

PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND



Photograph courtesy of the Convention and Visitors Bureau of Providence.

Providence is a canvas on a grand scale, a former industrial hub attempting to recreate itself as a 21st-century center of art, culture and tourism. The Rhode Island School of Design has plans for a new campus center designed by the Pritzker Prize-winning Spanish architect Rafael Moneo, and developers are converting old downtown buildings into pricey loft-style condos.

But one of the most symbolically charged—and least likely—arts-related building projects in Providence is a nondescript shopping plaza called Eagle Square. In fact, Eagle Square is less notable for what it contains than for what it supplanted: a vibrant alternative-arts space known as Fort Thunder, which was cobbled together from a complex of old textile mills in the mid-1990s and included a performance-art collective known as Forcefield. “I was absolutely knocked out, not just by Forcefield but by the whole Fort Thunder scene,” Lawrence Rinder, chief curator of the 2002 Whitney Biennial, told *The Providence Journal*. “There was so much going on, so much creativity in the air.”

Forcefield was invited to participate in the prestigious Whitney exhibition, and its installation was a hit. But even that success wasn’t enough to save the collective’s home, which was

demolished and paved over for the Eagle Square parking lot. The rise and razing of Fort Thunder says a lot about the cultural life of Providence. There’s plenty of creative spark and abundant artistic activity, but the city has not always made the most of its strengths.

Providence was quick to identify the arts as a catalyst for rejuvenating a moribund municipal economy, due in part to the efforts of former mayor Vincent A. “Buddy” Cianci. During his two decades in office, the colorful mayor used his clout on behalf of a range of cultural institutions, including Providence Performing Arts Center, Trinity Repertory and AS220, a lively arts-center-cum-café that offers youth and community programs as well as live-work spaces for artists.

Still, critics say that even more than most politicians, Cianci—who was sent to jail in 2002 for racketeering—promised more than he could deliver, doled out support inconsistently and often failed to see projects through to fruition. One frequently cited example is his plan to turn downtown Providence into a SoHo-style neighborhood with artists’ lofts, galleries, chic restaurants, trendy bars and live-theater venues.

To great fanfare in the mid-’90s, Cianci pushed for tax breaks to help artists move into an area known as the Downcity Arts District. Yet

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the rehabbed live-work spaces proved too expensive for any but the most established and successful. Theaters and restaurants pulled visitors into Downcity, but not in large enough numbers to support a thriving gallery district. Several galleries that had located downtown were forced to close their doors.

The post-September 11 economic slump and the trend toward consolidation within the banking industry also hindered growth. Fleet bank, which recently merged with Bank of America, was among the companies moving their headquarters outside the state, making it increasingly difficult for arts groups—particularly smaller ones—to gain access to corporate support. Meanwhile, the neighboring city of Pawtucket took a page from Cianci's book and launched its own artist-friendly campaign, successfully wooing the Providence-based Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre, which relocated into an old armory-turned-arts-complex in Pawtucket.

Artists and arts officials, though, hope Providence has turned a corner with the 2002 election of its new pro-arts mayor, David N. Cicilline. Since taking office he has founded an arts-and-tourism office, which operates on a \$400,000 annual budget and manages a \$100,000 revolving fund for arts groups in need of quick bailouts. "Basically, what the mayor is saying with this department is that arts and culture are an integral motif that is weaved through every reasonable part of the city government," says Cliff Wood, who heads the department. "When we make policy, we want to consider art."

City government isn't the only institution making changes. Traditionally, the Rhode Island School of Design's primary presence in the community was its highly regarded art museum. But in recent years the design school has begun to move "off the hill": Downtown is now home to the school's new technology center, art gallery and store, as well as a renovated bank building containing live-work spaces for graduate students. In addition, the \$38 million Moneo-designed campus center is on track for groundbreaking in 2005.

Last year RISD took another step forward. Along with three other tax-exempt Providence colleges, it reached a precedent-setting, 20-year agreement with the city to contribute nearly \$50 million to municipal services. The voluntary payments headed off what might have become a costly and divisive court battle had the city pressed to collect property taxes from the schools. "We want to lead the charge to keep our city vital, because in some ways it's the key to our



PROVIDENCE JOURNAL

own success," says RISD president Roger Mandle, who spearheaded the agreement.

Some people already see signs of a renewed vitality. GTECH Holdings Corp., a firm that is a leader in lottery technology, plans to move its headquarters to downtown Providence, while Providence Place, a regional mall that opened in 1999, has proven itself a sales-tax boon to the state. Meanwhile, Providence Performing Arts Center president J.L. "Lynn" Singleton has good news to report. "Attendance-wise, we had the

best year ever last year at PPAC,” he says of the 2002-03 season. “It’s all about product. A roadhouse like this, you got good shows, you’re a genius; you got bad shows, you’re stupid.”

While overall funding from the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts was down by about 10 percent in 2003, many smaller players on the arts scene are managing to survive and flourish. Perishable Theatre, an experimental theater company that faced rocky times due to a \$100,000 budget shortfall in 2003, found a home in the AS220 complex and embarked on a joint capital campaign. Providence Black Repertory Company settled into a permanent home downtown and raised \$2 million toward outfitting a new 150-seat mainstage theater.

Individual artists continue their creative work too. “Over these five years, what’s changed is people are being recognized,” says Jim Drain, 28, a RISD-trained member of the now-disbanded Forcefield. “It’s hard to step into commercial venues. It’s that crossover, accepting success or not, and trying to find what integrity really is.”

In a way, Providence itself is at a similar crossroads. Some people see the city’s proximity to Boston as important to its growth. Trend

watchers note that young, upwardly mobile workers in the computer and design industries and white-collar professionals from Boston are buying places in Providence and commuting to work across the state line. These newcomers are reportedly not only attracted by lower housing costs and quiet suburban neighborhoods, but also by the city’s hip, artsy vibe.

“We used to make the claim that Providence had the highest density of artists per capita of any city,” says Umberto Crenca, AS220’s founder and artistic director. “I think there’s a kind of sense of humor and attitude about Providence that appeals to artists. The place has a feel and a scale that’s very appealing.”

Still, he says, it’s becoming increasingly difficult for fledgling arts troupes to gain a foothold. “Providence has become a hot real estate market,” he notes. “There were a lot of space opportunities, but that window is rapidly closing. It’s getting much more difficult for artists.”

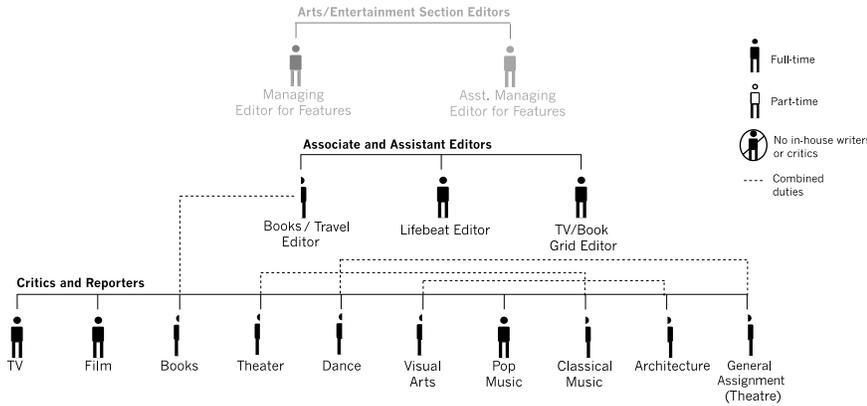
Maintaining Providence’s appeal to artists—even as it continues to attract those interested in the arts such as tourists, new residents in their 20s and 30s and older suburbanites—may be the city’s next big challenge.

BY VALERIE TAKAHAMA

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In-house Arts Staff (does not include features staff, copy desk and freelancers)



The Providence Journal

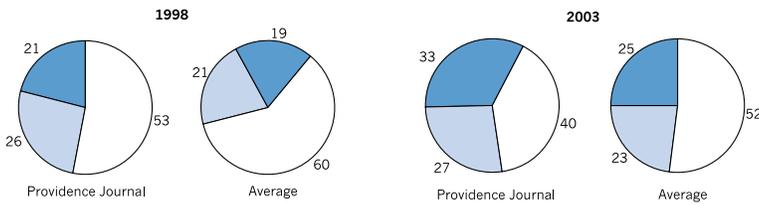
1998-2003

- Daily circulation:
- Arts-and-culture newshole:
- Number of arts-and-culture articles:
- *In-house arts staff:

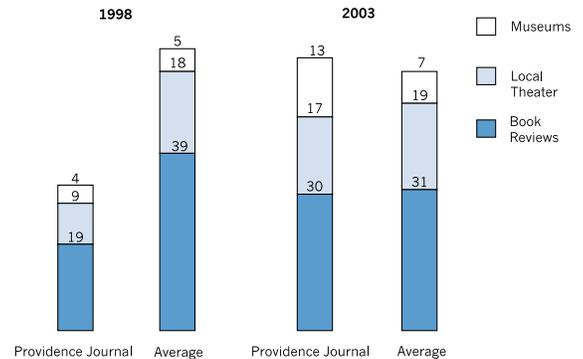
*The Providence Journal publishes 7 regional zoned editions that sometimes draw an additional newsroom staff.

Distribution of Arts-and-Culture

percentage of arts-and-culture newshole assigned to articles , the television listings grid and to other listings

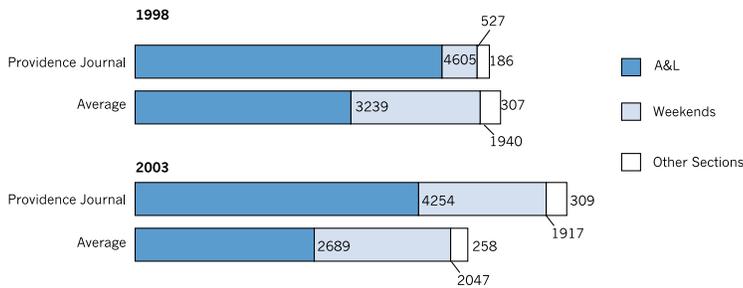


Book Reviews, Local Theater & Museums
 number of book reviews and articles on local theater and museums



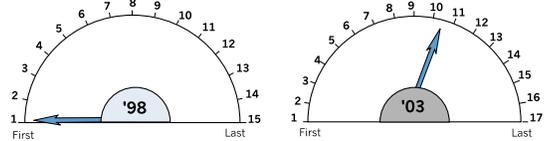
Newshole for Listings

space (in column inches) devoted to arts-and-culture listings



Television Journalism

ranking among all newspapers studied for percentage of arts-and-culture journalism newshole (listings excluded) devoted to television



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL WAS a newspaper that was already committed to listings when *Reporting the Arts* first took a look back in October 1998. That focus grew even stronger five years later. The size of the *Journal's* overall arts and culture newshole has remained virtually unchanged. However, the volume of listings has mushroomed from 47 percent of that space to 60 percent. This increased commitment was evident almost across the board—for movies, the performing arts and music. The A&C listings in the *Journal's* weekend arts supplements—Sunday's Arts and Thursday's LIVE—more than tripled during this time. The number of listings in the daily arts-and-lifestyle section, entitled Lifebeat, remained enormous.

LIVE was launched after we did our first study, and its addition doubled the presence of weekend supplements in the *Journal's* pagination, causing it to rise from minuscule to around the industry average for the papers analyzed. Yet the size of the weekend A&C newshole for articles remained low despite the increase in the number

of pages. Some of their added size was accounted for by a high proportion of full-page advertising—18 percent compared with a 12 percent average.

The *Journal* was one of six metropolitan newspapers out of the 15 we tracked that both shrank its A&C journalism yet failed to shrink it simultaneously. Its declining average article length meant that the *Journal* ran substantially the same number of A&C articles in October 2003 as it did in October 1998, yet those pieces occupied much less space.

The cutbacks in television journalism—a former staple of the daily Lifebeat section—were severe. In October 1998 TV occupied a disproportionate 22 percent of the *Journal's* entire A&C newshole for articles. Five years later that percentage was halved to an industry average. By contrast, its story count on local theater and book reviews increased, growing from unusually low to average. The *Journal* also filed more articles on museums than any other newspaper we studied.—AT

ARTS COVERAGE IN PROVIDENCE A CRITICAL VIEW

WHILE ONE OF the functions of newspapers is to report change, journalists themselves are notoriously averse to it. Case in point: *The Providence Journal*. In 2001 the Belo-owned paper initiated a series of staffing moves—buyouts, retirements, appointments and reassignments—that was greeted with widespread uneasiness among critics, writers and other members of the paper's arts, entertainment and features staff. "There was a lot of anxiety for a lot of reasons," says Phil Kukielski, the then-newly appointed managing editor for features. "Here I was, a guy with no features background, coming over into the department, and we had all these vacancies. The feeling was, 'What the hell's going to happen?'"

In the end, here's what happened: Five members of the arts and entertainment and features staff retired, including Kukielski's predecessor, a full-time critic and another staffer who wrote criticism. Instead of replacing the departing arts writers outright, the paper reorganized the staff so that the classical-music critic also assumed the theater beat and a features writer took on theater and dance criticism. In addition, an editor who had formerly split his time between editing and writing about books stopped the latter in order to assume editing duties in the travel section.

When the dust settled, two positions were lost—a reduction Kukielski contends has actually had a positive effect. He believes not only that the paper's performing-arts criticism has remained largely undiminished in both quality and quantity but that its books coverage has actually improved. Although space allotted to book reviews and features in the Sunday arts section was reduced from two pages to one, a new books feature added to the Live Weekend tab has, according to Kukielski, made the paper's coverage "more timely" and "off-the-news" than before.

But some members of the arts community view the staff reductions in a less rosy light. "*The Providence Journal* lost two of its most tenured arts people, and they have not made up the difference," grumbles Randall Rosenbaum, executive director of the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts. As Bob Jaffe, president of Rhode Island Citizens for the Arts, notes, "We would like to see people reviewing who know something about the history of the subjects they're

writing about."

On a larger scale, much in the Providence media landscape remains the same as it was five years ago. The city is still well-served by broadcast and print media—from network-affiliate and cable news shows to community newspapers such as the *Cranston Herald* and the New England edition of *The New York Times*. One standout is the alternative weekly *The Providence Phoenix*. With 60,000 readers in Rhode Island and southeast Massachusetts, it gets high marks for its lively coverage of the theater, visual arts and club scenes, and for reporting on how gentrification and other development trends impact the city's ambiance.

Still, the *Journal's* dominance on its home turf remains largely unchallenged. Despite a slight dip in circulation—from 166,888 in 1998 to 166,460 in 2003 for the daily, with a corresponding decline in Sunday readership from 237,629 to 234,147—the *Journal* continues to be the largest newspaper in the region and the only daily serving the entire state. "The good news with the media here is it's not hard to figure out," notes J.L. "Lynn" Singleton, president of the Providence Performing Arts Center. "You've got one state paper, so you don't splinter your efforts. You know where to go."

The *Journal* continues to run a relatively large number of arts-related stories throughout its metro, state and business sections—and, notably, its editorial pages. In fact, some of the most thoughtful and compelling writing on cultural issues during October 2003 appeared in the commentary section, which ran editorials and op-ed pieces on such subjects as poet-laureate appointee Louise Glück, the death of writer George Plimpton and the "green" architecture of the Woods Hole Research Center on Cape Cod. "One of the things that every arts organization tries to be clever at is not directing arts information toward only one avenue at the paper," says Rhode Island School of Design president Roger Mandle, who notes that the paper has run stories about the art school in nearly every section. "The *Journal* has been willing to see us as a matter of broad community interest. We're not just pigeon-holed in arts and entertainment."

The majority of the paper's arts coverage runs in its daily 12-page Lifebeat features section, its 50-page Live weekend tab, which appears on Thursdays, and the eight-page Sunday Arts section. The latter two contain voluminous listings and calendar items, and the paper's overall amount of listings mushroomed from 47 percent of the entire newshole in 1998 to 60 percent in

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2003. Most of the other writing in those sections falls into the review-preview category. According to Cliff Wood, head of the city's new Department of Art, Culture and Tourism, the *Journal* is better at covering events and making announcements than at bringing depth and analysis to important issues. "We have this new department, which is being recognized as being at the vanguard," he says. "We had good coverage when we announced it. Now, you'd think there'd be a story asking questions—not a fluff thing—but asking questions about how you plan to integrate economic aspects as an arts and cultural advocate." But, he notes, the *Journal* hasn't asked them.

Despite the impact of arts and culture on tourism and the economic development of Providence's downtown, the paper still lacks a

well-defined strategy to cover the so-called "Providence Renaissance." But maybe it doesn't need one. And it looks like, for now at least, it won't be offering one to its readers. "I think everybody recognizes that it's an important story," Kukielski explains. "Do we have a Downcity czar that we've appointed who would direct arts writers and city government people? No. We're not organized that way. I think overall, the Providence Renaissance or the development of Providence as an arts community is getting an appropriate level of coverage. Could we do better? Absolutely. One valid criticism of the paper is that we've covered the Providence Renaissance incrementally, day by day, exhaustively for the past 30 years, but we didn't stop often enough to do the big assessment."

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