

# Bill 2018-1212

## NOMINATION OF THE ABRAMS HOUSE TO BE DESIGNATED AS A CITY HISTORIC LANDMARK

CITY COUNCIL REPORT

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**ABRAMS HOUSE - HISTORIC NOMINATION STAFF REPORT**

**Name of Property** ..... Abrams House  
**Address of Property** ..... 118-A Woodland Road  
**Property Owner** ..... Mr. William Snyder and Ms. Patricia Snyder  
**Nominated by:**..... Mr. Don Courtland  
**Date Received:**..... August 7, 2018  
**Parcel No.:** ..... 85-R-211  
**Ward:**..... 14th  
**Zoning Classification:**..... RD1-L  
**Neighborhood:**..... Squirrel Hill  
**Council District:**..... 8 - Strassburger

**FORMAL ACTION REQUIRED BY THE HISTORIC REVIEW COMMISSION:**

1. Act on the Preliminary Determination of Eligibility for Historic Designation (October 3, 2018)
2. Conduct a public hearing for the Historic Designation (November 7, 2018)
3. Review the Report prepared by staff for the property in question, and make a recommendation to the City Council on the Historic Designation (November 7, 2018)

**FORMAL ACTION REQUIRED BY THE PLANNING COMMISSION:**

4. Conduct a public hearing for the Historic Designation (December 4, 2018)
5. Review the recommendations of the Historic Review Commission and make a recommendation to the City Council on the Historic Designation (December 4, 2018)

**FORMAL ACTION REQUIRED BY THE CITY COUNCIL:**

6. Conduct a public hearing
7. Review the recommendations of the Historic Review Commission and the City Planning Commission and take action on the Historic Designation

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**FACTS**

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1. On August 7, 2018 , the staff of the Historic Review Commission received an application for the nomination of the Abrams House to be designated as a City Historic Landmark.

2. **Description of the Abrams House** *(as extracted from the nomination form)*

The Betty & Irving Abrams House, commonly known as the Abrams House- and sometimes referred to as the Venturi House (hereinafter referred to as the Abrams/Venturi House -is located at 118-A Woodland Road. It is a two-bedroom and two-and-a half-bathroom house seated on roughly a third of an acre of land in Squirrel Hill near the campus of Chatham University. Built between 1979 and 1982, the house had one owner since its construction, the Abramses, who lived in it until Mrs. Abrams' death on February 6, 2018.

The house was to be sited on a lot that was the back portion of a lot fronting on Woodland Road. The buildable area of the lot straddled a swale which parallels Woodland Road and Shady Avenue and was graced by a historic stone bridge that once spanned a stream running through the swale.

3. **History of the Abrams House** *(as extracted from the nomination form)*

The Abrams House started as a dream. As a teenager growing up in Squirrel Hill, Betty Abrams was inspired by works of art and architecture around her, and in particular, by the Frank House, designed by renowned modernist architects Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer and located at 96 East Woodland Road. She decided she wanted to live in a modern home and, in 1979, she and her husband commissioned the internationally acclaimed architect, Robert Venturi.

4. **Significance of the Abrams House** *(as extracted from the nomination form)*

The *Pittsburgh Code of Ordinances, Title 11, Historic Preservation, Chapter 1: Historic Structures, Districts, Sites and Objects* lists ten criteria, at least one of which must be met for Historic Designation. The nominator is of the opinion that the Abrams House meets several of the criteria as follows.

2. Identification with significant person or persons

Robert Venturi, founding principal of VSBA, derives his reputation from both his architecture and theoretical and critical writings. His most recent book, written with Denise Scott Brown and published by Harvard University Press, refers to Mr. Venturi and Ms. Scott Brown's contributions as "[having] influenced architects worldwide for nearly half a century."

Mr. Venturi's major work includes a provincial capitol building of the Haute-Garonne in Toulouse, France; the Mielparque Nikko Kirifuri resort hotel near Nikko, Japan; the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery in London; additions to the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego; the Seattle Art Museum; and recently, conceptual design of two high-rise offices in Shanghai; major expansions to Lehigh Valley Hospital; a chapel for the Episcopal Academy near Philadelphia and designs and documents for a new wing for the Woodmere Art Museum in Philadelphia.

VSBA has engaged in over 70 academic projects for over 30 institutions of higher learning, including labs for the University of Kentucky, Princeton, Penn, Michigan, UCLA, UC Santa Barbara, and Yale; libraries at Dartmouth, Penn, Bard, and Harvard's Dumbarton Oaks; and campus centers for Princeton, Dartmouth, Penn, Delaware, Harvard, and Swarthmore. VSBA's architecture and planning are known for particular responsiveness to the client's program, schedule, and budget and to the building's context, accommodating a distinctive aesthetic for each project.

Mr. Venturi's teaching, lecturing, and writing have received widespread attention and critical review. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (Museum of Modern Art Press, 1966) has been translated and published in 18 languages, including a Samizdat edition in Czechoslovakian. It has been honored with the

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AIA's Classic Book Award. It and Learning from Las Vegas (with D. Scott Brown and S. Izenour 1972) are still in print. Mr. Venturi's awards include the Pritzker Architecture Prize (1991) and the Presidential National Medal of the Arts (1992).

3. Exemplification of a distinguished architectural type, style, or design

The Abrams House was the first Postmodern building in Pittsburgh and, as such, represents a unique example of a building style in Pittsburgh. Postmodernism was championed by Robert Venturi. Venturi's Abrams house represents a unique blend of the architect's design philosophy as laid out in Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture in 1966. Venturi, one of the leading voices in Postmodern Architecture in the 1960s, rejected the cold, pure, and literal notions of modernism. He rejected the modernist argument put forth by Mies Van Der Rohe that "less is more" and, in his own tongue-in-cheek way, he refuted it with his own musing, "less is a bore."

Proponents of the Postmodern movement reintroduced traditional architectural forms into predominantly abstract architecture of the 1960s. Venturi's Postmodernism called upon recognizable forms and motifs from traditional architecture such as the chimney, the gable roof form, and symmetry, but he deployed those elements in unusual and unexpected ways. In 1962, he explored complexity and contradiction in the Vanna Venturi House that he designed for his mother in Chestnut Hill, PA. Regarding this design, it was noted in A History of Western Architecture, by Lawrence Wodehouse and Marian Moffett, University of Tennessee (Mayfield Publishing Company, Mountain View, California. 1989. "Post-Modernism", on page 499):

*Venturi combined simplicity of external form with complexity of interior layout, conventional symbols and elements with contradictory arrangements.*

Simple in its materials, the exterior of the home reflected Venturi's principle of the "decorated shed" where ornament and other design elements were applied to the basic form of the building. The front of the Vanna Venturi house did not match the back. The interior unfolded from the entryway into space that could not be expected from the outside. Inside, Venturi played with forms, scale, and other relationships that challenged the straightforward nature of modern architecture that preceded this design.

5. **Integrity**

The building is unchanged from its original design and materials.

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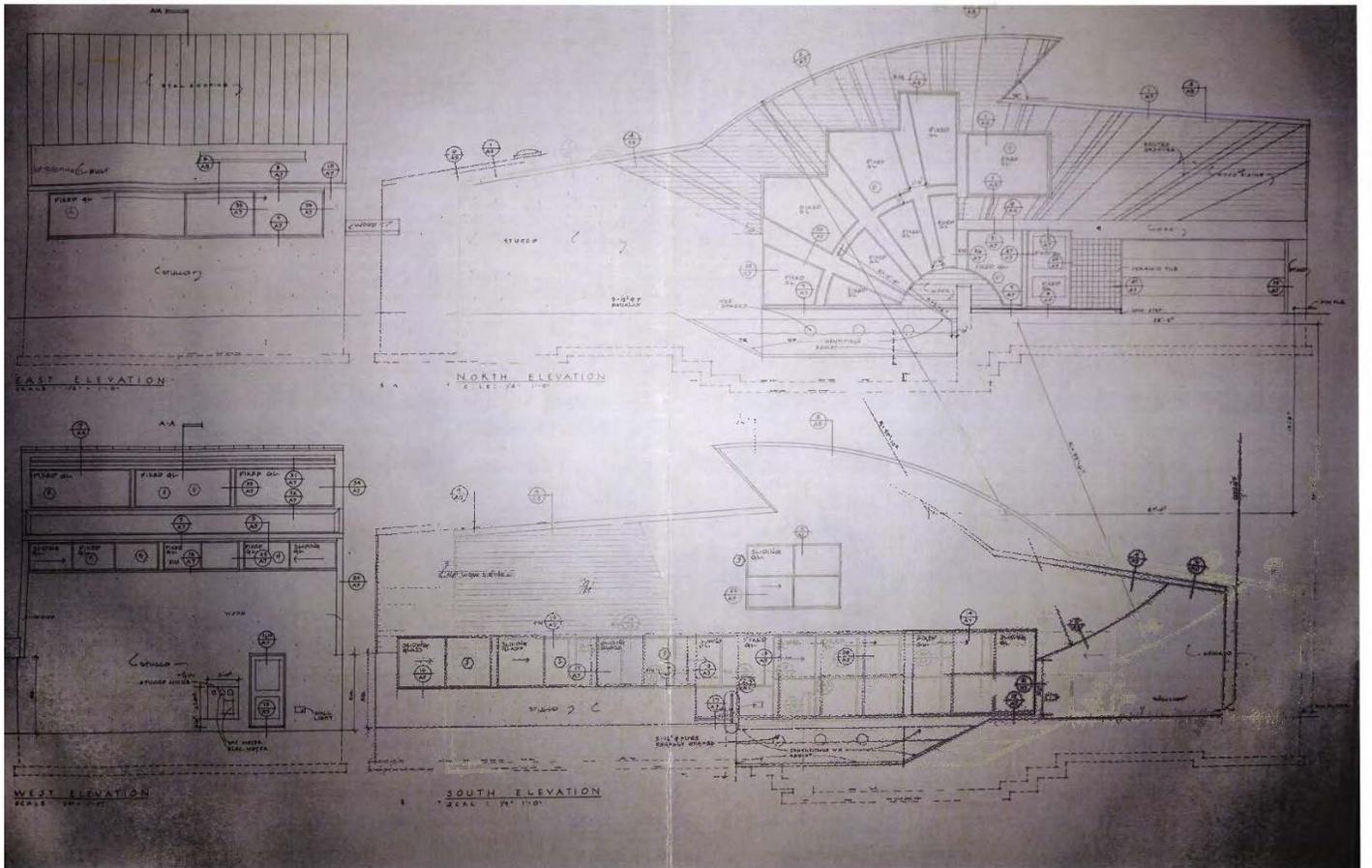
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**6. Photos**



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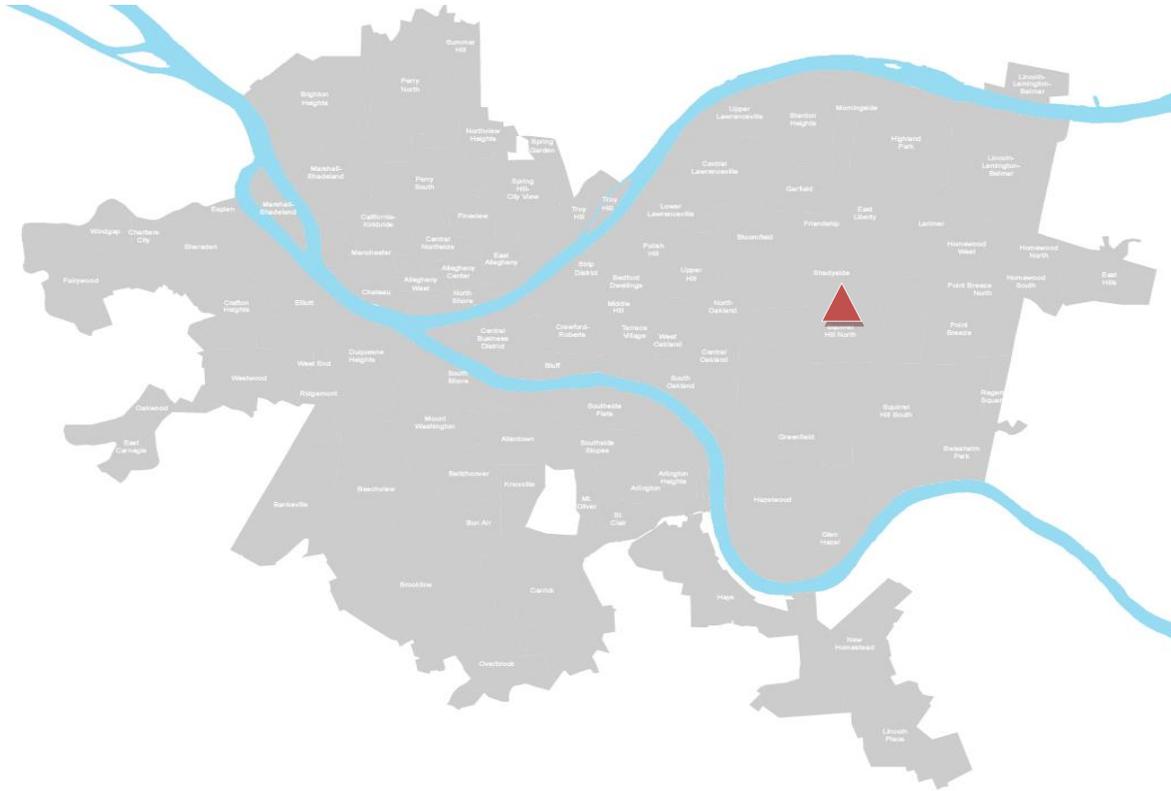


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**7. Maps**



**8. Recommendation of the Historic Review Commission**

The Historic Review Commission held a public hearing regarding the designation of the Abrams House. On November 7, 2018 the Commission voted to recommend to City Council that it designate the Abrams House as historic

**9. Recommendation of the City Planning Commission**

The City Planning Commission held a public hearing regarding the designation the Abrams House. On December 4, 2018 the Commission voted to recommend to City Council that it designate the Abrams House as historic.

**10. Question of Law for City Council**

Title 11 Section 1101.02(e) EXTERIOR ALTERATION. The alteration of exterior architectural features which can be **seen from a public street or way.**

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**11. Meeting Minutes**

**HRC MINUTES – OCTOBER 3, 2018 – PRELIMINARY DETERMINATION HEARING**

NOMINATION OF THE ABRAMS HOUSE  
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Pittsburgh HRC – October 3, 2018

**Abrams House**  
**118-A Woodland Road**

*Historic Nomination*

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**Owner:**

William I. Snyder & Patricia S. Snyder  
203 Creek Drive  
Sewickley, Pa 15143

Ward: 14th

Lot and Block: 85-R-211

Inspector:

**Nominator:**

Donald A. Kortlandt  
100 W. Station Square Drive, Suite 450  
Pittsburgh, Pa 15219

Council District:

Nomination Received: 8/7/18

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**National Register Status:**    **Listed:**                      **Eligible:**

**Proposed Changes:** Nomination for historic designation.

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**Discussion:**

1. Ms. Quinn explains that for both nominations, the Commission will be deciding if the nomination potentially has merit, and if they make a positive decision, the owner will be required to undergo historic review for any exterior changes. Even if they do not make a positive decision, however, the properties can't be demolished. She gives some background on the nomination including its nomination by PHLF and their negotiations with the owners. She goes over the description of the house and site nomination and talks about the lack of visibility of the house from the public right-of-way. She states that she did receive several emails in support of the nomination. She states that the property also has retained integrity.
  2. Mr. Snipe states that his concern is that this building is on private property that can't be seen from the public right-of-way, and there will be no public benefit from its nomination.
  3. Ms. Quinn states that she did check with the law department, and was advised that those issues won't be considered at this time.
  4. Ms. Halderman states that she feels that the nomination does meet Criterion 3, but agrees with Mr. Snipe's concern.
  5. Mr. Gastil clarifies that they can accept the nomination, and will potentially have to look at the other issues at a later time.
  6. Ms. Quinn states that it will have to go through the process, unless the nominator withdraws the nomination. She states that it is up to the Commission what their ultimate recommendation will be.
  7. Ms. Aguirre comments that accepting the nomination as viable will give the nominator more time to fundraise, etc. She states that this is one of the most modern buildings that has come before the Commission.
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8. Mr. Falcone states that the City ordinance does not specify a 50 year time frame like the National Register does, and he would like to compare this nomination with the National Register standards. He does share the same concerns as other Commissioners about public good.
  9. Ms. Aguirre allows comment from a member of the public.
  10. Mr. Andrew Moss steps to the podium. He states that he has been in the house and would argue that it does not deserve to have historic designation, both because of the lack of access and visibility and also the poor condition.
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**Motion:**

1. Mr. Falcone moves that the nomination is viable as it meets at least one of the ten established Criteria [Per the nomination, **Criterion 3**, exemplification of an architectural type, style or design distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship, the State of Pennsylvania, the Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States.]
  2. Ms. Halderman seconds.
  3. Ms. Aguirre asks for a vote; Ms. Aguirre, Mr. Falcone, Ms. Halderman, and Mr. Gastil are in favor, Mr. Snipe is apposed, and Ms. Loysen abstains. Motion carries.
  4. Mr. Gastil comments for the record that he would like the Commission to address the proper authorship of the work at the next meeting.
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**HRC MINUTES – NOVEMBER 7, 2018 RECOMMENDATION**

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Pittsburgh HRC – November 7, 2018

***Abrams House***  
***118-A Woodland Road***

***Historic Nomination***

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**Owner:**

William I. Snyder & Patricia S. Snyder  
203 Creek Drive  
Sewickley, Pa 15143

Ward: 14th

Lot and Block: 85-R-211

Inspector:

**Nominator:**

Donald A. Kortlandt  
100 W. Station Square Drive, Suite 450  
Pittsburgh, Pa 15219

Council District:

Nomination Received: 8/7/18

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**National Register Status:**    **Listed:**                      **Eligible:**

**Proposed Changes:** Nomination for historic designation.

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**Discussion:**

11. Ms. Quinn states that she received another packet from the nominator including interior photos, which she projects on the screen. She states that the nominator as well as a representative from the owner are in attendance today.
  12. Ms. Aguirre reminds the Commission that they found that the property potentially meets **Criterion 3**, exemplification of an architectural type, style or design distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship, the State of Pennsylvania, the Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States.
  13. Mr. Donald Kortlandt steps to the podium; he is the nominator of the property. He asks if they considered the significance of the architect.
  14. Ms. Quinn states that as far as she recalls the question was if this was a good example of the architect's work or not.
  15. Mr. Gastil states that he does believe it to be significant in that regard, and just wants to make sure that the full name of the firm is used and not just that of the architect.
  16. Mr. Kortlandt gives some background on the property and PHLF's history with it as well as the options that were explored with the owners to preserve it. He also addresses the private nature of the home and concerns about its condition.
  17. Ms. Aguirre asks for testimony from the ownership.
  18. Mr. Stanley Levine steps to the podium; he is representing the owners. He also introduces Patty Schneider, one of the owners. He states that he appreciates the testimony of Mr. Kortlandt but would like to address the frailties of the nomination as it relates to this particular home as well as the circumstances that
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led to the nomination from the owner's perspective.

19. Ms. Aguirre asks for public comment.
20. Ms. Melissa McSwigan steps to the podium. She states that Woodland Road has many significant homes that are important to the City of Pittsburgh. She states that she understands the issue with visibility but states that the road is part of the Chatham campus and some former homes have been incorporated into the campus, and that the road is fairly vibrant and accessible despite being private. She states that the topography of the city is challenging and hopes limited visibility wouldn't prevent designation. She states that she is hopeful about the possibility of the home being moved or some other compromise being reached.
21. Mr. Joel Sancher steps to the podium; he is a contractor. He states that he went through the house at the request of the former owner and found that it is in extremely poor condition. He cites some construction issues that would prevent it from being moved or even being repaired.
22. Ms. Aguirre asks for additional public comment; there is none.
23. Mr. Gastil recaps the process for the Commissioners.
24. Ms. Quinn reads into the record what the Commission is allowed to consider.
25. Mr. Harless clarifies that the criteria for designation do not address visibility from the public right-of-way.
26. Ms. Quinn states that is correct and would come up at this point if a project were proposed.
27. The Commission discusses the nomination

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**Motion:**

5. Mr. Falcone moves to provide a positive recommendation on the nomination to City Council as it meets at least one of the ten established Criteria, **Criterion 3**, exemplification of an architectural type, style or design distinguished by innovation, rarity, uniqueness, or overall quality of design, detail, materials, or craftsmanship, the State of Pennsylvania, the Mid-Atlantic region, or the United States.
  6. Mr. Harless seconds.
  7. Ms. Aguirre asks for a vote; Ms. Aguirre, Mr. Falcone, and Mr. Harless are in favor, Mr. Snipe and Ms. Loysen are opposed, and Mr. Gastil abstains. Motion carries.
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**PLANNING COMMISSION MINUTES –DECEMBER 4, 2018**

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**B. DEVELOPMENT REVIEWS** (See **Attachment B** for staff reports.)

1. Hearing and Action: [Historic Nomination: 118-A Woodland Road, Abrams House](#)

[Ms. Quinn](#) made a presentation in accord with the attached staff report. Ms. Quinn recommended approval of the proposal.

The Abrams House (often referred to as the Venturi House) is a two- bedroom, two-and-a-half bathroom house seated on roughly a third of an acre of land in Squirrel Hill near the campus of Chatham University. The home was built between 1979 and 1982 and had only one owner the Abramses, who lived in it until Mrs. Abrams' death in February of 2018.

Ms. Quinn stated that the Historic Review Commission finds that the Abrams House meets criteria three – exemplification of a distinguished architectural type, style or design. The Abrams House is of frame and Masonry construction with a rolled roof, demonstrating conventional building methods, with stone-faced ponds abutting the first-floor living room and dining area and being connected under the first floor via culverts to reflect the site's historic watercourse which was spanned by historic stone bridge which now spans the pond segment abutting the south wall of the living room. This House represents a unique blend of the architect's design philosophy as laid out in Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture in 1966.

Ms. Quinn concluded by requesting that the commission make a positive recommendation to City Council.

Stanley Levin of Woodland Road presented reasons why he feels that the Planning Commission should not make a positive recommendation to City Council. He said after reviewing the City Code he believes the commission should also consider preserving harmonious properties and decide if this property is suitable for recommendation.

Woodland Road is a private road maintained by the residents of Woodland Road including Chatham College. He gave a definition of Trespass as it relates to the Pennsylvania Code. The road is private and trespassing would be prohibited. Visiting this property would be trespassing.

He also presented information relating to the state of the said property stating that the home is severely deteriorated and has extensive water damage the windows seals are destroyed resulting in a permanent fog on them. He also show several photographs showing the damage.

He concluded by requesting that the commission make a negative recommendation to City Council based on the trespass issue and the extreme deterioration of the property.

The Chairwoman called for comments from the Public.

Don Courtland of 115 Grandview Avenue the applicant of this nomination spoke in full support of the nomination stating that the property meets many of the criteria's to be a historic nomination.

Clayton Deusch a resident of Western Pennsylvania spoke in opposition of the nomination stating that this is a rush to judgement and should not be nominated.

There being no [more](#) comments from the Public, the Chairwoman called for questions and comments from the Commissioners.

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Ms. O'Neill stated that section 1101 relates only to the Historic Review Commission when considering exterior alterations.

Mr. Levine said the workmanship of this home is wood. This house will not last in the years to come.

Ms. O'Neill asked if the applicant has received any quotes on the costs of the restoration.

Mr. Levine said in excess of \$200,000.

Ms. Snyder the owner of the property said she has been trying to get this home in shape for 2 years. Mr. Myers turned his back on her and the home. She feels this is hypocrisy and the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation had the chance to fix it. She brought it because no one wants it. Now they want to make her to her do it and she is completely exhausted

Ms. Quinn addressed the 10 criteria and if you want to address condition you would need to compare it to other Venturi homes. The Historic Review Commission does to address condition.

Ms. O'Neill asked if condition considered.

Ms. Quinn said no but the applicant can submit a hardship application.

Ms. Mingo asked Ms. Quinn if there is any intention by the City to nominate any other modern houses.

Ms. Quinn said that one of the goals is to do a midcentury survey to nominate more properties in the city.

Ms. Deitrick called for the motion to make a recommendation to the city council.

There being no more questions or comments from the Commissioners, the Chairwoman called for the motion.

Ms. O'Neill said that the commission does sympathize with the property owner.

**MOTION:** That the Planning Commission of the City of Pittsburgh provide a positive recommendation to City Council.

MOVED BY Ms. Dick;                      SECONDED BY Ms. Mingo.

ROLL CALL:

**Yes**

Ms. Detrick  
Ms. Mingo  
Ms. Dick

**No**

**Abstain**

Ms. O'Neill  
Ms. Burton-Faulk

OPPOSED:

None

**CARRIED**