

EXPERI/MENTORS

TRANSMITTING AGENCY AT AS220, THE STEEL YARD AND NEW URBAN ARTS

BY ANNIE FISCHER

When Odysseus fails to come home after the Trojan War, Athena assumes the mortal form of Mentor—a trusted advisor—to offer guidance to Odysseus' son, Telemachus, who has come of age in a home besieged. Athena encourages Telemachus to banish his mother's suitors and go in search of his father. When he faces setbacks and doubt, Athena reminds him to be a person of action. When he feels isolated and desperate, she affirms his self-worth.

Their dyadic relationship, with its voluntary conveyance of wisdom and counsel, remains part of our cultural inheritance—most obviously in etymology: this is the origin of mentorship. Investment in such a process ideally results in the transmission of knowledge, social capital and psychosocial support, similar in benefits to a sense of community. In Providence, three arts non-profits show that investing in community itself creates fertile grounds in which such relationships naturally grow.

AS220, a sprawling complex of arts and enterprise, grew out of a central belief in each individual's expressive potential, regardless of conditions. Since 1985, when a group of frustrated artists made use of co-founder and artistic director Bert Crenca's last \$800 and rented a one-room loft at 220 Weybosset St. in downtown Providence, the mission has been to provide egalitarian accessibility to resources.

To state the obvious: the mission has been a success. Anyone remotely familiar with the art scene in Providence is aware of AS220's presence. The organization is a giant.

In addition to monthly exhibits in four rotating galleries, AS220 runs a print shop, a darkroom and media arts lab, and a high-tech fabrication and electronics studio—its "cottage industries" where program leaders develop instruction in a variety of media and crafts. For 14- to 21-year olds, AS220 Youth offers a community-learning center, with a labyrinth of high-ceilinged workrooms and a personal recording studio. Nightly programming takes place at the Empire Performance Collective: a black box theater, dance facilities and theater arts school.

Moreover, AS220, which owns and operates three mixed use buildings, has been helping to drive the transformation of downtown Providence for nearly three decades. It operates a \$4.1 million annual budget and serves more than 1,000 artists per year. The number of part-time and full-time staff members hovers around 60, and everyone—including Bert Crenca—earns the same hourly wage. To adopt another system would be to suggest that Crenca has more value than an employee who mops the floors.

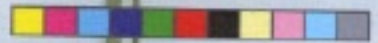
"I know that's not true," says Crenca. "I know because I've done that job."

About a mile west, in a formerly heavily contaminated strip of Providence's Industrial Valley, the value of opportunity matters equally to staff members at the Steel Yard, a community center for the industrial arts. They strive to facilitate projects in which artists can achieve both personal expression and productive output. Located on the 3.5-acre former location of the Providence Steel and Iron Co., which closed in 2001 after a century of industry, the Steel Yard was founded to give small-scale fabricators access to necessary shop space and equipment. But it quickly found a devoted following of hobbyists and co-education materialized as a by product of the collaborative atmosphere.

Professional artists and fabricators now offer some 100 classes per year in fields like welding, blacksmithing, jewelry and ceramics. "It's sort of like art school meets tech school," says Executive Director Howie Sneider. "Even when instruction is really technical, our curriculum is still creative."

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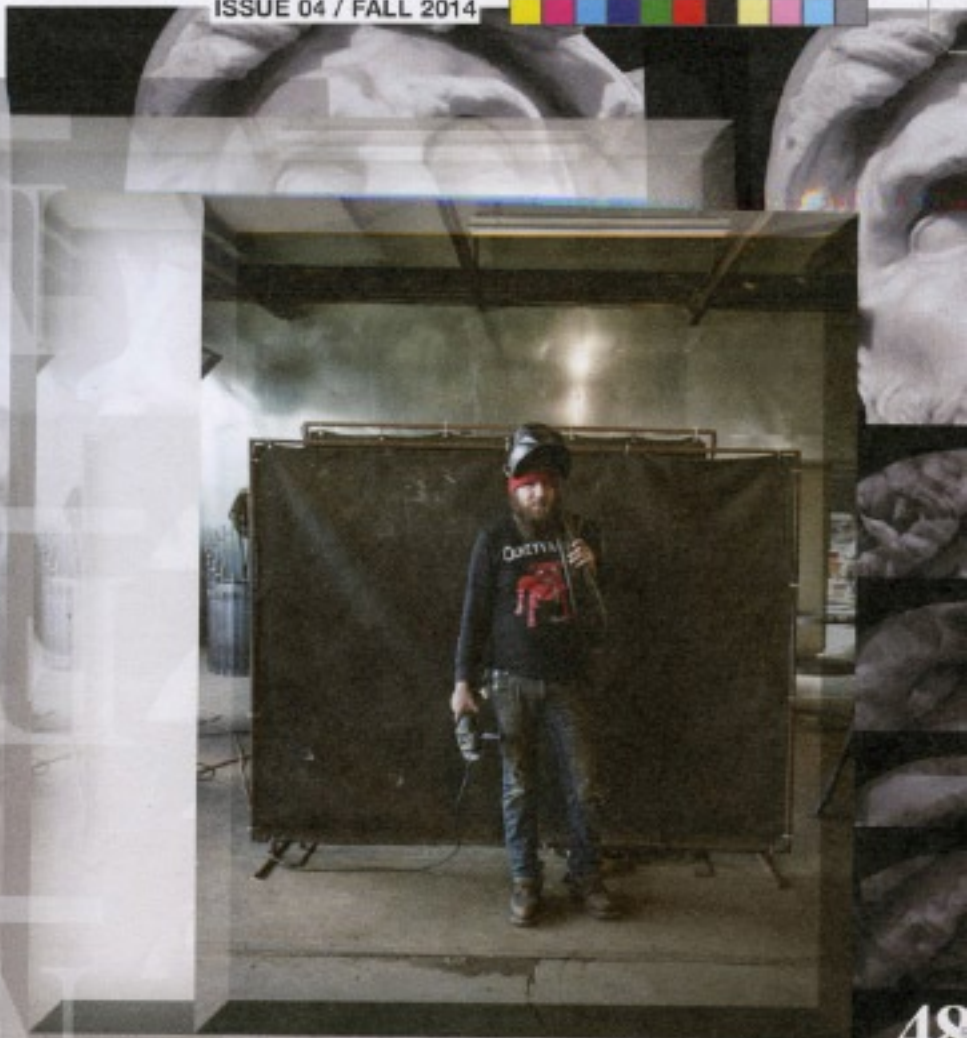
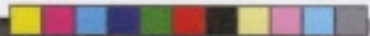
Peering in the window at AS220's "Fab Lab," where students, designers and artists can access digital fabrication tools.



COMMUNITY/CHANGE



Overlay images, clockwise from upper left: Collage by Miguel Revelorio created as part of a photography class at AS220 Youth; Tim Ferland, Art Production Manager at the Steel Yard, oversees artist teams for the Public Projects department; Drawings by Anoudy Alba's mentoring group at New Urban Arts; An arrangement from Flowers by Semia, a business next to the Steel Yard that often partners with them on events.



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Like most nonprofits, the Steel Yard depends on public grants and private donations for projects like Weld to Work, a paid workforce training program that pairs underemployed 18- to 24-year-olds with seasoned metalworkers, and Camp Metalhead, a series of summer youth workshops. But the Steel Yard also generates a smart stream of earned income—last year, nearly \$200,000—with its Public Projects operation, in which artists and fabricators collaborate to design and produce urban street fixtures like bike racks, trash cans and benches. Earlier this year, for instance, five Steel Yard artists and a 10-member fabrication crew worked in conjunction with the city and the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority to produce a fleet of brightly colored bus shelters.

"We create frameworks for artists to gain professional experience," says Sneider. "It's a healthier way for members of the creative class to support themselves."



Top: Children at play on the Steel Yard.

Bottom: Spoken word poet Naomy Gutierrez and mentor/DJ Chris Hampson at New Urban Arts.

It's also a terrific way to support each other. In modeling this sort of professional approach to creative opportunity—or creative approach to professional opportunity, maybe—the Steel Yard helps artists recognize the social capital they already possess.

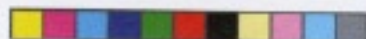
A similar ethos exists at New Urban Arts. Founded in 1997 as a free arts program for public high school students, New Urban Arts stresses youth empowerment. Its core project is the Youth Mentorship in the Arts program, in which students work with trained artist mentors twice a week throughout the school year—more so as collaborators than protégés. The sustained practice helps them acquire skills and knowledge in the arts, at the same time developing positive relationships with peers and non-parental adults.

A more structured approach to guidance, it still bears the stamp of consensus: after potential mentors apply through a rigorous process for a predetermined number of annual positions, the students together help choose the year's final selections. And—as one teenager pointed out on a recent Friday afternoon—it's not like there are offices. Desks, sure, but everyone works in the same room.

This may be what New Urban Arts, AS220 and the Steel Yard share most centrally: the organizations cultivate individual agency through collaborative community. It takes a bottom-up approach to resource development, one in which mentorship is not a conditional property but an emergent one, and the voice of experience ever-shifts in context.

Earlier this year, when New Urban Arts' no-clock policy posed a problem—students kept missing bus rides home—it was agreed a timepiece should be hung. The younger artists took design control, fixing fake dynamite to a typical schoolroom clock: a ticking time bomb. The object hangs just inside the studio's front door—a playful reminder for heroes in the vicinity that there's important action to be taken, vital work to be done. One suspects Athena would like it very much.





Clockwise from upper left: Embroidery by Lolade Ashamu at New Urban Arts; Umberto Crenca, Artistic Director and Founder of AS220; Portraits of AS220 youth and instructors; A ceramics class in process at the Steel Yard; John Bhogal, mural instructor and former member of AS220 Youth; A much-beloved pagoda marks one of the entrances to the Steel Yard.