

Middle-Class Middletown?
Wesleyan University and the Reinvention of Urban
Space

by

Stephanie Campbell O'Brien
Class of 2008

An essay submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in Sociology

“Constrained resources and our difficulty in conveying a clear message have perhaps obscured the University’s high quality and distinctive institutional identity...By any objective standard, a Wesleyan education is among the best preparations available for a full and successful life in a fast-changing and interdependent world. A clearly-targeted marketing strategy must assert Wesleyan’s core academic commitments.”

“Financial resources, directly and indirectly, have the greatest impact on institutional prospects and reputation.”

Wesleyan

Strategy for

October 30, 1998

Wesleyan University is an elite, private institution with a national reputation. Among its competitors it cites “Brown, Williams, Amherst and Swarthmore,” all top-tier academic institutions to whom Wesleyan “loses top applicants” (*Strategy for Wesleyan* 1998). As evident in the opening quotations, Wesleyan attributes its lack of competitive edge to problems with conveying its quality, as well as its comparably smaller endowment. Marketing an image of excellence is essential to the competitiveness of a university. According to Wesleyan’s strategic plan, this image is directly linked to that of Middletown, Connecticut, the city in which the university is located. The plan states that in comparison to competitor universities, Wesleyan students rate their town-community experience less favorably; Wesleyan relations with Middletown constituencies must address this concern (1998).

Beginning in the 1960s, Middletown experienced deindustrialization and economic downturn that led to poverty, joblessness, and a debilitated commercial district through the 1990s. In 1988, the murder of a young girl on Main Street by a mentally-ill patient from Connecticut Valley Hospital struck fear into the hearts of downtown’s patrons, lending to a “perception of crime” that persists; “It is as if the people of Middletown have indelibly etched the event in their minds and connected it to Downtown” (Mullin Associates 1996). Achieving infamy through the pages of the nationally-circulated *New York Times*, by 1990 Main Street Middletown was summed up through these depictions: “The feature advertised at the Capitol theater is ‘discount Wine Liquor Beer’...Homeless people now outnumber shoppers on some parts of Main Street” (Ravo 1990). Middletown had entered “troubled times,” yet the city was slow to respond to deteriorating conditions until 1996 with the death of Omar

Irving. Sixteen-year-old Irving was fatally shot in the North End, a section of downtown, shocking city officials and community members into action (Delisio 1992). In response, the city government organized what it called the Urban Homesteading Task Force to designate the North End a Neighborhood Revitalization Zone (NRZ). The NRZ designation would be a tool used to attract grants and give more power of eminent domain to the city, but it would also require a lengthy bureaucratic application process (Lisker 2005). On an NRZ committee half the participants must be community residents; to achieve this end North End organizer Lydia Brewster brought together the first members of what would become the North End Action Team (NEAT), a community advocacy organization. After initial interest, NEAT faulted the NRZ tool for its lack of commitment to community self-determination in redeveloping the North End and the community members left the committee. Without the North End community representatives the city was forced to drop the NRZ application; both the city government and NEAT began to strategize new approaches (Brewster 2007).

Meanwhile, atop its hill sat Wesleyan, “a country club...There is no reason to go beyond its walls until it’s time to go home” (Lindsey 1995). This sentiment, initially expressed in 1972 but restated for its continuing pertinence in a 1995 *Argus* article, appears time and again in Wesleyan student discourse. Students weren’t shy in voicing their distaste for the city in 1992: “There’s no culture in Middletown, only at Wesleyan,” one student complained; another admitted, “Women do not feel comfortable downtown after dark. The majority do[es] not even feel comfortable during the day” (Hartman 1992). Statements like these do more than show a

disconnection between the campus and Middletown as a physical entity, they point to class-specific incongruities between an elite university community and a purportedly delinquent, or at best alien, citizenry. “There’s no doubt that for a while Wesleyan students thought that Main Street was at best uncool, and at worst, dangerous. And parents too,” remarks Professor of Sociology Rob Rosenthal (2007). In the competition for attracting and keeping good students, this sort of Main Street could only hurt the university.

The divide between town and gown is palpable in Wesleyan’s historic ambivalence toward its link to the wider community of Middletown, as many of its constituents have noted throughout the years. “I didn’t really feel a connection to the community when I was a student here...I didn’t really have an awareness of Middletown, its plight, its place in the universe,” recalls Pam Tatge, current Director of Wesleyan Center for the Arts (2007). Physically, Wesleyan sits on Foss Hill overlooking Main Street and the river; the only interactions many students had with Middletown were out of necessity: “If an ATM was on campus, no one would ever leave” (Lindsey 1995). Mirroring the students, Wesleyan’s past administrations have had a reputation both internally and externally for their lack of communication with Middletown constituencies, “Wesleyan really paid no attention to the community so there was nobody talking,” points out Rosenthal (2007). Planning and Zoning Director Bill Warner states, “Prior to ’94 all we did with Wesleyan was regulate them” (Warner 2007).

In the past fifteen years, Wesleyan has shifted from a stance of ambivalence toward Middletown to one of active engagement with the city. In terms of building

lasting relationships that leave a tangible mark on Middletown, the connections the administration has made with various groups working on the redevelopment of Main Street stand out as key. Led by former President Doug Bennet and Vice President Peter Patton, Wesleyan has taken on a campaign of what it calls “enlightened self-interest,” the idea that Wesleyan can take part in efforts to improve Middletown while also serving its own needs (Patton 2007). This sentiment is the driving force behind the Green Street Arts Center (GSAC), made possible through Wesleyan support in order to “serve as an anchor for the revitalization efforts underway in the North End of Middletown” (GSAC *Mission Statement* 2007).

Why such a shift? Wesleyan must “support Middletown in its revitalization efforts... [because] the attractiveness of Middletown to prospective students and faculty in terms of retail activity and cultural opportunities may play a significant long-term role in sustaining excellence” (*Wesleyan Strategic Plan* 2005). The logic behind this strategy: the competitiveness of the university depends on attracting the best students and faculty. As an elite private university, Wesleyan sustains an institutional culture of privilege; through its discourse it links attractiveness with dominant middle-class values and tastes. Crafting Middletown to appeal to these interests must therefore be a priority.

Class, Culture, and Urban Space

Through its revitalization efforts, Wesleyan University is engaged in a classed production of social and physical space.¹ This specifically *middle-class* production

¹ The structure of class and class boundaries is a perpetual topic of social science debate (Abercrombie and Urry 1983; Wacquant 1991). Recent analyses of class that focus on the United

relies upon the assumption that these are values that fit the general interest of the Middletown community. Many sociologists have attributed the refusal to draw class divides to a tendency to see middle-class values as a universal norm (Ehrenreich 1990; hooks 1994; Zukin 2004). This universal middle class is “everywhere represented as representing everyone,” and is thus “nameless, camouflaged by a culture in which it both stars and writes the scripts” (Ehrenrich 1990: 4, 6). The assumed ubiquity of middle class cultural preferences shields hierarchies of both social and cultural power from view.

States frequently distinguish the middle class from a working- or lower-class counterpart through an emphasis on education (Ehrenreich 1990; Lamont 2000; Brooks 2000; Lareau 2003). Those whose economic and social status derives from their education, especially a college degree, are middle class. Without this educational resource, blue-collar or working-class people are bound by the “severe barriers [they face] in access to jobs and other social benefits” (Lamont 2000: 2).

Scholars link these educational and economic resources to distinct cultures based on class (Bourdieu 1984, 1989). Using Bourdieu’s formulation, individuals of different social locations are socialized differently. The systems of interaction and perception, how one is socialized, make up one’s habitus, how one performs and reads the social world. These perceptions and performances can be differentiated through classification. Being able to read and locate different forms of habitus in a social structure is a form of capital, only available to “agents who possess the code, the classificatory schemes necessary to understand their social meaning. Habitus thus implies a ‘sense of one’s place’ but also a ‘sense of the place of others’” (1989: 19). These categorizations through habitus presuppose our ability to connect representations of culture with social positions, creating “a world of common sense, a world that seems self-evident” (19).

Relations between positions in social space are shaped by the distribution of resources within that space. According to Bourdieu, these resources may take the shape of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital, which may be exchanged for one another and serve to distinguish between individuals or social groups. Class is structured both by objective differences in capital and subjective perceptions of taste, as informed by habitus: “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (1984: 6). Bourdieu writes:

This objective element of uncertainty...provides a basis for the plurality of visions of the world which is itself linked to the plurality of points of view. At the same time, it provides a base for symbolic struggles over the power to produce and to impose the legitimate vision of the world (1984: 20).

These different points of view are essential in the construction of social space i.e. individuals and groups occupy different social positions, and thus see the world distinctly according to their position. When one point of view asserts authority over another through claiming to be a true or natural understanding of the world, this perceptual hierarchy is the foundation of a power struggle between groups of different social status.

Symbolic struggles over power are important precisely because they are the basis of real power. The authority to assert one’s own interpretations of the world is a resource of control. A prime example of the ability to assert perceptions is the middle-class monopoly on standards of social interaction and culture.

The imposition of cultural authority on objective space is a key underpinning of urban development and gentrification literature (Zukin 1991; Smith 1996; Bridge 2006). Often understood in terms of literal displacement of working-class and poor residents, gentrification also encompasses a shift in the aesthetic culture of an area. The language of revitalization and renaissance often suggests that affected neighborhoods were previously “somehow devitalized or culturally moribund” (Smith 1996: 32). Working-class aesthetics are “tacky” and “parochial” (Ehrenreich 1990:7), their cultural consumption patterns “vulgar because they are both easy and common” (Bourdieu 1984: 176). Through new kinds of investment, updated commercial frontage and streetscapes, an area takes on a new, middle-class character. Gary Bridge writes:

[Gentrification] is the symbolic as well as physical occupancy of the central city. The retail and leisure spaces that surround many gentrified neighbourhoods again reflect good taste, in coffee (Atkinson 2003), food and a whole range of other lifestyle services (Bridge and Dowling 2001). The gentrified neighbourhood is the clearest expression of new middle-class cultural capital... a boundary of socially legitimized taste of the new middle class that is valorised in the built form of the city. The realisation of the quality of urban life of one group often leads to a diminution in the quality of life for other urban residents. (2006: 722).

The middle-class revival of *downtown* is central to the notion of urban development as battleground because downtowns have traditionally been home to working-class and poor residents and are spaces frequented by mixed-income clientele (Smith 1996). In other words, middle-class aesthetics do not enter a space previously uninhabited or devoid of culture; revitalization is a process of deliberately changing a neighborhood from one sort of space to another. Consequently, the actors who engage in changing downtowns, no matter the terminology used for that action, are responsible for the varied implications of those changes for groups located within the physical space.

While previous literature provides an important background, the story of Wesleyan's role in the urban development of Middletown is primarily mapped through Wesleyan's own distinctive discourse. As this story unfolds, I focus on ways Wesleyan itself conceptualizes and presents the issues of class, culture and space. My choice is not to exalt Wesleyan's vantage point or discourse over that of other groups involved in the redevelopment process. Rather, it serves as means for highlighting the ideological implications of the discourse of an institution that seldom has to explain itself.

Central Claim

Middletown's image as a working-class community hardly comprises the regional draw that Wesleyan needs to attract talent and money. To fit this need, the university's language and actions demand a physical and symbolic middle-class reinvention of Middletown. In order to reinvent the space successfully, when Wesleyan envisions and acts on urban redevelopment it presents a symbiotic relationship between its own goals and those of other Middletown bodies. This relationship is especially clear in the case of the Green Street Arts Center, the social and physical space that I will consider in most depth. Yet the assumption often ignores or downplays Wesleyan's construction of Middletown as a space defined and determined by the presence of the college and its own preferences and needs. Despite Wesleyan's desire to pursue its own interests while simultaneously reinventing Middletown for the good of all, the class divide causes Wesleyan's own interests to subtly trump all others.

The noteworthy events in the recent history of downtown Middletown's "renaissance," the development process in which Wesleyan has participated over the past decade, are numerous and complex; each event is experienced, remembered, and articulated differently depending on who you ask. I will not attempt to cover all of these intricacies. Rather, by drawing out some of the history of this process through a Wesleyan-focused lens, I hope to make the university accountable for the repercussions of its dealings, to give its classed construction a name.

Background

Middletown's history has been shaped by conflicting representations, and realities, of its character as a blue-collar versus a college town. Depictions of Middletown as blue-collar or working-class abound in both literature and personal descriptions by and about Middletown citizens, distinctly those citizens not related to Wesleyan: "We're just plain old blue-collar, hard-working people" (Warner 2007). These depictions most readily refer to the notable immigrant population in Middletown and its long-standing connection to downtown and the old industrial zone that abuts the North End of Main Street. Immigrant life was originally centered in the townhouses and apartments of the North End, Middletown's "first home for new immigrants" (Warner 1990: 78). The cultural mix of the North End, its density, and its location adjacent to Main Street, Middletown's historically active commercial and civic hub, make the district a unique one in Middletown: "The North End remains as Middletown's last truly urban neighborhood" (NEAT Website 2007).

While “urban” is used here positively to promote the preservation of an historic residential neighborhood, it also connotes the social ills that cities face and hints at their prominence in Middletown’s North End. These perceived ills are readily in apparent the language of students who ventured out into Middletown, often in the form of volunteering, who described Middletown as a place in need of service. “Altruism is in Style” at Wesleyan proclaimed *U.S. News and World Report* in 1993, citing the 60% of Wesleyan seniors who “reported involvement in a volunteer service activity during their undergraduate years” (1993). Faced with Middletown’s estrangement, one student writes in 1985, “It’s all too easy to forget the poverty of a large part of this community. Tutoring takes the taboo away from Middletown and its poverty (Hayashi 1985). Two years later, “A growing number of students are discovering this other world, and in the process many of them are confronting problems to which they have never before been exposed, such as homelessness, poverty, domestic violence, illiteracy, and sexual abuse” (Sureck 1987). This dialogue about volunteerism, the dominant one up through the early 1990s, is contingent on the representation of Middletown as a sick city. Students highlight their privilege in comparison to the larger Middletown community through their ability to classify Middletown. Compare to Ehrenreich’s analysis of “helping professions,”

full of generous-spirited people...but roles that confer authority...For working-class people, relations with the middle class [in these professions] are usually a one-way dialogue. From above come commands, diagnoses, instructions, judgments, definitions (1990: 139).

Like middle-class helping professionals, students have the privilege to make judgments, defining the terms of the relationship between students and the city. They

present the relationship as one in which they alone have something to give, but from which they can learn.

While Middletown's "troubled times" provided a space for Wesleyan students to confront unfamiliar realities, they also threatened Wesleyan's prestige. Cognizant that attracting students lay in part in their attraction to Middletown, President Bennet stressed that "Wesleyan cannot revitalize Middletown, but the University can act as a catalyst and a proponent of change at opportune moments" (Hudson 1997). In other words, while Bennet denied the ability to completely change Middletown, the quotation suggests that Wesleyan could both spark and support projects that it deemed worthy. The opportune moments for change would be those selected by the university. Vice President Peter Patton recalls, "Bennet's political background in the state—his father Douglas J. Bennet, Sr. '33, was active in both state and local government—led him to want to partner with the city, and to understand how it must be done" (Hudson 1997). The major path for partnership chosen was clear: invest in downtown. Under Bennet, Wesleyan invested time, knowledge, bodies, and money into several large projects, including the *Downtown Market Area Plan* and Wesleyan Development Roundtable, the North End Community Workshop, the Inn at Middletown, and the Green Street Arts Center. "None of this would have happened without Doug's leadership," says Patton, figuring President Bennet as the force behind the investment. Patton referred to "Wesleyan's motive in revitalizing the decaying downtown [as] enlightened self-interest," suggesting that Wesleyan's efforts to revitalize Middletown would benefit both Wesleyan and the town at large

(Rockwell 2005). Wesleyan's official position, as stated in President Bennet's cover memo to Wesleyan's strategic plan:

We believe that our engagement in the community is important for the social good and the quality of life in our community. We also believe that as Middletown thrives, so will Wesleyan. A vibrant community is a key variable in *attracting the best faculty, staff and students* (Bennet 2005; my emphasis).

With Bennet, Wesleyan officially sanctioned its role as a player in Middletown, in the name of the good of both parties. While Wesleyan will admit its own motives in the relationship, it consistently presents the outcomes of its work with the city as mutually beneficial; the relationship is assumed to be symbiotic. In its discourse about revitalization Wesleyan never mentions a history of Middletown's social ills, nor are references to class differences ever explicit. Yet when Wesleyan's plan speaks of social good and quality of life, it speaks from its own point of view. Consequently, it understands the general interest of the community in terms of its own institutional culture and needs.

Not only did the arrival of Bennet to Wesleyan in 1995 mark new investment, it also meant more communication between city bodies and the university. Gerry Daley, member of Middletown's Common Council at the time and current Chairman of the Economic Development Committee, remarks, "Doug Bennet becoming president marked a significant and immediate shift toward the involvement of Wesleyan in the Middletown community" (Daley 2007). Daley recalls that Bennet was willing to "sit at the table with everyone," a table that included the varying interests of the city government, business leaders, activist citizens, and the university. As a powerful institutional player itself, one wonders not only about Wesleyan's own interests but its ability to work with the "community" as opposed to elite city

representatives. Patton contends, “[Bennet] said right from the beginning, ‘Let’s do this in a grassroots way. Let’s work with community members to find out what they want and what we can give’”(Holder 2007). Wesleyan has been “giving” to Middletown for quite some time; the student volunteerism discussed above is a testament to the service Wesleyan students hope to provide for Middletown. In contrast, when Patton and Bennet point to “grassroots” work, it evokes a coalition of common citizens coming together to promote change in traditional structures of power. Wesleyan’s new tack, it seems, was to be “supportive but never dictatorial. It has always asked the residents, ‘What do you want?’ and then supported that goal” (Rockwell 2006).

Under Bennet’s tenure Wesleyan took part in a number of large-scale efforts to aid in the revitalization of downtown, most notably the 1996 *Downtown Market Area Plan* and Wesleyan Development Roundtable, the 1998 North End Community Workshop and *Middletown Report*, and the planning, construction and operation of the Green Street Arts Center, which opened in 2001. The first of these efforts was the Wesleyan Development Roundtable, which took place in conjunction with the *Downtown Market Area Plan* issued for the city earlier that year. Known as the Mullin report, the *Downtown Market Area Plan* was a planning study supported by Wesleyan and the city of Middletown that detailed Middletown’s commercial possibilities, highlighting those related to Wesleyan. “We were definitely part of the conversation,” says Patton in reference to the report, which cites Wesleyan as the key market for Middletown business. Bringing the report to campus, the ’96 Wesleyan Development Roundtable, spearheaded by Paul Yaro ’71, convened “alumni

participants and more than two dozen university, business, and civic leaders... for a two day conference directed toward identifying policy and investment options for Middletown” (Hudson 1997). The report and the following roundtable were touted to the broader Wesleyan community as defining a new partnership between Middletown and the university. As to the benefits for Wesleyan, the table came together through the notion that “bringing town and gown into cooperative partnership is key if universities want to continue to attract highly-valued students in a competitive market” (Hudson 1997). Here, Wesleyan again acknowledges its own vision in changing downtown: make it more attractive commercially to its potential students. Likewise, the Mullin report cites the university as an untapped market, readily available to pump money into Middletown if only given the chance:

The role of the Wesleyan market...is crucial as an immediately “tapable” market. The image of Wesleyan is powerful. It represents tradition, quality, commitment and relative affluence (Mullin 1996: 8).

In citing the “Wesleyan market,” the Mullin report brings up a key issue of how to frame the Wesleyan-Middletown relationship. From a city government point of view, the Wesleyan community becomes the constituents to whom they should cater, in the hopes of boosting Middletown business. Wesleyan reaps the benefits of being the central focus of development. The report cites Smith College and its hometown of Northampton and Amherst College and Amherst as the ideal models for Wesleyan and Middletown to follow in order to offer “a highly marketable city-and-campus package” (Hudson 1997). Almost twenty pages of the report are devoted to a list of the services that occupy each city’s downtown and whether students, parents, or faculty will use these services. As the roundtable concludes, “Northampton has undergone a renaissance that has yielded a bounty of benefits for Smith College”

(Hudson 1997). Wesleyan is well-aware of the competitive edge that a “renaissance” of Middletown would bring; likewise Wesleyan is crucial for commerce. The questionable assumption is the Wesleyan-dominant perspective: Middletown’s redevelopment is contingent on a Middletown defined as a *college town*. In other words, the Wesleyan community’s consumer and service interests trump the desires and needs of other Middletown constituencies.

The Mullin report justifies this Wesleyan-centered outlook through its conclusion that:

this traditionally blue-collar city has changed dramatically in ways that have not been appreciated. Approximately 40 percent of Middletown’s adult population is composed of affluent, well-educated professionals with a high level of disposable income. Another 42 percent falls into the category of young, upwardly mobile with steady incomes. Only 16 percent have low socio-economic indicators (Hudson 1997).

According to the Mullen report, Middletown is only perceived as blue-collar; in truth, according to the roundtable, the atmosphere cultivated by Wesleyan has transformed at least a part of Middletown into a city of the relatively affluent (Hudson 1997). The downtown should reflect this prosperity with a shift toward “refinement.”

The report notes that downtown’s “key weakness is the lack of adequate retail activity and the disproportionate share of service and institutional uses” (Mullin 1996: 4). Here the reader is confronted with the first sign of an “other” in opposition to the Wesleyan market. As a commercial hub, downtown must discourage sites that provide services for residents not spending money. Also at issue is *how* money is spent. At the time of the Wesleyan Development Roundtable, Paul Yaro was already praising the increase of Middletown’s “‘cappuccino and futon coefficients’ that signal a downtown taking an upturn” (Hudson 1997). Yaro uses the terms cappuccino and futon to signal class-specific consumer desires and spending patterns; they connote

the “tastes and dispositions” that Bourdieu links to cultural capital (1984, 1989). This classification is likewise clear in the report’s short-term and long-term recommendations.

These recommendations are crucial to understanding why harmony of interest cannot be assumed, how the social space of a college town can instead be a site of conflict. Beyond attracting “upscale” shops, the city should first “prohibit social service activities from locating on Main Street” (Mullin 1996: 9). Social services are located in downtown areas because these areas tend to be home to working-class and poor residents, as is the case in Middletown’s North End (Smith 1996). Without personal transportation, the population must have easy alternative access to the services which they need. Conversely, the recommendation suggests that these social services may be distasteful to a more affluent population which may not use them and which associates these services with the poor.

Even more direct are the recommendations to “discourage subsidized housing in the Downtown area” and “develop a campaign to expand market rate housing in the Downtown area” (Mullin 1996: 10), the very definition of gentrification (Smith 2006; Bridge 1996). By displacing the current working-class population in order to expand more expensive housing, the downtown would receive a new clientele with more money to spend. The projected results of these recommendations are obvious: attract an affluent clientele, get rid of undesirables. As the roundtable notes, “Colleges and universities throughout the Northeast are recognizing that the days of academia as a cloister—remote and removed from geography or urban policy—are gone” (Hudson 1997). If the university can no longer separate itself from what it

considers the disagreeable aspects of its surrounding community, its marketability becomes increasingly linked to the future of its hometown. The strategies promoted here by the report and Wesleyan make downtown Middletown more appealing to a middle-class clientele, but they have acute negative consequences for downtown's current working-class and low-income population.

Green Street: A Case Study

An initiative realized: what existed in 1997 as a paragraph on paper advocating for a community center in the North End today exists as the up-and-running Green Street Arts Center (GSAC), "a vibrant cultural and educational center combining the resources of Wesleyan and Middletown to transform lives through the arts and foster the creativity that exists in all of us" (GSAC Website 2007). According to its Director and mission statement, to counter the North End's seedy and unsafe reputation of "doom and gloom" GSAC serves as a beacon for the immediate community as well as the greater Middletown area (Astor del Valle 2007). Through its after school program, GSAC offers a safe and engaging environment for children to receive homework help, participate in arts activities, and engage with mentors. The after school program "focuses on serving Middletown's deserving, yet underserved children and young adults, offering scholarships to ensure all children the opportunity to participate in the program regardless of economic background" (GSAC Website 2007). At least half of the after school participants must come from the immediate neighborhood. GSAC also offers tuition-based private music and

dance lessons, classes geared toward adults, and performances, lectures, and workshops open to a more regional audience.

Not only does GSAC seek to enhance the lives of the individuals who participate in its programs; it is also meant to “serve as an anchor for the revitalization efforts underway in the North End of Middletown” (GSAC Website 2007). By showing a face of stability and “quality,” a goal of GSAC is to attract community, municipal, and commercial investment in the North End in the hope of transforming it, or at least its reputation, from “a drive-through drug center” into an area “known for its active and diverse community” (Patton 2007).

The Product

Multiple realities are a fact of reconstructing the past and understanding the present. The history of GSAC is a case in point, as various groups have explicated their vision of GSAC and use it in different ways. How its beginnings are remembered and how its future plays out depend on who gets to assert ownership of the space.

In the fall of 1998 after the failed attempt by the city to get NRZ status for the North End, the city of Middletown contracted the Yale Urban Design Workshop to develop a new plan for the revival of the North End, including a community workshop and the resulting *Middletown Report*. In form and function, the workshop stressed the importance of diverse community voices and interests:

The goal of the highly participatory Charrette/ Workshop is to engage public interest and involvement in a ‘conversation’ about common goals and thereby to empower the citizens of the neighborhood, town, or city to shape their own environment (Yale 1998: 1).

In contrast to the Mullin report and Wesleyan Development Roundtable just two years before, the workshop sought to identify ways to reconcile a number of different interests, or at least provide a forum for them to be voiced. Included in the process were not only North End residents and members of NEAT, but also students and faculty from Wesleyan and members of the city's Planning and Zoning Commission. Before the workshop, the planners engaged in a preparation phase with NEAT, Wesleyan students, and the Planning and Zoning Commission in order to develop a backdrop for the project. The report notes, "Not only was this time to listen to the various constituents, but it was also a period when the project was looked at from various points of view: urban design, architecture, housing, retail and economic development, streetscape and landscape design" (Yale 1998: 3). Consequently, the first phase served to orient the Yale professionals with specific issues of the North End that the parties involved deemed most relevant. Looking at the North End through these lenses highlights some possible areas of contention between interest groups. As the discussion of the Mullin report addressed, physical spaces are designed to consider and provide specific needs and services. Whereas economic development might benefit from an increase in housing quality and costs, neighborhood residents may depend on lower rents and easily accessible social services. Design brings up questions of preference and taste as well as access; for example, are parking lots going to be provided to bring in people with cars, or will a community playground within walking distance for nearby residents be the focus of a streetscape?

Of the many recommendations in the *Middletown Report*, one comes specifically and forcefully from North End residents, that of the need for a community center:

Time and time again during the workshop, residents of the North End, old and young alike, voiced the need for a youth and community center. A place near their neighborhood that would provide adult education, a community bulletin board where young people could find job opportunities, workshops for youth and elders to make crafts, a program that can organize people volunteering in community projects, after school programs for teenagers, summer camps, a swimming pool to beat the summer heat, basketball courts, a place to hold block parties, a place to hang out, find counseling, lift weights. Residents expressed *a definite need for a place to organize strength in community* (Yale 1998: 22; my emphasis)

Residents are making a two-fold request. They ask not only for services, such as recreational activities and education, but also for a place of which they can take ownership and use toward developing real communities ties. The report stresses, “People in the neighborhood need to have a place that they can share in common with everyone, a place that everyone can identify with, a place that symbolizes the neighborhood itself” (Yale 1998: 21). The community center would be the physical embodiment of the social space of the North End.

In the year following the issuing of the *Middletown Report*, members of NEAT sought ways to put its recommendations into practice. The idea of a community center was considered the most promising, and in January of 2000 NEAT met with then-Mayor Domenique Thornton, city planners, and Wesleyan’s Patton to ask for support in its construction and foundation (Rockwell 2005). While NEAT did not specifically ask for a community arts center, “someone had suggested it might take shape as an arts center,” and Wesleyan’s Patton and Center for the Arts Director Tatge latched onto the idea. Wesleyan was looking to make its mark downtown, both as a way to reach out to the Middletown community and to try to curb the “blight coming up the hill” (Tatge 2007).

Why make an investment through the arts? Tatge recalls two reasons for the focus on the arts; first, because of the existence of “organizations that had already been born in the North End that were arts-centric—Kid City, Oddfellows, the Buttonwood Tree” (2007). While these other successful arts organizations in the North End signal a positive and promising environment for the arts, an arts-based community center risked providing a service that was already there. As one community organizer put it, “There were already arts programs that were actually organic, from the community,” framing Green Street as less directly tied to the community and therefore less authentic, a competitor of these other organizations” (Alexander 2007). Since the project began complaints by other arts organizations concerning competition from Green Street have, in fact, been expressed in various forums (Dworski-Riggs, et al 2007). The second reason for an arts center that Tatge mentions, that “the arts is a strength of Wesleyan’s,” is a many-sided issue (Tatge 2007). On the one hand, as a participant it makes sense for Wesleyan to be supportive in an area where they have the most to give in terms of expertise. Conversely, Wesleyan has many strengths beyond the arts; the choice to focus on the arts speaks to the cultural implications of how the North End will be transformed. NEAT’s Brewster puts it, “We all say yes to things because we think we should...but the neighborhood doesn’t really care about taking ballet lessons. You’re just trying to get through the day” (Brewster 2008).

Brewster’s argument mirrors interpretations of art and artist culture that have drawn on artistic privilege of studying art, as well as working-class opposition to its symbolism or lack of practical use (Bourdieu 1984). More recently, development and

class literature point to the presence of the arts as a source for attracting new capitalist investment in gentrifying areas (Lloyd 2006, Brooks 2000). David Brooks' "bourgeois bohemians" market a rebel artistic cultural sensibility. This "educated establishment...imposes a social discipline on the rest of society so as to improve the 'quality of life'" as defined by their own tastes and needs (2000: 46). An arts center constructed by an elite university in an urban neighborhood has the weight of these connotations on its social image.

With Patton and Tatge in support of the idea of an arts center, they approached President Bennet to support the plan. One of the most convincing factors was the potential partnership with NEAT: "NEAT was a part of politicking here at the university in terms of convincing Doug Bennet that this was a good idea to take on" (Tatge 2007). NEAT stood as an obvious community player to whom Wesleyan could point in terms of advocating for the center as a Wesleyan-Middletown partnership. Tatge points out, "Universities, and arts organizations frankly, think about doing these kinds of projects for the good of the community and often don't have that community based partner that's obvious, so they try and manufacture it" (Tatge 2007). NEAT's presence helped legitimize the center in terms of signifying community representation within the plan. In the presentation of symbiosis, having NEAT as a partner meant that Wesleyan could highlight community goals, doing something "for the good of the community," over their own needs. Yet Brewster explains her recollection of Wesleyan's reasoning:

They needed more space for their arts, for their non-arts major students to be taking arts courses, and perhaps for artists housing and studio space. They had a shortage of space on campus. I don't think that's how Wesleyan sees it at all, but that was how our initial conversations went (Brewster 2008).

The point here is not that Wesleyan *should* ignore its own interests; rather, Brewster's recollection brings up the potential for varying perspectives based on social position. The fact that NEAT sees Wesleyan as self-interested, while Wesleyan fails to acknowledge this divergence of interests, has implications for rationalizing the future of Green Street.

With the support of Patton, Tatge, and NEAT, Bennet agreed to sign onto the project, hiring John and Francis Padilla to conduct a feasibility study in regard to both Wesleyan and North End residents' interest in the project. The study, *Community Development Through the Arts*, consisted of twelve interviews of Wesleyan faculty and staff, eight interviews of Wesleyan students, and eighteen interviews of North End stakeholders, including members of NEAT, property owners, and community residents. It considered both interest in the arts itself and the potential goals of the center, as well as physical locations for the site. If the arts center were to be determined feasible, the study would inform its vision.

Looking back to the initial catalyst behind the idea of GSAC, the study refers to the North End's plight and the ongoing efforts of redevelopment and revitalization. "Wesleyan University's timing in exploring the feasibility, and developing support in the North End community for the arts center could not have been better" due to the center's potential to attract other investment:

Among external community members, Wesleyan is...uniquely positioned to implement the arts center as it brings instant credibility to the project, it can attract the resources to bring the concept to fruition, and it can help build the critical mass of activity to accelerate the revitalization of the North End. Several of those interviewed by New Paradigms voiced the opinion that Wesleyan's success in the North End can change the character of Middletown within five years (New Paradigms 2001: i).

The statement is important because it links Wesleyan's future with that of the arts center. First, it labels Wesleyan an "external" community member with the ability to act upon a community neighbor. Wesleyan's affiliation with the arts center would change the character of the North End because it has not been considered part of the North End physically or socially. Supported by Wesleyan financially and symbolically, Green Street embodies the transfer of Wesleyan culture into North End space. As Tatge puts it, "Many universities have arts initiatives that go out into neighborhoods, but the idea of creating and taking on a space within a neighborhood is really unheard of. Green Street has the potential to be model for how a university can create an anchor for a revitalization of a neighborhood" (Tatge 2007).

Why would Wesleyan take an active role in revitalizing the North End? The study finds, "Wesleyan recognizes that its future success is linked to the future of Middletown, particularly the downtown area that is within walking distance of the campus," recalling Wesleyan's fear of "blight coming up the hill" from the North End (New Paradigms 2001: 14). The *Wesleyan Magazine* article about Green Street is telling in its depiction of the North End:

Hurry along Main Street's sidewalk on any given day and you're apt to see a group of disheveled unkempt men in dirty jeans clustered on a street corner, calling loudly to a friend who disappears into a liquor store. A neon sign in the window of the Spanish grocer's storefront warns would-be shoplifters, "We forgive, but we don't forget" (Rockwell 2005).

The vision is one in which the Wesleyan reader is located in a place they don't feel safe, through which they need to hurry in order to avoid the tasteless, alcoholic bums, stereotyped by their "unkempt" appearance and "loud" behavior. Not only does the note about a Spanish grocery store highlight ethnic difference, it assumes crime and distrust in the area. Whereas earlier accounts saw the entirety of Main Street as

threatening, this characterization is one of many which describe the current North End as the remaining peril to the safe space of Wesleyan. Thus it is in Wesleyan's interest to make the North End more compatible with its own vision.

The study found that Wesleyan's investment in Green Street could not only change the character of the neighborhood physically, but socially as well. Through an after school program directed at North End children, North End parents themselves note how the value of the arts as well as a college education could be bestowed upon participants:

Parents feel the Wesleyan students embody hope, youthful energy, and an 'anything is possible attitude' that they want their children exposed to. Moreover, they feel Wesleyan students are uniquely qualified to mentor and speak to their kids about the value of education (New Paradigms 2001: 12)

North End parents recognize in Wesleyan the potential social benefits for their children due to its cultural status as an institution. Participation in after school activities is a signature of "the dominant set of cultural repertoires about how children should be raised" (Lareau 2003: 4). Thus GSAC can be understood as classed institution by virtue of its link to Wesleyan as well as the middle-class socialization instilled in its participants.

This socialization is also evident in the fact that GSAC would bring together people of different socio-economic backgrounds. In order to make the center financially viable, the study finds that "users of the Center's offerings will need to pay for those services... youth and adult scholarship funds will need to be established to defray the cost for those who cannot afford it" (New Paradigms 2001: 30). In order for North End residents to be able to afford to use the center, GSAC must attract paying customers from other parts of the city or the suburbs for both the after

school program and private classes that the study recommends the center offer. In effect, the study reveals the negotiation that must go on between fashioning GSAC as a place for and owned by the North End community and making it into what others have called a “regional draw” in order to function financially. GSAC Director Janice del Valle asserts, “People from suburbia have wondered, ‘Is this a place I can send my child?...I think that thinking is starting to change. We'd like to bring other kids in here, mix it up a bit’” (Griffin 2007). The presence of middle-class children at Green Street has the potential to distinguish the center as classed due to middle-class comfort in institutional settings. Lareau has found that in after school activities, middle-class children exhibit “the sense of entitlement characteristic of the middle-class. [Children in her study] acted as though they had a right to pursue their own individual preferences and to actively manage interactions in institutional settings” (2003: 6). Consequently, middle-class children tend to take control of and dominate institutional spaces; working-class children may feel alienated by this behavior, though they are expected to mirror it as the norm.

The Future

A dream in danger? Despite the enormous amount of investment that has gone into the Green Street Arts Center, the center has reached a turning point in terms of both funding and clientele. Wesleyan’s budget for the renovation, programming, and operation costs at the start of the project, \$2.2 million, was set to cover costs from the center’s opening in fall 2004 through 2007, at which point the center was to be financially independent from the university (Bradley 2004). However, GSAC has yet

to attract enough outside support both financially and in the form of bodies to make community control a viable option.

Not only is the university still supporting the center financially, it has also increased its symbolic connections, both of which have the potential to shift the orientation of the center towards university values and interests. Wesleyan hosted a Green Street Arts Center Benefit Gala in November of 2007, strategically scheduled to coincide with Parent's Weekend and the inauguration of Wesleyan President Michael Roth. Featuring dinner at GSAC and a concert in Wesleyan's Crowell Concert Hall, the event was heavily marketed to the Wesleyan community through flyers, mailings, and emails; tickets ranged in price from fifty dollars for the concert alone to three thousand dollars for "table sponsorship," including tickets for ten guests (GSAC Website 2007).

On the GSAC webpage, just under the Center's name "A Project of Wesleyan University" stands in bold letters, a marketing strategy to attract higher-end customers who would see the Center's affiliation with Wesleyan as a mark of quality (Dale Cramer Burr 2006). In order to boost funding, Green Street has accelerated its campaign to reach a wider audience. Recall Astor del Valle's comment, "We'd like to bring other kids in here, mix it up a bit" (Griffin 2007). Unlike the majority of current after school participants, who receive scholarships for the program, kids from the suburbs will pay. In the way of the sustainability of Green Street lies a class cleavage of weighty consequence in terms of what kind of forum the center will become in terms of who and what purposes it will serve.

The initial feasibility study stresses that for GSAC to be a successful investment for Wesleyan, it must be obviously and inherently linked to the university.

From the first page the study finds,

While Wesleyan is genuinely interested in using its influence and good offices to act as a catalyst for revitalization of the North End, the academic best interests of the student body and faculty are paramount. Wesleyan's involvement in the arts center must make academic sense for students and faculty such that it must provide for formal and informal links to the Wesleyan curriculum" (New Paradigms 2001: i)

And again: "the academic best interests of the study body and faculty supersede that desire [for revitalization]" (4). For the arts center to both succeed in the long run and make sense for Wesleyan's interests, the study stresses that Wesleyan must consider first and foremost the institutional rather than the North End community needs. This language directly contradicts the idea of North End ownership and identification with the center as a symbol of community solidarity.

Interestingly, GSAC's financial problems at this point are related to a lack of paying customers, perhaps evidence that the center has appealed to the needs of the North End residents unable to pay more than it has to paying middle-class customers. However, from Wesleyan's point of view such a shortage of funds undermines their ability to sustain the center. If GSAC "fails", what would be the repercussions? Wesleyan has focused on the loss it would be for the North End community and NEAT, yet it would also be a blow to Wesleyan's prestige and to the downtown redevelopment efforts (Rosenthal 2007). Because of the way it understands the "general interest" of Middletown as shaped by its own middle-class worldview, Wesleyan does not see the undermining of North End community ownership as potentially equally detrimental to the spirit of Green Street as Green Street's financial failure. Despite Wesleyan's understandable desire to pursue its own interests as well

as help others, despite its best intentions to balance the two, its own interests overshadow those that don't fit its institutional perspective.

Final Thoughts

On January 2, 2008, I attended "A Conversation about Youth," a special youth panel organized by NEAT. Of highest concern among the kids was the issue that there was nothing for them to do in Middletown, nowhere for them to go where they would be welcomed. Ironically, as the kids complained of nowhere to call their own, the panel was being conducted in a practice room in GSAC. Though the majority of kids were involved in programs at GSAC, even while sitting in its physical space they neglected to mention it.

Wesleyan University is an elite, private institution with a national reputation. Its success depends on its ability to attract the best faculty, staff, and students. This success may come with a middle-class revitalization of downtown Middletown, but it also depends on Wesleyan's ability to sustain its initiatives. The Green Street Arts Center, Wesleyan's largest investment in the community to date in terms of time, manpower, and money, is facing a financial and structural crisis. While Wesleyan could eventually take over the space for its own use, the above vignette serves as evidence perhaps that North End residents don't "see" GSAC because it already is not for and of them.

What will Middletown look like in five years? In ten? Will it be the next Northampton, fit to meet the cultural consumption needs of the town's middle-class university market? If Middletown does become the next hot college town, Wesleyan

can expect a boost to its image in comparison to its competitors. Meanwhile, North End community demand for a space of solidarity still stands. What the incumbent residents of the North End can expect for the future remains to be seen.

References

Scholarly Sources

- Abercrombie, Nicholas, and John Urry. 1983. *Capital, Labour and the Middle Classes*. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- _____. 1989. "Social space and Symbolic Power." *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 14-25.
- Bridge, Gary. 2006. "Perspectives on Cultural Capital and the Neighborhood." *Urban Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 4, 719–730.
- Brooks, David. 2000. *Bobos in Paradise*. New York: Touchstone.
- Ehrenreich, Barbara. 1990. *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- hooks, bell. 2000. *Where We Stand: Class Matters*. New York: Routledge.
- Lareau, Annette. 2003. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lamont, Michèle. 2000. *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lloyd, Richard. 2006. *Neo-Bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Postindustrial City*. New York: Routledge.
- Smith, Neil. 1996. *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City*. New York: Routledge.
- Wacquant, Löic J.D. 1991. "Making Class: The Middle Class(es) in Social Theory and Social Structure." 39-64 in *Bringing Class Back In: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*. Eds. Rick Fantasia, Rhonda Levine, Scott McNall. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Warner, Elizabeth. 1990. *A Pictorial History of Middletown*. Norfolk, VA: The Donning Company/Publishers.
- Zukin, Sharon. 1991. *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disney World*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

*Newspaper and Magazine Articles**

- Bradley, Rory. 2004. "Green Street Arts Center Moving to Bigger Location." *Wesleyan Argus*, April 23.
- Delisio, Ellen. 1992. "Wesleyan Students Come to Aid of City." *Middletown Press*, September 5.
- Griffin, Alaine. 2007. "North End Blooms with Creativity." *Harford Courant*, July 12.
- Hartman, Mitchell. 1992. "Wes Students Rate Host City—CBB Finds Liaison Needed." *Middletown Press*, July 3.
- Hayashi, Kei. 1985. "Community Service for Self and Others." *Wesleyan Argus*, March 8.
- Holder, William. 2007. "The Bennet Style." *Wesleyan Magazine*, Issue 1.
- Hudson, Jane. 1997. "An Old-fashioned College Town, Wesleyan and Middletown: Partners in Downtown Revitalization." *Wesleyan University Alumnus*, Spring Edition.
- Lindsey, Grant. 1995. "The Evolution of a College Town." *Wesleyan Argus*, October 13.
- Lisker, Roy. 2005. "North End Revitalization in Middletown, CT: The North End Housing Initiative." *Ferment Magazine*, February 6. Retrieved October 3, 2007 (<http://www.fermentmagazine.org/NEAT/neh11.html>).
- Ravo, Nick. 1990. "1950's Town Battles 1990's Woes." *New York Times*, April 2.
- Rockwell, Cynthia. 2005. "Green Street: School of Dreams." *Wesleyan Magazine*, Issue I. Retrieved October 3, 2007 (http://www.wesleyan.edu/magazine/magazine/mag_archives/).
- _____. 2006. "Middletown's New Buzz." *Wesleyan Magazine*, Issue I. Retrieved September 20, 2007 (http://www.wesleyan.edu/magazine/magazine/mag_archives/).
- Sureck, Shana. 1987. "Coming Down off the Hill." *Wesleyan University Alumnus*, Winter/Spring Edition.
- Unauthored. 1993. "Altruism is in Style." *U.S. News and World Report*, October 4.

* Newspaper and Magazine Articles were primarily accessed through the Wesleyan University Archives. Page numbers missing from these citations throughout the

document are due to the form of the collection; the articles had been physically cut from the original source.

Unpublished Documents and Studies

Bennet, Douglas. 1998. "Cover Memorandum to the Board of Trustees" from *Strategy for Wesleyan*. October 30. Wesleyan University Website. Retrieved November 20, 2007 (http://www.wesleyan.edu/Pages/strategy/Strategy_djb.htm).

Dworski-Riggs, Deanna, Ali Kimmell, Kelly Klein, Shira Miller and ??? 2007. "*Green Street: Art in Middletown.*" Community Research Seminar Study, Wesleyan University, May 15.

Dale Cramer Burr and Associates. 2006. *Spark: Assessing the Beginnings of Green Street Arts Center*. Commissioned by Wesleyan University, August.

Green Street Arts Center. 2007. "Green Street Mission Statement." Middletown, CT: Green Street Arts Center Website, Retrieved November 4, 2007 (www.wesleyan.edu/greestreet/background.html).

Mullin Associates, Inc. 1996. *Downtown Area Market Plan, Middletown, CT*. Commissioned by the Middletown Department of Planning and Zoning. November.

New Paradigms Consulting, Inc. 2001. *Community Development Through The Arts: A Feasibility Study for the North End Community Arts Center*. Commissioned by Wesleyan University, May.

North End Action Team. 2007. "The History of the North End." North End Action Team Website. Retrieved December 20, 2007 (<http://www.neatmiddletown.org/Info%20and%20Archive/historyne.html>).

Wesleyan University. 1998. *Strategy for Wesleyan University*. Wesleyan University Website. Retrieved November 20, 2007 (<http://www.wesleyan.edu/Pages/strategy/strategy.html>).

Wesleyan University. 2005. *Engaged with the World: A Strategic Plan for Wesleyan University, 2005-2010*. Wesleyan University Website. Retrieved November 20, 2007 (<http://www.wesleyan.edu/wesleyanplanning/>).

Yale Urban Design Workshop. 1998. *The Middletown Report: North End Community Workshop*. Commissioned by the City of Middletown, October
Presentations and Personal Interviews

Alexander, Jennifer. 2007. Personal Interview. Conducted at Wesleyan University, December 10.

Astor del Valle, Janice. 2007. "Building Bridges Between University and Community." WeSeminar Presentation, Wesleyan University, November 2.

Brewster, Lydia. 2008. Personal Interview. Conducted at North End Action Team Office, January 17.

Daley, Gerald. 2007. "First Friday: The Future of Middletown." Panel Discussion, Wesleyan University, April.

North End Action Team. 2008. "A Conversation with Youth." Panel conducted at Green Street Arts Center, January 10.

Patton, Peter. 2007. Personal Interview. Conducted at Wesleyan University, December 4.

Rosenthal, Rob. 2007. Personal Interview. Conducted at Wesleyan University, December 13.

Tatge, Pamela. 2007. Personal Interview. Conducted at Wesleyan University, December 10.

Warner, William. 2007. Personal Interview. Conducted at the Middletown Department of Planning, Conservation, and Zoning, December 15.