

1608D Beekman Place, NW
Washington, DC 20009-4021
June 26, 2013

Mr. Edward F. Sanderson, Executive Director
State Historic Preservation Officer
RI Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission
The Old State House
150 Benefit Street
Providence, RI 02903

Dear Mr. Sanderson,

Recently a professional colleague made me aware of the Preservation Society of Newport County's intent to build a Visitor Welcome Center project within the fenced historic landscape area of The Breakers to replace their sales tent.

Thus I am writing to you to ask that the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission, as the approval body holding an easement on the site, require the removal of this proposed project from within the historic landscape of The Breakers and recommend that a smaller facility be built on adjacent property outside the historic grounds.

The Breakers is a National Historic Landmark (NHL) symbolizing the Gilded Age in America that is probably the most famous historic property in Newport. Commissioned by the Vanderbilt family in the 1890's, it consisted of both the mansion and its landscaping designed by Ernest and James Bowditch. Preservation of this landscape, which was specifically cited as being significant in the National Historic Landmark nomination, is integral to maintaining the integrity of this site. Construction of the proposed Welcome Center would not only adversely impact this historic landscape, but also prevent its restoration to its NHL 1896 – 99 Vanderbilt period of significance.

Thus I fully endorse the following summary recommendations of the Historic Designed Landscape Assessment for the proposed Visitor Center Project prepared by Heritage Landscapes LLC:

- Deny approval of the proposed project as presented.
- Incorporate best practices into The Breakers landscape stewardship. Begin with full recognition of the importance of an authentic landscape.
- Prepare a thorough Cultural Landscape Report Parts 1 and 2 for The Breakers landscape.
- Site contemporary visitor facilities outside of the fenced and gated historic property.
- Based on thorough planning, restore The Breakers historic designed landscape to the character and features of the Period of Significance, 1893 to 1899.

Considering that Newport is interested in being designated as a World Heritage Site and may try to be added to the US Tentative List when it reopens, projected for 2014, damage to the historic landscape of the Breakers will be an integrity issue for World Heritage Site consideration. Also, if Newport cannot preserve the integrity of a site that is as well-known as the Breakers, the preservation of other lesser sites could be considered to be endangered, since the ensured protection of its historic components is a major consideration for evaluation for World Heritage Site designation.

Sincerely yours,

Darwina L. Neal, FASLA, US/ICOMOS Fellow
Landscape Architect
Chief, Cultural Resource Preservation Services,
National Capital Region, National Park Service (retired)
Member, ICOMOS/IFLA Cultural Landscape Committee
UNESCO World Heritage Site Nomination Reviewer