

Jewelers' Row

Philadelphia Historical Commission
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Designation Committee

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I'm David Brownlee. I teach architectural history at Penn, I'm a member of the board of the Preservation Alliance, and I was a member of the Historical Commission and chaired this committee for sixteen years.

It's always fun to talk about architectural history. But it's important, too. Architectural history is one of the most significant repositories of our cultural memories, and we are always living in its latest chapter. We should try to get it right.

To start off with, I want to say that I trust your judgment when it comes to looking at Jewelers' Row, because it really is just what it looks like: a largely intact group of buildings that reflect the interesting history of downtown Philadelphia over about 170 years. It's important to say this at the start, because, I regret to say, the critical evaluation that you've received is largely an attempt to make you disbelieve what it is plain to see.

The evaluation does this by deploying several painfully obvious deceptions: by misrepresenting the goal of the nomination (and saying that its effects would be terrible), by misrepresenting the criteria that a nomination must satisfy (and then saying the nomination doesn't meet them), and, throughout, by disguising the thinness of the argument in a cloud of spurious empiricism--of irrelevant diagrams, charts, and graphs.

To start, the nomination does not seek, as the evaluation claims, to "freeze the district in a past use." This pronouncement is clearly meant to mislead and thus frighten property owners. Not only does the nomination not seek to do that, it could not. While the past use of buildings may be an interesting part of their story and contribute to their historical significance, and why it's why we call this "Jewelers' Row," as you well know, the use of a building today and its use tomorrow are unregulated by the city's historic preservation ordinance. Indeed, because of legislation passed last November, owners of designated historic properties actually get several breaks if they want to modify their buildings to serve new functions, and our newly reconfigured tax abatement policy adds to that tax advantages for the rehab of older buildings.

What designation protects is only the exterior appearance of buildings, not what goes on behind the façade. Familiar examples of historic buildings that have been adapted to serve new functions abound—including PSFS, once a bank and office building and now the Loew's Hotel. And the adaptive changes behind the façade can be big: the 45-story St. George's apartment building was okayed by the Historical Commission to be built behind York Row the preserved federal era townhouses in the 700 block of Walnut Street. If Jewelers Row had been designated, the Toll Brother's project could have looked like that.

My second point is that the evaluation misrepresents the criteria for district designation: they do not require what it calls "a superlative level of significance or cultural representation." That's simply not so for any designation, and, all the more so in historic districts, where designation requires things that are, in the words of the ordinance, "distinctive," "established," "familiar," and just plain "significant."

Nor does the ordinance require, as the evaluation seems to interpret it, that nominated properties have only one significant characteristic, and that they possess it purely and always and everywhere. This misapprehension leads the author to point out repeatedly the changing uses, the shifting demographics, and the succession of architectural styles that characterize Jewelers Row—as though these were faults. In the effort to discredit the nomination's eligibility under criterion (a), for example, the evaluation emphasizes that only three of the original Carstairs row houses survive, and that the purely residential character of the street was changed in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when some houses were altered and others were replaced by distinctive buildings of a new type, which were erected

to serve first the printing and then the jewelry trades. No one disputes this; the nomination says this. And it's far from being a disqualifier.

The attempt to portray the changing uses and demographics of Jewelers Row as a disqualification is also reflected in the critical analysis of criteria (h) and (j), in which quantitative data from census records, directories, and building permits are used to demonstrate conclusively the never-challenged fact that Jewelers' Row has changed functions over the years, successively occupied by upper middle class residents, printers, jewelers, and now (once again) by increasing numbers of residents.

As you know, changelessness is not a requirement for designation, and while intended to cloud the argument, this research actually bolsters the nomination's presentation of the district as a microcosm of two centuries of Philadelphia's cultural, commercial, and architectural history—its history of change.

(Although I don't think that this should be an argument about numbers, there is one number to which I do want to call your attention: 38. That is the number of extant buildings that are designated as significant or contributing in the East Center City Commercial Historic District on the National Register that will gain protection that they don't have now if Jewelers Row is designated.)

An obsession with architectural purity also skews the analysis of architectural style under criterion (c), which complains about the presence of newer storefronts. The continuous rebuilding of storefronts is, of course, the norm in commercial districts; indeed, it is one of their most distinctive features, and, in that context, it is notable that there are eighteen architecturally significant storefronts among the inventoried buildings of Jewelers Row—although—purists beware, they are not all in the same style as the buildings to which they are attached.

Mind you, this complaint about discordant storefronts underlies the broader attack that is made with the strange little diagrammatic façade elevations on page 7, which are designed to make you disbelieve what you remember seeing on Jewelers Row, in part by failing to assign value to any storefronts and by omitting Eighth Street and the 800-block of Sansom. In real life, which the evaluator wants you to forget, we do not see a collage of disembodied fragments. Our experience is shaped by the totality of the buildings. Even though historical detail is missing or altered in some places (notably at street level), the buildings' size, scale, and corporeality is almost never compromised, and even most of the non-contributing buildings play along. It's that totality that we remember and that we call "Jewelers' Row."

History is, after all, a record of change, and it is peculiar that an evaluation that rails against an imaginary hold on future change should fail to celebrate the evidence of change in the past. Most of us are used to seeing change, and it doesn't confuse us. Many of you remember that I used to have very nice brown hair, but you still recognize me with gray hair and you don't see me with the top of my head deleted. Dr. Thomas used to have a beard, and I bet you recognize him, too.

So I suggest to you again what I said at the beginning: trust what you see on Jewelers' Row. What you see is what criterion (g) calls a "distinctive area" and (h) calls an "established and familiar visual feature." It is the kind of place that Louis Kahn was thinking of when he said, "A street is a room by agreement," by which you can be sure that he did not mean that every building on the street looked the same—but that they came together to do something. The buildings of Jewelers Row come together like that, in their differences, to exemplify what criterion (j) calls "the cultural, political, economic, social, or historical heritage of the community." That heritage isn't one thing, and designation doesn't require that or freeze the way we use designated buildings. The story of Jewelers Row is, indeed, like the story of Philadelphia, a story of complexity and change, and it is right for us to care for the places where this narrative is told—especially where it is told memorably, as on Jewelers' Row.