

Providence scores high against criteria for vibrant downtowns

It has been nearly a generation since her thought-provoking and polemical *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* appeared, but some of the ideas expressed are still as valid today as they were 28 years ago.

This second of the five major books that Jane Jacobs has written is the one that captured the imagination of the public and caused planners to rethink, argue and debate many of the policies and practices they had come to accept as immutable.

Just as important, the book caused experts to look at the city through a different perspective and see it in a manner that she articulated so well. She suggested envisioning sidewalks as areas of safety, parks as dead spaces, streets as major public spaces and urban renewal projects as a blight on the landscape.

Writing at a time when city neighborhoods were being destroyed by the 1949 Urban Renewal Program and 42,000 miles of interstate highways then under construction, Jacobs undertook to make us aware of the consequences of these actions. The Urban Renewal Program was subsequently ended in 1974, and our highway system is almost completed, but these programs still bear evidence of having changed the face of the city. And many of the thousands who were displaced by these actions still reminisce about their former homes in vibrant neighborhoods.

More importantly, in addition to telling us what is wrong with policies and programs that destroyed viable parts of the city, she listed the ingredients necessary to help recapture the vibrant city. Paramount to all of these is diversity.

Diversity is common to most cities but not all cities have it. For example, the South Bronx and Detroit, she says, are devoid of that mix of convenience, interest and vitality that cause them to be devoid of life after 7 pm. How does a city and its districts generate this diversity that is so necessary to city vitality? This is accomplished by fostering the following four conditions:

- The district must have more than one primary function. This ensures that people are outdoors at different times for different purposes and use facilities in common.

- Most blocks must be short to allow a variety of options for walking and preventing some streets from becoming isolated and devoid of people.

- There must be a combination of old and new buildings so that small shops with little capital can still find space for their operation.

- The population must be large.

These four conditions also have relevance today, even for small cities, and it would be of interest to see how a place such as downtown Providence might measure up based on these four conditions.

Having more than one primary use in the downtown ensures that people are on the streets at all times of the day and night. It is this presence of people at all hours that contributes to safety in the city as well as interest and vitality.

Downtown Providence has offices that serve this function, and there is much activity at certain times of the day related to this function. Entertainment activities serve this useful purpose at night: The important presence of the

Trinity Repertory Theater, for example, means that close to 1000 patrons may be at the Lederer Theater at any given time, evenings and weekends included.

The Providence Performing Arts Center, the Civic Center and the many nightspots also add more people to the downtown during the nighttime hours. Restaurants form a secondary function, resulting from servicing many of the primary functions previously mentioned.

Add to this the important role of educational institutions that operate both day and evening in the downtown, with classes and dormitories and other cultural activities such as the public library, art galleries and museum.

Retailing still serves as a useful daytime activity, and elderly bus riders get free transportation into the downtown during the day to use the city streets and shops. That time-honored and distinctive landmark in the downtown, Haven Brothers Diner, also serves the very useful function of providing a safe place in the downtown throughout the nighttime hours.

The final primary use of the downtown is housing. Well over 2000 people live in the downtown and, although most are elderly people who normally do not venture out at night, residents need other activities in the downtown.

The Providence downtown is blessed with short streets to provide different paths. This means that an approaching stranger (and Jacobs makes the point that a city is made up of strangers so that various forms of security are necessary) can be avoided by changing streets. I still remember walking at night on long blocks in St. Louis and other cities where an approaching stranger could not be avoided, and my resulting concern was about my safety.

Old buildings allow small businesses to take hold because rents are low. High rents in new buildings preclude the establishment of bars, antique shops and small restaurants that could make it in a downtown. Rehabilitation and new construction on Thayer Street, for example, have driven out the small, non-chain operated shops that added so much character to that Providence street.

Concentrations of people produce convenience, and nowhere is this more evident than in a downtown. The fact that more than 30,000 people find their way into the Providence Central Business District to work five days of the week means that many other activities are predicated on this concentration of workers. The problem this causes, though, is evident on weekends, when shops and restaurants will close because not enough people are there at that time.

Some of this off-hours use is provided by downtown residents, but this is where tourism—and a convention center—become vitally important. And the waterfront is becoming a major magnet for evening and tourist activities, something that Jacobs said 28 years ago ought to be done.

Given these four considerations that Jacobs spells out in her classic work on the American city, Providence is indeed fortunate. It scores high in all four categories. With the new developments proposed for the downtown, there is a good deal of optimism (a word relatively new to the Providence vocabulary) that the future will be even better.

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