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: **100 S. Independence Mall West**

Postal code: **19106** Councilmanic District: **1st District**

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2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: **Plexiglas Chandeliers, Rohm & Haas Building**

Common Name:

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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: Mixed Use Office/Commercial

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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): **1965**

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: **1965**

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: **Gyorgy Kepes**

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan:

Original owner: **Rohm & Haas Company**

Other significant persons: **Pietro Belluschi**

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.

8. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

SEE ATTACHED

9. NOMINATOR

Name with Title: **Benjamin Leech, consultant** Email: **bentleech@gmail.com**

Organization: **Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia** Date: **May 26, 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: 28 June 2016

☑ Correct-Complete ☐ Incorrect-Incomplete Date: 29 August 2016

Date of Notice Issuance: 30 August 2016

Property Owner at Time of Notice

Name: KPG-IMW Owner, LLC c/o Keystone Property Group

Address: One Presidential Blvd, Suite 300

City: Bala Cynwyd State: PA Postal Code: 19004

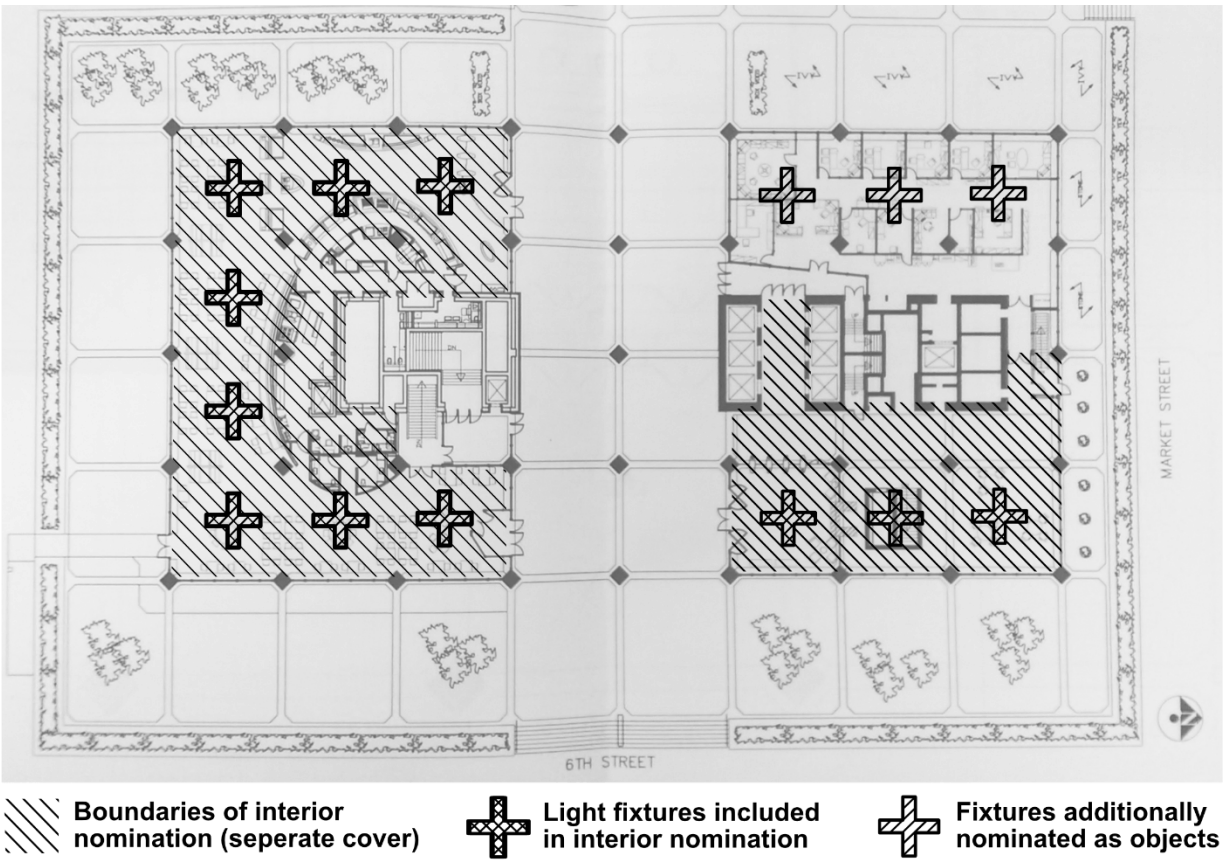
Date(s) Reviewed by the Committee on Historic Designation:

Date(s) Reviewed by the Historical Commission:

Date of Final Action:

☐ Designated ☐ Rejected 3/16/07

5. Boundary Description



Fourteen Plexiglas chandeliers are suspended from the ground-floor ceiling of the Rohm & Haas Building, 100 S. Independence Mall West. The ground floor of the building is divided into two pavilions by a central open colonnade. The north pavilion contains six of these chandeliers, located along the east and west perimeter of the pavilion's interior. The south pavilion contains eight chandeliers, located along the east, west, and south perimeters. Eleven of these chandeliers (three in the north pavilion, and all eight in the south pavilion) are located in (and contributing features of) a "public interior portion" of the building that has been nominated under separate cover to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The remaining three are located along the west perimeter of the north pavilion in an area of the building designed and used for non-public functions and therefore excluded from the boundaries of the public interior nomination. However, all fourteen chandeliers satisfy the definition of an "object" established in the Philadelphia Historic Preservation Ordinance and the Philadelphia Zoning Code, § 14-203 (195): "A material thing of functional, aesthetic, cultural, historic, or scientific value that may be, by nature or design, movable yet related to a specific setting or environment."

6. Description

Each identical fixture is a cruciform 16-foot by 16-foot assemblage of illuminated Plexiglas rods of varying lengths and diameters arranged around a concealed cold cathode light box. Light is diffused both laterally for a glowing veil-like effect, and directed upwards and downwards through the exposed round ends of each rod. Each is suspended from the ceiling by eight thin wires (two per “arm”) and a metal conduit pipe at the midpoint. These wires and pipes meet the ceiling at joints in the folded concrete forms. Each fixture includes approximately 2,000 individual rods.

7. Significance

The Rohm & Haas Building, designed by Pietro Belluschi in collaboration with the George M. Ewing Company, is an architecturally and historically significant modernist icon commissioned by one of twentieth-century Philadelphia's leading corporations, the specialty chemical manufacturer Rohm & Haas Company. The building broke ground in 1963 and was completed in 1965; in 2007, at only 42 years of age, it was individually listed on the National Register of Historic Places "for its exceptional importance in the area of architecture as one of Philadelphia's premier examples of the modern movement style of architecture and the work of a nationally significant architect."[1] The building's ground-floor interior spaces feature custom-designed chandeliers commissioned by Rohm & Haas to showcase Plexiglas, the company's signature product. Designed by György Kepes in close collaboration with Belluschi, the Ewing Company, and Rohm & Haas engineers, each chandelier is original to the building and related in design and use to its specific architectural setting and environment. These chandeliers therefore merit listing as historic objects on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places by meeting the following criteria as established by Philadelphia's Historic Preservation Ordinance, Section 14-1000 (1):

> 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;
>
> *and*
>
> E: Is the work of a designer, architect, landscape architect or designer, or professional engineer whose work has significantly influenced the historical, architectural, economic, social, or cultural development of the City, Commonwealth, or nation;

[1] Hamilton, Cynthia Rose. "Rohm and Haas Corporate Headquarters," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form. December 20, 2006, Section 8, p. 1.

The original concept of using Plexiglas for a series of large lobby fixtures can be traced to Pietro Belluschi, the building's primary architect. Belluschi was attracted to the Rohm & Haas commission by the client's interest in incorporating new and innovative applications for its products, including its signature Plexiglas acrylic plastic.[2] Like many other leading modernists, Belluschi believed in the honest expression of materials and the potential for new twentieth-century building products to inspire new approaches to architecture. Especially after World War Two, historicist styles had fallen decisively out of favor and modern materials replaced traditional ornamentation as the symbolic and literal "face" of contemporary architecture. This instinct dovetailed perfectly with a new generation of corporate patrons like Rohm & Haas, who, in the prosperous postwar decades, eagerly embraced modernism's popular associations with progress, efficiency, and ingenuity when commissioning new headquarters.

Plexiglas was first invented by Rohm & Haas scientists in the 1930s and developed commercially as a moldable, shatterproof glass substitute for the automobile industry and home furnishings. Production shifted almost exclusively to military applications during World War II, where the material proved indispensable (and extremely profitable) in the manufacture of airplane cockpit and gun turret canopies. Following the war, Rohm & Haas again rediversified its Plexiglas production as it sought new markets and developed new applications, including automotive components, product displays, illuminated commercial signage, home furnishings and fixtures, and scientific equipment.[3] For Rohm & Haas, incorporating Plexiglas into the design their new building was a significant opportunity to showcase the material in a highly visible setting and to test experimental new applications. In exploring new ways to integrate Rohm & Haas products into the building's design, Belluschi proposed lights with Plexiglas rods "which would hang like the prisms on the old chandeliers."[4]

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[2] Hamilton, p. 8.5.
[3] Blaszczyk, Regina Lee. *Rohm and Haas: A Century of Innovation.* Bainbridge Island, Wash: Fenwick, 2009, pp. 16-24; Hochheiser, Sheldon. *Rohm and Haas: History of a Chemical Company.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986, pp. 75-6.
[4] Ibid, p. 8.10.

At the time of the Rohm & Haas commission, the 63-year-old Belluschi was dean of architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and had recently designed (with Walter Gropius and Emery Roth & Sons) the highly-controversial Pan Am Building in New York City, then the largest office building in the world. A leading proponent and practitioner of modernism, Belluschi first gained national attention with his Equitable Building in Portland, Oregon (1944-1948), one of America's first International-style glass curtain wall office blocks. Credited with more than 1,000 designs over the course of a seven-decade career, Belluschi received the American Institute of Architects' prestigious Gold Medal in 1972 and the National Medal of Arts from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1991. In addition to his large-scale office towers, Belluschi is also widely celebrated for a series of smaller-scale houses and churches that reflected a more intimate, regionally-inspired approach to modernist design.[5] The Rohm & Haas Building is Belluschi's most significant Philadelphia-area work, though he also designed the Temple Adath Israel synagogue in Bala Cynwyd (with Charles Frederick Wise, 1956-7), the parking garage adjacent to the Rohm & Haas Building (with the George M. Ewing Company, 1966), and the University Lutheran Church of the Incarnation (with Alexander Ewing & Associates, 1969) in West Philadelphia.

Belluschi was born in Italy and studied engineering at the University of Rome before attending Cornell University as an international exchange student in the early 1920s. Remaining in the United States following his graduation with a degree in civil engineering, Belluschi eventually settled in Portland, Oregon as a draftsman in the office of A.E. Doyle. He became the firm's chief designer following Doyle's death in 1928; in 1931 he completed the Portland Art Museum, his first high-profile project and a stylistic departure from the firm's typical historicist oeuvre. Growing increasingly attuned through the 1930s and 1940s to the modernist approaches of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier, his portfolio of houses, offices, university buildings and shopping centers across the Pacific Northwest eventually attracted a national following. In 1951, M.I.T. selected Belluschi to head its prestigious School of

[5] Goldberger, Paul. "Pietro Belluschi, 94, an Architect of Major Urban Buildings, Dies," *New York Times*, Feb. 16, 1994.

Architecture and Planning, a position he held for fourteen years while also maintaining an active design consulting practice.[6]

At Belluschi's suggestion, the Rohm & Haas Company commissioned fourteen large light fixtures for the building's ground floor from György Kepes (1906-2001), a fellow MIT faculty member and a pioneering figure in the then-nascent genre of "light art." Kepes is best known today for his prolific writings on art theory and visual perception, and for his legacy in establishing MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies, a cross-disciplinary research institute dedicated to the integration of arts and advanced technology. His *Language of Vision*, a popular college textbook first published in 1944, generated thirteen editions and was translated into four languages.[7] He is celebrated in some circles today as "one of the most influential minds of the early modernist era" and even, in his MIT obituary, as "the greatest pioneer in the marriage of art and technology in America, if not the world."[8]

Born in Selyp, Hungary in 1906, Kepes studied painting at the Academy of Fine Art in Budapest before moving to Berlin in 1930 to pursue filmmaking and photography under Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, a seminal figure in the Bauhaus movement. In the turbulent run-up to World War II, Kepes followed Moholy-Nagy first to London (1936) and then to Chicago (1937), where he joined the faculty of Moholy-Nagy's New Bauhaus School, a precursor to the Illinois Institute of Technology's acclaimed Institute of Design. He began teaching at MIT in 1945, where he authored numerous texts and taught continuously until his retirement in 1972. Beyond academia, many of his most prominent works were site-specific architectural installations commissioned by corporate clients, including a kinetic neon wall mural for the facade of a Radio Shack store (Boston, 1950), a programmed light sculpture for the KLM Airline ticket office in Saks Fifth Avenue (New York, 1959) and lobby sculptures for the Pan-Am Building (New York, 1963). Kepes also collaborated with Belluschi on stained glass installations for at least two

[6] "Oral History Interview with Pietro Belluschi," Aug. 22-Sept. 4, 1983, Smithsonian Archives of American Art," http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-pietro-belluschi-11614.
[7] Erikson, Erik et. al. *Georgy Kepes: Works in Review.* Boston: Museum of Science, 1973, p. 23.
[8] "Gyorgy Kepes, founder of CAVS, dies at 95," *MIT News,* Jan. 16, 2002; Poulin, Richard. *Graphic Design and Architecture: A Twentieth-Century History.* Beverly, Mass.: Rockport Publishers, 2012, p. 135

major ecclesiastic commissions: Church of the Redeemer (Baltimore, 1959) and St. Mary's Cathedral (San Francisco, 1964-1969).[9]

[9] Poulin, p. 135; Orosz, Márton. "Light as a Creative Medium in the Art of György Kepes," *The Pleasure of Light: György Kepes and Frank J. Malina at the Intersection of Science and Art*. Budapest: Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, 2011, p. 55; Erikson, pp. 61-62.

8. Bibliography

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Poulin, Richard. *Graphic Design and Architecture: A Twentieth-Century History.* Beverly, Mass.: Rockport Publishers, 2012.