

Montgomery Preservation, Inc.

Promoting the Preservation, Protection and Enjoyment of Montgomery County's Rich Architectural Heritage and Historic Landscapes

Our Unimaginable Loss: COMSAT Laboratories Building, Clarksburg

This article is a chronicle of a cherished and singular building that represented a nation's promise within our country's 20th-century history. It is a love story, a precautionary tale, and a challenge. It is a testament to the power of place and the knowledge that once a building is gone, it is gone forever.

On March 24, 2026, the Montgomery County Council announced in a press release that it had “voted unanimously to approve the Clarksburg Gateway Sector Plan with revisions. The Clarksburg Gateway Sector Plan Area covers approximately 969 acres in northern Montgomery County, near Interstate 270 (I-270) and Clarksburg Road. The recommended plan establishes a new vision for a more complete, connected and sustainable Clarksburg community. The recommendations in the plan focus on shaping future development and improvements to the transportation network, providing additional recreational opportunities for residents, advancing the County’s housing and economic goals, and preserving and protecting the natural environment.” Council President Natali Fani-Gonzalez stated: “I am very excited for what’s next in Clarksburg” and pointed out that “The Clarksburg Gateway Sector Plan will help define the direction of this community for years to come and play an important role in strengthening our economy and providing desperately needed new housing.” Council Vice President Marilyn Balcombe said: “This sector plan strikes the right balance between preserving and enhancing the attributes of Clarksburg that its residents know and love.”



While it is true that the Clarksburg Sector Plan is important to Montgomery County, what the Council statement misses is the importance of preserving notable architectural masterpieces such as the COMSAT Laboratories building (COMSAT) as a vital component of this plan. Montgomery Preservation, Inc. (MPI) views this omission as a failure of leadership from the County Council and the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC). This treasured example of Modernist architecture

and national history is now lost, and Montgomery County will mourn its erasure in years to come.



It was truly disappointing in recent deliberations that no member of the Planning Board or County Council stood up for the uniqueness and the opportunity of COMSAT. In the public record are oral testimonies and letters from local and national architectural, historic, and planning experts, from residents of Clarksburg and elsewhere in the County, from the Historic Preservation Commission, and the

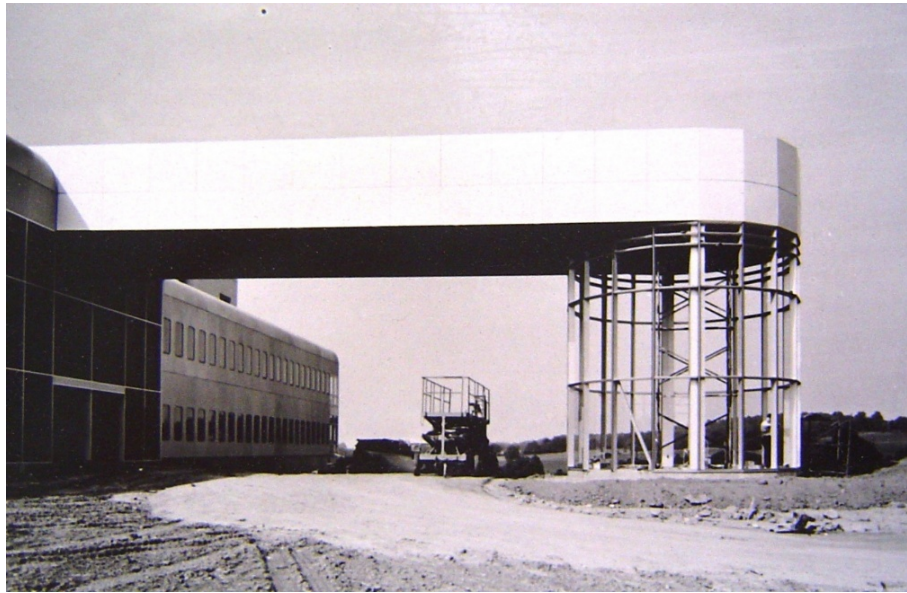
reminder that architect Cesar Pelli – winner of the Gold Medal of the American Institute of Architects – himself once came to talk about the impact of COMSAT on his internationally renowned body of work and the work of other architects. The COMSAT building should have been listed as a National Historic Landmark.

Over many years, MPI had worked hard to ensure that the approved Clarksburg Gateway Plan identified COMSAT as a focal point – a visual landmark proudly celebrating the best in Modern architecture and its nationally significant history – and be reused and repurposed for new character-defining community uses. This incredible opportunity was lost, and we are poorer because of it.



Previous Documentation of COMSAT as an Historic and Architecturally Significant Property

For more than two decades, beginning with [its listing in the Maryland Inventory of Historic Properties](#) in 2003, many efforts to document the historic and architectural significance of COMSAT have been made. Each effort reinforced the incontrovertible conclusion that this remarkable building was a Maryland architectural gem, and one of the most significant examples of Modern architecture in Montgomery County. And as Benjamin Forgey, *The Washington Post* architecture critic wrote in a June 24, 2005 article, COMSAT, along with the Atomic Energy Commission in Germantown and the National Bureau of Standards near Gaithersburg, “presaged the development of the now-famed technology corridor – the backbone of Montgomery’s economic might.”



MPI has recognized COMSAT since 2004, when University of Maryland professors Isabelle Gournay and Mary Corbin Sies nominated it to the National Register of Historic Places – the nation’s list of properties worthy of preservation – as part of their research project initiated by the Maryland Historical Trust (MHT) to document Modernism in Maryland.



In 2005, the Montgomery County Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) unanimously recommended that COMSAT in its setting be designated on the Master Plan for Historic Preservation; it meets almost every standard. When the recommended action came to the Planning Board in 2005, acclaimed architects Frank Gehry, Robert Stern, Hugh Newell Jacobson,

and Benjamin Forgey urged historic designation, but the Planning Board refused to forward it to the County Council.

The building's primary architectural qualities – the lightness and tightness of its aluminum-and-glass skin, the orderly extension of four two-story wings from a central spine, the transparency of the "catwalk" connecting these units – all were carefully calculated. In particular, Pelli worked closely with landscape architect Lester Collins to keep sharp the distinction between the architecture and the informal, bucolic setting of meadow and trees.

The building is often cited by architectural historians as an early instance of "high-tech" architecture. It remains a classic example, to use scholar Leo Marx's memorable phrase, of the Modernist "machine in the garden."



In 2017, COMSAT's importance reached a national audience. A [USA Today article](#) in the architecture and design travel section included COMSAT as one of 25 "Must See Buildings in Maryland" and praised it as "an exceptional candidate for adaptive reuse."

Early Efforts to Designate COMSAT as a Montgomery County Historic Site

In the late 1990s, Montgomery County's expansion moved farther north into the county's suburbs. Large tracts of land such as COMSAT's came under pressure from planned improvements. In its 1994 vision for the area, County planners supported the "transit-oriented development" model to redevelop land for higher-density uses around transit corridors.

Unfortunately, the County did not protect COMSAT as a historic site.

In November 2004, the HPC received a nomination for designation of COMSAT from University of Maryland professors Isabelle Gournay and Mary Corbin Sies, as part of their research project initiated by the Maryland Historical Trust to document the best of Modernist architecture throughout the state. In its entry for this property, the Society of Architectural Historians *Archipedia* summarized: "COMSAT is the premier example of a mid-twentieth century corporate suburban campus in Maryland, with additional international significance through its function as a groundbreaking public-private entity in the development of artificial satellite communications for military and civilian applications." Gournay and Sies study concluded that the COMSAT building rises to the level of statewide and even national importance. Professors Gournay

and Sies identified it as the only Maryland structure designed by internationally-recognized master architect Cesar Pelli.

The HPC reviewed this nomination at three meetings in early 2005 and unanimously recommended that the COMSAT building and its 33.47-acre environmental setting be designated on the Master Plan for Historic Preservation as it meets criteria 1a, 1d, 2a, 2b, 2c, and 2e. In 2005, the HPC again reviewed COMSAT as part of the Clarksburg Gateway Sector Plan and unanimously voted to designate COMSAT and its environmental setting to the Master Plan for Historic Preservation.

2006 MPI Efforts to Develop Workable Solutions for COMSAT’s Preservation and Re-Use

In 2006, MPI organized a design charette, with three days of sessions held at Montgomery College in Rockville. Attending were COMSAT’s proud architect Cesar Pelli, planners and preservationists from the Washington



Metro Area, former COMSAT employees, and local citizens. Mr. Pelli talked about the impact of this building on his international body of work and on other architects. Charette attendees clearly demonstrated that the then-owner’s plans for development could easily accommodate

historic building. COMSAT was identified as an opportunity, not an impediment, also eligible for financial incentives and designation in the National Register.

Over 40 architects, planners, and residents mingled at tables to discuss ways to preserve the building. According to a June 4, 2006 article entitled “Architect Pelli Joins Effort to Save COMSAT building,” MPI President Wayne Goldstein said: “It’s a landmark. It could be the crown jewel the way the Silver Theater is of Silver Spring.” Other Clarksburg residents said: “We have a unique building here. It would make a fantastic art museum with a fancy restaurant or maybe some designer stores with a sculpture garden outside.” Architect Pelli concluded: “It was an influential building. It would be criminal to tear it down.”

In September 2024, MHT determined that COMSAT was eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places – the nation’s list of historic properties worthy of preservation. Cesar Pelli’s architectural design was highly praised. MHT also noted that COMSAT was one of four Pelli-designed buildings in the region and the only commercial design still standing in Maryland. Importantly, the building was also found eligible under Criterion A in the area of Science, Engineering, and Communications, at a national level of significance. Founded in 1963 as a result of the Communications Satellite Act of 1962, COMSAT’s research developed our nation’s modern communication technology that was revolutionary at the time.

Recent Hearings on the Clarksburg Gateway Sector Plan

In 2025-2026, a series of public hearings was held to discuss the sector plan and consider views of the public about retention of COMSAT.

MPI President Eileen McGuckian offered testimony at multiple hearings during this period:

The design of the COMSAT building was as modern as the nature of the business, and as promising as the dawn of a global communication industry. It was designed by Cesar Pelli, who would become one of the most prominent architects of his time and who remained proud of COMSAT for the rest of his career and life.

In the 1960s, a decade of road-building and suburban population explosion occurred. When our interstate (first known as U.S. Route 240) opened in 1957 to connect the towns of Washington, Rockville, Gaithersburg, Clarksburg, and Frederick, it cut through large dairy farms. The road soon was dotted with Federal agencies, followed by bursts of residential subdivisions and new commercial centers nearby.

Designated on the Master Plan for Historic Preservation are three Clarksburg sites. Clarksburg Historic District, Clarksburg Schoolhouse, and Dowden's Ordinary are locally important, but none match the national and international significance of COMSAT.

How can you ignore this? For the past 20 years, COMSAT has been identified by citizens, historians, architects, researchers for Maryland Historical Trust survey of Modernism, the National Register of Historic Places, twice by unanimous HPCs, and currently by more citizens and professionals connected with this site.

It is important to note that Owner Approval is NOT a criterion for historic designation, nor should it be, nor has it ever been. Designation doesn't totally guarantee survival. But failing to officially recognize such a unique structure is never the best option for County Officials.

COMSAT is truly extraordinary. When it opened in 1969, it followed a remarkable decade, after Sputnik and Voyager, and the beginnings of satellite communication in a partnership chartered by Congress of the private company COMSAT and the quasi-public company Intelstat.

In the 20th century, COMSAT continued the growth of Montgomery County as the venue for new industries. Our technology corridor began with atomic energy, then satellite communication, and then biosciences. At COMSAT were conducted the research, design, and implementation of innovations such as real-time international voice communication, live international broadcast television, and videoconferencing.

Montgomery County is fortunate to have COMSAT here, still in its original setting. It meets the majority of criteria available to judge significance in our code. The Council plays the final role here, as intended by the creators of our preservation program. Your

attention to the criteria outlined in our County Code is required in the designation process.

Please, unanimously keep COMSAT as a special site in the Clarksburg Plan. COMSAT is the single-most important property in Montgomery County to represent our national role in the advancement of science, engineering, and technology and our local place in Modernist Architecture.

It is not difficult to imagine this extraordinary building moving on to its next phase, with new life in one or more creative uses. This has been done with special buildings everywhere in the United States, everywhere in the world, even in the Washington Metro area. Yes, this requires support from a variety of sources, but the result will be spectacular and you will not regret deciding to save COMSAT.



Its survival will be enhanced by designation and financial incentives at County, State, and National levels. The owner need not reuse the entire building. Save only the iconic Cesar Pelli section and build around it; adapt it for a new use – how about a library? Incorporate its history into the experience of new residents, workers, and visitors. This is an opportunity, not an impediment.

MPI urges the Council to designate COMSAT on the Master Plan for Historic Preservation. Once significance of the building is established, next steps are for the owner, neighbors, interested users, and public officials to together plan a future for this iconic property and some land around it. Keep in mind the Silver Theatre & Shopping center, National Park Seminary at Forest Glen, Greusendorf Log House in Germantown, and the Rockville Academy; each property was designated over the objection of their owner, and each of these now anchor community success stories vital to our heritage today.

Two full decades after its initial recognition, the building is more venerable, an Alumni group of COMSAT employees have kept its presence alive, and an excellent study of Montgomery Modern was conducted and published by the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC).

As proposed by several speakers at public hearings and a letter from the association of former COMSAT employees, the entire structure need not remain for there to be recognition of the extraordinary work done here in a unique building designed by a renowned architect.

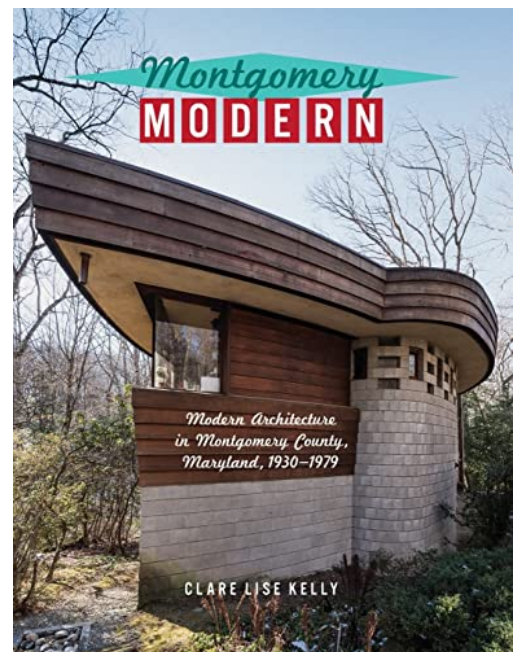
Learning from this Loss: New Steps by MPI to More Effectively Address Preservation of Examples of Modernist Architecture in Montgomery County

The loss of COMSAT has underscored the need to take more forceful action to ensure that other examples of Modernist architecture are better understood by the public and our appointed and elected officials. MPI has begun to plan for the following actions.

Explaining Why Our Modern Built Heritage Deserves Protection

Helping the public to understand the importance of modern buildings begins with creating community appreciation before buildings are threatened. One of the most notable examples of increasing public understanding about the value of these buildings was publication of Claire Lise Kelly's pioneering book [*Montgomery Modern: Modern Architecture in Montgomery County, Maryland, 1930-1979*](#).

Other examples of how this is accomplished include public tours, lectures, and exhibits focused on our area's Mid-Century heritage to foster a sense of value. Establishing a Modern Architecture heritage corridor or heritage area in Montgomery County, replete with interpretive markers, is a particularly effective method that could be implemented to increase public understanding about notable buildings designed by local Modernist architects such as Arthur Anderson, Stanley Arthur, John Samperton, and John Sullivan, among others.



Thompson Mayes, in his thought-provoking book [*Why Old Places Matter*](#), explores the reasons why old places matter to people. He stresses a number of significant points:

- **Continuity:** Old places create a sense of community that helps people feel more balanced, stable, and healthy. Mayes says “Perhaps the most important thing to say about preservation when it is really working as it should is that it uses the past not to make us nostalgic, but to make us feel that we live in a better present, a present that has a broad reach and a great, sweeping arc, and that is not narrowly defined, but broadly defined by its connections to other eras, and its ability to embrace them in a larger, cumulative whole. Successful preservation makes time a continuum, not a series of disjointed, disconnected eras.”
- **Old Places Help Us Remember:** Place memory is important. Memory contributes to the sense of continuity. Memory also gives people identity – both individual identity and a collective identity. The continued existence of a place permits the revision, reevaluation and reinterpretation of memories over time. The essential features of landmarks are the place they hold in a geographic area's memory.
- **Old Places Embody Our Identity:** Although our identity with place changes over time (and can be re-created in different places), the places that form our identity act as tangible

objects that support our identity. According to Mayes, “People survive the loss of places that support their identity. And many times, these places survive in memory. But the continued presence of old places helps us know who we are and who we may become in the future.”

Implementing the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s 10 Tips to Preserve Places from the Recent Past

One of our nation’s oldest and most outstanding preservation advocacy organizations, the National Trust for Historic Preservation offers concrete, real-world examples that MPI plans to incorporate into its outreach efforts in the future. Its [essential guidance](#) is worth exploring in detail. Here is a summary of key points that can assist us together to preserve examples of Modernism in our communities:

- Form a volunteer group to help coalesce interest in examples of our recent past.
- Host special events such as special exhibits or lecture series that feature local historians, architects, and professors speaking about the area’s modern architecture.
- Conduct community workshops to educate specific audiences about examples of the recent past.
- Offer tours of important examples of buildings constructed in the Modern era.
- Survey and inventory resources from the recent past. Identification of which recent past sites are important is one of the first steps toward preserving and protecting them.
- Evaluate each property to determine if it meets the criteria for listing in the County Master Plan for Historic Preservation and/or the National Register of Historic Places.
- Make a clear, compelling, and well-documented case that establishes importance.

Creating coalitions is essential for success. There is strength in joining with other organizations to preserve resources from the Recent Past. In particular, MPI plans to work with Preservation Maryland, the Maryland Historical Trust, and Montgomery History in developing new initiatives. MPI will also redouble its efforts to enlist knowledgeable individuals who can speak with elected officials and testify before planning and historic preservation bodies. The goal is to significantly increase the number of people providing persuasive testimony, especially in person.

High on our priority list is to re-start efforts to develop a comprehensive historic context statement for Mid-Century Modern buildings in Montgomery County that follow the Secretary of the Interior’s [Preservation Planning Guidelines](#). Although professors Gournay and Sies worked on developing such a statement, this was never completed.

With the loss of COMSAT, Montgomery County would greatly benefit from a definitive and authoritative framework for professionally determining which examples of our recent past are worth designating and protecting. The need to complete this context statement is now more important than ever. MPI will be working to help develop a path forward so that this framework can be completed in the near future.

Locating Architects Who Have Successfully Integrated Preservation and Restoration into Their Practices

The nation's premier organization focused on Modern architectural design is [Docomomo US](#), the American chapter of Docomomo International, a non-profit organization dedicated to the documentation and conservation of buildings, sites, and neighborhoods of the Modern movement. President-Elect Todd Grover wrote a compelling letter to the Montgomery County Council in support of preservation and reuse of COMSAT. MPI will work with Docomomo US to locate examples of Modern architectural design that have been adaptively reused to better understand the mix of financial and regulatory tools that can be brought to bear to other efforts in Montgomery County.

The [American Institute of Architects](#) maintains national lists of architects who have strong track records regarding historic preservation. Likewise, the AIA's [Baltimore chapter](#) and [Washington, DC chapter](#) retain information that can be used in local preservation efforts. Often this information includes case studies of how economic studies programs have been leveraged to help defray the cost of preservation or adaptive reuse. Other groups such as the [Potomac Valley Chapter AIA](#) may also have information that could be of assistance in developing a historic context.

One useful example of summary information on these topics can be found in the architectural practice of [Alfredo Trevino Architects](#) in Lawrence Township, NJ.

Interested parties can also learn about other efforts to preserve and protect Modernist architecture here:

- [The Architect's Newspaper](#)
- [US Modernist Archives](#) – Documenting, Preserving, and Promoting Modernist Residential Architecture

Final Reflections on the Loss of the COMSAT Building – Our Failure to Find Common Ground and Protect and Celebrate the Entirety of Montgomery County's 20th Century Built Heritage

Almost 50 years ago, the County Council enacted a law to identify and protect the best of every era of our history. The process to designate sites on our Master Plan for Historic Preservation has been tested and deemed to be sound and appropriate. As citizens who value the richness of historic properties that bring meaning to the places in which we live, this law is what helps to make Montgomery County special.



In 2026 – the Semiquincentennial Year of both our country and Montgomery County, when we celebrate our rich local history and architecture that citizens and visitors can still see – we need to reflect on every era, including the unique place of COMSAT.



We need more than the now-ubiquitous “(fill in the blank) Town Center” signage that we see at every new community and shopping center. We need to retain historic landmark buildings and structures that visually communicate the importance of place. This is what was lost in Clarksburg recently.

Cultural heritage represents the spirit and purpose of humanity. As you ponder this situation and future efforts to protect our heritage, please consider this statement by John Sawhill, the former President and CEO of the Nature Conservancy in the 1950s:

In the end, our society will be defined not only by what we create, but what we refuse to destroy.

Notably, the approved Clarksburg Gateway plan does call for the development of a meaningful interpretive program to tell COMSAT’s full story. MPI looks forward to working with county historic preservation officials, representatives of the COMSAT retired employees’ organization, and the property owners to develop and implement such a plan. This planning must be initiated immediately, as of this writing the landmark has yet to be fully razed.

Mark Edwards, Vice-President for Outreach

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