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Cavallaro's rescue offers some lessons

Author(s): ROBERT BEHRE Of The Post and Courier Staff **Date:** January 21, 2002 **Section:**

Three years ago, Rick Hendrick Imports was seriously considering razing The **Cavallaro** restaurant as part of a plan to expand its sales area along Savannah Highway. Last week, Rick Hendrick general manager Sears Sauls accepted a Carolopolis award from the Preservation Society of Charleston for the car dealer's efforts to save and rehabilitate the Art Deco landmark.

The story of The **Cavallaro**'s salvation contains several interesting lessons:

w Charleston might have passed the nation's first preservation ordinance, but preservationists can't rely solely on government. As it became known that The **Cavallaro** might be torn down, Charleston City Council considered passing an ordinance that would have given it new protection, but the votes weren't there.

w Public pressure still works. If so many people hadn't voiced their concern about losing the 1946 building, it's almost a certainty that it would now be gone.

w A growing number of preservation battles may be fought in the suburbs, where many buildings are approaching 50 or even 75 years of age. Most everyone seems to accept the idea that downtown Charleston's 18th- and 19th-century buildings ought to be saved, but the idea of preserving more recent buildings is a tougher sell.

w There's no substitute for a generous property owner.

Even if public pressure made Rick Hendrick Imports realize that it might anger potential customers by proceeding with a demolition, the choice to save and reuse the building seems as generous as it was practical.

"It's nice to be recognized for doing what we think long range was doing the right thing," Sauls says of the Carolopolis award. "It was painful because it required a lot larger investment than what we should have been making. I'm proud of it but it's hard to take that to the bank."

The dealership spent an extra \$500,000 to save the old restaurant as part of its \$4 million expansion on Savannah Highway. "We didn't need to spend that \$500,000 then," Sauls says. "It will be a while until we get a return on what we have spent."

In its award, the Preservation Society calls the building "a rare surviving Lowcountry example of vernacular Art Deco roadside architecture."

It was built in 1946 by Charleston investor and businessman C.B. "Skeet" Lawrence on land that once was part of the Farmfield Plantation owned by William Ravenel Esq., great grandfather of state Sen. Arthur Ravenel, Jr., R-Mount Pleasant.

Lawrence's son, Richard G. Lawrence, told the society that the restaurant was located on Savannah Highway 2.5 miles from Charleston to give the locals "a feeling like they were going somewhere." Its opening night gala featured Cab Calloway, and the restaurant's reputation for steaks and dancing would make it a focal point of Charleston in the 1940s, '50s and '60s.

By 1998, an attempt to revive The **Cavallaro**'s glory days had come to an end, and Rick Hendrick Honda bought the property. Its plans to tear it down triggered a ruckus that even reached the national level when Preservation magazine listed the building as endangered.

"There was a lot of pressure, a lot of interest in this market in preserving it," says Sauls, who wasn't working on the expansion at the time. "I've made numerous trips through that building with people from Charleston who remember it specifically or vaguely. They're intrigued and think it's neat what we've done," he adds.

The car dealer enlarged openings on the south and west facade so automobiles could be driven into a showroom, but it managed to save as much as possible of the exterior Art Deco details, such as its entrance markers, block glass and other ornament. Francheschi Robert and Eve Architects worked on the design for the 6,800-square-foot building.

Some may dislike how the exterior colors were changed from pink-peach to a stark blue and white, or how some transparent glass windows replaced some glass blocks. Or that it's not a

restaurant any more.

But that may be nit-picking.

That the building has managed to survive, albeit in an altered form is a positive.

And Rick Hendrick's salesmen can recite a song title by the building's namesake, bandleader Carmen **Cavallaro**, as they work with a customer to clinch a deal: "There's Yes! Yes! In Your Eyes."

Other properties receiving the Carolopolis award this year include: 246 Ashley Ave.; 19 and 23 Kracke St.; 82 Broad St. (the Charleston County Courthouse); 36 Ashe St.; 76 Vanderhorst St.; 66 Columbus St.; 379-381 King St.; 46 Warren St.; and 93 Hasell St. (St. Mary's Catholic Church).

w The College of Charleston's Program in Historic Preservation and the Historic Charleston Foundation are teaming up to offer a series of preservation craft training workshops. The topics and dates include the following: restoring stained glass (Feb. 7-8); traditional crafts for historic houses (March 21-22); and faux finishing (April 4-5). The sessions cost \$145 per person or \$125 (early registration). For more information, call 953-5822. The college also plans a plaster workshop in October, but the exact date has not been set.

Robert Behre may be reached at 937-5771 or by fax at 937-5579. His e-mail address is rbehre@postandcourier.com, and his mailing address is 134 Columbus St. Charleston S.C. 29403.

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