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Intro to Maritime Studies – MAST 2101

TREDS Paper: Fort Trumbull Redevelopment: For Whom and How?

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At first glance to an outsider, the Fort Trumbull neighborhood of New London as it exists today does not seem to have much of a story to tell, environmental justice wise or not.

Overgrown patches of land are paired with dirt brown leveled swaths of former city blocks.

There are no historical markers telling the story of the neighborhood that was¹. The websites of surrounding state parks and historical associations make no mention of the recent history of this place and what transpired here over the last 25 years, despite it having made national news. It is arguably the second most famous destructive plot that New London has endured in its long history, the first being Benedict Arnold's traitorous raid and ruin of the city. However, in the late-1990s greed and power-hungry personalities, spurred on by "job blackmail"² and a city straddled with an unbalanced plethora of untaxable property, forced a small but dedicated group of residents all the way to the Supreme Court for the landmark "*Kelo v. New London*" case which became the face of eminent domain battles for years to come. While the "redevelopment" of Fort

¹ While no markers exist in the neighborhood itself, Susette Kelo's "little pink house", which was a major focal point of the campaign to save Fort Trumbull, was eventually moved to Franklin St. in New London where it has stood since 2008 as a monument to the case and Fort Trumbull.

² "Job blackmail" is a tactic used by "an industry that has a hold on a community or person because of lack of other job options" according to the Environmental Humanities department at Gettysburg College. Its usage is varied, and no formalized definition appears to exist but this is the definition I am using for this paper.

Trumbull³ may not strike some as a location of environmental injustice, perhaps this is because we often think of environmental justice (EJ) issues as those primarily related to clean air, water quality and of protecting animals and plant life. However, the intersectional EJ advocates of the last 40 years have brought to light the impact of policies on human populations, especially those of marginalized identities which had previously been ignored or minimized. With this expanded definition⁴, we see that a lack of distributive justice (“fair treatment of all”) as well as procedural justice (“meaningful involvement”) were key components to Fort Trumbull’s unfortunate demise. The neighborhood presents an interesting case study in how previous land uses contributed to environmental abuses, which in turn distributed unequal living conditions to its citizens (many who were of marginalized identities) and was then ultimately undone by glaring omissions of procedural justice. Ultimately, the citizens of New London paid a great price for its leaders’ lack of forward-thinking city planning that could have delivered a new era to the region.

Home to the eponymous Fort, military installations and their associated buildings, the Fort Trumbull neighborhood had been bustling and of some importance through the 19th and early 20th century. Located on a small peninsula cut off from the surrounding city by railroad tracks which were built in the mid-19th century, the Fort Trumbull environs had become a sleepy corner of New London by the latter half of the 20th century. Different factions of the military and federal government re-utilized buildings here and there, but overall the Fort itself dominated the landscape and proved to be a lumbering anchor. In addition to being the location of a sewage

³ Fort Trumbull as it is referred to in this paper will be taken to mean the neighborhood of Fort Trumbull, and not the military installation.

⁴ The Environmental Protection Agency defines EJ as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations and policies.”

treatment site, it had been home to a few different industrial uses, such as a linoleum factory and an automotive scrap yard, which caused lingering environmental concerns. These hazards would figure prominently into discussions upon redevelopment in future years. In the meantime, nothing was really done to mitigate the risks on site to the people who lived in the neighborhood. Residents were subjected to the odorous stench from the sewage treatment plant, which had open tanks, and topsoil that was laden with chemical runoff. Additionally, residents complained of lax trash and snow removal service, as well as the city's non-response to buckling sidewalks and infrastructure challenges.

Despite the previous land uses, environmental degradations and unequal living conditions compared to some other neighborhoods in New London (especially the upscale neighborhoods further along Pequot Ave.) Fort Trumbull was a thoroughly working class, house-proud and hardscrabble enclave through the 20th century, and boasted many families who lived there for generations. However, things took a dramatic turn in 1996 when the Navy's closure of the Naval Undersea Warfare Center hit the neighborhood hard. After the closure, which caused the loss of 1,000 jobs (Benedict 2009, 16) Fort Trumbull began to resemble a ghost town as foot traffic dwindled and former employees moved out of the neighborhood. The residents who remained were mostly low income, elderly or had lived there for multiple generations and either did not want to move or did not have the means to relocate. Some residents were not fluent in English. These demographic factors figured prominently into what made Fort Trumbull a target for easy manipulation in the redevelopment process.

The issues faced by Fort Trumbull residents were not theirs alone. Since mid-20th century, New London as a whole was suffering under contracting industry activity, and new infrastructure

challenges. As highways and new bridges carved up the city, and commercial shopping moved westward towards Waterford and the suburbs grew outside the city limits, New London struggled to maintain relevancy and a resilient economy within its ever-shrinking borders. Though home to several high-profile institutions such as Mitchell College, Connecticut College, UConn, the Coast Guard Academy and other defense related federal government operations such as the Navy's Undersea Center and National Guard among others, unfortunately these properties did not add to New London's tax base. In addition, the city's notable historical institutions and churches also were exempt from being included in the tax base. As such, the shrinking city was also getting less and less tax revenue from these land uses. It's no wonder that Fort Trumbull wasn't seeing its streets repaired – many other neighborhoods in New London were also being left to benign neglect. While the city did receive some payments-in-lieu-of-taxes from federally owned properties, these payments were never what New London would have received through market valued payments. In light of this, the city was eager to identify opportunities for development that would increase their tax base and lead to growth for the city.

Interest at the state level to develop in New London was generated by Republican Governor John Rowland who prompted a re-ignition of the New London Development Corp (NLDC), a dormant non-profit organization to act as an intermediary on behalf of the city. Through backdoor meetings, the NLDC was populated with a high-profile director, Claire Gaudiani, who used her connections to bring in top management from Pfizer to tailor the deal to their liking. Fort Trumbull landed in the NLDC's sights, and the geographically sequestered peninsula appeared to be the perfect place to remake in Pfizer's vision. While parts of the neighborhood were certainly threadbare, it was hardly the slum in need of bulldozing that the

NLDC made it out to be. The NLDC did not have any regard for the families that lived there and determined that the parcels of lands and the houses on them would be easy to buy-out, negotiate for or eventually seize. The NLDC sought and was granted the authority by the city of New London to utilize eminent domain in order to secure the entirety of the peninsula for redevelopment.

At this point, no wholly formalized plans existed for what exactly would be developed at Fort Trumbull on behalf of Pfizer. Plans were entirely speculative, given the shifting nature of what properties started to become available to them as the NLDC's power grew to provide them with more options. This is an important distinction that would later come to bear in the Supreme Court case "*Kelo v New London*" which is the tension between properties being seized for public use, versus property being seized for public purpose. In previous legal uses of eminent domain, private property could only be seized through fair compensation and where it was needed for public uses such as roads, hospitals, schools, infrastructure, and etcetera. In the case of Fort Trumbull – property was being seized (in some cases with people not receiving fair compensation) and with only the theoretical notion of how the redeveloped land would aid in the public good – mostly through trickle down effects of having a new mixed use commercial and corporate district.

The NLDC never intended to engage the residents of Fort Trumbull, or really the city of New London, in its plans for the land. Its timeline would not have afforded an opportunity for feedback in the first place. While some machinations were happening behind the scenes in the autumn of 1997, it was late December 1997 when Pfizer announced that "they would be developing their Global Research and Development Headquarters on an abandoned 24-acre mill

site adjacent to and immediately south of the Fort Trumbull area.” (Benedict 2009, 52) Letters began arriving at residents’ homes two months later in February 1998, and demolition was poised to begin in April 1998. Residents barely had time to absorb, much less interrogate what was happening, and letters from the NLDC made it appear as if it was a foregone conclusion that it would be successful in obtaining almost 100 properties (Benedict 2009, 62), either through optioning, paying for (at below market rates) or seizing through eminent domain.

After securing commitments from major players such as the state’s governor and a corporate partner (Pfizer) as well as real estate agents to act as buyers on behalf of the NLDC, momentum quietly ramped up right under home owners and the city government of New London’s noses. The NLDC believed they already had legal recourse to seize the properties through eminent domain and thereby didn’t need to hold any kind of public hearing or engagement around the decision. The situation would have looked different in these early stages if the neighborhood at large had been chosen for redevelopment by the city without having had a buyer and developer already in mind for the project and thereby catering the particulars to its needs. Pfizer’s involvement at this point gave so much credence to the plan that made it seem like a foregone conclusion. The city did not have to adopt their own redevelopment plans and then have to convince business to root itself there – Pfizer and the NLDC already had the plan and the money.

The residents of Fort Trumbull put up a valiant effort to save their homes, but ultimately failed after the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the New London. In the end, Pfizer backed out of the bulk of the project and what site they did develop, they sold the day after their tax abatement expired. The bungled development plan cost over \$80 million and the city has nothing to show

for it. By handing over the authority to a third party to utilize eminent domain, the city of New London cut off the only recourse the residents of Fort Trumbull would have had in petitioning to save their neighborhood and to leverage their ability to negotiate for better compensation. The neighborhood, in its absence, is a testament to unchecked hubris, poor oversight and glaring procedural injustice.



Elliot, Sean D. *Italian Dramatic Club*. Photograph. New London, June 9, 2019. The Day.



Merriam, Dwight. *Eminent Domain Protest Signs, New London*. n.d. Photograph.



Fort Trumbull 25 Years Apart. Photograph. Arlington, n.d. Institute for Justice.

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