



Public Art Review, Issue 45 Fall/Winter 2011 “Old and New: In Rhode Island, tradition and innovation merge to benefit the community,” by Martina Windels, 61.

## Old and New In Rhode Island, tradition and innovation merge to benefit the community

**The recent unveiling** of Maya Lin’s design *The Meeting Room*—a park redesign intended to improve and reenergize Queen Anne Square in the center of Newport, Rhode Island—reveals the challenges involved in placing public art in Rhode Island. This state prides itself on being home to more historic structures per capita than any other, and it has a strong preservation movement guarding these structures. So any change to the built environment, including the placement of public art, inevitably brings up the tension between old and new, traditional versus contemporary, and is bound to be accompanied with lively exchanges.

Lin, best known for the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C., proposed a subtle design of four partial stone foundations recreated according to plans of colonial structures, all originally found in Newport. Lin describes her design as a palimpsest that references New England’s traditional stone walls and documents layers of history while simultaneously providing seating atop 18-inch-tall walls with views of Newport Harbor, Trinity Church, and historic structures surrounding the park.

The Newport Restoration Foundation (NRF) raised financing and commissioned Lin’s proposal for the public park, which was originally given to the city by Doris Duke, the philanthropist who founded the NRF in 1968. The foundation is largely credited with saving many of the colonial structures that still dominate the streetscape today. “We have a long tradition of some of the finest architects, landscape architects, and cabinetmakers working here, using Newport as a laboratory for their ideas and their work,” says Pieter Roos, the executive director. “We wanted to introduce somebody from the twenty-first century into this mix.”

Ironically, what is intended to honor Doris Duke and provide a monument to historic preservation’s accomplishments is labeled a fake by critics because it uses not authentic, historic foundations in their original locations but interpretations of those foundations. In response, Roos warns that “preservation should not be presenting a freeze in time. Cities change all the time—that’s what keeps them vibrant.”

Providence and other towns in Rhode Island keep changing through a variety of public art initiatives.

### One Percent Projects

“Things evolve, things are not static,” says Elizabeth Keithline, director of project grants for organizations and public art at the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts (RISCA), echoing Pieter Roos. While pointing to Rhode Island sculptor Peter Diepenbrock’s

*Torsion III* (2010), an abstract bronze sculpture funded by the state’s one-percent-for-the-arts program, Keithline discusses the specific challenges Rhode Island faces because of the necessity “to marry historic sites and contemporary art works.”

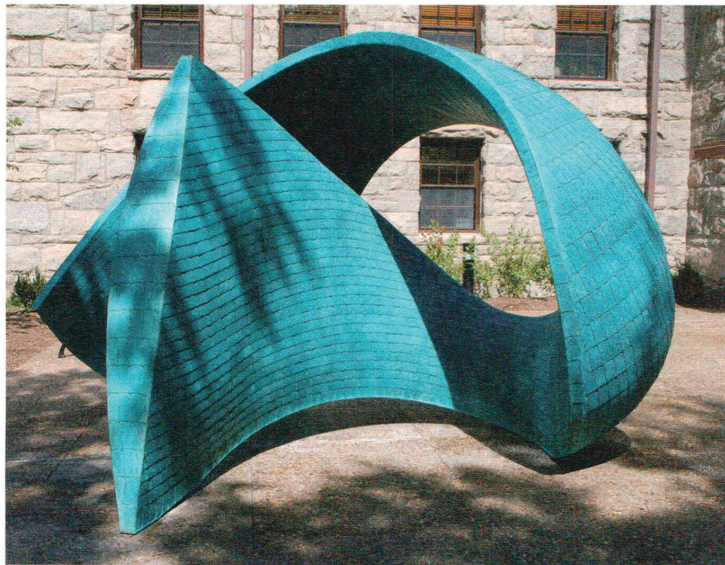
In Diepenbrock’s piece, she notes that the large swooping gesture constructed from small, overlapping bronze rectangles echoes the patterns of the large, rough granite blocks used in the original construction of Lippitt Hall, which sits along the quad of the traditional New England campus of the University of Rhode Island in South Kingston.

Other recent percent-for-art funding paid to commission Mikyoung Kim’s *Horizon Garden* (2010) in front of the Rhode Island Convention Center, Cliff Garten’s *Schooling* (2011) at the Graduate School of Oceanography at University of Rhode Island, and Bill Fontana’s *Natural Song Lines* (2007) installed along the walkway to the Kent County Courthouse in Warwick.

Keithline is proud that many of the pieces RISCA funded have increased in value over time. “Based on the price point of our program, we often get artists on their way up, before they become recognized nationally and internationally,” she says, referencing earlier works by James Carpenter and Ursula von Rydingsvard that adorn the airport, among others.

### The Educational Institutions

Local collector and enthusiastic patron of the arts Dr. Joseph Chazan has paired his keen interest with a strong financial commitment to promote art and artists in Rhode Island.



Rhode Island sculptor Peter Diepenbrock’s *Torsion III*, a percent-for-art work at the University of Rhode Island in South Kingston.





ABOVE: *WaterFire*, an annual event, has attracted millions of visitors to Rhode Island.  
 BELOW: A Tape Art piece by Michael Townsend and Colin Bliss by city hall in Providence.



“People are affected by their environment, their surroundings, and I see my involvement with art as my commitment to the community,” says Chazan. He has commissioned Rhode Island artists Howard Ben Tré, James Reynolds, Jonathan Bonner, Nicole Chesney, Steve Easton, Coral Bourgeois, and Agustín Patiño to create art for The Wheeler School and its Seekonk farm, which is open to the public.

Besides the sculpture at The Wheeler School’s farm, Bonner’s subtle, sophisticated sculptures can be found across his home state with the most recent addition, *Gaze* (2011), gracing the lawn of the Temple Beth El on Providence’s East Side. A Holocaust memorial to be located downtown is in the works. And another piece by Bonner, a Brancusi-inspired granite column, marks the entrance to the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD).

The presence of one of the oldest and most highly regarded art schools in the country has helped make Rhode Island an arts destination. Located on Providence’s Benefit Street, one of the country’s most complete, preserved historic streetscapes, the museum recently added a modern wing designed by Spanish architect Rafael Moneo.

RISD’s neighbor, Brown University, has instituted its own one-percent-for-the-arts program, committing money for art with every construction and renovation project. The program has brought works such as a sound installation by Brown alumna Nina Katchadourian entitled *Advice from a Former Student* (2010) and a carpet by Ann Hamilton to the campus. In addition, Brown University started a loan program that has enabled it to borrow public art by Calder, Noguchi, and Lichtenstein from foundations to display in a three-year rotation, and it commissions artworks to be installed on the campus on a temporary basis. Last year *Square Roots*, a large installation by Patrick Dougherty, graced a campus green.

### City-supported Creativity

While RISD has helped to establish Providence as an arts destination, it is the city’s government that has made a commitment to expand that reputation.

Unlike the state, the city of Providence does not have a budget for public art, but it does have a strong Department of Art, Culture and Tourism (ACT). The ACT works closely with artists and arts organizations in an effort “to add to the vibrancy of the city and the civic life in the community,” says Lynne McCormack, the director. “We are interested in ethereal and ephemeral installations and events that foster community building.”

Last summer the city invited Michael Townsend and Colin Bliss, infamous for building an illegal apartment in the nearby shopping mall, to create one of their massive Tape Art pieces. Using custom drawing tapes, the Tape Art team installed a 14,000-square-foot drawing engulfing a skating rink across the street from city hall as part of the city’s 375th anniversary celebration.

This year’s Woolly Fair, described by founder Sam White as “our Providence-born DIY art carnival,” provided stipends to 19 artists to build a 40-foot dome and 21 space pods, creating “a brief, dreamlike environment on a large scale” around the theme “To the Moon.” The event, according to White, “is very much rooted in the participatory culture that Burning Man fosters.” It’s held at the Steel Yard, a large brick industrial mill complex that has been undergoing restoration and environmental remediation. It’s now an arts complex where





public artist Brower Hatcher has a studio, and where Ellen Driscoll, with a fellowship from the Rhode Island Foundation, recently created *Distant Mirrors*, an archipelago made from recycled plastic milk bottles that floated down the Providence River as part of the city's anniversary celebration.

Similarly, AS220—Providence's venerable, hip downtown arts organization—recently renovated two historic buildings to expand its facilities. The wall behind the original building on Empire Street features a large mural by Shepard Fairey, who studied at RISD, and along its front runs a sculpture by Jonathan Bonner.

An outstanding example of a public art event that builds community is *WaterFire*, a sculptural installation originally created by Barnaby Evans for the 10th anniversary of First Night Providence (*First Fire*, 1994) and the next one (*Second Fire*, 1996) for the International Sculpture Conference and the Convergence International Arts Festival. Since 1996, several times each summer, baskets float down the Providence River accompanied by music and are lit on fire at sunset. The installation has been credited with attracting millions of visitors to Providence and Rhode Island.

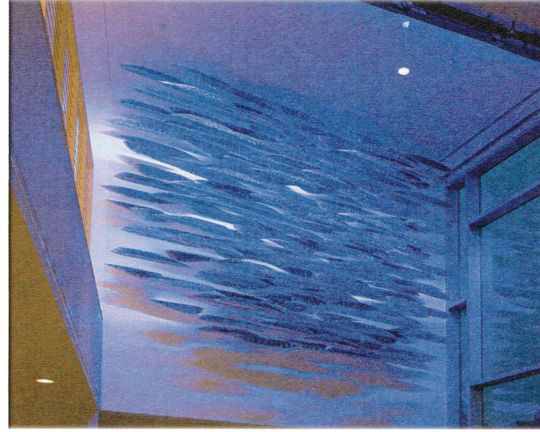
### Support for Arts

Providence, which promotes itself as “the Creative Capital,” recently received \$200,000 from the NEA's Our Town initiative, focused on creative placemaking projects that shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, or city through arts and cultural activities.

When touring the city with McCormack, Rocco Landesman, head of the NEA, enthusiastically praised Providence's accomplishments. “You guys get it,” he said. “The kind of things we are always talking about—things like creative placemaking and using the arts to bring communities together—you're doing it already.” The NEA funding will be used to provide public programming for Greater Kennedy Plaza and support public artworks through AS220, the Steel Yard, and CityArts in coordination with public presentations in the summer of 2012 with *WaterFire*, the Rhode Island Philharmonic, and Festival Ballet, contributing to the rich array of arts offerings across the state. Other public art programs there include Project One in Newport, Rhode Island College's Sculpture Tour, the sculpture park at Tiverton's Four Corners Arts Center, and the City of Pawtucket Arts Festival.

The fact that so many artists call Rhode Island their home helps to create this art-friendly environment and many willing participants. Similarly, in the preservation movement, the fact that a significant number of Rhode Islanders live in historic structures makes for a broad support of the local preservation movement. The intersection of the two—art and preservation, or conservation and creation—can at times create friction. But it simultaneously provides these local constituencies, who share a deep commitment to community, the opportunity to shape it and participate in it.

**MARTINA WINDELS** is a designer who has written about art and design for Art New England, American Craft, Metalsmith, Glass Quarterly, and several Rhode Island publications. She recently was a member of a panel charged with selecting public art for the Department of Motor Vehicles in Cranston, Rhode Island, as part of the state's one-percent-for-art law.



TOP: Cliff Garten's *Schooling* at the Univ. of Rhode Island's Graduate School of Oceanography.  
MIDDLE: Jim Reynolds' *Arch* at *Wheeler Farm* in Seekonk, commissioned by Joseph Chazan.  
BOTTOM: The dome at this year's Woolly Fair, a DIY art carnival in Providence.