

## LOWER NORTHWESTERN PHILADELPHIA--AN HISTORICAL RETROSPECTIVE

### **LOWER NORTHWESTERN PHILADELPHIA --AN HISTORICAL RETROSPECTIVE**

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**ABSTRACT:** Today, when passing through Lower North Philadelphia, one can see almost no signs of the vast amount of redevelopment money that has been spent in this neighborhood in recent decades. Generally, the area exhibits the signs that we have come to associate with urban decay and decline. It is a residential neighborhood filled with social problems and decayed buildings. An amount of more than \$775,000 has recently been advanced to construct a project to revitalize Lower Northwestern Philadelphia via Urban Initiative Grant. The area is boundaried by Broad Street, 26th Street, Poplar and Susquehanna Avenue. This is not the first project that has sought to revitalize Lower North Philadelphia. In fact, renewal projects targeted to this area since 1950s. In these renewal projects, the issues of historical perspective seems just like these projects to the area-- a routine topic. Social-economic analysis and political critiques have identified certain key factors such as population structure, criminal, bureaucracy and renewal policies, racial invasion, racial segregation, housing market, etc. The sphere of physical environment retrospective has been significantly overlooked. The spatial structure of the neighborhood, the institutions (e.g. churches, schools, hospitals, etc.), the buildings, the streets, the land uses, are also important elements. It is essential and also interesting to study the development process of physical environment that has occurred in study area before we propose any other renewal project. This paper seeks to present the major elements of North Philadelphia's physical environment across different time periods that in Philadelphia. Historic research presents the background for the present reality. A simplified case study of those renewal projects has been undertaken at the end of this work, in order to foster critical discussions of these projects.

#### **Open Farm Land Before 1800**

Geographically, North Philadelphia lies between the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers. It is embraced within a high, rocky piedmont area, and plain. The piedmont and coastal plain form two parallel bands along the east coast. They stretch from New Jersey to Georgia. Most of North Philadelphia is part of a coastal plain which was once full of slow moving streams. This land was fertile because it was filled with marshes. Theoretically, the Lower North Western Philadelphia should have been pretty good farm land, and in fact, this area was tilled by early Dutch and European settlers.

In the early 1680s, a Philadelphia plan was proposed as a grid system. It was to be developed along High Street (now Market Street) from the Delaware riverside toward the west. However, in reality the earliest urban activities grew mainly along the Delaware River waterfront stretching north and south. By 1800, the built up area in Philadelphia was mainly concentrated on the east side close to the Delaware waterfront. A few buildings were separately located in other areas within Philadelphia

(now Philadelphia Center City). Lower North Western Philadelphia was open farm land. A portion of this area was not used as farm land though it could be easily watered and tilled.

In 1802, the Plan of the City of Philadelphia proposed that the development of Philadelphia should cross the Schuylkill River toward the west. The city spatial structure followed a grid system. The northern area of 'Philadelphia' in that period was still sparsely used. Lower North Philadelphia was not even considered as part of the newly developing area in the 1802 plan. If any land use existed in what was to become Lower North Philadelphia in this period, it would have only been farms and isolated houses. But, of those there were very few.

### **A Relatively Higher Social Status Area By 1860s**

In early 1800's, Philadelphia functioned more than a political center, the city acted as an important commercial harbor in the early 19th century. Along the Delaware river waterfront there was a built up area filled with storage, hotel, retail, residential uses, and official place such as the old city hall, etc. The population and commercial activities were located at the Delaware waterfront. Philadelphia did not grow as Penn had envisioned in his plan.

"The town, however, did not grow quite as Penn had intended. It took many years for houses and stores to march along High (now Market) Street, and residences never, as anticipated, rubbed shoulders along the Schuylkill. Activity, building and growth moved north and south alone Delaware River..."(Raw, 1975, p.34)

In the early 1850s, the Philadelphia city boundary was what is called Center City now. It embraced Vine Street on the north, and South Street on the southern border. William Penn proposed a grid street block plan which was to guide how Philadelphia formed its basic spatial structure. In fact, Philadelphia was just another city that accepted the grid system in United States.

"..., hundreds of American cities and towns across the country adopted the gridiron pattern..."(Rawl, 1975)

Before 1830s, compared with other developing areas in Philadelphia, Lower North Western Philadelphia was not a very prominent place.

"At that time(1820s) most of the region north of the city(Philadelphia) was open farm land. Some small villages had begun to grow along the thoroughfares, as Francisville had on Ridge Road..."(Webster, 1981, p.284)

However, by 1860, North Philadelphia had swiftly changed from unused land and farms to a built up area. It offered more fresh air than Philadelphia Center City in that era. We can find banks, stores, different row houses, cottages and terraces here.

"Houses of all types were going up in the area(North Philadelphia) during these two decades(1840-1860)..."(Webster, 1981, p.287)

The grid block street system on the east side of Broad Street was formed due to its location adjoining the Delaware waterfront. The land uses on the west side of Broad Street were also altered. The first appealing land uses included institutions, churches, houses, stores, etc. Girard College was the first giant institution built there.

"The main hall at Girard College,..., was finished in 1848. It was, and is, the most impressive classically inspired structure in the city."(Rawl, 1975, p.191)

Another institution, Commissioner's Hall, was built in 1849.

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"When this structure was erected in 1848 for the district of Spring Garden, it was regarded as the largest and most elegant commissioner's hall in the country..."(Masbaun, 1926, p.58- )  
The Philadelphia Wigwam was erected on Girard Avenue between Twentieth and Twenty-First Streets in 1866.

"A temporarily structure erected on Girard Avenue between Twentieth and Twenty-First Streets for the convention held by the friends of President Johnson's Reconstruction policy..." (Masbaun, 1926, p.40)

In the 1860s, many houses were erected in the developing neighborhood, for example, in the summer of 1863, more than 160 houses were built between Poplar and Berks Streets in North Philadelphia.

These buildings all belonged to individuals of a higher social stratum. In this period, Lower North Philadelphia was characterized by institutional and residential land uses. Some of the residential buildings were of a very high social status compared to other residential areas within Philadelphia.

### **The Beginning Of Nightmare From 1890**

The grid system of North Philadelphia was a heritage from Center City. A large residential area had been built up. However, the social security conditions began to decline. According to the Crime Pattern statistics for 1840, 1850, 1860, and 1870, the crime in North Philadelphia increased, but still, the neighborhood was far better in this regard than Center City and much of rest the city.

Temple University was founded in the heart of North Philadelphia in 1888. In that period, the United States experienced an education boom.

"... for the children of less well-endowed parents, Russel H. Conwell, the dynamic Baptist minister..., developed his informal education meetings into Temple College, chartered in 1888..."(Rawl, 1975, p.255)

By the early 1860s, there were already some street plans concerned with North Philadelphia. However, these plans were not practical for that time. There was major difference between the reality and the plans. According to the "Atlas of the City of Philadelphia", which was presented in 1860 by Department of Survey, most of this area was farm land, especially the area between Ridge Avenue and Broad Street. Before 1860s, the grid street system was proposed as an image to show how North Philadelphia was to be shaped. However, we can find buildings that were cut by the grid street lines. This evidence shows the grid system never moved out of the proposed plan stage. And it was followed on the west side of Broad Street.

In the Lower North Western Philadelphia area, Ridge Avenue is the only thoroughfare which does not follow the horizontal and vertical grid street block system in the plan. William Penn proposed his plan for Philadelphia and made Ridge Avenue the only exception in this area, Penn's plan created triangle, trapezoid, and some other polygon blocks which were not rectangle or square. The spatial structure in this region was partly characterized by Ridge Avenue. Ridge Avenue was originally an Indian trail. According to Alotta's record:

"It was so named because it was situated on the ridge between the Schuylkill and the Wissahickon... In 1803, the citizens of the area petitioned the legislature for a turnpike road alone the ridge. This petition was refused... Eight years later, an act was passed to enable the government to incorporate a company for making an artificial road... The road was extended... in 1836 to cover the span from Vine to Cambridge. The remainder was opened by affidavit

between 1883 and 1904. The turnpike was freed from toll prior to 1873."(Alotta, 1990, p.194-195)

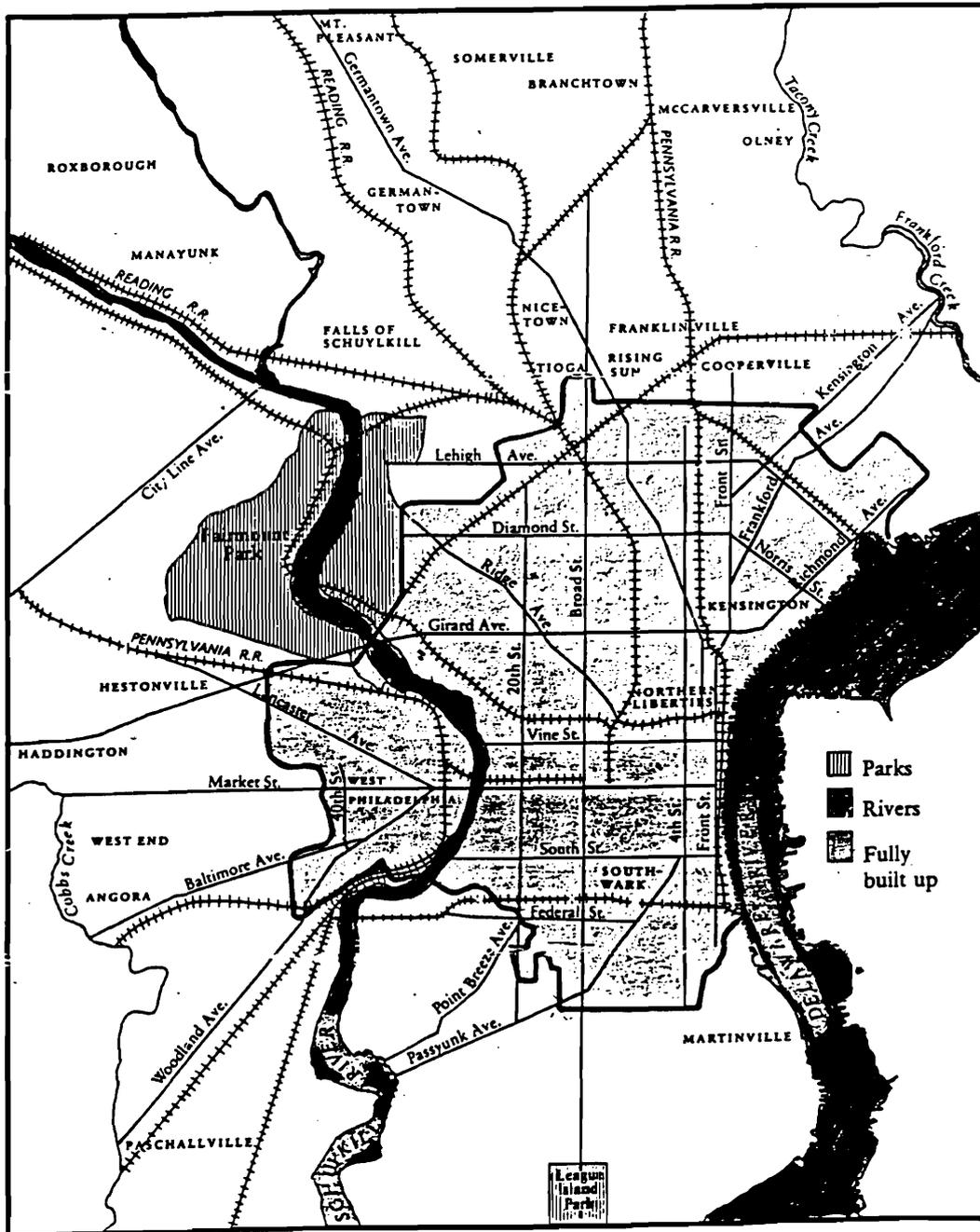
The rowhouse is a major residential building feature in the study area. The rowhouse originated in Philadelphia on Sansom Street. According to Rawl's record, Morris Folly sold part of his land to Thomas Carstairs who built a row on the south side of Sansom street. It was the very first time that the row-house pattern was used on a large scale in Philadelphia.

"Row-house development on a large scale began just after the turn of 19th century, although much earlier small uniform houses had been built in courts and alley. ... It was reported that of five hundred houses built annually forty percent of them were put up by Sansom... There were some objections to the uniformity, but row houses, novel early in the 1800s, become commonplace in the city."(Rawl, 1975, p.129)

A map presented by Miller showed the developed area in Philadelphia in 1896. North Philadelphia was included in the fully built up area. The spatial structure of North Philadelphia area had been largely determined by that time. North Philadelphia is thus a 19th century neighborhood, a mix of workers, middle class and some upper class housing which have faces the economic and social changes of the 20th century.

Before and during the First World War, due to the improved communication by highway, ship, and railroad, Philadelphia was a major commercial and manufacturing center in the United States. In that period, North Philadelphia developed mainly along with the use of street car, and horses, especially on the west side of Broad Street, which is comparatively far away from the Delaware waterfront. This section was built up later than the east side of Broad Street in North Philadelphia. By the 1920s, the Lower North Philadelphia residents were of the middle working class. However, an increasingly developed and extensive highway system, which began to emerge in this decade, began to take away the original North Philadelphia resident to the further suburbs, which were considered better places to live and were now easy for commuters. Trolley, bus and rail lines also expanded to support this outward movement. In the meantime, following the immigration wave from different areas, the domestic racial immigration wave proceeded rapidly from the southern United States to Philadelphia.

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Philadelphia Built Up Area, 1896

The Depression weakened the urban sprawl in Philadelphia. It kept citizens, those who could not afford to move or live in the suburb, in the Center City and its nearby areas, including Lower North Philadelphia. This sector was in a bad situation from then on. The population density increased in these neighborhoods. Some row houses, which had been a decent place to live in prior decades, absorbed twice and even triple the number of dwellers. From 1940 to 1980, the population structure in North Philadelphia dramatically changed. Between 1940 and 1960, the population in Philadelphia was concentrated on West, South and Lower North Philadelphia. Lower North Philadelphia populated more than 300,000 people. Between 1960 and 1980, the population in Lower North Philadelphia declined to less than 200,000. In the same period, some Philadelphia suburbs had huge growth on population, such as Lower Northeast and Upper Northeast. On the other hand, the population structure in Lower North Philadelphia had also changed. The black population was 30% in 1940, 40% in 1950, 60% in 1960, then closed to 70% in 1970 and 1980.

### **An Expensive Laboratory Of Renewal Projects After The War**

The government housing policy after the World War II accelerated the deterioration of the area. For the most part only those who could not afford to move to Philadelphia's suburbs stayed. It was obviously a vicious cycle.

"... and Lower North Philadelphia had relatively greater proportions of the city's black population at an earlier stage, which was reflected in a lower than city average home-ownership rate in 1940. After the War, expanding home-ownership opportunities drove the citywide average from 35 percent to nearly 60 percent in one decade. Yet in each neighborhood, the decade of rapid growth in black population was matched by a corresponding decline in home ownership." (Adams, 1991, p.75)

In 1960s, the existing land uses in the study area included residential, public institutions and commercial. Along both sides of Broad Street and Ridge Avenue were commercial land uses. The rest was mostly residential and some institutions and recreational activities. The area displayed a mixed land use pattern. From 1950 to 1970, Temple University became a substantial land owner in this area. Temple's expansion changed part of the spatial structure and land use pattern in North Philadelphia. It also reduced the residential density. Meanwhile, physical renewal along Broad Street stretched from Spring Garden Street to Diamond Street. There was a large scale construction of public institutions. The State Building, the William Penn High School, the Human Service Center and Progress Plaza were important constructions south of Temple.

Renewal projects had been proposed to improve Lower North Philadelphia from the early 1950s. Both the city and federal government had contributed help for the area. In the 1950s, the policy was aimed at demolishing the blighted area in order to rebuild and clear out the mixed land use pattern. The programs failed because the renewal actions were too expensive and did not match the private investment sector.

"... the city spent nearly one-third of its urban renewal funds in Lower North Philadelphia between 1949 and 1970, ..., Lower North Philadelphia ... as the first site for slum clearance under the 1949 federal redevelopment legislation..."(Adams, 1991, p.108-109)

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In the 1960s, the study area was chosen to be revitalized under the Model City Program.<sup>1</sup> It was not only focused on the rebuilding of the physical environment, but also included the social sphere such as: job, health, and education programs, etc. It was a very good renewal project, but it still failed. Critiques of the project charged the government tried to benefit the area by urban renewal projects. They claimed political justification can not have the leverage on the private sector which is profit orientation. But, in fact, to assert that the government can not adjust the pace to make use of private sector is not appropriate. The major reason Model City Program achieved only limited success was the lack of attraction for private real estate investors. FHA and VA mortgage system encouraged real estate investors in the Philadelphia suburbs. Plus North Philadelphia's bad market reputation in that era. Why run the risk of putting money on a troubled land instead of clean suburbs where the perception was of a constant good market?

The Model City Program also faced a major problem in United states, spatial segregation of racial groups. The study area was then composed of almost 80% low income black residents. This fact plus the absence of large numbers of new immigrants, meant a lack of new residents.

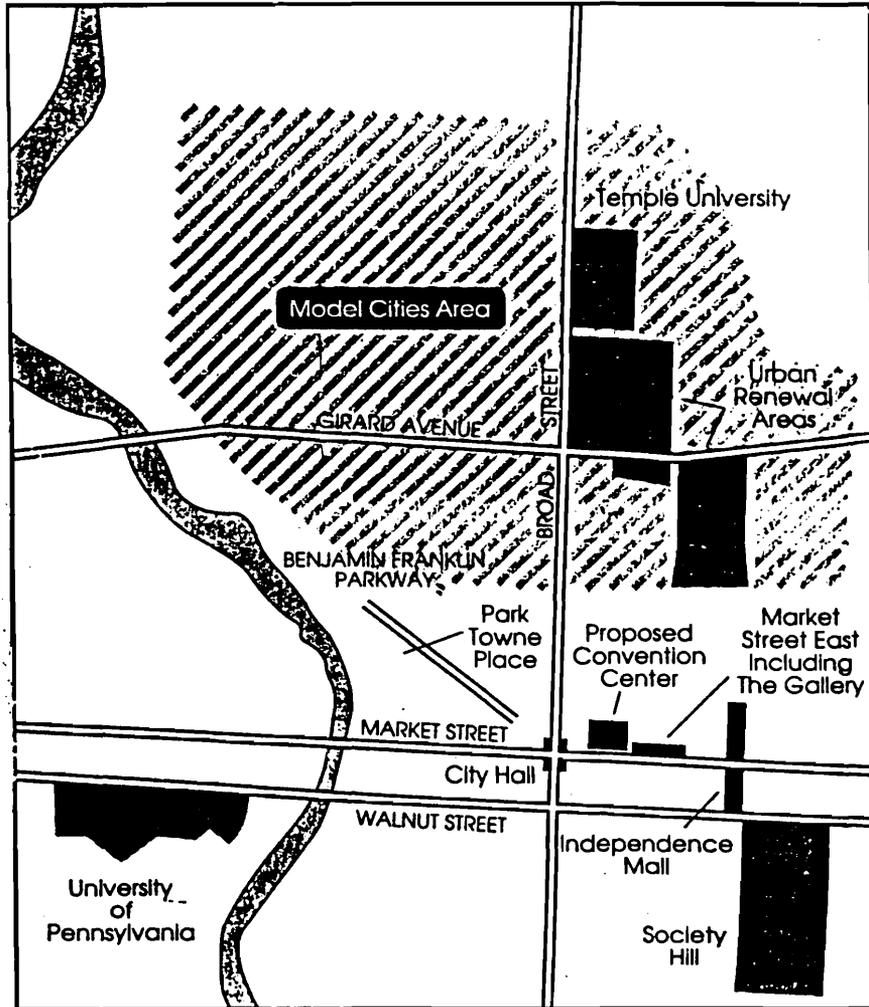
The practical spatial restriction that all the Center City nearby faced was a relatively poor physical environment; and is, compared it with the suburb residential area, no beautiful view, less open space, no roses. If one could spend an equal amount of money or even more money to live in a decent suburb, why live in North Philadelphia?

Another factor was the "social label". It was a fact that public housing residents were mainly black in 1960s. To live in public housing represent a social strata. The image seemed to be only those who could not afford moving out of the place stay in public housing level. Philadelphia had located most of its public housing in North Philadelphia, as this was the area of cheapest and oldest existing housing.

The program also met with a poor timing, the strong suburbanization trend. From 1950s, suburbanization had been continuing not only in Philadelphia, but in all the central cities in United States. Central cities' population kept moving out to suburbs in metropolitan areas. As the Philadelphia Center City grew old, it lost its superiority to residential places. As I noted earlier, the federal highway system program and mortgage policies accelerated suburbanization, and indeed, suburbs provided a better physical environment for its residents on the whole. Suburbanization was not avoidable. Theoretically, it is a growing stage of a city. Practically, from 1950s to 1960s, it is a historic product in United States. Facing all these, Model City Program's function was limited.

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<sup>1</sup>The study area had also been regarded as a residential area in other plans. The Comprehensive Plan, a plan presented in 1960s, proposed Lower North Philadelphia as basically a residential area, including educational institutions, as well as retail and recreational. The population density was 20 to 39 units per residential acre to the north side of Girard College, the rest of this area was 40 to 59 units per residential acre. All of the unplanned commercial activities along Broad Street and Ridge Avenue were cleared out in that plan.



Modern Cities Program Area  
(From: Adams, 1991)

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### **Conclusion**

Through all these, the study area has transformed into what it is now. From the beginning to the present, the study area has taken different roles in Philadelphia. First farming land, then a respectable place with official and educational institutions, a convenient residence for commuters, then an affordable place to live, and finally an expensive empirical place for renewal projects. It has passed through a rigid process. Due to various factors in different periods, it has been carved into what it is today. How to revitalize this area is an important issue. Timing and skillful strategies will determine its destiny. A good start would include a historical context for the renewal projects proposed for this area.

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