

NEW HOPE IN NEW HAVEN

DEMOLITION THAT FOLLOWED FIRE COULD CREATE RENEWAL OPPORTUNITY

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NEW HAVEN — When city officials approved a high-rise apartment tower for a long vacant lot at State and Chapel streets last year, they thought they had plugged the last big hole along Lower Chapel, a still gritty stretch running along the north side of the gentrifying Ninth Square neighborhood.

And until mid-December, it seemed that they had.

Then, in the early morning hours of Dec. 12, a three-alarm fire erupted in the Brass Monkey, a neighborhood bar that had been open less than a month. In the aftermath, nearly one-third of a city block has been demolished, at least seven businesses permanently displaced —



and, now, a large rubble lot opened in the heart of a district primed for a full-scale revival.

The sudden appearance of an acre-sized vacant lot just east of the city green worries people who recall the decades when the future apartment tower's lot stood not merely empty (which it still is), but also without prospects.

Yet several major Lower Chapel and Ninth Square property owners say the new space represents an opportunity to advance the area's renewal that probably did not exist when the old buildings were still standing.

"The buildings that were there were functionally obsolete," said Chris Nicotra, managing member of Olympia Properties, which owns about 40,000 square feet of commercial space in and around Ninth Square. "Sometimes it's more difficult and more costly to convert functionally obsolete buildings than to build new."

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Nicotra, whose firm renovates and leases existing buildings, envisions mixed-use development at the site, with retail, office and residential uses. He could even imagine another residential tower in addition to the 485-unit building Fairfield developer Bruce Becker plans for the bigger vacant lot one block down the street.

Part of Colonial New Haven's original town plan, Ninth Square, southeast of the city green and adjacent to the State Street commuter rail station, is home to a growing number of bars, clubs, restaurants, boutiques and residential developments of varying ambition.

Robert Orr, an architect who owns a building across Chapel from the former Kresge and Sectors buildings, said the depth of the demolition zone — from Chapel Street to Center Street — might allow for a subdivision of the 800 block of Chapel.

"There could be a new skinny street going through the block to create four new corners," he said. "A lot could go on in there."

Michael Schaffer, of C.A. White, which owns an 83-unit luxury apartment building adjacent to the demolished structures, said the new lot offers a chance to build large-scale ground-floor retail space, scarce in downtown New Haven.

"I don't see this as a disaster for the block," said Schaffer, who added that it is a disaster for several small businesses. "Sometimes crises can lead to better situations."

No one has made any specific proposals in the month since the fire, which did not badly injure anyone and which remains under investigation. City officials say they have focused their attention on clearing the site and resettling affected businesses and have been too busy to contemplate redevelopment.

But not too busy to worry about it.



BOB MACDONNELL / THE HARTFORD COURANT

A CRANE tears down the Sectors building, second from right, and the adjacent Kresge building, center, between Chapel and Center streets in downtown New Haven last Thursday. Both buildings have been reduced to rubble. Several major Lower Chapel and Ninth Square property owners say the new space represents an opportunity to advance the area's renewal.

"This is a key block for us," said Kelly Murphy, the city's economic development administrator. "We don't want to see a hole there."

The path to redevelopment of the site is far from clear and is not off to a smooth start.

A hostile standoff between Mayor John DeStefano and the owner of most of the demolished property, Paul Denz, of Mid Block Development, has generated an atmosphere of tense uncertainty as to how and when the lot might be redeveloped — and by whom. The city wants to buy the land and has suggested that it would consider taking it by eminent domain, if necessary.

Denz, who last February acquired several interconnected Ninth Square buildings collectively known as the Grants and the Kresge buildings, where the fire occurred, says he's open to "good faith negotiation." But he remains upset that the city tore down so much so fast and refused to let him help manage the demolition process, the cost of which he will likely bear.

"I have more questions than I have answers at this point," said Denz, who

was negotiating renovation plans with city officials at the time of the fire. "Why was it necessary to go in there and put the wrecking ball to this so quickly?"

Earlier this month, Denz filed an appeal of the city's demolition order, trying to stop it, but demolition proceeded, anyway. City officials said the buildings' condition presented an imminent danger to public safety. Denz's attorney, Jeffrey Donofrio, of North Haven, said the appeal would preserve his rights "in the event information we ultimately receive shows that the city didn't follow state law."

By last Thursday evening, contractors had reduced most of the Kresge properties — which face three streets — to rubble. The Sectors building, an adjacent property on Chapel with a different owner, also came down; the city decided that the Kresge was effectively holding it up. At the time of the fire, the buildings housed jewelry, clothing and furniture stores at street level, among others, but the upper levels had for years been vacant and shabby on the outside. Architects and developers who had previously seen the inside say that renovation

would have been difficult, at best, and costly.

Denz says he might like to redevelop his property himself.

"I am very interested in doing a development there," he said. "I always have been. But if they're going to make it impossible for me to do business or they're going to take it, I don't know what my options would be."

John Wareck, a developer of condominiums and luxury lofts nearby, finds the standoff between Denz and the city disconcerting and makes him think of all the years that the corner of Chapel and State sat forlorn and forsaken.

"How long was that an empty lot?" he said.

For now, there's a new hole in the heart of Lower Chapel.

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