

# Revisoning Schuylkill Banks and the Lower Schuylkill River

by Sean O'Rourke, AIA



Copenhagen

## Prelude

*I went to Copenhagen on vacation not too long ago and while walking around the city it was difficult not to interact with its waterways. I found canals lined with houseboats in the residential neighborhoods. A working harbor with tugboats, ferries, and naval yard. A social scene of boaters in everything from simple kayaks to million dollar yachts. I was surprised to find public swimming pools floating in the harbor packed with sunbathers and swimmers, underwater parking garages, movable pedestrian bridges, a boardwalk that floated high above the harbor at some points and low enough to dip your toes in the water at others, even boardwalk follies that challenged any sensible notion of accessibility or safety. My son and I even encountered a "rave" along the water's edge one evening that included public drinking, dancing, and loud music culminating with jumping off the street*

*bridge into the harbor. I would not condone such behavior in Philadelphia nor would I suggest these design elements need to be duplicated in our waterways. (I agree with Stephen Perzan's desire, as expressed in a previous DAGspace, not to copycat other waterfronts.) I did realize when I returned to walk the Schuylkill Banks that the Danes had a much more visceral relationship with water than we do in Philadelphia. And I asked myself why can't we have that same connection?*

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### Recognition of Ongoing Efforts.

I am familiar with, and applaud, all the great things happening along our two rivers. The large scale planning along the Delaware River that aims to reintegrate the river and its abandoned edge back into the adjacent neighborhoods. As well as the repurposing of the Delaware's piers for a host of functions that will reintroduce us residents to this big river. While on the other side of Center City, many residents are familiar with the smaller Schuylkill Banks, the sliver of park between the CSX train tracks and the Schuylkill River that links Fairmount Park with the western edge of Center City and will extend eventually to Bartram's Garden and hopefully beyond. It is a trail that at times seems as heavily used as the Schuylkill Expressway.



Schuylkill River below Paine's Park

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I enjoy time spent running and biking on the Schuylkill Banks trail. It offers great views of the river and provides me with easy access to the larger park beyond. But I have been thinking, too. I read both “The Tidal Schuylkill River Master Plan” (2003) and “The Lower Schuylkill River Master Plan” (2013) and recognize that they admit that the river itself is important to the vision of future development along this section of the river. I know enough to admire the Philadelphia Water Department’s storm water initiatives to appreciate how the Schuylkill River works as a tidal river in the greater watershed of the region. I have also read what Beth Kephart has written about the Schuylkill River and its ever changing character through its long history and its relationship with Philadelphia.

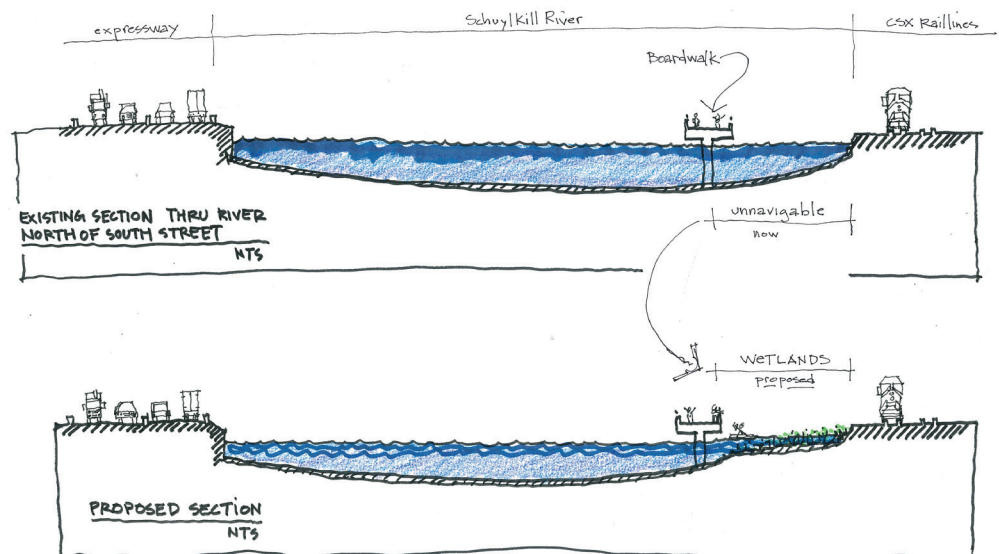
But I still think we are missing an opportunity to look at Schuylkill Banks and the river itself in a different light.

### Proposal.

I am suggesting that we imagine Schuylkill Banks as an “urban tidal river eco-system.. What do I mean by an ‘urban tidal river eco-system’?

- Could the stream banks (where bulkheads don’t exist now) be repaired, replanted, and restored to provide a natural habitat for both fish and wildlife that complements a tidal river system?
- Could the sliver of park serve as a filter for the storm water that travels through it to the river?
- Could landscape/art/architectural interventions be added along the water’s edge that allow residents to engage with this river habitat in ways that teach, celebrate and demonstrate its history, character, and potency?
- Can we investigate how the above elements can create “places” unique to Philadelphia and the Schuylkill River and which serve its residents and visitors alike?

The Schuylkill as an  
“urban tidal river  
eco-system,” by Sean  
O’Rourke



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Right now Schuylkill Banks seems like an elaborate infrastructure project, with bulkheads, trails, stairs, ramps, and boardwalks designed to move people from one place to another. And it is an impressive one! But still, its relationship to the river seems more like a burden than a benefit. And precedent suggests the future trails and arrangements for accessibility will follow similar patterns. I suggest that we should be asking how can we develop simultaneously a stronger relationship with the Schuylkill River that both enhances the river's attributes (improved flood capacity, rehabilitated river edge, enhanced water quality, increased water and land wildlife habitats..., etc) as well as increases our understanding of the river-through place making that engages the river's edge in diverse ways.

Don't get me wrong. However difficult it has been building Schuylkill Banks from scratch, I imagine an urban tidal river ecosystem will be even more difficult. The river in this section is tricky with a fixed channel but a dynamic edge, which means that when it floods, huge sections of the Banks are covered with mud and debris and any physical infrastructure improvements are susceptible to damage. And how do you handle a natural eco-system that is both **urban**-designed, to be engaged by a host of people in a variety of ways, and **artificially natural**-designed, with a recognition of the fragile interdependence of the natural system.

### Who can do it?

Who is capable to do this? Well it happens that in a great city like Philadelphia we have the resources to do it ourselves:

- The Academy of Natural Sciences, now affiliated with Drexel University, has much collective expertise about watershed ecologies, stream restorations, and wetland research, with nationally recognized faculty and scientists and a ready body of students. Imagine if their next research field station for environmental river studies were housed on the Schuylkill River at Bartram's Garden.
- The Philadelphia Water Department runs the region's premier urban environmental education destination at the historic Water Works, at the base of hill crowned by the Art Museum, which today showcases Philadelphia's urban watershed. The PWD's sustainability agenda, from green storm water infrastructure development to waterways restoration, model the best practices in the industry. They are already well on their way to owning this effort.

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- Philadelphia Parks and Recreation (which has absorbed the old Fairmount Park Commission) has long been the primary steward of environmental education and the natural park system in our city. They have a vision of how park land enhances both the resident and visitor experience of the city. The Schuylkill Banks could be one more jewel in their park system crown, which serves our city so well and distinguishes Philadelphia from other cities.



Dupont Crescent

- The University of Pennsylvania is now the owner of the longest stretch of natural river bank left along the lower Schuylkill River, at the “Dupont Crescent” site upstream of the Grays Ferry Bridge. It would be a shame if this “innovation” hub did not engage the Schuylkill River in an equally innovative manner.
- And finally, the William Penn Foundation should lead this effort. Their interests in watershed protection and place-making could reinforce a vision that would change the way Philadelphians engage with their Schuylkill River. They have the grant money that could fund the initial study that evaluates the opportunities and challenges of such a collective effort to change the way we interact with our intimate river. And this proposal should lead the development efforts outlined in the various planning documents-not follow them.

The design of an “urban tidal river eco-system” that creates places for residents and visitors to interact with the Schuylkill River could be the differentiator that recognizes the unique conditions of Philadelphia.

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