

# Proposal for the Repair and Restoration of the Robinson Store Mosaic-Clad Concrete Façade

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## ABSTRACT

Originally built in the late 19th century the Robinson Store is a five story, nine-bay brick commercial structure erected on the south side of the 1000 block of Market Street. Remodeled in the 1940s, the adaption involved the complete demolition and replacement of the building's original nineteenth-century front elevation with a modern concrete five-story shopfront designed by Victor Gruen, a pioneer designer of American shopping malls for the Grayson-Robinson Company chain of retail womenswear. Constructed of poured in place concrete, this S-shaped front elevation was clad in purple mosaics which were illuminated by mercury arc lighting to highlight the mosaic and attract customers. This Philadelphia branch of the company chain is the last surviving example of a building campaign that epitomized the use of using building facades as advertisements. This iconic building on Market Street was nominated to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places in 2016 but was delisted in November 2017 due to questionable redevelopment pressures and weak preservation response. This commercially and architecturally significant building deserves to be recognized for its significance and reinstated on the local register and restored. Restoring the forceful and dramatic mosaic-façade which was designed to revitalize Market Street's retail appeal would be an integral part of the restoration scheme. This research explored a methodology for the repair and restoration of the mosaic-clad concrete on the Robinson Store façade by analyzing similar mosaic restoration case-studies. The preservation strategy includes documenting the present conditions of the tesserae; integrating non-destructive surveys and laboratory analyses to test the concrete and mosaics to select contemporary compatible materials for repairs; introducing expansion joints and solutions for tile replacement. The proposed methodology reflects a thorough understanding of the issues and lessons learnt from the archival research, field observations and laboratory testing and using the conservation principle of minimum intervention and replacement in-kind to restore and enhance the significance of this once luminous facing on Market Street.



Figure 1. Robinson Store, c.1946. (Source: Guttoscho Collection, Library of Congress).



Figure 2. Conservation of dale-de-verre at the New York Hall of Science. (Source: Ennead Architects).



Figure 3. View from Wilshire Boulevard and Fairfax Avenue. Photo by Joshua White/JW Pictures. (Source: Academy Museum Foundation, <https://www.academymuseum.org/en/about/the-building/preservation/mosaic-tiles>).