

THE PHILADELPHIA CROSTOWN COMMUNITY

Architects: Venturi, Scott Brown and Associates, Inc.

Location: Philadelphia, PA

Client: Citizens' Committee to Preserve and Develop the Crosstown Community

Completion: 1970

South Street spans Philadelphia's two rivers at the southern edge of William Penn's plan. It is a commercial strip street at the scale of Main Street. It could, in fact, be called the main street of Philadelphia's center-city black community. At the turn of the century and until the 1920s, it was a fashionable street, serving a center city and a South Philadelphia residential market. Early suburbanization, the Great Depression, and World War II took their toll, but it was not until the 1950s, when South Street was named the last segment of a proposed expressway ring around Philadelphia's central business district, that a 10-year decline set in.

By the late 1960s, a new spirit was abroad; a group was formed and was headed by Mrs. Alice Lipscomb. It represented the neighborhood groups that string the length of South Street and was based in a storefront at 820 South Street. Pickets appeared at City Hall, and city government, fearful of urban unrest and eager for peace in the long, hot summer ahead, heard the voice of the community over those of the State Highway Department and Chamber of Commerce and stopped the Crosstown Expressway. South Central Philadelphia was scheduled to receive federal funds for planning and renewal.

At this point (early in 1968) Venturi and Rauch were approached by an advisor to the Committee who said, "If you can like Las Vegas Strip, we trust you not to try to neaten up South Street at the expense of its occupants." We were to be architects and planners to the Citizens' Committee, under contract but without fee, to plan for the Crosstown Community, as represented by the Citizens' Committee to Preserve and Develop the Crosstown Community (CCPDCC), and help present its case to the public and to governmental and private agencies whose decisions affected the community, notably, the Highway Department, the City Planning Commission, and the Chamber of Commerce.

Meanwhile, a counterplan was evolving in our office. It was based on CCPDCC goals, on members' detailed knowledge of the area, and on information available in local agencies, such as it was. The primary focus was on the rehabilitation of housing for low-income owners and renters, with corresponding neighborhood improvements and with minimum relocation of households. Second came economic and social advancement through increase of local employment, local business ownership, and home ownership. The plan proposed placed control of local planning in community hands, enabled the community to receive income and profits from land development, and rehabilitated South Street as the "strip center" of a vital commercial, cultural, and civic life. This plan was successful and the expressway was defeated and South Street is a vital neighborhood today.

