

DESIGN ADVOCACY GROUP

of Philadelphia

TO: Philadelphia City Planning Commission
and the Philadelphia Art Commission

FROM: The Steering Committee of the Design Advocacy Group

RE: Dilworth Plaza

DATE: 18 May 2009

A comprehensive redesign has been proposed for Dilworth Plaza, the public space on the west side of City Hall. Few places in the city are more prominent, and few are more disappointing than Dilworth Plaza as now configured.

This is a project of great promise, and it behooves Philadelphia, the city that loves to hate itself, to be bold enough to grasp the opportunity and wise enough to guide it. Our comments should be understood as a contribution to the ongoing civic dialogue that is essential for this project to succeed.

The Center City District has sponsored this proposal, and we are grateful that they have spearheaded this important initiative. But this is a public space and its remaking will represent Philadelphia. It is now, therefore, time for the City Planning Commission, which has been charged by the mayor with overseeing the appearance of our city, to step forward and insure that the proposal is thoroughly and publicly evaluated in a manner that insures the achievement of its high aspirations.

The design has received conceptual approval from the Historical Commission with regard to its impact on the adjoining historically certified building, City Hall. The next step is the Art Commission, which has not yet reviewed the revised design, and, like the Planning Commission, they must now devote to it the attention deserved by a project that is likely to be the largest public work of urban design undertaken in these difficult times.

The improvement of Dilworth Plaza is a dauntingly complex project, and we believe that the proposed design is promising, but several design challenges must be met before the project should be approved. To meet these challenges, we are heartened that the CCD has employed Philadelphia architects and landscape architects of very great talent who have consistently received national and international recognition.

The goals of the project are laudable. The proposal would remove the ramps, steps, railings, sunken courts, and raised platforms that now subdivide the area. In addition to providing unimpeded physical access, increased visual access would be given to the Victorian façade of Philadelphia's landmark City Hall. A versatile outdoor space would be created. The dark and labyrinthine underground interconnections among SEPTA's Blue, Orange, and Green Lines and the regional rail system would be improved and better connected to the pavement level, all in a spirit

of democratic inclusivity. The intersection of Market and Fifteenth Streets would be tamed, with the roadway narrowed and pedestrian crossing allowed from all corners. A more conventional sidewalk-and-street trees configuration at the Fifteenth Street curb line would properly relate this project to the other squares of Penn's plan for Philadelphia. A very substantial increase in planted surfaces, augmented by permeable paving and contemporary water management technology, would contribute to Philadelphia's greener future. The head houses and the multi-function fountain/piazza have the potential to be works of great distinction.

However, significant questions must be answered before this project can be considered complete:

- Most importantly, this plan must be integrated with at least conceptual planning for the contiguous public spaces: the other three sides of City Hall, City Hall courtyard, the ground floor public rooms of City Hall (mooted for use as public art galleries, restaurants, and other festive public functions such as the Marriage License Bureau), the plazas at the northwest and southwest corners of Fifteenth and Market Streets, Love Park, and Reyburn Plaza. If the vocabulary of forms adopted for Dilworth Plaza is to be successful, it must be determined where and in what ways it is to be applied to these other areas; and if the program decisions for Dilworth Plaza are to be the right ones, these other areas must also be programmed.
- The reconfiguration of underground spaces poses many challenges in coordination and design, and it does not appear that these have been fully developed. Just as the project reclaims the ground plane, it must contribute renewed vigor and optimism to the often dreary complex of vertical spaces directly below it that is used by many citizens every day. The challenges of coordination include working closely with SEPTA, which is planning to rebuild the City Hall station on the Broad Street line, an undertaking that must be closely coordinated with the Dilworth Plaza project. Foremost among the design challenges is the decking over of the present sunken courtyard to create the northern portion of the proposed concourse; the obstacles are enormous and perhaps insurmountable. The coordination of the many entrances and exits to the concourse (including deciding the fate of those now closed) is also a vexing problem.
- It is essential that this area include major public art, and to that end locations must be identified by the architects and a process for identifying artists of great merit must be put in place in time for them to contribute to the final form of the design.
- The low, swooping glass roofs of the head houses would present significant problems to those responsible for their cleanliness and for preventing vandalism and dangerous activity. Solutions for these problems must be identified.
- The outdoor café must be evaluated and designed in conjunction with an understanding of the program for City Hall's courtyard and interiors. Perhaps a temporary building is more appropriate for the time being.
- The proposed lawn will be placed in a challenging environment, subject to a good deal of shade and heavy pedestrian use. Further analysis of desire lines must be undertaken to determine whether the lawn needs to be crossed by paved walkways or replaced by paved surface.

- The traffic-taming measures proposed for the intersection of Fifteenth and Market Streets may worsen downtown gridlock. It must be shown that this can be avoided.
- The pixel fountain, café, and lawn will demand significant investments in lighting and specialized storage facilities as well as a sustained, high-level of management and maintenance. These considerations must be explicit in the planning.
- This project will be undertaken under the most challenging economic conditions that most of us have experienced, and the work that is to be modified or replaced was built of expensive materials little more than thirty years ago. Therefore, the full cost of the project must be understood and publicly reviewed, and the opportunities to reuse the existing materials and features must be explored. The itemized construction budget must be carefully analyzed and the various components of the project comparatively evaluated to insure that the most consequential and most certain to succeed are completed.

Some of our greatest works of urban design originated during the Great Depression; Philadelphia must commit itself to creating a project that will be viewed similarly.

The Design Advocacy Group of Philadelphia is a volunteer organization whose nearly 1000 members come from a broad spectrum of disciplines and share an interest in design, development, and planning. DAG's mission is to encourage public discussion about design and to advocate for design excellence.

c/o Claflen Associates, 1619 Walnut Street, Suite 510, Philadelphia, PA 19103-5402