



Chestnut Hill Local

(/)

Wednesday, May 8, 2024

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NW Philadelphia: Unprotected and vulnerable

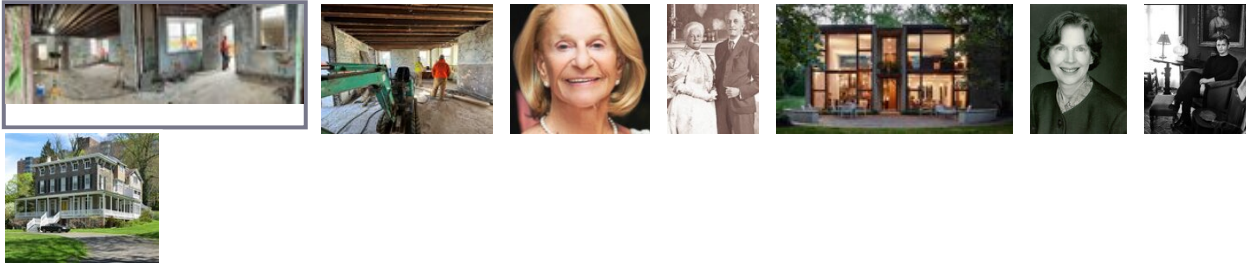
Local heroes are protecting the future by preserving the past



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Renovation is now underway at Maguire Hall, the 1850s Victorian building at 9001 Germantown Ave. that the Woodmere Art Museum purchased with the support of the Maguire Foundation. The high-profile property was not protected by historic status and is currently zoned for as many as 20 new homes. It is now being converted into a museum space, event space and education center for Woodmere.

PHOTO COURTESY OF WOODMERE ART MUSEUM



Posted Wednesday, May 8, 2024 12:00 am

by Francesca Chapman

This special report is in recognition of Historic Preservation Month.

Oscar Beisert is perched in a Germantown coffeehouse, having a businesslike chat with a reporter about the elaborate bureaucracy of Philadelphia historic preservation: the city agencies involved, the forms that have to be filled out, and how we compare to other cities.

Suddenly, he jumps out of his chair. “Put your stuff down,” he says. “Just come outside for a minute.”

A few steps out the door, the 5900 block of Wayne Avenue is in peak Philadelphia springtime, with sun glancing through the trees that line the street, and solid two-story homes of Wissahickon schist and stucco anchoring friendly porches and pocket-sized green lawns. In the middle of the block, a graceful mansion in the Italianate style looks down on the idyllic scene.

“In any other town, this would be the nicest house in town,” Beisert said. “Here – ” he shrugs. “It could all disappear tomorrow.”

There’s no reason to think it will disappear tomorrow, this is a rhetorical flourish on the part of the busy architectural historian and preservation specialist – but the point is that it could, as it lacks any official protection against demolition and redevelopment. This caution applies to great swaths of Northwest Philadelphia, a reminder, during this National Historic Preservation Month, of what’s at stake.

Recent wins and losses

In the past year, preservation advocates have celebrated several wins. To cite just a few: Plans have proceeded to turn the former St. Michael's Hall, now the Frances M. Maguire Hall, into an annex of the Woodmere Art Museum. A builder halted an immediate plan to demolish Teviot, the noted Queen Anne mansion on East Willow Grove Avenue. Legal proceedings are underway that may jump-start the redevelopment of the long-vacant Germantown YMCA, and elsewhere in Germantown, a newly created Urban Village Historic District will protect the 18th-century Market Square and several surrounding blocks from demolition, and subject any new projects in the district to review by the city's Historical Commission.

But notable battles have also been lost, emphasizing the fragility of the area's built landscape.

The fate of the Hiram Lodge, the massive fraternal lodge and storefront built 145 years ago at 8425 Germantown Ave., is up in the air after its owners declined to rebuild following a 2022 fire. Boxwood, an 1897 stone home, was torn down by the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf for a parking lot after the Philadelphia Historical Commission voted to waive the building's historic designation for the school. Plans for outsized new apartments along Germantown Avenue, encouraged by the Philadelphia Planning Commission's Project 2035, have residents worried that new buildings will dwarf existing residences and businesses.

"We're losing our character, and our community is woefully unprotected," said Lori Salganicoff, executive director of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy.

No thorough inventory

Part of the problem, Salganicoff said, is that Philadelphia, despite its status as one of the United States' oldest and most historic cities, has no thorough inventory of its properties.

"We don't have an accounting or a survey of all the city's historic buildings – only what's been counted by the historic districts or community non-profits like ours that have undertaken to do that. So we've lost countless historic buildings before people realized they were important."

There are various levels of recognition for the area's historic properties. The Chestnut Hill neighborhood, from Northwestern Avenue to Cresheim Valley Road, from Stenton Avenue to the Wissahickon Valley Park, has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1985. That honor was awarded after Shirley Hanson and Nancy Hubby,

founders of the Chestnut Hill Historical Society, joined forces with Richard Snowden, Jefferson Moak and an army of interns and volunteers to research and catalog more than 2,700 properties in Chestnut Hill.

Their application eloquently described what, almost 40 years later, many residents still value most about the area: “With few exceptions, the great houses of Chestnut Hill are impressive for much the same reasons as many of their more modest counterparts in that a sense of comfortable, human proportion, the quality of detailed design, and the choice of indigenous materials are more important than merely being large.

“The result is something quite unusual: a community tied architecturally to its natural surroundings, scaled to the human form, and exquisitely planned and detailed with an eye not simply toward grandeur but a rustic, comfortable elegance.”

The city’s role in registering protection

However, for the nitty-gritty of historic preservation, inclusion on the National Register offers prestige but not protection. To ensure that developers do not “alter, add or subtract,” a property must be on the city’s Register of Historic Places, administered by the Philadelphia Historical Commission, said architect Justin Detwiler, a member of the commission’s architectural committee.

Just 90 of the Chestnut Hill historic district’s 2,700 properties – about three percent – have that designation, according to the Chestnut Hill Conservancy.

That percentage holds true for most of Northwest Philadelphia, Beisert estimated.

Meanwhile, Boston has protected about 7 percent of its buildings, while Washington, D.C. has protected an impressive 20 percent, according to the National Trust for Historic Preservation. In New York City, the number of protected properties is close to five percent of the whole, according to the N.Y. Landmarks Conservancy.

So Philadelphia is trailing significantly behind its peer historic cities – a fact which has local preservationists alarmed.

“In the last 10 years, thanks to Oscar Beisert and some others, there’s been a focus on making nominations to Philadelphia’s Register of Historic Places,” Detwiler said. “Because as development has spread throughout the city, new development has threatened historic buildings and shed a light on the fact that very little of our city is really protected.”

Neighborhoods develop their own approach

Mt. Airy and Germantown have different protections than Chestnut Hill. In Mt. Airy, preservationists secured a city historical designation for the stretch of Germantown Avenue that makes up the central district in 2021. And it was just this year that the Historic Germantown association – with Beisert’s help – won the designation for Germantown Urban Village earlier this year.

Rather than attempting to secure the city’s historic designation for the upper stretches of Germantown Avenue, Chestnut Hill organizers are using a battery of techniques to maintain the traditional character of the business corridor.

Some, like the decades-old Urban Design Guidelines promoted for Germantown Avenue, simply provide design and maintenance standards for storefronts. But those standards have never had the strength of the law behind them.

Now, three core civic institutions – the Chestnut Hill Conservancy, the Business Association and the Chestnut Hill Community Association – are developing a proposal for a zoning overlay “to more effectively manage the development and evolution and preservation of the good character we have on Germantown Avenue,” the group’s Larry McEwan told the Local in September. Such an overlay, if approved by city officials, would create specific legal rules for construction and demolition along the neighborhood’s commercial strip.

Sometimes, it just takes one person

While protections like zoning overlays are eventually hashed out in community meetings and City Council, other efforts to preserve historic properties take place behind the scenes.

When word got out that the Sisters of St. Joseph were planning to sell the former St. Michael’s Hall, the Woodmere Museum of Art found a donor, Frances Maguire, whose \$10 million gift supported not only the purchase of the high-profile Germantown Avenue property but its conversion into museum space, event space and education center for the Woodmere.

Salganicoff at the Chestnut Hill Conservancy estimated that had a developer purchased the Hall – which had no designation as a historic property – current zoning would have allowed demolition and the construction of as many as 20 new homes on the site.

The Conservancy, which has applied for and won city protection for numerous area properties, did so for The Yellowstone, an 1887 Georgian Revival residence set back from Germantown Avenue near the Conservancy’s headquarters. When the house went up for sale in 2022, the group solidified the acclaimed house’s future, and that of its

outbuildings and substantial wooded lot, by working with the seller's real estate agent to market it specifically as a historic property. The buyer would have to be preservation-minded.

Listings for The Yellowstone cited its architectural and historical bona fides – it was designed by Theophilus Chandler, founder of the University of Pennsylvania's architectural program, and its first owner hosted the fledgling Chestnut Hill Improvement Association there. But there was a more intriguing nugget: the house had been owned for many years by Pauline McCloskey, Grace Kelly's godmother.

Before Kelly became a movie star or a princess, ads for the house noted, she passed “a good part of her childhood here, riding horses out of the stable/carriage house. Her 1956 ‘Wedding of the Century’ to Prince Rainier of Monaco was planned in the main house.” The house sold to new owners who presumably appreciated its unusual heritage.

A never-ending battle

But the work of preservationists rarely veers into the glamorous. Sometimes, the process grinds on for years before resulting in what looks like a win – or at least a happy compromise.

The long slog to protect 208-10 Rex Ave., an 1857 Italianate stone home with a graceful wooden veranda, began six years ago when its owners proposed selling to a developer who would split the house into five condominium units and build another dozen units on the sloping lawns surrounding it.

Neighbors on the quiet block mobilized in protest, forming an association that would go on to monitor every new proposal for the site (full disclosure: this reporter joined the group last year). The Chestnut Hill Conservancy, which had applied for the house's designation as a historic property, eventually received that protection for the house in 2021.

Meanwhile, the original developer amended the plan slightly, then dropped out of the project. A second developer came and went. A third, after two years of negotiating with the neighbors and local civic groups, eventually scaled back the project to five condos in the original house and two single-family homes behind and to the side of the historic home.

The latest revision won unanimous approval from the Chestnut Hill Community Association's Land Use, Planning and Zoning Committee and a sigh of relief from the neighbors. Last week, the city's Zoning Board of Adjustment approved the variances required. Construction could start later this year.

“It will ultimately be a very successful project if it stays on the course it’s on now,” said Detwiler. “That is an example of (how it was) done right, where the neighbors are unified, became informed, and approached the developer, who understood the value in getting the community on board.

“As someone who sits on a commission that listens to public comment,” Detwiler added, “it’s unfortunate that there is often very little public comment. We care about that, we listen to that. Not everyone has the time to do that, (but) the meetings are on Zoom – you don’t have to go to City Hall like the old days! If people are willing to make their voices heard, it really matters.”

Scale and context

Philadelphians who object to new construction are rarely opposed to the idea of construction itself, conservationists say. It’s the scale of many new projects that creates concerns.

“What we’re seeing more and more is that the city says, if you have a five-acre lot, you can create five one-acre parcels,” Salganicoff noted. “That’s why any time a big property comes up for sale, there are overtures to encourage development. It’s about extracting value” by building to the maximum allowable fill.

A developer viewing a parcel might ask “How can I maximize?” she added. “If I can build straight up and out to the sidewalk, why wouldn’t I?”

That building philosophy is now playing out in Chestnut Hill, where multi-unit buildings have been proposed that could loom over the small Chestnut Hill Baptist Church at Germantown Avenue and Bethlehem Pike.

A recent study from the Pew Charitable Trusts found that a large majority of Americans support policies to build apartments near transport hubs and “near offices, stores or restaurants.” And Philadelphia city planners have deemed that’s where apartments should go.

But in practice, it means that “any open space at all is very vulnerable,” Beisert said.

He cited the four-story, 70-some-unit apartment building proposed for 6915 Germantown Ave., which is located right next to Mt. Airy’s Lovett Library and would sit immediately adjacent to the historically designated Joseph Gorgas House, built in 1798. A smaller house on the corner, not designated, would be demolished to clear space for the apartments.

“It feels like a little green pocket, a vestige of Old Germantown,” Beisert said. “To my mind, the Historical Commission should be able to say, ‘Sorry, you’re not going to be able to build that behemoth there.”

“I don’t think that’s insane. We have vacant lots in Germantown next to train stops. That’s where the density should go.”

The idea of scale is critical to a successful mix of old and new, said Detwiler, who is also an associate with John Milner Architects, specialists in historic preservation.

“Historic buildings and development can relate to one another, but so much of what we’re seeing is not rising to the level of contextual harmony,” he said.

A pet peeve of Detweiler’s: “Not every floor of a building should have the same ceiling height,” he said. Traditionally, ceilings in multi-story buildings got lower as the floors got higher. On many new builds, he noted, “The third floor is too tall. They look top-heavy because there’s no understanding ... of the scale and how to build a house in this vernacular.

“Folks often think it’s fussy, but the success of these projects often comes down to these details,” he said, adding that “Northwest Philadelphia has a great wealth of architecture where everyone considered the details.” Detwiler praised the renowned Woodward Homes, constructed as multi-family housing but with considerate details like shared garden space. “Today it would be a large box with a rooftop garden,” he said.

Lessons from the recent past

For a sense of how new construction can be happily integrated into the landscape, look no further than the Northwest’s extensive stock of mid-20th-century housing. It used to be new. And though such houses bore no resemblance to their 19th- and early-20th-century neighbors, each seems “tied architecturally to its natural surroundings, (and) scaled to the human form,” in the words of Chestnut Hill’s submission to the National Register.

“We have iconic, internationally important mid-century housing,” Salganicoff said. “People are very interested in and curious about the mid-century architecture here.”

Louis Kahn’s Margaret Esherick House, Robert Venturi’s Vanna Venturi House and Mitchell/Giurgola’s Dorothy Shipley White House are all on the city’s historic register. Several popular Conservancy tours and lectures have focused on the local works by the internationally renowned architects.

“But how famous were they in 1970?” asked Shirley Hanson, who organized “An Evening of Speculation: Chestnut Hill’s Future” for the Historical Society – now the Conservancy – that year.

The three architects were the evening’s speakers. The audience “heard optimistic predictions that Chestnut Hill would be able ‘to accommodate change without doing violence to its character’,” Hanson recalled.

“That’s a question we would face again and again.”

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LOCAL CALENDAR

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LUDINGTON: Casey Cooks with Kids

Ludington Library
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Homeschool at Riverbend

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THE LATEST



A farewell brings a new era and a new coach to winning SCH track and field program (/stories/a-farewell-brings-a-new-era-and-a-new-coach-to-winning-sch-track-and-field-program,32176)

There's been a major development in Springside Chestnut Hill Academy's track and field program: Coach Paul Hines officially retired.

[\(/stories/a-farewell-brings-a-new-era-and-a-new-coach-to-winning-sch-track-and-field-program,32176\)](/stories/a-farewell-brings-a-new-era-and-a-new-coach-to-winning-sch-track-and-field-program,32176)

Grateful for moms, and memories (/stories/grateful-for-moms-and-memories,32175)

More than 115 years after Anna Jarvis established the first Mother's Day, with the help of John Wanamaker, the second Sunday of May has become a shared moment.



(/stories/grateful-for-moms-and-memories,32175)



Feds fund reconstruction of aging Wissahickon bridges (/stories/feds-fund-reconstruction-of-aging-wissahickon-bridges,32174)

The nearly 200-year-old Valley Green and Bells Mill Road bridges in the Wissahickon Valley Park will soon undergo a much-needed reconstruction.

(/stories/feds-fund-reconstruction-of-aging-wissahickon-bridges,32174)



NW Philadelphia: Unprotected and vulnerable (/stories/nw-philadelphia-unprotected-and-vulnerable,32170)

This special report is in recognition of Historic Preservation Month.

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Celebrating the Long Run

SCH coach crosses the finish line after 43 years page 8

City bartender still pouring after 50 years page 13



Grateful for moms, and memories

Moments from 11 years ago... grateful for moms, and memories

Feds fund park bridges repair

Federal program designed to fund... Feds fund park bridges repair

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