

Story of cities #7: Philadelphia grid marks birth of America's urban dream

William Penn's city was planned as a utopian ideal; a grid of broad streets to promote green urban living for settlers to this 17th-century colony. While Penn grew disillusioned, his design lives on in Philadelphia, and around the world

Emily Mann - Tuesday 22 March 2016.

The surveyor Thomas Holme's "Portraiture of the City of Philadelphia", printed in London in the politically turbulent and deathly cold winter of 1683, is a picture of urban grandeur, civility and order. Designed to encourage shareholders and lure settlers with the prospect of a new and improved life in the Quaker William Penn's fledgling Pennsylvania colony, Holme's document is a 17th-century forerunner of more modern US billboards selling "the American dream".



The antique advertisement depicts a rectilinear grid of long, broad, intersecting streets stretching for two miles between navigable rivers to east and west, and a mile from north to south. At the grid's heart is a giant civic square, echoed in each quadrant by a spacious park adorned with symmetrical plantings of bushy trees. A rash of numbered property lots spreading from each side and up the main streets suggests development is well under way; the blanks represent room for opportunity.

Like the nationwide dream it foreshadowed, the grid's promise was at once mythical and foundational: a utopian urban ideal that not only guided the construction of Philadelphia, but resonates in cities and towns across America – and arguably the world – shaping millions of lives, identities and minds. Such has been the persuasive power of the 1683 advertisement that, three-and-a-half centuries later, its influence lives on in the city's latest development plan, Philadelphia2035 – a vision for the future rooted in a vision of the past.

Penn – a well-connected Englishman who made it his mission to create a refuge in America for Quakers and other persecuted religious groups from Europe – was prone to celebrating his colony as a free gift from God. In fact, Philadelphia's construction depended on a cunningly negotiated deal with the English king.

In March 1681, a cash-strapped Charles II, unable to repay a debt owed to Penn's late father Adm Sir William Penn, instead made the young heir sole owner of 45,000 square miles of land south-west of New Jersey and north of Baltimore – the king assuming, in a god-like fashion typical of British imperial monarchs, that the territory was his to give. As a feudal-style proprietor, Penn could in turn grant out land as he saw fit.

Within a month, he published the first in a series of promotional tracts with the aim of generating investor interest in his plan to "settle a free, just and industrious colony". His promised land guaranteed freedoms, rights and liberties – for white Europeans at least. The first cargo of enslaved Africans sold fast to his settlers on its arrival in 1684. Penn wished that his new capital would 'never be burnt, and always be wholesome'

To encourage investors, Penn commissioned a map of "Some of the South and East bounds of Pennsylvania in America, being Partly Inhabited". Those who "partly inhabited" the territory included Swedes, Dutch and English as well as indigenous peoples, though the map's depiction of "Sesquahana fort Demolished" seems calculated to give the impression that the land sold to new buyers would be, as Penn claimed, "free from any Indian encumbrance".



More attractive than accurate, the map (see above) is decorated with trees – almost an alphabet from ash to walnut – which served not merely to justify the name of Pennsylvania (meaning Penn's woods), but to suggest the land's great fertility and commercial viability, including an abundance of timber fit for building. In a vast forest clearing along the Delaware river, Penn planned a great port city connected to the country by 17th-century superhighways uniting commercial and landed interests.

Troubled by the memory of fire and plague in London during the 1660s, and their frequent devastation of colonial ports, Penn wished his capital would “never be burnt, and always be wholesome”. With that aim, the streets were to be “uniform down to the water”, and each house would ideally be placed in the middle of its plot, “so there may be ground on each side for gardens or orchards or fields”. Penn’s imagined city was not really a city at all. It was, in his own words, “a green country town”.

When he arrived in America in autumn 1682, Penn found Holme, his surveyor general, staking out the city’s first streets on a neck of land between the Delaware and Schuylkill rivers. The pair agreed the location could hardly be bettered for the health of business and bodies alike. By extending the grid to connect the riverbanks, they created a 480-hectare (1,200-acre) city with two waterfronts, maximising its commercial potential as well as access to drinking water. This is the design idea set out in Holme’s Portraiture, and which continues to define Center City, Philadelphia today.

The grid’s great virtue is its adaptability, says Daniel McCoubrey, president and principal of the Philadelphia-based architectural firm VSBA LLC. “The grid was easily laid out by surveyors, then divided to meet commercial and residential needs, and it is infinitely extendable.” As Holme commented, his plan could “when time permits, be augmented”.

For a speculative venture such as Philadelphia, McCoubrey says gridded plots made it easier to sell property “sight unseen”. Hence the grid plan “became the primary means of dividing and selling land during westward expansion” across America, forming the basis of many subsequent cities and towns.

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Even the smallest urban lots in Holme’s plan provided room for a garden and small orchard alongside a house – “to the great content and satisfaction of all here concerned” – and streets that initially commemorated prominent residents were renamed after “the things that spontaneously grow in the country”, such as Chestnut, Mulberry and Vine.

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“The plan continues to have a strong and positive impact on the life of Center City, Philadelphia,” says Gallery, who worked with the leading post-war planner Edmund Bacon at the Philadelphia City Planning Commission in the 1960s. Not only has it proved flexible for the wide range of residential and commercial development from 1683 right through to 2035, he suggests, but it is easy for both residents and visitors to understand. For his part, McCoubrey sees Philadelphia as a great city for walking as well as living and working.

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In time, Penn became all too aware of the “troublesome work” of urban planning. He returned to England in 1684, forced home by politics and financial setbacks.

By 1700, he was so disillusioned that he tried, unsuccessfully, to sell back his proprietorship to the crown. But the Penn family’s hold on the province through to American independence – when now-prosperous Philadelphia provided the setting for the signing of both the Declaration and the Constitution – and the birth of institutions.

Writing in defence of his colony in November 1683, Penn wrote: “Whatever men may say, our wilderness flourishes as a garden, and our desert springs like a green field.”

However much the physical imprint of Penn’s plan may morph and fade, the values inscribed in his grid and squares – equality, adaptability, community, greenness – promise to shape the city’s image for years to come.



Statue of William Penn in Philadelphia.

