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## When The Site Is The Problem

By TONI GOLD

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Mayor Eddie Perez wants a new building for the Pathways to Technology magnet high school that is now housed in a recycled strip mall on the Windsor-Hartford border. He wants to build it on the southeast corner of Farmington Avenue and Broad Street in Hartford.

Few passing motorists even realize there is a building site on that corner. It is high ground that offers a spectacular long view of downtown skyscrapers and the Capitol, but it also has a much nearer view of I-84 at its congested best. Could such a site be anything other than a piece of right-of-way left over after years of tweaking the Exit 48 ramps? It is that. But it is also a perfectly buildable site where a signature building at the gateway to one of the city's busiest precincts would be a desirable addition.

Unfortunately, the triangular site is bordered on one side by the interstate itself, and on the other two sides by "No Man's Land," as the surrounding streets are known locally. No Man's Land is a sea of asphalt and traffic signals where Farmington and Asylum avenues and Broad and Cogswell streets all meet next to a patch of park containing a historic monument.

From here, Asylum and Farmington avenue join, widen and plunge downhill toward Union Station and downtown, meeting three of Exit 48's five highway ramps, plus Spring, Garden, and Spruce streets, along the way. No Man's Land is congested to the point of dysfunction for much of the day, and plagued by speeders the rest of the time. There are frequent accidents. Why would the mayor choose such a location?

To put the school's students near internships with the large employers, and because of his desire not to take any real estate off the tax rolls - laudable motives both. But the neighbors were appalled, as they told the architects, school board members and the mayor himself at a recent presentation.

The neighbors' objections don't center on the school, which could be a fine addition to the Asylum Hill neighborhood. They are worried about No Man's Land, the blighted and dangerous barrier of streets that would cut the school off from everything else, and about the total gridlock that additional traffic would likely bring.

No Man's Land is a poster child for the failure to link transportation and land use. In the 40-year effort to "improve" I-84, and to add and relocate ramps to accommodate ever more cars, intercity buses and the General Assembly, both transportation and land use have been degraded.

Aggravated over the years by the big companies' creeping demolition of historic houses for additions to their parking empires, and by the public works department's desire to accommodate automobile traffic on the city's streets at the expense of virtually everything else, such a barren and dangerous environment is a predictable result.

The three-minute walk from The Hartford to downtown has become challenging if not unthinkable;

property values have fallen and crime has risen in Asylum Hill; and the big companies' employee recruitment has been hurt by the dismal surroundings. The Hartford-New Britain busway is currently stalled at Flower Street, unable to find its way through No Man's Land.

The experience of a former director of the YWCA illustrates exactly what No Man's Land has become. She rented an apartment in Morgan on the Park, the high-rise apartment building about 200 yards down the hill and across Asylum Avenue from the Y, so she could walk to work. After first being terrified by the pedestrian environment, and then being accosted more than once by motorists who assumed she was a prostitute, she gave up and began driving to work.

The urban revival that Mayor Perez seeks cannot occur until places like No Man's Land are transformed. The good news is that something can be done about blighted public spaces like No Man's Land - something big that really makes a difference. Detroit's Campus Martius is a good recent example; Portland Oregon's Pioneer Courthouse Square is an older one (see [www.pps.org/info/newsletter/december2005/squares\\_intro?referrer=newsletter\\_contents](http://www.pps.org/info/newsletter/december2005/squares_intro?referrer=newsletter_contents) for descriptions of these and others).

When asked to fix the public space blight first, the mayor said, "That's a whole separate project," and not one the school project could wait for. Indeed, it would be a whole separate project, a much bigger one than the magnet school itself. But such a project could also have a much greater economic impact than the school, and is probably essential to the school's success there in the long run anyway.

A vision for a transformation of this space has actually been created by Bill Mocarsky, a local keyboard musician who is also conversant with computer design; his work can be seen at [www.peopleofgoodwill.com/esplanade/esplanade3.html](http://www.peopleofgoodwill.com/esplanade/esplanade3.html). He shows visions of parkland and grand promenades superimposed on existing photographs of the Capitol and on the impressive classical facade of The Hartford.

Mocarsky imagines I-84 buried underground, and green and pedestrian-friendly connections made from Asylum to Capitol Avenue, and from Broad Street to Bushnell Park. Fantasy? Perhaps, but the particulars are not the point. The point is that this kind of big vision is possible when a public blight is thoughtfully re-imagined. It is a necessary ingredient for the kind of change that No Man's Land requires. The other necessary ingredient is leadership - leadership that is seriously committed and will expend political chips to make such a thing happen.

Mocarsky has provided the vision; can Perez provide the leadership?

The mayor has been a savvy and creative advocate for development projects in the city, both downtown and in the neighborhoods. But until he can look beyond the boundaries of individual sites and grasp the significance of the 50 percent of Hartford's real estate that he already owns and controls - the streets, sidewalks and other public spaces - he cannot claim to be a visionary leader.

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