

Providence's biggest asset is its growing waterfront

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By Chester E. Smolski

Twenty years ago, the view of the city of Providence from the Washington Bridge was a dismal one. As one looked to the south and toward the water, the most visible signs were that of a scrapyard and metals firm with mountains of scrapmetal everywhere in sight. This veritable junkyard did nothing to enhance the first impression of Rhode Island's capital city.

The Providence Preservation Society recently voiced its displeasure at the proposed Riverview Place, a \$65 million apartment complex to be built on the banks of the Seekonk River. One of their objections centered on a proposed 22-story tower that would destroy the attractive vista that one experiences by looking into the Fox Point neighborhood, with its juxtaposition of three-story buildings that ascend the higher ground of the East Side. The proposed tower is also completely out of scale with the buildings in the neighborhood.

Our first impressions of cities are affected by the vistas we encounter as we enter other cities also. Entry into Athens today from the south is a sad one with smog-filled air, dirty industrial development and general rundown conditions encountered along much of the way. By contrast, one of the most spectacular entrances into a city is by air into Rio de Janeiro, that beautiful green mountain and white sand coast along which this most attractive city was built.

The cities of England are unique, of course, because of the wise legislation passed in the 1930s that provides for a nondevelopable greenbelt to surround the cities. It is not uncommon to be two or three miles away from a major city center and be completely surrounded by farms: a sharp contrast from the typical sprawl of housing and commercial strip development that most commonly surround the cities of this country.

All too often it is this monotonous and similar development encompassing our cities that appears to make American cities all too similar, and one is hard pressed to find uniqueness and diversity between them. But there is one area that provides opportunity for cities to be considerably different, and that is if they have a waterfront location.

It was through the generosity and vision of East Side benefactor Mary Sharpe that the city of Providence was to eventually replace the junkyard lying between Fox Point and India Point with open space. The 12 acre India Point Park that now graces the entrance into the capital city opened in 1974 to serve neighborhood needs, but it also allows one to view the city and its waterfront with a more positive image.

But that park and the remainder of the waterfront lay dormant and in generally poor conditions and repair until the Hot Club, a small bar in a small, detached building, opened in 1983 on the Providence River, across from Narragansett Electric's power plant. Slowly, over the years as the bar expanded, so did the other activities on the waterfront. And in 1985, to introduce people to the waterfront, a festival was held.

The increasing interest in the waterfront was demonstrated in the recent and most successful fifth Providence Waterfront Festival, with upwards of 75,000 people attending the two day event. With 45 corporate sponsors and hundreds of volunteers to help, the city organized the activities so that most of the waterfront in that India Point and Fox Point area was in use, and the many water activities served to enhance the whole affair.

The city has drawn up plans for various types of development for the waterfront along the Providence and Seekonk Rivers over the past several years as a continuation of the Capital Center and river relocation plans. To its credit, many of the ideas presented on paper have come to pass and more look promising for the future. Providence has discovered its waterfront.

The hot properties in cities today are the waterfronts, whether they be on rivers or the oceans; and riverfront cities, like Memphis and New Orleans, and oceanfront cities, like Baltimore and Boston, are making major investments in these areas. It was not always so.

Waterfronts were essential to the growth of cities in the early days when agricultural and mining products, and in time, manufactured products, were shipped by water. The railroads in the middle of the last century opened up the

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interior of the nation and also became the dominant means of shipping goods. Rail lines went to the water, but often paralleled the water and cut off the waterfront from the rest of the city. And then came the trucks with their need for roads, which also helped to separate the city from its waterfront.

In the case of Providence there was a similar history, but hurricanes added to the rundown conditions of the waterfront. Damaged docks and piers even now are common sights in the Providence River, and abandoned buildings attest to the disinvestment that was common just a few short years ago.

The return to the waterfront started in cities over a decade ago when buildings near the water were rehabilitated and commercial ventures moved in. Ghiradelli Square and the Cannery in San Francisco were among the earliest.

The restoration of Boston's Faneuil Hall, which was developed by the Rouse Co., took place in the late 1970s, and from there development activities moved to the immediate waterfront. Other developments such as Baltimore's Harborplace in 1980, followed by the South Street Seaport in New York, Bayside on Biscayne Bay in Miami and Jacksonville Landing are some of the seven major waterfront projects that the Rouse Co. has done.

Other developers have also moved into potentially viable waterfront areas, the most excit-

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ing now being the New Jersey waterfront facing New York City. Newport Center is the heart of what is projected to be a \$10 billion investment in Jersey City. Port Liberté, also in Jersey City, is a \$1 billion mixed-use development built on canals that will have 750 boat slips. And these developments are only two of 20 projects lined up in the six communities from Jersey City to Fort Lee in the north.

St. Louis with its Gateway Arch and Laclede's Landing is still undergoing change along its Mississippi riverfront. Also on the Mississippi, Memphis found itself with a sandbar created in the river in 1913 that now boasts a \$60 million theme park with plans to build 1000 residences as well. This Mud Island development adjoins the Memphis downtown.

Most unusual, Lake Havasu City, a new town in Arizona, purposely diverted water from the Colorado River to give the community a waterfront as well as some water to go under the London Bridge purchased from London in 1968. Incidentally, the Bridge is the second most visited site in Arizona after the Grand Canyon.

Cities are discovering that waterfronts are the connecting links between their downtowns and the water, and waterfront development serves to expand and strengthen the downtowns. That is certain to be the future of Providence's downtown when the one acre waterplace park at the foot of the state capitol opens as part of the relocated Woonasquatucket River.

For those skeptics who could not imagine having boat moorings in the Providence River near the Point Street bridge, how does the idea of having small boats picking up and landing passengers at the foot of the our lovely Beaux Arts capitol strike you? That will be a reality in three years time, as Providence continues to reshape its city center and waterfront. And a more attractive waterfront will serve to give a positive impression to those who enter the city for the first time. □

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