

# PROVIDENCE

## Preservation Society

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### Bright Days Ahead for Poirier's Diner

When Providence developer Jon Özbek purchased Poirier's Diner in 2002, he had no idea it would be over ten years before his dream of bringing a truly authentic diner back to the West Side would be realized. "It is one of very few examples of this building type left in the state," says Özbek, adding that the diner "has been making a significant contribution to the city for more than 65 years."

Manufactured by the Kullman Dining Car Company of New Jersey, Joseph A. Poirier Jr. brought the stainless steel diner to Atwells Avenue in Eagle Square in 1947 — where it remained until 2002 when many of the buildings in the Eagle Square complex were demolished as part of a major redevelopment project. That's when Özbek, developer of nearby Loie Fuller's, The Avery, and "north," stepped in — rescuing the diner from certain demolition, and starting a decade-long project to bring this local landmark back to life. No stranger to complex preservation projects, Özbek previously won a number of PPS Historic Preservation Awards for a variety of projects, including the rehabilitation of the historic Henry Molter House (1888) at 1447 Westminster Street.


In its original location, the diner served workers at a massive industrial center that included the GE Base Plant, Uncas Manufacturing, the ALCO / U.S. Rubber complex, and Harris Lumber. The retreat of large industrial groups from the Northeast forced Poirier's, along with many other diners in the region, to find a new customer base.

Diners once dotted Providence's industrial landscapes, first in the late nineteenth century as mobile "lunch wagons," then as permanent eateries in the early 1900s when diner manufacturers set up shop throughout the Northeast. By the 1940s, the Kullman Dining Car Company had gained a reputation for stylized designs, featuring stainless steel panels, glass block windows, porcelain flutes, and interiors that featured stainless steel sunburst patterns, Formica counters, and ceramic tile floors, in what is known as the "Streamline Deco" style.

After purchasing the diner in 2002, Özbek stored it behind Loie Fuller's, where it remained for eight years during the search for a new site on the West Side. It was during this time that a number of stainless steel components were stolen from the diner, which meant that many unique features would have to be recreated, in many cases through only the use of old photographs.

One of the first steps in the diner's rehabilitation was the preparation of a National Register of Historic Places nomination by Kim Smith of the Providence Revolving Fund, thereby (in 2003) making it only the second diner in the state to be placed on the National Register after the Modern Diner in Pawtucket. The nomination, which enabled Özbek to access both Rhode Island and Federal historic tax credits, documented the development of the building type and the history of Poirier's Diner.

*continued inside*



Poirier's Diner (1947), once located in Eagle Square, now located on Westminster Street. Photo: Brian Jones

*continued from front*

In 2010, Özbek found the right location at 1380 Westminster Street, the site of a marginal auto salvage yard and repair shop in the Armory Historic District. The diner was then attached to a newly constructed building that will house the kitchen and bathrooms, which, in turn, was attached to the existing garage building. The garage will now function as storage, extra seating and a lounge. Özbek then began the slow and painstaking process of thorough exterior and interior restoration to revitalize this architectural gem. By studying old photographs and peeling away layers of paint, Özbek and his team, including Kim Smith, closely restored the diner to its original appearance. Some materials, such as the aforementioned stainless steel components, portions of the ceramic tile floor, and glass blocks, were missing and had to be carefully replicated or restored.

The accurate restoration, and in some cases replacement, of other historic materials took considerable time and effort. In the case of the exterior decorative columns, one original had luckily been set aside before the theft. That original piece was shipped to Cherokee Porcelain in Knoxville, TN, for replication and new porcelain enameling. The new columns were installed along with new stainless battens to finish the siding. The majority of the diner's windows also had to be recreated from scratch, using a wide variety of aluminum extrusions and louver punches to replicate the originals. In every case, the proposed replacements were carefully reviewed by the Revolving Fund and accordingly, the State Preservation Office.

Layers of paint were removed from the existing porcelain enameled ceiling panels, and the surface was cleaned in accordance with recommendations from Cherokee Porcelain. Rust holes and pits were patched, and the panels were reinstalled. A Providence-based custom sheet metal fabricator, using plans prepared by MODA, LLC, was able to replicate stainless steel components stolen from the building while it sat in storage. MODA, LLC then installed those pieces in their original locations with guidance from historic photographs, and the "ghosts" of the originals still extant on the interior and exterior of the building.

Now nearly completed, Özbek hopes the diner will open this summer, continuing Providence's long history of diner operation. He is confident the diner will quickly become a popular destination on the West Side, part of a new cultural landscape that favors locally owned and operated businesses. Özbek concluded, "The diner should remain a vital employer, public space, visual landmark, and should make a neighborhood contribution for years to come."

