

PUBLIC ART/Festival turns city's downtown into a canvas

Oct 1, 2001 12:00 PM

Each fall, Providence, R.I., changes from a state capital into a public performance arena and a museum of contemporary art. That is when the Office of Cultural Affairs (OCA) for the city's Parks Department hosts the Convergence International Art Festival.

The citywide festival, which draws about 500,000 people annually, features large-scale public sculptures, performances, concerts and exhibitions. Every year, more than 30 artists are commissioned to provide sculpture for the festival. They are given site-specific guidelines and up to \$2,000 to allow their work to remain in Providence for one year. "The sculpture stands year-round as a reminder that Providence is a city that embraces its public space," says Nancy Derrig, superintendent of the city's parks department.

According to festival creator and OCA Director, Bob Rizzo, having contemporary art downtown says much about Providence. "Through Convergence we get a city that is full of public sculpture," he says. "It also helps give the impression that we are a city that is open to new ideas. It has recognizable impact."

Additionally, the festival provides public arts variety to the city. "The sculpture brings a lot to the city because the art is renewed every year," Rizzo says. "We aren't stuck with one big piece that is expensive to maintain. [The art] makes people look at the city a little differently."

The Street Painting Festival, modeled on an Italian tradition since the 16th century, is part of the Convergence Festival. It transforms South Main Street into a color-splashed collection of more than a hundred asphalt canvasses, each sponsored by a business, organization and/or individual(s). This year, a Film/Video/Animation Festival and a Music for the New Millennium concert rounded out the event.

The festival was created in 1988 when the city began rehabilitating the 420-acre, Victorian-era Roger Williams Park and started hosting cultural programming to entice families back to the park. In 1996, the festival expanded into the city's entire downtown. More than 150 artists participated in this year's multi-week festival, which is funded by OCA and organizations including CapitolArts Providence and the state Division of Tourism.

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