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# Preservation Society is a national leader

In the summer of 1977, I was impressed to hear of the good works performed by the Providence Preservation Society at a meeting of the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, which preserves and restores historic buildings and sites of that world city.

Back then, I was doing a faculty seminar at Columbia University, and we were asked to attend and participate in one of the Commission meetings as part of our architectural history study of the city. When the Commission chairperson stopped the meeting to ask if we had any questions regarding their work, I identified myself as coming from Providence, and raised a question.

The chairperson's response was, "You come from Providence? Then we should be asking you the question because we look to the leadership and work being done there by the Preservation Society as examples of what can be done to save our historic buildings." It was with a good deal of pride that I left the meeting, after speaking privately with the chairperson, and after having been recognized as coming from the city that was setting an example for New York.

Here in Providence, it is through the annual meeting of the society that we have the opportunity to catch up on some of its activities and, most important, to be reminded, again, how valuable this organization is to the past and future of the city, much like the Landmarks Preservation Commission chairperson reminded me in New York.

This time the words of recognition and praise came from no less an authority than Richard Moe, President of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. To sit in the opulent setting of the Garden Room of the historic Omni Biltmore Hotel — and to be told that the Providence Preservation Society is one of the organizations that can be counted on the fingers of one hand as the best in the country at what they do — again raised that measure of pride for the work of the society. One of the oldest such organizations in the country, this national leader, with its large professional staff and a host of volunteers who contribute immeasurable amounts of time and expertise, gives Providence a reputation in historic preservation that few other cities can match.

Moe's message to the audience of 300 was that the society should consider expanding its efforts into a statewide effort and, further, to inculcate a preservationist ethic among the populace. As with environmentalists, preservationists should encourage the type of thinking that makes the public aware of the valuable resources that must be saved for future generations. And to make this population consider themselves preservationists.

Perhaps the most important point made by Moe is that preservation is a tool that must be used in city revitalization. Since our historic buildings and resources are normally found in our old cities, and since old cities are the ones that are experiencing so many of our urban problems, bringing these old structures back to life provides needed housing, including that for low-income families, restores civic pride; puts

valuable property back on the tax rolls, helps reduce vandalism and fires which abandoned buildings attract, gives us a sense of identity with our past, and provides a major attraction for the tourist trade.

In addition to the inspiring message given by the speaker, one of the other major highlights of the meeting was the report of the Revolving Fund, the development arm of the Society. Buying up old buildings to restore, helping prospective buyers with financing, and providing expertise regarding construction, painting and a host of other restoration services, the Fund operates throughout the city, including South Providence, Elmwood, the West End, and other neighborhoods that hold some of the city treasures.

The Fund's report always draws exclamations of surprise and wonderment when houses are shown, before and after restoration. A house that is derelict, abandoned, boarded-up, covered with graffiti and that, most would say,

should be torn down, is next shown as a remarkably transformed period-piece, a beautifully adorned and painted reconstruction that captures some of the essence of Providence's era of greatness. Even after several examples of before-and-after rehabilitation, one is still amazed at the remarkable change that has taken place in these buildings.

Arnold Robinson, newly selected Executive Director, helped set the tone for work ahead with his presentation of the 10 "most endangered" structures that could fall to the wrecker's ball. A mighty challenge, but based on the experience of the past, the Providence Preservation Society has demonstrated that it can rise to the task and continue to keep Providence in the forefront of historic preservation among the cities of this country.

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