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2003

The Central-Classical Revitalization Program:
Separate Minds, Separate and Distinct Spaces

In 1843 the City of Providence made the commitment to establish its first public high school. This school was to offer students a more advanced education than the basic reading, writing and arithmetic instruction offered in the city's elementary schools. Prior to its instatement, heated debate ensued over the implications of investing tax money to "educate children above working for their support." Opposing voices argued that such an education was "too aristocratic" to serve the majority of the population.ⁱ From very early on, debates over public education in the Providence centered on the class implications of a quality education.

In the late 1950s through the 1960s a new debate over elite and standard high school education came to the fore as Providence ushered in a new stage in its public school history. In debates over the construction of a school complex that would house two institutions of differing repute - Classical H.S., a magnate school, and nearby Central H.S., a school which served student populations from the center of the city - one could still see elements of concern over the mixing of "aristocratic" and non-aristocratic education manifesting itself in school policy and in the structuring of educational spaces.

"The Master Plan for Public School Sites," published in 1950 recommended that measures be taken to improve the area around Central and Classical High Schools, as well as the school buildings themselves. This report suggested that many of the residential, commercial and rundown public structures that were blighting the area be torn down.ⁱⁱ There were several reasons for the suggestion relating to the state of the surrounding neighborhood, the state of the school buildings, and the ideology of urban revitalization in American cities during that period. However this story of a revitalization project where exceptions were repeatedly made for the sake of one community to the possible detriment of another, says something about notions of elitism and separatism in American society that surrounded urban revitalization efforts of the mid-century.

The neighborhood where Central and Classical stood was called the West End. In the mid-19th century it had been a suburban settling place for the middle to upper-class. Over the decades it grew into one of the nation's largest twentieth century Italo-American immigrant communities.ⁱⁱⁱ Rate of change statistics between 1954 and 1959 for certain indicators of blight and substandard living conditions, indicate the reasons for the Providence Redevelopment Agency's concern for the neighborhood. For example, in recent years the rate of venereal disease had increased 3.3 times; there were 3.7 times the incidence of juvenile training school admissions; 6 times the incidence of residents receiving public assistance; and 2.8 times as many "illegitimate births."^{iv}

In an age when city government preferred to tear down and rebuild impoverished neighborhoods using federal monies, the "unstable" appearance of the West End neighborhood made it a target for revitalization efforts. However, another a major driving force targeting the West End was the perceived need to invigorate the two area high schools. By the late 1950s Providence's most prominent secondary institution, Classical High School, was falling apart. The Classical building, located on the corner of Pond and

Summer streets, was undoubtedly in need of repairs. This latest incarnation of Classical High School had been designed by Martin and Hall Architects, the firm responsible for the design of Hope H.S.

The floor plan of the building, traced the shape of the letter “H,” with a central section designated for assembly rooms, offices, and library, flanked on either side by the longer legs of classrooms. The gymnasium and lunchroom were located in the basement. The exterior façade had a hipped roof, and a brick exterior with limestone trimmings. Built in 1897, the building had been damaged by two fires in the 50s. Though it was determined that the structure itself was sound and Dr. James L. Hanley, the school superintendent, made assurances in 1958 that the school could continue without repairs for at least the next 5 years, there was a sense that new facilities would have to be prepared for the school in the near future, as the building did not seem to be holding up well to the wear of time. Additionally, Classical and its less prestigious neighbor, Central High, were lacking in much desired sports fields.

Central High School, located on Pond and Winter Streets, was built in 1923 under the direction of William E. Hartwell, Commissioner of Public Buildings. The building was three stories and had a plan that formed the letter “E.” The façade was symmetrical, and the ornament reflected the Tudor Revival style. The confluence of the neighborhood’s decline and the deteriorating condition of the Classical facilities finally lead to serious dialogue concerning future plans to ameliorate conditions beginning in 1958. As many speculated on what ought to be done, there was an underlying awareness of the institutions that were manifested in the physical buildings and student bodies.

A major question for debate was, “Should Classical be maintained as a separate institution?” One option for dealing with the population of Classical students was to disband the school altogether and distribute the students among the three other unfilled public high schools in the city; the neighboring Central High School which served the center of the city; Hope high school, which served Eastern Providence; and Mt. Pleasant which served northern Providence.^v This solution was the suggestion of the 1952 the O’Connell Commission. Though economical and feasible, this option represented a threat to the very existence of Classical.^{vi} Classical, an established magnet school, was also considered a single purpose school, that is, college preparatory, sending 98% of its students to colleges.^{vii} With its specific trajectory, the school had a limited curriculum that could be accommodated at the other high schools should students wishing to go on to college desire similar classes. This proposal presumed that high achieving kids could thrive within the other three existing high schools.^{viii}

However prestige and powerful allies would make this solution impossible. Classical was a highly valued institution in the city, and for many, its importance transcended habitat. “Classical is not just another high school. It has both devoted friends and strong enemies, an enormous reputation among parents, alumni and colleges that is largely well-deserved, and a forceful magic that coaxes the best from the pupils and teachers in a way that is unmatched by any other school in the state.”^{ix} With words like “magic” and “coaxing” one could infer that the prestige of initiation within the Classical community contributed to the loyalty alumni had to the institution. Classical also had an important ally, James Hanley, then superintendent of Providence schools, who was committed to preserving the institution of “Classical High School in new or old form.”^x

Presuming that the Classical institution would be maintained there were three

ways that the *Providence Journal* suggested that it could be re-housed. The Classical population could commandeer the local Nathanael Green Junior High School, and subsequently disperse the junior high schoolers into other schools (to their great inconvenience). Secondly, the city could spend an estimated \$1,000,000 or more to renovate the existing structure with the hope of maintaining it for another three or four dozen years. By staying in the area, Classical would be included in a local redevelopment project that would provide it and the neighboring Central high school with the desired athletic facilities that were lacking in both. The third and least economical option, the construction of a completely new school at the cost of several million dollars, was put forth, but initially not to “be considered seriously.” It was the *Journal*’s belief that land acquisition fees would be too great, and it would be difficult to persuade voters to cough up the money, as the city already had a surplus of educational resources and a steadily dropping population.^{xi}

Another factor in the planning equation was that the Planning and Redevelopment Agency had its eye on the future of the neighborhood, and planned to incorporate Central and Classical High into plans to revitalize the West End neighborhood. Central ought not to be developed without Classical, because, as the Mayor put it, “I don’t believe we will have a redevelopment project if nothing is done for Classical.” Any possible transfer of the school away from the neighborhood would leave Central an “orphan in a dilapidated area.”^{xii} In later conversations another idea was set forth. This was a pricey proposal, whose estimated cost was \$6 million, that called for the total abandonment of the existing Classical and Central High School buildings, the school administration building, and Central’s additional buildings (Annex A and Annex B). In their place students of both schools would receive equally new buildings arranged around a quadrangle, and new shared athletic facilities stretching out from the southwest portion of the campus. The only buildings that would be retained would be the gymnasium and central heating plant.^{xiii}

Because Central was only 35 years old at the time, Providence’s Urban Renewal Administration was apprehensive about spending unnecessary tax dollars on a new building, though it was seemingly more open to spending extra money to accommodate expensive scenarios for Classical. One supporter of a new Central building, Councilman Wood, cited some possible advantages of a totally new plant which included “the chance to build a series of buildings designed to complement each other in a central location,” and the long term opportunity to “achieve savings in maintenance.” He noted that if Central went untouched, it would always be 35 years closer to the hoariness for which Classical justified new facilities. A more uniform environment would also create a pleasant campus effect.^{xiv} In early discussions concerned with planning the new school complex, there were several solutions put forth for the future Classical and Central relationship, with price-tags that ranged from \$3 to \$6 million.

In 1959 the call “For an Impartial Study of Classical High,”^{xv} was finally heard. Space planners from Keith R. Kundhart Associates of New York were hired in June to perform such a study. In September the consultants reported back with three basic plans:

Plan A: Self contained buildings for Classical, Central and the administration buildings, at a construction cost of \$8,103,815; separate dining halls, gymnasiums and auditoriums for each school.

Plan B: Remodel the old gymnasium for Classical; create a self contained Central with its addition and modernization, and an administration building complete with maintenance shops and a garage for a cost of \$8,152,924.

Plan C: The most economical of the three proposals called for a smaller Classical and a small addition for Central, focussing square footage in a commons building that would house facilities for both schools. This plan would also accommodate an administrative building with its own dining hall. Its estimated price-tag was \$7,664,184.

Plan C, the most economical and integrative double campus program proposed, called for intermingling of students from the two schools when engaging in certain activities. The single “commons building” for both schools, would provide joint dining rooms, auditoriums, and gymnasiums for Central and Classical high schools. The structures called for in this report were: “(1) A new Classical High School on Westminster Street; (2) A new and separate school administration building located on Broad Street just behind Central High School; (3) An addition to Central High School, also located on Broad Street and connected to the new Classical by a covered walk.”^{xvi} This school complex would be a 20-acre “educational center” within a 67-acre Central-Classical urban renewal project. The building also had the potential to become an important hub for the entire school system.^{xvii}

This prescription was met with applause from some and incredulity from others. Some desired all students to have a more integrated in equal experience of school facilities and spaces, where others desired to keep the schools segregated in the name of distinction, identity and perhaps, “magic.” In Fall of 1961, appeals were made in an editorial in the *Providence Journal* to commit to an integrated campus, lauding the proposed “commons” building for use by both Classical and Central. The consultant firm that had presented some options for redevelopment urged that “[P]utting these facilities under one roof and using them for both schools would save money in construction and maintenance.” It was also suggested by Sherwin J. Kapstein, member of the Providence School Committee, that the two schools share a library, to pool resources of staff and supplies, and avoid duplicates.^{xviii} Opponents of the integrated campus, were attacked as people “who see exclusiveness as one of Classical’s chief virtues,” and warned that, “if some people believe... that Classical students would lose their drive to achieve by sharing a place to eat and shoot baskets with central – and make their view stick, then we had all better revise our ideas of what education is about. Classical can retain its space in the sun by bringing its program up to date, not by building a wall around itself.”^{xix}

Influential Classical alumni retorted that they did not want to see the “identities” of the two schools become confused with the inception of cohabitation.^{xx} Classical was a school known for its honors awards and ivy-league acceptance letters. It was believed that by creating a sanctuary for its students, it would be able to maintain the kind of atmosphere necessary for excellence. There were other arguments relating to school size, and logistics creating a building that would accommodate the needs of so many.^{xxi}

As early as 1961, there were already complaints over the indecisiveness of educational programmers. “[T]here can be no construction until plans are drawn, and there can be no plans until the school department staff and the school committees agree

on the school program and the educational arrangements that will serve best to carry it out.” Here it was obvious that the pedagogical ideology of the institution would have a major impact on the architecture of the school. This would determine not only the program, but the shape and layout of spaces. The school committee was still embroiled in the decision of whether they would proceed with the new high school at all.^{xxii}

The majority of persons on the various committee’s involved, desired to maintain as much distinction as possible for Classical from other schools, i.e. Central. However, in 1963 Sherwin J. Kapstein and a small group of supporters were still fighting for the commons building, as the School Committee mulled over the shape of the future development. The evening before one School Committee meeting, he sent a five-page memorandum to his fellow committee members which detailed his arguments for the commons building. A commons, according to Kapstein, which provided dining, auditorium, physical education, and library facilities for the two schools, had been the subject of a long debate on the part of school committee and leaders of Classical alumni groups. Kapstein advocated this common building as a means of advancing democratic values, enhancing the “image” of Central High School, and of course, saving money and reducing the size of the actual Central and Classical buildings. In his words “By erecting a commons building to serve both Central and Classical, in addition to the new facilities for each and the renovation of Central, it is more likely that we would more effectively and efficiently serve the cause of democracy and public education in our city, state and nation than we would if we build so-called self-contained school.”^{xxiii}

It was already felt by many that Classical siphoned off the city’s “strongest pupils” who could have provided “leadership and examples for their student bodies,” at Hope, Central or Mt. Pleasant. This siphoning was more pronounced because Classical was the only high school to incorporate 9th graders into its curriculum, where other high schools began in the tenth grade. Also, though Classical had long accepted talented pupils from outside the city who were willing to pay tuition fees, and admitted any who chose to come despite its accelerated level, many transferred out of the school after their first year for “academic reasons.”^{xxiv} Unfortunately, the appeals of Kapstein and his supporters came to no avail, as only a week later, siding with the recommendations made by Providence’s school superintendent, James Hanley, School Committee electing a plan for the Central-Classical project to produce “two schools, as self contained units.”^{xxv}

At the heart of the controversy seemed to be worry over thwarting or seizing the opportunity for fusion of the Central and Classical communities through architecture. Champions of “democracy” and economy sought to inter-mingle the two student bodies in a shared environment. They saw a common space as a means of enhancing the prestige of Central High School by improving its resources, and also of creating a plan that would reduce construction, supply, and administrative costs. It would also provide a space for social and cultural exchange between otherwise segregated students.

Those who desired to keep the distinct reputation of Classical in tact fought to create an enclosed environment for students with the greatest potential to achieve. As the mayor had put it only a year before, Central was the potential *orphan* child to Classical. Its very existence brought revenue to the West End revitalization project, and it was thought that this assistance should be enough.

Granted, there were reasons, aside from reputation, to keep the two schools distinct. The separate building for shared facilities might require hiring an extra assistant

principal to supervise the space. However, in Mr. Hanley's own words, "Perhaps the most important advantage of my recommendation is that it preserves the identity of both high schools." One might easily read into these words, the message that separation "preserves the reputation of the Classical institution." Additionally, Hanely complained "An arrangement that provides for the students of one school [i.e. Central High School] to occupy or use facilities jointly with the students of another high school [i.e. Classical High School] for a substantial part of the day tends to weaken the identity, the unity, the esprit, the morale of both schools."^{xxvi} The School Council finally sided with Hanley.

Mayor Walter H. Reynolds sponsored the architectural design competition for the center. Professor Walter F Bogener, of the Harvard Graduate School of Design was selected to run the design contest. It was his belief that this was the first competition for an urban school within a redevelopment project. The jury included, superintendent Hanely, dean of the school of architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Dr. Pietro Belluschi, dean of the school of architecture at Rice University, William Caudill, chairman of the American Institute of Architects committee on schools and educational facilities, Alonzo J. Harriman, president of the Rhode Island School of Design, Clarence H. Gifford, and chairman of the Redevelopment Agency, Edmund M. Mauro. Even before the design was determined, the program for classical was already set out. The School would have resource centers and individual study cubicles for pupils in each academic discipline, even laboratories, movable walls, auditorium, and a small television studio.^{xxvii} Eventually \$4 million was allotted for the design and construction of a new school for Classical. Including the Classical building, the total Central-Classical project, including an addition to the Central school and long sought after athletic schools for each entity, came to a total of \$8,500,000.^{xxviii} By the time the vote was held in 1963 for the educational complex's design, estimated budget figures were at \$8,850,000.^{xxix}

The winners of the competition, local architects, Peter Geddes and Albert Harkness were praised for their ability to meet the program requirements. They had experience designing other campus elements, including dormitories for the University of Rhode Island, the Edmond W. Flynn School on Blackstone Street, the East Greenwich High School, the West Barrington Junior High. Their design placed the new Classical building on Westminster Street. Extending out from behind the building to Broad Street were the auditorium, and gymnasium. Along side these buildings was the brand new athletic field. The existing Central edifice was retained. A new gymnasium and cafeteria were bisected from the classrooms by Winter Street. A covered bridge would be constructed to safely carry students from one side of the street to the other, out of the danger of oncoming traffic. Behind these buildings would extend the new Central athletic fields. Not surprisingly, the winning entry placed athletic fields for Central and Classical on opposite sides of the campus. Facing Broad Street would be an auto-body shop, for central students. The two classroom buildings were to be united by a commons – the one place where students from the two schools could congregate and socialize.

The new structures were two and three stories of brick and concrete, surrounding the 3 story Tudor Revival Central School. The complex housed both Classical and Central High School, and was Providence's first "educational park" style campus in the state.^{xxx}

As the new facilities reached their completion, R. Einar Soderback, superintendent of public buildings, was able to point as a high point for the Central renovations - lighting fixtures in of the classrooms.

Fricker, to make a deliberate statement about his beliefs on the project did not choose to attend the award ceremony for the design prize. However, at the ground breaking for the project, Fricker, was present and able to muster up some positive words for the then former Mayor, Walter Reynolds, and the current Mayor, Joseph A. Doorley, for cutting through a lot of the red tape, in order to move the project forward.^{xxxix}

Though largely overshadowed by praise for the new campus, the snubbing of Central in the planning of the Educational Complex did not go unnoticed. In the winter of 1969, an impassioned parent wrote a letter to the *Providence Journal*, entitled “Central is a Poor Cousin to Classical” complaining of deficient facilities that would have been improved by pooling certain school resources between to schools. She complains of the meager holdings in Central’s libraries, where Classical’s walls and shelves were lined with books.^{xxxix} With such a clear example of opportunity lost by maintaining a division between the resources of the two schools, one can see what was lost in upholding separate identities.

ⁱ P. 7, Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, *Statewide Preservation Report: West Side, Providence P-P-1, May, 1976*. RI, 1976.

ⁱⁱ “Master Plan for Public School Sites,” *Redevelopment Plan for Central-Classical, Project No. R.I. R-2. Providence Redevelopment Agency, 1961, Providence, RI*

ⁱⁱⁱ Providence City Planning Commission, *Neighborhood Analysis*. (1969) Providence, RI. pp. 426

^{iv} Providence Redevelopment Agency, *Redevelopment and Planning for Central-Classical Project No, R.I. R-2*. (1961) Providence Rhode Island. p. 5

^v Providence City Planning Commission, *Master Plan of Public Schools*. (1966), Providence, RI. p. 48

^{vi} “For an Impartial Study of Classical High,” *Providence Journal Bulletin*. 8/24/59:15

^{vii} “Joint School Building Urged,” *Providence Journal*. 1/17/63:17

^{viii} “For an Impartial Study of Classical High,” *Providence Journal Bulletin*. 8/24/59:15

^{ix} “Question on Classical – School Board’s Slow Pace on Plans Threatens Serious Study of a New modern Program,” *Providence Journal*. 10/8/61:N44

^x “Four Plans for Central-Classical Project Submitted,” *Providence Journal Bulletin*. 6/27/58:1

^{xi} In the 1937 the public school system in Providence contained 41,00 pupils, 94 buildings and 1,600 teachers. In the postwar years, with the vacuumish draw of middle class populations to the suburbs, the school system contracted to 27,600 pupils, 62 buildings, and 12,000 teachers in 1964. City Planning Commission, City of Providence, *Technical Appendix to the Master Plan for Public Schools*, Providence, RI. P. 3

^{xii} “New High School Proposal Presented,” *Providence Journal*. 3/23/60:1

^{xiii} “Four Plans for Central-Classical Project Submitted,” *Providence Journal Bulletin*. 6/27/58:1

^{xiv} *ibid.*

^{xv} “For an Impartial Study of classical High,” *Providence Journal*. 8/24/59:15

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- xvi “Joint Building Asked for Central, Classical” *Providence Journal*. 9/24/61:1
- xvii *ibid.*
- xviii “Some Sensible Plans for the New Classical High,” *Providence Journal*. 10/26/61:29
- xix *ibid.*
- xx “Two-School Plan Given Board Okay,” *Providence Journal*. 1/22/63:1,25
- xxi “City Education Center Cost Put Over 9-Million,” *Providence Journal*. 3/27/62:1
- xxii “Question on Classical – School Board’s Slow Pace on Plans Threatens Serious Study of a New modern Program,” *Providence Journal*. 10/8/61:N44
- xxiii “Joint School Building Urged,” *Providence Journal*. 1/17/63:17
- xxiv *ibid.*
- xxv “Two-School Plan Given Board Okay,” *Providence Journal*. 1/22/63:1,25
- xxvi *ibid.*
- xxvii “City Education Center Cost Put Over 9-Million,” *Providence Journal*. 3/27/62:1
- xxviii *ibid.*
- xxix “Judging Is Set On School Plan,” *Providence Journal*. 10/20/63:N35
- xxx Sanderson, Edward F.; Woodward, William McKenzies. *Providence: A citywide Survey of Historic Resource*. (1986) Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission. Providence, RI. p. 241
- xxxi “two Schools Ready by ’60?” *Providence Journal*. _____?
- xxxii “Central is Poor Cousin to Classical,” *Providence Journal*. 12/17/68:16