

ARCHITECTURAL DIGEST

JUNE 2014

WHY PROVIDENCE IS THE COUNTRY'S BEST SMALL CITY

Amazing architecture, great food, wall-to-wall culture—Rhode Island's capital has it in spades

Text by Samuel Cochran

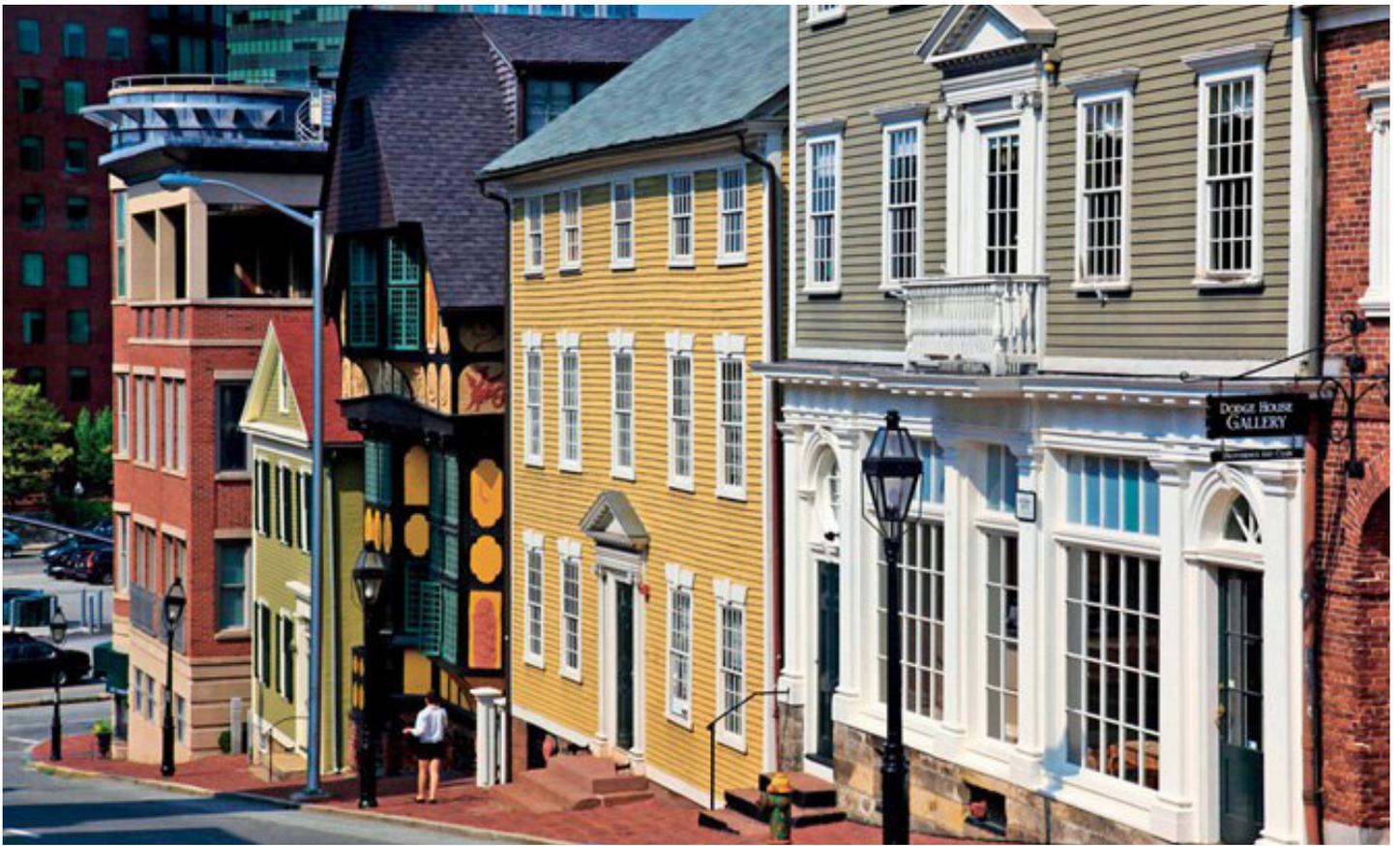


As the petite capital of our nation's littlest state, Providence, Rhode Island, seldom steals the spotlight. But what the city lacks in scale and profile, it certainly makes up for in style and spirit, with rich architectural interest, top-notch restaurants, charming waterfront parks, and a creative community whose influence extends far beyond the region. Today the metropolis, its downtown revitalized, is a destination well worth exploring in depth. And what better time to do so than now, when warm-weather getaways beckon up and down this stretch of New England coast?

Situated at the head of Narragansett Bay, Providence was founded in 1636 by Roger Williams, a religious exile from Massachusetts and a champion of spiritual freedom who envisioned the town as a "shelter for persons distressed of conscience." Anguish, thankfully, can no longer be counted as a source of the city's cultural solidarity, but a tradition of independent thought persists, owing in large part to Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). Both campuses spill across College Hill, an east-side enclave blessed with a well-preserved stock of 18th- and 19th-century residences. Postcard-perfect Benefit Street in particular makes for a lovely stroll.

"Providence is full of interesting neighborhoods, and College Hill is a favorite, its historic and modern buildings all coexisting beautifully," says AD100 architect Annabelle Selldorf, who is currently overseeing the renovation of Brown's John Hay Library. When the 1910 English Renaissance-style landmark reopens this September, visitors will be able to revel in the restored 4,400-square-foot reading room, an eloquent double-height interior with a coffered ceiling. That project joins several additions to the school's grounds, most notably the Diller Scofidio + Renfro-designed Granoff Center for the Creative Arts, with multiple venues for student exhibitions and performances.

Historic spaces are being reborn all throughout Providence but nowhere more dramatically than downtown. As recently as a decade



ago, the area was eerily desolate, a seeming stage set of edifices left over from the city's early-20th-century heyday as a center of the jewelry, textile, and silverware industries. Now the streets hum with pedestrian traffic. This past fall, the Arcade—America's oldest indoor mall, built in 1828—reopened as a retail hub and loft complex. Nearby is the Dorrance, a restaurant in the lobby of a 1901 former bank building, where the stained-glass windows and gilded 30-foot ceilings make for a splendid setting in which to enjoy Plymouth Rock oysters and other New England specialties.

The city's latest before-and-after triumph is the Dean, a 52-room downtown boutique hotel whose April debut instantly reenergized a hospitality scene dominated by big names like the Omni and the Biltmore. Conceived by the design firm ASH NYC, the Dean is located in what was first a church settlement house and later a strip club. "We didn't totally disown its salacious past," says ASH CEO Ari Heckman, a Providence native. "There is still a bit of a sexy vibe." Moodily lit and flecked with brass accents, the interiors feature a smart mix of furniture, from custom-made pieces by local artisans (the steel bed frames, for example) to vintage gems like the lobby's Jean Prouvé bench. "We wanted to honor what makes Rhode Island special but also introduce something new to the city," notes Heckman.

That same mind-set prevails two blocks away at Birch, a year-old restaurant helmed by Benjamin Sukle. "The area has incredible food products, and we want to showcase them in ways that aren't standard," says Sukle, a 2014 James Beard Foundation Award nominee for best chef in the Northeast. Seasonal ingredients take on rich, unexpected flavors thanks to nuanced combinations and innovative techniques. In one memorable dish, warm beets have been dehydrated, then rehydrated with shiso vinegar; in another, roasted carrots are topped with grilled quahogs.

Providence is rife with foodie pleasures. Al Forno, a riverfront mainstay, has been known to lure diners from as far as New York for its grilled pizzas, baked pastas, and made-to-order desserts. On the east side, Farmstead, a cheese shop and eatery, delights with hearty artisanal fare. (Its chef, Matt Jennings, was also a 2014 James Beard nominee.) And on the west side, the restaurant North is boldly reinterpreting Asian cuisine with such Momofuku-caliber dishes as dan dan noodles with goat, squid, and fermented chilies. North Bakery, a satellite project, sets up shop around the corner this summer.

When it comes to design shopping, the city boasts a number of under-the-radar sources for savvy aesthetes. Fans of American Colonial furnishings will be in heaven at the Stanley Weiss Collection, whose stock fills all four floors of an 1895 department-store building downtown. Three years ago, antiquarian Richard Kazarian (401-453-6000) transformed an unassuming structure on the east side into a storefront for his eclectic treasures, the bulk of which remain at his house/showroom in nearby Pawtucket. (He'll take you there on request.) Pawtucket is also home to 20th-century-design dealer Adam Edelsberg's by-appointment gallery, where Claude Conover vessels mingle with rare pieces by the likes of Frank Gehry and Paul Evans.

There are, of course, cultural attractions to rival the commercial and the culinary. A trip here would not be complete without a stop into the Providence Athenaeum, an 1838 Greek Revival library designed by neoclassical standard-bearer William Strickland. Just blocks away is RISD's Nature Lab, a unique facility where visitors can find visual inspiration in a dazzling array of shells, skeletons, and other specimens. The RISD Museum, meanwhile, contains an impressive collection, including a trove of American decorative arts displayed in a 1906 wing modeled after a Federal-style residence.

Such institutions, modest though they may be, are the perfect embodiment of the city itself: small, yes, but also special.