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Hope & Main, Rhode Island's first culinary incubator, is located in a former school building in Warren where it operates a popular farmers-makers market called the Schoolyard Market. The non-profit organization helps local entrepreneurs launch early-stage food companies and food-related businesses.

REPURPOSED PRESERVATION

Adaptive reuse ensures future of historic buildings

An abandoned 1912 public restroom in Boston becomes a bike repair and coffee shop; a 103-year-old school in Warren, Rhode Island, provides 17,500 square feet of state-of-the-art incubator space for start-up food entrepreneurs; a former tobacco barn and cigar factory from the 1830s in northwestern Connecticut houses a craft distillery—these examples are at the forefront of historic preservation today. They are among the latest applications of a strategy preservationists call adaptive

use or reuse—the process of reviving old buildings with new purpose to prevent their loss or destruction.

One of the first to suggest that old buildings could be saved by finding new uses for them was Historic New England founder William Sumner Appleton. Radically for his time, Appleton recognized that museum use would never protect more than a few landmarks and that preserving large numbers of historic structures would require other approaches to keep them vital and functioning. In a May 1910 bulletin that announced



An abandoned “comfort station,” or public restroom, built in 1912-13 on Columbia Road in the Uphams Corner neighborhood of Boston’s Dorchester section, will be reused as a combination café and affordable bicycle and parts sales and repair shop called The Sip & Spoke Bike Kitchen.

in 1912 acquired a small, disused harness shop on the village green to be resurrected as a tea shop quaintly named At the Sign of The Tea-kettle and Tabby Cat. A 1914 *House Beautiful* account reported that the WVIS not only sought to increase its operating funds but also to make the town more appealing and “to serve as a means of increasing social interest among the townspeople and a homelike stopping place for tourists.” WVIS also strove to fulfill a mission: “eliminate political, sectarian, and class prejudice and create an enterprise in which there could be a common interest,” building a spirit of friendliness and cooperation in a “cleaner and more attractive town.” It is still in operation as the Wenham Tea House.

the formation of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (Historic New England’s founding name) he argued the merits of preserving buildings.

Appleton’s first application of his vision for how his organization would acquire an old building and keep it viable through a new use was the Swett-Ilsley House (c. 1670) in Newbury, Massachusetts. This building had a long history of commercial use by tradesmen and small craftsmen, including carpenters, cordwainers, saddlers, and tavern keepers. Purchased by the organization in 1911 and restored by preservation architect Henry

Charles Dean, Swett-Ilsley House was rented to tenants and opened as a tearoom. Tearooms were one of the most common forms of adaptive reuse of old houses in the early twentieth century, as ubiquitous in New England then as the condominium conversions of old mills and schools would become in the 1970s and 1980s.

Tearoom conversions appealed to a romantic vision of the past. Astute preservationists recognized that they could capitalize on that appeal, perhaps none more so than the Wenham Village Improvement Society (WVIS) in Wenham, Massachusetts, which

Reusing a building with a higher purpose in mind beyond the simple goal of saving a historic resource underlies many adaptive reuse projects. From its headquarters in a refurbished 1930s Texaco gas station, the West Broadway Neighborhood Association (WBNA) in Providence, Rhode Island, undertakes projects to preserve and promote the neighborhood as “a safe, vibrant, and sustainable place to be SWELL (Shop, Work, Eat, Live and Learn locally).”

The WBNA’s purpose updates the Wenham Village Improvement Society’s for today’s social needs. In partnership with other non-profit, private, and public organizations,

RIGHT This undated photograph shows the interior of the Wenham (Massachusetts) Village Improvement Society's tearoom, called At The Sign of The Tea-kettle and Tabby Cat. The mural above the fireplace reads, "Polly put the kettle on and we'll all take tea. For the cup that cheers and not inebriates waits on all." **BELOW** A onetime Texaco gas station is now home to the West Broadway Neighborhood Association in Providence, Rhode Island.



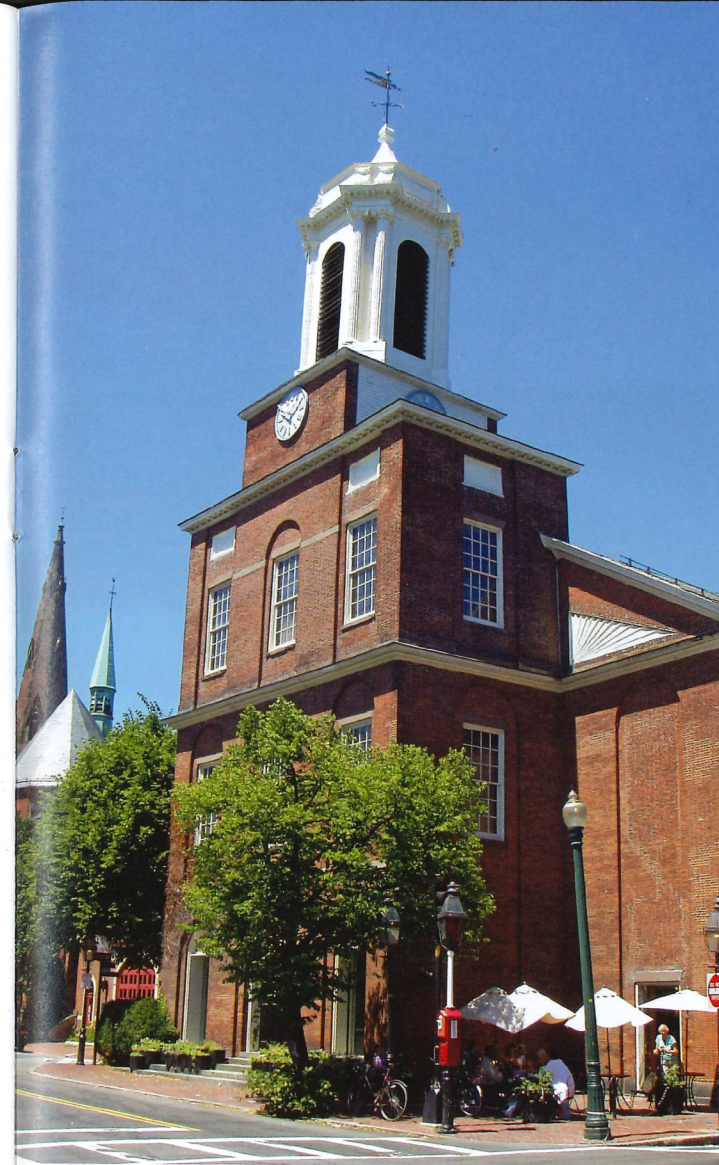
WBNA has converted historic structures into multifamily affordable housing and non-profit office space; created market-rate and affordable rental units in an 1892 schoolhouse; and set up composting, community gardens, rodent control, and recycling programs, and park and play spaces to create a safe and clean neighborhood on Providence's West Side.

Adaptive reuse success stories like WBNA's are often just one facet of an ongoing effort to retain and preserve historic buildings. Experience during the twentieth century has shown that new threats to old buildings arise generationally, requiring new approaches to meet changing social, economic, and

demographic trends. Churches, architecturally prominent but diminishing in community life, are particularly vulnerable. Boston's 1807 Charles Street Meeting House, for example, has weathered at least three major transitions in the last century.

In 1921, when Charles Street was widened ten feet to accommodate traffic, a group of Beacon Hill advocates raised funds to move the meeting house a commensurate ten feet west, toward the Charles River. Then in 1947, its longtime owner, the Charles Street African Methodist Episcopal Church, facing "economic,

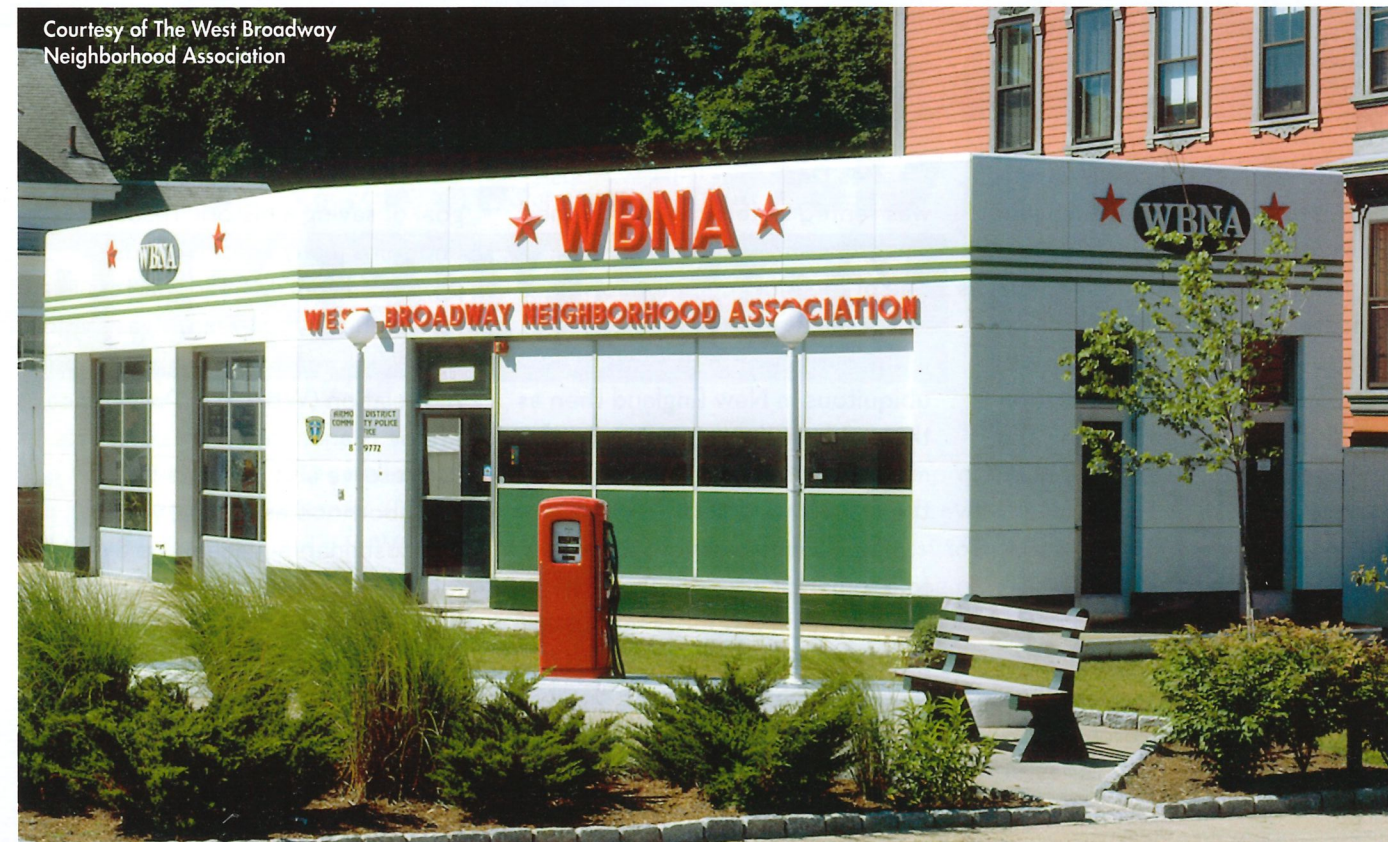
social, and political forces that made continued existence on Charles Street difficult" (according to the Boston African American National Historic Site), sold the building. Historic New England briefly took possession of the structure and placed its first preservation restriction on the property before conveying it to a Universalist



The Charles Street Meeting House on Charles Street in the Beacon Hill section of Boston was built in 1807 as Third Baptist Church and has a long history of housing different congregations. In the early 1980s the exterior was restored and the interior renovated for retail and office space and residential use. This is one of the offices in the building



Courtesy of Paul Elias



Courtesy of The West Broadway Neighborhood Association

congregation. By 1980, that group's needs had shifted and the building's fate was once more in limbo until an activist Boston architect, John Sharratt, purchased it. Sharratt created a bold and prize-winning reuse that combined two floors of office space in the sanctuary with ground-floor retail and a five-level residence in the tower.

Stewart Brand's 1994 book *How Buildings Learn* (winner of Historic New England's first Book Prize in 1995) affirms the idea that buildings must be periodically adapted and reshaped to survive. Twentieth-century industrial and commercial buildings, many with large, open spans and masonry and steel-reinforced construction, often adapt well, especially when federal and

state tax credit programs and other incentives can offset development costs. In New Milford, Connecticut, a 1917 switching and equipment building for the Southern New England Telephone Company, after serving a variety of uses (temporary elementary school, town offices, and a recreation center), reopened in 2013 as Ameico, a retail store for contemporary design products.

Retaining flexibility in interior spaces is among the design principles that increasingly characterize adaptive reuse projects. Recently, interior architecture students at the Rhode Island School of Design considered options to adapt the sanctuary at Newport (Rhode Island) Congregational Church as a public performance

space while still allowing for worship services on Sundays. Students proposed a series of minimal, reversible designs for different musical genres that would protect the church's iconic 1880 John LaFarge interior decorations. The group also produced a sweeping architectural fabric canopy art installation that filled the polychrome space.

From tearooms to incubator spaces, adaptive reuse—the simple idea that buildings can evolve to accommodate new uses within the existing structure—reflects a century of successful historic preservation, with creative and inspirational examples in every community throughout the region and beyond.