A Growing City: Residential Construction and Urban Congestion in Center City Philadelphia

Philadelphia, the fifth largest city in the United States and currently home to the third largest downtown population in the country, is experiencing a resurgence of buyers and renters in the Center City area. After decades of steady decline in its downtown population, the city’s residential neighborhoods are again becoming attractive. However, the influx of residents to the Center City area brings issues of congestion. And so the question remains: how will Philadelphia cope with parking and street congestion in the years to come?

Over the past five years, Center City Philadelphia has seen a continuous growth in population and residential construction. Despite an overall loss of residents in Philadelphia, Center City is booming. Boasting the country’s third largest downtown population after New York and Chicago, Center City’s population has increased 11.5 percent since 2000, jumping from 78,902 to 88,000. Experts predict this trend will continue, with a possible population of 96,000 to 105,000 by 2010 (Slobodzian).

The city is cleaning up after its industrial history, with many old warehouse buildings throughout the city being converted into new, luxury loft
condominiums. New, state-of-the-art condos and apartment buildings are springing up all over the city, welcoming the rush of people to the downtown area. Empty-nesters from the neighboring suburbs, recently graduated students from the city’s numerous universities, wealthy businesspeople, and families with children of varying ages are all moving back into the lively downtown area. Even commuters to New York City are finding homes in Center City. With the assistance of SEPTA, Greyhound, and Amtrak, the commute to New York is less than two hours, and the affordability of Philadelphia is a major selling point to New Yorkers.

This steady increase in population also creates a continuing demand for housing. This demand has spawned the design and construction of numerous high-rise residential complexes in the city. In the next four to five years, the recognizable skyline of Philadelphia will be dramatically transformed. With the exception of the 975-foot Comcast Center that is currently under construction, all of the new skyscrapers will be residential. Thirty or more high-rises are scheduled for completion by 2010, making Philadelphia ready to accommodate the population surge. With 1,350 recently completed apartment and condo units, 3,574 slated for completion by 2008, and another 7,205 proposed for 2010, Philadelphia hopes to lure residents and businesses alike, revitalizing a city rooted in history (Kelly).

Philadelphia has taken the opportunity presented by this building boom to rejuvenate the city’s architecture. Developers are commissioning renowned architects to design sleek new buildings that will change the face
of the city. On the Schuylkill River waterfront, the Richard Meier designed Mandeville Place, “a lithe, glass condo tower,” will enliven the waterfront on a site between Walnut and Chestnut Streets (Kelly). At 608 feet tall, this 43-story, 45-unit building will create a visual link between the current “end” of the skyline and the newly completed Cira Centre across the Schuylkill at 30th Street Station (Mandeville). Robert A. M. Stern, designer of the Comcast Center, has also created a design for a condo tower on Rittenhouse Square. “The first luxury-class condominium development to be built on Rittenhouse Square in 25 years,” this 33-story building will house 500,000 square feet of condos (10 Rittenhouse). Handel Architects is responsible for the design of The Residences at the Ritz-Carlton. This 485-foot, 44-story tower will occupy the site of the former Meridian Plaza Building at the corner of 15th Street and South Penn Square (South).

Adjacent to the Residences at the Ritz will be another high-rise condo tower, 1441 Chestnut Street. Slightly taller than the Residences at the Ritz, this 50-story, 300 unit tower, designed by Cope Linder Architects of Philadelphia, will face Chestnut Street, with the intent to invigorate Chestnut Street along the neighboring blocks (Luxury). Cope Linder Architects is designing another high-rise in the city at 1706 Rittenhouse Square. This ultra-luxurious condo tower will be 30 stories tall and feature an automated underground parking system that is new to Philadelphia (Holcomb).

Another Philadelphia firm involved in the current residential boom is Bower Lewis Thrower Architects. Their design for the Symphony House at
Broad and Pine Streets is currently under construction. At 31 stories, this tower will house 163 luxury condos, with the lower floors containing a parking garage and a new home for the Philadelphia Theater Company (Ytterberg). Another Bower Lewis Thrower project is Phase Two of the 12th and Filbert Street Garage. This tower will hold 144 loft-style condos in 22 stories, while retaining the parking and retail facilities on the lower levels (Ytterberg).

The Philadelphia firm Agoos/Lovera Architects is also currently undertaking several residential projects in the city. Near the site of the 12th and Filbert Garage, A/L is designing a 20 or more story high-rise called the 12th and Arch Streets Condominiums. At 1100 N. Delaware Avenue, A/L is working on a 14-story, 67-unit condominium tower. The firm is also designing a renovation for the Locust Club near Rittenhouse Square that will become an eight-story building with 17 units. For the future, Agoos/Lovera has also been hired to study the possibility of converting part of Two Liberty Place into residential units (Agoos/Lovera).

Other major residential buildings planned for Philadelphia include The Murano, a 43-floor, 316-unit condominium tower currently under construction at 21st and Market Streets (Murano). This building is the first of several high-rises to be built in the quickly developing Market Street West area. Another building proposed for Market West is 1919 Market Street. Set to occupy the lot adjacent to the G. Fred DiBona, Jr. Building (formerly the Independence
Blue Cross tower) on the corner of 20th and Market Streets, this building will house 283 units in 38 floors (Kostelnii).

On the Delaware River waterfront, the city of Philadelphia is implementing a program to reclaim old industrial sites and convert them to residential and public use areas. The program aims to clean up existing brownfield sites and piers in the river, creating lively areas along the riverfront, including a walking and biking path similar to the Schuylkill River Pathway. As part of this program, developers are buying these sites and building high-end condo towers that provide excellent views of the city and the river. One such development is already under construction. Waterfront Square, located on N. Penn Street just off Delaware Avenue and just north of Spring Garden Street, has plans for five residential towers holding a total of 966 units (Waterfront). Another riverfront building, Marina View Towers, will be built just north of the Benjamin Franklin Bridge. The building will hold 180 homes in 30 stories, and it will feature a parking garage and retail space on the lower floors (Ytterberg). At Front and Walnut Streets, 101 Walnut “will continue the resurrection of Front Street, long moribund in the wake of the construction of I-95, and continue Philadelphia’s waterfront revival” with an 11-story tower boasting 10 full-floor homes (Ytterberg). The Delaware Waterfront area has shown so much potential that renowned entrepreneur and developer Donald Trump is planning to erect Trump Tower Philadelphia, a 45-story tower near the Waterfront Square site, to house 250 luxury condos (Parmley).
The New York Architecture firm of Sharples Holden Pasquarelli designed a 12-story, 30-unit building at 108 Arch Street with loft-style apartments that was completed in January 2005. The firm also designed Old City 205, a project proposed for the corner of Race and Second Streets, as a 10-story, 53-unit building designed to maximize sunlight and views of the Delaware River and Benjamin Franklin Bridge (SHoP).

On the Schuylkill Waterfront, another residential project is currently under construction. Edgewater, near the Art Museum and across the river from 30th Street Station, consists of a 13-story, 270-apartment building, a parking garage to hold 565 cars, and 23 rowhouses that tie the complex to its surrounding neighborhood (Ytterberg). Further south, the Naval Square development seeks to renovate an old naval facility situated on a 23-acre lot. The development will include 750 residences, featuring both condos and townhouses (Chamberlain). At the corner of Locust and S. 15th Street, the Lewis Tower, a 33-story building, is being converted into Aria the Condominium, a complex containing approximately 115 units.

The Washington Square area is receiving plenty of attention as well, with the recently completed Saint James luxury condos dominating the sky above the square. Nearby, at 11th and Spruce streets, a proposed building called Le Grenier “repairs a hole left in Washington Square West by a burned building.” This 7-story, 19-unit condominium is meant to heal the neighborhood; however, problems may arise because of the building's lack of on-site parking (Ytterberg).
The list of Philadelphia’s residential construction projects is quite impressive, including several proposed projects not mentioned above. The projects under construction and in the proposal stages will undoubtedly attract residents to the Center City area. This influx of residents will have positive effects on the city’s economy, as well as injecting new life to the city in general. However, the arrival of more residents will result in additional vehicles, and without careful planning, the streets and parking lots of Philadelphia will become easily congested. With the possibility of over 100,000 residents in the Center City area by 2010, up from less than 80,000 in 2000, it can be assumed that approximately 10,000 new cars will be sharing the streets in only 4 years (Slobodzian).

Center City Philadelphia currently enjoys a surplus of parking, with 48,000 available off-street spaces, 523 garages, and 6,400 metered spaces (Chapman). “At peak times, just over 79% of spaces are occupied, according to surveys in 2000/01” (Chapman). Still, with such a large number of people moving into the Center City area, the spaces not currently in use will be quickly filled. Another advantage for the Center City parking situation is car-free households. “According to the 2000 census, 52% of households did not have a car. Almost all of the remaining households have just one vehicle” (Chapman). In the case of the new residential construction in the city, with the exception of Le Grenier, all of the proposed buildings and buildings under construction have on-site parking, whether it is in the form of multi-level garages or adjacent parking lots. In addition, many of these
parking areas were designed to accommodate all of the building’s residents, plus parking for the public.

Beyond merely parking cars, Center City must deal with increased traffic on its streets. Increased traffic congestion can be relieved by increased use of public transit services. Philadelphians are currently headed in the right direction. From 2003 to 2004, total average weekday ridership for SEPTA, PATCO, and NJ Transit in Philadelphia rose from 267,171 to 273,051. Continuation of this trend may relieve the increased traffic on Center City streets. Philadelphia also boasts a fairly high bicycle usage rate, with a 3.1% share of trips by bicycle, placing Philadelphia in the middle of top 15 bicycle-using cities nationwide (Center).

Philadelphia, as a result of careful planning by William Penn, is a very walkable city. Since the founding of SEPTA, larger portions of the city are accessible to residents without cars. If the increase in the population of Center City causes severe traffic congestion issues, residents will naturally avoid driving and find alternate ways of moving around the city, such as walking, biking, and riding public transit.

With the recent resurgence of Center City Philadelphia as an attractive residential area, people are constantly migrating into the city. The predicted increase in population will be accommodated by a shower of new high-rise residential buildings. Moving into the city with the new populous will be thousands of cars, creating a potential for severe urban congestion problems. However, with Center City’s current surplus of
parking and well-established sidewalk and public transit infrastructures.

Philadelphia is poised to successfully diminish any congestion problems that may arise in the coming years.
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