Riverfront Recapture? Who captured whom?

For many Hartford residents, the state-funded urban development by that name is a concrete wharf, re-establishing pedestrian access to the Connecticut River. The project was a great idea. The name, however, is little more than a lovely literary alliteration, with more illusion than allusion. Whatever committee approved the name Riverfront Recapture should have their heads examined, or perhaps take a geology course.

Mark Twain -- Hartford's most famous resident -- would have lampooned the namers of this project for their hubris writ large. Having seen the Mississippi River as "the majestic, the magnificent," Twain would have likely felt the same about the Connecticut River, New England's largest and steadiest.

During the late 19th century, Twain probably witnessed the construction of Hartford's 30-foot-high dikes, which were built to protect the then-thriving industrial city from damaging floods. He probably watched as the dikes cleaved downtown from its riverfront, its raison d'être. As an amateur river scientist, he may have taken satisfaction in watching the river finish off its capture of Hartford, rather than the other way around. Were Twain alive today, we might be quivering under his rapier-sharp pen.

Indeed, it is the river that has captured us. As T.S. Eliot wrote in "The Dry Salvages": "I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river/Is a strong brown god -- sullen, untamed and intractable."

The one good thing about Hartford's riverbank setting is that it could be worse. We could be living in New Orleans, Bangladesh or Venice, all of which are sinking beneath a rising sea. Hartford, however, lies on stable ground. Below the multicolored coat of urban fill, beneath the olive-colored skin of floodplain mud, lies the solid muscle of hard-packed glacial soils and rugged backbone of maroon-colored sandstone. But all this strength is helpless against the rising tide, which slowly grows higher, century after century.

The first inhabitants of Hartford were Native Americans, who camped on what was then a lovely river overlook near the confluence of the Park and Hockanum rivers. Later, as the Vikings settled Newfoundland, Indians of the Late Woodland Period grew corn on the floodplain, at the present site of Adriaen's Landing. We know this because the distinctive pollen of Zea mays (native corn; also called maize) lies trapped in the floodplain mud of that age, which was deposited whenever the river overtopped its banks, bringing with it an annual complement of moisture and mineral nutrients. This stimulated the luxurious growth of herbaceous vegetation and kept the forest at bay, producing a seasonal grassland perfect for livestock grazing and crops, yet with access to the river for water, transportation and the view. These floodplain soils were the bait that first lured European settlers to Hartford. They took the bait and became captured, as though they were fish on a line.

The second capture was inevitable. As the settlement grew, the land just above the level of seasonal floods (then called freshets), but adjacent to it, became the most valuable, especially for commerce. It wasn't long before property owners realized that they could make more well-drained land by artificially raising the elevation of the floodplain with fill -- a mixture of gravel, demolished buildings, coal clinker and other debris. The stability of the fill gave the illusion of solidity and control, which led to the construction of expensive buildings and streets, the most famous of which is the Old State House. The financial investment alone captured Hartford on the floodplain, as though the city were chain-tethered to a place that occasionally went underwater.
The third and final capture was the ugliest. Too much money had been invested in downtown Hartford to tolerate the annoyance of rare floods. In an act of industrial hegemony, the Brahmins of Hartford took it upon themselves to tame the river with dikes, once and for all. Ironically, in the process of dike construction, one that Robert Frost might have lamented, the city walled itself in, as its dwellers walled the river out. Unwittingly, they had let themselves be captured by the river, not on a line and not on a chain, but in an open-air cage, however big it might appear.

My point? Any access to the riverfront is a good thing. Riverfront Recapture was a good start. Another three or four projects like that might be a good idea, although preferably with a less naive name. A break through the dike -- perhaps as part of a future Coltsville project -- would be even better. And given one break, why not another, and another?

Although it is my instinct to tear down the dikes completely, even if it involves some risk, this is clearly not in the state's best interest, because there is too much money invested already. Besides, doing so would snarl up traffic for at least a decade, given that I-91 cruises along on top of the dike (that's why you get to see the river from your car). The most logical -- although politically and financially absurd -- notion would be to raise the city to the level of the dikes (rather than lowering the level of the dikes to the city) and produce what an Old World archaeologist might call a "tell," should the city ever be abandoned and leveled.

The developers of Riverfront Recapture were absolutely correct in making the psychosocial connection between the long-term health of the city and access to the "strong brown god" that gave it life. It is this slightly vengeful god who, perhaps peeved by the temerity of the city clinging to its flank, broke the dikes in the great flood of 1936.

Meanwhile, sea level is rising. The river rises in refrain. Who will make the next break?