Title
Giving Form to a Creation Story: Remaking Independence Mall [Place Profile]

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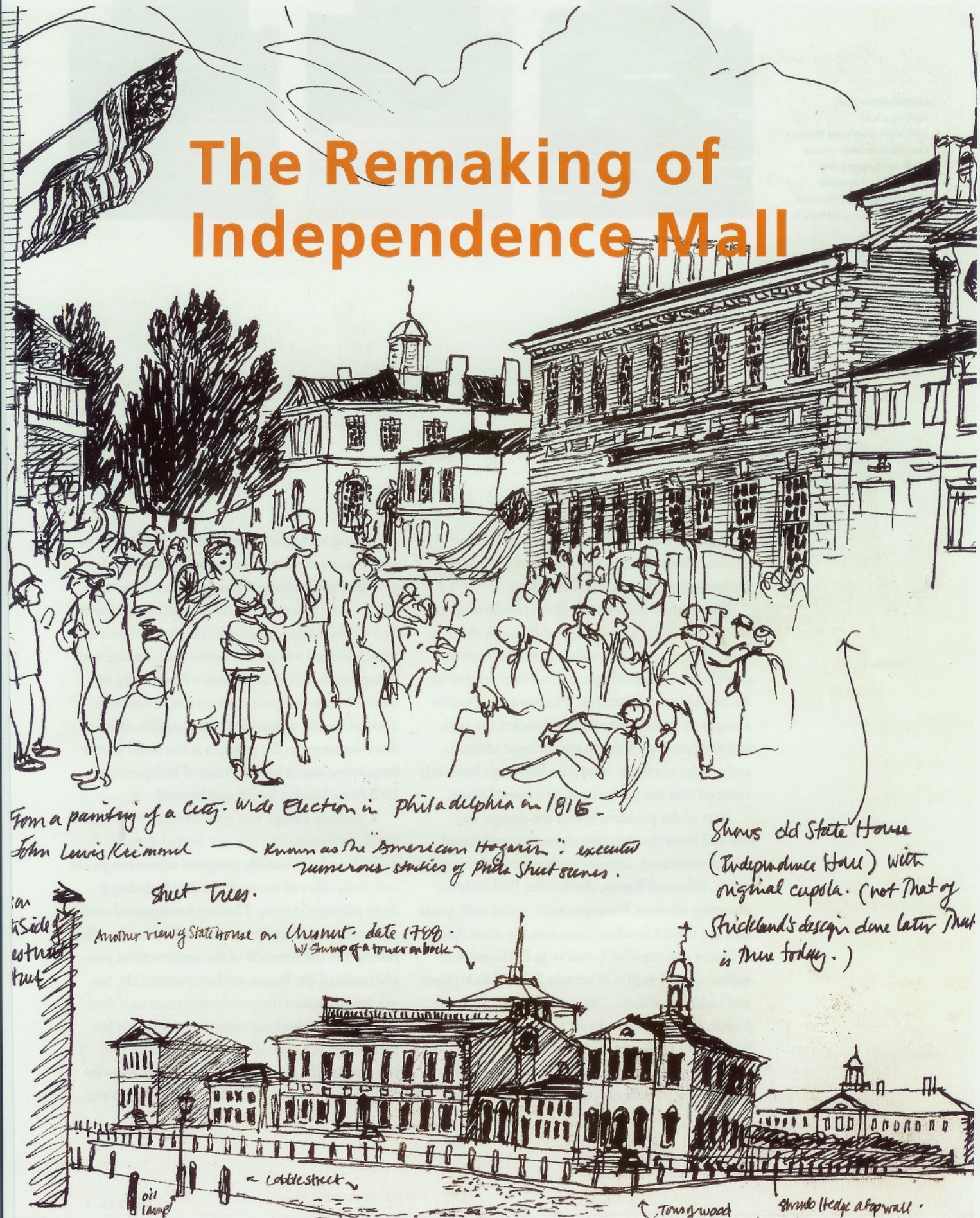
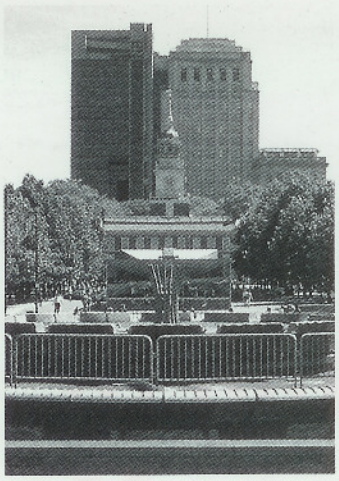
Giving Form to a Creation Story—

Edward Hicks, *Peaceable Kingdom*, 1844-46. Courtesy Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, Colonial Williamsburg

Sketchbook
Courtesy Laurie Olin

The Remaking of Independence Mall





Independence Mall, looking south.
Left: View from third block
Center: View from second block, with Liberty Bell Pavilion in foreground
Right: View from first block
Photos: George L. Claflen, Jr.

Independence Mall has been a resounding failure, whether judged as a work of art, a social setting, urban design or architecture.

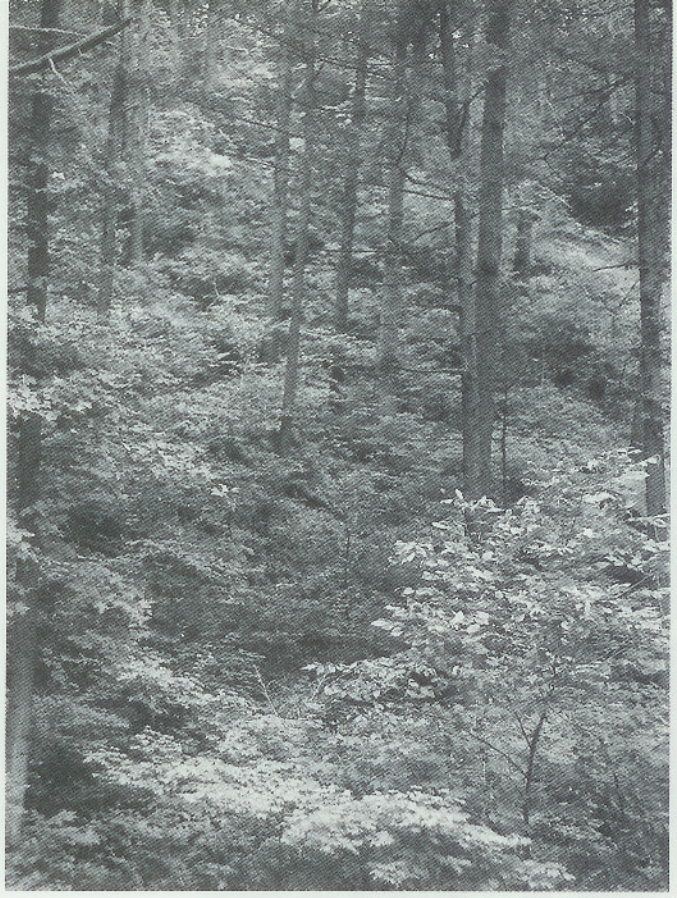
It is an enormous swath, three blocks long and one block wide, that was ripped through the city, filled with grotesque architectural elements and unwelcome, unusable spaces, and surrounded by deadening new structures. The routing of traffic along busy arterial streets that bracket the park and the removal of the neighborhood immediately to the north for interstate highways have only ensured that the park would be a dismal place.

Part of the problem is that the design was derived from the baroque classicism associated with seventeenth-century authoritarian European states. Edmund Bacon, the former Philadelphia planning director, has repeatedly stated with pride that the model for the design was the work Andre le Notre executed for Louis IV in Paris and Versailles, as well as that of certain Renaissance popes and bishops in Rome, Nancy and other seats of power. Consequently, more than five hundred buildings—some of them nineteenth-century masterpieces—were removed to make way for the park, in the pursuit of some phantom colonial purity and architectural classicism, heavy on symmetry and a misconceived set of spatial forms.

Subsequent changes have only made matters worse. A small, eccentric (but handsome) Liberty Bell pavilion (designed by Romaldo Giurgola and John Lawson) was placed in the mall, on axis with Independence Hall and about a block away, in 1976. Despite the pavilion's merits, it has been derided locally as resembling a roadside diner or drive-in; more to the point, it is too small to suit its purpose and it blocks views of Independence Hall from Market Street and beyond.

A parking garage was built beneath the second block; unfortunately, it is not buried deeply enough and its clumsily designed access ramps cut into both sides of the park, further isolating it from adjacent streets. The city has repaired some of its structural problems and roof leaks; the effort resulted in the removal of the architectural paraphernalia of the Bacon era but, regrettably, has not strengthened the poorly designed roof deck.

The third block was originally designed by Dan Kiley as a grid of trees with fountains inspired by the great bosques of orange trees in Seville and Cordoba. It failed largely due to the



A landscape along Wissahickon Creek, Philadelphia
Photo: Laurie Olin

lack of people and sympathetic uses nearby. Haplessly isolated, it has been remodeled and ruined by National Park Service designers and maintenance practices.

Any one or two of these mistakes might have been overcome, but together they proved overwhelming. Certainly the appropriateness of precedents chosen for the elements of the Bacon–Larson scheme is doubtful. It stands (or stood) as a warning that memory and its uses are acts of imagination and judgement. The wrong precedent willfully forced upon a situation is bound to fail.

A Fresh Start

Although wholesale changes to the buildings and traffic that surround Independence Mall are not likely soon, a redesign and reconstruction of the park itself are now well under way.

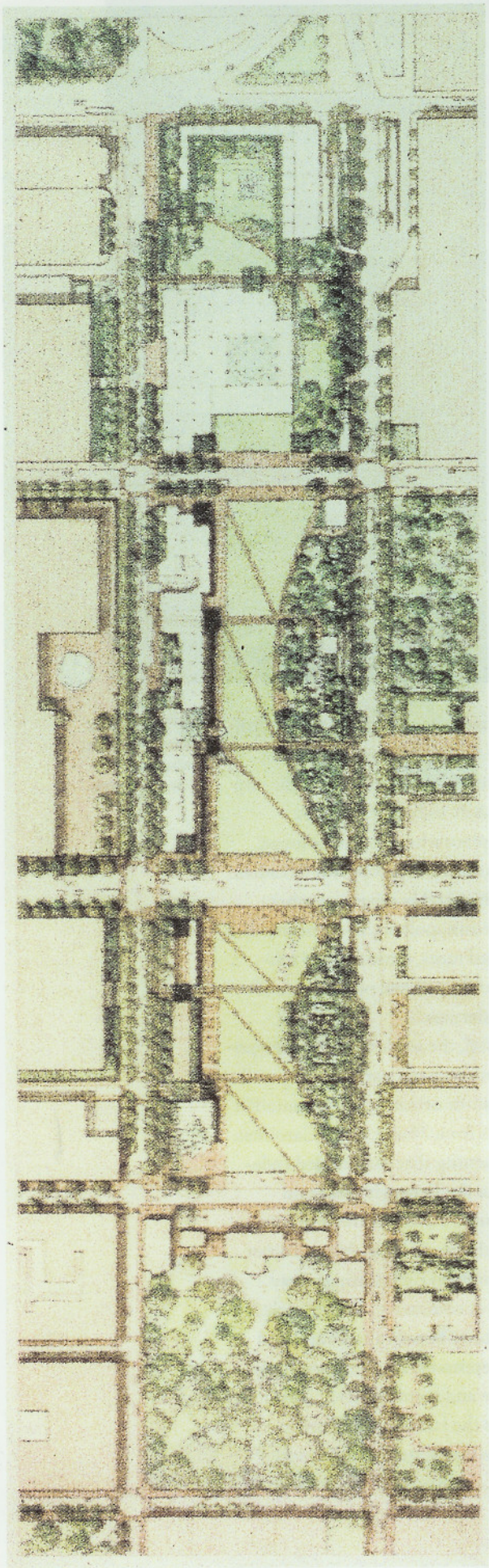
My firm has played a lead role in the project since early 1998. Hired by the park service to prepare a new master plan, we assembled a group of designers, preservationists and engineers, all of whose offices were located within walking distance of the park and each other, knew the city and site well, and cared deeply about the outcome, personally and professionally.

Our initial task was to develop alternative ideological and formal strategies for the arranging and developing the proposed elements within the three-block area. That first summer, I delved into the history of the events between 1760 and 1800 —the period of the Declaration of Independence, the Revolutionary War, the Continental Congress and the drafting of the Constitution, and the decade when Philadelphia was the nation's capitol. Ultimately, I realized, our challenge was to give physical form to a creation story: the settlement of the city and the founding of our nation.

I became particularly interested in the evolution of Philadelphia's urban fabric, especially its condition of *rus in urbs*. Although Philadelphia may have been the world's second largest English-speaking city at the time (after London), there were numerous gardens and farms within the city. Known for its orchards and plentiful trees, Philadelphia was a place where scraps of forest and pasture, horses and cows, crops and Palladian architecture were thoroughly mixed together. While urbane and cosmopolitan, an open city of commerce and mixed races, ethnicity and religions, Philadelphia was perched on the edge of a continent and a wilderness.

During this period, the seeds of our contemporary suburban devotion to trees and lawn, as well as our habits of loose-fit urbanity, were planted in colonial settlements from Maine to the Carolinas. The near-pastoral setting that surrounded Independence Hall (then the Pennsylvania State House) existed for only a brief moment in time, but it was re-created repeatedly as this and other state capitals decamped to rural settings away from dense centers of commerce. Accordingly, some sort of reciprocity between buildings and greenery, ideas of representation between town and country, culture and nature seemed in order.

In a way this was the landscape and urban design equivalent to the paintings of Edward Hicks, an eccentric, early nineteenth-century



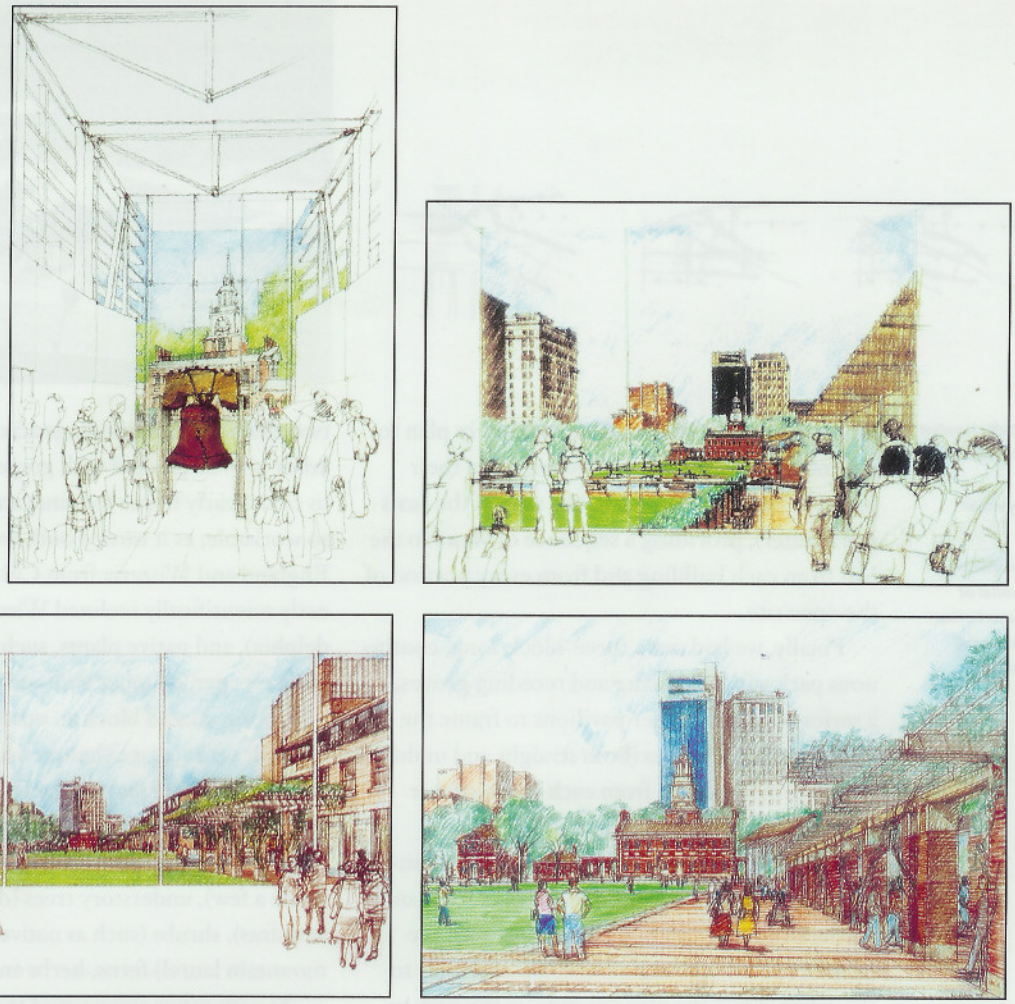
Independence Mall master plan
Graphic: Olin Partnership

Quaker preacher who painted numerous renditions of a Peaceable Kingdom, wherein he brought together disparate strands of thought, tradition and events, conflating them into one coherent image. In several such images, Hicks depicted William Penn meeting with Lenne Lenape Indian sachems under the "treaty oak" at Shakamaxon on the bank of the Delaware River. The river bears a remarkable resemblance to the Tiber painted by Claude Lorraine—the Tiber being the river where Aeneas ceased his wandering to establish a new home, thereby founding Rome.

Thus we see Penn founding a new community, and by implication, a new civilization, founded upon the principles of freedom of religion and respect for the individual. Themes of tolerance and peaceful co-existence are underscored by a group of animals derived from the remarks of the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament, depicting a "peaceable kingdom" in which the lion shall lie down with the lamb, the ox with the wolf, goats with bears, and so on.

Our task was to create such a unity from an equally disparate set of materials, that is to say, the various elements of the park service's program. On the first block would be an enlarged, improved pavilion for the Liberty Bell. On the second block would be a large new visitors' center and smaller educational facility to help introduce the park, the city and the region. On the third block would be a new institution devoted to the Constitution—part museum, part institute, part conference center—as well as facilities for park maintenance staff and equipment.

These all were to be lodged in a green park, a place where people could exercise their first amendment rights (usually in the form of protests) and where crowds of up to 6,000 could attend events. We were also to sort out the many busses, coaches, horse-drawn carriages, tour trolleys, transit and local business and neighborhood traffic.



Top row: Proposed views from the new Liberty Bell pavilion and visitors' center

Bottom row: View of Independence Hall from National Constitution Center; Independence Mall, first block

Graphics: Bohlin Cywnski Jackson (top left), Olin Partnership

Framing Independence Hall

First we tackled the issue that has bedeviled architects and planners for nearly a century: How should visitors view Independence Hall? How could the new design offer views of the building that respect its dignity and significance? To complicate matters, the sponsors of all three proposed buildings wanted Independence Hall to be visible from their buildings.

When Independence Hall was built, it was one of the largest and most impressive structures on the continent. While the clearing of the mall created unprecedented views along a multi-block axis, a pair of large insurance company buildings have been built immediately south of Independence Hall; consequently, in Bacon's cherished straight-on view, it now appears as a diminutive old building collaged against nondescript, backlit monoliths. Moreover, numerous prominent designers, planners, critics and historians have objected to the axial plan based upon the fact that in colonial and early Federal times there were buildings immediately across the street.

After considerable puzzlement and walking about the site day after day, Jim Kise and I discovered a way to see Independence Hall once more as a large building with only trees, smaller structures and the sky behind. Early views of the hall were from diagonal perspectives, from the intersections of Chestnut and Fifth or Sixth streets. That was the answer. We found the location in the southwest portion of the first block where the new bell pavilion should be positioned to make the strongest visual connection to the hall.

Before long, Bernard Cywinski and I hit upon several other principles that became important to our proposal. First, we reintroduced the numerous small east–west streets and alleys that had been erased by Bacon's plan. These would not only serve as pedestrian paths and service lanes, but also as markers, scaling devices, resting places and traces of colonial urbanity.[1]

We next laid out rest of the programmed structures in a long enfilade along Sixth Street beyond

Studies of Liberty Bell chamber and model of proposed Liberty Bell pavilion
Graphics: Bohlin Cywnski Jackson

Opposite: Model of visitors center (left) and model of National Constitution Center
Photos: Kalman McKinnell Wood (left), Pei Cobb Freed (right)

the Bell Pavilion. We configured them in plan to resemble a progressive shallow curve on their parkside flank (analogous to the rake of the seats in a theater), providing a sequence of views to the hall from each building and from every portion of the open site.

Finally, we laid out a three-block-long, continuous park with advancing and receding groves, a series of paired corner pavilions to frame the open spaces, and paths (both straight and undulating) to provide access from each street corner into the park.

Our plan, while not symmetrical in the conventional sense, is balanced. Groves of trees and gardens stand opposite the buildings with the lawn between, opening views from each part to the other. Thus the plan reconnects the park to the city: it rebuilds urban fabric along Sixth Street, with buildings, doors, windows and activities; it provides a continuous, permeable greensward along Fifth Street. The city is put back together physically while an armature for interpretation, performance and memorials is created.

Independence Hall is given back its prominence, though not in a manner that makes it look weak, like a petite or foolish dictator. The view from the Liberty Bell will reinforce the memory of its former situation atop the old State House; it will be the same view that people had in the eighteenth century when buildings across Chestnut Street forced views to be oblique and from a near distance, bringing emphasis to what was an imposing civic building.

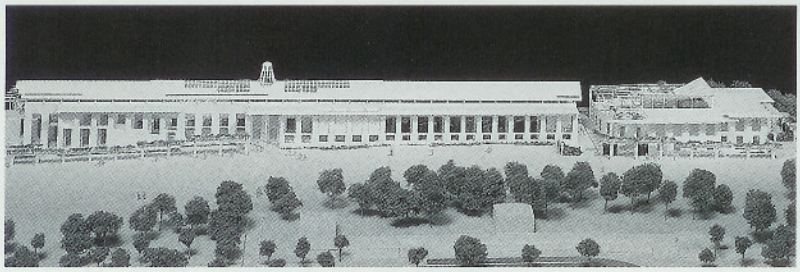
Remembering *Rus in Urbs*

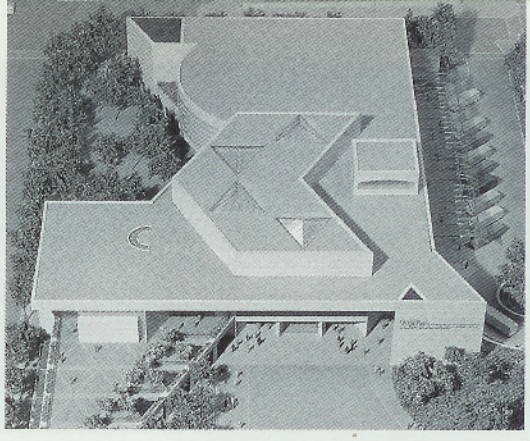
The park itself will consist of simple but evocative elements. An arbor accompanies portions of the two-block long park, offering shade, color and fragrance, as well as providing layers of screening between people in the park and the large, late-twentieth century buildings across the street. The arbor is to be planted with grape vines to remind us of the early hopes for vineyards and wine (not so workable, as it turned out), roses brought from England and Wisteria from China (named for the early scientifically inclined Wister family of Philadelphia), and native plants, such as Clematis, Virginia creeper, trumpet vine and Dutchman's pipe.

On the second block an outdoor cafe and small kiosk sit on a terrace sheltered and surrounded by plants of the sort that can be found throughout the ecologically rich valleys around Philadelphia—trees (tulip poplar, hickory and chestnut, to name a few), understory trees (dogwood, redbud, sassafras), shrubs (such as native azaleas and mountain laurel) ferns, herbs and wildflowers.

As with other elements of the park, there is no attempt to reproduce some early scene or particular place. Instead, we used material that lends itself both to contemporary needs and interpretation regarding the society, individuals, place and events that formed the setting for the independence movement, revolution, constitutional convention and initial capitol of the United States. As direct products of the enlightenment, Philadelphia and its early inhabitants participated in developments in science, especially in the collection, identification, propagation and exportation of a wealth of American plants. It seemed natural to us that a national park charged with interpreting the historical setting for the Revolution, many of whose leaders were involved in agriculture, industry and science, should employ plantings that contribute to the many narratives to be presented here.

Finally, each building surveys an expanse of lawn, as popular in British and American country houses and parks of the eighteenth century did, and as our homes and institutions do today. Thus, the situation of modernity and sophisticated





and up-to-date urban life, is to rub up against native plants, gardens and open vistas that echo those with which Philadelphia began, albeit serving a new situation, namely that of a secular pilgrimage shrine, urban oasis and education and entertainment venue.

Architectural Expectations

During the master plan phase, it was not known who the architects for the new buildings would be or how the projects would be funded. The park service, therefore, asked us to prepare architectural guidelines for the bulk, mass, height, location and materials of the new buildings.

Our team quickly and unanimously agreed that there should be no neo-Georgian, revival style or postmodern architecture, no pretend colonial features. (This approach was consistent with the Secretary of the Interior's standards for inserting contemporary facilities within historic sites and was acceptable to the park service, but it came as a surprise to many Philadelphians, who would have been perfectly happy with pseudo-historical buildings.) Thus copying Georgian detailing was forbidden, as were semicircular masonry arches and coated glass. We urged special attention to the use of masonry, wood, metal and stone in a manner sympathetic to how those materials were employed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century buildings in the neighborhood, and asked that designers consider devices that could break up the new buildings' length and mass.

The range of excellent institutional, commercial and domestic buildings nearby led us to suggest a transition in scale and materials from one end of the park to the other, beginning with brick and a little bit of metal and stone for the bell pavilion; brick and a more liberal use of stone and metal on the visitor center; and the possible use of stone and glass exclusively on the Constitution Center. We requested that these buildings maintain a streetwall along Sixth Street, with a greater proportion of solid wall than openings, but called for greater transparency on the side facing the park. We hoped the buildings would relate their interior activity to the park, to animate it and help light it at night.

The cornice of Independence Hall, about forty feet above the pavement, was set as a height limit for structures in the first two blocks. For these two narrow buildings, a pitched roof was mandated. The building on the third block, which was much larger, was allowed to be taller on the back (northern) portion of the site and a flat roof was permitted.

The first portions of the park are expected to open next year, and it is possible that the entire ensemble will be complete and functioning by 2006. This is not a long period of time in the life of any city, but is likely to be a moment of significant transformation. Certainly, not since the Benjamin Franklin Parkway project in the early 1900s has such an ensemble of coordinated buildings, designed by such a distinguished group of architects, been attempted in Philadelphia.

There is little in the project that portends nostalgia. Yet the new park and buildings have the potential to become a portion of the city that is loaded with memories of the place and culture, of the astonishing events that took place here two and a quarter centuries ago.

Notes

1. Some of these still exist. They lead east and west from the site, affording views to important surviving artifacts such as Christ Church, or providing access to nearby attractions and popular cafes and theaters. Their evocative names (such as Apple Tree Alley) were worth reviving if only to revive the memory of these lost streets.

Independence Mall Master Plan

Client: U.S. National Park Service
Landscape architect and lead firm: The Olin Partnership
Architect: Bohlin, Cywinski, Jackson
Planner: Kise, Straw and Kolodner

Independence Park

Client: U.S. National Park Service
Funding: William Penn Foundation
Landscape Architect: Olin Partnership

Liberty Bell Pavilion

Architect: Bohlin, Cywinski, Jackson
Client: U.S. National Park Service
Funding: City of Philadelphia, Walter Annenberg Foundation

Gateway Visitor Center

Client: Independence Park Institute
Architect: Kallman McKinnell Wood
Funding: City of Philadelphia, State of Pennsylvania, Pew Charitable Trust

National Constitution Center

Client: National Constitution Center
Funding: Private individuals, corporations, U.S. Congress
Architect: Pei Cobb Freed