

# **Analyzing an Urban Site in its Context: Riverwalk**

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## **Analyzing an Urban Site in Context: Riverwalk**

To thoroughly analyze an urban site, many aspects must be taken into account. Any piece of architecture includes not only the physical elements which it included, but also a sense of the local buildings and people which surround it. One must have an understanding of a neighborhood to decipher the role played by each individual element. In examining the Riverwalk sculpture project (Appendix A), we had to study the geography, economic variables, residents in the area, the history of the art, and its site.

Upon visiting the site, we discovered that the project was not nearly as easy as we had thought — our first complication lay in pinpointing Riverwalk. We were originally unsure as to exactly what comprised the piece — whether it was simply the art, or if it included the nearby buildings, parking lots, and wharf. The art was obviously intended to work itself into the fabric of the community; however, as we later discovered, that community wasn't what it could have been.

### **The Site**

Riverwalk is a series of sculptures between Piers 3 and 5. Situated between waterfront townhouses and an overpass, Riverwalk occupies a leafy section of Delaware Avenue. The sculptures of mermaids, mermen, nautical knots, fish, and tools, occupy 800 feet. The installations, made of concrete, ceramic, steel and tiles, allude to the ports of Philadelphia.

Their creation is an effort to recall the history of the area as well as to redevelop the area. To the south end is "Hulk," a lookout that resembles a ship, and sculptures of horses. To the north is "Lighthouse," a metal and glass piece evocative of shipyard derricks, crowned with a weathervane shaped like a fish. The other Riverwalk sculptures also serve a practical purpose: they are meant as seats and benches. The concrete sculptures lining the street have a deep

seat which faces in towards the sidewalk. This public art is meant to be utilized by the community and not just admired.

Installed in 1990, it was designed by Andrew Leicester, a British artist born in 1948. Leicester worked with the Fine Arts Program of Philadelphia's Redevelopment Authority to build Riverwalk with a sense of the community and surroundings. Various components of the city were utilized in the design. Local students in the art community were involved in the project. For instance, the ceramic sculptures were made by students of the Tyler School of Art at Temple University. The effort of aesthetic revitalization incorporated not only the artist, but involved cooperation between the city, the public, and the art itself.

The existing Riverwalk occupies only a fraction of the area covered by the original plans. In 1982, the plan for riverfront redevelopment began with the idea for a three-mile long Riverwalk, complete with entertainment and shopping. Apartments and condos at Piers 3 and 5 had just opened, after much negotiation and redesign, when the sculptures were installed (Appendix C). The revitalization efforts were difficult for us to follow — because we were unable to access the 1980 census materials, we were unsure as to exactly what was being revitalized.

At a time when the area was just beginning to develop into a residential area, the city chose to erect a series of sculptures, hoping it would bring people to the area. However, though there are apartment buildings and sculptures, there is not much else, and the gentrification of the area is still ongoing. There are plans to open a nearby mall. Philadelphia and Camden are also beginning to cooperate in their re-creation of the waterfront.

By associating the images in the sculptures with the city's maritime history, as well as the mythological references to water, Leicester and the developers of Riverwalk hoped to make the new riverfront resemble the bustling

harbor that once existed. Riverwalk serves as a synthesis of the revitalization efforts of city planning and images of nostalgia for an older Philadelphia. The process of planning and improvement is slow, and this environment of art and community is one of the first few steps in the redevelopment of the area.

### **Urban Context**

The building which was a functional pier in a former life has been converted to upscale homes and businesses. The large and contiguous structure retains the names Pier Three and Pier Five, but little else is the same. The outside is painted a sky blue, as is a large gate which prohibits easy access to the interior. On one side the structure is bordered by the Delaware River and on the other runs the overpass for the Delaware Expressway. The Benjamin Franklin Bridge, draped in red, white, and blue, is visible from the front sidewalk.

Several businesses reside in the lower level of the building. Topak Marketing, Inc., AIG, and The Peter Group, -- names that tell nothing about their actual purpose, are located in a group next to The Ristorante La Veranda. Two signs outside the restaurant make clear the clientele to which this establishment caters. On the front door a sign reads, "Proper Dress Required," and on the sidewalk "Valet Parking \$4.00." However, the image which the Ristorante is attempting to achieve is somewhat dampened by the limp, wet noodles strewn on the sidewalk. The chefs in the kitchen toss out leftovers for the pigeons that swoop down from the trees which line the street. At lunch, people sit in suits and ties, presumably on business. There is a take-out eatery beside the main restaurant which is less formal and serves pizza and soft drinks. A marina and a tour office for The Spirit of Philadelphia are the only remaining connections to the water at Piers 3 and 5.

A resident of the condominiums let our group into the main residential area, with the understanding that we were photographing the building for a

school project. In order to prevent any misunderstandings, the resident had to notify the front desk (at which sat an armed security office) of our presence. Earlier in the week she had called security to report a suspicious man outside her bedroom window, and was now worried that unknown people might trigger security action.

Instead of interior hallways, the condos were connected on the ground floor through an open-roofed structure reminiscent of warehouses (the building's original function). Each apartment looked out onto this outside path, and had either a glassed-in room, or a ground-level porch. These glassed-in porches allowed a glimpse of living quarters. Most of these areas contained a home office complete with computers and fax machines, suggesting upwardly mobile owners. The second-story apartments were connected via a series of walkways and an elevator down to the ground floor.

Outside elements were introduced through the open roof. A small communal deck with wooden chairs and tables overlooked the Delaware River. This deck and outdoor balconies attached to some of the condos provide the only outside seating. The street which runs parallel to the entrance is not conducive to walking or enjoying a sunny morning on a park bench. The overpass creates noise and a less-than inviting atmosphere.

Our last stop was the main lobby of the condominiums. The concierge was dressed in an outfit modeled after sailor uniforms, a feeble attempt to connect the building with its seafaring past. Muzak blared from hidden speakers and on the glass coffee table copies of "Ski," "Consumer Reports," "Better Homes and Gardens," and "Photography" were arranged in a symmetrical row. These magazines and the expensive luxury cars (Mercedes, Lexus and BMW) which drove into the private parking garage (beneath the ground-level apartments) indicate residents with disposable income and time on their hands.

## **Service Space**

As has been previously stated, Riverwalk is situated within a newly-developing urban neighborhood. The community, only a few blocks' walk from South Street, appears to have everything going for it: waterfront views, financial stability, desirable property, and a convenient downtown location. One might assume that a community like this one would naturally have all of the convenient resources associated with the location; however, we discovered that, for many services, the exact opposite was true. The Riverwalk region was designed, not as a residential district, but as a tourist area. Thus, there are no conveniently located supermarkets, no local welfare agencies, and few schools within walking distance (please see appendix B).

For a work of art, none of these service centers are necessary – there are restaurants, bars, the occasional convenience store, and a couple of movie theaters for tourists who visit Riverwalk. Those who live in the vicinity, however, are forced to journey outside their neighborhood for many amenities which most city-dwellers take for granted. Phlash, the tourist bus, is the closest form of public transportation. It takes more than 30 minutes to travel 20 blocks, however, because of the round-about route which the bus takes. Also, Phlash is more expensive than regular public transportation, and does not sell monthly commuter cards. Therefore, this is a community in which most of the residents rely on cars, as is evidenced by the huge garage under the apartment complex.

This transportation issue alone restricts the number of eligible residents. Furthermore, because all of the developments are new (within the past 10 years), there is no older, more affordable (and less elite) section of the area. Therefore, only people with a certain income (which includes, not only rent, but at least 1 car), are able to live in the Riverwalk region.

The residents in the Riverwalk community are dependant on cars because their area lacks reliable public transportation. Convenience is a crucial issue -- as we learned from residents, it is frequently necessary to utilize suburban services. This includes grocery stores, high schools (local children attend public school in Lower Merion), and shopping malls. Riverwalk dwellers are restricted from using resources in other parts of the city which cater to publically-transported residents. The Market East Gallery Mall, for instance, which is the closest shopping mall, does not have convenient parking, and is therefore predominantly utilized by those who can access it by public transportation. The same is true of local supermarkets. Riverwalk residents are denied access to many urban amenities, and are therefore relegated to the same outside status (by means of access) as are local suburbanites. This is especially true for education.

While there are some elementary schools convenient to the Riverwalk area, they are few and far between. Meredith Elementary School is close, on Fifth and Fitzwater Streets; St. Peter's (a parochial school) is also local, on Third and Lombard Streets. Both of these schools, however, only go through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. There are two public high schools in the area -- Bodine High School (4<sup>th</sup> & St. George Sts) and Furness High School (1900 S. 3<sup>rd</sup> St.). The latter is near Independence Mall, a 30-minute walk from Riverwalk. We were unable to find Bodine High School because St. George Street did not appear on Philadelphia maps. While visiting the Riverwalk site, we were fortunately able to find a woman familiar with the site. She was a professional babysitter waiting for her charge to return from school (the charge, we later discovered, was in 9<sup>th</sup> grade). The fact that an adult was employed to watch a high school student was another telling sign of the area: students are obviously immobile on their own -- an unusual situation in the city. The residential area was far enough from the

bustling downtown region that parents did not feel comfortable letting their children wander unsupervised. The distance between home and town, however, was sufficiently far that some external form of transportation was necessary to allow these children any sort of freedom.

The babysitter was able to tell us about the problem of education in the area – if parents did not want to send their children to Catholic or selective public schools, there were very few local choices available. Also, regardless of elementary school, it was most convenient for parents to send their children to high school in the suburbs – both for safety, academic, and transportation issues. According to state law, these urban students were bused daily into the suburbs and returned to their downtown homes in the afternoon.

In America, middle- and upper-class parents are often heavily involved in their children's education, because they frequently have both financial means and more leisure time than do their poorer counterparts. It is common for parents to develop adult relationships which center on their children — through the PTA or other such organizations, adults meet others with similar interests. In the case of Riverwalk, parents who send their children to school in the suburbs are likely to be involved in communities there, rather than in the city, for the aforementioned reasons. The fact that the Riverwalk area does not have its own school system forces members to seek an external community. The “amputated” feeling of Riverwalk members which causes them to participate in a community outside of their geographic region is a telling sign that Riverwalk is a less than utopic area.



## **Quantitative Context**

We studied both the 1990 U.S. Government Census of the Riverwalk area and the 1990 census statistics for the national average. This comparison gave us a very insightful view of the domain and its inhabitants. The results of this collation were very interesting. In some aspects, Riverwalk simply echoed the average statistics. In other ways, however, Riverwalk's identity is definitely unique.

One of the most startling figures from the collected census information was that of age. Only two percent of people living in Riverwalk were over the age of sixty-five. This was quite unusual, as almost thirteen percent of our country's population in 1990 was sixty-five years and older. We were forced to wonder what this figure meant in the given context. We hypothesized that the type of housing was not designed to be appealing to older people. Another guess was that housing of this type was simply not affordable to the elderly, who don't have yearly income. To extrapolate upon these theories, however, we needed to look at the average incomes and rent prices for the area.

When the household incomes of the area were compared with the rent and home values shown, the information was slightly baffling. In 1990, the average house in the Riverwalk area was worth about \$226,488. Average monthly housing costs for the area were about \$1,850, and the average renter could expect to shell out an average of \$1,010 a month as well. When looking at household incomes, however, one could see that they varied considerably. Although the average household income was \$71,825, a full fifteen percent of residents had household incomes under \$15,000. We were unable to determine how people on such limited incomes were able to afford Riverwalk's high rents.

Household composition and wage earning were also interesting, especially on a gendered level. Out of the 224 households researched by the

census, thirty-three percent were defined as Family Households. These families were all compiled of married couples, forty-six percent of which had children between the ages of newborn and seventeen. There were no single-parent families. It was also interesting that the family median income was \$91,708. This proved to be more than twenty thousand dollars over the average household income for the area, and over thirty thousand dollars more than the median household income for non-families in the area. Compared to the national average, the mean salary for families in Riverwalk was fifty-six thousand dollars higher. Still, about seventeen percent of Riverwalk area residents were defined as being in poverty, and of these all were families consisting of married couples.

It was easier to understand salary figures after investigating who was working, and the types of jobs that were held by residents. According to the census information, eighty-six percent of the Riverwalk population was over the age of sixteen. This information also disclosed that eighty-one percent of Riverwalk residents were over the age of sixteen and employed, revealing that a large majority of the people in Riverwalk were working. This was a much higher percentage than the national average, in which seventy-seven percent of the population was over sixteen years old, and only forty-seven percent of the population was over sixteen and employed. In terms of the gender of the working population, Riverwalk percentages were also different from that of national averages. Almost seventy one percent of the area's workers were male. Although this may have been the norm for many parts of the nation at some points in history, in 1990 women accounted for forty-six percent of people working in the United States.

The jobs common to Riverwalk inhabitants were somewhat varied. The majority (eighty percent) of the jobs held by Riverwalk residents were white

collar. Almost eighteen percent of workers were self employed, (a number that exceeded the national average by about ten percent), and twelve percent of those employed in the Riverwalk area worked at home. A much smaller group of residents was employed by the government. Although none claimed to be working in local governments, there were some residents working for the state government (3 percent) and some working for the federal government (six percent). Many workers took advantage of the greater Philadelphia area as a source for potential jobs. Over sixty-six percent of workers had jobs in the county, nine percent worked in other parts of the state, and the final twelve percent worked outside of the state. Perhaps the reason for a fairly high number of people with out-of-state employment (nearly nine percent above the national average) could be explained by Philadelphia's close ties with neighboring states, especially New Jersey.

A look at the ethnic make-up of the area showed it to be quite homogenous. Most of the area's residents seemed to be from families of "old" immigrants, as their ancestry was mainly western European (with highest concentrations from Germany, Ireland, and Italy, respectively). Nearly ninety-eight percent of residents were born in the United States; the remaining population was of people who were not yet naturalized citizens, and who had entered the country only in the 1980s. The only foreign languages reported to be spoken were French/French Creole, and Polish. Ninety-five percent of the residents reported that they could only speak English.

In evaluating this data, Riverwalk appeared to fit the mold of what used to be seen as the "All American Family" – white, English-speaking, and middle to upper-middle class. There was not much variety in family composition, or in heritage. We wondered whether the cause of this seemingly strictly-structured environment was forced or voluntary, and how the neighborhood residents must

have handled the inevitable changes in the homogenization of their community that occasionally occurred. The U.S. census information was able to give those interested a unique insider's perspective of the area, which allowed us to question the history and implications of such an area, and its place in today's society.

### **Alternative Uses**

The Riverwalk area apartments and art installation are a well-meaning but unsuccessful attempt to revitalize a segment of the Philadelphia waterfront area. Warehouses and parking lots have been transformed into a livable and potentially viable area. Newly constructed housing has attracted a community of young, wealthy citizens. The attempts to make this an interesting and "happening" destination have failed, however; the area is now predominantly residential.

The art itself is ineffectual because apartments and condos block the view of the water, eliminating the physical connection between the water and the artistic themes. It is not a worthwhile destination for tourists because of the gated nature of the housing, as well as the lack of shops. There is very little to do, other than a maritime museum. Public transportation is inconvenient, thus destroying the potential attraction of the seaport. Future plans to develop a shopping mall in the region will have a detrimental effect — it will further prevent people from actually walking around the area. Instead, we propose a series of ground-level shops and restaurants, particularly built into the bottom stories of currently-existing apartment buildings. Arcades leading out to the seaport would increase pedestrian traffic, and cafes with outdoor seating facing the water could become very popular, both as a tourist attraction, as well as to the area's residents.

The art installation, which never grew to its expected length of three miles, should be expanded closer to the water. A boardwalk-type design would increase interest and create a potential tourist destination, which would therefore heighten commerce. Hopefully, the city would recognize the revitalized enthusiasm by expanding public transportation to the area. Increased transportation would allow the residents to improve their status as members of the city community by making downtown Philadelphia more accessible to them, and would encourage outsiders to utilize the area.

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## Appendix A: The Riverwalk Sculpture Project Designed by Andrew Leicester, 1990



Although it was intended to stretch 3 miles down the waterfront, the Riverwalk art installation is currently only 800 feet long.



**Appendix A cont'd: The Riverwalk Sculpture Project, Designed by Andrew Leicester, 1990**



As befits a waterfront installation, the images are associated with mythological water creatures and Philadelphia's maritime history.



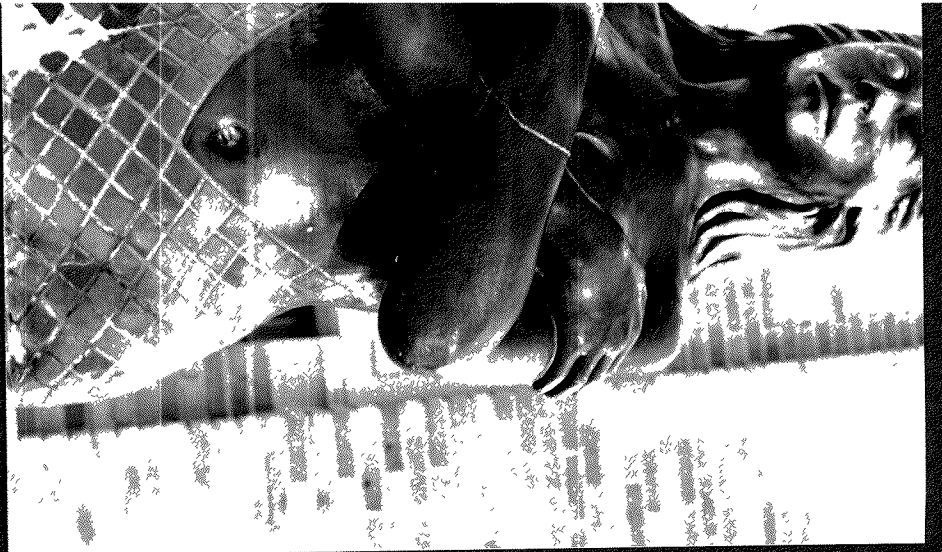
The Riverwalk art project has a double purpose: many of its pieces are designed to be used as seats and benches.







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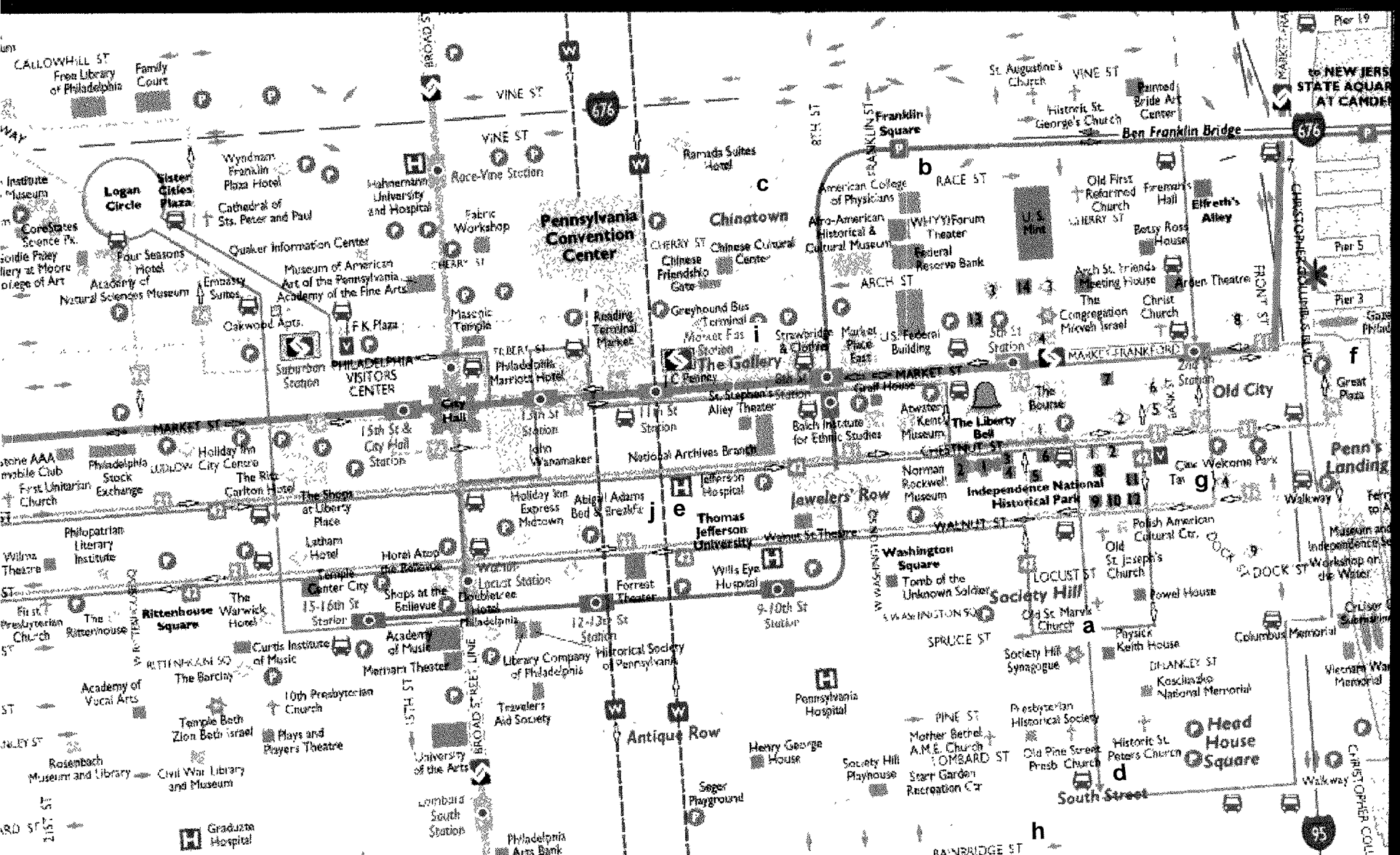
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Appendix A cont'd: The Riverwalk Sculpture Project, Designed by Andrew Leicester, 1990

## Appendix B: Service Spaces in Relation to Riverwalk

- a Grocery
- b Police
- c Fire
- d Bookstore
- e Hospital
- f Public Transportation
- g Cinema
- h School (elementary)
- i Mall
- j Social Service (Medicaid)



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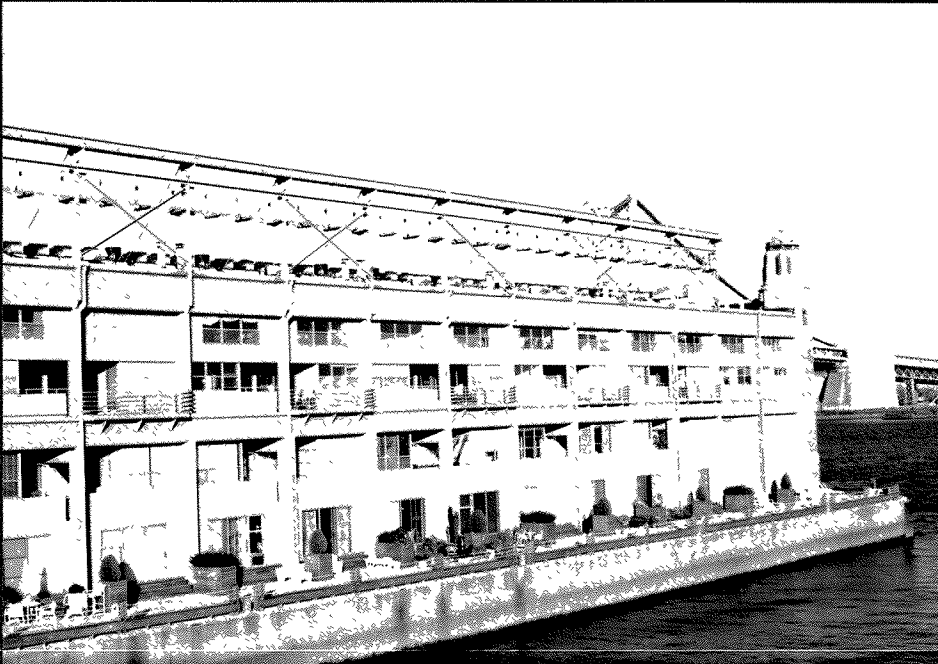
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**Appendix C:  
The Apartments at Piers 3 & 5**



A large gate at the entrance of Pier 5, now a condo complex, prohibits easy access to the interior.





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**Appendix C cont'd: The Apartments at Piers 3 & 5**



Instead of interior hallways, the condos are connected on the ground floor through an open-roofed structure reminiscent of a warehouse (the building's original function). The second story apartments are connected via a series of walkways and an elevator down to the ground floor.

Each apartment has either a glassed-in room or patio which looks out onto a communal path.