CONNECTING AND COMPLETING DOWNCITY

INTRODUCTION

Providence has earned a reputation as a renaissance ‘comeback’ city for more than a decade. Currently considered one of our nation’s hottest cities, Providence has served as a model for other cities for how to foster a period of dynamic population and economic growth during the 40s and 50s. Providence’s reputation is well-earned as a result of an impressive series of large downtown projects that took place in the 90s: the building of the Civic Center, Convention Center and Waterplace Park; the restoration of the Biltmore Hotel; the clean-up and uncovering of two rivers; and the construction new development around Capitol Center and the Providence Place Mall.

THE 1992 CHARRETTE

In 1992, Duany Plater-Zyberk & Company (DPZ) was hired to lead the master plan charrette for the downtown. It was clearly recognized during this process that the revitalization of the Downcity area would be a crucial part of sustaining the city’s renaissance. Andrés Duany, the project principal for DPZ, suggested that Providence could be a case study in the history of American planning having both benefited and suffered from the planning ideas of the ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s. With the best of intentions, Providence has followed many other cities in implementing trendy planning ideas that proved to be mistakes: the destruction of wide swaths of traditional urban fabric for the construction of highways; the assembling of large superblocks cleared for urban renewal; and the building of large projects, like new convention centers or downtown shopping malls, believing that these places could be the salvation of cities emptied of population and economic life.

In the decade following the 1992 Downcity Plan and its follow-up in 1994, Providence’s urban renaissance continued to build momentum overall; however, Downcity’s redevelopment moved slowly and fitfully. The Convention Center was completed and properly connected to the Westin Hotel and Providence Place Mall–but, significantly, not to Downcity. Even as early as 1992, Duany foresaw this as a problem: “If it is not to be a disaster, the Convention Center and the downtown must be integrally linked.”

On a positive note, local developers began to redevelop historic buildings into spectacular lofts during the late 1990s bringing many new residents to Downcity for the first time. In addition, Downcity continued to collect an impressive array of diverse arts institutions: Trinity Repertory Theatre, Providence Performing Arts Center, Black Repertory Theatre and AS220. Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design made plans to develop an expanded presence with studios, student apartments and other academic functions–all located in Downcity. Johnson and Wales University, Roger Williams University and the Uni...
versity of Rhode Island have continued their long commitment to Downcity Providence with various projects to improve their presence.

**DOWNCITY TODAY**

Like many other American cities, Providence once rested much of its economic hopes on the new Convention Center. Lacking the beaches and golf courses of the Sunbelt to attract the typical convention visitors, however, it is now clear that the economic future of the convention center rests on the health and vitality of the city instead. To that end, another charrette was scheduled by the city and held early in 2004.

Participants in the 2004 charrette came with many of the same complaints about Downcity that were voiced during the earlier charrettes. These issues related to parking, safety, the attractiveness of the Downcity streets, the availability of affordable housing and space for artists, and the difficulties of redeveloping older buildings for modern use under the current regulatory regime.

One of the biggest obstacles to development has been both the limited supply of parking and, ironically, the amount of land that is currently being held as surface parking. Much of the surface parking in Downcity is owned by people who are unwilling to give up the parking lots they have in order to lease space in their buildings. Most alarmingly, there is concern that the city is losing major office tenants to suburban locations where the land is cheaper, expansion is easier, ample parking is available, and offices are located within closer commuting distance to their employees’ homes. As a result, just as Downcity is beginning to attract a critical mass of new residents with attractive housing, it is apparently losing the corporate tenants to the suburbs.

It is appropriate then that this plan has been titled “Completing and Connecting Downcity” because in order for Downcity to be a viable place, the city must address the needs of both the residential and commercial market. To that end, the charrette team’s efforts were focused on establishing a strategic set of particular interventions intended to both complete Downcity in a way that will help spur a sustained pattern of redevelopment and connect Downcity to its nearby neighborhoods.

**ADDRESSING THE ISSUES**

Rather than spend a lot of time on the general planning issues, which are for the most part well in hand in Providence, the 2004 charrette functioned like a fire brigade called to address problems at particular locations. Some of the interventions address specific obstacles to Downcity development, such as the problems of parking and the issues associated with the current design review process. Other interventions seize strategic opportunities to restore the continuity of the urban fabric. This can be accomplished by filling in gaps that may prevent Downcity redevelopment from achieving the synergy necessary to sustain it and by making particular connections between Downcity and the Convention Center or the west side neighborhoods. So, the interventions are efforts to repair the ill effects of past planning mistakes and to create recommendations from the 1992 plan that have not been implemented. Now even more clearly indicated than before were a number of planning mistakes. The plan itself is fortunate to have a downtown that is both compact and highly walkable. It is embellished with an extraordinary amount of intact, high-quality urban fabric as well as a large number of historic buildings that date back to the heyday of American urbanism. During the 2004 charrette, the team noted a very strong appreciation by its residents for the historic architecture of Providence and the serious and thoughtful efforts dedicated to its preservation. A number of other participants, however, suggested that excessive concern for historic preservation could in itself be an obstacle to redevelopment. This constituency cited the creation of multiple layers of design and development review, added costs, and unpredictability that goes hand-in-hand with historic preservation as impeding progress.

**IN CONCLUSION**

It is hoped that this plan will both reinforce a common vision of Downcity Providence and provide a series of practical steps for realizing that vision. The overall purpose of this plan is to restore the continuity of this high quality urbanism by establishing a predictable environment for Downcity redevelopment. By facilitating both public and private investment into both small and large projects, each can contribute to the economic, social and cultural vitality of Downcity as an urban neighborhood. Big projects can be important to establishing the reputation of a city, and, clearly, Providence is a place capable of big projects. The proposal to move Interstate 95 (I-95) is a compelling indication of the city’s commitment to its renaissance. Ultimately, however, the quality of the urbanism depends on the extent to which it can become the work of many hands collaborating with a common vision. The details of this vision can be as varied as those who participate in realizing it, but they need a common sense of mission. This plan is intended to facilitate the finer grain of urban redevelopment that will really bring such a mission to life.

Once adopted, implementation of the Connecting and Completing Downcity Plan will depend on being consistent with the daily small decisions and facilitating the efforts of private developers who wish to contribute to Downcity’s renaissance as a great urban neighborhood.
ANALYSIS

The analytical diagrams clearly illuminate the strengths and opportunities that Downcity Providence has in its favor, as well as the challenges the city faces to complete the transformation of Downcity into a connected and urban neighborhood. The first drawing (reference drawing here) illustrates the urban fabric as it exists, using the street grid and building footprints. At the heart of Downcity, one can still see evidence of the high quality of urbanism that emerged a century ago during the commercial heyday of downtown Providence. Much of this urbanism is, remarkably, still intact between Fountain and Weybosset Streets and from the river to Snow Street. On the other hand, the increasingly ragged pattern of building at the western edge of Downcity suggests the damage wrought by the past decades of highway construction and urban renewal.

Existing Conditions. Current plan of the city of Providence, including imminent relocation of Interstate I-95.

The extent to which the fabric is intact is also indicated by an analysis of the quality of the existing street
frontage. There is not only quite a lot of frontage that can be evaluated as “excellent,” but there is also a high degree of continuity, particularly along Westminster Street. When the “excellent” frontage is combined with the “promising” stretches, the result is a solid core of a continuous network of pedestrian-friendly streets, with obvious opportunities to include more of the Downcity area. One can also clearly see, however, that the quality of the frontage degrades quickly as one moves west. Here, the highway dramatically exacerbates a divide between Downcity and the west side neighborhoods. The key to connecting Downcity to the neighborhoods will be to bridge the highway and repair the regrettable conditions on either side of the cut made by the highway.

The map of attractions provides a quick indication of Downcity’s assets. Unfortunately, as seen on the map, many of the attractions fall outside of the small core area where the pedestrian network is most intact. An analysis of the neighborhood structure based on the number of “pedestrian sheds” (a circle defined by a five- or 10-minute walk from the center), illustrates the potential for Downcity and its nearby neighborhoods to be integrated into a walkable urban environment. This environment would include a wide range of neighborhoods with different lifestyle options, arts and entertainment venues, business and employment opportunities, and cultural vitality — all within easy reach.

THE COMPONENTS OF THE PLAN

As the title suggests, this plan is comprised of interventions aimed at achieving two kinds of goals: “completing Downcity” and “connecting Downcity to the surrounding neighborhoods.” Of course, a key to completing Downcity is also ensuring that there are well developed connections within Downcity as well.

Two general drawings illustrate the overall approach to this plan. The Master Plan proposal shows all of the buildings and sites identified for redevelopment. These proposals are described in detail below, but it is also important to understand that each is conceived as a way to complete (or, in many cases, repair) the continuity of the urban fabric. The Master Plan shows how the proposed interventions fit into the whole context. The other general drawing calls out the key connections be-
between Downcity and nearby neighborhoods.

Note that almost all of these street connections are associated with arriving at a place. The connection from Capital Center and the Providence Place Mall terminates at an improved Emmett Square. The Broadway connection not only emphasizes the importance of the bridge over the highway, but also the importance of establishing its destination at a beautiful new LaSalle Square. The Washington Street connection picks up the Washington Street corridor and creates a terminus in what will be called the Westside Commons. The Westminster Street connection bridges between two dramatic "V" intersections. In order to connect Downcity, it’s not enough simply to beautify the streets. The streets have to be brought to life by establishing destinations worth the walk at strategic points in the network.

Following common practice, this plan includes two different categories of intervention intended to achieve these dual goals of completing and connecting Downcity: General Controls and Special Projects. The General Controls are always the least glamorous part of any plan, but they are a key part of the underlying framework that guides new development so that it takes place at strategic points and in ways that contribute to the overall vitality of the city. The Special Projects are more vivid and dramatic, but always to be seen as pieces of the larger project of realizing the goals of the plan.

GENERAL CONTROLS

Because this plan is the result of a charrette intended to follow up on earlier and more extensive planning, fewer changes to General Controls are needed. There are two specific adjustments to the General Controls that we propose: adjustments to the regulating plan in order to reinforce some specific aspects of the code, and a revision or restatement of the A/B street assignment.

REGULATING PLAN

The Regulating Plan shows a pattern of zoning that is no different from the existing zoning already in place. The one key difference is that the coding should be changed to specify the number of stories allowed rather than the height described in the number of feet. The reason for this is that when building heights are limited in terms of number of feet permitted, there is incentive to reduce the ceiling heights in order to squeeze as many floors as possible. When the building height limitation is expressed in terms of a number of stories, developers are more likely to allow more generous ceiling heights in their buildings. The end result is that the proportions of the building — inside and out — are designed for effect rather than in response to the limitation on ceiling heights. The second coding proposal is to indicate where particular buildings need to have retail frontage, in order to insure the continuity of the street network.

THE A/B FRONTAGE ASSIGNMENT

One key to a successful city is acknowledging that not every street can or should be expected to achieve the highest standards for pedestrian friendliness. First, if every street is held to the highest standard, there is a tendency to dilute the effort resulting in an overall effect that is not as successful. Second, some streets will inevitably have to provide sites for uses (e.g., parking structures, drive-through windows for banks, automobile service) that are oriented to the automobile. In doing so, the pedestrian quality of the frontage will be disrupted. "A" streets are those streets that are held to the highest standard of pedestrian-oriented frontage. "B" streets are those that are either farther from achieving that high standard, or unlikely ever to achieve it because of the necessary persistence of some uses.

The prior plan established an A/B grid. This plan proposes a reconsideration and reassertion of those assignments (see illustration). Some of the streets identified as "B" streets actually do have excellent pedestrian frontage. The most important part of this diagram is the network of "A" streets, which should provide a clear indication of those streets that need to be given the most attention in order to realize the goals of this plan.
As mentioned before, one of the keys to creating connections across the divide formed by the highway is to create places of sufficiently high quality where one arrives after braving the experience of the bridge. At the western approach to the Washington Street Bridge, there is the new public safety complex, with its parking garage and a great deal of open land devoted to surface parking. The effect is a kind of “no man’s land” before one begins to get into the more interesting streets of the west side neighborhoods.

SOLUTIONS
On close examination of the street pattern and existing land uses, the charrette team came to the conclusion that Washington Street, which lies between Dean and Winter Streets, is a “B” street, whereas West Fountain Street is the more important and promising connection to the neighborhood. In order to create a more welcoming place to mark one’s arrival on the west side, the team proposed a realignment of West Fountain to connect more directly to Washington Street (as shown in the plan). Both the surface parking to the south and the façade of the parking garage to the north would be masked by a layer of townhouse-scaled buildings. This same approach is also used to reduce the scale of Washington Street, which currently reflects highway geometrics, and to provide a transition to the neighborhood from the larger buildings along the highway. Although the rendering reflects an earlier scheme than the one that appears in the plan, it suggests the scale and character of the buildings around what is now being called the Westside Common.

Continuing up West Fountain Street, a number of sites exist that are suitable for infill development. In addition, on the edges of the more consistently residential neighborhood to the west, a fair amount of older, small industrial buildings are ripe for redevelopment. The intention is to use this overall reconfiguration of the area as a strategy to encourage smaller increments of redevelopment here than in other parts of the study area. This approach not only creates a more diverse and finely grained character for the neighborhood, but also provides opportunities for smaller, local developers to play a role in the future of Downcity.
Of the many specific proposals generated during the charrette, one of the most crucial to Providence’s initial redevelopment push is the reconfiguration of LaSalle Square. Located at the intersection of Broadway and Empire Streets, this critical junction is at the northwest corner of Downcity and is the receiving end of a considerable amount of automobile traffic. This is often a source of delay and frustration for drivers and fear and discomfort for pedestrians. However, surrounded by the Dunkin’ Donuts Center, the old Public Safety complex, BlueCross/BlueShield (BCBS) headquarters and Trinity Brewhouse, this intersection has the potential to attract substantial pedestrian activity, both day and night and to become an animated and vibrant feature of Downcity. The pedestrian quality of this square is fundamental to the effort to connect the Dunkin’ Donuts Center and the Convention Center to the rest of Downcity and to connect a revitalized Downcity to Federal Hill and the west side neighborhoods.

TRANSFORMING AN INTERSECTION TO A SQUARE

The key to this transformation lies in converting the public space from an intersection to a square. By rerouting traffic around a formalized LaSalle Square, vehicular congestion can be alleviated while providing for a more interesting and comfortable pedestrian experience. Furthermore, remarkably little in the way of construction is needed to effect this transformation. Rather, creative collaboration would be required between the city of Providence and BCBS in order to arrive at a mutually beneficial arrangement.

With more than 3,000 employees, BCBS is Providence’s largest single Downcity employer, and it is looking to expand. The company’s offices are currently dispersed throughout several buildings in Downcity, but the limits of growth that can be accommodated in its current facilities are reached. This is precisely where the city is in position to help. While the underutilized (and probably expensive to maintain) semi-circular plaza
in front of the BCBS headquarters is insufficient for viable development, the city owns various properties that would provide good locations for additional office space.

PUBLIC/PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS ARE KEY TO REVITALIZATION

At the final charrette presentation at the Biltmore Hotel, Andrés Duany proposed a land swap between BCBS and the city of Providence as a way to meet their respective needs. According to this plan, BCBS would trade the private semicircular plaza for one of four Downcity sites that could be developed to provide the company with the office space it requires. These sites are described in detail in this report and include 1) the failed “park” at the northwest corner of Westminster and Empire Streets; 2) the old Public Safety building and its expanded block on LaSalle Square; 3) the Fogarty building (adjacent to the current BCBS headquarters); and 4) the two blocks straddling Orange Street on the south side of Friendship. With the transferal of property, the city would then be at liberty to complete LaSalle Square, while BCBS would gain a lot that is better suited to its programmatic needs. BCBS would have the benefit of the attractive public space in the newly reborn square, both as an amenity available to its employees and as an appropriately dignified setting, and a prestigious address for its current office building.

In addition to the tangible benefits gained by both parties through such an agreement, this proposal is key to connecting and completing Downcity. Being one of two nuclei of significant redevelopment (the other being Cathedral Square), this project could initiate a ripple effect of subsequent improvements. These improvements are likely to begin immediately on the square once its initial transformation has made the surrounding parcels more attractive as development opportunities. By collaborating in this effort, BCBS and the city of Providence will reinforce the long and mutually beneficial relationship they have experienced and provide a model of public/private collaboration for others who look to play a significant role in the future of Providence.


A facelift for the aging Dunkin’ Donuts Center will provide the necessary urban wall at the north side of LaSalle Square. This lining slides past the BCBS headquarters to reach out to the Convention Center and links it seamlessly to the life of the square.
DISCUSSION
Capitol Center is better connected to the city than it has ever been in certain respects, and continued development in that area will give it increasing importance. For its part, the mall was well designed for its urban setting providing reasonably pedestrian-friendly frontage along Francis Street. The problem is the lack of pedestrian connection between the north side of Memorial Boulevard (at the mall) and the Biltmore Hotel.

In the prior plan, there were two important stipulations attached to the building of the mall. First, there was to be no cinema built there. This would present the opportunity to locate a cinema that could help bring convention visitors into Downcity. Second, there was to be no pedestrian bridge connecting the convention center and the mall. Contrary to these stipulations, both the pedestrian bridge and cinema were built. As a result, the bridge provides a very effective connection to the mall from the convention center; however, getting from the streets of Downcity to the mall and the pedestrian bridge is difficult.

Emmett Square is a confusing area with crisscrossing lanes and a scattering of islands and dividers. This is confusing for vehicular traffic, difficult for pedestrians to traverse, and surrounded by an incoherent suburban architectural look that is not worthy of this important location in Providence.

EXISTING: “Emmett Intersection” hosts the charrette team, shown here stranded amid a sea of asphalt.
parking lot and a rather utilitarian car rental operation that would be more appropriate to an airport location. The extension of the Providence Journal building has been built as a single-story windowless structure that looks like an outdated suburban bank. There is a proposal to add an exterior escalator to offer visible access to the pedestrian bridge that would stretch to the mall across the nine lanes of highway and terminate in the city. While this provides a little improvement, the main problems remain untouched.

SOLUTIONS

Both traffic calming and pedestrian comfort could be improved by reforming this complex intersection into a coherent square. To accomplish this, two lanes of one-way traffic should be built around the square on three sides. (On the [need info] side, adjacent to Kennedy Plaza, two-way traffic would be permitted to allow buses to cut directly to the Plaza avoiding the square.) Pedestrian crossings would be easier as well as safer. The landscaped site next to the Westin should be made available for development. In addition, the surface lot next to the parking structure owned by the Providence Journal should be used for an expansion of the parking structure, with building frontage along Fountain Street and a pedestrian bridge connecting to the Providence Journal building. This new parking capacity could be used to serve the parking requirements of the Biltmore Hotel. The redesign of the streets around the square would allow a little additional land for redevelopment of the green extension to the Providence Journal building as an attractive western edge to the square.

Eventually the highway geometrics characterizing Memorial Boulevard will need to be redesigned to create a more appropriately urban boulevard. This would be the final, but nonetheless important, move in creating a closer connection between Capital Center and Downcity.
CATHEDRAL SQUARE

OBSERVATION: Westminster Street is a critical connection between Downcity and the west side. However, in its current configuration, it is blocked by the McVinney Auditorium and Cathedral Square.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
A. Demolish the McVinney Auditorium and reconnect Westminster Street through Cathedral Square.
B. Redesign Cathedral Square as a public space, which can be used for large gatherings or for parking cars (as required).
C. Restoring the historic street pattern, by establishing the diagonal connection of Weybosset Street to Westminster.
D. Renovate or rebuild the public housing complex to provide a more pedestrian-friendly streetscape.

DISCUSSION
Cathedral Square is a classic example of an earlier generation of planning ideas: a large-scale urban renewal project incorporating public housing and replacing the older street grid with a system of now under-utilized pedestrian walkways. At the time of the 1995 charrette, repairing such extensive damage to the urban fabric seemed improbable. However, during the 2004 charrette, discussions with the Archdiocese and other relevant stakeholders indicated a general willingness to consider the radical surgery necessary to restore Cathedral Square.

Once a beautiful and significant public space located at the point where Westminster and Weybosset Streets converged, Cathedral Square served both as a proper setting for the cathedral and as a dramatic point of arrival from the west side neighborhoods. The square was also a significant place because this stretch of Westminster Street collected incoming traffic from neighborhoods farther to the west and south, thanks to the convergence of Westminster and Cranston Streets. The two Y intersections that bring Weybosset and Cranston Streets into Westminster once formed a “bow tie” that gave this stretch of Westminster particular importance. When we compare the diagram of the street network in 1844 with the currently existing condition, we see that the redevelopment of Cathedral Square eradicated the eastern end of the bow tie. This disrupted the continuity of the traditional street network in a way that underscores the isolation of Downcity from the west side neighborhoods, a result of the construction of I-95.

For traffic headed downtown from...
the west, Westminster Street terminates at McVinney Auditorium and funnels vehicular traffic to turn along the service road. Pedestrian traffic is also forced to find a path around the building - a route that is neither obvious nor welcoming - or to detour to Washington Street. For traffic going west, Westminster Street is closed at Empire Street, forcing a detour to Weybosset Street.

The pedestrian walkway that continues up the hill to the square is closely lined with the stark and looming brick facades of the public housing complex. The large square in front of the cathedral is accessible only to pedestrians, but there is little reason for pedestrians to be there. In addition, the area suffers from both the reality and the perception of crime, a situation that is made worse by the relative lack of traffic.

**SOLUTIONS**

The proposed plan for Cathedral Square involves implementing a number of specific interventions that are designed to restore the character and continuity of the traditional urban fabric, recover the vitality of the square as a proper setting for an important building, encourage strategic redevelopment projects that will be an important key to the completing of Downcity, and restore the viability of the Downcity side of a connection to the west side neighborhoods.

The first step is to reopen Westminster Street and Cathedral Square to vehicular traffic by removing the pedestrian mall at the east end and demolishing the McVinney Auditorium at the other. With the demolition of the McVinney Auditorium, the Archdiocese can make additional land available for redevelopment, not only to meet its own needs but as a way to generate capital to support other parts of this project. The design team suggests the development of townhouses or other low buildings to the west of the cathedral, which will present a more attractive gateway to Downcity from the Interstate and the west side neighborhoods. In a traditional manner, the Cathedral would be visible above the urban fabric. This overall composition, in conjunction with the proposal to make over the Westminster Bridge, would be one of the two signature gateways to Providence.

To the east of Cathedral Square, stark modernist buildings contain public housing units and social services. There is a lack of activity at street level that creates a feeling of insecurity. Two proposals have been recommended to improve this stretch of Westminster. In Proposal 1, the existing buildings are replaced with townhouses of the same type, architectural character and scale as the townhouses that might be built between the square and I-95. In Proposal 2, the more modest proposition, a relatively inexpensive transformation of the facade involving the addition of bay windows and the enclosure of the useless (and unsafe) arcades, is suggested. Both proposals illustrate the value of a feature that serves to terminate the vista as one looks up Westminster Street to the west. In Proposal 1, an arch indicates the east end of the Westminster Bridge and marks the connection to the west side neighborhoods.

During the charrette, a number of groups talked about the need to create a large gathering place for outdoor cultural events and performances. Cathedral Square should be redesigned in the manner of a European plaza suitable for multiple uses. A properly designed plaza can be used to park cars when needed for that purpose, or it can be closed off and used for large gatherings, with the Cathedral as a beautiful backdrop.
DISCUSSION

The two bridges connecting to the northwest corner of Downcity from the west side neighborhoods con-
verge just west of LaSalle Square. Broadway and Atwells Avenue form a triangle with the service road along
I-95 defining the edges of what used to be the site of a much-loved circular gas station. Approaching from the
west side across the bridge, or catching a glimpse from I-95, the view is dominated by the Holiday Inn, a large
but unremarkable Modernist building with an egg-crate façade. Because of its potential visibility from the In-
terstate as well as its location at the point where Broadway lands on the Downcity side of I-95, the triangular
site is a particularly important oppor-
tunity for significant architecture.

At one time, drivers on I-95 knew they were in Providence because of the dramatic view of the capitol building. This view is now blocked by Providence Place Mall, built in [?]. Consequently, there is a need to es-
tablish a new signature [?] for Prov-
dence. Two opportunities have been proposed: The first is to transform

OBSERVATION: Broadway provides an important con-
nection between Federal Hill and the northwest corner
of Downcity. This connection is heavily used in spite of being rather hostile for pedestrians.

RECOMMENDATION:

Create incentives and guidelines to encourage the developer of available land in this location to create a coherent and distinctive composition encompassing the bridge [which one?], the existing Holiday Inn, and a new building to create an important gateway for Prov-
dence.
The existing Broadway Bridge features a depressing view of the Holiday Inn with the LaSalle Square intersection dissolving beyond.

Westminster Street Bridge and redevelop the western edge of Cathedral Square; the second is to redesign Broadway Bridge and redevelop the western edge of LaSalle Square.

The charrette plan suggests that the developer of the old gas station site should be encouraged to build a designer to take on the Broadway Bridge superstructure, the new building and a renovation of the existing Holiday Inn as a single, unified composition. The site for the new building is currently zoned for a height of 300 feet, allowing for a dramatically slim building. The result would be a project that could take full advantage of the opportunities for generating real estate value and also mark Providence in a way that would distinguish it from other locations along the linear city of the Interstate.

The renderings in this report illustrate the effect of a unified composition in three different styles of architecture: modernist, traditional and postmodernist design.

The existing Broadway Bridge features a depressing view of the Holiday Inn with the LaSalle Square intersection dissolving beyond.

These renderings show the possibilities of a small site zoned for a 300-foot high building. The traditional (above) and modernist (below) schemes depicted here supplement the preceding post-modern version and are intended to demonstrate that the style is inconsequential—as long as the architecture is exceptional.
DISCUSSION

The Providence Convention Center, with its open glass façade and entrance facing the intersection of Mathewson and Sabin Streets, is well designed as an urban facility. Where many similar facilities in other cities are sealed off from the urban context, convention visitors can look out from the lobby to view the art deco façade of the Providence Performing Arts Center. In principle, Mathewson Street is an ideal opportunity to bring Convention Center visitors into the heart of the arts and entertainment district.

Unfortunately, the view of this crucial connection from the Convention Center is currently dominated by parking lots, back of buildings and streets that lack vitality. As a result, visitors are lured in the other direction - across the bridge to the mall. The alignment of Mathewson Street is interrupted by a small parking lot behind the Providence Journal building. Although there is a newly renovated building on the west corner of Mathewson and Fountain Streets, the east side of the block, between Fountain and Washington, is entirely taken up with surface parking. While activity can be found just a few blocks away from the Convention Center, there is little to indicate when viewing the area from inside the building. Lack of light and pedestrian life on the street are likely to raise concerns about the safety of venturing out even to known destinations.

SOLUTIONS

A number of renovation projects are in the pipeline in the vicinity of the Convention Center. This indicates that potential exists to turn this area into a more inviting bridge between the Convention Center and the commercial area found along Washington.

THE MATHEWSON TRANSITION

OBSERVATION: Mathewson Street is the key connection from the Convention Center to the PPAC Plaza.

RECOMMENDATIONS:
A. Replace the small parking lot behind the Providence Journal building with parking along Fountain Street, and restore the continuity of the Mathewson Street axis from PPAC to the Convention Center.
B. Redesign Mathewson Street between Fountain and Sabin Streets as an active square that provides an inviting transition between the Convention Center and Downcity.
C. Redevelop the existing surface parking lot as structured parking with pedestrian-oriented frontage, possibly as a site for a proposed five-plex cinema.

EXISTING: This surface lot devastates the otherwise continuous north side of Washington Street and makes for an unglamorous approach to the Convention Center’s Downcity entrance.

PROPOSED: A proposed cinema would complete the north frontage and act as the southern node along the transition between Washington Street and the Convention Center.
ton, Westminster and Weybosset Streets. (The potential replacement of the Fogarty Building is one important opportunity that has yet to take shape.) In order to knit these developments together and create a comfortable transition from the Convention Center, however, the gaps in the pedestrian frontage created by surface parking need to be filled in. In addition, the continuation past the Providence Journal building to the Convention Center needs to made both more pedestrian-friendly and more inviting from the vantage of the Convention Center visitors.

The first step is to remove the small parking lot tacked on to the rear of the Providence Journal building and restore the continuation of Mathewson Street. The parking capacity now provided by the rather unattractive parking lot would be replaced with a more dignified solution: a tree-lined service lane that takes advantage of the extra width on Fountain Street to create reserved parallel parking along the south side of the Journal building.

With the removal of the parking lot, the continuation of Mathewson Street from Fountain to Sabin Street can be reconfigured as a small square that would be well-lit and activated by a pavilion or interactive fountain. The owners of the Providence Journal should also contribute to the quality of the square. By redesigning the rear façade of the building which is now liberated from its parking lot, it becomes an additional entrance. This entrance will offer a more public function capable of contributing to the activity of the square. One possibility suggested during the charrette was that this could be an ideal location for a museum dedicated to the history of Providence.

The large parking lot between Fountain and Washington Streets is visually prominent from the lobby of the Convention Center making this a possible site for a dramatic and inviting gateway to Mathewson Street. The rendering shown on this page illustrates a well-lit and animated marquee that provides information regarding arts and entertainment opportunities in Downcity. At the south end of the proposed building, the façade also repairs the current gap in the Washington Street corridor. Overall, the goal should be to strengthen the Mathewson Street connection by encouraging redevelopment at strategic points along the whole corridor. Visitors should ideally be able to look down Mathewson Street toward PPAC and see several destinations towards which they might walk. This effect can also be reinforced with a consistent lighting program.

During the charrette, the team learned there is a cinema company eager to find a location in Downcity. This is very good news from the standpoint of the effort to create a more connected and completed neighborhood. Cinemas are not only desirable as attractions and amenities in and of themselves, they also help to stimulate activity that is distributed relatively evenly during the day (as opposed to theatre and performing arts facilities which tend to create concentrated surges in the restaurant business by starting and letting everyone out at one time).

Because of the particular importance of activating the connection between the Convention Center and the city, the charrette team identified several potential sites for a cinema along Mathewson Street. The first of these sites is the surface parking lot along Mathewson Street (between Washington and Fountain Streets). The corner of Fountain and Mathewson Streets is visually connected and completed neighborhood. Cinemas are not only desirable as attractions and amenities in and of themselves, they also help to stimulate activity that is distributed relatively evenly during the day (as opposed to theatre and performing arts facilities which tend to create concentrated surges in the restaurant business by starting and letting everyone out at one time).

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DISCUSSION

Although the conversion of Weybosset Street to two-way traffic is a necessary part of the restorative process of the city’s street network, the Providence Performing Arts Center (PPAC) is concerned that this will disrupt their patrons’ ability to take advantage of a drop-off in front of the center. At one point in Weybosset Street, there is a widening of the sidewalk for a structure that was originally a comfort station but now serves as a police substation. In addition to the concern expressed by PPAC regarding the future of its drop-off area, there are other reasons to consider redesigning this whole area as the street is converted back to two-way traffic.

The small, rather formless, plaza around the comfort station is unremarkable in its current configuration and visually chaotic. As the southern termination of what should be a major connection across Downcity, the PPAC plaza is a missed opportunity. Concentrating activity around the PPAC will help create a distinctive sense of place to contribute to the

PPAC PLAZA

PROPOSED: Option 3—The grandest of the three candidate schemes allows for a dignified PPAC Plaza to terminate the Mathewson Street corridor, opposite the Convention Center.

OBSERVATION: Weybosset Street is scheduled to be restored to two-way traffic as part of the gradual restoration of the system of two-way streets proposed by an earlier plan.

RECOMMENDATION: Redesign Weybosset Street in front of PPAC to give it a more distinctive identity as an attractive plaza.

EXISTING: As Weybosset Street bellies out in front of PPAC, the former comfort station is orphaned in a loosely formed setting.
momentum reflected in the upgrading of the businesses and restaurants along Weybosset Street.

**SOLUTIONS**

To create this sense of place, three different schemes were developed for the PPAC Plaza. The first scheme was the simplest and most inexpensive solution, although one that accomplishes little more than maintaining the drop-off area for PPAC. Weybosset Street would be returned to its original configuration, with a drop-off area established in front of PPAC through the use of striping on the road surface. The comfort station would be removed (possibly relocated to LaSalle Square) in order to make sufficient room for both two-way traffic and the drop-off within the right of way.

The second scheme is a little more ambitious. The plaza around the comfort station would be turned into an island dividing the two-way traffic along Weybosset Street. The drop-off area in front of PPAC would be established with bollards.

The third scheme is the most radical and distinctive solution. The pavement of the entire area in front of PPAC, including the sidewalks, would be turned into a well-designed and carefully detailed cobblestone plaza. In this configuration, parking would be accommodated in the manner of European plazas that are used with extraordinary adaptability to accommodate parking, vehicular traffic (moving slowly), and pedestrians. The comfort station could remain in place and a change in surface from asphalt to cobble stone would help to calm traffic. Through-traffic would be accommodated but calmed in part by the change in surface from asphalt to cobble stone. This solution would have the advantage of creating a more distinctive place at the termination of Mathewson Street, a place that is both much more flexible in its potential uses and capable of providing a more dramatic setting for PPAC.
DISCUSSION
Although they physically connect Downcity with the west side neighborhoods, the I-95 bridges are a psychological obstacle to active pedestrian connection between the neighborhoods. The experience of walking across any of the bridges is daunting enough, so that one is unlikely to brave it unless there is significant motivation. In order to create connection between Downcity and the west side, there needs to be two kinds of interventions: a physical improvement of the bridges and the establishment of immediate destinations on both sides such that there is

OBSERVATION: The Westminster Street Bridge is an important connection between Downcity and the west side, but it is currently a hostile and discouraging gap for pedestrians to cross.

RECOMMENDATION:
Reconstruct the Westminster Street Bridge as an arcaded pedestrian crossing, with small, inexpensive, carefully managed retail spaces.
a continuous and high-quality pedestrian experience as one approaches the bridges from either side.

Considerable discussion took place at the charrette regarding an earlier proposal that would deck over a substantial stretch of I-95 in Providence and, consequently, disrupt the urban fabric. Two problems with the proposal were recognized: First, there is the problem with creating connections across a decked-over highway if the deck is to be simply landscaped as a park; and, second, although this might be a desirable and even feasible solution in the long run, it is costly and difficult enough that it is unlikely to happen in the near future. Other solutions were considered, including the possibility of decking over only a small section between two bridges or widening the bridge to allow an opportunity to create a more sheltered pedestrian connection.

**SOLUTIONS**

A more immediate and cost-effective solution was suggested when the team discovered that the existing bridge at Westminster Street is actually wider than it needs to be. It is possible to use that excess width in order to turn the crossing into a more comfortable experience for pedestrians and to offer real rewards to those on their way to destinations on the other side of the bridge.

The proposal is to use the excess bridge width to create an arcaded walkway along with a series of small, low-cost stalls that could be made available to vendors while still allowing two travel lanes for vehicular traffic. This could be accomplished without having to add any additional structure to the existing bridge. The overall effect would be similar to the famous Ponte Vecchio in Florence, Italy. The north side would be an arcaded walkway that would provide shelter with occasional views of the highway through windows. Places for artists, street vendors and small-scale retailers could be made available, although it would be important to establish standards and guidelines for the use of these spaces. As a result, what is currently an unpleasant and regrettable gap in the pedestrian connection could be turned into an asset and an attraction. From the highway, the bridge would also become a significant symbol at the gateway to Providence, part of a picturesque composition that includes the proposed redevelopment at Cathedral Square.
DISCUSSION
One of the gems of Westminster Street, the old Providence Journal building is situated at a location near a number of recently renovated loft buildings that are beginning to bring new residents to the neighborhood. The size and structure of the building make it a potential site for the cinema seeking a location in Downcity. As noted above, the cinema would play an important role both by adding to the amenities available in Downcity and by bringing a steady level of activity to the streets around it. Although this site would not have the immediate impact of a location along Mathewson Street, a cinema located here would bring people to Westminster where there is currently not much happening at night. This area will become increasingly important as a connection between the Westminster and Washington Street corridors of Downcity, and the expected redevelopment of the Jewelry District and Old Harbor area.

THE OLD PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

OBSERVATION: The old Providence Journal building is a striking and beautiful historic building and an important opportunity to bring activity to this stretch of Westminster Street.

RECOMMENDATION: Consider renovation of the old Providence Journal building as a possible site for a new six-theatre cineplex.

EXISTING: One of the finest architectural works in Downcity, the old Providence Journal building can once again become a vibrant contributor by adapting its function to suit modern needs.
**DISCUSSION**

The Rialto Theatre is a small but once-handsome historic structure on Mathewson Street between Washington Street and Westminster Street. Behind it, there is a surface parking lot accessible from Snow Street, which is currently under multiple ownerships and difficult to redevelop. Parking lots like this one are crucial to the business of leasing space in nearby buildings. This parking dependence is often a critical obstacle in the transformation of surface parking lots into uses more appropriate for Downcity.

This site is a particularly promising location for a cinema. Aside from the symbolic appeal of restoring and reusing a building that had been built historically as a theatre, the site has the opportunity to bring light and activity to a midpoint area between the two major anchors at opposite ends of the Mathewson Street corridor: PPAC and the Convention Center.

A cinema in this location would draw visitors to the center of Downcity and hold up the middle of the Mathewson Street connection.

**PROPOSED:** Preserving the historic building can be facilitated by adapting its overall use to accommodate the needs of the adjacent land owners. The cinema would regain its original function, while the existing parking spaces receive protection from the weather.

**OBSERVATION:** The old Rialto Theatre building is strategically located about half way along Mathewson Street between the Convention Center and PPAC.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Consider renovation of the Rialto Theatre as a possible site for a new six-plex cinema.

**THE RIALTO CINEMA**

**EXISTING:** The Rialto Cinema has suffered over the years, but its former presence can be resurrected with only minimal attention.

Aerial view of the Rialto Cinema site. Possible site for a six-plex cinema.
DISCUSSION

If Downcity is going to attract a critical mass of residents to the convenience and excitement of urban living, it is necessary to attract retail that will enable residents to meet their ordinary daily needs within walking distance. The first and most important anchor for a residential neighborhood is a market. It is crucially important, however, that a new market be properly located and not just left to chance. In order to attract a good market to Downcity and ensure that the location contributes to “completing and connecting” Downcity, it is necessary to identify an appropriate site and facilitate its acquisition so that it is relatively easy for the market to come in. Ideally, the site should be located close to the bridge at Westminster Street, so that it is accessible to the residents of both Downcity and the west side neighborhoods.

SOLUTION

An ideal site at the intersection of Weybossett and Empire Streets, where the diagonal into Cathedral Square is to be restored, was identified. This location is both close to Cathedral Square and the Westminster bridgehead, and it could also become an important connection to the Jewelry District as it is redeveloped and improved. Large enough to encompass a market with a footprint of 10,000 square feet, the site also has 70 spaces of surface parking in front. Because of the change in grade on the site, the entrance to the market could be on the alley, and the entrances to shops on the second level could face on to Weybossett Street. A parking structure of six or seven stories above the market and other retail could add to the overall parking capacity of Downcity.

OBSERVATION: The residents of Downcity need a market.

RECOMMENDATION: Acquire a site for an urban market and parking structure at Weybossett and Empire Streets.
THE WESTMINSTER STREET MARKET

DISCUSSION
The connection between Downcity and the west side neighborhoods across I-95 depends very heavily on creating pedestrian-friendly destinations on either side of the highway. Currently, this is not the case as pedestrians have to suffer through a block or so of unfortunate experience before there is a sense of having arrived in a neighborhood.

SOLUTIONS
Two other ideas to improve the Westminster Street crossing were proposed: Redesign Cathedral Square on the east side of the highway and transform the bridge into a distinctive pedestrian experience. The third piece of the overall solution is to create some strategic redevelopment on the west side of Westminster Crossing. If this stretch of Westminster Street is to be attractive and welcoming for pedestrians crossing from Downcity, it needs to provide uses that give people a desire to cross. In addition, the street needs to be continuous and pedestrian-oriented up to the sidewalk.

For these reasons, the site on the north side of Westminster Street has been identified as one of the possible locations for an urban market that could serve the growing population of Downcity residents. As well as the residents of the west side neighborhoods, if the market is to be located on the north side of I-95, it needs to be located as close as possible to the bridge in order to keep it within walking distance for Downcity residents. This particular site is close to the Westminster and Washington Street bridges and the relatively upscale residential buildings located on Washington Street just east of the bridge. This site is also particularly important because it faces both Westminster and Washington Streets, the two critical bridgeheads connecting to Downcity. Hence, it is critical to enhancing the quality of the arrival experience at two different points on the west side.

The proposed design would mask parking in the center of the block behind a liner building along Washington Street and behind the market that would face Westminster Street. The whole project could be made financially feasible by the incorporation of the market as part of a larger mixed-use development that could include apartments, condominiums or offices above.

Along the south side of Westminster, the proposal also indicates using infill development in order to balance the opposite side of the street and to create the kind of street enclosure necessary to establish a pedestrian-oriented neighborhood center. In addition to giving character and definition to Westminster Street at this important juncture, this could be an opportunity to encourage the development of small retail opportunities along Westminster Street just to the west.

THE ATWELLS SITE

DISCUSSION
There are early indications that sites along I-95 are becoming attractive locations for relatively tall buildings, which are permitted under current zoning. This could be good news insofar as these buildings provide a buffer along the Interstate for the adjacent neighborhoods. However, such buildings present a problem of compatibility with the scale and character of the west side neighborhoods. In addition to their height, such buildings have a tendency to present the neighborhood with their back sides creating streets dominated by large parking lots and automobile-oriented entrances. The frontage is often unattractive and can be disruptive of the urban character of the neighborhood, even when a relatively sensitive developer tries to beautify the site with berms and extensive landscaping.

There is a tendency for neighbors to try to stop projects like this, but in the course of pursuing what are often losing battles, the neighborhood ultimately loses standing in the process and the ability to affect the outcome. In such circumstances, it is better to intervene to make the building better from an urban standpoint.

SOLUTIONS
The project designated as the Atwells Site provides an illustration of the way tall buildings can be handled appropriately from the standpoint of their relationship to the neighborhood. In this case, the high-rise tower would provide visual articulation at a scale appropriate along the high-speed Interstate mirroring the development of the sites on the opposite side of the Broadway Bridge. In return for the city’s willingness to vacate a small section of Federal Street, the developer is to be asked to mask the parking with liner buildings that create a pedestrian-oriented frontage on both Broadway and Bradford Streets.

The liner buildings also serve to bring the scale down to a level more compatible with the surrounding neighborhood.
In addition to providing retail at the ground floor, the garage can contribute to the pedestrian experience by allowing its featureless facade to become a canvas for a local artist.

DOWNCITY PARKING SPINE

DISCUSSION
The good news is that people are coming to Downcity, even on weekends. The bad news is that they are finding it increasingly difficult to park. The director of one of the theatre companies commented that the high cost of parking has become a big issue for his audience which has to pay nearly as much to park as they do for the ticket to the show. In addition, Downcity business owners are certain that they are losing business because there isn’t either too little parking or it is too expensive for their clientele.

The design team identified substantial parking capacity but noted that it isn’t always available to the public, nor is it easy to find or convenient to every location. The existing garages at the mall and Convention Center, which are available for patrons of Downcity businesses, are not used to capacity. However, when the mall was built, connections to these parking facilities from Downcity were not convenient. The large parking garage on Washington Street (near the Biltmore Hotel) was recently restricted to monthly renters only. This rule was enacted as a response to sharp increases in insurance rates due to the high level of vandalism associated with short-term parking operations in that location. The unavailability of this lot also puts pressure on the owners of the Biltmore Hotel, whom have had to pay for guest parking elsewhere.

SOLUTION
Three issues emerge as part of the solution to the parking situation. First, much of the parking capacity is located along a north-south axis that stretches from Johnson & Wales to the Convention Center along Snow Street. A potential capacity of approximately 3,000 spaces exists here. If this route was designated as the “parking spine” for Downcity, a single system of signs could be created to guide visitors to this parking.

More generally, parking needs to be treated as a crucial part of the city’s infrastructure, much like the administration of the city’s water and sewage. The city’s parking capacity needs to be coordinated by a centralized parking authority. One of the things that makes this possible is the ability to offer the spaces as incentives to developers who are willing to build to the plan within a particular period of time. This is a way to get those who are speculating and sitting on their land to act more quickly. The spaces would still be available for public use, but they would be counted against the developers’ parking requirement, exempting them from having to provide their own. Once the proposed 3,000 spaces have been established along the parking spine, the city should not build any more. It is possible to exceed the carrying capacity of a downtown by oversupplying parking.

Finally, one source of the obsession with parking is that people are coming downtown with one destination in mind. They want to park nearby and leave when their business is completed, in contrast with cities like Manhattan where you find a place to put the car so you can be out in the city. If the pedestrian experience is good, and there is enough activity on the streets, the parking doesn’t always need to be so convenient. Part of the solution to the parking problem is weaving the downtown together so that there is a “park once” environment. Analysis of the walkable frontages shows that the network is not yet continuous, which means that you can’t get from one venue to another without walking past unpleasant things.
From the west side of the bridge to the triangle formed by the convergence of Westminster and Cranston Streets, Westminster Street is currently characterized by an uneven pattern of development. The buildings on the north side of the street are beginning to reflect a renewed pattern of retail, but the domination of the south side of the street by Classical and Central High Schools has some unfortunate impacts. High schools are almost always considered undesirable land uses locally because of the combined effects of traffic and the presence at certain times of the day of large numbers of high schools students. In addition, the modern structure of Classical High School is set back from the street in a way that disrupts any possible continuity of pedestrian frontage. Citizens Bank holds the apex of the triangle that forms the western side of the Westminster Street “bowtie,” but beyond it there are large surface parking lots.

This stretch of Westminster Street is a crucial connection between Downcity and the west side for several reasons. It is the western bridgehead of this important bridge—the point of arrival and departure that mirrors the proposed redevelopment of Cathedral Square. It is also historically the western end of one of the distinctive and dramatic features of the historic fabric of Providence: the “bowtie” formed by the convergence of two major streets. The proposed restoration of this historic piece of urban form, and the emphasis that might be given to it by way of judicious infill and redevelopment at critical points, offers an opportunity to create a piece of beautiful, lively and distinctive urban fabric that reads as a continuous urban place even across the usually overwhelming divide of the Interstate highway.

**OBSERVATION:** On the west side of the bridge over I-95, Westminster Street has begun to reflect the growing popularity of the west side neighborhoods; however, the street still presents a somewhat ragged combination of uses that are currently not well integrated into a coherent place.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

A. Encourage infill development between Classical High School, Central High School and Westminster Street.

B. Encourage infill development and build liner buildings to mask surface parking lots and establish a more continuous frontage.

C. Identify opportunities for land swaps that would assist the school board in resolving its need for additional space in return for cooperation in improving the frontage along Westminster Street.

The Westminster Street “bowtie” is anchored by opposite bookends: Citizens Bank to the west and Cathedral Square to the east.

THE WESTSIDE BRIDGEHEAD

**DISCUSSION**

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