

# 30-Year Watch

**Liberty Bell Pavilion,  
Philadelphia, by  
Mitchell/Giurgola  
Architects, 1976  
By Fred Bernstein**

In preparation for the U.S. bicentennial in 1976, the National Park Service commissioned Romaldo Giurgola (of New York's Mitchell/Giurgola Architects) to design a new building for the Liberty Bell.

Moving the bell from Independence Hall to a modern structure was bound to create controversy. Giurgola, said to be "keenly aware" of the concern, worked to maintain a strong relationship between the bell and its traditional setting. Visitors entered his building through a long, spine-like room that angled up until it culminated in the tall chamber housing the bell itself. A skylight, running down the center of the spine, ensured that the top of Independence Hall remained in view. And, with only glass behind it, the bell appeared to rest at the base of the old building.



**Pavilion viewed from new pavilion**

*Philadelphia Inquirer* architecture critic Inga Saffron has described the glass and aluminum building as "an architectural origami" with "swoops that prefigured by decades the work of Frank Gehry and Santiago Calatrava." But, at just 4,000 square feet, it had a hard time holding its own against the vastly larger masonry buildings around it.

Two years ago, the Park Service unveiled a larger, brick and granite Liberty Bell pavilion, designed by Bohlin Cywinski Jackson. Unlike the Giurgola building, which – by design – was smack in the center of the mall, the new building was moved to the edge, leaving a lot of space for greenery.

For a time, the Giurgola building was used as a security checkpoint for visitors. But it stood in the way of a lawn that planners hoped would run, uninterrupted, from Independence Hall to the National Constitution Center (a new building by Pei Cobb Freed and Partners).

Demolition of the pavilion began in March. "Removal will be complete and the area will be landscaped in time for the Fourth of July celebration," Frances Delmar, a spokesperson for Independence National Historical Park, wrote in an e-mail.

As a building that dies before it has decayed, the Liberty Bell pavilion is in good company. In Minneapolis, the Guthrie Theater, designed in the early 1960s by Ralph Rapson, and still functioning beautifully, is slated to be torn down this year. (The Guthrie's last season in the building ends in May, and its new building, by Jean Nouvel, will open later in 2006.) The original Guthrie, connected to the Walker Art Center by a common lobby, will be replaced – like Giurgola's pavilion – by a lawn.

Rapson (who still practices in Minneapolis) and Giurgola (now living in Australia) have both outlived their buildings. Born in Italy, Giurgola came to New York on a Fulbright fellowship in 1949. In the 1970s, he moved to Philadelphia, where he began teaching at Penn and was closely associated with Louis Kahn, Robert Venturi, and Ed Bacon – a group that was sometimes labeled "the Philadelphia School." In the 1980s, he became chair of the architecture department at Columbia, and later spun off his firm's Philadelphia office (which is now the firm MGA Partners Architects). From New York, he moved to Canberra, Australia, to supervise construction of his Australian capital complex. (The New York office of Mitchell/Giurgola Architects has carried on without Giurgola.)

For a while, it looked like the Liberty Bell pavilion would, like Giurgola, find a new home. American College in Bryn Mawr agreed to relocate the building to its suburban campus – which has several other Giurgola buildings. The deal was announced with great fanfare. But then, when the college was unable to raise the money for the project, it said little publicly. That left people thinking the building had been saved; in fact, the bell was about to toll. Last-minute attempts to find a taker (for \$1) failed.

Perhaps it's time for someone to create an outdoor architecture park, the American equivalent of Japan's Meiji Mura Museum, where dozens of buildings endangered by development – including much of Frank Lloyd Wright's stunning Imperial Hotel – have been relocated. Preserving buildings out of context, though not ideal, is better than not preserving them at all.

"Someday," said a ranger at the new Liberty Bell pavilion, who didn't want his name used, perhaps because he seemed to care almost as much about Giurgola as about the Liberty Bell, "we may read that the National Park Service tore down one of the Philadelphia School's most important buildings."

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