

Developer has plans to preserve Westinghouse atom smasher

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A developer has knocked over the Westinghouse atom smasher east of Pittsburgh but plans to preserve the structure no matter what happens to the property it was on.

The brick building at the base of the five-story, lightbulb-shaped atom smasher was in too much disrepair to save, said property owner Gary Silversmith of Washington, D.C.

"But we are going to establish a new concrete base for it, and keep it at the site, and have the bulb repainted, including the 'W' for Westinghouse," Silversmith said. "I think this is an iconic piece of history."

Westinghouse Electric Corporation completed the atom smasher in 1937 as the nation's first industrial nuclear generator. Silversmith's investment company bought the property from Westinghouse parent, CBS Corp., in 2013.

The atom smasher was so far ahead of its time that when Westinghouse decided to build it in 1936, it would be another three years before the discovery of nuclear fission revealed the possibilities of nuclear power.

Westinghouse physicists created nuclear reactions by bombarding target atoms with high-energy particles. They accelerated those particles down a vacuum tube from the top of the structure to a pressure vessel 47 feet (14 meters) below.

Research done at the Forest Hills site led to the discovery of the photo-fission of uranium, part of the process involved in the generation of nuclear power, according to the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers. The atom smasher was deactivated in 1958.

Silversmith may develop residences or rental storage units on the property, but said he'll keep the atom smasher intact because of its historical significance.

Silversmith—and before him, CBS parent Viacom—has tried to donate the structure to the Smithsonian Institution, as well as the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center and the Carnegie Science, both in Pittsburgh, but were refused because of the unit's size.

The atom smasher was designated historically significant by the Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation in 2000.

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