

## What's the future of history?

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Once a ruin, the Masonic Temple in Providence is now a luxury hotel; state tax credits that have made such transformations possible are now on hold. The Providence Journal / Steve Szydowski

PROVIDENCE A preservationist's work is never done.

That, more or less, is the theme of this year's Historic Preservation Conference, which takes place Saturday at sites around the Rhode Island capital. Highlights include a panel discussion on the impact of "green" technologies on historic preservation, bus tours of Providence's mill buildings, and walking tours of historic neighborhoods in the West End, South Providence and Elmhurst-Mt. Pleasant.

The state agency that sponsors the annual conference, the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, is also taking a bow this year. The reason: the 40th anniversary of the Rhode Island Historic Preservation Act, the landmark legislation that established the commission and which has guided Rhode Island's nationally recognized preservation efforts since 1968.

(The commission, meanwhile, is the state's ultimate authority on matters of historic preservation. In addition to the annual preservation conference, the commission identifies historic sites and properties, awards state and federal preservation grants and coordinates bond issues relating to historic preservation. It also handles applications for the National Register of Historic Places.)

At the same time, the conference's line-up of tours, talks and panel discussions reflects some of the tensions and challenges facing the preservation movement these days.

One area of immediate concern: the fate of the state's historic tax-credit program, which grants tax breaks to developers who renovate historic properties. The program is widely credited with rescuing buildings such as Providence's long-decrepit Masonic Temple (now a boutique luxury hotel), but it has come under fire recently as the state tries to close a \$150-million budget shortfall.

Rhode Island and other states are also grappling with a longer-term problem: what to do with buildings constructed in the 1950s, '60s and '70s. Though not "historic" in the Washington-slept-here sense of the word, such buildings are legally eligible for historic status after 50 years.

But are Rhode Islanders, many of whom have actively supported preservation efforts in the past, ready for a wave of "historic" ranch houses and "landmark" office towers? Sally Zimmerman, a preservation specialist with Historic New England, thinks the answer is a qualified "yes."

"Are ranch houses suddenly going to start popping up on the National Register of Historic Places? Probably not," says Zimmerman, who will be part of a panel discussion titled "Preservation Modern: Our More Recent Past." "But on the larger question of whether buildings from the 1950s and '60s should be considered part of America's architectural heritage, of course. And people understand that."

In fact, Historic New England (formerly the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities) already owns one such property: the Gropius House in Lincoln, Mass. Built in 1937 by Bauhaus-founder Walter Gropius, the house boasts a long list of modern amenities, including cork floors, plate-glass windows and recessed lighting. Much of the furniture, meanwhile, was designed by Gropius's Bauhaus colleague and fellow architect, Marcel Breuer.

Yet while it has plenty of competition from older buildings — Historic New England owns more than 40 properties, including the Casey Farm in Narragansett and the Clemence-Irons House in Johnston — the Gropius House consistently ranks as one of the group's most visited sites.

"Every year, it's near the top in terms of visits," Zimmerman says. "Granted, it's a lot younger than some of the other properties we have. But it's just as historic."

Nor is the Gropius House an isolated case..

"Actually, New England was one of the first beachheads for modern architecture in America," Zimmerman says. "You had Gropius and Breuer at Harvard. You had (Finish architect Eero) Saarinen working at MIT. And you had a lot of their students settling in the New England area."

While Zimmerman's panel looks ahead to the preservation of 20th-century (and eventually 21st-century) buildings, other events will highlight preservation's past and present.

The conference's keynote speaker, Richard Longstreth, for example, will look back at some of the preservation movement's successes over the past 40 years. Among them: making Americans more aware of their architectural heritage and fostering preservation programs and initiatives.

Longstreth, who directs the Graduate Program in Historic Preservation at George Washington University and is well known in local preservation circles (he worked at the preservation commission in the mid-1970s), will also address some of the movement's current concerns. One likely topic: preserving "cultural landscapes" — parks, public gardens and open spaces that may have no buildings on them at all.

Other events will explore the impact of preservation efforts in Rhode Island.

In fact, organizers say that the idea for this year's conference (the official theme is "Preservation Past, Present and Future") reflects both the 40th anniversary of the state's preservation legislation and the key role the state has played in shaping and influencing the national preservation movement.

"When it comes to historic preservation, Rhode Islanders have a lot to be proud of," says preservation commission executive director Edward Sanderson. "After the federal government passed preservation legislation in 1966, we were one of the first states to enact our own version two years later."

In particular, Sanderson cites the role played by Antoinette Downing, the charismatic co-founder of the Providence Preservation Society who left the organization to become the preservation commission's first director. In the mid-1950s, Downing was the dominant force behind the so-called "College Hill Study" — the landmark preservation study that helped save College Hill and that introduced the then-radical notion that preservationists should try to protect historic districts and neighborhoods rather than just single buildings.

"Antoinette had such a huge influence," Sanderson says. "The idea that historic preservation isn't just about saving a few iconic buildings — that it was about preserving historic neighborhoods and communities as well as individual historic sites — was largely an outgrowth of the College Hill Study and the other studies she did at PPS and the commission.. Now, of course, it's a commonplace."

Downing's legacy is commemorated in the Antoinette F. Downing Volunteer Service Award, which is given out each year for longtime service to the preservation cause. This year's honoree is Deming Sherman, a Providence lawyer who has been active in the local preservation community.

Other award-winners being honored at the conference include architect Cornelis de Boer, Grow Smart Rhode Island and the West Broadway Neighborhood Association.

As for the economic impact of historic preservation, Sanderson says there's really no argument: preservation has been an economic bonanza, especially for Rhode Island.

"Over the years, the commission has given about \$2.5 billion in historic preservation grants," Sanderson says. "That much we can document. But the economic impact of historic preservation is really much bigger. Tourism, for example, is one of the state's biggest industries, and historic sites are the state's number one tourist attraction. Just think where we'd be without Benefit Street

and the Newport mansions.

Rhode Island's annual Historic Preservation Conference takes place Saturday from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Registration begins at 8:15 p.m. at Trinity United Methodist Church, 375 Broad St. in Providence. The keynote address and the 2008 State Historic Preservation Awards ceremony will follow at 9 a.m. For more information on walking tours and the various sessions, call (401) 732-1009 or visit [www.rihphc.state.ri.us](http://www.rihphc.state.ri.us) (click on Sessions & Tours). On Thursday, The Journal's Weekend section will preview the tours.

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With its daylong program of talks, tours and panel discussions, the Historic Preservation Conference is the closest thing the state's preservation community has to an annual family reunion.

This year's conference, however, may feel more like a wake.

On Thursday, the House Finance Committee recommended ending the state's historic tax-credit program, which grants tax breaks to developers who renovate historic properties.

Advocates say the program, which was enacted in 2001, has spurred more than \$1.5 billion in new investment — all of it aimed at renovating historically significant, yet often derelict buildings that would not have been saved without the program's incentives. Critics answer that the state, which is facing a \$150-million budget deficit in the current fiscal year and a projected \$384 million next, can no longer afford to hand out tax breaks to developers.

One fan of the historic tax-credit program is Scott Wolf, executive director of the anti-sprawl group Grow Smart Rhode Island. In an interview Friday, Wolf called the program "a runaway success" and "one of the most effective economic development tools of the past decade." Wolf, who will participate in a panel discussion on the tax-credit issue at Saturday's preservation conference, also said that efforts to end the program, even in the face of record budget deficits, were shortsighted.

"Quite simply, the historic tax-credit program has been a huge success," Wolf said. "Economically, it's brought in tens of millions of dollars in new investment. It's created new housing, including affordable housing, in a state that desperately needs it. It's improved communities and created new sources of revenue for state and local governments. It even has environmental advantages, since many of these buildings are on former industrial sites that are cleaned up as part of the renovation process. It's a win-win-win program."

At the same time, Wolf said he understood the pressure lawmakers were under. He also praised Finance Committee members for allowing projects already approved for the tax-credit program to proceed, though subject to higher fees and reduced tax benefits for developers.

"This is obviously a very difficult time," he said. "I just hope we don't abandon the tax-credit concept entirely. In my view, that would be tossing the baby out with the bathwater."