

THE STEEL YARD PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND



PROPERTY DETAILS	Address:	27 Sims Avenue, Providence, RI
	Size:	3.5 acres
	Former Use:	Steel fabrication facility
	Contaminants:	Lead
	Current Use:	Artist studios, education and job-training facilities focused on industrial arts
Owner:	Woonasquatucket Valley Community Build	
PARTNERS	Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (RIDEM), Rhode Island Economic Development Corporation (RIEDC), Rhode Island Council on the Arts, Coastal Resources Management Council, Woonasquatucket River Watershed Council, Narragansett Bay Commission, City of Providence, Olneyville Collaborative	

FUNDING DETAILS	EPA Brownfields Cleanup Grant:	\$400,000
	EPA Section 128(a) funding (from RIDEM):	\$199,000
	Urban Revitalization Fund of Rhode Island loan (from RIEDC):	\$100,000
	Fundraising:	\$137,000
	Donated materials and labor:	\$118,000
HIGHLIGHTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Converted steel factory into artist workspaces and educational facilities that help catalyze community and economic development in distressed neighborhood. • Innovative site design embraces urban industrial character while providing flexible open spaces and onsite storm water management. 	

Motivation for Redevelopment: The Steel Yard is located in the Olneyville neighborhood of Providence, Rhode Island. Olneyville borders the Woonasquatucket River and is part of Providence’s Industrial Valley district, once a flourishing industrial center home to textile, jewelry, and metal manufacturers. For the past 20 years, however, the area has been in economic and physical decline as factories have closed or moved away, taking jobs with them. Olneyville is now one of the most distressed areas of Providence with extremely high rates of poverty and unemployment. Physically, the neighborhood is characterized by abandoned and contaminated industrial lots, lack of green space, and dilapidated housing stock.

Remediating and redeveloping brownfields in Providence’s Industrial Valley is an essential strategy outlined in the City’s Master Plan to revitalize these depressed communities. Projects such as the Steel Yard redevelopment are rebuilding community pride, enhancing access to open space and the river, and providing economic and educational opportunities.

Property History: In 1902 the Providence Steel and Iron Company built a structural steel shop on the 27 Sims Avenue site. The complex expanded over the next 40 years, eventually featuring two brick buildings and a network of overhead gantry cranes. Providence Steel applied lead-based paint to steel beams as part of their operations. Overspray from this activity resulted in elevated levels of lead in the property’s soils.

After being in business for over 100 years, the steel fabrication facility closed in the early 21st century. The complex was purchased by a developer who conducted environmental site assessments. In 2002, two local artists and entrepreneurs purchased the property. The owners formed the nonprofit Woonasquatucket Valley Community Build (WVCB, which operates as the Steel Yard) and began to actively rehabilitate the facility. From the beginning, the owners’ vision was for the complex to remain a working industrial site, offering space for and education in industrial arts. While the Steel Yard was able to quickly develop and expand its programming to feature youth programs and classes in ceramics, glass, jewelry, blacksmithing, and welding, its progress was hindered by the environmental contamination that remained on the property and would be costly to clean up.

Project Results: Initial site cleanup efforts conducted by the Steel Yard involved removing soils with the highest concentrations of lead while excavating and stabilizing soils with lower levels of contamination. In 2007, WVCB received a \$400,000 EPA Brownfields Cleanup Grant to finish cleanup work at the two parcels that comprise the Steel Yard complex. The grant was used to cap the onsite contaminated soils with a combination of clean soil and permeable pavement, initiating the site’s physical rehabilitation.

The old Providence Steel buildings have been converted into over 9,000 square feet of workspaces for artists, classrooms for education and job training in the industrial arts, and office space. The site design embraces the property’s urban industrial history while incorporating innovative approaches to sustainability such as the use of uncommon recycled materials and an onsite storm water management system that features permeable pavement and bioswales. The property also includes nearly 12,000 square feet of flexible open space used for events, classes, and artist workspace.

The Steel Yard redevelopment project has had rich rewards for the local community and the city as a whole. The redevelopment has eliminated blight, reduced an immediate health threat, and helped to establish a sense of place in the community. Through its training programs, career development opportunities, small business incubation, and frequent public events, the complex, which employs over 170 people, serves as a catalyst for community and economic development. The Steel Yard’s success has reinforced Providence’s commitment to the creative arts as economic drivers while paving the way for nonconventional, noncommercial reuse of industrial properties.

TIMELINE	
1902	Steel fabrication facility built
Early 2000s	Facility closes
Early 2001	Phase I Assessment
Nov. 2001	Phase II Assessment
2002	Site purchased by founders of WVCB
2003 - 2010	Design, cleanup, and construction
Sept. 2010	Ribbon cutting