

Art sprouts where industries decline

by Nestor Gula
photos courtesy of Gillian Christy



Throughout North American cities there are countless areas where factories have packed up and moved to the outskirts, other cities, other regions or even other countries.

Back in the days there were teeming communities built around these factories and warehouses — people used to walk to work. As the factories declined and closed up shop, these areas, once thriving communities, hit hard times. People lost their jobs, moved away, stores closed, property values plummeted, empty derelict buildings were now at the center of the once vibrant community.

The urban revival movement is not new — it has existed for many decades but the work is slow and expensive. There are many great shining examples of urban renewal.

Providence, Rhode Island, is also a city that has some areas that are undergoing an urban revival movement. At first though, Rhode Island conjures up images of pristine lawns and yacht clubs — but there was thriving industry in this small US state. Someone had to pay for the pristine lawns and the yacht clubs after all.

Olneyville is one such area. It was originally settled in the early 17th century and was an important industrial and trade area at the time of the American Revolutionary War. A gentleman named Christopher Olney settled in this area around 1785 and he operated a gristmill and a paper mill here. His prominent position in the industrial sphere of Providence led this area to adopt his name.

During the Second World War, the Olneyville area was very busy with many mills and foundries among other industries. The end of the war brought about a change to industrialization and living patterns. This precipitated a

decline in Olneyville that has been relatively unchecked to this day.

With many vacant lots and abandoned industrial buildings Olneyville was ripe for renewal. It would have been easy to raze all the buildings and fill the area with shiny new condo developments and big box retail outlets. However the local council and residents wanted to preserve the area and much of the renewal has been

The building that is known now as the Plant is a prime example. There have been industrial building on this site for over 200 years, starting with a paper mill building built by non-other than Christopher Olney. It was later converted to a bleaching house for a cotton mill. There were many additions added and removed over the two hundred year history of the building. The mill closed in 1952, after 137 years in operation, and since then on the building was occupied by many different and served various functions.

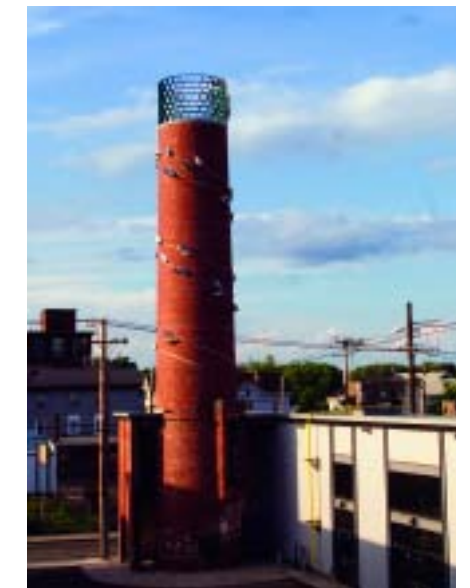
This building was to be the



The building and smokestack before the renewal project started.

centerpiece of the urban renewal in this part of Providence. The site was purchased by Puente Providence (www.puenteprovidence.org), a local small non-profit organization whose philosophy is to buy local, be green, preserve historic structures, promote diversity and collaboration and support works of art. This was to be their first project. The Plant, as the building is now known, is an intentional mixed-use development offering live/work, office, commercial and event space in this historic mill complex. Since The Plant featured a large and prominent smokestack it was quite a landmark for the community. The organization decided to enhance this landmark with some public art. A competition was held and a local artist, Gillian Christy won the competition.

“There was a request for proposal and I had a studio at The Steel Yard (www.thesteelyard.org) and decided to enter to competition, said Christy. “There were nine other entries and I



Once finished the smokestack greatly enhances The Plant building.



Christy assisting some student volunteers in fabricating elements of her sculpture.



Christy bearing down and grinding elements of her sculpture to shape.

made the short list of two. We received a stipend to bring the project forward, with costing and the like. And then I was awarded the commission."

Although she currently resides in Providence, no too far from the project site, she originally hails from Davenport, Iowa. The 28 year-old artist studied at the University of Northern Iowa, and graduated with a bachelor of fine arts with an emphasis in sculpture in 2002. "I wanted to move to the east coast and though that New York or Boston might be a little too big for me so I decided to be in the middle, and so settled in Providence," she said. "The Smokestack was my first commission of this scale, this was my big break into the creation of large scale public art, which I love." Christy wants to focus on public art in her career.

Christy said there were some hurdles to overcome when designing her creation for the smokestack. "There were no original plans, just some old photographs," she said. "In the 1980's, I'm not sure exactly when, there was a major storm that twisted the top part of the smokestack. The

bricks themselves got twisted and the smokestack became a hazard. The city issued a work order to tear down the damaged part of the smokestack. The city just did what they had to so that it was safe and low maintenance – it seems they just knocked the damaged bricks from the top of the smokestack right inside the smokestack itself." The smokestack itself is 60 feet tall and Christy's sculpture added seven feet to the overall height.

"It is very visible on Route 6 and 10 which are major routes in Providence. It is highly visible in all the surrounding areas. You can see the sculpture and smokestack very distinctively from several miles away," said Christy.

Besides the unique look of the sculpture that adorns the renovated smokestack and building, there was an additional unique aspect of this public art. Christy used many local volunteers to help her assemble some elements of the piece. "We organized a class based around the project incorporating the production of several pieces into the curriculum and held this class at The Steel Yard. All this information was posted in the neighborhood," said Christy. All of the

people who volunteered came from the local community. There was a great cross section of people, students, teachers, a daycare provider among others." She added that most had no metalworking experience, so it was a great learning experience for them as well as a lot of fun.

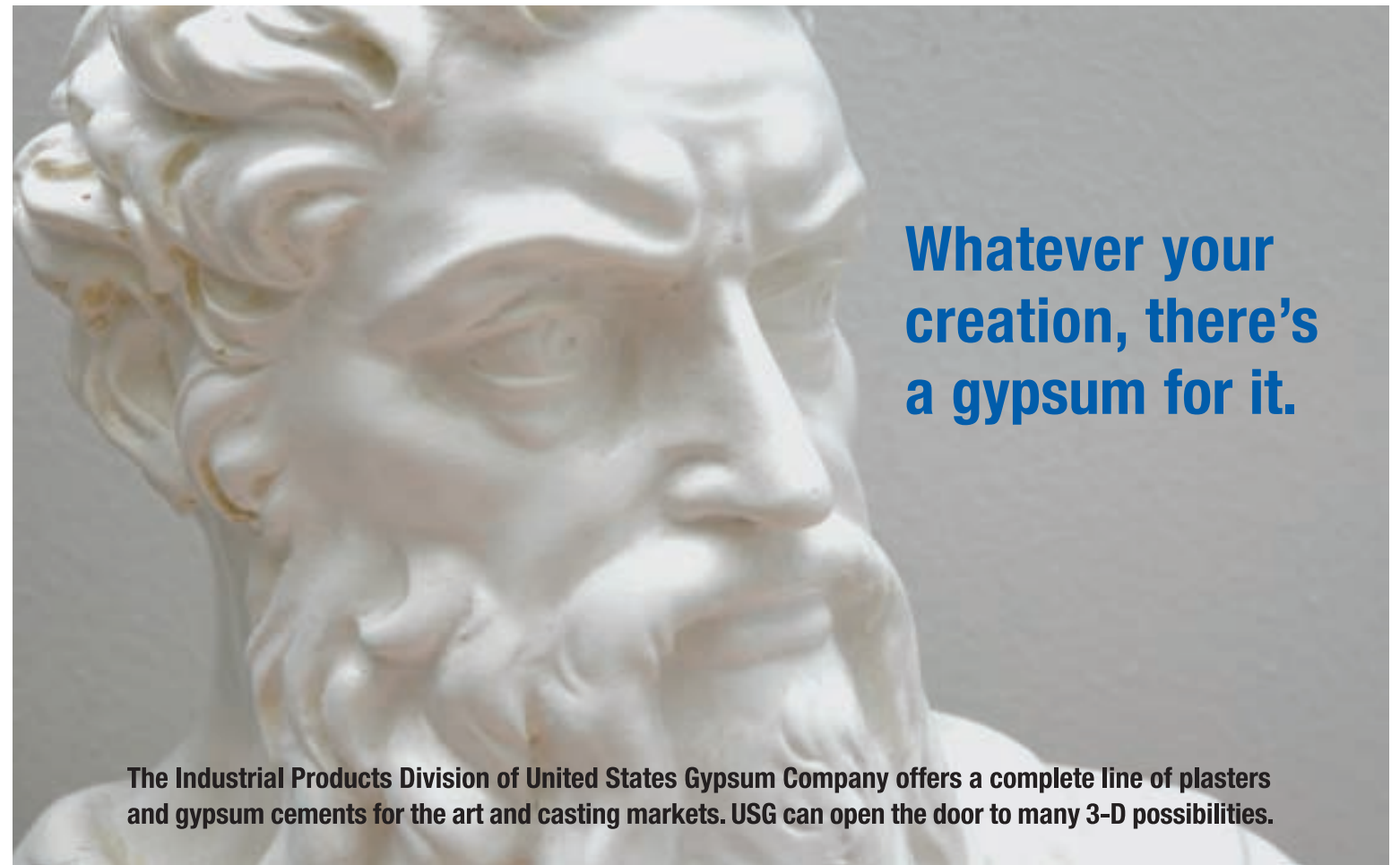
The reaction of the community was very positive said Christy. "Everyone was very excited. I received a citizen's citation from the mayor of Providence, David N. Cicilline. Then the neatest part of it is that I will run into someone and they comment that they might drive out of their way to see the chimney and others will say that they see it everyday on their commute and they love looking at it."

Christy says that although she enjoys drawing most of her creative work is carried out in three-dimensions. "I usually get an idea and then make a small model out of metal. I'm a proficient welder," she said. "I also make smaller pieces about 16 inches in length. These are my sketchbook of ideas. I get a lot more satisfaction by just going into the studio and developing it there."

Many readers are probably familiar with Christy's work already, "I picked up a great gig with the NFL," she explains. "I made the graphics work for the previous season of football. I would sculpt metal that they would then use as props. It was an artistic venture. It was a very good gig."

She has some current public art commissions and is in competition or a few more. "I like public art because I really enjoy how close the viewer can be to it. They can enjoy it at their own leisure," she explains. "They can go up to it and touch it. There is no museum or gallery type feel. You are enjoying the art as part of your daily ambiance." ■

Check out Gillian Christy's site at www.gillianchristy.com



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