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Going Out with a Sigh

The story I'm about to relate took place over the space of seven months, and the outcome ratcheted up so much emotion that it was

impossible to write at its last turning point. On October 1, 2009, the backhoes revved up their engines at 8 A.M. sharp, the earliest time allowed for such noise in my township, and La Ronda began falling to earth.

In each of our communities, no matter where we live, there is at least one building or one space that makes us stop for just a moment, either out of admiration for its beauty or as a moment of reverie for some past moment in our private histories that the place evokes. Sometimes it is the sight of a particular house that reminds us of the first time we rode our bicycles unaided by parental hands, or perhaps a tree that marks the burial spot of a long gone pet whose bark or purr we suddenly remember. And sometimes it is just the beauty of a structure that we have always admired, one that served as a backdrop to a phase in our lives. This story falls into the last category.

La Ronda was a house built in 1929 for the family of well-to-do leather-goods manufacturer Percival Foerderer. Designed by architect Addison Mizner, the 14,000 square foot residence sat in a quiet neighborhood that grew up around it, many of the significantly smaller but no less elegant structures emulating its Spanish style, so popular in Palm Springs, Florida at the time. La Ronda remained a family home for decades, last owned by Arthur J. and Angela Kania, who raised their now-grown daughters there. After



Sept. 10, 2009: The silt fence is up, trucks are on site presumably to cart away some of the interior features during gutting, but in this “pre-demolition” scene La Ronda still looks intact from the outside.

moving to the winter warmth of Florida, Kania sold La Ronda in March 2009 for \$6 million to a mysterious owner who remained unknown and unnamed as he hid behind a corporate name for months as the drama began to unfold.

The first inkling that life was about to change was the demolition permit application submitted to the township in April. Shock waves rippled as perplexed officials announced that La Ronda hadn't made it onto the incomplete list of structures protected by historic designation, and that they could do no more than delay issuing the permit. Why tear down La Ronda? Because it was “too big”, and the new owners wished to build their own dream home of a mere 10,000 square feet in its stead. Oh, and it didn't have

air conditioning, which would be “too expensive” to install.

Riding in on his white horse, a wealthy admirer of Mizner's buildings (and residing in another Mizner structure in Florida), Benjamin Wohl stated that he was willing to buy just the building and to move it to another empty building lot that propitiously happened to be just down the street. Cautious optimism colored our lives: the building would be saved intact, and the demolition applicants would have money in their pockets from not having to tear it down. Ah, but now here comes the seller of La Ronda, claiming salvage rights to the building. Perplexed, the deed to the mystery owner was carefully scrutinized to find such a clause, and

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Mizner's Spanish-style detailing, which he popularized in Florida during the 1920s, was a beautiful sight in this southeastern Pennsylvania neighborhood.

perhaps it was there. Kania claimed his purpose was to donate certain important features to the Philadelphia Museum of Art and to salvage others for himself. Lovers of the building preferred to think that a whole La Ronda was worth more than bits and pieces of it in a museum.


But when Kania visited La Ronda, he found that much of the interior had already been damaged, at which point he felt the conditions of sale and been breached, so he revealed the name of the mystery owner: Joseph D. Kestenbaum, who had earned his wealth as CEO of his various investment companies.

Meanwhile, Wohl persisted in his offers and now knew to whom to direct his pleas. His version of the story is that Kestenbaum put so many conditions into negotiations that he was unable to meet them. Kestenbaum's version is that Wohl never put his money where his mouth is. Groups of protesters rallied before the gates of the castle. Both local and state papers were filled with pleas and finger-pointing. Township officials wrung their hands and promised to finish the list of significant structures that it had begun in 1985 but never completed, and to put some teeth into preservation ordinances.

All the while, time kept ticking away, and the last day of the 90-day moratorium passed without resolution. Kania salvaged from the interior what Kestenbaum had not already destroyed. The backhoes arrived on site, and at the end of the

second day, a Friday, only the towers of La Ronda remained standing. That sad vision remained for the weekend, and by the end of Monday nothing but rubble remained. A week later, the last of the majesty that had been La Ronda found its way to a quarry two counties away to be used as clean fill.

The images in this article represent my last memories of La Ronda, taken before Kestenbaum's name had been revealed but as soon as I had heard that dismantling had already begun, well before the moratorium expired. I had never taken photos of it before, imagining it would always be there to admire in my drives through that neighborhood. I could not bear to watch the backhoes, and have not visited the bare site. I'll probably hate the new residence just because of what it replaces.

There is a take-away lesson here. Those things we care about cannot be put off for another day. We have to protect them as soon as they become precious to us. My township is now vowing to pay more attention to what its ordinances say and to complete its list of significant structures, although it will take constant reminders from the citizenry to keep that review on track. We will have to become more involved in our local government if we want to maintain the history and beauty of our community. We need to join the meetings, take part in committees, recommend sites for preservation, fill out paperwork, and make sure someone reads it. 

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