

Residents turn out to hear experts on Hill development, conservation

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Members of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy's "Visionaries Roundtable" panel (from left) landscape architect Bryan Hanes, Philadelphia Inquirer architecture columnist Inga Saffron, Penn architecture professor David DeLong, and Bowman Properties managing partner Richard Snowden. (Photo by Sue Ann Rybak)

by Sue Ann Rybak

More than 350 people packed the auditorium at Springside Chestnut Hill Academy on April 21 to attend "The Visionaries Roundtable" hosted by The Chestnut Hill Conservancy to discuss the future of Chestnut Hill and how to balance preservation and redevelopment in the midst of one of the city's biggest building booms.

Friday night's panel discussion moderated by Gail Harrity, president of the Philadelphia Art Museum, featured four experts on architecture and development: David DeLong, professor emeritus of architecture at Penn; Inga Saffron, the Philadelphia Inquirer's Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic; Richard Snowden, managing partner of Bowman Properties; and landscape architect Bryan Hanes, who has been instrumental in designing the Philadelphia Rail Park.

The event commemorated the 50th anniversary of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy, formerly the Chestnut Hill Historical Society, and a similar forum where renowned architects Louis Kahn, Romaldo Giurgola and Robert Venturi gathered to deliberate that same question: "How do we protect what's significant, while encouraging opportunities for growth and new masterpieces being created?"

Filmmaker Nathaniel Kahn, son of Louis Kahn, opened the event by recalling the words of his father at that meeting in 1970.

"We can only know Chestnut Hill as a spirit," he said. "The old houses have become inseparable from the trees and the landscape. One is not isolated from the rest ... these things must have agreement ... Chestnut Hill must retain its gardens and the balance of land and not give way to need. Need alone is not enough because it is uninspired."

Kahn said his father's words still resonate today. He said any new development or change "must not destroy or distract from the great character of Chestnut Hill."

Keynote speaker Witold Rybczynski, a Hill resident and emeritus professor of urbanism at the University of Pennsylvania, told the audience that James Stirling once remarked that "architects have always looked back in order to move forward." He added that the same could be said for communities - specifically Chestnut Hill. He told the audience that all development is not bad. Chestnut Hill was once a new development.

"The iconic character of Chestnut Hill was not a natural occurrence," he said. "It was a man-made place. It began as part of urban garden city movement."

He said Henry Houston's vision of an urban garden city transformed Chestnut Hill into the historic garden district it is today. Rybczynski said for a city to remain vibrant in the future, it must have a clear understanding of its past and be willing to embrace responsible redevelopment.

Thanks to a grant from the William Penn Foundation's Watershed Protection program, the "Residential Conservation, Preservation and Development Study," will help the community identify and communicate priorities for preserving privately-owned residential property and green space in Chestnut Hill in an effort to protect the Wissahickon Watershed. The six-month study, which ends in May, is being conducted by the Chestnut Hill Community Association and the Chestnut Hill Conservancy with assistance from the Natural Lands Trust, Philadelphia University, the University of Pennsylvania and other key stakeholders.



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Saffron said Philadelphia is experiencing a boom like it hasn't seen since the early 20th century, when immigrants were flooding to the city to work in factories.

"Chestnut Hill is lucky to have groups like the conservancy that can help create a masterplan to examine land use and historical resources," she said. "I think it's crucial to look at what else is going on in the city and be proactive."

She encouraged residents to not only discuss what land is available for construction, but to closely examine zoning classifications, so there are no surprises like the 29-story building being built on historic Jeweler's Row.

"New construction can reinvigorate a community," she said. "Change isn't necessarily bad. The challenge is to control that change and make sure it happens in the best way. An increase in population is essential, in order to support businesses on the Avenue, schools, and churches. Those institutions won't be viable unless those populations are continually refreshed."

She suggested that Chestnut Hill consider becoming a conservation district because there is more flexibility in the kinds of development that can take place there. She encouraged audience members "not to be afraid of change, but to be willing to manage that change."

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