

Mid-Century Modern Commercial Corridors

Central Northeast District



April 2014
Philadelphia City Planning Commission

Introduction

The period following World War II was an optimistic, forward-looking time in American popular culture. The architectural style of this time period is known as Mid-century Modern. Designers embraced the optimistic spirit of the time, experimenting with the newest technologies and materials in building, and incorporating “futuristic” elements. Mid-century Modern design used sleek, simplified geometry and non-symmetrical and angular planes.

As commercial areas became increasingly auto-oriented, businesses sought to grab the attention of passing drivers with increasingly eye-catching signage and storefront design. However, they also considered the pedestrian experience, with large windows that allowed pedestrians a full view into the store, and generous canopies that provided shade on the sidewalk.

Mid-century Modern architecture is just now being recognized for its architectural and historic merit. Because designers of this time period were focused on the use of new, modern technologies and looking towards the future, the Mid-century Modern style is completely distinct from earlier styles more traditionally thought of as historic. As a result, this style has often been under-appreciated and overlooked, and many fine examples have been altered or destroyed. Now, the Mid-century Modern style is increasingly being recognized as unique, innovative, and emblematic of its own time.

Facade is composed of dramatic, geometric forms such as the horizontal canopy

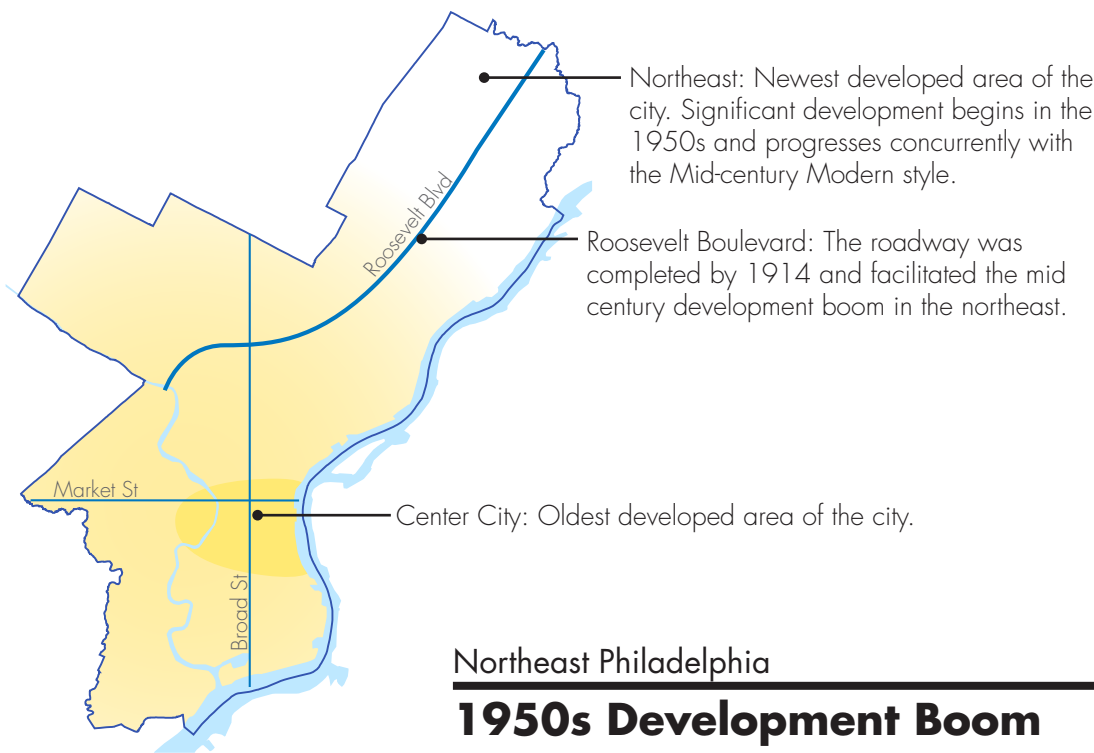
Large areas of glazing with minimal framing

Size and location of signage addresses automobiles



Lit Brothers at the corner of Cottman and Castor Avenues, 1954
Source: City of Philadelphia Department of Records

In the 1950s, the original development of Central Northeast commercial areas coincided with a period of architecture when many retail and office buildings welcomed both drivers and pedestrians. Eye-catching signs and storefronts grabbed the attention of motorists, while large display windows and projecting canopies enhanced the sidewalks.



Northeast Philadelphia

1950s Development Boom

Northeast Philadelphia developed rapidly during the 1950s, as automobiles made it easier for residents to settle here and commute to Center City and other job centers. Commercial development dramatically increased with the opening of the Lit Brothers department store on the corner of Castor and Cottman Avenue in 1954, and progressed concurrently with the Mid-century Modern style.

The northeast area of the city is dotted with one-of-a-kind, iconic buildings from this time period, in particular commercial buildings, banks and institutions. Elements of the Mid-century Modern style can be found throughout the Rising Sun, Bustleton, Cottman and Castor Avenue commercial corridors, ranging from some remarkable individual buildings to more everyday commercial facades.

As these corridors are revitalized, the most iconic buildings of the mid-century should be protected and preserved. Preserving and restoring architecturally significant buildings and commercial corridors will help the district maintain its identity. Similarly, restoring the Mid-century Modern style of more typical commercial buildings will also help build and strengthen the identity of commercial corridors in the northeast.



Verree Road and Ripley Street, 1956



Verree Road and Ripley Street, 2013

Typical commercial strip that has maintained its architectural character but improvements, such as new signage and awnings, could enhance its original features.

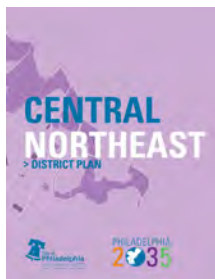
Philadelphia 2035 Central Northeast District

District Plan Recommendations

As a supplement to the Philadelphia 2035 district plan for Central Northeast, this study reviews the mid-century modern architectural vocabulary, identifies the iconic examples of this style within the district, and suggests how to enhance mid-century modern elements as an approach to revitalizing commercial corridors.



Central Northeast District,
location within Philadelphia



Central Northeast District Plan
available at phila2035.org

This study documents some of the corridors' streetscape conditions that are the impetus behind various recommendations in the Central Northeast District Plan. In general, the district's streetscapes are of a higher quality in residential areas than in its commercial corridors. Residential areas are extremely well-cared for and residents take pride in their carefully maintained houses, yards, driveways and sidewalks. The appearance of some of the commercial corridors is in sharp contrast. Signage, sidewalks, facades, and landscaping look exhausted and have inconsistent street frontage, creating a visually cluttered streetscape with low pedestrian usage.

The plan recommends a wide range of strategies and tools to improve the conditions of some of the commercial corridors, from zoning changes, physical improvements, establishment of business associations or improvement districts, and preservation. The strategy of revitalizing the corridors by enhancing their Mid-century Modern architecture is a priority recommendation. This study will help to build momentum towards implementing that recommendation, as well increase awareness and appreciation of the Mid-century Modern architectural style.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATION #31

Enhance the architectural integrity of commercial corridors that reflect the unique concentration, identity, and place-making value of Mid-century Modern architecture:

- Coordinate applications for the Commerce Department's Storefront Improvement Program for eligible addresses
- Create a historic preservation plan that supports commercial and mixed-use reinvestment in the district, including recommendations for zoning, conservation tools, marketing, and designation strategies, e.g. Mid century Modern thematic district to enable property owners to access financial incentives.





Mid-century Modern Commercial Architectural Vocabulary

Facade Geometry

Mid-century Modern design is characterized by smooth, simple geometry and intersecting angular planes. While architecture of earlier eras tended to use small, embellished details, modern design favored large, smooth surfaces and sharp angles. Curved elements were sometimes also used to break up the otherwise linear geometry of the design.

Materials used in Mid-century Modern facades were typically modular. Mid-century design embraced elements that could be pre-fabricated and assembled on site, such as bricks, curtain walls and tiles. These modular materials add another layer of geometry to the design of facades.

Mid-century Modern storefronts are usually asymmetrical, with angled walls guiding the visitor towards the entrance. While storefronts of earlier eras tended to have a central entrance with symmetrical windows on each side, modern storefronts usually have an entrance placed asymmetrically.



Angular, geometric storefront

8720 Bustleton Ave



Asymmetrical storefront

6428 Rising Sun Ave



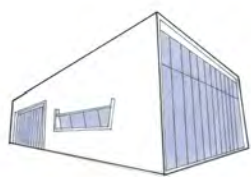
Curved facade element

6425 Rising Sun Ave



Modular building material

6432 Rising Sun Ave



Mid-century Modern Commercial Architectural Vocabulary

New Glazing Technology

Designers embraced new technologies such as the manufacturing of plate glass and pre-fabricated parts, which allowed for new types of windows in modern buildings. Two main types of windows are most emblematic of this period: plate glass windows and curtain wall construction.

Plate glass windows are smooth, large, uninterrupted windows that could extend floor-to-ceiling. This new “open front” style allowed complete visibility into the store, putting the whole store on display instead of just a small window area.

Curtain wall construction consists of vertical windows with mullions that utilized the modern technology of pre-fabrication for easy assembly. These windows create a very regular geometric pattern in the appearance of a facade.

These window types, and others from this era, are fixed (the glass cannot be opened or moved) and create a smooth, geometrical appearance.



Plate glass windows



7267 Rising Sun Ave
7251 Rising Sun Ave



Curtain wall construction

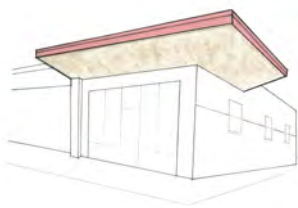


1919 Cottman Ave
6647 Bustleton Ave



Fixed windows,geometric

2206 Cottman Ave
7601 Castor Ave



Mid-century Modern Commercial Architectural Vocabulary

Storefront Canopies and Projecting Roofs

Although businesses of this time period were increasingly auto-oriented, Mid-century Modern design still considered the pedestrian experience. To provide space and shade for pedestrians to view goods inside the store through the large, plate-glass windows, businesses installed canopies or permanent awnings. New technology allowed for projecting metal canopies without support columns (cantilevered). Both of these styles continue to be common across the Central Northeast district.

Designers also experimented with the geometry of roof types, using flat, folded, or angled roofs instead of a typical roof with a single peak. Dramatic roof projections that address the automobile were also common during this era. For example, car ports were common on residential buildings, and commercial buildings often identified driveways with both projecting architectural features and signage.



Source: Ben Leech, Preservation Alliance

Projecting roof line, pedestrian oriented

1800 block of Cottman Ave
2200 block of Cottman Ave



Canopy, key architectural feature

2014 Cottman Ave



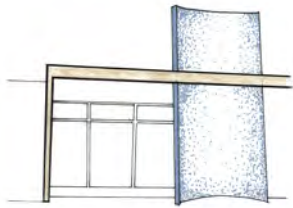
Angled roof line

7311 Elgin St



Canopy, automobile oriented

1620 Cottman Ave



Mid-century Modern Commercial Architectural Vocabulary

Facade Materials

Materials used in Mid-century Modern facades were typically modular. Mid-century design embraced elements that could be pre-fabricated and assembled on site, such as bricks, curtain walls and tiles.

Common facade materials include brick (blonde, red, or glazed), formed concrete, simulated stone, aluminum, glass, opaque glass (vitrolite), glass block, and small mosaic tile.



Brick, plate glass



Glazed brick



Formed concrete, plate glass



Simulated stone



glazed brick, aluminum cornice



Vitrolite, glass block, simulated stone



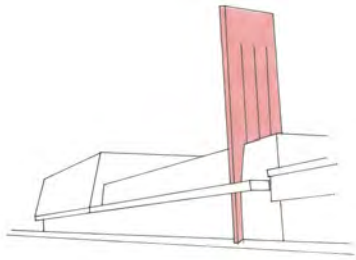
Tile, plate glass, simulated stone



Glass block, blonde brick



mosaic tile, aluminum details



Mid-century Modern Commercial Architectural Vocabulary

Signage

Mid-century Modern commercial businesses often included custom-designed, eye-catching signage on their storefronts.

Projecting signs are scattered throughout the Central Northeast district. Many are still the original materials from the era and therefore are in need of repair and restoration.

Signs that were mounted at a high elevation on poles allowed businesses to catch the attention of passing drivers, especially for businesses set further back from the street with parking in front. These signs are often iconic, unique and monumental.

Monumental signs also appear in Mid-century Modern architecture as elements that are integrated into the buildings. Commonly known as “high-flyers,” these signs are not stand-alone structures, but rather key architectural elements within the composition of a building or a facade.

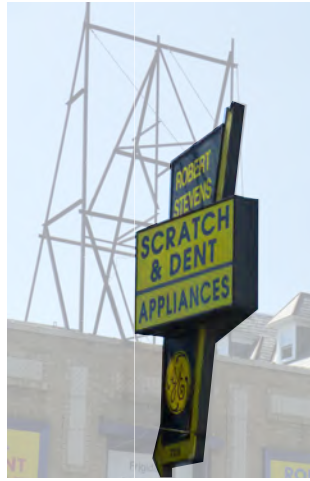
Signs with individually-mounted lettering are also typical of the mid-century modern style. These signs could also be illuminated with neon mounted on top of or behind the letters.

Projecting signs



1936 Cottman Ave

Source: Ben Leech,
Preservation Alliance



7119 Rising Sun Ave



7124 Rising Sun Ave



7112 Rising Sun Ave

Post signs



2014 Cottman Ave



8500 Bustleton Ave



2045 Cottman Ave



6826 Bustleton Ave

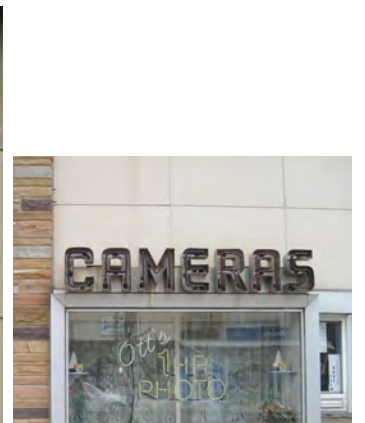
Architectural signs



1620 Cottman Ave



Neon with visible tubing



6901 Catsor Ave

Signs with individually-mounted letters

Recommendations for nomination to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places

Ott Camera, 6901 Castor Avenue

Built: 1955

Architect: Allan A. Berkowitz

Ott Camera is an excellent example of Mid-century Modern commercial architecture. Most of the facade is composed of opaque, colored glass framed in aluminum and simulated stone, with a glass block window detail on the second story. The building is in excellent condition with very few apparent alterations to its original design.

The “Ott” sign which tops the building, projecting through and above the red glass outline, is the most outstanding feature. It is an excellent example of Mid-century Modern signage, with exposed neon tubing which likely maintains its original appearance. The sign is an integrated part of the building’s architecture.

Allan Berkowitz was a Philadelphia architect who is most known for his modern residential designs. He designed many homes in the Philadelphia area as well as libraries, schools, and churches.



Recommendations for nomination to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places

Northeast Library, 2228 Cottman Avenue

Built: 1963

Architect: Geddes, Brecher, Qualls and Cunningham

In addition to commercial buildings, many of the civic buildings in Central Northeast date from the mid-century. The Northeast Regional Library is a striking example of the civic architecture from this time period.

The front of this building features tall windows separated by mullions, a Mid-century Modern technique of emphasizing and exaggerating the height of the building.

Along with the next door District Health Center #10, this library forms a small node of civic services along Cottman Avenue. It also provides one of the only shaded resting places, planted with trees, along the corridor.



Source: Ben Leech, Preservation Alliance

Recommendations for nomination to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places

District Health Center #10, 2228 Cottman Avenue
Built: 1974

Architect: Norman Rice
(Sculptor: Evelyn Keyser, 1976)

District Health Center #10 and the Northeast Regional Library form a small node of civic services along Cottman Avenue. This building has many Mid-century Modern features such as the green glazed brick facade and extensive aluminum detailing. Much of the facade has floor-to-ceiling windows which allow visibility into and out of the health center's waiting room.

Norman Rice, who designed this building, was a prominent Philadelphia architect who was educated at the University of Pennsylvania. Among his other projects was the renovation of Fitter Square and design work for the Center City PSFS building.

"Families," the totem-like statue in front of the museum, is by Evelyn Keyser, a modern artist who completed eight public art pieces in the city of Philadelphia. She lived in nearby Elkins Park, in a home also designed by Norman Rice. The vertical sculpture provides a counterpoint to the horizontal building. The sculpture is 27 feet tall and has 56 figures on it, representing the members of a family who would use the health center.



Source: Ben Leech, Preservation Alliance

Recommendations for nomination to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places

**First Federal Savings, 1919 Cottman Avenue
(now Firsttrust Bank)**

Built: 1956

Architect: Thalheimer and Weitz

Banks embraced the Mid-century Modern style as a way to demonstrate to their customers that they were engaged with modern technology and convenience. Because bank buildings tend to maintain relatively permanent locations and ownership, the banks were more willing to invest in the design of their buildings and to maintain them over time. As a result, Central Northeast contains many banks that are iconic examples of Mid-century Modern design.

The First Federal Savings Bank (now Firsttrust Bank) is a particularly striking example. On the first story, tall windows provide transparency and light into the bank, while on the upper stories, curtain wall construction provides a strong geometric rhythm. The bank anchors the corner of Castor and Cottman and responds to the irregularly shaped parcel.

The Central Northeast has quite a few other notable bank buildings with Mid-century Modern design, including the Philadelphia Savings Fund Society, now Citizen's Bank (2014 Cottman Avenue), the Fidelity Trust Building (8200 Castor), PNC Bank (2200 Cottman Avenue), and Bank of America (6425 Rising Sun Avenue).



Source: Ben Leech, Preservation Alliance



Key map

Commercial corridor illustrative improvements

Cottman Avenue between Shisler and Belden Streets

Over time, development has increasingly favored the car in the Central Northeast district, resulting in commercial areas that lack pedestrian amenities. Pedestrian amenities should be restored in areas where they have been neglected, and added where they are missing. This particular block is a good location to illustrate recommended improvements because it is directly across from the Woodrow Wilson School, the storefronts are good examples of typical, every day Mid-century Modern design, and the public realm is spacious enough to accommodate new amenities.

The mix of both auto and pedestrian amenities that was present in mid-century commercial architecture should be encouraged and restored. The on-street metered parking and generous sidewalk width are existing amenities that encourage both automobile and pedestrian patronage of the businesses. Features that could be enhanced or added include removing repetitive signage from the windows and the canopy, adding street trees, and cleaning the building facade.

Restore and add pedestrian amenities to commercial corridors:

- Maintain and restore projecting canopies and permanent awnings
- Add street trees to wide sidewalks lacking shade
- Improve appearance of storefront by removing clutter from windows
- Re-open windows that have been boarded shut
- Use only transparent grates for security
- Remove unnecessary and repetitive signage
- Consistently place signage on a flat sign board above storefronts
- Restore any original Mid-century Modern design elements



Cottman Avenue existing conditions, looking southeast

Storefront glazing is clear of clutter

New sign bands are consistently placed

Canopy is a featured architectural element and is clear of signage

New street trees buffer traffic



New planters enhance pedestrian environment

New paving defines store entrances

Cottman Avenue illustrative improvements

