SECOND EDITION

COLLEGE HILL
a demonstration study of historic area renewal

Conducted by the Providence City Plan Commission in cooperation with the Providence Preservation Society and the Department of Housing and Urban Development
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Copies of this report may be obtained upon request from the City Plan Commission, City Hall, Providence, Rhode Island 02903.
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COLLEGE HILL DEMONSTRATION GRANT STUDY

Conducted by the Providence City Plan Commission with the assistance of Blair Associates, City Planning Consultants, Providence, Rhode Island.

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Dear Mayor Doorley:

Subject: Urban Renewal Demonstration Project No. R.I. D-1a

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to make Urban Renewal Demonstration Funds available for reprinting the College Hill demonstration study of 1959, with an additional chapter summarizing the activities in the College Hill area since the original publication.

The citation accompanying the American Institute of Architects’ award to the Providence City Plan Commission in 1960, in recognition of the Commission’s leadership in preparing the College Hill study, summarized the value of this study:

No other city in the United States has presented its historic conservation and rehabilitation problems as clearly, as succinctly or as beautifully. In our opinion, this is a major contribution to American architecture, to community planning and to civic design.

The City of Providence and the Providence Preservation Society are also to be congratulated for the major contribution made by the College Hill study to the methodology for planning the preservation and renewal of areas of historic architecture. The analytical techniques and planning procedures developed in this study are valuable guides which have been used by many other communities undertaking a program of historic preservation.

We in the Department of Housing and Urban Development are glad that this reprinting will once more make the College Hill study available to persons and organizations concerned with planning for the preservation of our country’s historic buildings and sites.

Sincerely yours,

Robert C. Weaver
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The outside cover shows Providence as it appeared on an old print in 1849.
FOREWORD

Throughout the nation historic architecture in the urban scene has been subjected to a continuous process of loss and deterioration. The art that is architecture cannot be collected in a gallery but lives on in the buildings themselves. Cities are the museums of buildings and the people are their curators; the citizens of old cities are responsible for finding ways to safeguard, renew and bring historic architecture into living use in the contemporary world. If over a period of time, the best structures of the past can be saved and the poor ones replaced, the cities will become repositories of man’s outstanding architectural achievements. Unfortunately, but few mechanisms for control and judgement of architecture exist on a city-wide scale, and good buildings are indiscriminately torn down with the bad as city changes take place.

ORIGIN OF STUDY

Awareness of the problems of architectural erosion in the College Hill section of Providence prompted the Providence Preservation Society to turn to the City of Providence authorities for help and the city subsequently turned to the Urban Renewal Administration for help. In April, 1957, under the provisions of Section 314 of the Federal Housing Act, the federal government granted the Providence City Plan Commission $48,533 in funds equaling two-thirds of the cost of a demonstration study aimed at developing and improving techniques for urban renewal in a historic area. The terms of the grant required local financial support and the Providence Preservation Society raised $18,530 by popular subscription, while the Providence City Plan Commission guaranteed contributions in staff services to make a total budget of $72,000. The project was allotted eighteen months and was carried out by the city by and through its City Plan Commission which in addition to special project staff engaged the services of the firm of Blair Associates, city planning consultants in Providence. In compliance with the terms of the grant, this report has been prepared and the findings are submitted herein.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

Since both federal and local sources have contributed to the support of the study, its goals, while complementary, are two-fold. The federal government considers College Hill sufficiently typical of other areas in the United States where historic communities have survived. It has chosen to support this particular study so that ideas and techniques could be developed which would prove helpful to other cities in their efforts to renew or preserve historic areas. It is hoped that this study will serve to enlarge the present store of ammunition to be used in the fight to renew the cities of the nation.

On the other hand, local residents have been interested in solving the problems which plague the area, and which made undertaking the study necessary in the first place. Civic officials and the residents of Providence want a plan to help them restore and protect their historic architecture, safeguard and renew their residential neighborhoods, check encroaching blight, chart future growth, build needed modern housing, make good use of waste land, ease traffic and parking situations and create needed parks and playgrounds. The study and the resulting report have been planned to meet the requirements of both federal government and local residents.

COLLEGE HILL

The College Hill study area lies immediately east of the Providence business district, and extends from the Providence River on the west to Hope Street on the east, from Olney Street on the north to the George M. Cohan Boulevard on the south. It contains the original seventeenth century settlement laid out in the time of its founder, Roger Williams, and is one of the few communities in the country where properties in close proximity to the central business district have been held in residential uses, and where descendants of the original settlers are still living.
By-passed by the business expansion of the downtown area, in part because of its steep hillside location, its most important early buildings remain. Still standing is the First Baptist Church in the United States, one of the outstanding colonial buildings in the country. Merchant mansions built just after the Revolutionary War in the first period of great prosperity and some of the finest homes in Providence lie within its confines. All told the area contains over two hundred and fifty residences and sixty-four public and other buildings of the colonial and federal eras. These brick and wooden buildings, edging the sidewalks of the old streets, make a community of early building that give as nothing else can the palpable sense of the city's (and with it, part of the nation's) past. Early Victorian mansions interspersed throughout the area add their note of sober dignity.

Approximately 13,000 people presently live in the area. Of these 3,000 are students in residence at the four higher educational institutions of College Hill: Brown University, Pembroke College, Bryant College and the Rhode Island School of Design. The limited commercial uses on College Hill are primarily related to the neighborhood except for a long strip of office and wholesale activity adjacent to the downtown area.

PROBLEMS

The study area contains overcrowded slums and neglected and worn out buildings. Some of its most important early building, now being submerged in city blight, is in dire need of special attention if the area is to survive. The area contains narrow streets choked with heavy traffic, and the parking problems within it are difficult. It has at present almost no recreational facilities and is in need of a new elementary school. Brown University and Rhode Island School of Design, hemmed in by built-up residential areas some of which contain concentrations of historic architecture, are faced with numerous planning problems as a consequence of their growth. Thoughtful and cooperative planning is needed if these city problems are to be solved and if the area is to retain its unusual character and its distinctive place in the life of the city.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Designed as an intensive city planning study, the purpose of the project has been to consider the broad range of community problems which beset an old section of a city and to develop proposals for the solutions of the physical, economic and social problems of College Hill. A primary intent of the study has been to develop methods and techniques for a program of preservation, rehabilitation and renewal in a historic area which can serve as a guide for other areas with similar problems. The specific aims have been to:

- develop a system for rating historic architecture;
- develop techniques for integrating areas of historic architecture into proposed redevelopment programs;
- develop a comprehensive master plan for the future growth of College Hill, in which the plans for the historic area take their place in the framework of the larger neighborhood plans;
- develop a comprehensive program of historic area preservation by reviewing methods in use elsewhere in the country and combining these with the new ideas developed in the study;
- demonstrate visually how contemporary architecture can successfully relate to existing historic architecture; thus attempting to dispel the idea that historic area preservation need foster eclecticism.
SUMMARY

The final report of the College Hill Study has been planned as a blueprint for action, and has also been designed to serve as a model for historic area renewal. It is composed of three major divisions:

PART I. PRESERVATION IN AMERICA

This section is designed to give a review of the necessary background information for the development of the College Hill program. It consists of a study of preservation efforts being carried out elsewhere in the country. An attempt has been made to investigate all types of methods and techniques of preservation in use in order to determine relative effectiveness and to judge which ones would best fit the needs of the College Hill area. The more significant findings of the investigation, particularly those involving areas similar to College Hill, have been discussed. They include a study of the various surveys and listings of historic buildings and discussion of the following topics: historic buildings in contemporary use, zoning and governmental control of buildings and land in historic areas, other forms of governmental control, master plans and urban renewal projects for historic areas, museum villages, historic trails and others.

The analysis of techniques for historic preservation in practice throughout the country has proven helpful in checking ideas and programs which the staff has considered feasible for the College Hill area. It has also pointed up the fact that there is need for a comprehensive approach to the problems of renewal of historic areas. In the development of the plan for College Hill, such a comprehensive approach has been attempted. It is hoped that the review of other historic areas included in this section of the report will serve to help other communities with historic preservation problems.

PART II. SURVEY TECHNIQUES

This section has been devoted to a presentation of the techniques developed for discovering, evaluating and incorporating into community planning, areas and buildings of historic or visual significance. It includes a list of and commentary on the criteria set up for judging worth of building; a description of the techniques devised for identifying and evaluating significant structures, including the methods used for collecting, recording and charting information and for scoring the buildings; uses to which the techniques can be put in developing the program of renewal; a history of College Hill from its origin to the present day and, for easy reference, an analysis of the building styles represented in the area. It is hoped that the techniques developed in this part of the study will be of use, not only for the College Hill program, but will aid other communities grappling with similar problems.

PART III. RENEWAL OF COLLEGE HILL

This section contains the comprehensive plan for College Hill in which the techniques for historic analysis developed in the previ-
ous section, are employed in incorporating historic architecture preservation into the framework of the planning, and more specifically, the urban renewal program. The plan evolves in three steps: a description of the area's characteristics, the general plan, and detailed proposals and designs.

The description of the area's physical and social characteristics provides the base of data from which stems the general plan. Subjects discussed here include description of peripheral areas, general land use, topography, assessment and taxes, population growth, and institutions and civic organizations.

The general plan is presented as a series of maps and proposals on separate topics and is preceded by a summary sketch master plan. This section is introduced by a statement of goals and a review of all official and private plans which have a bearing on the area. Specific proposals are made for traffic and parking, land use, zoning, recreation facilities, a new school, a special zoning ordinance to protect historic architecture, and an Urban Renewal project within which areas are designated for clearance, rehabilitation, and conservation. Following the general plan is a presentation of the detailed proposals and the accompanying physical design. For this purpose the area is presented in two parts according to the general program of implementation: the first, the urban renewal project area; and the other, the university area with its different problems and different solutions. In this part of the report the architectural designs of the planning proposals attempt to show how contemporary design can complement existing groupings of buildings of a past era. Concluding this presentation and relating all of the proposals visually is the 25-year general plan of College Hill showing new buildings, pedestrian ways, and open spaces.

The last section of Part III, Carrying Out the Program, relates the specific proposals described above to a program of implementation recommended to accomplish the major goals of renewing the College Hill area and of restoring its historic buildings. Among the steps recommended are:

- a proposal for an urban renewal project which would include resumption of urban renewal activity on the Constitution Hill Project at the northern end of College Hill, and an extension of the boundaries of the already designated urban renewal area to include a large portion of the southern part of College Hill. This program would incorporate plans for rehabilitation of the historic areas and buildings with a program of clearance for certain restricted areas within the confines of the total renewal area;

- a proposal to develop a historic trail along Benefit Street as an anchor for the whole community of historic buildings in its immediate neighborhood, and to realize the full potential of historic interest in the old section of Providence;

- a proposal to develop a park and museum around the spring which was the center of the original Providence settlement, the house site and burial site of Roger Williams to be a memorial to
Roger Williams as the founder of the Rhode Island Colony and as a national leader in religious freedom. This proposal is made in conjunction with the recommended proposal for the Benefit Street Trail to be a natural starting point for the trail;

- various public agency programs including proposals for public works, traffic and parking, a new school and recreation areas;

- regulatory programs, in particular, a proposal for historic area zoning designed to include the western slope of the hillside for most of the length of Benefit Street and other parts of the study area. This zoning program has been designed as the mechanism by which other historic areas located outside the project area can effect the protection needed for structures of historic and architectural value. Draft of a historic area zoning legislation are presented in this section of the report for study and submission to the state legislature and the Providence City Council;

- a program recommended for consideration by the institutions in the area, designed to be used as a basis for cooperative planning for future expansion and as a policy-making guide for the protection of the historic building in the environs of the institutional holdings;

- proposals designed to encourage private investment by enlisting the cooperation of individuals and organizations to invest in key areas, and recommending a special mortgage facilities program to help individuals and groups in their attempts to check deterioration and to rehabilitate historic neighborhoods; and

- proposals to establish representative citizen action committees charged with continuing to work for the accomplishment of the objectives of the program; such as the supervision of the landscaping programs, administration of the Benefit Street Trail program, maintenance of a real estate clearing house, a center for information and for advice on repairs and decoration of old houses, direction of publicity and organization of such projects as open house days, demonstration houses, etc.

CONCLUSION

The publication of this report brings the College Hill Study to a close, but the real work of the project – creating a satisfactory environment in an area rich in historic architecture – has just begun. The City of Providence hopes that the programs developed in the course of the study can help to solve some of the problems which face the city in its attempts to improve its old neighborhoods and renew its historic buildings, so that its heritage can be kept as a legacy for future enrichment and enjoyment. It is hoped that this detailed study of a particular historic area will also serve to clarify the problems of other old cities and point the way to their solution. If in the future these goals are achieved, the basic purposes of the study will have been accomplished.

Appreciation is deeply felt for the many persons and organizations that have rendered assistance or participated actively in the development and completion of this report. Particular thanks should go to the membership of the Providence Preservation Society which provided, in addition to financial assistance, their inestimable moral support continually throughout the study. And to the others who are too numerous to mention, go our thanks for their time and energy.