Grand Avenue Special Services
District Yale IEDL Project
Learnings from Park Street, Hartford commercial street corridor
Anna Eapen and Sei-kashe M'pfunya
Park Street Case Study

- Yale IEDL Project Overview
- Grand Avenue
- Park Street
- Looking Forward + Next Steps
Supporting Commercial Corridors

Main Street commercial corridors have traditionally been the economic backbone of neighborhoods across America, but the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the closure and movement of local businesses elsewhere.

Current Trends & Needs

Commercial corridors now look varied; local context has become paramount. Development efforts span a wider range of community types. ➔ Thoughtful, tailored approaches are needed ensure community trust, engagement, and improvement.

Commercial success and community success are intertwined. From beatification to affordable housing, commercial corridors rely on robust communities (and continued investment into their development). ➔ Coordination of efforts across community organizations, business owners, and government actors is now a necessity.
Mini Case Study on Park Street

To highlight the key activities, partnerships and milestones contributed to the commercial corridors development.

Park Street can serve as an example to consider in future revitalization efforts of Grand Avenue and show

1) What has worked well
2) What could have been done
### Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>63.0%</td>
<td>Latinx</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.8%</td>
<td>Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Grand Avenue

Grand Avenue is a commercial corridor located at the heart of the Fair Haven small neighborhood community. Since the 1960s, it has been home to a significant Black and Latinx population.

### Community Assets

- **Ethnically diverse community** has led to a rise of Latinx businesses
- Strong community based retail with nearly **90 businesses** on the corridor
- A diversity of **community based anchors** from banks to its schools, libraries and clinics.
- A strong architectural and historic identity
- Active transport corridor
The Grand Avenue SSD was established in 2009 with a clear mission to support the merchants and businesses of the commercial corridor.

**Current Issues**

1. Crime and Security
2. Business Investment and Corridor Image
3. Retail Leakage
Park Street, Hartford
68% Latinx population (2020)
Learning from Commercial Corridors
Both home to a significant Latinx populations and ethnic diversity

Grand Avenue Special Services District (est. 2009)

Board Budget: US$40K
Board Makeup

- Angel L. Sierra, President (board since 2002, business & property owner)
- Luis Rodriguez, Commissioner (board since 2003, owns El Comerio)
- Stanley Gutt, Commissioner (board since 2002, property owner)
- Reina Lopez, Commissioner (board since 2002, property owner)
- Roberto Muñiz, Commissioner (business owner, board for a few years)
- Carlos Valinho, Commissioner (board since 2002, property owner;)
- Diane Wiemer, Commissioner (board since 2002, property owner)
- Bernie Diego, Treasurer (board since 2002, owns Peerless Travel)

Park Street Special Services District (est. 2002)

Board Budget: ?
Board Makeup

- Angel L. Sierra, President (board since 2002, business & property owner)
- Luis Rodriguez, Commissioner (board since 2003, owns El Comerio)
- Stanley Gutt, Commissioner (board since 2002, property owner)
- Reina Lopez, Commissioner (board since 2002, property owner)
- Roberto Muñiz, Commissioner (business owner, board for a few years)
- Carlos Valinho, Commissioner (board since 2002, property owner;)
- Diane Wiemer, Commissioner (board since 2002, property owner)
- Bernie Diego, Treasurer (board since 2002, owns Peerless Travel)
Learning from Commercial Corridors

Both home to a significant Latinx populations and ethnic diversity

**Grand Avenue**
- Present Issues: Crime, Safety, Resource Access, Investment
- Corridor Image
- Crime: 63.0% Latinx (2020)
- Safety: Grand Avenue Special Services District (est. 2009)

**Park Street**
- Present Issues: Crime, Safety, Resource Access, Investment
- Corridor Image
- Crime: 68.0% Latinx (2020)
- Safety: Park Street Special Services District (est. 2002)

*CTDataHaven, 2020 (Population Statistics)*
Introduction

Secondary Research

- Dissertation
- Annual City Reports
- Newspaper Articles
- Revitalization Plans

Historical Overview
Park Street (1990 - 2010) Historical Overview

The main focus of this period was to make "housing as a stabilizing force" for the local economy.

- **1990s**: Hartford Areas Rally Together (HART) focused on housing redevelopment.
- **1991**: Broad-Park Development Corporation (BDPC) for housing and commercial development.
- **1992**: Spanish American Merchants Association incorporated into CT.
- **1995**: Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance (SINA) Plan and efforts with SAMA and BDPC for housing, commercial projects, antigang violence and youth leadership.
- **1997**: Learning Corridor.
- **1998**: Neighborhood Revitalization Committee Plan worked to improve deteriorated communities.
- **1999**: SINA partners with Hartford Hospital, Institute for Living and Trinity College for revitalization efforts and creation of the learning corridor.
- **1999**: Connecticut Historic Homes Rehabilitation Tax Credit Program.
- **2000**: Connecticut Historic Homes Rehabilitation Tax Credit Program.
- **2002**: Parkville identified as a key player for market and real estate development.
- **2002**: Special Services District for business development, retail and housing; Park Squire housing investment.
- **2003**: Park Street Streetscape project; regulation allowances for housing in industrial buildings; National historic buildings tax credits.
- **2005**: 10 year Frog Hollow NRZ committee plan.
- **2006**: DECD federal HOME dollars Investment.
- **2007**: City of Hartford state grant into parking meters, facade improvement, video cameras.
- **2007**: Billings Forge Community Work of the Melville Charitable Trust focus on restaurants.
Key Policies

The main focus of this period was to make “housing as a stabilizing force” for the local economy.

1) 18 out of 33 policies and initiatives targeted housing development, improvement or restoration.

Park Street (1990 - 2010)
Historical Overview

Main Themes
- Housing
- Business Development
- Streetscape and Facade Improvement
- Anti-gang Violence and Crime
Key Stakeholders
Who was instrumental at the time?

- Frog Hollow Neighborhood Revitalization Zone
- Broad Park Development Corporation
- Hartford Areas Rally Together (HART)

1990

2000

2010

- Hartford Next Neighborhood Empowerment Economics Together
- Hartford Hospital, A Hartford Healthcare Partner
- Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance (SINA)
- SAMA, Spanish American Merchants Association
- City of Hartford
- Trinity College, A Division of Hartford Hospital
- Love Your Block
- Institute of Living
- Vecinos Unidos
- RiseUp For Arts
- Real Art Ways
- Connecticut Children's Hospital
Park Street (1990 - 2010)
Historical Overview

**Impact**

**Merchants**
- Business facades improved
- No real focus on workforce development, job creation or selling to local residents

**Latinx Community**
- Marginalization and displacement of Latinx communities due to market rate housing dominance
- Many households were denigrated to poor housing, no institutional support for education or medical services

**Crime**
- Gang violence and crime prevalent
- Housing development and streetscape projects stemmed off some crime
- More affluent still feared shopping Park Street

**Early 2000s**

- $4,600 Latinx community per capita income
- $13,500 Non-Latinx community per capita income
- 57% Parkville households earned more than $25,000
- 53 Homicides with 17 being gang related (1994)

Rojas, 2015
NYTimes Dec 25, 1994 Article
Park Street (2010 - 2023)

Historical Overview

The period has seen an expanded focus on the built environment - streetscapes, facades, historic preservation, & housing are top of mind.

Key Activities

2010: Hartford Courant profiles Park Street as a bustling corridor with “retail vibrancy downtown longs for”

2011: Frog Hollow NRZ Plan released, focusing on housing and streetscapes

2013: CT housing authority approves cache of federal tax credits, including ~$760k for rental units in 6 historic Frog Hollow buildings

2015: CTfastrak commuter bus stations open on Park Street, on Parkville side

2016: 5-Year Strategic Plan prepared by SINA, LISC, and the Mutual Housing Association of Greater Hartford; focus on affordable housing & employment

2017: NRZ approves state plan to demolish Lyric Theater and build library

2020-2021: Lyric Theater demolished, new public library opened

2022: $1.5M U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services Grant for homeownership split between Frog Hollow & nearby neighborhood; SINA instrumental here

2023: Frog Hollow NRZ Strategic Plan draft available for feedback
Key Policies

The main focus of this period was **an expanded focus on the built environment** - streetscapes, facades, historic preservation, & housing have been top of mind.

The biggest change in the neighborhood? The demolishing of the Lyric Theater to build the **$12.5M Park Street Public Library**
Park Street (2010 - 2023)
Historical Overview

Impact

Merchants
- Business facades & streetscape improved
- Pandemic accelerated turnover and vacancy, less general foot traffic

Community Members
- Continued neighborhood population decline
- Minimal investment in livelihoods & wellbeing

Crime
- Gang violence diminished; crime still an issue, especially open drug use

2018-2020

34%
Poverty status
(24% for Hartford, 10% for CT)

7%
Homeownership
(24% in Hartford)

Nearby Efforts

Parkville (contains western portion of Park St.)
- Large cross-sector investments being made into a thriving business park + arts initiatives

Downtown (borders Park St. to the east)
- Investment in safety and employment through Ambassadors program

97.4%
Residents working outside of Frog Hollow (stagnant since 2002)
Interviews

During a visit to Park Street the Yale IEDL Team had the opportunity to speak with merchants on the corridor and hear from them:

1) What has changed on the corridor in the last few decades?

2) Who has been instrumental in their success?

3) What could be still be improved in terms of support and resources for local business?
Merchant Interviews
Key Takeaways

Building Community Culture

Community Festivals

What we learned
Park Street was a hub for Latinx Festivals. Slowly coming back with the DominGO open street festival

Room for Growth
Room to bring back the energy and community showcases of lost festivals and center on anchor food enclaves like El Mercado

Community Building and Public Spaces

What we learned
Local strategies to celebrate culture used to happen informally (e.g. spit roasts). Love Your Block Initiative has revitalized some community building

Room for Growth
Some of the informal efforts by individual merchants have disappeared
Street Specific Strategies that stood out

Community Level
Centering the cultural identity of the street and bringing in local and outside residents

Festivals
Food
Culture

City Level
Grant Support
Sidewalks
Street Lamps
Dealing with Crime
Individual Investments and Security Measures

What we learned
Merchants invest into cameras, railings, bullet proof windows and strong security with some federal support

Room for Growth
Drugs and loitering are still and issues and there is room for restorative youth programs, as well as patrol efforts by local police

Community Reliance to fend off Crime

What we learned
Some merchants form coalitions to ensure corridor safety and not have railings to detract customers. Some improve store front aesthetic but keep railings.

Room for Growth
Police are quite absent on the corridor. There is also variation in the levels of safety merchants feel.
Street Specific Strategies that stood out

**Social Level**
- Investing into the image of the corridor and the culture
- Art Lot Box
- Murals
- Community Playground
- Library

**Crime**
- Ensuring safety but still drawing in customers
- Window Bars
- Monitoring
- Police
Institutional Interviews
Key Takeaways

Secondary Research
Both online and during a visit to Park Street, the Yale IEDL Team had the opportunity to speak with individuals who had lived in, worked in, and/or studied the Frog Hollow area and its adjacent neighborhoods.

1) What has changed on the corridor in the last few decades?

2) Who has been instrumental in creating change in Frog Hollow?

3) How are surrounding communities changing in comparison?
Community actors took more of a backseat given the vibrant activity of the SSD/merchant association during the 2000s. With less of an overarching role now, the SSD could benefit from an updated vision and connection to other neighborhood actors.

**Institutional Interviews**

**Key Takeaways**

**What we learned**

A once active and highly visible SSD is still operational, but activities and broader engagements are **unclear**.

**Room for Growth**

Catalyze new period of growth through **communication** and **transparency**; develop ties with all merchants.

**Neighboring districts are taking distinct approaches to revitalization and formulating larger-scale strategies.**

**What we learned**

Frog Hollow used to have more development activity; its **neighbors are now ahead** in vision and connectedness.

**Room for Growth**

**Co-learn and work closely** with neighboring areas; create “**activation strategies**” to tap into their relative strengths.
Looking Forward
What Grand Avenue Can Learn
Overall Lessons Learned

What can any SSD learn from these findings?

Street-specific strategies alone are not enough

1. Accounting for the broader local context matters
   - A one-size-fits-all approach misses the different capacities and assets communities have. There are critical differences in tax base, active community organizations, history of merchants, local networks, etc.

2. Fostering a community of active support for all merchants matters
   - An engaged SSD which makes resources available and known to all merchants makes a difference. This can include:
     - Help with applying for loans & other financial programs
     - Providing merchants with business training for finances, operations, marketing, etc.
     - Street improvements - cleaning, graffiti removal, unifying the look of facades, pedestrian amenities
Overall Lessons Learned

What can any SSD learn from these findings?

## Street-specific strategies alone are not enough

### Co-learning with merchants and external stakeholders matters

- An SSD aware of its linkages can harness them for learning & change.
- **Support & Advocacy:** By actively supporting merchants, SSDs can understand their needs, elicit feedback, change offerings, and advocate for resources to fill gaps.
- **Partnerships:** Merchant success and community success are intertwined; partnering with community stakeholders paves the way for policy change and neighborhood vision.
Ongoing Questions

Grand Avenue is now in a reactivation phase. What are important questions and opportunities to consider?

1. How expansive do you want your role to be? What are the goals of the Grand Ave SSD? What is its resource capacity to meet those goals?
2. Who else is vying for Fair Haven? What is the potential for collaboration and synergy in corridor vision?
3. What are potential avenues for further research? What details of the policies are important to know? Why were certain foci chosen for a time period?
4. What are other regional partnership plans that have been done? Are there existing partnerships to tap into or model
Thank You!
Anna Eapen and Sei-kashe M’pfunya
Potential New Haven Partners

What can any SSD learn from these findings?

- An SSD aware of its linkages can harness them for learning & change.
- **Support & Advocacy:** By actively supporting merchants, SSDs can understand their needs, elicit feedback, change offerings, and advocate for resources to fill gaps.
- **Partnerships:** Merchant success and community success are intertwined; partnering with community stakeholders paves the way for policy change and neighborhood vision.
Interview 1
Hardware Store

What has worked?

COMMUNITY LEVEL
- Huge sense of family
- Latinx Festivals used to happen (Puerto Rican Day Festival)

SOCIAL LEVEL
Beautification/Facade Improvement
- Fixed store fronts, sidewalks, pavers cleaning early mornings

Small Business Development
- Awareness meetings for new programs, benefits or loans to explain and help merchants qualify
- Computer classes

CRIME
- Graffiti team respond to vandalism within 24 hours
- Street lamps and cameras inside and outside
- Rolled down gates and bullet proof windows to look like San Juan using federal $

What is still an issue?

COMMUNITY LEVEL
- Festivals have moved to Bushnell Park
- Much lower foot traffic due perceptions of safety on the street

SOCIAL LEVEL
Beautification/Facade Improvement
- No recent efforts

CRIME
- Used to have community service workers to walk the streets
- Mi Casa used to have youth programs
- Strong negative perception of the Street in terms of crime in the media
**Interview 2**

**Phone repair**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>What has worked?</strong></th>
<th><strong>What is still an issue?</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>COMMUNITY LEVEL</strong></td>
<td><strong>COMMUNITY LEVEL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DominGO open street festival occurs every year</td>
<td>Used to have Park Street Festivals but had to pay to use your front area for vending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SOCIAL LEVEL</strong></td>
<td><strong>SOCIAL LEVEL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beautification/Facade Improvement</td>
<td>Beautification/Facade Improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Some cleaning and business front changes.</td>
<td>• Not for free so resorted to cleaning on their own</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Small Business Development</strong></td>
<td><strong>CRIME</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Very little assistance from business nonprofit programs</td>
<td>• Used to have community service workers to walk the streets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Loan programs have strict upfront cost barriers nearing $30,000</td>
<td>• Strong negative perception of the Street in the media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CRIME</strong></td>
<td><strong>CRIME</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Have security rails on the storefront for safety and cameras</td>
<td>• Break in do happen but they have window rails</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mi Casa youth programs</td>
<td><strong>CITY LEVEL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CITY LEVEL</strong></td>
<td><strong>CITY LEVEL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Not many good investments. Too many of the same store on the corridor</td>
<td>• Not many good investments. Too many of the same store on the corridor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• High taxes</td>
<td><strong>CITY LEVEL</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Interview 3
Jewelry Store

What has worked?

**COMMUNITY LEVEL**
- Jamaican Day Parade
- Love Your Block Initiative
- Joggers from hospital frequent the store

**SOCIAL LEVEL**

**Beautification/Facade Improvement**
- Fixed store fronts, sidewalks, pavers cleaning early mornings

**Small Business Development**
- Access loan programs
- Some degrees of police assistance

**CRIME**
- Youth programs
- Store doesn’t have many break ins and takes out watches everyday;
  Don’t have window rails
- Store owners help each other out if there is no police
- Stores help homeless when they can

What is still an issue?

**COMMUNITY LEVEL**
- Used to have a spit roast day in front of Bohio cafe

**SOCIAL LEVEL**

**Beautification/Facade Improvement**
- No recent efforts

**Small Business Development**
- Large grants are mostly taken by larger businesses

**CRIME**
- Drug abuse by youth
- Mental health is an issue still
- Homeless in the Catholic Church have no place to go after