

CONTEXT: PHILADELPHIA'S COMING OF AGE (AND ITS INTERSECTION WITH MY OWN).

I am bicoastal these days, but the context of my walk through Philadelphia is a coffee chat with an old co-worker on Center City's "startup row". I'm home for the Winter Quarter break, reconnecting with old contacts. My trip has an ulterior motive, though. It's a reunion between me and my old neighborhood. Lemann describes my own family's history well in the last paragraph of "Get Out of Town": while my ancestors emigrated to the Passyunk area of South Philly in the early 1900s, my parents raised me in suburban New Jersey, and I returned to the neighborhood as a white-collar yuppie in 2014. I am at once insider and outsider -- with ties to the ethnic locals that built the neighborhood, but belonging to the young gentrifying class that is returning to the city in droves. I keep aware of all this intersection as I walk my route - starting at Broad Street and Passyunk Avenue, up through Ninth Street's Italian Market, and up through the hyper-developed Center City region (Figure 1). The following is an attempt to determine how Passyunk is walkable, livable, but also how quickly it's changing as the face of Philadelphia does. During my walk, I identified four themes that suggest vast challenges, but optimism, for my old neighborhood.

I. URBAN SPRAWL HAS CRIPPLED WALKABILITY.

It's a frigid December morning in the city, and the sun barely peeks through a thick fog over the concrete and power lines. I start walking at the corner of Passyunk Avenue and Broad Street at 8 AM, observing the rush hour into the center of town. It's difficult to find parking - I wedge my Dodge into a spot between two sedans. (Philadelphians are expert parallel parkers, out of necessity.) It's here that I begin observing the tension between Passyunk as a residential neighborhood, and as a massive thoroughfare for morning commuters. Cars honk repeatedly, paying no mind to the family homes just a block away. There is a bustle, but also an eerie quiet apart from the honking. Broad and Passyunk is a pass-through for every commuter, but a destination for no one - for at least this brief pocket of South Philly, there is no "there" here.

Urban sprawl is a common theme in Philadelphia, and its effects have permanently scarred some of the city's most tight-knit neighborhoods. Both of the city's waterfronts are blocked from public access by interstate highways. Just ten blocks away from where I stand is a section of I-95, built in the 1970s and reminiscent of the Robert Moses era, that razed 10,000 rowhomes in order to be finished. Misuse and urban sprawl appear in every neighborhood - and Broad Street's run through Passyunk is no different (Figure 3). My pictures depict a relatively busy rush hour, but with few pedestrians. A main reason is the careless zoning of the street, which, with its wide sidewalks and access to public transportation, should make it a retail hub. Instead, banks, hospitals and other complexes make walking down the block an isolating chore. This drabness remains the case until Broad Street reaches City Hall. Luckily, I'm headed into the dense residential blocks of Passyunk.

II. COMMUNITIES ARE SELF-ENERGIZING.

Passyunk wasn't built for the automotive age, let alone for its current density. The blocks that I'm walking cover land that was undeveloped farmland, outside of the city limits, in 1800 when the grid was drawn (Figure 3). Dense row houses were built here in the late 1800s to accommodate the immigrant boom of Italians, Irish, and Polish - the first wave of my own ancestors that settled here. These row houses, two-story brick lots with seven-foot-deep basements, mostly still stand.

I walk down the one-lane Passyunk Avenue, I begin to see the locals going about their own mornings. The traffic jams the street, and the residents, who know better than to drive, fill the small sidewalks. Our neighborhood is residential and unassuming, lively, and a little dirty. There are schoolchildren and crossing guards, trash bags on the sidewalk - some spewing open sewage. There's a diverse group of old and young, working-class and white-collar, hipster and immigrant, forced together by the density of the row homes. For this, there's ample retail: a mom-and-pop pharmacy, a dive bar, two delis. I step over a man parallel-parked in front of a café, changing his tire in the cold, while the yuppies in the window, sipping their lattes, look on.

There's a feeling of intersection in the air - that the working-class traditionalism is being encroached upon by a younger, worldlier set. The rents are rising here. But the tension doesn't boil over - and, in fact, there's a harmony about all these people, who are from different places and going different places too, sharing a common neighborhood.

III. UNDER-USE BREEDS MORE UNDER-USE.

As I drift north toward the high-rises in the center of town, the neighborhood abruptly ends at Washington Avenue – another thoroughfare, like Broad Street, dividing the city from itself. As I continue walking, the city becomes more modern and a little more isolating with each passing block. Brick is replaced by block-long glass. Block-long developments, high-rise condo units, again without retail, flank some of the streets. The property mix – little but residential, coupled with tight parking and few other reliable transport options, create an eerily quiet city center (Figure 5).

The development here was, in part, incentivized by a culture of misused real estate in the center of the city. In the Society Hill neighborhood, close to my lunch meeting, there are few non-residential properties, some of which serve as investment vehicles for absentee owners. A large set of federal and city government office buildings, with beautiful and ornate architecture, sit vacant. The neighborhood is spotless and well-to-do – but even its residents, unfortunately, eat, work, shop elsewhere. This is a pattern of misuse breeding further misuse. I see mostly empty streets. Blocks away on Race Street, where I end up, there are crowds and energy at Reading Terminal Market. Directly in the center of what is now the office-and-district, RTM is an excellent example of adaptive reuse. The old Reading Railroad train terminus, built to serve the city's first suburban commuters, has since been converted to an open-air market that serves thousands at a time.

IV. HERE, OLD HAS WELCOMED NEW.

As I walk back to Passyunk, I think about the city's successes and failures in adapting its landscape to its changing needs. There are some flaws – the focus on auto transit, the obvious zoning problems, the adversarial local government which prevents small-scale development. (Many of my neighbors in Passyunk find trouble building a roof deck, or a third floor on their row house, spending many months retrieving the right permits.) The current trend, that of young professional influx, is promising for the neighborhoods outside the center. I walk through a row of restaurants back down Passyunk Avenue – many of which didn't exist five years ago. There are, noticeably, families with children on streets where there didn't used to be. I smell fried food and hear music. The denseness creates energy, which creates walkability, which makes the neighborhood desirable – a virtuous cycle.

Philly has seen some successful experiments in mass urban renewal. Bart Blatstein's massive *Piazza* project in the Northern Liberties single-handedly revitalized that neighborhood in the 1980s, and kicked off a domino effect of development in the surrounding neighborhoods. Large-scale projects, though, have yet to penetrate Passyunk. This is because the neighborhood has always *been* a neighborhood, a little self-contained economy with all the necessary parts. The generational shifts are changing the vibe of Passyunk Avenue – but are also "assimilating" into locals themselves. The old guard, the aging immigrant class, and their yuppie counterparts (who oftentimes are their children or grandchildren) coalesce surprisingly well. These interactions encourage human connection – economic, personal, neighborly. This, more than anywhere else I've lived, makes the neighborhood walkable, desirable and exciting.

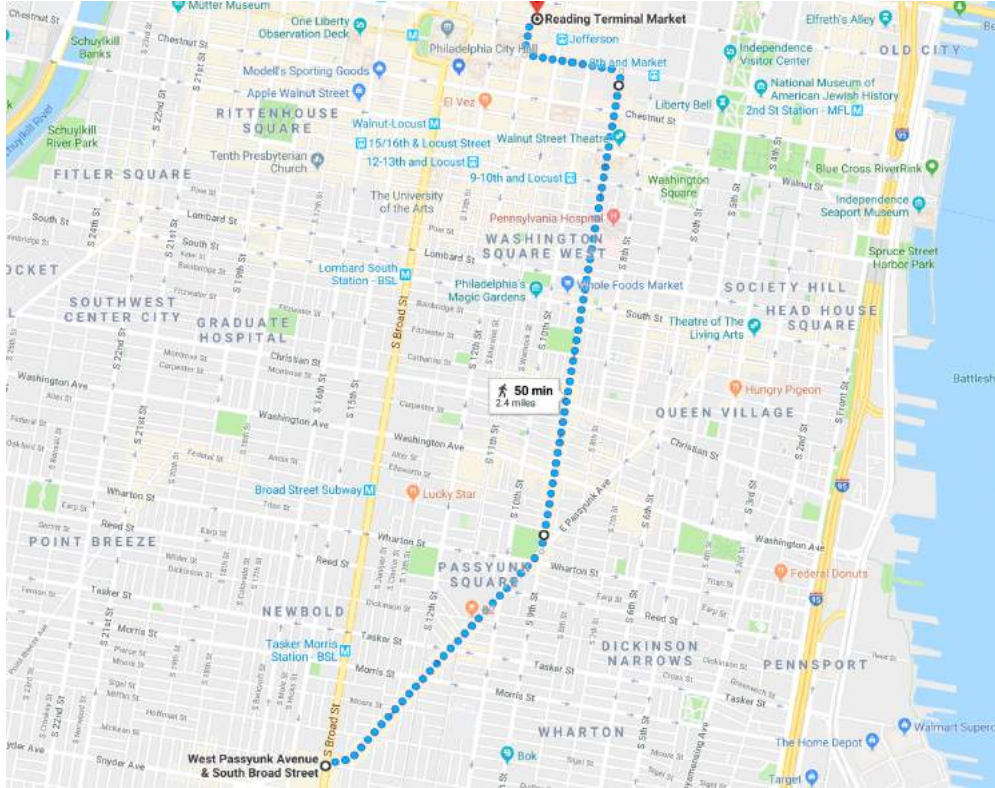


FIGURE 1. Your correspondent's route. Philadelphia is small enough city that I pass through un-gentrified and recently developed neighborhoods before reaching Center City, all in under two hours.



FIGURE 2. Broad Street and Passyunk Avenue, a main thoroughfare for drivers, but avoided by pedestrians. Here we see the intentionally planned wide sidewalk, begging for boulevard retail – instead, we get parking garages and a block-long doctor's office. Dense residential real estate is just off to the left – this is a missed opportunity.

Also, cars on Broad Street are allowed to park on the median.



FIGURE 3. The oldest known map surveying the Passyunk area, from 1802. Note Cedar Street, now South Street, is the southern boundary of the city. The “Intended New Road Called Federal Road” originally passed through a pasture, but quickly became a dense grid by the late nineteenth century. Row housing was built en masse to accommodate the influx of immigrants – and a generation after, the tight streets proved to be ill-equipped for the arrival of automobiles. This is still true.

Your correspondent lived in a row house at the red X for 2 years.

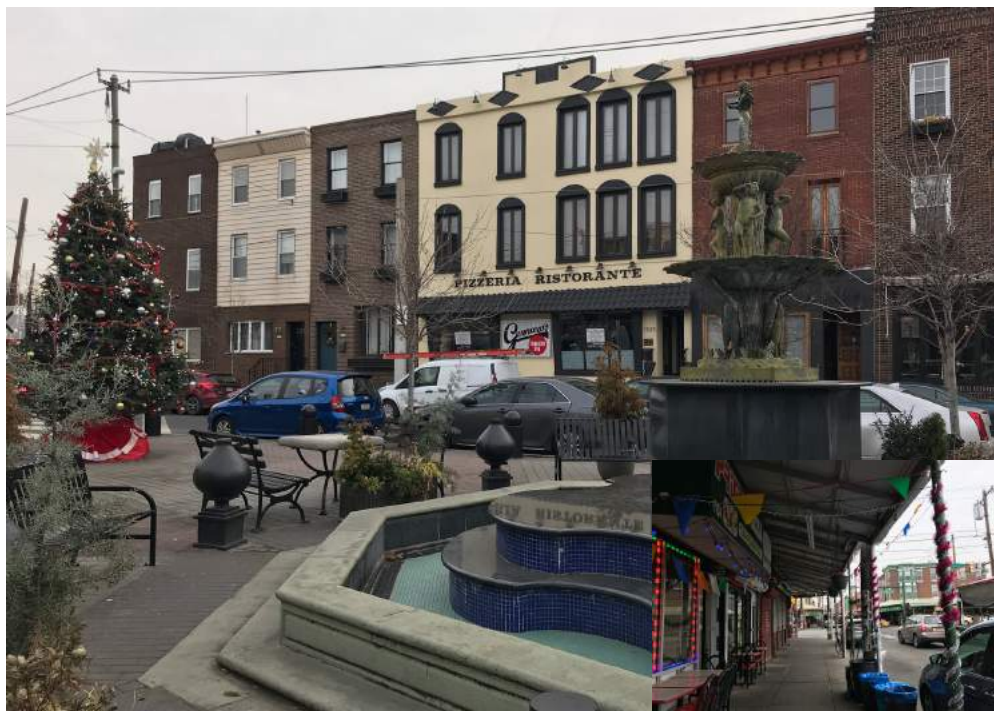


FIGURE 4. Passyunk Square, the dense neighborhood center, on a frigid morning. Authentic local fare and high walkability has made the neighborhood desirable, attracting restaurateurs, craftsmen, and even tech offices to the area.



FIGURE 5. More evidence of non-walkability in otherwise welcoming and open spaces. New developments pop up beside historic properties in Society Hill. The property mix – little but residential, coupled with tight parking and few other reliable transport options, create an eerily quiet city center. At bottom right: a vacant set of federal office buildings.

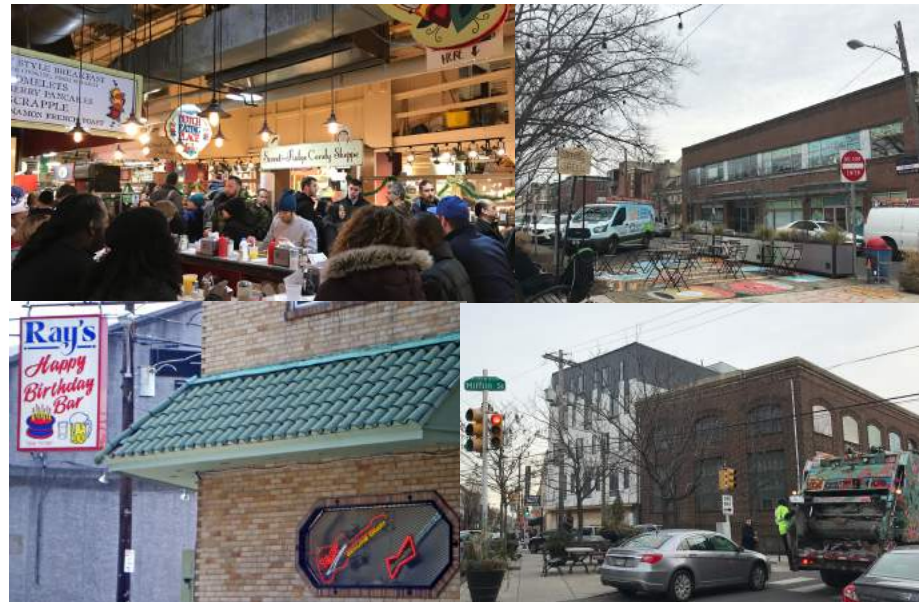


FIGURE 6. The best examples of “highest and best use” on my walk. Clockwise from top left: lunch at RTM. In Passyunk, open streets initiatives create a walkable space at the intersection of a school and storefront hub. On Passyunk Square – this is common – piercingly modern housing coexists alongside an old factory. Ray’s Happy Birthday Bar, Passyunk’s unpretentious neighborhood dive, is frequented both by seasoned locals and the new generation of yuppies, who have coalesced into one demographic with surprisingly little tension. Ray’s owner still performs a jazz concert every first Saturday, which your correspondent used to attend together with (1) his 82-year-old grandfather and (2) his millennial housemates.