

# Driving in Circles

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*Downtown Providence got rid of its highway.  
Can it lose its dependence on cars?*

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**Colin Kane is seated at a wood-paneled bar in the members-only Providence University Club.** A Republican Party event fills the room next door. Kane, a real estate developer with deep roots in the city, seems to know everyone at the club, an exclusive institution housed in a 19th-century mansion wedged between Brown University and Rhode Island School of Design.

He pulls out a map of Providence, puts it on the bar and begins to sketch. He draws the outline of buildings on an otherwise empty swath of downtown where Interstate 195 used to run. “We have to build an identity, a vision for this place,” says Kane, chairman of Rhode Island’s **I-195 Redevelopment Commission**. His sketching is no accident: Kane’s job is to fill in the blank swath running through Providence.

Walking through the city, it’s impossible to miss the barren scar left by the interstate highway. The neighborhoods on each side pull back from the empty space. Buildings seem to turn their backs away. A series of concrete piers bisects the river.

Like many American downtowns, Providence’s historic center was hacked apart to make way for an elevated interstate highway in the mid-20th century. I-195 fundamentally repositioned the inner city away from the pedestrian and toward the automobile. In the late 1980s, Rhode Island began to rethink that decision. Leaders chose to remove and relocate a portion of the Interstate cutting through Providence, embarking on a costly reverse engineering of the decision made a generation earlier. It reflected a trend that’s been seen in highway-split cities around the country, from **Portland, Milwaukee and San Francisco** to New Orleans, which is now considering a plan to **tear down a section of its downtown expressway**.

Plans for a streetcar line, bike lanes and a renewed neighborhood of medium-scale buildings, all coordinated with the teardown project, imply a return to Providence’s past as a walking city. Certainly that is what many highway removal advocates want to see.

Yet conversations with Kane and others implementing the redevelopment of the I-195 corridor suggest that the city’s future downtown could be just as oriented toward automobile commuters as in the past, albeit in a different guise. In other words, the \$610 million road removal project may leave Providence with a revitalized downtown, but not one significantly less car-centric than what was there before.

## ROAD WORK AHEAD, AND BEHIND

Today’s plans for a reinvigorated downtown are a long time coming. I-195 was built in the 1950s to link Providence with its eastern suburbs and southeast Massachusetts. The road slashed through the once-active Old Harbor industrial neighborhood and



cut downtown off from the Jewelry District — once the nation’s center of the trade — before crossing over the Providence River and skirting the harbor in East Providence. The road aged poorly, partly because it handled more than twice as many cars as it had been designed for. By the late 1980s, it had become obvious to the State Department of Transportation that the highway would have to be rebuilt.

Two weeks into his job at the city’s planning department in 1989, Thom Deller and his colleagues pounced. “We began saying, let’s move the highway out of downtown,” says Deller, who now heads the agency. State transportation officials initially laughed off the idea, but a sympathetic governor, Edward DiPrete, encouraged a change of heart. Proponents called it a no-brainer: “The overall community development goals were absolutely in sync with the transportation development goals,” said Providence Foundation Executive Director Dan Baudouin.

No one suggested eliminating the traffic artery altogether. Instead, a new route half a mile south, just past a hurricane barrier, would be more direct, offer the possibility of construction without disturbing traffic and require little use of eminent domain. Best of all, it would open a huge plot of developable land downtown.

State officials broke ground on the \$610 million project in 2003. It was the largest roadwork project in the state since the completion of the interstate system. In 2010, the new road — affectionately known as the “Iway” — opened. A signature span in the form of a large green-blue arc served as a reminder that the new road, and the highway



removal project that instigated it, marked a new day for the region. The old road was subsequently demolished, leaving the empty plots that await redevelopment today.

## CLEARING FOR CHANGE

On South Water Street, facing the site of the old I-195 bridge, is a modest brick building. Now that the road is gone, you can stand in one of its commercial spaces and look out to the river and over to the Jewelry District.

The structure, however, was clearly built with the road in mind, with parking out front and the businesses positioned slightly below street level, requiring pedestrians to descend stairs to get in. Hasan Askari works inside the building, running **Concept Link**, a printing and graphic design company. Askari, who moved to Providence 20 years ago, is happy about the highway's demolition, and not only because he expects more business. "It has given the area a lot more character," he says.

Across the river, Kendra (she declined to offer her last name) steps away from her work behind the counter at Olga's Cup and Saucer, a quaint café in the Jewelry District. To her, too, the highway removal is a good thing. "I want this area to be more pleasant, more welcoming, more inviting to shoppers," she says. Not that the coffee shop needs much more patronage: On a mid-winter's day, snow poured down, but locals packed the tables. The bustle is no surprise given the area's popularity as destination for creative professionals and the fact that Olga's is one of few daytime food and drink establishments around, if not for long.

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*"Before that project was done, you had a bunch of parking lots and no one knew the river was there."*

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The redevelopment of the I-195 corridor promises to bring new development to both sides of the river, knitting Olga's neighborhood together with Askari's. Nine acres of public parks, a pedestrian bridge over the river and a new grid of streets, designed to replicate what had been there a half-century ago, will turn the two distinct areas into a bigger, denser downtown. In the midst of the new infrastructure, 20 acres of vacant land will be sold to developers, who are expected to add 2-3 million square feet of commercial and residential space. In the end, planners expect a series of four- to five-

story buildings, similar in density to the built-up sections of downtown Providence, though without high-rises. Nothing other than a few public space improvements, however, has been designed so far. Specific new buildings will have to wait for private investors, and Kane specifically avoids hypothesizing how buildings, or the district in general, will look. It could be modern and glassy or, if developers prefer it, historicist.

For Askari, all this new development poses questions about his business's future. "I wouldn't be surprised if they tried to raise the rents," he says.

Kendra takes a bigger-picture view. "It took them forever to redevelop downtown," she says, "But once they did, it really helped Providence."

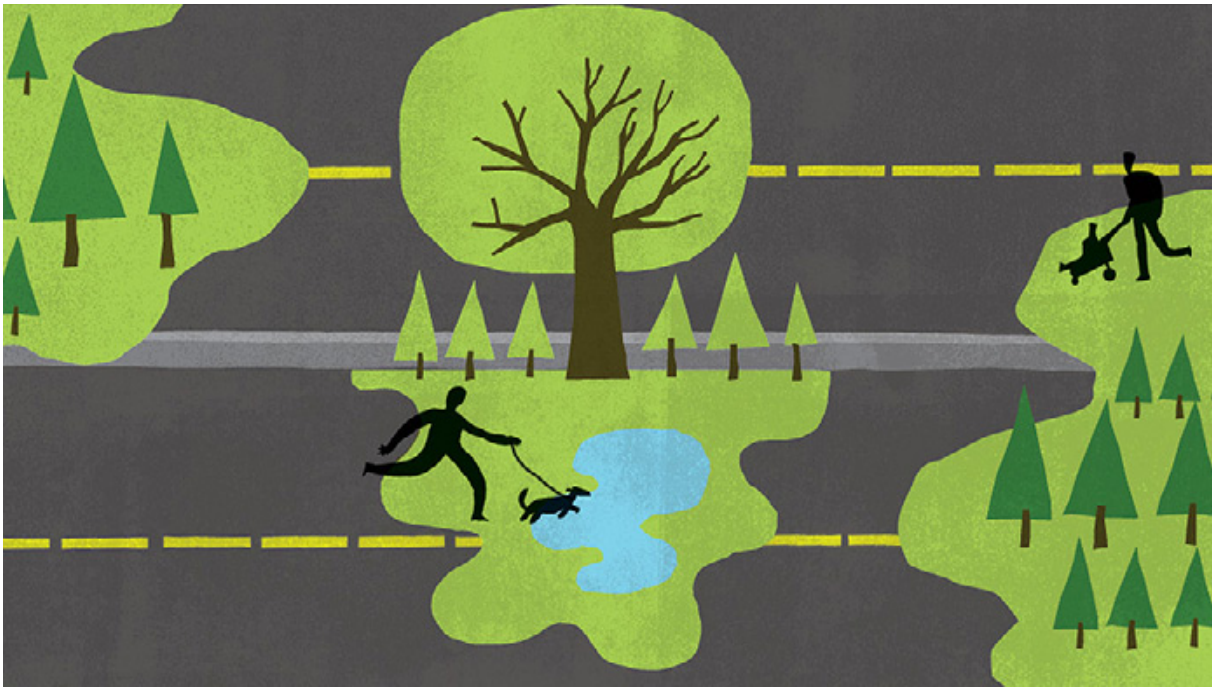
Providence has changed. Over the past 20 years the city has undergone a renaissance, with popular bars, restaurants and even some national chains like American Apparel moving into long-vacant storefronts. The expansions of Brown, RISD and Johnson and Wales have brought thousands of students to the area. What was once a central business district that emptied out in the evenings is now populated, if not crowded, with young people.

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But what was perhaps the greatest contributor to Providence's recent evolution was strikingly similar in form to the I-195 relocation project. In the mid-1980s, another state entity, the **Capital Center Commission**, worked with Amtrak and the Boston-area commuter rail authority to relocate downtown railroad facilities about 1,000 feet north from the ornate Union Station facility to a modern structure just adjacent to the State House. The move cleared tracks out of the historic city center, providing land ripe for redevelopment where there had previously been none.

The empty land begat three massive economic development projects: Waterplace Park along the city's Woonasquatucket River, a huge new shopping mall at Providence Place and the Rhode Island Convention Center, which was completed in 1994 at a



cost of \$356 million in public funds; it was renovated in 2008 for about an additional \$80 million. These have undoubtedly brought people in.

“Before that project was done, you had a bunch of parking lots and no one knew the river was there,” Baudouin says. Now the area is unquestionably the heart of downtown.

Yet visitors to the mall and convention center generally drive up to park and shop or convene without leaving the interior. Perhaps more critical to Providence’s regeneration was a much smaller-scale creative intervention called **WaterFire** that has cost the public virtually nothing. Barnaby Evans, a local artist, created WaterFire on the river in 1994, the same year Waterplace Park opened. The nighttime installation of 11 sparkling bonfires floating on the river in the otherwise dark park attracted people and plenty of buzz. Evans’ work, which has grown to include over 80 bonfires, continues to be a draw for tens of thousands of visitors who descend into — and then walk around — the city about every other weekend from May to October.

All of that because inopportune transportation infrastructure was moved out of the way 25 years ago.

## 20 ACRES AND A MALL

“How often does a city that is basically built out find itself with 20 vacant acres?” Thom Deller asks. The state’s decision to remove and replace the highway challenged city planners to imagine a new Providence, especially since Deller understated his

city's situation: Those 20 acres are supposed to catalyze construction on the largely undeveloped blocks surrounding them that take up four times as much space.

Over the past decade, Deller's department developed a proposal for a "**Knowledge District**." If Providence's future was not in manufacturing, shipping or likely even financial services, it would have to concentrate on attracting employment associated with its universities and health centers to maintain its strength. So far, Brown has invested heavily in the area, **building a new medical school** and several laboratories there. Both Brown and Johnson and Wales have expressed strong interest in using redevelopment land to shore up their expansion plans — but neither has been granted the land thus far. Kane has left their future involvement up in the air. "It is impossible to predict whether or not the institutional interest will align with state and city economic and physical objectives," he says.



Meanwhile, the state-empowered I-195 commission has gone head-to-head with Deller and his group over the zoning laws that will eventually determine what can be built on the site. Deller and others have argued that the commission reduces local sovereignty significantly by allowing the state to overrule local codes, even the special zoning code the city wanted to establish for its Knowledge District. Last year, Deller testified against the bill proposing the commission, citing his apprehension about empowering the state to overrule local decision-makers. The testimony had little effect; the state legislature approved the commission with little discussion and the group was up and running by late 2011. Deller still harbors concerns. "To have seven outsiders have full power over 20 acres of land is concerning," he says.

Despite differing views on how the I-195 land should be redeveloped, no one seems to disagree on how it shouldn't be redeveloped. What no one wants? Another **Providence Place Mall**.

Just like the convention center next door, Providence Place is the sort of project conceived by economic development boosters to "save" a downtown by turning it into



the suburbs. As if the mall's 1.3 million square feet and 4,000 parking spaces weren't evidence enough, the large signs pointed directly at highway commuters testify to the attraction's suburban audience. And while the mall has undoubtedly expanded the city's tax base, it has not done much to bring life back to city streets. With its corporate-bland architecture and massive parking structures, it is practically walled off from the rest of the downtown. In the long run, that could hurt Providence — a city whose uniqueness, according to Frank LaTorre, director of public space for the **Downtown Improvement District**, lies in its walkability. "That's what people are looking for," LaTorre says.

LaTorre, who co-founded the Improvement District in 2005, says "a thriving mixed-use downtown is the vision" for Providence. The center city has already achieved much of this objective, bringing a mix of local and national stores and restaurants to a neighborhood of new and old buildings, most of which are pedestrian-oriented in scale. It may not be booming, but it exemplifies what makes Providence Providence, not Any-Downtown, U.S.A. The I-195 district, LaTorre seems to be saying, should extend that character.

Can that effort be reconciled with the economic incentives of bringing suburban-light facilities such as the mall, or with the economic development vision promised by Deller's Knowledge District?

These are opposing — and potentially mutually exclusive — views for how this post-highway downtown should look and feel.

It will ultimately be Colin Kane's group, the I-195 commission, which makes the decisions about what fills the land vacated by the road. In focusing powers in this state-appointed agency, Rhode Island chose specifically not to auction off former highway land to developers at the highest price. No superblocks will be dedicated for malls or huge complexes; the agency is charged with nurturing a block-by-block urbanism. Thus the public sector has retained for itself the responsibility to design Providence's future, rather than let it fall immediately into the hands of the profit-motivated. To Baudouin, this would ensure the city's appropriate development. "There was a real need," he explains, "for someone to be in charge of this development."

## SMART GROWTH OR UTOPIAN THINKING?

A sea of surface parking lots surrounds the former site of I-195. Go there on a weekday morning and watch thousands of people cruise in, park and walk a few blocks to jobs. In the evenings, the process reverses. For most of the day, the liveliest thing around is

the city's family court complex, based in a five-story brick mausoleum and surrounded on all sides by asphalt. The desolate zone makes manifest the failings produced when a city is rebuilt to accommodate the automobile.

The emptiness resulting from the I-195 teardown makes the situation even more depressing — at least for the moment. Parking meters line up along the edge of empty fields, as if hoping somehow the shoppers will come before the stores.

The **Rhode Island Public Transportation Authority** (RIPTA) has a vision that could mean an end to this parking-infused environment. Former Mayor (now Rep.) David Cicilline argued that Providence could learn from such cities as Seattle and Portland, Ore. by building a streetcar line between its most popular destinations, and he identified funds to begin studies. Helped along by the Obama administration's decision to invest hundreds of millions of dollars in streetcars and other transit

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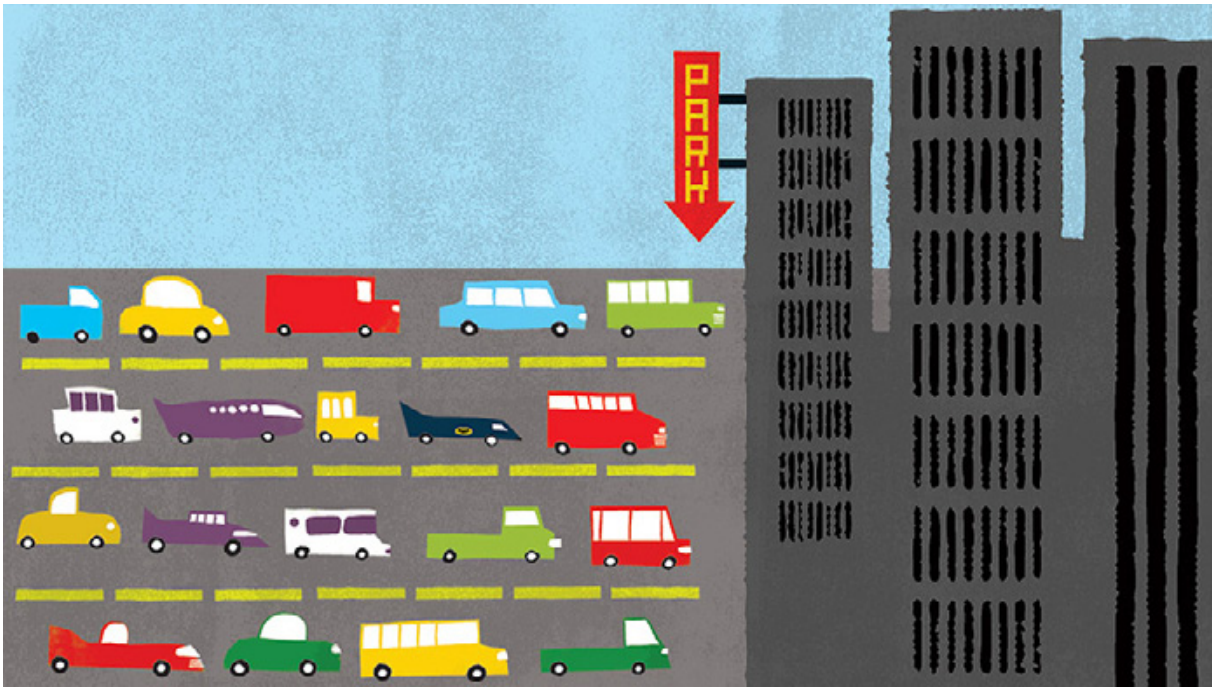
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improvements, the project may actually stand a chance of receiving federal aid.

According to current plans, this “**Core Connector**” would extend 2.5 miles from Brown and RISD, run through downtown, roll past the I-195 land and the Jewelry District, and terminate just past the Rhode Island Hospital. Amy Pettine, a planner for RIPTA, sees the project as “a kind of unprecedented opportunity.” By connecting “eds to meds,” she hopes the project will “help concentrate and intensify development.” Like many American regions hoping to stabilize and improve their center cities, Providence sees streetcars as a path to improved economic opportunity.

In some ways, the \$126 million project would complement the I-195 removal, opening up the newly developable areas to additional transportation options and connecting the 25,000 students and 50,000 employees already within the area. Pettine notes that **a city study** found a stunning 100 acres of vacant or underutilized land within a quarter-mile of the streetcar route. In the Jewelry District, according to the city's **downtown plan**, only 45 percent of land is effectively used.

Within Providence's tight-knit downtown, it's easy to imagine streetcars gliding along the skinny streets. The modern vehicles would nicely contrast the historic brick



architecture and offer a sublime update over the existing, and slightly hectic, bus transfer center.

But Kane is skeptical of the streetcar, referring to it as the creation of “utopian” thinkers. People in Providence “want to park close” to their workplaces, he insists. This is why his plans for downtown are predicated on the creation of 6,000 to 7,000 new parking spaces in or near to the I-195 redevelopment corridor. The new parking lots will increase the sum of spaces available in the center of the city by about half. In a critical departure from most urbanist planning schemes, Kane wants up-front state funds not just to build streets and parks but also to subsidize the creation of publicly owned garages.

LaTorre agrees with Kane’s emphasis on the importance of parking. His organization represents businesses downtown, and to him, parking “is the big meat-and-potato issue; it has to be easy, it has to be affordable.” Meanwhile, an earlier proposal to fund a local contribution for the streetcar’s costs by using a tax on downtown businesses has met considerable opposition, putting the project’s future in doubt. Kane says that “the trolleys will work so much better after I get these buildings built” — and the associated parking.

Indeed, the highway removal offers the potential for encouraging alternatives to automobiles, but even those who push for them dismiss any sweeping rethinking of the way the city works. Almost everyone involved in planning Providence’s

revitalized downtown rejects the idea that the city could prosper without a large amount of new parking.

In the minds of most people, the streetcar is not a solution to the parking crunch or the travails of commuting. Rather, it is a sign of public-sector support for development, a non-vital enhancement, similar perhaps to a park but far less important than a parking garage. Pettine suggests that one potential role for the transit line would be supporting a “park-once” strategy, in which people drive in and out at rush hour and then use the streetcar to get around for lunch. It’s a minimally intrusive, non-confrontational approach to public transportation advocacy.

Kendra, of Olga’s coffee shop, is excited about the bicycle, walking and transit improvements going into the new district. But she admits that she drives to work most days, despite living within easy biking distance of the café.

Streetcar or not, Providence is likely to remain a cars-first kind of place.

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## REVIVING WITHOUT RETHINKING

What story does the redevelopment of Providence’s downtown tell? And what does its potential transformation inform us about the state of mid-sized cities in general?

Providence, like many other cities around the country, is betting its future on the revival and expansion of its downtown core. Rather than allow mistakes of past highway builders to continue weighing down on the city’s urban development, municipal and state leaders have taken a proactive step forward. Downtown will finally have a chance to expand, if there is enough demand to justify it.

But the choices that will determine Providence’s future shape still lie ahead. If the project does well, will it simply replace local businesses like Askari’s with more national chains like those in the mall? And how will the project affect the city’s relationship to automobiles, which are credited at least in part with dooming the downtowns of Providence and so many other American cities?

For now, one clear consequence to the project has been that the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on the replacement of the downtown highway have resulted in the construction of a new, wider road half a mile south. Thousands of parking spaces in garages are planned to replace hundreds of parking spaces on the surface. A streetcar, if it ever gets built, will likely be afterthought for a project whose focus will remain on the car.

An obsession with automobility encouraged cities like Providence to abandon their downtowns a half-century ago, and that reliance on the automobile has been



difficult to shake. “We will have the best commuting roadways in New England,” Kane argues, and maybe he is right. But good highways do not make an exciting city.

Yet perhaps this is the America we live in today. We want more vibrant centers even in our midsize cities, but we want to build them without returning to the transportation and living environments we relied upon when they were first built. We want renovated, restored downtowns — but we want to be able to drive into and out of them. Will it work?

“I want to make Providence cool enough to get young, single folks to come and want to live here,” Kane emphasizes. Citing the success of cities like New York and Boston, he says, “If it doesn’t attract a smart and dynamic demographic, then it will have failed.” How realistic a goal can that be in Providence, a place with such big economic problems and a legacy of dismissing pedestrians demands in the center city?

Kane smiles. He doesn’t address the specifics of the question. “I’m confident,” he says. >



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Yonah Freemark** is a journalist who writes about cities and transportation. He created and continues to write for the website *The Transport Politic*, and has also contributed to *Next American City*, *The Atlantic Cities*, *Planning*, and *Dissent*.



## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Tim Gough** has been working in Philadelphia as a designer/art director for various agencies and design firms for the past 8 years. His art is influenced by the screen printed process and mid century graphics. His work has been found in books, magazines, newspapers, and other ephemera nationwide and abroad. He frequently shows his drawings and screen prints in various galleries and shows.

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