Chapter 2: Study Area Background

2.1 Cities in Search of New Roles

The final decades of the 20th century were marked by a massive exodus of manufacturing from American cities to suburban or offshore sites, to the point where no major city in the United States had a majority of its workforce employed in manufacturing by the end of the century (Ward 1998, 187). Simultaneously, residents were also forsaking the city for new suburban homes—between 1950 and 1970, the percentage of metropolitan residents living in suburbs rose from 41% to 50% (Massey and Denton 2014, 592). As the populations of cities fell, businesses there closed or followed their customers to the suburbs. In many cases, these trends were powerful enough to starve cities of their economic base, presenting them with an existential problem.

Although there were attempts by cities to retain manufacturers or attract new ones, it eventually became apparent that manufacturing would not return and that cities were in need of a new role. Thus, in recent decades, cities have sought to reposition themselves as their metropolitan areas' hubs of the service sector (Ward 1988, 187). Attempts are also being made to entice suburbanites to relocate back to the city or at least to visit it with greater frequency and to spend more money there. Often, cities have tried to emphasize their centers' historic character to this end. Informing this tactic has been the popular if controversial school of thought that aesthetic and cultural considerations have recently come to play a greater role in the making of residential choices, especially by younger and better-educated demographic groups. Thus, ambience

and culture are often seen as necessary for attracting or retaining talent in high-technology and creative industries (Clark et al. 2002, 498-500). Under this assumption, cities have an advantage in attracting such talent; Ford (2003, 3-4) points out that buildings in a variety of ages, sizes, and degrees of repair can be found in cities, meaning that a range of rents and activities is possible there that is seldom matched by suburban shopping malls and housing tracts. For most of the 20th century, the core of the typical American large city has been dominated by office space (141), with the surrounding land taken up by "support activities" such as port facilities, rail yards, warehouses, and low-end housing such as residential hotels (6). The second half of the century has seen many of these activities, and some of the office space, decamp from the city, leaving behind vacant or underutilized land that is unsightly or polluted or both, but also freeing up space for "clean," if space-intensive, cultural and leisure-related land uses, such as sports arenas, museums, and performing-arts venues, on which many cities are pinning their hopes for an economic boost.

Hartford, when seen in this light, is quite typical. Industrial employment in the city grew until 1952, with workers in the service sector outnumbering industrial employees from 1960 onward (Grant 1982, 169). The decennial census of 1950 found the city's population at what turned out to be an all-time high of slightly under 180,000 (US Census Bureau 1950a); the figure fell to just over 120,000 by 2000 (US Census Bureau 2000a). From 4.55% in 1970 (US Census Bureau 1972, 27), unemployment in the city roughly tripled to 15.9% in 2000 (US Census Bureau 2000b); in the latter year, the poverty rate stood at 30.6% (Hartford Public Library and the Hartford Community Data

Collaborative 2012). The thinning of the population and its purchasing power robbed the central city of much of its vitality. By 1997, Hartford was perceived as "a poster child for urban decay," with high building vacancy rates and retail "in the doldrums," the two flagship downtown department stores having both gone out of business in the early 1990s (Petersen 1997).

**Table 1.** Study area population trends since 1950

	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010
Hartford	177,397	162,178	158,017	136,392	139,739	121,578	124,775
Tract 500500	3,572	2,607	1,152	1,123	1,473	1,448	1,477
Tract 500400	3,024	2,783	2,805	3,039	3,028	2,065	1,687

Sources: Data from Connecticut Secretary of the State 2013; US Census Bureau 1950a, 1960b, 1970, 1980a, 1990a, 2000a, 2010e.
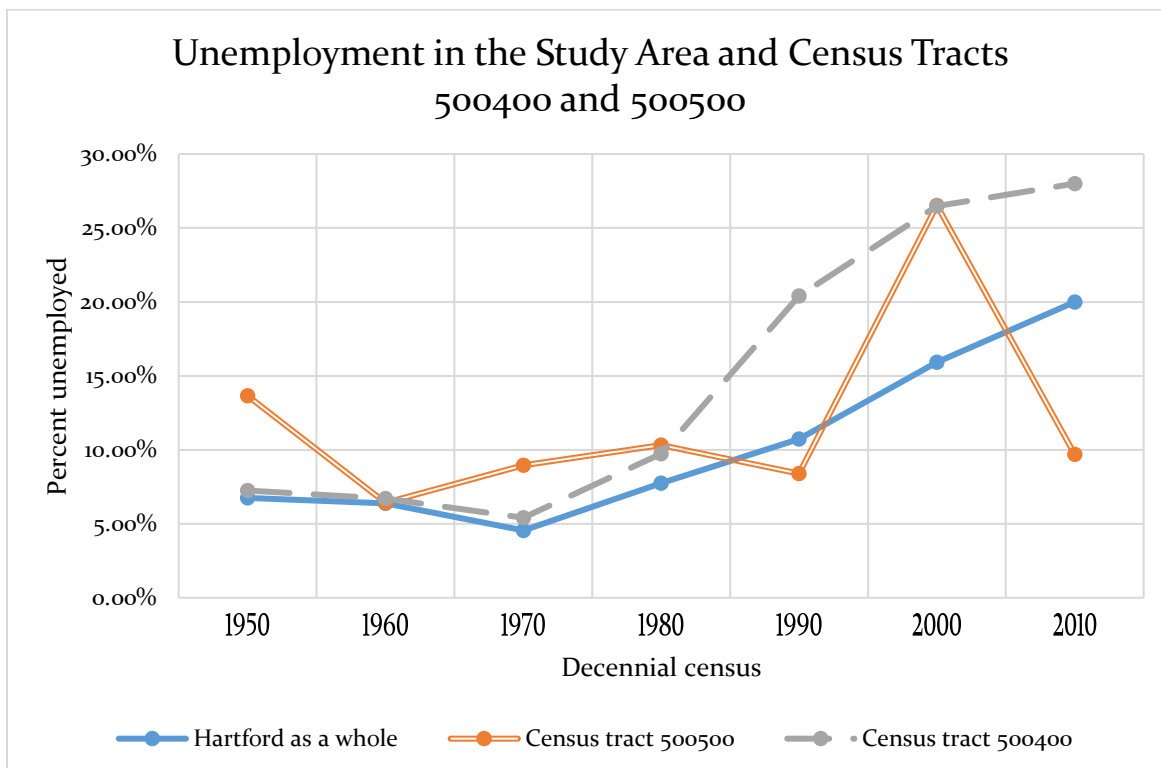
Figure 1. Unemployment (as percentage of civilian labor force) in Hartford and the two Coltsville census tracts since 1950

Sources: Data adapted from US Census Bureau 1950c, 1960a, 1972a, 1980b, 1990b, 2000b, 2010f.
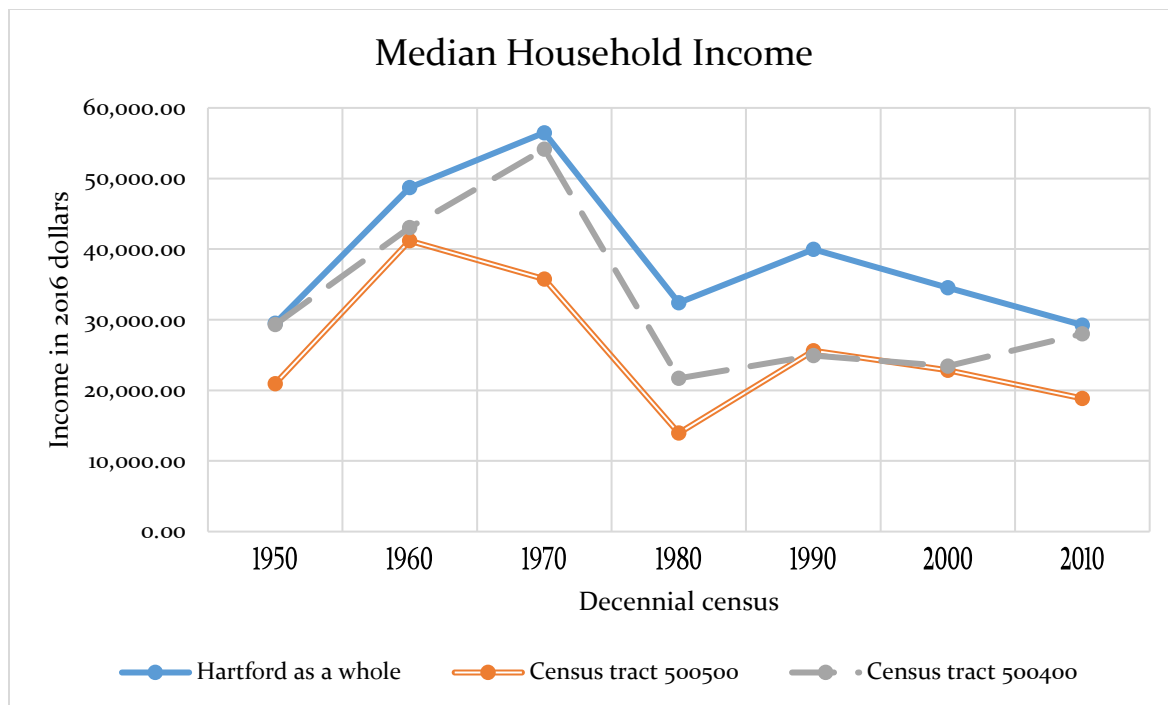
Figure 2. Median household income in Hartford and the two Coltsville census tracts since 1950, in 2016 dollars.

Sources: Data adapted from US Census Bureau 1950b, 1961, 1972b, 1980c, 1990c, 2000c, 2010c; US Department of Labor 2016.

Like many other American cities in the same situation, Hartford is looking to culture, arts, leisure, and education to lure suburban spending visitors, if not new residents. A set of measures for revitalizing the city, dubbed the "Six Pillars of Progress," were identified in the 1990s by the state, federal, and local governments as well as business interests. The "six pillars" include encouraging new housing downtown with the goal of creating 1,000 units; improved access to the city's riverfront, which is largely walled off from the city by Interstate 91; revitalization of Harford's civic center; the establishment downtown of a community college campus; improved and expanded downtown parking; and a convention center. As part of these efforts, downtown Hartford's riverfront has seen a massive development called Adriaen's Landing take shape with a combination of state and private funding. Containing a convention center,

residences, hotels, an entertainment-retail district, the Connecticut Science Center, and their associated parking garages, the complex was expected to attract four million visitors each year and lead to the creation of 1,900 jobs (Peacock 2001). Immediately north of downtown, a minor-league baseball stadium is being built, although its projected costs and benefits to the city have been the subject of much controversy.

In Hartford's Sheldon-Charter Oak neighborhood, south of downtown on the Connecticut River, stands what some believe to be another potential visitor draw and undoubtedly one of Hartford's claims to fame. A complex of industrial buildings dating from the 19th and early 20th centuries, it is linked with the name of one of Hartford's most famous natives (albeit one inseparable from controversy) and was the site of an important milestone in the Industrial Revolution. Attempts to adaptively reuse the former Colt firearms factory have been underway since at least the cessation of arms production there in 1994, with parts of the factory having been reused earlier. At times, such attempts clashed with various stakeholders' visions for making the most of the place's historical significance. Other factors hampering the old factory's rehabilitation apparently included industrial contaminants on the site, the moribund state of Hartford's real-estate market in the 1990s, and the sheer magnitude of the project; nevertheless, after several false starts, progress is being made on repurposing the old manufacturing complex. Meanwhile, efforts to recognize and publicize the site's historic significance reached a turning point in 2014, when the Coltsville Historic District comprising the factory and its former workers' township became a unit of the National Park System.

2.2 The Colt Factory and the Study Area

Figure 3. View of the Colt factory (left) and the Connecticut River (somewhat overflowing its banks), with downtown Hartford in the background; photograph taken from the Charter Oak Bridge looking northward.

The city of Hartford, Connecticut is the study area of my research. The future national park is a 260-acre site (O'Connell et al. 2009, 6) to the southeast of downtown Hartford (see figure 4). The park consists of two non-contiguous parts; the southern part makes up the bulk of the park's territory and contains the former Colt factory and most of the other surviving related buildings, as well as Colt Park (a municipal park in the City of Hartford Parks System, not to be confused with the Coltsville National Historical Park). The smaller part to the north of it is centered on the Church of the Good Shepherd and its parish house. The factory itself occupies 17 acres bounded by Masseek Street to the

south, Hyushope Avenue to the west, Nepaquash Street to the north, and Van Dyke

Avenue to the east and northeast (City of Harford Planning Division 2000). A railroad

and Interstate Highway 91 separate the factory buildings from the Connecticut River to

the east (see figure 4). Colt Park comprises much of the land area of Sheldon-Charter

Oak, the neighborhood containing the former factory. The rest of the neighborhood is a

mixture of residences and office space, although some light industry remains (Flodine

2015b); such mixed land use seems to be the legacy of redevelopment during the 1980s,

which included the adaptive reuse of another former factory (Hosley 2005).

Coltsville National Historical Park
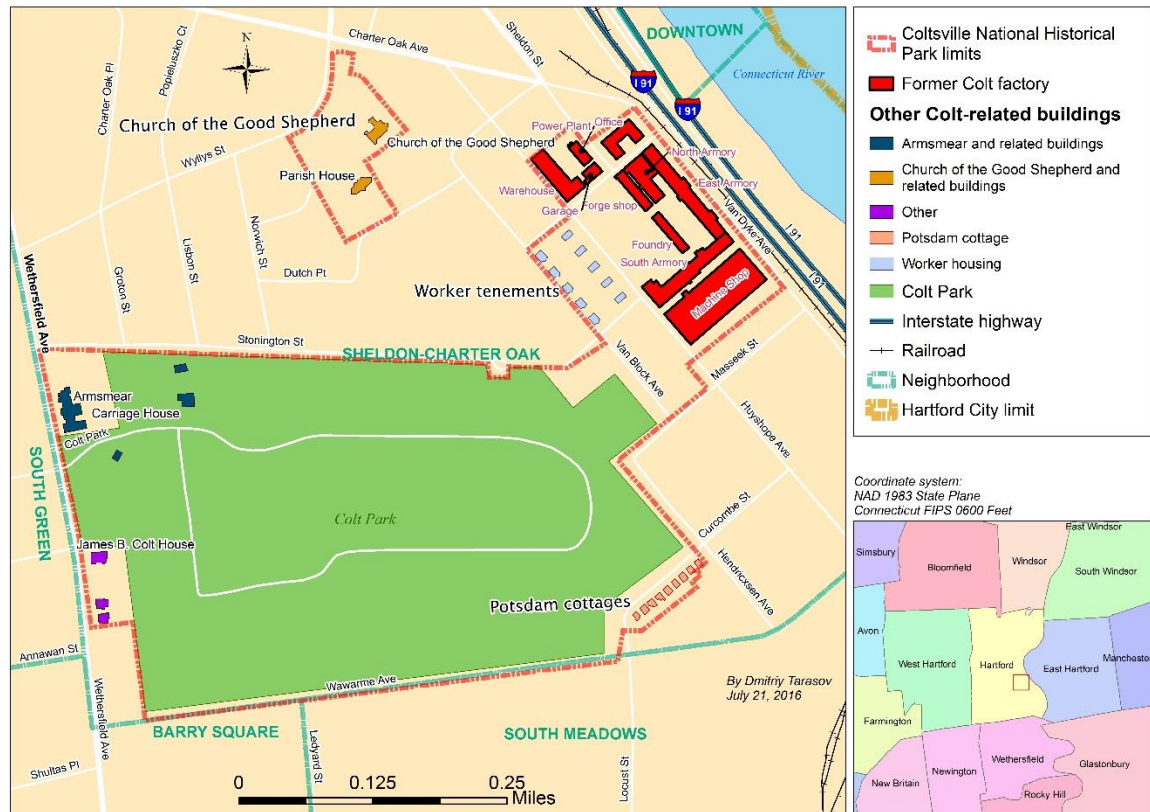
Figure 4. Detailed view of Coltsville National Historical Park

Sources: Data adapted from Bogar 2012; Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection 1984; Esri ArcGIS Content Team 2011; Flodine 2015a; Museum Insights et al. 2008, 8; US Census Bureau 2012.

Sheldon-Charter Oak has been no exception to the problems that have beset

Hartford in the last few decades. The neighborhood's boundary roughly corresponds to

those of Hartford County census tracts 500400 and 500500. Tract 500400, south of

500500, is the larger of the two; although much of it consists of Colt Park, it also includes

the factory buildings. Historically, the workforces of the Colt factory and other nearby

factories likely comprised much of these tracts' populations; at the time of the 1950

census, "operatives and kindred workers" were the most numerous type of worker among

the male population of census tract 500400 and the most common type, among both genders, in tract 500500 (US Census Bureau 1950c). Post-World War II trends in these two tracts broadly parallel the postwar history of Colt and the rest of Hartford's industry. Population of the two tracts has generally been on a downward trend in the postwar era, with tract 500500's population in 2010 less than half of what it was in 1950 and tract 500400 having lost nearly half its residents (see table 1). Decennial censuses from 1990 onward show tract 500500's population as being stable at between 1400 and 1500 residents (US Census Bureau 1990a, 2000a, 2010e). Tract 500400's population fell between 1950 and 1960 (US Census Bureau 1950a, 1960b), then rose slightly by 1970 (US Census Bureau 1970) and slightly more by 1980 (US Census Bureau 1980a), falling ever since (US Census Bureau 1990a, 2000a, 2010e). Unemployment in Hartford as a whole seems to have reached a post-World War II low of 4.55% as late as 1970 (US Census Bureau 1972a). It has climbed in every decennial census since then, however; a broadly similar pattern is observable in the two main Sheldon-Charter Oak census tracts (see figure 1). Apparently, the effects of deindustrialization were not strongly felt in Hartford until after 1970, meaning that, in this city's case at least, the phenomenon is somewhat more recent than suburbanization. Median household income also continued to rise after World War II, until 1960 in 500500 and until 1970 in 500400 and in Hartford as a whole; however, it plunged dramatically between 1970 and 1980 and, although there has been a slight recovery since then, it is still considerably below its postwar high, for both the two Sheldon-Charter Oak tracts and the city (see figure 2). Before 1970, therefore, although suburbanization was taking place, conditions seem to have been improving for those who

remained in the city; the poverty for which Hartford became known by the 1990s (Coakley 1995) seems to have set in rather abruptly between 1970 and 1980.

More than half of all housing units (458 of 726) in tract 500400 were built before World War II. In 500500 and in Hartford as a whole, housing from that era forms a plurality of all housing units, with 34.2% and 47.86%, respectively (US Census Bureau 2010d). Worn-out housing is thus likely a problem in both Hartford in general and Sheldon-Charter Oak in particular, although Coltsville has recently seen some renovation of existing housing and creation of new housing units, and there is much historic housing in Sheldon-Charter Oak that would probably be ripe for renovation should the neighborhood become attractive to new residents again.

Of Coltsville's surviving buildings, the most iconic is certainly the red-brick East Armory, known internally at the company as Building A; the building is located at 55 Van Dyke Avenue and faces eastward, toward the Connecticut River (see figure 14). The onion-shaped blue dome on its roof, speckled with gold stars and crowned with the figure of a rampant colt, is a local landmark; it is clearly visible from Interstate Highway 91. Completed in 1867, the Armory incorporated what were then state-of-the-art fireproofing techniques in order to avoid the fate of the original East Armory, which stood on the site until being destroyed by a fire in 1864 and which was visually almost identical apart from being constructed of brownstone rather than brick (Labadia et al. 26). Two wings of the original East Armory (see figure 6) survive behind it; now known as the Foundry (Building F) and the Forge Shop (Building D) (27), they are the oldest structures on the site, pre-dating the fire of 1864 (19). Of the other factory buildings, many have been torn

down over the years, including, in the late 1940s, a "massive" West Armory (Gosselin 2012); nevertheless, ten major structures remain. Besides the East Armory, Foundry, and Forge Shop, they are the North and South Armories (Buildings M [see figure 20] and P [see figure 21], respectively) (Labadia et al. 28), Warehouse (Building W), Machine Shop (Building R) (see figure 22), Power Plant (U), and Garage (O)—all built during World War I—and the World War II-era U-shaped Office Building (N) (29). The flood of 1936 took a toll on Coltsville's other buildings—a number were torn down due to flood damage (18)—as, perhaps, did post-World War II urban renewal. Even so, nineteen units of 19th-century worker housing still stand; these include ten five- or six-family tenements on Huyshope and Van Block Avenues, built in 1856 (see figure 7), and nine two-family "Potsdam cottages" on Curcombe Street, from 1859 (see figure 25). The tenements are still used as dwellings, having been restored as "housing for middle-income workers" at some point by 1982 (Grant 1982, 196). The cottages on Curcombe Street, built in a style that evokes traditional German half-timbered architecture, originally housed the workers of Colt's willow ware factory, many of whom came from Potsdam (137-8).

Other remnants of Coltsville are three managers' houses on Wethersfield Avenue, the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd at 155 Wyllys Street, built in 1869 in the Victorian Gothic style (see figure 17), and its Caldwell Colt Memorial Parish House (see figure 18), added in 1896 in memory of Caldwell Colt, the Colt family's only child to survive into adulthood. Still standing on Wethersfield Avenue are Armsmear, the Colt family's mansion (see figure 28), and its several associated structures such as the carriage house. Finally, the building at 157 Charter Oak Avenue was originally built by Colt's

company as a warehouse, and a number of residential and industrial buildings not constructed by the company but dating from the same era remain in the vicinity (Labadia et al. 32-36).

Between Armsmear and the former factory lies the expanse of Colt Park (see figure 10), originally Armsmear's garden, which Elizabeth Colt willed to the City of Hartford for use as a park at her death in 1905. Warwarme and Van Dyke Avenues run atop dikes built in Samuel Colt's day to protect the industrial complex from the waters of the Connecticut River (O'Connell et al. 2009, 11-15). The ponds, fountains, plantings, statues, and greenhouses in Colt Park are gone, however, having been removed in favor of lawns and athletic fields by 1952, as is the machinery in the former factory. As of 2009, a private nonprofit organization was working with the City of Hartford to develop a botanical garden on the Wethersfield Avenue end of Colt Park (where another landmark, a monument to Samuel Colt, stands), but there were no plans to restore the park to its Colt family-era splendor (O'Connell et al. 2009, 15).

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