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CITYSPACE

Killing the Golden Goose



Market force economics: Ninth Street is a prime example of how a streetscape can benefit the city.

Photo By: Michael T. Regan

Urban uniqueness must be preserved.

by Mitchell Gordon

As the story goes, a goose that could lay one golden egg each day was killed by its impatient owner who wanted all the gold immediately. The story could be a parable for quick-fix development in unique commercial corridors in Philadelphia. South Street, for instance, is not a mall, but you wouldn't know it from recent commercial development there. Such development may bring in new tax revenue today, but the reasons for coming to South Street -- the artsy, funky, unique specialty-type place

that creates the social capital of a crowded boardwalk -- could diminish with real estate conversions that ultimately deplete the reasons for visiting the street.


While Old City and Manayunk have directly benefited from the South Street area's apparent unconcern with inroads of blandness at street level, the lessons here are equally important to other unique areas, like Germantown Avenue at Chestnut Hill, the Italian Market, Market Street, Penn's Landing and Antique Row. On Walnut Street West (Rittenhouse Row), a zoning overlay now stops more banks and fast food places from killing its intrinsic value. Market Street West wasn't as lucky. A study by urban consultant Robert Waldman showed that Market Street --from 11th to 21st Street -- had no less than 27 banks and financial services at street level. This lack of strategic zoning has sucked vitality and street life from the urban core, especially after 5 p.m., which has left Philadelphia with a loss of golden opportunities to attract more tourists and visiting regional residents -- and, thus, a loss of wealth in revenues.

For areas like South Street, traditional and pigeonholed zoning overlays may not be enough. Headhouse District has seen the addition of ordinary, fast food, low-ambience commerce while pillars of uniqueness have left, or are leaving. The Painted Bride moved and Grendel's Lair is gone. The Book Trader is set to move early next year. (See news feature [here](#).) Large corporations hungry for foot traffic will be quick to pounce on emerging tourist areas with vulnerable zoning, and the result frequently is a loss of cachet and visitor attraction. It is the investment in uniqueness and tourist amenities -- so crucial for visitor dollars -- that places like Commerce Bank seem to not understand. The bank recently took over restaurants in Headhouse Square and the Avenue of the Arts, after having snuck in a branch on Walnut Street shortly before the zoning overlay there took effect.

Marginalizing uniqueness makes for a poor master plan for the city of the 21st century. Better strategies are needed to be competitive, but this can be difficult. After a fire that destroyed Palumbo's restaurant, this gateway to the Italian Market was replaced by a pharmacy with surface parking. It would have taken longer to come up with a more appropriate use for this site, so some jobs were created, a bit of ambience was defeated and the gateway to the Italian Market became a pharmacy sign.

We can no longer afford to be half-hearted when it comes to planning for areas of the city that are our golden geese. We may need new zoning guidelines and new special service districts to protect these unique areas from being squandered. Here are some tips:

1. In the new economy, a zoning overlay made for tourist corridors must intervene in the trafficking of commercial rental properties to enforce the greater good, namely the uniqueness of a city, whether it be Bourbon, 42nd, Walnut or South Street. Uniqueness is a generator of urban wealth; it is the golden goose, and may need rental restrictions and protections to survive. Consideration must be given to lower-rent boutiques, arts-related shops and theaters, cafés and experimental restaurants that have the power to deliver high foot traffic as a whole, rather than relying heavily on high-rent commerce that may be of questionable value in attracting pedestrians to stroll and window shop.
2. Some unique areas may need design treatments to bring out their best, including: landscaping, lighting and street furniture, better signage and awnings, individualized storefronts and window displays, a designer icon (i.e. Chinatown's Friendship Gate), a new town square and event marketing.



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cial rates for the merchants and artists who live in the area. These are ng them out of the market can create a cultural vacuum, which can sit.

l specialty shops, community theater, preserved ambience, imaginative cratspeople. It is our choice to uncover this weath or to bury it.

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