New Brunswick to supply its residents with essential services, and the city was trapped in a “steady and inexorable cycle of urban deterioration.” In a speech at the Akron Roundtable on 18 August 1988, the former vice president of corporate affairs for Johnson & Johnson, John J. Heldrich reflected that “Even worse than the physical and economic damage was a feeling of helplessness. Everything seemed to stop. It was like waiting to die. We had hit bottom.”

The Decision

In 1988, the Akron Roundtable presented a special series with the theme “Turnaround Cities.” The invited speakers were from cities experiencing dramatic change: Boston and Lowell, Massachusetts; Rochester, New York; Dayton, Ohio; Wilmington, Delaware; and New Brunswick, New Jersey. John J. Heldrich, the New Brunswick representative, was no stranger to the change that had taken place. Indeed, he was not only a witness since his birth in 1929, but also an active agent in its change. Heldrich grew up playing baseball off the walls of the New Brunswick Johnson & Johnson factories “dreaming two dreams…one was to play for the New York Yankees and the other was to work for Johnson and Johnson.” In 1939, when Heldrich was ten years old, this was still a possible dream: the Johnson & Johnson plant sprawled out along the Raritan River, fifty-one red brick buildings on the same land where the company was established in 1886.

John Heldrich returned to New Brunswick after overseas deployment in World War II and enrolled in night classes at Rutgers University. As the fate of New Brunswick would have it, Heldrich never joined the ranks of Mickey Mantle and Yogi Berra for the Yankees, but instead found employment among the likes of General Robert Wood Johnson and Richard Sellars of Johnson & Johnson in 1950. He spent two decades managing several plants for Johnson & Johnson, was promoted to the corporate offices, and by the late 1960s was assigned to develop the company’s worldwide administrative structure. By that time, Johnson & Johnson, a booming international corporation, had outgrown its historic New Brunswick headquarters and was faced with a critical decision: to stay or to leave New Brunswick.

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1 Remarks. John J. Heldrich. Akron Roundtable, 3
3 Remarks. John J. Heldrich. Akron Roundtable, 3
4 Ibid., 4
5 Interview with John Heldrich, 3
8 Interview with John J. Heldrich, 3
Johnson & Johnson was at no loss for reasons to leave: the prospects of a future in New Brunswick were questionable and the company had “extensive land holdings in some of the most beautiful suburban and rural locations in New Jersey.”

George Street Playhouse founder Eric Krebs said, “You have to envision that, in 1974, Downtown New Brunswick had nothing open at all throughout the entire downtown area except for one place called Gino’s.” The comment is hyperbole, but illustrates the perception that the business district was desolate. Despite this, Richard B. Sellars, the chairman of Johnson & Johnson, stated in a 1974 speech: “I am personally confident that under the right conditions, the city of New Brunswick can be revitalized and move into an era of progress and prosperity.” Though he warned, “I am equally certain, however, that no single element of the city can make this happen on its own.”

In 1974, the New York Times reported in an article “J&J’s New Brunswick Tract”, that since December 1973, “four Philadelphia-based concerns, whose executives and source of funds were a closely guarded corporate secret, have invested more than $1.5-million to option or purchase property in a decaying six-block downtown section.” Bill D. Ross wrote, “Over the months, a main topic of conversation among city and county officials, business and civic leaders, and residents and shopkeepers in the affected area has been: “Who is behind the buying spree and what are they going to do with the property?” Richard B. Sellars responded in a statement that the property acquisitions were “a possible solution to our long-range expansion and modernization requirements.” The tract in question – bordered by Albany Street, George Street, Water Street and the Pennsylvania rail embankment – should be familiar to the modern reader: here lies the international headquarters of Johnson & Johnson.

Coalition Formation

If you walk into the lobby of the Johnson & Johnson headquarters today you would find hanging on the wall the company Credo. Robert Wood Johnson wrote the credo in 1943, the third part reading, “We are responsible to the communities in which we live and work...We must be good citizens – support good works and charities.”

Andy Baglivo, hired by John Heldrich as a consultant in redevelopment said, “They have their corporate credo, which, believe it or not, they actually follow.” However, he added, that despite their sense of responsibility to the community “they didn’t want to stay here if they became an oasis in the middle of decay.”

In the mid-1970s, in a board vote decided by the chairman Richard Sellars, Johnson & Johnson made the “tentative decision” to stay in New Brunswick given the promise that the city would commit itself to holistic revitalization. At the Akron Roundtable, John Heldrich later remarked, “Dick Sellars took the lead in bringing together a representative group of New Brunswick business and institutional leaders.” The group decided to hire the American City Corporation, a subsidiary of the Rouse Corporation, “to determine whether New Brunswick had the potential for revitalization.” The American Cities Corporation – led by CEO Leo Molinaro – attracted the interest of John Heldrich

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9 Remarks. John J. Heldrich. Akron Roundtable, 4
10 Interview with Eric Krebs, 18
13 Ibid.
14 Johnson & Johnson Credo: http://www.jnj.com/wps/wcm/connect/c7933f004f5563df9e22be1bb31559c7/our-credo.pdf?MOD=AJPERES
15 Interview with Andy Baglivo, 10
17 Remarks. John J. Heldrich. Akron Roundtable, 6
18 Ibid.
because of American Cities’ involvement in the “Greater Hartford Process,” a coalition of private business and public government. Heldrich said: “I became enamored with the [Hartford Process and the] fact that they were forming a coalition between the business sector, the private sector, the public sector and the community. So conceptually, it was a wonderful model.”

John Heldrich told Sellars about the Hartford Process and arranged for him to meet Leo Molinaro. After an hour-long meeting, Heldrich recalls Molinaro saying of Richard Sellars: “He’s not ready, John. He’s not ready for what we – we’re talking about – taking on a whole city…You’re going to have to convince him to take on the city.” It is not clear what changed his mind but about a year later, as Heldrich recalled, Dick Sellars called him on the telephone and said, “John, that…guy you got in here a year or so ago…Get him back.”

At the Johnson & Johnson Guest House, an expansive white property with impeccable landscaping, tucked into a corner of New Brunswick between Mile Run creek and the Delaware & Raritan Canal, Richard Sellars convened a meeting with the Mayor (and Johnson & Johnson executive) Richard J. Mulligan (1975 – 1978), the heads of the Middlesex General (now Robert Wood Johnson) and Saint Peters hospitals, Rutgers President Edward Bloustein, bankers (at the time New Brunswick had seven banks, five of which were local) and community leaders.

The New Brunswick Study Committee, with John Heldrich serving as the chairman, decided to hire the American City Corporation, a subsidiary of the Rouse Corporation, to conduct a study that would determine, essentially, if the city could be saved. Each representative pledged to cover a part of the cost of the study and Johnson & Johnson pledged to cover the difference.

In January 1975, after interviewing more than one hundred “individuals throughout the community,” The American Cities Corporation released its comprehensive study. On the first page, in a letter to Chairman John Heldrich, Leo Molinaro wrote that New Brunswick did have the potential for revitalization so long as the private sector was thoroughly involved. “While we fully recognize and appreciate the indispensable roles to be played by institutions, government and the residential population,” Leo Molinaro wrote, “our experience throughout the nation has convinced us the business community has leadership resources that are often under-utilized in community development.” This set the precedent for the involvement of Johnson & Johnson.

The study described four conditions that hampered future growth: no citywide goals; uncoordinated community leadership; the negative perception of New Brunswick both in the city and throughout the region; and the absence of a development corporation that could act in the public interest. On the other hand, American Cities found that New Brunswick possessed numerous assets that would foster future growth: advantages in location and access to major transportation networks; a sound economic base; the institutional strength of New Brunswick in health and education; the seat of Middlesex County; local corporations interested in the revitalization of New Brunswick; and the Raritan River, although the report noted that “this resource has become obscured and diminished by random development and consistent neglect.” The city was perhaps not as bad as some had perceived. Indeed, when Andy Baglivo was hired by Johnson & Johnson as a public relations consultant during this time, he was driven around supposedly hopeless New Brunswick neighborhoods and thought: “I’m

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19 Interview with John Heldrich, 7-8
20 Interview with John Heldrich, 8-9
21 Interview with John Heldrich, 9
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., 10
25 Ibid., ii
looking at them…and I said, “You know, in Newark this would be a pretty good residential neighborhood.”

The American Cities Corporation recommended a public-private partnership to plan and implement the revitalization of New Brunswick. The study called for New Brunswick Tomorrow, which would be responsible for developing community goals and determining development priorities. Those priorities would then be implemented by the New Brunswick Development Corporation, “a for-profit private development corporation in the public interest with one overriding mission: To plan, package, finance, design, construct and manage new facilities consistent with goals of revitalization.”

This mission involved demonstrating to developers that New Brunswick was worthy of private investment. The study wrote that “Any sound developer will be wary of an inner city project until he sees public and private programs and actions underway on the land around the project area he is expected to develop.”

About a half year later, after the study was released on 1 July 1975 – following the advice of the American Cities Corporation – New Brunswick Tomorrow (NBT) was officially formed as a union of private, public and community stakeholders. New Brunswick Tomorrow took the form of a corporation with a staff and board of directors. John Heldrich, the corporate vice president of Johnson & Johnson, was elected chairman. In the 1988 Akron Roundtable speech, Heldrich later commented, “As a private, non-profit corporation, it was not mired in the bureaucracy and the political pressures that often exist in the public sector.”

The formation of New Brunswick Tomorrow was unique in that it was able to exist outside of the public sphere while including members of the local government. Two initial goals of NBT were economic development in the central business district and neighborhood preservation.

On 30 January 1976 the New Brunswick Development Corporation (Devco) – a private, for-profit formed following the advice of American Cities – was created to serve as the physical implementation partner of New Brunswick Tomorrow. Richard Sellars, the chairman and chief executive of Johnson & Johnson, was elected chairman of the Devco board.

Urban Planning & Testing: Research & Development?

In the middle of 1976, New Brunswick Tomorrow commissioned the architectural and planning firm I. M. Pei & Partners to develop a conceptual land-use plan for the central business district. The plan included commercial office buildings, a hotel, town houses, a cultural center, and improved traffic circulation. In the 26 May 1976 New York Times article “I. M. Pei Proposes a Rebirth for New Brunswick,” the architect is quoted as saying, “New Brunswick’s business district is kind of sick.” Perhaps alluding to the American Cities study he added, “but compared with other center cities its neighborhoods are stable and the city is manageable.”

The plan designated specific sections of the central business district – mixed-use office, government center, retail spine (along George Street), hotel and residential neighborhood – which, when compared to actual development, have been faithfully followed.

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26 Interview with Andy Baglivo, 24-25
27 The American City Corporation. Trends, Issues and Priorities In the Revitalization of New Brunswick, New Jersey. Columbia, Maryland, January, 1975, vii
28 Ibid., 33
29 Remarks. John J. Heldrich. Akron Roundtable, 8
30 New Brunswick Tomorrow. 1980 Annual Report
31 New Brunswick Tomorrow. “Downtown Renewal Plan as presented by I. M. Pei & Partners”
33 New Brunswick Tomorrow. “Downtown Renewal Plan as presented by I. M. Pei & Partners”
An important element of the plan was the extension of Route 18 across the Raritan River, which Pei described as “vital to the future of New Brunswick.” The parkway was problematic because drivers wishing to travel westward on Route 18 had to take Route 27 (Albany Street Bridge) across the Raritan and then continue again on Route 18 in Highland Park; the abrupt ending at Albany Street dumped traffic directly into the central business district. The American Cities Corporation study described how the impasse worked against the natural advantages of the location of New Brunswick.

The two available bridges—Albany Street and Landing Lane—are totally inadequate to meet current demands. As a result, the congestion works like a tide each day that floods the central business district with cars—not of prospective customers, but of irate, impatient commuters trying to make their way home or to work. This daily congestion…continues to be a major unresolved issue that works against the advantages of location.

The extension of Route 18, which would create a third bridge across the Raritan, was proposed in 1948 and stymied for years. Criticized by environmental groups for paving over 6,000 feet of the Delaware & Raritan Canal and by Rutgers students because the new route would travel behind the three River Dorms and the Raritan River, Route 18 became a contentious issue. The New York Times reported that the New Jersey Commissioner of Labor and Industry Joseph A. Hoffman, “declared that the proposed route ‘is vital to the economic revitalization of the New Brunswick area and, in the last analysis, is essential to the economic development of our state.’”

Downtown traffic congestion was viewed as such an impediment to revitalization that Johnson & Johnson refused to build its international headquarters without construction of the Route 18 extension.

Uncertain of the public’s support for the revitalization, in 1976 New Brunswick Tomorrow conducted a citywide poll by the Eagleton Institute of Rutgers University to determine what residents thought about the condition of the city and efforts to improve it. Andy Baglivo, a former reporter who was hired as a consultant by Johnson & Johnson as a personnel resource that they could contribute to New Brunswick Tomorrow, suggested the idea of a poll. The Eagleton Institute was considered appropriate because “it’s very difficult to say that a university, particularly a prestigious one like Rutgers, would have a poll that would say, “Hey, what do you want us to find?” In August the results were released and indicated that the residents were not as anti-renewal as Johnson & Johnson thought. They were generally supportive. Four years later the 1980 poll found that “Three-quarters of permanent New Brunswick residents approve of what New Brunswick Tomorrow is trying to do, with only 7% disapproving.”

That is not to say Devco and New Brunswick Tomorrow were formed without criticism. The success and influence of both private organizations involved “working hand-in-hand with governmental agencies, and even [usurping] some governmental planning responsibilities.” Board members were appointed, not elected, and many of those members did not live in New Brunswick.

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34 Ibid.
36 "Bardin Ruling on Route 18 Shift Awaited." New York Times. 6 Apr. 1975
37 Ibid.
38 Indeed, perhaps J&J’s most important contribution to New Brunswick – after their decision to stay -- was personnel. In the 1970’s and 1980’s New Brunswick had trouble attracting talent to municipal positions.
39 Interview with Andy Baglivo, 19
Christina Foglio, who served as Devco president in the late 1980s, said, “we could not have done what we did at Devco with community members at the table.”

The two private organizations created a streamlined path to urban development that existed outside of public democratic processes. “I think in the first ten years of New Brunswick’s redevelopment it was a small amount of people with a tremendous amount of power that directed everything that was going to happen,” Foglio said. That tremendous amount of power created an atmosphere where large projects could develop – certainly not the case in other struggling cities – with the catch being that community participation would be kept to a safe minimum.

Plaza II

New Brunswick is home to three buildings designed by I. M. Pei & Partners, the firm renowned for its design of the glass pyramid that stands before the Louvre in Paris. Two of those buildings are well-known – Johnson & Johnson’s headquarters and the Hyatt Regency hotel – though the other, Plaza II, while less significant in size, was important in ending a dry-spell in which no new office construction had been built in downtown New Brunswick. In Pei’s conceptual plan for downtown revitalization, he designed a modern, red-brick building to fill the gap between Plaza I and the United Methodist Church on George Street that was cleared in the 1960s under Urban Renewal. Though an unremarkable structure, a remarkable amount of effort was required to begin construction. The New York Times reported on 14 April 1977 that Johnson & Johnson contributed 25% of the financing and seven other banks and lenders provided the rest. Walter H. Waggoner wrote that New Brunswick

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43 Interview with Christina Foglio, 30
44 Ibid., 32
officials expected the building “to help reverse the deterioration of the central business district.”

Says Anthony Marchetta, “No one would finance it, and they ultimately had to put together a consortium of something like a dozen banks to fund that little office building because nobody wanted to take the risk of investing in New Brunswick. That’s how bad it was. Nobody would fund New Brunswick.” Johnson & Johnson assured its commitment by pre-leasing office space to one of its divisions. When the building opened in 1979 it was the first new commercial development in the central business district in a decade.

The year after the financing was arranged for Plaza II, on 6 April 1978, Johnson & Johnson formally announced its decision to stay in New Brunswick. Governor Brendan T. Byrne gushed that the news was “one of the most significant corporate investments in the revitalization of a city in the history of New Jersey (italics mine).”

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47 Interview with Anthony Marchetta, 32
48 New Brunswick Tomorrow, 1980 Annual Report, 4
Richard B. Sellars (left), Governor Brendan Byrne (center) and former Johnson & Johnson chairman and CEO James E. Burke (right) observing a model of the international headquarters at a 1978 press conference.
Chapter Three: 1978 – mid 1980’s
Revitalization Actualizes

If the first stage of change in New Brunswick was chaos and the second was planning and testing, the third was actual physical revitalization. As noted in the close of Chapter Two, I. M. Pei’s Plaza II was the first new commercial building in downtown New Brunswick in more than a decade. Pulling together the financing for this project required the commitment of numerous skeptical parties and demonstrated how revitalization in New Brunswick necessitated concerted cooperation.

In 1979, New Brunswick elected perhaps its most powerful mayor, John A. Lynch, Jr. Though his image has been tainted by 2006 corruption charges, Mayor Lynch pushed the physical revitalization of New Brunswick forward with impressive prowess. Lynch was born in 1938 to John A. Lynch, Sr. and Evelyn Rooney. “A hell of a battler…a tough Irish kid,” David Harris, founder and director of the Greater New Brunswick Day Care Council said of Lynch.¹ “He would fight you to the end and, you know, he was a tremendous leader.” His father served as the Mayor of New Brunswick from 1951 to 1954 and as State Senator from the 7th District. Today, his name graces the Route 18 bridge over the Raritan River. John A. Lynch, Jr. was mayor from 1979 to 1991, and from 1981 to 2001 served as State Senator. In holding these two positions, Lynch Jr. could advocate on behalf of New Brunswick in the state senate. Said former Newark Evening News reporter and political advisor to Governor Cahill (1970 to 1974) Andy Baglivo, “the son far outshone the father, let me put it that way.”²

The Route 18 Saga

If the redevelopment of New Brunswick could not proceed without the commitment of Johnson & Johnson, then Johnson & Johnson would not commit until the extension of Route 18 through New Brunswick to Piscataway was approved. In a 9 July 1977 New York Times article, Walter H. Waggoner wrote, “One of the longest disputes over highway construction in the state’s history ended today when New Jersey was granted a Federal permit to complete a section of State Route 18 in Middlesex County and to build a bridge over the Raritan River in New Brunswick.”³ The New Brunswick Tomorrow 1980 Annual Report described the decision as ending a “quarter-century of frustration.”⁴ Indeed, for New Brunswick Tomorrow, Devco, the city of New Brunswick and Johnson & Johnson, the Route 18 extension was the major stumbling block for revitalization. One of the issues delaying construction was the federal law prohibiting interfering with a navigable waterway. This angle of opposition was discredited in picture-perfect fashion when Bill Hamilton and Joe Valenti, two candidates for State Assembly, walked across the Raritan River at low tide in rubber boots.⁵ The completed John A. Lynch Sr. Memorial Bridge, named in honor of the mayor’s father who died in 1978, opened to traffic 1 October 1980, erasing the image of impasse symbolized by the three massive Route 18 bridge piers that had stood in the Raritan River since 1970, construction stalled midway through.⁶

Though the extension did reroute traffic around the city and eased congestion within the business district, it cost the city of New Brunswick access to the Raritan River. This imperfect solution was emblematic of the regrowth of New Brunswick: development tainted by irreparable loss. Whether or not the Raritan River was a navigable waterway perhaps obscured what lay in the path of the new

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¹ Interview with David Harris, 17
² Interview with Andy Baglivo, 12
⁴ New Brunswick Tomorrow. 1980 Annual Report, 4
⁵ Interview with Sheehan, 16
Route 18: a mile and a quarter segment of the Delaware & Raritan Canal. All of the canal but this section was designated a state park and listed on the National Register of Historic Places; that small piece of the 67-mile whole had been excluded in a political compromise.\(^7\) Route 18 travels over and covers up this portion today.

The historic significance of the canal was outlined in a *New York Times* article published three months before permission was granted to construct the bridge. The Delaware & Raritan Canal “was the first inland waterway used by steam tugboats and one of the first to use the telegraph to warn lock tenders upstream of approaching barges” and at present “remains the oldest and longest fully watered, non-functioning canal in the United States.”\(^8\) Despite this, the highway was deemed too critical to redevelopment and regional connectivity. As a supposed act of environmental mitigation, a park was built over the highway portion behind the three Rutgers River dorms. The Memorial Homes, also backing the highway, received no such treatment.

**Hiram Market: Historic or Not?**

“What happens in Hiram Market will determine the face which both the city and Johnson & Johnson will present to the world for the next century.”\(^9\)

- Philip Marden, a Rutgers sociologist as quoted in a 1979 *New York Times* article

Before Route 18 cut across the waterfront of New Brunswick, and before the Central Business District of New Brunswick shifted south to George Street, Hiram Market was *the* commercial center. A citizens’ campaign to preserve the Hiram Market historic district found sixty-one structures built before 1900 and twenty-one from before the Civil War.\(^{10}\) Rebecca Yamin wrote that the “market itself, built in 1814 and destroyed in 1865, was a shed measuring 25 by 150 feet, but it was also the hub of

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\(^8\) Ibid.


the city’s religious, educational, financial, and commercial activities for at least seventy-five years of the nineteenth century.”11 The district was added to the New Jersey Register of Historic Places on 25 June 1980, but removed years later. After years of neglect – which some critics contend was intentional – the district became a “dilapidated relic of the early and mid-nineteenth century.” A place, Gregory Turner argued in his Master of Architecture thesis “Hiram Market,” that was also “the most architecturally cohesive urban neighborhood in New Brunswick and indeed, anywhere in central New Jersey.”12 In the I. M. Pei & Partners conceptual plan for downtown, the four-block, 8.8-acre site was designated a residential district which would abut a hotel. “Demolition of almost the entire site is recommended, to be rebuilt with rows of modern townhouses and stacked duplexes and triplexes, all five-stories high,” Turner wrote in 1977.13 However, “because sensitivity to our past heritage should be more acutely felt,” Turner contended, “demolition of this area should not be a forgone conclusion.”14

In 1974 Anton Nelessen arrived in the Hiram Market area in New Brunswick to teach urban design at Rutgers University. He became friends with Bob Schneider, the owner of J. August Café and a student at the university who brought his dog with him to every class.15 (The dog graduated with an honorary degree). Schneider introduced Nelessen to the city and enticed him to stay: “Listen, you should move here because we could have an incredible time. Look at this place, it’s deteriorating, it’s funky, it’s interesting, this could be one of the greatest places to live anyplace.”16 Nelessen was an urban designer and architect by profession, so together with Schneider and other local residents, they started to formulate a grassroots approach to the revitalization of downtown New Brunswick.

While Anton Nelessen and others were thinking about historic preservation, New Brunswick Tomorrow presented a different plan with the release of I. M. Pei’s conceptual layout. Says Nelessen, the plan “literally bulldozed everything.”17 That plan galvanized a local cadre that included a historian, a Ph.D. student, restaurateurs, members of the gay community and the founders of the Crossroads Theater, among others.18 In response, Anton Nelessen arranged to teach an Urban Design Studio at Livingston College that would focus on developing an alternative revitalization plan.19 Rutgers University Provost Kenneth Wheeler asked to join the class.20 One of the outcomes was an alternative plan for the proposed hotel to fit on one block. This was smaller than the proposal from Pei, which in turn, was smaller than what actually was built.

Though Gregory Turner has argued that Hiram Market was an “architecturally cohesive urban neighborhood,” Devco and Johnson & Johnson – intent on building a downtown hotel – disagreed. On 11 May 1979, Historic Design Associates of Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York conducted an architectural-historic survey for Devco with the purpose of identifying and evaluating the “historical and architectural resources” in the Hiram Market area.21 The location for the hotel and conference center, as proposed by the planning firm Raymond, Parish, Pine & Weiner, Inc. in April 1977, was a five and a half acre site bordered by Albany Street to the north, Neilson Street to the west, Memorial

11 Ibid., 21
13 Ibid., 8
14 Ibid., 10
15 Delta’s now occupies the former site of the J. August Café. Interview with Anton Nelessen, 5
16 Interview with Anton Nelessen, 6
17 Ibid., 10
18 Ibid., 8
20 Interview with Anton Nelessen, 12
Parkway (Route 18) to the east, and the north side of Hiram Street to the south. This site is roughly
twice as large as that outlined by the I. M. Pei plan, which extends only to Church Street to the south.

The unnamed author of the architectural-historic survey begins by depicting New Brunswick as a steadily declining city:

Between 1965 and 1976, New Brunswick lost all seven of its large, quality department stores, in addition to five-sixths of its smaller quality retail establishments. In constant dollars, the assessed value of the CBD properties declined by 77 percent between 1950 and 1976. During the same period, taxes generated from the CBD fell by 52 percent, from $794,000 to $383,550, even though the tax rate doubled during that time.\(^{22}\)

The proposed hotel was hailed as a major anchor for the revitalization of downtown New Brunswick, and also as a symbol of the city’s transformation from a retail hub to a service- and institution-based economy. It would seem then, that the only interference with this transformation were the relics of the retail industry and surrounding homes in the older Hiram Market area. The Architectural-Historic Survey pursuant to the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 by Historic Design Associates was conducted in a way to challenge the importance of those local relics and represented the pro-development sentiment that the area was historically insignificant. Andy Baglivo, part of that sentiment, said, “Historic preservationists held us up for a while and cost us a lot of money” in the Hiram Market area dispute. “I think they said something about they might find some privies down there.”\(^{23}\)

For such a survey, the authors were rather unsympathetic to the architectural history of New Brunswick. The author writes, “The transition from the small port city of the 1820’s to the industrial city of the 1870’s and 1880’s had resulted in growth accompanied by an almost continuous process of tearing down and remodeling of the old buildings to create the new.”\(^{24}\) The “funky” area that Anton Nelessen moved into was dismissed by the study as a blighted area with “an architectural disunity” and “architectural disharmony.” To conclude the section “The Architectural/Historic Content of Hiram Market Area” the author writes, “the area lacks cohesion and integrity, and instead appears as a jumble of scattered and unrelated buildings.”\(^{25}\) It is difficult to read the study without noting the perceived bias. The study was prepared for the New Brunswick Development Corporation, which was heavily subsidized, in both finances and personnel, by Johnson & Johnson. Perhaps the most important part of the study came on page twenty-five with the notice that the new Johnson & Johnson world headquarters would be constructed north of the study area.

Anton Nelessen said of Johnson & Johnson in a 1979 New York Times article, “If people disagree with them, they threaten to leave – to take their bat and ball and go home.”\(^{26}\) Indeed, in this conditional relationship between the corporation and New Brunswick, Johnson & Johnson – the supposed key to revitalization – did not hesitate at imposing their “clean desk mentality” on the messiness of Hiram Market.\(^{27}\) The fact that the area had been declared eligible for placement on the


\(^{23}\) Interview with Andy Baglivo, 37


\(^{25}\) Ibid., 29-32


\(^{27}\) Interview with Christiana Foglio, 15
The hotel site is cleared in the foreground and the Johnson & Johnson headquarters is under construction in the background. 
(Courtesy of Rutgers’ Special Collections and Archives)

National Register of Historic Places in 1979 did not deter Johnson & Johnson. Rather, Johnson & Johnson financed lobbyists and consultants to revoke the designation. According to Christiana Foglio, this left Mayor Lynch in a catch-22 “saying, ‘I got to keep them here. I got to keep them happy. If I’m going to move this forward, this is what I’m going to sacrifice.’”

The alternative plan that Anton Nelessen created in his Urban Design Studio was eventually presented to Devco and New Brunswick Tomorrow. David Harris, President of the New Brunswick Urban League Chapter and Devco board member, recalled a tense community meeting in which Nelessen presented the alternate plan following Dick Sellars and Devco’s proposal for the downtown hotel. He describes Nelessen as “brilliant” and Sellars “a big, handsome guy.” In the scene,

When [Sellars] stepped across the street to be involved in the community, he was a fish out of water. Here’s Nelessen getting up to propose the alternative after Dick Sellars and his crew made their presentation. And obviously the crowd was for Nelessen, and Dick Sellars said something that I could actually see him saying this right now, it hurt so bad. Dick Sellars said, “That’s a great plan,” to Nelessen. “But the only plan I have money for is this one.”

Harris did not stay on the board of Devco for long, learning, he said, that public meetings were in actuality times to listen to community input on projects that had already been planned.

The Hotel & the UDAG
The hotel in question was made possible in part by the Urban Development Action Grant program, enacted by the Carter administration in October 1977. This federal program was designed to

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29 Interview with Christiana Foglio, 15
30 Interview with David Harris, 13
31 Ibid., 14
encourage private investment and development in distressed urban areas. What made the program unique was that the public grant was not released until private capital was committed. In its twelve years of operation, the UDAG program supplied $4.6 billion to 1,200 cities. In 1979, New Brunswick earned the fourth highest UDAG award per capita nationwide after receiving a grant worth $6,000,000. (Adjusted for inflation, in 2009 that grant would be worth close to eighteen million dollars.)

Receiving a six million dollar grant – the largest UDAG commitment in New Jersey at the time – did not come by chance. Mayor John A. Lynch, Jr., and Johnson & Johnson both lobbied for federal money with the understanding that private investment would be hard to come by. Christiana Foglio noted that, “UDAGs were really driven into New Brunswick from the J&J lobbying point of view. Because that was during a Republican administration and they were so wired that they could get the attention. So for a small city, it got an enormous amount of federal support.” On 29 September 1980, there was a groundbreaking ceremony for the $28 million 300-room Hyatt Regency.

Johnson & Johnson Headquarters: ‘A Building in a Park, A Park in a City’

I. M. Pei’s firm raised eyebrows in New Brunswick for more than the architecture of the Hyatt Regency Hotel, of which Henry Cobb, a principal architect, regretfully remarked: “I’m sorry that the hotel wasn’t a better piece of architecture.” (Anton Nelessen was less kind: “I think the Hyatt is one of the worst designs I have ever seen.”) The firm was also asked by Johnson & Johnson to do a

33 Ibid., vii
35 Nathan, Richard P., and Jerry A. Webman. The Urban Development Action Grant Program. Princeton: Princeton Urban and Regional Research Center, 1980, 112. New Brunswick’s position in the rankings is more likely third because its population is listed at 47,000 for 1975. According to the Census the 1970 population was 41,885 and for 1980 41,442.
37 Interview with Christiana Foglio, 13
38 New Brunswick Tomorrow. 1980 Annual Report, 7
39 Interview with Henry Cobb, 28
40 Interview with Antony Nelessen, 33
master plan for its new headquarters, and at about the same time the firm was asked by New Brunswick Tomorrow to conceptualize a plan for the central business district.\textsuperscript{41} Despite the prevailing out-migration of corporations from cities to suburban office parks, Johnson & Johnson decided to reestablish itself in New Brunswick in pronounced fashion with a $77 million corporate headquarters designed by I. M. Pei.

The difference between the headquarters and what it displaced is striking. Before the sleek urban office park, the area was one of the oldest in New Brunswick with human-scaled buildings ranging in height from two to four stories of brick and wood-frame construction.\textsuperscript{42} John J. Heldrich, president of New Brunswick Tomorrow at the time, characterized the site as a “deteriorating 12-acre tract of mixed business uses and few residents.”\textsuperscript{43} According to Mayor Sheehan the commitment of Johnson & Johnson instantly inflated otherwise rock-bottom real estate values: “You know, they couldn’t have sold the property for 25 cents, but now because J&J is buying it…now it’s worth a million dollars plus!”\textsuperscript{44} The site included Washington Street and alleyways that no longer exist. The erasure of streets and numerous buildings provided I. M. Pei a \textit{tabula rasa}.

The vision for the Johnson & Johnson headquarters changed with its acting chief executive. Richard Sellars, before stepping down in 1976, wanted a skyscraper; his successor, Jim Burke preferred no tower. Henry Cobb talked Sellars out of the idea of a monumental skyscraper, because the firm “wanted to engage this property on a scale that seemed sympathetic to downtown New Brunswick.”\textsuperscript{45} This is a tricky comment in that downtown New Brunswick was transitioning from an older, mid-rise city to a renewed and rebuilt center with unprecedented building heights. So the question is, sympathetic to which downtown?

In developing the plan for the site, there were debates over whether to have an office building with retail on the ground floor or a campus with the buildings set back. The firm opted for an ‘office in a park, park in a city.’ Part of the reason for this was concern over security in the industrialist sense and the need to maintain a level of privacy. The idea was for passersby to walk past a park – albeit a private one – rather than just an office building. To develop this park feel, the architects borrowed from an nearby source: the landscape architecture of Rutgers University. Henry Cobb explained, “We picked up on the Rutgers campus precedent over the low wall with a raised ground level beyond it. It's an interesting thing that when you have a wall, if you raise the ground level beyond it, it reads much less like a wall. You know, a wall is with the ground on both sides is just a wall, but if it's a change of plane and has a different reading then somehow…you're invited to enjoy the park even though you're not in it.”\textsuperscript{46}

In the article “The River, the Dutch, the District, and the Corporate Giant: New Brunswick and the Past,” Rebecca Yamin traces the ideological history of Johnson & Johnson and explains how the headquarters “is a perfect expression of the company’s ideology.”\textsuperscript{47} Early on, the pharmaceutical company committed itself to asepsis, a state of the absence of disease-causing microorganisms that is reflected in the shimmering sixteen-story tower. The pristinely manicured lawns with walls invite the viewer, but simultaneously to deny the guest: ‘look, but don’t touch.’ Johnson & Johnson prides itself upon medical cleanliness and sterility, rightly so, as this is the reason they grew to be an international pharmaceutical giant. However, in committing itself to New Brunswick, and in rebuilding its

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{41} Interview with Henry Cobb, 5
\item \textsuperscript{43} Remarks. John J. Heldrich. Akron Roundtable, 13
\item \textsuperscript{44} Interview with Patricia Sheehan, 14-15
\item \textsuperscript{45} Interview with Henry Cobb, 17
\item \textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 27-28
\item \textsuperscript{47} Yamin, Rebecca, and Tony Masso. "The River, The Dutch, The District, and the Corporate Giant: New Brunswick and the Past." \textit{New Jersey History} 114. February (1996), 26
\end{itemize}
headquarters, a necessary precondition, like the need for Route 18, was that its headquarters be placed in an “appropriate physical setting.” 48 Thus, the ‘picture frame’… 49

Resultant Real Estate Activity

and the Picture Frame

“Well there’s the picture frame, everything around the park is now complete…” 50

Anton Nelessen

The construction of the new Johnson & Johnson headquarters sparked a wave of real estate investment. This wave emanated from the core of the headquarters – the northeast corner of George and Albany Streets – and spread south throughout the central business district. In 1982, the headquarters were completed and in September of the same year the Hyatt Regency Hotel was dedicated.

That year, Johnson & Johnson commissioned American muralist Richard Haas to paint a trompe l’oeil on the side of the PSE&G substation (which it had earlier bought) on Albany Street touching the southeast corner of the Johnson & Johnson campus. 51 The mural transformed the plain brick wall of the substation into the side of a Neoclassical building with detailed white cornices, impossibly tall windows and an interior passageway which appeared to link the sidewalk through to the other side of the building. The optical illusion was so believable that John Heldrich remembers unsuspecting bicyclists crashing into the wall. 52 Despite the popularity and grandeur of the mural, it was merely a temporary beautification project on a building which Johnson & Johnson intended to demolish. 53

The mural and building lasted five years. One reason that the substation was demolished was that it was obsolete; while another, more intriguing reason was that there was an agreement with I. M. Pei that he would not show the Johnson & Johnson headquarters in his portfolio with the substation in

49 Interview with Anton Nelessen, 33
50 Ibid., 38
52 Interview with John Heldrich, 47
view. In this way, Johnson & Johnson and Pei worked in tandem and with leverage to restyle the downtown aesthetic. Popular and quirky installments like the Haas mural and funky and messy areas like Hiram Market – both neighbors to the corporate headquarters – were deemed incongruous to the modern style cast onto New Brunswick by Pei.

The beautification and subsequent demolition of the nearby PSE&G substation represented one part of the establishment of an appropriate ‘picture frame.’ The ‘picture frame’ concept explains how every old building bordering the Johnson & Johnson campus was either razed or significantly rehabilitated and replaced by new developments. If the headquarters can be understood as the center of a clock, and the hour hands correspond to different buildings, it is easy to see how real estate development emanated out from Johnson & Johnson and into immediately surrounding properties:

Beginning at twelve is the Railroad embankment; this structure cuts diagonally creating a northeasterly border to the Johnson & Johnson campus. Moving clockwise are Route 18 and Johnson Drive, roads whose contours roughly frame the campus until four o’clock, and whose construction Johnson & Johnson engendered. Crossing Albany Street at five o’clock is the sprawling Hyatt Regency, a hotel which was owned by Johnson & Johnson, funded through an Urban Development Action Grant that was lobbied for by Johnson & Johnson, and from an operations standpoint, economically feasible through the guarantee of guests visiting the Johnson & Johnson international headquarters.

Due Mari, Kilmer Square, Old Man Rafferty and Kilmer Park make up the stretch of Albany Street from Neilson to George Street, from four o’clock to seven. Though the Due Mari building was spared from demolition and refurbished, the others – a mishmash of half-vacant and deteriorating storefronts – were not and were cleared to make room for Kilmer Square (1986). This vast low-rise retail and office development fills the space in between Due Mari and Joyce Kilmer Park and extends south to Church Street. According to Anton Nelessen, the structure is problematic because the developers “violated all of the basic retailing rules by putting it up on a platform” and removed retail from the street grade. Whatever the reason, retail has historically failed to thrive in this environment. Johnson & Johnson bought the corner property on George Street and Albany and built Joyce Kilmer Park, dedicated in May 1977. Heldrich recalled the symbolic importance of the park: it “was a big catalyst. Because for the first time, people started, and you could feel it, started to take pride, here we

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54 Interview with Christiana Foglio, 14
55 Interview with Antony Nelessen, 36
got the new city.”

Despite the promise and optimism the park was often locked. According to Christina Foglio, “It was John Heldrich that locked it. He didn't want to get up in the morning and walk by and see homeless people sleeping there.” Still today, often during daytime hours, the park is locked to visitors.

With the hour hand striking seven o’clock, across George Street, is the Albany Street Plaza. There was a groundbreaking in 1985 and opening in 1988. This block-long two-tower development was the undertaking of Omar Boraie, an Egyptian who came to New Brunswick in the 1960s seeking a Ph.D. in chemistry, who then dropped those plans after entering real estate. To underscore the importance of Johnson & Johnson to this wave of real estate activity, a New York Times article reported that, “Only the enduring presence of the pharmaceutical giant Johnson & Johnson, whose headquarters are across Albany Street, allowed [Boraie] to make the leap of faith.”

A year later, the Golden Triangle office building opened on the northwest corner of George Street and Albany. The Golden Triangle, another Pei design, embodies both the success and shortcomings of redevelopment in New Brunswick. Through effective political leadership under Mayor Lynch, part of the project was financed through a UDAG and Johnson & Johnson guaranteed office rentals. However, the building was master leased from DKM to Johnson & Johnson, which under the conditions of employment with Johnson & Johnson there was a subsidized cafeteria built-in. This move negated a key benefit of having a 200,000 square feet office building: the lunchtime purchasing power of hundreds of hungry employees. New Brunswick gained another sleek office tower, but failed to capitalize on one of the key economic benefits. Similar to the wall of the Johnson & Johnson campus across George Street, the side of the Golden Triangle fronting George Street – a parking garage – is dull and vacuous, creating an empty pedestrian experience between the retail corridor and the historic Rutgers Old Queens campus. The northern corner of the Golden Triangle then meets the massive stone embankment of the railroad, the most enduring relic of historic New Brunswick, completing the picture frame.

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56 Interview with John Heldrich, 13
57 Interview with Christiana Foglio, 28
60 Ibid.
61 Interview with Foglio, 27
Chapter Four
Transferable Model?
Unique Success Story?

In the years since the picture frame was completed – the Johnson & Johnson headquarters, the Hyatt, Route 18, Kilmer Square, Albany Street Plaza, the Golden Triangle – New Brunswick has evolved in ways unthinkable in the mid-1970’s, when Devco was just starting. The Livingston Avenue corridor grew into a lively arts center bringing in school children by day and older patrons of the arts in the evening, many of whom are also patrons of the close by upscale restaurants. The Memorial Homes were demolished and across New Street, new, residential developments have taken shape. People want to live in New Brunswick. Rutgers has also increased its involvement in downtown, building two tall residential dormitories there and moving art, policy and planning classes to Civic Square.

The George Street Playhouse is on Livingston Avenue

In some part of the parking lot of the Golden Triangle, the George Street Playhouse once hosted performances to packed audiences. The theatre dates back to 1968, when Eric Krebs, a 23-year-old Rutgers Ph.D. candidate in English, started Brecht West, a small, seventy-four-seat theatre on 47 Easton Avenue.¹ A year later the theatre moved to 61 Albany Street, the eventual location of the entrance to the Johnson & Johnson headquarters.² Krebs described that location: “It was just a little working part of a little working town that had kind of gone to seed, which is why we could rent the Brecht West at lower Albany Street for $150 a month.”³ He recalled that, “J&J was completely uninvolved with Brecht West in any way; it was so counter to their image.” In a New York Times article the theatre was described as “a leftist coffeehouse setup.”⁴ Krebs added, “But [J&J] did get involved at the start of the George Street Playhouse.”

In 1974 – before Devco or New Brunswick Tomorrow were formed – Eric Krebs spotted a building for rent on George Street across from where the Johnson & Johnson headquarters would later develop. It was an old Acme supermarket being used as a carpet warehouse and the rent was $450 per month.⁵ This became the George Street Playhouse. Ralph and Barbara Voorhees contributed money towards renovations and Johnson & Johnson offered a $4,500 grant to install bathroom plumbing.⁶ The first production premiered on Friday, 20 September 1974, and admittance cost four dollars, two for students. Anthony Marchetta and his wife saw a performance of Sleuth there and “were stunned at…how good the performance was. We immediately signed up as subscribers the following year trying to support the effort for this theater, and I think the theater for lots of reasons helped the city along in its process. It stayed there. It was open at night. It brought people into town.”⁷ By 1981 Marchetta was the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the George Street Playhouse.

The Playhouse was critical in reestablishing New Brunswick as a regional center and luring visitors into the downtown. When Kenneth Wheeler, Rutgers New Brunswick Provost, arrived in the city in 1969, “people simply would not come who didn’t live here, would not come to New Brunswick at night. Well, there was no reason to come; you know, the State Theatre was a pornographic theater

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¹ Klein, Alvin. "IN PERSON; The Road to the Tony’s." New York Times. 6 June 1999; A young Al Pacino directed the play Rats there. Interview with Eric Krebs, 9
² Interview with Eric Krebs, 4
³ Ibid., 15
⁴ Interview with Krebs, 14; Klein, Alvin. "IN PERSON; The Road to the Tony’s." New York Times. 6 June 1999
⁵ Interview with Krebs, 16
⁶ Ibid., 19
⁷ Interview with Anthony Marchetta, 37
and there weren’t any restaurants.” After the formation of the Cultural Center, people from surrounding communities had reasons to visit New Brunswick and the city became a destination for entertainment and restaurants. Jacque Rubel, an early supporter of the arts in New Brunswick, was perhaps the first to imagine a New Brunswick Cultural Center. A Highland Park resident, Rubel founded the Middlesex County Culture and Heritage Committee and ran summer arts camps. Her vision for the Cultural Center included the Elks building, the YMCA, the State Theatre, new facilities and Livingston Avenue closed to vehicular traffic.

Devco and New Brunswick Tomorrow started to see the value and potential of the idea and in 1982 the Office of Physical and Capital Planning of Rutgers University prepared “Studies for the: New Brunswick Cultural Center” for the New Brunswick Arts Development Commission. Eric Krebs and Orrin T. Hardgrove, president of New Brunswick Tomorrow from 1981 to 1995 were two of the nine commission members. The study noted that in the last decade the idea of a Cultural Center “has generated great periods of excitement and anticipation, only to slip away into the limbo of false hope.” The authors suggested that the early 1980s was the ideal time to actually develop the project for a few reasons: the Mason Gross School of the Arts needed a permanent home; the George Street Playhouse had to relocate because Devco needed the property to build the Golden Triangle office tower; and the Crossroads Theater, facing Route 18, could benefit from a new location.

Other factors aligned to make this timing fortuitous: Devco had bought the State Theater, the YMCA was for sale and the Mason Gross School of the Arts wanted to remain downtown (it occupied the former Arnold Constable building, a department store on the corner of Livingston Avenue and New Street) under the condition that it found a permanent home. Similar to finding financing for Plaza II, the study suggested that the potential partners could not act alone: “It must be a cooperative effort.” The study, valuable and visionary, deviated from the precedent set by the construction of the Hyatt Regency Hotel and Johnson & Johnson headquarters in that the establishment of the Cultural Center would involve the adaptive re-use of existing facilities instead of demolishing them. The State Theater, which devolved into a pornographic theater after moviegoers started choosing multiplexes in the 1960s, was recognized as a “monumental resource” and imagined as an anchor to the Cultural Center. The YMCA, also on Livingston Avenue, was for sale for an advertised $950,000 and it was determined that by reconfiguring the interior the building would work as a theater. This would be the future home of the George Street Playhouse.

With eyes on their property, Devco and Johnson & Johnson approached the George Street Playhouse about selling. The board of the Playhouse agreed as long as there was a fair price and that a new location could be found. The new location became a contentious issue. Paul Abdulla, President of Devco, proposed the former Davidson’s grocery store. The board rejected this offer fearing that the regional customer base would not follow the playhouse from its location near the New Brunswick train station and across the street from Johnson & Johnson to a “location in front of a public housing project in a much more desperate part of New Brunswick.” After rejecting the grocery store offer New Brunswick Tomorrow hired a New York theater consultant to determine other possible options. His survey found those to be: Davidson’s grocery store, Ferren Mall and the YMCA.

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8 Interview with Kenneth Wheeler, 4  
9 Interview with Eric Krebs, 22  
11 Ibid., Introduction  
12 Ibid., 2  
13 Ibid.  
15 Interview with Anthony Marchetta, 42
Ferren Mall on Albany Street was the first choice for the George Street Playhouse. The building was under construction and Anthony Marchetta imagined that the floor plan – which featured offices and a wide-open ground floor space – could be reconfigured to fit a theater and a lobby.16 The site was ideal because it was across the street from the train station, making it convenient for the New York actors and directors who made up the core of the Playhouse personnel. However in 1983, the Ferren Deck opened with retail, not theater, and in the words of Mayor Lynch served as “the jump start” to revitalization, “just to show some signs of life.”17 Interestingly, this project included a new Rutgers University bookstore, a trying step in convincing the school to invest downtown.

When it was decided that the YMCA would be purchased and that Devco would convert it to a theater, the Cultural Center began to take shape. In Fall 1985 the George Street Playhouse opened its first season on Livingston Avenue in a space twice as large as its former location. The Cultural Center study had commented in 1982 that the size of the old space was “insufficient to sustain [George Street Playhouse’s] program.”18 However, in the initial years the assumption that a larger facility would sustain the theater proved mistaken. Krebs realized, “We almost went into bankruptcy because we fell into the edifice complex, which is…a small organization gets a big building and can’t support it.”19 Still, the theatre was able to bring people downtown, spurring the growth of fine restaurants and two additional theaters. On 24 April 1988, after significant renovations, the State Theater reopened. Kenneth Wheeler described the process: “it took John Heldrich persuading Dick Sellars, out of his own pocket, to buy the State Theatre, buy the porno Theatre, and hold it until Devco had the resources to turn it into a concert hall.”20 Three years later the Crossroads Theater Company opened; both theaters were on Livingston Avenue.

Rutgers: Town & Gown

In the formation of the Livingston Avenue corridor, Rutgers University, traditionally uninvolved in New Brunswick, became involved. Edward Bloustein, Rutgers President from 1971 to 1989, facilitated the transformation of PJ Young’s department store on Livingston Avenue and New Street to the Mason Gross School. This move “brought students back into town for the first time in decades,” said Anthony Marchetta.21 Historically the relationship between Rutgers and New Brunswick had been mired by conflicts. Schools are exempt from paying property taxes, so in the 1960s it was common for New Brunswick politicians to run anti-Rutgers campaigns because their Payment-in-lieu-of-taxes (PILOT) was considered too low. According to Patricia Sheehan, mayor of New Brunswick from 1967 to 1974, “Rutgers wouldn’t even admit they were in the city. They contributed nothing.”22 Another issue was how Rutgers students displaced families from stable neighborhoods. Sheehan explains the conflict,

[In] critical neighborhoods, very, very stable neighborhoods, mostly around main campus Rutgers, the housing was getting priced out of the region of middle income people, and the investor-driven market by packing it with students was just, you know, phenomenal. And so when people would talk about gentrification in other cities what was really the gentrifying kind of factor in New Brunswick was not the yuppie movement of the mid and late eighties, it was the pressure on the value of turning a single family home into multi-units. And so you had a

16 Interview with Anthony Marchetta, 43
17 Interview with John A. Lynch, Jr., 9
19 Interview with Eric Krebs, 26
20 Interview with Kenneth Wheeler, 13
21 Interview with Anthony Marchetta, 44
22 Interview with Patricia Sheehan, 17
real clash between the city administration and it felt like an anti-university movement, but it really wasn't. It was trying to preserve the stock.  

Within Rutgers, “the faculty really wasn’t involved,” remembered Kenneth Wheeler, who joined the faculty in 1969. “They didn’t ask much of the faculty at that time.” Andy Baglivo, speaking from the perspective of Johnson & Johnson and New Brunswick Tomorrow said in a similar vein, “we did not get much help, I have to be honest with you, from the faculty at Rutgers.”

Part of the problem of cooperation between Rutgers and development in New Brunswick involved conflicting ideologies. Kenneth Wheeler, who was a Provost at Rutgers and board member of New Brunswick Tomorrow, commented that, “since Johnson and Johnson was footing the bill, they were listening, but they were running the show,” which allowed them to impose their hierarchical, corporate structure onto the development process. This was at odds with the university and faculty who did not operate in such a strongly top-down environment. He explained the conflict through his experience in New Brunswick Tomorrow board meetings,

The meetings that we had were run by John [Heldrich] and a staff of three of four people and American Cities and their work was done behind the scenes…The votes were always unanimous for everything that was presented. Roy Epps, one time in the 12 years or so that I was on the board, voted to abstain. But that wasn’t really – our purpose was to help – but not to influence and to change course unless they were clearly going in the wrong direction. And so we were – I really hesitate to use the term, but [New Brunswick Tomorrow was] a rubber stamp committee and we were intended to be.

He then asked, “Can you imagine having a lot of people from Rutgers on a rubber stamp committee?”

The conflict also involved Rutgers’ hesitancy to invest in New Brunswick. Much of Rutgers New Brunswick is not actually in New Brunswick; most of the land area is actually across the Raritan River in Piscataway, where the Busch and Livingston campuses are located. The story of how the Easton Avenue Apartments came to be developed in the 1980s explains why the interests of the city and those of the university were sometimes incongruous. In the struggling real estate market of the late 1980s, Christina Foglio of Devco was pushing for student housing in downtown New Brunswick. There was already investor activity in the residential neighborhoods converting houses to rentals, but Mayor Lynch “wanted to get more and more vibrance [sic] in the center city.” Foglio recounted that the arguments of the university were: “We own all this land in Piscataway. Why would we embark on anything in downtown? It’s not safe. You know parents don’t want students to live there.” Still, Devco and the mayor’s office persisted; the private sector was “dying for any projects” and Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital, on the adjacent property, needed parking. Despite the University’s reluctance, Foglio explains, “why it got done was that Lynch held up the Rutgers budget in the Senate until we got the commitment for the housing.”
Mayor Lynch & Political Stability

“Johnny Lynch was one of the smartest guys I ever…”

Andy Baglivo

“But his leadership, his vision, his strength of character and his ability to impose his will, if you will, on people because he was a man with tremendous ability, insight and instincts – he’s the smartest guy I have ever dealt with.”

Thomas Kelso

“Strong leader, and he’s a very bright individual…knew the political games.”

Anthony Marchetta

“He was a very, very bright man. Probably too bright for his own good.”

Ralph Voorhees

These above comments and the manner in which Rutgers committed to building the Easton Avenue Apartments begin to explain with just how much savvy Lynch operated as Mayor and State Senator. By holding these two positions he could leverage the Rutgers budget in Trenton to receive what was needed back in New Brunswick. Lynch could lobby for grants and legislation for New Brunswick, and indeed, those efforts helped bring the Hyatt and Route 18 to fruition. Lynch also had a way of looking forward: he used Community Development Block Grants early in the revitalization process to replace the old, combined water and sewage system with new infrastructure. “He took a lot of heat because it was under the street,” Christina Foglio said of Lynch. Though, this facilitated investment because developers “weren't saddled with this aging infrastructure that could not handle the kind of vision and development that, you know, he had and the people around here have.”

That vision and an environment that encouraged development and investment were promoted by political stability. Since Lynch was elected in 1979, there have been only two mayors of New Brunswick. “There was the ability to know that if people were going to invest in the city, if people were going to invest money, resources, time or whatever it is, they knew that if leadership told you it could produce something, it could do it by-and-large,” Thomas Kelso said. “I think that was important to be able to give people the confidence to invest in the city.” The combination of political strength and stability with institutional strength and staying power was crucial to attracting outside investment in the city and in turn, reviving New Brunswick.

Dynamics of Change

Because Johnson & Johnson is such an important part of New Brunswick’s story, it is worthwhile asking why it did actually stay in New Brunswick. Was it because of the company credo and the need to show dedication to the community? Was it a small core of powerful executives – John Heldrich and Richard Sellars – who had personal relationships with the local environment? Was it for marketing purposes and to enhance its corporate image, to show that it participated in the revitalization of New Brunswick? Was it to take board members up to the top floor of the headquarters and show them the company’s involvement in the transformation of the surrounding community? Like any

32 Interview with Andy Baglivo, 11
33 Interview with Thomas Kelso, 19
34 Interview with Anthony Marchetta, 35
35 Interview with Ralph Voorhees, 11
36 Interview with Christiana Foglio, 12
37 Interview with Thomas Kelso, 11-12
corporation, they must have had their bottom-line ever in mind, so why pour millions of dollars into a struggling city?

The reality is that the decision to stay was probably a combination of dedication to the community with regard to the company credo and the insistence of local executives. Regardless of the reason for their staying, if Johnson & Johnson had left, the city would have undoubtedly faltered. Building its corporate headquarters was critical to changing the image of downtown New Brunswick, which for many people was that of a falling-apart, crime-ridden place. The company was instrumental in funding initial redevelopment studies and in organizing the two main organizations that set out to improve the city in a holistic way. New Brunswick Tomorrow and Devco were both financially subsidized by Johnson & Johnson but also, and perhaps more importantly, in personnel. “When I took over, staff-wise, the city was very shallow,” Mayor Lynch recalled. “Attracting people of any caliber was difficult.” By placing influential board members and giving money to these two private organizations, Johnson & Johnson created a system to work in whereby the local government was less important and development could occur in a way they could manage. “Plus, J&J couldn’t really give money directly to the city and control it,” Marchetta observed.

As former Mayor Sheehan explained, the decision to stay could have been perceived in two ways: “To stay in New Brunswick and take the abuse of marshaling together the parcels of land…that was taken by some as a diabolical plot.” For others it was, “a gold mine at the end of the rainbow.” Johnson & Johnson added prestige to New Brunswick and was viewed as a resource to be preserved. Because Johnson & Johnson did decide to stay, and did invest its financial and human resources in a city where other institutions like Rutgers were not involved and many others were leaving, it was natural that Johnson & Johnson led and controlled the process. As Kenneth Wheeler understood it, “Since Johnson and Johnson was footing the bill, they were listening, but they were running the show.” This had two outcomes: significant investment in development and also a process of development that was controlled by one side. The consequential financial investment was a boon to New Brunswick but it also left the Anton Nelessens in powerless positions.

Indeed, much of the significant development was produced through processes that lacked transparency and controlled community participation. “We could not have done what we did at Devco with community members at the table,” said Christina Foglio, the issue being that property acquisition would be more difficult in a transparent situation and that the process may have been endless. Judging by other interviews, Foglio was not alone in these sentiments. Lynch expressed why democratic planning is difficult: “you can’t have a hodgepodge of planning going on to make things come out correctly.” Another: “My feeling is that community involvement is important to a degree, but what does a community know about redevelopment?” Anthony Marchetta asked. “I just don’t think that the general community has the big picture view. And unless you have a corporate private sector involvement coupled with a public sector, you could have community meetings from now until eternity and nothing will ever get done.”

Transferability?

So ultimately, in this story of the redevelopment of New Brunswick, considered a success by many standards – square feet of office space, Zagat-rated restaurants, construction of townhouses, hotels and conference centers – the question is, can the process be transferred to other cities?

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38 Interview with John A. Lynch, Jr., 7
39 Interview with Patricia Sheehan, 14
40 Interview with Kenneth Wheeler, 5
41 Interview with Christiana Foglio, 30
42 Interview with John A. Lynch, Jr., 21
43 Interview with Anthony Marchetta, 59
The short answer is No. New Brunswick is unique in many aspects: its size, the presence of major, prestigious institutions, political stability, and powerful individuals who, with leadership and dedication, pursued successful change. Few cities have a Johnson & Johnson willing to invest in the community, nor are there John Heldrich’s and John Lynch’s leading and uniting the private and public sectors. “There was a certain confluence of stars that I’m not sure you can replicate,” Patricia Sheehan said.\textsuperscript{44} Cooperation among many disparate organizations and leaders materialized in what John Heldrich called, “a unity of purpose.”\textsuperscript{45} These dynamics are not replicable and indeed the product of a unique environment and determined individuals.

That is not to say that certain elements of the redevelopment process cannot be replicated and transferred to other cities. The formation of Devco and New Brunswick Tomorrow are applicable models of bringing together various community members, business leaders and government officials. Though the New Brunswick models have flaws, (mainly that they were initiated by Johnson & Johnson and thus set up in a way that Johnson & Johnson could maximize influence), such organizations can be recreated elsewhere without such a dominant institution shadowing above. Development can be a slow and difficult process because of myriad problems, but Devco and NBT made sure communication was not one of them by bringing various leaders to the same table.

Still, the overall process of development can be improved by looking at the pitfalls that were experienced in New Brunswick. The most glaring problem is the absence of the community voice. While John Lynch may be correct in saying that “too many cooks spoil the broth,” there is also something inherently problematic in designing cities without comprehensive community input. This is emblematic in the fact that most of the board members of Devco do not even live in New Brunswick. For a city that has an image of transience, of a population coming and going, and of the built environment rising and falling by the generation, it is crucial to engage the community in a way that encourages people to stay. New Brunswick has been enormously successful at attracting the investment of developers, but the true success of the city will be measured by attracting the investment of the people.

\textsuperscript{44} Interview with Patricia Sheehan, 33
\textsuperscript{45} Interview with John Heldrich, 24
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Note: Much of the content of this thesis was derived from the interviews of the following people: Andy Baglivo; James Cahill; Robert Campbell; Henry Cobb; Roy Epps; Christiana Foglio; Ted Hardgrove; David Harris; John J. Heldrich; Thomas Kelso; Eric Krebs; John A. Lynch, Jr.; Anthony Marchetta; Anton Nelessen; Christopher Paladino; Glenn Paterson; Patricia Sheehan; Jeffrey Vega; Ralph Voorhees and Kenneth Wheeler. The interviews were conducted by Dorothea Berkhout and Dr. David Listokin of the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy and have not yet been published.


Johnson & Johnson Credo: <http://www.jnj.com/wps/wcm/connect/c7933f004f5563df9e22be1bb31559c7/our-credo.pdf?MOD=AJPERES>


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