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Cities are for people

Chester Smolski

A WALK in downtown Providence clearly shows that the concentration of bus services at Kennedy Plaza is a scheme to encourage bus ridership and reduce auto use and its pollution, especially along Dorrance Street.

At least that was the thinking when the Urban Mass Transit Administration granted Providence more than \$5 million to reshape Kennedy Plaza into its present form. The resulting traffic routing which now appears is much improved over a former pattern that saw some of the best drag races ever in the early hours.

Tourist literature proclaims that Providence is a walkable city, for downtown has narrow, old streets that meet at all angles, and interesting buildings that remind of a rich past. The result is an intimate scale that does not overwhelm the senses by man-made features and structures.

It is this human scale of narrow streets that may explain the unbelievable behavior of dashing across the street at any given point, not using marked pedestrian routes, zig-zagging between cars and expecting to get to the other side in one piece. In other cities with wide streets, one could never survive crossing them the way pedestrians do here.

The size of the central business district is small, so that from the intersection of Dorrance and Westminster, it is no more than 10 minutes to any edge of what is considered the city center. This size resembles the walled medieval city that was based on walking.

I recently spent some time in St. Louis — where one can see the beautifully restored and "Rousified" Union Station on the western horizon of downtown. About 30 minutes later, after arriving on foot, I

could appreciate what is meant by a "walkable city." Passing by many extensive blank walls of buildings and vast open spaces along the way also gives better meaning to "human scale."

We are fortunate to have an intimate and compact city center that lends itself to walking, and can thus be promoted as one to be enjoyed on foot. But can it?

In recently making a traverse from Memorial Circle (in Rhode Islandese, "the place where the monument used to be,") to the Providence Journal Building, I was nearly hit by

Tourist literature proclaims Providence a walkable city

cars at three locations: Suicide Circle, by the old post office, and at Fountain Street near the Biltmore. The reason is very simple: city officials have forgotten the basic premise of urban centers: "cities are for people."

It was the *Interface: Providence* report that came out of the Rhode Island School of Design in 1974 that was a spark to the later revival of the Providence central business district, and from the report came again the reminder of the purpose of cities: They are for people, not cars.

In almost any city, one will see construction in progress, because cities are never finished and are always undergoing change. But in just about any city I have seen, there are some types of traffic controls around construction sites so that pedestrians can move in safety.

With downtown Providence facing years of construction, are we supposed to wait until all building activity has stopped before traffic controls appear on the scene?

It is bad enough for local people, because we have grown accustomed to such lack of concern, but what of the new people in town, especially tourists. We persuade them to come to this walkable city, then place all types of barriers in their way. Why have a city that can be seen and enjoyed on foot, and then, rather than do something to enhance that quality, destroy its distinctive character?

When London's Oxford Street got too crowded with cars and people, the sidewalks were widened and the streets narrowed, then limited to cabs and buses. They know that people come first. Isn't it time Providence acknowledged that important concept?

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by Dick Wright

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