

THE SUCCULENT EMPIRE OF STEVEN POSES

In the '60s, he was anti-war as well as anti-business. But his restaurants now bring in \$11 million a year, and he's finding it difficult to get back into the kitchen.

Breaking new ground, Poses' City Bites is restaurant as new wave theater and the only one of his properties to have a shaky start.

STEVE POSES IS MARCHING north on 17th Street, toting a black binder filled with narrow-ruled paper and small, immaculately inscribed notes. He stops in front of The Market of The Commissary — the gourmet food-to-go emporium he opened in 1980 around the corner from his Commissary restaurant. He is on his way back to his Commissary office, returning from a meeting with the newly appointed general manager of 16th Street Bar & Grill, the storefront restaurant that was once called Frog before Poses moved Frog to posher digs in a townhouse on Locust Street.

So he's walking up 17th, and there's some grimy, half-eaten thing on the sidewalk in front of the Market — a croissant, maybe, or a mashed-up egg roll. He reaches down and picks up this unsavory morsel, escorts it to the corner and deposits it in a City of Philadelphia trash can. He wipes his hands and proceeds along his way. He does this without even thinking.

Another day on 17th Street — a hot,

STEVEN X. REA, an Inquirer staff writer, last wrote for the magazine on filmmaker Susan Seidman.

stultifyingly humid Friday in June — Steve Poses can be found inside a refrigerated truck, sweating buckets as he unloads baskets of Frog/Commissary-catered food that is being prepared assembly-line style by a crew in the basement of the First Baptist Church. The spiffy platters of chicken breast, Mediterranean pasta, tomato and basil and little tortes in the shape of zoo animals are being readied for "Zoobilee '84," the annual fund-raising shindig benefiting the Philadelphia Zoo.

Poses, 38, who has been called the Man Who Fathered the Philadelphia Restaurant Renaissance, can also be called the Man Who Is Seen a Lot on 17th Street. It's like his office corridor, this swank stretch of Center City sidewalk between Sansom and Locust.

At various times during any given week, Poses — a seriously intense guy with a dark, trimmed beard and quick, dark chestnut eyes — can be seen hoofing down 17th on his way to the 16th Street Bar & Grill or to Frog. He can be seen dodging cars as he crosses Sansom and 17th making for the front door of the Architects Building, where Shooting Stars Inc. — the umbrella organization that houses Poses' Philadelphia restaurant empire — has its offices.

Sometimes, Poses is just standing there somewhere along 17th, trading small talk with a shop owner or some friend he has bumped into. An art gallery proprietor will stop and ask Poses to come in and survey some new show, or a fellow member of the Center City Association of Proprietors — a small-business group that Poses helped form in 1976 — will collar him and start complaining about garbage pickups or some new zoning ordinance or the lousy parking situation.

And at the end of a lot of days — 7-ish, 8-ish — Poses can be seen ducking down the 17th Street steps into The Market of The Commissary to get something — in one of those handsome green-and-white-checked shopping bags with the carrot on them — to bring home for dinner.

MOST OFTEN THESE DAYS, POSES — who has just lost something like 65 pounds in a six-month-long, medically supervised liquid diet — can be found inside the Commissary and its new upstairs restaurant with the Southwest theme, USA Cafe. After several years of overseeing the operation of his domain from the 21st floor of the Architects Building, Poses decided in May to get back in the thick of it. He moved his files and Rolodexes into a cluttered, crowded room he shares with Commissary executive chef Joe Mercuri, somewhere in the maze of kitchens and walk-in refrigerators upstairs at the Sansom Street building.

They call it "hands-on" in the business biz, getting back to the day-to-day running of things, and that is what Poses is doing.

Sort of.

Yes, he's the Commissary's new general manager — or proprietor, as they say in Shooting Stars lingo — responsible for the daily operation of the restaurant, cautioning hostesses to be cheerier, approving menu changes, dealing with staff problems and salary requests and wine selections and a zillion other details.

But at the same time, Poses is also the head of this giant holding company that last year grossed more than \$11.5 million, a company that employs close to 500 people. Even though Shooting Stars Inc. recently divested itself of the two Eden cafeterias, it is still the largest upscale restaurant organization in Philadelphia. Poses predicts that this year, without the Edens, gross sales will still be about \$11 million.

Shooting Stars, fall '84, looks like this:

- Frog (no, it's not pronounced *froog*, even if it does have an umlaut over the o): In a three-story townhouse along Locust Street between 15th and 16th, Frog, since it opened in 1980, has been one of the preeminent eating establishments in Center City, offering *haute cuisine* at *haute* prices in a *haute* environment that's cool and elegant without being intimidating.

- Frog/Commissary Caterers: This is

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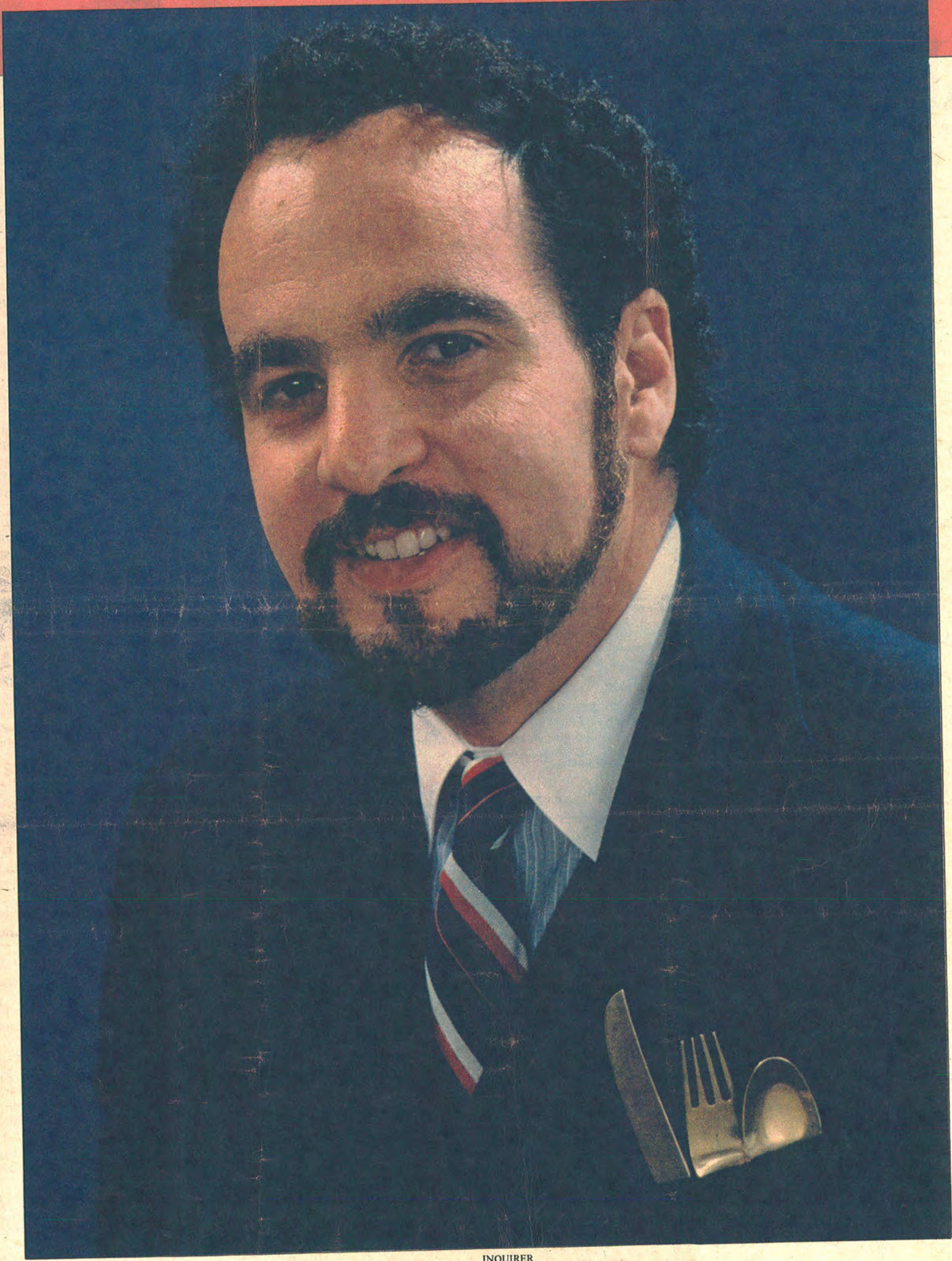
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one of the city's foremost catering operations. Its kitchen is in the cramped building shared by the Commissary and its upstairs restaurant.

- **The Commissary:** Philadelphia's first gourmet cafeteria, in operation since 1977, is still, arguably, the best. It opens early and closes late; there's a piano bar, a wine bar, a counter for omelettes and pasta, and a kitchen with an emphasis on soups, salads, *charcuterie*, savory tarts and rich desserts.

- **The Market of The Commissary:** Here you'll find fruit, salads, wild mushroom pizzas, imported condiments, spices, teas, coffee beans, breads, pastries — all that good yuppie stuff, immaculately displayed.

- **16th Street Bar & Grill:** The original Frog storefront site has been, since 1980, a dark, lively neighborhood-style bar and grill famous for its deep-dish pizzas, relatively modest prices, copper bar and eccentric jukebox.

- **City Bites:** Late last year, Poses and company opened up a new restaurant in a new neck of the woods — an island of trendy L.A.-style wackiness amid the staid cobblestone streets of Society Hill and Old City. It is a restaurant as new wave theater, and after a shaky start, it seems to be doing well.

- **USA Cafe:** When it opened in September, Poses' latest venture with the Upstairs at The Commissary sit-down restaurant was all blinding-orange-and-green walls and sports equipment everywhere — including a 1942 Indian "Chief" motorcycle suspended from the ceiling — and offbeat, nouveau Southwestern cuisine. The cuisine and the motorcycle stayed, but six weeks later, Poses threw out the sports equipment, painted sandy earth tones over the glare and was planning landscape photographs for the walls.

So, Steve Poses has all this on his mind. A zillion details. He keeps a stack of 3-by-5 index cards in his shirt pocket. When he thinks of something — a new idea for a pasta, somebody he has to call, a book he should read, some organizational adjustment, a memo to send out — he writes it down on a card, tucks it back in his pocket. He's a pretty obsessive guy.

He is sitting in the main dining room of the Commissary. It's 10 o'clock on a Monday morning. He's talking about this "hands-on" business, excitedly, earnestly.

"I probably have not been a line manager [at one of my restaurants] since the Commissary opened in 1977," he says, although he has tried to remain an active influence on the estimated 4,000 meals his restaurants serve daily. "But it's one thing to sit in your office and work out menus, as opposed to being in the kitchen, tasting and experimenting."

A case in point: Steve Poses and The Seaweed Pasta. A few weeks before the June 6 benefit this year for the Pennsylvania Ballet's 20th anniversary — an affair for which Poses was donating the food — he had a notion about seaweed pasta.

"I had read something in the Times

Poses talks about being able to "cook in my head," although the transmission of concept to conception doesn't always work. Take the night of the Pennsylvania Ballet's 20th anniversary gala, the night of The Seaweed Pasta . . .

hat gave me a suggestion," he recounts, talking a little like a scientist who has discovered something big while fooling around with his beakers. "So I grabbed 20 minutes, and I took a shot at making his seaweed pasta. And I had to run back to a meeting, something distracted me, but when we were planning this menu for the ballet, I said, 'Let's finally figure out how to do a seaweed pasta.'"

And lo and behold, comes the gala, attended by Rudolf Nureyev, Suzanne Farrell and Peter Martins, Lee Radziwill, Dr. J and Mayor Goode, and there was this first course: a pasta flavored with seaweed, made to look like seaweed, served atop an artfully arranged seaweed salad.

And . . . and . . . it was lumpy. Now, in that lofty gathering, the celebs were eyeing one another, and the ballet people were trying to raise money, so kelp-green lumpy pasta was the least of their concerns. Nobody seemed to notice, and everybody ate a lot, and everybody had a real good time. But Steve Poses knew: *The pasta was lumpy.*

After the gala he thought and thought and thought about what had gone wrong. All the right elements for a wonderful dish had been there, what had been the problem? And finally, after going over the meal in his head, he figured it out. Seaweed pasta — of the right texture, that is — must be prepared in smaller quantities and then the lumps stay away.

Poses talks about being able to "cook in my head," but sometimes the transmission of concept to conception doesn't always work out. Still, he's buzzed about the seaweed pasta.

"So," he surmises, "I think the change of having me more hands-on involved will hopefully lead to a new period of creativity and experimentation here that I'm personally excited about."

STEVEN POSES IS ONE OF two sons of a "very good cook" and of a lawyer turned packer of processed foods (pickles mostly) turned real estate man. He grew up in Yonkers, N.Y., a suburb of New York.

He was captain of the safety patrol in junior high school (read: nerd), an editor of his high school yearbook and class president in his senior year (read: nerd turned achiever).

He came to Philadelphia in 1964, a freshman at the University of Pennsylvania; and took his bachelor's degree in sociology in 1968 after studying city planning and a little architecture along the way. "I found that I couldn't really draw well. So I dropped out of architecture, but at the same time, I became active in social issues and interested in the relationship between people and buildings," he says.

After graduation he trained for the Peace Corps, but quit to work with SANE (the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy). To avoid going to Vietnam he needed a draft-deferrable job, so he became the media instructor at the Green Tree School, a private Germantown school for emotionally disturbed children. There he met Naomi Fisher, a pretty woman with a winningly scattered look, whom he married in February 1983.

It was at the school, the couple recount, sitting in their big stone house in Germantown one summer evening, that Poses started his first restaurant: the Green Tree Cafe.

"Two days a week, the kids cooked and prepared lunch for the staff," Poses says. "And the staff would buy its lunch, just like a real restaurant."

After Poses got his occupational deferment, he got a physical deferment ("for hemorrhoids," Poses says, offering an embarrassed laugh). "Teaching at the Green Tree was not the thing that I really wanted to do," he says, so in the fall of 1971 he took a job as a busboy at La Panetiere, the celebrated French restaurant on Locust Street owned by Peter Von Starck. Poses polished wine glasses, swept crumbs off white-linen tablecloths, and watched how a restaurant works.

Poses speaks affectionately of the late Von Starck, who taught him a love of flowers (Poses spends upward of \$75,000 a year in floral arrangements for his restaurants) and helped him pick out a site for the first Frog.

"I remember the day that a friend's mother called to tell me about the storefront that [became] Frog," Poses says, a nostalgic tone in his voice. "I went right over and then went back and got Peter and pulled him by his shirtsleeves. We both pressed our noses to the window, and I told him this is where it could be."

And so, in April 1973, with an investment of \$35,000 gathered from family members and friends and his own savings, Poses opened Frog, a 55-seat bar and grill fashioned after "a coffeehouse of the '50s." His brother, Fred, and his sister-in-law, Joyce, were partners. Poses became the restaurant's head cook.

He had a falling out with Von Starck, however, when several employees of La Panetiere — including Kamol Phutlek, the Thai chef who is now co-owner of Alouette — left to work for Poses. "I went to him [Von Starck] and explained that these guys wanted to come to work

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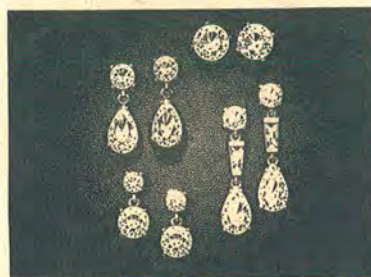
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for me, that I didn't ask them to come, it was, after all, a free country. And he didn't agree. I mean, we kidded about it ... but he truly considered himself a royalist and felt that these people were not free to leave his employ."

Once his restaurant was under way, Poses had some ideas he was determined to try out. "I liked to cook, which was something I discovered in college," he says. "And I like being community-involved, and for me, my initial concept of what a restaurant should be was a place where friends could come and eat food that I'd make, and we'd sit around and discuss great issues."

The rest is Philadelphia restaurant history. What began as a comfortable fern bar laden with spider plants and mismatched furniture and a surfeit of frog paraphernalia (frog-shaped ashtrays, dishes with frogs on them, frog wallpaper in the rest rooms, frog matchbooks) soon became a comfortable fern bar that was raking in big bucks.

Operating pretty much in a vacuum — its only direct competition in "new-

style restaurants of relaxed mood and innovative food were Les Amis, The Garden and Wildflowers — Frog was a hit from Day One.

In the kitchen, Poses began experimenting more — incorporating diverse elements and mixing Thai, French and American cuisines in new ways.

A year later, Frog took over the apartment behind it and expanded to nearly 90 seats. In '77, the Commissary opened. A few months later, the Upstairs dining room opened. Within a year the Commissary, too, expanded.

According to Paul Roller — a chef at the original Frog who later worked at the Commissary — Poses' mini-empire "had become recognized as an exciting restaurant organization. Things were going very well financially. Some of the heavy catering weeks, the business was grossing \$100,000."

Then in 1980 — "a big year," says Poses — the first Eden opened, as did the Market. Frog moved to its new location. In 1981, the 16th Street Bar & Grill opened on the site of the old Frog, the catering business was hopping, the Market doubled in size, and a second Eden — in University City — opened.

fairly spectacular. "I think in the early days, the impact was close to awesome," recalls Roller. "Here was this bunch of kids having a good time, and all of a sudden when the Commissary began to get successful, and the catering thing began to take off, there was a realization that 'gee, this is Big Time stuff!' The catering competition wasn't just Astral Plane around the corner anymore, now we're talking about taking on these big catering guys, too."

Another former staff member from the early Frog days says that while the mood was mostly amicable (artsy types — painters, musicians, actors — would work there until their other careers began to pay off) there were some drawbacks, too. Although Poses expected a full commitment, the money was not so hot and raises were few and far between, a complaint that disenchanting employees continue to make.

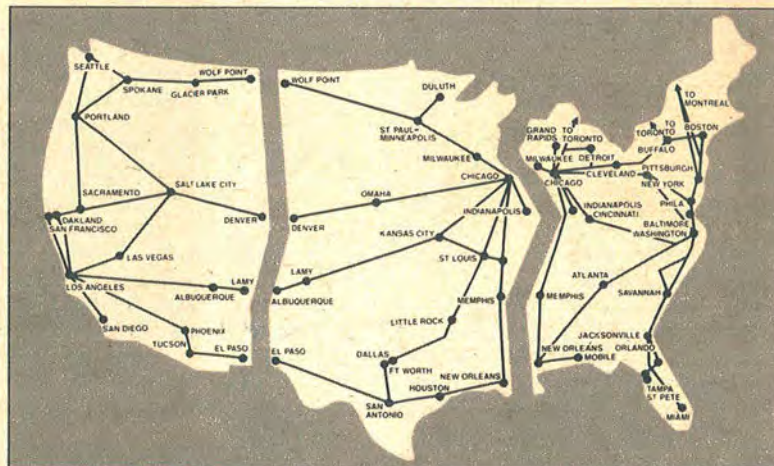
"Poses had an astonishingly short temper that first year," the ex-staffer recalls. "It certainly wasn't because the business wasn't going well. The big tip-off for me that it wasn't just a happy-go-lucky restaurant experience, a group of

with a real hard-line business sensibility, was, after he'd been open a year and he'd pretty much made a killing beyond anyone's wildest expectations, a new person dropped by for an interview with him, and he came out of the kitchen wiped his hands on his apron and sa down at the bar.

"And the woman was asking him questions, and finally she just straight out asked him, 'To what do you attribute the success of the restaurant?' Well, I expected him to go on at some length talking about food and the nice people who worked there, how happy he was to have a restaurant, and he said something like, 'Well, when I told someone I wanted to open a restaurant, this fellow told me there are three important things to consider. They are location, location and location.'"

SUDDENLY THERE WERE places to eat in Philadelphia other than Arthur's Steak House and Bookbinders. The new cuisine that Poses' restaurants helped define in this town — an eclectic mix of Asian season-

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American — suddenly began shooting up all over the landscape.

"It was a great age for experimentation," Roller remembers, "because you could make mistakes and not be too uptight about them."

Poses calls it the tabula rasa effect, this Philadelphia heritage that's developed over the past 10 years or so. "We had no preconceived notions. We were waiting for diversities of experience and taste to effect how we approached food. You had this group of kids who liked to cook and had somewhat rejected the establishment ways of doing things [the formality of the cuisine and the staff], and they got exposed to a whole range of cooking and didn't know what worked and what did not work. Nobody ever told them — you know, Mama and Papa never told them that different things worked different ways. So I think that's what led to the evolution of the cuisine in this city, and I do think it's mirrored to some degrees in other cities as well.

"I think that the Philadelphia heritage over the last 10 years has been this development of this somewhat unique mixing of Oriental, American and French cuisines that makes a lot of sense, given the history of who's worked in Philadelphia restaurants." Poses is quick to point out the tremendous influence that Thai cuisine has had locally.

Chef Phutlek concurs: "There have been many Thais working in Philadelphia restaurants, putting curries on menus. It has been very important."

"Kamol was more creative... He applied his own innovations, his own intellect to the process. His impact was really felt at Frog and, again, when he moved on to La Terrasse."

SO HERE'S STEVE POSES, ONE-time anti-war activist who now heads up a thriving, sizable Philadelphia business. While he by no means leads an ostentatious life, he is well-off. He drives to and from work each day in a big black BMW. He resides with his wife, who is a freelance video producer, and with two dogs in a country-ish house amid 55 acres of the Awbury Arboretum in Germantown.

A small core of people who helped him build the original Frog are still with Poses today. Edwin Bronstein, who heads a Center City architectural firm, has worked with Poses on each of his projects. Don Falconio, Shooting Stars' vice president and chief operating officer, has been with Poses since the day Frog opened. Carol Delancy, the proprietor of Frog, was hired that first summer. There was, from the start, a tradition of promoting from within. As the company got bigger, those who were with Poses early on assumed positions of power.

Lately, Poses has been rethinking the in-bred corporate structure of his enterprise, which comprises eight top people and a general manager at each restaurant. He has made a few outside hires to bring a "fresh" perspective into the business and in June let go about 40 employees, about 60 percent of the staff,

of his business, Poses is management-cool about the firings, seeing it as a way of getting rid of "any single employee [who] is impairing or not abling the organization as a whole to reach its potential."

Poses is a man enamored of the complex machinations of running a business. He makes a concerted effort to be a righteous boss. He catches himself when he refers to "my secretary" and changes it to "my assistant." He makes an effort to know as many names as possible, so when he passes through the kitchen of the Commissary he can say, "Hi, Earl," to the dishwasher, "Hello, Sonya," to the hostess.

Still, as Paul Roller pointed out, there's no way to keep a business that employs 500 people as intimate as one that employs 30. It's one of the main reasons that Roller left and started his own restaurant: Roller's opened in Chestnut Hill in 1982.

"You figure, if you spend a minute a week with each person, you're out 10 hours," Roller says. "It's an impossible task. The whole thing shifts — you're getting away from food as art... Obviously, when you have that size family to feed, you have to become increasingly bottom-line oriented. I think it's a vicious cycle you get caught up in.

"I just saw the organization getting too big," he adds. "Once you get into that, you're expending more energy in politics than you are in cooking... Things don't run as well."

that he still thinks highly of Poses. And his wife, Becky, is working with Poses' company on the design of a Frog/Commissary cookbook.

"We just grew in different directions," Roller observes. "I like the guy personally a whole lot, and that's the problem. There are these two sides to all of us — the personal side and the business side. But I can't stress it enough: He's a hell of a guy, and what he did, especially in the early days, to help me, you can never say thanks enough."

"In the '60s, I was very much anti-business," Poses muses one night in his stark living room. "I feel very strongly now about the role business can play in people's lives and the satisfaction that people can get out of work, which is not a thing I was at all in tune with in the '60s. I feel very strongly now that work can provide meaning for people and that entrepreneurs and employers are really key figures in creating opportunity for people — ideally. It's not always the case, they can be exploitive. But it does create opportunity."

Though Poses has cut back considerably in his involvement with civic activities these past few years, he remains a vital force in "economic-development sort of issues" in the city. He is a member of the Center City Association of Proprietors, and he's involved with the Convention and Visitors Bureau, the Greater Philadelphia Economic Development Coalition, and the Greater Phil-

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"Eighty dollars."
"How long you play?"
"About 15, 20 minutes."

Darnell cited another example of project psychology — the nearby group of boys tossing a basketball at the makeshift hoop, even though a city park with basketball courts was only a block away. "That's not a real basketball goal," he said, "but it's theirs. It's raggedy, but it's here, and it's the right height, and nobody's going to take it from them. If they do, if somebody tears it down, they'll just put it right back up — because it's theirs."

After Wilson Goode's election as mayor, public housing tenants and their leaders throughout Philadelphia were cautiously optimistic that the government might finally make some major improvements in public housing. But Darnell scoffed at the idea that any politician — black or white — would make a difference.

"You'd do best not to go around here talking to people about what the mayor is going to do to improve things," he told me. Folks in the projects know that the only system that works for them, he said, is the system they devise for themselves.

Everybody's scared

SOUTHWARK IS A fearful place. The elevator repairmen who come several times each week move through the grounds with an armed guard. Two men sweep the floors, moving together through the buildings because the union considers two of the three high-rises unsafe.

"This is one of the worst projects there is," a co-worker warned during my second week on the crew. "If you don't pack nothing, man, you better think about carrying a knife or something." He was watching the ever-present youths idly standing not far off as he spoke. "They rob each other, so what do you think they care about you and me?"

In the cleanest and safest of the three buildings — the one that houses mostly senior citizens — one man is permitted to work alone. A Philadelphia Housing Authority guard station looks out onto the lobby, where, at least theoretically, no loitering is allowed.

But in the other buildings there is not even a pretense of security. The housing police rarely visit them. According to Hazel Jones, who lives in the 1000 Building, considered the worst building,

to quell a disturbance or quiet a party, they will often report that a major crime has been committed, such as a shooting or stabbing. "Then they'll come up," she said. "But that's the only way to get them to come."

But even in the senior citizens building, no one feels safe. "Ain't like it used to be anymore," said Lenore Hill, 84, a longtime Southwark resident. "Everybody's scared."

One day in April, Mary Downes, 74, despite a bad leg, was in the hallway with a mop, cleaning the floor near the elevators because, she said, the custodians never do it. In the pocket of her robe she carried a large pair of scissors for protection, and in her living room, lying near the door, was a large pocket knife. She said she has never had to use either of the weapons, "and I hope I don't have to, but you've got to be careful around here."

Residents of her building say they are like sitting ducks for criminals who know what days the public assistance checks arrive and who loiter in the hallways, waiting for a chance to strike. Sometimes they break out hallway lights, plunging public areas in the building into total darkness.

A workman watched the idle youths nearby, then warned, "They rob each other, so what do you think they care about you and me?"

During the security guard strike in April, tenants said they hardly noticed the difference: They never feel safe.

"I had to get out," said Herb Brown, an ex-resident who returned to Southwark one afternoon to visit friends. He and several other men and women sat in the noisy laundry room on worn wooden benches. Brown said he moved away from Southwark, where he had lived for seven years, after his apartment was burglarized several times. "I woke up one night — I had been watching TV and had fallen asleep, and then I had to go to the bathroom — and I woke up and saw my papers were scattered all over the floor," he said, describing the last of the burglaries. "I started to get out of the bed and my foot hit [the burglar]. He was on the floor going through my papers."

Brown said the man, who had already taken \$170 from his pocket, ran out of the apartment, leaving him unharmed.

Mismanagement and waste

EVERYONE ASSOCIATED with public housing can give a reason why the projects are so bad. HUD officials blame many of the problems on the PHA's mismanagement and waste.

PHA director of planning Michael Dougherty cites cost-cutting during the 1950s, when most of the high-rise projects were built. This, he says, resulted in buildings that are poorly constructed and hard to manage.

And a PHA area manager, John Pressley, says: "You must understand: We serve the poorest of the poor."

But whatever the causes and whoever is to blame, it is the tenants who suffer.

Addie Mahoney, 22, had lived for two years in the 1000 Building, a tower that residents say was decently maintained and livable 10 years ago but that had become the filthiest and the most decayed by the time improvements were begun earlier this year.

Shoddy construction, massive flooding caused by broken pipes two years ago, and minor flooding each winter since, left interior walls rotted and exterior walls cracked. Until recently, the building was nearly half empty, and a

major complaint was that burglars and rapists routinely entered apartments by climbing over balconies or crashing through walls from vacant units next door.

Except for the sweeping view of Center City and Penn's Landing from her window, little distinguished Mahoney's 10th-floor apartment from the decrepit shacks seen in old photographs of Depression-era sharecroppers. There was a huge hole in one wall above the bathtub. Sheets of plastic had been taped over it to hide exposed pipes.

There was no light in the bathroom. Water from the leaking pipes had long ago shorted the circuits, she said. And even in winter, entering the apartment was like walking into a steam room, because hot water ran full blast into the bathtub and could not be shut off.

"That's been running for as long as we've been here," said Mahoney, a soft-spoken woman who lived in the two-bedroom apartment with her ill mother, her son and her sister's two children. PHA plumbers had come in to fix the faucet, but it didn't stay fixed. The only way to shut the water off was by going to the apartment next door, where there was a valve that controlled water flow in both apartments.

When asked about Mahoney's complaints, Sigmund Porter, the project's manager, said he was not familiar with them. But he said that plumbing problems have been so numerous at Southwark, and sometimes the same problems have had to be repaired so many times, that plasterers have not been able to keep up with demand. Many of the holes in people's walls were left by repairmen, he said.

Much of the repair work at Southwark is of shoddy quality, performed by incompetent workers who owe their jobs to political connections, said John Holmes, who was the maintenance superintendent until late March. He said that neither school credits nor ability have ever been the determining factors in who got hired or promoted. "Most of them go through their politicians" to get jobs, said Holmes, who said that a superior once ordered him, against his will, to promote an incompetent but politically well-connected employee.

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Philadelphia Cultural Alliance. He is also strongly in favor of the controversial Rouse & Associates proposal to build two towers taller than William Penn's hat atop City Hall. He says it is time for Philadelphia to move ahead, take some risks. He makes a strong argument in favor of Rouse's proposal, but it is not an entirely disinterested one: Rouse is also the developer of the Society Hill Sheraton Hotel, to be built across the street from Poses' City Bites.

ARCHITECT BRONSTEIN has known Steve Poses since long before Frog. Bronstein and his wife rented an apartment to Poses, who was still working at La Panetiere ("he'd bring home incredible leftovers," Bronstein says). It was a little studio near 23d and Locust, and there was a sleeping loft above the kitchen. Poses used to try out recipes on the Bronsteins, and they all became the best of friends.

"When we put the first Frog together, I helped him more as a friend than as a professional architect," Bronstein remembers. "And my wife and I each worked there for a while — doing a shift as host or hostess."

The architect tells a story about how the Commissary came to be: "Steven was trying for about a year to locate a place to open a second restaurant. We looked for a while at a space in the Academy House, and we looked at a few other spaces. Finally — this was in the second year of my practice — I was on a long camping trip with my family, and he located the Sansom Street space for the Commissary. And when my wife called her parents one day, there was a message that I should call Steve Poses, that he had to reach me. So I called him and he said, 'I've found this building, and I need you to come back and do it.' And I said, 'I can't. I'm camping and I'm not coming back for six weeks.'"

So Bronstein suggested that Poses gather up some notebooks, pencils, scales, triangles, some reference books, and he made arrangements to pick up Poses at the airport in Charlotte, N.C.

"For two days he camped out with us," Bronstein says. "He and I worked on a picnic table while the family was out carousing around. And we came up with the basics of the Commissary out there — in this place called King Mountain, N.C., I think. And he came home and did the initial drawings himself, based on what we did there in the mountains. The drawings were good enough to get financing together, and then, by that time, I came home and actually did the working design."

Of the projects that Poses and Bronstein have collaborated on, City Bites is unarguably the most unusual, costing some \$300,000. Inspired in part by the Australian new wave flick *Starstruck*, in part by Los Angeles restaurants such as Wolfgang Puck's Spago, it is a brazenly garish place, cluttered with erotic Rafael Ferrer sculptures, New York graffiti art,

Poses directed Bronstein to conceive of it not as restaurant design but as theater design. City Bites was to be a stage set, with waiters and waitresses, in stylized punk garb, dressing the part.

It also turned out to be the only Poses restaurant that was not an immediate hit. During the winter months after its opening, City Bites was the backdrop for an empty stage. In June, the restaurant purged almost the entire staff.

"Initially, I think we were a little too far out," Poses says about the rocky early going. "I mean, I knew it was going to be unusual for Philadelphia, and I wanted to do that. I was bored... As smart as we are, as experienced as we are, I've probably learned as much about the restaurant business in the last six months struggling through City Bites than in the previous 11 years. It's been hard."

With City Bites, perhaps Poses forgot his "three Ls" ("location, location, location") or perhaps he just overestimated the foot traffic in the area. Either way, he says the experience has brought home to him the idea that "in this business, you're only as good as your last meal." In an effort to lure more customers, he has brought in a new general manager, modified the restaurant's decor, started featuring live music, opened an outdoor terrace cafe and instituted some menu changes — "just some remerchandizing and tailoring."

"I feel terrific about it now," he says. "I think City Bites will come to occupy its place next to Frog, Commissary and 16th Street as sort of institutions in the Philadelphia restaurant landscape."

Ah, *landscape*. Paul Roller sees that word as a key to Steve Poses. "I think that in many ways, Steven has always been a frustrated architect. And sometimes I think he views restaurants more as architecture than sustenance, although some would argue that architecture is sustenance. He probably would argue that. Certainly, we're involved in something that is theater, and the set is important. But still, if the playwright isn't careful in his craft, if the dialogue is nil, you can't come away whistling the props."

What's next for the one-time boy wonder? How does he keep himself interested in it all, keep it vital?

Well, Poses says he's beginning to "rethink" the Commissary, that the concept is seven years old, that he wants to "tinker" with it. Maybe make it more like a food court, with lots of different counters, different types of cuisine.

"My objective is to embark on a redesign of it that makes the Commissary in 1985 as much of a breakthrough as it was in 1977," he says.

Why mess with a good thing? Says Poses: "To keep it fun. Sometimes I ask myself if this is something I want to do for the rest of my life, and there isn't an answer to that, really. I enjoy it, and I get a lot of satisfaction out of it. Sometimes, some of the fun goes out of it, and that's when I question it, but then it's also a time in which I say, 'OK, how can I bring more fun back to it?' Then it gets fun again, satisfying." □

super-short, satiny robe for Hot Chocolate, a dark vest and pants for Mr. Unique. Then they emerged, one at a time, to strip to the driving funk and R&B accompaniment.

The women had looked forward to this show all week. Partly, it was that the two dancers were old favorites. But there was another reason, too: For all the crime, the filth, the grief and fear and shame of living in one of Philadelphia's worst federally subsidized slums, the single most universally oppressive aspect of life for these women — far and away — is dullness.

Since most of the female tenants are unemployed, they have a lot of free time to kill. On any weekday, a visitor to the projects would likely find

In the hallway, a young man dipped out the powdery substance, put it to his nose and snorted. In the speak-easy, the strip show was about to begin . . .

women gathered in this room, arguing heatedly among themselves about anything or nothing. Or they'd be sitting silently for long stretches in each other's presence, with a television and a phonograph blaring simultaneously, competing for their jaded attention.

The rhythm of life in the projects is determined not so much by the funk and rap music that throbs from the radios, but by daytime television. PHA managers say they can tell the time of day by the level of activity on the grounds and by the number of complaints they get in the office.

"At a certain time of day we expect a rush [of complaints]," said PHA area manager Dennis Kirkland. "It comes when they get the kids off to school, and there's nothing else to do. When the stories [soap operas] come on, it lulls. When the stories go off, it starts up again."

"It's really dull living here in this building," said the woman who runs the speak-easy. Of her friends, who spend their days in her apartment, she said, "This is all they do all day. We could be putting this energy to work, you know. . . . All this energy is going to waste."

About three years ago, some of that energy had been channeled for a short while into something more constructive — a tenants' organization that had filed a lawsuit to force the PHA to improve conditions. The women had also held cleanup campaigns and operated the elevators during the day to keep youths from vandalizing them.

The group had first coalesced in December 1981, during the most traumatic winter in recent memory for the residents of the 1000 Building. Freezing temperatures caused pipes to burst in the high-rise, and that in turn caused flooding throughout the building.

Residents had trouble getting either the city Water Department or the PHA maintenance workers to shut off the water. "So we bent the elevator doors so the water could run down the shaft," said the speak-easy owner.

"There was ice in the hallways and all up the steps," she said. Water also froze on the elevator cables, so the elevators wouldn't work for weeks after the flooding stopped. The only way for residents to reach their apartments was by climbing the treacherous, ice-covered stairs.

oper about a year. Eventually, they stopped pushing management to make improvements, stopped regularly mopping the hallways, stopped operating the elevators. "We stopped; then the building got back like it was," said one woman.

open case where the strip show was about to begin, a young man took out a marijuana cigarette. He dipped one end into a small, plastic bag containing a powdery substance, then stuck it into his nose and snorted. His face and body

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