

Creative Places

How RISD Invigorates Providence

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At this moment, designers are creating dynamic change in the global economy. Highly sophisticated companies and developed nations now recognize that a primary differential in the competitive edge of their products and their nation's well-being is created through effective design. Government and communications, medical devices and procedures, military strategies and political programs all are being "designed" using practices taught in quality art schools. Meanwhile, these schools are realizing the benefit to society and to themselves of direct involvement in communities. American University Professor Shalini Venturelli has noted: "For the very first time in the modern age, the ability to create new ideas and new forms of expression forms a valuable resource base of society and not merely mineral, agricultural and manufacturing assets." She calls this asset "cultural wealth," and describes it as a new "measure of the vitality, knowledge, energy and dynamism in the production of ideas that pervades a given community."

Institutions like Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) provide New England with cultural wealth in a variety of ways, including the great art and design housed in their museums and their vibrant faculty and student body, which numbers in RISD's case, 1,900 undergraduates and 375 graduate students from the United States and almost 50 countries.

Traditionally, institutions have relegated their relationship with their neighbors to a discreet set of activities referred to as "town-gown relations," but RISD considers itself an active participant in the ongoing redevelopment and future aspirations of the city. In the 1970s, Gerald Howes, a RISD architecture professor, conceived of a plan to change the fundamental structure and appearance of Providence. After the city relocated railroad tracks and uncovered a long hidden river running through its center, RISD found itself with a spectacular riverfront campus. RISD's reorientation to downtown Providence physically positions the college

for direct collaboration with leaders of the city's business community, government officials, nonprofit organizations and local residents. This engagement has helped RISD to flourish and also helped revitalize the city.

With a population of just over 175,000, Providence has the advantage of size. The city can claim an intimacy, a sense of community. So in addition to collaborating with the college's immediate neighbors, RISD faculty and staff engage in a multitude of conversations to improve the city, ranging from the Rhode Island Economic Policy Council's attempt to designate Providence a world design capital to the Rhode Island Public Expenditure Council's debating of state budget issues to the CEOs for Cities and the Providence Foundation's work on revitalizing the city's downtown.

RISD is committed to helping nurture Providence into a creative city that is competitive with any in the 21st century. But what exactly can an institution of higher education bring to the infrastructure, the vitality of a city, and the quality of life for all its residents?

RISD's contributions take many forms. The Center for Design & Business, for example, is a joint venture between the college and Bryant University, established in 1997 to unite the design and business communities for purposes of economic development. The joint venture includes a Design & Business Entrepreneurship Center, which provides mentoring and training for design-related businesses. Funded by the U.S. Small Business Administration, the entrepreneurship center specifically helps design-based inventors, innovators and product developers during the critical stages of growing successful businesses.

An "incubator" program helps the region's designers succeed commercially. The program offers design entrepreneurs regular meetings with a multidisciplinary mentor team, business and commercialization skills training, professional development sessions, one-on-one consulting, entrée to a network of business contacts, shared work and conference rooms and access to RISD and Bryant assistance with business plan implementation.

CITY-STATE, an urban design lab based at RISD, works in collaboration with Brown University and other colleges and universities on design projects that

help cities and towns plan together. In collaboration with the Rhode Island Foundation, RISD faculty and students have convened business and community leaders for an exhibit and symposium on the role of design in addressing the issue of affordable housing.

The college's Art Education Graduate Program and Center for the Advancement of Art and Design Education, meanwhile, help integrate the arts into the programs of many Rhode Island school systems. A partnership with the Providence Board of Education has created an arts-focused curriculum for one-third of the students at Providence's Hope High School. This formal agreement with Hope High School positions RISD to help create and mentor an arts community within the economically distressed school and has provided two scholarships for Hope students to attend RISD.

RISD attracted internationally recognized nonprofit organizations to relocate to Providence as part of an effort to create a cluster of important cultural resources in the city. Most recently, Yo Yo Ma and his Silk Road Project announced their decision to relocate their headquarters to Providence to connect to the RISD community. Several years ago, RISD welcomed the Alliance of Artist Communities, the national service organization supporting artists' communities. The Pont Aven School of Contemporary Art has also relocated its U.S. headquarters to the RISD campus.

While RISD has been helping revitalize downtown Providence, the college has been growing too. The college's endowment quadrupled from \$67 million in 1994 to \$250 million in 2004. RISD's first comprehensive capital campaign, designed to solidify funding for scholarships and endow faculty and curatorial positions, new technologies and facility upgrades is nearing completion.

The cornerstone of the campaign is the college's new Chace Center, designed by leading architect Jose Rafael Moneo. This six-story building, which will rise on Providence's North Main Street, provides new teaching space and attractive public areas, expands the RISD Museum's exhibition galleries and research space, and creates a "front door" for the museum to the City of Providence.

The museum was founded as part of RISD in 1877. Its permanent collection of nearly 80,000 objects includes paintings, sculpture, decorative arts, costumes, furniture and other works of art from every part of the world, including pieces from Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome and art of all periods from Asia, Europe and the Americas, up to the latest in contemporary art. The museum is RISD's largest cultural resource, offering a wide array of educational and public programs, such as school tours and professional development opportunities for K-12 teachers throughout the region.

For a college of art and design, the urban landscape is exceptionally important. The shift of RISD's

physical presence from the periphery to the heart of the new Providence is emblematic of the college's current engagement with the community. RISD has renovated a historic warehouse into a home for its Industrial Design Department, beautified the riverfront through landscaping, renovated two downtown commercial spaces into graduate studios and the Center for Integrative Technologies and opened *risd|works*, a retail store and gallery that showcases the work of RISD faculty and alumni.

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RISD is also in the final phase of converting the former Rhode Island Hospital Trust Building, built in 1917, into an innovative living-learning center that will feature library and residence spaces. Plans call for a complete renovation of the 12-story building, which will house The Fleet Library at RISD on the first two floors. The remaining 10 floors will provide living space for 512 students. The library will become a unique and important art and design resource, enhancing opportunities for artists, designers, entrepreneurs and small business owners in Providence and throughout southeastern New England.

Creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship lay at the heart of Providence's history and its future. As the city is recognized symbolically as a world design capital, the designation will answer Venturelli's challenge "not how to prescribe an environment of protection for a received body of art and tradition, but how to construct one of creative explosion and innovation in all areas of the arts and sciences." That's crucial, for as Venturelli warns: "Nations that fail to meet this challenge will simply become passive consumers of ideas emanating from societies that are in fact creatively dynamic and able to commercially exploit the new creative forms."

Many RISD graduates stay in New England after college, but many go on to other art capitals internationally where they remain in contact with RISD and Providence. In this way, RISD supplies the talent that will allow nations to respond to Venturelli's challenge, for our students will have learned from their role in RISD's interaction with Providence and our region.

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