

Welcome center at Breakers is appropriate

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By Nicholas Brown

Opponents of the planned welcome center on the grounds of the Preservation Society of Newport County's The Breakers mansion appear to believe that a historic property must be frozen in time. That view flies in the face of a fundamental principle of historic preservation: adaptive reuse.

True, Newport is blessed with several examples of Colonial structures still being used for their original purpose: Trinity Church, Redwood Library, Touro Synagogue, etc. But it has many more where historic buildings that have been re-purposed: the Brick Market (which my father helped save), all the mansions under the care of the Preservation Society of Newport County, Lime Rock Lighthouse, and on and on.

Changing to meet the exigencies of the times is indeed adaptive reuse,

the heart of modern historic preservation. It is that principle which doubtless persuaded the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission, the highest authority on historic preservation in the state, to give its approval to the society's proposal.

The Breakers is no longer a single-family dwelling. It exists and can continue to exist only as a visited historic property. Its vocation now is to inform and to inspire its visitors about decorative arts, the skilled craftsmen who built it and the people who lived there.

As a former professional in the museum field, I can affirm that visitor services are fundamental in doing this. Ticketing is but the tip of the iceberg. Just as vital is orientation — showing visitors what they will see and why it is important. Visitors both expect and deserve a whole

range of other services, not least adequate toilet facilities and the ability to purchase a cold drink and a snack. The Preservation Society's temporary welcome center, housed in a tent, has benefited all the society's properties by describing tour options, selling multiple-visit tickets, providing directions (and also offering extremely rudimentary port-a-potties). But the proposed center will also orient visitors to all Newport.

The welcome center will be sited where initially there was elaborate landscaping, but the Vanderbilts themselves found maintaining this scheme impractical soon after World War I. The restoration of the serpentine paths must be considered against the background of the present use and value of the entire property. This updating is similar to the spotlighting of pictures, addition of air-conditioning for climate control,

rolling back of rugs — all necessary alterations from The Breakers' original historic state (including the lack of uniformed footmen, I might add).

In this discussion, it is imperative to consider the alternatives. Some have suggested that the center be constructed in the society's parking lot across the street. But that would gravely impinge on Salve Regina University and the Ochre Point Association by displacing many, many cars and buses that would have to seek parking on adjacent streets. And any other, more remote location would dilute effective orientation of visitors to the society's premier attraction.

It has been alleged that erecting a permanent welcome center on The Breakers grounds would set a dangerous precedent for other historic properties. Such future proposals must be reviewed with the same

adaptive reuse criteria: Is the departure from the *status quo ante* justified to accommodate the new use of the structure/estate?

To me as a retired museum and historic preservation professional, the functions performed by the proposed welcome center are absolutely non-negotiable. You must ticket, you must provide toilets and refreshment, and you fail in your mission if you do not provide orientation. Further, when dealing with a Gilded Age experience, what you provide must have class. So my question to those who are queasy about the proposed center on the Breakers grounds is, if not there, where better?

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