Rewrite / Reweave North Philadelphia:
Patterns for Second-Growth in the Postindustrial City

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"To avoid the meaninglessness of the contemporary city it is not necessary to search for some ideal in the preindustrial past. It is possible to start with a given reality of any existing city and to discover in most of them a residuum of tradition sufficient to support a consistent, imaginative, and sometimes even radical reinterpretation of the status quo."

– Dalibor *Vesely, Architecture* arid *Continuity*[1]

INTRODUCTION

The depth and breadth of the physical decomposition of postindustrial inner-city neighborhoods has confounded American culture for the latter half of this century. The problem has been examined from the point of view of economics, racial politics, social psychology, and technology; and strategies to reverse the decline have been undertaken in various modes. But the outcome of repeated revitalization schemes has been remarkably consistent: industrial sectors of cities such as those in Philadelphia, Newark, Baltimore, Detroit and Chicago have resisted amelioration. In fact, the rate of deterioration of vast districts of the urban environment has accelerated in three decades and has become perhaps the first, apparent failure of American positivism in land development. The intractability of so-called urban blight, and the inability to "solve" it, suggests a radical redefinition of the terms of the problem, and with it, a reconsideration of what constitutes success or failure in placemaking.

The history of most American industrial neighborhoods, including both their growth and decline, has been contained within only a few generations. Within a brief time frame this trajectory has been remarkably symmetrical revealing an almost organic logic: the period of decay is about equal to the period of development. Yet, in our urgent desire to see the physical deterioration reversed, we have tended to dwell on what is visible at present, ignoring where and how these conditions exist in an evolutionary cycle. The development of industrial neighborhoods did not emanate from an ethos that valued place as an anchor of human existence and a source of community.[2] *Rapid "first growth" in service to the demands*

of the exploding industrial economy was the text that dictated most of the urbanism of the nineteenth century. The idea we now consciously seek — of establishing dwelling for the long-term, of making a place *sustainable — is a relatively new concept in American urban design. It is not surprising, then that the form of the industrial city in its primary iteration, was frankly* utilitaria *The idea we now consciously seek — of establishing dwelling for the long-term, of making a place sustainable — is a relatively new concept in American urban design. Its schema neither suggested nor explicitly supported communal continuity, and provided little that would discourage subsequent postindustrial abandonment when the fit was no longer precise.*

In America, continued opportunities for growth and change have been obtained in mobility, and in the potential of the vast undeveloped landscape to provide an unlimited "blank slate" for imprinting new forms of inhabitation — literally, for form to follow function. But this process has proceeded to the present point where the geographic limits have been reached and the technological requirement for space surpassed. The redistribution of population to cleaner and more prosperous settings and the weakening of the grip of the industrial machine has created slack space in city neighborhoods. Unsightly though these neighborhoods may be, they do contain "a residuum of tradition" — that latent potential for creating from its vestiges a deeper sense of place and inhabitation. Now, perhaps is the time when the constructed landscape of the American inner city may reasonably undergo a "second growth — one in which meaning and continuity of living experience consist in its primary definition.

NORTH PHILADELPHIA: A CASE STUDY

North Philadelphia in many ways typifies the ethos of nineteenth-century industrial expansion. Its unrestrained development was one of the great success stories of this period. Neither geography nor pre-existing culture provided much resistance to Philadelphia's growth northward that began in earnest at mid-century with consolidation of the city.[3] Heavy industry such as steel fabrication and associated machine
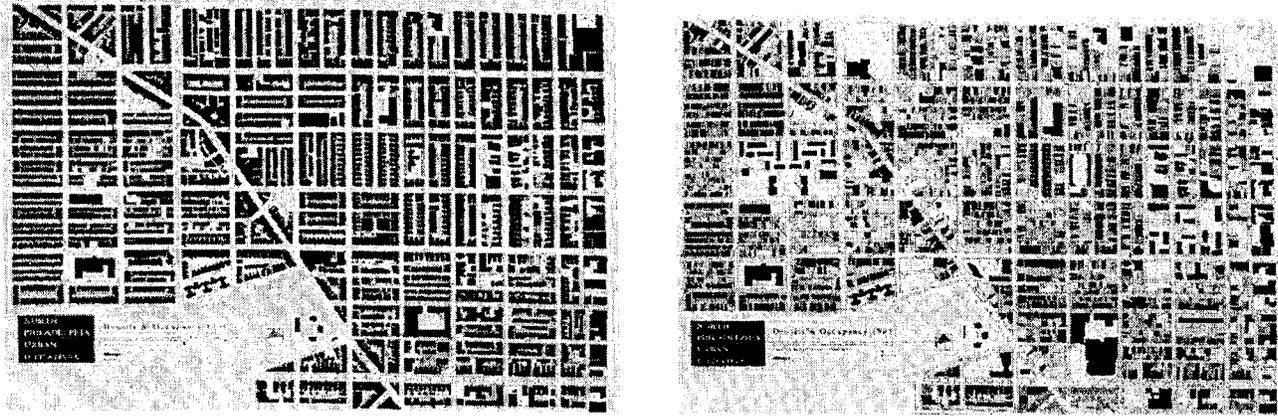
Fig. 1 a and b. Occupancy/Density in a North Philadelphia neighborhood: 1951 and 1995.

manufacturing, light industry such as textiles, printing, and woodworking, and shipping of raw materials and manufactured goods were the economy that nourished the city, and earned North Philadelphia the title "workshop of the world."

North Philadelphia's industrial power was fueled by immigrant workers who arrived in successive waves in the ports of this and other east coast cities. Continually changing the culture of the city, they came from Germany, Eastern Europe, Italy, and Ireland, and were followed by the "Great Black Migration" from the rural American South. These displaced populations carried with them as much of the ritual and fabric of culture that could be translocated; and they were remarkably able to recreate in the short term, a sense of the old world within the new neighborhoods they occupied. The apparent richness and vitality of ethnic urban life in Philadelphia and other immigrant havens has been romanticized by urban critics such as Jacobs, Gans and Mumford. But like a collage that compresses space and time, this makeshift culture was illusory in its sense of depth,. Though these neighborhoods were diverse, productive and active, they were basically temporary quarters — places of transition for those en route to a better life.

Philadelphia's original Penn-Holme plan was abandoned in favor of an undifferentiated grid — more efficient and normative, more in keeping with the fluid nature of the industrial experiment. On a visit to Philadelphia in the mid-nineteenth century, Charles Dickens lamented the gridiron development that had been imposed relentlessly upon the growing city. He described it as having a "distracting regularity,"[4] and in this phrase captured the feeling of unsettledness evoked by the abstraction and intrinsic opacity of the urban form. This truth may have been evident even to American city-builders, but in their rush to industrialization they did not perceive placelessness in the built environment as a problem, or even an issue, as urban form was a response to the present contingencies of an expanding economy and work force.

Thus the land was "occupied" rather than "settled," using with unabashed pragmatism a military rather than a community model. The undifferentiated gridiron plan — abstract, scaleless, and transferable— was the principle organizing scheme of most industrial sectors (if not the entirety) of nineteenth century American cities. The city grid — derived from the traditional military encampment and deployment system — was not a *plan*, but a spatial diagram replicable in an infinite number of situations, convenient for rapid orderly disposition of people and materials. It was a formal paradigm innately biased toward the temporary rather than the permanent. In its pure form, it possesses none of the qualities that support long-term inhabitation — those that inspire human

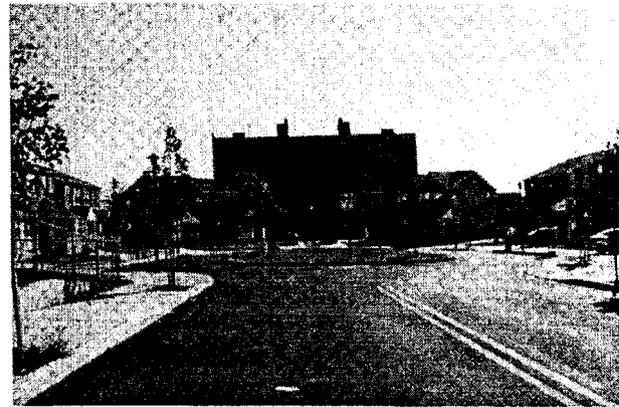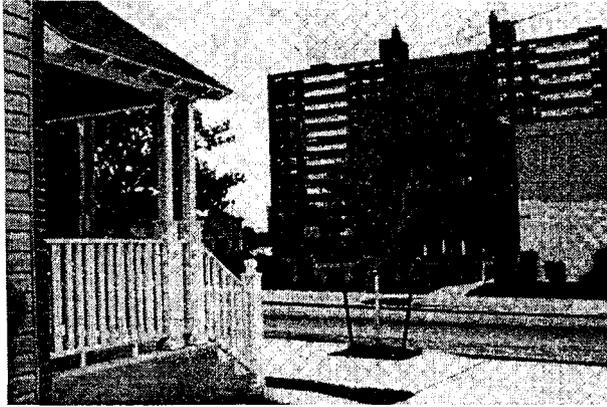Fig. 2 a and b. The expansion of the undifferentiated grid and its consequence.

Fig. 3 a and b.Two *inner-city dwelling* reform *policies:* 1960's *and* 1990's.

affection for a place and patterns of reciprocity with the environment. It is by design easy to set up, but most significantly, and problematically for an urban application, easy to decamp.' While in the *current critique, environments like North Philadelphia* may *represent a major failure of American civilization, as paramilitary installations constructed and de-constructed with remarkable timing, they may have indeed succeeded in their own terms.*

REFORMISM AND DESIGN: SO MUCH THINGS CHANGE...

At the end of the Industrial era, over-built districts like North Philadelphia, deteriorated. The grid city had ceased to be the threshold to a better life, but rather a repository of poverty and social inequity. It became less and less a "the ghetto of opportunity" and more and more a "ghetto of last resort."[6] *Reformers embarked on what is now a* half-century *old sociopolitical mission to fix slum neighborhoods, to restore their fleeting vitality — but without an understanding of the underlying social and environmental dysfunction that was, and had been always a part of the* place-structure *of the industrial city. Those* reform *initiatives that had a distinct environmental agenda, were chiefly extrinsic to the community — public policy-driven, and produced ad* **seriatim.** *Discontinuities of the social fabric created by the rapid turnover of ethnic populations in the industrial period, were now followed in postindustrial period by discontinuities in the built fabric.' Reform was experienced in a series of dramatic makeovers, whole neighborhood environments were swept away. Blight was eradicated in these programs, but in the process, little in the way of social or constructed culture was permitted to take root and to provide the standing framework necessary for building a stable community.*

Beginning at the end of the last century, successive reform initiatives produced different formal models, each purporting to be a radical new solution to the problems of social environmental deterioration: first, housing reform, slum clearance programs of the 1920's and 1930's, *and followed by post World War* II Urban *Renewal, in the 1970's the neighborhood preservation movement, and now, a renewed enthusiasm for*

broad stroke demolition and rebuilding;. While schematically so different, each reform has been remarkably consistent in its basic text, or programmatic concept. The same question is posed again and again: how to re-make the institution *of dwelling space* for the *poor'? This question objectifies both the people and the place, presuming passive inhabitation in an environmental blank slate. The compulsion to erase and replace as the means of reform, has both proceeded from and precluded a real knowledge of place, and in its actions, has done much to undermine the establishment of self-sustaining community fabric.*

Now in the 1990's, *with renewed interest in and sympathy for the inner city (thanks to funds from the federal level — the Empowerment Zone)* a "new" development *and design policy has emerged. In a rush to make most efficient use of these fleeting funds, the current trend is again toward broad sweep demolition. In 1995 and 1996 six high-rise public housing structures in North Philadelphia have been imploded, and others around the city scheduled for similar fates. These demolitions have been attended by carnival crowds of citizens — the spirit of the event akin in its morbid* voyeurism *to a public execution. Less of a spectacle is the clearing of whole run down blocks so that new developments in a suburban paradigm can be built quickly efficiently and with little resistance from (or acknowledgment of the trace of previous in habitation) Both high rise and traditional row house are being demolished and replaced with a "market-driven" concept of suburban site planning, in hope of coaxing those people with middle class aspirations back into the city; as if by living in these state of the art homes they might complete the image. In a stroke of historic irony, just as the* energy-*intensive, socially-alienating single-family* dwelling-cum-*shopping-mall pattern is reaching its point of cultural obsolescence, it has been adopted as the new model for curing the inner city.*

Significantly, both the original formative patterns and the subsequent reconstructive interventions have been imposed consistently from without. Rather than emerging from an acceptance of the place on its own terms, in its present evolutionary state, a superabundance of transcendent visions have projected upon the inner city. This creates an environ-

mental situation that is inherently unstable. Rather than a web of existing patterns and new dwelling imperatives, the design history of the industrial neighborhood is composed of an accretion of discrete layers, applied either as successive economically-driven installations, or as policy-driven experiments in urban theory. It is now our struggle to gradually rewrite the environmental text in a paradigm of settlement; and reweave the space of dwelling in a way that will allow people to bind to their place.

REWRITE/REWEAVE

How then to rewrite the text? How to reweave the fabric so that a story of the present can play out, bringing with it traces of the past? How, in essence, to allow North Philadelphia to become a place of dwelling rather than a place of transition? George Santanya observed: "Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness...those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." We would do well to examine open-mindedly "the given reality" as Vesley has put it. In our anxiety to reassure ourselves of our ideal of democratic purity, the "dark history" that we have not acknowledged and often destroyed, is perhaps the very history that should provide the point of departure for establishing communal structure and urban form that is deeply human and abiding. The environmental situations that reformers have found so shameful have in many ways not been understood for what they embody in terms of human culture, and what they may be covertly suggesting as paradigms for building an authentic communal landscape. Not having been closely read, these situations are therefore not able to be rewritten.

Indeed, what has sprung authentically from within — regardless of its perceived social value — must be regarded as a great opportunity rather than pathology. Disturbances in the environmental fabric or events that resist or reinterpret the status quo are often expressions of root creativity: they open up the possibility for building a self-sustaining community. Sometimes they are pragmatic, informal, and intuitive — built responses in the environment to human needs for shelter, self-expression and neighborly affiliation. Sometimes they are accidents of conjunction, where disassociated urban systems collide forming environmental situations that permit complex and original patterns of inhabitation. And sometimes, they are the very patterns of decomposition which, having undermined the external order, have begun almost invisibly to rewrite the neighborhood text. Together these may provide a matrix for acting knowingly upon the environment. These conditions also support environmental latency, such that unanticipated uses and meaning can accrue over time.[8]

PATTERNS AT THE EDGE: THE BEGINNING OF PLACE-IDENTITY

Sam Bass Warner's acute observation that in North Philadelphia — unlike the similarly working class South Philadelphia — the lack of geographic limits has contributed to its vulnerability to decay. Although it has been argued that institutionalized racism was the more powerful determinant of environmental quality,[9] the notion of place identification through its physical edge conditions is still valid and an important point of investigation. It is interesting to note that the most entrenched decay in Philadelphia has occurred where the grid had been most able to expand without interruption by, or engagement with the natural geographic features. This occurs significantly at the center of North Philadelphia, miles from the defining edges of river front and distinct topographical conditions that have sustained other neighborhoods in the city (See Figure 3a).

But new edges derived from man-made geography are clearly evolving — edges that would help to differentiate and give a sense of place to the congested and seemingly boundless center. These are occurring at the sites of acute postindustrial decay, and suggest opportunities for regeneration that can be woven into the residual order of the past. One such opportunity occurs along the path of the massive freight and passenger rail system that penetrates the heart of North Philadelphia. Its presence is striking as an interruption in the regular and orthogonal urban morphology. Although constructed roughly within the same time frame, the residential grid and the sweeping rail pattern functioned with virtually autonomy did not seek to reconcile their ruthless juxtaposition. The major rail system cut a broad swath through the grid, typically flanked by a wide ribbon of industry and parallel service roads, such that the overall disruption to the fabric was and is significant. The harsh collision of the two systems notwithstanding, during the heyday of the American Industrial period these corridors were what Kevin Lynch would refer to as "seams,"[10] as they housed the workplaces for the local citizenry. The intersecting residential streets fed into this corridor, allowing conduits to the factories. Often a row of properties across would orient to the industrial-rail geometry, creating a weak but significant gesture of frontality and a pattern of odd lot shapes and non-orthogonal street intersections.

As industry left the area great hulks of concrete and masonry were left standing vacant, awaiting condemnation as they posed greater and greater hazards to the community. Their demolition, met with despair to the many for whom economic growth is the sole measure of the continued viability of urban life. But several spontaneous patterns of positive inhabitation have occurred as this edge has physically decomposed, creating the spatial definition so necessary in place-making. The clearing of vast parcels of land for health and safety of the adjacent neighborhoods has created the beginnings of a continuous spine of open space that, if preserved and improved, could substantially change the livability of the buried interior neighborhoods of North Philadelphia, and would certainly increase the economic value of the housing. Even unimproved, the presence of open space relieves frightening monotony, opens the cloying internal focus, making imaginable avenues of connection to a larger system.

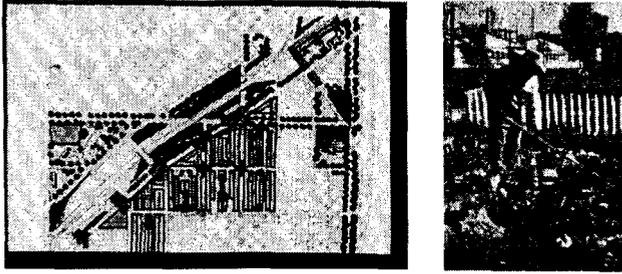A testament to the archetypal, evocative power of large

Fig. 4 a and b. Transformation of abandoned railway corridor to greenway.

continuous open space, is the concerted community claim that has been brought to bear on these sites. Former industrial sites directly facing homes along the rail corridor have inspired acts of collective grassroots enterprise. A series of non-regulation but eminently useable playing fields now occupy space once owned by manufactures. In a compelling example of collective re-appropriation, a major six acre parcel was claimed and transformed from its current use as a dumping ground into one hundred community gardening plots, that have become a focus of sustained community activity for the adjacent neighborhood. This reinvention of part of the spatial system of the industrial era, has generated a subsequent layer of finer grain response. Across the street, residents have taken advantage of the circumstance of geometric irregularity in the fabric: residual residential side yards have become semi-public spaces housing a seasonal neighborhood cafe; triangular inter sections have become visible intersection for selling fruits and vegetables grown in the garden; a home daycare facing the garden uses one "gardening plot" for play and environmental learning.

CONNECTIVE PATTERNS: THRESHOLDS AND SPACES OF EXPRESSION

Broad Street, the city's main civic artery is another major element of the urban structure that is now poised to be reinterpreted in a postindustrial context — that is of defining, identifying and integrating a sense of community within a larger civic order. Broad Street, perhaps concrete and "imageable" in the pre-industrial period, when it was limited to a several blocks north and south of City Hall, was never fully developed as an urban element. It was weakened by its rapid, premature and boundless extension — especially northward. From its central point downtown, it now races through North Philadelphia, straight and virtually uninterrupted five miles to the city limit. Cars and buses above, subway below, it functions like an inner city transitway — as a movement diagram more than an urban street. Dedicated to seamless fast moving traffic, Broad Street has become functionally disembodied — like the rail lines, part of an extrinsic movement system. But its form, unlike the rail pattern, is not inherently dissociative: where the curving sweep of rail-industrial cor-

ridor suggests contiguous extra-human movement that gesture outward, Broad street is an intrinsic — albeit unique — part of the urban morphology.

The opportunity exists to rewrite the text and reweave its form as a street of thresholds between neighborhood particularity and civic wholeness. Using its pattern of decay and of resilience to advantage, the communities that have lain hidden from public view, can have a place and a presence on Philadelphia's main street. Thresholds into adjacent neighborhoods can be woven through the striated urban layers, building upon the "residuum of tradition" to be found in the existing patterns of environmental resistance and decay. Behind the patched, but relatively intact facade of North Broad Street lies a fairly continuous zone of neglect, abandonment and abuse. Originally these blocks housed service structures or the second tier of large homes, all long since obsolete. This lost territory has attracted transitory elements of the ghetto economy: drug trade, prostitution, and "chop shops". More stable residential district lie beyond, but residents are forced to run the gauntlet en route between home and schools, shopping, entertainment and transportation. Those from outside the neighborhood are discouraged from ever leaving Broad Street. But, as repellent as this space in-between appears, it is eminently tractable, and typologically consistent throughout the city. When taken as a whole the several layers of space from Broad Street back into the community possess what Anderson characterizes as a high degree of "environmental latency" in terms of position in the larger fabric; of juxtaposition of vacant land and robust urban elements; and of existing and desired patterns of use by the community residents, institutions, and transients alike.

A particular threshold condition, that could be a prototype for others has begun to emerge at a location on Broad Street where are concentrated a number of institutions important to the community: the Freedom Theater, the Blue Horizon Boxing Arena, William Penn High School and others. A large lot between the theater and boxing arena opens a layered view into a ragged but richly suggestive depth of urban space. The patterns of occupancy and vacancy, of public and private ownership reveal the possibility for a modulated sequence of open spaces and new community facilities stretching deep into the neighborhood fabric, linking local churches and residential blocks to a larger urban system. A design intervention proposes a large public node on Broad Street linking not only the Freedom Theater and the Blue Horizon, but giving presence and a sense of place to William Penn High. An axis into the community gathers and redistributes pedestrian movement so that it is no longer limited to the busy and street network, engaging more directly existing community institutions; it reinterprets in positive social terms the inherent informality of those contingent spaces that now separate rather than join the neighborhood to its face on Broad Street; and it creates a public place of community expression — an eddy in the relentless flow of movement up Broad Street, out of the city.
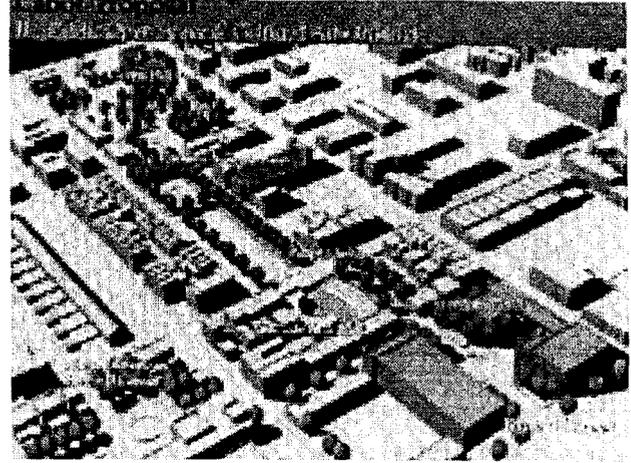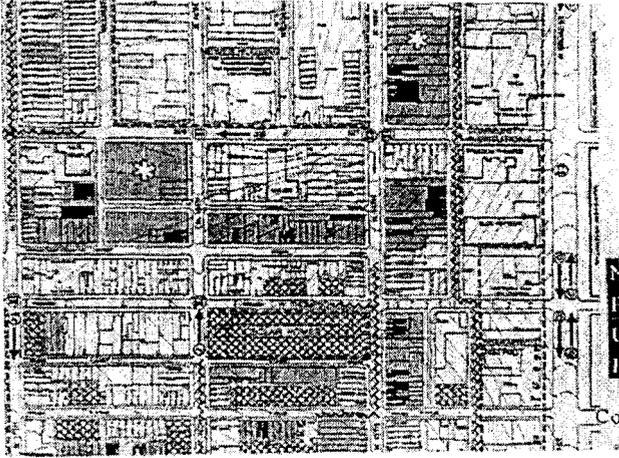
Fig. 5 a and b. Rewriting the zone between neighborhood and city: Existing and proposed

THE DWELLING PATTERN REVISED

Other patterns of renewal that emerge from "the given reality," can be found in active disturbances in the fabric that have had unintended, and frequently unseen, positive effects on neighborhood environments. At a more residential scale the intervention of the smaller branches of the rail network has created surprisingly felicitous conditions. Some blocks that have been interrupted by the diagonal path of railroad have become cul de sacs, that are well cared for intimate communities. Taking advantage of the closure and elevation differential that often occurs when the two systems meet, a street become finite, spatial and habitable. This situation can be seen also to work at other conjunctions of disassociated urban systems: where grid meets and is displaced by the topographically determined order of preindustrial routes, or where institutions with their own internal program and inertia are interposed within the street network. The walled campus of the Girard College occupies several blocks along Ridge Avenue, an ancient Indian trail now burnished into the streetscape. The order of diagonal street has served to alter the pattern of the grid, staggering its streets — *woonerf*-like —

diverting and slowing vehicular traffic, and at the bounding edge of the College forms closure, spatiality, and a sense of place in the streets that abut it. These are accidents, but they suggest that the overlay — indeed intervention — of new urban systems that may be born of a postindustrial culture may continue to enrich the fabric. The abstract grid only comes to life by its convergence with the force of another system. It is set in to work, in Heidegger's terms, by the concrete gathering of circumstance."

The drain of population from the industrial core, and the associated reduction in building density, offers an exceptional opportunity to rewrite the text of urban dwelling in a more habitable paradigm, without resorting to the suburban model of the single family detached house. Here also the residue of past orders, the accidents of juxtaposition and the spontaneous imprints of individuals on their environment can begin to suggest ways of meaningfully repatterning the spaces of dwelling, to allow them in Rossi's phrase, to be "formed with all its history."[12] Lower density of fabric provides spatial situations with more flexible relationships between built and unbuilt space. Given the change in the figure-ground rela-
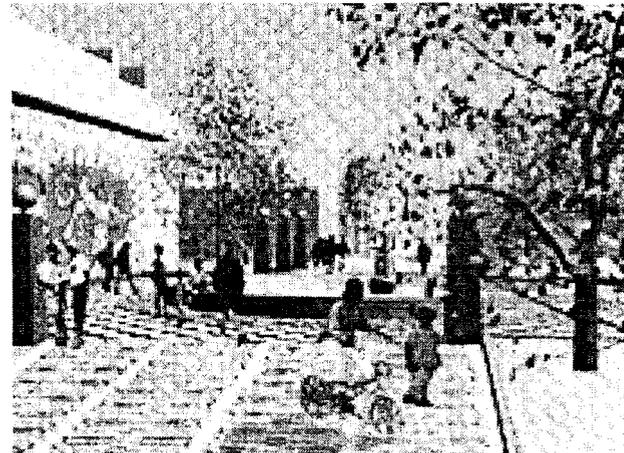

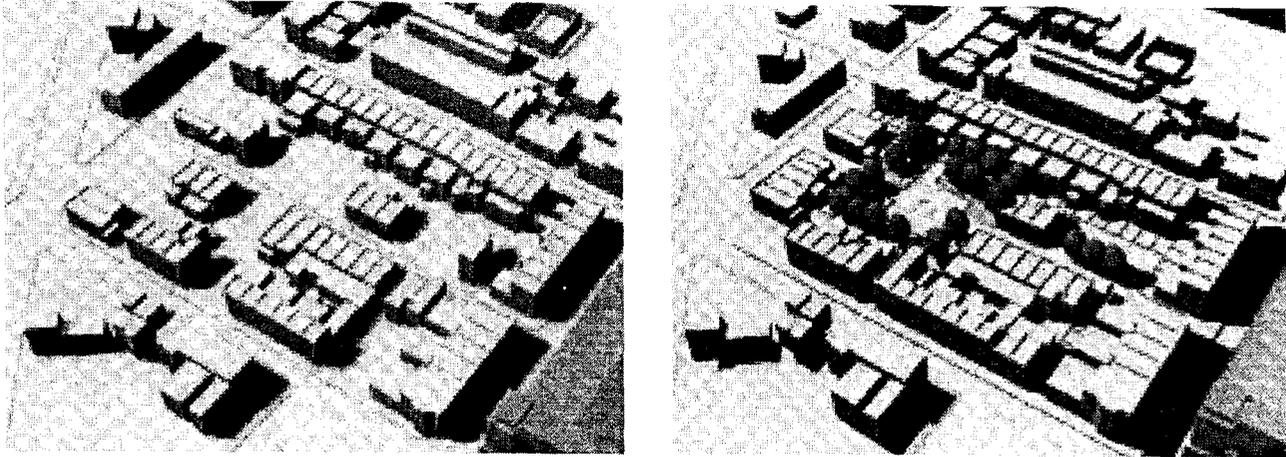Fig. 6 a and b. Threshold to neighborhood from Broad Street: Existing and proposed.

Fig. 7 a and b. New neighborhood dwelling paradigm: Two blocks rewoven as one.

tionship from the traditional order of fabric to its present state, new space types that reinterpret the old public-private paradigm can emerge. Vacant land can be selectively aggregated to form village greens that on a communal scale provide places of orientation and differentiation for the sub-neighborhood unit, often invisible within the sameness of the urban landscape.

At the scale of the home, the patterns of postindustrial culture can take root and perhaps flourish within the ruins of the industrial city. Family reorganization, that has been taking place over the last fifty years, now threatens to undermine the text and sustainability of suburban form that has been our most salable model of dwelling. Socially alienating and functionally counter-supportive, a free-standing suburban home is at pains to accommodate the multiplicity of activities, the range of inhabitants, and needs for inter-household support that is required of contemporary life. But neither does the row house type as it was built for nineteenth century family life, appeal to car-driving. yard-loving, kitchen-dwelling Americans.. The densities that occur in many decayed neighborhoods of North Philadelphia have plummeted from 50-60 dwellings per acre to a more habitable 20-25 units — still five times the density of the suburban tract housing. Yet within this decimated state of the urban fabric there remains an inherent structure of proxemics that can frame a much broader range of neighboring and intra-houshold spatial relations than in the suburban pattern — dense clustering can coexist with more open distribution of built and natural form.

Perhaps a more varied urban landscape will emerge from construction upon the repetitive cellular pattern of the bearing wall row house, using a revised version of "supports."" The cramped fourteen by thirty foot, two story row home, or its impossibly large alternative, the three story at three to four thousand square feet do not — in and of themselves — fulfill current needs for living space, outdoor space, light, flexibility and maintenance. Twins and double-width houses with large multi-lot side yards can retexture parts of neighborhoods

through selective demolition, addition, and by combining adjacent structures. A new L-shaped house type — a variant on Alexander's Pattern "The Long Thin House"[14] — can assure maximum natural light penetration and the definition and integration of outdoor space, With row house lots aggregated, expanding properties laterally, the mid-block pedestrian alleyways, now dangerously overgrown and disused except for criminal activities, can be widened. Off-street parking can be located behind the home without eroding the street edge with multiple curb-cuts. And depending on the depth of the block the mid-block parking alley can expand to accommodate other shared uses such as children's play space, and community gardens, or secondary access to rental units or in-home work space.

CONCLUSION: SECOND GROWTH

By the end of the twentieth century, and after five hundred years of occupation, the North American continent is no longer the *terraincognita.* For better or worse it has been broadly populated and developed by people from diverse and remote cultures. Manifest Destiny has been fulfilled and we must look back. The cities — artifacts of the high period of industrialization — grew, and naturally were abandoned as new technologies made yet un-built un-claimed space beyond accessible. The pattern of occupation in the suburbs, was conceptually similar to its urban counterpart, but different in scale and texture — sprawling continuous, and shallow — as the industrial city was dense, fragmented and labyrinthine. Hastily loomed, as it were, the fabric of cities (and some suburbs too) has been unable to resist the intensity and multiplicity of uses, rapid changes imposed upon them. They have given way. However, this should cease to be a source of collective anguish, but rather the situation must be recognized for what it is — a natural event in the evolution of a place. Revitalization need not take place as a restoration of the past, nor an extrinsically generated concept of reform, but as an intrinsic transformation and a remaking — a second growth that is more.

NOTES

[1] D. Vesely, *Architecture and Continuity.* (London: Architectural Association, 1982), p. 12.

[2] G. Wright, *Building the Dream, A Social History of Housing in America,* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), p. 86.

[3] S. Warner, *The Private City: Philadelphia in Three Periods of its Growth,* 2nd Ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987).

[4] Ibid., p. 53.

[5] The observation has also been made by Charles Waldheim with regard to Detroit, Michigan.

[6] C. Adams, D. Bartelt, D. Elesh, I. Goldstein, N. Kleniewski, W. Yancy, *Philadelphia: Neighborhoods, Division and Conflict in a Postindustrial City.* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), p. 11.

[7] N. Lemann, "The Myth of Community Development," in *The New York Times Magazine.* 1:9:1994.

[8] S. Anderson, "People in the Physical Environment," in *On Streets.* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986).

[9] C. Adam, et al., Op. Cit.

[10] K. Lynch, *Image of the City.* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), p. 65

[11] M. Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling Thinking", in *Poetry Language, Thought.* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1971).

[12] A. Rossi, *The Architecture of the City.* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982).

[13] N J. Habraken, *Supports. An Alternative to Mass Housing.* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972). Translation: B. Valkenburg.

[14] C. Alexander, et al., *A Pattern Language, Towns, Buildings, Construction.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 535-537.

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