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Newsmaker: Preservationist Rosin: 'They're all like my children'

Q&A

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*[Elizabeth Rosin](#)'s career reached another pinnacle last month, when she was named as Preservationist of the Year by the Kansas City chapter of the **American Institute of Architects**.*

During the past 15 years, Rosin has worked with two local firms to help preserve more than \$500 million worth of historic architecture in the area. She founded Rosin Preservation LLC in 2006.

*At both firms, Rosin performed the research necessary to allow owners of old buildings to get them listed on the **National Register of Historic Places**. That's a prerequisite for earning state and federal historic tax credits to help finance rehabilitation, and Rosin Preservation specializes in the tax credit application process, as well.*

*In 2014, Rosin and her firm played key roles in several high-profile projects, including redevelopment of Commerce Tower, the Kansas City Power & Light Building and the historic **Folger Coffee Co.** plant. She also remains engaged in an effort to help save Kemper Arena from the wrecking ball through historic designation.*

On-site exploration of bricks-and-mortar subjects can be exciting, said Rosin, who once braved her tremendous fear of heights to inspect a dirigible dock from a deck above the 105th floor of the Empire State Building.

But those thinking about following in her career footsteps should be warned: Historic preservation isn't all the stuff of Indiana Jones. One also must be wired to enjoy the thrill of monotony: "Just the research and writing for a single (National Register) application can easily take 80 hours."

How did you come to be a historic preservation specialist?

I had wanted to be an archaeologist from the time I was really young, so that was my focus when I went to college. We lived Denmark when I was in second and third grade. My third-grade history class was all about ancient Danish civilization, and my family visited a lot of ancient sites. We would do day trips to visit different Viking mounds and Iron Age villages, things like that. And the town we lived in had a great archaeology museum.

You were otherwise raised and educated in the Northeast, and that's where your career started, right?

Yes. After earning my bachelor's degree, I worked for an archaeology firm, Cultural Resource Consulting Group, in Highland Park, N.J. They did a lot of compliance work, so I did a lot of walking in the woods, surveying future utility corridors and things like that to make sure that no archaeological sites were going to be disturbed.

What brought you to Kansas City?

After graduate school, I worked for the Louis Berger Group's Boston area office for two years. ... Then I left the private sector and came to work for the Kansas City Landmark Commission (now called the Historic Preservation Commission) in 1993. It's part of the city planning department, and they administer the city's preservation ordinance. Owners of buildings in local historic preservation districts have to get commission approval before they make changes to the exteriors. And while I was with the commission, we designated quite a few new local historic districts — Old Hyde Park being probably the biggest.

What was your first impression of Kansas City?

We moved here right before the '93 flood. I think it rained the first 40 days we were here. But I'm a huge art deco fan — I'd been really involved with the Art Deco Society in Boston — and when I first started driving around Kansas City and seeing all of these commercial buildings with this amazing art deco terra-cotta, I was blown away. Yes, Boston has all the Colonial and Victorian architecture, but Kansas City has the 20th-century stuff that they don't really have.

Is there a favorite building you've worked on since returning to the private sector in 1998?

They're all like my children. But the BMA Tower was definitely one of my favorites just because it's so beautiful. It's a piece of sculpture. There are also projects that are really satisfying because you've helped bring back a building that was in really horrible shape. ... The President Hotel is, hands down, the worst building I have ever been in during the "before" stage. It had been empty for 20 years, had been vandalized and was full of bird droppings.

You're going to be moving to an old building you're buying at 1712 Holmes Road. So you're becoming your own client, right?

Yes, we're working to get it designated, and I would love to be able to get the tax credits (for refurbishing). The back part was built in 1926 and was a brass foundry. After World War II, it became a machine shop, and the gentleman who bought it added on the front piece in 1945 and then expanded to the south. The neighborhood was transitioning from residential to light

industrial at the time.

Are you afraid Kansas City will run out of historic buildings to preserve?

It's definitely getting harder because the bigger, older, easier ones have all been done. But the beauty is that every year more buildings reach that magical 50-year-old threshold (at which point they are eligible for historic designation). Granted, the whole aesthetic definitely changes when you get into the late 20th century; you see a lot more homogeneity. But these buildings, too, tell a unique story about Kansas City as a place and about what was happening nationally.

Rob reports on real estate and development.



Elizabeth Rosin says she was “blown away” by Kansas City’s art deco buildings when she first arrived.

Andrew Grumke | KCBJ