



## **Young Preservationists Association of Pittsburgh Position on the Nomination of the Nabisco Plant to be a City of Pittsburgh Historic Landmark**

The Young Preservationists Association of Pittsburgh, a group of young-minded, development-oriented, and progressive leaders representing the nine-county southwestern Pennsylvania region, nominated the former Nabisco Plant to highlight the vast development potential for the site—as loft housing, mixed-use development, or even a bakery—but not as a vacant lot. We submitted the property nomination as a proactive way to extend the revitalization of East Liberty that is currently underway to the rest of the neighborhood—a strategy built upon preservation of its past.

### **Historic Preservation as a Catalyst for Economic Development**

Historic preservation is often a potent catalyst for economic development because it builds on the fabric of the local community and protects neighborhoods from the top-down, big-bang schemes that have been proven failures. Experiences in Pittsburgh and abroad demonstrate that preservation and reuse of historic sites makes good economic sense and benefits the communities in which they are located.

On Pittsburgh’s North Side, the recent renovation and reuse of the former Heinz factory buildings will provide a positive economic impact on the surrounding neighborhoods and on Pittsburgh. Substantial economic impacts from historic preservation have already been realized in Manchester, Allegheny West, Central North Side (the Mexican War Streets), and on the South Side.

Other good examples exist in other parts of the country. Minneapolis was featured in the May/June issue of *Preservation* magazine for its innovative use of the now-empty Pillsbury mill buildings that line the Mississippi River. Those old buildings are forming the core of housing, offices and retail space in a hugely successful neighborhood redevelopment effort that could bring more than 1,000 housing units to the complex<sup>1</sup>.

Closer to home, in East Liberty, the neighborhood is experiencing a revival based on preservation of its past, and the Nabisco nomination is an attempt to build on this momentum. The new Whole Foods grocery store, built in an existing building, has sparked new development not seen in 30 years.

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<sup>1</sup> Camille Lefevre, “Grinding Fire: Minneapolis’ Mill Quarter rises from the ruins of spring wheat and hydropower,” in *Preservation*, May/June 2004, pp.66-67.

Two new restaurants have opened around the corner, including a rare Ethiopian restaurant that is often packed with eager diners. Motor Square Garden has been tastefully restored and reused as the home of AAA of Western Pennsylvania. The newly-restored Kelly-Strayhorn Theater provides a much-needed boost to East Liberty's nightlife. The Liberty Bank Building on Penn Avenue is coming online, and more commercial and housing development consistent with neighborhood values is planned.

East Liberty is now home to a healthy exchange of commerce among street vendors and hip-hop entrepreneurs that seek to reverse the mistakes of the past.

The aim of the Young Preservationists is to highlight the positive impact of historic preservation as a key to economic development efforts, particularly in low- and moderate-income communities. Our strategy is part of an attempt to attract developers, investors, funders, and financiers of preservation and reuse of the region's most important historic assets. Although recent headlines suggest that the Pittsburgh region is stuck in a quagmire of malaise (job losses, population declines, and municipal financial woes), there are good things happening here.

Unfortunately, we also must live with our mistakes—buildings that should have been restored and reused but were not. What would have become of a restored Lawrence Paint Building at Station Square, which could have housed riverfront lofts and a signature restaurant, but was demolished just a few years ago? What could we have made of the North Side Market House demolished in the 1960s? Or of an intact, restored Lower Hill District that would have rivaled Greenwich Village for uniqueness and charm but was demolished in the 1950s? Or of an East Liberty that was saved from maligned, top-down planning?

Pittsburgh is a very special place, and preserving this sense of place is critical to our future. Preservation of place is what numerous writers—such as Jane Jacobs, Tony Hiss, and Richard Florida (author of *Rise of the Creative Class*)—claim will ultimately lead to a region's economic, social, and political growth. Last year, for the first time ever, the YPA unveiled a list of the “Top Ten Best Historic Preservation Opportunities in the Pittsburgh Area.” The list is an attempt to spotlight the vast development prospects for these historic properties. Preservation and reuse of these properties makes good cultural, political, and economic sense for their neighborhoods, provided we give preservation a chance to work.

### **Historic and Architectural Merits of the Historic Nomination**

It is important to note that the Nabisco Plant is one of the largest structures in the City of Pittsburgh. It occupies more than 450,000 square feet of space that covers two city blocks. It can be seen for miles and has been a community icon of progress and hope since it was built in 1918.

YPA believes that the National Biscuit Company bakery meets the following five criteria for designation as a “historic structure” in accordance to section 1.4 of the Pittsburgh Historic Preservation Ordinance.

*Criteria Number 2. Its identification with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the cultural, historic, architectural, archaeological, or related aspect of the development of the City of Pittsburgh, State of Pennsylvania, Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States.*

The collaboration of Adolphus Green (1843-1917), first chairman of the board and later president of the National Biscuit Company, and his architect Albert G. Zimmermann produced a series of state-of-the-art bakeries across the nation, substantially changing the way cookies and crackers were manufactured and marketed. A 1912 article in *The American Architect* stated: “. . . the consolidation and concentration in many lines of business which have been effected in recent years is bringing a different class of men into control - - men who brush aside the makeshift methods of the past and construct solidly and permanently for the future as far as it is possible for human foresight to provide.” (270) Adolphus Green, a lawyer by training, became involved with the consolidation of 114 bakeries and went on to run the National Biscuit Company for nearly twenty years. Although he died two months before the building permit was issued for the Pittsburgh factory, his policies prevailed in its building.

*Criteria Number 3. Its exemplification of an architectural type, style or design distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship.*

The factories resulting from the above collaboration were twice published for their trend-setting fire safety measures including the steel framing and fireproof tiling, and their use of one and one-half inch maple flooring and architectural embellishments above and beyond the normal requirements for factory buildings.

*Criteria Number 4. Its identification as the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose individual work is significant in the history or development of the City of Pittsburgh, the State of Pennsylvania, the Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States.*

The Nabisco factory represents the work of Albert G. Zimmermann (1866-1947) whose practice expanded from Chicago to New York when he was hired as the in-house architect for the National Biscuit Company. National corporations were in their ascendancy at the turn of the century and architectural uniformity was a new concept for the time. There were architects who designed bakeries locally such as the Bartberger & Fisher firm and C. D. Cooley (later the McCormick Company) and they also began to branch out across the country, but neither was associated with a national brand as powerful as Nabisco.

Benno Janssen’s successor firm, Hoffman & Crumpton, authors of the 1948 addition, was known locally for their parking garages and other industrial buildings.

*Criteria Number 7. Its association with important cultural or social aspects or events in the history of the City of Pittsburgh, the State of Pennsylvania, the Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States.*

The products made by Nabisco illustrate a major change in the way households were run between 1898 and the first World War. Pre-packaged food in sizes appropriate for an individual family revolutionized the way food was delivered in the United States and set the scene for the self-serve supermarkets of today.

The National Biscuit Company became a powerhouse in the sales of packaged cookies and crackers by combining some of the best regional bakeries into a national corporation in 1898. By 1917 when the East Liberty factory was constructed, Nabisco was a household word, especially its Uneeda Biscuit brand that catapulted the bakeries into a much-needed expansion.

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*Criteria Number 10. Its unique location and distinctive physical appearance or presence representing an established and familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or the City of Pittsburgh.*

The Nabisco factory faces Mellon Park and Reizenstein School in the East Liberty/Point Breeze section of the city. As such, it has a large “front lawn” and acts as a good neighbor to the nearby residential areas. Thousands of Pittsburghers spent their careers working at the factory with the American flag perched on the rooftop. It also supplied the best “olfactory pollution” (baking cookie smells) in the city and has been a neighborhood landmark for nearly ninety years.

### **The Nomination Process**

YPA submitted the Nabisco nomination with the best intentions and in good faith. However, recent articles in the paper seem to indicate that no attempt was made to notify the property owner, Regional Industrial Development Corporation. In fact, a letter of notification, as required by the City’s historic landmark law, was sent to RIDC on May 27, 2004, informing them of our intention to nominate the former Nabisco Plant for historic status. We did not anticipate a negative reaction from the property owner. After all, given the success of historic preservation here and elsewhere, who wouldn’t support historic preservation as a tool for economic development?

Regardless, we look forward to a positive and constructive dialogue to emphasize the development potential of this site as it relates to the surrounding communities. We recognize that the historic nomination process and the implications for historic designation are often initially misunderstood. But it is important to emphasize that historic designation does not hinder or preclude development. Historically designated structures and districts simply guide development in a way that respects the local community’s values and history.

The YPA stands ready to engage in positive and productive conversations with developers, property owners, and other community stakeholders to encourage the sensible and economically feasible restoration and reuse of historic properties. We would like RIDC to consider YPA as a resource for helping to build bridges with the community, consider opportunities and alternatives, and find other successful examples of adaptive reuse of historic properties that can be applied to the former Nabisco site. We view the historic designation process as a win-win for everyone.

### **Leaving A Legacy for the Next Generation**

Our vision of development based on adaptive reuse of historic buildings sees a future Pittsburgh that shines with activity, new business, and healthy neighborhoods – but still looks like Pittsburgh. Pittsburghers before us made wise investments in creating buildings that would last for decades. We should not squander these resources, but rather nurture and grow this inheritance for the next generation.

YPA believes that historic preservation *is* progress and makes good economic development sense. Historic Preservation has a tremendous track record of generating economic development while also preserving the character of communities. We encourage everyone who cares about the next generation to give historic preservation a chance and support the historic nomination of the former Nabisco Plant.