

CHANGING SKYLINE: CHANNELING TV HISTORY

Renovation of a Rittenhouse Row tower shines a spotlight on an old KYW studio where performers included Mike Douglas, Ernie Kovacs, and Zsa Zsa Gabor.

February 04, 2011

By Inga Saffron, Inquirer Architecture Critic

Every city has a few buildings that are so completely mismatched to their surroundings that you can't help wondering how they got there. Such was the case with a small, brooding tower on Rittenhouse Row that I used to think of as the Dark Knight of Walnut Street.

While the neighboring shops and early-20th-century skyscrapers all vie for our attention with big, eye-catching windows, the facade at 1619 always stood silent and inscrutable, veiled in a burka of black soapstone panels.

How did such a loner of a building ever find its way onto Philadelphia's toniest shopping street? And what mysteries lurked behind that impenetrable cloak?

Plenty, it seems.

The secrets of the Dark Knight have just been opened to the light, thanks to a top-to-bottom renovation by Bohlin Cywinski Jackson, the same architects who created the Apple store a few doors to the east. Not only did they rip off the building's solid facade and transform it into a glowing column, they also uncovered a wealth of stories about a little building that played an outsize role in the history of television.

It turns out that the six-story building - a sort of skyscraper in miniature - was once the home of KYW's radio and television operations.

This was where America's first televised soap opera was performed, where comedian Ernie

Kovacs adapted his zany routine for a TV audience, where a salty-mouthed Zsa Zsa Gabor inspired the invention of the tape delay, and where Mike Douglas perfected the art of the celebrity talk-show host. Everyone from John and Yoko to Richard Nixon obligingly trooped into his basement studio for conversation before a live audience.

As hard as it is to imagine, all those milestones occurred in a building that is just 51 feet wide and only slightly taller than the townhouse-size shops on its flanks.

The little retail and office tower was commissioned in 1938 by Westinghouse Broadcasting - the Comcast of its era - to house its newest trophy, KYW radio, which the company had just relocated from Chicago to Philadelphia.

Because Walnut Street was so noisy, Westinghouse's architects, Tilden & Pepper, covered the facade with the thick stone tablets to sound-proof the recording studios, located on the upper floors. When television came along in the early '40s, the two-story-high spaces were easily adapted for cameras.

In the early '60s, KYW carved a small theater into the basement for Douglas, who had retooled himself from a big-band-era crooner. Celebrities would beat a path down Walnut Street, past Bachrach photographers and Roger Kent menswear, to appear on Douglas' daytime show. He particularly favored singers, and used the program to boost the careers of performers including Barbra Streisand, Aretha Franklin, and the Rolling Stones.

KYW (which had been traded from NBC to CBS) moved out in 1972, to a new home on Independence Mall that was even more dark and forbidding than 1619 Walnut St. Over the years, so many tenants passed through the building that much of its pioneering television history was forgotten, buried under layers of carpet and sheetrock. But when the current owners, Vesper Property Group, began gutting the interior last year, they found traces of the

early broadcast era preserved like ancient cave drawings. You can still see the shadows of tape markings on what was Douglas' studio stage. Overhead, stenciled numbers on the steel rafters mark the positions where cameras and lights were hung. The footprint of a "gentlemen's cocktail lounge" is now visible on the new retail mezzanine, a reminder of television's freewheeling early days. Vesper founder Gary Silvi said the surviving vestiges will be left in place - at least until new tenants cover them over again. While two firms have taken most of the office space, he's still searching for a major retailer to lease the 13,000-square-foot, three-level shop.

For all the nostalgia that those interior discoveries evoked, the architects' treatment of the KYW building exterior was anything but reverent.

Although 1619 is located in a Center City historic district, the designers at Bohlin Cywinski Jackson were permitted to strip off the facade after two of the soapstone panels crashed to the sidewalk one morning in July 2009 and the building was declared a danger.

The new facade, designed by Bernard Cywinski and Andrew Moroz, is as different from the old as dark is from light, yet it still manages to acknowledge the building's modernist heritage. The original architects were clearly mimicking PSFS' 1932 groundbreaking tower, right down to the tan brick they chose for the vertical piers at the building's corners.

Cywinski and Moroz play up that resemblance to PSFS: For the office floors, they replaced the original soapstone grid with a crisp arrangement of ribbon windows and aluminum panels.

They made their strongest mark on the street, however, turning a rather ordinary retail space into a two-story stunner. The storefront is faced in a sheer curtain of glass, similar to the facade that BCJ designed for the Apple store.

But while Apple's glass wall is all about erasing the boundaries between inside and out, the storefront at 1619 is more of a riff on geometry: The square of the storefront glass is reprised in the square aluminum door frame and the square pins that hold the glass in place.

The arrangement was dictated partly by necessity. Vesper's budget for glass couldn't match Steve Jobs', and BCJ needed to include more fins and pins to hold the wall in place. Still, the end result is one of the rare instances where a major alteration has improved a historic building.

One particularly nice touch is the new mesh screen that crowns the building, making it appear taller and slimmer. Cywinski and Moroz further emphasize the verticals with the addition of black and white stripes above the office vestibule.

To break up the flatness of the facade, Cywinski persuaded Vesper to include a balcony on the top floor. "It's an element of humanity you don't always see on a commercial building," he noted. "It makes the building participate with the street."

That's something no one would have ever expected from the old Dark Knight.

Contact architecture critic Inga Saffron at 215-854-2213 or isaffron@phillynews.com.