

THE REPORT OF THE ARCHITECTURAL COMMITTEE OF THE
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Arlene Matzkin, Chairperson

Commission Conference Room
Suite 1301, 1401 Arch Street

28 January 1993

Present

Arlene Matzkin, AIA, Chairperson
William Cornell, P.E., Carpenters' Company of Philadelphia
David Hollenberg, National Park Service
Penelope Batchelor, Historical Architect, Independence National
Historical Park
Herb Levy, AIA
David DeLong, Chairman, University of Pennsylvania Preservation
Program
Tony Atkin, AIA

Jane Hix, Esq., City of Philadelphia, Law Department
Richard Tyler, Ph.D., Historic Preservation Officer
Randal Baron, Preservation Planner
Ira Kauderer, Executive Secretary

Also

Samuel Fadullon, Philadelphia City Planning Commission
Juan C. Roberts, Fairmount Park Council for Historic Sites
John McIlhenny, Fairmount Park
Peter Andrew Copp, R.A., Martin J. Rosenblum, R.A. and Associates
A. Anderson, Fairmount Park Historic Preservation Trust, Inc.
Larry Snyder, Executive Director Fairmount Park Historic
Preservation Trust, Inc.
Bill Blades, Philadelphia Historic Preservation Corporation
Howard Kittell, Preservation Coalition
Audrey R. Thornton, American Women's Heritage Society, Belmont
Mansion
Robert S. Saxon, Saxon/Capers Architects
Jan Haigis, Sites Council Trustee
Tom Hine, Philadelphia Inquirer
M. Altshuler, Old City Civic Association
Joe Sweeney, Public Property, City of Philadelphia
Stephen Orova, Commodore of Schuylkill Navy
Mark Fountain, Philadelphia Jugglers Club
Roger Prichard, Old City Civic Association
Richard W. Thom, Old City Civic Ass'n, Historic East Market
Street

Gwen Camp, Anne Frank Institute
Bob McClennen, Builder

Approval In Concept

Belmont Mansion: This proposal calls for conceptual approval to restore Fairmount Park's Belmont Mansion to its original 18th century appearance. Larry Snyder of the Fairmount Park Historic Preservation Trust addressed the Committee. Mr. Snyder explained that the City capital budget has provided \$400,000 for repairs to Belmont Mansion. As a result of the Historic Structures Report that was completed last year the Fairmount Park Historic Trust has made a grant application to the William Penn Foundation and the Pew Foundation for a total of \$475,000 for the preservation of Belmont Mansion. William Penn Foundation has informed the Historic Preservation Trust that their portion of the grant has been approved. Pew will consider their portion this June. The expectation is that this portion of the grant will similarly be approved. Both foundations have limited the use of their money to restoration of the Mansion itself. The money provided by the City will be used for auxiliary buildings and the grounds.

Mr. Snyder then turned to plans for long-range use of the building. The main block of the Mansion itself needs to be made available for historic interpretation. The auxiliary buildings must be preserved and rehabilitated to serve as social program spaces for the building. These auxiliary buildings are more suitable for these functions and would relieve the load placed on the main building. The current 20th century building that connects the mansion to the auxiliary buildings would be removed so that the interpretive portion of the building would stand by itself.

This proposal also calls for the removal of the third floor of the main block of the Mansion. Martin Rosenblum addressed this portion of the proposal. Mr. Rosenblum noted two important factors affecting this part of the project. First, funding is becoming available. Secondly, the 18th century building fabric has survived intact, including plasterwork and millwork and is in a remarkable state of preservation.

Mr. Rosenblum noted that the building as it stands today with a wrap-around porch and the added third floor reads as an Italianate structure such as can be found Germantown and East Falls. The distinguishing characteristics of this building are obscured by these elements.

A letter was produced to the effect that Keast and Hood,

engineers, has determined that the building is currently structurally unstable because of the third floor addition. The building is unable to carry the load placed upon it by the third floor. There are two alternatives that could remedy the situation. One would be to stabilize the third floor with trusses. The third floor would then be unusable. A second solution would be to take the third floor off. Mr. Rosenblum stated the importance of removing all water above the ornamental plaster ceilings. Given that the third floor space has no logical use, no access and is putting a surcharge on the building and is obscuring the original intent of the building, the architect considers the best solution to remove the third floor.

Ms. Batchelor asked how the building could be staffed. Ms. Audrey Thornton of the American Women's Heritage Society addressed the Committee. Ms. Thornton leads the group that has leased Belmont Mansion during the last eight years. She stated that the restoration of the building is planned so that the income producing rental of the space will carry on during the construction. This will be possible because many of the events take place outside on the grounds. After restoration, the grounds of the building will continue to be used for social functions and meetings while the Mansion itself will be available for guided tours. The Mansion will also be open for visitation on a regular basis. Mr. Rosenblum added that the site is heavily booked approximately 240 days per year.

Mr. Rosenblum then presented a rendering of the plaster ceiling that exists in the salon. He asserted that it is one of the two or three most elaborate ceilings in the country from the period. In its entirety the salon recalls that of an English country house. The building as intended is a form that is not represented in this region outside of Belmont.

Mr. Rosenblum outlined the overall restoration of the Mansion. The porch would be removed to reveal the masonry of the facade. The third floor would be removed restoring a delicate sense of proportion inherent in the original design. He showed a photograph of a painting showing the original design of the building. Mr. Rosenblum added that though the current designs are conceptual, closer examination of the existing building will likely reveal more information on which to base exact designs.

Mr. Tyler noted that the Historical Commission often urges retaining additions and alterations to structures when these changes have attained their own place in history. He noted, however, that in the case of Belmont Mansion, many of the existing alterations were done in response to an early 20th

century fire, and have little historical significance. Mr. Tyler also expressed his concern that fabric of questionable value not be retained at the expense of the integrity of the 18th century building.

Mr. Reinberger responded to Mr. Hollenberg's question about how much of the restoration of the building will be conjecture. He stated that in the case of the roof, the existence of graphic representations of the original design, framing and other physical evidence will enable the architects to come up with at least a close approximation of the original. Cornice profiles are likely to turn up as the more modern layers of the building are stripped away. Below the roof, all of the masonry exists from the original facade.

Mr. Rosenblum added that interpretive information would be included in the restoration of the building, to help visitors understand the original context of the building. The research conducted for the restoration of Belmont Mansion has led Mr. Rosenblum to reassess long held notions about 18th century architecture in Philadelphia. He asserted that the design of Belmont Mansion rivals the design of anything that was constructed in tidewater Virginia in the same period.

Mr. Hollenberg expressed his concern that if the Committee recommended approval of the proposal to remove the third floor and of the other alterations to the building, it would set an unfortunate precedent and depart from the policy of retaining historic alterations to significant buildings. Mr. Rosenblum responded that though those who know Belmont Mansion are somewhat aware of its value, in its present form it has not had the power to attract widespread recognition. As a result, the building has been slated for demolition several times. Restoring the original design would end this cycle of "boom and bust" for the building.

Mr. Rosenblum stated that about one million dollars is currently available for this project. This will be enough money to recondition the outside and do a large part the work on the auxiliary buildings. He added his belief that as the project proceeds successfully, the foundations would decide to fund the completion of the work.

Dr. DeLong expressed the opinion that it is necessary to distinguish the conjectural portions of the design through the use of a different shade of paint or some other subtle method.

Mr. Cornell moved that the Committee grant approval in concept for the plans as presented. Mr. Levy seconded the motion