

**SEEING THE CITY WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE  
BOTH PAST AND PRESENT: A framework for planners to learn  
about the city and inform planning practice**

by

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City Planning

**ABSTRACT**

Urban form can be thought of as a record of the historical development of the modern city. It is an educative record in that through examination of the morphology of the city we can learn about the social relationships, class structures, ideologies, institutions, and meanings which inhered to the city at different stages of its development and together contributed to the form of the city as we know it today. This thesis is autobiographical in that it recounts the process of discovery, the learning, and the questions that were raised as I explored the morphology-the record-of Society Hill, Philadelphia.

I emerged from the experience of having immersed myself in a history of the neighborhood, the Jewish history of Society Hill, with a clearer way of perceiving and a deeper, more penetrating way of understanding the city. This "way of seeing" in turn calls for frame reflection for planners so that we can make more explicit the world view that shapes our understanding of the city, and formulation of plans. The example of Society Hill points to the underemphasis and undervaluation of a framework that sees the city within the context of human experience, both past experience in terms of the historic record, and present experience in terms of the subjective meanings of space. A methodology of "getting out there" as represented by the form of this thesis, is suggested to redress the observed "frame imbalance" and lead us to a more complete and balanced understanding of the city.

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## **1. The City as Historic Record**

The morphology of the city reflects the interaction of evolving and complex political, economic, and social forces. Urban form can therefore be thought of as a record of the historical development of the modern city. It is an educative record in that through examination of the morphology of the city we can learn about the social relationships, class structures, ideologies, institutions, and meanings which inhere to the city at different stages of its development and together contributed to the form of the city as we know it today. Paul Knox, a British geographer, emphasized the importance of urban form in relation to historical explanation; urban form provides "clues" which make it possible to "identify the physical and social bases of modern urbanism".

"The historic city obtrudes as a visible factor in the contemporary landscape of the cities throughout Europe and North America, revealing itself in turn as historic artefact, slum district, or, more subtly, as the morphological template upon which successive waves of urban renewal and land use changes have taken place".<sup>1</sup>

The historic city "obtrudes" in the landscape of modern cities to

varying degrees. We must not only look at the city that remains standing today but also inquire into what of the city has been destroyed, and why. Extant urban form—the morphology —of the city is therefore only a *potential* record of historical development.

The contents of this record are precarious, always in danger of erasure. With the erasure of the record we potentially obliterate or obscure from our vision important pieces of history. Consequently our perception and memory of history is altered.

The 1980's have been heralded as a decade of "urban revival in the United States".<sup>2</sup> As urban renewal, downtown revitalization, and gentrification rebuild the central core of many of our cities, much of the history of our nation has either been destroyed, or is in danger of being destroyed. It is precisely in these sectors of the city where change is now occurring that evidence of the evolution of our cities is to be found.

The evidence—"the clues"—are to be found in those buildings that

remain standing and are representative of different periods in a neighborhood's history. Some of these vestiges are consciously preserved by historic preservation commissions as landmarks whereas others are more obscure and exist largely hidden from our view, their survival a seemingly incongruous happenstance. The survival of these hidden "unplanned" vestiges is fortuitous for they provide points of discovery through which we can explore masked histories of a neighborhood and derivatively the larger city of which the neighborhood is an integral part.

Exploration of a building's history can tell us about the function and meaning that this building once had in relation to the surrounding area and how both function and meaning have changed over time. The people that once occupied the building, and the building's uses provide insights into some of the conditions and way of life that existed in a neighborhood over time. In this sense the process of discovery is archival in its reconstruction and documentation of historical facts, thus making historical explanation possible.

The process of historical discovery also has another function. It challenges us to think about how history is represented in the city. We are motivated to ask questions about the relationship between the values of decision makers and planners, and the attributes of the urban environment. Who decides how, and which histories are to be represented in the environment are important questions at a time when planners are focusing on issues of "downtown revitalization and redevelopment". Critical decisions concerning what stays in a neighborhood and what goes will effect the conception and understanding of the history of the city by future generations of city dwellers, planners, and academics alike.

This thesis is autobiographical in that it recounts to the reader the process of discovery, the learning, and the questions that I raised as I explored vestiges or points of discovery existing within the neighborhood of Society Hill, Philadelphia. The goals of this thesis are threefold:

(1) to represent an outline of an interactive learning process that is easily replicable . It is in this respect that the city can be conceived

of as an educative record, offering an opportunity for learning through exploration and inquiry into both the form of the city that we can readily observe and the form of the city that is either seemingly insignificant or may no longer exist. It is an interactive model of learning from and with the environment that is both exciting and relevant for students and policy makers.

(2) to present what I have learned substantively about the experience of a group of people which was made possible by investigation of the history of a building.

(3) to reflect further on both the learning process and the knowledge gained through this process in order to illuminate some of the issues and questions that arise, and are inherent in the conception of the city as a potentially educative record.

## **2. Society Hill: Urban Renewal and the Recreation of History**

Society Hill is a neighborhood in Philadelphia that is nationally recognized as a prototype of urban redevelopment and what "good planning" can accomplish. Society Hill was transformed from what was described as a "bombed out" area of "ageing and overcrowded, tattered... low rent residences", to one of Philadelphia wealthiest residences as well as an important tourist attraction.<sup>1</sup> Fundamental to attracting both wealthier residents and tourists to Society Hill was the recreation of a Society Hill intended to project an historically "authentic" image of the old Colonial city. Society Hill was redesigned to create the image of the "greene country town" of William Penn's "holy experiment". In order to recreate the "genus loci" of the Colonial city, painstaking effort was taken to ensure that colonial "townhouses", lantern lit and cobblestone paved streets, and quaint alleyways would all be present. The scale of the redevelopment program necessary to transform Society Hill led the urban geographers Cybriwsky and Western to the conclusion

that Society Hill was an especially significant case of urban renewal because "such a total transformation of the environment is without precedent"<sup>2</sup> A.E.G. Morris concurs with their observation writing that:

"Philadelphia since the 1960's has been the most widely illustrated example of on-going comprehensive restructuring and systematic renewal of an historic urban core."<sup>3</sup>

It is important to look briefly at the urban renewal of Society Hill which produced the "total transformation" of urban form to it's present manifestation of colonial character and elite occupancy . Understanding the ambitions and intentions of the urban renewal plan establishes the contextual framework within which the significance of the discovery of incongruous vestiges can be appreciated.

In the 1940's Society Hill was a deteriorated neighborhood that was part of a city described by Lowe as "a donut: a vast metropolis built up around a hollow center...(the downtown areas) were submerged in

slums".<sup>4</sup> Society Hill had the unfortunate distinction of abutting the birthplace of the Constitution of the United States. The area stood obstinately as an embarrassment to the conscious of Philadelphia, it's physical squalor and poverty amidst the historic landmarks of our nation disgraced and castigated the city, in particular the local elites and government officials. The city of Philadelphia as a whole was not doing much better, the local economy was suffering as the raw-materials processing and manufacturing industries began to decline. Something had to be done to reverse the trajectory of economic decline besieging the city. According to Smith three "essential ingredients" combined to stave off the deteriorating economic condition of the city. These three ingredients were: (1) a coalition of powerful business and civic leaders named the Greater Philadelphia Movement, (2) the government, at both federal, state, and local levels including the passage of the federal housing act of 1949, and the granting of a home rule charter in 1952 which gave Philadelphia increased autonomy in matters of local policy and generation of revenue, (3) private financial capital.<sup>5</sup> Leaders in business and government agreed that the future of the city was tied

to the success of the city center and the emergence of a downtown focused economy. It was within this environment of optimism and reform that Edmund Bacon, a Philadelphia born architect who later became the Executive Director of the City Planning Commission, emerged with a vision for Philadelphia's future. Bacon was one of the creative forces behind the promotion of the Better Philadelphia Exhibition of 1947 which was supported by the city and local business concerns. Displayed to the public (385,000 attended) were visions of what the city could look like in thirty years. The City Planning Director at the time commented that the exhibition "made people see the city as solvable".<sup>6</sup>

Edmund Bacon was one of the chief proponents of guiding development through the use of comprehensive plans. Nothing short of a "complete metamorphosis of the environment" was envisaged by Edmund Bacon, then Executive Director of City Planning for Philadelphia, as necessary in order to revitalize the city as an attractive place to live and work. The resurrection of Society Hill was the target of the residential component of a comprehensive

planning strategy for center city Philadelphia. Designated as part of an urban redevelopment area, Society Hill qualified for federal and state funds made available by the passage of Urban Renewal legislation. Public funds in combination with private capital financed the redevelopment of the area.

Kenneth Halpern writing in "Downtown U.S.A." has applauded Society Hill as a "lesson in the use of urban renewal to preserve and renew the prevailing character of a historic area".<sup>7</sup> Halpern's assessment of Society Hill points to an important factor in the success of Society Hill, the creation and selling of history. Scholars studying the phenomenon of gentrification and the "urban renaissance" have indicated that such transitions in neighborhoods are "catalyzed by certain physical attributes...most notable of which is that of historicity: an urban fabric that was once dismissed, or at least overlooked, now becomes celebrated for its architectural style and 'authentic' ambience".<sup>8</sup> Society Hill is exemplary of this trend. Advertisements aimed at selling the historicity of Society Hill to elites in the hope of drawing them "back to the city" abounded.

Examples of such ads included one placed in a program of the Philharmonic Hall at Lincoln Center in New York which read:

"This is Society Hill...the new fashionable community...famous for its prominent citizenry since before the Revolution...(we have) carefully preserved this tradition. The houses are 20th century in design and materials, but retain all the charm and flavor of Colonial America."<sup>9</sup>

In order to recreate the "charm and flavor of Colonial America" massive surgery of the building stock and displacement of former lower income residents was required. Buildings such as the warehouses and dilapidated eighteenth and nineteenth century row homes which were incongruous with the desired colonial image were either "selectively cleared" and replaced with an appropriate colonial vestige, or received cosmetic surgery to ensure congruity. Similarly, the predominantly lower income residents of Society Hill were told that, "they would have to compromise their interests with those of the city".<sup>10</sup>

Society Hill unequivocally succeeds in projecting the image that it has remained colonial in character continuously through its

forthcoming tercentenary celebration. I would however argue with Halpern that Society Hill is more representative of a palimpsest rather than a "renewal of prevailing character". One image, one history, and one form of the city was intended to supplant other equally legitimate periods in the history of the neighborhood; similar to a palimpsest where one text has been removed from a parchment in order to make room for another text, all evidence of the preceding text having been obliterated. A heterogeneous neighborhood containing varied building types and functions, and a diversity of people and lifestyles has been homogenized in accordance with the plans and visions of those in power. Inherent in the perception of the environment as a palimpsest which can be manipulated and transformed to suit the purpose or imagination of those in power is the erasure of other histories and social realities that either obstruct or are discordant with the realization of that vision.

Standing in the midst of the "colonial" period architecture and lantern lit streets is the incongruous, imposing edifice of the B'nai

Abraham synagogue. It was the discovery of the B'nai Abraham synagogue that inspired me to explore another period in the history of Society Hill. A period when these same alleyways and courtyards housed an immigrant population and teemed with poverty and disease, an area considered Philadelphia's worst slum. This little known and obscured experience is that of the Russian Jews who settled in Society Hill during the era of the great wave of immigration to this country at the turn of the century. The B'nai Abraham synagogue which was founded in 1882 stands today as the most prominent vestige of a neighborhood that at the turn of the century was considered Philadelphia's equivalent of the lower east side of New York, a densely populated neighborhood that served as the first area of settlement of the Russian Jewish immigrant of 1900.

The continued existence and survival of the B'nai Abraham synagogue is due to the tenacity and intransigence of a few men who assiduously attend the daily minyan for prayer. Their tenacity and struggle to maintain continuity and meaning in the midst of

dramatic social changes has ensured the survival of the synagogue, defying the imperatives of changing demographic, economic, and religious structures. Their struggle to maintain continuity through the survival of a synagogue that was once the center of orthodox Jewry in Philadelphia has provided a point of discovery, an opportunity, to transcend the homogeneous image of history - "the restoration of a prevailing character" - that Society Hill was designed to project. We are invited to discover and learn about the history of a neighborhood and the experience of a people that is largely vanished and in a few years time will be all but obliterated as the old synagogues are converted into condominiums and their devoted worshipers begin to pass away.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note that I am focusing only on the experience of one group of people who lived and contributed to the history of Society Hill. Other groups, in particular the black community of Philadelphia, has an important history and attachment to the neighborhood for it was here that William Still operated an underground railroad office, Octavius Catto was shot down, the

Mother Bethel A.M.E. Church was founded and Richard Allen remains buried today.<sup>12</sup>

The synagogue of B'nai Abraham and the remaining members of the congregation serve as the lens through which we can view the Jewish experience in Society Hill. The survival of the synagogue from 1882 to the present allows us to identify three periods in the social history of the Jews of Society Hill which correspond to larger demographic trends within the Jewish community of Philadelphia. These three periods are:

- (1) "The hub of Jewish life". The Russian Jew settles in Society Hill 1890-1910.
- (2) "From hot dogs to steak". The growth and decline of the Jewish community 1920-1965.
- (3) "They call it the Society Hill now". Urban Renewal and gentrification: The return of a younger generation of Jewish professionals and the changing nature of Jewish religious and communal life: 1965-1987

### **3. Society Hill: A Hidden History**

#### **"The Hub of Jewish Life"**

"Die Rushishe shul", B'nai Abraham, was founded in 1882 and was the first congregation organized by the Russian Jewish immigrants arriving in Philadelphia. These immigrants were part of the wave of Jews fleeing pogroms, persecution, and discrimination that were intensifying in Russia during the last half of the nineteenth century. Between 1881 and 1899 the United States received 547,850 Jewish immigrants, 36,390 (6.6%) of whom landed at the Port of Philadelphia. By 1904 it was estimated that 60,000 Jews had arrived at the port of Philadelphia.<sup>1</sup>

The catalyst for the en masse immigration of whole Jewish communities was the killing in March, 1881 of Czar Alexander II. The assassination spurred a series of riots and pogroms directed at the Jews who served as scapegoats for the angry mobs. Shortly

thereafter in May, 1882 the Russian government instituted the May laws which restricted the Jews to a limited area known as "the Pale of Settlement". In accordance with the edict Warsaw and other large cities were depopulated of Jews. In addition to geographic confinement the Jews were restricted occupationally, educationally, and politically. With few opportunities available and living as defenseless victims of pogroms and random violence the Jews only viable option was to emigrate. Recounts a present member of B'nei Abraham, a 93 year old man, of the Pale:

"It was horrible. I'll never forget the day the cossacks came and took my great grandfather, the Rabbi of the village. It was a shabbos morning. Just after services they came up to the shul and asked my great-grandfather to lead them through the forest on their horses. He refused, he wouldn't ride on shabbos, it's forbidden. So, they dragged him through through the woods. We found him hours later, he had died for Kiddush Hashem.(sanctification of G-d.) My father left soon thereafter for America, and we followed a few years later.

Fully one third or 2,000,000 of Russias 6,800,00 Jews had left the country by 1900.<sup>2</sup>

The first immigrants to reach the shores of Philadelphia arrived

aboard the steamship "Illinois" which carried a cargo of 360 Jewish refugees. The arrival of the "Illinois" marked the beginning of the great wave of East European Jewish immigration that was to continue until the First World War. The estimated 12-15000 Jews living in Philadelphia prior to 1870 would increase to 75,000 by 1900, and reached it's apogee of 200,000 Jews by 1918.<sup>3</sup> It has been estimated that between the years of 1884-1891 approximately 41,000 East European Jews settled in Philadelphia.<sup>4</sup>

The arriving Jews first settled in the area of Society Hill in the vicinity of Fourth and Lombard streets, one block from where B'nai Abraham now stands, and less than a mile from where the boats landed at the foot of Washington Avenue in South Philadelphia.

(the immigrants) settled in blind, bandbox alleys with hydrants and cisterns in the courtyards along Fourth and Fifth streets, south of Pine, a small area that was to become Philadelphia's equivalent of New York's Lower East Side. Here the vast majority were to remain until after World War II.<sup>5</sup>

The area of Society Hill where the immigrants first settled encompassed the entirety of Ward 5. The U.S. Census of 1900

delimited tracts according to the existing political division of the city. Thus Ward 5, a political division was coterminous with the census tract. The ward extended east to west from the Delaware River to Seventh Street, and north to south from Walnut Street to South Street. The census of 1890, 1900 and 1910 provide only a skeletal picture of what Society Hill was like. Furthermore, it is important to note that no question concerning religious affiliation is included in the census, thus Jewish demography has been in the words of one scholar "plagued by a lack of feasible data".<sup>6</sup> The closest approximation of the Jewish population available from the census is the number of foreign born population of Russian origin. Of course not all Jews are of Russian origin, and by the first generation the number of remaining foreign born is considerably reduced.

Table 1: Population Characteristics according to the Census from 1890-1910.

<u>Ward 5</u>	<u>1890</u>	<u>1900</u>	<u>1910</u>
Total Population	16987	16868	17006
Total White Population	14619(86%)	15617(93%)	16243(96%)
Total Black Population	2335(14%)	1251(7.4%)	763(4%)
Total Foreign Born	5915(35%)	7133(42.3%)	8426 (50%)
Russian Born	N.A.	N.A.	5149 (61%)

We can assume that the majority of the foreign born in 1890 and 1900 were from Russia given our knowledge that the area had a large number of Jews Also, the census of 1910 which does have data on country of origin shows that the majority of the foreign born were in fact from Russia, and thus most probably were Jews. The peak of the population of Ward 5, the area of Society Hill, was reached in 1910, with 17,006 inhabitants, 5149 or of whom were Russian born (thus we can assume Jewish). This period also marked

the peak in population of all of the wards in South Philadelphia.

Written accounts of the neighborhood are more fruitful in regard to estimates of the Jewish population of the area. According to Dr. Charles Bernheimer who conducted studies of the burgeoning Russian Jewish immigrant communities in the United States at the turn of the century, the area surrounding the Young Women's Union which was located in the heart of Society Hill on Pine Street was, "Composed of more than eighty percent of Russian Jews ... It was literally the center of the Jewish population of the area."<sup>7</sup> Statistics of public school enrollment provide a rough approximation of the Jewish population. The public schools of the immediate area, which included one located directly across from the Young Women's Union, "Had a Jewish population of 85 to 90 percent."<sup>8</sup>

Table 2: Jewish Enrollment in Public Schools of Society Hill 1900<sup>9</sup>

<u>School</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>% Jewish</u>
Horace Binney	Spruce blow Sixth	75
Kindergarten	" "	76
James Forten	Sixth above Lombard ( 1/2 block from B'nai Abraham)	91
Wm. Meredith	5th & Fitzwater ( 2 blocks below Society Hill)	95

(source: Bernheimer, The Russian Jew in the United States, p.202)

The Russian Jewish population although originally settling in the area of Society Hill did not remain confined to this area, spreading southward as the numbers of immigrants arriving continued to rapidly increase. In addition to Ward 5, Society Hill, the wards of South Philadelphia including the First, Second, Third, Fourth, and Seventh, all of which housed the growing Russian Jewish population also were home to other immigrant groups. The total area of the six wards covered 2.3 miles, 1/50th of the total area of the city, and held 165,385 people 1/8th of the total population of the city. In 1907 the Jewish population constituted the largest ethnic group in the South Philadelphia area, counting an estimated 55,00 people.<sup>10</sup>

In a period of twelve years since the arrival of the Illinois, the Jewish population of South Philadelphia had grown from 300 to 30,000.<sup>11</sup>

Immigrants settled in the area largely because of the existence of cheap housing and close proximity to the landing site. The area of Society Hill and the few blocks immediately contiguous to the neighborhood came to be regarded as, "One of the vilest Jewish immigrant neighborhoods."<sup>12</sup> Numerous descriptions of the neighborhood by settlement house workers, Jewish communal workers, and journalists all attest to the blighted living conditions found in the area. Indicative of the blighted, multi-problem nature of the area was the location between 1899-1910 of six settlement houses. One of these settlement houses, the University Settlement House on Alaska Street, pioneered the "encounter with the slum" that was part of a city wide movement to "efface the slum and upgrade the condition of the immigrant."<sup>13</sup> One settlement house worker described some of the more decrepit, overcrowded streets of the neighborhood:

"Alaska, Gaskill, and Kater streets (all within Society Hill) were notorious for their decaying wooden "bandboxes", the offal and animal excrement encrusted in their wooden sidewalks and cobblestone alleyways".<sup>14</sup>

Society Hill although predominantly Jewish did contain within it a heterogeneous population of previous immigrant groups who like the Jews moved to the area as the first in a successive wave of domiciles, and a significant Black population that had lived in the area since the time of the founding of the city. In addition to housing a heterogeneous racial and ethnic population, "neighborhoods within a neighborhood", the beginnings of a residentially stratified Jewish community were developing. Two accounts written at the turn of the century, one by the head of the College Settlement, Anna F. Davies, and the other by Charles Bernheimer although reflecting the xenophobia and prejudices of the time, provide sketches of the neighborhood illustrating both the heterogeneity and the seeds of intragroup stratification:

"A narrow dirty street (7th & Lombard), a crowded alley filled with children and adults, with dogs and cats, with garbage and refuse, the air cries with rough language...Next to this is Mom Hewitt with her counter of cold victuals; farther on blind Susen preaching. It all seem like a show, a spectacle

in which we have no part because we are on the surface of it, ignorant of it all, unable to understand, only repelled...The Negroes...have moved west, and Russians, Poles, Hebrews, and diverse nationalities...have strongly entrenched themselves".<sup>15</sup>

"It ( the Russian Jews) has swarmed into Pine and Spruce Streets, formerly occupied by Old Philadelphia families. It has, become in some cases, more respectable and less dangerous morally...Some of the well-to-do Jews are in the northern portion of the section on Spruce and Pine Streets. Lombard is lower grade, especially because of its mixture with lower class negroes.. South Street is a bee-hive of business activity among the Jewish people...Of the north and south streets, Fourth contains the most thickly settled Jewish population... Immediately west of the the northern portion of the Jewish section are numerous negroes, and southwest is predominantly Italian...In the northern portion of this down-town district the Jewish people mingle with the left-overs of Americans.<sup>16</sup>

In 1881 Philadelphia was in the midst of a severe housing shortage. The immigrants arriving in Society Hill found themselves crowded into small row homes on narrow streets and alleyways. A study conducted to examine housing conditions in the city found that an average of 9.17 persons lived in a house in the Jewish section, compared to the city average of 5.4 persons per house. There was no plumbing in the homes and cold water was supplied by the communal

hydrant on the outside, usually in the back courtyards of the tenements. The public bath house was located at Fourth and Gaskill, in the heart of Society Hill. In addition, many private bath houses opened to meet the overwhelming demand for bathing facilities. Remembers the 93 year old B'nei Abraham congregant:

"We didn't have a toilet or a bath. In the courtyard between the homes there was a dump toilet and a spicket that two buildings had to share, that was it. It was freezing to go to the bathroom. Once a week, on Friday, right before Shabbos my father would take us to the bathhouse."<sup>17</sup>

The neighborhood quickly adapted to the newest wave of immigrants. Palpable signs of Jewish occupancy were visible as the, "House fronts were converted into shops emblazoned with signs in Hebrew characters...Familiar signs in Hebrew characters designated where Kosher food could be bought(and)...Other signs lettered in Russian, Polish, and Yiddish, advertised bath houses."<sup>18</sup>

Immigrants found work in three principal occupations ,(1) in the needle industry; where they worked in sweatshops manufacturing suits, overalls,etc.,(2) in cigar making, and (3) as merchants and

peddlers, opening shops on South Street, and operating pushcarts on Fourth Street. On the stoops in front of houses for want of any other location were found handcraftsmen, umbrella repair men, and cobblers practicing their trade.<sup>19</sup> Sweatshops, small manufacturing, and cigar making plants dotted Society Hill, an area of considerably mixed land uses. South Fourth Street from Lombard to Monroe, a four block stretch, was the center of the sweatshop district, and was to become the center of the Jewish business district, bustling with pushcarts, delis, bakeries, and butchers. Today the area remains a garment and linen district retaining a hint of the what that the area must have been like in 1900.

It was within the immigrant neighborhood of Society Hill, the densely populated, overcrowded, deteriorating "ghetto", that Congregation B'nai Abraham emerged to serve as the religious home for the Yiddish speaking Jews. It was both the oldest and largest of the Eastern European congregations in the area<sup>20</sup> B'nai Abraham was one of a profusion of forty five places of worship that were reported to have existed within a half square mile south of Spruce

Street within the neighborhood of Society Hill.<sup>21</sup> These places of worship were not all synagogues as we might imagine them. These congregations did not own large buildings, hire a Rabbi, and have a structured and formal organization. On the contrary, most of these places of worship called "chebroth" were similar to small societies. Many of these smaller synagogues were an outgrowth of the "landmanschaft" which were fraternal associations of people from the same town. The landmanschaft served a vital function to the immigrant community. Firstly, they provided a vehicle of adjustment for the immigrant, allowing the immigrant to adapt to an alien environment. A sense of security and continuity was provided through association with fellow townsmen from the "old country" thus countering the disorienting impact of an urban industrial society. The functions of the early landmanschaft were to aid the sick, provide death benefits and a place of burial, to provide for the exchange of news and correspondence from the homeland, and to establish a social network for those from the same area.<sup>22</sup> Many landmanschaftn evolved into synagogues. A living example of the evolution and merger of two landmanschaftn is the Society Hill

Synagogue, a Conservative synagogue that caters to the predominantly younger generation of Jews who recently moved "back" to the neighborhood. Originally a Baptist church, it was purchased in 1910 by the Roumanian American congregation and later was merged with Congregation Agudath Achim, both of which were landmanschaftn established at the turn of the century. Many of the landmanschaftn looking for buildings to house their congregations would buy or rent church buildings whose worshippers had moved away. In fact, B'nai Abraham originally met in a converted church until moving to its present building which was designed by Philadelphia architect Charles Lewis Bolton. <sup>23</sup>

The evolutionary process from landsmanschaft to synagogue or "shul" was explicated in some detail by the foremost observer of Russian Jewish immigrant life at the time, the heretofore extensively quoted Dr. Charles Bernheimer:

"The founding of a congregation usually emerged along these lines: A few individuals, usually as such as came from the same town or district, feeling the necessity of some concerted action, banded together to form a beneficial society ordinarily bearing the name of the town or district whence most of the members came. The aim of such societies in the

first instance was to assist financially any of the members who might be sick, to provide burial for the dead, and a death benefit for the widow or orphan of the deceased. After the society became strengthened in numbers, a hall was hired for meeting purposes and was converted into a praying room. With the approach of the high holy days, a season when every Jew feels the need of a synagogue, seats were sold to its members and in this way revenue was obtained to purchase a building. The building was altered for purposes of Jewish worship and the society imperceptively turned into a congregation, retaining, however, for a long period, its beneficial elements. The original beneficial society was called a Chevra and the final form a congregation. The main difference between the Chevra and the Congregation is the fact that the former has no special place of worship, whereas the later has."<sup>24</sup>

The synagogues which abounded in Society Hill and South Philadelphia practiced a form of worship that could be considered Orthodox in the sense that they were tied to a traditional Jewish religious practice. Robert Tabak in his analysis of the evolving nature of Orthodox Judaism in Philadelphia concluded that, "While only a minority had clear theological definitions of Judaism, the synagogues they went to, their way of eating, their patterns of holiday and life cycle observance like their language, tied them to traditional Judaism."<sup>25</sup> The form of worship was communal in nature with lay officers leading services and conducting the

business of the synagogue. The service was more personal, less inhibited, and to many, quite indecorous.<sup>26</sup>

B'nai Abraham with a congregation of two hundred members and daily classes which could boast an attendance of 80 students held the prestigious position of being the "center and pace-setter for all of down-town Jewish life"<sup>27</sup> Written in the program of the fifty-fifth anniversary celebration of B'nai Abrahams founding is a description of an event that attests to the prominence that the synagogue had in the immigrant community. The year is 1903:

"(we heard news of the) Kishnieff Massacre. A day of fasting was proclaimed; the stores on South Street were voluntarily closed; in the middle of a week-day the community flocked to the synagogue and filled it to overflowing."<sup>28</sup>

Another reason for the preeminence of B'nai Abraham among the Orthodox synagogues of Society Hill , and among the Philadelphia Orthodox community at large, was due to the respect and status accorded the spiritual leader of the congregation, Rabbi Bernard L. Levinthal. B'nai Abraham along with three other congregations

brought Rabbi Levinthal from Lithuania in 1891 after the death of B'nei Abraham's first Rabbi, who was Levinthal's father in law. Rabbi Levinthal was to become the unofficial leader of Philadelphia Orthodoxy. Rabbi Moshe Shapiro described Levinthal's position of influence and authority as one such that, " No matter was undertaken in Philadelphia Jewry except by the initiative, assistance, or support of Rabbi Levinthal."<sup>29</sup> Rabbi Levinthal's influence and reputation was not confined to the Orthodox community of Philadelphia. Levinthal had established a reputation in the Philadelphia Jewish community at large, was among the leaders of Orthodox Judaism in the United States, and had achieved national stature outside of the Jewish community. Rabbi Levinthal was the only Rabbi among a delegation of American Jews sent to the Paris peace talks after World War I. In local matters Levinthal was instrumental in the establishment of the Vaad Hakashruth,( a board that supervised and ensured that meat was slaughtered according to Jewish law) as well as taking a leading role in strengthening Jewish religious education. He was also one of the founders of the American Jewish Committee. The Union of Orthodox Rabbis of America of which

Levinthal was a founder met at B'nei Abraham for their second annual conference in the early 1900's.<sup>30</sup>

Levinthal lived in Society Hill on Pine Street in a house purchased for him by the synagogue. A biographer of Dov Bernard Revel, the former president of Yeshiva College and a close friend of Levinthal's, wrote of Levinthal's home on Pine Street:

"The home (716 Pine Street) was a four story house with very large rooms which always seemed to be filled with people. The young rabbi (Revel) joined the master in the dining room where Rabbi Levinthal dealt with representatives of Talmud Torahs (Jewish religious schools), shohatim (butchers), and charitable institutions."<sup>31</sup>

Rabbi Levinthal whose role was singular among Orthodox leaders of this period remained rabbi of B'nei Abraham for 61 years until his death in 1952. The honor and reverence given to Levinthal combined with the size of the synagogue and it's distinction as the Russian shul as opposed to the landmanschaftn which were more representative of the the villages, all combined to make B'nei

Abraham what one congregant referred to as, "The number one shul in Phila."<sup>32</sup>

I have referred to this period of Society Hill's history as the development of an immigrant community. Accordingly, I have referred to the Russian Jews who came to this country at the turn of the century as immigrants. An important qualification of the term immigrant is necessary. The Russian Jews were more akin to refugees in the sense that they left their homes in Russia not primarily as the result of a voluntary decision to search for wealth in America but rather because they saw no other choice but to emigrate from Russia or remain subjected to persecution and discrimination. The post 1882 Jewish immigrant coming to America differed in this respect from the German Jewish immigrants of the early and mid nineteenth century and had vastly different needs. The Russian Jew arrived without money, ill clothed, and emotionally scarred. The new frontier of America was but one more of a series of alienating, although concomitantly liberating, events in the life of the Russian Jew. It called upon him to search for fellow

villagers—"the landsman"—in order to build a sense of security in an environment filled with uncertainty and trepidation.

Immediately upon their arrival in Philadelphia the Russian Jews had begun to develop the foundations for an organizational network responsive to their spiritual and material needs. Equally important, the Russian Jewish immigrant needed to establish the rudiments of community which were a psychological imperative if they were both to overcome the traumatic loss of community due to migration, and simultaneously adapt to the demands of an urban, industrial society. B'nai Abraham, the other synagogues, and the landmanschaftn comprised one component of an extensive network of self-initiated organizations that arose to address almost every aspect of the immigrants spiritual, intellectual, philanthropic, educational, and recreational needs. Ranging from the small threads of community, the landmanschaftn, to larger umbrella organizations which served the entire Russian Jewish population, the immigrants initiated a self constructed network of organizations all working towards the end of establishing a community—a supportive whole.

In an earlier study I compiled a list of over 100 organizations that had been organized in the immigrant community of Society Hill between 1885-1900.<sup>25</sup> This list ranges from Matzoh and Fuel societies to Yiddish newspapers, from the Yiddish theatre to the establishment of a Jewish maternity hospital. When one looks at the list of organizations that appear in the appendix and locates them on the map of immigrant institutions of 1900 you can begin to get a feel for the different life embodied within the same geographic area of a city . This community called by many "the ghetto" was to serve as both a point of entry and exit into the larger urban industrial society of which the immigrants were to become an integral part. The "ghetto" allowed for continuity and change; maintaining a critical equilibrium for the immigrant as he made the transition and adjustment to the demands and culture of a new world. It is important to understand the immigrant neighborhood of Society Hill if we are to understand the context from which the Jewish community evolved to it's present form. For it was within the Jewish community of Society Hill and South Philadelphia that the

seeds of Jewish religious and communal life in Philadelphia were planted, and were to take on their particular form.

I feel that it is important at this point of the thesis to reflect on the process of discovery covered thus far. The reconstruction of the history of the Jewish immigrant neighborhood was made possible through inquiry into the presence of a vestige, the B'nai Abraham synagogue, existing in Society Hill, 1987. If we are to understand the synagogue's history we must learn about the function and meaning that the synagogue played in the lives of the people who organized and contributed to its development. We cannot divorce the building from the context within which it emerged and matured. The history of the building serves as a portal to the history of the Jewish experience in Society Hill. The reconstruction of history is now complimented by the memory of the remaining members of the congregation as we move from the settlement of the immigrant community of Society Hill at the turn of the century to the nascent Jewish community of 1920-1940. Our exploration of history through oral accounts given by the congregants who presently attend the

daily minyan at B'nei Abraham is aided by the use of census data and, as with the reconstruction of the immigrant community, the use of accounts or reports written during the period of time under study.

## **"From hot dogs to steak": The Growth and Decline of the Jewish Community 1920-1965**

"Like drugstores each corner had a shul" (synagogue) recalls Irv, a long time member of B'nai Abraham. Irv comes to the minyan every weekday morning before going to work on the properties he owns in the neighborhood. Thinking back to the neighborhood that he grew up in he recalls, "It was all Jews down here, I remember when there were different synagogues for every occupation, for instance, B'nai Rubin was a prestigious shul that the wool and linen merchants from 4th street went to, they had money just like Har Zion today." (a wealthy suburban synagogue) <sup>1</sup>

Speaking with other members of Bnai Abraham and some of the older Jewish men who still have stores in the area, all remember the neighborhood as a center of Jewish life, described by many as a ghetto.

Remembers Willie, a man in his early seventies who was

bar-mitzvah in B'nei Abraham, " The shuls used to be packed... We had 900 members when I led the choir back in the forties". Sam Auspitz, the owner of the Famous Delicatessen which has been in the neighborhood since 1921, recalls, "There weren't enough shuls for all of the Jews down here... During the high holidays they would have to pitch tents on 4th and 5th Streets so that people could daven(pray)."

Jewish life outside of the synagogues was equally vibrant. Fourth, Fifth, and South streets were the heart of the Jewish shopping area. Kosher butchers, delis, bakeries, wedding halls, and tea houses proliferated within an eight block radius of the corner of Fifth and South. The "hub of Jewish life" of the immigrant neighborhood of Society Hill in 1900 flourished throughout the 1920's and 1930's.

Jack is an 82 year old man was born in Ukraine and came to this country in 1923. He is an energetic, youthful man with bright blue eyes, a sardonic wit, and a furtive look that always makes you wonder whether he is telling the truth or putting you to the test.

Jack operates a stand where he sells all sorts of new and used clothing, house supplies, and an occasional piece of luggage. He has stood at the same spot on Fourth Street for 62 years. He talks about Fourth Street, Philadelphia's equivalent of the Lower East Side of New York's Mulberry Street:

"It was all pushcart all the way down to Catherine Street... Everyone had one or two pushcarts. I started out here selling rags... The street was crowded you could hardly move, everyone trying to make a buck. It was all Jewish back then, there were some Italians and Blacks too but mostly poor Jews, an immigrant section"

Sam Auspitz, who came to the United States from Hungary in the same year as Jack, remembers Fourth Street:

"It was all pushcarts...Was a bargain street, an area for bargains. There were seven delis just on Fourth Street. It was very competitive, used to fight for pennies...big price wars...This was the big bargain area where people would come to shop, a poorer neighborhood not like the Jewish area uptown, that was more refined."

Dr. Steinberg a 93 year old member of the congregation who came to this country in 1905, remembers doing all of his shopping on Fourth Street as well as participating in the "Torah parades" that took

place on the street:

"Everything was on Fourth Street, Kosher butchers, the baker, it was like the Ninth Street market is to the Italians... When a shul would purchase a new Torah they would have a parade down Fourth Street, it was a big event."

Where Fourth Street a crowded, pushcart lined street that served as an outdoor bazaar, Fifth Street had a different commercial function. Fifth Street housed the wedding halls, restaurants, some small retail shops, and store front offices. The Jewish Forward, a Yiddish newspaper, had it's offices on Fifth Street, it's name remains emblazoned on the steps of the building that is now a French restaurant. Everyone I spoke with remembers the weddings on Fifth Street. They speak of the great banquets on Saturday nights that were held in halls . As Leon, the 82 year old Gabai or sexton of the synagoue, recalls, " Everyone would go to the weddings on Fifth Street." Leon also tells of the restaurants that lined the street, "You had every kind of restaurant you could ask for, meat, dairy., you name it is was on Fifth Street... I started out at a stand on Fourth Street in front of the bakery and ended up going into buisness with a partner. We bought a restaurant the "colonial" on Fifth Street, it was

a Jewish style restaurant and bar... I started on Fourth and ended on Fifth."

South Street was the commercial spine of the neighborhood. Almost all of the stores were owned by Jews. Here was located Snellenbergs clothing store about which historian Max Whiteman writes:

"Fifth and South, intersected by Passyunk Avenue, had emerged as an important commercial center and soon became the envy and an ambition of the street hawker and pushcart peddler who stood awed by the great Snellenburg clothing store." <sup>2</sup>

Hat stores, shoe stores, furniture stores, bedding stores, and delis were all to be found on this busy thoroughfare. South street was not only a shopping center for the immediate Jewish neighborhood but also drew people from all over South Philadelphia. Also located on South Street and intersecting alleyways were the "Russian tea houses." Remembers Sam Auspitz, "The tee houses on Gaskill Street(one block over from South Street) was where you'd go to play poker and kibbitz." Leon similarly remembers the tea houses, "You'd

sit and play domino's...You could get a full meal there too, Jewish cooking.... During the prohibition the tea houses would serve a little wine and some schnapps, it was like a speakeasy."

The memories of Jewish life of Society Hill from 1920-1930 are similar to the accounts written of the Jewish immigrant neighborhood in 1900. The reminiscences of the vibrant Jewish life embodied in the neighborhood all took place in an environment of poverty, substandard housing, overcrowded living conditions, and at times hostile relations with other poor ethnic groups living within the area. Remembers Dr. Steinberg who lived on the border between the Jewish and Polish neighborhoods:

"The neighborhood was rife with hoodlums...it was a tolerant area but it was a poor, tough area... The only reason I didn't get beat up was because I had blue eyes, they didn't think I was Jewish...When I became a doctor years later the only way I could travel in the area at night was to carry my medical bag, otherwise they'd have bothered me."

Gedalia, who comes to synagogue every sabbath morning and remains inside the sanctuary until sundown so as not to travel the considerable distance to his home on prohibited on the sabbath,

described the neighborhood to me:

" Used to be a great Jewish neighborhood...but it was a slum,  
a dirty area with wooden houses...it was a dump."

Sam Auspitz concurs, describing the area as a, "Dilapidated, cheap  
neighborhood... You could buy a house for \$300-\$400".

Confirming the general depiction of a deteriorating neighborhood as  
described by past residents, was a study of the Neighborhood Center  
conducted in 1940 by Julius Grier. The Neighborhood Center study  
covered four wards in South Philadelphia, one of which was Ward 5,  
the neighborhood of Society Hill. The Neighborhood Center itself was  
located one block south of South Street on Bainbridge Street. The  
study found that as of 1939 , 96% of the residential structures in  
the area had been constructed before 1905 and 23.9% of the houses  
were built prior to the Civil War. This compared to 38.4% citywide.  
The number of new accommodations built in Society Hill between  
1900-1940 was 9% of the total number of homes in the area  
compared to 61.6% of the total houses recently constructed  
citywide.<sup>3</sup> The study also found that 66.4% of the structures were

considered substandard, nearly 43% of the family accommodations had no toilets. It was also found that 11.6% of all of Philadelphia's demolitions took place within these wards. Consequently there were over 100 vacant lots in the area.

The study concluded with a dour assessment of the Russian Jewish community's physical environment, similar to the sketches of the neighborhood provided by present members of B'nai Abraham when asked to describe the "old neighborhood":

"In housing and living conditions, the area appears to be one of the worst in the city. Much of the housing is substandard and predates the Civil War...The entire area has the appearance of neglect-is blighted and transitory in character...All in all, the area presents a pattern of least desirability for residence since it contains all the indices of blight...(the study area) is therefore in need of complete rehabilitation and redevelopment."<sup>4</sup>

The impetus for movement out of the neighborhood was therefore attributable in large part to the harshness of the living conditions. Geographic mobility-the movement out of the neighborhood-was also fueled by an emphasis on social mobility and "bettering

yourself". The immigrant Jew saw America as a land of opportunity . Unlike Russia, where a Jew was confined to the Pale, a Jew in America could earn an education and attain success, both of income and status. Immigrant parents whose goal it was to open a business and make money, did not want their children to enter the business they had struggled to build. Instead they pushed their children to study hard and earn a degree.

Sam Auspitz, who at one time owned seven prosperous delis, explained to me:

"The major goal in life was to send the children to college...The greatest hope for a Jewish family was to have children that would grow up to be professionals...All your money went to their education, it's from our tradition."

Jack, a peddler on Fourth Street all of his life, voices the same commitment to educating the children so that they could become "professionals":

"I was always poor, and I'm still poor, but my kid's a C.P.A. accountant and lives in a beautiful suburb in Jersey... All people wanted in those days was for their kids to go to college, you put away all that you had for the kids."

Jews in the prosperous 1920's achieved economic successes. Within a single generation the Jews achieved affluence and moved into the middle class of American society. The concomitant of occupational mobility was geographic mobility. Jews moved from the "ghetto" to more affluent areas of the city and suburbs. Here they "re-concentrated" once again creating a Jewish religious and communal life as they had done upon their arrival to this country.

As the first area of Russian Jewish settlement in Philadelphia, Society Hill and South Philadelphia experienced rapid losses of Jewish population as people became more affluent. Success in business, the rise to the middle class or white collar status, the emphasis on education and social advancement for the children, and the opening up of the suburbs after the Second World War all precipitated the movement of the Jews from the neighborhood beginning in the 1930's. From a peak of 55,000 Jews in South Philadelphia in 1904 the Jewish population of the area shrank to 28,000 by 1944, a drop in Jewish population of 60%. Jews continued

to live in steadily decreasing numbers in the area of Fourth and Fifth Streets, from Spruce Street in Society Hill to Oregon Avenue in deep South Philadelphia.<sup>5</sup> Available estimates of the Jewish population indicate that although the loss of Jewish population was more rapid and showed the most considerable decline it was part of a larger trend in population loss in the area.

Table 3: Trends in Population of Society Hill: Ward 5

	<u>1910</u>	<u>1920</u>	<u>1930</u>	<u>1940</u>	<u>Change 1910-40</u>
Total	17006	12138	9683	7142	-9864 (-138%)
Jewish	5149	N.A.	1245	700	-4449 (-636%)
Black	763	1155	1155	759	- 4 (- .5%)

Three trends are illustrated by the above chart. First, the total population of the area has declined precipitously, losing 9876 residents in a thirty year period. Second, the Jewish population experienced the greatest proportional decline of the major groups residing in the area. Both in terms of actual numbers of people lost (4449) and percentage change(-636%) over a thirty year period, the

Jewish population clearly exhibits a swift movement out of the neighborhood. Finally, we see that a substantial minority of Black residents has maintained a steady presence over the same thirty year period.

The Neighborhood Center Study from which the estimates of the Jewish population are drawn concluded that:

" The decline in population has been considerable, with the Jewish group showing a more rapid shrinkage than any of the other ethnic groups...The Jewish population in the intensive area ( the four wards of which Society Hill is one) has shown the most considerable decline...Young married couples are particularly eager to move out, the neighborhood is regarded by most of them as responsible for lowering their social status....If the present rate of decline continues, there will be practically no Jewish people in the district in another decade or two."<sup>6</sup>

All of the people I spoke with presented a simple story of the process that accounted for the decline of the Jewish neighborhood. People made money and consequently they were able to afford to buy a house in nicer areas; a more suitable environment to raise the kids. The shopowners who used to live on top of the stores

(according to the 1940 census over 30% of the family accommodations in the area were categorized as "Business with Dwelling") moved out to the suburbs but kept their place of business in the neighborhood. The parents emphasis on education and on becoming a "professional" led the majority of second generation Russian Jews to careers outside of the family store. When the parents retired the stores closed, and the neighborhood was left both without Jewish residents and Jewish businesses; the demise of the "hub of Jewish life" was complete within one generation. Dr. Steinberg's retelling of why Jews moved out is representative of the group:

"The Jews became more prosperous. They go into business, become wealthy and move out to the suburbs... This all happened starting in the 1930's and especially after the war."

Jack, the peddler from 4th Street, describes why in his view the Jewish merchant district died:

"Children of immigrants didn't want pushcart jobs, to be "pushcartniks"... The people who owned stores moved away in the 1940's, when they died there was no-one to take their place, the kids didn't want the business."

The people that I talked with were happy to be able to move out of

the neighborhood. A move out meant a move up. Society Hill was associated with low status, of being a penniless immigrant with no choice but to live in the crowded ghetto. Despite the frustrations and initial deprivation and harshness of American life which often led people to pronounce a curse on Columbus - *a klug tzu Columbus*- America nonetheless offered liberating possibilities. Movement out of the neighborhood was movement into American society and symbolized in part the entrance of the immigrant Russian Jew into the mainstream of middle class American life where Jewish and American values were synthesized to form the beginnings of a distinctive American Jewish character.

Wille, the treasurer and former choir director of B'nei Abraham moved out of the neighborhood after the Second World War. He described to me his reaction to moving out of Society Hill:

" I was happy to get away...like going from a hot dog to a steak, bettering yourself."

Dr. Steinberg voices a common denominator already discussed in the decision to move, the wish to improve the environment where the

children would grow up. Lest I was too sentimental Dr. Steinberg emphasized to me that it's ridiculous to imagine that there was anything to miss about the "old neighborhood"

" I wanted to raise my children in a neighborhood that was safe so I moved to Wynnefield in the late 1930's.( Wynnefield was one of the second area of Jewish settlement. It was an all Jewish neighborhood of tree lined streets and predominantly single family homes). There was nothing to miss down here, that's ridiculous The only thing I liked about the area was that it was the place I grew up and it was near the river...like the Egyptians who had to be near the Nile, I liked being near the Delaware..it's my Nile"

The Jewish migration out of Society Hill began within the relatively short span of thirty years from the time they arrived. As table 3 illustrated the Jewish population of Society Hill, Ward 5, had decreased in a period of twenty years from 5149 in 1910 to 1245 in 1930, a loss of 3904 Jewish residents. An additional 545 Jews moved out in the period between 1930-1940. Estimates of the Jewish population after 1940 are "guestimates" as the only source available was the Census. The 1950 Census reports that in Tract 005, the area of Society Hill, there were 681 persons of Russian origin constituting 9.8% of the total population of the tract. In 1960

the Foreign Born population of Russian origin totaled 490 persons, although this constituted 14.5% of the total population as the tract lost over 3000 residents. The sizeable loss in population during this period was probably attributable to the initiation of urban renewal in the area which entailed wholesale clearance of structures and displacement of people. The decline in the numbers of foreign born or descended people of Russian origin (which we must use as a rough approximation of the Jewish population) seems consistent with the prevailing trend of Jewish population decline in the area. After the Second World War it appeared as if Grier's prognostication that practically no Jewish people would be left in the area in a decade or two was quickly becoming a reality.

The years following the Second World War until the beginning of the urban renewal of Society Hill in the mid to late 1950's constituted the next distinctive period in the history of the neighborhood. This same period is known as "the Golden Age" of American Jewry. It was a time when the children and grandchildren of immigrants found "education, careers, and affluence that their fathers could only

dream of.<sup>7</sup> A map of the social geography of the Jewish population of Philadelphia of 1950 would be virtually unrecognizable to someone reading a map of Jewish settlement in Philadelphia in 1900.

By the early 1950's the Jews had moved out of the areas of the first and even second settlement to the outlying areas of the newly constructed Northeast section of the city and post war suburbia. A 1957 Federation of Jewish Agencies study estimated the distribution of the Jewish population of Philadelphia as residing in six principal areas:

<b>Olney-West Oak Lane</b>	<b>48,300</b>
<b>Wynnefield-Overbrook</b>	<b>30,000</b>
<b>Germantown-Chestnut Hill</b>	<b>16,300</b>
<b>Eastern &amp; Western suburbs</b>	<b>43,400</b>
<b>Northeast Phila.</b>	<b>48,300</b>

The total number of Jews residing in these six areas comprised 75%

of the Jewish population of 250,000 in the Philadelphia metropolitan area. The findings of the study pointed to the fact that "before long there would be few reminders of the early, large, immigrant Jewish ghetto in South Philadelphia"<sup>6</sup>

Accompanying the movement of Jews was a pattern of synagogue relocation. Many synagogues rather than closing their doors permanently when the Jewish population of an area declined, would follow the movement of Jews and reestablish the congregation at a new location. B'nai Abraham did not move or close its doors as Jews left Society Hill. Although the majority of the forty five places of worship in Society Hill counted in 1893 were gone, a significant number remained after WWII. The following table lists the synagogues existing in Society Hill in four periods; 1900, 1955, 1965, 1987:

**Table 4: Synagogues of Society Hill in Four Periods of It's History<sup>9</sup>**

Synagogues remaining after 1955 are marked with an asterisk\*

<u>Name of congregation in 1900</u>	<u>1955</u>	<u>1965</u>	<u>1987</u>
Congregation Israel	Anshe Hungarian	*	
Congregation Agudas Achim	Anshe Neziner	*	
Congregation Ahavas Achim	Beth Jacob		
Congregation Ahavas Chesed	Bnai Abraham	*	*
Congregation Ahavas Zion	Bnai Rubin		
Congregation B'nei Abraham	Kesher Israel	*	
Congregation B'nai Jacob	Poale Zedek		
Congregation B'nei Joseph	Roumaninan Am.	*	*
Congregation B'nei Shram	Viina	*	*
Congregation B'nei Zion			
Congregation Beth Israel			
Congregation B'nai Rubin			
Congregation Emunath Israel			
Congregation Kesher Israel			
Congregation Ohev Zedek			
Congregation Shomre Sheboth			
Congregation Tiferes Israel			
Viina Synagogue (1905)			

There seem to be three reasons for the continued existence of these orthodox synagogues in an area of dwindling Jewish population. The first reason is that of the Jews who remained in the area most were older and traditional in their religious observance. Although small in total number there were enough devoted among them to maintain a small congregation which in Jewish law can consist of as few the ten men necessary for a minyan. The second reason is that many

stores remained in Jewish hands and consequently many of the Jewish storeowners although living in other areas of the city continued to attend the "downtown shuls". This is particularly true of the period before the urban renewal of the neighborhood when the food distribution center of Philadelphia was located on 2nd Street in Society Hill. Many of the food merchants and kosher butchers would walk over to the synagogues located on Fourth And Fifth Streets near Lombard Street to pray in the morning before going to work or in the evening before they returned home. Finally, many of the members of the synagogues of Society Hill who had moved out of the area would return on weekends for sabbath services. They maintained their attachment and commitment to the synagogue even though they had moved and possibly even belonged to the newer Conservative synagogues characteristic of the new areas of Jewish settlement. Leon somewhat irritated by what he perceived to be my insinuation that the synagogue should have closed, summarized the situation for me:

" We had no reason to move or close up. The buildings paid up, and even when the businesses closed up or people moved they still came back. We don't owe anybody, just got a new roof, spent \$7000 on repairs...Why should we close? A lot of the

members are the sons and grandsons of the original members, they don't live in the area anymore, but they keep a membership. Why not, for \$25."

The U.S. Census from the years 1940 and 1950 shows that as the Jews left Society Hill the Black population which had always comprised 10% of the area expanded to 20% by 1950, increasing from 759 persons to 1363 persons. Housing in the neighborhood remained below the average standard of the city. As of the 1950 U.S. Census more than 30% of the dwelling units were in need of major repairs or were without private bath as compared to 12% of all dwelling units in the city. There had been no new construction of housing units in the area since before the First World War. The 1950 U.S. Census counted 98% of all structures in the area were built before 1919. South Street the once bustling shopping center of the area was becoming desolate as stores closed and no form of business emerged to take their place. Remembers

Willie who owned a shoe store on 5th & South, the former "hub of Jewish life":

" The street (South Street) started dying back in the 50's, 60's. We sold the store and moved out. People were afraid to walk, they wouldn't shop down here anymore."

Leon recalls South Street and walking to shul in the 1950's and 1960's:

"South Street was very bad back then. The area was much more dangerous than it is now, I used to be afraid to walk to shul on the winter mornings when it was dark out."

And so appeared Society Hill on the eve of urban renewal. A neighborhood that was founded as part of a "holly experiment", later to serve as home to successive waves of immigrants, Society Hill was about to embark on the latest incarnation of an American dream; the rebirth of the industrial metropolis.

The metamorphosis of Society Hill from a neighborhood of "least desirability" to an "unsurpassed location" occurred within a period of twenty five years beginning in the late 1950's. The initial changes in the neighborhood were abrupt taking place within ten years. The subsequent years were the time needed for the private market to complete the revitalizing trend of new construction and renovation initiated by public sector investment; a process now referred to as

gentrification. Where in 1950, 98% of the buildings were built prior to 1919, by 1980 the U.S. Census reported that 60% of the structures had been constructed between 1960-1980. Only 37% of the buildings constructed prior to 1919 remained standing in 1980, thus 67% of Society Hill's authentic "colonial" homes were built in the "modern" period of the 1960's, 70's, and 80's.

The physical transformation was coupled with a social transformation entailing considerable displacement. In 1950, 1363 or 20% of the neighborhood's 6982 residents were lower income blacks. By 1980 the neighborhood was only 3% black, over 1000 of the areas blacks were gone. The displacement is evident in statistics accumulated by the U.S. Census on the length of residence of the areas population. In 1950, 84% of the population had lived in the same house as they did the year before. In 1980, 57% of the population lived in a different house outside of the area. We can infer that a turnabout in population occurred in this period as older residents left or were displaced. U.S. Census figures indicate that a virtual inversion of income, occupational status, and home values

occured during this period.

Willie who observed the urban renewal of the area during the remaining days before closing his store on South Street looked back on this time with disbelief:

" It was about 15-25 years ago that the area really began to change. At first the hippies came to South Street and opened up restaurants. The street was really dying back then, Rizzo was mayor at the time....An expressway was supposed to come through here, right through South Street. People sold their properties cheap, wanted to get out. But the expressway fell through. I never knew the neighborhood would be worth what it is now, I could've bought homes for nothing, who knew? The whole neighborhood looked so different then, to think of the money I could've made...Well, nothing I can do now."

Willie raises two interesting points concerning the urban renewal of the area. One is the rarely mentioned and short lived history of South Street as a hippie area, a gathering place for "bohemians". A neighborhood with old buildings, cheap rents and ideally situated close to the downtown and the riverfront, the neighborhood was perfect for artists and "bohemians" willing to take the risk of living in an area described as a "haven for ferocious misanthropes".<sup>10</sup>

The other point concerns the proposed construction of an expressway that was envisaged to run along South Street. The planned expressway required the demolition of buildings along South Street in order to provide the space necessary for a multi-lane highway. The project did in fact fall through, but the city retained the power of eminent domain acquired for the expressway project; Furthermore, federal funding was available for urban improvement projects. This confluence of circumstances provided a propitious environment for the inception of a large scale urban renewal project.

B'nai Abraham hung on through the years of urban renewal, acquiring historic certification by the Pennsylvania Historical Society. Certification ensured that the building would remain untouchable by either the bulldozer or the developer. With the building completely paid for the only worry the synagogue had was maintaining a minyan; the presence of ten men required for public prayer. This was, and continues to be an omnipresent threat to the survival of the congregation.

The urban renewal of Society Hill which transformed the neighborhood to one of the most "distinguished addresses" in Philadelphia should have been good news for B'nai Abraham. As B'nai Abraham struggled to maintain a minyan in an area that no longer housed many Jews, a large number of Jews were about to move back to the neighborhood. They were included among the ranks of the young professionals and business people who moved "back to the city" as envisaged and planned for by Bacon and the leaders of the city's power elite. A 1981 Federation of Allied Jewish Agencies report found that center city including Society Hill was "the fastest expanding Jewish area within the city".<sup>11</sup> The study estimated that 20,000 Jews lived in the Center City-University City area. B'nai Abraham, the former "pace-setter of all Jewish life down-town", now faced the final challenge to its survival. It had thus far withstood the dissolution of the Jewish community and the plow of the bulldozer. Would the young Jews who were now settling in the area attend and support B'nai Abraham as the few remaining members grow older and less able to do so?

### **"They Call It the Society Hill Now":**

"You can't get them no more", said Leon dejectedly one afternoon as we stood outside the synagogue waiting for enough men to arrive to make the minyan. As we stood there both knowing we wouldn't have a minyan on this rainy afternoon Leon continued, "we never used to have a problem getting a minyan, we had two minyans just in the morning, plus people would come in and out of the synagogue all afternoon to learn Talmud, but that was the old days. There's just no-one left to call up, the older people are all dying out." This conversation with Leon was to be a familiar one both morning and afternoon as we would wait for eight more men to trickle into the basement of the synagogue for prayer.

The daily minyan of B'nai Abraham was struggling to survive and Leon was leading the fight. He was the third generation of his family to belong to Bnai Abraham. Both his father and his grandfather were gabais, sextons, of the synagogue and now Leon in retirement after having closed his restaurant was carrying on the family legacy. As

Leon told me, "I'll always go the shul as my father and my grandfather did. As long as I'm alive the shul will be alive."

The men who saw B'nai Abraham through a critical period of transition in the Jewish community of the neighborhood had either died or were much older now. Only a few of these men still lived in the neighborhood and were able to attend services on a regular basis. My assumption that there were a greater number of older Jewish men remaining in the area since the time when it was the "pace-setter of downtown Jewry" proved to be overly optimistic. In fact, it turned out that there were only four such men at B'nai Abraham, the rest of the minyan resembling more of a "potluck" comprising a varied group of people including some who had lived in the area, some who may still live in the area but stayed to themselves, and a couple of mentally ill people that Leon brings in off of the street. Of the younger generation of Jews who had moved back to Society Hill and now lived in the "fastest growing Jewish area of the city" none were to be found at B'nai Abraham.

The struggle of B'nai Abraham to maintain a minyan is embodied in the efforts of Leon to keep the minyan alive. Where other synagogues might only open on the sabbath Leon keeps the synagogue open seven days a week, "I have no vacation from the shul, I live there." Leon lives in the memory of what the synagogue once was, and what it meant to his family. The tenaciousness of this memory fuels his determination. As Leon told me:

"Believe me if I could get away I would, but if I'm not there who would open the shul, no-one...I got no choice...I love this shul, I cry for it at night to think of what this shul used to be, it breaks my heart... I'm telling you I hear the shul crying at night...I have *rechmones* (compassion) for the shul, what it used to be like here I can't tell you...so what can I do but keep trying and as long as I'm well enough that's what I'll keep doing."

I met Leon on the first sabbath morning that I went to B'nai Abraham for services. This marked the beginning of my exploration of the enigma that B'nai Abraham had always represented to me. Previously, I would walk past the synagogue on summer nights and observe a group of older Jewish men sitting outside the synagogue on Lombard Street speaking Yiddish to one another. Not only did the building appear incongruous to me, but these men sitting outside of

the synagogue seemed to exist in another world which conjured up images of the "ghetto". What this synagogue and these men were doing in Society Hill was a mystery that had intrigued me since childhood. That first sabbath morning I had finally mustered enough courage to enter the door that I had only furtively peered into throughout my years of living in the neighborhood.

I proceeded to the basement of the synagogue where services are held. As soon as I entered the room I was welcomed into the congregation. Leon turned to the other eight men who were seated around the long wooden tables that line the sides of the wall, and exclaimed, "He's a lifesaver, if it wasn't for him we wouldn't have no minyan today." He then turned to me, "So don't run away we got a nice lunch after shachris ( morning service)." It turned out that every sabbath after the morning service and before the afternoon service they have a small lunch, called a kiddush, where they serve a traditional sabbath lunch consisting of the special bread of the sabbath called challah, gefilte fish, herring, and hard boiled eggs. While the men eat (there are no women members of the congregation

other than the Rabbi's wife) the Rabbi gives a small sermon on the portion of the Bible that was read during the morning service.

Most of the men present were in their seventies or eighties so I drew some attention, the older men inquiring, "Who's the stranger?" Immediately following lunch I was introduced to Leon, who had been running around making sure that everyone was eating, simultaneously cleaning your plate as he refilled it. Leon was introduced to me as the president of the congregation, "Do you know who you're talking to?", asked one man in a heavy Yiddish accent who later turned out to be the vice president of the synagogue, "That's the president of the shul, Mr. Wapner".

It was through Leon that I learned not only about the history of B'nai Abraham but more importantly about remaining dedicated to a purpose and a structure of meaning in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. If it were not for Leon the daily minyan would cease to exist. Every morning and afternoon he opens the synagogue and begins the arduous and painstaking process of gathering ten men

for prayer. He can always count on a few regulars, but even they are attending the minyan less and less frequently. Leon gives some of the men one or two dollars from the "pushka" (a silver pitcher into which everyone contributes a small amount of change at a certain point in the course of the service) for coming to the minyan. Leon recounts an amusing story of one of the men that he used to "help out with some change":

"There used to be a real schnorer ( cheapskate ) who would charge me to come to shul. One day he says, you want me to come to shul, it'll cost you \$2 if I just sit and \$3 if I lay T'fillin. (phylacteries worn by men during morning services except on the sabbath and holidays) What could I do I needed him, if it were the old days I'd have thrown him out of here so quick...But what can I do you can't get the Jews no more."

An important source of human capital "the Jews" for the minyan comes from Keshet Israel, a synagogue founded only a few years after B'nai Abraham. Keshet Israel also holds a daily minyan and faces the same struggle for survival. The two synagogues existing within one block of one another have a symbiotic relationship, each dependent on the other for survival while simultaneously fighting to retain autonomy. The members of the two synagogues are fiercely loyal to their respective synagogues, yet they recognize their

mutual interdependence-- they help one another to "make a minyan". One of the more interesting survival strategies that the two congregations have adopted which is reflective of their intransigence in remaining separate occurs when one congregation that has ten men will complete their prayer and then upon completion of the service will send over whatever number of men are necessary for the other congregation to have a minyan. For instance, let us say that Bnai Abraham and Keshet Israel each have seven men. Both need three men to make a minyan. The most efficient solution would seem to be that the two congregations would choose one location to hold the service thus combining their congregations for a total of fourteen men. The economic solution that predicts the pursuit of efficiency and the optimal allocation of scarce resources once again proves incongruent with human psychology. Instead what actually happens is that one of the congregations (A) will send three men to (B). Four men now remain at (A). They wait until the other congregation completes their service. Upon completion of the service at (B) the three men of (A) plus three men from (B) now go back to (A). Upon their arrival

services at (A) commence. This allows both synagogues to maintain independent worship, essential to the conservation of identity. As Leon would say, "We both remain open , no-one closes for nobody". This sort of interchange transpires both for the morning and the evening service on average three to four times a week.

Observing this phenomenon it seemed more logical to me that the two congregations should alternate the location of the services from week to week, from one synagogue to the other. In that way the combined strength of the two minyans each of which routinely gets seven to eight men would assure the continuity of a minyan and at the same time respect the importance of remaining autonomous. The symbiotic relationship of the two congregations would thus be formalized in a structure that would allow for mutual benefit while acknowledging the importance of the continuity of a separate identity. Leon politely listened to my suggestion and then proceeded to "set me straight":

"I wouldn't shame the shul by merging with Keshet Israel. At one time we had to help them out, we never had problems

getting a minyan they always did. We wouldn't gain nothing if they closed up, as long as I'm alive this shul goes on with or without them."

And so the two synagogues, one block apart, continue to struggle each day for a minyan. Everyday Leon picks up the phone sitting in the corner of the basement room and calls Keshet Israel inquiring, "How many you got?" A typical exchange will then proceed with Leon continuing, "We got seven, we need three. If you send three over here then we'll send four back so you can daven". If all goes according to plans three men will come to Bnai Abraham, sit down and read the paper until the seven men of the congregation complete the morning or afternoon service, and then they return back to Keshet Israel joined by one, two or however many men are needed for Keshet Israel to pray. Leon and Abe are the respective generals of their congregations choosing which troops will will serve double duty. Typically Leon would point to one or two of the men, usually a man named Fievel, a strong man of 92 years who can handle the walk to Keshet Israel, to go over and "help em out".

The assertion of an independent identity is essential to a sense of

continuity for the remaining members of these congregations. The rivalry between the "shuls" has a long history . The perpetuation of this rivalry almost to the detriment of maintaining a minyan points to the important function this rivalry serves. There are times when both congregations rather than combining will choose not to pray publicly. (Without a minyan it is considered in Jewish law as if you prayed alone)

Peter Marris in his book, Loss and Change, offers an explanation of why this rivalry exists.<sup>1</sup> Peter Marris has hypothesized that conflict functions as a vehicle for accomodation to change. Change engenders discontinuity the consequence of which is ambivalence and anxiety. In the adaptation process individuals struggle to conserve the past while adjusting to the changed circumstance of the present. Conflict serves as a release mechanism, relieving tensions through the displacement of ambivalence on others. The conflict, in the case of the two congregations serves two functions: (1) it is essential to the experience of continuity through the perpetuation of a historic rivalry (2) it serves as conduit for

releasing the tensions inherent in the changes in the Jewish life of the neighborhood.

The exchange of men between congregations, the tenacity of Leon in calling assorted men to help out "to make a minyan", and the commitment and devotion of a small group of "regulars" together are responsible for the survival of the daily minyan. Of the four synagogues existing in present day Society Hill only Keshet Israel and B'nai Abraham maintain a daily minyan. The other two synagogues only hold sabbath services. Another two synagogues established at the turn of the century both of which occupied large buildings of very detailed and beautiful architecture have recently closed. One is now a condominium and the other mentioned earlier in the paper is an antique bazaar. Leon reflected on the closing of the synagogues and the demise of the daily minyans:

"All the shuls are closed up down here. They all had daily minyans, we had two just in the morning. But no more, you can't get the Jews no more not even for shabbos. The kids don't come to shul, they make money and they become reformed (members of the Jewish reform movement). It's not the same anymore"

No longer was it simply a matter of there not being enough Jews in

the area to support the synagogues, but as Leon points out the nature of Jewish religious observance had changed.

The survival of B'nai Abraham since the 1930's has been a battle against changing demographic, economic, and religious imperatives. The period from 1930 until after the second world war was a period during which B'nai Abraham battled the economic and demographic imperatives of an increasingly affluent and geographically mobile Jewish population. The Jewish population of Society Hill dwindled to a fraction of what it once was as an upwardly mobile Jewish population left the "old neighborhood" for the verdant suburb. The desire for upward mobility that at one time induced the movement out of the neighborhood, in the 1980s enticed Jews back as the area had become a prestigious place to live. However, the current which brought the Jewish population back, what ought to have been good news for B'nai Abraham, was to present the most recent challenge to B'nai Abraham's continued existence changing nature of religious observance. The neighborhood that had "synagogues like drugstores" and "all the shuls packed" was now home to a new generation of

Jews who placed less emphasis on religious observance and the importance of tradition.

Society Hill is an important record of the history of the Jews in Philadelphia. The history and experience of B'nai Abraham as the first and most prestigious of Orthodox synagogues in Philadelphia to the present where the congregation struggles to maintain a daily minyan is illustrative of changes in the religious and communal life of the Jew in Philadelphia and in America. In a sense, the Jews left the neighborhood on their movement up and now having attained successes are able to afford to come back. The incongruous juxtaposition of the building of B'nai Abraham in the midst of Society Hill, and the men who make that survival possible on a daily basis, teaches us about the experience of continuity and challenges us to consider the meaning of discontinuity. In particular, the Jewish community needs to ask whether the discontinuity between generations of Jews in terms of the traditions and the communal responsibility exemplified by the minyan has been lost in the process of assimilating to the larger society. The question must be

considered as a minyan struggles to count ten men and synagogues are unable to remain open in an area that a significant number of Jews call home.

We are left with an open question of what will become of B'nai Abraham? If the experience of other orthodox synagogues in the area is any indication of the future then B'nai Abraham's remaining years are few. The future is dependent on the younger generation of Jews now living in Society Hill. Whether they will recognize the historical significance of the synagogue to the identity of Jewish Philadelphia is dubious. The importance of B'nai Abraham to the experience of continuity for the remaining members of the congregation has motivated their tenacity to hold in the face of countervailing forces. Their fight to maintain continuity provides an opportunity for the Jewish community of Philadelphia to maintain continuity and a connection with the past through the support of B'nai Abraham and the efforts of its dedicated members.

## **Frame Reflection: Ways of Seeing the City**

The investigation of the B'nai Abraham synagogue illuminates two striking incongruities in our understanding of Society Hill. One is the incongruity of history between the deliberate creation of a colonial history and the unintended survival of a few vestiges of other intermediary histories. (intermediary in that they represent periods other than the solely colonial period of history that has been recreated) The other incongruity is between the older men of the minyan of B'nai Abraham and the predominantly younger, upper middle class professionals of the area—the "yuppies". The fact that these experiences appear as incongruous calls for us to think about how we see and understand the city. We can think of how we see and understand the city in terms of a frame that we use to make sense of the world—to understand and structure reality. Thinking about the frames we use to understand reality can therefore be called frame reflection. Society Hill in particular calls for frame reflection for planners, as the present construction of the neighborhood is the product of a planning vision, a planning process, and is representative of a distinct set of planning

values.

The apparent incongruities existing within Society Hill illuminate two larger frames-ways of seeing the city-that predominate planning practice. These larger frames and the incongruity from which they are derived are:

#### Predominant Frame 1.

*Frame* City as a palimpsest or a plain of land values. Morphology can be manipulated and transformed to suit the demands of those in power with little consideration given the potential impact such changes might have on the historical meanings that inhere to urban form.

*Incongruity.* The planned recreation of only period in the Society hill, the colonial history, in contrast to the non-planned for intermediary histories of which a few vestiges precariously remain.

#### Predominant Frame 2

*Frame* Using statistics, demographics, and images to understand the people of the neighborhood and believing that through the use of such a

data base we feel we know what a neighborhood, it's people, and the community are like.

*Incongruity:* The men of the minyan exiting "invisibly" within Society Hill, yet holding important attachments to a place that is considered one of the "most prestigious addresses in Philadelphia" and as such is perceived as being composed of a homogeneous population of "elites" defined as upper income, younger, white professionals

Where the city as a palimpsest was the frame used to create the present physical fabric of Society Hill, and the city as statistics and images is the frame used to subsequently understand the social fabric of Society Hill, we can use the same incongruities that are a product of such frames to re-frame, or develop an alternative way of seeing, and understanding the city—an alternative frame.

### Same Incongruity/Alternative Frames

*Alternative Frame 1: Physical Context.* City as a record of not only one period of history, but potentially of all periods of history. We are

motivated to think of the city in a historical perspective where different groups of people at different periods of time produced meanings in a neighborhood, and together contributed to the development and history of the neighborhood as we should know it today. We are led to ask questions of how we can represent the experience and meanings that people have created in the neighborhood, thus preserving a "true" record of the historical development of the city.

*Alternative Frame 2: Social Context.* City as a place of subjective meanings not captured by statistics, demographics or other indices that are used to describe and understand the city. We are motivated to understand how people in a neighborhood use space, attach meaning to space, and form community within the spatial delimitation of a neighborhood or census tract. The use of average statistics to understand the majority of the population of a neighborhood not only ignores the meanings that this measured majority makes in the neighborhood, but also ignores the heterogeneity of people (however small this group of people may be) such as those of the men of the

minyan, that may be unnoticed in aggregate data, and the meanings and attachments that such individuals or groups hold in a neighborhood

**Frames in potential conflict:**

The city strains to accommodate to the changing demands and requirements of the economic and technological environment within which it must survive. Intrinsic in this process of accommodation is a tension, or conflict between the inherent fixity of the built form of the city and the demands that this built form either be restructured, or destroyed in order to meet the changing demands of the economy and the changing requirements of technology. It is within this environment that the frames we use to understand the city are exposed, and the potential conflict between framing the city as palimpsest or record, as objective statistics or subjective meanings ensues.

We can juxtapose the generative frame that produced Society Hill to the alternative frame that emerges out of the same experience, to explicate further the implications and potential consequences associated with both frames, so that we can later illustrate how these

frames inform and are used to structure problem solving by public planning departments as they are confronted with the demands and constraints intrinsic to the nature of cities.

### *City as a Palimpsest/City as a Record*

Framing the city as a palimpsest means that urban form and spatial structure are free to be manipulated to suit any purpose deemed appropriate. Why is this? Because seeing the city as a palimpsest divorces the city from the context of human experience. In other words, you see the form of the city as being a uniform surface or plain of land values that is not invested with human meaning. Consequently, you are led to promote, advocate, and initiate changes in the morphology of the city that ignores, and does not adumbrate fully the costs that such morphological changes impose on the historical meanings invested in urban form.

The idea of a palimpsest is best captured by the laissez faire economic maxim that urban space should be used to serve "the best and highest

uses". Real estate developers who look only at land values, and planners who restrict themselves to technical discussions of zoning requirements or architectural specifications that are responsive to the demands of such developers, use the frame of the city as a palimpsest.

In contrast to this view we can see the city within the context of human experience as a record of the historical development of the modern city, and the people who contributed to that development. Framing the city as a record, as a plain that is invested with human value recognizes that an important aspect of the morphology of the city is that it reflects the experience of its inhabitants. Preserving in some form the city as a record, allows the city to be used as a portal to history as well as a statement of our continuity with history. In contrast to the city as a palimpsest where morphological changes are seen as "natural" or part and parcel of advancement, framing the city as a record allows us to assess fully the costs of proposed morphological changes, accounting for the potential losses to the record that such changes might entail.

### *City as Objective Data/City as Subjective Meanings*

Planners often rely on a set of data to understand neighborhoods. Attempting to know who lives in a neighborhood they turn to census data of population characteristics. Attempting to know what a neighborhood looks like they turn to census data on housing characteristics, or fire maps that yield information on building heights, set backs, and street widths. Put together, a composite or "neighborhood profile" is assembled that serves as a framework for problem solving. One frame that planners have a predilection for is the use of such objective measures to understand reality. Plans based on this frame neglect an entire dimension of the city that numbers can never express. The men of the minyan point to the alternative frame that captures what numbers are bound to miss, the meaning that people make in the city, what I have termed the subjective meanings of space. Planners that rely on the objective frame might be led to promote plans, or advocate changes that are incongruent with the concerns of the neighborhood, or worse ignore the concerns of a neighborhood.

Framing the city as a statistic and as a palimpsest both share a common denominator of divorcing the city from the context of human experience and the meanings that people make in the city, both past and present. Understanding the physical fabric of cities as building heights and street walls, and understanding the social fabric of the city as population percentages and average incomes, ignores the entire context of meaning that people produce in the city. Numbers are inanimate and as such they are capable of removing planners from the impact that plans which propose morphological change could have on a city that is invested with the personal, and universally appreciated dimension of meaning.

### **Frames in Action: An Example of How Frames Inform Decision Making and Structure Problem Solving**

An example from my own experience in a planning commission last summer illustrates how the frames, or ways of seeing the city, that we have discussed, were used to structure the issues and concerns that

were to be addressed in a re-zoning proposal.

*The Problem:* A predominantly lower income neighborhood consisting of mostly low rise tenements is on the verge of gentrification. Pressure is being exerted on the planning commission by both the mayor and the real estate community to re-zone the area to accommodate, and encourage the projected increased demand for housing. As is, the existing tenements and current zoning regulations for the area do not present an investment opportunity profitable enough, or one that could realize the perceived full potential for profit, that the city and the real estate developers are hoping for.

*How did the planning commission structure the problem?* The planning commission restricted itself to looking at building heights and set backs, stating its objective as ensuring that any changes in zoning would not result in the construction or renovation of buildings that would be incongruent with the architectural character of the neighborhood. In other words, as long as the buildings would fit an architectural definition of neighborhood character then zoning changes

would be recommended, and promoted. A hint was made to look at demographics, but in the end there was no time left to undertake the "necessary study". This was clearly superfluous to their understanding and structuring of the problem.

*What frame did the planning commission use?* The planning commission used a frame similar to that of a palimpsest used by the real estate developer. No consideration was given to the meanings which inhere to urban form, either past or present. Also, who lives in the neighborhood, the "human character", was not part of the planning commission's formulation of the problem. The planning commission entered into the discussions with the mayor and the developers exerting pressure for re-zoning with a frame that sees the city as a plain of land values. This frame common to both developer and planner then formed the basis for a problem solving exercise whose goal was to figure out the best way to guide the development, that was accepted as imminent, into an acceptable architectural form. Discussions would later consider the issue of potential displacement, but at this stage of the discussion building heights, set backs, and street walls dominated r

and preoccupied the commissions energy and effort.

*An Alternative frame for approaching the problem:* The planner is caught in a balancing act between the pressure to encourage development, seen as a desirable objective by the mayor, and to be responsive to the potential impact that such development could have on the people of the neighborhood, and the meanings that inhere to morphology of the neighborhood. In this case these two realities are in conflict, morphological change (and concomitant social change) are being encouraged. The planner in contrast to accepting the development as given can bring to the bargaining table a way of seeing the city that is absent from their developers view of the city and the planning commissions view of the city in this particular case. Bnai Abraham and the men of the minyan point to a way of seeing the city within the context of human experience. Using this frame we are led to structure the problem solving activity within a framework that recognizes and evaluates the "costs" to present residents and the historic meanings that the proposed re-zoning might engender. The problem that confronts the planning commission and which is not given enough attention is the

concomitant social change that the proposed morphological change might entail. Recognizing the concomitant social costs, defined as the potential negative impact on present residents and the potential erasure of historic meaning, requires the suggested alternative frame for seeing the city. If such a frame were adopted the first step taken in addressing and structuring the problem of re-zoning would be not to frame the problem as an architectural one, but as a human one. Restricting ourselves to a narrowly defined goal of ensuring architectural congruity attempts to distance and divorce planners from responsibility for the potential social costs that the disruptive physical changes imposed by the re-zoning proposal. Only by using the alternative frame can a full and complete assessment be made of the costs and impact of the proposed re-zoning. Bringing this framework to the problem can structure and focus the problem solving activity on ways to balance the needs of the city with the interests of a neighborhoods residents. From this formulation creative solutions that attempt to ensure both continuity of the record, and the representation of residents concerns can be initiated.

## **Balancing the Frames: Towards a Methodology for a New Weighting System**

It would seem from the preceding examples of Society Hill and my experience at the planning commission that there is more emphasis, an unequal weight, given to the frames that see the city as a palimpsest and as a statistic rather than the frame that represents the totality of human experience and meaning. The question is how might we redress this unequal weighting, and enlighten planners to a more complete and balanced understanding of the city? An underemphasized, undervalued methodology, or framework of practice, that would help planners achieve this balance is "getting out there". This methodology is suggested by my process of discovery of Bnai Abraham and the minyan:

(1) Walking the neighborhood. By walking the neighborhood I discovered B'nai Abraham and the men of the minyan.

(2) Talking to people in the neighborhood. Talking to the men of the minyan I learned about a history and meanings of the neighborhood that I would not have otherwise known about if I had relied on other sources

such as the U.S. Census to understand the neighborhood.

(3) Reading about the neighborhood. From books and articles to plaques on buildings, I was able to learn pieces of history that are easily hidden or erased by new development. Readings complimented walking and talking, as well as pointed to me to new paths of discovery that led me to more walking, talking, and learning.

### **Frame Reflection as a First Step**

Frame reflection is strongly recommended for planners so that we can make more explicit the world view that shapes our formulation of plans. Frame reflection is the first step towards addressing the issue of what constitutes planning values. The frames that we rely on, whether at a conscious or subconscious level, are reflections of a value system. Frame reflection is therefore the first step towards addressing what our values as planners are. Specific to this thesis, the city as a record assumes certain values that we have to address: What are the histories that we want to preserve? Why do we want to preserve them? What does it mean to preserve the record and what might this entail?

Finally, we must accept that the city is always going to be in a state of tension and potential conflict between the fixity of its morphology and the changing demands of the economy and the requirements of evolving technologies. The question is what can planners bring to this balancing act? I would argue, and this thesis supports my argument, that a focal consideration that planning can bring to the formulation of strategies and policies that address the problems and pressures confronting the city, is an emphasis and concern with the human dimension of urban change. Frame reflection and the adoption of the methodology suggested by this thesis are the first step toward a planning practice that is rooted in the human context of the city both past and present.

## Endnotes

### Introduction: The City as Historic Record

1. Paul Knox, Urban Social Geography. London and New York: Longman Group Limited, 1982, p. 5.
2. See Roman A. Cybriwsky and John Western, " Revitalizing Downtowns by whom and for whom?," in Geography and the Urbvan Environment edited by D.T. Herbert and R.J. Johnson. New York: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 1982.

### Society Hill: Urban Renewal and the Recreation of History

1. Roman A. Cybriwsky and John Western, " The Political Reconstruction of Revitalized Neighborhoods: Society Hill, Philadelphia, and False Creek, Vancouver," in Gentrification, Housing, and the Restructuring of Urban Space, edited by N. Smith and P. Williams. London, Boston, and Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1985.
2. Ibid.
3. Qouted in N. Smith, "Gentrification and Capital:Practice and Ideology in Society Hill," Antipode 11, 3 (1979), p.24-35.
4. Cybriwsky and Western, " Political Construction," p.4.
5. N. Smith, op. cit., p.27-8.
6. Quoted in Cybriwsky and Western, " Political Construction," p.7.
7. Kenneth Halpern, Urban Design in Nine American Cities. ,1978, pp.

8. Cybriwsky and Western, " Revitalizing Downtowns," p.346.
9. Quoted in Cybriwsky and Western, " Poiitical Construction," p.17.
10. Qouted in Cybriwsky and Western, " Political Construction," p.
11. Two synagogues, B'nai Rubin and Neziner, both founded at the turn of the century have recently been sold. Neziner has been converted into condominiums, and B'nai Rubin houses an antique bazaar.
12. Here I follow the desciption of Society Hill given by Philadelphia historian Maxwell Whiteman in M. Haller (ed.), Peoples of Philadelphia. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1973.

### **Society Hill: A Hidden History**

1. Murray Friedman (ed.), Jewish Life in Philadelphia 1830-1940. Philadelphia: ISHI Publications, 1983.
2. Here I am following the historical accounts of the Jews in Russia in Abraham J. Karp, The Jewish Experience in America Vol. IV The Era of Immigration. Waltham, Mass.: American Jewsish historical Society, 1969.
3. Larry S. Ullman, " East European Jewish Immigration to Philadelphia 1880-1924,"( unpublished Master's Thesis, Temple University,1962).
4. Friedman, op. cit., p.7.

5. Maxwell Whiteman, "Philadelphia's Jewish Neighborhoods," in Peoples of Philadelphia, edited by M. Haller. Philadelphia: Temple University press, 1973, pp. 231-55.
6. Rober Ross Tabak, " Movement of Synagogues in Philadelphia: 1945-65, Development of a Methodology,"( unpublished paper, Temple University, 1978).
7. Charles S. Berheimer, ed., The Russian Jew in the United States. Philadelphia: The John C. Winston Co., 1905, pp. 200-11.
8. Ibid., p. 205.
9. Ibid., p. 206.
10. Ibid., p.51.
11. Maxwell Whiteman, op. cit., p. 246.
12. Ibid., p. 241.
13. Ibid., p.244. See also, Harlan P. Phillips, " War on Phialdelphia's Slums: Walter Vrooman and the Conference of Moral Workers, 1893," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, 76 (January, 1952), pp. 47-62.
14. Maxwell Whiteman, op. cit., p. 241.
15. Julian L. Grierfer, "Neighborhood Centre-A Study of the Adjustment of a Culture Group in America," ( unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, New York University, 1948), p. 142, qouting Robert A. Woods and Albert J. Kennedy, Handbook of Settlements.
16. Charles S. Bernheimer, op. cit., p. 53.

17. Maxwell Whiteman, op. cit., p. 241, citing Edmund J. James ed., The Immigrant Jew in America ( New York, 1907), p. 304.
18. Maxwell Whiteman, op. cit., p. 239.
19. Ibid.
20. Robert Tabak, " Orthodox Judaism in Transition, " in Jewish Life in Philadelphia 1830-1940, edited by Murray Friedman. Philadelphia: ISHI Publications, 1983, p. 50.
21. Maxwell Whiteman, op. cit., p. 240.
22. Julius Grier, op. cit., p.22.
23. Philadelphia Inquirer, September 29, 1978.
24. Charles S. Bernheimer, op. cit., pp. 162-63.
25. Robert Ross-Tabak, op. cit., p. 49.
26. Murray Friedman, op. cit., p. 8.
27. Souvenir of the Fifty Fifth Anniversary of the Congregation B'nai Abraham, published June 12, 1938. Archives, Jewish Archives housed at the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.
  
28. Ibid.
29. Qouted in Robert Ross-Tabak, op. cit., p.63.
30. Philadelphia Inquirer, op. cit.

31. Qouted in Robert Ross-Tabak, op. cit., p.57
32. Andrew Altman, " Society Hill: Home of the Russian Jewish Immigrant of 1900," ( unpublished paper, 1962).

### **"From Hot Dogs to Steak": The Growth and Decline of the Jewish Community**

1. Congregation B'nai Rubin has been recently sold and is now houses an antique bazaar. Still visible are Hebrew writings alongside the entrance of the building.
2. Maxwell Whiteman, op. cit., p.238.
3. Julian Grierfer, op. cit., pp. 326-28.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 323.
6. Ibid.,336-7.
7. Murray Friedman, op. cit., p 25.
8. Federation study cited in Murray Friedman, Philadelphia Jewish Life: 1940 -85.
- 9 List of synagogues in Society Hill compiled from two sources:  
!955 &1965 synagogue list is found in Robert Ross-Tabak, "Movements of Synagogues in Philadelphia: 1945-65," (unpublished paper, 1978), and the 1900 and 1987 list qan be found in the author's, "Society Hill: Home of the Russian Jewish Immigrant of 1900," (unpublished paper,1983).

10. Philadelphia Inquirer, April 26, 1965, quoted in Roman Cybriwsky and John Western, The Political Reconstruction of Revitalized Neighborhoods.
11. Federation of Allied Jewish Agencies report cited in Murray Freidman, Philadelphia Jewish Life: 1940-85.

**"They Call it the Society Hill Now"**

1. Peter Marris, Loss and Change. Garden City, N.Y. : Anchor Books, 1975.

**Appendix: Map and List of the Institutions and Organizations of  
the Russian  
Jewish Community of Society Hill:1900**

SYNAGOGUES

- Congregation ISRAEL 5<sup>th</sup> and Pine Streets  
 Congregation Agudas Achim 514 S. 3rd St  
 Congregation Ahavas Achim 754-6 S. 3rd St.  
 Congregation Ahavas Chesed 322 BAINBRIDGE ST  
 Congregation Ahavas Zion 815 S. 4<sup>th</sup> Street  
 Congregation Bnai Abraham 521 Lombard  
 Congregation Bnai Jacob 5<sup>th</sup> above Lombard  
 Congregation Bnai Joseph 525 BAINBRIDGE  
 Congregation Bnai Shm 521 Lombard  
 Congregation Bnai Zion 532 Pine Street  
 Congregation Beth ISRAEL 417 Pine Street  
 Congregation Bnai Ruben 6<sup>th</sup> and Kator Streets  
 Congregation Eimath Israel SE Corner 5<sup>th</sup> & GASKELL  
 Congregation Keshar Israel 421 LOMBARD ST  
 CONGREGATION OHEV ZEDEK 322 BAINBRIDGE ST.
- 100 members. Collect money for the Jewish poor of Jerusalem.  
 Largest of the "downtown" synagogues. 225 members. Daily classes, 80 students.  
 Building STILL STANDS TODAY  
 FORMER WHEATLEY HALL. 150 MEMBERS.  
 NOW LOCATED AT 412 LOMBARD

60 members

overseas SHORE SHABATH

518 S. 3rd St.

CONGREGATION THRES ISRAEL

620 Addison St.

AGUDATH HA-KEHILOTH

130 Lombard St

UNION OF DOWNTOWN CHEBROTH - FUNCTIONED AS AN OVERSEER.

CHEBROTH SOCIETIES

PARSHNER BENEFICIAL SOCIETY

744 S. 8th Street

Free burial, in case of sickness members receive \$4 a week. Meets 1st and Sundays.

Wilner Beneficial Assoc.

733 S. 6th Street (SIMPSON HALL)

WINTZLER CONG. BENEFICIAL SOCIETY OF DAVID

302 BAINBRIDGE ST.

37th ACHUM BENEFICIAL SOCIETY

238 PINE STREET

SICK, DEATH, BENEFITS FOR MEMBERS MEETS 1st/3rd SUNDAY

WAZER AND SCHERSCHIMER ASSOC.

712 S. 3rd St.

CHIEFER UNTERSTÜTZUNGSVEREIN

214 DELANCEY STREET

HIFTE YESHURANSHE PHILIA

250 MAURICE STREET

WODOLIER ASSOCIATION

610 S. 3rd St

70 MEMBERS. RELIGIOUS WORSHIP, SICK AND DEATH BENEFITS

WTEK MOHLWER VEREIN

754 S. 3rd St

WATZOH AND FUEL ASSOC

238 PINE STREET

500 Members, FURNISHES MEMBERS WITH MATZOTH AND FUEL WHOLESALE.

WURLANDER VEREIN

238 PINE STREET

85 MEMBERS. SICK, DEATH BENEFITS, FREE BURIAL MEETS 1st/3rd THURSDAYS

WRONPRINZ RUDOLPH ASSOC

214 / 216 PINE STREET

EBROTH/SOCIETIES

RONIPRINZ RUDOLPH ASSOC	214-216 PINE STREET	MEETS 2ND/4TH SUNDAYS
RAKAUER BENI ELCHIM BENEFICIAL ASSOC	417 PINE STREET	ALSO A CONGREGATION. 146 MEMBERS
ELMER ASSOCIATION	513 S. 3RD STREET	MEETS 1ST/3RD SUNDAYS
AMENICZER ASSOCIATION	764 S. 4TH STREET	
ITOMER CHEMRA	305 SOUTH STREET	
MIRE MOIAM ASSOCIATION	710 SOUTH STREET	
QUANTON AID ASSOCIATION	245 S. 6TH STREET	DISTRIBUTES ARTICLES AMONG THE POOR. 25 MEMBERS. MEETS EVERY SAT. EVENING
ENABURGER ASSOCIATION	242 UNION STREET	
SOHRUSKER ASSOCIATION	242 UNION STREET	
LIZABETHGOND BENEFICIAL ASSOC	203 PINE STREET	MEETS 1ST/3RD SUNDAYS
BIRZJER ASSOCIATION	322 BRIMBRIDGE STREET	
WALYSTOK BENEFICIAL ASSOC.	733 S. 6TH STREET (SIMPSONHALL)	MEETS 2ND/4TH SUNDAYS
ARDITCHEFNER VEREIN	420 MONROE STREET	
IL-GEMEINER OESTERREICHISCHER KRANKEN UNTERSTUETZUNGS	238 PINE STREET	80 MEMBERS. MEETS 1ST/3RD SUNDAYS
QUJAMIAN AMERICAN CHEMRA	515 S. 5TH ST.	
SOEPHIE TSEDEK ANSHE SZEBER	327 S. 7TH STREET	

EDUCATION/LIBRARY SOCIETIES

ISRAELI SCHOOL ASSOC.	8 <sup>th</sup> above SOUTH STREET SW CORNER 10 <sup>th</sup> and SOUTH 41 <sup>st</sup> and SOUTH STREET	
AMUD TORAH	617 PINE STREET	230 STUDENTS
EDUCATIONAL ALLIANCE	516 SPRUCE STREET	FREE INSTRUCTION OF ENGLISH, AND OTHER SUBJECTS FOUR NIGHTS A WEEK
HEBREW ALIYA SCHOOL	716 PINE STREET	
HEBREW STUDENTS LEAGUE	604 S 2 <sup>nd</sup> STREET	
EMERSON LITERARY SOCIETY	426 PINE STREET	
GENOTH ZION	238 PINE STREET	NIGHT SCHOOL (MEETS AT 406 SOUTH SIXTH STREET)
YOUNG WOMENS UNION	422 1/2 BAINBRIDGE STREET	NURSERY, EDUCATION. CLUBS, JUVENILE AID FOR DELINQUENT YOUTH, GYMNASIUM
HOME OF DELIGHT	426 PINE STREET	KINDERGARTEN, LIBRARY, READING ROOM, SAVINGS BANK, CLUBS, CLASSES
YOUNG MENS HEBREW UNION	230 PINE STREET	GROWTH OF A SMALL NUMBER OF LITERARY SOCIETIES, LECTURES, DEBATES, SOCIAL
DAILY DAY NURSERY	427 PINE STREET	
(YOUNG HEBREWS PROGRESSIVE SOCIETY	426 PINE STREET	MEETS EVERY SATURDAY AFTERNOON FOR DEBATES
ZION INSTITUTE	249 PINE STREET	(AT 251 PINE STREET WAS THE SOCIALIST LEAGUE)
YOUNG WOMENS ARENA CLUB	230 PINE STREET	AFFORD EDUCATION, AMUSEMENT TO FEMALES IN "HUMBLE" CIRCUMSTANCES

HILANDTROPY... HEALTH CARE

- JEWISH MATERNITY HOSPITAL 532-34 SPRUCE EZRATH WASHIM (HELPING WOMEN) NOW THE REBECCA GOETZCLUS
- ENGLISH SEASIDE HOME FOR INVALIDS APPL YAT 552 SPRUCE STREET
- SOUTHERN DISPENSARY 318 BAINBRIDGE STREET
- MT. SINAI HOSPITAL ASSOC 527 PINE STREET
- JEWISH SHELTERING HOME 218-220 LOMBARD STREET WARFAROS HOME, IMMIGRANT SHELTER, ALSO A HOME FOR THE AGED
- HOME FOR JEWISH ORPHANS SW COR 10<sup>th</sup> AND BAINBRIDGE STREETS
- NEIGHBORHOOD HOUSE 618 ADDISON STREET
- ROTTENTANT EPISCOPAL CITY MISSION 411 SPRUCE STREET
- ACATION HOME FOR JEWISH WORKING GIRLS 428 BAINBRIDGE STREET
- FORWARD MOVEMENT MISSION NE CORNER 2nd AND BAINBRIDGE
- SIKUR CHOLUM 214 PINE STREET (CALCEDONIA HALL) "VISITING OF THE SICK"
- PHILA SOCIETY FOR RELIEF OF THE HUNGRY 732 S. 5<sup>th</sup> STREET
- JEWISH HOSTER HOME AND ORPHANASYLUM APPL Y 121 S. 5<sup>th</sup> STREET LOCATED IN GERMAN TOWN
- MILANKOVES CLINIC SE CORNER 5<sup>th</sup> and SPRUCE
- BARON DE HIRSCH ASSOC. 242 UNION STREET EXTREMELY IMPORTANT INFLUENCE IN ASSISTING JEWISH IMMIGRANTS
- BRITH SHOLOM 506 PINE STREET CENTER FOR PHILANTHROPIC ORGANISATIONS (1906)

5<sup>th</sup> MARD RELIEF ASSOC 338 GRISCOM

ADORNMENT GARBA KADISHA 809 S. 5<sup>th</sup> STREET

FREE BURIAL SOCIETY

LABOR SOCIETIES

SHOEMAKERS BENEFICIAL ASSOC 733 S 6<sup>th</sup> STREET

SICK BENEFITS FREE BURIAL, EMBROIDMENTS

SHOEMAKERS PROTECTIVE ASSOC 746 S 8<sup>th</sup> STREET

SICK BENEFITS FREE BURIAL

EVISH FEDERATION OF LABOR 150 SOUTH STREET

ALSO VARIOUS HESON TRADES ONCE LOCATED HERE

NEWSPAPERS (IN YIDDISH)

DIE JUDISCHE PRESSE 708 S. 5<sup>th</sup> STREET

THE JEWISH PRESS

DIER VOLKSWACHTER 310 SOUTH 5<sup>th</sup> STREET

THE PEOPLES GUARDIAN

PHILA-STADT ZEITUNG 710 S. 3rd STREET

CITY JOURNAL

JEWISH DAILY FORWARD 5<sup>th</sup> AND PINE STREETS

THEATRE / BATH HOUSES

THEATRE FOR YIDDISH 8<sup>th</sup> STREET BELOW LOMBARD

NON SOCIETY HILL PLAYHOUSE

JALIC BATHS 410-412 GASKILL

USED PRIMARILY BY THE RUSSIAN JEWS AS PRIVATE BATHS WERE FEW.

RUSSIAN BATH HOUSE 436 LOMBARD STREET