

## OBSERVATIONS ON THE GREENING OF PHILADELPHIA

### INTANGIBLE — AND TANGIBLE — BENEFITS RESULT FROM INVESTMENT IN GREEN INITIATIVES

BY JOHN J. SOROKO

I have been thinking about the role the legal community can play in the revitalization of Philadelphia and, in particular, a commitment to public art and green spaces. So as I approached my office one day recently, I was again struck by the beautiful swath of green that banks the Roy Lichtenstein sculpture, *Brushstroke No. 2*. The sculpture has graced the courtyard outside our Philadelphia offices since Duane Morris, under the leadership of our former chairman, Sheldon Bonovitz, arranged through the Lichtenstein Foundation to have it installed upon moving into our new building two years ago. Each day, thousands walk by and admire it. Personally, it always adds a bounce to my step as I pass it heading into the office. I am proud that this is something we are sharing with the city of Philadelphia.

Another example of a sharing with the community of beauty in both art and nature is one that I am far from alone in appreciating: The Philadelphia Flower Show. It is difficult to live in Philadelphia and not be aware of this spectacular event presented annually by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS). If you have never attended, you owe it to yourself to do so. To call it “a flower show” barely scratches the surface of this world-class event. Now in its 179th year, the flower show presents stunning floral displays on a staggering scale with varieties seldom seen elsewhere. There are also top-rated musicians (this year’s theme was “Jazz It Up”), high teas, lectures, demonstrations and (new this year) a family area that offered puppet shows, stories and life-size topiaries of Sesame Street characters that mesmerized my 8-year-old daughter.

Over the last few years I have become more involved in supporting PHS, and my wife and I have regularly attended the annual black-tie event put on by PHS in support of the flower show and other PHS

initiatives. It is always great fun, and I am happy to support an organization that brings so much to the community. But last year, Jane Pepper, president of PHS, graciously invited me to take a behind-the-scenes tour of the preparation for the show.

It was nothing short of phenomenal. The scale, the planning and the level of detail that go into orchestrating this event is astounding. After the tour and dinner, Pepper first described to me another project that she heads in concert with the PHS: Philadelphia Green. For those unfamiliar with it, Philadelphia Green is dedicated to working with neighborhood residents in and around Philadelphia, community organizations, and public and private entities to create and restore open spaces in Philadelphia’s residential neighborhoods, downtown areas and at its gateways. Founded in 1974 as a division of PHS, Philadelphia Green is one of the oldest urban greening projects in the country and was helping to rebuild blighted landscapes and strengthen community ties long before “green” became fashionable. As Pepper says, “It’s amazing the difference a well-tended park or community garden can have on a community.”

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She went on to tell me more about the project, its goals and the manner in which it supports itself. Through the efforts of Pepper and a group of remarkable volunteers and PHS staff, Philadelphia Green has brought the beauty and life-affirming impact of nature to the hearts and minds of the citizens of Philadelphia for almost 35 years. I went home that evening truly moved by the Herculean efforts at PHS, and I was back in Pepper’s office within a week to ask how I might help.



Roy Lichtenstein sculpture, *Brushstroke No. 2*

I learned that Philadelphia Green relies heavily on working in partnership with neighborhood residents and community organizations — using greening as a way to strengthen community ties and encourage residents to empower themselves by participating in the reclamation of their own neighborhoods. Over the past two mayoral administrations, city leaders have strongly emphasized instituting green initiatives, and we are fortunate that our mayor, Michael Nutter, is a champion of these programs. Through the generous support of the private sector and the hard work of dedicated volunteers, Philadelphia Green has effected unbelievable change in its reclamation of Philadelphia’s landscape.

I learned more about the project and joined a committee, the Green City Strategy (GCS) Committee, which has grown out of Philadelphia Green and places its emphasis on creating economic incentives for businesses to invest in green initiatives.

What GCS was designed to address is the fact that investing in community aesthetics yields more than social gains; it encourages businesses to stay and to invest by providing

economic incentives. It also encourages developers to see the potential in neighborhoods that would otherwise continue to be ignored. A conversation between John Ball, president of Shoemaker Construction Co. and current chair of GCS, and Blaine Bonham, executive vice president of PHS, who has worked tirelessly with the organization since the early 1970s and has played a major role in its continued growth and success, is instructive.

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Prior to becoming chair of GCS, Ball had already been for many years chair of The Reinvestment Fund (TRF), a national leader in the financing of neighborhood revitalization. Begun in 1985 as a small community development organization working in Greater Philadelphia, TRF has evolved into a progressive, results-oriented, socially responsible community investment group that today works across the mid-Atlantic region. Over the years, TRF has worked closely with another important organization run by the city of Philadelphia, the Neighborhood Transition Initiative (NTI), which raises money through public bonds, creating targeted investment for the remediation of blighted city landscapes.

It was through these programs that Ball became involved with PHS. PHS had been brought in by the city to implement its Clean and Green program. Once NTI had removed crumbling structures, PHS came in and planted grass, trees and flowers. Incredibly, this took place over millions of square feet of reclaimed space that have become parks, gardens and playgrounds. To put that into perspective, NTI and PHS are responsible for reclaiming some 40 acres of space within the confines of Philadelphia. John Ball's involvement in GCS has been a driving force in showing the corporate community that not only is greening the right thing to do socially and for the general welfare of our environment, but that the economic benefits are considerable and measurable. All of this has had a meaningful economic impact as well. As John Ball once asked Blaine Bonham, the key question is: "What does this do for my pocketbook?"

According to Bonham, that comment was a transforming moment in his career. What at first seemed an offensive question turned out to be the source of one of the most important lessons he has learned about his industry: that there is nothing wrong with emphasizing the economic incentive for the business community to invest in green projects. "The motivation becomes almost incidental," says Bonham. "While the value of our work stands on its own, the future would indeed be bleak if all the businesses went away. We can't afford to ignore that, and there is no reason that we should. This is a win-win for everyone."

In part because of that conversation, PHS agreed to manage a study conducted by the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania and funded by the William Penn Foundation. The study, headed by Wharton professor Susan Wachter, showed that there are tangible economic benefits to the investment in green initiatives, and the study demonstrated the efficacy of these efforts as a barometer of the economic health of a city.

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Presented with hard economic data, the business community has responded, and the economic impact has been remarkable. The Wharton study cites a \$12 million rise in property values in Philadelphia's New Kensington neighborhood as a result of \$1 million invested. Another section showed a 10 percent increase in nearby property values attributable to tree and garden planting. In addition, a 2006 National Geographic study showed a 50 percent reduction in crimes committed in and around buildings surrounded by trees and shrubs compared to areas with no vegetation.

As is by now apparent, what has taken place through the efforts of Pepper, Ball, Bonham and so many at PHS is nothing short of fantastic. Social investment has given birth to economic investment, and the city of Philadelphia is benefiting from this partnership.

Still another example of the endless ways to get involved is a new project that we are working on at Duane Morris. We are looking into joining forces with other Philadelphia

law firms to institute the first-ever Green Summer Associates Program, where all summer associates would be invited to be a part of a volunteer program for PHS and the Green City Strategy. Our hope is that we will encourage these summer associates, many of whom will eventually choose to call Philadelphia their home, to choose to invest in the future of Philadelphia by supporting PHS and its community programs.

The work being led by Jane Pepper and everyone at PHS is fantastic. It has been great to learn more about it and to support those efforts. I can't think of a better way to give back to our community. If you are interested in learning more, please contact the dedicated staff at PHS who can best put your talents to work. PHS is at (215) 988-8800 or [www.pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org](http://www.pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org). Call and "get green." You'll soon be helping to build a better Philadelphia.



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