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January 1- 7, 2004

CITYSPACE

Plums and Lumps



Block party: The residents of the 2100 block of North Eighth Street deserve kudos for their superb care of the street.

Photo By: Michael T. Regan

2003 was the best of times and the worst of times.

by William Becker and Alan Greenberger

The end of the year brings the season of giving. In that spirit, we hand out some Design Advocacy Group (DAG) holiday gifts -- sugar plums and lumps of coal -- to those deserving design endeavors of 2003. In the limited space here, we offer up this grab bag of presents:

Sugar Plum: Let's start with one that is off most people's radar: the 2100 block of North Eighth Street. Here, in the heart of North Philadelphia, in the middle of a stressed neighborhood, is a block of rowhouses that is intact and superbly cared for by the residents. This block defies all conventional wisdom. One block in either direction is in some trouble. In the middle is a jewel. Neighbors are routinely out cleaning. Holiday decorations abound. When it's time for everyone to have a flag out, flags are out. The mayor needs to give these folks an award if they haven't already gotten one.

Sugar Plum: After decades of planning and setbacks, the Waterworks Interpretive Center -- a project of the Philadelphia Water Department -- opened. Ironically, its planned opening in October was delayed due to heavy rainstorms and potential flooding in the building. But when it finally did open, those fortunate enough to have been there experienced a wonderful new addition to Philadelphia's cultural and historical scene -- an informative display of the history of Philadelphia's drinking water and the importance of maintaining a clean watershed -- all carefully renovated into one of the most remarkable civil engineering and architectural projects in American history.

Lump of Coal: The "big lump" goes to the proposed garage on the 900 block of Chestnut Street. Not through malice but through circumstance, Thomas Jefferson University Hospital and its developer partner, Interpark of Chicago, have backed themselves and the rest of us into an ill-considered plan to place a 300-foot-long garage on a major street. Try as they might to dress it up and convince us that retail on the ground floor will be good, their insistence on this location denies the opportunity for TJU to improve its campus and, at the same time, make a significant contribution to the well-being of the city.

Lump of Coal: More grandiose plans for Penn's Landing that continue to ignore the fundamental problem created by I-95. The only plan that takes it on -- called without the slightest hint of irony as "Atlantis," the Lost Continent -- is so weird as to be almost laughable. Let's be honest about Penn's Landing. The only ones who are interested in overdeveloping this site are those who are understandably hung over from years of failure and ready to let anything happen just to show progress. In terms of likely benefits to the city as a whole, Penn's Landing is not at the top of our list of priorities. We all need a time-out to consider the next move.

After-the-Fact Sugar Plum: In a town like ours where history is ever-present, we need to recognize the wisdom of *not* giving the Historical Commission purview over new construction. While one can reasonably ask the question, "Who is looking out for good new design?" it is safe to say that it shouldn't be those who are charged with defending the city's architectural heritage. We ought to be more robust and forward-looking unless we want to become a quaint historical venue. Just remember: London -- arguably one of the most historic cities on Earth -- found a way to build a monumental, high-tech Ferris wheel on the banks of the Thames, within sight of Parliament and Big Ben.

After-the-Fact Lump of Coal: We also need to recognize that there are a lot of people who live here who wish to make small improvements to their homes and property. With the growing number of historic districts in the city, more and more "small-timers" are going to have to face the process of Historical Commission review -- a prospect not to be taken lightly for its ability to produce stress. There are far too many stories of these folks being shut down at the Commission for minor variations on historical correctness. This has got to stop. We must establish and fund a friendlier, lower-level system of adjudicating residential and small commercial applications, reserving the full Commission and its committees for more urgent matters.



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The long-awaited Schuylkill River Park is finally available to the public, -be has the potential to reconnect Center City to its waterfront in a provide a recreation/parkland connection between downtown and the It could provide a model for the entire Schuylkill-Delaware waterfront. funding will be available to finish the job and whether the city and

CSX Railroad can agree on how to provide proper access to the park. Stay tuned.

With the start of NTI implementation, the School District embarking on a \$1.5 billion capital program and design on numerous projects -- both announced and unannounced -- under way, 2004 promises to be a year in which there will be no shortage of worthy projects to consider. We at DAG plan on buying our holiday gifts early in preparation. Happy New Year to all.

William Becker and Alan Greenberger are co-founders of the Design Advocacy Group.



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