



## **An Agenda for Design and Planning in Philadelphia** **Design Advocacy Group of Philadelphia**

APRIL 7 2015

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### **I. INTRODUCTION -- “BOTH -AND” NOT “EITHER -OR”**

Philadelphia is hot again. Young professionals want to be here, retired professionals want to be here, and the city regularly scores in the upper ranks of good places to live and work. Developers are falling over each other to accommodate strong demand for housing, and billions are also being invested in office construction in Center City and West Philadelphia. And once again Philadelphia is having a mayoral election just in front of the presidential election and unlike the last time, one of the national candidates will be selected here. This is a whole new ballgame. But this game is complex and not entirely equitable. The rising demands of the millennial generation and the achieved dreams of the aging yuppies have coincided to make a vibrant and dynamic greater Center City. However, not all parts of the city are so fortunate.

Philadelphia remains the poorest of the big cities, and our story is a tale of two cities. In the past, thoughtless politicians have played off one constituency against the other – but this must no longer be allowed. Philadelphia’s extraordinary new economy is an engine that can power benefits for all Philadelphians. There are many elements that must contribute to such success, including public education and economic development, which have their own complex dynamics. As the Design Advocacy Group (DAG), our responsibility is to identify what must be done in the design and planning sector.

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Philadelphia is the poorest of US Big cities: “Already the poorest big city in America, Philadelphia also has the highest rate of deep poverty - people with incomes below half of the poverty line - of any of the nation’s 10 most populous cities. Philadelphia’s deep-poverty rate is 12.2 percent, or nearly 185,000 people, including about 60,000 children

Alfred Lubrano, Inquirer Staff Writer Posted on Philly.com: September 26, 2014

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## **II. DESIGN AND PLANNING THEN (2006) AND NOW**

Convinced that urban design and planning are among the most important accomplishments and indicators of civic intelligence, in the spring of 2006 DAG issued its “Reform Agenda for Planning and Design Review in Philadelphia.” We confronted a civic design vacuum, pointing to both general apathy toward design and the ineffectiveness of many civic agencies and boards. There was corruption--not in the legal sense, but in the sense of a gradual corrosion of core responsibilities. The first sentence stated bluntly “The system of planning and design review in Philadelphia is broken and needs to be fixed.”

The Planning Commission had, for example, no plan, and the Zoning Board of Adjustment was widely known for making unpredictable decisions, often with bizarre conditions unrelated to the zoning code. The mayor at the time had allowed the position of “transportation coordinator” to lapse, and the city was completing the demolition of thousands of houses, with no operational plan for the reuse of the land.

The DAG Reform Agenda of 2006 called for many things that subsequently occurred – such as a new zoning code, a master planning process, design review for important projects, and the appointment of well-qualified members to design-related boards and commissions. Other priorities that we set-- such as the planning for the Delaware waterfront--were already under way in the waning days of the Street administration. Mayor Nutter reinforced all this by appointing an experienced and well respected architect and planner, Alan Greenberger, as deputy mayor for economic development. Suddenly design counted in a way that it had not previously and new conversations began to take place by the same time that the city was emerging from the economic slump of 2008-2010.

The new zoning code became effective in 2012 and the master plan (Philadelphia 2035) was published in 2011. (The planning process is continuing to move through the newly defined planning districts.) The pace of development has steadily picked up over the last five years, and Civic Design Review now a central and highly public step in the approval of major projects.

DAG's overarching goal has been to increase the level of the civic dialogue about design and planning, and viewed through this prism we see not only the substantial achievements of recent years, but serious issues that will need thoughtful attention going forward. So when we ask, after eight years of progress, "Is the work done?" we must answer "no." While what has been achieved is worthy of celebration and recognition, there are issues that have not yet been successfully addressed, and there remain structural problems that could, in the next administration, erode the real progress that has been made.

Below we first evaluate some important recent plans and achievements.

### **III. WHERE WE ARE NOW:**

#### **LOOKING FORWARD AND CHECKING THE REAR VIEW MIRROR**

##### **1. Delaware waterfront**

One of the great planning successes of the last eight years is the Delaware River Waterfront plan, heavily subsidized by the William Penn Foundation. An elaborate planning process has been concluded, a thoughtful and popular plan has been published, and a waterfront development corporation has been reorganized and professionalized. But while several "early action" projects have been highly successful— including increased waterfront access and "pop up" parks, there has been no new waterfront housing built for the last several years, and some projects at variance with the new plan have been approved, albeit reluctantly, for legal reasons. This is hardly an auspicious start. Some property owners who have benefitted from an enormous planning effort over many years are still unwilling to invest

further in aligning their plans with a carefully vetted civic vision. Our leaders must climb into the bully pulpit and mobilize all the city's resources to achieve this long deferred dream.

## **2. Schuylkill waterfront**

Switch to the Schuylkill River, and the situation is reversed. Here there is now significant development pressure and large projects are under way on both sides of the river. But, so far, there is no overall plan for this vital area, which promises to become a lively, riverspanning neighborhood. The AMTRAK 30th Street station planning process is beginning to go public and will no doubt be significant, but their study area, while large, emphasizes the station, Drexel, and its immediate neighbors. When DAG protested the insensitive approach that Children's Hospital took to its mega project at the southern end of this critical area of the Schuylkill, there was no plan to refer to, and despite an editorial favorable to DAG's position, an op-ed by DAG, public reservations expressed at Civic Design Review, and three critiques of the project by Inga Saffron, the project is moving forward with only modest improvements. In this light the steady achievements of the Schuylkill River Development Corporation seem miraculous. They have created a wonderful armature for a plan, but where is the plan itself? The new administration must make one.

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### **What are the foundations interested in now?**

One might suggest that the foundation interest that jump started the Delaware project has been redoubled with the announcement of a much larger initiative on open space by two foundations working together.

Ashley Hahn in PlanPhilly March 16, 2015: A new collaborative initiative announced Monday by the John S. and James L. Knight and William Penn foundations hopes \$11 million in new public space grants would help realize five long-planned new park spaces. Funders anticipate these grants will help support new, accessible civic spaces in neighborhoods that have not yet enjoyed Philly's recent public space boom, from a section of the Reading Viaduct to a segment of the Schuylkill River Trail, from the wide expanses of East and West Park to a neighborhood park on Germantown Avenue.

### **3. Dilworth Park**

Dilworth Park is a major success. But it was a success that was designed and paid for “off the books” insofar as city involvement was concerned. It has restored the dignity of City Hall’s west façade and brought great life to a previously dead zone at the core of the city. While better integration with SEPTA improvements and a more comprehensive approach to the entirety of City Hall would have made it much better, this project was conceived, moved ahead, and is completed. What was the secret? Money. The Center City District raised most of the funds for this project, which gave it great flexibility in selecting the excellent design team and in completing the project on a realistic schedule. It’s only to be regretted that this work was entirely outsourced and could not incorporate much needed improvements to the adjacent SEPTA stations and the ground floor of City Hall. In the future, such plans should be the city’s, and our elected leaders should rally the forces needed to accomplish them.

### **4. Historic Preservation**

Another major area of concern is the health of our historical preservation process. In 2006 DAG praised the Historical Commission as the civic board having the healthiest and most complete discussions as it reached important decisions. Unfortunately this is not the case today. The Commission has accumulated a string of preservation failures that make it appear unable to meet its civic purpose of advocating and enabling preservation. In a city as complex and as historic as Philadelphia, no reasonable observer would expect all worthy preservation objectives to be met, nor would one expect agreement on preservation value. The current situation appears to be driven by a lack of leadership on both the commission and the staff, compounded by a shocking lack of funding. Many worthy preservation objectives are threatened during periods of boom growth, leaving an impoverished environment when clearer vision prevails. Philadelphia could avoid some of the worst excesses of this syndrome if made a preservation plan, and to do that the commission staff has to be large enough to accomplish this work. The lack of support for preservation in the birthplace of the nation is scandalous.

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**DAG's opinion in 2006:**

The Historical Commission is a model. Within the present system, the Historical Commission is the most successful unit that deals with design and planning. It has a diverse, well-qualified and energetic Commission, a motivated staff, a strong ordinance, and the right structure to consider both details and broad policy initiatives. This does not mean that we agree with everything that the Commission has done, but that by and large the debates have been the right debates to have at the right times and they have been relatively transparent.

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**5. Zoning, master planning, and design review**

The new zoning code became effective in 2012, the master planning process is continuing to move through the newly defined planning districts, and Civic Design Review is now functioning. But the integrity of the new zoning plan, like the old one, is being eroded by continued Councilmanic interference, the mapping is far from complete, the aspirational design review process that we advocated was not created.

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A search of City Council's legislative site indicates that amendments to the zoning code have been considered 103 times since the new code was passed in December 2011. The number of amendments considered per year is slightly greater than the number considered in selected pre code years.

DAG's opinion in 2006: Ad hoc councilmanic overlays are not a model. By contrast, [to the then transparent Historical Commission]the practice of adding zoning changes and zoning overlays, often originating with the council person, creates over time a barely manageable diversity of requirements and constraints. The Planning Commission should seek to get ahead of the curve on zoning changes, rather than reacting to crises.

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The planning commission needs to be staffed adequately to complete the mapping in two years, and, given the evolution of design review into a neighborhood-oriented forum, the new mayor and his or her director of planning need to advocate more prominently for design excellence. We need no more Family Courts and Symphony Houses.

## **6. Institutions + corporate citizens setting examples**

The work of Comcast in developing its new innovation center stands in contrast to the stumbling and mediocre approach of CHOP. Comcast encouraged its development partners to bring in a world class design team, listened to them, and actually followed Philadelphia's new "skyplane" zoning model. The building project moved forward very rapidly and will join the first Comcast tower as an anchor of quality in the western part of Center City. The owners and investors in the Gallery, who are in a much more intimate public private partnership with the city, must be held to the same high standard. The same goes for the other projects on Market East and for the 30th Street Station project, which involves AMTRAK and Drexel University. The latter has the potential to transform a place of decidedly mixed messages into another district of extraordinary design excellence and great civic value. Effective city planning must harness, guide, and coordinate the energy of these good institutional citizens, steer those who are doing less well, and generally incentivize others in this city of eds, meds, and commerce to contribute to our overall visions.

## **III WHAT GOOD GOVERNMENT CAN DO**

### **1. Reorganization, with planning in the driver's seat**

In 2006 DAG advised realigning government organization to deal more effectively with emerging 21st century problems, and, in that spirit Mayor Nutter brought together planning and commerce. But there remain obvious

shortfalls that urgently need attention--as revealed by the deadly collapse of the building next to the Salvation Army Thrift Store in 2013, which resulted in the move of the Department of Licenses and Inspections the Public Safety portfolio.)

But while there is a pervasive feeling that the current organization of the development, planning, and building agencies is not effective, and while some proposals are already moving forward, the only thing harder than developing a new zoning code is this kind of sweeping reorganization.

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San Francisco is a wealthy city with about half the population of Philadelphia. A cursory review of its Planning Department reveals a staffing level of 206. The same telephone directory survey for Philadelphia, adjusted upward to include the Zoning Unit of L & I and the ZBA staff yields about 65. In Boston, with a population considerably less than half of Philadelphia's the Planning Department and the Redevelopment Agency are combined and on this basis the counts are about 140 for Philadelphia and 206 for Boston. If Philadelphia were to have the same number of planners per capita as San Francisco, it would have over 375 and if it had the same as Boston the number would be 564 in planning and redevelopment combined.

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The new mayor must face this challenge, joining a discussion that has been dominated until now by Council President Clarke's ill-timed and incompletely studied proposal. In finding a way forward, the mayor must make this a subject of civic discussion. We would expect forward looking leadership to commit to conducting the studies necessary to understand the problem and re-align city government with the problems that we expect it to address. In any new organization, a leading role must be assigned to the city planners. Another aspect of government structure is the Philadelphia Charter itself. Recently the charter was amended clearing up a decade's old anomaly in the organizational position of the prison system and making the Office of Sustainability permanent. Similar steps should be considered for the Historical Commission and the Office of Arts, Culture, and the Creative Economy.



## 2. Complexity can be discriminatory.

Good government organization is necessary for social justice and equity. The current complexity favors large organizations that can hire the experts needed to navigate the system and get the attention of senior administrators, while small developers and investors and the general public have a much more difficult situation. The city is burdened with a large number of expensive quasi-planning and quasi-implementing agencies with overlapping missions: PIDC, Commerce Department, PRA OHCD, and PCPC. We must assess whether this bureaucracy is effective, and, if not, we must resolve to re-structure government to get important work done quickly. A streamlined redevelopment process must also involve the Philadelphia Water Department and the Streets Department in the planning process.

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“In Philadelphia, painting a few lines on the ground apparently requires the unanimous approval of 19 community organizations, two councilmen, three city departments and a regional planning commission.” Jim Saksa in PlanPhilly 2015 about pavement striping for Washington Ave.

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For this work, the PCPC needs additional resources. Something is seriously wrong, but it is not that Philadelphia is not spending enough on government. There is a serious misallocation of resources when it comes to planning. Also rarely mentioned as a civic initiative, is the growing infrastructure of capable Community Development Corporations and umbrella organizations such as the Community Design Collaborative and the Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations. The new zoning code requirement for a modicum of transparency and process in neighborhood organizations that seek Registered Community Organization (RCO) status has also had a salutary effect.

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Washington DC publicly tracks and grades its agencies on a websites designed for this purpose. <http://grade.dc.gov/>

It is an extraordinary commitment to an open process. (Although there seems to be a bit of “grade inflation.”)

Washington also publishes documents that make the reorganization and realignment of agencies an essentially routine process. Why not move in this direction here? Our greatest enemy is the fear that change will lead to something worse –this did not happen in the last eight years-- why not nurture a shared sense of civic mission and civic problem solving that can only be demonstrated by a ruthless sense of purpose.

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### **3. Department of Transportation**

In 2006 we recommended strongly that the city create a Department of Transportation, because Mayor Street had famously let the city’s “Transportation Coordinator” position lapse. While the Nutter administration has created a Department of Transportation and Utilities, it has been, like many other efforts, a modest add-on rather than a fundamental re-alignment of existing bureaucracies. Much of the expertise and personnel base that should be in a Department of Transportation now resides in the Streets Department, which itself is divided between street and roadway responsibilities and trash collection. We think the transportation situation needs to be addressed further and that one of the best options has been chosen by many of our peer cities, which separate the responsibility for streets and transportation from sanitation.

### **4. Investment and infrastructure**

Philadelphia’s impressive web of civic structures including police and fire stations, libraries, parks and recreation centers, and health centers largely put in place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries continues to suffer from years of under investment in both maintenance and replacement. The capital budget although well-managed is inadequate, and if it continues at these historic low levels it will feed a spiral of decline in civic services and competitiveness of Philadelphia relative to the both its suburbs and its urban peers. The new administration needs to reverse this disinvestment in our physical plant.

#### IV. DESIGN EQUITY: A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Philadelphians may live in two cities, but they are linked far more intimately and effectively than the citizens in our competing, peer cities. And a big part of what pulls us together is “design equity.” Philadelphia is already a city with a distinctive and handsome (and often historic) physical form that each inhabitant can understand, and it is served by a transportation infrastructure that links the neighborhoods to the center and brings an extraordinarily diverse range of citizens together for work, pleasure, and public life.

Philadelphia has much to lose if it falls back into a zero sum mentality that pits one worthy set of civic needs (or one neighborhood) against another. Design and development tools are crucial to the evolution of forms of urban development that create new opportunities for all the citizens of Philadelphia and also for residents of the region who rely on it for employment, civic, cultural, and government services.

We will note below several topics that raise challenges to design equity:

##### **1.Housing**

Quick – what is Philadelphia’s housing policy in 25 words or less? Ah, you can’t do it. The reason you can’t is that we really have no housing policy other than trying to get the most out of steadily declining federal resources. The continuing withdrawal of the federal government from the housing business is a trend that we cannot continue to ride to the bottom. We need a fresh look at housing policy in light of the resources that are actually available. DAG has examined one component of a comprehensive housing policy in its Healthy Rowhouse project (see sidebar).

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from DAG's Healthy Rowhouse project: 2015

The Housing Challenge Philadelphia's stock of rowhouses is an extraordinary asset that allows the city to offer homeownership to more low-income homeowners than virtually any city in the country. Yet these rowhouses are deteriorating faster than their owners can repair them.

70% of all housing units in the city are rowhouses.

75% of those houses are over 50 years old.

78% of Philadelphia seniors over age of 60 own their own homes.

40% of all renters live in single-family homes.

38% of owner occupied homes in 2012 were owned by households earning less than \$35,000.

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Viewing housing from an urban design and preservation perspective, this project emphasizes the unique advantage Philadelphia has over most other American cities because of its high percentage of rowhouses and the related high percentage of home ownership-- even among families with modest incomes.

As we indicated above, we are open to reorganizing the city's housing and planning agencies, but the key driver for housing should be policy. Developing an effective policy that works for Philadelphia requires major research and development combined with the political savvy to make things happen. The policy structure can only be developed with substantial investment and for this reason it might be worthwhile to seek major foundation investment in this sector. As the voters interview the candidates, we recommend that they seek a mayor who shows interest in both the

hard political work and multi-level engagement that it will take to mobilize our resources to address this fundamental challenge of city-building.

## **2. Neighborhoods**

Germantown and Point Breeze are very different neighborhoods under stress. Germantown is the second most historic Philadelphia neighborhood after the downtown historic district. It has varied topography, great transportation, an intense mixture of uses--and great stress. Several organizations that were essential to its revitalization have collapsed, and there is now a very difficult but critical moment in which Germantown can again be launched on a positive trajectory. It needs a strong plan for that launching.

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Just as the digital world now makes mass customization possible in many products, one size fits all federally dominated housing policy is probably an artifact of the last century. There is an opportunity to revitalize housing policy by considering the unique needs of our diverse urban regions and linking these insights to adequate and equitable funding mechanisms that promote housing, neighborhood conservation ,and renewal.

Recent commentary by a housing expert

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Although gentrification is an issue of some significance in Germantown, it is of overwhelming importance in Point Breeze, a highly uniform neighborhood in South Philadelphia with excellent access to Center City.

Development opportunity can create value for all residents when it is shaped by good planning and neighborhood management. Market dynamics must be understood and become a factor in zoning and land bank decisions, and the non-profit sector must be allowed to compete with the private sector for sites and development opportunities. Without this healthy competition, there will be inadequate lower cost housing. Neighborhoods such as Mt. Airy and

Francisville have championed inclusive growth through painstaking efforts and have learned much that may be helpful to other neighborhoods.

### **3. Lower northeast Philadelphia.**

The physical qualities of upper Kensington, Mayfair, Tacony, and Frankford have much to offer, but there needs to be a rigorous understanding of the problems of drugs, crime, and poverty that are literally tearing these fine neighborhoods apart. They cannot be revitalized by isolated design gestures; they require coordinated civic investment, housing policy, and social services.

### **4. Re use of school buildings.**

The recent “disposal” of many public school buildings has been an example of how not to do it. The School District is, of course, in crisis, and so this was not really planned; but it should have been. While the surplus buildings vary in quality and suitability for alternative uses, it seems odd that, until recently, the School District was approving charter schools that renovate office buildings or industrial structures for their uses while buildings actually designed to be schools remain vacant. Moreover, many smaller school buildings make excellent housing conversions (where there is financing), but they are also often located where their redevelopment can contribute to networks of open space and recreation -- if there is planning.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

Making cities great requires planning and commitment. Ed Bacon reportedly said that “Seven years is one day in the life of a city.” Philadelphia’s 332 calendar years compress to just 47 “civic days.” By this measure, then, we are still young (and sometimes foolish), but we have a bright future if we can muster the civic vision to make plans and the will to implement them.