

Changing Skyline: Urban design groups mark 10 years of effecting change in the city
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The year 2002 was not a good one for anyone who cared about Philadelphia's two languishing waterfronts, its fraying downtown or self-destructive accommodation of the automobile. Pay-to-play, the practice of giving political donations in exchange for government contracts, was reaching a crescendo as Mayor John Street revved up his reelection campaign, and the influence manifested itself in things that got built - or didn't.

Enormous parking garages were proposed for Penn's Landing and Rittenhouse Square. Money that had been appropriated to create the Schuylkill Banks trail sat unused, even as \$1 million was squandered on pink planters for LOVE Park. Meanwhile, the federal government's forced closure of Chestnut Street, in front of Independence Hall, suggested that the city's essential form - its street grid - was no longer valued.

But as proof that good ideas can bubble up from the mire of bad times, 2002 was also the year that two important urban design groups came into being, the Design Advocacy Group and PennPraxis.

As they quietly celebrate their tenth anniversaries, it's hard to imagine what Philadelphia would be like today without them. Since they began advocating for more thoughtful development, they have dramatically changed the culture in the city. Ideas that were dismissed a decade ago as looney and fringe - like the notion that stand-alone garages deaden Center City's streets - now get a serious hearing, even if city officials don't always find the resolve to put them into practice.

The two groups have different birth narratives, though with a bit of overlap. The Design Advocacy Group, known as DAG, grew out of the ashes of the bankrupt Foundation for Architecture. Six members - including architect Alan Greenberger, now a deputy mayor - began meeting regularly to discuss the merits of high-profile projects, and

expanded into a group of hundreds. Greenberger's presence in the top echelons of City Hall speaks to the group's influence.

PennPraxis was the brainchild of Gary Hack, the former dean of the University of Pennsylvania's design school. He intended it as a platform for faculty "to do real-world projects," says director Harris Steinberg, who was also among DAG's founders. The first of those projects were the forums that led to a new, more comprehensive master plan for the Delaware waterfront.

But both were a clear response to the city's marginalization of urban planning, which had begun under Mayor Ed Rendell and continued into the Street administration, says Shawn McCaney, who works at the William Penn Foundation, overseeing grants for projects in the city. He can still remember the dismay that planners and architects felt back then about the city's let's-make-a-deal approach to development.

"The city was suffering from a desperation economy, and just moving from transaction to transaction. You couldn't ask developers to do anything" for the public good, he explains. "There was a point when people said, 'We don't have to take everything that comes down the pike.' "

As DAG and PennPraxis began pushing back against the deal-making, the foundation would become a major supporter by funding studies to support their progressive agendas. DAG was, and still is, mostly an intellectual salon, where ideas are debated. But PennPraxis was intent on fashioning real plans that it could offer as alternatives.

PennPraxis also wanted to give the public, and not just developers, a say in shaping the city's planning decisions. Successive administrations had been putting Penn's Landing up for sale without consulting city residents about how that city-owned space should be used. Every development there flopped.

When PennPraxis decided to devise its own plan, hundreds showed up at the first meeting. Through the discussion, it became clear that the city had made a huge strategic mistake in focusing on the Penn's Landing site, and not the whole central Delaware. PennPraxis' "vision plan," funded by the William Penn Foundation, articulated a broader way of thinking about the waterfront. The vision is now official city policy.

The value of public participation in such discussions seems so elemental that it's hard to believe that residents were once actively excluded. As Steinberg recalls, those initial days in 2002 felt "almost like an Iron Curtain moment," with DAG, PennPraxis, and William Penn all tearing down the established order.

Measuring influence can be tricky. Looking at DAG's list of accomplishments, though, gives a sense of how much its talking salon has shifted public attitudes in favor of more civic-minded planning and design.

Because DAG is a consensus organization, it has taken a hard stand against a project only once, when it opposed the Jefferson Hospital garage on Chestnut Street. It lost. In 2003, it decided instead to sponsor candidate forums as a way to wield its influence. The events forced planning onto the election-year agenda and elevated its importance. When Michael Nutter ran for mayor in 2007, DAG members helped write his policy papers on planning issues. After his election, Mayor Nutter appointed several "DAGsters" to city volunteer boards, like the Planning Commission.

After the staff director's job opened up, Nutter tapped Greenberger for the position, and elevated him to deputy mayor - a rare example of an architect achieving a position of government influence. Under Greenberger, the city has enacted virtually the entire DAG agenda, completing an overhaul of its zoning code, a new comprehensive plan for the city and, of course, a waterfront master plan.

That doesn't mean the Nutter administration is always faithful to the DAG ideas it has embraced. David Brownlee, an original DAG member and Penn professor, says "there has been a lot of disappointment about what the Planning Commission has done on the waterfront. I'm worried about the integrity of the vision."

Nutter's slip-sliding is a warning that the battles over basic urban design values are far from over. A group called the Developers Workshop, funded by zoning lawyers and real estate interests, had succeeded in undoing some key policies. There's no guarantee, either, that Nutter's successor will embrace even a fraction of DAG's agenda. DAG, which adheres to Quaker-style consensus, still has trouble taking a group position on controversial projects.

Whatever the group's weaknesses, it will have a lot to celebrate at its birthday party Oct. 14, to be held at the Center for Architecture on Arch Street. These days, when members complain about Nutter's planning mistakes, pay-to-play isn't even on the list.