

# Chestnut Hill Local

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## Hill Friends plan new meetinghouse

by Barbara Sherf



Americans for the Arts vice chairman Michael Verruto and architect James Bradberry at the site of the future Chestnut Hill Friends Meetinghouse. (Photo by Barbara Sherf)

Having outgrown its 79-year-old meetinghouse on Mermaid Lane, the Chestnut Hill Friends Meeting is planning to build a new facility as a place “for people of all faiths to gather for contemplation, reflection, or quietly delighting in the beauty of a lovely Skyspace by distinguished artist James Turrell,” according to longtime Meeting member Signe Wilkinson.

At a July 8 gathering under a simple white tent on the nearly two-acre parcel of vacant land where the Meeting intends to build its new facility, Wilkinson described the Meeting’s plans for a new, artistically significant space on Mermaid Lane close to its current meetinghouse, which will be sold. The Meeting hopes to break ground in late

2011.

Wilkinson, the Pulitzer prize-winning editorial cartoonist for the Philadelphia Daily News who with her husband, Jon Landau, raised two daughters in Chestnut Hill, began her presentation with several humorous illustrations, showing where Chestnut Hill is (outlandishly dominant on a local map) and what it is known for – good coffee and golden retrievers.

She then suggested to the audience of 50 local residents that in the future Chestnut Hill is likely to become known for the James Turrell Skyspace in the room used for worship in the new 8,500-square-foot, L-shaped meetinghouse.

Wilkinson said Turrell, an internationally renowned contemporary artist

who is a Quaker and whose medium is light, has generously donated the design for a Skyspace as a gift to the Meeting but also to “the Chestnut Hill community, the City of Philadelphia, and the region.”

“Throughout their history, Quakers have held a central belief that the spark of God, the Light within, exists in every person,” Wilkinson explained. “Light is a core concept for Quakers. The simple and serene new meeting room in Chestnut Hill, where the natural light of the morning and evening sky fosters meditation, will help to ground people in this inner light.”

In his Skyspaces, Turrell constructs a chamber containing seating, lighting and an aperture in the ceiling, where visitors can sit in silent contemplation of the sky at dawn and dusk, Wilkinson explained. The contrast between the internal light of the room and the altering natural light outdoors intensifies viewers’ perception of the changing sky.

The Turrell Skyspace not only will be a first for Philadelphia, she said, but will also have significance on a national level, providing an exceptional environment for meditation and open during scheduled hours to visitors to sit in silence in the light-filled space.

Wilkinson said the new meetinghouse would also:

- provide a new home for worship and for the many social outreach projects of the expanding Chestnut Hill meeting membership
- create an inviting green space bordering Fairmount Park at the entrance of Chestnut Hill by reclaiming the asphalt-covered quarry on the building site and
- be built to 21st-century LEED (Leadership in Energy and

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Environmental Design) specifications while retaining a graceful style reminiscent of traditional Friends architecture.

The funds to purchase the building site included gifts from Meeting members and a significant bequest from a German woman who immigrated to the U.S. and joined the Meeting during World War II.

It was purchased from United Cerebral Palsy of Philadelphia (UCP), whose headquarter are adjacent to Chestnut Hill Friends Meeting at 100 E. Mermaid Lane. UCP provides a comprehensive early childhood program as well as day, evening, and weekend programs for adults.

"We are pleased that UCP has been so successful in its mission," Wilkinson said. "However, we are limited in our ability to use the meetinghouse during the week and also to provide childcare and programming."

She introduced Jim Bradberry, of Bryn Mawr-based James Bradberry Architects, who showed sketches of the exterior and the floor plan of the interior of the green building he is designing, which will utilize solar energy and sustainable design elements. He said the meeting room for

worship will form the long section of the L-shape and will be parallel with Mermaid Lane. A smaller community room will face a stand of pine trees at the rear of the lot that borders the Wissahickon.

Bradberry noted that a plan for the building's landscaping has been drafted by Carol Franklin, a managing partner in Andropogon Associates, Ltd., and incorporates as many native plants as possible. Franklin's family has had a long association with the Meeting.

Michael Verruto, vice chairman of Americans for the Arts, a nonprofit that aims to create opportunities for all Americans to participate in the arts, and a Chestnut Hill resident, pointed out that Turrell is "a world renowned artist who has no permanent public works in the Philadelphia area or even in the mid-Atlantic area."

"This is a major coup for Chestnut Hill and the greater Philadelphia community," he said. "It will be a treasure that will bring visitors to this area to experience his work. Chestnut Hill will be known as the place where the Turrell is."

Noting that Turrell donated a Skyspace design to the Live Oaks Quaker Meeting in Houston, Texas,

Wilkinson cited a Texas Monthly Magazine article about the 100 things Texans should do before they die.

"While it was heavy on the barbecue, number 44 on their Bucket List is to relax in the Live Oaks Friends Meeting in Houston under the James Turrell Skyspace," she said, then quoted from the magazine:

"Sit on the simple white-oak pews near sunset and turn your head heavenward: experience that open space in the ceiling, the Skyspace created by artist James Turrell is homage to the fading day. The sky shifts from a bright blue to a velvety navy; sometimes a bird flips by your line of sight, sometimes you can feel the night air settle on your upturned face. Always you are reminded of the solemnity and brevity of life; how it is possible to catch and hold onto time and how it disappears right before your eyes."

"This was written by a journalist," Wilkinson said. "If you can move a journalist, you can move almost anyone. I know by experience."

For more information on the project, go to [www.chfmnewmeetinghouse.org](http://www.chfmnewmeetinghouse.org) or e-mail [campaign@chestnuthillquakers.org](mailto:campaign@chestnuthillquakers.org) or call 215-247-3553.

