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## CITYSPACE

### Preservation in Practice



**BUILDING MECCA:** People are drawn to Philadelphia's rich architectural diversity, including the Mellon Independence Center.

Photo By: Tim Brace

#### It's possible to save Philly's buildings.

*by Gersil N. Kay*

When it comes to architecture, Philadelphia has among the greatest collections in the United States.

It spans 300 years of myriad architectural styles. This distinctiveness makes us a destination for the world. People come here to see authentic buildings of every style, and even without instruction, the public is instinctively drawn to its architectural roots. It is critical to retain representative architectural heritage so that future generations can learn practical information from the past. Precious energy can be saved occupying still-usable older properties, because efforts of tearing down and rebuilding are eliminated.

A fine example of restoration of commercial space and a veritable saga of determination is the Lit Bros. building at 701 Market St. The restoration of the 1-million-square-foot complex, now called the Mellon Independence Center, kept the original structure while adding office space to the interior. This project also included partial restoration of the facade. These were 19th-century buildings which featured individual brick, marble and brownstone facades. A decorative metal crest topped the roof. When Lits ceased operations, there were plans to demolish this block-long property.

That started years of negotiations with at least five developers proposing to take on restoration. As a trustee of a multi-employer pension fund, I persuaded 1,600 union members to march to keep this structure, with the promise of many jobs to restore it. Eventually there were indeed 1,600 jobs. Though it may seem counterintuitive, it can actually take more people to work on restoration of an existing building than to erect a new one.

The general contractor was meticulous in scheduling work. When "hot work" (with open fire) was required, a crew of four, including an off-duty fireman was used, since this was a vulnerable timber construction. Radios on the job were silent so alarms could be heard promptly. Many traditional construction methods were recalled and used. Paneling left over from previous work at Independence Hall was carefully installed in one of the rooms. The now-white building remains a symbol of Center City retail merchandising.

Across Center City from Lits lies 30th Street Station. Over the years, insensitive repairs and changes hid the elegance of this art deco structure. Restoration of the building was a \$100 million project.

The scheduling of the trades was masterful, controlled through the busy project manager. Because there wasn't enough time to inspect the property thoroughly during the initial site visit, sadly many contractors familiar only with new construction were caught off-guard by the massive asbestos content in every part of the property, even behind the passengers' seats in the main waiting room. Its removal far exceeded the agreed contract prices, because they weren't aware of the widespread use of this material 70 years ago. This unfamiliarity with building methods of the 1930s caused others to find awful surprises behind walls that were opened only to reveal deep gaping voids instead of work spaces.

Workers tried several ways to clean the tobacco-stained travertine walls, but hand-scrubbing with soap proved the best method to return the dark brown surface back to ivory. This was some arm-tiring job! Bright red and gold trim renewed the ceiling to its original rich color scheme. Snaking conduits carelessly nailed onto the decorative panels had to be removed and holes refilled.

An ingenious scaffold was designed to reach the 100-foot ceiling so that plasterers, painters and electricians could work simultaneously. The entire assembly was moved forward at midnight every night. This saved time and a great deal of money. The huge pendant chandeliers were each 35 feet long. They had to be taken down and trucked to a restorer. Every lighting fixture was refurbished, allowing the original design to remain. Specialists had to be found to clear the great bas relief in the room next to the ticket counters.



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air-conditioning ducts were found. Even trudging through sand in lower real world in the construction industry. They saw firsthand the urgent coordination, especially in working on older structures.

of all members of the team, are still necessary to deal with existing commercial, institutional, industrial, residential and historic sites. The Mellon Independence Center and 30th Street Station are two examples of how preservation can truly work in practice, that saving massive structures is not an impossibility. We still have buildings around the city that may appear daunting, but the economic and civic rewards are well worth the renovation efforts.

*Gersil N. Kay is president of Philadelphia-based Building Conservation International, an organization advocating for historic preservation.*



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