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# Providence

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*Examples of what engineers really do and our contributions to society are omnipresent, yet they are invariably overlooked by society as a whole.*

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BRIAN BRENNER

I started watching a TV show on Friday nights called *Providence*. It's about a family living in Providence, Rhode Island. It's a low brain power television show. The people are mostly nice and get into pat situations that they try to fix. The father is a veterinarian, so there are usually cute sick puppies and chimps around. One of the main characters is dead and appears in dreams. This is a little bit strange, but it's OK because it's Friday night after a long week, and you don't want to have to deal with PBS anyway. Also, the title, *Providence* is pleasant and comforting; it's better than a television show named *Latrine* or *Waste Dump*.

Ever the engineer, I realized that one of the reasons I like the show is the way it depicts infrastructure. The built environment of Providence practically glows on the screen. The city and neighborhoods are usually shown in golden sunlight, in early October. The nighttime scenes sparkle. The city — with

its buildings, bridges and neighborhoods — is on the screen so often that it's almost another character. The show's basic theme is that the main character decides to return home from soulless Los Angeles to her family in homey Providence. There is a subtext here that Los Angeles is not a real place that you can live in and be happy, but "home" is. In terms of the built environment, the way "home" is depicted by the show is interesting.

## A City Transformed

The real Providence has experienced a dramatic transformation in recent years. A lot of civil engineering work has gone into rebuilding the city. The old Providence was sort of dumpy, a run-down, past-its-prime small Northeastern city. The Providence River was polluted and buried in culverts. Today, the newly rebuilt Providence has a rescued downtown river and park along its banks. There are gondola rides on the river. The bridges crossing the river are sculptured and appealing. This downtown park is the site of an event called "WaterFire," where on Saturday nights during the warm season giant bonfires are lit on river barges and they play classical music along the banks. Most of the residents of Rhode Island attend these events, traveling from the nether reaches of the Ocean State (which can take a few minutes). Overall, the small downtown has been rebuilt with a new shopping mall, a terrific railroad station, hotels and facilities. It is now a place to visit.

The residential neighborhoods of Providence are, for the most part, well-kept and intact. There are a lot of old Victorian houses and preserved historic areas to walk in. The show chose a big old Providence house to be the home of the fictional television family. There are many neighborhoods that really do look like what is depicted on the show. As with everything else in film, the real Providence is not as wonderful and glowing and dramatic as the televised version. Rhode Island residents, while being nice, aren't all that nice. But I think, overall, the city now has a lot going for it, and the show captures that.

For civil engineers, it's interesting that Providence is about to embark on its own version of Boston's Central Artery Project. The plan is to relocate the junction of Interstate highways I-195 and I-95. These two highways currently mash in a 1960s-style interchange too close to other expressway junctions on I-95, leading to frequent traffic jams. Although the project's original motivation is traffic improvement, there is an opportunity for urban improvement as well. The rerouted highway will cross the Providence River on an elegant tied-arch bridge, replacing the current gangling mass of steel beams and piers, and thus further gracing the rebuilt river. The highway relocation will reconnect an older area of the city to downtown. This section has been cut off by the I-195 expressway. There has been much rebuilding activity in this particu-

lar section already, with new shops, lofts and the Providence Children's Museum. Since the scope of the project is still many factors smaller than the Central Artery/Tunnel Project, Rhode Islanders feel a bit overshadowed. But it's still an impressive, big project in its own right, in spite of the overwhelming "Big Dig" to the north. It is a good example of peripheral benefits that can be realized from a transportation rebuilding project.

### **A Partial View**

The lack of engineers' presence in popular culture and thought makes me grateful for the little crumbs thrown to us. In the grand scheme of things civil engineers design and build the infrastructure that makes society possible; however, we're often taken for granted. There was a recent bidding war for a new Red Sox baseball player. His contract could almost fund the entire highway construction job in Providence. It would be better if there were some bidding wars over really good structural engineers. But since that's not about to happen, I guess it's OK to sit back and watch on television the bridges and buildings of Providence, at least on a Friday night.

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