



PDF Complete
Your complimentary use period has ended.
Thank you for using PDF Complete.

[Click Here to upgrade to Unlimited Pages and Expanded Features](#)

[send to printer](#)

May 13-19, 2004

CITYSPACE

Guiding Philly



House of Dues: Guild House, at Seventh and Spring Garden, was among the earliest works of Robert Venturi. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

style of architecture, it *defined* the architectural style of the late 20th century known as postmodernism. Most Philadelphians are probably unaware of Guild House and those who see it while driving along Spring Garden Street probably think of it as ordinary at best (something Venturi would consider a compliment) or downright unattractive, a common reaction in the architectural world when it was first built. Yet it was the simple use of familiar materials and forms, and incorporation of modest decorative features that made the building a striking departure from the architecture of its period.

Aside from the inherent importance of the building, the designation of Guild House represents an interest that has emerged among historic preservationists around the country for the preservation of important buildings of the recent past, notably those now 40 to 50 years of age that were the expressions of modern architecture in the period after WWII and up to the 1960s. In 2000, the National Trust for Historic Preservation sponsored a conference on this subject in Philadelphia and other cities have begun to examine their architectural heritage from this period. DOCOMOMO, an international organization with a local chapter in Philadelphia, was formed to draw attention to the architecture of this period. And there are even a number of Web sites specifically devoted to the preservation of the "recent past" (see www.recentpast.org or the Los Angeles Conservancy's Modern Committee's Web site at www.modcom.org).

Defining which buildings of this period are "historic"-- meaning important enough to be protected from demolition or alteration by historic preservation laws -- is a challenge. I found this myself back in 1985 when I produced the first edition of *Philadelphia Architecture: A Guide to the City*. For the period from 1940 to 1960 I found only eight buildings in Philadelphia worthy of inclusion. (It's interesting to note that two of my eight have already been demolished!) Four of these were designed by Louis I. Kahn, Philadelphia's other internationally famous architect of the late 20th century. This is not to say that there aren't more significant buildings of that era, but it does point up the difficulty of deciding which buildings of that era are significant once you get past those designed by prominent architects.

There are a number of buildings by prominent architects that make logical next candidates for historic designation. These include Venturi's house for his mother in Chestnut Hill, Kahn's Richards Medical Center at Penn and his Esherick House also in Chestnut Hill, and Parkway House in Center City designed by Elizabeth Fleisher and Gabriel Roth. After

Age is relative when talking about historic preservation.

by John Andrew Gallery

Most people think that for a building to be historic it must be really old. The National Register of Historic Places in Washington, D.C., defines historic buildings as ones that are over 50 years of age and, presumably as a factor of age, ones whose architect is no longer living. Philadelphia's historic ordinance has no such explicit criteria, but the designation of buildings under 50 years of age and by living architects is rare. And therein lies one of the reasons why the designation of Guild House at Seventh and Spring Garden, is important, and why it reflects a new era in historic designation in Philadelphia. As noted in last week's CitySpace the Philadelphia Historical Commission added two buildings to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places in April.

Guild House was completed in 1964, making it merely 40 years old. It was one of the earliest works by Robert Venturi, now considered to be one of the most important architects of the 20th century. Not only is Robert Venturi still alive -- and continuing to produce outstanding building designs from his office in Manayunk -- but his partner on Guild House, John Rauch, and their collaborators, Horace Mather Lippincott and Paul Cope, are also thankfully still with us. Thus, the designation of Guild House contradicts basic standards many people use to define "what's historic".

In the world of architecture, Guild House is one of the most famous buildings of the 20th century. As Jon Farnham, Ph.D., of the Historical Commission noted in his outstanding nomination essay, Guild House is not just an important example of a



Your complimentary
use period has ended.
Thank you for using
PDF Complete.

[Click Here to upgrade to
Unlimited Pages and Expanded Features](#)

Penn Center worthy of preservation in its current form as an example of urban revitalization and the work of Ed Bacon? Is Yorktown worthy of being designated as one of the first neighborhood urban renewal efforts and the first to benefit African Americans to remain in Philadelphia? What about the 1950s National Products Building (now Drexel University) at 32nd Street, a late example of the work of George Howe, architect of the PSFS Building?

Frankly, none of these excite me as much as the National Products Building in Old City with its glitzy orange terra-cotta facade representative of the exuberant commercial architecture of its day. It was designated as historic last year. It represents the broader range of distinctive architecture of the 1950s described on the National Park Service's Recent Past Initiative Web site as including "futuristic coffee shops and soaring airport terminals to homes of the postwar suburbs." Those are the buildings that seem worth seeking out, that have the special character of the 1950s that might make them worth preserving.

I'm looking for suggestions; if you've got one send it to me.

John Andrew Gallery is executive director of the Preservation Alliance.



-- Respond to this article in our Forums -- [click](#) to jump there