

The Hidden Dimensions of Culture and Class: Philadelphia

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For more than 20 years reinvestment and resettlement trends have been reshaping residential neighborhoods near downtown Philadelphia. Stimulated initially by urban renewal activity in the 1950s and 1960s, the process of rehabilitation has been proceeding with remarkable speed in that part of the urban core that Philadelphians call Central City. At least 10 neighborhoods already have substantial upper-income populations, while another eight are showing marked reinvestment trends. Nightlife, once virtually nonexistent in central Philadelphia, is booming as well. Fashionable bars, restaurants, nightclubs, discos and cabarets are proliferating in areas where the sidewalks used to roll up after sundown. A recent survey, for example, indicated that no fewer than 150 new restaurants have opened in Center City during the past two years (Thompson, 1979).

Yet from beneath the glitter and enthusiasm, a darker side occasionally surfaces. After months of grumbling about “tourists” parking on their sidewalks, white ethnic residents in one neighborhood recently staged a protest in which they blocked traffic and slashed automobile tires. In a Puerto Rican area, the firebombing of a house by a neighbor undid in one night many months of a new resident’s rehabilitation work. And in a black neighborhood, angry protestors

attempted to block construction of upper-income townhouses and marched on City Hall demanding an end to “recycling” policies. While these are scattered and unrelated incidents, they are representative of many similar events that point to another side of the reinvestment process: a dimension of cultural and economic conflict that belies the facile optimism of the boosters of “revitalization.”

As obvious a lesson as it seems, reinvestors are being reminded almost daily that the inner city is not the open and relatively unpopulated suburban frontier of the 1950s. For despite the grim language of “decline,” “disinvestment,” “abandonment,” and “decay,” most older urban neighborhoods hardly ever became devoid of people and supportive social and economic institutions. Instead, the inner city of Philadelphia, like the cores of most other northeastern and north central cities, has been the home for a variety of social groups whose recent experiences and views of the world are markedly different from those of the affluent, enthusiastic and confident professionals who are settling in next door. It is hardly surprising that the “newcomers” are not exactly being welcomed with open arms. Much attention, of course, has been paid to the most dramatic side effects of reinvestment—the phenomenon of

displacement. But far too little thought has been devoted to the more subtle and perplexing tensions which are generated simply by mutual coexistence.

Unless planners and policy makers become aware of the nature of these cultural clashes (which involve differing attitudes toward the neighborhood, the home, sex roles, childrearing and work), the next decade of urban resettlement may be characterized by bitter and occasionally vicious conflicts between economic and social groups which have traditionally been segregated in American society. If predictions about population redistribution trends are correct . . . , then we may be involved in nothing less than the complete remaking of the inner residential cores of most older American cities. Put bluntly, we do not have the luxury of doing it badly again.

This chapter focuses on the cultural and class tensions that have emerged in recent years in two reinvestment neighborhoods in central Philadelphia. Yet our context is a much broader overview of the patterns of disinvestment and public urban renewal during the past two decades. For the conflicts generated by private reinvestment have not occurred within a social or historical vacuum. Rather, the perceptions different groups hold of events in the present have been very much influenced by their experiences in the past. Thus, it is important to establish that although the remaking of the commercial and residential downtown has appeared an unquestioned success to some, for others it has been a deeply unsettling experience that has often bordered on personal disaster. [. . .]

CONTRASTING CONCEPTIONS OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Perhaps the best way to comprehend the varying interpretations of the term "neighborhood" between new and old residents

is to look at the different attitudes toward change in Fairmount and Queen Village. Newcomers chose to reinvest in these areas not only to be close to jobs downtown, but also precisely because these neighborhoods were changing. They saw these areas physically and psychologically as extensions of downtown renewal, and were attracted, in large part, because these were places "on the way up." For them, Fairmount or Queen Village was valued not so much for what it had been, but rather for what it might become.

This generalization might not apply to the few early newcomers who arrived in Fairmount or Queen Village in the 1960s. There were few predictions at that time that these neighborhoods were on the threshold of change, and it is doubtful that many early arrivers knew, or even wanted, the type of transition that would follow. Most of the early migrants came because house prices were low and because they valued socially heterogeneous environments. They decried the "monotony" of suburbia and the "sterility" of Society Hill, and hoped to fit in socially with their new neighbors.

However, by the early 1970s, the type of resettlers began to change. Many were endued with a "pioneer" spirit, and felt that their very presence was pushing back the "wilderness" at the "urban frontier." For them, the prospect of changing a neighborhood was both a challenge and a social responsibility. They undertook major housing renovation projects, which typically employed either ultramodern or "historically authentic" styles, depending on the person and the house. In altering the physical landscape, they contributed to what they defined as urban betterment, and signaled to other young, professional people that the neighborhood might become another Society Hill, a standard against which the extent of reinvestment in other neighborhoods is often compared. As a newcomer to Fairmount said in 1972:

“More and more people like us are moving into neighborhoods like this. The cities are coming around, revitalizing. “

For many newcomers the neighborhood was perceived as a means to an end rather than as an end in itself. It was clear by the early 1970s that both neighborhoods were good for investment, and many new residents were drawn partly because they could realize a substantial profit by selling their houses after a short stay. Many saw Fairmount or Queen Village as a way station in their personal life cycles or professional careers. As they advanced economically, or as children were born and approached school age, many newcomers would move to other settings. In this way, residential turnover rates increased greatly in both neighborhoods, because new arrivals started to take the place not only of established residents, but also of earlier newcomers. For a number of reasons that will become obvious shortly, this transience is often deeply resented by the “indigenous” population.

Such attitudes among newcomers contrasted sharply with neighborhood perceptions held by long-term residents. For many adults in Fairmount and Queen Village, their neighborhood is the only one that they have ever lived in. Some have lived in the same house for longer than 50 years, and quite a few can trace their family’s presence in the area for three or more generations. Other residents are immigrants from the chaos of post-World War II Europe, and for them Fairmount or Queen Village is the first and only residence they have known in America. Many long-term residents have relatives or lifelong friends in the neighborhood, and until prices escalated recently, it was not unusual for newly married children to buy a house on the same block as their parents. In Fairmount in 1974 after reinvestment had begun, as many as two-fifths of long-term residents had relatives elsewhere in the neighborhood and approximately one-fifth had relatives on the same block.

Community life revolved around the many churches, schools, clubs, and small corner businesses which dot both neighborhoods. Often, these institutions were identified with specific ethnic groups. As Robert Park (1915) noted more than six decades ago, no sooner did European immigrants settle in a place than they attempted to recreate the institutions and folkways of their former village life. As quickly as they moved in and located jobs, they established religious institutions, social clubs and beneficial associations. “The effect of this,” wrote Park (1915, pp. 579–580), was

to convert what was first a mere geographic expression into a neighborhood, that is to say, a locality with sentiments, traditions, and a history of its own. Within this neighborhood the continuity of the historical process is somehow maintained. The past imposes itself upon the present, and the life of every locality moves on with a certain momentum of its own, more or less independent of the larger circle of life and the interests about it.

To be sure, ethnicity is now less important in defining social relations than it once was, and old immigrant neighborhoods are not as isolated socially from the surrounding areas as when Park made his observations. But remnants of such patterns persisted into the 1970s both in Fairmount and Queen Village. It is difficult to measure such things precisely, but an indication that ethnicity and propinquity remain important is provided by a survey of marriage patterns in Fairmount. Of 174 marriages which involved at least one neighborhood resident, 43.7 percent involved partners within the same ethnic group. Moreover, in nearly one-half of the cases, husband and wife lived within four blocks of each other prior to marriage.¹ So too, the sentiments and traditions that Park described remain, and have contributed over the years to the neighborhoods’ strong sense of identity and cohesion. As Caroline Golab (1977, p. 166) wrote in her

study of Philadelphia's immigrant communities, the neighborhood was important to residents in an emotional sense,

because it was the physical entity embodying their community, their system of social and emotional relationships. Their homes became extensions of themselves and the neighborhood became the physical extension of their homes. The neighborhood was a personalized, almost internalized thing. Any threat to it was a threat to them.

Thus, for long-term residents Fairmount or Queen Village has been "home" in the full meaning of the word. The neighborhood was not just a locale within the city, but also a community of family and friends and the setting for an entire way of life. A social worker in Queen Village explained the conception of neighborhood held by long-term residents as follows: "A neighborhood is more than their house. It's more than the money they can invest or the money they could get. It's a sense of pride, a sense of family. It's a sense of sensitivity. It's a sense of church. It's a sense. It's a sixth or seventh sense that no newcomer can ever have."

USE OF OUTDOOR SPACE

These contrasting conceptions of long-term residents and newcomers manifest themselves in the use of the neighborhood. For example, in good weather, and especially after dinner, sidewalks and streets are crowded with long-term residents of all ages engaged in a social routine that reflects the cohesiveness of the neighborhood. The front steps of houses, which abut sidewalks in these row-house communities, often function as outdoor extensions of living rooms. Inside space is generally reserved for immediate family, but outside, residents sit on their steps or in aluminum folding chairs and greet passing neighbors. Certain doorsteps have become regular congregation points for groups of residents

defined variously by age, kinship, ethnicity and proximity. Children play hopscotch, stickball and street hockey where there are vacant parking spaces or tour the neighborhood on their bicycles, while street corners and playgrounds belong to teenagers who frequently hang out in large groups. During hot summer weather, bar patrons take their drinks outside and form tight clusters at tavern corners. First impressions of such patterns might suggest chaos and crowding in a tightly packed neighborhood, but both areas have a complex territorial order which prescribes a time and place for different people and their activities and thereby reduces conflict.

Newcomers are not part of this way of life. Most are not interested in participating, but even those who came to the neighborhood "to be with the people" generally find that the "people" will have little to do with them. Outdoor life in Fairmount and Queen Village, as it was observed in other urban villages (Gans, 1962; Suttles, 1968), is tightly bonded by social networks, friendships from childhood, common ethnicity and common work experiences. Outsiders cannot possibly share this. Neighboring relations between established residents and newcomers might be cordial, but full integration of the two groups rarely occurs. Only in those specific instances when the two share a common external enemy, such as Queen Village's battle against exit ramps for Interstate 95, have effective bonds been established.

For newcomers, the outdoors is rarely the setting for sustained social interaction. It is used instead for such specific activities as jogging or walking the dog. While new residents might spend some of their free time in restaurants and nightclubs near their homes, they do not consider the immediate neighborhood to be the locus of their social lives. They know fewer of their neighbors, including other newcomers, than do long-term residents, and when they do

visit friends in the neighborhood, they visit indoors. In fact, many of the newly rehabilitated or newly constructed houses occupied by newcomers have no front steps at all. Instead, the house presents to the world a locked, iron gateway, or some other system of security.

CULTURE CONFLICT

The transition in Fairmount and Queen Village, has, therefore, brought into contact two groups with contrasting perceptions of neighborhood and with different lifestyles. These contacts have often produced conflict. For example, one source of tension concerns the exterior decor of houses. Many newcomers are interested in the preservation of old housing styles, and have had the facades of their dwellings restored to the "original" appearance. In Queen Village, the older of the two neighborhoods, historic certification of houses is popular among new residents. By contrast, more old-timers prefer simple and functional structures, and have covered their facades with artificial stone and have added aluminum storm and screen doors. Problems arise when well-meaning newcomers suggest to neighbors that they fix up their house "the way it is supposed to be." This is more than an insult about the appearance of a house; it is also indicative of an attitude that consciously promotes neighborhood change. Old residents resist such suggestions because they are well aware that tax reassessments generally follow in the wake of highly visible improvements. Many have thus come to consider renovated exteriors, be they historic or modern, as symbols of unwanted intrusion and unwelcome change.

Similarly, the process of new construction and changing land use patterns can also generate tensions, especially when they interfere with customary lifestyles and routines. For example, in Fairmount

an empty industrial property with a large parking lot that children used as a sports field has recently given way to the construction of expensive townhouses. In Queen Village new people have been known to press for the removal of some "obnoxious" non-residential use, only to learn later that they were threatening to eliminate a neighbor's job. So too, there is resentment among long-term residents about the proliferation of trendy boutiques and fashionable restaurants and nightclubs. This is especially the case in Queen Village, which now has 43 restaurants and bars that cater to affluent tastes. Twenty-two of these opened between 1977 and the first half of 1979. In the midst of a recent protest against traffic, trash and late-night noise that results from such establishments, an elderly Queen Village woman contemptuously exclaimed: "Our neighborhood is being used as a playground for the rich!" (Kaufman, 1979).

Indeed, this contrast might be seen as reflective of a major cultural difference between representatives of a declining economy based on the old work ethic and on production, and those employed in expanding service fields oriented toward amenities and the ethic of consumption. In *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb (1972) have remarked upon the peculiar ambivalence that blue-collar people show toward those who do not labor with their hands. While they recognize and often resent the superior social status of the white-collar professional, they find it difficult to believe that these people actually work. This is further reinforced by the very different work patterns of the increasing number of artists, professors and self-employed individuals who have recently settled in the two neighborhoods. When new people obviously have the money to afford expensive houses and new cars, or when they frequent new restaurants and bars until all hours of the night, the resentment grows.

Thus, as increasing numbers of newcomers arrived in Fairmount and Queen Village, the basic character of the neighborhoods changed. The tastes of new residents started to dominate the landscape in both areas, and old ways of living started to disappear. Television and air-conditioning have taken their toll as well on old habits of “sitting out.” But increasingly with population turnover, old-time residents remarked that “this place isn’t like it used to be.” Since 1970, a number of immigrant institutions have closed because of suddenly declining patronage, and others are on the verge of closing. As one elderly Ukrainian woman in Fairmount lamented: “Our people keep dying or moving out.” So too, many of the small “ma and pa” stores and friendly corner taps are gone, replaced by new business with new owners. An anecdote that is repeatedly told in Queen Village captures well what many old-timers feel is happening in their neighborhood. “You know,” one version goes, “it used to be I would go out to the corner store to buy a newspaper and my wife wouldn’t expect me back for at least an hour. I’d usually get caught up talking with someone. Now I go out, there’s no one on the street, so I’m back in two minutes and my wife asks me what’s wrong.”

CATAclysmic CHANGE

All these conflicts might be considered no more than the intriguing contrasts generated by the diversity of urban life were it not for economic factors which have repeatedly exacerbated tensions. As rehabilitation has proceeded, each neighborhood has been pulled into the orbit of the Center City housing market by powerful economic forces. Very quickly, increasing demand exhausted the supply of vacant properties, and market pressures soon forced the eviction of long-term tenants from apartments and rented houses. Likewise, the price of rehabilitation and new construction soon pushed

housing values and tax assessments sharply upward. For example, the average sales price (adjusted for inflation) in Fairmount rose by more than 400 percent between 1961 and 1976 (Cybriwsky and Meyer, 1977). In parts of Queen Village the increase was even higher.² Tax assessments rose in Queen Village by an average of 129 percent between 1970 and 1979,³ and some properties had increases of between 400 and 500 percent.⁴ This compares to an increase of 17 percent in the contiguous First Ward. In sum, the conflicts that we have described involve more than misunderstandings between different cultural groups. Rather, for long-term residents who can no longer afford their neighborhood, an entire way of life is at stake. A community worker in Queen Village summed up her perceptions of the process as follows:

What you have is a class problem. You have people coming in who have money, who can make repairs. They had very good motives. They were going to upgrade the community and support the ethnic people who were there. They wanted some of the life style, security and safety and knowing neighbors and the friendliness that you don’t always get. But what happened is, you had individuals just buying the property and doing repairs or whatever and it caught on. So you had people who could afford \$40,000, you know, young married, professionals, some children, moving in. . . . So it became obvious to the community that these were outsiders. You can take one or two, but when you begin to get in the minority. . . .

It ought to be clear from this, though too often it is not, that the “enemies” in reinvestment neighborhoods are neither new people nor old, but a process of change that can only be termed cataclysmic. Our research has indicated that in the initial stages of the process, rehabilitation activity did not seem threatening to a majority of residents. Many were pleased by the arrival of “new blood”

and the resulting improvements to deteriorating buildings. But there seems to have been a threshold that was crossed, after which feelings and perceptions radically altered. Some became embittered when a relative or friend suddenly was forced to go. Others became aware of the change only when their recently married children could not afford housing in the area. Many were annoyed by illegal real estate solicitation. Others began to see the consequences of rampant speculation. In Queen Village, the sudden increase in apartments created a dramatic parking problem seemingly overnight. In both neighborhoods, the demolition of old warehouses and businesses to make way for townhouse developments seemed to signal to many that the process had “gotten out of control.”

As rehabilitation moved block by block through the neighborhoods, feelings changed from surprise, to helplessness, to rage. Old-timers began to feel that their communities were being bought out from under them. A former resident of Queen Village expressed it this way: “There is an incredible feeling of impotence. I can’t do anything about these people. . . . They are coming in and they are liable to do me in. . . . We are at their mercy. They are the big guys coming in. They have the money. I just hope that they don’t do us in.” The pastor of a black church in Queen Village, whose congregation was rapidly displaced, put it more starkly: “. . . the process looks to me inexorable. Money follows money—and it’s just eating the neighborhood alive!”

Indeed, the rate of change has been so intense that newcomers who bought houses not more than five years ago have joined established residents in seeking limits and restrictions on local development. Many in Queen Village joke about what is termed the “last-one-in syndrome,” but there is serious concern by all residents about parking, apartment density, bars and restaurants, and skyrocketing prices.

THE INNER CITY AT A CROSSROADS

There seems to be no end in sight. Inflation and rising energy costs are increasing the demand for inner-city housing, and within the past two years, reinvestment patterns have surfaced beyond the immediate downtown area. For example, a recent in-house study by the Philadelphia Planning Commission found that in the deteriorating neighborhood of Northern Liberties northeast of Center City, 50 percent of the properties changed hands in 1978 alone. A recent issue of *Philadelphia Magazine* even contained a “handicappers” guide to the next “in” neighborhoods, complete with tips from experts on how to speculate in inner-city real estate (Saline, 1979 and companion articles in the same issue). It appears that several neighborhoods are thus on the verge of replicating the patterns of cataclysmic change which we have observed in Fairmount and Queen Village.

Many observers of the reinvestment process have argued that this is only the inevitable course of neighborhood change. Given the cumulative “snow-balling” effect of market forces, it is often asserted that no other type of transition will be possible. The fact that residential location frequently serves as a symbol for social prestige is one reason why rapid turnover is to be expected. Individuals and groups, it is argued, ultimately prefer to live with those who share their values, their customs and their tastes (Perin, 1977). Indeed, since 59 percent of all the dollars spent on new housing construction and rehabilitation in South Philadelphia were spent in Queen Village alone,⁵ there seems to be some evidence for this clustering effect.

Whether this truly reflects individual preference, or is the result of the steering and marketing activities of realtors, developers, speculators, and “fashionable” magazines, remains a question for further research. But let us assume, for the sake of argument, that

such “boom town” development will characterize future patterns of urban reinvestment. What then are the consequences for our cities?

One only has to look back at the experience and the literature of urban renewal to become painfully aware of the social and psychological consequences of forced dislocation (Fried, 1963). Similarly, Kai T. Erikson (1976) has analyzed quite sensitively the traumas which result from the loss of the sense of “communality,” as all supportive social institutions disintegrated in the wake of the flood in West Virginia’s Buffalo Creek in 1972. One does not have to like either the physical appearance or the values of older urban communities to recognize that they created a cohesive moral order that regulated the daily activities of life on the street. As we destroy these social networks and patterns of interaction, we destroy one of the things that has made our cities livable and safe.

But beyond these social costs are obvious economic ones. Just because we have swept the problems of older urban neighborhoods out of the view of the “revived” downtown does not mean that we have solved them. On the contrary, we may actually exacerbate them. Private upper-income rehabilitation decreases the supply of low-cost housing without decreasing the demand. It can thus only impose uprooted people on contiguous neighborhoods, create overcrowding, and further strain already overextended social services. So too, it obviously is impossible to plan adequately or budget appropriately for rapidly changing populations.

Finally, there is the disturbing possibility that if we do not cool off these “hot spots” of reinvestment by moderating the process or dispersing demand, then it is likely that some form of backlash will result. Already in both neighborhoods we have studied, newcomers have been subjected to vandalistic initiations that begin with the arrival of the moving truck. Damage to new people’s

cars, graffiti painting on their homes, verbal abuse and harassment on the street are not uncommon. Our observations also suggest that such incidents are most heavily concentrated on the blocks which are undergoing the most rapid transition.

Even outside reinvestment areas, there have been significant reverberations. For example, throughout low-income, minority areas of Philadelphia, there is a growing sense of uncertainty about the future. Fears of “recycling” are emerging in some neighborhoods far from downtown where there are no signs of reinvestment activity. In some areas, groups have thus been opposing any public Community Development expenditures out of fear that this will only ignite a wildfire of speculation. Conspiracy theories abound concerning which neighborhoods will be forcibly changed into the “next Society Hill.”

It is too early to discern whether reinvestment trends in other neighborhoods will reach the fevered pitch which characterizes Philadelphia’s current “hot spots.” The public sector may yet be roused to effective action. Differing neighborhood characteristics and land use patterns may moderate the process in other communities, as might mounting resistance from lower-income groups. External influences, such as energy, may take an unexpected twist. Even the fashionableness of the city may prove to be a fad of limited duration. Yet, if trends persist on their present course, it will certainly not be the first time in the history of urban development that short-range, highly profitable gains have been achieved by imposing the costs not only on the poor, but also upon a not so distant future.

NOTES

1. These statistics were obtained from analysis of daily lists of marriage license applicants published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1968 and 1969. These years were chosen to eliminate

newcomers, who at that time were a small part of the area's population.

2. The data are from the *Philadelphia Real Estate Directory* and are for four representative reinvestment blocks in the neighborhood. We are grateful to Deborah McColloch for doing the tabulations.
3. These statistics are from records of the Philadelphia Tax Assessors Office and were compiled by Lynne Goldman.
4. This information was provided by the Queen Village Neighbors Association from their files on property tax appeals.
5. This figure was made available by the Department of Licenses and Inspections in Philadelphia.

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