

Rescuing history in Roxbury



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FOR DECADES, the vacant firehouse on Eustis Street in Roxbury tilted toward the Eliot Burying Ground, as if predicting its own demise. Only the wooden braces put in place 15 years ago by the city prevented the collapse of Boston's oldest remaining firehouse. But now preservationists are mounting a serious rescue effort for the 150-year-old structure.

Historic Boston, a nonprofit preservation group, is undertaking a \$2 million renovation and expansion of the former firehouse, a two-story brick building with an arched entry that evokes the days of hand- and horse-drawn engines. The building has been out of service as a fire station since 1919 and abandoned since the 1950s. But it is redeemable, according to Historic Boston director Kathy Kottaridis, who plans to make it the new headquarters for the organization, now housed downtown in the Old Corner Bookstore on School Street.

Historic Boston's commitment to move to the more humble Roxbury neighborhood puts a sharp focus on the group's wider efforts to restore historic buildings in outlying neighborhoods, including Fields Corner in Dorchester and Logan Square in Hyde Park. It's a chance both to restore significant buildings and to remind residents that there is plenty worth protecting far from the historic districts of Beacon Hill and the Back Bay. "This place matters," reads Historic Boston's sign on the Roxbury firehouse. And it matters that the group is not only talking a good game about cherishing older neighborhoods, but setting up shop in one, too.

Investment visits Roxbury in fits and starts. But armed with a 99-year lease from the city, Historic Boston can really sink its roots in this hardscrabble section near Dudley Square. One area that deserves greater attention is the abutting Eliot Burying Ground, the final resting place of two colonial governors, Thomas Dudley (1653) and Joseph Dudley (1720). The locked cemetery rarely receives visits from history buffs despite its presence on the National Register of Historic Places. Historic Boston staffers will be ideally situated to serve as caretakers and tour guides for the burying ground. City officials could help by extending the brick sidewalk and decorative lampposts fronting the cemetery to include the area in front of the firehouse.

The richness of Roxbury's past deserves proper illumination. ■

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