

Saving a jewel of the Emerald Necklace

Old landmark seeks new life



Anne Lusk (left) of the Harvard School of Public Health, Bill Powell (center) of the American Institute of Architecture, and Hugh Mattison of the Friends of Pinebank joined with a local worker, Claire Chisholm, to discuss preserving the Pinebank mansion. (Essdras M. Suarez/ Globe Staff)

By Bill Porter, Globe Staff | September 11, 2006

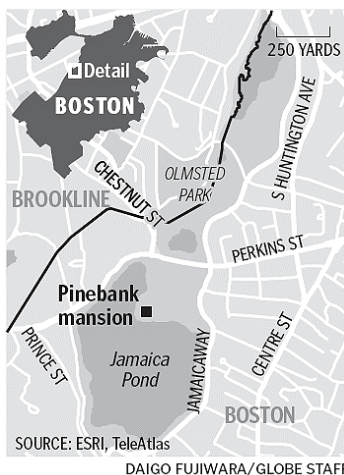
Blackened by soot, despoiled by graffiti, and crumbling under the assaults of vandalism and neglect, a star-crossed landmark near the shore of Jamaica Pond now faces the wrecking ball.

Time is running out on the Pinebank mansion, built in 1870 by a family of merchants and philanthropists, and still standing on a promontory within the Emerald Necklace, the system of parks and waterways that was designed by Frederick Law Olmsted, and that is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Jamaica Plain building is the only mansion that Olmsted retained in the park system. But it was gutted by two fires in the 1970s, has been uninhabitable for 30 years, and is now beyond repair, according to the Boston Parks and Recreation Department, which recommends dismantling the building.

“It would be nice if it could happen this fall,” said Mary Hines, a spokeswoman for the department. “It’s becoming more and more dangerous for people passing by.”

The city will discuss the future of Pinebank Thursday night at the Arnold Arboretum.



But a citizens' group is trying to save the Gothic mansion, saying that it should be reconstructed to restore some beauty to the landscape. Hugh Mattison, founder of Friends of Pinebank, said the mansion could be turned into a cultural center, and estimated that the project would cost about \$5 million. Much of this could be privately raised, he said.

The group is preparing documents for incorporation, and intends to apply for status as a nonprofit organization. This, Mattison said, could attract funding from major foundations. He also expressed hope in a partnership with the city. Hines said the city was still open to alternatives to tearing down the mansion, but she said that the cost of restoring Pinebank would be closer to \$10 million.

“Much of the masonry has deteriorated to the point beyond which it can be restored,” said John Wathne, president of Structures North Consulting Engineers of Salem, which completed a structural assessment of the building for

the city in January.

“Our investigation concluded that it would have to be dismantled almost entirely to the ground, which was certainly a disappointment,” Wathne said.

Pinebank was originally owned by the Perkins family, which had built a summer home on the site in 1802. They replaced it in 1848 with a year-round home, but it burned down 20 years later. The family hired architects John Hubbard Sturgis and Charles Brigham, who also designed the first Museum of Fine Arts building in Copley Square, to draw plans for another house.

In 1895, three years after the city acquired Pinebank for inclusion in Olmsted's project, fire struck again. Rebuilt again, Pinebank served as headquarters for the Parks Commission for a decade, and as Boston's first children's museum from 1913 to 1936. It housed offices for the engineering division of the parks department from 1936 to 1970, and was used for arts courses and a theater.

Anne Lusk, a member of Friends of Pinebank, said that without the mansion, the Emerald Necklace would be missing one of its pearls. She said a reconstructed Pinebank would provide the Emerald Necklace with a destination for pedestrians and bicyclists.

The interior could incorporate the latest standards for a green environmental design, Lusk said. Friends of Pinebank envisions the mansion as an arts center with a café, restrooms, and space for community groups, which could sustain itself financially.

"Olmsted liked the juxtaposition of the natural landscape and the built elements," said Lusk, who holds a doctorate in architecture from the University of Michigan, with a specialization in environmental psychology.

"It's not the same if you arrive at a piece of grass overlooking a pond," she said.

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