

The history of Garden Court reaches back to the 1920's when one person single handedly envisioned and created this West Philadelphia neighborhood. Unfortunately though, Clarence Siegel's plans came to a halt when the Great Depression ravaged America, leaving his project unfinished. The magnificent apartment building that Siegel had planned was, in fact, never completely realized. However, the neighborhood did not lack aesthetically because of this. The majority that was completed could stand alone as a tribute to Siegel's creative brilliance. Garden Court may have had some low points through out its history, but the neighborhood has nevertheless maintained its unique structural beauty which is showcased today.

In the years following WWI, Clarence Siegel had been just an average builder responsible for various rows of houses in the West Philadelphia area. It was around 1919 that he began acquiring land from The Drexel Company and Eli K. Price on which he would build Garden Court¹. This area of land lay in between the rail and trolley lines, therefore leaving the region rather inaccessible before the advent of the automobile. This factor played a big part in the exceptional design of Garden Court, because it was the only West Philadelphia community that was planned in order to accommodate the newly introduced automobile².

¹ "Who's Who" The Building of West Philadelphia: An Historical Survey of Suburban Architecture, 7 Oct 2005 <<http://www.business-services.upenn.edu/communityhousing/survey/whom.html#R%205>>

² George E Thomas, "The Garden Court Historic District of University City" University City Historical Society, 7 Oct 2005 <<http://uchhs.net/HistoricDistricts/gardencourt.html>>

The homes were designed to sit further back from the street shielded by a front lawn, sidewalk and trees. It was hoped that the automobile would be parked in garages found out back of the house which were accessible from a service lane strategically placed in the block core. Therefore, the automobile would be present, but the greenery of the neighborhood would also be preserved. This service lane was also meant to be used for trash pick up and deliveries, which would now take place in the back of the houses³.

Garden Court may have been distinct for its ability to accommodate the automobile, but this was not the only factor that made it distinctive. Clarence Siegel had borrowed various elements from the English Garden City blueprint to help bring his own vision into existence⁴. One of these was the hierarchical set up that can be seen on a street to street basis. Siegel had wanted to create an environment heterogeneous in income. Therefore, his neighborhood included various sized homes and featured an apartment building located on the North side of the 4600 Pine block. The apartment building was called the Garden Court Plaza and was intended to be the foundation of the community. Immediately on the other side of Pine Street were the larger single homes. Lastly, the smaller row homes were located the furthest South on Osage Street⁵.

This arrangement was exceptional because no other builders in the West Philadelphia area had tried to create such a diverse environment⁶. However, it is hard to determine how successful Siegel actually was in realizing this dream.

³ Ibid.

⁴ “University City Cultural Tour” University City District, 7 Oct 2005
<http://www.ucityphila.org/things_to_do/cultural_tour.cfm

⁵ “The Garden Court Historic District” <<http://uchhs.net/HistoricDistricts/gardencourt.html>

⁶ Ibid

The glaring fact remains that this neighborhood was built around the automobile. In the 1920's the automobile was still a rare commodity, and was definitely not available to the lower brackets of society. Therefore, just how staggered the incomes were remains unclear⁷. Siegel did, however, manage to create a community that varied in ethnicity, which was rather unusual for the times. This can be seen from the last names of the original residents⁸. Whether or not Garden Court had actually attained the social mixture that Siegel envisioned, there seems to have been a sizable amount of intermingling.

The Garden Court Plaza was meant to be the focal point around which the neighborhood was built. However, the initial dream for the apartment complex came crashing down in 1929 when the Great Depression hit. Therefore, Siegel and his architect, Ralph Bencker, were forced to halt construction on the building, leaving it permanently unfinished⁹. Fortunately though, the Garden Court Plaza was able to function through out the years as an apartment building even though it was incomplete.

As the 20th century progressed many changes took place in West Philadelphia, needless to say, not for the better. The neighborhood of Garden Court stood as no exception. By the 1980s a once exclusive apartment building, which was modeled after Garden Court Plaza, was dilapidated. Known as the Pines Apartments, they were owned by a painting contractor and were poorly

⁷ "The City Beautiful and the landscape of the Automobile" The Building of West Philadelphia: An Historical Survey of Suburban Architecture, 7 Oct 2005 <<http://www.business-services.upenn.edu/communityhousing/survey/26develop4.html>>

⁸ George E Thomas, "The Garden Court Historic District of University City" University City Historical Society, 7 Oct 2005 <<http://uchs.net/HistoricDistricts/gardencourt.html>>

⁹ Ibid

managed. These apartments are only an example of the problems plaguing the community. Fortunately though, the University of Pennsylvania included these apartments in their urban initiative campaign and purchased the properties in 2001 for a total approximate sum of \$4.5 million. The building was then completely renovated and renamed Cornerstone. Presently, the majority of tenants are neighborhood locals with no Penn affiliation¹⁰.

Today, Garden Court still displays the original charm of a unified neighborhood. The Philadelphia City Planning Commission identifies the exact boundaries as Locust Street on the North, 45th Street on the East, Cedar Avenue on the South and 52nd on the West¹¹. The majority of this land was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on July 5, 1984. This area encompasses those houses and the apartment building that were built by Clarence Siegel. The exact parameters that were placed on the National Register were Pine Street on the North, 46th Street on the East, Larchwood Avenue on the South and 50th Street on the West¹².

Garden Court is one of the smallest neighborhoods in West Philadelphia with an estimated population of only 3,000 people. Just like the surrounding neighborhoods, Garden Court is made up of a racially mixed community. However, the incomes and property values within this region are well above the

¹⁰ Lucy Kerman and John Kramer, West Philadelphia Initiatives: A Case Study in Urban Revitalization (University of Pennsylvania)

¹¹ Philadelphia City Planning Commission, *The Plan for West Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Published by the Commission, June 1994) 61

¹² George E Thomas, "The Garden Court Historic District of University City" University City Historical Society, 7 Oct 2005 <<http://uchhs.net/HistoricDistricts/gardencourt.html>

West Philadelphia norm. This could be related in some way to the traditionally high rate of Penn-affiliated residents in certain areas¹³.

Adding to the individuality of Garden Court is a formal park which residents can enjoy. Black Oak Park, also known as Malcolm X Park, is an entire block, bounded by 51st, 52nd, Pine and Larchwood Streets¹⁴. In the past, the park has hosted a music festival and a community services fair. Today, Black Oak Park provides a place for casual recreation, such as taking a short walk or just relaxing on a bench¹⁵.

Garden Court also hosts Ben Barkan Park. Ben Barkan Park can be found on a small landscaped area at 50th and Spruce Streets. It may not be much, but it does offer some green relief from the congested city. Three blocks East, at 47th and Spruce Streets, residents can enjoy a game of tennis on the public tennis courts. These courts add yet another unique dimension to the Garden Court community. However, the neighborhood resources do not end there. Residents also have the convenience of a small shopping center located at the intersection of 48th and Spruce Streets. The shopping strip includes a Blockbuster, beauty salon, small grocery store and a dollar store. This eliminates the need to travel outside of the community for everyday necessities¹⁶.

Garden Court has a very rich history that as told earlier can be traced to Clarence Siegel. It was Siegel who laid the architectural foundations for this community to build upon. Without him, Garden Court might not have existed in

¹³ Philadelphia City Planning Commission, *The Plan for West Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Published by the Commission, June 1994) 61

¹⁴ Ibid, 61

¹⁵ Ibid, 135

¹⁶ Ibid, 61

its current physical form. However, it has been the past and present residents that formed the community. It is they who assessed what the neighborhood needs, and took action. They created groups, such as the Garden Court Community Association, and brought residents together under a unified objective of maintaining the community. It is they who preserved and up kept Garden Court making it the vibrant neighborhood it is today.

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