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TERMINAL TERMINAL?:
Philadelphia's historic preservation law doesn't protect interiors like 30th Street Station's.

Photo By: Michael T. Regan

Preserving historic interiors.

by John Andrew Gallery

In recent years, several historic preservation issues have raised the question of whether the city's Historic Preservation Ordinance should include the ability to designate and protect interiors that have a special historic character. The most significant case has been the Boyd Theatre. The original historic designation of the theater was rejected by the State Supreme Court because the city's ordinance doesn't allow interiors to be designated. In 2002, the city declined to designate the theater because its only historic significance (in the eyes of the Historical Commission) was the interior. Recently the closing of Caldwell's jewelry store has raised the issue of the fate of its historic interior, designed by Horace Trumbauer.

Designating interiors is a relatively untested aspect of historic preservation law. Relatively few cities have the power to designate interiors in their ordinances. Boston, New York and Washington, D.C. do, but even in those cities relatively few interiors have been designated. In New York, Radio City Music Hall, the Four Seasons restaurant and part of La Guardia Airport's terminal have been designated. The key test is this: Are these places that are not just open to the public, but dependent on public access for the nature of their business? That is, do the insides of the buildings achieve the same type of public benefit provided by the outside and therefore, are they appropriate for public protection?

A primary focus of designating historic interiors would be those in privately owned buildings. Even those have some level of protection from existing mechanisms. The Preservation Alliance's easement program can protect interiors as well as exteriors and often does, notably the lobby spaces of historic office and apartment buildings where we also hold an exterior easement. Other interiors are protected by the economic incentives of the federal tax credit program for historic properties or the economics of the project itself. The striking interiors of the lobby spaces at such buildings as The Phoenix, the Ben Franklin House or The Drake are all so valuable to the success of those projects and to historic tax credits that they have some degree of protection for that reason alone. The same is true of such places as the interior of the Girard Bank building, now the Ritz-Carlton Hotel.

Nonetheless, there are some places where interiors have not been well preserved. This is particularly true of smaller commercial buildings, and one of the reasons for concern about the Caldwell store. The great interior of the Jacob Reeds store is somewhat lost as a drugstore, as is the interior of the former Provident Bank building at 19th and Chestnut, another drugstore.

Would it be useful to amend the city's ordinance to include interiors? Overall, I tend to think the answer to that might be yes, and the Alliance is gathering information from other cities in order to explore this more fully. If we did change the ordinance, what interiors might be appropriate candidates for designation? Here are a few that come to my mind:



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public interiors of the city. It has been beautifully restored and is well
n and permanent protection.

great public interiors and an important symbol of downtown
ained and not in danger, but deserving of designation and protection.

€ The Lobby of the Curtis Building: A handsome lobby in itself, but more importantly, it is the setting of the Dream Garden mural. While the mural is protected, access to it is dependent on access to the lobby and including it within the designation would guarantee public access to the mural.

€ The Boyd Theatre: It's surprising that the city itself hasn't proposed amending the ordinance based on the Boyd Theatre case. But controversial as it may be to suggest this, the Boyd deserves interior designation and, although not as grand as Radio City Music Hall, would probably fall under the public access provisions of such designations that seem to be legally acceptable standards.

John Andrew Gallery is executive director of the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia.



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