

**PUBLIC COMMENT ON  
700-34 RACE STREET**

## Reevaluating the Roundhouse's Historical Significance and Potential for Redevelopment

Woodworth, Beckett <bwoodworth@KPMG.com>

Fri 9/8/2023 3:17 PM

To:preservation <preservation@Phila.gov>

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To the esteemed members of the Philadelphia Historical Commission,

As you prepare to vote on the Roundhouse's induction into the Philadelphia Historical Commission on October 13th, I urge you to consider the following points. While some may argue that the Roundhouse is a significant building, its architectural and historical value is not as substantial as it may seem, particularly when taking into account the historical mistreatment of black and brown communities by the police department.

- Firstly, the Roundhouse's status as a former police headquarters does not inherently make it a significant building. Many structures have served similar purposes throughout history, and this alone does not warrant preservation. Furthermore, preserving a building that symbolizes an institution with a history of racial injustice may send the wrong message to the communities that have been directly affected by these issues.
- Secondly, the Roundhouse's interior design is far from practical. Its twisting corridors and confusing layout not only make it difficult to navigate but also limit its potential for adaptive reuse. While it may have once served a purpose in deterring escape attempts from holding cells, this design is now more of a hindrance than a benefit.
- In response to committee member [Suzanna Barucco's statement](#) that a use will be found for the building, it is important to consider the challenges that the Roundhouse's design presents. The building's unconventional layout makes it difficult to repurpose, and any potential uses may require significant alterations, undermining its historical integrity.
- Moreover, the Roundhouse's location in one of the United States' densest city centers, directly across from a future subway station entrance, presents an opportunity for redevelopment. Rather than preserving an architecturally peculiar and historically insensitive building, this prime location could be utilized for much-needed housing or other community-oriented projects that promote healing and growth.

In conclusion, I urge the Philadelphia Historical Commission to consider the broader implications of preserving the Roundhouse. While it may hold some historical value as a former police headquarters, its impractical design, prime location, and association with racial injustice make it a less-than-ideal candidate for preservation. Instead, let us focus on creating a more vibrant and functional space that better serves the needs of our city and its residents, fostering an environment of inclusivity and progress.

Best regards,

**Beckett Woodworth** (he/him/his)

Senior Associate, Accounting Methods and Credits Services @ KPMG LLP

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October 9, 2023

The Hon. James Kenney, Mayor  
City Hall, Room 115  
Philadelphia, PA 19107

Dear Mayor Kenney:

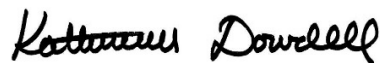
Philadelphia has a wealth of historic buildings, but as you well know, many are not protected as they should be. One of these buildings is the former Police Administration Building, known informally as the Roundhouse. A difficult building for some to love, it is nevertheless an architectural and structural landmark. However, its past use caused many to feel that this building was unworthy of protection.

The city is to be commended for the very thorough and rigorous public engagement process it conducted to discuss the architectural and social history of this building and its occupants. The conclusion of that concerted effort resulted in the building being nominated for addition to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, and being recommended for approval by the Designation Committee of the Philadelphia Historical Commission in September. The final step in this long process, approval by the full Historical Commission, was scheduled for their next meeting, on October 13, 2023.

It was therefore quite puzzling and very dismaying to learn that this final approval hearing has been continued to March 2024. Word on the grapevine is that this delay was requested by your administration, in order to allow the next mayor to “make the decision”. Make the decision to do what? The building is clearly significant, and the public is in favor of the building being repurposed rather than demolished. It’s unclear to me what other outcome could be accomplished by waiting.

The next mayor will have a full plate of issues to handle. Rather than deferring this decision and further burdening our next executive, I encourage you to rethink this position. There’s been a long public engagement process; the memory of the designation committee meeting is still fresh, and the Commission should be reviewing this application while its own committee members and the public are still engaged. Postponing this decision after a broad public process fuels disengagement – exactly the opposite result of what that effort was designed to accomplish. Please put this case back onto the Historical Commission’s agenda as soon as possible.

Very truly yours,



Katherine Dowdell, AIA

Cc: Jon Farnham, Executive Director, Philadelphia Historical Commission  
All members of the Commission and Designation Committee  
Paul Steinke and Hannah Stark, Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia



# PRESERVATION ALLIANCE

*for greater philadelphia*

October 10, 2023

Philadelphia Historical Commission  
1515 Arch Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19102

Re: Philadelphia Register nomination of 700-34 Race Street, aka The Roundhouse

Dear Members of the Historical Commission,

I am writing in reference to the nomination for the Police Administration Building, commonly known as “The Roundhouse.” We urge the Historical Commission to consider this nomination at their upcoming meeting on October 13 and not continue it to March 2024 as is currently the plan.

The nomination is a collaboration between the Preservation Alliance and Docomomo US- Greater Philadelphia Chapter and represents an enormous expenditure of time and effort designed to show that the building meets the criteria for designation. The Committee on Historic Designation agreed and unanimously recommended the building for designation at its September meeting.

In addition, The Kenney Administration conducted an impressive, thorough, and thoughtful community engagement process that culminated in April 2023 with the recommendation that this building be placed on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.

It is now time to finish the job and ensure that the building is preserved and eventually redeveloped to serve its community and the city. The coming new Mayoral administration will bring with it new Historical Commission leadership, risking the waste of all the effort that has brought us to this point and, more importantly, putting the long-term survival of the Roundhouse at risk.

We urge the Commissioners to deny the continuance request and approve the nomination, the last step in an already lengthy process. We believe that the Historical Commission and the current administration should proudly champion the designation of the Roundhouse as the conclusion of its robust and thoughtful engagement process.

Sincerely,

Paul Steinke  
Executive Director

**BREAKING NEWS from Boston**

Paul Steinke &lt;psteinke@preservationalliance.com&gt;

Wed 10/11/2023 12:32 PM

To:preservation &lt;preservation@Phila.gov&gt;

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**The Architect's Newspaper****Boston City Hall has been recommended by the municipal government for landmark status**

<https://www.archpaper.com/2023/10/boston-city-hall-recommended-municipal-government-landmark-status/>

If anything, Boston City Hall has been more vilified for its architectural style than our Roundhouse, or frankly any building in Philadelphia. Yet Boston's mayor has just come out foursquare behind landmarking that city's controversial 1968 municipal headquarters.

Meanwhile in Philadelphia, our outgoing mayor wants to punt on landmarking the Roundhouse despite its clear worthiness, despite the Architectural Committee's favorable recommendation just last month, and despite all the time, effort and municipal treasure that has gone into getting it to the brink of designation.

Please share this news with the Commission.

Paul Steinke  
Executive Director  
Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia  
(215) 546-1146 ext. 1  
[www.preservationalliance.com](http://www.preservationalliance.com)



October 10, 2023

Philadelphia Historic Commission  
1515 Arch Street  
Philadelphia, Pa. 19102

Re: Philadelphia Register nomination of 700-34 Race Street, aka The Roundhouse

Dear Commissioners:

For the reasons set forth below, we write to respectfully request that you vote *now* in favor of historic designation of the former Philadelphia Police Administration Building (The Roundhouse). Docomomo-phl is a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and reuse of significant examples of mid-century modern architecture.

Docomomo-phl first submitted the historic designation application for the Roundhouse to the Commission in June 2019. Since then, the city of Philadelphia's Department of Planning and Development has held months of vigorous public outreach and engagement – through on-line submissions, in-person testimonials, and town-hall meetings-- to gauge the public's view of the building and ask, "what's the future of the Roundhouse?" Docomomo-us held a national conference in June of 2022, which put the Roundhouse's architectural significance front and center nationally. A website, [www.savetheroundhouse.org](http://www.savetheroundhouse.org), has been established by a host of preservation-minded organizations to further educate and engage the public on the preservation and reuse of the building. And, of course, last month, the Committee on Historic Designation has agreed to historic designation. The outcome of this engagement and evaluation is clear -- repurpose the building rather than demolish it.

The thorough and rigorous public engagement process has now concluded. The architectural significance and the social history of the building have been vigorously debated. The time to study the building's past has ended and *now* is time for the Commission to vote on its future. Postponing a decision on this landmark building to wait to gauge the attitude of the new mayor toward preservation is counter-productive and does not align with the independent, non-political, and fact-based nature of the Commission and its mandate.

We respectfully request that the Commission act by voting now on the historic designation application for the Roundhouse to secure its future.

Sincerely,  
docomomo-phl

## Nominate the Roundhouse

Tom Normile <TNormile@keasthood.com>

Thu 10/12/2023 6:01 PM

To: preservation <preservation@Phila.gov>

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Dear Commissioners:

I'm writing to lend my voice to the already loud chorus in favor of approving the nomination of the Roundhouse to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places.

The motion to continue the issue until the spring wreaks of old school Philly politics. Let's be better than that. This is an opportunity to seize a win for the City, both for now and generations to come.

Deny the request for continuance and approve the nomination

Tom

**Thomas J. Normile, PE**

Senior Principal

**Mobile: [\(215\) 983-7302](tel:(215)983-7302)**

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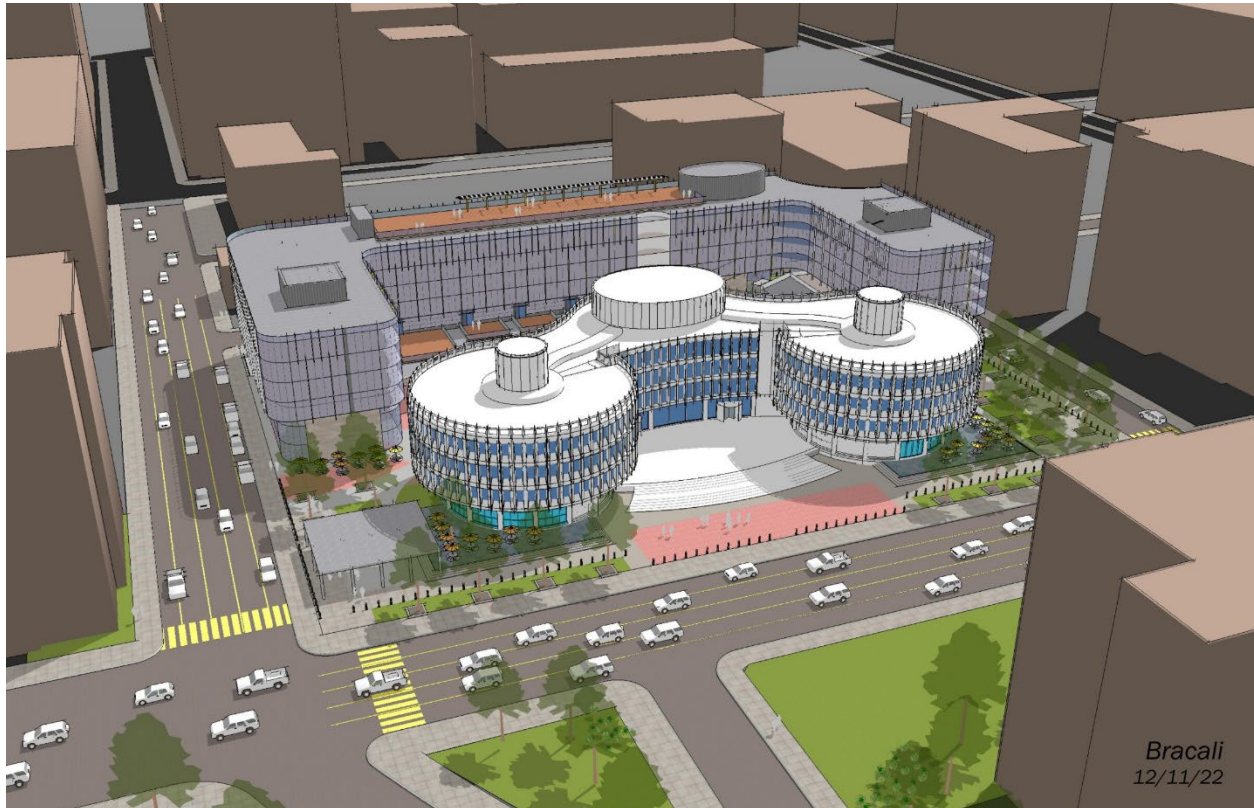


# DAG PHILADELPHIA DESIGN ADVOCACY GROUP

Advocacy statement    October 6, 2023

## The Future of the Past: Preserve Philadelphia's Roundhouse

By Eli Storch, Nika Faulkner, and David Brownlee, for the DAG Steering Committee



Rendering by Anthony Bracali for the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia 2022

Philadelphia's "Roundhouse," the Police Administration Building, is haunted by the dark history of police brutality and destructive urban renewal. Although conceived as a monument of progressive public policy and shaped by the stereotype-breaking ideas of the so-called "Philadelphia School" of architects, not long after its construction in 1959-1962, those negative associations—in particular its connection with the regime of Police Commissioner Frank Rizzo-- began to accumulate. The building became a symbol of dysfunction and cruelty in the criminal justice system.

This complex, important, and interesting history is laid out in the July 2023 [nomination of the building to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places](#). The nomination explains the significance of its design-- by Robert Geddes (Geddes Brecher Qualls & Cunningham) and August Komendant-- and also provides an account of its subsequent association with the Rizzo era of police misconduct. The question of whether the Roundhouse should be preserved and re-used will come before the Philadelphia Historical

Commission at its October 13 meeting. The time has therefore come to imagine the next chapter of the building and consider what good it could do.

Preservation is often conflated with the uncritical celebration of the past and a narrow focus on aesthetics. That is an oversimplification. Preservation at its finest safeguards our entire cultural history, protecting buildings so that they may serve as monuments to the events that occurred within and around them.

First and foremost, the preservation and adaptive reuse of the Roundhouse offer opportunities to remember the past holistically while imagining a better future. Demolishing the building, for which some have argued, would erase some of the physical evidence of Philadelphia's complicated history—a history that should be confronted and its lessons learned. Community values must therefore be placed at the center of planning for the preservation and re-use of the building, and the City of Philadelphia has appropriately engaged in a far-reaching public engagement process, as explained in the March 2023 report [Framing the Future of the Roundhouse](#).

That process, together with the Historical Commission's decision on the designation of the building, must shape the Request for Proposals with which the city will invite plans for the future of the site. A thoughtful RFP, which mandates both the preservation of the building and continuing public outreach, can catalyze a project that recognizes the dark past of the Roundhouse while serving Philadelphia in a new and impactful way.

Indeed, the potential benefits of the preservation and re-use of the Roundhouse are great. The site faces Franklin Square and stands adjacent to Chinatown, and its redevelopment offers many opportunities to accommodate community services and create a walkable, green connection to the square. Some of those possibilities are demonstrated in the [conceptual renderings commissioned by the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia](#). The drawings by Anthony Bracali demonstrate a variety of development possibilities for the empty, south part of the site, while opening it to public access. Excitingly, the renderings also show how the Police Administration Building can be stripped of the blank-walled, one-story annexes facing Race Street that were a late addition to the program. That change will allow the building to become a luminous gateway for the project, facing Franklin Square.

The adaptive reuse of the Roundhouse also has notable environmental benefits. Its demolition, the disposal of demolition materials, and new construction would require an immense amount of energy, fuel, and materials. Repurposing the building will have a much smaller environmental impact.

The preservation of the Roundhouse is an opportunity to show what holistic storytelling can do for our troubled society, how older buildings can be usefully woven into the fabric of our rapidly changing city, and what the conscientious stewardship of resources can do for our deteriorating environment. DAG supports the adaptive reuse of the Roundhouse and urges the Philadelphia Historical Commission to vote for its addition to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. We look forward to a future when the Roundhouse serves the community progressively, as originally intended.

*The Design Advocacy Group (DAG) is a public forum and advocate for design quality and equity in the planning, architecture, preservation and physical development of Philadelphia.*

<https://designadvocacy.org/>