

PRACTICE: THE ROWHOUSE REIMAGINED AND RELEVANT

BY JOANN GRECO

Tiny houses? They may be the latest residential trend but Philadelphians have been making do with, and reveling in them for ages. Sustainability? What do you call shared walls, smaller footprints, and flat roofs crying out for solar arrays and succulents? Affordability? How about blocks and blocks of new \$250,000 homes nestled alongside older ones long ago bought and paid for?

When it comes to today's real estate buzz-phrases, the unprepossessing rowhouse ticks off points again and again. And Philadelphia, where they make up some 60 percent of occupied housing units, is proving a lab for imaginative designers willing to tackle the form. "We have come to really love rowhouses," says architect Brian Phillips, AIA, principal at ISA, one of several young firms creating a new urban residential vernacular. "They're a super-flexible type that's more about the context of the urban fabric than just housing. They defer to the city. And the minute you break out of tradition, there's a lot of possibilities in that little box."



These small, inherently affordable row houses would never be built today, but they offer home ownership and low cost rentals to people who would be shut out of the market in most big cities.

Possibilities exist, too, in the good old-fashioned, standard issue rowhouse: a brick-clad rectangle of between 1,000 and 2,000 square feet that typically measures 16-feet wide by 40 feet deep and rises two or three stories. Plenty of aspirational and affluent homeowners have invested in updating their tired interiors while upgrading their inefficient systems. Meanwhile, thousands of lower income homeowners are eager to simply get their houses back into shape.

A plethora of organizations, such as Habitat for Humanity and Rebuilding Together Philadelphia, stand ready to help them, operating on the principle that the most affordable (and most sustainable) home is the one that's already built. One emerging effort, the Healthy Rowhouse Project – founded by the Design Advocacy Group (DAG) – recently secured funding to work with such service providers in developing a model to rapidly implement repairs and preserve housing citywide. The idea is that fixing leaky roofs and replacing rotting joists keep both the building and its inhabitants safe and healthy.

"The Philadelphia rowhouse has given so many people a chance to own a home," says Kiki Bolender, AIA, who serves on the project's working team. "It's just heartbreaking to see the amounts that can cause someone to give it all up. For a fraction of what it costs to demolish and rebuild, we can save existing stock – and help the people who live there stay."

Rowhomes weren't always such a regular part of the Philadelphia landscape, of course. William Penn's "countrie town" only morphed into a dense one of narrow homes on compact lots as the city grew and landlords and developers divided their parcels. Rowhouses in Philly came to mean everything from the trinities of Elfreth's Alley to the post-Civil War mansions of Rittenhouse Square. Today, emphasizes Bolender, who also co-wrote *The Philadelphia Rowhouse Manual*, the rowhouse "absolutely remains relevant as a building type."



The family space of Belfield Townhouses. It is the first Certified Passive House project in Pennsylvania. Designed by Onion Flats.



Once a house becomes vacant, it can deteriorate quickly, eroding the neighborhood fabric.

Most of the new stuff going up in greater Center City and other residential environs runs true to form, only bigger. But during the last two decades, a handful of architects have dared to tinker with the template in neighborhoods such as Francisville, Fishtown, Kensington, and Point Breeze. The preferences of contemporary homeowners, sustainability concerns, and the push toward affordability are driving this re-examination of an ever-hardy but adaptable building type. Yes, the form has

limitations: narrowness is one, verticality another. Phillips says, "Stairs are a huge issue for us. Whether spiral, straight, switchback; in the front, in the back, in the middle; we spend a lot of time on where they go. "But these parameters inspire creativity. We see these limitations as opportunities."

New materials, new uses

"Traditional rowhouses came from a different expectation of privacy because there were many more occupants living in

them than there are now. The generally accepted progression is public rooms on the ground floor to private on the top. But we're seeing a lot of conversion of bedrooms into different living environments that don't always require a door," says Phillips. For example, his firm has put master bedrooms on the second floor, reserving the third for a guest room or an auxiliary living area. Basements have progressed from throwaway mechanical spaces to usable ones. The advent of rear-entry garages – the result of Philadelphia's updated zoning code banning front-loaded ones – has presented a new small space that faces the street and can be used as a home office or a different kind of entry.

Out front, things remain pretty much the same. "Normally, the fronts of our houses are all where you'd expect them to be. We're very committed to obeying the rules of the urban fabric," says Phillips. ISA's Sheridan Street development, for the nonprofit community group Asociacion Puertorriquenos en Marcha (APM) was one of Philadelphia's first green affordable housing projects. There the houses are positioned in an unusual staggered arrangement necessitated by the site's oddly-shaped lots.

Facades don't necessarily hew to the old rules either. ISA's work for sustainable developer Postgreen Homes. Phillips says "Windows often take a back seat because even the best insulated ones don't completely seal a building's envelope against energy leakage. They take these considerations to a whole new level. We've learned to allow in natural light from the top or by punctuating the facade in different patterns and sizes so [the fenestration] doesn't resemble the typical well-behaved lineup of older rowhouses."

As Alex Dews, executive director of the Delaware Valley Green Building Council, observes, "the further you push the envelope in terms of sustainability, the further you're going to get from the traditional look of a rowhouse."



A block of green affordable housing on Sheridan Street developed by Asociacion Puertorriquenos en Marcha. Designed by ISA.

Affordable, not “cheap”

The same is true when architects address housing affordability. For instance, ISA’s first project with Postgreen was the 2007 series of “100K” houses in East Kensington. Phillips says “Brick was the first thing to go in favor of fiber cement planking that is substantially more affordable. Rowhouses are inherently affordable since you’re only building two facades not four. For us, simple design moves, flat facades made of one material, and reducing the number of interior walls, save on construction costs while providing a minimalist aesthetic.”

Design-build practice Onion Flats has pursued adaptive reuse and other aspects of sustainability since its start. One early project features entrances made of converted freezer doors found on site. The firm’s forays into affordable housing don’t stint on incorporating quality green elements, either. For Belfield Townhomes, developed for the nonprofit Raise of Hope in 2012, the team leveraged its modular construction techniques to build net-zero capable houses, the first Certified Passiv Haus in Pennsylvania.

While acknowledging that Philadelphia is in danger of coasting on a new set of design clichés, Bolender welcomes those daring to “mess with the form to make it 21st-century. In general, these homes are much more compatible with city life than the suburban-style affordable housing developments of the past.”

Rather than sacrificing style, the best affordable housing simply means two things: smaller living quarters and more basic materials. “The \$100K house was asking questions about a new kind of starter home and how the rowhouse could be modest, yet still smart,” Phillips says. Even Postgreen’s more expensive developments (400K-ish) are built for millennials moving to Fishtown and Kensington.

Bolender agrees that there’s room for relatively smaller, more affordable units that fall in what’s being called the “missing middle” of the housing spectrum. “But not many developers want to build them. That’s why it’s so important to save the ones we’ve

got. So many of them were built as workers’ housing, which meant – people could afford them!”

Older can be better

Thousands of 50-plus year-old rowhomes dot the Philadelphia landscape in all directions. Dews says “They already have the potential to be much more efficient than a typical brand-new single family home because of their shared walls. They are so sturdy and durable that once you do some demo, you have a blank slate that is easily upgradable to the most modern, efficient, and code-compliant of building systems.”

Even basic system repairs – patching a roof, weatherstripping a window – can go a long way toward making homes more habitable and encourages its low-income owners to age in place. Rebuilding Together Philadelphia renovates the homes of 75 families each year, mobilizing hundreds of volunteers, working off a checklist of 25 goals established with the National Center for Healthy Housing. According to Stefanie Seldin, executive director of Rebuilding:

“The repairs cost an average of \$8,000 and are designed to improve safety, health and efficiency. They are not cosmetic.”

Take the recent case of Margaret, who turned 81 on the day a Rebuilding team arrived to install grab bars in the bathroom, replace moldy carpets with vinyl flooring, caulk and seal windows and doorways, and repair faulty plumbing. Seldin elaborates: “Since 2010, home values have doubled in Margaret’s neighborhood east of Temple University. That means taxes have increased and someone like Margaret doesn’t have money left over for repairs. But she wants to stay. When we were done, Margaret said it was the best birthday present she’d ever received.”

Usually, saving a building makes sense. But some are too far gone – or have already disappeared – and so new construction, too, has a part to play. Practiced in tandem, the delicate balance of infill and conservation, of innovation and context, can contribute to the making of a healthy and diverse city. Bolender says “Remember, it’s not just Philadelphia that people call home – it’s a neighborhood and it’s a street.”

And, very likely, it’s a rowhouse. ■



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