

You Lose One, You Win One

The fate of two buildings on the Preservation Alliance's 2005 Endangered Historic Properties has been determined with decidedly different outcomes: the Bunting Friendship Freedom House in Darby Township was recently demolished, but the Oskar Stonorov steel house in Charlestown Township has been saved.

The current owners of the Bunting Friendship Freedom House demolished the 275-year old house on December 17, 2005, to clear the site for new development. Samuel Bunting, a Quaker and early Darby Township (Delaware County) resident, built this hall-and-parlor-plan, 3-room house for his family who owned and resided here for over two centuries. The house was eligible for National Register listing for its Underground Railroad connection, and twentieth century use as a Quaker day-care and community center. Despite advocacy efforts of local preservationists, the township permitted the demolition.



Bunting house being demolished

On a more positive note, a prototypical steel house that modernist architect Oskar Stonorov designed and erected on his property in suburban Philadelphia in 1946, has been carefully disassembled and stored for reconstruction at another site.

Stonorov designed and built the two steel houses in Charlestown Township, Chester County, for manufacturer William Harmon, and with the encouragement of Walter Reuther (who was looking for opportunities to continue employment of war-time steel workers). Stonorov's architectural colleague Louis Kahn may have also collaborated on the design.

Stonorov and Harmon developed the houses as prototypes of mass-produced pre-fab houses marketed to returning WWII veterans. Under the name of "Harmon Houses", several hundred were eventually manufactured in Wilmington and shipped to sites in as many as 40 states before the company went out of business.



Photo from the Library of Congress

A preservation solution for the prototype was ultimately agreed upon by its property owners, the township and its Historic Architectural Review Board (HARB), and the Preservation Alliance. Two of Stonorov's steel houses stood in the way of new residential development proposed for a portion of the architect's rural property which now controlled by the family estate. Initially the estate parties wanted the steel houses demolished in order to create a new access road to the residential development, but the HARB recognized their historical significance and successfully brokered a delay of demolition in order to find a way to save one or both of the structures.

Dale Frens (of Frens and Frens Restoration Architects), who is the architectural consultant for the Charlestown HARB, asked the Preservation Alliance if it would play a role in saving the steel houses: given their unusual "Erector Set"-like construction, it was thought that the houses could be successfully de-constructed, and the pieces saved for future restoration at another site. Would the Alliance take ownership of the disassembled houses?

The Alliance agreed to accept donations for the funding of the disassembly, then contracted with 18th Century Restorations, Inc. – a restoration contractor which has experience in taking apart historical buildings – to do the work. Along with another generous donor, the Stonorov estate contributed funds to the project, and the township has provided secure and sheltered storage of the steel pieces at one of its township facilities.

It was determined that funding and time constraints would allow only the complete disassembly of the larger, three-bedroom steel house. The smaller, two-bedroom house has been documented and scavenged for replacement parts before demolition.

De-constructing the larger house proved to be quite a challenge: the galvanized-steel exterior wall and roof panels were bolted to a steel framework with fasteners that resisted conventional, modern tools. Finally, the contractor located a craftsman who had worked in the post-WWII recreational-vehicle industry which used similar steel construction methods. The RV worker was able to produce a specialized drill bit which also accommodated the bolt fasteners at the steel house.

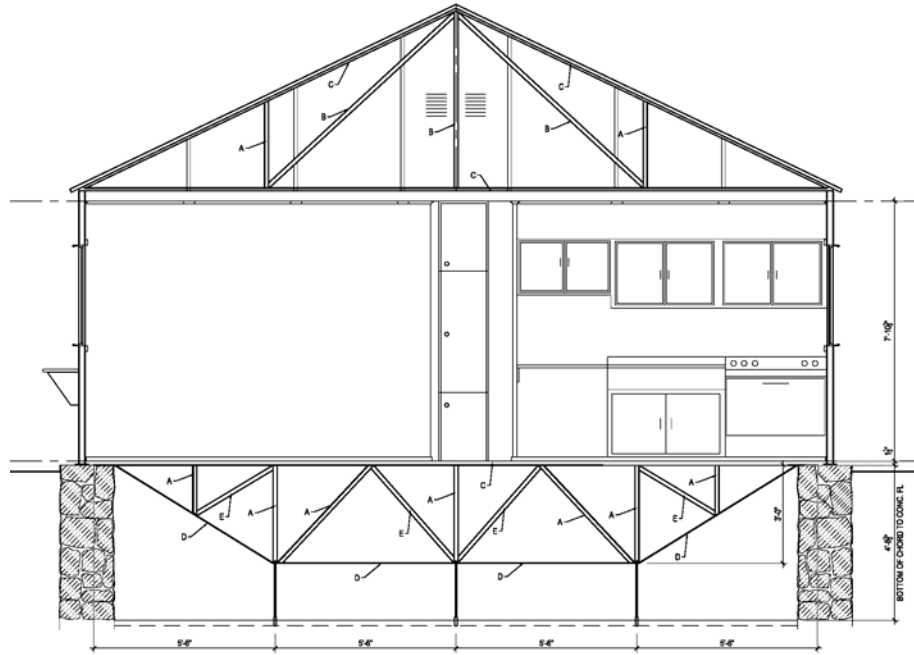


Disassembling the steel house. Photo: Dale Frens

Disassembly of the steel house took three weeks during January 2006. The house's steel framework, exterior wall and roof panels, roof and floor trusses, steel casement windows, doors, and assorted interior elements – such as the fireplace and casement and molding samples – are now labeled and safely stored.

The next challenge is to find an appropriate new owner. The Preservation Alliance is actively publicizing the availability of the disassembled steel house through its and other web sites (e.g., see www.historicproperties.com), the print media (e.g., the January 16, 2006 issue of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*), and word of mouth. So far, inquiries have come from as far as Alaska, Utah, Texas, and the Caribbean islands.

The Alliance hopes to choose a new owner for the steel house soon, one who can demonstrate a commitment of resources necessary for its restoration. Future preservation of the steel house will likely be guaranteed by a preservation easement held by the Alliance. The future owner should also provide for some public benefit, e.g., visibility of the house at its new site, or periodic access to the house. Interested parties can contact Randy Cotton at randy@preservationalliance.com or 215.546.1146 x 2.



Cross-section of steel house. Drawing: Frens and Frens Restoration Architects