

Brown University Urban Studies Newsletter Spring 2006



Table of Contents

Letter from the Editor.....	p. 2
2006 Honors Project Summaries.....	p. 2
Towards a Model of Sustainable Transportation in Cape Town, by Amy Barad.....	p. 3
Providence's Role in Helping Hope High School, by Robbie Corey-Boulet.....	p. 4
Geography and Collective Identity in Manhattan, by Caitlin Boyle.....	p. 5

2006 Honors Project Summaries

Letter from the Editor:

On Saturday, March 18, a collaborative forum titled “Design Matters: Forum II on the Providence Waterfront” convened in Providence. The forum was sponsored by the Providence Preservation Society with Brown University Urban Studies (through the Harriet David Goldberg Fund), RISD City-State, Save The Bay, AIARI (American Institute of Architects, Rhode Island), and Roger Williams University School of Architecture and Historic Preservation. Included in the forum was an exhibition designed by RISD students and three Brown students— Caroline Jordi, Matt Willse, and John Wooster—recommending design solutions for the area opened up by the relocation of Interstate 195. The exhibition, “Big Plans, Best Practices: Reconnecting Providence,” is an example of the rich relationship between Providence and students of urban issues.

Over the past decade, Providence has undergone massive physical, cultural, social, and political changes. Students and faculty witness these changes and often jump eagerly into opportunities to think critically about them and suggest appropriate policy. The lessons learned in Providence carry students far. While some choose to contain their study and activism locally, others apply their knowledge on a national or global scale. This edition of the Urban Studies Newsletter reflects students’ relationship with Providence as well as the world beyond.

--Rebecca Sauer, Editor-in-Chief

Caroline Jordi is writing a thesis examining the relocation of Interstate 195 in Providence. Providence has a rich history of movement and change. The city has moved a river, train tracks, buildings, and most recently, this major highway that bisects the city.

With the relocation of Interstate 195, between 20 and 33 acres of land in downtown Providence will be freed up and available for park space



and private use. There are several different proposals in place for the use of this land. Caroline will analyze these proposals as well as compare Providence to Boston and Berlin, other cities that have undergone similar projects. Her comprehensive report will hopefully be useful to the City of Providence in deciding between these various schemes. Additionally, through a Geographic Information Services (GIS) analysis of the area, Caroline intends to provide the Providence Planning Department with accurate data as to the future needs of the city as it continues to grow.

Kelly Gagnon is writing a thesis on the construction of the Teddy Ebersol Red Sox Fields at Lederman

Park in Boston. The park, located on the Charles River Esplanade, is being redeveloped with public funds as well as a large donation made by the Red Sox Foundation, in honor of Teddy Ebersol, the deceased son of Dick Ebersol (president of NBC Sports). Because of this public-private partnership, there is an opportunity to construct a high quality facility and also a responsibility to the public to create an appropriately inclusive service area. A Field Use Agreement is currently being created to determine what communities— “local” versus “regional”—will use the fields, which will open in the spring of 2006. Kelly’s study uses Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technology to identify populations within a reasonable travel distance and in greatest need of the park. Populations are rated based on Environmental Justice status, a high percentage of youth, and a lack of access to comparable parks/facilities. Based on these findings, Kelly will make recommendations for the Field Use Agreement to present to the funding organizations.

Melissa Epstein’s senior thesis analyzes the redevelopment of brownfield sites. Brownfields are abandoned or underused industrial and commercial sites that have been contaminated by prior industrial uses. The perceived or real environmental contamination adds risk to the development of these sites. However, in recent years developers have realized the economic and social value behind these idle properties, and despite the brownfield risks being greater than those of greenfields, have

Continued on p. 6

Towards a Model of Sustainable Transportation in Cape Town

by Amy Barad, '07

“Democracy without access means nothing”
(Enrique Peñalosa, Former Mayor of Bogotá,
Colombia).

South Africa stands as the world's most divided society today. In its urban areas, this inequality is manifested into myriad challenges, including housing, the provision of basic needs and services, education, sanitation, and public transport. I spent four of my seven months abroad in South Africa in Cape Town. Because I did not have a car there, the lack of safe and sustainable public transport certainly impacted me. Although Cape Town does contain a commuter railway linking the suburbs, grave accounts of violence and crime on board deters many people from using them. Additionally, the fee system is based on distance and disproportionately affects the poor, who live far away from the central city due to remaining apartheid zoning laws. People who have access retreat to personal cars. Those who do not have access, like me, rely on minibus taxis, which prove too expensive for the poor.

The Bicycling Empowerment Network (BEN), an integrated system devised by a Cape Town Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), is an attempt towards a viable solution to the transport crisis. BEN will emulate a transport paradigm created by former Bogotá mayor, Enrique Peñalosa between 1998 and 2001. It attempts to spawn sustainable development and close the inequality gap. Bogotá and Cape Town bear similar socioeconomic challenges, which are manifested spatially. BEN illustrates a move away from simple pro-poor strategies and instead engineers a system that

would generate positive implications for the entire society.

According to Peñalosa, “The backbone of the alternative city model [consists of] pedestrian streets, sidewalks and parks, supported by excellent public transport.” Bicycles, a basic and social form of transportation, are critical to the plan. The recently completed Transmilenio System in Bogotá is an integrated transport system that involves buses, bicycle lanes and pedestrian lanes. The bus stations themselves contain bike storage areas and guards and are dispersed in a wide radius around the city to increase accessibility. Pedestrian lanes are deliberately positioned in median strips dividing the two directions of traffic in attempt to create a visual symbol that walking and equality are at the center of the city's policy. Car use is legally limited through the implementation of “No Car Days” and the conversion of parking spaces in the central city to sidewalks.

In a lecture that I attended in Cape Town in September, BEN member, Andrew Wheeldon, expressed excitement about the social consequences of a similar system in Cape Town. In a society plagued by gates, fences and the privatization of public spaces, safe public parks and transportation with a diverse ridership could significantly benefit the community and contingently lower crime and violence. Additionally, South Africa currently faces a large unemployment crisis, with statistics measuring about forty-five percent of the population. An integrated transport system necessitates bike guards, bus drivers and many manual

laborers, creating sizable economic opportunities. BEN has received commercial support from firms willing to provide subsidies on bicycles and will charge a flat rate for all bus rides, regardless of distance, making this system more equitable. The environmental and health benefits of mass transit are undoubtedly positive. The petrol crises that Cape Town has been facing since December provide a startling example of the need for this creative solution.

Personally, I felt that the most compelling feature of the BEN's plan derived from the notion of one city looking to another with a similar context as a reference for sustainable development. Regardless of the eventual success or failure of BEN, this notion of averting top-down bureaucratic structures and fostering a community between urban areas of the developing world struck me as very inspiring.



Image from
<http://www.benbikes.org.za/>

Providence's Role in Helping Hope High School

by Robbie Corey-Boulet, '07

In February of 2004, state Education Commissioner Peter McWalters unveiled plans to improve Providence's notoriously under-performing Hope High School, which had for years been plagued by low test scores, a high number of suspensions and a dropout rate of 52 percent. While the school was, by nearly all counts, failing to meet basic performance standards, it was unclear prior to McWalters' intervention whether Hope would remain under management of the Providence Public School District or whether the state would assume control of its daily operations.

At the time, Hope embodied many of the problems hindering urban public schools nationwide. In addition to sub-par student performance, the school faced harsh budget constraints, and teachers commented on the difficulties of administering personalized education to a growing immigrant population.

As McWalters geared up for a comprehensive intervention, leaders of local youth and faith-based organizations charged with evaluating Hope's status and future prospects urged him to shut the school down, with one stating publicly that, "The system has failed." These leaders, however, were divided as to whether Hope should remain under city auspices or whether the state should relieve the school district of its duties. Given that the state seemed unlikely to allocate further funding to the school no matter who was in charge, McWalters' decision became a judgment call as to whether the Providence Public School District or Rhode Island's education department could better manage

the struggling urban institution.

Following over two months of deliberations, McWalters decided to let the city retain control. Though he mandated a wide range of internal improvements and installed a "Special Master" to ensure that these changes were effectively implemented, Hope kept its autonomy.



Once McWalters announced his corrective action plan in February, the district underwent a thorough restructuring of the faculty, ensuring that all teachers at Hope were committed to the plan's initiatives. Administrators bolstered the school's advising programs and heightened ongoing improvements to foster individualized education and teacher-student relationships. In addition, district veterans Wayne Montague and Arthur Petrosinelli took over as the school's principals, providing leadership that drew on their collective experiences with the Providence school system and its students.

Hope's improvements under the plan

seem to affirm Providence's ability to handle even its most troublesome institutions. Rather than assume that more powerful state bureaucracies can better cater to municipal needs, proponents of school reform should instead attempt to tap into the city's strengths as a willing and enthusiastic agent for change.

The difference is "like night and day," long-time Hope employee Ralph Taylor told the *Brown Daily Herald* in October. "I've been through three different administrations here, and this is the first time I've seen the kids the way they are – enthusiastic."

Montague and Petrosinelli corroborated reports that disciplinary problems are on the decline, adding that students have thus far reacted positively to the more personalized nature of revised curriculums.

In the end, the lowering of Hope's dropout rate and an increase in test scores may ultimately hinge on factors beyond the city's control. The school remains chronically under-funded, and everyone from longtime faculty members to student volunteers have complained about limited resources and programs overwhelmed by rising student populations.

But long-time school employees have wholeheartedly praised the positive effects of McWalters' plan. Granted, Hope has yet to complete a full year with the reforms in place, but early indications support the argument that urban public schools can in fact thrive under municipal supervision.

Geography and Collective Identity in Manhattan

by Caitlin Boyle, '07

As a product of Columbus, Ohio--a culture that fosters zealous Buckeye fans--I have experienced firsthand the phenomenon of collective identity. My semester at the Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning and Preservation, exposed me to another reputable example of local pride and collective identity: Manhattan Island and its residents. Manhattanites have an infamous confidence and, arguably, an implicit respect for their fellow Manhattanites. Perhaps Manhattan's geographic status as an island facilitates and reinforces the cohesion of its residents.

This September, in an exercise for my studio class, I explored the relationship between the physical island and the common identity on Manhattan. My exploration was facilitated by Robert Smithson's project *Floating Island*, a barge planted with vegetation that was pulled around Manhattan by a tugboat. Smithson's vision was in motion from 8am-8pm September 17-25th, 2005, twenty-five years after he sketched it on a napkin.

While tracking the barge using cell phones and other technology, I attempted to document responses on Manhattan Island. My partner Misha surveyed the perimeter of the island, following the barge along the public spaces on the water. He reported information back to me via cell phone and left voice messages for public retrieval on NowPublic.com. I remained in the middle of the island as a

center figure, unifying the fragments of information he presented by creating a website and a blog and assisting in determining his route. In this process, Misha and I engaged the concepts of periphery/center and fragments/whole. I then extended these concepts to investigate the identity/island relationship.



The parks along the periphery of the island of Manhattan, and the greenways that connect them are satellites to Central Park. The mobile barge acted as a contrast to these static satellites.

Whit1512 post on the blog:

I love that it is somewhat a tribute to Central Park, and speaks to the importance of having green space on the island. *I almost wish they could just anchor it down out there and it could be a permanent fixture of the Hudson River.* Since that's probably not the most economical, replanting the trees in Central Park is a fantastic idea.

This comment prompts reflection on how a permanent barge would affect Manhattan and the identity of Manhattanites differently than the traveling barge. There are then three cases to consider: A, in which there is

no barge; B, in which the barge moves around the island; and C, in which the barge is anchored in the Hudson River.

A. When there is no barge, Manhattanites use Central Park as an orientation guide. Their focus extends/projects inward since the park is located in the center of the city. This common point of reference is a unifying agent that creates a common identity among Manhattanites.

B. The barge in motion surpasses Central Park as a common orientation guide because it is temporary and unusual. The barge draws people out to the periphery of the

island and, in their physical displacement, they reinforce and recognize the physical boundary of Manhattan. This forges a new common identity among Manhattanites, based on their understanding of their physical isolation.

C. In the third scenario the barge is anchored and its magnetic quality has different implications. It creates a division among Manhattanites, as those in its vicinity recognize it and transgress the water barrier to identify with New Jerseyites that also relate to the barge.

Due to the recent development of Manhattan's waterfronts, the exhibition is quite timely. The ideas raised by the barge stimulate consideration of the impacts that reclaimed waterfronts will have on the identity and cohesion of Manhattan's residents.

Urban Studies Newsletter

assumed the challenge of turning these properties into positive assets for the surrounding community. Using five case studies she will be analyzing the interrelationship of the key players in the development process and the collaborative trends behind individual motives. She intends to show how combined efforts by developer, government, investor and community groups expedite the redevelopment process while simultaneously reducing the risks of developing on a contaminated site, ultimately providing an outlet for urban economic revitalization and social consensus. The five case studies are: Atlantic Station in Atlanta, Georgia, Tide Point in Baltimore, Maryland, Victory Park in Dallas, Texas, The Gateway District in Salt Lake City, Utah, and Carson Marketplace in Carson, California.

Rebecca Sauer's thesis examines skateboarding as an urban spatial practice, subculture, and form of art. Her paper argues that skateboarders creatively reuse space and actively engage in the physical architecture of the city in a unique manner. Accompanying this paper, which is both historical and analytical, is an installation at the John Nicholas Brown Center's Carriage House Gallery on Benefit St., in Providence. A combination of both audio and visual stimuli in the installation space will simulate the skateboarder's experience in an urban streetscape.

Rachel Lauter is writing her Urban Studies honors thesis on faith-based Community Development Corporations (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia. She is examining the role of these faith-based resource providers

in the governing regime of Atlanta, and specifically asking whether faith-based CDCs in black urban regimes such as Atlanta's are less oppositional to the regime and more private-sector oriented than CDCs working with similar populations that are not faith-based. Her hypothesis is that an emerging progressive voice among black clergy in Atlanta has altered the nature of the political regime and, through faith-based community development efforts, has been advocating for greater public intervention in providing resources for the urban poor.

Using surveys and interviews, the thesis will compare secular and faith-based CDCs by looking at what kinds of resources the organizations provide and how they create linkages between local, state, and federal governments.