



Photo: UPenn and Georgia Tech students site visit, Credit: Suzanna Barucco

Educational Collaboration for the Philadelphia Police Headquarters

February 19, 2013

Written by the Georgia Tech and UPenn studios - See end for details

Through a series of fortunate circumstances a unique collaboration has developed between the **University of Pennsylvania's Historic Preservation Graduate Program** and **Georgia Institute of Technology's School of Architecture** around the future of the Philadelphia Police Headquarters affectionately and not so affectionately known as the "Roundhouse". Designed in 1962 by **Geddes, Brecher, Qualls and Cunningham** with structural engineer **August Komendant**, a cross-discipline collaboration has united the UPenn historic preservation graduate studio with a 3rd and 4th year architecture design studio in an effort to contribute to the conversation in Philadelphia about the future of this important building.

The structure for collaboration was developed by **Jack Pyburn, FAIA** who is the 2013 Harrison Design Associates Visiting Scholar in Historic Preservation in the Georgia Tech School of Architecture; **Randall Mason**, Associate Professor and Chair of the Historic Preservation Program in the University of Pennsylvania School of Design; and **Suzanna Barucco**, Lecturer and Studio Director for the UPenn Roundhouse preservation studio. Commencing in the fall 2012 semester, the UPenn preservation studio provided the historic context research as well as a preservation plan for the building and the Georgia Tech architectural design studio used that valuable background information to consider design opportunities for an expansion of the building and the reuse potential of the Roundhouse interior. While both studios will produce their own unique and original outcomes, combined the programs allow for an enriching collaboration with real world experiences. The following are a series of descriptions from the two teams on the history of the iconic Roundhouse and their observations on the partnership.

Brief History of the Roundhouse

Designed to be a symbol of progressive community based policing, the Philadelphia leadership in the late 1950's wanted the building to promote a positive public image of the police department after years of corruption and cronyism associated with the department's location in City Hall. The Roundhouse's dramatic curvilinear skin was fabricated using the newly imported Dutch *Schokbeton* system of architectural precast concrete combined with Komendant's structural daring produced a unique design allowed only by the state of the art construction technology. Uncertainty of the building's future was revealed in 2008 when the City announced plans to move the Police Headquarters to a presently vacant but much larger historic building in West Philadelphia, noting that the move would consolidate police functions and allow the redevelopment of the Roundhouse site to offset the cost of the new home. An additional threat is the public's perception that the building is

in poor physical condition, which stems primarily from the occupants' publicly expressed dissatisfaction with current building conditions.

A UPenn Perspective of the Roundhouse Collaboration (by Allee Berger and Kimber VanSant)

In October 2012, the UPenn historic preservation studio team learned that Jack Pyburn would be teaching a historic preservation focused architectural design studio focusing on reuse options for the Roundhouse. Recognizing that our research and preservation plan would inform and be utilized by students at Georgia Tech, and that those projects could in-turn be used to make the case for the building's reuse, we were enthusiastic to be involved in a real-world preservation scenario that would continue well past the completion of the course.

The UPenn Roundhouse team's desire for our group to reach beyond the class to help save the building from demolition guided our individual project selections, which included writing the local nomination to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places (Allee Berger), creating a conservation plan for the exterior (Christine Beckman), developing design solutions for the interior (Chelsea Troppauer), as well as the exterior (Karina Bishop), and the development of an advocacy campaign to save the building (Kimber VanSant). Through both our collaborative and individual efforts, the UPenn studio devised a preservation plan for the building using planning methodologies and presented our findings and final recommendations in December 2012.

Following the conclusion of the course, Berger and VanSant have continued to work towards the preservation and reuse of the building through the “Save the Roundhouse” advocacy campaign, with the primary goal of educating the public about the architectural and social value of the building. Through traditional and **social media**, as well as future lectures, panels, and a design charrette showcasing design interventions and proposals for its reuse, we hope to influence the near and far on the building’s significance and reuse opportunities.

Collaboration with Georgia Tech Studio

In February 2013, the UPenn preservation team was given the opportunity to meet and present its research to the Georgia Tech students working on reuse strategies for the Roundhouse. UPenn presented its research and preservation plan and the Georgia Tech students shared their initial studio work, primarily development of a Revit and physical model as a tool to understand the exceptional technological characteristics of the building. The UPenn team was impressed by the enthusiasm of the Georgia Tech studio and by the extraordinary level of detail in their work. The studios toured the building together, and although it was the UPenn team’s third time through the building, seeing the Georgia Tech students experience the Roundhouse for the first time was inspiring. After parting ways, the UPenn team felt re-energized and encouraged by the work the Tech students were producing. Despite an 800-mile separation, it was clear that we are all working toward a common goal: the reuse and preservation of the Roundhouse. At the completion of the semester, we plan to incorporate their designs into our advocacy campaign in the hopes that they will serve as a critical tool in

helping the City, the public, and potential developers visualize the building's reuse.

What collaboration Between Architectural and Preservation Education Can Mean

The methodology established for the Roundhouse was influenced by the building's rich history, innovative design and the building's technology. As mid-century buildings approach the 50-year mark, preservationists have been faced with many challenges including: a limited knowledge base for these resources, an alarming increase in the number of extant buildings that require preservation, once-innovative materials that do not age well and/or are no longer in production, functional obsolescence, and the ever-present stigma attached to mid-century aesthetics. Except for the condition of the materials used (the precast concrete is in excellent condition for its age) the Roundhouse falls under each of these categories and represents a situation where preservationists are growing increasingly interested in addressing such circumstances. As students, we were confronted with these challenges and forced to think in a scope far bigger than typical preservation situations.

Georgia Tech School of Architecture/ 3rd & 4th Year Design Studio Response to Collaboration

The Georgia Tech Roundhouse Studio is organized to introduce preservation to undergraduate students, most of which have had little or no formal academic exposure to historic preservation as they rapidly approach graduation. The Roundhouse project as an architectural study seeks to provide an experience of designing in a historic context. It started with research to gain a deep understanding of the resource on which to identify

and document physical and cultural features that are essential qualities of its character and value. It was in this area that the UPenn collaboration was of exceptional value to the Tech students. The personal and academic values of the UPenn students was as valuable to the Tech students as was the deep research they produced, if not more. The Georgia Tech Roundhouse studio has involved the production of a Revit 3D model of the roundhouse, an exercise that required complete understanding the building, and the construction of a physical model, a valuable resource when designing an expansion of the building and considering the reuse potential of the Roundhouse interior. The studio will consider two use alternatives for the site half of which is parking lot, the addition of high density housing with the historic structure converted to an amenity/ community center and a corporate/general office use with the Roundhouse housing support functions such as food service, common meeting rooms, product display, etc. The final designs will require attention to the design of the addition, the reuse of the Roundhouse, the development of a connection between the two and consideration of site design features.

The value to the individual Georgia Tech studio members of their collaboration with the UPenn preservation studio can best be described by the students themselves.

Allison Clark: Up until this point, my undergraduate coursework has involved little to no work with preservation and re-use so I was extremely excited to have the opportunity to work on the Philadelphia Police Headquarters. We are now four weeks into our relationship with the Roundhouse and we have already learned much about the building. Thanks

to the help of our comrades at University of Pennsylvania we were able to get a running start on the process of getting to thoroughly know our building inside and out. We looked at their research critically. Because we are studying the Roundhouse from a distance, the work of the UPenn students has been of great value in developing a deep knowledge of the building. Personally, I feel having both sets of eyes on the project (those of the Penn students and our GT studio) allows for multiple vantage points on how to understand the building and develop creative alternatives for its preservation and reuse.

Visiting Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, and the Police Headquarters itself gave me an entirely different outlook on the project. Being able to hear the passion in the Penn students' voices about this historical building made the efforts of our studio much more tangible and significant. The Penn Students were both logically and emotionally charged and helped us realize the impact of this building in Philadelphia's Architectural history. The most beneficial part of the trip was going to the Philadelphia Police Headquarters. Photos and text are no comparison to seeing the building in person and I was able to appreciate the Roundhouse from a different perspective, which I hope to convey throughout the semester. The Roundhouse is truly inspiring and I was able to see past the faults that most spectators hold against it and see its potential to be an auspicious landmark.

Emily Lemke: After meeting the UPenn preservation students, my perspective on this project broadened. Their commitment and level of engagement to "Save the Roundhouse" gave me inspiration and motivation for this project. Not only did they provide us with their exceptional research and analysis, but the UPenn students helped prepare us for our designs of re-

use. After meeting the UPenn students my perspective on Historic Preservation changed because we are engaging in a real project that can influence the planning for the city of Philadelphia. The impact that we can have through this project was inconceivable prior to the collaboration.

Trey McMillon: Having not had exposure to historic preservation during my undergraduate education thus far, I was extremely interested in the University of Pennsylvania student's perspective of the Roundhouse as a functional monument to the past rather than simply a building that will either be torn down or renovated to some degree. The UPenn insight helped me think about how through my design intervention I can pay homage to the building; improving upon it with an addition, but without overshadowing the original building. Geddes, Brecher, Qualls, and Cunningham did something remarkable with this design on a multitude of levels – form, structure, circulation, mechanical functionality, light, and many more. Before visiting the building and our collaboration with the UPenn studio, it was hard to realize all these intricacies through images and drawings.

Marie Acalin: The graduate preservation students at the University of Pennsylvania provided our design studio with an invaluable wealth of knowledge and perspective upon which we can demonstrate credible alternatives for the future of the Roundhouse. Their insightful and deep research and recommendations saved our team countless hours and allowed us to advance into the preservation of the resource without having to spend the majority of our semester adequately researching and documenting its significance. Their willingness to work with us offers our team an additional

five people who are dedicated to finding viable solutions that allow the building to be preserved.

Weston Landis: The visit helped me to reframe the purpose of this project as well as the challenges we face as a studio in the months ahead. I have learned that the traditional context of historic preservation is shifting, leaving mid-century buildings vulnerable to their own public perception. Prentice Hospital and the Philadelphia Police Headquarters building are just two prime examples. The cultural influence and significance of these buildings to architectural education often goes unrecognized by those outside of the design community. This design exercise is an opportunity to influence the future of the Police Headquarters site as well as the role architects and students of architecture play in the preservation of buildings. The site visit was invaluable to my understanding of preservation and the ever-changing needs of buildings within a progressive society. The research done by the Praxis studio will be critical in moving forward and guiding our studio in the right direction during the initial design phases.

Marc Whitley

When I saw images of the Philadelphia Police headquarters building for the first time my reaction was impulsive, judgmental, and to an extent ignorant. I reacted, as many seem to, with distaste. For me the Roundhouse represented the typical 1960s brutalist concrete building that is hard, cold, and dirty due to poor weathering and a lack of maintenance. My concern at that point was if I could be enthusiastic about preservation on a building I wasn't sure I liked. While I can't say that my opinions were quick to change, they became more open as I became more familiar with the building. As I read the University of Pennsylvania students' report on the Roundhouse I became intrigued by the history of the building and area. I started to see that there

should be some type of respect associated with the Roundhouse. It wasn't until our studio visited the building during our trip up to Philadelphia that the significance of the building hit me. I couldn't help but like the character of the building in its curves, location, and history. While I can't say that I love every aspect of the building or that every bit of the building should remain as it was originally designed, I now feel that the presence of the building should remain despite whatever development pressures there are on the site. For me, the roundhouse speaks of the character of Philadelphia. While it may not be appreciated now, it should be appreciated in the future.

This article was a result of contributions from:

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<http://docomomo-us.org/news/educational-collaboration-for-the-philadelphia-police-headquarters>