

DESIGN
ADVOCACY
GROUP

of Philadelphia

September 27, 2004

The Philadelphia Historical Commission
576 City Hall
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19107

Re: Richards Medical Research Building
Historic Designation

Dear Commission Members:

We write in support of designation for the Richards Medical Research Building, a seminal work of modern architecture by Philadelphia's Louis I. Kahn.

Tucked away as it is behind the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, the Richards Medical Research Building is often unseen by most Philadelphians. However, to those who do know it, it is a rare work of profound influence on modern architecture, particularly in Philadelphia where the emergence of the so-called 'Philadelphia School' was taking place in the 1960s.

Richards challenged international modernism and presented, instead, a more contextual, rich and complex design than the sleek appearing buildings of its day. By doing so, Louis Kahn established himself as major theorist and professional who not only influenced generations of architecture students at the University of Pennsylvania, but also throughout the United States and the world.

Just as PSFS is often taken for granted as the progenitor of modern skyscrapers, Richards too is sometimes overlooked for the architectural expression it gave to vertical service cores and horizontal served spaces, in this instance, laboratories and offices. These elegant forms were given richness through the expression of material and structure that became Kahn's trademark. The organizing principles developed by Kahn are as vibrant in contemporary architecture as they were when he was developing them almost 50 years ago.

Richards has often been criticized for the lack of functionality of its laboratory spaces. Do not let the mythology of those criticisms undermine the importance of this building. Richards was developed at a time when laboratory work was undergoing its own transformation. Within years of the completion of Richards, standards for laboratories were changing, subjecting this building to a certain level of analysis by hindsight.

It's true measure of impact can be felt by the importance still placed on its design by visitors who come here from around the world to see it among a small, select handful of architectural masterpieces in Philadelphia. As 'modernism' becomes 'historic', it is critical to designate this building for its role in changing the course of architecture.

Sincerely,

Alan Greenberger AIA
Vice Chair

cc: John Gallery, Preservation Alliance