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Poughkeepsie: Main Street, Route 55/44, and Route 9

As someone who studies urban planning and development the City of Poughkeepsie is quite unique. When I walk to Main Street and the Poughkeepsie central business district I am in love with the gorgeous buildings of yesteryear, but where are the merchants, why is there so many empty store fronts and why are their so many prostitutes, drug addicts and homeless people. It is tough to be critical but Main Street Poughkeepsie is one of the most underutilized spaces in all of Dutchess County, if not New York State. What caused the demise of Main Street and the once thriving Poughkeepsie central business district? Unlike the other upstate cities I have profiled Poughkeepsie is much smaller but like many cities in America it was profoundly affected by the Modernist planning schemes of the 1950s’ and 1960’. To get strong answers I read the book Main Street to Main Frames, which chronicles Poughkeepsie transformation. I also want for a very long walk around the arterials Route 55/44 to see how the arterials design effects the surrounding neighborhoods.

In Poughkeepsie, the increasing number of vehicles, plus limited parking spaces, created traffic jams on Main Street and at the intersection of Market and Main in the heart of downtown. North– south traffic on Route 9, along South Avenue and Market Street, became constricted by having to go through the center of the downtown, while east– west traffic was similarly congested along Main Street. (Flad 211) In 1953, the city, along with the state, began plans for a North– South arterial to bypass the center of downtown, designated as Route 9. It would become one of the first major physical changes wrought by external forces that would come to dominate the changing face of the city over the following two decades. (Flad) The North– South arterial highway got under way in 1959, although construction did not actually begin until 1963 due to delays in rights-of-way arrangements. Completed in 1966 at a total cost of $14 million, the high-speed highway had bulldozed its way through historic neighborhoods and had created a real and a perceptual barrier between the river slope area and the central core along the ridge paralleling Market and Bridge streets. (Flad 212) Many Poughkeepsians opposed the alignment of the North– South arterial because it would cut into 228 parcels, including 178 dwellings housing 200 families. (Flad 212)

In 1966, the same year as completion of the North– South arterial, the city planning board presented a proposal for an East– West arterial to run from routes US44 and NY55, on the eastern border of the city, to the Mid-Hudson Bridge. In phrases that echo urban planning rhetoric of the time, the proposal posited that an arterial roadway, sliced through the built-up area of the city core, would relieve congestion for through traffic and act as “a convenient and efficient way to bring City and area residents from their homes to Downtown.” (Flad 213) In 1973, the New York State Department of Transportation (DOT) presented a complete draft of the plans, which the federal highway administration approved in 1974. (Flad 213) Both the eastbound and westbound arterials undermined the livability of neighborhoods that the high-traffic arterials dissected. House parcels that fronted onto city streets were widened to make room for the arterial, such as along Church Street, were cut so that sidewalks abutted front steps and porches. (Flad 213) Housing values of structures along the arterials declined and many became rental properties.

Poughkeepsie’s Main Street served as the commercial center of Dutchess County from the nineteenth and into the first half of the twentieth century. (Flad 214) Poughkeepsie’s Central Business District was once the strongest downtown area between Albany and White Plains.” The decline of Poughkeepsie’s central business district (CBD) characterized the trend in American cities in the mid-1950s. A few main factors were involved: the population of the city had reached its peak and actually began to decline, while the population of the surrounding towns increased rapidly; the growth of IBM and associated businesses in the town of Poughkeepsie, and the loss of manufacturing jobs and other businesses in the city, preference of the shopper to use the automobile rather then alternative forms of transportation, combined with the development of shopping plazas and supermarkets on highways outside the city boundaries. (Flad 216)

The City of Poughkeepsie in an attempt to answer the rise in competition, responded in a few ways: by building up its employment base by creating a coherent plan for the downtown as the center for financial and governmental activity; by increasing available parking; and by constructing a downtown pedestrian shopping area. (Flad 217). The idea of a central city pedestrian mall received favorable attention in medium-sized cities that were in the process of revitalizing their CBDs in the late 1950s. The first two pedestrian malls in the United States, in Toledo, Ohio, and Kalamazoo, Michigan, opened in 1959, and newspapers reported on the innovative schemes. George Spitz, the mayor of Poughkeepsie in 1959, liked the idea “as a means of adding to the midtown business district attractions.” 25 As a “hustling, bustling center of activity,” it would be a lively competitor to the suburban malls. (Flad 220) The main mall was created by creating a pedestrian only main street from Catherine street to Market street, while the parking spaces would be toward the back of buildings facing the arterials. Between 1950 and 1960, Poughkeepsie managed to increase available parking spaces by almost 50 percent. (Flad 218)

You could imagine that a city that had millions of federal dollars spent on redeveloping its infrastructure would become a success story, but like many of the Utopian and Le Corbusian plans of the mid century the effect of the urban renewal had catastrophic consequences for Poughkeepsie. The corner of Market and Main Street was once the center of Dutchess County looked nearly abandoned during the 1980s and 1990s because of the lack of shoppers and pedestrians. The main mall was a massive failure for the Poughkeepsie central business district. The lack of access, the absence of clear and safe passageways deterred shoppers from walking onto the mall and safety concerns were the biggest complaints made by wary shoppers. In 2001, the Main Mall was closed and Main Street between Catharine and Market streets was recreated as a two-lane street. No single event set Poughkeepsie on a downward spiral I would attribute Poughkeepsie decline to a multitude of reasons. A number of forces have conspired against the City of Poughkeepsie, the carving up of neighborhoods to build arterials; the formation of the dreary main street pedestrian mall; competition to local stores from regional malls; and the city's decision to level entire neighborhoods to replace them with towers in the park style public housing.