

The Journal News

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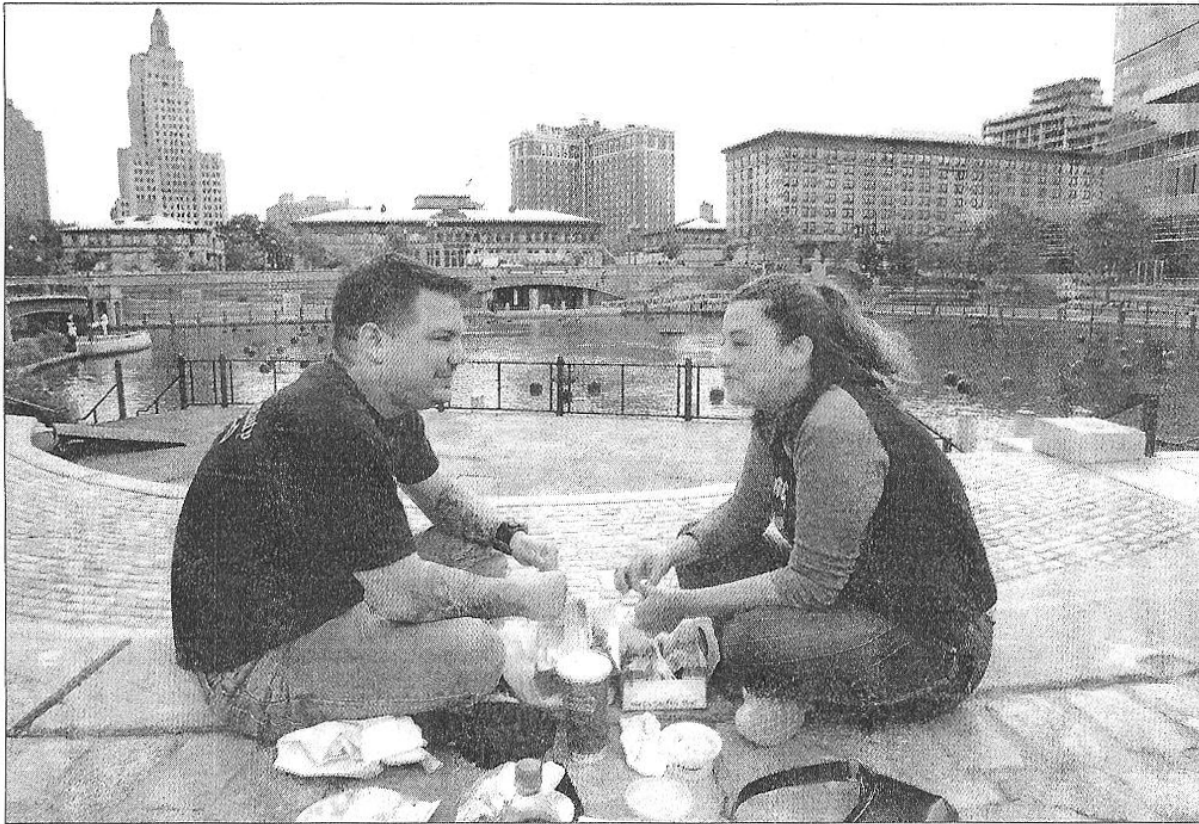
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URBAN RENEWAL REINVENTING A DOWNTOWN

Saved by the Saw Mill?

Unearthing river, as in Providence, could be Yonkers' catalyst



Photos by Matthew Brown/The Journal News

Frank Whitehead, left, of Dayville, Conn., enjoys a lunch with friend Tara Almeida of Fall River, Mass., at Waterplace Park in Providence, R.I. "When I was 16, parents didn't really want you to come up here at night. Now, it's more like a metropolis should be," Whitehead said. Providence's renaissance serves as a model for dozens of other waterfront cities, including the city of Yonkers, which has plans to uncover the Saw Mill River.

Michael Gannon
The Journal News

Frank Whitehead and Tara Almeida sat on the ground cross-legged, facing each other, enjoying their lunch and the comfortable late summer day outside in Waterplace Park, the serene riverside spot in the center of this midsize New England city's growing downtown.

On one side of them, the busy Providence Place mall bustled with shoppers. On the other, workers applied the finishing touches to a new office building as cranes erected two condominium towers.

On its surface, the scene was wholly unremarkable. But what the area has become is nothing short of amazing for those who knew Providence more than a dozen years earlier, when the Providence River was buried under concrete and train tracks that lent the area its derisive nickname

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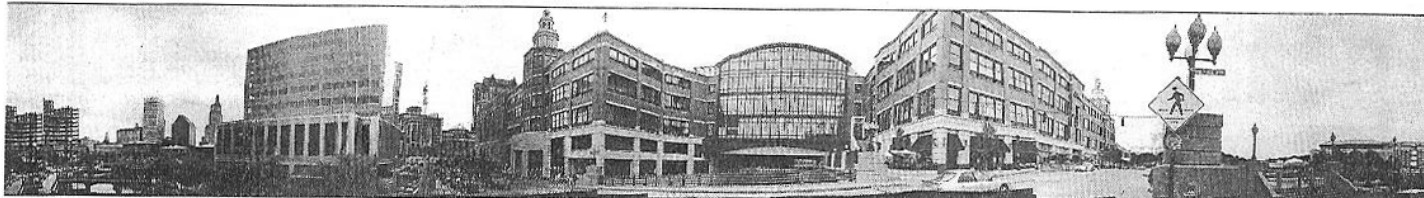
"When I was 16, parents didn't really want you to come up here at night," said Whitehead, a 35-year-old student at the University of Connecticut who grew up in Newport, R.I. "Now, it's more like a metropolis should be."

Providence's renaissance serves as inspiration for dozens of other waterfront cities looking to remake themselves as more pleasant places to live, work and shop — including Yonkers. Yonkers points to Providence and San Antonio as models for what the city would like to do in uncovering the largely invisible Saw Mill River, which runs underneath

Please see **PROVIDENCE, 4A**



Helene Ekblom, an exchange student at Rhode Island School of Design, walks along Waterplace Park in Providence, R.I. Waterplace Park was completed in the mid-1990s, and it serves as a centerpiece for development in the city.



A panoramic view of downtown Providence, R.I. At the center is the \$530 million Providence Place mall, a key to a revived retail scene. The city, founded in the 1600s by Roger Williams, is home to Brown University, Providence College and the Rhode Island School of Design. Photos by Matthew Brown/The Journal News

Providence inspires Yonkers plan

PROVIDENCE, from 1A

much of Yonkers' downtown, and connecting revamped neighborhoods and stores through riverside parks.

Forgotten water

Uncovering the Providence River and the tributaries that merge to form it, the Woonasquatucket and the Mohassuck, is a public works project that can be traced back more than three decades.

Its infancy was in the 1970s, when the federal government provided money to upgrade rail lines between Washington, D.C., and Boston, which Providence saw as an opportunity to move and sink the tracks that had divided the city since the late 19th century.

The waterways were an afterthought to that plan but gained prominence in the early 1980s, eventually becoming a focal point of a 1985 agreement between the city and the state to move the river and tributaries, uncover the long-polluted water and replace the concrete covering with a series of picturesque bridges.

"That was the catalyst; there's no question," said Mark Motte, a professor of urban studies at Rhode Island College who, along with colleague Francis Leazes, co-wrote a book, "Providence, the Renaissance City," and a number of articles about the city's rejuvenation.

Waterplace Park was completed in the mid-1990s. The tranquil waters serve as the centerpiece of an astounding transformation that continues today.

In addition to the mall, the nearly completed glass office building where Fidelity Investments is about ready to move, and the condos going up alongside Waterplace Park, an abandoned Masonic Temple building nearby is being converted to a Marriott hotel.

The growing interest in housing has breathed new life into the area, said Daniel Baudouin, executive director of The Providence Foundation, an organization founded in 1974 to help save the historic Biltmore Hotel, the closing of which was one of the low points in the downtown's deterioration.

"It's the transformation from a 19th-century manufacturing center to a 21st-century economy," he said.

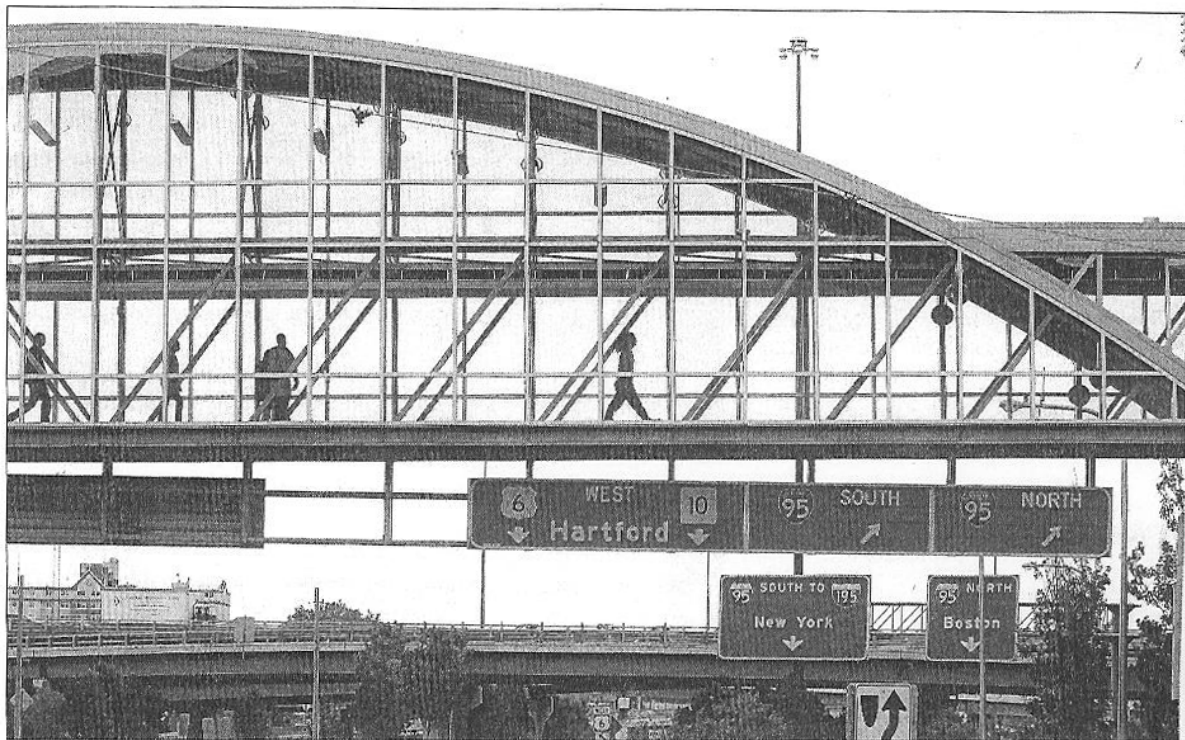
Residents, however, are not the only vital force of the new downtown. WaterFire Providence, a decade-old public art installation conceived by artist Barnaby Evans involving more than 100 bonfires lit in braziers stationed in the middle of the river throughout downtown, has drawn thousands of people a year to dine and drink and is credited by civic boosters for helping to foster a sense of community that once did not exist in the area.

A river runs through it

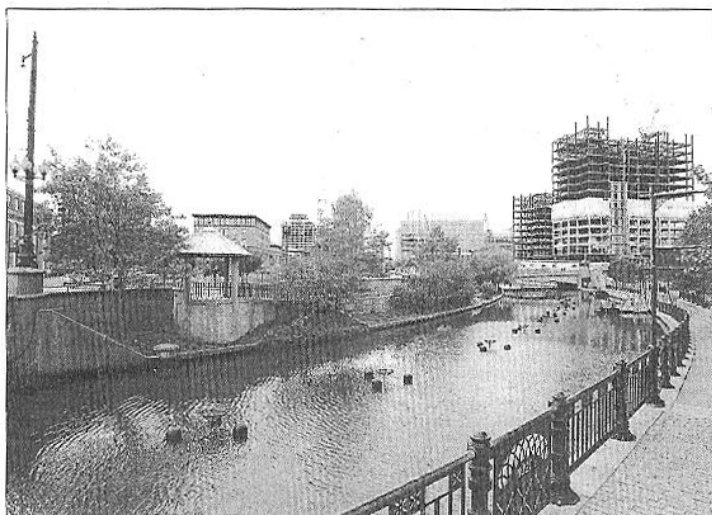
The seeds planted downtown are now making their way to more far-flung neighborhoods like Olneyville, where Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse, one of the developers working on a \$3.1 billion master plan for downtown Yonkers, is converting abandoned old warehouses into offices and apartments in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods.

The company's first of several projects in and around Providence, the \$55 million Rising Sun Mills, opened two years ago and is now almost fully occupied.

The sprawling complex, featuring 146 apartments and 150,000 square feet of office space primarily occupied by a software engineer-



Pedestrians walk across a footbridge connecting downtown to the Providence Place mall in Providence.



A section of WaterFire Providence, an award-winning public art installation by Barnaby Evans, features more than 100 bonfires lit in Braziers, stationed in the middle of the river throughout downtown Providence.

ing company, is connected to downtown by about two miles of the Woonasquatucket, which flows behind the buildings.

When Struever first arrived at the site, the river was badly polluted, filled with old tires, refrigerators and other debris dumped in the once desolate spot.

The company invested \$5 million in remediation of the river, working with community groups and the Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council to clean it, said Bill Struever, president and chief executive officer of the developer.

"The community feels they own it," Struever said of the river.

"They were part of reclaiming it."

Struever sees similar opportunities in Yonkers, where the Saw Mill River flows through Nepperhan Valley behind the old Alexander Smith and Sons carpet mills.

Uncovering lost stretches of river and cleaning it, however, is only half the battle, Struever said.

Developers must also be mindful of opening public access to these rejuvenated waterfronts and create reasons to visit them.

At Rising Sun Mills, for example, a barbecue pit and benches adorn a community gathering area near a platform overlooking the river.

Artists skeptical

Not everyone is thrilled with the changes in Providence. While most agree that the city looks better than it did in its recent past, the changes also have brought angst to some longtime residents who fear they are being priced out.

The city, which is home to several colleges and universities, including Brown University, Providence College and the Rhode Island School of Design, has long had a vibrant art scene fueled by the schools and the once-cheap rents.

Claudia Perri, a 56-year-old self



Bill Struever, president and CEO of Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse, tours a section of the Rising Sun Mills complex being converted into a livable work space for artists in Providence. Struever Bros. is one of the developers working on a \$3.1 billion master plan for downtown Yonkers.

described former hippie who moved back to Cranston, R.I., from Colorado several years ago after 30 years away, said she would love to live downtown but can't.

"I don't know anyone who can afford it who's not a doctor or a lawyer or some insane thing where you make a ton of dough," Perri, an artist's model, said on a recent afternoon as she had a cigarette near the river walk.

Civic leaders and developers have tried to address the concerns of artists by including affordable housing in many of the developments and even catering some projects to artistic types. Struever, for example, has partnered with a nonprofit to redevelop an old mill building next to Rising Sun Mills into live-work lofts for artists.

To make such projects work, however, is difficult financially, business leaders said. Even the development meant to attract for-profit enterprises is expensive and re-

quires huge investments from the city, state and federal government.

Uncovering and creating public space along the city's waterways cost \$330 million, said Motte, the Rhode Island College professor. And the state sold the land to the developers of the \$530 million Providence Place mall for \$1, he said.

Still, the economic rewards at this point are inconclusive at best, Motte and Leazes agreed. Property values have risen dramatically, but the city still requires significant assistance from the state to fund its schools and generally make ends meet, Leazes said.

That's not to say the project was not worth it — it will take time to realize the full potential, he said.

"The city looks different," he said. "There's a whole different feel here. There's hope here."

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River walks common in urban renewals

Providence, R.I.

Waterplace Park is a 4-acre park and river walk that serves as the focal point of a rejuvenated downtown in this once decaying, industrial New England city.

The park opened in the mid-1990s after the polluted Providence River and the two tributaries that merge to form it were uncovered. The park features an amphitheater, landscaped areas and boat landings and is hugged by pedestrian paths.

Venice-inspired bridges connect the city's traditional downtown to the east side, where the state Capitol and colleges like Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design sit.

For more information, visit: www.pps.org/great_public_spaces/one?public_place_id=86.

San Antonio

The city's River Walk is the top tourist attraction in Texas, according to the Paseo del Rio Association, a 27-year-old nonprofit organization founded to promote and support this city park.

The river has always been a part of the city's nearly 300-year-old history, with multiple public

works projects throughout the 20th century controlling flooding and developing the River Walk.

The river flows through the city before merging with the Guadalupe River and flowing to the Gulf of Mexico. Water taxis and tours are available on the river, which is lined by restaurants, shops and bars. The river even features "Marriage Island," where wedding ceremonies can be held.

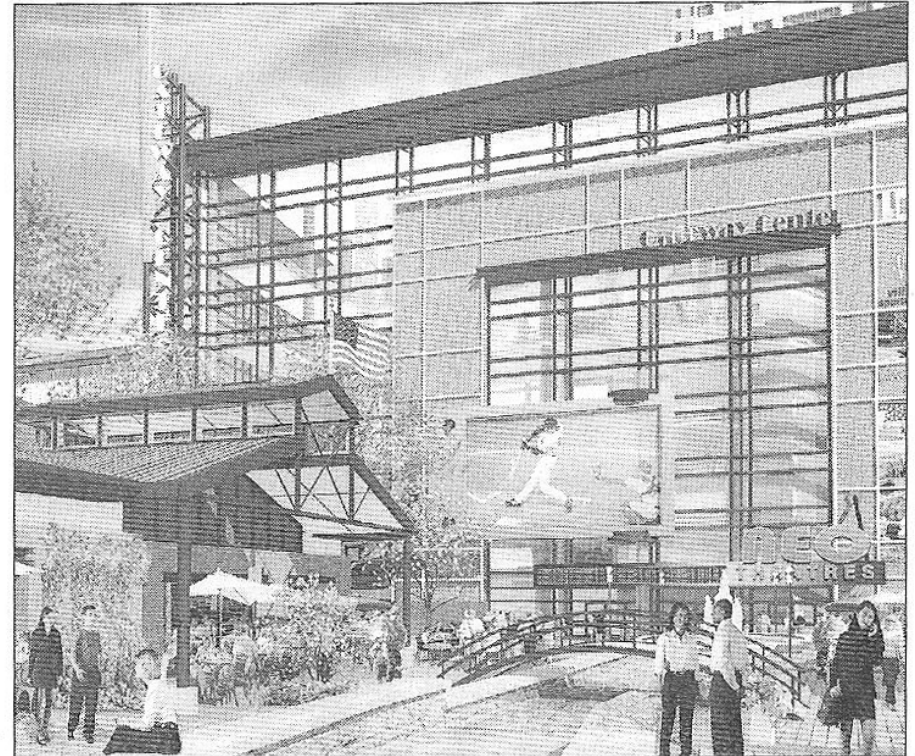
For more information, visit: www.thesanantonio-riverwalk.com.

Yonkers (proposed)

Developers Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse, the Fidelco Group, and Cappelli Enterprises are expected in November to unveil a master plan for a projected \$3.1 billion redevelopment that would uncover stretches of the Saw Mill River, which has long flowed under parts of downtown, near Getty Square and in Larkin Plaza.

The state Legislature this year pledged \$24 million to the "daylighting" plans, which have long been backed by Gov. George Pataki and the environmental group Scenic Hudson.

For more information, visit: www.sfcyonkers.com/projects.



An artist's rendering shows what an uncovered river and adjacent ballpark might look like in Yonkers. The developers envision uncovering parts of the Saw Mill River currently running underneath parts of downtown, near Getty Square and in Larkin Plaza.