

# GIRARD AVENUE STREETScape

CONCEPTUAL DESIGN  
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA



what can people in the neighborhood do to make it a better place to live?

“fight for a supermarket”

“trash cans!”

“support the corridor!”

“more street lights”

“rally to get rid of nuisance businesses”

“support local businesses!”

# 5 Live/Work (& Play) along West Girard

## 5: Live / Work (& Play) along West Girard

**50%** of survey respondents cited trash and litter among their top three concerns about Girard Avenue.

**47%** cited the limited selection of stores.

**45%** cited SAFETY issues at night,

**& 44%** cited the vacant storefronts.



*Improved storefronts poised to welcome new businesses to West Girard Avenue*

Brewerytown began as an integrated community of diverse uses nestled within close proximity to one another. Even as late as the mid-20th Century, a mixture of residential, commercial and industrial uses formed the basis of each block. Since the community's decline, many of the commercial and industrial uses have been replaced by vacant land and buildings. With emerging new interest and investment in housing, the community needs to balance this growth with an emphasis on improving the commercial environment. New jobs and services are necessary to prevent Brewerytown from becoming something it has never been – a bedroom community.

This is a good time to be proactively planning for commercial corridors in Philadelphia. The Philadelphia Department of Commerce's ReStore Philadelphia Corridors initiative as well as services offered by the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) and the Enterprise Center are channeling dollars and implementation assistance to traditional commercial streets. This portion of the report is grounded in these larger trends, seeking to guide Brewerytown toward a mixed-use and vibrant future.

At the heart of Brewerytown's commercial renaissance is Girard Avenue. Girard Avenue has always captured the imagination and hopes of local residents. Once serving as the main street for Brewerytown, Girard Avenue has since struggled to compete with other neighborhood centers, Center City, and larger big box commercial developments. Vacancies dot the corridor on both the ground level and upper floors. The deterioration has instilled negative perceptions relating to safety, which reinforces Girard Avenue's primary role as a major physical, social and economic boundary in lower North Philadelphia.

Today, West Girard Avenue is at a tipping point. What were once vacant storefronts have been redeveloped over the past few years for new restaurants and stores including Rita's Water Ice. The work by MM Partners to strategically improve and market empty storefronts coupled with new events like Art + Soul Food has generated a buzz about the street resulting in the upcoming grand opening of a new coffee shop (Mugshots) and a proposed Mexican restaurant.

A coalition of community groups have also made a shared commitment to bringing West Girard back. These groups – GBCDC, FCDC, Girard Coalition, the West Girard Business Association and the West Girard Community Council – have worked closely together to bring about targeted streetscape improvements, new lighting, and façade improvements. Coming soon is a renewed park which will serve as the Corridor's western gateway along with the Metamorphosis sculpture dedicated in 2004.

The strategies described below were developed to reinforce and augment these initiatives.

### 5.1 Continue to Advocate for a Supermarket and Healthy Food on West Girard

For years, Brewertown residents have expressed a need for a supermarket in the community. For years, hopes were pinned on transforming the vacant site at 27th and Girard into a supermarket, but the size of the parcel made it difficult to attract a retailer. About four years ago, the Westrum Development Company offered their site at 31st and Girard for a potential supermarket. While that possibility generated a lot of enthusiasm, their site also presented problems in attracting a grocery due to its location, shape and limited street frontage on Girard. To help sort through the issues, a Supermarket Coalition was formed with representatives of local civic groups and CDCs to market both sites to potential grocers and serve as a community liaison between City representatives, residents, property owners and potential retailers.

Today, the potential of attracting a supermarket is very much in flux. Some grocers have expressed interest, but nothing has substantively moved forward. Complicating matters is the recent completion of the Fresh Grocer at Progress Plaza on North Broad Street, which offers shuttle service to shoppers.

Every effort should be made to ensure that a supermarket is developed. Continuous coordination with local officials and developers will be needed by the Coalition as well as each of its individual partners including the GBCCDC. At the same time, the GBCCDC should also work to bring healthy food to the community by coordinating closely with the West Girard Community Council and citywide organizations like Farm to City to explore the possibility of a larger farmers market on one of these sites as an interim strategy.



The two sites that have long been considered for development of a supermarket on West Girard

## 5.2 Have an Achievable Back-Up Plan for Mixed Use Development at 27th and Girard

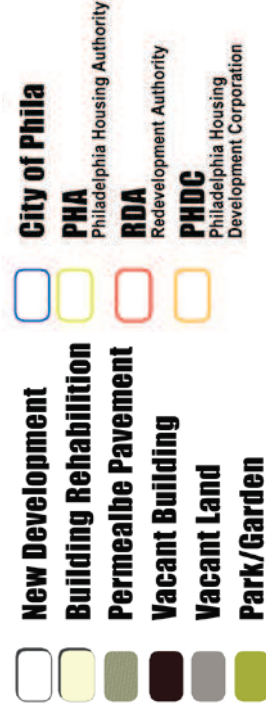
As the single largest tract of vacant land fronting on Girard Avenue, this site has garnered widespread interest from residents and politicians alike. Since successfully defeating a McDonald's proposal, the site has been actively promoted for a new supermarket. As discussions are still ongoing regarding the potential for a supermarket on the 31st and Girard parcel, the community should have a back-up plan if in fact a supermarket is developed elsewhere.

In keeping with community desires, the site should be redeveloped for a dense mix of uses. The objective is to add density, promote opportunities for residential use which will fuel added demand for retail, and sensitively provide adequate parking accessible to West Girard Avenue without being visually obtrusive. There is potential for 12,000 to 15,000 square feet of new retail facing Girard Avenue with 3 floors of residential use above resulting in approximately 50 units of housing. As indicated in the market overview completed for West Girard Avenue, potential retail uses could include a mix of the following: pharmacy, small bookstore, restaurants, clothing store, jewelry store, computer store, florist, garden center, and coffee shop. Parking for the development is proposed behind the development, accessed from 27th Street. 80 to 90 spaces could be provided to serve both the retail and residential uses.

An additional opportunity is to couple new infill development along 27th and Taney, Harper and George Street with the redevelopment of this site. The currently vacant properties along these streets could result in 39 new homes, 4 rehabilitated structures and 1 new retail spaces with two apartments above on the corner of Taney and West Girard. There has long been interest and a development plan proposed for vacant properties along George Street which was put on hold pending a decision regarding a supermarket. A mix of market-rate homes and affordable homes would help to erase this visible gash between the Fairmount and Brewerytown neighborhoods.



Existing vacancy and ownership at the 27th Street site and proposed conceptual site plan



### 5.3 Improve Gateway Signage to Make West Girard a Destination

West Girard Avenue is a clearly defined commercial corridor – Fairmount Park frames one end, and the Girard College Wall frames the other. However, the entrance experience from either end is confusing and chaotic. On the west, the Metamorphosis sculpture has helped to make a statement but the upcoming improvements to the small park across from 31st Street will significantly improve the experience of entering the corridor.



*Proposed concept for improving the gateway toward 25th and Girard*

To the east, the majority of traffic flows through the 25th and Poplar intersection. A small sign on a traffic island directs people to turn right toward West Girard Avenue. This sign, buried between traffic poles, is less visible than the sign that directs people to the Zoo. This traffic triangle should be improved with new landscaping and a visually stunning sign that welcomes people to West Girard in a graphic and playful manner. Close coordination with the Streets Department will be needed to ensure that improvements do not impede the safety of the intersection or operations of the existing traffic lights.



*Existing conditions at 25th and Poplar*



*Proposed improvements to the intersection of 29th and Girard*

### 5.4 Make West Girard Safe and Beautiful

Clean and safe are regular slogans for commercial corridors. Residents have clearly expressed that these basic amenities are what West Girard needs to encourage activity. GBCDC, FCDC, the Girard Coalition and the West Girard Business Association have successfully lobbied for initial streetscape improvements for the corridor which included new pedestrian street lighting. The following recommendations build upon this recent success with an emphasis on additional improvements and ongoing maintenance.

#### Focus on the 29th and W. Girard Intersection

- 29th and West Girard is an important center in the community where two major streets cross. It is also a source of concern with regards to pedestrian safety. According to the Philadelphia Pedestrian and Bicycle Plan, this intersection is one of the four most dangerous intersections in the community in terms of pedestrian collisions between 1990 and 2005. New streetscape improvements should be targeted in this area to reinforce the role of this intersection and improve safety. Proposed recommendations include: introducing planted bumpouts to ease pedestrian crossings, slow traffic and help call attention to this major intersection; advocating for new Big Belly trash cans; installing new bike racks; planting new trees; improving crosswalks; and installing new signage. GBCDC and their partners should coordinate with the Philadelphia Water Department to explore the possibility of integrating raingardens into the proposed bumpouts to help manage stormwater.



*Existing conditions at 29th and Girard*

### Expand the lighting along West Girard

The new pedestrian lights set a positive tone for the corridor but additional opportunities should be explored to improve the nightscape of the Avenue. Solar LED lights should be installed in the trees to add a playful and decorative touch along West Girard. New Kensington CDC has installed these lights along Columbia Avenue. In addition, exterior LED fixtures should be explored for businesses to illuminate their sidewalk, and solar LED spotlights should be installed to highlight the Metamorphosis sculpture in the evenings.

### Coordinate ongoing streetscape maintenance

There should be a continued effort to sustain and expand the scope of the streetscape improvements already implemented along West Girard. Necessary maintenance includes: annual tree pruning to improve safety along the corridor and ensure that store signage remains visible; teaching and reminding business owners to weed their sidewalks; and advocating for Big Belly solar compacting garbage cans along West Girard.

### Create information display boards along West Girard Avenue

Two information display boards should be installed on West Girard Avenue to create a public space to disseminate community and retail information. The boards would serve two audiences: local residents/business owners and visitors to the community. Information on redevelopment projects and community initiatives could be posted to keep residents and businesses informed and to entice them to become more involved in the revitalization process. A map of the neighborhood's retail offerings and a list of stores would provide visitors a way to learn more about what Brewerytown has to offer. The plan recommends locating these information boards in the improved park space on the south side of Girard at 31st and at the proposed development at 27th and Girard (Recommendation 5.2). Interim strategies for getting this information out publicly along the Avenue should explore the installation of large posters or video projections in storefront windows.

Continue to improve façades: Critical to bolstering West Girard's physical presentation is in maintaining and improving building façades. FCDC in partnership with GBCDC and the Girard Coalition have successfully improved a number of façades on the corridor. This activity should continue and include upgrades to business signage.



Recent lighting and signage introduced along West Girard Avenue



## 5.5 Reinforce the Growing Arts Scene

Years ago, a few artists took up residence in and around Brewerytown. These artists found inexpensive space and the opportunity to make a difference in a struggling community. Today, there are a growing number of artists living in the community as represented by the Art + Soul event as well as the successful Fairmount Arts Crawl which extends into Brewerytown and includes many Brewerytown artists.

The opportunity is to better integrate artists into planning, designing, and implementing public improvements along Girard Avenue thereby imprinting their talent and vision on the physical character of the corridor. To make the most of this opportunity, West Girard (and Brewerytown) will need to advocate for artist work space, coordinate marketing, and provide opportunities for artists to create and display their work publicly. Specifically, GBCDC, FCDC, the Girard Coalition and the West Girard Business Association should pursue the following:

### Market the upper floors to college students and artists

Upper floor apartments above retail uses are often difficult to rent or sell to families. As rents have increased in Fairmount, there has been a steady stream of artists and Temple University students renting space along, or near Girard Avenue. The Business Association can play a key supporting role in this growing trend by working with realtors to directly target students and artists for upper floor space. A promotional flyer that lists the local arts resources and events as well as an on-line presence that provides relevant information should also be explored.

### Put out a call for artists to populate participating stores with art

Existing businesses are opportunities to showcase local art. This can be done for a special day or event or for longer term arrangements. The benefit is more publicity for artists, developing a stronger connection between local businesses and artists, and as often experienced, increased patronage of local stores.

### Explore opportunities to temporarily reuse vacant storefronts for art and artist workspace

When market forces are not enough to fill vacant storefronts, they often sit vacant. One to two vacant storefronts should be identified as opportunities for new artist studio space or storefront art. GBCDC, FCDC, the Girard Coalition and the West Girard Business Association should explore funding opportunities to incentivize property owners to make space available for short-term leases for this purpose until such time as a new store can be attracted to occupy the space. There are potential yet substantial benefits to this strategy. Viable businesses on West Girard that are currently deadened by empty storefronts will benefit as artists replace “For Lease” signs with original works of art and generate additional foot traffic. In addition, building owners will begin to realize a modest return on their investment (as opposed to maintaining a vacant storefront), and as traffic increases, can attract the conventional retail and service tenants for whom the spaces were originally conceived. Such mutually beneficial arrangements should be encouraged, formalized, and marketed.



*Vacant storefront art exhibit on South Street by the Philadelphia Dumpster Divers, March 2009*

*Source: [www.ravenswingstudio.com](http://www.ravenswingstudio.com)*

### Continue to expand the Art + Soul Food event

In addition to the Fairmount Arts Crawl, this event has created the foundation to further establish the community as a growing scene for the local arts. Efforts should be made to coordinate “gallery” openings and public art along the corridor with this event.

### Link up with Design Philadelphia and Philagrafika

Design Philadelphia and Philagrafika are recognized nationally as innovative events that promote Philadelphia’s arts and design culture. As Brewerytown further expands its arts offerings, West Girard should play a prominent role in hosting events and art installations associated with these events. Using businesses and vacant storefronts as described above would provide fertile ground for local artists to make a statement in their own backyard while promoting business activity along West Girard.

## 5.6 Use Paint as a Cost-Effective Branding Tool

The potential streetscape improvements described in Recommendation 5.4 are necessary but also expensive. While it would be ideal to install curb bumpouts at every intersection along West Girard similar to what is proposed for the 29th Street intersection to help improve pedestrian safety, the reality is that an alternative, and less costly, approach is necessary.

The existing no parking boxes at each intersection represented by a nondescript white “X” are opportunities to combine the intent of more aggressive streetscape recommendations with the talent and energy of artists described in Recommendation 5.5. The recommendation is to re-imagine these no parking boxes as colorful street murals designed by local artists. If coupled with basic crosswalk improvements, these new splashes of color would act as low-cost bumpouts encouraging drivers to slow down. Most importantly, each intersection along West Girard, each of which could receive a different street mural approach, would help to brand the Avenue in a unique way.



*Cost-effective opportunity to brand Girard with paint using local talent.*

As there are limitations to using paint on streets, this idea is intended as a pilot project and a temporary installation. Despite the limitations, this is a cost effective means to help brand and generate some buzz for West Girard and should be tested. If successful, community partners can decide whether to re-paint or further improve these spaces in the future. New Kensington CDC is currently moving forward with a street mural in Fishtown which will provide some valuable insight into the challenges of undertaking this improvement.

*Existing no parking, no stopping boxes on Girard.*