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CITYSPACE

The Five Questions



On The waterfront: Johnny, you shoulda helped your city.

Why is Penn's Landing different from all other developments?

by Todd W. Bressi

Photo By: Michael T. Regan

Now that the city has received four proposals for redeveloping Penn's Landing -- and a neighborhood group has put an alternative plan on the table -- it's time to consider how they stack up.

Recent articles in this column and in the *Inquirer* have evaluated how well the proposals take into account "Penn's Landing Principles," seven common-sense yet powerful concepts created through a community deliberation process for developing and designing the area.

Another set of issues is lurking quietly in the background. Architects sometimes say that "form follows function," but in urban mega-projects like Penn's Landing, it is just as likely that "form follows finance" (to borrow another phrase). That is, the way the development project is organized and financed will have a tremendous impact on what kind of place this turns out to be.

So there are substantive questions to be asked, not so much about the design details, but about the structure of the development process. Here, for starters, are a few that should be on the table:

Does it come with strings attached?

In the urban mega-project business, the most important "strings" are financial. Is development at Penn's Landing expected to generate ongoing revenue (beyond the developer's profit), perhaps to help retire debt incurred to build the improvements that are already there? Is the sale of the site expected to generate one-shot revenue that's been used to plug a budget gap somewhere down the road? Considerations like these will drive the deal, the development economics and, ultimately, the design.

How does the proposal break into parts?

Rare is the urban mega-project that gets built in one shot. Nobody wants to risk all that capital at once. And nobody expects that all the space that is developed at Penn's Landing -- whether office, retail, hotel or residential -- can be absorbed into the market at once.

So if Penn's Landing is built over time, what will the various components be? Will they be staged in such a way that if one part is delayed, the others won't be blocked off by a dormant construction site? Will they be financed in such a way that if one part fails, the rest of the project won't collapse?

Moreover, it is essential that public infrastructure gets built all at once, and gets built first. But how will expensive up-front or shared costs -- such as new streets and public spaces, or decking over I-95, or a parking garage -- be paid for and carried while the rest of the project catches up? Is this the purpose of the public subsidy that some of the development teams have requested?

Who are the players?

Rare is the urban mega-project that gets built by one entity. Often, one team serves as the overall developer, another builds the project and another operates the place once it's finished. A large project like this could be spun off to multiple specialized entities.



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is important to know who will be involved at each stage, what their the expectations for the place. For a project like Penn's Landing, it will be undertaken by the private sector, which by city agencies and which bear public goals for each stage of the project, and a process for keeping

What's the plan for the public realm?

Nowadays, the public realm is primarily regarded as an amenity. But think first about the powerful role public space plays in structuring cities. For millennia, city development began by laying out squares and streets, which together formed a structure that framed subsequent decisions about locating buildings and land uses. No matter what the pattern of development, and how it changes over time, streets and spaces gather everything together and create the sense of a city. In what way will the public realm at Penn's Landing provide a "civic framework" that structures private development and melds it into the larger pattern of Philadelphia?

The public realm is also an attractive force, the part of a place that draws people in, and keeps them coming back, even if they don't live or work in the area. In this age of privatization, questions of who owns the public realm, who pays for keeping it up and who's in charge of keeping it safe, vibrant and attractive are critical. These arrangements, and the ground rules for making decisions, need to be on the table.

What will the place look like?

That's what glossy renderings are supposed to show us. But this is a trick question: Good urban places are never finished. Just look at how Center City has evolved over three centuries; even the most historic areas have changed, if subtly.

Yes, give us your best assessment of how Penn's Landing could be built out, but be up-front about decisions that might be made down the road, and about what elements of the project might reasonably change over time.

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