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CITYSPACE

## Forlorn Franklin Square



**PARK MISPLACED:** Franklin Square, a long-ignored patch of land, could be a thriving urban escape if only someone would champion its rebirth. Photo By:

Michael T. Regan

### How can we cherish what's left of William Penn's city squares?

*by Steve Conn*

First there were five.

When William Penn originally laid out this town in 1683, he left space for five city squares. It was an inspired, visionary act, and Philadelphia's plan became the model for urban design throughout the country.

Then there were four.

Early in the 19th century, city fathers decided to appropriate Center Square for a grand civic purpose. The square became the site of a municipal waterworks that provided clean drinking water from the Schuylkill to residents. These waterworks, too, became a model for other cities to copy. After the system outlived its usefulness, Center Square was chosen to be the home of city's new government center, the marvelous Second Empire-style City Hall that's still in operation today.

Then there were three and a half.

Early in the 20th century, a new generation of city fathers decided to blow a broad diagonal through William Penn's grid and create the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. It served to link City Hall with the new art museum and Fairmount Park. In doing so, Logan Square was transformed into Logan Circle. While it has lovely plantings and elegant fountains, and while it is being made more pedestrian-friendly this summer, Logan Circle remains essentially a dressed-up traffic roundabout. It provides lovely visuals for people whipping around it at high speeds, but acts little like a town square ought to.

Today, there are effectively two and half of William Penn's original five squares remaining: Rittenhouse, Washington and what's left of Franklin.

When the Benjamin Franklin Bridge's ramps and the Vine Street Expressway were completed, Franklin Square was left almost entirely marooned, cut off from the rest of the city. The place has been made almost impenetrable by an accumulation of bad design and planning decisions. It is almost impossible to approach the square from the east — you'll have to fight traffic heading to and from the bridge. Can't really get there from the north either, since it abuts the Vine Street Expressway retaining wall. The south side is bordered by Race Street, which, at that point, widens and becomes a mini-expressway for cars coming off Vine or headed to the bridge. The west side is your best bet, but only because the cityscape there is merely bleak.

Once you get there, chances are you'll be virtually alone. Very few Philadelphians, except those with no place else to go, make this trip. It has the feel of a place abandoned, lonely and neglected. It's hardly the way William Penn's legacy ought to be cherished. But figuring out what do about it, or how to undo what has been done to it, is a vexing dilemma.

It is difficult to imagine any way to remedy the intrusions of the expressway and bridge that wouldn't cost lots of money. Walking across the Benjamin Franklin Bridge is one of great walks in the city, and creating a more hospitable connection between the bridge and the park could be exciting.

Leaders in Chinatown have complained that it has no place to grow, and yet it seems to me that there is space — in the form of surface parking lots and other underutilized real estate — for the neighborhood to fill in between Ninth Street and the park. Doing this would turn Franklin Square into Chinatown's back yard.

Perhaps the only way to revive it is to move the 6th District police headquarters from 11th and Vine streets somewhere else to make room for housing, of the sort that is springing up around Washington Square right now. As much as the suggestion horrifies me, maybe we need to consider the idea of selling half the park to a private developer for the same purpose. Maybe a shrunken but lively park is better than the moribund place that exists now. But none of this can be




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about what to do with the place. The time for this is right now  
process to design its future. Franklin Square, part of the park system,  
ds.

and future potential to let it sit as it is. Whatever results from a  
public conversation, Franklin Square needs a champion, a constituency, a set of heroes. Some person or persons who  
will make this their park, fight for it, raise money for it, clean up the trash and plant new trees. Without that, the  
square is likely to sit as it is: sad, unused, forlorn.

*Steve Conn is a Philadelphia native and an associate professor of history at Ohio State University.*

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