

The Problem with the Penn's Landing Proposal Is....

by Stephen Perzan

The reason that plans for Penn's Landing always seem a little dismaying is that they are usually just like every other city's riverfront plan—without enough pizzazz to make them exceptional.

Here's what I think is lacking with the current plan, which Hargreaves Associates is crafting for the Delaware River Waterfront Corporation. It tries to duplicate what is going on everywhere else in the "World of Waterfronts," and it only replicates what is quite readily available elsewhere in our own great city.

Do we really need another stage for heavy metal or rock shows when we currently do that on the Parkway, and could do it even more successfully elsewhere, in Fairmount Park at the Mann or the Dell? Do we need a "floating barge swimming pool" in the Delaware when keeping open all the neighborhood swimming pools would serve Philadelphia and all of its citizens better, and with greater ease and convenience? Do we need another place to set up food trucks and water ice stands, at the cost of 100 million plus dollars? After all, isn't that what Love Park is for?

Is magnificent Penn's Landing destined to become the "World's Largest Outdoor Orange and White Striped Tent," fitted to accommodate "The World's Largest Oktoberfest"? Aren't there other locations along the Delaware that are more appropriate for such activities than this almost sacred space, where the Welcome first landed – the rich humus of Penn's Holy Experiment and of all America's Future?

To put it bluntly, the proposed Penn's Landing Project is just more of what Philadelphia already has, and nothing better.

Penn's Landing should be the unique expression of our side of the Delaware. If New Jersey wants noise, action, bells and whistles – let them have all that, and let us watch them from our "less developed" but more residential and hospitable Penn's Landing side of the river.

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A sign posted along Columbus Boulevard



A car entering the Lombard Circle ramp to I-95. The ramp runs a mile and a tenth north through the entire Penn's Landing area, until it discharges onto I-95 just south of the Benjamin Franklin Bridge.

So here is my proposal. Remove the designation of “Alternate Route to I-95” from Columbus Boulevard as it is currently posted. That could start with removing the unnecessary entrance ramp to I-95 that begins at Lombard Circle and a mile later discharges traffic onto I-95 just south of the Benjamin Franklin Bridge – scarring the full length of Penn’s Landing. The ramp is obtrusive and completely unnecessary, because there are three other ramps that connect Columbus Boulevard/Delaware Avenue to I-95 in less than three miles!

Completely removing the Lombard Circle ramp would let I-95 be moved back at least 30 feet from the river, and that would let Columbus Boulevard to become a real boulevard—not the “mini-me” companion to I-95 that it is now.

The current proposal for Penn’s Landing, like all earlier plans, tries to tackle the intrusion of I-95 by building “cover overs” while ignoring the real highway problem, which is Columbus Boulevard, the six-lane thoroughfare designated as the “Alternate Route to I-95.” To do nothing about Columbus Boulevard—to allow it to remain the desertifying Roosevelt Boulevard of the waterfront—is foolish. Does anyone enjoy crossing a six-lane highway, full of traffic speeding along at 45 mph or more?

Penn’s Landing is “Sacred Space” and should be treated and honored in a way that reflects its history. It should be a special place of residence for some, while remaining open for all Philadelphians to enjoy: a modern-day example of Penn’s Greene Country Towne.

The area could be new kind of neighborhood in our city, where automobile traffic is kept to a minimum, public transit is sufficient, and bike paths and sidewalks are the main ways of getting about. It should provide an experience like New York City’s Roosevelt Island with its Four Freedoms Park—designed by Philadelphia’s late Louis Kahn.

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Top dream for a moment--perhaps Penn's Landing could be the much-needed new home of UNICEF. While the UN has to be located in New York City, there is no reason that UNICEF could not be located elsewhere, and Penn's Landing might be the perfect place.

We cannot sacrifice this area to the trivial or to the copycatting of other riverfronts. It demands dignity, and all Philadelphians should come together to find it.

A new type of design is called for, with a vision that will perdure in the way that the significance of that first landing at Penn's Landing's has endured. This area needs a new "Holy Experiment" that embodies an entirely new way of living and interacting, without primary reliance on the use of the automobile. It can be filled with inventive housing, recreation, and interconnective features that combine to build a unique neighborhood--one that William and Sarah Penn might have been pleased to survey from their neighboring Slate Roof House on Second Street, site of today's Welcome Park.

Philadelphians would be proud of a Penn's Landing that won international fame and was not simply the zone dotted with tinsel and trinkets that has been presented by today's planners. If they get their way, Philadelphia will squander a holy and sacred space, time and money, and a great opportunity, and tears will flow from William Penn's eyes atop City Hall.

It would also encourage an increase in nightlife and theater activities along the Walnut-Locust Street corridor and provide an extra incentive for merchants to locate there.

Not only that, but it would provide travelers from Camden, or other points thereabouts, with easier access to the Philadelphia International Airport, without having to take their car or rent an airport limousine. For the New Jerseyite, or even Philadelphian, using PATCO would take the hassle out of the journey and involve only one connection change at University City Station to the Regional Rail Airport Line. This could prove a real delight.

With all these possibilities, I wonder why the PATCO LINE at University City Station isn't already complete!

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