



Providence from Smith Hill, 1825. (From Providence: A Pictorial View, by Patrick Conley and Paul Campbell; Rhode Island Historical Society.)

## Dr. Downtown looks back Millennial roses and raspberries

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**L**AST WEEK, Dr. Downtown issued his roses and raspberries for last year. This week, the doctor offers this service for the last millennium, lately expired. Of course, Providence was not founded until two-thirds of the second millennium, *anno domini*, had elapsed. Very well. It will be hard enough to fit 364 years' worth of roses and raspberries into one column.

- **A rose** to Roger Williams, founder, who undertook several dangerous Atlantic crossings to keep Rhode Island from being swallowed up by Connecticut. In the last half century, the Nutmeg State made mincemeat out of its major cities. If Roger Williams had failed, Providence, as the largest city in one of the richest states, could have implemented the Downtown Providence 1970 Plan, which proposed to demolish City Hall, among other beloved buildings, and kill the downtown with modern architecture.

- **A rose** to the Browns, Iveses, Carringtons and other merchant shipping families who accumulated the state's first significant wealth, expending some of it on beautiful buildings, then transferring it adroitly into textiles in the 1800s, and ultimately shifting to textile mills in the South, where labor was cheaper. The resulting decline of Rhode Island from the nation's most robust manufacturing state in 1895 to one of its lamest began as early as the '00s (the 'Aughts, or, as a friend of mine has proposed, the 'Zeros). This decline proved that even poverty has a silver lining.

- **A rose** to the Rhode Island architects whose houses and buildings survive in Providence today because, by mid-century, the state could not afford the sort of urban renewal Connecticut has inflicted upon Hartford, Bridgeport and New Haven. Urban renewal failed for many reasons but it is ugly for one reason: modern architecture. So a rose each to John Holden Greene, Joseph Brown, Thomas Tefft, Russell Warren, James Bucklin, Samuel F. J. Thayer, George Waterman Cady, Frank Martin, George Hall, Alfred Stone, Charles Carpenter and Frederick Ellis Jackson. The doctor offers himself a raspberry for any major pre-modernist Rhode Island architect he has omitted.

- **A rose** to the Rhode Island School of Design, founded in 1877 to promote creativity in textile design. It also fostered the artistic spirit that animated the city's architecture well into the 20th Century.

- **A raspberry** for the city's waterfront plan of 1870 to clean up the "old hulks and scows, and the wharves covered with ungainly wooden sheds, forming an intolerable nuisance in the center of the city." The first sections of the infamous Crawford Street Bridge opened in 1873. Today, we recall the "world's widest bridge" (Guinness Book of World Records) as a sad joke, but without it, the rivers could not have been uncovered to such lovely effect in 1990-96.

- **A rose** to the Providence Preservation Society for saving Benefit Street from urban renewal. In particular, a dozen roses each to Antoinette Downing and the late Beatrice O. "Happy" Chace, whose strategy for saving the street house by house worked so well that a bad compromise plan with as much "urban removal" as preservation — the College Hill Demonstration Study of 1959 — was almost entirely shelved.

- **A raspberry** to the authors of the Downtown Providence 1970 Plan (1961), mentioned above, for offering a vision only a Stalinist could love, so unappealing and unaffordable that it was soon gathering dust. Two parts that were implemented — the Westminster Pedestrian Mall and Cathedral Square — were both aesthetic and programmatic failures.

- **A rose** to Mayor Paolino, who reopened Westminster Street with a classic design that remains perfectly suited to the street's historical architecture.

- **A raspberry** to the mayor's father, whose longstanding love of parking lots and willingness (along with too many other downtown landlords) to wait for the elusive Big Tenant has undermined not only his son's good works on Westminster Street, but his own highly laudable program of building restoration.

- **A rose** to Johnson & Wales, whose longstanding program of building restoration and new construction has added greatly to downtown's beauty.

- **A rose** to Ron Marsella, Bruce Sundlun, Robert Eder, Joe DiStefano, Joseph Arruda, Claiborne Pell, Gordon Hoxie, Terry Murray, Phil Noel and Dan Varin for jumpstarting Capital Center, the model public/private project, in 1978; the late Ron Jalbert and The Maguire Group, *engineers extraordinaires*; Bill Warner and Friedrich St. Florian, whose traditional riverfront and mall designs foretell a lovely future — if pro-modernist design panels and preservationists don't boot it.

- **A rose** to Mayor Cianci, who from his first administration stressed beautification and supported the major projects that undergird the city's renaissance. His rose is, however, retractable if he continues to dog it in Downcity. Or if he does not reform the city's taxation, zoning and code policies and practices. These probably scare off private investment worth as much as, if not more than, his excellent vision and rhetorical skills bring to Providence in terms of gondolas, TV shows, favorable press, etc. "He kept us out of the Nutcase State" remains Roger's legacy, not Buddy's.

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Commentary