

Curb Clutter

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Last summer I visited Montreal. It's a great city and, in many ways, a lot like Philadelphia. Similar in population, it has a vibrant, modern downtown; an old, historic area along the river; and interesting, ethnic neighborhoods with great restaurants. The most strikingly noticeable difference is the total absence of visual clutter along the curb line of its downtown streets, a situation that has become an overwhelming frontal assault in Center City Philadelphia.

Montreal successfully manages to organize and direct its traffic and pedestrians with a minimal amount of street furniture and signage. On its downtown shopping streets, the only objects along the curb are street lights, trees, an occasional phone booth and a decorative advertising kiosk with maps and visitor information. Parking and directional signs, perhaps one or two per block at most, are attached to the light poles along with banners announcing events or museum exhibits. Parking kiosks, similar to Philadelphia's new system tend to be back against the building line.

Philadelphia, on the other hand, has a ballooning collection of objects designed, installed and maintained by a variety of agencies whose standards are not coordinated, and which often provide redundant information. In addition to street lights and trees, the typical Philadelphia curb line includes Direction Philadelphia signs (the system for fast-moving cars that guides drivers to key destinations), Walk! Philadelphia signs (the system for slow-moving visitors that provides pedestrians with mid-block maps and destination wayfinding at corners), newsstands and honor boxes, bus shelters with Ride Philadelphia transit information, big belly trash compactors and recycling receptacles, U.S. Postal Service mailboxes, state historic markers, big brown traffic light control boxes, parking signs and payment kiosks, headless parking meter poles, a variety of bollards, planter boxes, bike racks and benches, event and institutional branding banners, Old Philadelphia Congregations information panels, numerous interpretive historic panels sponsored by various civic groups and, very recently added, a whole new signage system for Independence Historic Park.

The Center City District has taken on the responsibility of maintaining this unruly collection of public appurtenances as best they can. The CCD has been directly responsible for the conceptualization, design, installation and maintenance of many of the wayfinding systems that make Center City a welcoming and friendly environment for visitors. These systems are attractive, consistent, helpful and well maintained. The CCD is also directly responsible for some, but not most of the street trees, for most of the banners and for most of the seasonal plantings and decorations. For the numerous other objects that are the responsibility of myriad other agencies including the Streets Department, SEPTA, Fairmount Park, the Parking Authority, the U.S. Department of the Interior and numerous neighborhood civic associations, the CCD deploys a sophisticated hand-held electronic tracking system with which their workers snap

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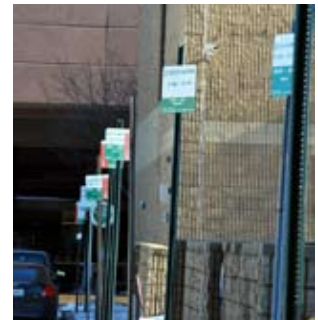
photos of items requiring attention and then email the images to the responsible agency for remediation. Biweekly meetings are held with all representatives present to review response and monitor progress.



Despite the efforts of the CCD, the visual clutter continues due to factors beyond its control. A typical one-block stretch in Center City, from Chestnut to Market, a distance of around 540 feet, yields 2 traffic lights, 7 lampposts, 10 parking signs, 1 payment kiosk with a “kiosk located here” sign, 5 headless parking meter poles, 2 Walk! Philadelphia signs, 2 bollards, 1 fire hydrant, 1 pole-mounted retail store sign, 5 trees and a vendor stand.

By far, the greatest contributor to the chaos is the Parking Authority. Its new signage and kiosk system was designed and installed without consulting with the CCD, which would have encouraged coordination with the existing graphic standards and any design guidelines that make the system more user friendly. The new payment kiosks, a system that in concept is a significant improvement over the conventional parking meter model, are confusing and frustrating to use and would benefit from a redesigned user interface that had been tested using real people. (An increasingly familiar site around town is clusters of people huddled around these machines holding money and looking bewildered.) Does each kiosk really need its own separate sign indicating its location? In other cities that use the kiosk system, (or even our own Headhouse Square pilot project) people seem capable of finding the kiosks a few feet away without needing another sign. At the very least, can't the locator signage be part of the kiosk to avoid having to bolt two things to the sidewalk?

The new parking signage is truly awful. The Parking Authority has replaced smaller, less obtrusive (but infuriatingly confusing) signs with larger, more obtrusive and equally confusing signs. It took a bit of study to realize that the new parking signs come in a variety of designs, formats and fonts, some much more graphically successful than others. The best design arranges the information in horizontal bands and uses a serif font that is readable and friendly. All of the other designs have awkward layouts with too many font sizes, are less legible and offer instructions that are downright baffling. There are many more signs than are necessary to get the message across. On the small, secondary block where my office is located there are nine parking signs within 200 feet because someone felt it was necessary to indicate exactly the places where parking is permitted and also the places where it's not permitted because of intermittent curb cuts. Don't we all know not to park in driveways? Do we need two signs for each location? Multiply that by every curb cut, fire hydrant, alley and bus stop in the city and



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you have thousands of unnecessary signs trashing the view. Part of the problem, visually, is that no two of these parking signs are at the same height or angle to the street, and none of them is plumb.

What could have been a clever solution to the vestigial parking meter poles – converting them to bike racks – has not been very successful. The Parking Authority's design, a bike-shaped ring and a cap, is visually and structurally flimsy and the installation has been sporadic. Many are already looking bent and beat up. Removing most of the remaining poles would be a big improvement.

The other major offenders that have already received much criticism are the big brown traffic control boxes found at many historic district street corners. These hulking, graffiti-attracting behemoths were individually located not by a designer or planner, but by the contractor who installed the system. Some are squeezed up against private homes, some block the windows of cafes and restaurants, and some press up against historic structures with the same destructive impact as a wrecking ball. These ugly intrusions were designed and located without the benefit of input from the CCD, the City Planning Commission, the Historical Commission or any neighborhood group. How can we let this happen in a part of town where the wrong window shutter design can wind someone up in court?

The most recent addition to our crowded streetscape is the Department of the Interior's signage for Independence Historic Park. This brand-new wayfinding system is handsome and helpful but, once again, was designed and installed without a hint of coordination with the other systems already in place. In some locations, there are now signs from different systems, literally inches from each other, pointing toward the same destination. While the need for branding may have generated the park's signage concept, a more cooperative approach would have made it so much more successful. One wonders whether there was even a glimmer of awareness that cooperation with the city would have been a useful gesture. But then these are the same people who wanted to close Chestnut Street and put up a six-foot-high security fence around America's preeminent symbol of freedom and independence.



It has become apparent that Philadelphia needs a higher level authority to regulate the pedestrian environment. The CCD can control a portion of the experience and, in its twenty years of existence, has helped to make Center City Philadelphia one of the most successful downtowns in the country. But many of the other independent components seem determined to undo much that has been achieved during this period through poor design and lack of professional oversight. We need a thoughtful, controlled, comprehensible and integrated signage system to regulate curbside parking in Center City. If Montrealers can figure out where not to park without a forest of huge signs, I would think Philadelphians could, too. N'est-ce pas?

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