

Providence, the Region And The New Urbanism

Part IV: Urban Lab Toolkit

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I. Urban Labs in Providence and the Region

This urban lab toolkit draws on the work New Commons performed for Cornish Associates and the Congress of New Urbanism's 14th Congress to be held in Providence, June 1 to 4, 2006. The lab concept, draft format, and urban issues herein are drawn from 27 interviews conducted by New Commons with local and regional urban practitioners. A copy of the full report, "Providence, The Region and New Urbanism: Visions for the City and Region" is at www.newcommons.com and then clicking on Congress of New Urbanism from our home page.

The city of Providence and the surrounding region of Southern New England present many location-specific challenges common to post-industrial cities across the United States. At the 14th Congress of New Urbanism – June 1 to 4, 2006, in Providence – urban labs will be used to address urban challenges in Providence—all of which can be applied to other urban places. An urban laboratory is a contained, ongoing process designed to bring attention to a challenge, seek solutions for that challenge, and develop the practices of those involved.

The origin of the lab: In 1997, New England new urbanists held a regional conference in Providence where the city was the classroom or laboratory for the conference. We walked the streets and learned together about the city and its evolution. There is no model for a lab, just an idea and intentions. It is not like a charrette, but might include a charrette. In fact, the lab is at the developmental point where the charrette process was at its birth: an idea to be tested and refined. We will invent the look and feel of the lab through the experience of doing it.

Beginning in the late winter and spring of 2006, a series of mutual learning and cultivation sessions are planned. These events will be used to build a local, multi-disciplinary network for making change to address urban issues.

We will begin the labs this spring and continue after the Congress until a solution is achieved or the lab is no longer useful. Labs will begin by engaging local stakeholders to establish the scope and direction of the selected challenges between March and June 2006. On Thursday, June 1, 2006, Congress attendees will be able to visit lab sites for in-depth analysis of the issues and organized brainstorming of design solutions. Labs continue beyond the Congress.

Practitioners of diverse disciplines as required to analyze complex challenges will conduct the labs. In addition to seasoned new urbanists other practitioners could include: the agronomist (for slow food), sociologist, traffic engineer, public artist, planner, community psychologist, economist, and strategist. The lab applies additional perspectives and tools, depending on the social, ecological, economic, cultural, local community knowledge, and built environment conditions of the place or issue under study.

II. Design of the Urban Laboratories

Direct the labs to achieve Five Outcomes

1. Develop a fact book for each of the lab locations. The fact book is a multi-disciplinary profile of the location to include facts, plans, projects and ideas.
2. Develop a new process for Providence to execute public/private partnerships that integrates the required players in one process (Not each partner with their own process).
3. Develop a new tool for use at future new urbanist Congresses: City as a Congress learning laboratory. Given the depth of the issues and the players championing them, there is an opportunity for CNUXIV to be more locally flavored than most of the past Congresses. In effect, the city and region becomes an extensive and intensive laboratory for learning both in the field and in the convention center.
4. Build a local operating platform and network among practitioners for ongoing learning and problem solving, allowing people to participate in tiers of involvement based on time and talent.
5. Produce a toolkit on how to design and execute an urban laboratory.

Integrate the required place-making elements

New Commons integrates six elements in one process of making a place – a city, a region, a village or an organization:

- Ecology – the natural ecosystem
- Social – class, ethnicity: ties that bind
- Built environment – private and public realm
- Community knowledge – local know-how and processes that define how things get done locally
- Culture – values and differences that define a place and its origins
- Economic – how goods and services are produced, traded and transacted, and how jobs and wealth are created and sustained

Use rules for change to make the labs work

- Develop a common vocabulary among diverse disciplines for continued conversation and work in the city and region.
- Combine 3 locations as a major spine of the city – Pawtucket line down North Main Street, to Kennedy Plaza, to Westminster Crossing/Cathedral Square to Cranston Street to Route 10 in Cranston.
- Think and act as if the new zoning ordinance applies to a location – test pilot the new zoning to better understand impacts.
- Site goals and conditions determine the approach and what disciplines gather to work on the issues; look at ecological, commercial, cultural, social, built environment and community knowledge.
- Prototype an expansive and integrated approach and process for a public/private partnership. Leverage diverse practitioner resources to solve urban problems. Invent new approaches to address urban issues that include charrettes (perhaps in a new format), but not limited to their use.

Apply criteria for picking local Labs

1. A catalytic project
2. A process does not exist
3. Has broad relevance beyond Providence to similar problems in cities in the northeast
4. Helps us look at regulatory change in action
5. It is ripe to get something useful from it
6. When the presenting problem is solved, it brings value to the City or part of the region
7. The issue is interesting, engaging and sexy. It will be fun to talk about.
8. The lab issue presents an opportunity to learn and evolve our collective knowledge about cities both from new urbanist practices and others

III. Three Phases of Urban Labs

Phase I: Winter and Spring 2006

The objectives for the phase I sessions are --

- Internalize the aims, processes, and practices of an urban lab
- Draft the goals for each location
- Identify and analyze the conditions surrounding each location, (facts, constraints, blocks, current and planned projects, resources)
- Determine the know how required to fully study the location
- Action steps to tackle up to the Congress
- Produce a draft fact book of the issues at the location

Standing Questions for all Phase-I Meetings:

1. What is the location?
2. What are the long-term goals for the location? Frame the goals as benefits.
3. What are the conditions: immediate and emerging?
 - What are the known facts about the location (that will serve as the foundation of the fact book – social, economic, ecological, community knowledge, cultural & built environment)?
 - Who lives there, works there, and who else relies on this place? Who has a stake in the place?
 - What are the constraints surrounding the site: physical, legal, financial, or political? What are the blocks and barriers of the location?
 - What is in motion as an emerging condition that will impact the location?
 - What plans or projects are on the drawing board as an emerging condition?
 - What requires research?
4. What are the potential solutions, opportunities, projects, or value adds?
5. To achieve the goals, what know-how, from which practitioners will be required? (Use multiple tiers to organize talent)
6. Inside the labs at the Congress: what do we want new urbanists to help with the most?
7. What are the proposed study actions for the next 75 days?

Phase II: June 1st, 2006 – CNU Takes a “Look” Inside the Labs

The look inside for each of the two labs is for 1/2 day on Thursday, the 1st of June.

Congress participants – regional, local and national – get inside the ongoing lab process in Providence via a “fish bowl.”

Engage in three learning steps at the Congress:

1. New England new urbanists and local practitioners share problem, findings and top 10 issues that need new urbanist help, while conferees listen – this is the fish bowl
2. Visit and tour the location with specific questions to pose to people at the location
3. Engage in structured and facilitated session among locals and conferees to complete further analysis of the issue and suggest solutions

Note: At the Congress, the “look” inside the labs at CNU is not – A charrette or the production of drawings.

Phase III: Labs Continues After the Congress, in Providence and Region

1. Determine what the situation needs --

- Design work like a charrette
- Policy changes by city or state
- Money
- Project development
- Engaging diverse citizens of the city
- Other?

2. Develop a phased critical path/action plan to guide execution.

3. Develop tools for the toolkit of New England New Urbanist best practices.

IV. Priority Lab Issues and Draft Conditions

Priority Issues

Through a series of meetings with local stakeholders, three issues were selected to serve as urban laboratories.

The Two we Begin With

1. *Create a neighborhood city center* as a major tipping point to evolve neighborhoods that have experienced historical disinvestment: Develop Cranston Street with character
2. *Re-knit the city* by connecting the downtown to the south and west sides, over the highway, at Westminster Crossing, including reworking and animating Cathedral Square
3. *Transit Oriented Development* on North Main Street

Conditions that Impact the Lab Issues

We want to build a network to implement the urban labs in the city and region, based on establishing the right context for the network, the urban labs, and the decisions that will be made. We need to work from as close to as possible shared understanding of the environment surrounding these places. Below are examples of what key conditions might inform such a context for group decision making. These conditions were developed by those interviewed and present in the first lab session in February 2006.

What current conditions are most critical to address: The stuff that is here now?

New Urbanism and Words

Is new urbanism the same as smart growth? Does terminology matter? What do we mean by “new urbanism?” Land use regulations affect all uses of land (environmental, building codes, etc.) and the need to educate the populace (public) about nomenclature. There is a need for an underlying principle of new urbanism integrated with regulation.

Are there other design processes and approaches that could also serve New England?

Why are more planners/policy managers not involved/invested in NU or smart growth? Politicians are speaking “smart growth” but not following the approach.

Integrate Approaches

We need a uniform regulatory structure (DEM, DOT...) so all are aligned working toward the same end. We need regionalism over fragmentation. We need a “Fact book” to clear up the facts and break through perceptions. There is a lack of funding to facilitate “change.”

Foster Sustainability

Cities have an advantage if they can figure out fuel oil/energy.

Challenge of schools: K-12, fear of children because of added costs of higher taxes, health care, day care. Health Care.

Transportation

Connect the neighborhoods and surrounding areas. Transit – foot, bike, train, bus—all connected global system.

Jobs and the economy

Our focus has to be keeping downtown jobs alive. Jobs: we need commercial development comparable to residential development to bring more job creating companies into the city.

Our Relationship to Design

How do architects design? We should be designing to the vernacular and to communities need for the public realm. We need a good understanding of design in the face of too much planning. Applying Christopher Alexander's idea of building *with* land and *not* on the land (system view)

Currently we are designing to sterile standards – it is a partnership of technocrats. So break out of it. Public space: focus on public parks, Kennedy Plaza, Station Park, and the new park in the 195 relocation. What are they going to look like? Who's going to program?

Housing, Change and the Community

There is a lack of foresight.

Lack of sense of community: "I've got mine" issue of lack of support for affordable housing. "I worked my butt off to get my house and now I don't want to subsidize the next guy." This is the perception, but in fact everyone who owns a house has historically gotten a subsidy by things like the GI bill, mortgage deduction, etc.

Keep housing affordability a priority and avoid a gap in it in relationship to health care and education.

Socio-economic disparity = lack of implementation.

Fear of ...almost everything.

Density has to be seen in relationship to the need to improve: public education, perception of affordable housing, and many neighborhoods priced out.

Zoning Constraints, Good Design & Development

We have a regulatory body built of civic law administered by volunteers. The problem is parochial knowledge/limited personal experience. In cities it's easier to get informed volunteers but in rural and suburbs, more difficult. We need standardize regulations: building/fire/zoning. Codes & Zoning: regulatory process and design codes.

What emerging conditions are most critical to address: The stuff on the horizon?

Changing landscapes – demographics.

Will the Latino population continue to grow? Will the 2nd generation follow the historical pattern and move to suburbs? Studies show that Latinos have strong home ownership motivation. Pay attention to the growth of the Latino population.

Comeback of Cities

Recovery of Providence is still fragile. Is the return to the city sustainable, are there weaknesses not thought of? Need to advance opportunities for inner city/town development options. Small cities in the northeast, southwest, and west coast are hot. Capitalize on Providence desirability (waterfront for example).

Time to Integrate What we Do

Make change. Determine what ideas have the most promise for our future. The city must address in an integrated fashion, the cost of housing, living, oil, transportation, and taxes. We need to develop the new economy (Providence, RI, USA). We have an aging population. We need to increase the tax base.

Now that developers are more engaged in smart growth, why are they not doing more? How do we use more of our latent powers? And move beyond what is no done? I'm not going to battle this with the public to make it right. Transportation engineers are structuring us into suburbs with regulatory silos with specific objectives instead of overall objectives.

Transportation Options

Extension of the T-line (Mass transit) into RI will continue. A multi-modal airport station is coming.

Ecology and Land Use

Climate change/water levies/flood plains. Approaching "build out" – lack of viable land for development. There is a lack of open space/common access to open space & amenities.

Inside the Urban Labs: what Problems Exist in the Issue

Conditions common to the lab issues

- They're all in RI
- They're all physical places or creating a sense of place
- Transportation is involved
- They all need help or attention
- In each, there's some regulatory quagmire
- Either missed opportunity or not at the best and highest use
- Bring humanity and more people to each place
- Improve the quality of the human experience in each place

Appendix I: Other Lab Issues for Later

1. *Reclaim the waterfront* on Allen's Avenue as an important part of our sense of place with both more development and public access and open space
2. *Create transit oriented development* by opening the closed Pawtucket rail station as a stop on both the Amtrak and MBTI train routes. Encourage dense mixed-use housing, retail and commercial space around the transit node.
3. *Develop new neighborhoods* with the largest land re-use project in the city: the relocation of route 195. The 19 or so acres of developable land offer opportunity for creative innovations in block design and land platting, but done so within predefined federal and financial constraints: 500 million in Federal money requires the restoration of the historical street pattern and the area must remain designated as the major in and out of the city
4. *Create a neighborhood city center* as a major tipping point to evolve a neighborhood that has experienced historical disinvestment: Develop Prairie and Public Street as a major vibrant intersection
5. *Create a neighborhood city center* as a major tipping point to evolve a neighborhood that has experienced historical disinvestment: Evolve Olneyville Square as the second old downtown in Providence

Conditions that Apply to the Other Lab Issues

195-Relocation

How can it happen quickly? Hit the ground running (not like the Big Dig)

No constituent group that lives there. Everyone's claiming it is their own.

The public part needs more study. There's a master plan for developers to fill in right. Can we get ahead of the regulatory curve? There'll be a design book.

There are 19 acres for development, based on historic street patterns.

Kennedy Plaza

Design problem: improve bus system & plaza experience. Social issues. Complex, major financing is needed. The current conditions of the plaza are a major reason why downtown doesn't fully work, economically.

"New Villagism"

This is a code phrase for new urbanism. Can the new villages learn from old villages? It is mixed use community. Do new villages at exit 5 off of 95 and Rt. 4/ Rt. 102. This is similar to traditional neighborhood design.

Olneyville Square

There is an opportunity to mine new ethnics with their commercial endeavors.

Prairie & Public

Many Streets stuck in the middle of an institutional area.

Waterfront/Allen's Avenue

Start with the general and then go to the specific.

Pawtucket Rail Station

This is an opportunity for mixed use. It's a historic train station. It is supported by the mayor. Requires regulatory change regarding the distance trains can stop. (Currently a

train can't stop in Pawtucket given the current stops in South Attleboro and Providence.) Or look to open up back of S. Attleboro station, which is currently fenced off.

Appendix II: Overall Urban Issues to Solve

Based on the network-building interviews conducted by New Commons, six types of Providence and regional-specific issues have emerged – other types can be added. This list is a menu to pick from for ongoing development in the region.

Overall City and Regional Planning

- Connect the dots among the planning and design principles of Brown University, Sasaki plan, city charter, and Downtown Improvement District to produce a common set of citywide principles (Dick Spies, Brown University)
- Cities are the focus, but what about what is in between? How do we make Narragansett Bay as known and as visible as the perception of Greater Tampa Bay? How do we relate to the critical regional elements of environment? How does new urbanism deal with these issues? (Curt Spaulding, Save the Bay and Jan Reitsma, Blackstone Valley Heritage Corridor)
- How do new urbanist villages compare to New England urbanism? (Tom Kravitz, Burrillville Planner) Related: “New Villagism” (Richard Godfrey, RI Housing)
- Neighborhood forum for continuous, structured citywide planning with citizens as partners (Bill Struever, Struever Bros, Eceles and Rouse)
- Affordable housing integrated with planning: usually more attractiveness of a neighborhood equals more expensive! Can affordable housing be done without driving people out? (Jack Gold and some board members at Providence Preservation Society; the Mayor; and Jan Reitsma, Blackstone Valley Heritage Corridor)
- Integrate and implement two major state plans: state land use plan and strategic housing plan (Kevin Flynn, Statewide Community Development and Planning)

Development Oriented Transit or Transit Oriented Development, Including Greater Density

- This could, for example, occur on two “long” contiguous streets in the city and metro: Elmwood to Reservoir (Providence, Cranston and Warwick) (Richard Godfrey, RI Housing; Mark Van Noppen, Armory)
- North Main Street (Providence into Pawtucket) (Thom Deller, DPD and Richard Godfrey, RI Housing)

Urban Neighborhoods and Urban Places with Character

These places are ready for mixed-use, mixed-income development including, but not limited to, affordable housing and the application of Christopher Alexander’s pattern language.

- Cranston Street/Armory area (Thom Deller, DPD and Richard Godfrey, RI Housing)
- Onleyville Square (Thom Deller, DPD and Mayor)
- Gateway to Southside at Trinity (Kip Bergstrom, Policy Council)
- Reservoir Triangle (Richard Godfrey, RI Housing and Thom Deller, DPD)
- Charles and Chalkstone (Thom Deller, DPD)
- Hope and Rochambeau: does it serve the city to allow this geography to build four story buildings to replace current single story buildings and what would this change mean for transportation (Mark Van Noppen, Armory)

- Assuming Broad and Elmwood have momentum, how to do the intersection of Prairie and Public Streets (Kip Bergstrom, Policy Council)
- Broad Street to move shop keepers from renters to owners and done by small increment developers (Gary Bliss, City Policy office)
- The other side of Westminster, near the high schools (Dan Baudouin, Providence Foundation; and Mark Van Noppen, Armory)
- Convene a panel followed by a task force to be engaged on the future of the Jewelry District among residents, property owners and institutions. What's the vision? What's your piece of the vision? Where do you agree and disagree? What choices are to be made? Output: 6 or so quality of life principles to guide development and the creation of Jewelry District neighborhood environment. (Dick Spies, Brown University)
- Promenade (Dick Spies, Brown University)
- Coming together of colleges in neighborhoods as small village centers (Jesse Shefrin, RISD)
- Art Center in West Warwick: How to stimulate downtown development? With 350 new upscale units coming on line, what do people want for retail and amenities? Is there a better way to revive depressed areas than the current law that calls for MED zones (Municipal Economic Development) authorized in West Warwick, Central Falls and Woonsocket, which allows for a business to charge only ½ the sales tax and keep it as well. This policy encourages big box, high volume retail replacing smaller retail. (Kevin Flynn, Statewide Community Development and Planning)

Public Realm, Pubic Spaces

- All public spaces for congregation (The Mayor)
- Cathedral Square (Dan Baudouin, Providence Foundation; Thom Deller, DPD; and Mark Van Noppen, Armory)
- Kennedy Plaza as a transit hub and a public place (The Mayor of Providence; Gary Bliss in the Mayors Policy office, and Mark Therrien at RIPTA.) RIPTA is open to considering how to layer in some kind of Public Square to co-exist with transit. There were three scenarios for the redesign three years ago, two of which included public space, but there was not then the political will to reduce the size of the park and deal with historical considerations to make it work. Secondly, develop a “rolling hub” emanating near Kennedy Plaza and moving out of the city into the neighborhoods to take the load of off it. The Plaza becomes a true Italian plaza and a transit hub at the same time. Overall, give kids and adults something to do there. Put up a stage for concerts (for adults and youth and pay local bands to play). Put up basketball hoops for games during the day when kids hang there. Install planters. Fountains. Tables and chairs for coffee. Get someone to do a coffee shop where the Seven Eleven is and take coffee and goodies across the street to the plaza
- Emmet Square (Richard Godfrey, RI Housing)

Land Re-Use

- 40 acres of land opening up under the relocation of route 195 (Mark Therrien at RIPTA for the location of a second downtown transit hub as a rolling hub; not as a constructed fixed hub like Kennedy Plaza; Kevin Flynn, Statewide Community Development and Planning; and the Mayor)

- Focus on the waterfront in particular. What are the consequences of removing 195? Bring life to the water: Seekonk River and Narragansett Bay. (Jack Gold and some board members at Providence Preservation Society)
- Narragansett Brewery (Richard Godfrey, RI Housing)
- Gorham site (Thom Deller, DPD)
- Narragansett Electric on Broad Street (Richard Godfrey, RI Housing)
- Top of the Bay: Pawtucket, Providence and East Providence watershed (Saul Kaplan, state EDC; Jack Gold, PPS; and Kip Bergstrom, Policy Council)
- Reconnecting downtown with the West and Southside's (Saul Kaplan, state EDC and Dan Baudouin, Providence Foundation)
- East Providence Waterfront (Kevin Flynn, Statewide Community Development and Planning)

Revitalizing of Our Mill Villages and Towns

- Blackstone Valley (Jan Reitsma, Blackstone Valley Heritage Corridor; Kip Bergstrom, Policy Council Tom Kravitz – Burrillville Planner)
- Borderlands – RI/CT border (Kip Bergstrom, Policy Council)
- Village Growth Centers. Create a model where the environment, affordable housing and density come together. Currently, in more rural areas, we have no public water and sewers access and these areas require a 2- acre minimum. DEM has yet to allow for packaged, localized sewer treatment plants. In the cities: What about transforming suburban streets like Reservoir Avenue to have 3 to 4 levels of density; cluster it so there is traditional town centers with higher buildings on either sides. (Kevin Flynn, Statewide Community Development and Planning; Tom Kravitz, Burrillville Planner; and Richard Godfrey, RI Housing who is going public with a “new village” concept)
- Redesign schools (The Mayor and Dan Baudouin, Providence Foundation)
- Providence Waterfront and Working Harbors (Jan Reitsma, Blackstone Valley Heritage Corridor; The Mayor, and Kevin Flynn, Statewide Office of Community Development and Planning)

Re-Designing Regulations and Zoning

- Focus on the partnership of the state, city/town hall and others -- (Doug Foy MA DEM; Curt Spaulding, Save the Bay; Paul Choquette, Gilbane Co; Mark Van Noppen, Armory Revival; and Tom Kravitz, Burrillville Planner)
- City zoning that is about community making to blends transportation, more density, mixed use and lifestyle and neighborhood markets (Mark Van Noppen, Armory and Gary Bliss, Policy office in the City)
- One stop city building to include, transit, sewer and water, schools, road and park management, street lights, and housing (Doug Foy, Mass DEM)

Three other problems of Providence that lend themselves to urban laboratories include: parking, green building (ala Gordon Avenue incubator, and 21st century work spaces.

Appendix III: Learning Formats to Tackle Issues in the City and Region

The previous section is a long and thoughtful list of urban issues to learn from and solve in Providence and the region. The question that produced these ideas was directed at what issues can urban labs address? But the conversation was so rich that diverse learning options, beyond labs, surfaced as viable approaches. Further, the list is larger than what the Congress or the city can handle at this time. Yet all are mission-critical to shape the future of the city and region. Consequently, some issues might fit for the original urban laboratories. Still others may fill program holes and fit better for other kinds of learning sessions at the Congress in the convention center. And still other issues are best for continuous attention at forums within the city and region independent of the Congress, both pre and post Congress.

The New Urbanist Laboratory: This kind of laboratory at the Congress would feature a new urbanist, local practitioners and vested constituents examining and discussing the situation in the field and at the congress site. The lens of analysis is the practice of new urbanism. The labs are opportunities to witness and shape a project in motion or jumpstart a new project.

A Living Laboratory is for the more wickedly complex urban problems. It would go beyond, but include, new urbanist practice (the charrette process and other new urbanist tools). A living laboratory will include other place-making frameworks to reflect economic, social, cultural, ecological, and community knowledge elements of the city. Further, it would include other participatory and visualization processes/tools to infuse into the learning and change process based on urban conditions and needs.

Both kinds of laboratories would start before the Congress and continue after it.

Best Practice Forums to extract best practice from one location and apply it to another.

Policy Debates to rankle over what would approach works best to solve what problems.

Learning Salons or Cafes to work with pre-defined urban issues to identify what practices are working and what has to come next.

We need a fuller understanding of the scope of each issue to determine what is the best approach – a new urbanist lab, living lab, best practice session, policy debate or learning salon/cafe, as well as knowledge of the conditions surrounding each issue to determine which format fits which issue.