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Bloat On The Water



The incredible hulk: The newest house on the Row is a missed design opportunity. Photo By: Michael

T. Regan

The St. Joe's boathouse is an affront to the city.

by **Harris M. Steinberg**

Georges Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884-86) depicts a languid summer afternoon on the banks of the River Seine in Paris. There is a sense of frozen motion in this painting of formal informality -- a stop-action view of a time and custom long gone. Stylishly dressed Parisians take in the sun and the boats and the breeze beneath the trees -- all in slow motion. Today we blade along the water's edge in Lycra.

I think of Seurat's painting when I think about Boathouse Row in Philadelphia -- the row of boathouses arrayed along the banks of the Schuylkill River, their slips pitched gently toward the water's edge. This cluster of boathouses, which begins with the lighthouse at the northern end and culminates in the majestic Greek revival Fairmount Waterworks at the south, is arguably Philadelphia's signature view. Nestled along the curving shoreline, the collection of buildings is much like the people Seurat caught in pointillist stop-action in Paris. For our view in Philadelphia is a snapshot of how Philadelphians used the Schuylkill over 100 years ago.

If we close our eyes, we can see Thomas Eakins and his friend Max Schmitt in his single scull. We can see Frank Furness working out the details for his roughly masculine *Undine Barge* house with its overscaled brackets and sensuous carvings. We can see a time when Philadelphia's finest architects created simple and elegant buildings of distinction at the Schuylkill's edge -- buildings with careful detailing and of a human scale, sited informally for recreation as if lounging beneath parasols along the Seine in Seurat's painting.

Sadly, such cannot be said about the new Robert M. Gillin Jr. Boathouse. Built a mile upriver from Boathouse Row for Saint Joseph's University and Saint Joseph's Preparatory School, this \$3.2-million building was dedicated in May 2002. Sited adjacent to the Canoe Club boat slips beside the newly restored Strawberry Mansion Bridge, the new St. Joe's Boathouse is a bloated hulk of a building. Wedged into its site and lacking any grace or style, the building -- the first boathouse built on the Schuylkill in 100 years -- resembles a maintenance shed or a turnpike rest stop more than a boathouse along Philadelphia's historic Kelly Drive.

To be fair, the building tries -- barely. It has a cupola and some columns and a bracket or two. There are two types of brick and there are wood windows. But that is about it. Every single design element (if you could call them that) is weak, tepid and flaccid. There is no design idea here. This is an oversize, ungainly box that does not relate to its site or its times.

The cupola is so tiny that you don't even know it's there. The massing of the building is graceless, with no finesse, detailing or charm. It's a box -- period. The columns at the front entrance are so spindly and the square wooden windows so small and placed so high in the wall that there is no sense of human scale on this building. Where the other buildings along Boathouse Row are built with a keen eye toward how a person would feel against the building, this boathouse is puffed up and tenuous -- it looks as if one stiff wind and it's all over. It more resembles a house of cards than a boathouse.



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in a city renowned for its boathouses and boat races, along a glorious
given a structure so prosaic that it gives one pause. Why was it built
building is a crime against Fairmount Park. Philadelphians deserve

we cannot allow expedient and substandard designs to be approved and built in the park. There is no equivocating on
this point. In a city where all too often the prevailing mantra is that any development is good development, we must
hold the line when it comes to building in the park. The Fairmount Park Commission must be held accountable for the
St. Joe's boathouse. If only we could hit backspace and delete. Would that it were that simple.

We don't dress up to travel anymore and we certainly don't loll beneath parasols at the water's edge. But we do have
fine architects in Philadelphia who can create distinctive buildings that bespeak our time and culture in a way that we
would be proud of 100 years from now. This St. Joe's boathouse is an embarrassment. It says that design didn't matter
in the early 21st century -- that Philadelphians had given up all that we had for a couple of magic beans. While the
building certainly serves the needs of its users, it is the people of Philadelphia who have been had.

*Harris M. Steinberg is the director of Penn Praxis at the Graduate School of Fine Arts of the University of Pennsylvania.
He is a member of the Design Advocacy Group.*



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