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A new concept of urban renewal

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My life is full of building tours and few surprises.

That wasn't the case with my Jan. 31 trip to the Left Bank, developer Carl Dranoff's \$58 million remake of the old General Electric Co. building at 31st and Walnut Streets.

I was more than surprised. As former Mayor Edward G. Rendell preached to a couple of New York investment bankers about the joys of Philadelphia living, I looked down from the sixth-floor lobby to the football-field-size courtyard below, my mouth probably hanging open as it does whenever I'm in awe.

The courtyard had been created by removing the middle of the building — 5,000 cubic yards of steel-reinforced concrete. Dranoff said that was enough concrete for 15

miles of sidewalk, or 20 floors of a 20,000-square-foot office building. About 1,200 cubic yards of soil was used to create the garden bed for the courtyard's bamboo trees and ornamental grasses. Dranoff, who has long been able to lure me to his projects with promises of a throat full of dust and ear-splitting construction noise, briefly joined me at the window.

Back in June, he and I had stood two stories below, in what is now mid-air, and tried to talk as two ram hoes chewed at the concrete floors and columns. "See that," Dranoff said, pointing to a pergola-like concrete structure toward the other end of the courtyard. "That's the only piece of the middle of the building remaining. We left it to give people an idea of the massiveness of the project to create what's there now."



The Left Bank apartments' large courtyard was created by removing the middle of the building. The amount of concrete taken away was enough to form 15 miles of sidewalk. On the left, developer Carl Dranoff talks with Charles Jefferson, the construction director, in the courtyard



I eventually pulled myself from the window, and returned to the January dedication ceremonies. I could repeat what everyone — Penn president Judith Rodin, Dranoff, City Council member Jannie Blackwell, Mayor Street, and others — said at the ceremonies

about the importance of The Left Bank to the future of University City and Philadelphia. They were articulate in their vision for Philadelphia. The Left Bank represents part of an \$800 million multiyear commitment by Penn and Drexel to University City.

The view from the Left Bank: Urban renewal's new meaning

The universities' hope is to create for Philadelphia an environment similar to Cambridge, Mass., the home of Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

But it is the courtyard that speaks the most articulately to me about the possibilities of buildings such as the old GE building that just three years ago was vacant and set for demolition.

We still find it easier to tear down rather than reuse. We continue to believe that the nation's resources are infinite, that we can expand farther and farther from our central cities, and that the only use for outdated industrial buildings is as commuter parking lots.

When I was growing up, "urban renewal" was the order of the day. In my hometown, which had been damaged by a flood in 1955, this meant tearing down older buildings, abandoned mills downtown,

and turning them into parking lots "temporarily" until new uses could be found for the land.

Forty years later, those temporary parking lots remain. They are usually empty, because there's no reason to be downtown. Few people work there; even fewer live there. No one shops downtown, because the supermarket and department store have been closed for at least two decades.

Before urban renewal, 6,000 people – almost the entire population – lived downtown on either side of the river.

Now, the 1,600 residents of Seymour, Conn., use the elevated highway – built over downtown as an urban renewal project in the early 1960s - to get to the malls.

That could have happened to South Street in the late 1960s and early 1970s when that area was slated to become a connector highway from the



The General Electric Co., building before developer Carl Dranoff's \$58 million remake. It is an example of reusing structures rather than razing them.

Schuylkill Expressway to Interstate 95.

Grassroots opposition derailed the project. Instead, South Street has become one of the things about Philadelphia that tourists talk about back home.

While touring The Left Bank, I told someone that I could undertake a similar project with a home-center credit card and six sunny weekends.

But, seriously, although you and I may not have \$58 million, the backing of two universities, and the cooperation of the city, we can create Left Banks on a much smaller scale by rebuilding and maintaining our own houses and neighborhoods. And that includes courtyards.

Our first house was a row-house in Queen Village. The backyard – 100 square feet at

most – had a concrete floor and a rotting shed.

I razed the shed, then ordered bricks and mortar mix from a supplier on Washington Avenue. I borrowed a book on brickwork, and, over the next several weeks, built garden enclosures tall enough to give the roots of plants room to grow before they hit the concrete.

When the time came for soil, a colleague with a small farm in Chester County trucked in several dozen trash cans full of it. We had to carry them through the house because there was no other way to get to the backyard.

By summer, what had been just a hunk of concrete was blooming with flowers and vegetables. I think it cost me \$150. The sense of satisfaction was worth about \$58 million.



The Left Bank apartment building, at 31st and Walnut Streets. Three years ago, the structure was vacant and set for demolition.