

Does downtown Worcester reflect its true image?

An urban expert compares Worcester and Providence's city centers

By Chester E. Smolski

Editor's note: Five years ago, Chester E. Smolski, then director of Urban Studies and professor of geography at Rhode Island College in Providence wrote an article for Providence Business News titled "Visiting Worcester makes one appreciate Providence" (www.pbn.com/old_site/w030695/smolski.htm). Recently, we asked Smolski, who is now professor emeritus of geography at Rhode Island College and who lives in Bristol, RI, to revisit Worcester, to see whether he thinks anything has changed.

Whenever I visit cities, I usually carry my camera with me to record some of the interesting features and characteristics of that city. So when I was in London a few years ago to visit my daughter who lived there, I decided on a Sunday afternoon to walk around her neighborhood. After four hours of walking, I returned without a single picture. In London? Nothing of interest?

Hard to believe, London is not much different in that respect than other cities in the world. The principal use of land in cities is in its residential areas, the places where people live — the neighborhoods. There may be differences in spacing, house types, architecture and general appearance, but where is the excitement that one expects to find in these

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major population clusters?

When one visits cities, one usually arrives in the center — the downtown, or, as the U.S. Census Bureau calls it, the "central business district," because of its central location and principal activity. Most forms of transportation lead into the CBD because that is where other activities are commonly found and that the visitor wants to sample.

ing from the move to suburbia — now where most Americans live — these Edge City centers are taking over the role of the older city centers. In addition, the folks that use these centers find people there who are familiar, in the sense of having similar incomes, attire and even skin color. In this sense, these newer cities lack the diversity that characterized the older city centers.



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The other unique thing about the CBD is that this is the one "neighborhood" where all residents and visitors meet. People usually stay within their own neighborhoods, where things are familiar, whereas other neighborhoods may be deemed unsafe or too exclusive. But downtowns are where all of the folks from all of the neighborhoods can come together — or at least it used to be that way.

But now we have Edge Cities, a term that journalist Joel Garreau coined and used for his book by that name on these suburban centers, which are now taking over the function and activities of the central city. Result-

The result of this movement has been to leave the older city center as the gathering place for the people left behind — that is, the poorer people and, often, the immigrant population that brings over 1 million of these new people annually to this country. So now these older cities are trying to revitalize their centers and to introduce new and different activities, to again become the principal gathering place for all people and all city functions. Increasing the number of housing units, closing off streets for pedestrian malls and building shopping malls have been used as part of this revitalization process. In addition, tax breaks and other unique financing,



(Above): That was then: The intersection of Worcester Center Boulevard and Central Street in downtown Worcester in 1995.

(Left): This is now: That same intersection, today.

such as tax increment financing or targeting federal community development funds for downtown development are also used.

The effectiveness of these measures varies from city to city. How has Worcester fared?

WHY WORCESTER?

Five years ago, I wrote a column for the *Providence Business News* about a visit to Worcester — especially to explore the newly opened Worcester Common Outlets. When I told my daughter, who works in the area, that I was going for a weekend in Worcester, she asked, "Why?" The report that I wrote was not a positive one.

My only connection with Worcester since that time is to inquire from my granddaughter about conditions there. She attends a college in the city, which she likes, but she often refers to the unsafe neighborhood in which she lives that is close to the school. This is, of course, not common to

Worcester since many urban schools find themselves in that situation — certainly a cause for concern, but also a fact of American city life.

So when I was contacted by the *Worcester Business Journal* to visit the city again for a weekend to see what changes have taken place, I gladly accepted this invitation. When I told another daughter, who lives in New Jersey, that we were visiting Worcester for a weekend, she also asked, "Why?" Apparently, they have a negative image of Worcester in New Jersey as well.

I like and study cities. So again I asked my wife to come along with me to give me her impressions as well — especially since we would visit Worcester Common Outlets again. And since I had spent two years living in Worcester a long time ago as a graduate student, I wanted to see the changes over that longer period of time.

It must be emphasized that my account is only an impressionistic view of Worcester.