

A Position Paper on Proposals for the Dilworth House

The proposal to tear down and redevelop the site of the Dilworth House on Washington Square has raised numerous questions in the design and preservation communities. The proposal was presented to Design Advocacy Group (DAG) by the developer, John Turchi, and his architects, Robert Venturi and Dan McCoubrey. Opposition to the proposal, led by the Society Hill Civic Association, has also been presented to DAG by Paul Boni (Vice President and Chair of the SHCA Zoning and Historic Preservation Committee). All spokespeople have done a commendable job in presenting their positions.

The developer has formally submitted papers to the Philadelphia Historical Commission requesting that the historic designation of the Dilworth House be changed to acknowledge the site, but not necessarily the house itself. DAG has been asked to take a position on this proposal. The issues are complex and have been the subject of numerous emails, conversation and even lobbying of DAG Steering Committee members by interested parties.

Our position is neither clearly ‘yes nor no’. Rather, we have tried to dissect the situation in order to separate it into identifiable questions – many of which have arisen in presentations and public discussion. In doing so, we recognize that the scope of these questions may go beyond the ones immediately before the Historical Commission.

1. *Is the request by the developer for a change in designation appropriate?*

DAG recommended to the developer during their presentation that if they wanted to pursue this proposal, they would have to seek the appropriate forum for it. In DAG’s opinion, the appropriate forum is the Historical Commission. It has the power and correct process to decide on the historical standing of the Dilworth House. This is the course that the developer is pursuing.

We are aware of some talk in the community that the situation was already decided when the house was declared historically significant and is, therefore, a matter of law that cannot be undone. We respectfully disagree. In our view, interpretations under the ordinance are subject to change as long as they are acted upon in appropriate public forums, with appropriate time for consideration, debate and action in accordance with the provisions of the ordinance itself.

2. *Is a change in historic status warranted? Will a change in historical status set a bad precedent leading to other proposals for ‘de-certification’ of significant properties?*

This question is perhaps the lightning rod for the greatest debate within DAG and is one that does not have a consensus answer.

Several members of the Steering Committee oppose the change in status simply on its own merits. They argue that the original designation was carefully considered and that the specific circumstances that argue for a change do not exist under the guidelines that established the designation. Some also argue that a change in status sets a bad precedent and worry that the fundamental underpinnings of historic districts and properties will be seriously undermined. They argue, as a matter of principle, that our ability to retain examples of important history is fragile against the forces of economic development. They further argue that developers cannot be expected to respect important artifacts of history if it is not in their economic interest to do so and that the public has an obligation to defend against this reality.

Others feel that the change in designation (from ‘house’ to ‘site’) is a reasonable way to accommodate a potentially good development and still respect the history associated with the site. They feel that a change in status of individual properties is understood to be handled and viewed on a case-by-case basis. They also feel that the unique combination of issues in this matter (special place in the city, manner in which the history is expressed, character of the house itself) does not represent a situation that can be construed to be a precedent in other instances.

As a Steering Committee, we are divided on this question.

3. *Is the house the best symbol of the history it represents?*

The house was built in the 1950s by then Mayor Richardson Dilworth to demonstrate his personal commitment to the redevelopment of Society Hill – a redevelopment that by nearly all measures has proven to be a great urban success. It was built in the style of colonial era houses and replaced larger, arguably more contextually appropriate, 19th century buildings on the site that were torn down to make way for the house.

Absent any historical markers, and aware that the house itself is a re-creation of something that was probably never at that site, several members of the Steering Committee are unconvinced that the house effectively represents the history that has made it significant. The presentation by Robert Venturi demonstrated that there could be more effective, street level representations of the history of the site that could be incorporated into a new building.

However, the fact that Mayor Dilworth himself was personally involved in the creation of the building suggests to other Steering Committee members that more than the site itself is important and that the house is an integral part of the historic designation.

4. *Is the design of the house itself architecturally significant?*

There are certainly those in the community who find the house to be anywhere from ‘charming’ to ‘not adverse’. In addition, the Society Hill Historic District nomination explicitly says that the kind of 20th Century ‘contextualist’ work represented by buildings like the Dilworth House is to be counted as one of the defining features of the district. There are also some who attach significance to its architect.

We do not find these arguments to be compelling. While houses of this type are noted in the Society Hill district nomination, we are unconvinced of its merits as an architectural object. In our view, its significance derives solely from the history associated with its creation.

5. *Does the promise of a ‘world class architect’ make the developer’s request more worthy?*

There are many reasons to be excited about the prospect of a new building by a very important architect on a very important civic square. Chief among these reasons is the confidence that Venturi Scott Brown will design a smart, sensitive and well-crafted building. That they are currently Philadelphia’s only world-class firm is undisputed. Had the developer proposed a building by a lesser architect, the issues discussed here would probably not rise to the level of importance that they have.

However, tempting as it may be to find this argument persuasive, the community holds no obligation to promote work by any individual firm. Further, there is no assurance that 1) the developer will retain the same firm for the duration of the process and 2) that the resultant building will rise to the level of stature of other work by the same firm.

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Having seen the design presentation thus far, it can be argued that the limitations of the client, site and program may produce a highly skillful, but not unusually significant, design. However, in the hands of less skilled architect, the design would surely not be as good as the one that was presented.

As an aside, some members of the community have commented that the developer should seek another site to showcase the work of this architect. As the developer owns this site and not others, the suggestion strikes us as irrelevant.

6. *Is the south-facing blank wall of the proposed design a significant enough drawback to oppose the proposal under any circumstances?*
The blank wall in question is the inevitable and fire code-mandated result of varying heights of development in a city in which there are frequently no setbacks from side lot lines. While blank walls are unfortunate, they are a by-product of the circumstances that also make cities dense and vibrant. In this instance, the blank wall appears to have been handled well and is in a position of very limited visibility from the surrounding streets. It will be visible to those living in nearby high-rise apartments. However, there is no legal or ethical requirement to assure unobstructed views for those who choose to live in high-rises.
7. *Is the proposed design in scale with the character of Washington Square?*
By all appearances the answer is yes. There are many large (and larger) buildings currently on the square. The proposed building is proportionally thin and the preliminary material selections seem appropriate.
8. *Is it worth recommending that the developer consider saving the Dilworth House and building his proposed building behind it?*
Some members of the Steering Committee believe in this approach as a worthy compromise. Others consider it an oversimplified and potentially banal answer. In any case, it appears that this developer and this architect believe more strongly in the proposal that has been made. We feel that commentary should be based on the merits of their proposal. If the proposal is rejected and they wish to come back with an proposal that preserves the Dilworth House, we will evaluate that on its own merits.

We hope that it is evident from this discussion that the issues surrounding the Dilworth House are complex. On a positive note, we find that the question is a good and lively one because it asks us all to consider our core values related to the sometimes tension between historic preservation and new development (both of which are important in Philadelphia).

If we were to take an 'up or down' vote on the Steering Committee, we would find a split decision. However, that lack of consensus does not prevent us from wanting to thoughtfully air the subtlety of thinking involved with this proposal in the hope that the Historical Commission and the public as a whole give it the same consideration. As one member of DAG explained it, situations like this are meant to be difficult. We should embrace the difficulty and use it as an opportunity to reach a higher level of civic dialogue.

Prepared by Alan Greenberger on behalf of the DAG Steering Committee
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