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Can't Get There From Here



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How Philadelphia fails to capitalize on its walkability.

by Steve Conn

When the dust finally settles on SEPTA's god-awful construction project at its 30th Street subway station -- whenever that actually proves to be -- you still won't be able to use the tunnel that connects the stop with Amtrak's 30th Street Station.

Riders who use the trains in New York or Washington can move easily, and without having to go outside, from their platforms to the subway. Not here, however, where anyone who wants to get around town on the subway after arriving by train must navigate bad traffic to get there, if you can figure out exactly where the stop is, and then descend down a particularly aromatic stairwell. It is an absurd situation.

But I'm not here to complain about SEPTA and its master plan to discourage ridership, a plan modeled on Leonid Brezhnev's manual of customer service.

Rather, the continued inability to move from 30th Street Station to the adjacent subway stop in anything like a reasonable, logical or pleasant way strikes me as emblematic of a problem that exists around the city. There is a growing number of places in the city worth going to these days. The problem is: How do you get there from here?

Let's ask that more specifically: How do get there without having to get into a car?

I put it that way because one of the hallmarks of Philadelphia is its small, intimate, pedestrian scale. Philadelphia is -- or should be -- among the nation's most walkable cities. (Hats off to the Center City District for posting all those maps that show people just where they can walk in Center City and how long it will take!) And it isn't, not yet, and largely because we have not paid enough attention to how different parts of the city are tied together, the connective tissue necessary for the city to be truly whole.

Try walking with me for a moment.

You are enjoying a First Friday in Old City and decide to have dinner in Northern Liberties. It isn't actually that far away but the distance seems longer than it is because any trip up Second or Third between the two places is a pretty bleak experience.

Or how about this? You've just been to visit Eastern State Penitentiary, one of the really great sites in the city. It's a beautiful day and you want to go over to the zoo. Again, the two places are pretty close, especially if you want to stretch your legs, get a little exercise and enjoy the day. But there isn't any corridor to take that makes this walk in any way appealing. So close, yet so far away.



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middle of Rittenhouse Square is really only about a mile, which for
Indeed, many people do, despite the fact that the space near the
pedestrians.

east-west axis would be -- imagine how the street life of Center City
could more regularly intrude University City and vice versa -- if the space between them contributed to rather than killed
off urban vitality.

No one ever visits the Philadelphia Museum of Art on a whim; it's too remote, aloof and far away. Yet when the linear
park along the Schuylkill is at long last complete I suspect we'll marvel at just how close the Art Museum has been to
Center City all these years.

It is exactly these kinds of projects that we need to develop and encourage, the kind that enable us to enjoy several of
the city's pleasures in a single day by enjoying its essential walkability. And there are plenty of ways to do this: old rail
corridors turned into trails; major avenues like Ridge and Germantown revitalized with new trees, sidewalks and lights;
traffic-calming measures to make other streets more humane.

Those who market the city as a tourist attraction, however, tend to think of the city as simply a collection of tourist
destinations. They have the ears of politicians whom they prod into building new such destinations and expanding old
ones. Hence, the new collection of "destinations" around Independence Hall, the two new stadia and -- Holy Grail of
them all -- the once and future Penn's Landing development.

That's fine as far as it goes, but those people tend to ignore the question of the connective tissue. (After all, for many
of the Penn's Landing boosters, the answer to the question, "How do you get to Penn's Landing?" is, "From I-95." D'oh!)

But by focusing only on creating destinations, the city's marketers also ignore the fact that a collection of "destinations"
does not a great city make. They ignore that the very life of a truly great city is not created by its tourist destinations
but in the spaces in between.

They ignore that perhaps the greatest of all urban experiences is the simple pleasure of taking a walk.

Steve Conn is an associate professor of history at Ohio State University and a member of Design Advocacy Group.



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