



SOCIETY HILL

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RECENT TRENDS IN HISTORIC DISTRICTS

"The Perils of Prosperity"

by **John Andrew Gallery, Executive Director,
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This article reproduces a presentation given at the May 18th Society Hill Civic Association General Membership Meeting. Gallery's talk, focusing on the explosion of development occurring throughout Center City, was an outstanding summary of the opportunities vs. potential crises now facing Philadelphia. For that reason we gladly print his talk in this supplement to the July/August 2005 Society Hill Reporter — so that you can share it with others or save it for tomorrow's "history."

Positive Effects of Development

In the past five years Center City has experienced an unusual surge in residential development. This tremendous interest in living in or near Center City is of great benefit to Philadelphia, as additional residents support new businesses, restaurants and cultural activities. The development trend has also been very good for historic preservation. Many historic buildings have been converted to housing, while others are being restored, in part because of the anticipated presence of a larger population in the vicinity.

While development trends pose challenges for historic districts and neighborhoods, I will first indicate the positive impact on historic preservation resulting from this recent growth in residential development.

- The Victory Building, at 10th and Chestnut Streets, is a very special landmark that preservationists feared would be demolished years ago. We fought to save it, but also wondered if it would ever be restored. And yet here it is today — restored to its stunning grandeur and now being converted into residential condominiums.
- The U.S. Naval Home, a National Historic Landmark at Grays' Ferry Avenue, stood idle for 25 years. Biddle Hall, the primary historic building on that site, is now well

on its way to being restored, also for condominiums, as part of a larger development of the site that few of us thought possible only a few years ago.

- Throughout Center City many older office buildings, such as the Phoenix at 16th and Arch Streets and the Lanesborough at 16th and Locust Streets, are examples of wonderful historic structures that have been converted without losing any of their character or their most important interior spaces.
- These residential developments are providing support for other projects. A few years ago, when we fought to save the Boyd Theater at 19th and Chestnut Streets, we thought it would be a long and difficult struggle. Well, it wasn't easy, but it happened remarkably fast for a development of that complexity. Clear Channel Entertainment is now at work restoring the theater and its remarkable Art Deco interior to its original splendor.
- The influence of current market conditions is not confined to Center City alone. When community groups and the Preservation Alliance successfully prevented demolition of the Nugent and Presser Homes — two extraordinary historic buildings in West Mt. Airy — I thought it would take at least a year to find a developer willing to undertake restoration of the buildings. But only a little over six months later, a developer purchased the property and is now planning to restore both buildings for residential use.

This great interest in residential development has had and will undoubtedly continue to have a positive impact on the preservation of historic properties. At the same time, however, such development creates perils for historic districts and neighborhoods. Three issues are of particular concern: parking, penthouse rooftop additions, and new construction.



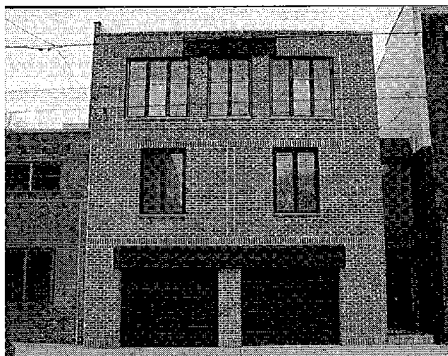
The Victory Building, abandoned for years, is now being converted for residential use.

Parking

Parking is always an issue for new development in Center City or any neighborhood. It was important when Society Hill was redeveloped during the 1950s and 1960s. At that time architects and developers took their cue from the historic carriageways, such as the one that leads from Market Street to Benjamin Franklin's house. New residential projects used similar entrances to reach shared parking located behind new houses.

But times have changed. Today, apparently, it is essential for many property owners to store their cars in what used to be their living rooms. Increasingly, small-scale, in-fill construction is characterized by a garage that occupies the entire first floor of a house, except for an entrance door. But with the popularity of today's SUVs, these garages are often too small, and the garage functions only as a way of reserving an on-street parking space in front of these houses. This conversion of the first floor to garages is not limited only to new houses. Often the first floor and front facade of older houses that are not protected by historic designation are being rebuilt to accommodate cars — because the inclusion of an inside garage often adds up to \$200,000 to the price of a house! Developers are, therefore, eager to provide garages regardless of their impact on neighborhood character. Furthermore, the city's current Zoning Board of Adjustment (ZBA) appears to support the inclusion of garages.

This pattern of garages on the first floor significantly alters the pedestrian experience of older neighborhoods. Instead of interesting door stoops, window boxes with flowers, windows at eye level, and various other attractive visual features, residential blocks are disrupted visually by a series of blank garage doors and entrance doors. These blocks lack the charm that Center City's historic neighborhoods are famous for and also give the streetscape a barren character that feels less safe. This trend has been very disruptive to the character of your adjacent historic community, such that Queen Village Neighbors Association (QVNA) asked City Council to place a moratorium on demolition.



The placement of garages on the first floor significantly alters the streetscape.

QVNA is now working to designate the area as a Conservation District with guidelines intended to preserve the pedestrian character of the neighborhood by limiting parking garages on the first floor of buildings.

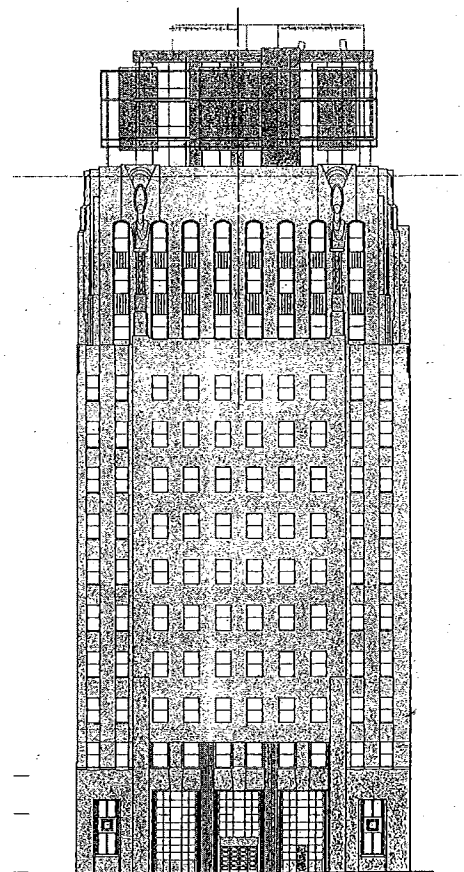
Penthouse Additions

The second trend of great concern is the inclination of developers to add a penthouse rooftop addition to historic buildings being converted for residential use. These penthouse units are obviously highly desirable from a financial perspective. Their views and rooftop terraces allow them to be sold at prices much higher than the \$1 million units now being found in many of these buildings. The additions seem to be "icing on the cake," as they are not required to make a development feasible. Rather they add additional profit to an otherwise "good deal."

Fortunately, thus far, most of these penthouse additions have been well done. In approving them, the Historical Commission appears to have followed fairly faithfully the National Park Service's suggestions regarding the application of the Secretary of the Interior's Standards to rooftop additions on historic buildings. The Park Service recommends that such additions be limited to one floor, be set back, be visually as inconspicuous as possible and in character with the historic building. Within Society Hill's Historic District, good examples of such additions include a one-story penthouse above the Saunders Building and the rooftop addition to the Lippincott Building, both on Washington Square. Equally successful in the Rittenhouse-Fitler Historic District is the Lanesborough, at 16th and Locust Streets.

But some additions are clearly problematic. At Front and Chestnut Streets a developer proposed a four-story addition above a four-story building. In fact, the addition was taller than the historic building itself! Fortunately, the Historical Commission turned down this proposal. However, the Commission did approve an out-of-character, very modern steel and glass rooftop addition to one of the historic bank buildings on the 400 block of Chestnut Street facing Independence National Historical Park. Because the Alliance holds a preservation easement on that building, we were able to work with the developer and architect to redesign the project to be more in keeping with the building's character.

Currently, and of great concern, there is a proposed plan that would add a 35' to 50' high rooftop addition to the historic N.W. Ayer Building on Washington Square. This proposed addition is to be constructed of steel and glass, shielded by wire-mesh screens and prominently illuminated at night. The plan is inconsistent with almost all of the Park Service's recommendations for rooftop additions and will dramati-



Proposed N.W. Ayer rooftop addition: Fifty feet of steel and glass

cally alter the character of one of the city's finest Art Deco buildings. This proposal is important not only because of the significance of the building itself, but because it may create a precedent for a new trend in rooftop additions on other historic properties.

If the Historical Commission departs from its practice of limiting additions to one floor to allow a 50-foot-high addition, then future additions may simply become a matter of degree: if 50 feet is OK here, when will an 80-foot or 100-foot addition be acceptable? This is particularly significant in light of the recent proposal to add a 14-story addition to the Lafayette Building opposite Independence Hall, at 5th and Chestnut Streets.

New Construction

The third trend of great concern is the impact of new condominium development either underway or proposed for historic districts. Recently, the Design Advocacy Group (DAG), a coalition of Philadelphia architects and planners, surveyed the number of residential units either under construction, approved, or planned for Center City and nearby neighborhoods. DAG discovered that approximately 9,000 total housing units are included in this list, mostly condominiums, and a significant percentage of these are located in historic neighborhoods. Many of them are large buildings on small lots made possible by a willingness of the ZBA to grant unprecedented zoning variances. For example, the proposed condominium development at 17th Street and Rittenhouse Square Street received a zoning variance allowing construction of a 31-story tower on a site zoned for three-story townhouses.

The impact of new construction on an historic district can be seen most vividly in what is currently happening in Old City. Several developers obtained zoning variances before the Old City Historic District was approved, allowing them to develop projects considerably out of scale with the community's environment. In response, the Old City Civic Association had City Council pass a height limit of 65 feet for the area north of Market Street, but that has not prevented buildings from going higher. Some, like the buildings

under construction on the former National Products Building site, on the west side of 2nd Street, have attempted to interpret the character of Old City loft buildings in a contemporary manner. Others, like the hi-rise on the 100 block of Arch Street, seem oblivious to the surrounding context, as is also the case with the building proposed to be constructed on top of the orange, terracotta National Products Building itself.

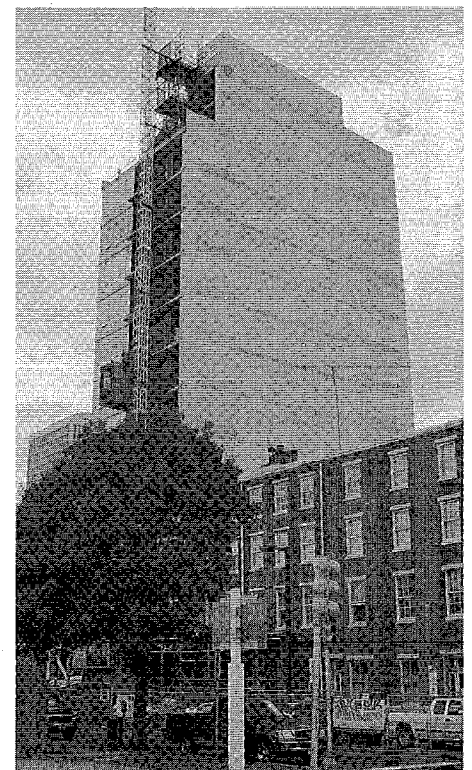
But probably the most dramatic change in historic character is occurring along Front Street, heading steadily south from Market Street toward Head House Square. The skyline of four-story commercial buildings with church spires in the background — as depicted in Scull and Heap's famous engraving, and in subsequent views of Philadelphia up through the end of the 19th century — is rapidly being replaced by a series of condominium developments. These buildings, like the one proposed between Market and Chestnut Streets, are generally taller than their four-story neighbors and have facades almost entirely of glass facing the river. From a marketing point of view this is understandable. But the resultant buildings are very different in character from their historic context. Some, like the Beaumont between Chestnut and Sansom Streets, are very tall and narrow due to the small size of their lots. The Beaumont also illustrates another emerging problem: its north façade is entirely blank, with no windows, because it is located on the party line of the property. These blank walls are becoming increasingly common: the north façade of the proposed 11-story condominium tower at Front and Walnut Streets is similarly blank, as is the south wall of the condominium proposed to be built on the site of Mayor Dilworth's house on Washington Square.

There are three more large vacant sites along that stretch of Front Street which will undoubtedly be developed for buildings of similar size and character. This steady southerly march leads directly to Society Hill's vacant NewMarket site at Front Street between Lombard and South Streets — where a developer proposes to build a condominium as high as 40 stories, although the zoning

code imposes a 35-foot height limit for any new residential building on the NewMarket site.

The great danger now is that any small piece of open land — or any property that could be converted into open land — is considered suitable for a hi-rise condominium. That has led to the controversial proposal to demolish the Washington Square home of former Mayor Richardson Dilworth. Although historically designated as a "significant" building within Society Hill's Historic District, the current owner is trying to have the designation of the building changed in order to demolish it and build a luxury condominium.

Unfortunately, the Historical Commission has little ability to prevent or influence these new developments. The City's Historic Preservation Ordinance gives the Commission limited power over new construction — in most cases limiting their authority to a 45-day period of review and comment that is not binding on the developer. And yet these new developments will greatly alter the overall character of the historic districts in which they are built, a character that — ironically — gives these sites and these neighborhoods their current high economic value.



Exemplifying the problem of a hi-rise with windowless blank walls is the Beaumont.

The Need for Balance

While we all want to encourage some degree of new residential development for the benefits they bring, the question before us now is how new development and/or conversions of historic properties can be accomplished without destroying the historic character of our neighborhoods or the character of the historic buildings themselves. The current troublesome trends are influenced by public policies that include the following:

- Many of the proposed new developments and rooftop additions require zoning variances. Until recently, the ZBA appears to have been willing to grant unusually large variances to take advantage of these opportunities for new housing. However, partially as a result of recent court decisions and appeals, many developers are now trying to build within the allowed zoning regulations. This is good, but there is still a need to revise the City's zoning code.

In addition, it is still very important for community associations to oppose excessive variances for both new construction and rooftop additions in historic areas. Moreover, the time has come for community associations in historic areas to recognize that the problems they face are also being faced by other neighborhoods. It's time to work together to support one another's positions and to have impact on the policies of public agencies. To this end, the Preservation Alliance plans to create an Historic District Advisory Committee, modeled after a very successful similar effort in New York.

- As previously noted, the Historical Commission has limited authority over new construction in historic districts. However,

the meaning of any historic district, such as Society Hill, is that the area as a whole has a character that is important to preserve over and above the preservation of individual historic buildings. New buildings, rooftop additions, and solutions to parking can all be accomplished in a way that preserves the context of historic districts while encouraging contemporary architectural design. Society Hill itself is an example of this. Many of the new buildings from the 1960s are excellent examples of contemporary architecture of the time, while also fitting the historic context of the neighborhood. It may be time to consider amending the City's Historic Preservation Ordinance to give the Historical Commission broader authority over new construction in historic districts.

- Even with broader authority — and especially in its absence — there is a need for design guidelines or principles for evaluating new construction projects, because the Secretary of the Interior's Standards do not apply to new construction, and there are no other commonly accepted standards that can be used by developers, public agencies or advocacy organizations. The Design Advocacy Group (DAG) has recently developed a preliminary draft of principles to fill this gap. The Alliance hopes to work with DAG to adapt these principles to historic districts and make them available for public discussion and use.

I believe this is a great period in Philadelphia's history and a great period for historic preservation. Our challenge is to find ways that balance new development while preserving the historic character of neighborhoods that makes Philadelphia the distinctive city that it is.



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The Preservation Alliance Needs Your Support!

Not only does the Alliance work actively to help us in Society Hill, it helps neighborhood organizations throughout the city and region. **BECOME A MEMBER** and help preserve the beauty and historic character of Philadelphia.

Join online at www.Preservationalliance.com or, for a copy of the Alliance's membership brochure, contact Membership Director Pippa Liebert at 215-546-1146, Ext. 19.

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