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Using Historic Preservation to Promote Affordability and Revitalization

The relationship between historic preservation and housing affordability is not always straightforward.

Researchers have noted that, in some cases, preservation has served to promote displacement and gentrification, whereas in other

cases preservation has encouraged needed development in disinvested areas. On November 3, 2023, [Historic New England](#) — a nonprofit organization that preserves historically significant buildings, landscapes, archives, and objects from the six New England states — hosted a panel discussion during its two-day [summit](#) in Providence, Rhode Island, featuring practitioners whose work leverages historic preservation as a tool to create affordable housing and revitalize neighborhoods. In highlighting the importance of affordable housing amid longstanding national conditions of housing underproduction, moderator Angela D. Brooks, director of the Illinois office of the Corporation for Supportive Housing and president of the American Planning Association, also underscored the importance of historic places and buildings as repositories of cultural, architectural, and sentimental value. Brooks asked the panelists to unpack strategies that combine preservation and affordable housing.

Those panelists included Carla DeStefano, executive director of [Stop Wasting Abandoned Property](#), a Providence-based nonprofit that develops affordable housing and revitalizes urban neighborhoods; Sarah Marchant, chief of staff and vice president of ROC-NH at the [New Hampshire Community Loan Fund](#), an organization that promotes investment in



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traditionally underserved communities in New Hampshire; and Carrie Zaslow, executive director of the [Providence Revolving Fund](#), a community development financial institution focusing on housing, neighborhood revitalization, and historic preservation.

Leveraging Historic Assets for Inclusive Redevelopment

Economic [changes](#) and deindustrialization in the 20th century left many New England cities and towns with obsolete industrial buildings and deteriorating housing stock. By the late 1960s and 1970s, many neighborhoods in the city of Providence were in severe decline, DeStefano shared. Today, that built legacy provides cities with an opportunity to both revitalize their historic structures and urban fabrics and provide needed affordable housing to address the region's ongoing housing affordability [challenges](#). DeStefano described her organization's efforts to revitalize Providence's South Side, which had been particularly hard hit by disinvestment. The slow work of restoring the neighborhood succeeded, DeStefano reported, by focusing consistently on respecting community needs, inclusivity, walkability, and access to amenities and services. DeStefano cited one project, known as the Purple House, to illustrate one of the benefits historic structures in Providence can provide: housing for families. The city's industrial past has left it with housing originally built for the families of mill workers; converting these structures to affordable housing fills a need not met by current development, which tends to favor one- or two-bedroom units, says DeStefano.

Marchant described how the [rehabilitation](#) of a long-abandoned Catholic school building in Nashua, New Hampshire, added needed emergency shelter services while galvanizing significant community support for finding a new use for the landmark building. Combining historic preservation tax credits, low-income housing tax credits, state community heritage [grants](#), and other public funding sources with funding provided by the community allowed the Nashua Soup Kitchen and Shelter to create a 91-bed facility with separate floors for men, women, and families in addition to 11 units of supportive housing. The project was recognized as the 2023 winner of the New Hampshire Preservation Award.

Community Involvement

Although the panelists discussed the importance of community support in historic preservation, especially in preservation projects involving inclusive development objectives such as creating affordable housing or emergency shelters, Zaslow discussed a program her organization operates that involves community members more directly in historic preservation. Because New England's housing stock is older, many moderate-income homeowners have difficulty covering the maintenance costs of their aging homes. Zaslow's organization offers a grant program that helps keep

historic homes in good condition while preserving significant financial assets for moderate-income homeowners. In addition, when those loans are used to rehabilitate a rental unit within one of these homes, the loan terms will include affordability requirements.

Complementing the proactive efforts of each panelist's organization are the efforts of the communities in which these organizations operate. Marchant discussed the grassroots role of these communities in identifying historic but underutilized resources and then finding development partners to bring their economic development, redevelopment, and revitalization plans to life. Zaslow's organization has partnered with the Providence Department of Inspection and Standards; as the department becomes aware of code violations in homes needing maintenance, they refer the homeowner to the Providence Revolving Fund, which can connect the homeowner with information, resources, and programs. Similarly, DeStefano's organization leverages the local preservation society's records of at-risk properties, crediting efforts at the street and local level as an important impetus for taking on projects.

These community connections assume special importance when historic preservation projects that incorporate affordable housing arouse community concerns. Although historic preservation to revitalize underinvested areas can be an easy sell, fears about changing an established community can be challenging. DeStefano discussed the difficulty involved in balancing preservation with affordability when sacrificing some older structures is necessary to achieve higher densities and prevent housing costs from escalating. In New Hampshire, Marchant recalled a project to adapt a former mill building that raised community concerns about the capacity of the local school system; education efforts focused on the community members who would benefit from the new housing, including teachers and police officers, helped assuage those concerns.

Overall, panelists agreed that historic preservation can be a useful tool to create new housing and generate new investment to revitalize entire neighborhoods. Rather than positioning those goals antagonistically, panelists showed how efforts to promote affordable housing combined with historic preservation can produce better results for people and cities than either goal can accomplish alone.

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