What Becomes the Barnes? Exploring Cultural and Temporal Contexts When Recasting Existing Sites

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If one accepts that architecture is a built narrative - understood by its users to widely varying degrees - what then is the responsibility of an architect to convey the past when envisioning future uses for existing sites? Should instances of programmatic discontinuity, advances in technology, or cultural and political shifts be made evident? This paper explores the opportunities that arise as designers confront the history of a place during design for re-development. Four Philadelphia precedents elucidate factors to consider and illustrate use of a site's latent temporal context. These provide a framework for examining and leveraging the context of the Barnes Foundation, the complexity of which is compounded by its existence as both an institutional construct and a physical place. Recently, the foundation sought and won court approval to alter its charter and re-locate its collection of art - from its purpose-built environs designed by Paul Phillipe Cret within an arboretum, to a future facility on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Center City Philadelphia. How should the foundation approach re-use of the historic site following the imminent removal of its renowned collection of art and with it, a significant piece of its identity?

Past is Plural

It is easy to imagine that the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA) in Philadelphia is now much as it was in 1876 when its opening coincided with America's Centennial Exposition and the World's Fair. The colors are vibrant, the handsome stone unblemished, and the brass lanterns and column capitals gleam. (Fig. 1) Yet, the building denies unseen pasts. In preparation for Philadelphia's Bicentennial celebrations in 1976, the PAFA undertook extensive renovations including the wholesale removal of a drywall mask that hid much of the original interior. The drywall concealed architects Frank Furness and George Hewitt's romantic use of industrial products, their material selections, construction techniques, and symbolic details. The drywall mask, in turn, spoke to mid-century preferences for a neutral background for the display of art. Beyond changing approaches to exhibition design, the drywall illustrates a once prevailing disregard for Furness' heavy, robust, and often curious architecture. Regard for Furness' work has returned and principles of historic preservation, in its infancy when the drywall was mudded and painted, are largely accepted and codified.[1]

Fig. 1: Lobby and grand staircase at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts Historic Landmark Building. Photo: © Tom Crane

During 'restoration,' should, however, a portion of the mask have been retained? When is the appropriate time at which to freeze the history recorded in the architecture? The attempt to return the PAFA to its physical state in 1876 singles out the time of "completion" as the most significant, the most valuable. This position makes the events occurring between initial construction and the present irrelevant; reveals a bias for the visible context over equivalent influence of the invisible; and pre-supposes the design of future renovations. Conversely the retention of some drywall presents opposing attitudes, and a more authentic and complex portrayal of the past. The result is an opportunity for visitors to form independent opinions - toward relationships between art and architecture, the evolution of craft and materiality, or the relativity of preservation, to begin. Instead, the "unchanged" interior presents a single, fixed and sanitized history. The public is obliged to learn about PAFA's complex past and its reflection of change - of culture, time, and place – from books or through the spoken word, despite the potential to learn these lessons from the physical context.

Comprehension of context is generally agreed upon as integral to the design process. Less uniform are the definitions of context and, by inference, contextual design. This paper is concerned with the terms "context" and "contextual" as they pertain to conceiving new designs for existing buildings.[2] In this scenario, context is too frequently defined by what is present and visible, and thus contextual design is often misinterpreted as roughly approximating the present condition. Similarly, standard preservation selects and then approximates a state deemed most valuable. Designers thus respond to and are constrained by physical forms and narrow timelines. Alternatively, a rich heritage can evolve from simultaneous readings of context – physical, cultural, and temporal manifestations – and can invite future contributions. The work of Frank Furness and changes to the PAFA describe shifts that occurred with periods of re-use, only some of which are recorded by the built environment. Their presence and absence is valuable in considering how past and future architects embrace and leverage moments of discontinuity to "enrich and thicken the sense of time embedded within any particular context."[3]

Past as Prologue [4]

"New meanings are made out of old ones…the survival of a past monument is a work in progress in which every finding is a refounding: not obliterating the present in the past, but giving to the past a new and transformed meaning."[5]

Fig. 2: Lobby and staircase of the Samuel M.V. Hamilton Building, annexed by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Photo: © Tom Crane

The PAFA recently renovated an auto manufacturing plant and showroom (c. 1916) across the street from its original building for use as an annex. The renovation by Dagit Saylor Architects showcases a dense grid of columns once required to support loads associated with its use as the Gomery Schwartz Motor Car Co. These columns often float freely in new spaces including within the foyer gallery. Here, a new stair begins and ends off axes from but adjacent to existing columns. (Fig. 2) The experience and arrangement recall a unique axial relationship between the grand stair and a stout column in the lobby of the Furness and Hewitt building. (Fig. 1) Likewise, each stairs' stringers use and express technology to develop clear spans between landings. The Dagit Saylor

composition unites memories of the structure and the institution, making the past available within the new. Examples that embed architectural history in this way are frequently criticized as "internally coded." [6] However, that the pair of curiosities can be experienced by visitors, and not just seen, raises the probability of awareness, if not complete understanding. Such stimulus offers users the chance to engage with space intellectually as well as physically and, with these moments, the built environment participates in relating that history.

The stair in the annex is a simple, if slightly overt, precedent for intentional use of the past as a prologue to contemporary design. In this light, context is understood as a point of departure in creating architecture that is emblematic of present time, place and circumstance. For existing buildings and new users, then, conceiving the future requires recognition of the past and present context as they relate to both occupier and site. The ideal result is not fragmentary. Instead, architects use their synthetic skills to transform and intertwine the complexity in the creation of relevant, unified compositions. Critics posit that the emphasis placed on context constrains creativity and reduces possible outcomes. I find the reverse to be true. The challenge is to negotiate cohesive proposals from limitless influences. The process asserts that architecture can be demonstrative without being derivative – it can make instances of programmatic discontinuity, technological advances, and cultural shifts evident without mimicking the context to which it is responding. Its form, expression, experience, or meaning, and the technologies, materials or methods that ultimately produce it, remain open to interpretation.

Entering the Past

Can a designer realistically "enter the spirit of someone else's design work" to the degree necessary for further meaningful contribution?[7] Another Philadelphia institution, the Eastern State Penitentiary National Historic Landmark (c. 1830) re-asks this question each year through a program in which artists install temporary works that illuminate either an experience of the historic setting or of incarceration in general. One such installation (designed by myself and a colleague), "Point-Cointerpoint: A Conversation with Haviland," initiates a dialogue with the penitentiary's architect, John Haviland, about Eastern State's role in establishing an architectural type – the radial prison. One of the largest and most technologically advanced buildings of its day, Eastern State "linked solitude with moral and vocational instruction, exemplified the Pennsylvania System of penology, and became a model for over 300 prisons worldwide."[8] Similar to Jeremy Bentham's panopticon, the guard occupies a position that permits unimpeded views and thus exercises control along the radiating lines of the prison's plan. Conversely, in a cell the view is limited in every direction, with the exception of a single oculus that directs the prisoner's gaze toward God if it is to be free at all. Every sentence was one of solitary confinement.

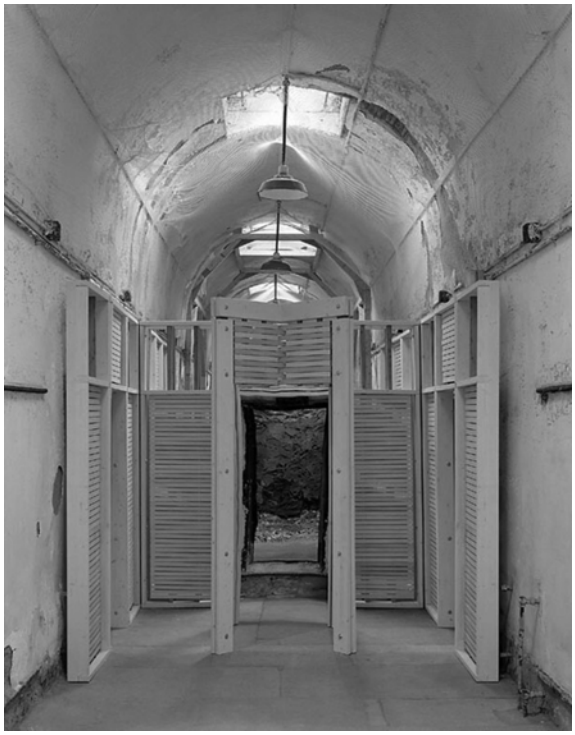

Fig. 3: Point|Counterpoint, installed in Cell Block 10, Eastern State Penitentiary. The guard's view is "captured" by a reflection of a prisoner's cell. Photo: © Frank Iaquinta/Halkin Photography

Our installation inverted these relationships. (Fig. 3) Through an intervention of screens, mirrors, and thresholds the view of the guard was captured and contained within a cell while the prisoners' views were extended and linked. Dependent upon the cell, one's view was directed either down the corridor that

leads to either the central rotunda or outside, or into another cell and beyond to an implied "horizon" brought in through an oculus. While the project proposed an alternate reading, the seeds for questioning Haviland's original thesis were found within the logic of the prison itself, its strict, relentless geometries and axes. Interpretation of context is no doubt subjective. Thus, meaningful discourse requires that cultures use shared language. In architecture that includes a language of physical form, used to understand the past and construct the present. An investigation of context that is limited to formal analysis however is incomplete without consideration of cultural and temporal factors. Haviland's forms affirm the then contemporary prevailing Quaker view that solitary reflection would lead a prisoner to seek his "inner light" and make him penitent. In practice, the extreme isolation and sensory deprivation often led to madness.

The installation held that architecture is a humanistic discourse that can be carried on by various practitioners over time. While this usually occurs indirectly and by inference, the interjection of a counterpoint to Haviland's scheme demonstrated a rare and brief opportunity to converse directly.[9] Other installations and artists offer alternative conceptions of Eastern State's physical, spatial, cultural, and temporal contexts. Many linger purposefully between the context of the prison as it is now and as it once was, focusing on particular periods and events between which the new creations oscillate. Experience of the projects demonstrates that, at least on some level, it is possible to enter into another's work as both creator and participant. These moments can transform our understanding of the built environment and its context.

Same As It Ever Was

It would be wrong and a simplification to assume that the Barnes Foundation today is the same as it ever was, despite extensive efforts by many to maintain the illusion. The site's development is the result of numerous influences, many of which occurred prior to existence of the foundation. Dr. Barnes controlled its shape from 1923 until his death in 1951. He intended to dictate its shape indefinitely by crafting a legal charter for the foundation that stipulated how it would operate and occupy the site after his death. A site, however, is always subject to change and the Barnes is no exception. How then should its impending changes be addressed? And, what opportunities arise when designers confront the history of the place when re-developing a site for a new use?

The preceding examples offer several lessons to consider when answering this question. First, the influence of context beyond that which is physically and immediately present must be addressed. The site existed before the institution, the perception of which has itself evolved, and will continue to do so. Second, a genuine proposal will incorporate multiple histories of both place and people. Third, anything other than a contemporary response would obfuscate the past and deny the influence of present technology and society. Imitation, concealment, and superfluous demolition of any past are generally discouraged. And lastly, a successful proposal will address tangible and intangible context at a variety of scales.

The present setting for the Barnes Foundation is the Delaware Valley, on land first inhabited by the Leni Lenape, a nomadic Native American tribe. Formal settlement occurred in 1682 with William Penn's sale of a tract of land to Quakers and Mennonites seeking religious freedom. They logged the dense forest and developed farms. The railroad arrived in the 1830's, connecting the city of Philadelphia with the countryside and introducing another wave of settlers - wealthy railroad barons who constructed enormous estates. It is the rail to which the Main Line owes its name but the mansions provide its notoriety. Prosperous commuters followed, taking up residence along the Main Line to insulate themselves from problems associated with the city's industrialization – pollution, poverty, and crime – a trend which continues to some degree today.[10] Dr. and Mrs. Barnes were part of this migration. Their decision to settle in Merion, a Main Line suburb is both natural and ironic and sets up, to a degree, the present conflicts and pending changes that face the foundation.

Conceiving the Barnes

"In the midst of a twelve-acre park in Merion, a suburb of Philadelphia remote from the beaten

path of art museums and galleries, stands a French Renaissance palace of bluff limestone, which houses the finest collection of modern paintings in the world with the one possible exception of a museum in Moscow…

The name of this paradise of art is the Barnes Foundation and presiding over it is the gentleman who collected and owns the pictures – Dr. Albert C. Barnes."[11]

Dr. Barnes was a poor child of the urban conditions from which other Main Liners sought to escape. A well-educated and self-made man, he co-developed a drug called Argyrol and made his fortune off its sale. The foundation he established grew out of an early experiment begun in his factory. Believing that access to education is paramount to a democracy, he allotted two hours of each work day to teach his workers lessons in philosophy and aesthetics. He hung the artwork he collected in the factory and collaborated with John Dewey on teaching methods. In 1925, Barnes established a foundation and by 1929 he sold his business to devote his time exclusively to the educational experiment. For the site of his continued experiment he chose a site in Merion on which Captain Joseph Langley had begun an arboretum. Barnes contracted French architect Paul Phillipe Cret to construct an art gallery, residence and service building, where Langley's house once stood. (FIG. 4) The gallery was not to be viewed as a museum but rather as a school.

"The establishment of the art gallery is an experiment to determine how much practical good to the public of all classes and stations of life, may be accomplished by means of the plans and principles learned by [Dr Barnes] from a life-long study of the science of psychology as applied to education and aesthetics."[12]

Inseparable from the educational experiment, Dr. Barnes developed the "ensemble," a technique for displaying his collection. Within each ensemble, he composed seemingly disparate works of art and craft into arrangements anchored compositionally and conceptually by significant paintings. At the time, the paintings he acquired – including works by Van Gogh, Cezanne, and Renoir - were relatively obscure. Today, the ensembles are recognized throughout the world for their eclecticism and for their inclusion of valuable works of art. The eclecticism is attributed in part to the method's disregard for chronology, genre, and subject matter, to begin. Furthermore, the break from tradition was intended to prompt consideration of the underlying elements of art and to demonstrate continuity between new and old, fine and primitive art. The setting for the collection and foundation further contributes to the ensembles. The surrounding arboretum, with its own school of horticulture, prompts visitors to relate art and nature, and to consider such relationships when viewing the paintings. The architecture is also understood as an extension of the collection for its incorporation of fine art through construction details – stone bas relief, custom tilework, and ornamental metalwork to name a few – that reflect the contents within. Lastly, specific works within the collection were once commissioned and acquired to fit literally with the physical architecture. Thus art, architecture and landscape complete one another.

Fig. 4: Approach to the Barnes Foundation's Main Gallery and Arboretum from Latch's Lane. Photo by Tom Crane Photography Inc., © 1998 The Barnes Foundation

Dr. Barnes solidified this arrangement in the foundation's charter by prescribing that ensembles and gallery would be complete upon his death – never to be moved, loaned, or altered. The foundation and court have historically given disproportionate weight to this clause, permitting other forbidden changes while preserving this one. Visible changes include: the update of environmental controls, access for the disabled, egress exits and signage, a parking lot and bus shelter, a museum shop and a new greenhouse, to

begin. Unseen changes include the charging of admission. In spite of and because of the goal to preserve the foundation and its value, as stipulated by Dr. Barnes, the institution is experiencing severe economic difficulties. To cope with financial shortfalls, conflicts with zoning in the predominately residential neighborhood, and to reach more of the public it was intended to serve, the foundation was granted the right to alter its charter and move the collection to a new site and facility on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Center City Philadelphia. What then becomes of the physical place that was long symbolic of the foundation and, more importantly, integral to its collection and emblematic of the ideals established by Dr. Barnes?

Becoming the Barnes

After the collection is moved, and with it the classes in art appreciation, the Barnes Foundation anticipates re-use of its site in Merion for administrative and research activities. These will likely require open and private offices, conference rooms, a small library and conservation laboratory, archival storage, and service spaces. But beyond accommodation of uses and users, what additional obligations to present the site's context are incumbent upon designers? The purpose of this paper is to examine temporal context so that it can inform a meaningful design for re-use of the Barnes Foundation's significant setting. A design proposal is not within the scope of this paper. However, several conceptual approaches of differing scales are being considered, two of which are introduced and foreshadow work to follow. The Barnes Foundation is best understood through its carefully composed ensembles and in this I include the setting in Merion. Thus all proposals for re-use have an obligation to include a public component in the otherwise introspective program for administrative and research activities.

The first approach cultivates continuity in the site's settlement and city|country dialectic. The resultant cultural and physical geography reveals complexities within the location, patron, foundation, and mission. Penn's Plan for Philadelphia presaged such conflicts, including the Barnes' past and imminent situations, spanning between city and countryside (now suburb).[13] The future design will maintain, enhance and reveal these conflicts and connections. The Barnes Collection at the Parkway introduces city dwellers and tourists to the foundation. Their interest piqued, some will carry on, enlarging their experience in Merion. Here, new architectural interventions and programs will help visitors to the site to complete the ensembles by interpreting the context. Lastly settlement is explored through present-day technology and its indifference to physical boundaries, recalling the nomadic Leni Lenape and pushing the exploration of spatial context into the virtual realm. If it was once radical to conceive of a factory as a school and its workers as deserving students, who is overlooked today, where can they be reached, and how will they learn lessons embedded in the Barnes Foundation, its collection, and its mission?

A second approach assumes continuity of the ensemble technique to order a composition that connects time, culture, and site by applying principles first recorded in Dr. Barnes' book *The Art in Painting*. Context is communicated experientially and aesthetically as if a commissioned piece. The contemporary intervention will energize and re-contextualize tangible holdings – the setting as well as pieces rescued from storage. Furthermore, it will communicate intangibles, unwinding a story - of forests, farmland, a factory, a home, a school, a museum, an office - as settled - by natives, the oppressed, tycoons, commuters, a family, teachers and students, tourists, administrators and researchers. It will contrast settings and inhabitants and reflect their motivations and effects. It will address social issues, including race, class, education and opportunity, and vacillate between tradition and innovation in structure, media, and content. Useful necessities – partitions, floor and window coverings, furnishings, and lighting – are treated as artful and integral to the installation, heeding the technique's disregard for chronology, genre, media and subject matter. The design of an administrative and research center will distill and communicate lessons once held by the ensembles that, in theory then, will never depart, despite removal of the collection. Such a result will testify to the sustained relevance of Dr. Barnes mission in contemporary form.

Reflecting on Responsibility

"As an architect, you inevitably work with those who have power because they have access to capital, and it takes capital to build buildings. But even if your client is the one with the capital and the power, buildings have multiple constituencies. The people who use a building are one constituency, and passers-by are another. And it is your responsibility to engage them too, or at least not abuse them."[14]

At 22nd and Walnut Streets in Philadelphia, two murals elegantly present multiple instances of culture and time and offer the passer-by a complex understanding of context. The Sun Oil Company commissioned an architect, Susan Maxman Partners, and an artist, Michael Webb, to design murals for the solid brick walls of two existing row houses. The party walls, each fifty feet from the corner, describe a gap in the urban fabric that could only have been created by demolition. Coincident with renovation of a gas station on the site, Sun Oil asked the designers to depict its neighborhood, Rittenhouse Square, which surrounds one of Penn's original four green spaces. The painted walls suggest flat facades of early warehouses and row houses typical of the neighborhood in the 19th and early 20th centuries. "Reflected" within their trompe l'oeil windows is St. James Episcopal Church. The church, now demolished, was designed by Fraser, Furness, and Hewitt, and "occupied the site in 1870 and stimulated construction of the elaborate townhouses nearby."[15] Many of the townhouses remain today.

The ability to share memories of public spaces contributes greatly to civic identity. A built environment that communicates its diverse and changing uses supplements these memories, providing a physical record to compliment oral and written traditions. The urgent need to advance a critical position toward re-use is particularly poignant in light of pending changes to the Barnes Foundation. Yet, less monumental but equally significant places present similar issues. Along Chestnut and Walnut Streets, commercial and public life

Fig. 5: The "shadow" cast by St. James Episcopal Church on the end wall of a Philadelphia row house. Photo: © Tom Crane

and the historic built environment undergo constant change, as is expected. Designs for re-use, however, largely overlook the temporal context embedded in facades, lobbies, interiors and signage, when envisioning plans for re-occupation. This oversight should not simply be dismissed as the ephemeral nature of retail culture. Retail culture itself has a context, and its meaning persists in spaces that remain and those which are yet to come.[16]

Architects are well trained in their responsibility to meet a client's aspirations, budget, and schedule and in the role of protecting the public's health, safety, and welfare. With each new commission, architects are increasingly accountable for the built environment's use of natural resources. And countless restorations confirm that architects are conscientious about preserving the past. Instances of change, however, are habitually overlooked or, even more unfortunate, removed from sites when judged inconsistent with the particular past chosen for representation. Thus, when planning for re-use, the context of architectural "artifacts" is disproportionately represented by that which is visible or present. This paper contends that architects have an additional, less-examined responsibility to investigate and make known a wider range of cultural and temporal contexts when re-casting existing sites.

Endnotes

[1] Steven Conn, in Metropolitan Philadelphia: Living with the Presence of the Past (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), offers a broad survey of the history of Philadelphia and how it influences contemporary conditions. He notes that architect Frank Furness, with collaborators, completed over 400 buildings in his lifetime, however most were neglected and subsequently demolished, including a church cleared to create the lawn of Independence Mall.

[2] Sandy Isenstadt, "Contested Contexts," in Carol J. Burns and Andrea Kahn, eds., Site Matters (New York: Routledge, 2005), pp 157-183. The aforementioned article offers a brief history of and explanation for the emergence of contextualism as a design theory.

[3] ibid, p. 171.

[4] The title of this section takes its name from the book, The Past as Prologue: the importance of history to the military profession, (Cambridge: New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Williamson Murray, Richard Hart Sinnreich, eds., and shares their cross-disciplinary belief in the relevance of history to the present.

[5] Sarah Beckwith, "Preserving, Conserving, Deserving the Past: A meditation on ruin as relic in postwar Britain in five fragments," in Clare A. Lees and Gillian R. Overing, eds., A Place to Believe In: locating medieval landscapes (University Park, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2006), p 210.

[6] See Isenstadt, "Contested Contexts," pp 165 – 166 for a brief critique on the necessity of internal knowledge to access the meaning of a work of architecture.

[7] Isenstadt, "Contested Contexts," p. 170 in referring to architecture's "ethics of occasion" in lieu of a commitment to principles, of which Michael Sorkin wrote in his Exquisite Corpse.

[8] Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission marker posted outside of Eastern State Penitentiary, 1996.

[9] For further reading on this architectural installation, see Tricia Stuth and Ted Shelton, "Point – Counterpoint: A Conversation with Haviland," Journal of Architectural Education 59 (2006): pp. 36-40. For further information on Eastern State Penitentiary and its Annual Artists Program, see www.easternstate.org.

[10] General information on the Main Line and the Township of Merion relies upon materials of the Lower Merion Historical Society and their digital archive at http://www.lowermerionhistory.org. These include: Dick Jones, ed., The First 300: The Amazing and Rich History of Lower Merion (Bala Cynwyd, Pennsylvania: Lower Merion Historical Society and distributed by Collingdale, Pennsylvania: Diane Publishing Co., 2000); and Phyllis Maier, "Rich Men and Their Castles," Montgomery County: The Second Hundred Years, (Montgomery County Federation of Historical Societies, 1983).

[11] The quotation was originally published in the September 22, 1928 issue of the New Yorker by writer A.H. Shaw, but was re-published by John Anderson, *Art Held Hostage* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2003), p. 1.

[12] Excerpt from the By-laws of the Barnes Foundation, Article IX, Section 32.

[13] The Barnes Foundation expansion site in Philadelphia is slated to be adjacent to Logan Circle, one of four of Penn's original green spaces that ring the central square. Penn's Plan for Philadelphia incorporates and foreshadows many land-use issues that confront today's urban centers and their surrounding landscapes. For further reading on William Penn and the Planning of Philadelphia, see John Reps, The Making of Urban America: A History of City Planning in the United States (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp 157 – 174.

[14] Deborah Berke, quoted in an interview by Peter Halley, Index Magazine, September 1997, http://www.dberke.com/about/index-97-09.htm.

[15] The general project scope and description draw upon a 1999 awards summary generated by the Society of Environmental Graphic Designers, http://www.segd.org/awards/1999.html.

[16] The current effect of retailers on historic architecture in Philadelphia, particularly along Walnut and Chestnut Streets, is detailed by Inga Saffron, "Changing Skyline: City's grand spaces are going, going…," Philadelphia Inquirer, posted July 28, 2006 on http://www.philly.com/mld/inquirer/living/home/design/15140184.htm.