ESSAY REVIEW

Philadelphia Lives


Two books dealing visually, and lovingly, with Philadelphia’s past have drawn two reviewers, one a social scientist and the other a social historian, each an occasional student of photography and its uses, who are past residents and ongoing lovers of that city. Philadelphia Stories offers a good deal that is valuable for students of urban process. Indeed, social-cultural historians Miller, Vogel, and Davis have created an unusual form of urban history. But Philadelphia Then and Now has a limited focus, for the more nearly fine-arts orientation of Finkel and Oyama has resulted in a collection of city views. Dover’s forthright presentation of Then and Now is adequate in the quality of reproductions, and is, as usual for Dover, a fine bargain. Temple University Press, unfortunately, in offering a volume at a considerate price, has done so at the expense of reproduction that is rather drab, even where the originals were almost surely capable of sharp and lively resolution.

Both books seriously “represent” the city. Finkel chose his “Philadelphia Then” photographs not primarily for aesthetic qualities but because they portrayed the city’s distinct characteristics. Oyama’s counterpart “Now” photographs, while technically excellent, were set up to be literally faithful to the point of view of the original camera, although occasionally showing the foreshortening (with consequent interpretive distortion) produced by using a longer focal-length lens than did the original camera. Because of this faithfulness, her pictures are not composed: they are serviceable photographs, and that is all. Miller, Vogel, and Davis “have avoided the formal and ceremonial urban view.” Their “focus remains on the lives of the
ordinary people of Philadelphia and what the photographs can tell us about those people and the city they lived in” (p. ix). Their most common photographic source is the work of photojournalists for whom the “human interest” shot was often a professional concern. Various local collections, public and private, and the Farm Security Administration and Works Progress Administration supplied photos that are mingled with the newspaper photographs.

Finkel and Oyama bemoan the decline in Philadelphia, interlarding regrets with the reflexive self-deprecation described as characteristic of Philadelphians. "In the late twentieth century, Philadelphians live among the ruins of two great cities. One might consider this a liability, perhaps even a source of embarrassment.” No. “[B]y the time of the Centennial celebrations of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, worship of the past had reached a raging pitch. Philadelphians recently celebrated again with Bicentennials in 1976 and 1987. History, it seems, is the city’s best by-product.” So, now, photographs “were not necessarily selected to flatter the city, but to explore the way in which the city has dealt with the past. Philadelphia, it seems, is by turns jealous, proud and ignorant of what it once was” (“Introduction,” unnumbered). This argument does not carry the reader through the book; we found ourselves looking at a series of paired photographs, sequenced geographically (west from the Delaware River to the Schuylkill, along Broad Street from South Philadelphia north, and so forth) but not chronologically or thematically. Neither singly nor in pairs do the photographs evoke much beyond curiosity and pleasure for those already drawn to Philadelphia.

Miller, Vogel, and Davis have produced a far more textured and intriguing book. Even its flaws are those of imagination. If the book is slightly less satisfying than the superb earlier Still Philadelphia, this is mainly due to the comparative weakness of the urban history literature for the more recent decades covered in the present book, leading the authors to compose chapters that are as episodic as processual. The “stories” approach works quite well, allowing a comfortable, uninsistent, but nevertheless analytic approach. The photographs, however, are “pictures,” not bases of analysis. The authors do not practice or encourage interpretation of a given pictured scene. The provenance of photographs is not explored, the basis for choosing them scarcely discussed, and their evocative qualities either treated trivially or ignored. They, like Finkel and Oyama, provide little sense of where the images presented “fit” within the range of existing images that might be relevant.

Finkel’s captions carry little descriptive or analytic weight. On the left-hand page, “then” is briefly described, then contextualized with a historical account of the origin, use, or response to the place, and sometimes with an
episodic account or two. On the right side, we learn about the building "now"—how it has been used and is used. Only occasionally does this scheme allow the reader to connect pieces of information about the buildings and places pictured. Miller, Vogel, and Davis write text, not captions. They "place" the photos and typically point out particular features of the subjects on two or three pages, but ignore the photographers’ points of view. For example, of one series of photos they write: “These close-ups vividly reveal the intense personal give-and-take characteristic of curbside marketing” (p. 37). The story in the text is well-organized, complementing and connecting the photographs with stories. Philadelphia Stories provides a helpful map, as Finkel and Oyama probably should have.

Finkel and Oyama’s book is about loss and preservation—and preservation through photos and photo collections. In one sense, the book is implicitly “about” the collecting philosophy of the Library Company of Philadelphia, the authors’ employer and source of the “then” images. The authors do not delineate their criteria of selection, though they call the process “winnowing” and state that after initial choice, “hundreds of sites were visited to determine changes since the time of the vintage photographs” (“Preface”). A pair of photographs of the main reading room of the Ridgway Building, at Broad and Christian Streets, the former site of the Library Company, contrasting its physical glory around 1930 and its derelict (and abandoned) state in 1987, is exemplary. Indeed, the 1930 photo documented a building that, despite its classical handsomeness, was “incongruous” (p. 33) in location. “Philadelphia nearly forgot its oldest library. . . . By the 1950s, the location was an openly admitted mistake. The cold, damp, dark and leaky library had more pigeons than readers” (p. 33). But, as this book attests, it has risen from the ashes (at a smarter location).

Then and Now documents the efforts, sometimes availing, of preservationists, who emerge as the most vivid actors in the book, though they are not acclaimed in any simple-minded way. Urban process in Philadelphia has been more inexorable, the book claims, than is good for the quality of life.

The criteria for this judgment are more nearly aesthetic than anything else: Furness’s flamboyance is vigorously praised more than once, as is Mullett’s slightly more restrained Beaux Arts work, whereas Sternfeld’s Post Office, replacing Mullett’s, is twice deprecated as “Mussolini Modern,” neither time in quotation marks. The rooftop sculpture by French on the Old Post Office Building is considered admirable while the street-level bas-reliefs “of stylized letter carriers” on the new Post Office by Amateis are dismissed. Of Sternfeld’s building, Finkel concludes: “The tropics were represented with a Gauguin-like figure, the tundra by an Eskimo, the Westerner by a cowboy, and the Easterner by a trousered citizen who might
have done Norman Rockwell proud" (p. 85). Such dudgeon is happily tempered by self-deprecation: the wonderfully bizarre City Hall is treated as wonderfully bizarre and generally a good thing. So, too, is the "gentlemen’s agreement" that long restrained developers from building higher than Penn’s statue atop City Hall. The book’s story-line, interestingly if unconsciously, is paralleled by the choice of scenes. In the oldest "then" photos, relatively many buildings and places have been produced by the government; somewhat more recent "then" photos emphasize scenes under private auspices; and the least ancient "thens" are the product of the institutional sector—particularly cultural institutions.

*Philadelphia Stories* is straightforwardly revisionist. The authors argue that a periodization that views the imposition of mass society upon urban life as near-complete before mid-century is inappropriate for Philadelphia. The fading of the small-scale community of street and neighborhood—in the face of the Progressives’ redefinition of urban institutions, the automobile, industrial decentralization, and the suburbs—is not the Philadelphia story. There, the authors argue, the unusually mixed industrial economy and the exceptional proportion of single-family, owner-occupied housing delayed what did happen eventually when urban development became subject to national rather than local forces. The photographs convey a sense of the persistent vigor of community life.

Given the underlying thesis, a number of themes characterize the particular Philadelphia stories presented here. One is the relationship of Philadelphia’s politics and economy to national developments. The photographs often bear this out elegantly. Strikes and other public expressions of "left" and working-class sentiment predominate, supplemented by photos of ethnically diverse faces, worn but energetically "protesting." Another theme is the contrast between neighborhoods and suburbs. We are shown an Arbus-like Levittown view of the flat faces of raincoated would-be-suburbanites lined up “when the first houses went on view in December 1951” and of a faceless man following a huge power mower through his tiny lawn. Some of these visual mockeries come a little too easy, but we should probably allow a few chuckles at the 1950s from a book that is on the whole deeply respectful of people’s various projects and concerns.

It is the story of the inner city that finally holds the attention and the hearts of Miller, Vogel, and Davis. They show city residents living in an urban fashion partly by doing things in the presence of others in the neighborhood and by creating neighborhoods in which they could build, squat, play, parade, demonstrate, farm, fish, picnic, vend, haggle, and schmooze—interacting without relinquishing the “privacy” of their own personal, ethnic, and cultural spaces. *Philadelphia Stories* makes a good case for the ability of carefully selected historical photographs to convey the
sense of urban life as lived. And yet, too, the authors romanticize; in pictures and in words, they paint the persistence of Philadelphia "community" in a rosy glow. One would welcome a more critical perspective on the manifestations of this persistence over the 1920-1960 period. And we do wonder: could the photographs, could any analysis that actually depended upon photographs as evidence, test their historical thesis? Photographs are indeed persuasive evidence for the presence of phenomena, like community, and may even suggest contemporary meanings, but can they indicate trends in their prevalence, as the authors' thesis does?

*Philadelphia Stories* also presents scenes and events that brought together varied groups from across the city, like baseball, another "romantic" ritual in urban life for which there are fine illustrations: the error at the end of a magnificently inept failed double play in the rotten wartime baseball season of 1943; and DiMaggio missing a high, hard one three years later but looking glorious; as well as a beautiful, rich photograph of a long line in the street near Shibe Park, hoping to get tickets after the Phillies improbably got into the 1950 World Series. In the photograph, the cops wear jodhpurs, and look very happy, both about their duty and about being photographed. The line is 95 percent male, and 100 percent white. A pair of older women stand alongside the line in foreground, conversing about something, probably not baseball; a middle-aged black man, in middle-ground, walks diagonally out toward the middle of the intersection, seemingly wishing to get as far away from the jubilant white line as his eventual pedestrian goal will allow. Symbolism abounds, to be "read" at leisure.

To underline the usefulness of photography as an analytic tool, the authors might have confronted the nature of evidence in visual media, outlining their rationale for selecting and (equally significant) arranging particular pictures on pages between text. This would have involved discussing: (1) the criteria of choice and of the biases photographs *qua* photographs may contain; (2) how they "read" and interpreted the photos in order to construct a history of urban Philadelphia; (3) how they expect readers to "read" the photographic evidence. Methodological self-consciousness would not only have strengthened the stories but also have added a chapter to urban history as a discipline.

Both books focus on change, although differently. *Philadelphia Stories* argues for the persistence of a Philadelphia culture in the face of social and economic development. The story of change in Finkel and Oyama is less exhilarating; there the "culture" succumbs, and little stands as it once had. There is a shared story of change in the two books as well: both describe the great changes, generally instituted by external forces in *Philadelphia Stories* and by local movers and shakers in *Then and Now*, and reflected in the transformation of the economic base from industry to service. Here,
again, the photographs become important, for they can interpret this transformation. In Philadelphia Stories, according to the pictures, the change was fine-grained and individual; in Then and Now the picture-story is rougher and presents "urban patterns." If shopping and retailing tell the economic story in Philadelphia Stories, rearrangements of center city tell it in Then and Now. Transportation is another sign of change, and the pictures selected by each team of authors is another indicator of their different perspectives. Willy-nilly, transportation is much shown: streets, tracks, viaducts, bridges, carts, wagons, trains, streetcars, trucks, and automobiles abound. As one gives way to the other, and walkers occasionally intrude, we see the changes historians tell. The visual works well here, in an undemanding way providing much to the authors and readers of both books.

It is a testimony to the complexity of an "urban image" that two books impelled by an attachment to place can offer such different views. There is a distance in Finkel and Oyama, conveyed by the frequent use of shots of two or three buildings; an architectural expanse rather than a concentration. Miller, Vogel, and Davis, by contrast, rarely use distance shots and almost never show buildings without at the same time showing how those buildings were used by Philadelphians: most typically the users are foregrounded individuals, although sometimes there are crowds, and sometimes parked cars whose occupants are easily imagined. For these and other reasons, the books feel different to us. The physical Philadelphia in Stories is live, visually engaging, and, in fact, evocative of the Philadelphia we love. Then and Now does not convey the warmth it asserts is there. The Philadelphia that emerges from Finkel and Oyama is that produced by the macro-geography of the city: that Market Street east of Broad receives pride of place is entirely appropriate, for implicitly the authors see the corporate actors in this part of town as setting the stage for action outside the city's center. On the periphery, out of view of the "then" photographers represented here, ordinary Philadelphians (the heroes in Stories) eke out a margin of autonomy.

There is one superb exception in Then and Now that shows how expressive of social change architectural photography potentially can be. The pairing of photographs begins with the wild festooning of signs in 1923 for Professor Samuel H. Lingerman, a ventriloquist, on his Northern Liberties building next to the triple-onion-domed St. Andrew's Russian Orthodox Church, placid by comparison. In 1987, Oyama photographed the Orthodox priest posing in front of the showman's former place of business, now a residence neatly stuccoed and painted and with "old-fashioned" architectural ornamentation newly added. Finkel notes: "At the celebration of the church's ninetieth anniversary in 1987, its balalaika orchestra played and remnants of the now-extinct weaving crafts were brought out for display. More than
ever, the sense of community was tied only to the church, for all the congregation’s remaining 120 families had moved from the neighborhood” (p. 93).

"Then and now" is one way to assert and even demonstrate change, but it does not engage the process. Periodization is the historian’s characteristic device for asserting explanation, and this is how *Philadelphia Stories* proceeds. Periods, small enough to be considered internally homogeneous in terms of the relevant phenomena said to be changing, are denoted and justified, and the multiplicity of propelling forces illustrated in written and in pictured scenes. While there are inherent difficulties in describing or foreshadowing forces of future change in still photographs, the intelligent text in *Philadelphia Stories* makes the periodization a successful device, and this a satisfying book.

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