REDISCOVERING DOWNTOWN:
STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE OF PROVIDENCE

by

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Sc. B., Civil Engineering
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Submitted to the Department of Urban Studies and Planning
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

This thesis establishes the importance of traditional downtowns in metropolitan regions, examines ways in which they can be revitalized, and proposes guidelines and strategies to facilitate the rediscovery of Downtown Providence, Rhode Island. First, an overview of the physical and functional development of downtowns is presented to offer evidence of their importance. Then, the development of Downtown Providence is traced, the current conditions are analyzed, and seven issues specific to the revitalization of Providence are identified. To learn what has been done to revitalize comparable downtowns, four cities with characteristics similar to Providence are examined—Worcester, Massachusetts; Portland, Maine; Norfolk, Virginia; and Stamford, Connecticut. The Providence-specific issues and the lessons learned from the case studies are then used to develop a set of guidelines for the future of Downtown Providence. Specific revitalization strategies are proposed that respond to these guidelines and acknowledge the unique characteristics of Providence. Finally, reflections on the role of planning and planners in downtown revitalization are offered. The conclusion drawn from the thesis is that downtowns have the potential to reemerge as important regional commercial and cultural centers because of their central location and existing physical infrastructure. Further, by exploiting the physical, social, and cultural characteristics that are particular to each city, careful planning and design can facilitate the redevelopment of downtowns that are distinct from one another.

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I owe my parents a great deal of thanks for fostering my desire to continue to learn. Michael, Art, Hensin, and Bill also deserve credit for offering their advice and being patient as I contemplated a career change. Above all, I wish to thank Debby. As my friend, she supported my decision to go to graduate school so that I could learn how to help others plan for a better future. As my wife, she has guaranteed that my own future will be brighter.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

This thesis establishes the importance of downtowns, examines ways in which they can be revitalized, and proposes guidelines and strategies to facilitate the rediscovery and renewal of Downtown Providence, Rhode Island. This thesis originated from a concern about the neglected conditions of many traditional downtowns and from a specific interest in the future of Downtown Providence. The traditional commercial center of Providence has continued to suffer from vacancies and underutilization, although much of its original physical character remains intact. In contrast, the edges of the district have seen an enormous amount of development over the past decade, and a proposal for a regional mall within three blocks of the city center is on the verge of becoming a reality. Nevertheless, the future of Downtown, itself, remains a question. Significant planning efforts are now being focused on the area, with proposals for housing, an arts and entertainment district, and related specialty retail. This investigation of the current conditions and prospects for Downtown is made with full awareness of the current plans, but the thesis proposes additional measures that can be taken to ensure that Downtown Providence will reemerge as the social and cultural center of the region.

OVERVIEW

Chapter 1 reviews the physical and functional development of downtowns to establish the importance of revitalizing these places, which have valuable physical and cultural attributes that are difficult to reproduce elsewhere. Chapter 2 examines Providence, Rhode Island, as a particular place that is seeking to revive its downtown. A study of the development history of Providence, a review of past and current planning efforts, and an investigation of current conditions Downtown lead to the identification of several key issues that need to be considered in forming strategies for the future. Chapter 3 presents

lessons from four cities that have characteristics that are similar to Providence—Worcester, Massachusetts; Portland, Maine; Norfolk, Virginia; and Stamford, Connecticut. A set of guidelines for the future of Downtown Providence is presented in Chapter 4. These guidelines are based on research and analysis of Downtown Providence and the lessons taken from the case studies. Chapter 5 proposes strategies and specific projects that respond to the guidelines and acknowledge the unique characteristics of Providence. Finally, reflections on the role of planning and planners in downtown revitalization are offered.

CONCLUSIONS

Downtown has played an important role in American society as a commercial, cultural, and social center; it has the potential to be a vital part of our society in the future. Some of the specific functions will be different from those of the past, but the past serves as a reminder that downtown evolved to accommodate a variety of activities. Therefore, downtown can be much more than a single-purpose central business district.

Downtown Providence, like the center of many other American cities, has surrendered its status as the traditional retail and social center of the region. Many of the reasons for the decline of traditional downtowns are similar from one place to another. In particular, suburbs emerged as places that offered alternatives to the traditional center of activity, and roads were constructed that facilitated easy access to these new "centers." Fortunately, many downtowns also share attributes that can facilitate their reemergence as important destinations: a central location within the region and a density of existing infrastructure that can accommodate a variety of uses. As many cities have taken steps toward revitalizing their downtown districts, useful lessons for a particular place can be learned by studying cities with comparable attributes. Yet, each city has specific physical and cultural characteristics. Plans and designs must be developed around these characteristics to utilize the full potential that each place offers and to avoid a "sameness" in downtowns similar to the look-alike environments that have been criticized in suburban shopping strips and malls. In addition, urban planners and designers must work with the people who will potentially use downtowns so that the planning process will identify and address the appropriate issues and tap the strengths of the local population. As downtowns once again become desirable destinations, they will improve the quality of life for the region's residents and strengthen their important roles as regional economic centers that support the entire city.

CHAPTER 1
THE IMPORTANCE OF DOWNTOWN

Downtown is a distinctive place in the American urban environment—physically, functionally, and culturally. The downtown skyline creates an identity for a city and, ideally, serves as a symbol of the city's vitality (Figure 1.1). The dense arrangement of buildings, each designed to present a recognizable civic or corporate image, sets the center of the city apart from the areas that surround it and reflects a concentration of activity. Historically, the uses downtown have included retail establishments, corporate and government offices, educational institutions, libraries, banks, restaurants, hotels, and theaters. While downtown will always be the geographic center of the metropolitan

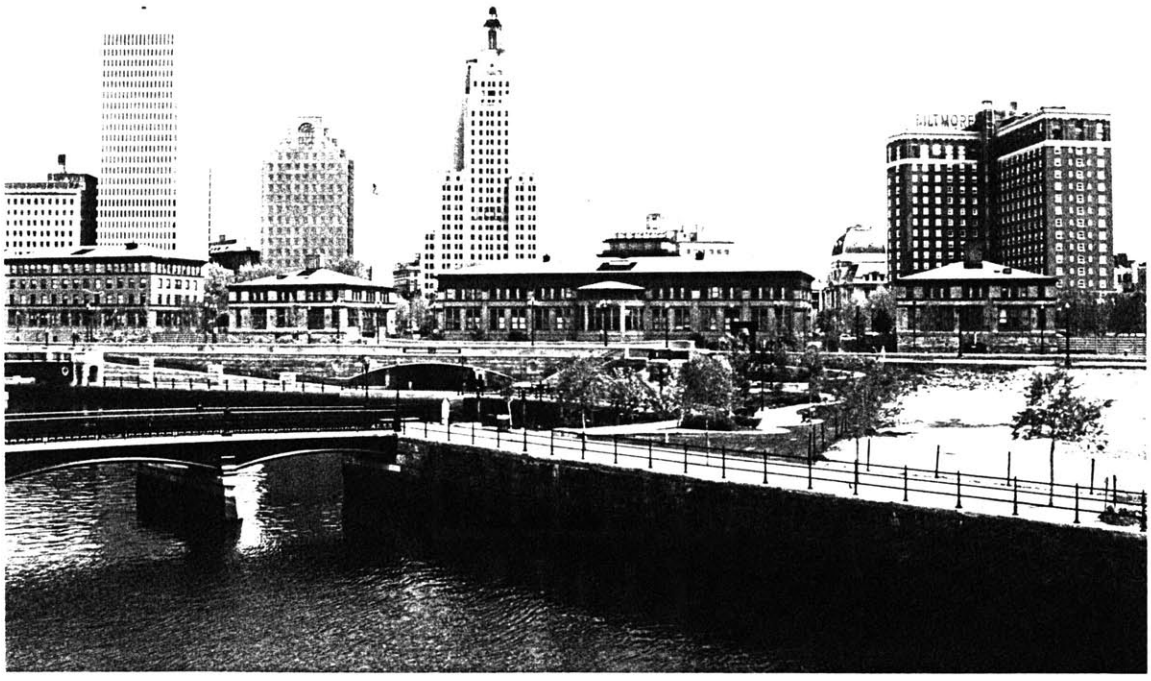

Figure 1.1: The Providence Skyline

region, its role as the center of commercial, cultural, and social activity is not guaranteed. Many downtowns play the important role of the city's central business district—a home to offices and banks—but have lost much of the vitality that diverse activities bring. As many of the traditional uses have left the center of the city, downtown faces an uncertain future.

Most downtowns evolved from a marketplace, the centrally located place at a port or crossroads where goods were traded. As the nation became industrialized, commercial activity grew more complex. Banks, insurance companies, and other professional enterprises located near existing commercial establishments, reinforcing the importance of the central commercial area. Railroad depots and streetcar hubs were located nearby, facilitating the movement of a large number of people to downtown. Specialized shops and eventually the department store, the mainstay of downtown retail activity, flourished in the center of activity. Department stores became community institutions as they served the consumer needs of the growing middle class, recognized the changing role of women in managing their families' budgets, and, in many cases, transformed shopping into an entertainment experience.[1] Restaurants and theaters added to the mix of activity, making it possible to enjoy a full day of shopping and entertainment downtown. The dense development was practical; one use benefited from its proximity to another, and consumers could go to one location to fill a variety of needs. This mixture of uses also had a social value; it provided an opportunity for people to interact.

The bustling, multi-use downtown no longer exists in some cities. The widespread use of automobiles and the accompanying proliferation of roads and highways after World War II had a devastating effect on downtown. Highways allowed residential and commercial development to spread away from the center of the city. Suburban residents, many of whom were lured from the city by favorable mortgage programs, found it more convenient to drive their cars to new suburban shopping centers than to deal with the congestion downtown. Those cars that did come downtown required places to park. The cohesive urban pattern was interrupted, and the density of activities decreased as buildings were demolished to accommodate parking lots and garages. For the first time, the retail establishments of the downtown main street faced competition from the new suburban shopping centers with their national chain stores. Many cities attempted to fight

[1] Bernard J. Frieden and Lynne B. Sagalyn, *Downtown, Inc., How America Rebuilds Cities*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1989, pp. 7–9.

back by trying to look more like the suburbs: shopping streets were closed to vehicular traffic, and buildings were given new modernist facades or were replaced altogether.

The new enclosed suburban shopping malls were successful, in large part, because they offered one of the strongest attributes of downtown, its concentration of a mixture of stores and commercial services, in a more convenient setting. Malls have replaced many of the functions of downtown and have even been referred to as "the new downtown."[2] Yet, shopping centers and malls cannot replicate every aspect of downtown. As Roberta Brandes Gratz explains in *The Living City*,

> The personality of a *real* downtown can never be achieved in a mall... The local spirit in full strength and the symbiotic relationship between the local merchants and community customers can be achieved only in a genuinely local setting—in other words, on Main Street or its equivalent downtown location. Local character is antithetical to the nature of a mall.[3]

The combination of uses and the distinctive physical form that developed over time gave this central place its identity. As Gratz' statement suggests, there is a personality to a downtown, defined by a combination of its central location, its buildings and streets, its collection of uses, and the people who use them. Downtown is so important because this character cannot be recreated elsewhere.

Many cities have lost some of the elements of their traditional downtowns. For example, physical reminders may remain in the form of old commercial buildings, but the original uses may no longer be there. Or a traditional use may still exist, but it might occupy a new physical form, such as shopping that now takes place in a downtown shopping mall. And while many downtowns have retained their important commercial functions as central business districts, some have lost much of the spirit of the old downtown. A downtown used by office workers during the day but void of activity at night and on weekends does not live up to its full potential. The term "central *business* district" may be an accurate description of what occurs there, but it doesn't do justice to the variety of activities that historically have occurred downtown. Some urban experts

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[2] Witold Rybczynski, *City Life: Urban Expectations in a New World*, New York: Scribner, 1995, p. 216.

[3] Roberta Brandes Gratz, *The Living City*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989, pp. 206-7.

have suggested that the term is a self-fulfilling prophecy for downtown since no other uses are being developed there.[4]

Yet, as suggested above, downtowns have the potential to once again become vital centers of commercial, social, and cultural activities because of their key physical attributes. First, all downtowns are at the geographic center of a metropolitan region, which puts downtown within reach of all of the surrounding communities and gives it an advantage over outlying areas. Second, the basic infrastructure is already in place, unlike undeveloped areas that would require significant new investment. Finally, this existing infrastructure of streets, buildings, and spaces in older downtowns is often of a type and at a scale that can accommodate a concentration of multiple pedestrian-oriented uses.

But what can these uses be and who will they serve? Some of the uses may be drawn from downtown's past as a center of multiple activities that served office workers, nearby residents, and people throughout the metropolitan region. If downtown is to recapture and maintain its traditional vitality, however, the uses that it offers should take advantage of its ability to offer a setting that is unmatched elsewhere. There are people who are looking for alternatives to the look-alike suburban strips and shopping malls.[5] Planners, developers, and business owners should look to underserved and dissatisfied market segments and use downtown as the setting to offer what these people are looking for. Commercial, educational, cultural, and entertainment uses that have been absent from many cities' centers are being rediscovered as viable functions in many downtowns. Some of these places have the potential to serve their local population while providing attributes that will also attract people from outside the region. As downtowns once again become desirable destinations, they will not only improve the quality of life for the people who rediscover them, they will strengthen their important positions as economic centers that support the entire city.

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[4] Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Vintage Books, 1961, p. 165, and Alex Krieger, "Initiatives and Goals for the Downtown," in *Downcity Providence: Master Plan for a Special Time*, Providence, March 1992, p. 20.

[5] Bruce Horovitz, "Malls are like, totally uncool, say hip teens," *USA Today*, May 1, 1996, pp. 1-2.

CHAPTER 2
THE DEVELOPMENT OF DOWNTOWN PROVIDENCE

Downtown Providence, Rhode Island, has great potential to reemerge as an important destination that offers a variety of uses. Significant attention continues to be directed to the edges of Downtown in an effort to reinvent the city's image, but planning efforts are also now being focused on the traditional center. Proper exploitation of its historical, physical, and cultural attributes can make Downtown Providence a regional attraction once again.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Providence was settled as a colonial village in 1636 along the eastern side of the Great Salt River, now called the Providence River. The town developed along Towne Street,* which was laid out parallel to the river in 1638 (Figure 2.1).

> Its name, the "Towne streete," was descriptive of its original character and importance. It did not lose its appropriateness during a hundred and thirty years. This mode of designating the sole or chief highway of a village was not uncommon in England, and was one of the earliest English traditions accepted by the town.[1]

Commercial activity was based upon the town's access to Narragansett Bay and the Atlantic Ocean beyond. The first warehouse and wharf were constructed in 1679, and Providence grew to become an important shipping port.[2]

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* This is where North Main Street and South Main Street are today.

[1] Henry C. Dorr, Rhode Island Historical Tracts, No. 15, The Planting and Growth of Providence Illustrated in the Gradual Accumulation of the Materials for Domestic Comfort, the Means of Internal Communication and the Development of Local Industries, Providence: Sidney S. Rider, 1882, pp. 14–15.

[2] Welcome Arnold Greene, *The Providence Plantations for Two Hundred and Fifty Years*, Providence: J. A. and R. A. Reid, 1886, p. 44.

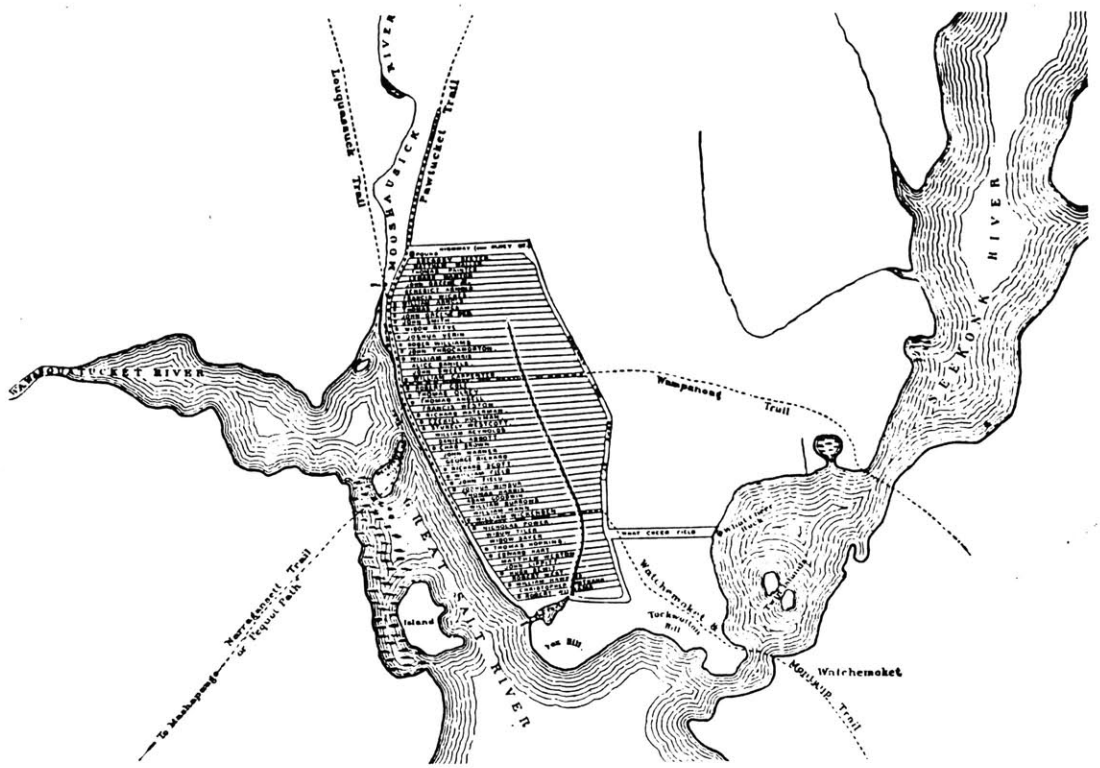

Figure 2.1: Providence, circa 1650

Much of the land on the western side of the river, where Downtown now lies, was undesirable for settlement and was used primarily for agricultural purposes. The area consisted largely of marshes and ponds and had a steep hill at the river's edge. A series of events in the first half of the eighteenth century made development on the west side of the river possible: the construction of a permanent bridge across the Providence River in 1711, the leveling of Weybosset Hill for brick making beginning in 1724, and the establishment of a new meeting house in 1746 by the Reverend Joseph Snow, Jr. and a group of religious dissidents.[3] The new residents of the west, "who resented the 'despotic rule' of Providence" by the residents across the river, considered breaking away to form their own town.[4] The new town was to have been called Westminster, for the town in England that was known for its liberal politics. Though the town was not formed, the name Westminster Street was given to the new road that led from the center of town to the country, through the growing residential western side of Providence. As Snow encouraged the development of real estate near his church during the second half of the

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[3] William McKenzie Woodward and Edward F. Sanderson, *Providence: A Citywide Survey of Historic Resources*, Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, 1986, p. 9.

[4] John Hutchins Cady, *The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence 1636–1950*, Providence: Akerman Standard Press, 1957, pp. 40–41.

eighteenth century, the area on the western edge of today's Downtown grew as a residential neighborhood and the early street pattern was established (Figure 2.2).[5] Weybosset Street, which followed the old path used by the native Pequots around the base of Weybosset Hill, and Westminster Street were ready to absorb the development that was to occur during the nineteenth century.

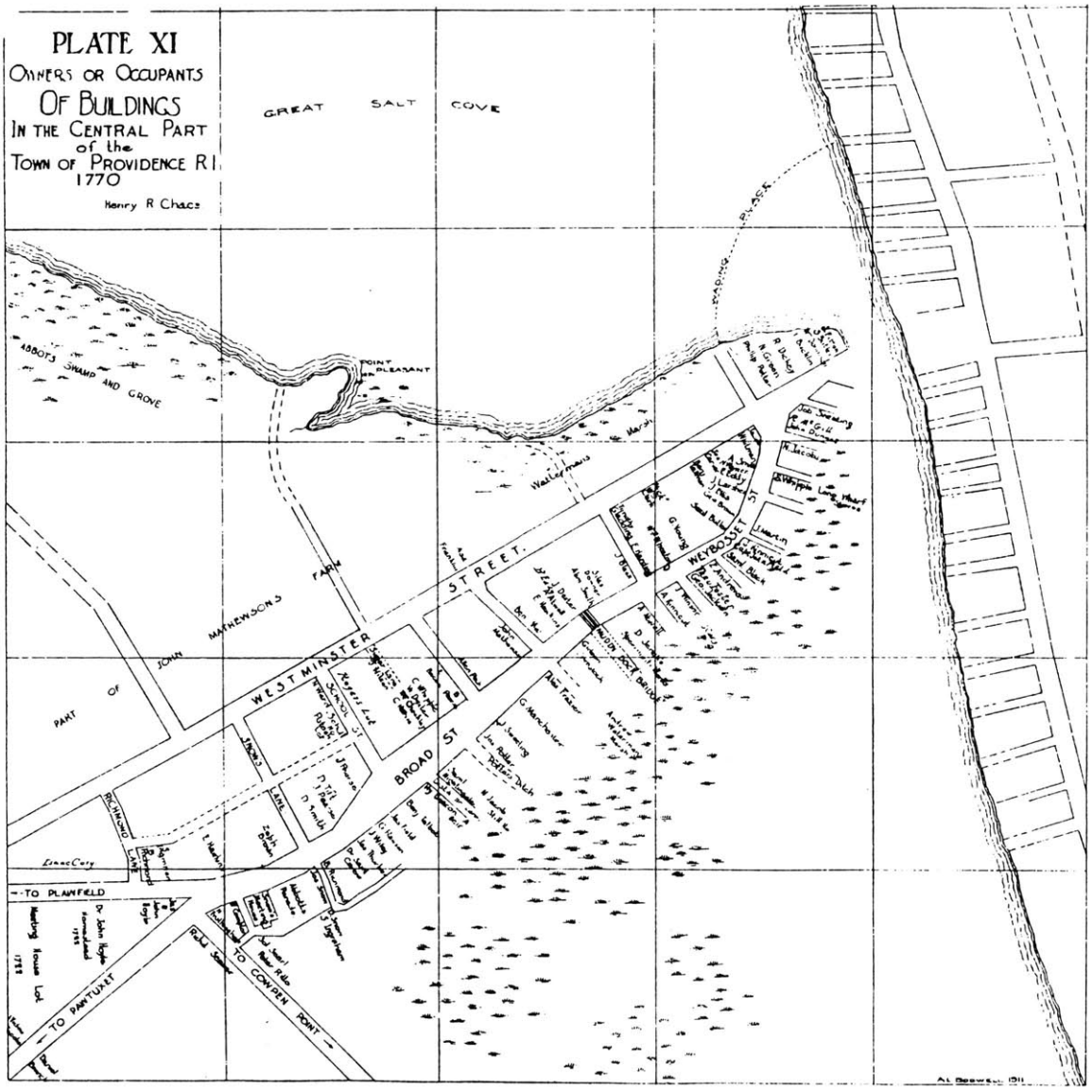

Figure 2.2: Central Providence, 1770

[5] Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, *Downtown Providence*, Statewide Historical Preservation Report P-P-5, May 1981, p. 6.

After the eighteenth century, development on the east side of the river

> ...seemed to stand still during several years, while a new mart of trade was rising in full view. The 'West side' was now threatening speedily to cope with the east, both in Town meetings and in private enterprise. Westminster Street, which in 1771, had but four houses on its south side, hoped, at no distant period, to be a successful rival of the old Town Street.[6]

The Market House, which was built in 1777 between the Towne Street and the bridge, was the center of commercial activity at the turn of the century. But as this area became more densely developed, further growth was limited by the slope of College Hill, which rose to the east.[7] The shift of commercial activity to the west was spurred after a fire destroyed thirty-seven buildings on South Main Street in 1801.[8] Significant commercial establishments, including banks and the post office, began to locate on the western side of the river around this time. The western part of town further established itself as the new commercial center in 1828 when the three-story Arcade, considered to be the first enclosed shopping mall in America, was built between Westminster and Weybosset Streets (Figure 2.3). Market Square still played an important role in the town's commercial activity, but the momentum for growth was clearly on the other side of the river (Figure 2.4).

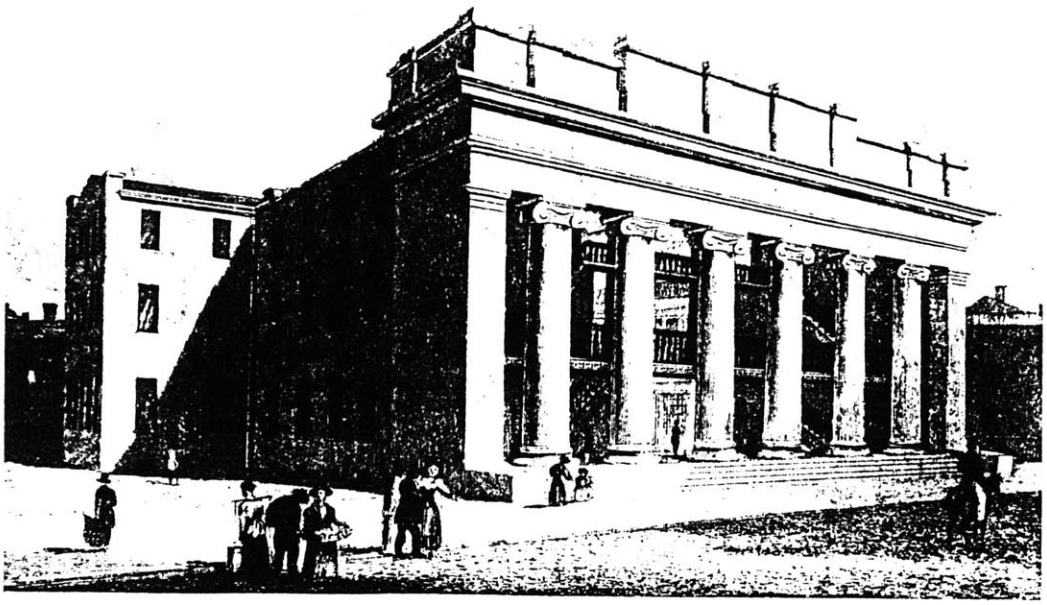

Figure 2.3: The Arcade, 1828

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[6] Dorr, The Planting and Growth of Providence, p. 240.

[7] Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, *Downtown Providence*, p. 10.

[8] Ibid.

Figure 2.4: Market Square, 1844

The industrial revolution had a profound impact on the development of Providence. As shipping declined in importance at the beginning of the nineteenth century, industrial developments in the production of textiles, machinery, and jewelry in and around Providence positioned it to become a major commercial center. Slater's Mill in neighboring Pawtucket is credited with launching the industrial revolution in America in 1790; the production of inexpensive jewelry, which is still an important industry in the city, originated in Providence in the 1790s; and the first power looms for the production of textiles were introduced to America in Rhode Island around 1812.[9] Well-known companies such as the Corliss Steam Engine Works, the Brown and Sharpe Manufacturing Company, and the Gorham Manufacturing Company originated in Providence. During the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, Providence's economy was based upon its strong industries, particularly base metals and machinery, jewelry and silverware, and cotton and woolen textiles.[10] Providence became "the major economic center of the most highly industrialized state in the nation."[11]

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[9] Greene, *The Providence Plantations for 250 Years*, pp. 243 and 331.

[10] Patrick T. Conley and Paul R. Campbell, *Providence: A Pictorial History*, Norfolk, VA: The Donning Company Publishers, 1982, p. 37.

[11] Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, *Downtown Providence*, p. 13.

The town of Providence adopted a city form of government in 1831. By the 1870s, as the city continued to prosper, a new City Hall was built—a building that still serves the same purpose today. Other buildings that define much of Downtown's current physical character were constructed during the nineteenth century, and the street and block patterns that developed during that period are recognizable today (Figure 2.5). Banks clustered around the Turk's Head corner at the convergence of Westminster and Weybosset Streets, which is still the center of the financial district, and other professional offices and

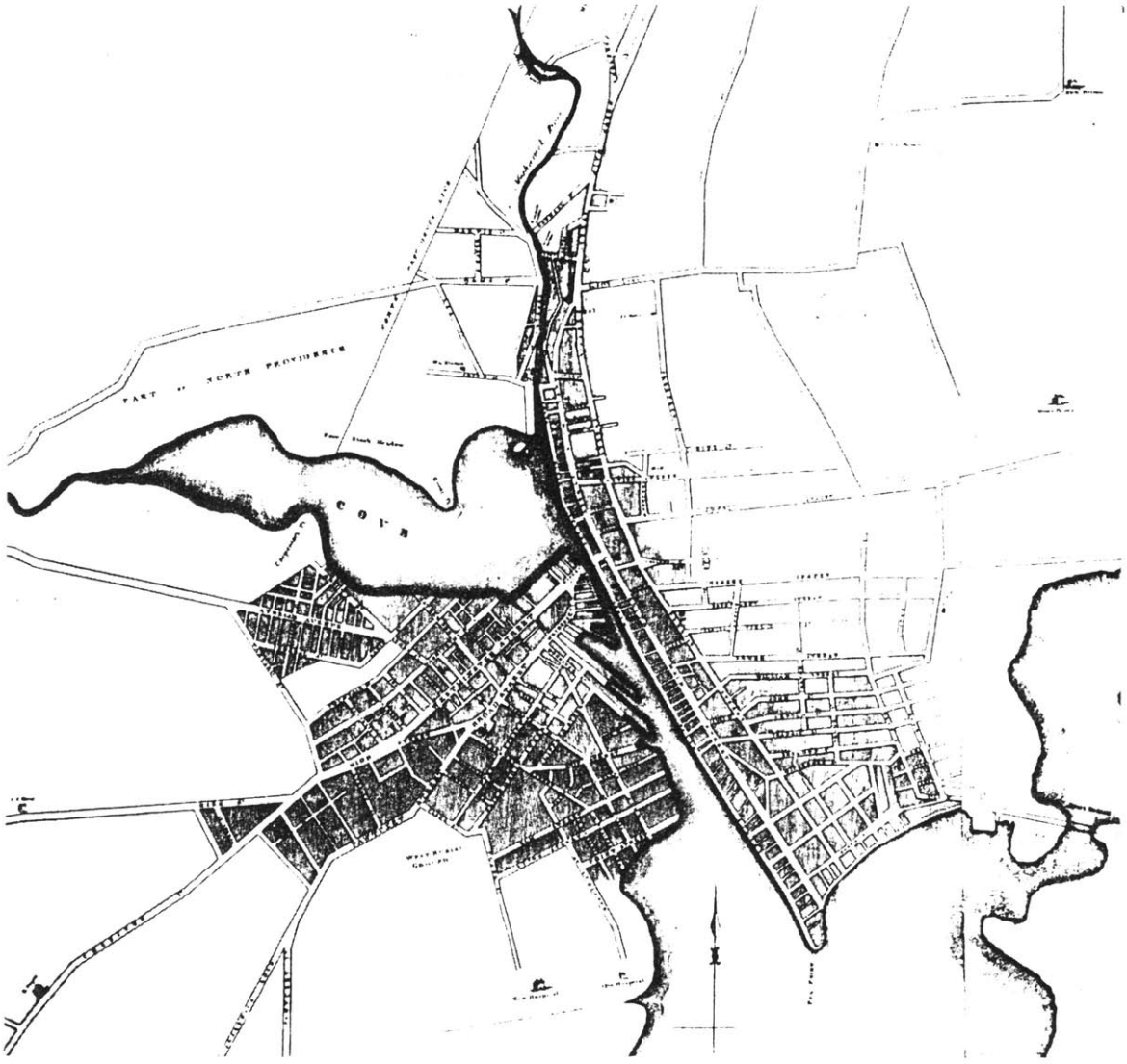

Figure 2.5(a): Providence, 1823

commercial buildings were developed throughout Downtown. The scale and architectural styles of the new buildings physically represented the city's importance as the regional economic center.

> The urbanization of Providence was perhaps most dramatically illustrated in its Downtown, where building technology kept pace with economic growth to produce larger, more innovative structures to house the numerous and increasingly specialized commercial and professional offices.[12]

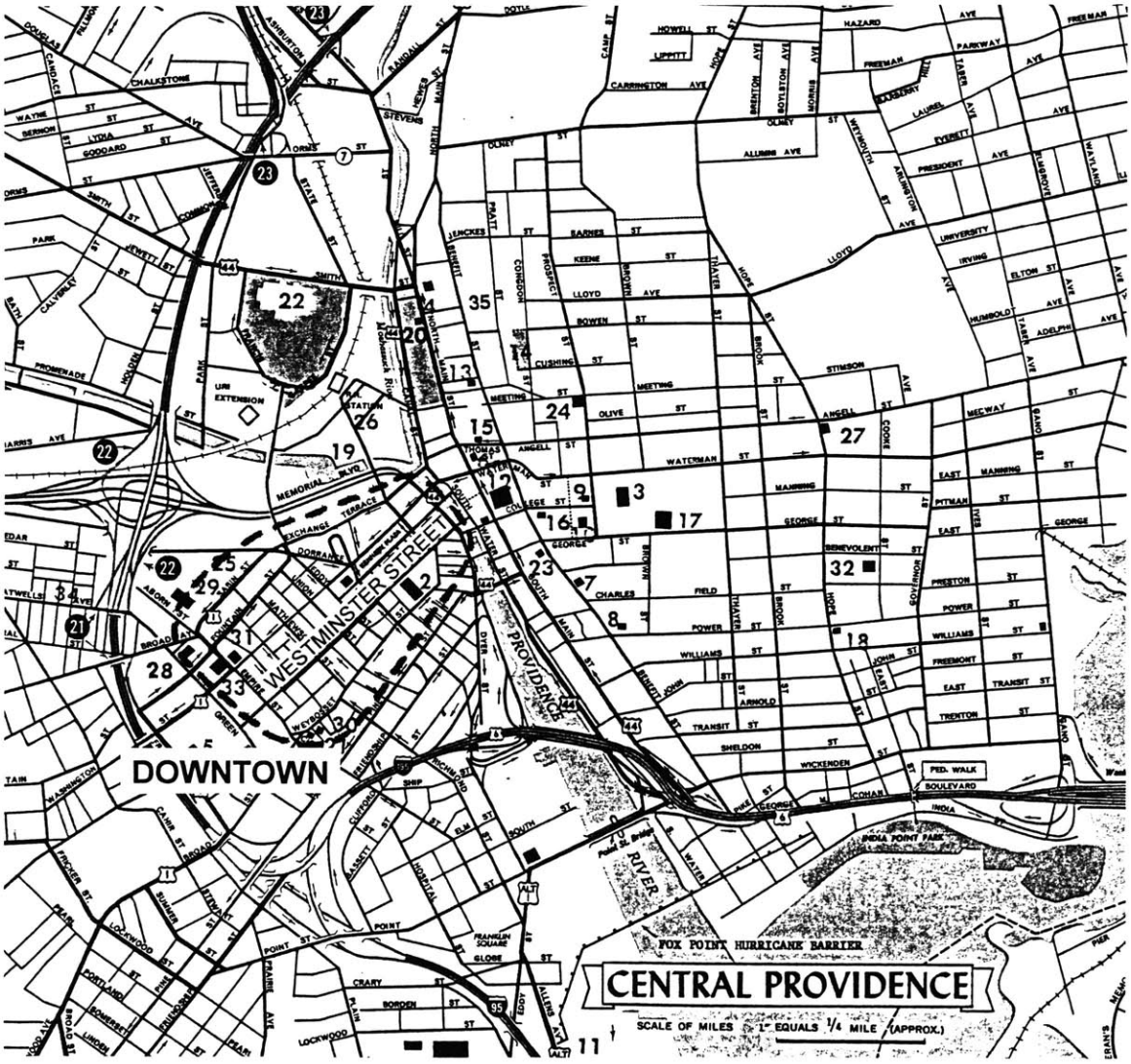

Figure 2.5(b): Central Providence, 1996

[12] Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, *Downtown Providence*, p. 13.

As the commercial importance of the city center continued to grow, Providence became a regional destination. Downtown was the logical choice for the location of the railroad depot and, by the 1860s, the hub of the streetcar system.[13] Rail lines connected Providence with Boston, Worcester, Hartford, and New York, as well as with the communities along the eastern side of Narragansett Bay and Fall River. By 1898 there were 435 trolleys carrying 34 million passengers annually over 120 miles of track throughout the Greater Providence area.[14] The transportation system allowed residential development to move beyond the city; however, it also allowed Downtown to reinforce its strength as the region's commercial and cultural center by providing direct, convenient access from the new outlying residential areas (Figure 2.6).

Figure 2.6: Cable Cars at Market Square, circa 1898.

[13] By 1879 there were seven railroad companies serving Providence, and there were stations other than the central Union Station (1848) on the northern edge of Downtown. When trying to decide on the location for a new station during the 1880s and 1890s, the city's desire to best serve the needs for passenger and freight in a growing commercial center outweighed the consideration for protecting water resources. A significant water feature, the salt water cove, was filled in, and the new Union Station was constructed close to the center of Downtown in 1898. (Rhode Island School of Design, *Interface: Providence*, 1974.)

[14] Conley and Campbell, *Providence: A Pictorial History*, p. 117.

Typical of nineteenth century urban downtowns, Downtown Providence was not only the financial center of the region, but the center of culture, entertainment, and consumer activity (Figure 2.7). The financial district was firmly established at the eastern end of Westminster and Weybosset Streets; other uses generally developed west of this area. The public library was located Downtown, as were a number of educational institutions. The Rhode Island School of Design had its first building Downtown, and two business colleges provided the skills required by the increasingly sophisticated businesses that were located in the city. In addition, the Providence School of Languages, St. Xavier's Academy for girls, and the Providence English and Classical School were located Downtown.

Figure 2.7: Westminster Street, circa 1890

Shopping and entertainment brought an even greater number of people Downtown. Many of the office buildings throughout Downtown were built to accommodate retail use at street level. Other buildings were constructed exclusively for retail, including specialty shops and, by the 1870s, department stores. At its peak as the retail center, Downtown had six department stores: Diamond's, Cherry and Webb, the Boston Store, Gladding's, the Outlet, and Shepard's.[15] Downtown was also the site of a number of theaters and

[15] Conley and Campbell, p. 145.

halls that provided area residents with music concerts, lectures, vaudeville shows, live theater, and, eventually, movies. Prior to 1900 there were the Providence Theatre, Shakespeare Hall, Howard Hall, the Forbes Theater, City Hall Theater, and Keith's Opera House.[16] After the turn of the century the major theaters included the Union, the Strand, Shubert's Majestic, Loew's State, and the Albee.

Downtown provided a full range of destinations for a broad range of users—offices, schools, stores, restaurants, hotels, and entertainment; it was the center of commercial, social, and cultural life. As the physical and symbolic center of the region, Downtown Providence was also a gathering place for important occasions. Parades went through the streets, crowds came to Exchange Place in front of City Hall to send soldiers off to war and welcome returning veterans, and people gathered to hear politicians and other noteworthy visitors speak (Figure 2.8). Downtown was a place of great significance, both

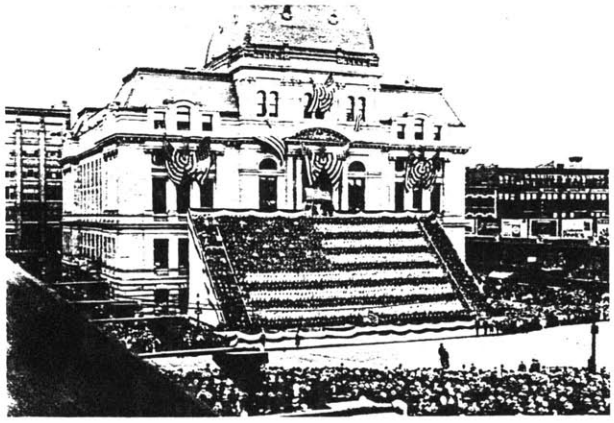

Figure 2.8: Exchange Place in front of City Hall, 1916

in the daily routines and special events in the lives of residents. Downtown Providence continued to prosper through the 1920s and remained the primary destination for entertainment and shopping into the 1940s. The city's population peaked at 267,918 in 1925.[17] Twenty-five years later there were still 248,674 people living in Providence, but by 1980 the population dropped to 156,804.* After World War II there were alternatives to the city and its attractions—suburbs and television. And as people moved out, new suburban shopping centers competed with Downtown.

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[16] Woodward, *Downtown Providence*, pp. 31–32.

[17] Patrick T. Conley, *An Album of Rhode Island History, 1636–1986*, Norfolk, VA: The Donning Company, 1986, pp. 265–266.

* The population increased to 160,728 by 1990 (U.S. Deptartment of Commerce, 1990 Census)

PLANS

As early as 1946, the *Master Plan for Land Use and Population Distribution* recognized that the Downtown retail district suffered from traffic congestion and a lack of parking.[18] The last electric trolley ran in 1948, and the final trackless trolley in 1955.[19] By 1958 business leaders and public officials were concerned about the economic health of Downtown. The *Comprehensive Planning Study for the Future of Downtown Providence* acknowledged the physical and social changes that were affecting the vitality of Downtown and considered ways of intervening to reverse the decline.

> A tremendous metamorphosis is taking place in the American city—both expansion in ever widening circles of suburban growth and disintegration at the core. This is accompanied by a decline in the effectiveness of the traditional social patterns on which city life depends to a great extent... On the one hand we have increasing traffic congestion and blight of downtowns and on the other there are automobile oriented suburban shopping centers that provide safety, glamour and visual excitement for the pedestrian shopper. A little paint here and there and an additional open evening during the week are not the long-range answers to this dilemma. If downtown is to remain dominant in the retail function within the metropolitan area, it must stay competitive and create a more controlled and beautiful environment. At this point design in its broadest sense emerges as the answer to the challenge.[20]

This report was followed in 1959 by *Downtown Providence 1970*, a study sponsored by the Downtown Business Coordinating Council. The study proposed major redevelopment that would have replaced much of the historic Downtown core with sanitized modern structures and plazas—a response typical of urban renewal schemes across the nation at that time (Figure 2.9).

Some of the projects proposed during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s were executed as an attempt to revive the Downtown area that had been so important in the city's past. The following account was part of a special issue of the *Providence Journal* in 1965 devoted to the opening of a new pedestrian mall on Westminster Street. It was hoped that the mall would help solve Downtown's problems by creating an environment that would bring shoppers back to the area.

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[18] The City Plan Commission of Providence, *Master Plan for Land Use and Population Distribution*, Publication Number Four, August 1946, p. 5.

[19] Conley and Campbell, p. 193.

[20] Downtown Providence Master Plan Project, Report Number One, *Phases I and II of a Comprehensive Planning Study for the Future of Downtown Providence*, October 1958, pp. 5–1 and 5–2.

> The visitor to Providence in recent years has been greeted by a dull, drab and rather dirty host. Downtown Providence, the heart and mainstream of Rhode Island, had lost its youth. In fact, in the years following World War II, it had tired and aged badly. Its face wrinkled. Its profile sagged. Its best Sunday suit had worn thin. In short, post-war downtown Providence had followed the path of numerous American cities in the mid-20th century, losing both its vitality and its shoppers. In the language of city planners and renewal officials, the downtown area had fallen victim to urban decay. But in the words of the average visitor or shopper, it simply was hard to get to, hard to park in, uninviting, old, tired and worn out. And the suburban shopping center thrived.[21]

The mall was created, urban renewal cleared parts of the western and northern portions of Downtown, the interstate highways were constructed to the west and south, and buildings were demolished over the years to create parking lots and garages. These projects were intended to have a revitalizing affect, yet Downtown failed to regain the vitality and stature of its past. Fortunately, not all of the plans conceived during the era of urban renewal were carried out, so much of the historic physical character of Downtown Providence remains.

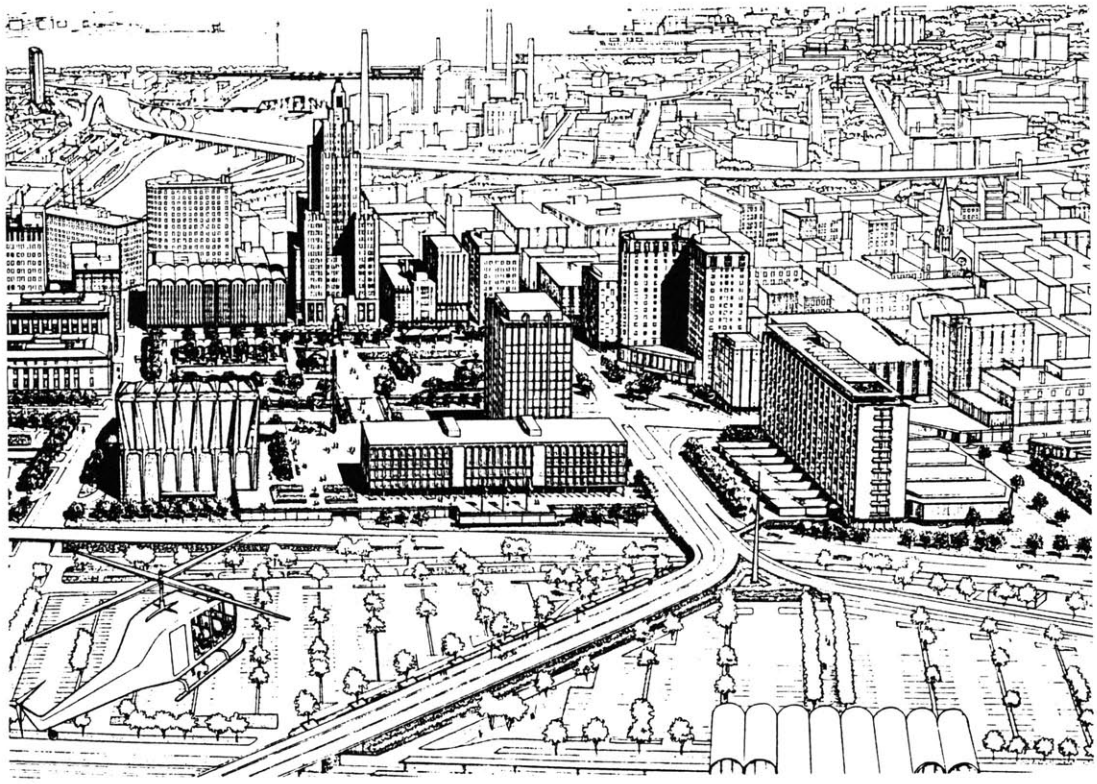

Figure 2.9: "Downtown Providence 1970," from the Downtown Master Plan of 1959

[21] Leonard B. Stevens, "The New Mall: A Vital Part of the Grand Plan," *The Rhode Islander, Providence Sunday Journal*, August 29, 1965, p. 14.

By the 1970s a new awareness of Downtown's characteristics had emerged. The historic preservation movement that had been responsible for reclaiming residential neighborhoods on the East Side turned some of its attention Downtown and eventually resulted in the rehabilitation of the Arcade, the Ocean State Theater, the old Providence Journal building, and numerous commercial buildings. In 1974 a group of faculty and students from the Rhode Island School of Design published a significant study of Downtown Providence, concerned primarily with improving transportation into, out of, and within the city. *Interface: Providence* recognized the variety of ways that the heart of the city could be used.

> First and foremost, we should understand that above all else cities are for people. Somehow this simple fact seems to have been lost in our headlong rush to progress. The very reason for the city's existence has been overlooked. Cities are not primarily for commerce,... Cities are not primarily for employment..., Nor are cities primarily for government...[A] city must have variety of choice sufficient to accommodate the incredible variety and combination of tastes of its people. By these means, it will thrive, its interests will be perpetually changing and alive for its inhabitants, and, of course, its spaces will reflect these varieties...[22]

Interface: Providence acknowledged the value of the existing attributes of Downtown Providence, rather than simply trying to find ways to make Downtown look and feel more like the suburbs.*

> In Providence we found a unique situation in North American cities, one which had apparently been overlooked by many who earned their daily livelihood within her precincts... [I]t has a most clearly defined Central Business District. Few cities have this clarity of definition. Also the town has not prospered in the last forty years to a similar extent as other cities, and, while one might think at first sight that this is an unfortunate factor, it has not suffered within the business area from the mad scramble for land with its concomitant high-rise construction. It therefore has the great opportunity today to prepare and prepare carefully for the intelligent revitalization of its downtown facilities. Furthermore, the Central Business District... remains eminently a pedestrian-scaled city precinct.[23]

The *Interface: Providence* plan also recognized that an improved intermodal transportation system, by reducing traffic and the need for parking spaces, had the

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[22] Rhode Island School of Design, *Interface: Providence*, 1974, p. 7.

* The 1958 Downtown Providence Master Plan Project also acknowledged that "[i]n an old city like Providence the desire for the ideal plan has to be tempered by the respect for what is there and cannot be changed for historic or economic reasons." That sentiment seemed to fade by the time the *Downtown Providence 1970* plan was released a short time later.

[23] *Interface: Providence*, p. 10.

potential to create open space and uncover the river that had been hidden beneath bridges to accommodate vehicular traffic.

The downtown intermodal transit station proposed in the *Interface: Providence* plan was never realized. Instead, in the mid-1980s a new railroad station was constructed across the Woonasquatucket River from Downtown, and the railroad tracks were moved and placed underground as the first part of the Capital Center project (Figure 2.10).

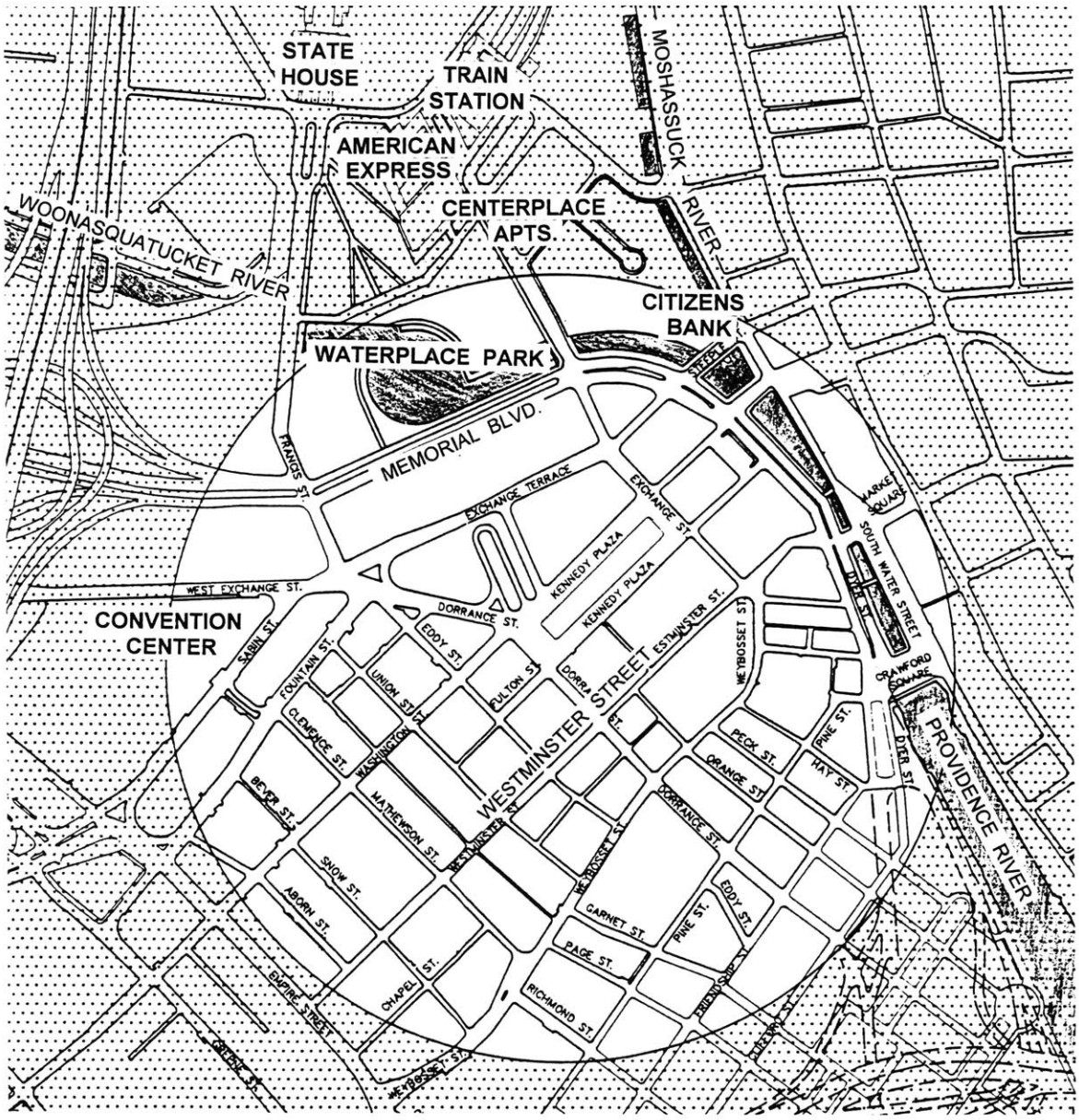

Figure 2.10: Downtown Providence and Capital Center, 1980s

While moving the railroad tracks away from the center of the city eliminated direct rail access to Downtown, it did help to reclaim the rivers. The Moshassuck and Woonasquatucket Rivers that join to form the Providence River were realigned and excessively wide bridge decking was removed to uncover the Providence River. The plans for Capital Center also included office buildings, apartments, a convention center, a hotel, bridges, a boulevard, and recreation space.* A major effort was underway in the 1980s to redefine the area *near* Downtown, but Downtown itself still needed attention.

The *Providence Development Strategy* report prepared by Carr, Lynch Associates and Melvin F. Levine & Associates in 1986 proposed a comprehensive mix of development Downtown that included office, retail, restaurant, residential, convention, parking, recreation, arts, cultural, and entertainment uses. The purpose of the strategy was "to make downtown Providence a better place in which to work, to do business, to live and to enjoy life. The strategy must strengthen and revive the downtown as the center of economic and cultural life of Providence."[24] Like the *Interface: Providence* plan which preceded it, the *Providence Development Strategy* envisioned Downtown as a place that could be used by a variety of people in a way that could improve the quality of their lives. This plan also recognized the economic importance of a healthy Downtown, and the strategy was based upon a link between improved quality of life and economic development. It realized that to attract the private development needed to improve the city's economy, Downtown must offer the amenities and activities desired by potential employers, residents, and visitors. The strategy recognized that it would be necessary to actively market Downtown to potential office developers and to manage and coordinate retail activity to provide a cohesive shopping district. The report recommended several specific projects, including a cinema, rehabilitation of commercial buildings for ground level retail and upper level housing, and exhibition and sales spaces for artists. Many of these projects are being pursued today. The report also recommended a partial opening of the Westminster pedestrian mall, keeping it closed to vehicular traffic during peak pedestrian hours. The City subsequently removed the mall entirely, restoring Westminster Street to its original role as a street. Trees, brick sidewalks, and new streetlights were added to improve the street's appearance. Closing the main shopping

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* Much of this work has been completed.

[24] Carr, Lynch Associates, Inc. and Melvin F. Levine & Associates, Inc., *Providence Development Strategy*, prepared for the City of Providence Department of Planning and Development, March, 1986, p. 2.

street of the city to vehicular traffic, without finding ways to attract a sufficient volume of pedestrian traffic to take its place, had failed to revive Downtown.

Fifty years after the 1946 planning study, current planning efforts are still trying to find the right strategies for revitalizing the heart of the city. The plans that have been guiding the redevelopment of Downtown over the past few years resulted from a charrette led by Andres Duany and a group of consultants in 1992. *Downcity Providence: Master Plan for a Special Time* was followed by *Downcity Providence: An Implementation Plan* and, in the summer of 1994, the *Downcity Project Implementation Plan.*[*] Following the initial charrette, Johnson & Wales University hired Duany to prepare a master plan for their expanding Downtown campus. The *Downcity* planning process was initiated by members of the private sector who were concerned about the stagnant, if not worsening, conditions Downtown. Despite the enormous investments made around the edges of Downtown and the physical improvements made to the Westminster Street streetscape, the center of the city continued to lose its struggle to hold on to retailers. This latest plan follows the principal idea laid out in the 1986 *Providence Development Strategy*; that is, Downtown Providence needs to become an attractive environment to a variety of users at times throughout the day and night.

The *Downcity* plan proposes that more people be encouraged to live Downtown by converting commercial buildings to loft housing. The plan also supports the establishment of an Arts and Entertainment District as a means of attracting additional people Downtown. This district would build upon existing arts and entertainment attractions by creating an environment that would include art galleries, bookstores, cafes, a cinema, and other related uses. Other components of the plan include a revived retail sector, supported by the new residents and the people attracted to the Arts and Entertainment District, and an integration of the Johnson & Wales expansion into this strategy for Downtown. The plan proposes accomplishing its goals through improved traffic circulation and parking; streetscape improvements along Mathewson Street, designated as the spine of the Arts and Entertainment District; adaptive reuse of old commercial buildings, with ground levels devoted to commercial use; establishment of design standards; coordinated promotion of arts and cultural activities; and coordinated management of retail uses throughout Downtown. Some of the proposed streetscape

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[*] "Downcity" is how people used to refer to Downtown Providence in the 1940s, "when downtown Providence was great," according to Duany's account of an interview with one longtime resident. (*Downcity Providence: Master Plan for a Special Time*, p. 3)

improvements have been made, plans are moving ahead to convert some buildings to housing, Johnson & Wales has constructed a large dormitory, and negotiations are taking place to attract a multi-screen movie theater. Retail activity is still sagging; but planners and property owners are hopeful that if some of the other proposals are implemented, there will once again be a strong market for retail Downtown.

DOWNTOWN PROVIDENCE TODAY

Observations of the current conditions in Downtown Providence lead to several key issues that need to be considered in forming strategies for the future of Downtown:

1. Downtown is physically unique

There are two primary attributes that make Downtown physically unique within the region: its concentration of preserved commercial structures within the old urban fabric and its central location within the metropolitan region.

- *Historic physical character*

  Much of the historic Downtown core centered around Westminster Street is physically intact (Figure 2.11). There are some relatively new office towers, a large Civic Center and Convention Center, a new college campus development, and some faceless urban renewal-era office buildings and a highway around its edges, but Providence is fortunate to have a rich concentration of preserved structures in its traditional Downtown. Some of the buildings are landmarks. The most notable of these is the three-story Arcade building, built in 1828 and considered to be the first enclosed shopping mall in the country (Figure 2.12). This building was recently purchased by Johnson & Wales University and still serves a commercial function as the site of several small restaurants, retail establishments, and offices. Other structures are not spectacular, but many of them are good examples of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century commercial buildings. In fact, all of Downtown lies within a national historic district. Many of the buildings have been restored, but others need attention. While some of Downtown's historic physical resources are still hiding behind modernized facades or are in need of repair, Providence is fortunate to have the raw materials of what was once, and could become again, an active Downtown.

  Parking lots and garages break the continuity of storefronts at some locations, but much of the historic urban fabric is uninterrupted within the Downtown core,

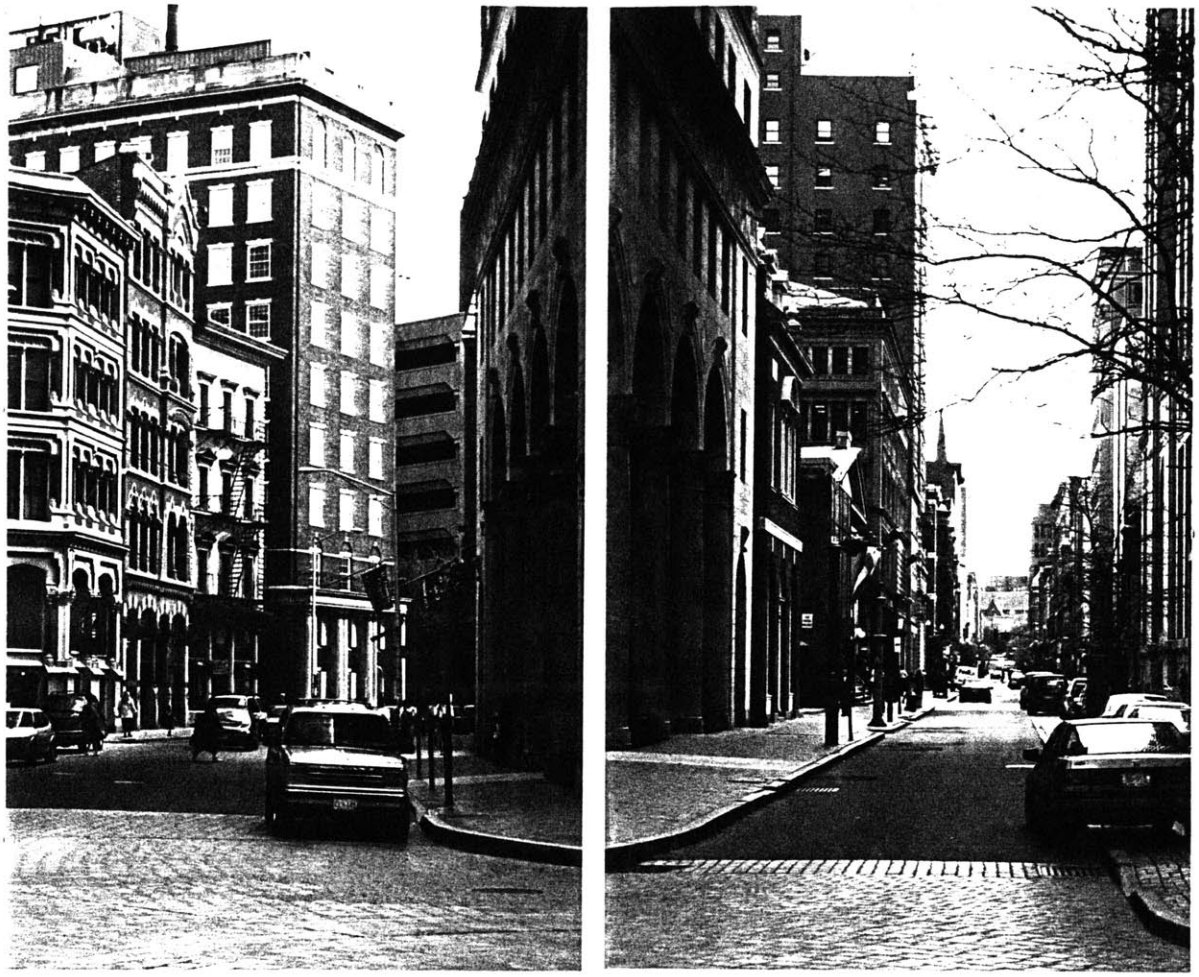

Figure 2.11: Weybosset Street (left) and Westminster Street, 1996

particularly along Westminster Street. The scale and density of the streets and buildings, including the relationship between building height and street width, have been recognized by urban designers and retail experts (Andres Duany and his Downcity charrette team) as being close to ideal for urban pedestrian standards. The narrow street widths permit shoppers to view merchandise on both sides of the street and to cross from one side to another easily. Providence already has the concentrated, pedestrian-scale that developers try to reproduce elsewhere. The investment in the basic physical infrastructure has been made, and time has allowed Downtown to develop character. Plans for the future of Downtown must be cognizant of its physical attributes.

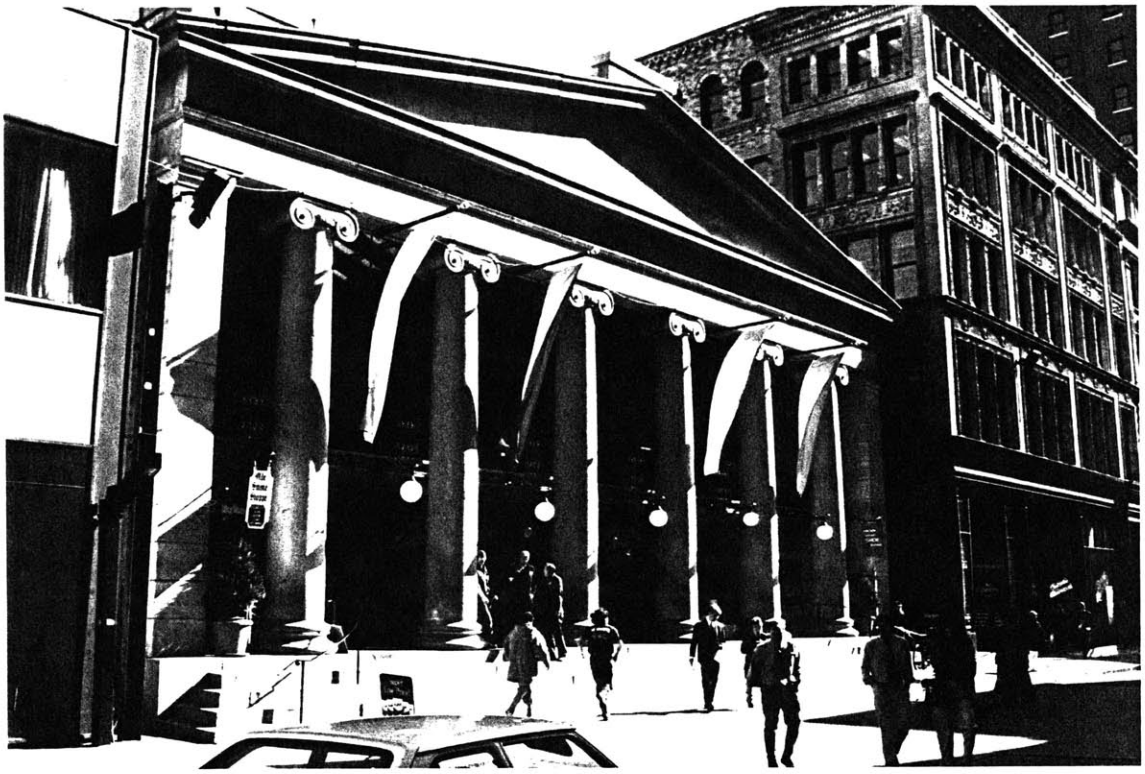

Figure 2.12: The Arcade, Westminster Street, 1996

- *Central location*

  Downtown is centrally located within the metropolitan region, which puts it within reach of a number of different communities in Rhode Island and Massachusetts (Figure 2.13). Market studies for the proposed Providence Place Mall estimate that Downtown is at the center of a trading area that includes nearly 1.1 million people.[25] In theory, these same people could be attracted to Downtown for other reasons. While the highways severed Downtown from the western and southern portions of the city and the trolley system that led directly to the outlying residential areas is no longer in place, the highways that allowed people to leave the city over the past few decades could become the same roads that bring people back into the city. Downtown's central location provides a physical advantage over outlying areas that could help people from throughout the region rediscover their common center.

[25] HSG/Gould Associates, prepared for The Office of the Governor, State of Rhode Island, *Retail Market Analysis, Providence Place*, May 1995, p. ii.

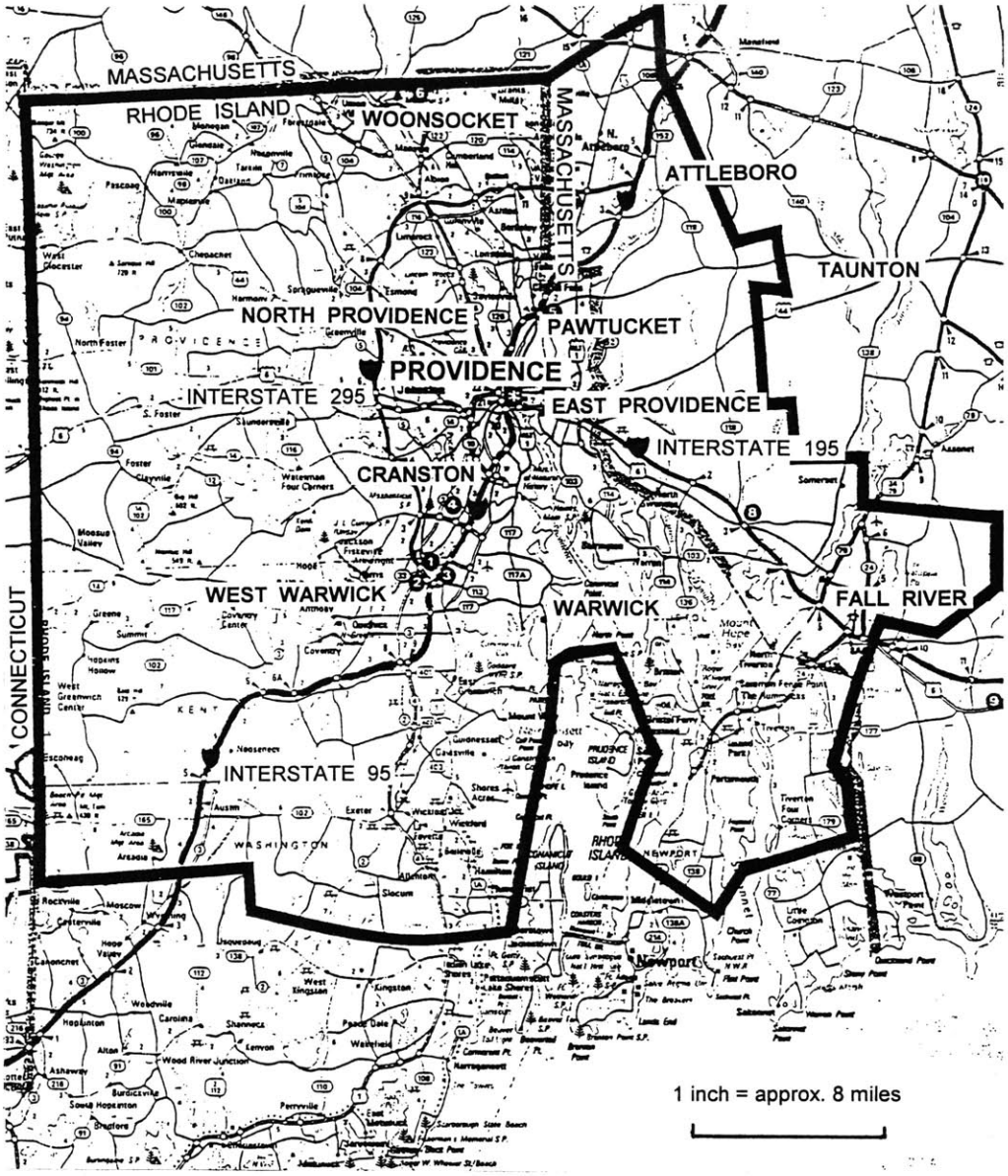

Figure 2.13: The Providence Metropolitan Region

2. Retail activity has declined over several decades

Shopping used to be one of the primary attractions of Downtown Providence. There is still retail activity, but it is not the major attraction it was prior to World War II. Much of what is there serves the 28,500 downtown office workers:[26] copy shops, travel agents, drug stores, donut shops, and restaurants. There are no strong retail anchors left Downtown. The department store buildings that are still standing have been put to new uses, including night clubs and educational uses. The decline of retail activity has left a significant number of storefronts vacant (Figure 2.14). Other

Figure 2.14: Vacant Storefront, Westminster Street, 1996

storefronts are underutilized as they are being used for classrooms or office space; such uses do not require a high degree of visibility and exposure to a steady stream of pedestrian traffic. Some of the storefronts along Westminster Street that are still used for retail are underutilized in another sense; they are not of the quality that one would expect to find along what used to be the primary shopping street through the heart of

[26] The number of office workers was obtained from *The Downtown Providence Offices Sector Strategic Plan*, 1995, Downtown Office Economic Development Plan Committee, September, 1995, p. 7.

the city (Figure 2.15). That is not to say that Downtown should be reserved only for upscale stores; a variety of uses is necessary to serve the diverse needs of the market. Perhaps these underutilized buildings would not be as noticeable if all of the storefronts around them were active.

Figure 2.15: Underutilized Storefront, Westminster Street, 1996

There are indications that retail activity may return to Downtown Providence. A limited market study conducted in March, 1996, determined that the Downcity planning area could support thirty-eight new retail establishments and sixteen new

food establishments.[27] In the meantime, a national real estate developer is expressing interest in buying a significant number of Westminster Street properties to develop retail uses.[28] Plans for a retail program should evaluate all of the potential markets for Downtown. Extra effort needs to be made to serve those for whom Downtown would be the most convenient option—office workers, students, and residents. When asked whether residents of a subsidized apartment complex on the edge of the district shopped Downtown, an administrator responded that "there isn't anything to use Downtown," and that elderly residents had to rely on others to take them shopping.[29] The challenge will be to provide a mixture of retail uses that will serve the basic needs of the people who are already in or near Downtown, as well as to provide the types of uses that will attract people who currently choose to stay away from Downtown because it doesn't offer what they're looking for.

3. Significant attention has been focused around the edges of Downtown

There has been a significant amount of new development around the edges of Downtown, and more is being planned (Figure 2.16). The Capital Center redevelopment area between the State House and the northern edge of Downtown includes the new Providence Station (1986) and the relocated railroad tracks, two new office buildings, an apartment complex, and the Rhode Island Convention Center and an adjacent hotel (1993). Most of these projects have views of Waterplace Park (1994) and the Riverwalk, which is now being extended along the east side of the Providence River. The riverfront development offers great potential to attract visitors, as has already been demonstrated at Waterplace Park; and there is further potential for some of these visitors to be attracted Downtown. New bridges and an underpass have been designed to accommodate pedestrians; however, the bridges fall short of providing direct access from the river to Downtown since pedestrians must cross the new Memorial Boulevard. In addition to being physically remote from Downtown, much of the development that has occurred at Capital Center is of a scale and style that does not relate well to the historic physical character of Downtown.

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[27] Melvin F. Levine & Associates, Inc., "Downcity Retail & Entertainment District Limited Market Analysis," March 11, 1996. (The planning area is defined by Dorrance, Pine, Chestnut, Empire, Sabin, and West Exchange Streets.)

[28] Thomas E. Dellar, Deputy Director for Planning, Providence Department of Planning and Development, interview April 1, 1996, and John M. Kelly, General Counsel, Cornish Associates, interview March 26, 1996.

[29] Lorie Creta, Office Administrator, Beneficent House, telephone interview by author, May 1, 1996.

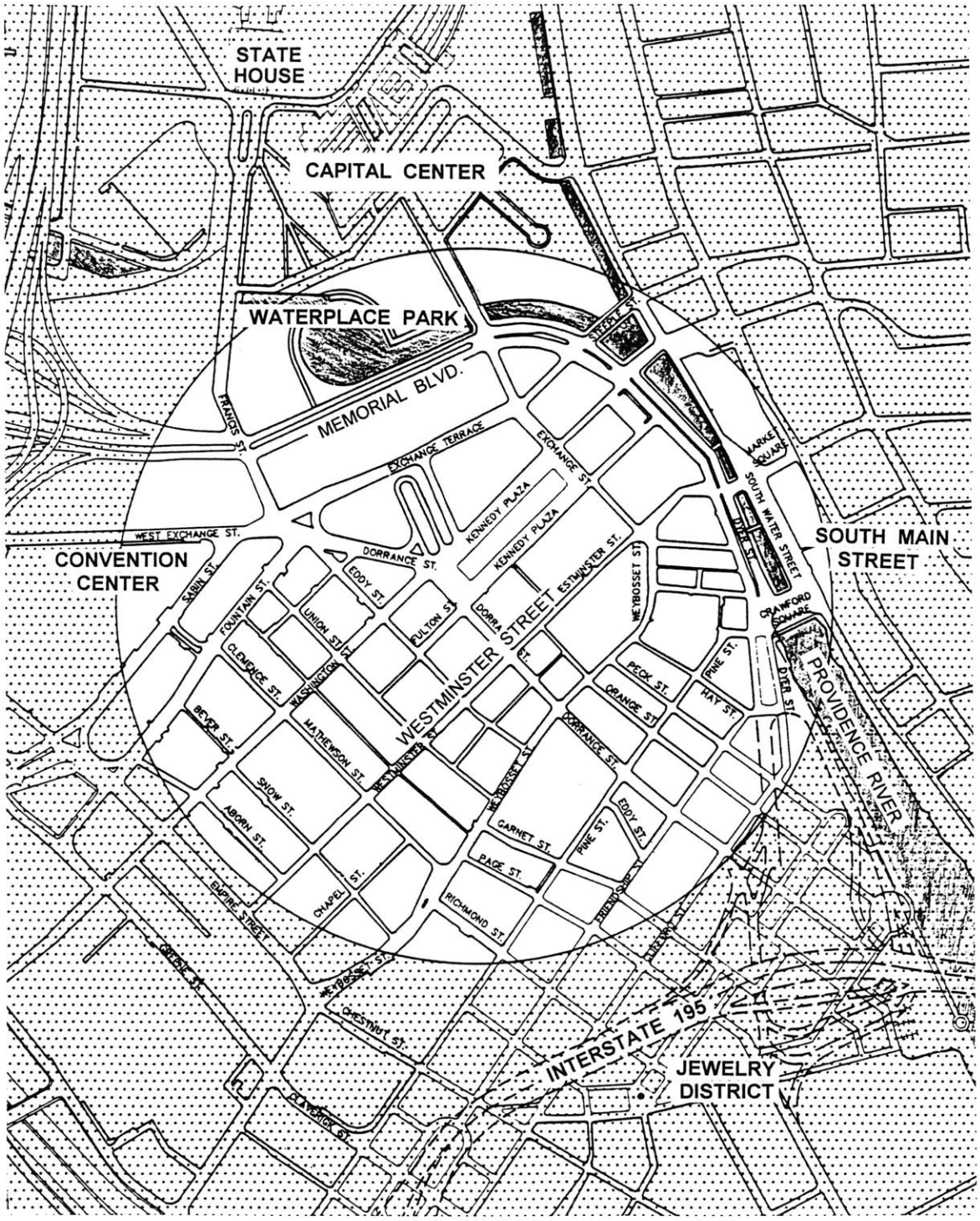

Figure 2.16: Development Around the Edges of Downtown

There has been a great deal of money and effort invested around the edges of Downtown, and much of the new development has been positive. Efforts must be made, however, to make sure that Downtown can benefit from this peripheral development.

Meanwhile, plans are being considered to relocate Interstate 195 to run south of its current route, thus opening up several new parcels for development. The development potential is so great, in fact, that this project has been referred to as "Capital Center South."[30] The highway currently runs through the Jewelry District, just south of Downtown. This district has a mix of industrial and other commercial buildings but has emerged as a small arts and entertainment district of its own, with a handful of nightclubs and restaurants, a live theater company, an antique store and cafe, some residential lofts, and a number of design offices. The relocation of the highway has the potential to strengthen the connection between Downtown and this district. Yet, the Jewelry District can provide support for Downtown or it can divert energy and activity that might otherwise be directed Downtown. As Downtown and the Jewelry District each continue to develop, careful consideration should be given to how these areas relate to one another.

A "Museum Mile" is also being proposed that would link planned museums in the Jewelry District with existing and planned museums along South Main Street, just across the Providence River from Downtown. The proposed network of museums would include the Children's Museum of Rhode Island and the Rhode Island Heritage Center in the Jewelry District, and Brown University's Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology and the RISD Museum of Art on South Main Street.* South Main Street offers the added attractions of a few specialty retail shops, restaurants, and an arts cinema. These sites are just beyond Downtown's edges and do not have direct physical connections with Downtown. If planned and programmed properly, however, a synergistic relationship between all of the areas could be developed while maintaining the individual identity of each area.

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[30] Daniel Baudouin, Executive Director, The Providence Foundation, interview, March 4, 1996.

* The Children's Museum already has a building under its control, the Rhode Island Heritage Center is working to acquire an unused Narragansett Electric building, Brown University already owns the building proposed for the Haffenreffer Museum, and the RISD Museum of Art is considering constructing a new entrance that would face downtown at South Main Street. (Bill Van Siclen, "A Mile of Museums," *The Providence Sunday Journal*, February 4, 1996, pp. E1 and E4.)

4. A major regional mall has been proposed near Downtown

A major regional shopping mall, Providence Place, is all but certain to be built on a site within the Capital Center development area between Downtown and the State House. The mall site is only four blocks from Westminster Street and is adjacent to the highway ramps, which reflects the value of Downtown's central location (Figure 2.17).

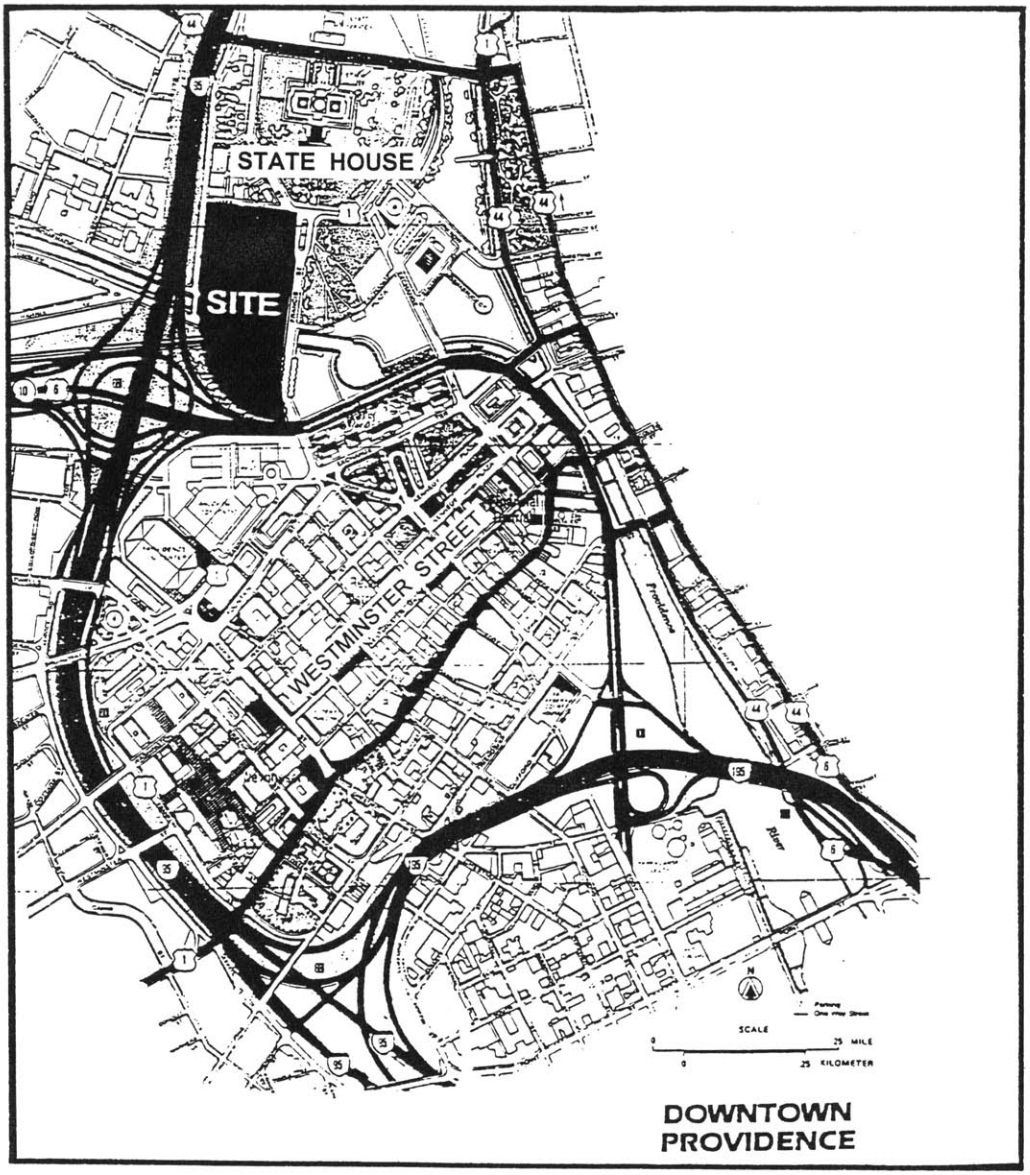

Figure 2.17: Site of Proposed Providence Place Mall

There has been an extensive design review process to address concerns about how the mall will relate, visually and physically, to the surrounding area. The relationship between the mall and Downtown is one of the specific issues of concern. A food court on the top level will have views of Waterplace Park and Downtown, in part to increase the likelihood that people who go to the mall will also go Downtown. The developer is also being asked to contribute to a Downtown marketing program and to help promote Downtown by providing information kiosks in the mall to let mall visitors know about regular attractions and special events Downtown. The side of the mall that faces Francis Street, the link between the State House and Downtown, will be oriented to pedestrians. There are also ongoing discussions about shuttle bus connections with Downtown and other areas. Despite the attention given to these important details, the fact cannot be denied that the mall will form a visual barrier between Interstate 95 and the city to the east, giving passing motorists a very different first impression of the city. Views of the State House, the Downtown skyline, College Hill, and the newly reclaimed rivers that all contribute to the identity of Providence will be severely restricted, if not denied all together.

If it is assumed that the mall is to be built, however, the effect that the mall will have on Downtown must be considered. The mall hopes to provide a shopping experience that is different from the current suburban alternatives and to capture some of the regional market that is now lost to the Boston area. The developer's projections also state that 15% of the traffic to the mall will come by foot.[31] These people will come from downtown offices, offices in and around the state house, and Waterplace Park. Although the mall is nearby, it is not actually in the traditional Downtown locus. While people may be attracted to the mall from its immediate surroundings, it is very likely that most people who drive to the mall from outlying areas will never even step foot Downtown. Physical and programmatic connections between the mall and Downtown should be as strong as possible, but downtown businesses should not rely on the mall to generate business for them. A strategy for Downtown should include ways to work with the mall to the greatest extent possible, but Downtown must stand out as a strong attraction in its own right.

[31] Rick Duggan, Project Architect, the Providence Place Group, American Institute of Architects/Rhode Island monthly meeting, February 26, 1996.

5. An Arts and Entertainment District has been proposed for Downtown

The City's current plans include an effort to strengthen the appeal of Downtown as an arts and entertainment destination. There are already a number of entertainment venues (Figure 2.18), including the Providence Performing Arts Center (concerts and

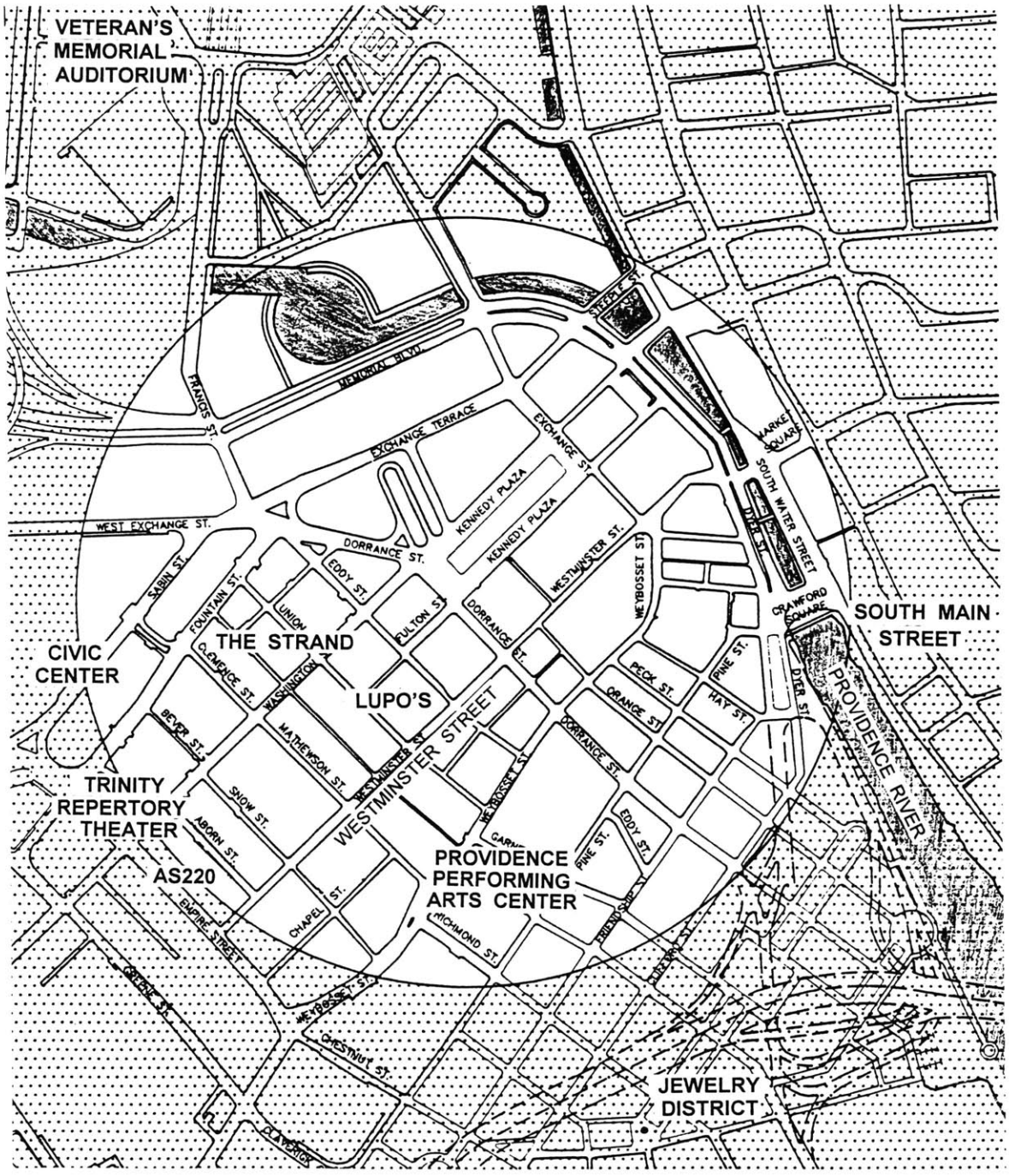

Figure 2.18: Existing Arts and Entertainment Venues

Broadway shows), Trinity Repertory Theater (nationally known live theater; Figure 2.19), AS220 (alternative performance art space, art gallery, cafe, artists

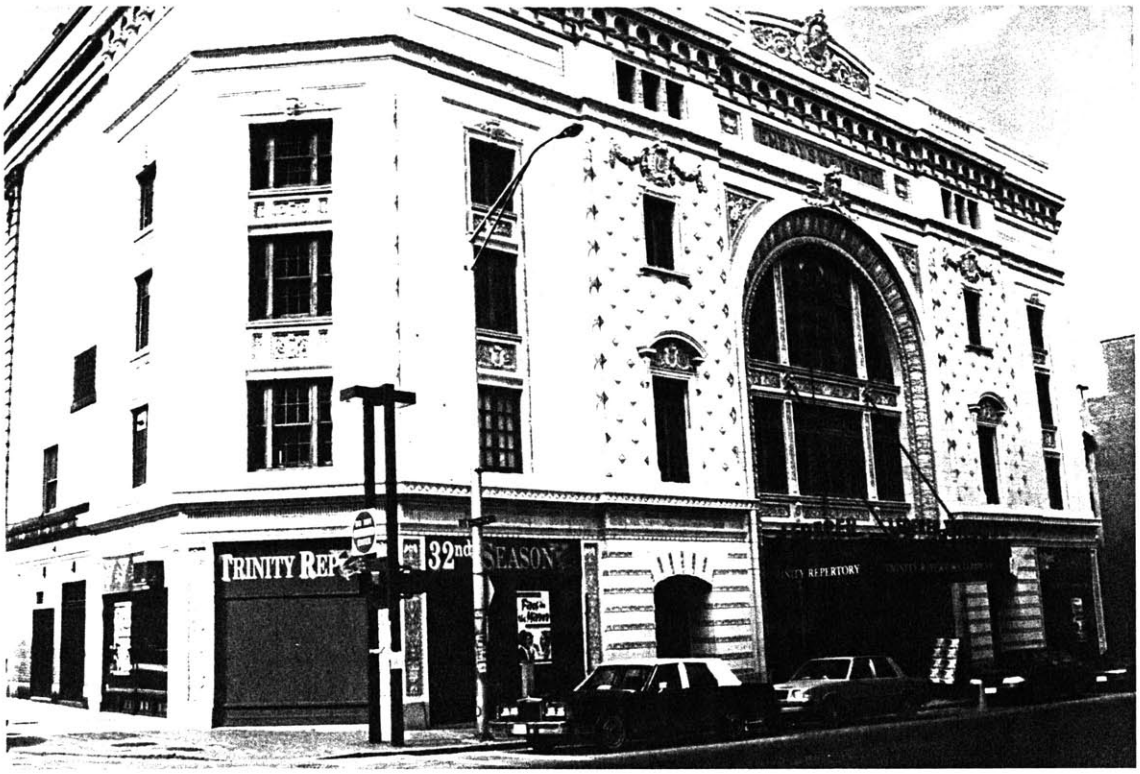

Figure 2.19: Trinity Repertory Theater

studios, and residential lofts), Groundwerx Dance Theatre (contemporary dance company), Alias Stage (live theater), Lupo's Heartbreak Hotel and The Strand (night clubs), and the Providence Civic Center (concerts, hockey, basketball, and special events). There are also a couple of galleries and several cafes, restaurants, and bars. Other attractions just beyond the edges of Downtown include Veteran's Memorial Auditorium (Rhode Island Philharmonic and other concerts) near the mall site; CAV (cafe, restaurant, antique store, and live music and readings), The Call (night club), Desperado's (dance club), TriBeCa and the Atomic Grill (restaurants), and Snooker's Billiards in the nearby Jewelry District; and the Cable Car Cinema and restaurants along South Main Street. All of these existing venues provide a strong base for the establishment of an Arts and Entertainment District. To make people aware of many of the existing attractions in and around Downtown, a collection of noted arts, cultural, historical, and architectural sites have been linked together through the formation of the Providence Banner Trail. The sites along the trail are

already highlighted on a corresponding map and will be identified with banners by the summer of 1996. Special arts and cultural events, including First Night and the annual Waterfront Festival, have also attracted people to the area.

A key component of the arts and entertainment district that is currently the subject of a great deal of attention is the proposal to attract a multi-screen cinema Downtown. [32] The Coalition for Community Development (CCD), a group of business leaders and property owners, has been trying to get a national cinema operator to locate a multi-screen theater Downtown. The Providence Preservation Society (PPS) has given its active support to the cinema project because of its larger interest in finding viable uses for the historic buildings Downtown.[33] CCD, PPS, and others feel that the real hope for generating business Downtown, and thus bringing active uses to the buildings, is to get people Downtown on a regular basis. Although there are places, as mentioned above, that currently draw people Downtown, the activity is sporadic. A movie theater would provide a steady, predictable stream of activity every night of the week and during the days on weekends. Restaurants and retailers could count on that traffic and would be more likely to make investments Downtown.

Another key aspect of the arts and entertainment district is to provide places for artists to live Downtown and sell or perform their art. The AS220 complex of studios and performance spaces, developed by a non-profit arts organization with financial help from the City, has a dozen apartments that are rented to artists (Figure 2.20). In addition, CCD plans to convert several commercial buildings to loft apartments, with an initial target market of artists and students, and legislation is pending at the State House that would give income tax breaks and sales tax exemptions to artists living or doing business in the designated Arts and Entertainment District as an incentive to live and work Downtown.

The existing concentration of arts, cultural, and entertainment destinations provides a strong base for the creation of an Arts and Entertainment District. The presence of artists living and working Downtown could add to this base and make it a place that is unlike any other within the Providence region. The attraction to the area

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[32] Ken Mingus, "Dispute over movie theater could jeopardize mall," *The Providence Sunday Journal*, February 25, 1996, pp. A1 and A18.

[33] Arnold Robinson, Executive Director, Providence Preservation Society, interview February 19, 1996.

Figure 2.20: AS220 Arts Complex

could be made stronger by the presence of a cinema as a generator of steady activity. The Arts and Entertainment District can be used to attract people to commercial uses Downtown. At the same time, it can provide an environment that supports artistic expression and improves the quality of life for the people who live and visit there. Plans must anticipate the possibility, however, that as the Arts and Entertainment District attracts visitors, the individual artists and small one-of-kind attractions that give the District its character could eventually be driven out as victims of their own success.

6. There is a strong presence of higher education institutions Downtown

There is very strong presence of colleges and universities in and around Downtown (Figure 2.21). Johnson & Wales University, known primarily for its culinary and hospitality programs, has the most significant presence. The university owns sixteen buildings throughout Downtown and leases four others.[34] A major new campus

[34] Johnson & Wales University, *Campus Master Plan*, February 1996.

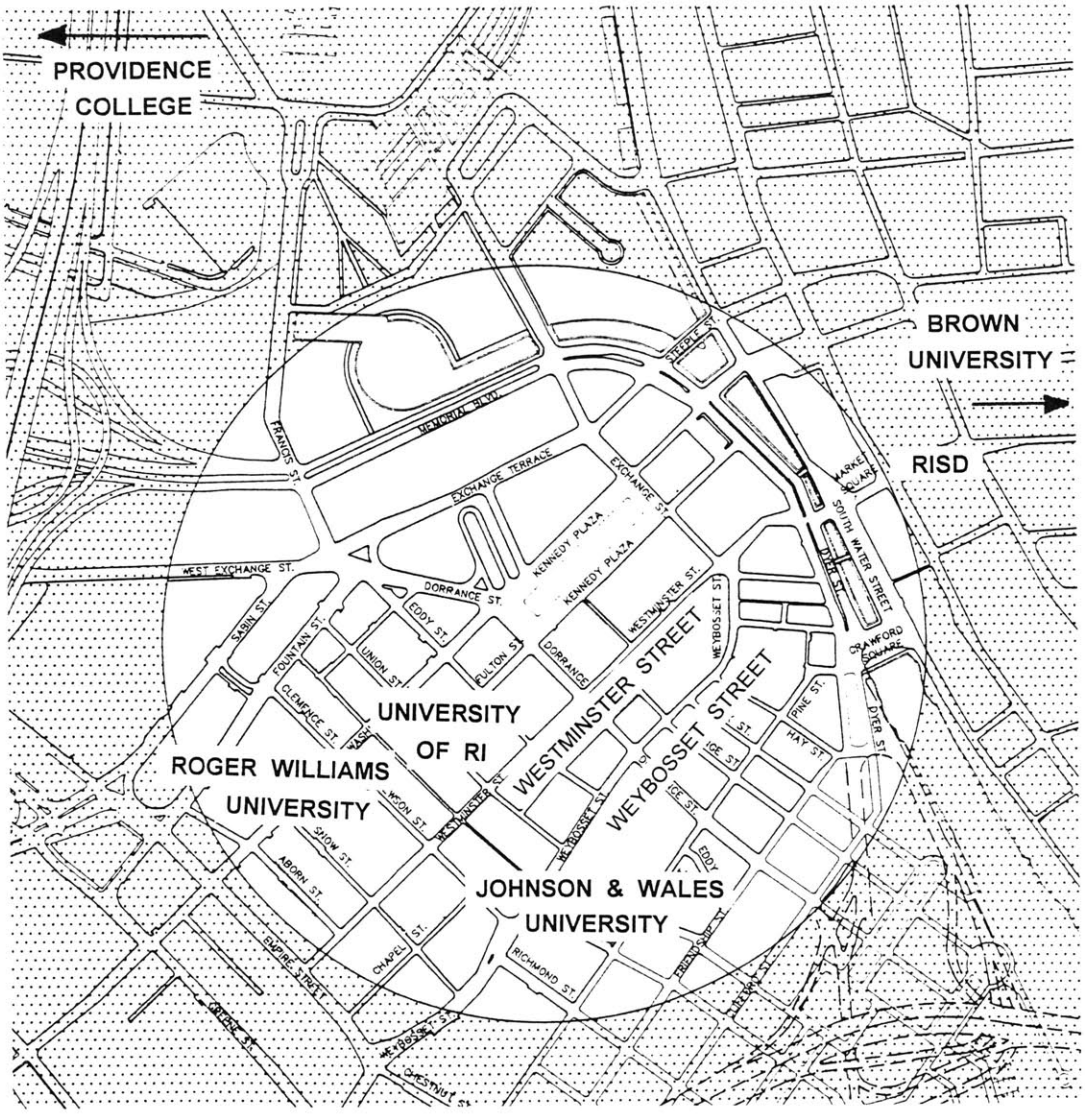

Figure 2.21: Colleges and Universities

complex occupying an entire city block was built recently on the site of the old Outlet Department Store, adjacent to an existing building that now houses the university's library. There are 113 classrooms and approximately 1,000 Johnson & Wales students living Downtown. Fortunately, the University has been closely involved in the planning process for the Downtown area. Their own Campus Master Plan, currently awaiting review by the City Plan Commission, works within the overall physical and programmatic plan for Downtown (Figure 2.22). Student dorms provide a desired residential component, and students, faculty, and staff provide a market for retail, restaurant, and entertainment attractions. Buildings along key pedestrian streets will include commercial uses at sidewalk level.

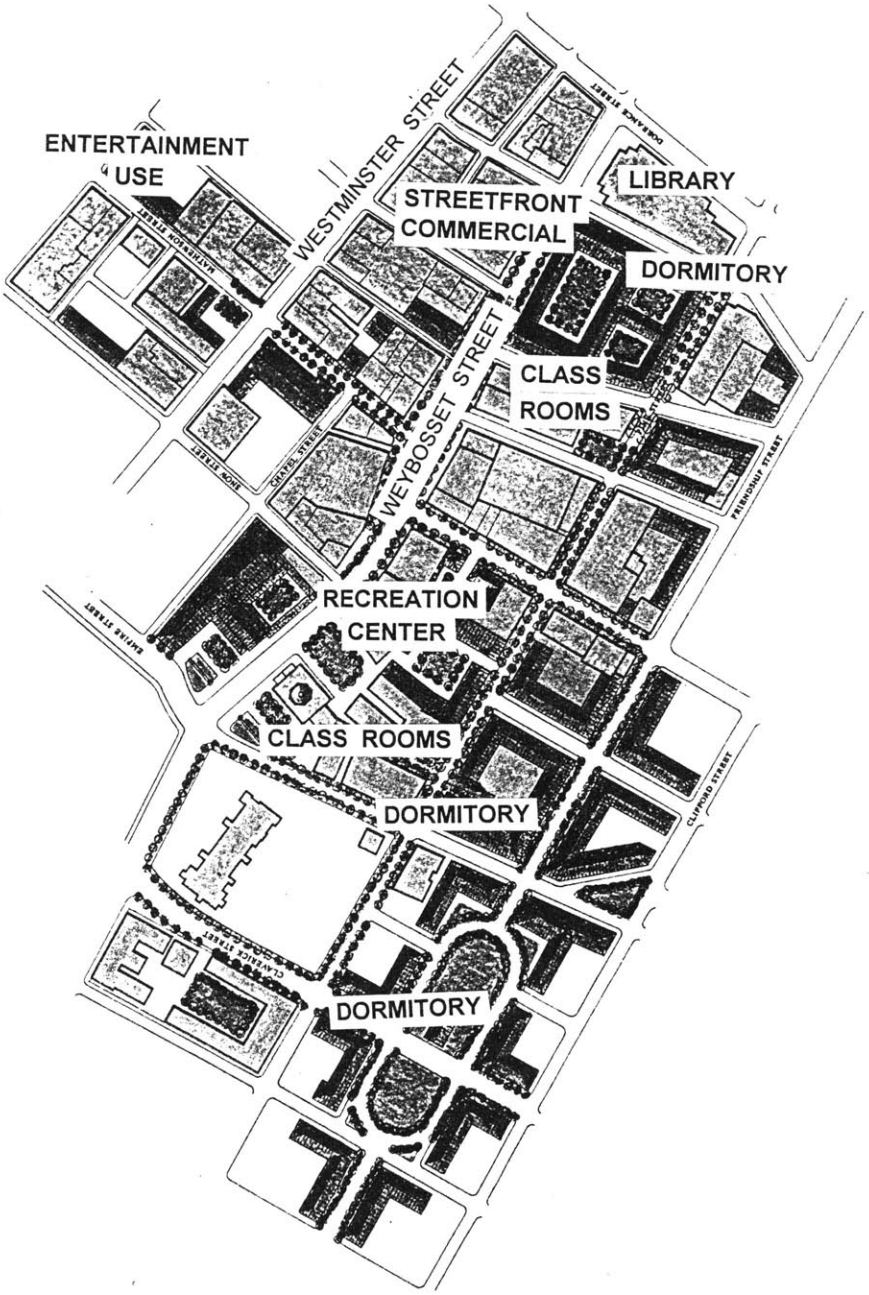

Figure 2.22: Johnson & Wales University Master Plan

In addition to Johnson & Wales, there are two recent additions to the academic community Downtown. The University of Rhode Island's College of Continuing Education, which relocated to its present location at the beginning of 1996, enrolls approximately 4,000 students per semester.[35] The URI facility occupies what had been a large void Downtown in the refurbished Shepard's Department Store building. Roger Williams University's new Metropolitan Center for Law and Education, which opened in 1995, occupies a renovated commercial building on Washington Street. There are other universities in Providence that are not located Downtown but offer a great deal of potential to help enliven the area. Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), in particular, could play a significant role in efforts to bring activity to the center of the city since they are within walking distance of Downtown. These two institutions, because of their strong reputation as leaders in arts and culture, also have the potential to support the emerging Arts and Entertainment District.

Downtown could serve as a common ground for the public and universities to interact and for the universities to interact with one another. Each of these institutions offers classes to the general public, and some of them also provide concerts, exhibits, and lectures that are of interest interest of the academic community. The universities directly support the revitalization of Downtown by bringing people there, day and night, thereby making it a more appealing place for others and providing a market for commercial establishments. Every effort needs to be made to take full advantage of what these institutions can offer to Downtown.

7. There are plans to increase the residential presence Downtown

The "Downcity" plan that is driving redevelopment efforts Downtown includes a residential component. There is currently very little housing directly within the immediate area, but there are approximately 1,400 units in six apartment complexes at the edge of Downtown.* The major residential presence Downtown results from the

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[35] Kathleen Yanity, "New digs," *The Providence Sunday Journal*, January 7, 1996, p. I1.

* There are 225 market rate units in Center Place at Capital Center; 444 market rate units in the Regency, 98 privately subsidized units for the elderly and disabled in the Grace Church Apartments, and 193 private Section 8 units in the Cathedral Square Apartments between Interstate 95 and Downtown; 291 public housing units in Dexter Manor on Broad Street; and 180 privately subsidized units in Beneficent House on Chestnut Street. Sources: management offices of Center Place (for Center Place and Regency figures), Beneficent House, Dexter Manor, Grace Church Apartments, and Cathedral Square Apartments.

Johnson & Wales dormitories, with 750 beds in the immediate Downtown area and another 279 just beyond the end of Weybosset Street.[36] There are also twelve artists' lofts in the AS220 complex and twenty-four market-rate units in the renovated Conrad Building at the west end of Westminster Street. The current plans call for approximately 500 units to be created in the immediate Downtown area by converting the upper levels of commercial buildings to loft apartments.[37] Legislation is pending at the State House that would stabilize taxes in order to make conversion more feasible, and separate legislation would grant income and sales tax breaks to artists who live or work Downtown. By having more people live Downtown, thereby increasing the number of people on the sidewalks day and night, it is hoped that other people would feel as though Downtown is a safe, attractive place to be. The residents would also help create a base to support the retail component of the revitalization efforts.

The authors of the Downcity plan believe that artists and students will be the first segments of the market to be attracted to downtown housing. Typically, these groups are willing to take more risks and, therefore, may be willing to live in places that are not already established as residential areas. Once the residential component of Downtown becomes more established, however, others may follow. There has been some consideration to developing retirement housing Downtown, since elderly people may find it attractive to live in a compact area that allows them easy access to places and services. The housing market should be considered carefully. If the artists are to be an important part of what makes Downtown a distinctive place, steps should be taken to ensure their continued presence there. Downtown housing should include a range of options such that a people from all income levels will be able to afford to live there.

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[36] Johnson & Wales University, *Campus Master Plan*, February 1996, pp. 2.1–2.4.

[37] Coalition for Community Development, *Downcity Project Implementation Plan*, June 1994, p. 6.

CHAPTER 3
CASE STUDIES

The downtowns of many cities throughout the country have gone through a period of decline since World War II. While each place has its unique set of circumstances, the underlying issue of how to attract interest and investment in the core of the city is the same. As efforts to revive Downtown Providence continue, it is useful to study what other cities have done to deal with similar problems. The choice of cases used in this study was informed, in part, through discussions with planning and economic development professionals who face these challenges every day. I was interested in looking at places that had some significant characteristics that were similar to Providence. Size; region; relationship to a port; the presence of educational institutions; the presence of arts, cultural, and entertainment attractions; and the presence of a shopping mall downtown were among the factors that I considered. Through my investigation, four cities emerged that share many of these characteristics with Providence—Worcester, Massachusetts; Portland, Maine; Norfolk, Virginia; and Stamford, Connecticut.

The summaries of the four cities that are presented here are not meant to be complete descriptions of the efforts that these places are making to revitalize their downtowns. Instead, I have focused on the portions of the overall strategies that illustrate useful techniques that could be applied to Providence. Each of the case study descriptions is followed by a summary of the key points to be considered for developing strategies for Downtown Providence.

WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS

Worcester provides examples of how integration can be used as a strategy to revitalize downtown. Integration of two types has taken place in Worcester. First, new development has been physically integrated with the surrounding downtown, and second, Worcester's many colleges and universities are being integrated into the planning process.

Worcester is an old industrial city approximately 40 miles from both Providence and Boston. Worcester is not a port city, but it was connected to the port of Providence by the Blackstone Canal in the 1820s and by rail twenty years later. The Providence & Worcester Railroad still connects the two cities, and both cities have commuter rail access to Boston. The population in 1990 was 169,759, compared to 160,728 in Providence. The Worcester market area is considered to be Worcester County, which had a population of 719,300 in 1995.[1] Worcester has ten colleges and universities throughout the city, and downtown has a base of arts and entertainment attractions and a regional shopping mall. Worcester's Main Street has some of its original historic character but suffers from a large number of interruptions in its fabric where buildings were removed to create parking lots. Despite a variety of retail and service uses that serve office workers and a segment of the city's residents, there is a storefront vacancy rate of nearly 20% along Main Street.[2]

Numerous physical changes are underway in downtown Worcester (Figure 3.1). Significant streetscape improvements have been made to highlight key areas as well as to provide a unifying element throughout downtown. A convention center and a large medical complex, Medical City, are currently under construction. Other plans include a railroad overpass that will serve as a highly visible gateway to downtown, the realignment of a boulevard to better accommodate pedestrian traffic and relate to the new development projects, and the restoration of City Hall and redesign of the adjacent Worcester Common. There are also plans to renovate the long-abandoned Union Station train depot as a multi-modal transportation center.

Like Providence, Worcester is in the process of redevelopment that will change the city significantly. However, both cities intend for their efforts to do more than change the physical appearance of their cities. A well-attended convention center, a major medical

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[1] The Worcester Telegram and Gazette, "Key Facts About the Worcester Market, " 1995.

[2] City of Worcester, "Downtown EOA Business Inventory," August 1, 1995.

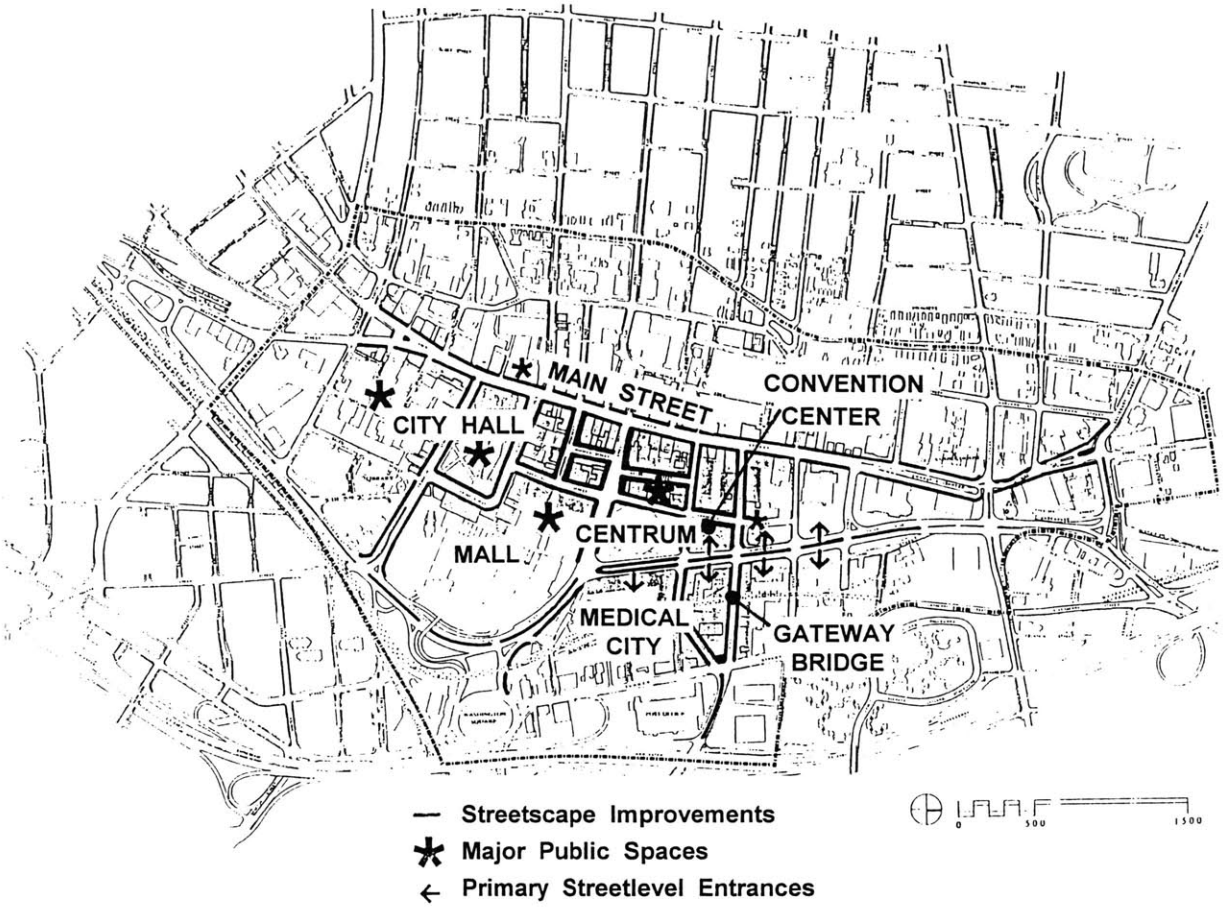

Figure 3.1: Plan of Downtown Worcester, Massachusetts

complex, and a busy shopping mall will bring significant economic activity to downtown Worcester, but these attractions will not necessarily have a positive effect on existing downtown businesses. The mall is easily accessible from the highway and has enough attractions, including a food court, to allow shoppers to have a complete shopping experience without ever stepping foot outside. Similarly, Medical City is designed to include retail, service, and restaurants.[3] The convention center, perhaps, has the greatest

[3] Chan Krieger & Associates, et. al., *Downtown Planning & Economic Development Update*, City of Worcester, September 14, 1994, p.12.

potential to introduce its visitors to downtown since conventioneers will want to find a place to eat or socialize.

The strength of Worcester's redevelopment plans is that the individual projects are physically well-integrated with the downtown environment. The designs of the convention center and Medical City make deliberate efforts to relate well to one another and to their surroundings. Of particular importance is the placement of pedestrian entrances on axes that create physical and visual connections between these establishments and Main Street. Another important design consideration was the strengthening of the connection between the mall and Main Street. Originally, the mall was designed to be easily accessible from the highway, with little regard for its relationship to downtown. Shoppers could go directly from the highway to the parking garage to the mall without even seeing downtown. The new food court has been designed to provide views of the Worcester Common and the primary pedestrian entrance. Streetscape improvements begin directly outside this entrance and continue around the Common, creating a direct visual and physical connection between the mall and Main Street (Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2: Streetscape Improvements, Worcester

Another lesson to be learned from Worcester's experience with its mall is the relationship between its businesses and those on Main Street, one block away. The mall was built in the 1970s as a response to a physically deteriorating and economically declining downtown that was having trouble competing with the suburbs. It was thought that the best way to meet this competition was to build a suburban-style mall in the center of downtown. The concern at that time was not to help Main Street, in particular, but to help downtown as a whole. In fact, many downtown merchants moved into the mall, having a significant negative impact on Main Street. However, the mall failed in the late 1980s as a result of a combination of factors—including its poorly planned interior, competition from new suburban malls, and the bankruptcy of one of its anchor tenants[4] —and the mall stood empty until the fall of 1994, when it reopened as a fashion outlet center. The outlet center provides a major retailing presence downtown, different from what shoppers can get in the suburban malls, but without competing directly with Main Street businesses. Businesses can remain on Main Street to serve office workers, residents, and visitors to the arts and entertainment destinations. This retail programming decision, in conjunction with the physical design changes made to the mall, demonstrates that it may be possible to have a downtown mall that is integrated with its surroundings. Main Street may be able to survive alongside the mall, as long as it provides viable alternatives that will attract its own clientele.

In addition to the significant physical changes that are occurring in Worcester, the City's Economic Development Office is taking several initiatives to revive downtown. These efforts include helping businesses to locate downtown and attempting to establish a business improvement district that would fund downtown maintenance, management, and marketing through a special tax on properties within a designated district.* One of the City's most innovative efforts, however, is the use of a consortium of educational institutions to assist with planning efforts. A "College Town Conference" was held in 1994 with representatives from the colleges, businesses, and city government. The conference report stated:

> The purpose of the conference was to heighten dialogue between college students and the City to create an environment conducive to college students citywide as well as in the downtown area. The primary goals of

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[4] Van Aroyan, Former Planner, Worcester Redevelopment Authority, Telephone interview, December 7, 1994; Dee Mosckos, Assistant City Manager, Worcester, 1968–1980, Telephone interview, December 9, 1994; Charles Zetteck, Project Director for the East Central Urban Renewal Plan, Telephone interviews, December 6–10, 1994.

* Further details about business improvement districts are provided in the Stamford case study, below.

> the conference were to raise awareness among college students as to existing attractions within Worcester and to utilize the input of students and faculty, as well as that of local business persons and City officials, to develop initiatives in the downtown area geared toward college-aged individuals.[5]

By integrating the concerns of the college community into the planning process, the City and downtown businesses hope to make downtown a more desirable place for the 24,000 college students[6] throughout the city. Conference participants indicated that students could be attracted by certain types of retail, restaurants, entertainment, promotions, and special events, as well as by opportunities for internships and community service. City officials believe that students should help determine what these attractions could be, thereby creating an atmosphere that welcomes students, and their consumer dollars, downtown. This process has the added benefit of helping to create an environment in which students will want to stay after they graduate from the city's colleges.

> Today's college students are tomorrow's company owners and entrepreneurs, educators and activists, politicians and artisans. We need to convince many of these talented and skilled persons to stay in Worcester—they are our most valuable resource.[7]

This is long-range thinking that could benefit downtown and the entire city.

Key points to apply to Downtown Providence:

- *Integrate the physical elements of downtown with the surrounding environment.*
- *Incorporate the interests of the college community into the planning process for downtown. Students, in particular, should be engaged in the process.*
- *Develop a streetfront retail mix that does not try to compete with the mall.*

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[5] City Manager's Office of Planning and Community Development, "College Town Conference Report," 1994, Background.

[6] The Worcester Telegram and Gazette, "Worcester Facts," 1991, p. 9.

[7] Ibid., Introduction.

PORTLAND, MAINE

Portland provides an example of how a city's arts and cultural resources can become an important component of plans for the future of downtown. Further, Portland offers ways in which the arts district can relate to other nearby areas so that a stronger whole emerges from what could otherwise be separate, competing districts. This case study, like that of Worcester, also offers ways in which people who will be directly affected by planning efforts can be integrated into the process—in this case, the artists, the cultural institutions, and the potential audience of the arts and cultural district.

Portland, Maine, despite being smaller,* is a port city that has several characteristics in common with Providence. As described in the 1991 *Downtown Vision* plan:

> Downtown Portland is a special place, important to City, region, and State. As the largest urban center in Northern New England, the downtown embodies a synergism of traditions, resources, talents and vision that have been nourished over time. It's natural setting and its historic built environment support diverse businesses, government services, arts, entertainment, academic, cultural and religious institutions, and recreation. While each could exist outside Downtown, only in the Downtown can people experience the vitality of their relationship. The whole is far greater than the sum of its individual parts. Each part is crucial to the greater whole and must be nurtured for the whole to flourish. Downtown Portland offers an intact 19th century cityscape, where diverse activities, building types and styles create a human-scaled urban fabric, encourage human interplay, and provide a strong framework for economic development.[8]

Downtown Portland, like other cities, has had to deal with the effects of growth and competition outside its boundaries. The downtown area is fortunate, however, to have a strong office market and nearby residential districts that support commercial activity. The city's healthy retail sector is located primarily in the specialty-oriented Old Port District. This area attracts downtown workers and local residents, and its unique character also draws tourists. At the same time Congress Street, Portland's main street, suffers from a high vacancy rate;* it has lost traditional retail businesses over the years,

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* In 1990 Portland's population was 64,358 and there were 243,135 people in the Cumberland County market area. (Market brochure, City of Portland, Economic Development Department, August 1995.)

[8] Downtown Vision: A Celebration of Urban Living and a Plan for the Future of Portland - Maine's Center for Commerce and Culture, Adopted by the City council of the City of Portland, Maine, March 11, 1991.

* The ground level retail vacancy rate was estimated at 41% in November, 1994. (Herbert W. Sprouse, Herbert Sprouse Consulting, and Marc Goldring, The Wolf Organization, Inc., consultants, *A Plan for Portland's Arts District*, prepared for the Arts and Cultural Steering Committee, November, 1995, p. II–2.)

some of these to the growing Old Port area.[9] The commercial health of Congress Street was dealt a crucial blow a few years ago when the Porteous Department Store closed its doors.

A business improvement district and management entity, Portland's Downtown District, was formed in 1992 following the recommendations of the City's *Downtown Vision* plan to develop a downtown management program (Figure 3.3).. Portland's

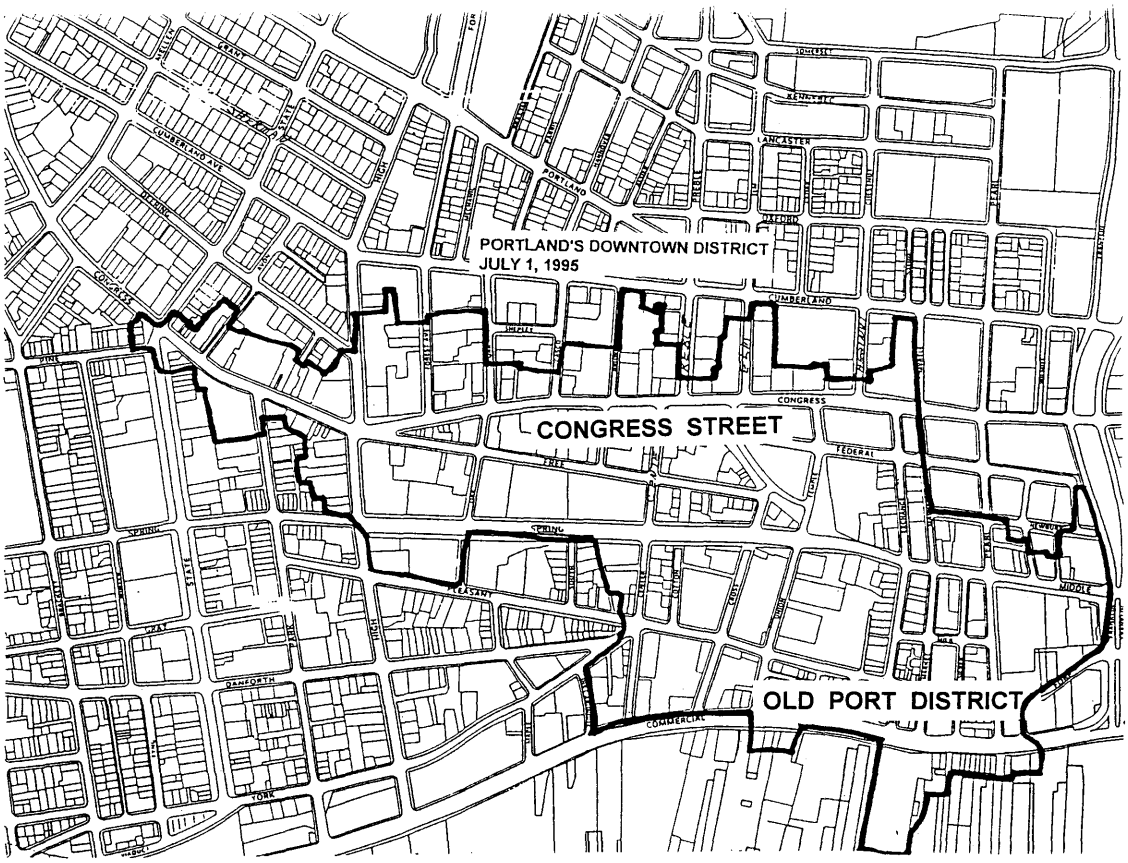

Figure 3.3: Plan of Downtown Portland, Maine

Downtown District (PDD) acts as "a leader, a catalyst, and a facilitator in the encouragement, support, and promotion of the economic vitality of Downtown Portland... PDD monitors and enhances the area's appearance, access, safety and general hospitality. PDD markets Downtown Portland to area residents, downtown workers and visitors."[10]

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[9] Downtown Vision, p. 23.

[10] Portland's Downtown District, "Strategic Plan 1995–1997," p. 3.

The Congress Street Advisory Committee—consisting of PDD Board members, the mayor, staff from the City's Planning and Economic Development departments, and representatives of the business community—was formed to look specifically at the problems facing Congress Street and to "identify and make recommendations with respect to Congress Street's waning economic vitality in order to achieve progress."[11] The Committee supports the current strategy for reviving Congress Street as the Cultural Corridor, the spine of the emerging Downtown Arts District, in recognition of the existing concentration of cultural institutions in the area.

The concentration of arts and cultural activity around Congress Street was highlighted in the 1991 *Downtown Vision* plan. The plan identified several important roles played by arts, cultural, and entertainment uses downtown, noting that their presence

- acts as a magnet for economic development,
- provides an amenity that contributes to the quality of life,
- celebrates the creative energy and opportunities that exist Downtown, and
- contributes a great deal to the economy as a strong industry.

Subsequent to the *Downtown Vision* plan, the Portland Arts and Cultural Steering Committee, a group consisting primarily of representatives from the city's arts and cultural community, was appointed by the City Manager to "advise him on how the City should support development of Portland's arts industry and to guide the planning process for Portland's emerging downtown arts district. These actions were taken in recognition of the importance of the arts, artists, cultural traditions, and cultural institutions to the economic health and development of Portland and the well being of its citizens."[12] The Committee directed a team of consultants to conduct *A Plan for Portland's Arts District*, which was adopted by the City Council in January, 1996, as part of the City's comprehensive plan. *A Plan for Portland's Arts District* examines the role that an arts and cultural district could play in the economic and cultural development of Downtown and the region, based on input gathered through working sessions with the Steering Committee and public officials, public meetings with interested citizens, and interviews with a great number of individuals who represented various interests in the development

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[11] Portland's Downtown District, "Report of the Congress Street Advisory Committee," January, 1995, p. 1.

[12] Herbert W. Sprouse, Herbert Sprouse Consulting, and Marc Goldring, The Wolf Organization, Inc., consultants, *A Plan for Portland's Arts District*, prepared for the Arts and Cultural Steering Committee, November, 1995, p. 1.

of the arts district. This comprehensive study also included a "cultural census" of arts and cultural organizations and individual artists to determine the economic significance of the cultural "industry," as well as an extensive survey of the potential audience for the district within the Portland area. The consultants proposed a mission statement to guide development of the Arts District, set forth several goals to be accomplished through the development of the Arts District, proposed key recommendations, presented near-term and long-term implementation plans, and proposed a breakdown for funding the implementation of the recommendations.

The general goals of developing the Arts District, as outlined in *A Plan for Portland's Arts District*, are to:

- Improve the economic performance of arts institutions in the Arts District and throughout the city.
- Enhance the economic impact of arts institutions in the city.
- Create a more favorable business climate in the District and in downtown Portland.
- Support the creative efforts of individual artists and safeguard their continuing presence in the community.
- Contribute to the overall quality of life in the community.
- Establish an Arts District that is a permanent feature of downtown Portland.
- Build community trust and collaboration of broadly diverse groups as a way of fostering cross-cultural communication and understanding.

These goals were developed from community input and from a review of the *Downtown Vision* plan. Each of the thirty-six recommendations described in the plan has specific significance to the development of Portland's Arts District, yet many of the issues are common to other places. The recommendations, therefore, offer valuable insight that can be applied to Downtown Providence and other places. Highlights from the recommendations follow.

- *Urban design can be used to strengthen the identity of the arts district and, in combination with coordinated programming, can create mutually beneficial links between the district and nearby areas.* The district needs to have a physical identity and character that are easily recognized by visitors, without being so rigidly defined at its borders that artists and attractions outside of the immediate center of the district are excluded from sharing in its benefits. Distinctive physical treatment—such as

signage, paving material, and lighting—can also be used to identify links between the Arts District and other nearby districts. The physical connections can be supplemented by strategically locating certain businesses to make the route between the two districts more interesting. A strong link between the emerging Arts District and the established Old Port commercial area, for example, could address the concerns of Old Port business owners who fear that the Arts District will draw attention away from their established market. Well-designed physical connections and strategically programmed uses in the area between the two districts can actually help them to mutually support one another.

- *The numerous efforts involved in successfully developing an Arts District need to be managed and coordinated.* The most significant recommendation was to establish a Local Arts Agency, an organization dedicated specifically to developing and administering the Arts District. Such agencies that exist in other cities take the form of private or public entities and can perform a number of responsibilities, including managing and coordinating facilities and programs, promoting and marketing the arts, grant-making, planning, advocating for artists, and providing technical services to artists and organizations. The Local Arts Agency should be broad-based, including representatives from the arts and cultural community as well as the business community. It would preferably grow out of an existing arts and cultural organization in order to avoid having too many organizations with similar interests working in the same area. The Agency would work separately from, but in cooperation with, the business improvement district. Cooperative efforts could include the development of strategies for marketing and physical improvements within the District. The consultants also recommended that the Local Arts Agency work with resident arts and cultural organizations to develop an audience development plan and with the City's Economic Development Department to attract businesses that would be complementary with the District.

- *The concerns of individual artists need to be addressed in any plan for an Arts District.* The development of the Arts District will meet artists' need for space to display, sell, and perform their work. The District is intended to make arts and cultural activity highly visible to the public. One real concern, however, is that the growing popularity of the Arts District could increase property values to the point that artists would no longer be able to afford to live and work there. It may be difficult to imagine that such a thing could happen in a place where there are vacancies and

property values are relatively low, yet a comparable situation occurred in the nearby Old Port District, now a successful specialty retail area, twenty years ago.[13] The City is working to help create housing cooperatives so that artists can control their own property. Another issue that effects the arts community is that many artists must, out of necessity, run their own businesses. The Local Arts Agency and the business improvement district could work together to provide business skills training, marketing assistance, and financial assistance to help ensure successful business operations.

- *Support for promotion and funding for the arts can be strengthened by considering artists and cultural organizations to be an industry that plays a strong role in the local economy.* To determine the magnitude of the economic impact of arts and cultural activity, a "cultural census" was conducted as part of the *Arts District Plan.* The number of employees, the value of payrolls, the amount of money spent by organizations and individual artists, and the amount of money spent by patrons were considered. The City of Portland was able to use the figures to support financial decisions that would facilitate additional activity within the industry. In recognition of the industry's contribution to the local economy, as well as its underlying role in improving the general quality of life in the community, the City plans to commit more of its financial resources to the Cultural Corridor over time.

- *A successful Arts District must target a broad range of participants to accomplish important social goals.* First, the presence of art and culture in the city should improve the quality of lives for as many people as possible in the entire community, not just audiences with specific tastes or those who can afford high ticket prices and expensive works of art. The challenge must be met, however, to maintain a high level of quality while appealing to as large an audience as possible through a variety of programs. Second, art has the potential to break down cultural barriers. Public art displays and performances can provide a common experience to be shared by members of all segments of the community who may not otherwise have an occasion to come together.

The detailed planning study for Portland's Arts District identified several key issues, set a number of goals to be accomplished through the development of an Arts

[13] Alexander Jaegerman, Chief Planner, Department of Planning and Urban Development, City of Portland, Telephone interview, February 26, 1996.

District, and proposed several recommendations to meet those goals. The process revealed the potential for a strong arts and cultural presence in the city to have a significant impact on the local and regional economy. The study also highlighted that this positive economic impact is coupled with the positive social impact that arts and culture can have on the quality of life for residents of the community. "The ultimate goal of the Arts District must be to provide the entire community with an amenity that is important in their lives."[14]

Key points to apply to Downtown Providence:

- *The Arts District should be given a distinct physical identity so that it stands apart as a unique place, but it should be related to other districts by physical design and programming of uses so that all of the districts can work together to create a greater whole.*
- *A Local Arts Agency should be established as an organization dedicated to managing and coordinating the numerous tasks required to develop and sustain a successful Arts District.*
- *The needs of individual artists, such as business skills and affordable housing and workspace, should be addressed to ensure that the artists that form the spine of the arts community can continue to live and work in the Arts District.*
- *A thorough study should be conducted to demonstrate the economic impact of the arts and cultural industry so that the evidence may be used to increase political and financial support for the Arts District.*
- *The Arts District should be programmed to be accessible and desirable to as many segments of the community as possible.*

[14] Sprouse and Goldring, *A Plan for Portland's Arts District*, p. IV–7.

NORFOLK, VIRGINIA

Norfolk provides an example of how a strong theme for downtown, and events and development that are programmed around that theme, can be used to attract people and investment downtown. Norfolk's downtown management and physical design strategies also offer applicable lessons.

Norfolk, Virginia, is another medium-sized city that has a downtown with several characteristics in common with Providence. The city's population was 261,229 in 1990,[15] and the market area within a fifty mile radius of downtown includes nearly 1.5 million people.[16] Downtown Norfolk is still considered to be the cultural and financial center of its region, yet it has suffered from a loss of its traditional retail uses to suburban malls as the population has shifted away from the center. The traditional main street was converted to a pedestrian mall and, like Providence's Westminster Street, was reconverted to a street when that strategy failed to attract shoppers. Ground will soon be broken downtown for a major regional shopping mall, and construction is currently under way to convert a former department store to the new site of a community college. Significant development along the city's waterfront began in the 1980s, and new office, hotel, and convention space has been added downtown.

The waterfront is the theme around which the city's revitalization efforts are focused (Figure 3.4). Waterside was developed in 1983 as a collection of eating and drinking establishments and non-traditional retail shops. Like other festival marketplace developments of its kind, it was developed more as an entertainment destination than as a traditional shopping center. A 1990 assessment indicated that Waterside had yet to become a big moneymaker, but had spurred additional downtown development.[17] New office and hotel development occurred along the waterfront during the 1980s, and the marketplace was expanded in 1993. Nauticus—the National Maritime Center that includes the Navy Museum, virtual reality exhibits, and an omni theater with an ocean theme—opened two years ago. Town Point Park has been the site of significant activity Downtown consistently since the early 1980s. Festevents, a non-profit organization,

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[15] U.S. Department of Commerce, 1990 Census of Population and Housing.

[16] Steven W. Cooper, Director, Department of Real Estate Development, Norfolk Redevelopment & Housing Authority, telephone interview by author, March, 1996.

[17] Jonathan Walters, "After the Festival is Over," *Governing*, August, 1990, p. 28.

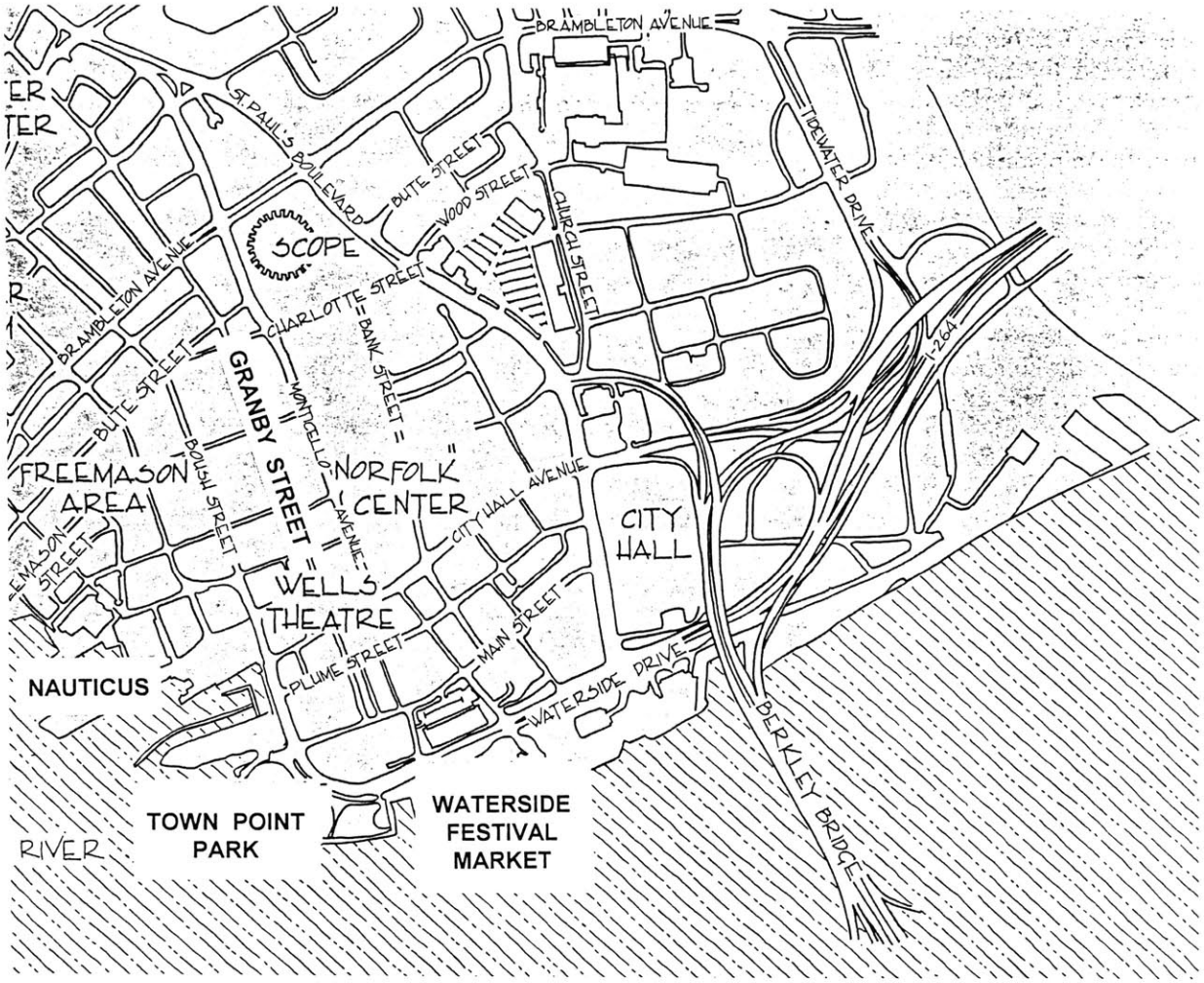

Figure 3.4: Plan of Downtown and Waterfront, Norfolk Virginia

has a staff of approximately twenty full-time employees dedicated for this purpose. Now in its fourteenth season, the programming effort was initiated as a way to bring people back downtown by giving them a reason to want to do so. Events include concerts, children's events, food and wine festivals, art shows, and Fleet Week, a celebration of the Navy and Armed Forces. Festevents receives its funding from the City and from corporate sponsors. It also has an "in-kind" sponsorship agreement with the media; Festevents puts corporate and media logos on flyers and posters, and the media establishes an on-site presence (e.g., broadcasts and prize giveaways) to help attract people to events. The programming and promotion of a full schedule of events gives a broad range of people reasons to come downtown on a repeated basis. The identification of a clear theme centered around waterfront recreation has given a focus to the

development and the promotion of events that have been successful in attracting people to the area. It is a significant part of Norfolk's strategy to revitalize downtown.

In 1989 an advisory panel from the Urban Land Institute strongly supported the use of events to attract people downtown and prepared a development plan and a project-oriented implementation strategy for downtown.[18] A number of the recommendations that were made by the panel are applicable to Providence and other cities:

- *Norfolk should build upon the successful use of its waterfront theme to create a national image.* The city is already known as the financial and cultural center of the region, but it can set higher goals to become a national destination. Establishing a strong image will position the city to attract additional development as the market permits it.
- *The success of Festevents' programming and promotional efforts in attracting visitors to the waterfront portion of downtown should be continued and expanded.* With the provision of proper venues, Festevents could work to attract people to the interior portions of downtown as well as to the waterfront. Restaurant owners and retailers should coordinate their efforts with Festevents to promote special events such as street festivals that would attract customers.
- *A "special benefit district" (business improvement district) should be created in the retail and restaurant district to fund security, promotion, maintenance, and physical improvements.* Providing an ongoing means of making the district safer, more attractive, accessible, and better-known has the potential to change negative public perceptions about the area, thereby attracting customers and additional tenants.
- *Each of the distinct districts in and around downtown should be linked to its adjacent areas to avoid discontinuities, yet each place must maintain its own identifiable character.* Pedestrian connections are of particular importance and may be accomplished by creating clearly defined routes, ensuring that direct access from one district to another is possible, and providing continuous activity along the way. Distinctive banners, lighting, and graphics are some of the ways in which the individual districts can be defined. The success of marketing downtown to the wide range of possible users (identified as office workers, residents, convention visitors, shoppers, tourists, and visitors of cultural attractions) depends on the accessibility of

[18] The Urban Land Institute, Downtown Norfolk, Virginia: An Evaluation of Development Potential and Revitalization Strategies for Granby Street and the "17 Acres" Site, Washington, July, 1989.

each of the districts and a clear relationship between them. Links to and from the waterfront are particularly important since the waterfront is a major attraction; its visitors can be drawn to the interior of the downtown.

Two major planning and development efforts currently underway downtown are very conscious of the importance of creating strong connections. As plans for a downtown regional mall have progressed, urban design issues have been a significant concern. The overall scale of the mall will be much larger than its downtown surroundings, so guidelines and principles were established to ensure that the mall will relate as naturally as possible to the surrounding area. Building facades will be designed to look like a collection of smaller buildings rather than one large structure, and pedestrian connections between the mall and downtown will be created by placing entrances on axis with existing streets that lead to the traditional main street. Similarly, the nearby development of the new downtown location for the community college is being integrated with the existing urban fabric. The college will occupy a converted department store and a newly constructed building, with entrances strategically designed to connect with the existing streets. The City is trying to encourage retailers who won't be able to afford mall rents to locate in less expensive buildings that will be visually connected to the mall and college. The intention is to get as much activity on the street as possible. To further advance its goal of getting people to walk through the old retail area, the City plans to locate its proposed light rail trolley line one block from the mall.

Key points to apply to Downtown Providence:

- *Develop a theme that will strengthen downtown's image. A strong theme can serve to promote the city as a national destination.*
- *Program events several days per week and throughout the year to give people a reason to want to come downtown. Dedicate sufficient staff for this purpose.*
- *Coordinate special events with merchants so that businesses may benefit from the crowds.*
- *Establish clear pedestrian links from major peripheral destinations to downtown.*
- *Establish clear visual and physical connections between major destinations within downtown.*

STAMFORD, CONNECTICUT

Stamford provides an example of the use of a unified downtown management entity as a means for improving streetfront retail business.

Stamford, Connecticut, had a population of 108,056 in 1990[19] and a market area that included 338,350 people within a ten-mile radius of its downtown.[20] Like so many other cities, Stamford has suffered from the decline of its traditional streetfront retail sector over the past few decades. A one million square foot regional shopping mall, Stamford Town Center, was built in the heart of downtown in 1982 (Figure 3.5). Downtown retail

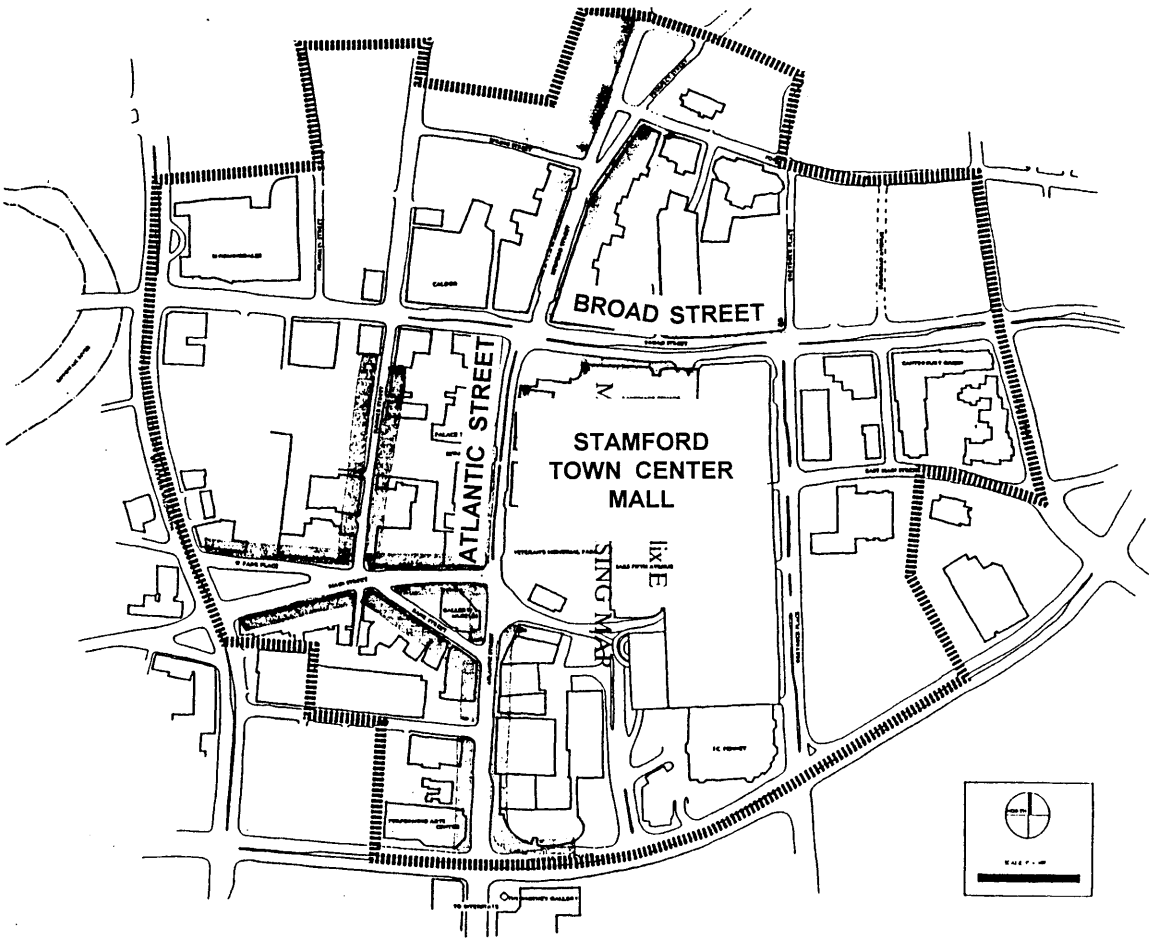

Figure 3.5: Plan of Downtown Stamford, Connecticut

[19] U.S. Department of Commerce, 1990 Census of Populations and Housing.

[20] National Decision Systems, "Pop-Facts: Full Data Report," April, 1993.

needed a significant boost at that time, and a majority of downtown merchants surveyed were in favor of the mall's construction.[21] By 1988, however, there was an underlying feeling of resentment toward the mall, which had become more of a competitive force than a positive boost to streetfront retail. While the mall had been a financial success, it was not physically integrated with the surrounding traditional downtown environment and did not help bring business to streetfront retailers. In fact, the 1988 Retail Survey of Street Level Businesses showed a substantial decline in the number of retail establishments, excluding those in the mall, from 1980 to 1988.* However, in addition to the opening of the Stamford Town Center, the decline of traditional retail in downtown Stamford may be attributed to a combination of factors—the development of suburban shopping centers, the dispersion of the population and other demographic changes, and national trends in the retailing industry.[22]

A nonprofit civic corporation, the Stamford Partnership, was formed in 1978 to bring business, government, and the general community together to improve the physical and economic climate of the city.[23] To direct efforts toward the revival of the traditional downtown retail core, the Partnership helped to create the Stamford Downtown Special Services District. The Special Services District is a legal business improvement district that was enacted by a City ordinance under State enabling legislation after approval of a referendum by 80% of the area's property owners. To foster a more desirable pedestrian and retail environment, owners of the 180 properties in the designated downtown district pay a 4% real estate surcharge to support unified management of the properties in the district. Guided by a fifteen-member Board of Commissioners, comprised of nine property owners and representatives of six business and civic organizations, the District is directly involved in marketing, promotions, parking issues, landscape and streetscape improvements, cleaning and maintenance, and leasing. The Downtown Special Services District has also been able to convince the Stamford Town Center that it is in the best interest of the mall, given its need to compete with other regional malls, to be set within an attractive environment and to redesign facades and entrances to relate to its downtown

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[21] "Downtown Stamford Retail Survey of Street Level Businesses," March, 1988, p. 20. (Provided by The Stamford Partnership)

* The number of establishments declined 25%, while the total amount of store space declined nearly 22%. ("Downtown Stamford Retail Survey of Street Level Businesses," March, 1988, p. 4.)

[22] Rodgers & McCauley, Inc., "Stamford Downtown Streetfront Retail Survey," prepared for Stamford Special Services District, July, 1993, p. 1.

[23] Stamford Partnership, Inc., "1994/95 Annual Report."

surroundings.[24] As part of the business improvement district, the mall supports the management and physical improvement of the entire downtown.

One of the tasks undertaken by the Stamford Downtown Special Services District was to commission a study that evaluated the potential mix of streetfront retail downtown and proposed a plan to guide retail retention and recruitment.[25] The consultants performed the comprehensive *Stamford Downtown Streetfront Retail Study* in 1993 with the help of the District's Board and its Retail Recruitment and Retention Committee. The study considered the following issues:

- national and local retailing trends;
- the demographics of the potential downtown market;
- characteristics of retail areas that compete for the same potential market;
- opinions of local downtown merchants, property owners and managers, and downtown and suburban shoppers;
- the appropriateness of certain categories of retail downtown; and
- the current retail situation downtown.

Recommendations related to tenanting, business retention and recruitment, management, and various physical issues were offered.

By analyzing the existing retail conditions, the potential market, and the potential competition, the consultants recommended a specific mix of retail uses and a retailing strategy. The study of the existing conditions within the district noted that vacancies and an incoherent selection of retail establishments created a disruptive shopping environment. Yet, the study highlighted the strength of some of the existing businesses, the emerging arts and entertainment district, and the proximity of offices. Strong businesses that were already in the district could support and be supported by additional complementary businesses; keeping existing merchants downtown was as important as attracting new ones. Similarly, certain types of commercial establishments would relate well to the growing number of arts and entertainment attractions downtown. The proper mix of businesses and attractions could create a mutually supportive environment.

The study identified city residents, office workers, and residents of the larger metropolitan region as the potential market for the downtown district. Interviews

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[24] David Anderson, President, The Stamford Partnership, interview, February 26, 1996.

[25] Rodgers & McCauley, p. 6.

conducted for the study indicated that local residents would be more likely to shop at downtown streetfront retail businesses if downtown had a more positive ambiance and if downtown businesses filled a specialty niche not offered by other shopping areas. Office workers indicated that they typically needed to run errands and make quick purchases. Card, record, gift, and accessory shops were identified as the types of establishments likely to be frequented by this group. Interviews with people within the larger region who were attracted to the restaurants and entertainment venues downtown indicated that there was little "spillover" onto the streets from these destinations, however, it was noted that an attractive retail mix and a pleasant street atmosphere could draw these potential customers to the streetfront retail.

Competing retail areas were analyzed to determine the types of stores, leasing arrangements, physical environment, amenities such as added security and free parking, and municipal support these other places had. This study was instructive in learning what could be done to improve the shopping environment, both by deciding which aspects to duplicate and which qualities Stamford could offer to make the downtown district unique.

Collectively, these analyses helped determine an overall retail strategy for downtown. The components of the strategy were to:

- increase the concentration of retail uses in existing retail areas before allowing expansion in other areas,
- develop retail and non-retail anchors in the downtown district,
- serve the needs of the office worker market, and
- attract other shoppers by offering unique shops and restaurants in an environment that the mall and other competing areas don't offer.

The consultants strongly recommended that the District follow the lead of mall and shopping center owners by hiring an experienced full-time retail management specialist to work toward bringing about a stronger retail environment. The report pointed out that successful downtown shopping districts required the same qualities as successful shopping centers and malls: a proper mix of tenants, well-maintained buildings and grounds, visible and attractive display windows, adequate parking, and a safe and secure environment. In fact, surveys of potential customers who said that they didn't shop in downtown's streetfront retail district cited parking, traffic, safety, and a lack of the right mix of stores as reasons that kept them away. Even if these were merely perceived problems, owners of properties along the downtown retail shopping streets needed to

address these points to attract tenants and customers. If the City could not increase services within the district, the funds raised through the additional property taxes in the business improvement district could pay for private security patrols and maintenance and repair crews.

In addition to working to attract customers, downtown property owners also needed to recruit tenants aggressively. Again, they could learn from mall developers who, in some cases, have obtained a desired tenant mix by offering incentives to tenants, such as construction allowances and low base rents tied to a percentage of sales. The retail district manager could monitor leases and work with property owners and brokers to help develop a leasing strategy to attract the types of tenants that would create an improved retail environment throughout the district. The importance of working to retain existing merchants was also emphasized. Incentives could be offered, if necessary, such as providing technical business assistance, hiring merchandising and design consultants, and offering attractive loan programs. The consultants recommended that the manager work closely with merchants to learn of their concerns and to help them express these concerns to the City and to property owners. By visiting merchants often and facilitating communication throughout the district, the manager would help build a cohesive downtown shopping environment.

Another significant role recommended for a downtown retail manager was the skillful marketing and promotion of the streetfront retail district to potential tenants and customers. Recommended marketing tools included joint advertising campaigns to emphasize downtown's central location and distinctive architecture, coordination of store hours and signage, and distribution of guides and maps of the district's restaurants, entertainment venues, and parking facilities. Marketing efforts could be supported by programming special promotions that give people an extra reason to go downtown. Special events such as festivals, concerts, and fairs could reverse people's negative impressions of a lifeless downtown; they bring people to the street, thereby attracting more people and improving security. The report noted that it was important to involve merchants in the planning of these events so that they wouldn't feel that the promotions were actually competing with their stores for attention. Bringing central, coordinated management to downtown would improve the likelihood of creating a healthy downtown retail environment.

Promoting a strong retail environment is only one of the strategies now being used to attract people to downtown Stamford. The mission of the Downtown Special Services

District is "to provide the central management apparatus to insure a safe, clean and pedestrian friendly downtown environment which is the destination for the region's cultural and retail needs."[26] In recognition of downtown's role as the cultural center, the Special Services District promotes four categories of uses: dining, arts and entertainment, shopping, and education. Distinctive logos appear on banners throughout the downtown district to highlight each of these themes. This is all part of a strategy to redefine downtown by creating a concentrated "scene" of activity that takes advantage of the centralized location that the suburbs can't offer.[27] Current activity includes the relocation of the University of Connecticut's Stamford branch to the vacated Bloomingdale's department store building, the addition of more cinema screens downtown, and the development of new housing. The Special Services District is actively marketing and promoting downtown as the place where a variety of activities happen.

Key points to be applied to strategies for Downtown Providence:

- *Establish a business improvement district with a unified downtown management entity. Hire a full-time retail management specialist to oversee coordinated property management, leasing strategies, and marketing.*

- *Conduct a thorough retail market study that examines the current conditions downtown, the potential market, and the possible competition. Use the results of the study to develop strategies for improving the physical environment, providing improved services, and developing a desired retail mix.*

- *Work to retain existing tenants while trying to attract new tenants to vacant storefronts. Listen to the concerns of existing businesses and provide enticements such as technical business assistance and merchandising and design services.*

- *Promote downtown through special events.*

- *Promote downtown by emphasizing its role as a central place that offers a concentrated variety of activities.*

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[26] Stamford Downtown Special Services District, "Discover Stamford Downtown," promotional brochure.

[27] David Anderson, President, The Stamford Partnership, interview, February 26, 1996.

SUMMARY OF POINTS FROM CASE STUDIES

The points taken from the case studies may be categorized such that the lessons learned from each can work together.

Physical interventions:

- Create a physically distinct identity for Downtown.
- Establish physical and visual links between destinations to integrate the uses within Downtown with their surrounding environment.
- Create clear connections between Downtown and the peripheral districts.

Organizations to be established:

- A Local Arts Agency to administer the Arts and Entertainment District.
- A Business Improvement District to oversee management of Downtown.
- An entity to organize and promote ongoing and special events Downtown.
- A consortium of colleges and universities that includes students and staff.

Studies to be conducted:

- An economic impact study of arts, cultural, and entertainment uses.
- A retail market study to examine existing conditions, competition, potential markets, and the potential tenant mix.

Programming:

- Create a theme for Downtown.
- Promote Downtown by emphasizing its role as a central location that offers a variety of activities.
- Plan retail uses that do not compete directly with the mall.
- Program events to attract a variety of people Downtown at different times of day, throughout the week, and throughout the year.
- Coordinate special events with merchants.

People to consider:

- Involve students and the entire university community in the planning process.
- Address the needs of individual artists.
- Address the needs of existing merchants while trying to attract new ones.
- Serve as many segments of the community as possible through uses and events.

CHAPTER 4
GUIDELINES FOR DOWNTOWN PROVIDENCE

Based on research and analysis of Downtown Providence and lessons from other downtown cases, a number of key guidelines for revitalization are proposed below. Together, these guidelines can shape strategies for the planning and development of Downtown Providence:

- Treat the arts, cultural, and entertainment attractions of the city as an important permanent industry, not just as a backdrop for other activities.
- Facilitate the greatest possible interaction between attractions within Downtown.
- Create physical and thematic gateways to Downtown to enhance its distinctiveness and to establish clear connections with the districts around its edges.
- Exploit Downtown's unique ability to offer a concentration of diverse uses.
- Program, promote, market, and manage Downtown.
- Actively engage the university community in the planning process.
- Establish a theme for Downtown Providence.

Specific points to be considered are summarized after the discussion of each of the guidelines.

1. TREAT ARTS, CULTURAL, AND ENTERTAINMENT USES AS AN INDUSTRY

A major objective of the City's current plan to revive activity in Downtown Providence is to build upon the area's existing arts, cultural, and entertainment attractions. The City plans to officially designate a portion of Downtown as an Arts and Entertainment District. An active, cohesive Arts and Entertainment District is intended to serve as a significant attraction that would bring residents and visitors Downtown. If pending state legislation is approved, artists who live and work in the district would receive income and sales tax

breaks. The tax breaks are intended to encourage a concentration of artistic activity that would add to the existing attractions.

> The development of an active artistic community, especially with the inclusion of "artists in residence", in this area would promote economic development, revitalization, tourism, employment opportunities and encourage business development by providing alternative commercial enterprises...[1]

This excerpt from the legislation indicates that the City recognizes the direct relationship between artistic activity and business and employment opportunities. However, the City's plan for Downtown focuses on the ability of arts and entertainment activity to attract other uses. The *Downcity Providence Implementation Plan* highlights a quote from the plan's lead consultant, Andres Duany:

> [Artists] bring art and life into the decaying parts of old cities. When artists occupy downtown they are followed by galleries, cafes, supply stores and performance spaces... I cannot emphasize enough the tremendous marketing advantage that culture can give Providence... There is nothing better.[2]

The encouragement of arts, entertainment, and cultural activity is an important policy decision that could help Downtown Providence stand out as a distinct place. The City correctly recognizes the value of arts, culture, and entertainment to provide a heightened quality of life for existing residents. These amenities also have the ability to attract additional investment to Providence; audiences will support retail establishments and restaurants, people may decide to reside Downtown, and companies may choose to locate in Providence. The City should treat the arts, cultural, and entertainment uses as more than a backdrop to other economic activity, however. The people, businesses, and organizations that provide these amenities should be treated as components of a strong, permanent industry that makes a significant contribution to the economy in its own right.*

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[1] Rhode Island House Bill Number 96-H 8206, "An Act Relating to Sales Tax – Exemption for Writers, Composers and Artists," Section 44-18-30B, a proposed amendment to Chapter 44-18 of the General Laws, February 6, 1996.

[2] Mayor Vincent A. Cianci, Jr., Downcity Task Force, Department of Planning and Development, *Downcity Providence: An Implementation Plan*, Providence, August, 1993, p. 18.

* "Arts," "culture," and "entertainment" do not necessarily belong in the same category but are discussed together here since all three types of uses are included in the plans for Downtown Providence. The City of Providence refers to the "Arts and Entertainment" District without using the term "cultural," and generally includes such varied categories as painters, live theater, rock music concerts, poetry recitals, cinema, and others. Commercial entertainment was not included in the Portland, Maine, study.

Providence should follow the lead of Portland, Maine, and conduct a thorough "cultural census" to document the direct economic impact of the industry. A study of the economic impact of the arts was done on a statewide level in Rhode Island by the New England Foundation for the Arts but it does not provide data specific to Providence. In addition, the estimates presented by the study may be conservative since it is difficult to determine which categories of economic activity related to arts and culture should be included in such a study.[3] A NEFA study estimated that non-profit cultural institutions employed 2,500 people throughout the state in 1988 and spent $25 million.[4] Spending by audiences in association with attending events during that same year was estimated at $13.5 million. The statewide numbers should be updated and a thorough study of the economic impact of the arts, entertainment, and cultural industries in Providence should be conducted to lend support to the effort to develop a strong arts and cultural presence Downtown.

As the amenities provided by the arts, cultural, and entertainment industry attract more people Downtown, some components of the industry risk being priced out of the area. The artists and businesses that will attract others to the District in the first place may, in time, no longer be able to afford to be there. In fact, in presenting the Downcity Plan, Duany acknowledged that this is likely to happen:

> Historically, most neighborhoods that have been revived were pioneered by artists. Greenwich Village, So Ho, Coconut Grove, Key West, and the Left Bank of Paris were all areas colonized first by artists...Ultimately, the middle class drives out the artists. This seems to be an irresistible force, not even Paris could resist. There is nothing that can be done, but it is a problem that you should look forward to, because it means that your downtown is alive.[5]

The eventual displacement of artists was also acknowledged by a policy advisor to the mayor.[6] A decision has to be made early on to make a commitment to maintaining the atmosphere that is being encouraged. The AS220 arts complex provides affordable housing to artists, but other loft "artist" housing now being planned will be left to market

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[3] Tereann Greenwood, Acting Executive Director, Rhode Island Philharmonic, telephone interview by author, April 15, 1996.

[4] New England Foundation for the Arts, "Economic Impact of the Arts in Rhode Island."

[5] Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Town Planners, *Downcity Providence: Master Plan for a Special Time*, March, 1992, p. 4.

[6] Luke Driver, Policy Advisor to Mayor Cianci, City of Providence, telephone interview by author, April 1, 1996.

forces. To ensure a continued presence of artists and others who work downtown, plans should be pursued to provide some residential and business space that can continue to be affordable as rental and ownership opportunities to people within a wide range of incomes. It is also important to actively engage members of the arts and cultural community in the planning process, rather than making plans for them. Again, the example of Portland's Arts District study may be followed; individual artists, people directly involved in the arts and cultural organizations, and interested citizens were all involved in providing input for the plan.

Summary:

- *Conduct a thorough study to document the economic impact of the arts and cultural industry.* Use the evidence from the study to maintain and increase public and political support for the arts and to leverage funds to the greatest extent possible. Support for existing and new arts and cultural attractions will likely be strengthened if the direct economic impact of the industry can be demonstrated.

- *Ensure that arts and culture are a permanent feature of the city, not just used as a temporary step toward revitalizing downtown.* In addition to providing an enhanced quality of life for people in the region, this industry is important as a source of economic livelihood. People's jobs depend on the strength of this industry—people involved directly in the industry as well as those who get the secondary benefit from the patrons who also spend money elsewhere downtown. Measures should be taken to ensure that the people involved in the arts and related businesses can continue to afford to live and work Downtown. Individual artists and representatives of arts and cultural organizations need to be an ongoing source of input for the planning process for Downtown to ensure that their interests continue to be met.

- *Establish a Local Arts Agency to represent the interests of the arts and cultural industry and to manage and coordinate the numerous efforts required to develop a high quality, successful Arts, Cultural, and Entertainment District.* The Agency should include a broad base of individuals and organizations involved in the arts and cultural industry and the general business community.

2. Facilitate Interaction Between Attractions

Downtown Providence is a relatively compact area. The scale of the streets, blocks, and buildings is conducive to a strong pedestrian environment. While all of the destinations within Downtown are accessible to pedestrians, this alone does not guarantee that potential users will actually go to them. Measures can be taken to maximize exposure to destinations. First, uses that do not generate a high volume of pedestrian traffic or that do

not require a streetfront location in order to be competitive should not occupy prominent sites. Second, uses can be placed strategically within Downtown to attract people on their way to a nearby destination. Similarly, certain types of uses can be clustered together to maximize their collective attraction. Finally, anchor uses can be located to draw people from one area to another. For example, the proper placement of strong destinations can attract office workers out of the financial district during their breaks or on their way to and from work. If the anchors are located properly, workers will also pass minor destinations that can benefit from the additional exposure.

Another way to facilitate desired movement through Downtown is to provide distinctive physical design treatment along specific paths. Signage, banners, pavement, lights, and landscaping are elements that can be used to identify routes. Key destinations and their entrances should be visually and physically accessible to these routes so that the pedestrian traffic that these destinations generate can be directed onto these routes. As was learned from the Worcester and Stamford cases, downtown malls in these cities generated a high volume of visitors, but the visitors did not interact with the surrounding downtown environment because interaction was discouraged by poor urban design. Worcester has learned its lesson; the mall is now oriented toward the Worcester Common and Main Street, new streetscape improvements provide clear links to destinations throughout downtown, and major projects now under development give special attention to establishing clear visual and physical connections with the surrounding downtown. Proper streetscaping and placement of entrances will encourage interaction among destinations.

Summary:

- *Major destinations should be placed strategically within the Downtown fabric to strengthen the interaction between uses.* A synergistic mix of uses will be created as pedestrians going to one destination will be exposed to other destinations that they did not originally set out to visit.
- *Distinctive streetscape treatment along key routes and careful placement of building entrances will direct pedestrian traffic so that Downtown uses work to the benefit of one another.*
- *Visual connections from key destinations to other uses should be created or reinforced wherever possible.*

3. CREATE PHYSICAL AND THEMATIC GATEWAYS

Downtown Providence is surrounded by the major redevelopment of the riverfront and Capital Center, the proposed "museum mile," a small specialty commercial area along South Main Street, the universities and historic neighborhoods on College Hill, the traditional Italian commercial district of Federal Hill, and the Jewelry District (Figure 4.1). Each of these districts, like Downtown, has the potential to draw visitors interested in cultural, arts, recreational, and entertainment attractions.

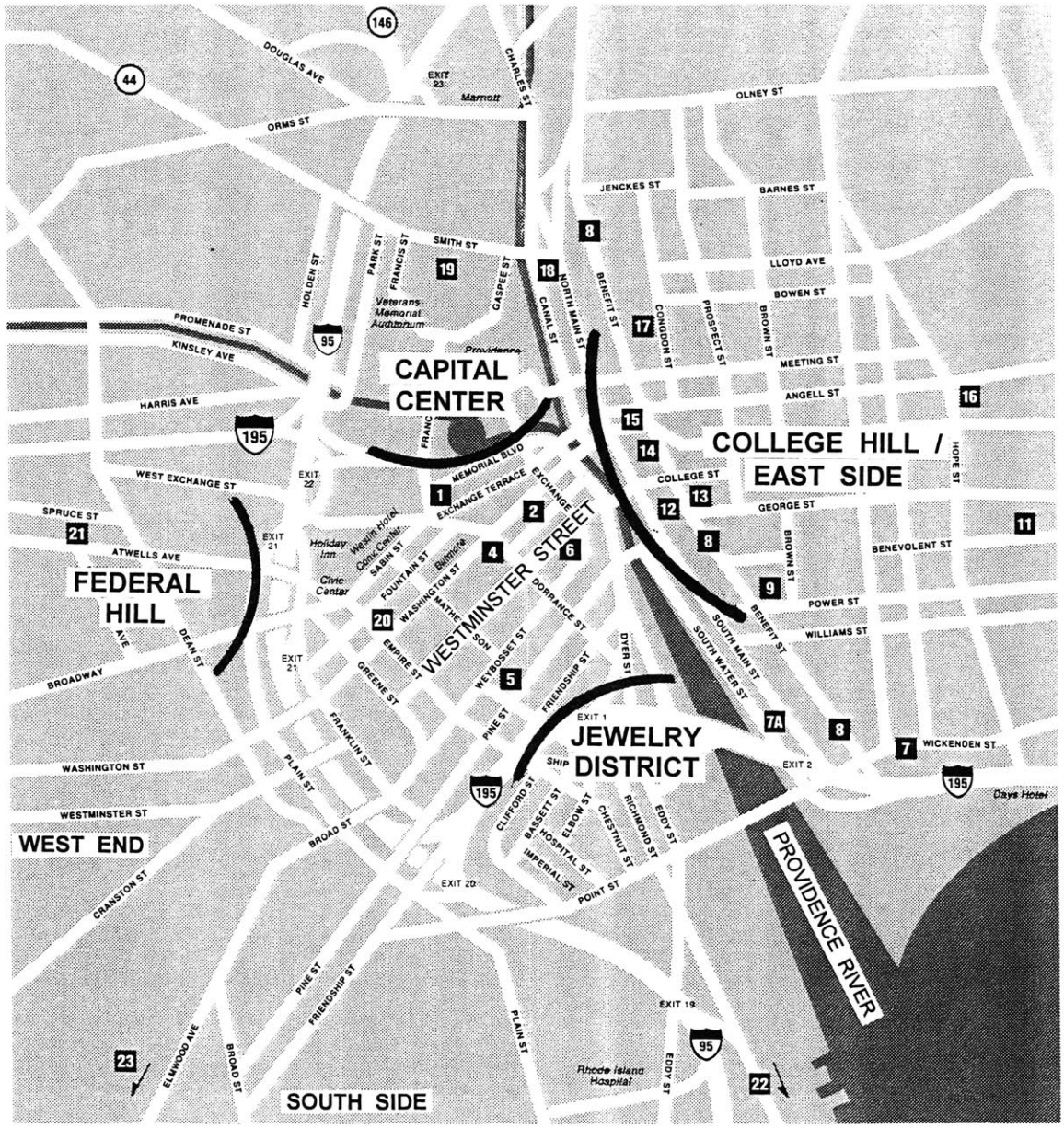

Figure 4.1: Downtown and Surrounding Districts

Plans to revive Downtown Providence should not ignore the activity around its edges since synergy between the center and the surrounding districts can create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Nor can it be taken for granted that visitors to these peripheral sites will also visit Downtown. By programming events and uses in one district that refer to the themes of other districts, "thematic gateways" can be created that serve as entry points from one district to another. People who arrive in one of the districts for a specific purpose may then learn of the existence of the other district and be encouraged to visit. Physical and visual links between the districts can also be established by clearly marking the routes from the outlying districts to Downtown. Rather than competing for visitors, the districts can form a planned, programmed relationship that creates a more interesting and inviting whole.

Downtown is one of several districts in the city, but its position at the center and its high concentration of activity serve to highlight its importance. Yet, the hierarchy needs to be firmly established; it must be clear that Downtown is the most important place in the region. Urban design can strengthen Downtown's distinctiveness and identity. Consistent streetscape treatment throughout Downtown that is different from that in the surrounding districts can set the center apart; however a much stronger statement can be made by creating physical gateways to clearly mark the points of transition from the outside into Downtown. Arches, columns, banners, and distinctive landscaping and architectural treatment at the entry points to Downtown are examples of "gateways" that announce one's arrival at a distinctive place. Thematic, physical, and visual linkages between Downtown and the surrounding districts should be established to help the districts support one another, but Downtown must be recognizable as the most important district.

Summary:

- *Create physical gateways to clearly mark the entrances from the surrounding districts to Downtown.* Special design treatment can be given to the routes that lead to these gateways in order to help pull the districts together, but Downtown must be the clear focus.

- *Create thematic gateways that serve as entry points from one district to another.* Events and uses in one district that refer to what exists in the others will help people learn about the other districts and encourage them to go there.

4. Exploit Downtown's Concentration of Uses

Downtown's physical setting is unmatched within the metropolitan region. It offers a centrally located collection of architecturally distinctive commercial buildings within a fine-grained urban fabric that is well-suited to pedestrian activity. This setting should not be planned as an alternate location to perform the same activities that can be performed elsewhere. The suburbs, the Providence Place Mall, and Downtown can each offer something different. Downtown can offer a concentration of diverse uses and activities that cannot be found in other places; it can be a "scene." This concentration of uses—arts and entertainment attractions, stores, restaurants, cafes, bars—in a distinctive human-scaled physical setting, supplemented by the nearby peripheral attractions discussed above, will provide an environment that is unique in the Providence area. Its central location, easily accessible by the same highways that have allowed people to leave the city, makes it a possible destination for people within the entire metropolitan region.

Retail activity is perceived as an important component of a healthy downtown—it provides a service, it provides entertainment, it brings people to the streets, and it attracts money. The new Providence Place Mall, by virtue of its scale alone, will be the major retail draw to the Downtown area. To compete with the outlying suburban malls and attract shoppers who now have to go outside of the region to find a high quality shopping experience, the Providence Place Mall will try to offer something different—it will be larger, more luxurious, and offer a different tenant mix than other malls in the region. One of the other attractions of Providence Place may, in fact, be its location adjacent to Downtown, the State House, and Waterplace Park, all of which will be visible from the mall. Providence Place's urban setting will make it a more interesting alternative to its suburban competitors, but the mall must not take this setting for granted. Managers of The Stamford Town Center mall in Connecticut realized that it was to their competitive advantage to contribute to improving the surrounding downtown environment in which the mall sits. Downtown merchants and the Providence Place Mall can coexist and benefit one another if they cooperate toward a common goal of promoting the entire Downtown area.

The following three-part strategy should be followed to ensure that Downtown can offer a retailing experience that doesn't compete with the mall but, instead, offers an alternative:

1. *Offer unique retail opportunities.* There has been concern that the mall will damage any real chance for a retail market Downtown. Yet, there has been recent interest by a national developer in investing in the traditional retail district along Westminster Street.[7] A sophisticated developer must understand the need to provide retail opportunities that the mall doesn't offer. Westminster Street should continue to provide convenient shopping to office workers and others who rely on downtown's central location, including the residents of the housing that is now being planned. Downtown's real potential, however, is to offer a unique experience that the mall can't offer, including one-of-a-kind commercial attractions for the Arts and Entertainment audience.

2. *Balance local and chain stores.* Chain retailers that typically choose not to locate in malls, such as Tower Records and Urban Outfitters, could support the Downtown environment.[8] Every effort should be made, however, to ensure that the mix of chain stores blends well with an eclectic mix of local retailers. Some of the mall shoppers may be attracted to the Downtown streetfront retail, but Downtown's strength may be that it will provide an alternative for the market segment that simply prefers not to shop in malls if given a choice.

3. *Create action Downtown.* In a discussion of urban retail, noted urban planner, developer, and scholar Alexander Garvin states that "the city shopping arcade and the urban marketplace are intended to attract customers who would otherwise spend their money elsewhere. Both try to be 'where the action is.' "[9] While the mall may be near where the action is, it is the actual Downtown district that should provide the action. The presence of students and visitors to the arts and entertainment attractions can contribute to the action.

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[7] Thomas E. Dellar, Deputy Director for Planning, Providence Department of Planning and Development, telephone interview by author, April 1, 1996; and John M. Kelly, General Counsel, Cornish Associates, interview by author, Providence, Rhode Island, March 26, 1996.

[8] Bruce Horovitz, "Malls are like, totally uncool, say hip teens," *USA Today*, May 1, 1996, p. 2A.

[9] Alexander Garvin, *The American City: What Works, What Doesn't*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996, p. 108.

The current plan to develop a cinema Downtown as a catalyst for the Arts and Entertainment District is a good one. It has the potential to attract a steady supply of customers to other establishments. In addition, since other activities are within walking distance—restaurants, bars, cafes, and eventually more stores—a Downtown cinema will provide a greater overall entertainment environment than its suburban or mall counterparts. But the developers of the cinema should be encouraged to provide a unique *movie*-going experience. Rather than providing the same suburban-style multiplex cinema in a different setting, the theater itself should be unique by having a distinctive lobby worthy of its urban surroundings and at least one very large screen for films that deserve to be seen on such a screen. This is a rare opportunity to provide something that the local market lacks.

Summary:

- *Downtown's central location, distinctive architecture, walkability, and mixture of activities that aren't available elsewhere in the metropolitan area are all attributes that combine to create a unique place within the region.* Downtown should strive to attract people on these merits rather than to simply provide a different setting for the same uses found in the suburbs.
- *Downtown and the mall have the potential to coexist and to benefit one another.* Downtown provides a distinctive setting for the mall, and the mall has the potential to make more people aware of what Downtown has to offer. Downtown merchants and the mall managers can work toward a common goal of promoting the entire Downtown area.
- *A cinema should be built Downtown, but it should not simply be a suburban-style theater that happens to be located Downtown.* While the Downcity Review Commission will likely ensure that the building's exterior relates well to its urban surroundings, the interior should lend itself to a unique movie-going experience. This rare opportunity should be taken to include a distinctive lobby worthy of its urban surroundings and at least one very large screen.

5. Program, Promote, Market, and Manage Downtown

Programming, promotional, marketing, and management techniques can be used to attract people downtown. While these four points do not need to be carried out by a single entity, coordinating efforts will greatly improve the likelihood of success. Whether Downtown is trying to compete with malls for customers or cater to a completely different market, it is instructive to examine the sophisticated tools and techniques that

successful shopping centers and malls have used to attract and maintain their customers. A combination of these tools may be useful to attract customers, audience members, or participants in free public events.

- *Special events should be programmed to attract a variety of people at different times of day and throughout the year. Downtown will have a greater chance of succeeding if people have several reasons to go there often.*

  A variety of short-run and one-night performances at the Performing Arts Center, a season of several plays at Trinity Rep, a continuously changing array of musical concerts at various venues, and rotating exhibits at the AS220 art gallery offer existing models of providing a variety of changing events. A multi-screen cinema will extend this idea even further, bringing more people Downtown more often than they come now. The weekend Farmers' Market and the summer concert series at Waterplace Park are seasonal events that add variety to Downtown. Annual events include the Downtown 5K Road Race, First Night, and the Waterfront Festival. This idea should be extended to offer as much as the market will support. Some events can change daily; others can change weekly, monthly, or seasonally. Potential visitors should know that there will always be something different to see, regardless of how often they care to visit Downtown; and events should be coordinated with merchants so that Downtown businesses can draw customers from these attractions. Coordinated programming must seek to generate important repeat business. Cinemas, for example, can only rely on new customers and repeat viewers of the same films for so long. They need to offer several different films to attract a varied audience, and they need to change the films from time to time to assure that they can attract the same people back again. Businesses either provide the types of goods and services that people need to keep coming back for or rely on a continuous flow of new customers. While there could eventually be a steady flow of one-time visitors to Downtown, it is unlikely that that market would be large enough to sustain Downtown businesses. A variety of events must be programmed that will keep people coming back. This cannot happen on its own, nor can it be most effective if a different entity is responsible for programming each event. Sufficient staffing must be provided for a continuous, coordinated program of events to be carried on Downtown. The Providence Parks Department currently has a staff of only two people to program events throughout the entire city. The Festevents organization

discussed in the Norfolk case study provides a model of a successful entity that has a full stuff dedicated to programming events in a limited area.*

- *Special events and permanent attractions need to be promoted and marketed locally, regionally, and nationally so that the public will know what exists Downtown. It cannot be assumed that the market will find Downtown.*

  Promotion of the entire Downtown district and marketing of individual businesses can be coordinated. Special events help to promote Downtown by demonstrating that it is an active place with a variety of offerings. Promoting Downtown as a desirable destination is, in turn, an effective marketing tool for attracting potential customers to businesses. Marketing and promotion efforts should highlight the central location, concentration of activities, and distinctive physical environment of Downtown. Specific marketing techniques include joint advertising among Downtown establishments to demonstrate the concentration of businesses; coupon books for Downtown merchants; sales and specials aimed at the student market; parking validation for customers; and guides to parking facilities, shopping destinations, restaurants, and entertainment venues. The Providence Foundation, a non-profit organization supported by over fifty businesses and organizations, has recognized the need to market and promote Downtown. Two recent efforts further demonstrate that specific steps are being taken toward this end: the Greater Downtown Area Visitor's Guide & Directory Map published in 1995 helps to market various commercial establishments and promote points of interest, and the Providence Banner Trail map distributed in April, 1996, is an effective means of promoting the numerous arts and cultural destinations in and around Downtown.

- *Managing the Downtown district through a single entity can provide a means of coordinating marketing and promotional efforts, as well as addressing other ways to improve the business climate Downtown.*

  Downtown management, which borrows from the success of mall management techniques, can be an effective tool for joint marketing and promotion, addressing the concerns of merchants, helping develop a desirable mix of businesses, and improving the physical environment. A manager can help determine the strategic placement of uses within the Downtown fabric in order to create a vibrant, synergistic mix of activities that strengthens the interaction between uses.

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* Festevents has a full-time staff of approximately twenty employees.

A management entity can also provide technical business assistance and arrange for consultants to help with such issues as merchandising and design. A Downtown Providence retail manager could exploit the strengths of local universities by pursuing business and retailing expertise from Johnson & Wales and design expertise from RISD, perhaps as services in lieu of taxes. Technical business assistance may be particularly necessary for start-up businesses and artists, who may need to develop business skills in order to promote and sell their work.

Management can also oversee the physical upkeep of Downtown and help create a safer environment. Safety patrols hired to walk the district and provide a presence on the streets can also offer information and guidance to visitors. Crews can pick up litter, remove graffiti, tend to landscaping, and maintain common areas. These crews could supplement the existing Keep Downtown Clean and Beautiful program and the mayor's citywide anti-graffiti program by providing a full-time presence Downtown.

Management can be provided through different means. As discussed in the Portland, Norfolk, and Stamford case studies, specially designated business improvement districts can be established, provided that appropriate legislation is in place and a majority of property owners within the district have given their approval.* Management services are funded through a special property tax within the designated district. The Main Street Program administered through the National Main Street Center of the National Trust for Historic Preservation is another model that could be appropriate in Downtown Providence.[10] The Main Street Program is based on four elements: organization, promotion, design, and economic restructuring. Funding for the Main Street Program may come from a variety of sources, including grants and loans from the Main Street Center and the municipality, as well as contributions from local merchants. In both cases, a manager coordinates efforts to improve the business environment within a specified district.

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* State enabling legislation to allow a business improvement district to be established in Providence is pending before the Rhode Island State Legislature (House Bill No. 96-H 8653 and Senate Bill No. 96-S 3016). Previous attempts to get the bill approved have been unsuccessful.

[10] Suzanne G. Dane, ed., *New Directions for Urban Main Streets*, National Main Street Center, National Trust for Historic Preservation.

Summary:

- *A centralized entity can manage downtown as a cohesive district.* Coordination of the interests and efforts of individual merchants and property owners can benefit the entire downtown district. A management entity can oversee physical improvements and maintenance, security, coordinated leasing strategies, marketing of the district, and provision of technical business services.
- *Special events can be programmed to attract people downtown at different times of the day, throughout the week and throughout the year.* Programming should be handled by a single entity with sufficient staff dedicated to plan, coordinate, and promote downtown events. Events should be coordinated with merchants so that businesses can benefit from the crowds that the events will attract.
- *Special events and regular attractions need to be promoted and marketed so that the public will know what downtown has to offer.* Promotion of downtown as a special district and marketing of individual businesses should be coordinated. Marketing and promotion should highlight the distinctive physical characteristics of downtown and its concentration of activities and businesses.

6. Engage the University Community in the Planning Process

The presence of several universities in Providence is a valuable attribute that should be used to the benefit of Downtown and the institutions (Figure 4.2). College towns are generally considered desirable places to live because of what the colleges offer to the culture, social life, and the economy of the larger community.[11] In Providence the community can benefit from a number of very different, internationally acclaimed academic institutions. Each of the institutions also has the potential to benefit from the others.

The current plan for revitalizing Downtown Providence recognizes the value of the city's academic community and begins to touch upon how the institutions could contribute to the revitalization effort. The *Downcity Providence* plan acknowledges that Brown and RISD students provide a potential market for Downtown housing in addition to the Johnson & Wales students already living in dormitories; students have money to spend in local establishments; efforts should be made to market arts and cultural programs to students, as well as to residents and visitors; student issues such as

[11] While the fact that colleges and universities are non-profit institutions that do not pay property taxes to their host municipalities is often a seriously debated issue, there is a great potential for positive economic activity in the form of jobs to local residents, spin-off businesses from academic activity, direct spending on the part of students and employees, and, in some cases, payment or services provided in lieu of taxes.

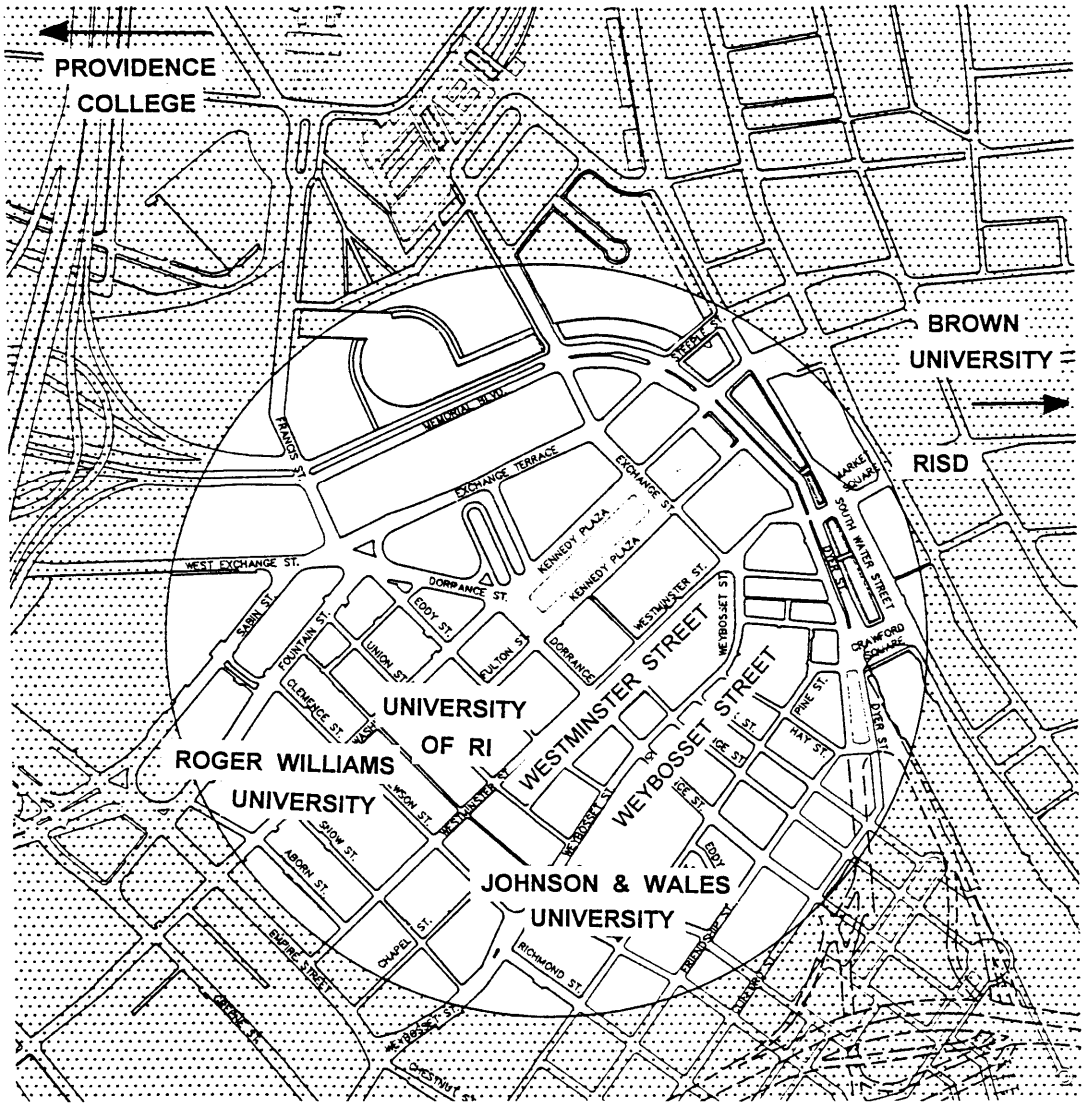

Figure 4.2: Colleges and Universities

transportation, housing, parking, and services should be looked at as a coordinated effort by all of the institutions; and that the "decision makers" from the universities should get together with the "downtown leadership" to work on a strategy for supporting Downtown.[12] The important element that seems to be missing from this plan is the need to engage the students and the rest of the university community (not just the "decision

[12] Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, Town Planners, *Downcity Providence: Master Plan For A Special Time*, March, 1992, pp. 4 and 15.

makers") from all of the institutions in the planning process. Community-based planning requires that the people effected by the plan be involved in making decisions for the area. In this case, students must be considered as a valuable part of the community, especially since they are acknowledged as a major component of the entire plan for a "new" Downtown.

Worcester's Collegetown Conference is one example of a planning process in which a broad range of representatives from the university community played a direct role. Before investing a lot of time and money in creating an environment that students, faculty, and administrators *might* be interested in being a part of, initiative should be taken to engage the university community in determining how they would *actually* want to use Downtown. Soliciting students' input about the type of social and cultural atmosphere that they desire could also help to create the kind of place that would retain students after they graduate. Coordinating this planning process with the business community, by creating internship programs that bring students and employers together, for example, could also help to create career opportunities that would enable more graduates to stay in Providence. In addition, efforts to retain graduating students in the city could be coordinated with economic development initiatives to help start-up companies and attract new businesses to the city.

There is a risk, however, that the students who are such a central piece of the plans to revitalize Downtown will simply be treated as part of the background. The *Downcity Providence* plan indicates that the presence of students may not be getting treated as seriously as it should be:

> Not only will [students] keep the buildings warm and lit, but they will also have money in their pockets to do things and to buy things. There is a certain retail energy that flows directly upon students and they, being young, usually appear picturesque enough to amuse the Convention center crowd.[13]

The plan acknowledges the value of students as consumers and residents who also add a sense of security Downtown. But rather than treating the students as entertainment for conventioneers, the students should be actively engaged in the planning process to make sure that they are able to get the most out of Downtown and that Downtown is able to benefit as much as possible from their presence. The intellectual and creative energy that students and faculty could offer has the potential to be a significant generator of activity

[13] Ibid., p. 4.

Downtown. The opportunity should be taken to tap into Providence's local and internationally recognized institutions and the people they attract.

Summary:

- *Engage representatives of the entire academic community in the planning process.* Input from students, faculty, and administrators will help to maximize the potential for Downtown Providence and the colleges to benefit from one another.
- *Ask students what types of programs and uses would draw them Downtown.* Students are being relied on to add to the economy and the dynamic atmosphere of Downtown, so it is important to determine what types of uses and activities are of interest to them.
- *Create an environment that will make students want to stay in Providence after they graduate.* An arts, entertainment, and retail environment that targets this age group is one factor that can entice graduating students to stay in Providence; however, job opportunities must also exist. Internship programs can help to establish connections between employers and students. Efforts to retain graduating students should be coordinated with economic development initiatives to help start-up companies and attract new businesses to the city.

7. Establish a Theme for Downtown Providence

Many cities are promoting their downtowns as arts and entertainment districts. Of the cases looked at in the previous chapter, Portland, Norfolk, and Stamford are actively promoting such districts, and Worcester is beginning to base part of its redevelopment strategy around its existing arts, cultural, and entertainment attractions. This is an encouraging trend, as it offers a vital future role for downtowns. Adopting such a strategy can be a good way to revive downtown as a vibrant part of a metropolitan region while offering amenities to enhance the quality of life for city and regional residents. This approach is applicable to Providence, but Providence must seek to stand out from other cities that are adopting a similar strategy. The shops, restaurants, academic institutions, and arts and entertainment attractions that make Downtown unique within the metropolitan region should be tied together by a theme to give it a distinctive, marketable identity. Potential residents, investors, businesses, and visitors should be able to identify Providence by its theme. For the theme to set Providence apart, it needs to be based on the unique history and existing attributes of the city.

Considered as a whole, the concentration of students, artists, jewelry makers, chefs, actors, musicians, writers, designers, and others who use Downtown Providence share a

common characteristic—they are all engaged in the creative process. Building on this idea, downtown Providence could be known as a center of *creativity.*[*] Few places have such a strong existing arts and cultural community to work with: a community of painters, designers, and writers, as well as a sophisticated audience, fueled by the presence of Brown and RISD; an outstanding collection of unique restaurants inspired by the culinary artists from Johnson & Wales; a theater community anchored by the presence of Trinity Rep; and an alternative music scene promoted by local clubs. These elements lend themselves to a theme that is stronger than "Arts and Entertainment District." Downtown Providence can be the "Creative Center" of the region, appealing to all age groups, ethnic groups, and income levels. It can also aspire to becoming the Creative Center of New England. Providence should be promoted as a place where creativity *happens*, as well as a place where creative works are displayed and sold.

Summary:

- *Many cities are promoting their downtowns as Arts and Entertainment Districts.* This is a valid strategy for developing a role for downtown that contributes to the quality of life and helps downtown stand apart within its metropolitan region.
- *Creativity is a theme that could distinguish Providence from other cities that have arts districts.* By drawing from its existing resources and establishing itself as a place where creativity *happens*, Downtown Providence will be distinct; not just from other places within the metropolitan region, but from other cities in New England and beyond.

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[*] The Providence Foundation stated its vision for "Downtown Providence in the Year 2010" in its 1994 Annual Report. The first of the eight components of the vision was for "A downtown of ideas and creativity; a place where creative people can develop and prosper." The proposal offered in this thesis is to not simply have creativity as one part of the vision, but to establish creativity as the central theme around which Downtown will be identified.

CHAPTER 5
STRATEGIES FOR DOWNTOWN PROVIDENCE

The guidelines outlined in the previous chapter were informed by analyzing the history and current conditions of Downtown Providence and by examining approaches that other places took toward downtown revitalization. This chapter uses these guidelines to develop revitalization strategies for Downtown Providence that utilize the city's unique characteristics. The strategies are presented for various locations throughout Downtown. The most general of these is a proposal to use the theme of creativity to unify the matrix of uses and activities throughout the entire district. At a smaller scale, physical and thematic gateways are proposed to form entrances to and from Downtown. Next, general strategies and specific project proposals for two of the primary streets through Downtown are discussed: Westminster Street and Mathewson Street. Finally, a catalyst project is proposed: a Visitor and Exploration Center that uses the theme of creativity to promote Downtown and the entire state.

1. THE THEMATIC MATRIX

The theme of creativity will characterize Downtown Providence as a place for exploring, discovering, learning; most importantly, it will be known as a place where original objects and ideas are produced. The aim is to give Downtown Providence an identity that will make it rise above other cities that are promoting their downtowns as arts and entertainment districts. This strategy draws upon the city's distinctive characteristics as well as its rich history. The inventiveness that made the city so successful as a place where goods were created, beginning early in the industrial era with jewelry and textiles, sets a precedent for rediscovering Downtown Providence as the "Creative District," the creative center of New England. Things will be produced here once again: objects, ideas, and trends. And, in keeping with the traditional role of downtown as both a cultural and

commercial center, the things that are produced here will be promoted, marketed, and sold. Key elements of the Creative District will include:

- crafts,
- fine arts,
- performing arts,
- literature,
- culinary arts,
- education, and
- specialty retail.

The potential venues for creative activity can be categorized as follows:

- *Production space*—studios for the production of jewelry,* paintings, textiles, photography, furniture, sculpture, and other works; kitchens for culinary artists; editing rooms for filmmakers; dance studios and rehearsal spaces for performing artists.
- *Performance and exhibition spaces*—stages and other venues for actors, dancers, musicians, poets, and other performing artists; screening rooms for filmmakers; galleries for displaying artwork; computer terminals to read on-line literary work and view computer-generated art.
- *Education and exploration space*—classrooms and demonstration sites for programmed instruction; places for self-guided exploration and interpretation of the various creative activities that are performed in Providence and throughout the state.
- *Selling spaces*—galleries, specialty retail stores, and cafes and restaurants that offer a place for creations to be marketed and sold to the public.

These individual places where creativity occurs and its products are marketed will collectively form a matrix of uses that ties Downtown together through its common theme (Figure 5.1). They will be spread throughout the district, including the back streets, to foster a sense of exploration. Several functions will be combined in some of these spaces, such as cafes that have performance spaces, and production studios that also display and sell art. Yet, not all of the production spaces would be for public display, as this would hinder the creative process in some cases. Artists who are willing to let others watch them work or rehearse, however, could open their studios to the public or

* Providence has a long history as the jewelry manufacturing capital and is still recognized as such. Jewelry trade organizations have display areas in and near Downtown, and at least one promotional brochure for the city uses the slogan "Providence: A Jewel of a City." Jewelry artists could exploit and complement this identity by displaying and selling their work in Downtown storefronts.

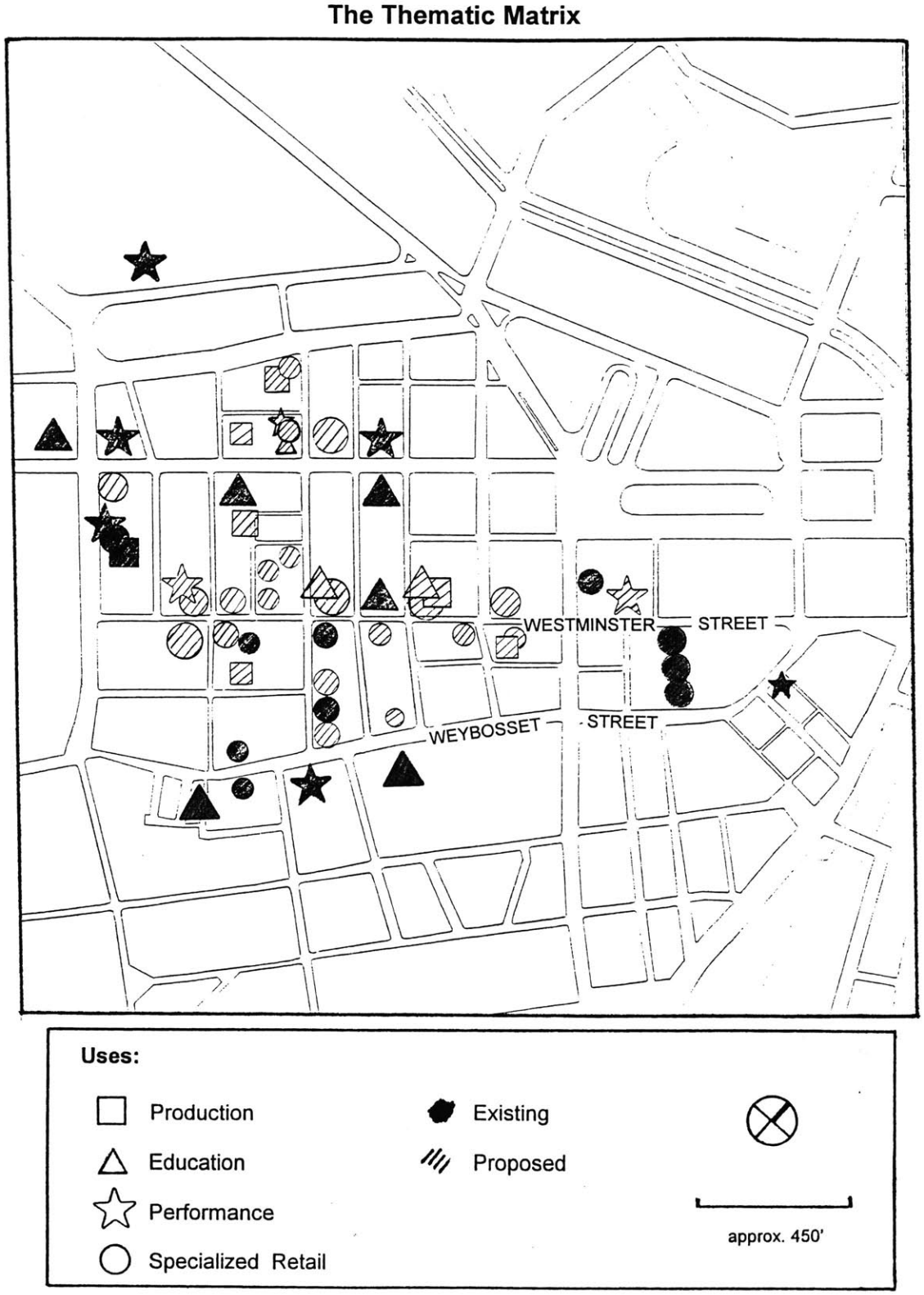

Figure 5.1: The Thematic Matrix

demonstrate their techniques and processes in designated exhibition studios. Interpretive space could also be provided to encourage the public to explore the creative process on their own, with a variety of materials and supplies to allow people to experiment with different media. In addition, public studio space and darkrooms could be rented out to provide places for amateur artists and hobbyists to work. The discovery and learning process could be given a more structured form by offering scheduled educational programs, such as painting classes and dance lessons. Special programs—classes, demonstrations, concerts, and plays—can introduce children to the various creative processes within the district. If children are excited about what Downtown has to offer, they can pass this enthusiasm on to their parents.

A strong theme of creativity can help promote Downtown as a unique place and can foster a creative energy within the community. However, the district must avoid becoming a theme park in which imported, mass-produced "art" simply becomes a commodity. At the same time, the commercial aspect of the Creative District cannot be denied. It provides a place for artists and craftspersons—including students, amateurs, and professionals—to expose and sell their work to a large audience. Periodic juried exhibitions of work produced within the district can encourage quality, highlight the local origins of the creative work, and attract crowds. With proper programming and oversight, creativity and commerce can coexist; artists can create and market their work, the public can explore various creative processes, and others who are simply attracted by the novelty can bring additional life to the streets and support other commercial enterprises within the district.

The commercial components of Downtown should relate to the underlying creative matrix to the greatest extent possible. By working together, the creative and commercial functions of the district can provide an environment that can't be recreated elsewhere. There are several categories of goods that would support the theme:

- *Original artwork*—artists from the district and throughout the region must have places to sell their original work. Some gallery space should be included in the studios and demonstration areas, but other galleries should be located in highly visible streetfront locations to provide maximum exposure to the work and to promote the theme.
- *Clothing, jewelry, and accessories*—original clothing, jewelry, and fashion accessories support the theme of the district and provide a more traditional retail component. The work of fashion and jewelry design students would lend a particularly unique aspect to this retail category.

- *Books, records, and videos*—the district's theme lends itself to selling these products of creativity. Specialty and used book stores, and newsstands with a wide variety of magazines and newspapers would support the retail aspect of Downtown and provide an outlet for independent publishing presses and bookbinders. Record and video stores could serve the mainstream market but could also find a niche by providing strong collections of alternative, classical, jazz, folk, hard to find recordings, and foreign and arts films. Record stores and video stores would be good streetfront uses in the proposed cinema and could also be located to attract patrons of Trinity Repertory Theater, the Performing Arts Center, and the music clubs.
- *Home furnishings*—craft and textile artists and furniture designers could provide unique offerings in this market. Showrooms of original works could be complemented by the presence of antique stores or a chain retailer such as Crate & Barrel. While not unique, the latter could provide a noncompeting anchor for shoppers who might also be interested in supporting the artists' showrooms and galleries.
- *Food*—restaurants, cafes, and bars could offer unique food and serve as performance venues and gallery spaces. While some of these establishments should simply remain as places to eat, drink, talk, and read, others could provide a place for poets, story tellers, and solo musicians to try out their work on the constantly changing crowd. Johnson & Wales could promote their culinary program by providing an opportunity for students to sell their food from pushcarts or from stalls in the Arcade. In addition, menu items from restaurants around the city could be offered on a rotating basis at one location Downtown. This place would be a marketing tool for restaurants that many people might not otherwise be exposed to and would allow people to explore the region's ethnic diversity by tasting Portuguese, Italian, Asian, Central American, African, African-American, and other types of food. The increased residential presence Downtown will also support bakeries and groceries.

Integrating the individual places where creation, performance, education, and selling occur into a cohesive matrix will require a conscious effort. The formation of a business improvement district management entity and a local arts agency could facilitate the process. The two organizations could work together to program, promote, market, and manage the activities within the Creative District.

2. GATEWAYS

Measures can be taken to create relationships between Downtown and the districts and attractions beyond its boundaries. The relationships can be created by making connections, both physical and conceptual, through different types of "gateways."

- *Physical gateways*—connections between Downtown and the areas that surround it can be reinforced by giving special physical treatment to the points of entry into Downtown. Arches, columns, banners, and distinctive landscaping and architectural treatment at the entry points are examples of physical gateways that announce one's arrival at a distinctive place.
- *Thematic gateways*—the theme of creativity and culture can be used to connect Downtown to places with which it is not physically connected. Coordinating programs at the museums and universities that lie outside of Downtown with cultural events and attractions within the Creative District, for example, creates a thematic point of entry to Downtown.
- *Neighborhood gateways*—Downtown sits at the center of the city, but it is physically remote from most of its neighborhoods. Introducing elements of these neighborhoods into Downtown will establish a conceptual point of entry to the outlying areas. For example, a single place Downtown that serves samples of food identified with each of the city's ethnic neighborhoods would be a gateway to those neighborhoods.
- *Statewide gateway*—Providence, as the state capital, is the place that all communities throughout Rhode Island have in common. By providing potential visitors with information about attractions throughout the state, as well as samples of the unique food, crafts, and other things these places offer, Downtown can serve as the gateway to the rest of the state.

It is the physical gateways that will most clearly help to establish the image of Downtown as a distinctive place. Physical gateways will provide unmistakable points of transition from the outside districts, serving to reinforce Downtown's central importance.

Gateways should be created at key sites to reinforce the points of entry into Downtown from specific outlying districts, and the streets that lead to the gateways should be given a special streetscape treatment to indicate that they are paths to a distinctive destination. The gateways can also play a secondary role of making it clear that other distinctive places, the districts that surround the center of the city, can be reached *from* Downtown. Downtown will be an interesting destination on its own, but it can become even more intriguing if it is known that it sits at the center of other interesting, easily accessible places. Each of the spines that extends into and out of Downtown at the gateways should be treated with a relevant theme to signify what lies beyond as one takes that route out of the center. Jewelry-related sculptures could line the route to and from the jewelry district, for example, and a water-related theme could be used along links between Downtown and the riverfront. Historic houses could be the theme that connects to the East Side and its landmark residential neighborhoods. Appropriate treatments could also be used to make connections with the State House and

with the Italian district of Federal Hill. The Local Arts Agency that should be established to oversee the Creative District could sponsor an ideas and design competition to create the links with the surrounding districts and the gateways that would mark the entries to Downtown.

Gateways to Downtown should be established from four key districts (Figure 5.2).

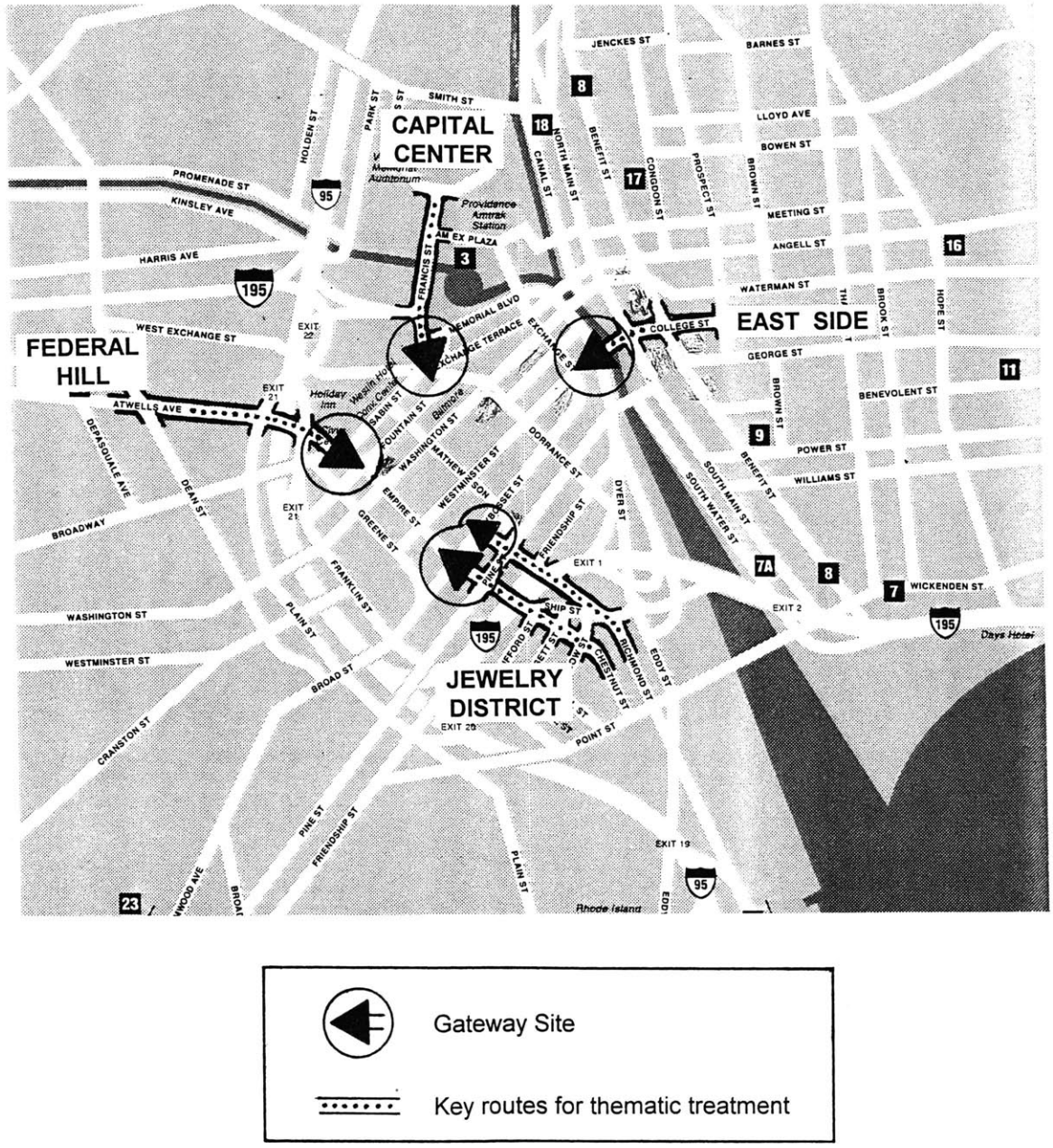

Figure 5.2: Gateways to Downtown from Surrounding Districts

- *The East Side*

  The entrance from the east into the financial district at the beginning of Westminster Street has historical significance as the link from the original settlement across the Providence River. It is a dramatic entrance as one comes down College Hill, reaches the open space at the bottom, crosses the bridge over the river, and squeezes through the curved narrow passage of Westminster Street between the tall buildings of the financial district. From there the straight, narrow stretch of nineteenth century "Main Street" is visible. A gateway should be established at the beginning of Westminster Street to mark this significant link from the historic neighborhoods of the East Side and the new pedestrian walk that stretches along the river. This site would also serve as the gateway from Brown and RISD, the South Main Street commercial district, two of the museums on the proposed Museum Mile, and traffic joining Memorial Boulevard from Interstate 195.

  There are areas on each side of the beginning of Westminster Street that should be given distinctive landscape treatment to mark the entrance to Downtown (Figure 5.3). This site could also include a sculpture related to the commerce and industry from which the financial district grew.

Figure 5.3: Westminster Street Gateway Site, from the East Side

- *The Jewelry District*

  Downtown and the Jewelry District each has a concentration of arts and entertainment-related uses. Taken as a whole, all of the individual destinations within the two districts are a very strong attraction. The mutual support of these destinations can be enhanced by establishing a clear physical connection between the two districts.

  There are two potential gateway points between Downtown and the Jewelry District: the intersection of Weybosset and Chestnut Streets (Figure 5.4) and the intersection of Weybosset and Richmond Streets (Figure 5.5). If traveling by car, Chestnut Street is the entry into the Jewelry District from Downtown, while Richmond Street is the entry into Downtown from the Jewelry District. Pedestrians are served equally well by either route. Both of these streets should be given distinctive treatment, related to a jewelry theme, so that it will be clear that they lead to special destinations.

Figure 5.4: Gateway Site, Chestnut and Weybosset Streets

The primary gateway would be at the Chestnut Street intersection, since Chestnut Street currently passes through or near a higher concentration of uses than Richmond Street, including the Johnson & Wales Bookstore, Alias Stage Theater

Company, several restaurants, and the future site of the Children's Museum. This intersection has the added advantages of receiving additional downtown-bound traffic from the South Side across the highway and having a large undeveloped site at one of its corners. The development of an architecturally distinct building that includes uses related to the Creative District's theme could make this site serve as a gateway to Downtown.

Figure 5.5: Gateway Site, Richmond and Weybosset Streets

The minor gateway site, where Richmond Street runs dead-end into Weybosset Street at a parking garage, is already marked on one corner by the Performing Arts Center building. This entry could become more distinctive simply by giving special treatment to the facade of the parking garage. Although it is slightly off-axis with the Mathewson Street spine through the Arts and Entertainment District, there is potential for Richmond Street to serve as a continuation of Mathewson Street as the Jewelry District becomes more developed.

- *Capital Center*

The relationship between Capital Center and Downtown is of significance for several reasons. First, the State House defines Providence's role as the state capital. The proximity of the State House establishes Downtown as the gateway to the rest of the state. Second, Capital Center is the site of significant new and future development, including the recently completed Waterplace Park and the proposed Providence Place Mall. These attractions will bring a great number of people right to the edge of Downtown. Finally, the Downtown exit ramp from Interstate 95 brings traffic directly to this area.

The importance of the connection between Capital Center and Downtown has already been recognized in two proposals. First, as a result of extensive design review, the Francis Street side of the Providence Place Mall will be given special facade and streetscape treatment. Second, the intersection of Francis, West Exchange, Dorrance, Sabin, and Fountain Streets, between the exit ramp and Downtown (Figure 5.6), has been identified in the *Downcity Project Implementation Plan* as a

Figure 5.6: Capital Center Gateway Site

major gateway to the city.[1] Two possible configurations have been offered to improve vehicular and pedestrian traffic and the visual characteristics of the site. Streetscaping, sculptural elements, and development of appropriately scaled, distinctive buildings around the intersection, as suggested by the *Implementation Plan*, can create a clear gateway into the center of the city (Figure 5.7). It is important that the major entry point from the highway and Capital Center be improved so that Downtown will be a more inviting place.

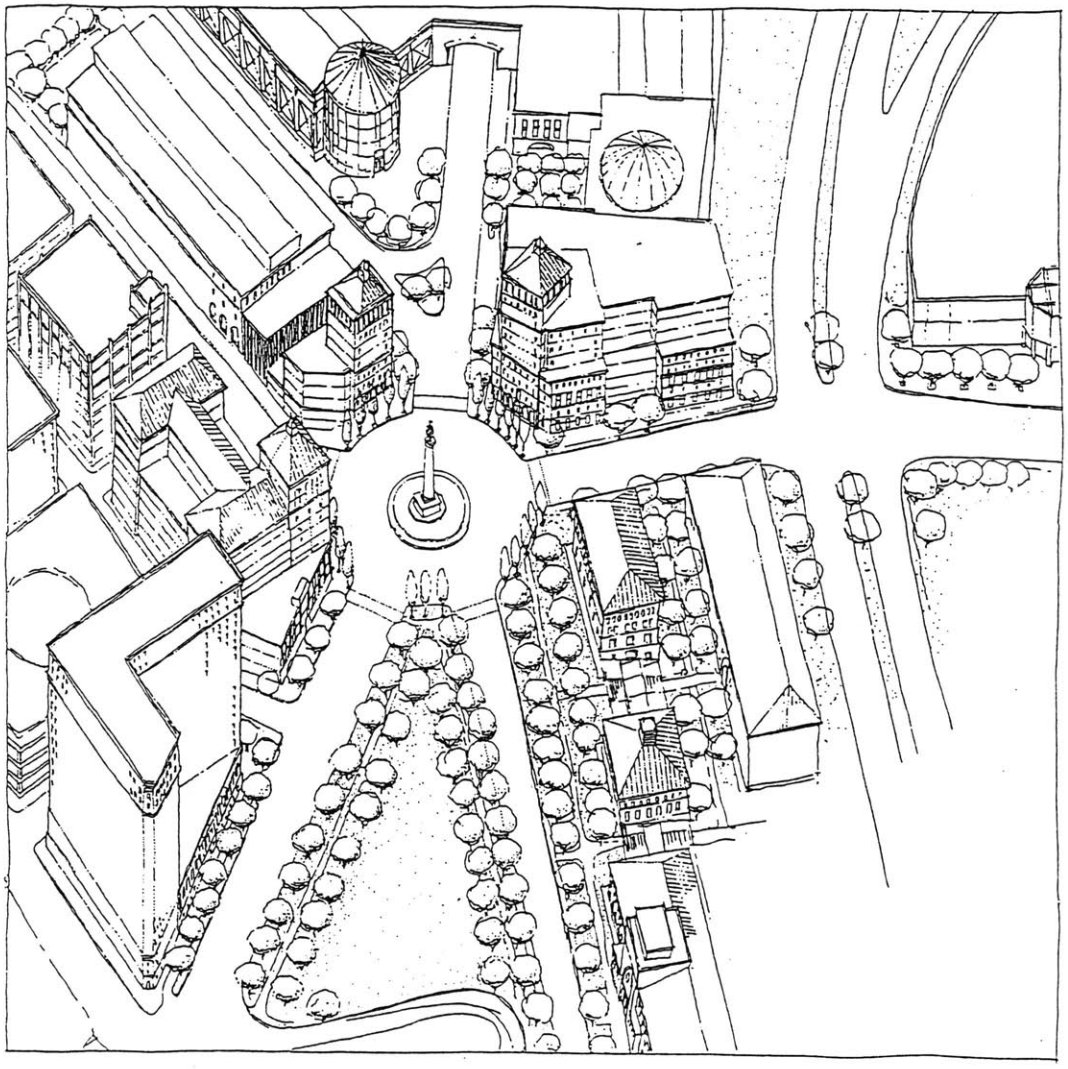

Figure 5.7: Gateway Proposal, "Downcity Project Implementation Plan"

[1] Coalition for Community Development and the Providence Foundation, *Downcity Project Implementation Plan*, June, 1994, p. 4.

- *Federal Hill*

  A strong connection between Downtown and Federal Hill will help to promote Providence as a city of neighborhoods. Federal Hill, Providence's "Little Italy," is one of the city's strongest ethnic neighborhoods, known for its pizzerias, bakeries, groceries, cafes, and fine restaurants. A distinctive arch over Atwells Avenue already serves as a strong gateway into Federal Hill, and the red, white, and green line (the colors of the Italian flag) painted down the center of the street enhances the neighborhood's character (Figure 5.8). The short route from Federal Hill to

Figure 5.8: Entrance to Federal Hill

Downtown should be clearly marked so that the two districts can reinforce one another, and the entry point to Downtown should be given a more distinctive treatment. This entrance is near two important landmarks, the Providence Public Library and Trinity Rep, but the first impressions upon entering Downtown are made by the incoherent combination of the monolithic Civic Center, the police and fire

stations, and a large office building (Figure 5.9). This area needs to be given a distinctive pedestrian-scaled streetscape treatment and a clearly identifiable entry point into Downtown, perhaps delineated by columns inspired by Italian architecture, to complement the arch at the other end of the link.

Figure 5.9: Broadway and Empire Street, Gateway Site from Federal Hill to Downtown

3. WESTMINSTER STREET

As the main street at the core of Downtown it is important that Westminster Street be alive with activity in order to set the tone for the entire district. Westminster Street, with its distinctive architecture and pedestrian scale, has a history as the primary commercial street in the city, the place that attracted people to Downtown from all over the region. If current plans to introduce housing and additional retail come to fruition, a mix of activity will be brought to the street. Owners of five commercial buildings, two of which front Westminster Street, are planning to convert the upper levels to loft apartments, while

leaving the ground floors available for commercial use.[2] The stretch of Westminster Street between Dorrance and Mathewson Streets has been targeted as the primary retail district Downtown, and a major national investor has recently expressed interest in buying a significant number of buildings along Westminster Street to introduce a mixture of local and nationally known specialty stores.[3] As these plans are beginning to unfold, it is important to consider how Westminster Street can once again become the social and cultural center of the region.

Key strategies for Westminster Street include:

- *Maximize the value of streetfront exposure.*

  There are now tenants that are inappropriate for many of the storefronts along Westminster Street. Offices and classrooms do not take full advantage of the accessibility of a storefront location. These locations should be reserved for businesses and destinations that depend on high visibility and high turnover. Retail and eating and drinking establishments are the most obvious examples of appropriate uses, since the buildings were originally used for these purposes.

- *Support the district's theme.*

  As more stores and restaurants begin to occupy vacant and underutilized storefronts, or even replace existing commercial establishments, uses that support the thematic matrix must be included. As discussed in the first strategy, these related uses will give Downtown its identity and serve to tie it together. Some storefronts must be made available for local artists to sell their work. Rental subsidies or ownership assistance should be considered so that artists and local businesses, not just national chains that could exist anywhere, can afford to be Downtown.

  As the primary street through the Creative District, Westminster Street should also include the district's Visitor and Exploration Center (described below as the catalyst strategy). The Center would provide information about what the district, the city, and the state have to offer and opportunities for the public to see demonstrations, take classes, or simply explore various creative processes on their own. It would also have spaces for displaying and selling artwork. As Westminster Street reemerges as

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[2] Kelly, interview, March 26, 1996.

[3] Dellar, telephone interview, April 1, 1996; and Kelly, interview, March 26, 1996.

the city's most distinctive shopping street, it will be the appropriate place to market what the Creative District has to offer.

- *Establish anchor destinations.*

  There must be strong attractions at each end of Westminster Street to maximize the number of people who will walk along the street and, therefore, be exposed to storefront businesses. The cinema site should be reconsidered. Rather than putting the cinema on Mathewson Street, which already has an anchor at each end, the cinema should be located on the parking lot at the corner of Westminster and Snow Streets to provide a nighttime anchor.* Appropriate ground floor uses in the cinema, such as a video store and a "food court" consisting of a rotating variety of Providence restaurants, would help to bring the daytime office crowd to Westminster Street. The parking lot across the street should be considered for a major retail anchor, such as Crate & Barrel, that might not locate in the Providence Place Mall.

  At the other end of the street, the first floor of the vacated People's Bank Building should become the new site of Lupo's night club, which will likely be required to vacate its current site when the upper levels are converted to housing. The club brings a lot of energy and activity to Downtown and should not be forced out of the Arts and Entertainment District that it supports and is so much a part of. This new location would strategically provide a nighttime entertainment anchor at the eastern end of the street, bringing life to the financial district when it is otherwise vacant and possibly encouraging nearby businesses in the Arcade and elsewhere to extend their hours. With the cinema on one end, the club on the other, and onstreet and structured parking at various points between them, there would be plenty of people around at night to give exposure to the numerous stores and restaurants along the street.

Some of the specific uses that should be established along Westminster Street are listed below and illustrated in Figure 5.10:

- The Visitor and Exploration Center at Mathewson Street.
- A cinema with ground level retail and restaurant at Snow Street.
- A major retail anchor across from the cinema.

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* The Carr, Lynch *Providence Redevelopment Strategy* (1986) first recommended that the Westminster and Snow Street site be used for a cinema/restaurant anchor.

- Lupo's nightclub in the old People's Bank Building.
- Retail spaces for artists and designers at various locations along the street.
- A gateway to Downtown from the east.

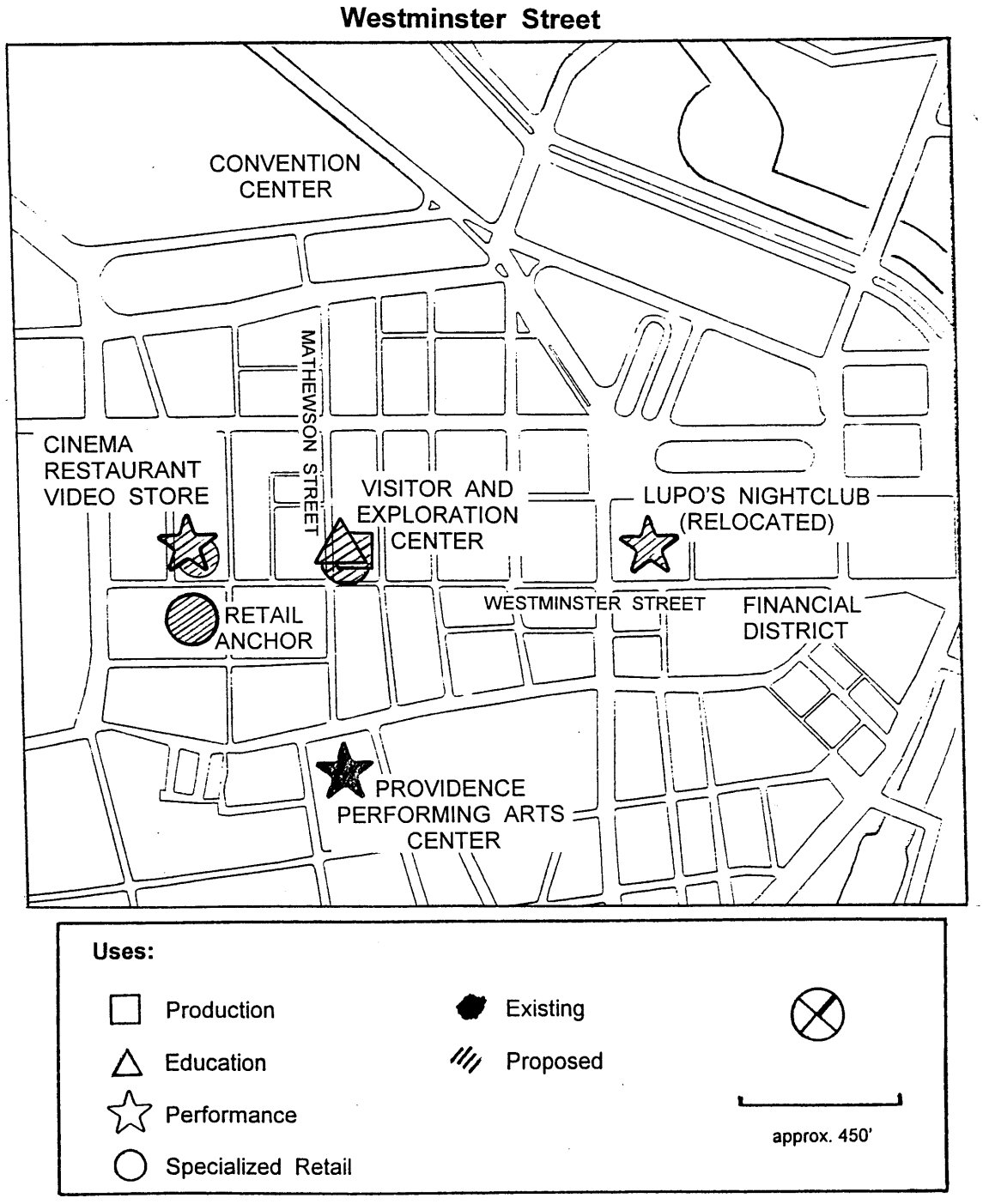

Figure 5.10: Proposals for Westminster Street

4. MATHEWSON STREET

Mathewson Street has been given special streetscape treatment to signify its new role as the spine of the city's emerging Arts and Entertainment District. The intention is for this street to be the major link between the Convention Center and the Performing Arts Center, thus drawing people to what will become, once again, a strong retail core along Westminster Street.* The placement of uses along Mathewson Street should facilitate pedestrian traffic to move from the Sabin Street end near the Convention Center into the rest of the district, and it should also encourage pedestrians from the student-oriented Weybosset Street to flow deeper into the district.

Key strategies for Mathewson Street include:

- *Maximize the flow of pedestrian traffic onto Westminster Street.*

  While the Mathewson Street spine of the Arts and Entertainment District is planned to have retail uses that support the theme of the district, its primary function will be to bring pedestrians from each of its ends onto Westminster Street. The Providence Journal-Bulletin parking lot near the Convention Center is the proposed site of a multiplex cinema. The cinema should be located in the district because of its ability to draw a crowd Downtown consistently. However, a cinema on the Journal-Bulletin site will not maximize the ability to expose other destinations to the crowds that it will attract. Since it is so close to the Convention Center and Hotel, people going to the cinema from these locations will not pass by the stores and restaurants that the cinema is intended to support. Rather, the cinema should be located on the parking lot at the corner of Westminster and Snow Streets, as proposed in the strategy for Westminster Street. Instead, the Journal-Bulletin parking lot site should be used to accommodate additional parking needs in the form of a parking structure with a suitable street front use, as discussed below. By placing parking on this site, people will have to walk past the retail establishments along Mathewson and Westminster Streets to get to the cinema and other destinations on Westminster Street. The Visitor and Exploration Center to be placed at the corner of Westminster and Mathewson

* The streetscape improvements do give Mathewson Street a distinctive character that provides a strong clue that it is an important route, but the connection at the Convention Center end of the street falls short. Mathewson Street's otherwise straight line between the two destinations takes a curve just in front of the Convention Center, and people exiting the Convention Center face the large blank walls of buildings across the street, not the clear route that Mathewson Street provides to Downtown. A realignment of Mathewson Street has been proposed in the *Downcity Project Implementation Plan.* Additional design work should be done to create connections between the Convention Center exits and Mathewson Street.

Streets (described below in the strategy for a catalyst project) will provide another significant draw from Mathewson Street to Westminster Street.

- *Draw students into the District.*

  The current master plan for Johnson & Wales University calls for development to be concentrated along the Weybosset Street edge of Downtown. Mathewson Street can serve as the route from the student uses along Weybosset Street into the district, thereby creating a vibrant mixture of students, conventioneers, movie-goers, and others along the street. To facilitate the flow of student traffic beyond Westminster Street, key sites near the Convention Center end of the street should be programmed to attract students. These uses should be determined, in part, by involving students from all of the universities in the planning process, but a few suggestions are offered here as examples.

  First, the ground floor of the parking structure proposed for the Journal-Bulletin lot, described above, could become the site of a record store.* This use would attract students and would also create a connection between Mathewson Street and the Strand nightclub next door. The other major anchor to be created at this end could be a student union shared by all of the universities, combined with a youth hostel and accommodations for visiting students. The student union could provide a common space for students from the different universities to interact in an informal social atmosphere. It could include a cafe and deli, space for student musicians and writers to share their work, space for student art exhibits, and common meeting spaces for clubs and interest groups. The youth hostel would provide a means of inviting international visitors to the Creative District. Johnson & Wales' Dreyfus Hall, located directly across Mathewson Street from the Journal-Bulletin parking lot, could be converted to such a use.†

Some of the specific uses that should be established along Mathewson Street to carry out these strategies are listed below and illustrated in Figure 5.11:

- A parking structure on the Journal-Bulletin parking lot.
- A record store in the ground level of the parking structure on the Journal-Bulletin site.

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* There is a record store on Union Street that may be forced to leave if plans to demolish part of the Grant's Block, as proposed in the *Downcity Project Implementation Plan*, move forward.

† The Johnson & Wales *Campus Master Plan* indicates that the university is considering selling some of its properties, including Dreyfus Hall, as it unifies its Downtown campus over the next several years.

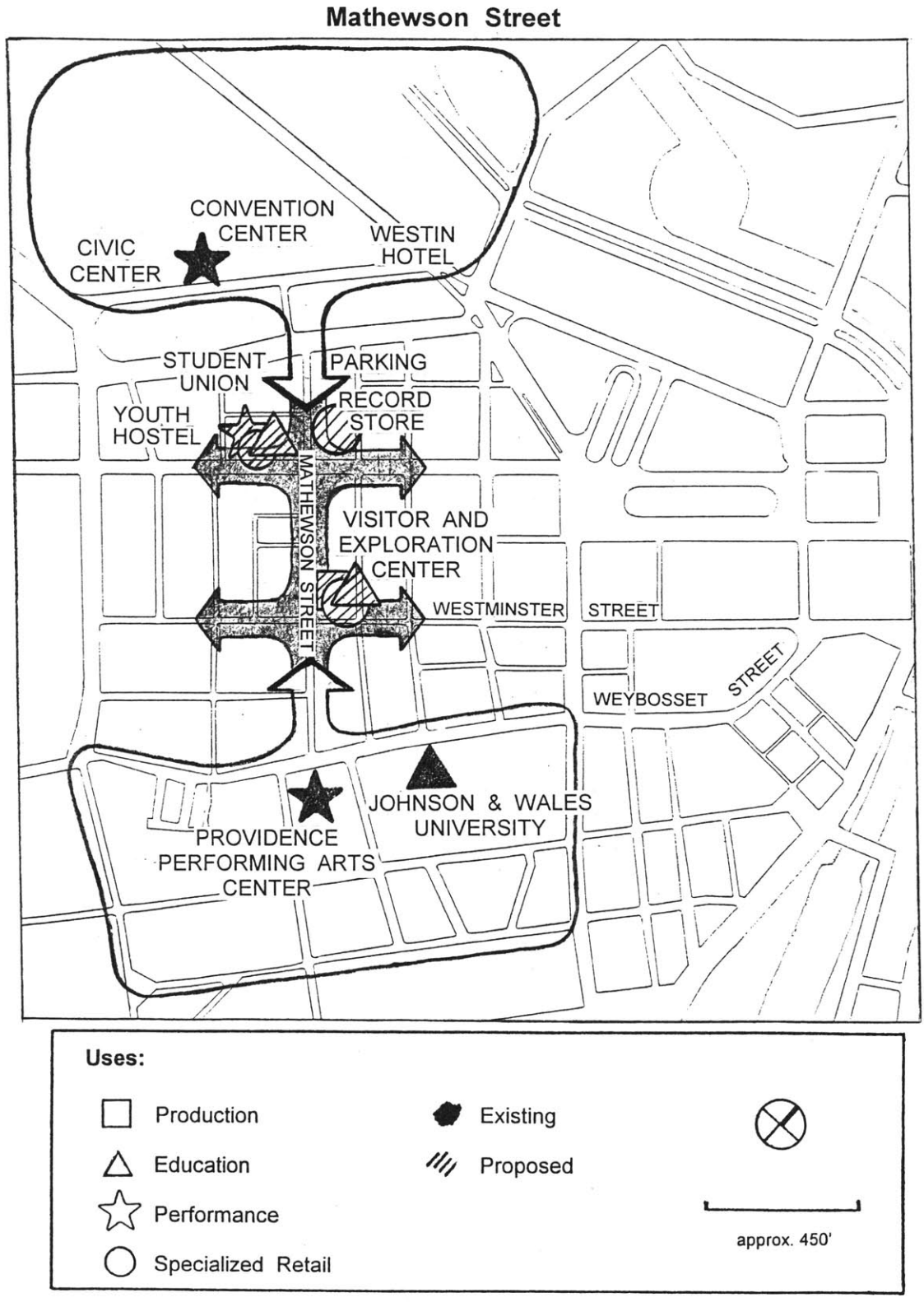

Figure 5.11: Proposals for Mathewson Street

- A student union for all of the universities in the Dreyfus Hall building.
- A youth hostel and accommodations for visiting students above the student union.
- A Visitor and Exploration Center at Westminster Street.

5. A CATALYST PROJECT

The Creative District will be identified by the matrix of theme-oriented uses that spreads throughout the entire district, but the district could be made stronger and more accessible by providing a single location that serves to promote the district and orient visitors. In addition to being the creative center, Downtown is the gateway to the entire state, made evident by the strong presence of the nearby State House. A state visitor center in the heart of Downtown could serve to promote the attributes of the Capital City as well as the attractions and creative products found throughout the entire state. The Rhode Island Department of Economic Development's Tourism Division should take the lead in establishing a Visitor and Exploration Center in the district. The State could lease space for the facility and provide operating funds but contract with a separate agency for the oversight of daily operations and programming of exhibits and events. In the previous chapter it was recommended that an agency be created to program and promote events Downtown; this agency could have staff dedicated to operating the Center.

The Visitor and Exploration Center will be an informational and educational tool, but it will also play an important marketing role and should, therefore, be located for maximum visibility. Downtown is the place where creative energy and the market will converge. The facility should be located at the corner of Westminster and Mathewson Streets to draw as many people as possible to the crossroads of the Creative District. One of the corners of Westminster and Mathewson Streets is occupied by the old Gladding's Department Store building, now owned by Johnson & Wales University. The ground level is currently underutilized, and the university has indicated a willingness to use this space in a manner that would be compatible with the emerging arts, entertainment, and commercial uses in the area.[4] The university could lease this space to the State. The State currently uses street level space in the adjacent building for offices and could possibly relocate these uses to allow expansion of the Visitor and Exploration Center. This prime location on what will re-emerge as Downtown's shopping street is the perfect place to market what the district, the rest of the city, and the entire state have to offer.

[4] Johnson & Wales University, *Campus Master Plan*, February, 1996, p. 7.1.

Specific components of the Visitor and Exploration Center will include:

- A directory of destinations within the Creative District, including retail businesses, restaurants, studios, performance spaces, entertainment venues, public educational opportunities, and cultural attractions.
- Informational exhibits about attractions throughout the city and state and samples of what visitors will find at these places, such as food and crafts.
- Staffed orientation and visitor services, providing tickets, hotel reservations, and travel information for Providence and the rest of Rhode Island.
- A small theater to screen films or slide presentations that orient visitors and describe the history and unique features of the district, the city, and the state.
- Permanent exhibit areas leased to entities such as the Rhode Island Tourism Division, the Greater Providence and Warwick Convention & Visitor's Bureau, the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts, the jewelry trade organizations, the universities, and others interested in promoting their presence.
- Demonstration spaces and classrooms.
- Interpretive space to encourage the public to explore various creative processes, with a variety of materials and supplies to allow people to work with different media.
- Revolving gallery space for artists from the Creative District.
- Revolving gallery space for students and faculty from Providence's schools and universities.
- Craft sales representing the work of various ethnic groups and local traditional craftspersons from throughout the state.
- Exhibit space to highlight innovative research projects from the universities.
- Changing exhibits that give local people reasons to keep coming back.

IMPLEMENTATION SUMMARY

Each of the strategies and proposals discussed above will require initiative on the part of key organizations to see to it that they are implemented. Recommendations for who should be involved in implementing these projects are summarized below.

- **The Thematic Matrix**

  The Creative District will be made up of a matrix of individual places where creating, teaching, displaying, performing, and selling occur. The successful integration of these individual components into a thematically unified district will require

cooperation on the part of artists and craftspersons, business owners, educational institutions, and cultural organizations. The management entity of the proposed Business Improvement District could coordinate businesses within the district; a Local Arts Agency, recommended in the previous chapter, could represent the interests of individual artists and cultural organizations; and the consortium of colleges and universities, also recommended in the previous chapter, could represent educational institutions and could include representation from primary and secondary schools, as well as providers of informal educational programs, to ensure that a range of educational opportunities are available to the public. The final component to the coordination of the Creative District is an agency to program and promote special and ongoing events within the district. These four organizations could coordinate their efforts through a committee of representatives from each group.

- **Gateways**

  The ideas presented for the physical gateways into Downtown serve as examples of what could be done to symbolize the importance of the district and make the center of the city more distinctive. An ideas competition should be sponsored by the City to solicit suggestions from the public as to what could be done at each of the gateway sites. This could be followed by a competition overseen by the Local Arts Agency to choose the actual designs for the gateways. The funding and creation of the gateways could then be a joint effort between the City, property owners in the Business Improvement District, and the Local Arts Agency.

- **Westminster Street**

  The creation of retail spaces for artists and designers would be coordinated through the Business Improvement District management entity and the Local Arts Agency. The proposals for a cinema, a major retail anchor, and the relocation of Lupo's night club would be implemented through private sector efforts. The Coalition for Community Development (CCD) is already taking the lead on bringing a cinema Downtown and should direct those efforts to the new location. CCD is also the owner of the building in which Lupo's is currently located and is planning to convert the upper levels to housing. CCD should work with Lupo's to relocate the night club to the vacant Peoples Bank Building. The development of a retail anchor on the parking lot across from the new cinema site at Snow Street would be a private sector effort.

This project could be directed by the investor that is considering the purchase of several properties on Westminster Street, but a Business Improvement District manager could also help to recruit a suitable anchor store.

- **Mathewson Street**

  Aside from the Visitor and Exploration Center, this chapter discusses two site-specific proposals for Mathewson Street. The parking structure with ground-level retail use proposed for the Providence Journal-Bulletin parking lot site should be developed by CCD, the developers of the cinema, so that the two uses can be linked. The student union and youth hostel proposed for the Dreyfus Hall building should be developed by Johnson & Wales in cooperation with the consortium of the city's colleges and universities. Students from all of the colleges should be involved in determining the design and uses for the student union, and Johnson & Wales' hotel management program should manage the youth hostel and guest rooms.

- **Visitor and Exploration Center**

  The Visitor and Exploration Center proposed for the Gladding's Department Store building would be implemented by the Rhode Island Department of Economic Development's Tourism Division. The State could lease the building from Johnson & Wales, provide operating funds, and contract with a separate agency for the day to day operations of the facility. The agency that should be established to program and promote events Downtown could dedicate separate staff to operate the Visitor and Exploration Center. This agency could work with the Local Arts Agency, the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts, the university consortium, the State Tourism Division, and others to bring suitable attractions to the Center.

AFTERWORD

This study has revealed to me that there is a future for downtown. The need to revive downtown is important to different people for different reasons, however: some people have business and financial interests at stake, some are concerned with preserving the physical characteristics that remind us of our history, and others are more concerned about the quality of life that an active, diverse downtown can offer. However, a common thread that runs through many of the reasons to revive the city center is that downtown can be a distinctive place with which residents can identify; a place that offers alternatives to the "sameness" of the all too familiar suburban environment. Given the current underutilized state of many downtowns, it seems likely that this revival won't just happen on its own. A great deal of effort will be required to revive and maintain the vital centers that developed over time through market and social forces. It is worth considering what the role of planning should be and who will plan for the future of downtown.

One of the primary roles of planning for downtown should be to determine ways in which the city center can contribute to the economic future of the entire city and the quality of life for all residents. People need jobs, decent places to live, and access to quality education and other services. Residents should also have access to recreation, cultural amenities, and consumer goods, and should be satisfied with their physical environment. While downtown can offer amenities that appeal to people from throughout the city, planning a downtown that is based on arts, culture, and entertainment and that strives to attract visitors from the suburbs and beyond may seem far removed from the need to address the day to day concerns of city residents. Yet, a highly utilized city center—with offices, stores, restaurants, residences, and arts and entertainment attractions—will have an impact on the entire city by adding to the tax rolls, thereby, supporting city services needed by residents, businesses, and institutions.

Planning can do several things to help revive downtown. First, planning should identify the issues, both opportunities and constraints, that are relevant to the future of a

particular place. Even if planning methods and "fashions" change, a plan that is based on the inherent strengths of a place and the people who live there will have a better chance of succeeding than one that does not thoroughly consider the local characteristics. Authenticity may be able to outlive trends and fads and can set one city apart from another. It is equally important to provide a realistic assessment of what needs to be done and what is possible, given certain physical and financial constraints. Second, planning can offer possible solutions to existing problems. Finally, planning should set goals and offer guidelines and strategies to reach those goals. Goals and strategies can provide direction so that tasks can be identified and responsibilities can be delegated.

But who should plan for the future of downtown? I've learned that planning doesn't have to be done by people trained as planners. Much of what gets planned, and implemented, is initiated by special interests. Business coalitions, educational institutions, and arts and cultural institutions are examples of the types of "non-planners" that are doing planning in Providence and the other cities I investigated. And this is appropriate. Individuals and organizations that intend to make money or otherwise benefit from being downtown, or who simply care about the future of downtown, have a responsibility to make it a place that will continue to serve their needs and meet their expectations in the future. Institutions that don't pay taxes should contribute in other ways, financially or through the provision of services. Universities, for example, can provide the community with cultural programs and events, and they can offer expertise from their academic programs in business, design, law and other applicable fields to contribute to the revival and sustainability of a healthy downtown. Businesses, through the implementation of business improvement districts, can contribute funds to pay for improvements and services beyond the basic services that their tax dollars cover. And all of these parties that have long-term interests in a healthy downtown should be involved in the planning process.

The private sector has taken the lead in planning for Downtown Providence over the past few years but has worked closely with the City to develop a consistent vision, to gain political support, and to work toward policy changes that facilitate implementation. The Providence Foundation and the Coalition for Community Development (CCD), two private non-profit organizations with representatives from businesses and institutions, have been at the forefront. The Providence Foundation "originates and advocates policies and projects for the development of downtown."[1] The Foundation's mission states that it

[1] The Providence Foundation, "1994 Annual Report."

"plays a leadership role in planning for downtown... [and] brings private sector experience to the development of plans and projects. The Foundation, working with the City, is a generator and keeper of the vision for downtown." Organizations with similar missions exist in some of the cities examined as case studies. CCD has hired consultants to prepare market studies, plans, and designs; acquired commercial properties that they will convert to housing; and negotiated with theater operators to try to bring a cinema Downtown as a catalyst for the City's Arts and Entertainment District. Johnson & Wales University, which is having a significant effect on the activity and the physical form of Downtown, has hired the same consultants used by CCD so that its master plan will fit within the overall plans for Downtown adopted by the City. The final example of a "non-planners" planning initiative is the creation of the Providence Banner Trail to highlight a collection of cultural, historical, and architectural sites in and around Downtown. A consortium of representatives from the City, the State, business interests, and arts and cultural institutions make up the Banner Trail Committee. One representative of the Committee stated that this project "has created a new breed of amateur city planners;" people with no professional planning experience developed a concept and then planned and implemented a project that will serve as a catalyst for the Arts and Entertainment District.[2] Business, educational institutions, and arts and cultural institutions all have a stake in the future of Downtown Providence, so it is appropriate for them to be involved directly in planning for Downtown.

Yet, the interests of *all* of the people who are affected by planning, not just those who have the money to hire consultants, need to be represented directly in the planning process; residents, business and property owners, students, artists, and others need to be included. The City has a responsibility to make sure that the public interest is incorporated into the planning process. Policies and regulations should reflect the needs and interests of the public, based on direct input and involvement from a broad representation of the complex interests that make up the city. These public policies and regulations should also facilitate high quality development that is appropriate to local physical and cultural characteristics. City planning departments should provide professional staff dedicated to planning for the interests of the public they serve and committed to the long-term quality of the city in which they work.

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[2] Terreann Greenwood, Acting Executive Director, Rhode Island Philharmonic, telephone interview by author, April 15, 1996.

There are also clear roles in the planning process for outside consultants. In addition to being able to offer specialized expertise, they can offer a fresh perspective and valuable experiences from other places. Ideas that local planners and their constituents might not have considered can be brought to the table by outsiders. In fact, it may require the perspective of someone who doesn't use a place on a daily basis to make people aware of their city's strengths and weaknesses. However, just as city planning staff must work with the public to identify important issues, consultants should work with local planners and the people of the city so that critical local issues and characteristics can be incorporated into their plans. In addition, while consultants' professional commitment may put their interests in the right place, they don't have to live with the solutions they propose. If outside consultants are used, there is also a need to involve local planners and others who will be affected by the plans to represent the long-term interests of the public.

There is a role for different types of "planners" in the planning process for downtown, since different responsibilities lie with different people and interest groups. The public must determine and express what they need and want, and public officials must see to it that the public's voice is heard. The public sector must also provide the services, infrastructure, and policies that will facilitate appropriate development. In addition, public sector planners must determine whether proposals are valid and in the public interest. Planning consultants can offer expertise and fresh ideas and solutions. The private sector, including businesses and institutions, should propose planning solutions and accept the responsibility of funding and implementing certain projects. This complex coalition of planners, each one an expert in its own way, is necessary to ensure that the necessary pieces of the plan are in place.

One of the most important roles of planning may be to determine the type of place that a city is to become. This decision should be made by the people who will use the city and be affected by its condition. There is strong support for Downtown Providence to develop as an Arts and Entertainment District. People seem to want to have a place that offers an interesting variety of activities as an alternative to their current options. If this is what the people want, if it makes good use of existing resources and unique local characteristics, and if it offers a strong likelihood of providing a sustainable future for Downtown and supporting services throughout the entire city, then it is an appropriate plan that will facilitate the rediscovery of Downtown.

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Figure 2.5 (b): Rhode Island Tourism Division, "Rhode Island 1995–1996 Visitor's Map."

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Figure 2.12: Photo by author.

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Figure 2.15: Photo by author.

Figure 2.16: Annotated by author; original base map from Katz, p. 155.

Figure 2.17: HSG/Gould Associates, "Retail Market Analysis: Providence Place," Map 1.

Figure 2.18: Annotated by author; original base map from Katz, p. 155.

Figure 2.19: Photo by author.

Figure 2.20: Photo by author.

Figure 2.21: Annotated by author; original base map from Katz, p. 155.

Figure 2.22: Annotated by author; original plan from Katz, p. 159.

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Figure 4.1: Annotated by author; original base map from Greater Providence Convention and Visitors Bureau, "A Stroll Through Providence."

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Figure 5.6: Photo by author.

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