



Delft University of Technology

## Comments on the Rehabilitation Plan, Franklin Court and Welcome Park in Philadelphia, USA

**Letter of Comment to The U.S. National Park Service, Independence National Historic Park, Superintendent and the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources and the U.S. House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands.**

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Date May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010  
Subject Benjamin Franklin Life & Legacy Museum

To The U.S. National Park Service,  
Independence National Historic Park  
Ms. Cynthia MacLeod, Superintendent  
143 South 3rd Street  
Philadelphia, PA 19106  
United States of America

Cc Members of the  
U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources  
Mr. Jeff Bingaman, Chairman  
304 Dirksen Senate Building  
Washington, DC 20510  
United States of America

Members of the  
U.S. House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands  
Mr. Raúl M. Grijalva, Chairman  
1333 Longworth House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515  
United States of America

Dear Cynthia MacLeod,

In Europe, my colleagues and I have seen the proposed redesigns for Benjamin Franklin Life & Legacy Museum as situated in Philadelphia's Independence National Historical Park. As an architect, urban designer and academician, I could only be grateful for your request for public input. Herewith the National Park Service has acknowledged the public importance of the place in society and city, in the State, the Nation and beyond. And, as it forms not just a place, the alterations as proposed are quite worrisome.

Franklin Court, including its museum, is situated just off Philadelphia's Independence Mall and, as we all know, it symbolizes 1776 likewise. In retrospective, it is a crucial part of the final stages of a project presented in the built-up to the sesquicentennial of the American Independence. According this 1915 plan, the project had to shelter the signing of the Declaration of Independence and the crafting of the United States Constitution as well as it had to give new settings for some buildings of national importance. So this early proposal laid the foundation for a museum and landscaped court. The first initiative was a continuation of the renowned City Beautiful movement, as one the architects, Albert Kelsey, previously had manifested in his pamphlet "The Philadelphia Parkway Project". New public spaces would symbolize civic society as, one, dominantly present since The Enlightenment and, two, underlying the existence of the United States of America. Kelsey's former associate Paul Cret continued proposing similar visions for the core of the city in the subsequent years. Still it took more than a decade and several plans to give the city its famous mall. It was this Roy Larson, Cret's the junior partner, who proposed for

the first time a mall. (Kesley and Beek 1902, Kelsey and Knickerbacker Boyd 1915, Cret 1933, Larson 1937) As most Philadelphians and professionals around the world know the work was continued by urban planner Ed Bacon. To make Larson's mall a true mall, as designed at places of national interest, Bacon studied the work of Walter Griffin and Pierre Charles L'Enfant. As such, he introduced a concept of a mall as laid down in among others Washington's National Mall. Fundamental in his redevelopment plan was also his functional-based approach. His ambition was to re-plan streets to keep through traffic out, in a way that the new mall would be foremost a 'pedestrian mall' as Bacon put it. He gave the public a place to gather as a whole. (Philadelphia City Planning Exhibition 1947, Bacon 1967) Eventually, on June 28, 1948, the U.S. Congress passed a law, which would establish the Independence National Historical Park "[f]or the purpose of preserving for the benefit of the American people". (US Public Law 80-795)

This all is unquestionable and it is not put on a stand for further deliberations at the present. However, Franklin Court could only be understood within this context. Honoring one of your nation's founders in the famous project by the design of the firm Venturi and Rauch, now under reconsideration, it is part of the same urban construction. According early plans, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown extended the network of public spaces through the site of the national shrine. Yet, where Bacon had proposed an International Exhibition to celebrate the bicentennial city and favored International Style to build a Benjamin Franklin museum on the site, the Philadelphia School, dubbed 'Scuola di Venturi', had chosen differently. Grand design was replaced by a kind of grassroots development. Supported by the public government, they retained some of the sixties activist spirit with their deep involvement in community planning. The result would be identified as Philadelphia '76, a series of individual pavilions, museums, reconstructed or rehabilitated historic houses, and taverns, representing our pluralist society. Ultimately, 'We the People' was brought to the people. Venturi himself had built the masterpiece; a so-called Ghost House on the site of Franklin's home. In a 'significant and significative scheme' and 'in anticipation of crowds who would visit' it architecture in a sense disappeared; what was left was sign. (Rowan 1961, Batcheler 1970, Venturi and Scott Brown 1972, Dixon, Coombs et al 1976)

Today, Franklin Court is not only a unique showcase of Late Modern architecture, but by its modest representation it respects the site as it is, and as the remainders have been excavated in 1950, just after Congress had passed the law to do so. Its creation has added a last pearl of independence to the initial plan of Kelsey. By means of steel frames, evocating the residence and print shop, and a 18th century garden, Venturi and Scott Brown have recreated the home of Benjamin Franklin as a true public space open for all people (even museum entry was free). By matter of course, the brick shed indicating the entrance of the underground museum allow people to continue their path indoors to the public subterranean exhibit. The exceptional but reserved design of the interior public space gives the floor to the exhibition of the remainders of the original foundation, walls, privy pits, et cetera. The place has gravitated a wide variety of individuals, groups and organizations since its opening. It has become an iconic public space renowned and internationally highly regarded in the fields of architecture, engineering, graphics, interior design, landscape and urban planning. More so, I would state that the design of Benjamin Franklin Life & Legacy Museum has become

closely interwoven with the contemporary idea of publicity, community and civic society, echoing the celebrated 'unalienable rights', which are extended beyond national recognition for federal history. The humble architecture and the permanent urban setting of these valuable cornerstones of the American Independence and, self-evident, the equality of all humans in general, has become a cornerstone itself. Thus, any rehabilitation has to be handled with great care.

From this perspective, the proposed redesign as presented on the compliance meeting of March 23, 2010 and recently published on NPS website neglects the essence of the place on two major aspects. Firstly, the design of the new entrance, in all its alternative studies, intrudes the court in an obstructive way. It reduces the original size remarkably, while stylistically the proposed design draws all the attention to High Architecture rather than respecting the historic precinct. By one single move, it substitutes both the original grassroots approach of the design of Late Modern public space and the essential foundation giving the space its public meaning in the first place. The suggested entrance competes strongly with the steel representation of the collective image of the original buildings. Secondly, but in the same line, the transformation of the interior public space in essence adds more confusing competition. The source of the museum seems to become overgrown by the introduction of detached boxes or displays chaotically laid-out. The public circulation is reduced, but as envisioned less clear. The handsome brick, which is referring to the 18th century buildings, and giving the space its catacomb nature, is whitewashed. Braking down walls, replacing them by blank white paper sheet alternatives and provocative architecture is like eliminating pages in our history books and rewriting a new book.

If outdated installations and lightning produce problems in the daily use of the museum, our discipline offers innumerable delicate ways to improve this. If circulation is a problem, signs and symbols in all their connotations could offer solutions which are more familiar to the iconic design. And, if capacity is a problem the answer might lay outside limits of conventional thinking, outside the area of study, and perhaps most literally just outside the current premises. So, in summery, if the focus of the project is the true rehabilitation of the museum, this project needs serious reconsideration, including design guidelines and a review of the assignment by the designers. Above all, with my comments I hope I could contribute to the rescue of this important place, as well as, and I quote your announcement of last May 5, "a new appreciation of the life and accomplishments of Benjamin Franklin".

Yours faithfully,



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