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March 2, 2018

Members of the Historical Commission  
Philadelphia Historical Commission  
1515 Arch Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19102

RE: 1821-1827 Ranstead Street

Dear Members of the Philadelphia Historical Commission:

My name is George Yu. Since 1989, for twenty-nine years, my wife Lotus and I have owned the 1821-27 Ranstead Street property, also known as The Musical Art Club. As you know, the architectural firm of Price McLanahan designed this building in 1916 - 1917. We love our building especially since we live in the Swarthmore/Wallingford area, where Will Price lived, practiced architecture, and where we are familiar with many of his designed houses.

When this Price McLanahan building became available in 1989, we were fortunate to be able to purchase it. In fact, we were wondering why our building was not on the City of Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. At that time, I had called the Historical Commission to inquire about its status. Mr. Baron informed me that the building was not qualified because of its location. The 1800 block of Ranstead Street, due to the lack of continuity and character, did not bear any historical significance to support the designation. The 1800 block of Ranstead Street was not included when the Rittenhouse-Fitler Historic District was established. This short street is not a part of any City, State or Federal Historic District.

Having spent 24 years of our architectural practice on the building's third floor, we have realized why the 1800 block of Ranstead Street has had such a negative impact on our building. The Musical Art Club backs on to a narrow, dead-end alley, serving the backsides of 6 restaurants, the rear side of a high-rise condominium, and three parking lots, where 16 trash dumpsters litter this short street. The townhouse next door is occupied by a 24-hour "massage parlor." In the past years, the City had raided this business multiple times, only to resume practice, as usual, in a matter of weeks.

Yes, our historic building is situated among garbage dumps infested with cat-size rats and a cathouse next door. Yet, we have continued to persevere and maintain this building in the best ways we could afford. Because of these appalling conditions of the street, we have had a hard time attracting long-term tenants to fully occupy the building. Although there is a tenant occupying the basement (1<sup>st</sup> floor), the second floor has been vacant for 21 out of our 28-year ownership. Our architectural firm had occupied the third floor until 2013, when we had merged with another firm, causing our relocation to the suburbs. After we had vacated our floor, we could not find a single tenant for 5 years. At this time, the building is still two-thirds vacant. Now, Lotus and I are retired. We have been operating this building, subsidized with our fixed income. Even though, while occupying the building, we were disappointed the building was not historically certified, we still personally felt its historical significance. Throughout the years, we had recovered numerous artifacts. At the main floor, formerly the “Club Room” and the entry Lobby, hidden above the acoustical ceiling, we uncovered and restored the badly damaged original barrel vaults.

When we had received word from the Commission that our Musical Art Club building was being nominated for historical certification, we were dismayed upon seeing the documented photographs. Not having the courtesy of speaking with us first, someone had trespassed and taken photos of the building’s interiors without our permission. The nomination falsely claimed our building structure as being in “good condition.” In fact, six years ago, the north parapet on the roof had almost collapsed. We have spent over \$135,000 to dismantle and repair the damage. Presently, above the front façade, due to rust and ice-jacking at the lintels and relieving steel beams, the south parapet and its flashing have deteriorated, causing continuous water infiltration. Under this parapet, there have been water leaks along the third floor ceiling. We had to build an interior gutter system (above the ceiling) to catch and drain the water. To keep the building sound, it will eventually be necessary to dismantle this parapet, replace its internal flashing and rusted steel work, and then, reconstruct the brick parapet with its terracotta coping. Also, we have found that the Mercer tile ornaments are falling apart and need to be restored. Without adequate rental income, we must defer this repair work indefinitely.

Three and a half years ago, we had reluctantly entertained the idea of selling the building. We have had three offers to purchase the building by developers, who were contemplating assembling a larger footprint for new development. The property is zoned CMX-5 with 1200% FAR. Since this fall, after learning of the proposed nomination, the potential buyers have withdrawn their interest. As architects, Lotus and I have always hoped to convince an imaginative developer to readapt the existing building into the new development without tearing down the structure. In our submission materials, as an example, we have shown the Philadelphia Lutheran Seminary’s new Classroom / Conference Center which we had designed, salvaging and blending historical structures with the new construction (Ref. Exhibit C-7 and C-8).

Allow us to express our earnest intention in speaking with this Commission. We are not here to convince you not to designate our building as a historic landmark, but rather, we ask you to go a step further to help sustain the livelihood of this beautiful building. The Musical Art Club is struggling to survive, because there is a lack of interested tenants to breathe life into it. The dreadful street environment is denying oxygen to this building. The Musical Art Club is like a muted piano, sitting idle without sound. What good is the piano, if it cannot play music? We believe the act of preservation is fundamentally different from the act of conservation. Conservation implies a concerted effort towards sustaining the possibility of life on a long-term basis. Just to preserve a lifeless building is like embalming a lifeless body. To conserve the Musical Art Club, it would require a combined creative effort of private and public endeavors. Within the prestigious Rittenhouse Square District, the 1800 blocks of Ranstead and Ludlow Streets are the two missing links. They have great potential for imaginative development, bringing new and old structures together by further injecting vibrancy to this part of Center City; thus offering Philadelphia the opportunity of increasing its tax base.

I am afraid someone is going to disregard our honest appeal because this might not be considered a part of PHC's responsibility. But we sincerely hope that the make-up of this body of commissioners is to encourage the diverse talents of various city departments to exercise their influence for not only saving the Musical Art Club, but also for the greater good of Philadelphia.

For PHC to just label the Musical Art Club as a "landmark" within an abysmal and unsafe environment, and then walk away, is not enough to fulfill your noble mandate: "*To strengthen the economy of the City by enhancing the City's attractiveness to tourists and by stabilizing and improving property values*"; and to "*foster civic pride in the architectural, historical, cultural, and educational accomplishments of Philadelphia.*"

We, therefore, respectfully request the Philadelphia Historical Commission in collaboration with various City Departments and the Center City District to act upon the following:

1. To deny illegal businesses such as those questionable four or five massage parlors existing on Ranstead and Ludlow Streets. (Ref. Philadelphia Code, Chapter 10-608)
2. To regulate the sanitary conditions and refuse management. (Ref. Philadelphia Code, Chapter 10-700)
3. To repair and to improve appearance and quality of street amenities.
4. To pave way for imaginative residential and commercial development harmonious with the historical structures.

We expect if we presented an economic and structural analysis of the property in its existing state and situated within an appalling street's environment, this would demonstrate to the Commission that a hardship exemption is warranted. However, going through such hardship appeal would be a lengthy and costly process, which in itself would be a financial hardship for us. We, as the building owners, do not have the means and power to change the surroundings, but are confident that, with PHC's help, if the neighborhood is cleaned up, we will receive the level of rent necessary to maintain the property. Accordingly, we are requesting the Commission to defer placing the property on the City Register until such time as the City satisfactorily resolves items 1 and 2 above. Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

George Yu,

w/enclosed Exhibits

cc: Mayor Jim Kenney; Councilman Darrell L. Clarke; Harris Steinberg; Paul Levy; Robert Shusterman.