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A (true) tale of two urban futures

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Two new Hartford buildings clearly signal the future of the city. Only a few blocks apart, Gothic Park and Sigourney Mews represent antithetical traditions in American history — and antithetical prospects for urban life in the Capitol Region during the next decade.

Gothic Park is a commercial venture tucked off in the trees at the western edge of Hartford's Asylum Hill neighborhood. An upscale office complex, with a striking but idiosyncratic design befitting its archaic name, this building is intended to provide an arcadian refuge for professionals and corporate executives who work in the city. "Want to escape the city?" one of Gothic Park's advertisements asks. "Move to Hartford. Imagine a five-acre oasis, wooded, quiet and clean, with ample full parking and easy access."

Sigourney Mews, in contrast, is a community-based residential project located in the heart of Asylum Hill on Sigourney Street. An elegantly designed complex of town houses, its aristocratic-sounding name disguises its egalitarian purpose. It is intended to provide 78 apartments for low- and moderate-income people who live in the neighborhood, but who are in danger of being driven out by gentrification or commercial expansion.

Sigourney Mews is a remarkably broad-based cooperative venture of neighborhood activists, homeowners, church representatives, city and state officials, private developers, bankers and HUD planners. The low- and moderate-income renters will become owners of their units after 15 years. Given the fact that many of these renters will be African-American and Hispanic, Sigourney Mews will ensure that there will be at least some economic and ethnic diversity in a neighborhood where housing for middle- and upper-income earners, now owned mainly by whites, is already well-established.

Each project reflects a larger American approach to urban life. Each, therefore, offers a window through which to observe two possible futures for the city.

It probably made good public relations sense to herald Gothic Park as an escape from the city, given the target clientele. Romantic anti-urbanism commands the allegiance of many professionals and corporate executives today, as it has claimed the loyalty of the American middle classes at least since the time of Henry David Thoreau.

Thoreau moved to Walden because he believed the city was a dirty and artificial place, where individuals easily lose their identity amidst the faceless crowds. He envisioned the world of wild nature as pure, quiet and an enhancement to human dignity.

Such attitudes became a self-fulfilling prophecy in 19th- and 20th-century America, especially after World War II, when thousands of Americans fled the city in search of an idealized life closer to nature, in the suburbs. Large government subsidies, in the form of the GI Bill, federal highway construction projects linking cities and suburbs, and mortgage interest tax write-offs, undergirded that middle-class flight from the city and channeled resources away from urban centers.

This made fulfillment of some of Thoreau's most negative prophecies about the city almost inevitable. After World War II, the American city did become an increasingly inhospitable and stultifying place to live. Such trends were only exacerbated by the so-called urban renewal projects, which had the effect of destroying neighborhoods.

But romantic anti-urbanism was only one American tradition. The Sigourney Mews project is rooted in an alternating pro-urban tradition. At least since the end of the last century, a positive kind of grass-roots communitarianism also flourished in many cities.

Typical examples of this tradition would be the turn-of-the-century Irish Catholic parish or the African-American Protestant congregation in the North. Such clusters of generally low-income city dwellers, bound together by a common history and by strong survival needs, generally sought to humanize their environment, rather than escape from it.

The Irish priest and African-American pastor regularly functioned as informal community organizers. Many residents readily developed a deep love for the riches of community life in the city, notwithstanding the many negativities they also experienced.

This positive urban grass-roots communitarianism assumed a variety of forms after World War II, in the struggles of some labor unions and community organizations and, to some degree, in the campaigns of the civil-rights movement. These larger expressions of grass-roots communitarian ethos were, in part, responses to the massive removal of economic foundations after World War II.

The Gothic Park project, with its appeal to an upscale clientele inclined to escape the city, represents the tradition of romantic anti-urbanism in pristine form. The Sigourney Mews project definitely stands in the grass-roots communitarian tradition.

Which future shall we choose for our city?

As far as I can see, the burden is on the side of anyone who would opt for the tradition of romantic anti-urbanism. That tradition will leave us with an inhumane, elitist urban center that will be mainly a blacktop jungle for the poor majority. It will offer only sterile enclaves for the affluent minority in golden high-rises downtown or well-protected, exclusive oases in the neighborhoods.

Coalition-building to better the lot of all who live in the city is a precarious venture. But like the many citizens who have struggled to implement some of the dreams of grass-roots communitarianism, I believe the risk is worth taking.

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