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Hall Monitor



THIS OLD HALL: No qualified person has the power to advocate for and safeguard this architectural treasure.

Photo By: Michael T. Regan

Creating an "architect of City Hall" position will go a long way toward protecting the grand masonry palace.

by Joanne Aitken

We've just reached a milestone, largely unnoticed: The City Hall scaffolding is now at the west portico and the exterior scrubbing and buffing is just about half done. Had someone complained too loudly in recent winters that his street hadn't been plowed, funding might well have stopped. Knock wood that the momentum of this stunning restoration is now unstoppable and that the city will soon be busting its collective buttons. Take a look: In bright sun against blue sky, with sparkling white roof cresting, spanking clean stone and newly painted windows, City Hall dazzles.

But now is not the time to stop. To keep even a new building useful (and to do it cost-effectively) requires continuous and knowledgeable maintenance and repair, and that in turn requires attention and planning -- not something the city does well. That City Hall is a distinguished and historic building only compounds the problem.

Despite the large sums devoted to the badly needed exterior work, now skillfully under way, the interior needs equal help, both to reverse years of ill-considered "improvements" and to upgrade major building systems. Such costly projects are probably years away. Meanwhile, the building suffers enormously because modest

improvements that are desperately needed remain undone and projects that do find funding -- no doubt well-intentioned -- are done so poorly that they undermine the building's integrity just as surely as the roof leaks do.

Take the piles of trash that line the edges of the south portal daily. For good reason, patrons of a Walnut Street restaurant don't pass garbage cans on their way in the door. The city owes its citizens the courtesy of a clean doorstep, even if it takes a little work. Someone needs to find a place to hide that trash till the moment of disposal.

And what about those tourists we're working to attract? One of the delights of a visit is the view from City Hall Tower, yet the tour office, which should rightly be a showcase, features a '60s-era aluminum door, two moth-eaten placards on metal posts with dented feet that might normally reserve a parking spot and paper signs taped to the windows. Understandably, the tour office staff has long lobbied for improvements.

But they should watch what they wish for. Across the way, the new office of the First Judicial District Information Center boasts an oak door (good try but no match for its historic mates), paper sign and roll-down security grille that makes a grim picture behind the door's glass light. The high security seems unnecessary since the courtyard is locked at night, but even so, the elegant original grilles protecting adjacent doors should have been the model for this visible public entry. What were they thinking?

The point is, no one's thinking. It's abundantly clear that no qualified person has the power to advocate for and safeguard this architectural treasure. Buildings this big and this important -- such as the U.S. Capitol or the PSFS Building -- often have an especially knowledgeable and experienced architect whose sole responsibility is to care for, plan and oversee all work on the building. As part of that job, the architect of City Hall would see that the building meets the needs of the its users, but not at the building's expense. With news that security measures are being planned that will substantially alter the entries to City Hall, the need for a guardian architect is more pressing than ever.

To induce City Council to do right by the building and create this position, Philadelphians might sweeten the pot. How better to demonstrate the building's symbolic importance than by raising funds to remove the most embarrassing sign of the its poor treatment, that abominable chain-link fencing used to secure the courtyard every night?



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exterior restoration, has developed a design for monumental gates
n McArthur, the building's architect, but never installed. Once you
see the gates in place and the composition complete.

: simply a pipe dream. Recall that not too long ago, when restoration of
Penn's statue came to a halt for lack of funds and the scaffolding threatened to rust in place, a successful grassroots
effort to complete the work and "Free Billy Penn" was born. Contributors were rewarded with pins, which were worn all
over town. Philadelphia may have some work to do to become a world-class city, but it already has a world-class City
Hall. Just over 100 years old, the exterior will soon look new. Now would be a good time for a successor campaign and
second pin: "Install the Gates! Time to Finish City Hall!"

Joanne Aitken, AIA, is an architect and member of Philadelphia's Design Advocacy Group.



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