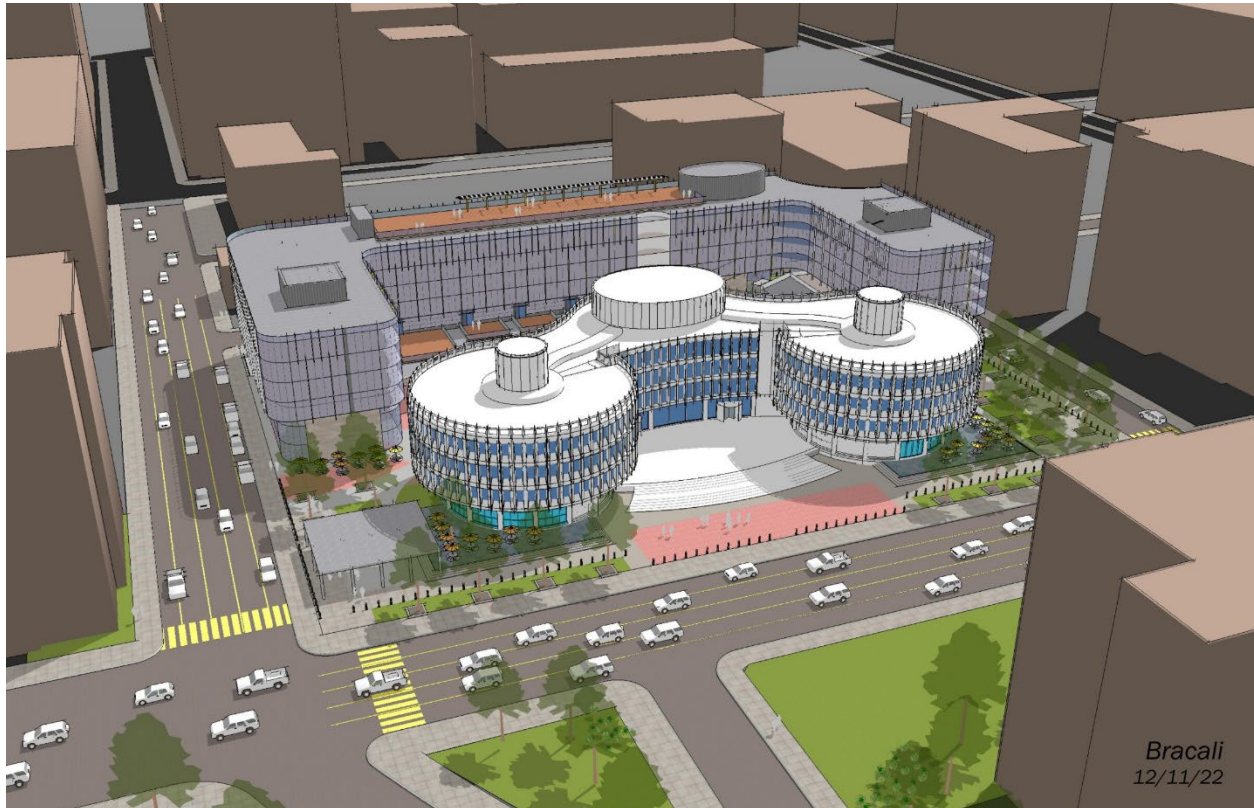


DAG PHILADELPHIA DESIGN ADVOCACY GROUP

Advocacy statement October 6, 2023

The Future of the Past: Preserve Philadelphia's Roundhouse

By Eli Storch, Nika Faulkner, and David Brownlee, for the DAG Steering Committee



Rendering by Anthony Bracali for the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia 2022

Philadelphia's "Roundhouse," the Police Administration Building, is haunted by the dark history of police brutality and destructive urban renewal. Although conceived as a monument of progressive public policy and shaped by the stereotype-breaking ideas of the so-called "Philadelphia School" of architects, not long after its construction in 1959-1962, those negative associations—in particular its connection with the regime of Police Commissioner Frank Rizzo-- began to accumulate. The building became a symbol of dysfunction and cruelty in the criminal justice system.

This complex, important, and interesting history is laid out in the July 2023 [nomination of the building to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places](#). The nomination explains the significance of its design-- by Robert Geddes (Geddes Brecher Qualls & Cunningham) and August Komendant-- and also provides an account of its subsequent association with the Rizzo era of police misconduct. The question of whether the Roundhouse should be preserved and re-used will come before the Philadelphia Historical

Commission at its October 13 meeting. The time has therefore come to imagine the next chapter of the building and consider what good it could do.

Preservation is often conflated with the uncritical celebration of the past and a narrow focus on aesthetics. That is an oversimplification. Preservation at its finest safeguards our entire cultural history, protecting buildings so that they may serve as monuments to the events that occurred within and around them.

First and foremost, the preservation and adaptive reuse of the Roundhouse offer opportunities to remember the past holistically while imagining a better future. Demolishing the building, for which some have argued, would erase some of the physical evidence of Philadelphia's complicated history—a history that should be confronted and its lessons learned. Community values must therefore be placed at the center of planning for the preservation and re-use of the building, and the City of Philadelphia has appropriately engaged in a far-reaching public engagement process, as explained in the March 2023 report [Framing the Future of the Roundhouse](#).

That process, together with the Historical Commission's decision on the designation of the building, must shape the Request for Proposals with which the city will invite plans for the future of the site. A thoughtful RFP, which mandates both the preservation of the building and continuing public outreach, can catalyze a project that recognizes the dark past of the Roundhouse while serving Philadelphia in a new and impactful way.

Indeed, the potential benefits of the preservation and re-use of the Roundhouse are great. The site faces Franklin Square and stands adjacent to Chinatown, and its redevelopment offers many opportunities to accommodate community services and create a walkable, green connection to the square. Some of those possibilities are demonstrated in the [conceptual renderings commissioned by the Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia](#). The drawings by Anthony Bracali demonstrate a variety of development possibilities for the empty, south part of the site, while opening it to public access. Excitingly, the renderings also show how the Police Administration Building can be stripped of the blank-walled, one-story annexes facing Race Street that were a late addition to the program. That change will allow the building to become a luminous gateway for the project, facing Franklin Square.

The adaptive reuse of the Roundhouse also has notable environmental benefits. Its demolition, the disposal of demolition materials, and new construction would require an immense amount of energy, fuel, and materials. Repurposing the building will have a much smaller environmental impact.

The preservation of the Roundhouse is an opportunity to show what holistic storytelling can do for our troubled society, how older buildings can be usefully woven into the fabric of our rapidly changing city, and what the conscientious stewardship of resources can do for our deteriorating environment. DAG supports the adaptive reuse of the Roundhouse and urges the Philadelphia Historical Commission to vote for its addition to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. We look forward to a future when the Roundhouse serves the community progressively, as originally intended.

The Design Advocacy Group (DAG) is a public forum and advocate for design quality and equity in the planning, architecture, preservation and physical development of Philadelphia.

<https://designadvocacy.org/>