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Architecture and Memory

When Myth Supersedes Reality: How The Providence River Is Being Used To Perpetuate a Cultural Fallacy

Every resident of Providence has seen the Providence River, the iconic body of water which wends its way 13km from Narragansett Bay to the city's center, dissecting the congested downtown plaza. Today, the river ends in a peaceful artificial basin in the center of town, surrounded by upscale restaurants and shops. However, despite its pivotal role in the growth of Providence as a city, the Providence River today is not known as a driving force in the city's evolution. Instead, it is known simply as the location of a recent urban spectacle – Waterfire. Today, the layout and architecture of the basin is designed solely with the intent of facilitating, and subsequently memorializing, this pseudo-cultural event, an event that perpetuates a very new cultural myth - - a myth depicting Providence as a historically artistic 'Renaissance' city. In doing so, the space serves to solidify a false memory of an era which does not and has never existed, and as a result serves to silence the actual history of the river and the city of Providence itself.

The history of the Providence River is a somewhat troubled one. Although the river played an integral role in the growth of Providence -first in the city's phase as a fishing port, later as a key driver in the booming manufacture of textiles at mills, and finally as an integral part of Providence's modern role as an industrial port - the river has

often been overlooked by the Providence community¹. From the turn of the century until the mid 1970s, the Providence River was largely covered over by transportation infrastructure - - paths and roads existed well above the river in the downtown area.² Somewhat surprisingly, it wasn't until Mayor Cianci's urban renewal scheme that the river was uncovered. Cianci understood the river's pivotal role in Providence's development as a port city; accordingly, Cianci diverted the river so that it would accumulate in the downtown basin, forming an integral part of the urban landscape – reflecting its integral role in the city's history.

However, this relatively recent space has been distorted to facilitate an even more recent urban tradition:

Waterfire. This event, which has perhaps become Providence's most famous urban tradition, serves to supposedly commemorate Providence's cultural history,



but in doing so creates a myth completely divergent with the city's actual history. In practice, Waterfire is a biweekly event hosted from April thru October where residents and visitors alike gather to watch hundreds of bonfires be set alight on the Providence River. Since its conception in 1994, creator Barnaby Evans has often described his intention to create an urban tradition that celebrated Providence's history, saying that

¹ "Providence: Three and One-Half Centuries at a Glance." May 2002. State of Rhode Island. 19 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.providenceri.com/history/centuries1.html>>.

² Ibid

“Physically, the [downtown basin] was beautifully designed but it didn’t have the social engagement that an urban civic space needed to have... [I wanted Waterfire] to become a civic ritual for the city and to be both a ritual to create social engagement... [But also] be symbolic of the renaissance of the city.”³

However, despite Evans’ desire for the event to be ‘symbolic’ of the city, the traditions of Waterfire seem to bear little resemblance to those of Providence itself. In fact, the rituals involved with Waterfire seem to be a befuddling mix of borrowed European and Asian motifs, giving the entire event an air of faux-culturalism. The one hundred bonfires are lit one by one by torchbearers in Gondolas as a procession of robbed figures bangs a gong. On the riverbanks, observers can often see choirs singing, performers dancing, or, bizarrely, Italian operas being performed. The lighting of the torches seems to have no relevance to Providence as a city whatsoever, evoking more associations with the torch lighting ceremonies of European fascist dictators in the 1930s than an American port.

While these performances could potentially have tenuous affiliations to the city – such as the Opera alluding to Providence’s substantial Italian community – the are clearly not indicative of Providence’s actual history. The city of Providence is known for being many things, including intellectual, industrial, historical, but one thing that it is not typically regarded as is artistic. In fact, aside from being known as the location of the

³ as quoted in Monagan, Susan. “The Art Maker as Active Agent: Six Portraits.” 1999. Community Arts Network. Feb. 18, 2009. <<http://www.communityarts.net/readingroom/archive/monagan/ch6-evans.php>>

Rhode Island School of Design, the city's history is much more closely associated with that of industrial manufacturing.

Thus, the myth the event perpetuates of Providence being a 'Renaissance' city is a false one. However, despite the event being less than two decades old, this myth has become so rooted in the urban imagination that Providence's official nickname is now 'The Renaissance City'⁴. Daniel Boorstin writes in his seminal work *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* how exactly this can take place, where the commemoration of a false memory can in fact make that memory a reality. He gives the example of a small hotel seeking to gain prestige in the urban community. Instead of acknowledging that the hotel needs to improve its service, the hotel decides to throw an event falsely commemorating thirty years of impeccable service to the community. Reporters attend, guests are invited, and because of the spectacle, soon the hotel is actively regarded as being an invaluable asset to the urban landscape.⁵ Waterfire is no different than our hypothetical

hotel - by celebrating a fallacy, Waterfire has in fact made that fallacy a reality for the future.

Despite Providence's lack of an artistic past, because that past was celebrated in such a spectacle, Providence is now



⁴ "Welcome to Providence." 2008. Providence Homepage. Feb. 18, 2009. <<http://www.providenceri.com/>>

⁵ Boorstin, Daniel. The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America. New York: Random House, 1961

regarded as a historically artistic city.

Because of the perpetuation of this myth, Providence River has now become a symbol not of its actual importance to the city's economy, but instead to the spectacle of Waterfire. Because of the architecture of the basin, the river is not simply a tranquil body of moving water: it is a constant reminder of the pseudo-event that takes place there, and by extension, the false memory the event commemorates. Vestiges and traces of the spectacle are intentionally left in the river throughout the year, constantly reminding passers-by of Waterfire. Even today, on a cold snowy February morning, one can see the empty, burned steel baskets used to house the burning torches. It is impossible to walk by the river basin without being visually assaulted by the constant signifiers of what annually takes place. In that reminder, we fail to see Providence River for what it truly is -- the most important factor in Providence's *economic* growth, not its role in a false artistic revival.

We tend to think of cultural myths as slow moving shadows, evolving gradually before becoming rooted in the cultural memory of a community. But as this recent event shows, through the spectacular commemoration of fallacies, myths can become deeply rooted in the cultural psyche in less than a generation. Pseudo-events such as Waterfire are dangerous not only because they commemorate non-existent events, but because the creation of these false histories and memories often supersedes the realities of a situation - - in this case the invaluable role Providence River has played in the growth of an industrial city.

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