



# Of railroads and regime shifts

## Downtown renewal in Providence, Rhode Island

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In the early 1970s it would have appeared to most observers that the situation in Providence, Rhode Island offered scant opportunities for successful development initiatives, so constrained was the city by economic and political weakness. The economy had been in decline since the 1940s and the city had suffered significant losses of both industry and residents. State and city politics were famous for patronage and corruption. Yet, despite such obstacles, a small group of political entrepreneurs were able, in relatively short order, to activate intergovernmental connections to secure previously unavailable federal resources, and also to remake local electoral coalitions and governmental institutions in ways that enabled them to deflect opposition and mobilize support for their redevelopment initiatives. Our analysis draws on the reconceptualization of city regimes within a *bargaining* framework, as proposed by Kantor *et al.* (Kantor, P, Savitch, H V and Haddock, S V (1997) The political economy of urban regimes: a comparative perspective. *Urban Affairs Review* 32(3), 373–396). Rather than treat their categories of *structural resources* as immutable, we see them — within limits — as the object of strategic manipulation by a city's governing coalition. In Providence, regime elites in both the private and public sectors successfully enhanced the city's bargaining position along each of the critical dimensions highlighted by Kantor *et al.* In particular, the robust intergovernmental alliances built by the regime permitted it to remake the downtown without relying wholly, or even primarily, on private capital, a pattern more common in the more integrated intergovernmental systems of Europe. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved

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### Introduction: regime shift, policy change

Urban regime theory takes as its main objects of analysis two questions: the constitution and contingent reconstitution of governing coalitions on the one hand, and their mediating impact on policy choices on the other (Stone, 1998). In a useful reformulation of urban regime theory by Kantor *et al.* (1997),

“[r]egimes are treated as governmental agents that function to *bargain out the terms of cooperation* between the public and private sectors in a liberal-democratic political economy” (p 349, see also Kantor and Savitch, 1993). As they see it, a potential weakness of most regime analysis is its exaggeration of the importance of agency. According to Kantor *et al.*, regime theorists pay insufficient attention to the structural environment, thus overstating the impact that “regime activities” have on policy. Their approach, by contrast, directs attention to the distribution of structural resources, which determines the

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relative bargaining advantages of the public and private sectors and thus, the practical limits on the outcomes achievable by a city's governing coalition. They identify three types of resources as particularly significant: (1) the city's competitive strength in attracting private investment; (2) the "intergovernmental environment" in which the city finds itself; (3) the "democratic conditions" of the local community. From these considerations they develop a typology of urban regimes qua bargaining agents. The main categories are *derigiste*, cities that enjoy both a strong market position and a solid place in an integrated intergovernmental system; *mercantile*, in which a competitive economy combines with a less integrated intergovernmental environment; and, finally, two categories reflecting cities with weaker market positions and varying degrees of intergovernmental support: *dependent-private*, the least advantaged type, in which the scale and shape of development is determined by the private sector's willingness to invest, and *dependent-public*, in which government directs and often funds development. Each of these types are then assigned sub-categories reflecting the strength of popular control.

Kantor *et al*'s (1997) typology is intended to place agency in the context of structure, to reduce the political permissiveness they perceive in many existing analyses of urban regimes, and we do well to acknowledge their counsel.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, typologies, by their very nature, necessarily lend themselves to a somewhat static image of the subject at hand — in this case, urban power systems. Yet, as the story of Providence, Rhode Island demonstrates, the process of regime constitution is ongoing and dynamic, and sometimes regime activity itself can redistribute so-called "structural resources".

### Providence as a case

In the early 1970s it would have appeared to most observers that the situation in Providence offered scant opportunities for successful development initiatives, so constrained was the city by economic and political weakness. The economy had been in decline since the 1940s and the city had suffered significant losses of both industry and residents. The downtown core, once a retail center for the state, had seen its customers enticed to suburban malls. State and city

politics were famous for patronage and corruption (Lockard, 1959). Yet, despite such obstacles, a small group of political entrepreneurs were able, in relatively short order, to activate intergovernmental connections to secure previously unavailable federal resources, and remake local electoral coalitions and governmental institutions in ways that enabled them to deflect opposition and mobilize support for their redevelopment initiatives. In the space of a few years, coalition elites in both the private and public sectors successfully enhanced the city's bargaining position along each of the critical dimensions highlighted by Kantor *et al* (1997).

First, Providence, like many older cities in the north, experienced a significant decline in its economic competitiveness after World War II. Industry, retail, and population all drifted away from the city to the suburbs and the Sunbelt. Still, despite the secular decline in its economic position, Providence never saw its core emptied of all significant economic enterprises (unlike so many other New England cities). In the early and mid-seventies, its fiscal position remained viable and, as the state's largest city, it continued to be the locus of important institutions.<sup>3</sup> The business leadership of the city, which was in those days still local in origin and outlook, played an important role in recognizing the window of opportunity for redevelopment when it appeared (see Heying, 1997, also Horan, 1991).

Second, in the late 1970s, an alliance among city, state, and national officials was mobilized that allowed the city to access vast sums of federal money just when many municipalities across the nation were experiencing a withdrawal of federal aid. In particular, Bruce Sundlun, at the time the CEO of the Outlet Company and Chairman of the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce (and who would become governor in the early 1990s), along with the state's senior US Senator, Claiborne Pell, and Rhode Island Governor Joseph Garrahy, engineered a redirection of already committed federal railroad funds, making it possible to uproot and relocate the railroad tracks that had divided the city's core. As a result of moving the tracks and placing them underground, over 60 acres of land were opened up for new development.

Third, Vincent (Buddy) Cianci, Jr.'s mayoral victories in 1974, 1978, and 1982 realigned city politics

<sup>2</sup>Kantor *et al*'s (1997) analytic categories overlap considerably with specific factors commonly employed by regime analysts in their studies of how particular regimes are constituted. In order to explain the extent to which a governing coalition will favor business interests or popular interests, others have looked at the mobility of capital, the shape of governmental institutions, local political values, and the legacies of earlier policies (Bachelor, 1994; Barnekov *et al*, 1989; Clarke, 1995; Elkin, 1987; Horan, 1991; Stone and Sanders, 1987). Kantor *et al* (1997) concede that regime analysts acknowledge these more or less "given" aspects of city politics.

<sup>3</sup>Those institutions included: strong regional banks (Citizens, Industrial National, and Hospital Trust); the utility companies (Providence Gas Company and Narragansett Electric Company); institutions of higher education (Brown University, Rhode Island School of Design, Johnson and Wales University, Providence College, Rhode Island College, and the Providence campus of the University of Rhode Island); a major teaching hospital (Rhode Island Hospital); almost all of Rhode Island's state government offices, including the central criminal and civil courts; the Outlet Communications Company, a regional retail and national communications corporation; the headquarters of diversified multinational manufacturing companies (Cookson America and Textron); and the main offices of several regional law, advertising, insurance and public relations firms.

in Providence. By 1977 he had become the dominant political actor in the city and his reelection under a new, “strong-mayor” city charter consolidated his position. Mayor Cianci promoted the redevelopment proposals with vigor, creativity, and ultimately, control of the city’s patronage. The operating assumption came to be that the mayor could “deliver” the city when popular acquiescence was necessary to consummate a redevelopment project.

In the terms employed by Kantor *et al* (1997), the city moved very rapidly from *dependent-private* to *dependent-public*, and it did so as a result of regime activity, as local officials and state and federal politicians rallied to the cause of a massive redevelopment of the central city. Faced initially with declining economic prospects, inattentive intergovernmental allies, and a parochial and clientelist political system, political entrepreneurs in Providence were able to plan and execute an impressive strategy of urban redevelopment by activating a powerful intergovernmental alliance, stoked with federal railroad and highway dollars. In the last two decades, Providence has been transformed from what the *Wall Street Journal* referred to as “a smudge on the road to Cape Cod” to a city acclaimed as “a national model of urban renaissance” in the *Utne Reader* and a “boom town” in the *New York Times*.

### **Economic decline and stasis: the absence of a policy for downtown, 1945–1975**

From 1945 to 1975, Providence’s market position weakened considerably. Providence’s 19th century regional primacy as a textile, jewelry and machine tool center ended and, like many Rust Belt cities, it underwent a profound restructuring after World War II (Bluestone and Harrison, 1983; Tabb and Sawers, 1987). The city’s manufacturing employment, industrial output, and gross retail receipts declined on a consistent annual basis from the early 1950s on (Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training, 1999). As industry moved out so too did many of the city’s residents, particularly those who could afford to take advantage of the suburban single-family homes being built in extensive subdivisions in nearby towns.

Between 1940 and 1970 the city lost nearly 100,000 people, a decline of almost 40 percent (United States Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 1970, 1980, 1990). As textile and other manufacturing industries closed down, relocated to Rhode Island’s suburbs or to the southern states where labor costs, land, taxes and utilities were cheaper, central Providence found itself with a legacy of obsolete, deteriorating buildings with no chance for their immediate adaptive reuse. By the early 1970s, suburban shopping malls and strip developments had been built in surrounding municipalities. Just eight miles south of Providence along Interstate 95, two large suburban malls, the Rhode Island and Warwick

malls, seized a growing share of the state’s retail dollars (Providence Department of Planning and Development, 1992). New office parks, some supported by the state, were established in suburban locations on virgin sites tailored to the reorientation of Rhode Island’s economy to emerging global communications industries. These locations offered good transportation tie-ins to computer hardware, software, telecommunications and defense research and development companies taking hold along Route 128 around Boston, 40 miles north of the Providence metropolitan area. By 1980, the metropolitan area would reflect the classic donut-shaped morphology of older American cities: a hollow center surrounded by a rim of newer residential and commercial development.

In sum, Providence enjoyed few of the competitive advantages characteristic of either the dirigiste or the mercantile cities discussed by Kantor *et al* (1997). Still, the city administration failed to develop the intergovernmental cooperation that might have yielded federal dollars for downtown renewal. The City had neither the capital, the will, nor the expertise to undertake redevelopment on the scale called for in the 1960 comprehensive plan produced by the city, *Downtown Providence 1970* (Providence City Plan Commission, 1960).<sup>4</sup> While retail was beating a retreat to the suburbs and manufacturing was exiting the region, local government floundered, failing to recognize that the remaining, not insignificant, strengths of the city provided a resource base that might generate a renewal. In addition to the strong banks, colleges and universities, state offices, and other economic institutions, as late as 1970, Providence was still home to over one-third of the state’s employment, and the locus of over one-fourth of all Rhode Island firms (Rhode Island Department of Economic Development, 1984; Smolski, 1977). Yet, city officials demonstrated no focus on rescuing the downtown; instead, Mayor Doorley and his staff neither “opened for business” nor pursued the federal aid that might have slowed the decline (interviews with Stanley Bernstein, Thomas Deller, Deputy Director of City Planning, Providence, Kenneth Orenstein, former Executive Director of the Providence Foundation and currently a consultant to the Rhode Island Historical Society, and Samuel

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<sup>4</sup>*Downtown Providence 1970* had, quite conventionally, called for widespread demolition and a complete rebuilding of the city center. The new central business district (CBD) would be a single-use environment focused on office development, punctuated by pedestrian zones, extensive satellite parking lots, large public spaces, a heliport, and numerous Corbusier-inspired office towers linked by multi-level walkways, plazas and retail corridors. It was also the first plan to articulate the desirability of relocating the railroad tracks from the center of Providence and moving them underground to open up more space for development in the urban core. The only notable accomplishments under the aegis of the plan were the pedestrianization of a shopping street known as Westminster Mall and the Weybosset Hill Development Area which included high-rise luxury apartments, office buildings and the Providence Civic Center, a sports and entertainment arena.

Shamoon, Associate Director of City Planning, Providence, August 1997). On the eve of the 1974 election season, the *Providence Journal* evaluated the Doorley administration as overly cautious and perhaps even a bit indifferent to the city's plight:

From the beginning, tight administration and a close rein on City Hall spending have been Doorley hallmarks. At times this may have prevented broad new approaches to city problems: Doorley often seems to look only at the bottom line, checking the cost figures, and often ignoring what are sometimes termed civic needs or social benefits.... Neighborhoods are deteriorating, yet it seems the Doorley administration's only response is to tear down more abandoned houses. The city's port, though profitable, has been decaying through lack of repairs. The mayor has never demonstrated much interest in urban planning of any kind.

(Bailey, 1974, G3)

Thus, despite the secular decline in the city's economic position, neither the business community nor government officials were particularly engaged in a debate over "What next for downtown?" Between 1945 and 1975 the city went through a 30-year period of incipient decline, driven by industrial restructuring, with little coordinated city planning and not much attention from local political elites who were more concerned with satisfying the patronage demands of the machine's clients in what remained of the middle class neighborhoods (Atash, 1988; Laffan, 1970; Perrotta, 1977). Such development as did occur in the downtown did so under *laissez-faire* municipal policies which essentially welcomed all forms of commercial activity to the city. The city's leaders, however, took little or no positive action to address questions of economic development or physical planning. While many northeastern cities were responding to decline in creative ways (Boston, Chicago and New York, for example, were pioneering new approaches to city planning and land use regulation immediately following World War II), successive generations of Providence officials appeared unaware of the power of the public sector to affect what got built, where, and by whom (interview with Dan Boudouin, Executive Director of the Providence Foundation, August 1997).

By the late 1970s, things had changed dramatically. The city regime shifted from one of *conserving clientelism*, whereby mayors and councils serve clearly defined constituencies in those neighborhoods that can be relied upon to re-elect them, effectively ignoring the downtown area (see Fainstein *et al*, 1986), toward the current *dependent-public* form of the regime, under which the city government leverages federal and state dollars as a substitute for private investment. Between 1986 and 1998, the City spent \$1.75 billion, approximately 90 percent of which was from federal sources, on public infrastructure improvements, including a convention center, a hotel,

rail and road upgrades, the relocation of two rivers to create a park, and urban design and landscaping projects. Since 1993 the effort has won several prestigious national awards. Today, a massive new shopping mall, reflecting over \$460 million in new private investment, dominates the downtown skyline, the culmination of the concerted effort by city, state, and federal officials to induce private capital into the city.

The impetus for these shifts in the vision and policies of the local regime was the change in the personnel active in the city's governing coalition, in their motivations, and in their ability to recognize latent resources that could be turned to the regime's advantage in generating downtown growth and redevelopment.

### **The intergovernmental alliance mobilized**

The complacency of the city elites was finally shattered by two precipitous events in 1973: first, the relocation of Rhode Island's largest independent insurance group, Allendale Insurance Company, to neighboring Johnston and, second, a plan by the judicial system to relocate the state court complex to the suburbs (interview with Kenneth Orenstein, former Executive Director of the Providence Foundation and currently a consultant to the Rhode Island Historical Society, August 1997). These announcements precipitated a sudden interest in the future of downtown. Around this time as well, two of Providence's largest department stores, Shepards and Gladdings, both closed their flagship downtown stores. The erosion of retail was not new, but suddenly the city was losing its most significant stores, and the downtown's private and public service sectors also appeared to be quitting the city. The trend threatened to evaporate the critical mass necessary to sustain a viable downtown economy which, it seemed, would no longer survive under the tacit city policy of benign neglect (interview with Dan Boudouin, August 1997). Just as Joseph S. Clark, Jr., Mayor of Philadelphia from 1952 to 1956, had commented upon taking office, "Two hundred and sixty-eight years of *laissez-faire* economics had left the city in a hell of a mess" (cited in Squires, 1996), the Providence business community was confronted with a confounding mess of its own.

Since Mayor Doorley, who would be voted out of office in November 1974, had shown neither interest nor leadership on matters relating to downtown during the preceding decade, the business community began to organize a response to the disintegration of the functional and physical fabric of the CBD (Bailey, 1974; Perrotta, 1977, interviews with Samuel Shamoon, July and August 1997). A relatively small group of Providence business leaders recognized the vulnerability of Providence to this new wave in the out-migration of firms and, approached Doorley in the fall of 1973 with the idea of forming a public-private partnership with the city (Goodrich, 1973; interview with Ronald Marsella, August 1997). Discussions

between the Mayor and the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce resulted in the establishment of the Providence Foundation, a nonprofit (501[c][3]) affiliate of the Chamber, with administrative support from the City. The Foundation's goal would be to "create, plan and facilitate feasible downtown development projects which can then be implemented by others" (interview with Daniel Boudouin, August 1997). In 1974 the Foundation hired Romolo "Ronald" Marsella as its Executive Director.

In the meantime, a new vision of urban rehabilitation arrived from a less conventional source. In response to the dramatic demolition and wholesale reconstruction proposed in the 1960 city plan, *Downtown Providence 1970*, several professors from the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) proposed a new plan, *Interface Providence* (Rhode Island School of Design, 1974). Published in 1974, *Interface Providence* called for improved vehicular and pedestrian circulation plans, with a ring-road and satellite parking garages (rather than the land-hungry parking lots envisioned in the city's official 1960 plan) to alleviate congestion in the core. The RISD plan also proposed improved road and pedestrian linkages between the existing financial district, the historic retail core, the government district and the surrounding residential neighborhoods of College Hill and Smith Hill.

Significantly, *Interface Providence* stimulated discussion of what would become the linchpin of the later renaissance — the relocation of the Amtrak railroad tracks and sidings, which effectively erected a "Chinese wall" between downtown, the State House and the northern part of the city. Even though the scenarios presented in *Interface Providence* did not expressly call for the moving of the tracks, the report's publication generated widespread debate over how to open up the city for development. The railroad tracks, their sidings, service facilities, and buffer zones carved a quarter-mile swathe through downtown, literally dividing it in half and separating the government center on Smith Hill from the commercial core centered on Kennedy Plaza. The absence of either a road or pedestrian bridge over the tracks meant, for example, that reaching the CBD from the State House entailed a half-mile circuitous journey around the periphery of the urban core. By submerging the tracks in a tunnel linked to a new train station on the northeastern fringe of the CBD, over 60 acres of land would be opened up for redevelopment (Figs 1 and 2).

Government officials at the state and local level, as well as business leaders, had long hoped to move the Amtrak railroad tracks out of downtown. The costs of such an undertaking had always seemed daunting. The RISD plan re-opened the issue and legitimized what had once seemed little more than a utopian wish. Indeed, *Interface Providence* was to prove a true catalyst for change and the key document in focusing attention on downtown renewal. All of the local leaders interviewed for this article identified *Interface*

*Providence* as the pivotal moment in crafting a vision for downtown. In one document, the fragmented planning goals of both the public and private sector were brought together. While the regime shift that followed the demise of Providence's long-standing postwar machine and the election of Mayor Vincent A. "Buddy" Cianci provided the foundation for fresh political initiatives, it was the publication of *Interface Providence* that provided the building blocks for a reconfigured downtown. Much of the plan was never implemented, but many of the essential ingredients, both public and private, that today constitute the skyline of downtown Providence find their blueprints in the maps, sketches, and renderings of this 1974 document (Fig. 3).

Underlying the *Interface Providence* plan were the predispositions of Rhode Island's senior US Senator, Claiborne Pell. The plan had its origins in a National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) competition for urban design work that incorporated intermodal strategies for city transportation. The Senator was a well-known advocate of public transportation and railroads, having written an influential book on transportation policy, *Megalopolis Unbound* (Pell, 1966). More importantly, Pell chaired a key Senate committee on federal railroad policy and spending. Pell's influence also included the NEA. He had a hand in the confirmation of the endowment's officers, approved the grant competition that solicited policies and programs for innovative intermodal transit schemes, and, according to a long-time aide, "strongly indicated a preference" for selecting *Interface Providence* for an award (interview with Kenneth Payne, former Staff Assistant to Senator Claiborne Pell, April 1999).

When Republican Buddy Cianci took the mayor's office in January 1975, he did so charging that the previous administration had "abdicated its responsibility to Downtown Providence" and proclaiming his impatience for new initiatives. He found Marsella and the Foundation to be useful allies (Wood, 1975). With the backing of the Chamber of Commerce, they embarked upon a concerted attempt to revitalize Providence's urban core and thereby tempt investors to return to the downtown. They persuaded the then-governor Joseph Garrahy to keep the state court system in Providence by building a new downtown court complex on Dorrance Street (the Governor Garrahy Court Building). This victory over the suburbanizing tendencies of the state government convinced local elites that they could tackle other downtown projects. Within 3 years, three more small but significant projects had been successfully completed. At the instigation of Outlet President Bruce Sundlun, the historic Biltmore Hotel was renovated and the old Loews Theater building was saved from demolition and reborn as the Ocean State Performing Arts Center. When Mayor Cianci anted up 300,000 city dollars for the renovation shortly thereafter, it was renamed the Providence Performing Arts Center (PPAC). Finally, the Providence Arcade (the oldest shopping mall in



**Figure 1** By 1894 the eastern rail corridor cuts a swathe through the middle of Providence's downtown. Source: Rhode Island Historical Society Archives



**Figure 2** In 1940 either side of the railroad tracks is literally one enormous parking lot, stretching from the State House lawn to the financial district. Source: Rhode Island Historical Society Archives

the US, dating back to 1828) was refurbished and reopened. In the absence of federal or state money, these projects were accomplished through low interest loans from downtown banks and city bond issues.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>In a role that had its origins in a lawsuit more than 15 years earlier, Bruce Sundlun was, according to virtually all of our informants, central to the planning and execution of these first initiatives. As a private attorney in 1958, he had successfully litigated (with the current senior US Senator and then *state*-representative John Chafee as co-counsel) to keep the Outlet under the control of his clients, a wing of the company's founding family. The arrangements that emerged placed Sundlun, Chafee, and the Industrial

These first projects were small in scope and would not significantly impact the overall downtown economy (Carr, Lynch Associates and Melvin F. Levine and Associates, 1986). They did, however, convince local boosters that they could corral unconventional financial resources to get things done. By 1978, the Foundation staff, with the support of the Mayor's

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National Bank in a mutually beneficial position on the corporate board (interview with Bruce Sundlun, April 1999). Sundlun was appointed the Outlet's general counsel and in 1976 became president.



**Figure 3** The Providence Place Mall fills a void in downtown and is the single largest structure in the central city. Source: Photograph taken by co-author Motte in August 1999

Executive Office and the Mayor's Office of Community Development had developed a more ambitious vision for downtown, drawing heavily from the ideas floated in *Interface Providence* (Collins, 1976, 1977a, b; interviews with Ronald Marsella and Kenneth Orenstein, August 1997). By then, Cianci had become the city's most visible personality and its most insistent promoter.

In the autumn of that year, the Providence Foundation funded a \$5000 feasibility study to assess the potential costs of moving the railroad tracks underground, about one-quarter mile northeast of Kennedy Plaza to a new location abutting the State House grounds. That set in motion a series of initiatives by the city, state, and federal governments that would, by the early 1990s, remake the tired and dingy city core into a showcase of public-private collaboration and an award-winning center of innovative urban design, infrastructure improvements, postmodern architecture, and public sculpture.

In Providence Ron Marsella, Executive Director of the Providence Foundation, and Bruce Sundlun of the Outlet Company and the Chamber of Commerce mobilized both private and public sector elites behind the goal of a reunified downtown that lay at the core of both the 1960 plan and the very different RISD *Interface Providence* proposal — specifically, around the idea of relocating the railroad tracks that drove a stake through the heart of the city. In October of 1978, Marsella reported to Sundlun that the federal government's \$15 million budget for rehabilitating the rail-

road tracks that split the city was potentially enough to cover the costs of rerouting them through an underground tunnel, thus removing the major physical barrier to an integrated downtown core. Sundlun, a long-time friend of Senator Claiborne Pell and his former campaign finance chairman, knew that the Senator — a "railroad nut" according to Sundlun, who was familiar with Pell's book and his role in federal railroad policy — was in town. Sundlun telephoned Pell and arranged a meeting on the same day that Marsella alerted him to the possibility of moving the tracks. Pell was enthusiastic about the proposal, and the three men then drove together to Governor Garrahy's office at the State House (interviews with Ronald Marsella in 1997 and Bruce Sundlun in 1999). Garrahy, too, climbed on board, and Mayor Cianci's response was also quick: "Hey, if the federal government's going to pay for it, let's do it" (quoted in McLean, 1989, p 33). With the key elected officials in agreement within a remarkably short time, Pell lobbied the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) to consider a redirection of the funding earmarked for renovation and upgrading of the Northeast Corridor tracks (see United States Department of Transportation, 1971).

The FRA agreed to the proposal subject to a demonstration of physical and fiscal feasibility. Within 30 days, the Foundation secured a Master Property Conveyance Contract which demonstrated that a series of property swaps would ensure that all land owners with titles to property abutting the new track locations would benefit from the deal. By the early summer of

1979, the US Department of Transportation conditionally approved the track relocation (interview with Ronald Marsella, August 1997; McLean, 1989). In January of 1982, a Cooperative Design and Construction Agreement was signed among the federal, state, and private land owners, the FRA money was secured and physical design work on the track realignment commenced. Reconstruction began 2 years later. The balance in the public-private partnership, once led by a small cadre of private sector businessmen and their staff representatives at the Foundation, shifted significantly in favor of the public sector (interviews with Samuel Shamoon, July and August 1997).

Unlike many medium sized cities experiencing similar stresses, Providence was able to demand the attention of the entire state leadership. Because it is the capital and primate city in tiny Rhode Island, state leaders have a vested interest in making the city an economic success. This makes it very different from, for example, Worcester and Springfield in Massachusetts, and New Haven and Bridgeport in Connecticut. Indeed, since the 1970s the state has been consistently supportive of the city's redevelopment agenda. Successive governors have been persuaded of the necessity for revitalization. By and large, the same observations hold for the state's legislative leadership. Although the state assembly was overwhelmingly Democratic during all of this period, Providence was viewed as far too important for its problems to be ignored. Despite constant squabbles with Mayor Cianci, who won his first two terms of office as a Republican (but is now an independent), statehouse Democrats shared a common economic and political stake in a revitalized Providence. Providence remained a dependable source of Democratic votes in statewide elections, Cianci's hold on the mayor's office notwithstanding. Moreover, whatever threat the mayor might have posed to the statewide Democratic power structure vanished following his defeat in the 1980 gubernatorial election. All this meant that, unlike other medium-sized cities, Providence could bring to bear a fairly unified effort by the state's entire leadership, something that was crucial in leveraging the necessary massive amounts of federal aid. Later, it would mean that Providence would get relatively good deals when negotiating with the private sector over public subsidies (interview with Baudouin, Executive Director of the Providence Foundation, 1997).

The special role of Senator Pell further distinguishes Providence from most of its counterparts. It only slightly exaggerates Pell's influence to suggest that the city's downtown redevelopment could not have happened without him. It was his intellectual patronage of *Interface Providence* that revived the railroad relocation into practical consideration and, ultimately, his political patronage that ensured Washington would bear the largest portion of the costs.

With this unusual array of local, state and federal

players in place, Providence began in short measure to engage in aggressive redevelopment policies and to capture large sums of federal and state money geared toward the redevelopment of the central business district. The wholesale facelift of downtown Providence's physical fabric and the reorientation of its functional role within the region that began to take shape in the 1980s did not happen by accident. A reconstituted city regime enabled and empowered the new leadership in ways that could not have been predicted on the basis of the ambivalent policies of the previous three decades.

### **A fragmented opposition, a new downtown**

The end of the 1970s transferred primacy to the public sector in both the planning and implementation of urban redevelopment projects in the newly expanded downtown. Beginning in the early 1980s, the public sector, through collaborative ventures among the city, the state and several quasi-public agencies, took the lead in downtown redevelopment. The goals remained the same as they had been when Sundlun and Marsella were the instigators — ie to facilitate private accumulation through property development — but the role of the players and the scale of the projects changed. As the city undertook to transform itself from an obsolete manufacturing center to a regional arts, entertainment, education, conference and financial services center, the city's ubiquitous Mayor Buddy Cianci, with some justification, took on the persona of Developer-in-Chief of Providence.

The success of the redevelopment initiatives required public support in order to secure the massive government expenditure in the central business district. The longstanding pipe dream of state and local officials to remove the Amtrak railroad tracks was given the imprimatur of professional respectability by RISD's *Interface Providence* plan. The publication of the plan was followed by an organizational effort on the part of the public and private sectors to explore and develop the feasibility of various components. That effort, with public hearings, promotional materials and glossy annual reports, attracted a great deal of attention on the part of both opinion elites and the general public. Although the formal Interface organization died for lack of funding in 1975 (Providence Journal, 1975), its vision — scaled back somewhat, but including the priorities of urban parks and river walks — formed the core of all future downtown redevelopment. Another flurry of downtown planning documents in the late 1970s explored and developed the feasibility of various components. With the state's dominant newspaper, the *Providence Journal*, insistently boosting downtown projects in its editorials (see, for example, Providence Journal, 1976b, 1977b, 1978, 1981a), a supportive public mood developed that gave the entrepreneurial mayor the room to promote the attempt to remake downtown Providence, despite the generally risk-averse charac-

ter of the Rhode Island and Providence electorates.<sup>6</sup> As the *Providence Journal* (1976a) proclaimed, “The city is fortunate in having a mayor who has caught the drift of what is happening in urban America and has dedicated himself to making it happen here...”<sup>7</sup>

Cianci’s ability to bring along the city council and city voters rested on more than his flamboyant style and formidable persuasive powers. In his first term, running as a Republican against a fractured Democratic Party organization, Cianci put together a slim victory by assembling support in the city’s traditionally Republican East Side along with surprising strength in the city’s minority wards. His victory cemented the realignment of Providence city politics and gave him an unusually free hand in charting the city’s course (Stone, 1994). With a few key allies on the city council, and the politicians from the old Democratic city machine squabbling among themselves, he was able to dominate Providence politics.

By 1977 Cianci had in fact consolidated almost total control of the community development process, appointing *all* of the members of the Citizens Advisory Council (CAC) on community development — about 73 members at its inception, 100 in 1977, and eventually rising to nearly 200. Indeed, on the few occasions in which neighborhood activists on the CAC presented any challenge to Cianci, he simply appointed more supporters.<sup>8</sup> The mostly Democratic city council repeatedly challenged the Mayor’s use of community development funds for patronage and his emphasis on the downtown at the expense of the neighborhoods (Providence Journal, 1977a, 1979a, b). Scandals of both a personal and political nature threatened his administration throughout his several

terms. Nevertheless, Cianci was able to engineer the designation of the downtown as a separate eligible neighborhood, and reserved more than half of CDBG monies for “mayor’s priorities”. (Providence Journal, 1977a). His primacy was only reinforced by the new, “strong-mayor” home-rule charter under which he was elected to his second term. Under Cianci, patronage served not a party machine, but the mayor’s personal organization, and that came increasingly to focus on prestigious projects in the downtown. The upshot was that by the early 1980s, the remaining opposition to the Mayor had been largely stymied. Indeed, despite some initial hesitation by the older downtown retail community, business interests were generally the only organized presence in the debate over the downtown.

Cianci was temporarily forced out of the Mayor’s office in 1985 when he pleaded *nolo contendere* to an assault on a man who was having an affair with his estranged wife. Joseph Paolino, Jr., who succeeded him, had already made clear his support for the entrepreneurial policies of the previous administration. As a member of city council, and as the son of a landlord with extensive downtown holdings, Paolino had come down in favor of the railroad relocation project, arguing: “We have to invest so we can receive.” (Providence Journal, 1981b). Moreover, he made no effort to reactivate the old Democratic machine, preferring to rely on his own personal network. Thus, when Cianci returned to office in 1988 — now as an independent — the Democratic Party remained fractured, leaving what was at that time considerable opposition to his administration disorganized and splintered. Downtown redevelopment policy became firmly identified with the Office of the Mayor (McLean, 1989).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>While the new downtown was being brought into existence, contemporaneous statewide efforts at economic development were being defeated. In 1984 Rhode Island voters decisively rejected a landmark referendum on a comprehensive economic development policy, the so-called “Greenhouse Compact”. The Compact proposed to funnel public incentives to emerging, “greenhouse” industries in the high-tech and services sectors of the economy. It failed because of a widespread perception that its process of development was elitist and possibly corrupt, and because it was expected to impose most of its costs on “the little guy”, and distribute its benefits mainly to younger, higher-income, better educated “yuppies”. The state’s aging, middle class electorate seemed to be expressing a reluctance to support major investments with uncertain or deferred pay-offs. Like the rest of the state, Providence voters opposed the Greenhouse Compact by a substantial margin (Silver, 1987; West, 1992).

<sup>7</sup>Many of the straight news stories provided a favorable spin on the downtown initiatives, as well. It is worth noting that the main reporter for the *Providence Journal* on the downtown redevelopment beat during the mid-1970s, William Collins, later became Cianci’s chief policy aide.

<sup>8</sup>By comparison, the Doorley administration had been slow to show much concern for integrating non-traditional (that is, non-white) constituencies into the machine. Both Doorley and Providence Democratic Party chairman Lawrence McGarry had left a similar organization of the Community Action Program, the Neighborhood Advisory Committee, mostly to its own devices between 1965 and 1969. Ultimately, it became a base of minority activism and intramachine friction (Perrotta, 1977).

## Renaissance city?

The 60-acre tract of land created by moving the railroad tracks out of downtown Providence was first referred to as the Capital Center District by Ronald Marsella at a Providence Foundation Executive Board meeting held in October 1978 to announce that the track relocation deal had been secured. The name was quickly adopted by the *Providence Journal* and the Mayor’s office. The relocation of the tracks and the subsequent realignment of the downtown rivers (the Moshassuck and Woonasquatucket Rivers’ confluence with the Providence) provided what amounted to virgin land in the central city. This facilitated planning on a much larger scale than had been attempted before in Providence. By 1983, enabling legislation from the City and State had created the Capital Center District, with a governing board comprising represen-

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<sup>9</sup>A fact conceded by his supporters and detractors during the authors’ extensive interviews with downtown “players”, past and present, during the summer and fall of 1997.

tatives of the Mayor, the Governor, and the Providence Foundation.<sup>10</sup>

During the 1980s, as a direct result of the Capital Center District designation, the railroad tracks were relocated (1985–1987), a new train station was opened (1987), highway ramps were constructed to link State Routes 6 and 10 and Interstate 95 directly to downtown (1988), a major street furniture and beautification plan was implemented (1989–1993), a new road and bridge linking Capital Center to the historic core (Francis Street) were put in place (1989), and over 60 acres of land were cleared for redevelopment (McLean, 1989).

Following immediately upon these land clearance and infrastructure upgrades, the State and City collaborated on a series of major construction projects in the 1990s: the River Relocation Project to make way for Memorial Boulevard (a downtown ring-road) and Waterplace Park (1989–1994); the Rhode Island Convention Center and parking garage (1993); the Westin Hotel (1994); a series of vehicular and pedestrian bridges over the Providence River, linking downtown to abutting neighborhoods on the city's East Side (1993–1996); and Memorial Park, the site of the city's relocated war memorial (1996). All of these projects were built with public money, some 90 percent of it leveraged from the federal government under FRA and FHA railroad and highway improvement programs (interviews with Daniel Baudouin and Thomas Deller, August 1997).<sup>11</sup>

The City has returned to a retail-based strategy as the best hope for saving the downtown. By the early 1970s, middle class flight to the suburbs had killed the last semblance of high order retail activities in downtown (Atash, 1988). The years that preceded the creation of Capital Center and the Railroad relocation, and Waterplace Park projects were fraught with uncertainty and indecision among both planners and private sector leaders about what, if anything, should be done to reverse the decline. When the Foundation was formed in 1973, the hopes for downtown on the part of local leaders like banker John J. Cummings (Industrial National Bank) and realtor Carroll Harrington did not focus on retail, but on corporate offices and mass transportation (Goodrich, 1973). In 1986, the Carr, Lynch Associates/Melvin Levine and Associates' report, *Providence Development Plan*, renewed the call for retail development in the downtown historic core. Preliminary plans for what would become the Providence Place Mall were announced by the then-Mayor Joseph Paolino, Jr., shortly thereafter.

Underlying the bricks-and-mortar transformation remains a fragile local and state economy. Before the new mall, very little private investment had been enticed into the city, and then only with substantial public subsidies. At the tail-end of the 1980s East Coast real estate boom, three significant developments did get built: the new headquarters of Citizens Bank (One Citizens Plaza, located at the new confluence of the relocated Woonasquatucket and Moshassuck rivers), Center Place (a speculative luxury condominium complex funded by the Harvard University endowment) and One Gateway Plaza (containing back office functions of American Express). A 1997 proposal by the Kraft family of Boston to construct a new stadium for their New England Patriots football team fell through when the state refused to provide an incentive deal lucrative enough to entice the owners away from their existing site in Foxboro, Massachusetts. Although the new Providence Place Mall represents more than \$460 million in private investment, it also has received substantial public subsidies. The owners have signed a tax treaty with the municipality under which it foregoes property tax payments for 20 years. The state, in turn, has waived much of the expected sales tax for 15 years, as well as providing other subsidies.<sup>12</sup>

So, while the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and even the *Utne Reader* have sung the praises of the "renaissance" of the city's downtown, and the Mayor has enthusiastically hosted community leaders from other cities to show off what he refers to as "Destination Providence", residents thus far have little to show for all the activity beyond municipal property tax rates and a per capita public debt that rank among the nation's highest. Even after the mall opens, it is expected to add few of the permanent, full-time jobs with good benefits that might sustain a sizable middle-class population.

Not much, perhaps, in light of the \$1.75 billion public investment committed to the downtown area, but the availability of private capital for investment in downtown locations is now globally constrained (Sundlun, 1997; Clark, 1996). In such an environment Providence, like other medium-sized cities with decaying downtowns, faces a double hurdle in attracting private investment. Too old and too densely built to provide spacious facilities, they have difficulty competing with suburban locations for modern

<sup>10</sup>The state's authorizing legislation initially included representatives of the Rhode Island State Legislature as well, a provision that was removed 2 years later.

<sup>11</sup>The chief sponsor of crucial components of the program that paid for Providence's redevelopment under the Intermodal Surface Transportation Act was Rhode Island's junior US Senator, John Chafee.

<sup>12</sup>The initial mall agreement, negotiated during Bruce Sundlun's tenure as Governor, funded construction with federal and state highway funds. Under the deal that was renegotiated by Governor Lincoln Almond, construction financing is coming from entirely private sources; however, developers were exempted from paying an estimated \$7 million in sales taxes on construction materials; and will be allowed to keep two-thirds of every sales tax dollar generated by the mall up to \$3.68 million annually the first 5 years of operation, and \$3.56 million annually the next 15 years. In addition, the mall was built on donated state-owned land, formerly the site of the University of Rhode Island's Providence campus (Providence Journal, 1995).

retail and manufacturing. At the same time, they may be incapable of challenging larger cities in the competition for corporate headquarters.

In Providence, we see the result of a mostly successful attempt to restore the luster to a dingy urban core in the hope of attracting new private investment. While Providence has managed to attract a major shopping mall, a luxury apartment complex, high-end hotels, and new bank headquarters, the city remains tensely situated between the pincers of suburban economies and big city prestige. Whether Providence can carve out a viable economic niche based on retail, back office operations, regional headquarters, and tourism remains an open question.

## Conclusion

Providence does not settle easily into Kantor *et al*'s (1997) typology. Providence at the end of the 1960s could only be described as declining and troubled economically and, like other American cities, it could hardly rely on a systematic and coordinated federal urban agenda. This level of dependence, however, prompted little activity on the part of the existing regime. The caretaker mentality of the governing coalition was supported by a patronage-driven political order that reinforced the lower-middle class population's risk-averse biases. The city exhibited neither of the characteristic variants predicted within the category of a *dependent-private* regime — it neither moved to a position of “radical renunciation” of the market, nor opened the city coffers, “vending” the city's remaining assets as an inducement to private capital.

Nevertheless, the reconceptualization of city regimes according to the framework proposed by Kantor *et al* (1997) still throws some light on the achievements of Providence. How do we explain the ability of this declining, gritty manufacturing city to pull off such a striking rehabilitation strategy? We identify a number of resources that were available for mobilization when a new generation of determined and entrepreneurial leaders emerged. Let us be clear. Although those leaders were indeed determined, entrepreneurial, and talented, achieving the wholesale reconstruction of the city center required that they have resources to put in the service of those talents. At the same time, Kantor's categories need to be recognized not as iron cages but as subject — within limits — to strategic manipulation. Market position, intergovernmental integration, and democratic conditions are not fixed. Regimes shift, policies change.

Providence was able to remake its downtown because it had untapped — and unrecognized — assets. Chief among these, ironically, was an unreformed, clientelist political system that could be turned to its advantage. Senator Claiborne Pell's keen interest in transportation policy and his Washington influence promoted *Interface Providence* and secured the federal funding for massive infrastructure projects.

Successive Rhode Island governors recognized the importance of rescuing the capital city from long-entrenched processes of decline and were prepared to become active participants in redevelopment policy. Mayor Cianci's control of the local political apparatus assured that the governing coalition could contain any resistance on the part of the city electorate and city council. The regime that emerged thus joined the sustained patronage of the national and state governments with the weakness of democratic politics in the city. The result was that an extraordinary redevelopment project was brought to fruition, with what are likely to be rather ordinary outcomes. The kinds of jobs created by all this activity are of two main types: information and technology-intensive jobs that reward a well-educated population, and low-order retail and service positions that provide a weak foundation for widespread prosperity.

Comparative regime analyses identify the decentralized institutional structure of the United States as a factor that enhances the dependence of American cities on private capital. Because of its robust network of intergovernmental alliances, Providence in some ways resembles the pattern more frequently found in European cities. For example, Michael Keating (1993) argues that:

In British cities direct business involvement has long been weak, and its increase has come via the central state, through state-sponsored business groups and development corporations and agencies with business input. In France, too, local business associations are relatively weak, giving political elites in collaboration with the state bureaucracy the lead role in development planning... In [both] development coalitions are more dependent directly on the central state.

(p 388). In the United States, on the other hand, local coalitions generally can depend far less on the national government for financial support and have less flexibility than their counterparts in European cities (Keating, 1993).

Kantor *et al* (1997) also stress the greater role of national officials and institutions in local development. Speaking of how the system of *cumul des mandats* under Chirac gave Paris unparalleled ability to mobilize extra-local resources and public commitment to a coherent vision of economic development, they remark, “One can only imagine how powerful a city council in the United States would be if significant portions of it also served in the House of Representatives, the Senate, both state houses, the national cabinet and, not least, the White House” (p 355).

Although the French model of overlapping memberships in different political institutions at different levels of government obviously does not apply to the case of Providence, it is striking how that statement comes so close to capturing the parameters of the intergovernmental alliance that produced the redevelopment agenda we have described.

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