

1987–present

West Philadelphia Landscape Project

**Model of
Best Practice,
"Imagining America:
Scholars and
Artists in Public
Life,"** White House
Millennium Council,
1999

**Model of
community-based
planning efforts,**
National Housing
Institute, 2000

**Model project for
ecology, history,
and design,** Harvard
University, Institute
for Cultural Landscape
Studies, 2004

**Community
Service Award,
American Society
of Landscape
Architects,** 2004

**Model for a
"fully integrated,
comprehensive
approach,"** Innovative
Designs for Education,
NYU's Institute for Civil
Infrastructure Systems,
2004

"[Spin] became a local hero, educator, leader of change, communicator, and a connector of people from all walks of life — taking her vision and making it a reality in the lives of residents, students, the design community, and government ... It was through her groundbreaking work that the City of Philadelphia can now boast being the Greenest City in America ... leading the effort to green America's cities through programs like our Green City, Clean Waters initiative."

HOWARD NEUKRUG, Commissioner, Philadelphia Water Department

The West Philadelphia Landscape Project (WPLP) is a landmark of urban design and design education, environmental sustainability, and community engagement. WPLP built real projects in partnership with community residents. It inspired middle schoolers to design changes to their neighborhood and taught them HTML in order to tell their story on the Internet. It transformed their chronically failing school. It forged relationships between inner-city kids and privileged university students. And it started a chain of events that contributed to a revolution in water-quality management represented by Philadelphia's billion-dollar "green" infrastructure project. All this was the product of design thinking.

Uniquely valuable is WPLP's engagement over 26 years with a single place, the Mill Creek watershed and neighborhood. Known as "The Bottom," the neighborhood is one of many such "Black Bottoms" in the U.S. They are at the bottom, economically, socially, and topographically. Here, harsh socio-economic conditions and racial discrimination are exacerbated by health and safety hazards posed by a high water table and unstable ground. Teaching landscape literacy, which entails both understanding the world and transforming it, has been a means for recognizing and redressing those injustices, just as verbal literacy was a cornerstone of the American civil rights movement of the 50s and 60s. Literacy in landscape enabled youth to read the environmental, social, economic, and political stories embedded in their local landscape and gave them a way to design new stories, to envision how to transform their neighborhood.

WPLP has designed and built dozens of community gardens on vacant blocks, which have enhanced life and stimulated tangible community development; some have won awards.

WPLP has been recognized internationally, nationally, and locally. It has been featured in newspaper articles, professional journals, national radio and television broadcasts, and international conferences and symposia, including a 1999 meeting at the White House.

WPLP's Mill Creek Project, an environmental design curriculum, transformed a middle school that was considered one of the worst in the city. Our teaching partners have founded similar projects in other schools, and the curriculum has inspired schools around the U.S. and abroad.

WPLP's pioneering digital database, created in the 1980s, helped push Philadelphia to create a Geographic Information System (GIS) database for the entire city. The City hired a former WPLP research assistant to help lead this effort.

WPLP has pioneered the use of the Internet for planning, implementation, and education. The first WPLP website was launched in early 1996 and won seven awards for design excellence. The site has received millions of visits from more than 90 countries.

WPLP has no client in the conventional sense. We work with partners who wish to collaborate—community gardeners, teachers and children, public officials—and make the results freely available.

PRINCIPAL PARTNERS

Philadelphia Water Department (1999–present)
 Aspen Farms Community Garden (1988–present)
 Sulzberger Middle School (1995–2002)
 Mill Creek Coalition (1998–2000)
 Philadelphia Green (1987–1991)

SPONSORS

University of Pennsylvania, Netter Center for Community Partnerships
 Massachusetts Institute of Technology
 J.N. Pew Charitable Trust
 Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars
 Ford Foundation
 Philadelphia Urban Resources Partnership
 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
 Kellogg Foundation
 John Simon Guggenheim Foundation

Model for how environmental history can demonstrate how the urban environment affects and shapes city life,

Environmental History, 2005

Model for applying Internet-based learning activities for K-12 classrooms, American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2004

Person of the Month, Philadelphia School District, November 1998



Screenshots from the WPLP home page at www.wplp.net.

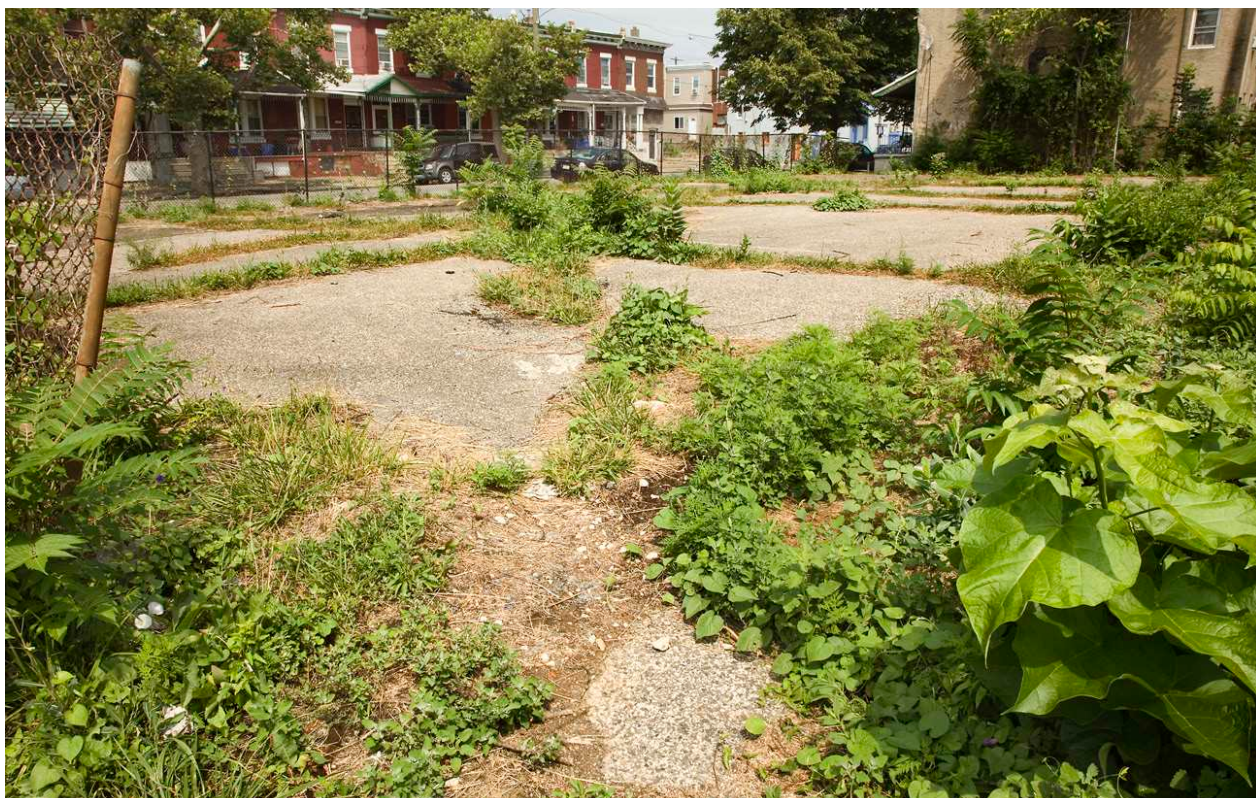


"This project [WPLP] demonstrates the links between environmental issues, education and heritage, and is a model for Ottawa as it seeks to comprehensively implement a "green city" strategy."

CITY OF OTTAWA, Canada, Growth Management Plan (2003)

"The West Philadelphia Landscape Project [is] one of the most extraordinary projects of 'social design' of the last two decades."

ROBERT FISHMAN, Professor of Urban Planning and Design, University of Michigan



Design Opportunities: Buried Floodplains and Vacant Land

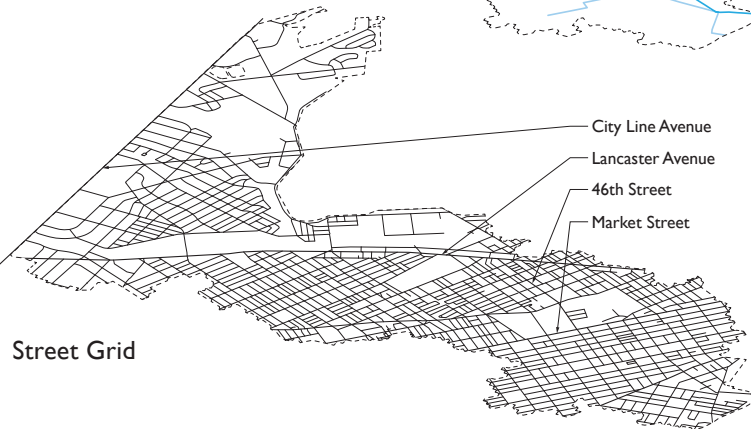
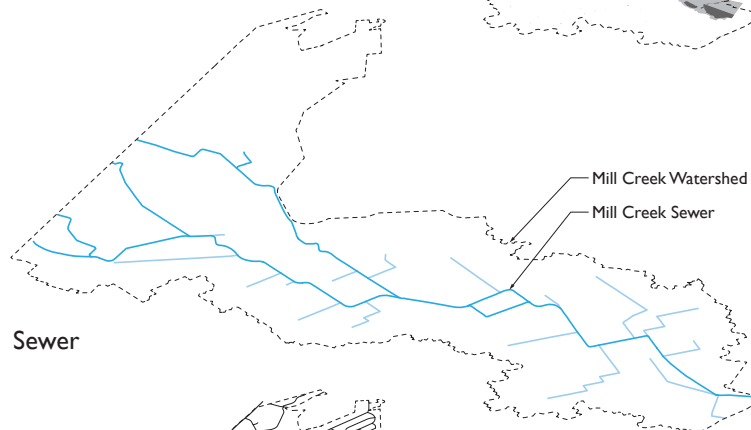
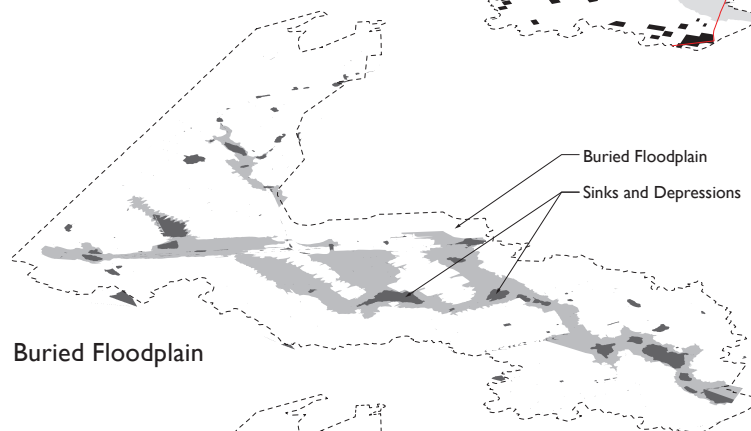
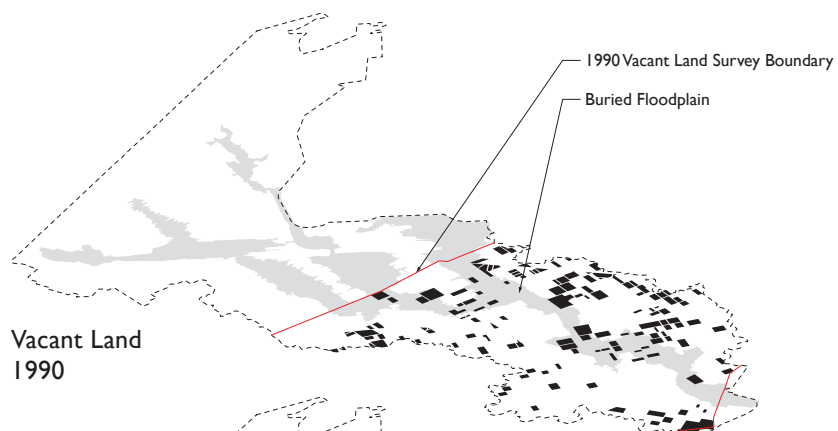
Much vacant land in West Philadelphia lies on the buried floodplain of Mill Creek, a correlation common to many other cities, including Boston, where I first discovered the phenomenon. The Mill Creek once drained two-thirds of West Philadelphia. Now, buried in a sewer, it carries all the stormwater and sanitary sewage from that area. Like most older U.S. cities, Philadelphia has a combined sanitary and storm sewer system, which overflows into rivers and streams after heavy rainfall and produces a flow that exceeds the capacity of sewage treatment plants. Since 1987, WPLP has demonstrated how a “green” infrastructure could use vacant land to hold stormwater in landscape projects that simultaneously restore water quality (by reducing combined sewer overflows) and rebuild neighborhoods.

First with hand-drawn maps in 1987–1988, then with digital maps, we analyzed the Mill Creek watershed, its topography and drainage, sewer system, and vacant land, as well as its land use and demographics.

Since 1987, WPLP has identified concentration of vacant land in valley bottoms as an opportunity to restore natural systems and rebuild inner-city communities.

Above Vacant land on the buried floodplain.

Right Mapping the Mill Creek watershed. During WPLP’s first phase (1987–1991), the focus was on the southern section and included territory outside the watershed.





Work with Aspen Farms Community Garden, which is on the buried floodplain of Mill Creek, has spanned 30 years.

Left Aspen Farms (1990) after construction of redesign.

Right Aspen Farms, before (1988); Student's redesign proposal (1988); Aspen Farms as an outdoor classroom (1997, 1998); Students propose new additions (1998); MIT students at Aspen (2010).

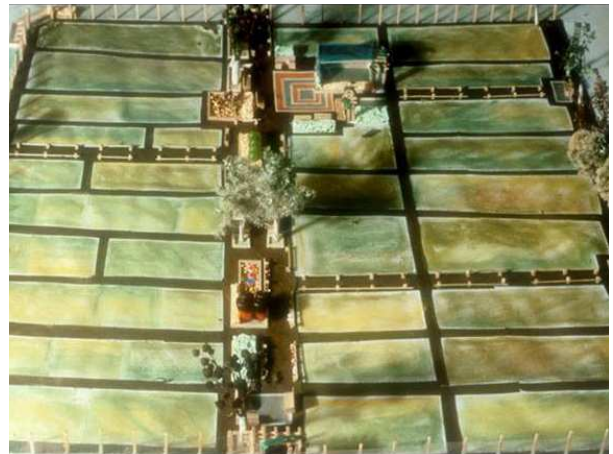
Designing Frameworks for Action

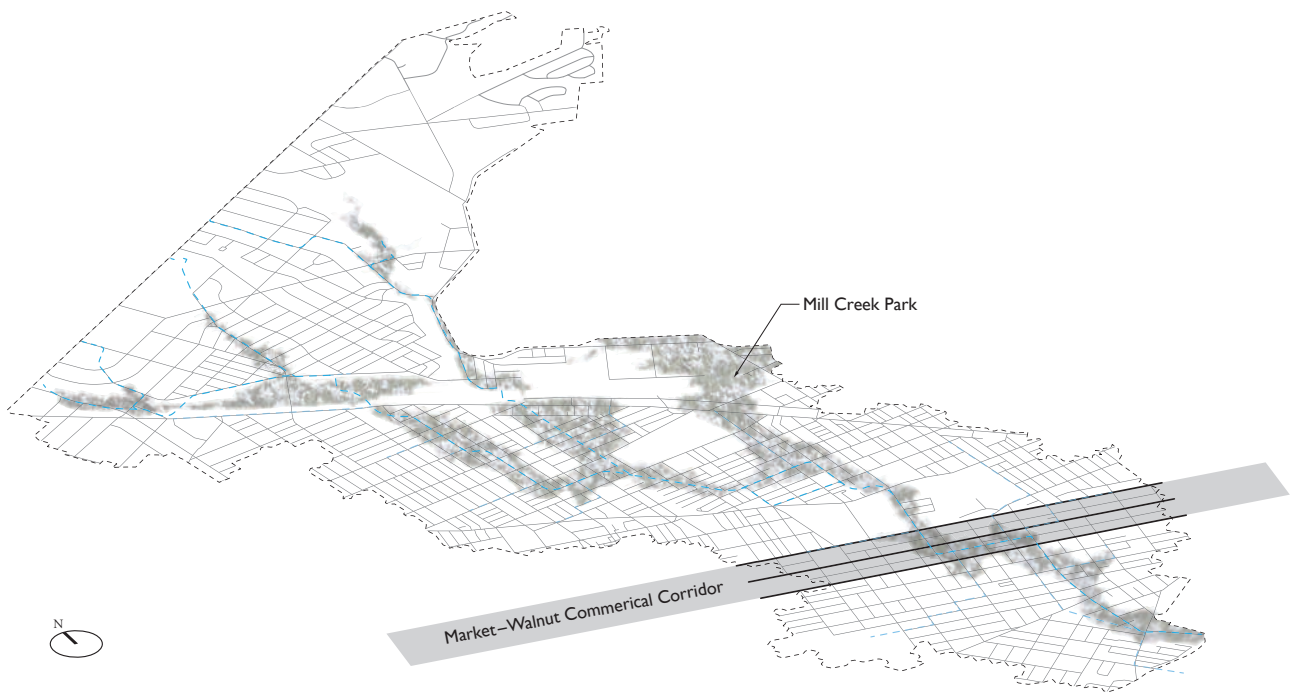
From the very beginning of the project, design and construction have gone hand in hand with mapping and planning. From 1987–1991, WPLP designed and built dozens of community gardens as models for how to build a sense of community and how to approach the design of larger neighborhoods. Many were catalysts for community development and many of these gardens survive today. Design had a strong influence on survival. The most successful designs were those that offered an open structure, which invited people to embellish. This approach has informed WPLP's design work since 1988.

These models of success have evolved over the past quarter century, within the frameworks we designed. One community garden, Aspen Farms, has been at the heart of WPLP's work since 1988. That year, the task was to incorporate a meeting place for a garden for fifty people without displacing anyone. One student's design, built in 1989, features a "Main Street" created by shaving off a few feet from many garden plots along the central path. The design made Aspen Farms a neighborhood showpiece and provided a framework that accommodates change.

From 1994–2002, as part of WPLP's Mill Creek Project, Aspen Farms served as an outdoor classroom for a Sulzberger Middle School, which is down the street. In the late 1990s, my students designed and built a new water garden and outdoor classroom for the middle school.

The partnership between Aspen Farms, the middle school, and WPLP was the subject of a TV special on NBC Nightly News.





The *West Philadelphia Landscape Plan: A Framework for Action* (1991) combines a top-down (comprehensive) and bottom-up (grassroots) approach. It does not prescribe a particular method or outcome, but is instead an open-ended guide that identifies opportunities for change and potential actors. Like the Main Street of Aspen Farms, it is meant to be filled in by the actions of a host of individuals, groups, and public agencies.

At the heart of this design framework is the buried floodplain of Mill Creek, to be designated as “Mill Creek Park,” a special district in which low-lying vacant land would be used to hold stormwater. It would not be a traditional park, however; some vacant land could be redeveloped for commercial uses. The design also calls for revealing and celebrating the presence of the buried creek.

The Walnut–Market Corridor, which includes the main east-west traffic arteries, is the second part of the framework. In 1991, this corridor was full of vacant land, and portions still are. Other parts of the proposal include: The Urban Forest, Redesigning Small Neighborhoods, and a Digital Data Center.

WPLP proposals inspired changes in public policy and led to new opportunities for urban environmental planning and landscape design.

Above A framework for action: Mill Creek Park and the Market-Walnut Corridor.

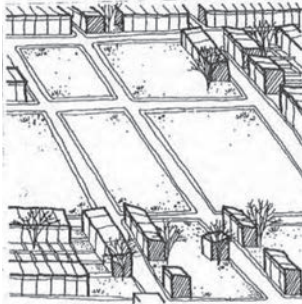
The proposed “plan” is a framework for action, which invites participatory improvisations by diverse actors, from individuals to public agencies. The plan is therefore presented in diagrams and a fictional text.

Right Proposal for Mill Creek Park (1991).

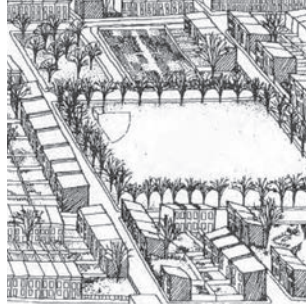
Following pages Proposals for the Market-Walnut Corridor and The Urban Forest (1991).

Mill Creek Park

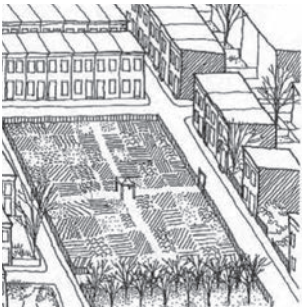
1. Vacant blocks in the floodplain
2. Vacant blocks in the floodplain reclaimed for community gardens, orchard, and playfield
3. Outdoor market and community garden in the floodplain
4. Flood control and park



1



2



3



4

From *The WPLP—A Vision for the Future* (1991)

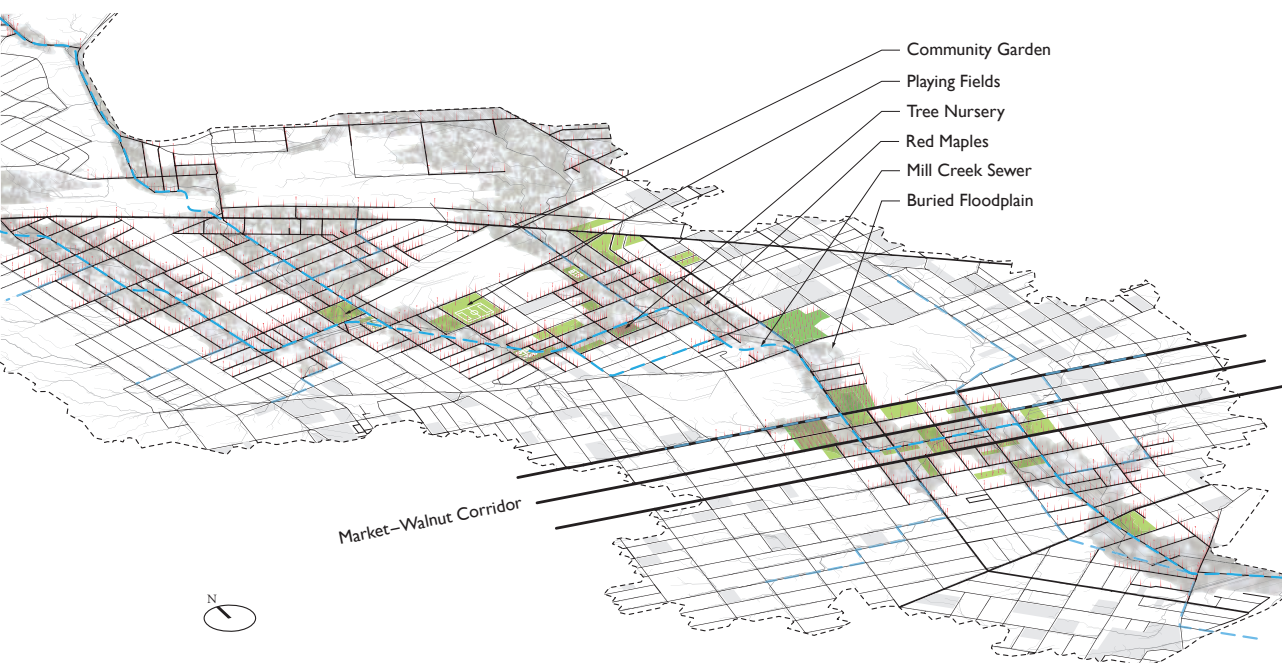
Mill Creek Park flows across West Philadelphia, winding its way through several neighborhoods, from the Mill Creek neighborhood on the north, through the Market Walnut Corridor to Spruce Hill, and along West Shore.

Every schoolchild knows the story of Mill Creek and the Park. How the creek once flowed on the land, and how it was then buried in a sewer and built upon. How the force of the creek's waters broke through the sewer and flooded basements, crumbled foundations, and caved in streets. How the land above the sewer became open once again, a gash of vacant land, trashed and abandoned. How Mill Creek Park was built and how rain now runs off rooftops, streets, and sidewalks into ponds in the park. How these ponds hold the water and slow its passage to the sewer, the treatment plant, and the river. Every schoolchild knows the connection between park and river.

At first glance, Mill Creek Park does not seem like a single park at all, but many disconnected bits of local open space (ballcourts, playgrounds, playfields, community gardens) and businesses (garden centers, tree nurseries and permeable parking lots). The thread that connects the whole—Mill Creek—flows beneath streets and park through an enormous, underground sewer.

In early spring, carpets of blue scilla bloom in grass and groves throughout the park. Red maples with their haze of red flowers in spring and scarlet leaves in fall and sycamores with their white trunks, grow in the damp soil of the old floodplain.

The character of each part of the park reflects the needs and values of residents in adjacent neighborhoods.



The Market-Walnut Corridor

From *The WPLP—A Vision for the Future* (1991)

After many years of planning and waiting, new buildings are being constructed in the Walnut–Market Corridor. The “renewal” promises jobs and educational opportunities for West Philadelphia. This was a long time in the making. During all those years, the “temporary” landscape established in the early 1990s grew and matured into an attractive setting that drew private investment. The new buildings were designed to fit within that landscape.

Double rows of trees were planted along the sidewalks on most vacant lots, and the interiors were planted in lawns, cloverfields, and meadows.

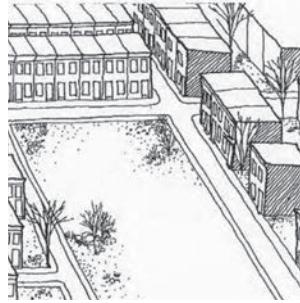
Another large lot was planted with a grid of small trees—a nursery for street trees. Every three to five years, the trees are transplanted to city streets and replanted with new trees. All this created a landscape framework for future redevelopment.

The Mill Creek Garden Center and Nursery occupies several large properties between 42nd and 47th Streets. The main retail center is designed like a garden; this is where the flowers, vegetables, and garden supplies are displayed and sold. Small trees and shrubs are in outlying lots nearby.

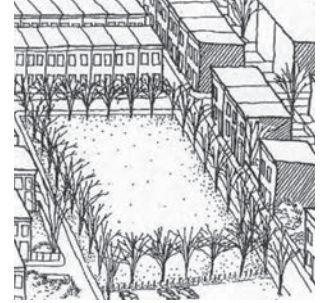
The Art Folk Park is a large, open meadow, visible from passing cars and buses, where artists construct and display their works. The works change continually. There is no formal selection process.... Many of the works are quite whimsical; others are more serious.

The Market–Walnut Corridor is recognized nationally as a model for attracting reinvestment and guiding long-term community development.

1. Vacant block
2. Vacant block reclaimed temporarily for playfield
3. Nursery for street trees
4. Landscaped parking lot



1



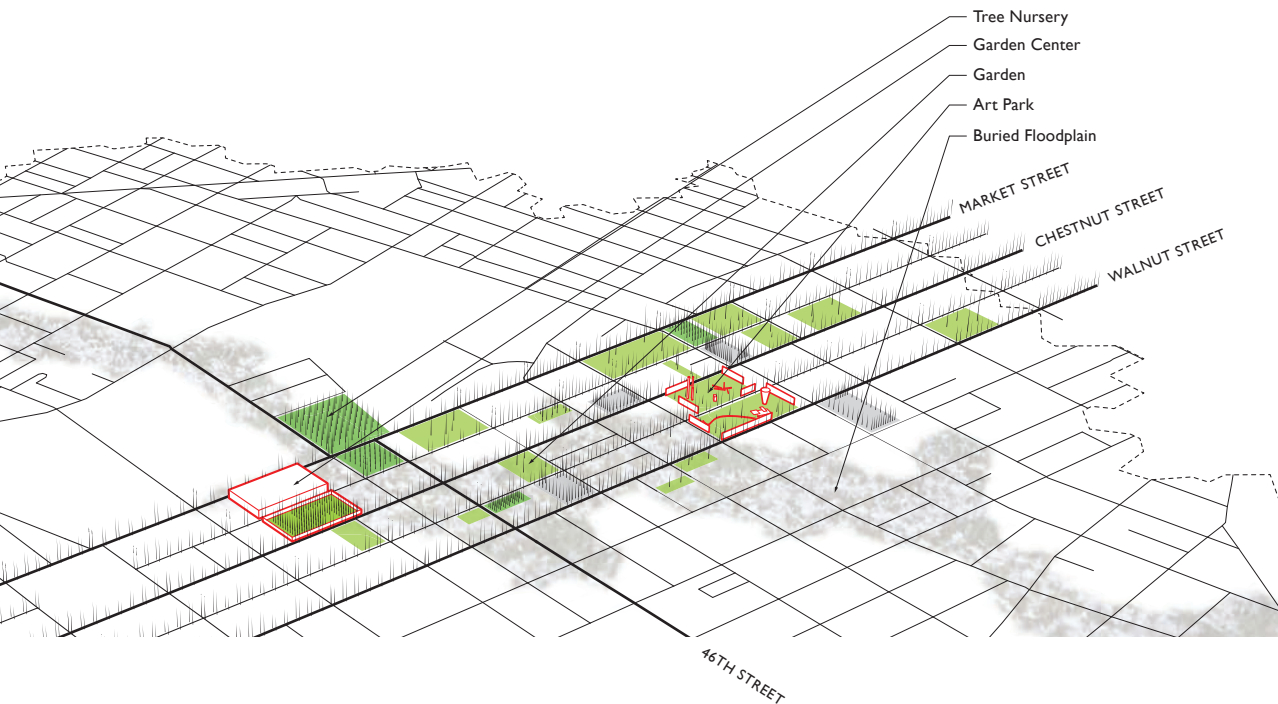
2



3



4



The Urban Forest

1. A block of rowhouses with street trees
2. A block of rowhouses with street trees
3. Playfield, trees, and parking
4. A nursery for street trees



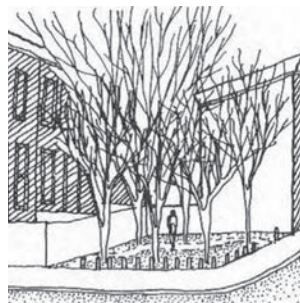
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From *The WPLP—A Vision for the Future* (1991)

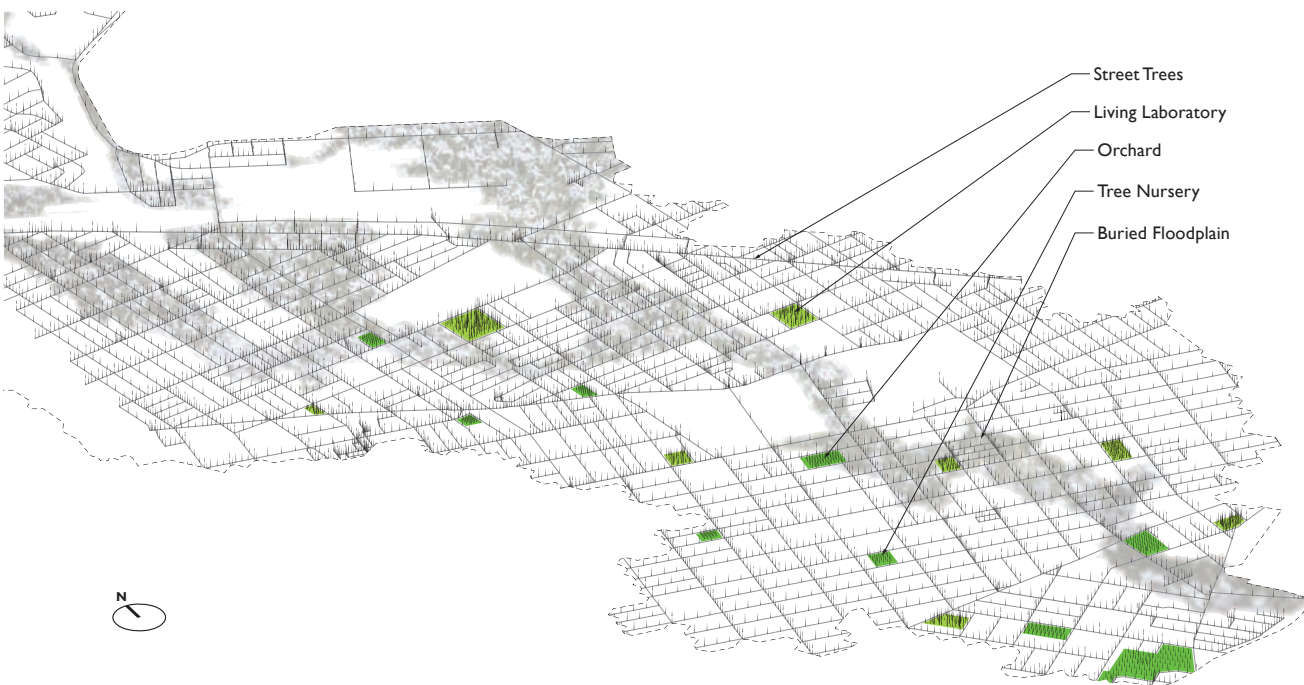
From the air, much of West Philadelphia looks like an urban forest. On the ground, Spruce, Walnut, and Chestnut Streets are shady, green corridors through which traffic flows. Off the major streets, within the neighborhoods, a massive reforestation has occurred. Even the narrowest streets are planted with trees. The new trees have made an enormous difference to comfort on streets and in homes on summer afternoons and evenings. The sound of traffic seems softer.

The new trees for West Philadelphia streets were grown right in the neighborhood on large, open lots. The trees start out as small whips, densely planted, and the weaker trees are thinned out as they grow to make room for the more vigorous. Every three to five years, the trees are transplanted to city streets and parks, and a new cycle of planting begins again.

Many West Philadelphia schools have living laboratories—successional meadows and wooded groves that the children care for and study as part of their science class.

There are groves of fruit trees on other formerly vacant properties. Apple Day is now celebrated every year on a summer Sunday; a day when the apples are ripe and everyone comes to pick their own.

West Philadelphia has been the focus of a twenty-year study on the effects of trees on urban microclimate. The Urban Forestry Project has brought international attention to West Philadelphia. The dramatic aesthetic results of the forestation program prompted many other cities to imitate it even before the results of the microclimate study became known.



Redesigning Small Neighborhoods

From *The WPLP—A Vision for the Future* (1991)

Many neighborhoods in West Philadelphia look very different than they did a century ago or even a decade ago. There are now gardens, outdoor workshops, playlots, and small parking lots between houses on blocks of rowhouses where once there was no outdoor space at all besides the street, sidewalk, and porch, and where ten years ago trashed vacant lots formed gaping holes between houses. Trees now shade the sidewalks on most residential blocks, where sun once baked them like an oven every summer.

Walking or driving through neighborhoods north of Market Street, the visitor is struck by the diversity among the blocks, despite their basic similarity.

Community development started small and proceeded block by block. While the interest of most residents remained focussed on their own block, many individuals emerged who were interested in working to improve the larger neighborhood. This has produced a cadre of leaders who have been influential in a host of projects within their neighborhood, as well as in the larger West Philadelphia community.

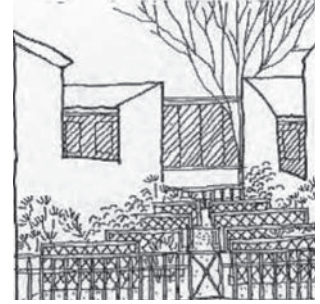
Changes to blocks range from the minimal—street trees and window boxes—to more extensive improvements—new houses, gardens, or parking lots on former vacant lots.

The neighborhoods south of Market Street don't look much different than they did tell years ago. They have received a more subtle renewal.

1. New houses
2. New gardens
3. Shady streets make new meeting and sitting spaces
4. A neighborhood reshaped for different uses: new houses, private gardens, community gardens, meeting places, playlots, offstreet parking, and orchards



1



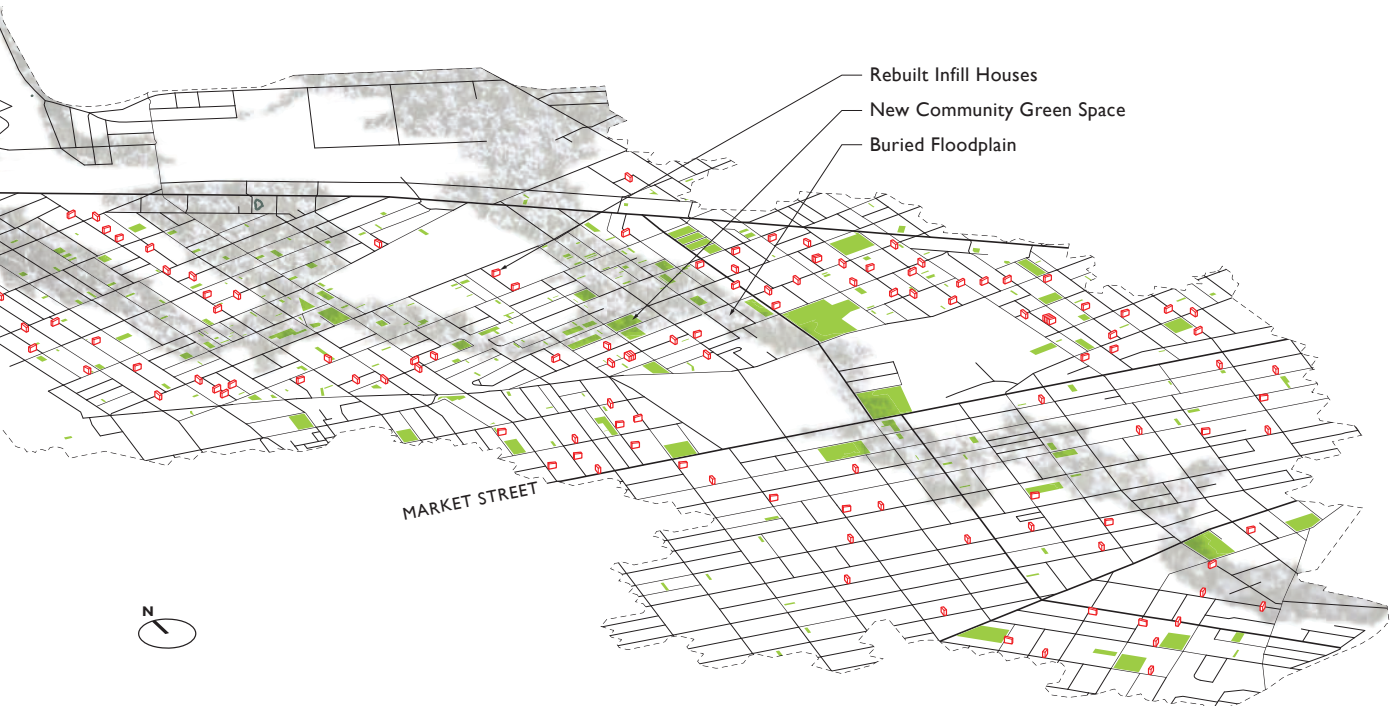
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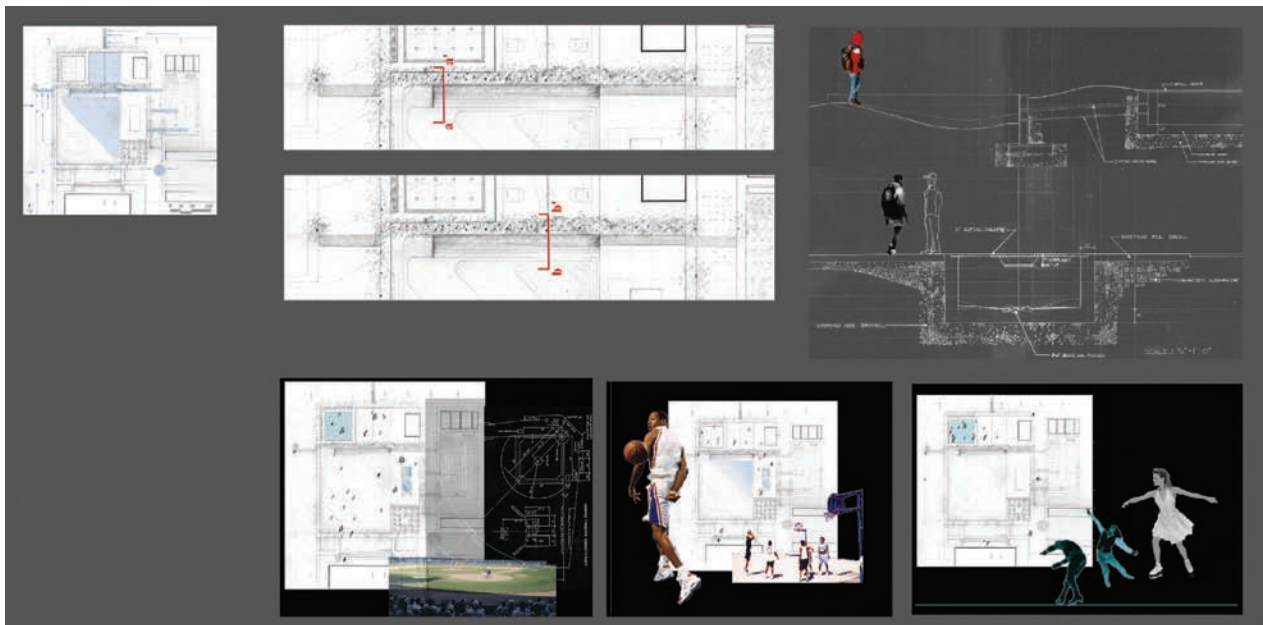


3



4





Left Proposal for Redesigning Urban Neighborhoods (1991).

My courses are designed to produce work that provokes public debate and informs actions by public agencies.

Above Penn students' designs by Eric Husta and Steve Sattler (1996). These designs were among dozens that explored how the urban drainage system could be redesigned to capture and detain storm water on vacant land in the buried floodplain in projects that also rebuild community.

Following pages MIT students' designs for the Mill Creek Watershed (2010). These designs were among many that verified the feasibility of the City's plan to capture the first inch of rainfall and prevent it from entering the sewer.

WPLP continues to design within this framework for action. What would Mill Creek Park be like? What about a water garden that is also an outdoor classroom and a stormwater detention basin? How can we design a process by which such projects can be supported, designed, built, and sustained over time? Hundreds of students in my classes at the University of Pennsylvania and MIT have designed answers to these questions over the past 25 years.

These classes challenge students to be pragmatic visionaries: grounded in an understanding of people, place, and politics, yet never losing sight of visions of what might be. Students' proposals range from detailed designs to strategic landscape plans. Working in a real neighborhood with real people on a real project, they put theory into practice, and some of their designs have been built.

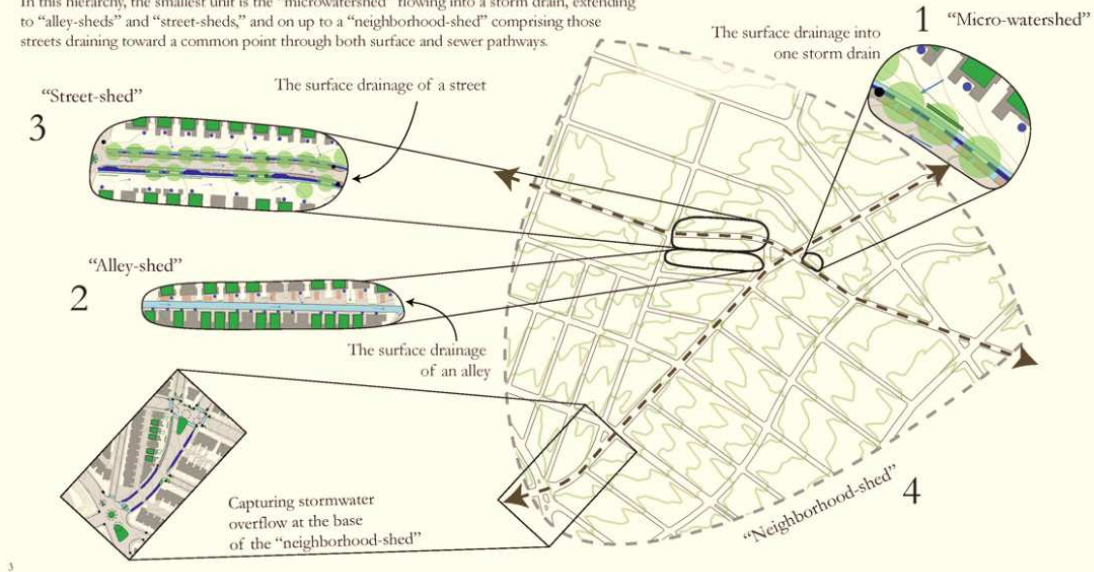
Starting in fall 1996, all student work is presented online and archived and featured on the WPLP website. Students' design proposals have been viewed by thousands of visitors to the website, and they helped persuade public officials and community residents that it is feasible to redesign and rebuild the existing urban drainage system so that it is functional, economical, and beautiful.

Watershed “Order” in the Wynnefield-Overbrook Neighborhood:

An Analogy to Stream Order Classifications*

Applying the concept of nested watersheds at the neighborhood scale, we identify and rank “-sheds” using a classification scheme inspired by stream order classifications in hydrology. In this hierarchy, the smallest unit is the “micro-watershed” flowing into a storm drain, extending to “alley-sheds” and “street-sheds,” and on up to a “neighborhood-shed” comprising those streets draining toward a common point through both surface and sewer pathways.

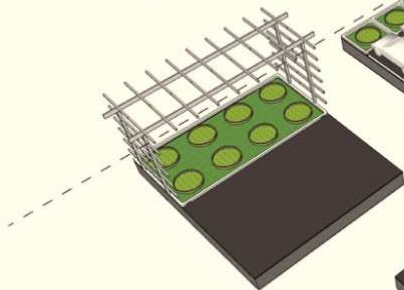
*See Ward, D’Ambrosio, and Mecklenburg, 2008, “Stream Classification,” The Ohio State University Extension. Available at: <http://ohioline.osu.edu/aex-fact/pdf/AEX44501StreamClassification.pdf>



Creating Community Care and Conforming to Code

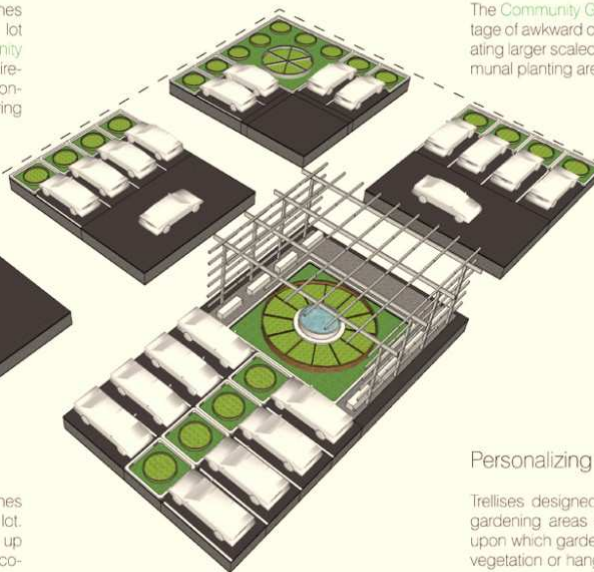
Parking Lot Edge Condition

Philadelphia Parking Design Guidelines require a 6' vegetated buffer where a lot meets a residential parcel. The Community Green BMP takes advantage of this requirement to create a parking lot edge that sponsors a sense of ownership while capturing stormwater runoff.



Parking Lot Interior Condition

Philadelphia Parking Design Guidelines require a 10% vegetated interior for each lot. Here, the Community Green BMP scales up to become a shared garden space to accommodate double-loaded, gardenless spots.



Parking Lot Corner Condition

The Community Green BMP takes advantage of awkward corner conditions by creating larger scaled garden rings and communal planting areas.

Personalizing the Parking Lot

Trellises designed to buffer seating and gardening areas also offer a framework upon which gardeners can grow hanging vegetation or hang tools / personal items.

CONCEPT

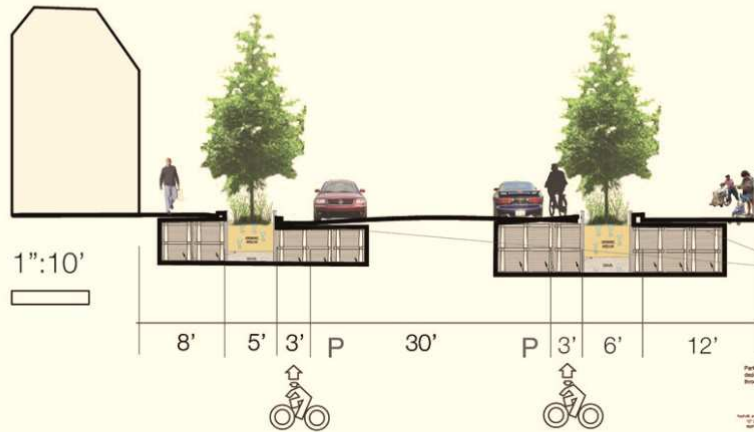
BMP DESIGN

IMPLEMENTATION

DEMO PROJECTS

IMPLEMENTATION I Phase 1 Street Detail

In the first stage, the city will repave the street, adding wide tree trenches that expand under the sidewalk and into the street. Pervious paving over the bike and parking lane will both allow water into the tree trench and marks the lanes.



The city would keep the travel lanes, but repave the parking, bike lanes and sidewalks in a permeable material. This would visually slow traffic, making streets safer for pedestrians and bicyclists.

Structures underground allow for uncompacted soil, promoting healthy street trees and providing space for water detention. Tree pits and trenches have flexible designs that can be adapted by institutions and residents.

1 City 2 Institutions 3 Residents



Underground structure allows for uncompacted soil and weight-bearing pavement

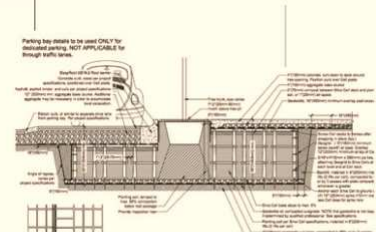


Diagram of the Silva Cell, by DeepRoot (www.deeproot.com)

4.214/11.314 WATER, LANDSCAPE AND URBAN DESIGN | DECEMBER, 2010 | STEPHANIE STERN & SHOKO TAKEMOTO



MILL CREEK WATERSHED - LANCASTER TRANSECT

Allison Hu & Florence Guiraud Doughty
Water, Landscape, & Urban Design Workshop
2010

Conceptual
View

A view conceptualizing a linear transformation of Lancaster Avenue, with a widened Northern pedestrian route, an elevated path, an embankment actively treating stormwater with the help of artists, strategic trenches, and a climatic approach toward the "Gratis"



The Mill Creek Project transformed a school, changed lives, and became a model for educational reform.

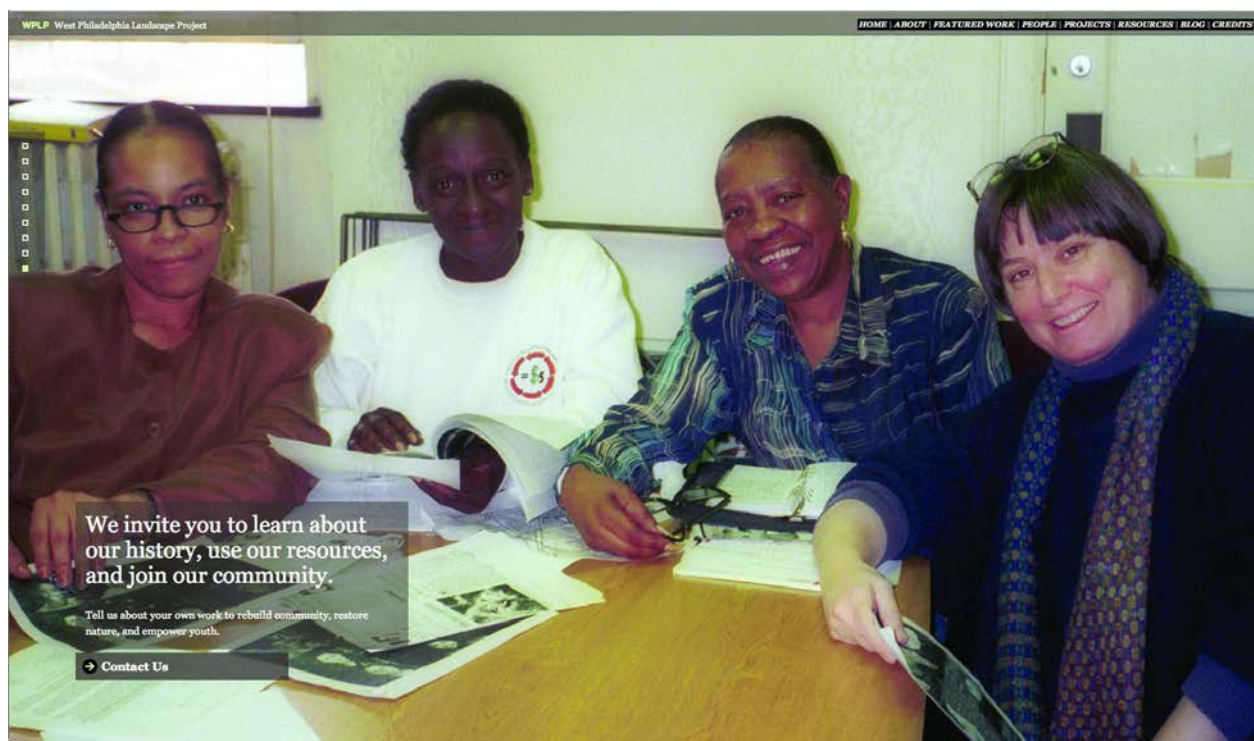
Above and right Middle school students learned how to read the landscape of their neighborhood, to understand how it came to be, and to envision designs for its future. They also learned HTML, which prepared some for future careers in Web design.

The Mill Creek Project: Environmental Design Curriculum

In 1994, confronted with skepticism about the existence and danger of Mill Creek's buried floodplain, I launched a program on landscape literacy and community development in partnership with a local middle school, where hundreds of 11–13 year-old children learned to read and tell the landscape of Mill Creek. They traced its past, deciphered its stories, and described their visions for its future. The tools they used were their own eyes and imagination, the place itself, and historical documents: maps, photographs, letters, and newspapers. The program had four parts: reading landscape, designing landscape change, building landscape improvements, and documenting these proposals and accomplishments on the Internet.

In 2012, I interviewed children (then 27 years old) and teachers from the middle-school. What they told me was revelatory. A girl told how it had led her from homelessness to a career in Web design. The teachers described how the project had transformed the entire school and their careers. These reflections are featured in a series of short multimedia videos for the Web.





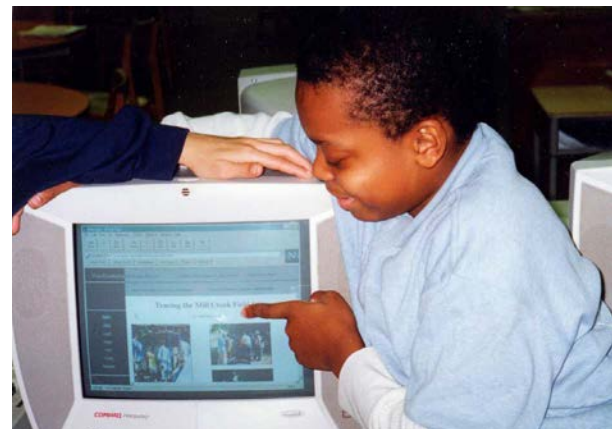
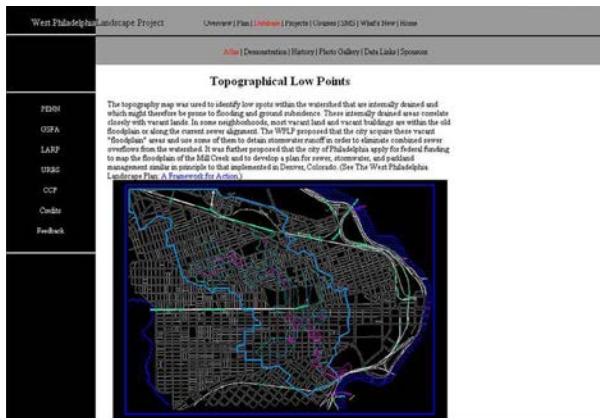
WPLP's Web Design: Another Framework for Action

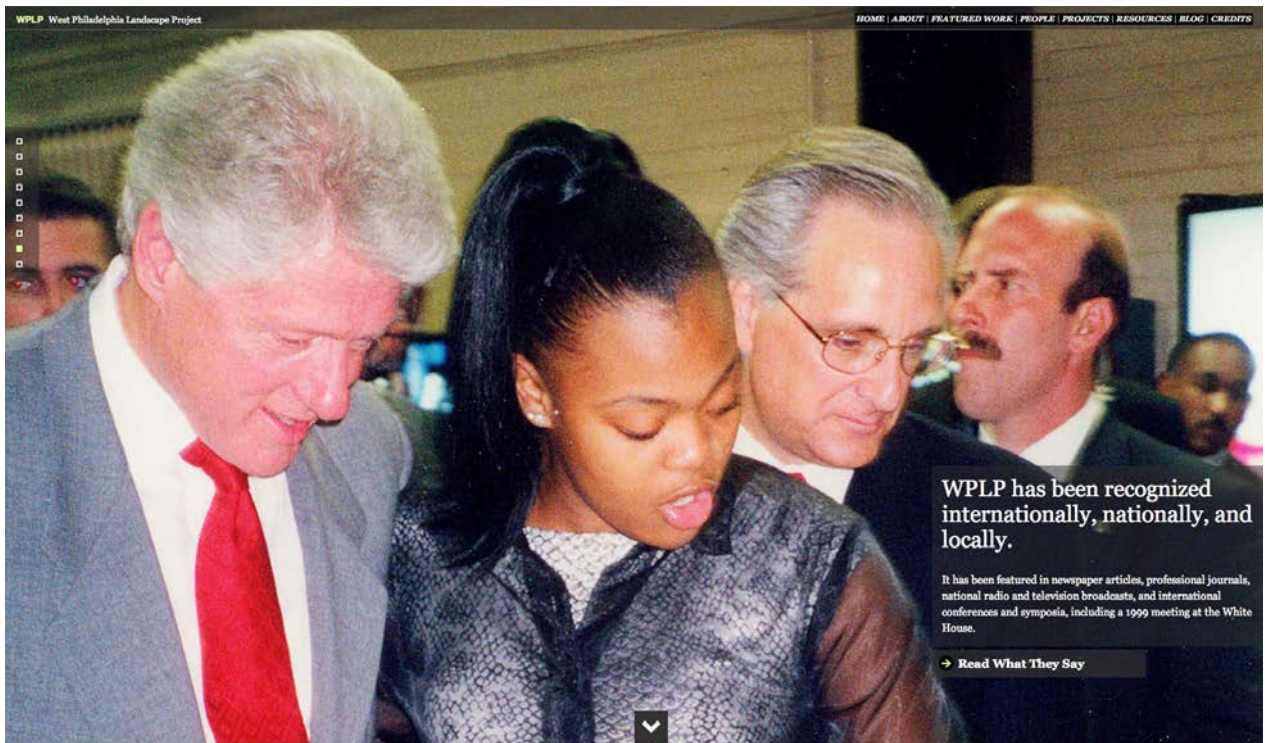
The Web has been an integral part of WPLP since early 1996, when our first website was launched. That first version featured my students' designs, a digital database, design reports, and built projects of 1987–1991. In 1997, it was enlarged to include the middle school students' website. Over the years, the website has evolved, and it continues to be a showcase and a forum (www.wplp.net). The WPLP website has received millions of visits from over 90 different countries since 1996, and has been a significant factor in WPLP's widespread impact. WPLP inspired a computer curriculum at the middle school, which introduced hundreds of children to Web authoring and computer programming, some of whom have gone on to a career in those areas. Web design can also be a framework for action.

WPLP pioneered the use of the Web in design, planning, education, and community development. Since 1996, millions of people from more than 90 countries have visited the WPLP website.

Above Screen shot from the WPLP home page (www.wplp.net).

Right WPLP website in 1997 (top), 2002 and 2008 (middle), from 1997–2002, middle-schoolers learned HTML and designed their own websites (bottom).





"This project [WPLP] brilliantly and uniquely integrated research, teaching, learning, and service in ways that resulted in benefits to scholarship, education, and improvement to communities. It is an exemplary model of how a place-based project can have wide applicability, as it works to solve a universal problem manifested in a local community."

IRA HARKAVY, Associate Vice President, University of Pennsylvania

"The West Philadelphia Landscape Project was twenty years ahead of its time: it anticipated today's concerns with urban water management, sustainability, and the relationship between physical and social infrastructure."

JANE WOLFF, Professor of Landscape Architecture, University of Toronto

"Anne Spirn's work is that of a visionary for a world where design allows people to occupy earth with care and love. Furthermore, her tireless dedication to education and community design has effectively promoted the enhancement of the quality of both environment and life."

ANNE VERNEZ MOUDON, Professor of Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and Urban Design and Planning, University of Washington



Above WPLP has been featured in international journals and national media, such as NBC Nightly News. Middle school students were invited to present their work as part of Governor Tom Ridge's Budget Speech on February 3, 1998.

Left In 2000, President Bill Clinton visited the middle school and learned about the Mill Creek Project.



“As a guide to a coherent, intricate and transformative approach to landscape architecture and urban design, Anne Whiston Spirn is a visionary of the first order whose innovative work on the ground has transformed and enhanced the quality of life in low-income urban neighborhoods in deep and lasting ways.”
CHARLOTTE KAHN, Boston Foundation

“While at Penn, ... [Spirn] constructed the intellectual gateway between McHargian Ecological Planning and what would later become known as Landscape Urbanism. The project most critical to this process was her West Philadelphia Project. This complex participatory action project showed how ecological systems not only underlie but erode and reshape cities through decay and economic impacts. Through it, she moved the department beyond mapping and reports to engaging communities in creating a future in which disparate and fragmented neighborhoods could meet their own needs while playing a role in creating a more robust urban ecosystem.”
KATHRYN GLEASON, Professor of Landscape Architecture, Cornell University

Dig These Gardens

Nature in the city is making a comeback, with the help of a few good friends.

By Ruth Eckdish Knack

Not so long ago, community gardeners were routinely dismissed in the same way that historic preservationists used to be—as “little old ladies in tennis shoes.” Yet this month, the Seattle city council is reviewing the draft of a new comprehensive plan whose land-use element considers community gardens as permanent open space. Like historic preservation, this movement is finally being taken seriously.

It's about time, says Anne Whiston Spirn. Spirn, a professor of landscape architecture and regional planning at the University of Pennsylvania, is one of a growing number of people around the country who are pointing to the importance of urban gardening as a community development tool.

Spirn is the movement's academic guru. In 1990 she and her students produced the West Philadelphia Landscape Plan, which is based on her work with community gardeners near the Penn campus,

where she has taught since 1986. “I'm interested in the gardens as a vehicle for reshaping entire neighborhoods,” she says.

Students in two of Spirn's studios analyzed local gardens and redesigned one, Aspen Farms, later carrying out the improvements. Their “greening project,” which concluded with a set of recommendations for the area, was undertaken in collaboration with Philadelphia Green, the community gardening group attached to the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, and the Organization and Management Group, which seeks to develop leadership capacity in low-income neighborhoods. The Pew Charitable Trusts provided grants totaling about \$750,000.



In the West Philadelphia Landscape Plan, Anne Spirn and her students proposed alternatives for reclaimed vacant land; here, an orchard on a vacant block. Below, Spirn is being interviewed in Aspen Farms by Steve Curwood, host of “Living on Earth” on National Public Radio.



“Anne's West Philadelphia Landscape Project is a classic effort to improve the relationship between nature and neighbourhood. She began by discovering that declining and abandoned homes in the area tended to follow the route of the former Mill Creek, a stream buried in the 19th century ... She then worked with local residents, middle school children, and the city to reclaim these lots for community gardens, open spaces and amenities, forming a green armature through the neighbourhood. After decades, her work not only transformed West Philadelphia, but also transformed hundreds of kids who learned to discover nature in the urban scene.” **DENNIS FRENCHMAN**, Professor of Urban Design, MIT

WPLP has been hailed by national and local media. Above, *Planning Magazine*. Right, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

“Deeply influenced by American Transcendentalism and Pragmatism, her insights are grounded in her work as a professional, especially in such projects as the West Philadelphia Landscape Project, which still is a model for similar efforts today to revive inner-city communities.”

REUBEN RAINEY, Emeritus Professor of Landscape Architecture, University of Virginia

The Philadelphia Inquirer

View

Sunday, November 15, 1992

The long-buried Mill Creek in West Philadelphia

CREEK from F1

of the fast-moving creek. Later, she and some of her students assisted in the design of a garden by residents of a block where the garages are inaccessible because the land has settled into the buried streambed. And she has determined that many of the areas of greatest housing vacancy in West Philadelphia are above the buried Mill Creek, which rises in Lower Merion and runs diagonally through the area, creating valleys near 47th and Fairmount and 43d and Walnut, then flows into the Schuylkill near 43d and Woodland.

"People in the neighborhood find the existence of Mill Creek and the problems it causes far more believable than people from the City Planning Commission, or developers or architects, or for that matter, anybody who doesn't live in the neighborhood," she said.

Mill Creek was one of many concerns of the West Philadelphia Landscape Plan, which was done by Spirn's department at Penn, with the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's Philadelphia Green program and the West Philadelphia Partnership, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. The project's most visible results to date are a series of community gardens and open spaces that were created with neighborhood groups, both as improvement projects in themselves and as ways to help people organize to improve neighborhoods.

It's worth emphasizing the literal grass-roots nature of this plan, which was highly collaborative and involved a great deal of listening to residents' ideas about what their neighborhoods ought to be. Having listened, the students who were involved helped people build things, and thus created successful examples of many of the approaches rec-

along and do something, while this plan contained the message that residents should define their goals and work to achieve them. Community gardening has a solid record of success throughout the country, and especially in Philadelphia. It fosters an energetic form of optimism.

This small-scale, person-to-person effort was supplemented by a level of thinking that is even rarer in most city planning — an analysis of the landscape of West Philadelphia as a whole. Mill Creek runs through the very heart of this concern, though the city has been built to suppress its reality.

Philadelphia is hardly unique in burying its rivers. Spirn, who taught at Harvard before coming to Penn, first became interested in the relationship between building vacancies and buried waterways in Boston. Nearly every 19th-century manufacturing city sought to suppress nature and maximize developable and taxable land. The trouble is that it doesn't quite work.

Now the industrial economy for which these areas were built is extinct, and desirable locations for both working and living tend to be gardenlike. It seems very worthwhile to take a look at whether this bit of nature that was buried more than a century ago might generate more wealth and happiness if its presence were recognized on the surface.

The West Philadelphia Landscape Plan does not see the Mill Creek watershed as a linear park like those along the Wissahickon and Pennypack Creeks. It does not recommend the radical step of moving Mill Creek out of its sewer. Instead, it argues that the buried river still exerts a strong impact along its path, and that, although no river is evident on

SURROUNDINGS

A long-buried creek in West Philadelphia

By Thomas Hine
INQUIRER ARCHITECTURE CRITIC

Most people probably don't think of Philadelphia as a landscape, but rather as a sprawling abstraction, a great expanse of graph paper made concrete. The monotony of Philadelphia is most evident when you drive through it, though it's easy even for the walker to believe that the city has no real topography — except in some oddball places such as Manayunk and Roxborough. Cyclists are more likely to think about Philadelphia as a place of hills and valleys; they can feel it in their calf muscles.

This featurelessness is an illusion. While Center City, South Philadelphia and the Northeast are a relatively flat coastal plain, the hills of West and Northwest Philadelphia signal the beginning of the piedmont. A boundary of continental scale slashes through the city, but the pattern of streets suppresses our

awareness of it.

For Anne Whiston Spirn, who chairs the department of landscape architecture and regional planning at the University of Pennsylvania, Mill Creek epitomizes the problem the city has understanding itself.

Mill Creek is one of the city's principal watercourses. It's probably not quite as large as Wissahickon Creek, in terms of the volume of water it carries, but its watershed does encompass most of West Philadelphia.

But if you're not familiar with Mill Creek, you're not alone. For most of its course, Mill Creek is invisible, channeled into an immense sewer.

Spirn recalls that when she was a student at Penn about 20 years ago, a piece of the street collapsed and she was able to look into the hole and get a view

See CREEK on F5

One proposal is to construct ponds to hold storm runoff above ground so that the water would flow more slowly into the sewer system. Now, after heavy storms, the rainwater overwhelms the city's treatment facilities, and results in the release of raw sewage into the Schuylkill. This idea has been successful in Denver, Spirn said.

Plantings of wetlands trees and bushes on the ground atop the buried creek would provide a subtle marking that would contrast with the vegetation found on higher ground in the neighborhood. This would be one part of the educational mission of the corridor, which would include elementary and secondary school programs to help students recognize nature in the city.

The creek's path would also define a corridor of community open space offering activities compatible with the flood plain: baseball diamonds, community gardens, sitting parks. Mixed among these would be horticultural businesses that would benefit from the presence of so much water and add an element of variety to the neighborhood — and jobs.

One idea is to create a nursery for growing street trees to supplement or replace those that are nearing the end of their lives. Trees grown in such urban conditions would probably have a greater chance of survival. A related idea would be to start a garden center that would sell appropriate plants for city gardens.

I hasten to note that Spirn and the others who worked on the plan are not seeking to displace the people and businesses along the waterway, although she says that they may be eligible for federal flood insurance. There are few things that can discourage homeowners more than a plan that calls for a lake where their

Rather, the plan calls for a recognition that this important natural feature exists and should be used, rather than fought, as opportunities become available. And it should be recognized that while much of this land has proven unsuitable for the uses to which it has been put in the past, there might be new uses that would work and add a new dimension to the lives of those who live in the area.

City plans are driven by the need for economic development, and there is an understandable reluctance to forfeit what appears, on paper at least, to be land that can be developed and taxed and would produce jobs. Spirn fears that large tracts of vacant land might tempt developers or public officials to place dense new developments.

One important piece of the West Philadelphia plan is a computerized database that was created for it. It brings together for the first time data on the land, its history, topography, uses and problems. The database, which can be loaded into a laptop computer, is available to help community groups do their own planning. Such an accessible integration of ecological, physical, social and economic information is, Spirn believes, a first for any city.

The final draft of the document has long been complete though it has not been published, nor have hearings been held.

It would be a pity if the West Philadelphia Landscape Plan were allowed simply to remain an academic exercise. Its concern with matters that are often viewed either as too small or too large to be considered by conventional planning offers a powerful and surprising way of thinking about the city.

The plan provides a reminder that



***Buried River, Opened Lives:* Reflections on People, Place, and Practice**

In 2012, I began to record oral histories from people who have participated in WPLP over the past three decades. Among those interviewed were teachers and children (now 30 years old) from the middle-school. What they told me was revelatory. Their stories are captured in a series of short multimedia videos: *Buried River, Opened Lives*. In “When Learning Is Real,” three middle-school teachers describe how the Mill Creek Project transformed Sulzberger Middle School and how it changed their understanding of what education can and should be. In “Fatima’s Story,” one of the middle-school students relates how the project changed her life. In “A Way to Fix Things,” a community activist describes her lifetime experience in the Mill Creek neighborhood and her collaboration with WPLP. In “Green City, Clean Waters,” the Philadelphia Water Commissioner describes that city’s landmark program in green infrastructure. In “Coming Full Circle,” three WPLP research assistants describe their role on the project and how it has influenced their career. “The Buried River” describes how the Mill Creek came to be buried in a sewer and the consequences; it includes my own reflections and traces the course of the former creek in today’s landscape.

Buried River, Opened Lives premiered at MIT in fall 2014. Since then the videos have been screened at multiple venues. They can be viewed online at www.wplp.net/stories.

Multimedia videos testify to how WPLP has changed lives, minds, policies, and communities. These videos are all online at www.wplp.net/stories.

Above Poster for the 2014 premier screening.

Right Three multimedia videos from the series, “Buried River, Opened Lives.”

