

Court building shows city planning failures: A poor process yields an architectural train wreck.

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Despite the Nutter administration's stated intent to reform Philadelphia's planning and design process, the proposed new Family Court building suggests the same insular, dysfunctional system that has for too long valued everything except the quality of planning and design.

Sadly, in terms of urban fit and architectural aspiration, the design falls far short of what Philadelphia deserves from a building that will represent our city, our judicial system, and our attitude toward families. The Design Advocacy Group believes the main culprit is a bad planning process.

To those outside the design profession, commissioning a new building may seem like a simple transaction: Identify a site, tell the designers the building's purpose, and let them go to work.

But those in the profession know there is no good building without a good client. Good buildings - those that are functional, sound, distinctive, likely to enrich the human experience, and sustainable - are the result of a rigorous process as well as clients who collaborate, question, and, above all, demand excellence.

It's not easy to be a good client. To help the city become one, the Design Advocacy Group has supported a welldefined, open, intelligent process for vetting important public buildings. Such a process would have fixed most, if not all, of the problems that plague the design of the Family Court building.

The new building's location - on the northwest corner of 15th and Arch Streets, facing JFK Plaza, commonly known as Love Park - is ideal. Currently a parking lot, the site needs a tall building to close a gap in the structures that shape the open space of Love Park and the Municipal Services Plaza.

The design's underground placement of parking deserves kudos. But its six lanes of curb cuts interrupting the Cherry Street and 15th Street sidewalks are pedestrian-unfriendly and should be consolidated.

The site's natural front door is on Arch Street, and that is where the building's entrance belongs, contrary to the design. An Arch Street entry would also eliminate the need for the 15th Street garage approach, which will just add to traffic congestion on that block.

The proposed building's neighbor to the north, the historic Cherry Street Friends Meeting, would be overwhelmed by the current design. A required setback from Cherry Street would have helped, but City Council approved an exception. On the Arch Street side, the building should match the setback of its neighbors surrounding Love Park, and it could easily be taller than the design proposes.

The plan of the building's interior, meanwhile, appears to have been hobbled by an unwillingness to consider ways of separating the public, judicial personnel, lawyers, and prisoners with more efficiency and grace. Countless historical courthouses show that can be done. Here, however, the ground-floor circulation pattern is labyrinthine.

It's also unclear how the lobby could effectively do the additional duty of hosting supervised visits between parents and children. But if its glass walls were screened for privacy, the view from outside the building would be of nothing but a circulation corridor.

Likewise, on the building's upper floors, where the courtrooms would be, a perimeter corridor reserved for judges would get most of the natural light. This is a waste of daylight, which could benefit the courtrooms. And windows showing human activity within would enliven the facade.

What's especially disturbing is that this public building - likely the most significant of Mayor Nutter's and Gov. Rendell's administrations - seems to lack any measure of architectural ambition. It should aspire to contribute an example of today's best architecture to the city's collection of important civic buildings.

While the Family Court building was apparently reviewed by the mayor, the governor, the City Planning Commission, and the Art Commission, it has not been subjected to an effective review or timely public and expert scrutiny. And

while it's expected to cost hundreds of millions of dollars in public money and to occupy one of the city's most prominent sites, it doesn't measure up to other recent examples of excellent court designs.

Before it proceeds another step further, this design must return to the city Art Commission and the public for a full review.