

## Arts & Entertainment

### Places: Mosque remains both a memory and a motivation

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By Patricia Lowry, Post-Gazette Architecture Critic

Ten years to the day after getting hauled off to the pokey for defiant trespass and obstructing traffic, The Four Mosquetekers gathered in a small circle with five other comrades, quietly marking the anniversary with a sidewalk vigil in front of the Syria Lot -- that pricey piece of Oakland real estate that once held the late, lamented Syria Mosque.

Aug. 27, 1991, was a great day for standing up -- or sitting down -- for what you believe in, and the four men who did so -- Jim Ferlo, John Murdock, Albert Petrarca and Marshall Goodwin -- looked back on the event, if not exactly wistfully, then surely with a certain degree of pride.



Glory days: Ten years ago, Marshall Goodwin rode the sphinx outside the Syria Mosque to protest the building's demolition.

By then, the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center (a k a the right hand) had outbid the University of Pittsburgh (a k a the left hand, which only later found out what the right hand was doing) and agreed to pay the Shriners \$10 million for the Syria Mosque and its parking lot.

The day before, Goodwin and Petrarca had climbed atop the two bronze sphinxes that flanked the entrance to the Mosque after noticing that they'd been propped up on wooden blocks, ready for removal. The sphinx-sitters rode high for a few hours, until the cops chased them off.

"I'll stay out here all night if I have to," Goodwin said back then, flashing a "Save the Mosque" sign to passing motorists. "I'll get back up there even if it means getting arrested."

The next morning, it did. After the Mosquetekers were hustled into a paddy wagon, the sphinxes were loaded onto the back of a flat-bed truck and driven away. Then a bulldozer started chewing away the Mosque's portico.

"It was a very enjoyable two hours," the irrepressible Murdock said at last week's vigil of his hang-time in the slammer. "I never paid the fine. I never will."

He recalled, perhaps for only the 50th or 60th time, how Ferlo turned to him in jail and said, "What we need in this town is a Preservation Pittsburgh."



After protesters were carted off to jail 10 years ago, demolition began on Oakland's Syria Mosque.

In its 10 years, the group that rose from the demo-dust of the Mosque has hosted house tours in Schenley Farms and a symposium on riverfront development. It's spoken out against building a too-big hotel on Mount Washington, the proposal to cover the Highland Park reservoir, the proliferation of "corporate graffiti" on the city's skyline and the demolition of buildings in the Fifth-Forbes corridor. Its members have initiated and/or supported the historic designation of St. Nicholas Church, the Oakland Civic Center and Murray Hill city historic districts, and the demolished Pittsburgh Wool Co. and Lawrence Paint buildings.

Its watchdog posture and grassroots activism have done a lot to raise public awareness about the architectural, cultural and social significance of the buildings and landscape around us.

The Mosque demolition "really opened up a lot of eyes," Ferlo said. "It was a defining moment for me as a community activist and a [city] councilman. As much as we lost the battle, I think we went on to win the war. There are more [city-designated] historic districts and structures."

Then he called on the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center to make good on its decade-old plans to build something other than a parking lot on the site of the Syria Mosque.

"I think it's reprehensible that we allow a few doctors' Porsches and Volvos to be parked here," Ferlo said.

It won't happen any time soon.

In 1991, the medical center planned to build its administrative offices there but later backed off after purchasing another site behind the Iroquois Building, where it built Forbes Tower.

"Our long-term goal is to eventually develop the property, but at this point we don't know exactly how and with what," said medical center spokesman Frank Racziewicz.

The Syria Lot was conspicuously absent from UPMC's seven-year, \$600 million expansion plan, announced in June, to build a new Children's Hospital, a University of Pittsburgh biomedical center, an ambulatory care facility for UPMC Montefiore, and other campus improvements.

After the vigil, I walked into the Syria Lot to see if it really was packed with Porsches and Volvos or if they perhaps let in the occasional Jeep and Saab.

"Are you parked here?" asked the advancing security guard, who had seen me talking to the vigil-keepers.

"No," I said.

He motioned me out of the lot.

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