



LIZ SPIKOL: ARCHITYPE

OFF THE GRID

Mount Airy may just be the best neighborhood in the city. (Yes, I said city.)

About six months ago, after 11 years in West Philadelphia, I decided to move. I'd been part of a wave of young white professionals who came to Cedar Park and made it possible for someone to open a haute-cheese patisserie where a friendly bodega used to be. I liked the bodega better, but it was my own fault.

Now I'd priced myself out of my neighborhood, but I still wanted trees, the birdsong, the mix of old and young, black and white, and the progressive vibe. So I moved to Mount Airy.

This decision has been met with undisguised horror. You'd think I moved from a 12-room penthouse on Rittenhouse Square to a shack next to a rest stop on the New Jersey Turnpike. There also seems to be a significant degree of geographical confusion. A couple of people have said, "I never thought you'd leave Philly."

And absolutely everyone has said, "But it's so *faaaar*."

Not to get all *Big Lebowski* philosophical, but far from what, man? Center City? This may come as a surprise to many, but just as the United States is no longer printed at the center of world maps, Center City—despite its name—no longer serves as a stand-in for the city's heartbeat. There are people who live in neighborhoods outside of Center City who don't come downtown often—and they survive.

Not only that, but if you want to get technical about distance, Mount Airy is eight miles away from City Hall. The commute is about 10 minutes longer but 10,000 times more pleasant than my former one. No more sweat-inducing subterranean trolley breakdowns. No more hour-long waits in piss-soaked stations. No more SEPTA drivers zipping by in half-empty vehicles as I stand in subzero temperatures. No more of that weird lady who always had to push to the back even though there weren't any seats because, well, if there were, would we really all be standing up like two-legged sardines?

Now I get sweeping vistas of the river (and of industrial calamity, poverty, graffiti, the Art Museum and all the rest the city has to offer). It's *Doctor Zhivago* rather than *The Taking of Pelham 123*.

Mount Airy, I should also note, contradicts some Philadelphia stereotypes. If we accept that Mount Airy is part of the city, "Philadelphia" is actually pas-

toral. A couple blocks from my apartment, I can walk into the woods and get so lost, I might wonder if I have enough water to survive. (This actually happened to me, because I never got to be a Brownie, much less a Girl Scout.) There are vast acres of secluded woods and meadow that you couldn't hope to see in a year.

Many people also think of Philadelphia as crime-ridden and plagued by ethnic tension. But Mount Airy seems genuinely, peacefully integrated. And I haven't heard one gunshot since I moved here, whereas in my old neighborhood (part of University City, mind you) I heard at least one per month. Shortly before I moved, in fact, I heard a series of gunshots as they entered the body of an innocent man shot by police. It was traumatic, the kind of thing that makes people say, "You should move out of the city." Turns out I didn't have to. Mount Airy's been in the city—I promise you—all along.

PROS YOU SHOULD KNOW



KIRSTEN MCCOY AND LAURA BUCHNER

Interior designers

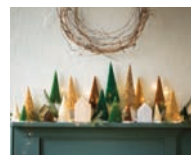
TRENDS WE'RE SEEING //

Gray is the new beige; neutrals with pops of color; antique brass hardware in kitchens. Chintz is back, with modern, fresh coloring and patterns.



IF YOU'RE DOING A TOTAL RENOVATION //

Have your entire team—architect, interior designer, landscape architect, contractor—on the same page. Pay attention to the architecture of your home, and find a style that complements the interior and the exterior. If you're on a budget, work in phases, with a master plan.



TO DO THIS SEASON //

Visit *Terrain* and Valley Forge Flowers for interesting seasonal decor, and treat yourself to a custom flower arrangement on the dining table for the arrival of holiday guests. Be on the hunt for outdoor furniture sales, to be ahead of the game for spring.

McCoy and Buchner own the Wayne-based firm Meadowbank Designs.