

Living Downtown

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With about 88,000 people (expected to reach 100,000 by the next census), Central Philadelphia has the nation's third largest concentration of downtown residents. They are walkers: to shops, restaurants, theaters, and museums. They have traded suburban homes and two- and three-car garages for busy sidewalks, leafy parks, and neighborhood cafes.

This is the old urbanism, characterized by density, diversity, and amenities. It doesn't get the same degree of scrutiny from contemporary critics as the new urbanist developments that dot suburbia, but it offers unparalleled lessons for both new and old places.

Ten-minute walk

Central Philadelphia consists of Center City, the two square miles between the Delaware and Schuylkill rivers, plus adjoining neighborhoods to the north and south — about four square miles in all. Its fastest growing neighborhoods are Old City and nearby Northern Liberties. Everywhere, vacant lots and surface parking are being converted to residential uses despite the slowing market.

Center City — which encompasses the central business district, elegant Rittenhouse Square, and Society Hill, perhaps America's most successful historic preservation project — is unusual among big-city downtowns because of the extent to which single-family houses are integrated with retail and office space. Palatial homes and ordinary brick row houses rub shoulders with glittering skyscrapers and ground-floor shops.

The secret of central Philadelphia's livability is the 10-minute walk, the distance most people are willing to journey on foot. Hundreds of maps throughout Center City show pedestrians where they are and how long it takes to walk to various attractions. A gold circle indicates places reachable in 10 minutes. From the convention center, 10 minutes would get you to Chinatown or the National Constitution Center. It's a bit farther from city hall to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, but the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts is only five minutes away.

It's because of all this walking, and the resulting crowded sidewalks, that central Philadelphia feels safe day and night. Although comprising only two percent of the city's total area, Center City accounts for over a third of its total employment. It generates some 40 percent of the city's total tax revenues. The ease of walking to work is part of the draw. One in four residents takes advantage of it.

Face to face

Residential Center City is remarkable for its density, about 40 units to the acre, most of it in low rises, with a sprinkling of apartment towers. East of the Avenue of the Arts, a hundred or so leafy blocks of compact, mainly three-story brick row houses, front leafy, granite-paved streets. The houses facing across these cobbled ways are rarely more than 14 feet apart. No parking is allowed on the narrow streets, although permit parking is allowed elsewhere. Car ownership is low and the local nonprofit car-share operation is booming.

Proximity produces more than the proverbial eyes on the street. These quiet blocks reward residents with abundant face-to-face encounters. Everyone knows everyone else's children and dogs, and neighbors regularly meet for coffee shop discourse.

Reflecting national trends, Center City household size continues to decline, as population grows. In Old City (where Betsy Ross is supposed to have made her flag), new construction exists alongside remodeled warehouses, art galleries, restaurants, and the Arden Theatre, the city's thriving regional theater. The Market–Frankford subway provides quick access to city hall, the office district, and the Penn and Drexel campuses in University City. Sidewalks and streets are jammed with pedestrians when galleries open in the evening for "First Fridays."

Most central Philadelphians rent, but house and apartment ownership is growing. It's still possible for 25-year-olds to buy good houses in South Philadelphia for as little as \$250,000 to \$350,000. Everyone seems to have heard of Philadelphians who commute by train to jobs in Midtown Manhattan. Others commute by car to suburban jobs.

A for effort

America's trend toward later marriages and later childbearing has contributed to central Philadelphia's population growth. Now the focus is on keeping the 30-plus group in the city, reversing the 50-year tendency of young families to move to the suburbs and their well-regarded schools.

Still, although many city schools have indeed gone downhill in the last half-century, Philadelphia has some of the best public schools in the region. The winners include the performing arts high school and a charter school that focuses on architecture. Part of the public school improvement can be traced to strong parent organizations, such as the voluntary one supporting Society Hill's McCall School.

But schools are less of a factor than in the past. Better management of the city's public schools has improved their performance greatly. Further, the number of households with no school-age children is growing (the figure nationally is two-thirds of all households). About half of central Philadelphia's households consist of one person, while the number of 50-plus households that choose to live downtown is on the rise.

Joiners

Thousands of people in central Philadelphia serve on nonprofit boards and committees that foster citywide entities like the Pennsylvania Ballet and the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, which among other things produces North America's grandest flower show. Another nonprofit group promotes the Avenue of the Arts, and yet another has created more than 2,000 murals in and beyond central Philadelphia.

Other nonprofits focus on neighborhood projects like the transformation of a vacant lot into one of the city's most attractive and useful pocket parks. It's named for the architect Louis Kahn, who lived nearby. Young Involved Philadelphians, an under-30 group, organizes meetings on locally important subjects, including how to get elected to office and options for the homeless. At least one independent coffee shop provides space for forums on various public issues.

Preservation benefits from this civic spirit. The city's early wealth is obvious from its surviving examples of 18th and 19th century architecture, including the 150-year-old Academy of Music, the nation's oldest and arguably most glamorous opera house. Today, various watchdog groups fight to save small, old buildings from overly large, traffic-inducing new ones.

Some of the historic preservation success is a result of the city's chronic financial troubles. City hall, the nation's largest municipal building, gorgeous in its recently cleaned splendor, would have been destroyed 50 years ago save for the fact that the city didn't have the money to demolish it.

Meanwhile, there are notable successes, even some surprisingly good mergers of old and new. For instance, the Pennsylvania Convention Center makes splendid use of the head house and train shed of the ornate Reading Terminal. Where passengers once boarded trains to Chicago, today 5,000 visitors gather for receptions.

In spite of itself

For the most part, the recent successes have come about despite city government, not because of it. The last two mayors generally sacrificed municipal planning for the dubious prospects of quick development deals. Collaboration between the city government, the regional transit agency, and private developers is weak, at best.

One sad consequence of weak planning is the slow and unsteady redevelopment of the Delaware waterfront. Approvals for five apartment towers were granted three years ago without requiring public access to the riverside. Both of the two new casinos planned for the city will be built on the riverfront, but a new state law prohibits local land-use regulation for casino sites.

There's hope in the appointment last fall of Janice Woodcock as executive director of the Philadelphia City Planning Commission. She exhibits a determination that has long been missing from the department.

Other local strengths include a decades-old network of community organizations that is charged with reviewing all development proposals, as well as applications for liquor licenses. This neighborhood review adds a measure of local protection even if it is not particularly comprehensive.

Finally, planning in Philadelphia benefits from the insightful commentary of Inga Saffron, the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* regular architecture and planning critic.

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Images: Kids on bikes in Rittenhouse Square. Photo By Lawrence O. Houstoun, Jr.

Ten-Minute Walk

In addition to the obvious places such as Independence Hall (where liberty found its voice in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution), other Center City must-see places include:

- The great court of the Wanamaker building, now Macy's, where shoppers enjoy the twice-a-day organ concerts.
- The long view from city hall past the three giant fountains toward the Art Museum.
- The neon sound waves and gong under the 12th Street tunnel at the Convention Center. It's a result of the city's one-percent-for-art program.
- The views from the city hall tower.
- The glorious marble Ritz-Carlton lobby, converted from a banking floor.
- The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts on North Broad Street. A Victorian extravaganza by Philadelphia architect Frank Furness.
- Three miles of underground concourse linking all the subway lines and below-ground trolleys.
- The Market East station, created when all the commuter rail lines were combined. Part of Ed Bacon's legacy. The tile mural of a woodland scene is another one percent treasure.
- The 150-year-old Academy of Music, which mimics Milan's La Scala opera house.
- The century-old, two-acre Reading Terminal Market.
- Loew's Hotel, the old PSFS Building, a great International-style classic.
- The breathtaking lobby mural and indoor courtyard of the Curtis Building.
- The Gallery, the vertical shopping mall developed by the Rouse Company, a rare American example of large-scale integration of transit and rail. Rail lines connect with the 30th Street Station, which offers high-speed service to New York and Washington.
- The art moderne station is one of the last of the great railroad depots.
- Theaters: Academy, Wilma, Prince, Merriam, Walnut Street, and Forrest theaters;

Kimmel Center (Philadelphia Orchestra and Philadelphia Chamber Orchestra); Academy of Vocal Arts; Curtis Institute.

Doing Business in Center City

By Paul Levy

In the 1950s and '60s, downtown planning in older U.S. cities like Philadelphia focused on restarting failed real estate markets. Years of decentralized, auto-oriented development and public redlining had left cities deeply disadvantaged.

As late as 1968, the regional office of the federal Housing and Home Finance Agency expressed skepticism about Philadelphia's plans to direct urban renewal resources to dilapidated Society Hill. Instead, the agency urged city officials to bet on a sure thing and concentrate development at the edges of Rittenhouse Square.

What a change 40 years makes. One look at the city's real estate pages — brimming with ads for new downtown condos and town houses — and it's clear that Center City is hot.

These changes call for a new planning mindset, one that focuses on the future. Forty years ago, the story was all about deterioration. The new urban storyline is about planning for and sustaining growth.

Successful cities, large or small, have always been places that created opportunity. From the agora in ancient Athens, to Covent Garden in 19th century London, to the office districts and stock exchanges of New York and Tokyo, the message is the same: "It's the economy, stupid." No matter how strong their focus on amenities and quality of life, cities fundamentally are places to work, and planning should reinforce their competitive qualities.

How to be competitive

For Philadelphia, that means ensuring tax policies that will foster the growth of the largest concentrated center of employment in the commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Look what's there already: 38 million square feet of commercial office space, 14 educational and health care institutions with over 60,000 students, 10,000 hotel rooms, 2,500 retailers, and several dozen arts, cultural, historic, and entertainment destinations. Collectively, all of these uses generate \$13.9 billion in annual salaries for residents across the region.

It also means enhancing a transit system that carries 272,000 riders downtown each day by adding new signage and real-time information, expanding daytime service, and running later at night. Transit makes urban density possible by reducing the dependence on autos and the ever-growing need for parking space. It allows the economies of scale that foster diverse, robust labor markets.

In the global knowledge economy, digital technology provides extraordinary mobility and choice. Work can be performed almost anywhere. Tourist, convention, and entertainment choices are plentiful. Successful cities have learned that they will never compete with suburbs by imitating suburbs. The competitive advantage of cities is their walkable streets and successful public places.

The Danish architect Jan Gehl has noted that in the mercantile and manufacturing city, people flocked to the streets out of necessity, because that's where work was often performed. In the postindustrial city, they choose to be in the public square, at cafes, and in parks.

So planning must also be about the quality of public spaces. Here in Philadelphia, William Penn's simple grid left us with a great legacy: an intimate scale that fosters public life. We have great shopping streets, in good weather dotted with almost 200 outdoor cafes. And we have important civic plazas. Rittenhouse Square and Washington Square are both successful as gathering places and economic generators. At Logan Square on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, auto-dominated spaces are being transformed with pedestrian amenities. At Center Square, planning has begun to reactivate lifeless 1960s plazas.

Taking things up a notch

For the last 15 years, the Center City District, the downtown business improvement district for a 120-block area, has burnished the basics. Organized by business leaders in 1990, the CCD is a unique hybrid: a state-authorized taxing authority with a private-sector board. It started with sidewalk cleaning and public safety and steadily expanded its role: promoting the area's shopping, dining, and entertainment options; facilitating the conversion of vacant buildings to residential use; installing over 2,000 pedestrian-scale light fixtures; planting trees; installing and maintaining a comprehensive wayfinding system; lighting the facades of cultural institutions, statues, and monuments; and providing matching grants for facade improvement.

With an annual operating budget of \$14 million, the CCD has used its bonding authority to finance over \$43 million in streetscape and public area improvements, and to leverage foundation and state resources.

In the last several years, the CCD has taken things up a notch, retaining design firms for a variety of projects. They have produced plans to overcome the barriers of 1960s-era expressways, tame multilane boulevards like the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, and enhance Center City parks and playgrounds.

Two other business improvement districts are in place downtown, one in Old City, another on South Street. Across the city, other BIDs operate in affluent areas like Manayunk and Chestnut Hill, in working-class communities like Frankford and South Philadelphia, and in the areas around the sports complex and on City Avenue.

Center City Philadelphia is a work in progress. After decades of reinvestment and revival, the demand for planning is bubbling up from below, driven by the desire to cope with and sustain success. A sign of the times: Center City neighborhood associations, faced with unprecedented growth, have been engaging planning firms to establish development guidelines.

All this testifies to the health of Center City, the need for management organizations like the Center City District, and an expanded role for planners.

Paul Levy is the founding executive director and president of the Center City District.

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