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The Grande Canon: Thou shalt reuse old buildings. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

Why new apartments in old buildings may be the key to Philly's future.

by *Patrick M. Starr*

It's time to celebrate an amazing Philly achievement. All too typical of our blasé town, almost nobody has noticed but me and a handful of my urban design "geek" friends.

I'm talking about an historic preservation/community revitalization achievement that in five or so years has seen more than 50 buildings rehabbed according to national preservation standards resulting in an economic investment of several hundred million dollars, drawing restaurants and stores and a couple of thousand new high-income residents to Center City.

What I am talking about is notably (for a town that is a definite public policy underachiever) the intended result (fancy that) of public policy. Given our penchant for screwing up on the "policy" end of things, this alone is cause for celebration. A few years back, Council passed and Mayor Rendell signed a 10-year tax abatement for conversion of older office buildings to new uses. That got the ball rolling. More recent revisions expanded eligibility to include unoccupied structures and new construction.

My favorite success result? The hulking industrial loft building at 2121 Market that I remember as a tuxedo manufactory, empty for more than a decade, now houses luxury lofts. It was a blight that fit in perfectly with the ever-expanding surface parking lots and porn shops in that vicinity. Now it's a beacon of renewal and vitality. Best of all, suburbanites passing on SEPTA commuter rail got front-seat views of the lights turning on as the newly rehabbed loft apartments were quickly snatched up by urban hipsters.

Life on West Market Street. And word is that a Trader Joe's is about to open in that location -- another sure sign of the growing impact of the Center City resident boom.

The list of dead spots brought to life is really long. And they are a quirky bunch of buildings too. My favorites aren't the big splashy conversions such as 1500 Chestnut, The Phoenix (former INA building) or The Left Bank. The ones I really love are the forgotten buildings: the old Blum Department store and the little art deco gem catty-corner to it that was "annexed" into the Adelphia House (both by Philadelphia Management, both at 13th and Chestnut Streets), the long-neglected Victory Building (10th and Chestnut), the deco-tower former Jewish Federation Building at 16th and Locust (with great views of St. Mark's Church), the cute little charmer on Washington Square that used to house a credit union (my bank) and is now luxury condos with HUGE views of the park (talk about highest and best use.).

Most exciting to me is seeing the "lights turn on" in long-neglected structures. In spite of an amazing amount of supply, due to recent demographics youngsters and oldsters seeking to escape the suburban doldrums have been fueling rising



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product. It's interesting to watch developers seek out new, less

Walnut-Chestnut corridor. Although local urban design geeks have "fabulous" downtown, reality was that until very recently there was no one on Chestnut Street after 7 p.m. (not to mention Market, JFK, Arch and all the intersecting streets). Although much better, even Walnut has a long way to go to achieve the "zing" of Newbury Street in Boston or Dupont Circle in Washington.

The missing piece was residents. Philadelphia has long claimed to have "the third largest downtown resident population in the nation." A statistical fact yes, but the reality has never lived up to the hype. In reality our great "mixed use" downtown was carefully segregated into residential below Locust and commercial north of Locust. Only on Locust Street (18th to 11th) and Walnut immediately around Rittenhouse Square did the two mix.

That is changing. The transformation is exciting to see. I walk down Chestnut Street west of Broad and there are people out and about. (Hallelujah.)

Still, there is much to be done. West Market is a sterile dead canyon that impedes north-south connections between the increasingly lively south side and Logan Circle and Franklinton. North Broad Street -- both east and west -- is about as dreary as dreary can be, but there are now pockets of residents at The Phoenix and not to mention the old YMCA tower and Packard Building. And then there are east Chestnut-Walnut impeding connections to Old City. Residential conversions all along this corridor could make a huge difference, if Jefferson University doesn't succeed in creating an institutional "dead zone" of their own (which looks pretty much inevitable -- I guess you take two steps forward and one step back). The failure of east Market, Chestnut and Walnut will leave the vibrancy of Chinatown isolated for many more years I fear, and what a shame.

That said, hey Philadelphia, let's pop some corks, and have a party. We have truly turned lemons into a sweet, bracing lemonade.

Patrick Starr is vice president for the Southeast Region of the Pennsylvania Environmental Council and a resident of Washington Square West.



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