

MEMORANDUM

TO: Philadelphia Historical Commission (the “Commission”)
FROM: Our Lady of Lourdes (“We” or our “Parish”)
DATE: November 6, 2023
SUBJECT: St. Donato’s Roman Catholic Church (the “Church”)

We respectfully request that the Commission rescind the designation of St. Donato’s Roman Catholic Church at 401-409 North 65th Street from the Philadelphia Registry of Historic Places (the “Registry”) on the grounds that the qualities that caused its original entry have been lost.¹ We recognize and appreciate the significance of the Church to its former parishioners and its surrounding community. However, we believe that the original nomination mischaracterized the condition and use of the building, and these mischaracterizations make the historical designation inappropriate.

St. Donato’s parish was founded in 1910 and construction of the Church was completed in 1922. For most of its history, St. Donato’s was vibrant center of the local Italian American community. However, St. Donato’s began to experience declining attendance and financial difficulties in the 1980’s and 1990’s, which continued until St. Donato’s Parish was finally merged with our Parish in 2013.

The Church was nominated for historical designation by Celeste Morello (the “Nominator”) in 2019 on the basis that it satisfied Criterion A (Church was significant for its association with St. Frances Xavier Cabrini), and Criterion E (Church was architecturally significant as an example of Durang portfolio of traditional Roman Catholic church architecture).² The nomination stated that the Church “seems to be in very good condition”, although the Nominator conceded that this assessment was based solely on exterior observation and that she was unable to view the interior on account of the Church being closed. The nomination also stated that the Church held one Sunday service as week. Further, the only pictures of the interior of the Church included in the nomination were copies of photographs taken for a 1943 booklet on St. Donato’s interior renovations, hardly a current depiction.

In contrast to the picture presented in the nomination, the Parish’s ability to use the Church for even occasional services was constrained even prior to 2019 by the deteriorating condition of

¹ City of Philadelphia, Department of Planning and Development, *Rules and Regulations. Sec. 5.14.b.*, Philadelphia Historical Commission, 12 Mar. 2021

² On November 30, 2022, we were afforded the opportunity by the Committee on Historic Designation to present our views against the determination that the Church’s cultural and architectural significance satisfied Criterion A and Criterion E. We continue to believe that the Church’s cultural and architectural significance do not satisfy Criterion A nor Criterion E, but appreciate that the Committee on Historic Designation has determined otherwise.

the building. The Parish was forced to suspend all use of the Church in September 2020 because the deteriorated state of the building and made further use unsafe and unpractical.

In a 2021 site visit memorandum issued by Keast & Hood Structural Engineers (the “Engineers”), the Engineers noted “the church suffers from various water leaks that are slowly evolving from nuisance to structural damage.”³ Although photographs of the exterior of the Church included in the nomination claim to show the Church’s latest “improvements,” the Engineers expressed concern with the poor condition of the terra cotta tile roof and indicated that water has been penetrating the interior of the Church. Currently, the interior of the Church is generally coated in fallen plaster, further indicating the water leakage has been continuous and pervasive. Falling plaster presents a danger to those inside the Church and, as noted by the Engineers, the potential of falling terra cotta tiles creates an immediate hazard to those outside.

In addition, we have experienced our own economic challenges since the merger in 2013. These challenges have meant that we have struggled to afford the continued maintenance of the Church. Today, the Church is in dire need of immediate renovations, but these renovations may face much higher costs and significant delays with the Church’s historical designation and listing on the Registry. Indeed, upon learning of the actual condition of the Church, its unsuitability for religious or other activity, and the economic pressures on our Parish, the Nominator rescinded her nomination.

The urgency to find a solution has only hastened as an increasingly large hole in the east end of the Church’s terra cotta tile roof has appeared. Water damage is the driving force of the interior deterioration, and this hole can make matters much worse. The location of the hole is causing severe deterioration to the plaster above the Church’s alter, which is evidenced by the plaster coated floors surrounding the alter. Roof renovations within the rules and regulations of the Commission would be much more costly and time consuming than standard renovations. We have been in discussions with Michael P. Donnelly Roofing Inc. (the “Company”) regarding renovation options and costs. We have contracted the Company to employ a temporary fix. However, the Company estimates that the cost of renovating the roof with the terra cotta tiles, as would be required by the Commission, could cost our Parish several million dollars. The Company estimated the cost of standard renovations would be less than one million dollars. Further, the Company ensured the standard renovations to the roof would be aesthetically very similar to the original terra cotta tiles. Also, the standard renovations are estimated to last for upwards of 50 years. Another key consideration is the timing of renovations. The temporary fix to the roof is a stopgap, and further renovations and structural inspections of the Church’s roof are needed. The roof is in dire need of permanent repairs. However, not only will it require substantially more time and effort to raise the requisite capital to renovate the roof within the requirements of the Commission, but the actual renovations will take longer. Although we are employing a temporary fix, the need for permanent repairs to the roof remains paramount. Further delay may cause irreparable damage to the interior of the Church and continued structural damage.

Unfortunately, the economic pressures facing our Parish are immediate. However, we continue to explore all options for the preservation of the Church, including a potential partnership with the Society of St. Francis Cabrini of Philadelphia (the “Society”), which is dedicated to

³ Keast & Hood Structural Engineers. *Site Visit Memorandum*. Project No. 210135A.01. 2022.

ensuring that the Church “remains a Roman Catholic sacred space, in order that it will serve as a dedicated shrine to St. Frances Cabrini and St. Donato.”⁴ However, it is our belief that the historical designation does not further the goal of the Society. As the Society raises funds in an effort “to take responsibility for the continued care and restoration” of the Church, we strongly believe that the historical designation makes the Society’s restoration goals much more difficult.

We recognize the important role of the Commission in safeguarding Philadelphia’s unique heritage and cultural resources. We request that the Commission rescind its designation of the Church from the Registry. We believe the qualities that led to the original entry have been lost and the historical designation is inappropriate. Additionally, the financial hardships of our Parish should not go unrecognized, and the historical designation will make it much more difficult to alleviate these hardships. We welcome the support of the Society and hope to find viable solutions to the needed renovation and restoration work and the continuing maintenance and upkeep of the Church.

⁴ “Saving St Donato Church.” The Society of St Frances Cabrini of Philadelphia, www.thesocietyofstfrancescabriniophiladelphia.com/aboutsavingstdonatochurch/.