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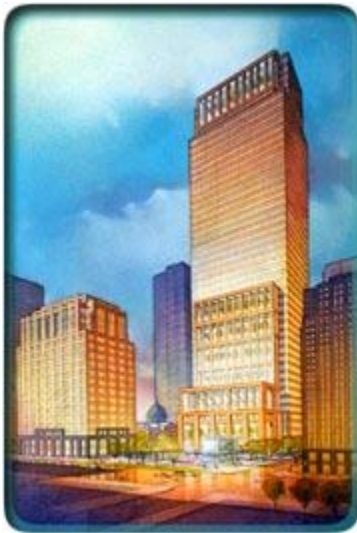
March 13-19, 2003

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High Hopes



To greater heights: The plans for One Pennsylvania Plaza at 17th and JFK take commercial architecture to another level.

The design for One Pennsylvania Plaza is a blueprint for excellence.

by Harris M. Steinberg

An interesting thing happened at the Design Advocacy Group's monthly meeting last week. A proposal to add a stock, Victorian-style greenhouse to the historic Engine House at the Waterworks drew weak shrugs of resignation at first, as if to underscore the time-honored Philadelphia development mantra that any development is good development. And then slowly a groundswell of questioning and debate started that grew into a passionate plea for design excellence at one of our most important and historic sites. "We deserve better," was the cry. Too often, it was said, we settle for mediocrity in a city renowned for urban design excellence and innovation for over 300 years.

One Pennsylvania Plaza, a proposed mixed-use office and retail development at 17th and JFK Boulevard, shatters that hackneyed development expectation. At 52 stories, One Pennsylvania Plaza is a project of bold and quiet intellect that is destined to raise the bar for commercial architecture in Philadelphia for years to come. This is a project that is about excellence, smart urbanism and the selling of a vision of 21st-century Philadelphia.

When built, Pennsylvania Plaza promises to be the finest addition to our city and skyline since the PSFS Building (George Howe and William Lescaze, 1929-1935), the revolutionary and iconic banking tower at 12th and Market streets that wrote the book on the relationship between modernism and urbanism. But One Pennsylvania Plaza does not aspire to be PSFS. Rather, it takes its cues from New York's venerable Rockefeller Center in Manhattan (Raymond Hood, 1932-1940), and the result is a project that is very much more than the sum total of its parts.

Planned for the edge of Penn Center, Philadelphia's tepid imitation of Rockefeller Center, the smart people of Liberty Property Trusts through the clever and talented hands of architect Robert A. M. Stern and landscape architect Laurie Olin have crafted a building so finely conceived and so seamlessly integrated into the urban fabric that at first glance you wonder what all the fuss is about. Behind the tailored, Saville Row-quality of its Kasota stone exterior skin (the same golden-hued limestone used at the Philadelphia Museum of Art), this dapper piece of urbanism strikes all the right chords.

At the street level, the tower is set back from JFK Boulevard behind a generous half-acre public plaza. An elegant outdoor room for meeting, eating and people watching, the plaza softens the transition from the street to the main tower entrance at its northern edge with the use of bosques of flowering trees, a fountain and granite planters. In a dexterous urban sleight of hand, the architects have sited a 17-story office tower to the west of the plaza that complements the height and massing of the Suburban Square building directly across 17th Street to the east -- just one of several intentional design moves that extends the reach of the building beyond its site boundaries.



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along with a revitalized concourse-level connection to the commuter
all that this project is as much about being a good civic citizen as it is
redesigned concourse will house retail and a state-of-the-art food
aircase to a 110-foot-high winter garden lobby in the larger tower.
er's, the good folks at Liberty Property are creating civic spaces that
will become part of Philadelphia's public realm. Without question, we will meet at Pennsylvania Plaza.

Above the lobby the tower quietly soars, for this is not a corporate icon. And indeed, Liberty has designed the building floor plates for maximum utility and flexibility, intending to attract a variety of prestigious tenants, without being custom designed for one signature client. With advanced communication capabilities, multiple atria, efficient and environmentally sensitive air handling systems and state-of-the-art security, One Pennsylvania Plaza incorporates the most advanced technologies in a building at the forefront of environmental design. And in response to the terror attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, oversized emergency exits are enclosed in a continuous concrete core that is 40 inches thick at the base level.

Liberty Property Trust is once again daring Philadelphia to be great. The company that in the 1980s defied the unwritten height limit of Billy Penn's hat -- unleashing a flurry of buildings that artfully scrape the sky, reinvigorating our urban identity -- now offers us a building of excellence that will quietly brush the clouds as it urges us onward. For this is a building that believes in Philadelphia's future as much as it is proud of our past.

With a nod to the Philadelphia Museum of Art in both its color and its abstracted classicism, One Pennsylvania Plaza grasps the significance of our rightful place in the history of American civic design while maintaining a keen eye toward the future. This is a building to be proud of. Would that the myriad tall buildings currently being built and planned for the city -- buildings that lumber on elevated and exposed parking decks -- take a cue from Liberty's play book. For if Liberty Property Trust is like the Yankees of the development world, with One Pennsylvania Plaza they are poised to once again sweep the series.

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