

DAGSpace articles are the opinions of their authors. While DAG hopes they will contribute to constructive public dialogue, the articles do not represent the opinion or position of the Design Advocacy Group. This article is reprinted with permission from the Philadelphia Daily News, where it was originally published.

DAGSpace: Time to Call Modern Historic

May 2009

Kathy Dowdell

Kathy Dowdell, AIA is a principal at Blackney Hayes Architects and chairs the Board of Directors of the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia.

Modern design is something that, as a culture, we are happy to embrace in our gadgets and our appliances and our cars; less so in our furnishings and buildings. The chairs in my family room, chrome and leather wonders by Mies van der Rohe, still look stunningly modern, despite being designed 90 years ago. Yet modern buildings are often neglected, if not actively shunned or unloved. As these buildings age, they are being threatened by changes in fashion and style.

While for many, the concept of historic preservation evokes images of gaily painted Victorian houses, meticulously restored Colonial landmarks, or stunning industrial buildings adapted for use as offices, museums, or loft apartments, monuments of modern architecture must begin taking their rightful place among these iconic images of old. As modern buildings age into the preservation movement, we face not only the question of what should be preserved, but what will be left to be preserved. Each generation seeks to do its own urban housecleaning, resulting in the loss of buildings which are simply not old enough to be fully appreciated; yet those losses, due to demolition or insensitive renovation, will be greatly mourned once it's too late. We are at one of those junctures now.

At risk is significant work from the "Philadelphia School" architects – Venturi and Scott Brown, Mitchell Giurgola, Louis Kahn, and others. The regional body of work of Mitchell Giurgola has already suffered some particularly tough losses in recent years, including the Liberty Bell Pavilion, demolished in 2006; the modern addition to the decorative Philadelphia Life Insurance building, a standard in architectural texts and courses, demolished in January 2008; and William Penn High School, which is now closed, with plans for its future uncertain. Venturi Scott Brown's Lieb house structure was saved, but the context of this building as an ordinary beach house is lost in its relocation to a lush site on Long Island. Kahn's Esherick House in Chestnut Hill, recently added to the Philadelphia historic register and lovingly cared for by current owners, has nevertheless been for sale for several years and failed to garner any bids during a recent auction of significant modern houses. His Trenton bath houses, also now saved, were on local and national endangered building lists for years. A prefabricated steel kit house, designed by Oscar Stonorov and rescued by the Preservation Alliance days before it would have been demolished, sits disassembled in a warehouse awaiting a new owner. Henry Martin's Mercantile Library, a "home-grown version of International Style architecture" which was awarded a Gold Medal by the Philadelphia Chapter of the AIA in 1954, sits boarded up and vacant.

Time and cultural distance are often needed to differentiate the ordinary or uninspired from the truly great. This becomes more difficult with buildings than with music or paintings. Scores and canvases can be stacked in an attic awaiting rediscovery, but buildings are not so transportable, and may be discarded before they are truly ripe for appreciation. We lament the loss of so many works of Frank Furness, which were widely viewed as ugly, excessively decorated, useless structures fit only for the wrecking ball at the end of his career. Now, fifty or sixty years later, we'd be thrilled to have some of them back, having acquired the necessary distance to appreciate

DESIGN
ADVOCACY
GROUP
of Philadelphia

them both individually and in context with the rest of the city. This pattern has been repeated again and again, as each generation seeks to correct the perceived errors of the past. The unfortunate end to this pattern is that we are left with a few individual pieces, rather than a body of work, from those prolific architects whose work would be better appreciated with some comparison to their own, or other, buildings. The current exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art showcases Cezanne masterpieces in conjunction with others by Cezanne, his contemporaries, and his followers – much the way we understand and appreciate buildings in the urban fabric. How much more this exhibit means because we are able to view a number of Cezanne's works, not just two or three.

Preservationists are often mistaken for people who want to freeze buildings in amber, never to be altered or destroyed. And some preservationists do feel this way. But to me, the goal is not to save everything, but rather to avoid altering or demolishing historic buildings without a thorough and thoughtful public discussion about the merits of the building, the context, and the building's cultural significance and place. It's time to have that discussion about Philadelphia's wonderful modern (and soon to be historic) buildings before it's too late.

What is your favorite modern building, and why should it be saved? Please let us know! Send your responses to www.preservationalliance.com.