

REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON HISTORIC DESIGNATION PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Harris Steinberg, AIA, Acting-Chair
Commission Conference Room, City Hall, Room 578
24 October 2002

Present

Harris Steinberg, AIA, Acting-Chair
Warren Huff, City Planning Commission
Janet Klein, Chair, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission
Bruce Lavery, The Athenaeum of Philadelphia

Diane M. Hughes, Executive Secretary
Laura M. Spina, Historic Preservation Planner
Richard Tyler, Historic Preservation Officer

Larry Copeland, Senior Attorney, Law Department

Also

Liz Zimmers, Zimmers Associates
Bill Rhodes, Elfreth's Alley Association
Aileen Bannon, Richard W. Thom, Associates
Richard W. Thom, AIA
Shawn Evans, AIA, Adjacent Resident
Heather H. Harris, Old City Civic Association
Richard E. Tucker, V.P. Franklin Bridge North
James Dunn, Elfreth's Alley Association
John Harkins, Contiguous Property-Home
Charles Rue, Cobblestone Redevelopment
Ellen Curry, Resident
Ted Watson, Old City Resident
Adam Laver, Esq., Klehr Harrison Harvey Branzburg and Ellers
Bob Berman, Old City owner

Harris Steinberg, Acting-Chair, called the meeting to order at 10:05 a.m.

109-131 North 2nd Street aka 117-21 Arch Street aka 128 Elfreth's Alley **National Products Company**

National Products, Company, Linda Levin
DATE: façade, 1957-58

Ms. Spina gave an illustrated presentation of the National Products Company building which incorporates several addresses: 109-31 North 2nd Street; 128 Elfreth's Alley, and 117-21 Arch Street. The National Products Company building meets criteria a, c, d, e, f, h, and j as outlined in Section 14-2007 of the Philadelphia Code. It is a unique example of modern commercial architecture in Center City Philadelphia. It reflects the environment of the 1950s as characterized by a distinctive architectural style and embodies distinguishing characteristics of modern architecture. Owing to its location on North 2nd Street, the National Products building represents

an established and familiar visual feature of the Old City neighborhood. Lastly, it exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

Sweeping rooflines, glass or tiled walls, metal accents, and details that defied gravity and traditionalism became signature elements in modern architecture. As the 1950s progressed, these elements of modern architecture were embraced not only by companies that built chains along the highway, but also the individual storeowner on Main Street. This architecture was able to make buildings visible to pedestrians and motorists from far down the street and attract customers. In a sense, the building itself became a form of advertising. The National Products Company building epitomizes modern commercial architecture. Its sleek, orange terra cotta tiles, smooth granite niches, undulating canopy and stainless steel letters are elements used again and again in modern commercial design of the period. The building succeeds in its purpose of catching the eye of a passer-by and advertising the products within.

Started by Harry Caplen in 1929, the National Products Company had an expansive inventory of restaurant supplies ranging from stoves to tables to dishes. In 1957-58 he installed a new façade and opened the showroom, a first in the industry. The design of the façade is attributed to Israel Demchick. Demchick received his bachelor degree in architecture from the University of Pennsylvania in 1915. During his career, Demchick designed apartment houses, stores, and restaurants, such as the Linton's Lunch Company.

Ms. Spina presented a letter from the Preservation Alliance in support of the designation. Mr. Steinberg opened the floor to discussion by the Committee. Ms. Klein commented that the presentation thoroughly dispatched the merits of the proposed property for designation. Mr. Huff inquired if the designation will encompass all of the property within its boundaries and said that the specifics of the entire property are a critical issue. He also stated that he could easily designate the façade; however, he believes that it is hard to recognize this property as a single parcel. Mr. Huff inquired if 131 North 2nd Street would be designated since it is a vacant lot and asked that Commission's legal counsel respond. Mr. Copeland responded that the designation would apply to 131. Mr. Lavery commented that only recognizing a portion of the building, such as the façade, would amount to treating it as an object. Ms. Spina and Mr. Tyler noted that the design of the façade proves that the vacant lot was considered in the creation of the façade.

Richard Thom said that the nomination was intended to include all eight sites of the property and offered to provide a detailed map of the property. He noted that the interior of the buildings is connected on all sides. Mr. Tyler stated that this is analogous to the Lit Brothers property.

Liz Zimmers, architect for a developer, showed drawings of the entire site and inquired about the affect of the designation in regards to the proposed development. Mr. Tyler responded that the standard procedures would prevail with jurisdictional review over the exterior only. She said that although she is not fully opposed to the designation, she believes that the designation should not be done hastily. She expressed concern that the designation of the Arch Street façade, as well as the wall facing Flag Pole Park will have an adverse effect on the development. Ms. Zimmers also noted concern that hidden structures behind the orange tile façade could present problems.

Shawn Evans, a resident, stated that 128 Elfreth's Alley was built as a loading dock; however, it is important to Elfreth's Alley history and represents 150 years of continuity and change. He also said that it would be a great loss if it were not designated.

Heather Harris, Old City Civic Association, stressed the importance of maintaining and protecting the rear walls facing properties on the river, which are party walls. Mr. Tyler explained that rears and secondary facades have a lower threshold of review, if they do not face a public right-of-way.

Adam Laver, counsel for a developer and equitable owner, stated his opposition to the designation and although his clients were not present for this meeting, he said that they would like to be heard. Mr. Laver said that he was not apprised of the meeting until the day before. Mr. Tyler stated that notice was sent to the owner at least 30 days prior to the meeting.

Ellen Perry, a home owner whose house faces the Arch Street façade, said that the developers are in the early stages of the proposed construction, and that they should incorporate the site into their construction design.

Ms. Klein pointed out that she believes that the continuation of the orange tile around the corner indicates the continuation of the façade. Ms. Spina concurred and added that the granite niche also continues around the corner. Mr. Huff expressed his ambiguity over the nomination while he believes that the façade is extremely important, he questions how the building on the interior of the lot would be developed.

Mr. Laverty made a motion to recommend designation subject to adding the geographics of 128 Elfreth's Alley to section 5. Ms. Klein seconded the motion which carried unanimously.

The meeting adjourned at 10:45 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Diane M. Hughes
Executive Secretary