NOMINATION OF HISTORIC BUILDING, STRUCTURE, SITE, OR OBJECT
PHILADELPHIA REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

SUBMIT ALL ATTACHED MATERIALS ON PAPER AND IN ELECTRONIC FORM ON CD (MS WORD FORMAT)

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1. ADDRESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE (must comply with a Board of Revision of Taxes address)

Street address: **6901 Castor Avenue**

Postal code: **19149** Councilmanic District: **6th District**

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2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: **Ott Camera**

Common Name: **Ott Camera**

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3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

☒ Building ☐ Structure ☐ Site ☐ Object

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4. PROPERTY INFORMATION

Condition: ☐ excellent ☒ good ☐ fair ☐ poor ☐ ruins

Occupancy: ☒ occupied ☐ vacant ☐ under construction ☐ unknown

Current use: Retail, residential

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5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

SEE ATTACHED

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6. DESCRIPTION

SEE ATTACHED

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7. SIGNIFICANCE

Period of Significance (from year to year): **1955**

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: **c. 2010**

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: **Allan A. Berkowitz**

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: **Adams Construction Co., Pittsburgh Plate Glass Co.**

Original owner: **Joseph C. Ott**

Other significant persons: **E.A. Lundberg**

CRITERIA FOR DESIGNATION:

The historic resource satisfies the following criteria for designation (check all that apply):

☐ (a) Has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City, Commonwealth or Nation or is associated with the life of a person significant in the past; or,

☐ (b) Is associated with an event of importance to the history of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,

☒ (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style; or,

☒ (d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen; or,

☐ (e) Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth or Nation; or,

☐ (f) Contains elements of design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represent a significant innovation; or,

☐ (g) Is part of or related to a square, park or other distinctive area which should be preserved according to an historic, cultural or architectural motif; or,

☐ (h) Owing to its unique location or singular physical characteristic, represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community or City; or,

☐ (i) Has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in pre-history or history; or

☐ (j) Exemplifies the cultural, political, economic, social or historical heritage of the community.

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8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

SEE ATTACHED

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9. NOMINATOR

Name with Title: **Benjamin Leech, consultant**

Email: **bentleech@gmail.com**

Organization: **Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia**

Date: **February 17, 2016**

Street Address: **1608 Walnut Street, Suite 804**

Telephone: **(215) 546-1146**

City, State, and Postal Code: **Philadelphia, PA 19103**

Nominator ☐ is ☒ is not the property owner.

PHC USE ONLY

Date of Receipt: 15 March 2016

☑ Correct-Complete ☐ Incorrect-Incomplete Date: 12 May 2016

Date of Notice Issuance: 13 May 2016

Property Owner at Time of Notice

Name: Robert and Maureen Ott

Address: 6901 Castor Avenue

City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19149

Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation: _____

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission: _____

Date of Final Action: _____

☐ Designated ☐ Rejected

5. Boundary Description

Beginning at the point of intersection of the Southeasterly side of Castor Avenue and the Northeasterly side of Longshore Avenue, containing in front or breadth on the same Castor Avenue, fifty feet and extending of that width in length or depth Southeasterly between lines parallel with along the said Northeasterly side of Longshore Avenue, the Southwesterly line thereof 100 feet, 11-⅛ inches and the Northeasterly line thereof 100 feet 5-⅛ inches. (per Deed 10153466, 9/7/1995)

6. Description

Ott Camera is a distinctive, uniquely intact mid-twentieth-century commercial structure located near the intersection of Castor and Longshore Avenues in the Oxford Circle neighborhood of Northeast Philadelphia. Constructed in 1955 as a retail addition to a c.1939 single-family home and professional office on the same parcel, the two-story, flat-roofed structure measures approximately 18 feet wide and 55 feet deep, filling a former side yard that once separated the original detached dwelling from a neighboring commercial structure to the northeast. Projecting beyond the setback of the original residence to meet the Castor Avenue sidewalk and property line, the addition features two highly visible facades facing northwest and southwest [Fig. 1]. These facades are expressed as a unified, freestanding volume, with the remainder of the addition concealed from view by the two adjacent structures. This volume is clearly differentiated in materials and massing from the attached gable-roofed colonial revival dwelling, which for the purposes of this nomination should be considered a separate and non-contributing feature of the nominated parcel [Fig 2].

The Ott Camera shopfront is clad in opaque buff-colored structural glass panels framed by a continuous ribbon of dark red structural glass trim that forms a projecting cornice along both faces of the shop's roofline [Fig. 4]. The shop's base is lined in a multi-hued rustic stone veneer that continues as a full-height panel along the far edge of the shop's primary northwest facade. The ground floor of this facade features a single metal-framed glass display box and a single-leaf metal and glass door facing Castor Avenue. A large second-floor window opening features a grid of metal casement windows. Above these windows, a very large flush-mounted sign spells "Ott" in green neon-lit metal channel letters. The sign's "O" bisects the glass cornice and pierces the roofline as a semi-freestanding architectural element. A smaller red neon channel-letter sign reading "CAMERAS" rests on top of the ground-floor display window [Fig. 3].

The flanking southwest elevation, also clad in buff structural glass, originally featured a full-width ground floor glass and steel display window [Fig. 4]. Unfortunately damaged beyond repair by an automobile accident c.2010, it has since been replaced by a solid simulated stone wall panel. Another red neon channel-letter sign reading "HOME MOVIES" survives along the top edge of this wall [Fig. 2].

Figure 1: Northwest (left, fronting Castor Avenue) and southwest (right, facing Longshore Avenue) elevations of the Ott Camera building.

Figure 2: Ott Camera and attached c.1939 single-family residence, facing northeast from the intersection of Castor and Longshore Avenues.

Figure 3: Castor Avenue ground floor detail.

Figure 4: Ott Camera in 2010, prior to ground-floor storefront alterations. Photo courtesy of Betsy Manning.

7. Signifiance

The Ott Camera building at 6901 Castor Avenue was designed by architect Allan A. Berkowitz and constructed in 1955 for original owner Joseph C. Ott's neighborhood camera supply and film rental company. The building was a large addition to Ott's existing private residence, adding a high-profile retail storefront to a growing business that had previously operated out of an office in Ott's home.[1] In both its form and materials, Ott Camera is a significant local example of a particular mode of modern commercial architecture that first took root in America during the Great Depression, slowly germinated in architectural journals and trade magazines during World War II, then fully blossomed in the consumer-oriented boom economy of the postwar era. Representative of a style often called "Main Street Modernism," its design reflects the migration of modern European design trends (as well as the migration of expatriot European architects themselves) into an American landscape increasingly shaped by mass production and mass consumption. Though commercial architecture in America has, since at least the middle nineteenth century, consistently adopted new building materials, construction techniques, and design philosophies to attract the attention (and, by extension, the patronage) of potential customers, retail design in the middle twentieth century underwent an unprecedented period of transformation by architects and their clients, both fully vested in the idea that architecture was a tool to create "machines for selling." Much as nineteenth-century pattern books helped popularize and disseminate architectural styles across the United States, twentieth-century architectural journals and trade catalogs were highly effective in promoting "a new look" for businesses that could only be achieved with the latest and most modern building materials and styles. Notable both for its uncommonly intact condition (the building is still currently owned and operated as a photo supply store by Joseph's son Robert Ott) and for the illuminating provenance of its design (which Berkowitz adapted directly from a popular trade publication promoting the use of Pittsburgh Plate Glass products), Ott Camera merits listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places by satisfying the following criteria established in Philadelphia's Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 14-1004 (1):

> (c) Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style; *and*
>
> (d) Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen.

[1] Application for Zoning Permit #82258B, 6901 Castor Avenue, 7/19/1954

Modernism and American Retail Architecture, 1925-1955

Figure 5: J.J.P. Oud's Café de Unie, Rotterdam, 1925. http://thecharnelhouse.org/2014/05/27/

In broad strokes, the history of retail architecture in twentieth-century America can be traced following outlines that first appeared in avant-garde design circles of turn-of-the-century Europe, particularly the Viennese Secession, De Stijl and Bauhaus movements. Embracing a graphic sensibility that treated building facades as advertising posters more than traditional architectural compositions, modern architecture found its first firm foothold along America's commercial corridors beginning in the late 1920s. Heavily influenced by contemporary European designs like J.J.P. Oud's 1925 Cafe de Unie in Rotterdam [Fig. 5], a small cohort of primarily European emigrant architects including Rudolf Schindler and J.R. Davidson in Los Angeles and Joseph Urban and Vahan Hagopian in New York began designing urban stores that broke radically from conventional architectural patterns by emphasizing smooth, continuous wall planes, modern construction materials, and Cubist-inspired compositions.[2] Rejecting the historicist forms and ornamentation of the myriad revival styles common to architect-designed commercial buildings of the era, these experimental architects were also among the first to wholeheartedly embrace the architectural potential of large-format signage on building facades, long a ubiquitous element of the commercial vernacular landscape but rarely sanctioned by architects themselves, who typically limited commercial identifiers to a few restricted zones (storefront fascias, parapets, etc.) of otherwise traditionally-fenestrated and ornamented facades. Until the arrival of modernism, most

[2] See Martin Treu, *Signs, Streets and Storefronts*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, p. 127ff.

Figure 6 (left): 922-924 Market Street, Philadelphia, n.d. Frank H. Taylor Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia
Figure 7 (right): 1204-1206 Market Street, Philadelphia, n.d. Frank H. Taylor Collection, Free Library of Philadelphia. Commercial signage often competed with or obscured buildings' architectural features.

commercial signage was a later accretion which competed visually with, or completely obscured, a building's architect-designed features [Figs. 6, 7].[3] In contrast, the signage of early modern shopfronts was an essential component of an overall design. "European shop designers had blurred the line between what was the 'sign' and what was the 'architecture,'" writes architectural historian Martin Treu. "Instead of merely adding the identification as an afterthought, the entire surface of the commercial establishment was one complete composition; no longer was lettering confined to its traditional location on the fascia board just above the shop windows."[4]

In emulating the *au currant* shopfront styles of Paris, Vienna, Berlin, and other capitals of European culture and fashion, early proponents of commercial modernism in America had adopted a new architectural vocabulary— one that replaced the traditional expressions of *gravity* (columns, beams, arches, keystones, etc.) with a decidedly more *graphic* juxtaposition

[3] Ibid., p. 35ff.
[4] Ibid., p. 122.

of free-floating surfaces and words. Just as significantly, they had also begun to cultivate a new client base traditionally ignored by professional architects— the store owner and the chain store. "The [American] architecture magazines of the early twentieth century were genteel portfolios of design work in which treatment of stores typically entailed the legitimations of history and convention and a discreet distance from the less seemly associations with commerce or fashion," writes architectural historian David Smiley.[5] Or as historian Gabrielle Esperdy asserts,

> Bound up as it was with the practices of selling and shopping, of advertising and marketing, of profit margins and retail trends, the commercial realm occupied a lowly position in the unwritten cultural hierarchy that dominated the architectural profession, and the spaces of commerce ranked well below those of government, art, education, and big business in terms of status and prestige.[6]

In contrast, these early modernists proposed that architects, instead of existing solely as purveyors of *propriety*, could instead be active partners in a retailer's quest for *profit*.

In hindsight, this proposition seems self-evident and this gravitation inevitable, but the subsequent proliferation of modernism in American commercial architecture was fundamentally affected by three later events, each of which helped amplify, in a uniquely American fashion, these early modernist impulses. First was the Great Depression, which, along with corresponding New Deal recovery efforts, radically upended established practices in architecture, real estate, the construction industries, and consumer spending. Second was the onset of World War II, which prolonged the Depression's state of arrested real estate development while simultaneously fostering a forward-thinking planning culture both within and beyond the field of architecture.[7] Not coincidentally, the war in Europe also drove a wave of émigré architects into America's professional ranks, many of whom would take a leading role in the development and promotion of modernist principles in America. Finally, the eventual

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[5] Smiley, David. *Pedestrian Modern: Shopping and American Architecture, 1925-1956*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013; p. 19.
[6] Esperdy, Gabrielle. "The Odd-Job Alleyway of Building: Modernization, Marketing, and Architectural Practice in the 1930s," *Journal of Architectural Education,* Vol. 58, n. 4 (May 2005), p. 28.
[7] See especially Andrew Shanken, *194X: Architecture, Planning and Consumer Culture on the American Home Front*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Allied victory in 1945 heralded an era of unfettered economic expansion, aggressive suburbanization, and the full flowering of a consumer culture that became, especially in the context of the Cold War, a major pillar of America's postwar self-identity. Each of these three major events had a direct and formative impact on how modernism, particularly within the commercial landscape, developed and spread.

It is virtually impossible to understate the disruption caused by the stock market crash of 1928 and its subsequent fallout: by 1933, new construction activity had come to a virtual standstill, millions of construction workers, architects, and building supply manufacturers were unemployed, consumer spending plummeted, and retail vacancy rates skyrocketed nationwide.[8] In 1934, newly-elected President Franklin D. Roosevelt unveiled a series of federal programs and policies—collectively branded the New Deal— to stimulate the economy. One of these was the Modernization Credit Plan, also known as the "Modernize Main Street" program, which passed in June 1934 as part of Roosevelt's National Housing Act. Operated by the newly-formed Federal Housing Administration, the program underwrote small low-interest loans for business owners to invest in commercial property improvements.[9] While the focus of the program was narrow, its ambitions were broad: to boost production at idled manufacturing plants, to create new work for architects and tradespeople, to promote consumer spending at newly-remodeled businesses, and ultimately to generate physical symbols of prosperity—modern new stores— along America's commercial corridors.

Though nothing in the legislation dictated any particular architectural style or product specifications, the Modernize Main Street program aggressively promoted a streamlined, machine-age aesthetic rooted in European precedents, but adapted for American mass production. Manufacturers like General Electric, Republic Steel, Libbey-Owens-Ford, Pittsburgh Plate Glass, and the Kawneer Company quickly retooled their product lines for the emerging

[8] Esperdy, "Odd-Job Alleyway," p. 26-27; Gabrielle Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street*: *Architecture and Consumer Culture in the New Dea*l. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008; p. 44ff.
[9] Esperdy, "Odd-Job Alleyway," p. 25-26.

storefront modernization market, while architects were urged to promote their services directly to prospective Main Street clients. Architectural journals began to fill with editorials and

Figures 8, 9: Modernize Main Street competition entries, 1935. 52 Designs to Modernize Main Street With Glass, *Libbey-Owens-Ford, 1935.*

features elevating the “store problem” into the ranks of “serious” architecture, alongside advertisements for new building materials like porcelain enamel and structural glass, extruded metal storefront systems, glass blocks, neon, etc. The impact was immediate: in June 1935 (the same month as the passage of the National Housing Act), Libbey-Owens-Ford sponsored the Modernize Main Street architectural competition, endorsed by the Federal Housing Administration to promote national recovery efforts. More than three thousand architects, one out of every three registered architects in America, submitted redesigns for typical Main Street drug stores, clothing stores, grocery stores, and gas stations— buildings so “quotidian that architects might have ignored them were it not for the extenuating circumstances of the Depression.”[10]

Winning entries, selected by a jury that included famed modernist William Lescaze, were widely publicized in architectural and trade journals, advertisements, and ultimately in *52 Designs to Modernize Main Street with Glass,* a widely-distributed full-color competition catalogue [Figs. 8-9]. As Esperdy notes, virtually all of the winning entries featured “flattened planes and poster-like facades, often highly colored, asymmetrical compositions with strongly defined horizontals and verticals, curved bulkheads, and signage expressed in bold graphics with contemporary typefaces.”[11] In addition to promoting Libbey-Owens-Ford’s Vitrolite brand of structural glass cladding, *52 Designs* (along with numerous follow-up campaigns by other manufacturers) effectively doubled as a pattern book for modernization in general, disseminating a streamlined modern aesthetic across the country to both architects and their clients alike. By the time that the Modernize Main Street program officially ended in 1943, an estimated $4 to $6 billion had been invested in commercial improvements nationwide, and a “Main Street Modern” architectural vernacular was as recognizable as it was widespread.[12] Even more significantly, retail architecture had captured the full attention of American architects, manufacturers, store owners, and, ultimately, consumers.

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[10] Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street*, p. 120.
[11] Ibid., p. 125.
[12] Ibid., p. 222.

The onset of World War II lifted the American economy out of the Great Depression, but effectively suspended manufacturing and construction activities not directly tied to the war effort. Rather than lose this newfound attention, retail architecture and the "store problem" continued to maintain a high profile in architectural discourse of the war years, even as this attention was largely relegated to the "paper architecture" of anticipatory plans. "194X" was a term coined to describe the unknown but presumably imminent transition to a peacetime economy freed from both the debilitations of the Depression and the demands of the war effort. "Almost from the moment the war ended the Depression, Americans began to forecast the world after the war," writes historian Andrew Shanken. "Buildings and cities provided vivid material for speculation, and architects posed as expert prognosticators."[13]

The 194X era proved fertile for the growth of modernism in commercial architecture, despite (or perhaps actually fed by) the dearth of real clients and projects during the war. During the Depression, most projects were necessarily modest in scope, typically limited to the ground-floor recladding of existing storefronts along established commercial arteries. By the 1940s more architects were experimenting, if initially just on paper, with broader design questions of composition and massing, not only of individual stores, but of commercial building types and development patterns in general. Architects increasingly adopted the language of behavioral psychology in their claims that modern design could draw potential customers off the sidewalk and into stores. The two-dimensional "poster front" of the Depression era evolved into more sculptural designs that consciously interrupted traditional streetwall continuity with recessed arcades, projecting canopies and display boxes, and curvilinear and canted forms. The "open" or "visual" front was predominant, eliminating solid front walls in favor of expansive windows that displayed entire store interiors from the street.

[13] Shanken, p. 1.

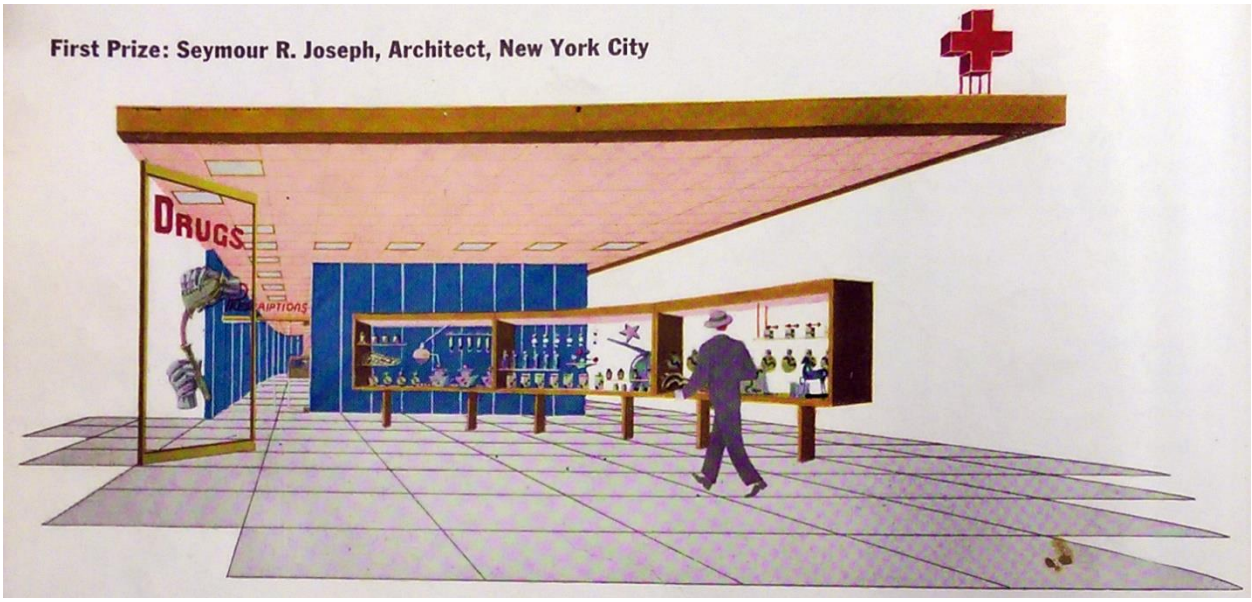

Figure 10: Winning entry in Kawneer's 1942 "Storefront of Tomorrow" competition. Pencil Points, *Feb. 1943*

Building product manufacturers remained key benefactors and promoters of commercial modernism during the wartime construction freeze, sponsoring major design competitions and advertising campaigns that placed the "store of tomorrow" front and center in the popular imagination.[14] One such company was the aluminum manufacturer Kawneer, which aggressively promoted its storefront and cladding products even while its assembly lines were retrofitted for the war. "Typical of much advertising during the war, Kawneer's advertising reflected how vital it was to keep a company name in circulation, since many industries had retooled for arms manufacturing or were severely hobbled by materials limits," writes Smiley. "Companies were looking to the future; a typical Kawneer advertisement included the copy, 'War work today…. Store fronts, Aluminum Doors and Windows Tomorrow.'"[15] In 1942, Kawneer also sponsored the "Store Fronts of Tomorrow" design competition, whose winning entries all featured variations on the open front [Fig. 10].[16] In 1944, Libbey-Owens-Ford published *Visual Fronts*, a follow-up to their 1935 *52 Designs to Modernize Main Street with Glass* that embraced the new open aesthetic, while its fierce competitor Pittsburgh Plate Glass produced *There Is a New Trend in Store Design*, a publication and series of advertisements featuring conceptual open-front store designs by such prominent modern architects as Walter

[14] Ibid., p. 96ff.
[15] Smiley, p. 77.
[16] "Store Fronts of Tomorrow," *The New Pencil Points*, February 1943, pp. 30-35.

THERE IS A NEW TREND IN STORE DESIGN

GRUEN & KRUMMECK'S
conception of a
Haberdashery Store

"A store for men should have a quiet and dignified appearance. A haberdashery store sells merchandise of widely different sizes Some of it, such as shirts, sweaters, jewelry, neckties, etc. warrants a showcase-like display Other merchandise, such as sport suits, and jackets are displayed on mannequins and, therefore, needs a large show window In our design we have chosen an unsymmetrical arrangement which gives both display possibilities. The treatment of the exterior walls continues into the sales room."

Pittsburgh Glass and Pittco Store Front Metal lend themselves perfectly to the design of striking, sales-winning store fronts and interiors. A complete line, including a type of glass or metal for every store need, these products are versatile, adaptable, and high in quality. And they are readily available through a nation-wide system of branches and dealers.

Merchants in all leading retail fields are being urged by Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company to consult architects. Advertisements in 21 magazines suggest enlisting an architect's aid *now* to plan for postwar store building and alterations.

FREE!

Two perspectives, plan, and several details of this design—on a 21" x 25" sheet. The sixth of a series of store designs by some of America's leading architects. Mail the coupon now.

Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company
2368-4 Grant Building, Pittsburgh 19, Pa.
Please send me, without obligation, your sheet showing more complete drawings of the Haberdashery Store by Gruen & Krummeck.

Name
Occupation
Address
City State

"PITTSBURGH" stands for Quality Glass and Paint

PITTSBURGH GLASS FOR STORE FRONTS AND INTERIORS

Figure 11: A Gruen & Krummeck concept design commissioned for Pittsburgh Plate Glass's "There is a New Trend in Store Design" series. Architectural Forum, *November 1944.*

Gropius, Pietro Belluschi, William Lescaze, Eero Saarinen, Oscar Stonorov and Louis Kahn, Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, and Gruen & Krummeck [Fig. 11].[17]

Of course, store design was just one facet of a much broader architectural discourse during the war years, one that grappled with larger issues of housing, education, manufacturing, transportation, and urban redevelopment. Both implicitly and explicitly, the automobile loomed large in all of these discussions. On the macro level, planners anticipated new suburban population patterns and consumer practices that widespread automobile ownership could facilitate; on the micro level, new auto-oriented building types like service stations, supermarkets and drive-ins drew increased architectural attention. Traffic congestion and parking shortages, a problem in most urban cores since at least the 1920s, led to much speculation about the fate of traditional downtown Main Streets vis-a-vis the more autocentric suburban shopping centers then on many drafting boards.

True to expectations, the end of World War II did bring profound changes to American culture and the built landscape. Average wages and buying power rose in tandem with a flood of new consumer goods, spreading the ascendant gospel of planned obsolescence. Rapid suburbanization was fueled by federal housing policy, highway construction, and the Cold War mantra of decentralization. After 1954, changes in federal tax law created huge financial incentives for constructing new retail developments (but not for rehabilitating existing structures), tipping the scales of commercial activity even more firmly toward new suburban shopping centers and away from traditional urban downtowns.[18] Between 1953 and 1956, for example, the rate of shopping center construction in America *tripled*, with 31 million square feet of shopping center space built in 1956 alone (compared to only 1 million in 1947).[19]

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[17] Smiley, pp. 83-85.
[18] On "accelerated depreciation," see especially Thomas W. Hanchett, "U.S. Tax Policy and the Shopping-Center Boom of the 1950s and 1960s," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 101, n. 4, October 1996, pp. 1082-1110.
[19] Hanchett, pp. 1098-1099.

But downtown's postwar decline was neither immediate nor definitive. Spurred by increased sales and the pressure to "keep up" with the competition, be it next door or across town, downtown and Main Street merchants in the late 1940s and 1950s built new stores and storefronts at an unprecedented rate and scale, translating the conceptual "paper architecture" of the war years into physical reality. As Martin Treu notes, "The postwar surge of suburban development forced greater change on downtown and Main Street than anything over a century of almost constant design evolution had yet done."[20] Now scaled explicitly for the automobile in addition to the pedestrian, the requisite *modern* store of the 1950s combined new materials, dynamic shapes, large-scale signage and graphics, open displays, and state-of-the-art lighting and climate-control technologies to attract and persuade. "The store front is the silent salesman working on the street 24 hours a day," wrote prolific commercial architect Morris Lapidus in 1954. "It is a newspaper advertising plastered across Main Street. Few indeed are the shops entered through a self-effacing door."[21]

Structural Glass, the Poster Front, and the Open Front

Two major trends dominated store modernization practices from the 1930s through the 1950s. Through the Great Depression, the streamlined "poster front" was ubiquitous: flat, colorful facades expediently applied over existing walls. Beginning in the 1940s, the more structurally complex "open" or "visual" front began to eclipse the poster front in popularity, blurring the line between store interior and exterior through the use of large plate glass windows, recessed arcades, projecting display cases, etc.[22] Both trends were aggressively promoted by the two leading glass manufacturers of the era: Libbey-Owens-Ford (L-O-F) and Pittsburgh Plate Glass (PPG). Pigmented structural glass, branded Vitrolite by L-O-F and Carrara Glass by PPG, was a

[20] Treu, p. 196.
[21] Morris Lapidus, *Designs for Modern Merchandizing*, quoted in Mike Jackson, "'Storefronts of Tomorrow': American Storefront Design from 1940 to 1970," *Preserving the Recent Past 2,* Deborah Slaton and William G. Foulks, editors. Washington, D.C.: Historic Preservation Education Foundation, 2000, p. 64.
[22] Treu, p. 162.

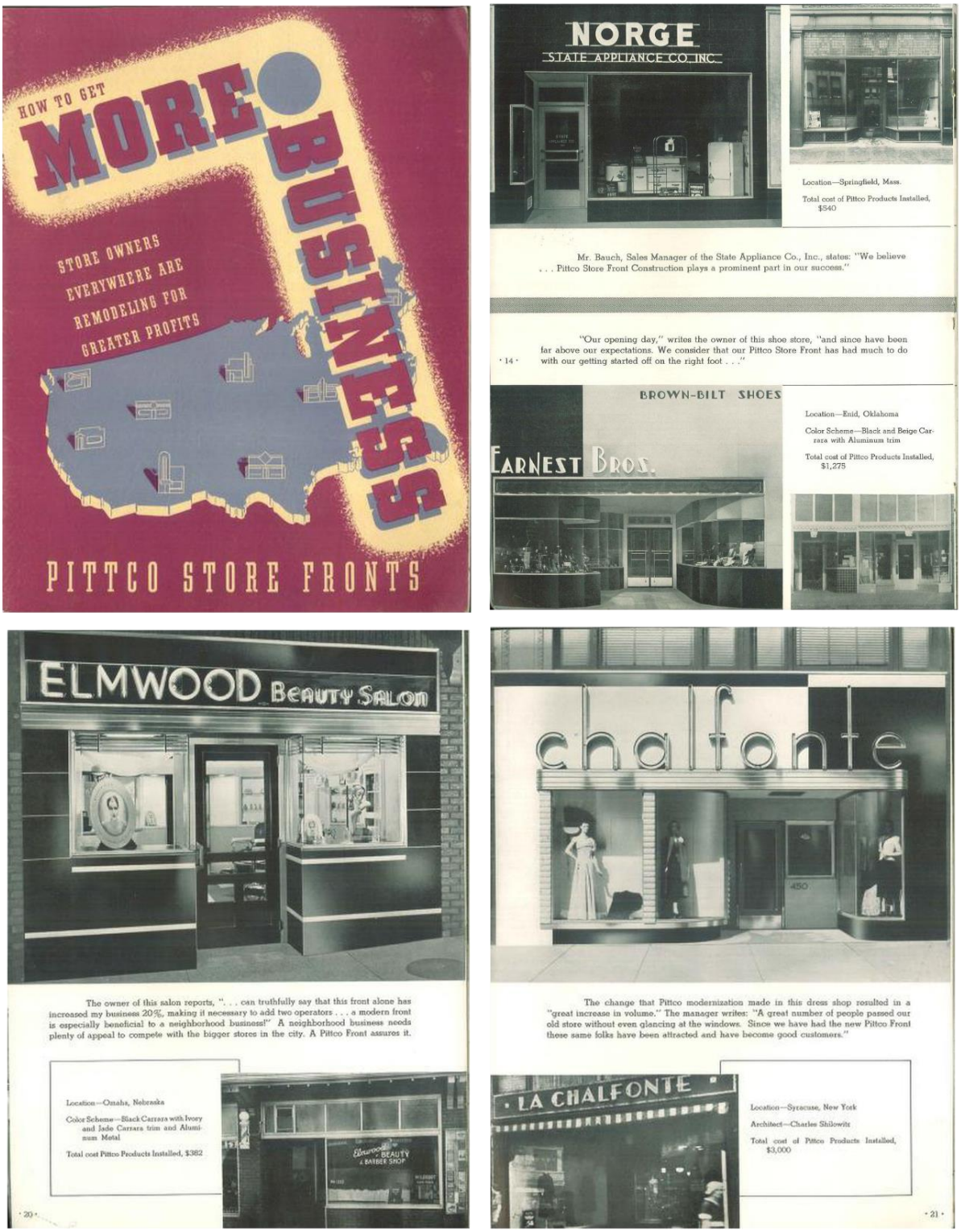

Figure 12: Before-and-after photographs highlighted the popularity of Carrara glass in modernization projects across the country. How to Get More Business, *Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company, 1939.*

material virtually synonymous with Depression-era modernization and the poster front. Originally developed at the turn of the twentieth century as an alternative to marble for sanitary kitchen and bathroom applications, designers in the 1920s began exploiting the product's decorative potential as manufacturers added new color and texture options to their catalogs.[23] By the mid-1930s, both L-O-F and PPG were marketing the material as an exterior cladding aimed directly at the emerging storefront modernization market. Unsurprisingly, nearly all of the entries featured in L-O-F's *52 Designs for Modernizing Main Street with Glass* used Vitrolite as a primary cladding material.[24] In Philadelphia and across the country, sleek new Carrara and Vitrolite storefronts soon became a common sight in central business districts and along neighborhood commercial corridors, largely aided by the New Deal's Modernize Main Street program [Fig. 12].

By the beginning of World War II, as many architects began exploring alternatives to the now-ubiquitous poster front, both L-O-F and PPG were reworking their product lines and marketing materials to take full advantage of the shifting trends. L-O-F's 1943 *Visual Fronts* design portfolio and PPG's 1945 *There is a New Trend in Store Design* advertising series both highlighted the companies' respective glass storefronts, frameless glass doors, and display cases, with structural glass often reduced to an accessory role as trim material. This evolution from poster front to visual front is perhaps best illustrated by yet another PPG advertising campaign, a *Design of the Month* mailer series the company distributed to architects and vendors from 1938 to 1960.[25] Each monthly mailer illustrated a "style suggestion" for a rotating collection of "modern" business establishments: shoe stores, luggage shops, dairy bars, record shops, candy stores, airline ticket offices, etc. [Fig. 13].[26] PPG's in-house director of architectural design Elmer A. Lundberg (1909-1971), a Pittsburgh native and graduate of the Carnegie Institute of Technology, created most of these designs, which evolved over time from relatively

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[23] Elk, Sara Jane, *Pigmented Structural Glass and the Storefront*. (Masters Thesis). University of Pennsylvania, 1985, p. 34.
[24] Esperdy, *Modernizing Main Street,* p. 123.
[25] Smiley, p. 86.
[26] Many of these mailers have been compiled and reproduced, though without attribution, in Heimann, Jim, ed. *Shop America: Midcentury Storefront Design 1938-1950*. Koln: Taschen, 2007.

Figure 13: Six examples of Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company's Design of the Month *mailer series, reproduced in* Shop America: Midcentury Storefront Design 1938-1950 *(Taschen, 2007).*

conservative poster fronts to more flamboyant, expressive open fronts.[27] Each mailer included a design brief, full-color perspective rendering, schematic floor plan, and product list; enough information to attract potential clients, but not enough to circumvent an architect's services. One such Lundberg rendering, "A Style Suggestion for a Camera Shop," was clearly used to guide the design of Ott Camera, as will be discussed below [Fig. 14].

Ott Camera in Context

Ott Camera was designed in 1955 by architect Allan A. Berkowitz (1913-1992), a native of Czechoslovakia who studied architecture at the Royal Technical University of Budapest and worked for a year in the Paris office of Le Corbusier before establishing a private practice in Budapest. In 1938 he emigrated to the United States. Before joining the U.S. Army and serving in Europe from 1941 to 1945, he worked on exhibition design for the 1939 New York World's Fair, briefly collaborated with Richard Neutra on a community center in Los Angeles, and designed various commercial buildings in Toronto, the New Jersey Shore, and Philadelphia. He resettled in Philadelphia in 1946; over the next decade, his portfolio included dozens of commercial, civic, industrial, residential, and ecclesiastic commissions across the Philadelphia region [Fig. 16].[28]

Despite this impressive architectural pedigree, his design for Ott Camera appears at first glance to be a verbatim copy of Pittsburgh Plate Glass and E.A. Lundberg's "Style Suggestion for a Camera Shop." In addition to the similarities in facade composition, stone veneer wall, and roof-piercing signage, Berkowitz's own presentation rendering borrowed liberally from (or even directly copied) many of Lundberg's details, even down to the film projector in the front window [Fig. 15]. But rather than diminish the architectural significance of the built design, this connection instead vividly illustrates the lead role that companies like Pittsburgh Plate Glass

[27] "Lundberg, Elmer A(gustinus) Jr." Koyl, George, *American Architects Directory*, *2nd ed.* New York, R.R. Bowker Co., 1962, p. 435; http://www.amazon.com/review/R3KBJ6HQYYWC29
[28] Berkowitz, Allan, "Biographical Notes," c. 1953, author's collection.

Style suggestion . . .

FOR A CAMERA SHOP

● Form and texture, the essential subjects of photographic art, have been aptly contrasted in this design for a camera shop. Rough stone complements the smooth suede finish of Black Carrara Structural Glass, and the clarity of polished Plate Glass balances the rich tone and soft luster of Pittco Metal.

The cantilevered display window suggests a bellows camera. Its size and position tend to focus attention on, and permit close inspection of the comparatively small objects in the display window. The back of the case may be open to permit a view of the store interior, or it may be closed and used, like the side walls, for the exhibition of photographs or other material.

The stylized name sign is given added impact by the attractive color of the ceiling.

LEGEND

Piers, lintel and return	½" Black Carrara Structural Glass, suede finish
Door and sidelights	¾" Herculite Tempered Plate Glass
Other glass areas	¼" Pittsburgh Polished Plate Glass
Metal construction	Pittco Store Front Metal, De Luxe or Premier, Alumilite finish
Name sign	Ribbon-type, painted metal lettering
Color scheme	According to Pittsburgh Color Dynamics principles

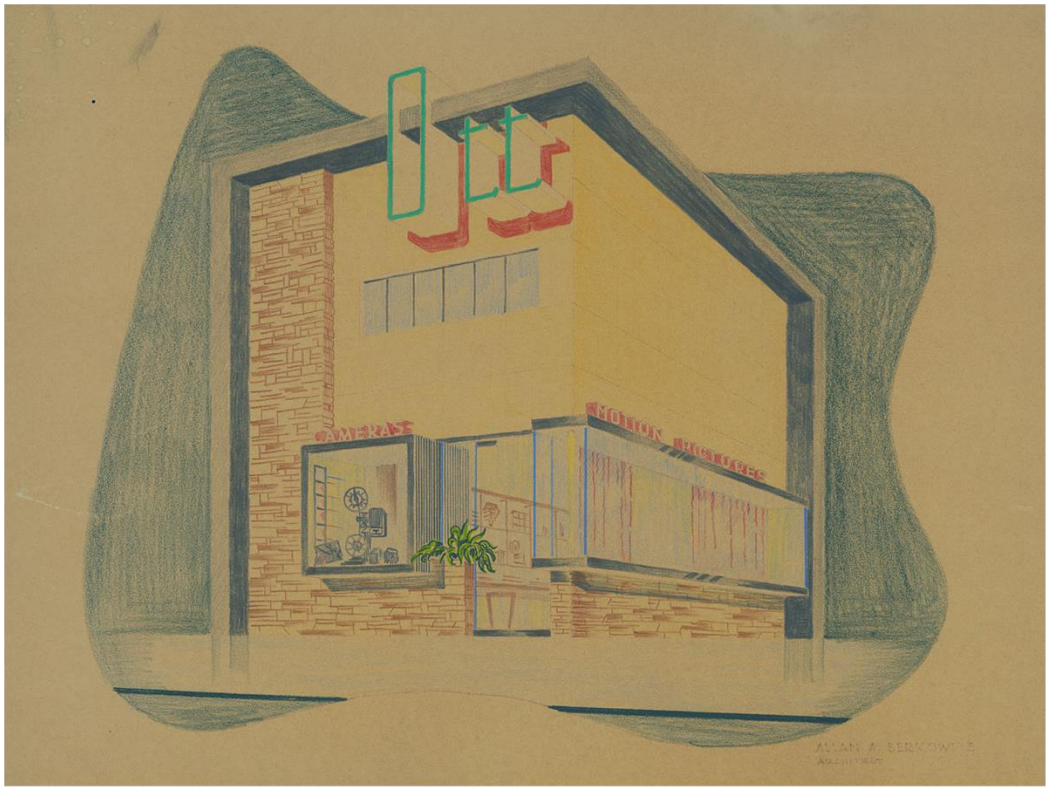

Figure 14 (top): E.A. Lundberg's "Style Suggestion for a Camera Shop," n.d. (c.1950). Shop America (Taschen, 2007)

Figure 15 (bottom): Allan A. Berkowitz's presentation rendering for Ott Camera, c. 1954. Courtesy of the Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania.

biographical notes

1913	allan a. berkowitz, born june 13, nagyszollos, czechoslovakia.
1936	graduates from the royal technical university of budapest, department of architecture. masters degree in architectural engineering.
1937	works in the office of le corbusier, 35 rue des sevres, paris, france, on city planning projects.
1938	awarded third prize at the international competition for a high school of budapest. practices in budapest designing housing developments, a 200 bed hospital, an apartment house and a hotel. arrives in united states august 22, 1938, and works in altoona, pennsylvania, on school projects.
1939	low cost housing, automobile showroom and restaurant in lakewood, new jersey. exhibition pavilion for new york world's fair. department store, toronto, canada.
1940	works with richard neutra, los angeles, california, and designs a community center.
1941	commercial buildings, philadelphia, pa.
1941-1945	u. s. army, position held: captain, assistant chief of staff, g-2, 3rd army, 16th armored division, normandy, southern germany, czechoslovakia.
1946-1947	settles down in philadelphia, and designs commercial and industrial buildings, a home for aged, a children's reception center, a women's medical college, a television station, a children's summer camp, a country club, and automobile showrooms.
1947	becomes a registered architect in the state of pennsylvania.
1948	elected corporate member of the american institute of architects and receives license to practice architecture in the state of new jersey. designs several episcopalian churches for communities of limited income, new jersey; an a. & p. supermarket, a shoe salon, a bar and grille room, philadelphia, pa.; paper processing plant, camden, new jersey.
1949	receives license to practice architecture in the state of new york. designs the congregation b'nai yitzhok community center in philadelphia, pa.
1950	designs the dusseau residence in wayne, pa.; individual stores and shopping center in philadelphia and bristol, pa.
1951	berkowitz residence in elkins park, pa. housing development subdivision, wyncote, pa. auditorium of temple sholom, philadelphia, pa.
1952	weiner residence, wyncote, pa. shopping center, 7th and sproul streets, chester, pa. kramer residence, lakewood, new jersey. liddonfield housing project for the philadelphia housing authority, 412 dwelling units and community center, torresdale avenue and megargee street, philadelphia, pa. warehouse, bristol, pa.
1953	f. w. woolworth co., 60' x 150' store, 6400 castor avenue, philadelphia, pa.

Figure 16: Biographical notes, Allan A. Berkowicz, c. 1954. Courtesy of the Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania.

played in the popularization and dissemination of commercial design trends, even among accomplished modern architects and their clients. At the same time, closer analysis reveals major differences in the two designs that illuminate unique local conditions equally significant to the building's history.

The first notable distinction is that, while Lundberg's open-front scheme features a highly transparent plate glass wall showcasing a soaring store interior, Berkowitz's Carrara-clad design is in some ways more reminiscent of 1930's-era poster-front shops.[29] This was partly a reflection of the building program itself, as the floor above the camera shop housed a bedroom addition for the existing attached residence (obviously a poor fit for a full-height show window). In its place, Berkowitz's Carrara wall was pierced by a central band of steel casement windows that, whether intentional or not, clearly mirror the fenestration pattern of J.J.P. Oud's iconic Café de Unie [Fig. 5], a building no doubt familiar to Berkowitz. The end result is a design that, while ostensibly symbolizing *au currant* 1950s shopfront fashion, also quietly echoes three previous decades of modernist antecedents and influences.

The second notable distinction is one of setting: while Lundberg's generic camera shop (and indeed the majority of his *Designs of the Month*) is depicted as a single facade between two party walls--a typical condition along dense urban commercial corridors-- Ott Camera was instead built as a semi-freestanding addition to an existing single-family residence along a low-density, mixed-use avenue on the urban periphery. As such, it fit neatly into neither the prewar urban, pedestrian-oriented shopfront mold nor the postwar mold of decentralized, auto-centric, standalone commercial buildings, but instead juxtaposed formal and functional aspects of both. As such, it represents a particularly interesting example of an under-recognized but not uncommon transitional building type, especially in postwar Northeast Philadelphia.[30]

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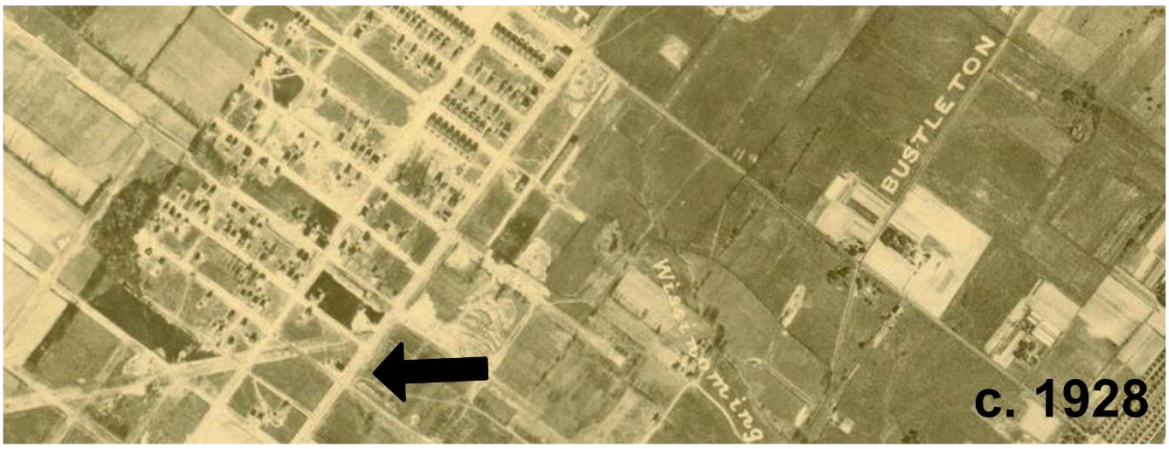
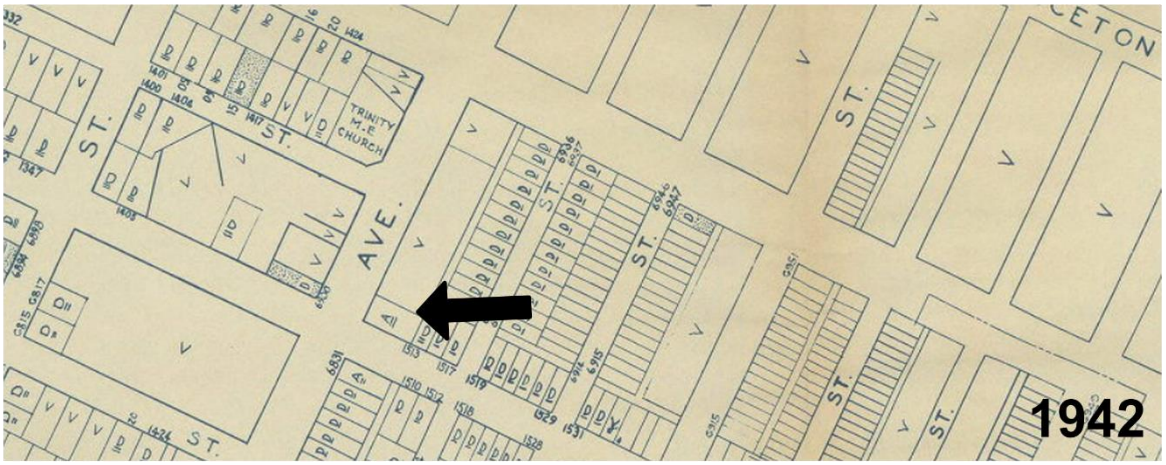
[29] The structural glass is assumed to be Carrara (as opposed to Vitrolite or another brand) based on its similarity to the standard colors depicted in *Carrara Structural Glass*, Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company, 1942, p. 8. http://archive.org/details/CarraraStructuralGlass

[30] Another comparable example, itself worthy of consideration for listing on the Philadelphia Register, is the Stein Flowers shop at 7059 Frankford Avenue (George Neff, 1950).





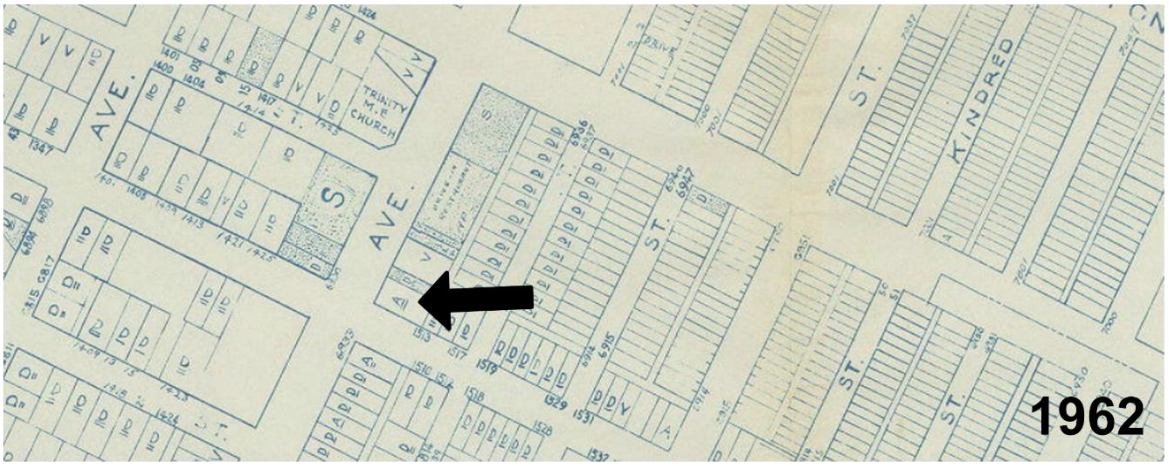


Figure 17 (top): Arial Survey of the Philadelphia Region, c. 1928, plate 55. Map Collection of the Free Library of Philadelphia.

Figure 18 (middle): Philadelphia Land Use Map, 1942, plate 7C-3. Map Collection of the Free Library of Philadelphia.

Figure 19 (bottom): Philadelphia Land Use Map, 1962, plate 7C-3. Map Collection of the Free Library of Philadelphia.

Located on the corner of Castor and Longshore Avenues a half-mile southwest of Cottman Boulevard, the Ott Camera site and its surroundings were largely undeveloped in 1922, when a streetcar line (Philadelphia Trolley Company Route 59) was built down Castor Avenue, linking Cottman Boulevard to the new Frankford Elevated line.[31] [Fig. 17] Even through the 1930s and early 1940s, large swaths of land north and west of Roosevelt Boulevard had yet to be developed, including large blocks up and down the Castor Avenue trolley route. Other stretches of Castor Avenue, particularly the adjacent 6800 block, featured semi-detached single-family homes with deep front lawns, establishing a fledgling suburban residential character to the corridor.[32] [Fig. 20] In 1939, a detached single-family home was constructed on a corner lot at 6901 Castor Avenue. Set back fourteen feet from both the Castor and Longshore sidewalks, the house followed the basic pattern of the subdivision to its southwest, but also featured a detached garage and an accessory office use (the first owner was a doctor).[33] For most of the 1940s, it remained the only structure on the block. Around the time Joseph C. Ott acquired the property in 1948, two additional buildings had appeared: a two-story commercial building immediately next door, and a gas station at the opposite end of the block.[34] By 1962, a drive-in restaurant occupied a large mid-block parcel and another gas station was built across the street.[35] [Fig. 19]

Ott operated a photo supply store out of the former doctor's office in his home for about five years before commissioning Berkowitz to design a major commercial addition in 1954. Their original zoning application proposed a large corner addition projecting out to both the Castor and Longshore sidewalk (Berkowitz's surviving presentation rendering likely depicts this initial scheme, given the apparent length of the Longshore-facing facade).[36] For unknown reasons this application was rejected, and the pair reapplied with a modified scheme the following year,

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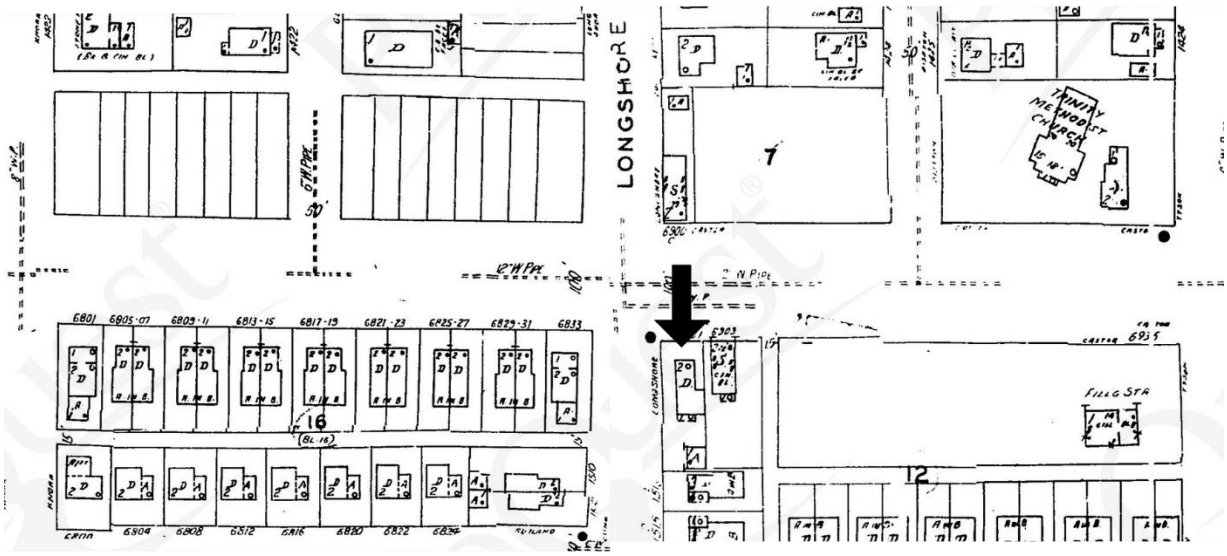
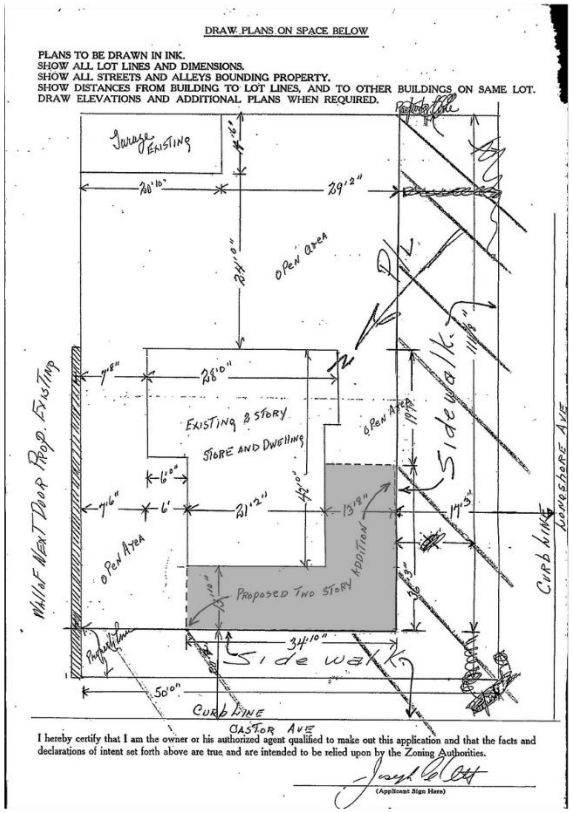
[31] Calnan, John, "The History of Philadelphia's Trackless Trolleys." http://www.septa.org/media/50th/trackless-trolleys.html
[32] Federal Works Progress Administration, *Philadelphia Land Use Map,* 1942.
[33] Application for Zoning Permit #40076, 6901 Castor Avenue, 5/15/1939
[34] Deed Book CJP, 2090, p. 357, 7/15/1948; Sanborn Fire Insurance Map Company, Philadelphia Volume 26, plate 2589, 1950.
[35] Federal Works Progress Administration, *Philadelphia Land Use Map,* 1962.
[36] Application for Zoning Permit #66500B, 6901 Castor Avenue, 8/14/1953

1950



1953



1954

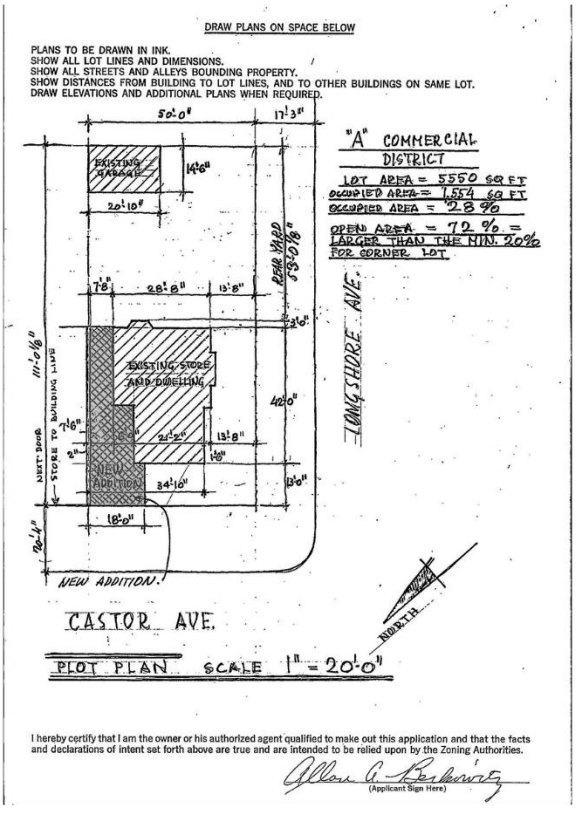


Figure 20 (top): Sanborn Fire Insurance Company Map, 1950, Vol. 26, plates 2588-9.
Figure 21 (bottom left)): Rejected 1953 zoning application for a corner addition (#66500B, 8/14/1953)
Figure 22 (bottom right): Approved 1954 zoning application for a modified addition (#82258B, 7/19/1954)

shifting the addition to abut the neighboring commercial property to the northeast.[37] [Figs. 21-22.]

Berkowitz's design took full advantage of the modified corner exposure, even if the approved location was less prominent than their preferred plan. Wrapping Lundberg's basic composition around the corner of the new building to form a quasi-free-standing cube, the design's sleek square lines, smooth and colorful surfaces, and bold neon signage cut a striking contrast to both Ott's existing residence and his commercial neighbor next door, whose design was far more deferential to the surrounding suburban residences. Clearly designed to stand out in an increasingly automobile-oriented landscape, the addition nevertheless retained the compact massing and sidewalk orientation of a typical urban shopfront, even in the absence of a typical pedestrian shopping corridor to compliment it. As such, it stands as an idiosyncratic reflection of the complicated and often contradictory history of commercial development in postwar Northeast Philadelphia.

Constructed more than a decade after the popularity of Vitrolite and Carrara first began to wane, Ott Camera is nevertheless also possibly the best-preserved and most distinctive example of a structural glass retail facade currently surviving in Philadelphia. A 1985 University of Pennsylvania master's thesis by Sara Jane Elk identified eight characteristic examples of intact structural glass storefronts across the city; none of these sites survive in recognizable form today.[38] While not a comprehensive inventory, these lost examples are typical of countless installations that have disappeared in recent years through demolition and alteration, including the illegal demolition in 2014 of the Philadelphia Register-listed Art Deco glass facade at 1106 Chestnut Street (Markham Ashbury, 1933), likely the city's oldest such example of the material.

Much like the Pittsburgh Plate Glass advertisement it emulated, Ott Camera also represents a veritable catalog of other characteristic midcentury modern finishes and features. For example,

[37] Application for Zoning Permit #82258B, 6901 Castor Avenue, 7/19/1954
[38] Elk, pp. 121-152.

the building's rustic stone base and sidewall are typical of the material's use as a contrasting element in many modernist storefronts, especially in the 1950s and 1960s. The building's original metal-framed projecting display boxes (one of which has unfortunately been lost) were also characteristic storefront features of the "open front" era, even on buildings (like Ott's) which lacked recessed entry arcades. Finally, Ott's intact channel-set neon signage is a significant example of the period's penchant for bold, architecturally-integrated graphics. While the technology became commonplace beginning in the 1930s, the majority of Philadelphia's neon signs were later additions mounted to existing commercial structures. Only a subset were, like Howe & Lescaze's iconic 1932 PSFS rooftop sign, architect-designed and integral to a building's original design. This high modernist ideal reverberated throughout storefront modernization efforts of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, though surviving examples of these signs are exceedingly rare today.

Conclusion

As described above, Ott Camera embodies several distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen, reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style, and therefore merits listing on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. As an intact structural glass shopfront, as an example of integrated architectural signage, and as an illuminating illustration of the role product advertising played in the dissemination of commercial modernism, Ott Camera is a rare, perhaps even singular, historic resource.

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