

Fresh ideas essential for redesigning downtown

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Whether downtown Providence has style, grace, elegance and good taste or whether it is seedy, sleazy, schlock and second rate, there can be no question that the quality of the built environment should be a major consideration in all center city development. If the downtown is to prosper, then it must be made aesthetically pleasing, inviting and comfortable, but who should be making these decisions on design?

The question of a quality built environment on a scale never before attempted will soon be addressed with the advent of the railroad relocation and development in which this one-sixth of the downtown area will be completely built anew. Studies have been concluded, tentative plans have been drawn, public hearings held, congressional funding likely, and an Environmental Impact Statement soon to appear in final form, a draft of which concludes that such a development will not adversely affect the physical conditions of the city. Further, a commission of 13 members has

been selected by city and state governments and the private sector to guide the development of this 60-acre parcel, a process that will occupy the decade of the 80's. This is a bold, imaginative and visionary venture, one which will generate 4,800 jobs, increase tax revenues by \$6.8 million, and create two million square-feet of building space.

The Capital Center Project can have more than just an economic impact on the downtown and the city; it can also contribute to the aesthetic appearance of the city center and enhance its total

character. It is here in questions of design that the Capital Center Commission must not only give close attention to what they see as the needs of the Project but they must, in addition, pay heed to public views on this matter.

Just as the city of Providence has recently been made aware that its public housing tenants ought to have representatives on the housing authority board — for who knows best about living conditions in these projects? — so also must the Commission have direct contact with the public. The 13-member Commission is well qualified to handle the task of overseeing development of the Capital Center, but it must be remembered that it is heavily business-dominated, and it would be a serious mistake if economic considerations got in the way of aesthetic and design issues that will arise during the life of the project.

This is borne out in the recent five-hour public hearing on the draft of the Environmental Impact Statement at which business interests dominated the meeting. The result was that the proposed railroad relocation appeared to be only a matter of real estate development rather than transportation issues as well.

It would be a mistake also to think of the 60-acre Capital Center as a self-contained development, one which did not link up to the present downtown and become an integral part of the entire city center. Urban design will play an important role in bringing about this integration of new and old.

Urban design is more than color of material, building height and other building related questions: urban design is also concerned with pedestrian movement, security, traffic flow and a host of other questions that will need to be answered. It is here that public views can be made through a review procedure.

Design review is a process for regulating segments of the built environment in accordance with the objectives that come from some community of interests, according to Tom Nally, architect and planner for the Cambridge firm selected to do the design for the Auto Restricted Zone in Kennedy Plaza. Recently speaking in Providence, Nally emphasized the necessity of public involvement, this "messy and complicated but necessary process" from which all will benefit. His words have special meaning for the Capital Center.

There needs to be a mechanism by which the Commission has direct access to the community which can react to plans and design, make suggestions, and feel that it, the general public, has had a direct involvement in the planning, design and development of the Capital Center. It may be through a public advisory committee, somewhat similar to the one used by the Federal Rail Administration in Providence for the Capital Center, or in some other means to establish and review public tastes and needs. This necessity to get public advice must be done on a continuing basis and not in the form of infrequent public hearings. This is not an easy task but absolutely necessary to ensure that the Capital Center Project is a total community effort and to avoid the charge that the Project is just a business venture put together by downtown interests.

The excitement of the Capital Center continues to build. The Commission will soon be assembling the legal framework for the organization to meet approval by the General Assembly in 1981. Somewhere in that framework the means of gaining and using community interests must be addressed. Such a measure will provide valuable community involvement and open the opportunities for obtaining a functional and aesthetically pleasing design for the Project. The end product could be a high quality and economically viable addition to the present downtown and one that would give us a first rate city center.

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