

B. NEIGHBORHOOD PROFILE

While other city neighborhoods have one predominant demographic group as residents, South Downtown neighborhood is made up of residents from both ends of the socio-economic spectrum. Those who could choose to live anywhere they please *choose* to live in downtown Hartford because they are attracted to the architecture, the urbanity of the neighborhood, the charming character, and the accessibility to many amenities. Its location downtown gives the neighborhood distinct advantage over any other Hartford neighborhood

Characteristics of South Downtown Neighborhood:

1. Located downtown, accessible to everything: government, business, cultural resources and amenities
2. Well-defined neighborhood centers at Main Street and Park Street; regional center at the State Capitol
3. Major employment center: State buildings comprise 35% of total buildings
4. Historic building stock: 90 % built before 1940
5. Variety of housing: types, income range, 50% of all buildings
6. Commercial only 9100 sf occupied: where to get a quart of milk ?
7. Building scale
8. Impacts of State, commercial area, cultural center as a neighbor: parking lots
9. Complexity of property ownership: state, city, neighborhood overlap
10. Few vacant buildings (only 9)
11. Access to recreation: Park, basketball, YMCA, Riverwalk, Colt Park
12. Access to transit, hospital, other services



State Capitol



Bushnell Park



Bushnell Auditorium



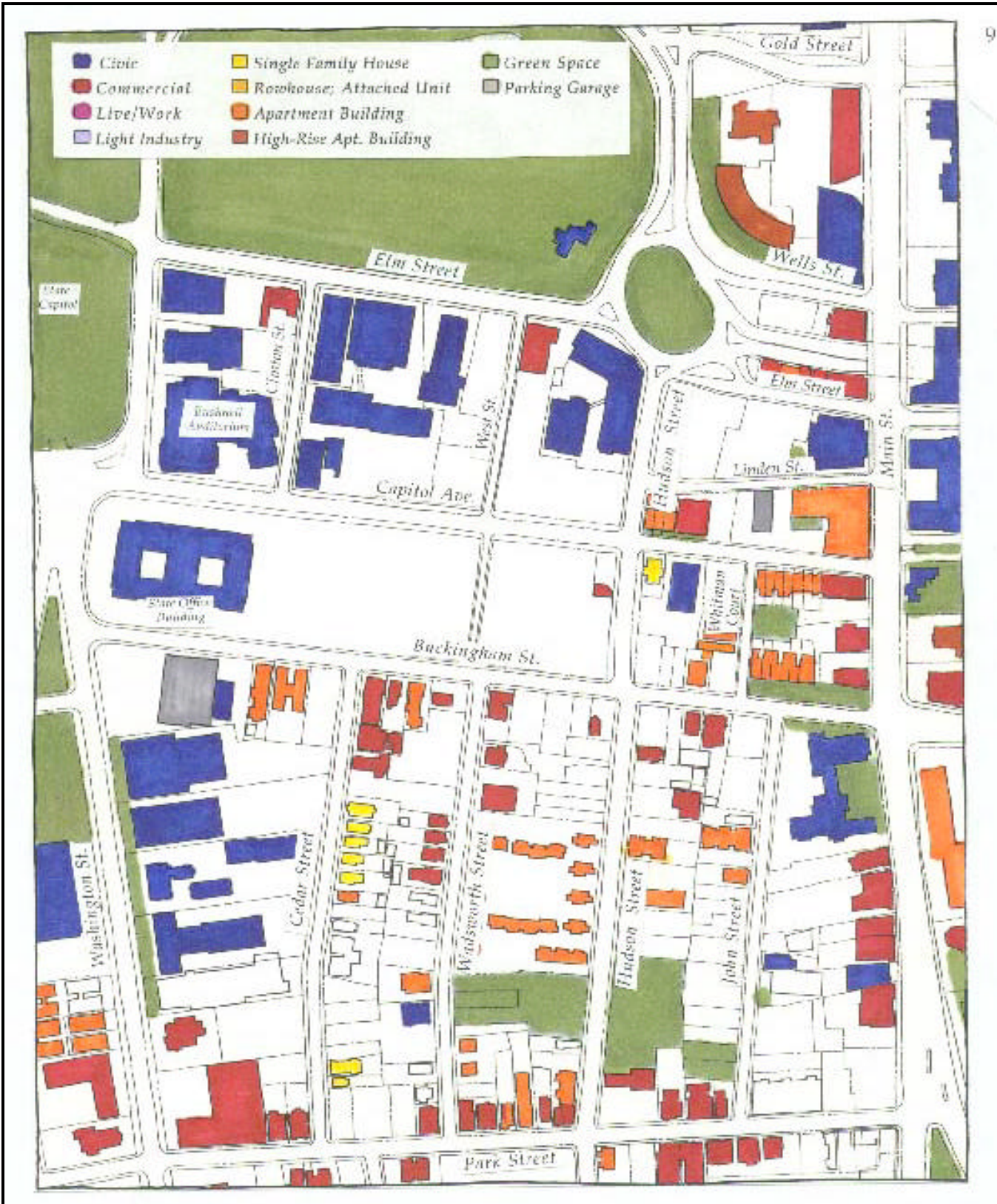
Main Street



Park Street



Wadsworth Atheneum



LAND USE

Existing

NEIGHBORHOOD DESCRIPTION

Assessment of Existing Conditions, north to south

A. Capitol to Buckingham: a wasteland

Around Bushnell Park there are many State offices, many grand and distinguished, with architectural details like the Department of Environment Protection and 55 Elm Street (rented as State offices), The State Capitol, visible from the park and nearly everywhere in the neighborhood.



Elm Street and Bushnell Park

One block south, Capitol Avenue is bordered on both sides by State parking lots, with over 1200 parking spaces. Once one of the grandest streets in Hartford, where holiday parades would march, Capitol Avenue, (between Washington and Hudson Streets) is virtually a "No Man's Land." The parking lot here is so large, it totals nearly 6 acres. While this may serve a purpose for the great number of State employees who commute, this real estate here is too valuable to use as surface parking.



Existing Buildings in SoDo, 2001

The impact of this vast area on the neighborhood can be seen best by looking at the drawing at the right, where only the buildings are colored in. Visitors unfamiliar with the neighborhood might assume this image was a city ravaged by war or urban renewal. But in fact, the area was cleared specifically for parking. While surface parking is usually chosen over other options because it is the most economical (in the short run), one has to consider the true cost over the past twenty years of this decision.



State Parking Lot, Capitol Ave.

Also located at the end of Capitol Avenue, across from the State Capitol, is what many consider to be the cultural center of the city, The Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts. Residents feel this is an important landmark and that it is an asset that should be capitalized upon by linking it to Main Street (and restaurants there). Capitol Avenue should be made more attractive, by developing both sides of the street, and enhancing it with trees and landscaping.



Rowhouses, Capitol Ave.

B. Hudson to Main: prime real estate

This area has some of the most sought after housing in downtown. The Linden and surrounding buildings are fully occupied and sales are at market rates. The refined scale of Whitman Court and rowhouses on Buckingham Street and Capitol Avenue. make it a very appealing place to live. The only down side is that there is *too little* of it. People would like to see more real estate developed for housing. They would live here if there were more available.

Like elsewhere in the neighborhood, the major problem here is that land is underutilized for parking. Too much land is given to surface parking; it's in the wrong place, and is too visible.

However, there are many pluses. One is that much of this real estate is held by a single owner. The opportunity to develop all or part of it, makes this corner one of the best candidates for early private development of any in the neighborhood. The corner of Hudson and Elm Streets, (owned by Central Baptist Church) is a *key site*.

C. Buckingham to Park: too much erased

Of the roughly 600 residents that live in South Downtown, approximately 30% live in housing affordable for households at or below median income. All that housing is located south of Buckingham Street. Most property here is privately- or city-owned. There are a handful of apartment buildings, and a few law offices in houses along Buckingham Street. As with the other areas already described, much of this prime real estate is underutilized.

A few apartment buildings are in poor condition (probably due to the lack of owner-occupancy) but remarkably, only a couple are boarded up (i.e. vacant). A cooperative housing complex with about three dozen units sits between Wadsworth and Hudson, with a common play area in the center.

At the southernmost end of the neighborhood, a park has been created on City Redevelopment Agency land for recreation (basketball courts) and baseball. But much of this land is simply spouting new vegetation without any particular function. This land runs behind Park Street, whose businesses need parking.

The blocks from Buckingham to Park are very long (nearly 1/4 mile). Pedestrians have carved walkways across blocks through empty lots, signaling the desire for connections across the neighborhood. John Street is too narrow to permit on-street parking and two-way travel.

D. Washington Street east to John: dramatic shift in scale

Mostly all the buildings along Washington Street here are state-owned properties. While only 1-3 stories high, these buildings are very long, and there is a dramatic shift in scale from large institutional (brick) buildings on Washington Street to the smaller wood frame houses on Cedar Street.

As a consequence of its location behind these sizable State buildings, Cedar Street, on the service side of the buildings, feels (and is treated) more like an alley than a street. The street is saved from falling into absolute despair by the presence of several tall mature shade trees. As with the other blocks south of Buckingham to Park, this is a very long block. However, the block is wide from Washington to Cedar, and it slopes: there is an opportunity to take advantage of the change in grade to accommodate a parking garage (the slope would allow access to each floor, so the garages floors themselves would not need to ramp, making a less expensive garage).



Whitman Court



John Street



Wadsworth Street



Washington Street



Cedar Street

Issues

1. Parking

Parking consumes a significant amount of land in the neighborhood. By either intention or by default, major parking lots have been created everywhere.. Approximately 50% of the neighborhood land use is given over to surface parking lots. While parking is a necessity of life, all these surface lots are occupying precious real estate in the heart of the city. Residents also feel it doesn't need to be as visible as it is now.

Parking lots along a street edge also degrade the quality of the street for the pedestrian. Ample space exists for accommodating existing parking in other, less visible, locations in the neighborhood. The state is not the only one to blame. Smaller lots serving church and office parking contribute to the problem by their being located in the wrong places: on corners and abutting streets instead of tucked behind buildings.

Action needed: Relocate parking to less visible locations.

2. Lack of activity after 5 p.m.

The western end of the neighborhood, the "No Man's Land" of the State parking lots, can be considered a *single-use zone*. After 5 p.m., there's little activity in the area. The sidewalks are empty at 5:30 pm.

Action needed: give people a reason to stick around; need more places for people to live, restaurants, and places to enjoy in the evening.

3. Lack of retail

Of the few complaints residents have about their neighborhood, the lack of retail is near the top of the list. Some have described their after work route home to pick up a quart of milk (by car, outside of the neighborhood). Many wish South Downtown had a small but well-stocked grocery store, with some carry-out food. The Linden was cited many times as the best location for a store, perhaps like D& D Market on Franklin Avenue, Highland Market, or the former Cheese & Stuff.

Action needed: Market and fill existing commercial space

4. Heritage resources at risk

Many buildings in the neighborhood are candidates for renovation but are not adequately protected from further deterioration from the elements and vandalism.

An additional threat to these buildings may be demolition: city funds are currently not available to remove vacant buildings. Hartford has almost 400 vacant buildings and barely the capacity to secure them all. There are only about a half dozen in South Downtown.

Action needed: Vacant buildings need to be properly secured and mothballed for future purchase and rehabilitation.

PARKING LOCATION



Too much neighborhood land devoted to surface parking

STREET LIFE



Lack of activity after 5 p.m.

VACANT COMMERCIAL SPACE



Lack of retail on Main Street

HISTORIC RESOURCES



Vacant buildings need protection from the elements and vandalism

5. Security

Some buildings, while very well maintained, have elements that reduce the safety of the street. Blank walls, service areas and parking next to the street are some examples. Retrofitting the building so habitable space, such as offices, is located next to the public sidewalk will put eyes on the street.

Action needed: Require habitable space next to sidewalk

6. Quality of public space: traffic/pedestrian interface

While no one would argue that many streets are very pleasant in South Downtown, most streets have few or no trees, have sidewalks right next to the travel lanes of the street, and are challenging to walk down as they are riddled with curb cuts (driveways interrupting the sidewalk). There are few protections between the pedestrian and the car. Wherever physically possible, street trees should be planted.

Perceptions of the neighborhood and real estate values are first formed from the public space. It is interwoven into the decision about investing in a neighborhood: when you buy a house, you buy the whole neighborhood. Streets need to be improved as an economic strategy, not just for aesthetics. Also, while there is some park land, it begs for more attention.

Action needed: Enhance public spaces such as streets and parks

7. Underutilized real estate

Some properties could capture higher and better uses: auto body and repair businesses, and gas stations. These businesses could stay in the neighborhood, as they offer a needed service, and a number of more suitable locations are available. Their appearance to the street side can be made more attractive.

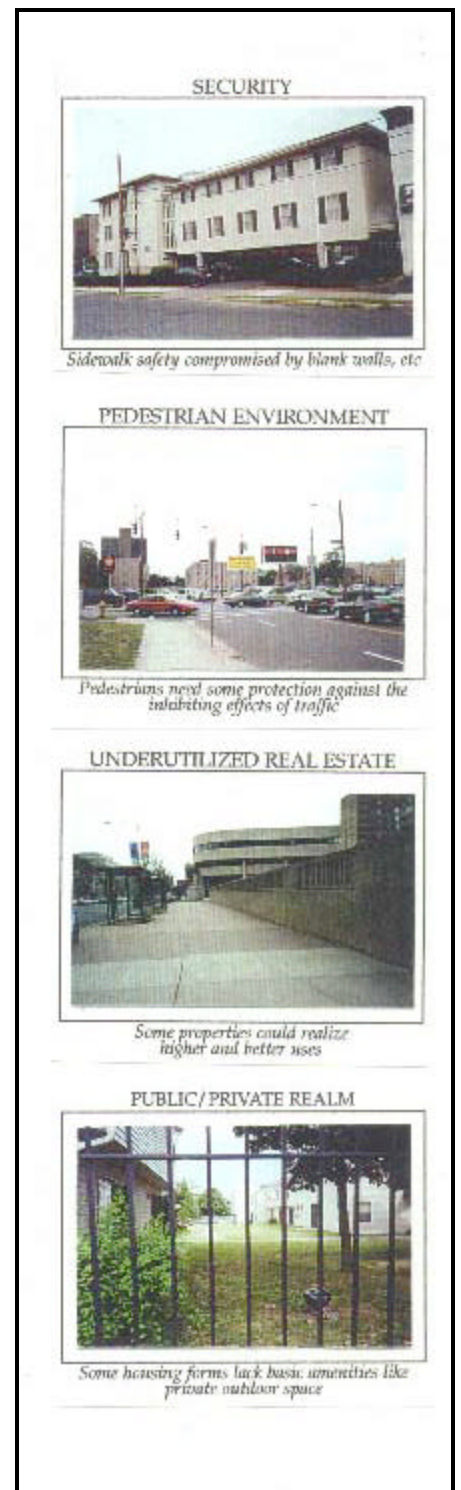
Action needed: Make service establishments less visible, retaining them within the neighborhood

8. Concentration of affordable housing

As with many Hartford neighborhoods, there is a significant population living in affordable housing. Ideally, affordable housing is dispersed throughout a neighborhood, not concentrated in one place.

By offering only one housing option to those attempting to climb up the ladder, many may be missing a chance to own property. More choices need to be available to those who are interested in becoming a homeowner.

Action needed: Need to better balance housing by creating more units with a greater variety of household types



Asset

1. Location

The neighborhood's chief asset is its location: proximity to all amenities; within walking distance to Bushnell Park, downtown, civic center, hospital, museum, theater, libraries, train station, and more.

2. Mix of Uses

There is a variety of civic, commercial, residential, institutional, and industrial uses in South Downtown. The neighborhood is fortunate to have within it a number of civic institutions, both cultural and religious, including the city and state libraries, The Bushnell Center for the Performing Arts, and five churches of differing faiths. Commercial uses include restaurants and small shops, the city teachers' credit union, and gas stations.

Though not part of the *South Downtown* neighborhood proper, Park Street is vital to the neighborhood for its stores and services. Park Street runs along the southern edge of the neighborhood. It is a commercial street, predominated by Hispanic owned-businesses. The retail businesses are primarily *neighborhood commercial* types: several small grocery or variety stores, hair salons, travel and insurance services, and miscellaneous repair shops. Just adjacent to the neighborhood are a chain drugstore and hardware store as well.

3. Plenty of Jobs

Well over 1000 people come to work in the neighborhood everyday, and several thousand more nearby at the State Legislative Office Building, the hospital, and downtown in City and State offices, law firms, social service agencies, courthouses, etc.

4. A Variety of Building Types

The wide variety of building types allows for a wide range of uses. The neighborhood has a remarkable stock of a variety of building types, from rowhouses to high-rise apartment buildings, apartment houses to houses. Quite a number of distinctively designed state buildings add greatly to the appealing scale and architectural character of the neighborhood.

Main Street has many commercial buildings, several churches, and market-rate apartment buildings. Some commercial space is vacant on the first floor, presumably due to the lack of residents and foot traffic at this end of Main Street.

Buckingham and Wadsworth Streets have a number of law and other offices occupying houses, adding to both commercial and residential uses.

5. Available Land



South Downtown is close to everything



A mix of uses makes the neighborhood interesting



Over 1000 people come to work every day in South Downtown



The wide variety of building types allows for a range of uses

One advantage to all the surface parking lots is that the land is already available for redevelopment. If the state relocates their 1223 parking spaces, there will be 6 acres freed up for redevelopment alone on Capitol Avenue.

6. Streets

Streets have comfortable proportions, easy for pedestrians to cross. On-street parking aids in keeping traffic speed safe. Mature trees on some streets contribute to making a welcoming environment.

7. Socio-economic mix

The neighborhood has a diverse population (which is not typical of most Hartford neighborhoods, where usually one group predominates). Approximately 30% of the neighborhood lives in modest- or low-income housing, and approximately the same percentage live in housing costing \$200,000 or more.

8. Open space

There is ample open space, including recreational space. There is a mix of playing areas to offer residents recreational space for different ages: basketball courts, baseball field, places of quiet repose. Park land could be better distributed in the neighborhood, and the location of some areas may be subject to change as the neighborhood develops.



Plenty of land is available for redevelopment



Neighborhood streets have comfortable proportions



Neighborhood residents are from both ends of the socio-economic spectrum



There is plenty of recreational space