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Architecture of Power in Philadelphia, an Analysis of the Comcast City Campus and its relation to the City Center

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Why Does this Matter?

Private interest was allowed to take over and control a city's skyline and to some degree their culture and identity. This is a bad thing by most measures and further illustrates the authoritarian nature of the capitalist economy. Just because someone has the resources under capitalism does not mean they should be able to subject an entire city of people to their undemocratic will.

METHODS

1. Historical and cultural analysis of Philadelphia's city skyline
2. Examination of the architectural style of historical buildings and the styles' role in the community
3. Examination of modern architectures' role in our society, and specifically Philadelphia's history
4. Examination of how the Comcast Buildings reframe Philadelphia's culture and recenters the city center away from governmental buildings and towards the private sector

RESULTS

- Modern architecture and skyscrapers in Philadelphia have realigned the city center and changed Philadelphia's cultural identity

Philadelphia's unique cultural relationship between its skyline and power structures means that it can be commodified by whoever builds tallest. Whoever manages that feat will thus rearrange the cultural center of the city regardless of the consent of the denizens due to the authoritarian nature of capitalist organization.

The building to the right of this text box is the Philadelphia city hall and was designed by Scottish architect John McArthur Jr. and Thomas Ustick Walter. It was completed in the year 1901 and its architectural style evokes its own power. Its architectural style is known as the Second Empire style, and it draws elements from both baroque and renaissance style architecture. Due to a gentleman's agreement, it was decided that no building in the city should eclipse the statue on top of the building's height. This agreement worked surprisingly well until One Liberty Place was built, despite public animosity towards any skyscraper reaching higher than this building. Corporate power and capital won the day over the will of the people. This led to the commercialization of Philadelphia's city skyline which had long been a cultural unifier for the people of the city.



Visible on the right is the Comcast Center lobby, home to the "Comcast Experience", a huge animated production playing on the massive screen integrated into the lobby which draws massive crowds of tourists and residents alike. This, combined with the mall held inside the building, is an attempt by the Comcast corporation to utilize the status that comes with being the tallest building in a city to commodify the city center for commercial gain: a feat that is only possible due to Philadelphia's historical status, cultural identity, and power structure being tied to its architecture which places importance upon the tallest building as a cultural unifier.



the destruction of the gentleman's agreement regarding building height and thus the recentering of the city skyline around the new tallest building caused many skyscrapers to be built in the city of Philadelphia. Furthermore, once the city hall was supplanted as the tallest building in the city, it was made clear to developers and investors that whoever could control the skyline could control the public center and the culture of Philadelphia. This was the case due to the cultural memory of city hall as a focal point for the denizens of the city and is apparent through the efforts by the comcast corporation to make the bottom floors of these buildings not only publicly accessible but also culturally significant.



Important information

About Comcast

- American telecommunications company which is largely hated by its customers, even winning the consumer reports worst company in America award twice and holding second and occasionally third place on many more occasions
- Occupies an actively antagonistic position towards the residents of Philadelphia as it was the cite of numerous protests, many of which were calling on Comcast to give more back to the city it exploits.

The Fight Against Skyscrapers

- According to news media at the time, many Philadelphians were opposed to the building of the skyscraper at One Liberty Place (the initial usurper of the gentleman's agreement). Apparently talking about it as one would a "Nuclear Bomb" (Goldberger, 1987)
- Private news media made light of the massive citizen-led effort to halt the construction
- Prominent Philadelphian city planner, Edmund Bacon, operated during the times these structures were being proposed and made. He predicted the recentering of the city and said this about the construction of One Liberty Place, "In our arrogance, we replace it with a floating center up for sale to the highest bidder".
- A poll conducted by *Philadelphia Daily News* found citizens opposed the Comcast Center's construction 2 to 1 and the Philly Mayor said his mail ran 1,000 to 1 against it. Despite this, it was clearly made anyways.

REFERENCES

Pictures by Wikipedia user Toniklemm, Jeffrey Totaro, and Joseph Kaczmarek respectively (top to bottom)
References *New York Times* writer Paul Goldberger and former Philadelphia Mayor Wilson Goode