

Blackstone River

The One River Project: Design, Economics, and the Environment Join Forces

By Chip Young



Communities in Rhode Island and across the country are struggling to repair and protect the quality of their waterways and set regulations about development along the water's edge. Typically, these regulations aim to protect the waterway through the maintenance of a "natural" vegetated buffer zone. Although the dimensions of the buffer vary from municipality to municipality, these regulations consistently limit development along the water's edge.

The "One River Project," a collaboration between the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) and the R.I. Economic Policy Council (EPC), is exploring an alternative development approach that synthesizes hard edges (existing piers, docks, dams, and walls) with the natural function of the river. The project is working on the historically significant Blackstone River. This urban waterway contains diverse physical features along its length, ranging from mill villages to ecologically important tidal wetlands.

Preserving the cultural and architectural history of the region's urban waterways while enhancing their natural ecological elements requires a new approach to the water's edge. The goal of the One River Project is to use the study of the Blackstone to design broadly useful new models for building great waterfronts where the people of the city can meet the water and appreciate its beauty. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) is funding this project in order to bring Rhode Island's eventual results in addressing these design challenges and opportunities to a national audience.

A Combination of Forces

The project will assemble teams of scientists, engineers, and designers to work in a series of charrettes this fall. These charrettes will be intensive one-day sessions designed to produce new strategies for building urban edges to rivers and tidewater zones. The criteria will prioritize clean water and healthy ecosystems while promoting a high-quality design for vibrant and accessible waterfronts.

These cutting-edge strategies will be tested in fully illustrated model development proposals and presented to a panel of experts, including public officials and private developers, in an open symposium in the spring of 2007. Feedback from the symposium will be integrated into the design strategies and tested in student studios in the fall of 2007. The final product will be an illustrated publication for national dissemination.

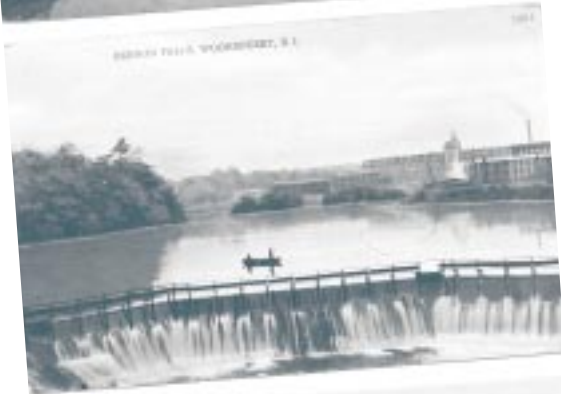
The ultimate goal is to strengthen the vibrancy of waterfront communities through innovative design. That will be done by creating state-of-the-art standards, with illustrated examples, for urban waterfront development, combining science, engineering, and design to improve water quality and natural habitats with creative urban design.

The One River Project aims to break down the longstanding expectation that safeguarding the environment and creating urban waterfronts are mutually exclusive. In addition, the project will engage both students and public officials in active problem-solving through design.

The project builds on an existing research project supported by RISD Academic Improvement Grants, the EPC, and various partners in the Blackstone River Valley. In the year preceding the NEA funding request (2005–2006), the One River Project reviewed the current state of environmental regulations, catalogued the development opportunities along the Blackstone River and tidewaters, and began testing new models for development through two interdisciplinary design studios at RISD, combining architects, landscape architects, and industrial designers.

The combination of professionals and members of the public looking at the physical science, social implications, economic impacts, and aesthetic quality of the environment in the region provides a unique opportunity to make the One River Project a national model for inspired innovations, and produce beneficial results for our communities with urban waterfronts.

—Chip Young is Communications Liaison for the URI Coastal Institute.



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