

COMMENTARY

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Breakers brouhaha

The Breakers mansion, in Newport, has long been one of Rhode Island's best-loved attractions. Built as a summer home by Cornelius Vanderbilt II, it draws some 400,000 people a year, providing visitors from around the world with a first-hand view of the opulence and splendor of America's Gilded Age.

Even when the utmost consideration is given to preserving this mansion's historical character, it is hard to get past its undeniable popularity — nearly half a million visitors each year. Yet until now, the only comfort amenities have consisted of restrooms in the mansion's basement and — during the warm months — a visitors tent and portable toilets.

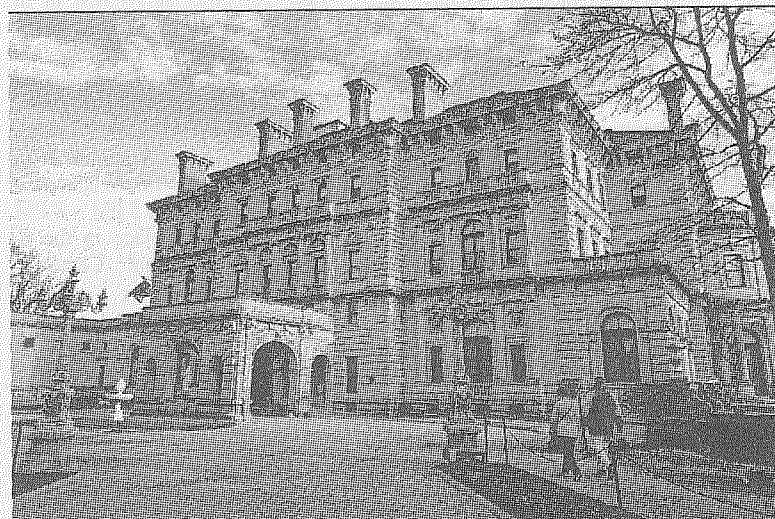
In response, the Preservation Society of Newport County, which has been a superb steward of The Breakers along with several other Newport mansions, preserving these important artifacts of our past for people to experience and enjoy, has been trying for several years to build a proper visitors center. Designed beautifully to blend into the property, the proposed center has a historic look and is “nearly invisible from most spots on The Breakers property” and from the street, as the society points out.

Newport's Zoning Board of Review approved the plan

earlier this year, but that hasn't stopped opponents from trying to put every impediment in its way. Recently, 21 members of the Vanderbilt family sent a letter to the preservation society's board, claiming that the society's management is exploiting the mansion and is not a “trustworthy steward.”

The crux of the letter is that the visitors center would blemish the property and should be placed elsewhere — in a parking lot across the street, or some other location. In a seven-page response, the society pointed out the letter's misleading and even untruthful claims, and explained the considerable effort that has gone into designing a helpful center that will be as unobtrusive as possible.

The fact is, The Breakers mansion is no longer a private family home; it draws hundreds of thousands of visitors each year. Certainly it is not too much to expect that those visitors, who are essential to help pay for the mansion's upkeep, have access to modern restrooms, as well as light fare such as sandwiches, and helpful information on other local historic sites. The center plan does not detract from the beauty and impact of The Breakers property, or the surrounding neighborhood. The campaign against it is one of NIMBYism at its worst.



The Breakers mansion, in Newport. JOURNAL FILE PHOTO