

Building Tall but Thinking Small

By William P. Becker

There's a lot more at stake in the feud between rival developers for the former Meridian site than who gets to go first. Yes, it would appear that once again our City government is so desperate for something – anything – to go forward that it has given its support to another development proposal that requires multiple variances from the spirit and letter of the zoning code. The message sent by the Zoning Board's approval of this project is crystal clear: there are no rules. A city government with no vision for its physical future grabs at the quick fix of construction jobs and incremental tax increases, with apparently no concern for the long term consequences to be borne by the public that will be looking up at and walking around these overscaled behemoths for years to come.

But this is not the worst of it. What's even more alarming is that the rest of us are witnessing this process with nary a peep of resistance. It's hard to know whether we have been beaten into a submissive sense of helplessness by repeated examples of such business as usual, or maybe we really don't know any better.

Compare our situation to what has been unfolding over the last few months in New York City. Recall that, just as at the World Trade Center site, the development "opportunity" at the former Meridian site exists only because of a tragic event, in our case a major building fire that resulted in loss of life and property. Just as in New York, the owners of the underlying real estate are trying to do what they are in business to do, which is to squeeze in as much new floor area as they can (and in our case many MANY more times than the zoning code will allow) so that they can maximize their potential profit from the new construction.

The first set of proposals for Ground Zero were required to replace all of the office space that was lost. When the plans were released, there was a huge howl of protest. Design professionals and the general public recognized that the only proper response to an unprecedented development opportunity tragically created at a unique site would be a progressive and innovative approach to rebuilding, and that the sheer volume of the required floor area made such a design impossible. The result was that a new group of world-renowned architects prepared a new set of design proposals that combined transportation, retail, office, residential, and public open space in new and exciting ways. An entire city has been galvanized by the imaginative power of the images that were created.

The contrast with our own city is truly embarrassing. Here we have a site directly across from our magnificent City Hall, which is in the midst of a long awaited and sorely needed renovation. It is literally at the center of Center City, at the intersection between the Parkway and the Avenue of the Arts. It is served by an underground concourse that connects to both branches of the subway system, the subway-surface network, the entire regional rail network, and the convention center and its two headquarters hotels. And what do we propose? To cut the site into two pieces and build giant, single-purpose residential towers above as many as ten floors of deadly above-grade parking. What a horrendous waste!

We have only to look across the street and down the block for examples of how to do better. First at Centre Square and again at Liberty Place, private developers with vision and civic responsibility built plenty of revenue producing square feet, but they also provided indoor and outdoor public spaces, underground parking, and, at Centre Square, connections to the transit system. The Meridian block has the potential to support the same mix of uses, yield substantial profit for its developers, and enhance the public realm at the same time. The solution is obvious: consolidate the two interests into one coherent design plan, put the parking and service below grade where they belong, provide pedestrian connections to the public concourse and transportation network, blend retail, entertainment and open space on the lower levels, and then build lots of office or residential floors above.

We should know better than to permit this unique location to be turned into a private precinct with access restricted to those who can afford to park or live there. This is not a matter of being pro or anti

development. This is an opportunity for Philadelphia to demonstrate that it is truly the world class city that it aspires to be, and that we will allow only the most progressive mixed-use, public/private, innovative building complex to occupy our most important and visible development site.

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