

**Urban Planning in Topeka:  
A City Loses its Identity**

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## INTRODUCTION

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On June 8, 2010, the grassroots organization ReThink Topeka scheduled a “High Noon” event on South Kansas Avenue in downtown Topeka, Kansas, calling out the 35,000 people who live and work there to see the sidewalks come alive – a noble goal. However, walking the streets that day, I wondered if anybody received the message, as the heart of the city showed little sign of life (Fig. 1). Despite the attempts of the street corner musicians and poets to animate the street corners, the few people they drew *reflected a city gasping for breath*, discouraging for a place once poised to be a model of urban life.

So why did this event fail to generate a pulse in the heart of Kansas’s capital city? A visit to the group’s website revealed no mention of the event,\* and the local paper merely had a short blurb that it was taking place, as indicated on the group’s Facebook page.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps more publicity would have led to a larger turnout.

Or perhaps not. Maybe downtown simply has no appeal.

To the nonchalant pedestrian strolling down certain stretches of South Kansas Avenue, an element of deception might be conjured by its false façade. At first glance, its brick paver sidewalks lined with trees and shrubs, dotted with benches and street lamps, and glass-enclosed bus stops tucked in here and there are attractive amenities (Fig. 2). But it doesn’t take long for a sense of desolation to sink in, once the less-than-modest flow of downtown workers subsides after the lunch hour, and empty street corners greet pedestrians who emerge from under the canopy of trees to insipid views of vacant storefronts and half-empty parking lots creating voids in the city fabric (Fig. 3). Intermittent vehicular traffic does little to enliven the four-lane road, and quick glances down side streets offer nothing to pique curiosity and en-



**(Figure 1)** Musicians perform on an empty street corner in downtown Topeka for ReThink Topeka’s “High Noon” event on June 8, 2010.

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\* Although, it should be noted that I visited the website the day after the event and any advertisement for it may have already been removed.



**(Figure 2)** *To the nonchalant pedestrian, a noon stroll down South Kansas Avenue affords a deceiving glimpse of city life.*



**(Figure 3)** *However, emerging from beneath the canopy of trees, insipid views of what lies beyond are exposed.*

courage impromptu excursions off the beaten path. These are not signs of vitality, to be sure. But what has made the city this way? Might it be the result of some grandiose plan meant to bring the city back to life?

## **TOPEKA: A BRIEF HISTORY**

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The city of Topeka, Kansas, traces its history back to the Oregon Trail in the 1840s, when three half-Kansas Indian sisters, from Independence, Missouri, and their French-Canadian husbands began a ferry service for travelers crossing the Kansas River. The city was incorporated in 1857 and blossomed into a prominent commercial hub for the region, as it became a regular stop for steamboats offering goods for trade. In 1861, after Kansas was admitted to the Union as the 34th state, Topeka was officially named the capital. The city experienced periods of economic prosperity and depression over the next several decades\* until growth fell to an historical low

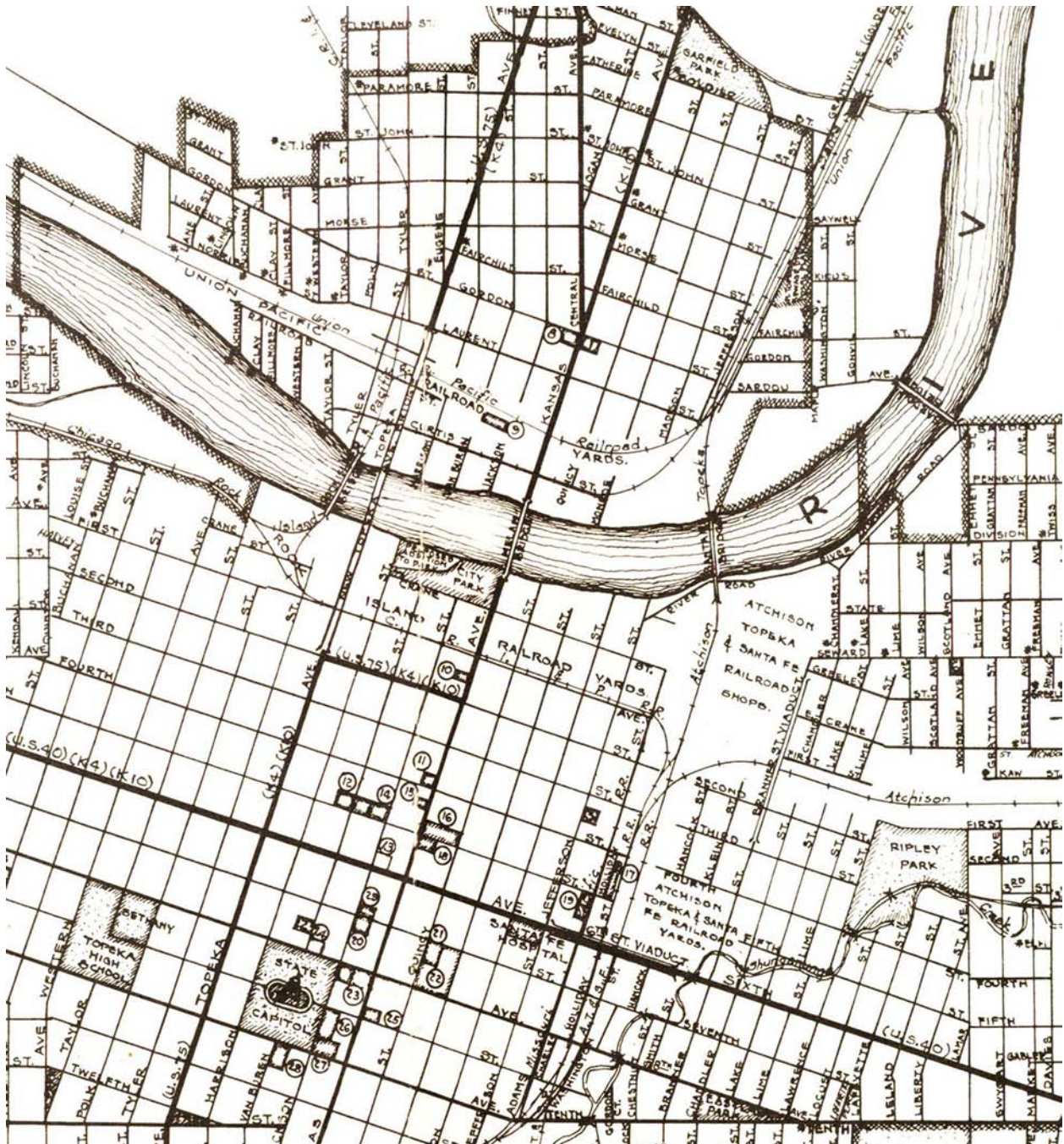
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\* Three major railway systems, the Union Pacific Railroad, the Santa Fe Railroad and the Rock Island Railroad, were established between 1860 -1890 which led to a boom period for the Topeka. Speculation dominated the real estate exchange of the city, and led to the ruining of many investors when the bubble burst in 1889. However, due to the advent of the railroads and becoming a major thoroughfare, the population of the city had doubled and enabled it to survive the depressions of the 1890s.

Topeka faced its first major natural disaster in the spring of 1903, when the banks of the Kansas River flooded, leaving much of North Topeka, a largely industrial area, under water. In response to the disaster, town's people constructed levees to prevent a reoccurrence, and Topeka was able to recover and maintain steady economic growth with the rest of the country in spite of the industrial setback.



during the Great Depression, finally settling economically as a medium-sized city dependent on agriculture (Fig. 4). The 1940s saw the development of new industries in the city, the emergence of which became crucial to its economic diversity. But a decade later, Topeka fell victim to an epidemic sweeping the country as its downtown began feeling the effects of urban decay.



(Figure 4) This 1947 map of Downtown Topeka shows the texture of the city before the 1950s.<sup>2</sup>

## IDENTITY CRISIS: URBAN RENEWAL & I-70

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*Topeka is thus on its way to creation of a civic jewel where ashes and dust were edging into the heart of the city.*

- The Topeka State Journal<sup>3</sup>

In the 1950s and 1960s city planners across the country mobilized as they were faced with the challenge of renewing their urban centers at the same time that the Federal Highway Act of 1956 funded the construction of highways coast to coast. The National Housing Act of 1954 abetted this movement, coining the term “urban renewal,” which described the reshaping of American cities through the acquisition and clearance of areas designated as slums, and intended to protect cities from further blight. Topeka, intent on becoming a model city, embraced these programs and hoped to reinvent itself and bring life back to its downtown. However, it was a vision of Utopia that shows no evidence of having come to fruition, leaving this chapter of Topeka’s history to serve as a catalyst for its present state.

### **Like Kansas City, Only Smaller**

*Reinventing the wheel, however, is not a waste of time. Imitation is. There is more to gain than lose in arriving at a new solution.*

- Roberta Brandes Gratz and Norman Mintz<sup>4</sup>

As talk of urban renewal spread throughout Topeka, community interest was kindled by stories in local newspapers of the successes that Kansas City, Missouri, experienced with efforts to reinvent itself through the aid of government funding. Articles reported that, “What has been done in Kansas City illustrates what Topeka’s Urban Renewal Agency hopes to do on a small scale,”<sup>5</sup> and descriptions of slum removal in blighted areas of the city painted a portrait of success that promised “a downtown area in which existing streets will be converted to pedestrian malls with moving sidewalks to facilitate passage of shoppers from fringe parking areas.”<sup>6</sup> Again, more vi-

sions of Utopia. *But could the perceived success of another city be translated into success for Topeka's urban renewal program?\**

*In Cities Back from the Edge: New Life for Downtown*, Roberta Brandes Gratz and Norman Mintz note that one of the hurdles to downtown rebirth facing a city "is the 'me too' syndrome, the assumption that to be competitive, the big ideas happening elsewhere must be imported."<sup>7</sup> This common mistake was grounded in Topeka's urban renewal beginnings, as comparisons to places such as Kansas City, Fort Worth and Brooklyn painted a vision of Topeka's future, despite it being a much smaller city with an economic base relying on different types of industry. Yet the newspapers continued to publish aerial photographs of Kansas City's intricate freeway systems, with its dramatic skyline carved by skyscrapers, shopping centers, high-rise apartment buildings and public housing projects. This, they claimed, was to be Topeka's fate, just on a smaller scale.

### **The Plan**

*The renewal program makes certain development of a carefully planned new district, performing the broadest function in serving its city. Its 26 blocks will be intersected by a major highway, its new buildings as they go in providing Topeka with a gateway few other cities or even metropolises will be able to rival.*

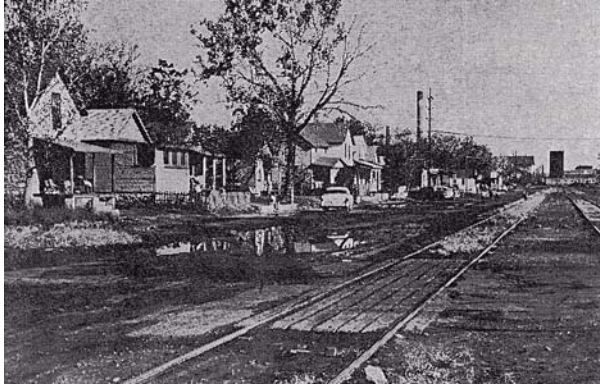
- The Topeka State Journal<sup>8</sup>

By the mid-1950s portions of downtown Topeka had become blighted with dilapidated housing creating substandard living conditions and, as one article described, "many blocks...where hovels face onto dismal alleys, where junk piles high in the yards...[and] where people live far below decent standards"<sup>9</sup> (Figs. 5, 6). Another noted the thousands of square feet of downtown upper-story floor space left vacant, mentioning that, "Fifteen or twenty feet above street level along Kansas Avenue, a second story ghost town is evolving gradually."<sup>12</sup> However, enrollment in the Federal government's Urban Renewal program provided new hope for the city with promises of a brighter future.

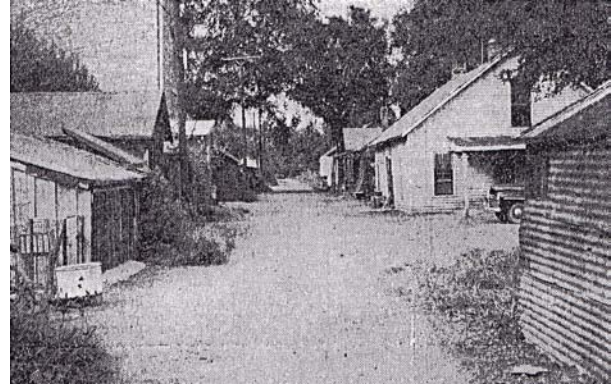
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\* Ultimately, urban renewal in Kansas City did not prove to be a success.





**(Figure 5)** *Railroad tracks served as playgrounds in some areas that the city hoped to revitalize through urban renewal.*<sup>10</sup>



**(Figure 6)** *The city also hoped that the urban new-ewal program would revitalize areas of downtown adjacent to the urban renewal area.*<sup>11</sup>

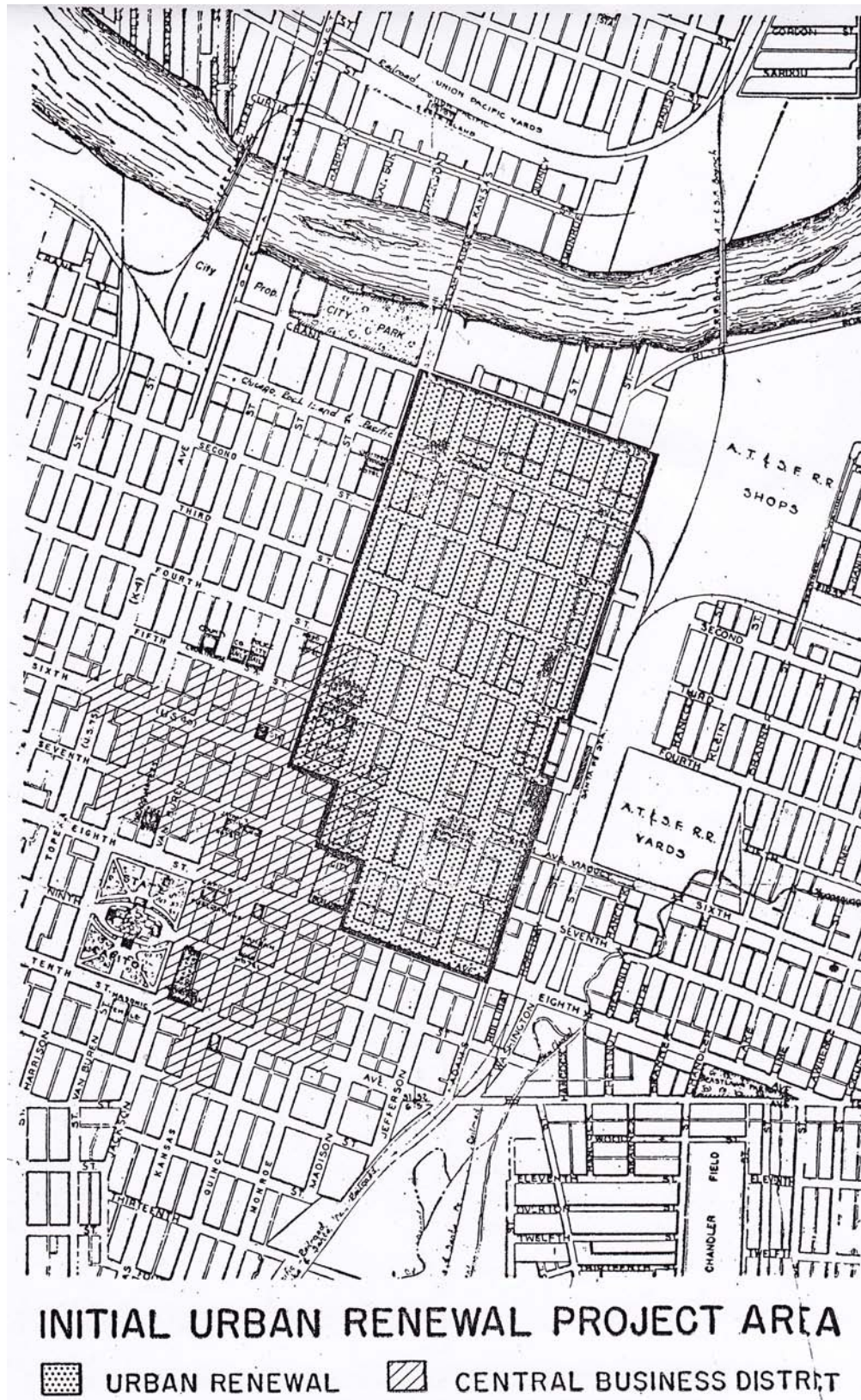
By June, 1956, Topeka mayor George Schnellbacher had completed appointments to a 35-man advisory committee that, after a careful study of the area, granted approval for the city's urban renewal initiative. A five-man Urban Renewal Agency was formed on August 7, 1956, eventually approving plans for a 37-block, 207.2 acre project area bound by Kansas Avenue and Crane, Sixth, Quincy, Seventh, Monroe, Eighth and Adams streets. The plan for the area (Fig. 7), known as the "Keyway," was submitted to the Federal government and approved on December 23, 1956, and sought "to eliminate substandard housing and to improve the usefulness of land where dilapidation of existing structures has created a public nuisance."<sup>14</sup> Its benefits would include "improved housing and living conditions, revitalization of the downtown business district, increased payrolls by the generation of new construction and business, and putting an older section of the city back into full value."<sup>15</sup>

Planning was also underway at the time for the construction of Interstate 70 through downtown Topeka , which would connect the newly constructed Kansas Turnpike to the east and US-40 to the west.\* Though construction had already begun on a bypass (now the free portion of I-470) west of Topeka, the downtown route was deemed necessary to "revolutionize Topeka traffic patterns by providing swift, through access to the downtown district."<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, it would provide direct connections to the central business and industrial districts envisioned in the Keyway plan. Its planned route (as it also lies today) entered downtown from the

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\* This portion of US-40, just west of the city, had previously been converted to the nation's first stretch of interstate.





(Figure 7) This plan shows the original Keyway Urban Renewal area in downtown Topeka, encompassing approximately 207.2 acres over 37 blocks.<sup>13</sup>



east and curved north to 10th between Madison and Monroe, continued north to about Fourth, then curved west to a point at about Second and Kansas Avenue (Fig. 8). Cutting through the heart of the city, it would claim approximately seven square blocks in the Keyway (nearly 20 percent of the area), and would result in the removal of all buildings in its right-of-way.



(Figure 8) A dashed line shows the proposed I-70 route through the heart of downtown Topeka.<sup>17</sup>

\*Although the I-70 route claimed a portion of the land and buildings in the Keyway area, it was not part of the Keyway Urban Renewal program and construction would have proceeded whether or not the Keyway plan was approved.



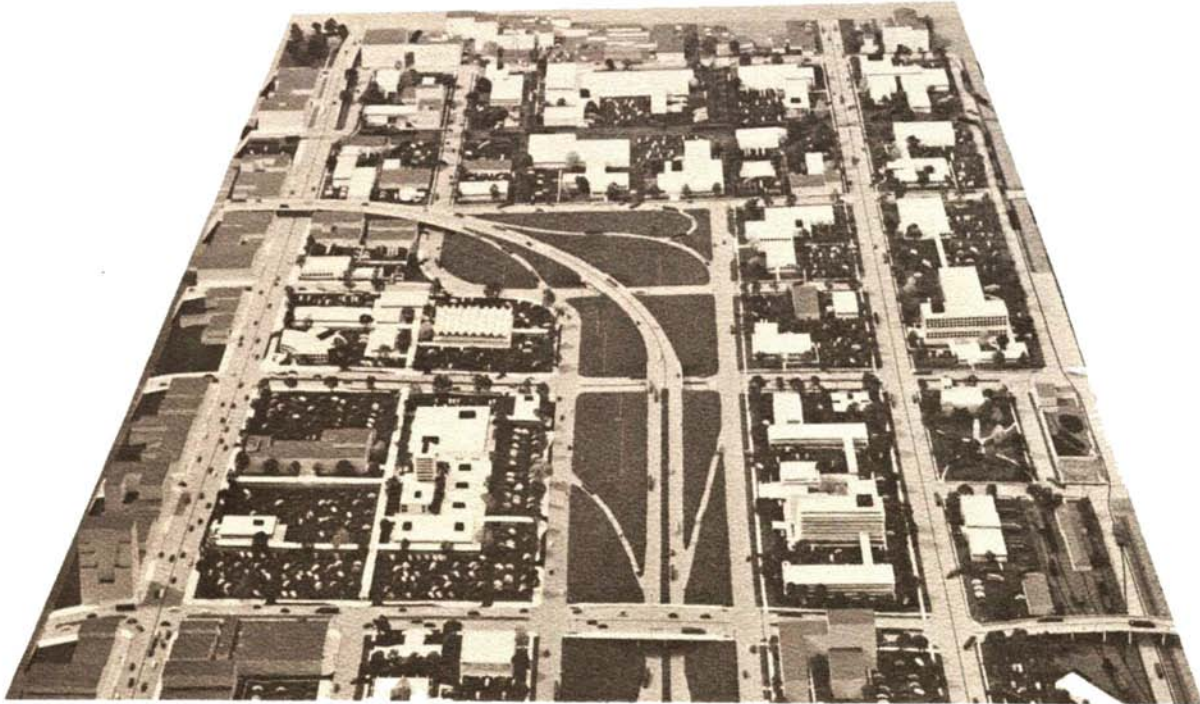
**(Figure 9)** This birds-eye perspective looking southwest onto the Keyway area envisioned what downtown Topeka would look like after urban renewal and the construction of I-70.<sup>18</sup>

As momentum grew and the Keyway Urban Renewal and I-70 plans moved forward, proposals were made by local architects, businessmen, realtors and contractors for development of the area, many of which included large supermarkets, department stores, drive-in banks, car washes, filling stations and ample above and below ground parking (Fig. 9). Proposed zoning of the area allocated the areas north and east of the expressway, bound by the Santa Fe tracks and the Kansas River, for industrial development, and the area to the southwest as an expansion of the central business district.

In January, 1959, a model of the proposed Keyway area improvements (Fig. 10), on view in a local store window, caught the attention of passersby as many stopped to comment on the display. One Topeka resident, Judy Branam, claimed that, "With the development of this project, Topeka should become one of the most up-to-date cities in the United States."<sup>20</sup> Another model gazer, Marlyn Nolan, described how it would "mean more parking space and will increase Topeka's chance for more commerce and industry."<sup>21</sup>

Not only did the casual pedestrian support the plan, local businessmen did as well. "I want to see urban renewal because Topeka needs something down here," declared John Kritzer, president of a furniture company located near the urban renewal area, adding that, "There is no





**(Figure 10)** *This model of the proposed Keyway area improvements, put on display downtown in January, 1959, for public viewing, offered a glimpse into Topeka's future.<sup>19</sup>*

public parking below 6th, other than our store's parking lot."<sup>22</sup> A manager of Montgomery Ward & Co., Harley Cox, remarked, "Anything that would improve downtown parking would be a blessing."<sup>23</sup>

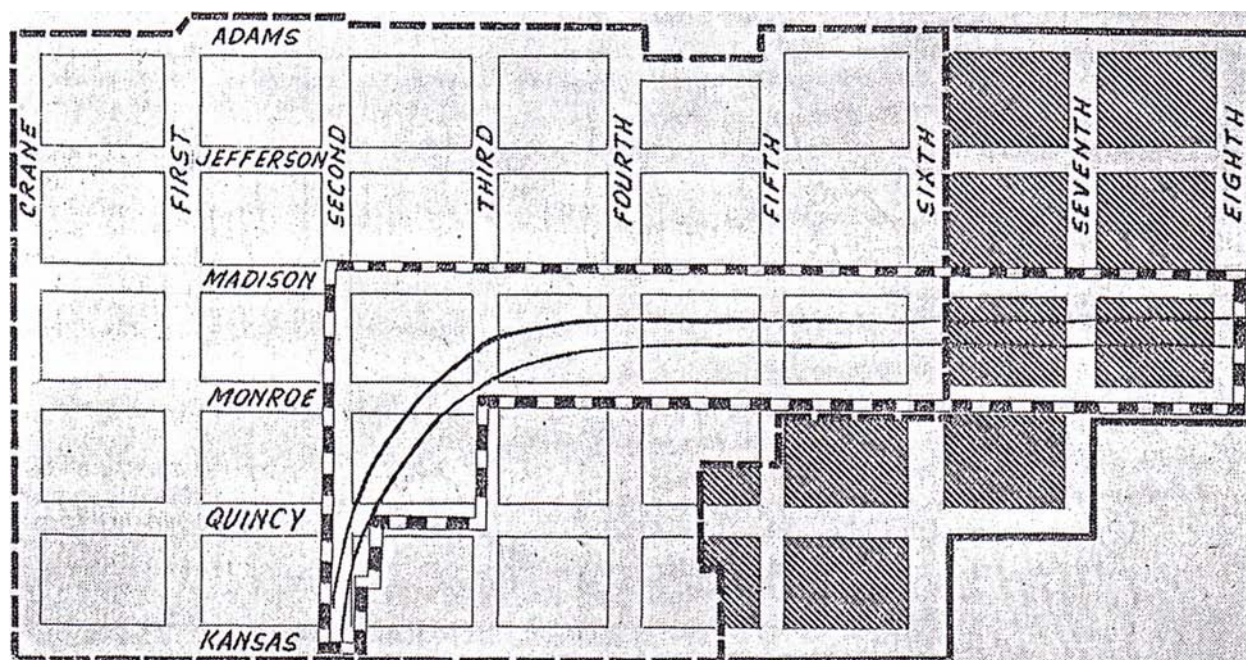
However, not everyone viewed the urban renewal initiatives as a positive thing for the city. One man who stopped to view the model on display, farmer and realtor James Cline, commented on the I-70 expressway saying, "That's the trouble today, there are too many roads where cars can speed. I think our roads are okay as they are now, you always get where you are going, maybe just a little slower."<sup>24</sup> Lee Samuels, clothing store owner, also objected to the expressway fearing that "the interstate highway will cut too close to the downtown area. It will hem us in, so to speak."<sup>25</sup> Another objector, James W. McIver, field director of the National Small Businessmen's Association, voiced his frustrations wondering, "What's going to happen to main street in Topeka when the new area is built? I'm talking about the little dress shop, the drug-gist, the shoe shine stand. You can be sure that the large corporations won't be hurt nearly so much."<sup>26</sup> Today, vacant storefronts provide the answer.



On June 5, 1959, the Topeka State Journal reported that the Urban Renewal Agency's Keyway plan gained federal approval and, over the course of the next year, would go through several changes, with the ultimate decision made to delete nine and one-third blocks in May, 1960 (Fig.11). Recommendations were also made to shift I-70 from its planned route between Madison and Monroe a block and a half east to Jefferson Street, though these pleas were ignored due to cost and time constraints. In January, 1961, city commissioners declared the Keyway "a combination slum and blighted area,"<sup>28</sup> and then approved the amended Urban Renewal plan on February 27, 1961. The Topeka Daily Capital described the final scope of the project:

The amended project area is generally bounded on the north by the river, on the west by Kansas Avenue and on the east by the Santa Fe tracks. The southern boundary begins east of the Post Office property at Kansas, extends east to the alley between Quincy and Monroe, south to 5th, east to Monroe, south to 6th and east to Adams.

Redevelopment plans for the area call for "I" light industrial zoning north of 3rd and east of Madison with the balance zoned "H" for business use.<sup>29</sup>



**(Figure 11)** In May, 1960, nine and one-third blocks were deleted from the Keyway area, highlighted on this plan by the shaded region. The dashed line shows the amended boundary, with the solid black line representing the original. The heavy dotted line marks the I-70 right-of-way.<sup>27</sup>

On March 15, 1961, federal officials approved the revised plan and Topeka's Urban Renewal Agency began buying properties in the Keyway area. In total, 648 families, or about 2,000 persons, were being forced to move in the 27-block site, with 300 to 400 families, or about 1,200 individuals, forced to relocate because of the construction of I-70.<sup>30</sup> By May, 1962, demolition was underway and the center of the Urban Renewal area fell quiet, as the majority of the buildings had been cleared and most of the people relocated. The Topeka Daily Capital described the scene:

In the middle you'll find reminders of neighborhoods; sidewalks that lead to shallow holes – holes about the size of basements that have been filled in. They're graves of a sort...

Quiet prevails in the middle but no where in the Urban renewal area is the silence more noticeable than over the strip of ground that will underlie the elevated I-70 super highway.

All that remains there are sidewalks and lawns – no trees, no buildings, no sound. It's unnatural. With all this evidence of people, there ought not to be quiet.<sup>31</sup>

Nearly 50 years later, with only the ghosts of its past left to tell its story, the silence remains, only to be broken by the occasional passing of cars overhead.

Land sales in the Urban Renewal area began in December, 1962, with inquiries for the acquisition of sites coming in from several firms representing various types of industrial and commercial interests. The following year, the Urban Renewal Agency began studying the possibility of adding a two-block area to the plan (left out originally due to opposition of property owners), bounded by Kansas and Madison between Fifth and Sixth streets, approving it in June, 1964. Family relocation in the area, previously estimated to take until June, 1965, had been completed the previous December and 97 percent of the structures had been razed, ahead of the estimated completion date. Thirty-seven percent of the properties had been sold and developers in the Keyway were named as the project continued on or ahead of schedule.<sup>32</sup> Over the next eight years urban renewal in Topeka pushed forward, transforming the landscape of





**(Figure 12)** Aerial view, looking southwest, of construction in the urban renewal area in 1964. Running through the center of the picture is the I-70 right-of-way, with the elevated portion of the freeway already erected. The razed blocks of the Keyway can be seen on the left side of the photo, as smoke rises from one of the construction sites at the center of the shot.<sup>33</sup>



**(Figure 13)** Aerial view, looking north, of the urban renewal area as it neared completion in 1973. I-70 sweeps in through the Keyway at the bottom right of the photo as it heads west, severing ties to other parts of the city. Large office complexes and parking lots occupy the southwest corner of the area.<sup>34</sup>

downtown by weaving a new urban fabric with a frayed modern thread (Fig. 12).

By 1973, after 17 years, the project was closed out at a final cost of \$8.2 million (about \$40 million today). In their 1973 *Annual Report*, the Urban Renewal Agency declared that, "Comparing the original model representing the dream...for redevelopment with what is now in place...we can conclude that the quality of the dream has been exceeded by that of the reality"<sup>35</sup> (Fig.13). But had Topeka realized its dream? Under the guise of urban renewal it transformed downtown into what it believed to be a masterpiece of modern urbanity. Absent, though, was the foresight needed to envision the consequences of regarding the city as a blank canvas, as its sense of identity was erased.

## THE CITY TODAY

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*It is difficult to design a place that will not attract people. What is remarkable is how often this has been accomplished.*

- William H. Whyte

Observing the city today, it is hard to imagine that the members of the Urban Renewal Agency would consider this the dream they envisioned. Much of the Keyway area lies as a decaying carcass of urban renewal, and the mistakes of the past continue to crumble along its worn city streets. The areas surrounding it have not fared much better, as the noxious miasma has slowly crept outside its bounds, suffocating life from the fringes of downtown (Fig. 14).

The area north and east of the freeway is an industrial relic, littered with run down buildings, abandoned train tracks, empty cracked parking lots, and a labyrinth of power lines (Fig. 15). An old Greyhound bus station lies empty (Fig. 16) and the Topeka Amtrak station remains lifeless during the day, sitting in isolation amid the barren landscape that surrounds it (Fig. 17). To the north, levees block views of the river; some might not even know it exists (Fig. 18). To the south stands an abandoned hotel, cut off from the city by 11 lanes of traffic (Fig. 19).





**(Figure 14)** The historic Capital Iron Works building stands amid crumbling curbs and overgrown sidewalks on the fringes of the Keyway area at 7th and Adams.



**(Figure 15)** A view looking west down 1st Avenue in the northeast corner of the Keyway area offers views of abandoned train tracks and a labyrinth of powerlines.



**(Figure 16)** An abandoned Greyhound bus station lies east of the freeway.



**(Figure 17)** The Topeka Amtrak station sits lifeless during the day, sitting in isolation amid a barren landscape.



**(Figure 18)** Levees block views of the Kansas River from downtown and North Topeka.



**(Figure 19)** An abandoned hotel sits at the corner of 10th and Madison, cut off from downtown by the interstate and adjacent arterial roads.





**(Figure 20)** *The Topeka Police Department and Shawnee County Sherriff's Office sits on a two-block site between South Kansas Avenue and I-70, with more than 50% of it devoted to parking.*



**(Figure 21)** *A Bank of America office complex and parking garage runs the length of South Kansas Avenue between 6th and 5th, depriving the street frontage of local businesses.*

The Keyway area to the southwest of the freeway is one large office complex after another, offering little to attract anyone without a reason to be there. The Topeka Police Department and Shawnee County Sherriff's Office occupies the center of a two-block site, with more than half of it devoted to parking (Fig. 20). A Bank of America complex runs the entire length of South Kansas Avenue on one stretch of block, its offices and parking garage depriving the street frontage of local businesses (Fig. 21). This condition is typical across the seven blocks.

The area surrounding I-70 is barren as well, as the concrete structure takes flight and soars high atop the buildings. All life on Kansas Avenue slowly dies towards the highway with "For Lease" signs outnumbering pedestrians, carrying this desolation north of the river (Fig. 22). Homes sit in its shadows sprouting billboards from their backyards and the only evidence of life is the rumbling of cars above (Fig. 23). Running beneath it, Second Street may be the best maintained street in the city, protected from the elements and relieved of all traffic.

Kansas Avenue south of the Keyway area from Sixth Avenue to 10th Street cradles some semblance of life, and when lost beneath the trees it can be easy to forget where you are. Its Main Street quality gives the city some character, with the occasional row of historic buildings and attractive streetscape defining a sense of identity (Fig. 24). However, it is not completely free from the perils of the decay that surrounds it since empty storefronts and muted pedestrian flows still plague the area (Fig. 25).



**(Figure 22)** *All life on South Kansas Avenue dies towards I-70 with “For Lease” signs outnumbering pedestrians.*



**(Figure 23)** *Billboards sprout from backyards as I-70 takes flight above the city.*



**(Figure 24)** *A row of historic buildings on Kansas Avenue south of the Keyway area gives downtown some sense of identity.*



**(Figure 25)** *However, even the most lively stretches of South Kansas Avenue are not immune from the decay that surrounds, as muted pedestrian flows and vacant storefronts still plague the area.*

## SO WHAT WENT WRONG?

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*For every problem there is a simple solution and it is wrong.*

- H. L. Mencken

Topeka’s urban renewal efforts conformed to the popular ideas of planners and developers with extravagant redevelopment plans aimed at revitalizing city centers. In their *Planning Report for “Keyway” Urban Renewal Project*, the Topeka Association of Architects (T.A.A.) explained that, “With the redevelopment of Keyway...the type of neighborhood will change from residential

to commercial and industrial...The building of the interstate highway through the area with its large right of way and elevated structures will change the nature of the area. The changing of the type of neighborhood eliminates the need for schools, churches, and parks."<sup>36</sup> In essence, they were relocating the population to create a place that needed to be populated, only with no one to do so. It was "the killing of place in the name of saving it."<sup>37</sup>

But the city's urban planners believed that it needed massive immediate change and the only way to revive it was to erase memories of the past and start anew. Though, as Gratz and Mintz argue, "This pattern of planned urban destruction parading as renewal...led to the sprawling, dysfunctional landscape with which the nation now wrestles."<sup>38</sup> This is because successful cities are not planned; they evolve over time, creating a sense of "place" by the people who make them their own.

*Today, much of Topeka's downtown lacks a sense of identity due to these past misconceptions. The Keyway plan uprooted residents and businesses; promoted single-use zoning that discouraged diversity and created borders; and left holes in the urban fabric where buildings once stood. The highway divided the city, and wider roads and ample parking facilitated the use of automobiles – creating the need for more roads. It became no worthy rival, nor a "civic jewel."*

### **[Re]location, [Re]location, [Re]location**

*...to overcome slums, we must regard slum dwellers as people capable of understanding and acting upon their own self-interests, which they certainly are. We need to discern, respect and build upon the forces for regeneration that exist in slums themselves, and that demonstrably work in real cities.*

- Jane Jacobs<sup>39</sup>

Relocating people from blighted or "slum" areas proved to be one of the most serious problems for Topeka's Urban Renewal Agency. Norville Wingate, Urban Renewal director, declared that, "Finding 'good' housing for these families,...not just another place to live, is the 'entire hub of our program.'"<sup>40</sup> He established an office in the Keyway area to connect with the people who lived there and promised to be "tough with [his] helpers"<sup>41</sup> as they attempted to understand the

problems concerning relocation. *However, noble as the gesture may have seemed, identifying the best method for relocating families was not the root of the problem; the problem was that they were being forced to move in the first place.*

While coordinating an early relocation survey of residents in the Keyway, Dr. William Key, sociology professor at Washburn University in Topeka, described the difficulties of relocation with fears that “unless considerable effort was made, many of the poorest families would be worse off after the project than before,” and “this was because many of the area residents ‘live in a very precarious equilibrium in which they can meet their day to day problems if nothing upsets this equilibrium.’” He goes on to say that a “substantial proportion of the minority groups believe that the project was designed to get rid of them.”<sup>42</sup> Jane Jacobs illustrates this point in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, mentioning that “relatively few people enter low-income projects by free choice; rather, they have been thrown out of their previous neighborhoods to make way for ‘urban renewal’ or highways and, especially if they are colored and therefore subject to housing discrimination, have had no other choice.”<sup>43</sup>

So what was really being done? Slum clearance was more than razing houses to make way for new and better development; it removed people from their neighborhoods, destroyed local businesses and, as described by the T.A.A., tore down schools, churches and parks. A sense of community was lost, only to be replaced by strangers who worked in the city but left for the suburbs as soon as the workday ended. Jacobs bemoans this practice saying that, “At best, it merely shifts slums from here to there, adding its own tincture of extra hardship and disruption. At worst, it destroys neighborhoods where constructive and improving communities exist and where the situation calls for encouragement rather than destruction.”<sup>44</sup> But there was a better answer not evident to the project planners too consumed with achieving Utopia: By focusing on regeneration instead of redevelopment, the common goal of revitalizing the city could be reached.

Ideally, efforts would have been made to keep people in place and build upon their roots, an unattractive answer, though, because massive immediate change is more easily sold than slow evolution. However, funds allocated for loans and subsidized housing should have been committed to helping people improve their environment, because moving them from one place to another did not ensure their problems would not follow. People have an attach-



ment to where they live, and providing them the means to improve their situation meant regeneration of blighted areas was possible. This was the change they were looking for but were instead forced out of their homes, left with only the memories of their lost communities. As one man who used to visit the area as a child recalled, "When you ask the older folks about 4th Street, an automatic smile comes to their faces. It is with tremendous sadness that there is nothing like a plaque or momento [sic] to establish the current site of the Topeka/Shawnee County Police Department as the place that used to be 4th Street[,] the Mecca of Black and Latino family life in Topeka during the time period."<sup>45</sup> Apparently, one man's Mecca is another man's slum.

Residents of the area weren't the only ones adversely affected by the Urban Renewal program. Local businesses and property owners suffered from what Gratz and Mintz described as "the death threat syndrome," explaining that:

Any residential, commercial, or industrial area begins to die once a new destiny is planned for it. Property owners cease maintenance, anticipating condemnation and demolition. Banks won't lend money, even if property owners are inclined to invest. Businesses move out, not waiting for the battle to play out. Even if an announced Project Plan eventually fails to materialize, the announced plan can kill an area.<sup>46</sup>

In Topeka, Frank Wilson, owner of a building at Sixth and Jefferson, began losing tenants due to misconceptions about the program.<sup>47</sup> Golda Carlson, owner of property located in the original Keyway project area, was told by the Urban Renewal Agency not to make improvements to her property before it was deleted from the project.<sup>48</sup> Sears and Roebuck left for the suburbs and local businesses were forced to relocate due to demolition. These are the effects of project planning, which could easily have been avoided if efforts had only been made to help people stay instead of moving them out.



## Zoned Out

*To see what is wrong, it is only necessary to drop in at any ordinary shop and observe the contrast between the mob scene at lunch and the dullness at other times. It is only necessary to observe the deathlike stillness that settles on the district after five-thirty Saturday and Sunday.*

- Jane Jacobs<sup>49</sup>

With the decision to start from scratch, the Urban Renewal Agency and their developers would be able to zone the land for what they considered the best use. As the T.A.A. explained, "The existing zoning of the area is a heterogeneous mixture of residential, commercial, and industrial zones...The proposed plan indicates a complete change of this situation; by including large land areas in a single zone the redevelopment of the area will be uniform and add to the effectiveness of Urban Renewal."<sup>50</sup> However, the only goal that this fallible method of zoning achieved was that it made things easier for planners, who often settled for the "obvious" solution. But it was the "heterogeneous mixture" of uses that made cities successful and allowed them to evolve into diverse places, drawing users to their core at all times of day.

Because of the way I-70 would divide the Keyway area, the Urban Renewal Agency and its developers felt the most logical solution was to zone the blocks north and west of the freeway for industry and those to the southwest for commerce.\* Unfortunately, this method of single-use zoning, combined with the construction of the highway, did nothing more than create boundaries dividing the city. Instead, mixtures of uses should have been promoted to foster cross-use, blurring the boundaries between city districts. A vibrant city is not one that has distinct boundaries; it is one where you can move from one part to the other without noticing the transition. However, planners and developers saw this as a form of disorder, but as Jacobs explained, "Intricate minglings of different uses in cities are not a form of chaos. On the contrary, they represent a complex and highly developed form of order."<sup>52</sup>

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\* As the T.A.A. explained, "The route of the trafficway through the Keyway area is very prominent and physically divides the area in such a manner that it seems logical to devote the area to the southwest of it to commercial use and the area to the north east of it to light industrial uses."<sup>51</sup>

Diverse cities are successful and intriguing places because they promote primary and secondary-uses that contribute to the successes of one another. They rely on each other for survival and create a complex framework for city life. The single-use zoning in the Keyway area prohibited this framework from forming, with its bland uniformity repelling life. The desire to separate dirty industrial areas from residential and commercial ones seemed logical, with the location of I-70 and the Santa Fe tracks seen as perfect barriers for preventing the spread of fumes into these districts, as if they extended to the heavens. “But the air doesn’t know about zoning boundaries,” notes Jacobs, “Regulations specifically aimed at the smoke or the reek itself are to the point.”<sup>53</sup>

Topeka’s Urban Renewal program uprooted families from their communities without replacing them, allocating only a small portion of the Keyway for residential uses. However, to realize diversity, a city needs dense concentrations of people who make the city their own and give it an identity, with a balanced mixture of zoning that attracts people to the streets throughout the day. If not, they fall dead on evenings and weekends as workers retreat to their suburban homes with nothing to draw them back. To witness this in Topeka stop by Schlotzsky’s deli at 607 Kansas Avenue and notice what time they close (it’s 3:00 p.m.) or take a drive downtown on the weekend and try to find a crowd of people (Fig. 26). It is a lot harder than you would think.



**(Figure 26)** *Downtown falls dead on the weekend, shown here in this photograph taken at 2:00 p.m. on a Sunday afternoon.*

## Out With the Old, In With the New

*We expect too much of new buildings, and too little of ourselves.*

- Jane Jacobs<sup>54</sup>

Topeka continued shedding layers of its history when buildings in the Keyway were razed to make way for new construction. However, vibrant city districts aren't born this way; it is their evolution over time that strengthens their identity by breeding buildings of different ages and styles where, as Gratz and Mintz explain, "an observer can 'read' the community's history on its streets."<sup>55</sup> This assortment of buildings helps promote the mixture of uses and diversity that follows, as small businesses often cannot afford the costs of new construction.<sup>56</sup> Over the years, buildings should be continually replaced or renovated, weaving a place's history into its cityscape.<sup>57</sup> This was an antidote to a loss of identity, a concept lost on Project Planners.

But as more modern facilities became available, large enterprises such as banks, supermarkets and department stores would often vacate their old quarters for more modern facilities, further exacerbating the problem. This phenomenon surfaced in Topeka when the Citizen's Planning Advisory Committee recommended that the old Capitol Federal building be left standing, though, originally planned for demolition. Capitol Federal Savings and Loan Co. president Henry Bubb revealed that, despite this recommendation, they would continue with plans to construct their new building at Seventh and Kansas, leaving the old one abandoned to avoid renting it to a competitor.<sup>58</sup> This policy of refusing to allow similar use was documented by Calmetta Y. Coleman in her 1997 *Wall Street Journal* article entitled, "Shuttered Supermarkets Prompt Civic Protests," that revealed how supermarket chains would engage in this practice to prevent competition.<sup>59</sup> Gratz and Mintz described a similar case with their tale of how the retail chain Bon-Ton refused to sell their building in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, for a similar use and the building remained vacant for 12 years.<sup>60</sup> In Topeka, two years after it was vacated, the Capitol Federal building was reported "obsolete and unusable for any foreseeable development of significance."<sup>61</sup>

## Would You Like Me To Drive?

*We have built a physical landscape that does not function and we have done it by design, not by chance. We have allowed the car and highway engineers to design and shape our lives. In 50 years, America has been remade to accommodate the car.*

- Roberta Brandes Gratz and Norman Mintz<sup>62</sup>

After World War II, as more and more families began leaving cities for the suburbs, a heavy reliance on automobiles evolved as people moved further away from commercial centers. The landscapes of cities were changing as superhighways were constructed through downtowns to move people in and out of the city, widened roads and more parking accommodations made it more convenient for vehicular travel, and the advent of trucking encouraged industries to move to the outskirts. Topeka's urban renewal program and construction of I-70 mimicked this trend, and the city was redesigned to meet the needs of its car-bound public. This was common practice, Jane Jacobs explained, because, "The simple needs of automobiles are more easily understood and satisfied than the complex needs of cities, and a growing number of planners and designers have come to believe that if they can only solve the problems of traffic, they will thereby have solved the major problems of cities."<sup>63</sup> This was the easy solution, and again speaks to the ineptitude of city planners and their failure (or refusal) to understand the complex nature of cities. What resulted in Topeka was an amalgamation of disconnected fragments of the city severed by the interstate, with large vacuums of deserted roads and parking lots making it easier than ever to get absolutely nowhere.

With the appeal of revolutionized travel garnering public interest, the Topeka State Journal declared that, "The new Interstate 70's limited-access superhighway, providing smooth, fast, safe transit across town – also from the suburbs into and out of the city – will cut neatly across the Urban Renewal's Keyway Project."<sup>64</sup> However, by expressing the allure, they were defining the problem, a tragic irony that still holds the city in its grasp. Detrimental as the construction of I-70 was, it does, however, serve its intended purposes quite well: transit across the city is swift because *downtown is avoided*; workers can easily commute into and out of the city, though, *no one is brought in to replace them when they leave*; and it did make planning the city

easier, resulting in *uniform zoning that deters cross-use*. It was an absence of critical thinking that brought the meandering giant through the heart of downtown, and today traffic speeds by high above the city while what lies below is left to collect dust.

In June, 1959, opponents of the highway's construction warned of this fate, and Topeka mayor Ed Camp and the City Commission asked that the freeway route be moved a block and a half east of its proposed location between Madison and Monroe to pass along Jefferson Street. Camp explained that, "50 to 60 Topekans having business interests in the area 'don't want to move to the east side of the expressway,'" also claiming that "several New York and Los Angeles interests . . . have expressed preference to the area west of the expressway rather than being bound by it on the west and railroad tracks on the east."<sup>65</sup> However, highway engineers claimed that moving it further away from Kansas Avenue would be a mistake, and Elmer E. Buell, the division engineer for the Bureau of Public Roads, "asserted that the expressway would not be a 'barrier' between portions of the renewal area because cross streets would connect them at frequent intervals."<sup>66</sup> Adhering to this vehicular-centered design philosophy, the State Highway Commission decided that the estimated cost of moving I-70 (\$145,000) and the time lost in planning (2 years) were too costly and the freeway would go in as planned.

But even rerouting I-70 was not the best solution because, ideally, the freeway would not have entered downtown at all. This advice was embedded (though not supported) in a 1959 Topeka State Journal editorial commenting that, "In recent years a trend has been to by-pass cities in the routing of major highways, demonstrated here in the Interstate 70 cutoff which is under construction west of Topeka, connecting US-40 with US-75 and the turnpike to the south. In most instances it was found benefits outweighed disadvantages."<sup>67</sup> So why was this trend not followed? The route mentioned (described earlier as the current toll-free portion of I-470) should have become the I-70 thoroughfare around the city. The fact that it was already being put in place makes this even more obvious, but since the project was independent of the Urban Renewal program, it was subject to less public scrutiny.

With plans finalized to provide swift transportation through Topeka, the predicted increase in automobile use needed to be accounted for. Planners designated roads for upgrading to accommodate interstate traffic and relieve congestion, and pleas from citizens and business owners achieved provisions for myriad parking. Monroe and Madison streets, for example,





**(Figure 27)** *Running parallel to I-70 on the west, Monroe Street, designed to funnel traffic onto the interstate, lies empty just before noon on a Monday.*



**(Figure 28)** *Madison Street, east of I-70, serves the same purpose and shares the same fate.*

were designated by the T.A.A. “as one way traffic streets...to serve and correspond to the exit and entrances to the interstate highway.”<sup>68</sup> But what did this really accomplish? What exists today is a seven-block stretch providing 11 parallel lanes of traffic on three different roads bordered or in-filled with parking. Curiously enough, there aren’t many cars (Figs. 27 ,28).

Fred Kent, president of Project for Public Spaces, a nonprofit planning, design and educational organization, describes how, “Traffic engineers are appalled by congestion even though in a downtown congestion is healthy. It means something is going on.”<sup>69</sup> The same could be said for a lack of parking. As Gratz and Mintz note, “The more downtown space devoted to parking, the less ‘place’ exists.”<sup>70</sup> But if less space is dedicated to parking, the balance becomes an incubator for diversity, capable of rearing various attractions to draw people into the city. And then if their biggest problem is finding a place to park, this should be regarded as an inconvenience of fortune because, again, it means something is happening.

Cities can, however, become a “place” again by freeing themselves from the restrictions of vehicle-oriented planning and design, and can be accomplished by what Jane Jacobs calls “attrition of automobiles.” She explains:

Attrition of automobiles operates by making conditions less convenient for cars. Attrition as a steady, gradual process (something that does not now exist) would steadily decrease the numbers of persons using private automobiles in a city. If properly carried out – as one aspect of stimulating diversity and intensifying city

use – attrition would decrease the need for cars simultaneously with decreasing convenience for cars, much as, in reverse, erosion increases need for cars simultaneously with increasing convenience for cars.<sup>71</sup>

It is this erosion that afflicts Topeka today, as its network of roads carry scattered traffic to a freeway that better serves as an impediment to vitality than the “gateway” that was envisioned. Parking lots create voids in the city fabric, and large parking garages lie empty at night with no one to fill them (Figs. 29, 30). But to remedy this problem, roads should be narrowed or eliminated (11 lanes of traffic is a bit much) to slow traffic to the speed of the pedestrian;<sup>72</sup> parking lots should be in-filled to foster uses that stimulate diversity; and reliance on private automobiles should be reduced to encourage public transportation. With this strategy of attrition, Topeka can reclaim its streets, returning freedoms once sacrificed by pedestrians to the city-goer.



**(Figure 29)** *A half-empty parking lot on the 600 block of South Kansas Avenue creates a void in the streetscape, opening views to a parking garage beyond.*



**(Figure 30)** *Exposed by a parking lot on the northwest corner of 4th and Kansas, views of the rear of these buildings may recall to some the “slums” that the urban renewal program aimed to eliminate.*

## BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARDS

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*Years of big plans, false hopes, and broken dreams have left most communities appropriately skeptical. When people see positive change quickly, no matter how small, they begin to believe in the future. Small steps invariably lead to bigger ones. Small, manageable steps are rarely included in conventional plans. Yet, early modest accomplishments build public confidence that big changes can be accomplished step by step.*

- Roberta Brandes Gratz and Norman Mintz<sup>73</sup>

Fifty years after its urban renewal program promised to revitalize the city, Topeka has gone back to the drawing boards in hopes of drafting a brighter future. Community initiatives from groups such as Heartland Visioning, Think Big Topeka and ReThink Topeka are leading the efforts to foster a new sense of identity for this capital city. Plans to redevelop downtown and the riverfront, bring in new technologies and nurture its budding arts culture aim to shape a vibrant community by growing businesses, strengthening the economy, retaining its youth population and making downtown a hub of city life. They are attempting to give it character, but should be wary that it needs to be a gradual change.

Too often, city boosters lack the patience to let a place slowly evolve. This leads to grand Project Plans that don't solve the problems of a city because a lack of immediate change is perceived as time and money not well spent. Superficial upgrades such as street and sidewalk improvements are appealing but do not generate growth<sup>74</sup> (Fig.31), and large development plans are enough to



**(Figure 31)** These attractive sidewalk amenities are appealing but not enough to draw a crowd.

spark public interests but not enough to improve public life. Topeka needs to take the time to define its problem so that it avoids radical efforts that do not address it. Downtown should not be redeveloped it should be regenerated. If the infrastructure is there, build upon it. The

waterfront should not be constricted by barriers disconnecting it from the city, downtown should be brought to the shoreline. Here it would form a seam where a boundary exists.<sup>75</sup> Arts and entertainment attractions should not be confined to North Topeka, some should be scattered throughout the city to strengthen diversity. Where they go, other uses will flourish. Furthermore, North Topeka should not remain isolated from the city it should be visually reconnected to downtown. When divisions are surmounted, bonds can be formed. And finally, I-70 should not be realigned; it should be removed. It should have never been built in the first place.

### Realignment

*One of the great public works projects of the next century will be deconstruction of freeways. There's going to be a lot of that happening once economists apply themselves to the economics of transportation.*

- Former Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist<sup>76</sup>

In anticipating its future Topeka is about to re-live its past, as current plans to realign I-70 through downtown are set to undermine the efforts to revitalize the city. The plans call for widening one stretch of the highway from four to six lanes, smoothing out a 45 mph curve to allow faster traffic, and upgrading the interchanges (Fig. 32). "This will be the transformational change we need," Topeka Councilwoman Karen Hiller was quoted as

saying, also adding that because of the views of the Statehouse it provided it would be "a perfect gateway to downtown."<sup>77</sup> It is uncanny how these thoughts from 2010 mirror the misguided sentiments from half a century earlier when the freeway was being planned. Apparently, it has also become a renewed trend to insouciantly appropriate the word "gateway" as a positive description for what would be a mistake.



**(Figure 32)** This photograph, taken at noon on Monday, July 26, 2010, shows the beginning of a near-empty stretch of I-70 planned for widening and realignment.

There are, however, those concerned with the proposals for the highway's realignment, claiming that travel into downtown would become more difficult. The Topeka Capital-Journal, in an article on the planned realignment, mentioned Topeka Mayor Bill Bunten's concern that "the connector roads running parallel to I-70 and the layers of ramps could be confusing," and that, "He called the potential effects on downtown Topeka 'devastating.'"<sup>78</sup> He's right; it's already happened once, and a close observation of current traffic patterns reveals this condition.

Mayor Bunten further emphasized his point claiming, "They're [the Kansas Department of Transportation] just building a road to get traffic going westward through Topeka and on to Denver," adding that, "They're not building a road to accommodate our city and our desire to revitalize our downtown."<sup>79</sup> To be honest, that they are building it at all is the crux of the problem.

However, there are voices of reason scattered amongst the proponents of realignment. The Capital-Journal noted the following:

[Jim] Rinner, the JE Dunn [Construction] veteran, worries about the width of the proposed new interstate and its effect on the tie-in between a developed riverfront and a revitalized downtown. With intersecting ramps and connector roads overlapping near the I-70 curve north of downtown, the realigned highway could be one of the only things visible from the riverfront.<sup>80</sup>

Mayor Bunten and Mr. Rinner's concerns are valid, as the proposed realignment of I-70 does nothing more than beckon history to repeat itself. A study of this past history makes it even more obvious and, in fact, the only virgin effect it will have on the city is that cars will move faster through it. Otherwise, it will still serve as barrier hosting a parasitic disease that erodes city life. But planners and traffic engineers are more concerned with bringing people in from outside the city than they are about the people that actually live there. However, it is the character informed by these people that draw others in, not interstates. The "build it and they will come"<sup>81</sup> mentality threatens this, because travelers driving to Denver aren't going to stop in Topeka regardless of where the interstate is located, at least not yet. What would they come to see? Multiple lanes of empty highway with precisely engineered interchanges leading to more



empty lanes on redundant surface streets? A city divided with its riverfront and northern limits cut off? How would that be advertised? "Come visit Topeka's riverfront for majestic views of vapidty and watch the sunset over I-70?" Sounds enticing.

Rather, an identity for the city needs to be created by the people who live there, with full effort being directed towards forming bonds in the community instead of divisions. Then, if strong enough, the city can become a vibrant place with a livelihood of its own, attracting passersby no matter how far from the interstate it is. If the attraction is strong enough to draw westward (or eastward) travelers into the city, the added time it takes to get there does not become so much of an inconvenience. But this won't happen with the repetition of past mistakes and the city should fight to have it removed to mend the city fabric. Only then will it be able to start piecing itself back together.

## CONCLUSION

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*A city cannot be a work of art.*

- Jane Jacobs<sup>82</sup>

With their whimsical dreams of Utopia and plans for it in hand, urban renewal crusaders of the mid-twentieth century sought to breathe life back into American cities by reshaping the landscapes that had evolved. But in an attempt to defeat urban sprawl, they merely facilitated the migration with big Project Plans that didn't solve the complex problems cities were facing. "One of the great social mistakes of urban renewal," note Gratz and Mintz, "was that it demolished more than it rebuilt."<sup>83</sup> By carelessly planning cities to operate as machines they destroyed any character or sense of "place" they had. But building utopian cities does not work because we all have different visions of what utopia is, and what is often left from the endeavor is certainly no sight to behold.

Topeka was a casualty of this epidemic and a half-century later still bears its scars. Its urban renewal advocates of the 1950s and 60s uprooted people from their homes and businesses, wiping the slate clean to plan a new future. Instead of investing in the people who lived

there, they decided to move them out. Instead of building and improving on the resources provided by existing infrastructure, they decided to start anew. Instead of fostering diversity and cross-use, they decided to form borders. Instead of drawing people into downtown, they decided to move them through faster. In attempting to get ahead the city fell further behind. Though the Keyway Urban Renewal area and highway running through it claimed a small portion of the city, the devastating effects of its redevelopment left the entire city to ruin in its wake.

But there is good news. Topeka can transform itself into the vibrant city it wishes to become because it has the people with the will and desire to do it; I have witnessed this firsthand. I have spoken with the artists, grassroots organizers and community members determined to make this happen. I have attended the block parties in neighborhoods surrounding downtown that afford glimpses of vitality. I have paraded down South Kansas Avenue on St. Patrick's Day with thousands of people smiling and waving at me, though most of us have never met. They are there and, if the collective voice of the community is loud enough, anything is possible.

As it looks to its future Topeka should recount its history, drawing lessons from past mistakes that have carelessly punctured its urban fabric. Current redevelopment plans should be meticulously studied, as they may bring it perilously close to repeating the failures of their predecessors, further eroding the city core. It should search for creative and innovative ways to foster its rebirth, driven by the hearts, minds and passion of the more than 120,000 souls that give it a pulse. It should create its own identity, an identity defined by the people that call it "home." But most importantly, it needs to know where it is heading before it decides how to get there. Because foresight is a much more powerful tool than hindsight, it requires critical thinking, not acquiescence to simple solutions.

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