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Oral History and Community Memory

When and why was an industrial park built on the northwest edge of the pond?

What did it replace?

The Official Redevelopment Plan for Mashapaug Pond was approved on December 2, 1960 after several government studies deemed the area “blighted,” and recommended rezoning.

The 1950s were a period of decay in Providence. After World War II, American industry and infrastructure continued to develop and thrive but not in Providence. Industries relocated to the suburbs and other states, aided by the new interstate highway system. As a result, Providence saw a tremendous decrease in population. Emigration to the area did not just slow, it reversed: by the end of 1949 the population reached 257,000; in 1960 207,495; and in 1970 179,116. Between December 1952 and November of 1954, the total employment in Providence declined 7.8%; manufacturing declined almost 10%¹.

The Federal Urban Renewal Project, administered by the Providence Redevelopment Agency, attempted to reverse the economic decline. They hoped to attract new industries, businesses and residents to the area by demolishing and rebuilding structures and zoning parking areas so the new areas would be more accessible to cars: “if Providence wishes to obtain more jobs to offset recent declines in employment and at the same time wishes to strengthen its tax base, it should consider seriously means for obtaining additional industrial plants.”² As the 1955 City Plan Commission Industrial Zoning Study outlines, industrial employment was crucial to the economic base of Providence. Manufacturing accounted for 51% of the total employment in Providence³.

A series of studies were undertaken to assess which areas of Providence could be rezoned—a sensitive combination of which areas were in need of rezoning, and which could be safely sacrificed as a political matter to the redevelopment efforts. Beginning in 1946 the area that would become Huntington Industrial Park was considered for redevelopment based on its qualification as “an Arrested District” (it met all five characteristics: 1) low density and low value of structures, 2) tax delinquency, 3) inadequate water and sewer service, 4) improper subdivision of streets and lots, and 5) inadequate housing)⁴. A later study, in 1955, looked at specific zones within the neighborhood. Three zones included land bordering Mashapaug Pond. The land consisted mostly of residences and vacant lots, under 99 different ownerships. Two of the three zones were not recommended because “development of additional industrial uses...would probably be detrimental to adjoining residential uses.” The third zone was not recommended because it was

¹ Providence Industrial Sites Statewide Historical Preservation Report P-P-6
Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, July 1981

² 1946 Master Plan for Redevelopment of Residential Areas
Pub #5, September 1946, The City Plan Commission, Rhode Island

³ Industrial Zoning Study. City Plan Commission, Edward Winsor, November 8th, 1955

⁴ 1946 Master Plan for Redevelopment

being considered as part of a separate proposed redevelopment project. However, the report left open the possibility of redevelopment in the future if financial questions were resolved. While it “strongly felt that the highest and best reuse for land on the western side of Mashapaug would be residential, study areas 9 and 10 in this area might also be considered for industrial zoning...diversity of property ownership and the presence of large numbers of residential structures in this area make it unlikely that the redevelopment could be accomplished by private developers.”⁵

A 1956 Redevelopment Act called for the “elimination of substandard areas” for the “[continual] development of improving urban environment” and “residential, commercial and industrial” zones. It once again deemed the land along the northwest edge of Mashapaug pond “blighted” and even reframed the debate by suggesting social and moral danger: “Conditions exist which are conducive to its becoming a slum blighted area and are detrimental to public health, safety, morals and general welfare.”⁶

The Act confirmed the area was an “Arrested District,” but that seems to be just another way of saying it was a poor and politically powerless neighborhood. For example the report showed housing was substandard: 8.8% had no bath, 46% had no central heating and 29.9% had no indoor hot water; train tracks separated the school from the majority of residences and many children crossed railway tracks at least twice a day. The report also stated that the land was poorly divided and that it “contain[ed] almost every example of how not to plat divisions”; it contained half streets, unpaved streets, streets at acute angles, off-set intersections, short blocks, and dead ends all of which supposedly impede traffic and make navigation difficult. The report also explains land lots were considered to be too small and of little value. The majority of lots were under 5,000 square feet and were “oddly shaped with fronts on two streets...giving the appearance of an alley” with no private space for residents. More importantly, this area was regarded as a “slum”. In an attempt to gather quantitative information about quality of life in the area, residents were surveyed. 71.8% of residents reported the structures and foundations of their homes were deteriorated, and 10.9% reported they were blighted. Only 16.6% reported living in acceptable conditions. Significantly, the reports concluded that the area was “not conducive to the development of a good residential neighborhood.”

Despite the failure of a 1957 application for government funds (“heavy workload in deteriorated districts and problems allocating limited funds...”) the city approved and adopted the “Official Redevelopment Plan for the Mashapaug Pond Redevelopment Project” on December 2, 1960. The 1960 Plan again outlined why the area needed to be redeveloped and included specific permitted uses and protective restrictions.

The original plan called for changes including an additional 17,444 feet of sanitary sewage lines, 5,490 feet of waterlines, 10,5000 feet of sewage, 20 street

⁵ Industrial Zoning Study

⁶ Providence Industrial Sites Statewide

lights, and 66,998 square yards of paving for a total estimated cost of \$1,325,000⁷. The city developed very specific uses for the land and protective measures. For example, there were standards as to how to dispose of waste (ironic considering the current status of the pond and soil), restrictions on the emission of odors, fly, ash, dust, fumes, vapors gases and other forms of air pollution were to be measured regularly and could not cause any damage to health, animals, vegetation or property, and there were specific laws about heat and glare⁸.

Methods of relocation for displaced families were also outlined. The city promised families and individual householders within the project area would have “the services of the family and business relocation service of the city of Providence.... Suitable accommodations at a rental each can afford and certified as decent, safe and sanitary by trained housing inspector will be offered...until satisfactorily relocated.” The plan also indicated that those eligible for public housing would receive first priority in low rent development of the Providence housing authority⁹.

The plan was amended several times in the next 20 years—in 1961 the proposed land use plan was revised, in 1965 the minimum lot area was extended and in 1979, the building setback provisions were made smaller¹⁰.

Ultimately, 567 homes were demolished for the construction of 117-acre site¹¹. Today, thirty-three different companies are listed as tenants of the Huntington Industrial Park employing a total of 814 individuals¹². It seems as though the attempt to revive industry was not as successful as the original plans intended it to be. It would be interesting to incorporate a study of what happened to the displaced persons into our work this semester and to find out if current residents are aware of the history of the industrial park, why it was built and what preceded it.

⁷ Mashapaug Pond Redevelopment Plan for the Huntington Expressway Industrial Park. Providence Redevelopment Agency. Providence, Rhode Island 1960.

⁸ Huntington Expressway Industrial Park Providence Redevelopment Agency Protective Controls for the Huntington Expressway Industrial Park, April 1966, Providence Redevelopment Agency 410 Howard Building Providence RI

⁹ Mashapaug Pond Redevelopment Plan

¹⁰ Amendments to the Redevelopment Plan, 1960

¹¹ Providence Industrial Sites Statewide

¹² Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation. “Select Business and Industrial Parks in Rhode Island with Tenants.” February 2010. Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation. October 7, 2011. <http://www.riedc.com/node/2851>

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