Former Mellon Bank
East Liberty

Prepared for the Planning Commission, City of Pittsburgh

June 1, 2021
A distinctive Modern design as **Gateway to East Liberty** at Penn and Centre Avenues
Centre Avenue Façade and Entrance
+Customized to triangular plot: sawtooth plan form, pedestrian access to both main streets
+Rhythmic formal moves: contributes texture, materiality, and shadow play to the streetscape + skyline
+Showcases quality Modern materials: signature brick, glass, terrazzo, aluminum
Sophisticated, Rhythmic Form
Penn Avenue Façade and Entrance
+ Simple, strong massing with central grand entrance
+ Symmetry: a dynamic contrast to the Centre Ave facade with bold formality + full-height glazing
+ Distinctive but related façades to two major streets
+ Showcases quality Modern materials and construction
Parklet Proximity
+A vegetated arboreal respite at the convergence of Avenues, activated with a side entrance
+Maximize use of peninsular triangular plot, potential amenity to pedestrians, community marker
Details

+ Quality building materials: green glazed mottled brick, terrazzo, vertical glazing elements, stainless chevron mullions, tinted green glass
+ As hardworking & straightforward as the region
+ Intact building envelope - built to last
+ Unique character provides visual pedestrian interest

coffered interior ceiling panels
Preservation of Modernist Heritage: preserving the *Innovation of Modernism*.

Social
Technical
Aesthetic
Setting/Context
Pittsburgh Modernism.

Social: corporate & civic relations
Technical: materials, innovation, industry
Aesthetic: reflecting usage, climate, resources, regional trends
Setting/Context: Pittsburgh’s distinct topography and plan/program
Mellon Bank Records at Detre Library & Archives at the Senator John Heinz History Center

The Heinz History Center acquired the Mellon Bank Records from the Mellon Bank Historical Library and Archives in 1995.

Mellon Bank Records date between 1880s-1970s and depict the employees and founders, buildings and architecture, and promotional activities of Mellon Bank and its acquired financial establishments.

Collection of Mellon Bank News monthly publications (1950s-1980s)

Supplemental Resources: Ex. Contractor Ledgers
A collection of Mellon Bank News issues (1960s-1980s): Corporate emphasis on design
Pittsburgh's collection of Mellon Bank branches is a unique, extensive assemblage of varied architectural style. Designed with intention and thoughtfulness of siting, program and form, the buildings represent an idealistic irreplaceable standard of our built environment: an exemplary treasure trove of American Corporate Modernist structures. Pittsburgh can lead by example in preserving the collection.
Squirrel Hill Branch
1965

Citizens Bank
2021
Lawrenceville Branch
1966

Redeveloped as co-retail concept with cafe & eatery, 2021
University Center Branch 1961
Paraboloid Thin-Shell Concrete Structure
DEMOLISHED 2004
Prefabricated Mobile Branch Unit 1967

Why was the new Latrobe Office built in North Hills?

There’s good reasoning behind this unusual method of bank construction. Edward L. Becker, assistant vice president in charge of the bank’s Buildings Division, explains it this way, “This new building design enables the bank to erect a handsome office at a selected site within two months after receiving approval for a branch location from the Comptroller of the Currency.”
East Liberty branch: A part of the collection
Pittsburgh National Bank’s Modernism
Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1966
Fifth Avenue and Craig Street, Oakland

Another gem in the genre.
Bank to Renovate In East Liberty

Mellon Bank's East Liberty branch building will remain in the redevelopment plans for that area, but the management of the bank expects to modernize the structure.

Plans for remodeling are going forward, but there will be no final decisions until the overall plans for the neighborhood are known.

The bank believes that other businesses not in the path of redevelopment in East Liberty must do some “sprucing up” in keeping with the community's planned new look. Those businesses which will have their quarters wiped out have the problem of moving. The bank says it is asking the last-named “How can we help?”

In the East Liberty bank, there is a detailed redevelopment map, and each time the Urban Redevelopment Authority acquires a piece of property, a colored pin marks the spot.

The Mellon Bank seeks to convey to the East Liberty public that the redevelopment is a good thing, even though it may take many years to accomplish.
Proposed Citizens Bank
Views & Site Plan
Plans currently awaiting demo permit
final approval to remove 6112 Penn Ave
Citizens Bank Architects:
Bisbano + Associates
CONCERN REGARDING OVERALL PLANNING VISION FOR BLOCK IN HISTORIC HEART OF EAST LIBERTY

CITIZENS 6112 PENN AVE, DCP-ZDR-2020-03210

DEMOLITION OF EXISTING BANK BUILDING. NEW CONSTRUCTION FOR BANK BUILDING WITH SURFACE PARKING. CENTRE AVE STREET TREES LOCATED WITHIN PROPERTY. USE A BANK IN A ONE-STORY BUILDING (2,500 SQ FT) WITH REAR SURFACE PARKING (7 REGULAR AND 1 ACCESSIBLE SPACES).

CHASE 6100 PENN, DCP-ZDR-2021-03233

ONE STORY BANK WITH ACCESSORY DRIVE-THROUGH ATM USE OF ONE STORY STRUCTURE AS BANK OR FINANCIAL INSTITUTION (LIMITED) (3,352 SQ FT) WITH DRIVE-THROUGH ATM, DUMPSTER WITH 6' TALL ENCLOSURE, 14 STALL PARKING LOT, AND ONE LOADING SPACE AT REAR.

EXHIBIT A: COMBINED SITE PLANS OF CHASE & CITIZENS BANKS PROPOSALS
Walkability Variable

3. Spatial Enclosure and Visual Interest

Good Street Walls
Pedestrians feel protected in a closely knit urban fabric with defined street edges, sidewalks lined with street trees, and visually appealing sidewalk infrastructure and building facades.

Streets with outdoor activities and active street facades attract pedestrians largely as it creates a lively social atmosphere during the warm seasons.

High Priority Routes

Defining high priority routes

Best streets for walking, based on community survey, workshops, and research:
- Penn Avenue, Centre Avenue, Highland Avenue
- Followed by Baum Blvd, East Liberty Blvd, Negley Avenue
- Followed by Broad Street, Beatty Street, Euclid Street

Worst streets for walking:
- Penn Circle
- Followed by Baum Blvd, Centre Avenue, Highland Avenue, Negley Avenue
- Followed by Beatty Street, East Liberty Boulevard, Broad Street, Euclid Street, St. Clair Street, Harvard Street

Each of the highest priority streets is discussed on the following pages.
Business Incubator.
Community Hub.
Pedestrian magnet.
Historical marker.

Pittsburgh Modern Committee
conceptual reuse proposal
Improvement potential: side entrance to parklet

Pittsburgh Modern Committee conceptual reuse proposal
April 2, 2021
Lucia M. Aguirre, Chairperson,
City of Pittsburgh Historic Review Commission
C/o Sarah Quinn, Historic Preservation Planner
Department of City Planning
200 Ross Street
Third Floor
Pittsburgh, PA 15219

RE: Historic nomination of 6121 Penn Avenue, East Liberty, Former Mellon National Bank Building

Dear Chairperson Aguirre,

The East Liberty Valley Historical Society enthusiastically and unreservedly supports the nomination of the former Mellon Bank building at 6121 Penn Avenue as a designated city historic structure.

We believe it meets the criteria as set forth in the historic nomination, namely, that it is an innovative and important example of the architecture and urban design of its day that it is an essential part of a series of architecturally significant mid-century Modern banking halls commissioned by Mellon National Bank for Pittsburgh, and that it is a unique and cherished feature of the East Liberty business district and community.

We think it is the best remaining building erected during the East Liberty renewal effort, evidence of which, for better or worse, is fast disappearing.

Its most distinctive feature, the sun-tower elevation along Centre Avenue, is a dynamic, playful feature of the building and an ingenious solution to the problem presented by the irregular footprint of the site.

You wouldn’t know it to look at it, but that footprint and the sun tower diagonal are the end products of forces that have shaped the intersection of Centre and Penn avenues for more than 200 years.

The diagonal thrust of Centre Avenue through the East Liberty grid owes its very being to the street plan. Landowner Jacob Negley laid out the village of East Liberty in 1817 with the intersection of two existing roads, now Penn and Frankstown avenues, at its heart. Both are east-west roads but Negley’s grid aligns squarely with Penn and diagonally with Frankstown, which continued as the Seventh Street Road (now Centre Avenue) west of Penn.

The juncture of Penn and Centre/Frankstown avenues has been a historic crossroads and meeting place for generations of East Liberty residents and visitors since the early 1800s, when pioneer settler Alexander Thomson built his log of the Swann Log Tavern there, at his farm along the Greensburg Pike, today’s Penn Avenue.

After Thomson’s death in 1812, John Beider operated a tavern at the same location, on the southeast side of Centre Avenue, opposite the site of the bank. In front of the tavern was a parade courtyard that functioned as a sort of East Liberty town square at the intersection of Greensburg Pike and the Frankstown Road. An 1862 map shows Centre Avenue leading to the rectangular courtyard. In his 1965 East Liberty history book “Staunton” on the Pike,” John Collins Jr. reports that Beider refused to give up part of Beider’s Square to allow Centre direct access to Penn.

A gentle and beloved host, practical joker and select Whig, Beider owned and operated the red-brick tavern from 1829 until his death in his mid-90s in 1865. The tavern stood until 1907 and from at least 1840, it and its proprietor were commemorated in block-long Beider Street, the alley behind Centre Avenue that led to the tavern. With the opening of the Enseidel Block residential and commercial development in 1913, it became Stevenson Place and the last whiff of Beider’s tavern on the landscape was lost.

In 1868, three years after Beider’s death, Liberty Hall opened in front of the tavern, on Penn at Centre and opposite the bank site, which at the time held small commercial buildings. The hall, which occupied most of Beider’s century square, hosted dances, performances, lectures, meetings and other social gatherings. When Centre Avenue was formally extended to meet Penn Avenue between 1872 and 1892, it bent to accommodate Liberty Hall, setting the dogleg in stone and creating the oddly shaped future banking lot on the southwest corner. The hall was demolished in 1925 but the dogleg remained, defining the custom boundary of the Mellon Bank lot and building. A small vestige of Beider’s Square remains as open space in the triangular, tower-pocked park next to the bank.

Thanks to Western Pennsylvania’s early road builders, and to Jacob Negley, Alex Thomson and John Beider, the intersection of Centre and Penn avenues has long been a bustling place and remains so to this day. This prominent juncture deserves a building of architectural distinction and merit, and it has that in the Mellon Bank building. History, culture and aesthetics would be poorly served if it was demolished and replaced with a small, generic building for the gain of a handful of parking spaces.

While we lament the loss of the 1899 City Deposit Bank building, we believe the Mellon Bank building of 1970 to be an eminent successor and well worth preserving as a landmark in its own right, and as a remembrance of one of the most consequential periods in East Liberty’s history and evolution.

It stands, too, as a reminder of the Mellon banking family, so long integral to shaping the East Liberty community it called home. Thomas Mellon, who founded T. Mellon & Sons Bank in 1850, married Sarah Jane Negley, daughter of Jacob Negley, whose family owned all of East Liberty. The Mellon family home stood a few blocks away at 401 N. Negley Ave. In the early 1940s, Tom and Sarah’s son Richard B. Mellon and his wife Jennie King Mellon built East Liberty Presbyterian Church one block from the bank. Today architect Ralph Adams Grant’s cathedral-like church is a cultural and visual beacon of hope and diversity. Together the bank and the church are symbolic of who the Mellon family meant to Pittsburgh and indeed the nation — making money and giving it away. Tearing down half of that equation would strike a devastating blow to the cultural fabric of East Liberty at its very heart.

Sincerely,

Justin P. Greenswalk, M.S., Historic Preservation
Director
East Liberty Valley Historical Society

Board of Directors:
Justin P. Greenswalk, President
George Clark, Vice President
Robert Ditto
Jared Ellis
La Donnelly
Edward Lesser
Pamela Lovese
Mike Stanowski

Endorsements

East Liberty Valley Historical Society, Inc.
P.O. Box 4922, Pittsburgh, PA 15206 | eastlibertyvalley@gmail.com | eastlibertychamber.org/HistoricalSociety
April 6, 2021

Lucia M. Aguirre, Chairperson,
City of Pittsburgh Historic Review Commission
c/o Sarah Quinn, Historic Preservation Planner
Department of City Planning
200 Ross Street
Fourth Floor
Pittsburgh, PA 15219

RE: Historic nomination of 612 Penn Avenue, East Liberty, Former Mellon National Bank Building

Dear Chairperson Aguirre,

The East Liberty Quarter Chamber of Commerce writes in support of the nomination of the former Mellon National Bank Building as a City of Pittsburgh Historic Landmark.

With a significant visual presence in East Liberty that enhances the unique character of the neighborhood and commercial district, the building is an important piece of Modernist architecture in Pittsburgh connected with a notable mid-20th century urban planning project.

Meaningful and familiar to the citizens of Pittsburgh, not to be underestimated is its importance to the architectural fabric, history, and character of the East Liberty neighborhood, and to this particular intersection.

The Chamber believes that, together, we should embrace its potential for reuse and redevelopment as an innovative solution that will compliment East Liberty’s positive growth.

Sincerely,

East Liberty Quarter Chamber of Commerce
March 31, 2021

To Whom It May Concern:

We write in strong support of the nomination of the former Mellon Bank branch in East Liberty at 6112 Penn Avenue as a City of Pittsburgh Historic Landmark. As the authors of the Imagining the Modern: Architecture and Urbanism of the Pittsburgh Renaissance, we are especially invested in preserving the great legacy of the city's modernist architectural heritage.

Our argument in support of the nomination is threefold:

First, the building possesses great architectural merit as an important piece of Pittsburgh's twentieth century modernist legacy. In addition to an interesting detailing that resolves the triangular site in an inventive manner, the building is further distinguished by its elegant use of an unusual speckled green glazed brick, with a terrazzo base and generous glass windows with gleaming aluminum trim. Based on the drawings we have seen, the proposed replacement bank branch is a poor substitute for the existing building. The massing is far less striking, original, or interesting, and the material choices proposed appear flimsy and temporary, offering neither the presence of the existing building nor offering something that is built to last.

Second, the building has significance as part of a series of an architecturally notable bank branches commissioned by the Mellon Bank throughout the region. Mellon Bank’s commitment to architecture is especially noted following WWII, and can be considered part and parcel of the leadership’s commitment to the Pittsburgh Renaissance. These small commercial gems can be seen in Lawrenceville, Squirrel Hill, Uptown, and East Liberty, to name a few. It should be noted that while each of these designs was different, many façades shared the material combination of glass, aluminum and the tell-tale speckled glazed green brick.

Third, the building represents one of the few remnants of a notable mid-20th century urban planning project, the urban renewal of East Liberty. While that larger project has been much maligned for decades, the full story is in fact far more nuanced. In fact, a number of aspects

of the plan defy the stereotypical characteristics of an urban renewal project. First, the plan of East Liberty occurred at the behest of East Liberty’s business community, not the city leaders or planners. Moreover, it was a deeply participatory process; according to our research, the planning staff held nearly 300 public meetings over the three years. And finally, the planners took great pains to preserve and integrate many older buildings into the master plan.

Today, we are asking City officials again to regard this building as their predecessors regarded older buildings more than seventy years ago, and take into consideration this piece of the neighborhood’s architectural history as you plan for the twenty-first century. Its continued presence will only strengthen the vibrant and eclectic center that East Liberty is now once again.

Respectfully,

[Signature]

Rami el Samahy, AICP
Co-Author, Imagining the Modern
MENDRAL, DUBELDUKER

Chris Grinley, SED
Co-Author, Imagining the Modern
MENDRAL, DUBELDUKER

Michael Kubo, PhD
Co-Author, Imagining the Modern
Assistant Professor, University of Houston
City of Pittsburgh Historic Landmark Nomination
6122 Penn Ave - Former Mellon Bank

To Whom it may Concern:

I support the nomination of the former Mellon Bank branch in East Liberty at 6122 Penn Avenue as a City of Pittsburgh Historic Landmark. This is a modest building by most measures but it is historically significant as one of a series of architecturally notable bank branches commissioned by Mellon Bank during the modern era and as a key remnant of an aspirational mid-20th century urban planning effort to renew East Liberty. The bank building also has two superlative architectural qualities. Its rich materiality, especially the sensuous green mottled brick that constitutes its major facades, is far superior to that of most commercial buildings from its time and from today. In addition, its careful urban design fully accounts for its unusual site and its rare exposed posture by adeptly offering related but distinctive facades to two major streets plus a key intersection. The nominator, Pittsburgh Modern Committee of Preservation Pittsburgh, has specifically invited me to comment on the building’s style. Style terms are always of questionable value in my mind. Style categories are matters of convention in labeling and grouping buildings, but buildings are rarely pure examples of any style and can be considered on their merits without recourse to rigid style categories. Style terms are inherently fluid as historians find different ways of studying and looking at buildings. This is particularly true regarding the architecture of the modern era where style terms are still being discussed, defined, and refined.

That said, I note that the nomination uses the style term Modernism (Functionalism) for the bank building. This is an applicable term and the nomination appropriately describes characteristics of limited ornamentation, an emphasis on materiality, and an overall form and aesthetic guided by the building’s intended purpose and function.

I will offer an additional term for consideration: corporate modern. Corporate modern refers to a variety of modern architecture that was frequently adopted by major corporations to house operations and to display a corporate presence through architecture. Corporate modern includes the concept of overall form and aesthetic guided by purpose and function. Corporate modern buildings commonly feature mental and glass construction often combined with brick. The term corporate modern is often used to categorize skyscrapers and other urban commercial buildings. Pittsburgh, a corporate center, developed numerous buildings of this sort during the modern era. The nominated bank building can be described as corporate modern due to its association with Mellon Bank, its functionalist form and aesthetic, and its materiality. It is a compelling surviving example of corporate modernism employed at neighborhood commercial scale.

Respectfully,

Martin Aurand
Architecture Librarian and Archivist Emeritus
Carnegie Mellon University
333 S. Highland Avenue #301
Pittsburgh, PA 15213

RE: 6122 Penn Ave - Former Mellon Bank
TO: Historic Review Commission
FROM: Prof. Kai Gutschow, PhD, Carnegie Mellon University School of Architecture

Dear Members of the Historic Review Commission,

I am a professor of modern architectural history at CMU, and I fully support the nomination of the former Mellon Bank branch in East Liberty at 612 Penn Avenue as a City of Pittsburgh Historic Landmark. With so much change happening in East Liberty these days, we are in grave danger of letting short-term profit and a quest for novelty erase our past. In the process we destroy legacies and avoid promoting our communal future.

The Mellon Bank building is an important remnant of a notable mid-20th century urban planning project, and with that an important piece of our history. The recent book Imagining the Modern: Architecture and Urbanism of the Pittsburgh Renaissance (2019) by Ramil el Samahy and Chris Grimley has made clear the importance of Pittsburgh and especially East Liberty’s place in the history of modern architecture in the US.

These buildings may be considered “ugly” by some, but the same can be said of Victorian mansions and sleek modernist buildings, both of which were considered ugly at some point. Style come and go. The Mellon Bank is a visually interesting example of the dynamic energy of the 1960s and 1970s renewal era: let’s keep it for our children.

Not often mentioned, but perhaps more objectively important than the values of memory, is the need to ADAPT and REUSE as much architecture as possible in order to combat climate change. Every existing building represents embodied energy. Destroying any building means adding to our landfills. Building new buildings means manufacturing new materials, which wastes precious energy and produces more pollution than ruins our health and changes our climate. Pittsburgh has been shrinking for decades; we have more than enough buildings. We should not need to build new buildings. Let’s reuse what we have in new and creative ways.

If the owner must build a new building, there are plenty of empty spaces and parking lots in East Liberty.

I sincerely hope this relic of our history can be saved! I support the nomination.

Kai Gutschow
Mellon Bank’s branch in East Liberty should be designated as a historic building. East Liberty was once home to an abundance of unique architecture that has slowly been stolen from our streets in place of new architecture and apartment high rises. We must be urgent in our work to preserve the neighborhood’s remaining gems in respect to its residents.

* It is unique architectural gems like the former Mellon Bank building in East Liberty that make an imagable, special place. We need to preserve the architectural heritage of our places before they disappear completely. The Mellon Bank building has character, heart, history, and scale that is irreplaceable.

* I consider this building to be a landmark and one of the architectural highlights of East Liberty. The thoughtful and creative design of the 3 street-facing sides of the building knit an awkward triangular piece of land into the fabric of the neighborhood.

* I’ve always admired this building for its uniqueness and design. It stands out and provides needed character in a neighborhood that is rapidly losing it to new generic construction.

* As a heritage conservation consultant formerly from the Pittsburgh area, I support the effort to save the former Mellon Bank branch in East Liberty. This building contributes to the character of the neighborhood, reflecting the diverse people that have shaped its past and the architecture that forms its identity. Pittsburgh has lost too many resources that have left voids in its tangible history.