

City Image Building

by Chester E. Smolski

It is only a beginning, but it is a step in the right direction. The recently announced proposal by the Mayor of Providence for the purchase of art works for city buildings and parks is a welcome sign that the city is finally recognizing the value of an aesthetically pleasing urban environment. Called "Art in City Life," the program could funnel as much as \$300,000 next year into works of art for city public spaces, much of it in the downtown area (see centerfold of Citiartnews, Fall/Winter Issue, 1979-1980). This important measure deserves the full support of the arts community as well as the citizenry at large.

A city's character is dependent on its aesthetics, both in terms of its physicality and the more human events that happen within. A street of beautiful buildings or a scenic park not only enrich our lives, but also contribute to boost economic opportunity. Pleasing cities are naturally easier to sell as sites for conventions and the tourist industry. As of now, Providence has only begun to tap these valuable resources. Interesting visual works, such as fountains, plazas, and sculpture, provide a sense of joy as one walks through the city environment. This capital city of ours needs a variety of art to further add to what can be one of the most attractive cities on the East Coast. The proposal by the Mayor is just one of the many needed moves for this to happen. The arts are a necessary ingredient for the rebirth of the city.

What direction should be taken to reshape the city's character? Certainly, the historic buildings and distinctive character of Providence are a major asset. But more can be done to enrich the city, to make its community more aware of its arts heritage, to educate its people to the contributions of its artists and to further enhance its budding reputation as a center for the visual and performing arts.

A similar historic city, Charlestown, South Carolina, has found the answer to this question of enhanced character through the sponsorship of a festival that, in three short years, has brought wide renown to the community. The Spoleto Festival, held annually in the late spring, attracts noted national and international artists, in addition to using local talent, to provide the best arts festival found anywhere in the country. The Festival, which spans seventeen days, is fortunate in having the originator of the famed Spoleto Festival of Italy, Italian composer Gian Carlo Menotti, in Charlestown to replicate his achievements. Through his work and the contributions of many others, Charlestown's Festival has transformed the city's year-round cultural life (to include, for example, two major ballet companies) and brought increased support for the arts.

Music, drama, dance and exhibits everywhere, not just in available performing spaces, but in galleries, schools, on the streets and in the gardens and parks make every corner of the city throb with excitement. Woody Herman jazz concerts, Rossellini films, American premiere performances of Italian comic opera, Leonard Bernstein performances and Tennessee Williams plays are just some of the offerings that reflect the spirit of this delightful Spoleto experience.

The festival brings not only a growing pride to this historic city (immortalized in George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*), but it has tremendously stimulated Charlestown's economy. It is estimated that the festival alone adds \$20 million to the local economy, a figure roughly equal to the entire tourist business annually generated in Providence. The arts that are fulfilling to the community are also good for its coffers.

Festivals highlighting the arts are now commonly used to draw attention to the unusual aspects of a city, to make use of these distinctive features. In Miami Beach, the Art Deco District is the focus of a festival; in Baltimore, the newest redevelopment site serves as the focus for a festival to dramatize the city's rebirth. Nearby Cambridge uses the Charles River for its Cambridge River Festival; Newport has shown what is possible with performances in its impressive mansions. Is something like this possible in Providence?

With a large pool of talented artists already in the city, schools of performing and visual arts located here, a performing arts center and theatre available and some of the most impressive and historic architecture of any small city in the East, it would appear that all of the necessary components for establishing an arts festival in Providence are present. To bring it all together would require the cooperation of the three locally based arts organizations, including Citiart, a city administration which has already demonstrated its support of the arts; organizations working for historic preservation, such as the Providence Preservation Society; and, most important, a committed business community to spearhead the financial backing for such a venture.

The potential ingredients for such a festival already exist in Providence. Only the process needs to be made operational. The product of such a venture could generate civic and artistic pride, bring citizens together in cooperative activities, boost local revenue, spur commercial enterprises and emphasize the city's special historic character. Other cities have shown the way. It is time now for a Providence Arts Festival to further enhance the image of a city on the move. □

Chester Smolski is the Director of Urban Studies at Rhode Island College.