

**THE MINUTES OF THE 540<sup>TH</sup> STATED MEETING OF THE  
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION**

**10 AUGUST 2007  
1515 ARCH STREET, ROOM 18029  
MICHAEL SKLAROFF, ESQ., CHAIR**

**PRESENT**

Michael Sklaroff, Esq., Chair  
Eileen Evans, Department of Licenses & Inspections  
John Herzins, Department of Public Property  
Rosalie Leonard, Office of City Council President  
Sara Merriman, Commerce Department  
Vincent Rivera, AIA  
David Schaaf, RA  
Thomas Sugrue, Ph.D.  
Scott Wilds, Office of Housing and Community Development  
  
Randal Baron, Historic Preservation Planner III  
Jorge Danta, Historic Preservation Planner II  
Jonathan Farnham, Acting Historic Preservation Director  
Rebecca Sell, Historic Preservation Planner I  
Karen Gonski, Administrative Technician  
Leonard Reuter, Esq., Assistant City Solicitor, Law Department

**ALSO PRESENT**

Shaina Horton, Stephen Varenhorst Architects  
Matthew Michetti, Stephen Varenhorst Architects  
Thomas Bernaro, Stephen Varenhorst Architects  
Drew Kruetz, Stephen Varenhorst Architects  
Dan Neducsin  
Stephen Varenhorst, Stephen Varenhorst Architects  
Khaled Tarabiea, University of Pennsylvania  
David Hollenberg, University of Pennsylvania  
Anne Beha, Anne Beha Architects  
Philip Chen, Anne Beha Architects  
Van Strother, New Covenant Church  
John Gallery, Preservation Alliance  
Laura Siena, West Mt. Airy Neighbors  
Kevin Smith, Manayunk Neighborhood Council  
Eric Poulain  
Timothy Calligan, Aegis Property Group  
Michelle McAleese, YCH Architects  
Jeff Krieger, Krieger Architects  
Peggy Conner, Chestnut Hill Academy  
Cynthia Padilla, Krieger Architects  
Jeffrey M. Laufer, JMLAA  
Alyson Herman  
Yao-Chang Huang, YCH Architects  
Dan Russoniello, Archer & Buchanan Architects  
Jonathan Tori

Cynthia Ray  
John Kontra  
Brett Harmon, Harmon Deutsch Architects  
Stephen Pollock, Esq., Ballard Spahr Andrews & Ingersoll  
Bernie Kapler  
Karin Rhodes  
Lance Becker  
David Orphanides, Esq.  
Julie King, Esq.  
Martin Rosenberg

**CALL TO ORDER**

Mr. Sklaroff, the Chair, recognized the presence of a quorum and called the 540<sup>th</sup> Stated Meeting of the Philadelphia Historical Commission to order at 9:05 a.m. Commissioners Brown, Evans, Herzins, Leonard, Merriman, Rivera, Schaaf, Sugrue, and Wilds were in attendance.

**MINUTES OF THE 539<sup>TH</sup> STATED MEETING OF THE PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION**

**ACTION:** Upon a motion proffered by Mr. Wilds and seconded by Ms. Leonard, the Commission unanimously approved the minutes, as corrected, of the 539<sup>th</sup> Stated Meeting of the Philadelphia Historical Commission, held 13 July 2007.

## **1 LEVERINGTON AVENUE**

Owner: Venice Island Realty

Philadelphia Management; Lubert-Adler Partners; Neducsin Properties

Applicant: Stephen Varenhorst, AIA

History: large open space with c. 1995 restaurant building

in Main Street Manayunk District

site of mill buildings, which were demolished between 1929 and 1945

Project: Construct residential complex

**ARCHITECTURAL COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION:** The Architectural Committee voted to recommend denial.

**OVERVIEW:** This application proposes to construct four buildings containing 280 condominium units on a 4.5 acre site on Venice Island, which is situated between the Schuylkill River and the Manayunk Canal. The site runs from the Paul Cret-designed Green Lane Bridge west to Leverington Street. The site is almost entirely vacant. The only structure on it is a unoccupied, non-historic restaurant building, which was erected in the 1990s. This building would be demolished as part of the project.

Major textile manufactories including the Crompton, Wabash, Arcola, and Eagle Mills were located on the site. A densely packed collection of five to seven-story, water-powered, masonry, mill buildings stood along the river and the canal, occupying all of the usable land. The first were erected prior to the Civil War. The mills were expanded throughout the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century. The mills still stood when the stock market crashed in 1929, but had been completely demolished by 1945.

The new condominium buildings would be six stories and 89 feet tall and would stand on columns raising the first floor 19 feet above grade and the flood plain. The architectural style is contemporary. The exterior would be clad in white and brown wood grain panels. Parking is planned on grade beneath and around the raised structures. Each unit would have a private deck as well as access to a common roof deck.

**DISCUSSION:** Mr. Sklaroff recused owing to his firm's relationship with one of the applicants.

Ms. Sell presented the proposal to the Commission. Developer Dan Neducsin and architect Stephen Varenhorst represented the application.

**MOTION:** Mr. Schaaf moved to approve the application as submitted. Mr. Wilds seconded the motion.

The applicant displayed a large model of the proposed development. Mr. Varenhorst stated that it would include 280 condominium units in four buildings on 4.5 acres. The buildings would be raised 19 feet above the site. He noted that the Planning Commission approved the project in June after three months of review. He will seek a zoning variance for height. The buildings are six stories tall; the upper parapet is 89 feet above grade; the lower is 77 feet. The zoning at the site limits the height to 65 feet. He will also seek a variance for exceeding the Floor-to-Area Ratio. He will request a variance for 1.6 times the size of the site. Mr. Varenhorst added that the project has received the requisite environmental approvals. Mr. Sugrue commented that the environmental issues do not fall under the Commission's jurisdiction. Mr. Varenhorst displayed photographs depicting the historic mill buildings and the Green Lane Bridge. He contended that the architectural vocabulary is diverse in the Manayunk Historic District. Mr. Varenhorst

described the site, which is bounded by the Green Lane Bridge, railroad bridge, canal, and river. He explained that this site is in an industrial area. He displayed photographs of nearby industrial buildings as well as large, recently-constructed, residential buildings. He stated the vacant, non-historic restaurant building would be demolished as part of this project. Mr. Varenhorst described how the railroad bridge stands about 60 feet above the site. A railroad line also runs along the canal at the northern edge of the property.

Mr. Varenhorst turned his attention from the site to the design. He explained the placement of the buildings, which were sited to allow for views of the canal and the river. He observed that he is proposing to building out toward the canal and river, running the driveways under the buildings; other architects who designed projects for this site gathered their buildings in the center of the island, forcing the paved areas out toward the water. He noted there is only one nearby historic building, the Keely Planing Mill building, which is nestled against the Leverington Street Bridge across the canal from their site.

Mr. Varenhorst remarked that the buildings are relatively tall and slender with elegant proportions. He added that, typically, buildings like these are 65 to 75 feet wide; these are 45 feet wide. He stated that he created large breaks between the buildings as view corridors; they are 35, 40, and 50 feet wide. He stated that the buildings are raised 19 feet above the parking lot. He stated that the sixth floor has half as many units as the other floors to allow for individual and common roof decks. He noted that the foundations will extend 30 feet below grade.

Mr. Varenhorst explained that the cladding would be a wood-grain core panel. This choice of material was in response to the Planning Commission's request to make the project LEED-certified. He stated that the panel is a recycled lightweight product. The applicant noted that the panels would be between 20 and 89 feet off the ground and read as a softened brown color rather than a wood-grain table-top-like material. He explained that the color palette of Manayunk was replete with cream, white, brown brick, and stucco colors. He asserted that the complex would complement the structures in the district. Mr. Varenhorst stated that the fenestration would be dynamic, not static. He is treating the facades like thin screens. The pattern of the windows would be interesting and have a soft reflection in the water. Mr. Varenhorst reported that the unit ceiling heights would be 10 feet. The windows would all be vertical and 8 feet in height. They are akin to mill windows, he claimed.

Mr. Wilds asked if the applicant could reduce the overall height without a loss of units. Mr. Varenhorst stated that the buildings are tall to leave much of the site open. The development would only cover 30 percent of the site, leaving 70 percent open to the sky. Some of the open space would be parking lots, but 40 percent would be landscaped.

Mr. Sugrue asked about the heights of the nearby Venice Lofts buildings. Mr. Varenhorst stated that they are about 60 feet tall. He reiterated that his buildings would be 89 feet tall. Mr. Varenhorst informed the Commission that his client would agree to vary the heights of the buildings, but would then need to extend some of them above the current 89-foot height. Mr. Schaaf remarked that the railroad bridge, which is very tall, defines Manayunk.

Kevin Smith of the Manayunk Neighborhood Council submitted a letter explaining that the neighborhood group does not support the proposal because it has not had an opportunity to fully discuss it. Mr. Smith asserted that the proposal is significantly flawed. He noted, in particular, that the scale and design of the complex was not appropriate. He stated that it was nothing more than low-cost, high-density housing. He claimed that the buildings would dwarf the Green Lane Bridge, which stands only 25 feet above the island. He claimed that the complex

would dominate the view approaching Manayunk. This complex would set a new height standard for Manayunk. Mr. Smith argued that the design is lacking architecturally; it would look like a drab tenement building. He stated that traditional mill buildings were four to five stories or 50 to 60 feet tall. He claimed that this complex bears no resemblance to any building in Manayunk or even Philadelphia. Mr. Smith claimed that much of what the architect represented as open space is not controlled by the developers. Mr. Smith noted that the rail line is still used three to four times a week. He also remarked that, although not within the Commission's purview, the buildings will be constructed from modular units fabricated outside Pennsylvania. Mr. Smith contended that the complex was designed to minimize the participation of the Philadelphia building trades. In closing, Mr. Smith stated that, if it approved this proposal, the Commission would capriciously disregard the Manayunk Ordinance and the history of Manayunk.

Mr. Neducsin contended that Mr. Smith must not be speaking on behalf of the Manayunk Neighborhood Council because his project has never been presented to the Council. Mr. Smith acknowledged that the applicant had not made a formal presentation to the Council, but explained that the Council had reviewed the project based on information garnered at Planning Commission meetings, Zoning Board hearings, and presentations made to the Manayunk Development Corporation. He also noted that the Manayunk Development Corporation had not taken a position on the project and he was not speaking on its behalf.

Mr. Smith displayed a photomontage showing the proposed development from the Green Lane Bridge. Mr. Wilds asserted that Mr. Smith's exhibit distorts the relationship between the bridge and the nearest edge of the development. He explained that, in reality, there would be a substantial gap between the bridge and the nearest edge of the building. Mr. Smith acknowledged that his representation may not be accurate. The buildings are set back approximately 150 feet from the bridge. Mr. Wilds asked Mr. Smith if the Council had supported or opposed other projects on the island. Mr. Smith replied that it had opposed the Dranoff and the Water Mill projects for floodway and safety reasons. Mr. Wilds again asked if the Council had previously opposed development on Venice Island. Mr. Smith observed that it was a legal question he could not answer. Mr. Smith reiterated his position that the Council objected to the current proposal because of the flatness of the design, uniformity of the heights and facades, and the potential for traffic problems. He suggested reducing the height by two floors and the number of units by one half to two thirds.

John Gallery of the Preservation Alliance highlighted the Architectural Committee's recommendation of denial. He opined that the proposed complex would be inappropriate for this location. He remarked that developers routinely seek to exceed the appropriate scales in historic districts. Mr. Gallery observed that the proposed buildings would be 150 percent taller than is currently allowed by the zoning code. He stated that it would exceed the FAR and the allowable number of units. Mr. Gallery remarked that this would be another example of overbuilding in an historic district. He asked the Commission not to dismiss this proposal as merely a zoning matter. He suggested that the developer should have presented an in-concept application to the Commission and not deferred his review to the last possible moment. He noted that the Architectural Committee made many valid criticisms. He asked that the Commission consider this proposed complex in its historic context. He opined that this would be an oppressive building. He noted that the application only included a single view from the Manayunk side. The project would totally obscure any views of the river. The uniformity is inappropriate for the historic district, Mr. Gallery claimed. Mr. Gallery urged the Commission to support the Architectural Committee's recommendation. The proposal does not comply with the

Secretary of Interior Standards. It is out of character architecturally and its scale and density are inappropriate. He urged the developer to rethink the design.

Mr. Wilds asked Mr. Farnham to elaborate on the staff recommendation. Mr. Farnham noted that the staff had undertaken considerable research to understand the context. He referred the Commissioners to a package of materials including maps and renderings of the old mills. He stated that the historic industrial buildings that once stood on and around this site were very different from the commercial and residential buildings on Main Street. The historic buildings on Venice Island were large, tall, densely packed, and irregularly arranged. Mr. Farnham stated that, although this proposal would not replicate the old mill buildings, it would create a contemporary development with a layout and massing that echoed the historic buildings. He acknowledged that it would block the view of the Schuylkill from Main Street, but noted that the historic mill buildings had also blocked the very same view. Mr. Farnham reported that the staff had not considered traffic, parking spaces, and other planning and zoning issues when it formulated its recommendation. The staff concluded that, although contemporary in style, the proposed complex would be compatible, as required by the Manayunk Ordinance, with the historic buildings and structures stand or once stood on and around the site. Mr. Gallery disagreed. He claimed that there are no buildings in Manayunk taller than 55 or 60 feet. He also noted that the cladding materials are not compatible. He concluded that the proposal does not comply with the Manayunk Ordinance.

Mr. Baron informed the Commission that Daniela Voith of the Architectural Committee, who had vigorously opposed this project during the Committee's review, had contacted the staff to clarify her position. She stated that, although she still advocated for height reductions and greater variety, she now supported the project.

Mr. Schaaf stated that the river is not visible from most points in Manayunk. Mr. Sugrue agreed.

**ACTION:** By a vote of 6 to 2, the Commission adopted the motion proffered by Messrs. Schaaf and Wilds to approve the application as submitted. Messrs. Herzins and Rivera dissented. Mr. Sklaroff recused.