

## **Deal was broken, history defiled What's all the fuss about two buildings? Plenty.**

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by Edwin Bronstein and George L. Claffen Jr.

Many people are wondering what the controversy is concerning the preservation of two buildings at the Convention Center site. Here it is in a nutshell.

There were 18 historic structures in the path of the Convention Center's expansion. Extensive discussions were held, and an agreement was reached in 2004 between two state agencies: the Convention Center Authority and the Pennsylvania Historic and Museum Commission. It stated that 16 of these structures could be torn down, but only if the facades and part of two buildings on Broad Street were saved.

During the summer, the Convention Center Authority announced that it wanted to back out of that agreement. The case was again put before the Museum Commission, which ruled on Dec. 20 that the agreement had to be kept.

The next day, at 4:30 p.m., the state Department of General Services - which is acting as the construction administrator and was not even a party to the original agreement - decided that it could ignore the Museum Commission. With no notice to the city, it had the facade ripped off one building the next morning. Concerned citizens alerted the press, and an emergency court order was obtained by Philadelphia's Preservation Alliance. It will be the subject of a hearing in Harrisburg tomorrow.

These two buildings are important because they are an integral part of North Broad Street and enable us to experience a century of Philadelphia architecture in its original setting. This gateway district includes City Hall (built from 1871 to 1901), the Masonic Temple (1870), the Arch Street Methodist Church (1870), the incomparable Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (1876), and a great high-rise from the roaring '20s at Broad and Arch Streets. Just to the north of this tower are the two buildings in question: the Philadelphia Life Insurance Co. (PLICO) building, from 1915, a stolid neoclassical structure that exudes confidence, and the PLICO Annex of 1963, where architect Aldo Giurgola pioneered a new, contextually sensitive modernism.

The whole in this case is considerably greater than the sum of its parts. Visitors will reach the Convention Center by walking across the plazas of the Municipal Services Building and City Hall. This tableau of buildings is critical to shaping their experience, linking them through memory to the many other architecturally important sites that Philadelphia offers. Because this streetscape was understood to be of preeminent importance by most architects and preservationists, there was little criticism of the agreement - even though the beautiful Venetian-brick central firehouse and 15 handsome commercial buildings were to be victims of the project.

There were and continue to be "logical" arguments advanced about the cost and safety of the project. Although state officials have had preservation design drawings for the buildings for more than a year, the case has been presented, selectively, as a safety and cost emergency. Even Bob Solvibile, Philadelphia's commissioner of licenses and inspections, felt it necessary to comment publicly that the city inspection results indicated repairable problems. Knowledgeable hands in the construction industry are likewise skeptical of the proffered cost estimates.

The technical issues raised are those that experienced preservation professionals are accustomed to dealing with every day. Construction and preservation inherently involve safety issues and that cannot be ignored, but neither should they be used to justify unwise decisions or high-handed and preemptive behavior.

We should all be concerned that the state is undermining its own credibility. The lifeblood of these government agencies is making agreements on behalf of the public. If they can no longer be trusted to deliver on their word or to act in the public interest, billions of dollars of preservation tax credits, construction projects, and vendor agreements could be affected.

The Convention Center is an important project and the best solution is a simple one: Proceed immediately with the original preservation and construction plan.

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