

Preserving Detroit, site by site

Q&A with Rebecca Binno Savage

BY ELLEN PILIGIAN | MARCH 25, 2009

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To revitalize and repopulate the inner city, historic preservation expert Rebecca Binno Savage wishes there were a larger state historic tax credit to inspire developers. [View larger photo](#)

Growing up, Rebecca Binno Savage dreamed of being an archaeologist, someone who studies the remains of a culture and its people. She kind of got her wish. Only today it's Detroit's buildings she mines for their past.

In her job as senior project manager at AKT Peerless Environmental Services in Detroit, the historic preservation expert helps owners of old buildings get historic designation, enabling them to receive tax credits.

She also meets with developers interested in restoring these buildings.

"I consider them (the) bravest people," Savage says. "(They) risk huge sums of money, sometimes

their life savings, in order to restore a property they feel has potential. ... Banks and other lending institutions typically refuse to lend for construction loans and make the process difficult and a struggle."

Born in Detroit, Savage, 45, worked in advertising for nine years doing print production before discovering her passion. After volunteering for Preservation Wayne in 1986, she joined the board of directors and saw how the nonprofit world worked. She was inspired.

"They had the same goals and aspirations for Detroit that I had."

It changed her life. She went on to get her master's degree in historic preservation from Columbia University (she has a bachelor's degree in marketing from Wayne State University).

Savage has since worked as a historic preservation specialist and consultant and currently serves as vice president of the Detroit Area Art Deco Society.

With a passion for Art Deco – she co-authored *Art Deco in Detroit*, published by Arcadia Publishing in 2004 – she has lectured about Detroit's Art Deco architecture at locations from Lawrence Technological University to the Art Deco Society of New York.

The former board member of the Michigan Historic Preservation Network, Preservation Wayne and the Greening of Detroit, currently sits on the boards of the Hamtramck Economic Development Corp., the Brodhead Army Preservation Society and Preserve Our Parks.

She says the best part of her job is seeing buildings she's worked on "go from vacant and empty, to occupied and lived in." Among them are the Lofts at Woodward Center, the Lafer Building and the Kales Building.

Savage says if money were no object she'd live in a condo at the top floor of the Book Cadillac. For now she makes her home in Hamtramck with husband Harley Savage Jr., a computer programmer/operator, and their cat, Stashu, to whom she enjoys speaking Polish.

What do you wish you could change about your field?

I wish that there were a larger state historic tax credit that was inspiring developers to restore historic properties. That would make sprawling suburban development in the outer-ring suburbs overpriced. Thus it would revitalize and repopulate the inner city.

What's your favorite Detroit building?

The Guardian Building is a masterpiece of Art Deco architecture and a landmark of international standing. It's an incredible combination of Aztec, Art Deco and skyscraper design. The Vanity Ballroom on East Jefferson is a rare ballroom with an incredible style. The Brodhead Naval Armory on East Jefferson has Michigan's largest collection of Works Progress Administration artwork.

Who are your favorite architects?

Wirt Rowland was a great visionary for Detroit in the 1920s. He designed the Guardian, Buhl and Penobscot buildings. Charles Agree's fabulous style gave Detroit's retail buildings personality. Albert Kahn was Detroit's greatest architect and the city would not have been the same without his firm's innovation and talent.

First place you'd take an out-of-towner?

Hamtramck Disneyland, St. Florian and our walkable community. Then downtown to the landmarks: the Guardian, Buhl and One Woodward buildings. Maybe Campus Martius, the Fisher Building in New Center and the RenCen – it impresses people.

What is your most treasured possession?

My grandmother's class ring. Hamtramck High School, class of '35. I always wear it.

What has been your most exciting work experience?

Last year, I nominated the Garden Bowl on Woodward Avenue for the National Register of Historic Places, and it was chosen to be a sample nomination on the National Park Service's Web site. This sounds like a "so what" thing – but it was chosen from thousands. I felt like I made it to the top of the heap.

What do you spend too much money on?

I eat lunch out every day, but downtown has so many terrific choices. I like Eph's on Woodward Avenue. It has great deli food and it's decorated with Detroit memorabilia. They also named the food after Detroit icons.

What superpower would you like to have?

Super strength. I'd brick up the entrances to Detroit's most vulnerable vacant buildings.

What would you do if you knew you could not fail?

Become best friends with (Ambassador Bridge owner) Matty Maroun and convince him that restoring the Michigan Central Station would be the greatest legacy gift he could ever leave this community.

What's one book you think everyone should read?

The Buildings of Detroit by W. Hawkins Ferry. It's an astonishing lesson to see all the amazing buildings that we have lost in Detroit.

What would you do if you had to change careers?

I would teach Detroit history.

Who do you look to for professional inspiration?

Michael Farrell, an art history and architecture history professor at the College for Creative Studies; William Colburn, former executive director of Preservation Wayne; and Michael Hauser, author, Detroit historian and marketing director for the Detroit Opera House.

One thing you wish someone would invent?

A mass transit system that pays for itself. That way we can justify its existence without taxpayer subsidy.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

My husband and I will be restoring a house and I'll still be on a lot of nonprofit boards. I've also always wanted to work for the city of Detroit.

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