

John Pettit

Philadelphia's neighborhoods

The soul of the city

Philadelphia has evolved from a port and seat of government to an industrial “workshop of the world” to a city that relies on tourism, arts, culture, and a plethora of medical and educational institutions. Philadelphia’s footprint underwent dramatic change with the Consolidation Act of 1854, which brought many of the region’s smaller townships, boroughs, and districts together under the umbrella of the City of Philadelphia. Many discrete towns were incorporated, and began to transition into neighborhoods of the redefined municipality. Given this history, they maintain their own distinct characteristics and have contributed to Philadelphia’s designation as “A City of Neighborhoods.”

Over the years, the identities of neighborhoods, commercial strips, and public spaces have been shaped by institutional forces or changing demographics. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, many of these changes shifted into high gear.

In most cases, neighborhood institutions and commercial strips tie together the diverse populations within neighborhoods and serve as an excellent window for visitors to understand both the past and future of the communities. Even though rivers, parks, hills, bridges, and expressways separate neighborhoods, the network of buses, light rail lines, trains, and trolleys that comprise the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) can take you straight to or within blocks of each one. Many are an easy walk from Center City.

This article highlights some of the more distinctive and diverse neighborhoods Phila-

delphia has to offer. Hopefully you’ll get out and enjoy them!

Chinatown

Established in the late 19th century, Chinatown has weathered a multitude of challenges, but pulled through to become a small but prominent part of Center City’s landscape. A 1926 article by local newspaper *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* reported on what it

saw as the inevitable end of the neighborhood as a result of its new neighbor, the Delaware River (now Benjamin Franklin) Bridge. The arterial streets and on-ramps approaching the bridge were poised to fundamentally change a neighborhood often viewed in an unfavorable light as a result of its proximity to Philadelphia’s red light districts. Chinatown survived the bridge, facing several additional hurdles throughout the 20th century. Urban renewal projects, such as the neighboring Convention Center, the Vine Street Expressway, a proposed but unrealized baseball stadium, and most recently a proposed casino have all altered or threatened to alter the character of the neighborhood.

The neighborhood’s staying power, despite its many struggles, highlights the strong sense of community that exists among residents and business owners. One of Philadelphia’s most distinct landmarks, the 40-foot “Chinatown Friendship Gate” at 10th and Arch Streets now



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welcomes visitors to a neighborhood filled with restaurants, shops, religious institutions, and nonprofits.

Old City/Society Hill

The earliest inhabitants of William Penn's new town packed into the few blocks against the river now known as Old City during the 1680s and 1690s. Although many Philadelphians later abandoned the neighborhood to a degree, the 1980s and '90s witnessed artists moving into the neighborhood giving it some of the character that lasts to this day. The factories, shipping warehouses, and merchant exchanges of early Philadelphia evolved into nightclubs, fashion boutiques, art galleries, lofts, movie theaters, and restaurants. Although many artists have been priced out and since moved to other neighborhoods, the renaissance left its mark.

During the day, tourists from around the world flock to historic sites like Independence Hall, the Betsy Ross House, Elfreth's Alley, Second National Bank, and Carpenter's Hall. At night,

Old City is inhabited by a decidedly different set. Doves of people from the city and region descend on the area for Old City's nightclubs and restaurants. On the first Friday of every month, art galleries in the neighborhood stay open late, with vendors and street performers catering to the overflow of people from the galleries along 2nd and 3rd Streets.

Society Hill, which sits just south of Old City, followed a trajectory similar to that of its northern neighbor. Once home to many of the city's wealthy and elite, Society Hill fell on hard times around the early 20th century. City planner Ed Bacon and the Philadelphia

Redevelopment Authority were responsible for Society Hill's dramatic mid-20th century turnaround. In the preservation effort, the city assisted many residents in rehabilitating the colonial homes that had fallen into disrepair.

Another distinct product of the Society Hill's rehabilitation came in 1963. I. M. Pei's three modern skyscrapers, Society Hill Towers, emerged, towering over the old houses in a strong break from the neighborhood's older architecture. Headhouse Square, which sits at the cobblestone intersection of 2nd and Lombard Streets, is an old market that remains a popular draw for vendors and public events. Society Hill is a pleasant, walkable residential historic district where visitors can revel in restored 18th- and 19th-century Philadelphia architecture.



Chinatown and the Benjamin Franklin Bridge from Tenth and Race Streets. *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, 1973.

Art museum/ Fairmount area

Fairmount takes its name from a hill listed by William Penn's surveyors in 1683 as "Fair Mount" and was under consideration as a site for Penn's home. Instead, in 1819, it became

a home for the Greek-revival Fairmount Water Works. The Water Works first supplied water to the city, later served as an aquarium, and is currently a restaurant and tourist attraction. In 1844, the city purchased neighboring Lemon Hill to protect the area around the Water Works, which went on to serve as the seed for Fairmount Park, one of the largest urban parks in the country. In 1928 the first portion of the Philadelphia Museum of Art was also built atop "Fair Mount." Sometimes referred to as the Art Museum area, Fairmount is a neighborhood where visitors and residents benefit from the cluster of cultural institutions and parks.

The Benjamin Franklin Parkway, a boulevard influenced by the Champs-Élysées, is lined with cultural destinations. The Free Library of Philadelphia, Academy of Natural Sciences, Franklin Institute, and Barnes Foundation are interspersed with public art like Alexander Calder's "Swann Memorial Fountain," Augustus Rodin's "The Thinker," and Henry Moore's "Three-Way Piece."

One of the few structures in the neighborhood that rivals the Philadelphia Museum of Art in scale is Eastern State Penitentiary. Built in 1829, Eastern State Penitentiary was an early experiment in solitary confinement and rehabilitative prisons until it closed in 1971. The massive structure lay dormant for years, but reopened for interpretive tours



Ninth Street Market in South Philadelphia. *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, 1972.

and events in the early '90s and grows as a destination for curious visitors. The vast structure is situated in the heart of the Fairmount neighborhood at 21st and Fairmount Streets, amid middle and upper-middle class residences and blocks peppered with coffee shops and acclaimed restaurants.

South Philadelphia

Like many Philadelphia neighborhoods, South Philadelphia has always been a neighborhood of immigrants. Italians, African-Americans, Polish, Swedish, and Irish populated the initial wave to the area. In recent years, Vietnamese, Mexican, and Cambodian residents have joined the community. One would be hard-pressed to overlook signs of all of these groups within any cluster of South Philadelphia blocks. South Philadelphia's diversity is most evident along 9th Street in the Bella Vista section and Passyunk Avenue in the East Passyunk section.

Ninth Street's traditional designation as "The Italian Market" has become a bit of a misnomer for the self-proclaimed "oldest and largest working outdoor market in the United States." Today the strip contains a diverse and multicultural array of businesses where Mexican Taqueiras sit beside Italian coffeeshops and outdoor produce vendors. Traveling south on 9th Street, one will eventually run into Passyunk Avenue, a former Indian trail that slashes diagonally through South Philadelphia's grid. Passyunk is also loaded with

traditional businesses serving the Italian American community, but recent additions include hip clothing shops, record stores, and restaurants.

On the northern border of the Queen Village and Bella Vista sections is South Street, the main bohemian district during the

1960s and 1970s. Although some vestiges of the one-of-a-kind shops and restaurants that once populated the street remain, chain stores are also a large part of the contemporary South Street experience.

Queen Village is home to Shot Tower, a 1,420-foot tower where ammunition was manufactured, and Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Church. Founded in 1677 Gloria Dei, the oldest church in Pennsylvania, is surrounded by a small but beautiful property maintained by the National Park Service. In Bella Vista, Ninth Street is the largest draw, but a number of bakeries, coffeeshops, delis, and popular brunch spots are favorites of locals.

Northern Liberties/Fairmount

After the shipyards, sugar refineries, coal storage facilities, and tanneries left the northern Delaware River waterfront, a post-industrial landscape of brownfields took their place.

Some nightclubs and restaurants took over the space, but years of unrealized developments, commercial projects, and the construction of Interstate 95 have left the waterfront a less than desirable place to visit. The neighborhoods located along it, Northern Liberties and its northern neighbor, Fishtown, have made up for the waterfront's shortcomings. These two neighborhoods have rapidly evolved into commercial destinations and contain residences sought after by artists and young professionals. The last two decades have seen artists convert spaces into galleries, as developers and entrepreneurs frantically establish businesses and residences to cater to them.

On the large site of the former Schmidt's brewery stands the concrete and glass Piazza at Schmidt's. Inspired by Rome's Piazza Navona, the 2009 development is comprised of a public square surrounded by condominiums. Businesses ranging from a tapas bar to a bike shop populate the ground level along "Liberties Walk." On any given visit to the Piazza, a visitor might encounter a Phillies game or film on a large outdoor screen, an outdoor music festival, or a craft fair.

A few blocks north, artists new to the neighborhood intermingle with a deeply established working-class population in Fishtown. As artists moved into the neighborhood, art galleries and bars slowly popped up along Fishtown's two major thoroughfares, Frankford and Girard Avenues. The intersection of the two serves as the current nexus of the neighborhoods' energy with businesses trailing off in every direction.

Palmer Cemetery, a neighborhood burial ground that dates back to 1732, provides a green respite to the tight grid of rowhomes that characterize the neighborhood. Delaware River's Penn Treaty Park, where William Penn is said to have entered into a peace treaty with the Lenape Indians, also offers attractive green space. Penn Treaty serves as a shining example of the river's potential.

The area along the river is still very much a work in progress, but just this year the Delaware River Waterfront Corporation released a master plan for the area that includes parks,

residences, businesses, and a controversial casino, Sugarhouse, along the river's edge. A new river park, Washington Green, has opened in South Philadelphia showing the potential for the waterfront to once again reconnect Philadelphians with the river. Development will start moving north, and story of the river will evolve yet again.

University City/West Philadelphia

If traveling over or under the Schuylkill River from Center City, one will wind up in the University City and West Philadelphia neighborhoods. The University City moniker is derived from the three major colleges within its borders. Drexel, University of Pennsylvania, and University of the Sciences taper off into a neighborhood lined with Victorian homes. These residences are home to a mix of students, college faculty, young professionals, families of all races, and recent immigrants.

Much of University City and West Philadelphia were part of Blockley Township at the time of the Act of Consolidation in 1854. It grew as a streetcar suburb around the turn of the century. During the 1960s, the neighboring colleges made their presence felt through a series of expansion projects, significantly altering the community's landscape. In the decades since the universities' ever shifting and expanding boundaries have led to some town versus gown tensions, but on a whole the neighborhood and the universities each benefit from the other's presence. 40th Street is a corridor of bars, restaurants, and shops designed to serve the students of the University of Pennsylvania, but hold appeal to a broader set of visitors, as well. The International House, a dormitory for international students, boasts a robust and diverse array of film and music programming and is a perfect complement to the Institute of Contemporary Art located right around the corner.

The area's large immigrant population has led to an array of casual ethnic restaurants along Baltimore Avenue, with Ethiopian cuisine having the strongest representation. An old firehouse has been refashioned into a brew pub serving brick oven pizzas, while

a few blocks away a dried out millpond in Clark Park now serves as a gathering place for soccer players and as an unofficial dog park. Clark Park also provides a home to a year-round farmer's market, which becomes particularly vibrant in the spring and fall months. During warmer days it often shares its space with a flea market or grass-roots music festival. The strength of the neighborhood lies in its diverse residents and constituencies.

Manayunk

Located north of Center City on the Schuylkill River, Manayunk is perhaps the neighborhood with the most distinct landscape and geographic topography. Manayunk originally bore the name "Flat Rock" and owes its development to the Schuylkill River. In the first half of the 19th-century, textile mills lined the banks using the power of the river's water. The Schuylkill River Navigation Company built a dam and canal. These features earned Manayunk the nickname "Lowell of Pennsylvania," a reference to the Massachusetts mill town.

Since that time, the old mills have been converted to condominiums and offices, and the canal now has popular biking and walking paths. The neighborhood still houses a working-class population with ties that go back generations, but a new population of young professionals began moving into the neighborhood in the 1990s. Main Street is the undisputed center of Manayunk activity with a variety of upscale independent stores and restaurants. Flat Rock was renamed Manayunk, the Leni Lenape word for "where we go to drink." The collegiate and post-collegiate set make good on the town's Lenapi name when the sun goes down.

When riding on the elevated Schuylkill Expressway across the river, one witnesses the uniqueness of the neighborhood. Rising above the mills and the canal, lines of rowhomes and church steeples traverse the hills. Over the decades these have served as home to German, Polish, Irish, Italian, and African American populations.

The Northwest

The northwest section of the city has three neighborhoods that share a number of commonalities while maintaining their own distinct identities. All three neighborhoods are primarily residential but share two arterials that define the area: the commercial strip of Germantown Avenue and the Wissahickon valley to its west.

The northernmost section of Germantown Avenue has the most businesses, many of which are upscale, serving the more affluent population of Chestnut Hill. The former streetcar suburb's buildings showcase the work of many of the city's best architects, even boasting a local train station, Graver's Lane, designed by local architect Frank Furness.

Further south along Germantown Avenue is Mount Airy. A small but modest number of independent businesses line both sides of the street below Allens Lane. West Mount Airy has served as a model of a successfully integrated neighborhood for years, housing some of the most progressive and liberal Philadelphia residents. The Germantown section of Germantown Avenue is notable for its many historic houses and buildings, including the "Germantown White House," where George Washington briefly lived in 1793 to hide from Philadelphia's yellow fever epidemic, and Cliveden, the site of the "Battle of Germantown" in the Revolutionary War.

The Wissahickon Creek is surrounded by Wissahickon Park. Comprised of 1,800 acres within the seven-mile long park, it is one of the most popular ways for Philadelphians to experience nature within Philadelphia's borders.

In addition to the hiking and bike trails is Rittenhouse Town, the remnants of a small 18th-century industrial town and site of the first paper mill in North America. Guard shelters built by the Works Progress Administration, the "Fingerspan" sculpture/bridge, and the Quaker "Toleration" statue are among the many landmarks visitors find tucked within the valley. *~*