

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON HISTORIC DESIGNATION PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Thomas Sugrue, Ph.D., Acting-Chair
Commission Conference Room, One Parkway, 1515 Arch Street, 18th Floor
12 February 2002

Present

Thomas Sugrue, Ph.D, Acting-Chair,
Bruce Lavery, The Athenaeum of Philadelphia
Hyman Myers, AIA
Harris Steinberg, AIA

Randal Baron, Assistant Preservation Officer
Diane M. Hughes, Executive Secretary
Laura M. Spina, Historic Preservation Planner

Larry Copeland, Senior Attorney, Law Department

Also

Richard A. Sprague, Esquire, Sprague and Sprague
Geoffrey R. Johnson, Sprague and Sprague
Lori Z. Flynn, Chestnut Theater Association, L.P.
Leslie Smallwood, Chestnut Theater Association, L.P.
John Gallery, Preservation Alliance
Michael Stern, Center City Residents' Association
Adam Schneider, Center City Residents' Association
Reverend Jermaine Quick, Mars Hill Baptist Church
John Blatteau, John Blatteau Associates Architects

Thomas Sugrue, Chair, called the meeting to order at 10:10 a.m.

Saint Simeon Church, (Mars Hill Baptist Church)

2650-52 North 9th Street, aka 900-18 Lehigh Avenue, aka 2659-61 North Hutchinson Street
Date: 1890 Parish House; 1891 Church; 1895 Rectory
Architect: Frank Rushmore Watson

Laura Spina made an illustrated presentation to the Committee. The Church of Saint Simeon, a U shaped complex of three adjoining buildings, was designed by Frank Rushmore Watson in the late 1880's. Originally built for the Saint Simeon Episcopal Church, a parish formed in 1886, the church was dedicated in memory of Right Reverend William Bacon Stevens, the fourth Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania. The work of Frank Rushmore Watson significantly influenced the development of church architecture in Philadelphia. The Church of Saint Simeon is one of the first mature works of architecture completed by Watson, known not only for his residential and commercial structures, but particularly for his ecclesiastical designs. created during the late 1800s until the mid 1930s. The Cambridge Camden Society promoted the

advancement of Medieval art and architecture, specifically of the Gothic period, and used the simple early English parish church as a model for Anglican Church design. In later years the Gothic style, while still considered the most appropriate for Episcopal Church architecture, was given a freer reign. The church of Saint Simeon reflects this new architectural freedom. The Kensington area of Philadelphia in the 1880s was a center of manufacturing and the district of Fairhill to the west of Kensington was growing rapidly with an influx of immigrants. In 1886, a committee of the Northeast Convocation of Philadelphia organized a mission parish in the area at 9th Street and Lehigh Avenue. Later enough money was raised to build a permanent church, and a few years later the parish was incorporated and received a charter from the court elevating it from a “mission” church to one of full status. As the neighborhood changed through the 20th century, the congregation at the church dwindled. In 1977, the Episcopal Diocese sold the complex to the Mars Hill Baptist Church. Today the Mars Hill congregation continues neighborhood outreach and religious programs, using the complex as a necessary base of operations.

Ms. Spina concluded that the Church of Saint Simeon meets criteria a, c, d, e and h of Section 14-2007 of the Philadelphia Code. It has significant character, interest and value as part of the development, heritage and cultural characteristics of the City. The Church reflects the environment of an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style, namely the predominance of the Gothic style in ecclesiastical architecture, and embodies the distinguishing characteristics of that style. It is the work of Frank Watson, an architect whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural and cultural development of the City. Finally the Church of Saint Simeon, owing to its unique location, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community and City.

John Blatteau, an architect, stated that the building’s facade is very impressive, that the interior details are still intact and that the overall integrity of the building still exists.

Reverend Jermaine Quick, pastor of the church, attended the meeting and stated that it is a pleasure and honor for the church to be nominated for designation.

Mr. Myers recommended some minor alterations to the language in the nomination. He wanted to clarify that the stained glass designers are German, while living in America. He questioned whether the bells still exist in the bell tower and noted that a wood trim exists on the louvering and above the tower, while the tracery is made of stone. He thought that it should be noted that the parish house is really two stories with an attic and the mansard roof retains the cresting. He believed that research should be done on John Baird, owing to his monetary contributions.

Mr. Sugrue said that the nomination should be amended to consider significance under criteria j, owing to volunteers and out of work laborers involvement, in as much as it was built for working people by working people and provided economic possibilities to the community during the depression of the late 1880s.

Mr. Myers that the design of the church relates to major features on Lehigh Avenue as well as to the houses on 9th Street, blending well with the surrounding neighborhood.

Mr. Laverty reiterated that the nomination include all the addresses of the church. It was stated that a garden exists in the center of the complex and Mr. Myers asked that photographs of the garden as well as photographs of the facades within the garden area be submitted for documentation.

Mr. Steinberg moved to recommend the listing Mars Hill Baptist Church on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, with the nomination to include the changes cited by the Committee. Mr. Myers seconded the motion which passed unanimously.

1908-10 Chestnut Street, Boyd Theater

Mr. Baron read the following statement:

“At the request of the City of Philadelphia Law Department, we have advised all parties that the matter of the Boyd Theater will not be on the agenda today. A new date will be set in due course. Mr. Sprague, representing the property owner has said that never the less, since he only found out yesterday that this would not be on the agenda, he would like to be allowed to read a statement. We have agreed to allow him to address the Committee. If the applicant also wishes to make a statement, this is also acceptable. After these statements, there will not be a discussion or questions.”

Mr. Sprague stated that the designation for the Boyd Theater (also known as the SamEric Theater) should be rejected. He presented the Committee with copies of a lengthy legal brief that sets forth in detail his argument for rejecting the designation nomination. He said that designation will impose financial harm to the owner. He recounted a previous designation of the Boyd Theater by the Commission that, after lengthy litigation, was rejected by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. In addition, he noted that John Street, who was then in City Council at the time of the previous designation, and who served on the Historical Commission, stated that the previous designation was wrong and improper. Mr. Sprague said that he believes that the exterior integrity of the building does not warrant historic designation. Also, he said that the architects, Hoffman and Henon, are known for Classic revival, not Art Deco, which is the style of the Boyd Theater. He noted that the former owner testified previously that exterior details of the building, such as the ticket pavilion, are not original. Finally, he said that this present nomination violates past court decisions and constitutes a taking of property without compensation by depriving the owner of its full use of the property. He therefore asked that the Committee recommend rejection.

John Gallery, of the Preservation Alliance, had no comment on the matter at hand.

Mr. Steinberg made a motion to adjourn. Mr. Myers seconded the motion which carried unanimously.

The meeting adjourned at 11:25 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Diane M. Hughes
Executive Secretary