

**Vision and Blindness:
Edmund Bacon's 1963 Plan
for Center City Philadelphia**

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11.301 Introduction to Urban Design and Development

Vision and Blindness: Edmund Bacon's 1963 Plan for Center City Philadelphia

The Nature of the Plan

The plan for Center City Philadelphia published by the Philadelphia City Planning Commission in 1963 is a further refinement of the ideas laid out for the downtown district in the 1960 Comprehensive Plan for Philadelphia. The Comprehensive Plan represents the accumulation of a number of planning projects undertaken by the Planning Commission under Edmund Bacon between 1949 and 1960. Edmund Bacon's extended planning process that eventually produced the Comprehensive Plan and the 1963 plan was undertaken to address the problems associated with automobile-enabled decentralization: population decline, suburban expansion and the resultant drain of tax base and businesses, and the departure of industry from the area. Bacon's response to these problems centered on business interests, and the 1963 plan articulates its commitment to businesses:

The plan is based on a belief in the initiative potential of the private enterprise system. Governmental activity is restricted to that minimum which is absolutely necessary to provide a framework which stimulates the imagination of private investors and which includes the physical facilities necessary to support those investments after they are made.¹

The specific goals for the Market Street East portion of Center City are articulated by Nicholas Polites in the 1973 edition of *Design and the Environment*:

Market Street East's Objectives are to

1. rejuvenate Philadelphia's sagging downtown retailing activities;
2. integrate and provide new links in a potentially superb public transportation system;
3. provide a sheltered environment for business, shopping, working and entertainment;

¹ *Center City Philadelphia Plan*, Philadelphia City Planning Commission, 1963.

4. help the center city capture a major share of the anticipated office rental market through 1985.²

These goals are consistent with the more general goals of making the city more attractive for business investment through design interventions. As they are more concrete than the goals articulated in the actual plan, these are the objectives that will be used to evaluate the plan's effectiveness.

In addition to the verbally articulated intentions of the plan, however, a number of underlying values are evident. By focusing exclusively on economic interests, the plan actively neglects the needs of low income and minority city residents. The vision for the city expressed by the plan is one in which 18th century elite residential forms (in the form of Independence Mall and Society Hill's townhouses) are celebrated alongside 20th century businesses at the expense of Chinatown and South Philadelphia residents. The fact that the plan does not focus on the north-south axis along which the city's ghettos are located also speaks to the narrowness of Bacon's vision.³ Even the watercolor renderings included in the plan (Figure 1) reflect the plan's blindness to the city's long-



Figure 1. Bacon's vision for downtown does not include the city's minority populations.

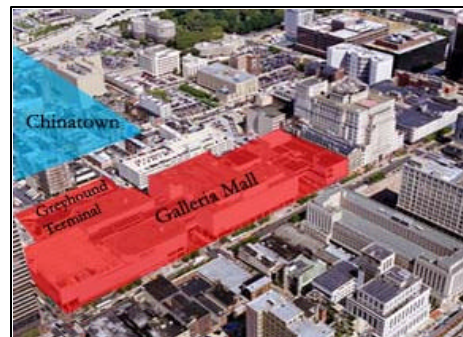


Figure 2. The Galleria Mall and Greyhound Bus Terminal physically isolate Chinatown from the downtown retail.

² Polites, Nicholas, "Recycling Cities: Downtown," *Design and environment*, 1973 Summer, v. 4, n. 2, p. 22-37.

³ "Twenty-five years (almost) after the Chinese Wall" *Progressive architecture* 1976 Apr., v.57, n.4, p. pp. 46-51.

standing racial and ethnic diversity. They depict only white middle-class families and businessmen using the proposed spaces. Also, major elements of the plan served to separate lower-income and minority populations from the downtown retail. A five-block wall of parking garage on the north side of Market Street and the highway ramps leading to it would have acted as significant barrier between Chinatown and the Market Street corridor. Though the parking garage was never built, the indoor mall and bus terminal on either side of Filbert Street, one block north of Market, (Figure 2) had essentially the same effect.⁴

The Constituents and the Planning Process

Consistent with the articulated goals of the plan, which focus mainly on investment in business and retail, the plan views its constituency as Philadelphia's business interests. The plan's success is dependent on their cooperation in continuing to privately invest in the city, and many elements of the plan were compromised in response to their concerns.⁵ For example, at Penn Center, the developer insisted on completely enclosing the pedestrian concourses under low ceilings rather than leaving them open to the sky as Bacon's plan had specified. The Chestnut Street pedestrian mall also suffered because of compromises with the business interests. Not only was public seating be minimized, but buses and cabs also continued to run along the street, so it neither became fully pedestrianized, not could it function as a real street. These changes to the plan's implementation were made without the same need for organized opposition as was seen in the neighborhoods. The business interests in Philadelphia had a legitimate place in the

⁴ Warren Huff, Urban Designer, Philadelphia City Planning Commission, Interview 12/2/2002.

⁵ "Twenty-five years (almost) after the Chinese Wall" *Progressive architecture* 1976 Apr., v.57, n.4, p. pp. 46-51.

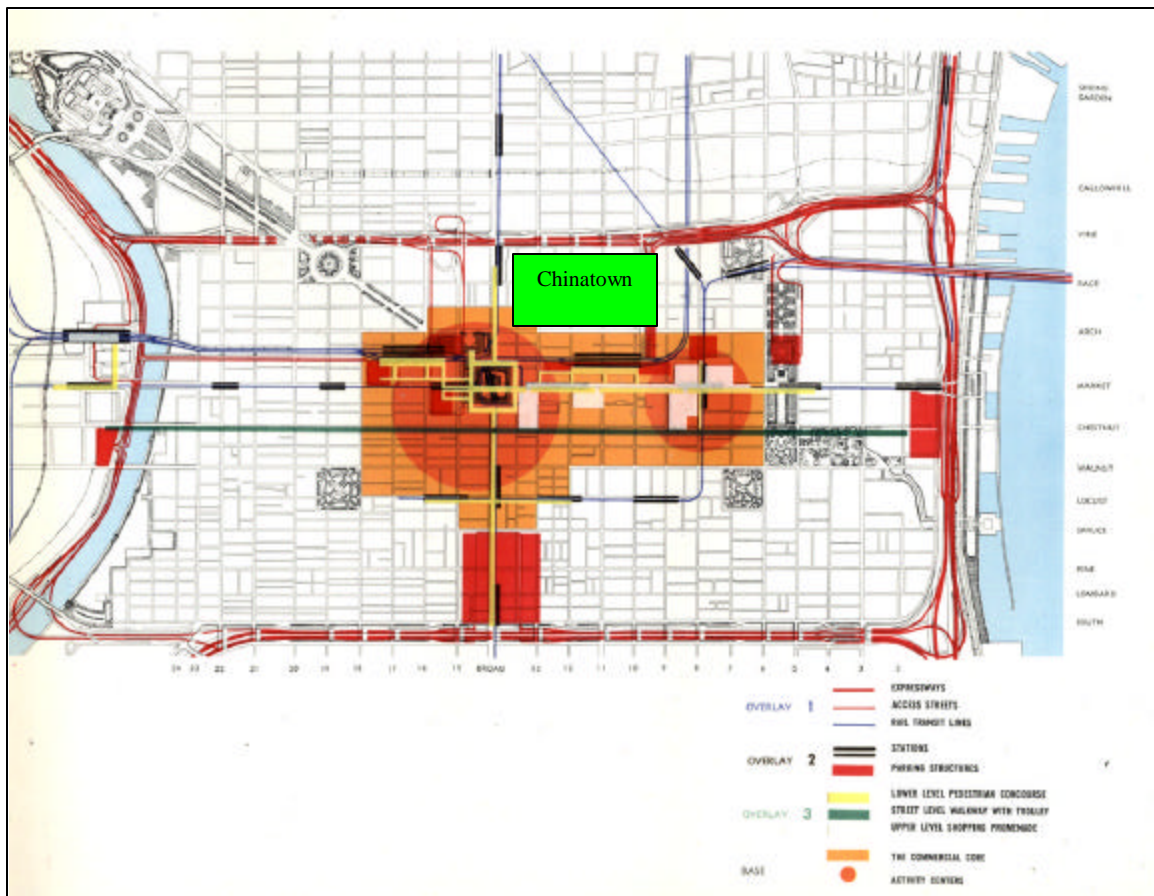
planning process. Their involvement is also seen in the form that resulted from the plan. Bacon did not insist on hiring renowned architects to produce the form of his vision. Rather, he gave preference to corporate architecture firms that created mediocre, economically efficient styles. The result was an efficient building process and a banal aesthetic that clearly articulates the supremacy of business in the city.

The influence of this constituency on the plan is evident in the document itself as well, both in its content and in its language. Half of the plan document focuses on analyzing existing business conditions and trends. Elements that are not directly related to business (e.g. residential development and the waterfront) are couched in terms of their effect on the city's business climate. The emphasis on business needs, however, reveals a secondary constituency: the white middle class suburbanites the plan is trying to bring back into the city:

Attractive housing in good neighborhoods... has proven it can make easier the recruiting of executive and office workers for Downtown firms. Good housing gives a desirable environment for Downtown business concerns and provides customers for Downtown retail stores.⁶

⁶ *Center City Philadelphia Plan*, Philadelphia City Planning Commission, 1963.

Society Hill was explicitly intended to bring a core of wealth back into city residence, and the expressways of the 1963 plan are designed to serve suburban residents. By catering to the automobile in its design, the plan immediately favored suburban populations over the existing urban residential populations for whom no public transit provisions were made.



The map in Figure 3 shows the proposed highway system in red, and the green box indicates the location of Chinatown in relation to the proposed projects. Cornered by the Vine Street Expressway to the north and ramps to the east, its access to downtown is blocked by a parking garage running along four blocks of its southern edge. This is but

one example of the plan's blindness to constituents outside of the white business elite. Downtown residential neighborhoods suffered as well from the plan's blindness to their needs. The city's general attitude toward the neighborhoods is expressed in the following quote Jeremy Alvarez, a city planner with the Planning Commission at the time:

I feel that Philadelphia is up against a rock and a hard place. It's absolutely our aorta that we get those middle class people to move into town and if there is a small price to be paid in the old neighborhood, it is almost trivial when compared to the... survival of the metropolis.⁷

While businesses were intimately involved in the planning process—sometimes to the detriment of the final product—the neighborhoods and residents were actively shut out of the process. Because this planning process was entirely top-down and non-transparent, little information about it is available. Tracing the events that led up to the 1963 plan is instructive in illuminating Bacon's general methodology.

In 1942, Bacon and a group of lawyers, planners, and architects convinced the city to reinstate the City Planning Commission and created citizen's watchdog group, the Citizens' Council on City Planning. He became executive director of the Planning Commission in 1949, and he worked with other planners and politicians to get two reform mayors into office in 1952 and 1956. He convinced the "the Pennsylvania Railroad to tear down the notorious Chinese Wall [its elevated rail line] on land it owned in fee simple, and then not to parcel off the land piecemeal to developers." When the demolition was announced he and architect Vincent Kling present a proposal for Penn Center on that site. Bacon also took advantage of the Greater Philadelphia Movement's desire to move the Dock Street meat market into South Philadelphia to facilitate

⁷ Levy, Paul, *Queen Village--the eclipse of community : a case study of gentrification and displacement in a South Philadelphia neighborhood*, Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Civic Values, 1978. pp. 22-71.

redevelopment between Independence Hall and the Delaware River. For this area, Bacon held several design competitions resulting in the I.M. Pei Society Hill design still present today⁸. Both of these projects were generated by Edmund Bacon and his chosen architects (either through personal contact or competition), and both appear in the 1963 plan. Their top down nature is reflective of Bacon's general approach to planning and suggests a similar methodology for the 1963 plan.

A Melded Model of City Form – The Efficient Information City



Figure 4. GM's vision of the future presented in its Futurama exhibit in the 1939 World's Fair.



Figure 5. View of Philadelphia driving west on the Vine Street Expressway .

The plan's emphasis on business interests and circulation patterns places it firmly within the Efficient City model of city form. Time and money are dominant values behind the development of express highways, underground connected pedestrian concourses, integrated rail systems, and investment in office and retail spaces. The emphasis on modern architecture to the exclusion of 19th century architecture (as with the Reading Terminal, which was scheduled for demolition prior to community protest) also gives the

⁸ All information in the preceding paragraph was taken from "Twenty Five Years (almost) After the Chinese Wall," *Progressive architecture* 1976 Apr., v.57, n.4, p. pp. 46-51.

plan a concrete visual association with the efficient city of towers and highways. Figures 4 and 5 compare the Vine Street Expressway (Figure 5) as it looks today with the vision of the Efficient City put forth by GM in their World's Fair "Futurama" exhibit of 1939 (Figure 4). Both separate pedestrians and automobiles by grade (a major feature of Bacon's plan), and both depict a city of boxy mid- to high-rise buildings.

Despite its strong "Efficient City" bent, the plan is also informed by elements of the Information City. What little the plan mentions of residential areas, it focuses on small-scale rehabilitation of old housing stock. While the expense associated with rehabilitation automatically priced out a large portion of Philadelphia's population, its cumulative effect was to give much of downtown Philadelphia a pleasant, pedestrian-scaled, historic character. The Independence Mall project also emphasized Philadelphia's theme of historical importance in shaping the birth of our nation, and Old City, with its preserved historic buildings also strengthens this theme.



Figure 6. Independence Hall.

Effectiveness

Of the four goals for Market East listed in the first section of this paper, the plan met three: it provided an integrated public transportation system, a sheltered

environment for business and shopping, and it helped the city capture a major share of the

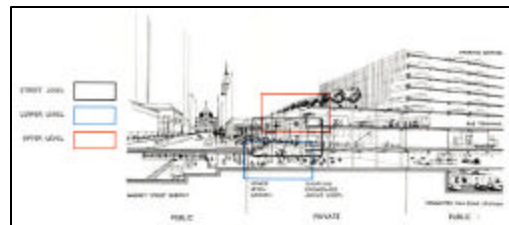


Figure 7. Section through shopping concourse on Market Street proposed by Bacon.



Figure 8. View from inside the Galleria Mall.

office rental market. It was not able, however, to reverse the trend of retail moving out to the suburbs.⁹ Market Street East remains a disappointing connector between the historical district of Old City and the towering offices of Market Street west of City Hall. Bacon's idea of creating an underground pedestrian concourse and a sheltered environment for working and shopping at Market Street East was translated into the Galleria Mall by the Rouse Company (Figure 8). While the mall does connect the Market-Frankford and PATCO lines to the SEPTA regional rail station during its hours of operation, when the mall is closed, so is the connection. Then transit riders must walk along the blank wall facing Market Street that prevents investment spillover into the surrounding area. By creating a "provide a sheltered environment for business, shopping, working and entertainment"¹⁰ the plan actually damaged the potential for revitalizing the rest of Market Street.¹¹ The block of Market Street that was home to Gimbel's department store before its closing remains vacant today. As early as 1965, the Citizen's Council on City Planning recognized that the plan's implementation was forcing secondary and supportive businesses to find new locations outside the central district and that the plan made no provision for their relocation.¹² The plan was actually least effective in one of its primary goals.

The plan's goal of integrating the public transportation system eventually came to fruition in the 1980s when the Center City Commuter Tunnel to the new Market East Station was

⁹ Beauregard, Robert A., "Urban form and the redevelopment of central business districts," *Journal of architectural and planning research* 1986 Aug., v.3, no.3, pp.183-198.

¹⁰ Polites, Nicholas, , "Recycling Cities: Downtown," *Design and environment* , 1973 Summer, v. 4, n. 2, p. 22-37.

¹¹ Beauregard, R.A., "Urban form and the redevelopment of central business districts," *Journal of architectural and planning research* 1986 Aug., v.3, no.3, pp.183-198.

¹² "White Paper on Urban Renewal in Philadelphia", Citizen's Council on City Planning., Philadelphia, March 1965.

completed. The plan called for the joining of the Pennsylvania and Reading rail networks, but did not predict that they would in fact merge with Conrail in the 1970s.¹³ The resultant coordination of the center city rail system has allowed for convenient movement into the heart of Philadelphia from suburban areas in both Pennsylvania and New Jersey as the plan had intended. The plan was also effective in its intention of increasing city's supply of office space and office use. During the 1970s and 1980s office space increased by 33.6% and the office market remained active with a modest rate of vacancy.¹⁴ This increase in office space has allowed new use patterns to develop downtown. Office buildings that were built in the 19th century are now being converted to residential uses, and this is finally bringing mixed uses into the commercial core of the city.

The image of the city created by Bacon to attract residents back into the city has met with considerable success as well, though it has raised concerns about equity. Society Hill and Queen Village remain centers of wealth in the city, but class and racial tensions and inequities persist as well. Some of the tension caused by the narrowness of Bacon's vision is captured in a quote by a black South Philadelphia reverend about the Queen Village redevelopment project:

I think the whole thing about this thing is to get Black people out of here and believe you me, in another few years, unless the trend changes, that's going to happen. These people just can't afford these high rents. Now those houses there behind us on Queen Street, with all that exorbitant price, and what the Black people make a month or a week, they can't afford that. But I think the community

¹³ Warren Huff, interview; and William Robbins, "Old Station in Philadelphia Sees its Last Train Pull Out." *The New York Times*, New York: November 7, 1984. Section A, p.14, Column 1.

¹⁴ Beauregard, R.A., "Urban form and the redevelopment of central business districts," *Journal of architectural and planning research* 1986 Aug., v.3, no.3, pp.183-198.

is going to be a nice community for those who can afford to live here. But I'm doubtful about our people, very doubtful. They'll have to take what's left.¹⁵

Bacon successfully created neighborhoods that fit the needs of the populations that he wanted to bring back to the city, and the image of these neighborhoods has greatly enhanced the image of the city as a whole. Unfortunately, it also serves to promote a sense that Philadelphia with areas designed for its middle class population that have no relation to the areas left over.

But is it a *Good Plan*?

Before any legitimate analysis of a plan can occur, the criteria by which it is to be judged must be clearly articulated. While many criteria might be helpful in determining whether or not a plan is effective or appropriate (as demonstrated by William Baer's article, "General Plan Evaluation Criteria"¹⁶) the following five criteria are basic necessary conditions for a plan to be *good* in a more comprehensive sense:

1. A good plan must clearly articulate its goals and context within the document that is presented to the public.

The planning document serves as a bridge between the planning office and the public. It must therefore legibly translate the planning intentions and process such that the public is able to make an informed response and engage in a dialogue with the planners. This plan fundamentally fails to meet this criterion. The document does not outline the process by which the plan was determined, nor does it suggest a process by which the plan might be altered through public input. It does not distinguish between existing/finished projects

¹⁵ Levy, Paul, *Queen Village--the eclipse of community : a case study of gentrification and displacement in a South Philadelphia neighborhood*, Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Civic Values, 1978. pp. 22-71.

¹⁶ Baer, William C. "General Plan Evaluation Criteria," *APA Journal*, Summer 1997, Vol. 63, no. 3. pp.329-344.

and new proposals, and it does not provide the public with necessary information to discuss the plan and its consequences.

2. A good plan must base its conclusions on reasonable predictions of future conditions derived from present conditions and past trends.

In order to convincingly respond to expected future conditions, the plan must be based on reasonable assumptions about current and future trends. The 1963 Center City Plan presents charts that predict population increases into the foreseeable future with the plan in place to maintain the population at its 1963 levels (Figure 9). The graph does not support this prediction however; rather, it suggests a stable population in the city with a steady population expansion in the suburbs. Rather than increase or remain stable, Philadelphia's population has suffered from a steady decline through to the present.

The plan assumes that all growth in the suburban region is growth that would occur in the city except that the city will have reached its capacity of 2.3 million persons. "When the population arrives at this figure, the City will be filled and all further population growth must take place outside the City and in the region around it."¹⁷ These assumptions are perhaps the reason that the retail plans were so unsuccessful. They did not account for the fact that population within the city would so

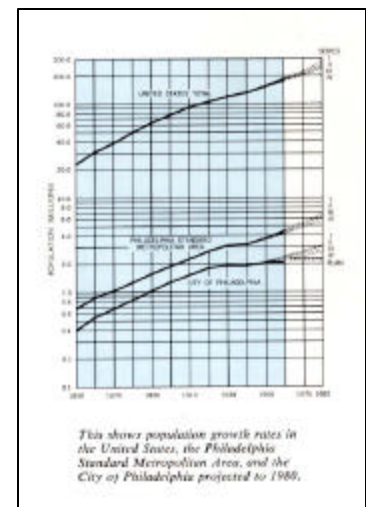


Figure 9. Chart showing anticipated population changes in the city and metropolitan region

¹⁷Center City Philadelphia Plan, Philadelphia City Planning Commission, 1963.

significantly that department store owners would be forced to follow their clientele into the suburbs. By 1965, the plan was already facing criticism for this blindness to reality. Dr. James Q. Wilson is quoted in *Architectural Record* as commenting that, “at first blush, [the plan] seems to be a public subsidy to keep the department store owner from having to face the hard choice that all business men must sooner or later face: if his customers move away, shouldn’t he move with them?”¹⁸

3. A good plan must engage all stakeholder interests in the planning process so that concerns may be addressed during its drafting as well as during its implementation. This criterion is of critical importance because it makes the difference between whether a plan can be implemented smoothly or whether additional costs of delay and appeasement must be incurred before the plan can go through at all. A process of stakeholder engagement also allows for the questioning of incorrect assumptions before they influence physical form, and it can take truly bad ideas off the table much earlier (the South Street Expressway for example). As discussed earlier, Edmund Bacon’s planning process was entirely top-down and took into account the needs of a very narrowly defined constituency. Neighborhood interests were not consulted prior to the release of the plan, and the “process” that followed was instigated by citizen protest rather than planner outreach. Not until 1968, with the inception of the Neighborhood Development Program, was citizen participation required by law in Philadelphia.¹⁹ Elements of the plan halted through opposition include the South Street Expressway, the parking garage on Filbert

¹⁸ Schmertz, Mildred F., “Philadelphia Report: A Long Wait for the Renaissance,” *Architectural Record*, 1965 July, v. 138, n. 1, p. 119-132.

¹⁹ “Twenty-five years (almost) after the Chinese Wall” *Progressive architecture* 1976 Apr., v.57, n.4, p. pp. 46-51.

Street, and the ramps through Chinatown. Had the affected residents been involved in the actual planning process, a plan might have been developed that integrated any existing revitalization activities rather than thwarting them. Simply drawing the location of the South Street Expressway on the planning books sent the street into an economic tailspin where there had previously been private efforts at revitalization.²⁰ In Chinatown, programs for revitalization were not added until the 1970s despite the areas proximity to the plan's core.

4. A good plan must balance goals of efficiency with sensitivity to the urban fabric and existing neighborhood structure.

If a plan does not strive for this balance, it runs the risk of creating more problems than it solves. Creating efficient movement within a city is not worth much if the fabric of the city is destroyed in the process, though a city also cannot strive for inefficiency (especially in circulation patterns) and hope to be competitive in an era of increased mobility brought on by the domination of the automobile. A good plan must be sensitive to the fact that the forms that emerge from the attainment of efficiency (especially in relation to automobile movement into and out of the city) are powerful forces that alter the character of their surroundings. Parking garages, expressways, on- and off-ramps, rail lines, and even pedestrian concourses profoundly affect the way surrounding space is used. While they may provide new connections between distant places in the case of highways and rail lines, they insert artificial barriers into the places they occupy.

²⁰ Warren Huff, interview; <http://www.centercityresidents.org/ourstory.html> "CCRA joined a coalition of neighborhood groups to halt a proposed Lombard-South Street expressway, which would have isolated Rittenhouse-Fitler from its neighbors to the south and thwarted the revitalization of the South Street corridor."

In the case of the Center City Plan, no balance was aimed for or achieved except in response to neighborhood opposition. Chinatown remains isolated from downtown by the Galleria Mall and the Greyhound bus terminal between Market and Filbert Streets. The plan for downtown retail turned its back on the vibrant community to its north and intended to slice through it with highway ramps running across five city blocks (see Figure 3). Only in regard to the Old City area did the plan begin to strive for this balance. Even there, however, Society Hill residents needed to protest and present an alternate plan before I-95 was lowered beneath pathways connecting it to the waterfront.²¹ Even in the areas that the plan gave the most attention to residential uses, it subordinated neighborhood needs to the goal of efficiency.

5. A good plan must articulate a vision to guide future development.

This criterion is one that some might argue with but is critical for the following reason: The city is a built, visual form. As such, people moving through it use the visual cues it lends them to place themselves and understand who they are in relation to the place they occupy. Planning generally happens in response to problems, which might also be read as changes or transitions. During these transitions, past visions of the city (or parts of the city) may be inadequate to respond to the new forces acting on the space. Any plan that attempts to bridge the divide between the past and the future must articulate a coherent set of values in physical form that will give people new cues as to how to interpret the place in its new social context. Without a coherent vision, the place will still articulate

²¹ Schmertz, Mildred F., "Philadelphia Report: A Long Wait for the Renaissance," *Architectural Record*, 1965 July, v. 138, n. 1, p. 119-132.

meaning through visual cues, but this meaning may not be consistent with the goals of the plan and may in fact act counter to those goals.

Edmund Bacon understood this criterion better than any of the others. He envisioned a dynamic business-oriented city that used its historical heritage to communicate its value as a place to live and work. The architecture produced in response to his plan is perhaps mediocre, but as corporate architecture, consistently reflects the ideals of the efficient city and the commercial city. The downtown business district is visually unmistakable from any other part of the city. The historic and residential districts also articulate very specific ideas about what Philadelphia is now as a product of what it has been. The preservation of historic structures in Old City Philadelphia has been an asset in its most recent transformation into an arts district. Queen Village and Society Hill continue to thrive as upper-income communities near the center of the city. Each place is visually distinguishable from other places in the city. The city itself, especially through the plan's emphasis on rehabilitation of old buildings, has maintained a very strong visual character that cannot be confused with any other city in America. The vision that Edmund Bacon produced and promoted remains one of Philadelphia's strongest assets today.

Conclusion

Despite the vision that Bacon bestowed upon Philadelphia, this plan cannot be considered a good plan. While Philadelphia is perhaps better for the investment and visual coherence that Bacon brought to its heart, it is also worse off for the plan's blindness to the realities of the automobile and the value of its existing neighborhood communities. Bacon's

planning did nothing to ameliorate racial tensions in the city, and in fact further marginalized minority populations and reinforced spatial segregation by pricing certain groups out of downtown residential districts without an “extensive program to treat acute problems of slums and housing decay which the original Federal housing acts and the Philadelphia renewal program were intended to correct.”²² The plan did not proceed out of a process that engaged those whom it would most affect, and it was not sensitive to the needs of its surrounding communities. By subordinating the interests of residents to the interests of business, the plan created a climate of contention and hostility rather than one of cooperative problem solving.

²² Schmertz, Mildred F., “Philadelphia Report: A Long Wait for the Renaissance,” *Architectural Record*, 1965 July, v. 138, n. 1, p. 119-132.

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Figure 7: Center City Plan, 1963. Philadelphia City Planning Commission.

Figure 8: www.gophila.com/photos/images/large/imgA002.jpg

Figure 9: Center City Plan, 1963. Philadelphia City Planning Commission.