

Building Providence: Why not shout it from the rooftops?

CHESTER E. SMOLSKI

IN THE PAST decade, we have moved railroad tracks and built a new railroad station; we are moving two rivers; and now we plan to move an interstate highway.

These were the opening remarks of Tom Deller, associate director of planning for the city of Providence to planners here for the annual meeting of the New England chapter of the American Planning Association. Just the thought of these words is mind-boggling.

I had to remind myself just how amazing it is that the capital city of Rhode Island is doing projects that no other city in this nation is even contemplating. Think about it! Concentrated in the small downtown of only one-half square mile of area, all of these projects are coming to fruition. Ten years ago who would have even thought that such development would take place? And here they are, two of which will likely be completed before the notorious Jamestown Bridge is finished.

Too often in Providence, and in Rhode Island, we talk about the things we don't do, or do poorly — a negative image we have of ourselves that Andres Duany highlighted in his discussions for revitalizing the downtown. Yet here are projects that should put Providence on the map. It is difficult to explain why we haven't received more publicity in the region and in the country about the good things happening in the downtown of our capital city.

Perhaps we just don't say enough good things about ourselves to others.

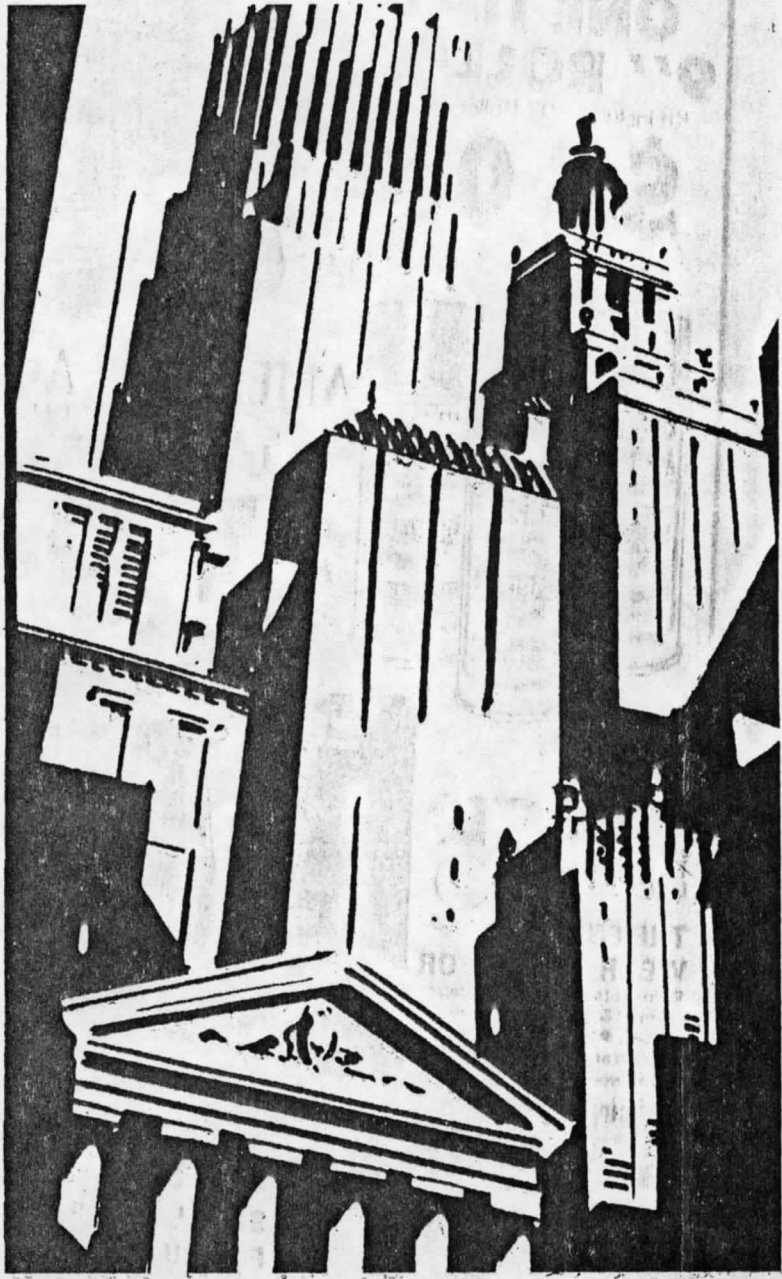
Listening to the executive director of the Providence Foundation also talk about downtown development, the Providence planner explain waterfront changes, the Mayor describe his Providence Plan and Bill Warner, architect and planner for much of the Capital Center and river relocation, describe his work on those magnificent bridges, made me realize how exciting all of this must be to someone viewing these projects for the first time.

And that was the exact reaction I got from talking to planners in attendance: "Sensational ... overpowering ... exciting ... overwhelming ... You really have your act together here in Providence" were some of the comments heard and received. These were the reactions of outside professionals, comments that I have yet to hear from our local citizenry over the period during which the planning and construction of these projects has taken place.

Thinking about the 125 planners at the meeting, and the positive impressions they received about Providence, which they will carry back to their respective cities, I realized that these exciting downtown developments could use more exposure, both to our own citizens and to outsiders.

How to do it?

There is no observation tower in Providence, no rotating restaurant



atop a major building, and no high pinnacle from which to get a detailed view of the downtown to see these activities. The too-distant 259-foot-high Neutaconkanut Hill in the western part of the city provides a vista of the downtown buildings. Propect Park on the East Side gives a closer look. The Turk's Head Club provides a detailed look at some of the buildings, as do the editorial offices of the Journal, which overlook the Convention Center construction project. And some CEOs with offices atop our tallest skyscrapers have an excellent view — but only for those privileged to get into these inner sanctums!

But possibly the best view of these developments — one that is accessible to the public — is from the top floors of the Omni Biltmore, and planners at the meeting had the opportunity to see some of this downtown activity, as well as use maps and models that were set up for the meeting.

But why should this view, and these maps and models, be available only for planners? Why not have a permanent display, with maps, models, pictures and videotapes (also shown to the planners) available in the upper level of the Biltmore? And why not staff the exhibit with a guide to explain these activities to visitors?

With the tourist season upon us, and visitors getting lost in the extensive construction downtown,

there should be a way for people to find out what is going on and why they should want to come back to see the finished product.

The Convention Bureau could include such a stop as part of itineraries planned for visitors. Perhaps the Biltmore could view this as a means to get more persons to visit the hotel and stay for a meal.

Thousands of tourists recently descended upon Providence to view our historic homes and capture some of the essence and flavor of the city. Such activities have resulted from the work of the Providence Preservation Society in historic preservation, and have helped bring a positive recognition to the city. Developments such as those in the city center have the same potential to present the capital city in a favorable manner.

Somehow, we need to capitalize on these opportunities, and help draw visitors to Providence — if, for no other reason, a display set up for local citizens would help to make all of us aware of the exciting developments occurring right under our noses. Maybe then we could see, appreciate and better understand the positive activities taking place here. And perhaps even boast about Rhode Island's capital city.

Chester E. Smolski is professor of geography and director of urban studies at Rhode Island College.