

Balancing Private Development and Public Good

*Three alternative visions
for Penn's Landing.*

PENN'S LANDING was conceived by planners Edmund Bacon and Oskar Stonorov in 1947. The spit of landfill at the foot of Market Street runs south to Lombard Street along the Delaware River and reflects the changes in Philadelphia's fortune and its urban economic freefall in the years following World War II. White flight and industrial displacement decimated the city's once-prosperous industrial and residential neighborhoods. To counter these trends, urban planners sought to sweep the city clean of its industrial past. As part of this vision, the warehouses, coal yards, and refineries that lined Delaware Avenue in Center City were demolished. Interstate-95 was located

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alongside Philadelphia's waterfront, leaving Penn's Landing—a 39-acre sliver of publicly owned land at the bottom of a 32-foot drop in grade across 380 feet of interstate highway and local roadbed.

For almost 250 years, the Delaware River provided a transportation advantage that helped propel Philadelphia to prominence. But urban renewal relegated the river to a largely abandoned industrial corridor. All that remained of what had once been an integral and natural relationship between the shoreline and the city was a remote memory of a once-thriving urban area. The creators of Penn's Landing grappled with the technological and political ascendancy of the automobile and trucking industries, and with urban economic change. Penn's Landing was to be a symbol for the new Philadelphia, and together with Penn Center, Independence Mall, and Society Hill, designed to place Philadelphia at the leading edge of urban design. People would henceforth look to Philadelphia as an exemplar of the new order and the power of urban planning. Society Hill, the transformation of a skid row into an urban enclave with pedestrian pathways and residential mews, is a true urban design success. Penn Center and Independence Mall, on the other hand, tell another story. Lacking a sense of human scale, these projects have ruptured the urban form, imposing barren and scale-less gaps in the cityscape.

Unfortunately, Penn's Landing was cut from the same cloth. Remote, too small, and economically disconnected, it has proved to be a thorny development proposition, underscoring many of the failures of modern urban planning.

The Penn's Landing Corporation, created in 1970, was charged with developing a waterfront attraction at Penn's Landing. Viewed by successive mayoral administrations as an important economic development project for the City, increasingly grandiose plans for the site were put forth, only to be discarded (see "Hard Landing," in this issue). Despite healthy public subsidies offered to developers to help offset infrastructure costs, the public was never offered a significant voice in the project. In 2002, when the Simon Property Group withdrew its proposal for an enclosed 600,000-square-foot entertainment complex with above-ground parking, some Philadelphians drew a collective sigh of relief; others were dismayed. Yet, before the dust had settled on Simon's departure, the City began looking for a new developer for the site.

THE PRINCIPLES

For 30 years, Philadelphia unsuccessfully tried to develop Penn's Landing, following the models of projects in Baltimore and San Francisco. Some people blame the fail-

ures on fluctuations in market cycles and changes in political administrations. Many see the barrier created by I-95 as the critical stumbling block to the site's viability. Planning has evolved over the years, and cities around the world are repairing urban renewal mistakes of the past, and reconnecting with their waterfronts. Against this long-term backdrop of failure, the School of Design and the Graduate School of Education of the University of Pennsylvania, in partnership with the editorial board of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, the region's largest daily newspaper, created a civic conversation about the future of the Philadelphia waterfront at Penn's Landing. For two months in the winter of 2003, more than 800 Philadelphians participated in the Penn's Landing Forums, a series of public events that included presentations on waterfront development and small-group sessions during which common-ground planning principles for the site were sought.

A set of core principles was the underpinnings of the forums. Together with a daylong workshop that engaged local design professionals and students in creating visions for the site, the forums helped frame a public conversation that reflected both the views and values of the interested citizens, with the knowledge of the experts. The forums offered the public an opportunity to play a role in shaping the plans. Rather than being relegated to their usual

role of saying "no," the forums offered Philadelphians an opportunity to say "what if." The principles gave voice to the public's desire to balance private development and public good. They also highlighted the inevitable tensions between public and private interests. A brief description of each principle follows.

Distinctively Philadelphia, with pride. Create a signature space for Philadelphia, a "front door" to the world to which its citizens can point with pride. Do not simply copy other cities' riverfront plans. Penn's Landing should not be a "chain store" place, but a Philadelphia place. This means it should reflect the city's virtues, such as human scale and walkability; a sense of history; a tradition of urban design; and diverse populations. There is a thirst by many for the site to include an "iconic" building or gesture—something that would join the Liberty Bell, Billy Penn's hat, and the Art Museum steps as a signature image of the city.

It's the river, stupid. Enhance, not diminish, people's enjoyment of the Delaware River. Give them more ways to connect with the water—looking at it, walking alongside it, doing things in it (such as fishing and boating). Penn's Landing should become a focal point of a growing Philadelphia identity as a "river city," with a network of riverside walkways and parks. But do this with respect for the Delaware as a "serious" river; Philadelphia's

status as a hard-working port city should not be sanitized.

Get the connections right. Understand that Penn's Landing is the key to mastering two sets of vital connections: first, east-west, between Camden's regenerating waterfront and Philadelphia's prospering Center City; second, north-south, among Philadelphia's fragmented waterfront amenities. Get the connections right, and the whole can be greater than the sum of the parts. Get the connections right, and a proper balance of uses becomes easier to achieve. Conversely, any plan for Penn's Landing that does not address the site's isolation is doomed. A good plan must include strategies for dealing with the I-95 barrier, restricted expressway access, parking, and mass transit, plus links to the Camden waterfront and Philadelphia's scattered waterfront amenities.

Bolster "Destination Philadelphia." Treat Penn's Landing as a regional attraction as well as a local park. Use it to consolidate the visitor appeal generated in recent years by impressive cultural and entertainment investments on Camden's riverfront and in historic Philadelphia. Make Penn's Landing a transition point where the multigenerational appeal of Camden meshes with the historic riches of Philadelphia.

Make it affordable and sustainable. Don't fall into the grandiose overreaching that has doomed three decades of plans for

Penn's Landing. Be realistic about economic potential and environmental limitations. To avoid the pitfall of cramming more onto the site than it can bear, treat it as one piece of a broader plan for the central waterfront. Don't approach riverfront development as a once-and-done event, but as a patient, generational enterprise. Learn from and capitalize on existing entrepreneurial development successes along the riverfront.

Keep it a public space. Preserve Penn's Landing as a fundamentally public space. Commercial uses should not overwhelm or preclude public uses that, over the past 30 years, have been its primary functions. Citizens place high value on the site's role as a gathering place for major public events along the river. The current design of the Great Plaza need not be maintained, but its function must be. City residents also value Penn's Landing highly as a safe spot where individuals can connect daily with open space and the river, so the event space should not intimidate or prevent people from enjoying the river on non-event days.

Use a public process. Ensure that the region's taxpayers, who paid to create Penn's Landing, have a say in its future. The public clearly does not want the fate of Penn's Landing to be determined by Philadelphia's "pay-to-play" wheeling-and-dealing. Plans based on an authentic public process are more likely to generate community pride and support.

GREEN RESPITE

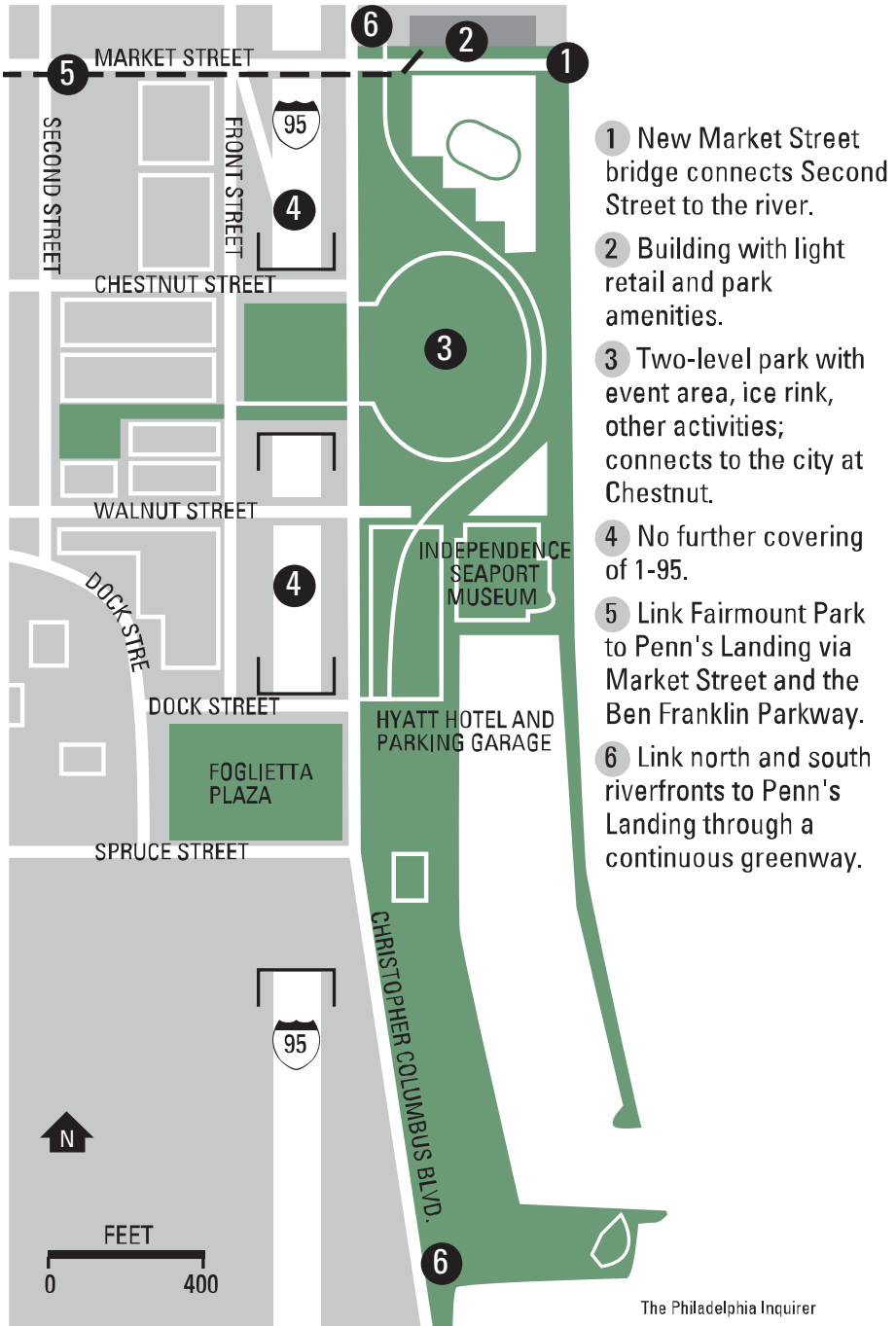
These principles served as the foundation for a day-long design workshop held at the Independence Seaport Museum on Penn's Landing on February 26, 2003. Teams of planners, architects, designers, engineers, economists, students, artists, and citizens developed three different design approaches for the site.

The goal of the first alternative is to make Penn's Landing a truly public place, providing both daily access to the river for nearby residents and workers, and a venue where the region can gather for major civic events. Heeding the principle of affordability and sustainability, this scheme proposes a new public park by the water's edge that offers relief from the city. Building upon an existing covering of I-95 between Chestnut and Sansom Streets, the design mediates the 32-foot grade differential with a bi-level park (both city- and river-level), inviting the public to enjoy the riverfront through an easy connection between city and river.

The plan calls for a public waterfront promenade for walking, biking, jogging and roller-blading and a park designed to accommodate spaces for both quiet and vigorous activities. This new park is envisioned as part of a continuous, green waterfront trail that will one day reach upstream to Pennypack Creek and downstream to the Schuylkill River and back up

to Fairmount Park. A new ceremonial bridge is proposed for the foot of Market Street to link the site to Old City. The plan is modest—acknowledging that past failures at Penn's Landing have stemmed in large measure from overreaching. The plan draws attention to Philadelphia's 40-plus miles of river frontage and aims to position Penn's Landing as a vital link in a green chain of new riverfront parks that are connected to new riverfront neighborhoods.

Figure 1: Green Respite



The Philadelphia Inquirer

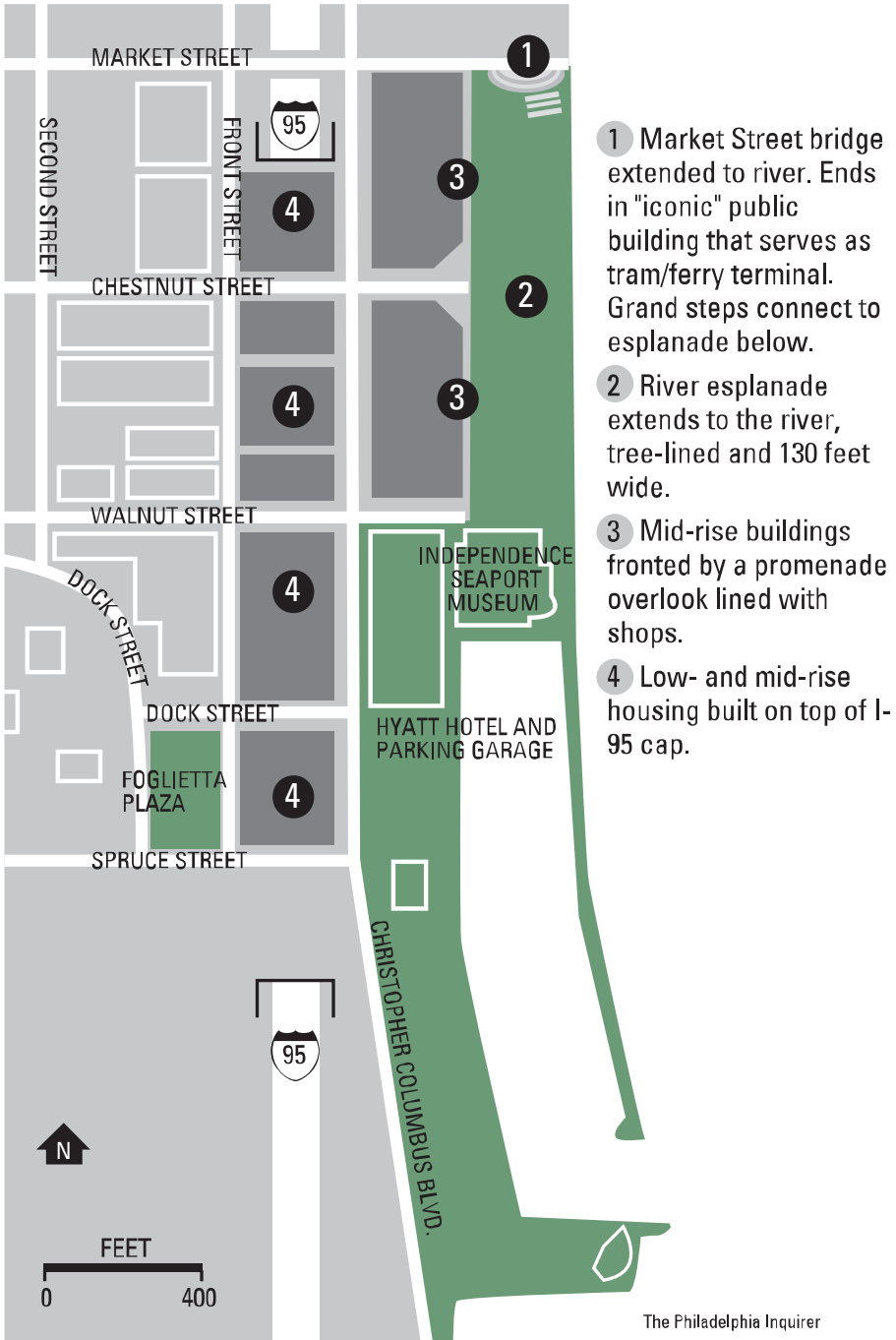
NEW NEIGHBORHOOD

The second alternative explores how, if the barriers between the river and Center City neighborhoods could be eased, Penn's Landing might become the heart of a new riverfront neighborhood. Learning from successful residential waterfront development in places such as Battery Park City in New York, Boston, Toronto and Vancouver, this scheme proposes building a deck over I-95 to create 8.5 acres of new development parcels. On this new land, the designers propose housing of a scale and density similar to nearby Society Hill. Additional mixed-use development (housing, retail, and parking) is proposed, with a 130-foot-wide public river esplanade envisioned for the water's edge. The design team mediated the grade changes of the site through multi-level development that would gracefully bring the public to the riverside esplanade. A new Market Street pedestrian bridge and iconic public building linked to a grand set of public steps (something like the Spanish Steps in Rome) was envisioned for the foot of Market Street.

This scheme is dense and urban, and seeks a balance between private development and the public realm by re-knitting the site back into the compact urban framework of Old City and Society Hill. By decking I-95, the planners create new revenue-generating development sites that

can help offset public subsidies. By reconnecting the city with Penn's Landing through residential and retail development in a new neighborhood, the planners have sought to animate the site with 24-hour street life. Protective of the public nature of its open spaces, this design creates multiple opportunities for private investment within a well-conceived public framework.

Figure 2: New Neighborhood



The Philadelphia Inquirer

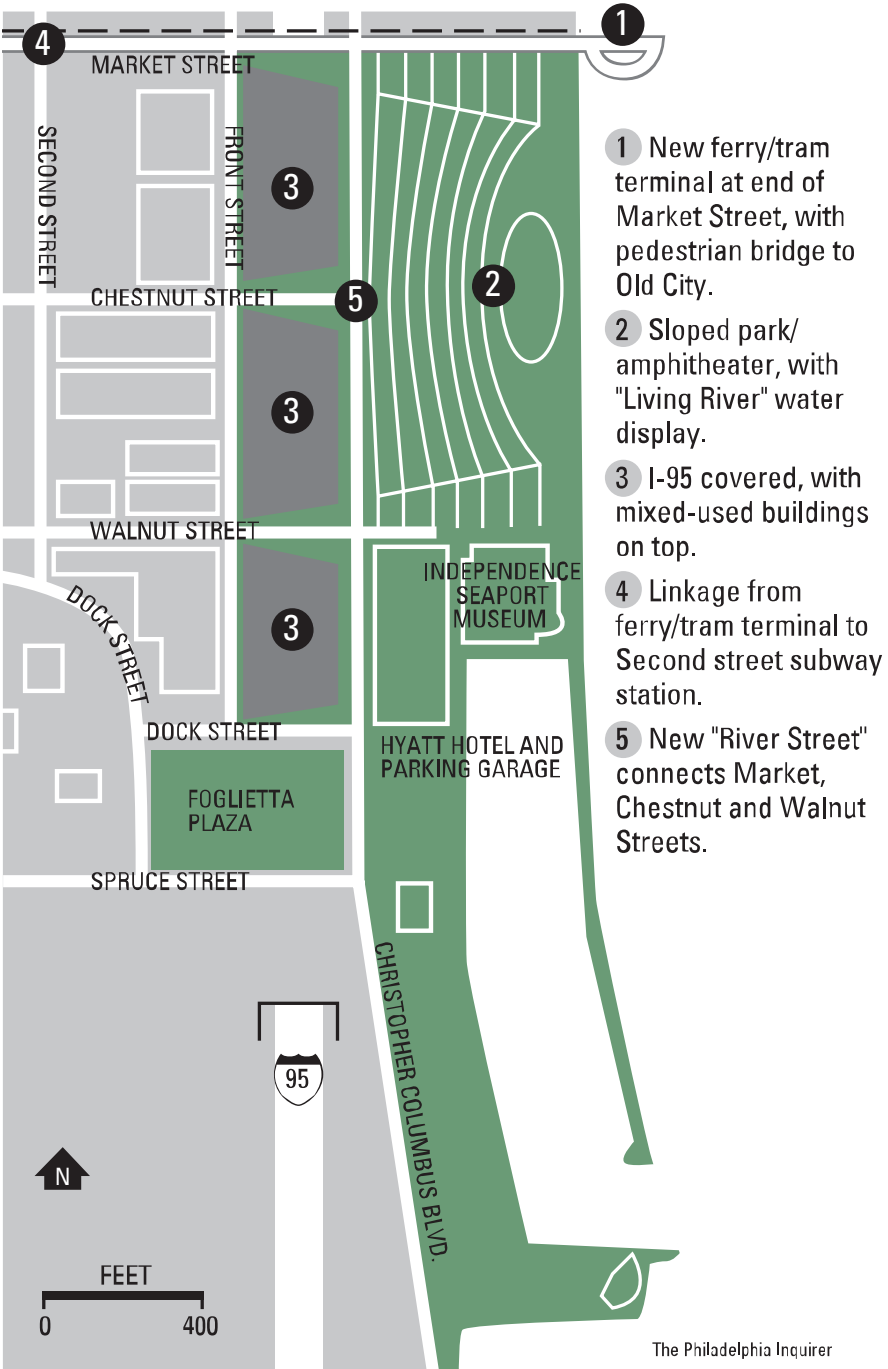
INDEPENDENCE HARBOR

The goal of the third alternative is to make Penn's Landing complement Center City's historic sites as well as Camden's waterfront attractions, and to create a regional tourist attraction embracing both sides of the river. This is the most ambitious of the three schemes—creating a large public gathering place lined with civic buildings built above the highway. Taking advantage of the natural slope of the site, the designers propose a grass amphitheater stretching from Market to Walnut Streets, decking I-95 in order to re-connect the site with the City. With the creation of a new urban space, Penn's Landing would maintain and augment its identity as the premier gathering place in the city for fireworks, concerts, and other major civic events.

Responding to the Delaware River Port Authority's campaign to promote the Camden, New Jersey, and Philadelphia waterfronts, this alternative dramatically realigns the Philadelphia terminus of the proposed (but currently on-hold) \$40-million aerial tram to the base of Market Street. Creating an urban oasis for tourists with children, the planners include interactive features such as a water display drawn from the river by wind energy that would feed clean and safe wading pools at the river's edge. Dramatic, grand, and civic, this plan would create a new public square in Philadelphia. While dependent

on public subsidies, it acknowledges that it is the public who would benefit from its realization. Like Chicago's recently completed Millennium Park, the design could dramatically impact property values in the surrounding neighborhoods and spark private development up and down the waterfront. Large public gathering places are vital to the life of a city; this plan proposes that Penn's Landing, due to its proximity to the historic district and the waterfront, is the appropriate place for a signature open space.

Figure 3: Independence Harbor



PUBLIC / PRIVATE TENSION

The three alternatives were published in the March 9, 2003 Sunday Review section of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and also appeared on the newspaper's website. Later that week, 350 people attended a final public forum at which the designs were presented and citizens worked in small groups to reflect on the extent to which the designs honored the principles and to select which scheme they would like to see built. While Independence Harbor was the slight favorite of the group that evening, a web-based poll taken over three weeks that spring found both Independence Harbor and New Neighborhood schemes to be the equally popular. One lesson to be drawn is that Philadelphians are yearning for a bold move at Penn's Landing—one that will reintegrate the site into the life of the city, with dense urban connections and vitality.

The three alternatives underline the tension among private development, public subsidies, and the public good. Throughout the forums, the participants questioned the use of significant public monies for private development. The issue of the relationship between public space and for-profit development is an important one. The open spaces of a shopping mall, for example, are not public in the same way Rittenhouse Square is. Recognizing and resolving the tension

between public and private space is fundamental to the future of Penn's Landing. Several important related questions remain. What exactly is the financial return on a public investment that is now 30 years old? How does the public benefit from private development on a site such as Penn's Landing? What role might Penn's Landing play in helping to reshape the entire waterfront, and in creating a new vision for the city? What is the appropriate role for the public in projects such as Penn's Landing? What role can design play in shaping a positive relationship between private development and the public interest?

CONCLUSIONS

The key to the three Penn's Landing alternatives is the decking, or burying, of I-95. The highway is the single largest impediment to successfully developing the site. However, while covering I-95 would be a dramatic and effective long-term solution for reconnecting the city with the waterfront, it would be extremely expensive. It appears unlikely that Philadelphia will have a Big Dig anytime soon. An alternative approach would be to turn Penn's Landing into a park, along the lines of the "Green Respite" option. This could be a practicable first phase, and would not preclude other development (over I-95) in the

future. A park would forge connections up and down the Philadelphia waterfront, as well as with the adjacent neighborhoods of Society Hill and Old City, and it would be economical. It would also be in line with current market demand, which is weak for commercial space, and probably not strong enough to support a full neighborhood. A park on Penn's Landing also would reposition the site as the centerpiece of a larger vision of Philadelphia as a river city.

We live in an era of intense public scrutiny; one wonders if grand projects such as Central Park in New York or the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia could be realized today. Involving the public in city planning carries risks. Non-professionals often wield power by saying “no” without understanding the larger context within which planning decisions are made. Civic participation in public design can hinder the work of professionals, diluting the strength of contemporary urban design—witness the current conflict between public expectations (raised through an international design competition) and private interests at the World Trade Center site in Lower Manhattan. Nevertheless, public forums encourage informed and constructive dialogue, and afford the public a way to knowledgeably inform policy makers and planners, without actually making policy or designing—an important distinction. It

is necessary to find a proper balance between public good and private interest in order to create high-quality urban environments.

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