

Protecting the Past

Historic Preservationists Oversee Our Built Heritage

Colorado's historic preservation movement has been among the busiest and most successful in the nation.

In fact, it has been so successful as a tool for the area's economic rebirth that the National Trust for Historic Preservation recently honored Denver Mayor Wellington Webb with the 2001 John H. Chafee Trustees' Award for Outstanding Achievement in Public Policy.

'Masonry buildings tell great stories and they hold their value through many lives.'
— Kathleen Brooker

Richard Moe, president of the National Trust, said: "Preservation became a catalyst that ignited a downtown renaissance. Thanks to the mayor's leadership, Denver now boasts some of the nation's most progressive preservation policies."

Webb responded to the award: "This award represents our community's shared vision and values. Downtown Denver's economic success is fundamentally tied to our emphasis on historic preservation. Denver has shown others that historic preservation is not only necessary, it is tremendously desirable and, most importantly, it is doable."

A few of the recent historic preservation achievements cited by the awards committee in Denver include:

- The renovation of the landmark Denver Dry Goods building into a mixed-use housing/retail/office development;
- Changes in the zoning codes to discourage demolition of historic buildings for parking lots and introduce design standards that make saving historic buildings easier and more profitable;
- The investment of substantially more public and private resources in housing and preservation, including the recent restoration of more than 40 derelict buildings.

While there are many local and regional historic preservation groups across the state, two of the most notable in terms of their ongoing efforts are honored here as representatives of the historic preservation movement throughout Colorado.

Historic Denver Inc.

"Denver is – and has always been – a brick town." That statement, according to



Kathleen Brooker, Historic Denver Inc.

Kathleen Brooker, president of Historic Denver Inc., is just one of the well-known historical truths about the Mile High City. "Of course, there are all sorts of other wonderful materials used here too, including some of the best stone buildings you'll see anywhere in the country, but this town – and LoDo in particular – was designed with brick as its signature building material."

Brooker and her staff at the private, non-



Elegant masonry facade of the recently restored Chamber Lofts Building, Denver

Historic Denver Inc.

Jackie Shumaker Photography

The historic Hardware Block in Denver's LoDo neighborhood

profit Historic Denver write grants and work in partnership with the private owners of older buildings to establish a preservation plan for them. First, the sites must be nationally registered and locally recognized historic properties. Then Historic Denver establishes a perpetual easement where the owner agrees to give up the right to demolish the building, makes a cash donation to help with repairs and allows Historic Denver to oversee its maintenance. This system becomes “the ultimate preservation tool,” according to Brooker.

Historic Denver has also been successful

in creating a national historic district for the downtown area. In Denver, that is the only way to permanently save older buildings from demolition, since a local historic designation protects them for only a year at a time. Representatives of Historic Denver met with each property owner in the area and asked them to participate in the district by offering tax breaks and incentives in exchange for their support.

Another part of Historic Denver's focus is on the city's neighborhoods, sustaining and expanding its 38 historic districts. Part of the goal is to stop the demolition

and replacement of older homes with what Brooker calls “the long houses” – the “fake stucco monsters” that stretch from sidewalk to alley and ruin the character of a block. That includes special attention to preserving older masonry homes since “they define the character of a neighborhood,” Brooker said.

Brooker's work at Historic Denver culminates her life-long love affair with beautiful old buildings and masonry. She gladly offers the reasons why preservation of masonry structures is so important to what she does: “It's the way that brick

The Colorado Historical Society

catches the light and reflects it back, especially at twilight. Nothing else soothes light quite that way. Then there's the beauty and value of masonry buildings. They tell great stories, and they hold their value through many lives. We try to preserve those stories for everyone."

The Colorado Historical Society

James Stratis makes no bones about it: "Preservation is maintenance and maintenance is preservation."

Along with his colleagues, Stratis – projects manager for the Colorado Historical Society – works to ensure that grant fund-

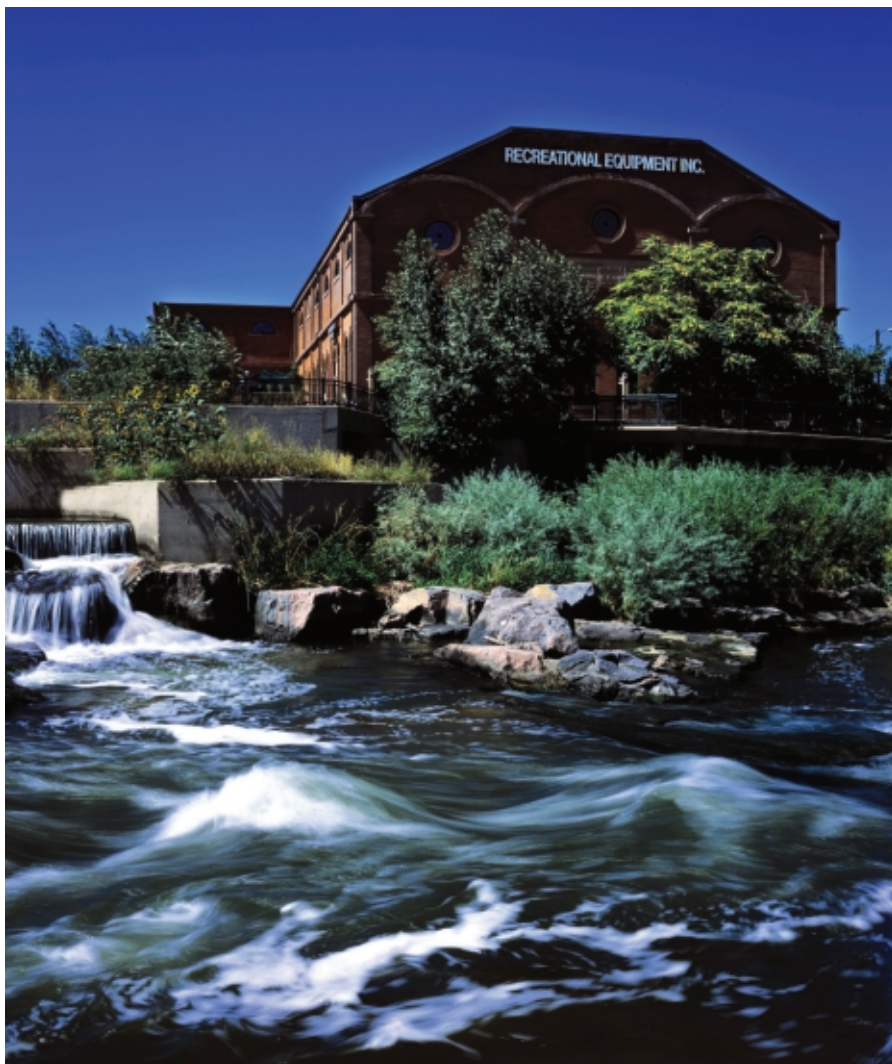


James Stratis, Colorado Historical Society

ing for the state's preservation projects gets into the right hands for the right reasons. As much as building owners and architects appreciate the technical expertise offered by Stratis and the Society's other historic preservationists, they also respect its financial clout.

The Colorado Historical Society receives 100 percent of its funding from the state's gaming taxes, around \$20 million a year. From that, they distribute grants twice a year to projects across the state, with recent averages of around \$100,000 per award.

"Because we hand out the grants, we can increase both the quality of maintenance



Denver's REI Flagship Store – A model of preservation and adaptive reuse

and the awareness of how to work with masonry and other materials in rehabilitation projects," Stratis said. "We oversee a lot of masonry buildings. That's a big part of our jobs – understanding how to preserve different masonry types, and that can get very technical. The only times we've failed is when we didn't require that technical attention to historic detail and maintenance."

Masonry preservation and maintenance requirements are often specced into the grants themselves, which requires the close cooperation of area masons. "We often collaborate with the local masonry firms. We need their expertise because they are

out there every day working with the materials, and they help us decide what can and can't be done in some projects."

'We often collaborate with local masonry firms. We need their expertise.'
– James Stratis

Stratis counts among the Society's recent masonry preservation successes the rehabilitation and reuse at the REI building along the South Platte River, the Denver

The Colorado Historical Society

Dry Goods building, the Wynkoop Brewery, the Tattered Cover Bookstore in LoDo and the William Fisher Mansion at 1600 Logan St., now the offices of David Owen Tryba Architects.

On those projects, the Colorado Historical Society provided technical assistance, regular project reviews and worked closely with sponsoring agencies like the Denver Urban Renewal Authority and others to facilitate their completion.

“We look at the smallest details and the bigger preservation picture at the same time,” Stratis said. “Our priorities are to create the longest life-cycle of preservation possible and the most cost-efficient maintenance plans for our buildings. We want people to keep coming to us for help and bringing us their expertise as well. That’s when it works like it should.” ◆



Jackie Shumaker Photography

Brick detail from the Apple Plumbing Center at 6th and Broadway