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Serendipity on the Schuylkill: The Fairmount Waterworks Heather Hood



View of the Waterworks from the Schuylkill River. Courtesy Mark B. Thompson Associates.



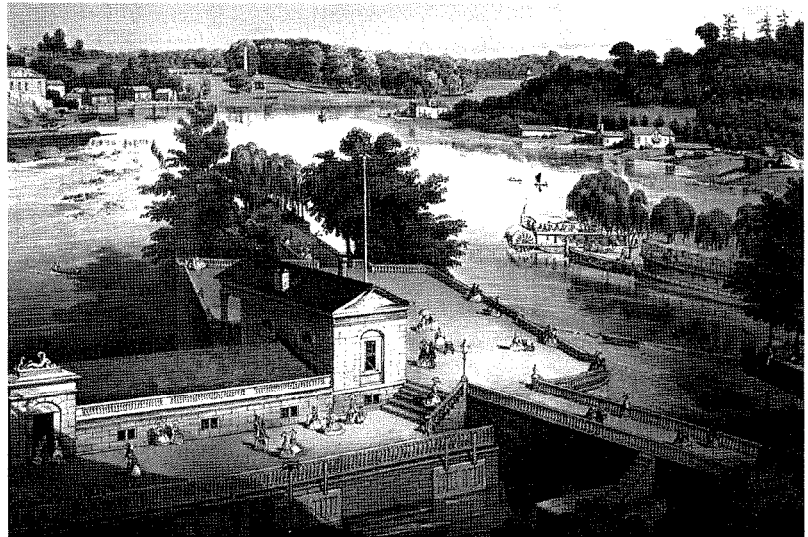
Philadelphia's Waterworks is a unique case of a civic place being born from urban infrastructure needs. Although its function has changed many times and it has suffered from a lack of consistent maintenance, the Waterworks remains embedded in many Philadelphians' image of their city. Today, people who see the Waterworks' potential and beauty are struggling to define a new generation of public uses that best adapt to the architecture and the diversity of people who could enjoy it.

The Waterworks played a significant role in Philadelphia's transformation from an artisan to a manufacturing economy. The city established a Watering Committee in 1798 after it had suffered two yellow fever epidemics and because it lacked a reliable source of water for putting out fires. The committee found that city wells were contaminated by cesspools and that an entirely new system needed to be engineered.

The first buildings were finished in 1815 and served as Philadelphia's primary pumping station until 1911, supplying up to five million gallons of water daily. The Waterworks drew in water from the adjacent Schuylkill River, purified it and pumped it to the adjacent Fair Mount, from which it flowed by gravity throughout the city. The compound evolved as the machinery evolved from steam engines to waterwheels to turbines. The New Mill House was constructed from 1869 to 1862 and the Old Mill House was renovated from 1868 to 1872.

The Waterworks' designers and superintendents, Frederick Graff, Sr., and Frederick Graff, Jr., always envisioned the Waterworks as a civic and educative place and found ways to incorporate public access to its grounds and structures. Paintings from the nineteenth century depict people strolling around and within the Waterworks, rowing, biking and picnicking. It was popular with the bourgeois Philadelphians, traveling businessmen, tourists, ice skaters, painters and lovers for many years. It even served as a steamboat terminal. By the 1880s, however, the city decided that filtration at other sites would be more efficient and reliable and stopped maintaining the Waterworks. By 1911, Schuylkill River water was far too polluted to be a source for the facility, which was decommissioned.

From 1911 to 1962, the Waterworks was used as one of the first aquariums in the country. In 1974, the Junior League (a local civic group) led a fundraising campaign to restore and preserve the main structures before they collapsed. Since then, the Watering Committee, Junior League members, Philadelphia's Water Department, the Fairmount Parks Commission and various individuals have been seeking a way to revive the Waterworks as a great place. Currently, a restaurant occupies the Engine House and an interpretive center occupies the Old Mill House.



Julius Bien, *View of Fairmount Waterworks from the Landing*, 1867. Courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art. Collection of S. Robert Teitelman.

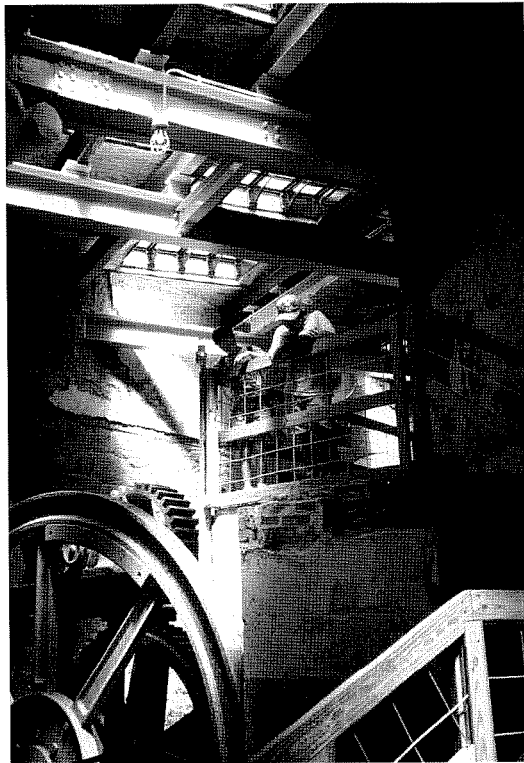
During the twentieth century, many activities have found a home in various parts of the Waterworks: the aquarium, restaurant and interpretive center; a swimming pool, a cafe and a storage place for the Waterworks' own architectural elements. Teens hang out there, rollerbladers meet there, people fish there. We know that something must be special about the Waterworks if it has remained a choice kissing spot for two centuries.

The Allure of the Waterworks

What about the Waterworks allows it to be so many things? Moreover, what has compelled people to rally for its preservation and reuse for almost a century?

Visiting the Waterworks, one feels a sense of comfort, security and possibility. The site, chosen so the Waterworks would be close to river water and Fair Mount, offers both a sense of seclusion and opportunities for expansive views. The winds are mild; the afternoon sun is warm; the sounds of the river create a gentle beat; and the varied architectural spaces and niches invite discovery. There is no one way to see and know the place;

Today the Waterworks' original machinery is open to view. Courtesy Heather Hood.



one can look down upon it, walk through it or see it, as most people do, from expressways across the river.

The Graffs infused the Waterworks with civic meaning by using the Greek Revival Style, signifying democracy and Philadelphia's grounding ideals of egalitarianism and humanism. They included human-scaled elements such as balconies, pavilions, promenades, gazebos and sculptures, and they included platforms from which people could observe the turbines at work and experience this great technological achievement. Imagine if our local power stations, television newsrooms and manufacturing plants were similarly conceived and explored.

As Philadelphia has matured, the location has become fixed in Center City's grand plan. The Waterworks now nestles between two prominent city landmarks, the Philadelphia Art Museum and Boathouse Row. All three sit at one end of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, a diagonal boulevard that leads from City Hall past institutions like the public library, the Franklin Institute, the Natural History Museum and the Rodin Museum.

People often assume the Waterworks is a civic place. My brother thought it was a mini-museum;

an old schoolmate thought it was an abandoned theater house; someone else I talked to was sure it was the first boathouse. While each had seen it but never been to it, each imputed to it a civic identity.

Current Intentions, Potential Alternatives

The Waterworks has again sparked people's imaginations, this time to preserve the place. The current Watering Committee is assembling funds in hopes of finding new functions for the Waterworks. Determining a program is difficult for many reasons. Much of the site lies within a 100-year-flood plain, there is little parking nearby and there will be difficulties with handicapped accessibility and safety.

One challenge is to strike a balance between the Waterworks's stature, which derives from its history, architecture and location, and its humble scale. The renovated Waterworks should also be accessible and attractive to its neighbors, as should any local project financed largely with public funds (\$2 million from the city and \$2.5 million from the state).¹

Nearby development projects will strengthen the Waterworks's importance at the civic and community scales. The Schuylkill River Development Council is developing a riverfront park that will lead from the Waterworks to South Street. Six thousand people (two thirds of them minorities) already live in this area; the conversion of the National Publishing Building into condominiums and construction of new homes nearby will bring in even more.²

The Brown Thompson Group, a development and architecture firm, brought the project to the fore three years ago by proposing that the Waterworks be used for an Olympic training center. The idea was rooted in the love many people in the area have for rowing and, after it was criticized for being too exclusive, evolved to include a mentoring program for inner-city kids. Still, to many



Far left: A cafe operated on the terrace in the 1970s. Courtesy Mark B. Thompson Associates. Left: Children attending the Philadelphia Water Department's summer camp at the Waterworks. Courtesy Philadelphia Water Department Interpretive Center.

people, rowers mentoring children from inner-city Philadelphia seemed to be an improbable idea.

The architecture and history of the Waterworks offer simple lessons. The Waterworks' future should be pondered through a public and local debate, rather than the proposals of a committee or hired professionals. The architecture and the program should be civic, educative and allow for further evolution.

Many types of spaces remain in the Waterworks (open, broken-up, small, large, above and below water levels, grouped, independent, slender, wide, indoor and outdoor), suggesting that it can accommodate the multiple activities that are characteristic of contemporary community centers and the multiple demands of diverse urban communities.

A number of activities immediately come to mind: artists in residence spaces for visiting artists or art scholars through a museum program, a crafts museum, an architectural education facility, offices and shared meeting space for nonprofits in the arts and education, a conflict management headquarters for local companies and organizations, a facility for public and private celebrations

(company picnics, weddings, graduation parties, summer solstice festivals, Kwanza festivals, rowers' rock-a-thons, rap contests and poetry slams), a restorative center and bath house, an affordable gym, an outdoor market (including food and crafts) during the warmer months and the rowing season. There must be many more.

The most powerful potential for The Waterworks lies in the convergence of the great desire to save it and the great needs nearby. If the Watering Committee and its consultants continue to develop an inclusive process to learn what those needs are, their dreams to save the place will more likely become reality, and the place will be even more widely cherished.

Notes

1. "Works in Progress: Two Visionaries Push a Grand Plan to Save the Showpiece on the Schuylkill: The Historic, Picturesque, Dilapidated Waterworks," *Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine* (20 November 1994), 11.
2. Alan J. Heavens, "Schuylkill Park Ready to Bloom," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Historical references from Jane Mork Gibson, "Fairmount Waterworks," *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 84:360-361 (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1988).