

A Year in Providence and the Region
Fragments to Seed
The November 10, 2006 Conversation with James Hillman
By Robert Leaver

This paper is composed of fragments in response to 4 of the 5 questions: do aesthetics cost more? How to build bridges among parts of the city? How do we know when a city is working? What is typically Providence?

On Place and Community

Place and space are different. Space is open and undefined like outer space, open space, or spacious skies. "Space is freedom, while place is security. What starts out as undifferentiated space become places as we endow it with qualities we value."¹

Place is a container that activates our senses, soul comes in. Place is about breathing in. In a place aesthetics pulse through us as in the words origin: "to breathe in." We gasp in awe, our heart aroused. Our identity is enriched in the places where we feel at home – if only temporarily. Yes, we want novelty and change, but not at the price of total loss of the integrity of a sense of place. Our place of origin, or current place of living, is home base, a stone to keep touching, what to hold in our hearts and go back to.

Community is experiencing the ties that bind us to others, in ways that matter, beyond our sense of self. As there are distinct senses of place, there are different kinds of community. Some communities, like the Shakers, have tight ties with little room for variation. Some communities have loose ties like Los Angeles, or like those who bond, intimately, in the stadium seats every week at a football game or among the men in the locker room of my gym every Sunday morning.

Like a sense of place, communities matter to our well being as people, to our organizations and where we live, like a city. Like places, communities come in many forms: communities of location – cities, neighborhoods, or towns; communities of interest – trade associations, networks and online workgroups; and communities of organization – business, civic organizations. In community, you develop a *deeper, felt-sense of community* that places you at the center of the calling you are pursuing – business, civic, ecological or artistic or, like me, a convergence of all of them.

Our "fall" into Place and Community – Ground Zero and Katrina

"Something is happening here"². What it is becomes clearer. The people of America – our culture – are slowly recovering two cherished American ideas: making places and fostering a sense of community. We are returning to these ideas because: The earth hurts – global heating and the loss of species are palatable. We are aware that fossil fuel oil supplies are past peak, on the downward cycle. We long for human connection in the face of more present fear post 9/11 and Katrina. These calls are from the Anima Mundi – the soul of the world – inviting us to pay attention to her. Wake-up Providence and the region: the new demands of place and community matter in "achieving our Providence."

1 Yi-Fu Tuan. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. University of Minnesota Press. 1977.

2 Stephen Stills. (from) *What's it Worth*. Buffalo Springfield. Reprise Records. 1967.

For me, making whole places and making diverse communities – in Providence and throughout New England – are the reasons – in some form or another – for what we do everyday in work, home, in the neighborhood, and at play. I need a more compelling reason to sit with others in conversation to argue, plan, and cajole. I long to be in service to something more vital than just being in or leading a meeting.

Two parallel, but seldom integrated, foundations have shaped American culture: how we engage in commerce and how we create our culture. 9/11 and Katrina – two disasters – ruptured our two-part foundation, revealing warts and opportunities. At ground zero American commerce was hit. The towers were technologically built and swiftly destroyed by technology. The destruction was marked by minutes. Arising from the rubble was a man of spirit – the hero – Rudolph Giuliani who so quickly rallied the polis, righting the ship. His call was to save New York and bring it back to even more greatness.

His urgency and quickness to right the ship pushed away a beautiful experience. In the wake of the twin towers falling, were reports in New York, for a week or so, of acts of kindness and a sense of belonging to community. In the wake of the fall of the twin towers, the feminine longing for connection and soul entered and stayed for a while.³ As the business of the city again took over, the feminine and soul retreated from its temporary, visible presence. To enter a place and be felt, soul requires sustained slowness.

In New Orleans, the source of our culture was smashed by hurricane Katrina. New Orleans is about the music, story, old buildings, and the vibe that define a good part of the culture of most old industrial, American cities. New Orleans was made by hand, over centuries. And nature destroyed it, slowly over many days with water and mud – two marks of the presence of soul. As is characteristic of soul, no one Giuliani-like spirit, rose up – and such an out front leader kept being asked for on the coast of Louisiana. In the absence of the one Giuliani-like driving force, leadership was assumed lacking. Yet, we heard so many stories of local, small acts of bravery and compassion. These small acts of kindness express the more invisible soul (in comparison to the visible spirit) or call for leaderful-ness and not the swift spirit of one charismatic leader. The “slower” feminine was more pervasive, and still lingers in New Orleans.

Post destroyed towers and flooding revealed the presence of “tough” urban problems that beg to be tackled: decaying infrastructure/technology and the marked differences between a building built by technology in New York, amortized to last 15 years, and those old buildings of New Orleans built by hand for a lifetime. A premium was placed on charismatic leaders as *the* true measure of leadership. On one hand, the public call was quick to rebuild the center of commerce in New York. On the other hand, the call was to dismantle New Orleans – The Americana of street musicians and storytellers. In fact, America longs for both. In the call to eliminate New Orleans, as a city, we saw the push for supremacy of American culture defined as mostly high “European” arts of New York City. And the proposed supremacy of commerce and high culture over street culture is a prevailing urban problem.

³ James Hillman. *Ground Zero: A Reading*. Vol II: *City and Soul* of the Uniform Edition of James Hillman. Forthcoming 2006. Spring Publications.

The twin towers and Katrina are calls to attend to place and community so they matter again. Once, not so long ago, making places – like operating a local bank, a local farm, or a local store – mattered to the masculine in us. Making places was once about using our hands to build and touch things and holding long-term work relationships. Business transactions required a handshake. We don't make places much anymore and we don't use our hands much either. Once not so long ago, making community – like raising a family, holding coffee hours or doing a barn raising – mattered to the feminine in us. In the absence of place and community, there is a rise in violence and anomie. Making places and building community once required lots of hands and seeing other faces. For soul to enter, the hands and faces of others must be consistently present.

We are both masculine and feminine. We need both parts to be whole. The masculine drives for independence and distinction. The feminine has a longing for connection and community. This call for places and community is not sexist bifurcation of men doing one thing and women doing the other! No. It is a call for reviving the psychological power of making places and making community, by hand, by and for both men and women. The two callings remain the same, but the actions – like running a local farm or holding a coffee hour – will be different today.

What factors make one place, our community – like Providence – speak to us and not others? John Berendt on his love of Venice: “The rhythm in Venice is like breathing, high water, high pressure: tense. Low water, low pressure: relaxed. Venetians are not at all attuned to the rhythm of the wheel. That is for other places, places with motor vehicles. Ours is the rhythm of the Adriatic – the seas...to us bridges (over water) are transitions. We go over them very slowly. They are part of the rhythm. They are the links between two parts of a theatre, like changes in scenery or acts. Our role changes as we go over bridges. We cross from reality...to another reality.”⁴

Andrei Codrescu on his love of New Orleans: “My nature is the city. Not any city: only those cities, like New Orleans, which have become nature. Here, there are doors older than most American trees, street corners dense with the psychic substance of past events, manhole covers that can be read just like a natural formation. This kind of city accrues a nature to itself over time: Doors are trees, street corners are hot springs, and manhole covers are arroyos. Forms become organic through use: Who can deny that jazz can have the force of wind, or the café au lait at Kaldi's is possessed of duration.”⁵

In Berendt's and Codrescu's city, you feel the longing and mysterious hold of their special places. Providence has more in common with Venice and New Orleans than New York. Providence is my hold, my place. I was born and will die here. It is my destiny to serve Providence and the region.

4 John Berendt. City of Fallen Angels. Penguin Press. 2005

5 Andrei Codrescu. From “My City, My Wilderness” in New Orleans: Twenty Years of Writings from the City. Algonquin Books. 2006. Note: the essay was written before Katrina.

Six Slow Movements for Providence and the Region

“Life is short, we must move slowly”⁶

In Providence, Slow down the pace of development so soul is noticed, experienced. Doing action plans or buildings alone does not make Providence a better place or community. Something more is required of us as citizens. In the wake of 9/11 and Katrina, we are invited into place and community, into slowness and soul making. For soul to be more present, we are asked to slow down and take into our hearts, six slow, evolving world movements. These six movements demonstrate localism on the rise.

Slow food is about the local production of food, as well as, a slow experience of tasting it. When we eat slowly, we are *in* conversation with others and their faces at our table. The slow food movement was born in Italy in retaliation to the intent of building a Mc Donald's on a cherished piazza. In a post-peak fossil fuel world, cities and their regions will be required to produce local food. The Intervale in Burlington, Vermont produces about 8% of the city's fresh food and does so on an old dump farmed by 13 entrepreneurial farmers.

Slow money is the work of Woody Tisch and the Investors Circle using patient capital (slow returns) to invest in sustainability companies in the US. The Circle has over 400 investors throughout the US. And we in Providence keep complaining that we are not keeping up with the fast and large money movements of Boston, Silicon Valley or New York. We are a slow money/bootstrapping economy, and it is time we owned it.

Slow learning is, in part, “stealing time from the culture”⁷ for reflection in a hurried world. It is time to get off of automatic pilot because as James Hillman says: “The ideas we have that we don't know we have, have us.” If we don't stop and reflect, publicly, we will keep doing what we have always done even though what we mostly do was conceived for a time past. Additionally, slow learning understands the local knowledge, or the places' “metis.”⁸ This is knowing how local practices and wisdom moves among our community because each place behaves differently based on its “metis.” Most people fail to understand the particulars of a place because they are blinded by, and thus impose on the locality, a global, generalized, abstract standard. Abstract standards reveal generalities of knowledge and not the particulars of a place's nuances and detailed local understandings. How often you hear: “Providence is no Boston.” Damn right: Providence is Providence with its destiny. Rhode Islanders love to give directions based on a building that use to be at that spot so you have to slow down and really consider the directions. We have our particular words like bubbler (slow) instead of water fountain (a more rushing feeling).

Slow community conversation. The new commons is not one physical place like the old New England commons where cattle grazed and the first town meetings and public notices were posted. The New Commons is many places. It is many things. It cuts across and converges neighborhoods, disciplines, and classes. It is part town hall, part grange hall, and part

⁶ A saying from Thailand quoted by the poet Naomi Shiob Nye.

⁷ The mantra of mythologist, Michael Meade

⁸ James C. Scott. Seeing Like A state: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed. Yale University Press. 1998.

third place, like Ray Oldenburg's coffee and barbershops of old.⁹ Further, it is the call to build the next generation of fourth places: the public realm that goes beyond the convention of parks and squares. The new commons is the bazaars of ancient Istanbul or Lisbon where goods were for sale in dense spaces of trading. The hum of the polis was felt in such places. In early Greece the agora – the bazaar – was the training ground for democracy executed in the more formal Greek spynx or theatre. And the agora is what the new commons strives to create.

Slow building. The buildings and public places created next in Providence will require an unfolding.¹⁰ In unfolding you talk with the people who will use the building or place. You sit with the land; you are in conversation with the land and the people until you sense, with your heart, what to do to help. As an architect, Christopher Alexander sits on the land, walks the land, and feels the land, until the building or public space the land and people want comes into his heart and then into view. For Alexander, it is a partnership among the land, the people, and the professionals. In June of 2006, Alexander said that Providence failed in creating most of its public spaces because we created buildings first before understanding the needs of the public realm and where people walk. Alexander's timeless way of building has us first defining the public realm and how people want to walk in it; then you build buildings in service to the public spaces and pedestrian paths. The next generation of sustainable, green buildings, in Providence, will not necessarily look like our old preserved, or most recent modern, buildings. Green building materials and ecological design considerations will challenge architects and planners to move beyond repeating history or doing modernism to create an elegant, aesthetic post modernism. Providence has the opportunity to create Alexander-like unfolding and green buildings in the old Harbor area – 19.6 acres of land to open to development, in 2012, when Route 195 comes down.

Slow cities, began in Italy, in 1999, when the Mayors of four cities got together to define guiding principles for their cities: less pollution, conserving local aesthetic traditions, fostering local crafts, produce and cuisine, and to make citizens aware of the pleasures and rewards of the leisurely rhythms of life. The 54-point charter is used by hundreds of European cities of 50,000 people or less.

So the challenge to Providence is to take in slow food, slow money, slow learning, slow conversation, slow building, and be a model slow city.

Providence: A City of Justice, Beauty, and Destiny

The job of citizens is to tune the vibe of the city. The Greeks named the city vibe, the polis¹¹ – the throng of the people or the lubricant that made Athenian democracy work. As soul makers of Providence, we “oil this place” to make the conditions for and practice of democracy more possible. The rebirth of Providence is about its people rising up after a long introverted sleep. A city is nothing without its people.

⁹ Ray Oldenburg. Last of the Great Good Places.

¹⁰ Christopher Alexander. The Nature of Order: an Essay on the Art of Building and the Nature of the Universe. The Center for Environmental Structure. Berkely, CA. 2002.

¹¹ Greek word for city is the polis

Making Providence requires citizens to pursue three timeless longings – longings we hold for our city with a slow soul. Here is James Hillman on three longings:¹² “Soul making is about entertaining and pursuing three ideas – and not literalisms to quantify – justice, beauty, and destiny.”

- Justice...our ongoing struggle to make our co-existence and co-participation, among people, and with the planet, possible.
- Beauty...our heart is open, senses alive, on fire – all from the aesthetic sensing and tasting of our city’s unfolding as a large work of public art. As you walk it, breathe in the life of the city with a heart aroused, taking in the sensate particulars of the experience we know as Providence (again coming back to the origins of aesthetics as the heart opened, breathing the experiences around us).
- Destiny...our realization something is meant, wanted of us – moments of feeling necessary – beyond our immediate concerns, we are pulled by a distinct call to live our Providence.

Combining these three timeless aims, in distinct ways, makes Providence, Providence. The confluence of justice, beauty, and destiny form our sacred places or chambers of memory. In the face of development in Providence (look at all the large cranes) a public inventory and consensus is required as to which of our sacred places, as chambers of the cities memory, to make visible and protect.

Here is how Providence is living these three aims of justice, beauty, and destiny. We display our beauty on a walk in the public realm along the cobblestone street, Pine Street, or having coffee, after a concert, at the all-night Haven Brothers Diner near city hall. We foster justice through the presence of over 15 innovative citizen associations like the Downtown Neighborhood Association. We live the destiny of Providence by living as quirky, entrepreneurial, aesthetic, creative, open, small is beautiful, diverse with less ethnic isolation than most places. Our destiny is *in* our founding story, as told by Roger Williams (the founder of RI who, in the face of the one “right” religious view of the Massachusetts Puritans, took a bold stand for religious freedom), who embedded in our state constitution: “to go forth as a bold and lively experiment of religious freedom for all.” Williams also wrote of soul freedom for all citizens.

As a city we experience our well being by owning *our* sense of place – what we stand for and want to see manifested. To be our true selves, we must own who we are – it is about soul freedom – and not accepting the external, generalized projection of what a city is or us trying to be like Boston or New York. After all, we are Providence.

Getting “right” our sense of beauty, justice and destiny, requires we accept the prompt of James Hillman¹³ on the power of citizens to animate everyday aesthetics and beauty in making a city:

“If artists are like the City’s watchdogs, the barking guardians of immediate un-anesthetized noticing, then a first priority of any city is to increase participation of its

12 James Hillman, Uniform Edition Volume II: City and Soul, edited by Robert Leaver, forthcoming in 2006 from Spring Publications. www.springpub.com

13 Ibid City and Soul

artists and to make life for them more possible – not easy or recognized or successful, merely possible.

By artists please, do not hear me to mean those with professional art skills. No. The artist that the city needs to favor is anyone whose perception and action embodies subversive, discomforting or aesthetic noticing – preacher, journalist, humorist, thinker, investor. Any citizen is an artist when he or she cuts through cant, demands quality, and refuses to be anesthetized.

Artists are not those who have taste, but those who *do* taste and see the world. They do not have special senses, sensibilities, sensitivities; they simply sense as men and women of senses, sensing what goes on, and responding 100% to the city, to its discomforts and outrages by being equally discomforting and outrageous.

The artist furthermore – and you are beginning to see that what I am calling artists others might call citizens – is always altogether engaged in work time and free time, functional, aesthetic, practical, and ideal. What happens in the street, what he or she smells and touches has no less importance than major policies and great ideas. The citizen as artist leaves nothing to George and nothing to Sam. He or she is the eternal busy body.”

My questions to us as citizen artists of Providence: What annoys you about our city? What needs more aesthetic, public noticing in Providence so we can breath it in, heart aroused, open? Where are you ready to be outrageous?

Our Daily Practice as Citizens of Providence

In 1987, a rug dealer from India was part of my life for that summer. He spent the night, at a party I hosted in Newport RI, walking about the room introducing himself like this: “And so Robert, how *do you* serve the world?” I still tingle when I hear his question. I am still pursuing it.

I invite us to tweak the rug dealer’s question: How do you serve Providence? Living the experience of citizen as artist, engaged in slow soul making, here are some suggestions to activate the hum of the polis, the throng of fellow citizens, to make our city touch the hearts of its people...

- Engage in public actions that move Providence from discomfort to more comfort and from comfort to more discomfort, knowing that city making is never finished, knowing standing with both comfort and discomfort is an essential creative tension to handle.
- Remember, our eyes’ gazing at another’s eyes on the city streets, is the core of our humanity. The eyes of others bond us in civil community; we are vulnerable when we feel the full faces of others. Community is more possible when we are vulnerable with the faces of all types and stations of people in the city.
- Hold public conversations with friends and strangers in the streets... dally with others. Slow it all down to converse on the street as an act of living our democracy. Make public conversations on the streets a daily ritual, like a prayer.
- Say hello to strangers, let your eyes meet the eyes of others.
- Publicly notice Providence’s quirky nooks and crannies and sacred places as gifts to talk about with others. Animate our quirks like Haven Brothers diner,

cobblestones on Pine Street. Reveal to others, the city's gifts like Westminster Street, with its intact 19th century look and feel as a streetscape. Andres Duany, the new urbanist planner, often in Providence helping us plan, likens Westminster Street, as the last jewel of an 18th century street in America, with an old European design and feel.

- Walk slowly – eyes wide open to take in the gaze of others and the surprises of Providence.
- Walk, with our heads up, looking, sensing and tasting the city's people and buildings instead of the habit of looking down at your feet or above to the skies.

These acts of soul making, are our work as citizens making our city. Publicly engaging people and our place are our obligations as citizens. Fully being with and caring for people and our sense of place are democracy in action.