

Kenneth Wheeler



DISCUSSION SUMMARY

As a former Rutgers University provost and urban historian, Kenneth Wheeler provides an inside look at redevelopment in New Brunswick from the perspective of the state university. He began his interview by stating that he was never “quite as enthusiastic about oral history as a lot of our colleagues.” [3] He admitted that it has been 25 years since his involvement in the revitalization process, “and so my memory has huge gaps and has areas filled in that probably really are not based on fact.” [3]

Wheeler jumped right into describing the revitalization process, stating that the revitalization of New Brunswick was “a Johnson & Johnson enterprise.” He contrasted J&J with Rutgers University: Johnson & Johnson (J&J) “was not a democracy; it was from top down, and the committees operated pretty much that way, too.” [3] Because “Johnson & Johnson was footing the bill,” Wheeler said, “they were listening, but they were running the show.” [5] Wheeler went on to say that John Heldrich—“the only vice president in probably 20 years who hadn’t moved out to Bernardsville or someplace”—was in charge. [5] He described Heldrich as a fascinating, complex man: “very modest in many ways, but he’s also very forceful.” [5]

Wheeler arrived at Rutgers in 1969 and noted that “ten or 15 years earlier, New Brunswick had been thriving—two big department stores downtown, a lot of activity—and the decline was sudden.” He described a bleak city: Visitors would not come at night, “the State Theater was a pornographic theater, and there weren’t any restaurants.” [4] For reasons that are not entirely clear, Wheeler “saw disaster ahead for the university” but had difficulty dealing with the administration and an apathetic faculty. [4] Part of this was that the faculty “have their disciplines and their focus and their concerns,” often unrelated to the redevelopment of the city around them. [9]

In one case, Wheeler spotted a three-story building with six one-bedroom apartments in downtown New Brunswick for \$250,000. He envisioned residences for visiting faculty members but, to his frustration, “the university wouldn’t touch it.” [10] While Wheeler viewed the property as a minimal investment in prime downtown real estate, the

administration in charge of the budget was cautious, leading to what Wheeler considered “missed opportunities.” [10]

In the mid 1970s and 1980s, as the New Brunswick redevelopment process was coalescing, Wheeler said that there was no “concerted Board of Governors policy” to become involved. “They just were not aware,” Wheeler said. [11] He pushed to have the university bookstore and Mason Gross school downtown, but these were isolated ventures. He noted that “everybody in American industry seemed to be fleeing the cities and moving to rural campuses,” and that would have been the “logical place for Johnson & Johnson to go”—but John Heldrich was successful in persuading the board to stay. [11]

Another building in which Wheeler saw potential was the State Theater, at the time functioning as a pornographic theater. [13] With Bob Totten, a Rutgers employee and devout Baptist, Wheeler inspected the theater to see if it was “acoustically feasible” to convert to other uses. Wheeler rejected the idea of scheduling an appointment, thinking that if the owners knew Rutgers was interested they would inflate the price. So the two bought tickets to a show: Totten backed in, so he would not have to see the screen, and performed a set of measurements to determine the feasibility. [13] The measurements proved that the theater could be transformed. “Ultimately, it took John Heldrich persuading Dick Sellars, out of his own pocket” Wheeler said, “to buy the State Theater—buy the porno theater—and hold it until Devco had the resources to turn it into a concert hall.” [13]

In another thought, Wheeler reflected that “if we hadn’t had a Haussmann, we wouldn’t want to visit Paris today,” referring to the civic planner Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann, who led the modernization of the French capital. [17] Regarding this, Wheeler elaborated: “Sometimes it takes a very focused effort by a relatively small group.” In the New Brunswick process, “the meetings that we had were run by John [Heldrich] and a staff of three or four people, and American Cities Corporation, and their work was done behind the scenes.” [17] There was a committee that voted “always unanimous for everything that was presented.” [17] Wheeler said that the committee’s purpose “was to help, but not to influence; we were a rubber-stamp committee and we were intended to be.” [18] So, the redevelopment process, led by Johnson & Johnson and executed in its corporate manner, was in contrast with how Rutgers University faculty would have proceeded. “Can you imagine having a lot of people from Rutgers on a rubber-stamp committee?” Wheeler asked. [18] He recognized that Johnson & Johnson was “making sacrifices” while Rutgers was not, and so was allowed to “have the say.” [18]

Still, these thoughts did not discourage Wheeler from praising redevelopment in New Brunswick: “I don’t know of another city in America that’s had as great a success.” [18] He admitted that mistakes were made and that the displacement of residents was “very traumatic business.” [18] However, Wheeler said, “I think that you can say that across the board, the population is much, much better off.” [19] This came in the form of “good low-income housing” and safer public space. “I think the community owes a huge debt of gratitude to J&J and the others who did it,” Wheeler said. [19]

In 1982, a year before Johnson & Johnson’s new headquarters was completed, “somebody put arsenic in the Tylenol bottles in a couple of pharmacies in Chicago.” Johnson & Johnson “moved right in, recalled everything, and made public announcements; they handled it as well as any capitalistic concern that I know of has handled a problem, and that’s been their history,” Wheeler said. He contrasted that efficiency with the lengthy process that Rutgers went through—over the course of 10 to 15 years—to reorganize the academic disciplines in New Brunswick. Johnson & Johnson and Rutgers are “two totally different kinds of institutions,” Wheeler said. [21]

Wheeler touched on historic preservation. When redevelopment was transforming the Hiram Market area, he believed that “you can’t tear down the city and rebuild it and have it viable in 20 years or 50 years. You’ve got to have a sense of continuity.” The nearby churches remained intact, albeit not for the sake of continuity. Wheeler said: “It was just they didn’t want to stir up the congregations, which were pretty powerful.” [26] He criticized the Kilmer Square area for being “poorly designed.”

In an anecdote, Wheeler “made a lot of noise” about preserving some buildings on Church Street, and the developers consented. [26] However, he “found out indirectly from some of their henchmen, the director of New Brunswick Tomorrow, the paid—the hired—gun, I found out that they had gone back on that commitment.” [26] Wheeler recalled that in an argument, the director said, “The contractor can’t afford it. I said he shouldn’t have signed the contract; he should have done his figures before he signed the contract. And so John [Heldrich] said, ‘Okay, we’ll take care of it.’” [27] This was one incident where historic structures *were* preserved. Wheeler “felt that more was torn down than needed to be” but acknowledged that, in the Hiram Market area, many of the historic structures “really were not re-habitable.” [27]

Wheeler commented on design in New Brunswick. The Johnson & Johnson headquarters building? “It’s ugly.” [28] He later added, “I. M. Pei designed that awful headquarters building.” [48] The Kilmer Park? “You never know when it’s going to be locked.” [29] He said that Kilmer Square on Albany Street is “a dead zone.” [47]

KEY QUOTATIONS

[Quotations have been edited for grammar and alphabetized by topic]

Gentrification

Even though Johnson & Johnson was trying to help with a variety of projects, trying to help the lower-income citizenry, I always believed that we ought to try very hard, early on, to gentrify. There had to be an educated, reasonably well-educated professional class of people who were involved to make a balanced community. [15]

John Heldrich

John Heldrich: I think he's a fascinating man; he's very complex. He's very modest in many ways, but he's also very forceful. [5]

Johnson & Johnson

Since Johnson & Johnson was footing the bill, they were listening, but they were running the show. I was very concerned at times about it being their show, and I was very concerned about the fact that it seemed to be focused on downtown commercial activity. John [Heldrich] was running the show. And he should have been given free reign, as he was, because they would not have done it without John; I'm convinced. [5]

New Brunswick in Decline

New Brunswick in decline: I first came in 1969, and 10 or 15 years earlier, New Brunswick had been thriving—two big department stores downtown, a lot of activity, and the decline was sudden. And when I came, people simply would not come who didn't live here, would not come to New Brunswick at night. Well, there was no reason to come; you know, the State Theatre was a pornographic theater, and there weren't any restaurants. There weren't even ethnic groups here other than African Americans at that time; the Mexicans hadn't come. So I saw disaster ahead for the university, or enormous expense in somehow or another acquiring the land and moving. It was my training as an urban historian, it wasn't that I was particularly prescient about anything, but I really had a very hard time with the administration; the faculty really wasn't involved. They didn't ask much of the faculty at that time. Bloustein was good—I had his ear, but the director of budget, Marvin Greenberg, resisted every move in that direction. His job was, you know, protecting the finances of the university, and he saw it as risky. So you know, he was doing his job, but it was still an obstacle. [4]

We weren't a city, really, and certainly, the inner city had virtually disappeared as far as a functioning center of this metropolitan New Brunswick. But it was only 50,000 [population]. [8]

New Brunswick after Revitalization

The city ended up building a lot of low-income housing—good low-income housing. You know, it was very dangerous to come to New Brunswick. People just didn't want to come here. People of Highland Park were afraid to come here. So again, I think every effort like this makes mistakes, but I think overall, it's very impressive and I think the community owes a huge debt of gratitude to J&J and the others who did it. I've been emphasizing J&J, but I mean to. I really believe that it was the single driving force. [19]

I don't know of another city in America that's had as great a success. [18]

Patricia Sheehan (Mayor and J&J Employee)

Pat Sheehan worked for Johnson & Johnson, and she was a middle-of-the-roader Democrat; I think most of the officers at J&J are Republican. But she worked well within that organization and, actually, John Lynch worked pretty well with them. [19]

Transparency

I think it sometimes takes a very focused effort by a relatively small group, and particularly if you're coming out of a hierarchal organization, as most corporations are. The meetings that we had were run by John [Heldrich] and a staff of three or four people, and American Cities Corporation, and their work was done behind the scenes. And they brought issues to the committee, which had representation from New Brunswick—Roy Epps was on the committee. The votes were always unanimous for everything that was presented. Roy Epps, one time in the 12 years or so that I was on the board, voted to abstain. But that wasn't really our purpose; our purpose was to help but not to influence and to change course unless they were clearly going in the wrong direction. And so we were—I really hesitate to use the term—a “rubber-stamp” committee, and we were intended to be. Can you imagine having a lot of people from Rutgers on a rubber-stamp committee? [17-18]