Realized in collaboration with the Connecticut Department of Economic Community Development and the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), the new 7,000-square-foot Visitors Center at the Hill-Stead Museum adapts and preserves historic interconnected outbuildings which originally housed stables, carriages, automobiles, and farm equipment.

Conceived by the pioneering early 20th century architect Theodate Pope Riddle, the 152-acre property houses her family’s furnishings and Impressionist art, including masterpieces by Monet, Degas, Picasso, and Whistler, as well as extensive pastures and gardens, partly designed by Beatrix Farrand.

The Visitors Center enhances the variety and quality of the visitor experience with indoor and outdoor amenities that respect the distinctiveness of Theodate Pope Riddle’s architecture. Importantly, the project expands Hill-Stead’s exhibit offerings with new galleries that meet museum-level standards for light, temperature, and humidity control.

Upon arrival, there might appear to be few alterations; the restrained yet impactful transformations reveal themselves incrementally.

In 2018, the first of several meetings occurred with SHPO staff to orient them to the Hill-Stead’s ambitious goals for the project. These meetings continued throughout design as best-practice approaches, technical details, and specifications were developed. SHPO also helped guide Hill-Stead through the application process for State of Connecticut Historic Preservation Tax Credits.

The scope of work involved the preservation, rehabilitation, restoration, reconstruction, and repair of historic elements in nearly every nook and cranny of the building. In particular, the design team took great care to integrate HVAC, life safety systems, new finishes, and glazing systems while preserving and enhancing the building’s outward appearance.

For any new interventions, the team was ever-mindful of the Secretary of Interior’s Standards, which say, in part: clearly differentiate that which is historic from that which is new. Moreover, whenever any new architectural or engineering element was being considered, the team asked itself, “What would Theodate do?”.

The project’s notable transformative and preservation aspects include:

- Introduction of aluminum-glazed entrances and infills at several existing large openings. The black aluminum frames and the reflectance and color properties of the glass were determined in collaboration with SHPO staff, as well as historic preservation experts at the National Park Service.

- Preservation, rehabilitation, and selective reproduction of interior pine paneling, which had developed a rich, warm patina over the last 100+ years.

- Cataloging, removal, storage, and reinstallation of large bluestone floor slabs in the former Drive Shed (now the New Media Gallery). This multi-step undertaking was required to facilitate installation of new structural sub-grade material, insulation, and a moisture management membrane.

- The new art gallery spaces require a high-performance thermal envelope to maintain exacting environmental control. However, introducing insulation to historic structures can sometimes create unintended, yet destructive moisture problems within exterior wall cavities. To prevent that, the art gallery spaces were detailed as a ‘room-within-a-room’, thermally-isolated from the historic structure’s uninsulated exterior envelope.
Conceived by the pioneering early 20th century architect Theodate Pope Riddle, the 152-acre property houses her family’s furnishings and Impressionist art, as well as extensive pastures and gardens, partly designed by Beatrix Farrand.
Upon arrival, there might appear to be few alterations; the restrained yet impactful transformations reveal themselves incrementally.
The project preserved, rehabilitated, and selectively reproduced interior pine paneling, which had developed a rich, warm patina over the last 100+ years.
The black aluminum frames and the reflectance and color properties of the glass were determined in collaboration with SHPO staff, as well as historic preservation experts at the National Park Service.
The project preserved historic elements and created new iconography such as these diffuser grills with a stylized insignia used by Theodate Pope Riddle.
The new art gallery spaces require a high-performance thermal envelope to maintain exacting environmental control. To avert that, the art gallery spaces were detailed as a ‘room-within-a-room’, thermally-isolated from the historic structure’s uninsulated exterior envelope.
The gift shop, front and center, restores the original historic character.
The project involved cataloging, removal, storage, and reinstallation of large bluestone floor slabs in the former Drive Shed (now the New Media Gallery).