

Testimony submitted to the Coalition of Inquiry into the State of the Future
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Next Great City: the Manufacturing of Inferiority and the Myth of Progress

With all of the rhetoric being bestowed upon us about Philadelphia as the "next great city," we might ask simply: what is a "great city"? How do we know when a city is great? What are the terms of greatness? And, more importantly perhaps, who decides what those terms are?

The origin of this "next great city" obsession seems to originate precisely from an October 2005 article by Andrew Nelson in the *National Geographic Traveler* magazine. Mr. Nelson romps around Philadelphia with urban hipsters and cognoscenti, attending an anniversary gala and a noisy art opening, sampling Philly delicacies and "mixing it up" in a couple of neighborhoods. The "greatness" Nelson seems to be after depends largely on Richard Florida's creative class formula: cities only thrive when young, hip, often gay, "creative" workers want to live and play there. In Philadelphia, Nelson finds (or is shown) -- amid the backdrop of a picturesque historicism -- all the right ingredients: grand, gritty old abandoned buildings ripe for redevelopment (plus some techy-looking new architecture), a restaurant "renaissance" with all the hottest fusion cuisines, an "effervescent" art gallery scene, a burgeoning city wifi program, and so many authentic, distinct neighborhoods (152, to be precise). All of these come together in the nouveau goulash that is Florida's "open city," a place inviting to "singles, gays, artists and individuals [who have] excitement and a sense of creative energy." But open for whom? Great for whom? The subtext here is that 1) the citizenry of Philadelphia is somehow deficient and inferior and needs an injection of "creativity," and 2) the terms of greatness are generated externally, not by the citizens but by a neoliberal conception of "natural" economic and cultural progress as internalized and spewed forth by a journalist reporting for a corporate travel magazine.

This upper-middle class influx of wealth and investment implied by such definitions of "greatness" for Philadelphia disenfranchises the very backbone of our cities: the folks who have managed to stay put throughout the worst of times when cities were not such inspiring places to live. Special care must be taken to insure that our long-time neighbors, who often may not be able to choose whether to stay or to go, are brought along on this "creative" adventure in urban living through such programs as inclusionary zoning, subsidized, mixed-income housing, intensive education and job-training programs, and the like. Without these economically diverse neighbors living side-by-side with us, we face the prospect of the Homogenous City, a deceptively classless mass of cafe lattes, white earbuds, and excessively priced condos.

Participation *ad nauseam*: 1,001 Easy Steps to a New Disempowered You

Submitted to an exhausting series of often repetitive public forums, the citizens of Philadelphia have been nearly bludgeoned to death with a particular brand of "civic engagement." The distinct feeling of *déjà vu* has been reported at these events, followed by a palpable cynicism regarding the effect of these engagement processes as they have been tried before but have not yielded many tangible results. Participants are asked to respond to simplistic narratives in order to tease out their values about a given subject (eg. "your friend is thinking about moving to Philadelphia; what reasons would you give her to do that?"). The conversations are generally framed in such a way as to emphasize the *positive* and de-emphasize the *negative*, thus an attempt is made to minimize conflict and tension, which are to be avoided for fear of derailing the process or demoralizing the participants.

The civic engagement sessions rely on clear hierarchies that mimic traditional models of representative governance. A small group of facilitators, moderators and experts determines the agenda, the questions and the format of the engagement process. Fractured into small working groups, participants respond on cue to specific queries. Their responses are collected, filtered, and then regurgitated as a presentation of the will of the people. The participants do not have access to the raw data, nor do they have any control over the interpretation and subsequent presentation of the data.

The effect of these restrictions on an organic, citizen-driven conversation coupled with the futility of so many of the same event repeated *ad nauseam* is to further insitutionalize the very negativity which these civic engagement processes are meant to counteract. Citizens are exhorted to join in but the illusive pay-off never seems to come. The prize of political agency is held out, but without giving the public real tools for self-organization and activism they end up leaving more disempowered then before.

Dopey Optimism: "This is the best (insert noun) ever!"

Let the superlatives fly! As was noted before, a dopey optimism pervades and mischaracterizes the inevitable and necessary conflicts that arise in any dialogic public process. Democracy opens up the space of conflict. While pragmatic democracy may ultimately depend upon a majority, its exceptional value resides in its guarantee that dissenting and minority voices will be heard and acknowledged.

The excess of cheerleading and back-patting displayed by the administrators of these civic engagement processes must be seen as necessary in maintaining the illusion of effective participation so as not to discourage the citizenry. Obviously, the key to these projects' funding and appearance of success lies in the very participation of the public. For anyone paying attention, however, the

rosy-colored reports ring false to the point of condescension, as if we, the fragile Philadelphians, might snap at the mere hint of conflict.

Constructive Negativity: the Transformative Nature of Agency

Philadelphia -- or Negadelphia, as one newspaper editor has dubbed us -- is "addicted to negativity," and the administrators of our Next Great City have developed a 12-step program to wean us off the sauce. Negativity is the old, corrupt, backward past. Philadelphia's great future will be built on that distinctly American superstructure of big ideas, optimism and a positive mental attitude. The public is consistently admonished to sublimate its negativity or forever be denied the status of Next Great City.

I would argue, however, that our negativity is to be embraced as it is a fertile field. The seeds of individual critical consciousness are sown in the soils of skepticism, negativity and dissatisfaction. The space of negation is non-compliance, the withholding of consent -- after all, it is the threat of withholding our consent that the authors of the Declaration of Independence expressly invoked as our means to resist destructive forms of government. When faced with the incessant onslaught of trespasses (physical and psychic) against us, self-preservation requires us to first yell "hell no" before we can safely utter "hell yeah." My privileging of negativity is not meant to suggest we devolve into a reflexive, immobilizing pathology. Rather, a transformation is necessary to harness to constructive power of negativity.

Negativity, as a fundamental component in critical thinking, must be tempered by political agency. It is not enough for the citizenry to function as passive subjects in the focus group of nominal civic engagement forums and roundtables, just as it is never enough to step into a voting booth every couple of years and choose the lesser of so many evils. The citizens of Philadelphia need to be given the tools of grassroots activism: self-organization, effective lobbying, non-violent direct action, and sustained campaigns. Without them, the endless feedback loop of participation hypnotizes the public into political apathy. With these tools as implements of deep, structural change in the life of the city, Philadelphians can determine for themselves from a position of power what the terms of its greatness are and take the necessary steps to realize them, one hard-won victory at a time.