

**THE MINUTES OF THE 360TH STATED MEETING OF THE
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION**

14 February 1992

City Council Caucus Room

Edward A. Montgomery, Jr., Chairman

Present

Edward A. Montgomery, Jr., Chairman
Christine Washington, Vice Chairperson
David Hollenberg
Jason Nathan
James Cuorato, First Deputy Director for Commerce, Commerce Department
Barbara Kaplan, Executive Director, City Planning Commission
Bennett Levin, Commissioner, Dept. of Licenses & Inspections
Scott Wilds, Executive Assistant, Office of Housing & Community Development

Richard Tyler, Historic Preservation Officer
Randal Baron, Preservation Planner
Sara Jane Elk, Historical Research Technician
Daniel W. Simcox, Executive Secretary

Also

George C. Lutz, Creative Remodeling, Inc.
John McGregor, Graduate Health System
Ken Jacobs, John Milner Associates
Alex Jacobs
Laurence Weilheimer, Wolf, Block, Schorr and Solis-Cohen
Larry Frankel, Juan Levy and Marcia Wilkof, Royal Theater Preservation Association
Judith Eden, Center City Residents' Association
Howard J. Kittell, Preservation Coalition of Greater Philadelphia
John Higgins and Sandra Garz, Foundation for Architecture
Jan Albaum, Central Philadelphia Development Corporation
William Blades, Randy Cotton and Donna Ann Harris, Philadelphia Historic Preservation Corporation
Rebecca Stoloff, Society Hill Civic Association
Michael Hardy, University City Historical Society
Thomas Hine, The Philadelphia Inquirer

After announcing the presence of a quorum, Mr. Montgomery extended a welcome to Bennett Levin, who recently was appointed Commissioner of the Department of Licenses and Inspections by Mayor Edward G. Rendell. Mr. Levin, a member of the National Trust for Historic Preservation who has restored historic railroad cars, expressed his pleasure in joining the Commission.

The Minutes of the 359th Stated Meeting of the Philadelphia Historical Commission, held 8 January 1992, Edward A. Montgomery, Jr., Chairman. It was noted that Mrs. Washington should be added to the list of members in attendance. A motion to adopt the minutes, made by Mrs. Washington and seconded by Mr. Wilds, was approved.

The Report of the Architectural Committee of the Philadelphia Historical Commission held 30 January 1992, David Hollenberg, Chairman. Mr. Hollenberg summarized three applications reviewed by the Committee.

Tabled

The Committee tabled an application regarding a sign installed without a permit at 164 N. Third Street. As the tenant promised to remove this inappropriate fixture when he vacates the premises at the end of February, the Committee tabled this matter until March.

Approval in Concept

The Committee recommended approval in concept for the proposed rehabilitation of two vacant rowhouses at 251-253 S. Camac Street. The applicants proposed to remove a mid-20th century, upper-floor, wooden rear addition and to construct in its place a new one-and-a-half story addition of cinder block and stucco in a Federal Revival style.

Though amenable to a proposal to stucco the rear portion of the historic buildings, the Committee maintained reservations regarding the appearance of the proposed addition. The Committee recommended a simpler design, more in the character of a "back building," like the shape of the existing wooden structure. The Committee recommended an approval in concept for the proposed work with the exception of the style of the rear addition.

Mrs. Washington seconded this recommendation, which was adopted unanimously.

Approval

The Committee reviewed a proposal by John Milner Associates of Philadelphia to re-roof the former parish house of the Church of the New Jerusalem, 2129 Chestnut Street. Once covered entirely with red, diamond-shaped, ceramic tile, the roof of the sanctuary and east slope of the parish house are now covered with gray slate. The highly visible south and west slopes of the parish house retain the ceramic tiles. However, they are likely more than 100 years old and many are cracked. As such, the roof allows substantial water penetration. The occupant wishes to re-roof the parish house in gray slate.

Following considerable discussion by the Committee, further exploration of alternatives by the applicant and another vote by the Committee, a consensus emerged to allow re-roofing in gray slate.

Mr. Baron forwarded the Committee's recommendation to approve this proposal, including:

- the proposed roofing of the stair tower and the repair in-kind of the roofs of the loggia and sanctuary;
- removal of the existing terra cotta cresting, contingent upon its replacement on all roof ridges where it presently exists when the roof is finished; and
- roofing the parish house in gray slate.

Mr. Hollenberg, who abstained from the Committee deliberations, also abstained from the following vote.

Mr. Wilds seconded this recommendation, which was adopted unanimously.

Ms. Kaplan inquired into the status of an outstanding violation on this property for the "Tomb of the Unknown Utility," a transformer installed above ground. Mr. Tyler reported that PECO could not install this fixture below ground as it did at the Society Hill Synagogue. Mr. Nathan added that the growth of the surrounding shrubs successfully shrouded this fixture.

The Report of a Joint Meeting of the Architectural Committee and the Committee on Financial Hardship of the Philadelphia Historical Commission held 30 January 1992, David Hollenberg and Barbara Kaplan, Chairpersons.

Mr. Hollenberg and Ms. Kaplan briefly reviewed the Report of the Joint Meeting. Michael Singer, the owner of the Royal Theater, proposes to demolish this building on grounds of financial hardship and public safety. The Committee reviewed information submitted which reports the owner's attempts to sell, lease and rehabilitate the property for years to no avail. The building has been vacant since the late 1960s. Mr. Singer does not plan to develop the site after demolition.

Mr. Nathan inquired into the condition of the building. When he walked through the building four years ago, some of the ceiling had fallen and the chairs were mostly rotted. He acknowledged that the facade was handsome, but asked if the structure was sound.

Mr. Tyler spoke regarding the condition and historic significance of the Royal Theater. He informed the Committees that he, an engineer and two architects walked through the building several months ago. From their visual inspection, which did not include any testing, Mr. Tyler offered the following remarks. Though damaged by water penetration, the building appears structurally sound. At least sixty percent of the plaster ceiling has fallen to the floor. Shallow pilasters are badly damaged and much of the ornamental plaster which concealed the ventilation system has fallen as well. Although there are enough pieces to reproduce the historic ceiling if desired, there is not enough extant historic fabric to warrant restoration. This absence of historic fabric, however, may afford considerable leeway in plans for redevelopment of the site. If a rehabilitation strategy includes federal income tax credits, this problem may become an advantage.

Regarding historical significance, Mr. Tyler reported that the Royal Theater was built in 1919 in a Regency Revival Style from plans of Frank Hahn. Constructed primarily of concrete, the building was intended as a cinema for the area's predominantly African American neighborhoods. The Royal became a significant cultural and entertainment center for African Americans and site of the founding of the Negro Motion Picture Operators' Union. Recognition of its significance came in 1980, when the Royal Theater was entered on the National Register of Historic Places, and in 1978, when it was placed on the Philadelphia Register.

Mr. Tyler noted that the potential for redevelopment of the Royal Theater was highlighted in the "South Broad Street Economic and Cultural Development Plan: Working Memorandum #2, Economic Development Recommendations," a report prepared for the Central Philadelphia Development Corporation in collaboration with an array of institutions and firms. The Plan declares that the Royal is "the key structure on (the 1500 block of South Street." At present, there is no commitment for development.

Mr. Hollenberg noted that questions remained regarding the owner's sudden concern that the property is uninsured, the extent of financial hardship and the degree to which it would be alleviated by demolition. To evaluate the owner's claims, though, further information is required. At the conclusion of the meeting, the Committees requested the following information:

- an appraisal prepared by an independent real estate appraiser. Ms. Kaplan requested that the staff arrange a meeting of the Committee and the appraiser, to clarify questions, before any work is undertaken.
- a clear comparison of the differential between the costs of a vacant lot and the costs of carrying the building.
- ten-year, pro forma financial analyses of several different proposals, specifically for a simplified theater and for several reasonable retail uses. Mr. Tyler suggested that the owner prepare economic analyses for plans previously prepared by Kise Franks Straw and Alley

Friends Associates. It was also suggested that these calculations include the federal Income Tax Credit.

- the costs of demolition;
- a clear statement of the owner's reasons for wanting to demolish the property now;
- a list of all extant violations and their status, as well as a cost estimate for securing the building better; and
- a complete list of expenditures for securing and repairing the building since 1975. This information will be used to evaluate whether the buildings present condition is the result of demolition by neglect and to assess the fairness the asking price of \$650,000.

Mr. Cuorato asked if demolition by neglect remained an issue for this application. Mr. Tyler responded affirmatively.

In regard to the appraisal, Mr. Nathan stated that the value of a property is inextricably linked to time. As such, he asked for an evaluation of the asking price of \$650,000 during the real estate boom of the 1980s and in today's more depressed market.

Following this request, Mr. Nathan seconded the joint recommendation of the two Committees. The Commission adopted the recommendation unanimously.

The Report on Staff Activities, January 1992, Richard Tyler,
Historic Preservation Officer. A MOTION to adopt this report, made by Mr. Nathan and seconded by Mr. Brownlee, was approved.

The Victory Building

Mr. Tyler reported that the Board of Licenses & Inspections Review reversed the Commission's denial of a demolition permit for the Victory Building. The Commission has thirty days from the date of the Board's ruling to appeal this matter to the Court of Common Pleas. The owner still must obtain a permit and post notice on the property for 21 days before commencing demolition. Mr. Tyler stated that he would call a Special Meeting of the Commission before the expiration of the 30-day period for appeal.

Also, Mayor Rendell has reconvened the Committee on the Victory Building, expanding its official membership to include the Preservation Coalition, the AIA, the Foundation for Architecture and the Philadelphia Historic Preservation Corporation, as well as two persons with expertise in economic development.

Mr. Tyler also noted that parts of the penthouse had been assessed as imminently dangerous by the Department of Licenses and Inspections. After the last windstorm, several pieces flew onto the adjacent parking garage, causing some damage. Commissioner Bennett Levin indicated that the dangerous material has been removed, or will be soon.

Mr. Nathan urged the staff to contact Thomas Jefferson University Hospital to confirm their rejection of Kevin Donahoe's proposal. He added that the staff should determine the reasons for their decision and try to encourage them to re-examine this proposal.

Resolution of City Council

Mrs. Washington inquired into the intent of the resolution of City Council. Mr. Tyler reported that the resolution represents Council's intention to investigate the effectiveness of the Philadelphia historic preservation ordinance. He suggested that this inquiry may be deferred until the Pennsylvania Supreme Court rules on reargument.

There being no further business, the Commission adjourned.

Daniel W. Simcox,
Executive Secretary

MINUTES APPROVED: 4 MARCH 1992