

**A WVIP Commentary**  
**By William O'Shaughnessy**  
**November 25, 2020**

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The city development commissioner Luiz Aragon is leaving.

Time to see what he has left in his wake.

He leaves an urban landscape once loaded with potential and opportunity, now littered with concrete and glass buildings with no lineage or character ... and urban architecture without style, dignity or reference to the City's hallowed background or its remarkable multi-cultural history.

These soulless structures could exist in Tulsa, Jersey City, Dayton, Flint, or Oklahoma City. They don't belong here. Which is not to say the City hadn't slipped into a slow, inexorable decline over the years as we turned away Lord & Taylor, Ikea, the United Nations and other suitors.

The rents for these behemoth boxes are still out of reach for cops, firemen, nurses, first responders, waiters, bus boys and teachers who don't need or require "concierge" service when they come home spent and exhausted after a hard day's labor.

Mr. Aragon, Mayor Bramson and the desperate, needy city council of the last several years bought in hook, line and sinker to the blandishments of a posse of high-rolling "What's in it for Me?" developers who pushed generic designs and plans appealing to the lowest common denominator. They dazzled the elders at City Hall with developer-speak phrases like "crowdsourced placemaking."

"The great international architect Renzo Piano once memorably said, "You can put down a bad book. You can avoid listening to bad music, but you cannot miss the ugly tower or that block of concrete that despoils the skyline of the city.

"There was no concept or mandate to innovate or be bold in all of this. A design concept, no matter how large or small, is the catalyst for a project and its development. In our downtown especially there is no music, no narrative, no intellectual public engagement for these soulless buildings, except gobble-de-gook like that "crowdsourced placemaking.

"It's been observed that "Architecture is a social act and the material theatre of human activity." But we showed no concern when confronted by drab aesthetics with drab, multi-cultural faux brick, plastic mullions, fake and weird styling cues – both inside and out. Sadly New Rochelle has become a ubiquitous bastion of bad architecture. We've become a victim of homogeneous planning.

Across the country we know that passionate civic activism has helped put an end to some very bad projects, private, as well as public. But not in New Rochelle where we begged developers to "Roll over and Pet me ...

"In recent years, our bourgeois mentality and perceived materialistic values stifled any unconventional or creative approach.

Blame it on the seeming paucity of urban planners today and speculators who are lacking in courage and vision that once distinguished the urban planning profession. Mind you, I'm not trying to urge or impose any pinched restriction or "artsy-fartsy" approach to the downtown opportunity.

But shouldn't the City, when contemplating Renewal, be allowed to have its surprises and contradictions in the dull, colorless urban landscape?

I'm not saying we should only have done business with developers who covet, understand and appreciate the architectural and conceptual genius of the likes of Renzo Piano, Santiago

Calatrava, Enrique Norton, Frank Gehry, Daniel Libeskind, Lord Norman Foster, Richard Meier, Robert A.M. Stern, the late Eero Saarinen, Michael Graves, James Polshek, Oscar Niemeyer, Costos Kondylis or Ren Koolhaas.

Thanks to my compadre Gregorio Alvarez, we've actually met and spoken with Santiago Calatrava, Lord Foster, Richard Meier and the late Costos Kondylis. Although they have designed brilliant buildings all over the world, they would gladly have taken a shot with poor, desperate, needy and too long ignored New Rochelle. But the greedy developers selected by the mayor, Luiz Aragon and our genius Council thought your City was not ready for prime-time creativity and the brilliance of a quality, imaginative urban architect.

As it struggled in years gone by, we were able to observe the genius and dedication of Mayor Alvin Richard Ruskin for many years as he fought to retain Bloomingdales, Arnold Constable and build a Macys. The liberal Republican was admired by both sides ... even by the Teddy Green-led conservatives. He was also encouraged by Hughie Doyle, Joe Evans and Elly Doctorow, Rocco Bellantoni, Joe Fosina and other Forward-looking people on the high council of our city.

Some blame has to go to the Board of Education of the day and age. When it was appointed by the mayor it was populated with lawyers, judges, successful business executives and wonderful women like Mary Jane Reddington and Ruby Saunders. It should not be a popularity contest as it is now for the one who can get the most votes ... and run by a superintendent answerable to no one. Once a year they come around and show themselves only at Budget time.

We have very high regard for several of those in City Hall ... starting with our skillful, dedicated and hard-working city manager Charles Bowman "Chuck" Strome. He knows the levers, the buttons and the tedious minutia of government better than anyone. Only Paul Feiner, George Latimer and Andrew Cuomo, the Governor himself, and very few others are in his league. Nita Lowey certainly is. Chuck is certainly a great recruiter. He finds talented people and protects them from the political winds. There are several other stellar players in City Hall, even to this day, including Police Commissioner Joe Schaller who succeeded the legendary Patrick Carroll. And Fire Chief Andy Sandor. And thank God we have a wonderful individual like "Don" Dominic Procopio heading up the Civil Service Commission. And our City Court, headed by Judges Anthony Carbone, Susan Kettner and Jared Rice. Jimmy Generoso is perhaps the best court administrator in New York State. We also have high regard for Paul Vacca, our longtime building inspector.

## Do We Really Need Another Apartment Building?

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The Board of Education? Forget it! We'd need Jimmy Breslin (The Gang That Couldn't Shoot Straight" to describe that group.)Who then to blame for the very bland stew of unimaginative apartment behemoths that development commissioner Luiz Aragon leaves behind?

We blame the city council. What we wouldn't trade for a Walmart, a Target, a Wegman's, a Bed, Bath and Beyond or a Best Buy! We'd even settle for a good deli!

In recent years there has been occasional glimpses of taste, sophistication and genius provided by Louis Cappelli who gave us a splendid example with his Trump Tower, still the most attractive downtown structure. Cappelli is also doing the right thing with his new building where the Standard Star and Marty & Lenny's once stood. There is another attractive building in the hood: the Valenti-Montefiore building is a worthy structure built by John and Charles Valenti and their father Jerry of sainted memory.

We even look back on those heady days when developers Norman Winston, David Muss and a marvelous character named Spencer Martin (who worked out of our office) at least gave us a Macy's and, for a while, a mini-shopping center.

And what of David's Island that lays forlornly rotting in the sun? We lost The Edison Company. And even Donald Trump because they wouldn't give him a bridge which would connect to overgrown and crumbling Fort Slocum out in Long Island Sound. It's a prime piece they still don't know what to do with.

The problem is not just downtown with all the dull, boxy, high rise apartment buildings.

We have been richly endowed by our Creator with nine miles of natural shoreline. We're not landlocked like poor Mount Vernon. But the elders of the City have done nothing about that precious waterfront resource. Davenport Neck is slowly disappearing, and Five Islands Park is underutilized, while Premium Point remains a guarded and pristine haven for the wealthy. Even Mamaroneck has done better with its waterfront via Harbor Island Park.

We also have a rich cultural heritage that once attracted Norman Rockwell and America's

greatest artists and illustrators. Among the City's prominent citizens were Lou Gehrig, Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, Frances Sternhagen, Lee Archer, Don McLean, Andrea Mitchell James Fenimore Cooper, Thomas Paine, Carl Reiner, Ken Chenault and three other chairman of AMEX, Vin Draddy, Richard Roundtree, Peter Lind Hayes, Robert Merrill, John Jay, Farouk Kathwari, Tom Rogers, Joe Klein, Governor Malcolm Wilson, Whitney Moore Young, Hugh Price, Willie Mays, Ben Ferencz, Frankie Frisch, Eddie Foy and the Seven Little Foys.

And ... YOU ... who subsidized all this with lavish tax breaks!

Unfortunately, all this was lost on Luiz Aragon. And Noam Bramson.

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Postscript: We've been pretty tough on Mr. Aragon. It's not personal. He is, in every telling and by every account, a very nice man with good intentions.

Let's just say ... he got what he could.

The same for Bramson.

However disappointing.

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William O'Shaughnessy, a former president of the New York State Broadcasters Association, was chairman of Public Affairs for the National Association of Broadcasters in Washington. He has been a point man and advocate for the broadcasters of America on First Amendment and Free Speech issues and is presently chairman of the Guardian Fund of the Broadcasters Foundation of America, the national charitable organization. He is also a longtime director and member of the Executive Committee of the Foundation. He has operated WVOX and WVIP, two

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*He is the author of "AirWAVES" (1999) ... "It All Comes Back to Me Now" (2001) ... "More Riffs, Rants and Raves" (2004) ... and "VOX POPULI: The O'Shaughnessy Files," released in January, 2011. He has also written "Mario Cuomo: Remembrances of a Remarkable Man," a tribute to his late friend Governor Mario M. Cuomo. His newest book RADIOactive for Fordham University Press, another anthology with interviews, commentaries, speeches and tributes was published in 2019. He is presently working on Townies, a paeon to those without wealth, influence or high estate in suburban Westchester County, the heart of the Eastern Establishment.*