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Chestnut Hill roundtable looks to the past to plan for the future

- Tuesday, April 25, 2017
- By [Alan Jaffe](#)
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- Visionaries Roundtable (l to r): Bryan Hanes, Inga Saffron, David De Long, Richard Snowden

For an evening focused on preserving historic buildings and protecting the landscape, there was a whole lot of talk about accepting development and preparing for change.

But that was the point. The program hosted by the [Chestnut Hill Conservancy and Historical Society](#) on April 21 was part of a process that is preparing the community for serious work this fall on a district plan for the Upper Northwest, one of the final components of the Planning Commission's [2035 Philadelphia2035](#) Comprehensive Plan. The Conservancy, in partnership with the [Chestnut Hill Community Association](#), is completing a study that takes an integrated approach to preserving the historic buildings and the natural beauty and function of the Wissahickon Watershed.

About 300 residents filled the auditorium of Springside Chestnut Hill Academy for what was called the “Visionaries Roundtable,” a panel of leading voices in the design, preservation, and development circles. The program paid tribute to – and borrowed quotes and themes from – a similar roundtable in 1970, when modernist architects Romaldo Giurgola, Robert Venturi, and Louis Kahn, each of whom had built transformative houses in Chestnut Hill, joined in “An Evening of Speculation” on protecting the character of the community.

For the current conversation, the participants were David De Long, professor emeritus of architecture at Penn, where he chaired the graduate program in historic preservation; Bryan Hanes, principal of the landscape architecture firm Studio Bryan Hanes; *Inquirer* architecture critic Inga Saffron; and Richard Snowden, managing partner of Bowman Properties, which has developed and manages historic residential and commercial buildings throughout Chestnut Hill.

In agreement

To open the evening, Nathaniel Kahn, filmmaker and son of Louis Kahn, described growing up in Chestnut Hill amid its “unspeakably beautiful” physical environment. He also recalled the 1970 panel discussion and said, “The concerns then are the same as those that face all of you today.”

He quoted his father: “Chestnut Hill inspires you ... 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.”

New development, Nathaniel Kahn added, “must not destroy or detract from the great character you have here.”



Evening of Speculation, 1970 | courtesy of Chestnut Hill Conservancy and Historical Society

Early development

Witold Rybczynski, emeritus professor of urbanism at Penn, presented the keynote remarks on the birth and growth of Chestnut Hill.

It was a “little hamlet, a place of great beauty” -- and “it was a development,” Rybczynski explained. Businessman Henry Howard Houston brought the railroad to Chestnut Hill, built a resort hotel, country club, church, and started a horse show to attract affluent families to his new community, where he was the major landowner. Houston encouraged the “radical idea” of moving out of the city to the garden suburb, which was still an open, flat area in the late 19th century. “The landscapes were built much later,” Rybczynski said.

George Woodward, a doctor turned developer, adapted the European garden city movement to Chestnut Hill, creating homes in a green environment, while bringing the sophistication of the city to the community.

Woodward wanted to attract middle-class families and worked with architect H. Louis Duhring on the designs of smaller but attractive, well-built, grouped houses, including a “quadruple house” where each home included five or six bedrooms. The new variety of housing, such as the handsome homes on Benezet Street, dramatically increased density in Chestnut Hill from the 1910s to 1930s.

During the same period in Seattle and Charleston, architects were experimenting with smaller houses in urban environments, using common buildings and shared lawns to create amenities within the restrictions of historic districts with less space. “There are many strategies for hitting on things so you can accommodate people,” while maintaining the aesthetic quality of neighborhoods, Rybczynski said.

He quoted John Stirling: “Architects have always looked back in order to move forward.” Faced with contemporary development pressures, Rybczynski said communities should do the same, adding, “Chestnut Hill was always an experimental place.”



Benezet Street houses | Photo by Carol Franklin, courtesy of Chestnut Hill Conservancy and Historical Society

Protecting the brand

Panel moderator Gail Harry, president of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, invited the panel to address the keys to striking a balance between preservation and change.

Richard Snowden said his company has followed core principles since it began 30 years ago. “The first: Do no harm. We have a museum collection of buildings and landscapes, and the scale, context, and gardens – it all really matters,” he said, and must be considered in any development in order to “protect the brand of Chestnut Hill.”

His second principle is “leave something on the table.” Snowden said his company strives to preserve original fabric or create beautiful new architecture, and include preservation easements as part of each project.

Development planning should be a “community-wide procedure,” he added. “But I ask that you don’t oppose development just for the purpose of opposing. Accept that there will be change, but bend it to the way you want your community to be.”

David De Long advised the audience to “guide responsible change” that is responsive to the historical environment. Rather than think in terms of preservation plans, he thinks about development plans. “Save what is there, and address what is to come,” he said, and argued the city’s Historical Commission should work hand in glove with the Planning Commission.

Inga Saffron added a larger context to the conversation, pointing to the building boom underway in Center City and beyond. The 16,000 property tax abatements handed out to developers over the past 10 years in Philadelphia is driving a “construction frenzy,” she said, and it has already spread to neighboring Roxborough and Manayunk.

Chestnut Hill is “well positioned for development,” she said, and “the challenge is to control that change in the best ways.”

Density comes in many forms, and new buildings can refresh the housing stock and enhance neighborhoods, while creating opportunities for young people and a more diverse community, Saffron said. Chestnut Hill’s large, older houses may not be able to remain single-family homes, she added.

The community can now decide “where is the right place to build and what kind of building it should be,” she said. “The key is to prepare for what’s coming, and prepare developers for what you expect.”



Pastorius Park, Photo by Gary Reed

Unique character

In describing the qualities of Chestnut Hill, Bryan Hanes cited the work of Bryn Mawr College geology professor Florence Bascom on the distinctive local building material, Wissahickon schist. The hills, valleys, green spaces and “wilderness within the city is also unique to this place,” he said.

On a recent spring walk through the neighborhood’s parklands, Hanes said he noticed the spreading damage of invasive plant species. “The fervent arguments of Chestnut Hill for preservation of buildings should take into account the landscapes as well,” he said.

He urged the audience to “take a greater initiative in our daily lives for the preservation of the landscape. It takes the spirit of everyone to care for the community landscape and contribute back to it.”

Snowden emphasized the value of the Conservancy’s [conservation easement program](#). While there are 2,800 buildings in the historic district, 1,300 new buildings could be developed on by-right subdivisions, he said. “Think of the impact of developing those 1,300 lots,” he said.

Toward the end of the roundtable conversation, the panelists were asked for ways to create a more vibrant community in Chestnut Hill.

Bryan asked residents to make Pastorius Park “more than just the best dog-walking park in the city.”

Saffron called for the preservation of more of Chestnut Hill’s smaller buildings, “where people just starting out can live.”

Snowden urged the audience to get involved in the Conservancy and Community Association, which are in need of members and support. “If you’re not engaged and bad things happen, shame on you,” he said.

Returning to the stage, Rybczynski said people should “not just do your duty. If you do a little more, the future will take care of itself.”

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Alan Jaffe has been a contributing writer for PlanPhilly since 2008, focusing on overlooked buildings and historic preservation issues. He was a writer and editor in the newspaper industry for nearly 30 years, including eight at the Philadelphia Inquirer and nine at the South Jersey Courier-Post. He is currently the director of communications for the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. He is also an antiques writer and collector and the author of "J. Chein & Co.: A Collector's Guide to an American Toymaker."

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