

DESIGN REVIEW OF THE SIX CASINO PROPOSALS

As an organization of 1,200-plus architects, urban planners, other design professionals and concerned citizens, Philadelphia's Design Advocacy Group does not take a position on gambling. But we believe that a second Philadelphia casino can do more for the city than just provide income. It can be sited and designed in ways that will help us to be an even more vibrant, walkable city of commerce, culture, and urban living. For this to happen, good design must be part of the discussion from the outset.

It is unfortunate that the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board has required the applicants to supply so little information about their designs, and several of them have taken advantage of that oversight. Most egregiously, Wynn Philadelphia has so far provided only two distant perspectives of their proposed hotel tower and a poor-quality site plan, reported in the media but which does not appear on the Gaming Control Board's own website.

However, even without good documentation, it is possible to recognize that, in DAG's opinion, each of the six proposed locations offers opportunities, some larger than others, and that the applications show various levels of success in seizing them. DAG has scored the siting of the six proposals, and we have also separately graded the architectural designs, making the most of the information on hand.

The six proposals would be located in three parts of the city, and it makes sense to begin with a general consideration of these alternatives.

The Live! Casino, Hollywood, and Casino Revolution are all proposed for the stadiums area in South Philadelphia. Here they might contribute to the development of a more concentrated, urban entertainment district along Pattison Avenue that the Philadelphia City Planning Commission envisions, connecting the South Philadelphia stadiums and the Blue Line. While this is a laudable goal, none of these three projects does anything toward reaching it. They're close enough for us to see the potential, and far enough away that the potential is unrealized.

The Wynn project is proposed for a Delaware River site whose development is very important to realizing the city's vision for the waterfront. But the Sugar House Casino is already located nearby, where it attracts a steady flow of activity, and we think that the potential of the second casino to do good should be deployed elsewhere.

Center City sites are proposed for the remaining two projects, Provence on Broad Street and Market Eight on Market, and we think that each has great potential to work synergistically with nearby development activity. This multiplier effect is largely absent at the other locations. Moreover, Philadelphia already has one suburban-style, drive-in casino (Sugar House) that caters to the audience that wants that kind of experience. It makes sense to make our second casino different, targeting another audience that appreciates a larger, diversified leisure time experience.

Now the individual evaluations:

Wynn Philadelphia

Siting. Wynn Philadelphia has identified a 60-acre Delaware waterfront site in Fishtown/Port Richmond. This site is critically important for the development of the city's plan for the Delaware River, which aims to connect residential neighborhoods to the river, provide public access, and create a trail at the river's edge. The applicant pledges to build 2000 feet of the trail and provide 24-7 public access to the park-like setting in which its hotel and casino will stand. Because this site is so completely walled off from the city by I-95, the type of extension of the city's residential street system onto this site, as mooted for other parts of the riverfront, may not be relevant here, and a well-designed entertainment venue in a well-designed park might be appropriate.

The site is only 2/3 of a mile from the Sugar House Casino (Penn Treaty Park and the mothballed PECO electricity generating plant lie between them), and the Wynn development has the potential to spur the development of this vital piece of the waterfront. In doing so, it would also create a de facto casino district, and while this may be desirable, its plusses and minuses have not yet been publically evaluated. And it would certainly depart from the mixed- used development, including residential, that the master planning for the waterfront envisions.

The site plan shown in the media shows a massive building footprint, oriented to the road and not the river, and surrounded by acres of parking covered by a green roof. At its furthest reach towards the river, the parking is immediately adjacent to the waterfront boardwalk, raising safety considerations. While the green roof is commendable, there is no certainty that the roof will be habitable. The remaining "leftover" portions of the site are allocated to discontinuous green space, which appears an obligatory afterthought. A much better solution would be to extend the gracious park-like entry around the hotel and casino and extend it to the river, creating a true park setting that would actually be usable by casino guests and the public. The addition of a multi-story garage structure would open up the site even more for green space and make future expansion or ancillary development feasible. As it stands, the siting gets a **D**. Only the green roof saves it from an **F**.

Architecture. The massive, casino/hotel is only shown in distant daytime and nighttime perspectives. It was designed by their in-house team (Wynn Design and Development) and appears to be a very generic high-rise.

Grade: **C-**

Live!

Siting. The Live! Hotel and Casino (Ninth and Packer) is on the wrong street (Packer rather than Pattison) and misses the greater opportunity, as an expansion of the developer's already functioning Xfinity Live facility (at 11th and Pattison). The casino project would absorb and glamorize the already satisfactory Holiday Inn, thus providing no increase in Philadelphia's hotel bed count. The car-dependent complex threatens to worsen game-time traffic tie-ups at the stadiums, and its proposed garage has unattractive facades that appear to compromise important views to Center City from Citizen's Bank Park. The best that can be said of it (and the other South Philadelphia sites) is that it is far enough from the residential districts that might find it an unwelcome neighbor. That's not enough to earn it more than a **C**.

Architecture. The Live! Casino has no identified designers, which is itself troubling, and it is a sprawling, horizontal, shopping-mall-style aggregation of small design elements. The architectural hearts of these project developers are in Voorhees, not Philadelphia. In our city, they get a **C-**.

Hollywood

Siting. The nearby Hollywood casino at Seventh and Packer is a similar suburban-style complex that risks tying up traffic for sports fans while contributing nothing to the creation of an urban entertainment district. The South Philly Turf Club already operates on this site, and the casino's proposed hotel will come later, at an unspecified date. It's another **C**.

Architecture. The Hollywood casino also has no identified designers, and it is another shopping mall lookalike that merits only a **C-**.

Casino Revolution

Siting. The Casino Revolution is proposed for Front and Pattison, in the elbow of I-95 as it turns westward to cross the Schuylkill. This is in a warehouse district, several blocks from the stadiums and offering scant opportunity for synergy with those sports facilities. Indeed, by repurposing a warehouse on the site, this project promises to open first. The sentinel tower of the hotel would not arrive until an unspecified later date. With even fewer opportunities than its South Philadelphia competitors, it had less to lose; but this did not inspire much creativity. What can be counted on in the first phase is not inspiring. **C-**.

Architecture. The design, authored by the Hnedak Bobo Group of Memphis, promises someday to include a stylish modern high-rise hotel that would be a South Philadelphia landmark. But it begins with the rehab of a warehouse, surrounded by warehouses. It's good to dream, but better to build. **C+**.

Provence

Siting. The Provence stands in the reviving commercial and cultural corridor that stretches north toward Temple University from City Hall, the Convention Center, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. The development of this site is of greater importance for the future of the city than the urbanization of the parking lot jungle around the stadiums or the even filling in a piece of the long Delaware waterfront. A short walk from the Convention Center, it includes the landmark Inquirer Building at 400 North Broad, which the project would remodel as a small hotel. These are highly important considerations. However, rather than address Broad Street, the main façade of the casino complex is on the south, on Callowhill Street, where it would face the on-and-off ramps for the eastbound Vine Street

Expressway, and it appears that a system of car ramps connected to a multi-story parking garage stands between the Inquirer Building and the casino itself. Overall, we judge that the great potential of this location has not been realized.

B+.

Architecture. The project was designed by established casino architect Paul Steelman of Las Vegas. The absence of legible floor plans limits the analysis of its functioning, but renderings and design statements by the architect invite skepticism. The claims that the design shows “French influence” are baffling, and seem to be related to the small mansard-roofed structures (more like American houses of the 1860s than anything Parisian) that form a rooftop village of shops and restaurants that targets those already in the casino. This is not an appropriate style for an American city of the twenty-first century, and this effort at historical quotation contrasts almost surreally with the banality of the long Callowhill Street façade, which manages to fill two blocks and span 15th Street without making a significant urban statement. A much better design is needed to make the most of this complex site. The present work is only a **C**.

Market Eight

Siting. Market Eight, at Eighth and Market Streets has even more going for it. It would be located at a multi-modal transit hub, with bus, subway, and commuter rail stations nearby and quick connections to Amtrak and the airport. It would fill a long underutilized (surface parking), high-visibility site. It would knit together the historic district, the Convention Center, and the retail and business districts of Center City, connecting the tourist city to the commercial city. And it would catalyze development on Chestnut East and Market East, which are both underutilized today.

The design deals effectively with these opportunities with a vibrant mixture of uses. The gaming floors are lifted above the street level, which thus can accommodate an array of dining and shopping alternatives, and automobile pick-up/drop-off is diverted from busy Market Street to a new roadway that ducks under the casino to connect Eighth and Ninth streets. Parking is (very commendably) underground. The hotel lobby is on the fifth floor, framed by rooftop gardens, above which rises a tower of guest rooms. In every respect, it merits a full **A**.

Architecture. This proposal presents by far the best design. The developer has employed a high-quality architect, Enrique Norten, and the managing partner of his New York office, Andrea Steele, played a large role in the team presentation to the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board. This emphasis on good design is heartening, and the

presentation includes detailed plans and a rendering, which allow it to be properly assessed. Market Eight's six-story pedestal, with a ground floor entirely devoted to shopping and dining, associates itself well with the forms and functions of the surrounding midrise commercial neighbors, while its handsome sculpted glass skin introduces something new to Philadelphia's modern repertoire. This is topped by a slender ten-story hotel tower.

Although there are some discrepancies between the plans and the renderings, and we worry whether this amount of architectural ambition will survive the rigorous costing out of the design that lies ahead, this project's contemporary, urban friendly approach gets an **A-** and extra credit for taking design seriously.

In sum, DAG urges the Board to thoroughly scrutinize architectural and urban design in its deliberations on the best casino proposal for Philadelphia. In order to make that determination, it should demand, and make available to the public, much more specific information from the applicants.

Based on its analysis of the six proposed sites, DAG sees the most benefit to the city from the two Center City locations. Of these, Market Eight has so far demonstrated the most sensitive urban and architectural design.