



# Brown University Urban Studies Newsletter

Spring 2005

## The Wrong Side of the Tracks

Aaron Stelson '05

The Amtrak station in Westerly, Rhode Island divides the small town. To the south, shops and restaurants bustle and Wilcox Park welcomes picnickers and duck-feeders. To the north, a littered field opens into a neighborhood torn by the closure of several mills. The North End, once a thriving Italian-immigrant community, now houses local bars and junkyards. Triple-deckers with peeling paint and crumbling porches characterize the abutting residential section. It is precisely neighborhoods such as the North End which Rhode Island's Growth Center Initiative has targeted.

In 2002, the Governor's Growth Planning Council issued a report encouraging the designation of growth centers in Rhode Island to conserve state and municipal resources, utilize infrastructure, foster community, protect farm and forest land, offer transportation alternatives, and provide new housing options. Growth centers would be identified for funding according to existing infrastructure, growth pressures and the promotion of compact, mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly development.

The Council identified two pilot sites: the East Providence Waterfront and the Village of Harrisville in Burrillville. Both locations have been able to coordinate local policy and state and federal funding to promote redevelopment. East Providence has embarked on a project to redefine their waterfront as a new downtown. Zoning laws require pedestrian-friendly develop-

ment, which includes affordable housing and retains public access to the waterfront. Developers have proposed several projects for area including GeoNova's \$200 million new village.

In accordance with the proposed Initiative, Burrillville established a "Village Planned Development" provision allowing Burrillville to ease density and setback requirements in exchange for planned pedestrian friendly developments. Using this provision and funding from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, The Community Builders, an affordable housing developer, has begun to redevelop the Stillwater Mill as senior housing. The proposal also includes plans for a new public library in the second phase of development. Both Harrisville and East Providence plans have been to redevelop abandoned properties and control growth in specific centers.

Although the revitalization plan recommends that Westerly pursue growth center designation for the North End, Westerly has been slow to move in this direction. Zoning in North End requires setbacks, densities and parking at levels characteristic of suburban areas. The result is that nearly every building in the North End, most of which were constructed before the establishment of zoning codes, is a nonconforming structure. This greatly increases the costs of redevelopment and thus reduces the level of investment in the neighborhood. The

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# Letter from the Editors: Up Close and Personal

Lee Reynolds '05 & Samuel Cochran '05

Greetings Urban Studies alumni, faculty, and concentrators:

It is the eve of our winter vacation, and Sam and I eagerly await our respective trips to Los Angeles and Barcelona. As students of Urban Studies, cities provide a dual-attraction: they are not only arenas for recreation but laboratories in which to test the theories and hypotheses of our coursework. Public transportation, sustainable architecture, urban renewal, and education reform: these are interests best examined up close. In our encounters with new cities, we relish the opportunity to apply our education first-hand.

The Urban Studies Newsletter offers faculty, students and alumni an idea of the current activities of the Department and the interests and ideas of current concentrators.

This edition documents both student work and student experiences – in short their encounters with cities both physically and academically. Aaron Stelson '05 discusses the Rhode Island Growth Center Initiative and its potential for success in Westerly, Rhode Island. Kerry Meath '05 summarizes her senior thesis research on counter-terrorism efforts in Providence and her proposed evacuation measures. Hannah Bascom '05 reflects upon her experience as a volunteer for English for Action while Becky Hurwitz '06 describes her introduction to urban life while studying in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Melissa Epstein '06 and Evin Issacson '07 both share their course work for Downtown Development, taught by David Meyers. Melissa investigates the co-dependence of the Dot-Com industry in the city of Atlanta. Evin articulates the need to reconcile redevelopment schemes with the existing idiosyncrasies of downtown Austin, Texas.

We hope that this newsletter provides insight into both the current direction of the Urban Studies Department and the endeavors of its sophisticated concentrators. Moreover, we expect that these pieces highlight contemporary issues facing the global cities addressed. If we cannot get there ourselves, we are happy to live vicariously.

Lee Reynolds '05  
Samuel Cochran '05

## *Editors-in-Chief*

Lee Reynolds '05  
Samuel Cochran '05

## *Design & Layout*

Rolando Peñate '06

The Urban Studies Newsletter is an annual publication of the Urban Studies Program at Brown University.

## News from the Department...

The Urban Studies DUG (Department Undergraduate Group) led this year by Lee Reynolds '05 and Zachary Youngerman '05 continues to provide Urban Studies students with monthly meetings in which Urban Affairs are discussed. This November, Dean Stratouly, president of The Congress Group, a real estate development, construction, property/asset management and investment company in Boston, MA., joined the DUG to discuss development projects in Boston and Las Vegas. Among other events, the DUG is planning an alumni panel in late March which will provide current students the chance to speak with alumni of all ages and of various fields of work. The DUG is an example of Brown University's efforts to provide opportunities for interactive education to its students.

Unfortunately, there will not be a Harriet David Goldberg Conference on Urban Affairs this year. However, the Harriet David Goldberg fund will be much appreciated by students who undertake summer research projects.



# Counterterrorism in Providence

*Kerry Meath '05*

Over the last three years, urban planning has started to take on several new forms as planners prepare their cities for the threat of a terrorist attack. Citizens nationwide, especially those in large urban centers, have lived with the fear that their communities could be attacked by biological, chemical or physical weapons of mass destruction. The Federal government has been equally concerned about the safety of its citizens and therefore has mandated that all states take preparedness measures for their communities. While this work does not generally involve changing the landscape of cities, it does involve working with community leaders and organizations to create preparedness strategies for the city. Creating plans to address biological weapon strikes within an urban setting is a comprehensive task that involves taking into consideration many characteristics. To successfully and efficiently implement a comprehensive distribution system, planners must consider several issues including the size of inoculation sites, language characteristics, transportation issues, and the interaction between the citizens.

A crucial component of the Medical Emergency Distribution System (MEDS) plan is establishing the type and number of MEDS sites that should be established. My research employs Arcview 3.3 (Geographic Information Systems or GIS) to help determine suitable sites for dispensing medication and sheltering dis-

placed citizens. In choosing a site I found it important to consider what size building would be most appropriate in each community.

A large site, such as the Duncan Donuts Civic Center in Providence, has the capability to hold hundreds of citizens at a given time. However, putting hundreds of people together in an emergency could be chaotic and dangerous, both inside and outside the building. People inside could potentially become aggressive, causing them to push and shove one another in order to ensure that they receive medication. On the outside, parking could become unruly as thousands of panicked citizens try to find spaces. A smaller site, such as a public school, might still be chaotic but easier to control. Therefore a greater number of smaller sites would be ideal. Public schools fit this 'perfect' size, and with around 52 public schools in Providence these institutions are well suited to the task. Public schools contain most of the amenities needed, such as handicap accessibility and back-up generators; more importantly, they are familiar to the community. People are more likely to know each other there and feel more comfortable during a crisis.

After I mapped public schools (using Arcview 3.3), each location was more specifically analyzed. I was able to consider the local population surrounding each school, the ward lines and the size capacity of each fa-

cility. Using block level census data, I looked spatially at language, vehicle, and disability information, as well as household data. I then looked at the specific needs at each site.

After doing my research, I decided on sixteen Red Cross Shelters and sixteen medical dispensing sites. The Providence Emergency Management is currently using this information in their MEDS plan development, because they recognize that site development is crucial. It is important for Providence to have these plans in place for an emergency. Looking at this from an urban planning perspective is valuable when trying to create effective and organized plans. The planning methods I have employed could be used by other cities in their MEDS plan development or in similar research that prepares cities for biological emergencies. While I hope that bioterrorism never strikes Providence, it is important for PEMA to take realistic preparedness measures to protect the city and its residents.



# Reconciling Authentic Urbanity

*Evin Isaacson '07*

For the last ten years, urban centers across America have engaged in successively larger construction projects aimed at breathing life into cities through arts, entertainment, and retail attractions. This proliferation of performing arts centers, baseball stadiums and museums are seen as bait with which to lure tourists – and their dollars – back into the increasingly empty urban cores. This effort to revitalize cities via the production of so called authentic cultural urbanity threatens to sanitize the very diversity and idiosyncrasy of the downtown. Nowhere is this fear of homogenization more palpable than Austin, Texas. Austin's downtown – which features an assortment of locally owned arts, retail, and entertainment venues – struggles to reconcile a need for increased consumer traffic with a desire to keep Austin, for lack of a better word, weird.

Preserving the unique character of downtown, Austin has been a primary goal of the public, private and non-profit sectors. Austin's April 15, 2003 Mayoral Forum discussed repeatedly importance of keeping Austin, Austin. The grassroots campaign dubbed "Keep Austin Weird" has achieved national notoriety due in large part to its distribution of t-shirts and bumper stickers in addition to a highly publicized five-kilometer citywide run. Pioneered by the local business community, this self-titled "collaborative fission of coordinated individualism," has portrayed the

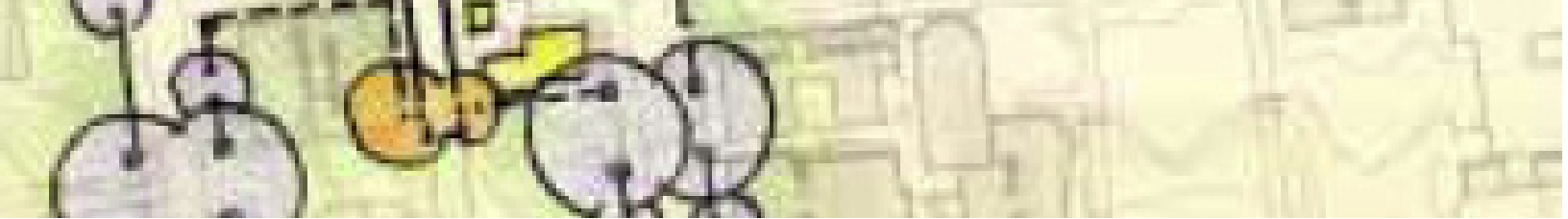
home-grown arts, retail and music scenes as the essential components of the city. The power of independent business community lies in its coordinated marketing and lobbying efforts. The Downtown Austin Alliance has developed an extensive publicity campaign for local retail, restaurants and music venues, while the Downtown Austin Neighborhood Association provides businesses with yet another voice in local government.

In the midst of these efforts, there is another image-shaping trend taking place in downtown Austin. The Austin Convention Center doubled its square footage in 2002. The Palmer Auditorium is being converted into the state-of-the-art Long Center for the Performing Arts. Hotels such as the Austin Hilton have followed in the wake of these construction projects, eager to meet the needs of the anticipated tourist wave. Promisingly, the Convention Center has events booked as far into the future as 2011.

While Austin's locally owned business sector has reveled in the traffic generated by these cultural construction projects, the buzz has also attracted several national chains and potential competitors including P.F. Chang's, Hard Rock Café and Borders. While the Austin-based business owners clearly fear for their own survival in the face of these new neighbors, their public objections to this retail development have struck

with many unaffiliated Austin residents who believe national chains destroy the individual character of the city. Indeed, former staples of the Austin music club scene have been forced to leave due to rising rents responding to corporate demand.

Even critics of Austin's development nonetheless agree that increased consumer traffic is necessary to support any growing retail and entertainment district. It is thus necessary to balance the divergent needs to construct tourist draws and maintain idiosyncratic arts and retail establishments. Austin already has an organic, artistic and weird identity – an asset to the economic success of any downtown. The future of Austin will be determined by the willingness of local business coalitions and their wide base of public support to reconcile their vision with that of developers in order to create a coordinated development plan and a sustainable, profitable retail, arts and entertainment district.



# Boom and Bust: Atlanta's Dot-Com Industry

*Melissa Epstein '06*

In 1999 and early 2000, business companies believed the internet would soon take over the world. Thriving dot-com companies like eTour.com, Realestate.com and WorldCom founded their national headquarters in Atlanta whose diversified economy, educated labor force and low cost of living provided access to high level services and top worldwide corporations while enabling them to fashion an image as an upper division corporation in a global city. As dot-com companies did so, Atlanta became the high tech industry center on the East Coast.

Dot-com companies filled available downtown office space and demanded more. Atlanta experienced a rapid increase in net absorption of square footage as demand overpowered supply. Anticipating huge benefits from the increase in demand for space, investors quickly kicked off various development projects in order to capitalize on the rapidly rising rent. As always, the stability and security of the dot-com industry rested in the hands of the stock market and America's unpredictable economy.

Companies thus bought vast amounts of office space in Atlanta in the hope that the market would drive the future growth of their businesses. Major companies like the Turner Broadcasting System – though only indirectly related to the dot-com businesses – began to build completely new buildings to accommodate

an increase in high-tech jobs in the future years. The dot-com industry had stimulated office development in Atlanta, for the first time in ten years since the completion of the SunTrust Banks building. Developers nonetheless wondered how long the dot-com industry's success would last.

The commercial real estate cycle hit a quick boom and an even quicker bust. As early as April 2000, dot-com companies felt the strong impact of the stock market plummet. Office space once owned by IKON lay abandoned for months when less than a year earlier the space would have been snatched in seconds. The dot-com industry had crashed, leaving empty loft, warehouse and tower space. Supply exceeded demand. Buildings along the Atlanta skyline were soon dubbed “see-through” because so few men worked in each building.

This boom and bust phenomenon created lasting positive and negative effects for the city of Atlanta. Economic uncertainty in the downtown left high vacancy, negative absorption numbers, slow leasing and a decrease in construction in all aspects of downtown office life. Through the boom of the dot-com industry, Atlanta nonetheless acquired a new type of businessman in the downtown, technological improvements for the city, international networks, a new demand for jobs, an attractive new arts culture, upgraded office facilities

and most importantly international name recognition in a specific industry. The city of Atlanta provided the dot-com industry vast amounts of space for corporate headquarters thus allowing them to consolidate their company, acquire cheap office space and most importantly international name recognition in a specific and well developed city.



# Finding the Community Within

Hannah Bascom '05

Today in Providence, immigrants represent 62 countries and speak 57 languages. While the influx of this diverse population has benefited the city – immigrants constitute the sole significant source of population growth in the city over the past decade – it has also created many challenges. Providence citizens and officials struggle to assure the social integration and economic well-being of a population whose opportunities for success have been dramatically diminished by their inadequate language skills.

Earlier this year, I began working with English for Action, an organization which provides classes devoted to language and practical skills to local adults. The program strives to lift adult members from the low wage jobs they have been limited to due to their language capacity while also focusing on building stronger bonds between parents, their children and their neighborhoods.

To encourage attendance among men and women with children, the program provides childcare three meetings a week and hosts weekly workshops with both parent and child. To encourage social cohesion, the program brings the adult citizen into a group with similar needs and interests which facilitates awareness and informal community empowerment and solidarity. In the American city, I believe that organizations such as English for Action which provide

both education and family support bridge the gap between language barriers.

Elementary, middle and high school ESL and bilingual education programs form the other essential part of English education. Many problems nonetheless lessen the impact of such programs to educate these students; its success depends on the stability of the student population. Increased mobility among students in addition to high dropout and absentee rates thus threaten to limit the impact of such programs. In Providence, approximately 18% of children are absent each day – the highest absentee rate in the state; 33% of a Providence school's population will change within the school year; and less than 400 of the 1,850 or so students who enter kindergarten each year will graduate high school together. Mobility, high drop-out rates and instability are only a few factors that challenge the successful education of students.

By fostering the parent-child bond and the citizen- community bond, programs such as English for Action tie families, perhaps permanently, to their respective neighborhoods. Also, by encouraging parents to participate in and witness the results of their child's education, such programs discourage parents from allowing their child to be absent. Finally, by teaching adults English, such programs allow for a higher wage job in their current neighborhood.

## Student Profile:

Rachel Lauter, '06 was awarded the 2004 Undergraduate Student Project Award by the RI Chapter of the American Planning Association. This award is annually presented to a student for academic or applied research, studio projects, community service or other works related to community research and planning. This honor recognizes Rachel's report entitled "Inclusionary Zoning: How Rhode Island Can Plan for Affordable Housing." Much of the material that Rachel collected can be found on the RI Statewide Planning Website and is frequently used in workshops to train local officials on zoning. Rachel's primary urban interests include housing, homelessness and urban poverty. She hopes to run for office in the future.

## Alumni Profile:

Recent graduate, Robin Reid '04, is studying sustainable architecture in one of the most dynamic urban places in the world: Barcelona, Spain. She was awarded a Fulbright scholarship last spring and is very much enjoying the challenges and the excitement of living abroad. Robin loves the Park Guell by Antoni Gaudi and all other Gaudi creations.



# Buenos Aires: Urban Studies Abroad

Rebecca Hurwitz '06

I am not sure whether or not I have class today. Everyday in Buenos Aires different political movements stage their respective marches and protests. Notices advertising a strike at the University of Buenos Aires line the interior and exterior walls of the sociology building on Marcelo T. de Alvear Street where I take classes. A mass of students hands out leaflets about the IMF, President Kirchner and the Argentinean student movement. Students urge me to come to a meeting, to get involved.

The University of Buenos Aires (UBA) spans the entire city. Its twelve campuses struggle to accommodate 300,000 students. In many of my classes, students have to sit on the floor. While there is no official Urban Studies department at UBA, everything about being a student here is urban.

The University leads you to every part of the city and the life of the student in turn becomes synonymous

with the life of the city. Indeed, education is part of urban life. Students of all ages come and go at every time of day and night to their respective classes. Women and men of sixty sit side by side with women and men of twenty. Some arrive late because they have been working the whole day. Although many students must balance work, family and politics with their education, they still come to class having highlighted the reading – so poorly photocopied that I can barely read it – in two colors. Whereas some of these students intend to finish a degree, others take the class simply to continue their government funded education. It is hard to characterize this group of people apart from their shared passion for education. Class strikes me more as a conversation between people in a crowded room than a structured lesson.

At Brown I find it easy to invest myself wholly in my work and nothing else. I have yet to integrate myself

fully into Providence despite its obvious pertinence to my urban studies education. While in Buenos Aires, I have constantly studied the city even when I don't mean to or when I hardly realize it. To walk down the street in Buenos Aires and to attend the university is to experience everything about the city first hand – from its constant energy to its frail physical structures. It feels foreign but fitting to academically analyze the city in my class and then upon leaving to watch my companions dissolve towards different bus routes. I feel like I understand what I see because of what I have read, but I also feel removed from what I have seen because of what I have read. To be confronted by urban life at all moments makes it both harder and easier to reconcile my academic understanding of the city with my experience of the city. When I leave class after several hours, I wonder when students will next gather with their painted signs in the streets or in front of their legislature.

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North End's infrastructure is either in disrepair or nonexistent. Little marketing has been undertaken for those underutilized properties ripe for redevelopment. Westerly has been unable to secure funding from federal or state governments to push redevelopment in the North End.

Westerly has taken small steps toward redevelopment. The North End Neighborhood Crime Watch and

Rhode Island Housing have begun redevelopment of seven structures as affordable housing. However, the project is running behind schedule due to the inexperience of Crime Watch and increased costs attributed to restrictive zoning. Westerly has also pursued designation as an historic district, which would offer tax incentives. Still, it is unlikely that these incentives alone would spur development.

If Westerly hopes to redevelop the

North End and link it to the downtown, it must combine the small-scale redevelopment and historic district designation with changes in the zoning code, significant public improvements, increased marketing of the neighborhood, and funding from the state and federal government. Only when a more comprehensive revitalization plan is pursued will the North End cease to be, literally, on the wrong side of the tracks.