

PART III

Philadelphia, Photographs and Stories

Sean O'Rourke and Jerome Lukowicz

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With their third contribution to DAGspace, architect Sean O'Rourke and photographer Jerome Lukowicz conclude of their haunting and beautiful prose-and-picture portrait of Philadelphia architecture.



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It's hard to see Falls Bridge (1895) as anything but awkwardly proportioned. Like a body builder who worked only his upper chest and arms to the neglect of his lower body the bridge just looks wrong. There seems to be more steel above the roadway than whatever could be below. Moreover, most of the heaviest girder plates run perpendicular to the span—at odds to even a naïve structural logic. It helps to understand that when it was built the bridge design was intended to hold a second road along its top, above the roadway of the bridge. This explains the physical appearance but still falls short of something else the photograph so exquisitely reveals.

The bridge, however top heavy and gawky, does something with the sunlight that celebrates or manifests motion and light. This is in contrast to how the sinuous elements of the wrought iron decorative hand rails glide up to and across the bridge, modeling the beautiful curves of natural growth. The sensibility of the railing is as solid and stable as each wrought iron piece. The bridge does the same thing, but with the space between its physical elements, and the resultant light/shadow filtering through becomes physical. On the bridge, sunlight is as tactile and solid as the exterior rail. Anyone in a car or a bike that traverses the bridge experiences the filigree of space, made of the ephemeral light and the motion of the experience as if under a forest canopy. The structural work surrounds the experience, not as the natural world might, but evenly spaced, orthogonal, and rigidly composed--manifesting light as space.

Take the same photograph from across the river, twenty feet above or below the bridge span, and there is nothing of substance. The light is invisible, absorbed in the darkness of the water and the shadows of the woods across the way. Photograph the railing alone and there is no light to speak of or point to, just ironwork--solid and tactile. Yet the bridge and the experience of its space within reveals light as substance, substantial enough to travel through, to experience as one might the space of time.

For over 400 years Philadelphia's staple crop has been row houses. They have served as capable homes for residents rich and poor, young and old. Despite Philadelphia's size we recognize its residential character rests in the ubiquitous but compact row house. The plan of the house is repeated in a row from one end of the block to the other, indifferent to the compass but respectful of the city grid. The long side walls of the row houses are common party walls shared with contiguous neighbors. The narrow front wall faces the public street and usually mirrors the condition on the opposite side of the street. The private rear opens to a back yard, sometimes an alley, and always the surrounding private yards of the row houses on the next street.

For every residential street of neat row houses with its proper distribution of all matters of public domain--sidewalks, steps, porches, front doors, ordered windows, shutters, and decorative trim that serve as the front face of the house--there is an equivalent rear end of the house. Though lacking in the decorum of the front, the rear is no less expressive with its own constituent parts: gutters and downspouts, back yards, alleys, utilities, and sometimes garages.

Row houses are a curious typology in how they offer residents a biased view of each other. Residents bond with adjacent neighbors using different senses. I see and greet my neighbors across the street in a public realm as proper as our front facades. Their comings and goings are indelible public activities. We express opinions of work habits, inclination of dress, temperance, and on all the visible accretions of our neighbor's public life. It is the public status we easily reciprocate through our own front windows and door.





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The backs of row houses are inversely related. We see the most private side of row house occupants across the alley: how they treat their pets, keep their garbage, and tend their laundry. There are even voyeuristic views into kitchens and bathrooms that reveal the private side of residents who, because they live a full block away, we have little occasion to meet. During the summer in our previous house, our kitchen was close enough to the house on the other side of the alley that we could hear the bar of soap drop in their shower.

If the front offers the most explicit public presentation and the rear the implicit private revelations, the side tenders the most intimacy. We know our party wall neighbors only through our ears. The masonry walls are auditory transmitters for the most public and private noises that emanate from next door. Imagine all your own peculiar private sounds that are shared: Saturday morning cartoons, dogs barking, phones ringing, yelling, crying, and laughing. It is not too difficult to recognize what the neighbors hear when we reflect on what we can hear, blushing. But invisible the neighbors remain, however intimate our acquaintance. My wife and I would read in bed at night listening to the boys next door giggle themselves to sleep. Seldom obtrusive, the sounds are a background melody reassuring us of nearby concurrent lives as parallel as the party walls.

What did the buildings hold? Warehouses, mills, and factories of the early twentieth and late nineteenth centuries surround Center City. Places of work for sawyers, printers, knitters, millers, spinners, weavers, wood workers, dyers, burlers, metal smiths, tailors, and tanners. When the machines of production and the economy of scale conspired to enlarge the process of production beyond the width of the front parlors or small workshops of the people who

made things, they left home and traveled to work. Work happened in these mill buildings and factories. This new building type housed their machines—looms, lathes, spinning frames, drills, presses, drop forges, and such specialized equipment illegible in this century, which made the artifacts. And out of these buildings came all the products that the twentieth century consumed in frenzy: the prodigal and necessary, the fashionable and common place. Production grew beyond the needs of the citizens of Philadelphia to meet the desires of a young, growing nation. In time the products became less desirable or useless, or cheaper to manufacture elsewhere; the machines were re-made smaller, faster, lighter; the processes of manufacturing moved down south, out west, overseas, or just were never replaced; what remains are the buildings. Obsolete for their original purpose, but still upright in their straightforward quotidian candor of masonry and labor.

When you live in a city for a length of time, it is easy to begin to appreciate how residents provide the essential personality to the place. But the idea that citizens are the character of the city is slippery until you realize it has less to do with their physicality and more to do with how they act and interact, and their relationships. If one is receptive to such attributes, they will quickly reveal a wealth of tell-tale signs. Most architects and urbanists will accept the merits of this position, yet might argue that a more balanced view of a city's physical and social components is needed. Winston Churchill said it best when he adroitly observed "We make the city and the city makes us." I firmly believe that the physical aspects of every city—the urban grid, the open space and streetscape, the buildings and materials, and the intimate tangible details—provide a unique sense of place.

How these man-made artifacts interact with climate and geography, and how residents live through such conditions is the real source of a city's identity. Yes, you can study a city and its architecture and stretch to comprehend its urban patters. I think you can approach an understanding of place and character through this activity. But I also believe that if you don't engage with the people who live in the city, if you don't listen to their stories, watch their lives, and participate yourself, you may never approach an understanding or appreciation of a city's character.

The real mystery is how earlier decisions produced the stage sets, where residents perform daily theater, and create a place unlike any other.

Thomas Holme lays out a seventeenth-century grid through a forest from one river bank to another, and forever after we tightly weave buildings into this warp and weft of urban cloth. Sidewalks full of shoppers, business people, and tourists fill the fabric with energy. Street corners come alive with people on summer evenings. An overflow of bar patrons, last minute corner store errand runners, even the drug dealers break the stillness. A church relocates, a transit line is abandoned, a parking garage is built, a diner closes, and we change the habits of a lifetime with less than a whisper of dissent. No single photograph, and not even a book or portfolio, can encompass the entirety of human agency and built artifacts that make up this vision. And you can't always point at anything; what you looking for is the space between things. Sometimes a photograph hints at this complexity.



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