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A new park to give the downtown a lift

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The recent discussions on the proposal for an auto-restricted zone in Kennedy Plaza have centered essentially on one idea: should this area continue to be used for cars and parking space or should it be turned over to pedestrians, with limited auto access, increased bus usage, and fewer parking spaces?

Some influential downtown merchants have spoken out strongly against removing places devoted to car use and have, instead, urged that more parking areas be provided and car access to shops be improved.

At the other extreme stand some community groups and individuals who prefer that the uniqueness of the downtown be strengthened by providing safe and pleasant space for people.

The solution to this problem may soon be resolved through the "natural" process common in old, industrialized cities of the Northeast whose buildings are old and frequently constructed of wood. This process is, of course, fires.

The most recent fire on Mathewson Street has effectively removed a building from the downtown and has freed 6,000 square feet of space which will be turned into a parking lot. This was also the case at the site of a burned-out building on Washington Street where, today, 20 cars are safely stored. More recently, the burned out Swarts Building has freed up space which presently houses 50 cars, and plans are to make this a permanent arrangement.

But is this the best use of land in the downtown? Will the provision of more parking space actually increase retail activity in the downtown? Will there be a revitalization of the downtown simply because access for cars is easier and will even more of the downtown, nearly half of which is now reserved for the car, be put into asphalt for the sake of the automobile?

The Providence downtown, like so many other old, city downtowns, is in trouble. In order to strengthen the city center it is necessary to capitalize on its uniqueness, that is, its human, walking scale and attractiveness. This was illustrated recently by a South Main Street closed to traffic with activities, art displays and wandering minstrels taking over the street. But people need pleasant and comfortable spaces, once in the downtown, to rest and perhaps watch other people, a favorite city activity.

Providence lacks adequate, pleasant, open space in its downtown. Discounting the 13 acres of lawn surrounding the State Capitol, there are only three acres of parks in the entire 350-acre downtown. But there is opportunity, currently to provide a small open space for the most intensively used part of the downtown, i.e., the financial district.

Plans are under way, at present, to turn the approximately 9,000 square feet of land formerly occupied by the Swarts Building on Weybosset Street into a parking lot. Although provision is being made to utilize some of this space for pedestrian flow and to use some brick walls to separate people from cars (an improvement over the normal type of parking lot), this valuable piece of property would be an ideal spot for a mini-park.

One of the most attractive parks in midtown Manhattan is Paley Park, a miniscule 4,200 square feet of land donated to the city which subsequently developed it at considerable cost. It is, as William H. Whyte states, "one of those wonderful amenities that is really without a price." Attractive and intensively used, it is a people-oriented and pleasant space in the center city.

The Swarts site would be ideal for the placement of a vest pocket park because of the large number of people who would be able to take advantage of it. Rimmed with small trees, covered by greenery with a small fountain in the center and with tables and chairs provided for people use, this valuable plot of land would enhance the value of buildings in the area, provide a focal point for the financial district, and draw people to the area so that business located here would be helped. It would also be a safe haven because the site is easily visible from the buildings surrounding it. But who would pay for this?

At present this valuable piece of real estate has potential to generate considerable income as a parking lot to the owner. It would be too much to expect a donation of this land to the city. Perhaps the city could buy the land. But if this proves to be too expensive then perhaps some arrangement could be made for the city to rent the land with, of course, the responsibility to develop and maintain it as a park. In this way the developer would receive an income and the city would have its park at minimal cost. Since city park development costs qualify for federal aid, this source of funding could also be used.

A park in the financial district of the downtown would do much to enhance the appearance of the area, raise the tax base of surrounding buildings because of increased value, serve as a source of identity to the area, and provide a priceless amenity. The opportunity is there. Will the city take advantage of it before this one-fifth-of-an-acre plot of land goes under asphalt?

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