



Your complimentary use period has ended.  
Thank you for using PDF Complete.

[Click Here to upgrade to Unlimited Pages and Expanded Features](#)

[send to printer](#)

April 8-14, 2004

## CITYSPACE

### None in the Hand



**Center contention: Some City Council members want to restrict development in areas that could later be used by public projects.**

Photo By: Michael T. Regan

### Why go after the birds in the bush?

*by Steve Conn*

I'm no economic development genius or anything, but let me see if I've got this straight: A development partnership buys an underutilized building at 144-50 N. 13th St. in an underutilized corner of Center City just north and west of the Convention Center. They begin to rehab it into upscale apartments. News of this makes certain members of City Council furious, and so now council is considering making such projects illegal.

Confused? Let me explain further.

This building lies in the path of the once and future Convention Center expansion. Indeed, this building is one of several structures from the late 19th and early 20th centuries slated to be demolished to make way for the center to expand west to Broad Street. As a shabby, run-down industrial building, this structure could have been purchased cheaply, relatively speaking, for the expansion project. As trendy living spaces, the building will surely cost much more to acquire before being demolished.

Councilmen Michael Nutter and James Kenney, among others, see this rehab as an example of developers attempting to loot the public purse. So they are supporting legislation restricting this kind of development in areas targeted for big public projects.

In a town where feeding at the public trough has always been regarded as an all-you-can-eat proposition, I salute Kenney and Nutter for looking out for the interests of taxpayers. But this building on North 13th, and the ire its rehab has generated in council, raise some fundamental questions about the future of the city and how it will be shaped.

At its most basic level, this bill in council seems to opt for those proverbial two birds over there in the bush, rather than for the one in hand right now. To call the Convention Center expansion chimerical may overstate things, but it sure is a long way from being a done deal, dependent as it is on state financing, slot machines and who knows what else from Harrisburg. And if the recent hubbub surrounding MTV's *The Real World* taught us anything, it is that any bet requiring the long-term cooperation of the local construction mafia comes with pretty long odds.

Given all that, are we really proposing that buildings sit empty -- or nearly so -- today, so as to keep their value depressed, because at some time, in some vague future, they might get in the way of some bigger project? That smacks too much of sacrificing the present for the future, especially given how contingent that future is.

More than this, however, pitting the conversion of this industrial building against the "progress" of an expanded Convention Center forces us to ask whether Philadelphia's future will staked on big, sometimes imperious development schemes -- convention centers, sports stadiums, the Gallery and Penn's Landing, for example -- or whether the city will change and grow because of much smaller, less flashy projects that alter the city block by block, building by building.

The Convention Center is a major economic engine of the city's post-industrial economy, and it must grow, so we are told, if it is to remain competitive with those in New York, Boston and Washington, D.C. If this is true, then we ought to ask: How big is big enough? When some other city decides to build an even bigger convention center, which will almost certainly happen in this current climate of convention center arms racing, then will ours have to expand yet again? Will the demand for exhibition space, meeting rooms, parking lots, loading docks and on-ramps ever cease?

The city took a risk by locating the center in the heart of downtown. Demolishing yet more of the city to make room for more conventioners risks serious urban cardiovascular damage. Notice what's going on there right now: On its best sides, the Convention Center hasn't really generated much by way of street-level urban vitality. On its worst sides, it is



Your complimentary  
use period has ended.  
Thank you for using  
PDF Complete.

[Click Here to upgrade to  
Unlimited Pages and Expanded Features](#)

the proposed expansion simply bring this sterility all the way to Broad

might be -- lost if the beast of the Convention Center is allowed to eat  
marvelous buildings from the turn of the 20th century standing in the  
way of the center's growth that might be reused in all sorts of interesting ways, such as apartments in an old  
lithography plant on North 13th Street. Far from being hopelessly blighted, this area of the city seems poised for the  
sort of revitalization that is already going on just north of Vine Street in what people are now calling "the loft district."

In the abstract, the city clearly needs both the big, dramatic projects and the smaller more entrepreneurial ones. In the  
real world, however, it seems ironic almost to the point of tragedy that they should be made the enemies of each other  
on North 13th.

*Steve Conn is a member of the Design Advocacy Group and is teaching in the history department at Temple University  
this year.*



-- Respond to this article in our Forums -- [click](#) to jump there