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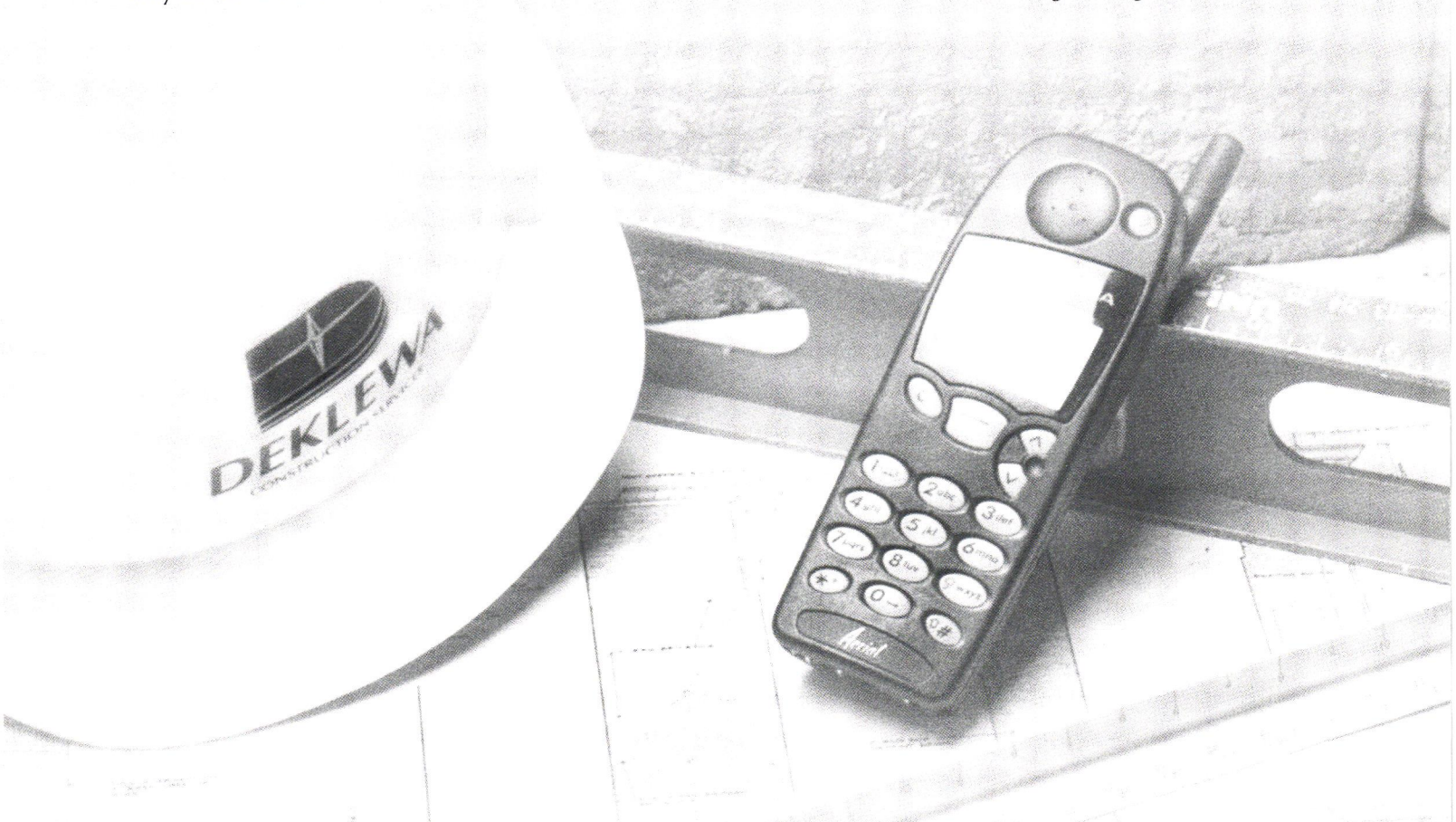
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The Piano (and History) Lesson By Tracy Certo



At its core, the play turns out to be a metaphor for historic preservation at its best: seeing the value of a structure rich in meaning and history and retaining it for good use that better serves the community.

August Wilson's Pulitzer-winning play,

The Piano Lesson, takes place in the culturally rich Hill District of the 1930's. If you saw the powerful performance during its recent run at the Pittsburgh Public Theater, you know the story revolves around a piano that was hand-carved by a family member. It is an object steeped in family history, imbued with symbolism of loss and want, and fought over relentlessly for decades. Years ago, blood was spilled over the piano and, as the play unfolds, an estranged brother and sister are at war over it. Sister Berniece wants to keep the piano and yet, she refuses to play the instrument anymore. Her brother wants to sell it, quickly, to make money and move on.

Every so often one of the characters actually played the piano, a soulful blues piece at one point, that hints of the lively era when the Hill gained a national reputation for its music and culture. As the other characters joined in—singing, stomping, clapping—it made for a magical theater moment.

The resolution of the piano's fate comes at the hands of divine intervention, when a ghostly presence that's protecting the piano scares the household into a new recognition—that yes, the piano has great worth but it needs to be used to attain its full value. In the end, the brother relents, content to leave the piano in Berniece's house, while she finally sits down to play and sing while the others join in.

At its core, the play turns out to be a metaphor for historic preservation at its best: seeing the value of a structure rich in meaning and history and retaining it for good use that better serves the community.

In this case, the community is one with a rich yet difficult and controversial history. Dr. Laurence Glasco of the University of Pittsburgh authored a piece about the history of the Hill District in the play's program. He writes that the arrival of the blacks in large numbers invigorated the social and cultural life of the Hill, as evident in the Wylie Avenue and Centre Avenue areas. People flocked to famous nightspots such as the Crawford Grill and some of the best jazz musicians in the country were nurtured there, including Billy Strayhorn, Earl "Fatha" Hines and Lena Horne. The

intersection of Wylie and Fullerton Avenues was then referred to as "Crossroads of the World".

It wasn't until 1917 that the number of blacks significantly increased, says Glasco. "The Hill during this era was by far the city's most diverse neighborhood, with black, Jewish and Italian residents living among more than 20 other ethnic groups—Germans, Poles, Greeks, Syrians, Irish, Chinese and others."

Correcting another myth, Glasco asserts that historically, the Hill was neither racially segregated nor characterized by racial tension. The community was, in fact, very mixed. Wilson's family, says the author, lived in the rear quarters of a home on Bedford Avenue, with an Italian and Jewish family in the front.

As the city's first suburb when it was founded in the 1800's, the Hill was "home to elite whites escaping the dirt and congestion of downtown." In the 1850's, it was transformed into a working-class area with the influx of German and Irish immigrants. The arrival of impoverished Jews and Italians in the 1890's and 1900's helped form the Hill's reputation as the city's "poorest, most unhealthy and overcrowded".

Two decades later, the Civic Arena was built amidst great controversy, displacing many residents and buildings in the lower Hill District and ultimately hastening the neighborhood's decline. Now known as Mellon Arena, this building is now on the list of the most endangered places in the city (page 10). Recently, the structure was denied historic designation status which would have saved it from demolition.

As August Wilson suggests, short of divine intervention, some historic preservation efforts are lost causes. Which makes the successful ones all the more worth savoring. Celebrating Historic Preservation Month, Columns takes a look at Pittsburgh's Endangered Spaces—some worth preserving, others more questionable—as well as historic preservation projects in this area and others such as Altoona.

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On the cover: Mellon Bank 3 Building Lobby Restoration, IKM Architects. Ed Massery, photo.

AIA Pittsburgh serves 12 Western Pennsylvania counties as the local component of the American Institute of Architects and AIA Pennsylvania. The objective of AIA Pittsburgh is to improve, for society, the quality of the built environment by further raising the standards of architectural education, training and practice; fostering design excellence; and promoting the value of architectural services to the public. AIA membership is open to all registered architects, architectural interns, and a limited number of professionals in supporting fields.

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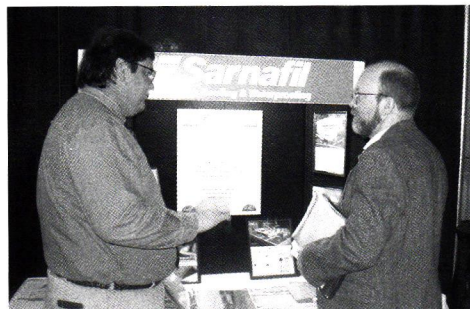
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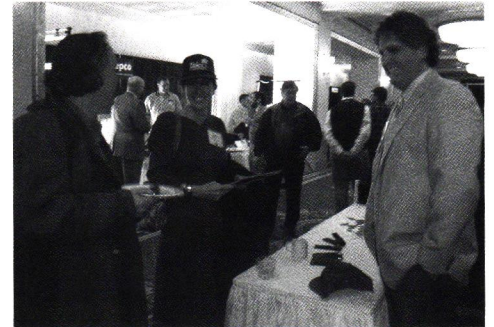
"I loved this. Can we do it every week?" wrote Rebecca Henn, AIA in evaluating the recent TRI AIA. "It was excellent," said Alan Fishman, AIA who attended two of the three days. "It's a great way to gain most or all of your CES credits plus I really enjoyed the ability to network with other architects. I don't understand why even more AIA members don't participate."

More than 500 attended the Opening General Session on April 10th featuring David Orr, professor and chair of the environmental studies program at Oberlin College. The Warhol Museum's director, the always provocative Tom Sokolowski, closed TRI AIA, eliciting comments ranging from "witty, thought-provoking and entertaining" to "fascinating how he connected the concept of rhetoric in making strong visual statements."

Throughout the three-day event, hundreds of architects and landscape architects attended a wide variety of seminars and browsed more than 50 exhibits at the Omni William Penn in Pittsburgh. Topics ranged from Architectural Applications of Structural Steel to 2000 International Building Code vs. 1999 BOCA code.. "The quality of the seminars was outstanding," said Fishman. "Kevin McGahey of Repco II was the greatest."



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More than 150 architects and 270 landscape architects attended the Exhibit Hall Opening Gala on April 11th.

