

Boffo for The Breakers

Newport's Gilded Age mansions are fabulous structures on gracious landscapes. No wonder these great houses are a major draw for tourists and source of pride for Newport residents. Thus, any proposed change to a mansion property generates public concern, as well it should.

Plans to build a "welcome center" on the grounds of The Breakers, the most famous and grandiose of the Gilded Age mansions, have understandably raised questions. Let us say right off that the visitors center is much needed and the plans for it have been drawn with the utmost sensitivity to the site.

Some may ask: Why does The Breakers need a welcome center? Must it be on the property itself?

First, The Breakers serves as the "entry" mansion — the first house most tourists to Newport visit. That makes it the ideal mansion for a visitors center.

The building would offer education on the mansions as well as sell tickets to them. That's now being done inelegantly on a tent at The Breakers — or, off-season, at an amusement-park-style booth. The center will provide restrooms, replacing the cheesy Porta-John trailer now on the grounds.

Some have suggested placing the welcome center in The Breakers parking lot, across Ochre Point Avenue from the mansion. But those spaces are precious, and the visitors center should be part of the mansion experience, not the parking experience.

The building's design, by Epstein Joslin Architects, of Cambridge, is nothing less than superb. The low structure would blend into the landscape and not be visible from the avenue. As for its taking up green space, it helps to note that the 3,750-square-foot building would not occupy much more area than the structures that the center will replace. And it's a lot better looking.

Those who have visited other great houses in America and abroad understand that the accommodations at The Breakers are not up to snuff. Newport should offer a first-class experience, and not just for the pleasure of tourists.

The tent has generated \$16 million of additional revenue since it first opened, in 2001. That money accounted for more than a third of the \$42 million that the Preservation Society of Newport County has spent on preserving and maintaining its buildings over that time.

A visitors' center offering intellectual content and help in planning a visit around Newport could raise even more revenues for the society. Equally important, it would make the mansions a greater draw for visitors, bringing more customers to Newport's hotels, restaurants, stores and other businesses.

Those still doubting the excellence of this plan should go to <http://www.thebreakerswelcomecenter.org/> and see for themselves.

The relevant authorities in Newport should promptly approve the society's plan and let the improvements begin.



THEBREAKERSWELCOMECENTER.ORG

Proposed welcome center for The Breakers, in Newport