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*Space and Culture* 2003 6: 429

DOI: 10.1177/1206331203253204

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# The Trope of the Organic City

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## Discourses of Decay and Rebirth in Downtown Seattle

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*Across the nation, the desire to reverse histories of urban decline has led city officials to plow public subsidies into big-ticket, privately controlled downtown redevelopment projects. But what determines the scope of public involvement in downtown redevelopment? Drawing on a larger study of Seattle development politics, this article argues that impersonal economic pressures alone do not determine the scope of public subsidies to downtown developers and retailers. Instead, the discursive context surrounding the decision to subsidize downtown redevelopment is equally as important. In Seattle, a coalition of retailers and city officials framed the debate over publicly subsidized downtown redevelopment within the confines of an organic trope, where the issue of subsidies was cast as a decision between the “life” and “death” of downtown. This article assesses the political implications of the organic city trope and offers recommendations on how the language of the “living city” can be rearticulated to help create and preserve urban civic space.*

**Keywords:** *urban revitalization; public/private partnerships; urban decline; urban politics; political discourse; urban discourse; organic metaphors*

In late 1994, at the request of then-Mayor Norm Rice, the Seattle City Council voted decisively to reopen one block of Pine Street in downtown Seattle to automobile traffic. Although this might sound mundane, the decision to reopen Pine Street was actually among the most controversial of Mayor Rice’s 8-year tenure. In many ways, it was easy to sympathize with his predicament. On one side, the mayor faced the ire of downtown merchants who had long argued that the Pine Street pedestrian mall cut

into retail sales by isolating retailers from city traffic. On the other side, the mayor faced pressure from citizen activists who saw the Pine Street pedestrian mall as a vital part of the larger Westlake Park—Seattle’s only true civic square. According to activists, when the city closed off Pine Street 6 years earlier, the newly created pedestrian mall effectively linked together two small plazas on either side of Pine to create one nice-sized public park. In the intervening 6 years, Westlake Park—in essence, the pedestrian mall flanked by two small tiled plazas—served as the civic heart of the metropolis and acted as the preferred site for Seattle’s political rallies and cultural celebrations. Rerouting auto traffic through Pine Street would cut the heart out of Westlake Park, leaving Seattle with no suitable place for such collective civic activities.

Norm Rice was therefore caught in an unenviable bind. The breaking point came at the end of 1994, when Nordstrom department store—Seattle’s premiere downtown retailer—threatened to kill its plan to invest \$100 million into a new downtown store unless the city agreed to reopen Pine Street to traffic. A scant 3 weeks later, the mayor and the city council agreed to Nordstrom’s terms. And in 1995, after an additional 6 months of wrangling with citizen activists (culminating in a public vote ratifying the city’s decision to open up the pedestrian mall), traffic once again rumbled through the heart of Westlake Park.

The question I want to ask at this point is fairly straightforward. The City of Seattle’s decision to reroute traffic through Westlake Park represented the sacrifice of a public resource—specifically, a large section in the city’s main civic square—in the interest of promoting the accumulation goals of private actors. In essence, the decision to kill the Pine Street pedestrian mall was a public concession offered to secure Nordstrom’s investment in the retail core. But what determines the scope of such public concessions in contemporary downtown redevelopment projects? How, in other words, are city officials and the public at large convinced that such concessions are in the civic interest?

There are clearly economic pressures and constraints at work here. City governments depend heavily on tax revenues generated by downtown retail, and so the voices of merchants can speak loudly during debates about public subsidies and downtown development. In addition, urban leaders also feel pressure to present the best possible “urban image” to potential investors in the global marketplace, and, in practical terms, this has meant public support for downtown projects that promise to raise a region’s international profile. In other words, in the global interurban competition for investment and growth, city governments must play the cards they’ve been dealt. If city leaders come to believe that public concessions are necessary to ensure that economic investment flows into their city (instead of the city down the interstate), they may be forced to swallow their pride and cut a check.

To be sure, then, there can be important economic motives behind any one decision to forward public concessions to private developers and investors. But as a scholar interested in political discourse, I want to argue that the discursive and rhetorical context surrounding such political decisions should be considered right alongside economic pressures and constraints. For in my view, city officials’ willingness to forward public concessions in support of private redevelopment projects is at least partly determined by the discursive environment within which such decisions get made. In short, if pro-subsidy forces in the urban political scene can cultivate a prevailing “sense” that “downtown is in trouble”—if they can cultivate, in other words, a prevailing discourse of impending urban decline and decay—then they can more easily extract public concessions from civic officials.

As the analysis below documents, Nordstrom and other pro-development interests in Seattle were ultimately quite successful in cultivating a sense of impending downtown decline and an overall discursive environment that legitimated the transfer of public resources into private hands. In particular, in their effort to overcome the mayor's initial resistance to the notion of subsidizing downtown redevelopment, developers and their allies drew on what might be called the "trope of the organic city" to cultivate a sense of urgency around downtown revitalization. Within this trope, "the city" was framed by pro-subsidy interests as a living but extremely fragile entity, whose "health" and "vitality" depended on the intervention of private-sector investors and the infusion of public resources. From within this discourse, those who supported the use of public subsidies took on the heroic role of urban physicians, willing to do whatever it might take to restore health to "our downtown." On the other hand, those who opposed such subsidies were framed as unthinking, even dangerous purveyors of urban disease and decay. If the health—indeed, the very "life"—of "our downtown" depended on subsidizing private redevelopment, then only the most irrational or self-destructive of citizens would oppose a life-giving infusion of public funds.

This article will therefore focus on the political debate over Nordstrom's demand that the city reopen Pine Street to auto traffic. In particular, the discussion will explore how pro-development, pro-Nordstrom interests deployed the language and imagery of the organic city to cultivate a discursive environment favorable to the project of publicly subsidized redevelopment. My analysis of this debate developed out of my larger study of Seattle's development politics that, during 1998-1999, drew on three main bodies of qualitative data, including: (a) 25 in-depth interviews of city officials, local activists, and downtown business leaders; (b) a large volume of archival research collected from the Seattle City Archives and the office files of city officials; and (c) an estimated 500 newspaper articles from the city's mainstream and alternative press. The present analysis of the Pine Street debate will draw on a smaller subset of this body of data and will rely primarily on press reports printed in Seattle's two major daily newspapers, archival data culled from the Seattle City Archives, and in-depth interviews of three key decision makers who led the push to reopen Pine Street.

Drawing on this data, I will begin by discussing how the recession of the early 1990s forced Mayor Norm Rice to place "downtown revitalization" at the very heart of his political agenda. Next, I will discuss how the Rice administration rallied around a massive, retail-focused redevelopment plan, dubbed the Rhodes Project, as their preferred strategy for reversing downtown's slumping fortunes. Finally, I will discuss how pro-development forces skillfully drew on the organic city trope to convince public officials—and ultimately, in a special election, Seattle voters—to include the reopening of Pine Street as part of the overall package of public concessions. The concluding sections will assess the more general political implications of the organic city trope and will offer recommendations on how the language of the "living city" can be rearticulated to help create and preserve urban civic space.

## Situating the Pine Street Debate

The struggle over Pine Street has its roots in the recession of the early 1990s, when Seattle's retail and office markets collapsed under the weight of Reagan Era speculation. By 1992, the declining fortunes of the retail core began to cause political problems for then-Mayor Norm Rice (Seattle City Council, personal communication, De-

ember 15, 1998). The Rice administration had assumed office just 2 years earlier with a commitment to keep downtown “safe and strong,” but they had few specific plans to offer public subsidies to promote downtown retail. However, by the end of 1993, as one member of the administration said, “it became inescapable that downtown was in deep trouble” (Downtown Task Force, personal communication, March 24, 1999). Revenue from downtown sales taxes had fallen steadily since the late 1980s, as the region struggled through the wider national recession. Much more tangibly, in 1992, Frederick & Nelson’s (F&N) department store, a Seattle landmark since the 1920s, closed its doors—leaving the most prominent building in the retail core vacant. By the end of 1993, the closure of the F&N building had been matched by the exodus of other nearby retailers, a development that sent ripples of concern through the downtown establishment.

At this point, the remaining downtown merchants began to lobby the city government for help, leading the Rice administration to quickly form a high-level “downtown task force” to address the problem (Downtown Task Force, personal communication, March 24, 1999). Although it was charged with addressing the slumping fortunes of downtown as a whole, from the beginning the task force focused narrowly

on the vacant F&N site (Downtown Task Force, personal communication, March 24, 1999). Already considered by boosters to be a “cancer” or a “black hole” (Erickson, 1995) in the retail core, the empty F&N site was not only a crucial symbol of decline for downtown elites but was also blamed for the closing of “dozens



**Figure 1.** Pine Street and Westlake Park

of stores and restaurants” in the surrounding area and for a never substantiated (and ultimately discredited) increase in downtown street crime (Aramburu, Norton, Drago, Bullitt, & Judd, 1995).<sup>1</sup> For the Rice administration, redeveloping the F&N site had become its highest priority.

As one member of the task force recalled, the city really had only one candidate in mind for the site—Nordstrom department store (Downtown Task Force, personal communication, March 24, 1999). The city wanted Nordstrom in the F&N site for a variety of reasons, including a somewhat sentimental desire to anchor the city’s retail revitalization around a company that began as a Seattle shoe store decades before.<sup>2</sup> Still, as one member of the task force freely admitted, the administration’s enthusiasm for Nordstrom mostly had to do with the retailer’s sterling reputation for bringing in hordes of free-spending upscale shoppers. Installing Nordstrom in the F&N site would not only ensure that the retailer would maintain their presence downtown, but it would also signal to other retailers that downtown Seattle was still a good place to do



**Figure 2.** The New Nordstrom Department Store

business (Downtown Task Force, personal communication, March 24, 1999).

So the Rice administration immediately spread the word that the city was willing to “find ways to help” any developer who had a viable plan to revitalize the retail core—especially if he or she had ideas on how to move Nordstrom into the vacant F&N site (Downtown Task Force, personal communication, March 24, 1999). As it turned out, it was Jeff Rhodes’s proposal that would quickly win over the task force. A former partner in one of the nation’s largest property development firms, Jeff Rhodes proposed a plan that would completely redevelop three blocks of Seattle’s most expensive real estate. The Rhodes Project, as it came to be called, would first move Nordstrom out of its existing home in the nearby Seaboard Building and into the vacant but much larger F&N site. Then, Rhodes would develop “Pacific Place,” a five-story and decidedly upscale retail-cinema complex right across the street from the new Nordstrom store and link the two structures together with a sky-bridge. All in all, the Rhodes Project represented a massive recentralization of retail activity in Seattle’s downtown core, and it was designed explicitly to compete with suburban malls for the region’s upscale consumers and with other cities for tourists and conventions. As one city official would later recall, it did not take long for enthusiasm for the project to spread throughout City Hall (Downtown Task Force, personal communication, March 24, 1999).

The main challenge would be getting (and keeping) Nordstrom on board—a prospect that seemed increasingly unlikely as the retailer began to unveil a laundry list of demands to the downtown task force. Put simply, by 1993, Nordstrom had grown accustomed to being wooed. “I mean, really,” as one task force member said, “in some places in the country, Nordstrom gets the building at way below market, and their whole first year’s inventory and it’s paid for by the city to get them there” (Downtown Task Force, personal communication, March 24, 1999).

Even worse, Nordstrom had up until this point expressed little enthusiasm about the notion of moving into the F&N site, repeatedly grumbling about the old building’s high asking price and its hefty renovation costs (Pine Street Development, personal communication, April 8, 1999).<sup>3</sup> With relocation costs estimated at nearly \$100 million, as one retail analyst said, it would be difficult for Nordstrom to justify such a move to their shareholders (Sather, 1995). In short, early on, both Jeff Rhodes and Nordstrom executives made it abundantly clear to the Rice administration that sub-

stantial incentives would have to be forthcoming to appease Nordstrom and make the Rhodes Project a reality.

As it turned out, the city was eager to deal. To support the project, city accountants and planners put together a handsome package of subsidies, including a \$24 million low-interest loan, a \$73 million parking garage built entirely at taxpayers' expense, and a long list of zoning waivers and historic landmark tax breaks. With these direct public subsidies on the table, the complex negotiations between Jeff Rhodes, deputy Mayor Bob Watt, and Nordstrom picked up steam, and, after weeks of informal meetings, the key players met for dinner in late 1993 to hammer out the final agreement (Serrano & Nelson, 1997). In exchange for nearly \$100 million in public assistance, the retail core would attract more than \$300 million in new retail investment, including a Nordstrom store at the all-important F&N site.

By the autumn of 1994, the deal seemed set. Although no one had signed on the dotted line, all three parties—Nordstrom, Pine Street Development (Jeff Rhodes and his investors), and the City of Seattle—had agreed on the outlines of the project and the scope of public subsidies involved. Or so thought the Rice administration. For just as the parties were getting ready to draw up the contracts, Nordstrom unilaterally issued a stunning last-minute demand: Open the Pine Street pedestrian mall to auto traffic, or we'll walk away from the deal. To review, this section of Pine Street was at that time a tiled pedestrian mall and an integral part of Westlake Park—a park considered by many to be the city's only true civic square (Boren, 1994). For their part, however, Nordstrom executives argued that a closed Pine Street created a traffic bottleneck in the heart of downtown, making the retail core an intimidating experience for suburban drivers used to four-lane expressways and wide open parking lots.<sup>4</sup> In November 1994, the retailer sent Norm Rice its ultimatum: Pine Street is a deal-breaker. Open it to traffic, or else (Nogaki, 1994a).

At this late hour, the Rice administration had little stomach for failure. Rather than risk seeing the Rhodes Project shatter at their feet, the administration quickly bowed to Nordstrom's last-minute demand and agreed to help push an ordinance reopening Pine Street through the City Council (Higgins, 1994). In his letter to the council, Rice positioned the Rhodes Project as the "linchpin" to downtown's revitalization, arguing that the continued deterioration of the retail core would be an unacceptable price to pay for the preservation of Westlake Park.<sup>5</sup> Coming from the same man who, as a city council member, helped to create the Pine Street pedestrian mall back in 1989, these arguments seemed to carry weight with the council, which quickly voted 7:2 in favor of a resolution to reopen the street to traffic (Higgins, 1995b).

Community activists and progressive urban planners were predictably outraged at Rice's Pine Street concession. Given the already substantial public subsidies involved in the Rhodes Project, activists argued the city had done its fair share in supporting Nordstrom's move into the F&N site (Aramburu, 1995). Organizing quickly in late 1994, opponents of the reopening formed the "Friends of Westlake Park," a coalition of community activists, downtown residents, and architects. As Friends spokesperson Rick Aramburu later told the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* (*P-I*), what united the group was not "anti-Nordstrom" sentiment but rather a common desire to preserve the pedestrian mall—a public space that, as part of the larger Westlake Park, still functioned as the city's primary gathering place (Higgins, 1995a). A scant 2 months after embarking on their campaign to keep Pine Street closed to traffic, the Friends succeeded in pressuring the city council to put the matter before Seattle voters in a special citywide elec-

tion to be held in March 1995 (“Closing Pine Street,” 1995). The question before voters was simple: Should the Pine Street pedestrian mall be reopened to auto traffic?

Thus began a frenzied 6-week campaign over the future shape of downtown. On one side stood a pro-growth, pro-Rhodes Project coalition of city officials, property developers, downtown retailers, and even organized labor and longtime Democratic activists.<sup>6</sup> Organized under the new name Citizens to Restore Our Retail Core (CRORC), this well-funded coalition exuded confidence about the March election and promised an aggressive direct mail campaign to persuade voters that, as one supporter put it, “kissing off” \$300 million in private investment downtown for the sake of “a 290-foot stretch of pavement” would be the “irrational equivalent of tossing one’s paycheck into a roaring fire” (Sperry, 1995). On the other side stood the Friends of Westlake Park—the ad hoc citizens committee that, by early March 1995, had raised about \$1,000 (Higgins, 1995c). For their part, the Friends argued that the Pine Street pedestrian mall functioned as an important part of Westlake Park and that the city should, as they put it, flatly reject Nordstrom’s 11th-hour attempt at corporate blackmail.

For the purpose of this analysis, I want to focus on the political discourses mobilized by the pro-Nordstrom side. What rhetorical strategies did Nordstrom’s supporters—including, at this point, the mayor, most of the City Council, downtown retailers, and the Rhodes Project’s developers—deploy to persuade Seattle voters? How did this discursive environment help to clear the way for the private appropriation of the Pine Street pedestrian mall? And finally, what possibilities exist for rearticulating elite discourses concerning urban vitality and decay in the service of preserving urban civic space?

### CRORC: “It’s Life or Death”

The challenge facing CRORC’s pro-Nordstrom campaign was clear. They had to convince voters that allowing cars to rumble through Westlake Park would be a small price to pay for \$300 million in downtown retail investment (Collins, 1995). So what political discourses did they marshal to achieve this goal? Overall, the central image of this campaign depicted the downtown retail core as a critically ill patient in urgent need of a life-giving infusion of capital investment. As city council member Jan Drago wrote, in urban America, “downtowns are fragile entities” that require “extraordinary public and private investment” to stay “healthy and vital.”<sup>7</sup> But, according to a glossy CRORC pamphlet, Seattle’s downtown “entity” had long been neglected by the public and private sectors and was therefore threatening to slip into a long period of disease and decline.<sup>8</sup>

The first theme of CRORC’s campaign therefore labored to cultivate a sense of urgency around the “downtown crisis,” mostly by arguing that the health of the downtown “entity”—and even the city as a whole—hung in the balance. “There’s an awful lot at stake,” warned CRORC consultant Jeffrey Coopersmith. “It’s the future of downtown at stake” (Higgins, 1995c). As one CRORC campaigner told the *P-I*, the retail core was “not dead yet, but it needs our attention,” adding that the Rhodes Project would “pump new life” into Seattle’s ailing downtown (Higgins, 1995d). For CRORC, then, the metaphorical patient was “slipping” and desperately needed the “shot in the arm” represented by the Rhodes Project (Nogaki, 1994b). As Kemper Freeman, a longtime real estate magnate, put it, reopening Pine Street to secure Nordstrom’s invest-



ment was “a black-and-white issue as far as I’m concerned. It’s life or death” (Sather, 1995).

Therefore, for CRORC’s supporters, the consequence of a vote to keep Pine Street closed to traffic would be nothing less than the “death” of downtown. But how could they convince voters to share this almost medical sense of urgency? Drawing on opinion research that showed that Seattle residents were indeed concerned about downtown crime and public safety (Downtown Seattle Association, 1993), CRORC’s second campaign theme argued that the closure of the F&N building marked the first step on a journey toward the kind of urban decay that has long gripped other, particularly rust-belt, American cities.<sup>9</sup> As CRORC argued, even a cursory look at the history of urban America proves that city governments ignore their downtown retail districts at their peril. Without the retail activity generated by the Rhodes Project, Seattle’s downtown could “easily slip into wretched decay, as has happened in too many of America’s cities” (Sperry, 1995). And, as one city council member cautioned at a pro-Nordstrom rally, “when your downtown dies, so goes the rest of your city” (Whitley, 1995).

In other words, CRORC’s second theme argued that “it can happen here.” Seattle was by no means immune from the sort of urban decline that had undermined cities “back East.” To the contrary, the signs of decay were already proliferating around town. “From my office at the Paramount Theater,” noted CRORC supporter Ida Cole, “all I see are abandoned buildings, empty lots with chain-link fences around them, graffiti, and no people.”<sup>10</sup> Without the Rhodes Project, and, particularly, without a successful redevelopment of the empty F&N site, the fate that had gripped Detroit and Buffalo would become Seattle’s fate as well. As one downtown business owner argued:

The vacant Frederick & Nelson building is a cancer in the downtown retail district. If it is not redeveloped into successful usage, there will be no question of whether downtown Seattle retailing will die, but when. . . . Just like many cancers, the effect of the Frederick & Nelson vacancy is spreading as more and more shoppers change their long-standing habits. . . . Action is required before it is too late.<sup>11</sup>

In this way, for CRORC, Pine Street was about more than a small stretch of downtown pavement. Instead, “Pine Street is about the future of this beautiful city. Pine Street is about making Seattle more like . . . San Francisco and less like Detroit” (Alkire, 1995).

Finally, in their last theme, CRORC argued that a vote to reopen Pine Street would “breathe new life” into downtown Seattle, sparking an unprecedented renaissance in the heart of the city.<sup>12</sup> By approving the reopening of Pine, voters would not only “clear the way” for a new Nordstrom’s store, a new retail-cinema complex, and \$300 million in private investment, but this act would also “give birth to additional shops, restaurants and theaters” (“Vote Yes,” 1995), sparking a more general “resurgence of Downtown Seattle as a place to work, shop, and live.”<sup>13</sup> The net result would be a more lively and exciting Pine Street, “full of people, interesting shops and spaces, with easy access to public transportation and parking.”<sup>14</sup> As one *Times* reporter enthused, a vote to reopen Pine Street would usher in a new era in downtown Seattle, one which would transform what had been merely a place to work and shop into a vibrant and exciting urban experience.

When . . . all the pieces are in place, a jazzy downtown could be hopping with an eclectic crowd: culture matrons wrapped in furs headed to restaurants, gawking conventioners

on generous corporate expense accounts, and teens shopping for the latest pump in their jump shoes. (“Coming to Life,” 1995)

Given this stark choice between the “life” and “death” of their downtown, Seattle voters in the end decisively approved the reopening of Pine Street, thus paving the way for traffic to be routed through Westlake Park (Lewis, 1995). With 61% of voters signaling their approval, CRORC hailed the election as a stunning endorsement of not



**Figure 3.** Pacific Place (retail-cinema complex)

only Pine Street’s reopening but also the Rhodes Project and the city’s revitalization policies more generally (Seattle City Council, personal communication, December 15, 1998). This may indeed be the case, but election polls and focus groups conducted by the *Seattle Times* and CRORC prior to the election suggest that many Seattle residents had mixed feelings about the potential impact of downtown redevelopment and the move to route traffic through Westlake Park. As one resident told the *Times*,

“I’ve certainly enjoyed having the street closed. . . . But by the same token, I can certainly understand the need for business development to continue” (Lewis, 1995). Other residents expressed some reservations about the coming transformation of the retail core. The city “is losing its personal appeal,” complained one citizen to CRORC’s focus group leader. With the coming influx of multinational retail chains and restaurants, she feared that the city would become “too international” and “too impersonal.”<sup>15</sup>

For their part, however, pro-growth city officials and downtown boosters expressed no such reservations about the Rhodes Project or the reopening of Pine Street. At an unusually celebratory meeting of the Downtown Seattle Association (DSA) 2 months after the election, Mayor Rice promised the assembled business leaders that Seattle’s downtown would soon “be a magnet for . . . economic activity” and the “envy of any in America” (Nogaki, 1995). Furthermore, the growing concentration of retail and cultural activity downtown would also position the city favorably in the competition for regional consumption dollars and international tourism and investment. “To manage to keep our major retailer in downtown when most cities would give anything for a Nordstrom store is a remarkable achievement,” said Deputy Mayor Anne Levinson. Not only is downtown Seattle “on tourists’ radar screens,” as *Washington CEO* enthused (Enbysk, 1996) but, as Levison predicted, “for the first time, downtown Seattle will start drawing people from the suburbs instead of the other way around” (Erickson, 1995). Two years later, as construction on the new Nordstrom store neared com-

pletion, DSA chairman Harold Greene (1996-1997) could conclude that “downtown Seattle has begun to realize its goal of becoming a world-class city.”

### The Trope of the Organic City

So let us return to some of the questions we asked in the beginning, with a particular focus on the discourse of the pro-Nordstrom coalition. What discursive structures underlie and hold together the themes of CRORC’s campaign? And in the end, what larger vision of urban vitality was woven into and expressed by the discourse of pro-development forces in Seattle? First of all, as I reviewed the statements and arguments offered by CRORC’s campaign, I would hear, again and again, a central trope: Downtown is a living but fragile entity. Using this organic trope—one that imbued downtown with a “life” and (potentially) a “death”—CRORC framed the debate over Pine Street within a series of binary oppositions, with one side of each dichotomy expressing a common desire for a “vital” downtown and the other side expressing a collective fear of urban “decay.”

VITALITY	DECAY
Rhodes Project	Westlake Park
Nordstrom	Pine Street Pedestrian Mall
Breathe New Lite	Wretched Decay
Give Birth	Ghost Town <sup>16</sup>
Renaissance	Cancer
LIFE	DEATH

In the end, these oppositions enabled CRORC to tightly associate the Pine Street pedestrian mall with images of disease and decay while associating Nordstrom and the Rhodes Project with images of renewal and renaissance. As a result, CRORC was able to position the reopening of Pine Street as the only rational and moral course of action. Within the discursive logic of this “city as organism” trope, rejecting Nordstrom’s demands and therefore the larger Rhodes Project would seem to be an irrational, almost unnatural embrace of decay and death over vitality and life.

Furthermore, in the heat of the campaign, this organic trope also allowed CRORC to frame the question of Pine Street within the confines of a simple and dramatic narrative. In other words, once the organic trope imbued the city with life, this “life” could then be placed in mortal, if metaphorical, danger. To this end, CRORC’s campaign narrative first presented “our downtown” as ailing from the “cancerous” F&N vacancy. But as the story continued, help was on the way. The Rhodes Project would be the “shot in the arm” that would restore downtown to “great thriving life.” The only thing preventing this future of great thriving life was, of course, the Pine Street pedestrian mall. This central conflict (i.e., the pedestrian mall vs. the life of downtown) further positioned the electorate as the only potential hero(ine) in the story. If voters rejected Nordstrom’s request to reopen Pine Street, the “cancer” would “spread” and downtown retailing and, by extension, the downtown as a whole would “die.” Yet if they ratified the decision to reopen Pine, they could assume the role of heroic urban physicians and “our downtown” could be up and “hopping” within months (Wilson, 1996). In the end, from within the discursive logic constructed by this trope and CRORC’s campaign narrative, the choice voters faced in the Pine Street debate became, quite

powerfully, a choice between “life” and “death.” Presented as such, it was really no choice at all. We would never choose “death” and “decay” for ourselves, so why would we choose it for our downtown?

This campaign narrative became all the more powerful when CRORC tapped into the rich cultural folklore generated by urban America’s postwar decline. In their remarks to the local press, for example, CRORC supporters took pains to remind voters of the experiences of other cities who let their downtowns die (with Detroit leading the list of cautionary examples). Furthermore, the images selected for CRORC’s campaign fliers also invoked the collective cultural memory of deindustrializing cities back East. The chain-linked fence, the abandoned lot, the boarded storefront, the graffiti-splashed wall, the much-hyped (but ultimately discredited) crime wave: Together, these references drew their symbolic power from the cultural storehouse of stories and images that dramatize, in the popular imagination, the consequences of postwar urban disinvestment and decline. As C. Wright Mills would put it, such invocations form a “vocabulary of precedents” concerning American urban decline. They act as cautionary tales, and they are told to shape future social action (Shearing & Ericson, 1991). In this way, although the references to “what happened back East” certainly obscured important historical and economic differences between, say, Seattle and Detroit, they nonetheless added dramatic urgency to CRORC’s larger story about the ailing downtown entity. Don’t fool yourself, Seattle. It happened in Detroit. It can happen here.

So what are the larger political implications of the organic city trope? First, at least as strategically deployed by the CRORC campaign, it would certainly seem that the trope functioned ideologically—that is to say, the trope enabled CRORC to present what was in fact a specific social interest (Nordstrom’s desire for smooth traffic flow) as a universal interest (a “vital” downtown).<sup>17</sup> In this way, the notion that downtown Seattle was a (sickly) organism operated as a hegemonic suture, stitching together a variety of competing social and political interests under a spurious assertion of a universal civic good (Barrett, 1994; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). In other words, in much the same way that allegiance to an abstraction like “the nation” elides divisions of class and race (Gilroy, 1987; Tomlinson, 1991), so does a decontextualized commitment to protecting the health of “our downtown.”

In reality, of course, “our downtown” is not alive at all. Instead, “downtown” is a symbol that derives its meaning from its position within a particular discursive formation. What “downtown” means shifts radically depending on whether you are talking to a developer surveying the city from his or her corner office or to a pensioner whose own view of downtown remains populated with memories of people and places long since gone. These actual living human beings have a variety of overlapping and contradictory interests, some of which will be served by, for example, the reopening of Pine Street whereas others will not. What was required in the Pine Street debate, in short, was a discussion among competing social interests about the relative gains and losses associated with rerouting traffic through Westlake Park. But the trope of the organic city neatly supplanted this confrontation of competing and complementary interests, and instead labored to unify the public around a heroic effort to save “our downtown” from a future of urban decay (Wilson, 1996).

Yet although this hegemonic analysis helps illuminate the particular discursive strategies pursued by CRORC’s campaign, it would be premature to dismiss the organic city trope itself as hopelessly tethered to dominant commercial interests. Far

from it. Even a cursory review of the urban planning literature reveals that organic metaphors have structured discourse about the city in ways that transcend narrow social divisions and interests. Drawing equally on the organic trope, for example, Le Corbusier (1927) announced that “we must kill the street,” whereas Jane Jacobs rose to the street’s defense in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961). Likewise, on his way to obliterating the South Bronx with his multilane highways, Robert Moses once quipped, “When you operate in an overbuilt metropolis, you have to hack your way with a meat ax,” whereas his most trenchant critic, Marshall Berman (1982), argued that Moses’s expressways stabbed through “our neighborhood’s heart.” Even the Friends of Westlake Park drew on the organic trope when, to dramatize the importance of the Pine Street pedestrian mall, they constructed a 13-foot sculpture depicting a human heart (labeled “Westlake Park”) with a knife (labeled “corporate interests”) cutting through it (Higgins, 1995b). The list could go on, but it seems clear that the organic trope may in fact be one of the most fundamental symbolic mechanisms we have for making sense of something as complex as “the urban.”

This should not surprise us. As Lakoff and Johnson (1981) have long argued, human linguistic systems are fundamentally metaphorical and, in particular, a great many utterances are structured by ontological metaphors that view abstract concepts, forces, or events as entities. For Lakoff and Johnson, such ontological metaphors serve a crucial purpose in discourse: They allow speakers to grasp the abstract as concrete, to grasp the ineffable as if it were like our everyday experiences as living, breathing beings. In this way, the organic city trope is an extremely useful tool. It allows speakers to concretely grasp the almost unbearable complexity of contemporary urbanization, wherein such abstract (but still “lived”) processes as neighborhood change, economic stagnation, gentrification, and redevelopment become recast in more intimate and human terms—as urban birth, growth, illness, and death. To be sure, such tropes inevitably conceal features of urbanization that do not fit the organic frame (such as the role of human agency and global/local economic strategies in these processes); but it is doubtful that we could do without it for very long. It is simply too useful to toss out of the conceptual toolkit.<sup>18</sup>

Still, the fact that organic metaphors may always be with us should not suggest that the public is condemned to view urban politics through the eyes of downtown developers and retailers. For as Volosinov (1973) has shown, even commonly held linguistic signs like vitality and decay (the two poles of the organic city trope) are multiaccental, that is, they are capable of taking on a variety of accents and meanings, depending on how they are enmeshed within wider networks of association and difference. Signs like vitality and decay are therefore open to struggle, as dominant groups attempt to suppress alternative accents that might express competing social perspectives. In this way, the struggle over Pine Street was, in the end, a struggle over whose social accents would be activated within the key signs of the organic city trope. What, in other words, does it mean for a city to be alive or vital? What causes urban blight? What policies should be pursued to nurture an urban revitalization? If the organic city trope provides a fundamental way of grasping issues related to urban disinvestment and redevelopment, the specific political meanings articulated by the trope nonetheless remain contingent on contest and struggle, as urban political actors attempt to draft the language of the living city to serve their own strategic ends (Hall, 1982; Laclau, 1977).

## Articulating Urban Vitality

The struggle over Pine Street should therefore be seen as a struggle between competing articulations of the organic city trope, that is, between competing expressions of just what urban vitality could mean for Seattle voters. On one hand, CRORC offered Seattle voters a vision of urban vitality built around what Guy Debord (1977) would call “the spectacle of the commodity,” where the public is invited to wander through spaces of high-end consumption to sample a breathtaking array of goods,



**Figure 4.** Urban Vitality, Brought to You by Old Navy (Downtown Seattle)

services, and experiences unavailable in a typical suburban shopping mall (Zukin, 1998). In CRORC’s vision, then, a vital city enacts “a public realm deliberately shaped as theater” (Crilley, 1993, p. 153, as cited in Mitchell, 1995). Within this urban theater, the public’s primary mode of interaction is one of spectatorship, as the public-as-audience is immersed in a carefully orchestrated series of thematic, and usually branded, consumption experiences and environments (Hannigan, 1998). To be sure, the public can periodically

move beyond spectatorship into full participation in the urban spectacle, but these moments usually come at a fee or involve a trip to the nearest cash register.

In the newly revitalized Seattle, for example, consumers can wander through Nordstrom’s flagship store or the airy spaces of Pacific Place and peruse a range of luxury merchandise unavailable anywhere else in the Pacific Northwest. They can play out dreams of sports stardom in nearby Niketown or immerse themselves in an idealized history of “Gold Rush Seattle” in Pioneer Square, the city’s restored historic district. As the city’s subsequent revitalization plans clicked into place, Seattle’s citizen-consumers could then end their day by sampling the world’s cuisines at downtown’s expanding legion of gourmet restaurants and repair to any number of cultural pursuits, from the latest performance of the Symphony to a Seattle Mariners (Major League Baseball) night game at the \$500 million Safeco Field.

Such was CRORC’s vision. And there are real pleasures to be found in this conception of “urban vitality as urban spectacle.” CRORC’s vision responds, at least at some level, to popular desires for a diverse, novel, and engaging urban experience, where we are swept up in the jostling urban crowd and exposed to a stunning diversity of sights, sounds, and tastes (Shields, 1989). Yet at the same time, we should not forget that this definition of urban vitality is underwritten by downtown retailers and developers with a specific set of economic interests to defend. As such, the diversity of the urban experience promoted by CRORC is, on closer evaluation, a limited and administered di-

versity—where the array of commodities, services, and amenities offered are carefully selected to appeal to a decidedly upscale “target market,” and where private control over urban space is extended to create the best possible consumption environment for national-chain retailers (Christopherson, 1994).

Given Nordstrom’s appropriation of the Pine Street pedestrian mall, it is the immediate fate of public and civic space under CRORC’s vision of urban vitality that concerns us here. For their part, retailers like Nordstrom have long viewed the careful control of urban space, and the meticulous arrangement of elements within this space, as crucial to their commercial success (Leach, 1993; Williams, 1983; Zukin, 1998). Modern-era department stores used control over space to evoke fantasies of luxury, wealth, and exotic travel, while channeling consumption to the most profitable items. Suburban shopping malls took retailers’ control over space a step further, this time enclosing the street itself and creating massive, wholly privatized “public” spaces, where every element (from the placement of benches to the temperature of the air) was arranged to provoke consumers’ desires and channel them toward the act of purchase (Crawford, 1992).

If such total control over the spatial environment surrounding their properties eludes the grasp of downtown retailers like Nordstrom, they still seem determined to exert as much influence as possible on nearby public spaces so that they serve, rather than detract from, the consumption imperative. In this way, the progressive extension of private control over urban public space for the purpose of promoting upscale retail is a crucial, if less overtly celebrated, feature of CRORC’s vision of urban vitality. As the struggle over Pine Street suggests, in this vision, public spaces that are viewed by retailers as utterly incompatible with commercial priorities—such as the pedestrian mall—are candidates for outright elimination, while other adjacent public spaces are subject to increased private influence and control.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, the ultimate fate of public space within CRORC’s vision of urban vitality may have been revealed when, just months after the vote to reopen Pine Street, a city-appointed task force floated a proposal to bring what remained of Westlake Park under the control of a nonprofit organization organized and funded by downtown retailers. In this proposal, the nonprofit organization—tentatively dubbed Westlake Inc.—would be given the authority to “establish use guidelines and standards, to issue permits [for events], and to decorate and improve the Park.” Westlake Inc. would then be charged with the task of “achieving standards of presentation throughout the park comparable to private business standards for customer spaces.” To this end, Westlake Inc. would endeavor to “program” (their word) the park with activities and music all year long, with the explicit goal of ensuring that the park “complement surrounding businesses” by providing a lively environment for shoppers and pedestrians (Westlake Park Management Review Task Force, 1996). Like the demand to reopen Pine Street to auto traffic, the Westlake Inc. proposal demonstrates the interconnectedness of spectacular consumption and private control in CRORC’s vision of urban vitality.<sup>20</sup>

For their part, the Friends of Westlake Park, however haltingly, attempted to offer voters a different sense of what a “healthy downtown” could mean. Their competing conception of urban vitality never quite emerged as a full-blown and positive vision; but, in a few telling moments, the Friends campaign at least provided hints toward an alternative way of assessing the health of the living city.<sup>21</sup> Periodically during the campaign, for example, the Friends would argue that “there is more to downtown than shopping” (Aramburu, 1995) and that, although a strong retail core is undoubtedly

important to the commercial health of the city, a more expansive notion of the urban good life depends on preserving spaces for activities that transcend consumption and exchange.<sup>22</sup> As Friends cochair Peter Steinbrueck told the city council, “Every great city in the world has a central civic square that serves an important community purpose, not only in providing gathering space for festivals and events, but in promoting a sense of humanity and cultural spirit.”<sup>23</sup> The only space in Seattle that served this function was Westlake Park, argued the Friends, and now voters were being asked to allow traffic to slice through the middle of this unique civic space. Focusing in particular on the diversity of uses hosted in the park since its creation, the Friends tried to focus attention on what would be lost if traffic were allowed to rumble through the park:

Should 1,000 cars an hour drive through the heart of a unique public space? Should we give up the place where: Presidents speak, steel drums entertain, toddlers toddle, shoppers relax, tourists wander, demonstrators speak out, carousels whirl, horse-drawn carriages line up, sand castles are built, and more than 200 scheduled events are held every year? We say NO.

What is interesting about the above quotation is its focus on, for lack of a better term, the use value of urban spaces. In other words, if CRORC’s vision provides a particularly rich example of, to paraphrase Lefebvre, “the representation of space”—that is, the practice of conceiving space as something to be planned, controlled, and tethered to what Harvey (1985) called the “roving calculus of profit and exchange”—then the Friends’ vision of urban vitality focused attention on Pine Street and Westlake Park as “spaces of representation,” that is, as particularly important examples of how spaces derive significance from their appropriation and use in daily urban life (Lefebvre, 1991). What was crucial about the original Westlake Park, then, was not merely that it was a chunk of tiled open space but rather that, through daily use, the public had claimed it as the city’s premier civic space, and as such it had come to serve a crucial role in the life of the city. In other words, in the 6 years since its creation, through more than 1,000 organized cultural events and political rallies, Seattleites had individually and collectively invested the park/pedestrian mall with social and political meaning, transforming a fairly sterile tiled square into the city’s most important civic space. For the Friends, the popular creation of this civic space was an achievement that should be protected.

In this way, for the Friends, routing traffic through the heart of Westlake would not merely reduce the total size of the park, it would place material limits on the uses to which the park could be put. With traffic rolling through the pedestrian mall, political rallies, corporate-sponsored events, musical groups, and other informal park uses would now have to compete with one another on the small tiled square left over on the south side of Pine Street. Large political rallies that once fit nicely into the park would now be forced to ask a city advisory board for permission to temporarily close Pine Street—adding another level of administration beyond the already cumbersome permitting process. The danger was that, by cutting the heart out of Westlake Park and leaving only two small tiled plazas behind, Nordstrom’s proposal would leave Seattle citizens with insufficient space to collectively gather and participate jointly in important rituals of democracy and cultural celebration. For the Friends, then, such a move would make downtown Seattle a less hospitable environment for the enactment of civic life, and would thus drain the city of its vitality.



## Conclusion

In the Friends' vision, what makes the city "live" is the way in which collective performance—especially in the enactment of cultural ceremonies and joint political action—breathes life into otherwise dead urban spaces. It is the memory of such collective action that endows urban space with life and vitality. In this way, the debate between CRORC and the Friends of Westlake Park was, at heart, a confrontation between two competing articulations of urban vitality, one promoting a conception of vitality built around spectacular consumption and public spectatorship and another promoting a conception of vitality as joint performance and ritual. Of course, in pragmatic political terms, the discursive debate was unequal from the start. With a war chest of nearly \$350,000, CRORC was able to outspend the Friends of Westlake Park by nearly 200 to 1. As a result, the public heard mostly about the exciting new consumption experiences awaiting them once they approved the reopening of the pedestrian mall. Largely unimpeded by the Friends' underfunded campaign, CRORC in the end succeeded in framing the debate as a stark choice between "life" or "death" in downtown Seattle, rather than as a contest between two competing conceptions of what it takes to nurture a living city.

The political task that remains is to find a way to articulate and defend a more expansive conception of a healthy downtown, one that does not equate urban vitality so profoundly with spectacular consumption and the extension of monopolistic private control within the urban public realm. In my view, the place to begin this project of rearticulation, although it may seem odd at first, is to rethink the strict divisions critical scholars typically draw between public and private space.<sup>24</sup> First, this distinction between public and private space most likely means little to urban residents who travel freely between these boundaries without even realizing it. Moreover, the strict classification of urban spaces into (progressive) public and (exclusionary) private categories usually obscures the ways in which the public and the private have historically been intertwined (Jackson, 1989; Zukin, 1991). For instance, public parks and squares have for centuries hosted all manner of private commercial activity, whereas ostensibly private spaces like pubs, churches, and union halls offer gathering places for a public more diverse in many ways than that found within strictly public spaces like government buildings and universities.

What is important, then, is not the classification of urban spaces as public and private, but rather an assessment of how particular spaces are used and signified in the process of daily life. The crucial political question then becomes one of use. What sorts of activities are sanctioned within a particular space (public or private)? What range of uses does urban space, say, in downtown Seattle, afford? Are there places for consumption, play, and spectacle? Are there spaces for communal celebration and political participation? Are the rules governing the use of these spaces arrived at democratically, or does private ownership and unequal access to economic power confer monopoly control over decisions governing the use of urban space?

In my view, such questions provide a much-needed way to focus attention on what is worth fighting for in the contemporary urban landscape. In other words, the central issue in struggles like that waged over Pine Street is not a battle against privatization per se, but rather the need to defend what Lynn Hollen Lees (1994) calls civic space. For Lees, civic spaces are defined not by their ownership status (i.e., public or private) but rather through their use. Civic spaces are spaces, either publicly or privately owned, with a history of hosting particular forms of democratic and cultural

practice. They are spaces in which citizenship is asserted through joint participation in the public rituals of democracy and cultural celebration. Although Seattle has many spaces set aside for spectacular consumption, where we are addressed not as participants and citizens but as consumers and spectators, the city has few civic spaces defined by their history of hosting the public rituals of democratic practice. And now, with the closure of the Pine Street pedestrian mall, Seattle has less civic space today than in the past.

In this way, the concept of civic space becomes a useful orienting principle. On one hand, it enables a critique of privatized spaces like shopping malls and corporate plazas, not merely on the grounds of privatization but rather on the grounds that, in many cases, private control is used to limit access to urban space, tightly regulate the kinds of activities allowed within urban space, and exclude democratic participation in decisions that regulate the use of space. Corporate owners of consumption spaces have not been known for their willingness to host political rallies and demonstrations (Loukaitou-Sideris & Banerjee, 1998). But these are the kinds of events that, in Lees's (1994) view, create the collective memories that breathe life into urban space. For this reason, the extension of retailers' influence over spaces like Pine Street and Westlake Park is to be resisted, if only because corporate owners rarely allow the sorts of uses necessary to endow urban space with civic significance.

Finally, the concept of civic space allows for a more robust and defensible definition of urban vitality than that often provided by progressive groups. For, as Lees argues, civic spaces like Westlake Park are not just built. They acquire their meaning through their history of facilitating collective political and cultural performance. The concept of civic space thus draws our attention to a notion of urban vitality evocative of Lefebvre's (1991) "spaces of representation." A living city, in other words, is a city with spaces for civic representation, with spaces for the joint enactment of democratic and cultural action. In this way, the spaces in the city that are most alive are those that have been animated by historical, political, and cultural performance and struggle. The political task ahead is therefore to preserve the civic spaces already invested with life and to carve out more living civic space within an otherwise commodified, privatized, and individualistic urban landscape.

## Notes

1. Letter to City Council, December 6, 1994. Seattle City Archives, Tom Weeks' Subject Files.
2. In addition, Nordstrom had long located its national "headquarters" operations in downtown Seattle, but with the overall slump in downtown retail, there was some speculation that they might soon move their administrative departments to the suburbs or beyond. If the retailer could be convinced to assume control of the Frederick & Nelson (F&N) building, they would almost surely locate their headquarters operations in the upper floors, thereby keeping hundreds of well-paying jobs in downtown Seattle (Downtown Task Force, personal communication, March 24, 1999).
3. For details on Nordstrom's on-again, off-again enthusiasm for the Rhodes Project, see Lane (1994), Nogaki (1994b), O'Corr (1994), and Sather (1995).
4. Citizens to Restore Our Retail Core (CRORC) campaign flyer. Open letter from the Nordstrom family to Seattle registered voters, March 1995.
5. Letter to Council, November 28, 1994. Seattle City Archives, Jan Drago Subject Files.
6. As Collins (1995) notes, CRORC hired many PR consultants often associated with progressive or environmental causes, including Cathy Allen and longtime Democratic activist Jef-

frey Coopersmith. In addition, CRORC recruited some of Seattle's most famous liberal heavyweights to serve on their board, including Ron Judd, the chair of the King County Labor Council. Judd's support seemed especially ironic, Collins writes, because Nordstrom had recently busted its retail and office employees union, United Food and Commercial Workers 1001.

7. Jan Drago, draft letter to the editor, Jan Drago's City Council office files.

8. As one CRORC flyer put it, "What was once a thriving area—the 'jewel' of Seattle's—has been abandoned. Frederick & Nelson is gone. . . . Dozens of vacant storefronts line a graffiti-scarred corridor. And nothing has happened to breathe life in the area. That is . . . until now [with the Rhodes Project proposal]."

9. See also CRORC Focus Group Transcript, Jan Drago's City Council office files.

10. CRORC campaign flyer.

11. Letter to City Council, December 6, 1994. Seattle City Archives, Tom Weeks's subject files.

12. CRORC campaign flyer.

13. Letter to City Council, December 9, 1994. Seattle City Archives, Tom Weeks's subject files.

14. CRORC campaign flyer.

15. CRORC focus group notes. Jan Drago City Council office.

16. When asked to explain why she supported the decision to reroute traffic on Pine Street, one city official described what she saw as a retail core in desperate circumstances. "There were no people [downtown]. There were no pedestrians . . . the buildings were all vacant. . . . It was just a ghost town there" (Seattle City Council, personal communication, December 15, 1999).

17. That is, CRORC's specific articulation of the organic city trope seemed to mobilize meanings that reproduced relations of domination (Thompson, 1984).

18. For other examples of how biological/organic metaphors structure ways of seeing and interpreting complex social phenomena, see Kraut (1994) and Sontag (1978). For another discussion of organic and medical metaphors in urban politics, see Wilson (1996).

19. Although the street remains ostensibly in public hands, the private appropriation of Pine Street goes beyond merely the reopening of the street to traffic. The city ordinance that reopened Pine Street includes a solemn promise from the city to never again close this crucial block of the street to traffic, so long as any retailer (not just Nordstrom) occupies the historic F&N building. In essence, this clause transfers control over this block of Pine to the private sector and allows a private firm like Nordstrom to "sell" this control to the next occupant of the F&N site (Aramburu, Norton, Drago, Bullitt, & Judd, 1995).

20. See also Harvey (1990, 1994), Zukin (1998), and Mosco (1999) on the interconnectedness of contemporary urban-based consumption spectacles and the acceleration of private control over urban space.

21. On the defensive from the start, the Friends spent the bulk of their campaign trying to rebut the claims of their pro-Nordstrom opposition (i.e., that downtown was not "in trouble," that the city had done enough to support the Rhodes Project, etc.). As a result, the Friends never directly expressed an alternative vision of urban vitality to voters to compete with CRORC's narrow focus on shopping and retail.

22. For example, Peter Steinbrueck wrote the following in a letter to City Council:

To be sure, not everyone sees the need for a large civic space in the heart of downtown. . . . It has been suggested that Pine Street corridor—from the Convention Center to Pike Place Market—could be transformed into [a] "great shopping street." While this may indeed be a fine idea and great for retail, it's no substitute for civic gathering space. (Seattle City Archives, Tom Weeks's subject files, January 10, 1995)

23. Seattle City Archives, Tom Weeks's subject files, January 10, 1995.

24. I include myself in this criticism as well.

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