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# Changing Skyline: Jefferson design breaks through rowhouse predictability

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Philadelphia's rowhouse streets, and even many of its commercial ones, follow a certain predictable rhythm. Redbrick building follows redbrick building. Windows and doors are usually flush with the facades. Buildings may sport finer or worse details than others, but this is not a city of statement architecture and icons. The nature of the grid makes it challenging for a building to stand out.

But not impossible. Take a stroll along 10th Street between Sansom and Walnut, and you'll encounter a small, but profound, aberration, a wrinkle in the smooth urban canvas. What was once the most bland of two-story brick buildings has been transformed into a delightful piece of sculpture.

The unusual new facade designed by Cecil Baker + Partners is not the sort of otherworldly spaceship that a Frank Gehry or a Zaha Hadid might land on a wide-open site somewhere in Los Angeles or Paris. Baker's sculpture is squeezed onto a narrow lot between two typical 19th-century Philadelphia workhorse buildings. It literally has to thrust itself into the public's field of view to get noticed.

Baker created the design by tearing off the original brick facade, which had been mucked up with a bad application of faux stone, and replacing it with a wall of glass. At the ground level, it's not much different from one of the high-end storefronts you see on Walnut Street.

Changing Skyline: The anti-Gallery



But as the glass climbs up the front wall, it begins to fan out, forming an off-kilter crystal that busts through the building plane, turning the rowhouse facade into a three-dimensional object. The protrusion extends just three feet over the sidewalk - the legal limit - but you can't miss it.

Maybe the most startling thing about this daring renovation is that it was commissioned by Jefferson University Hospitals, the institutional behemoth that dominates the Washington Square West neighborhood. Long partial to dowdy, neo-traditional architecture, the hospital is on a mission to rebrand itself as a cooler, more innovative organization.

After CEO Stephen K. Klasko took

over last year, he encouraged employees to think more entrepreneurially. To help, he made his first building project an incubator for bio-med start-ups, with the zippy name Jefferson Accelerator Zone, or JAZ. Given that much of the new hospital architecture we're seeing in Philadelphia is gargantuan in scale and blandly corporate, Klasko's desire to make his mark with a rowhouse-size building is refreshing.

Jefferson already owned the building, which was occupied by its videography department. For years, it was closed off from the city like so many Jefferson buildings by hospital advertisements pasted over the windows.

Klasko told me in an interview that his administration is now committed to transparency and innovation, and he wanted the Accelerator design to convey those new values. You can't find a better communicator than Baker's open, imaginative facade, a visual depiction of the shattering of tradition.

Baker has been designing rowhouses (and much else) in Philadelphia for 40 years. He has produced a lot of fine work, but like so many architects here, he is seldom allowed by clients to stray outside the lines.

As a result of that cautious approach, Philadelphia rarely produces architecture at the extremes, either ridiculous or innovative. You almost never encounter anything that might be described as fun.

That wasn't always the case. Frank Furness designed exuberant, highly colored compositions in the 19th century that still thrill. And in the 1950s

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A view of the second-floor interior of the 10th Street innovation hub. As the glass facade of the Jefferson Accelerator Zone project begins to fan out, it forms an off-kilter crystal protrusion that extends just three feet over the sidewalk - the legal limit.

and 1960s, Philadelphia architects conducted ambitious experiments with form and materials. Today, so much architecture here (and elsewhere) looks as if it had been assembled from an Ikea flat pack of standard parts.

Because of its unusual shape, the bulging diamond at the top of the Accelerator had to be custom-built. Construction was not cheap. It cost Jefferson \$775,000 to retrofit the 1,825-square-foot building.

Once he was instructed to produce a design that expressed the idea of innovation, Baker said, his mind immediately turned to Ben Franklin and his famous kite experiment. You can see the kite motif in the planes of glass pushing out of the facade. He softened the transition to the neighboring building by inserting

vertical wood slats over the recessed entrance.

The rest of the project was pretty straightforward. The interior was gutted and outfitted with meeting rooms and a lounge, all visible from the street. Ironically, the interiors seek to express the hospital's new mantra of innovation with bright colors and reproductions of modernist furniture - now the de facto look for corporate interiors. Still, it's a change from the usual hospital neutrals.

You also don't want to look too closely at the construction details, which are poorly finished in places. In fairness, Baker was hired only in May, after Jefferson's building contractor had already started work on the project.

Klasko said he sees the Accelerator as a quick and easy way to heighten

its visibility in the city. It's part of the same strategy that led the hospital to purchase the naming rights to Market East station. With shuttles now running between the station and hospital buildings, the emphasis on transit is an incredible turnaround from a decade ago when the hospital insisted, against strong public opposition, on building a grotesque, open-deck garage on Chestnut Street to advertise its presence.

From the inside of the Accelerator, Jefferson employees can easily see the hospital's two original buildings, as well as the activity on 10th Street. If the Accelerator helps the hospital remember that it is part of a complex, unpredictable city, that will be the biggest innovation of all.