

Address: 1501 JOHN F. KENNEDY BLVD, #C

Name of Resource: Philadelphia Hospitality Center

Proposed Action: Designation

Property Owner: City of Philadelphia

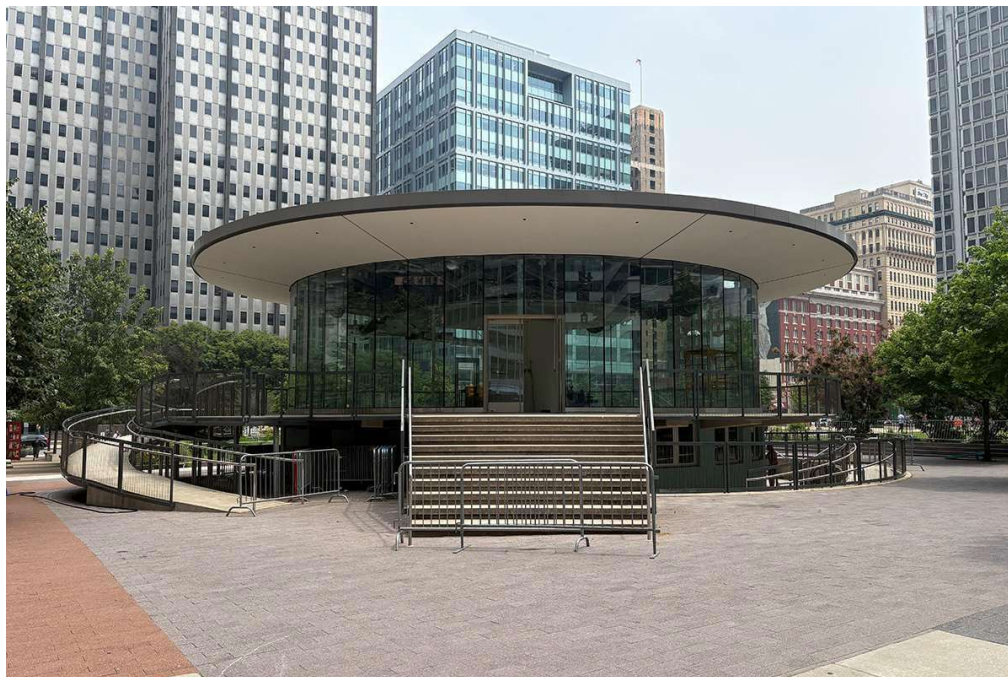
Nominator: Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia

Staff Contact: Joshua Schroeder, joshua.schroeder@phila.gov

OVERVIEW: This nomination proposes to designate a portion of the property at 1501 John F. Kennedy (JFK) Blvd, #C, known as the Philadelphia Hospitality Center (also the Love Park Visitor Center or Fairmount Park Welcome Center), and list it on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The Philadelphia Hospitality Center, located at the southwest corner of John F. Kennedy Plaza, commonly known as Love Park, was designed by architect Roy F. Larson of Harbeson, Hough, Livingston & Larson and was constructed in 1959–1960. The nomination argues that the Philadelphia Hospitality Center at 1501 JFK Blvd. satisfies Criteria for Designation A, C, D, and E.

Under Criteria A and C, the nomination argues that the Philadelphia Hospitality Center was an integral feature in the development of John F. Kennedy Plaza, and Penn Center more generally, as part of the post-World War II era of urban renewal and was central to the city's efforts to revitalize Center City Philadelphia. Under Criterion D, the nomination further argues that the Hospitality Center is emblematic of the International Style. Finally, the nomination contends that the building is representative of architect Roy F. Larson, who had a significant influence on modern architecture in Philadelphia, satisfying Criteria E.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: The staff recommends that the nomination demonstrates that the Philadelphia Hospitality Center at 1501 John F. Kennedy Boulevard satisfies Criteria for Designation A, C, D, and E.



Philadelphia Hospitality Center, 2025.

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 (CD, EMAIL, FLASH DRIVE)
ELECTRONIC FILES MUST BE WORD OR WORD COMPATIBLE

1. ADDRESS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE *(must comply with an Office of Property Assessment address)*

Street address: 1501 John F. Kennedy Blvd, #C

Postal code: 19102

2. NAME OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

Historic Name: Philadelphia Hospitality Center

Current/Common Name: Love Park Visitor Center or Fairmount Park Welcome Center

3. TYPE OF HISTORIC RESOURCE

☒ Building

☐ Structure

☐ Site

☐ Object

4. PROPERTY INFORMATION

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

Occupancy: ☐ occupied ☒ vacant ☐ under construction ☐ unknown

Current use: _____

5. BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

Please attach a narrative description and site/plot plan of the resource's boundaries.

6. DESCRIPTION

Please attach a narrative description and photographs of the resource's physical appearance, site, setting, and surroundings.

7. SIGNIFICANCE

Please attach a narrative Statement of Significance citing the Criteria for Designation the resource satisfies.

Period of Significance (from year to year): from 1959 to 2015

Date(s) of construction and/or alteration: 1959-60

Architect, engineer, and/or designer: Roy F. Larson (Harbeson, Hough, Livingston & Larson)

Builder, contractor, and/or artisan: John McShain, Inc.

Original owner: City of Philadelphia

Other significant persons: N/A

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

Please attach a bibliography.

9. NOMINATOR

Organization Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia Date June 16, 2025

Name with Title Kevin McMahon, consultant Email hstark@preservationalliance.com

Street Address 1608 Walnut Street, Suite 1702 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: June 17, 2025

☒ Correct-Complete ☐ Incorrect-Incomplete Date: July 2, 2025

Date of Notice Issuance: August 1, 2025

Property Owner at Time of Notice:

Name: City of Philadelphia, Philadelphia Parks and Rec

Address: 1515 Arch St, 10th Floor

City: Philadelphia State: PA Postal Code: 19102

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 and Justification

Currently, the property at 1501 John F. Kennedy Boulevard – the location of the historic building known as the Philadelphia Hospitality Center – consists of three condominium units: #B, #C, and #D. This nomination applies to Unit #C, which is coterminous with the aboveground public space known as John F. Kennedy Plaza or Love Park. As illustrated below, Unit #C is bounded by North 15th Street on the east side, John F. Kennedy Boulevard on the south side, North 16th Street on the west side, and Arch Street on the north side. However, as illustrated below, this nomination intends to limit the boundary of historic designation to a buffer zone extending about 45' from the building in all directions, this being the distance from the building to the property line along JFK Boulevard and 16th Street. The remainder of Unit #C should be excluded because it retains few traces of Vincent Kling's original 1960s-era design of John F. Kennedy Plaza. Unit #B, which encompasses an underground parking garage beneath the northern portion of Unit #C (the park) and extends beyond those boundaries under 15th Street, Arch Street, and 16th Street, should also be excluded from the designation, as should Unit #D, which encompasses an underground area beneath 15th Street where there is a loading used by the Municipal Services Building.



Property Boundary Map (Imagery from atlas.phila.gov)

6. Physical Description

The Philadelphia Hospitality Center, also known as the Fairmount Park Welcome Center or the Love Park Visitor Center, is a one-story, International Style building at the southwest corner of John F. Kennedy Plaza, near the intersection of North 16th Street and John F. Kennedy Boulevard in Center City Philadelphia. Built in 1959-60, this diminutive circular building was designed by the architect Roy F. Larson of Harbeson, Hough, Livingston & Larson for the Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau. The engineering firm of Keast & Hood also played a major role in the structural design of the building. Historically, the building served as the city's primary tourist information center and PCVB headquarters. Typical of the International Style, the Hospitality Center is constructed of reinforced concrete and steel and has transparent, full-glazed walls around its entire circumference. Although the Hospitality Center today is a major landmark within JFK Plaza, which is more commonly known as Love Park, the building predates the construction of the larger plaza.

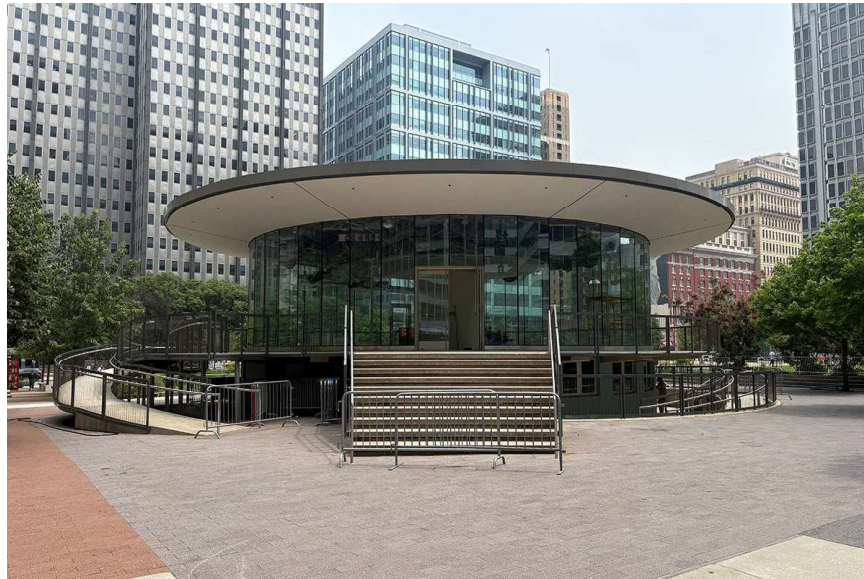


Figure 1: Southwest elevation, looking northeast from the corner of 16th Street and JFK Blvd (June 2025).

At the time of its construction, the Hospitality Center occupied a wedge-shaped property bounded by JFK Boulevard (formerly Pennsylvania Boulevard) to the south, 16th Street to the west, and the Benjamin Franklin Parkway to the northeast. In 1964, the Parkway was vacated between 15th and 16th Streets. At that time, John F. Kennedy Plaza, a public space designed by Vincent Kling & Associates, was built. The plaza, completed in 1967, remained intact until the 2010s when it was demolished and replaced by the plaza that exists today. As part of the reconstruction of JFK Plaza, the Hospitality Center itself was renovated. In or around 2019, the building's original glass curtain wall was replaced with the present glass panels, the balcony railings were replaced, a new ADA ramp was constructed, and all new building systems were installed. These changes have not significantly impacted the integrity of the building, which retains much of its International Style character.

Nomination to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places
1501 John F. Kennedy Blvd #C, Philadelphia, PA

The Hospitality Center is circular in plan, measures roughly 72 feet in diameter, and stands approximately 24 feet tall. The building's main floor, which is about four feet above grade, overhangs a lower level which is partially below grade.



Figure 2: Northwest elevation, looking southeast toward City Hall and 2 Penn Center (June 2025).

The lower level consists of concrete walls clad in original, teal-colored ceramic tiles and contains a number of aluminum double casement windows, an aluminum-framed glass door, and several mechanical louvers. The door sits in the center of the group of windows, which are found in the southeast and northeast quadrants of the circular plan, and opens into a sunken, uncovered space. This area has an outer, curved retaining wall, the radius of which corresponds to the building's exterior walls. Built into the retaining wall are original concrete stairs and a ramp with stainless steel railings, which provide access down from the park. A concrete stair also descends into this area from the balcony on the main level above.

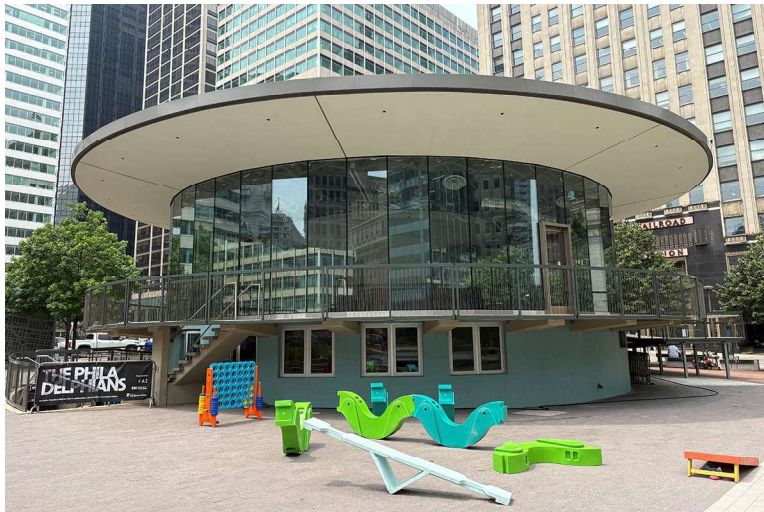


Figure 3: Northeast elevation, looking southwest toward 4 Penn Center and Suburban Station, aka 1 Penn Center (June 2025).

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On the main level, which is primarily accessed from a concrete stair in the southwest quadrant of the circle – the stair points towards 16th and JFK – clear glass panels make up the entire circumference of the exterior wall, which is encircled by a continuous concrete balcony with steel cable railings. The concrete stairs and balcony, which is supported by regularly spaced concrete outlookers, are original. Within the southwest quadrant (left of the main stair), a compatibly designed, switchback ADA ramp was installed in the location of a previous but no-longer ADA-compliant ramp in 2019. The glazed exterior wall, which consists of a frameless system punctuated only by thin, vertical silicone joints between each panel, replaced the original stainless steel-framed glass curtain wall in 2019. The balcony railings were also replaced that year. The new materials have been sensitively designed, however, and are compatible with the original design intent of transparency and lightness. Built into the exterior wall are a pair of aluminum-framed glass doors facing the main stair in the southwest quadrant, and a similar single-leaf door in the northeast quadrant.



Figure 4: Southeast elevation, looking northwest toward the INA Building and 1515 Arch Street (June 2025).

The building is capped by a hat-like, steel-framed roof with a center crown containing metal ventilation louvers, and a wide, flat brim, which extends outward to cover the full circumference of the main-level balcony (see [Figure 5](#)). The fascia of the roof is clad in aluminum sheet metal, and the underside (or eaves), which angles slightly downward toward the glass wall, is clad in some kind of stucco or fiber cement panel material installed in 2019.

The interior of the main level currently consists of a large open space around a central, reinforced concrete core. Although it is not an exterior feature, the core is worth describing for its unique structural form, which is (and has always been) visible through the transparent exterior wall. Designed by the engineering firm of Keast & Hood, the core rises at an inverse taper, terminating in a broad cap similar in form to an oversized mushroom column, as Benjamin Leech has suggested.¹

¹ Benjamin Leech, “Philadelphia Hospitality Center,” Pennsylvania Historic Resource Survey Form, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 2014.

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This core supports the roof of the building, which consists of a framework of tapered steel trusses radiating outward around the entire circumference (see [Figure 5](#)).

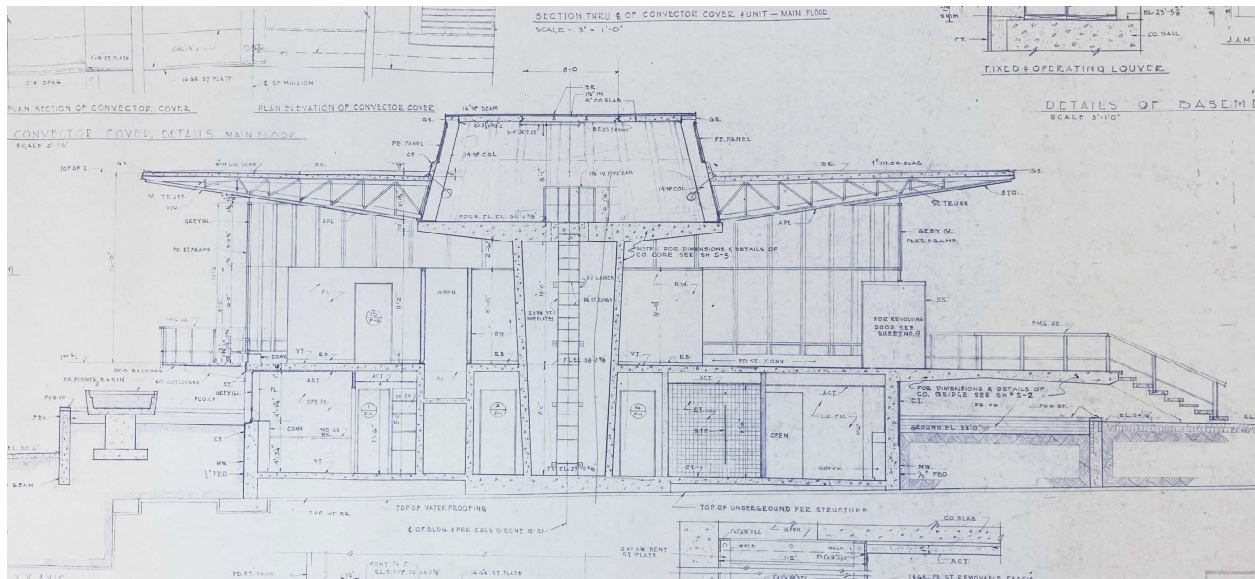


Figure 5: Building section from the September 8, 1959 permit drawing set (Philadelphia City Archives).

7. Statement of Significance

Built in 1959-60, the Philadelphia Hospitality Center was designed by the architect Roy F. Larson of Harbeson, Hough, Livingston, and Larson, a firm which, thanks in no small part to Larson himself, played a significant role in shaping the built environment of Philadelphia in the decades after World War II. This diminutive building, planned as a welcoming center for visitors, was commissioned by the Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau (PCVB) whose headquarters were incorporated into the project. Notably, the Hospitality Center was built on the edge of Penn Center, a massive urban redevelopment that radically transformed and modernized the downtown area west of City Hall during the 1950s and 1960s. Like Penn Center's gleaming high-rise office towers, the Hospitality Center was a striking example of modern design. Although small in size, the building, through its distinctive circular form, concrete and steel structure, and sheer glass curtain walls, symbolized the rebirth of Center City in the post-World War II era as effectively as any of Penn Center's skyscrapers.

For its close associations with post-World War II urban renewal in Center City Philadelphia, particularly the Penn Center redevelopment, the Philadelphia Hospitality Center merits listing in the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places by satisfying the following criterion as established in the Philadelphia Historic Preservation Ordinance §14-1004 (1):

Criterion 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.

As a distinctive example of the International Style of architecture and as a notable work of the architect Roy F. Larson, the Philadelphia Hospitality Center also merits listing in the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places by satisfying the following criteria:

Criterion C: Reflects the environment in an era characterized by a distinctive architectural style.

Criterion D: Embodies distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style or engineering specimen.

Criterion 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.

Significance under Criterion A:

The Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau (PCVB) began planning for a new welcoming center for visitors as early as 1955. Originally connected to the Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce, the PCVB was a non-profit organization whose mission was to promote Philadelphia as a destination for conventions and tourism. In the 1950s, the latter grew increasingly important to the city and its economy as the family vacation became a defining feature of American middle-class life. Mayors Joseph S. Clark and Richardson Dilworth sought to capitalize on this trend, viewing tourism as "integral to revitalizing the city in the wake of the Great Depression and World War II."² City leaders believed Philadelphia had much to offer visitors, especially with major new attractions like

² Charlene Myers, "Tourism," *Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia* (2016), <https://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/essays/tourism/>, accessed June 9, 2025.

Independence National Historical Park, which first opened in 1956. In the coming years, the PCVB, which marketed Philadelphia to a national audience, would play a major role in improving the city's image and increasing its appeal as a vacation spot.³ From its ground-floor office in the Bulletin Building at Juniper and Filbert Streets, the organization became a major resource to visiting tourists, providing free information on key attractions, lodging, and dining. But while the PCVB was close to Center City's major transportation facilities – Reading Terminal, Suburban Station, and the new Greyhound bus terminal in Penn Center – the organization felt it needed an office with greater presence and visual appeal, one which would easily attract visitors unfamiliar with the city. By 1955, the PCVB started to look for a site on which to build a new home. Al Paul Lefton, PCVB's president, hoped the new Philadelphia Hospitality Center, as it became known, would serve “as a showcase for Philadelphia,” and be “a striking symbol of Philadelphia's friendliness and its desire to give real service and a warm welcome to visitors.”⁴

In December 1956, the PCVB announced it was considering two locations for the new center, one at 15th and Market Streets and the other at 16th Street and the Benjamin Franklin Parkway.⁵ By August of the following year, the latter site had been approved by city leaders. PCVB then began planning for its new building. The site – the wedge-shaped property bounded by the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, 16th Street, and John F. Kennedy Boulevard – had been set aside as public space in the 1952 plan for the redevelopment of what became known as Penn Center (see Figure 6).⁶ This massive urban renewal project, led by city planner Edmund Bacon and architect Vincent Kling, would replace the Pennsylvania Railroad's old Broad Street Station and the hulking viaduct leading into it – an area of about ten acres along Market Street and JFK Boulevard between Broad and 18th Streets – with a modern complex of gleaming office towers connected by plazas and subterranean concourses. Begun in 1953 and substantially completed by the end of the decade, Penn Center dramatically transformed Philadelphia's downtown for the postwar era. In the words of city planner and University of Pennsylvania professor Martin Meyerson, Penn Center, “more than any other improvement, symbolized the emergence of the new Philadelphia.”⁷

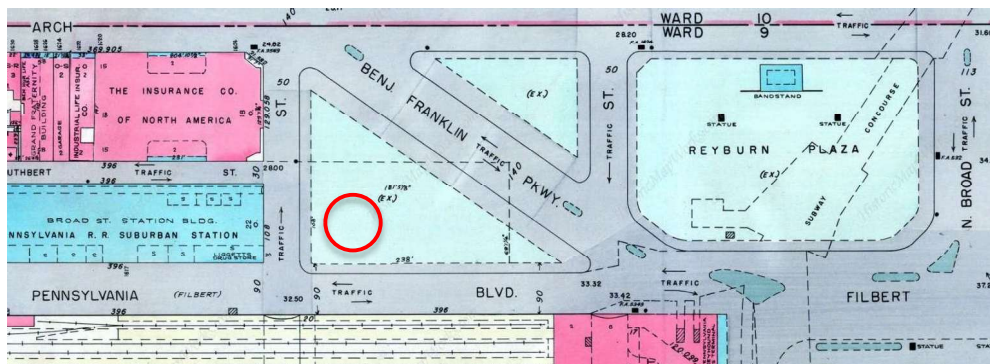


Figure 6: The original site, prior to the creation of John F. Kennedy Plaza (from the Franklin Survey Company, *Intra City Business Property Atlas*, 1939). The future location of the Hospitality Center is shown in red.

³ William B. Collins, “Phila. Pushes Plans to Recapture Share of Tourist Business,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 25, 1959.

⁴ “Hospitality Center Site in Midcity is Sought,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 7, 1956; “Hospitality Center Planned at 16th St. and Parkway,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 4, 1957.

⁵ “Hospitality Center Site in Midcity is Sought.”

⁶ Philadelphia City Planning Commission, “Penn Center Redevelopment Area Plan,” 1952.

⁷ Martin Meyerson, *Face of the Metropolis* (New York: Random House, 1963), 61.

Although PCVB's new visitor center was planned and funded independently of Penn Center, its site was chosen in large part for its central and highly visible location between City Hall and the new Penn Center Buildings, along the edge the redevelopment area. According to PCVB's promotional pamphlet for the center, the site "is ideally located in the center of the city, near most of the hotels and transportation facilities. It also has the advantage of being in the heart of Penn Center, an epic project which is readily associated with Philadelphia's tremendous new growth."⁸ The PCVB and the architect they selected, Roy F. Larson of Harbeson, Hough, Livingston & Larson, worked closely with the City Planning Commission to select the site and ensure the project would coincide with the goals of the larger Penn Center redevelopment. Most importantly, the city wanted assurances that the new center would not interfere with its goal of building a public plaza on the site, as called for in the City Planning Commission's 1952 plan. Backers of the Hospitality Center assured officials that the new building could be incorporated into a future plaza.⁹ Accordingly, Larson placed the building, which he made circular in plan – in part to maximize its compatibility with an as-yet undesigned plaza and “to contrast with the severely rectangular buildings of Penn Center,” neatly into the lower, southwest corner of the site.¹⁰

Construction of the new Hospitality Center, which would be overseen by John McShain, Inc., began at the end of 1959. The total cost of the project was \$400,000, with the city contributing \$105,000 to the effort. The remainder was funded by private interests. By late October 1960, the project had been completed and building was formally dedicated in a public ceremony attended by Mayor Dilworth on October 24th. The opening of the Hospitality Center coincided with a major, national marketing campaign by PCVB to lure conventions and leisure travelers, and the building itself played a key role in this effort. As Benjamin Leech has written, “The building's innovative form and modern materials were designed to project a spirit of forward-looking optimism befitting the promotional vision of the PCVB.”¹¹



Figure 7: The Hospitality Center in 1962, Lawrence S. Williams, photographer (Athenaeum of Philadelphia).

⁸ Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau, “Hospitality Center” (1960). Copy stored in the Philadelphia City Archives.

⁹ “City Ready to Go Ahead with ‘Hospitality Center,’” *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, April 15, 1959.

¹⁰ “City to Dedicate \$400,000 Center for Visitors,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 23, 1960.

¹¹ Leech, 8.

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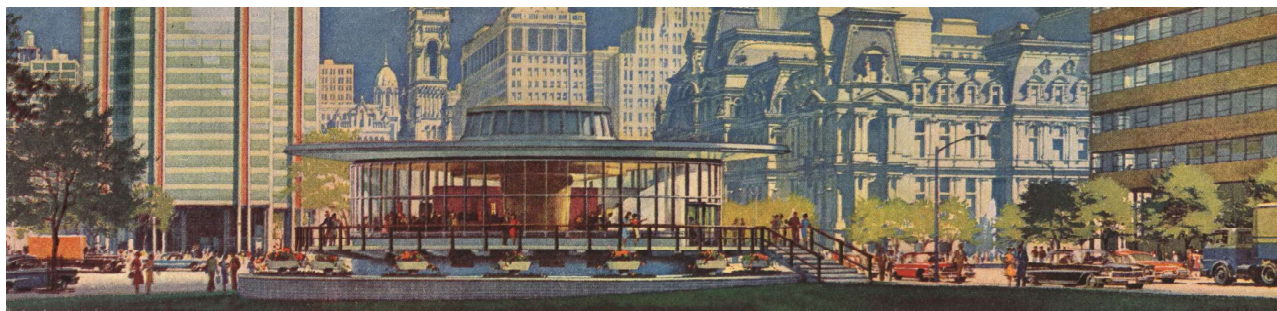


Figure 8: Illustration of the Hospitality Center as it appeared in a Philadelphia Electric Company advertisement in the July 9, 1960 edition of the *Saturday Evening Post*. The company hailed the building as one example of how “Progress takes giant strides in the nation’s birthplace.”

Over the next few years, the Hospitality Center was used in a variety of ways to promote and advertise Philadelphia, all in an effort to place the city “in the forefront of America’s leading tourist centers.”¹² On the main level, the building contained a lounge and reception area, which were surrounded by a continuous, covered balcony around the exterior walls (see Figure 8). These spaces, apart from offering tourists and convention-goers a place of welcome and respite, also regularly hosted art exhibitions, fashion shows, and parties where city leaders welcomed notable visitors to Philadelphia. Within its first six months, the Hospitality Center was drawing on average 150 visitors per day, a dramatic increase over the 25 visitors the PCVB received everyday at their old location.¹³ The main level also featured several PCVB offices. On the lower level, there were additional offices as well as restrooms.

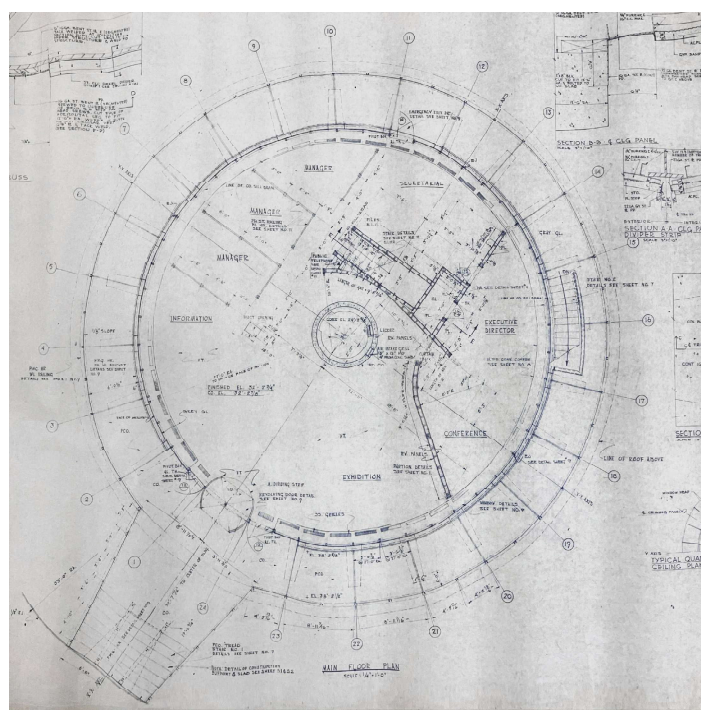


Figure 9: Plan of the main level from the September 8, 1959 permit drawing set (Philadelphia City Archives).

¹² Charlie Bannister, “We’re Out to Bring in Tourists Aplenty,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, April 17, 19

¹³ Joseph C. Goulden, “2 Offices Scramble to Lay Red Carpet for Phila. Visitors,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 9, 1961.

The Hospitality Center was more fully incorporated into Penn Center in 1966 when the city proceeded with construction on the surrounding plaza, which had been a component of the original 1952 plan for the redevelopment area. Between 15th and 16th Streets, the Parkway was vacated, and the Hospitality Center site was consolidated within the newly reconstituted, full city block. Here, architect Vincent Kling and his firm designed a multi-tiered, hardscaped public space, which was surrounded by trees and had a large, circular fountain in the center (see Figure 10). The latter was important in how it played off the geometry of the Hospitality Center and created an appropriate southern terminus to the Parkway. Opened in 1967 as John F. Kennedy Plaza, this public space was one of several designed by Kling within Penn Center in what was its final phase of development. Hinging on the new Municipal Services Building (MSB), also designed by Kling and completed in 1966, these spaces included Reyburn Plaza (known as Thomas Paine Plaza today), which was built directly east of the MSB, and Dilworth Plaza (known as Dilworth Park today), which extended southward from the MSB along the western elevation of City Hall. Taken as a whole, the plazas helped to establish a continuity in the urban environment and link the old city to the new office complex to the west. These projects also very effectively tied the Hospitality Center into the larger Penn Center redevelopment.



Figure 10: Rendering of John F. Kennedy Plaza by Vincent Kling & Associates, 1966, looking northwest toward the Benjamin Franklin Parkway and Museum of Art (Temple University Libraries). The Hospitality Center is visible at far left.

The Hospitality Center remained a major source of information for tourists and other visitors for decades. Although the building was left vacant after the new Independence Visitors Center on Independence Mall opened in 2001, it was given new life in 2006 when it became the Fairmount Park Welcome Center. In 2010, the building once again became a “full-blown” tourist information center. That year, the center was staffed by trained concierges from the Independence Visitors Center and became a “convenient one-stop location downtown where visitors can buy tickets for more than 40 tours, attractions, and performances.”¹⁴ Even so, the building’s future was called into question in 2014 after the city sold the underground parking garage beneath JFK plaza to InterPark, a private company. The sale spurred the city to begin planning a complete redesign of the plaza, but it was uncertain if those plans incorporated the Hospitality Center. As a result, the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia named the building one of its “Places to Save” in September 2014, and

¹⁴ “A City for the Arts,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, June 25, 2010.

Preservation Pennsylvania, a statewide organization, placed the building on its list of endangered sites in February 2015.¹⁵ A significant campaign of public support, led in part by PennPraxis and the Young Friends of the Preservation Alliance, ultimately saved the building, however.

The final plans for the new JFK Plaza/Love Park, designed by Hargreaves Associates, erased Kling's 1960s plaza but fully embraced the Hospitality Center as an important architectural feature. Not only would the building convey a feeling of continuity between the old and new plazas, but it would also serve as a desirable amenity by being renovated for use as an indoor/outdoor café or restaurant. In that project, led by architects KieranTimberlake, the aluminum-framed glass curtain wall was replaced with full-height glass panels, which were custom made; new code-compliant railings were installed on the main stair and around the full circumference of the balcony, and a new ADA ramp was installed to the left of the entrance. These alterations, completed in 2021, sensitively modernized the Hospitality Center and have allowed much of its historic character to shine through. The interior spaces, too, were renovated, and all new building systems were installed. Although a local chef signed on to open a restaurant in the building, these plans were derailed by the Covid-19 Pandemic and the building has now sat vacant for several years. Still, the Philadelphia Hospitality Center remains an important and attractive symbol of the significant redevelopment efforts that transformed Center City for the post-World War II era.

Significance under Criteria C, D, and E:

Roy F. Larson and the Architecture of the Philadelphia Hospitality Center

The Philadelphia Hospitality Center is a notable work of modern architecture by Roy Frank Larson (1893-1973), partner in the prominent firm of Harbeson, Hough, Livingston, and Larson. Born in Minneapolis in 1893, Larson worked as a draftsman in several architectural firms in Chicago before moving to Philadelphia in 1918 to attend the University of Pennsylvania. There, Larson studied architecture under Paul Cret (1876-1945), the widely influential, École des Beaux-Arts-trained architect who served as professor in Penn's architecture department between 1903 and 1937. Larson earned the B.S. degree in architecture in 1923. Like many of Cret's more promising students, Larson immediately went to work for Cret who maintained a flourishing practice in Center City even as he continued to teach at Penn. By 1925, Larson had been elevated to junior partner and played an increasingly important role in the firm, making substantial contributions to commissions like the Barnes Foundation in Merion, PA (1923-25); the Integrity Trust Company Building in Philadelphia (1923-29); and the Eternal Light Peace Memorial in Gettysburg, PA (1937). It was also during Larson's tenure that the Cret firm completed such notable projects as the Benjamin Franklin Bridge (1922-26), the Rodin Museum (1926-29), and the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia (1932), although Larson's role in these projects, if any, is not known. Beyond his position in Cret's office, Larson became a leader of the architectural profession in Philadelphia as president of the local branch of the American Institute of Architects between 1938 and 1940. Larson was elected a fellow of the A.I.A. in 1940.¹⁶

¹⁵ Stephen Salisbury, "LOVE Park Building Listed in Danger," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 10, 2015.

¹⁶ Sandra L. Tatman and Roger W. Moss, *Biographical Dictionary of Philadelphia Architects: 1700-1930* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1985), 466; Dennis L. Johnson, "Roy Larson – The Architect of Philadelphia," Swedish

Following Cret's death in 1945, his four younger partners continued the practice under a new name: Harbeson, Hough, Livingston & Larson (later known more commonly as H2L2). Apart from Larson, the firm was composed of John F. Harbeson (1888-1986), William J.H. Hough (1888-1969), and William H. Livingston, Sr. (1898-1965). Like Larson, all three had studied under Cret at Penn and become notable designers in their own right, ensuring a steady flow of high-profile commissions over the next two decades and beyond. Among the many notable H2L2 projects on which Larson served as lead designer were the Eastern Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute (1951-56), the Van Pelt Library at the University of Pennsylvania (1960-62), and the Scott Library and Administration Building at Thomas Jefferson Medical College (1967-70), all of which are extant (see [Figures 11-13](#)).

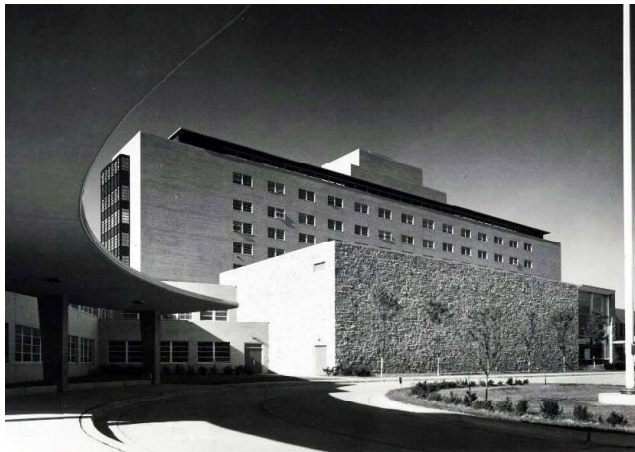


Figure 11 (left): The Eastern Pennsylvania Psychiatric Institute, designed by Roy F. Larson/H2L2 and built 1951-56 (Paul Cret Collection, Athenaeum of Philadelphia).



Figure 12 (right): The Van Pelt Library at the University of Pennsylvania, designed by Roy F. Larson/H2L2 and built 1960-62 (University of Pennsylvania Archives).



Figure 13: The Scott Library and Administration Building at Jefferson Medical College, designed by Roy F. Larson/H2L2 and built 1967-70 (Thomas Jefferson University Archives).

American Genealogist (2016:4), 14-16; "Roy F. Larson, Society Hill Planner" (obituary), *Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 2, 1973.

Larson also led H2L2's involvement in major planning efforts. Among his many accomplishments in this area, Larson played a central role in the design of Independence Mall and of Independence National Historical Park during the 1950s and later. Larson was the first to envision a mall extending northward from Independence Hall, and to conceive of the Historical Park extending eastward to encompass sites like Carpenters Hall and the First and Second Banks of the United States (see [Figure 14](#)). In partnership with Vincent Kling and Oscar Stonorov, Larson also heavily influenced the redevelopment of Society Hill, working closely with Edmund Bacon and the Philadelphia City Planning Commission to refine and extend Bacon's innovative system of greenways across this historic neighborhood (see [Figure 15](#)).¹⁷ As an architect and planner, and as president of the Philadelphia Art Commission from 1945 to 1968, Larson was a leading force in shaping the built environment of Center City Philadelphia in the postwar era.

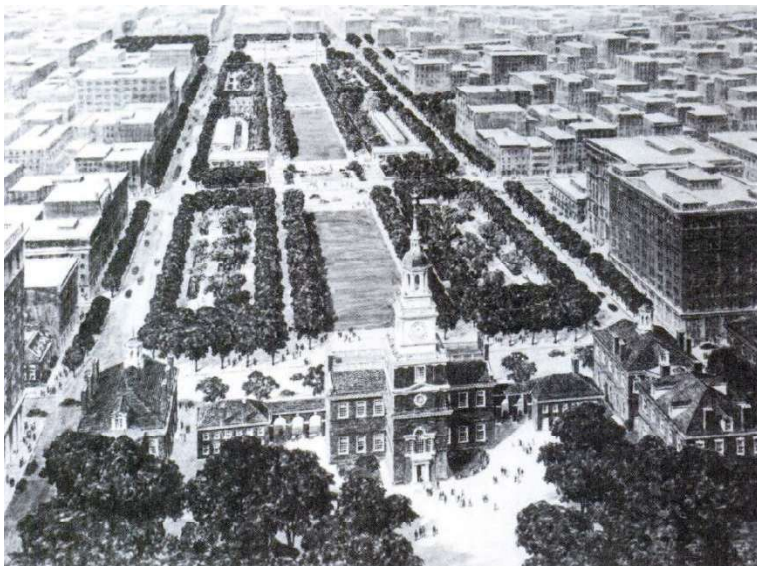


Figure 14 (left): Rendering of Roy F. Larson/H2L2's 1952 plan for Independence Mall (Philadelphia City Planning Commission)

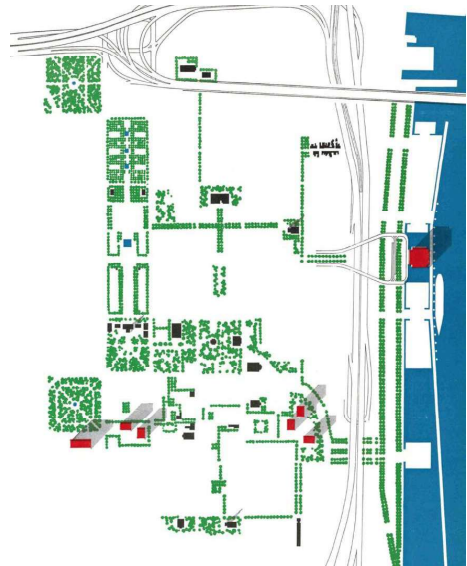


Figure 15 (right): The greenway plan for Society Hill and Old City, designed by Roy F. Larson, Vincent Kling, and Oscar Stonorov in 1960 based on Edmund Bacon's original 1947 scheme. This image from Edmund Bacon's article "Downtown Philadelphia: A Lesson in Design for Urban Growth," published in the May 1961 edition of *Architectural Record*, was later used by Bacon in his influential 1967 book, *Design of Cities*.

The Philadelphia Hospitality Center, though it is one of the very smallest projects completed by Larson over the course of his long career, is highly characteristic of his work. Like the work of other architects practicing in Philadelphia in the mid-twentieth century, Larson's Hospitality Center reflects an effort to transition away from the conservatism of his Beaux-Arts training toward an architecture, which, by embracing new forms and materials, was better suited to the postwar world. Larson was, as architectural historian James F. O'Gorman has written, one of "a number of designers trained in traditional methods who continued to work after World War II and to adapt their classical

¹⁷ Edmund N. Bacon, "Downtown Philadelphia: A Lesson in Design for Urban Growth," *Architectural Record* (May 1961), 134.

or picturesque educations to ‘modern’ forms.”¹⁸ This characteristically Philadelphian form of modernism, O’Gorman continues, “merged Beaux-Arts formality and weighty materials with the thin lines, flat planes, weightless cantilevers, and continuous fenestration of the International Style,” a description which seems perfectly tailored to the Hospitality Center itself.¹⁹

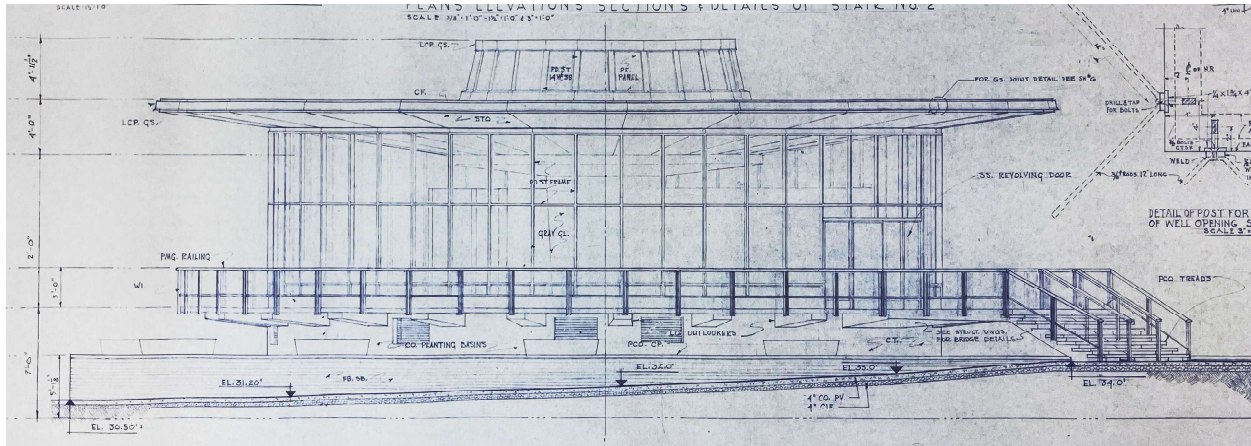


Figure 16: Elevation from the September 8, 1959 permit drawing set (Philadelphia City Archives).

As effectively as any other project, the Hospitality Center illustrates the push and pull of traditional and modern ideas which characterizes Larson’s architectural work during this period. The building’s “Beaux-Arts formality” is conveyed through its symmetrical massing and base-shaft-capital composition. More importantly, the building’s circular form recalls a type of small, circular temple from the Classical world, the *tholos*, which was later reinterpreted during the Renaissance era with the Tempietto, built in Rome during the early sixteenth century. Like these historical models, the Hospitality Center has an enclosed circular space or *cella* at the center and is surrounded by a continuous covered porch. But Larson’s employment of Beaux-Arts methods and reliance on historical models ends there. Above all else, the Hospitality Center is a strikingly modern building. As Leech has written, “Engineer Keast & Hood’s unique structural system employed cantilevered steel roof trusses radiating from a central, hollow reinforced concrete core, allowing clear floor spans and uninterrupted glass curtain walls. Its conspicuously cantilevered roofline and floating slab balcony further articulated the building’s sleek profile.”²⁰ Therefore, while the Hospitality Center in some ways reflects Larson’s conservative Beaux-Arts training, its design was also strongly influenced by the International Style and other developments in modern architecture after World War II. Through its transparency, lightness, and gem box quality, the building helped to convey a “spirit of renewal and expansion,” which architectural historian Emily T. Cooperman has argued was

¹⁸ James F. O’Gorman, “The Philadelphia Architectural Drawing in Its Historical Context,” in *Drawing Toward Building: Philadelphia Architectural Graphics, 1732-1986*, ed. James F. O’Gorman, Jeffrey A. Cohen, George E. Thomas, and G. Holmes Perkins (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1986), 11.

¹⁹ O’Gorman, 11.

²⁰ Leech, 8.

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a defining quality of postwar architecture in Philadelphia.²¹ As the city's primary welcoming point for visitors, the Hospitality Center helped to convey this spirit to the world.



Figure 17: Nighttime view of the Hospitality Center in 1962, Lawrence S. Williams, photographer (Athenaeum of Philadelphia).

²¹ Malcolm Clendenin and Emily T. Cooperman, "Thematic Context Statement, Modernism: 1945 to 1980," prepared for the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia and published in July 2009.

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