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Park town: Parking garages, like this one near 16th and Chancellor streets, are deliberately scarce in Chicago. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

The lessons of Chicago would play well here.

by Joanne Aitken

I spent a long weekend in Chicago last October and found myself wondering, how bad can its winters be? Which surprised me because I'd never considered leaving Philly before. I moved here 20 years ago thinking its greatness was about to be realized. Watching the city take one step backward for each step forward over the years, I still had faith. Until recently, that is, when I became depressingly convinced that the danger is not so much the intractable economy/schools/poverty/crime but the more difficult politicians/developers/businessmen/institutions who, because they can't see the goose who can lay the golden egg, just might be about to kill her.

Let's get this straight: We'll never woo anyone to Philadelphia who doesn't want to be in a big city in the first place. But if we ruin our big-city amenities trying to be something we're not, we'll lose everyone who does. So let's stop our provincialism and look at cities that actually attract people and jobs. Do Boston or San Francisco encourage the easy parking, suburban-style development and disregard for planning and preservation that are being foisted on us? I don't think so. Rather, they enhance their appeal by nurturing what Philadelphia has in abundance, that rare and exotic commodity, a truly urban way of life.

For Philadelphians, Chicago is a fresh take on what's possible, since it appears to be thriving, having embraced all the things we continue to dither about.

Contrast our waterfront with Chicago's. The city by Lake Michigan is overcoming its ill-placed highway while making sure there are reasons to get to the other side. The lakefront is "the city's front yard," catering to residents with beaches, marinas, open space and a festival pier served by a free bus loop. Conspicuously absent are parking and big box stores.

Compare new housing in North Philly with thousands of market-rate units that are going up on old Chicago industrial sites. I saw four-story brick and limestone (!) rowhouses placed snug to the sidewalk and not a garage door to mar the street, since cars are in back.

Or consider Philly's self-destructive approach to parking. Chicago transit runs frequently, well into the night, when it and the sidewalks are populated. Parking garages must be somewhere, but I didn't notice, and there wasn't a surface parking lot -- or vacant lot -- in sight.

How long have we been waiting for the Schuylkill River parkway? In Chicago, suburbanites are rejecting their lawns and flocking to lofts in former factories along the river. Again, no visible parking, but a developer requirement for landscaped walkways at the water's edge is turning the river into a public promenade.



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es by the thousands. The new Millennium Park expands the lakefront
ing an ugly rail yard into a cultural destination where Frank Gehry's

ent that we've been asked to swallow? Its buildings may not be very
old, but Chicago treats them as assets. The spectacular frontage of South Michigan Avenue is now protected.
Designation was controversial but the preservationists won. Dozens of historic skyscrapers are in pristine condition. Two
house museums are undergoing the kind of restoration that only Independence Hall would get here. A recent decision
preserves a quirky low-rise artist community -- think Sansom Street -- in the midst of a hot real estate high-rise zone.
All the historic bridges are being restored. Unlike Walnut Street's highway bridge replacement, they're pedestrian-
friendly and when seen from a tour boat below -- haven't we talked about one for years? -- they're gorgeous.

Or the Convention Center? In Chicago construction is under way.

Granted, three days aren't enough to uncover Chicago's strengths, let alone its flaws. But what made me toy with the
thought of living there was the glimpse of a city that has an urban vision of what it is and will be, leadership that's
making it happen, and excellent planning and execution that produce results that sing. In dense old cities like ours,
where quality of life suffers or gains from each public or private project alike, Philadelphia's failure to get it right is
distressing.

For now I'm unlikely to abandon Philly because I still think there are many ways this town could be better than Chicago
-- or Boston or New York or San Francisco -- if we ever got serious about making the world-class city we say we want.
If true, we need to find leaders who recognize the traits that characterize a good city and will husband the resources of
this urban goose to get that golden egg.

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