

Hard Landing

*The unfinished development
history of Penn's Landing,
Philadelphia.*

FOR MORE THAN 40 years, the part of Philadelphia called Penn's Landing has been the site of grand development proposals—more than ten, all unbuilt, surely a record. The checkered development history of this site serves not only as a cautionary tale but as a chronicle of how urban development theories have changed, yet stayed the same.

William Penn never landed at Penn's Landing. Penn first set foot on American soil in 1682 in New Castle, Delaware, some 30 miles southwest of Philadelphia. By that time, the planning of Philadelphia was well under way. It is possible that when Penn arrived at the site of his future city he disembarked on the bank of the

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Delaware River at the foot of what would be High Street (later Market Street). But that would have been about a thousand feet inland from present-day Penn's Landing. The imaginatively named river-front site at the foot of Market Street is modern and man-made, created with landfill in the early 1960s. The artificial character of Penn's Landing is important to note, for this was not a vacant urban site; it was created specifically for the purpose of real estate development.

THE VISION

The genesis of the development planning for Penn's Landing was a 1963 master plan of the waterfront developed by the architectural firm of Geddes, Brecher, Qualls & Cunningham, commissioned by the Department of Commerce of the City of Philadelphia (Figure 1). The proposal for the 75-acre landfill site contained half a million square feet, consisting of an office tower and lower office buildings, a science park, a boat basin with historic vessels, and a 2,150-car parking structure. The most striking architectural feature of the project was a 30-storey tower, which housed the port operations. The high-rise building was located at the foot of Market Street, symbolically terminating the east-west axis of one of the city's two main thoroughfares. As part of a strategy to revitalize the

city's reputation as a world port, there was a quay-type embarcadero that could berth at least two 30,000-ton cruise ships. The target date for completion was 1976, when Philadelphia planned a world's fair to coincide with the bicentennial of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The entire development was estimated to cost \$120 million, \$80 million of private investment and \$40 million of public money. It was strictly an architectural proposal; no developer was associated with the development.

The Department of Commerce plan contained characteristics that would

Figure 1: View of Philadelphia showing first Penn's Landing proposal with centerpiece highrise, 1963.



steer—and bedevil—future proposals. The vision of a tower at the foot of Market Street captured the imagination of public officials, notably Edmund N. Bacon, executive director of the Philadelphia Planning Commission. A little thought might have raised questions about the wisdom of locating a solitary office building one to two miles from the business center, but the drawings and models that were circulated at the time made it appear a logical modern extension of Penn's original city plan. The function of the office building as a "nerve center for port operations" justified its image as a sort of maritime "control tower." A second critical issue was access. The interstate highway, I-95, which had not yet been built, was projected to be at grade. So it was necessary to link Penn's Landing to the city by a single elevated overpass more than 400 feet long. Such a tenuous connection should have raised questions about the commercial viability of the project.

It was the planning for I-95 that precipitated a second version of the plan. Following intensive lobbying by the city and the state, it was decided to depress the interstate highway for seven blocks, from Market to Lombard streets. That meant that the section of the highway opposite Penn's Landing could be decked over, and surface streets extended into the site. In 1967, a new plan was prepared (by Robert Geddes, Romaldo Guirgola and Walter

Weisman) that included large areas of landscaped decks over the highway, leading to a marina and retail space, as well as additional commercial buildings.

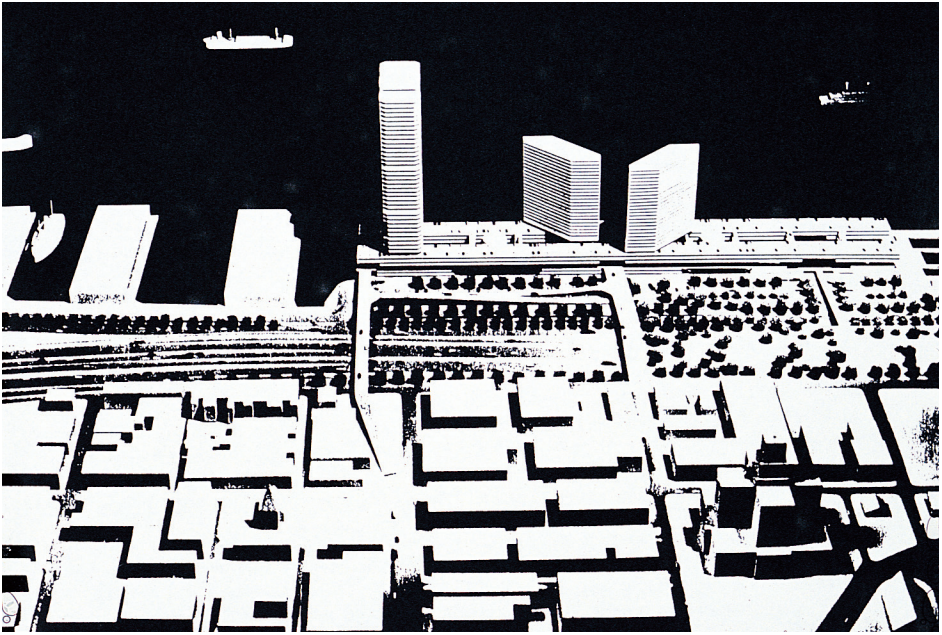
In 1969, the Philadelphia Bicentennial Corporation launched an ambitious plan that included not only Penn's Landing but other development projects at 30th Street Station, North Broad Street, and the Camden waterfront. In fact, neither the master plan, nor indeed the world's fair, came to fruition.

THE CORPORATION

In 1970 an important event took place that would greatly influence the future of the site: the founding of the Penn's Landing Corporation (PLC), a quasi-public, not-for-profit corporation controlled by the City. Since the purpose of a development corporation is to develop, the creation of PLC assured that, one way or another, development would take place. Stated differently, not developing commercial space on this site was no longer an acceptable option.

PLC wanted a project that coincided with the bicentennial celebrations (even if there was not to be a world's fair), and hired the architectural firm of Murphy, Levy, Wurman to prepare a new master plan. Their plan split the site into several development parcels, with most of the

Figure 2: McCloskey Company proposal, 1973.



development at the south end of the site. This plan was more ambitious, proposing a development of about one million square feet and a larger variety of uses. There were offices (370,000 to 480,000 sq. ft.), 200 apartment units, retail, restaurants and entertainment (175,000 to 225,000 sq. ft.), laboratory buildings (100,000 sq. ft.), and museums (20,000 sq. ft.), as well as a parking structure for 1,100 cars. The diagrammatic proposal assumed that large parts of the still-unbuilt I-95 would be covered. As with the previous plans, no developer was involved.

In 1973, PLC held a developer competition for the largest parcel. There were

three submissions. Frankel Enterprises (Geddes, Brecher, Qualls & Cunningham, architects) proposed offices, apartments, and a hotel in four high-rise buildings. The Mondev submission (Bower & Fradley, architects) had a 20-storey tower located on the Market Street axis, as well as a convention center, hotel, apartments, townhouses, and a 4,000-seat performing arts center. The winning scheme, by The McClosky Company (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, architects), included an office building/hotel high-rise on the Market Street axis, and two smaller apartment slabs (Figure 2). The most striking feature was a 1,400-foot-long base building that contained a parking structure as well as retail space.

Figure 3: Mixed-use proposal, 1983.



The mammoth parking structure illustrated two main limitations of the Penn's Landing site. First, due to its location disconnected from the city, you could get to it only by car, so you needed a lot of parking. Second, because the site was landfill in the river, this parking had to be housed above-ground. To provide access for cars, McClosky requested an additional ramp from I-95, which was then under construction. This caused resistance among neighborhood groups, which sued the City and brought construction to a halt for several years as the issue resolved. The ramp was not approved. Without an access ramp, The McClosky Company refused to proceed with the project. PLC, attempting to find another developer, approached Gerald Hines, without success.

With no development in sight, and the bicentennial looming, the City invested \$13 million in landscaping improvements to Penn's Landing. During the bicentennial, the area was used for special public events, fireworks, and concerts. This influenced public perception, and Penn's Landing began to be seen as a place that should include a significant amount of public space.

In 1980, the PLC signed a contract with Jack Blumenfeld (Bower, Fradley, Lewis, Thrower, architects) to develop Penn's Landing. The considerably more modest proposal included an office tower on the Market Street axis (but only 17 stories high), a 35-storey apartment building, a hotel, and retail and restaurants in the base structure—a smaller, but probably

realistic, proposal. Before the project could start, there was a city election and the administration changed. The new mayor demanded that the developer reduce the density and create more public space. Eventually the City cancelled the contract, and although Blumenfeld sued, and eventually settled out of court for \$8 million, the project was dead.

In 1983, the PLC commissioned yet a new master plan from Cope Linder, architects; once again, no developer was involved. The mixed-use proposal included the by-now usual combination of office, retail, hotel, and apartments and townhouses (Figure 3). In addition, there was to be a large public open-air performance space called the Great Plaza, a marina, a Port of History Museum, and a 600-foot communications tower at the foot of Market Street. Several years later the \$10-

million museum and the 3.5-acre Great Plaza were built, with public funds.

In 1986, Rouse & Associates was selected to develop the next phase of the master plan: an office building (250,000 sq. ft.) and a festival marketplace (Figure 4). The following year, one of the prospective clients, DisneyQuest, announced that it would not locate on Penn's Landing but on Market Street downtown. Nevertheless, three years later, Rouse unveiled an ambitious design (Jerde Partnership, architects). Then, only weeks later, Rouse announced that it would not continue with the project, citing a nationwide slump in retailing and a glut of office space in Philadelphia.

Caught unawares, the City hastily organized a competition in order not to lose the \$10 million federal Urban Development Action Grant attached to the development. The Welcome

Figure 4: Rouse & Associates proposal for festival marketplace, 1986-89.



Figure 5: Welcome Partnership proposal with 52-storey office tower, 1989-90.



Partnership (Bower Lewis Thrower, architects) was selected to develop the 37-acre portion of the site. The project was conceived as an extension of the city, with high-rise apartment towers, a variety of retail, a hotel, and an exhibition hall (Figure 5). The most striking building was a 52-storey office tower—at the foot of

Market Street. It was by far the most ambitious proposal to date, but by the following year, with a weakened economy and sagging office market, the Welcome Partnership also withdrew, and the project was dead.

For the next eight years, there were no development proposals for Penn's

Figure 6: Model of Simon Property Group's entertainment and retail complex, 1997-2002.



Landing. Instead, PLC and the City concentrated on improving access to the site, at a total cost of \$78.4 million (mostly federal funds). Two pedestrian bridges were built, as well as three ramps from I-95. A gas line was brought to the site.

TRY, AND TRY AGAIN

Having tried office, cultural, and residential uses, like many urban development corporations, PLC decided to build a shopping mall. In 1997, the corporation picked Simon DeBartolo (now Simon Property) to develop a 400,000-to-600,000-square-foot entertainment and retail complex (Figure 6). The estimated

cost was \$130 million, of which \$30 million was public money for infrastructure improvements. A new sidelight was an additional \$40 million of public money for an aerial tram connecting Penn's Landing to Camden.

By the following year, the estimated cost of the mall had risen to \$200 million, of which \$50 million was public money. In 1999, Simon announced a tenant list. The mall had grown to 740,000 square feet, with total cost of \$174 million (of which \$62.3 million was public money). Then a pattern made itself evident: rising construction cost estimates, followed by postponements. In 2001, which had been the original opening date, a delay was announced in what was now a \$250 mil-

lion project. In 2002, the cost was projected to be \$329 million, though the mall was now 600,000 square feet. Finally, in August 2002, Simon announced that it was withdrawing from the project.

Once again, Penn's Landing had been abandoned at the altar. This time, however, with the tram under construction, the City found itself in an embarrassing situation. Four developer proposals were considered for the site: a huge multi-billion-dollar entertainment and residential complex; a \$150 million amusement park with an indoor water park, a giant Ferris wheel (similar to the London Eye), and a concert tent; and two mixed-use projects consisting of retail, residential, office, and public spaces. At the time of writing, the City has selected the two mixed-use projects as finalists, but has not made a choice between them. Both of the projects require hefty infusions of public money. The Tower Investment project is a \$258 million development that requires a \$103 million public subsidy, while the Brandywine Realty Trust project is a \$270 million development that requires a \$132 million public subsidy.

LESSONS

It would be wrong to describe Penn's Landing as simply a development failure. There are a number of on-going uses, most

notably a 33-room Hyatt Regency hotel, several restaurants, the Seaport Museum, the U.S.S. Olympia, and a skating rink. The Great Plaza is the site of regular concerts, fireworks displays, and assorted festivals. Nevertheless, the millions of dollars that have been spent over the years on plans, public hearings, infrastructure improvements, and public institutions have not borne fruit. Some lessons can be drawn from the experience.

It is difficult to develop large urban sites.

Extremely large development projects such as Rockefeller Center and the World Trade Center are few and far between, and generally are the result of unique circumstances (the Depression, in the case of Rockefeller Center; massive public subsidies, in the case of the World Trade Center). Most urban districts grow incrementally, the new building on the old. Recent large urban development projects such as Canary Wharf in London and Battery Park City in New York City have followed this incremental model. The challenge of a site that is as isolated as Penn's Landing is that the project needs a sufficient critical mass to be a success, but because of this mass, it is particularly susceptible to economic swings, and never quite seems to get off the ground.

It is important to understand the market.

Over and over again, grand plans were made for Penn's Landing, even as demand—and population—in the city

was falling. The imperative, apparently inherited from the original master plan, to make a grand architectural gesture seems to have precluded scaling back the plans to more realistic dimensions.

It is difficult to combine public and private spaces in a city. The thinking on this at Penn's Landing seems to have swung back and forth. Initially, it was conceived as a purely private development. Then, as Penn's Landing assumed a more public character, public spaces and public buildings were introduced. This produced confusion about the appropriate character of the place. Was it a public amenity, like a park or a pier, that deserved the support of public funds? Or was it a private development site, like a shopping mall, that was essentially a private enterprise? To say that it had to be both simply blurred the picture, functionally and economically.

Waterfront sites are not automatically commercially attractive. The commercial attractions of Penn's Landing are marginal. It is next to a very large freeway; access to the city is awkward; the walking distance from the downtown core is large; the cost of parking structures must be factored into any development project; and, finally, the cost of construction on landfill is a major issue, judging from the spiraling costs of most projects. These limitations were obviously visible from the beginning. What seems to have encouraged development is the waterfront location, as if a water view

could trump the real liabilities of the site.

The successful development of Baltimore's Inner Harbor (which started in 1964, a year after Penn's Landing) has no doubt served as an ongoing model and goad for the would-be developers of Penn's Landing. Yet the analogy between the two sites is imperfect. One is a contained harbor, with easy and convenient access to the city and, more important, access to the water's edge. The other is a confined site along a broad river's edge, on the far edge of the central business district, separated from the city, and lacking an intimate relation to the water. Location is everything.

Only recently has the waterfront—once smelly, noisy, and dirty—been seen as an amenity. The problem is that Philadelphia, which was once firmly tied to the Delaware and the Schuylkill rivers, has reoriented itself in other directions, northeast and northwest. If William Penn were to come to Philadelphia today, he would probably land in Franklin Mills or King of Prussia.