

Welcome to Providence

Perhaps it is no coincidence that Providence, a city that witnessed so many beginnings of national importance – from the introduction of religious tolerance by Roger Williams and the first stirrings of the American revolution to the country’s industrialization – seems particularly eager to continuously reinvent itself. The city’s core has been shaped by a sequence of major urban reorganization projects – and our conference hotel sits right at its center. While commercial activities had for a long time centered on the area around the old Market House (1774) at the foot of College Hill, a major shift occurred in 1847, when a new, majestic railroad station was built on the northern edge of downtown (Thomas Tefft, 1848, destroyed 1895). The irregular salt water cove in that area was partially filled in (the train station already stood on newly claimed land, Providence’s response to Boston’s burgeoning Back Bay project). The remaining oval basin behind it was encircled by a highly popular promenade. In the following decades large office buildings and a new City Hall (Samuel Thayer, 1874, modeled on Boston’s old City Hall by Arthur Gilman) brought definition and prominence to the public square in front of the station.

Fifty years later, Providence had become one of the major industrial centers in the Northeast, with thriving machine, metal and jewelry industries and growing banking facilities. A larger railroad terminal with more space for train tracks and parking became necessary. What remained of the cove, including two rivers that flowed into it, was covered or filled in. The position of the new Union Station (Stone, Carpenter, Willson 1895) further north boldly doubled the size of the city’s principal public space. The station itself (right across the street from our conference hotel) assumed the unusual form of five pavilions lined up like the cars of a train, and came with an artificial hill in front of it: the train tracks were elevated by one story, allowing streets to cross

Fenske/ Neumann
12/07/03

underneath, in order to connect the city's center with the newly built Rhode Island State House (McKim Mead and White, 1891-1902). Saturday evening's reception will take place beneath the State House's majestic dome.

In the mid 1980s, a third railroad station, Providence Station (Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, 1982-86), was built still further to the north, and the earlier process was reversed: the rail lines were reduced in number to two and placed underground. The old railroad station now houses offices and restaurants and the land claimed from the abandoned railroad tracks has been turned into the 'Capital Center' development area. The rivers have been uncovered and are today framed by an urban park with walkways and 12 new bridges (William Warner, 1992-2000). A new, much smaller cove was created in memory of the first one. Several of the parcels have since been built upon, the most conspicuous one with an enormous urban mall, right next to our hotel (and connected via a pedestrian bridge); others, across the street, still await development. But already, the "Providence Renaissance" is considered one of the most successful recent urban renewal projects in the United States.

Scores of new restaurants have opened in downtown, and the area is in the process of being transformed from a former business center into a residential district and the seat of major educational institutions: the old Shepard's Department Store now houses classrooms of the University of Rhode Island; on the site of the former Outlet Department Store, Johnson & Wales University has erected its main campus; and the Rhode Island School of Design is in the process of transforming the 12-story Beaux Arts Hospital Trust Company Building (York & Sawyer, 1917) into a grand library topped by 500 dormitory rooms. The urban renewal and highway projects that devastated the hearts of so many American cities in the 1960s left Providence's relatively intact. Many great old buildings have survived there, among them the 1828 Arcade

Fenske/ Neumann
12/07/03

(not to be missed), Richard Upjohn's Grace Church (1845-46), the Providence Performing Arts Center (Rapp and Rapp, 1928) and others. The western section of downtown, however, has been replaced with new office and apartment buildings, and on its southern side, parking lots still speak of the unfulfilled dreams of an earlier era. A project that matches the scope and ambition of the moving of the railroad tracks is the current relocation of the intersection of highways 95 and 195 further south (2003 – ca. 2010), which will provide additional land for development close to the city center.

Much more awaits you beyond downtown. On the East Side along Benefit Street (within walking distance from the hotel, but also easily reached by trolley) you will find the architectural witnesses of Providence's wealth in the 18th and 19th centuries: majestic churches (the First Baptist Meeting House of 1774-75 will be the location of our Friday evening award ceremony and plenary lecture); the houses of Providence merchants, such as the Browns, Ives, Carringtons (1786, 1791, 1810); the Museum of the Rhode Island School of Design (where our reception on Friday night will take place, and which will host an exhibition of Renaissance architecture books and drawings in honor of the SAH meeting) and the Atheneum (1836-38), the city's first lending library, designed by William Strickland. Many of these and other buildings will be open for the conference participants on Thursday evening, as part of the city's Gallery Night. Brown University is integrated into this neighborhood, facing the city with Philip Johnson's List Art Building of 1971 (don't miss the Bell Gallery's "Unbuilt Providence" exhibition, organized to coincide with the SAH meeting). Brown's central campus is well worth seeing; it is a "microcosm of American architecture" with good examples of colonial, federal, Greek and Gothic Revival, Richardsonian Romanesque, Beaux-Arts, and modern architecture. South of downtown is the "Jewelry District," in which several old silver plating factories have been

Fenske/ Neumann

12/07/03

recently converted to restaurants; to the west is Federal Hill, the old Italian neighborhood with countless restaurants along Atwells Avenue. Both can easily be reached by trolley from downtown.

Providence prides itself in a long history of hospitality. This began when a group of Narragansett Indians (who had already learned some English) greeted Roger Williams in 1636. When his boat landed in today's Fox Point, they exclaimed "What Cheer, Netop!" (Netop meaning "friend" in their native language). We hope that you will feel similarly welcomed in Providence. We look forward to seeing you in April!

Gail Fenske and Dietrich Neumann
SAH Fifty-Seventh Annual Meeting, Providence