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Urban Renewal and the Struggles of Gentrification in Fishtown, Philadelphia

Samantha Kupersmith

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 greened, desolate old warehouses were turned into trendy urban housing projects, and the community worked to bring in new businesses. However, with this incredible transformation came the effects of gentrification. Original residents struggled to mesh with the new community and keep up with rising prices. Through the immense efforts of the NKCDC and the community solutions were developed to mitigate gentrification and retain Fishtown’s historic character while still continuing its transformation into a new hot spot of Philadelphia.

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.

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.

The majority of the efforts that contributed to this transformation have been spearheaded by the NKCDC. Their mission statement proclaims their goal: “to strengthen the physical, social, and economic fabric of the community by being a catalyst for sustainable development.” Their main area of focus has been the post-industrial region of Fishtown, Philadelphia. This area was given new life through the immense efforts of the NKCDC and 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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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 new hot spot of Philadelphia.

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The majority of the efforts that contributed to this transformation have been spearheaded by the NKCDC. Their mission statement proclaims their goal: “to strengthen the physical, social, and economic fabric of the community by being a catalyst for sustainable development into a new hot spot of Philadelphia.” 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 new hot spot of Philadelphia.
Figure 2. Aerial view of Fishtown showing ample green space

The executive director of the NKCDC, Sandy Salzman, a fourth generation Fishtowner, 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 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 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 Kensignton 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.

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 executive director of the NKCDC, Sandy Salzman, a fourth generation Fishtowner, 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.”12 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.13 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.14 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.15 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 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.” The CAH was the first step in the re-development of many of the old industrial buildings.

After the success of the CAH 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 area. They formed the challenge of revitalizing a past industrial building, much like CAH. 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.” They used the history of housing in Philadelphia to help their project fit in the context while still being unique. This history of housing helped to slow down the effects of gentrification by showing that there were still options for affordable housing in Fishtown and Kensington. To do so, she partnered the NCDC with Post Green Homes to design Awesometown. The NCDC wanted to put in place a structure that calmed the rising home prices and could work to keep Fishtown the family oriented, working class neighborhood it was for years, while still indulging in the excitement and vibrancy that comes with new investment. The vacant land for this project was donated by the city and used to be home to a chemical plant. This was the first project of mixed affordable housing in the area. It has a total of fourteen units. Ten are selling at the market rate of $370,000 for two-bedroom units and the other four are subsidized by the NKCDC to sell for half price. This 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. 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. 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 residential units, retail space, a coffee shop, and the new headquarters for the NKCDC. They want the building to be “glassy and inviting — two words that don’t describe anything about the Orinoka Mills now.” 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.” 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. 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:“a useful, ‘intensive’ green roof.” The Rag Flats sold at market-rate prices and thus furthered gentrification in the area. Nonetheless, this small project showed how rebuidling, as opposed to tearing down, can make a strong impact in a struggling community.

With the population rising and the economy rapidly improving, 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. To do so, she partnered the NCDC with Post Green Homes to design Awesometown. The NCDC wanted to put in place a structure that calmed the rising home prices and could work to keep Fishtown the family oriented, working class neighborhood it was for years, while still indulging in the excitement and vibrancy that comes with new investment. The vacant land for this project was donated by the city and used to be home to a chemical plant. This was the first project of mixed affordable housing in the area. It has a total of fourteen units. Ten are selling at the market rate of about $400,000, and the other four are subsidized by the NCDC, to sell for half price. This 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. 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. This use of locally made fixtures helped stimulate the local economy and made the Awesometown homes an even greater part of the community.

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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 an “antagonistic dynamic between the community 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 of 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 and resisted gentrification and redefined 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 run-down 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 Gilllen 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 of 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 NKCDC 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 revitalizing 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.

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.