

# Providence Journal

## Historic success stories saluted

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Housing originally built for mill workers in the Lonsdale section of Lincoln has been revived for a new generation.

PAWTUCKET — The Masonic Temple in Providence, the municipal halls in Barrington and Pawtucket, old houses for mill workers in Lincoln, and the Touro Synagogue in Newport were all honored yesterday by more than 500 architects, artists and historians as successful historic preservation projects.

The large crowd attending the 2007 Statewide Historic Preservation Conference also talked at length about incorporating “green” building techniques into restoring historic buildings, and honored several leaders in Rhode Island’s historic preservation efforts:

- Karen L. Jessup, who began as a volunteer at the Providence Preservation Society and later became its chairwoman. She is a local preservation educator and consultant, and she also serves on the board of trustees of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.
- Charlotte Eschenheimer Johnson, who for more than 20 years has led the effort to save Newport Harbor’s Rose Island and its familiar lighthouse from development plans and disrepair, and to restore the island’s buildings. She was credited with transforming “an isolated and abandoned historic property into a well-interpreted and environmentally sustainable landmark.”
- Bob Mende, a master carpenter, cabinetmaker and general contractor, who for more than 50 years worked on some of the state’s most prized preservation projects, including the John Brown, Stephen Hopkins and Truman Beckwith houses. The group said that Mende’s “craftsmanship was critical in making historic preservation a successful alternative to demolition, and his commitment to professional practice serves as a model to preservation craftsmen and women who follow.”

The conference, organized by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, began in historic Tolman High School, and provided tours of historic buildings nearby as well as of Central Falls, hydropower facilities on the Blackstone River and industrial sites in East Providence and Pawtucket.

The group also honored SWAP, for Stop Wasting Abandoned Property, a group credited with developing more than 1,400 units of affordable housing by renovating old houses and building new ones on empty lots in Providence.

And it honored two other preservation projects — the Gordon Avenue Business Incubator in Providence, and the John Waterman Arnold House in Warwick, which was built during the American Revolution and was recently restored by the Warwick Historical Society.

Jean Carroon, a Boston architect leading restoration of Boston's historic Trinity Church and the conference's keynote speaker, said that incorporating energy savings and other "green" features into historic buildings is long overdue, probably delayed in part by intense campaigning by oil companies that tried for years to discredit the reality of climate change.

She encouraged fellow architects and designers to think holistically. Building a low-energy building in the suburbs doesn't accomplish much, she said, if visitors have to drive to it.

"Focus on transit, smart growth and keeping people in the cities," Carroon said.

When it came to Trinity Church, she said the restoration team never used the word "green." But she said she believes it's one of the most "sustainable" buildings in the country.

Completed in 1877, the church put its architect, H.H. Richardson, and American architecture, on the map, Carroon said. It holds 1,000 people, and it serves one of the largest Episcopal parishes in the country, she said.

To create more space, contractors went underneath the church and dug out room for 15,000 square feet of additional meeting rooms.

No one wanted to add air conditioning to the church, because that might harm the historic John LaFarge murals, Carroon said. But it was necessary to cool the new meeting rooms. That was done by sinking six, 1,500-foot wells into the ground and installing piping so water could be chilled deep underground and then circulated through a closed-loop system into the rooms on warm days.

The church is sustainable, Carroon said, because it is already more than 125 years old and it will continue serving many future generations.

She said architects should be skeptical of miracle products, such as PCBs, which were used to insulate electrical equipment but are highly toxic and persistent. The country is still trying to clean them up.

In a panel discussion on the “Greenness of Historic Preservation,” Martha L. Werenfels, a Providence architect, talked about how her firm created an atrium in the middle of the block-sized Peerless building in downtown Providence to allow daylight to reach rooms.

The renovated building doesn’t meet the so-called LEED green building standards, she said. “But it’s a place where people can live, work and dine without a car. It’s smart and sustainable.”

Julia Craighill, director of green building for Struever Bros. Eccles & Rouse Inc., described some early thinking for converting the old Narragansett Electric plant in the Jewelry District into Dynamo House, a home for the Heritage Harbor Museum, a hotel and office space.

The company plans to put photovoltaic cells on part of the roof, and plantings on another part.

One surprise at the conference was news that Edward F. “Ted” Sanderson, executive director of the state historic commission, will be made an honorary member of the American Institute of Architects at its annual convention next month in Texas. Only a handful of people get such awards. This year Sanderson joins six other honorees, including Steve Winn, the Las Vegas casino mogul, and Amory Lovins, the internationally recognized energy expert.

Sanderson’s nomination, by local architects, credits him with transforming thousands of derelict properties, making Rhode Island a place that people look to for rehabilitation of historic architecture, and “profoundly changing the perception of historic preservation projects.”