

The First Ten Years of the Design Advocacy Group of Philadelphia

Elise Vider

In late 2001, a group of six Philadelphia architects, planners, and design junkies sat down to a brown-bag lunch to share their worries about the future of the physical city.

Philadelphia, because it had been long beleaguered by population and job loss, was hungry for development — any development. Quality of design, suitability of site, impact on neighborhoods, traffic management and other considerations were secondary. The once-mighty Philadelphia Planning Commission, led in its heyday by the legendary Ed Bacon, was widely dismissed as ineffectual and irrelevant, a shadow of its former self. And the Foundation for Architecture and its Civic Issues Committee had just folded, leaving Philadelphia with no informed advocates for excellence in the built environment.

With an antiquated zoning code, inadequate planning, and no one calling for high quality design, the real estate boom that was getting underway had already become an open season for developers.

From that first session grew The Design Advocacy Group, widely known as “DAG” (the name stuck before the group had a chance to even fully consider it), which rapidly established its credentials as an independent and powerful voice for excellent design and planning in Philadelphia. **Ten years later, that is still what we are.**

2012 is shaping up as a watershed year for DAG. Besides marking our tenth anniversary, we have a new chair, the architect Kiki Bolender, a new website, and an astonishing 1,373 “members” on our listserv. Our monthly meetings routinely attract 80 or more attendees – at 8 A.M! – to listen to prominent speakers. Our leadership is widely quoted in the media, and our positions are cited frequently in editorials. Developers and public officials seek our input.

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So it seems a good time to document DAG's history, at least informally. (I've long held that DAG would make an excellent dissertation topic for a student of organizational dynamics.)

Bill Becker and Alan Greenberger, both stalwarts of the late Foundation for Architecture, convened that first group of brown-baggers, and they were DAG's first and second chairs. That inaugural session also included Ed Bronstein, Charlie Thomson, Janice Woodcock and myself.

Their vision was simple and strong; in the words of Becker: "We were going to be all-volunteer and transparent, just the smartest group that would influence outcomes and we were going to do it by pursuing a path that was opposite to the traditional Philadelphia path, which was to follow the money. We were to be a voice at the table to say that design is important, not a luxury and not incompatible with doing things quickly, efficiently and not at exorbitant cost."

The early DAGsters crafted a mission statement that still stands today: "The mission of the Design Advocacy Group is to provide an independent and informed public voice for design quality in the architecture and physical planning of the Philadelphia region. Our goal is to be proactive as well as reactive; effective as well as thoughtful; critical as well as constructive. We want to create an unparalleled voice for design, a group whose opinion on the quality of our environment is sought after and whose contribution makes a difference. We are a group drawn from a broad spectrum of disciplines, comprised of motivated individuals who are routinely engaged in matters of design, development and planning and who are not afraid to speak out." After three preliminary sessions, we agreed that each would invite two more attendees, and the first "official" DAG meeting was held on April 3, 2002, at the offices of MGA Partners, with 19 in attendance. Our first roster of issues included Mayor John Street's then-new Neighborhood Transformation Initiative, specialty vs. chain retailers on Rittenhouse Row, the Schuylkill Metro route through Center City, Penn's gateway project, air rights at 30th Street Station, long-range planning on the Delaware River, and expansion of the Convention Center.

The issues before us today have clearly changed, but DAG still operates on its original model of guerilla advocacy. As honest brokers – unencumbered, as a group, by financial or professional ties to development, political or civic projects – DAG rapidly gained influence by sharing with the public its knowledge about urban design and planning.

Along the way, we created a steering committee empowered to "speak" on behalf of DAG, but

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DAG remains without formal organization, with no board of directors, bylaws, dues or fundraising apparatus. All it takes to become a DAG “member” is to go to the website and provide a name and email address.

As with many Philadelphia institutions, DAG’s decision-making process is influenced by the Quaker tradition of consensus. Every month, at our open-to-all meeting, issues are deliberated and information is shared. A guest speaker, often a developer or architect, presents a proposed or planned development. Attendees toss out reactions, ideas. If a more deliberative response is called for, an informal task force will form itself to consider the issue and report back to the full DAG membership. DAG’s 16-member steering committee frequently takes up questions that seem to require a response – deliberating and sharing drafts of opinion pieces, letters and testimony and engaging in long and collegial email debates that have become legendary within the city’s design and planning circles.

DAG’s first major public foray was in 2003 with its “Pride of Place” forum. Moderated by David Brownlee, a longtime DAGster and art history professor at Penn, the event drew 150 to a crowded Carpenters’ Hall to discuss issues related to parking, the Delaware River waterfront, Center City development and historic preservation. From that grew a second forum at the Franklin Institute at which mayoral contender Sam Katz debated issues with attorney Michael Sklaroff, sitting in for Mayor Street.

In 2006, in anticipation of the next mayoral election, and led by architect George Clafien, DAG drafted its Reform Agenda, a pivotal document that called for, among other things, a Philadelphia Department of Transportation, design review, a comprehensive citywide plan and zoning reform. (That year DAG also issued its Urban Design Evaluation Guidelines, a list of questions that remains an invaluable tool for community groups and others that assess proposed projects.) A 2007 forum at the Free Library drew hundreds to hear Democratic candidates for mayor discuss planning and design issues in advance of that year’s primary.

It is a major point of pride for DAG that so much of the Reform Agenda was incorporated into Michael Nutter’s platform and, subsequently, the agenda for his administration. While the call to “raise the bar for quality and diversity in design” remains an ongoing challenge, “the Reform Agenda highlighted things we more or less take for granted now,” notes Brownlee, who since 2007 has served as DAG vice chair along with Clafien. It should also be noted that Greenberger,

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a DAG founder and chair, now serves as Philadelphia's deputy mayor for planning and economic development.

Over the years, DAG advocacy has focused on myriad public and private development proposals – gaming, parking garages, schools, the waterfront, planning, historic preservation and much more.

In 2009-2010, architect Joanne Aitken (who has just stepped down as chair after three-plus years) guided DAG through another key development by securing a three-year grant from the William Penn Foundation, which has enabled DAG to hire a DAG Fellow, Anna Ishii, who serves as webmaster and administrator. The new website is also a result of the foundation's generosity. And watch for "DAG Postcards," a new outreach initiative to be launched this year.

As Philadelphia moves into its fifth century and DAG begins its second decade, we remain firm in our conviction that, as Bill Becker puts it, "design affects the quality of every environment, so design quality is a matter of public interest." And DAG proudly continues to offer an alternative model for public advocacy; we are an all-volunteer group, guided by principle and committed to using informed discussion and consensus to elevate public dialogue about the physical character of Philadelphia.

ELISE VIDER (EliseVider.com) of Elise Vider Editorial Services is an award-winning writer and editor. She is a co-founder of DAG and remains active on the Steering Committee.

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