



Chestnut Hill Local

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Monday, November 23, 2020

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Firehouse proposal challenged Hill's sense of surroundings



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A rendering of the new modern apparatus building, currently underway.



Posted Thursday, November 19, 2020 3:36 pm

by Patricia Cove

Working in the field of design, my interests are quite varied, especially in how we are all affected by our surroundings, both interior and exterior. It has always been fascinating to me how people react to color or style, starkness or embellishment, modernity or traditionalism, and exactly what part psychology plays in all of that. Why do some only want to live in a sleek modern structure, with clean, modern furnishings, within a stark landscape? Or, on the other hand, why have many in Philadelphia, chosen to live among history, purchase a home built in 1795, and decorated it with authentic Federal antiques?

The answers to these questions are very difficult to understand and even harder to convey to most people. But it is my job, as a designer, to not so much "understand" these differences as to make sure my clients achieve the results that they envision. Another part of my professional life involves working with the Chestnut Hill Conservancy and the Chestnut Hill Community Association on committees whose responsibility it is to make sure that our "surroundings" remain consistent with those that attracted us to this community.

The Historic District Advisory Committee, for example, reviews proposed projects in light of how they will affect the surroundings of our National Historic District. Clearly, if you moved to Chestnut Hill because of its character, you are in the majority. You fell in love with the old buildings, the mix of brick and Belgian block, the subtle signage within the business district, the historic paint colors, the Wissahickon schist and especially the preservation and maintenance of the historic architecture. Some historic communities are so passionate about qualities like these that ordinances are put into place to assure their continuation. Charleston, Nantucket and Santa Fe are just a few cities that have embraced their heritage and went to great lengths to secure it.

Five years ago, Chestnut Hill was concerned that we may lose a very important piece of historic architecture: our firehouse on West Highland Avenue. A new structure was needed to accommodate the everwidening fire trucks used by the city. Working with the Philadelphia Historic Commission, the conservancy saved the historic firehouse by having it listed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. But that did not solve the problem of the trucks.

Cecil Baker, a prominent Philadelphia architect, and his team were hired to design a new building that would be located right next door to the historic one.

Many on our committees, especially the Historic District Advisory Committee, were worried. How on earth would this work? Modern right next to historic? Talk about whiplash. When Chestnut Hill became a National Historic District in the mid1980s, years of research and documentation had taken place, including in depth descriptions of our architecture, landscape, social and organizational history, with an emphasis on our "natural" identity. These qualities were inherent elements and the basis for our receiving the recognition of a National Historic District. A new, and "modern" building could mar our historic architectural landscape and certainly disturb those of us who revel in the characteristics of our historic streetscapes.

The committees prepared themselves for the formal design presentations that major projects require, and were eager to see exactly what the architects would present. On the appointed evening, the principal of the firm, Cecil Baker, made his opening remarks.

It is often quite clear why some design and architectural firms are renowned. It is no surprise that Cecil Baker & Partners is one of them. What Baker said that night to a packed audience, and a committee filled with architects, planners and designers, has stayed with me and has answered many of the questions posed above. Why did we choose to live here and not Santa Fe? Will we be able to embrace this new, modern structure? If so, how? And

Why? I'll discuss those aspects in my net column. Stay tuned.

Patricia Cove is principal of Architectural Interiors and Design in Chestnut Hill and chairs the Chestnut Hill Conservancy's Historic District Advisory Committee.

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