

# From Down and Out to Up and Coming

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### Downtown

**Providence** is poised to take off as the next urban revitalization success story. It's been on the precipice for years, receiving steady infusions of hope here and there, but this time advocates say it's really happening.

"We're on the cusp of something extraordinary," says Mayor David Cicilline. City planners, developers and politicians have been diligently putting the puzzle together and are just waiting for the last few pieces to fall in place — comprehensive transportation and the right kind of retail. The biggest, most complicated piece, though, will be to lure the residents in.

"Downtown has seen a tremendous transformation over the last four years in particular," says Cicilline. "Once the residential developments are done, we'll see a grocery store, a dry cleaner, and everything you need to make it work."

The area — led by the historic core called Downcity — is showing more than signs of life; it's a downright resuscitation. More than forty new trendy stores and restaurants have opened in the last three years. Crime is at a twenty-eight-year low in Providence, with major violent crimes down eighteen percent last year, according to The Providence Journal. Developers are forging ahead with plans for new residential towers and hotel rooms, although the luxury condo market does seem to be softening. Cornish Associates, a major Downcity developer, estimates that the one square mile bounded by Smith Street, I-195, the Moshassuck and Providence rivers, and I-95, hosts approximately 30,000 office workers, while the Providence area hosts 30,000 university students and staff per day. Every year the Dunkin' Donuts Center, the Convention Center and hotels bring in more than 1.7 million visitors.

Still, compared to Boston, downtown Providence is pretty sleepy. After years of public and private investment, the question on everyone's lips is, "Is Downcity viable?" The answer depends on whom you talk to. Providence Planning Director Thomas Deller says, "We've been aggressive in our planning, and we might be a little ahead of the market." Developers gambling big money on the prospect of a vibrant town center say not only is it viable, its success is inevitable. Locals — famously pessimistic — are sitting back with crossed arms, waiting to watch it fail.

Urban planning experts say downtown Providence has a lot going for it. It has five four-year colleges and universities, numerous arts and cultural attractions such as AS220 and WaterFire, a burgeoning startup-company culture, and some restaurants that rival Boston's food scene. Once I-195 moves south, the size of downtown will double to include the Jewelry District. But the city's biggest asset is the beautiful turn-of-the-century American mercantile architecture of Downcity's historic core, built between the mid 1800s and about 1930, and mostly left alone to age gracefully.

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Until the mid-1900s, cities had focused all their economic and social activity in a central downtown area, but the advent of malls, highways and suburbanization pulled business away from places like the department stores of Downcity Providence. Add a steep decline in industrial manufacturing, and many urban areas hit tough times. For Providence, the 1970s were the darkest period in the city's history. But while other cities were swinging a federally funded wrecking ball at their older neighborhoods to cure an economic ailment, Providence was mostly spared, thanks to early intercession by the Providence Preservation Society to save College Hill from urban renewal. It is now possibly the largest registered historic district in the country.

“It was the first time the federal government had funded a plan that called for the revitalization of a neighborhood in a way other than clearing it,” says Ken Orenstein, former executive director of the Providence Foundation, a private nonprofit that advocates for planning and development issues in downtown.

“The bones are right,” says Massachusetts Institute of Technology urban design professor Dennis Frenchman. “The

scale is great. The environment is wonderful. In the end, that's going to bode very well."

What is true for fixer-upper homes is even truer for cities. It's a lot harder to fix a fundamentally ill-designed environment than it is to shine up a good one that's been tarnished by years of neglect. For years Frenchman has been bringing city design and development students to Providence because, he says, the city has a strong "sense of place," that quality that makes visitors know they're in Providence, not Anytown, U.S.A.

"People identify with places where buildings have a sense of history and especially with buildings that are built on a street grid that dates back to Indian times," says Jack Gold, executive director of the Providence Preservation Society. "The city developed over time. City Hall cost millions of dollars to build. The quality of materials of many mid-nineteenth century buildings downtown is outstanding. We cherish that sense of legacy."

Avoiding "clear and scar" urban renewal also meant that streets were never widened — an important factor in the scale that Frenchman talks about. Narrow streets and wide sidewalks slow cars down and make it more comfortable for people to stroll. In addition to the space between buildings, the height of the buildings also contributes to a city's scale. The most desirable height-to-width ratio is different depending on the type of atmosphere you're trying to create. The effect is known as creating a street room. Dense commercial districts should be at least 3:1, a ratio that is found on Market Street in San Francisco, meaning that it's thrice as tall (from building to building, including street and sidewalks) as it is wide. Forgettable, suburban strip malls have a ratio of about 1:16. Newbury Street in Boston is 1:2, a cozy street room. Westminster Street in Providence is 2:1.

Exceptionally good bones and neighborhood character are what attracted Cornish Associates' Arnold "Buff" Chace to Downcity. According to Ari Heckman, director of marketing and retail leasing for Cornish, no one was interested in Downcity when Chace bought his first downtown buildings in the early nineties at auction. He originally planned to develop them as offices with first-floor retail, but the office market was in a slump at the time. In the mid-nineties, Chace sent a crude survey to 1,000 Rhode Island School of Design graduates still living in the area to ask if they'd like to live downtown. Twelve percent said yes. The prospect of residential living in downtown Providence was radical at the time, but Chace pieced together seven layers of financing to rehabilitate the Smith Building and the Packard Building. Cornish now rents more than 200 apartments above retail space in seven historic buildings along Westminster Street. Ninety-six percent are occupied. Monthly rents range from \$500 to \$3,500 for 750 to 2,800 square feet.

To attract people to a once-dead downtown, there has been an astounding amount of public and private investment in major infrastructure projects, new construction and renovation of historic buildings over the years. Starting more than a decade ago, the city buried the railroad tracks that used to cut through downtown Providence at nineteen feet above the street and built a new train station. Over the next few years, it uncovered and rerouted two rivers and built Waterplace Park, the Convention Center, the Providence Place mall, the Capital Center, and several new apartment towers. It also launched WaterFire, restored the Providence Performing Arts Center, the Trinity Repertory Theater and

the Biltmore Hotel, moved a major highway, and completed a \$9 million renovation of the central bus hub at Kennedy Plaza, a historic transportation hub that's been in continuous use since 1875.



The city and its business leaders have focused on changing negative perceptions downtown by creating a business improvement district to fund a yellow-uniformed crew that keeps the streets clean and safe. The “Live It Up” downtown marketing campaign promotes arts and entertainment with new maps, brochures and a website ([providencedowntown.com](http://providencedowntown.com)). New construction is cropping up everywhere: the InterContinental Hotel, the Waterplace residential towers, the GTECH building, the Westin tower, the Masonic Temple project, the renovation of the Holiday Inn, now a Hilton, and the newly renovated classical white Rhode Island Hospital Trust building at the head of Westminster Street, which brought 500 RISD students to the west side of the river.

Over the past decade, Cornish has functioned partly as a developer and partly as a policy changer, in order to make it easier and more affordable to renovate Down-city's historic buildings. The biggest change was aimed at rezoning the area to allow buildings to house a mix of different uses under one roof — instead of being required to replace the old department stores with new retail shops, developers can also use the upper floors for housing, offices or cultural activities. More importantly, mixed-use zoning diversifies the type of activity along the street and encourages a steady flow of foot traffic at different times of day — a quality that's hard to find in the suburbs.

Cornish strategically tackled many buildings at once to create a critical mass of lofts, shops and offices. It created a neighborhood destination. But Chace knew that it would take more than one refurbished building here and there to bring people back to a deserted downtown. All good urban planners will agree that having an empty lot or a crumbling building in the middle of a downtown is less than ideal. Heckman, therefore, doesn't think of other developers as competitors. “Anyone developing in downtown is our friend,” he says.

“When you reach that critical mass of enough new things to do, you get a synergistic effect,” says Donald Eversley, president of the Providence Economic Development Partnership. “The more stores you get, the more people you get, the safer you feel. That leads to more people coming downtown who stay late for a drink or come early to eat in a restaurant if they're going to a show.”

Eversley says downtown will succeed because it offers something the mall does not — a rich collection of small, boutique-type stores and independent restaurants. “It’s the anti-mall,” he notes. “People who go into malls are unlikely to go into an old New England downtown because the streets are too narrow. They want guaranteed parking and chain stores.”

Nevertheless, Eversley and others are happy Providence Place is there. Former Providence Foundation director Ken Orenstein says that when the mall opened in 1999, it gave people a reason to come downtown again. “Since we can’t avoid malls, I’d rather have it in downtown than in Swansea,” says Eversley. “It adds parking and a lot of retail stores.”

**“ The more stores you get, the more people you get, the safer you feel. ”**

The ultimate goal is to attract new residents to downtown. “Every problem in downtown will be improved by [increasing the number of] people living there,” says Chace. “We need more people on the street all hours of the day...200 people in the new towers being built will help. We’re trying to do our own part for strategic development.”

MIT Professor Frenchman agrees: “Residential is good for the economy, good for quality of life; it brings a new tax base, especially if they’re mostly young people without kids, and empty nesters.”

Judging from condo sales data released last November by the Warren Group, a Boston-based real estate market research company, Downcity is on its way. Providence condo sales increased 24 percent between November 2005 and November 2006 while condo sales across the state decreased by nearly 4 percent in the same period. After the artist and student pioneers moved into Downcity, the economics of the region forced a second wave of residents. From an overheated Boston residential market in the north down to the New York metropolitan region in the south, companies and individuals were looking for better (read: cheaper) options.

“Providence was just sort of sitting here in the middle. Some of the new energy has come from people running from somewhere else,” says Eversley.

Jack Gold of the Providence Preservation Society worries that new construction is being sold at prices that few people can afford. “Who’s going to live in these places?” he asks. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, Providence has one of the top ten highest poverty rates in the nation. “I can only hope that the prices may be reduced to a point where they are more affordable to middle-income people and a larger portion will be made available to renters.” Indeed, the market has already shifted — OneTen Westminster was slated to house all luxury condos, but it is widely rumored that a portion of the floors in the towers are now being made into W Hotel rooms.

But don’t count on locals to show up anytime soon. While Rhode Island’s elite and middle classes have largely forsaken downtown — most are astonished when they walk down Westminster Street now — outsiders see possibility

where locals do not. Heckman, who grew up in Providence and lives in a loft on Westminster Street, says that Cornish projects are attracting many people from outside Rhode Island who recognize the area's potential because they compare it to New York, Boston, San Francisco, Portland or Washington D.C.

“People with an urban sensibility come from elsewhere with different expectations,” says Eversley. “They’re less obsessed with parking in front of a place and more interested in the street-level environment and shops and bars and running into friends. They want to be on the street at night. People see a kernel of a more developed urban center that native-born people just don’t get. They’ve found an authentic place with a particular flavor. It’s true that we have tough problems — an ailing school system and crime — but other cities have that without the flavor.”

But one former city employee and Providence native who asked not to be identified says that flavor might leave a bad taste in your mouth if you’re not from Rhode Island. “New people might move to Providence, but you have to give it time,” she says. “It all looks shiny and perfect on the surface, but they’ll keep hitting the same roadblocks. Trash cans are overflowing, unions block everything, there’s a small-town mentality where everyone’s related; if you walk into Twin Oaks and grab your cojones the right way, you get a table. When outsiders see this, they’ll leave. It’s Rhode Island, and people love it or hate it. Most people who love it are from here. If they’re not from here, they can’t understand it.”

She also doubts that people will flock to Providence because it’s cheaper than Boston and New York. “The piece that’s missing from the equation is that it’s no longer cheap, so what’s the point?” she asks. “In Rhode Island there are so many beautiful places to live, like Narragansett or East Greenwich. You can live in Boston for not much more than you’d pay in downtown Providence. People who can afford that won’t want a little studio in Downcity... What? So they can walk to Trinity Rep? Come on, it’s a joke.”

Jef Nickerson disagrees. He moved here in 2003 after living in New York City and became the facilitator for Urban Planet Providence, an online discussion forum about local urban issues, and president of Greater City: Providence, a citizen group that advocates development that will make the city vibrant with robust mass transit and economic opportunity. “At one of our forum meetings,” he says, “we had a show of hands from people who had been in Rhode Island less than five years, and the overwhelming majority of us fell into that category.” Nickerson is positively giddy about Providence’s potential. “Providence was the best, most affordable, most livable urban place to live in New England,” says the native New Englander. But what if quality of life got any worse than it is to-day? “I’d move to Boston in a heartbeat,” he says.

Rhode Island’s characteristic pessimism runs deep. It keeps many locals away and prevents them from seeing Downcity’s dramatic transformation from when it was depressed and vacant after 4:30 p.m. “They haven’t been in downtown Providence in fifteen years, and they ask, ‘Aren’t they all bums down there?’” Eversley says.

People say Rhode Island pessimism comes from growing up in a place that people aspired to leave. Your great-grandfather might have started in Federal Hill, your grandfather moved to North Providence, and your father made it to

Narragansett — what are the chances that you'll undo everything your family accomplished by moving to downtown Providence?

As pessimistic as locals are, though, they're also loyal. Former executive director of the Providence Foundation Orenstein tells of an old adage that nobody complains about the Ocean State louder than a Rhode Islander, but you'd be hard-pressed to find someone who loves it as fiercely. That might be the opening booster needed to bring Rhode Islanders back to town.

Heckman thinks it's simply a matter of time before the excitement about downtown spreads to locals. "Cities, like people, can lack self-confidence," he says. "Providence has extremely low self-confidence. But when we get people down to see our projects, they're astonished. They can't believe it's Providence."

Downtown living may seem ridiculous to some Rhode Islanders now, but all new trends take some getting used to. The Rogers' Curve is a theory of innovation that predicts some people are more likely to pick up a trend before others. Its five categories are: the innovators (brave pioneers), early adopters (respected opinion leaders), early majority, late majority, and laggards (traditional people who are comfortable in the mainstream). In the case of Downcity, newcomers have been the innovators and Rhode Islanders are the laggards.

The problem isn't only a perception of a dirty and dangerous Downcity; it's also an intractable love affair with the car. "Rhode Islanders complain if they have to walk two blocks," says Eversley. But for an urban environment to be successful, space for people must take precedence over space for cars — that means more homes, stores and sidewalks and fewer parking spaces and traffic lanes. "Parking lots are the single biggest obstacle to a good pedestrian experience, to the vitality of Downtown," says Heckman. The closer together destinations are located, the more likely people are to walk to them.

Planners across the country have found a way to balance the desire for walkable neighborhoods and the fact that most people will continue to drive until they find an alternative. These park-once districts allow drivers to park in public spaces and meander around a shopping district — a behavior that has been shown to reduce vehicle traffic and increase foot traffic.

That is what Heckman, Nickerson and Mayor Cicilline envision when they describe their hopes for downtown to be a place where people don't need a car to get around. Transit 2020 — a forthcoming study commissioned by the mayor and conducted by the Rhode Island Public Transportation Authority, environmental groups, transportation consumers, and city and state officials — lays out a plan to develop a transit system that allows people to live in, work in and visit Providence without a car.

Recommendations for filling in and redesigning crucial parts of downtown are also documented in "Connecting and Completing Downcity Providence," a 2004 plan by Miami, Florida-based New Urbanist firm Duany Plater-Zyberk and

Company. The plan identified redevelopment opportunities “intended to both complete Downcity in a way that will help spur a sustained pattern of redevelopment and connect Downcity to its nearby neighborhoods.”

James Charlier, president of Charlier Associates, a Colorado-based multimodal transportation planning firm, names a few factors that make an area inviting to pedestrians: Do people or cars get the most space? Does the proportion of the street room feel good? What do people see as they walk next to buildings — display windows or blank walls? Are people protected from traffic by trees and a parking lane? Can people walk to a variety of places — houses, jobs and entertainment? The answers to these questions put Down-city Providence squarely in the “pedestrian-oriented” category, but it’s missing one major component. Connectivity. The city planning department wants people to be able to walk around inside the district without incident, but they should also be able to walk easily and safely to Downcity from other neighborhoods. “The tendency in Providence is to plan in discreet neighborhoods,” says Planning Director Tom Deller. “But we need to plan the city as a whole.”

According to the Duany Plater-Zyberk plan, the key to connecting Downcity to the rest of Providence is creating a continuous network of streets that are safe and appealing. In other words, fill in vacant lots with buildings, redesign dangerous intersections, create interesting pedestrian walkways over I-95, and move parking lots into attractive multifloor garages, all while maintaining the character of the neighborhood. The result will be to blur the edges between downtown and the rest of the city, so it doesn’t take a psychological leap to pull people from the neighborhoods across invisible boundaries.

But some people think it’ll take more than pedestrian-friendly streets to get Rhode Islanders out of their cars. “People aren’t in love with their cars; they’re in love with time and money,” says RIPTA planning manager Tim McCormick. “When downtown parking prices go up, and they see a new express bus stopping in front of their workplace, they’ll choose to take the bus. They’ll move to locations that make it convenient.”

RIPTA and public transit have played a large role in the redevelopment of downtown. The transit agency launched free and discounted transit pass programs for university students; it established park-and-ride lots about two miles outside of downtown; it created a downtown trolley system that runs every twenty minutes into surrounding neighborhoods; and it advocated for “parking cash-out” legislation that lets employees receive a bus pass instead of a free parking spot if they want it. In short, RIPTA gave people a way to get to and around the area without clogging already congested roads and relieved some of the demand for parking.

The agency’s efforts have paid off. Not only has ridership gone from 19 million to 25 million annually in just a few years, with more than 57,000 people a day passing through Kennedy Plaza, but eight bus lines are over capacity. The only thing holding back service expansion is a lack of funds from the state.

Theoretically, shoring up the transit system will also be important to support workers who move downtown to be near jobs. But some people wonder whether new jobs will ever materialize. New employment opportunities are only trickling

in, but Heckman says he expects three major sectors to continue growing in downtown Providence: education, financial services, and start-up retail and design businesses. “Companies like Fidelity are moving high-value workers down from Boston, and I think this trend will continue as people discover Providence as a less-expensive, business-friendly state capital with all the amenities and less hassle than our bigger neighbors,” he says.

Beyond improving transit and negative perceptions, everyone agrees that a major component holding Downcity back from being a thriving neighborhood is the lack of a grocery store and pharmacy, two services that would make it easier to live downtown. Providence Economic Development Partnership President Donald Eversley has made it one of his top priorities to attract a grocery store and pharmacy to downtown Providence.

“It’s been a huge problem. I don’t know how these people are selling apartments without a grocery store,” Eversley says of condo developers.

The number one problem is numbers. “We don’t have a big enough local population to bring in big enough spending power,” says Deller. Even Whole Foods and Trader Joe’s, which have ample experience in urban areas, have been advised by leasing consultants that there aren’t enough people downtown to support a store.

But Eversley doesn’t believe that’s true. “There’s more than enough demand for a decent-sized market,” he says. “The first grocery store to make a move is going to look like a genius. We’ve talked to every independent operator in Southeastern New England.” The factor that prevents them from signing on the dotted line is a suburban mentality, Eversley says. They are used to seeing a huge freestanding store located near a highway with 200 parking spaces right out front, and Downcity just doesn’t have that kind of property available. Eversley is looking for a grocer who’s willing to operate with a new business model.

“Anecdotally, most of these are family-owned companies, well-known names around town,” says Eversley. “My sense is that many of them feel they’re at capacity with their current operations. The people in charge are looking at retirement in ten years and don’t want to invest in something that will take two years to be profitable.”

“We also don’t have a pharmacy. CVS is a Rhode Island company, but downtown has no pharmacist. I don’t get it,” says Eversley. “It’s unconscionable.”

“Traditionally [downtown Providence] has been more of a commuter destination. It doesn’t make a lot of business sense to have a pharmacy there. But with new residents moving in, that might change,” says Mike DeAngelis, the corporate communications manager for CVS.

Both Deller and Eversley remain optimistic. “We’ll keep working on it. It’ll happen, but it’ll take time,” says Deller. Ari Heckman is already on the job — he is actively urging CVS to incorporate a pharmacy into their Westminster Street store. Heckman also says he is in negotiations with two Rhode Island grocers and one Boston grocer for a 16,000-

square-foot space to accommodate a small store.

Walking down Westminster Street with Heckman is like watching an address book spring to life. The guy knows everybody. People wave from doorways and nod hello as they walk by. He skillfully balances his primary conversation with a smile and quick greetings for passersby on the street. This vast network serves him well in his job at Cornish. Heckman says he has the advantage of living downtown and understanding the perspective of someone who wants basic retail services, like a grocery store and a pharmacy. At one point, he stops mid-sentence to swing a hand down to the ground and snatch up a derelict candy wrapper.

A decade ago, there would be no point in picking up a single piece of trash because it would make no difference. But today a candy wrapper looks out of place in this pristine environment. There just aren't many people around at 8 p.m. on a Monday night to notice it. Yet.

The consensus is that patience will pay off for developers. They aren't doing this for themselves. They're doing it for their grandkids. "Buff's projects are not economic slam-dunks," Heckman says. "They're about not losing money and creating a civic return." One day, they might even seduce Rhode Islanders back to their capital city.