

# COMMERCIAL SUCCESS

By Dominic Mercier



Three venerable Philadelphia commercial corridors are in need of a facelift. In the face of many challenges, can creative solutions born in a partnership of design firms and community-based organizations return these once thriving districts to their former glory?

## THE PLAN

Since their inception, Philadelphia's commercial corridors have long been the lifeblood of thriving neighborhoods. Before the heyday of corporate centers, big box stores, and low, low prices, these corridors were central to life in a neighborhood, providing residents with places to shop, work, and even try their hands at business ownership. In the city, many of the commercial corridors have lost some of the potency they enjoyed in their more halcyon times, suffering under grinding projects, like the rebuilding of major segments of SEPTA's Market-Frankford Line, traffic and signage issues, and high vacancy rates.

**Above:** Terra Studio, LLC, has proposed a roller skating rink with a play area and amusements for the site of the Imperial Theater on Philadelphia's 60th Street Commercial Corridor. **Below:** The family owned New Angle Lounge hopes to reinvent itself as the restaurant and jazz club Trilogy.

In January 2007, the Community Design Collaborative (the Collaborative), a partner of AIA Philadelphia, launched Infill Philadelphia, a five-year initiative that gathered designers, government officials, community members and development groups to address neglected public spaces. The first step of the initiative was to look at reinvigorating Philadelphia's commercial corridors, the interest in which was bolstered by the city's own ReStore Philadelphia Corridors program that is directing an infusion of \$65 million from a recently approved bond toward making Philadelphia's corridors more welcoming and increasing business lifespan.

To make sure any designs created during the initiative would move from the drawing board to creation, the Collaborative partnered with the Philadelphia Local Initiative Support Corporation (LISC), known as a leader in commercial corridor development. The two organizations posed a design challenge, bent on restitching the fabric of three distinct Philadelphia corridors.

Following the philosophy that revitalizing neighborhoods takes a diverse amount of experience and expertise, the challenge teamed up three volunteer design firms with three community-based organizations, which selected the sites the teams would work on. The sites, in the West Powelton and Cobbs Creek neighborhoods, and along South Philadelphia's East Passyunk Avenue, represent a mix of corridors on the rise, the decline, and the status quo, each with their own unique set of problems. The design challenge gave rise to three highly innovative designs for adapting an existing building into a full-service restaurant, re-envisioning a vacant theater, and refreshing the gateway to an already bustling corridor.

## THE SITES

### New Angle Lounge

Lancaster Avenue Commercial Corridor, West Philadelphia  
People's Emergency Center Community Development Corporation  
CICADA Architecture/Planning, Inc.

Follow Lancaster Avenue long enough, and you will reach the glitzy shopping centers of the Philadelphia area's Main Line. As it zips through West Philadelphia, catty-corner to William Penn's grid system, the sights couldn't be different, though. The corridor, which for years has seen considerable decline, is filled with beautiful 19th-century buildings enriched by their original architectural detail and is on the cusp of revitalization thanks to investment by Presbyterian Health Center, University Science Center, and University City High School. Adding to the mix is the proximity of Drexel University and the University of Pennsylvania, and the student housing spill into the neighborhood.

The focus of the site is the family-owned New Angle Lounge, appropriately named as it sits on the triangular intersection of Lancaster Avenue, and 39th and Spring Garden streets. LaTonya Furman, the second-generation owner of the taproom, was seeking to change the business to a full-service restaurant and jazz club, Trilogy, due in part to the corridor's resurgence. The project, tackled by CICADA and the People's Emergency Center CDC, included three buildings on the island of a block. The central idea in the design was to open up the ground floor and connect the restaurant with the sidewalk, where, as an illuminated beacon, it will better serve the corridor as a gateway.





The design incorporates elegant vertical signage and an undulating canopy that syncs fluidly with the element of jazz. Large street-level windows provide natural light for lunchtime diners and soft illumination for those who take their dinner alfresco. The openness continues inside, as the three walls separating all three buildings are removed, providing unobstructed sightlines to the jazz stage.

**Imperial Theater**  
**60th Street Commercial Corridor,**  
**West Philadelphia**  
 The Partnership Community  
 Development Corporation  
 Terra Studio, LLC

Stretching 11 blocks, from Arch in the north to Catherine in the

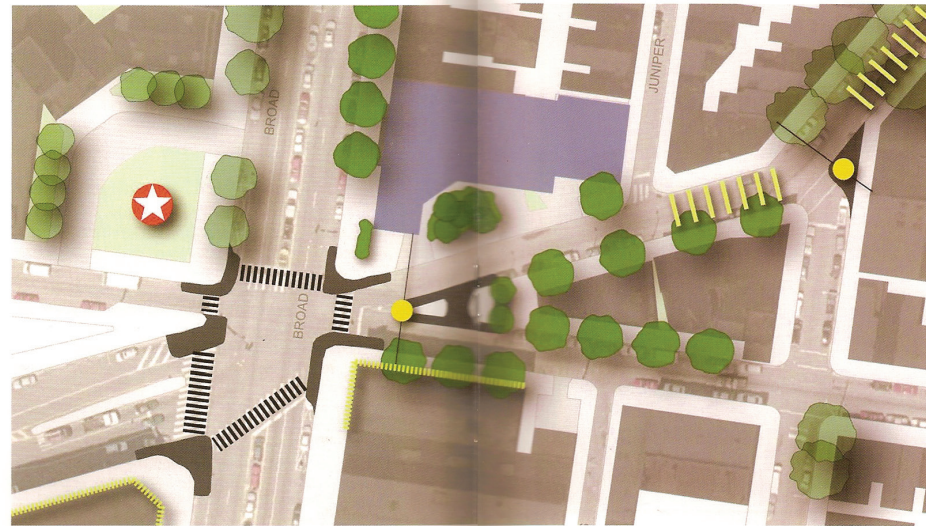


south, along 60th Street in West Philadelphia, the Cobbs Creek Commercial Corridor sits in a predominantly African-American neighborhood where two-thirds of the residents are homeowners, yet the corridor faces high vacancy rates. Today, only about 10 percent of residents are reported to make their purchases on 60th Street, partly due to the drawn-out reconstruction of SEPTA's elevated Market-Frankford Line. Competition from large retailers in the suburbs of Delaware and Montgomery counties has also added to the burden.

Currently, the corridor is receiving funding from LISC's Commercial Corridors Revitalization program, as well as the Partnership CDC. With the reopening of 60th Street Station, the corridor is ripe for revitalization. Supporting the effort is a strategy for the corridor, gleaned from a 2003 study by the city's Department of Commerce, which recommended trimming off a few blocks and consolidating the corridor between Arch and Spruce streets, where most of the businesses are located.

The site focused on the vacant Imperial Theater, originally opened in 1914, with its large white arch anchoring the 200 block of 60th Street where it sits. The project consisted of two parcels: the theater and its attached storefronts and five vacant lots that front 60th Street and a partially occupied warehouse. With a primary concern of preserving the theater's façade, the team, disappointed to learn there were no architectural elements inside to save, explored two options for the site. The first was mid-rise housing, but that option did not fit into the strategy to focus residential plans south of Spruce Street. The second idea, a family entertainment center, was well-suited to the goal of re-establishing the corridor as a fun destination.

Using the Imperial's arch as the entryway, Terra Studio's design would capitalize on the theater's interior space and refit it as a roller skating rink. Research has shown that entertainment centers rely on multiple attractions, and the team's plans demonstrate that, when combined with the surrounding parcels, the space could be configured to accommodate dining and party areas, a snack bar, a video arcade, a softscape play area, and amusement rides.



**Broad and Passyunk Gateway**  
**East Passyunk Avenue Commercial**  
**Corridor, South Philadelphia**  
 East Passyunk Avenue Business  
 Improvement District  
 Brown & Keener Bressi – Urban Design and Place Planning

If you're not from the neighborhood, it's hard to find Passyunk Avenue, let alone spell or pronounce it correctly. The corridor is well known to those who shop there regularly, and out-of-towners and stumping politicians who make it a point to swing by the dueling cheese steak shops Pat's King of Steaks and Geno's Steaks. Historically Philadelphia's well-known Italian neighborhood, the area has grown increasingly diverse and has seen an influx of both homebuyers and ethnicities.

Much like Lancaster Avenue, Passyunk cuts a diagonal swath. Running east of Broad Street to South Street, shoppers flock to hundreds of independent retailers for authentic Italian cuisine and specialty items on the avenue. Begun in 2002, the East Passyunk Avenue Business Improvement District (BID) has developed a marketing strategy and implemented renovations to numerous storefronts. One of its focal points, however, is streetscaping improvements at key intersections, including its daunting gateway at Broad and Passyunk. Confusing for drivers and often frightening for pedestrians, the intersection is anchored by a hospital and two banks. The northward bend that the avenue takes shortly beyond Broad cuts off any view of the commercial corridor.

Brown & Keener Bressi recommended re-engineering the gateway intersection to permit left-hand turns onto Passyunk and adding bump-outs to shorten the walking distance for pedestrians crossing Broad Street, with the added effect of slowing down drivers entering the corridor. Taking into account South Philadelphia's unique lighting schemes – the neon glow of Geno's outdoor lighting and strands of lights that are often draped over its streets – the team presented sev-



eral lighting schemes, such as strands draped over Passyunk before the bend or 'urban chandeliers' at strategic points to catch the eye, to create an identity that says "Downtown South Philly." The team also included a long-term project recommendation in suggesting redevelopment of the northeast corner of Broad Street and replacing a one-story building housing a bank with a multistory, mixed-use property that provides parking for the corridor and reclaims the corner.

**The Next Steps**

In West Powelton, the Furman Family, along with People's Emergency Center CDC, is working on funding to turn the New Angle into Trilogy and has turned to Temple University's Small Business Center for help with a business plan. CICADA has taken drawings of its plans and is using them to help secure loans for the family. Including owners and seeing their enthusiasm has created a model the Community Design Collaborative says it hopes to see in the future of its Infill projects. On 60th Street, a problem arose early in the process. As Terra Studio and the Partnership CDC began their work, ownership of the Imperial changed hands. Currently, both groups are reaching out to the current owner, but in the meantime have taken the plans and ideas for block-face improvements to other sites in the corridor, hoping to tie in to the city's grant program for façade improvements. The solutions developed for East Passyunk Avenue have created a model vernacular that would be an ideal implementation for creating community identity.

**Above:** The intersection of Broad Street and Passyunk Avenue as it stands today. **Opposite top:** The New Angle Lounge sits at the triangular intersection of Lancaster Avenue and 39th and Spring Garden streets. **Opposite bottom:** Currently, the Imperial Theater site sits boarded up along 60th Street. **Center:** Streetscaping plans for the Passyunk Gateway aim to make the avenue more accessible for both cars and pedestrians.