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## COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS

by  
**Kristi  
Cameron**

Photos by  
**Eirik  
Johnson**

# Rising from the Ashes

Thanks to the vision of two young developers,  
a former industrial complex now stands  
as a model for neighborhood revival.

Few places have a greater industrial legacy than Providence, Rhode Island. A succession of textile, jewelry, and metal fabricators made the city prosperous in the 18th and 19th centuries, but their subsequent decline left behind some 250 vacant mills, not to mention a hole in the economy. The working-class Valley and Olneyville neighborhoods on the banks of the Woonasquatucket River are full of these buildings, and it's here that a nonprofit artists'-colony-cum-trade-school called the Steel Yard has forged a development model that's not only deeply rooted in the city's manufacturing past but fosters the creative community Providence is placing its bets on today.

The Steel Yard consists of two modest clusters of brick-and-aluminum buildings that frame a large patchwork of grassy and paved grounds. Though it just had its ribbon cutting last September, nothing about the site looks new or polished. That's partially due to circumstance—the completion of a major landscape-remediation effort has, for the moment, drained the organization—and partially by design: the site is meant to host get-your-hands-dirty industrial-arts classes and large-scale fabrication projects. In short, the Steel Yard is not your typical factory-to-condo conversion.

"I've been very critical of developers who maxed out these older mill sites, where every inch is somehow built on," says Drake Patten, the executive director of the Steel Yard. "What I've learned in doing this project is that there's a reason for that. It's impossible to clean up these sites without spending an extraordinary amount of money. If the Steel Yard founders had done a business plan, this place couldn't have happened."



The Steel Yard's executive director, Drake Patten (seated), and founders, Clay Rockefeller (left) and Nick Bauta, in front of the organization's industrial shop. Providence Steel & Iron once did ornamental welding here; now the space hosts ceramics and welding classes.





## WELDING STUDIO

Instead of a business plan, the founders—Clay Rockefeller, a 32-year-old Brown graduate and the great-great-grandson of John D. Rockefeller, and Nick Bauta, a 34-year-old RISD graduate and the grandson of the Canadian food magnate W. Garfield Weston—started in 2001 with some big ideas and enough money to acquire the \$1.4 million, three-acre Providence Steel & Iron complex at 27 Sims Avenue. “We wanted to approach the question of what to do with a historically industrial property in light of the changes to the area,” Rockefeller says. “I was particularly interested in what the next successful model for industry would look like, and if it could be sustainable in a scaled-down way that focused on local markets.”

Two events influenced them. The previous summer Rockefeller spent a day volunteering at the Crucible, a beloved institution in Oakland, California, that offers affordable classes in and studio space for the industrial arts. “Something there clicked for me,” he says. “I became hyperaware of the importance of being part of a healthy ecosystem. I’d valued community my entire life, but I hadn’t given much thought to how to cultivate it. This was the first time I began

to aggressively explore the role of physical space as it pertains to community.” The idea of creating a collaborative environment where people could support one another in the act of making things took root.

Back in Providence that fall, a controversy erupted over plans to replace Eagle Square, a collection of 14 mill buildings in Olneyville that were home to an influential underground art and music scene (members of the band Lightning Bolt were early residents), with a shopping center. People stormed a city-hall hearing to fight both the destruction of the mills and their own displacement. At the time, Mayor Buddy Cianci was experiencing a backlash against the city’s much lauded efforts to rejuvenate downtown, an effort that had, since 1976, rid the core of the train tracks that once isolated the statehouse, relocated the confluence of the Woonasquatucket and Moshassuck Rivers, and uncovered the paved-over Providence River. But it was all accomplished, people began to feel, at the expense of outlying neighborhoods.

The hearing resulted in a modification to the development plans, leaving some of the old buildings intact. But more important, it catalyzed Providence

**Welding occupies the main portion of the industrial shop. Students come for classes, and practicing metalworkers pay to use the space and tools.**



Community Works Rhode Island commissioned custom garbage cans (far left) for Parkis Avenue through the Public Projects program. Students from the nonprofit arts program AS220 made the flower sculpture (left) during one of the first classes the Steel Yard ever offered.

Below: The Choppehead Cycles/Queen Street team presents its first-round sculpture at the 2010 Iron Chef competition. Emmanuel Barada is speaking while his teammates Frank Barada (behind Emmanuel), Aminata DeGroot (behind sculpture), and Tim Ferland (with beard) look on.

into rethinking the value of its industrial architecture. In short order, the mills qualified for landmark designation, historic-preservation tax credits, and zoning exemptions that allowed for residential conversions. Eager to ensure that some of the buildings remained accessible to artists, Rockefeller partnered with three Valley residents to convert the nearby Armington & Sims Engine Company building into artists’ live-work spaces, now called Monohasset Mill. But even before the project was finished, he realized the work was so expensive that he couldn’t offer as much affordable space to the creative community that he had hoped to. So later in 2001, when he and Bauta—both metal sculptors—learned that the Providence Steel & Iron property next door was for sale, they jumped at the chance to buy it. “We had a perfect reason to save it,” Bauta says. “It’s a beautiful example of a working industrial site. And it’s right in the heart of the area that has always been full of artists.”

They established a private foundation and began to offer welding space, using existing equipment and Bauta’s own tools. After plugging along as a ragtag band of artists and fabricators, Bauta and Rockefeller brought on Patten in 2005 to help the organization “grow up.” With a modest \$400,000 annual operating budget (collected through a combination

of revenue raised on-site and philanthropic grants), Patten oversaw the development of youth programs and classes in ceramics, glass, jewelry, blacksmithing, and welding.

One of the Steel Yard’s most financially successful initiatives is the Public Projects program, which has landed 90 contracts to make street furniture, including five separate jobs for the Providence Downtown Improvement District. “I put a bid for trash receptacles out to five companies, and the Steel Yard won in a competitive process,” says Frank LaTorre, PDID’s director for public space. “I was happy about that. Why contract to a huge company in Minnesota when we have a nonprofit down the street?”

The Public Projects program pays folks like Tim Ferland, who learned to fabricate and weld at the Steel Yard, to produce the furniture. “I was a bar-back when a friend introduced me to the Steel Yard,” says Ferland, who has since parlayed his newfound skills into a career and his own business, Metal Tooth Fabrication. “If it wasn’t for them, I definitely wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing today.”

Despite such successes, the Steel Yard faced one major hurdle to moving forward: it was sitting on a contaminated site that would cost \$1.2 million to clean up. “We could receive no bank loans, no major capital-improvement



Bottom photo: Annulli Kiers/courtesy Steel Yard; others, Erik Johnson





Left: Ceramics sit cheek by jowl with welding in the industrial shop. Much of the clay that students use is donated by RISD. Below: Pieces waiting to be glazed sit out on shared shelving.

## CERAMIC COOPERATIVE

foundations would even talk to us, and our insurance was deadly expensive," Patten says. They did have one thing going for them: being a nonprofit allowed the Steel Yard to secure a total of \$600,000 worth of Environmental Protection Agency brownfield-redevelopment funds in 2007, costs a commercial developer would have had to assume and recoup through sales. It was enough to get the ball rolling, but it took two years to get the necessary permits, due to a perceived conflict in the plan, developed by Klopfer Martin Design Group, which proposed naturally filtering storm water while keeping the toxic soil on-site (a choice that was cheaper and more philosophically acceptable to the group than dumping it in someone else's backyard).

Patten fought for their vision, navigating the sometimes competing concerns of the Rhode Island EPA, the Department of Environmental Management, the Coastal Resources Management Council, and the Narragansett Bay Commission. Last fall, after nine months of construction, KMDG finally delivered a landscape flexible enough to accommodate everything from public gatherings to a large delivery of steel while preserving the untamed culture of the Steel Yard. "Everyone was afraid that the place would change," says Kaki Martin, a principal of KMDG. "We worked hard to make sure there was room for that spontaneous, wild urban character to return."

No longer "rusty and sharp," as Rockefeller describes the property's original state, the Steel Yard is primed to draw more visitors. But Patten still needs to raise the million-plus dollars necessary to update and weatherize the buildings. Fortunately, the Steel Yard team has come to embrace a slow-growth approach to development. "The end product that we have collectively created is better because it has taken us so long," Rockefeller says. "It has allowed us to respond to the ways people interact with us rather than air-dropping this thing in."

There are still an estimated 90 underused or vacant mills in the city. The Steel Yard approach certainly isn't the most profitable model for developing them—only now, after ten

years, have the partners come close to recouping their initial investment. What they have done, however, has resulted in rich rewards for the local community and the city as a whole. Artists now have a stable place to work that "has relieved some anxiety about where they'll end up next," says David Cicilline, the former mayor who was elected to Congress last November. The Steel Yard has also paved the way for other noncommercial programs, including the Paul Cuffee Maritime charter school, which inhabits an old bus-depot maintenance facility down the street.

Most important, the Steel Yard has helped change the way Providence, which rebranded itself the Creative Capital in 2009, sees development. "Having the people at the Steel Yard debate with us and present options for building off the arts community has forced us to think differently about who we are as a city," says Thomas Deller, who heads Providence's planning department. "It's making us consider how we can use this example to do other things." Cicilline goes further: "We embedded lessons from the Steel Yard in the city's comprehensive plan, so it will have an impact on the process for a long time." ■ / \*

