

The death and life of Philadelphia's 'middle neighborhoods'

Inga Saffron Updated: March 17, 2017 — 3:01 AM EDT

They're not among the star neighborhoods that can boast slick new townhouses and trendy bars serving craft beer. But they're not blighted messes, either, forever struggling with drugs and shootings. These places are poised somewhere between success and failure. And they have a catchy name: middle neighborhoods.



[Tacony](#) is a classic Philadelphia middle neighborhood. Perhaps best known for its namesake bridge spanning the Delaware, it is too far outside the orbit of Center City to feel the warmth of its white-hot revival. But having come through deindustrialization and the foreclosure crisis with relatively modest

damage, Tacony's strength is that it remains an intact, working-class neighborhood where you can buy a decent house for under \$100,000 and walk to schools, shops, and transit. If some of those houses and stores could use a little TLC, well, they're working on it.

The term *middle neighborhood* was popularized by [Paul C. Brophy](#), who runs an urban-planning firm outside Baltimore. He grew up in Philadelphia's Hunting Park section in the 1950s, and the ups and downs of that neighborhood inspired him to edit a book published last year on the subject, [On the Edge: America's Middle Neighborhoods](#). The echo of "Middle America" is intentional. These working-class survivors, Brophy explained, "are not getting the attention they deserve" and need to take matters into their own hands if they hope to ward off further decline.

Philadelphians tend to obsess over gentrification, but the decline of [middle](#)

[neighborhoods](#) is the far bigger challenge. As a Pew Charitable Trusts [study](#) recently pointed out, only 15 census tracts meet the definition of gentrification, and 164 are suffering from falling household incomes.

The story of [how Tacony is tackling its issues](#) is particularly instructive. [Ten miles upriver from Penn's Landing](#), in the Lower Northeast, Tacony lacks the locational advantage of its closer-in neighbors served by subways and trolleys. Yet its civic leaders are still ambitiously trying to follow the playbook pioneered by East Passyunk and Fishtown.

Tacony does have a stop on SEPTA's Trenton line, a huge asset. But tucked in the lee of I-95, the neighborhood feels like an independent village. It emerged in its current form in the late 19th century when [progressive-minded industrialist Henry Disston](#) moved his saw factory there and laid out streets for a planned company town. As other factories followed, Irish and Italian immigrants poured in. Life revolved around the parish, Torresdale Avenue, and the gracious parks that Disston built as a buffer between the houses and the industrial zone along the river.

Even after factories started closing in the 1950s, many families stayed put, often finding jobs at the nearby prison in Holmesburg, said Brian Costello, a disabled veteran who married his high school sweetheart and who now lives in the house his grandparents used to own. Tacony never emptied out the way some neighborhoods did, thanks in part to an influx of Latinos and African Americans, but it has become [poorer](#) and more run-down.

Brophy believes deterioration is the canary in the coal mine for middle neighborhoods, and they need to quickly organize people “with a shared interest in the future” to combat the trend. Declining neighborhoods have a bad habit of obsessing over their flaws, he noted, rather than trumpeting their positives, like Tacony's walkable streets and great housing stock.

The effort to prevent Tacony from falling off a cliff began about five years ago, when local civic leaders grew concerned about the rise in vacant storefronts

on Torresdale Avenue. They decided it was time to rev up the nonprofit community development corporation by hiring a full-time manager, Alex Balloon.

His first goal was to freshen up the Torresdale Avenue shopping district. The CDC tapped into the city's storefront improvement program and now [boasts 30 renovated facades](#), the most of any Philadelphia neighborhood. Other city grants helped Tacony buy security cameras and plant street trees. The group has also been vigilant in going after the owners of boarded-up houses.

Their work is starting to pay off. Several eateries opened on Princeton Avenue after the CDC lobbied to have the street made two-way to slow traffic. That includes Becky Rogers' Puddin's Cake Corner, a fancy bakery that was priced out of East Passyunk, and the Sawtown Tavern, founded by Troy Everwine and Mike Scotese. One of the city's best charter schools, [MaST](#), is opening a Tacony branch. Impressed by the efforts, Councilman Bobby Henon opened a satellite office in the middle of the shopping district.

Tacony is also getting a trickle of artists. In pursuit of a bigger studio, [sculptor Jim Licaretz](#) and his partner, Sandra Larimer, are renovating Tacony's 19th-century post office, which they bought for \$198,000. They moved from Tulip Street in Fishtown to Tulip Street in Tacony, a distance of seven miles.

For similar reasons, two Brooklynites, Ashley de Vries and Darren Musatto, decided to relocate to Tacony. Both musicians (their band, [the SB Deluxe](#), [plays the World Cafe](#) on Friday), they wanted to start a recording studio and needed a large, open space. Because their daughter attends Temple University, they initially looked in Fishtown.

Then they stumbled on the 10,000-square-foot [Tacony Savings Fund Building](#), built in 1897 by John Ord. "Other neighborhoods were more popping," said de Vries, but "we decided space is more important than proximity to bagels." The price, \$412,000, would have bought them a 2,000-square-foot rowhouse in an established neighborhood like Fishtown.

De Vries said they have been welcomed by Tacony's old-timers, and they have thrown themselves into civic work. Integrating newcomers is key for middle neighborhoods, Brophy argues.

Along with longtime residents on the civic association, de Vries is trying to [assess a controversial proposal](#) to install a sex-themed "community center" in the former Tacony Music Hall, the neighborhood's only designated historic building. Ironically, the CDC is being forced to move from the hall after losing its lease.

Tacony's historic housing stock is something Balloon wants to use to promote the neighborhood. Tacony just succeeded in having [55 blocks of Disston's planned neighborhood listed on the National Historic Register](#). "We're not trying to turn Tacony into a Fishtown or Northern Liberties," Costello told me, but he believes preservation can be a stabilizing force.

Other projects are in the works. Tacony is waiting for the [K&T trail](#) on the Delaware to reach its [Lardner's Point park](#) at the base of the bridge. And there's hope for a farmers' market.

For now, the threat of gentrification remains a long way off. "We tend to think of millennials as all the same, a group of latte-and-laptop-toting people. But they're also SEPTA drivers and casino workers," said Balloon.

If Tacony can find a way to prosper and remain affordable, it will have succeeded beyond anyone's expectations.

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