

Family Court
AUGUST 4 2010

The continuing news coverage about the proposed new Family Court Building, with its understandable focus on the personalities of the key players, what they knew, and when did they know it, has obscured an equally if not more serious area of concern. This sad story is a textbook illustration of the dangers of an ad hoc and secretive approach to making planning and design decisions about significant public buildings.

Twenty years ago, when Philadelphia was in serious financial distress, such an approach may have been justified as the shortest path to getting anything built. Careful and thoughtful evaluation of options was dismissed as too time consuming and it seemed that any new building on any site was welcomed with open arms.

Thankfully, these conditions are behind us, and it is long past time we stop acting as if nothing has changed. Instead of yet another example of developing our civic institutions one "deal" at a time, the Mayor should charge our capable Planning Commission with leading a systematic and creative analysis of a variety of options for the Family Court, engage the public in the evaluation of the most promising ideas, and only then select the approach that uses all the pieces at our disposal to yield the best results for the City.

It's not as if we don't know how to do this. Philadelphia is famous nationally for its historic leadership in city planning and the planning process initiated by the City Planning Commission and Penn Praxis for the revitalization of the Central Delaware River Waterfront provides ample evidence that we still have the talent and experience necessary to do things in the right way.

But new information about the Family Courts needs and site selection highlights how the political process – all questions of improprieties aside – runs rough shod over a proper planning process that is the City's best hope of achieving not just short-term, but long-term benefits from the project. Planning is all about choices. In a rush to critique the design of the proposed Arch Street building, we lost sight of the fact that because there had been no public planning process, there didn't seem to be any choices. But, of course, there are choices which should have received serious, even-handed consideration – we see no evidence that they did – which would have sparked the kind of questioning and "what if" thinking that is the basis of good planning and design.

For example, some have suggested that the magnificent building complex at 46th and Market Streets would be ideal for the Family Court. Located adjacent to the new Youth Study Center, it would enable us to save a long vacant and deteriorating historic building, would conceivably result in a better quality building at a lower cost, would capitalize on dollars recently devoted to the rebuilding of the Market Street EI, and could be the beginnings of a transit-oriented development in a neighborhood which sorely needs development. Besides, the site is big enough and there is no need for expensive underground parking. It is a legitimate question how this site compares to the one at 15th and Arch, which surely merits a high rise at some point, but is too small for the Family Court without a spot zoning change, and is in such a congested area that the Court's parking and service needs will destroy the pedestrian experience and threaten grid lock for cars exiting the Vine Street Expressway to Center City. Finally, the Arch Street site seems ideal for future private development, but not so for the West Philly location, so where best to invest our scarce public dollars?

An even more intriguing alternative was suggested in the August 4 edition of the Inquirer by John Gallery, of the Preservation Alliance, who made a thoughtful and persuasive argument for continuing the use of the Family Court building on Logan Square, augmented by a new annex nearby that would contain the functions of the Family Court that are currently housed in the building at 11th and Market. Contrary to first impressions, it seems that the truly dire conditions that spurred plans for a new court house are limited to the Market Street building, while the Logan Square building has been continually maintained and carefully upgraded. It is fair to ask why we wouldn't choose to spend less money to build a small but excellent quality annex and, by means of limited improvements to the main building, retain the architectural splendor of the Logan Square building – which could never be regained with the budget we have now – for its users.

As happens in a good planning process, one good idea suggests yet another possibility that merits consideration. The current plans for the expansion of the Central Branch of the Free Library, the twin of the Family Court building located just across 19th Street, include the construction of a spectacular addition on the block directly to the north, along with a modest renovation of the existing building. The proposed addition, however, would occupy only a portion of the site, so the northern half facing Callowhill Street is to become an outdoor green space. Since the Library expansion is moving none too swiftly, would it be possible to achieve a critical mass to propel the project forward – and for that matter, benefit the Parkway – by combining the Family Court annex and the Library addition on this same site? The site is already fully under control of the Library, and it is surely large enough to accommodate the needs of both institutions. In this new building, the monumental interior public room planned for the Library Addition might become an even more useful – and affordable – public amenity if it is shared by both institutions. Even

better, several levels of underground parking could be included to serve not only the Library and the Family Court, but also the demand from the new Barnes as well as the burgeoning neighborhood to the north. And better yet, savings from the combined budgets for the new complex, along with income from the underground garage, might free up enough funds to provide for the full renovation of the once magnificent original Central Branch building.

Without study we can't say which, if any, of the alternates is best for the City, but it is clear that we have choices and that some of the choices have the potential to be a win, win, win. This is the value of planning: that the resulting whole is greater than the individual pieces. Philadelphia can't reach its potential as a wonderfully vibrant metropolis - historic *and* newly and adventurously reborn – if we don't use the professional talents we have to engage in this kind of creative and public process rather than cede that power to the narrow focus of the folks who – even if well intentioned – see no further than the limits of a single project. We know that careful and deliberative planning can sometimes be frustrating to impatient leaders eager to see results immediately. But we also know that a collaborative process that draws upon the thinking of many experts and of an engaged citizenry has the potential to come up with not only the best ideas, but also the support necessary to see them implemented.

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