

# A Civic Renewal

Proposal for Reuse of the Civic Arena

Robert S. Pfaffmann, AIA

# A Civic Renewal

The Civic Arena is an architectural and engineering landmark that can have new life as civic space for the Lower Hill and support the vital reconnection of the Hill community and downtown Pittsburgh. This proposal is framed to elevate the dialogue and engage ideas in an open and inclusive community planning and design process.

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**Pittsburgh Moderns**



**"Race to the Future" 1961**

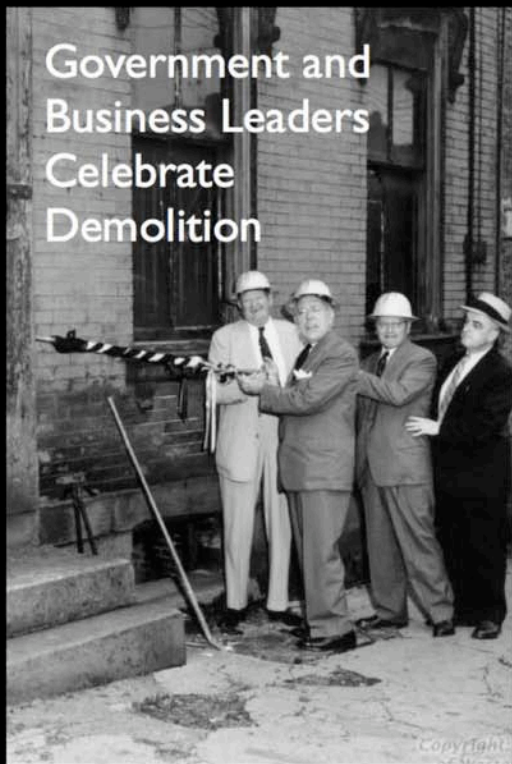
## Jane Jacobs, *Death & Life of Cities*, 1961

"Cultural or civic centers can probably in a few cases employ ground-replanning tactics to reweave them back into the city fabric . . . One side of Pittsburgh's new civic center, at least, might be rewoven into the downtown, from which it is now buffered."

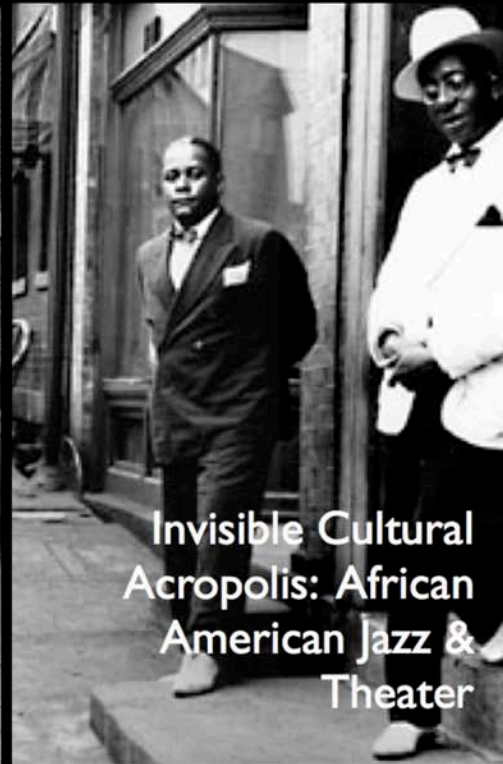




**Government and  
Business Leaders  
Celebrate  
Demolition**



**Invisible Cultural  
Acropolis: African  
American Jazz &  
Theater**



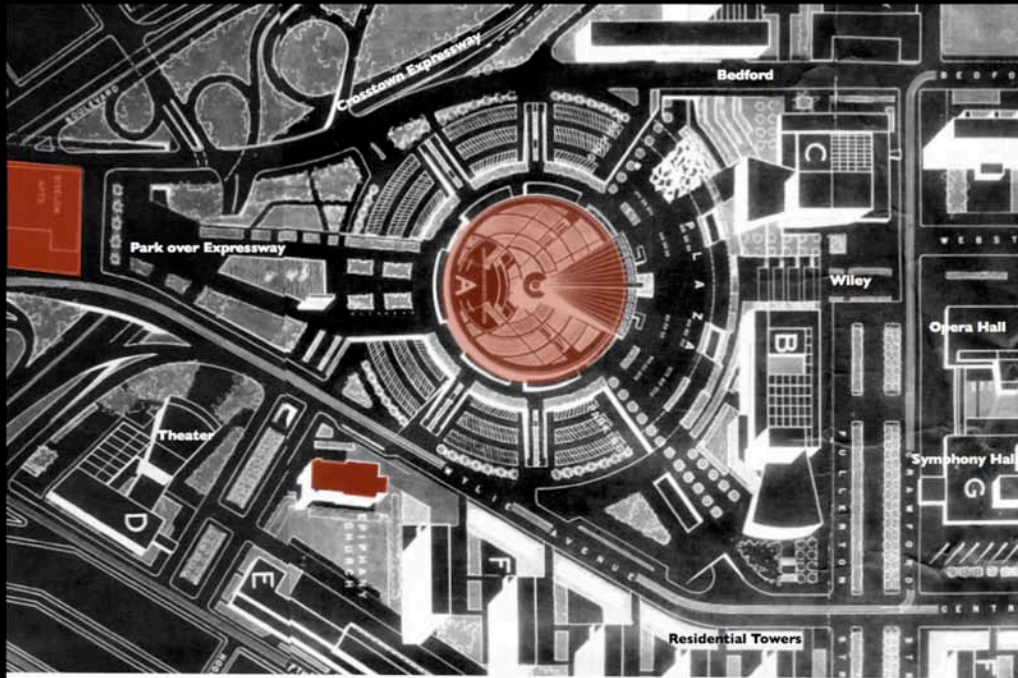
Hill view point: wall!

# Multiple viewpoints

View from Historic Suburban Wiley Avenue Today







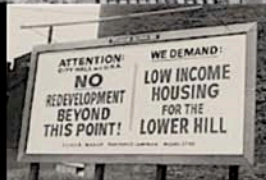
Failed Master Plan: "Cultural Acropolis"

# Urban Renewal Rootshock: thousands dislocated



The dense gridiron pattern of the Lower Hill about 1952. A crumbling jungle of 19th century brick and timber, sordid streets and decayed relics of the past, the area waits for the transformation promised by the redevelopment program.

James Van Trump 1961





Reconcile place, memory & energy



# THE PITTSBURGH CIVIC ARENA: MEMORY AND RENEWAL

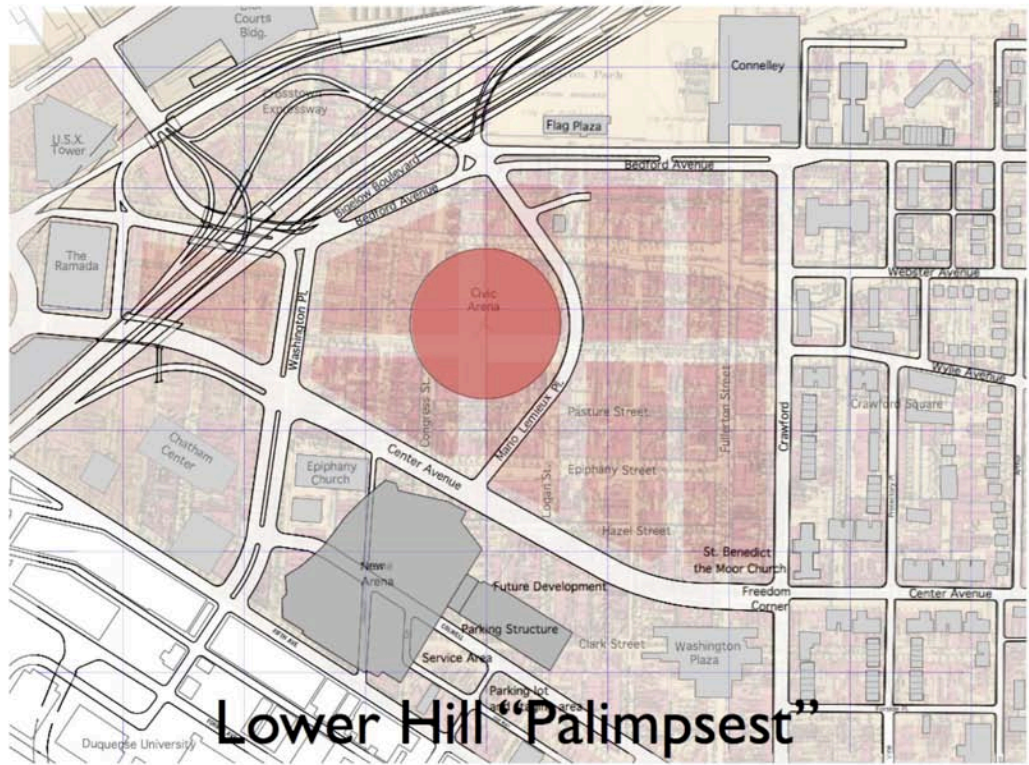
An abstract from proceedings at the 2008 International DOCOMOMO Conference  
"The Challenge of Change" Dealing with the Legacy of the Modern Movement  
Robert Shaw Pfaffmann, AIA

## Origins

The history of urban renewal and modernist design in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is a story of success and failure. Pittsburgh's post-war environmental reforms are well known, as are many of the groundbreaking visions of patrons and designers, such as Edgar Kaufmann (Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater), Henry Heinz (Gordon Bunshaft's Portal Bridge), and Richard King Mellon (Mies van der Rohe's Mellon Hall).

But not all of Pittsburgh's modernist replanning efforts were successful. Today, Pittsburgh is challenged with reconstructing once-innovative attempts to redesign large areas of the city. These sudden, top-down, clean sweeps mostly failed, leaving economic decline in neighborhoods like East Liberty and Allegheny Center. On a more massive scale, Pittsburgh's lower Hill District—one of the nation's most important, historic African American communities—was extensively destroyed for construction of the Civic Arena. The project, conceived by Kaufmann and funded as an inventive public-private partnership, evicted 8,000 people from their homes.

While significant in design, the 1961 Civic Arena (architects Mitchell & Ritchey with structural engineers Ammann & Whitney) is a symbol to many in the Hill of the great injustice of urban renewal. To over 1500 dislocated families (80 percent black), the Arena destroyed the community bonds that most planners recognize as indicators of well-being and long-term sustainability.



# Lower Hill "Palimpsest"

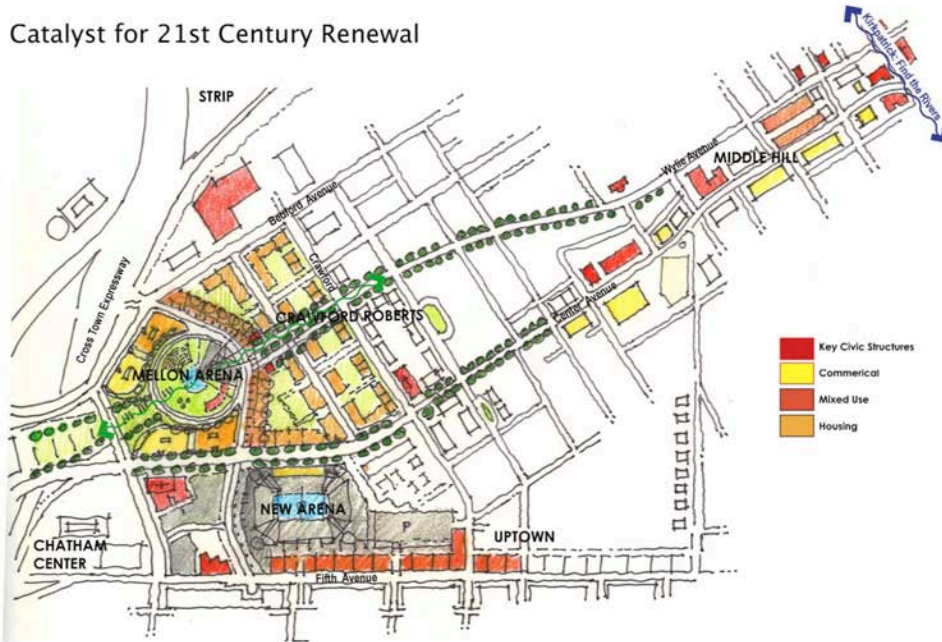
## **Renewal of Renewal**

Under a proposed reconstruction of the lost street grid between the Hill and Downtown, the Civic Arena is proposed to be torn down in a “renewal of urban renewal.” This reflects trends by cities hoping to “undo” the damage of urban renewal by promoting current New Urbanist planning over past modernist design, to the point the latter is considered unworthy of preservation or even reuse.

To local officials, urban design consultants and the prime tenant of the Civic Arena—the NHL’s Penguins—the demolition is a done deal. But a small group of preservation advocates has not given up on the building—or the community.

We have proposed that renewal of physical (and ultimately social) connections across acres of parking around Mellon Arena—as it is now known—can be accomplished more successfully through reuse of the Arena shell as a civic space that could anchor the community, much like a traditional town square. One of many models is Lucca, Italy’s ancient Roman coliseum—now a model urban space surrounded by housing and shops.

# Catalyst for 21st Century Renewal



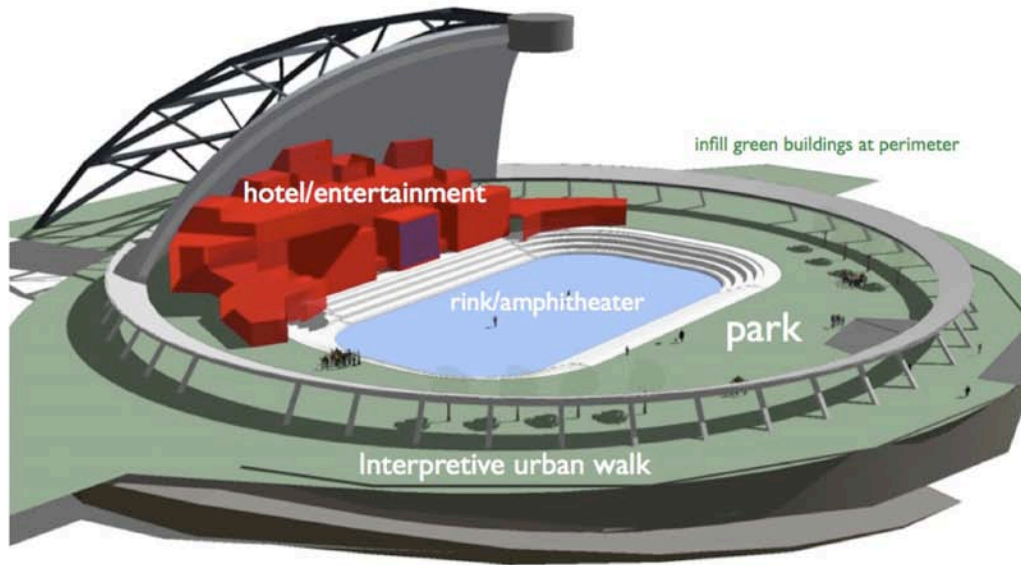
## A Civic Renewal

Many civic design advocates hope there can eventually be a comprehensive master plan for the entire Hill where the community that was so damaged over forty years ago can openly evaluate the merits of reusing the Arena. The challenge parallels debates around the world, where idealistic mid-century plans for renewing cities are becoming historic in their own right.

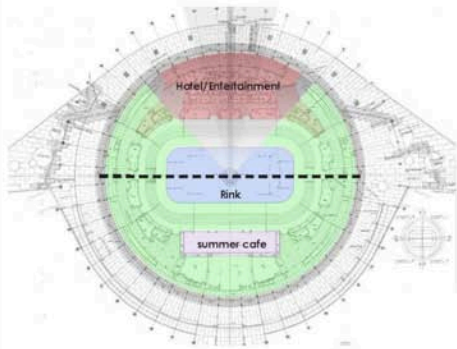
The complexities and contradictions of twenty-first century design and preservation are not easily navigated in the rich social context of the Hill. One of its greatest residents, playwright August Wilson, may point the way: “*My plays insist that we should not forget or toss away our history.*” While he was referring to his roots in the community and the culture he knew, his words challenge us to ask questions about the *many* histories and memories that exist—some good, some bad. The question for buildings like the Arena is, do we delete it from our memories or transform it?

Robert Shaw Pfaffmann, AIA  
September 2008

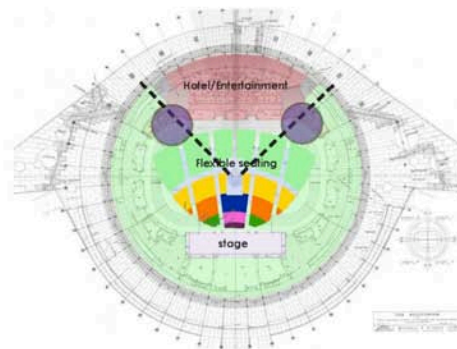




## Towards a Civic Renewal



Capacity Study with reuse of rink (park space in green)

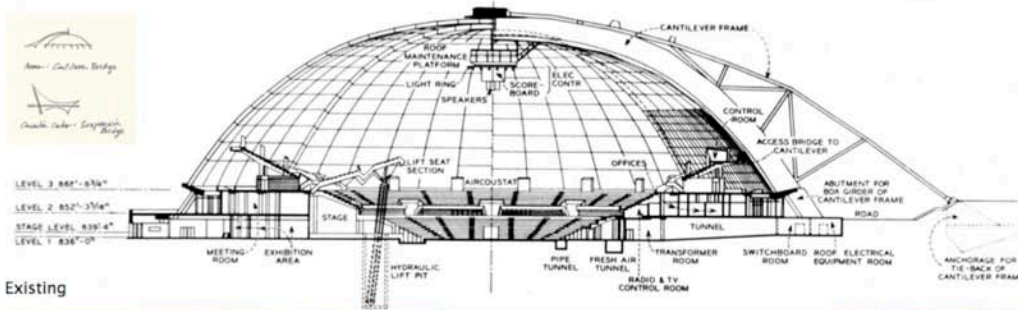
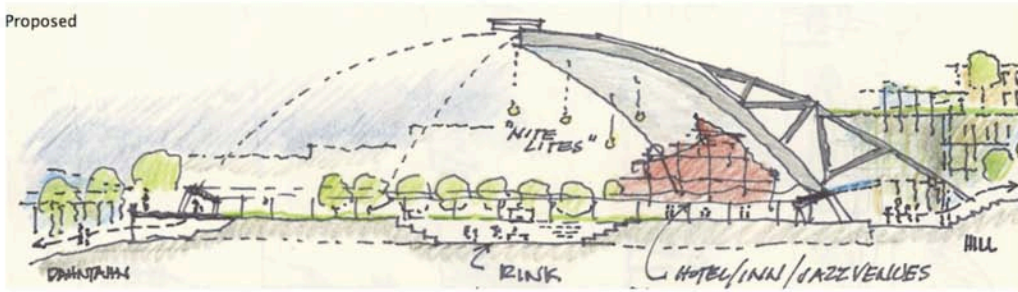


Capacity Study with flexible 4,000 seat amphitheater

**Programmatic Capacity and Flexibility**

The Civic Arena's 450,000 gsf footprint could provide accommodation for a wide range of uses including: A themed W-style hotel with entertainment and restaurant functions. Community uses would include a convertible rink/court with the capacity to accommodate outdoor events similar to venues like Millenium Park in Chicago .

Proposed



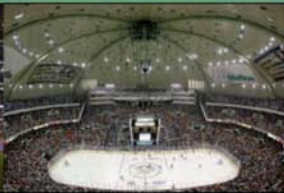
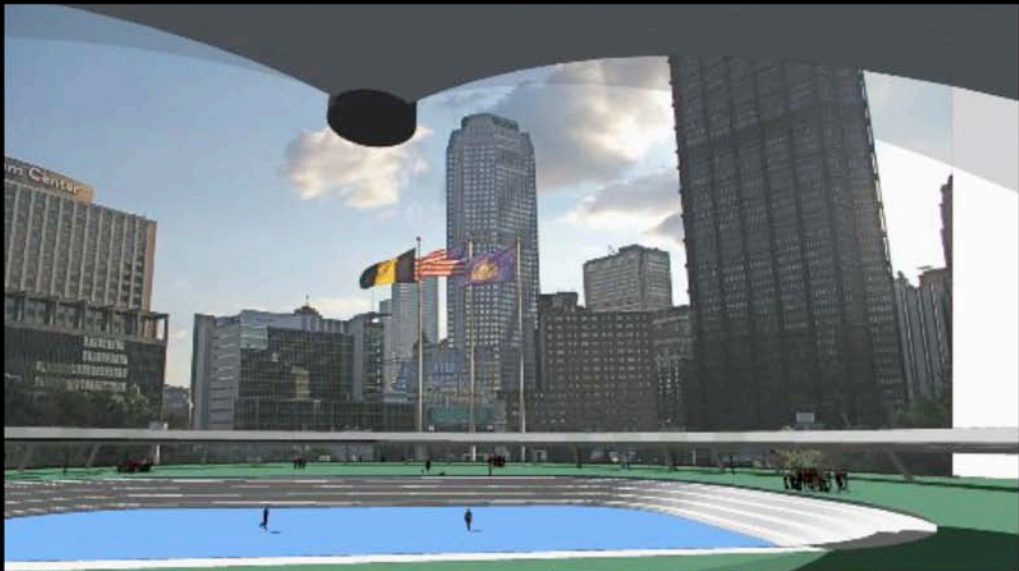
Existing





## Crawford Belvedere







JAZZ AMPHITHEATRE  
+ HOTEL BEHIND...  
TO CENTRE

TO THE CITY!

GREEN ZONE

LAWN

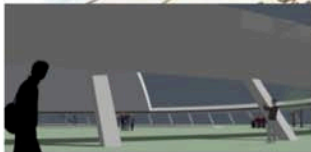
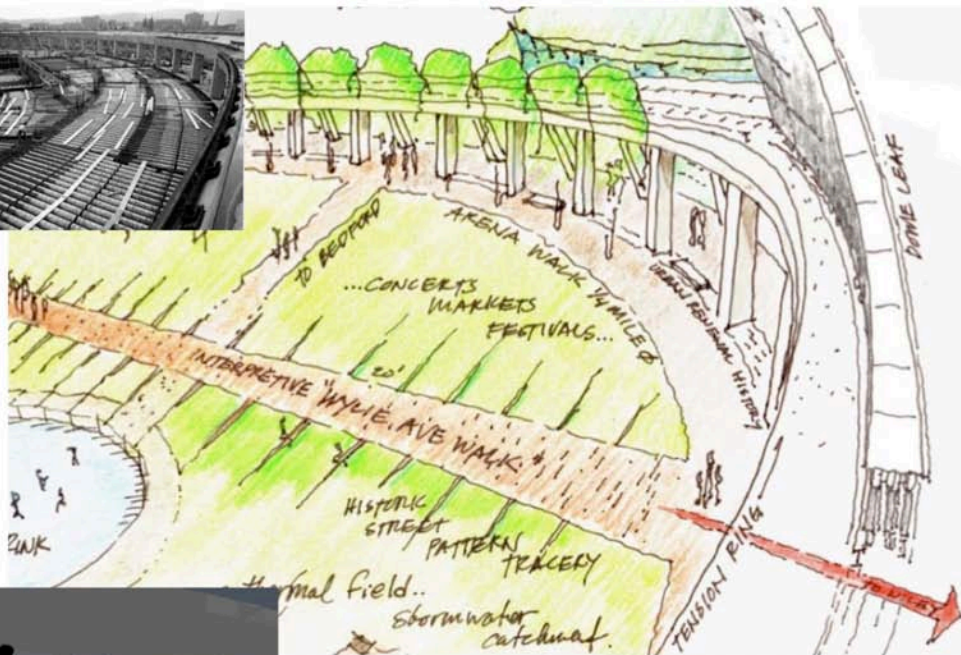
"LYNNE WALK"

SKATING

"MEMORIES OF THE  
STREET"

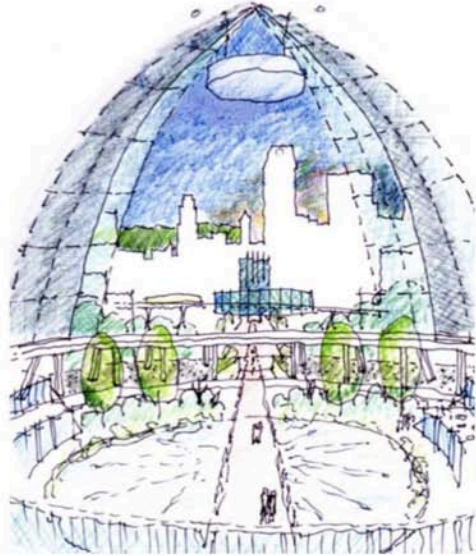
"STAIRS OF THE HILL"

TO BEDFORD






Pittsburgh Youth Jazz festival from postcard



## Room with a view!

(with the world's largest interior storm window!)





**"My plays insist that we should not forget or toss away our history"**  
*Playwright August Wilson*





Help Reuse the Igloo!

Preservation Pittsburgh  
[www.preservationpittsburgh.org](http://www.preservationpittsburgh.org)  
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