

Celebrating 25 Years of Bringing the Arts to The People

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THESE DAYS IT'S not unusual for news of Providence city government to capture the attention of the media. But one city office has made the community and the media look twice, literally, for years. Behind the city's downtown contemporary sculptures and Waterplace Park performances is the Providence Parks Department Office of Cultural Affairs, which celebrated its 25th anniversary season this summer.

Each year the Office of Cultural Affairs (OCA) supports over a hundred quality art, music, dance, performance, and cultural events in the city's public parks that are free, or at low cost, to the public. Annually, an estimated three quarter-million audience members encounter a broad range of artistic styles and forms in Waterplace Park, Memorial Park, and along Riverwalk.

Providence has invested millions into downtown riverfront and park renovations, but they would be incomplete without things to do in them.

"The Parks Department Office of Cultural Affairs brings together people who appreciate the visual and performing arts," say Providence Mayor Vincent A. "Buddy" Cianci, Jr. "Their programming is part of what makes this a city of choices. There's always some type of quality cultural programming going on."

Mayor Cianci has long supported the arts as a way to improve the cultural vitality and economics of the city. Since 1976, the OCA has been committed to revitalizing public parks. Its initial mandate was to return music and the arts to Roger Williams Park.

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“Looking over the past twenty-five years, the Office of Cultural Affairs has met our expectations and more,” says Nancy Derrig, Superintendent of Providence Parks. “I think one of the goals at the beginning was to find a way to bring families to Roger Williams Park. The park had fallen on hard times, and it was not a family place anymore. None of the facilities were what they are now. In the beginning we felt we would need activities that would attract families.

Events, like concerts and festivals, were first introduced at that time. The very first thing, ‘Sunday’s in the Park,’ was designed for families. Getting families back into the park, along with plans to renovate the buildings, would allow the community to see what the park once was.”

Visual arts events and performances persuaded the community to return to the 420-acre, historic park during its renovation and rediscover its beauty. The office developed a prototype for successful arts programming at the park and provided quality events there.

“We were so successful in transforming Roger Williams Park that it has exploded in popularity,” says Derrig. Back in 1976, they worked hard to entice people to enter the park. Twenty-five years later the number of visitors has swelled to over 2-1/2 million.

Arts events and performances persuaded the community to return to the 420-acre, historic Roger Williams Park during its renovation; now, over 2-1/2 million people visit annually.

By 1980 Roger Williams Park renovations were nearly complete, and the park was bustling with family activities and public support. That first directive had been met, and the office’s free cultural programming branched out to include parks citywide.

Throughout Providence, community members harnessed the assistance of the OCA to develop their own festivals. The office gave community organizations financial backing, planning assistance, and technical advice. Popular events, including the Latin American Festival, were initially supported by the OCA and are now run independently.

Arts and culture invigorated Roger Williams Park in the 1970’s, why not downtown in the ’90’s? With that in mind, the city’s mandate shifted to downtown when Waterplace Park and the Providence Riverwalk opened. In 1996 the OCA began producing concerts, festivals, and special events in parks downtown. The OCA’s Convergence Festival branched out from its Roger Williams Park venue to the downtown parks and open spaces, and the agency became the curator of contemporary art downtown.

The annual Convergence Festival turns Providence parks and urban land into a public contemporary art museum.

Bob Rizzo, director of the office for 15 years, is an accomplished artist himself and approaches his job that way. “Putting it all together and envisioning the sculpture and music in the city is an art form to me,” says Rizzo. “I spend a lot of my own time looking at books and slides, on artists websites, attending art student critiques, and listening to music. I want to know what is happening and who the emerging artists are.”

One of Rizzo’s great achievements is the annual Convergence Festival, now held each September. Established and emerging artists are commissioned for the event, which takes place in Providence. The Rhode Island Division of Tourism has teamed-up with the office this year to help promote Convergence events statewide.

Some critics say the OCA should promote a nationally recognized artist, fund one dominant public sculpture, or have one big-name event for the Convergence Festival. “That is the opposite of what we’re trying to do,” says Rizzo. “We hire many extraordinary artists who often go on to receive prestigious public commissions. We give them a chance, and we take risks. The artists often have something to prove, and that is when we get great art.”

“The presence of public art has long been under-represented in Providence,” notes Barnaby Evans, a prominent artist and early “discovery” of the OCA. “It is important for the vitality of the city.”

The presence of Convergence art is the most tangible evidence that Providence is an arts city. “Convergence has been a great way for artists to show their work in Providence,” says Rizzo. “It also brings a lot to the city because the art is renewed every year. We aren’t stuck with one big piece that is expensive to maintain. Instead, the folks here have much more experience with public sculpture. When people travel, they realize how much we have right downtown and that is significant to remember. Convergence art makes people look at the city a little differently, and it makes them think differently.”

During the annual Convergence Festival, art converts Providence Parks and urban land into a public museum of contemporary art. “The sculpture stands year long as a reminder that Providence is a city that embraces its public space,” says Nancy Derrig, “and celebrates the arts as a part of everyday life.”

THE OFFICE OF Cultural Affairs has been able to put a face on the arts community in everyday experiences. “Artists create art so they can create a dialogue and want to know it has impact,” says Cathy Bert of the Bert Gallery. “The presence of art is nice for the city because it provides a great visual message that this is an arts community.”

The office has developed collaborations with arts organizations throughout the city and the state. Gallery Night Providence

grew out of the 1996 Convergence Festival, and now includes 20 galleries along with a free ArTrolley tour provided by the city.

Not only has the agency built relationships with the business community, it has worked tirelessly to develop relationships with emerging artists. Now a well-known artist, Barnaby Evans received his first three public commissions from the OCA. In 1996 Evans installed a form of WaterFire, braziers of floating fires placed along the river, along Waterplace Park and Riverwalk at the Convergence Festival and received national attention. WaterFire is now a series of 90 flaming braziers set afloat on the river, features recorded music from around the world, and is held on designated evenings throughout the year.

“By providing artistic activity and by putting arts programming downtown, the OCA creates a significant arts statement in the city,” says Randy Rosenbaum, Executive Director of Rhode Island State Council on the Arts.

“The version of WaterFire that appeared during the Convergence Festival received so much attention, volumes more than its initial appearance at First Night in 1994,” explains Evans. “It was larger, the weather was nicer, and it was along the new Riverwalk.”

“The presence of public art has long been under-represented in Providence,” continues Evans. “It is important for the vitality of the city.”



The OCA has provided extraordinary locations for thousands of artists and performers. Performances in free public venues, like Roger Williams Park’s Temple to Music or Waterplace Park in downtown Providence, have shaped careers because they are unlike a theatre or classic stage appearance.

Dominique Alfandre of the Island Moving Company has been impressed by the OCA’s willingness to include modern dance performance in its repertoire of programming. “I remember when I performed at Roger Williams Park years ago. It was the first time Island Moving Company performed outside. Performing at the Temple to Music was really an amazing idea.” Outdoor performances have since become a signature of the company.

Island Moving Company’s experience in an outside, public realm has been significant to developing their style. “The whole idea of having a performance where the audience could wander in and out was amazing. Most (modern dance) events were in arenas where audience members bought tickets, came to that performance, and sat down. This experience was different in that people who hadn’t even planned to attend a dance festival that day came and experienced it. Maybe it was a surprise as they walked through the park. The informality of performing outdoors is the most pleasant part of Convergence.”

“The Office of Cultural Affairs has attracted other creative people to the city besides artists,” observes Jay Coogan, Dean of Fine Arts at RISD. “...creative businesses want to be a part of this community.”

Artist Peter Stempel first connected with the OCA with his impressive Convergence sculpture Ceramic Buoy Color Field. “The project was ambitious, but I wasn’t certain that Bob (Rizzo) would agree to show it at Convergence. So, when I hadn’t heard back from Bob after I sent him my proposal, I walked into his office one day with a scale model of my piece. That pestering helped quite a bit and I got into Convergence. They put a lot of faith in me,” says Stempel.

It took more years than I care to admit to pay off credit cards for that project. But, that is the project that gave everybody else confidence that I could build a 200 by 110 foot sculpture. Without that first Convergence piece none of the public art work I have done would have happened,” explains Stempel. “Convergence has a high level of visibility (for artists). It gave me a format to interact with public art. So, I spent the \$2000 commission on this piece that has given me considerable visibility as opposed to (my work) in private homes that reaches only a small number of people who visit that home.”

Randy Rosenbaum, Executive Director of Rhode Island State Council on the Arts (RISCA), knows how the public OCA programs have invigorated this renovated, historic city. “The work they do has energized Providence and now the rest of the state,” says Rosenbaum. “By providing a level of artistic activity and by putting arts programming downtown, the Office of Cultural Affairs creates a significant arts statement in the city.” The Rhode Island Division of Tourism has teamed up with the office this year to promote Convergence statewide.



One significant challenge that faces the Office of Cultural Affairs is funding. Rizzo's office receives a scant \$70,000 in city funding. That amount is not enough to maintain the high-caliber performances, distinctive concerts, and hip festivals that reflect the city's arts legacy. Rizzo has been innovative in the way he has developed financial resources. Through an affiliation with CapitolArts Providence, a non-profit organization that funds Convergence and other projects, grants from the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts and the Providence Tourism Council have subsidized the city's funds.

Over the years, the office has moved all of its programming from Roger Williams Park to downtown. John Palmieri, director of the Providence Planning and Development for the past eight years, is enthusiastic about the role of arts and culture in the city. "Some cities try to create ways to include art in their city. Providence has always had an arts presence. With Rhode Island School of Design, Brown University, Johnson and Wales, the arts have historically always been here," says Palmieri.

The free public events include a broad spectrum of artistic styles and forms and always offer something extraordinary. They are meant for the whole community to enjoy together, not something exclusive to one group or another.

"The Office of Cultural Affairs has been able to harness resources and provide cultural programming in a central way," says Palmieri. "It complements what RISD and Trinity (Repertory Company) are doing. Their office has been significant in creating arts programs that pay homage to the city's status. The Office of Cultural Affairs has been largely responsible for the enhanced reputation we enjoy as a city that embraces art and culture. The office manages to do things with real skill and aplomb. They do it the right way."

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It is that finesse which has given Cultural Affairs its highly regarded reputation. "The Office of Cultural Affairs is very sensitive to the high arts in a way that respects the city's status and that influences the city's center," remarks Palmieri.

The Office of Cultural Affairs has made a difference in the city. Providence has invested millions into downtown riverfront and park renovations, but that would be incomplete without things to do. Cultural Affairs has helped transform this venerable, post-industrial relic into a vibrant, vital city center filled with lively arts programming.

"There is no question of a program's success when it is funded through the office," explains Jay Coogan, Dean of Fine Arts at RISD. "The programs are there, people see them, they are diverse in nature, and enliven the city at a time when people want to be out."

Coogan has noticed that Providence's lively cultural community appeals to newcomers.

"The Office of Cultural Affairs has attracted other creative people to the city besides visual and performing artists," adds Coogan. "Others with creative minds, creative businesses want to be a part of this community. Providence is an arts magnet that pulls people here."

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