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Boston's West End

Urban Obsolescence in Mid-Twentieth-Century America

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IN 1951, Boston's City Planning Board produced a comprehensive urban renewal scheme detailing the city's woes and imagining a better future. Amid much dry data, one page spread stands out (figure 3.1).[1] On the left, a black-inked map of Boston's West End depicts a crooked maze of dense-packed blocks, back alleys, courtyards, and vacant lots. Atop reads the title "An Obsolete Neighborhood" while across lies the pendant image titled "And a New Plan." Here is an imagined future cleared of congestion, modernist slab blocks arrayed in a park setting. A decade passed before the West End was infamously obliterated and the "New Plan" realized, but once singled out as "obsolete," the neighborhood's fate was largely sealed. How and why had the West End earned this dubious distinction?

Curious, too, is the choice of title. What did it mean to designate a neighborhood as "obsolete"? What and whose purposes did this assessment serve? Where, moreover, had the term "obsolete" come from in relation to urban form, and where was this rhetoric going? From the mid-1930s through the early 1970s the question of the obsolescence of neighborhoods and cities was posed regularly in discussions of American city planning and urbanism. Consequently, obsolescence became a key paradigm for conceptualizing and managing change in the American urban built environment, part of a national strategy for clearing urban land in the hope of improving citizens' lives and dwellings. This chapter offers a critical history of the idea of urban obsolescence using Boston's West End as a case study.

The "obsolete" West End of 1950 was an L-shaped, forty-eight-acre area in the northwest part of Boston close by the downtown business and civic district. Settled in the early nineteenth-century, the West End for a hundred years had

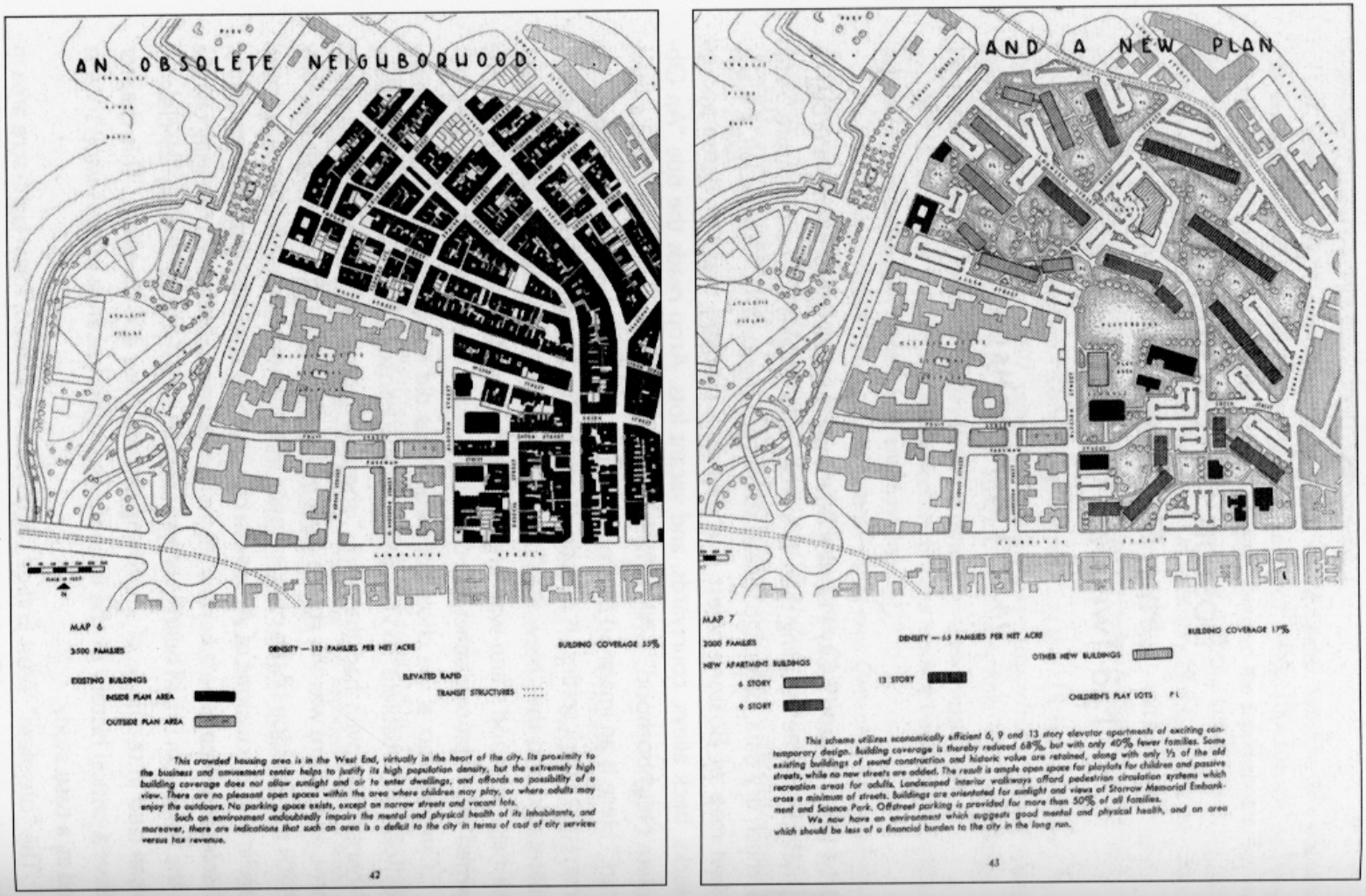

Figure 3.1. "An Obsolete Neighborhood . . . and a New Plan": the graphic that doomed the West End. *Source: A General Plan for Boston: A Preliminary Report* (Boston: Boston City Planning Board, 1951), 42–43.

been a district primarily of first- and second-generation immigrants. In 1950 working-class Italians represented a plurality of the West End's twelve thousand inhabitants, living alongside substantial Jewish and Polish communities, plus smaller numbers of Greeks, Albanians, Ukrainians, African Americans, students, artists, and hospital workers who had settled there for its low rents and central city location. Fragmented by ethnicity and income—the poorest concentrated in the dense center—the West End was never socially a "cohesive neighborhood," although it could look so because of its dominant working-class culture, architectural uniformity, and defined boundaries.[2]

Physically the West End was hemmed in on all sides: to the south by broad Cambridge Street, to the west by Massachusetts General Hospital and the Charles River, to the north and east by elevated rail lines and light industry. Within, the West End could feel claustrophobic. Only three of its two dozen streets ran all the way through; the rest extended a few blocks at most. Along cramped roadways and sidewalks a jumble of high, narrow, three- to five-story tenement buildings constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries formed nearly continuous walls. Ground-floor stores and luncheonettes were ubiquitous. Trees appeared rarely in this brick and asphalt world. Density and disorder in the West End are the physical qualities of this "obsolete neighborhood" emphasized by the 1951 figure-ground plan.

Beneath the 1951 plan, statistics and a caption summarized the argument for the West End's obsolescence. Primary was the congestion of people and buildings: 112 families per net acre; building coverage of 55 percent that "does not allow sunlight and air to enter dwellings, and affords no possibility of a view."[3] These were densities, the *General Plan for Boston* noted, that "exceeded the standards set up by the American Public Health Association's Committee on the Hygiene of Housing."[4] The caption continues: "There are no pleasant open spaces within the area where children may play, or where adults may enjoy the outdoors. No parking space exists, except on narrow streets and vacant lots." Worse, the neighborhood's congestion "undoubtedly impairs the mental and physical health of its inhabitants." Most frequently cited was the neighborhood's high incidence of tuberculosis, which "ranked worse than 53 of 64 areas in Boston."[5] Ultimately, human distress and physical density exacted costs beyond the district's borders: "There are indications that such an area is a deficit to the city in terms of cost of city services versus tax revenue." From physical congestion to ill health to economic liability, this was the logic of the West End's obsolescence.

Subsequent planning studies of the West End from the mid-1950s filled in this outline. All featured a comprehensive housing survey whose conclusions were sobering. "Nearly 80% of all dwelling units in the West End rank as substandard or only marginally standard."[6] Of 631 West End buildings surveyed,

89 percent lacked rear stairs and 80 percent lacked fire escapes; 61 percent had trash strewn about; and 60 percent showed signs of rat infestation and 75 percent other vermin. Of the 3,671 dwelling units surveyed, 63 percent lacked washbasins and 64.8 percent had "larger" or "extreme defects" in their walls, windows, or floors.[7] This survey represented Boston planners' "main argument for describing the area as a slum," according to the sociologist Herbert Gans, then living among the West Enders.[8]

The survey that determined the West End's substandard obsolescence was conducted by "trained field inspectors using the American Public Health Association (APHA) technique."[9] Initially conceived in the early 1940s to help standardize wartime housing, the APHA's *Appraisal Method for Measuring the Quality of Housing* (four volumes in all, published in 1945 and 1946) was most widely used after enactment of the federal Housing Act of 1949, which required assessment of a city's existing housing stock before it could be replaced and improved. Upon publication the APHA manual was pronounced "without question the most scientific approach yet made to the measurement of housing quality on a large scale."[10] Twenty years later it was still "the best system yet devised for the appraisal of substandard housing."[11] Adopted by the United States Public Health Service, the APHA method was put to use at redevelopment agencies in a score of American cities, including Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Washington, Los Angeles, New Haven, and Saint Louis.

By APHA protocol, field inspectors with printed appraisal forms first canvassed a neighborhood to assess "penalty score points" on individual items from toilet facilities and sleeping arrangements to heating equipment and overall structural condition. One to three penalty points represented "slight threats" to public safety; maximum penalty points indicated "extreme and ever-present threats."[12] Separately, the whole neighborhood would be subjected to an "environmental survey," which assessed penalty points for items like land crowding, commercial nuisances, and inadequate community facilities. Field scores would be transcribed by office clerks onto punch cards for sorting, statistical analysis, and aggregation into block and neighborhood tables, charts, and maps. The sum of penalty points produced a neighborhood's total housing quality score, "the distinctive feature of the method" that expressed "complex relationships in a single figure."[13]

Fewer than 30 penalty points for a total housing quality score represented grade A "good to excellent housing." More than 120 penalty points indicated grade E "thoroughgoing slums." In the middle, a 60- to 89-point grade C score represented "mediocre housing districts in which extensive blight and obsolescence can be expected . . . housing which no official agency would condemn, but which may involve serious problems of blight and shrinking values during the next ten or twenty years."[14] For the category of the obso-

lescent vigilance was required: "The encroachment of grade C blocks into higher grade areas indicates a spreading blight which local agencies will wish to check both as protection to the remaining unspoiled neighborhoods and as a safeguard to the city's tax base."[15] Grade C obsolescent areas endangered the whole city and risked themselves collapsing into wholly obsolete slums. For that, intoned the APHA manual, "there is usually no practical remedy except rebuilding."[16]

Bureaucracy and abstraction characterized the APHA *Appraisal Method for Measuring the Quality of Housing*. The goal was to provide planners with a fine-grained, block-by-block, building-by-building analysis of urban housing conditions, indicating if an area needed "minor improvements," "radical rehabilitation," or "must be torn down."[17] Earlier classifications based on large-scale census tracts and just a handful of indicators had been imprecise and failed practically in guiding planners' decisions about which neighborhoods and blocks needed the most help first. Now the APHA had laid out a method employing dozens of criteria that could ideally target the citizenry most in need. One author forecast that an "official designation of substandardness by areas will serve as a beacon to guide the agencies of reconstruction."[18] The manual's grading rubric represented a "concise and quantitative picture . . . that will be understood by the busy public official or the layman."[19]

As a political tool, the APHA manual made the "determination of basic needs . . . a matter of quantitative measure" so that "it becomes possible to put all the housing cards on the table, where every group concerned may consider dispassionately its proper role in the reconstruction task."[20] The APHA method thus functioned as a kind of urban triage, officials and politicians using it to diagnose urban ills and prioritize areas for redevelopment surgery. The method's political effectiveness rested on its scientism and apparent objectivity, which could be used to transcend the usual class and ethnic divisions of American big-city politics seen as stymieing reform and social improvement.

The APHA *Appraisal Method for Measuring the Quality of Housing* reflected scientific methods traditionally applied by public health experts to sanitation engineering and infectious diseases. The manual also represented an expansion of public health into broader social concerns. "The public health of the future must be not only an engineering science and a medical science; it must also be a social science," proclaimed C.-E. A. Winslow, Yale University professor of public health and chair of the APHA's Committee on the Hygiene of Housing.[21] With financial support from the League of Nation's health organization, the U.S. Public Health Service, and philanthropies like the Milbank Memorial Fund and the Rockefeller Foundation, the APHA's Committee on the Hygiene of Housing began in the 1930s a decade-long study of housing matters from illumination and recreational facilities to housing survey procedures and stan-

dards of occupancy. Raising standards would decrease illness and accident rates and provide "esthetic satisfaction" and "refuge from the noise and tension of the street and market place," declared the APHA's *Basic Principles of Healthful Housing*. It would also protect against "the sense of inferiority developed in a home notably below the standard of friends and neighbors."[22]

The APHA's *Basic Principles* reflected long-standing views on the physical environment's determination of physical and social health, supplemented by a modern emphasis on the individual's mental health and happiness. Urban obsolescence now included a neighborhood fabric's failure to support individual self-esteem as well as moral and creative self-actualization, in terms developed at this time by the psychologist Abraham Maslow's "hierarchy of human needs." Modern, too, was the APHA housing study's organizational structure and institutional framework. Analysis of urban obsolescence exemplified the "big research" approach of the interwar years, bringing together government, academia, professional organizations, and foundations in a "totalist view of American life as an objectified, quantified mechanism."[23] For the APHA housing study some dozen separate interdisciplinary subcommittees were organized, each composed of experts from numerous fields.

The *Appraisal Method for Measuring the Quality of Housing* was authored specifically by the APHA's Subcommittee on Appraisal of Residential Areas, whose members included a statistician, sociologist, doctor, and housing specialist, plus the city planner Frederick J. Adams. Son of the famous planner Thomas Adams and himself founder in 1947 of Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Department of City and Regional Planning, Frederick J. Adams had since the 1930s been active in discussions on the obsolescence of American neighborhoods and cities. He was respondent to an important 1935 article on "Obsolescence in Cities" in the *Planners' Journal*, the leading professional publication that Adams edited from 1937 to 1940. He served on APHA subcommittees examining recreational facilities and home sanitation, and he chaired the subcommittee on environmental standards that authored *Standards for Healthful Housing: Planning the Neighborhood* (published in 1948).

Adams wrote widely on urban redevelopment, asserting that "the basic pattern and a large proportion of the structures in our cities are physically and economically obsolete" and that "the obsolete physical design of our cities is the major cause of the flight to the suburbs."[24] To replace obsolete neighborhoods, he proposed a comprehensive master planning process and universal metropolitan standards—the same in suburbs and cities—that legislated proper provision of direct sunlight, air circulation, noise abatement, usable outdoor space, municipal services, lot coverage, and population density to benefit all citizens regardless of class, race, and place of residence.

In 1949, Adams founded his own planning consultancy with two MIT col-

leagues, John T. Howard and Roland B. Greeley, "to study and advise on current and future problems of community development," according to the announcement of the partnership's formation.[25] Their first big job was none other than the *General Plan of Boston*, in which the West End was officially designated "obsolete." For Boston officials the choice of Adams's firm would not have been difficult. Adams was a leader in the planning profession, an expert in inner-city redevelopment. His consultancy offered "advice on layout and design . . . comprehensive land use and zoning" to supplement the City Planning Board's technical staff. And Adams's office was in downtown Boston on State Street, one street over from City Hall. The ideas and procedures Adams developed during the 1930s and 1940s the city of Boston was putting into practice in the 1950s. It is easy to imagine his leading role framing the *General Plan of Boston*'s vision and visuals, especially the page spread on the "obsolete" West End that conjoined public health rhetoric with city planning graphics. Adams represented a personal link between the APHA's housing standards methodology and the fate of Boston's West End. As a theorist and consultant, his fingerprints are all over the "obsolete neighborhood" designation and condemnatory housing survey. In effect, Frederick J. Adams had authored the West End's obsolescence.

Of course, Adams was not the sole inventor of the idea of urban obsolescence in midcentury America. A constellation of individuals and institutions from the 1930s through the 1960s produced the idea that America's cities were becoming obsolete. Significant among these included the planner Carol Aronovici, who edited an early 1932 collection of essays on "Obsolete Cities."[26] The planner George Herrold authored a seminal 1935 article on "Obsolescence in Cities" for the official journal of the American City Planning Institute.[27] Presidential housing adviser Miles Colean in 1953 wrote: "A city in which there were not at all times some worn-out or obsolete parts would not be a dynamic city."[28] Popular magazine articles from the early 1960s asked, "Are Cities Obsolete?" and "Are Cities Dead?"[29] Nearly forty years after debate began, there remained strong faith in "the basic message: the basic fact of life—which is that the city is functionally obsolete," as one urban policy expert put it in 1970.[30]

The term "obsolescence" was first applied by planners to urban neighborhoods and cities in the 1930s as a near-synonym for "blighted" and "decadent." In the dark "soul-searching" years of the Great Depression, "we are becoming blight-conscious as a people," observed the tax expert Mabel Walker in 1938, aware of the harm done to citizens and cities by substandard living conditions.[31] Boston's West End exemplified obsolescence's symptoms: overcrowding, narrow streets, heavy traffic, mixed commercial and residential uses; inadequate sunlight, fresh air, and open spaces; dwellings advanced in age and deficient in public health standards of sanitation and heating; and proximity to central business districts that obsolescent areas threatened to degrade economically.

Indeed, economic liabilities were the special mark of obsolescent areas measured by declining rents, property values, and tax receipts. These were factors distinct from and less tangible than the visible decay of a slum still profitable to its landlords.[32]

The planners' distinction between slums and obsolescent neighborhoods allowed policy makers to draw boundaries between urban areas more and less salvageable, or in transition from one state to another, as well as determine degrees of risk for effected districts and the surrounding city. The confluence of the terms "blight" and "obsolescence" from the 1930s through midcentury proved particularly effective in heightening and framing anxieties. Blight insinuated naturalistic contagion; obsolescence implied objective assessment of performance and value. Together the two played to emotion *and* reason. Blight's epidemiological connotations would help elicit a public health response; obsolescence framed urban ills as a matter of economic survival. The discourse on urban obsolescence triaged America's wounded cities, peering beneath surface impressions of social and physical decadence to deeper, equally if not more worrisome, currents of economic decline.

The fundamental economism of urban obsolescence derived logically from the first application of the term to the built environment in the 1910s and 1920s. Owners of downtown American office buildings puzzled over the unpredictable financial demise and early demolition of properties built only a few decades earlier, like the Gillender Building on Wall Street reduced to rubble in 1910 after just fourteen years of life. Economists and engineers began talking about buildings' "financial decay," adopting late-nineteenth-century industrial accountancy's terms for measuring the "service life" of capital assets like telephone poles, streetcar wheels, and railway stations.[33] Obsolescence, a factor distinct from physical wear-and-tear or depreciation, was understood as a loss of value and serviceability caused by competing new technology—for example, diesel engines obsolescing steam.

The federal corporate income tax, introduced in 1916, featured "a reasonable allowance for obsolescence," but without specifying a specific level of deduction. From this point on, the American corporate real estate industry took a vital interest in maximizing allowances for depreciation and obsolescence. Less building "life" in the eyes of the law would mean more profit for owners. Subsequently, the National Association of Building Owners and Managers embarked on a decade-long study of building obsolescence through analyses of downtown business districts and demolished structures, especially in its home base of Chicago, identifying contributing factors like changes in fashion and district character, competing buildings with better services, inadaptable interior layouts, and adjacent buildings blocking light and air.[34] Each and all could produce

unpredictable, precipitous declines in an office building's financial worth and profitability to its capitalist owners, thus constituting a tax-deductible business expense under U.S. law.

In 1931 the building owners' efforts to establish the truth of short building lifespans bore fruit, when the Bureau of Internal Revenue produced depreciation tables that factored in obsolescence, defining commercial building lives at around a mere thirty years.[35] The political achievement had been to turn extreme cases of obsolescence in Chicago's Loop district into the standards of the U.S. tax code, producing windfall profits for building owners across the country. (By contrast, in Great Britain, where the tax code did not allow obsolescence deductions for buildings, no such similar discourse on architectural obsolescence appeared in the interwar years.)

The more general consequence was to establish in public consciousness the idea of building obsolescence as an inevitable truth of the modern built environment. By the 1930s the term "obsolescence" had become ubiquitous in the fields of real estate, finance, and city planning. A 1935 bibliography listed 125 articles related to the subject.[36] Newspaper articles propagated the concept of quick commercial building obsolescence.[37] When planning and public health professionals began defining urban obsolescence in the 1930s, they reflected this worldview and extended its particular economistic, not to say capitalist, outlook to residential neighborhoods and whole cities.

By the 1940s obsolescence had become a paradigm, a way of conceptualizing change in the built environment that presumed and quantified dramatic losses of value over shortened periods of time. What was in effect a proposition about how the built environment evolved—that the measurably better and new made expendable the insufficient old—came to be accepted as a reasoned if not natural fact. From an idea of single building obsolescence, the concept had been expanded by planners and other professionals into a related notion of urban obsolescence. And although there were differences between the commercial and urban applications of obsolescence—the former avowedly economic and focused on individual structures, the latter more generally social and encompassing whole environments—both commercial and urban obsolescence shared similar beliefs in quantifiable performance and the expendability of rapidly outmoded objects. Moreover, the discourse's collective basis, built up by researchers in a range of fields, helped persuade commentators, policy makers, and elite public opinion of the theory's truthfulness. What in effect had been in the 1920s an actuarial and political expedient for capitalist building owners became by midcentury a set of mythic beliefs, that short building lifespans characterized modernity and that the simple process of obsolescence underlay the dynamics of change in the modern built environment.

What then to do about America's urban obsolescence? Some commen-

tators accepted obsolescence as a fact of modern urbanism, even a sign of vitality. Tax expert Mabel Walker explained: "If the city of the future is to have health and vitality it must be possible for these great human tides to flow in and out easily and readily. We must think in terms of a fluid city . . . these old cities of ours have got to be loosened up at their stiff old joints and elasticized in their hardened old arteries."[38] If marine metaphors reflected an essentially sanguine view of urban obsolescence, analogies to the human body usually reflected a darker naturalization. The planner George Herrold wrote of a "cure for obsolescence" and "preparing a patient for his operation."[39] Cancer, which had been a slum metaphor for decades, documented by the historian Robert Fogelson, became the "commonplace" metaphor for blight and obsolescence in the 1930s and 1940s.[40]

However one metaphorized obsolescence, always in its logic was the quandary, What to do with the obsolete object? On this point all concurred. "There's only one way you can cure a place like the West End, and that is to wipe it out," judged a Boston banker.[41] In midcentury America renewal by demolition was the consensus response to urban obsolescence. Politicians envisioned civic revival. Residents and unions envisioned housing and jobs. Capitalists envisioned profits. Boston mortgage bankers, advocating for the West End's complete demolition, argued "that it would be difficult to sell the cleared land were it surrounded by aging if well-kept tenements."[42] For their part, planners and architects envisioned cities remade by their guiding hands. Herrold asserted: "Obsolescence is a challenge, it is a test of human adequacy to master its environs."[43] The planner Carol Aronovici thundered, "Let the cities perish, so that we may have great and beautiful cities."[44]

The term "obsolescence," I would suggest, also contributed to this agreed, radical response. Obsolescence connotes a terminal process, an emptying of usefulness and value in competition with something new and better. But the suddenness and externality of obsolescence leaves the obsolete object intact, as opposed to slow, intrinsic, physical decay. The problem then becomes what to do with the superseded yet more or less whole artifact. The solution, by the logic of obsolescence, is to discard the old, to break with the past since by definition the old has lost its value in competition with the measurably superior new. The logic of obsolescence, applied to the built environment, represented in effect a clearance technique: a definitive devaluation of a building or neighborhood, a foreclosure of adaptability; a relegation to the past and emptying of relevance for the present and future; imminent replacement by the new and improved.

Obsolescence is thus of course also a politics. Implicitly it embodies an asymmetry of power, between those who make the designation of obsolete and those who must live under it. The politics of obsolescence allows those

with power to deem dysfunctional, valueless, and out-of-time the habits and habitations of those without power.

Within American midcentury political economy, the paradigm of obsolescence played key roles. It facilitated the designation of neighborhoods for demolition, not least by helping to broker an elite consensus for redevelopment. Before the Housing Act of 1949, housing activists, business interests, and municipal politicians had failed to agree on solutions for America's urban problems, divided by different economic and social priorities. The paradigm of urban obsolescence helped break this deadlock by presenting a mutually agreeable framework for rebuilding and revaluing the urban landscape.

The obsolescence paradigm's fundamental economism resonated deeply with a conception of capitalism as creative destruction, in the economist Joseph Schumpeter's well-known phrase. In his famous 1942 book, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*—written while Schumpeter was teaching at Harvard and inspired by modern American industrial developments in steel, power, and transport—Schumpeter opposed static equilibrium theories of capitalism with the counternotion of a dynamic capitalism constantly roiled by entrepreneurial innovations deploying new technologies, products, organizations, and techniques. This process, thriving on obsolescence, Schumpeter called the "perennial gale of creative destruction . . . that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure *from within*, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one. This process of Creative Destruction is the essential fact about capitalism. It is what capitalism consists in and what every capitalist concern has got to live in."[45] Analogous conceptualization of the urban built environment as governed by the process of obsolescence would have made inherent sense to entrepreneurial American capitalist interests. The paradigm framed America's urban ills as matter of economic development curable by a literal creative destruction.

In 1937 the first federal Housing Act had reflected the social concerns of housing activists, calling for the "eradication of slums" and "the provision of decent, safe, and sanitary dwellings for families of low income." Twelve years later, as the obsolescence paradigm took hold, the Housing Act of 1949, which would help fund ambitious inner-city redevelopment schemes nationwide, extended itself to "the clearance of slums *and blighted areas* . . . providing maximum opportunity for the redevelopment of project areas by private enterprise" and "the advancement of the growth, wealth, and security of the Nation."[46] The inclusion of these last phrases, plus the term "blighted areas," intertwined at the time with "obsolescent," elevated the importance of private market economic factors for residential area redevelopment schemes. Conceptualizing the problem of America's cities in terms of obsolescence's economism helped make

federal urban renewal legislation palatable to American businessmen otherwise antipathetic to government social programs.

The government's role in urban reinvestment was key because capital interests on their own lacked the legal and financial resources to redevelop large urban areas. States provided eminent domain legislation to assemble sites without the obstacle of recalcitrant landowners. Federal funds covered two-thirds of the cost of acquisition and demolition before cleared sites were sold to private developers. In effect, government streamlined and subsidized the processes of capitalist reinvestment in obsolescent urban areas. From the perspective of local politics, the obsolescence paradigm also served useful purposes. Its bureaucratic logic disarmed opposition to redevelopment. As Boston authorities told critics: "To people who lived there for a long time the West End may not seem 'substandard.' But the preliminary studies made by the Housing Authority show that it is."[47] The APHA-sanctioned "official designation of substandardness" appeared objective, irrefutable, and apolitical. Resistance was futile against the technical judgment of obsolescence and expendability.

In fact, the West End's demise was as much political as scientific. The neighborhood was not statistically the city's worst. Other neighborhoods, like the North End, had even worse vacancy rates, land values, building conditions, and population densities than did the West End. The 1951 *General Plan for Boston* openly acknowledged the elite Back Bay's similar densities of people and aged buildings. Yet the Back Bay was officially deemed "old but not obsolete," its "preservation of permanent values"—that is, its immunity to obsolescence—depending on the Back Bay's apparently greater adaptability to change.[48] In truth, the West End lacked the Back Bay's cultural cachet and the North End's political clout as the center of Boston's Italian American community. Moreover, the West End's planned gentrification conformed to the agendas of downtown merchants anxious for nearby middle-class shoppers, of adjacent Massachusetts General Hospital desirous of higher-class neighbors, and of real estate developers covetous of the West End's Charles River views.[49] Against this array of factors, West Enders were powerless.

In Boston, as elsewhere, the administrations of postwar reformist mayors, like Boston's John B. Hynes, used the obsolescence paradigm to gain federal funding for urban renewal, marshaling planning expertise and public health techniques as alibis for political agendas and economic redevelopment. In many cities, including Boston, the political goals were replacing ethnic and black working-class neighborhoods with middle-class voters whose shopping dollars might reinvigorate nearby downtown retail districts and thus help struggling municipalities compete with their suburbs. "Boston must 'provide pleasant accommodations for the great American middle class, or perish,'" declared the chairman of the

Boston Finance Commission, reflecting the midcentury crisis mentality among urban businessmen and politicians around the country.[50]

From the point of view of city planners, the obsolescence paradigm served their profession's particular purposes, too. By the 1930s planners had abandoned City Beautiful–style fixed solutions for urban centers and came instead to favor techniques of quantitative analysis and notions of "dynamic equilibrium" at the metropolitan scale.[51] The obsolescence paradigm, in its economism and acknowledgment of suburban context and competition, answered to this shift in planning theory, which took the perpetual change of obsolescence to be the new normal urban condition under capitalism. For their part public health professionals varnished the paradigm's social component, with their commitment to human well-being, and provided a practicable scientific application with the APHA housing appraisal manual. City planners and public health experts alike used the idea of obsolescence to expand their disciplines into the social sciences, thus enhancing their professions' political relevance by offering policy makers a framework for managing the plight of America's cities. Moreover, the paradigm's long-term, collaborative, multidisciplinary research efforts—exemplified by the APHA's housing study—depended on financial and institutional support from universities, government, and charitable foundations, thus marshaling elite American civil society within the consensus for obsolescence.

The paradigm of obsolescence also possessed great cultural purchase in America's consumer economy, charmed by notions of "planned obsolescence" and expendable commodities. Since the late 1920s, marketers had enjoined Americans to accept "progressive obsolescence . . . a readiness to 'scrap' or lay aside an article before its natural life or usefulness is completed, in order to make way for the newer and better thing."[52] During the Depression government-sponsored "planned obsolescence" of the built environment was proposed as an economic catalyst: after twenty-five to thirty years a "building can be destroyed and a new one erected, with resultant stimulus to employment."[53]

In the affluent postwar period, obsolescence was even more compelling. Manufacturers accelerated the pace of product changes to quicken obsolescence and stimulate consumption. Marketers sold consumers on the desirability of the new and improved and the expendability of the obsolete. The goal was to keep refilling American homes and driveways with the newest gadgets and furnishings. Economically, business executives asserted, obsolescence stimulated growth: "Without installment buying and obsolescence, large sections of our billion dollar industries would rust."[54] Planned obsolescence and mass consumption appeared to embody essential American characteristics of change, abundance, and egalitarianism, as well as individual free will and pleasure. "You

are not *forced* to buy new products," explained an industrial designer. "You *like* to do it."[55] Fears of economic stagnation destabilizing capitalism in contest with socialism underwrote ideological devotion to obsolescence from Depression-era through Cold War America. Like a marketer's vision, the "obsolete neighborhood's" aggressive disorder, as illustrated in the 1951 *General Plan for Boston*, would be replaced by the pendant "new plan's" genteel, modern openness —the city suburbanized, a new-and-improved neighborhood obsolescing the last century's model in performance and styling.

Finally, there were the obsolescence paradigm's racial and class dimensions, which underwrote its ideological effectiveness. Planners adopted real estate appraisers' bias that ethnic and racial heterogeneity signaled diminishing economic value, or obsolescence. "The area slipped down another notch and today is inhabited by some eighteen different nationalities," wrote George Herrold about a Saint Paul, Minnesota, neighborhood.[56] The Federal Housing Administration's 1938 *Underwriting Manual* listed "lower class occupancy, and inharmonious racial groups" as "adverse influences" in a neighborhood's Economic Background Rating, to be used in disqualifying "obsolete" neighborhoods for mortgage guarantees.[57] In terms of class, an obsolete neighborhood's congestion offended middle-class evaluators' beliefs about order, privacy, and safety, contrary to working-class residents' own experience. In the West End, children "preferred to play on the streets—where the excitement and action they valued was available," noted sociologist Herbert Gans who studied the neighborhood's social networks before their erasure.[58] "Even the sense of adjacent human beings carried by noise and smells," wrote other West End researchers, "provides a sense of comfort."[59] Precisely those elements of crowded public life and adaptation to physical density that best supported the localized social identity of a working-class neighborhood—the close congestion of streets and hallways, variety stores and taverns, children playing in the roads, women leaning out of windows, men on the street corners, families on their stoops—these were what middle-class evaluators, wedded to social ideals of individualism and mobility, found to be obsolete in public health surveys.

The 1951 designation of Boston's West End as obsolete thus represented a complex ideological construction, conjoining middle-class values and consumerism with state policy, capitalist methodologies, and multidisciplinary professional expertise. In midcentury America obsolescence's allure was overwhelming: simple in its dualism, a reflection of material abundance, progressive in its liberation from the past, promising a better future modeled on the spacious, car-centered suburban competitor that had apparently already bested the inner city economically and demographically. In Boston, as elsewhere, the consensus for obsolescence was seemingly unopposable. Even social service providers

"approved of the redevelopment," as did Catholic churchmen, who "described the area as a slum [and] looked forward to the redevelopment of the West End, and hoped for a more middle-class group of parishioners."[60]

Ineffectively and too late, residents organized in 1956 a Save the West End Committee. Personalizing resistance by demonizing developer Jerome Rappaport and mayor John B. Hynes missed the point that impersonal bureaucratic techniques, not individual agency, undergirded the redevelopment process. Taking the fight to the city on its own terms, through a failed lawsuit that claimed housing survey statistics overstated the neighborhood's substandardness, did no good. Arguing about percentages of unsound buildings simply reinforced the underlying paradigm's validity. From the moment the West End was designated in 1951 as an "obsolete neighborhood," singled out and illustrated in the *General Plan* as the epitome of Boston's urban ills, the bureaucratic wheels were set in motion for its destruction. One report led inexorably to another and then another in the mid-1950s, largely out of public sight and with no apparent internal dissent, each new study substantiating the original designation of obsolescence until the whole bureaucratic sequence of approvals and funding for demolition and redevelopment had successfully run its course by the winter of 1957–58.

In the spring the City of Boston seized the whole of the West End by eminent domain. Rent was now due to the city that owned all buildings, residents began leaving, and those who remained received official notices to vacate their homes. By 1962 the demolition of nearly the entire West End was completed. Some two thousand families were displaced, scattered throughout the metropolitan area. Nine hundred buildings were demolished, leaving behind a flattened wasteland of dirt, brick, and ghostly streets. Out of this rose Charles River Park, a modernist complex of concrete and brick townhouses and towers in a park setting, loosely adapted from the 1951 "new plan" and renting mostly at market rates. Against this catastrophe the West Enders had been powerless, overwhelmed by the weight of professional expertise, institutional support, governmental policy, and bureaucratic technique. There was no counterlanguage or strategy to obsolescence.

The paradigm of urban obsolescence was something new for the twentieth century. In contrast with the divisive, personalized politics of Paris's Haussmannization in the nineteenth century, obsolescence's technocratic framework represented an evolution in tactics to clear and revalue urban land, working through a consensus of capital and the state, civil and consumer societies, conjoining economistic values of quantifiable performance and impersonal competition with a social theory of progressive change based on the identification of modernist planning with healthful social, physical, and psychological development.

In midcentury America obsolescence was the dominant paradigm for comprehending and managing urban change. (Elsewhere around the world, the term "obsolescence" appeared more sparingly in urban renewal discourse, never as emphatically as in capitalist, consumerist postwar America.)[61]

Yet obsolescence's efficacy survived hardly long enough to see through the West End's redevelopment. The terminology itself rarely appeared again in reference to Boston or other cities' redevelopment projects after the mid-1950s, when "blight" became the dominant term, having shared the stage equally with obsolescence for more than two decades. The planners offered no insights into the evolution of their vocabulary. Perhaps blight's naturalistic connotation of contagion was more useful in enlisting downtown business elites to support redevelopment of contiguous residential neighborhoods, which they might otherwise have cared little about. Perhaps, too, the term "obsolete" had become too risky in its own economistic implications. It threatened to reveal too much of the planners' cold-hearted thinking, at odds with the subjective realities of residential community life, unlike that of business districts' built environments not so easily reduced and governed by a capitalist logic of measurable performance and profit. "Obsolete" laid too bare the ideological alliance of capital and state. The economistic inflections, which had enhanced obsolescence's political effectiveness in the 1940s, ultimately helped discredit the paradigm.

Always there had been contradictions within the paradigm. How, for example, to square obsolescence's intangibility and unpredictability with the concreteness of its statistical determinations? Or how to overcome the contradiction between the paradigm's fundamental temporality and fixed solutions to obsolescence, exemplified in the West End's "new plan"? Or, again, how to reconcile the paradigm's economism with its social agenda? Which took priority? And what to do with the paradigm's conflation of the categories of the physical and social? In which realm was the West End an "obsolete neighborhood," physical or social, or was it both? The distinction never comes clear, nor the chain of causality from one to the other. A member of the APHA's own Committee on the Hygiene of Housing acknowledged, "there is little evidence that substandard housing per se causes sickness and death."[62] Indeed, slippage between the physical and the social allowed condemnation as obsolete in one category to justify reform in the other. The paradigm's effectiveness as a tool for redevelopment depended on obfuscation of its ambiguities and contradictions. Looking too closely might hamstring its operability.

Perhaps the most destabilizing contradiction involved the exceptions to obsolescence: those individual structures exempted from the overall neighborhood designation "obsolete." In Boston's West End five buildings stayed—two churches, a historical house, a school, and social service agency—officially because of their structural soundness and community usefulness, ideologically be-

cause they were the neighborhood's few elite-styled, historical constructions.[63] What remained served as reproach to the obsolescence paradigm's consequences, contradicted its totalizing logic. If these buildings were worth saving, possessed of some intangible value, why could not others in the "obsolete neighborhood" also be immune to obsolescence?

By the mid-1960s elite consensus for the obsolescence paradigm was breaking down. The West End's cataclysmic demolition and diaspora became a cause célèbre among social scientists and planners, who publicized the effects of relocation and the West Enders' satisfaction with their neighborhood and the grief of losing it.[64] Herbert Gans argued that the West End was "not really a slum" and that "obsolescence per se is not harmful; the judgment merely a reflection of middle-class standards."[65] In planning history, the lessons of the West End are credited with making "sure that Bostonians, and indeed the whole nation, would never forget the human impact of this sort of wholesale clearance and displacement of a still-viable neighborhood."[66]

At the same time, the consumer discourse of planned obsolescence lost its credibility, thanks to critiques like journalist Vance Packard's best-selling *The Waste Makers* (1960), which excoriated the consumer culture of planned obsolescence as shallow, profligate, and manipulative.[67] Faith collapsed, too, in expert research's capacity for social good—think of Rachel Carson's 1962 environmental call to arms, *Silent Spring*. Suburbia, which had seemingly rendered the inner city obsolete, now appeared itself superficial and inauthentic in comparison with the ethnic, working-class, inner-city residential districts planners had once condemned. Now these neighborhoods (as long as they were white) appeared to embody civic health and economic vitality, according to commentators like Jane Jacobs, who wrote in her famous 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, "cities need old buildings. . . . Time makes certain structures obsolete for some enterprises, and they become available for others."[68] Subsequent historical events finished off the obsolescence paradigm. Urban upheaval in America's black ghettoes was followed by economic austerity exacerbated by the 1973 oil crisis. All this put paid to the political and financial support for federal renewal programs, which had funded the designation and demolition of obsolete neighborhoods.

Once obsolescence had seemed the city's inevitable destiny: creative destruction as axiomatic—shortened lifespans, expendable buildings, obsolescent cities as myths of modernity. But now, instead of representing a crisis, a promise, a threat, a spur to new thought and action, obsolescence has been ostensibly superseded by its opposite and today's ruling term: "sustainability." Most often identified with energy-efficient technology, the paradigm of sustainability properly encompasses a host of expert strategies to revalue rather than discard the old—from facilities management and life-cycle assessment, to historic

preservation legislation and adaptive reuse techniques, as well as vernacularism, architectural postmodernism, and the heritage industry. These are all ways to reverse obsolescence, to revalue and retain the existing built environment.

In reaction to the excesses of obsolescence and then chastened by oil-crisis austerity, new environmental and historical sensibilities emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. These have led over the past thirty years to an emphasis on context and to the primacy of sustainability as architecture's dominant ideology of change, emblematized by the universal recycling symbol of three chasing arrows. If obsolescence embodied principles of discontinuity, supersession, and expendability, sustainability embodies opposite principles of continuity, conservation, and stewardship of architectural and natural resources. Yet the relation between architectural sustainability and obsolescence is as much filial as agonistic. Both depend on technology and measurable performance as markers of value. Adaptive reuse is a variation on the 1960s architectural megastructure: new components inserted into long-life frames. Architectural obsolescence and preservation both define the past as broken off from the present. In other words, we have not overcome the other side of the argument in the 1960s as much as the triumphalist narrative of sustainability might have us believe. Our time remains, as lived experience always is, polytemporal, in sociologist Bruno Latour's phrase—always new and old together, coeval, coexistent, sustainability *and* obsolescence.[69]

Some of this contemporary paradigm and its complexity can be seen in recent developments in Boston's West End. The owners of the Charles River Park complex recently rebranded it the West End to capture "the neighborhood spirit and electric energy of Boston's historic, wonderful and cherished West End."[70] Modernist townhouses are being replaced by foursquare, brick-faced buildings mimicking the shape and patina of the demolished tenements. The City of Boston along the area's streets has hung banners featuring large, grainy photographs of the old neighborhood. A new West End Museum founded by former residents commemorates the lost community.

The paradigm of obsolescence thus renders neighborhoods like the West End doubly mythic: first in the categorization of "obsolete," which abstracted and denied complex realities; now in the marketing and mourning of what was lost unnaturally under the rule of obsolescence. A national architecture critic pines for the West End's "memory, sensuality, intricacy, and location."[71] Among former residents, the sense of injustice a half century later remains palpable in the pages of *The West Ender*, the diaspora's quarterly newspaper. Steeped in memories and myths, the dislocated forget their complicated history—that when it existed, "the concept of the West End as a single neighborhood was foreign to the West Enders themselves."[72] The past, especially the recent past,

is not sustained in the contemporary West End; it is whitewashed and effaced as effectively now as it was in the age of obsolescence.

What finally are obsolescence's ethics, the moral dimensions of the paradigm and its consequences? Here, alongside its mythologizing, must be denounced aspects of obsolescence's logic that leveled more or less functionally sound neighborhoods and exiled their inhabitants. The experts' diagnostic tools ended up as political weapons for wholesale clearance. Quantifications of performance paid little heed to the intangibles of lived experience and social satisfaction. Wasteful disregard for what exists counts heavily among obsolescence's sins. But alongside its authoritarian and destructive dimensions, obsolescence also possessed productive and progressive elements. Drawing attention to the crises of American inner cities, the paradigm laid out a decisive solution by striking at the status quo without remorse for the past, clearing the field not just for new physical approaches but also for more socially just redistributions of the city's resources, its housing, open spaces, and community facilities. Experts sought enhancement of human potential through physical alterations based on universal standards that did not discriminate by race, class, or geography. Those who subsequently perceived only the harm done by the obsolescence paradigm fail to credit its progressive instincts and successes and avoid accounting for the costs of the status quo: Who wins and loses if matters are left unchanged?

Left alone, districts like Boston's West End would not have remained the same. The gentrification that has scattered Boston's other inner-city communities, like the South End, to the winds would surely have done the same to the West End, just more slowly than urban renewal. What was irredeemably lost under obsolescence was physical, and what came out of obsolescence has its virtues. In architecture, belief in obsolescence, in short-life buildings and the need for flexibility, produced innovative design worldwide and on the urban level could replace tenement districts with landscaped spaciousness and admirable modern buildings, like the West End's Boston Synagogue (1971) and the Regina Cleri Home for Retired Priests (1973), which diversify Boston's traditionalist built environment.

Ultimately, it may be best to consider ethically the paradigm of obsolescence similarly to the way the critic Fredric Jameson once wrote about capitalism: "Positively *and* negatively all at once . . . as catastrophe and progress all together . . . at one and the same time the best thing . . . and the worst." This would mean acknowledging obsolescence's "demonstrably baleful features . . . along with its extraordinary and liberating dynamism simultaneously, within a single thought, and without attenuating any of the force of either judgment."[73] Such thinking would not foreclose moral assessments but would rather suspend judgment of good *or* bad for a more ethically difficult but historically more use-

ful framework of good *and* bad. Obsolescence, like capitalism, would be understood as a historical force, which both responds to contemporary conditions and represents, to quote Jameson, "the framework, and the precondition for the achievement of some new and more comprehensive" mode, in our case, for conceptualizing and managing change in the built environment.[74] In this light, obsolescence was the phase that had to be passed through, for better and for worse, on the way to sustainability.

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