

OPINION

Why the Provident building's gorgeous transformation is still a missed opportunity

A developer has done a first-rate job renovating the long-vacant eyesore. But it's still worth asking whether the city could have gotten a better deal.



The Provident Mutual Insurance building, which has just been repurposed as a public health campus, is just a few steps from the 46th Station of the Market-Frankford Line.
Inga Saffron

by Inga Saffron | Columnist, For The Inquirer

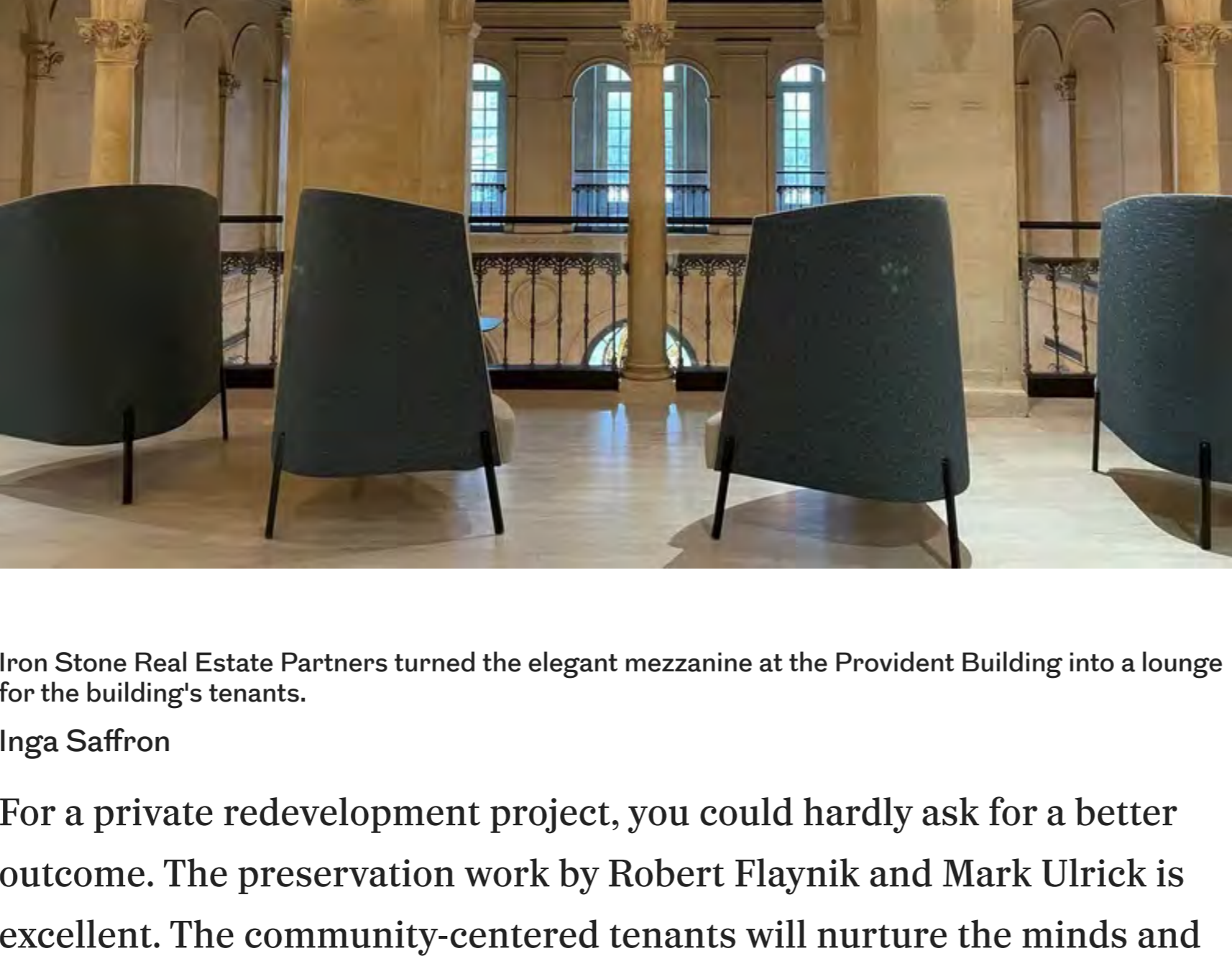
For years, no one could figure out what to do with the Provident Mutual Insurance building, the enormous neoclassical pile at the gateway to the Mill Creek neighborhood in West Philadelphia.

Philadelphia Police Department complained it was [too far](#) off the beaten track. Even after the city spent \$52 million to renovate the regal-looking office building at 46th and Market, no government agency would agree to move there.

So, the former Provident Mutual Insurance headquarters ended up sitting empty and unloved for years, until Mayor Jim Kenney's administration finally unloaded it in 2020, selling it to [Iron Stone Real Estate Partners](#) for the fire sale price of [\\$10 million](#).

Boy, did that developer get a bargain.

In just two years, Iron Stone has transformed the long-vacant eyesore into a bright and bustling public health campus. Its ornate lobby, marble-clad hallways, and paneled meeting rooms have all been polished to a high shine, and its suites of offices are filled with a variety of nonprofit tenants, including a branch of Children's Hospital and a KIPP charter school. With the \$85 million renovation complete, Iron Stone is now gearing up to build [1,240 market-rate apartments](#) on the eight acres that surround the building.



Iron Stone Real Estate Partners turned the elegant mezzanine at the Provident Building into a lounge for the building's tenants.
Inga Saffron

For a private redevelopment project, you could hardly ask for a better outcome. The preservation work by Robert Flaynik and Mark Ulrick is excellent. The community-centered tenants will nurture the minds and bodies of people in the neighborhood. And the developer's plan to construct high-density housing promises to bring a large population of potential transit riders to the doorstep of the Market-Frankford line's 46th Street stop.

Yet the project still comes with a big asterisk.

Once grand plans for police headquarters

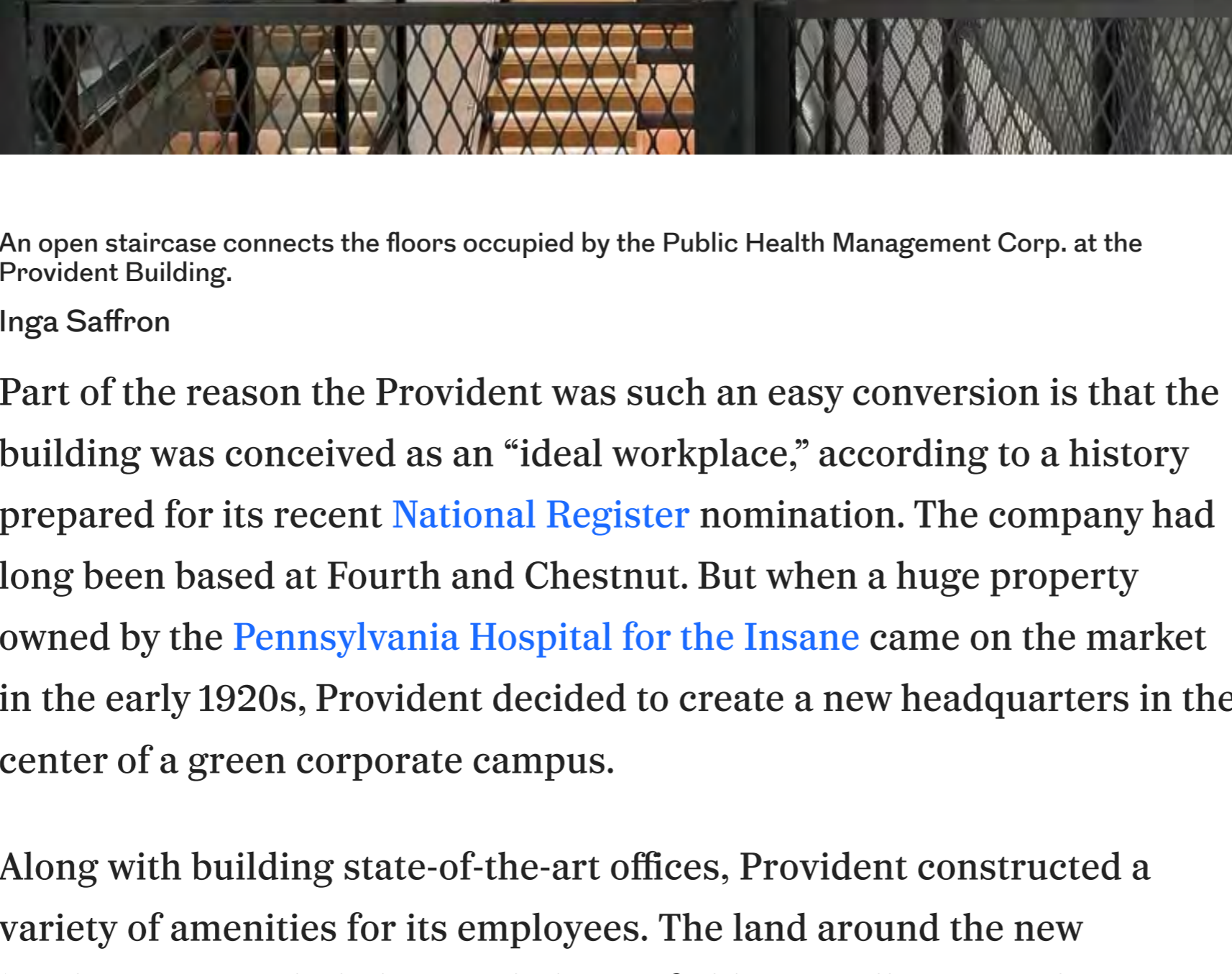
Those with long memories will recall that the Provident was [selected](#) by former Mayor Michael Nutter's administration to replace the Roundhouse as the police headquarters. Designed in 1927 by the influential architect [Ralph Adams Cram](#), the former insurance building had all the pomp and majesty the force could want, from a grand entrance flanked by Corinthian columns to a clock tower topped by a gold dome. As the project went forward, the city spent more than \$50 million to stabilize the exterior and fix the roof. Even the dome was regilded.

But in 2017, Kenney did an about-face and announced that the police would instead move their headquarters to the former Inquirer building on North Broad Street. Not only did the decision result in a big financial loss for the city, but the Inquirer building has also turned out to be a poor fit for the department's needs.

Unlike the Provident, the Inquirer is not purely an office building. Although it includes a slim tower, most of the space is in the large podium where the newspaper's printing presses were once housed. Because it's an open area, carving it up for different users was difficult. Many police functions, including the homicide division and the 911 call center, ended up in offices with no windows.

It would be an [oppressive](#) place to work even in the best of times. But with the police department experiencing a serious staffing crisis, and [struggling](#) to attract new recruits, those conditions are an extra liability. For the first time, there is talk of going outside the city to find quality candidates. But when applicants take a look at the new headquarters, they may have second thoughts. Like everybody else, the police need a good working environment to do their jobs well.

The contrast between conditions in the Inquirer building and the renovated Provident couldn't be more extreme. Although the Provident's neoclassical exterior looks traditional, its interior was quite cutting edge for the time. The office floors were designed to be flexible spaces that could be easily adapted to changing needs. On the outside, every facade is covered with a grid of windows. Even though Iron Stone had to substantially reconfigure the offices to suit its tenants, everyone still gets plenty of daylight.



An open staircase connects the floors occupied by the Public Health Management Corp. at the Provident Building.
Inga Saffron

Part of the reason the Provident was such an easy conversion is that the building was conceived as an "ideal workplace," according to a history prepared for its recent [National Register](#) nomination. The company had long been based at Fourth and Chestnut. But when a huge property owned by the [Pennsylvania Hospital for the Insane](#) came on the market in the early 1920s, Provident decided to create a new headquarters in the center of a green corporate campus.

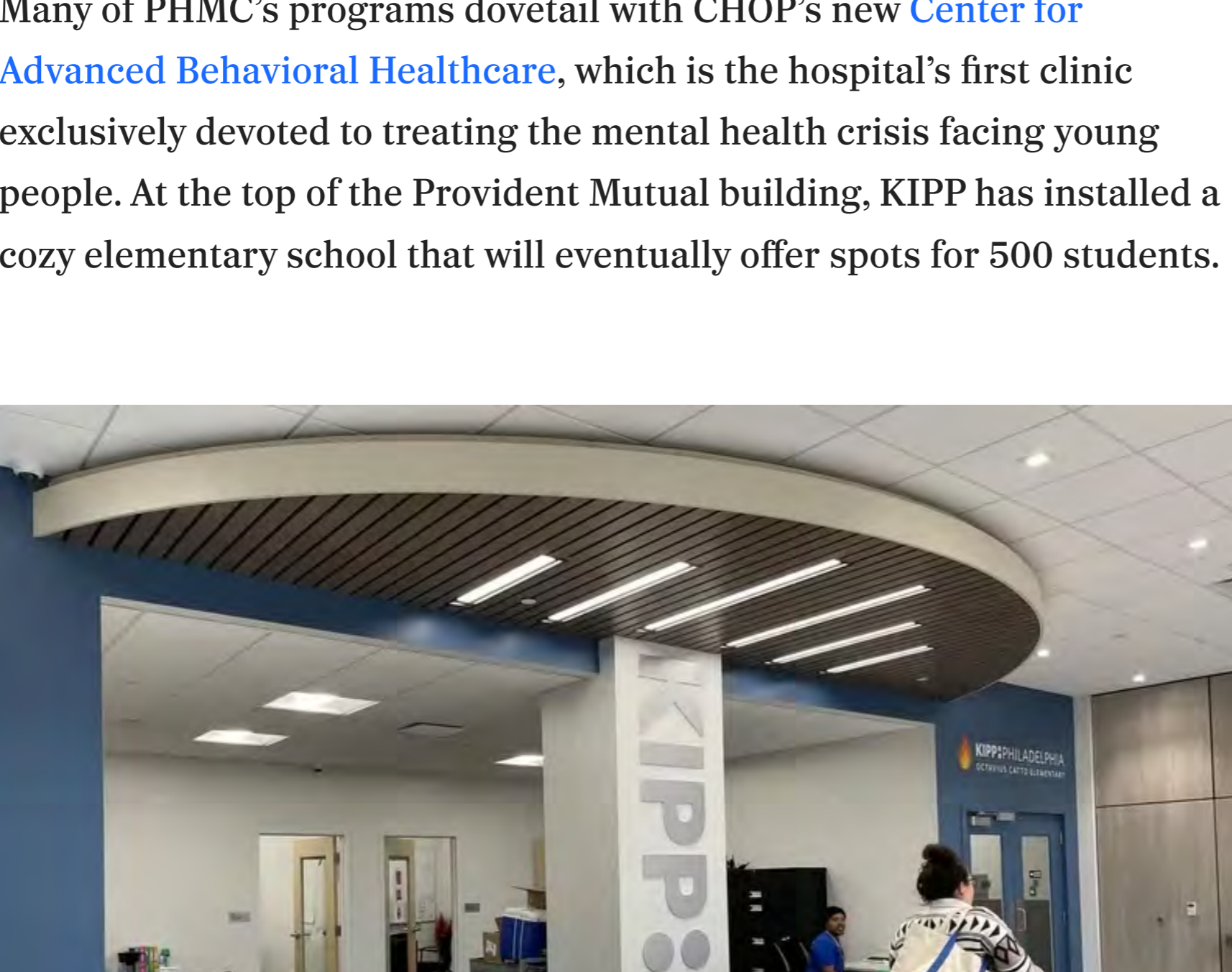
Along with building state-of-the-art offices, Provident constructed a variety of amenities for its employees. The land around the new headquarters included several playing fields, as well as an auditorium and power plant. Because the Market-Frankford Line had just extended into West Philadelphia, it was possible for employees to travel from Center City to 46th Street in minutes.

But what was seen as a virtue in 1927 didn't play so well a century later. When the Provident was proposed for a new public safety building, the police department balked at the idea of moving to West Philadelphia. They felt the 46th Street location was too far from the courthouses and city services, which are clustered around City Hall. They couldn't understand just how convenient the site really is.

The evolving neighborhood

The Provident's neighborhood has changed dramatically since the company left in 1983 to return to Center City. After World War II, the housing authority concentrated hundreds of units of subsidized housing north of Market Street, between 44th and 48th Streets. Now, as Penn and Drexel campuses creep west, the area is exploding with a half-dozen lab buildings, as life science companies scramble to create space for research.

Those research labs have been accompanied by new, market-rate housing north of Market Street. The residents of the new apartments are likely to be more affluent. While the Philadelphia Housing Authority wants to keep the area affordable by redeveloping its 12-acre [West Park project](#) at 44th and Market into a mixed-income neighborhood, that project could take years.



The new offices of the Philadelphia Health Management Corp. at the Provident building feature a light-filled reception area. The space was designed by Fifteen Architecture.
Jeffrey Totaro, Courtesy of PHMC/ Fifteen Architecture

Despite the changing demographics, Iron Stone conceived its redevelopment of the Provident with Mill Creek's longtime residents in mind. Its largest tenant, Public Health Management Corp., saw the Provident building as a chance to bring interconnected health services — from treating autism to managing obesity — to a high-quality, neighborhood health center, its CEO, Richard J. Cohen, told me. Its designer, Fifteen Architecture, has carved out a light-filled oasis on the lower two floors.

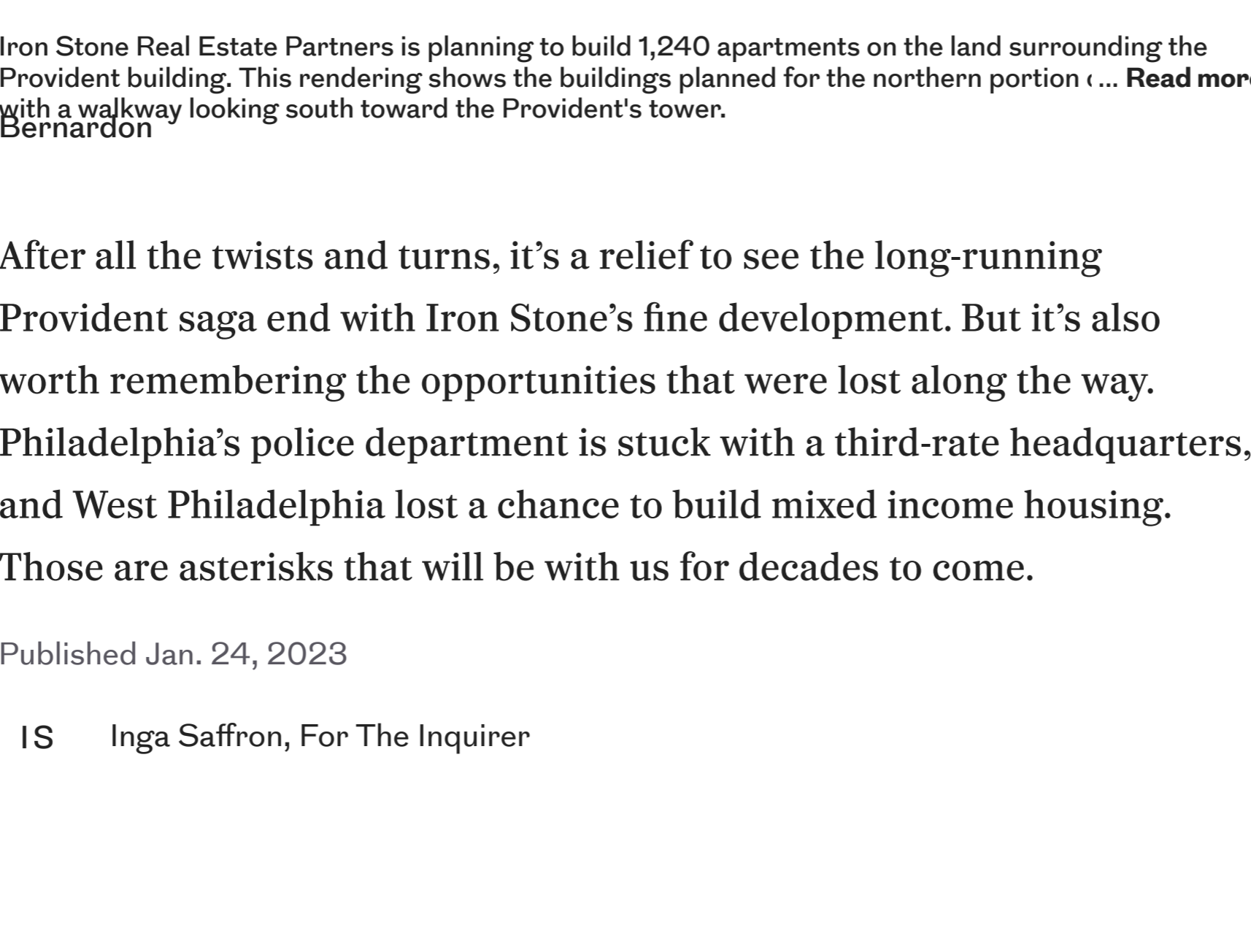
Many of PHMC's programs dovetail with CHOP's new [Center for Advanced Behavioral Healthcare](#), which is the hospital's first clinic exclusively devoted to treating the mental health crisis facing young people. At the top of the Provident Mutual building, KIPP has installed a cozy elementary school that will eventually offer spots for 500 students.



A KIPP elementary school occupies the fourth floor of the newly renovated Provident Building at 46th and Market.
Inga Saffron

Iron Stone also turned an unused part of the attic into a cafeteria and exercise room. Even those spaces have glorious windows. It has also created a gracious pedestrian walkway that leads to an accessible entrance.

Wait until the Provident is surrounded by 1,200 apartments. Given how many units can be built on the property, you would think the Kenney administration could have gotten more than \$10 million for the property. As a rule of thumb, developers expect to pay about \$25,000 per unit in land costs. That works out to over \$30 million for the land alone.



Iron Stone Real Estate Partners plans to turn this parking lot on the north side of the Provident building into housing. The lot fronts on Haverford Avenue, at 46th Street.
Inga Saffron

I don't have a problem with the city selling its property below market value. Government is not a business. But when it does sell its assets at low rates, it should do so to advance policy goals. By giving away the land with no strings attached, the Kenney administration lost an opportunity to require Iron Stone to incorporate affordable housing into its development. (Although City Council recently [adopted](#) a new law requiring West Philadelphia developers to include apartments for low-income tenants in their projects, Iron Stone's proposal predates that measure.)

Iron Stone Real Estate Partners is planning to build 1,240 apartments on the land surrounding the Provident building. This rendering shows the buildings planned for the northern portion ...
Read more with a walkway looking south toward the Provident's tower.
Bernardson

After all the twists and turns, it's a relief to see the long-running Provident saga end with Iron Stone's fine development. But it's also worth remembering the opportunities that were lost along the way. Philadelphia's police department is stuck with a third-rate headquarters, and West Philadelphia has a chance to build mixed income housing. Those are asterisks that will be with us for decades to come.

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