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Love and Money in Bridgeport

The beleaguered Connecticut city is showing signs of real life.

By Karrie Jacobs

The word people like to use when they're being upbeat about Bridgeport, Connecticut, is bones. As in "The pre-war fabric of downtown provides the bones for the type of walkable urban place that is increasingly in demand." So wrote the American Institute of Architects' sustainable-design assessment team in its recent analysis of the state's largest city (population: 144,229 and, for the first time in decades, growing). "It's a city with great bones," says Donald C. Eversley, the director of planning and economic development.

And those "bones" are immediately apparent when arriving by train, an easy hour and 20 minutes from Grand Central. The New Haven-bound side of the platform affords a lovely view of the Pequonnock River. Never mind that the I-95 overpass looms overhead or that Steel Point, the planned site of an ambitious (and endlessly delayed) mixed-use complex, sits vacant directly across the water. There is clearly potential here: outdoor bars; beers and buckets of steamers; condos with views; hotel rooms; bike paths. Someday...

A short stroll from the train station, the downtown area is tantalizing. It's small but has a decent mix of handsome historic buildings, inoffensive modern ones, and the usual oversupply of parking garages. Unlike downtown Stamford, 23 miles west, it hasn't been redeveloped into one seamless, soulless office park. Mayor Bill Finch is currently nearing the end of his first four-year term. (He replaced John Fabrizi, who publicly admitted to alcohol abuse following a drug allegation; the previous mayor spent time in jail on corruption charges.) Finch summed up the AIA report this way: "They said this is the city of opportunity."

Well, sort of. Bridgeport is infamous for its postindustrial poverty, daunting crime statistics, and a university that, in the early 1990s, was bought out by Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church and boasts as its most famous alum Faisal Shahzad, aka the Times Square bomber. Still, under other circumstances—in some other state, for example—this could be a nice place. It has more than 20 miles of coastline (largely inaccessible), a smattering of industrial jobs (the 400 employees of Derecktor Shipyards build yachts and ferries here), and a growing population (approximately 1,400) in its compact downtown. There's even a new Whole Foods open (except it's just over the border in upscale Fairfield). The problem: Connecticut has never had any love for its cities. And what Bridgeport clearly needs is love, which—and I'm serious here—is exactly the sentiment America's many woebegone cities require. Our bleakest cities cry out not just for civic pride but civic passion. (Oh, yeah, and lots of investment dollars.)

So this is it, the moment for Bridgeport and other struggling cities (like Detroit, Buffalo, Cleveland...) to blossom. It's time for a revival of those cities that were abandoned by the industries that once sustained them and have thus far been untouched by the waves of prosperity that have buoyed our showcase cities. Why now? The conventional wisdom about cities has finally changed.

When I visit Mayor Finch in the city hall annex (originally a Gimbels department store), he argues that Connecticut undermined its cities way back by making it impossible for them to grow: "We're one of two states

that doesn't have land annexation in its constitution." For a 16-square-mile city that balances its budget on property taxes, with endless acres of abandoned industrial sites, the sad fact is that much of what generates revenue (like that new Whole Foods) is on the other side of a municipal border. At the same time, Finch sounds like pretty much everyone on the urbanism lecture circuit these days when he says that cities are the healthiest, most economically and environmentally sound places to live. "Gas in our lifetimes is going to be ten dollars a gallon," he predicts. "Things that people aren't thinking about right now are going to happen."

So far, the evidence in Bridgeport of a newfound love affair with the city is real but modest. Eversley takes me on a walking tour of downtown. There are old banks, like Citytrust, whose offices have been converted to desirable rental apartments, and ones like the squat, temple-shaped Mechanics and Farmers Savings Bank building, which is still awaiting rescue. The developer Eric Anderson restored the old Arcade Hotel and has attracted a cupcake bakery, a Mexican café, and a nonchain pharmacy to the downtown's lovely 19th-century light court. Another developer, Philip Kuchma, recently completed a complex called Bijou Square, a historic restoration paired with new construction, which includes 84 units of housing and a 1910 theater reopening this summer with indie films, live entertainment, and a lobby bar.

Slowly, the Finch administration's curatorial approach to downtown is paying off. But the bigger problem is what to do with the hundreds of acres of brownfield sites. The scale of the industrial abandonment is a reminder of the size of the investment required to make Bridgeport whole again. In an ideal world, General Electric would find a way to repurpose the monumental, 77-acre 1915 Remington Arms plant, which it bought in 1920 and operated until 2007, for the huge solar-panel factory it intends to build somewhere in the United States. That seems unlikely. Every city in the country is clamoring for the plant and GE appears indifferent to the potential others see in the Bridgeport facility. The AIA study suggests turning the GE/Remington complex into an "alternative technologies research center." Appealing, but improbable. Indeed, demolition is scheduled to begin on the facility this summer.

The city has proposed the East Bridgeport Development Corridor, a plan intended to spur reuse of the blighted acreage. The most promising component so far is the P. T. Barnum Metro-North Station, named for the circus impresario and former Bridgeport mayor. If completed, it will be the city's second rail station and is envisioned as a catalyst for mixed-use, transit-oriented development. Barnum Station is part of a package of similar projects in New York and Connecticut that received a \$3.5 million, federally funded Sustainable Communities Initiative Grant, part of an effort to seed pilot projects that integrate housing, economic development, transportation, and environmental planning. Bridgeport expects its share to be \$250,000, enough to fund a feasibility study, which is, Eversley says, "a ticket to the dance" for the next round of federal funding. Finch hopes the Obama administration starts an infra-structure bank that would help public/private partnerships actually build the projects encouraged by planning grants.

In the meantime, the most vivid evidence that someone loves Bridgeport is Two Boots, a branch of the New York City-based Italian/Cajun pizza miniempire. Its Mardi Gras-bead-covered walls are the cheeriest thing around for miles. Owner Phil Hartman attributes the choice of Bridgeport for his first out-of-town location to his passion "for cities that are lost causes." (Recently, he opened a branch in Baltimore.) Hartman truly loves Bridgeport, but he's impatient with the pace and scale of development. Speaking of the hoopla surrounding the completion of Bijou Square, he says, "We need, like, 70 of these buildings."

Hartman is right. And maybe one of these days someone will show Bridgeport the love and fund the big-ticket developments, such as Barnum Station or the proposed Green Energy Park. The city does have an \$11 million federal grant to finance an infrastructure upgrade on Steel Point, a necessary precursor to any planned development. (Work is scheduled to begin early next year.) In theory, housing, retail, offices, and a marina will follow. Until then, Eversley and Kuchma, side by side in a Two Boots booth, tally small victories: the recent arrival downtown of a single dry cleaner, the relocation of a cheese shop from tony Westport. "We'll need another 300 or 400 apartments to support a decent-sized supermarket," Kuchma calculates. It's a slow process. But if Bridgeport can find love, there's hope for Detroit, Buffalo, and Cleveland.