



de·moc·ra·tize

verb **make accessible to everyone**

pres·er·va·tion

noun **history improving the future**

P R O V I D E N C E P R E S E R V A T I O N S O C I E T Y

the plan



November 2021

background

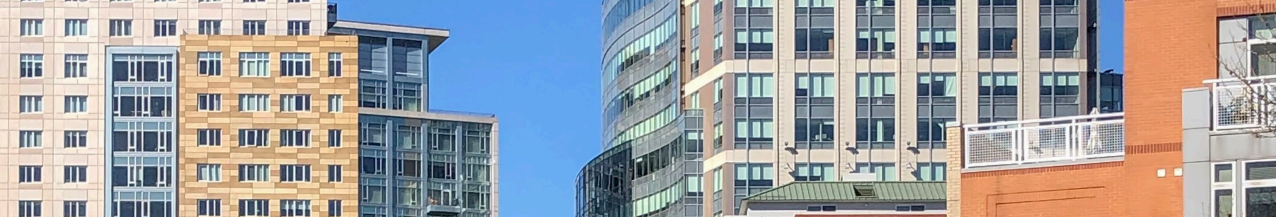
Since 1956, the Providence Preservation Society (PPS) has played an important role in the preservation and revitalization of the city. We have innovated the practice of historic preservation, establishing a reputation as a national thought-leader in our field. Upon our founding, we piloted a model for urban renewal that included historic preservation as a core tenet, a revolutionary concept at that time. Later, in 1980, we launched the Providence Revolving Fund to help revitalize neighborhoods using real estate finance tools; it became the most admired revolving fund in the country.

Today, however, we and our preservation colleagues nationwide struggle to demonstrate relevance to a broader audience.

the challenge

While transformative of the built environment, our work has not engaged a city-wide audience, nor adequately protected and stewarded Providence's complete architectural legacy. We have not kept pace with the issues most affecting the residents of Providence. Recognizing this, and **believing that historic preservation has a role to play in addressing a range of contemporary challenges** we set about to develop a strategic vision that will engage the broader community of people who care about preservation; thoughtful planning and design; vibrant, healthy, and safe neighborhoods; and affordable, quality housing. We hope they will join us in realizing our vision of a vibrant and sustainable City of Providence, where everyone can thrive.

PPS believes this plan embodies our founders' hopes for Providence and is forward-looking in a way that those thinkers and innovators, as well as subsequent leadership through the decades, would champion. We hope you agree.

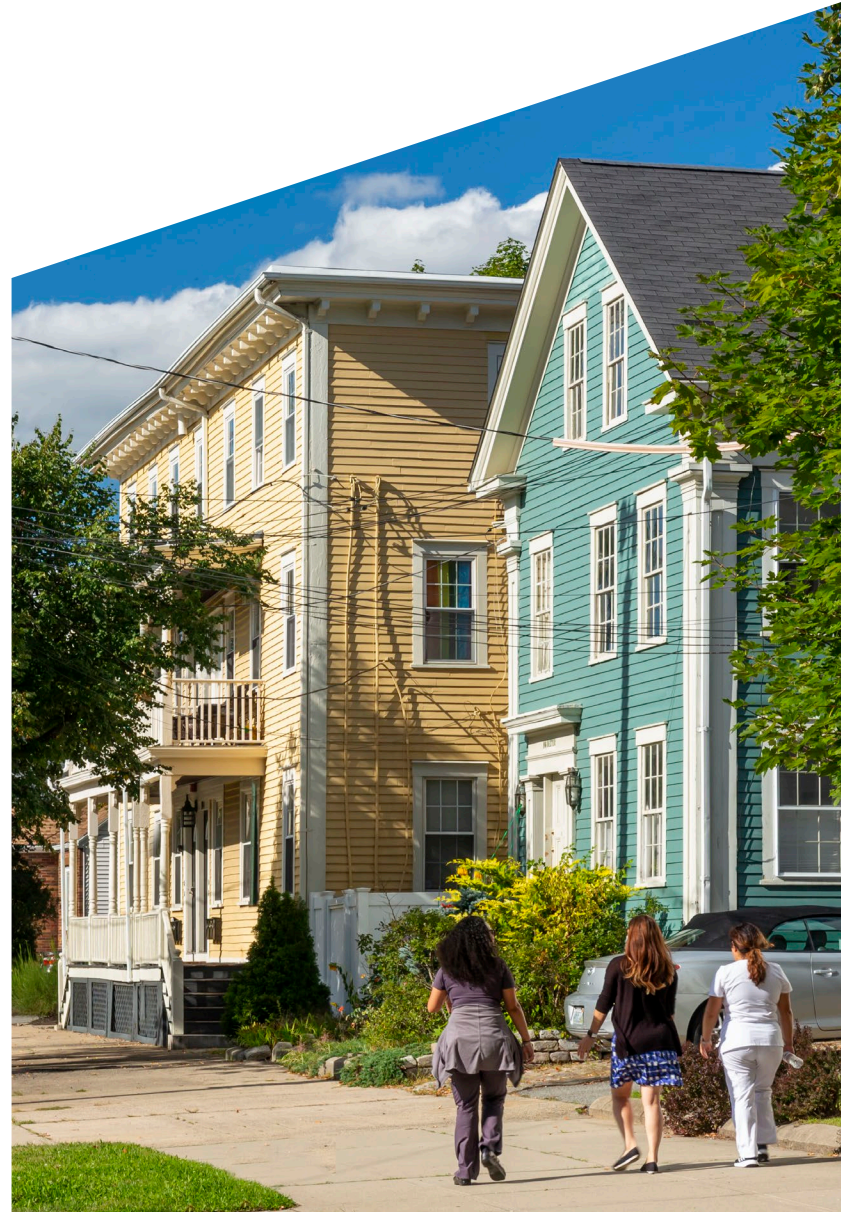


our vision

We envision a Providence,
celebrating and preserving its past,
building an equitable, vibrant, and sustainable future.

the mission

We support and advocate for historic preservation,
thoughtful design, and people-centered planning.



planning

We began our strategic planning process in the fall of 2020 and were deeply moved by then-current events, which we felt permanently changed cultural perspectives in society. The global pandemic and the summer of racial reckoning underscored our nation's legacy of systemic racism and injustice. It inspired PPS to consider our own culpability in this legacy and to commit to addressing it in real and meaningful ways.

The planning process included a number of activities and internal assessments. It began with an anti-racism training workshop conducted by [Rhode Island for Community & Justice](#). This was followed by an audit of latent racism in several of the organization's projects and programs, a community survey, a series of in-depth interviews with external stakeholders, and finally, an internal review of the organization's assets and capabilities. A summary of the findings is listed below:

strengths

- high awareness
- recognized as leading transformation of Providence
- highly regarded among white, wealthy residents
- strong financial position

opportunities

- thousands more buildings to preserve
- broad support for preservation among Providence residents
- developing a traditional trades program
- making preservation and its benefits accessible to more people

weaknesses

- contributed to historical displacement
- lack relationships to work effectively with neighborhoods where majority of residents are people of color
- College Hill related work consumes most resources
- small staff trying to do too much

threats

- young residents, people of color, and most policymakers don't see our work as relevant
- grantor and donor focus on social issues constrains impact of current strategic direction
- current funding model and staff may not support desired growth

planning

These investigations prompted the board to undertake difficult but thoughtful deliberations, which in turn inspired bold thinking and a desire for consequential action. Over the last several years, we struggled with how best to address certain programs and advocacy issues:

- How can we build trust in underserved neighborhoods so that we understand the implications of our advocacy work before we take a position?
- How can the Historic House Marker program tell a fuller story of the people of Providence in all parts of the city?
- How can PPS ensure our online Guide to Providence Architecture is diverse in the places it includes when most architectural surveys of Providence were not written with cultural or racial diversity in mind?
- How do we open doors to expanded audiences through programming and events?
- How do we celebrate and support the preservation of intangible heritage and sites that do not meet established standards for historic integrity?
- Can we do a better job of acknowledging historic places in all parts of the city?
- Can we share our research methods and tools more broadly?
- Is PPS the best voice to tell every story about our city's past and present?
- How do we use our institutional voice in respectful, intentional ways?
- Is PPS establishing and growing a base of support that will sustain the organization well into the future?

Our attempt to answer these and other questions can be found in the guiding principles, five-year goals, strategic focus areas, and operational plans that follow. Taken together, these elements map out near- and long-term aspirations, and **define a commitment to preservation practices that are very much of their time: democratic, people-centered, and inclusive.**



guiding principles

1 We serve the whole population of Providence.

We will significantly expand our sphere of influence and engagement beyond its traditional base of College Hill and the East Side.

This means we will work to preserve places of significance for people throughout the city. This requires additional effort to build trusting relationships, new pathways for communication, and measurement of the outcomes. For example, for many years we have earnestly included places throughout Providence on our Most Endangered Properties list. We have asked the community for nominations and vetted them ourselves, but those who currently respond are a small subset of the Providence residents who care about historic places. By building new relationships and asking people what places they care about, we will be better able to highlight and preserve more places. Partnering and deepening our work with organizations such as Rhode Island Latino Arts and the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society are other ways to manifest this principle.

2 We support those who work to preserve our historic buildings.

We honor and celebrate people doing preservation, not just the work itself. We define preservation broadly and lower barriers to participation. We respect the experience, expertise, and priorities of community members and are supportive of community-led preservation practices and projects.

This means that historic preservation needs to return to its roots, to a time when the movement was led by people at the grassroots level preserving places that mattered to them. It means that national standards for architectural recognition and preservation may not always be the highest and best way to effect preservation citywide. It means trusting community historians and artists, like Haus of Glitter, who achieve preservation through interpretation and storytelling, especially when they challenge established narratives.

guiding principles

3

We put people first.

We save historic buildings because they promote human well-being by providing housing, jobs, education, a sense of belonging, and moments of beauty.

This means that the work we've done for over six decades will continue to be for people. We've always believed that humanity benefits from the preservation of old buildings and designed spaces, but we haven't communicated that in a way that is relevant to people. We will also listen to perspectives that tell us how preservation advocacy can benefit or harm people in ways we do not already understand.

4

We are equitable and inclusive.

We demonstrate our commitment to equity and inclusion in all aspects of our organization, including our hiring practices, board development, advocacy, and program planning.

This means that we must intentionally change the way we work. One way this will occur is to make extra effort to ensure that our advocacy priorities are balanced and informed and that our house markers and online architecture guide represent the full history of Providence placemakers.

5

We pursue a restorative agenda.

We acknowledge the harm done by historic preservation. We work to preserve people *in place* and uplift the stories of people of color.

This means that the focus we place on equity, citywide advocacy, community knowledge, and people who have not been part of the historic preservation story, will be prioritized in a way that begins to balance the scales. One way this could happen is in the recognition of significant historic resources. While we do not have statistics for the City of Providence, there is an oft-cited statistic that "less than 8% of sites on the National Register are associated with women, Latinos, African Americans or other minorities." Our work can and must do more to recognize and protect these histories.

reconciling our history

Since our founding in 1956, PPS has had a role in shaping the City of Providence's neighborhoods, streets, buildings, and landscapes. Our reputation was built on revitalizing historic neighborhoods in Providence, and as a result, many of Providence's architectural treasures have been preserved for future generations. Civic and neighborhood leaders embraced the value of historic preservation and that work expanded beyond PPS. Notably, it became a tool to create affordable housing. Community Development Corporations such as Stop Wasting Abandoned Properties (S.W.A.P.), Omni Development, ONE Neighborhood Builders, and the Elmwood Foundation, among others, used financial incentives and federal preservation standards to stabilize neighborhoods. Historic rehabilitation tax incentives activated the private development market and provided funds to nonprofits for restoration projects. City leaders saw the value in preserving significant buildings like City Hall, the Biltmore Hotel, the former Loew's Theatre (PPAC), Bomes Theatre, mill buildings, and old school buildings, places that make history visible, that other cities have lost.

Providence as a whole has benefited from historic preservation's impact as an economic development tool, an educational resource, a catalyst for affordable housing, and as celebration of beautiful places and artisanship. But we recognize that the benefits have been unevenly distributed.

Our work has been used to reinforce systemic inequities within urban renewal and homeownership, with profound consequences for residents who lack resources and power, especially people of color, immigrants, and those with limited financial means.

There are complex forces at work; in this document, we can only acknowledge our role in the process, not speak to the motivations of others or describe how the systems work.

PPS was formed in response to mid-twentieth century urban renewal, a threat that galvanized many white civic leaders in Providence to protect specific older neighborhoods from widespread demolition and redevelopment, even as city leadership sought to destroy them. We sought to unite those factions with a focus on Benefit Street and South Main Street, where Colonial and Federal period buildings had been used for working class housing and businesses for 200 years. We led the effort to eliminate so-called "blight" in those areas, making choices about which structures were important to preserve, based on our values at the time. The ultimate result was both the preservation of the city's oldest buildings and the displacement of residents, most of whom were Black or Cape Verdean.



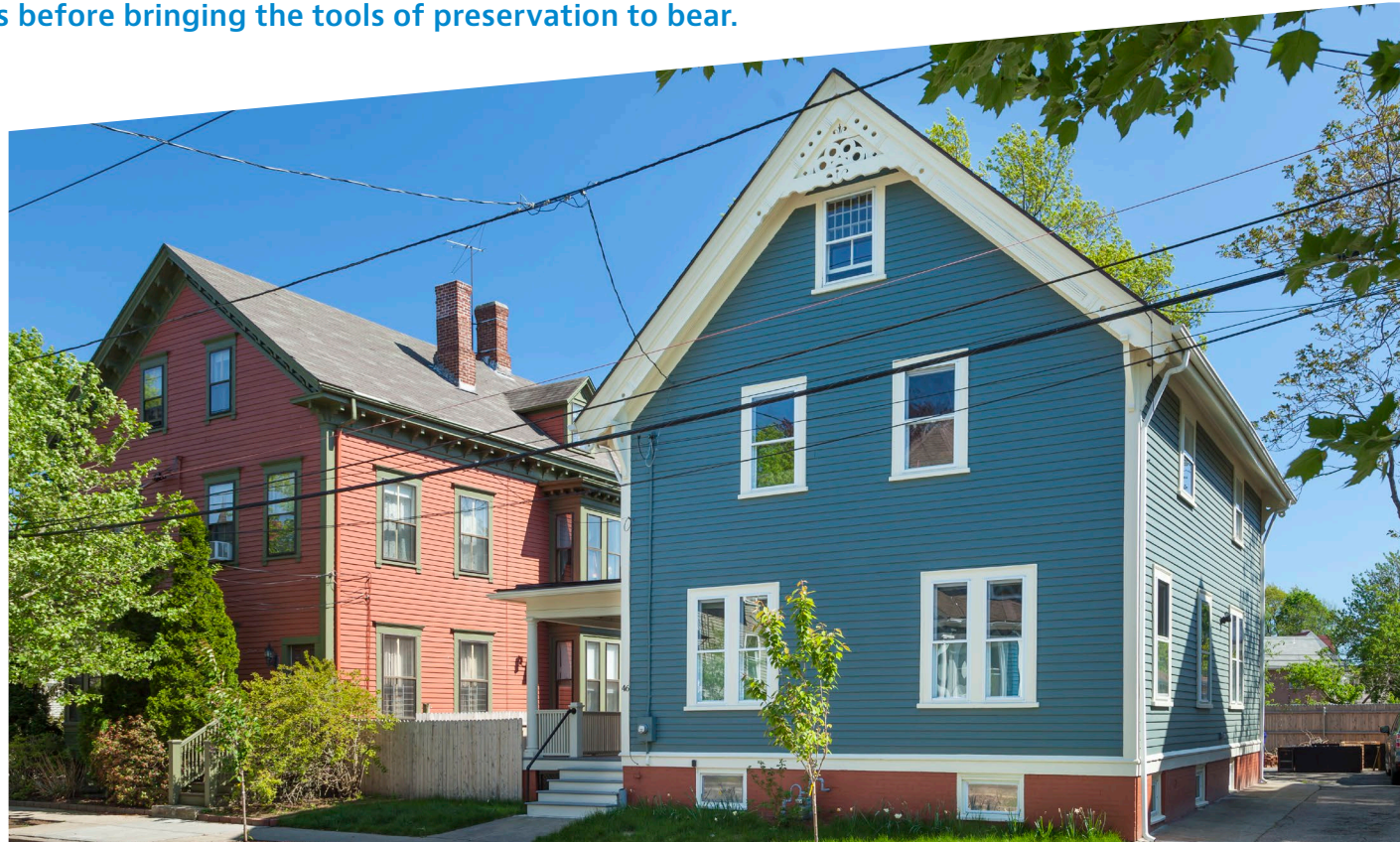
reconciling our history

In the 1980s, we once again saw the potential to save aging historic homes, this time the Victorian-era houses in the Federal Hill, West End, and Elmwood neighborhoods. Through a subsidiary organization, we funded the restoration of dozens of houses, most of which were vacant and abandoned. Many projects preserved affordable housing units, but over time these physical improvements led to gentrification and the displacement of lower-income families from these areas.

We have supported land use and planning practices that have helped make many places better, but which have also directly and indirectly erased the history and contributions of people of color. We have not always prioritized the needs of existing residents in older neighborhoods, nor have we advocated equally for all neighborhoods or cultural heritages. Now, more than ever, we must learn better ways to listen to, work with, and support established communities.

PPS acknowledges that we have taken part in racist practices that have negatively impacted our community.

Recognizing this, and believing that historic preservation does have a role to play in addressing a range of contemporary challenges, we are committed to being anti-racist, embracing a restorative agenda, and partnering in meaningful ways with communities before bringing the tools of preservation to bear.



modeling stewardship

Unlike some other preservation organizations, PPS's early goal was not to preserve one or several "important" buildings. Our founders believed in the power of historic preservation to revitalize entire neighborhoods. They were people interested in antique buildings, primarily those built before the mid-nineteenth century, and approached historic preservation with the ethos and best practices of the time. Central to their thinking was the value of stewardship, the belief that all citizens, businesses, and organizations have a duty to protect important resources, like buildings and neighborhoods, for future generations.

PPS has been a steward of the Old Brick School House at 24 Meeting Street (ca. 1769) since 1959, just three years after our founding. The City-owned building had long been used for educational purposes, but was vacant after the Meeting Street School relocated in 1957. Its colonial history and location near Benefit Street made it an ideal home from which to grow the organization. Over the years, volunteers and staff of PPS and the Providence Preservation Society Revolving Fund maintained the School House according to best practices for historic buildings and used it for public programs and organizational meetings.

In 2017, we created a plan for 21st century use of the building, with an aim to address structural and systems issues and to make it fully accessible. We are working to usher in a new era of educational programming that honors the work of our predecessors, people who created such programs as the Consultant's Bureau, the Old House Doctor, and the Children's Heritage Education Program. Thanks to the many donors to our recent capital campaign, this building will continue to honor our founders and the many others who worked to steward this building, while also celebrating earlier innovators who provided educational opportunities for Black youth, newly arrived immigrants, and the disabled.

As part of our efforts to democratize preservation, we will acknowledge other models of stewardship that are working in service of the same ideal. For example, the Haus of Glitter Dance Company + Performance Lab is completing a two-year residency at the City-owned Esek Hopkins House. Their research, interpretation, and presentation of a complex historical figure and his role in the transatlantic slave trade contributes to the dialogue about whether and how places with difficult histories are preserved. Rhode Island Latino Arts has for years worked to preserve a largely intangible history, that of the early permanent settlement of Latinos in Rhode Island. Most buildings associated with those early immigrants are no longer extant within Providence, but RILA's Barrio Tours are cultural preservation at its best.

July 30, 2021, at the Old Brick School House, Governor McKee signs a bill implementing the newly developed African American history curriculum for R I public schools.



focus areas

1 Unlocking the power of historic preservation in underserved communities

Our year-long 2021-2022 collaborative project with the South Providence Neighborhood Association to build trust and learn alongside Southside residents will serve as the foundation for PPS's community outreach moving forward. Lessons learned will inform how PPS builds relationships and serves neighborhoods traditionally excluded from historic preservation, aiming for deeper, more sustained engagement with Providence's diverse neighborhoods. We will work to uplift community goals and the work already being done, leveraging our resources and knowledge to advocate for communities that feel marginalized by the City of Providence's rules and processes.

Year-1 actions

- Inform our advocacy framework with lessons learned about when and how to advocate for community needs based on the South Providence program
- Develop a community toolkit for guiding grassroots conversations and action around historic preservation in neighborhoods typically excluded from that work
- Organize staff to regularly attend community and neighborhood association meetings in at least half of Providence's neighborhoods to establish a working understanding of the advocacy and planning issues relevant to residents

5-year goals

- Our board and advisory committee(s) include residents from half of Providence's neighborhoods, including at least a third people of color



focus areas

2 Prioritizing advocacy for impact and equity

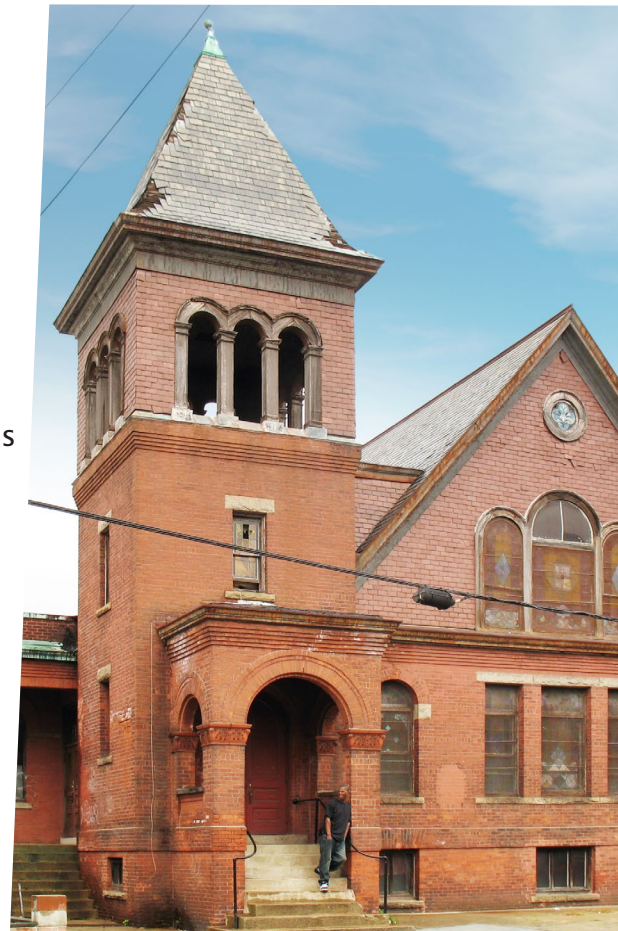
PPS will promote the well-being of Providence residents by advocating for thoughtful new construction and the protection of historic structures and neighborhoods, especially in those areas of the city typically excluded from that work. We will work to protect sites of historical and cultural importance to the local community, including those that reflect vernacular styles, in addition to architecturally recognized ones. We will develop tools that empower individuals and groups with knowledge of land-use planning methods and resources, and we will be clear about what level of support we can provide for any specific situation. We will prioritize advocacy for places that are not already protected by local zoning ordinances, easements or other regulatory tools.

Year-1 actions

- Develop and share our clearly defined approach to preservation advocacy
- Develop a toolkit that can be used by citizens for effective preservation advocacy, including a series of programs and recorded videos
- Make the Historic House Marker, Most Endangered Properties, Planning and Architectural Review, and other programs more inclusive
- Explore protection measures for resources not already protected by local zoning ordinances, easements, or other regulatory tools

5-year goals

- Issues generated through relationships with community groups and neighborhoods not traditionally represented in historic preservation represent at least half of our annual advocacy agenda and related programs



focus areas

3

Training the next generation of preservation tradespeople

Many older buildings have grown dilapidated and unsafe due, in part, to the severe shortage of people with the right skills to assess, repair, and maintain them. Simultaneously, many people in the metro region struggle to find meaningful work. PPS's preservation trades training program and community shop will create career opportunities for historically excluded populations while addressing the shortfall of skilled tradespeople. Our workforce intensives – modeled on our successful [Window and Workforce Training Program](#) – will provide preservation trades and job readiness training, plus on-the-job experience and employment support. We will introduce weekend or evening courses to fee-paying participants, including property owners, contractors, real estate professionals, and former trainees. Scholarships for low-income individuals will be available. A new community shop will provide a space for training and business incubation for preservation tradespeople.

Year-1 actions

- Run two workforce intensives
- Deliver four workshops for property owners and former trainees
- Pilot a version of the community shop
- Build awareness and interest through outreach and marketing, including improved trades training website content
- Refine and develop course curricula to ensure replicability.
- Explore a preservation trades fair to bring together preservation tradespeople, property owners, employers, and the public in celebration of Providence's architecture, history, and community

5-year goals

- Successfully train 150+ people from historically excluded communities and place them in well-paying trades jobs or self-employment
- Establish relationships with 20+ local/regional preservation and construction organizations that offer apprenticeships and/or meaningful employment
- 400+ homeowners, realtors, and construction industry professionals have participated in our preservation-related workshops



focus areas

4 Building a community of rehabbers

The housing stock in Providence is among the oldest in the country; almost 70 percent of the city's housing supply – about 51,000 units – was built prior to 1959.¹ While these older structures contribute to Providence's architectural character, many residents struggle to maintain their older homes, or their landlords can't or refuse to do so. Issues associated with older housing units include inadequate ventilation, lead paint, electrical issues, and accessibility. The health and economic burden falls most heavily on lower income residents, particularly residents of color. Providence has recently had the third highest rate of income inequality in the United States, with the wealthiest residents earning 16.7 times more than the poorest; this imbalance is starkly racial.²

PPS will assist a large, diverse group of Providence old-house residents to rehab and maintain their homes by finding sustainable, low-cost solutions. Our activities will include co-creating community, curating resources and content, and producing classes and workshops, while engaging the Providence Revolving Fund to consult on projects and provide funding for repairs.

Year-1 actions

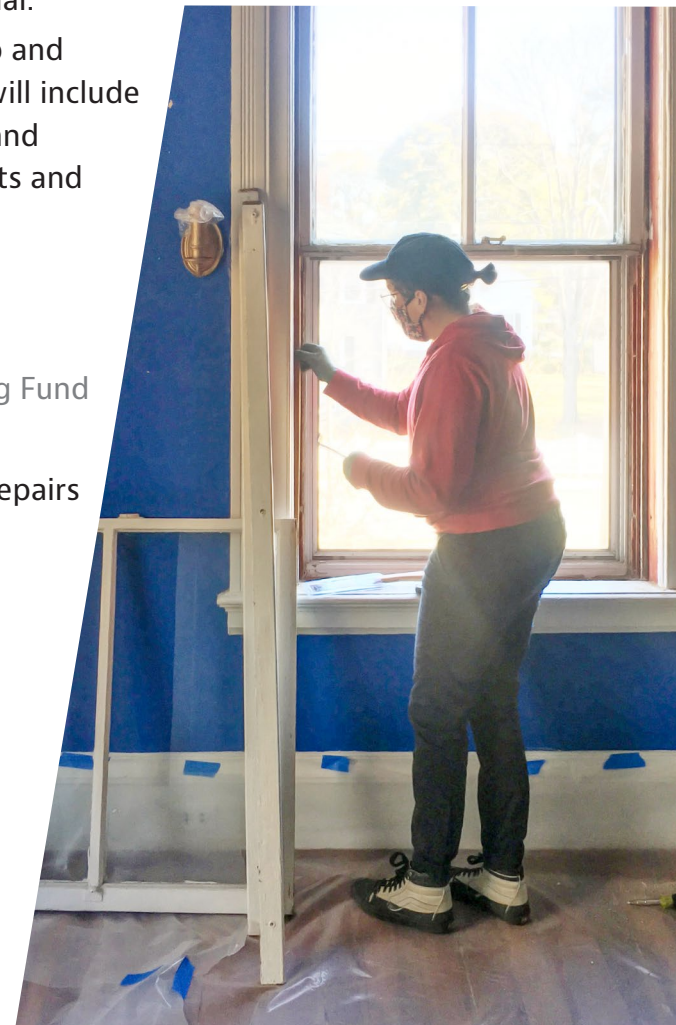
- Establish and promote an online community for rehabbers
- Plan a homeowner education program and portal with the Providence Revolving Fund
- Offer a window rehab workshop for homeowners
- Determine the feasibility of establishing a program to provide assistance with repairs to low-income homeowners
- Create a recognition program for rehabbers

5-year goals

- Engage 15,000+ Providence residents, reflecting the city's racial and ethnic diversity, in housing rehab activities
- Directly assist 500+ people of color to improve their homes

¹ City of Providence Anti-Displacement and Comprehensive Housing Strategy

² City and metropolitan income inequality data reveal ups and downs through 2016, Brookings Institute



focus areas

5

Daylighting Black heritage on College Hill

PPS will help establish a semi-permanent interpretation of the built environment along Benefit Street, raising the visibility of Black lived experiences spanning 300 years of history. In addition, we will visibly and publicly interpret the history of our headquarters building, the first school for African-American children fully supported by the City of Providence, within this context. Upon completion of the renovation of the building, we will make it available at low or no cost for community meetings.

Year-1 actions

- Use external communication tools to acknowledge the historic role that PPS, preservation, and urban planning practices have had in exclusion and oppression
- Form a working group/advisory committee of scholars, stakeholders, and community knowledge-keepers to shape the form and content of interpretive efforts
- Determine the feasibility and scope of interpretive experience at the Old Brick School House
- Orient the Benefit Street booklet refresh and online [Guide to Providence Architecture](#) expansion projects around this theme. Ensure current interpretive tools are inclusive of the full breadth of Black history
- Continue to diversify the online guide, including updating 35+ existing entries, adding 12+ new sites, and one new tour of College Hill Black history
- Identify the most used/ideal configurations for the Meeting Hall and create a flexible furnishings plan

5-year goals

- The significance of the Old Brick School House and the context of Black and educational history in Providence are highlighted publicly and visibly
- The full history of the African diaspora on College Hill/along Benefit Street is presented in a visible, semi-permanent way, along with other well-established histories



our organization

The Providence Preservation Society will have a staff that brings a diversity of skills and lived experiences and that is committed to improving our city, fostering a community of rehabbers, and advocating for important cultural and historical resources. This will require that we more than double the number of financial supporters and invest in grant writing.

We will review and, when appropriate, reallocate our assets to align with our strategic priorities.

Year-1 actions

- Explore rebranding to appeal to a broader audience.
- Redefine what it means to be a supporter of PPS
- Develop an equitable fundraising model
- Determine how our assets can best contribute to our mission and the implementation of this strategic plan
- Identify areas where additional staff may be needed to accomplish organizational goals

5-year goals

- PPS will have a racially diverse staff that serves our community through innovative workforce development, fostering a community of rehabbers, and advocating for important cultural and historical resources.
- Increase the budget 30% or more, by more than doubling the number of financial supporters and investing in grant writing



acknowledgment

PPS deeply appreciates the support we received in developing this strategic plan.

Achieving our goal of becoming relevant to more people and building trust more broadly required honest assessments from those for whom we were not so relevant, whose trust we had not earned. For their time, frankness, and constructive suggestions, we especially want to thank the staff and youth facilitators at Rhode Island for Community & Justice, the external members of our Strategic Planning Committee, the community leaders who participated in interviews, and the members of the community who reviewed and provided feedback on this document.

For a full year, our Strategic Planning Committee, Board of Trustees and staff worked together on this plan: assessing our work, envisioning the future of PPS, and mapping out a plan for how to achieve that vision. We are grateful for their open-mindedness, thoughtful contributions, and substantial dedication of time. For their leadership of the planning process, we are grateful to consultant Susan West Montgomery, board president Warren Jagger, and board member and Strategic Planning Committee chair Heather Evans.

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Strategic Planning Consultant

Susan West Montgomery

Strategic Planning Committee

Osman Cortave

Travis Escobar

Heather Evans Chair and PPS Trustee

Diana Figueroa

Dwayne Keys

Warren Jagger President, PPS Board

Barbara Sokoloff PPS Trustee

Cait Swanson PPS Trustee

Carrie Zaslow PPS Trustee

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Warren Jagger President

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Arria C. Bilodeau

Kathryn J. Cavanaugh

Heather Evans

Barry Fain

Kirsten E. Kenney

Rochelle Lee

Cathy Lund

Wendy MacGaw

Christopher J. Marsella

Jonathan Pitts-Wiley

Patricia Raub

Edmund A. Restivo Jr.

Elizabeth W. Rochefort

Shideh Shafie

Jacqueline Shaw

Barbara Sokoloff

Wm McKenzie Woodward

Architectural History Consultant

PPS Staff

Aaron Ahlstrom

Kate Blankenship

Kayla Campbell

Angela Kondon

Kelsey Mullen

Rachel Robinson

Brent Runyon

acknowledgment

Community Leaders

Leah Bamberger Director of Sustainability, City of Providence
Kyle Bennett Director of Policy and Equity, United Way of Rhode Island
Marcel Betancur Director, Latino Policy Institute, Roger Williams University
April H. Brown Interim Director, Racial and Environmental Justice Committee
Jennifer Hawkins Executive Director, One Neighborhood Builders
Eileen Hayes President & CEO, Amos House
Gloria Johnson Former Board Chair, West Elmwood Housing Development Corporation
Marta V. Martinez Founder & Executive Director, Rhode Island Latino Arts
Cortney Nicolato President & CEO, United Way of Rhode Island
Chris Samir-Rotondo Co-Director, Direct Action for Rights and Equality
Howie Sneider Executive Director, The Steel Yard
Neil Steinberg President & CEO, Rhode Island Foundation
Larry Warner Director of Grants and Strategic Initiatives, United Way of Rhode Island

External Contributors

Matthew Garza
Marc Hutchison
Katherine Hypolite-MacMannis
Marta V. Martinez PPS Advisory Board

Rhode Island for Community & Justice

Ayomide Aina Youth Facilitator
Rose Albert, MA Youth Programs Director, RICJ
Toby Ayers, PhD Executive Director, RICJ
Charon Martinez Youth Facilitator
Sarah Ortes Youth Facilitator
Nathalya Peña Youth Facilitator
Nanda Shewmangal, MA former Youth Programs Director, RICJ

Photographs

pages 11,13 PPS staff
all others Warren Jagger Photography