

## FOUNDATION CORNER



### A BETTER BOATHOUSE: PRESERVING A HISTORIC STRUCTURE NEAR THE WATER

**BUILT IN THE EARLY 1900S, THE BOATHOUSE WILL BE MOVED AND IMPROVED  
DURING THIS AUTUMN'S SEAWALL PROJECT.**

By Jill Connors

At Harbour Court, a stucco and half-timbered building has perched near the water's edge for more than 100 years, beloved for its enchanting architecture and playful purpose. Originally constructed as a playhouse for John Nicholas Brown, the building features a beadboard-paneled interior and delightful porch; the entire structure is capped with a flared cedar-shingle roof. In the 1980s, the playhouse was outfitted with restrooms and gradually became known as the Boathouse, in recognition of its frequent use during boating season. According to preservation architect Martha Werenfels, the building is possibly unique: "I don't know of any other small, whimsical building so close to the water that has survived for so long."

To ensure that the Boathouse continues to survive, plans call for it to be relocated a few feet inland—away from the pounding waves and frequent overtopping that have eroded the nearby stone seawall to the point that the seawall must be completely rebuilt this fall.

"As part of the seawall project, we need to move the Boathouse," says Commodore Paul M. Zabetakis, M.D. "Every year, the water

comes up and hits that building. If you look closely, you can see the damage. That's a historical piece of this property."

A Club subcommittee studied the Boathouse issue and the fact that the structure had to be moved—and saw the opportunity to make improvements: The plans call for more resiliency in the building's ability to withstand the elements as well as the construction of two new ADA-compliant bathrooms, all while preserving the historic integrity of the building. The Boathouse preservation is an ideal project for support from the New York Yacht Club Foundation.

The Foundation was created in 2007 for the sole purpose of maintaining both historic Clubhouses—44th Street and Harbour Court. Having provided more than \$8.1 million in grants for preservation projects to date, Club-member donations to the Foundation continue to be essential.

Although the Boathouse is arguably a very small structure, it presented a complex set of regulation challenges for the Club and architect Werenfels to address.

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The Boathouse's proximity to the water has subjected it to the brute force of many a winter storm. While it's held up remarkably well for a structure of its advanced age, a move inland along with an extensive restoration will ensure it remains an iconic part of the Newport waterfront for many years to come.

"The most interesting thing about the Boathouse project in my opinion is that this 340-square-foot building encapsulates so many regulatory entities," says Werenfels. "We had the somewhat competing requirements between historic preservation, CRMC coastal-zone construction and ADA compliance. The entire project is all about striking a balance to keep historic character, improve resiliency and make the building accessible." To address coastal-zone construction issues, the new location and foundation will make the building more resilient to the elements.

"We believe the Boathouse is currently sitting on brick piers," says the architect, who has specified a concrete slab with a three-foot crawlspace for the Boathouse's new foundation. This new crawlspace will include four flow-through vents. In the case of flooding or big wave action, water will go under the Boathouse and into the crawlspace, which will have drains.

"The flow-through vents ensure there is a way for water to go in and under and back out again," says Werenfels. "It's a resiliency measure that will be a much-needed improvement. Right now, the building isn't resilient at all."

For ADA compliance, Werenfels designed two handicap-accessible non-gender bathrooms to be added at the east end of the Boathouse, repurposing a portion of the porch. A continuous walkway is in the plans also. The Boathouse's existing men's and women's restrooms will remain intact.



For historic integrity, the exterior materials used on the new restroom section will be stucco and wood half-timbering to match what is already on the rest of the building, and two new wood windows will match the existing windows. The original building will remain intact but will receive attention in the form of restoring the existing wood windows and repairing the stucco that has been damaged by harsh weather over the years. An important historic-preservation element of the project has been ensuring the Boathouse's new location still relates in the same way to the curvy path designed in the early 1900s by the famed landscape-architecture firm Olmsted Brothers. This rambling set of stone steps leads gently from Harbour Court's main house down the lawn's steep slope toward the water amid beautiful plantings and trees. Historically, the structure has always stood just a few feet away from the end of the Olmsted stairs—and happily, that will continue to be the case. After thoughtful consideration to balance coastal-zone requirements and historic integrity, the new location—slightly south and west of the original spot—is very much in keeping with the historical relationship to the Olmsted stairs.

As of mid-March, the project had received nearly all approvals, with the remaining hurdles expected to be cleared soon—thanks to the extensive planning and forethought given to the competing requirements of historic preservation, coastal-zone construction and ADA compliance.

"We have received approvals from Newport Historic District Commission, R.I. Historic Preservation & Heritage Commission and the State of R.I. Building Code Commission," says Harbour Court General Manager Jim Boyd.

The City of Newport and the CRMC approvals are the final two needed.

"It is my hope," says Werenfels, "that when the project is complete, the look and location of the Boathouse will seem as it always was: a delightful structure nestled at the base of the Olmsted steps, with the beautiful harbor just ahead."

The New York  
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