

THE MINUTES OF THE 353RD STATED MEETING OF THE
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

10 July 1991

City Council Caucus Room

Edward A. Montgomery, Jr., Chairman

Present

Jason Nathan, Presiding Chairman
William Brown
David Brownlee
David Hollenberg
James Cuorato, Commerce Department
Louis Einhorn, Deputy Commissioner, Department of Public Property
Barbara Kaplan, Executive Director, City Planning Commission
Scott Wilds, Office of Housing and Community Development
David Wismer, Deputy Commissioner, Licenses and Inspections

Maria Petrillo, Esquire, Deputy City Solicitor
Richard Tyler, Historic Preservation Officer
Randal Baron, Preservation Planner
Sara Jane Elk, Historical Research Technician
Daniel W. Simcox, Executive Secretary

Also

Michael F. Young, Classic Management, Inc.
Jennifer Goodman, Preservation Coalition of Greater Philadelphia
Sydelle Zove, Penn-Knox Neighborhood Association
Catherine Franklin, Penn-Knox Neighborhood Association
Susan Wright, West-Central Germantown Neighbors

Jason R. Nathan, presiding as chairman, called the meeting to order and announced the presence of a quorum. He then introduced Louis Einhorn, Deputy Commissioner of Public Property who will serve as designee for Commissioner Perez. Having extended this welcome, Mr. Nathan proceeded to the agenda.

The Minutes of the 352nd Stated Meeting of the Philadelphia Historical Commission, held 12 June 1991, Edward A. Montgomery, Jr., Chairman. A MOTION to adopt these minutes, made by Mr. Wilds and seconded by Mr. Wismer, received unanimous approval.

The Report of the Architectural Committee of the Philadelphia Historical Commission held on 27 June 1991, David DeLong, Presiding Chairman. Committee Chairman David Hollenberg forwarded two recommendations from the Committee.

Approval: The Committee recommended approval of plans by Vitetta Group to install an exterior lighting system to discourage vandals and vagrants at St. Mark's Church, 1625 Locust Street. The Committee remarked that the proposal was a sensitive and reasonable treatment to address a difficult problem at this Gothic Revival landmark built 1845-1851. Mr. Cuorato seconded the recommendation, which was adopted by unanimous vote.

Approval in Concept: The Committee enthusiastically recommended approval in concept of plans by Shapiro Petruskas Gelber for the Valley Green Inn, a mid-nineteenth century inn along Wissahickon Creek. By improving an open-air terrace instead of constructing a new banquet room, this revised proposal reduces the scope of work of plans previously approved in August 1990. The Committee commended the architects for this new design. Dr. Brownlee seconded the recommendation, which was adopted by unanimous vote.

The Report of a Meeting of the Committee on Financial Hardship of the Philadelphia Historical Commission, held on 3 July 1991, Barbara Kaplan, Chairperson. Ms. Kaplan explained that the Committee focused its deliberations on whether the owner had demonstrated that the subject property imposed a financial hardship. This determination is a separate and distinct process from the consideration of a permit application. As provided for in the preservation ordinance, financial hardship is only one of several factors which may weigh into a decision regarding permit applications. Jason Nathan added that the Committee, in its second meeting, continued to delineate its role. He stressed that it consciously steered away from broader planning issues which are more appropriately addressed by the Commission itself. Mr. Nathan also emphasized that the determination of the Committee and the ultimate decision of the Commission on these applications touched on fundamental constitutional issues. Following this discussion of the role of the Committee, Ms. Kaplan resumed the report.

5324-26-28 Germantown Avenue: The Committee determined that owner Michael Young demonstrated financial hardship for these properties. Having forwarded this determination, Ms. Kaplan broached other significant issues. She questioned the design of the proposed development, its compatibility with the surrounding area and its economic viability. She suggested that a shopping center on Germantown Avenue with a parking lot in front would detract significantly from the character of this historic area.

Owner Michael Young suggested that the social and economic conditions of the surrounding area were not conducive to storefront retail. Further, he suggested that new construction behind the historic buildings would hurt the viability of a shopping center by reducing its visibility from the street. In support, he referred to the testimony of six independent realtors who stressed the importance of "visibility" and suggested that preservation of the historic buildings in front would hurt the development of the larger site. Mr. Young maintained that a parking lot in front was important for the convenience and safety of consumers. In support, he pointed to the success of Freedom Square just several blocks away.

Dr. Brownlee stressed that the "visibility" argument contradicted a basic premise of historic preservation -- that historic buildings are amenities which will attract people and money. He indicated that these buildings are significant examples of the development of Germantown Avenue and of the adaptation of residences with ground-floor commercial uses. Further, all contribute to the historic streetscape of Germantown Avenue.

Ms. Kaplan also questioned the stated need for visibility and a front parking lot by contrasting this site with those offered as successful examples by Mr. Young. A site alluded to in Mount Airy is isolated with railroad tracks to the rear. In contrast, this site is located along an historic row of stores with residences to the rear. Second, the area surrounding this site suffers less crime than that around Freedom Square; hence, the purported safety offered by the proposed parking is less critical. Mr. Nathan added that the communities surrounding the other sites requested parking in front of their shopping centers. Here, the Penn-Knox Neighborhood Association opposes such a plan because they want to preserve their historic buildings.

Mr. Tyler indicated that Richard Cohen, previously retained to assess the owner's claim of financial hardship, had not changed his conclusion that substantial public subsidies were necessary to rehabilitate these properties. If anything, the weakening of the financial market further diminished the viability of this project. Mr. Cohen also supported the claim that preserving 5324 would reduce the visibility of a new development to the rear of the parcel. Mr. Tyler observed that most places where a single historic building was preserved as part of a shopping center were on large suburban sites. Yet, Mr. Tyler stressed that his primary concern was the present lack of funding and firm plans for redevelopment. For this reason, he recommended allowing the demolition of those buildings which are in poor condition: 5326, 5328 and the rear addition of 5324. However, he urged the preservation of 5324, which is structurally sound, through the depth of its gable until development plans are firm and financing secured.

Mr. Cuorato noted that the initial demolition request for these properties was made more than a year ago. The owner has cooperated with the Commission and has met with representatives of the community to explore preservation strategies. Mr. Cuorato expressed satisfaction that hardship had been demonstrated for this site.

At this time, the Chairman invited public comment. The following four individuals rose to urge the preservation of 5324 Germantown Avenue: Susan Wright of West Central Germantown Neighbors, Sydelle Zove and Catherine Franklin of the Penn-Knox Neighborhood Association and Jennifer Goodman of the Preservation Coalition of Greater Philadelphia. Ms. Franklin remarked that these buildings were viable structures when Mr. Young acquired them and suggested that some of the deterioration has resulted from neglect. She expressed dismay that an area of national significance continued to lose its architectural stock.

Ms. Kaplan repeated the findings of the Committee on Financial Hardship, which determined that the owner had demonstrated financial hardship for 5324, 5326 and 5328 Germantown Avenue. Following a second by Mr. Brownlee, the Commission adopted this conclusion of its Committee.

A MOTION was made by Mr. Brownlee to approve the application for a demolition permit for 5326 and 5328 Germantown Avenue, as well as for the rear addition to 5324; further, to disapprove the request to demolish 5324 Germantown Avenue until development plans are certain and financing has been secured. Mr. Hollenberg seconded this motion.

Mr. Cuorato discouraged further deferral of this application, because of the absence of a viable means of preservation despite efforts by the owner and other interested parties to devise one.

Mr. Tyler clarified that this motion would entail no further delay or analyses. It would prevent the demolition of 5324 until plans are certain and financing secured. Ms. Kaplan suggested that an alternative plan which may incorporate 5324 into a larger development may result in the preservation of this structurally sound historic resource.

THE MOTION was adopted by a vote of 7-1, with Mr. Cuorato opposed and Mr. Einhorn abstaining.

Victory Building, 1001-1013 Chestnut Street. Having referred to the written account in the Report, Ms. Kaplan briefly summarized the Committee review of the Victory Building. The Committee requested the retention of an independent consultant to assess the documents submitted in support of the owner's claim of

financial hardship. Mr. Hollenberg abstained from the discussion of this application. Further, members of the Committee and Commission will schedule a tour of this building.

The Report on Staff Activities, June 1991, Richard Tyler, Historic Preservation Officer. There being no objection, this report was incorporated into the record.

There being no further business, the Commission adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,


Daniel W. Simcox,
Executive Secretary