

COMMENTARY ON DESIGNATION OF 23 WEST PENN STREET BY THE PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION BY THE DESIGN ADVOCACY GROUP

The Design Advocacy Group (DAG) strongly supports the designation of 23 West Penn Street, known as the Boys and Girls Club of Germantown, as an important historic asset for that neighborhood and the City of Philadelphia. Members of the DAG Steering Committee are architects, planners, historians and urban advocates. We felt someone needed to stand up for our respective professions in the face of biased and subjective reports commissioned by Club leaders who not only are unfamiliar with historic buildings, but seem to fear them. Their fervent wish is to demolish this building.

Germantown abounds in buildings that trace the history of the city, socially and architecturally. They vary in academic architectural significance, but taken in relation to one another they make up a neighborhood unrivaled in architectural character anywhere else in the city. Similarly, Germantown is known for the intense involvement of its citizens. There aren't really 99 civic groups there, but sometimes it feels that way. Yes, there is poverty but no, this is not a ghetto in need of a savior.

The handsome building at 23 West Penn boasts a remarkably intact exterior. Among the irreplaceable tarred header Flemish bond, one can observe a total of one deteriorated brick, located at the drip point of a window air conditioner. (A long-deteriorated swimming pool addition is beyond repair and not essential to the architecture.) The grand entrance and beautiful open stair are generous and uplifting. Photos show a skylight, beamed gym and quirky spaces that seem to embody what Gaston Bachelard calls "the poetics of space". Statements by Club leadership that the appearance of the exterior is misleading as far as the condition or usefulness of the building are not borne out by the reports or the building plans.

Per the criteria as stated in Section 14-1004 of the Philadelphia Zoning Code, this building is an excellent candidate for designation under the following categories.

- Criteria (a) *"...has significant character, interest, or value as part of the development, heritage, or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth, or nation..."*. No one in this room would argue about the significance of the Boys (and later Girls) Clubs in Philadelphia and in this country. That history is evident in their buildings. The Shane Victorino Nicetown Club on Hunting Park Avenue is a wonderful building that must make the boys and girls very proud.
- Likewise, Criteria (b) *"Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation"*.
- Criteria (g) *"Is part of or related to a square, park, or other distinctive area that should be preserved according to a historic, cultural, or architectural motif"*. As part of a historic ensemble, the building faces the deteriorated but magnificent facade of the Trinity Lutheran Parish House, with a deteriorated but fine Italianate house next door. These two grand buildings sit perhaps ten feet downhill in elevation, deferring to their more modest neighbors uphill, like the intimate mews of Linden Terrace and Linden Place, each with four houses sharing a lane. A walk around the perimeter of the extended site reveals a fine grained neighborhood with rowhouses, porches and bits of the commercial and industrial past.

- Criteria (h) "*Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community, or City*". For all of its architectural and human treasures, Germantown is a neighborhood at a tipping point. If this building were torn down, and a hockey rink and new one-story club building erected in its place, not only would the near neighborhood suffer, but the multiple nearby parcels owned by the Club would inevitably be turned into parking lots. Ice hockey is definitely not a mass transit kind of a kids' sport. Or, that use on those parcels would be prevented by zoning, leading to on site parking lots where a well known and distinguished building once stood.

Reasons to save the building are obvious - both as in individual building and as part of an urban fabric. However the glaring deficiencies and biases of the reports written by to support their client's desires require serious analysis.

HECKENDORN SHILES ARCHITECTS: GERMANTOWN BOYS AND GIRLS CLUB EXISTING CONDITIONS CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS 4/5/17

This firm has done beautiful work in adaptive reuse, so it is bewildering to read their report that uses words like "failure" over and over, as if the building were irredeemably lacking in potential.

"LIFE SAFETY HAZARDS AND ACCESSIBILITY NON-COMPLIANCE"

The authors seemed shocked that a grand ceremonial stair was not part of a fire-rated corridor, that door openings varied in size and that (heaven forbid) the drinking fountain was not at an accessible height. After 20 minutes studying the plan, an architect could see a scheme for an elevator and added fire stair that would make both levels of both parts of the building accessible, and provide required fire-protected egress. Ten architects corralled in a room with enough coffee would come up with ten more schemes. Ueland and Junker estimated \$1,500,000 for basic modifications in 1985. That's \$3,795,000 in today's construction dollars - obviously not enough to do a full scale renovation. But double that number and the Club is still at a fraction of its portion the very generous gift from the Roberts family.

"BUILDING CONDITION FAILURES"

Water damage to ceilings, water in basement, peeling paint, damaged floor finishes and wood trim in poor condition. Those are problems to be remedied, not "building condition failures", a loaded term oddly out of place in a professional report. What is most interesting is what is NOT in the report. The word "structural" does not appear once. Floor collapses are mentioned, but no architect would call a structural failure a "floor collapse", sandwiched between mentions of window leaks and missing ceiling finishes, and not alert the client to structural problems.

"BUILDING DEFICIENCIES FOR MODERN PROGRAM"

According to the report, the building lacks security, safety, line of sight, and (chillingly) operational observation, all bringing to mind a Panopticon-like environment with few staff and many children. Programs for children all over the world thrive in all kinds of old and new buildings. The listed program elements of art, music and technology could all thrive in this building. Ice hockey could not thrive on this site, with or without the current buildings, and a fine neighborhood would be saddled with a monster in its midst.

GEORGE THOMAS: ANALYSIS OF THE PHC DESIGNATION REPORT FOR THE GERMANTOWN BOYS AND GIRLS CLUB 3/21/17

Coming from a writer honored for his biographies of local architects, this is a remarkably emotional and tone-deaf report. The building is seen as unworthy because:

- No one has written a PhD thesis on the architect.
- Because it was not previously designated, *"there was no local or regional interest in the architecture or history of the building"*.
- *"Its preservation would take funds necessary to meet the institutional mission."* If the Club cannot raise enough funds to repair this building, there is no way it could afford to run the massive complex it desires.

The writer's apparent lack of experience in actually renovating buildings is minor when seen in light of his main argument. He posits that those neighbors supporting historic designation do so because they are racists, and cites the nomination's *"...failure to disclose the real reason for the nomination"* (page 2) which is *"merely to prevent the construction of a new facility that would markedly improve the situation for the user community"* (page 20) and that the nomination *"assumes that racial segregation is a social or cultural norm"* (page 6). He came to the head-scratching conclusion that the neighbors' desire to save the Club's building is *"an attempt to force the club out of its neighborhood and away from its long-term setting."* (page 17)

It is likely that everyone in this room is aware that architecture, planning, zoning and historic preservation have all been used as cudgels to enforce white privilege. Most of history has been written from the position of white privilege. But Mr. Thomas seems to be caught up in a kind of hysteria over the past as he assigns those motives to this nomination. He concludes that if the nomination is successful *"Germantown's exclusionary use of historic preservation will have reached a new low."* (page 22)

Respectfully, the Design Advocacy Group urges the Commission to file the Thomas report at the very back of a very dark closet, and to accept the nomination for 23 West Penn Street, based on the criteria set out by the City of Philadelphia as listed above.

One can only assume that Mr. Thomas thinks some classes of society deserve fine old buildings and others don't. Describing this building in the context of a largely African American community, he states, *"It's architectural character is meaningless to its user group at best; at worst it is evidence of a hand-me-down past to the present user group."* (page 13).

Actually, no. White folks don't have a monopoly on architectural character and kids of all classes and races deserve places where they can dream, be inspired and have their spirits uplifted by architecture.

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On behalf of DAG 5/12/17