



FINAL WORD

BY JAMES WRIGHT

Leveraging History to Revitalize Community



For nearly two decades, old urban centers like Philadelphia have been undergoing a process of revitalization. Multiple forces drive that movement, which is occurring throughout the city, at different scales and in a variety of geographic

and demographic contexts. This variety makes the renewal process so intriguing and rich with possibilities.

From my own community development perspective, I can attest that a more authentic form of revitalization occurs when development is driven by residents and leverages existing community assets. The resurgence of Lancaster Avenue is a prime example. The commercial corridor and surrounding neighborhood have achieved positive and, more importantly, sustainable change by bringing the community together and drawing on residents' knowledge, skills, shared histories and lived experiences. When residents see equity as the product of our work together, they develop a more positive outlook toward the process of change. Certainly urban development should involve attracting new capacity and creating new assets to support local economies. Still, high-quality neighborhoods result from strategies that not only make residents fully aware of their ownership in both the community and its development, but also lend them the capacity to act on that awareness in a positive way.

At People's Emergency Center (PEC), where I work, historic preservation plays a significant role in an

asset-based approach to urban revitalization. A key point of PEC's redevelopment strategy is to highlight landmarks that have significance to the community. For instance, the architectural beauty of the West Philadelphia Title and Trust Building was obscured until PEC worked with the community and building owner to remove a 40-foot billboard and 26 signs, repoint the brick, and clean up the façade. Now the magnificent building has become a point of neighborhood pride. People even take selfies in front of it.

Refurbished icons like West Philadelphia Title and Trust then take on further meaning as backdrops to iconic moments in history. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his historic "Freedom Now" speech at the intersection of 40th and Lancaster in 1965, now commemorated by a bust, mural and historic marker right across the street from the old bank building.

Cities like Philadelphia are layered and multi-faceted. The compelling history of a neighborhood's waves of settlement, its industries and changing modes of transportation provide the undergirding assets for revitalization. Long-time residents reinvigorate with pride when they see the opportunity to take part in that community's renewal, while a younger generation, living and working in urban communities for the first time, is attracted to the character of historic structures such as train stations, churches, town halls, old banks, even warehouses.

Storefront maintenance, however, has not always kept in step with the resurgence of neighborhoods. Many of the buildings along Philadelphia's most historic commercial corridors still house active retail stores, some of them legacy or long-time family businesses, but the storefronts are in disrepair. Older businesses have

limited resources to invest and keep their storefronts pristine. Newer businesses often implement inappropriate designs or quick fixes that ignore the history or character of that particular corridor. The few businesses that show some design consciousness often only apply good design to the first-floor level of the storefronts, leaving the rest of the building in shabby condition. The City of Philadelphia Department of Commerce has been a strong advocate for proper storefront renovation. Their Storefront Improvement Program (SIP) has been a tremendous help to businesses that want to improve their storefront in a high-quality fashion.

For business owners along Lancaster Avenue that have participated in SIP, like Pearl Bailey Anderson, of La Pearl Beauty Emporium at 3857 Lancaster Avenue, the renovations have enhanced their reputation, drawn new customers and increased sales. Her work inspired adjacent property owners to renovate their façades as well in a way that was historically sensitive. As a form of community reinvestment that recognizes and leverages a neighborhood's history and style, the SIP plays a key role in asset-based community redevelopment.

The resurgence of Lancaster Avenue demonstrates the exciting potential of resident-driven, asset-based revitalization. I am proud that our approach, now led by our new Corridor Manager Brad Vassallo, serves as an inspiration and role model for other communities and commercial corridors within Philadelphia and across the country. ■

James Wright is the director of community, economic, and real estate development at the People's Emergency Center CDC (PECCDC). James has 15 years of experience in neighborhood planning, economic and real estate development, and galvanizing multiple stakeholders to leverage community assets, specifically business corridors.

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