

Downtown Design Review Committee Review: Summer Memories

It's been a tame summer for the Downtown Design Review Committee. With so little to report on, your correspondent has resorted to spending weekends out of state on a work-vacation R&R/R&D hybrid, smoking medicinal herbs and studying other zoning schemes for much-needed perspective. Ironically, the hard thinking I've done on the road has left me out of town for some actual DDRC meetings. This August edition of DDRCR will recount my travels and the light development that's been approved by the DDRC at its May, July and August meetings. (I did not accidentally omit the word "June." I was in fact canoeing on a lake in Minneapolis the day of the meeting, and all records of it have been mysteriously expunged from Providence's Open Meetings Portal.)

Before I begin, let me explain that recent DDRC meetings have been uneventful because developers secured approval for their expansive summer campaigns many months in advance. Back columns of the DDRCR can provide you with diligent reporting on such matters, so long as they took place within the boundaries of the D-1 zone. (Real estate criticism is extremely territorial and I stay in my own lane now that I'm top dog at *Motif*.)

Without further ado, let us reminisce.

"The Parking Lot District"

Pre-weathered steel panels are the distressed jeans of architecture. That said, I own distressed jeans and I also approve of the proposed Garrahy Courthouse parking structure's hypothetical paneling. Nothing looks uglier to me than a design that purports to outlast nature.

The multistory Garrahy Courthouse parking structure will replace a surface parking lot at the intersection of Clifford, Richmond and Friendship Streets, an area that a nearby restaurant, the Red Fez, has already dubbed "the parking lot district." Developers at May's meeting were hoping to skirt a requirement that they build retail on the structure's Clifford Street facade. Seemingly in reaction to a series of screeds from Jewelry District residents who attended the meeting, the DDRC will advise the Zoning Board to reject such a variance.

The funniest part of the May meeting was when one developer said, "Friendship is a one-way street," as part of an answer to a resident's question about potential traffic congestion. In Providence, you often don't have to look hard for incriminating symbolism.

The Dog Days of Summer

July was easily the most boring DDRC meeting I've ever attended. Typically I'm fascinated by the Chace family; I can always rely on them to personify a link between ruthless textile industrialism and whatever venture a later generation's business elite has used to exploit public resources for private profit. In the 19th century, the Chaces dammed rivers to spin power looms. In 2017, they build publicly subsidized housing and office space and sell it at market rate. But at the July meeting, the Chaces simply needed to renovate the Biltmore Hotel's garage to make room for a bigger power generator. Lupo's Heartbreak Hotel also got approval for a sign that flashes, and a restaurant slated to open at 385 Westminster

Street can now alter its storefront windows.

I missed August's meeting for a Martha's Vineyard getaway with two couples, a girl I almost dated three years ago and my friend Alan. Weren't you lonely, Doc? No, because I have real estate. Martha's Vineyard is a case study in what authoritarian zoning and land conservation can accomplish, and I was smitten with the fruits of the island's extremely nostalgic planning principles. While I was swimming, eating fish and admiring the Carpenter Gothic style from the back seat of a convertible, developers at 444 Westminster Street were busy hammering two pieces of minor zoning legislation through the DDRC. The weird thing about me is I really wish I could've been there.

A luxury student housing developer is making storefront alterations at the Elizabeth Building (100 North Main Street), one of Providence's few cast-iron buildings. In late July, I spent a hungry day admiring the style in SoHo, the epicenter of cast-iron architecture in New York City and a very expensive place to eat lunch. In SoHo, cast-iron buildings were constructed in the late 19th century for commercial and manufacturing purposes, later evolving into artists housing, then rich artists housing, then just rich housing. Located near the heart of RISD's campus, Providence's Elizabeth building will soon provide rich artists housing.

I recently had my mind blown when I learned that Founders League, Dave's Coffee, the Avery, North Bakery, Revival Brewing Company and every store in the Westminster Arcade share a sign painter. In addition to quietly implementing a unified aesthetic for Providence's hipster economy, Providence Painted Signs (PPS) did the Trinity Repertory Company's new mural, which I think is great. PPS closed the August meeting with an approved request to paint a mural on the western elevation of the Majestic Garage (191 Washington Street).

The Majestic Garage and downtown Providence in general have a weirdly strong mural game and I'm not sure why -perhaps a subject for September's DDRCR. In the meantime, I'm off to Manchester, NH, Gloucester, MA, and select mill villages in the Blackstone Valley to do some more hard thinking.

The Downtown Design Review Committee (DDRC) meets monthly to approve all renovation and construction in Providence's D-1 zoning district. The Downtown Design Review Committee Review (DDRCR) is an almost monthly column that reports on this meeting and its consequences. Doc Brinker will answer any and all land use inquiries at doc_brinker@aol.com.