

GUEST OPINION

The city's historic sites are in big trouble

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Philadelphia is a city with a past. But the ability to preserve its distinguished history in bricks and mortar is being threatened by insufficient funds, insensitive public policy and the quest for modernization.

Earlier this summer, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the country's largest preservation organization, placed Independence Hall on the 1991 list of "America's 11 Most Endangered Historic Places." Together with the other sites that comprise America's most historic square-mile, the birthplace of our nation is in disrepair.

Although the National Park Service puts on a brilliant face for tourists, as many of these landmarks appear to be in mint condition, it does not have enough money for more than "quick-fix" maintenance. Adequate federal funding is not available to repair leaky



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roofs, to replace archaic fire sprinklers, plumbing, heating, air-conditioning systems or to remove potential hazards such as asbestos.

The National Park Service, along with local preservationists, historians, and corporations, is seeking a pool of funds that will ensure the protection of the national landmarks within the urban park's limits.

But what about those historic treasures outside of the park's boundaries? Surely, they also represent Philadelphia's historic legacy to the nation, and unfortunately they do not enjoy the stewardship of the National Park Service. Among these are Eastern State Penitentiary, built in 1821 as a model for other penal systems across the nation and in Europe; the site of the 1876 Centennial; and the Fairmount Waterworks where restoration efforts of the mid-1980s have been stalled by the city's fiscal problems.

While these sites fight the ongoing battle to enlist public and private funding in order to survive, others are threatened with demolition.

In July, when the state Supreme Court declared that the city's historic preservation law violated the state

constitution's provision that private property "cannot be taken for public use without just compensation," demolition of structures like the Boyd — Philadelphia's last surviving wide-screen theater — and the Victory Building — a 19th century commercial structure designed in the same Second Empire style as City Hall — became more of a certainty.

Philadelphia's history is once again being sacrificed; lest we forget the breaking of the "gentleman's agreement" that once ensured William Penn's historic dominance of the city's skyline.

While Philadelphia's politicians and developers are giving empty promises of new economic growth, they ignore the city's most valuable tourist and promotional resource — its history. Agencies like the Philadelphia Historical Commission [which deals with this matter at a meeting today] must take a firm stand to preserve our historic resources, rather than to stand idly by and permit the greedy destruction of them.

Philadelphia's uniqueness as an American city lies in its 300 years of history. We can either build on that strength and earn the respect of other urban centers which have failed in the effort to preserve their past or we can succumb to the historical indifference and insensitive public policy-making that has come to characterize our city's attempt at modernization.

The choice is ours to make. If we act wisely, the dividends will be great for ourselves and for posterity.