

THE VALUE OF DESIGN IN MAINTAINING REGIONAL MARKETPLACE POSITION



DOWNTOWN MARKETING & DEVELOPMENT

By Barry Cassidy

One of the things I look for when strategically repositioning a municipal entity is

how a place looks. I have always been a fan of historic resources and how they impact the sense of place in a town.

Infill construction is an important part of the design effort. When you are in the city, there is a lot of color in the apartment buildings, which is done to turn the nature of the space. I am not big on those kinds of buildings. I like the infill to look like it belongs.

A prime example of looking like it has been there all along is the development along both sides of the Great American

Pub in Phoenixville. One vacant lot enhancement extends building coverage to an adjacent lot. The other new building is the infill Iron Hill building. They look like they have been there for much longer than they have been.

If your town does not have consistency of design, there is a potential for people to have a bad interpretation of the space. For example, open lots, highway signage, and poor architectural mix can make people think less of the space.

Recently my friend Isaiah Zagar's mural in Old City Philadelphia was saved and unsaved in less than a year. There were conflicting concerns among the arts community in dealing with the mural on the former Painted Bride Building.

In 1991 I arrived in Philadelphia to take control of the New Kensington Community Development Corporation. The Painted

Bride's director reached out to me because he was an acquaintance from my time on the Pennsylvania Local Arts Network Board. He gave me the nickel tour and welcomed me to town. The work was underway to create the "Skin of the Bride." I was not overwhelmed with the look it created at first blush, but I became a fan as the work progressed.

Little did I know that the creator of the mural and I would become good friends when I took over the South Street Headhouse job. Although now, and I know only what I read in the newspaper, the venerable mural at the former Painted Bride is once again slated for demolition. I also became aware that the Lantern Theater had tried to purchase the building to keep it as an arts center.

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Isaiah Zagar's mural at The Painted Bride in Old City Philadelphia.

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So why is the mural so important, and why should the work's protection be perpetuated and this will never happen again?

For the record, Mr. Zagar is a character. Just the fact that during my Day of the Dead parade, he rode a wooden steed down the center of South Street in only a speedo in November is enough for me. And pushing me over the edge in wanting to preserve this mural is the time he included a woman's bare breast

on the mural where the Buster Brown Shoe Store, located on the 400 block of South Street next to Phila-Deli, which enraged an otherwise docile shoe store owner to scream in my face. And along with the welcoming tour of the Painted Bride venue, these things are experiences I will never forget and will cherish.

If anything, there should be a façadomy which is the architectural and construction practice where the facade of

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a building is designed or constructed separately from the rest of a building, or when only the facade of a building is preserved with new buildings erected behind or around it. This action would solve whatever issue arises and would be a selling point for retail behind the façade to become part of the woodwork. That woodwork is the spirit, traditions, and feel of Old City Philadelphia.

By definition of the name of the area "Old City," there should be no question

you keep the mural. Use and structure can accommodate the mural. It can ... there is no debate. What there is, I am afraid, is a bit of tit-for-tat with the neighborhood groups who sometimes get carried away a little bit in their desire to remain the same.

I say this with the experience of trying to cut down a dead tree once in Society Hill and having the association people freak out at me because I was cutting down all the trees. There was also the time I tried to get a crumbling building taken down, much to the chagrin of the Bella Vista Association. I had a lot of success working with those organizations on keeping a lid on South Street, but there were limits to their tolerance.

I will not point any fingers and let Emily Smith from Magic Gardens do that. It seems like, and in this case, it is a "be careful what you ask for, as you might get it." Yeah, you fight the density and lose the cultural distinction that makes you "Philadelphia" or, for that matter, "Old City Philadelphia."

Plus, I don't like them messing around with my friend's legacy. These are treasured works of art that define the area, the space and the city.

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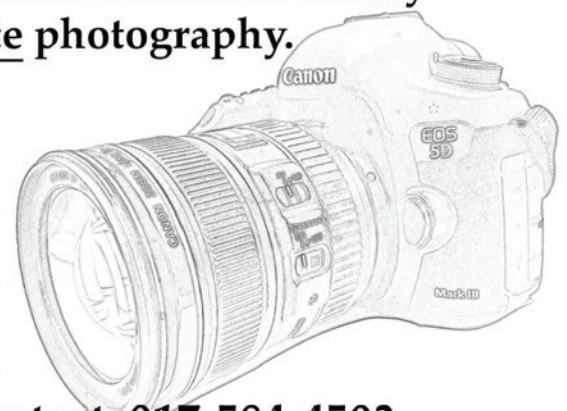
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