

Sustainable Providence?

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Sustainability, broadly defined, attempts to construct an array of social and economic relationships that allow basic human needs to be met in the present, while at the same time preserving ecological and human diversity for future generations. Such a working definition challenges classic liberal notions of economic self-sufficiency and political independence. Cities have always been interdependent--on one another other as well as on non-urban areas in their hinterlands--for commerce and trade, and for economic and cultural innovation. As such, cities provide a variety of opportunities for nurturing a sustainable civil society built on shared values of dependence, diversity, and development.

Achieving sustainability is, in and of itself, a multifaceted process that relies on transforming how cities are viewed by the dominant culture in America, through media depictions and portrayals, as well as in the political agendas of those in, or vying for, power. Sustainable concepts should move us beyond the media sound bite and the smoke and mirrors of political speech, but too often the media message prevails.

In this short think-piece, we examine the construction of the present and how the media frame/constrain conversations on the meaning of the city: its very nature; who makes and breaks it; and who owns it and claims it.

Merging questions four and five from the discussions that took place during James Hillman's visit to "A Year in Providence" in 2005 provides a possible framework for seeing the city as the media sees it.

Question #4. How do we know that a city is working? How can we promote "good" news in the media? What is "real" local news?

Question #5. What is typically Providence? How can we characterize the essence of this city? Who are Providence's ghosts and whose presence still shapes the city?

A city that “works” is an elusive concept and a relative one. A city can work fine for one group or faction, while at the same time fail to meet the needs of others who live and work there. To be truly sustainable, a city needs to work for, or at least have the capacity to help, all segments of society. City. Civitas. Civilization: Our urban centers should embody the best and embrace the multiple contributions of those who choose to live in them. Cities that work tap their assets in creative ways. They provide innovative outlets for human and financial capital, historical and cultural legacies, native-born and newcomer alike. All cities work at some level, but they can leave too many people behind. A truly successful urban place—one that “works”—might be a city where people are valued, respected and rewarded for their contributions to civil society, whether or not there is profit to be had.

Given the corporate nature of news outlets and the media in general, a successful city typically is promoted as one that meets the needs of educated upper-middle- and upper-class elites. The media narrative for Providence as a city that works is that here is a place where people aspire to be part of a metropolitan lifestyle reborn: Waterfire, PPAC, Trinity, Nordstrom, RISD, Brown, granite corporate HQ's, rehabilitated Victorian houses on the East Side, and upscale downtown living spaces in the Westin and at One Ten Westminster. The camera lens is soft, tinted rose or sepia.

Of course, these scenes probably do not resonate much with a majority of the city's inhabitants or the state's TV viewers. Media Providence is just a little too well dressed, a little too primed, a tad metrosexual. Certainly, Metrosexual Providence is not available to all. Those picture-perfect Victorians and shiny towers just cost too much. They might even be icons of resentment.

Beyond the canyons of Interstate 95 is the flipside of Media City's daily news cycle, and there aren't many shiny towers out here in the city's own little patch of shock and awe. This city is where “neighborhood” and “low income” and “in the early morning hours” and “an individual

known to the police” are pregnant with meaning. We do not need to read between the images too carefully to see the inherent class, racial, and educational biases that shade the scene. Here the camera lens’s focus is very sharp, unyielding, unwavering; the SteadyCam of Action News is always hungry for crime, corpses and crying relatives.

Rehabbed gingerbread Victorians and shabby triple-deckers. Like so many American cities, Providence The Media City has bipolar disorder.

But what TV never shows us is that cities that fail to adopt sustainable principles rarely solve their endemic social problems. In too many cities, one group or faction may endure, while others fail. Since no city, suburb, or other classification of communal life is truly isolated or removed from the others, the fates of all communities are linked; not dovetailed by any means, but enmeshed in complex patterns and flows. That story is too vexing for the local evening news, even as a contextualizing, “background” narrative.

Indeed, most definitions of civilization (V. Gordon Childe’s, for example) imply class stratification, taxation, surplus, and inter-city trade. These all connote power and hence division. Rhode Island has always had divisions and conflict in and among its cities. For Rhode Island’s local TV channels, the persistent theme is duality, split personality, and the exaggeration of difference. It is always clear who the “other” is and there are a lot of “them.” In terms of the media, when Providence serves the needs of the elite, or at least the aspirations of those who seek entry to the elite (and the capital that that implies), it is touted as the place to be. When the city is seen as a place that hinders the accumulation of assets or the fulfillment of basic educational, cultural, and human needs, it is portrayed by the media as dysfunctional, worthy of flight. The city itself causes its own demise, sending profitable, productive people and institutions to outlying areas.

This was the case with Providence following the Second World War when it lost a greater proportion of its residents to the suburbs than any other city in America. As such, throughout the 1960s-1990s, the city was portrayed in the media—especially by those outlets

headquartered in the city—as a cauldron of corruption, high taxes, and municipal governmental ineptitude. How else to explain “white flight” and the exodus of capital?

Bad news has not gone away, but there is now a sense that Providence is something worth knowing and experiencing, at least in its downtown core. In this spirit, there is an emphasis on “consumption” activities like tourism, leisure, shopping, fine dining, conventions, entertainment, public art, gatherings and happenings. Just as the new landmarks and icons of downtown Providence’s physical and cultural fabric are praised, so too should the social and economic diversity of the entire city be a part of how the media portrays Providence.

The “other” Providence is seen either as having potential only as a collection of “up and coming areas” with “investment potential” or, alternatively, as being essentially dead. Rarely does the “good news” include stories about people and places where positive events are a normal part of urban life. Surely, definitions of success should not be limited to resuscitated downtown glitz (or the suburban/exurban idyll, all homogeneous and static). The sustainable city embraces and celebrates the overall fabric of urban life in all its diverse, vibrant and kinetic forms. With “good news” comes bridge-building between people and places, rather than the reinforcement of class and social divisions with walls and cultural barriers.

Sustainable cities are flexible and reflect the voices of new players and changing economic, political, and cultural circumstances. While the shape, size, and contents of the sustainable city are fluid, the underlying principles are permanent: respect for pluralism, acknowledgement of conflict, and the need for inclusion for all those who wish to build new bridges or cross old ones.

Providence is currently defined on an East-West axis. New bridges over Interstate 95 and the relocation of Interstate 195 are a start, but a more sustainable model might include unobstructed pathways between city spaces and city people, and across cultural, political, and economic borders. As downtown Providence evolves into defensive space based on successful urban renewal, the neighborhoods need to be seen as worthy places to which bridges ought to provide the connections.

Neighborhoods grow and change. There is vibrancy and creativity. Maybe Providence is getting there, but you would never know it watching local television, listening to the radio or reading the newspaper.