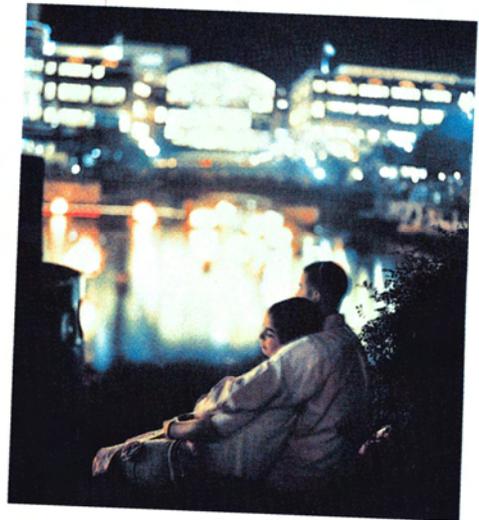


September 17, 2006

FALL TRAVEL ISSUE

Road Trips



The Washington Post Magazine
 SEPTEMBER 17, 2006

FALL TRAVEL ISSUE

Road Trips
CYCLISTS OF THE CARIBBEAN
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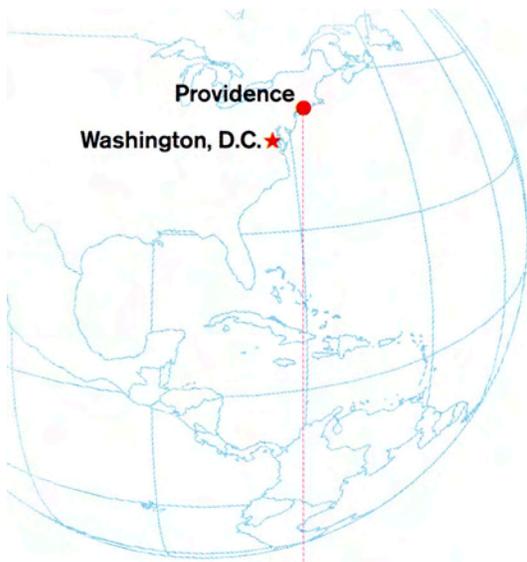
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GLOBE ILLUSTRATION BY NATHANIEL VAUGHN KELSO; PHOTOGRAPHS, FROM LEFT, BY PETER MCBRIDE AND GREG MILLER



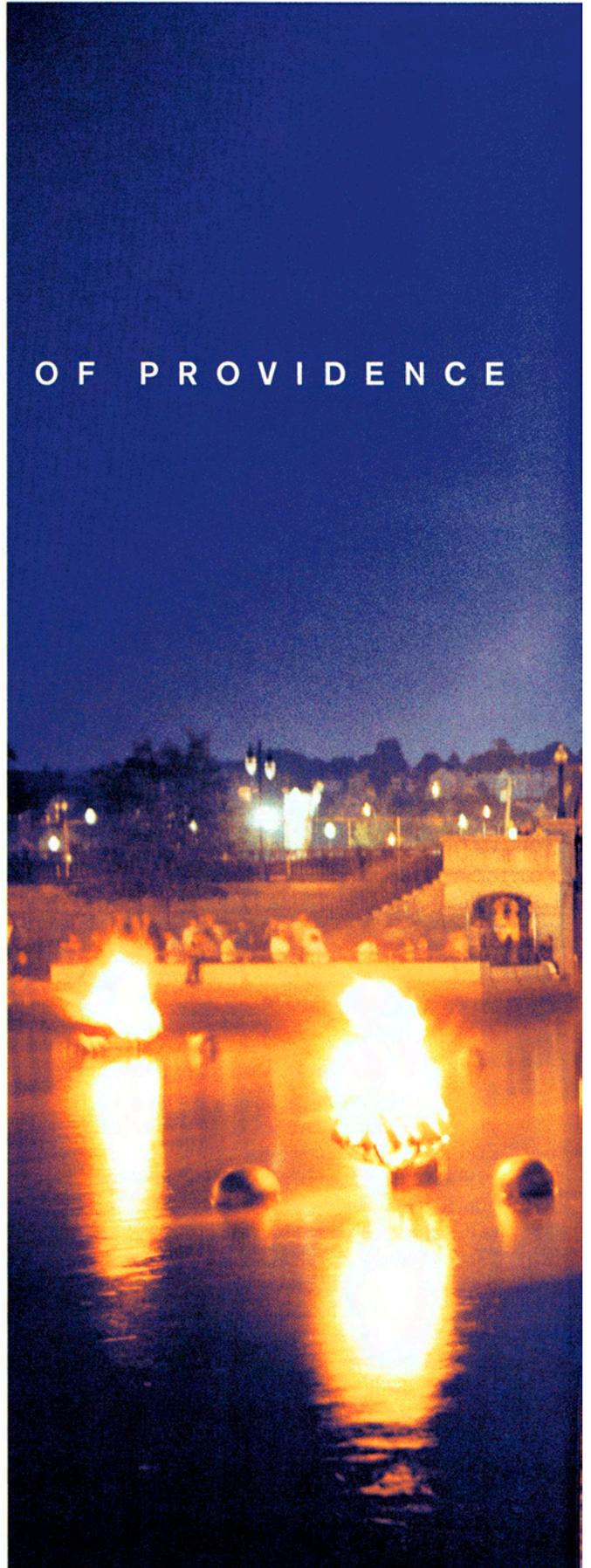
THE ELEMENTS OF PROVIDENCE

A city that had
fallen into ruin now
burns brightly again —
thanks in part to
WaterFire, a burgeoning
festival that combines
ritual, reverence
and urban vitality

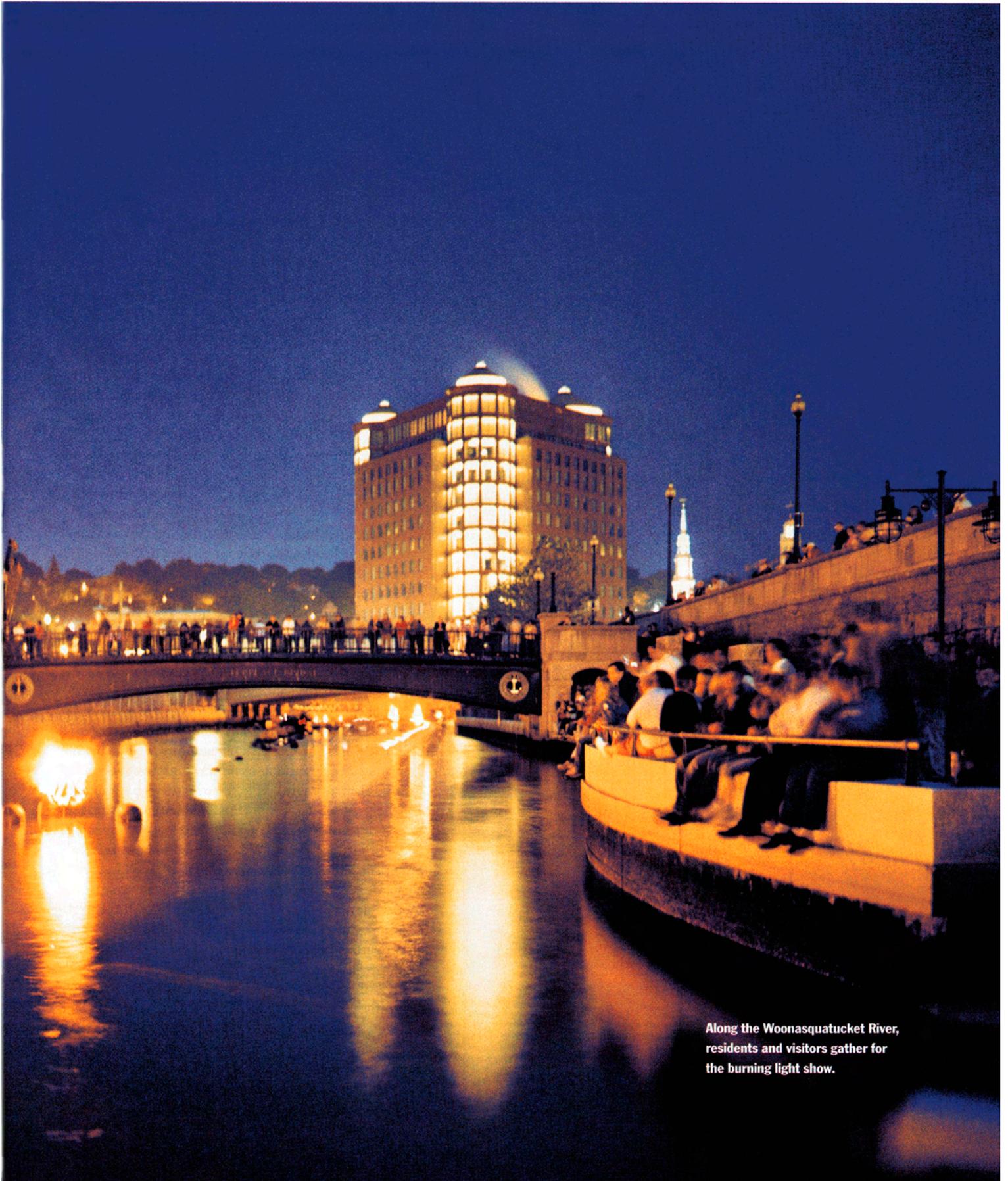
By **CARLO ROTELLA**

S

UNSET ON AN OVERCAST LATE OCTOBER EVENING, shortly before the year's final lighting of WaterFire. The tide is up, surging in from Narragansett Bay, temporarily reversing the direction in which the city's rivers flow. Fallen leaves drift upstream on the Providence River, which passes between manmade walls through the heart of the city. Where the waters divide, some of the leaves wander to the right into the canal-straight Moshassuck River, but most of them pass to the left into the larger Woonasquatucket River and on into the great circle of the river basin by Waterplace Park, in



GLOBE ILLUSTRATION BY NATHANIEL VAUGHN KELSIO



Along the Woonasquatucket River, residents and visitors gather for the burning light show.



WaterFire's Model is the *passeggiata* — the European evening stroll amid an informal street pageant that sustains community and connection to place.

front of the Providence Place mall.

Boat-borne volunteers, dressed all in black like Kabuki stagehands, have loaded logs and kindling into 100 braziers — steel-lattice containers shaped like three-foot-high martini glasses — that float, moored, in the three rivers. The reflected lights of the city, brightening in the deepening gloom, seem to rise up out of the depths to move just under the water's surface. On a riverside walkway, a young man in a ball cap carries a stepladder from bridge to bridge, mounting it to light the candles in ornate chandeliers that hang from the spans' undersides.

The recorded music begins with the chimes of a summoning bell, then droning strings and flute. More than half a mile of riverfront has been wired for sound, 60-plus speakers connected by UHF transmitters and receivers, time-delay circuits and a couple of miles of heavy audio cable. The music, a contemplative mix that will range throughout the night across classical, avant-garde, new

age, the margins of pop, and ethnic and traditional styles from around the world, is loud enough to pervade the scene but does not force you to raise your voice to compete with it.

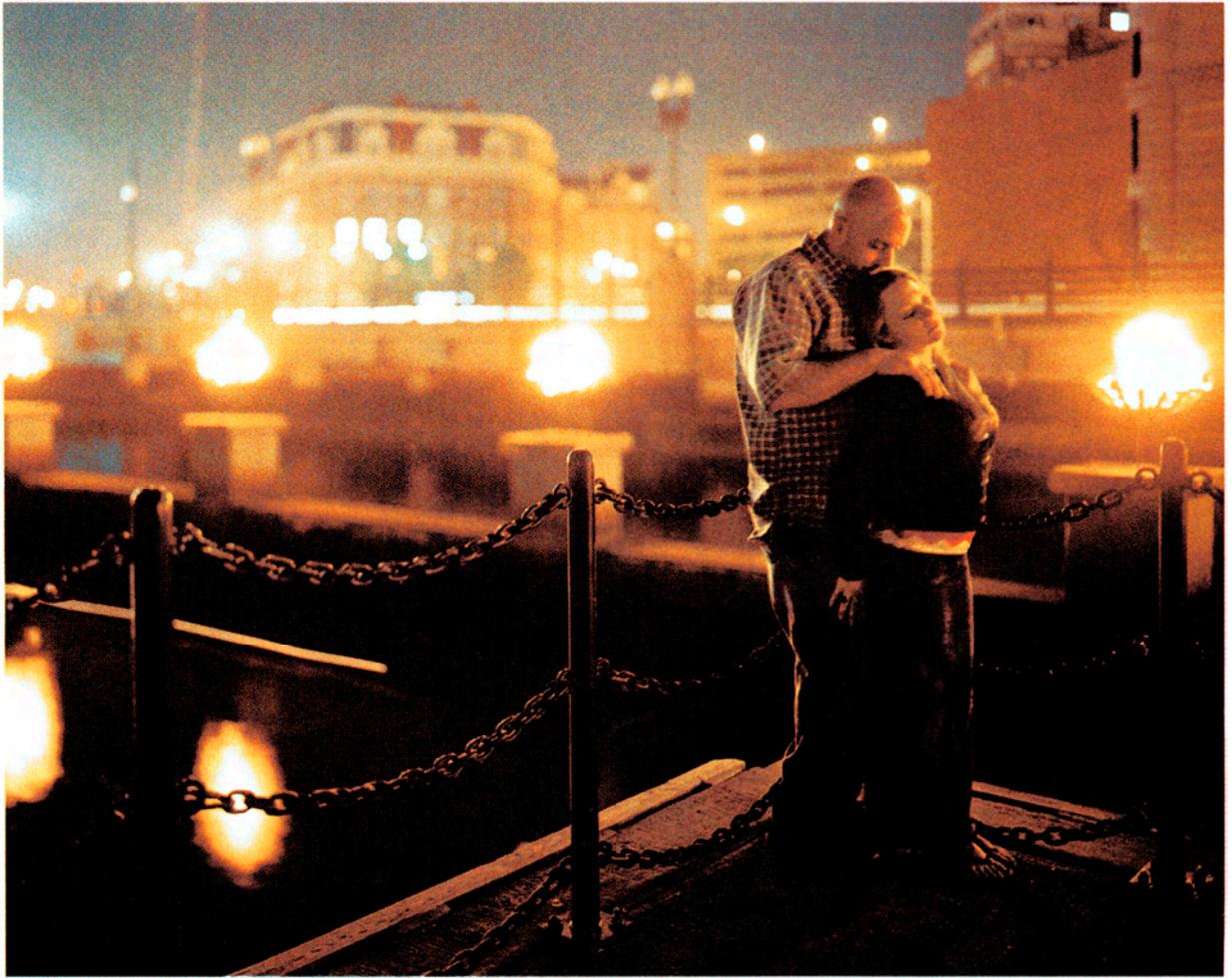
Water, fire and music: public art at its most elemental. On about 20 evenings from late spring to late fall (the exact number of lightings depends on the eternal essentials: tides, weather and corporate sponsors), WaterFire's orchestrated merger of simple, recombinant components draws large crowds of locals and visitors to Providence's revived downtown. Attendance has approached 100,000, equal to more than half the city's population, at some midsummer lightings. From modest beginnings as a small, one-time First Night event in 1994, WaterFire has grown into an important civic institution with a dozen year-round employees and a \$1 million annual budget. An individual lighting involves 100 volunteers, additional subcontractors and a 24-hour cycle of prep work and cleanup.

It seems as if everything in the city wants to fit itself into the order and rhythm of the event. A bus grinding uphill provides counterpoint to boats sliding silently through the water. A train whistle sounds in the pause between tunes. Buildings seem to attend, crowding down to the water's edge. People, too, of course. They arrive in couples, threes, larger collections of family or friends. They stroll along the banks or find a place to sit and look at the water, waiting for the fires.

A flotilla of six wood-tending boats enters the circular basin, the upstream end and ceremonial center of WaterFire. Black-clad volunteers lean out with torches from the boats to light the braziers. The fires brew up smartly, crackling and settling, throwing out sparks that sail on the breeze before extinguishing themselves in the water with a tiny hiss. The bittersweet, autumnal, deeply New England smell of burning wood spreads through the city.

I've been attending WaterFire lightings off and on for the past decade. Every time I come, I am taken by a rush of feeling that has two distinct parts. One is a sense of intimacy with Providence, an old city by American standards (it was founded in 1636) and an insular one, where I'm always acutely aware that veiled, closely held local meanings shadow the official history retailed at monuments and landmarks. The other part of my response is that at every lighting I find myself resolving to be a better person — to contribute more to the public good, to be more neighborly, more patient with my kids, more appreciative of my wife, to notice beauty. I suspect that the two reactions form the halves of a single whole, that to touch the city's soul means to be touched by it in turn. This time I'm going to try to figure out why WaterFire gets to me the way it does.





The romantic promenade lures couples for quiet strolls. Opposite, WaterFire's creator, Barnaby Evans.

Chicago (Blues Festival), San Francisco (Chinese New Year), Philadelphia (the Mummers Parade) and Washington (the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, among others). Looking farther afield, to Europe, there's the Palio in Siena, Carnevale in Venice, the running of the bulls in Pamplona, Oktoberfest in Munich and all manner of religious and folk observances with centuries-deep cultural roots.

Providence, which would seem to have more in common with, say, Youngstown, Ohio, than with those other cities, makes an unlikely addition to the list. Although Providence is architecturally distinguished and historically significant — as an ancestral home of religious freedom in America, among other things — it has been better known for generations as a depressed, corrupt, cartoonishly parochial Rust Belt city on the skids. It has also been overshadowed by Boston and New York, the cultural capitals to the north and south. Now, though, WaterFire draws culture-seeking travelers in surprisingly large numbers.

"The piece is designed to have very soft edges," says Barnaby Evans, the Providence-based artist who created WaterFire, meaning that it welcomes all types of wanderers-in, fitting itself to all kinds

of agendas and schedules. I have arranged to run into him at the lighting. Salt-and-pepper-bearded, wearing a leather jacket, he greets passersby and stoops to pick up a plastic cup somebody dropped on the river walk. "It's the opposite of the theater model, where the shows all go off at eight, all the restaurants have to feed everybody before that, everything has to happen on schedule."

His model is the *passaggiata*, the Southern European habit of the evening stroll during which you take the air while participating in an informal street pageant that sustains community and connection to place. Because American life is so dominated by the car, the television, air conditioning and other technologies that discourage casual but meaningful encounters in public space, Evans intended WaterFire to satisfy the resulting hunger to commune with fellow citizens and the city itself. The mall can't meet that need; neither can Google.

This *passaggiata's* neighborliness might not necessarily seem welcoming to outsiders, but, Evans argues, WaterFire appeals to visitors because it requires no special knowledge of the city. "As a completely new event, it doesn't have localized identity in the way that some older ones do," he says. "It's deliberately universal. Seeing it the first time, you have every right and opportunity to interpret it as authoritatively as somebody who's lived here." Tourists, often blamed for ruining event places by diluting their local character, actually help WaterFire succeed. "With tourists, you have that new energy, that discovery, going on. It's not the same as centuries-old religious and ethnic festivals with layers and layers of meaning and neighborhood-to-neighborhood rivalries

Providence went through a classic postindustrial decline that bled the life from the city. “In our minds,” says Bob Burke, “we were dead and buried.”

you wouldn’t hope to understand at all as a tourist.”

I’m not a local, but I’m not exactly a stranger to Providence, either. I grew up in Chicago, where I first encountered an exquisitely gloomy, peak-roofed, demon-haunted Providence in the pulp fantasy stories of H.P. Lovecraft, the city’s literary hero. There’s a single phrase in Lovecraft’s *The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath*, which I first read when I was 10 years old, that hooked me on Providence for

life: “There is Providence quaint and lordly on its seven hills over the blue harbor, with terraces of green leading up to steeples and citadels of living antiquity.” I have lived in the Northeast more than half my life, and in Boston, only 45 minutes north of Providence, since 1997, and I know my way around the real Providence almost as well as I know my way around Lovecraft’s city, but I will always remain an outsider. In Rhode Island, one of the most proudly local and un-

homogenized places in America, people give directions by referring to buildings that were torn down long ago. If you don’t know what they’re talking about, you’re out of luck. For a Chicagoan, too, Providence’s greater age makes the place seem all the more inscrutable: smaller than my city, yes, but denser, tighter, more deeply layered with secret history. WaterFire raises the ghosts of Providence; I half-sense them, indistinct presences collecting along the riverfront, drawn by the light, warmth and sound.

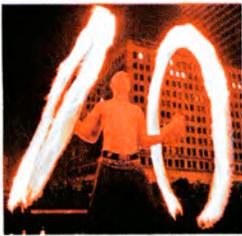
THE LIGHTING IS NOW IN FULL SWING, a rhythm it will sustain until 1 a.m. The music rises and falls, as do the fires, replenished by the boats. Other craft decorously ply the waters: refurbished water taxis from Bangkok, long black gondolas and a glamorous little boat fitted out with a canopy under which two couples sip wine at a wooden table by lantern light.

WaterFire’s intimate yet grand scale adds to its potency. I could easily throw a cellphone across the Providence River, but it’s still

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ROVING ON THE RIVER

WaterFire’s half-mile route offers a wide range of activities and arts performances



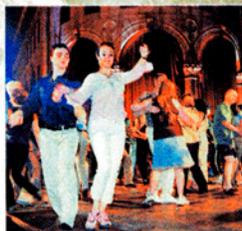
Rings of Fire: One of the festival’s many performers.



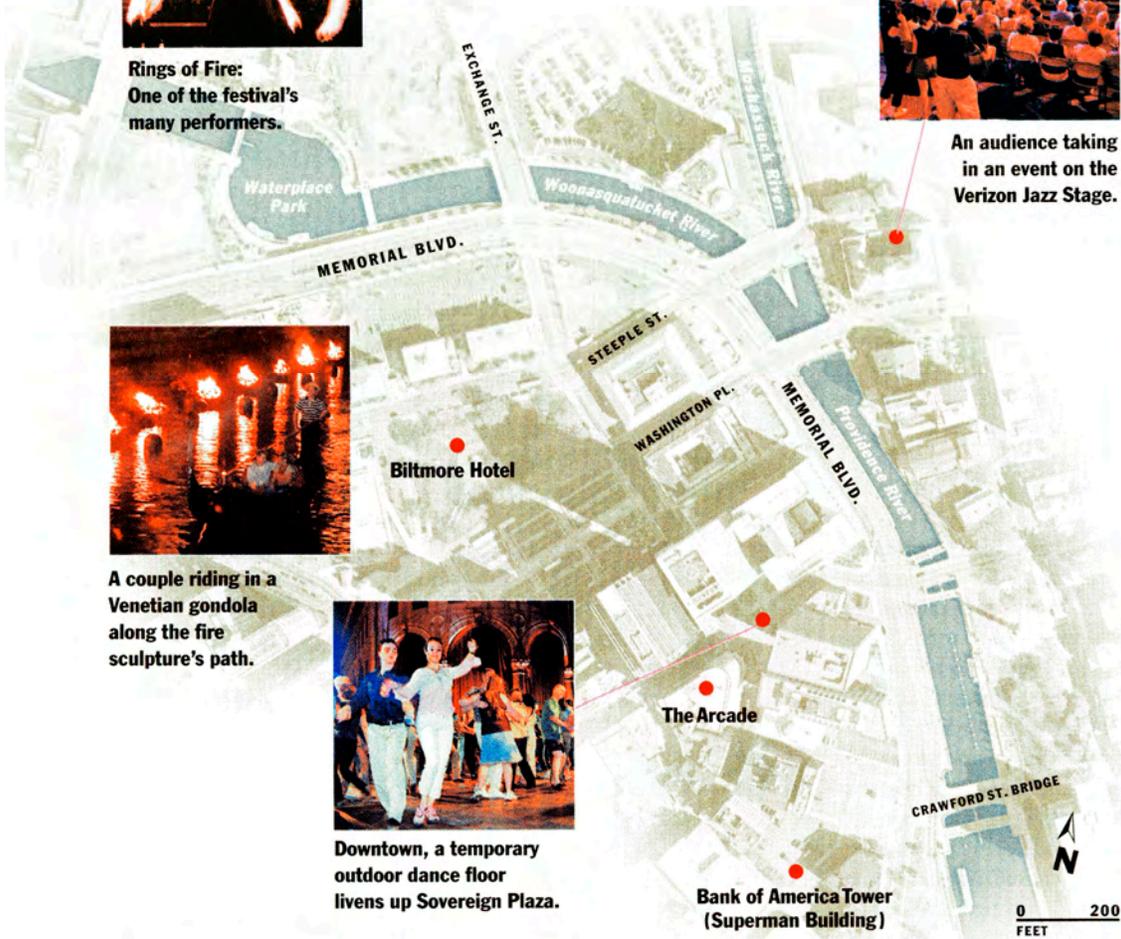
An audience taking in an event on the Verizon Jazz Stage.



A couple riding in a Venetian gondola along the fire sculptor’s path.



Downtown, a temporary outdoor dance floor livens up Sovereign Plaza.



MAP BY LARIS KARKLIS; TOP TWO PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL MELFORD / PROVIDENCE WARWICK CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU; BOTTOM PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEW MILNE / ASSOCIATED PRESS



Providence

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 28

wide enough to seem like a significant body of water. WaterFire's half-mile-plus stretch of riverfront terrain feels rich but compact, complex but knowable. After an hour or two of strolling up and down its length, I find myself returning to and lingering at the junction of the three rivers, where the land narrows to a point like the prow of a ship thrust into the Providence River. Standing on that point, where the secondary line of braziers on the Moshassuck converges with the main line of braziers on the Woonasquatucket and the Providence, I feel for a moment as if I may have found WaterFire's heart. The moment will pass, though, as the music changes, the night deepens and my own perspective shifts with each phase of rest or motion.

I WALK TO POT AU FEU, a restaurant near the far downstream end of WaterFire, to see Bob Burke, its well-connected proprietor. Barnaby Evans and several others have told me to talk to Burke if I want to understand what WaterFire means for Providence. I find him at the downstairs bar in his restaurant. Like almost every other provider of food and drink located anywhere near the riverfront, he's doing excellent business tonight. Burke, whose swept-back silvered hair, good suit and bow tie are offset by the crinkled mouth of a recovering class clown, takes me for a walking tour of his end of downtown. WaterFire enlivens the blocks by the water, but when we turn inland the aroma of wood smoke follows us down darker, quieter streets.

As we walk, he tells me about the falcons that hunt squabs from a deco skyscraper known as the Superman Building (for its resemblance to the Daily Planet building in the comic books and the old TV show), and about the landing pad for zeppelins on its roof. He explains that there are people in town who brag about "the Big O in the Big O" — that is, having sex in the giant letters atop the Biltmore Hotel that spell out its name. He shows me the Arcade Building, claimed by some to be "the first indoor shopping mall in America," the two dissimilar classical facades of which preserve in stone a nearly two-centuries-old disagreement between its architects — the perfect Providence story in that it features antiquity, independent thinking, a beef and a quirky result.

To understand WaterFire's importance, Burke says, you have to talk about downtown Providence's amazing comeback in the past couple of decades. First, there was a classic postindustrial decline, spanning the mid-20th century, that bled the life from the city. "Downtown was a graveyard with lights," he says. "In our minds, we were dead and buried. We all knew why we were in the *Guinness Book of World Records*." Extensive concrete decking covered the rivers, including a 1,147-foot-wide platform listed by Guinness as the widest bridge in the world. Atop it was an intersection known as Suicide Circle. Pedestrian-unfriendly streets, city-dividing highways, railroad tracks, parking lots and other dead spaces dominated the cityscape. Reduced from a cultural and commercial hub to a desolate crossroads for cars on their way to other places, the once-lively downtown felt entombed, like its paved-over rivers. Most citizens, urbanites as well as suburbanites, shunned it.

But Providence was lucky, it turned out, to have been so depressed and passively led that it failed to wreck its elegant building stock with the sort of sweepingly misguided urban renewal projects that trashed other cities' downtowns in the 1950s and '60s. That made it easier, beginning in the 1980s, to refit downtown as a place where people want to go: to shop, to have fun, to encounter culture, to imbibe the city's history and character, and, when WaterFire's braziers are lit, to enjoy a passeggiata in the company of their fellow citizens. Since Burke bought Pot Au Feu in 1986, he says, Providence has added more than 12,000 restaurant seats, part of a downtown boom that has also brought stores, office space and hotel rooms.

The most crucial step of the comeback was uncovering and rerouting the rivers to restore the city's connection to the water, giving it a new physical and ritual center. Burke says that this monumental project, completed in the early 1990s, "had a profound effect on the collective unconscious of Providence. When you began to tear those bridges apart and uncover the land, dig into the earth to move the rivers — and we all saw the unearthing — we were thereby psychically exhumed from our urban grave." In his account I hear echoes of Lovecraft, whose oeuvre features both live burial and reanimation.

Burke insists that restored infrastructure could not have, by itself, produced new life.



FALL TRAVEL | Providence

“You still have to make the streetscape, the hardware, interesting to people,” he says. “And for that you need software — like WaterFire, which is the great example. It brought people in the region back to the city, got them in the habit again.” Visitors started coming, too, from Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York and beyond. It’s no exaggeration, he says, to credit WaterFire with making downtown Providence a destination.

The numbers back him up. An economic impact study of WaterFire in 2004 shows that it attracted at least 1.1 million visitors to Providence. More than half came from out of state, and most of these travelers cited WaterFire as the reason for their visit. The study estimated WaterFire’s direct economic impact for the year at \$33.2 million. “We were surprised by how big the numbers were,” says Donald Keinz of Acadia Consulting Group, which conducted the study. “They make WaterFire a bigger draw than the Newport Folk Festival or the Newport Jazz Festival, a bigger draw than anything in the state except Newport itself.”

With its resonance of both baptism and funeral Mass, WaterFire turns the process of urban redevelopment into something nearly sacred. “Remember, 60 percent of this state is Catholic,” says Burke, whose full name is Robert Ignatius Loyola Burke. “We have this great outdoor sacrament. The ritual, the reverence, the holiness, the smoke like incense, the chants — all that resonates with Rhode Island Catholics in particular.”

Before we part ways, I ask Burke if he thinks of a particular place as the heart of WaterFire. He replies, “I love to stand on what is now the Crawford Street Bridge, the new one,” a graceful, modest span all the way at the downstream end of WaterFire, closest to Pot Au Feu. “One, it has the prettiest view, because the elevated braziers make a spectacular reflection in the water.” The last 15 braziers on that end do not float on the river; rather, they are mounted directly on the granite pediments of the old, Guinness-worthy Crawford Street Bridge, and rise a few feet above the water, all that remains of the decking that

covered the river. “Two, symbolically, that’s *the spot*. That’s where the old bridge was, so that’s where the city was reborn. And, three, if you turn and face south on the bridge, you get the smell of the bay, 25 miles away, from Newport. There’s always a breeze there. That’s the spot where the wind whips up the bay, and if you’re a real Rhode Islander you can breathe in the ocean air and feel your roots.”

I walk to the new bridge to see for myself. There’s a little outward bulge in the middle of the downstream side that seems to enjoy its own permanent breeze bearing a taste of sea air. I stand there, savoring it, admiring the reflection in the water of the raised braziers. My subjective map of WaterFire keeps changing. I had thought of the circular basin at the upstream end as its center; or, if not the basin, then the point in the middle where the three rivers meet. But no, it turns out that WaterFire’s secret center could be here, at the downstream end, which I had thought of as the place where the event peters out.

Of course, the next resonant spot I find may supplant these others. WaterFire's elements encourage you to conjure with them, to keep recombining them as you make the artwork your own. Barnaby Evans says that you don't need to know anything about Providence to come up with an authoritative understanding of his creation. Bob Burke says that only a true Rhode Islander who knows the lore of Providence can fully understand it. WaterFire leaves room for both to be right.

WALKING BACK UPSTREAM, I find that the riverfront has become a vast open-air love zone. It's almost 10 p.m.; the fires burn hot and bright in the lovely dark. The crowd appears to consist mostly of couples now, thousands of them, young and old and in between, leaning together as they stroll, hunkering down by the water in jumbled pairs.

Evans has the greater community in mind when he says that he intends to bring people together, but his creation practically yanks couples into a clinch, too. The forgiving *mysterioso* lighting, mood music, pleasing smells in the air and warm feelings pervading the crowd all frame your woo-object to best advantage. You feel the city around you come alive with possibility, elevated from the normal, and the same thing happens to the two of you. The moon, hanging between office buildings, can turn even the most prosaic steel-and-glass cubicle-hive into a romantic tower on a stage set for love. There are just enough things to do and material to work with to shape the evening into a series of quiet pleasures without distracting you from each other. *Let's go up on that bridge and see what it looks like from there. Let's walk back down the river and stop for a drink. Let's sit by the water and watch the boats. Let's just listen. Let's . . .*

I'M ON MY WAY TO WORK A SHIFT ON A WOOD-TENDING BOAT, something I've wanted to do ever since I attended my first lighting. I've worn black and brought gloves, as instructed. A supervisor at the dock speaks into her headset, and a few minutes later a boat swings in to pick me up.

Once aboard, I join a crew of six whose job it is to keep the fires stoked. The boat has run low on wood — about five cords of salvaged pine and cedar is burned per hour — so we stop to resupply at one of the half-dozen bridges that span the river along WaterFire's length. Snugged under the

bridge, we reach up beneath its arches to grab logs stacked there, toss them behind us into the boat, then make off down the river to continue our rounds.

The job has a rhythm to it, part of the larger rhythm of WaterFire. You grab a log with each hand from the pile in the boat, then, ranged along the gunwale with other volunteers, you take your turn to place your logs into a brazier as the captain maneuvers the boat by it. Up close, the fires toast your face, and it takes a few attempts to get the hang of timing the boat's coasting approach and keeping stray embers from singeing your hair or eyebrows as you dump in the wood. It's all done without sudden movements or loud talk, with a stately smoothness encouraged by Evans as part of WaterFire's aesthetic. There's something at once restful and inspiring, like meditation, about the routine: being out on the water, doing your job among others, holding the logs ready as you pull up to the brazier, waiting your turn, reaching into the heat and light to put them in, feeling the fire rise up with new force as the boat pulls away and moves to the next one.

Why have I grown so attached to WaterFire? Not just because it satisfies the urge to engage intimately with a place, and not just because of my own Lovecraft-inspired yen for Providence in particular. Not just because attending WaterFire is the opposite of locking yourself in the house, watching TV and growing ever more fearful of public life and space. And not just because the combination of water, fire and music operates on some basic mammalian pleasure center that doesn't get enough stimulation from the routines of city living.

Those reasons all matter, but I come back for this one: As I work my shift on the boat, and as I walk along or sit by the river, I am seized by a heightened sense of city-ness — of a great crush of humanity, the living as well as the ghosts of the dead, all gathered in one place by the water, their desires and labors and cares shaped by Providence and shaping it in turn. The upwelling of feeling resonates in the buildings, the bridges, the curve of the river, the faces of the people gazing at the fires. I see that they feel it, too. Everything else that isn't this feeling seems to evaporate and lift away, like wood turned to smoke. 

Carlo Rotella, director of American Studies at Boston College, last wrote for the Magazine about music in Chicago.