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The Future of the Built Environment in the City of Brotherly Love

by Michelle Sahl

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The City of Philadelphia has experienced *visible* destruction in the wake of the coronavirus, police brutality, financial challenges, and racism. But the *invisible* destruction of our city's social fabric has been lived in the shadows for decades – often reflected in our built environment.



Chestnut Street Collage 2020, Image credit: Michelle Sahl

While we have fought to preserve historic structures, we have long failed to address the loss of moral and economic value that has ravaged many neighborhoods across our city's 135 square miles. Rather than continue to mourn what we've lost; we should begin to envision and plan for a better future.... literally *from the ground up*.

The well-known management theorist, Peter Drucker, noted that “The greatest danger in times of turbulence is not the turbulence; it is to act with yesterday's logic.” To paraphrase Drucker and others and adapt their advice for this moment: with crisis, comes opportunity. Philadelphia now faces a fork in the road. One path leads to patching up yesterday's status quo; the other path rises toward a better future built on what we've learned, what we know, and what can be realized.

At first glance, we notice the results of the widespread looting and vandalism that has torn apart upscale Center City. The *Philadelphia Business Journal* reports that “vacancies had been cropping up along Walnut and Chestnut streets as well as the streets that branch out from them, and many of those empty storefronts have become difficult to backfill.”¹ Minority neighborhoods, however, have been damaged as well, including, for example, the 52nd Street commercial corridor.² In June, few neighborhoods escaped devastation--from West Philadelphia to Southwest Philadelphia, Port Richmond, Kensington, and North and South Philadelphia, and the list goes on.

First, we have to *examine what we've lost*.

Small businesses – unable to remain viable – are permanently closing, and large chain stores will also close various locations, including some in Philadelphia.³ There is the loss of smaller / independent restaurants. Gyms are closing. Facades and storefronts have been destroyed. Gaping holes now remain where physical structures once stood for decades⁴

We can already see *recent changes that may endure*.

The remote/work-from-home style will be with us on a more permanent basis leaving potentially large swaths of empty office space.⁵ People may be inclined to move out of the city, resulting in a dip in population growth and the diminishment of our tax base. At the same time, redevelopment of blighted properties – a “solution” underway decades ago under the John Street administration – continues, for

example along the Kensington corridor.⁶ The concern, of course, is as old as the city's mid-20th-century initiatives: redevelopment is often associated with gentrification, and that is not the solution.

At this opportune time, we are offered many chances to rebalance the City of Brotherly Love so that it genuinely speaks for all its residents. Now we can ask ourselves, *what are the options?*

"Recycling" is the name of the game for *repurposing emptying facilities*. Reviewing the inventory of vacant structures created by the city's prior de-population and the loss of businesses to the suburbs will provide a first indication of the properties that are ripe for repurposing. *Combining* small businesses into single, shared properties allows cost-sharing, economies of scale, and the maximum use of space. In fact, shared "ghost kitchens" began popping up well before the coronavirus and urban closures began.⁷ Ghost kitchens facilitate the sharing of work space, some even without a storefront, and the sharing of rent that is often too expensive for one small business alone.

Housing demand will change the landscape. Much of the future demand is projected to be in medium- and low-density neighborhoods and away from urban centers, as home size will grow to meet the need for office space, gyms, and living space.⁸ Robert Dietz, who leads the National Association of Home Builders, a trade organization, foresees the acceleration of the conversion of retail spaces into residential property. This will be linked with on-going increases in online retail and delivery. *The need for physical retail and office space will decline* as flexible telecommuting options expand.

And while we're at it, let's pull our *school buildings* into the mix of our re-envisioned future. Schools too often sit vacant for hours in the evenings, on weekends, and in the summer months, and entire school buildings have sat vacant for years without purpose.⁹ However, reopening is now planned for November, possibly with staggered class hours for students and staff, which will increase the use of our buildings.

Revitalization of our schools is one of the ideas that "can help cities repurpose community assets to meet

their economic, educational, and social infrastructure needs.”¹⁰ Our future “built environment” has to be conceived as a piece of the foundation of our *social infrastructure*.

There will be *greening opportunities* that build on the decline of climate change and pollution that has resulted from reduced automobile traffic during the pandemic. The re-allocation of more city-owned or vacant land in the neighborhoods offers the potential for increasing community-run green space and urban gardens, which will in turn increase the availability of fresh produce in disadvantaged neighborhoods. There are currently about 40,000 vacant lots in Philadelphia, and while three-fourths of these are privately owned, nearly 10,000 are available for repurposing.¹¹ Moreover, with our newly-raised sensitivity to the significance of public statues, we should look to redirecting the “one percent for art” contributions in City-funded construction projects to the expansion of public green space.¹²

With all the possibilities for creating more “green jobs,” requiring little training, making these necessary structural changes should be a given. Yet, how do we get from here to there with limited economic resources and varying political will? *Public-private partnering* between agencies of government and local corporations will be needed to realize a more sustainable and equitable built environment and a more equitable social infrastructure. Fortunately, Philadelphia is home to a dozen or more large for-profit, publicly-traded companies, each with annual revenues exceeding \$1 billion. These companies stand to benefit from an even more livable, equitable, and sustainable urban landscape, which will enable them to attract and retain a strong workforce.¹³

We need a *city-wide vision* for the future of our built environment – not a piecemeal approach that tackles problems sector by sector or department by department. Architecture is more than construction. It is shaped by the interaction of purpose, environmental characteristics, use, and the desires of residents and constituents. Today, the murals that have been painted on boarded up storefronts reflect our collective yearning for a visual art that expresses the emotions of the moment, celebrating social justice and

investment in social capital.¹⁴ American cities have a responsibility to protect and represent their residents, and that responsibility should be visible *from the ground up*.

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