Urban Renewal

The story of Boston’s urban renewal begins in Washington, DC, with the passage of the federal Housing Act of 1949. The law allocated money to cities for slum clearance and redevelopment—which came to be known as urban renewal—but not for rehabilitation. Cities would have to demolish entire neighborhoods to be eligible for the money. Boston secured funding for two such projects: the demolition of New York Streets, for redevelopment for light industry, and of the West End, for middle- and upper-income residential use. (A third project, the demolition of Whitney Street for middle-income residential use, was city funded.)

Responsibility for urban renewal originally fell to the Boston Housing Authority, which oversaw the New York Streets redevelopment. In late 1957, the Boston Redevelopment Authority was established to expedite redevelopment of the West End. Today’s Boston Planning & Development Agency descended from the Redevelopment Authority.

New York Streets

New York Streets was no stranger to change. The neighborhood had undergone slow transformations several times as the fortunes of the shipping companies, railroads and other industries located there had risen and fallen and housing needs changed. But in 1952, the city began planning for a dramatic overhaul of the neighborhood.

Boston saw its economic future in attracting modern manufacturing to the city, but it was difficult to find parcels of land large enough to build the necessary factories. The New York Streets, located near the brand-new Southeast Expressway, was an attractive location for these industries.

In 1955 demolition began in New York Streets; by 1957, the city had removed 321 structures and reshaped the neighborhood landscape into superblocks. These larger city blocks, which erased many of the New York-named streets, were designed for industrial tenants and speedy traffic flow.