

The Jury's Back

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It's good news that Mayor Michael Nutter has put architecture and urban design at the top of his agenda and that his plan includes the creation of a "Design Review Advisory Board." Design review has proved itself in many other great American cities, and, in the past, Philadelphia has shown that it could do it, too. Between 1911 and 1951, although this included some of the bleakest days of municipal corruption, much of Philadelphia's most admired architecture and city planning was created under the helpful scrutiny of the Art Jury, which reviewed all of the public and much of the private design work in the city. This included, most notably, the construction of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway and the design of all the encircling buildings. What were the ingredients of that success?



The Art Jury's annual reports recorded its decisions and championed its causes—for example, the completion of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, controls on advertising signage, sensitive routing of highways, and good design for even utilitarian structures. In 1945 (bottom center) it mourned the death of architect Paul Cret, who had served on the Jury since its inception in 1911.

The Art Jury was led by civic and cultural leaders who were committed to great architecture and respected by both political leaders and the public. The first appointees to the Art Jury included George Widener, the inheritor of his father's streetcar fortune and the greatest art collector in the city; Edward T.

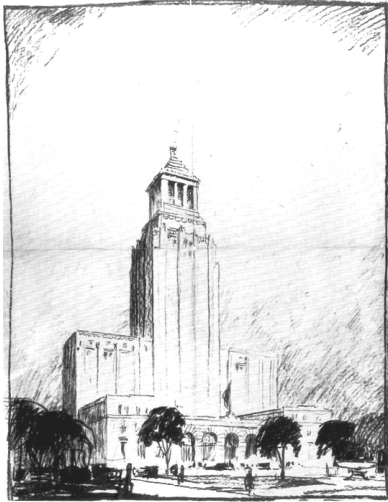
Stotesbury, who ranked not far behind Widener in wealth and art; Eli Kirk Price, Vice President of the Fairmount Park Commission and a leading advocate of the construction of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway; Leslie Miller, principal of the Museum and School of Industrial Art (what is now the University of the Arts), and Charles Harrison, who had just retired as provost of the University of Pennsylvania. Harrison was the first chairman. Over the next forty years, the chairmanship passed to Joseph Widener (who replaced George on the Jury when his brother went down with the Titanic), John F. Lewis (president of the board of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts), Stotesbury, Paul Cret (the eminent architect, about whom more will be said), and J. Stoddell Stokes (president of the board of the Philadelphia Museum of Art).

The Art Jury earned a broad mandate. Although originally conceived as the guardian of the city's art collection (hence the name), the Art Jury was transformed into a design review panel by Mayor John Reyburn when he appointed its first members in 1911. In the early years, its review powers were limited to public architectural projects, which city agencies voluntarily submitted for advice. But this review was made mandatory by statute in 1913, and at the same time the purview was extended to include all private construction on or over public land. The latter included bridges and almost all signs. Then, in 1915, the state legislature gave cities the power to regulate private construction within 200 feet of public parks, and Philadelphia used this to assign to the Art Jury control over all development on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway and adjacent to parkland throughout the city.

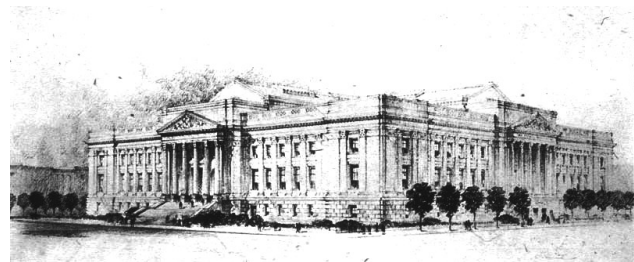
The Art Jury was served by eminent professionals. As required by the enabling legislation, the Jury included an architect, sculptor, and painter. The key position in terms of design review was the architect, and from the founding of the Jury in 1911 until his death in 1945, the architect on the panel was Paul Philippe Cret, the renowned French-trained designer who led the architecture program at the University of Pennsylvania during its several decades of preeminence among American schools. As its secretary (today we would say executive director), the Jury hired the noted city planner Andrew Wright Crawford, a recognized leader of the City Beautiful movement. And when it came time to review the design of the biggest public building of the era, the Philadelphia Museum of Art (which occurred while Cret was serving in the French army during World War I), the Jury sought the advice of a team of out-of-town experts (including John Russell Pope, subsequently architect of the Supreme Court and National Gallery in Washington).

The Art Jury adopted procedures that worked—improving designs without legislating taste. As they explained in their second annual report, the Art Jury defined its work as “essentially critical, but at the same time intended to be helpful in character.” They therefore chose to conduct their work in private, appointing committees (invariably including Cret) that met with the architects of each project and subjected their work to something like the “crits” that they remembered from their student days. Drawings were passed back and forth, approvals were conditioned on further review, and recommendations were made and adopted. For

example, following the advice of the out-of-town experts, the blank wall that the Philadelphia Museum of Art was to have turned toward Fairmount Park (its “back door”) was replaced by a portico. Architect Irwin T. Catherine pruned the replica of the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus from the top of the school administration building, bringing it down to the mandated height limit in the process. What Cret called a “childish” design for a convention hall was scrapped in 1926, and Crawford went to talk informally with the designer of an “inadequate” preliminary design for the Franklin Institute, which was entirely recast.

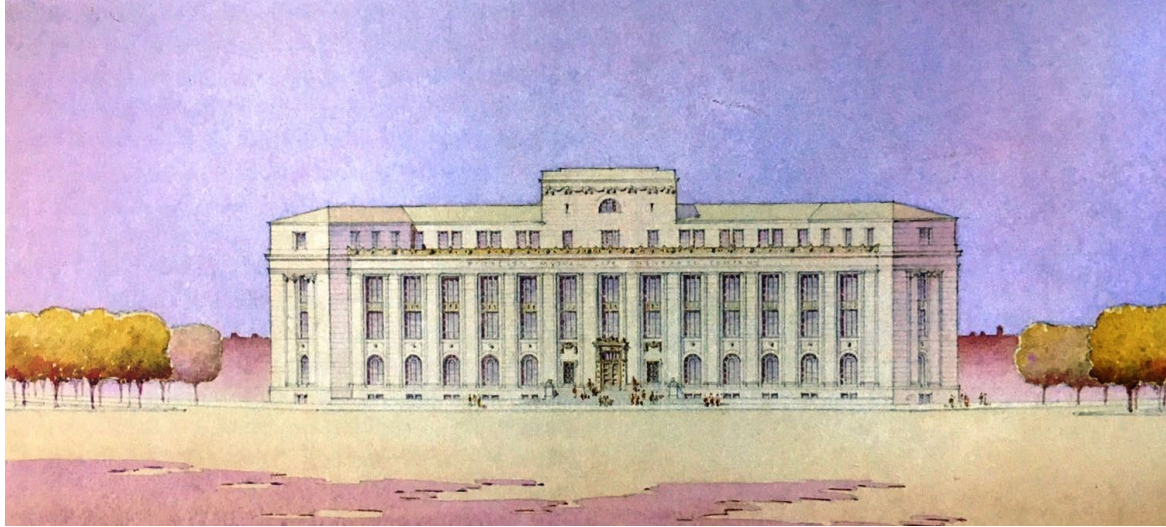


The Art Jury forced the school administration building, completed in 1931, to conform to the 200-foot height limit for buildings on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, foregoing the historicist pinnacle shown at left (1928).



Under Art Jury review, John Windrim’s rather grimly monumental proposal for the Franklin Institute (1930, left) was replaced by a gentler, Palladian design (1931, right).

Milton Medary, the design architect for the Fidelity Mutual Life Insurance Company building, listened to Cret’s encouragement and put aside his rather staid first design in order to create a bolder, two-arched composition. Renovated and expanded, the result is now the Perelman Building of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



The Fidelity Mutual Building, as completed in 1927 (bottom), is a much more powerful design than originally proposed in 1925 (top).

All this was done with an open mind to innovation and change. The Art Jury approved numerous examples of the jazzy modernism called Art Deco, including skyscrapers on Rittenhouse Square, apartment buildings on the Parkway, and the Navy and Marine YMCA (today the Metropolitan apartment building) on 15th Street. However, two apartment buildings proposed for the Parkway, which would have encroached on public land, were flatly rejected.

Of course, then and now, no one agreed with all of its decisions. The Art Jury abided by its rules, and this led to some surprising rulings, and because it was a committee, unanimity was not always achieved. In 1921, for instance, a lackluster courthouse design was automatically approved because a quorum of the Jury could not be summoned during the sixty days allotted to its review. (The project came to naught, and the site was reassigned to the Franklin Institute.)

Paul Cret did not always have his way. While he was absent in France serving his homeland during the First World War, his countryman Jacques Gréber came to Philadelphia as a consultant to the Fairmount Park Commission. In that capacity Gréber convinced the Art Jury that it made sense to replicate the great eighteenth-century palaces of the Place de la Concorde in Paris on Logan Square in Philadelphia, in the guise of the Free Library and Municipal Court buildings. In 1922, with construction of the library under way, Cret could only lament in a private report to the Jury, "It will be a matter of regret to some that such an important [project] built by the city will not deserve more than the doubtful praise of being a copy of a good example."



Logan Square (at left) need not be a copy of the Place de la Concorde, Cret thought. But he did not win that argument.

The Art Jury's principled, often critical work was accomplished with little rancor. Charles Harrison, upon resigning in 1916, averred, "I cannot recollect a single unkind word spoken at any one of our numerous meetings during the last five years." (When, famously, Joseph Widener quit the Jury in 1920, it was widely known that the precipitant was his argument with the mayor over the construction of a stand-alone museum for the Johnson Collection of paintings. But this was not a matter of disagreement within the Jury.)

The Art Jury championed the rights of the public. Starting in its first year, the Jury tirelessly campaigned on behalf of public amenities. Philadelphia's sidewalks, overhung by myriad projecting signs, made gloomy by metal awnings, and narrowed by various encroachments, were a critical battleground. Eventually winning sweeping bans on overhanging signage and "marquises," the Jury stated that this fight was only "a portion of the larger matter of sidewalk obstructions in general." (1918) Also of high public importance were the numerous bridges that lifted railways over city streets and that carried cars and trains across the Schuylkill

River. Significantly, given today's attention to the subject, the Art Jury spent several years in the early 1920s reviewing the incrementally improved design for the South Street Bridge. Then as now, the waterfront was the subject of a sustained campaign, focusing on what is today still the tantalizing prospect that the banks of our rivers might be reclaimed for public use.

The Art Jury saw education as an essential part of its mission. Many of the Art Jury members were teachers, and they came naturally to the task of mobilizing public opinion and educating Philadelphians about the necessary conditions for good design. They touted the advantages of building the Benjamin Franklin Parkway and completing the institutions of public instruction and recreation that were slated to be built there. They carefully explained the necessity of employing minimally invasive measures in conserving the paintings that the city owned, fulfilling the responsibilities for which the Jury had originally been constituted. And they were unflagging proponents of a permanent City Planning Commission, seeking in this to fulfill the vision of Mayor Reyburn, who, when he created the Art Jury, had also established a Comprehensive Plans Committee. The latter had withered away under his successors, was briefly revived in 1929 by City Council, and only permanently established in 1942. A planning commission, they reasoned, was needed to complement the work of the Art Jury.

The Art Jury made the connection between good design and good economics. With leading industrialists and financiers among its members, the Art Jury strove to advance the city's economic wellbeing through its actions. It never failed to note that while cost-cutting was not its job, its recommendations often saved money, somewhat smugly recording in its first report "That the cost has been reduced in many cases shows that good taste and economy are often synonymous." More broadly, the Art Jury encouraged investments that would build Philadelphia's prosperity. "A city is like a great merchant; if the latter would attract visitors, he must build an attractive structure," it argued in 1920, summarizing more pithily, "People do not go to cities which are famed for their ugliness."

The Art Jury networked with similar organizations nationwide. Born when Progressive Era reformism was sweeping the country, the Art Jury took advantage of the breadth of the movement that it had joined. Comparative information from other cities was regularly collected and studied, and in May 1917 Philadelphia's Art Jury hosted a conference of several dozen similar public art bureaus. Before adjourning to Joseph Widener's estate in Elkins Park, where the delegates were to see Art Jury president's fabulous art collection and have lunch, they were welcomed by Mayor Thomas Smith. He regaled them with a story:

"When I became Mayor of the city, ...I was confidentially informed that the Art Jury of Philadelphia was a useless tail to the administration kite and that I would do well to discourage the members and eventually have them disband as an Art Jury. [B]ut I found that the Art Jury was composed of men of standing and ability in our

community, men who, I very shortly learned, were very peculiarly qualified to act in the capacity in which they were acting.”

Smith avowed that he attended most meetings of the Jury, and that while he didn't always agree with their rulings, he respected their work. We can hope that Mayor Nutter will have reason to feel the same way about Philadelphia's new design review board.

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The Design Advocacy Group of Philadelphia is a volunteer organization is a volunteer whose more than 1,200 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.