Urban Renewal and the Struggles of Gentrification in Fishtown, PA

Samantha Kupersmith
Lehigh University

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This essay discusses the history and current state of the post-industrial region of Fishtown, Philadelphia. This area was over-ridden by trash, crime, and abandoned buildings, but, with the help of the New Kensington Community Development Corporation (NKCDC) and the City of Philadelphia, it has been transformed into a vibrant hub for arts, culture, and culinary wonders. Vacant lots were cleaned and transformed into a vibrant hub for arts, culture, and culinary wonders. The city of Philadelphia has experienced a rebirth over the last decade. It has been the home to much new development and an overwhelming amount of revitalization in run-down areas. It was ranked 3rd in the New York Times list of the top fifty-two cities to visit in the world this year. Although Philadelphia’s new title as a “hot city” cannot be pinpointed to one project, an immense amount of the new development has occurred on the east end of the city in neighborhoods such as Fishtown and Kensington. At the end of the 20th century, this area of Philadelphia was struggling with vacant, dilapidated, and even dangerous properties that perpetuated crime, drugs, and violence. With the help of the New Kensington Community Development Corporation (NKCDC) and the City of Philadelphia, this area was given new life. Fishtown and Kensington are now thriving neighborhoods for the arts, culture, and a new generation of “young and hip” millennials.

The areas of Fishtown and Kensington are located in East Philadelphia along the Delaware River. The area is bounded by Front Street to the west and an Amtrak Railroad to the north. This has been a prominent area of Philadelphia since the 1730s due to its proximity to the Delaware River. The name Fishtown originated from the shad fishing industry that began there, as well as the shipbuilding and repair industries. These industrial jobs were the beginning of a working class neighborhood that would last for decades. This was only the beginning of Fishtown and Kensington’s industrial future. Glass furnaces were erected at the end of the 1700s, which paved the way for the Industrial Revolution. By 1830, the Industrial Revolution had taken over the area. The Delaware River was lined with shipbuilding and repair businesses. More than half of Fishtown residents had jobs relating to marine fare. Through the 1800s, more and more industries came to the area. The textile industry came to Fishtown with the same force as shipbuilding. By the mid-19th century, textile factories dominated the area. In 1854, Kensington and Fishtown officially became part of the city of Philadelphia, which led to the growth and diversification of the industries in these neighborhoods. Although Fishtown and Kensington were booming at the end of 19th century, the 20th century did not bring as much success.

After The Great Depression and World War II, industry began to significantly decrease. By 1960, most of the industries in Fishtown had disappeared. The jobs dried up and vacant buildings became more common than occupied ones. This deindustrialization led to high unemployment and population loss. These factors, combined with vacant properties, caused increases in crime, violence, and squatting in the abandoned buildings. It seemed as if this area of Philadelphia was doomed until the New Kensington Community Development Corporation (NKCDC) was founded in 1985. The NKCDC was founded by a Neighborhood Advisory Committee (NAC). NACs were being set up all over Philadelphia to deal with money coming from the government and set up programs in low-income communities. Their original goal was to meet the housing needs of the community by rehabilitating vacant buildings, setting up housing programs, and assisting in energy usage. However, in 1995, they felt they needed to expand the scope of their work. They conducted a year-long planning process that brought together over 200 residents, businesses, and organizations to discuss the future of the neighborhood. This was the true beginning of the transformation of Kensington and Fishtown.

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The city of Philadelphia has experienced a rebirth over the last decade. It has been the home to much new development and an overwhelming amount of revitalization in run-down areas. It was ranked 3rd in the New York Times list of the top fifty-two cities to visit in the world this year. Although Philadelphia’s new title as a “hot city” cannot be pinpointed to one project, an immense amount of the new development has occurred on the east end of the city in neighborhoods such as Fishtown and Kensington. At the end of the 20th century, this area of Philadelphia was struggling with vacant, dilapidated, and even dangerous properties that perpetuated crime, drugs, and violence. With the help of the New Kensington Community Development Corporation (NKCDC) and the City of Philadelphia, this area was given new life. Fishtown and Kensington are now thriving neighborhoods for artistic, culinary, and musical action and home to a new generation of “young and hip” millennials. The areas of Fishtown and Kensington are located in East Philadelphia along the Delaware River. The area is bounded by Front Street to the west and an Amtrak Railroad to the north. This has been a prominent area of Philadelphia since the 1730s due to its proximity to the Delaware River. The name Fishtown originated from the shad fishing industry that began there, as well as the shipbuilding and repair industries. These industrial jobs were the beginning of a working class neighborhood that would last for decades. This was only the beginning of Fishtown and Kensington’s industrial future. Glass furnaces were erected at the end of the 1700s, which paved the way for the Industrial Revolution. By 1830, the Industrial Revolution had taken over the area. The Delaware River was lined with shipbuilding and repair businesses. More than half of Fishtown residents had jobs relating to marine fare. Through the 1800s, more and more industries came to the area. The textile industry came to Fishtown with the same force as shipbuilding. By the mid-19th century, textile factories dominated the area. In 1854, Kensington and Fishtown officially became part of the city of Philadelphia, which led to the growth and diversification of the industries in these neighborhoods. Although Fishtown and Kensington were booming at the end of 19th century, the 20th century did not bring as much success.

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Figure 1. Map of Philadelphia showing the boundaries of Fishtown

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development and community building. One of their first major improvements was the Open Space Management Program. This program was created in response to concerns about the negative impact of vacant land on the community. In 1987, they opened The Garden Center, which turned a vacant lot into a lush community green space. This marked a turning point in the revitalization of the area. Since then, “more than 300 parcels of land have been cleaned and greened, 156 lots have been transferred to homeowners as side yards, and 15 trash-strewn vacant lots have been transformed into community gardens.” This cleaning and greening of vacant lots was the first major step to completely change the ambiance of the community. The NKCDC also obtained grants to improve lighting, benches, signage, bus shelters, bike racks, and sidewalks. These improvements made Fishtown and Kensington more physically attractive, sustainable, and green. These are all qualities young professionals look for when moving to a new community.

The NKCDC also aided in immense amounts of real estate development and economic development. They kept with the theme of sustainability by rehabilitating abandoned buildings and converting many of the old factories into both market-rate and affordable housing. They aid in economic development by assisting both start-up and existing businesses find funds and available properties.

The executive director of the NKCDC, Sandy Salzman, has been at the lead of many of these major developments. When she started as Executive Director in 1998, Frankford Avenue, a prominent street in Fishtown, was desolate. Nonetheless, she decided “we were going to make it into an arts corridor. We didn’t have one gallery; there was no artist living on Frankford Avenue. We didn’t even have a coffee shop.” At the time, Salzman knew the arts neighborhood was moving north, through Philadelphia. Her options were to simply let them pass through, or embrace them. She chose to embrace them, and now Fishtown has one of the best First Fridays, a city-wide monthly celebration of arts and culture, in Philadelphia. As a Fishtown native, has been at the lead of many of these major developments. When she started as Executive Director in 1998, Frankford Avenue, a prominent street in Fishtown, was desolate. Nonetheless, she decided “we were going to make it into an arts corridor. We didn’t have one gallery; there was no artist living on Frankford Avenue. We didn’t even have a coffee shop.” At the time, Salzman knew the arts neighborhood was moving north, through Philadelphia. Her options were to simply let them pass through, or embrace them. She chose to embrace them, and now Fishtown has one of the best First Fridays, a city-wide monthly celebration of arts and culture, in Philadelphia. As a Fishtown native, Salzman held concerns that her organization’s revitalization efforts would drive out the lower income residents due to gentrification, the process of higher income tenants moving to a low-income area, driving up rent, and forcing out long time lower income residents. In order to mitigate this, she established a variety of ways to keep Fishtown an affordable place to live. The NKCDC “held workshops to teach creative types how to buy property while it was still inexpensive. They encouraged artists to renovate their buildings: put their business on the first floor, live on the second and rent the third for an extra income stream.” This brought many young low-income artists to Frankford Ave and began to change the demographics of Fishtown. Another major effort to keep Fishtown affordable was the Awesometown townhouse project. This was a mixed-income, affordable housing project with some units selling at market rate and some for half rates and subsidized by the NKCDC. These efforts by Salzman and the NKCDC limited gentrification in Fishtown and Kensington while still making it a modern and fashionable place to live.

Although the NKCDC has been at the lead of Fishtown and Kensington’s revitalization, the city of Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Horticultural Society (PHS) have also provided funds and assistance. Philadelphia’s Corridor Management Program has been a major factor in the maintenance and beautification of the main streets in Fishtown and Kensington. They provided funding to the NKCDC to hire a corridor manager who “oversees activities to make the corridor clean and safe and works to attract new businesses to the area.” The Store Front Improvement Program reimburses the owners of commercial buildings and businesses up to 50% of the costs to make storefront improvements. This is a major incentive for small business owners to improve the façade of their stores, and thus transform the corridor as a whole.

The PHS has been an enormous asset in the cleaning and greening of Fishtown and Kensington. It has been in existence since 1827 with the goal of improving the quality of life and creating a sense of community through horticulture. The PHS LandCare Program was created to address the issue of land vacancy throughout the city of Philadelphia. Through this program they come to selected vacant lots, get rid of all debris and weeds, and transform it into a green asset for community building. Fortunately, many of these selected lots have been in Fishtown and Kensington, thus making the PHS a major contributor in the transformation of the landscape in these areas.

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The makeovers of vacant lots in Fishtown and Kensington completely transformed the area from a desolate and crime-ridden postindustrial neighborhood into a green, community-oriented place to live. The NKCDC was successful in transforming vacant lots, so the next logical step was to move to vacant buildings. The first and most influential of these projects was the Coral Street Arts House (CSAH). The CSAH was formerly a textile mill that sat vacant for decades. It had become an eyesore in the community with illegal dumping and graffiti. In 2003, a $7.5 million investment was made to completely renovate the building.
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The NKCDC has been at the lead of both market-rate and affordable housing. They encouraged artists to renovate their buildings: put their business on the first floor, live on the second and rent the third for an extra income stream. This brought many young low-income artists to Frankford Ave and began to change the demographics of Fishtown. Another major effort to keep Fishtown affordable was the Awesometown townhouse project. This was a mixed-income, affordable housing project with some units selling at market rate and some for half rates and subsidized by the NKCDC. These efforts by Salzman and the NKCDC limited gentrification in Fishtown and Kensington while still making it a modern and fashionable place to live.

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The CSAH was the first step in the re-development of many of the old industrial buildings. After the success of the CSAH and greening efforts, many private developers became interested in Kensington and Fishtown. Onion Flats, a design-build architecture and development firm, was one of the first to begin a project in the neighborhood they love even as it gentrifies. Sandy Salzman of the NKCDC felt she needed to slow down the effects of gentrification by showing that there were still options for affordable housing in Fishtown and Kensington.22 To do so, she partnered the NKCDC with Post Green Homes to design Awesometown. “The mixed housing encourages people of varying socio-economic statuses to live together,” NKCDC Director of Real Estate, Kevin Gray, explains, “We think mixed-income development is the best way to promote equality in our neighborhood.” One of the goals of this project is to enable the original Fishtowners and Kensingtonians to be able to remain in the neighborhood they love even as it gentrifies.23 The Awesometown homes are also LEED Platinum certified, which make them an even better fit with the theme and ideals of the new community in Fishtown. Some of the sustainable features include permeable paving for parking lots, a green roof, and locally made cabinets in all of the kitchens.24 This use of locally made fixtures helped stimulate the local economy and made the Awesometown homes an even greater part of the community.

Following in the footsteps of the Awesometown project, is the Orinoka Civic House. This project is set in the dilapidated 19th century Orinoka textile mill. This building has served as the cover for much illegal activity and is a dangerous eyesore within the community. In October of this year, they broke ground for the new 70,000 square-foot building. It is set to contain 51 affordable homes an even greater part of the community. Some of the sustainable features include permeable paving for parking lots, a green roof, and locally made cabinets in all of the kitchens. This major project is hoped to be the anchor of future development in Kensington. It is a physical sign that a better future for a neighborhood is possible.

The previous projects were immense steps in the right direction for housing and revitalization of old industrial buildings, but one of the best signs that a community is changing is the improvement of its schools. The New Kensington Creative Performing Arts High School is just that sign. It was constructed in 2010 on what was previously an extremely contaminated brown site and hot spot for drug dealing. It now serves as the home to the first LEED Platinum certified public high school in the United States. The school is located between Fishtown (rapidly gentrifying) and South Kensington (blue collar industrial). One of the goals of the school was to help bring these communities together. Architects designed a welcoming, transparent structure that encourages community use and engages its surrounding environment to better integrate it into both communities. The LEED Platinum certification of the school is especially relevant in this neighborhood due to the NKCDC and the PHS’s city, no real transformation is possible without altering the framework for imagining and actualizing which questions, instigates a dialogue, and provokes controversy rather than merely solves problems.25 These three firms needed to work together to design a housing complex that fit in the context of Philadelphia, as well as Fishtown. They accomplished this with the conservation of the rag factory, as well as many green sustainable design elements that fall in line with the values of the new Fishtown. They have green space woven between buildings and a usable, “intensive” green roof.26 The Rag Flats sold at market-rate prices and thus furthered gentrification in the area. Nonetheless, this small project showed how rebuiding, as opposed to tearing down, can make a strong impact in a struggling community.27

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confirmed that, whether at the scale of a building or a city, no real transformation is possible without altering the framework for imagining and actualizing which opens questions, instigates a dialogue, and provokes controversy rather than merely solves problems.35 These three firms needed to work in a team forming a complex that fit in the context of Philadelphia, as well as Fishtown. They accomplished this with the conservation of the rag factory, as well as many green sustainable design elements that fall in line with the values of the new Fishtown. They have green space waven between buildings: a green roof. The Rag Flats sold at market-rate prices and thus furthered gentrification in the area. Nonetheless, this small project showed how rebuilding, as opposed to tearing down, can make a strong impact in a struggling community.36

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Following in the footsteps of the Awesometown project, is the Orinoka Civic House. This project is set in the dilapidated 19th century Orinoka textile mill. This building has served as the cover for much illegal activity and is a dangerous eyesore within the community. In October of this year, they broke ground for the new 70,000 square-foot building. It is set to contain 51 affordable residential units, retail space, a coffee shop, and the new headquarters for the NKDC.42 They want the building to be “glassy and inviting – two words that don’t describe anything about the Orinoka Mills now.”43 Salzman believes this project is going to be transformational for the revitalization of Kensington. The Orinoka building was the epitome of everything that needed to change within the community. Salzman hopes that, “This project will continue the positive momentum in Kensington. We are excited about the lasting effect Orinoka Civic House will have on the community.”44 This major project is hoped to be the anchor of future development in Kensington. It is a physical sign that a better future for a neighborhood is possible.

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Figure 4. Image of Rag Flats from Arch Daily

Figure 5. Image of Awesometown Townhomes

Figure 6. Before Orinoka Mill

Figure 7. Future rendering of Orinoka Civic House from Philly Magazine

and rehabilitate the building. The original structure was kept intact to preserve the industrial history of the area. It opened in 2005 as affordable housing with twenty-seven units of artist live-work space. Upon its opening, the new residents assimilated into the community and brought with them exhibitions, workshops, and community outreach events.45 The introduction of the arts to Frankford Ave acted as a model and catalyst (and the Coral Street Arts House has spurred rehabilitation of over 40% of the surrounding vacant industrial buildings which are undergoing renovation).46 The CSAH was the first step in the re-development of many of the old industrial buildings.

After the success of the CSAH and greening efforts, many private developers became interested in Kensington and Fishtown. Onion Flats, a design-build architect and development firm, was one of the first to begin a project in the area. They accepted the challenge of revitalizing a past industrial building, much like CSAH. They took a former rag factory and re-conceptualized it as a residential garden community created by prototypical forms of dwellings commonly found in Philadelphia: the row house, the trinity, the loft, and the pavilion.47 They used the history of housing in Philadelphia to help their row house, the trinity, the loft, and the pavilion. They assigned the “row experiments” to Minus Studios, and the custom steel work to Cover. “This team approach project had too many facets to be limited to one firm. They showed how rebuilding, as opposed to tearing down, can make a strong impact in a struggling community.48

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cleaning and greening efforts. These green ideals are implemented to the extent that the students, teachers, and staff at the New Kensington Creative Performing Arts High School are taught about sustainable living through the structure. The building itself was constructed in a U-shape to allow daylight to reach into every classroom, thereby decreasing lighting and air conditioning loads. The U-shape also wraps around a small garden area for classes and horticultural projects. Additionally, the building plan was arranged to promote community living and supports maximum community use. All communal spaces, such as the cafeteria, gymnasium, and auditorium, function as independent structures so they can be accessed after hours. The New Kensington Creative Performing Arts High School has become a major asset to the community and proof that “even deteriorated urban landscapes can be revitalized to become sources of hope for the future.”

The success of the various housing projects resulted in not only a nationally significant school, but also immense amounts of economic development. With the funding assistance of the Corridor Management Program, many new businesses have come to Fishtown in the last ten years. The most monumental feat was the ability to support restaurants and create neighborhoods that are in need of revitalization. There are dozens of run-down neighborhoods surrounding Center City, Philadelphia, that are in need of revitalization. Fishtown is the perfect example of one that has made immense progress. Economist Kevin Gillen described Fishtown as “Philadelphia’s poster boy for revitalization of a formerly working-class neighborhood by educated and creative-class millennials.”

Although this revitalization after the post-industrial decline sounds like a positive for urban development, it has had negative impacts on the original residents of Fishtown and Kensington. With the influx of younger, wealthier people comes an increase in price of home ownership, taxes, and overall cost of living. In 2000, the median price for housing in Fishtown was $40,000. The median price was up to $210,000 in 2013. Many longtime residents fear they will not be able to keep up with the rising prices and will be forced to move elsewhere. This raises the issue of displacement. If all the lower class neighborhoods become gentrified, where will their original lower-income residents go? Gentrification presents a major problem of balance for the city of Philadelphia. Despite concerns over gentrification, the city can’t afford to slow development. So, it must find ways to encourage growth while protecting long-term homeowners and creating neighborhoods that are economically and racially diverse.

Social strain has been another result of gentrification. The Irish, Polish, and German blue-collar residents of Fishtown and Kensington have lived there for generations. These groups have long been relatively homogeneous. Despite gentrification, the city’s original working-class residents. Mixed housing mitigates gentrification and defined themselves as communities based on principles of green, diverse, and community-oriented living.

Fishtown’s transition to a destination has not come without the growing pains of gentrification. Gentrification is an epidemic sweeping across Philadelphia. It is a phenomenon that has captured the attention of academics and planners. This movement is occurring in many cities and goes by many names; “the back-to-the-city movement,” “urban renaissance,” and “neighborhood revitalization” are just a few. The dictionary definition of gentrification is as follows: “the process of renewal and rebuilding of decaying urban areas.” In Philadelphia in particular, this has been a hot topic for the recent development movement. There are spaces dedicated to the creation of areas that once were crime-ridden and decrepit. The influx of middle-class or affluent people into deteriorating areas that often displaces poorer residents. Philadelphia in particular has been a hotbed for this recent movement.

There are several different types of gentrification, including the following:

1. **Residential Gentrification:** This type of gentrification involves the replacement of lower-income residents with higher-income residents. This can occur through the purchase or rental of homes, the renovation of older homes, or the construction of new homes.

2. **Commercial Gentrification:** This type of gentrification involves the replacement of lower-income businesses with higher-income businesses. This can occur through the replacement of existing businesses with new businesses, the renovation of commercial spaces, or the construction of new commercial spaces.

3. **Cultural Gentrification:** This type of gentrification involves the replacement of lower-income people with higher-income people who are interested in preserving and promoting local culture. This can occur through the purchase or rental of homes, the renovation of commercial spaces, or the construction of new public spaces.

Despite the negative impacts on the original residents of Kensington and Fishtown, gentrification has changed these postindustrial, dilapidated areas into a thriving hub for artistic, culinary, and musical action. Renovating an area will always force the prices to go up, but that should never be an excuse to leave it as it is, especially when the current state is crime-ridden and decrepit. The NKCCD has made every effort to make Fishtown a place where both new residents are encouraged to join the community, and older residents are encouraged to stay. Through mixed affordable and market-rate housing they are promoting people of all incomes and socio-economic statuses to live in Fishtown. Mixed housing mitigates gentrification, while still reviving and redeveloping the community. This notion of a diverse community falls in line with urban renewal ideals that have been in effect since the United States was desegregated in the 1950s. Cookie-cutter homes and the nuclear working class family are things of the past.

The values of green space and sustainability are also worldwide trends. Cities as large as Barcelona and Paris follow this model and pride themselves on their parks and green spaces. Urban development is moving away from segregated and dense urban landscapes toward diversity and sustainability. Fishtown and Kensington have served as model communities for the future redevelopment of post-industrial towns. They battled against gentrification and redefined themselves as communities based on principles of green, diverse, and community-oriented living.
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There are now many upscale restaurants and beer gardens. The most notable include Frankford Hall, The Pickled Heron, Pizza Brain, Little Baby’s Ice Cream Shop, and La Colombe. These are names of restaurants and beer gardens. The most notable include Frankford Hall, The Pickled Heron, Pizza Brain, Little Baby’s Ice Cream Shop, and La Colombe. These are names that are known throughout Philadelphia and have made the city’s reputation as a center for food and drink. There are names of places that are known throughout Philadelphia and have made the city’s reputation as a center for food and drink. There are names of places that are known throughout Philadelphia and have made the city’s reputation as a center for food and drink. There are names of places that are known throughout Philadelphia and have made the city’s reputation as a center for food and drink. There are names of places that are known throughout Philadelphia and have made the city’s reputation as a center for food and drink.  

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The success of the various housing projects resulted in not only a nationally significant school, but also immense amounts of economic development. With the funding assistance of the Corridor Management Program, many areas that often displaces poorer residents.” Philadelphia in particular has been a hotspot for this recent movement. There are dozens of run-down neighborhoods surrounding Center City, Philadelphia, that are in need of revitalization. Fishtown is the perfect example of one that has made immense progress. Economist Kevin Gilien described Fishtown as “Philadelphia’s poster boy for revitalization of a formerly working-class neighborhood by educated and creative-class millennials.” Although this revitalization after the post-industrial decline sounds like a positive for urban development, it has had negative impacts on the original residents of Fishtown and Kensington. With the influx of younger, wealthier people comes an increase in price of home ownership, taxes, and overall cost of living. In 2000, the median price for housing in Fishtown was $40,000. The median price was up to $210,000 in 2013. Many longtime residents fear they will not be able to keep up with the rising prices and will be forced to move elsewhere. This raises the issue of displacement. If all the lower class neighborhoods become gentrified, where will their original lower-income residents go? Gentrification presents a major problem of balance for the city of Philadelphia. Despite concerns over gentrification, the city can’t afford to slow development. So, it must find ways to encourage growth while protecting long-term homeowners and creating neighborhoods that are economically and racially diverse. Social strain has been another result of gentrification. The Irish, Polish, and German blue-collar residents of Fishtown and Kensington have lived there for generations. It feels unjust that they are being forced out of homes they have lived in for decades at no fault of their own. This has resulted in an “antagonistic dynamic between original residents and new-comers.” There is bound to be tension when a new group impedes on an older group’s territory, especially when they are as different as young creative professionals versus old-time, European blue-collar workers. One native Fishtowner, Bill Francisco, expressed that he accepts the newcomers who show respect for the histories, traditions, and values of Fishtown’s original working-class residents. However, by completely changing the landscape of Fishtown and Kensington, the identity of these areas has changed, making the original residents hostile to the new people and the changes they brought with them. Despite the negative impacts on the original residents of Kensington and Fishtown, gentrification has changed these postindustrial, dilapidated areas into a thriving hub for artistic, culinary, and musical action. Renovating an area will always force the prices to go up, but that should never be an excuse to leave it as is, especially when the current state is crime-ridden and decrepit. The NKCCCD has made every effort to make Fishtown a place where both new residents are encouraged to join the community, and older residents are encouraged to stay. Through mixed affordable and market-rate housing they are promoting people of all incomes and socio-economic statuses to live in Fishtown. Mixed housing mitigates gentrification, while still reviving and redeveloping the community. This notion of a diverse community falls in line with urban renewal ideas that have been in effect since the United States was desegregated in the 1950s. Cookie-cutter homes and the nuclear working class family are things of the past.  

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