

**A “Renaissance” Referendum:
A People’s Perspective on Gentrification During the Hoboken Mayoral Election of 1985¹**

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Abstract: By the 1980s Hoboken, New Jersey, had gone through a stark transformation that made it a model for American cities. The once bleak, post-industrial cityscape had become a trending destination for a new group of young urban professionals looking for a place to settle. By the city’s mayoral election of 1985, residents faced a tough decision between incumbent Steven Capiello or the city’s upstart councilman, Thomas Vezzetti. While Steven Capiello represented the forces of urban renewal, Thomas Vezzetti channeled the grievances of those disaffected by the Square Mile City’s rapid gentrification. This paper will aim to explain the forces that shaped Hoboken’s redevelopment from the 1960s through the 1980s by examining the voices of Hoboken’s residents and its politicians.

By 1985, Hoboken resident Harry, aged ninety-two, had been ousted from his longtime apartment. Representative of the hot real-estate market hitting post-industrial cityscapes in the 1980s, Hoboken had become an attractive locale for young urban professionals or “yuppies” and the redevelopers seeking to profit off them. The young developer that bought out Harry’s building explained in his redevelopment plans that “there were some incontinent old men that were losing it [living in the building],” casting aside the elderly ex-residents as sick and senile. “... [I try] to just imagine what the rough shell looks like inside and after you strip away everything what’s

¹ The author would like to thank Dr. Beryl Satter of Rutgers Newark and her research seminar class for helping in the development of this paper.

gonna be left? And what you will have to work with is the structure straight. When I go in, I try not to respond too much to the grossness.” The developer provides a glimpse at the economic and social transformations facing Hoboken in the 1980s, which saw rampant gentrification pit established Hobokenites against the new transplants that seemingly sought to supplant them.²

As the commodification of space became a competition for the maximization of rents in the Square Mile City, displacement was cast as an inevitable outcome of esoteric market forces. This view, along with all the free market rhetoric of the 1980s, however, elides the fact that the push for urban revitalization in Hoboken was greatly abetted by local and federal policies. Harry and others like him became victims of a political and economic system bent on growth at the expense of its community members. This growth represented a growing divide between the city’s population, becoming the main fault line in Hoboken’s hotly contested mayoral campaign of 1985 between Steve Cappiello and Thomas Vezzetti. In the twelve years preceding the 1985 election, Cappiello had guided the city through its “renaissance” as Hoboken’s incumbent mayor. Crime rates dropped and property values soared, but not all the city’s residents experienced the developments in a positive light. Long time Hobokenites saw their claims to their homes wane as rents increased and displacement became commonplace. Those disaffected by these changes came to protest Cappiello’s program of urban redevelopment under the banner of Thomas Vezzetti, a councilman from the second ward who championed a more inclusive growth model that advocated longtime residents.

Scholarship on Gentrification and Hoboken

² *Delivered Vacant*, dir. Nora Jacobson (1992; Island Pictures, 2020), <http://www.offthegridproductions.com/films/delivered-vacant/>.

Major cities like Washington DC, San Diego, Toronto, London, and New York have usually been the central focus of works on high-intensity gentrification and displacement. In turn much has been written about the historical developments that fostered a culture of urban renewal and the class polarization of housing markets in these urban regions. In *Gentrification*, historians Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly outline the development of back-to-the-cities movements in the 1970s into the full blown processes of gentrification by the 1980s. Based on new consumption trends in relation to a growing backlash against suburban living, the authors note how a new middle class of upwardly mobile professionals came to inhabit postindustrial cityscapes. By the 1980s a new jargon of the young upwardly mobile urban professional or “yuppie” was introduced into the vernacular, which came to represent in part the displacement processes of gentrification. The consequences of an economic transition away from industrial production to an emphasis on finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE) led to an increased demand for central city living while crippling native urban citizens’ access to the same spaces. As new residents transplanted themselves into these urban zones, intersections between local residents, developers, community identities, local histories, education, and class status became points of contention. The authors note however, for all the examination of gentrifying forces, there has been a significant lack of literature produced on the nongentrifying groups already residing within these urban areas.³

Dylan Gottlieb’s study of Hoboken in the 1980s provides another look at gentrifying processes at work. Gottlieb highlights Hoboken’s painful transition from blue-collar industrial center into a white-collar city and shines a light onto the societal configurations that abetted displacement arsons in the city between 1978 and 1983. Similar to the work of Lees, Slater, and

³ Loretta Lees, Tom Slater, and Elvin Wyly, *Gentrification* (London: Routledge, 2007), 89-125.

Wyly, Gottlieb explores the relation and fascination yuppies had with back-to-the-cities movements and the various facets of the backlash against suburbia; however, he narrows down his focus on specific economic machinations.⁴ In her documentary *Delivered Vacant*, director Nora Jacobson explores the same processes of gentrification in Hoboken as Gottlieb. Providing interviews with residents on both sides of the Hobokenite/yuppie divide, Jacobson provides an intimate portrait of the city as citizens and politicians come to negotiate Hoboken's growth as it transitions through its "renaissance."⁵ Though a filmmaker and not an academic, Jacobson is one of the few researchers to describe those already residing in a gentrifying area.

My essay then will aim to highlight the political dimensions that encompassed Hoboken's transformation in 1970s and 1980s as the city's new transplants came into conflict with established residents. Trends that pitted yuppies and gentrifiers against local Hobokenites came to a head in the Hoboken mayoral election of 1985, and by centering this election as a key crossroads in the development of the city, I intend to highlight the key contentions revolving around the city's movement toward gentrification. The election pitted Steve Cappiello representing the more monied white-collared interests of the yuppies and developers against Thomas Vezzetti and his constituency of less affluent and blue-collared residents. This particular election provides a glimpse into the development of urban spaces and how they are shaped by both public and private enterprises. By analyzing the mayoral election of 1985, I aim to present a detailed account of the public's opinions of the social reconfigurations occurring within the city at the time and show how these public sentiments informed and were embodied by an election with gentrification at its core.

⁴ Dylan Gottlieb, "Hoboken Is Burning: Yuppies, Arson, and Displacement in the Postindustrial City," *Journal of American History* 106, no. 2 (January 2019): 390-416, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jaz346>.

⁵ Jacobson's film was shot during an 8-year span between 1984 and 1992; for more information see; *Delivered Vacant*.

Examining occupational and demographic data between the 1960s through the 1980s will help illuminate the changes occurring within Hoboken by the time of the election. Campaign literature from both candidates found in the Hoboken archival collections provide a record of the candidates' platforms. Drawing from interviews conducted by Nora Jacobson will add depth to the societal and political contexts of Hoboken during the early 1980s. I will also draw on her work to provide background for the Hoboken mayoral race of 1985. Another set of key resources will include newspaper clippings from the 1970s through the 1980s and a compilation of letters sent into *The Hoboken Reporter* during the mid-1980s. Though I will not claim to speak for every single Hoboken resident, I aim to compile an aggregate consensus of the key concerns of those living through the processes of urban reconfiguration. The research will produce a better understanding of Hoboken's aspirations as the city entered into the mayoral election in 1985. This work will shed light on how the forces of gentrification were articulated by those at the ground level. It will also answer the young developers question from the initial anecdote, "after you strip away everything what's gonna be left?"⁶

Hoboken's History

Hoboken's identity in the twentieth century has historically been linked with immigration; the city's ethnic demographic composed of roughly 70,000 Dutch, German, Irish, and Italian migrants by 1910. These immigrants found a home as well as employment in the city as their cheap labor fueled the city's manufacturing plants of Keuffler and Esser, American Sweets, Lipton Tea, and Maxwell House Coffee through the second half of the 1900s. The backbone of the city also rested on its location. Situated on the Hudson River adjacent to New York City, Hoboken's manufacturing base relied on transatlantic shipping routes to distribute its products. However, as

⁶ *Delivered Vacant.*

the United States transitioned away from an industrial to service model throughout the following decades, this economic base declined. Big manufacturers left Hoboken for the industrial parks of the south and because of this, the city's unemployment shot up. The daytime working population that hit its peak at 100,000 during World War II dwindled down to 15,000 by 1975, doubling the national unemployment rate at the time. By the 1960s, Hoboken's lack of deep-water ports and land mass left it unable to adapt to new methods of containerization, leading to an exodus of shipping companies to Newark, Elizabeth, and southern states. This further crippled Hoboken's already ailing economy.⁷

Hoboken's housing narrative reflected the economic realities of immigration and manufacturing in the first half of the twentieth century. Since the 1930s the city's housing was redlined by the Home Owners' Loan Corporation. Negatively citing the city's Italian racial composition and decaying housing from the turn of the prior century, the HOLC gave Hoboken the agency's lowest D rating, hindering residents' access to bank loans and mortgages, while slumlords capitalized on the appraisal by renting out rundown and subdivided leases. As Hoboken's industrial and shipping base weakened, its middle class moved out, replaced by new migrants from Puerto Rico who found work in the city's remaining factories and garment district.⁸

This urban decay coupled with its primary association with dock and factory work came to define the city by the 1960s. "Hoboken- I've been through it a million times on the train. But I thought it was just a lot of factories." Another commonly repeated trope, "Hoboken- you mean

⁷ Christina A. Ziegler-McPherson, *Immigrants in Hoboken One Way Ticket, 1845-1985* (Charleston, SC: History Press, 2011), 16-18; Joseph Barry and John Derevlany, *Yuppies Invade My House at Dinnertime: A Tale of Brunch, Bombs, and Gentrification in an American City* (Hoboken, NJ: Big River Pub., 1987), xvii-xviii.

⁸ Wall text, *The Fires: Hoboken 1978-1982*, Hoboken Historical Museum, Hoboken, NJ.

people really live there?”⁹ These perceptions of “Ho-Ho-Ho Hoboken” as a laughingstock of a city and just a “slum looking for a city to attach itself to” would soon change in the following decades.¹⁰

In an effort to fight off poverty and increase opportunity on a national level, Lyndon B. Johnson passed his grand vision for America in the form of the Great Society. A subsection to this effort, the Model Cities Program (MCP), began to offer aid in urban areas in an effort to reinvigorate American cities hit hard by the economic shifts away from industry. Under Mayor Louis DePascale, Hoboken applied for and received a roughly \$2 million infusion to support initiatives that included improvements to the city’s education, family planning, and the city’s recreation.¹¹

By 1972 Hoboken’s MCP’s Home Improvement Program (HIP) began using government subsidies to entice middle class suburbanites to relocate within city limits. In order to circumvent redlining hurdles and the stigmas associated with it, the MCP offered first-wave gentrifiers subsidized mortgage rates at a lower 3 percent interest rate, opposed to the higher 8-12 percent national standard, in what became “bait for brownstoners.” By 1975 a major brownstone boom, fueled by a new counterculture aesthetic and a reverence for historical architecture, began developing in Hoboken. Mayor Steve Cappelletto announced that the Community Development Agency (CDA), a new local-public-private initiative would help distribute federal subsidies to developers in order to rehabilitate Hoboken’s ailing housing infrastructure. The CDA’s focus on

⁹ Donald Singleton, “Hoboken: Snug harbor just off midtown,” *New York Daily News*, January 5, 1973, clipping (Hoboken Vertical Files, Hoboken Library) <https://hobokenlibrary.org/history-collection/hoboken-vertical-files/>.

¹⁰ William Calborborne, “The last laugh for Hoboken,” *The Record*, December 24, 1976, clipping (Hoboken Vertical Files, Hoboken Library), “Hoboken’s Ex-Cop Mayor is Making His City a Contender Again,” Hoboken Government & Politics Collection, 3.

¹¹ Louis De Pascale et al., *Hoboken Model Cities Comprehensive Plan* (Hoboken, 1969), Hoboken Government & Politics Collection, Accessed Feb. 21, 2023, <https://hoboken.pastperfectonline.com/archive/EE64D1C1-36C3-4C2B-BB68-129783116850>.

diverting funds to restore multi-unit buildings indicated what would become a turn away from the early “first wave” brownstoners to “second wave” gentrifiers like yuppies and large developers. Cappiello and the CDA simultaneously launched a marketing campaign aimed at using the city’s proximity to New York City as a way to attract New York’s burgeoning class of young urban professionals.¹²

“The Great Divide”

By 1977 Cappiello, who had been serving as Hoboken’s mayor since 1973, proudly declared in an interview on the city’s turnaround that “people used to think of this place as a hellhole. In the past three or four years, we’ve been able to get a lot of civic pride back.” By this time reconstruction on the city’s housing infrastructure was well underway, with \$30 million injected by public and private capital into about 15 percent of the city’s housing stock. Rejecting the “raze and rebuild” model of urban renewal, Hoboken officials instead focused on revitalizing historic brownstones, row houses, and even old flats originally built for Tootsie Roll employees. By the mid-1970s, 85 percent of loan applicants were longtime Hoboken residents, while 15 percent were newcomers like interior decorator Patricia Tuohy and her lawyer husband Charles. This signaled what would become a growing shift in the city’s employment and ethnic demographic over the coming years.¹³

Word of mouth and coverage of Hoboken’s bargain brownstones, ethnic diversity, and relatively safe streets spread across the nation to places like Soho, Greenwich Village, Pittsburg, and Daytona. With this, Hoboken’s unexpected charm drew in newcomers suffering from the

¹² Gottlieb, “Hoboken is Burning,” 397-398.

¹³ David Treadwell, “Hoboken Revives Its Housing, Becomes Other Cities’ Model,” *Daytona Beach Morning Journal*, July 21, 1977, Accessed Mar 3, 2023, <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1873&dat=19770721&id=9mYpAAAAIBAJ&sjid=G8oEAAAIAIAJ&pg=2312,1858119>.

mundanity of suburban life and looking for city living but on the periphery. As Mrs. Tuohy put it after moving, “I dreaded leaving Manhattan. Now I’d dread going back.” A growing colony of journalists, artists, lawyers, and other upwardly oriented professionals sought to capitalize on Hoboken’s popularity and convenient location. These newcomers increasingly lived in New Jersey but worked in New York. This influx of white-collar workers brought with them new capital used to reinvigorate old housing as well as developers looking to profit from the real estate boom. With property investments totaling anywhere from \$45,000 for renovations for a 100-year-old home to \$15,000 on a four-story house, Hoboken revitalization from post-industrial wasteland to a “chic” urban destination reflected an ongoing “renaissance” for the city.¹⁴

Hoboken, aptly nicknamed the Square Mile City, is approximately 1.25 square miles. By the 1980s the city’s average household income stood roughly at \$15,540 as compared to the \$24,540 of surrounding areas. With its unemployment rate at double the national average at 16 percent, Hoboken’s primarily blue-collar natives would have to compete with any influx of migration into the city. Unfortunately for longtime residents, the incursion of more affluent newcomers in the form of young upwardly mobile professionals would soon increase. What had started as a trickle of left-leaning academics, artists, and social workers in the 1970s became a torrent of corporate professionals, lawyers, and stockbrokers by the 1980s. These yuppies making upward of \$50,000 annually put what little space the city had left at a premium. By the early 1980s the threat of increasing rents and the displacement associated with it began permeating the city’s atmosphere.¹⁵

¹⁴ Treadwell, “Hoboken Revives.”; Stuart James, “Living High in Hoboken,” clipping (Hoboken Vertical Files, Hoboken Library), *ibid.*; \$50,000 in 1980 would be the rough equivalent of \$193,000 as of March 2023. For comparison the roughly \$15,000 of established Hobokenites is comparable to roughly \$58,000, data provided by *CPI Inflation Calculator*, <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl>.

¹⁵ *Social Explorer*, <https://www.socialexplorer.com/a9676d974c/explore.>; Barry and Derevlany, *Yuppies Invade*, xxii.

“My building was sold, my rent tripled, and after 18 years in my apartment, I was forced out. My family helped to build Hoboken. I have roots in Hoboken...too bad I can’t enjoy living there any more,” noted A.D. Emahs in a letter he submitted to *The Hoboken Reporter*. Others joined him to voice their discontent on the pages of the same weekly newspaper. One ex-Hobokenite wrote in rather scathingly about an ex-landlord, “I know how difficult it was for you [the landlord] to dispossess me from the reasonably priced Hoboken apartment I rented from you.... I know you feel bad, because your wife told me so when she promised to [talk] to your lawyer...” In a response to the veiled personal attack on his character the landlord wrote in, “I had the choice of paying \$700 a month for a similar apartment in the house of a stranger or simply occupying an apartment in my own property.” By the mid-1980s Hoboken’s real estate market had decidedly transmogrified from the days of mortgage redlining and the HOLC’s D rating. This change was evinced by the written altercations between these established Hobokenites over the city’s shrinking housing stock.¹⁶

As young urban newcomers proceeded to lay claim to the city’s space, fault lines appeared between them and established locals. Yuppie wealth came to be seen as a threat to locals’ existence. With their designer haircuts, attache cases, three-piece suits, and Sony Walkmans, these new urban professionals stood in stark contrast to longtime Hobokenites. Likened to a “plague of biblical locusts” ready to ruin Hoboken and the people living there, these foreigners were seen as waging economic warfare on Hoboken’s less well-off. One elderly resident admitted in defeat, “we have to make way for the rich, we can’t afford to buy condominiums, I’m on Social Security.” In order to keep up with these changing economic demographics, another resident noted “...I should get rid of my cats and start dealing in cocaine, and then I’d be sure to pass the muster and land the best

¹⁶ Barry and Derevlany, *Yuppies Invade*, 3-5.

condo in town.” Ralph Ruggiere, another local, jokingly expected that after a hard day’s work longtime residents would soon be enjoying “repast[s] of Alpo and Gainesburger,” for dinner due to skyrocketing rents.¹⁷

To established Hobokenites, yuppies presented an “avant-garde” and “hip” model of living that was an antithesis of their blue-collar city. Nothing was sacred to these invaders; from street names to the fish shop, the fabric of Hoboken’s identity was under siege. The vitriol between the two groups spilled over into conflicts that included who to blame for a local butcher’s death, how to walk up or down a street, race, parking spaces, Ronald Reagan, antique shops, garbage disposal, and arguments on the utility of condos. On a simple trip to the library, Ruggiere was annoyingly introduced to the “pseudo-esoterica” of a newly moved in resident who was loudly inquiring about “some obscure opera and its equally obscure composer.”¹⁸

Terms like “out of towners,” “newcomer,” “yorkie,” and “yuppie,” came to take on derogative overtones as they became common insults hurled at outsiders moving in. These monikers were a sort of reactionary defense against a horde trying to usurp Hoboken’s immigrant legacy and ethnic charm. Some yuppies attributed the city’s decay to the previous generation of inhabitants as one transplant explained, “perhaps the fault lies with ‘natives’ who didn’t take the necessary steps to insure the stability of their lifestyles.” By 1984 the “Hoboken Renaissance” was understood as a “ripoff” by the Hoboken born and bred: an ill-conceived plan by the triumvirate of bankers, developers, and local politicians that may have boosted the city’s economy but priced out long-time residents.¹⁹

¹⁷ Barry and Derevlany, *Yuppies Invade*, 4-12.; *Delivered Vacant*.

¹⁸ Barry and Derevlany, *Yuppies Invade*, 21-32.

¹⁹ Barry and Derevlany, *Yuppies Invade*, 7-12.

From a newcomer's perspective however, Hoboken presented a cheaper and safer alternative to living in the Big Apple and provided an escape from the mundanity of suburbia for others. "People in Hoboken are paying \$200 a month for an apartment with this beautiful view of the George Washington Bridge and New York skyline. Over there people are paying up to \$1,000...and all they get to look at is Hoboken," was a common joke among residents. For others like Donald Singleton, tired of the daily 50-mile commute to and from Manhattan and having to rake and mow the lawn of his Cape Cod, moving his family to Hoboken from Morris County had been an easy decision.²⁰ For Jane Civalor and her husband the mental, financial, and physical toll of having to manage their home in the suburbs coupled with their four-hour daily commute had been alleviated by moving. Providing an easy commute with its close proximity to PATH (Port Authority Trans-Hudson) transit and NYC, coupled with cheap rents and no front lawns to manage, Hoboken was, according to the *New York Daily News*, the perfect "snug harbor just off midtown."²¹

Hoboken's newest inhabitants saw themselves as model citizens participating in the city's "renaissance" by maintaining their apartments, paying their taxes, and working hard. Their world view was also openly progressive as Hoboken's diversity that included Italians, Germans, Puerto Ricans, Irish, and Indians provided charm for these newly minted residents. These young and idealistic newcomers baffled old time residents with their willingness to accept anyone regardless of creed, race, and sexual orientation. This acceptance of others without prejudice ironically enough created another point of friction between the two groups. Newcomers saw a city with ailing

²⁰ Singleton, "Hoboken: Snug harbor just off midtown."; Donald Singleton, "Hoboken: a renaissance on the waterfront," *New York Sunday News*, October 31, 1976, (Hoboken Vertical Files, Hoboken Library), <https://hobokenlibrary.org/history-collection/hoboken-vertical-files/> (Accessed April. 19, 2023).

²¹ Barry and Derevlany, *Yuppies Invade*, 10

housing and infrastructure and injected it with fresh capital and a positive mindset, reviving Hoboken into a “national model to America’s ugly cities.”²²

For the most part, displacement was not an agenda priority for these new transplants. Palmer Monroe writing on behalf of “yuppie” citizens noted “we didn’t know that the landlords in Hoboken were so desperate for money that they would do anything to get you people out of the city. We just want a place to live just like you.” By 1985 newcomers flooded the streets and willingly paid higher rents than previous tenants, capitalizing on Hoboken’s prime location. In order to accommodate this flood of settlers, developers turned to the condo, which housed multiple units within the same building. In 1981 Hoboken contained roughly 40 condo apartments, and by 1986 two-thousand units of the city’s private rental stock had been converted to condos. These units cost between \$100,000 to \$200,000, whereas only a few years earlier, an entire brownstone was valued between \$40,000 to \$50,000.²³ The slow pace of brownstone renovations had given way to a frenzy of luxury condo conversations. Rampant speculation and development propelled property valuations into unattainable territory for longstanding residents as luxury living became the norm in Hoboken.²⁴

Political Issues and the Election Stage

The development boom that transpired between the 1970s and 80s came to a shocking head in the form of the fires that terrorized Hoboken’s citizens between 1978 and 1983. Approximately five hundred tenement and apartment buildings were set ablaze by what investigators deemed as arsons. In the effort to further develop Hoboken, the CDA had targeted affluent young professionals in hopes of attracting higher rents into the city. In order to make way for their capital,

²² *ibid*, 21-22.

²³ Barry and Derevlany, *Yuppies Invade*, xxi.

²⁴ Gottlieb, “Hoboken is Burning,” 391.

however, space needed clearing. As Daniel Gottlieb astutely identified, “the CDA hoped that private equity could replace sweat equity in Hoboken.” By providing subsidized loans to landlords, Hoboken’s CDA along with local banks provided the capital needed to renovate their buildings in order to attract a growing class of middle-class professionals. In turn these loans created a “perverse incentive” to renovate and then price out low-income tenants. With a push to capitalize on the white-collar employment boom occurring in NYC, the CDA formed advertising drives that included visitors guides, brochures, optimistic newspaper interviews, arts and food fairs, and the creation of a thirty-stop walking tour. With luxury apartments and condos in short supply within the increasingly fashionable city, those left inhabiting one-third of the city’s housing stock under old rent-control laws found themselves in the crosshairs of tenement landlords. Aiming to cash in on increasing demand, both local and absentee tenement owners waged a campaign of neglect, harassment, buyouts, which culminated in the arsons targeted at the primarily low-income segments of Hoboken.²⁵

Some landlords took advantage of loopholes in the city’s rent-control laws, making improvements to their buildings in order to charge tenants more for these “repairs.” For those reliant on federal and local subsidies any increase in their rents would require them to “voluntarily” move out. Others used a “hardship increase” that allowed rent hikes if a percentage of profit was not being met by an apartment unit.²⁶ These rental trends effectively priced out Hoboken’s lower-income residents. Intimidation was another tactic used by landlords. When asked why he thought his hot water was turned off an elderly resident promptly replied, “I told you harassment.....just to make it tough for us.”²⁷ In July 1981 a local vacancy decontrol law was passed that allowed for

²⁵ Gottlieb, “Hoboken is Burning,” 401-404.

²⁶ *ibid*, 397-398.

²⁷ *Delivered Vacant*.

rent increases to “whatever the market could bear” as long as the previous occupants vacated. In turn those living in rent-controlled apartments found themselves especially at risk for eviction by arson. The fires left fifty-five dead and roughly eight-thousand residents displaced.²⁸ The city’s citizens, however, were well aware of the correlation between the arsons, rent decontrol laws, and the changes in city demographics. In a handbill advertising a march against the arsons for profit, organizers argued “the city council and Mayor Capiello are to blame for these arson deaths because they passed vacancy decontrol and gave the landlords financial incentive to drive out tenants!” These activists protested the war effectively being waged by the city against its poor.²⁹

With Hoboken’s rebranding a seeming success and with vacancies in the city below 1 percent by 1985, the city’s already ailing infrastructure was increasingly taxed.³⁰ With both sewage and rain water running through the same pipeline and all eight of the city’s floodgates in disrepair, the city sewage systems’ condition was best summarized by Councilman Thomas Kennedy: “our sewer system is so old when it rains, people pray at night.”³¹ Congestion on the roads and parking spaces also became major points of contention that same year. The city’s parking authority had to consider raising monthly parking rates on nonlocals and conducting a feasibility study on the construction of a new garage between an old shipyard and the Maxwell Coffee factory.³²

Encompassing these parking and sewage issues and promising a solution for both was the Port Authority’s \$600 million development plan, which pledged to use \$125 million dollars to

²⁸ Gottlieb, “Hoboken is Burning,” 390, 405.

²⁹ *March Against Arson-for-Profit*, Handbill, Hoboken Government & Politics Collection, <https://hoboken.pastperfectonline.com/archive/0F4EB85A-7786-4B7D-8948-691032332938> (Accessed Feb. 21, 2023).

³⁰ Gottlieb, “Hoboken is Burning,” 397-398.

³¹ Paul Clolery, “Mayoral candidates debate in Hoboken,” *Hudson Dispatch*, April 17, 1985, clipping, HSC (HPL), *ibid*.

³² Margaret Schmidt, “Hoboken considers new parking garage,” *Jersey Journal*, clipping, Hoboken Scrapbook Collection *abv*, HSC (Hoboken Public Library, N.J *abv*. HPL, NJ), <http://www.digifind-it.com/hoboken/scrapbooks.php>.

create two new streets, repair roads, fix the floodgates, and improve the city's water processing systems. In return the Port Authority asked to use the remaining \$475 million to construct new office and residential buildings as well as public parks, a hotel, and a marina on the waterfront. The program directly benefitted the Port Authority and helped continue Hoboken's waterfront development.³³

For all the city's growth however, Hoboken's schools and affordable housing situation did not share the same positive trajectory. Hoboken's schools historically underperformed, but by November things worsened. Citing low pupils, 53 Hoboken High School seniors scored well below their peers statewide. Because students at the high school level were found overall to be lacking in reading and mathematical proficiencies, the state did not recommend the district for recertification.³⁴ With a majority of the city's housing stock converted into high-priced rentals or leased to affluent transplants, affordable housing in Hoboken became a scarce commodity. When the Caparra Homes Project opened in the city in March of 1985, 200 low-income families applied for the 20 available apartments. Highlighting the competition for affordable housing in Hoboken, one applicant lamented, "it's a shame that you have to have people lining up 48 hours before the opening." For some residents like the school board's Steve Block and second Ward Councilman Thomas Vezzetti, this assemblage of problems were all interrelated and found their root cause in the Cappiello administration.³⁵

The 1985 Mayoral Campaign

³³ Paul Clolery, "Sewer, traffic backup fixable," *Jersey Journal*, April 19, 1985, clipping, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

³⁴ Paul Clolery, "State cites low pupil scores in report flunking city schools," *Jersey Journal*, March 22, 1985, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

³⁵ "200 stand in line 48 hours for 20 apartments in Hoboken," *Jersey Journal*, March 7, 1985, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

From 1973 Hoboken's growth had primarily been the charge of Steve Capiello. The foremost proponent of rehabilitating the city's image, Capiello had ousted Mayor Louis DePascale but built on the former's program of using federal funding to subsidize Hoboken's growth. Understanding the debilitating effect crime had on investments, Capiello's agenda pushed for an expanded police force that took the fight to drug dealers, criminals, and illegal waste dumpers. During his first term as mayor, Capiello claimed the city's crime was down by 10 percent with serious crime cases down by almost 50 percent. With a "tough on crime" policy initiated, the Capiello administration could focus on the city's economic growth.³⁶

Recognizing the fading importance of industry as an economic base as well as the growing exodus of middle-class families from Hoboken, Capiello by 1975 asserted that his city needed to "find a new economic reason to exist."³⁷ This new model of development needed to make an asset out of Hoboken's underutilized waterfront. Marshaling in a hodgepodge of federal grants and subsidies throughout the 70s, Capiello aimed to revitalize the local economy through housing investments that would create jobs within the city and boost property values.³⁸ With safe streets and a revitalized housing stock, it was Capiello's goal that this pivot toward housing development would "attract higher income residents and new commerce."³⁹

³⁶ "Capiello calls for war on drugs, crime," *Jersey Journal*, July 3, 1973, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

³⁷ Steve Capiello, "Hoboken must find a new economic reasons to exist," *Jersey Journal*, February 28, 1975, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

³⁸ Steve Capiello, "Hoboken's position best in this century," *Jersey Journal*, February 8, 1974, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*; Two beneficiaries of this program were Applied Housing Associates and West Bank Construction, both local affordable housing developers.; For more information see; Gottlieb, 400.; Jim DeRogatis, "Developers Would Reshape Hoboken," *Jersey Journal*, August 26, 1986, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

³⁹ Steve Capiello, "Hoboken's position best in this century."

By creating developmental agencies to oversee Hoboken's "renaissance," Cappiello was able to ensure his vision for the city's revitalization was realized.⁴⁰ The CDA was one such organization with its mission laid out in its original 7 pronged plan: "eliminate slums and their causes; eliminate conditions harmful to health; to conserve and expand housing; to expand and improve community services; to develop land and other natural resources particularly the waterfront; to reduce isolation of income groups; and to restore and preserve historic properties."⁴¹ In a publication advertising the benefits of the CDA, unsightly vacant structures were shown being demolished and row houses revitalized. All this rehabilitation abounded with ethnic charm and community spirit as the booklet heavily featured Hoboken's community at work and play.⁴² Whatever the original intention of the CDA was with all its vagaries, by the first year of its creation in 1975 it was set in charge of distributing federal dollars to developers renovating multi-unit buildings as well as launching a marketing push to attract more affluent residents. By 1977 the CDA had clearly set its eyes on the yuppie demographic. In a visitor's guide published in the same year by the agency to attract prospective residents, the CDA emphasized the city's defining feature. Rather than showcase Hoboken's brownstones, ethnic diversity, or historic baseball field, the CDA chose rather to feature New York City's skyline.⁴³ With his program for Hoboken's revitalization a success, Cappiello was able to win reelection twice in 1977 and 1988 by campaigning on his "business like approach to meeting the city's needs."⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Steve Cappiello, "Hoboken must find a new economic reasons to exist," *Jersey Journal*, February 28, 1975, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid*.

⁴¹ "Hoboken CDA Plan Explained," *Hudson Dispatch*, January 9, 1975, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid*.

⁴² *Hoboken ... Reaching Out to Tomorrow*, Booklet, Hoboken Government & Politics Collection, Accessed May. 8, 2023, https://www.hobokenmuseum.org/collections-item-detail/?page_number=1&entry_id=33911020-f8b4-11ed-ab39-a329634b091a.

⁴³ Gottlieb, 402-403.

⁴⁴ *Political campaign pamphlet for Mayor Steve Cappiello and City Council candidates for 1977 election*, Campaign Pamphlet, Hoboken Government & Politics Collection,

By 1985 Hoboken's "renaissance" and its yuppie invasion was in full force, but under the surface boiled the discontent of those disaffected by the rapid pace of urban redevelopment. With displacement rampant, affordable housing scare, and a myriad of other problems, a referendum on Hoboken's "renaissance" began brewing within the ranks of old-time Hobokenites. One man willing to take the stand against this wave of gentrification and those responsible was Thomas Vezzetti.

At almost six foot tall, unshaven, seemingly always carrying two shopping bags and dressed in anything from dirty polka dot shirts to bright, red-striped pants, Vezzetti was well known to the city's 42,000 residents. Having graduated with a master's degree in history from New York University and working on his PhD in English Literature, Vezzetti for all his smarts was considered the town's eccentric or "village idiot."⁴⁵ A colorful critic of the Capiello administration, Vezzetti originally ran the Hotel Madison, catering to the "alcoholics and bums" of Hoboken. Holding on to his clientele's welfare checks to provide them with monthly sustenance and shelter, his concern for the city's marginalized came to define his political career.⁴⁶ After selling the Madison in 1977 citing ill-health, Vezzetti worked numerous jobs within Hoboken from security guard to management analyst where he spent his days "counting potholes." During these various stints Vezzetti waged a lonely crusade against the city's administration and what he saw as its nepotism, backroom dealing, and hypocrisy.⁴⁷

<https://hoboken.pastperfectonline.com/archive/3FFD9726-9A38-48D6-8402-992829923606> (Accessed Feb. 21, 2023).

⁴⁵ Vezzetti was most likely given the title "village idiot" for his constant attacks on the Capiello administration and attending several under-attended municipal meetings over the years. His personal histories included rumors of him sleeping on municipal jobs, playing football for the Navy without a helmet, and being called "the illegitimate father of the drunks" for his days as the proprietor of the Madison Hotel/Bar. For more information see; Barry and Derevlany, *Yuppies Invade*, 50.

⁴⁶ Barry and Derevlany, *Yuppies Invade*, 49-52.

⁴⁷ Randy Diamon, "Gadfly Spruces Up," *Hudson Dispatch*, January 8, 1984, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid*.

“Appearing at every public meeting in the city for longer than anyone can remember,” Vezzetti became known as one of Hoboken’s toughest critics by attacking city politicians for their self-serving behavior.⁴⁸ In 1981 Hoboken’s Board of Education voted to hire the wives of two city officials and the mother of the board president. Vezzetti criticized these board appointments, citing conflicts of interests and took his complaints to the Hudson County Prosecutor Harold Ruvoldt.⁴⁹ In 1982 Vezzetti once again called on Ruvoldt, citing a secret meeting between Mayor Capiello and the city’s education board, which Vezzetti believed to be a violation of New Jersey’s Open Public Meetings Act. The act gave the public the right to be present at meetings of public bodies.⁵⁰ Sometime during the spring of 1983 the Hoboken Director of Recreation organized a pier parking lot to raise money for the town’s little league. Vezzetti was concerned that the lot was not operating with proper authorization and oversight and called upon the County Prosecutor’s Office to investigate.⁵¹ City Council President Walter Cramer and Vezzetti also waged a verbal war, with Vezzetti accusing Cramer of violating city law by living outside of city limits, abusing tax dollars, and having multiple conflicts of interests.⁵² At a hearing by Hoboken’s school board to approve the district’s budget in 1983, only two citizens attended the hearing prior to the vote. Thomas

⁴⁸ Steve Block, “A Break from Machine Politics,” *Hudson Dispatch*, March 3, 1984, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid*.

⁴⁹ John Watson, “School Board Jobs a “Family Affair” in Hoboken,” *Jersey Journal*, December 9, 1981, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid*.

⁵⁰ Thomas Rojas, “Capiello Denies “Secret” Meeting,” *Jersey Journal*, May 26, 1982, clippings, Hoboken Scrapbook Collection (Hoboken Public Library, N.J), *ibid*.

⁵¹ “Prosecutor probing Hoboken pier parking,” *Jersey Journal*, April 21, 1983, clippings, Hoboken Scrapbook Collection (Hoboken Public Library, N.J), *ibid*.

⁵² Walter Cramer was a major ally of Mayor Capiello and was also the council representative for the city’s 2nd ward. Vezzetti accused Cramer on multiple occasions of living in Freehold, NJ and was against Cramer holding the two public positions of City Council President and Board of Education business administrator simultaneously. Vezzetti would end up unseating Cramer as 2nd ward representative in the council elections of the following year. For more information see; Thomas Rojas, “Vezzetti, Cramer in Hassle,” *Jersey Journal*, July 22, 1982, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid*.

Vezzetti was one of them, there to inquire why the budget rose even though enrollments had declined.⁵³

As gentrification began picking up steam during the 1980s, Vezzetti decided to run for office as Second Ward Councilman and found a bullhorn to start his campaign. Waging a one-man operation, Vezzetti took to the streets to publicly denounce the Cappiello administration as a “secret mafia” profiting off of the arsons and the displacement of longtime residents. Hoboken’s “village idiot” suddenly turned into a viable politician by “saying loudly in public what most people were saying quietly in private.”⁵⁴ Trading in his Bermuda shorts and dirty T-shirts for “ill-fitting suits he picked up in a going out of business sale at a nearby clothing store,” Vezzetti further channeled his eccentricities into verbal admonishments that doubly served as campaign slogans like, “the administration has two types of people working for them—idiots and gangsters.”⁵⁵ With bullhorn in hand, Vezzetti paced on the city’s 14th Street shouting at passersby about the abuses and failures of the city’s administration. At first Vezzetti’s ragtag coalition consisted of those most affected by the effects of displacement, such as the distraught, the homeless, or near homeless. As he began championing the halt of rampant development and a plan for more inclusive housing, Vezzetti’s political brand gained steam with a wider Hoboken audience. In a stunning upset victory during the City Council Elections of 1983, Thomas Vezzetti was able to unseat his old nemesis Walter Cramer as the second ward’s city council representative.⁵⁶

As a councilman Vezzetti continued advocating for transparent government and Hoboken’s marginalized. Within days of being sworn-in as councilman he offered Mayor Cappiello advice on holding two public offices at taxpayer expense, “with all-due respect Steve, I think you should

⁵³ “Hoboken Board OKs School Budget,” *Jersey Journal*, March 17, 1983, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid*.

⁵⁴ Block, “A Break from Machine Politics.”

⁵⁵ Barry and Derevlany, *Yuppies Invade*, 51.

⁵⁶ Barry and Derevlany, *Yuppies Invade*, 52.

resign either as mayor or freeholder.”⁵⁷ During his council tenure Vezzetti and Patrick Pasculli, another reform-minded councilman, called for various reforms such as a government reorganization plan that sought to reduce government overheads by consolidating multiple municipal departments. This in turn would reduce the city’s high tax burdens and increase government effectiveness and accountability by cutting superfluous positions.⁵⁸ Another effort at transparency included endorsing a return to an elected school board. Citing the unnecessary jobs at the board of education and the mayor’s ability to control board appointments, Vezzetti circulated a petition that sought to check any undue influence from Cappiello.⁵⁹ By 1984 Vezzetti and Pasculli began pressing for the passage of a municipal code of ethics that required city officials to make full financial disclosures.⁶⁰

Rent and housing were other contentious issues at the heart of Vezzetti’s time as councilman. Conducting hearings and voting against ordinances that would effectively raise rents and cause displacement, Vezzetti pushed to strengthen the city’s rent-control laws and remove incentives for arson. As an advocate of those victimized by Hoboken’s redevelopment policies he declared, “developers and politicians are trying to drive the people of Hoboken away so they can get higher rents from out-of-towners, and that’s going to be stopped.” For all his attempts at reform however, little actual legislative reform came out of them as he and Pasculli were the lone voices of dissent on a city council filled with Cappiello allies.⁶¹

⁵⁷ “Vezzetti Offers Advice to Cappiello,” *Jersey Journal*, July 15, 1983, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

⁵⁸ James Kopchans, “Vezzetti Won’t Give Up on Reorganization Plan,” *Jersey Journal*, March 12, 1984, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Brad Kelly, “1,000 endorse elected ed board,” *Hudson Dispatch*, September 30, 1983, clippings, Hoboken Scrapbook Collection (Hoboken Public Library, N.J), *ibid.*

⁶⁰ James Kopchans, “Cappiello Foes to Press for Hoboken Ethics Code,” *Jersey Journal*, November 30, 1984, clippings, Hoboken Scrapbook Collection (Hoboken Public Library, N.J), *ibid.*

⁶¹ Gottlieb, “Hoboken is Burning,” 413.

Vezzetti's crusade against Cappiello's political machine did not go unnoticed by the citizens of Hoboken, however. By 1985 a movement against the high taxes, inadequate municipal services, and crumbling infrastructure of the Cappiello administration coalesced around Vezzetti as he threw himself into contention for the mayor's seat. In order to effectively turn the tide against the wave of gentrification washing over the city, Vezzetti would once again run for office and pick up his signature bullhorn to canvas the streets of Hoboken. Publishing his views in the *Hoboken Reporter* Vezzetti explained, "[Cappiello] has become wealthy as a result of his political and economic maneuvering" and "his backroom deals have ruined our city."⁶²

The Runoff Election

By May of 1985 Hoboken's mayoral election took on the portrayal of a referendum on the Cappiello administration and the "renaissance" that it had fostered since 1973. The voices of the discontent could increasingly be heard throughout the city and as election day drew near, it became patently obvious that the election would come down to the incumbent mayor and his loudest detractor. What had originally been a field of four consisting of former councilman Nunzio Malfetti, then-councilman Thomas Kennedy, Thomas Vezzetti, and Mayor Cappiello was whittled down to just Vezzetti and Cappiello by June.⁶³ When the polls closed on May 14th, Cappiello had amassed 42 percent (5,227) of the vote while Vezzetti had won 34 percent (4,282), both candidates

⁶² Barry and Derevlany, *Yuppies Invade*, 53.

⁶³ Nunzio Malfetti had been an independent city councilman for the sixth ward from 1975-1983. During the election Malfetti chose a more personal, face-to-face approach to campaign and decided not to participate in the four major debates held for the election. The *Hudson Dispatch* correctly predicted his chances of winning a majority for mayor in 1985 were slim. For more information see Brad Kelly, "Malfetti's a Street Man," *Hudson Dispatch*, May 5, 1985 clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*; Thomas Kennedy had won an at-large council seat as a Cappiello ally in 1977 and then again in 1981. Running for mayor in 1985, Kennedy broke with the Cappiello camp and ran as an anti-administration candidate. Kennedy, however, needed to out anti-administration Thomas Vezzetti, something he did not accomplish in the mayoral election. For more information see Brad Kelly, "Kennedy Claims Hoboken Advantage," *Hudson Dispatch*, May 9, 1985 clippings, Hoboken Scrapbook Collection (Hoboken Public Library, N.J.), *ibid.*

falling short of the required 50 percent plus one majority needed to win on the first ballot. With the runoff election scheduled for the 11th of the following month, both candidates further entrenched themselves in the political fault lines that defined their pre-runoff campaigns.⁶⁴

Running on his record of growth, Cappiello found himself in the awkward position of having to defend his said achievements. Citing his leadership as a catalyst for Hoboken's revitalization, Cappiello campaigned during the runoff on the rose-tinted slogan of "The Cappiello Years." These years according to his campaign encompassing a drop in major crime by 50 percent, while providing 4,000 units of affordable housing.⁶⁵ Through Cappiello's efforts his campaign maintained that Hoboken gained national prominence for its creative use of city governance in order to develop its waterfront to the economic benefit of all. In order to continue this prosperity, Cappiello pitched himself as the pro-growth candidate whose reelection would usher in further economic opportunity, lower taxes, higher school tests scores, and more affordable housing.⁶⁶

In a show of solidarity with pro-growth forces, Cappiello wooed the yuppie voting bloc. According to one resident's assessment, yuppies would overwhelmingly vote for Cappiello due to his adamantly pro-development platform explaining, "that's what yups are into."⁶⁷ For newer transplants not versed in the drawbacks of gentrification, Hoboken's prosperity indicated that "Cappiello must have done something right"⁶⁸ and was poised as the election's most experienced

⁶⁴ Hoboken Race for Mayor, *Jersey Journal*, May 15, 1985, clippings, Hoboken Scrapbook Collection (Hoboken Public Library, N.J), *ibid*.

⁶⁵ Though Cappiello had started to consider and campaign for the city's poor by election time, his efforts seemed very late in coming and conveniently timed according to his detractors and just another sign of his politicking. For more information see; "Hoboken's Great Debate: Mayor, Vezzetti Clash on Initiative, Independence Part I," *Jersey Journal*, June 5, 1985, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid*.

⁶⁶ "The Hoboken Bullbuster: Special Election Edition," Hoboken Government & Politics Collection, Accessed Feb. 19, 2023, <https://hoboken.pastperfectonline.com/archive/FB4086B2-E5AC-4B55-B684-986434508529> .

⁶⁷ Brad Kelley, "Cappiello and Running Mates Make Pitch for "Yuppie" Vote," *Hudson Dispatch*, April 30, 1985, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid*.

⁶⁸ Barry and Derevlany, *Yuppies Invade*, 64.

candidate. Another segment of the Cappiello faction planned to vote more on pragmatic considerations than on any high-minded sentiments toward the mayor. The editorial board of the *Hudson Dispatch* explained, “the good news is that we think [Cappiello] should be re-elected. The bad news is that the choice is based more on what Cappiello is capable of doing...than on the job he has done for the past four years.” Another part of their glib endorsement advised the mayor to “start paying attention to some of the things that matter but don’t vote, like sewer pipes and water mains.”⁶⁹

Those who did not decide to join the Cappiello positivity parade were more critical of the unfairness inherent in the city’s prosperity. In his effort to revitalize Hoboken, Mayor Cappiello overlooked several key aspects of city life from infrastructure to education and public services. Most importantly, however, Cappiello overlooked the Hoboken born and bred.⁷⁰ Though redevelopment increased the city’s property values and prestige, it also created the prospect of extinction for these longtime Hobokenites. Under this duress, long-established residents could not help but feel that the city had deteriorated both socially and physically under Cappiello’s stewardship. Cappiello’s toughness as a politician was also called into question. Hoboken residents did not see him as tough enough when defending Hoboken’s best interests but being “plenty tough with those who [weren’t] strong enough to defend themselves- the homeless, the poor, the children.”⁷¹ The city’s Hispanic population also publicly lambasted him when the mayor claimed aiding those affected by displacement; those of Hispanic origin were disproportionately victims of the arsons. In reaction to a TV interview given by Cappiello on his benevolence toward the demographic, Hispanic residents protested, “the fact is, the mayor and this administration have

⁶⁹ “Dear Mayor Cappiello,” *Hudson Dispatch*, May 5, 1985, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

⁷⁰ Barry and Derevlany, *Yuppies Invade*, 66-69.

⁷¹ “Cappiello for Mayor,” *Jersey Journal*, May 9, 1985, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

given little to help Hispanics except words.”⁷² The Capiello administration’s policies during its previous terms helped bolster Hoboken’s white-collar gentrification at the expense of its traditionally blue-collar demographic.

If Capiello overlooked Hoboken’s longtime residents, Thomas Vezzetti embraced them. Quintessentially continuing his run as an anti-administration candidate, he campaigned on a reform ticket that sought to lower taxes, promote government transparency, and reign in rampant waterfront development and speculation. Vezzetti also pushed a wider agenda of housing reform that would see through the passage of stricter rent-control laws and the creation of more affordable housing and a housing trust fund.⁷³ Painting his opponent as an out of touch politician and symbolic of “everything wrong in Hoboken and Hudson County politics,” Vezzetti became the voice of those disenfranchised by Hoboken’s gentrification. For local school board member Steve Block and others, Thomas Vezzetti “breathed new life into Hoboken’s moribund political process.”⁷⁴

To city residents Vezzetti seemed too brash and too crazy to be anything but honest. For many years Hoboken’s toughest critic served as the lone voice of dissent in numerous public forums by attacking politicians for their negligence and failure to solve Hoboken’s problems.⁷⁵ In turn, during the election of 1985, he served as the candidate that could sever Hoboken from its patronage-laden and self-dealing political machine. By holding the Capiello administration

⁷² James Kopchains, “Hispanic Tenant s Dispute Capiello’s TV Interview,” *Jersey Journal*, January 25, 1985, clippings, Hoboken Scrapbook Collection (Hoboken Public Library, N.J), *ibid*.

⁷³ Brad Kelly, “Vezzetti Colorful and Caustic Campaigner,” *Hudson Dispatch*, May 7, 1985, clippings, Hoboken Scrapbook Collection (Hoboken Public Library, N.J), *ibid*.

⁷⁴ Barry and Derevlany, *Yuppies Invade*, 54.

⁷⁵ Block, “A Break from Machine Politics.”

accountable during his two years as councilman, citizens saw Vezzetti's mayoral campaign as an honest approach to better governance that could "clean up city hall."⁷⁶

His detractors and opponents, however, saw an inexperienced and abrasive political actor in need of "psychological testing." Seen as "power-mad and incompetent" as well as a bully, Vezzetti was known to disrupt council meetings and debates with his loud tirades against political corruption.⁷⁷ Unpopular with the yuppie demographic, he was booed while trying to campaign at a rally heavily featuring Cappiello.⁷⁸ As for developers, there was no love lost between the two factions as Vezzetti himself stated that "developers claim I'm dangerous."⁷⁹

By the time the polls opened on June 11th the election was painted as a competition between an "incumbent mayor running on a record of prosperity and a one-term city councilman who [saw] that prosperity [as] tainted by unfairness."⁸⁰ When the polls closed and the final votes were tallied, Vezzetti had upset Cappiello by a 2 percent margin, winning with 6,990 to Cappiello 6,647 votes.⁸¹ What had decided Vezzetti's victory was the question he commonly asked while canvassing the city's streets, "do you want to stay in Hoboken?"⁸² Charged with insensitivity toward longtime Hobokenites, Cappiello's redevelopment of the city ultimately became his undoing in his reelection bid. With rents jumping from \$200 in 1975 to \$800 in 1985, rampant redevelopment had displaced too many Hobokenites. One ex-Cappiello supporter lamented, "I've

⁷⁶ Barry and Derevlany, *Yuppies Invade*, 67.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 62.

⁷⁸ Kelley, "Cappiello and Running Mates Make Pitch for "Yuppie" Vote."

⁷⁹ Thomas Vezzetti, *Political campaign letter from Thomas Vezzetti*, Letter, Hoboken Government & Politics Collection, Accessed Feb. 21, 2023, <https://hoboken.pastperfectonline.com/archive/EE64D1C1-36C3-4C2B-BB68-129783116850>.

⁸⁰ Peter Wehrwein, Hoboken to Elect a Mayor Today," *Hudson Dispatch*, June 11, 1985, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid*.

⁸¹ Paul Clolery, "Cappiello Seeks Recount, Says Results won't Change," *Jersey Journal*, June 13, 1985, clippings, Hoboken Scrapbook Collection (Hoboken Public Library, N.J), *ibid*.

⁸² Paul Clolery, "Election's Fate was Sealed by Others' Backers," *Jersey Journal*, June 12, 1985, clippings, Hoboken Scrapbook Collection (Hoboken Public Library, N.J), *ibid*.

been with Cappiello since 1969, but he has forgotten all about the people with him then.”⁸³ Anti-Cappiello sentiment also rose strongly among the city’s Hispanic population, evinced by the strong voting numbers against the incumbent mayor in the city’s primarily Hispanic 4th ward. The city’s Spanish-speaking population never forgave the mayor for waging a war against the city’s poor.⁸⁴ Cappiello’s courting of the yuppie bloc was also thought to have failed, as one resident explained, yuppies “don’t vote” and were “nothing but affluent squatters.”⁸⁵

“I wanted to stay in Hoboken” became a common trope for those who voted for Vezzetti.⁸⁶ Affordable housing, better rent-control laws and schools, along with a say in the local government were the key concerns that elected the new mayor. In less than 12 hours after defeating Cappiello, change was in the air as Vezzetti symbolically exchanged his bullhorn for a broom in front of his campaign headquarters proclaiming “we will make a clean sweep of city hall with this broom.”⁸⁷

Hoboken Post-Election

In the immediate aftermath of his election Vezzetti set about trying to change housing policy in Hoboken. Passing a 60-day moratorium on the construction and rehabilitation of residential units by developers, the City Council hoped that a halt in construction would provide the time necessary to study the effects of rampant gentrification and devise ways to counteract

⁸³ Patricia Donnelly, “The Runoff Takes Center Stage,” *Jersey Journal*, May 15, 1985, clippings, Hoboken Scrapbook Collection (Hoboken Public Library, N.J), *ibid.*

⁸⁴ Brad Kelly, “4th Ward is a Key Battleground,” *Hudson Dispatch*, June 3, 1985, clippings, Hoboken Scrapbook Collection (Hoboken Public Library, N.J), *ibid.*

⁸⁵ Brad Kelly, “Yuppies Turned off by Election,” *Hudson Dispatch*, May 6, 1985, clippings, Hoboken Scrapbook Collection (Hoboken Public Library, N.J), *ibid.*; Further evidence of Cappiello’s failure to attract the yuppie vote could be seen in 5th Ward’s voter tally. The ward experienced a drastic increase in property values due to favorable redevelopment policies passed by the Cappiello administration during the 10 prior years. Cappiello’s campaign team expected the incumbent mayor to do well in the district but won neither the main or runoff election in the ward. In the runoff Cappiello lost the ward 985 to Vezzetti’s 1294. For more information see “Hoboken Race for the Mayor,” *Jersey Journal*, June 12, 1985, clippings, HSC (HPL, N.J), *ibid.*; Brad Kelly, “Candidates Woo Apathetic Voters,” *Hudson Dispatch*, HSC (HPL, N.J), *ibid.*

⁸⁶ Barry and Derevlany, *Yuppies Invade*, 69.

⁸⁷ Brad Kelly, “Vezzetti: I’ll Clean House,” *Hudson Dispatch*, June 13, 1985, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

rapid displacement.⁸⁸ By September 1985, Vezzetti and his administration laid out their study on Hoboken's housing crisis and proposed drastic changes in housing development for the city. Recommendations in the plan made by longtime Vezzetti ally, Steve Block, included the creation of affordable housing units through a system of developer givebacks, creating city-owned housing developments, setting up a housing trust fund, redeveloping the southwest section of Hoboken, and an end to the practice of "warehousing."⁸⁹ The plan however was met divisively citywide with some citizens criticizing the proposal's vagueness and anti-developer sentiment. One resident who had come to laud the revenue generated by the city's rehabilitation dissented, "they want to drive the only source of income out of town."⁹⁰

The Vezzetti administration also sought to help lower-income tenants by identifying abusive landlords. The municipal government compiled a list of the city's worst slumlords—who, in attempts to force their tenants to vacate, kept their buildings in a constant state of disrepair—to properly identify and fine any repeat offenders.⁹¹ The city's shift toward more inclusive growth policies also included the rehiring of Michael Coleman, an affordable housing advocate. A former Model Cities and Community Development Agency director under the DePascale and Cappiello

⁸⁸ For more information see; Margaret Schmidt, "Hoboken Passes 60-Day Building Moratorium to Slow Development," *Jersey Journal*, July 6, 1985, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

⁸⁹ The housing plan proposed requiring development projects, except those low-income ones, to provide or "give back" affordable housing as part of the approval process. In lieu of housing units, developers were given the option of contributing cash, land, or buildings. Any revenue received from the proposed plan would be put into a rotating trust fund made available to Hoboken residents in need of a housing loan. For more information see; Margaret Schmidt, "Housing Crisis Study Recommends Drastic Measures in Hoboken," *Jersey Journal*, September 25, 1985, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.* Warehousing was the practice of keeping apartments vacant until their rental or sale value increased. Some landowners also did this to create artificial scarcity and drive their unit's rental price. Others used warehousing to empty their buildings so they could easily renovate to luxury housing or convert to condos. For more information see; *ibid.*; Jim DeRogatis, "City Council is Closing in on Waterfront Development," *Jersey Journal*, May 20, 1986, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

⁹⁰ Margaret Schmidt, "Housing Plan Divides Hoboken", *Jersey Journal*, September 26, 1985 clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

⁹¹ Rose Duger, "Hoboken Listing Worst Slumlords," *Jersey Journal*, August 24, 1985, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

administrations, Coleman left the year the Model Cities Program merged with the CDA. He was reappointed by Vezzetti in 1986 with the goal of creating more lower to middle-income housing within Hoboken.⁹²

For all his ambition, however, Vezzetti found himself grounded due to a combination of political and economic realities by the second year of his administration. With a resurgent Cappiello winning a crucial council seat as the 3rd Ward's representative, along with other council losses, Vezzetti failed to retain his slim majority on the City Council early on in his mayoral tenure. Faced with "obstructionists," the Vezzetti administration waged an uphill battle as it tried to institute housing reform within its first years. Though the administration was successful at stopping "warehousing" and rebuffing the Port Authority project, other victories came few and far between.⁹³ Major affordable housing projects never fully materialized as the City Council consistently tabled administration proposals. Facing a dearth of federal funding, finding adequate financing for these projects also hindered any significant developments on the affordable housing front. By 1987, midway through his mayoral term, Vezzetti reluctantly admitted he needed a more "realistic" approach to governance. In an attempt to temper the expectations of his administration,

⁹² Coleman had originally resigned from the CDA in 1975, explaining that he had a much harder time working under Cappiello. Signs indicated that Cappiello wanted to see Coleman replaced with someone the mayor was more comfortable with. Coleman's resignation at the time was not taken lightly by those on the council as he was credited with pulling the city back from the brink. For more information see Elizabeth Parks, "Cappiello 'Middle Man' in Coleman Resignation," *Hudson Dispatch*, July 25, 1975, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*; Margaret Schmidt, "Coleman's Goal is Sill Affordable Housing," *Jersey Journal*, January 28, 1986 clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

⁹³ The Port Authority had given up on building in Hoboken by 1987 citing the difficulty it had with the city's new administration and the resentment it faced in Hoboken. Even Cappiello believed the Port Authority's proposal was not favorable to Hoboken in the market condition at the time. For more information see; Anthony DePalma, "Port Authority Cancels Plans to Build in Jersey," *New York Times*, October 24, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/10/24/nyregion/port-authority-cancels-plans-to-build-in-jersey.html>; Jim DeRogatis and Bill Campbell, "Issues: Development," *Jersey Journal*, May 6, 1987, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*; Vezzetti's administration was successful in passing an anti-warehousing ordinance in June of 86. For more information see; Bill Campbell, "Fireworks Old Despite Bomb Scare and Council Passes Warehousing Law," *Jersey Journal*, June, 19, 1986, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

he explained, “we are trying to revamp the city—the sewer plant, the municipal garage, the streets, parking troubles—before we can move ahead...we have been trying to take out 50 to 100 years of negligence. To expect this immediately would be herculean.”⁹⁴

Meanwhile condo development and the city’s gentrification marched onward with Vezzetti lamenting, “you can’t say we’ve stopped growth or even slowed it down, at best we’ve curtailed it.”⁹⁵ In 1986 alone 10 percent of the city’s 7,300 rental apartments were converted into condominiums. By 1987 major development projects like Baker Office Buildings, Skyline Condominiums, and the Jefferson Trust Condos were nearing completion. Dozens of other projects were also in the works with countless more small rehabilitation initiatives having been undertaken.⁹⁶ The Vezzetti administration had no power over these projects as their building permits had been grandfathered in. The city also had not officially passed any ordinances prohibiting construction.⁹⁷

In February 1988 an affordable housing deal was finally reached between developers, tenants, City Council members, and community groups. A vote was expected within 35 days after its introduction, but administration hopes took a sudden turn the following month.⁹⁸ On March 2, 1988, at 12:03 am, Thomas Vezzetti died of a massive heart attack.⁹⁹ During his tenure as mayor, Vezzetti presided over policies that included laws prohibiting “warehousing,” the creation of a

⁹⁴ “Vezzetti Predicts City Ready to Make Its Move,” *Jersey Journal*, July 1, 1987 clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

⁹⁵ Anthony DePalma, “How Hoboken Tries to Control Growth,” *New York Times*, February 2, 1986, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

⁹⁶ Jeffrey Roff, “Hoboken Condo Units Grow in ‘86,” *Hudson Dispatch*, December 1, 1986, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*; DeRegatis and Campbell, “Issues: Development.”

⁹⁷ DePalma, “How Hoboken Tries to Control Growth.”

⁹⁸ Christopher Ave, “Housing Deal is Reached,” *Hudson Dispatch*, February 1, 1988, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

⁹⁹ David Lippman and Michael Stearns, “Vezzetti Dies of Heart Attack,” *Hudson Dispatch*, March 2, 1988, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

program to replace sewage facilities, developmental guidelines for the waterfront, reshaping the Planning and Zoning Boards of Adjustment, and City Hall reorganization. The affordable housing deal that would have required developer givebacks that Vezzetti had championed prior to his election, however, remained unapproved at the time of his death.¹⁰⁰ Though his tenure ran short, Vezzetti left a legacy in Hoboken as a selfless agitator for reform and an honest man. In the wake of his death, city residents looked on with pessimism as they contemplated Hoboken's future and their mayor's death. One resident reflected on Vezzetti: "he always fought the regime, but they tied his hand. They put the poor people out of the temple."¹⁰¹

Conclusion

During the early 1980s, Hoboken's average family income stood at \$15,540 as compared to \$24,540 of the surrounding areas, lagging behind its neighbors by about 36 percent. By 1990 the city had made up part of that difference, and the average family income was roughly \$48,800 compared to the \$55,600 of surrounding areas. Hoboken now only trailed behind its neighbors by 13 percent.¹⁰² Its demographics had drastically changed as well. The city's Hispanic population, which numbered at 17,151 in 1980, declined to 10,036 by 1990. Cappiello's war against the poor effectively cut the Hispanic population down by 41 percent. Rented apartments with tenants making more than \$20,000 increased from roughly 2,700 in 1980 to 7,600 in 1990, reflecting the more affluent demographic moving into the city. The number of white-collar workers in the finance, insurance, and real estate industries also saw their numbers increase substantially. During the 1970s these white-collar professionals numbered around 500. By 1990, 3,430 Hobokenites

¹⁰⁰ Jim DeRogatis, "Vezzetti Presided Over Great Change," *Jersey Journal*, March 3, 1988, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Walter Owen, "Public Pessimistic with Vezzetti Gone," *Hudson Dispatch*, March 7, 1988, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid.*

¹⁰² Social Explorer.

found employment in said industries.¹⁰³ This influx of workers was reflected in the city's unemployment rate by 1990, which stood roughly on par with the national rate at 6 percent.¹⁰⁴

These demographic changes, however, were not the simple result of esoteric market forces gone awry. Rather, they were a result of a concerted effort by the city's government and property developers to push for urban renewal. Capitalizing on federal subsidies offered by initiatives like the Model Cities Program, the DePascale and Capiello administrations were able to foster an urban "renaissance" within Hoboken. Marshaling in grants and other federal monies during the 1970s, Capiello was able to bolster growth using federal funds to entice other private investments into the city.¹⁰⁵ With the success of his early efforts, such as his tough-on-crime and waterfront development policies, Capiello further grew Hoboken's brand with the creation of the Community Development Agency.¹⁰⁶ The CDA's drive to attract young upwardly mobile professionals into Hoboken was a success by 1985. The city's popularity gained so much traction, however, that a campaign of arson and intimidation was waged to drive out any economic stragglers. For the Capiello administration, those marginalized by the city's revitalization were a mere afterthought.¹⁰⁷

As federal subsidies dried up and displacement became commonplace, the city's vulnerable championed Thomas Vezzetti to take the government's helm. This paradigm shift in favor of the city's misaligned, however, came too little too late. The development boom and the market forces that had been ushered in by prior administrations had taken too firm of a grasp on the city. By the time Vezzetti won the mayor's seat, Hoboken's affordable housing was an extremely scarce

¹⁰³ Gottlieb, 415.

¹⁰⁴ Social Explorer.

¹⁰⁵ Gottlieb, 399.

¹⁰⁶ "Capiello calls for war on drugs, crime" Capiello, "Hoboken must find a new economic reasons to exist."

¹⁰⁷ Gottlieb, 405.

commodity. One of Hoboken's housing projects contained 1,350 units with a vacancy rate of only 2 per month. Its waiting list was 262 names long and 300 more waited to get on the list. At the city's other set of subsidized apartments, Applied Housing, 1,300 apartments had a waiting list of 500. Another 1,500 applicants were waitlisted for the actual waitlist.¹⁰⁸

If Cappiello was able to leverage state and federal funds in order to grow Hoboken, Vezzetti did not have the same success during the Reagan years. On Hoboken's inability to finance more affordable housing Vezzetti lamented, "We aren't getting any more revenue from the government....[federal] financing is almost completely knocked out. Even the UDAG (Urban Development Action Grant) is almost gone."¹⁰⁹ Compounding the issue of affordable housing was the city government's lack of developmental space, having sold off most of its land to private individuals and firms. Hoboken, in turn, became reliant on private developers for the construction of subsidized housing, something it could not legally force any developer to do.¹¹⁰ Even with federal subsidies, low-income housing had fallen out of favor in the city as one representative of Applied Housing explained, "affordable housing cannot compete in this market. If we had all of the subsidy programs, in their heyday, available to us, the demand of the middle class still would make low income housing impossible."¹¹¹

The global patterns of gentrification seen in the 1980s held true in Hoboken. As new consumption trends and a backlash against suburban living came into vogue, young upwardly mobile professionals caught up in the wave of 1980s financialization moved into the city.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Paul Clolery, "Affordable Housing Remains a Dream as Rent Subsidies Dry Up," *Jersey Journal*, July 23, 1985, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid*.

¹⁰⁹ Bill Campbell and Jim DeRogatis, "Vezzetti Reviews His First Year," *Jersey Journal*, July 1, 1986, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid*.

¹¹⁰ Paul Clolery, "Affordable Housing Remains a Dream."

¹¹¹ *ibid*.

¹¹² Lees, Slater, and Wyly, *Gentrification* 118-127.

Location played a key role in attracting these yuppies, as Hoboken's proximity to New York City and PATH provided an easy commute to New York's financial district.¹¹³ Established Hobokenites, however, found themselves forced out of their homes due to this new group of residents. Both groups, yuppie and non-yuppie alike though, were simply looking for a place to call home. The clash that ensued between them was an outgrowth of the economic and housing insecurity that were manifested due to political policy. While the two sides waged cultural warfare against each other on the letters page of the *Hoboken Reporter*, the real instigators of change sat behind their desks in their development offices and Hoboken's city hall.

The mayoral election of 1985 aired the city's grievances over gentrification and displacement. The election is important as it informs us that free market forces were not solely responsible for Hoboken's gentrification and the displacements that followed. Nor was it simply self-interested yuppies looking to displace locals for a piece of prime real-estate. Rather, the evidence makes it clear that it was primarily a combination of federal and local intervention that proactively enticed developers into Hoboken and set about the ensuing gentrification. Though consumption trends, financialization, and location all play a role in the "successful" transformation of a city, it is important not to overlook the political contexts in which these events unfold. Steve Cappiello's election and subsequent re-elections during the 1970s and early 1980s could be understood as Hoboken's electorate prioritizing pro-growth policies over others. By 1985, longtime Hobokenites, fearing displacement, elected Vezzetti in hopes of "hold[ing] economic forces in line," but by then it was too late.¹¹⁴ Gentrification had permanently altered the city's housing landscape. By the mid-1980s, Hoboken's identity as an industrial port-town had faded,

¹¹³ Gottlieb, 391.

¹¹⁴ Barry and Derevlany, *Yuppies Invade*, 53.

replaced instead by an understanding that “development is life blood.”¹¹⁵ Hoboken’s model of growth provides a cautionary tale for other cities seeking to capitalize off of gentrifying trends. While the prospect of increased revenue from more affluent tenants may tempt city administrations to push for luxury construction projects, they risk marginalizing the very community residents they claim to serve. In the process of building up the community, city officials may inadvertently demolish its very identity.

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¹¹⁵ Rose Duger, “Rotary: “Development is Life Blood,” *Jersey Journal*, October 10, 1985, clippings, HSC (HPL), *ibid*.