

Robert E. Freeman dies at 44; head of Providence Foundation

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PROVIDENCE — Robert E. Freeman, 44, whose prodigious skills as a writer, city planner and historic preservationist made an indelible imprint on downtown Providence, died yesterday at Miriam Hospital.

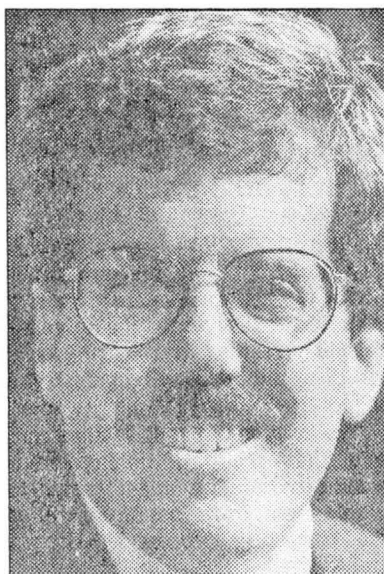
For the past three years, he had been executive director of the Providence Foundation, a business group that promotes downtown redevelopment.

An architectural historian by training, he had a "very practical sense of how to apply the tools of his trade to have things really happen," said Ron Marsella, who worked with Mr. Freeman on plans for Capital Center, the \$140-million renewal project now under way between Union Station and the State House.

"You can have a grand idea, but if the details aren't done right, it can be ruined," Ken Orenstein, another former executive director of the Providence Foundation, said.

Mayor Vincent A. Cianci Jr. ordered all city flags flown at half-staff tomorrow in honor of Mr. Freeman. "He was a wonderful contributor to the city. We want to recognize him. He gave a great deal," the mayor said.

Freeman and colleagues said it was



ROBERT E. FREEMAN

Until this month, Mr. Freeman had been working on proposals to carve out an arts and entertainment district downtown and relocate the bridges that carry Route 195 over the Providence River.

The aim was to create a future for a central business district that seemed to have run out of steam in the early 1980s, when the last downtown department store folded and dozens of smaller retail stores closed.

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Congress had just appropriated billions to rebuild the aging Northeast Corridor rail line between Boston and Washington. Marsella, who was executive director of the newly created Providence Foundation at the time, said Mr. Freeman, "on loan" from the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, helped create the consensus needed to move the tracks.

Mr. Freeman had been hired by the Preservation Commission in 1976, after graduating from the Columbia University School of Architecture with a master's degree in historic preservation. His first task was to write an architectural history of Cranston, a suburb of Providence with a handful of historic buildings and a habit of tearing them down.

But his master's thesis had been about the reuse of old movie theaters, so when the Loew's State Theater on Weybosset Street in downtown Providence was threatened by the wrecking ball, Mr. Freeman was recruited by the Providence Foundation to save it. He helped engineer the plan to have the theater purchased by a consortium of local corporations. It reopened in 1978 and is now called the Providence Performing Arts Center.

Although his "on loan status" was supposed to be temporary, Mr. Freeman stayed with the Providence Foundation until 1980. "A little like the man who came to dinner," he would say later with characteristic wit.

When Marsella left the foundation to go into private business, Mr. Freeman followed him, working first for Urban Consultants, where he was an associate, and then the Marsella Development Corp., where he was manager of the Manning Plaza project in Wayland Square.

Then, in August 1985, Mr. Freeman went to work for the Massachusetts Land Bank, a quasipublic agency that makes real estate loans with a public purpose.

Robert Freeman

With the death of Robert Freeman at the age of 44, Providence has suffered an exceptional loss. Since this young architectural historian came here in 1976, he had been a leader in virtually every facet of the drive to renew the city's center. To his most recent position as executive director of the Providence Foundation, he brought a keen vision, abundant energy and a remarkable sense of what was possible to achieve in a city where different groups often vociferously disagree about major local issues.

The physical changes now transforming the city will stand as monuments to Mr. Freeman's lively appreciation of history, space, buildings and the human environment. He was a principal figure behind plans to move the train station and open up land that is now the home of Capital Center. He

enthusiastically backed a scheme to open up more land along the Providence River and in the Jewelry District by moving the Route 195 overpass. And he spoke with eloquence in favor of creating an arts and entertainment district in the city's heart. And these are only the high spots.

At this newspaper, we came early to have a high regard for Mr. Freeman's lively ideas and surpassing faith in the city's capacity for renewal. In numerous articles for us, he ventured beyond conventional city planning ideas, shaking off the forebodings of skeptics and proposing schemes that meshed the needs of historic preservation with those of a busy modern city. Rob Freeman saw both the past and future of Providence as his friends, to the nurture of which he cheerfully gave much of his career.

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