

Seeing the city through suburban eyes

American cities are, in the minds of many, quite intimidating. They are congested, noisy, dirty, too difficult to drive in and, of course, the home of muggers, rapists and murderers. For these and other reasons, too many people avoid the opportunities and fail to appreciate the joys that come with city experiences.

Today, most Americans live in the suburbs and commute to their jobs in the suburbs, infrequently taking advantage of the city. Furthermore, during the post-war era, we have raised a generation of people who were born, educated, married, had children and are now retired in the 'burbs. And they would not have it any other way, happily admitting to never wanting to leave or never feeling the need to make use of the city.

Here in Rhode Island, we have one major city, measured by local standards but not by those of a national scale. The capital city of Providence has most of the features of big cities, with a downtown, some major business and industrial firms, a transportation system, historical structures, institutions and diverse people. But unlike big cities, there is a sense of place, a sense of identity, a sense of control and even a sense of intimacy that reflects the manageable size of Providence.

Thus, it would appear that Providence would offer the best of both worlds, having most features of the big and frightening city yet retaining some of the small town ambience that many of us treasure. Sometimes characterized as charming, historical, intimate and manageable, Providence usually ranks high when compared to many other cities in the nation.

Yet given all of these positive characteristics, something is missing. That missing ingredient is critical mass—a large and concentrated population that can support many and diverse activities. One discovers this missing ingredient by taking a short trip north to the largest city in New England and 20th largest in the nation—Boston.

For those who fear the traffic (it can be fearsome), are concerned with the expense and difficulty of parking and are frightened by the maze of narrow and one-way streets, they should take the simple measure of making the trip on a Sunday.

The one hour run by car from Providence is easily done on a Sunday morning when traffic is light and, on arrival, one finds free parking available on the street. Although free, the parking around the Faneuil Hall Marketplace and the north end is at a premium, even at 10 in the morning. But the deserted financial district, located just four blocks south of the marketplace, is the place to park.

Good cities are full of surprises and here one finds a real gem in the form of a park from which to discover some of the joys of this major city. The nearly complete Post Office Square Park, located between Milk, Congress, Franklin and Pearl streets, is nearly surrounded by available free street parking on a Sunday morning. And the Milk St. Cafe, located on the south edge of the park, is the place to start the day with coffee and sweets.

The small crowd dining outside the cafe in the park, the melodious sounds of the piano and guitar duet, the beauty of the park itself, the elegant and diverse modern and historic buildings overlooking the park—all of these reflect the splendor and joy found in this quiet setting in the heart of the city. And one can even feel the sophistication that exudes from being in the presence of a great city.

More needs to be said about the park because the process by which it was constructed is also illustrative of critical mass; in this case, enough talented people from the private sector with the money to make things happen. All cities have movers and shakers, but there has to be enough of these highly motivated, committed and talented decision-makers with their abilities to raise money to handle major projects such as the Post Office Square Park.

A recent Boston Globe story detailed the intricate operations that went into the construction of this park. A decrepit, old, city-owned parking garage and a parking mogul with a 40-year lease occupied this less than two-acre triangular parcel in the heart of the financial district just three years ago. A group of several downtown business executives came up with the idea of a park over an underground parking garage, and in 1983 formed the Friends of Post Office Square, a non-profit corporation. Critics, including the city government, said it couldn't be done, yet this did not daunt the group's efforts.

After five years of lobbying, cajoling, apply-

ing pressure and kicking \$1 million into the kitty, construction began. The lessee was bought out for \$6 million and some parking fees; the friends sold \$29.5 million worth of shares of stock in the corporation; \$51 million was borrowed. Parking fees from the 1400 space, underground, six-level parking garage will pay expenses, with any excess to go into the general revenue account of the city. Approximately 40 years from now, after all capital costs have been erased, the garage will revert to the city.

More than a beautiful sculptured piece of landscape that will brighten the lives of many city dwellers and visitors, and more than the convenience of storing cars underground and out of sight, the Post Office Square Park is a tribute to the vision, tenacity and ability of a dedicated group of private sector leaders who saw a need, working diligently to overcome obstacles, and provided an amenity that is a tribute to the city in which they work.

The short walk to the Faneuil Hall Marketplace from the park provides delight and as one views the stunning architectural achievements in the variety of buildings found in this part of the downtown. The range is from historic to current, from Romanesque to post-modern and from unique to common. Boston is certainly one of this country's premier cities, and its buildings reveal this character.

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