

TRAVEL

A Newport celebrity gets a multimillion-dollar makeover

Rosecliff, a Gilded Age Rhode Island mansion, gets a well-deserved touch-up and reopens to the public on Sept. 1.

By [Christopher Muther](#) Globe Staff, Updated August 29, 2023, 5:32 a.m.



After a \$7.4 million renovation, Rosecliff mansion in Newport, R.I., has returned to its Gilded Age glamour. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

NEWPORT — After a splashy silver screen debut in the 1956 film “High Society,” this celebrity enjoyed supporting roles in “The Great Gatsby,” “True Lies,” “27 Dresses,” and “Amistad.” But like many Hollywood stars, [Rosecliff](#), the famous Gilded Age mansion that provided a glamorous backdrop to memorable films, was starting to look a bit weathered around the edges.

Last week, the [Preservation Society of Newport County](#) unveiled Rosecliff’s \$7.4 million facelift. The 1902 mansion was closed in January for eight months of extensive restoration. Work on the 30-room, 28,800-square-

foot mansion was focused on the exterior, with the exception of the mansion's enormous ballroom. The intricate, 3,200-square-foot ballroom floor was recreated with 305 white oak panels.


The mansion reopens Sept. 1 with an exhibition of Chinese art collected by Newport's 18th and 19th century merchants and industrialists.

According to Trudy Coxe, chief executive officer of the Preservation Society of Newport Country, the mansion, commissioned by Nevada silver heiress Theresa Fair Oelrichs, had started to crumble. Pieces of statues on the front facade of the mansion were beginning to fall to the ground.

"So we had to put netting around the previous sculptures so that people wouldn't get hurt," she said at an unveiling of the renovations last week. "But you could look up and see that a cupid would have a big chunk out of her arm, so that had to be repaired. The only way to repair the four sculptures was to start over again."

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In addition to recreating the Baroque-style sculptures, 600 feet of the ornate balustrade that runs the roof's perimeter was carefully removed, recreated, and replaced. The 5,000-square-foot roof was replaced with a new rubber membrane that should last 30 years.



The backyard and grand fountain on the back lawn at Rosecliff mansion in Newport, R.I. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

The biggest change most visitors will notice is the freshly gleaming exterior. According to Mike Taber, director of properties for the Preservation Society, all of the mansion's marble and terra cotta surfaces were steam cleaned.

There were less glamorous updates, such as stripping and repainting the windows, rebuilding the back stairs, and cleaning the fountains. But one of the more mundane tasks unveiled a glitzy surprise. While sandblasting paint from the iron gates on the mansion's front door, workers discovered gold gilding that had been painted over for decades.



Workers found gold gilding buried under paint during a \$7.4 million renovation of Rosecliff mansion in Newport, R.I. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

“I’ve worked here for 20 years and never even imagined that those doors were so luxurious,” Coxe said. “When they told me I said ‘Are you sure the doors were gilded? Really?’ It was just, wow. It makes such a difference.”

Rosecliff, which was designed by the famed Beaux-Arts architectural firm of McKim, Mead & White, is one of the most recognizable mansions in Newport thanks to its distinctive heart-shaped staircase and its elaborate ballroom. It was completed in 1902 at a cost of \$2.5 million. Principal architect Stamford White modeled the Rosecliff after the Grand Trianon, a 17th century garden retreat built at Versailles for Louis XIV of France.

According to Coxe, the renovation of Rosecliff was one of the most significant undertaken by the preservation society. The organization spends \$10.5 million annually to maintain the mansions. Most of those funds come from ticket sales, and rentals for events such as weddings, filming, and corporate parties.



Robert Redford outside Rosecliff in a scene from the film "The Great Gatsby," 1974. ARCHIVE PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

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NewsnShort

8/29/23 - 6:38AM

Instead of paying homage to the uber wealthy, this would be a perfect opportunity to turn this, and many others, into affordable housing. Celebrity worship is really insulting when we face the multitude of serious problems that we do.



Tim Casey

8/29/23 - 6:52AM

It really can't be used for affordable housing. The rooms, the layout, and the plumbing do not lend themselves to multiple tenants.

And really, it's a beautiful building.

Newport was actually a big slave trading post in the 1700s. The people who amassed great fortunes and built these mansions in the late 1800s did it on the backs of low-paid workers, all while doing shady deals that hurt the average person. Unfettered capitalism is a bad thing - most everyone knows that.

But a beautiful building is a beautiful building, even long after the builders are dead and buried. We may not remember anything about them, but we can enjoy what they left behind.



JAG49

8/29/23 - 7:02AM

And you would do this if you owned the property or if a resident of Newport where tourists flock here to tour these mansions, providing money for hotels, restaurants and other businesses?



trumpedout1

8/29/23 - 7:19AM

You can put affordable housing anywhere. You have to be trying to get a rise out of the reader. Please tell us you aren't serious? Please?



WhatsWrongWithYouPeople!

8/29/23 - 7:55AM

New home for illegal immigrants?



chuckflies

8/29/23 - 8:02AM

News, Read some history and appreciate it for what it is.



Daisy5432

8/29/23 - 8:35AM

FFS



Timster

8/29/23 - 9:48AM

Affordable housing? You can't be serious. These places are dinosaurs. They require people paying entrance fees to see them to keep them up. They're money pits.

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MassTax

8/29/23 - 7:03AM

The über wealthy that built it for themselves may be gone, but these beautiful buildings are now for everyone. No, they can't be chopped up into subsidized housing, but they can be used as wonderful settings for community events. Instead of being bitter, think of it as an enhancement for public life that these venues exist for the community.



swfoutsida

8/29/23 - 7:09AM

Soviets agree, tear down and put up block housing.



selg

8/29/23 - 7:15AM

Are there any copy editors left at the Globe?



smoza

8/29/23 - 8:18AM

Do you have a specific complaint about this article, or is that just an amorphous lament?



Antietam

8/29/23 - 9:05AM

Long gone.



PogMoThoin504

8/29/23 - 9:47AM

No.

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JerseyBoy#1

8/29/23 - 7:41AM

The building is art - I say we sell all the art we can find and build low income housing to make Newport look like the Bronx. If only some can have nice things - then no-one should have nice things.
Kidding.....



Run silent, run deep!

8/29/23 - 8:20AM

Having toured this home and several of the others, what struck me most was they were built as summer homes for the NY tycoons who built our railroads and created the oil industry. Our present day “oil barons” would rather spend their money building rockets to fly to other planets.



Altair Blue

8/29/23 - 8:21AM

The Gilded Age did, in a roundabout way, give way to the progressive labor policies of successive FDR administrations, and included the National Labor Relations Act (1935) and the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938).

Congress passed the Labor Management Relations Act (1947) over the veto of President Truman, and as many folks have remarked, we are back in the middle of a second Gilded Age.

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