

5 *for the* FUTURE

BY DARRELL HOFHEINZ

Building on its first four decades, the Preservation Foundation is refocusing on a handful of initiatives to bring its advocacy and outreach deeper into the community to reach new audiences.

Discussing the threat of rising sea levels on low-lying coastal areas, environmental author Jeff Goodell held his audience spellbound last year during a program sponsored by the Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach at The Colony hotel.

Water is coming, Goodell warned — and lots of it. Blame human-induced global warming, rising ocean temperatures and melting ice caps, said the author of *The Water Will Come: Rising Seas, Sinking Cities, and the Remaking of the Civilized World*.

And, he said, Palm Beach had best get prepared.

It was exactly the latter concern that had spurred the Preservation Foundation to inaugurate its innovative “Water Rising” series of lectures, which Goodell’s talk kicked off. The open-to-the-public program, which drew civic leaders and government officials, was notable not just for its of-the-moment relevancy but also because it nodded at a sea change that had been steering the organization in new directions.

And as they celebrate the foundation’s 40th birthday this year, officials there are finding new ways to interpret their longtime mission



The late Palm Beach Mayor and U.S. Ambassador to Cuba Earl E.T. Smith also was the first chairman of the Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach after its founding in 1980. PHOTO COURTESY PRESERVATION FOUNDATION

of helping the community learn about and preserve the town’s historic sites.

Many of the new initiatives have emerged during the four years since longtime Palm Beacher, interior designer and foundation stalwart Pauline Pitt was elected by the organization’s board of trustees as chairwoman, several weeks after the death of her predecessor, John Maschek, in November 2015. Since then, the foundation has undergone a significant reorganization of its staff under the leadership of Pitt, the board of trustees and Executive Director Amanda Skier. Skier, the foundation’s former education director, was promoted in June 2016 following the resignation of Alexander C. Ives, the former executive director and president.

Executive Director Amanda Skier, left, and Board of Trustees Chairwoman Pauline Pitt say developing innovative programming and initiating more community outreach are vital to ensure the continued success of the 40-year-old Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach. Skier and Pitt are seated in the loggia at the foundation’s building on Peruvian Avenue. PHOTO BY DAMON HIGGINS



The Water Rising series and other new programming all reflect what Skier says is the core mission of the foundation.

“We want to make sure that people understand the significance of the built environment. In my opinion, it’s the most tangible representation of history,” Skier says.

The Preservation Foundation was founded in 1980, only a year after the town established its Landmarks Preservation Commission, the town board that oversees landmark protection for architecturally significant houses, buildings, scenic areas and other elements. The designation, which must be approved by the Palm Beach Town Council, generally protects landmarks from significant alteration unless the commission reviews and approves those changes.

A recent exhibit about the foundation’s 40th anniversary, displayed at its headquarters at 311 Peruvian Ave., noted the distinction between the nonprofit group and the municipal landmarks board: “The founding members (of the foundation) realized that the Town of Palm Beach needed an organization un beholden to the politics of the Landmarks Preservation Commission to protect the architectural and cultural heritage of the town.”

When Pitt took the reins of the 1,500-member group, she recalls, she knew that increasing the organization’s outreach into the community was crucial.

“When I took over, I sat and listened for about six months and then decided that we needed to do something new and different,” says Pitt. “And thankfully, we found Amanda, who is so educated and passionate about preservation. We worked together, and I certainly listened to her to put all of the ideas together to get more younger people involved.”

So where is the organization headed, now that it has four decades of experience with preservation and education? Here are five of the top initiatives the foundation is pursuing as it builds on its past and helps the community navigate an ever-more-complex future where historic properties are concerned.





PAN'S GARDEN AND 'LANDSCAPE STEWARDSHIP'

BLASTS FROM THE PAST

The Preservation Foundation established Pan's Garden in 1994, nine years before it would move its headquarters to a site immediately south of the half-acre green space. The garden is planted with species native to Florida to give residents a better idea of the town's botanical heritage — not only plants but the wildlife they attract. Stretching an entire block and open to the public, the garden features distinct areas — a wetland centered on a pond and an upland — representing habitats found in Florida. The garden is said to be the state's first native-plant botanical garden in an urban setting.

EMBRACING THE FUTURE

Forward thinking when it made its debut, Pan's Garden celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2019 and is playing a more important role as the foundation puts a new emphasis on what Director of Programming Katie Jacob describes as "cultural landscapes." The idea, she says, is to view historic buildings not in a vacuum but as part of the landscape that surrounds them, whether that's the grounds of a specific estate or the overall fabric of a neighborhood.

"When we talk about 'cultural landscapes,' we're really talking about the buildings and the natural environment — everything working together as one package. And I think Pan's Garden provides that," Jacob says.

Skier agrees. "We're always talking about stewardship of

these great homes, but we are also stewards of the natural environment," Skier says.

Last year, the foundation hired Susan Lerner as its director of horticulture, and she has worked to remove non-native plants that had found their way into Pan's Garden over the years. Lerner sees the garden as "a frontrunner in how people will be stewarding their landscapes."

Among Lerner's tasks, she also is meeting with residents and town staff to provide information about native-plant varieties and how to make use of them in local gardens and landscapes, including hedges. The town and the Garden Club of Palm Beach also have mounted efforts to promote sustainable landscapes, particularly in the use of native plants.

And next year will mark the 10th anniversary of the foundation's Lesley S. Smith Landscape Award. It honors exceptional Palm Beach landscape designs that complement the historical character of Palm Beach but also are "forward thinking," according to the foundation.

The foundation also this season is offering a series of garden classes and lectures, which were opened to the public for the first time in the past couple of years. Several of those programs focus on native species and how they can help property owners avoid chemical fertilizers. "We have to heal the environment" Skier says, "and we can do that by creating habitats for butterflies and birds — and finding ways to create a more resilient community. We have the first-hand knowledge and the resources right here."



FAR LEFT: One of the areas in Pan's Garden recreates the habitat of a wetland area, centered on a pond.

Pan's Garden is a testament to the town's botanical heritage. It features only native plant species, including spotted bee balm, **ABOVE**, to attract bees and purple beauty berry, **LEFT**.

PHOTOS BY MEGHAN MCCARTHY



ENGAGING THE COMMUNITY



Guests gather for a cocktail party at a landmarked house in Palm Beach, part of the 1878 Series, a newer program designed to attract younger members to the foundation. PHOTO BY CAPEHART

BLASTS FROM THE PAST

From its founding, the foundation and the town's early champions of historic preservation understood that garnering public support and understanding for the organization's mission was key to ensuring the success of its projects, events and fundraising efforts. The latter includes the foundation's signature dinner dance for members, one of the highlights of the season's social calendar. The gala will mark its 40th anniversary in 2021.

The foundation's popular lecture series — open to foundation members and the public — along with walking tours of historic neighborhoods have long been part of the organization's community-outreach calendar. So has the annual Historic Properties Workshop, founded in 1996 to help homeowners and others better understand and tackle issues facing older buildings.

EMBRACING THE FUTURE

As it enters its 40s, the foundation is actively endeavoring to reach more people and different audiences — and attract new members, says Jacob, who is focused on developing new programming to complement long-standing events.

"As we move forward, how can we continue to engage the community?" she asks.

One way is to focus on younger adults — a move supported by Chairwoman Pitt.

"Getting younger people involved in preservation is so important," says Pitt. "Certainly, we have so many younger people move to Palm Beach with their children.



The foundation's annual dinner dance is a highlight of Palm Beach's social calendar. A lakeside tent was erected for the 2018 event at a private estate. PHOTO BY CAPEHART

That's very different than it used to be."

Skier and her team, Pitt adds, are delivering programming that fills that need.

Take, for example, the recently established 1878 Series, which involves several cocktail parties each season — aimed at younger members of the organization — in historic houses owned by foundation members. Displays and presentations during the events focus on the history of the house, the architect and the restoration process. The most recent series focused on mid-20th-century architecture, considered by many a new frontier for preservation in Palm Beach.

"It's a very simple way to bring people to landmarked homes, using a little carrot of a cocktail party but then giving them education along the way," Jacob says. "We've found that by bringing people to these landmarks, they're a lot more engaged."

In the same way, the foundation has begun holding its Historic Properties Workshops on location so that attendees can see, for example, how a homeowner of a historic house might be addressing flood risks. Last fall, the workshop focused on landmarks in the Royal Poinciana Way commercial district.

"We were looking at the revitalization of landmarks and how they affect the cultural landscape of a street," Jacob says, noting in particular the revamp of the Royal Poinciana Plaza shopping center. "That was very exciting for that area, and I think it helped produce a renaissance for that street."

She adds: "If you just do something (about a building) in the lecture room, they're just seeing the building — they're not really taking anything back with them. But if they're actually there, it provides them the feeling of a sense of place and why the building is actually important."

The foundation's lecture series also broke new ground over the past two years with the introduction of a series of experts devoted to the effects of climate change and rising sea levels — and how communities at risk, especially those with historic buildings, are responding.

3

ENLIGHTENING THE NEXT GENERATION

BLASTS FROM THE PAST

In 1987, the Preservation Foundation founded its Heritage Education Program to teach fourth-graders at Palm Beach Day School — today Palm Beach Day Academy — about Palm Beach's cultural history by using the town's architecture as a touchstone of the curriculum.

Over the years, the program has expanded to four schools in Palm Beach and West Palm Beach. Students are taught about historic structures and the architects who built them and learn to recognize architectural details and style in the local community, with a goal of understanding the need for historic preservation. At the end of the multi-week program, students design, build and landscape their own miniature house in the Mediterranean Revival, Colonial Revival or Bungalow style using a supplied house kit. A recent addition to the program tasked students with designing a modern-day addition to their historic house — and then presenting it at a mock Landmarks Preservation Commission meeting, at which their peers played the roles of commissioners reviewing the plans. The exercise added a critical-thinking component to the program, organizers say.

EMBRACING THE FUTURE

With a goal of bringing educational options to more students, the foundation is exploring new field-trip programs that would expose more elementary school students to local history through the Heritage Education program.

"It would be a one-day event for students, to bring them to the foundation for a condensed version to do activities with them and then, perhaps, take a walking tour of Worth Avenue and the surrounding neighborhood," says Director of Education Aimee Sunny.



The Preservation Foundation's education programs at the historic Little Red Schoolhouse in Phipps Ocean Park reach thousands of fourth-grade students each year. PHOTO BY ALLEN EYESTONE

A likely focus would be the legacy of noted society architect Addison Mizner, whose fanciful buildings popularized the 1920s-era craze for Mediterranean Revival-style architecture in Palm Beach — and beyond.

"It's the most most widely recognized style in all of South Florida," Sunny says. "No matter what community you're from, you can see examples of that style in your community — and learn about the origins of the style in Palm Beach that led and shaped the architectural environment of South Florida."

The program would complement a field-trip initiative that since 1990 has been part of the foundation's educational outreach: Each year, thousands of fourth-graders from Palm Beach, Martin and Broward counties visit the historic Little Red Schoolhouse in Phipps Ocean Park, where they take part in a "living history" program to learn what a typical school day might have been like in 1886, the year the schoolhouse was built.

In other education initiatives, the foundation has expanded its undergraduate and graduate scholarships for students pursuing architecture, historic preservation and related fields, and also hosts a summer internship program for college students who undertake projects in preservation and archival research.



Fourth-graders create model houses in historical styles common in Palm Beach as part of the foundation's Heritage Education Program, founded in 1987. An expansion of the program to reach more students is in the works, organizers say. PHOTO BY KATIE JACOB, COURTESY OF PRESERVATION FOUNDATION



ARCHIVES, RESEARCH AND SCHOLARSHIP

BLASTS FROM THE PAST

Among its archives, the Preservation Foundation for years has been home to collections of the architectural drawings of three key architects who designed some of the most notable houses in Palm Beach — Marion Sims Wyeth (1889-1982), Belford W. Shoumate (1903-1991) and Henry K. Harding (1904-1984).

In 2018, the foundation acquired the extensive archives — with 24,000 architectural drawings alone — of architect John L. Volk (1901-1984), who designed and renovated hundreds of houses in Palm Beach, other parts of Florida and the Bahamas. And in 2019, the archives of the late interior designer Polly Jessup (1899-1988) were added to the foundation’s collection.

EMBRACING THE FUTURE

“We want to be actively advancing scholarship of Palm Beach’s architectural history,” Skier says, adding that the goal of the foundation has been to offer the archival services and resources of a true research institution.

“How do we share everything in our archives? It doesn’t do anyone any good if we just hold it,” Skier says.

Toward that end, Director of Archives Shellie Labell, who was hired in 2016, has been working to catalog and digitize materials in the foundation’s collections, to make them more widely available to scholars and the public. Labell’s goal is to have 100 percent of the collection digitized and available for research by mid-2021.

“So much of the collection hasn’t been accessible,” Labell says. “People often didn’t even know it was here. And if nobody’s looking at it, then nobody’s learning anything from it.”

And Skier is especially excited about the foundation’s forthcoming book about Wyeth and his work, authored by former town landmarks consultant Jane S. Day, whose original research on Wyeth is complemented by that of the late historian Dr. Donald Curl. With a publication date tentatively set for fall 2021, the as-yet-untitled book will comprise the first comprehensive survey of Wyeth’s work, Day says.

The foundation also recently updated and republished two books. First issued in 1974, *Landmark Architecture of Palm Beach*, a groundbreaking work by the late preservationist Barbara D. Hoffstot, helped galvanize the island’s residents to preserve historic buildings threatened by redevelopment. The new fourth edition corrects inaccuracies and is a much more comprehensive look at the town’s landmarked structures, Skier says.

The foundation also updated and reissued a book featuring restored Palm Beach estates that have won the organization’s Robert I. Ballinger Award, established in 1988. *Palm Beach: An Architectural Heritage*, marked the first new edition since the original version, *Palm Beach: An Architectural Legacy*, was written by the foundation’s first executive director, the late Polly Earl, and published in 2003.



This undated rendering of the Royal Poinciana Plaza was included in the donation of the John L. Volk Collection to the foundation.



Director of Archives Shellie Labell examines materials in the extensive John L. Volk Collection, which the late architect’s son, John K. Volk, donated to the foundation in 2018. The collection was later appraised at more than \$1 million. PHOTOS COURTESY PRESERVATION FOUNDATION



ABOVE LEFT: Funded by Sam Lehrman, a renovation of Earl E.T. Smith Park near Town Hall celebrated the foundation's 40th anniversary. PHOTO BY SARGENT PHOTOGRAPHY

ABOVE RIGHT: The foundation partnered with the town and The Garden Club of Palm Beach for the recent beautification of historic Bradley Park on Bradley Place at Royal Poinciana Way. PHOTO BY CAPEHART

BLASTS FROM THE PAST

Over its history, the foundation has been involved in countless efforts to help preserve Palm Beach's historical buildings and landscapes, Skier says.

Among the most notable was a successful effort to save from demolition the 1886 Sea Gull Cottage, the oldest house in Palm Beach and the home of railroad-and-hotel magnate Henry M. Flagler before he built Whitehall, today the Flagler Museum. In 1984, the foundation had the house moved from its second home at The Breakers to a spot near its original lakefront location south of Whitehall on property owned by Royal Poinciana Chapel, where it underwent a top-to-bottom restoration.

Other community-focused projects included the foundation's Palm Sale, which for 25 years sold palms, initially to replace those that were damaged or killed by lethal yellowing in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The foundation was also among the major funders of two projects at historic Town Hall — an exterior restoration in 1989 and an interior update 20 years later. Immediately west of Town Hall, the foundation took the site of an old gas station and turned it into a privately owned, open-to-the-public park named for the late former Mayor Earl E. T. Smith, who served as the foundation's first chairman.

EMBRACING THE FUTURE

In January, in honor of the foundation's 40th birthday, the organization made plans to rededicate Earl E.T. Smith Park after it underwent a refurbishment last year.

Those efforts followed a much more extensive beautification project at Bradley Park across town, which the foundation completed in late 2017 in a public-private partnership with The Garden Club of Palm Beach and the town.

Such community involvement recently has found expression in other ways, as well. Late last year, the foundation co-sponsored with the town a two-day Historic District Educational Symposium. Open to the public, the event's goal was to help people better understand the pros and cons of creating historic districts. Proponents say doing so can preserve the architectural charm and character of whole neighborhoods by protecting houses there from significant alteration or demolition unless first reviewed by the Landmarks Preservation Commission.

And after more than 40 years of landmarks preservation in town, Skier notes that preserving high-quality and culturally significant mid-20th-century houses and buildings in Palm Beach is emerging as a welcome priority with preservationists. As she puts it, new buildings at some point become old buildings worth saving.

The foundation also uses its annual awards program recognizing architecture and landscapes to spotlight historically sensitive renovations and restorations (the Robert I. Ballinger Award and Polly Earl Award), notable landscaping projects (the Lesley S. Smith Award) and new architecture (The Elizabeth L. and John H. Schuler Award).

"The quality of these projects sets an example of excellence for the entire community," Skier says.