

For some reason I felt nervous going to knock on doors. Nervous to ask people questions and sounding unsure of myself. It could have been that I hated being that person you avoid or turn off the porch light when you see them. Maybe it was because these were “bad neighborhoods”. Maybe because I had heard stories of drug addicts or gotten advice to use extreme caution because you could never know whose door you were knocking on. There was this impending doom feeling. Like the next door could be a crazy drug addict or worse an angry dealer wondering what the little white girl wanted in his neighborhood. But door after door that didn’t happen. Person after person, I learned their stories. In fact the people in Port Richmond were nice--unreservedly frank when sharing their opinions, but genuinely nice people who cared about their neighborhood. The people in Bridesburg were even more friendly. Other people on the team would talk about being invited inside to stranger’s homes, which always seemed odd. Why would a resident want to allow an outsider with a clipboard into their house? But the first time it happened to Ali in Port Richmond, and I later joined her, it seemed obvious. These were the types of people who cared enough to have a real conversation. The “quantitative” questions we asked were rarely answered with a simple yes or no.

As the work continued on, each day out in the field became easier. In fact, after a couple surveys I would get a sort of adrenaline rush. I wanted to get more surveys, learn more interesting tidbits about the history and current state of the community. We would leave the car in the early evening and somehow I didn’t notice three hours and 4 or 5 surveys go by. At the beginning while still surveying in Port Richmond and Bridesburg, the people were downright loquacious. Though our pitch advertised 10-15 minutes for a survey, it was almost impossible not to go longer. Maybe in saying their grievances out loud they thought about those feelings too and were able to speak in a way that was freed by anonymity. Sure, they talked about it with neighbors, friends, family. But I am outsider. An objective party who could, and wanted to, listen to their issues with the neighborhood...problems that had long been put in the back of their minds as givens that they just had to get used to living with.

The best was finding how passionate and invested they were in the community evidenced by the fact that a question could only be answered by a detailed narrative. When asked about who they called on to address environmental hazards, some residents scoffed at the efficacy of city agencies. If they called, they *might* come out or try to solve the problem. But anything the city did to fix a short-term issue was really only treating a symptom. There was a much larger, systemic challenge that was causing all of these problems. Drugs and prostitution ravaged the better part of Kensington and was quickly spilling over into Port Richmond. The arterial roads were the major dividers. Once you went west of Aramingo the neighborhood changed dramatically. The same was true going north of Lehigh. There was hardly anything that could be done and yet it drove some of the most pressing concerns of these residents.

Bridesburg remained largely untouched in its compacted community protected by the river and 95 to the east and to the west, and the large plot of the Dow Chemical Co. and Betsy Ross Bridge to the south. Bridesburg remained a “family-first” community, but it also remains

insular. There is very little movement in and out of Bridesburg; people stay for generations often in the same house or nearby blocks. Rather than civic associations, residents use the Parks and Rec center and go to the Boys and Girls Club situated next to the old chemical factory and adjacent to a scrap metal warehouse.

But Port Richmond is more open, the borders are more fluid because they are connected within the grid network characteristic of the rest of the city. Transience through the neighborhood is a greater problem, and generally Port Richmond is much larger compared to Bridesburg. Given the small area and tight-knit community in Bridesburg it was easy for them to speak not only for themselves, but also for their neighbors. That is to say that residents in Bridesburg seemed to feel more comfortable answering questions about the neighborhood as a whole. Conversely, Port Richmond was a block by block neighborhood. Certain parts were closer to 95 than others, some bordered Kensington, some blocks were denser rowhomes, others were spread out with back and front yards. A large portion of the residents were older and had lived there most, if not all, of their lives. But the generational pull wasn't there. Port Richmond has a large Polish community, who move to that neighborhood just to be close to others of the same ethnicity. Given the age strata typical of the neighborhood, community is more passive; it manifests in the form of political awareness often resulting in apathy. Residents have been asked time and time again what it is that they want and need. But because the neighborhood is generally okay, resources are redirected to needier areas like Kensington. In other words, politicians typically don't make good on their promises. In the larger scope of negative impacts, Port Richmond feels a shallow ripple. But the community is older, and if their traditional means yield no results then there is little else, in their minds, that they can do.

Though canvassing got continually easier in terms of nerves, the weather and time change did us no favors. The timing couldn't have been better to go to Kensington, the monolithic section of the city made up of several neighborhoods. End sarcasm. There were sections of Kensington that we couldn't even go to because they were too dangerous to be knocking on doors. I thought of it as any other dangerous neighborhood. If I paid attention to my surroundings and didn't do anything stupid then nothing would happen. All through our field time in Bridesburg and Port Richmond any time a neighbor asked where else we were going, when they heard Kensington they emphasized extreme caution. It reminded me that I was an outsider. The people in the smaller neighborhoods knew I was a stranger because they knew all the people in the approximate vicinity. But in Kensington it was because we would stick out like sore thumbs. Clipboards or not, there was no blending in.

My concern was less for myself and more for the others in our survey team. I knew what I was signing up for when I joined the project. Months of research, daily Google alerts, and talking with people who worked directly in Kensington gave me a sense of the potential risks involved. But what about the others? Did they know how dangerous certain parts of Kensington were? Would they know how to respond if something happened? What if something happened to someone based on the area I assigned to them that day?

The project couldn't be stalled by "what if's" and we pressed on. We would head north of Lehigh. Our first outing in "deep" Kensington was in a sub-neighborhood called Harrowgate. It is about ten blocks away from an all-night Chinese take-out place where a woman had her life threatened by a small, hispanic man claiming the blood in the syringe he held to her face was his own, affected with AIDs. We took the block slowly. In other neighborhoods we could split up and have one person on each side of the street. Here we had two people on each side of the block and waited until everyone had finished before moving on. We were surprised by the condition of the neighborhood. There were some gruffer attitudes, but there were also some genuinely enthusiastic residents. The people were neighborly to one another, going in and out of each other's homes and greeting everyone on the street. They were surrounded by problems like drugs, prostitution, tire yards catching on fire, dangerous drivers, noise pollution from Castor Avenue and the Market-Frankford Line, etc., but the people living there made the best of their circumstances. I started thinking that all those stories were exaggerations or sensationalized incidents that only happened in news stories. I recalled an article I read about "bad neighborhoods". It said that when we shield ourselves from the places that are categorized as bad by developers, news outlets, anecdotes or other stories we also cheat ourselves of the good parts of a neighborhood. Despite that negative activities that make the area unsafe, there are still good parts and really good people. Maybe it wasn't so bad. But then I thought, I get to go home tonight. I don't know what it feels like to live in this place. It's different coming home to this block than it is to visit it. It's different when you feel like you can't walk to the grocery store to pick up milk or feel strange about walking around the block to get in the car. The sounds at 6 pm aren't the same as the sounds at midnight and 2 am. So maybe it wasn't so bad, but maybe I just didn't know.

Where in Harrowgate we expected worse and got better, the experience in Somerset might have been the precise inverse. But nothing can quite prepare you for the conditions of Somerset. Trash blanketed the sidewalks and filled the gutters. Things that didn't apply to the grand majority of blocks in our other neighborhoods were filled out in full on these blocks--industrial sites, litter, corner stores, and so on. There were gutted electronics dumped on several corners. Everything was covered in a layer of dirt and grime. The El cast shadows over all below it; underneath was only punctuated with color by the bright signs of the pawn shops, cash for checks, and all night take-out restaurants--all with either no windows or bars covering them. The infrastructure was in disrepair. Buildings were falling apart, windows either broken or boarded up, the sidewalks hadn't been attended to in years...there was little relief from the blight. The single SEPTA police officer in front of the Somerset station provided some comfort, but those loitering were greater in number. Nothing said, "Welcome" in this place.

It was one experience to drive through the area as we had on other excursions assessing which areas to canvass. It was another to actually walk the streets, exposed. Exposed because we didn't fit in. Exposed because there was no way to know what to expect, no way to really be prepared. The streets, filled with desperation, were...heartbreaking. I was mad. I

was mad that there were places like this in Philly. Because I love Philly. I didn't want to think of part of it as broken, so hopelessly broken. What's worse is that we, as a city, let it happen. It's true that in the 80s and 90s Philly was in bad shape. On the verge of bankruptcy, a mass exodus of the middle class, corrupt government, and a host of other problems that set Philly up for failure. Since then it has lifted itself up to a become prominent city in the form of regained population, continuous development, improved city services, and greater civic engagement. Somehow Kensington was left behind and continued to deteriorate. As industry left it became a prime location for an open-air drug market; the troubled area only became more troubled to state that seemed almost unsalvageable. Yet there were people living there. Honest people trying to make an honest, meaningful life in their community. With the challenges seemingly insurmountable, many residents had given up hope of things ever getting better...or ever getting out. They're stuck. The places we barely wanted to drive are the places they have to go home to and sleep at night, the places where they should want to relax and spend leisure time. It's a hard thing to do when every corner has a nook or a divot where drugs are likely to be stashed, addicts use the bench in front of a home to shoot up and leave the needle on the sidewalk, trash blankets entire front yards, stray animals roam and spread pests and bacteria. In Bridesburg they spoke for the whole neighborhood; in Port Richmond they spoke for their block. In Kensington they spoke for their door. With the community disjointed the residents were disconnected in many ways, but it was obvious that they craved that social fabric. The people who came to the door cared too, they just had little capacity to make the change happen on their own.

The humanity of the people in Kensington had been removed by cautionary tales, news reports, and images of the worst parts of the neighborhoods. From this perspective the concern is on keeping yourself safe by avoiding the area because you have the capability to do so. Being involved in this project, my viewpoint has been reaffirmed that instead of avoiding problem areas we need to more aggressively take action to improve them. My cognitive map of Philadelphia has been extended. Kensington is no longer a blank space. I have memories there, and so its a place of significance. My understanding of Philadelphia as a city is richer and my notions of what defines community are more nuanced and complex. Communities can be defined in terms of physical boundaries, but they can also be defined by the hope of the people in a place (or lack thereof)--what residents want the community to be. "Bad neighborhoods" might have bad things that happen there, but there is also plenty of good too. But if we continue to overlook the places in our city (or discount them as not part of the city at all) that are struggling, then really it's us who are the bad ones.