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30 The Strand: A New Castilian Dwells in Philadelphia

The New Castle fire of 1824 essentially left James McCullough, a local merchant, with a blank slate. With his home on The Strand destroyed, McCullough found himself with an empty lot and in the unique position of being able to build any type of house he pleased. Taking full advantage of the occasion, he ultimately built himself a home that one could say better fit his self-image. As a widower, he was the sole author of his rebuilding enterprise, and the finished product thus primarily reflected the identity of one individual. The before and after of McCullough's property could not be more different: the prior structure (fig. 1), which could best be described as a *Frankenhouse* – a home that was part Dutch and part homegrown New Castle – was replaced by a decidedly more fashionable and unified, high-end Philadelphia townhouse (fig. 2).¹ McCullough even topped off his home with Greek Revival interiors, pulling out all the codes of high-end and high-living. It seemed that to McCullough, a city fire was a terrible opportunity to waste.

This switch, from a local vernacular form to an imported standard type, is a rather dramatic shift and one that espouses some interesting rhetoric. To understand why 30 The Strand looks like a Philadelphia townhouse, one must realize that the design of a house is not only determined by the physical needs of the owner, but by his psychological needs as well. Although the primary function of 30 The Strand was to provide shelter for

¹ See 1804 La Trobe Survey

the McCullough family, its secondary function was to speak of the wealth and status of the owner. In constructing a new home, McCullough realized that he was simultaneously constructing his own identity. Thus, perhaps McCullough's design philosophy could best be summarized as, *you are what you build*; in which case, it was imperative that his home promote an image of a successful merchant. It is not surprising to consequently find that McCullough built a home on The Strand that was orderly, refined, and most importantly, in its structure, it pointed towards New Castle's successful neighbor to the north, Philadelphia.

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It is best to begin an analysis of James McCullough's post-fire building activities with an introduction to the principle actor of this story: 30 The Strand. However, in order to truly understand McCullough's house, one must look beyond the façade and architectural plans, and envision how the home's form organized the daily lives of its occupants and visitors. For houses do not exist in sterile, glass boxes, but rather, in a vibrant, populated world, and thus, in order to truly understand a plan, one must visualize how it activates the human body. For houses are not only structures, but they are also *structuring* structures in that their design determines how one moves through and occupies their spaces. Consequently, this introduction to 30 The Strand will take movement into account by partially taking place as if visiting McCullough's home.

Three stories tall and three bays wide, the face of 30 The Strand projects a rather rational and cohesive image onto the street. Upon seeing the façade, the visitor could safely assume, and is supposed to assume, that this orderly nature extends into the interior design of the home. The side entrance is raised above street level, and to access the front

door, one must walk up four steps. These steps are the first in a series of mechanisms one encounters when moving through the house that serve to slow down entry into the home's polite spaces. The change in elevation also lets the visitor know that he or she is about to enter a new physical and psychological space. At the front door, however, this physical signal is accompanied by other less palpable thresholds, such as changes in smell and heat, that also function to alert the visitor to the fact that he or she is passing into a different type of space. However, as the front door opened, McCullough's visitor would not only have been greeted with new smells and temperatures, but also by the McCullough's servant who regulated entry into the home. After the "front door drama" of interacting with the servant and proving that one is of the right caliber, the visitor would finally be able to step into the house.²

Inside, the home possesses a polite front block that is two rooms deep (fig. 3). These rooms function as parlors, as spaces of sociability. A hallway that runs the length of the first room mediates access to these rooms from the front door (fig. 4). By positioning the interior doors to the parlors towards the end of the hallway, one's entry into these polite chambers is resultantly slowed down, extending the processional aspect of one's entrance. The long, narrow shape of the corridor works to push the visitor forward, into the larger of the two parlors. Emerging from a small, tight space into this sizable, open room heightens the dramatic effect of entering the rear parlor. In many other similar townhouses, the entrance hall runs the entire length of the front block in order to maximize the privacy of both parlors. However, in the McCullough home, such privacy has been exchanged for a larger and more impressive space, as a servant

² Dudden, *Serving Women*, 119.

answering the door would have to walk through this rear parlor. The two parlors function en suite, as the double doors between them can be opened to create one, much larger room for entertaining guests (fig. 5). When closed off, the front parlor is internally the most private space on the first floor. However, this privacy is tempered by the fact that externally, it is the most public space as one can peer into it from the street.

The parlor is where the visitor's procession momentarily ends, perhaps as James McCullough welcomes she or he into the polite spaces. However, to the rear, extends an indented stair area called a *piazza* that leads into an adjoining kitchen (fig. 6 and 7). The piazza and the entry hallway essentially serve the same function in that they are both intermediate areas, mediating entry into polite spaces. However, it is the piazza that functions as the primary pivot upon which this house turns as it not only provides a physical transition from service to polite spaces, but it also psychologically shifts the home from New Castle to Philadelphia. For the indented piazza is a distinctly Philadelphia form as it is the defining feature of a Philadelphia townhouse. As defined by William Murtagh, a Philadelphia piazza "is often narrower than the back-buildings and forms a connecting link between them and the front block...Behind this stair area stretch rooms of various use – kitchen, scullery, laundry, etc."³ However, the piazza is not a form that comes to simply signify Philadelphia. As Murtagh notes, the piazza is not the dwelling of the everyman, but quite to the contrary, it is a form found in the homes of

³ Murtagh, "The Philadelphia Row House," 12. Murtagh's description of a standard Philadelphia town house could equally be applied to McCullough's home: "the Town house...is two rooms deep...The larger size of the lot allows this plan to include a hall which runs the length of one side of the front block...the Town house is situated at the front of the lot and its narrower backbuildings extend to the rear. The front block is followed by a secondary stair area or 'piazza.' This in turn gives access to the various backbuildings." 12.

the rising middle class and thus is imbued with a certain pedigree. For example, the Pancoast-Lewis-Wharton House, which was built in 1790 and had its rear ell enlarged in 1834, is spatially organized around a piazza (fig. 8). The piazza is thus a rather selective sign – not signifying Philadelphia at large, but rather, representing a smaller segment of the population, the well to do of the city. Consequently, it is not surprising to find that McCullough incorporated the piazza into the design of his home, emphatically linking his house in New Castle to the city of Philadelphia and his self to its successful merchants.

However, McCullough was not the only New Castle resident who attempted to engage in Philadelphia townhouse forms. One can find other contemporaneous instances where New Castle houses were reconfigured to include a piazza and rear kitchen. Such examples exist at 11 and 13 Market Street, the Rodney House, and the Darragh House. In each, a piazza and kitchen were added to the original double-pile homes with basement kitchens, circa 1820-1830. The meaning of these additions should not be dismissed as simple necessity, but rather, they can inform one of what the residents of New Castle expected a “proper” house to look like. Additions to homes often address more of what is *felt* to be lacking, rather than what actually *is* lacking. In other words, the changes made to these houses, the addition of a piazza and the shift from a basement- to a first-floor kitchen, can best be read as an attempt to meet expectations of what a house should look like. Through such reconfigurations, it can be seen that in New Castle, the piazza and rear kitchen do not just signify Philadelphia, but they also come to connote a “proper” house.

McCullough's home engages in this conversation of "proper" housing, but it has a distinct advantage over its neighbors. Whereas other homeowners had to create the impression of a Philadelphia townhouse by adding a piazza and kitchen onto a pre-existing structure, the fire allowed McCullough to build such a home as one piece. If houses are built to be statements, then one could say that a home with an addition, such as the Rodney house, is essentially a sentence with many conjunctions: it is a house *and* piazza *and* kitchen. However, 30 The Strand expresses itself as a single, cohesive sentence. Consequently, although both may articulate the same idea, the McCullough home is able to do so in a much clearer and effective manner. While the owners of the "conjunction-statement" houses must try to reach the ideal, "proper" home as best they can given their pre-existing architectural baggage, McCullough is able to come closer to that ideal in one single swoop.

McCullough's house, like all houses, is composed of different sign-systems that provide partially redundant ways of expressing the same idea. The interior décor of 30 The Strand serves to reiterate the messages relayed by the plan of the house; that is, it espouses the wealth and status of the owner, and it reinforces the polite or service nature of a particular room. In his interior decoration, McCullough, like many of his neighbors, takes up the codes of Greek Revival – of the New Castle variety. In other words, he seems to possess a taste for paterae and fancy mantles. One can read the character of a room through these embellishments: polite spaces are adorned with paterae (fig. 9) and possess similarly detailed and elegant mantles, while the fireplaces in service spaces are either left bare or provided with a much simpler or smaller mantle (fig. 10). One can further read the level of "politeness" of a chamber through the level of detail of the

mantle, as these elements are directly proportional. Thus, the most polite space, the second floor chamber, also houses the most elaborate mantle (fig. 11). Thus, McCullough's home speaks elite not only in plan, but also in finish.

However, perhaps the most important moment of décor occurs is the first-floor, front-parlor chandelier (fig. 12). Residing inside the house, the chandelier feigns the role of a private object. However, its elaborate detailing seems to allude to the fact that it knows it has a rather large audience. For in reality, the chandelier plays a rather public role, as it is the primary object one sees as one passes by on the street. As such, the chandelier comes to stand for the interior décor of 30 The Strand as a whole, as it serves to tell the passerby what the rest of interior looks like. The placement of an identical chandelier in the rear parlor also functions to reinforce the "en suite" nature of these rooms.

However, by including details that are often lacking in other such Greek Revival homes, McCullough is able to make his house a distinctly well-finished home. For example, whereas in other houses, many interior doors usually have only one good face, the doors of 30 The Strand have the same level of finish on either side. The detailing on the stairs, which continues up even to the purely-service third also marks this home as distinctly high-end (fig. 13). Although these details may seem minor, in a town that seems to be quite conversant in Greek Revival décor, such seemingly small variations become quite meaningful distinctions, and it is precisely these distinctions that signal McCullough's status.

For McCullough, it is important that his house echo a Philadelphia townhouse as authentically as possible. As previously discussed, the plan of a house organizes the

daily lives of its occupants. Thus, as a result of inhabiting the same architectural space, a Philadelphia merchant residing in his townhouse in Philadelphia and McCullough in his home in New Castle, would have their lives structured in the same manner.

Consequently, McCullough's home is able to align him with Philadelphia elite not only in taste, but also in behavior. Through his townhouse, McCullough is able to consequently inscribe himself into the culture of Philadelphia elite across distance, and living in such a house offered McCullough the ability to partake in relevant daily-life experiences that help form and define class.

One of the primary objectives of a Philadelphia townhouse's design is to create different experiences for homeowner and servants. Perhaps what the structure is implemented to do can best be explained through a semantic distinction: while both may exist in the same space, it can be said that McCullough *dwells* in the house while his servants *reside* in it. That is, for the owner, the home establishes a sense of place, while it puts the servant in a state of unease. Although the hierarchical relationship between master and servant itself sets up such a system, the structure of the house, and the way it organizes movement, reinforces this difference.

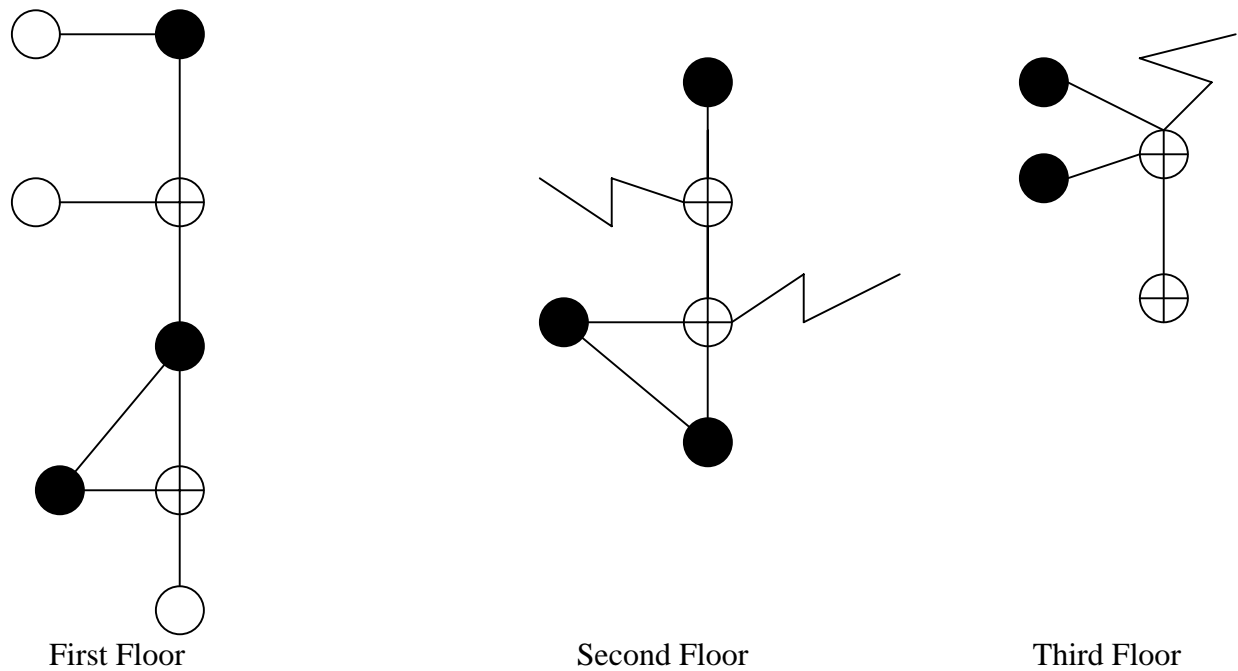
Servant and homeowner occupy different wings of the home, as separated by the piazza. On the first floor, the polite parlors occupy the front of the home, while the kitchen is placed to the rear. This segregation continues onto the second floor as the servant's chamber is located above the kitchen, while the homeowner's parlor and chamber is located to the front of the home. The third floor, composed of three small rooms, caps the front block, but these are servant quarters. However, the piazza, functioning as a transitional zone between polite and service spaces, is only one

mechanism through which homeowner and servant are separated. 30 The Strand also possesses two points of access into the house, such that the experiences of servants and homeowners even begin to diverge as they approach to the home from the street.

Although the homeowner is allowed the luxury of accessing the front door, the servant must enter through a passage on the opposite side of the house that leads to a side door. The homeowner is resultantly thrust into the front, polite block, while the servant enters into the kitchen. Thus, these separate entrances work to effectively put the residents of the home, both physically and mentally “in their place.”

However, the servant and polite sections of the home are not only differentiated by their placement on opposite ends of the house, but also by the different dynamics of movement that exist within their respective spaces. This difference can best be illustrated by mapping the home as a social module, as outlined by Dell Upton in his article, “Vernacular Domestic Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Virginia.”⁴

⁴ Dell Upton, “Vernacular Domestic Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Virginia.”



● interior, heated space; ⊕ interior, unheated space; ○ outside

Through these diagrams, one can see that movement through the polite spaces of both the first and second floors, is circular in nature, which functions to facilitate the circulation of movement. However, the servant spaces of the home are constituted by a completely different dynamic. In the access diagrams, one can see that the servant spaces are connected in a linear and segmented manner; they are axial and thus the servant's movement is placed under tighter control. Put simply, the polite spaces of 30 The Strand are circular and structured to ease the homeowner's movement through the house, while service spaces are axial and limiting. These different dynamics ultimately serve to reinforce the hierarchical relationship between homeowner and servant by creating two different ways of life within one structure.

With its full Philadelphia townhouse plan and elegant Greek Revival finishes, McCullough's home seems to suggest that the town of New Castle was prospering. Unfortunately, such an assumption would be wrong. It often seems that a city's greatest flourishes of display occur either when it is at its exuberant peak or when it is anxiously gilding its decline. For New Castle, the case was the latter. The elegance of McCullough's home is not evidence of a city in prosperity, but rather, one struggling to keep hold of its prominence. By 1800, New Castle's economic vibrancy had been squelched by the rise of both Philadelphia and Wilmington.⁵ In the first decades of the nineteenth century, New Castle suffered as Philadelphia lost its position as America's primary port to New York and with the arrival of the Panic of 1819. As a sign of its stagnation, New Castle had roughly the same population in 1820 as it did ten years prior.⁶ However, in 1824, New Castle was still optimistic that it could reverse the beginnings of its decline. It was hoped that by switching their investments from foreign trade to transportation, New Castle could return to prosperity. Consequently, as described by Constance Cooper in *350 Years of New Castle, Delaware*, "New Castle's people handled their economic situation between 1808 and 1828 with persistence, vigor, and moderate success...Whatever their secret doubts, New Castle's men faced the world with outward confidence."⁷

Perhaps there exists no better evidence of that "outward confidence" than the post-fire facades of The Strand. McCullough was not alone in emulating an urban environment to which he aspired, as the entire street shared in an architectural dream of

⁵ Cooper, *350 Years of New Castle, Delaware*, 87.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

urbanization. With their orderly and cohesive houses, it seems that the residents of The Strand did not want to wait for the artifacts of a thriving urban environment to organically grow out of a newly flourishing New Castle. Rather, they switched the paradigm, hoping that by erecting the evidence of prosperity, actual prosperity would have to follow suit. Architecture was deployed on behalf of an agenda. Consequently, there seemed to exist a profound idealism in the newly rebuilt The Strand: that the simple act of building the structures of a prosperous city, would, in turn, produce that thriving city.

However, a Philadelphia townhouse signifies something different in Philadelphia than it does in New Castle. When a structure organically develops out of a city, it represents something that has already transpired. That is, a Philadelphia townhouse, an architectural form that grew out of the city's prosperity, comes to signify and represent the city's success. In importing this form into New Castle, however, and thereby changing its context, McCullough ultimately alters its meaning. In its new environment, the Philadelphia townhouse comes to signify New Castle's aspirations, its desires to return to its former glory, and, more specifically, McCullough's desires for himself as a merchant. However, 30 The Strand is a part of a continuous conversation: its meaning is not pinned at the time it was built, but rather it changes over time as its context is constantly in flux. As New Castle continued to decline and fall into a slump, McCullough's house comes to represent New Castle's faltering aspirations. If the Philadelphia townhouse represents an ideal, then the reality of New Castle contaminates that ideal and turns the house into a sign of New Castle's frustrated desires.

The fate of James McCullough also went the way of his town. After his death, his house was sold to pay off his accumulated debt.⁸ Evidently, McCullough, unable to accrue money in his life, was not as successful of a merchant as his house implied. Perhaps the lesson of 30 The Strand is thus that it is not that *you are what you build*, but *you are what you bill*.

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⁸ *Deed Record Book F Vol 6 218*.