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Looking for Excitement



Space is the place: the subway concourses under City Hall could be utilized as exciting public gathering spaces.

The public spaces around City Hall are rich in potential. Just look what happened in Rotterdam.

by **George L. Clafien Jr FAIA**

If New York is the city that never sleeps, Philadelphia was for a long time the city that never woke up. City Hall stands today, because we never got around to tearing it down. The same cannot be said for the public spaces nearby, which have been reconstructed continuously throughout the last century and now constitute one of the most exciting, if improbable, sequences of urban space in any city in America.

What am I talking about? I am referring to all the places where one can go without paying -- indoors and out, above ground and below, near City Hall: the subway and suburban concourses, the Clothespin, Dilworth Plaza (west of City Hall) and the City Hall aprons and courtyards, the MSB plaza, Love Plaza, the arcades on Filbert Street, the courtyard north of the Marriott. The Convention Center and its long-stalled expansion give these spaces a new job.

The history is amazing. Center Square (the site of City Hall) was first an open space, reserved for public buildings in William Penn's plan of 1683; next it was a park with the city water pump house in the middle, a symbol of civic pride. Then City Hall was constructed over 31 years, commencing in 1875 (it may take that long to renovate it). In 1881 the Pennsylvania Railroad's Broad Street Station was erected adjacent and above ground. Even though the terminal became unnecessary with the completion of Suburban Station in 1929 and 30th Street Station in 1934, its demolition did not occur until 1953 to clear the way for the impossibly banal buildings of Penn Center.



The Penn Center project, highly regarded at the time, kicked off a cycle of development in which this exciting but congested area was opened up and turned over to public plazas and gathering places, each fitted out in a uniquely inappropriate fashion. Who could love the pathetic tree surrounded by glass at the 15th and Market subway surface car stop, or the unbearably pompous design for the hard-won real estate of Dilworth Plaza?

These spaces stand today as empty monuments to the failed plans of the past, many of them associated with Philadelphia's indefatigable Ed Bacon. Yet, paradoxically, they sit astride the greatest opportunity in the city. Why? Because this is the center, and it is diverse, intense and above all, three-dimensional. From the Broad Street subway to MSB Plaza, there are five distinct levels of public space, creating unique connections found nowhere else outside of Manhattan. Horizontally, these spaces also connect the Parkway to the downtown core. There is a rich mix of residences, offices, retail and entertainment. This area is both the most populated and the most democratic place in the city. Everyone uses it: locals, commuters, students, workers, residents and even a few skateboarders. And in the foreseeable future, when the Convention Center is extended to Broad Street, thousands of visitors will drift through



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activities. It is time to take charge of this area and make this "drift" a
ent and event.

mission to plan for these spaces. This is good news. My first suggestion:
decorate these places but to make them work together in meaningful
sequences. Understand the area as a complete ecology of spaces and activities. Take advantage of the opportunity to
link the Convention Center to the Parkway, office buildings to transit concourses and tourists to residents. Fill them with
life at least 16 hours a day. This means both design and operation. It means lighting, equipment, power, scheduling --
all expensive, to be sure, but the cost of doing business as a world-class city.

Our urban competitors are already doing this. Rotterdam, 40 percent of our size, has developed the Schouwburgplein,
where events are choreographed throughout the day and night assisted by the provision of spectacular lighting on
moveable arms, sound and image-making systems. When thought of this way, public space becomes not just a channel
to pass through but a sequence of civic rooms suitable for rock concerts, video performances and countless other
events that would mix tourists, residents and workers. San Francisco has had remarkable success with its Yerba Buena
Gardens, designed by Philadelphia architects, which link the convention center, five museums and the Sony Metreon to
the hotel district along Market Street.

As for City Hall itself: The courtyard is the most controllable of public spaces. Make it a place for performances, theater
and general fun. Let the aprons reflect and engage the streets that they terminate. In general, let Philadelphians
celebrate their lives there. Make its rooms available for weddings, funerals and parties as well as government business.
Give it back to the people.

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