

Listening to Little Rowhouses

By Sean O'Rourke, AIA



Figure 1, Kimball Street, north of Washington Avenue (Sean O'Rourke)

I've been listening to the thoughts of some of those intimate rowhomes on the smaller streets in my neighborhood (like Kater, Pemberton, Webster, Montrose, Kimball, and League Streets), which thread between the main thoroughfares of South Philly. Those little houses have some big questions:

Why do you love us?

When you chose me as your rowhome, you chose all of us on the street. I may not be a world class beauty, but I am confident in my rowhouse character, in my row of other homes just like me. We are more than any one of us; our collective poise is self-evident. Rowhouses make the streets in our neighborhoods into intimate rooms, which are precious. We are comfortably convivial, almost a paradise of homes. I assume this attracted you to me in the first place. Our two stories, our own backyards, our small streets with marble stoops and an occasional tree in the narrow sidewalks, suggested a future place for you and yours--and maybe a little one--to grow within and around. It is sweet to imagine how we were built for one another.

I understand I am not cheap; nothing is cheap around here, but maybe we seemed safe and manageable for a first timer. I am not too wide, nor too tall, and my depth seems just right—with a couple of windows in front and back. A simple roof, straightforward systems, and a basement for storage. I am easy to encompass; scaled appropriately, my stature seems appropriate for the street.

The shared character of all of us rowhomes—along these streets of narrow width and long length, with cars at the curb in front, sunlight peeking over our cornices, breezes that come in the back and go out the front, the sharing of everyday lives through the intimacy of party walls, across the streets, and over our backyard walls—is alluring. You could afford us, wrapping your arms around our compact bodies, filling our rooms with energy and affection—imagining a community.

So why did you destroy me?

Why do you need to climb on my roof, to rudely slap another floor on top of me? You piled on me like a bully lording over his peers, overburdening me with expectations to be something I am not and can't be. (There is no beauty in an eighth grader photographed in a class picture of second graders—is there?) My new height, my stretched façade, embarrasses the others on the block, demeaning their stature and scale. You cast aspersions, shadows, and bulk where none should be. I imagine you wanted more, expected you could build it in this place, and that nothing would change but for the best. But it did. You hurt me, us, the block, even the street.

Your selfish greed sanctioned the similar behavior of others. Envy wrought copies, and together you conspired to destroy what I thought you loved. I am not a bigger rowhouse like those on Bainbridge, Fitzwater, Catharine or Christian. My street, its scale and character, is far different. No amount of desire or money—or the blunt grafting of a carbuncle on my top, could get me there. And your pitiful, self-indulgent attempt hurt me and harmed our block.

What can we learn from this?

I understand that relationships run their course. One of us may change in ways that the other can't. Families grow in wealth and size and want different things than they originally desired. I am okay with that. I appreciate that it may be time for you to move on. My life is measured in human generations, and the days of sharing my life with several generations of one extended family are probably long past. So leave me behind to serve someone else. I will not be jealous if your passion has run its course or changed direction. Bainbridge, Fitzwater, and Christian are just around the corner. They have large rowhouses of fine standing, wider streets, and friends and neighbors worthy of your attention. Be gone.

But on your way out, can you walk outside, down our steps, across the sidewalk and into the street, and then turn to face me and apologize—to me, and the rest of my friends on the block?

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