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CITYSPACE

A Jury of Peers



Buh-Bye: Rittenhouse Business Machines, on the 100 block of South 18th Street, does have history. Still, it's doomed. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

Keep politics and connections out of preservation.

by Amy L. Webb

On a corner of Rittenhouse Square, a new custody battle over four buildings has once again pitted the city's Historical Commission and interested developers against local merchants and preservation advocates.

The battle is all but lost for these merchants, but it is still emblematic of a long and tired debate that the city has heard for hundreds of years: In whose best interests is preserving -- or not preserving -- Philadelphia's buildings?

In a city where the organization charged with hearing petitions and granting preservation rights is staffed with real estate lawyers and mayoral appointees, and where developers have strong ties to local government, it may seem to some as if the fate of historic buildings is predetermined. On the other hand, the same vocal opponents to development and new infrastructure in the past have been unwilling to hear arguments about economic stimulus and growth while at the same time have criticized elected officials for job loss, high taxes and blight.

Maybe it's time to rethink not the debate over which building should belong to whom, but the means used to designate something as historic.

Rittenhouse Business Machines, which stands on the 100 block of South 18th Street, is one of four buildings set for demolition. Its gray concrete and marble exterior doesn't look historically significant, necessarily. Next to it is the Perry Milou Gallery, which is housed in the old Rindelaub's Bakery. In the doorway of the gallery is a bright-red notice of Application for Demolition -- on Feb. 13 the Historical Commission unanimously voted in favor of Hal Wheeler, a developer with a proposal for a 33-story condominium tower.

Individually, the buildings can't compete with the red-brick relics of Ben Franklin's time. Rittenhouse Business Machines could use some exterior work, and the gallery's white facade could do with a wash. But together, those two buildings, along with Lombardi's Pizzeria and Breakaway Bikes cycle shop, comprise a Philadelphia block with atmosphere. The buildings may not be historically significant, but there's history in them and an example of architecture, design and community unknown to cities such as Santa Fe, N.M., or Minneapolis -- because those cities each have its own local flavor.

"You can't build a historic district," says Jonathan Fine, president of Preservation Chicago, a nonprofit historic preservation group. "You might be able to try it in Disneyland. But in real life, it doesn't work because there's no authenticity to it."

The problem, at least for Chicago and Philadelphia, is politics. In Chicago, it's up to the aldermen, which represent different districts throughout the city, to advocate for preservation. "Most of them do," Fine says. Chicago does have a historic landmarks commission, but its chair owned a piece of a building being reviewed by the commission, and he was later forced to resign.

Philadelphia's Historical Commission, which was created in 1955, has designated historic districts and helped preserve -- and sometimes helped demolish -- historically significant buildings. But the commission is often mired in controversy. The chair, Michael Sklaroff, is a well-known attorney with the firm Ballard Spahr Andrews & Ingersoll, where he manages the real estate department, one of the nation's largest. Sklaroff's practice area includes real estate, eminent domain, land use and development -- and he must often recuse himself from decisions on whether to grant a property historic status or to hand it over to a developer.



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attempted in February to strip the commission of its ability to designate and give that power to the council. The move would have taken the -- as well as the architects, designers and historians who sit on the members who often give more weight to local developers than to -- it highlighted how intensely politics and preservation are tied.

"We hear of people complaining about their politicians or grumbling at meetings," Fine says. "In Chicago, we're fighting similar battles to Philadelphia, but we're winning more of them. We take to the streets with picket signs if we think a historic building is threatened. You can fight City Hall and you can win."

It makes logical sense not to give City Council the power to designate a building historical or to tear it down. Elected officials aren't necessarily experts on architecture, masonry or design. On the other hand, it doesn't make a lot of sense for the mayor or other elected officials to appoint real estate moguls or the lawyers who represent them to the commission -- what good is the chair of a committee who must constantly back out of decisions because of personal interests?

In contrast, the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission's 12 members are scholars, historians, designers and architects. New Orleans' Historic District Landmarks Commission is staffed with architectural historians, building-code experts and city planners.

If the best interests of buildings and the city are in question, maybe the best solution is to combine what other cities are doing with the legal system. Re-staff the Historical Commission to include only architectural historians, scholars and building experts who are familiar with local design but have no ties to either the city's real estate market or preservation advocates. Every time the commission would hear applications for historic designation, members would have no choice but to evaluate a property for what it is -- either a historically significant building or a property ready for new development.



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