

Stealing the Show:

Ed Rendell and the Urban Design Politics of Philadelphia's Mummers Parade

On January 1st, 1995, the Mummers marched up Market Street. The same day, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* featured three articles and a spread in the *Inquirer Magazine* dedicated to the city's locally legendary folk-festival, the Mummers Parade. January 2nd, 1995, "A new year, and a new route," and "Protesting and strutting, while the parade went on," were the paper's headlines. By mid-February, the city had committed to returning the parade to South Broad Street, its home of over 90 years. January 1st, 1996, two headlines ran side by side on the front page of the *Inquirer*: "Mummers take Broad St. in style," and "Rendell sworn in for his 2^d term [as mayor]." This back-and-forth game throughout the 1990s that eventually ended with the Mummers permanently moved to Market Street followed directly from the policies and priorities of Ed Rendell's two terms as mayor of Philadelphia.

The original parade route of 1901, the first year the city sponsored the festivities, led costumed revelers from South Philadelphia up Broad Street from Oregon Avenue 2.5 miles to compete for prizes outside City Hall. The 1901 move marked the first time the parade was drawn out of its South Philadelphia home, where it had previously flourished informally with prizes awarded by merchants¹ rather than the city. The current Market Street route makes no physical reference to the roots of the festival, and this is one of the primary objections that Mummers continue to voice against the change. That the change was initially motivated and encouraged by Mayor Ed

¹ "Italian settlers brought more exotic flavoring to the Philadelphia New Year's revelry with the Latin flair for costuming and melody. New Year's Eve parties often burst out of homes to cavort through the streets of South Philadelphia. By 1877, these had become area parades, often stimulated by merchants' prizes." from a press release published on <http://mummers.com/release.asp>.

Rendell, whose political objectives especially in his second term were to increase the city's visibility as a tourist attraction further fuels the fires of debate.

William Penn's plan for Philadelphia built the city around two neutral axes: Market Street running east-west between the Delaware and Schuylkill rivers and Broad Street running north-south along the spine of the peninsula. Planning in the 20th century, however, has been focused along the Market Street axis and has virtually ignored Broad Street, which extends into the city's neighborhoods to the north and south.² Edmund Bacon, Philadelphia's most prominent planner, focused his investment in the city along the Market Street axis, envisioning a strong office sector to the west and retail to the east. His plans also encouraged the preservation and celebration of the city's history in Old City at the eastern edge of Market Street and the new Independence Mall running across Market at 5th Street. Rendell's desire to move the parade to Market Street reflects a continuity between his ideas of revitalization and those of the past, which tended to focus on the city's center as a means for attracting tourists and suburbanites rather than the various communities that continue to form the backbone of the city's identity.

When Rendell took office for the first time in 1992, he inherited a budget deficit of \$230 million and a city with self esteem so low that in the 1970s, it was advertised under the slogan, "Philadelphia isn't as bad as Philadelphians say it is."³ In his first term he was able to bring the city back into fiscal solvency and instill a sense of pride back into its citizens, but his primary push in terms of economic development was consistently oriented toward Center City, where

² Edmund Bacon's 1963 plan is a major example of this blindness to the Broad Street corridor. A longer analysis of that plan's effect on the city's development can be found in my paper, "Vision and Blindness: Edmund Bacon's 1963 Plan for Center City Philadelphia".

³ Siegel, Fred and Kay S. Heymowitz. "Why did Rendell fizzle out?" *The City Paper*. Autumn, 1999, Vol.9, No. 4,

40% of the city's jobs were located in 1999.⁴ He openly promoted a tourism-driven economy capitalizing on the Center City's historic character and colonial roots. To this end the mayor invested money to bring hotels to Philadelphia through tax incentives, developed the Broad Street between Pine Street and City Hall into an "Avenue of the Arts" hosting the Kimmel Center, theaters, and the University of the Arts, as well as a number of hotels and restaurants. He was also able to attract a deal with Disney to build a new DisneyQuest center on East Market Street (though this eventually fell through and the site remains a surface parking lot). The initial move to Market Street was attributed to the construction on Broad as part of the Avenue of the Arts project, but the intention of city hall to make the move more permanent was voiced repeatedly by Kevin Feeley, Rendell's press secretary, though Rendell himself tended to emphasize that the ultimate decision would lie in the hands of the Mummies themselves.

One of the primary concerns voiced by the city during the debates over the parade's route was the sharp drop in attendance numbers from an average around 500,000 attendees in the 1980s to barely 100,000 in the 1990s.⁵ Some speculations suggest that moving the parade to a shorter route on a narrower street would naturally make the crowds seem larger without any increase in their size. Reasons for the drop in crowd size have inspired myriad speculation, but the change seems to coincide most closely with the airing of the parade on local and cable television stations and with efforts to make the parade more family oriented by enforcing fines for public drinking and drunkenness at the parade, both of which occurred in the early 1990s. Although the city lost

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Woestendiek, John. "A Mummies flap over crowd size," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. January 3, 1994. The article describes a conflict in which police estimates of crowd size initially fell around 22,000 or approximately the number of Mummies actually participating in the parade. The numbers were eventually adjusted upward to around 80,000, but the debate over dwindling crowds can be found in most parade articles throughout the 1990s.

150,000 residents between 1990 and 1999, this decline had been occurring for much of the 20th century.

Further analysis would be necessary to determine how much the change in crowd size could be attributed strictly to population decline, but it is unlikely that population is the only or even the main reason for the sharp drop of the 1990s. Rather, the consistent efforts to take the festival out of the parade first by reducing the consumption of alcohol during the parade and then by further efforts to make the parade a family affair with scheduled performances and a new route designed to attract tourists and suburbanites through its proximity to subway lines and the more familiar Center City tourist areas. Tom Muldoon, president of the Philadelphia Convention and Visitors Bureau explained in a 1998 Philadelphia Inquirer article entitled “The Marketing of the Mummers” that

in the early 1980s, the Mummers Parade generated a lot of restaurant and hotel business...If you walked around in Center City, people were everywhere partying. Parts of that led to excesses... the parade became tamer, and less and less people got involved. It lost some of its populist appeal.⁶

How a parade whose roots rest firmly in its “populist appeal” can thrive in a climate that seeks to capitalize on its potential as a tourist attraction rather than to enhance its appeal to a more local audience by encouraging its Carnival-esque revelry and general freedom from social conventions (including sobriety) is questionable.

The parade is comprised of various clubs of performers whose mostly male members primarily derive from South Philadelphia working class, ethnic-white enclaves. Though the parade has diversified both ethnically and geographically (and began admitting women into select groups in

⁶ Von Bergen, Jane M., “The Marketing of the Mummers” *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. December 29, 1998.

1975), it remains firmly rooted in South Philly and celebrants continue to gather on Second Street (or Two Street as it has been dubbed by the Mummers) after they have finished the parade route. Many of the Mummers, especially those in the Comics division, still represent Philadelphia's working class. New Year's Day marks the one day in the year when it becomes acceptable for plumbers, fire-fighters, and construction workers to dress as women, don feathers, and dance up the street to City Hall. Its route through South Philadelphia along Broad Street for years provided a major economic boost to the hotels and restaurants that could provide food, warmth, and bathrooms to intoxicated observers and participants. The move to Market Street in 1995, with its endorsement from the city and sense of permanence (that was eventually confirmed), diverted business away from those local hotels and restaurants to the food court of the Gallery Mall on Market Street and the Convention Center.

The city is probably correct that tourists are more likely to watch the parade on Market Street, home to Independence Mall and a common route for the Philly Phlash, the Philadelphia tourist shuttle. Critics, however, are equally correct that a large population of South Philadelphians, limited in their access to public transportation, will no longer attend the parade despite efforts to run shuttles between South Philly and Market Street. In South Philadelphia, the parade is for many a "family affair" because participation is passed down from generation to generation and South Philadelphia family members would traditionally host their suburban relatives in town for the parade. The "family affair" that the city wishes to make out of the parade is for a generic family that has no connection to the parade and is not interested in participating in the revelry themselves. The city's current policy toward the parade continues its historic preference to

economic development that creates spaces appealing to those unfamiliar with the city (as Society Hill did in the 1960s) rather than enhancing the character of local community places and events.

On January 1, 2000, Ed Rendell, decked out in full Mummers gear, lead the Mummers into the new Millennium down Market Street. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* headline on November 5th, 1999, read: "Mummers do Market: Broad Street march to end." The political symbolism of this move is unmistakable. Rendell is the mayor who moved the Mummers. By leaving the decision to their vote (which favored the Market Street route by a 3-1 majority) the mayor gave himself a measure of amnesty from the wrath of South Philadelphia. By laying responsibility on the Mummers to reverse the trend of lowered numbers likely caused in part by television coverage and greater restrictions on the drinking and revelry surrounding the parade, the mayor forced their hand. The only practical change on the table was Market Street. A Market Street parade, however, is a Center City parade no matter that its Mummers come from South Philly, and a Center City parade provides no direct benefit to South Philadelphia. The historic urban design politics of Philadelphia have been reinforced through the urban design politics of its Mummers Parade.