

PRESERVATION PITTSBURGH

201 South Winebiddle Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15224

March 30, 2002

Ms. Susan Shearer
Preservation Pennsylvania
257 North Street
Harrisburg, PA 17101

Subject: 2002 Pennsylvania at Risk Nomination: **PITTSBURGH CIVIC ARENA**



1. Nominators:

Preservation Pittsburgh
201 South Winebiddle Street
Pittsburgh, PA 15224 Contact: Rob Pfaffmann: 412 471-2470

Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation
One Station Square
450 Landmarks Building
Pittsburgh, PA 15119 Contact: Arthur Zeigler 412 471-5808

2. Physical Description of the site:

The Pittsburgh Civic Arena occupies a 92-acre redevelopment site known as the "Lower Hill" on the edge of downtown Pittsburgh.

3. Historical significance:

The Pittsburgh Civic Arena is historically significant as an engineering and architectural innovation. The Civic Arena was the world's largest dome in 1962 at 415 feet in diameter. The dome consists of six moveable sections and two fixed, supported by a space frame box girder. Pittsburgh architectural historian Franklin Toker noted: "It is a pity that the failure of the development around it denied the Civic Arena the acclaim it deserves as one of the triumphs of engineering in the post war period."

4. How Extensive is the site known/ Is it open to the Public?:

Nicknamed the "Igloo" it is a well-known venue to Pittsburgh natives and visitors alike. It has a seating capacity of 18,000 for events ranging from hockey games, to concerts. Its original purpose for the Civic Light Opera was doomed due to problems associated with modern rigging and stage requirements. Most residents of Pittsburgh have probably attended an event at the arena during their lifetime.

- 5. What is the threat to the site?:**
DEMOLITION. The Pittsburgh Penguins have proposed to build a new arena nearby and have convinced local politicians that the old arena is no longer viable as a hockey venue due to lack of amenities that produce higher income such as luxury boxes. The Auditorium Authority, which owns the Arena and a number of others have gone on record as desiring to see the building, demolished.
- 6. What would eliminate the threat?:**
The threat could be eliminated by a plan to adaptively reuse the Arena that could support new development in the sea of parking lots now surrounding the structure. (see sketch concept attached). PHLF and Preservation Pittsburgh are actively working to identify and grow support for saving the structure for new uses, including hotel, cultural center and maglev station, just to name a few.
A developer competition and financing (the value of site and leverage with Penguins financing possibilities could make it attractive to a developer with the right concept.
- 7. Is the threat imminent?**
Yes. Although the Arena will not be torn down until the Penguins finance and build a new arena, the process of deciding what to do will occur this year. A preservation week educational reuse workshop, local nomination and press conference are planned in order to influence public officials and public opinion in favor of reusing the Arena as an anchor for redevelopment of the lower hill..
- 8. Who are the major players trying to preserve the site?**
Elbert Hatley, Former Executive Director of the Hill CDC 412 431-8831
Preservation Pittsburgh, Contact: Rob Pfaffmann: 412 471-2470
Pittsburgh History & Landmarks Foundation Contact: Arthur Zeigler 412 471-5808
George Conte Greensburg Hotel Interior Designer 724 832-7055
- 9. Is there opposition to preservation of the site?**
Yes. Councilman Sala Udin, the Penguins and city officials have voiced support for demolition, and thus are expected to oppose efforts to save the Arena.
Councilman Sala Udin 412 255-2134
Tom Kennedy Pittsburgh Penguins 412 642-1300
Don Carter, UDA (Planners for Penguins) 412 756-1133
- 10. How would listing in Pennsylvania at Risk help to alleviate the threat?**
Listing would help to get the public to see the importance of the structure as a civic, engineering and design landmark. It is a special opportunity to drawing attention to post war design that is often overlooked. Like the PSFS building in Philadelphia, it is eligible for the national register and has been determined eligible by PHMC. (see attached letter). We would coordinate the listing with a special issue of the PHLF newsletter and other events planned for preservation week, including a local historic structure nomination.
- 11. Has Preservation PA been involved with the site in the past?**
No.
- 12. Other than listing in Pennsylvania at Risk, what can Preservation PA do to help?**
1. Provide lobbying assistance at the state level. Possibly work to attach conditions to state financing funds proposed for the project.
 2. Help make sure that the State History Code and Section 106 process is enforced at the state level, if funds come from state or federal sources.
 3. Assist in identifying state funds for supporting a study for reuse.
 4. Develop a "Preserving Pennsylvania Modern Landmarks" event or session at the annual conference in Pittsburgh in 2004.

SUMMARY OF THE CIVIC ARENA HISTORY & BIBLIOGRAPHY:



The **CIVIC ARENA** was built in 1960 as part of the redevelopment of Pittsburgh's lower hill. The Arena was originally planned as the home of the Civic Light Opera. The Arena was not successful for its original purpose for the Opera, but quickly became a successful venue for concerts, basketball and professional hockey.

The key feature of the structure is its moveable roof. A spectacular and innovative expression of engineering and architectural technology, the Arena was designed by Architects Mitchell & Ritchey with New York Bridge Engineers Ammann & Whitney. Its dome is structurally important because it was the largest moveable roof in the world. The architectural expression of arena was unique and provided a forward-looking vision for the Pittsburgh skyline.

The Civic Arena is the oldest active professional sports venue in country and as such is to be replaced by a new arena nearby. The Arena is proposed to be demolished once the new arena is built.

Preservation Pittsburgh and PHLF are actively working to identify practical new uses for the arena that would integrate into the cultural life of the Hill district in order to correct a major flaw: the surrounding sea of parking lots. Proposals for reuse include an African American Cultural Center, Hotel and Maglev station.

The inclusion of **CIVIC ARENA** on the endangered list would greatly help our efforts to call attention to the threat and encourage public officials to reconsider the demolition plan. We have included additional documents supporting this nomination, including an international publication, *DOCOMO Journal*, which advocates for the preservation of modern movement structures.

Attachments/Excerpts from:

Charrette October 1961 by James D. Van Trump
20th Century Pittsburgh by Roy Lubove pp130-133
Pittsburgh by Franklin Toker's pp235
Sketches by Rob Pfaffmann and George Conte
Newspaper articles from Post Gazette March 2002