

RIVER RECLAMATION or IMAGE EXPLOITATION?

An Investigation of Water Quality Aesthetics

in the

Upper Providence River

and its

Associated Impacts upon Human Behavior

by

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INTRODUCTION

Brown University and the Providence Journal-Bulletin sponsored a conference in December 1982 entitled, "Who Will Save the American City?". In attendance was James W. Rouse, a renowned urban planner esteemed for his ambitious attempts to restore failing urban centers and his successful waterfront projects such as Harbor Place in Baltimore and Faneuil Hall in Boston. During a tour of Providence he remarked to Ken Ornstein, director of the Providence Foundation, a non-profit affiliate of the Greater Providence Chamber of Commerce, that it is a pity the waterfront is underutilized and neglected.¹ Rouse, lamenting that the city and its associated commercial and transportation interests had paved over the river, commented, "People love the water."² This statement was the catalyst which has spawned a new vision of Providence, a vision which will not only reclaim the past but also usher in the future. As the city's largest renewal plan in its history begins to take form, Providence will change from a declining town to a metropolis experiencing a Renaissance. According to the 1983 Waterfront Redevelopment Proposal, credited to Warner and Associates, a dynamic urban environment will emerge. The proposal encompasses: relocating the confluence of the Woonasquatucket and Moshassuck Rivers from beneath the Post Office; turning Memorial Square (Suicide Circle), into a pedestrian area; removing old bridges and adding new ones to ease the flow of traffic; altering highway ramps; constructing a 4.5 mile linear park with a bicycle path and walkway along the waterfront; and promoting the development of small commercial enterprises, residential units, and marinas.

¹ Personal communication with Ken Ornstein, October 1984.

² Dan Stets. Providence-Journal Sunday Magazine, August 26, 1984.

The history of this waterfront, from Roger William's initial settlement until the 1980s gives part of the background necessary to understand the need for the current revitalization effort. A glance at the political and economic aspects of Providence fills in most of the remaining gaps in appreciating the extent of urban renewal. This background, in addition to the actual goals of the development proposals, which attempt to refurbish and unite the entire downtown, are covered in the first section.

After this general overview, I identify selected factors associated with the quality of water in the study area. These factors, comprised of biological and chemical constituents, physical manifestations, and regulatory and legal issues, are examined in terms of their impact on potential commercial and recreational activities on the site. These factors, ranging from: water degradation from untreated sewerage to snow removal wastes dumped off the Crawford Street Bridge; odor perception to floating debris and litter; site specific water classification to enforced regulation of human activities; have related institutional responsibilities and economic realities which must be confronted. This second section expands on these issues and lays the groundwork for interpretation and assessment of water quality aesthetics presented in the third section.

This section, based on interviews and discussion with advisors, identifies certain problems concerning river aesthetics which have not received sufficient attention. Consequently, I utilize the technological creativity of the Chicago waterfront and the high aesthetic value of the San Antonio Riverwalk to display good examples of appropriate management and maintenance of water quality in an urban environment. Viewing economic considerations as a top priority I pose both interim and long-term solutions to water quality problems in the Providence River.

In the final section I synthesize the information in my previous chapters and draw conclusions. From this base I derive concrete proposals to attain my objective, a self-sustaining maintenance program for enhancing the quality of water in the Providence