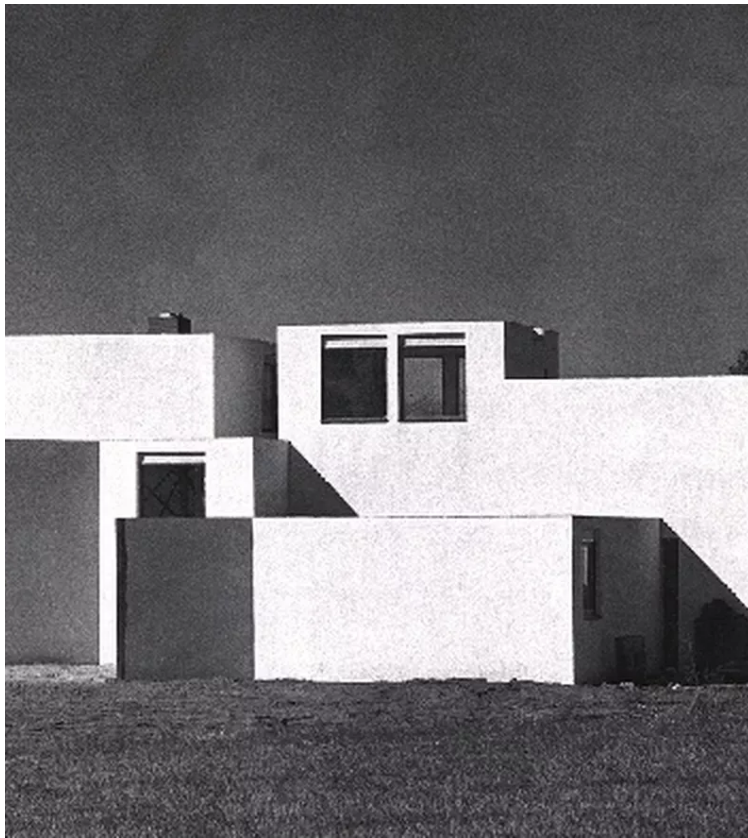


PHILADELPHIA



The Shipley White/Giurgola House, which Docomomo helped to obtain an historic designation | Courtesy of Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia

ARCHITECTURE

A Q&A on preservation with Docomomo's Dan Macey

How do we work to preserve modern buildings in Philly?

By **Anna Merriman** | [@Anna_Merriman](#) | Apr 9, 2019, 4:30pm EDT

We recently sat down with Dan Macey, board member of the [Philadelphia](#) chapter of Docomomo and resident/owner of a modern gem, the [Margaret Esherick](#) house in Chestnut Hill. Macey told us all about Docomomo's efforts to preserve modern buildings in Philadelphia, why it's important to look at saving—or at least reusing—these buildings, and how the average modernism lover can get involved.

Curbed: What does Docomomo PHL do?

Dan Macey: It's an organization trying to preserve midcentury buildings, bringing attention to them, their architecture, and their cultural significance.

I think now in the light of these cities—and Philadelphia is one of those cities—that are growing, with developers anxious to build

new structures and put people in different types of housing, the old buildings don't lend themselves to that, so developers are more reticent.

I think part of our mission around the world is to say "stop." Not necessarily stop development, but make developers more conscious of what they're doing, and help them reuse these buildings in ways that are more functional in today's lifestyle.

We're not anti-development. We're about preservation.

Philadelphia has a variety of architecture, but when people think of Philadelphia, they think of the colonial style, and they think "we have to preserve the colonial homes," which is important. But if you think about it, most of the colonial structures we're saving are not because of the architecture, but because they're historically important.

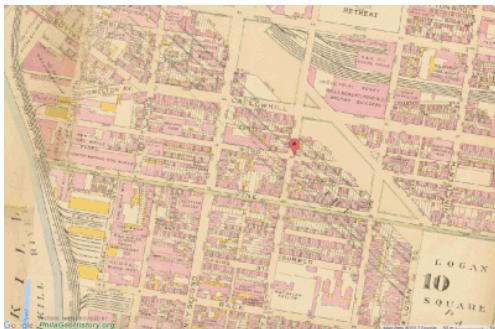


Dan Macey (pictured) is a board member with Docomomo PHL | Provided by Dan Macey

Talking about the various styles, how has the modern movement shaped Philly?

You could claim that we're the birth of modern skyscrapers because of the [PSFS building](#), which was the first modern skyscraper, built in 1932. Who imagined that building would be so iconic of what a skyscraper is today? At the time, it was so innovative.

To me, Philadelphia is the birthplace of urban modernism. You had urban planning on the [parkway](#), also [Edmund Bacon](#), with Society Hill. All of that was trying to make society and the city better through modern structures.



The Benjamin Franklin Parkway—from original renderings through today. | via G.W. Bromley's 1910 Philadelphia Atlas/Google Earth

Honestly, they tore down good parts of the city to produce what they thought at the time was going to be better for society. You can call it an experiment, whether it worked or not—and a lot of people say it didn't, because it created gigantic concrete or brick pavilions and buildings.

So, some people say it was a failure because it destroyed the downtown in Philadelphia for a long time, and many people say it hasn't ever

been revived. But that experiment stood alone.

At the time the city was doing this—around the midcentury—they hired prominent architects like [I.M. Pei](#) to do the kinds of things that were so innovative at the time. And

they continue to be interesting visually, and to create a fantastic skyline for the city.

Can you discuss Docomomo's past efforts to preserve modern structures?

What we've worked on lately is called "One Building, One Brew." Basically, we're trying to make architecture a little more fun, so we have an expert go to a modern building—this week we did the PSFS building—and we tour it, and talk to people who know about the building to discuss its significance. After that, we go and have a drink, so it's a casual kind of affair.

But from an advocacy point of view, probably the most significant thing we did, last year, was we got together with the Preservation Alliance and the Chestnut Hill Conservancy, and helped file for the preservation of the [Giurgola House](#) (*Editor's note: Also known as the Shipley White House*), which is an important modernist home.

There are obviously three main important modern houses in Chestnut Hill: my house (the Margaret Esherick House), the [Vanna Venturi House](#), and the Giurgola House.

Part of what makes Philadelphia, Philadelphia is the diversity of its buildings.

We were worried about it being neglected by its owner, which is another type of problem you can have when someone who owns a house gets old and can't take care of it anymore. So we've put it on the historic preservation list, which gives it the historic designation, and obviously, it can't be torn down.

What are some other preservation projects Docomomo has undertaken?

We had a wake for architect Victor Gruen's [Robinson Building](#) (designed in 1946) last year. If you look at early pictures of the building, it was absolutely gorgeous. It had mosaics on the front, and it was a sort of celebration of retail, of capitalism.

The bottom line is that it became undesignated as historically prominent through the Department of Licensing and Inspections, which shouldn't have authority over that. We're trying to work with the developer to incorporate the structure into whatever they're doing, which has yet to be determined.

But those are kind of things that are threatening these buildings, like the Roundhouse (on [Race Street](#)). The city doesn't know what they want to do with it, and most people think of it as ugly.



The "Roundhouse" Brutalist-era building that has long been loved and loathed by Philadelphians. | The Washington Post/Getty Images

I think part of our job is to make people understand that these buildings aren't ugly, and anyway, if they are ugly, why can't you preserve an ugly building?

There are really some great examples of people using these buildings in new ways, while maintaining the architectural integrity of them. So it can be done; it's a little harder than just knocking it down, but we all think that it's worth it.

Part of what makes Philadelphia Philadelphia is the diversity of its buildings. If they all look the same again, then the integrity and character of the city is also gone.

What would you say to people who think that way, writing off Brutalism as ugly or outdated?

I think you really need to look at the building—what it was originally built for and its intention. Maybe through the years it has not lived up to its expectation.

The problem with a lot of Brutalism is that they tried to create a lot of public spaces that are hard and concrete, and there's not a lot of green there. And the living structure is higher, so these plazas are often enclosed. I think these buildings need to be looked at and reworked for how we live today. Maybe they need to be made a little greener, literally, with more grass.

If you really look at a Brutalist building, you get a better impression than if you just write it off. I think it's just that over time, a lot of these buildings were not being used for what they were intended, or time has caught up with them. That's the question: are these

We asked Macey to list his favorite modern pieces in and around the city. Here they are, with links for more information.

1. [Beth Sholom Temple](#), Frank Lloyd Wright (1954)

buildings worth saving? I'm not going to say every Brutalist building is worth saving, but we need to look at saving some of them.

Can you discuss the risk of demolition to modern buildings in Philly?

Well, we don't want to wait until the last minute. We want to be proactive, and that's part of what we're doing through our network. We want to get to people before (demolition permits) happen.

And again, that has to do with education.

Who are developers building these buildings for? Who are the clients? If a client says, "I love this building, I want to maintain it," then the developer is not going to tear it down. So it's not just developers, it's the whole mindset of what is important and what is beautiful. Historic preservation is not just the responsibility of the developer but also of the client.

People say, "modern buildings aren't comfortable" or "modern furniture isn't comfortable." That's always the criticism. But if you understand the aesthetic, they can be comfortable.

What's your advice to a modernism lover who wants to get more involved in the preservation effort?

I think if you love Philadelphia, you have to think about why you love Philadelphia, and then part of what you do is you start looking around.

And if you realize that part of the reason you love the city is the diversity, the people, and the architecture, then part of that is modern architecture. So therefore, you already like modern architecture and you don't even realize it.

Look around, first of all. And then if you see an interesting structure, google it. Learn a little bit about who built it, why, and the time period.

There's nothing new under the sun, so all buildings now learn from the past. There's modernism incorporated in what architecture is doing now.

If it turns out that what you like is modernism and modern buildings, then Docomomo is a great organization to belong to. So is the preservation alliance, as far as historic

2. [PSFS Building](#), George Howe/William Lescaze (1932)

3. George Nakashima Complex, George Nakashima (1946-1970)

4. [Hill College House](#), Eero Saarinen (1958)

5. [Margaret Esherick House](#), Louis Kahn (1961)

6. [Society Hill Towers](#), I.M. Pei (1964)

7. [Police Administration Building/Roundhouse](#), Geddes, Brecher, Qualls and Cunningham (1963)

8. [Fairmont Park \(Love Park\) Welcome Center](#), Roy Larson (1961)

9. [Rohm and Haas Headquarters](#), Pietro Belluschi (1964)

10. [Morton Weiss Residence](#), Louis Kahn/Ann Tyng (1950)

There's nothing new under the sun, so all buildings now learn from the past

preservation goes. There are other international groups that involve modern preservation, like the group called Iconic Houses.

What's great about Docomomo is it's not just an organization of professionals, it's not a bunch of academics, it's just a bunch of people who are interested in learning about modernism.

Note: This interview has been edited for length and clarity.



PSFS Building

, Philadelphia, PA

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