

Op/Ed on Family Court

JANUARY 14 2012

Hard to believe that there could be yet another reason to qualify the new Family Court Building as the poster child par excellence for how not to procure a good public building. Yet the new year brought word (January 5, 2012 “New Fight Over Home for Court”) that will ensure its special status. To those who know anything about the way thousands of projects are successfully planned, designed, and constructed every day in this country, the story is astounding.

First, the decision was made to abandon use of the well-maintained, fully functional, and historically significant court building on Logan Circle, possibly leaving it vacant for years, even though the only portion of the court in need of replacement may be the one located at 11th and Market Streets. Next the judicial branch, which under normal circumstances would be considered the building user, not the owner, ignored the normal method of procuring public projects – one that ensures proper process – in favor of managing the job itself. Then a site was chosen that was too small for the required program, even after the property was spot zoned by City Council so that the building could legally disregard the existing code requirements. All of the above was done without the knowledge, review, or comment of the public or the adjacent property owners, despite the fact that this building will likely be one of the largest and most prominently sited new civic buildings in the City for a long time to come.

This has been a botched process from the start, as the Design Advocacy Group pointed out previously, lacking in both professional guidance and public scrutiny during the planning process, and it has resulted in a design that fails in terms of urban fit and architectural aspiration. Now that construction has begun, we learn that the cost estimate – previously cited as the reason for not providing the architectural materials and character befitting an important civic building – was wrong. It has been discovered that there is enough money to make the building bigger, but not enough to improve the quality or the design. And the enlargement will require permission to increase the building bulk yet again.

We already pay the people at the Pennsylvania Department of General Services to build public buildings, we have a talented group of well qualified professionals at the Philadelphia City Planning Commission to guide the planning and design of projects like this so that they benefit the City, and we have zoning regulations that– despite some deficiencies of the existing Zoning Code – are designed to create a city that looks like what we decided we want.



Moreover, we have several commissions and agencies, such as the Zoning Board of Adjustment and the Art Commission, which can ensure that the public gets a chance to see what's proposed and to comment. We need to use the system that we have and demand that it functions as intended. That way this city can expand its architectural legacy and increase the urban vitality that we Philadelphians both desire and deserve. It may be too late to do anything but remember this project as a cautionary tale, but there's at least one more chance to try to make the system work at the next Art Commission meeting on February 1st when the Family Court will again be on the agenda.

Joanne Aitken FAIA

Chair