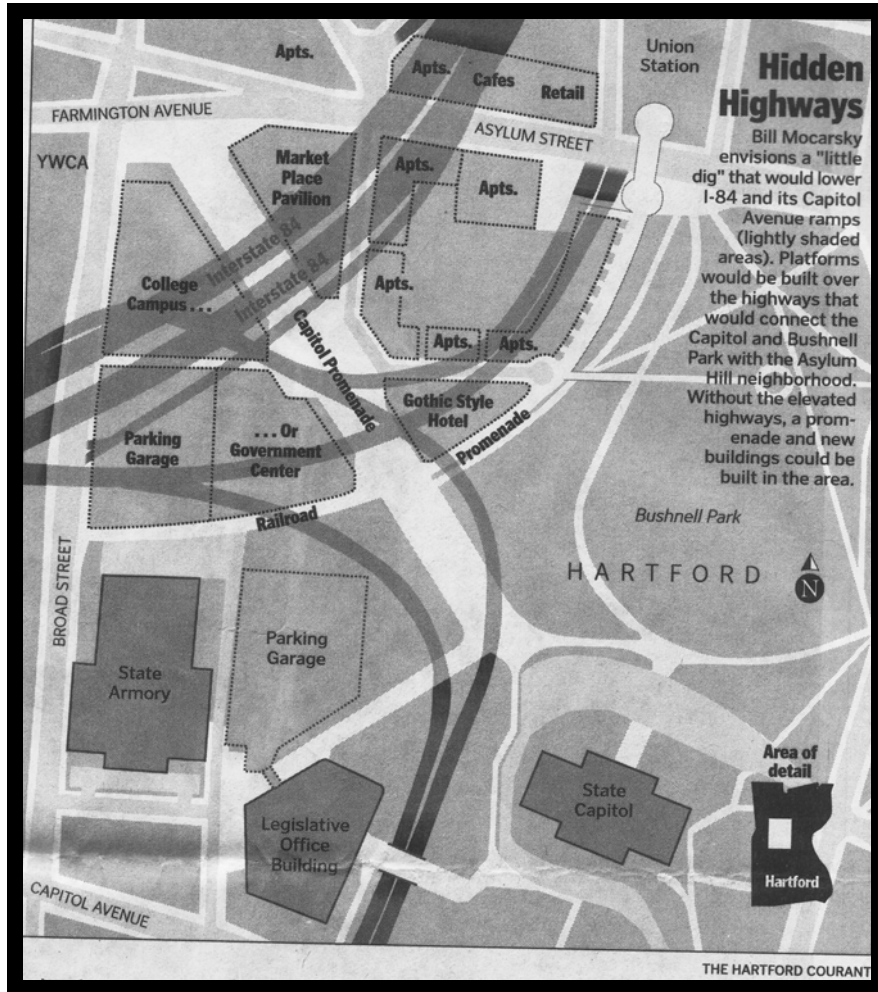


Tunnel Vision For City

Hartford Courant May 12, 2003
By TOM CONDON, Courant Staff Writer



Bill Mocarsky of Manchester is a musician who, perhaps atypically, pays attention to the cities he plays in. He considers how they look and how their space is used, and sometimes sits at his computer and redesigns them, in the tradition of urbanist Jane Jacobs and other amateur planners.

A few years ago, Mocarsky examined the area around the state Capitol in Hartford. He observed how the highways on the northwest side of the property create a "virtual wall" that has two unfortunate effects.

The "wall" diminishes the otherwise grand vista of Bushnell Park and the Capitol because it "gives the feeling of a long-stalled construction project."

Also, it cuts off downtown and the Capitol from the homes, businesses and cultural institutions of the Asylum Hill and West End neighborhoods.

Over the last few years, Mocarsky developed a plan to change the area. He calls the concept "Opening Up the City."

It involves lowering I-84 East and its Capitol Avenue exit ramp, which are

elevated on a series of trestles (known to highway people as the Aetna Viaduct), and running them under Broad Street. I-84 West at this point is already below grade.

He'd then build platforms over the highways, essentially reconnecting the natural slope of the land. That done, he'd construct a promenade from the corner of Broad Street and Farmington Avenue right up to the Capitol. It would intersect with a smaller promenade along the railroad tracks, and be joined by a third pathway coming across the I-84 exit ramp from the Legislative Office Building to the park.

Since last year, Mocarsky has circulated the idea to developers, officials and neighborhood people, and the response has been positive. Jennifer Cassidy, Asylum Hill activist and member of the neighborhood's redevelopment committee, calls it "innovative and exciting."

She says the highway created a "No Man's Land," a barrier of concrete and empty land. Mocarsky's plan would not only reconnect Asylum Hill to downtown and improve the pedestrian environment, but also attract development to the now-unused areas.

The idea of moving a highway was in the news recently, with the opening of a major section of Boston's "Big Dig," the northbound lanes of the new 1.5-mile Central Artery Tunnel.

The Dig, officially the Central Artery/Tunnel Project, is burying I-93 under downtown Boston, replacing a crowded and decaying elevated highway that cut an unsightly swath through the city for more than 40 years. Some called I-93 the Hub's "other green monster."

What a coincidence. I-84 has done much the same thing, on a smaller scale, in Hartford. Should the city entertain the idea of a "little dig," on the order of Mocarsky's proposal?

Based on the cost of the Boston project, a local project would, of fiscal necessity, have to be smaller. The Big Dig ballooned from an original estimate of \$4.5 billion two decades ago to \$14.6 billion today, the record for a public works project, leading to a slew of charges, investigations and political posturings. On the other hand, the cost of the Dig has spurred interest across the country in controlling the cost of public construction, something that could accrue to Hartford's benefit.

Also, Hartford simply doesn't need a project of anywhere near the magnitude or complexity of The Big Dig. Boston's effort replaces almost 8 miles of tunnels and bridges. The engineering challenges include placing the tunnel 120 feet below the surface, under the Red Line subway, and building a 10-lane bridge across the Charles River - the widest cable-stayed bridge in the world. Mocarsky's talking about perhaps a quarter-mile of highway and exits at grade or in trenches.

The Dig isn't the only project of its kind, only the biggest. Highways have been buried, turned into smaller boulevards or removed altogether in Milwaukee, San Francisco (with the aid of an earthquake), Portland, Cincinnati and Toronto, freeing urban land for development and, usually, increasing property values. The

Big Dig will create 26 acres of new land, most of which will be green space. Mocarsky says his plan would create land for offices and apartments that would overlook the park.

One factor favoring Mocarsky's plan - or something like it - is that the proposed Hartford-New Britain busway is to go through the area along the railroad tracks. It has a stop near the State Armory that at present is somewhat isolated, not easily reached from the neighborhood.

Cassidy says the neighborhood is "all supportive" of the busway, but fearful that the "hostile pedestrian environment" around the Armory and other Asylum Hill stops could "doom it to failure." Indeed, the highways and wide streets with fast-moving traffic make it a code orange for walkers.

So, if cost and design issues can be surmounted, weaving the Capitol area into the nearby neighborhoods "is a workable concept," says Tom Maziarz, a transportation planner for the Capitol Region Council of Governments.

Mocarsky thinks connecting the park to the neighborhood and the Legislative Office Building would complete it, make it the centerpiece. "Great open spaces should lead somewhere," he says.

Lowering I-84 is not something likely to happen in the immediate future, says DOT planner Rich Linnemann. There's no money for highway projects that have already been approved, such as rebuilding the Flatbush and Sisson avenue interchanges, never mind new and expensive ones. Linnemann says lowering the viaduct would be complicated, involving the railroad tracks, local streets and parking areas.

But, says Mocarsky, it ought to be considered for the long term. The highways built in the 1960s defined much of the city for the next four decades. As other cities have proved, this can be changed.

During the traffic planning for the Rentschler Field stadium project a few years ago, planner Patrick Pinnell floated the idea of changing the path of I-91 as it passes downtown Hartford. He suggested it go to East Hartford over the Charter Oak Bridge, follow Route 2 and return over a new bridge near the Hartford landfill. "A highway is not like the weather - you can change it," he says.

Pinnell says he likes Mocarsky's concept for several reasons. Getting rid of the viaduct would be an aesthetic improvement. Legislators would have to encounter the city as they came and went from the Capitol.

Finally, it might encourage state officials to integrate the Capitol and surrounding government buildings into a campus-like setting.

Mocarsky feels I-84 did considerable damage to the city, isolating neighborhoods, wasting historic buildings and draining life out of downtown. He thinks his idea would begin to put it back together.