

# Designing Providence's Riverfront Revival

By Tom Ardito

Twenty-five years ago, the once-meandering rivers of downtown Providence had become, essentially, a set of pipes. Over them squatted "the widest bridge in the world," a deck of roadways featuring the rotary known as Suicide Circle. The lower Woonasquatucket and Moshassuck rivers—along with their confluence, the upper Providence River—were almost completely hidden beneath a sea of asphalt.

In early 1982, William D. Warner, a planner and architect, proposed a study that would look at reconnecting Providence with its lost waterfronts. The timing was fortunate, as the R.I. Department of Transportation was just beginning a project to relocate the railroad downtown. "So you can see we were under the gun," said Warner during an interview at his office, a renovated mill in Exeter, R.I. "They're already building this thing, and we're getting funding to commence a study."

In 1983, Warner's firm, William D. Warner Architects & Planners, embarked on the project with funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Providence Foundation, and the R.I. Department of Transportation. From the outset, the study included public participation workshops. "That was key," said Warner, "because the people didn't even know where their rivers were. I said, 'Look, folks, it doesn't have to be this way.'"

"We began to develop a groundswell of interest to uncover the rivers," he continued, "to make them accessible. At the same time, we solved the traffic problem, which made it a real project because the funding came from the Federal Highway Administration to build it." The state's transportation planners recognized the value of the proposal and, by late 1984, approved a \$60-million project to unearth the rivers and extend Memorial Drive, improving traffic flow through the downtown. Construction was completed 12 years later, in 1996.



Photo courtesy Narragansett Bay Journal.

Warner designed 12 low, graceful, arched bridges to span Providence's reborn rivers and designed Waterplace Park and Riverwalk. Now one can ride a Venetian gondola, dine overlooking the river, or simply stroll along the water's edge. Since completion of the project, more than a million people have attended Barnaby Evans' WaterFire, an occasional installation of flaming torches and surreal music on the rivers. Many of these visitors were undoubtedly unaware that the watercourses were all but lost just two decades ago.

In 1990, Warner's firm turned its attention to the state's next major transportation undertaking: rebuilding Interstate 195. Warner again teamed up with the Providence Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts and developed the Old Harbor Plan, which proposed moving the highway seaward of the Fox Point Hurricane Barrier.

State transportation planners approved the proposal, and construction has begun on the project, which will uncover 45 acres of waterfront land in downtown Providence for use as parks, streets, and for private development. The project includes the extension of the Riverwalk to Fox Point, improving the pedestrian connection between downtown and India Point Park. Warner's vision will, once again, reunite a part of Providence with a vital element of the city's heritage—Narragansett Bay.

—Tom Ardito is Editor of the Narragansett Bay Journal, and Outreach and Policy Coordinator for the Narragansett Bay Estuary Program. The Narragansett Bay Journal is available online at [www.nbep.org/journal/](http://www.nbep.org/journal/). This article was reprinted from Public Access to the Rhode Island Coast. The guide is available from Rhode Island Sea Grant at [seagrant.gso.uri.edu](http://seagrant.gso.uri.edu)—click on "Bookstore."



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