



RESTORATION
HOUSING

Isabel R. Thornton

Speaker Kit

MEET ISABEL



Isabel Thornton has built her career around a simple belief: that every person deserves to have a safe place to call home and that the builders of our past got it right. As an affordable housing and historic preservation specialist, she has spent more than two decades turning that belief into tangible change. After years of working in communities across the country developing affordable housing, she turned her attention to her hometown of Roanoke, VA. When she saw families paying more than half their income for substandard housing, she recognized an opportunity hiding in plain sight: with targeted investment, Roanoke's historic buildings could offer stability and dignity to her neighbors that needed it most. That conviction became Restoration Housing.

What began as a one-woman effort has grown under Isabel's leadership into a full-fledged development and property management organization known for transforming long-neglected structures into high-quality, affordable homes. Her approach is refreshingly practical: start small, focus on impact, and reinvest where others have looked away. Each completed project may be modest in scale, but together they're reshaping families and neighborhoods one restored home at a time.

RESTORATION HOUSING'S MODEL



Restoration Housing takes a distinctive approach to affordable housing by reinvesting in the historic buildings that once anchored Roanoke's neighborhoods. Many of these properties - often distressed, long-neglected, and abandoned by absentee property owners - still hold the potential to meet today's housing needs if returned to safe, livable condition. As the national conversation increasingly turns toward increased density to expand affordability in walkable, mixed-use areas, Restoration Housing stands out for showing that these solutions already exist within the historic fabric of our cities and towns.

Restoration Housing's work is centered on neighborhoods that have seen decades with little public or private investment. While rents in these areas may be technically "affordable," conditions are frequently substandard. Restoration Housing fills a unique niche by pairing historic preservation with high-quality affordable housing development through a blend of fundraising, local foundation support, Historic Tax Credit syndication, and State and Federal housing grants. This scrappy combination of resources allows Restoration Housing to bring distressed properties back to life while keeping rents within reach for the families who need them most.

SPEAKING SERVICES

Isabel's expertise comes from a rare blend of academic training, professional experience, and lived insight. She has an extensive resume of public speaking, particularly on how past public policies and urban design principles have shaped our communities—and the role historic preservation can play in restoring under-resourced neighborhoods while maintaining long-term affordability. She has been invited to share this perspective at statewide conferences, preservation forums, community development summits, and university programs, where her emphasis on equity-centered reinvestment and practical preservation has earned strong praise.

Services Offered:

- Event Keynote
- Podcast
- Seminars
- Guest Lecturer
- Webinars
- Expert Interviews
- Q&A Sessions
- Panel Discussions

Rates:

Speaking rates vary depending on the type of event and amount of travel and preparation required. Consideration is given to event location (e.g. is travel involved, or is it virtual), event type (e.g. is Isabel creating tailored material for your event), and event length (e.g. is it a concise event or include multiple components). We ask that all travel and accommodations be covered by event organizers in addition to an agreed upon speaking fee. And as a nonprofit, we understand fellow nonprofits and educational institutions are operating on a tight budget - if you would like Isabel to speak, we're happy to find a rate that works for everyone.





Isabel Thornton

Education:

- BA in Architectural History from the University of Virginia
- Masters in Historic Preservation and Urban Planning from the University of Southern California

Boards & Committees:

- Community Housing Partners Board of Directors & Real Estate Development Committee
- Carilion Medical Clinic Board of Directors
- Blue Ridge Interagency Council on Homelessness

Accolades:

- Women’s History Month Proclamation, City of Roanoke, March 2026
- Affordable Housing Advocacy Award, Roanoke Regional Housing Network, May 2023
- 100 Virginians to Meet in 2023, Virginia Business, Jan. 2023

- 40 Under 40, The Roanoker, January 2022
- Power in Preservation: The Contributions of Women to Historic Preservation, Featured in Exhibit at Dumbarton House of The National Society of the Colonial Dames of America, November 2021 – December 2022
- Keys Soulcare Lightworker, Alicia Keys Soulcare Initiative, March 2021

Project Awards:

- Kegley Preservation Award for Adaptive Reuse of The Grove on Patterson, Roanoke Valley Preservation Foundation, December 2025
- Governor’s Award on Volunteerism and Community Service for partnership that created The Grove on Patterson, Governor Glenn Youngkin and First Lady Suzanne S. Youngkin, November 2025
- Kegley Preservation Award for Neighborhood Preservation, Roanoke Valley Preservation Foundation, November 2021
- Gabriella Page Preservation Award for Villa Heights, Preservation Virginia, November 2020
- Kegley Preservation Award for Historic Rehabilitation of Villa Heights, Roanoke Valley Preservation Foundation, November 2019

SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS

TV Appearances:

- *National Community Development Week Series: Episode 2 – Community Development Block Grants*, Roanoke Department of Planning, Building & Development and Roanoke Valley Television, May 2025
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5msbW6jgLjs>
- *Protecting Our Parents Series: Finding Homes for Cost-Burdened Seniors*, WDBJ7 with Natalie Faunce, February 2025
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1WL5IAPYR8Y>
- *Here@Home Series*, WDBJ7 with Kate Capodanno, July 2024
 - <https://www.wdbj7.com/video/2024/07/17/restoration-housing-celebrates-decade-transformations/>
- *What It Takes With Tom Landon*, Blue Ridge PBS, May 2022
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acfqZPe4DDM>
- *Here@Home Series*, WDBJ7 with Kimberly Broom, April 2026
 - <https://www.wdbj7.com/2026/04/07/historic-church-transformed-into-affordable-senior-housing-roanoke/>

Webinars:

- *Webinar Series*, Heritage Ohio, July 2023
- *Historic Preservation & Affordable Housing*, Dumbarton House of the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America, April 2022
- *Preservation Award Interview Series*, Preservation Virginia, October 2020
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HbnvKljgFcA>

Podcasts:

- *Rehabbing Old Houses into Affordable Housing*, USC Podcast Save As: Next Gen Heritage Conservation, January 2024
 - <https://sites.usc.edu/saveas/2024/01/24/season-4-episode-5/>
- *Practical Preservation Podcast*, Keperling Preservation Services, August 2022
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l0cl85T3jiQ>

Panels:

- *Housing Insecurity Panel*, Roanoke Women's Foundation, August 2025
- Roanoke Regional Housing Network Symposium, April 2025
- *Unconventional Partnerships to End Homelessness Panel*, Blue Ridge Continuum of Care Annual Symposium, August 2019

SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS

- *Alumni Panel*, University of Virginia School of Architecture, April 2019
- *Preservation & Gentrification Panel*, Virginia Preservation Conference, November 2018

Guest Lecturer:

- *Race-Based Policies & Urban Design Practices Shaping Our City*
 - Raleigh Court Presbyterian Church, October 2025
 - Roanoke College
 - Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce *Ladies Who Launch*, 2021
 - Becoming Beloved Community Committee of Christ Episcopal Church, October 2021
 - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_RehV3z2Zg
- *Finding Solutions for Affordable Treatment and Recovery Housing*
 - ACE's Conference, June 2025
 - Virginia Governor's Housing Conference, November 2024
- *Fixing Up Older Homes for Good / A Different Model for Affordable Housing*
 - AIA Virginia, October 2022
 - City of Danville, January 2020
 - Roanoke Regional Chamber of Commerce, 2019
 - Virginia Tech, 2019
 - Community High School, 2019
 - City Works Expo, 2018

Publications:

- *Can God Fix America's Housing Crisis* by Mark Dent, The Hustle, April 2025
 - https://thehustle.co/originals/can-god-fix-americas-housing-crisis?fbclid=IwY2xjawPkqhVleHRuA2FlbQlxMQBzcnRjBmFwcF9pZBAyMjlwMzIxNzg4MjAwODkyAAEepUOd_ERMsrSR6sa8PH_K5FjcqWbPKmPTxWABIWUFcbUOIx8pAlQzQ5fwZlYA_aem_iHdklBYbam-4Tv5s1K6Nig
- *Creating Middle Housing Through Historic Preservation* by Isabel Thornton & Maribeth Mills, Planetizen, April 2023
 - <https://www.planetizen.com/features/122765-restoring-vacant-middle-creating-middle-housing-through-historic-preservation>
- *One House at a Time* in Upfront > Take Note, Virginia Living, December 2021
- *Housing with a Heart* by Christina Nifong, The Roanoker, September 2021
 - <https://theroanoker.com/magazine/features/housing-with-a-heart/>



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