The empty Industrial Trust Building, a.k.a. The Superman Building:
Making the case for rehab and reuse
By Building Enclosure Science and Providence Preservation Society
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As we celebrate the Superman Building’s 92nd birthday this week, we seek to clarify important truths about the building’s condition and argue for the skyscraper’s reuse viability.

**Background:** The Industrial Trust Building, or “Superman Building,” as it is affectionately known, is one of the nation’s prototype Art Deco high-rises, predating the much taller Empire State Building by two years. At 26 stories, this early skyscraper opened to tenants on October 1, 1928. Ninety-two years later, the building is without an anchor tenant and has stood vacant since 2013. In 2019, the Superman Building earned the dubious distinction of landing on both the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s¹ and the Providence Preservation Society’s (PPS)² lists of Most Endangered Properties. Yet, this is the time to be optimistic about its future.

**Current condition:** Architects, engineers, and builders of the early 20th century experimented with how to safely create very tall buildings with new materials; Superman, like many of its counterparts of the day, is over-built and over-designed. Engineering consultants retained over the past several years have determined that structurally, the Superman Building is in solid condition.

According to Building Enclosure Science (BES)³, the exterior enclosure of the building was built with Indiana limestone, one of the most durable types of all stone construction. Most areas of the building and nearly all of the stone detail work are in pristine condition, which attests to the performance, durability, and sustainability of this material. The attractive limestone facade includes carved friezes that depict early Rhode Island history and industrialization. Expert studies and interviews with restoration craftsmen who have worked most recently on the building’s exterior have revealed important facts:

- Though vacant for seven years, the basic upkeep that the current owner has continued – keeping the electricity, heat, and water operable – has maintained much of the structural integrity.
- Less than 5% of the limestone cladding needs repair. The application of modern waterproofing techniques and materials could cost effectively restore sections of the upper levels, so that they would not need to be replaced.
- Indiana limestone is readily available for use to replace any original units as needed.
- Modern systems of keeping water and ice out of exterior walls would result in drastically reduced future periodic maintenance needs.
- A long overdue cleaning of the friezes and use of modern accent lighting technology would result in a monumental building that truly anchors the center of Providence, further establishing the capital city’s ongoing and sustainable downtown renaissance.

BES further notes that prior building tenants have had, in part, a flawed approach to the maintenance and repair of the building enclosure, choosing only to periodically catch and remove pieces of limestone, rather than systematically addressing the root causes of sectional deterioration. Arguably, this building

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¹ NTHP, 2019 America’s 11 Most Endangered Historic Properties
² About PPS, https://ppsri.org/
³ About BES http://www.buildinges.com/
is long overdue for a forensic building enclosure condition assessment, removed from the biased subjectivity of litigation and tenant disputes. This would include an overview of actual material conditions, quantifying areas in need of repair, and the development of a hard-cost restoration budget.

Yes, there are generational maintenance and façade issues that need to be addressed and building systems that must be updated. This is typical in the rehabilitation and repurposing of any older building. There are examples of these rehab projects all over Providence – mill conversions along our rivers and department stores and theaters downtown. In fact, after sitting vacant for 25 years, the South Street power station (a.k.a “Dynamo” building) was thought to be an unrealistic if not impossible project by prominent local architects and developers, both from an economic and an engineering/design standpoint. Now, South Street Landing stands as a $220-million model of a public-private partnership and creative design and engineering, receiving a national award in 2019 from the National Trust for Historic Preservation⁴ and plaudits from national news and trade outlets.⁵

**Reuse viability:** The notion of a single-use and user (owner or tenant) for the Superman Building is unrealistic. Even as a banking flagship for so many decades, the majority of occupants were office tenants. The Spring 2020 RISD “Saving Superman Studio”⁶ produced a variety of mixed-use concepts to coexist within the existing building envelope, in what is still the tallest building in Rhode Island. A successful adaptive reuse plan will prioritize much-needed residential use accompanied by office, retail, educational, and/or entertainment uses, and it is reasonable to expect an incremental approach to repopulation of the building.

**Effects of the pandemic:** The short-term and long-term effects of the coronavirus pandemic are not yet fully realized. These certainly will include the economy, interior architecture, and where and how people live and work. As the RISD students demonstrated, while responding during the outbreak, Superman provides a canvas for incorporating designs for specific demographics – millennials working from home, senior citizens co-located with on-site health services. The pandemic is an opportunity to assess Providence’s current and future needs and to use this vacant building to meet them.

While public buildings (schools, shops, offices) are seeing modifications to limit disease transmission, best practices can literally be built into the new plan for this existing historic structure. Examples are minor design decisions, such as antimicrobial brass handles and hands-free faucets and doors, and more substantial design alterations, like configurations of rooms and circulation corridors and operable windows. Superman can become a national model for historic rehab responsive to a public health crisis.

**Demolition is neither necessary nor advisable.** Besides the cost, scale, and disruption of demolition—estimates range from $40-60 million and the closure of that block of Westminster Street for two years—Superman’s naysayers need only to be reminded that those who said that South Street Landing could never be done were wrong. PPS is actively promoting the need for political will and a creative vision, which includes actively seeking advocacy partners. The time is now to save the Superman Building.

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⁶ RISD studio [https://savingsuperman.risd.edu/](https://savingsuperman.risd.edu/)