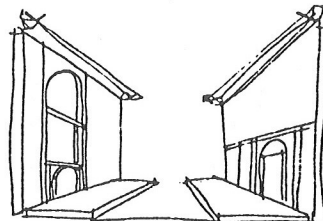
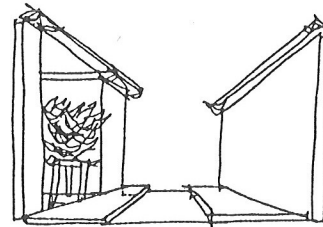


Respect for the Urban Fabric

Guidelines and regulations must be adopted to ensure that new buildings respect the continuity of existing buildings. Street walls should be preserved. Open spaces should be designed, not merely result from leftover land. When appropriate, retail uses should be at the ground level. Building entrances should be legible and well defined.



A Third Philadelphia Plan: The Theoretical Base

By Robert L. Geddes, FAIA



palimpsest *n.* a written document, typically on vellum or parchment, that has been written upon several times, often with remnants of earlier . . . writing still visible, remnants of this kind being a major source for the recovery of lost literary works of classical antiquity [from Greek *palimpsestos*, rubbed again]—*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 1981

Historians, critics, planners, and architects often have chosen metaphors to understand cities. There have been religious, social, organic, mechanical, and compositional analogies. Colin Rowe sees the city as a collage, while Christopher Alexander insists that the city is not a tree.

A particularly useful image is that of a palimpsest. Consider a city as a writing surface, a tablet on which various texts have been written over the centuries. Earlier words and lines have been erased, but their vestiges remain, shaping the present document. Additions either enrich the past or try to obliterate it.

The palimpsest analogy applies to individual buildings within a city, to streets and neighborhoods, and to the city as a whole. In Oxford, England, for example, in 1637, a new porch was grafted onto the side of a medieval church. The baroque style of the porch—John Summerson calls it Anglo-Flemish mannerism—polemically contrasted with the medieval, but its spatial position was determined by the original structure. Today's emphasis on rehabilitating old buildings has yielded many such architectural palimpsests, buildings in which the past is not so much preserved as amended to serve contemporary life. Past and present join together to create a new whole. The contemporary incarnation is enriched by its association with history, while the old structure is given renewed life and purpose.

But not all palimpsests can be read coherently. An old, altered, and much-erased document can be a muddle. Lining the main streets of most American cities are fine old brick and stone, turn-

of-the-century commercial buildings, their facades hidden behind glass and metal masks, inappropriate storefronts tacked on to make the structures look modern. The result is often incoherent, and better possibilities are lost.

On a larger scale, the palimpsest analogy offers a way to judge a city's plans for development with respect to its history. One city that attempted to obliterate the past was Boston, in the 1950s. Downtown Boston, essentially a medieval city, had grown organically. As the city expanded, streets and common spaces fit themselves into the topography of the peninsula with its hills and watery inlets. The North End, one of Boston's oldest neighborhoods, had twisting, narrow streets and dense housing. When postwar urban renewal sought to clear the clutter away, what had been a vital neighborhood became a dead zone. Attempts to erase the past failed; images of the old North End haunted the new.

Fortunately, the cultural traditions and historic fabric of the North End were strong enough that, after the clearance was halted, the area's form and vitality began to reassert itself. Today the North End is again one of the vibrant areas of downtown.

Any city plan that tries to ignore the past, rather than reinforce and build upon earlier layers of the palimpsest, is in danger of creating an incoherent whole. Most urban districts, left to their own devices, resist large-scale erasure. Neighborhoods will intuitively stick to the original text, making modifications that build upon the urban structure and fabric.

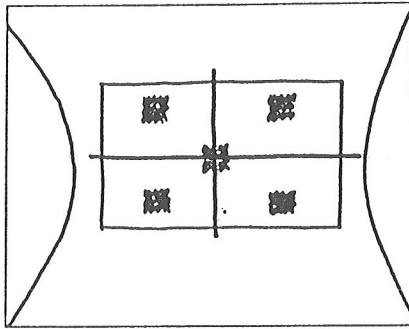
Even cities with seemingly unpredictable and disorderly patterns of growth can be understood more clearly when viewed as palimpsests. Dallas, an archetypal boomtown, has actually been shaped by overlaid sets of urban designs. In 1846 John Neely Bryan planned a 580-acre land grant in a gridiron pattern with blocks 200 feet square. As it grew, the Bryan tract met other plots of land, laid out at slightly different angles. The grid systems merged, forming an odd but picturesque mosaic pattern that still exists in downtown Dallas.

This was overlaid in 1910 by a comprehensive city plan that attempted to give form to the city's rampant growth. The plan, by George Kessler, considered the city's weaknesses and strengths, amending the former (for example, recommending levees be built

Mr. Geddes, a design principal of Geddes Brecher Qualls Cunningham and Princeton's Kenan professor of architecture, was urban design consultant for the third Philadelphia plan. He was aided in preparing this article by Robert Brown and Ann de Forest.

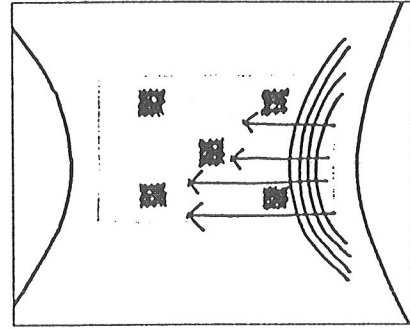
The Grid

William Penn's practical plan for a "greene countrie towne."



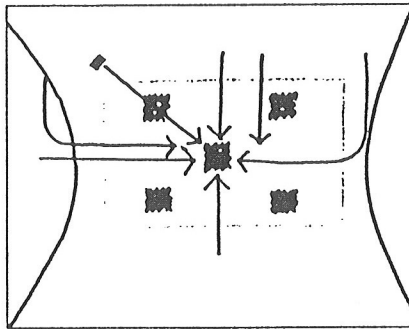
Early Settlement

With an early economy based on trade and the port, the city grew outward from the Delaware river-front.



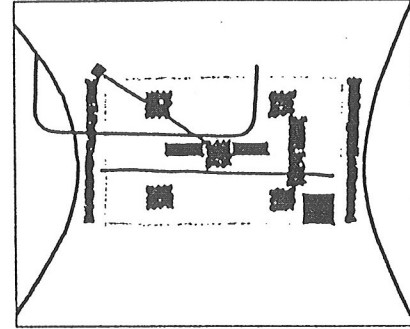
Reinforcing the Center

By the late 19th century, development began to concentrate near Center Square and was reinforced by subway lines intersecting at City Hall. The Parkway, the one fundamental departure from Penn's plan, extended Fairmount Park to the center of the grid.



The 1963 Plan for Center City Philadelphia

The 1963 plan focused on improving access to Center City and on the redevelopment of downtown areas including Market Street East and Society Hill, and the "great marginal elements"—the Delaware and Schuylkill riverfronts.



Text and illustrations above and on the following page were reproduced directly from the plan document.

on the flood-prone Trinity River) and reinforcing the latter (adding plazas to mark the city's key entry points). While the Kessler plan did not organize all the growth that followed, its structural order, like that of the Bryan plan, still informs the dynamic city.

Center City Philadelphia, with a clear spatial structure that dates back to the city's beginnings, is a positive example of an urban palimpsest. In Philadelphia, growth and change have tended to acknowledge and reinforce the past. Whereas in Dallas one may have to consciously search for the lines of history, in Philadelphia one can easily peel back the layers of the palimpsest to discover the original city. This is more than just an interesting historical exercise. The structure of the past provides guidance for future growth.

Last May, the City of Philadelphia released the new plan for Center City, the third in its 300-year history. The goal is to stimulate growth without sacrificing the qualities of livability that give Philadelphia its special character. The new plan sets out to define and reinforce Philadelphia's character by considering both its structure—grid pattern, cross axes, and open spaces established by the 1683 William Penn plan—and its fabric—the intricate texture of buildings, streets and sidewalks, squares and plazas.

To extend Center City's existing structure, the new plan proposes to reinforce the commercial core along the historic cross axes while protecting the residential neighborhoods. To establish a buffer zone between the commercial core and residential areas, the plan proposes a transition corridor, promoting mixed-use development while preserving the streets' pedestrian scale. Improving the links between the various activity centers is a key strategy. Moreover, the plan identifies five major development districts within Center City, each with its own plan appropriate to its character, within the overall structure of the urban palimpsest.

The Center City plan seeks to ensure that new development preserves the continuity of Philadelphia's urban fabric. While the urban structure establishes the framework for the city and its growth, the city's fabric—the sidewalks, the tree-lined streets,

the parks and plazas, the scale of buildings and their entrances—embraces the details of everyday life in the city. A large part of the plan focuses on those diverse details, identifying the particular features that distinguish, say, Society Hill, with its Georgian brick row houses, from Old City, with its cast-iron factory buildings and mixture of commercial and residential life.

Mindful of the city's existing structure and fabric, the plan designates certain areas for growth and others that should be carefully preserved. For example, the plan stipulates exactly the "high spine" zone where tall buildings should be built and other zones where their construction would be inappropriate to the city's scale and skyline. Center City's two "frontiers," along the Delaware River on the east and over the rail yards along the Schuylkill River on the west, have been identified as underdeveloped areas that, when their potential is reached, will not only contribute to Philadelphia's vitality as an urban center but also eliminate development pressure on the areas of Center City where the intimate scale and residential character should be preserved.

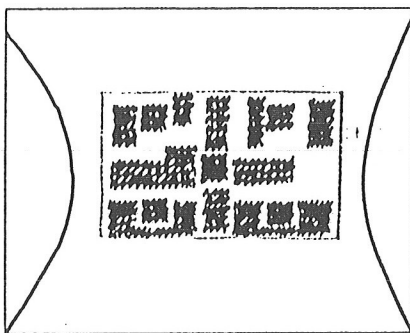
Because great streets make great cities, the plan proposes four principles for the fabric of Center City: "street walls" formed of facades along a uniform building line; intentional, defined open spaces, not merely residual spaces left over by buildings; building entrances that address the street and vividly inform people on the sidewalks; vitality at the ground level, whether social, commercial, or architectural.

The new Philadelphia plan is the latest addition to a very old document. Rather than distinguishing or blurring the visions for the city that preceded it, the 1988 plan underlines and clarifies its precedents and makes past strengths accessible to a new generation. Clearly visible just beneath the new lines of text is the last earlier layer of the palimpsest: Philadelphia's second plan, the Bacon plan of 1963.

In its time, the Bacon plan also built upon Philadelphia's spatial tradition and concentrated on urban structure. Its strength was in physically articulating and reaffirming connections between what had become disparate parts of the city. Its strategy focused on rehabilitating Society Hill, a district with spectacular, if run-down, examples of colonial architecture; and, through a system

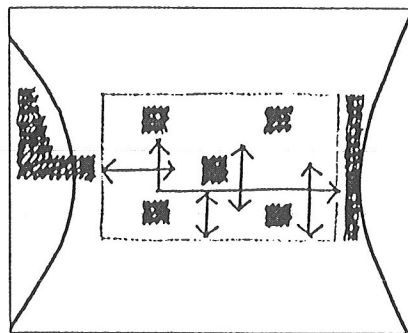
A Framework for Physical Development

The framework for the development of Center City is based on two fundamental concepts: development must be directed to appropriate areas and limited in areas that have a distinctive character that could be threatened by inappropriate development.



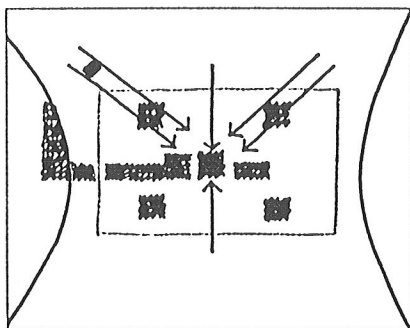
Linkages

A key strategy of this plan is to strengthen the links and improve circulation between downtown activity centers. As the new frontiers of the riverfront and 30th Street Station grow, the importance of circulation within Center City grows.



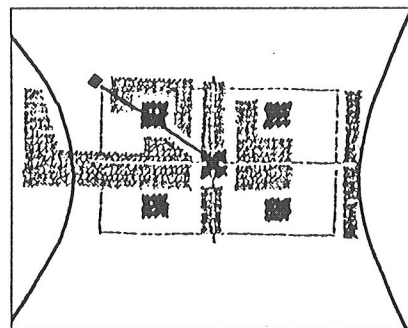
City Hall and Tall Buildings

Protecting the views of City Hall and the statue of William Penn can be achieved while permitting the development of tall buildings. Tall buildings should be directed to those areas of greatest transit accessibility.



Development Districts

Five development districts in Center City have the greatest potential for growth and change: Market West, Center City East, Broad Street, Parkway North, and the Delaware riverfront.



of pedestrian greenways, physically linking the residential area with the green expanses of the city's historic places.

Also, rather than encouraging development to head only westward along one of the original axes—Market Street—the 1963 plan proposed to balance the growth, to stimulate development along the eastern side of the corridor as well. The 1988 plan, which considers Center City East and Market West as prime areas for continued commercial development, builds upon this earlier concept of balance and introduces another balance along the north-south axis, Broad Street. And, because the 1963 plan pointed to the Delaware and Schuylkill riverfronts as untapped areas ripe for development, today's "new frontier" areas build upon some of the groundworks that were laid 25 years ago.

With William Penn's vision as his model, Edmund Bacon had taken the idea of a "Center City" literally. His plan made downtown the central focus of the metropolitan area. Through expressways, mass transit networks, and pedestrian walkways, it got people into the center city and moved them through the urban structure. Embellishing and modifying Penn's spatial concept, Bacon sought to draw out the rich physical delights inherent in Penn's original framework.

Between the first and second plan lay several centuries of urban development. Perhaps the most intriguing mark on the urban palimpsest was made early in this century. On maps of Center City, one line seems to contradict the geometric order of the grid—the diagonal line of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. Although it is a fundamental departure from Penn's original plan, the parkway does not muddle the clarity of Center City's layout. Rather, as a direct link with the romantic landscape of Fairmount Park, it introduces a tree-lined boulevard into the city fabric; at the same time it reinforces the existing center at the intersection of the two axes.

In other ways, the subway and railroad lines, introduced after the turn of the century, reinforced the urban structure by following the Broad Street and Market Street cross axes. Later, this confluence of transportation paths would influence Bacon's decision to redevelop Market Street east and west. While their placement may seem strikingly logical today, one can imagine how

incoherent the core of the city could have been if the mass transit links had followed a pattern independent of the historic structure.

The original layer of text, the structure underlying the entire Center City Philadelphia palimpsest, is William Penn's plan of 1683. Unlike Boston, a city of medieval character that developed organically and adjusted to the shape of the land as it grew, Philadelphia was laid out according to Renaissance principles of clarity and order. Penn had a vision for his plot of wilderness, and he articulated his vision with a practical plan larger than London or Paris at that time. He mapped out a grid-patterned "greene countrie towne" on the neck between the Delaware and Schuylkill rivers. Two wide streets would meet at the center, the intersection marked by a public square.

Today, Center City Philadelphia closely resembles Penn's original vision. The gridiron, the two major cross axes, the four green squares, and the central square continue to be the essence of the city's structure. One has to look at the urban fabric—the small 18th-century residences, emblematic civic and religious buildings, and grand town houses on the west—to realize that Penn's ideal symmetrical form actually grew asymmetrically. He envisioned the city growing from a Front Street along each riverbank eventually meeting in the middle. But since the early economy was based on trade and the port, the city grew first south to north, and then westward, from the banks of the Delaware. The practical, economic dynamics at work determined Philadelphia's fabric, but those unpredictable forces were always guided by the ideal of Penn's clearly articulated grid and cross-axial structure.

All cities have a palimpsest, a text that has been rewritten over the years. Philadelphia's, built on a tradition of two prior plans, has a clearly laid out classical spatial structure for guidance. Even in cities as diverse as Dallas and Boston, one can be informed by peeling back the layers. By trying to discern the palimpsest, one comes to understand the essence of the city. As Philadelphia's third Center City plan demonstrates, such understanding not only connects one with the past but also leads to a more potent vision for the future, a vision of growth and change that builds upon a city's historic structure. □