GREEN PARTY From left, Patrick and Johnny McDonald, Howard Steinberg and Tim McDonald on top of E-Flats in Northern Liberties.

Let It Grow

Developer Tim McDonald is building environmentally friendly houses in Northern Liberties that are changing the very notion of what a rowhome can be. Yes, in Philadelphia **BY DAN P. LEE**

WE'RE STANDING ON GRASS, ON RECENTLY LAID SOD, on a patch of lawn that just so happens to be growing atop the roof of a newly constructed Philadelphia rowhouse—a Philadelphia rowhouse, it should be noted, really in name only. On a silver-colored early-autumn day, 35 feet above terra firma, with three stories of structure beneath us, we're high enough here that the afternoon traffic on I-95, elevated along the banks of the river as it is, speeds by parallel to us—on the same plane—the *whoosh* of the trucks and cars reaching our ears a moment or two after they pass. The view, though, is panoramic. In the opposite direction, as we face west, the skyline soars and spreads equally, the spires of the Liberty Towers piercing holes in the dark gray clouds so that a hundred sharply angled shafts of sunlight pour through, illuminating the blue-black glass of the high-rises and spotlighting the famous effigy, atop City Hall, of Philly's original architect.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **PAUL PUGLIESE**

Then we focus closer, looking down onto the neighborhoods stretching out from here on tiny Laurel Street in Northern Liberties, and it is this part of the view, strangely, that seems most interesting. A huge old brick factory stands just before us, a relic of the old neighborhood—of the old Philadelphia—completely resurrected by recently architecturally born-again mega-developer Bart Blatstein. Random patches of newly vacant brown earth, sprinkled with pieces of old rubble. Countless old rowhomes stacked up against each other, sagging into each other, some dilapidated, some well-kept. Abrupt and unexpected holes of aqua, tiny aboveground pools in the distance. Clumps of trees bending in the breeze, church steeples climbing, thousands of flat roofs, rising and falling with the slopes of the terrain. It is unexpectedly lovely, a mosaic of authentic Philadelphia life. Architect Tim McDonald, his brother/partner Patrick and I have been quiet, each of us turning the 360 degrees to take it all in, until at last I offer an observation so obvious from this vantage point that it seems almost redundant:

"Why doesn't every builder working here realize how beautiful this is?"

Tim McDonald, 42, tall, thin and bespectacled—a sort of Dr.-Mark-Greene-from-the-TV-show-*ER*-looking guy—laughs. And then he tells me that's the same question every person he's ever brought "up here" has asked—*up here* being one of the "green roofs" that the McDonald brothers and their partners at the development company Onion Flats have incorporated into a vision for what rowhome living in Philadelphia in the 21st century can, and should, be.

As we're standing here, a few feet from the group of solar panels that will provide all the electricity needed for this building and then some, I remember the 2003 documentary *My Architect*, made by Nathaniel Kahn. It is his eulogy to his brilliant and enigmatic father, Lou Kahn, perhaps the most forward-thinking—and, shamefully, underappreciated—architect Philadelphia has ever produced, whose ideas and plans for a new, better kind of urban living fell on deaf ears here. I ask Tim McDonald whether he's seen the film.

He smiles, says he has, and then points to an old brick wall a block away that seems to rise oddly high into the sky.

"That's the wall," he tells me. "That's the wall from the movie. Do you recognize it? This is actually where Lou Kahn grew up. Lou Kahn grew up right around here in Northern Liberties. He walked past that wall every day."

In the film, this rather inconsequential wall serves as a kind of touchstone, a visual refrain harking back to Kahn's childhood, a stark monument to the roots of his inspiration. It might work just as well for *this* moment, for

LIGHT SHOW A Rag Flats rowhouse in Fishtown.

these neighborhoods north of Center City, hotbeds for development of a magnitude and scale not seen in at least 80 years. From where we're standing, the question of why every developer doesn't acknowledge the beauty of the city is about a lot more than the idiosyncratically lovely view. It's really a question of why, at a time of unprecedented development, we're relinquishing our architectural future to the whims of pretty much anyone who wants to build here, when what we could be doing—what the McDonalds *have* done, in the townhouses under me—is rethink what our neighborhoods might look and feel like.

Tim McDonald and his partners think big. They aspire to create architecture that not only works and looks good and sells, but that, while fitting within the character of its existing neighborhood, is wholly original and environmentally responsible *and* adds to the city's larger fabric. To them, the rowhome, Philadelphia's quintessential residential architectural form, shouldn't be replicated by simply tearing down old ones and replacing them with essentially the same thing but for faux colonial or Victorian facades and stainless steel appliances and granite countertops. To the guys from Onion Flats—"onion" as in multiple layers, and "flats" with its European implications—the rowhome is a form to be reimagined, recast.

That this kind of smart, modern architecture with a mind toward sustainability is going on at all in Philadelphia is surprising, given the city's historic tentativeness (read: backwardness) when it comes to architecture and planning. Charles Dickens, visiting in the 19th century, found the city "handsome but distractingly regular," repressed by its "Quakerly influence." When downtown Philadelphia underwent massive redevelopment in the 1950s and '60s, officials scoffed at Lou Kahn's radical idea for a completely new kind of urban center, with a string of circular garages built along Vine Street, in which people would park their cars in order to walk into a totally pedestrian Center City replete with buildings more evocative and utilitarian than just huge rectangular slabs of glass—an unprecedented if not completely practical approach that now seems oddly green and modern. (When Ed Bacon was asked by Nathaniel Kahn whether he thought it tragic that the downtown of our city contains not one single building by perhaps its greatest architectural son, Bacon, the longtime city planning director, writhed in anger, responding, "Well, I tell you one thing, it would have been an incredible tragedy if they would have built one single thing that Lou proposed for downtown Philadelphia! They were all brutal, totally insensitive, totally impractical.") As Philadelphia modern architect Stephen Kieran has said, "It's easier to do modern architecture in Rome than it is in Philadelphia."

Nothing's changed. Patrick McDonald tells me that when he called the city to discuss requirements for rainwater reclamation systems, officials told him they knew of no such systems in the city, could offer no guidance, and would look to his project after the fact to learn about it. While rainwater runoff is one of the city's most serious problems, causing sewers to back up and flood homes and polluting the city's drinking-water supply, until recently Philadelphia had done almost nothing to encourage solutions—solutions such as green roofs, which not only offer homeowners the benefit of better insulation, and the absorption of some of the summer heat that otherwise creates a sort of urban desert, but which also absorb 50 to 60 percent of a rainfall; the rest of the rain enters the drainage system in a slow, more natural trickle.

And yet, given the city's notorious architectural conservativeness—and the current administration's utterly laissez-faire attitude when it comes to development—Tim McDonald and his partners at Onion Flats have been able to effect change, even if it's on a small scale, by showing us what's possible; their structures speak for themselves. Moreover, McDonald has also, after years of fighting, shown the light to one of Philadelphia's most powerful developers, Bart Blatstein, reviled for his strip-mall aesthetic; his arrival in Northern Liberties several years ago was greeted by McDonald and pro-neighborhood groups with death dirges.

McDonald won, to the point where the two men are friends now—and, far more important, McDonald was, as Blatstein himself puts it, "a tipping point for me with design and architecture."

The McDonald family's story is another in Philadelphia's great canon of immigrant achievement. The patriarch, Jack, a miner, brought his young family to Philadelphia 40 years ago from Ontario, after

Jack's best friend, Gene Ceppetelli, a Philadelphia Eagle who became a plumber after suffering an injury on the field, invited Jack to work with him. Patrick, Mike, Tim, Johnny, and their sister Erin (who died suddenly in 2005) grew up middle-class in Havertown. After high school, the boys all went their separate ways, with Patrick becoming a master plumber and ultimately running a plumbing and heating company with his dad in Philly. Johnny fled to California (as did Mike), where he dropped out of college and got involved in the music biz. Tim studied architecture at Penn State.

Up to that point, a pretty conventional family. But then Tim, before getting a master's degree at McGill in Montreal, apprenticed with Yasuo Yoshida in Japan. Yoshida is a provocative avant-garde architect whose firm builds its own designs and entrusts huge responsibility to apprentices. That was the beginning of something new for Tim: "His office was a steel shop and a wood shop. And I really learned to think in steel in that office. I showed up, and he spoke very little English, and the first day, he gave me the design of this huge project. And he didn't tell me what to do. It was up to me to figure it all out."

In 1996, Tim returned to Philly from Montreal and started teaching at local universities while freelancing residential and commercial work. One day, annoyed with Philly's overall indifference to architecture, he decided to open the city's first architecture gallery. He spotted a dilapidated five-story walk-up "full of pigeon shit" between 2nd and Front on Market Street, and bought the building with his older brother Patrick. Along with their father, they renovated the upper floors into loft apartment space. To their surprise, the project—dubbed Market Flats—came together. "It was the beginning of us developing our language of building, with glass and steel and sliding doors," Tim says. The units were quickly occupied. The gallery, called Faarm, thrived, drawing large crowds and hosting regular exhibitions for local professional and student architects, exploiting the high concentration of architecture schools in this city (Penn, Temple, Drexel and Philadelphia University all have full-fledged programs) and Tim's closeness to them. Nonprofits are notoriously tough to sustain, though, and Tim closed the gallery after two years. But the brothers were on their way to a personal aesthetic.

In 1999, Patrick and Tim discovered the old Capital Meats building, an abandoned meatpacking facility on Laurel Street in Northern Liberties, across from the two duplexes they recently completed and on whose green roofs we stood. "Northern Liberties was a really scary place then," Tim says, and the building was in horrible shape. They employed ex-students of Tim's to design living spaces and work alongside the McDonalds in the construction. "It was an experiment, where we really got to play with our ways of building, our ways of thinking," Tim says. The project became a meditation on the ideas of community and natural light and open space; virtually every room would feature windows—a view into the next.

In the middle of that project—dubbed Capital Flats—Jack McDonald died from a brain aneurism. His death pushed brother Johnny to leave the music business and start working with his brothers. It took a year and a half to complete eight units, but the press—appreciating a "work of art," as the *Philadelphia Weekly* called it, in a still-pretty-bad neighborhood—fawned, and they were quickly rented. Occupants were diverse: young architects, lawyers and other professionals, and a wealthy English couple in their 60s living in Philly for business.

It was the next project, however, that really stamped the firm's rowhome aesthetic. Tim McDonald had taken a trip to Venice, and had been thinking more about communal living and how to take the idea of a rowhouse—which for 300 years was three floors of tiny, often lightless rooms—and open it up. In 2002, for $80,000, the McDonalds purchased an old, sagging rag factory on East Berks Street in Fishtown, a project to be called—what else?—Rag Flats. After hauling away nearly 130 tractor trailers full of trash, the brothers began constructing an 11-unit mix of three-story townhouses and lofts, open, with high ceilings, full of windows, and centered on an open courtyard accessible by a carriageway street entrance. They left the original factory wall along the street in place, and to contain the project built two townhouses on either side. The McDonalds were determined to keep the integrity of the neighborhood intact, and though portions of the structure appear distinctly modern, the building is flush with its neighbors and blends almost seamlessly.

While the project was still in the early stages of design, Patrick had an epiphany. Why not create a truly sustainable building, with solar panels, a rainwater reclamation system, and green roofs? To Tim, it seemed a natural fit to his ideas about light and space.

One recent afternoon, Patrick took me on a tour of Rag Flats, where he lives in a spacious loft, and where the brothers have sold eight of the 10 available properties, for between $350,000 and $750,000. He showed me one unit still under construction, featuring a soaring living room open to the upper floor; a multi-story glass wall looks out onto what will become a green roof, shared with neighbors. Up a floating staircase, open in the center and with horizontal panels of glass on each level to allow light to pass through, we toured the master

bedroom: a loft looking out over the entire living space and beyond to the screened communal courtyard; huge frosted squares can be moved to create a wall closing off the loft. There are modern accoutrements—bamboo floors, stainless-steel appliances, marble, granite, whirlpool, etc. Each floor accesses an outside patio or deck, and we climbed a winding staircase to the roof high above the neighborhood, with a panoramic view of the city, though the spaced-out townhouses themselves, with their jutting square and rectangular shapes, were part of the show, too. These are *row*houses? Indeed. *Inquirer* architecture critic Inga Saffron wrote in a review that the units "are roughly the size and shape of a typical Philadelphia rowhouse. But in most other respects, they are as different from the city's new crop of townhouses as the 19th century is from the 21st."

And Rag Flats' "greenness" is much more than a putting surface on top. Solar panels provide electricity for the entire building—so much that at certain times of day, the meters spin backward. The windows in the units are maximum-efficiency, so heating costs are remarkably low. The green roofs, with several inches of dirt holding grass and other plants, provide added insulation, in addition to community spaces. The 6,000-gallon water reclamation system, positioned under porous pavers in the center courtyard through which blades of grass poke, provides all the water for irrigation. Huge stalks of bamboo rustle in the wind. Patrick tells me this is just the beginning; in future buildings, Onion Flats is contemplating water filtration systems, so collected rainwater can be turned potable. In essence, the plan is for a completely independent dwelling.

I find it hard to believe, but Tim tells me that the building cost for such a structure is comparable to that of "someone doing a shitty rowhome down the street."

It's all so impressive that you do find yourself believing in his grand hope: "Everybody in Philadelphia's afraid of opening up questions and pushing the envelope a little bit. But that's bullshit. This is the future. It's about a sustainable way of designing and building—and thinking—about life in the city in the 21st century."

The *Philadelphia Weekly* recently touted the city's burgeoning greenness, but the cover story also noted that Philly remains one of the most polluted cities in the country, that its recycling efforts are woefully inadequate, that city building codes demand very little in terms of sustainability and efficiency, that

City Hall still has no department of environment or sustainability director (unlike most other major American cities), and that despite PECO's offer of wind power to its 1.6 million customers in and around Philly for a measly surcharge of $13 a month, just 30,000 residential customers have switched, even though there's capability for twice that many. Even Atlantic City—Atlantic City!—has proven more forward-thinking in renewable energy, with the construction last year of five windmills that supply enough energy to independently run the Atlantic County wastewater plant and more than 2,500 homes. (Plans are being discussed—with the support of most politicians and residents—to install a hundred more windmills offshore, with the potential to fuel 45,000 homes.)

Compare that to Chicago, another cold-weather industrial city, which over the past few years has aspired to become, and now is pretty much universally considered, the greenest city in America. Mayor Richard Daley has seized the title of "green mayor," with all the political cachet it brings. In addition to planting some half a million trees and pushing for ultra-low-polluting buses and taxis, Daley made the installation of green roofs his pet project, mandating that developers who receive tax support install them, and offering grants and other kinds of financial incentives to residents. More than two million square feet of lawn now grow on Chicago's roofs, including 33,000 square feet of aromatic gardens, meadows and woodlands atop City Hall.

And how's this for a classic Philadelphia postscript? When Chicago looked to find a designer to engineer its City Hall green roof, they found one on McCallum Street, right here in Philly. Until recently, the company, Roofscapes Inc., one of the most respected green-roof-engineering firms in the country, has in grand Philadelphia tradition been mostly ignored locally (though it did build the green roof atop the Fencing Academy of Philadelphia, for years one of the city's only two large green roofs).

"To think that Rag Flats is the most innovative thing being done in Philadelphia ... " Inga Saffron of the *Inquirer* trails off in mid-sentence. "I just got back from Denver, and it occurred to me just how stuck in our ways we are here. I like Rag Flats a lot—it's very nicely thought-out and finished and appealing. But you go to Seattle or Denver or San Diego, and you see just so much more, so much more variation."

When asked why, Saffron, like everyone else I spoke to for this story, points to the Street administration, which has "taken the point of view that any development is good development, that beggars can't be choosers, and that their job is to just clear the way for it." But Saffron also cites something more intrinsic. "Statistically, Philadelphia has fewer college grads than other cities. I think people overall—and this is of course a big generalization—are less educated, less worldly, less traveled here. I believe John Street only left the country once, and that was to go to Israel. If you haven't traveled around and lived in other places, you think the way it works here is normal, and it's a lack of sophistication."

And yet there is hope.

Lately there has been some interest from the city in addressing development issues—granted, not always from the top down. The Philadelphia Water Department adopted a new code that calls for city builders to deal with rainwater onsite, and the city's watersheds program office is pushing porous pavements. Urban gardens—even small urban farms—are sprouting in some sections of town. Mayor Street, to his credit, after leaving the position of planning board director vacant for a staggering 19 months, finally named well-respected city architect Janice Woodcock to the post. (How much she can accomplish in a year remains to be seen.) And Street recently finally addressed the huge issue of development on the waterfront, a setting that seemed poised to become a Wild Wild West for developers, by granting UPenn's Penn Praxis, a nonprofit consulting group of students and faculty from the design school, some oversight for planning.

What also may help save Philadelphia from itself is something that seems, at first blush, utterly counterintuitive—the recent slip in the residential real estate market. "This could be a really good thing for us," says Saffron, "because we came to the precipice and we didn't go over, and the kind of really unplanned development that we could have had probably won't happen. So if we're smart as a city, we can reassess, and we can plan."

The most powerful tool for change, however, probably lies not in City Hall, but in something bigger—us. Because the conversation isn't just about buildings, and planning, and construction materials—in fact, it's not fundamentally about those things. It's much more about what we want our city to look like, and how we want to live. It's about convincing not only city officials, but also neighbors present and future—and thereby developers—that good architecture is more than, say, a fake Disneyesque Italianate piazza in the middle of a gritty, raw, urban location.

Which brings us back to Bart Blatstein. Several years ago, Blatstein began buying up huge portions of Northern Liberties, including the old Schmidt's brewery, which, despite vociferous opposition from the neighborhood, he promptly tore down, planning to replace it with said Italianate piazza. Tim McDonald, on the Northern Liberties design committee, quickly became Blatstein's arch-enemy, and for years fought his plans for the Schmidt's location. Finally, one day in 2003, in a last-ditch effort to break through to him, McDonald took Blatstein's rendering for the piazza home with him, put it in his computer, and redrew it, deleting the Italianate stuff and giving the building a contemporary design. The next time McDonald saw Blatstein, he gave the redesign to him. Annoyed, Blatstein stuffed the printout in his pocket, and didn't look at it again until that night, when he got home.

"I just kept pushing it aside on the table, then looking at it again, and finally I thought, you know, it's worth a conversation," Blatstein recalls.

The next day, McDonald's phone rang.

"Tim, it's Bart."

"Yeah, Bart."

"I hate your fucking guts."

"Listen, Bart, this is not personal. I just really want something good for this neighborhood."

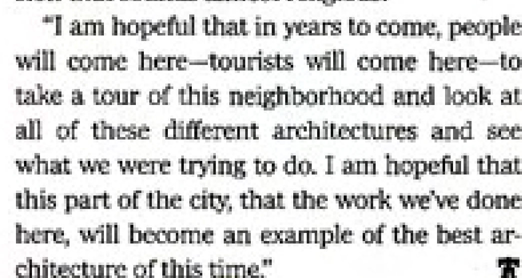
"I hate your fucking guts because you make me think." (Yes, big-time developer Bart Blatstein really said this.)

They had a meeting.

"He is the most egotistical human being I've ever met," McDonald says now. "And in that meeting, he became the most humble person I've ever talked with. Because he basically said, 'You know what? I just don't want to make a mistake here. I know what I like, but I don't know if it's any good.' And I said, 'Good! Thank you! Yeah, you could fuck this city up if you didn't realize that! Great. Okay!' And that was the beginning of it."

McDonald introduced Blatstein to his friends at the firm Erdy McHenry, and now Blatstein's work in Northern Liberties is widely admired as some of the best, most innovative architecture the city's seen in years. Blatstein says he's a better man—and especially a better developer—for it: "It's been very gratifying to do something special and still be able to make the numbers work."

And then Blatstein—strip-mall mogul, for chrissake, John Street's guy!—reveals that two of his buildings in the neighborhood were inspired by the work of Lou Kahn. It's a conversion that sounds almost religious:



"I am hopeful that in years to come, people will come here—tourists will come here—to take a tour of this neighborhood and look at all of these different architectures and see what we were trying to do. I am hopeful that this part of the city, that the work we've done here, will become an example of the best architecture of this time."

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