

TO PLAN OR NOT TO PLAN

By HARRIS M. STEINBERG

MICHAEL SKLAROFF shares his limited and ultimately disdainful view of the planning profession in Philadelphia in his Oct. 25 op-ed in the *Daily News*, "Celebrate the success of city planning."

Sklaroff depicted planning as a necessary evil that is ideally consigned to an advisory role in an arena dominated by the lords of laissez-faire economics. Extolling the Hyatt at Penn's Landing and Dave & Buster's on Delaware Avenue as paragons of market-driven riverfront development, Sklaroff, chairman of the Philadelphia Historical Commission and a Philadelphia real estate lawyer, unwittingly illuminates the shallowness of his argument and the depth of the schism between planning and development in contemporary Philadelphia.

Don't be fooled, Philadelphia.

Sklaroff would have you believe that the development world has the public's best interests at heart. Sklaroff's paean to the bonhomie of marketplace-driven development is stirring but disingenuous.

While praising Waterfront Square as "using the assets of the river to build new communities," Sklaroff forgets to mention that Waterfront Square is a gated community. The riverfront is a natural asset that all Philadelphians should be able to access and enjoy. But it is being sold off parcel by parcel to the highest bidders. Even the city is in on the act with its recent request for proposals for the two piers north of Penn's Landing for use as a casino.

Is this what we want, Philadelphia?

Philadelphia's patron saint of planning is William Penn. His "holy experiment" was both a brilliant real estate deal and a religious experiment.

His rational gridiron plan for the city of Philadelphia interlaced public good and private development with five iconic squares clearly delineating the public realm - the series of public spaces that make up the great stage of the theater of public life. We still respect the rules Penn established over 300 years ago. William Penn didn't give Rittenhouse Square to developers.

Sklaroff and his clients shouldn't be afraid of planning and design. It's as if they haven't looked around lately, but it's not a secret that design sells these days. From Vancouver to Boston to Barcelona, cities around the globe are cashing in on a well-designed public realm. These are the hot towns we should be emulating - not Dodge City.

Ironically, New York, the bosom of laissez-faire economics, is a source of planning inspiration for us, with Amanda Burden, the executive director of the New York Planning Commission, serving as an exemplar of the engaged contemporary planner.

Burden has spectacularly energized a moribund institution and in so doing is breathing thrilling and beautiful life into New York's boroughs, extensive waterfronts, public spaces and development zones.

She is creating richly contextual plans and innovative zoning codes that allow for a myriad of uses both public and private. She has won over the suspicious development world with her combination of moxie, design savvy, political skills and plain good taste in creating a physical renaissance in New York.

Wish that Philadelphia were so lucky.

We shouldn't be afraid of quality design. We shouldn't be afraid of beauty or of aspiring for excellence in the public realm.

We all deserve to live in a beautiful city. We need a vision for the Philadelphia of the future. We need a vision of a city created by citizens, planners, architects, developers, historians, economists and all manner of stakeholders. We need an honest civic conversation about what we all want our city to be. We should not be cowed by the cudgel of development - made to fear that if we don't allow the marketplace to do its thing, we will wither and die.

William Penn showed us that commerce and the public good can coexist. That we can create places of simple beauty and still make a buck. Let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater by allowing the marketplace to dictate our physical future.

We deserve better, Philadelphia. We're just not that desperate.

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