

Moving Beyond the Idée Fixe: Needed, a Broader Leadership Vision

By Ronald Lee Fleming, FAICP

The recent letters to this newspaper about the Preservation Society of Newport County (PSNC)'s Welcome Center Proposal at the Breakers bear witness to the polarizing effects of an all or nothing approach. Solving the problem of facilitating tourist visitation and balancing neighborhood integrity usually requires an open discussion and indeed the planning pact that PSNC signed with the neighborhood several years ago should have facilitated the dialogue. The following illustrations prepared by a recently assembled team of architects, planners and an historian demonstrate that taking the time to open up the planning process might produce some results that a broader coalition could support. Of course, this self-selected team acknowledges that they weren't privy to the PSNC planning process because the PSNC leadership apparently wanted to keep their plan private. Groups were briefed after the proposal was completed. This fear of communicating early on may have been a fatal flaw. The team acknowledges the marketing desires of PSNC within a context that recognizes the recent research about the landscape values of the site, recalls other historic elements, (the lost or moved buildings of that context) and seeks to enhance that existing context *while doing no harm, the first rule of preservation planning.*

The goals of this team included:

1. To respect the National Historic Landmark Site and to recognize its potential as the Vanderbilt's meant to present it- carefully landscaping the periphery with handsome gardens and actually moving buildings off the site so that the spectacular limestone façade of the house bounded by its massive gates would elicit the maximum shock and awe effect of a Gilded Age Icon..
2. To interpret the Gilded Age story and the larger narrative of Newport preservation, which is not currently told at existing centers and probably requires more square footage for an effective audio visual presentation than PSNC currently proposes (check out square footage of complex audio visual exhibitions like the sophisticated one at Monticello; this doesn't appear to be addressed at all.)

3. To facilitate the visitor experience in ways that respect neighborhood character. (Those porta potties could probably have been replaced long ago instead of using the discomfort as an argument for this particular idée fixe)

4. To adaptively use existing structures and enhance the Greystone Villa parking lot site across the street from the Breakers.

5. To cooperate with Salve Regina which bounds the Greystone parking lot site on three sides and thus could share the investment in additional parking within the site and could use the “potting shed building” (the Smith property) to the west to support PSNC. PSNC sold this structure to Salve a few years ago after slicing off a bus lane from the site, a more comprehensive planning process would probably have seen this potential for adaptive use).

There are several design solutions, which separately or together might meet these goals:

1. A liner building on the front of the existing Greystone Villa parking lot, which recovers the building form of the Peabody and Stearns barn, moved off the Breakers site by the Vanderbilts. This could house the ticket office and exhibition/ interpretation space.

2. A ghost mansion façade which could mask a multiple level parking lot and exhibition space using elements of the stone façade of Greystone in an abstract form with tiers of landscaping to cover the parking layers which might be partially sunken.

3. Adaptive use of the “potting shed building” west of the parking lot into exhibition/interpretation space and eating facilities around a court yard configuration with a pergola leading back to the Greystone parking lot site. This potting shed was part of the original Greystone estate.

4. An adaptive reuse of the currently unused gatehouse within the Breakers Gate leaving just a ghost framework of the existing large chimney thus freeing up the interior space and retaining the chimney casement on the exterior. (a variation on the space frame of the lost Benjamin Franklin house in Philadelphia) It could also include rehab of the second toilet stall on the ground floor of the Breakers, which has been closed in recent memory

despite the lines waiting to use the toilet during summer concerts.

Some of these proposals might cost more money than the current new design on the grounds, but we have every confidence that the financial minds on the board can find ways of raising the money from existing cash flow on admissions, parking fees, loans or grants. The proposals will encourage the society to work together with its neighborhood and institutional partners to realize the goals of the original planning compact and avoid the silo thinking which afflicts so many institutions. It might require a change in leadership, which can demonstrate more preservation wisdom and some humility that comes out of working successfully with others.

This approach with these and other options then encourages a dialogue with the community and with potential institutional partners. A more expansive leadership style may garner increased wisdom, just as humility and graciousness can reassure potential donors and reveal options that might turn a polarizing challenge into an opportunity.

This could benefit a broader constituency while affirming the pact with the community signed a few years ago. (This writer made the first grant to fund that earlier planning process. It would be a pity not to learn from it.) Let's start talking to one another again and share ideas.