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## CITYSPACE

### Design for Dummies



**WE CAN DO BETTER:** The Grays Ferry Shopping Center, nestled behind a sprawling parking lot, serves as an example of poor urban planning. Photo By: Michael T. Regan

Regan

Good urban design simply means shaping the city — whether at the level of single buildings, streetscapes or entire neighborhoods — in ways that are both aesthetically inspiring and functionally, well, urban. It means recognizing that any great city is a complicated network of uses, people and spaces. It also means making decisions to foster that complexity and inter-relatedness.

In this sense, good urban design is just as important for Strawberry Mansion as it is for Society Hill, but the sad fact is that many of Philadelphia's working-class and poor neighborhoods have been — and are still being — damaged by dreadful design choices. Developers use cookie-cutter formats, aim for a lowest common denominator and treat poorer neighborhoods with a sort of contempt.

Take, for example, the Grays Ferry Shopping Center, home to a Pathmark, McDonald's and various other stores. Sprawling across several blocks of Grays Ferry Avenue, it is fronted by an immense asphalt parking lot. It might look right in front of a subdivision complex in any American suburb. Except, of course, that this plaza is adjacent to two dense urban neighborhoods, and the skyline of the city rises majestically up behind it.

Many of the people who use the shopping center come on foot from the distressed neighborhood to the south. They must cross five lanes of fast traffic and then trudge across that bleak, vast parking lot. It is a degrading — not to mention dangerous — experience.

The 4000 blocks of Chestnut and Walnut streets provide another object lesson in how one set of bad design decisions leads to yet more bad decisions. First, both streets were turned into high-speed expressways for commuters coming into and out of the city. This inevitably degraded these once tree-lined, residential corridors. Then, when existing housing fell in value and desirability, they were replaced by car washes, auto dealerships, gas stations and even suburban-style strip malls — businesses that cater to those driving through the area rather than those living in it. That created an inhospitable canyon between University City and the neighborhoods to the north.

Even small choices can have big consequences.

At the 47th St. and Baltimore Ave. commercial hub, exciting things have been happening of late. Two new restaurants have recently opened. One is in a brand-new building that joins two existing structures. A nearby grocery store has expanded, too. And yet the momentum being created here will be stymied because the Philadelphia Parking Authority, that bastion of progressive urban planning, maintains a surface parking lot in the middle of it all.

We have a similar attitude about historic buildings in neighborhoods outside of Center City. Block for block, Philadelphia has more historic architecture than any city in America, yet we are demolishing much of our 19th-century heritage in distressed industrial neighborhoods without regret.

We should be clear that all development — or demolition — projects regardless of where they are in the city must be approved by the same set of city bureaucracies. More often than not, however, those responsible for overseeing development have blithely approved many of these lousy projects, implicitly telling Philadelphia's poor and working class: You deserve no better.

### The cycle of urban decay starts with poor planning.

by Steve Conn

Design. The very word sounds expensive. It seems even more decadent when coupled with other ritzy-sounding adjectives: interior designers, graphic designers, modern design.

As a result, we tend to think of "urban design" as something reserved for big, high-profile projects and tony, affluent enclaves rather than for the rowhouse neighborhoods that make up most of this city. Urban design is something we fight for in Center City and Chestnut Hill, not in South Philly or Kensington. This perception about urban design is as tragic as it is wrong.



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Philadelphia's neighborhoods by banks, private real estate interests and  
ment — no matter how tacky or poorly planned — is better than  
they will simply walk away.

Making good design decisions, even if the process takes longer and costs a bit more, is a wise long-term investment in a neighborhood's future. Look at what has happened to Progress Plaza on Broad Street between Cecil B. and Girard. That suburban-style shopping center has quickly become a shabby, underutilized eyesore, and has certainly not catalyzed neighborhood redevelopment in the area.

We are at an urgent moment in Philadelphia's neighborhoods.

The mayor's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative is creating vast new areas for potential development. When developers come knocking, we need to demand that the same care and planning that goes into projects in Old City or Rittenhouse Square is given to North Philly too. All Philadelphians deserve nothing less than the best urban design.



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