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CITYSPACE

Pitch Location



Spot off: While the musical offerings are inviting, World Caf Live's location on a hectic Walnut Street corridor leaves much to be desired. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

WXPN and its World Caf  Live are in a tough spot to succeed.

by Steve Conn

I'll admit it, I was knocked over. When I went to see the new home of WXPN at 31st and Walnut streets on its celebratory opening weekend, I was dazzled. I've probably passed the empty old building, once home to a plumbing fixtures manufacturer, that WXPN now calls home a thousand times, but I had no idea what it looked like inside. And I had no conception of what could be done with the space by a team of creative architects and designers.

It is a stunning transformation and an irresistibly wonderful example of how one piece of the city's industrial past can be brought back to life as a part of its post-industrial future.

In World Caf  Live, Philadelphia now has not one but two new venues for live music: one casual, mixing banquette seating with modern furnishings, for "up-and-coming acts" (for which there is no cover) and the other, much bigger and fancier, for headliners, featuring a dramatic two-tiered auditorium.

As a piece of the city's cultural infrastructure, the new WXPN and the live music offshoot, World Caf  Live, have the potential to make Philadelphia a national center of the folk and indie music scenes. As the manager of the World Caf  Live said to me, there really isn't any place like it anywhere else.

Still, lots of questions remain unanswered, all probably still causing the folks at Penn and WXPN some sleepless nights.

The biggest question of all is the oldest one in the real estate book. Real estate always boils down to three words: location, location, location. So, the make-or-break issue for the new WXPN is its location.

On one level, WXPN's new location is terrible. Its Walnut Street front door sits on that part of the street that has been transformed, thanks largely to the visionaries at PennDOT, into a high-speed expressway. And there isn't much in the 100 yards east or west to make this place inviting; not even a tree to relieve the bleakness of concrete and traffic. From this vantage point, it seems hard to imagine that the place will draw the hundreds of nightly patrons it wants to attract.


If you enter from the side door on 31st Street, however, things look more interesting but no less problematic. You get to 31st from Chestnut (it runs underneath Walnut at this point), and from here you find yourself on a real sidewalk, connected to Drexel's campus, and staring at the new apartments that occupy the old General Electric plant.

Down here, the street has a funkier, more urban feel. It's easier to imagine crowds slipping into the side door—or even going up the pedestrian staircase to Walnut Street—to enter WXPN. But this neighborhood feels isolated from vibrant Center City. This, in large part, can be attributed to traffic patterns—and infrastructure—along the Walnut Street corridor. Not only does Walnut Street look like an enormous highway overpass here—which it, in effect, is—but there is an elevated freight line running overhead too.

Can the building itself and the scene it creates prove enough of an attraction to overcome its somewhat forbidding address?

Everyone who has considered the issue recognizes that Center City and West Philadelphia need to be more seamlessly integrated than they are now. The accretion of bad planning decisions over two generations—bad expressway layout, bad bridge design, bad use of a waterfront resource—makes this a formidable challenge. Undoing these problems will take time, money and some heroic engineering.

Given all that, the decision by WXPN to move into this new location is just as remarkable as the renovation the building itself has just undergone. It doesn't so much face a challenge as issue one: Here's what we are doing to connect the life of Center City with the equally vibrant life of West Philadelphia. Will you join us to help make this happen?



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I applaud their bold decision to move to a location that over the years

professor of history at Ohio State University.

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