PHILADELPHIA ON THE EVE OF THE NATION'S CENTENNIAL: A VISITOR'S DESCRIPTION IN 1873–74

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PHILADELPHIA, FOUNDED in 1682 by William Penn, was almost eligible for a bicentennial when the United States was preparing to celebrate the one-hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. Penn's design for his city called for a grid plan of well laid out streets parallel to one another in north-south and east-west directions. Moreover, the founder sought to foresee every contingency of urban living and made provision for such things as parks, open spaces, an adequate dock area, and thoroughfares large enough to accommodate commercial traffic as well as for the over-all beauty of the city. Most European metropolises up until then had gradually developed from previously existing settlements or towns. Penn had the advantage of planning his city before construction began. In this way he hoped Philadelphia would rationally provide for all the needs of its population. By 1873-74 the physical change that had taken place in Philadelphia during nearly 200 years of urban growth was described by a German traveler who visited the city on the eve of the nation's centennial celebration on a trip which was to take him from coast to coast.

Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904) is principally known today as a geographer and anthropologist whose areas of specialization were human geography (anthropogeographie) and political geography. In 1880 he became professor of geography at the Munich Technical University and in 1886 at the University of Leipzig. In 1873 he had been asked to make a trip to the United States as a reporter for the Kölnische Zeitung (Cologne Daily News) and to write a series of articles about life in America. These articles were subsequently collected and

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1. Taken from Friedrich Ratzel, Süüde und Kulturbilder aus Nordamerika, 2 vols. (Leipzig, 1876), 1: 201–215.
published as a book entitled *Städte und Kulturbilder aus Nordamerika* (Leipzig, 1876).\(^2\) In this book Ratzel makes many perceptive and interesting observations about such things as urban life, city planning, education, architecture, and ecology during the 1870s when America was rebuilding after the Civil War and entering its age of industrialization. The book also reflects the attitudes of Europeans toward America at that time. Ratzel makes frequent comparisons between cities in America and those in Europe, giving us an idea of the similar and dissimilar problems which urban growth was creating for nations on both sides of the Atlantic.

Upon visiting Philadelphia in the winter of 1873-74, one of the things he chose to describe for his German readers was the over-all design of the city. European urban centers generally were not designed like Philadelphia but had evolved in more or less haphazard fashion as the towns had grown. They were filled with streets and alleys running in all directions. Long streets often changed names every few blocks, and finding a house number was not an easy task since the numbering system did not in every case conform to a particular pattern. Always a careful observer, Ratzel gives a clear picture of Philadelphia's physical layout and its style of urban architecture, praising the regularity and uniformity of the grid plan. At the same time he is critical of its shortcomings, indicating to the reader how it deviated from Penn's original plan in its use of open space. By commenting on its virtues and its faults, the author presents us with a picture of the metropolis as it looked to a European about 100 years ago, and he shows us how it had changed midway between its founding and the present day. He also makes some interesting comparisons to other cities, especially New York, with regard to layout, home design, and parks. Ratzel also focuses attention on those ecological problems which have become matters of great concern today by calling attention to the fact that cities must not only build to accommodate the needs of their inhabitants but at the same time must also care for the natural environment. In addition, his description of the preparations for the Centennial Exposition provide us with an insight into the plans which were made in preparation for the national celebration as well as the problems which had to be overcome at that time.

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Main Exhibition Building at the Centennial Exposition from a Stereopticon.

Slide taken by the Centennial Photographic Co.

Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania.
FRIEDRICH RATZEL'S ACCOUNT

Philadelphia, as founded by Penn, was laid out on a tract two miles long and a mile wide between the Delaware and Schuylkill rivers according to a street plan which carefully avoided all curves or bends and adhered as much as possible to rectangles and squares. According to this plan, a wide piece of land running the length of the city, on the banks of both the Delaware and the Schuylkill, would not be built upon, and many places would be reserved for parks. Two main thoroughfares 100 feet in width, one running from east to west, the other from north to south, were to intersect in the center of the city, and the side streets were laid out parallel to these, of which the more important were to be 60 feet wide. In the older sections of the city the plan has been faithfully carried out insofar as direction and width of the streets are concerned. Thus that portion of Philadelphia which lies in between the Delaware and the Schuylkill is a large collection of rectangles of all different sizes. Conforming to this regularity, the north-south streets are merely numbered, and the house numbers have also been so systematized that finding the location of a house can be done at a glance. The even numbers are on the south, the odd numbers on the north side. Between First and Second streets the houses are numbered from 100, between Second and Third streets from 200, and so forth. If a house number is 836 one knows that it is between Eighth and Ninth streets. On the east-west streets which are named, rather than numbered, the houses are numbered from 100 to the next 100, from street to street.

Philadelphia, therefore, is probably the most exactly and evenly laid out of any city of comparable size or larger, unless someday one arises among the rapidly growing cities of the West to compete with this city for the title. It is remarkable how, over the years, the Philadelphians have adhered to the rectangular system of intersecting streets and how few exceptions have been allowed. This regularity notwithstanding, the city has accommodated itself under all circumstances to its position between the two rivers that at one time formed

3. For a brief discussion of Penn's plan see John W. Reps, Town Planning in Frontier America (Princeton, 1969), pp. 204-223; for a survey of European city planning upon which Penn could build, see Reps, Town Planning, pp. 5-34.

4. A description of Philadelphia's impact on urban development in Western cities can be found in the excerpt from James Parton's article in Bayrd Still, Urban America; a History with Documents (New York, 1974), pp. 101-103 and in Reps, Town Planning, pp. 222-223.
its outer limits on the east and west. Nevertheless it is apparent that this extreme regularity, advantageous as it may seem, particularly as compared to our haphazard, compressed methods of city planning, is not really appropriate for big cities. Only one of the two streets designated in the Plan as main streets has become a commercial thoroughfare filled with stores, offices, signboards, vehicles, dirt, and dangerous pavements, with few people there except for business purposes. The other street remains empty and deserted and without being distinguished looking, or only so in an appealingly lonely way. It runs through the business area, partakes of some of its noise and refuse but does not share the life and activity. The elegant traffic is concentrated on the street south of Market Street which runs from river to river named Chestnut Street, and on this street there is no lack of grand, at times attractive buildings, for here among others are to be found the State House, the post office, the banks, and the big hotels, but on the other hand it is too narrow to represent worthily the main street of a really important city such as this. The situation is the same in Walnut and Pine streets, the next two parallel streets, north of Chestnut, where quite a few plain but elegant brownstone and marble homes have been built. These streets are also much too narrow to give any appearance of importance.

What Philadelphia lacks is a main artery, and this can only be a diagonal street which for the most part would take the traffic from the rectangular streets of a large part of the city and carry it farther on, a street such as Broadway. In the newer section of town they were wise enough not to shun diagonal streets and once in a while even a winding one. In Philadelphia's early days the Quaker sense of regularity was responsible for the beauty which characterized the

5. Market Street.  
6. Broad Street.  
7. Ratzel reports this incorrectly to his German readers. The streets are not north but south of Chestnut with Locust and Spruce between Walnut and Pine streets.  
8. The author is referring to Broadway in New York City which, by running south-east to north-west, diagonally transects the grid plan of Manhattan. Approximately fifty years after Ratzel made this observation, Philadelphia moved to remedy the situation which he mentions. In 1917 the city began the construction of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway in order to cut across the grid and speed traffic from the center of the city to the East River Drive.  
9. Those sections of the city which developed beyond the original city, i.e. beyond or outside of Penn's grid plan.
center of the new, large, rich, and well situated city—the true Philadelphia. Now, because of the regularity of the city layout, traffic seems dispersed into several streets and is hindered by the omnipresent right angles, and the whole idea of a grid plan for Philadelphia looks like a failure just as any project does which does not coincide with its intended purpose. Traffic simply did not want to go the way the "rational city" founders wanted it to go. But those Philadelphian super-rationalists of the eighteenth century had more important things to do than just plan the city. Nevertheless it is well that they did not live to see how their plan worked out, or else in the end they would have had to recognize that things take their natural course and do not always obey reason.

The old city plan, on the other hand, is unfortunately not being adhered to precisely in those areas in which its creators really were striving for something permanently useful, that is, in reserving certain places to be maintained as parks or open squares. Thus, instead of having open space along the attractive sloping banks of the Delaware, this area is so lined with ugly storehouses and offices that the view of the other bank or of the islands in the river can nowhere be really enjoyed. Girard, a Philadelphia benefactor, sought by means of bequests and legacies, to renew interest in Penn's idea, leaving these banks vacant and laying them out as parks, but it is not an easy matter to clear the area of buildings again. Likewise, the original plan for the large Central Square in the middle of the city was abandoned in favor of a number of little squares which do not appear to me to be very well maintained.

In local phraseology, Philadelphia is called the "Quaker City" and "the city of homes," the latter implying that Philadelphia (in proportion to the number of inhabitants) has more homes than any other city in the United States. It deserves this reputation, and probably of all the big cities of the civilized world it suffers least from overcrowding. The area of the city encompasses 6 square miles and contains 134,740 buildings, of which 124,302 are home dwellings; thus no more than 6 people reside in one house. How the number of houses in other important cities compares to that in Philadelphia today cannot be ascertained, but the census of 1870 definitely shows that Philadelphia, in absolute terms, has more houses than any other metropolis. As of that date there were 112,336 home dwellings in

10. Stephen Girard (1750-1831) was a financier, philanthropist, founder of Girard College, and active in Philadelphia's civic life.
Philadelphia whereas New York, in spite of its appreciably larger population, had only 64,044. This fact can be explained only by custom, which tenaciously held on to a method of arranging living quarters that was recognized to be beneficial in spite of the many seeming advantages which the row house system offers. Moreover, it must be noted that Philadelphia's life style in general is not so complicated and is less expensive; work is taken more seriously and is more conscientiously performed here than in New York. One hears the complaint that it is difficult to obtain liquid capital here, although the city is very wealthy. When one inquires as to the reason for this, he is told: the money which Philadelphians possess has been earned through work, while in New York there is a great deal of speculation and the millions of dollars which are always passing from hand to hand in transactions can be easily provided. I am told that the middle-class, self-supporting, well-off yet not used to luxury living, is much larger here in Philadelphia than in New York and might also account to some extent then for the favorable ratio of homes to inhabitants here.

The typical Philadelphia home dwelling, the model for about four-fifths of all the homes here, is a building constructed of exposed brick with the steps, sills, and door and window frames made out of some kind of cut stone which in the better and middle-class houses is actually white marble. The ground plots are generally long and rectangular, the house taking up the entire depth of the land except for one of the two rear corners which is used as a courtyard. The interior of the homes seemed to me to be narrower and plainer than those which I have otherwise seen in America and differs with regard to the arrangement of space in that no basement has been added to the home, while the parlor, dining room, and kitchen are found on the first floor, all other rooms on the second. Most houses, even better ones, have only two stories, with a very small minority having more than two. I got to know some very nice little homes in the suburb of West Philadelphia—long rows of small villas with verandas considerably raised up and back from the street. One of my acquaintances lived here with his wife and child in half of such a small villa where there were two rooms and the kitchen on the ground floor, with two more rooms upstairs. It was an inexpensive and very pleasant dwelling, simple and homey.

A curious practice is the already mentioned use of marble in all homes which are in any way semi-respectable looking. Marble is not found in this region, is not cheap, and does not go particularly
well with the dark red of the brick. But the people appear to be so proud of having something of white marble on their houses that sometimes the door and window frames are painted white in an attempt to imitate it (not very convincingly), with only the sills and threshold made of marble, even if it is of a multi-veined, gray variety. Generally they have hidden their marble steps so well under a wooden covering that one would think they are trying not to look at them! I really think that it is the neatness of such a marble-trimmed little brick house, the red and the white together, which makes them attractive to the Philadelphians. The owners diligently clean and wash these buildings, and on Saturdays they create veritable floods on the sidewalks, actually scrubbing the marble clean with soap. Thus, Philadelphia could be a very clean city if so many of its streets were not so dirty. This is a fault which it shares with all large cities which I have seen in America. Perhaps the situation is better in summer than in the damp winter of 1873-74 when I saw them!

In the few cases in the city where an expensive house has been built, the people prefer to use brownstone in the New York style. In West Philadelphia there is a magnificent block of two-story dwellings which are very simply built and covered from top to bottom with the most beautiful white marble slabs. The simple design and the excellent shingling material perfectly complement each other. The reader who is coming over for the Exposition should take a look at some of the marble houses on Chestnut Street, especially one located between 14th and 15th streets which is constructed from a stone with gray veins and cloud-like configurations in it. It appears to me to make a very stately, pleasant impression.

Although the homes in general are by no means as elegant as in New York, the churches and other public buildings here significantly stand out from the mass of predominantly uniform, plain, small houses which certainly do not give this city a metropolitan atmosphere. I have actually heard it called "an overgrown village" by someone who was born here and who still lives here. The majority of public buildings in the older part of the city date from the period when everywhere in America people built in Greek style,1 and you can scarcely go along a street in which a Doric or Ionic temple, be it a church, lodge hall, the mint, or post office, does not display its colonnade. There is also no lack of curious looking churches, and lavishly decorated mammoth commercial buildings. Just recently a

11. The Greek Revival was popular in America in the 1820s and 1830s.
THE CENTENNIAL: BALLOON VIEW OF THE GROUNDS.
Courtesy New York Public Library
Masonic Temple has been built on Broad Street (the Leipzig Illustrierte Zeitung featured a picture of this in 1873) which was admired very much because it was constructed out of a beautiful granite, richly decorated with ornaments and lavished with towers and turrets. At the moment some large buildings are under construction in the area, some of which should be finished for the Exposition, and, if nothing else, they should be imposing looking. The Philadelphians have high hopes especially for the State House now under construction.

Philadelphia's city park, Fairmount Park, is certainly the most interesting attraction Philadelphia has to offer. It is to be the site in 1876 of the projected International Exposition in celebration of the hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. This gives the park a double interest since it is also a good example of land use planning for all those who take an interest in the good health of urban populations. This park encompasses some 3000 acres of land running for a mile on both sides of the Schuylkill River and includes a stretch of one and one-third miles along the banks of the Wissahickon, a tributary of the Schuylkill. The reason for this vast spread, of which the Philadelphians are so proud, is found in more than just a rivalry with other cities which had good parks before Philadelphia did, or because of the old, rather small park which lies at the south end of Fairmount Park. It actually has been so expansively laid out along both rivers because of a concern for the city's water supply. With the growth of industry, the upper part of the Schuylkill, from which Philadelphia gets its drinking water, became so polluted from all kinds of wastes as to prompt serious concern about the state of the city's health. The transformation of both banks into a park not only has stopped the source of pollution but has also provided the city with a charming landscaped recreation area without too much effort or cost. For non-Americans there is little point in arguing whether this park is three or four times larger than New York's Central Park or whether there are many in Europe which cover a still greater area. Similarly we do not ask whether it is correct when the Pocket Guide of Philadelphia states that there are "not many rivers in this

12. This Masonic Temple is located at Broad Street and John F. Kennedy Boulevard and built between 1868 and 1873 by James H. Windrim.
13. The City Hall was built between 1871 and 1901 by John McArthur.
country and few in Europe like the Wissahickon.” The park is big and beautiful enough to be sufficiently enjoyed without the exaggerated trimmings. The Schuylkill in this area is approximately as wide as the Neckar near Heidelberg but makes a greater impression because it contains considerably more water. . . . In the park itself the banks are mostly rocky and steep and remain covered with wooded and grassy areas down to the water’s edge. The Wissahickon flows almost up to its very estuary among wooded hills, and plenty of picturesque views can be had from the street running up the hill from its right bank.

Because of both these rivers and a landscape filled with numerous hills and rock formations, Fairmount Park needed only to deviate from Nature here and there by removing an occasional rough spot in order to be utilized to its maximum as a recreation area. Except for its size it looks to me like one of those areas which one sees laid out around a spa in the mountains: they have graded a few paths, placed a few benches along the way, perhaps also encased a spring. Now, almost effortlessly, an entire mountain slope has become the most beautiful garden that one could imagine. As mentioned already, here are the two rivers, mighty, unadulterated, natural artifacts which make you forget everything in the entire park which has been designed or laid out by man. In contrast, an area like New York’s park, for example, would never be able to bring such complete satisfaction as here despite its abundance of trees and pools.

In this park they are going to build the next International Exposition. The place has already been decided upon, and a white flag edged with stars with the words “1776 Centennial 1876” on it as well as a few national flags fluttering here and there from tall poles announce far and wide where the location is to be. The spot seems to be well chosen—the best in the entire district (as far as I can judge from my small knowledge of the area around Philadelphia). One

15. The Neckar River, a 240-mile long tributary of the Rhine, starts in the Black Forest and passes through Stuttgart and Heidelberg, entering the Rhine near Mannheim.
16. This was written in January, 1874, by Ratzel. For a detailed contemporary description of the Exposition and its site, see The Centennial Exposition (Philadelphia, 1876) and for a more modern account see John Maass, The Glorious Enterprise (Watkins Glen, N.Y., 1973).
travels from the city through the old park, over one of the three bridges which run right next to each other over the river, going up about 60 feet on the right bank of the Schuylkill through a very pretty area, until one comes to a level spot stretching out towards the West on which the large field for the International Exposition has been staked out. It has a slightly rolling terrain, predominantly meadowland with occasional clumps of trees. If one walks about a quarter of an hour farther, one comes to a 30-foot elevation which rises like a step from which one can obtain the most beautiful view over the whole park and sections of Philadelphia. This park dominates the entire exposition area, and it certainly will make a magnificent picture once the colorful activities have been unfolded here within the confines of this beautiful landscape. From the exposition area itself there is a broad view up the Schuylkill towards Philadelphia which also offers some interesting sights. I hope the smell of kerosene here is not as overwhelming during the jubilee festivities as it was the two times when I visited the place! Philadelphia has very humid summers, and this smell could make people with sensitive natures rather uneasy.

On the average, a person could go by foot from the center of town to the exposition in a good hour, but there are also horse drawn and steam powered trains aplenty on this route and no lack of steamboats on the Schuylkill. A “Centennial Restaurant” is already being advertised, although behind the huge sign at present there is only a big horse stall to be seen.

At the moment there is little to be said about the preparation for the Exposition. Some building plans for the art gallery, for example, have already been agreed upon, and when Congress has approved its appropriation, then the State of Pennsylvania will see what it and its major city Philadelphia are in a position to contribute. At present the newspapers are urging on the work with all their might, and in most states and territories exposition commissions have been appointed. Nobody among the knowledgeable people with whom I have spoken about the matter doubt however that the tasks to set up properly and run the exposition will be an extraordinarily difficult, if not an impossible job, considering the number of men and minds which will, or will want to, bring their influence to bear and considering the fraud which without doubt will creep in here as it has in other places.