



## Upcoming event recalls legendary architects' prescient words about Chestnut Hill at 1970 panel discussion

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At a 1970 panel in Chestnut Hill (from left), Philadelphia Museum of Art Director Evan Turner, architects Romaldo Giurgola, Robert Venturi and Louis Kahn, and Chestnut Hill Historical Society founding member Nancy Hubby. (Photo courtesy of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy)

by Shirley Hanson for the Chestnut Hill Conservancy

In the beginning was the remarkable natural setting along the Wissahickon gorge. What is now Germantown Avenue, over time changing from a trail to a well-traveled roadway, meandered along its ridge. As Chestnut Hill grew, settlers respected the natural setting and the buildings that preceded them.

In 1966, this tradition sparked a response to a plea in the Chestnut Hill Local. Then, individuals rallied to rehabilitate the VFW Building, a valued Germantown Avenue landmark. Quickly, these individuals formed the Committee for the Preservation of Historic Buildings in Chestnut Hill.

Outspoken doubters countered, "There is nothing historic in Chestnut Hill." True, there is no equivalent of Mount Vernon here. Notably, though, the community is an assembly of buildings of varying ages, sizes, and styles designed with care to complement existing structures and the natural setting.

Soon the small committee strengthened its voice for preservation when it became the Chestnut Hill Historical Society in 1967. This organization treated Chestnut Hill as a comprehensive unit, more significant than the sum of its parts, and looked ahead to contribute to its future.

Three years later, the nascent organization concluded its annual program series with "Chestnut Hill's Future: An Evening of Speculation." The panel, moderated by Evan Turner, director of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, featured three trailblazing architects, leaders of the "Philadelphia School" of architecture. Each of these architects – Romaldo Giurgola, Louis Kahn, and Robert Venturi – had designed a modernist home in Chestnut Hill in the 1960s, and they engaged the public in a discussion about the nature of new development in this treasured corner of Philadelphia.

Such was the star power of the three architects that architecture classes were canceled as far away as New York City so that students could travel to Philadelphia to hear these luminaries. They spoke with optimism that Chestnut Hill would be able to accommodate change without doing violence to its character.

Robert Venturi answered the question "What is good about Chestnut Hill? He concluded: "Vitality and variety. Chestnut Hill is almost unique in this country because it is an old community which has had continuous vitality. There has been no decline and renewal. It has had continuous evolution and growth."

Louis Kahn added that Chestnut Hill "must keep its essential character." He warned, "Indiscriminate use of the land would do more harm than good to the entity that is the city. Chestnut Hill inspires you. It depends so much on its natural features – its streams and trees and general contours. The old houses have become inseparable from the trees and the landscape. One is not isolated from the rest. They must be counted as though what is there is part of the landscape, and new things must have agreement."

Today the organization with a new name, the Chestnut Hill Conservancy, celebrates its 50th Anniversary by reflecting upon these words, which are just as relevant today as in 1970 – perhaps more so in light of the stronger pressure for new development on natural lands and redevelopment of existing buildings. "Visionaries Roundtable: Preservation and Change in Chestnut Hill" is upcoming on April 21 and will be moderated – another poignant echo – by Philadelphia



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Museum of Art President and CEO Gail Harrity. Lending their insight and sparking what promises to be a rousing discussion are keynote speaker Witold Rybczynski and visionaries David De Long, Bryan Hanes, Inga Saffron, and Richard Snowden. They will reveal their views of the future – and solicit views from the audience – on Friday, April 21, at the Cherokee campus of Springside Chestnut Hill Academy, beginning at 6:30 p.m.

The event will also toast the just-announced news that the Chestnut Hill Conservancy is the recipient of the 2017 Board of Directors Award from the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia, a regional recognition of exceptional stewardship of historic properties. The Conservancy will receive the award at a ceremony in Center City this June.

Tickets to the April 21st Visionaries Roundtable are only \$10 (for students, \$5) and available at [www.chconservancy.org](http://www.chconservancy.org) or 215-247-9329, x202. A “Meet the Speakers” reception with fondue and wine will begin at 6 p.m. for \$40 a person (includes the main event). A complimentary social courtesy of Chill Frozen Yogurt will follow the event. The Visionaries Roundtable is generously sponsored by Chestnut Hill Conservancy 50th Anniversary Presenting Sponsor, the Nottingham-Goodman Group of Merrill Lynch, as well as Johnson Kendall & Johnson, Krieger + Associates Architects, Kurtz Construction, Dennis F. Meyer Inc., Old Village Master Painters, and Pure Insurance.

*Shirley Hanson is a founder and board member of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy and one of the organizers of the Visionaries Roundtable.*

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	<b>FRI 30</b>	<b>SAT 1</b>	<b>SUN 2</b>	<b>MON 3</b>	<b>TUE 4</b>	<b>WED 5</b>
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