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## Raising the Bar



**Taxi Gergy: You might be able to hail a cab in Philly, but inside the city's taxis fail miserably.** Photo By: Michael T. Regan

### Seemingly small improvements will go a long way toward making Philly great.

by Alan Greenberger

I moved to Philadelphia in 1974 and it has not disappointed me. Over the years, it has become more cosmopolitan. There is now serious discussion about Philadelphia as a world-class city, but let's be realistic. We are not, and will not be, a true "world city." That's a title reserved for places like New York, London or Paris. But if our sights are on places like Boston, Barcelona or San Francisco, particularly in terms of their attractiveness and vitality, then by all means let's have that discussion. We can start by raising the bar on our standards for the public environment, which, if we are being honest, are not good enough.

In my past two columns, I wrote about two of the little things that downgrade the street: the way we handle honor boxes and parking signs. Here are four more slices of our lives that tell me we are not there yet.

### Taxicabs

I once heard it said that a city in which you can't hail a cab is just not a city. Fair enough. We pass that hurdle. Where we absolutely fail is the quality of the cabs and their operation.

Why is it so hard for Philadelphia cabdrivers to have their dome light on when they are available and off when they are not? This commonly understood tradition is alien to our city. Inside the cab: ugh. The seat space is cramped. It usually looks shabby. The plastic in the barrier is scratched. The air conditioning is wait, what air conditioning? The trunk space? I have never -- emphasize never -- seen a Philadelphia cab with a clean trunk. A lot of the cabs on our streets suggest that we call 212-NYC-TAXI to complain. That's because the cab was taken off the streets of New York by law after a few years, but found renewed life here in second-tier America.

I was just in London where people are serious about cabs: vehicles actually designed to be cabs, comfortable seating for five in the rear compartment, immaculate, driven by people who actually think they are in public service! The cabs in Philadelphia are a disgrace. I make it a point to compliment any driver who keeps his cab looking good. It happens once out of every 10 rides, at best.

### Utility Improvements

We all know that cities are constantly in a state of rebuilding. No less true for utility work, which requires that streets get ripped up from time to time. When a utility company digs up the street, it is required to make repairs, but it is not required to return the street to its former condition.

So in Old City, for example, brick and Belgian block streets are routinely being torn up and, when repaired at all, filled in with blacktop. There are any number of places on Market Street where handsome (and expensive) brick paving in the



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blacktop or simply left as a hole. Even blacktop repairs to blacktop

in small, hand-laid granite blocks. Blacktop repairs are unheard of.  
than we do. What does that tell you?

## Mass Transit

I actually think that our mass transit system is pretty good (recent noises by SEPTA about service cuts aside). The rolling stock is relatively new and the cost is not really that out of line with most other big-city transit systems.

The subway and regional rail stations are another matter. If one station epitomizes our community's contempt for transit, it's 30th Street. Here, beside one of the great railway stations in the world, is one of the ugliest transit stops in the world. Did you know that there used to be an underground connection between 30th Street Station and the subway? SEPTA boarded it up decades ago rather than make it good.

Their negligence is met in kind by, among other things, people who routinely smoke in the stations despite signs everywhere saying that it's illegal.

## Litter

We all know the jokes about "Filthydelphia." We definitely have a problem with litter. Our Center City is very clean, due entirely to the work of organizations like the Center City District, Old City District and South Street Headhouse District. If you want a taste of what life would be like without them, just take a walk down Second Street below Market early on any weekend morning. From gnawed chicken wings to fast-food wrappers to handbills, it's all there at your feet. Drop litter on the streets of Singapore and get arrested. Drop litter on the streets of Philadelphia and get ignored.

Improvement is not going to happen because some oversight agency gets religion -- though that would be a welcome change. Improvement will happen when our tolerance for a low-quality environment dissipates. Every single one of us has to care more and do something about it.

*Alan Greenberger is a principal of MGA Partners, Architects, a professor of architecture at Drexel and a founding member of the Design Advocacy Group of Philadelphia.*



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