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# CONSTRUCTING A CONNECTING PLACE

## The Nation's Oldest Presbytery Gets a Sustainable New Home

By Amanda Gibney Weko

**“***We strive to be . . . a hub for networking and communication within and beyond the borders of our presbytery. We are a ‘connecting place’.*”  
– Presbytery of Philadelphia

Designed to reflect the Presbyterian Church’s mission and service to the greater Philadelphia community, the new administrative headquarters for the nation’s oldest presbytery helps the church empower, support, and join with its congregations and neighbors. The building houses business and executive offices for a staff of 11 serving over 135 churches in Philadelphia, Bucks, Montgomery, and Delaware counties. Amenities include a large conference space for use by local churches and community groups, a small chapel, and the Presbyterian Resource Center, which houses shared resources for the presbyteries of Philadelphia and West Jersey.

The project gives built form to the presbytery’s mission, and does so in a sustainable manner. The administrative offices were relocated from an historic mansion at 22nd and Locust Streets in Center City, Philadelphia, to a property on East Gowen Avenue in the northwest part of the city. New construction al-

lowed for on-site parking and easier access, both of which were challenges of the original headquarters. It also presented opportunities for environmentally and economically responsible construction.

Bill Cobb of Haverstick-Borthwick Co. led the design-build project for the presbytery. Active in the church for decades, Cobb volunteered his time as owner’s representative on behalf of the presbytery’s board of trustees.

*“Sustainable design was a priority for both the presbytery and the design team”*

- Joseph Powell, BKP

“The project made a statement about the presbytery’s core values,” explained Cobb. “The new headquarters is still within the city but serves more communities and offers more uses, in an extremely energy-efficient building.”

Buell Kratzer Powell of Philadelphia, Pa., designed the facility, with construction provided by LSN Contractors & Construction Management, LLC, of Esington, Pa.

“Sustainable design was a priority for both the presbytery and the design team,” said BKP Principal Joseph Powell, AIA, LEED AP BD+C. “We also considered the building’s neighborhood context and long-term functional efficiency. The design encourages a new sense of collaboration among different departments and with church leaders and community members who visit the building for meetings and events.”

Energy performance was optimized through the use of a geothermal ground-water-source heat pump HVAC system, controlled lighting systems, and water-efficient restroom fixtures. Clerestory windows and skylights flood the interior with natural daylight and views, with exterior sunshades maximizing solar gain in winter and minimizing it in summer. Porous bituminous paving and rain gardens for storm water management complement natural indoor finishes and furnishings such as bamboo paneling and terrazzo tile. A green roof has been designed for inclusion in the future. Although the building was designed to achieve LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Silver, the presbytery did not pursue formal certification.

The headquarters shares its northwest Philadelphia site with Oxford Presbyterian Church, and sits within the context of semi-urban brick twin homes. The new building’s exterior brick and manufactured stone veneer systems offer an insulation factor while complementing

nearby architecture. The building’s 8,500 square feet are comfortably spread on a single story for both accessibility and appropriate scale within the neighborhood.

In the former headquarters, staff members were divided among four floors—a logistical challenge for regular interaction. Now, executive, managerial, and

As an emerging MBE contractor, LSN viewed the presbytery headquarters as a keystone project

support staff are centralized in a skylit quadrangle. Each of four departments: Finance (e.g. business administration and accounting), Ministers (e.g. pastoral ministry, general presbytery, and stated clerk), Churches (congregational ministry), and Mission/Partnerships are orga-

nized around shared filing and support spaces. A combination of open workstations with private and semi-private offices ensures flexibility of use over time. The openness of the plan allows the staff to interact with patrons and visitors.

The new arrangement offers two wings: one each for administrative and public spaces. The division permits community meetings and events to take place away from staff member areas and allows public areas to operate when administrative staff members are unavailable, such as in the evenings or on weekends.

The Resource Center serves all member churches as a library, educational center, welcome station, and research facility. It is immediately visible through the building’s main entry, welcoming and inviting members to share information and a sense of community.

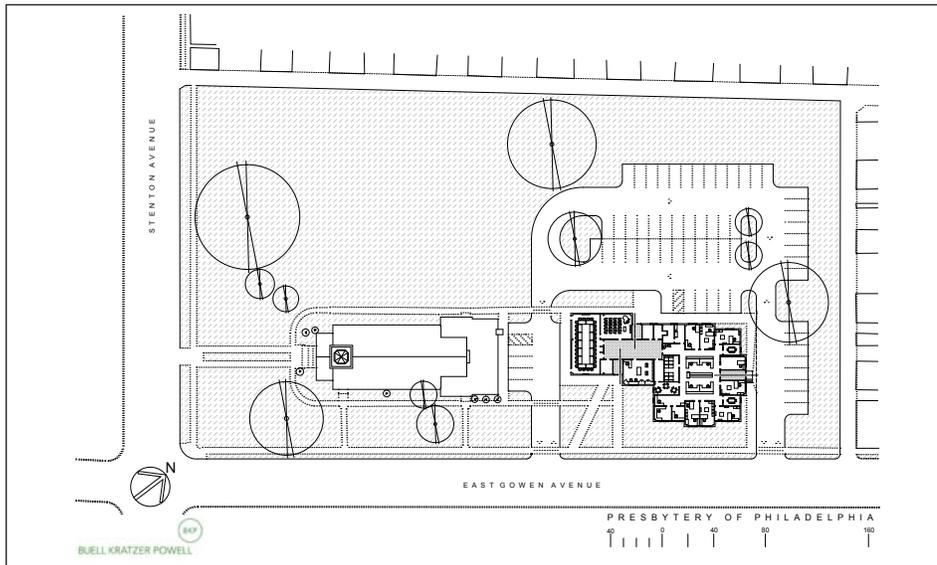
“The design has been very effective for us because it helps us connect in a more collegial way,” said presbytery Busi-

RIGHT: Presbytery of Philadelphia Administrative Headquarters Lobby.

BELOW: Presbytery of Philadelphia Administrative Headquarters with neighboring Oxford Presbyterian Church in the foreground.

Images ©Jeffrey Totaro, Photographer and used courtesy of Buell Kratzer and Powell.





Presbytery of Philadelphia Administrative Headquarters site plan.

ness Administrator Larry Davis. “We are working together a lot more; there’s more staff interaction and communication.”

Davis indicated over 600 people each month visit the new administrative headquarters for meetings and events. Although the presbytery reduced its building area from 14,000 to 8,500 square feet, a functional layout improves efficiency. The new building allows the presbytery to hold far more meetings for committees and churches in a centralized location and contributes to organizing other aspects of the ministry that weren’t possible in the previous building.

“There’s a great sense of space and light and air,” added Davis. “We don’t feel like we’ve downsized.”

Randy Washington, owner of LSN Contractors, oversaw the construction management scope of work along with his quality control team of Henry Cooper and Ben Spillard. LSN was responsible for selection of all subcontractors, cost and quality control, budget monitoring, schedule maintenance, and coordination of biweekly construction meetings.

As an emerging MBE contractor, LSN viewed the presbytery headquarters as a keystone project, and worked collaboratively with Cobb and the design team to execute effectively. According to Washington, the biggest project challenge was overcoming difficult weather conditions. Fast-track construction proceeded through the winter of 2010, when major storms caused multiple delays. However, the team maintained its schedule and the headquarters was completed in August of the same year.

Additional project teammates included structural engineers Joseph Barbato & Associates of Chadds Ford, Pa., and civil engineers Hunt Engineering of Malvern, Pa. 

## HAVERSTICK-BORTHWICK FOR THE IMPORTANT PROJECTS

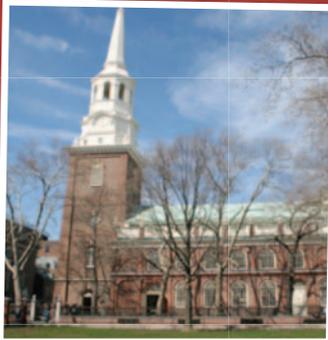
### Christ Church Philadelphia and Neighborhood House



The Founders of the Country worshipped here. George Washington, Betsy Ross and Benjamin Franklin, to name a few. The Episcopal Church in America was established here when they

broke away from the Church of England as the new Country was founded. The Neighborhood House was the only gathering place in the area for the nearby immigrant populations in the late 19th century

When the Sanctuary needed to be restored and fire protection added, followed by the restoration and ADA adds to Neighborhood House, Haverstick-Borthwick Company was chosen to make it happen.



**Some of the Awards to Date:**  
 GBCA Building Excellence  
 First Place Historic Preservation  
 Sanctuary - 2008  
 Neighborhood House - 2010  
 Philadelphia Preservation Alliance  
 Preservation Achievement Grand  
 Jury Award  
 Sanctuary - 2008  
 Neighborhood House - 2011

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