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CITYSPACE

Victory on Chestnut



Thanks to preservation-minded activism, the Victory Building is being restored.

by Patrick M. Starr

What's Opera, Doc?: The story of the Victory Building resembles that of a great opera -- twists, turns, acts of God, enraged citizenry, selfishness, greed and political intrigue over a sweep of decades. Photo By: Michael T. Regan was *hot*.

The Victory Building (VB) and I go way back. We have a history. First, I saw it as an architectural triumph. Later, I got to know it intimately as the London Victory Club, one of Center City's hottest nightspots around 1980. The dramatic first floor was perfect as a club, with cavernous "make-out" rooms that had 20-foot ceilings and enormous 16-foot-high open doorways "telescoping" room to room. The dancefloor had 30-foot ceilings, and I remember an overhead cable supporting a spaceship out of which dancers would "explode," dangling and spinning to the pounding beat. It

All this floods back as I walk past and glimpse the familiar interior illuminated for the first time in 20 years, as VB's rehabilitation into apartments for Jefferson students and a new university bookstore proceeds.

Alas, the glory days ended in 1982 with a suspicious basement electrical fire. Though the fire went to four alarms, there was little visible damage -- not surprisingly, as VB was built like the proverbial "brick shithouse," out of granite and masonry. Still, the building, owned by none other than the inimitable Sam Rappaport, became an unlit, lifeless hulk -- contributing to Chestnut Street's downward spiral.

For years, as I passed, I shook my head in dismay as trees sprouted from the cornice 70 feet above. (Aren't ailanthus trees -- trees of heaven -- astonishing?) For years, the Victory Building sported a green crest in the spring and an autumn crown of gold. Similarly, vagrants infiltrated the building. I saw the makeshift rag rope hanging out of the first-floor rear window, which was accessed by standing on top of the Dumpster always positioned right under the window. No surprise then that the Fire Department had to respond to repeated fires lit *inside* the building.

In 1991, under pressure from the Department of Licenses and Inspection to seal the building and make it safe, Rappaport decided instead to seek a demolition permit from the city, raising quite a ruckus.

Extraordinary measures were taken by the Preservation Coalition, which railed against the demolition and went so far as to place an ad in the *Inquirer* exhorting citizens to write to the mayor demanding that the city turn down the demo permit. Ed Rendell had just become mayor, and he was no preservationist. Still, pressured from inside his administration by trusted staffers Joe Torsella and Terry Gillen, and having received several hundred letters from concerned citizens, the mayor came down on the side of "good." Furthermore, he pledged to find a reuse, and in truth, his administration worked hard at it for a time, commissioning studies and seeking developers. Although the VB had survived its "near-death" experience, no reuse materialized.

Incredibly, the Preservation Coalition was forced to ante up private funds to seal the building, particularly the roof, in the face of Rappaport's recalcitrance. More than \$5,000 was expended at the time, just to stop the ongoing "demolition by neglect" of the VB.

In the end, the VB literally outlived Rappaport, who died. In the most bizarre twist in the tale, the city's municipal courts finally ordered Rappaport's estate to seal and stabilize the VB yet again -- this in the wake of the bizarre killing of a Common Pleas judge who happened along just as a sign fell off of one of Rappaport's buildings. This time the more benign Rappaport estate actually complied, saving the Victory Building from further deterioration. This set the stage for Philadelphia Management's extraordinary "packaging" of rehabilitation of both the Victory Building and Jefferson University's graduate student housing -- a combo that makes the "numbers crunch."



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measures pay off. Relatively modest investments in sealing, sheathing great historic preservation opportunity. Economic conditions do within the city's powers -- can make all the difference. Chestnut Street that exudes style and history -- a vast improvement over the surface demo permit been issued.

The story of the Victory Building resembles that of a great opera -- twists, turns, acts of God, enraged citizenry, selfishness, greed and political intrigue over a sweep of decades. Let this building stand as testimony that extraordinary measures in the name of historic preservation are good public policy. We must never let it go unchallenged that an important historic building cannot be saved. Viva the Victory Building.

Patrick M. Starr is vice president of the Pennsylvania Environmental Council, an educational membership-based nonprofit, and a longtime activist in urban design issues.



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