

Prov. Evening Bulletin
9 March 1977

Saving valuable resources

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At last, its time has arrived! After years of talking, viewing, writing, and field tripping, someone is finally listening to those select few who saw the architectural, historical, and, today, economic value of saving and restoring our old buildings.

Most recently it was a city councilman in Providence who suggested that the old Rhode Island School for the Deaf complex on Hope Street be renovated into housing for the elderly: a new use for buildings which were originally built for a different purpose and which have not outlived their usefulness.

Call it what you will, renovation, recycling, rehabilitation, adaptive use, or adaptive re-use, the purpose of this process is to save a valuable resource ("... they just don't build them like they used to.") that cannot be duplicated at today's prices. These buildings include old schools, mills, houses, and many other structures that still have value, but not in their present state.

The economics of construction today negate the ability of the builder to construct buildings that have the style, grace, and beauty of many of these old buildings. But even though some of these buildings do not have these qualities, they are still too valuable to destroy. They can be put to other uses.

In Providence the school department owned 42 buildings in 1975. The Leggett Report of that same year projected that, based on then current enrollment trends, Providence could close 18 schools over the

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next ten years. Whether this actual number will be closed is debatable but to-date, four schools have been closed. What to do with these old schools?

In Gloucester, Massachusetts, they had the same problem with the Central Grammar School. After talk of razing it and putting the land into — what else? — another parking lot, a young architect convinced the local authorities that it would be far better to recycle the building into units for the elderly. Today, one of the finest examples of elderly housing in the Northeast is the Central Grammar Apartments.

Built in one-half the time required for new construction, at two-thirds the cost of new construction, with units averaging 700 square feet rather than the 400-500 square feet common in such new construction, and with ceilings in many cases reaching 14 feet, this solid granite and brick structure stands today, as it has for the past 88 years, as a familiar and-accepted part of the neighborhood. Neighbors actually petitioned to save the building and provide elderly housing; so different from neighborhood reaction to new construction for the elderly in many communities. Of interest, 40 percent of the elderly residents of Central Grammar had attended that school when it served that function.

Yet another type of building which is to be found in most of our Rhode Island villages and cities is the ubiquitous vacant and abandoned mill. Can nothing be done with these substantial structures except to wait for the inevitable torch?

The tannery in Peabody, Massachusetts, is a good example of how an old leather tannery and major eyesore in the community could be recycled into apartments that today are a source of local pride. This complex of 284 mixed-income apartments has maintained the flavor of its previous use by retaining the old wood vats and tanning wheels as part of the imaginative landscaping, and by moving the old steam operated pumps outside to be transformed into sculptures that enhance the plaza areas.

This recycling development has now reached to Rhode Island, with the enterprising architectural firm of Gelardin/Bruner/Cott, Inc. turning its talents to the Valley Falls Mill in Central Falls. Recognized for its work on the Chickering Piano Factory in Boston, this firm hopes to make use of existing water power for the heating and hot water for what will be a 100-unit mill complex for the elderly.

Old buildings are a valuable resource in our old cities. Before a vacant Manton Avenue School or 16 structures in the Chad Brown complex are destroyed, it is necessary to determine what other uses are possible for these substantial buildings. Perhaps a board of review needs to be established to pass judgment before anyone is allowed to destroy these reminders of our past.

What should we do with outdated and abandoned schools, mills, and other such buildings? It is time we looked to and utilized the past in order to have a better future.

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