

TEAM PROJECT
National Trust for Historic Preservation
Preservation Leadership Training
New Bedford, Massachusetts
June 1999

The Corson Complex

Dramatic changes have occurred in New Bedford's historic downtown area due to the outstanding efforts and dedication of the Waterfront Historic Area League (WHALE). Since its creation in October 1960 in response to the impacts of urban renewal, WHALE has played a key role in driving the revitalization of New Bedford. While much historic fabric has been saved, preserved or restored against great odds, one of the key challenges currently facing WHALE is what to do with the Corson Complex, a cluster of National Register-listed historic buildings located in the heart of the historic district. The National Trust's Preservation Leadership Training comes to New Bedford at time when a critical decision must be made as to how to restore the complex in a manner that meet the goals of WHALE, as well as the needs of the community.

History and Significance

The Corson Complex consists of two commercial buildings (c. 1878 and 1884) at 25-27 William Street and house (c. 1865) located in the rear of the buildings at 27 Bethel Street. In September 1997 the buildings suffered a extensive fire and the city initially ordered their demolition. Recognizing the significance of the buildings and the devastating impact their loss would have on the fabric of the historic district, WHALE paid for an engineering study which demonstrated that the buildings could indeed be salvaged.

In addition to funding the engineering study, WHALE recently purchased the complex for restoration and redevelopment. Although stabilized and salvageable, it has been established that the restoration and redevelopment of the Corson complex is not economically feasible for a for-profit developer. WHALE, therefore, must take on the role of developer, as they have on several occasions in the past. Once again, they face a challenging task which calls for a creative solution.

Moby Dick Marine, the owner occupant of the site from the early 1950s until the time of the fire could not afford to carry out the project, but wants to return to its historic location. WHALE strongly supports retention of such a long term maritime business in the historic district. The purchase was made under the terms that Moby Dick Marine would become the occupant of the entire first floor of the commercial buildings (approximately 4200 square feet) upon the completion of the project.

Background and Context

New Bedford is seen by its residents as a wonderfully diverse and culturally rich community with a proud past, present and future. The whaling capital of the world in the 18th century, the city has evolved to become the home of many major industries, which manufacture products used throughout the United States and abroad. The city prides itself on a working waterfront and historic district, as well as its expanding retail and tourist trades.

While it is a city with a population of approximately 100,000, New Bedford maintains a close-knit community feel and offers a good quality of life. Named one of the top ten "Green Cities" in the country by the World Resources Institute in 1993, New Bedford offers fine parks and beaches. Enhanced with festivals and celebrations throughout the year, the city is regarded by many as a good place to live or visit.

In addition to the positive effects of the efforts of WHALE, downtown New Bedford is going through an impressive transformation. Proposed new developments, including the creation of an aquarium in a historic power plant building on the waterfront, expansion of the Whaling Museum, and the ongoing redesign of the highway into a more pedestrian-friendly, tree lined parkway, are focusing a lot of energy and attention on the area.

The National Park Service (NPS) established the New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park in 1996 to preserve and interpret 19th century maritime and whaling history. The park consists of the 13-block Waterfront Historic District, in which individuals and groups continue to own and operate their properties. The role of the NPS is to work with local partners to preserve and interpret the resources within the park.

Despite all of the positive activity and developments in the community, local support for a preservation-based revitalization of downtown is not unanimous. Because the city faces some of the challenges common to many urban areas, such as joblessness and poverty, some see the costs associated the investment required for preservation as excessive and unnecessary. The statistics speak for themselves:

- the current unemployment rate in New Bedford is 12.2%, compared with the statewide average of 6.7%
- the number of people living below the poverty level is 16.8%, compared to the statewide average of 8.9%
- the median household income of \$22,647 is 61.3% of the state average
- the school dropout rate is 9% compared to the statewide average of 3.7%

In order for historic preservation to be recognized as valued as a community development tool, it must be balanced against the pressing social needs for jobs, education and safe and affordable housing.

The Issue

Since its creation WHALE has not been an organization known to avoid a challenge. They have successfully taken on many seemingly impractical and economically infeasible projects in order to carry out their mission. The Corson Complex project presents another daunting task for the

organization -- the odds of saving it were great and the cost of redeveloping it will call for very creative financing and problem solving.

The community is watching and waiting for results. The complex has been stabilized, but it is critical to take the required steps to move the project forward to completion. As a non-profit organization with limited resources, WHALE can't afford to put those resources into simply maintaining the property in its current state. On the other hand, as a non-profit with a preservation-based mission, they are the only ones who can and will take on the project where profit is not the bottom line. Several options are on the table and a decision must be made as to what course of action to take.

Restoration and reuse of the Corson Complex will serve several positive purposes. It will draw additional attention to the ongoing efforts of WHALE as an organization and will demonstrate once again that historic preservation is an economic development tool for New Bedford with direct beneficial impact on the downtown and spin off effects on the community as a whole.

Team #1: Preservation is the Key

It is obvious to many people who visit New Bedford that the downtown has benefited greatly from the positive effects of historic preservation. Local support for making the investment and focusing on downtown is not unanimous and some see the costs associated with it as excessive and unnecessary in light of other community needs which are perceived as being more pressing. Detail how historic preservation is perceived today by elected officials, neighborhood residents and leaders, community development corporations, business owners and preservationists. Identify and articulate the sources of both positive and negative perceptions.

Identify the non-profit and public groups and agencies who have a stake in historic preservation. **Design a public awareness/education program that teaches New Bedford's citizens and public officials that the preservation of historic resources in the downtown is an economic development tool that benefits the entire community.** Describe the roles of each stakeholder in this campaign.

Team #2 WHALE Preservation Education and Resource Center

One of WHALE's long term goals to develop and operate a Preservation Education and Resource Center to serve the needs of the community at large. It is hoped that the center will be a part of the redevelopment of the Corson complex. Such a center would ideally house and/or provide such services as a resource library, public education programs, access to technical and financial assistance, liaison to the city, and neighborhood outreach services.

Design a preservation education and resource center to be operated by WHALE and housed in the Corson complex. Assess the need for such a center and focus on determining who the key users would be and how they would use it. Include in your description key elements that would be included in the center and identify and define the roles of each of the stakeholders.

Describe the role that the center would play in the community and how it would be promoted. Outline the principal points that would be used in a fundraising campaign to develop and operate the center.

Team #3: WHALE Reuse of the Corson Complex

In order for the building to most efficiently and effectively meet the programmatic and functional needs of WHALE, a number of changes must be made to the Corson complex, including a connector to the adjacent building which currently houses WHALE and a penthouse to house a board room/public meeting space. The building would ideally house WHALE's offices, a historic preservation resource and education center, office space for other non-profit organizations, and ground floor retail in addition to Moby Dick Marine. The National Park Service will also be a partner in the project.

Analyze possible mixed use plans for the Corson complex which would include these elements. Choose one to develop and describe it in a redevelopment plan. Describe what could be physically accommodated on the site. Carefully consider how your plan will accommodate parking and vehicular access, signage and new construction.

Using the historic district guidelines, provide detailed descriptions of the physical changes, if any, you would make to the building to accommodate the development. Describe those changes which, though allowed by the guidelines, may jeopardize the integrity of the site if implemented. Using precedents found elsewhere in the historic district, formulate your arguments for both minimum and maximum changes to the site. Articulate the financial and political incentives, as well as the regulatory obstacles, inherent in your plan. Include in this statement the community support or opposition you would expect for the plan.

Team #4 Retail Use of the Corson Complex

Although WHALE has agreed to dedicate a substantial portion of the first floor of the complex to Moby Marine, a significant amount of space remains for other redevelopment and there is an increasing interest in retail space in the historic area. **Analyze the possible retail uses for the additional space in the Corson complex and choose one to develop and describe in a redevelopment plan.** In your plan, address what type of retail use would best serve the current needs in the area and describe the clientele. Describe what could be physically accommodated on the site. Carefully consider how your plan will accommodate parking and vehicular access, signage and new construction. Include basic floor plans and other appropriate drawings.

Using the historic district guidelines, provide detailed descriptions of the physical changes, if any, you would make to the building to accommodate the development. Describe those changes which, though allowed by the guidelines, may jeopardize the integrity of the site if implemented. Using precedents found elsewhere in the historic district, formulate your arguments for both

minimum and maximum changes to the site. Articulate the financial and political incentives, as well as regulatory obstacles, inherent in your plan. Include in this statement, the community support or opposition you would expect for the plan.

Team #5 Residential Use of the Corson Complex

Interest in residential use within the downtown waterfront historic district is increasing. Although WHALE has agreed to dedicate a substantial portion of the first floor of the complex to Moby Dick Marine, the remaining square footage in the buildings allows for a significant amount of other redevelopment. Using the current zoning and land use codes, **analyze the possible residential uses for the Corson complex. Choose one to develop and describe it in a redevelopment plan.** In your plan, define the type of residential units that would best serve the current needs in the area and describe the market for the units. Describe what could be physically accommodated on the site, e.g., number of units, square footage, etc.. Carefully consider how your plan will accommodate parking and vehicular access, signage and new construction. Include basic floor plans and other appropriate drawings.

Using the historic district guidelines, provide detailed descriptions of the physical changes, if any, you would make to the building to accommodate the development. Describe those changes which, though allowed by the guidelines, may jeopardize the integrity of the site if implemented. Using precedents found elsewhere in the historic district, formulate your arguments for both minimum and maximum changes to the site. Articulate the financial and political incentives as well as regulatory obstacles inherent in your plan. Include in this statement, the community support or opposition you would expect for the plan.

PRESERVATION
LEADERSHIP
TRAINING

NEW BEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS
JUNE 5-12, 1999

TEAM 1: PRESERVATION IS THE KEY

Kathy Anderson
Nick Brown
Brook Hobson
Paul Morris
Chad Perry
Clarissa Rowe
Polly Stiles

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Our task: *Design a public awareness/education program that teaches New Bedford's citizens and public officials that preservation of historic resources in the downtown is an economic development tool that benefits the entire community.*

What is the Issue?:

While the downtown of New Bedford has benefited from historic preservation, the view that preservation is an important, and viable tool for the improvement of the community is not universal.

We are but guests here and do not pretend to know all of the dynamics at play in this wonderful city. What can this team of preservationists contribute to the Corson Building project, to WHALE, to New Bedford? What we do know is our own emotions and reactions. Before we get to the task at hand, we thought it would be helpful for this New Bedford audience to know what we see when we look at the building and where it sits in the Historic District, adjacent to this working waterfront.

In the historic district and throughout the city, we see buildings that have marvelous brick detailing, scope and feel. With the Corson Block, we see buildings of pleasing scale that relate to its neighboring buildings. It fits in. We like it. We like the figurehead of the woman because it recalls New Bedford's rich history. Ultimately, we saw a tremendous challenge and opportunity.

To start our discussion, think of a building or place that you once loved, and that might no longer exist; perhaps it was a childhood home, your grandparents' home, your first school or church, the old town hall. Try to remember why you liked it so much.

Overview:

Defining Preservation

Preservation encompasses so many different concepts and practices. In the broadest terms it provides a continuum from past to present to future for people and their environments. Going well beyond bricks and mortar, preservation isn't what it used to be. (OVERHEAD 1)

The terms we associate with preservation, however, can be ineffective in persuading people that preservation is a key part of a community's economic revitalization and growth. Preservation does not exist outside of the established economy or society. It is part and parcel of who people are, and how they interact with the environment around them. In more validating terms, preservation can be a catalyst for many things:

- Job creation
- Long term stability
- Legacy for our children
- Local economic benefits

Because it can entail so many different components, preservation involves many challenges and we would not consider it "easy." Any public outreach and education program must address these challenges.

First, there is the challenge of scarce resources-

The context here in New Bedford includes the reality of facing its economic and social challenges. Dealing with these challenges often results in a narrowly focused program which simply throws money at something in hopes that it will go away. (OVERHEAD 2)

Despite New Bedford's challenges and the reality of limited resources, there is no denying that preservation is working here, mostly, we believe, because of community pride and vision. Additionally, preservation can help address these challenges in tangible ways:

Preservation stimulates broad-based economic development.

Heritage Tourism is a rapidly growing revenue source, and New Bedford, with its rich architectural and cultural history, based on the whaling industry, is primed to take advantage of this trend. The National Park Service has already recognized New Bedford's potential.

Historic preservation stimulates the local building economy. Preservation projects need skilled labor. As you know, the cobble streets outside this building used New Bedford people to install the utility lines, put in the historic lights and lay the cobblestones. The Corson complex would need this same

kind of labor force.

Historic preservation operates within a framework of responsible business practices and can help pay for itself. Public/private partnerships create funding packages that tap into available resources without diverting funds from other services.

Historic preservation stimulates additional private investment. Think about Baltimore's inner harbor, a catalyst for additional investment and improvements in that city.

More specifically, one cannot ignore the positive effects and diverse forms of preservation and community pride taking place in New Bedford:

Think of Father Levesque and his work to preserve St. Anthony's Church with the assistance of a few very committed volunteers.

Think of the work of WHALE and the 40 buildings it saved.

Think of the exemplary neighborhood spirit, illustrated by the neighbors of John Bullard, who pulled together to protect his family's home from a fire started by a lightning strike while he was away.

These examples of localized activity, inspiring in and of themselves, only hint at the future accomplishments possible through public/private partnerships.

A second challenge is in the political arena-

Preservation is seen as "in the way" of progress. Elected officials are pulled from all sides, having to work for the best interests of their entire constituency. Why should they spend public money on an old building in the middle of the historic district? In many parts of the country, preservation is seen as politically unpopular and very risky.

Here, the political leadership is committed to preservation in the community because it understands that preservation is about people and real economic benefits.

Elected officials recognize the value of preservation in economic development and the conservation of scarce resources, through the recycling of historic buildings for use now and into the future. They see preservation as an economic engine. They understand the history of their town.

And they have been rewarded in the polls because of their views.

A third challenge is one of perception-

Preservation is often perceived as unnecessary, especially in times of economic downturn

and in the context of crucial social needs. This attitude should not be seen as a negative, as it presents great opportunity to discuss how preservation can be used to meet these needs. The preservation activities in downtown New Bedford present the perfect opportunity to showcase its functions as an economic development tool.

How should preservationists face these challenges?

General

New Bedford is a strong community committed to diversity. Present and future preservation activities in New Bedford demonstrate the recognition of its commitment to cultural diversity. The cultural diversity manifests itself in the built environment, meriting the protection, celebration, and interpretation of many historic resources, some of which we are only beginning to recognize.

Basically, we suggest a bottom-up approach, a “grassroots” effort that reaches the key players (OVERHEAD 3). The message you cultivate should tell the story of historic preservation and why the Corson Block is important to its neighborhood and to the City. The plan should create an integrated visual identity for preservation connected with the Corson Block. The plan should emphasize that the rehabilitation of the building is another successful example of a private/public partnership. We also believe public involvement in as many aspects of the project is key to its success.

To be specific, let us briefly address our suggested approach to four or the key partners.

Public Sector

Need: There is a need to persuade the public sector that historic preservation is a viable/proven economic development tool.

Plan: Demonstrate to elected officials and staff how the city stands to benefit. Outreach could include:

Constituency meetings

One page fact-sheet that clearly and concisely explain preservation with photos

Work with representative from Ward #4 to do outreach to other ward heads

Site visits to historic properties, including the Corson Buildings

Businesses

Need: Alliances with local business leaders and organizations to build confidence in

and develop a unified voice for preservation as a tool for economic development and strengthening

Plan: Education and outreach strategies could include:

Tours of the area

Testimony from those already established

Expand relationship with Downtown New Bedford, Inc. and the New Bedford Economic Development Corporation

Monthly round tables to discuss needs, perceived fears, successes, technical assistance, etc.

Neighborhoods

Need: There is a fear that preservation of historic buildings will divert critically needed funds, rather than act as an economic engine to draw tourism; On the other hand, there is fear that tourism will effectively disrupt the character of the city and cause undue stress on residents.

Plan: The benefit of getting the neighborhoods involved is that it will create community ownership and reinforce community pride and history. Demystify the perception of what the park will be to let everyone know that the Park Service isn't coming in, taking over, and embarking on a widespread building campaign.

High level of personal contact.

Speak with elected officials about community opinion leaders and then contact them.

For the wider community, reach out via:

Educational materials

Exhibits, both fixed and traveling

Announcements in local media

Corson Building newsletter to keep people updated on progress and programs

Community cultural organizations

Religious organizations

Web page about project on community-based website.

On-site, hands-on workshops for residents including

-safety issues

-historic plaster repair

-clues to your historic building

