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Learning from the Grays Ferry Riverfront District

by Nando Micale, FAIA

NANDO MICALE, FAIA, is an architect and planner and co-chair of the DAG Waterfronts Task Force. A principal in LRK's Philadelphia studio, Micale has more than 25 years of experience in planning and designing for vital, sustainable districts and neighborhoods. He is an Adjunct Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, where he leads second-year urban design studios focused on housing and waterfronts.

The Grays Ferry Riverfront District is the focus of the graduate level planning studio that I am now teaching at the University of Pennsylvania's Weitzman School of Design. The studio includes a DAG-funded planning and design charrette, which will help to generate a "Plan for Advocacy." Led by PennPraxis Managing Director Julie Donofrio, the charrette will occur in November, and Donofrio (who is a member of the DAG Steering Committee) will develop the Plan for Advocacy document in early 2021.

DAG selected this waterfront district for the project because the neighborhood has been and continues to be impacted by gentrification. With the extension of the Schuylkill River Trail, it will remain highly susceptible to change in the next decade. In the face of this gentrification, the charrette process will seek to envision alternative futures for the Grays Ferry community that are inclusive, offer economic opportunities to current residents, and provide a framework for access to the river and further investment.

The studio is specifically focused on this problem statement:

The tension around the physical and socio-economic effects of gentrification in the planning of US cities has been brought to the forefront as one of the many issues highlighted in the national equity discussion and the Black Lives Matter movement. The question for the studio is: "How do we as urban planners and designers lead the effort to provide low-income neighborhoods with the tools to engage with developers,

city regulatory agencies, and city political leadership in advocating for equitable neighborhood redevelopment? What does neighborhood advocacy and equity planning look like in 2020 and beyond?”

To date the studio has developed a baseline of existing conditions, has engaged with the city’s Citizen’s Planning Institute and the Office of Civic Engagement and Volunteer Service, and is preparing briefing materials for the DAG-sponsored charrette in November. In preparation for that charrette, PennPraxis convened a series of focus groups during the second week of October, which included community leaders, city agencies, and other stakeholders. The information gathered from these focus groups will help the studio participants complete the briefing materials. Utilizing the results of the charrette, they will distill a set of principles and develop planning and design tools for the community to advocate for equitable neighborhood change.

PennPraxis will integrate the studio’s final recommendations into a Plan for Advocacy, which will be presented at a DAG event in the spring.



Study area for the Grays Ferry Riverfront charrette