Sparks Shot Tower

-a study of history and community-

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The Sparks Shot Tower is located in Philadelphia in an area which is best defined as the border of two city sections, Queen's Village and Southwark. It is a historical sight, almost two centuries old, but has been converted into a children's recreation center, playground, and park. Various neighborhoods surrounding it are easily distinguished on the basis of race and income and the playground is well used by most of these neighborhoods with the exception of the wealthy section to its north. The playground and park serve as a center of community for the five block area immediately encircling it and, at the same time, attract younger children from two other area neighborhoods that lack adequate play space for them. Although once a historical site, the tower now serves as a playground which not only attracts children from the surrounding areas, but also helps to unite the neighborhoods from which they come. In recent years, however, the actual recreation center has been used less and less frequently and is in need of some re-thinking. The combination of history, recreation, and socialization, provide interesting future possibilities.

Shot towers were invented in London in 1789 to improve the shot manufacturing process. Instead of being placed into molds, molten lead, mixed with arsenic for smoothness, was dropped from the top of the tower, becoming spherical and solidifying as it fell. A pool of water lay at the bottom of the tower, into which the shot fell to be cooled. Sparks Shot Tower was the first shot tower built in the United States and represented the beginning of "a new U.S. industrial independence." (see appendix P, D --historical marker). The shot tower was built in 1808 by Thomas Sparks and John Bishop in response to Jefferson's Embargo Act of 1807 which prevented the importation of hunting shot from overseas. In 1812, the purpose of the shot tower changed from making hunting shot to making ammunition for the War of 1812. The shot tower industry's association with the war displeased Bishop, a Quaker, and he sold his half of the business to Sparks. Shot towers remained "indispensable" throughout the 1800's and the shot tower remained in the Sparks family for three generations, until 1903 (Stewart 70-72).

Sparks Shot Tower is located on the north side of Carpenter Street (originally Jones Street) near Front Street in South Philadelphia. At a height of 142 feet, the shot tower became a landmark for one of the oldest settled communities in the United States, Queen's Village, which was settled by Swedes in 1640. The round brick tower has a diameter of thirteen feet at the top and of thirty feet at the base. The U.S. Lighthouse Board used this tower as a model when designing early lighthouses. Another shot tower was built in Philadelphia at Schuylkill and Arch Streets, but has since been taken down. In fact, the shot tower is one of only four surviving shot towers in the United States. (www.lighthousedigest.com)

In 1907, the area next to the tower became a playground, and in 1913 Sparks Shot Tower was taken over by the Philadelphia Playgrounds Association (now the Philadelphia Recreation Department's Neighborhood Playgrounds) (Stewart 70). A sign on one of the doors to the main building says "Shot Tower Recreation Center," however, despite many attempts, we were never able to get inside. When speaking to the recreation center staff over the phone, we were told that they operate from Monday to Friday between the hours of 1:30pm and 9:30pm. However, it was not open on the two weekdays we visited during these hours. Neither, for that matter, was it open on either of the two weekend days when we visited. Residents and park goers alike said that they rarely see the doors to the recreation center open.

Outside, the Shot Tower Playground occupies a fenced in area where neighborhood children can come to play on modern playground equipment (see appendix P, E). The playground area is approximately 150 feet by 90 feet and the equipment includes two "jungle gym" structures and six swings. The ground under the playground equipment is a red rubbery material, softer than the white pavement, brick, and asphalt making up the rest of the ground area. Also, numerous benches are located throughout the playground, on which parents are usually seen sitting while their children play (see appendix A and B).

The adjacent lot is a worn-looking sports field which is surrounded by a chain link fence and accessible through a gate from the playground. The actual playground area itself is surrounded by an iron fence (see appendix P, A) with the only opening, a chain link gate, on Carpenter Street. The fences surrounding the playground and field prevent loitering, particularly because the park closes at dark. Without a fence, the area would have a more open feel, but the presence of a fence probably is comforting to the parents who send their sons and daughters there to play. Children are keep secure and out of the way of the cars on busy Front Street. Also, the cleanliness of both the playground and field would likely be jeopardized without the fences (see appendix P, B).

In fact, the playground, for the most part, appears very clean and safe. Trash cans are visible and the ground is without litter. On our first visit, we had seen some vandalism in the form of writing on the brick wall facing the playground. However, when we returned, it appeared that the wall had since been cleaned. Most of the playground and field are visible from surrounding areas. A kind of "back alley" lies next to the actual tower, between the building and the fenced in field, where some picnic tables have been placed. One area behind the field, an extension of the recreation space, looks as if it has been cleaned up or is in the process of being restored. Some parts have been recently painted and a new shed has been added. However, other benches are missing seats and a mural on one wall is cracking and decaying (See appendix P, C).

Parents appear to be comfortable leaving their children at the playground, particularly when the children are in groups. We saw a few parents come over to check on their children and then leave them playing while they walked somewhere else. Some parents prefer to sit on benches while their children play, while it seems that parents with younger children walk around with them as they play.

The children we saw at various times on the playground ranged from about two to ten years old. At one point as we observed, a group of boys were running around and exploring behind the tower building, two men were playing frisbee on the field, some

children were swinging and playing on the equipment, and a father was teaching his daughter how to ride a bike. The different types of equipment and the presence of the field seem to accommodate a large range of activities. Certainly it is a place for whole families as much as it is a place for groups of kids.

However, at street level, a flat brick wall along the sidewalk prevents the recreation building and actual tower structure from seeming very inviting. Three metal doors are the only openings in the brick walls which make up the building. Bordering the playground on the side opposite the tower is the somewhat larger, busier Front Street. What look like windows in the tower have been bricked over or boarded up. Because the area is so compact and the brick walls are rather unrevealing, the presence of the tower is more obvious from farther away, across Front street. There is a small but visible indication of its historical significance, a historical marker, located on Carpenter Street, which was placed in 1997 (see appendix P, D). This provides passersby with a bit of information on the Tower's history. However, the tower and its historical significance seems to have been forgotten over the years.

Outdated information posted near one of the metal doors provides further evidence that the actual building which houses the tower and recreation center is rarely used. A sign outside announced that advisory board meetings for the facility meet monthly. However, after calling, we were informed that the advisory council had not met in over a year. Also, there was posted news about a 1996 shot tower summer camp. From this posted information, one can infer the limited efforts that in the past two years have gone into maintaining the recreation center. Though it does seem that at one time the indoor center, which functions only with the help of volunteer workers, was actually a thriving place.

Sparks Shot Tower has its own bit of folklore as well. According to an article in Lighthouse Digest, the Tower was constructed on an old burial ground and "tales have been told" (3) of a mythical "Green Lady" who appears at the top of the Tower on Halloween night to make sure that children behave themselves. Whether or not this tale is still told

today, such a myth illustrates that the tower's current association with children has been present through much of the past century.

Moving outwards, the area immediately surrounding the shot tower park is a distinct neighborhood consisting of the shot tower block of Carpenter Street one block to the south and north, and a couple of blocks to the west. This small area seems to be a lower middle class district, predominantly white, and is set apart from the surrounding neighborhoods by physical obstructions as well as economic and racial categories. Coming up from Southwark into Queen's village, Front Street narrows considerably after Washington Avenue. Along this street, but not through the immediate community, runs bus 57. It is the only form of public transportation noticeable in the area. Along Washington Avenue, a solid wall of commercial and industrial cement buildings line the street and section off the community behind it. Front Street, with a raised section of I95 directly on the other side, creates another boundary. The five-block area is mostly residential, with the businesses pushed out into the blocks immediately westward and northward. These businesses finish the square wall of physical boundaries, forming a protective barrier around the shot tower and bordering homes (see appendix C for mapping of this and all below mentioned sites).

The businesses in this area help to define both the five-block community surrounding the shot tower as well as the other communities to its north. Hot Waves, South, a hair salon "for progressive hair", is one example. Haircuts are moderately expensive, 18 dollars for a man's cut and 28 for a woman's. The salon caters to the white community that it borders, offering prices that, with the specials and coupons they offer are still affordable to lower-middle class citizens, while at the same time attract an even wealthier crowd from the north-eastern sections of Queen's village above. A small, up-kept plaza nearby houses a Wawa, a dry-cleaners, and Number One China, a Chinese eat-in restaurant, places frequented by locals but not unique so as to attract outsiders. A tavern and bar on the adjoining street also serve as places for local gathering for adults. Many of the same people who frequent these businesses make use of the park as well.

On the other side of I-95 a historic Swedish Lutheran church called Old Swedes stands secluded from the area, fenced in with tall brick barriers and high iron gates. (The fact that the church was originally Swedish has some significance, as the area was founded by Swedes. A consulate for Finland, Norway, and Sweden also serves the neighborhood.) In addition to weekly services in its historic brick church house, this church provides the area with a protected, private day care center and a neatly kept green space with brick and cobblestone paths for walking dogs and jogging. These places tend to be frequented mostly by the wealthier members of Queen's Village who live north of the shot tower. It should be noted that this affluent day care center, called the Young Children's Center for the Arts, is the closest school to the park and yet rarely uses it, although it has no playground of its own. Perhaps this is a clue to the fact that the area's wealthier residents would like to distance themselves as much as possible from the rest of the community including the nice but slightly run-down shot tower park.

The houses in the immediate neigborhood around the shot tower are in good condition. Most of the houses are small but neatly kept historic row-homes. The sidewalks are clean and often landscaped with small trees and flowerpots, obvious signs of concerned and proud locals. Continuing farther north, the houses become increasingly large and more expensive. One house bordering the baseball field is an obvious attempt at gentrification. It is an unusually large house for the city, appearing as though it should be located in one of the city's rich suburban developments. Set back from the road, a brick walkway and large garage are some of its unique amenities. Unlike many of the other houses in the area, this house seems univiting and independent from the rest of the neighborhood. The wide variety of expensive, unique restaurants and shops near South Street undoubtedly attracts these kinds of residents to the northern half of Queen's Village, away from Southwark, while the other residents remain in the area using its businesses and its playground and interacting with eachother.

In the five block area surrounding the park, there appears to be very few, if any, minority residents. Most of the residents are, lower-middle class families made up of all ages of children, parents, and even grandparents. According to local home owners, there are also some young singles that take up residence in the area for a year or two but often end up leaving after that and are not really considered part of the community. Aside from the singles, most of the people in this small area seem to think of it as a fairly tight community, where people know and care about each other as well as the appearance of the community. One man with whom we spoke is on his way back to his house after throwing away a dead bird that was left on the sidewalk. Another elderly man was sweeping leaves off of the walk in front of his house. They both agreed that there was a strong sense of community in the area, aside from a few people who did not get along with the rest of them. Among the "annoying things" that these people did was to petition to have the rec-center and park closed since it sometimes creates a parking problem during baseball games.

Besides these "annoyances," the rest of the community greatly enjoys having the shot tower playground and park close by. Parents also often enjoy taking their children to play in the playground and meeting other parents in the process. In the summer months, a wading pool with a fountain behind the baseball field keeps their children cool. The baseball diamond offers a place for little league games to be held; both children and parents in the community participate in and enjoy these games. Aside from playful activities, the park serves as an informal business location for the small five block community around the shot tower, holding flea markets there in the warmer months. Most residents enjoy the flea markets as much as the baseball games. Home owners also agree to the fact that the park and playground bring value to the homes in the area and are a big improvement over the run-down houses that were previously located on some of the land. Besides some minor parking inconveniences, the park does not create any problems for the residents. Loitering is not a real problem, and the park does not attract crime as it is designed for young children and is closed after ten o'clock at night.

However, the residents of the five block neighborhood around the park are not the only ones who use the park. Many people in other surrounding neighborhoods use the Shot Tower recreation facilities as well. In order to fully explain the interaction of the people in these sections with the community immediately surrounding the park, it is necessary to define each neighborhood's boundries.

The other neighborhoods surrounding the site to the south and to the west are clearly marked by their residents and types of housing. To the south, beyond Washington Ave., the population, though still predominantly white, seems to be less affluent than those immediately surrounding the park. The quality of housing around this area strengthens this perception. Although the houses resemble the residences surrounding the tower, they are not cared for nearly as well and several are even abandoned. The houses in this part of Southwark have the same potential as those surrounding the site; however the finished paint jobs and stylized carved doors present in residences around the tower are absent here.

A few blocks to the west, beyond Moyamensing Ave., newly built low-income houses are situated still within Queen's Village. Construction of these models continues nearby with a posting for "Applications Now Being Accepted." Among these new developments are three high rise housing complexes, two of which are abandoned and obviously condemned. Based on the presence of abandoned and decaying housing, and the low-income housing projects, it can be inferred that this neighborhood is significantly more impoverished.

The distinctions between the sections intensifies with the presence of two churches of the same denomination. One is the Old Swedes Church, mentioned earlier, which is located east of the site's neighborhood across I-95 and the other is the Emanual Lutheran Church located to the west and actually at the center of the new public housing development. While Old Swedes appears to be used by the affluent, predominantly white neighborhood to the north of the shot tower, the Emanual Lutheran Church is used primarily by the lower-income residents who live in the area three blocks west of the tower. In this way, the

existence of the two churches serves to further define the separation of the neighborhoods around the park.

The neighborhoods to the south and west of the shot tower playground lack suitable areas for young children to play. Although recreation and gathering points exist, their aim is not directed towards younger children. In Southwark, approximately three blocks from the shot tower, an institution called the Southwark House is located in a large building on Front Street. Older citizens come together through the Southwark House just as residents around the site use the shot tower grounds as a gathering place. For example, like the flea markets held at the shot tower park, a sign outside of the Southwark House advertised for the "Southwark House Bazaar and Flea Market." However, because it lacks the facilities to do so, it is incapable of providing younger children with outdoor spaces to play.

Another neighborhood center present (outside the immediate area of the tower) is an urban gardening project sponsored by Penn State. It is in close proximity with the new public housing development. The garden's thriving vegetation attests to the heavy neighborhood use it receives. Additionally, on one wall bordering the garden lies an intricate and well-preserved mural that depicts the surrounding area. Like the grounds of the the shot tower, the garden seems to function as a gathering place for families in the neighborhood, especially during the warmer months. Once again, the focus of this establishment is not to provide entertainment for young children.

Recreational centers also exist outside of the five block community surrounding the shot tower. The Philadelphia Department of Recreation maintains the Ralph Rizzo Ice Skating Rink on the south side of Washington Avenue at Front Street. Basketball and hockey courts sit next to the rink. These facilities seem more appropriate for use by older children who do not need supervision. Indeed, observation confirmed this, as the children using the outdoor recreation areas were approximately 10 and older, and no younger children utilized the facility.

Conditions elsewhere in the Southwark-Queen's Village border area show the lack of appropriate play space for younger children. A green space of approximately two square blocks sits south of Washington Avenue at the corner of East Moyamensing Avenue. The space's winding walkways, park benches, and shady trees give it the potential to function successfully as a play space. Unfortunately, conditions of the area prevent this possibility. Not only is the space in disrepair, but several groups of men loiter in the parks vicinity. Additionally, upon nearing the area, we were greeted with the pungent smell of marijuana. Such an area where narcotics are overtly present is certainly inappropriate for children of any age, particularly younger ones.

In the area west of the tower, surrounding the low-income housing, there are currently no areas for children to play. The new houses back up to a large shared courtyard which could be used for playing. However, the dusty dirt and brown grass does not provide a welcoming atmosphere. Instead, many of the children choose to play in the parking lot or gather at one of the construction sites to play on the large dirt mounds. Besides being unsafe, the playground the construction site creates is also temporary. As construction comes to a close, the children in the area will once again have limited access to play areas of their own.

Traffic in these sections also heightens safety concerns for children playing.

Leaving Queen's Village and crossing into Southwark, the contrast between the neighborhoods became immediately obvious as we moved from a quiet two lane road onto Washington Avenue -- a major four lane road dotted with traffic lights. Additionally, in contrast to the area immediately surrounding the tower, the number of stops for public transportation increases outside the tower's vicinity. In our survey of the area, we observed not only more bus stops, but also an increased number of buses running through the area but not stopping. This increase in traffic, particularly since buses are large and noisy, amplifies the industrial and commercial atmosphere of the surrounding area and makes the area even more inappropriate for young children to play.

Given the absence of suitable spaces for younger children to play in neighborhoods surrounding the tower, many of the children from these more impoverished areas utilize the tower's playgrounds. One boy playing in the parking lot of the housing project said that he often walked to the park to play. Not only do children from the area use the park, but organized after-school programs and preschools do also. One resident mentioned that students from several schools in Southwark often come to the park. When we looked into this we discovered that the Southwark House, mentioned earlier, offers a publicly funded after-school program for children. The workers for the program often walk with the children over to the shot tower playground to give them an outdoor place to play. This is somewhat ironic since the walk from the Southwark House is much less safe in comparison with the walk from the Young Children's Center for the Arts, which we mentioned doesn't use the tower playground. The majority of the children in the Southwark Houses' program are from area public and parochial schools such as the closest school, George Washington Elementary, which is five blocks away, Nebinger School, six blocks away, St. Mary Magdalen de Pazzi, seven blocks away and Sharswood School, twelve blocks away (See appendix G). A program worker we interviewed said that the kids usually come from lowincome households.

The Village Learning Center is another local day-care center. A sign on the front of their building reads "providing Philadelphia with quality child-care and education for over ten years." This day-care center, though it seems to be targeted to higher income families than those who might use the Southwark after-school program, is more community oriented than the Old Swedes day-care center, mentioned above. The Village Learning Center is located about four blocks from the shot tower in a historical row-home across from a small shopping plaza. The center has little, if any, green-space of its own. According to a local resident, The Village Learning Center is one of the day-care centers in Queen's Village and Southwark that use the shot tower recreation facilities.

The joining of people of different races and income brackets at the shot tower playground does not seem to bother any of those who use the recreation facilities. "Kids are kids," one resident explained. "They just want to play." Within the context of this setting, the shot tower park helps to connect the immidiate community around the tower with the bordering neighborhoods through the children who use the park.

Statistical information which we gathered from the 1990 United States census report reflects what we have discovered about the shot tower community and the nearby neighborhoods. The census tract in which the shot tower lies, tract twenty-five, contains five subdivisions called census blocks. Block one, which houses the shot tower, is a rectangular area one block wide and six blocks long (See appendix D). The census does show that this block, as we observed, is predominantly (76.4%) white (CD). This block contains both part of the lower-middle class community immediately surrounding the shot tower and the less affluent section of Southwark to the south of the tower. Since the block's median household income is \$14,688, we can assume that it is this less affluent section of Southwark which pulls the number down. Fifty-two residents in this area are below the poverty level (CD).

Census block five, the next block to the west, is an area two blocks by five blocks between Second Street and Fourth Street. This block, which contains the rest of the immediate community surrounding the shot tower, is a slightly wealthier area than the blocks on either side of it (see appendix F). The median household income is the highest in the census tract at \$32,083 (CD). This, again, supports what we have discovered about the area. Also, the fact that this number is considerably higher than that of block one, reveals the spreading influence of the wealthier neigborhood to the north. This would explain such businesses as the hair salon, Hot Waves, which tries to cater to the lower-middle class residents as well as the more affluent ones.

Block five is 47.9% black. This is due to the fact that bordering on the west is block four, which is a predominantly black area (see appendix E). In fact, block four, which

contains most of the the public housing development that we discussed, is 88.9% black.

(Block five contains the other part of the public housing complex.) Block four also has a median household income of \$8,021 and 584 of its 1,169 residents are below the poverty level (CD).

There are some other census data about the tract as a whole which is pertinent to the study of the shot tower playground. Of the family households in the tract with children under 18, the majority of them, 215, are single mother households. Of these, 180 are black and 35 are white. This may account both for the heavy use of the park by the black neighborhood and the need for afterschool programs, such as the one run by Southwark House, which use the park. There are also 126 married couple families and 15 male householder families with children under 18 in the tract (www.census.gov).

Our observation of a wealthier area above the shot tower neighborhood is verified by the 1990 census data as well. The two tracts above the shot tower, tracts seventeen and sixteen, are the wealthiest in an eleven-tract area surrounding tract twenty-five. The median household incomes of tracts seventeen and sixteen are \$36,439 and \$32,744, respectively. This is compared to a median household income of \$19,232 in tract twenty-five. Also, in wealthier tracts the population is 9.9% and 8.8% children ages one to fifteen. In tract twenty five, on the other hand, 20.1% of the population is children of that age (www.census.gov).

Based on all of the statistical data, facts about the building, and information we gathered from the section of Philadelphia around our site, we devised a future plan for the shot tower and recreation center. Our recommendation is to keep the site as a recreation center and playground, since it seems to hold a significant place within the community as such. However, the recreation center needs improvements. At one time, it seems, the actual recreation center funtioned as a resource to all surrounding neighborhoods, connecting them in the process. We would like to see it do this again. The recreation center should offer programs that would attract children from all of the surrounding neighborhoods, even the

affluent one to the north. In this way, through direct interaction and cooperation between playing children, the neighborhoods could become more united. This proposal, however, requires money that the recreation center and area doesn't have. For this reason, the shot tower needs to find significant means to fund its center, possibly through reviving the tower's place as a historical monument.

Beyond its modest historical marker, the site lacks sufficient acknowledgement of its historical significance and importance as a landmark of the area. It is a tower which stands taller than any building nearby. It also is a tower which is nearly 200 years old and at one point served as a landmark for Queen's Village. Nonetheless, despite its visibility, the actual tower itself seems forgotten. According to one resident, the tower is just another building for area residents who use the park. "It's just there," he says. "Nobody really thinks about it."

However, given the area in which the tower is located, reviving it as a historical landmark is not improbable. There are many different sites within a one-mile radius which draw outsiders to the area. First, the Riverview Shopping Plaza, just three blocks east of the park, with a myriad of stores including an American Appliance, a Pep Boys, and a Just For Feet, draw consumers to the area. Secondly, there are a number of historical sights that attract tourists. These include Penn's Landing, the Old Swedes Church, and the frequently visited Mummers Museum, again just three blocks away.

From this, we concluded that opening the actual tower for touring, as many lighthouses do, might be a good way of making money for the recreation center while reestablishing the site as a historical landmark. (The idea of opening the tower for tours actually was suggested in the 1997 Lighthouse Digest Magazine which notes both the architectural greatness and the historical significance of the shot tower.) Of course, the opening of the tower to the public would take construction -- either minor or major depending on the interior of the building which we were never able to see -- and this has the potential of costing a great deal. However, we believe that in the long run, opening the tower

to the public would be a great economic benefit to the park, thus improving it as a play center for the children and families in the neighborhoods upon which its shadow falls.

Standing out above the Philadelphia neighborhoods on the border between Southwark and Queen's Village, the Sparks Shot Tower has potential as the neighborhood landmark it once was. Unfortunately, as is, the tower itself is more of a blemish on the horizon than a source of neighborhood pride. Though the area aroundthe tower has successfully been turned into a play area, in the past few years, the use of the tower building, which houses the actual shot tower recreation center, has diminished. The shot tower park serves to both define each surrounding neighborhood by its distinct needs and wants as well as connect the neighborhoods through various family interactions. Re-establishment of the tower as a neighborhood landmark would further this connection of the area neighborhoods while linking the area to its unique past and hopefully leading it to a bettered future.

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"Tiger Map Server Browser" Updated 1999, http://www.uscensus.gov/ Cited November 20, 1999.

Appendix

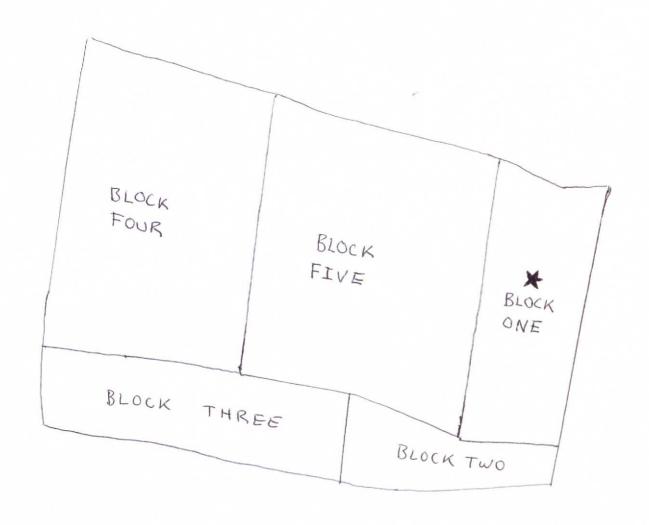


- playgrand equipment and - chairlink fence - bleachers - historical marker

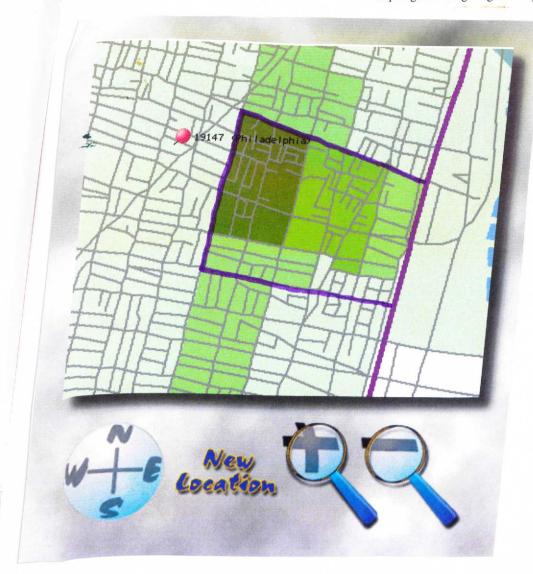
- iron ferce

a wall which encircles a dry fountain. This is the location of the "decaying mural" and benehes.

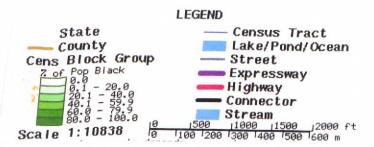
Census Tract 0025 -- by blocks



*= Sparks Shot Tower playground and recreation center.

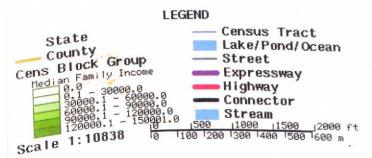


Percent of Population Black





Median Family Income

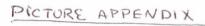


Spark's Shot Tower



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Picture Appendix



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a side view of the fenced park on carpenter and front streets.





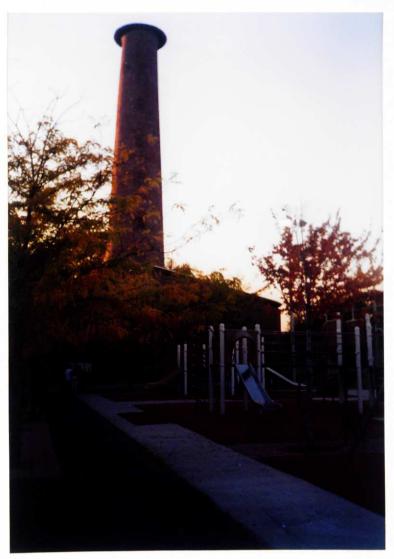
A view of the playground from the baseball field next to it.



The wading pool and mural



The historical marker for the shot tower on Carpenter street.



PE Spark's Shot tower and playground