



Design Advocacy Group – Position Statement Proposed Development at 23rd and Arch  
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We favor the construction of the proposed residential towers at 23rd and Arch Streets, but we hasten to point out that this is a case where a good project on a high visibility site can attain greatness through the continued evolution of its design. The fact that this project could come on line just as a game changing company (hint: from the West Coast) might come to the 30th Street area raises the stakes even a little higher.

The developer, architects, Logan Square Neighbors Association, and City Council have all participated in months of discussions to make this project possible and to make it as good as it is. The design has many commendable features, replacing a hole in the urban fabric with a large residential community and bringing a large grocery store to the neighborhood. We believe, however, that, regardless of the approvals process to date, attention should be paid to several important deficiencies in the design that could elevate this project to world class status.

Most critically, this project presents another example of why we must also work – urgently – to put in place an overall vision and comprehensive plan for Philadelphia’s Schuylkill waterfront, as was accomplished on the Delaware riverfront, lest its enormous potential be wasted.

*Parking Design.* Our first concern is the overall site planning of the parking. We can accept that underground parking is too expensive for the market that this project is seeking to attract. But we do not understand why the space under the railroad viaduct is not proposed for parking, as it is difficult to use for anything else, and it is used for that now. And if there is to be above-grade parking, more imagination should be invested in its design. We would prefer to wrap the parking with architecture that hides it. Only a block away a large parking garage (also in the floodplain) has been carefully concealed with townhouses fronting on 23rd Street. Elsewhere in the neighborhood, there are several internal parking courtyards that maintain the residential streetscape. The wrapping doesn’t have to be row houses. It could be apartments massed to form a base.

If such a “wrap” cannot be created, every effort should be made to design a truly significant urban garage. There are many good examples in town, from the conservative contextualism of the Rittenhouse Garage at 20th and Walnut, to the dazzling recent renovation of the Strawbridge and Clothier garage at 8th and Arch. This project’s garage cries out for similar attention.

*Bland Façades.* The repetitive glass facades of the residential towers are generic examples of a formula that is fast becoming a cliché. Similar facades are being implemented in the conversion of the old Glaxo office building at 16th and Vine and also at Dalian on the Park, above Whole Foods at 22nd and Pennsylvania Avenue. A project as large as this one is big enough to enjoy the economies of scale that make a more inventive façade affordable. The prominent site merits this effort.

*River Access.* The project proposes an expensive bridge across a public right-of-way to connect the two towers, but that effort seems misplaced. The bridge that is needed is one across the railroad tracks to Schuylkill Banks Park and the water's edge. This would be a great amenity for the residents, who could walk north along the river to the Art Museum and Fairmount Park or south to Center City, via the stairs and ramps at the JFK, Market, Walnut, and Chestnut bridges.

*Lack of Planning.* Which brings us to the most important issue of public design that is evident here – the lack of public planning. Many of the issues we confront here would be much easier to anticipate and address if there were a comprehensive plan for the intense development of the Schuylkill River, that addressed such basic concerns as increasing public access to the waterfront, calculating and satisfying the need for parking, defining the accommodation to be made for permanent infrastructure features, such as the railroad viaduct and railroad right-of-way, and giving more guidance with respect to the floodplain.

Leaving property owners, developers and neighborhood residents on their own as they make decisions about these important sites is not the way to maximize the public benefit. Philadelphia needs a master plan for the Schuylkill River.

*The authors are respectively, the chair, and vice-chairs of the Design Advocacy Group, a membership organization that seeks to promote high quality design, urban design, and planning in the region.*

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The Design Advocacy Group is a volunteer organization whose more than 1,500 members come from a broad spectrum of disciplines and share an interest in Philadelphia's design, development and planning. DAG's mission is to encourage public discussion about design and to advocate for design excellence.