

Saving grace of Rhode Island

By Bryan Rourke

Journal Staff Writer



*Firehouse 13, a new alternative-arts center opening near the Cranston Street Armory, will have living and working space for artists and a performance stage. Anna Shapiro, right, is the director.
The Providence Journal / Sandor Bodo*

PROVIDENCE Let the talking and touring begin.

Saturday's the 23rd annual Rhode Island Statewide Historic Preservation Conference. It's in Trinity Church.

Joseph Newsome is there now, in a big red brick building at the intersection of three city neighborhoods: Elmwood, South Providence and West End. He wants to show you something, sort of like Marley in A Christmas Carol. Newsome is the lead community development consultant in Trinity Restoration. He wants to introduce you to preservation — past, present and, he hopes, future.

“There is a faith dimension to this.”

Hence the church; enter now. Stand on the rich red rug between the wooden pews. Look up. Follow Newsome's finger through the stained glass light and exposed rafters to the vaulted ceiling. There, he says, is preservation past. No, it doesn't look like much, but that's the point. A fire destroyed the roof and three windows in 1983. Now you wouldn't know.

Step into the adjoining building. Descend to the basement. See offices and meeting rooms in the last stage of construction. This is preservation present. In 2003 a frozen pipe burst and destroyed everything down here.

The church catastrophes seem so biblical — first fire, then flood — that when Newsome pauses at a doorway, you expect the worst, maybe a stairwell filled with locusts.

But no, it's just mildew, "moisture coming through the exterior of the building."

This is preservation future: Re-pointing, re-plastering and re-everything is in order. And when it's done, the 1914 building, the annex to the 1864 church, will again be a theater, the one that gave birth and name to the Trinity Repertory Company.

History is where we live and work

More than 500 people are expected to attend this weekend's conference. That, according to Edward Sanderson, executive director of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, makes it one of the top 10 preservation conferences in the country. When attendance is considered on a per capita basis, he says, Rhode Island is number one.

"Some states have some wonderful historic buildings that they figuratively put a velvet rope around and people go look at them once in a while. In Rhode Island, historic buildings are where we live and where we work."

See for yourself. The conference involves all kinds of tours: by foot, bus and bike. The explorations are mostly on Providence's West Side. (See sidebar for conference details.)

One tour of note is the "Three Cheers for Trinity Square" walking tour. It, of course, involves three components.

First, around the corner from Trinity Church is Firehouse 13, the former Goodwill Engine Company No.13 headquarters. About two years ago the 1865 building was converted into lodging for artists in residence, and for an art gallery.

"We've had such an incredible response to what we do. Clearly there is a need," says gallery director Anna Shapiro. More restoration and preservation in the neighborhood, she says, would bring more people and vitality to the community. "Creative development goes hand in hand with gentrification."

Second, across the street from the church, is the Grace Church Cemetery. Anne Tait is its artist in residence, using its caretaker's cottage for her studio. The Gothic revival cottage was created in 1860, and the cemetery in 1834. Its nine acres, with 9,000 graves, is an open space in a dense urban area, a place to appreciate nature and the art on the gravestones. "The 19th century looked at a cemetery as a retreat from the urban center," Tait says. "This was a pretty remote spot. You took yourself out of the city and went out into nature."

Third, of course, is Trinity Church, whose staircase leads to the past and future. At the top, you find a cozy theater with a balcony. From 1964 to 1973, this was the home of Trinity Rep. Now it's used as a temporary place of worship for a small congregation whose own church is under construction.

Renovating the space is only half the issue; maintaining it is the other.

“A good deal of the project is the challenge of energy today,” Newsome says. “Just keeping the building heated is critical.”

The 2003 flood was caused when the church tried to save money by setting the temperature precariously low, according to Newsome. A pipe froze and burst. Now, he notes, the price of oil has doubled.

The only way to preserve the cavernous building, he says, is to conserve energy. And he says the best way to do that is to build another building.

Trinity Church’s most vital self-preservation asset, according to Newsome, is its land: 1.75 acres, most of which is a parking lot. On it, he proposes that a children’s arts academy be built. Below ground, Newsome proposes geothermal pipes. Above ground, he proposes a field of solar panels (cars would park beneath them). These, he says, would provide more than enough energy to sustain the entire site.

But the proposal poses a question.

“Will historic tax credits be able to be used on energy generation that is used to save a historic building? It’s a substantial issue. If we can figure it out here, some of the lessons can be applied to other churches.”

Looking to the future

“There is a tendency to just look back at what has been accomplished,” says Sarah Zurier, special projects coordinator for the RIHPHC, the conference sponsor. “But this year, we’re looking forward to what we might accomplish in the next 10 years.”

Trinity Church is one consideration. Much of Providence’s West Side is another.

Every year the site of this conference is conducted in different parts of the state. Last year it was in Pawtucket. The last time it was in Providence was in 2001, when the focus was on the downtown and the East Side, which have received lots of preservation consideration.

“We think in 2008 that one of the most exciting preservation stories in the state is going on in the West Side of Providence,” Sanderson says.

Factory buildings in Olneyville and the West End have been converted to apartments and condos. Multifamilies in the Armory District have been restored, as have nearly all the grand houses on Parkis Avenue in Elmwood.

While there may be many factors contributing to this, Sanderson says there’s one major reason: the state’s historic preservation tax credit. Since 2001, it has spawned \$2 billion in private investment, he says. But with the state budget terribly imbalanced and all state programs under

scrutiny, Sanderson worries.

“Preservationists always look for the dark lining in the silver cloud. The state tax credit for historic preservation is under attack.”

Still, he says, “This is a program that has no difficulty showing the results of the work. You can walk in and use the results. . . .”

The 23rd annual Rhode Island Statewide Historic Preservation Conference is Saturday, all day, at Trinity United Methodist Church, 375 Broad St., at the intersection of Elmwood Avenue, Broad and Bridgham streets, in Providence. While the advance registration deadline was last week, some seats are still available and registration resumes at the conference, 8 to 9 a.m.

The conference involves nearly three dozen talks and tours in three sessions: late morning, early afternoon and late afternoon. There will be an exploration of success stories in preservation and of future topics of concern. There will be attention given to preservation of residential, commercial and industrial buildings. If it pertains to preservation, from the mechanics of tax credits to finding new uses for old places, it's part of this conference.

The tours, which are all conducted on Providence's West Side — Trinity Square, Elmwood, Armory district, Broadway, Elmhurst and Mount Pleasant — are by three modes: foot, bus and bike. Take your pick.

However, if you're registering Saturday morning, your choices of talks and tours will be limited to what's still available.

The conference begins with opening remarks at 9 a.m. The first session is at 11:15 a.m.; the second at 2 p.m.; and the third at 3:45 p.m. Lunch is at 12:30 p.m. in the Cranston Street Armory, which includes a tour of the building. The conference closes with a 5 p.m. reception at the Pearl Street Lofts, a renovated industrial building around the corner from the church.

Admission is \$40, and includes the entire conference, plus lunch and snack. For a complete conference schedule, visit www.preservation.ri.gov/conference. For questions, call (401) 732-1009.