

70  
years

THE HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

2003

# *fleeting streets*

THE PLIGHT AND PROMISE OF NORTH PHILADELPHIA

BY BRIAN D. JOYNER PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSEPH ELLIOTT

Dense and visually stimulating, downtown Philadelphia bustles with shoppers, business-people, and day-trippers. Musicians raise the spirits of passersby with impromptu concerts on street corners. Hotels, restaurants, specialty shops, and gourmet outlets crowd the streets. Center City—as the downtown district is known—caters to the young middle class and empty-nesters eager to take advantage of Philadelphia’s new energy. Everywhere, it seems, are signs pointing out the city’s legendary connection to a nascent America. It is not hard to convince people of the importance of Independence Hall, the Liberty Bell, or the Betsy Ross House. It is Philadelphia’s other history, in another part of town, that needs civic and economic bolstering.

**Opposite:** Boys on Diamond Street in North Philadelphia, a fashionable address in the 19th century. Most of the row houses are still in good shape.





In North Philadelphia, there is no saxophone music to brighten the afternoon, no signs trumpeting the neighborhood's rich past or directing visitors to trendy shops and historic sites. Dilapidated buildings sit next to vacant lots, which are as common as homes with residents. Construction equipment sits knee-high in weeds, seemingly a portent of things to come.

This in spite of the fact that North Philadelphia is a catalogue of 19th-century architecture, the tangible record of an Industrial Age boom that earned the city the nickname "Workshop of the World." Swaths of eclectic Victorian-era buildings, from the mansions of industrialists to the row houses of workers, line the streets.

That this legacy is in danger prompted a recent study by one of the country's official authorities on historic architecture. The Historic American Buildings Survey, part of the National Park Service, came to North Philadelphia in the summer of 2000 to document the neighborhood's extraordinarily intact specimen structures. The place could be a poster child for the HABS mission.

### Philadelphia's Urban Legacy

Between 1875 and 1900, North Philadelphia underwent an amazing transformation. Until about 1850 it was mostly farmland. After the Civil War, with a surging populace and industrialization, the area transformed into one huge construction site. Philadelphia became the world's premiere industrial city, a leader in pharmaceuticals, textiles, shipbuilding, glass, and more. Giants such as the Disston Company, the world's largest saw manufacturer, called the city home.



**Opposite: Church of the Advocate; Above left: Molded brickwork of the Greater Straightaway Baptist Church; Above center: Attic of Girard College; Above right: Carved detail on a pew at Green Hill Presbyterian Church.**

When the HABS team arrived, the job was twofold: to create a record of the remarkable buildings and to bring attention to the need for preserving them. Perhaps no one was happier to see the team than the Advocate Community Development Corporation, run by local activists with a stake in the place. Advocate has roots in North Philadelphia going back to the late '60s, the peak of urban unrest and the early days of the Black Panther movement.

Advocate is all about preserving the community. From the start, there was a confluence of vision with the HABS team—historians, architects, and a photographer.

Lensman Joseph Elliott captured the decaying splendor of the place, conveying a sense of loss and urgency. At the time, the nonprofit Foundation for Architecture (now defunct) was conducting tours. The foundation paired with HABS to produce a promotional brochure using the project's research—by historians Jamie Jacobs and Donna Rilling—as well as its compelling images. "Going Uptown: The Extraordinary Architecture of North Philadelphia" was part of a plan to draw attention to the place. When the foundation folded, Advocate picked up the tours and took the effort farther. Drawing again from the HABS work, the group developed the exhibit "Acres of Diamonds: The Architectural Treasures of North Philadelphia," which spent early 2003 at the University of Pennsylvania's Myerson Hall Gallery, cosponsored by the university and the Preservation Alliance of Greater Philadelphia.

The industrial wealth displayed itself in stark contrast to the Quaker roots of William Penn's city. Streetcar lines gave easy access to downtown, the disposable income of the nouveau-riche manifest in brownstones and row houses, the new geography of an Anglo-American middle class with its businesses and institutions.

The HABS documentation offers a breathtaking view of this history. The work produced meticulous measured drawings, historical research, and large-format photographs (some shown here). A congressional appropriation—to fund HABS documentation in southeastern Pennsylvania—helped finance the project, with the monies matched by the William Penn Foundation.

The survey highlights many of the prominent buildings, some of which are focal points and a source of pride in the community: the Wagner Free Institute of Science, an example of late-Victorian educational-institutional architecture; the Disston Mansion, the ornate Victorian home of the industrial magnate; and the Divine Lorraine Hotel, one of the country's few luxury hotels open to African Americans during the Jim Crow era.

The team captured the more pedestrian specimens as well, characterized nonetheless by ubiquitous and wonderful detail. On West Girard Street are twin row houses with canted bay win-



**Above:** A longstanding community makes its life amidst a 19th century landscape.

dows and ornate stone lintels. North 16th Street is filled with identical three-story row houses with corbelled brickwork.

Eventually, speculative building ventures in North Philadelphia provided housing for all income levels. Well-to-do Philadelphians moved on to the Main Line and other suburbs. Churches, synagogues, and other institutional buildings were built for the new constituency. Later, much of this fabric would be adopted by the African Americans who arrived in

the great migrations of the 1920s. They eventually became the dominant population in North Philadelphia and remain so.

#### **Life in the Here and Now**

HABS historian Catherine Lavoie explains that while her program has become well known for “tramping around in the backwoods looking for vernacular architecture,” its purpose is to record outmoded and endangered buildings as a hedge





against potential loss. Lavoie sees the deterioration of urban areas as one of the most pressing preservation issues of our time.

Effectively abandoned, North Philadelphia west of Broad Street was spared the destruction of urban renewal in the 1960s. By the 1970s, the residents who remained were unable to maintain the buildings. The houses were too large for low-income renters, and out of vogue for middle-income buyers. As in many cities today, decay crept in slowly until desolation became a fixture. Despite the affection for any number of architectural styles in this country, says Lavoie, “We’ve largely ignored the urban environment.”

Former Mayor Ed Rendell focused most of his efforts on improving Center City. Using HUD community development block grants, he encouraged a refurbished downtown, attracting new hotels, visitor facilities, and reinvestment. The relative rarity of the city’s remaining colonial architecture provides a compelling incentive for its preservation. Saving Philadelphia’s industrial past has been less of a priority, in part (and ironically) because of its ample stock.

There are many places that could be added to the catalogue of national treasures. John Gallery of the Preservation Alliance of Greater Philadelphia says that cities with a size and history comparable to his have two to three times the number of historic districts. But because of limited resources, the city has not conducted surveys to designate districts locally or nominate them to the National Register of Historic Places, which are measures that could help to provide protection and open doors to potential funding.

North Philadelphia’s case is hampered by its public image. Most Philadelphians know little of

its history or architecture, but do know it to be rough. News reports offer a steady diet of crime and vandalism.

Advocate is on the front lines of the daily challenges. It has reconstructed or built over 400 properties, is involved in 500 more, and has won numerous awards for its projects. Director Joanne Jackson arrived four years ago to lead a nonprofit and has since become a staunch preservationist. Take a walk around Diamond Street and she will show you numerous projects Advocate is working on—from the landscaping, new playground, and murals at the Duckery School, to the row of three-story townhouses designed by well-known local 19th century architect Willis Hale, now being converted into duplexes with a revenue



**Above:** Supporting walls in the attic of Girard College; **Left:** Children pose for photographer Joseph Elliott on a North Philadelphia street; **Near left:** Inside the former home of jazz legend John Coltrane.



producing apartment in each unit. Many are rented to students at nearby Temple University. Advocate is deeply involved with the community, looking to attract retail stores to an area where Rite-Aid does more business per square foot than any other place in the city.

Jackson's group is a presence in the HABS imagery. One of the most notable structures in the photos is Advocate's name-sake and spiritual center, the French Gothic Revival Church of the Advocate, one of the few examples of its kind in the United States. Its spectacular architecture stands in stark contrast to the nets installed over the pews to catch the crumbling plaster.

The church is where Advocate got its start, formed in 1968 by Christine Washington, whose husband, Paul, was pastor. The Washingtons, who made the church available for Black Panther meetings, commissioned the artwork that adorns its walls. Based on biblical passages, the murals take two different looks at the African American experience: one, a fiery, retributive interpretation, the other a Cubist time capsule of events and prominent figures. In contrast to the transcendent architecture, the epistolary art is staggering, part of the historic gravity of the place.

While some work is being done to revive North Philadelphia, there is concern that the elements that define the neighborhood are being forgotten or devalued. Gallery points out the incongruity of some of the housing built by the Philadelphia Housing Authority, particularly the Swiss chalets constructed next to 19th century row houses. "The new urbanism seems too often to be the new suburbanism," he says. The city should let Advocate select the models and handle the renovation, Jackson says.

The issue of gentrification has arisen, but Jackson says the community is happy at this point just to have buildings occu-

ped. Advocate depends on Temple University, not just for renters, but also for volunteer and work-study help. Temple has built several dormitories in the area, and students are choosing to stay in the neighborhood rather than seek housing elsewhere. There has been some infusion of middle-class homeowners as well.

### What Should Happen Now

Neighborhood improvement for places outside City Center was a component of John Street's successful political campaign to replace Ed Rendell as mayor. His Neighborhood Transformation Initiative seeks to rebuild Philadelphia's neighborhoods as safe, thriving communities with quality housing and cultural character. This is one means of encouraging development, providing an administrative flexibility that the HUD block grants did not. However, in fulfilling two of its goals—eliminating blight and acquiring land for development—some historic fabric may be destroyed.

At a recent conference of the Philadelphia chapter of The American Institute of Architects, Gallery and Jackson presented their passion for North Philadelphia. Knowing the effect that it would have on the partisan audience, Jackson made the most of the HABS photographs. She wants to re-establish the neighborhood and its buildings in the public consciousness. She and Gallery suggested ways that the government and developers can contribute to North Philadelphia's rejuvenation.

Gallery suggests that better use be made of the 20 percent Federal tax credit for rehabilitating National Register properties that produce revenues (rental housing, restaurants, offices, and the like). He says there is a proposal in the State legislature for a similar tax incentive. The city is considering a tax credit for homeowners who restore their historic houses.



**Far left: Statue at Church of the Advocate; Center and near left: Details of Founders' Hall at Girard College, one of the greatest expressions of 19th century Greek Revival architecture in the United States.**

**Opposite: The Disston Mansion, home of a wealthy tool manufacturer during Philadelphia's industrial heyday.**



He also recommends easements and conservation districts to protect areas not eligible for national or State recognition.

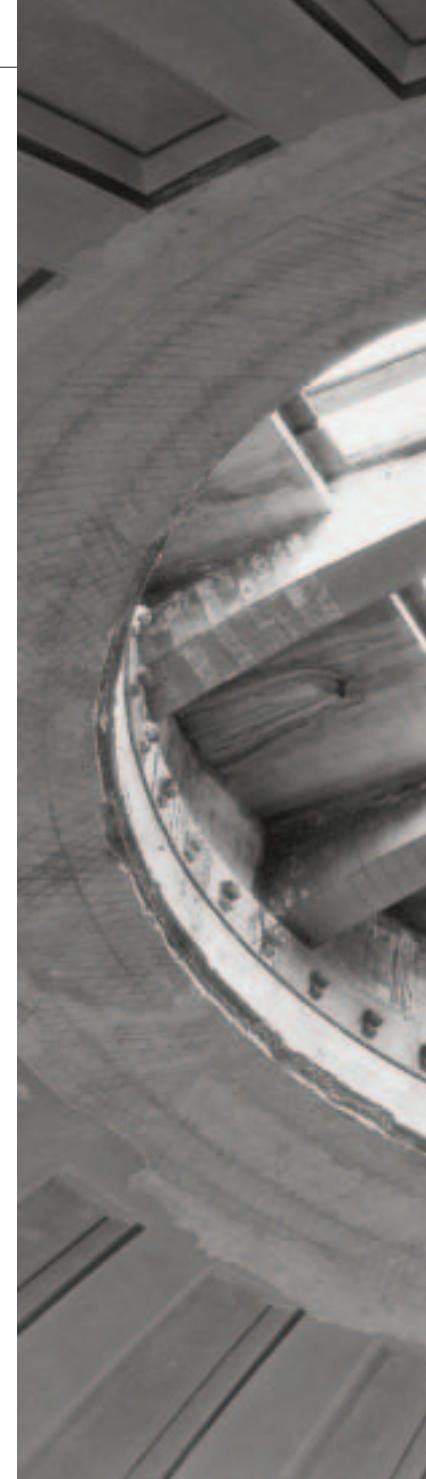
Jackson says the cost of a building, depending on size and condition, ranges from \$75,000 to \$300,000. Replacing marble windowsills and repointing brickwork, to say nothing of structural repair and interior work, can put the price well into the hundreds of thousands of dollars. There's the rub: New construction is expensive too; the only "cheap" option is leaving properties unoccupied.

So what is the answer? Other areas around the country have used tax inducements to attract people back to the urban core. Tax credit programs have had some success in Maryland, most notably in Baltimore. In Richmond, the Jackson Ward Historic District has benefited from tax breaks linked to National Register designation. Such measures are not a cure for urban woes, however. No city has revitalized its core through tax incentives alone.

All parties agree that higher visibility will only benefit the community and encourage home buying and rehabilitation. The local chapter of The American Institute of Architects gave three blocks in North Philadelphia its Landmark Building Award. But ultimately it is the public that has to embrace the area's industrial past and its legacy.

Depressed conditions aside, it is the hidden grandeur of North Philadelphia that could be its saving grace. When Jackson describes being in the Disston Mansion, she voices a sentiment shared by many, "After you've been in this building, you can never look at North Philadelphia the same way again."

Brian D. Joyner is a writer and editor in the National Park Service's Office of Diversity and Special Projects. For a retrospective of HABS' work over the decades, see the inaugural issue of *CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship* at [www.cr.nps.gov/CRMJournal/](http://www.cr.nps.gov/CRMJournal/). For more information on the HABS North Philadelphia project, contact Catherine Lavoie, National Park Service, Historic American Buildings Survey, 1849 C St., NW (2270), Washington, DC 20005, (202) 354-2185, e-mail [catherine\\_lavoie@nps.gov](mailto:catherine_lavoie@nps.gov). The exhibit "Acres of Diamonds" will be in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in May 2004, at the Community College of Philadelphia in September 2004, and at Philadelphia's Temple University in February 2005.



**Left to right: A family in front of a brownstone on 17th Street; the Divine Lorraine Hotel; skylight at Girard College; one of the Disston Mansion's turrets; Top: Advancing decay.**



