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Three Groups Join in Effort to Save Wright's Ennis House

By [HUGH EAKIN](#)

In a last-ditch effort, a consortium of preservation groups has assembled a plan to save the Ennis House, a striking 1924 building by Frank Lloyd Wright in the Los Feliz Hills above Los Angeles.

The National Trust for Historic Preservation, together with the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy and the Los Angeles Conservancy, has created a foundation to raise the millions of dollars needed to rehabilitate the house, which suffered critical damage in a 1994 earthquake and again in heavy rains last winter.

Reminiscent of an Aztec or Mayan temple, the sprawling building is the largest of the four houses that Wright built in the Los Angeles area in the 1920's using an experimental form of concrete block construction. After the flooding, in which large chunks of the building's facade fell off and the south-facing retaining wall failed, the house was briefly "red-tagged" by the city's Department of Building and Safety as unsafe for entry.

The new entity, called the Ennis House Foundation, has a plan in place to begin emergency work on the house within 60 days, said Robert Leary, chairman of the foundation.

As of yesterday, the foundation, which now owns the building, had met the basic requirements necessary to obtain \$2.1 million in earthquake relief money from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Mr. Leary said.

On Monday, the foundation received a city building permit, as well as authorization it needed from the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs to do work on a designated city Cultural Heritage Monument.

The campaign to save the house has been led by the actress [Diane Keaton](#), who is on the board of the new foundation. She faults the Hollywood community for not taking more of an interest in the house, which has been featured in films like "Blade Runner" and the original "House on Haunted Hill."

"It should really be saved by my community, the film community, because it's been used so many times," she said in a telephone interview. "As an actress, I've always been drawn to the drama of the place."

To qualify for the FEMA money, the project's organizers must demonstrate that they have access to matching funds and a viable rehabilitation plan in place.

The house's previous caretaker, the Trust for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage, was approved for a \$3.1 million FEMA grant in May 1999, provided that it fulfilled the criteria. But it was able to raise only a portion of the matching money, and only \$1 million of the FEMA grant was released, an agency spokeswoman said. The remaining \$2.1 million is to expire on Sept. 10 unless the matching funds can be raised.

Through intensive efforts over the past few weeks, this financing - in the form of donations, bank loans and pledges - has now been "virtually secured," Mr. Leary said.

Even if the initial stabilization work can begin as planned, however, the house faces significant financial challenges. According to several people involved in the project, the overall work needed could total \$12 million to \$15 million.

The fund-raising effort began in earnest in early June, when the National Trust placed the Ennis House on its list of 11 most endangered historic places. (The building was also on the World Monuments Fund's recently released biennial list of 100 most endangered monuments in the world; it had been on the previous list as well.)

In June, the National Trust joined with the Los Angeles Conservancy and the Frank Lloyd Wright Building Conservancy to start a rapid overhaul of the building's administration.

The result was the dissolution of the old trust late last month and the creation of the Ennis House Foundation, run by an 11-member board including two trustees from each of the three groups involved.

Several people involved with the house cited the financial ineffectiveness of the previous trust, which was established in 1980 by the last private owner, Augustus O. Brown, as a factor in the building's continued decay. Although it allowed the public to visit the house on guided tours, that trust did not have much of a public profile and lost what few assets it had in the 2000 stock market crash.

In 2002, the trust received a \$100,000 grant from the Getty Foundation for emergency work, including the installation of two large steel supports, which now hold up what remains of the building's retaining wall, but money for a large-scale effort remained elusive.

"It became a house museum in the hands of a nonprofit organization without an adequate endowment," said Richard Moe, president of the National Trust. "And this is unfortunately too common a practice. These houses really need endowments, because visitation alone will never support them."

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