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October 30-November 5, 2003

## CITYSPACE

### Wharf Rat



**Rittenhouse on the Waterfront?: As public space, the square helps generate big private bucks.** *Photo*  
By: Michael T. Regan

### Keep Penn's Landing in the public realm.

by Harris Steinberg

On a late August evening in 1879, Walt Whitman was detained at the site of Philadelphia's half-built City Hall. Leaving his open summer car to view the structure, the poet wrote of a building of magnificent proportions -- a majestic and lovely show there in the moonlight -- flooded all over, façades, myriad, silver-white lines and carv'd heads and mouldings, with the soft dazzle -- silent, weird, beautiful . Returning to his carriage that evening of moon splendor and star splendor, Whitman

took the ferry home to Camden.

Silent, weird, beautiful.

Would our buildings dazzle Whitman today? Do we still construct poetry?

Wish that Whitman were here today to weigh in on the great generational drama known as Penn's Landing. For 40 years, the city of Philadelphia has struggled to develop its central waterfront. Grandiose plans for large-scale development have come and gone with the hope that intensive development on this remote slice of land will reap great economic rewards for the city.

We are poised yet again to enter a development pas de deux as four suitors dazzle us with ever-grander visions of waterfront splendor. Sounds a bit more like the story of the goose who laid the golden eggs than the majestic timbre of Whitman.

So, why do we repeatedly chase this elusive Siren? Perhaps we need a paradigm shift.

Another way to think about developing Penn's Landing might be to not develop it. An oxymoron? Not really, for as Peter Linneman, professor of real estate at the Wharton School, told us during the Penn's Landing Forums (convened by the Penn Praxis program at the University of Pennsylvania and The Philadelphia Inquirer) last winter -- development on this surgically removed site simply can't sustain itself -- there's no market there -- yet.

A leitmotif that ran throughout the Penn's Landing Forums was the call for Penn's Landing to remain a public space. Great public spaces, after all, are urban development catalysts, like supernova, drawing people, energy and life into their ever-expanding orbit.

All of this begins to imply that the creation of a fantastic public realm should precede private development at Penn's Landing. Makes sense to me. It's then fair to ask if we really want a developer to design our public spaces.

What does it mean to be a public space and how public would the open spaces in the current development proposals really be? Are they truly public? Or will they be private spaces that appear public, like those in a mall -- part of a controlled and managed private environment?

When thinking about the public areas of Penn's Landing, we should think about issues like signage and the encouragement of public activities such as a speaker's corner or skateboarding. Who controls these activities? Do we want to control these activities?

Think about what makes truly great urban public spaces. A great public realm is often typified by excellent architecture (usually a variety of styles from different time periods) that serves to define strong spatial edges and boundaries; an intelligent understanding of human and humane scale (from the individual to the monumental); beautiful, durable and elegant detailing and appointments (paving, benches, lighting, building materials); strong urban vistas that link the site to its urban context along with an urban permeability that seamlessly integrates the space into the life of the city.



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democratic values and way of life (think the National Mall in D.C. and brilliant Rockefeller Center in New York City, successful, truly great development entity. The market must be telling us something here. We

Great public spaces are vital, evolving, organic organisms that encourage a diversity of forms, styles, peoples and events, while retaining a strong, individual, often idiosyncratic, indigenous public presence.

Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia's quintessential public space, fits the bill with a clear distinction between public and private realms. Paul Cret, the French, Beaux Arts-trained architect, artfully designed the public improvements to the square in 1913 within a space that was planned and forever set aside as public land in 1682 by William Penn and Thomas Holmes. Private development hugs the edges of Rittenhouse Square. It's the place to build precisely because the public realm is so wonderful. Penn did not give the square to developers. There's a message here.

Remember that cities are about the collective energies and synergies of people in time and space. Development by a single hand tends too often to deaden public activity and energy.

Cities around the world, from Barcelona to Boston, are demonstrating the potency and power of good urban design and planning -- proving that development flows into well-designed, thoughtful areas of strength and stature.

Let's think about creating an exceptional public realm at Penn's Landing. Allow Philadelphia's world-class design community to connect the city and the waterfront, deck over I-95 and watch the city flow back to the river. Then make a place -- a truly public place -- at the water's edge that would dazzle Whitman. Done right, development will take care of itself. Otherwise, we just might be looking at another golden-egg-laying goose.

*Harris Steinberg is a local architect and a member of the Design Advocacy Group.*



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