



Historic, But Not Preserved

Finding funding to preserve historic structures is difficult; here are three struggling to survive.

Everyone has seen it from their car window: the **Pirelli Building**, adjacent to the IKEA store at the juncture of I-95 and I-91 in New Haven. Two stories on the ground, five above, and a space in between, more often than not draped in a banner advertising the Pilot Pen Tennis Tournament or low prices on IKEA products. But a momentary glimpse at 65 mph also reveals shattered windows and Venetian blinds askew, prompting the question of why the deserted building stands at all.

Constructed in 1968 and designed by Bauhaus disciple Marcel Breuer, the structure for decades served as the offices and laboratories of the Armstrong Rubber Co. It was built as part of the Great Society's Model Cities Program, a '60s urban initiative on which New Haven spent more money than any other American burg, according to local architect Daniel Pardy. Breuer formed the building's texture using sculpted precast concrete panels and intentionally connected the highway traveler to the New Haven skyline through the building's peekaboo gap. These Modernist features and the threat of development in the area prompted Pardy and the now defunct preservationist group Alliance for Architecture to nominate the building to the State Register of Historic Places in 1997.

Pardy credits the designation for having preserved the Pirelli Building to this day—even though city officials did not favor it because they wanted a clear title to sell to developers. “Very likely IKEA [the property owner] would have taken that building down,” he says. Jeff Zeitlin, sales manager of IKEA New Haven, counters that IKEA “very much recognizes the architectural status of the building,” and is open to reusing it. Both sides agreed to demolish part of the lower plinth, leaving the now empty tower intact. (Instead of looking like a capital “L” as in the photo *above left*, it now looks like an “I.”) Currently IKEA is looking to sell or lease it but has no firm offers.

There are more than 50,000 buildings on the State Register, but the Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism doesn't track how many are derelict. Placement on the Register is “primarily honorific,”

according to David Bahlman, director of the CC&T's Historic Preservation and Museum Division, though it could also be an opening for grant funding for nonprofits and tax credits for private owners and developers. There is one caveat, however: “If there are state or federal monies involved in a project, then there is a regulatory process that would assess plans for demolition or alteration of the property,” says Bahlman.

Even with no federal money involved, Chris Handrinis ran afoul of preservationists in Norwalk. In 2001, Handrinis and a partner purchased a house at 93 East Ave. (known as the **Grumman-St. John House**) adjacent to the Norwalk Inn. Their intent was to knock it down as part of an expansion of the inn. Unbeknownst to them, the house—built circa 1750—was included on the National Register, and thereby automatically listed on the State Register. After the city issued demolition permits, the Norwalk Preservation Trust, Attorney General Richard Blumenthal and other preservationist groups filed for an injunction, winning it in 2007.

The property was in disrepair and partially inhabited when Handrinis's holding company purchased it. The deterioration has only continued since. Handrinis interprets the injunction, which forbids “demolishing, removing and destroying” the structure, as an order not to touch it whatsoever, as any restoration or stabilization would entail some removal of material. Attorney General Blumenthal is currently suing Handrinis for contempt, arguing that he is allowing vandals and the elements to do what the wrecking ball cannot.

Not all preservation situations are so adversarial. Paul Sweet, Plainfield's first selectman, says no one has opposed developing the burned-out **InterRoyal Mill** site, part of the Lawton Mills Historic District. Sweet hopes the several buildings that remain after the 2005 arson will be repurposed. “The townspeople want to see something done,” he says. “The worst-case scenario is we make it into a park.”

With many towns and developers struggling to find funds to stay afloat in this economy, let alone refurbish historic properties, expect more parks than preservations.