

Changing Skyline: Roundhouse's Brutalist style is worthy of gentle treatment after police move out

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The Philadelphia Police Department plans to leave "the Roundhouse" at Seventh and Race Streets in Center City and move to the neoclassical Provident Mutual building at 46th and Market Streets in West Phila.

It's a good bet there were no brand consultants in the room when a style of early '60s architecture was given the name "Brutalism." Built with concrete, usually on an enormous scale, these buildings are almost universally loathed by the public.



The reaction is easy to understand. The majority are government buildings that really do live up to the Brutalist name - soul-crushing, monumental structures that are often atrociously maintained. Still, given our current affection for the *Mad Men* era, it is surprising that we haven't yet seen a softening for the swankier, more sophisticated members of the group.

In Philadelphia, my nominee for reconsideration would be the Police Administration Building, a.k.a. "the Roundhouse," at Seventh and Race Streets. With its sinuous, double-barreled profile, washboard abs and sculptural details, it has real style, which is more than you can say for many of today's bland, glass towers.

The Roundhouse comes with a pedigree, too: Its designers - Geddes, Brecher, Qualls and Cunningham - were members of the influential Philadelphia School, the '60s movement that shook up modernism and included such luminaries as Louis Kahn and Robert Venturi.

So why bring up this ancient history now? Although the Roundhouse still faithfully serves the city's finest, its days as police headquarters are numbered. After years of promising larger quarters for the police, the Nutter administration just took the first concrete step (so to speak): The city has hired a consultant to turn the grand, neoclassical Provident Mutual building at 46th and Market into a suitable home for the police. Deputy Mayor Everett Gillison vows to break ground within three years.

Given the trials that have befallen other important Brutalist buildings, like Chicago's Prentice Hospital and Richard Neutra's Gettysburg Cyclorama, it's not too early to start worrying about the Roundhouse's future. Brutalism, an unfortunate translation of the French term for concrete, *béton brut*, is so out of fashion that almost all examples are considered disposable.

It's no secret that the city would be happy to demolish the Roundhouse and sell the land. A 2009 master plan for Market East showed a tower on the site.

The Preservation Alliance included police headquarters on this year's list of endangered buildings. Its loss would deprive Philadelphia of a distinctive piece of modern heritage, an important legacy of its postwar reinvention under Mayor Richardson Dilworth.

This isn't an argument for keeping the police at the Roundhouse. The police really do need more space. Filing cabinets line the curved hallways. The homicide unit is jammed into a room so small, detectives joke that "the roaches have nowhere to hide."

The move will also rescue the Provident, a worthy historic building that has sat empty far too long. It could be a win for both buildings if the Roundhouse finds a more sympathetic user, like a hotel or apartments.

The disdain for the Roundhouse, I think, has to do with our general inability to separate a building's condition from its architectural merit. All buildings lose their luster when they get old and are unable to serve their original function. The ill-treatment of the Roundhouse has emphasized its worst qualities, like the unfortunate fence that surrounds it. That doesn't mean we should cast it aside.

Two master's students in PennDesign's preservation program, Kimber VanSant and Allee Berger, grew to love the Roundhouse's swooping curves while studying its history, and are campaigning to have it listed on the National Register through a Facebook page called Save the Roundhouse. Meanwhile, a Georgia Tech architecture professor, Jack Pyburn, has asked his students this semester to study possible reuses.

Through their research, they came to understand that the Roundhouse was never intended to be an intimidating fortress that asserted brute police muscle. Just the opposite.

As bad as conditions are at police headquarters, they were worse when Dilworth took office. Police operated out of the basement of City Hall, another building once targeted for demolition. Commissioning a modern police headquarters in 1959 was an assertion that a new, progressive era had arrived. The designers' gentle curves and bright white concrete suggested a more humane approach to law and order.

The technology used to construct the Roundhouse was as progressive as Dilworth's politics. With the help of the celebrated engineer, August Komendant, the architects embraced an innovative system of precast panels. Supported by a central core, the interior of the cylinders were completely open, without columns.

The architects also hoped the layout would reinvent the organization of the Police Department. Major offices like the police commissioner's were located in an outer ring near the windows, while the support staff occupied an inner ring.

Other than art museums like the Barnes Foundation, it's rare these days to see the Roundhouse's kind of craftsmanship. Light and shadow dance across the sculpted, deep-set windows of precast concrete. The architects echoed the building's round form in the details, from cylindrical elevators and exit signs to curving, custom-made, built-in cabinets.

VanSant and Berger don't even like to call the Roundhouse Brutalist, preferring the term *expressionist*. The Roundhouse, they argue, belongs to the same movement that produced Eero Saarinen's much admired TWA Terminal at New York's JFK Airport.

That was a building that people once wanted to be rid of, too. Our eyes and taste change. You might not like the Roundhouse now. But I predict you will - assuming it survives.