

Urban Land Trusts: Connecting Communities Through Shared Spaces

by Craig Springer

Crack open a land trust brochure, or click on its website. Here's what you most predictably will see: The words and the photography will conjure a place unspoiled by the hand of man, where nature functions at its potential. The imagery might bring to your mind's eye a bucolic scene, something emblematic of a passing way of life, something your grandparents thought would always exist.

But what about urban landscapes? Grand open spaces may be iconic for conservation, but there are other lands to be conserved where success is not measured by acreage, but more by people served; by not restricting land uses, but more by encouraging the use of the land.

It is estimated that 80 percent of Americans live, work and play in urban areas. For many years, urban land trusts have served this population, working on such diverse projects as creating community gardens, protecting urban waterways and waterfronts, transforming vacant or previously contaminated lots into parks, and establishing greenways through cities, just to name a few. Smart growth strategies are making urban areas more attractive, creating a better quality of life through green infrastructures, and taking development pressure off surrounding countryside.

The problems faced by urban land trusts differ greatly from those faced by land trusts working in rural areas, from soil contaminated with heavy metals to graffiti. The work of urban land trusts often intertwines with the work of social justice groups. A close look at three land trusts working in different cities reveals their profound impact on the urban communities.

The vistas of trees, farms and open spaces that inspire many land trusts stand in contrast to the vistas that move Terry Mushovic. She is the executive director of the Neighborhood Gardens Association (NGA), in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Those that attended Rally 2005 might re-

call her as a presenter on urban lands conservation. In one capacity or another, she's had a hand in urban lands since graduating from college.

A native of Dayton, Ohio, Mushovic started out in college intending to be a school teacher. She attended Denison University, and on a teacher exchange program, went to Philadelphia to teach high school biology. She was attracted to the East Coast, so much so that she stayed and eventually earned a horticulture degree at Temple University. That degree armed her to work for the Pennsylvania State University's Urban Gardening Program, which she directed for 12 years. Then seven years ago she became executive director of the Neighborhood Gardens Association that she helped create in 1986. Her inspiring vistas are city lots in neighborhoods far removed from rural vistas. For her, blighted buildings, and high-voltage transmission lines, busy streets, dense population, and the near-constant din of sounds endemic to city life is the realm where she works—



THE WARRINGTON COMMUNITY GARDEN in Philadelphia is among the most richly diverse and most successful of communal gardens.

Neighborhood Gardens Association

and makes a difference for conservation.

Philadelphia has a long history of community gardening. This older city is typified by a large number of small houses built around a former manufacturing job base. But now the factories are gone, the jobs are gone, and some of the original or second-generation homeowners are gone too. Left behind are a large number of vacant lots, crumbling homes and trash. Thirty years ago, the affected communities sought to do something, and community gardening took root. The community gardens had their start with the assistance of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society and Penn State University coop extension office. But the gardens still faced a problem common in land conservation: they began to attract the attention of developers. In response, the Neighborhood Gardens Association was formed.

The NGA's genesis came from wanting to be able to anchor a title to the land, said Mushovic. And where does the trust get most of the vacant lots? From the city of Philadel-

phia. There are no easements, and no vague title to these lands, said Mushovic. "From my experience and understanding, easements are not easy," she said with a jovial laugh. "We have clear title to our holdings, and the city supports what we do—they have donated over half of what the NGA holds, and at only the cost of transferring title." And there is no shortage of potential land holdings for the NGA; Philadelphia has one of the largest inventory of vacant lands of any major industrial city in the United States. Over 40,000 lots lie vacant citywide.

There are many reasons for setting aside these small parcels, tiny postage stamps compared to the big easements conserved in perpetuity by rural land trusts. They are tangible and measurable reasons, like giving people space to grow their own foods. "The yields are pretty significant," said Mushovic. She didn't have a bushel-per-acre statistic, but noted anecdotes that speak to yield. Citing a survey by the Penn State Urban Gardening Program, "91 percent of food gardeners grow so much, they have excess produce and donate it to friends, community centers and their churches."

The gardens also serve to blend people from the neighborhood in this communal place. Residents tend to be African Americans, Latinos, and immigrant families from Southeast Asia. Mushovic noted that people served by urban land trusts are quite diverse. "The gardens bring people together, people from different origins, and that is reflected in their foods—everyone is interested in each other's gardens," said Mushovic. "The crops re-

fect the community: African Americans grow collard greens, beans and potatoes; Latinos favor peppers, and Asians grow specific greens and gourds—it's wonderful to see."

The Warrington Community Garden is among the most richly diverse and most successful of communal gardens. On three-fourths of an acre, college professors are growing crops alongside poor immigrants from Southeast Asia. The language barrier is an abyss, but is bridged by friendly attempts at communicating with sign language.

Aside from the nutritional benefits of neighborhood gardens that provide fresh produce to community members, there are economic benefits as well. Mushovic says that a University of Pennsylvania economic study showed that neighborhood greening can boost property values. Street trees alone can raise values by 9 percent; a communal garden nearby adds another 30 percent.

Mushovic says one of the biggest differences between urban land trusts and rural land trusts is the size of protected

properties. Many of the properties that the NGA holds in trust are comparatively small: 30 feet by 60 feet. The NGA holds in title a total of eight acres scattered throughout the city. Another difference: the lands are actively used. "We have soil producing food, with people coming and going.

Even the smallest plots are like city parks, alive with people. It's like the people are the bigger focus, where for the rural trusts, the focus is on the land itself. People are our main priority."

Some of the problems Mushovic has encountered centered on initially taking properties into the NGA that were less than desirable. They were ultimately donated back to the community or the city. The acquisitions had been driven by specific grantors, and were easily available, but by attrition, the families involved in the gardening lost interest, and some eventually passed away. With no one interested in keeping a communal garden going, the decision to divest the properties was a clear one to make. The more successful gardens have been those with a mixed-age of active gardeners. In some areas where the gardens are situated, crime is a constant concern, but because so many of the gardens are

tucked between houses, there is lots of ownership in the gardens, and lots of eyes on them at all times. Pilfering is more of a problem than vandalism, according to Mushovic.

The NGA urban land trust has challenges universal to trusts of any size and any locale: sustainability and fundraising. Though the NGA has support from the city of Philadelphia, that doesn't necessarily translate to coin in the coffer. It has a large number of dedicated individual donors, but grants and foundations go a long way in fueling the NGA gas tank. It operates citywide on non-public dollars. And that may be a singular difference with another prominent urban land trust, Chicago's NeighborSpace.

NeighborSpace is publicly funded for the most part, but new efforts are bringing in private dollars. It operates under the direction of an 11-member board of directors, seven of whom are appointed by government entities around Chicago.

The gardens bring people together, people from different origins, and that is reflected in [what they grow].



A GARDENER at the Warrington Community Garden.

Neighborhood Gardens Association

That has had its upside and its downside in growing the land trust, says Executive Director Mary Jo Schnell. Schnell holds an MFA degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and has for most of her career worked in the non-profit sector, including a successful stint at America's Second Harvest. NeighborSpace was created in the mid-1990s as a result of a government-led citywide planning effort to increase green space.

"The extent to which government is involved makes us unique among land trusts," says Schnell. "We have significant access to government, and the government has access to NeighborSpace. These board members provide great insight and experience but are coming from a different organizational culture. In other words, the government commitment is good, but challenging because NeighborSpace is a non-profit and how nonprofits operate in terms of governance and decision-making doesn't always fit their model of how to get something done."

One potential remedy would be to expand the board to include new directors with fundraising experience, from outside of government, as well as community garden representatives, a strategy originally put forth by the founding governmental agencies. Schnell believes that populating the

board with these committed civic leaders would assist in bringing in more grant and foundation resources to NeighborSpace.

As with the NGA, NeighborSpace owns the land, rather than doing business by easements. Protected lands are typically urban gardens, small tracts that Schnell calls "urban Edens." NeighborSpace only acquires land on behalf of committed community groups. What this typically means is that the group has already established the garden on the land. "Once secured through fee simple title,

we enter into long-term partnership agreements with the group and leader," says Schnell. "We feel it is important for us not to get into managing their project but to preserve the



NEIGHBORSPACE PARTNERED with Whittier Elementary School in Pilsen, a predominantly Mexican-American community, to create the Xochiquetzal Garden. The name refers to a mythical bird of peace.

Resources

www.communitygarden.org

■ The American Community Gardening Association is a bi-national nonprofit membership organization of professionals, volunteers and supporters of community greening in urban and rural communities. The Association recognizes that community gardening improves the quality of life for people by providing a catalyst for neighborhood and community development, stimulating social interaction, encouraging self-reliance, beautifying neighborhoods, producing nutritious food, reducing family food budgets, conserving resources and creating opportunities for recreation, exercise, therapy and education.

www.pps.org

■ Project for Public Spaces is a nonprofit organization dedicated to creating and sustaining public places that build communities. It provides technical assistance, education and research.

www.tpl.org, click on "City Parks"

■ The Trust for Public Land: An estimated 80 percent of Americans live, work, and play in urban areas. TPL has helped more than 190 cities complete over 420 park

projects. TPL offers research on park trends and best practices; help forging a community vision for parks and open space; help developing public-private partnerships for land-protection assistance with real estate negotiation to acquire new properties; and help with private and public fundraising for parks.

www.uli.org

■ A membership organization of community builders, the Urban Land Institute provides responsible leadership in the use of land to enhance the total environment. ULI examines land use issues, impartially reports findings, and convenes forums to find solutions to complex land use problems, collaborating with industry and stakeholder groups worldwide.

Books

■ TPL also has several books and reports on city parks including *Urban Parks and Open Space*, *Inside City Parks* and *The Excellent City Park System: What Makes it Great and How to Get There*.

■ The Landscape Architecture Foundation published *Urban Open Space: Designing for User Needs*, by Mark Francis (Island Press, 2003).

intent and integrity of the community-based effort that led to the garden's establishment. This way, we are not only preserving the very uniqueness of the project but also a sense of ownership the community has for the success of their efforts."

Schnell says that many of these parcels have seen generations of activity, and are expressions of society. "Community groups have taken over a swatch of land to provide an outdoor asset on their block. Our interest is in preserving those expressions and land use cultures. We have people from all points of the Earth growing foods familiar to them."

She also articulated an investment in the future, citing that "we're not about big riparian areas, big fields—I do know that access to the land and the chirping of a cricket kids hear on the small plots are large portals to other worlds, like those preserved in rural areas."

Schnell has the sense that NeighborSpace-protected land has a passive effect in lowering crime rates in the city, a conclusion supported by studies done in other cities about similar efforts. She says the gardens bring people out of their homes: "They're outside, visible to one another, showing love for the outdoors and bringing their community together. This reduces anonymity between neighbors, and neighbors who know each other tend to look out for each other."

And societal benefits accrue, too. "You meet the nicest people in dirt—in an urban area, people re-imagine a vacant lot as they dig dirt—they are re-imagining themselves and their communities. Kids are impacted and begin to understand the importance of being a steward; the simple act of digging in the dirt can make a difference," says Schnell.

Across the country, Tsilah Burman shares much in common with Schnell and Mushovic. Burman heads the Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust (LANLT), which deals with small in-fill properties in low-income and underserved neighborhoods in Los Angeles, California. Like the other cities, the LANLT measures its success not in acreage protected, but in people served and number of spaces created, according to Burman.

Burman is well suited to lead a land trust, having worked nearly two decades in commercial real estate. Her land trust, like the other two, does not employ easements; the LANLT leases land long-term, or purchases it for conservation, creating small "pocket parks" and community gardens. The LANLT has been operational for 20 months; seed funding from the city got it rolling. LANLT is addressing environmental justice issues through its work. Burman says that studies show low-income communities of color seriously lack green space as compared to white communities. LANLT's mission is to alleviate this inequity.

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NYC Garden Land Trusts

In 1999, New York City was set to destroy more than 100 community gardens through a public auction. The Trust for Public Land (TPL), in a last-minute deal reached with the city, agreed to purchase 62 of the gardens for \$3 million (roughly one-quarter of their market value). Since 1999, TPL has made many investments in the gardens, and has worked with leaders of the gardens to create three new nonprofit organizations to take over the ownership and management of the sites.

The Bronx (16 gardens), Brooklyn/Queens (34 gardens), and Manhattan (14 gardens) land trusts, have each hired staff to work with the boards of directors to help raise funds and manage the land trusts. TPL is providing \$200,000 in start-up funds for each land trust.

A core group of gardeners, serving as the leaders in each of the three new land trusts, has had extensive discussions and training, and continues to make critical decisions about the governance and operation of each land trust. Each has a 15-person board of directors including gardeners and experts elected by the land trust memberships. The boards have the principal responsibility of leading and managing all aspects of the land trusts.

The land trusts ensure that the gardens are protected as neighborhood resources for public use, and that the volunteer groups managing each garden are open to accepting new members and governed democratically through group decisions. Each land trust will have the opportunity in the future to acquire additional open spaces to preserve them for public use.

The Land Trust Alliance, through its New York State Conservation Partnership Program, provided a 2004 grant to support TPL's land trust formation efforts. All three land trusts are now LTA members.

Much of the work of the LANLT is in gang neighborhoods. Without the pocket parks or gardens, there are no communal spaces. The parks provide a venue for programming not otherwise found in these neighborhoods, such as after-school classes, health and fitness classes, arts and cultural enrichment classes, and leadership development training for people of all ages. "Part of the reason why people get involved in gangs is there is no other sense of community where they live, and few opportunities. A new community is created through the process of neighbors becoming involved in the planning, development, management, maintenance and programming of their local park or community garden."

A growing obesity and diabetes epidemic in Los Angeles can be reduced by kids and adults having places to play and exercise. According to Burman: "By creating a decent quality

of life for everyone and respecting all people by involving them in the decision-making, you have a profoundly positive impact on their lives. These communities have no green space—only concrete—and when you raise the quality of life, you change people's outlook on their present and future." The differences made in individual lives also translate to benefits to society in terms of decreased violence, increased health, a more livable city for all people, and economic development and job training opportunities, which in turn lead to a more productive workforce.

The outlooks, and in fact, the vistas these urban trust leaders share are quite different than land trusts that save large open spaces. These urban land trusts have similar challenges and opportunities as any other trust; they all operate as a nonprofit directed by a board of directors, and they seek to set aside lands, preserved by different mechanisms. But



NEIGHBORHOOD RESIDENTS participate in aerobics classes in a 12,000-square-foot pocket park in South Los Angeles.

they deal with a different set of visions, goals and concerns.

Community garden projects in particular are important not only because they represent what a community values in terms of land use, but also because they can provide impacts such as reduced crime in urban areas, reduced anonymity among community members, and opportunities to connect with lesser-served populations.

Where the urban trusts plow ground, you won't find a bucolic scene, no

farmsteads, no pristine lands without the imprint of man. Quite the contrary. The imprint of people is the measure of success, improving the lot in life of human capital. Connecting people to the land in the most unlikely of places is a circularity of experience, returning people to community, where human capital trumps acreage. 🍃

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