Reimagining Providence's streets

When you think about downtown Providence, what comes to mind? Maybe it's the rivers and WaterFire, the beautiful murals, or our world-class restaurants. Given the city's dense framework, streets are the major public space that comprise our downtown. But is this space being used to its full potential?

According to recent data, 24% of Providence's valuable downtown space is dedicated to parking. While some amount of parking downtown will always be necessary, a quarter of the land is far too high. There is vast potential to meet public needs beyond where vehicles sit unused.

Parking and the value of outdoor public space came into sharp focus during the pandemic. Parks and streets were flooded with people and restaurants and shops couldn't safely operate indoors. In response, we took over parking spaces to meet the demand for fresh air, connection and commerce. Parklets — the term for a parking-spot-to-public space conversion — were created for people to gather, eat and socialize. The pandemic helped us reimagine how our city streets and town centers can serve our communities.

As we have been coming back to 'normal,' we have been letting cars take back more control.

What is not returning, it seems, is office life. The permanent transition to remote and hybrid work is causing an existential crisis for downtown economies — one that can only be solved by making our city centers more inviting places to live, work and play.

As we see more people living downtown we also need to think about how these new residents access green space within walking distance in a predominantly 'concrete jungle.'

Consider the climate crisis. Urban areas like Providence are typically hotter than other parts of the state in the summer. Climbing heat and polluted stormwater runoff can both be mitigated by incorporating more trees and vegetation into our streets.

Public health can be improved by providing small gathering areas and access to green space, as even small opportunities to interact with nature