

# Sharing ideas for a better city

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## *Chester Smolski*

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It was billed as "Rebuilding the Medium-Sized North American City," and representatives from nine cities throughout this country and Canada assembled in Providence to discuss ideas, ingredients, processes, and problems related to restoring the physical fabric of the city.

The three-day conference recently held at the Rhode Island School of Design was organized by five local groups and institutions, including the city of Providence, and funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. The conference was the first of a two part series in which representatives from these same cities will gather again in Providence next spring to discuss changes in their own cities resulting from the discussions held at this first meeting.

The over-long and over-full presentations that came from all ten cities were varied in quality and, in most cases, full of substantive suggestions on means, techniques and results of redevelopment in these cities.

The medium-sized city, based upon the attendees at the conference, ranged from the 10th largest city in the country, San Antonio, Texas, with its approximate 800,000 population, down to Charleston, South Carolina, with its 55,000 population. Yet, varied as were the sizes of these communities, some ideas presented are applicable to all 10 cities and they bear repeating, especially as they relate to Providence.

A San Antonio River flowing through the center of this predominantly Hispanic city was little used and even avoided, little different from Providence's Woonasquatucket River, and it divided the city. Recognizing the potential of an urban waterway that could be used, the public and private sectors organized and cooperated to spark this prototype park/business urban core waterway. Today, River

Walk internalizes the city and is a center of activity including business, entertainment, park, shopping and conference facilities. New construction underway includes a new Hyatt Regency that will have the river flowing through its main lobby.

Portland, Oregon, with its 380,000 people and claim to be America's most livable city, did something of a similar nature along its Willamette River. A four lane highway paralleled the river and cut off access to its banks. The city removed the highway and put in a lovely riverside park, done with little citizen opposition because the excellent public transportation obviated the necessity for that highway. Of interest, the recently appointed Federal Secretary of Transportation, Neil Goldschmidt, was the mayor of Portland: would that he be as successful with public transportation in this country.

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### *Integrating the old with the new is a permanent process associated with city growth*

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Charleston, South Carolina, the smallest of the middle-sized cities, has one of the largest historic districts of any city in the country. Approximately one-fifth of the total city area is in the old and historic city district, where all building exterior is subject to architectural review for historic authenticity. The beauty of this historic city, as a result, is a joy to behold, and this beauty will be there for our children because of the persistence of the preservationists in that city.

Savannah, Georgia, with the nation's largest urban historic districts, also sets a model for historic preservation. Recogniz-

ing the need for restoring historic buildings in low income neighborhoods and the necessity to avoid displacement of these residents, the Historic Savannah Foundation has used revolving loan funds, federal grants and city help to upgrade properties and prevent white intrusion and expansion into black, low income areas. Interestingly, John Hayes of the Foundation was greatly impressed by the quality of restoration work in Providence and city cooperation in this preservation effort.

Pittsburgh is not only the home of the world champion Pirates and Steelers but it is also a national leader in preservation. Arthur Ziegler, Executive Director of the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation, described their efforts in restoring the 41-acre Station Square complex, a task that generated both a financial profit and preservation of an historic legacy. And the profits earned from Station Square by this "non-profit entrepreneur" are being used for restoration in other parts of the city.

Jean Rousseau, representative from Quebec, put a different perspective on restoration. Integrating the old with the new is a permanent process associated with city growth and not a new idea. He also stated that we must not worship something just because it is old and, in fact, there is an element of elitism in the preservation movement, especially when it draws from the needs of the poorer community.

Rebuilding our cities may mean the restoration of a neglected waterway or old buildings but we must also be mindful of the new. And new construction must be balanced and integrated with the old. This attention to the physical fabric of the city must, in the end, be concerned for what will work best for people because, as Interface: Providence reminds us, cities are for people.

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