

Catching glimpses of life on Westminster Mall

By CHESTER E. SMOLSKI

It is the best place to see what this country is about. It is the one place where people mix freely, whether rich or poor, black or white, young or old. And it is the one "neighborhood" where residents from all other city neighborhoods meet on a common turf. This meeting place of residents, visitors, college students and workers is, of course, the downtown or, in professional parlance, the central business district (CBD).

This collection of people thus makes the CBD the best place in which to enjoy that age-old practice of "people-watching." We all delight in looking at faces, figures and attire, and in the downtown one finds a great variety and mix of people to observe, enlivening one's views of his or her counterparts.

People-watching is best done from a pedestrian zone, such as Westminster Mall, for here one can sit, relax, eat, look and enjoy the myriad of faces passing by from the safety of an area set aside for people, free from the noise and danger of passing cars. With more than 40 percent of the Providence CBD allocated to the automobile—and the resultant competition for limited space in the downtown—the mall becomes a special gathering place for people.

Activities to be found on the car-free Westminster Mall, in addition to the shopping, may include groups collecting money for charities, veterans passing out leaf-

lets protesting governmental actions, people dressed in unusual attire proclaiming their religious beliefs, a preacher trying to save souls, a musical group performing for a few coins or someone gathering signatures to protest nuclear weapons. All of these actions contribute to the liveliness and interest of the downtown.

Compare this with our suburban downtowns, (i.e., the malls), where such activities are discouraged and diversity is dampened. The result is clean, sheltered space, but one lacking in interest and boring to experience. And further, in this middle-class setting, one rarely sees some of the less fortunate, who are an integral part of our society.

This is especially the case with poor people. Poverty is certainly not pretty to see, and stooped figures that may be unclean, rummaging through trash receptacles and wearing tattered clothes, are shunned by persons not familiar with such needy folk. Yet these less fortunate are accepted in city centers as part of the urban scene.

This is far different from the suburban experience, which provides only a limited, one-dimensional view of society. Those who have had little exposure to the varied mix of people in the downtown may be inclined to use words such as "strange" or "weird" when referring to these people. This unfortunate attitude may likely spring from the homogeneity characteristic of the suburban environment. It is too bad that downtowners get a bum rap from these outside observers who do not

comprehend the character of urbanites.

The joy of observing the amalgam of individuals and groups in Westminster Mall is that one becomes aware of our diverse cultural and ethnic heritage, of our democratic system that gives each person the same voting privilege, no matter what his condition or situation, and a greater sense of understanding and compassion for people different from ourselves. Spalding Gray said it so well at his recent appearance at Trinity Theatre when he stated, "I had to leave Barrington to discover blacks and Jews."

The Westminster Mall serves as a magnet for the eclectic and colorful melange of people who give a distinctive character to our city center. Negative terms referring to the economically and culturally diverse people found here may only reveal one's own suburban bias. It would be better and more positive to describe this diversity as colorful, not strange; character, not weird; variety, not different; multicultural, not unusual: for these words best describe the democratic blend of individuals found on the mall and in the CBD.

Lewis Mumford had a vision of the good city as a place designed to "permit and encourage the greatest number of meetings, encounters, challenges between varied persons and groups." And that is exactly what downtown Providence accomplishes. □

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