

# Hindsight

*Philadelphia, 1986-1992*

Brian C. Moss: Hindsight

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above: satellite view of the Philadelphia region and city border, 2024

left: illustrated map of the Philadelphia region when known as Coaquannock, "Grove of Tall Pines," and as First Seen by the White Men, 1934  
image credit: The Philadelphia City Planning Commission



aerial view of the devastation caused by the MOVE fire of May 13, 1985  
image credit: [The Philadelphia Inquirer](#) and Temple University Urban Archives

## Prologue

In May of 1985, a year after we finished art school, my best friend and I were still living in the Olney section of the city when the Philadelphia police decided it was a good idea to drop an explosive device onto a row home in West Philadelphia during an extended period of drought. The bomb was intended to force the people in the house to MOVE (pardon the pun). We watched all night on TV in astonishment as the police and fire department let the blaze burn out of control, eventually destroying three rows of houses on either side of the street and alley. In addition to the targeted structure where eleven people were killed (including five children), sixty other homes were destroyed.

Earlier that year, my girlfriend had been diagnosed with stage 4 Hodgkin's Disease, cancer of the lymph nodes. Later that year, my mother's father would die of cancer at the age of 76.

After my best friend and roommate moved to San Francisco that summer so he could better enjoy the pleasures and privileges of being a gay man finally out of the closet (he already had HIV, but wouldn't find out for a while), I moved into a three-story, four-bedroom row home in Manayunk with my girlfriend and two other friends from school. Rent was \$375 a month and I had a job at the Navy Yard in South Philadelphia as an electronics apprentice in Fire Control. I quit after nine months and started working as a lunch delivery boy for minimum wage (around \$3.30 an hour) plus tips at a little takeout restaurant in East Falls.

In February of 1986, my father gave me his old Rolleiflex twin-lens medium-format camera that had probably been sitting in a closet since the 1960's. These are some of the images I made...















**RAILROAD AND INDUSTRIAL  
LAND USE - 1956**

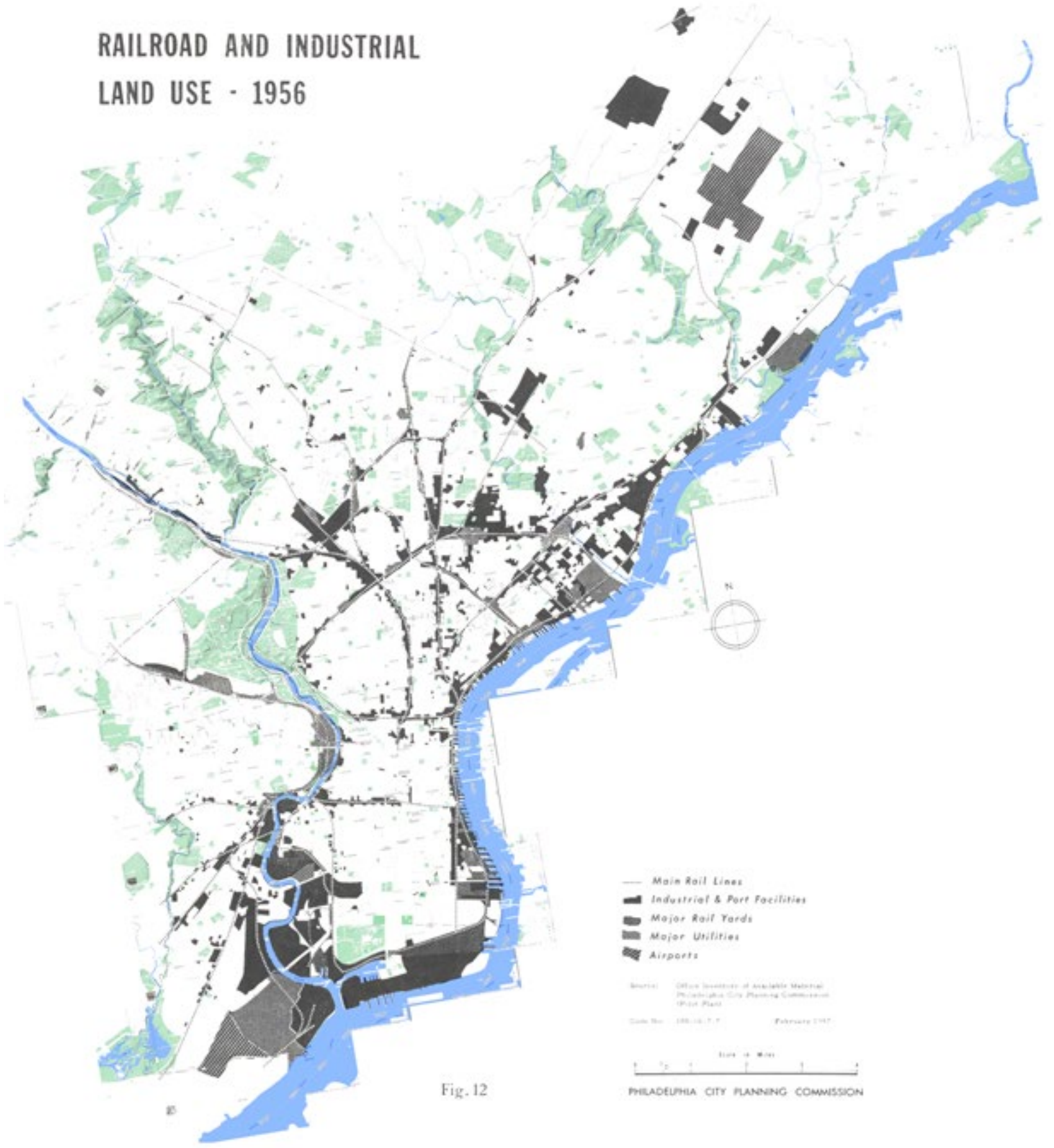


Fig. 12

















Barnes' New Map of the Consolidated City of Philadelphia, 1855

### *History, memory and ruins*

Growing up in Philadelphia, history was inescapable. School trips to Betsy Ross's house, the Liberty Bell (back when it was still in its tower at Independence Hall), The Franklin Institute (with the walk-in Giant Heart), Valley Forge. Blue and yellow (our state colors) signs marking where George Washington slept were ubiquitous. This was U.S. history, revolutionary history, and the local pride that comes with it. That all happened long before my family came here, though in a very real way it was one of the reasons why. Our history was different, but the promises of assimilation were great, so the national origin stories became part of ours. As I have aged, my own history (filtered through [faulty?] memory) is layered on top of this. Other disjunctions come into play: white (and Jewish) flight, gentrification, who can live where and why, what gets saved and who decides.

Construction on the house I lived in until 1980 was completed just before I was born in 1962. A suburban split-level just inside the city boundary in the Far Northeast, the new development was called 'Golden Gate.' My mother's father helped my parents buy the place for what seems like nothing today. The price was \$21,000 and the interest rate on their mortgage was around four percent. My father left before my second birthday and my twenty-five year-old mother went back to college to finish her teaching degree so she could better support the two of us. Like me, she was an only child and married my father in part to get away from her stepmother.

Before her marriage, she lived in a house her father had built in Elkins Park before her mother died in 1953. While my mother went to night school at Temple University, I spent a lot of time at that house. It was less than a mile from where I went to art school in 1980, though he and my grandmother moved to a small Atlantic City condo in 1976. My grandfather's handiwork was evident in our home too and I recall as a child going to "help" him work on a rental property he owned in Conshohocken, the small town about five miles west of Philadelphia where my mother had grown up.

Without researching the Montgomery County property records in person, I have no way of knowing what it cost to buy the land in Elkins Park and build from nothing back then. That information is mostly too old for the internet to provide, though a real estate website lists enough data to jolt my memory. Details like 'Number of stories: 2,' 'Total room count: 7,' 'Bedrooms: 3,' and 'Bathrooms: 3' bring vivid details to my mind. Two bathrooms were upstairs, and the third was on the first floor between the kitchen and the living

room. It was next to the door to the backyard where my grandfather tended his fruit trees and built the electric go-cart that my cousin and I drove in the wrap-around driveway. The precise square footage (704) of the basement where I used to watch my grandfather tinker in his workshop must somehow coexist with the certainty that the house could not have been built in 1940 because my mother was born the year before that and lived in Conshohocken until she was at least 10 years old.

What does all this have to do with my photographs? At least as much as living among the ruins of Rome during my junior year abroad in college. When I was a child, I could never understand how so much of Philadelphia had fallen into such a state of disrepair. In some ways I still can't, though I've learned a lot more about poverty and wealth and their relationships to neighborhoods and jobs. I do remember taking the train into Center City and watching as the landscape transitioned, becoming less green and more industrial, the quantity and extravagance of the graffiti increasing until it gradually dissipated before arriving downtown at Reading Terminal.

My desire and interest in exploring abandoned places stems from personal, as well as formal motivations. I was never the kind of person who would photograph people I didn't know and being alone always felt normal anyway. Wandering around places by myself started in the woods behind my house when I was very young. This was my first experience with exploration and I certainly developed a taste for it. As a boy, this was acceptable; the vast majority of significant world explorers were men, of course. My latchkey childhood was certainly different than my mother's. She was a child of the Depression and protected enough as a girl to never learn how to ride a bicycle. It took a long time before I began to understand the concept of mobility as gendered!

What gets saved can be happenstance, as much as the reasoning or political clout of various preservation societies. Can history also be about what gets torn down, what gets forgotten, what cannot be retrieved? I was taught history mostly as patriotic indoctrination: my basketball team is the 76ers! Awareness of this history is built-in, but it affects everyone's world view differently. American history is valuable, but what drew me to these places was their loss of value. All that effort to build them and keep them up, all the memories and experiences of the people who lived or worked there: where had it all gone?



Midvale Heppenstall Company, Nicetown  
closed 1976 / demolished 1980's  
photographed 1987, 1988





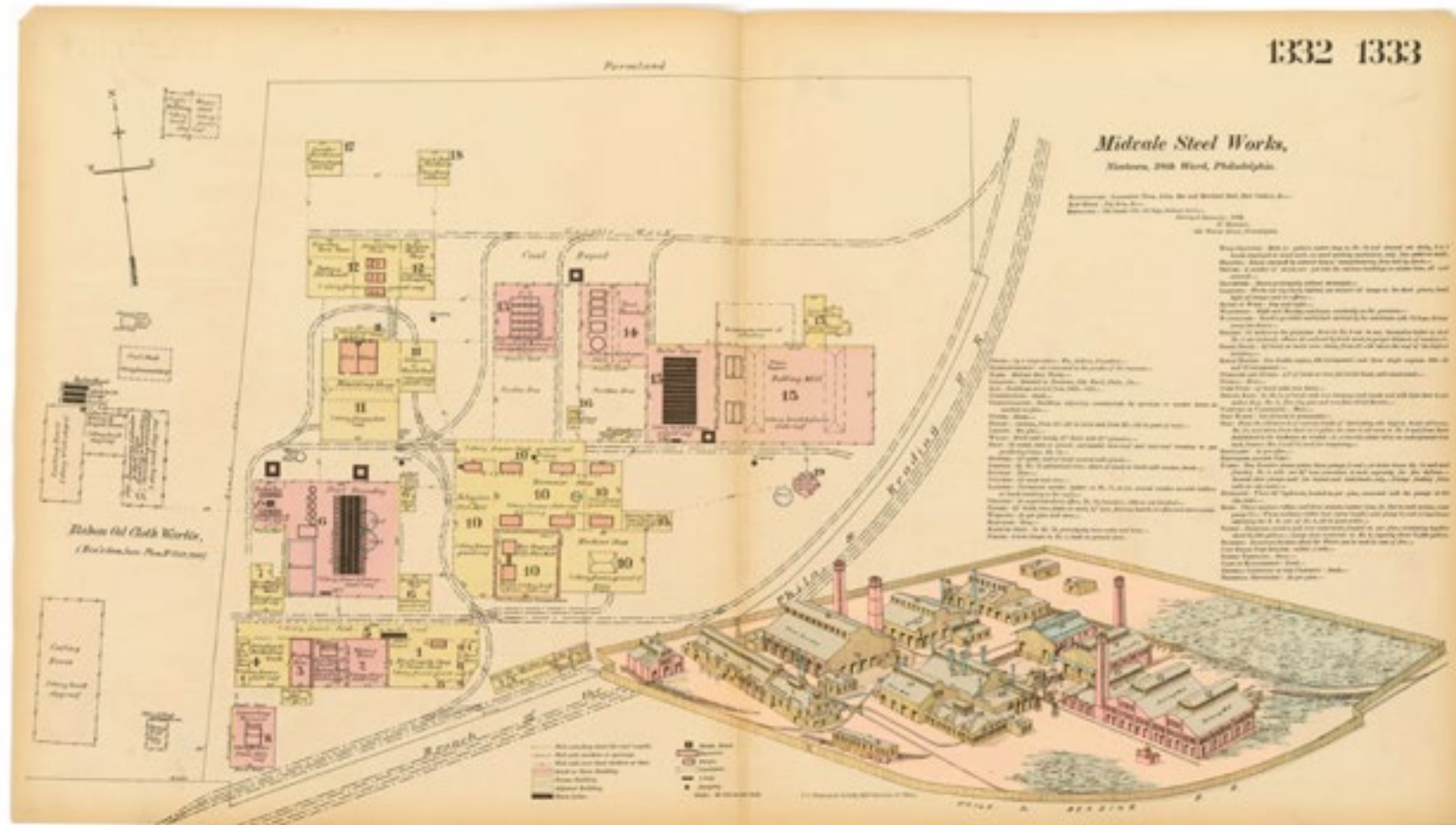












Midvale Steel Works Aerial View, 1879

image credit: *The Hexamer General Survey* of illustrations of industrial and commercial buildings and properties from the greater Philadelphia area

When I was a child, we used to pass this factory from two very different vantage points. It was on the right side of the train on the West Trenton line into Center City, just past Wayne Junction. This was one stop past Elkins Park and two stops after Wyncote where my father's parents lived. My father's father rode that same line to work downtown every day for most of my life. So did I during the summer of 1979 when I worked at his camera store.

You could also look down at the buildings from the Roosevelt Boulevard Extension which we took into the city. The elevated roadway towered some 75-100 feet over the train tracks and the factory below, which was established in 1867 by William Butcher and became the Midvale Steel Works in 1871 or 1872. Strangely enough, Frederick Winslow Taylor worked there from 1878 to 1890. When I was a grad student at CalArts, I remember Allan Sekula lecturing about him. Taylor was the originator of "the efficient management of work-related time" (known as Taylorism) and stressed piecework production. His method was based on "an elaborate system of time studies to determine precisely how" long a worker should take to finish a task and pay him based on his efficiency.

The factory closed during the Bicentennial celebration year just before I started attending high school nearby. It was also very close to a bar where the father of my mother's boyfriend worked. Because he taught acting at a college a block from

my high school, we would sometimes go to the bar after theater performances. Someone would order me a ginger ale from the tap which I would sip all evening while playing the shuffleboard bowling machine!

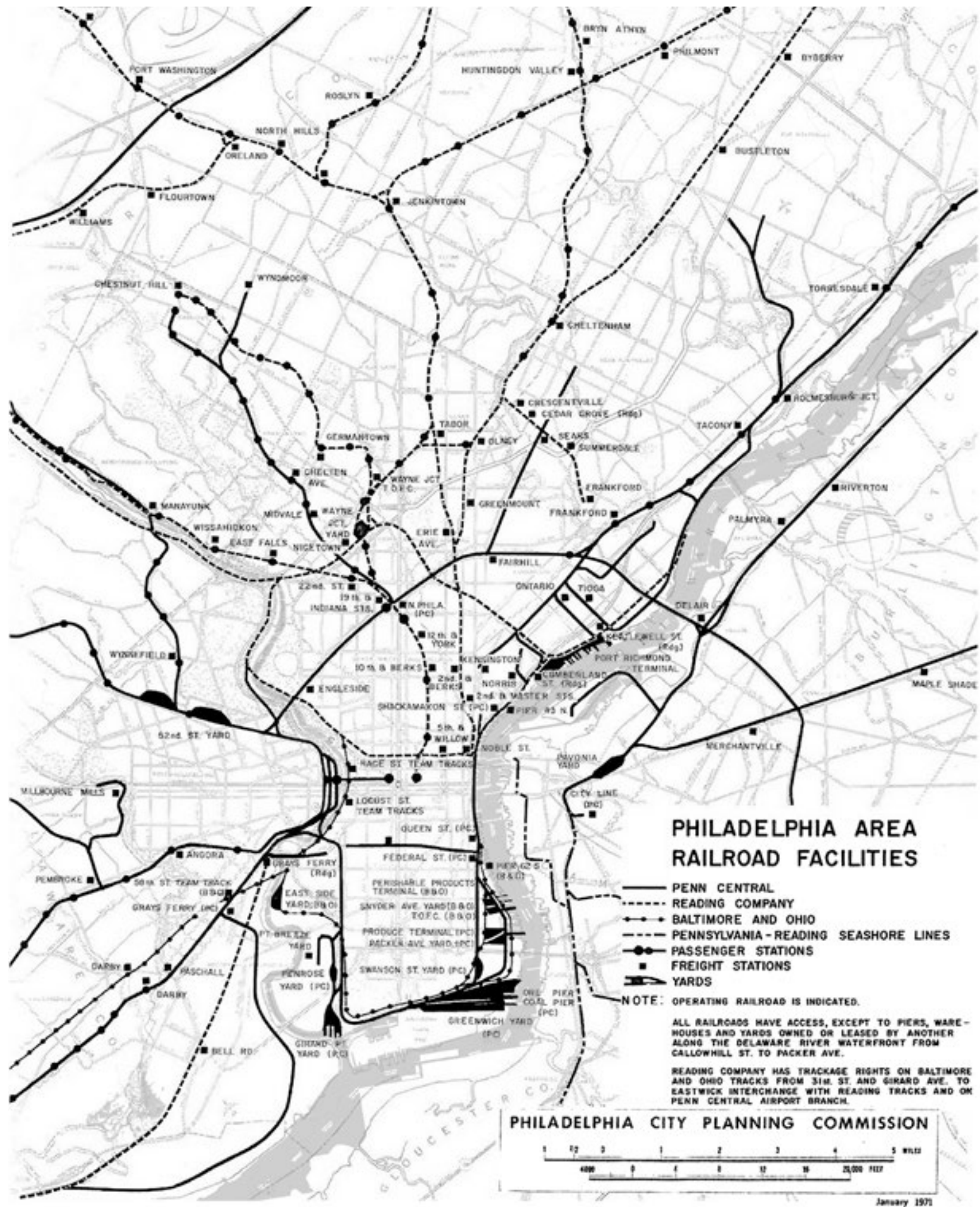
Midvale Heppenstall was gradually razed in the 1980s. I photographed the site in August and November of 1987 and again in May of 1988. At the time, this was the largest and most terrifying place I had ever photographed. A child died there right around the time of my last visit.

*A 4-year-old North Philadelphia boy drowned yesterday afternoon in a rain-filled pit at the old Midvale-Heppenstall steel plant, a sprawling, long-abandoned complex that children in the Nicetown neighborhood call "the clubhouse."*

—Credit: By Beth Gillin and Michael B. Coakley  
*Inquirer* Staff Writers

*PHOTO [caption] (1) I. Khaby Muhammad, a neighbor, tells how the Nicetown boy jumped into the pit behind her and lost his grip on a length of hose.*

—*The Philadelphia Inquirer* / JOHN COSTELLO  
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May 11, 1988



Group of Locomotives, 1905  
 image credit: Hagley ID, Box 1, folder number 2, Midvale Steel Company plant album (Accession 1974.362),  
 Audiovisual Collections and Digital Initiatives Department, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE 19807



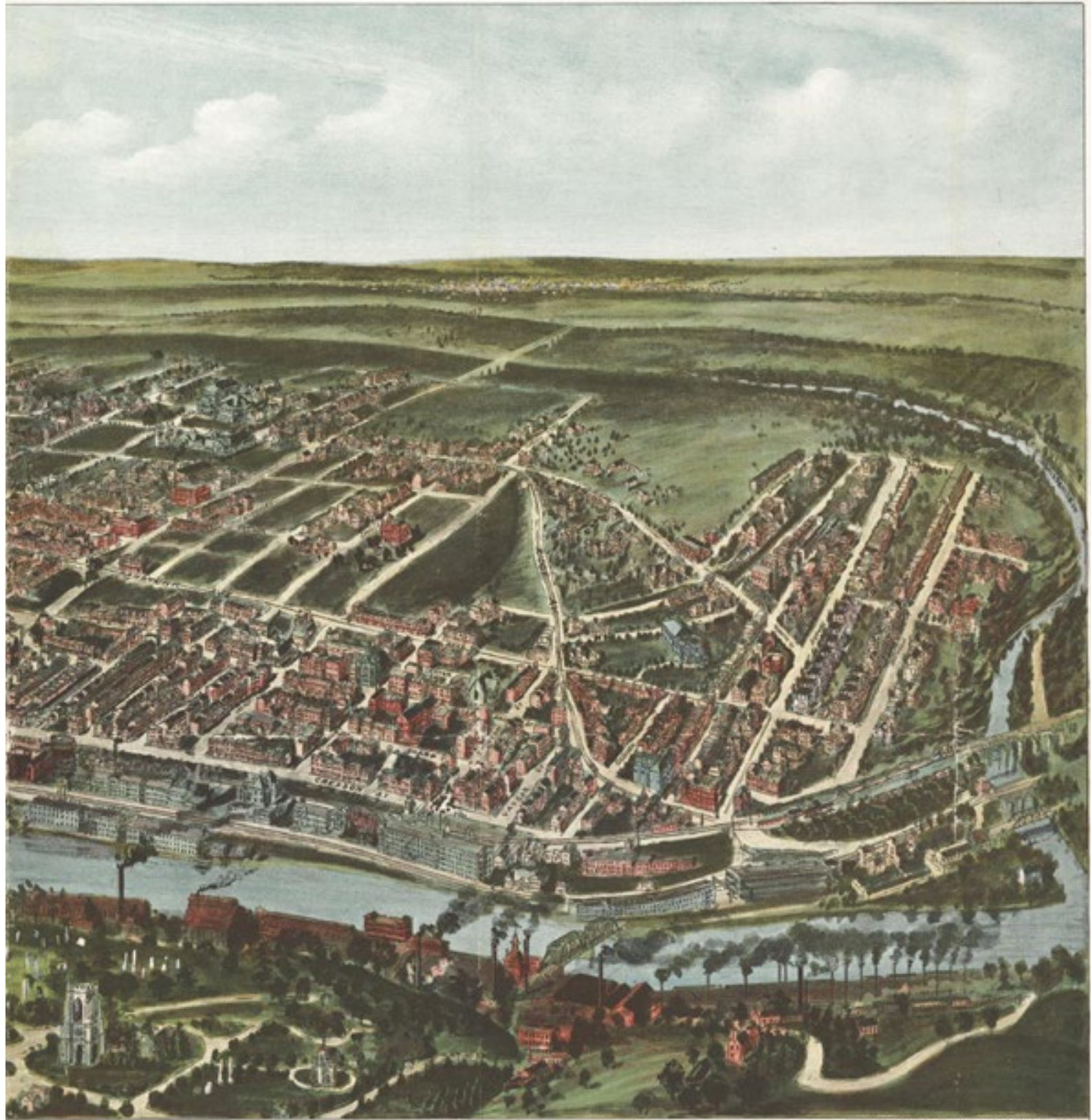
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76-69309

BIRDS EYE VIEW OF  
**MANAYUNK**  
**WISSAHICKON -**  
 FROM WEST LAUREL  
**PHILADELPHIA,**

1907

Copyright 1907 by FOWLER & KELLY, MORRISVILLE, PA.



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VIEW OF  
**MANAYUNK**  
**WISSAHICKON -**  
 FROM WEST LAUREL  
**PHILADELPHIA,**  
**PENNSYLVANIA**

1907

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Map Division,  
 OCT 18 1909  
 Library of Congress

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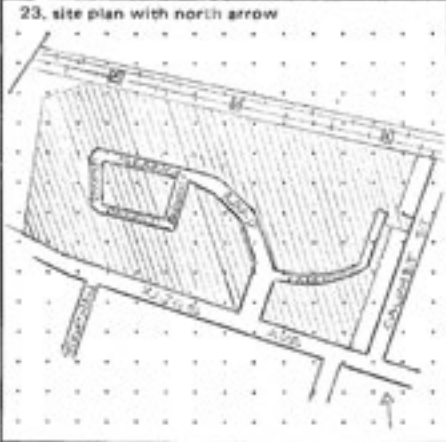
Schuylkill Falls Apartments, East Falls  
closed 1986 / demolished 1996  
photographed 1987, 1990









<b>PENNSYLVANIA HISTORIC RESOURCE SURVEY FORM</b> OFFICE OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION Box 1026 PA HISTORICAL & MUSEUM COMMISSION Harrisburg, PA 17120		7. Local survey organization <b>Clio Group, Inc.</b>		5. present name <b>The Schuylkill Falls Project</b>	1. County <b>Philadelphia</b>
8. property owners name and address <b>Philadelphia Housing Authority</b> <b>42 S. 15th Street</b> <b>Philadelphia PA 19102</b>		9. tax parcel number / other number <b>N.A.</b>			
12. classification site ( ) structure ( ) object ( ) building 00 in N.R. district yes ( ) no ( )		13. date(s) (how determined) <b>1955</b>		11. status (other surveys, lists etc.) <b>414218191210</b> use sheet: <b>Germantown Quad</b>	
14. period <b>1940-1959</b>		15. style, design or folk type <b>International Modern</b>		19. original use <b>housing project</b>	
16. architect or engineer <b>O. Stonarov</b>		17. contractor or builder		20. present use <b>abandoned</b>	
18. primary building mat./construction <b>reinforced concrete, brick trim</b>		21. condition <b>average</b>		22. integrity <b>average</b>	
23. site plan with north arrow 		24. photo notation <b>GT-NWP(G)-2-15</b>			
25. file/location		26. brief description (note unusual features, integrity, environment, threats and associated buildings) Though not old enough to qualify for the Register, the Schuylkill Falls housing project is imposing as a landmark in design, scale and social planning. The buildings are two skip-stop apartments slabs at the base of the foothills that loom above low rises that share the palette of brick, concrete and colored panels of the high rises. While the low rises have been successful, the high rises have been catastrophic, dens of social collapse and horror in the best tradition of modern project design. The high rises show brick clad end towers, with concrete slab and infill structure, treated as horizontal balconies.			
27. history, significance and/or background The Schuylkill Falls housing project is a landmark in modern design by one of the important early theoreticians of the modern movement. Their size, dominant position on the hillside, and the overscaled elements of their facades marks them as the most prominent buildings of the region. Of greatest importance is the fact that the main buildings have been abandoned.		28. sources of information			
29. prepared by: <b>G. Thomas</b>		30. date <b>6/27/83</b>			
3. street address or specific location <b>4301 Ridge Avenue</b>		4. SURVEY CODE <b>027-68280-04301</b>			

This 'partially' abandoned public housing project was about a mile from our house in Manayunk and less than a mile from the restaurant on Conrad and Bowman Streets in East Falls where I worked as a delivery boy for three years. The low-rise apartments on Ridge Avenue were still occupied when I shot all but the first of these images in January of 1990. I had already moved to Frankford and no longer worked in the area.

These two fourteen-story high-rise apartments opened in 1955, were vacated sometime between 1976 and 1986, and imploded in 1996. I probably drove past them hundreds of times. Their harsh modernist style was an anomaly in a neighborhood of two- or three-story single homes and row houses mostly built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The buildings were also less than a mile from Dobson Mills, a civil war-era blanket factory on Ridge Avenue where two housemates and I rented 6,500 square feet of studio space for \$0.10 per square foot per month (including heat) in 1986. We built eight artist studios and sublet the extra five for three years until the developer Willard Rouse bought the complex and paid us to terminate our lease in late 1988 to build new condominiums.

The 714 demolished high-rise units were replaced by 158 low-rise townhomes and apartments between 2004 and 2007.

PHILADELPHIA- The Philadelphia Housing Authority (PHA) had an aesthetic and social vision for the redevelopment of the Schuylkill Falls public housing site.

*The authority wanted to take advantage of the natural beauty of the hilltop site, overlooking the historic Schuylkill River and Falls River Bridge. But more important, the PHA sought to integrate the new public housing units into the surrounding community, which includes an exclusive section of Philadelphia that boasts Gov. Ed Rendell and Sen. Arlen Specter among its residents.*

*The old public housing site, Schuylkill Towers, was a walled-off community with inward-facing courtyards isolated from the surrounding neighborhoods...*

—“Reintegrating Public Housing”  
by Jerry Ascierio, 8/1/08

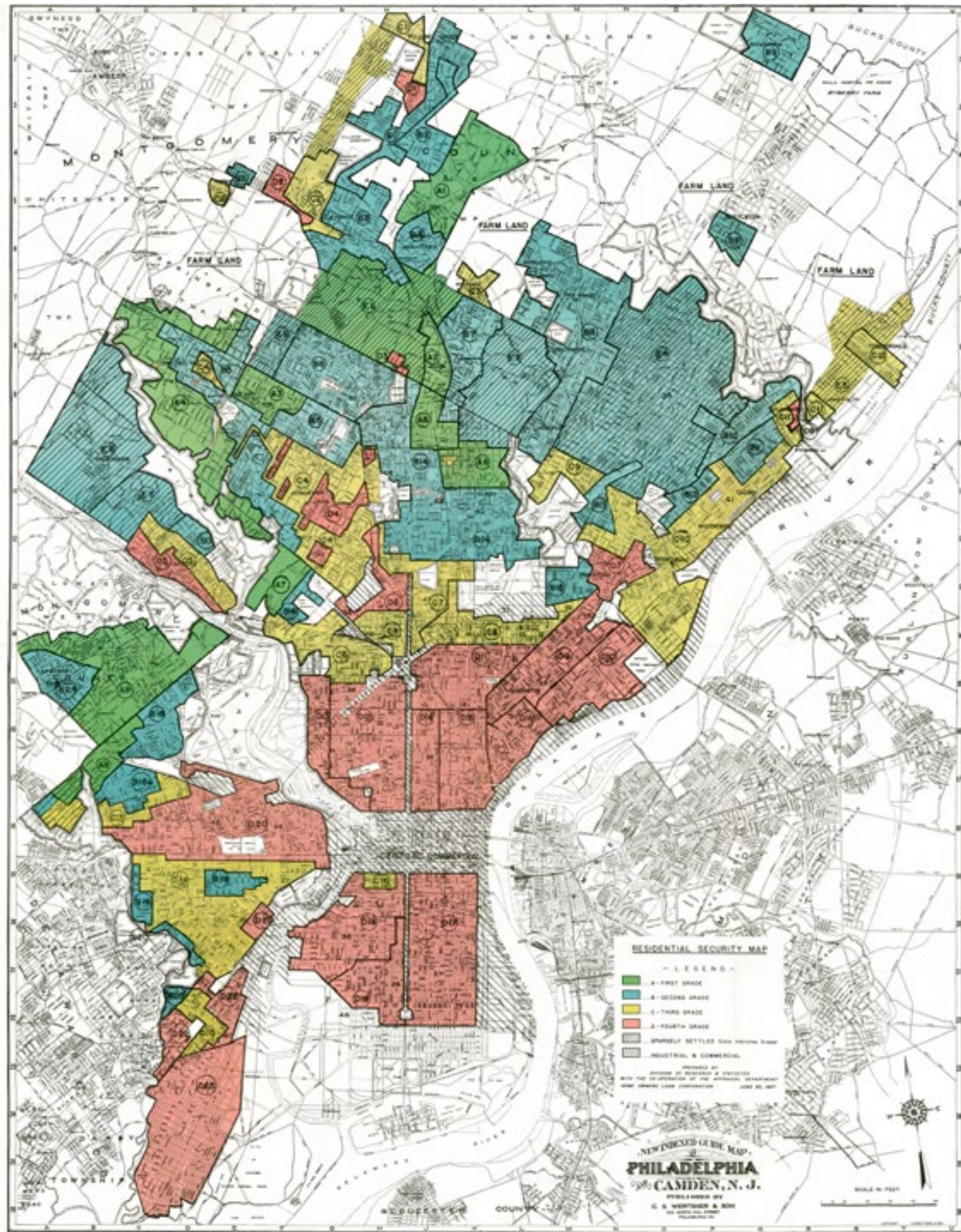
[https://www.housingfinance.com/news/reintegrating-public-housing\\_o](https://www.housingfinance.com/news/reintegrating-public-housing_o)

*There's a great book called "Closing Time" by Joe Queenan, about growing up poor and Irish in East Falls. His family lived in that building for a time.*

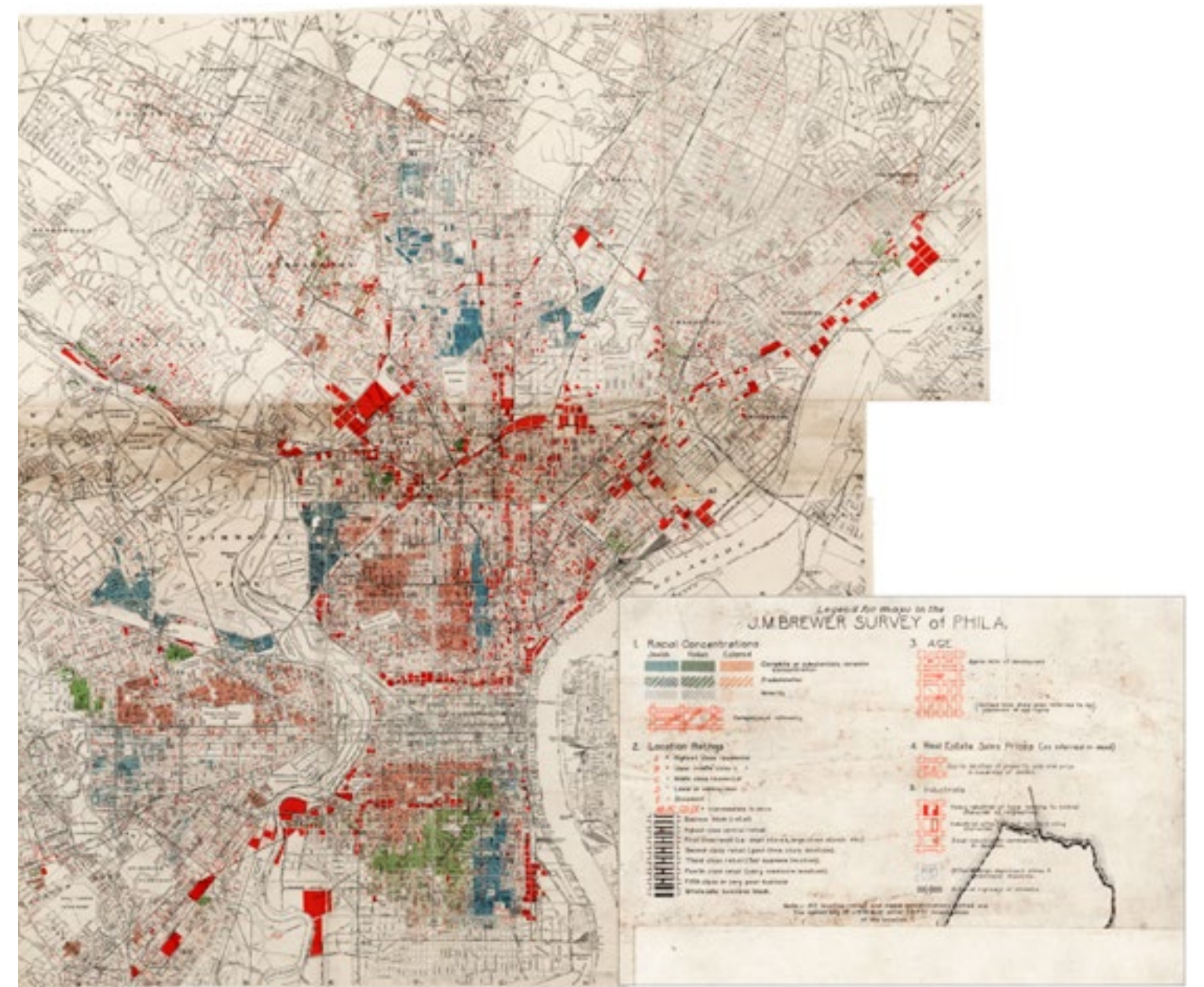
*He talks about how they would look across the river at the gleaming new Presidential Apartments, and wonder about the lives of those wealthy enough to afford them, so foreign [sic] from their own.*

*The residents of Schuylkill [sic] Falls would jokingly refer to their own building as the "Vice-Presidential Apartments."*

—comment by Dexter Gresh  
about a photograph of the Schuylkill Falls Apartments on the 'Old Images of Philadelphia' Facebook page, 6/29/22



Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), Philadelphia Security Map, 1937



The University of Pennsylvania Redlining in Philadelphia project provides an example of a map created to guide lending in Philadelphia. The map was created in 1934 by J.M. Brewer, who owned a real estate consulting company and later was chief appraiser for Metropolitan Life Insurance.

This legend... from the original for the U. of Pennsylvania website: [enlarged above]

The legend looks like the “colored” areas are coded yellow, but it’s actually red on the map. Brewer created another map in 1935 and helped draw the federal Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) map of Philadelphia in 1937.

Erin Hatton sent a link to that 1937 HOLC map, which reflects the governmental institutionalization of racism, marking some groups as inherently undesirable:

—<https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2012/04/25/1934-philadelphia-redlining-map>

map of Philadelphia by appraiser J. M. Brewer, Property Services, Inc., 1934



Kent Theatre, Kensington  
closed 1968 / demolished 1989  
photographed 1989















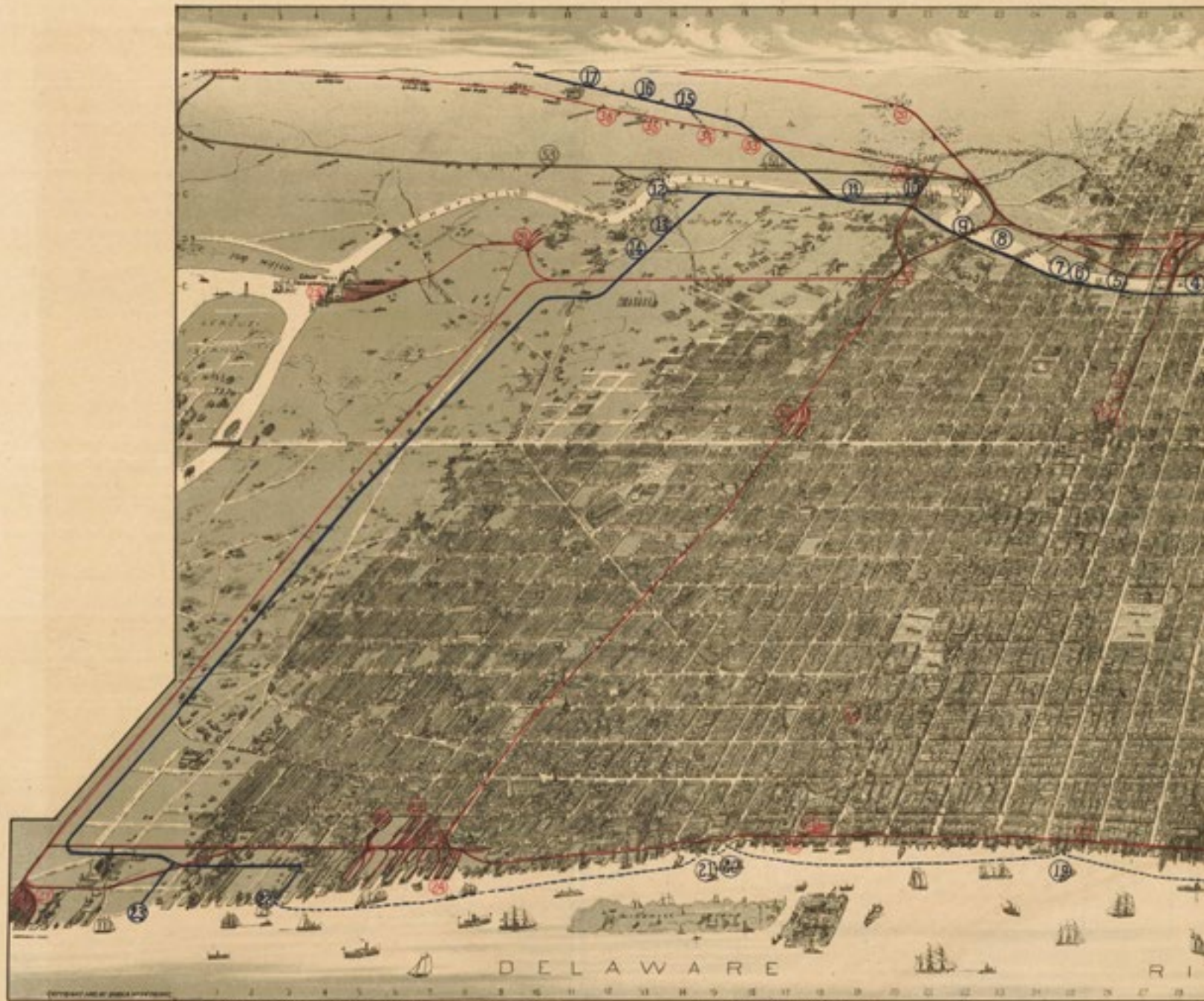
In January of 1989 while driving home, I passed this theater in the midst of being demolished. After grabbing my camera and some film, I immediately drove back to shoot it before it was gone. There were no barriers to entry, despite the half-destroyed nature of the structure. Perhaps it was so solidly built in 1890 that safety wasn't really an issue. Another possibility was that no one had much concern for the local population due to the neighborhood's bad reputation. The illustration for the redesign at left omitted the Market-Frankford elevated rail line that runs down Kensington Avenue directly in front of the building, making this view purely imaginary.

One of my housemates from Manayunk and I had bought a house in Frankford with the money we received from our recent studio buyout. It was the first (and only) building I've

owned: a dilapidated three-story eight-bedroom Victorian mansion built in 1888. The price was \$86,500 and though our mortgage was 9.5%, sometimes the heating bill was more than the monthly payment. Unfortunately, after many years of sweat "equity" as my mother described it, the property was sold at a huge loss in 1995 three years after I had moved to Los Angeles for graduate school.

My ex-housemate moved out in 1991 and I couldn't find enough tenants to help cover the mortgage and the seemingly endless repairs. Someone even broke into the house and stole some antique chandeliers. If we hadn't sold it, I wonder how long it would have taken before it became just another abandoned property.

architectural rendering (circa 1927) by Hoffman - Henon Co., Architects & Engineers: Kenton Theatre, 2649 Kensington Avenue, Philadelphia, PA. image credit: Irvin R. Glazer Theater Collection / Athenaeum of Philadelphia



25-696520

PENNA. & N. J. DIRECTORY OF TERMINALS IN PHILADELPHIA.	
<p>1. Atlantic City, Pa., and Atlantic City, N. J., and Atlantic City, Del.</p> <p>2. Camden, N. J., and Camden, Del.</p> <p>3. Chester, Pa., and Chester, Del.</p> <p>4. Delaware River, Pa., and Delaware River, Del.</p> <p>5. Easton, Pa., and Easton, Del.</p> <p>6. Lancaster, Pa., and Lancaster, Del.</p> <p>7. Pottsville, Pa., and Pottsville, Del.</p> <p>8. Reading, Pa., and Reading, Del.</p> <p>9. Scranton, Pa., and Scranton, Del.</p> <p>10. Sunbury, Pa., and Sunbury, Del.</p> <p>11. York, Pa., and York, Del.</p> <p>12. Philadelphia, Pa., and Philadelphia, Del.</p> <p>13. Philadelphia, Pa., and Philadelphia, Del.</p> <p>14. Philadelphia, Pa., and Philadelphia, Del.</p> <p>15. Philadelphia, Pa., and Philadelphia, Del.</p> <p>16. Philadelphia, Pa., and Philadelphia, Del.</p> <p>17. Philadelphia, Pa., and Philadelphia, Del.</p> <p>18. Philadelphia, Pa., and Philadelphia, Del.</p> <p>19. Philadelphia, Pa., and Philadelphia, Del.</p> <p>20. Philadelphia, Pa., and Philadelphia, Del.</p> <p>21. Philadelphia, Pa., and Philadelphia, Del.</p>	<p>1. Atlantic City, Pa., and Atlantic City, N. J., and Atlantic City, Del.</p> <p>2. Camden, N. J., and Camden, Del.</p> <p>3. Chester, Pa., and Chester, Del.</p> <p>4. Delaware River, Pa., and Delaware River, Del.</p> <p>5. Easton, Pa., and Easton, Del.</p> <p>6. Lancaster, Pa., and Lancaster, Del.</p> <p>7. Pottsville, Pa., and Pottsville, Del.</p> <p>8. Reading, Pa., and Reading, Del.</p> <p>9. Scranton, Pa., and Scranton, Del.</p> <p>10. Sunbury, Pa., and Sunbury, Del.</p> <p>11. York, Pa., and York, Del.</p> <p>12. Philadelphia, Pa., and Philadelphia, Del.</p> <p>13. Philadelphia, Pa., and Philadelphia, Del.</p> <p>14. Philadelphia, Pa., and Philadelphia, Del.</p> <p>15. Philadelphia, Pa., and Philadelphia, Del.</p> <p>16. Philadelphia, Pa., and Philadelphia, Del.</p> <p>17. Philadelphia, Pa., and Philadelphia, Del.</p> <p>18. Philadelphia, Pa., and Philadelphia, Del.</p> <p>19. Philadelphia, Pa., and Philadelphia, Del.</p> <p>20. Philadelphia, Pa., and Philadelphia, Del.</p> <p>21. Philadelphia, Pa., and Philadelphia, Del.</p>

# Philadelphia in 1888.

MAY 10 1888  
1888

G2524  
PaAs  
1888  
Pa



Dodge Steel Castings, Tacony  
closed 1986 / demolished 1994  
photographed 1990-93









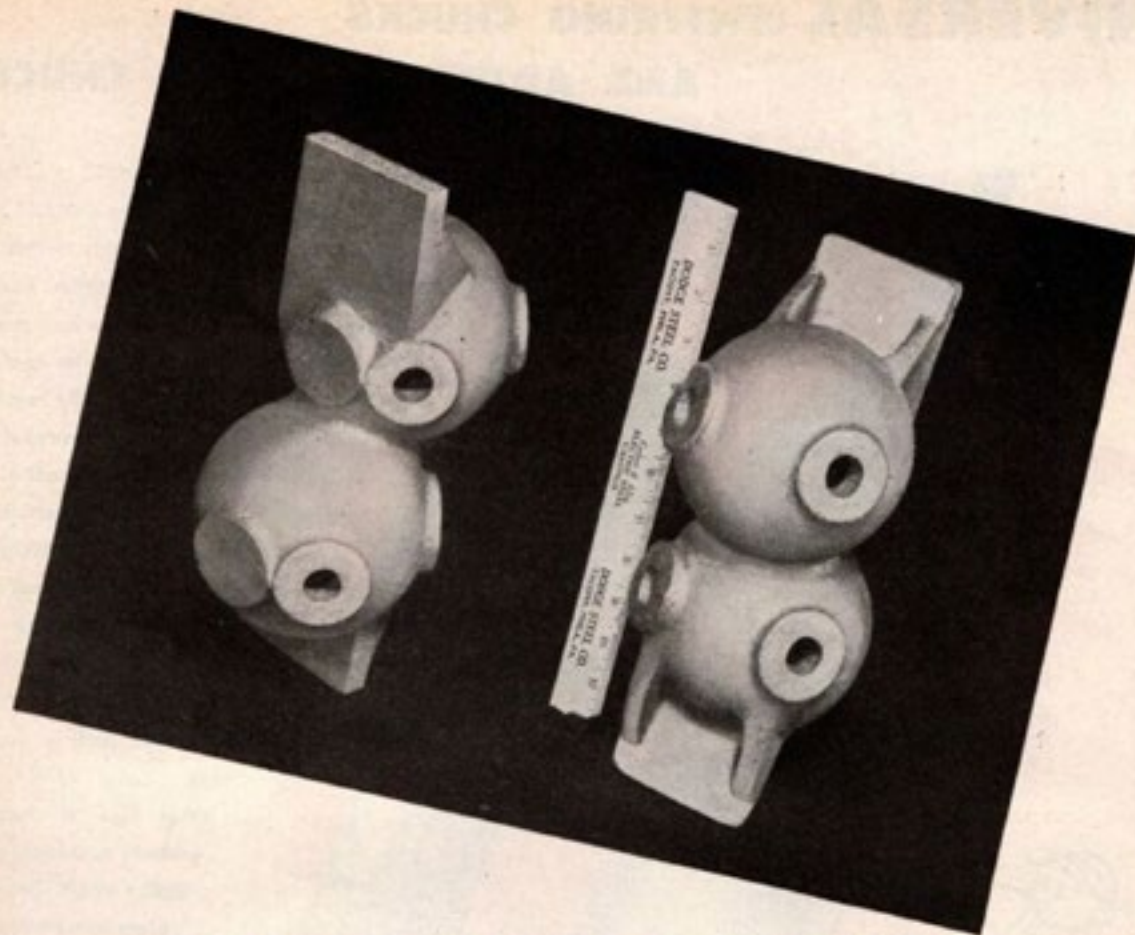












## MORE THAN SKIN DEEP

When you see steel castings as good-looking as these you can expect them to be *sound* castings, too.

Their clean external appearance is an indication of *uniform* quality *throughout*. (It's mighty hard to get a smooth surface on a flaw-filled, unsound casting.)

We make it our business to make sound castings *in the mold*. That's

important—it means fewer rejects—less wasted machining costs.

Cleaner castings mean less finishing time, too—they're produced to closer tolerances. They're harder for us to make, of course—but it's worth it. That way we're building satisfied customers . . . by saving them money and helping them build better products. Let's talk it over.



### DODGE STEEL CASTINGS

DODGE STEEL COMPANY • TACONY, PHILADELPHIA 35, PA.

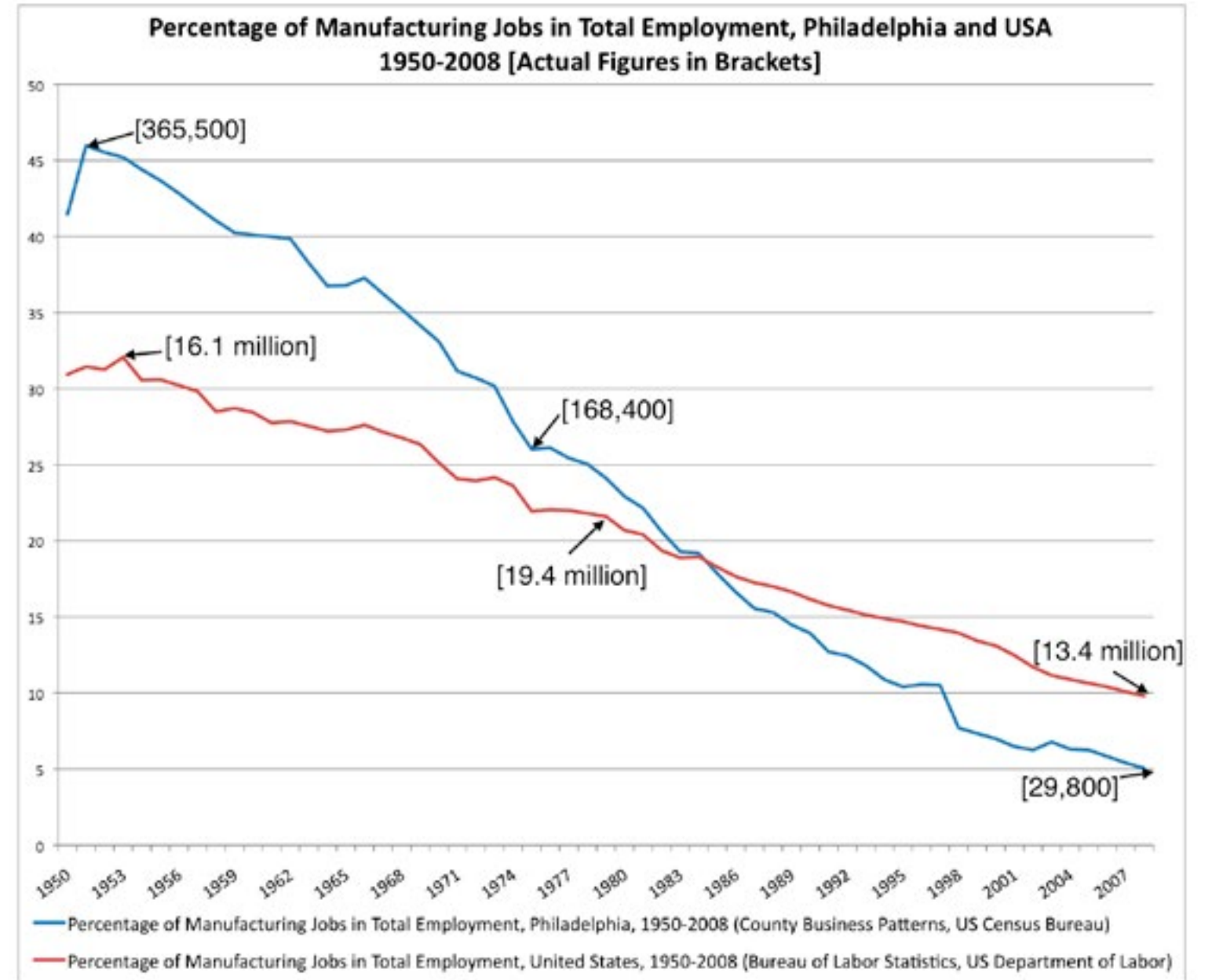
224—THE IRON AGE, December 13, 1945

The Tacony-Palmyra Bridge crosses the Delaware river from Tacony on the Pennsylvania side to Palmyra, New Jersey. My mother's stepbrother and his family lived in Cherry Hill, N.J. and we would always drive over this bridge to see them. After my grandparents moved to Atlantic City just before I started high school, we also passed the factory on our way "down the shore." Dodge Steel Castings occupied twenty acres on State Road right next to the bridge and had this giant sign of a ladle pouring molten metal through the space between the words *Steel* and *Castings* into a mold below. I can't remember if the metal was neon or if I ever saw it lit up, but just the thought of it brings the sign to life.

We'd bought a house in Frankford about two blocks from Frankford Friends School which I attended for a little while before my mother finished her teaching degree. After starting to explore the area, I drove past Dodge Steel for the first time in many years: its completely derelict and abandoned state was shocking. I began photographing there in November of 1990, not knowing at the time that this project would change my life, eventually paving the way for me to leave the city where I'd grown.

DODGE FOUNDRY AND MACHINE COMPANY  
BALANCE SHEET  
As of MAY 1987 and MAY 1981

ASSETS	Current Month	This Month Last Year
<b>CURRENT ASSETS:</b>		
Cash	5765	54201
Accounts Receivable	1675291	2263667
Less Allow. for Doubtful Accts.	< 45308	< 33073
Net Receivables	1629983	2230594
Raw Materials and Supplies	438572	934066
Work in Process	454816	658577
Finished Goods	267671	210562
Net Inventories	1153059	1202205
Prepaid Expense	22614	117936
<b>TOTAL CURRENT ASSETS</b>	<b>2811441</b>	<b>3605876</b>
<b>FIXED ASSETS:</b>		
Machinery and Equipment	4670221	3263071
Less Accum. Depreciation	2483341	< 2094723
Net Machinery & Equipment	2186880	1168348
<b>TOTAL ASSETS</b>	<b>4998321</b>	<b>5374224</b>
<b>LIABILITIES</b>		
<b>CURRENT LIABILITIES:</b>		
Notes Payable - Bank	-	250000
Accounts Payable - Trade	1036389	1329349
Payroll and Pension Costs	177610	176200
Loan on Accounts Receivable	495041	958364
Federal Taxes	-	-
Accrued Taxes	72080	94103
Accrued Liabilities	240174	356557
Notes Payable - Lessor	-	-
Notes Payable - Other	522844	455272
Total Current Portion of Long Term Debt	522844	455272
<b>TOTAL CURRENT LIABILITIES</b>	<b>2544138</b>	<b>3619246</b>
Long Term Debt - Lessor	-	-
Long Term Debt - Other	952812	754900
Total Long Term Debt	952812	754900
Deferred Taxes	28200	-
<b>TOTAL LIABILITIES</b>	<b>3525120</b>	<b>4374146</b>
<b>STOCKHOLDERS EQUITY</b>		
Capital Stock - Preferred	1250	1250
Capital Stock - Common	134700	136200
Additional Paid in Capital	89100	90800
Retained Earnings		
Fiscal Years ending 1972 Thru 1974	< 1304342	< 1304342
Fiscal Years ending 1975 Thru 1981	1931283	1643161
Current Fiscal Year ending 1987	609870	432409
<b>TOTAL NET WORTH</b>	<b>1462561</b>	<b>999478</b>
<b>TOTAL LIABILITIES AND NET WORTH</b>	<b>4987681</b>	<b>5373624</b>
<b>Supplemental Data</b>		
Net Working Capital	267303	< 13970
Current Ratio	1.10	.99
Inventory Days on Hand	27	21
No. of Days Sales in Receivables	57	56



## *Land, territory and mobility*

Thinking about the past necessitates a different understanding of place and distance. When walking was the only mode of travel, rivers and oceans presented a problem if they were large enough. Eventually, someone built rafts and boats that allowed these bodies of water to become the first highways. But traveling long distances was still difficult before big ships or trains, let alone cars, planes, and the internet. Our perception and understanding of the larger world goes through similar stages as we grow up. First, we are carried or pushed in a carriage. Eventually we learn to walk but are taught not to stray too far from mother or home. We must learn to look both ways before crossing the street. Someone thinks we're still too young to take the bus and hitch-hiking is dangerous.

Because my mother never learned and my father wasn't around much, I had to teach myself how to ride a bicycle. A friend must have had an extra one because I remember coasting down his inclined driveway over and over again, pedaling furiously into the cul-de-sac before losing balance and jumping off, or crashing on the asphalt. Once I figured it out, this was the beginning of independence! I still remember the thrill of being able to ride over a mile away to visit a friend at her house in seventh grade: limitations shifted, and distance was less daunting.

I stopped going to day-care after school in sixth grade and began taking a SEPTA (Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority) bus to middle school the next year. It was a dedicated school bus as we were too wild to allow any other passengers on board. The school was a little more than a mile away and I remember not being allowed to walk at first, but my relationship with the bus was uneasy. Too many other kids, having to wait to be picked up or for the bus to leave after school: everything about it was constricting. Other kids would sometimes throw stinky rotten fruit that fell off a certain tree from the side of the road, aiming for the open windows and occasionally splattering all over somebody inside. Eventually I realized that if you subtracted the distance I had to walk from my house to the main road just to get on the bus, the actual walk to school was less than a mile anyway, so I think I reasoned that it just didn't count. And because no one was around to enforce this walking prohibition, that's what I ended up doing all the time.

Learning to drive was the next big step in expanding my ability to venture from home, particularly when combined with the chances that your parents were wealthy enough to get

a new car and give you the old one. In 1976, I decided (or was convinced?) to go to the "better" high school that my father attended because the one in my neighborhood had a "drug problem." Walking or biking was out of the question because it was almost ten miles away. There were one or two other kids in the neighborhood that I could carpool with instead of taking two buses (or two buses and the subway) to get there. My mother was a supervisor at six Get-Set Day Care centers in nearby Germantown so she would usually be willing to drop us off in the morning. Taking public transportation home sometimes took more than an hour and was especially miserable after gymnastics practice during the winter when it was cold or snowy and the sun set early. But once a friend finished renovating a powder blue 1967 Mustang, I didn't have to go with mom or take the bus anymore. Much freedom ensued: listening to the Grateful Dead on the 8-track and getting high on the way to school became the norm! So much for good grades, but going to art school would solve that problem.

In 1980, I moved out of my mother's house to live in the dorms during my first year of college. She gave me her old Toyota Corona and I was notorious for taking friends on "adventures," driving all over the place at night or on weekends because I knew the city so well. We would explore quarries (even finding some dynamite once), cool gardens, parks and historic locations, eventually expanding to abandoned buildings. Once, my roommate and I went inside a boarded up house that had been empty since my mother lived nearby in the 1950's. He needed an old door for a sculpture he wanted to build so we went inside. Someone who worked at the apartment complex saw my car parked and started yelling at us. We came out and drove away while he chased us for a while before I lost him. Unfortunately, he wrote down my license plate number and soon the cops showed up at my graphic design class looking for me. I was back in my dorm room by then but heard all about it, eventually calling the police station and somehow negotiating a trespassing misdemeanor instead of being hauled off to jail.

My understanding of the city expanded in concentric circles over time. Somehow, this notion of vision across distance became part of my photography. Long before I understood images as akin to windows, I also began to notice my attraction to photos that had no exit, no horizon line and no sky. Your view was blocked, similar to how I felt about the present and the future.



along the Delaware River:  
Frankford, Port Richmond  
photographed 1989-90





















### *Vita brevis, ars longa?*

A teacher in high school once asked my class to ponder the question, “If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound?” I thought about it and came to a conclusion. Of course! The sound exists independently of anyone needing to hear it. I chose to devalue myself: (human) presence was not required. This question is still hard to reconcile. To this day, I find it difficult to consider the philosophical alternative: without consciousness, without perception, nothing exists. We make the world.

Before my girlfriend died, we talked about what would become of her body after she was gone. She dreamed up this crazy camping trip out west where my best friend and I could scatter her ashes and we promised her that we would. We did this for many reasons of course, but at the time, the promise was probably the most significant. Thinking about it in this context, I wonder if this was a way for her to impact our lives despite her absence. That was our choice. Eleven years later, my best friend died of AIDS. I still have the work from his MFA thesis show, but will anyone ever see it again?

I am dead as well (or will be, as I write this). Roland Barthes wrote about photography and time as a laceration—the paradox of the present moment forever represented in an image coexists with the certainty that any (every?) preserved moment is an impossibility, already gone as it registers on

the film. Were all those nineteenth century photographers attracted to ruins because they somehow proved that the things we make can last longer than we will? What makes anything worth saving, worth seeing? Who gets to decide about the value of things, or of anyone?

I don’t know if I was always preoccupied with the shortness of life. If so, maybe that’s one of the reasons I was attracted to photography. If recording something is always to some degree an attempt to save it, this implies some awareness of death (and loss). In the mid 1980’s when I first started asking myself what attracted me to these places, it wasn’t too long before I tied them to the circumstances of my life: only child, absent father, never stayed in one school too long. But despite almost never showing any people, these images don’t always focus on absence or loss.

A friend recently told me that looking at my photographs put her in my shoes. They were experiential and very present, not detached or distant. This seemed odd to me at first, because I always thought of them as a reflection of my loneliness at the time. But hearing how they made her feel was both enlightening and encouraging. If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that I can’t control interpretation. I can only guide it. This book is an experiment. It’s not meant to be a summation, but a beginning.







































## *Epilogue*

In July of 1992, I drove across the country from Philadelphia to Los Angeles to attend graduate school. A few shots in this book were made the following summer while finishing *What helps Dodge helps YOU*, a project documenting the former site of Dodge Steel Castings beside the Tacony-Palmyra Bridge. My approach to photography changed after finishing my degree and these images sat in boxes for many years.

I started teaching photography part-time at various universities across southern California in 1997. This book was partly funded

by a 2024 Delphi Award: the first professional development funds made available to non-tenure track faculty (NTTF) at Loyola Marymount University, where I helped organize a union for NTTF that same year.

Thanks for supporting my photography must be given to my father's father and my father's brother in-law at Mid-City Camera Exchange in Center City, but that's another story...



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For Pop-Pop Al, 1909-1985,  
who told me not to get a job working with my hands;

and for Marsha, 1962-1988,  
who was an inspiration.

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