

PHILADELPHIA NEIGHBORHOOD RECOVERY TOUR

TOUR STOP #8: LEHIGH PARK CENTER

CENTRAL LOCATION: Lawrence Street between Huntingdon Street and Lehigh Avenue

Introduction

Conversion of a former medical complex into a mixed-use venture, combining housing with educational and community-service facilities.

Neighborhood Background

The Lehigh Park Center is situated in a neighborhood identified in recent times as West Kensington. In the mid-19th century, the neighborhood was dominated by textile mills—especially carpet mills—and related trades, such as dye works and yarn factories. Later, hosiery and knitting mills were established. Workers lived in rowhouses, within walking distance of their jobs. In 1928, 350 of the city's 850 textile firms were still located in the general "Kensington" area. But the number of firms dwindled during the Great Depression. Except for an uptick in business during World War II (mosquito netting and tarpaulins, among other products), the decline in manufacturing continued on a drastic, downward spiral.

In the 1880s, St. Christopher's Hospital for Children was built at 5th Street and Lehigh Avenue, a location bordering the wide, chaotic industrial corridor of American Street (where steam trains and horse-drawn wagons mingled). A century later, the community had lost virtually all of its original industry and with that, its traditional sources of livelihood. Many residents were dismayed by what seemed like the final blow: St. Christopher's Hospital planned to move to a new, undetermined site, where a major expansion program could be undertaken. Community members worried that this much-needed, neighborhood-oriented institution would abandon them altogether, and what's more, the soon-to-be-vacated complex would fall into ruin.

To address this concern, representatives of the hospital began meeting with a coalition of neighborhood organizations. St. Christopher's decided to build its new facility at Front Street and Erie Avenue, an accessible location to the people of the old neighborhood. The hospital began moving to this location in 1989. However, the future of the old hospital complex—a collection of buildings of various sizes and ages—was a more difficult issue to resolve.

Development of the Venture

Lehigh Park Center has its origins in a community-minded healthcare facility. In the 1980s, St. Christopher's Hospital for Children, situated for a century at 5th Street and Lehigh Avenue,

decided to relocate. But the hospital's board and management team promised neighboring residents and the city administration that they would not just turn off the lights and walk away.

The neighborhood, on the edge of West Kensington (once highly industrial and densely residential) is referred to by community planners as eastern North Philadelphia. Two centuries ago, the ethnic mix was Irish, English, Scotch, and Germans. Today the population is predominantly Latino.

For several years, the hospital and community jointly considered a variety of reuse options for the complex, which covered more than two city blocks, with six large buildings and approximately two-dozen smaller ones. The complex had a noteworthy setting, facing the western edge of a tree-filled, but neglected, neighborhood park called Fairhill Square. Privately owned rowhouses, in need of rehabilitation, could be seen on the other side of the greenery.

Based on standards established by a panel of residents and hospital representatives, St. Christopher's advertised for redevelopment proposals and selected Canus Corporation, a Philadelphia-based firm with substantial experience in the adaptive use of older buildings. Canus sold off smaller portions of the property and redeveloped others, while working on design concepts with Blackney Hayes Architects. The entire project was given the name Lehigh Park Center, comprising the following components that were developed between 1991 and the present:

- Rehabilitation of the Huntingdon-Bromley Pavilion—two former medical-office and outpatient-services buildings—into a 29-unit apartment. This project was achieved through a joint venture of Canus Corporation and Nueva Esperanza (a local community development corporation).
- Rehabilitation of the Nevil Building—a 40,000-square-foot office building and a 14,400-square-foot medical services facility—into preschool and elementary-school classrooms, as well as administrative space for the School District of Philadelphia.
- Conversion of the Morris Building—a former acute-care facility—into 48 family-oriented apartment units. Joint-venture partners for this project were Canus Corporation and the Association of Puerto Ricans on the March (see Tour Stop 7).
- Conveyance of the Facilities Management Building and the Laboratory Annex (occupying the southeast and northeast corners, respectively, of the intersection of 5th Street and Huntingdon Avenue) to two Latino artists' groups. The Facilities Management Building has been rehabilitated as space for after-school arts programs for young people. The Laboratory Annex became a privately owned restaurant and café.
- Rehabilitation of 17 hospital-owned row houses by the Hispanic Association of Contractors and Enterprises (a community development corporation). These homes were then sold to first-time buyers.

This former hospital site, which had been a likely white elephant, has instead become homes, schools, social-service offices, and businesses, which are helping to revitalize other parts of this neighborhood. Extending north on 5th Street, a block north of the former hospital site, is a lively retail corridor, the spine of *El Centro de Oro* (the Golden District). Some of the large industrial

buildings that previously dominated Lehigh Avenue have been leveled and replaced by modern construction. For example, the site of a carpet factory at 7th Street and Lehigh Avenue is now Dorado Village, a low-rise family-oriented housing development. The site of the massive, long-vacant Quaker Lace Factory—destroyed by arson in 1994—was developed into an architecturally inviting public school, opened in 2002. (It fronts onto 4th Street and Lehigh Avenue; the gymnasium faces Fairhill Square.) The Lehigh Park Center is well positioned to continue serving as a supportive resource for neighborhood families.

- Lehigh Park Center is discussed in *21st-Century Neighborhoods: Assets & Advantages of the Older American City*, a 38-page illustrated booklet available from the Community Design Collaborative (\$8).
- For information on the design, contact the project architect:

Blackney Hayes Architects
105 South 12th Street
Philadelphia, PA 19107
215/829-0922 voice
215/829-0596 fax
www.blackneyhayes.com

- For additional information, contact:

Canus Corporation
410 Shurs Lane
Philadelphia, PA 19128
215/483-3769 voice
215/483-7577 fax

- Hispanic Association of Contractors and Enterprises
215/426-8025 voice
215/426-9122 fax
167 West Allegheny Avenue
Philadelphia, PA 19140
www.hacecdc.org/programs
- Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations
1314 Chestnut Street, 7th Floor
P.O. Box 22641
Philadelphia, PA 19110
215/732-5829 voice
215/732-5725 fax
www.pacdc.org

A Personal Perspective

Comments by Michael Greenblatt

Partner

Canus Corporation

Canus Corporation was a general partner in the development of Lehigh Park Center. [In December 2001, the partnership interest was sold to a community development corporation, Hispanic Association of Contractors and Enterprises (HACE)]. Our participation began in 1989, when we responded to a "request for proposal" from St. Christopher's Hospital for Children. The hospital was in the process of moving to a new location, because of concerns about crime in the surrounding neighborhood, a need for closer staff parking, and the desire to remain competitive by building a more modern facility. Community members and representatives of the hospital worked together to make sure that ideas for redeveloping the site were in sync with the interests of the neighborhood.

We took title in 1990 and immediately sold some of the parcels to community groups for their use, including 17 rowhouses that were rehabilitated by HACE. The vacant hospital complex was leased back to St. Christopher's for a two-year period, during which time the hospital maintained all the carrying costs. We made development plans in three phases, which caused some difficulty in finding investors, who typically prefer to see the full picture. Finding new uses for the six largest buildings was challenging: each one was different from the other and none had a layout that could easily be converted to residential use. Initially, one of the buildings was scheduled to be a nursing home, but when state requirements proved too stringent, we switched to creating 29 low-income apartments.

When we first started to build, we used 24-hour-a-day guards to protect the site, and even then, there were still problems with crime. Today, the stabilization provided by the redeveloped complex has been monumental. The community has benefited from the residential units and the early-learning center. Spin-offs from the main project include the creation of an art center and the rebirth of a local park [Fairhill Square].

Lehigh Park Center stands right in the heart of a vibrant Latino community, with a functioning retail district. Had we not become involved in this project, or not been able to reach completion, I fear the neighborhood might not have been turned around. Instead of becoming a huge vacant nightmare, the old St. Christopher's site became a success story and a model for future development.

Nearby Points of Interest

TALLER PUERTORRIQUEÑO CULTURAL ARTS CENTER

www.tallerpr.org

215/426-3311

2721 North 5th Street

Founded in 1974 as a community center and workshop celebrating Puerto Rican and Latin American culture, Taller Puertorriqueño includes a book-and-craft store and an extensive archive of art and resource material. The gallery shows the work of local artists and occasional traveling exhibitions. Nearby, at the Taller Puertorriqueño Education Center, 5th Street and Huntingdon Avenue (2557 North 5th Street), artist Roldán West designed a colorful, textured exterior mural that depicts Puerto Rican myths. Hours: Tuesday 1 p.m.–5 p.m. Wednesday–Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Call 215/623-6320 for information about lectures, workshops, and performances.

MURAL ARTS PROGRAM

PHILADELPHIA DEPARTMENT OF RECREATION

www.muralarts.org

www.gophila.com/murals

215/686-8366

Established in 1984 (initially as an anti-graffiti initiative), the Mural Arts Program has created more than 2,000 painted walls. This extraordinary, nationally recognized program emphasizes collaboration between the artist and the community—resulting in bold, colorful compositions that have altered the architectural landscape of the city and fostered civic pride. In the words of director Jane Golden, the murals "serve to provoke thought, to inspire dreams, to bear witness, and to remind people that they are part of a larger world." In 1996, the program became part of the Philadelphia Department of Recreation. Murals locations near Tour Stop 8 include:

2721 North Fifth Street (at Lehigh Avenue)

TALLER PUERTORRIQUEÑO

Artists: Staff of the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program. Completed 1986 (restored 1999 by Parris Stancell).

Notes: When the Mural Arts Program was in its early “anti-graffiti” phase, *Taller Puertorriqueño* was one of the initial murals. It was restored 13 years later by Parris Stancell, who is among four local artists featured in a 2001 WHYY-TV documentary called *Mural*. The dog-headed man in the center is a “vigilante” whose role in Puerto Rican folklore is to frighten bad spirits away.

Sponsor: City of Philadelphia.

2557-59 North 5th Street (at Huntingdon Avenue)

EL CORAZON CULTURAL DEL BARRIO

Artists: Roldán West, Danny Polanco, Joe Brenman, among others. Completed 2000.

Notes: Created for the exterior of the Taller Puertorriqueño Education Center, near the cultural arts center (see above), *El Corazón Cultural Del Barrio* incorporates mosaic tiles into a mural of Puerto Rican myths.

Sponsors: Butler Family Fund, The Pew Charitable Trusts, Philadelphia Foundation, The Samuel S. Fels Fund, The William Penn Foundation, Independence Foundation, Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund, Nathan Cummings Foundation, Taller Puertorriqueño, and City of Philadelphia.

503 West Dauphin Street (at 5th Street)

PAS PARA VIEQUES

Artists: Joe Brenman and Danny Polanco. Completed 2001.

Notes: *Pas Para Vieques* celebrates Pedro Albizo Compos, a mid-20th-century Puerto Rican separatist.

Sponsor: City of Philadelphia.

427 West Dauphin (at 5th Street)

PUERTO RICAN WOMAN

Artists: Michele Ortiz and Stephanie Campbell. Completed 2000.

Notes: *Puerto Rican Woman* is heavily framed to follow the uneven outline of the building. At first glance, the mural looks as though it stands free of any structure.

Sponsor: Philadelphia Empowerment Zone.

Directions

TO LEHIGH PARK CENTER

Lawrence Street between Huntingdon Street and Lehigh Avenue

FROM BEGINNING POINT

READING TERMINAL

12th and Market Streets

By Car: West on Market Street (toward City Hall). Right onto 13th Street. Left onto Arch Street. Right onto Broad Street (Route 611). Right onto Lehigh Avenue. Right onto Lawrence Street.

By Mass Transit: SEPTA bus #47 northbound. Board at 7th and Market Streets. Get off at 5th and Huntingdon Streets. Walk East on Huntingdon Street, one block, to Lawrence Street.

Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority Information line:

215/580-7800

www.septa.org

FROM PRECEDING TOUR STOP

ASSOCIATION OF PUERTO RICANS ON THE MARCH

6th and Diamond Streets

By Car: South on Germantown Avenue. Right onto Diamond Street. Left onto North 5th Street. Right onto West Cumberland Street. Left onto North Leithgow Street. Left onto West Huntingdon Street. Go two blocks to Lawrence Street.