

AIA New Jersey Brings Attention to Bell Labs

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SUMMARY

AIA New Jersey facilitated a wave of public interest in the Eero Saarinen designed Bell Labs building in Holmdel, NJ, through a design charrette, charrette report, and open house. Since its closing in 2007, the use and importance of the building had been in question, razing the modernist structure had even been considered. The building recently changed owners and is slated to be a mixed-use adaptive reuse project. The new ownership credits AIA New Jersey for bringing attention to the importance of the building and helping to identify potential renovation options.

BELL LABS BACKGROUND

Built in 1962 and expanded in subsequent years, Bell Labs in Holmdel, N.J., designed by Finnish-American architect Eero Saarinen and landscape design by Sasaki, Walker and Associates is considered the most important example of Post World War II architecture in New Jersey and one of the most important in the nation. Bell Labs was home to the work of several Nobel laureates and significant technological achievements involving data networking, the transistor, cellular telephone technology, solar cells, and the laser, to name a few.

The building was closed in July 2007 and the 472-acre property was listed for sale by owner Alcatel-Lucent. That same year the site was named to Preservation New Jersey's list of the "10 Most Endangered Historic Sites in New Jersey."

ARCHITECTS JOIN, PRESENT OPTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

On April 11, 12 and 13, 2008, 36 design professionals and planners convened for a design charrette at the site to "visit, study, reflect, analyze and scheme" about the magnificent building and its landscape. In December 2008, a 70-page report titled, "The Bell Labs Charrette: A Sustainable Future," was published. It documents the charrette and serves as a resource to those who want to learn more about the effort to preserve and rehabilitate Bell Labs in a way that reflects its origins and the integrity of its design while adapting the site to meet a new era.

The Bell Labs charrette, charrette report, tour, open house and attendant publicity have resulted in more than 40 mentions in 20 media outlets.

Additionally, the contract purchaser of the property, Ralph Zucker, president of Somerset Development, credited the charrette with reaffirming his vision for the property and with guiding the company in its formation of a preservationist approach to its redevelopment. Zucker said the charrette succeeded in demonstrating that the building had great flexibility and could be adapted for a number of uses. Somerset's plans call for preserving the building and landscape and adapting it for retail, office, hotel/conference center and residential uses, with a rezoning plan having recently been submitted to the municipality. The property had previously been considered too difficult to preserve and earlier plans had called for demolishing most of the structure and replacing it with smaller office buildings and single-family homes.

In addition to the artistic and historic significance of preserving a modernist landmark that is symbolic of the technological achievements of the American corporation, the outcome also has green significance in that the huge building is being adapted to new uses rather than being torn down. The adaptive reuse is clearly a more sustainable approach than demolishing it and building new.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

AIA-NJ's Historic Resources Committee led a coalition that sponsored the charrette and the charrette report. The other coalition members included Preservation New Jersey and DOCOMOMO-US New York/Tri-State (the regional chapter of the international group devoted to the Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighborhoods of the Modernist Movement), as well as their national umbrella. The coalition's efforts won a NJ State Historic Preservation Award.

AIA-NJ called attention to the conclusions of the charrette through a subsequent tour of the building for AIA-NJ members in June of 2008 and their participation in an open house attended by approximately 1,500 area residents in September of 2009. In 2008, AIA-NJ also named Bell Labs to its "150 Best Buildings and Places," which was

developed in association with AIA's 150th anniversary.

The Public Awareness Committee of AIA-NJ, chaired by Robert Barranger, in conjunction with AIA-NJ's public relations consultant, Beckerman Public Relations, publicized the efforts to call attention to the need to preserve the building at every step of this process, including the charrette, the publication of the charrette report, the historic preservation award and the building tour.

Through the public awareness process and ongoing dialogue with the importance of this building local AIA members and the local component have maintained an engaged role increasing the public's awareness of the AIAs mission and position in the local community.

RESOURCES

More Best Practices

The following AIA Best Practices provide additional information related to this topic:

- 21.06.06 The Minnesota Design Team
- 21.06.04 AIA Iowa Celebrates 100 Years, Increases Architectural Awareness
- 21.06.05 Using the Media to Communicate Your Message

Feedback

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Key Terms

- Leadership
- Associations
- Design associations
- Architectural associations
- The American Institute of Architects
- AIA components
- Historic preservation
- Design charrettes