

## **PART II**

# **Philadelphia, Photographs and Stories**

**Sean O'Rourke and Jerome Lukowicz**

*All photographs copyright Jerome Lukowicz*

Architect Sean O'Rourke and photographer Jerome Lukowicz offer a second installment of their eloquent word-and-photo portrait of Philadelphia in the newest DAGspace.



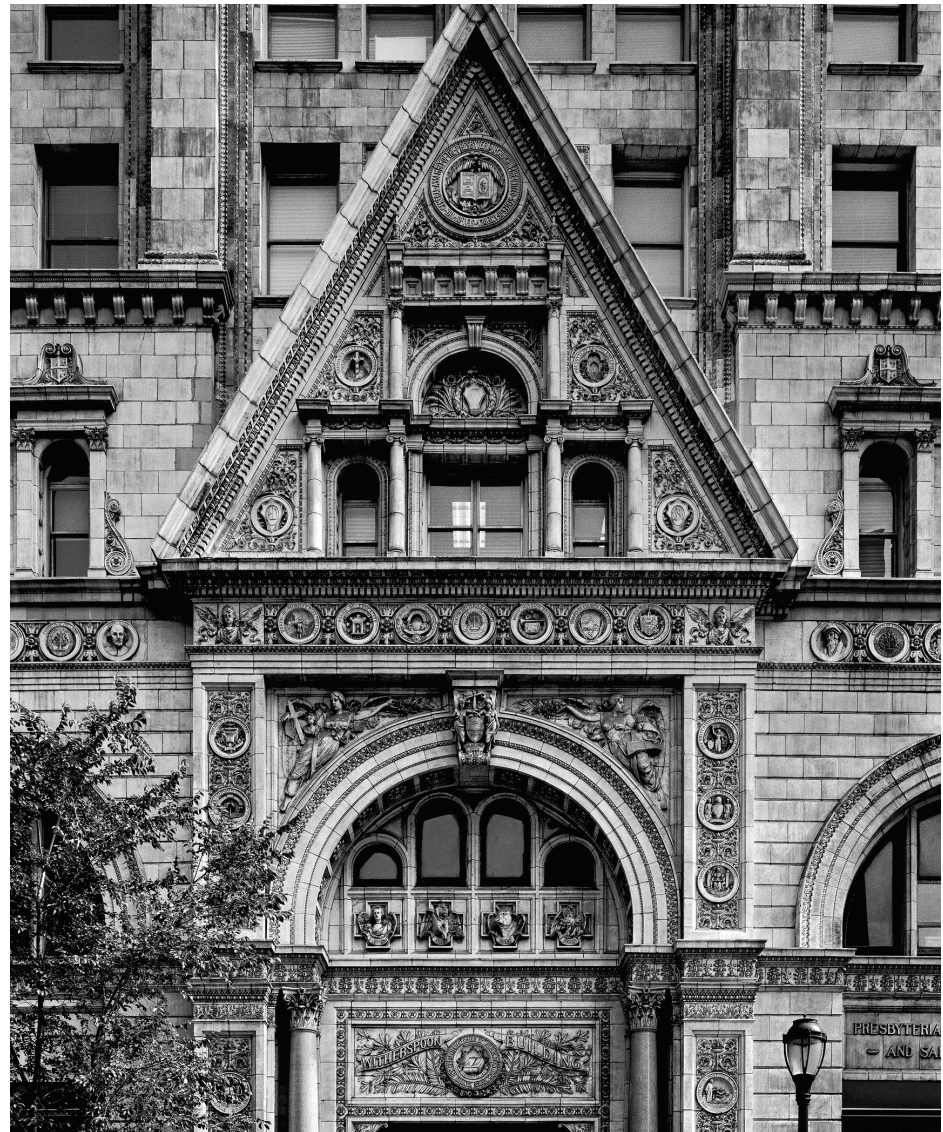
© Jerome Lukowicz

Is it ambition, optimism, or just plain panache that motivates one to imagine a façade as a sign? Not a postmodern gesture, winking at its irony, so much as a heartfelt, naïve effort to take advantage of the entire façade to increase business. There looks to be beautiful architecture behind the slapdash painted boards on this façade, at times visibly providing rhythm to the signs, at other times covered up haphazardly. The proportion of the building façade suggests the original building was handsomely designed, scaled with syncopated openings and with piers and pilasters that stretched its height. It is easy to imagine the architect and builder standing together across the street in admiration. The cornice, dentils, and brickwork are detailed at a scale and with proportions that suggest to both the owner and the community a refined bravado and formality.

Yet the recent surface treatment might suggest a certain obliviousness or even rudeness to the solid, carefully proportioned original facade. Except I can't help but look at the cow with the full udder or the oversized chicken and feel that someone stood back when the boards were hung and the walls painted and smiled in the same content way as the first proud owner. What was first wrought in subtle architectural script became the canvas for the vernacular language of the itinerant sign painter. Perhaps the message is not as different as the medium suggests.

The building was meant to be read; its sculptured iconography a language of expression that at one time meant something. In 1895 Joseph Huston designed the Witherspoon Building, named after John Witherspoon, the Presbyterian minister who was the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence, as the headquarters of the Presbyterian Church in America. He intended to relate the history of the church through the building's ornamentation. I recognize angels in the spandrels, the seal of Philadelphia carved in the key of the center arch, even the four figures representing the gospels emerging from the cruciform, but most else remains illegible. I am not convinced that the sixteen full-size terra-cotta statues that originally stood on the entrance pediments would have helped. I've seen them where they stand today in a garden across town, and I don't recognize them. They are as enigmatically silent as most of the other iconography. Nor would I surmise the ten prophets that once stood along the eighth floor belt course would have helped in guiding me to any revelations.

I imagine looking at this building is like hearing a beautiful, sonorous foreign language whispered in your ear or scanning a page of abstract characters. We can admire the melodic sounds or graphic appearance with little appreciation of the content. The figurative representation is texture, resonant of light and shadow; the rhythm of elementary shapes frames and scales the content—but don't ask what it all adds up to. One might claim when the statues of the prophets disappeared, the inspiration necessary to detect their meaning went with them. Victor Hugo claimed the book would destroy the medieval cathedral as the iconic tool for representation and cultural expression. This building, despite its beauty, provides no evidence otherwise.





GOLDEN GATE  
RECEIVING

OPTIMISM  
DINING ROOMS  
BEST DEAL  
1024  
BED ROOMS

1024

SALE  
1024

1024

NO PARKING  
LIVING ROOMS

BEST DEAL

BEST DEAL

NO PARKING

One mattress shows up across the playground, one or two children lingering about. Another mattress appears, placed on top of the first, bouncing ensues. Abandoned mattresses are not uncommon sights on empty lots around the neighborhood. They are difficult to dispose of otherwise, but once abandoned attract small vermin and lit matches. It becomes apparent that it is not adults who are dumping mattresses on the playground, as a third one walks to the site over many children's legs. With three mattresses serious jumping begins. It is recognized quite early that jumping up and down, with all its bumping and tussling, doesn't provide equal opportunity. The kids in the middle end up pummeled while those on the fringe end up on the concrete. So turns are taken; with only one or two participants involved at a time, individual improvisation occurs. Not surprisingly yet another mattress appears. Straight jumping is replaced by running and jumping. The mattresses provide both the spring board and the landing pad.

The tumbling gets serious as full somersaults and handstand flips extend the repertoire. A group of children has grown to a crowd of more than twenty--none over five feet tall. At this point whatever order existed should have succumbed to chaos. But the opposite occurs. Without an adult in sight, a straight line forms of over twenty kinetic figures twenty yards away from the mattress. The line, agitated like a cat's tail, remains true as the tumbling begins. Participants release down the runway, bounce and flip and land, only to return to the back of the line. With each child's arms around the next one's waist, no cutting occurs, as the line moves fast, jerking to the side like an agitated cat's tail, so everyone can see the performances. The gymnastics of a few are spectacular; others are just enjoyably funny, but the order of them all is amazing. Recess, however well supervised, has never approached such disciplined intensity. It is rare to witness such revelations of promise and potential from the windows of our house. The energy of the children and the order of their activity are incongruous friends--companions united briefly in the spell of a summer afternoon.



Buildings in most cities like Philadelphia, with its dense urban fabric, have fronts, sometimes backs, and, on occasion, even sides. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Holy Communion (Isaac Pursell, 1880), a church of Romanesque stature, evidently shows its good side to the main street. Its richly detailed limestone, rusticated and worked surfaces, corners, and openings strives to put its best face forward. The building turns the corner, and the material switches, as the alley side is designed in brick, dark in contrast with the light-colored entrance façade; there is some decorative work, but this is a working man's material. For colonial Philadelphia, brick was the expected material used in its most famous public buildings, such as Christ Church and the State House, and all the homes. But by the nineteenth century, when the church was built, the brick was buried in the wall or relegated to the sides or back. Even the more elegant row homes built at the same time as the church used brownstone or limestone for their façades. Only working class homes would deign to present front facades built in brick.

Even the best modernist buildings of the twentieth century recognized the merits to celebrating the front of the buildings. The Sidney Hillman Medical Center in the foreground (Magaziner and Polss), designed in 1950, presents polished granite slabs to the front. However, as the building turns the corner, the material becomes rougher Kasota stone – not exactly a poor mans' material but nonetheless a contrast in texture to the polished face. Even the polished stainless steel edge of the canopy highlights the front facade. The use of the polished surfaces on the north face of the building seems inspired. The surfaces reflect light, giving back to the street the light lost in their almost perpetual shadows.

These two buildings are strong examples of their styles – proud buildings of their time and place. However incongruent they seem to be, it is curious how they share design affinities. The conversations they share as they stand across the alley from one another seem so much richer than what one hears from most buildings that share the same block or street.

**SEAN O'ROURKE, AIA**, is an architect at Bergmann Associates. He has lived, practiced, studied, and taught in Philadelphia since arriving here from college in 1984.

**JEROME LUKOWICZ, ASMP**, is a commercial, portrait and fine art photographer. He has lived and photographed in Old City since 1985. His work can be seen at [www.lukowicz.com](http://www.lukowicz.com).

## DAGspace

---

CENTER FOR ARCHITECTURE | 1218 ARCH STREET | PHILADELPHIA, PA 19107 | [DESIGNADVOCACY.ORG](http://DESIGNADVOCACY.ORG)

---

The Design Advocacy Group of Philadelphia is a volunteer organization is a volunteer whose more than 1,400 members come from a broad spectrum of disciplines and share an interest in design, development, and planning. DAG's mission is to encourage public discussion about design and to advocate for design excellence.