

Discovering Philadelphia

Places Little Known

David S. Traub

Foreword

by David B. Brownlee

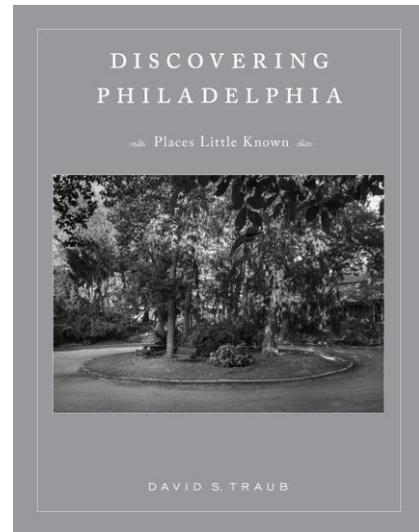
Philadelphia, like all great cities, is a convergence of contradictions. On the one hand, it is a mighty metropolis. We were the “Workshop of the World,” which erected the world’s tallest building (City Hall held that title until 1908) and built the longest suspension bridge (the Benjamin Franklin Bridge was beaten by the Golden Gate in 1937). And huge construction projects transformed Philadelphia’s heart in the 20th century: the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, Penn Center, the Gallery, Convention Center, and stretching beneath Market East, the vast Commuter Tunnel.

But it is not this Philadelphia of big accomplishments to which David Traub opens our eyes. His photographs tenderly capture another Philadelphia, a wondrous city of intimate places and intricately textured things. His art reveals settings that have been visibly shaped by human hands and warmed by human presence.

David Traub’s Philadelphia is the storied City of Neighborhoods, which, he wisely counsels, might be more appropriately called the City of Homes. Map and camera in hand, he has explored its many corners, recording their constitutive elements. He shows us small theaters, social halls, libraries, churches, and clubs, but the preeminent stars of Traub’s Philadelphia Story are the row house and the neighborhood park.

Philadelphia row houses are sometimes huge and occasionally individualistic. The big Queen Anne twins on Springfield Avenue in Squirrel Hill are almost suburban in scale and pretension, while the diminutive residences on the 2200 block of West Page boast outsized details. A remarkably curvaceous façade interrupts the usual flatness of “rowhousetown” at 5124 Rochelle Avenue, and Traub signals numerous examples of eccentric splendor—perhaps most notably the vivacious studio/residence at 1619 West Thompson, which resembles the work of Wilson Eyre.

But the quintessence of the row house is quietude, and although row houses are modest in art and almost anonymous in presentation, their subtle variety is enormously appealing. In Germantown, Traub leads us up Springer Street to see an exceptional group of early-19th-century millworker houses, and on the 800 block of South Hancock in Queen Village, he photographs a cluster of rare wooden houses, built outside the zone in which William Penn required brick façades. He carefully presents the taxonomy of the species, inviting us to compare the two-story houses



of the 5800 block of North Wakefield Street and their upscale, three-story kin in the 1500 block of North Gratz.

The most natural habitat for the Philadelphia row house is a “little street,” and Traub shows us plenty. His small byways are both old and new, and it is not antiquity but quirky littleness and detachment from the urban to and fro that have won them a place in his viewfinder. Some favorite quirks: the littlest little street (900 block of South Bodine), the hardest to find (700 block of South Darien—a map is provided), and an exceptional crooked street in our grid-plan city (3300 block of West Hagert).

The other defining constituent of Philadelphia’s neighborhoods is the small park. While Penn gave his city five green squares, and Victorian civic visionaries created the vastness of Fairmount Park, Traub shows us the tiny patches of green that were created by local initiative. Again, the variety is quietly stupendous. There is the private cemetery on North Broad Street where Dr. George de Benneville benevolently buried two British soldiers next to his family after the Battle of Germantown. Then rural, it is now an island in an urban ocean. Distinctly urban and urbane are the formal, ’20s-era courtyard gardens of the Rittenhouse Plaza (on Rittenhouse Square) and the Garden Court Apartments (at 47th and Pine). And miraculous in their origins (and discovery) are tiny Paolone Park, a triangular speck of greenery between Sears and Medina Streets, and the 2700 block of South Smedley, a London-style square framed by early-20th-century row houses. Both are almost unfindable in the dense weave of South Philadelphia streets.

Apart from tiny houses and little parks, David Traub offers some delicious singular discoveries. The miraculously preserved Wood Street steps lead us back to the original topography of Philadelphia’s waterfront. Two 18th-century country taverns survive intact, at 1035 Cheltenham Avenue in East Oak Lane and the “Blue Bell” on Cobbs Creek, reminding us of the vastness of the landscape that surrounded the colonial city. And then, for something completely different, the stunning modernist dream house by Israel Demchick at 510 West Godfrey Avenue brings us face-to-unexpected-face with Philadelphia’s avant-gardism.

We are very fortunate that David Traub possesses not only a great eye for architecture but also considerable skills as a photographer. His black-and-white images are almost literally colorful: warmed by dappling sun, energized by diagonal shadow lines, and crowned by skies full of sculpted clouds. Like the scenes that he captures, the photographs are quiet and truthful, sometimes axially composed as though to stare down our flights of fancy. But while David Traub’s photographs are simple, like the city he has explored, they are full of life and invite us to explore them.

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