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WATCH HILL'S historic Ocean House reopened June 1 after a \$140 million reconstruction — rebuilt from the ground up.

The Essential Ocean House

By MICHAEL J. CROSBIE

Summer memories are particularly strong. Depending on where you grew up as a kid, you might have vivid recall of a beach visited each summer, complete with an old merry-go-round, an ice cream shop and a grand Victorian hotel decked out with yellow clapboards and yawning porches overlooking the Atlantic. That memory is from Watch Hill, R.I., and the big hotel was (and now is, once again) the Ocean House.

Built just after the Civil War, the Ocean House was one of New England's most celebrated summer enclaves, surmounting a bluff on the east side edge of Watch Hill, just up the hill from Bay Street. Over the years the Ocean House grew and changed — a new wing was constructed to the north, a hip roof was added to the tower to accommodate an elevator, and more rooms were added.

A century on, the Ocean House was way past its prime, and most people today who remember it at all recall it as a dilapidated "fire trap," as my wife's Aunt Helen pronounced it when visiting in the 1970s. Things went downhill from there. By the early years of this century, the Ocean House was shuttered and slated for demolition, its site fertile ground for a crop of McMansions.

Watch Hill shuddered at the thought. Banding together to save the Ocean House, the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, local preservationists, town planner Bill Hasse and the Westerly Town Council helped create an "Ocean-front Historic Hotels" ordinance. That stopped the McMansion developers, but it didn't change the fact that the hotel was too far gone to save.

Centerbrook Architects, hired



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THE OCEAN HOUSE, which opened in the 1860s, had fallen into disrepair by the 1970s and was eventually deemed unsalvageable.

by Watch Hill resident Chuck Royce (who jumped in to revive the hotel), did a careful survey of the building and concluded that the cost of bringing the Ocean House back to its former glory as a viable hotel would be prohibitive. The structure was shaky, the cellar was beyond resuscitation and would not accommodate the needs of a modern facility, most of the existing building fabric was beyond restoration and code violations were numerous. Centerbrook advised Royce to tear it down.

This didn't sit very well with preservationists, who had just fought to save it. But Centerbrook made an interesting argument about reconstruction as preservation. Based on their research, they determined that the year 1908 was the apex of the hotel's history. Why couldn't a new Ocean House be reconstructed as it looked a century ago? This would mean designing a hotel with 49 rooms that would appear smaller from the front, which faces Westerly Road (before additions were made later in the 20th century), but expanded

in size as it faces the beach (allowing 23 condominium units, a spa, underground parking, function rooms, and other amenities expected in a contemporary resort, making it economically feasible).

Some preservationists had trouble with the idea that Ocean House would have to be torn down in order to save it. The Ocean-front Historic Hotels ordinance dictated that the new hotel be similar in size to the historic structure.

Centerbrook worked with an advisory committee of historic design experts on the design. The existing building was carefully documented. The overall heights of the new building are true to the original, as are critical dimensions such as the distance between floors and the size of windows and their position about the floors.

Parts of the old building were salvaged — a decorative window and balcony over the front door; the front desk, a beach stone fireplace on the first floor that was taken apart and reconstructed precisely in the new hotel, and an

old wood and wrought iron elevator cab that was sensitively enlarged so that you can't tell the new parts from the old. The architects were careful to replicate the columns, capitals, woodwork, railings — all the touchable details that give architecture its character, its authenticity. All of the materials close to human touch and eye are made of wood, while details on the upper stories are of synthetic materials easier to maintain.

Walking around and through the reconstructed Ocean House, it is difficult to argue with Centerbrook's logic—the only way to save the old building was to tear it down. If one follows a very strict interpretation of preservation, Ocean House is gone — there is very little of the original hotel that once stood on this spot. But in the larger context of the town of Watch Hill, the site, and its 140-year history, Ocean House is very much preserved.

The key here is to be clear about what is saved through preservation. A narrow view focuses exclusively on preserving a physical object. A broader view of preservation recognizes the fact that buildings constantly change physically. Additions are made, taken down, new pieces are added, old parts are demolished. What we are left with is a presence — the building in its context — the street, the neighborhood, the town, the city.

That presence is what is worth saving — and now infuses the Ocean House — even if it means we lose an old building beyond saving.

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