

PART I

Philadelphia, Photographs and Stories

Sean O'Rourke and Jerome Lukowicz

All photographs copyright Jerome Lukowicz

Architect Sean O'Rourke and photographer Jerome Lukowicz have teamed up to create the newest DAGspace, an eloquent portrait in words and photographs of some of Philadelphia's most memorable, yet unremembered places.



© Jerome Lukowicz

Some photographs suggest stories. Their allure is invested in the stories that are implied by the images. As I considered this notion two well known photographers came to mind: Henri Cartier-Bresson and Diane Arbus. Though I won't pretend to know their intentions, I think they both succeeded in making photographs that resonate for most viewers because their work suggests the richness of a story. Each photograph is a storyline, engaged, not as a plot resolved, but as an inexplicable adventure. Cartier-Bresson's photographs may be more succinct, like aphorisms or puns. While Diane Arbus' photographs succeed as narratives in the same way that a day's worth of speeches at London's Speakers Corner might constitute a story. Her images suggest a potent past or mysterious hereafter.

Other photographs exist with little or no storyline implied. They capture explicit moments with little preface and no afterward. A posture of restraint holds the image together as a singular sublime moment--not so much with a hint of what came before or even a forecast of the future, but just as is. It is a profound presence, though still lacking in prescience or memory. Not quite without a story but the weight of the moment suppressing the before and after. I think they require a little more work to appreciate, for they hide their wealth in a reticence with little patience for the imperceptive.

All photographers are story tellers; every time they open the shutter a plot is exposed. But the way a photograph is taken explains little about how we listen to or read it. And we shall expect little profit if we lack imagination and attention. Jennifer Szalai, in another context, writes that storytelling "offers a way of living through questions without succumbing to the needling impulse to answer them." Perhaps the best photographs do as well. For she continues, "Even if there is an element of experience that will forever elude language, the story [and if I can suggest photographs too] can carry us to the threshold; then it is our turn to live through the rest." This is the fruitful and necessary but nonetheless mysterious collaboration for anyone who enjoys looking at photographs.



© Jerome Lukowicz

A city street, wide and well-stripped; a streetscape of graffitied walls, empty sidewalks, and hard scabble trees. An elevated commuter rail line with a train whooshing by on a trestle bridge. Church steeples on the skyline and row homes in the far distance, all under a sky of milky soft clouds like a down quilt turned inside out. Nothing individually remarkable, and together still more commonplace than not, at least in this city. It is Philadelphia, easily recognizable to most of us; though not necessarily the neighborhood we live in or walk through. But still from the train on the tracks up above, or the city street below, this kind of space is common to the liminal areas we cross through on our daily journeys about the city. It may be the nineteenth century equivalent of the suburban sprawl that is more familiar farther out on the edges of cities.

It is a little different in that these areas in the city have almost heroic features that are seldom present in twentieth century suburban versions. In the suburbs the most heroic object is a concrete highway overpass, while the city offers the encompassing, graceful arch of a bridge that is both a wonderfully scaled architectural element and also a gateway to an apparently more vibrant other side. Lawns of parking lots fill the suburb, while in the city solid masonry walls hold the wide sidewalk, and street edges are lined by mature trees. There are urban forms, spaces, and vistas here, suggesting a nicer place than it might really be. But where are the people? And why would they be here? It is perhaps a poignant reminder that cities like Philadelphia, that were once more populated than they are now, have interstitial spaces both full enough of infrastructure and still empty of life; looked at but seldom seen with any appreciation.

City walkers share an urban sidewalk like dancers on a crowded dance floor. We walk with the city's rhythm, and its vitality leads us. We move fast and forward, gauging our position by our own motion and our location by everyone else's. For most pedestrians the city's physical features are hardly noticeable, the walls of the street motionless, inert and invisible. We look at no one and nothing directly, reading the barely perceptible physical tells that keep us from crashing into one another. Our own bodies unconsciously and subtly suggest—through posture, position, and speed—our future movements for everyone else to react to. The city doesn't move; we do—until someone stops, perhaps a tourist or a suburbanite, unaccustomed to the decorum of the sidewalk. Our eyes move upward. The sight is unfamiliar. The distance and scale change the perception of our place in the city. Our bodies still, our eyesight and other senses grasp the illusion of our own centeredness while the physical world seems to move around us. The buildings slide by each other in their own silent dance as we stare from far below.



© Jerome Lukowicz



I am on the phone, a weekend afternoon, looking out my front windows toward the playground. A car drives onto the playground, stops, and a young man gets out, walks back toward our house out of view. A car on the playground is not common, for the paved cement lot is surrounded by a tall chain link fence. Though an opening exists for vehicles, the rare appearance of a car is usually an indication that the school police are visiting the site. Curious now, I notice the car is still running as the man reappears, walking deliberately with a concrete block in his hand. I perceive trouble as I hang up and dial 911. The man dives headfirst into the driver's window with his feet in the air. He pops out, waves away a woman with groceries walking through the playground and casually looks around. I can hear the car's engine revving, even through our closed windows. He reaches back in towards the wheel, jerks the transmission stick and steps back. The car and he take off in opposite directions.

By this time I have described what I'm watching rather incredulously to the operator. My friend who has run out the front door reports back the view of the young man hopping onto the front hood of a moving car as it drives away. Should be easy to identify I suggest to the operator. The abandoned playground car, as inertia predicts, heads for the rowhouses across the playground. First it threads the fence gracefully lifting a section of chain link up as it drives off the playground. Avoiding a telephone pole the car falls down the curb, crosses the street, jumps the next curb, and drives into the front of an abandoned rowhouse. I come out of our house, running across the street imagining the car will explode at any minute as on television. Another neighbor appears alongside and he more bravely approaches the car as I knock on the adjacent houses to warn residents of the potential danger. The car, wheels spinning, is damaged but stubborn as the engine runs at full

speed. The rowhouse, despite the hole punched in the wall below its front window, resolutely acts as if nothing happened. We turn the car engine off and wait. The police never really respond. The fire truck comes finally, inspects the gas tank, sprays the engine, securing the threat of fire. Eventually the police do arrive, surrounding the site with yellow ribbon but not deciding to interview any witnesses. "No one ever sees anything" was their not too careful response. They call for a police tow truck, wait nearby, and finally drive away. The day continued while our lives returned to normal activities. This could be the end to the story: a little car fun, no one hurt, no one held responsible, but some stories take on a life of their own.

As the day wore on, people walked by the car, checked out the damage, remarked on the incident and passed on. Someone, initially headstrong, opened the front door and rifles the glove compartment. Others stopped just long enough to pop the hubcaps, jerk the radio, and unplug the battery. Resourceful men with shopping carts peeled and pried whatever decorative metal graced the car. By twilight both front hood and rear trunk were up and the jack had been used to set free the tires. When the police were called, and they were called many times (enough times to have 911 hang up on us!), they arrived only to see the scavengers walk away to sulk like vultures nearby until they were called away. Asked by the operator to describe the perpetrators, we suggested the steel belted radials they were rolling down the street might give them away. As any surprise gift, especially one so voluptuous is received overindulgently, with little modesty or grace, the car was received into the neighborhood rather coarsely. By the next morning it was on blocks, engine partially dismantled, dashboard mangled. What began as a stolen car with some front end damage ended as a naked piece of junk.

SEAN O'ROURKE, AIA, is an architect at Bergmann Associates. He has lived, practiced, studied, and taught in Philadelphia since arriving here from college in 1984.

JEROME LUKOWICZ, ASMP, is a commercial, portrait and fine art photographer. He has lived and photographed in Old City since 1985. His work can be seen at www.lukowicz.com.

DAGspace

CENTER FOR ARCHITECTURE | 1218 ARCH STREET | PHILADELPHIA, PA 19107 | DESIGNADVOCACY.ORG

The Design Advocacy Group of Philadelphia is a volunteer organization is a volunteer whose more than 1,400 members come from a broad spectrum of disciplines and share an interest in design, development, and planning. DAG's mission is to encourage public discussion about design and to advocate for design excellence.