Gentrification and the Heterogeneous City: Finding a Role for Design

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In cities where de-industrialization has left large segments of their populations in poverty, once thriving working class neighborhoods are increasingly threatened by rapid market-driven gentrification that transforms them in terms of race and economic class. Poor residents are pressured to move by rising living cost, local cultures are erased and replaced by dominant cultural norms and urban space evolves towards a homogeneous formal language. Gentrification poses a threat to the realization of just and democratic urban life, a life in which a broad array of people have the "right to the city" which, as Lefebvre suggests includes the right to appropriation: access, use and pleasure that constitute a broader conceptualization of ownership.[1]

That cities will change is indisputable, and change is mostly a sign of health, but it is also true that contemporary neighborhood change increasingly operates on an extraterritorial plane happening quickly, opportunistically and unilaterally. With an invisible hand deftly at work, neighborhoods are evaluated and developed as trading commodities—what Lefebvre would call "exchange value"—rather than a mosaic of places for diverse constituencies.[2] Gentrification leaves little room for a discourse around place that might lead to new sites of democratic engagement, to the emergence of hybrid institutions, and to the creation of more porous urban space. This paper will consider a pair of contiguous neighborhoods in Philadelphia where market-driven gentrification has come face to face with powerful grassroots civic advocacy; and it looks at what architects, landscape architects and urban designers can do to help neighborhoods resist gentrification and support heterogeneity in making places where the hand-print of multiple publics might be found.

WHAT DOES DESIGN HAVE TO DO WITH IT?
The literature of gentrification—theories, processes, and social impacts—resides primarily in the realms of political science, sociology, urban studies and geography, addressing careful place-based studies through the lens of larger cultural and economic drivers.[3] These are serious critical analyses and by nature do not propose resolutions, especially not in material spatial projections that architects employ. But the consequences of gentrification are played

out in actual physical space, so it is important that a discussion of the phenomenon that has radically changed neighborhoods worldwide be more fully explored in the literature of architecture and urban design practice.
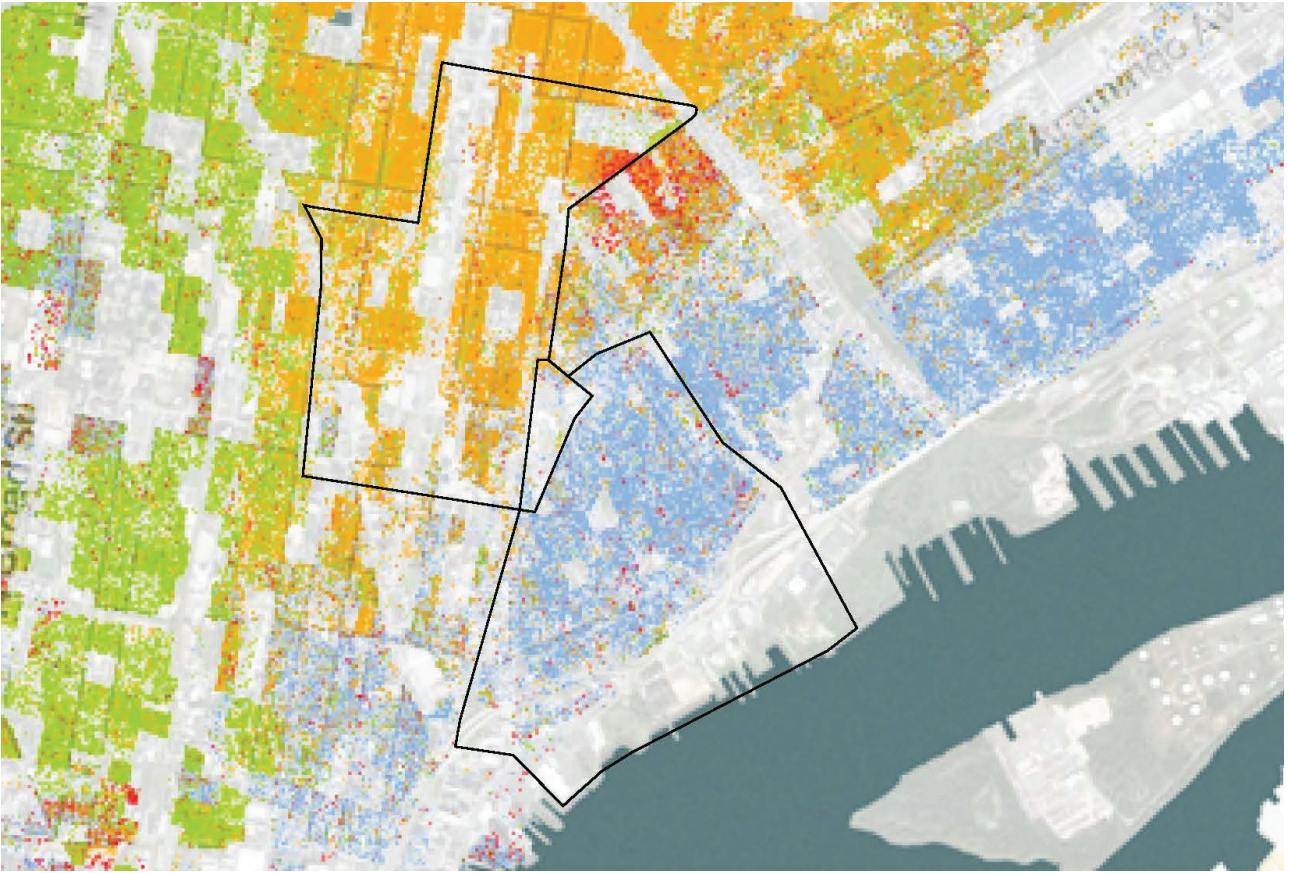
In the 1960's and 70's when the agents of gentrification and displacement were clearly defined public entities empowered by urban renewal policy, architects were active, vocal advocates for change. Then battle lines were clear. Not so in in our contemporary neoliberal economic environment where the prime movers in gentrification operate behind the scenes. Private developers, seeking profit in emerging new markets in neglected, strategically located neighborhoods partner quietly with public policy makers. Together these public-private partnerships build tax revenue and national status, marketing the gentrified neighborhoods as a product of the "creative class" and young people are welcomed into "up and coming" neighborhoods. First gradually, then rapidly, the ragged edges are smoothed, rents rise and poorer old-time residents relocate. A far cry from the ethos of creative risk-taking that the hip emerging neighborhoods were meant to represent, a haunting predictability begins to pervade the newly gentrified urban spaces. Cafes, bike shares, dog parks, galleries, and pop-up parks proliferate and are replicated from city to city.[4]

Many architects and designers feel that they are powerless in the face of this economic juggernaut. Among them many who are social advocates often find themselves mirrored in this branded environment and are ambivalent about their complicated relationship with gentrification: they are both its agents and consumers.[5] Yet this very ambivalence could be instructive and valuable. Since architecture and its allied design professions are inevitably entangled with capital and production of space, both sides of the issues surrounding gentrification are present in design practice, and can be used to mitigate its negative social impact.[6] Far from being without agency in this struggle, architects, planners and landscape architects have the skills to closely read patterns of spatial use, to anticipate gentrifying trends, to imagine and co-design community futures to pre-empt gentrification—in essence to help secure the right to the city for its diverse constituents.

Indeed, important social impact design practices tackle project-based work that addresses inequity and a weakened democratic context.[7] While these practices have created a movement that benefits the public interest, most do not explicitly situate the work in the broader political and cultural framework of gentrification. There are notable exceptions: Rios and Aeschbacher—each steeped in community-based practice—have argued that designers "who intervene directly in the world can create physical social spaces for others and in some cases seek to redefine asymmetrical power relationships".[8] The work of Estudio Teddy Cruz in San Diego border communities and of Alex Salazar in Oakland that both seek a redefinition of the role of design as a means of challenging neoliberal policies around housing, zoning and real estate development. All argue for an expanded political context for design thinking in a world that embraces privatization, deregulation and market bias. While making conceptual links with the macro-environment, practice is locally grounded, at a scale understood in depth by ordinary citizens. With this knowledge powerful place-centered partnerships can be forged and asymmetries can be recalibrated. Teddy Cruz exhorts us to "focus on the issues of the local [because we will find] every issue converges there."[9]

THE GENTRIFICATION DEBATE: CHANGE AND HETEROGENEITY

In the 1960's, as the suburbs began to lose their appeal, a back-to-the-city movement was begun led by those willing to take risks on "dodgy" neighborhoods—the young and well-educated, do-it-yourselfers and artists looking for unique and affordable residential and workspace. Seeking escape from banality, to the authenticity, grit and diversity to be found in the city, they were often unaware of the social consequences of their colonization of poor neighborhoods as well as of the invisible mechanisms that increasingly have supported and guided their "pioneering spirit".[10]

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Figure 1: Neighborhoods are sharply
separated both by race (yellow: Latino;
blue: Caucasian) and infrastructure.
Image Copyright, 2013, Weldon
Cooper Center for Public Service,
Rector and Visitors of the University of
Virginia (*Dustin A. Cable, creator*).
The dark alienating space beneath the
El. (*Andrew Jacobs, 2014*)

There is an on-going debate between those who would tout the emancipatory nature of gen-
trification[11] versus those who condemn the "brutal inequalities and economic fortune that
are produced in the process".[12] The short-term effects of gentrification on so-called qual-
ity of life issues are often positive, and longtime residents have expressed mixed feelings
about neighborhood change. The study of Harlem for example showed only minimal dis-
placement, and many neighbors appreciated the improved amenities, reduced crime rate,
school improvement and increased housing values.[13] But over time costs tend to outweigh
the benefits in the form of increased taxes, rents and the influx of expensive retail making
local shopping unaffordable. And the immeasurable costs are more subtle and affective.

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Observers like psychiatrist Mindy Thompson Fullilove have eloquently expressed the damage to the emotional ecosystem done by uprooting people from their homes.[14] Those who can afford to stay often suffer from feeling like a stranger in their own neighborhood where the social capital is found in familial ties and history,[15] and with this the dismantling of cultural patterns and neighborhood ethos as represented by the appropriation of public space and development of new hip, socially exclusive establishments.[16] In a poignant capitulation to the commodification of the dwelling, residents will often sell out at a considerable profit only to find they cannot afford housing in as good a neighborhood and must again forge new communal bonds.
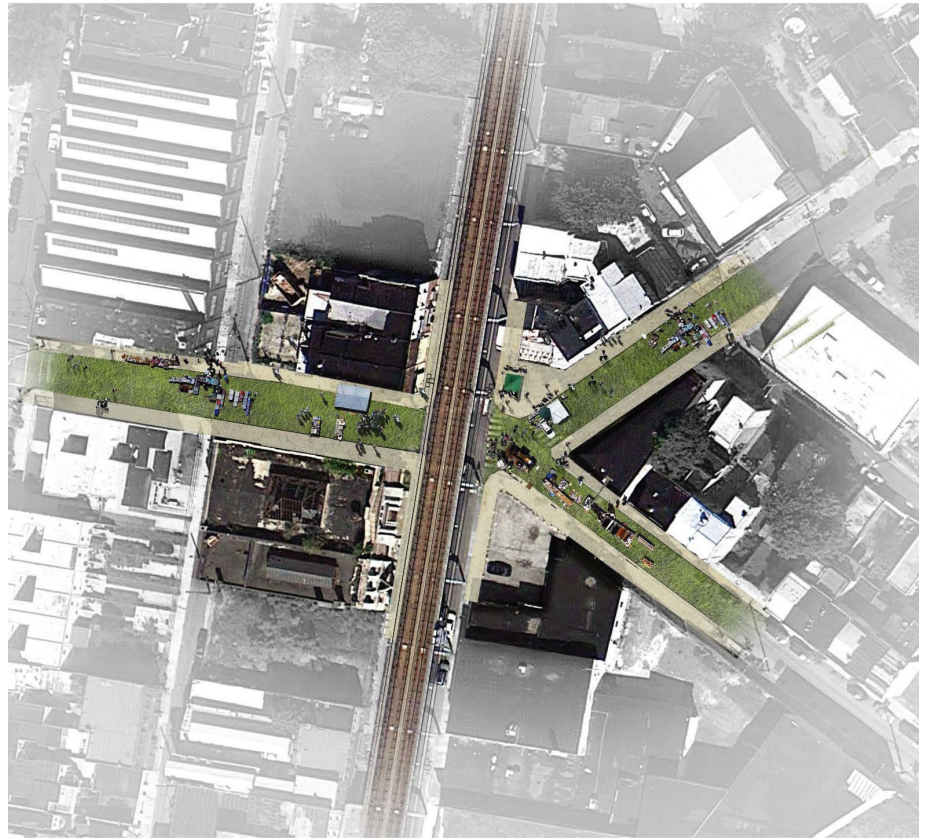

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PARALLEL WORLDS: A CASE STUDY

In this context we examine the emerging transformation of two adjacent neighborhoods in the Kensington area of eastern North Philadelphia. Research and design partnerships with both neighborhoods have been established over several years. Questions of gentrification, shared and differing neighborhood agendas, and overlap and intersections of spatial claim have been explored through interviews with stakeholders, residents, leaders, and policy makers; physical spatial analysis and projections have been undertaken through community-based studios.

Despite their close proximity, Fishtown and Norris Square have grown as separate parallel worlds, ethnic enclaves with intensely inscribed identities that owe much to different underlying spatial structures and development histories. Fishtown a traditionally white working class neighborhood is in the full throttle of gentrification, with artists and other well educated young people moving into what has become Philadelphia hottest "creative" neighborhood. Across a sharp geographic boundary where different street grids collide at a scruffy commercial corridor darkened by the elevated train, is the poor, but well-organized Latino

Figure 2: Symbols of neighborhood identity. Hand-painted Puerto Rican flag in the Norris Square park (*Sally Harrison 2003*). The promotion of an arts festival on the "Frankford Avenue Arts Corridor" (*Andrew Jacobs, 2014*)

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neighborhood of Norris Square. The neighborhood has its own unique spatial and visual identity, built incrementally over several decades. Market pressures spreading to Norris Square are forcing conflict over affordable housing and along the border zone between the two neighborhoods. Here the unequal power relations inherent in gentrification beg the question of social justice as a spatial function.

The Norris Square neighborhood is a product of Philadelphia's rapid late 19th century industrialization; after the late 20th century industry collapse the neighborhood depopulated becoming known as the "Badlands". Members of Puerto Rican community displaced by the publicly sanctioned gentrification of urban renewal resettled in this "ghetto of last resort"[17] drawn by the large square, a spatial anomaly in the otherwise undifferentiated gridiron layout of central North Philadelphia. The square, surrounded by struggling institutions and vacant brownstones was in the 1970's a famous drug market, but a group of young mothers bent on building the neighborhood into livable place for displaced Latino families, rallied the local Catholic church and police and occupied the park, holding midnight prayer vigils and peace marches, and gradually appropriated the space.[18] The community commands a remarkable identity-building amenity in the park, which is now well tended and a site for relaxation and active recreation, movie nights and community gatherings.

Emerging from grassroots activism the Norris Square Civic Association (NSCA) has acquired and renovated much of the housing surrounding the park for preschools and social services;

it has built 150 units of affordable family and senior housing, and it is developing a large community center in a cluster of buildings once occupied by a monastic order.[19] Particularly moving is a gardening initiative has appropriated multiple vacant lots just off the square for urban farming and sites for the expression and celebration of Latino culture. Flower and vegetable gardens, a casita with an outdoor kitchen and a chicken yard, brilliant murals and installations of everyday artifacts form the growing landscape of "Las Parcelas".

In contrast, Fishtown grew from its colonial origins as an urban village, expanding in ethnically identified clusters as different groups arrived from Europe. Its intimate and irregular street grid derived from the geometry of the riverfront, evolved organically with smaller manufacturing sites, churches and graveyards woven into the residential fabric. It maintained a fierce clannish ethos around parish and workplace, 20 but by the 1990's job opportunities had dwindled, housing lost value, crime rates grew. Younger Fishtowners moved from the old neighborhood, leaving a fabric of relatively intact housing and by the early 2000's saw an influx of young, but savvy artist-gentrifiers, many of whom became small-time developers. Seizing on the economic and status advantage of the young creative class and seeking to reverse the decades-long depopulation trend, a commercial/arts corridor was conceived in 2004 on Frankford Avenue. A study touted the advantages of art as a branding agent for commerce and development as well as for its commodity value. So blatantly catering to the middle class taste, there was barely any mention of the very nearby Front Street with its bodegas, dollar stores and bargain clothing shops as competing viable commercial corridor.[21]

Figures 4: A proposed hybrid library/maker-space creates spatial porosity and brings elements of Norris Square's visual culture into the shared public realm. (*Arjumand Anjum, 2015*).

IN-BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: *A TERRAIN VAGUE*

Interactions between the two neighborhoods were rare, resulting from burnished physical as well as social conditions. Racial hostilities had been decades in the making. The collision of street grids at Front Street created a disorienting, discontinuous cross-movement network, a divide reinforced by the elevated rail, darkening the struggling commercial street below. A vacant seven-acre site that had been the terminus of a defunct rail line stretched along Front Street for several blocks toward the end of the commercial corridor expanding the divide between the two neighborhoods—creating a *terrain vague* filled with abandoned vehicles and inhabited by small colonies of homeless drug users. The only evidence of border crossing was a narrow beaten path connecting Fishtown to the El stop at Berks and Front Street. The path originated in a break in what was referred to as the Fishtown Wall—a four-foot retaining wall demarking the community boundary.

The NSCA had acquired the site, and to catalyze activity, had developed a market and lunch spot featuring Latino specialties in a small warehouse along the path the El. To build on this the NSCA invited design proposals for the site's development. Could this no-man's land become a shared amenity transforming the *terrain vague* into a connective node between the two neighborhoods? Strategically located, it had transit access to the whole city—potentially a place of larger scale civic intercourse. Proposals followed this ethos of inclusivity looking to develop spaces of mutual interest and encounter, with mixes of uses including commerce, urban horticulture, education, recreation, and entertainment. Underlying patterns of circulation and public space would build in porosity creating multiple cross-neighborhood linkages within and through the site.

But unable to make a go of developing the site itself, NSCA sold it to the school district. A magnet school for the creative and performing arts was finished in 2011—a LEED platinum building that was part of the trend of urban greening that Fishtown had also eagerly adopted. With development funds from the water department the 7-acre site was branded "The Big Green Block" in the zip code "Sustainable 19125". Virtuous as the sustainability goal may have been, and as appropriate to an inter-community scale a magnet school may be, it did little heal the divide between the two neighborhoods: the school and its elevated playing field fill the site, allowing no informal "loose spaces" that Stevens and Frank speak of that might encourage public encounter. [22] Even the passage to the El stop was swallowed up: a narrow footpath enwalled with chain link fence.

In the end a project so potentially rich in opening up possibilities for building heterogeneous democratic city life, closed the door. Reinforcing a boundary it became a victory for gentrification; new expensive housing filled in on longtime derelict lots adjacent to the Big Green Block, and developers began to eye land across Front Street. Fishtown continued rapidly gentrifying, with new row housing once valued at $100,000 being sold for five times as much. The Frankford Avenue Arts Corridor was now enlivened with bike racks salvaged from industrial machinery, smartly designed bus shelters, and an annual "energy' festival, with a slew of coffee shops, galleries, and art supply stores all with trendy names, the Rocket Cat Café, the Sculpture Gym.

Despite their sophistication the gentrifiers tend to cling to their parochialism, having maintained fixed boundaries in their own mental maps. A three year resident and art school educated waitress in the Soup Kitchen (not a soup kitchen…) was completely was completely unaware of Norris Square Park (though only three blocks away). She reported also her boyfriend owned a building on Front Street and was disgusted by behavior of the other occupants of the street—not picking up trash, hanging on street corners etc. The point was confirmed by the North Philadelphia city planner "my Fishtown folks never cross Front Street; they wouldn't know about Norris Square park."[23]

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DESIGNING THE HETEROGENEOUS CITY

With the seven-acre site transformed from terrain vague to the Big Green Block, Front Street has become what a board member of the Fishtown's community development corporation described as "the sharp boundary… where the real fight is going to happen."[24] Residents of Norris Square are legitimately fearful of gentrification, especially those who can remember their expulsion forty years ago from the now fashionable Fairmount area. However, in their decades-long isolation in the Badlands, the NSCA managed to consolidate ownership and claim of the neighborhood's strategic land resources. For-profit developers who know the value of green space have begun to swarm into Norris Square only to be frustrated by the barriers put in place to defend against displacement.[25] Venting on blogs, the would-be gentri-fiers accuse the NSCA of hoarding properties some purchased cheaply from the city; others accuse the director's protective stance toward securing an affordable culturally focused neighborhood as being close to racist.

There is indeed a kind of inevitability in this contest: not that Norris Square will be gentrified, or alternatively that it will block all neighborhood change, but that spaces of negotiation will be required. Rather than a boundary that separates or belongs to either one or other of the cultures, the Front Street corridor in all its fragmentation presents the opportunity to create another layer of citiness, a broad irregular seam that loosely laces together the two neighbor-hoods with spaces and spines of interaction and mutual utility.[26] Design focused on porosity rather than closure of the street edge can allow interpenetrations of all kinds: of light, move-ment, sight lines, vegetation into otherwise bounded territories. Overlapping programs and heterogeneous public spaces can invite interactions: simple civil contact in a shared envi-ronment or passionate debate among co-habiting interests. And a spatial reminder of the transcendent temporal quality of urban life, it would serve well to reuse the 19th century fabric that predates ownership of either competing group.

Design speculations transforming Front Street's uninviting aspect include renovating a his-torically significant vacant bank as a community market and town hall and developing retail with upper story housing setback from the noise of the El and allowing light to enter the dreary space below. On a site linking Front Street and Norris Square is proposed a hybrid democratic institution, combining library and a maker-space offering use value to both constituencies. In its presence at the border zone the building both represents the colorful imagery in Norris Square, and offers a physical threshold into the neighborhood. A landscape proposal envisions crossing the divide by "turfing" the streets as they pass below the El, a temporary installation where spatial continuity can replace discontinuity, and where public encounter and cross-cultural dialogue can energize the breach even as it is becoming ever more contested.

FINDING A ROLE FOR DESIGNERS

The city, framed as *oeuvre*, as Lefebvre says, "is closer to a work of art than to a simple mate-rial product".[27] In these terms, neighborhoods, especially those built through sustained grassroots efforts, may possess the underlying complexity to withstand exogenous forces if given representation. If designers expand their role beyond the consultant-client prod-uct/service-delivery model, they can act both as partners in a shared civic endeavor and as agents capable of representing and advancing the *oeuvre*. Redressing the banal heartlessness of gentrification can be viewed as a design challenge writ large, where principles of archi-tecture, landscape architecture, and urban design can be brought to bear: context, spatial layering, growth, porosity, pattern, public-private interface, materiality, luminosity.

Designers can first employ their skills to help communities build a layered narrative of neigh-borhood spatial culture. This narrative can weave together practices and meanings inscribed in the physical environment, representing often hidden strengths -- from the front stoop and

ENDNOTES

1. Henri Lefebvre, "The Right to the City" in Eleanor Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas, eds., *Writings on Cites/Henri Lefebvre* (Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1996) 101.

2. Ibid: 67-68

3. See: Neil Smith, The New Urban Frontier: *Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (London: Routledge, 1996); Loretta Lees, "Guest Editorial" *Environment and Planning A* 36 (2004): 1141—1150; Japonica Brown-Saracino, *The Gentrification Debates* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2010); Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places* (New York: Oxford University Press 2010).

4. Derek Hyra, "The Back to the City Movement: Neighbourhood Redevelopment and the Processes of Political and Cultural Displacement" in Urban Studies Vol.52 (10, 2015.): 1753-1773.

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6. Bryony Roberts, "Looking for the Outside: 'How is Architecture Political?'" in *The Avery Review 5.* http://averyreview.com/issues/5/looking-for-the-outside

7. See: Bryan Bell, ed., Good Deeds, Good Design: Community Service Through Architecture (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2003); Bryan Bell and Katie Wakeford, eds., Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism (New York: Metropolis Books, 2008); John Cary and Public Architecture, The Power of Pro Bono: Forty Stories about Design for the Public Good by Architects and their Clients (New York: Metropolis Books, 2010.); and Kate Stohr, Design Like You Give a Damn 2: Building Change from the Ground Up (New York: Metropolis Books, 2012).

8. Peter Aeschbacher and Michael Rios, "Claiming Public Space: The Case for Proactive, Democratic Design" in Bell and Wakeford, 87.

9. See: http://tmagazine.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/01/21/the-nifty-50-teddy-cruz-architect

10. See note 2

11. See: Andres Duany, "Three cheers for "gentrifica-tion'" in *The American Enterprise 3* (Apr/May 2001): 36-39; Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002) and Richard Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

12. Loretta Lees et al., *Gentrification* (New York: Routledge, 2008): 210.

13. Lance Freeman and Frank Branconi, "Gentrification and Displacement: New York City in the 1990's" in *Journal of the American Planning Association 70* (January 2002):39-52.

14. Lynne Manzo and Patrick Devine-Wright, *Place Attachment: Advances in theory, Methods and Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2014):141-153.

15. Derek Hyra, "The Back to the City Movement: Neighbourhood Redevelopment and the Processes of Political and Cultural Displacement" in *Urban Studies 52* (October 2015): 1753-1773.

16. Brooke Havlik, "Eating in Urban Frontiers: Alternative Food and Gentrification in Chicago" Masters Thesis University of Oregon (0171N_10846) 2013.

17. Karen Wilson, "Building El Barrio: Latinos Transform Postwar Philadelphia" in *Pennsylvania Legacies 3* (November 2003) 17-21

18. Patricia Haynes, "Philadelphia: A City of Neighborhoods" in *A Patch of Eden: America's Inner-City Gardeners* (White River Junction NH: Chelsea Green Publishing, 1996): 71-116.

19. Personal Interview with Patricia DeCarlo, January 2015.

20. Personal interview with Shanta Schachter, July, 2014.

21. Group G, LLC., "Frankford Avenue Arts Corridor" Unpublished report, 2004.

22. Karen Franck, and Quentin Stevens, *Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life* (London: Routledge, 2006)

23. Personal Interview with David Fecteau, July 2014.

24. Personal interview with Wesley Casconne, January, 2015.

25. DeCarlo 2015

26. Andrew Jacobs, "Convergent Dwelling: Neighborhood Identity and the Landscape Narrative" *Master of Landscape Architecture Thesis* (Providence RI: Rhode Island School of Design, 2014)

27. Lefebvre:158.

28. Maria Ballesteros et al. eds. *Verb: Crisis* (New York: Actar, 2010): 168-180.

the corner store that support social and economic interaction; to the multi-functionality of school and church buildings that give new meaning to neighborhood institutions; to patterns of connectivity; to homes that reconfigure to accommodate changing occupancy and informal businesses; to vacant lots and bounded streets appropriated for play and celebration. In the context of gentrification's bent toward branding the neighborhood as consumable product, visualizing this kind of complicated—often messy—place-identity is ultimately a more potent platform for future development. It corrects asymmetries of power by framing a dignified expression of a collective presence saying: We are here; our neighborhood is valued as a place, not a site of exchange.

This expression of neighborhood culture forms a core of resistance that initiates habits of analysis and design thinking. Embedded in this holistic conception of place, are information sets that map out sites of opportunity, vulnerability and contestation, and with this knowledge a strategic rather than reactive approach to control of land can be adopted, either by formal acquisition or informal appropriation. Designs that emerges from these explorations of place may look different than concept-driven plans; they would operate on multiple fronts and at diverse scales, employ tactics that energize larger systems, and create new spatial hybrids that take cues from need-driven adaptations. A plan might include the build-up of an identity-reinforcing web of key neighborhood gathering places (grand or modest), while exploring the potential of critical sites in border zones and projecting forays into territories beyond the pale.

When the complexity of lived space is valued beyond simple currency of exchange, a broader expression of the city as *oeuvre* is free to unfold. Now the goal is not just to preserve a community's "right to stay put," but having established a secure base, to serve the interests of the next scale of urbanism in the space where different communities overlap. Here, day-to-day contact with others' spatial habits and expression accumulate. Sometimes highly ambiguous and fluid, the margins can be vigorously engaged, indeed celebrated, as sites of negotiation and contestation, where hybrid forms of collectivity are actualized. If together designers and communities are willing to engage with rather that flee from conflict, they can contribute to a broader authentic discourse on how we shape the city around shared values of a democracy.[28] Here designers are not accessories to a narrow agenda, but can orchestrate differing cultural perspectives and visualize spaces of encounter where a mosaic of multiple publics is represented on the larger urban stage.