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# South by Southwest: how Center City's relentless expansion remade a historic neighborhood

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**By Patrick Kerkstra**
*For PlanPhilly*

The transformation of Southwest Center City from one of Philadelphia's most blighted and crime-riddled neighborhoods to one of its most desirable is nearly complete.

On some blocks, luxe town homes now list for over $1 million. Contractors clog the streets, working dozens of active construction sites. Perhaps most telling is this remarkable stat: the neighborhood's stock of abandoned homes and vacant lots - which numbered at least 554 in the late 1990s - has dwindled to about 80 [pdf].

"We have become kind of a poster child for gentrification," said Andrew Dalzell, program coordinator for the South of South Neighborhood Association, or SOSNA. "For better or worse, at some point developers looked at this neighborhood and just saw dollar signs."

It is not hard to understand why: location.

From SOSNA's headquarters at 19th and Christian Streets, Rittenhouse Square lies just a half-mile away, and the office towers of Market Street stand just a few blocks further north. Once construction on the South Street bridge is finished later this year, a 10-minute stroll will take residents to the University of Pennsylvania, the city's largest employer.

"A friend of mine likes to say that Center City's edge is wherever people will pay Center City prices for a home. South Street used to be that. But in reality now that line is Washington Avenue," Dalzell said.

The median sales price of a single-family home in Southwest Center City is now $282,000, a staggering 526 percent increase in just 12 years. A residence in this neighborhood - which stretches from South Street to Washington, and from Broad to the Schuylkill - now costs nearly 2.5 times as much as the average Philadelphia home.

### About this report

The reporting of this article was funded by a grant from the William Penn Foundation. It is the first in a series of PlanPhilly stories that will explore the dynamics of two redeveloping Philadelphia neighborhoods, Southwest Center City and Eastern North Philadelphia.

"The biggest factor is location. It was people wanting to live in or near Center City, but not being able to afford property north of South Street," said Terry Gillen, Executive Director of the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority and a longtime resident of the neighborhood.

Yet location alone does not tell the whole story of Southwest Center City's transformation.

In a perverse way, the neighborhood's wretchedness in the 1980s and 1990s served to set up its redevelopment. Blight, crime and abandonment had depressed property values in Southwest Center City to absurdly low levels for an area so close to Philadelphia's wealthiest neighborhoods. That created opportunities for developers to buy empty shells at remarkably low prices, refit them with granite countertops and make a handsome profit on the deal.

### Kromer's Study

In 1998, John Kromer - then head of OHCD - led a city survey of abandoned properties in Southwest Philadelphia. Ten years later, Kromer organized a second neighborhood vacancy survey through the Fels Institute of Government at Penn. He updated that survey's findings at PlanPhilly's request. Kromer is now working on a similar study examining Eastern North Philadelphia, an area that has been extensively redeveloped

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The Christian Street YMCA. Photo by John W. Mosley

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**Chew Playground: Bryant Church Community Day Event**
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