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**HISTORY AND ARCHITECTURE WITH A SIDE OF TOAST:  
ELMWOOD'S CENTRAL DINER LISTED ON NATIONAL REGISTER**

A vintage 1947 diner in Providence's Elmwood neighborhood received federal recognition for its contributions to the history of commerce and architecture. Frederick C. Williamson, Chairman of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission, announced that the National Park Service has added Central Diner to the National Register of Historic Places. The National Register is the Federal Government's official list of properties throughout the United States whose historical and architectural significance makes them worthy of preservation. Central Diner—today known as the Liberty Elm Diner—is a rare and well-preserved example of a distinctive twentieth-century American building type, as manufactured by a pioneering diner manufacturer, the Worcester Lunch Car Company of Massachusetts. In addition to its architectural significance, Central Diner embodies changes in the Providence diner business in the decades after World War II.

Located at 777 Elmwood Avenue, Central Diner is a one-story, steel-framed, prefabricated structure, measuring ten feet six inches in width by forty feet in length. The distinctive barrel roof projects three feet over each end. The structure is clad in red and yellow porcelain enamel panels set beneath aluminum windows. A flat-roofed, stainless steel-clad entry

vestibule is centered in front. The flat-roof, concrete block additions to the 1947 structure contain a dining room and kitchen.

Inside, the diner has remained largely intact since the day it rolled out of the factory, and is in good condition. The long pink Tennessee marble counter offers chrome stools for fourteen customers on one side and a backbar with stainless steel sunburst-style panels, yellow porcelain enamel grill hood, and menu boards on the other. Other original features and finishes include original oak booths, yellow and blue tile floor, black and yellow tile wainscot and counter apron, light-blue porcelain enamel ceiling, and metal hat racks.

According to diner lore, the American diner originated with an enterprising teenager on the streets of Downtown Providence. Beginning in the 1850s, Walter Scott sold sandwiches and snacks from a basket to late-shift workers at the Providence Journal and other night-time denizens of downtown. When his business outgrew his basket, Scott acquired a pushcart, which allowed him to sell hot coffee as well. Successive “night lunch” providers built bigger and better wagons, and eventually companies were launched in several northeast states to manufacture “lunch cars” for the trade.

The Central Diner was car number 806 built in the factory of the Worcester Lunch Car Company in Massachusetts. In 1947, Ralph “Truck” Narducci of Providence ordered the custom-built diner—completely furnished and stocked—and opened it for business at the corner of West Exchange and Gaspee streets in Downtown Providence. This spot (where the Westin Hotel stands today) was in thick of the city’s central business district, steps away from Union Station, City Hall, hotels, theatres, factories, offices, shops, warehouses, residences, and garages.

After World War II, the heyday of the downtown diner was over. Roadsides and suburban locations had become the new hotspots for quick, homemade, on-the-go eats. Ralph Narducci relocated the Central Diner from Providence’s central business district 2.75 miles south

to 777 Elmwood Avenue in 1953-54 and built a new concrete block kitchen structure in anticipation of bigger business. Elmwood Avenue was a thriving commercial corridor, with the Elmwood Theatre and numerous other businesses (many of them catering to drivers) in the immediate neighborhood. Meanwhile, the downtown parcel at the corner of West Exchange and Gaspee streets was cleared for a parking lot.

The relocated diner was known as Central Diner through 1972. It has changed hands, changed names, and received a number of facelifts since then. Some may remember eating at the Elmwood Diner, Jenn's Elmwood Diner, Ole Elmwood Diner, Louie's Diner, Roberto's Café, or La Criolla Restaurant. In 2006, Elmwood resident Carol "Kip" DeFeciani purchased the property and initiated another overhaul, restoring the diner to its historic appearance and opening for business as The Liberty Elm. This update signals the owner's pledge to direct one percent of profits to purchase new disease-resistant American Liberty Elm trees for Elmwood Avenue. The elm trees that once lined Elmwood Avenue have succumbed to Dutch elm disease or street widening. DeFeciani intends to replant the elms in Elmwood and keep the coffee brewing for neighborhood residents and commuters headed down the avenue.

The National Register nomination for Central Diner was prepared by RIHPHC historian Sarah Zurier, consultant Kim A. Smith, and photographer Denise J.R. Bass. Diner owner Carol DeFeciani commented, "I'm so happy to see Providence get recognition for one of its most unique historic structures, and to bring that recognition into the Elmwood neighborhood where the Liberty Elm Diner is the gateway to the Elmwood Historic District."

In addition to honoring a property for its contribution to local, state, or national history, listing on the National Register provides additional benefits. It results in special consideration during the planning of Federal or federally assisted projects and makes properties eligible for Rhode Island tax benefits and loans for historic rehabilitation projects. Owners of private

property listed on the National Register are free to maintain, manage, or dispose of their property as they choose. As the state office for historic preservation, the Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission is responsible for reviewing and submitting Rhode Island nominations to the National Register.

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