

## **DAGchair : April 5, 2012**

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This is an anecdotal account of the last meeting written by the chair, to be published each month. These notes are intended to update people who were not able to attend the meeting. They are not intended to be minutes. If anyone has items to add or correct, please contact me. It is also intended to be a heads up about current and upcoming DAG issues. As always, tips, gossip and ideas are welcome.

### **GENERAL DISCUSSION**

Tim Kerner, longtime active member of DAG, has left to live in Brazil for two years. We wish Tim and his family all the best, and we thank him for all his work for DAG.

The DAG Postcard Project, in honor of DAG's tenth anniversary, will feature an exhibit at the Center for Architecture beginning July 30. One part of the exhibit will feature buildings completed in 2002 or after, and will invite viewers to vote on their favorites. The rest of the exhibit will feature Philadelphia buildings going back to 1682 that embody principles of good design.

Andrew Goodman of Penn Praxis handed out flyers for the public meetings about the Lower Schuylkill Master Plan. Those meetings are now over, but you can keep up with the project on [planphilly.com](http://planphilly.com).

<http://planphilly.com/mid-point-report-lower-schuylkill-master-plan>

### **WONKISH HEARTS AFLUTTER**

First, we all know that Philadelphia is the city of firsts - America's first hospital, first zoo, first stock exchange, first daily newspaper. We made the national news on April 2 with coverage of the new first ever e-lane for texting-while-walking pedestrians. Our own Rina Cutler was tired of seeing pedestrians "walking with their heads down, busy emailing, texting, and paying absolutely no attention when they cross the street". So she and our Mayor

inaugurated a specially marked sidewalk lane in the 1400 block of JFK Boulevard with a particularly cunning graphic of a distracted pedestrian. Sadly, the e-lane was only scheduled to be in place for April Fools week.

Second, on a more serious note, Christopher Stromberg says that the developers of Carpenter Square have committed to ground source heat pumps for the entire development. We saw this project presented last month by [Christopher and Brian Johnston](#). I don't know if there is precedent for such a mixed use geothermal installation in Philadelphia, but the developers deserve our applause for taking a financial risk to make a strong commitment to energy conservation.

## LAND BANK PANEL

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development defines a land bank as “a public authority created to efficiently acquire, hold, manage and develop tax-foreclosed property, as well as other vacant and abandoned properties.” Implementing such an entity is admittedly a very complex business, but we attempted within an hour to hone in on those issues of interest to DAG members – how public policy impacts the built environment, for better or worse, for richer or poorer. If you haven't read John Kromer's excellent DAGspace article with his opinions on a land bank for Philadelphia, find it at

<http://www.designadvocacy.org/dagspace/philadelphia-land-bank---why-we-need-get-it-right>.

The following items were brought up at our March meeting when we started this discussion.

- Transparency and predictability in the process
- Design quality of the resulting buildings
- Clear titles, and current lack thereof
- Streamlined process
- Relate to remapping
- Distinguish between types and sizes of parcels in the process

Three guests graciously agreed to come out early in the morning to discuss proposals for a land bank in Philadelphia. In support of breaking down stereotypes and silos, a bit of biographical information is included for each.

John Carpenter is Deputy Executive Director at the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority (PRA) in charge of Land Policy and Neighborhood Stabilization Program. He is the force behind the administration's new "Front Door" policy for disposition of City-owned properties. He is also a furniture maker and award winning potter.

Jennifer Kates is a lawyer, and Legislative Assistant to Councilwoman Maria Quinones-Sanchez, sponsor of the land bank legislation. Jennifer has a strong history of advocacy and activism, and has an enviable criminal record as one of the 400 protesters arrested at the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia.

Jeff Allegretti is president of Innova Services and has developed many properties under PRA's federally funded Neighborhood Stabilization Program. He brings a developer's view of current programs to acquire and develop city-owned land. Jeff is also the author of a book-length study on the theoretical connections between Christian mysticism and psychoanalysis in the context of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. (Symbolic castration, lost love objects and the existential void relating inevitably to vacant land policy?)

Each of the panelists gave a short presentation. Jennifer and Jeff's slide shows can be found at <http://www.designadvocacy.org/meeting/land-bank>. John's will follow once the Front Door policy is officially introduced. In keeping with our off the record press policy, what follows are my reflections on the discussion, not a record of who said what.

In the question period, panelists started by discussing the "business plan" to get City-owned vacant land back into productive use, and how to include privately held property without making the whole initiative too expensive to succeed. Two important themes emerged - the need for accurate data about vacant properties and the need to clear a path through tangled titles for many vacant properties. Ellen Avila of the Office of Property Data was in the audience and offered to speak with anyone who is interested in the data piece – [ellyn.avila@phil.gov](mailto:ellyn.avila@phil.gov).

Moving into less comfortable territory, the next question started with a quote from Bruce Katz, Brookings Institution vice president and founder of its Metropolitan Policy Program. *"Everywhere you turn, at the city, at the metropolitan or state scale, you find either individual leaders, or more likely networks of leaders, who tend to put place over party and ideology."* Or, in our fair city, put place over Councilmanic Prerogative. Could Council members put limits on their trading of favors in order to truly benefit our whole neighborhoods and our whole city?

That discussion is way off the record. (See? You really do have to attend the meetings to hear the good stuff.) My takeaway was surprisingly positive. The Council members have ground level knowledge of their districts that is essential in planning for the use of vacant land. The more forward-thinking members would like to spend more time on “impact work”, or setting policy, and less on the “service work” of keeping their more vocal constituents happy on mini-micro-local issues involving land use. A well-established land bank could help them to assume that higher level role. Inevitably, some members will hang onto every shred of control they can muster over every minute of the process.

So why not use Council members’ expertise early in the process, in concert with the Planning Commission. Set aside those sites that could be significant. Don’t allow one rowhouse lot to be sold that would keep a positive new development from happening. Then after those high-level decisions have been made, let the process run without Council interference, with liberty and justice for all!

After listening to Jeff, it was obvious that there are private developers with goals similar to those of the community development corporations (CDCs). Again, in an effort to break down the stereotypes, there are bad guys and good guys on both sides. We all know bad developer / speculator types – shiny Italian suits, shiny German cars, shiny silver tongues. But CDCs can be power hungry too. One cranky Star Trek fan commented online, *“I bet that once the Land Bank is set up under the RDA, (a certain civic group) will be waiting to suck up banked property like a vacuum cleaner to expand its mission. Kinda like the Borg. “Your block will be assimilated”.”* Then there are the good guys and great projects - the private developers like Jeff and the terrific projects like Paseo Verde by WRT, a team effort by Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha (APM) and developer Jonathan Rose.

## **WHAT’S NEXT?**

The Land Bank Issue Committee has met twice, and will formulate testimony for City Council in June. We are working in concert with the Philadelphia Association of CDCs (PACDC) and the Building Industry Association (BIA), and will continue to be in touch with the administration and Councilwoman Quinones-Sanchez’s office. Your comments are welcome. At the May 3rd DAG meeting, Tim McDonald of Onion Flats presents the Ridge Flats project for the former Rivage site on Kelly Drive. And don’t forget Aloha Friday. Go out with your friends and talk about our city. Look and listen. See and be seen. Have fun.



Thanks to you all for your time and energy. Aloha.

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