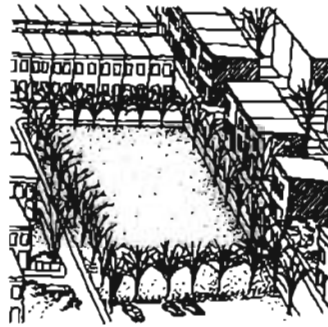
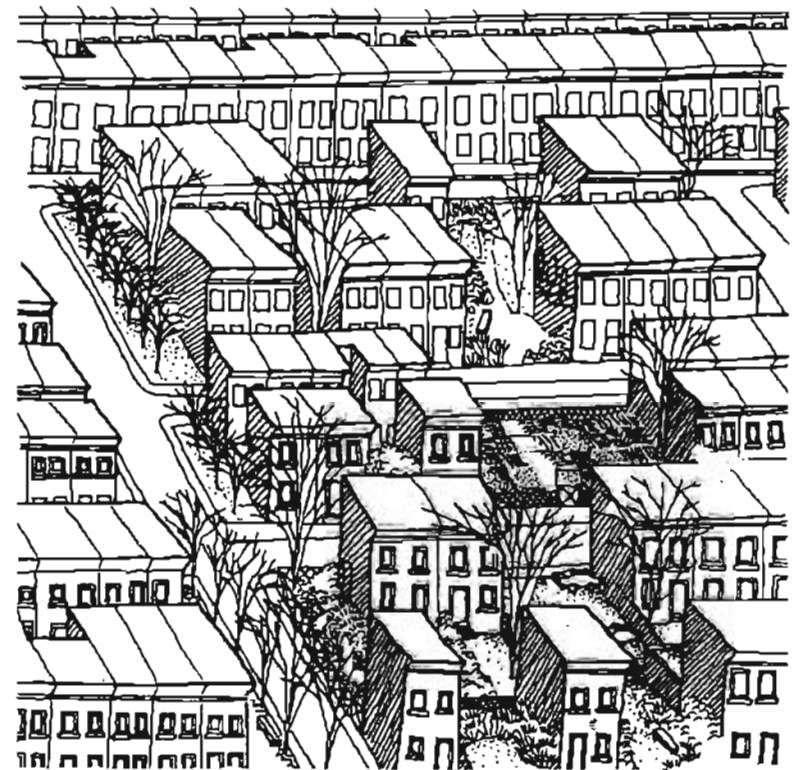
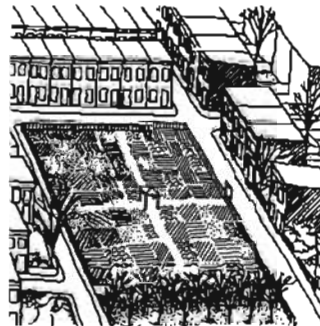
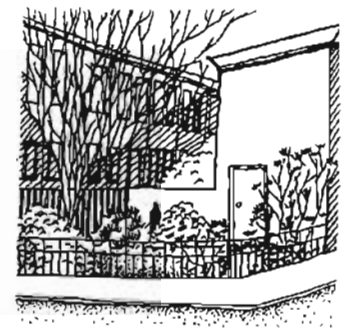


VACANT LAND

A RESOURCE FOR RESHAPING URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS



VACANT LAND:

A RESOURCE FOR RESHAPING URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS

A Publication of the West Philadelphia Landscape Plan

Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning

University of Pennsylvania

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This publication was written by Anne Whiston Spirn, Michele Pollio, and Mark Cameron, but it represents the summary of work to which many others contributed. The West Philadelphia Landscape Plan and Greening Project is a three-year community development and research project funded by the J. N. Pew Charitable Trust and conducted by the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning at the University of Pennsylvania, The Organization and Management Group, and Philadelphia Green, under the auspices of the West Philadelphia Partnership.

The initial formulation of ideas about vacant urban lands as a resource for reshaping the city was explored by Anne Whiston Spirn in a study funded by the National Endowment for the Arts in 1984-1985. All of the vacant land types and potential uses described here were first proposed as part of that study. This project extends that work, and much of the text of earlier, unpublished reports is incorporated here.

A map of land use in West Philadelphia, including vacant land, was produced in summer 1987 as part of the initial documentation of the physical environment of West Philadelphia by research assistants John Berg, Elizabeth Koreman, Christopher Britten, Rumi Yoshimi, and Ruth Loewe. The source of this map was the Philadelphia Planning Commission. Aerial photographs taken in 1985 were also used to update the city's map. Subsequent fieldwork revealed far more vacant land than had been recorded on city maps or that were apparent on the aerial photographs. In summer 1989, a field survey of all streets in West Philadelphia was

undertaken to compile a reliable and up-to-date record of vacant lots. This fieldwork was supervised by Michele Pollio and Sharon Fitzgerald Principato, with the help of Geoffrey Anderson, Mark Cameron, Kacey Constable, and Elissa Sharp.

The investigation of vacant lot types, their distribution in West Philadelphia, and the limitations and opportunities posed for landscape development was undertaken by Anne Whiston Spirn and Michele Pollio in fall 1989, and refined, with the help of Mark Cameron, in summer and fall 1990. The design language employed in this discussion was initially developed by Anne Whiston Spirn in Summer 1988 with the help of research assistants John Widrick, Karen Reutlinger, Laura Will, Kate Deregibus, and John Berg. Tarna Agranat prepared the drawings and maps for this report. Dan Marcucci, Mark Cameron, and Tarna Agranat all worked on the layout.

Many of the successful examples identified in the text and appendix were built under the auspices of Philadelphia Green and the Philadelphia Horticultural Society. Several were designed and constructed as part of the West Philadelphia Landscape Plan and Greening Project. The design and construction of these projects were supported by a grant from the J. N. Pew Charitable Trust. Many of the ideas for landscape improvements to vacant lots have already been implemented by Philadelphia Green as part of their Lotscape Program. Many other ideas presented in this report were developed in collaboration with Charlotte Kahn of Boston Urban Gardeners, with the staff of Philadelphia Green, including Blaine Bonham, Sally McCabe, Michael Groman, Denise

Jefferson and Susan Ross, and with Gerri Spilka of The Organization and Management Group.

PUBLICATIONS IN THIS SERIES

- I. *The West Philadelphia Landscape Plan: A Framework for Action*
- II. *Models of Success: Landscape Improvements and Community Development*
- III. *"This Garden is a Town:" Shaping the Community Garden*
- IV. *Vacant Land: A Resource for Reshaping Urban Neighborhoods*
- V. *Shaping the Block: Redesigning Small Urban Neighborhoods*
- VI. *The Computerized Data Base: A Guide to the West Philadelphia Landscape Plan*

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Dedicated to the energy and vision of those who are already reclaiming their neighborhoods.

THE WEST PHILADELPHIA LANDSCAPE PLAN

The West Philadelphia Landscape Plan and Greening Project is a three-year community development and research project funded by the J. N. Pew Charitable Trust and conducted by the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning at the University of Pennsylvania, The Organization and Management Group, and Philadelphia Green, under the auspices of the West Philadelphia Partnership.

The West Philadelphia Landscape Plan is based upon the conviction that individuals, small groups, and local organizations, as well as public agencies and developers have a role in shaping the landscape of the city. Incremental improvements to the urban landscape by individuals and small groups can have an enormous, cumulative, effect on the city and how it looks and functions. The West Philadelphia Landscape Plan seeks to encourage and support such incremental improvements, as well as to identify large-scale projects that can only be accomplished by neighborhood-wide organizations and city-wide or regional public agencies. Landscape planning and the design and construction of small, neighborhood landscape projects have proceeded simultaneously and have informed one another throughout the project.

The scope of this plan is more comprehensive than what are commonly referred to as "greening" projects, for the landscape of West Philadelphia is more than parks, gardens, and street trees. The urban landscape embodies the total physical environment within which built structures fit. It includes hills and valleys, rocks and earth, rivers and underground streams upon which the city rests. It includes the framework of

streets, sidewalks, and public utilities which structure the city and through which people, water, wastes, and energy flow. And it includes the playgrounds, parking lots, plazas, private yards, and vacant lots that fit within that larger framework. The plan addresses the major transportation and stream corridors which provide a neighborhood-wide structure and serve both local and regional needs, as well as smaller, more discrete projects tailored to suit the needs of local residents.

West Philadelphia is a multi-racial, multi-cultural inner-city neighborhood. Crime, rising drug use, unemployment, poverty, and the physical deterioration of housing and public infrastructure are pressing issues. These are fundamental problems that any plan for West Philadelphia must address, including a plan for landscape improvements. Clearly landscape development alone cannot solve these problems. Nevertheless, even small, incremental improvements to the urban landscape can produce major improvements in the function and appearance of the city and in the quality of urban life. Successful landscape projects can serve as catalysts for other community development projects and as important adjuncts to a wide variety of social programs, such as education, job training, employment, and community organizing. The West Philadelphia Landscape Plan addresses these social issues, as well as environmental problems, such as land subsidence and flooding in areas over buried streams and filled land.

The products of the West Philadelphia Landscape Plan are six reports and a computer database that integrates text, statistics, maps, and

drawings. *The West Philadelphia Landscape Plan* provides an overview of the plan and *Models of Success* describes successful examples that have already been built and draws lessons for similar projects that could be undertaken in West Philadelphia. *"This Garden is a Town"* explores existing community gardens as models for neighborhood-based planning. *Shaping The Block* focuses on the block as a significant unit of neighborhood and explores how residents can reshape the block they live on to better support their needs, values, and activities. *The Computerized Landscape Plan: A Guide* describes the computer database and its potential uses.

This report, *Vacant Land: A Resource for Reshaping Urban Neighborhoods*, analyzes the different types of vacant land that occur in West Philadelphia, how they fit into the larger natural and social systems of the city, and how they may be reclaimed. It suggests general design ideas for a number of potential uses that can be tailored to fit the needs of particular people and places.

A RESOURCE FOR RESHAPING URBAN NEIGHBORHOODS

Vacant urban land is well recognized as a social, an economic, an environmental, and an aesthetic problem that affects millions of urban residents. These vacant lands are a product of forces beyond the control of the neighborhoods where they proliferate, and they have become a symbol of neglect, decay, and despair. Yet vacant land also provides an opportunity to reshape urban neighborhoods that no longer serve the needs of their residents.

Vacant lands are not evenly distributed. While some neighborhoods have very few vacant lots, other neighborhoods are more than half vacant. West Philadelphia is typical in this regard: neighborhoods south of Walnut Street have very few vacant lots; neighborhoods north of Market Street, especially Mill Creek, Belmont, and Mantua, have many vacant lots, including entire blocks that are vacant. In both the Mill Creek neighborhood and the Walnut-Market district (between 43rd and 47th Streets), most vacant land is found within the old floodplain of Mill Creek and its tributaries. While most vacant land in West Philadelphia lies within residential neighborhoods, larger tracts of vacant land create distinct boundaries at the edges of neighborhoods. In other areas, particularly within the district bounded by Market and Walnut Streets, large blocks of vacant land resulted when institutions or businesses relocated or when land was condemned in the 1960s by the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority.

Although vacant lots are currently a nuisance and an eyesore, vacant land embodies a great opportunity for improving the quality of life in inner-city neighborhoods. While much of this

land may be developed eventually to provide new housing, institutions, and businesses, some should be retained as public and private open space. In West Philadelphia neighborhoods north of Market Street, the land was originally developed with very dense housing, mostly rowhouses, with tiny yards and very few playgrounds or parks. In these neighborhoods, the street is often the only playground accessible to young children, and window boxes and tiny plots have been the only land available for gardens. The reclamation of vacant lands affords an opportunity for many potential uses: for new yards, gardens, playfields, playgrounds, and playlots, and for outdoor markets, outdoor workshops, and off-street parking. This transformation can also serve as evidence of community energy and pride, as a training ground for emerging leaders, and as a catalyst for further community development (see *Models of Success: Landscape Improvements and Community Development*).

TYPES OF VACANT LAND

CHARACTERISTICS OF VACANT LAND

Vacant land too often is regarded as a monolithic problem requiring a monumental solution. Yet vacant lands are extraordinarily diverse in both their physical character and social context. Vacant lots occur as small isolated, "missing teeth," and as large tracts under single or multiple ownership. Some vacant lands were once the sites of buildings, now demolished, while others were never built upon. The physical and social character of the neighborhoods in which vacant lands occur also varies greatly. They may be primarily residential or they may harbor a mixture of commercial and residential uses.

Location, size and shape, physical conditions, and ownership of vacant land all influence its effect upon a neighborhood and its potential use. An abandoned house lot in the middle of a block of rowhouses, on the one hand, and a vacant city block, on the other, afford different opportunities and pose different sorts of problems for potential future use. While a single vacant lot in the interior of a block of rowhouses does not significantly effect the physical fabric of a neighborhood, a large vacant corner lot may, and an entire city block certainly will. While a single small house lot may be transformed into a private garden, a meeting place, a playground, or even a community garden, it will not be suitable for a playfield, which requires a much larger space.

Location. The specific location of a vacant lot—at mid-block or on the corner, on a major street or an alley, on a hilltop or in a valley bottom—is one of the most important factors that influences who will be interested in using a lot and to what use it will be put. A vacant lot on a residential block may be adopted by the homeowner next door or, if yards

on the block are small, several residents may create a community garden. In neighborhoods of rowhouses with no yards and with many small children there may be a demand for a meeting place with a sitting area or small playground. Vacant lots on blocks with rows of stores provide space for extra parking and, ultimately, for the construction of new stores.

Every block and every neighborhood is composed of territories, whether strongly or loosely bounded, and the location of vacant land within that territory will influence to whom the lot seems to "belong." A vacant lot within a block of houses will be perceived as part of that block's territory, while the identity of corner lots is more ambiguous, since they may seem to belong to two separate blocks or to neither. Similarly, vacant lots at the edge of a neighborhood may be more difficult for that neighborhood to "claim."

It is easy to forget that the land upon which the city rests was once a landscape of forests, meadows, wetlands, and streams. The hills and valleys of the former landscape are still visible, but forests, meadows, and wetlands have been built upon, and former streams are now buried beneath streets and buildings. While the forests are gone, rain continues to fall and flow downhill across the land or in underground sewers to the old floodplain. Wet, relatively unstable soil conditions in the old floodplain have contributed to the fact that large portions of that floodplain are now vacant. This is the case in West Philadelphia, and in many other cities.

Size and Shape. Size and shape of a vacant lot are important factors in determining its future use.

Long, thin lots, for example, may not be suitable for gardens or meeting places, but could become paths that link streets or blocks. Some uses require a minimum amount of land. Playfields, for example, require a large space, while a sitting garden or a playlot for young children may be quite small. A small lot may be cleared and landscaped by a few individuals, while a very large lot requires the participation of many individuals and a greater neighborhood commitment. Small projects also appear more personal and private, and they may be less vulnerable to use or abuse by strangers. Small lots may be more easily acquired, if they consist of a single property or a few, adjacent properties. Smaller properties may also have lower taxes. Larger lots are frequently composed of different properties, each owned by different individuals. It may be difficult to secure the right to use these, and, if they are not owned by the people who improve the lot, to assure the survival of those improvements.

Small, isolated, vacant lots occur throughout West Philadelphia, while large tracts of vacant land are concentrated mainly in the Market-Walnut corridor between 43rd and 47th Streets and in the Mill Creek and Belmont neighborhoods. Within the floodplain of Mill Creek, the shape of these tracts may be rather irregular, roughly following the course of the old stream bed and/or existing sewer. The Belmont neighborhood does not lie within the floodplain, but the pattern of scattered building demolition has produced multiple, contiguous vacant properties which, collectively, compose an irregular shape within city blocks.

Physical Conditions. The physical conditions of the vacant lot--the character of the soil and its drainage; steepness of slope; patterns of sun and shadow; and the types of plants--are all important factors that influence how difficult it will be to reclaim the lot and which potential uses are most appropriate. Every vacant lot has a history. There is very little land in West Philadelphia that was never built upon, and some land has been used for many, successive uses throughout the centuries. Knowledge of how a vacant lot has been used in the past provides clues to the character of soil and conditions beneath the ground surface.

Former quarries and floodplains in West Philadelphia were filled with rubbish and dirt and built upon. The ground in these areas has since settled or shifted, sometimes damaging building foundations and walls. While many of these damaged buildings have since been demolished, one can still see cracks and settlement in buildings that remain standing in these areas.

If a vacant lot was once occupied by buildings, there may be buried foundation walls, and the soil may consist of building rubble contaminated with remnants of lead paint or other materials. Since most buildings in West Philadelphia are built of brick or stone, however, rather than wood, lead paint is not likely to be a major problem. If industrial or commercial buildings once occupied the lot, there may also be old concrete or asphalt pavement covering the surface of the soil. This rubble will need to be removed, and the soil worked and perhaps even replaced, if the land is to be cultivated as a garden.

The slope of the land is important for future use. Most of the land in West Philadelphia is fairly flat, but vacant lands in the old floodplains are often in low-lying depressions, where water collects and the soil remains wet after rainstorms. These vacant lands are best left open and used for a purpose where periodic wetness or flooding is not a concern. They may even be used as part of an overall network for storm water management and flood control (see "Storm Drainage and Flood Control" as a potential land use).

The amount of sunlight a lot receives determines what plants will grow there. Vegetable and flower gardens require direct sunlight during spring and summer, so vacant lots that remain in the shadow of adjacent buildings for most of the afternoon will not be appropriate for community gardens. Shade during the summer, however, is an asset for a meeting place or playground; shade in fall, winter, and early spring makes such places uncomfortable at those times. For some potential uses, such as a parking lot or infill housing, the amount of sun or shadow does not matter.

How long a lot has been vacant and whether the plants have ever been cut influence the kind of plants growing on the lot. Land that has been vacant for many years may have large trees, while other land, vacated more recently, may have meadows of weeds and wildflowers. Depending upon future plans for the land, these existing plant communities may be incorporated into a new design.

Adjacent buildings must also be taken into consideration when deciding the future use of a

vacant lot. The height and proximity of surrounding buildings determines how much sunlight or shadow there is. In dense residential neighborhoods, a vacant lot may be easily adopted by the house next to it, while vacant lots among businesses or industries may be better suited to a parking lot, storage area, or new building.

Ownership. The ownership of a lot is very important when considering reclamation. Many vacant lots are owned by absentee landlords, some of whom are delinquent in paying city taxes. It may be possible for an individual or neighborhood group to acquire ownership of such properties. Other lots, although vacant, are being held by land speculators for future development. Such an owner may give permission for someone to improve the lot with a garden or playfield, but these improvements are likely to be displaced when development occurs. In still other cases, the city itself may be the owner and may be willing to transfer the property to a local resident or group of residents who wish to improve the lot. The Philadelphia Land Trust has recently been founded to help local groups, like community gardeners, attain ownership of property in order to protect their investment of time and resources.

Variations in size, shape, and location combine to form characteristic types of vacant land, each of which represents different opportunities and limitations for future development. The following pages describe these types more fully: missing teeth; corner lots; connectors; vacant blocks; Swiss cheese; and multiple, contiguous blocks. Missing teeth are individual lots or small clusters of lots that form

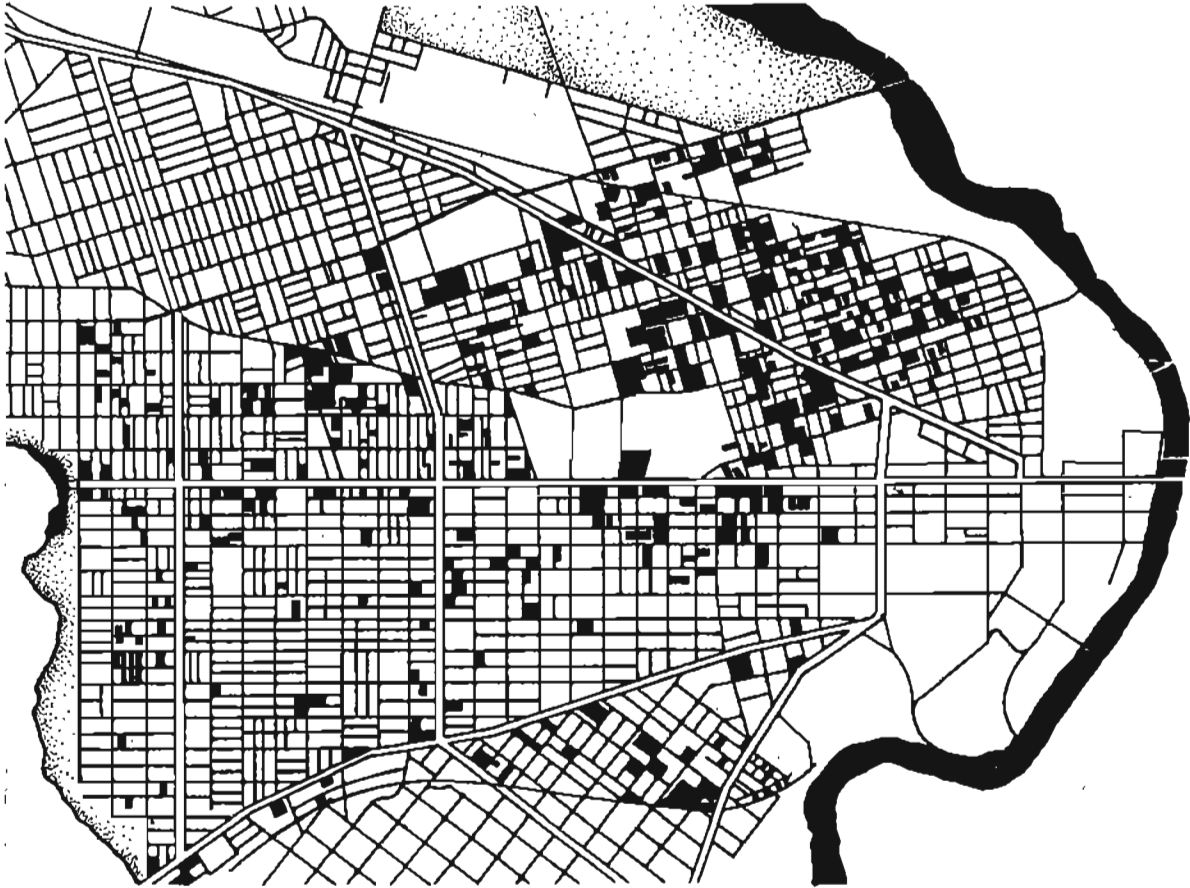
TYPES OF VACANT LAND

gaps within a relatively intact block. Connectors consist of a single lot, several lots, or abandoned alleys that make new connections between blocks. When there are nearly as many or even more vacancies on a block than there are intact houses, the condition called "Swiss cheese" results. Sometimes, whole blocks are vacant or even multiple, contiguous vacant blocks.

Each of these types of vacant land reflects different factors—social, economic, and natural—in their formation, and each affords different opportunities for reuse. Other characteristics, such as physical conditions of the land and ownership, contribute to further variations among vacant lots and affect their potential for improvement. The following pages describe different types of vacant land and some suggestions for improvements. Potential uses are described later in greater detail.



VACANT LAND IN WEST PHILADELPHIA



VACANT LAND IN WEST PHILADELPHIA: ALL TYPES

- 1. Missing teeth
- 2. Vacant corners
- 3. Connectors
- 4. Vacant blocks
- 5. Swiss cheese
- 6. Multiple contiguous blocks

TYPES OF VACANT LAND

Missing Tooth

A "missing tooth" is a vacant lot or a group of adjacent lots within a block that creates a gap between houses. Missing teeth are particularly noticeable in blocks of rowhouses and among rows of stores, where even one missing building creates a noticeable break in the block. Missing teeth are less noticeable in blocks of free-standing houses with large yards, since gaps between houses already exist.

In West Philadelphia, missing teeth occur mainly north of Market street. Particularly in the Belmont, Mantua, and Mill Creek neighborhoods, there are many blocks with single or multiple missing teeth, frequently with vacant lots on both sides of the street. Multiple missing teeth give blocks an open appearance, especially in neighborhoods that were once densely developed. When there are many missing teeth on a block, they form a "Swiss-cheese" pattern (see "Swiss Cheese"). On blocks of rowhouses with stoops, porches, or tiny yards, a missing tooth provides an opportunity for the block to develop additional outdoor space. This will be particularly important if there is no nearby playground or park.

The size and shape of missing teeth depends greatly upon the type of block in which they occur. In blocks of rowhouses, a single vacant lot will be long and narrow, bounded on both sides by the windowless two-story or three-story building walls of adjacent houses. Typically, these blocks have tiny backyards, so the rear of the missing tooth is often bounded by the back wall of the house facing another street. In this situation, the lot may be quite shady, depending upon the height of the adjacent building walls, which cast shadows, and upon the lot's orientation to the sun.

If the front of the lot faces east, the lot will get sun in the morning; if it faces west, the lot will get sun in the afternoon; and if it faces south, the lot will get sun midday. Lots which face north will probably be quite shady except at midday during the summer.

Missing teeth that occur on blocks with detached houses or institutions and businesses tend to be larger and more open. The height and proximity of adjacent buildings, the width of the street and the orientation of the lot all determine how sunny the lot is and whether it feels open or enclosed.

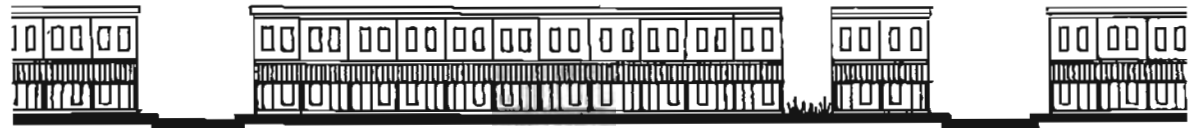
There are other features which vary from lot to lot that also influence its character and opportunities for improvement. When several adjacent lots are vacant, for example, they form a large gap in the middle of the block. In other cases, lots that have been vacant for some time may have mature trees that can be incorporated into a future design for the lot. When two or more missing teeth on adjacent blocks create a link between streets, they form a different vacant lot type (see "connector").

Improvements to the missing lot. The relatively intimate, enclosed scale of the missing tooth provides both opportunities and limitations for improvements. On the one hand, relatively little effort is required to clean and clear the lot. One person, or a few neighbors, can easily accomplish this. The small size of the lot means that a limited investment in trees and flowers or grass can make an enormous difference to the appearance of the street. On blocks of rowhouses, the lot is easily secured by a short fence. On the other hand, a

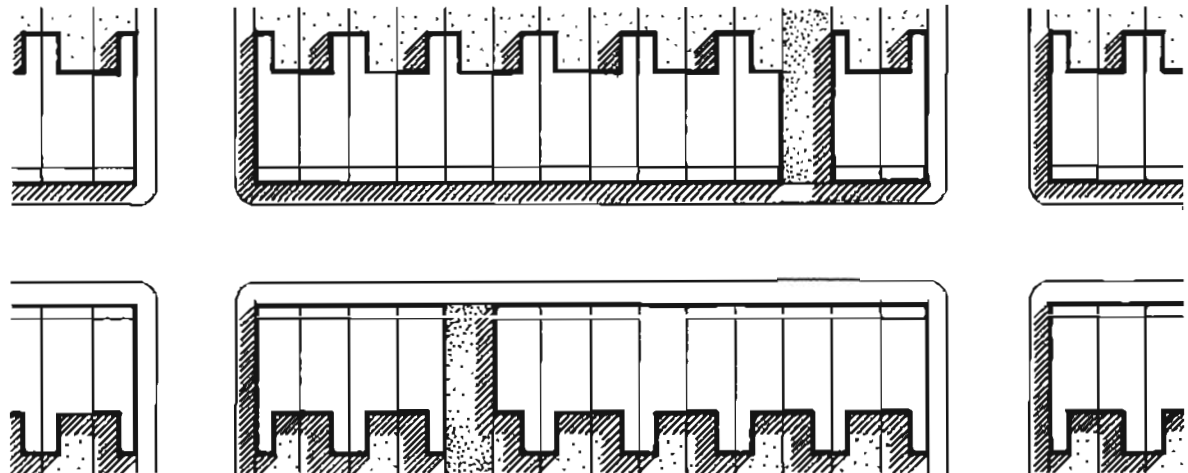


single missing tooth affords relatively little space, and unless there are multiple vacant lots within the block, there will not be sufficient space for garden plots for more than a few individuals. A missing tooth provides opportunities for small groups of people living on the block.

Potential future uses for which this type of vacant lot is appropriate are new building, private garden, meeting place, playlot, community garden, outdoor workshop, outdoor market, parking lot, orchard, and woodland. The particular character of a specific lot, its neighborhood context, the needs and desires of nearby residents, who owns the lot, and available funds will influence which uses are most appropriate for that place.



Missing Tooth



Plan of Missing Tooth

TYPES OF VACANT LAND

Examples. The following places provide examples of how Philadelphia residents have transformed missing teeth vacant lots for a variety of new uses.

Private Gardens: There are numerous private gardens which were created on missing teeth vacant lots on the 2500 block of Hope Street in North Philadelphia. America Villaneva's garden is filled with vegetables that she uses in Puerto Rican dishes. The Trimback's garden down the street is easily identified by the wooden sign carved with their name. Next to the sign are a small wishing well and a flower garden. The Trimbacks added a small, above-ground swimming pool so that their grandchildren could swim when they come to visit (for more details on other gardens on Hope Street and how they came to be see *"This Garden is a Town"* and *Models of Success: Landscape Improvements and Community Development*).

In West Philadelphia, two doors down from the Westminster community garden on the 4700 block of Westminster Street, Jean Reid has recently claimed a vacant lot as her own. The lot was a missing tooth, filled with building rubble and other debris and bounded on either side by the blank walls of adjacent houses. Over a couple of days, Jean Reid cleared the front part of the lot and erected a fence and gate along the edge of the sidewalk. At the entrance to the garden, she built a small gravel path edged with brick and rubble found on the lot, and planted flowers on both sides. Further back in the garden, Mrs. Reid planted tomato and pepper plants. She plans to finish clearing the back portion of the lot next year and to plant a larger garden.

Playlot: Behind Aspen Village, a Philadelphia Housing Authority project bounded by Aspen, 49th, and Folsom Streets, is a children's garden. The garden occupies a lot on Folsom, a short narrow alley that connects 49th and 50th Streets. It was once the site of a row of garages and is bounded at the rear by the backyards of houses from another block. The lot has play equipment and several wooden containers planted with flowers, and a paved play surface. These clearly mark the lot as the territory of children. The children also planted a garden at the edge of Aspen Village which leads to the playlot.

Community Garden and Meeting Place: A small flower garden with places to sit was built as part of the West Philadelphia Landscape Plan and Greening Project on two vacant lots on the 400 block of Dearborn Street in the Mill Creek neighborhood. Although Mill Creek Park is only a couple of blocks away, the residents of the street, many of whom are elderly, wanted to create a garden where they felt more secure and which they could care for themselves. The garden has raised flower beds, edged with wooden railroad ties which are wide enough for sitting, a bench, and a meeting area with a picnic table in the rear of the garden.

The Top o' 46th Street Sitting Garden and the Sun Community Vegetable Garden are side by side on Linmore Street in the West Shore neighborhood. The rear of the vegetable garden looks down over the railroad tracks while, trees are growing along the back of the sitting garden. The trees shelter the small meeting area from the railroad tracks behind and give the place a sense of refuge. Someone sitting on a bench in the Top

o' 46th Street garden commands a prospect down 46th Street to Woodland Avenue beyond. Further down Linmore Street is the West Shore Sitting Garden. A gazebo sits in the center of this garden, surrounded by flowerbeds and flowering shrubs. These gardens are but three of dozens in the West Shore Greene Country Towne (for a more detailed description of West Shore, see *Models of Success: Landscape Improvements and Community Development*).

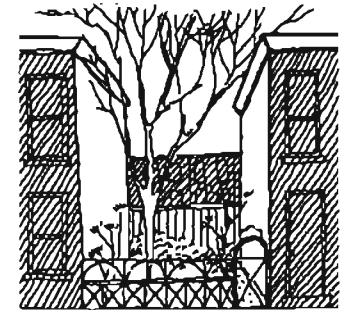
Parking Lot: On the 400 block of North 33rd Street in Mantua, residents have made two adjacent missing teeth into a secure place to park their cars. The parking area, which holds about six to eight cars, is bounded on either side by rowhouses and enclosed in the front by a low fence and lockable gate. The surface of the parking area is covered with gravel. Between the sidewalk and the fence, is a small space filled with flowers and evergreen shrubs. On the same block, the Macedonia Holy Bible Church of God has turned a missing tooth next door into a parking lot for the church's bus.



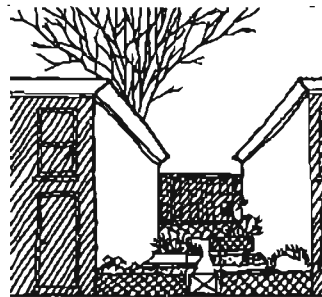
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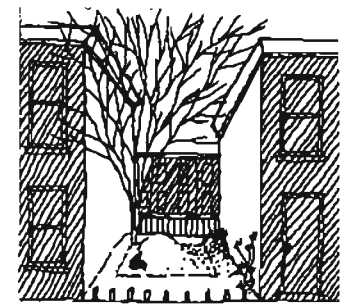
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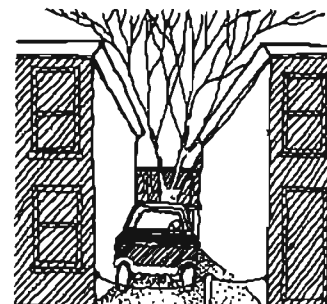
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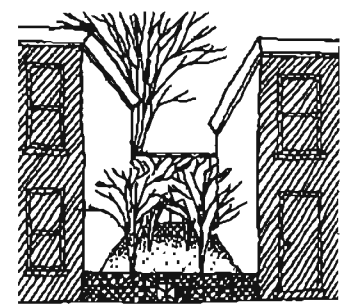
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7



8



9

1. Missing tooth
2. New building
3. Private garden
4. Community garden
5. Meeting place
6. Playlot
7. Outdoor workshop
8. Parking
9. Woodland

TYPES OF VACANT LAND

Corner Lot

This vacant lot type consists of one or several adjacent vacant properties at the corner of a block. Corner lots are bounded on two sides by adjacent buildings and on the other two sides by street and sidewalk. Corner lots are highly visible due to their location. The larger these lots are, the greater their impact on the adjacent blocks. Since a corner lot occupies the intersection of two blocks, it may seem to belong to both blocks or to neither block. Corner lots are also exposed to traffic and passersby from outside the immediate neighborhood and are more likely to experience dumping and vandalism than small lots within residential blocks.

Vacant corner lots occur throughout West Philadelphia. Along with missing teeth, they are the most frequent type of vacant land. There were once many corner stores throughout West Philadelphia. Some of these neighborhood stores still exist, but many have vanished, leaving numerous abandoned corner buildings and vacant corner lots. Vacant corner lots are most common in blocks of rowhouses north of Market Street. Particularly in the Belmont, Mantua, and Mill Creek neighborhoods, there are many blocks with vacant corners, sometimes with more than one corner of an intersection vacant, creating a separation between blocks in what was once a coherent, densely developed neighborhood.

The size and shape of a corner lot depends greatly upon the type of block in which it occurs. In blocks of rowhouses, a single corner lot will be long and narrow, bounded on two sides by the windowless, two-story or three-story building walls of the adjacent houses. Corner lots on blocks with detached houses are likely to be larger

and are overlooked by the windows of the adjacent houses.

Because of its visibility and its location at the entrance to two blocks, the character of the vacant corner lot exerts a great influence on a person's impression of the block and neighborhood. When a corner lot is filled with rubble and debris it gives the adjacent blocks a feeling of decay; when a corner lot is used and maintained, however, it gives the neighborhood a sense of vitality.

There are other features which vary from lot to lot that influence its character and opportunities for improvement. Vacant corner lots are much sunnier than missing teeth of similar size, but location makes some corners sunnier or shadier than others. Lots on the northeast corner are exposed to sun from midday through the afternoon and will be particularly warm. Their southwestern exposure, especially if protected by building walls to the north and east, creates a "sun-pocket" which provides a warm place to sit in cool weather. These will be much hotter in the summer, however. Lots on a southwest corner will, in contrast, be cooler if they are shaded by adjacent buildings during the late morning and late afternoon.

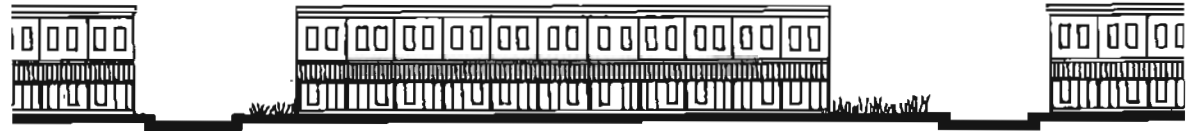
Sometimes corner lots are adjacent to one another, forming one large lot that connects two intersections. Such lots are particularly sunny and have an even more "public" appearance than a single corner lot. Corner lots across the street from one another provide an opportunity to create a sense of gateway into a block or neighborhood. In lots that have been vacant for some time, there



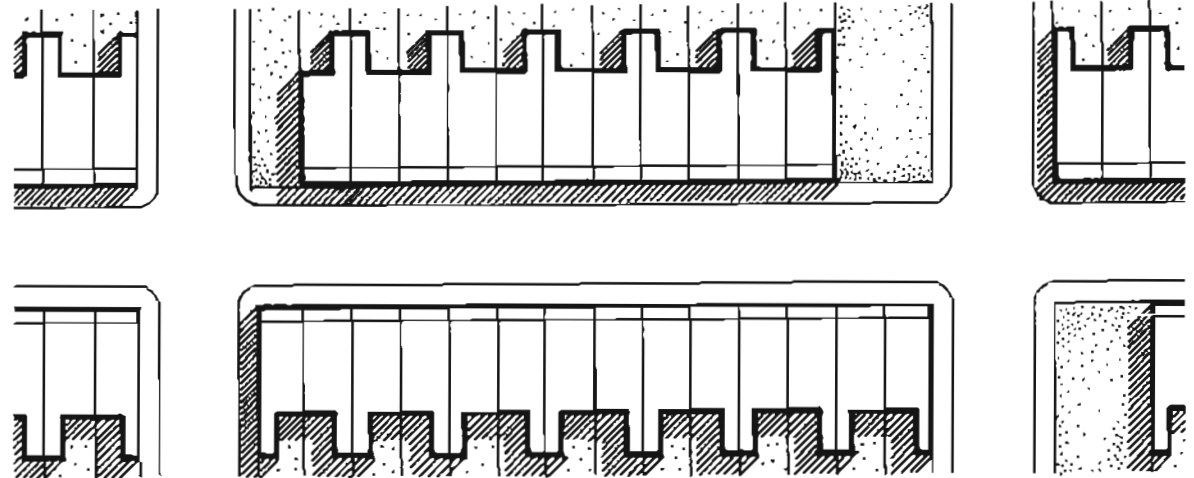
may be mature trees that can be incorporated into the design for the lot.

Improvements to the Vacant Corner. A vacant corner has the potential to serve as a gateway to the block or to become a meeting place for residents from adjacent blocks. On blocks of rowhouses with stoops, porches, or tiny yards, a vacant corner lot provides an opportunity to develop additional outdoor space. This will be particularly important if there is no nearby playground or park. If the corner lot is small, a single person or a few neighbors can clean and clear the lot. A limited investment can make an enormous difference to the appearance of the adjacent blocks. Corner lots require a fence to protect improvements from the casual vandalism of passersby. Usually, a simple, low fence is sufficient to prevent such acts; it serves as a sign that the lot belongs to someone. On large corner lots, a fence may constitute a considerable part of the cost of improvements.

Potential future uses for which vacant corners are appropriate are new building, private garden, meeting place, playlot, outdoor workshop, outdoor market, community garden, parking lot, orchard, and woodland. The particular character of a specific lot, its neighborhood context, the needs and desires of nearby residents, who owns the lot, and available funds will influence which uses are best for that place.



Corner Lot



Plan of Corner Lot

TYPES OF VACANT LAND

Examples. The following places provide examples of how Philadelphia residents have transformed vacant corner lots for a variety of new uses.

New Building: In the 1970s, a fire destroyed a large detached house on the corner of Baring and 36th Streets in Powelton Village. In this neighborhood of large, detached houses with yards and with a playground just two blocks away, there was no need for additional open space. In the mid 1980s, Drexel University built a new house on the corner lot. The size and the shape of the house is similar to others in the neighborhood; its style is modern, but it is in keeping with the nineteenth century homes.

Private Garden: Down the street from the new building described previously, at the corner of 36th and Hamilton Streets, is a corner lot that has been fenced in and planted as a private garden for the house next door on North 36th Street.

Meeting Places: Vegetables and flowers are grown at the Westminster Community Garden, but the main feature of the garden is the meeting place. The corner garden is like an outdoor room, enclosed by a wooden frame draped with wisteria. Within the open walls and vine-covered roof are many treasured objects: a ceramic dragon, a birdbath, a concrete bench with a lion-claw base, old porch chairs, and a grill. The Westminster garden was designed by a student in Penn's Department of Landscape Architecture and built as part of the West Philadelphia Landscape Plan and Greening Project.

The OK Corral, the Leo Donald Memorial Sitting Garden, and the 47th and Upland Community Sitting Garden are all small meeting places on former vacant corners in the West Shore neighborhood. All have benches and plants, but each has its own character, a reflection of the people who created each place and meet there. These gardens were all built under the auspices of Philadelphia Green (for more details on the West Shore Greene Country Towne see *Models of Success: Landscape Improvements and Community Development*).

Community Gardens, Meeting Place, and Path: The Powelton Winter-Summer Garden was started in 1977 by ten families who reclaimed a vacant lot on the corners of Race, 33rd and Winter Streets. A distinguishing feature of the garden is a diagonal path that divides the garden in two and forms a shortcut between the corners of 33rd and Race and Natrona and Summer. The path is the remnant of an old footpath that existed across the lot prior to the formation of the garden. The path connects the eastern part of Powelton Village with routes to Market Street and Drexel University on the south and the commercial area around 36th and Lancaster to the west. Gardeners, with occasional help from students in Drexel fraternities across the street, maintain the path by spreading wood chips and planting flowers along the border. There are also benches for sitting along the path and a bulletin board.

In the Spring of 1988, residents on the 4100 block of Pennsgrove applied to Philadelphia Green for help in creating a community garden on their vacant corner lot. Residents worked closely with Philadelphia Green and faculty and students

in the Department of Landscape Architecture at Penn to design and build the new garden. Today, a sunburst mural overlooks the Pennsgrove Community Garden, a symbol of neighborhood renewal and a reflection of the radiating pattern of paths within the garden. The garden occupies two lots on the corner of 41st and Pennsgrove and is enclosed by a wire fence. Between the fence and the sidewalk is a raised flowerbed. A simple gate, decorated with a wreath, leads into the garden. A series of paths radiate from the center of the garden and define the edges of the garden plots which are filled with flowers and vegetables. A picnic table and benches underneath a trellis at the back of the garden serve as a meeting place for gardeners and visitors.

Playground and Meeting Place: A sign over the entrance forms a gateway to a small park on the corner of 36th and Wallace Streets. The sign announces that the park is dedicated to the people of Mantua and was dedicated in July 1972 as a project jointly supported by the Mantua Community Planners, the Philadelphia Department of Recreation, the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Underneath several large, shady trees are grass, a metal climbing structure for children, and a small open shelter.

Outdoor Market: The corner of Mantua Avenue and 34th Street, just south of the Philadelphia Zoo and over the railroad bridge, is a major gateway into West Philadelphia through which many commuters and West Philadelphia residents pass everyday. On the southwest corner is an outdoor market tended by a single gentleman whose merchandise changes with the season—Christmas

trees in December and t-shirts in summer. The grass on the lot is neatly mowed, and a trailer parked in the middle of the lot provides storage. The lot is enclosed by a chainlink fence and gate from which the proprietor hangs signs and merchandise. Presiding over the whole scene is the imposing, three-storey high figure of Patti La Belle painted on the windowless wall of the rowhouse nextdoor.

Parking Lot: A parking lot at the corner of 36th and Warren Streets just south of Lancaster Avenue provides parking for approximately fifteen cars. The lot is paved with asphalt. A narrow border of grass and trees separates the lot from the sidewalk and improves the appearance of the lot considerably.



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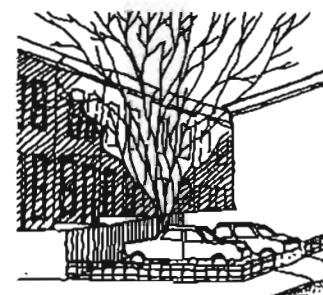
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1. Vacant corner
2. New building
3. Private garden
4. Community garden
5. Meeting place
6. Playlot
7. Outdoor market
8. Parking
9. Orchard

TYPES OF VACANT LAND

Connector

A connector is vacant land that makes a new connection between streets or blocks. Connectors may consist of a single lot, several lots, or an abandoned alley which create a connection between two streets in the middle of a block. The larger the connectors are, the greater their impact on the blocks they connect. Vacant lots that connect blocks of rowhouses create a noticeable gap within those blocks. Vacant lots that connect blocks of detached houses may just seem like a side yard for adjacent houses.

In West Philadelphia, connectors occur primarily in the Mill Creek, Belmont, and Mantua neighborhoods, between blocks of rowhouses. Connectors also occur between major east-west streets, such as Chestnut and Market, and the smaller residential streets behind them, such as Sansom and Ludlow. The connection between large commercial streets and smaller residential blocks creates a corridor that makes the residential streets vulnerable to the noise, traffic, and activity of the commercial area.

The character of a vacant connector depends greatly upon the types of blocks it connects. Connectors that link blocks of rowhouses or rows of stores may be long and narrow, bordered by the blank walls of adjacent buildings. Vacant land that connects blocks of detached houses or large, commercial buildings is wider and more open. The height and proximity of adjacent buildings, the width of the streets, and the orientation of the connector all determine how sunny it is and whether it feels open or enclosed. Wide connectors, for example, receive sunlight throughout the year, but narrow connectors may only have occasional sunny spots.

There are other variations that influence the vacant connector and its opportunities for improvement. In some cases, vacant lots that are perpendicular to each other connect two blocks. Typically, these occur near the corners of blocks and separate the corner building or buildings from the remainder of the block. Connectors in the middle of two blocks are relatively protected, while those on the corner are more exposed. Sometimes an abandoned alley connects two vacant lots, creating an irregular path between blocks. When connectors are larger than one acre, they become vacant blocks. Several of these are in the Market-Walnut corridor in low-lying areas over the Mill Creek sewer or old floodplain.

Improvements to the connector. A connection between two or more blocks creates both opportunities and limitations for improvements. Connectors can serve as a shortcut, meeting place, or playlot for two or more blocks. Such new uses may be particularly needed in dense neighborhoods with busy streets and no park or playground nearby. If the connector links several blocks, a new walkway may be created through the blocks. In any case, it is best if people from each of the connected blocks are involved in planning the improvements. Getting people who may not know each other to cooperate in cleaning, maintaining, and monitoring a shared space may be difficult, particularly in the beginning. Improvements to small connectors are easiest to establish, and modest additions can make a noticeable difference. In larger connectors, more block residents must participate to make the improvement successful.

In some cases, residents do not wish to have a connection between blocks and choose to



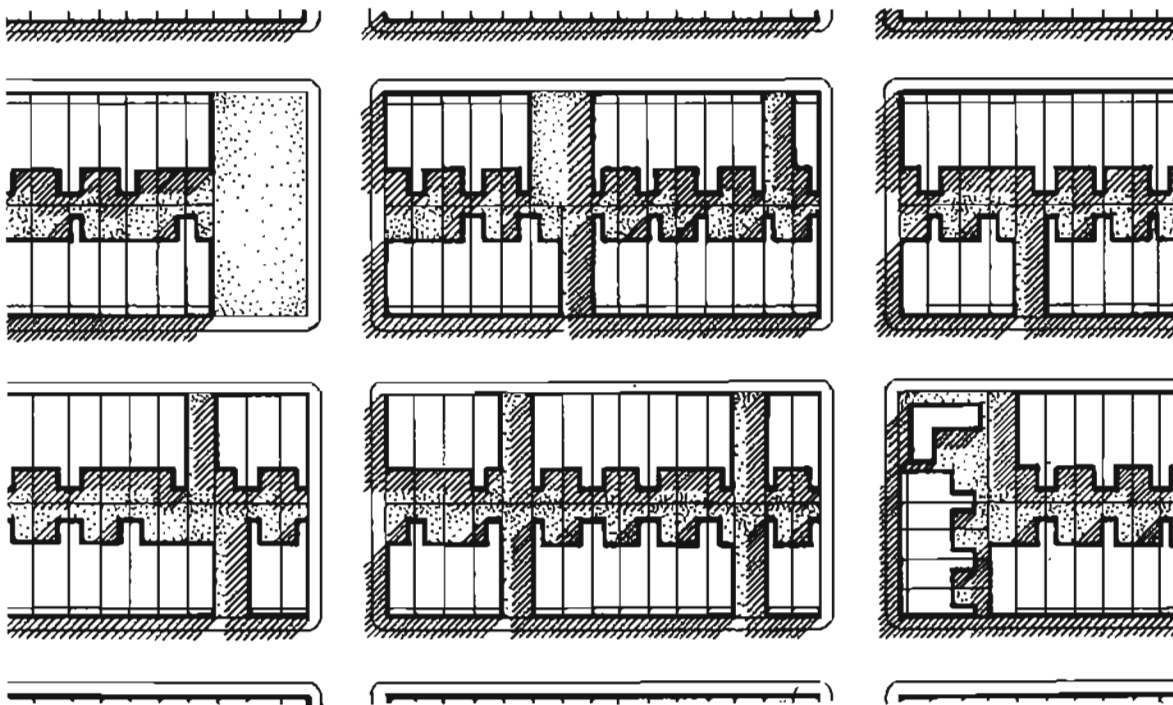
close the connector with a fence. There are many examples of closed connectors in West Philadelphia. In such cases, each side may be reclaimed separately.

Vacant connectors in commercial districts, such as the Market-Walnut corridor, tend to be quite large and will most likely be developed by the City or a private developer. When these connect a busy, commercial street with a small, residential street, care should be taken to develop the residential border at a scale appropriate to the adjacent houses.

Potential future uses for vacant connectors are new buildings, community garden, meeting place, path, playlot, parking lot, orchard, meadow, woodland, and storm drainage and flood control. The particular character of a specific lot, its size, immediate neighborhood, the needs and desires of nearby residents, who owns the lot, and available funds will all influence which use is most appropriate for that place.



Connector

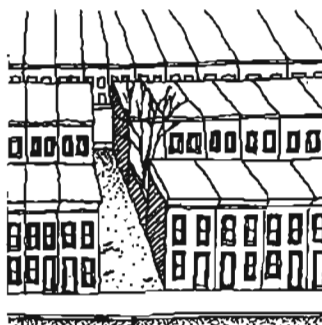


Plan of Connector

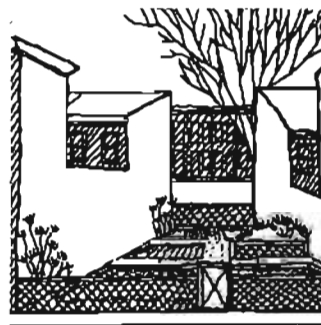
TYPES OF VACANT LAND

Examples. There are many examples throughout West Philadelphia where residents have adapted connectors for a variety of new uses. In most cases, this has been done informally when, for example, a path has been worn by people using the connector as a shortcut, or when a couple of old chairs or sofas have been set out to create a place to meet. In other cases, residents have enclosed the connection to prevent people from passing through and use the fenced-off part of the connector for a private garden or for parking.

The Society Hill Greenway is a walkway that winds through the Society Hill neighborhood from Pine Street to Walnut Street between 4th and 6th Streets. The walkway consists of a brick path, bordered by shrubs, trees, flowers, and ground cover, which sometimes widens into a sitting area with bench or a small neighborhood playground. This network of garden footpaths departs from the main streets and passes through the middle of blocks on land that was once vacant missing teeth and connectors.



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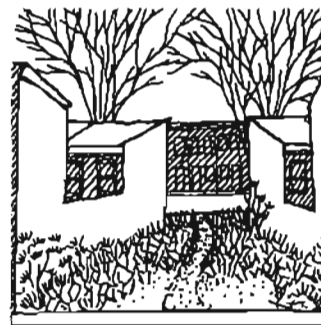
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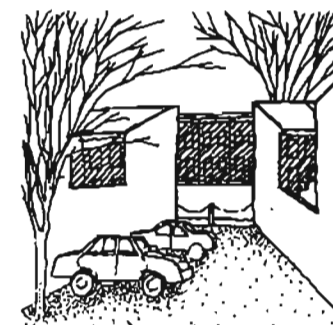
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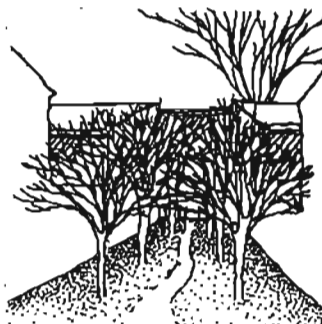
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- 1. Connector
- 2. Community garden
- 3. Meeting place
- 4. Playlot
- 5. Path
- 6. Parking
- 7. Orchard
- 8. Woodland

TYPES OF VACANT LAND

Vacant Block

This type of vacant land occurs when an entire city block or an area of an acre or more is vacant. Vacant blocks may consist of a single property or many, adjacent properties. A vacant block is open and unprotected and often becomes a dump for trash and construction debris. It is highly visible and exerts an enormous impact on the surrounding blocks, especially if it is filled with rubble and trash. Because vacant blocks are usually bounded on at least two sides by streets, they may seem to belong to more than one block or to none.

In West Philadelphia, very few neighborhoods contain vacant blocks. These occur primarily in the Mill Creek and Belmont neighborhoods and in the Market-Walnut commercial district, especially near the University City Science Center. Blocks adjoining vacant blocks often have many vacant lots. In fact, vacant blocks frequently occur in areas with a Swiss-cheese pattern of vacant land and occasionally in areas where there are multiple contiguous vacant blocks.

The size and shape of a vacant block depends on the type of neighborhood within which it is situated. On diagonal streets, like Lancaster Avenue, that cut across the grid of north-south/east-west streets, vacant blocks are small and often irregularly-shaped. In residential areas, vacant blocks are frequently about an acre in size. In these cases, homes may have been abandoned and demolished after destruction by fire, flooding, or subsiding land. In industrial districts or in commercial districts along major streets, vacant blocks are larger. These blocks are often vacant because a large institution or business failed or

relocated, or because the land was condemned and cleared by the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority.

The character of a vacant block depends greatly upon the character of the neighborhood that surrounds it. Overlooked by blocks of rowhouses with porches or tiny front yards, a vacant block appears large and disruptive within an otherwise densely developed neighborhood. Surrounded by industry or warehouses, however, a vacant block may seem smaller and less noticeable. Vacant blocks within a residential neighborhood may be monitored and claimed by the surrounding blocks, while vacant blocks bordered by busy streets or within commercial/industrial areas are often isolated and difficult to claim. Different uses are appropriate for these two contrasting contexts.

There are other features which vary from block to block that influence the character of the vacant block and its opportunities for improvement. In the Mill Creek neighborhood, most vacant blocks lie above the current sewer or filled-in portions of the old floodplain. These vacant blocks resulted when homes and businesses, damaged by subsidence and flooding, were demolished. Vacant land over the sewer or old floodplain is not appropriate for new housing or small businesses and is best developed as playfields, gardens, parking lots or other uses which can be combined with stormwater management. In industrial districts, vacant blocks may have toxic soils, making horticultural uses unsuitable. Successional meadows or woodlands may have grown up on blocks that have been vacant for several years. If these are fenced, cleaned up, and managed, meadows and open

woods can be an attractive, economical use. Large, mature trees can be incorporated into a future design for the lot. Vacant blocks are exposed to sun and wind throughout the year and are therefore particularly warm in summer and cold and windy in winter.

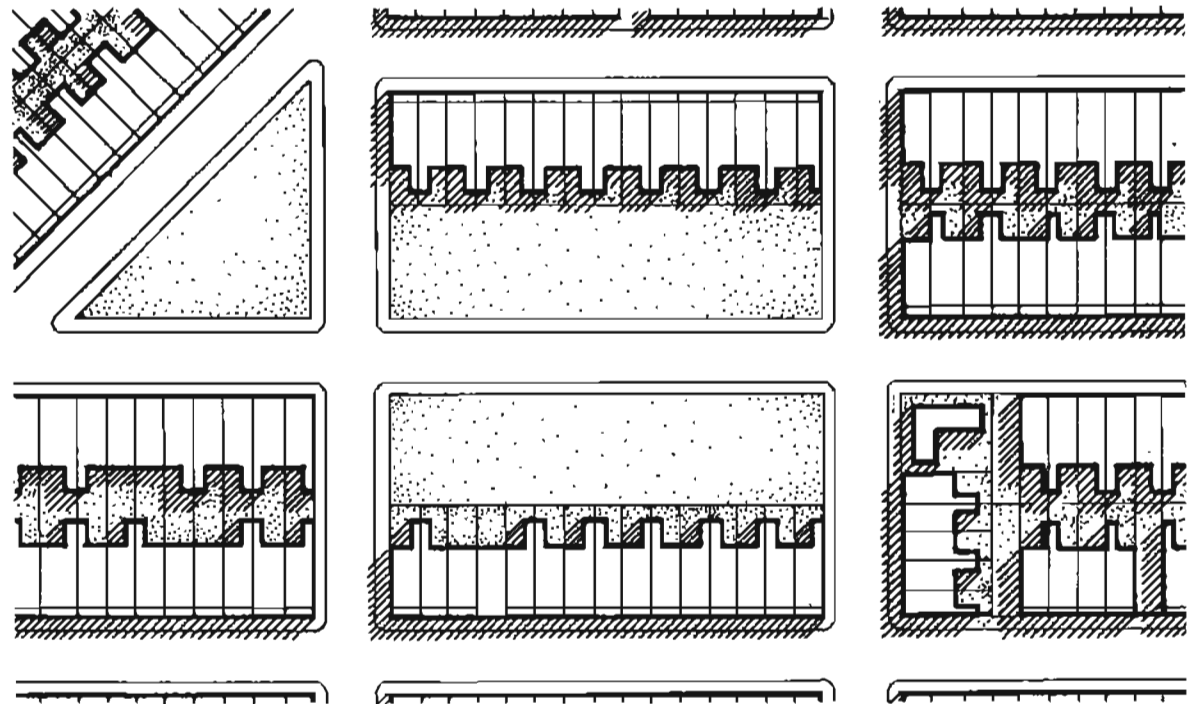


Improvements to the Vacant Block. The large tracts of open land on vacant blocks provide both opportunities and limitations to improvement. This is one of the few vacant land types that is appropriate for large-scale recreation, housing, or commercial development. Such improvements can turn a vacant block into a new focus for a neighborhood. Because a vacant block is large and probably contains multiple properties, it may not be possible for a few individuals or even a block group to develop and maintain the entire block. The assistance of a public agency, community development corporation, or non-profit institution may be required to transform the vacant block into new open space and to help acquire the land and arrange appropriate ownership. New building on the block will almost certainly involve the participation of agencies, institutions, or private developers. Since most vacant blocks are faced by houses or businesses on at least two sides, any plans for new uses should include residents of these adjacent blocks. It is also important to respect the order and scale of buildings on adjacent blocks when planning new buildings.

Potential future uses for a vacant block are new buildings, community garden, playfield, parking lot, outdoor market, orchard, meadow, woodland, and storm drainage and flood control. Given the large size of a vacant block, it may accommodate several of these uses. The particular character and size of the specific block, its neighborhood context, the needs and desires of nearby residents, who owns the properties on the block, and available funds will influence which uses are most appropriate for that place.



Vacant Block



Plan of Vacant Block

TYPES OF VACANT LAND

Examples. The following places provide examples of how Philadelphia residents have transformed vacant blocks for a variety of new uses.

New Buildings: Carriage Lane is a development of twenty-two townhouses on the mostly vacant block south of Hamilton Street between 31st and 32nd Streets. The three-story, townhouses are of similar scale and character as surrounding houses. The development includes garages and shared parking to the rear of the units, although this results in a lack of private yards.

New Buildings, Meeting Places, and Playlots: New townhouses on a former vacant block on Market Street between 39th and 40th Streets were arranged to form interior courts that open onto the street, each with a playlot and place to meet. The front doors of each house face this court, and the front windows overlook the play area.

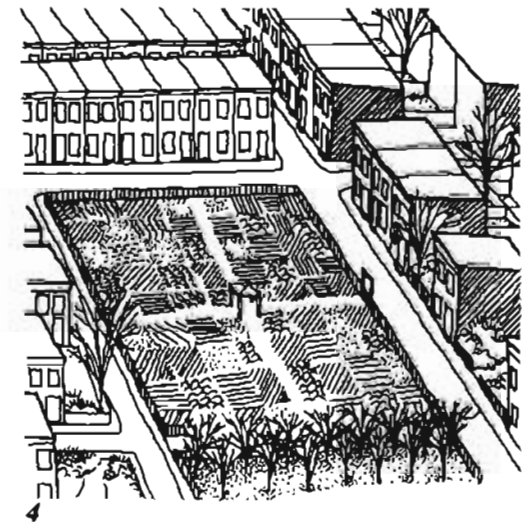
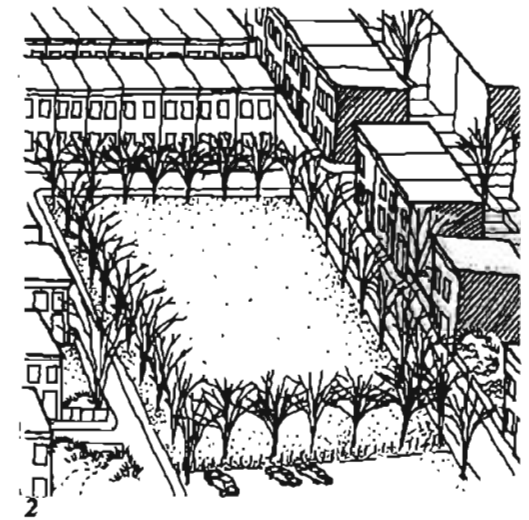
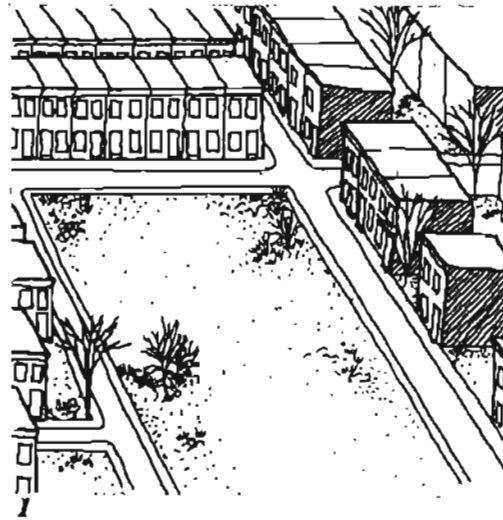
Community Garden, Playground, and Path: A small playground and enormous community garden fill a large block on North 52nd between Poplar and Wyalusing Streets. The playground has swings and other play equipment, as well as several benches. It has a hard asphalt surface and is enclosed by a fence. On weekdays, vendors sell fruits and vegetables on the corner, using part of the playground's fence to secure their stands. The community garden takes up most of the block. It is split into two parts, each of which is surrounded by a fence. A path between the two fences permits people to cross from Poplar to Wyalusing without entering the gardens. This path follows the course of what used to be a small alley named North Wilton Street.

Playfields: A large municipal playfield with lights for nighttime play occupies a large block between Woodland and Grays Ferry Avenues and 47th and 48th Streets. The block was once occupied by the large buildings of a Home for Incurables.

Woodland: Small woodlands have been planted on vacant lots in several American cities. In Oakland, California and Boston, Massachusetts, such projects have been part of educational programs for elementary school students. In Oakland, children planted a woodland on a vacant lot near their school. Several class sessions introduced the children to how trees grow and reproduce, the importance of trees and forests, and how to plant and care for trees. Following these classes, the children formed small teams, each of which had the responsibility for planting one tree and caring for it over the following year.

Outdoor Market: In London, England, a large vacant block on a busy street in the Camden neighborhood afforded the opportunity for a special type of outdoor market. The Camden Garden Centre is both a place to buy plants and garden supplies and a training center for unemployed youths. A tall, dense, green hedge forms the outer boundary of the market. Inside, plants on display are arranged as part of a garden, organized by types of garden environments: plants for shade, plants for sun, plants to climb walls and trellises, plants for water, etc. The staff of the garden center are trainees who take classes two days a week in horticulture and garden construction and maintenance. A parking lot behind the garden center accommodates customers with cars and delivery trucks (for a more detailed description of the Camden Garden Centre see

Models of Success: Landscape Improvements and Community Development).



1. Vacant block
2. Playfield and parking
3. New buildings, private gardens, playground, and meeting place
4. Community garden and orchard

TYPES OF VACANT LAND

Swiss Cheese

This type of vacant land occurs when there are nearly as many or even more vacant lots on a block as there are buildings. Swiss cheese vacancies form irregular patterns of open land within one or more city blocks. Individually, the vacant lots may consist of missing teeth, corner lots, connectors, and vacant blocks. Taken together, however, they form the Swiss cheese pattern of vacant land. Because of the large number of vacant lots, this condition is quite visible within the surrounding neighborhood and often affects several adjacent blocks.

In West Philadelphia, this pattern of vacant land occurs mainly north of Market Street, particularly in the Belmont, Mantua, and Mill Creek neighborhoods. In many cases, the Swiss-cheese pattern occurs within several adjacent blocks, roughly following the buried Mill Creek stream. The impact of the Swiss-cheese vacant land type is greater than individual missing teeth, corner lots, connectors, and vacant blocks because the large number of vacant properties creates an appearance of extensive deterioration.

The character of the Swiss-cheese pattern depends upon the type of blocks in which it occurs. On blocks of rowhouses or rows of stores, the lots may be a mixture of single, long, narrow lots and several adjacent vacant lots. On blocks of detached houses, apartment blocks, or commercial buildings, the vacant lots are likely to be larger.

There are variations that influence the Swiss-cheese pattern of vacant land and its opportunities for improvement. Since the Swiss-cheese pattern is a collection of missing teeth, vacant corners, connectors, and vacant blocks, it

therefore includes lots of varying sizes, shapes, and exposure. Narrow lots in the middle of a block are more private than corner lots and are shaded by adjacent houses. When there are several adjacent lots, the space is sunnier. Sometimes there are many small missing teeth on a block; in this case, residents of adjacent houses may adopt the lot next door for private gardens, outdoor workspace, or for offstreet parking. When individual lots are large, reclamation may require a group effort and entail some sort of joint ownership. In lots that have been vacant for some time, there may be mature trees that could be incorporated into a future use for the lot.

In the Mill Creek neighborhood, most Swiss-cheese blocks lie above the current sewer or filled-in portions of the old floodplain. These vacancies resulted when homes and businesses damaged by subsidence and flooding were demolished. Vacant land over the old floodplain or sewer is not appropriate for new housing or small businesses, and is best developed as playfields, gardens, parking lots or other uses which can be combined with stormwater management.

Improvements to the lots. The relatively large scale of this vacant land pattern provides both opportunities and limitations for improvement. Because the Swiss-cheese pattern consists of vacant lots of different sizes, shapes, and character, many different uses can be accommodated. Reclamation of these lots may occur gradually, over the years, the result of actions by many different people, both as individuals and in small groups. More rapid reclamation over a short period of time will have a

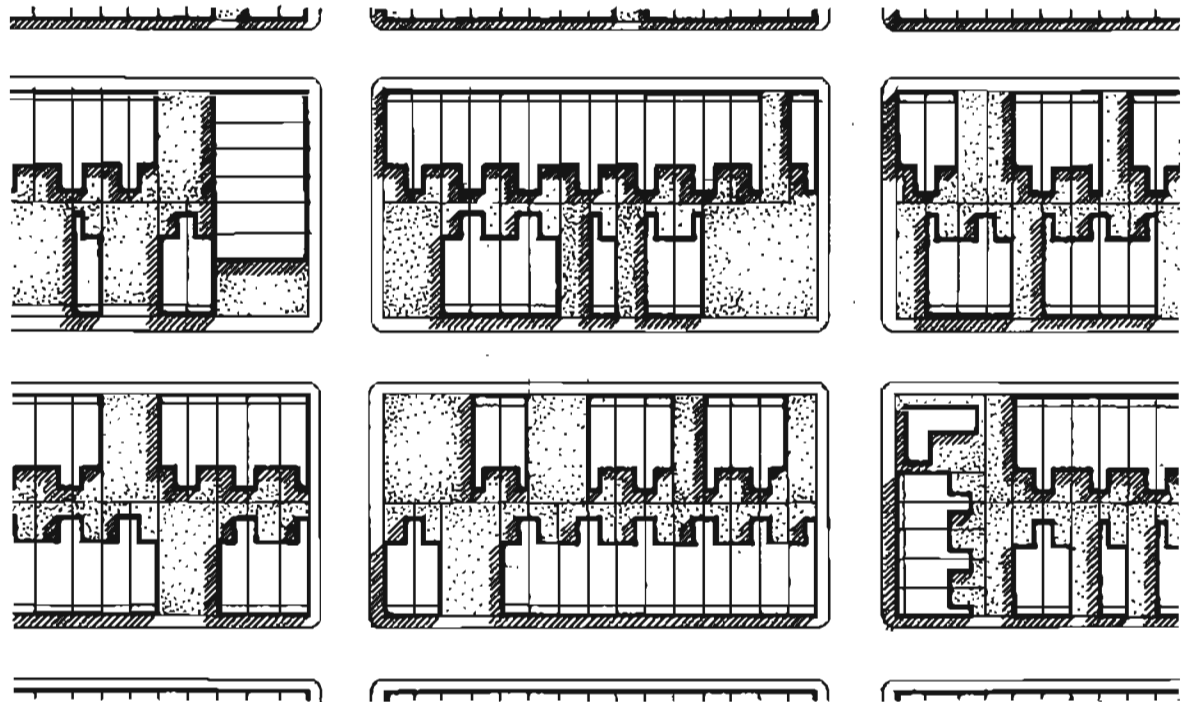


large impact on the surrounding neighborhood, but requires more organization and the participation of a community development corporation, public agency, or non-profit institution.

Potential future uses for this type of vacant land are new buildings, private gardens, community gardens, meeting places, paths, playlots, outdoor workshops, outdoor markets, parking lots, orchards, meadow, and woodland. Several of these uses may be accommodated within the many vacant lots that make up this type. The particular character and configuration of the specific lots, the surrounding neighborhood, the needs and desires of nearby residents, the owners of lots, and available funds will all influence which uses are most appropriate for that place.



Swiss Cheese



Plan of Swiss Cheese

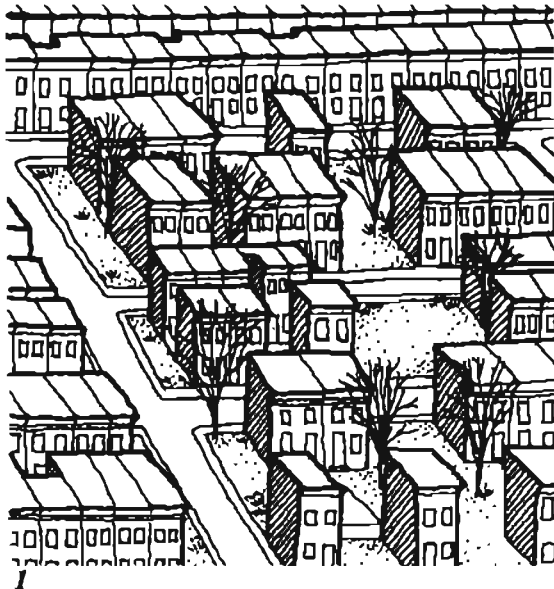
TYPES OF VACANT LAND

Examples. The following places provide examples of how Philadelphia residents have transformed a Swiss-cheese pattern of vacant lots for a variety of new uses.

Private Gardens, Community Garden, and Playlot: In 1984, the 2500 block of Hope Street was like many of the other blocks in its neighborhood; half the block consisted of trash-filled vacant lots. Some of the lots now have vegetable gardens, while other lots have a playlot, swimming pool, or picnic table. Most of the lots are now each owned by individual residents on the street, but one garden, the *Jardin de la Comunidad*, is a community garden (see "*This Garden is a Town*" and *Models of Success* for a more detailed description of Hope Street).

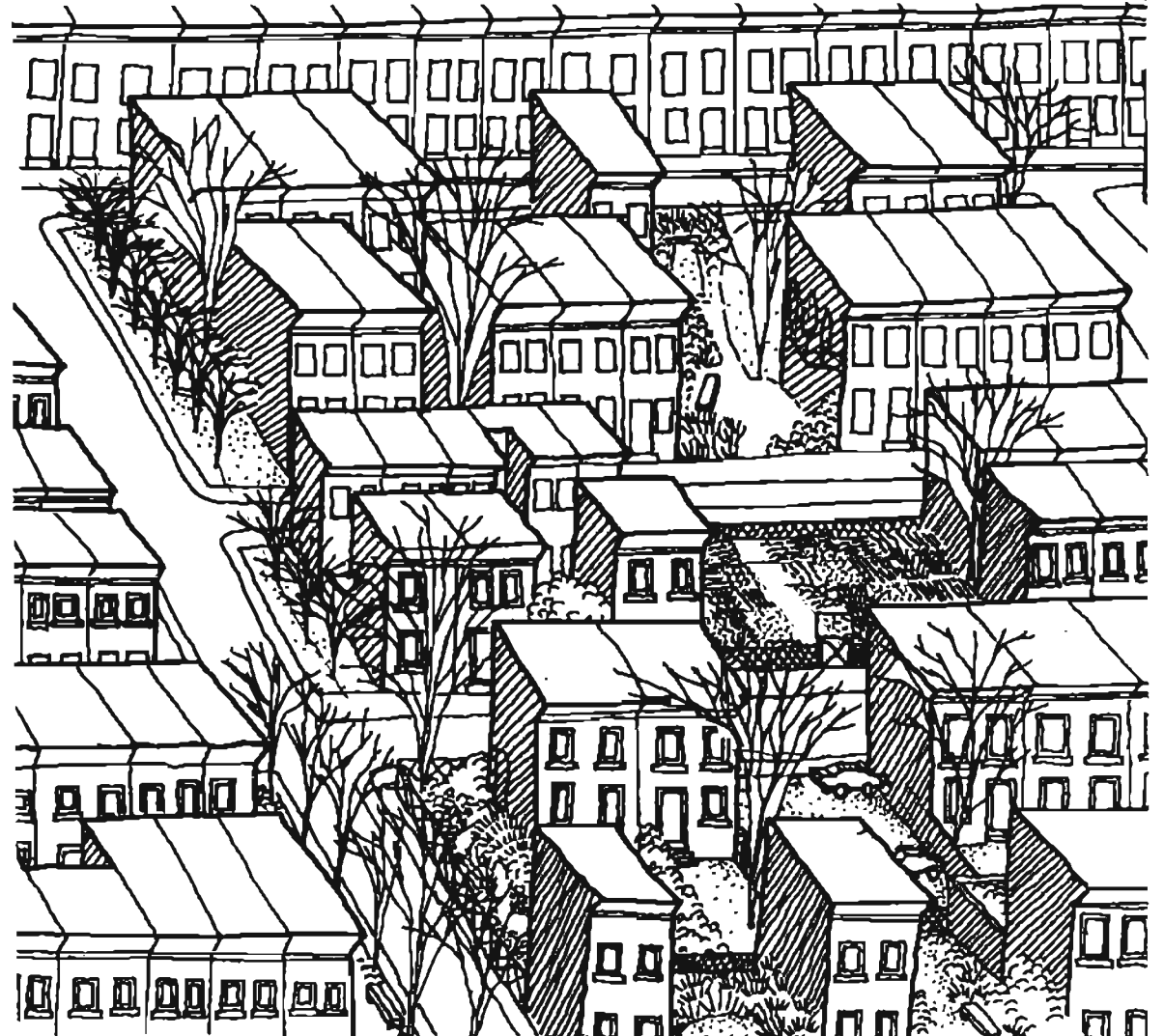
Private Gardens, Community Gardens, Playlots, and Meeting Places: West Shore is a small neighborhood bounded by Woodland and Grays Ferry Avenues, and 45th and 47th Streets. In 1982, West Shore became Philadelphia Green's third "Greene Countrie Towne." The Green Countrie Towne program, named after William Penn's seventeenth century vision for Philadelphia, is a twentieth century vision for how the social impact of landscape projects in a single neighborhood can tie a neighborhood together--"visually through greening, and socially through a network." At one time, there were over 100 vacant houses and lots in the West Shore neighborhood. Today, only a few vacant houses remain, and vacant lots have been replaced by gardens on every block; their uses vary from playlots and barbecue pits to gardens for vegetables, flowers, and sitting (see "Meeting Place" for a description of several of these gardens

and the report *Models of Success: Landscape Improvements and Community Development* for a more detailed description of West Shore).



1. Swiss cheese: a combination of missing teeth, vacant corners, connectors, and vacant blocks

2. Vacant lots reclaimed for different uses: private gardens, community gardens, meeting places, playlots, parking, and orchard



2

TYPES OF VACANT LAND

Multiple Contiguous Vacant Blocks

Multiple, contiguous vacant blocks create a hole in the urban fabric. This pattern is distinguished from the Swiss-cheese pattern by the large size of the vacancies that comprise it. Whereas the Swiss-cheese pattern may include missing teeth, vacant corners, and small connectors, as well as an occasional block, this pattern includes vacant blocks of an acre or more. Bounded on many sides by streets, the land is open and unprotected and often becomes a dump for trash and construction debris. Multiple contiguous vacant blocks are highly visible due to their size and their impact is great. That impact is felt not only on the adjacent blocks, but also extends into adjacent neighborhoods. This phenomenon is of concern not only to neighborhood residents, but to the city as a whole, for it represents and reveals major problems whose solution is beyond the scope of individual residents and local groups.

In West Philadelphia, only the Mill Creek neighborhood and parts of the Market-Walnut commercial district contain multiple, connected vacant blocks. Except for the blocks near the University City Science Center that were cleared by the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority in the 1960s (many of which have since been built upon), this pattern is associated with the Mill Creek floodplain. The Mill Creek is a large stream that was buried in city sewers in the late 1800s. The streambed was filled in, and roads and houses were built on top, but the creek still flows beneath the city. In the years since the floodplain was filled, the land has settled, damaging many homes and businesses. Cracks in the sewer also allow water to saturate the soil, so many buildings in the floodplain have wet basements. The

expense involved in the upkeep of buildings in these areas probably contributed to their demise. Eventually, entire blocks of housing and industry were abandoned and demolished, especially where buildings had been constructed over the sewer. In the 1960s, the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority cleared land in the Mill Creek neighborhood and built public housing in these low-lying areas. Today, much of this housing is abandoned or in poor repair, subject to the same problems of periodic flooding and subsidence that plagued the former houses. Other land remains vacant. Other low spots in the Mill Creek floodplain lie between Walnut and Market Streets from 43rd to 47th Streets. Here also are contiguous vacant blocks.

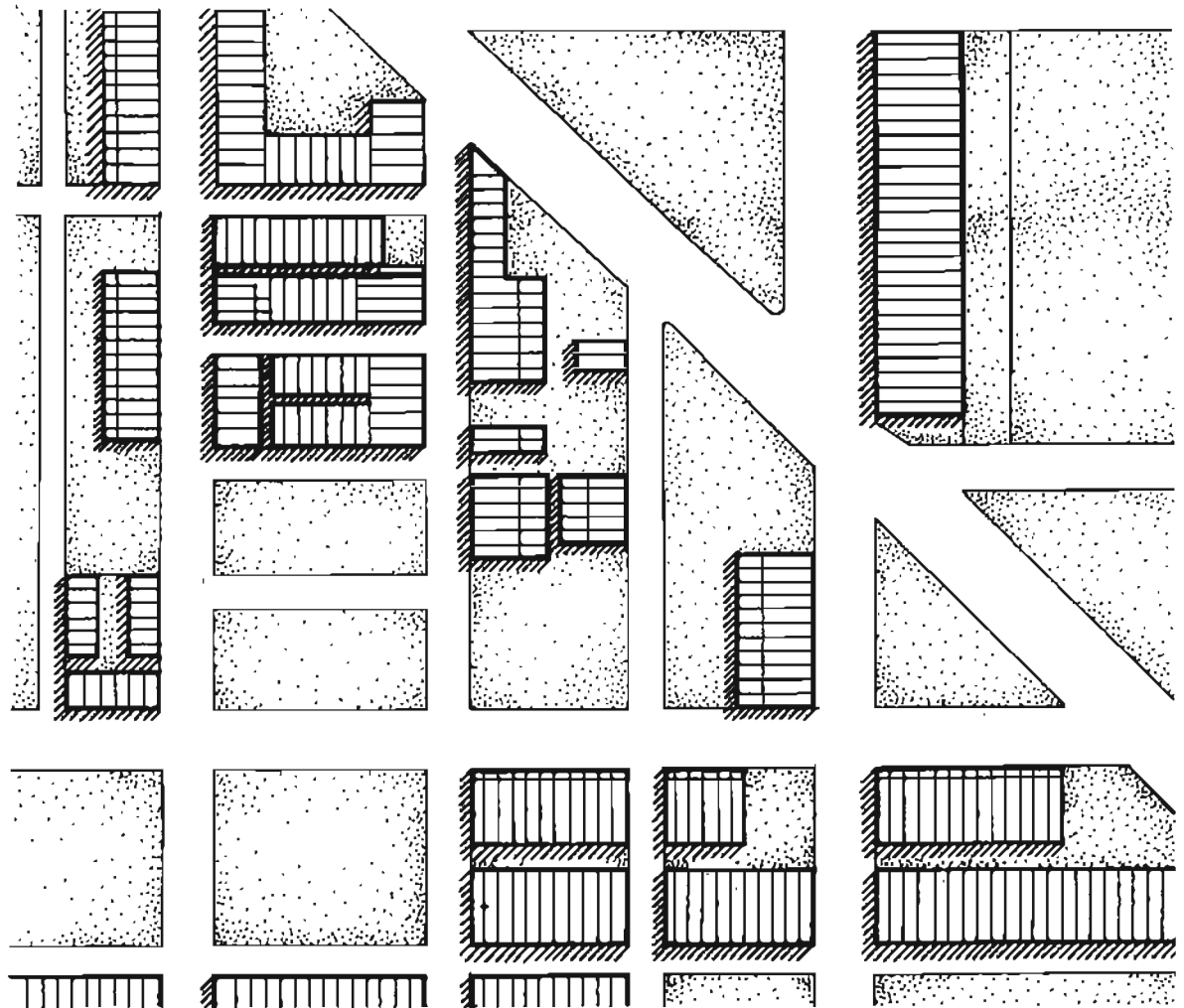
Since multiple contiguous vacant blocks are quite large and extend over a number of blocks, their character is similar, whether in a residential or an industrial neighborhood. These vacant blocks are quite open and exposed to the sun during the entire year. Weeds from vacant blocks encroach upon neglected, broken sidewalks and streets. Contiguous vacant blocks create a desolate landscape, one difficult to revive through the efforts of neighborhood residents without the aid of city and regional interests.

Improvements to Multiple Contiguous Vacant Blocks. Multiple, contiguous vacant blocks are a great opportunity. They cover a large area, and their redevelopment, whether for large-scale recreation, housing, or commercial uses, has the potential to transform the surrounding neighborhood. Because contiguous vacant blocks comprise such a large amount of land, probably under multiple ownership, redevelopment will



almost certainly require the participation of public agencies, institutions, and perhaps private developers.

Potential future uses for this type of vacant land include a combination of new buildings, community gardens, meeting places, playlots, playgrounds, playfields, parking lots, outdoor markets, paths, orchards, meadows, woodlands, and storm drainage and flood control. The particular character of the vacant blocks, their neighborhood context, the needs and desires of nearby residents, who owns the properties, and available funds will influence which uses are best for that place.



Plan of Multiple Contiguous Vacant Blocks

TYPES OF VACANT LAND

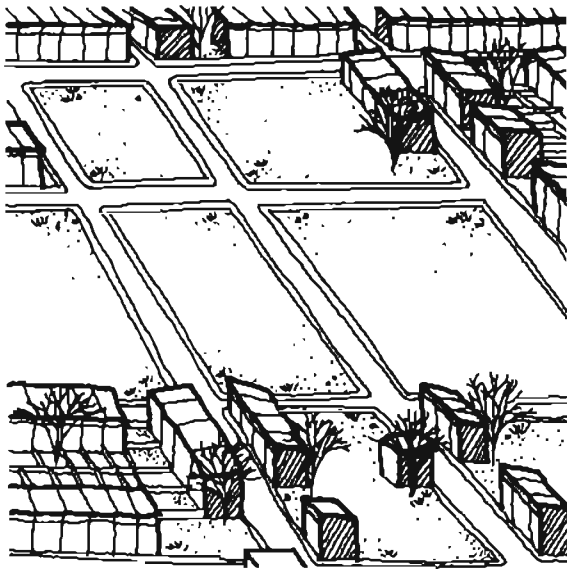
Examples. The following places provide examples of how Philadelphia has transformed multiple vacant blocks for a variety of new uses.

New Buildings, Meeting Places, Playlots, and Parking Lots: The Haddington Townhouses occupy several adjacent blocks between 54th and 55th Streets and Poplar, Wyalusing, and Westminster Streets that were once occupied by houses and mills. The brick rowhouses are two stories high, with front doors facing the street. Behind the houses, on the interior of each block, are parking lots and landscaped meeting places, playlots, and common lawn.

Playgrounds and Playfields: The Mill Creek Park cuts a diagonal path across several blocks of the Mill Creek neighborhood, following the underground course of the Mill Creek sewer. This land was once occupied with rowhouses much like those still standing on adjacent streets. When the park was built, streets were realigned, and several streets now dead-end into the park. The park includes playgrounds for small children, playfields, basketball courts, and paved areas for bicycle riding and skateboarding. Benches, covered shelters, and other areas for meeting are also included, in addition to paths that serve as short cuts for people in the surrounding blocks.

New Buildings: An Unsuccessful Example. The Mill Creek Public Housing is an example of poorly located and poorly designed new buildings. In the 1950s, several blocks of rowhouses and vacant lots between Brown, Westminster, 47th, and 49th Streets were torn down and replaced by low rise and high rise public housing. The units include none of the features of houses on the

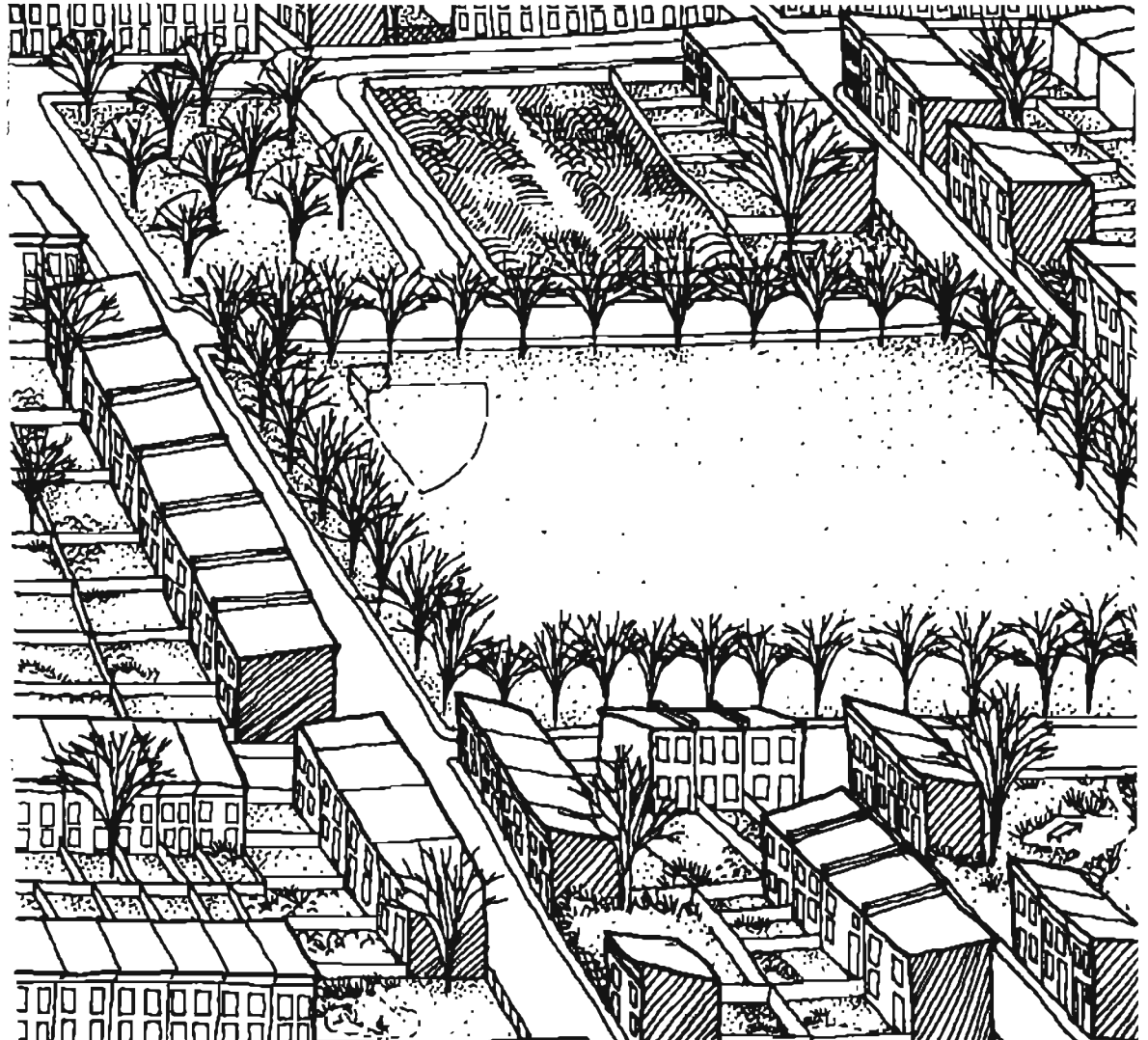
surrounding blocks, such as porches or clearly defined yards. They provide no intermediate place like a porch or a stoop between the private space of the house and the public space of the street, no refuge from which to sit and watch the street. They provide no place to garden. Even worse, the new housing was built over the old Mill Creek floodplain. Although the creek itself was buried in a sewer, the land around it is still subject to subsidence and flooding. These conditions led to deterioration and abandonment of the previous buildings in this area and have continued to affect the new buildings over the last thirty years. Today much of the "new" housing is deteriorated or abandoned.



1

1. Multiple, contiguous blocks

2. Vacant blocks reclaimed for different purposes: new buildings, private gardens, community gardens, meeting places, orchard, and playfield



2

RECLAIMING VACANT LAND

COMMON FEATURES

There are many potential uses for vacant urban land. These are as diverse as the purposes and needs of the city's citizens, institutions, and corporations. Many vacant lands in West Philadelphia will be redeveloped as new buildings for homes, businesses, and institutions. Much of the land, however, will remain open, and this study focuses primarily upon the many options that exist for the new urban landscape. These potential uses range from gardens to playfields, from outdoor markets to meadows and woodlands, from parking lots to parks that also hold rainwater. The people who will create these places and use them are equally diverse; they range from individuals who want to improve their own block, to neighborhood organizations, businessmen, institutions, and public agencies.

Despite the variety of potential uses and sponsors and the diverse sizes, shapes, and locations of vacant lots, there are certain common purposes and common features. All of the new uses will provide settings for the fulfillment of human needs that cannot be met by buildings alone. All belong to a territory and comprise a territory within themselves. All have boundaries, whether these are sidewalks, fences, or building walls. Many provide a path for people to move from one place to another, most will have an entrance or gateway, some may form the gateway to a block or neighborhood. Some future uses will have all of these features and additional ones, while others will have only a few. The form these features take will vary with the type of vacant lot and its intended use, but the role these features play remains the same.

Claiming Territory. One of the most disturbing things about vacant lots is that they are a sign of abandonment and neglect. Untended vacant lots contribute to an overall sense of neglect in the blocks and larger neighborhoods in which they occur. Even when other properties are well cared for, a single littered, unkempt vacant lot gives the entire block a sense of shabbiness. Abandoned lots are perceived as no man's land and frequently become dumping grounds, particularly when the lot is large or on a corner.

Reclaiming a vacant lot entails literally claiming it as territory that belongs to somebody. This may be done by simply keeping the lot clean and marking the boundaries of the lot or by putting the lot to some clearly visible use, such as a garden, sitting area, or a playground. Vacant lots that occur as "missing teeth" within a block of houses are readily perceived as belonging to that block or to an adjacent house. A corner lot, because it is not so readily perceived as belonging to someone, requires more effort to establish a sense of territory than a missing tooth on the interior of a block. It may be necessary to construct a fence around a corner lot if those who reclaimed the lot do not wish it to be used by "outsiders." It is even more difficult to claim vacant lands that cover whole city blocks or where there are relatively few adjacent buildings. Without a fence that declares ownership or without a landscape that is clearly maintained for public or private use, these large vacant lands become dumping grounds, for they seem to belong to no one.

Whether a lot seems to belong to someone, be it an individual or a group, also

depends upon how intensely it is used. People claim a place through their use of it--for meeting, for play, for gardening, or other activities. Even when there is no one present, evidence of personal property or making and building will communicate a sense that the place belongs to someone.

Boundary and Gateway. Besides the treatment of the land itself, whether it be a garden, a playfield, a meadow, or a small park, the character of the boundary is probably the most important feature in claiming the vacant lot as a cared-for territory. A boundary fence controls whether and where one can enter. One can talk across a short wall or fence, for example, while a tall fence or wall discourages communication with those within. The character of boundaries and gates is a way of communicating to whom a place belongs and who is welcome. In this sense they serve the same purpose as signs: "please come in;" "all welcome, please do not pick the flowers;" "no trespassing." Boundaries and gates should therefore be designed deliberately to clearly communicate the intended message. An open gate is an invitation to walk inside; a locked gate shuts out those people who do not belong; while a closed, unlocked gate signals that outsiders may be welcome as guests.

Path. A path connects two or more places and can serve as a shortcut, between a neighborhood and a local school, for example. A single narrow lot creates a path from one block to another, while a much larger vacant lot, or series of contiguous vacant lots, can include a path within them. A path can also join many places and several neighborhoods. Sidewalks do this and so do paths within parks. The width of a path, its length, the places it connects, and whether it is enclosed by a

gate or open to all affect who uses the path. The shape of a path also conveys a message; a meandering path invites you to take your time.

Meeting Place. A meeting place is a place where people come together, for two friends to talk or for a large group to gather, such as a block party. A meeting place may just be a couple of chairs beneath the shade of a tree or it may be marked by a more elaborate, built structure like a gazebo or trellis with a protected area underneath. A low fence may be a place where people within a garden meet and talk with people passing by on the sidewalk. Small gardens can be a meeting place, and larger gardens or parks may include one or more meeting places within them. A vacant lot can be transformed into a place for people to gather, especially in densely built neighborhoods with no parks or community centers.

Refuge and Prospect. Landscape projects can provide a refuge within densely built neighborhoods of streets and rowhouses: a cool, shady place on hot summer days or a warm, sunny spot to sit on a cool early spring or late fall day. Transforming a vacant lot into a garden or meeting area can provide neighborhood residents with a small territory to call their own, a refuge where they can feel secure and and a prospect from which to watch the comings and goings on the street. A refuge or a prospect can also be created within a garden, playlot, or meeting place. People like to feel protected and also to see and be seen; a vine-covered trellis or a tree with a bench underneath and with a view of the garden are found frequently in places people create for themselves. Children like to crawl into enclosed places where they are hidden from the eyes of

adults; they also like to climb high to get a view over what's going on. Playlots and playgrounds that provide both small, enclosed places and mounds and towers provide for both sorts of play.

Sign. A sign conveys a message. "The Top o' 46th Street Sitting Garden" identifies a place. "Keep Out" or "Visitors Welcome" tell people what is expected of them. A wall mural, like the painting of mountains at Aspen Farms, can also serve as a sign of the specific identity of the place. A fence can also be a sign that tells people what to do. For example, a low fence with an open gate is a sign that people are welcome in the garden, whereas a high fence with a locked gate tells people to keep out. Reclaiming vacant land is a sign of neighborhood renewal and commitment. Lots cleared of trash, with fences and flower borders, vegetable plots, and benches are all signs to people passing on the street that neighbors here care for their block.

POTENTIAL USES

Vacant land may be an eyesore within a neighborhood, but it also affords an opportunity to reshape the neighborhood and meet the needs of its residents. The future use of a vacant lot depends upon who owns it and what their intentions are and upon the needs and resources of those who propose to develop it. Many vacant lands are owned by the city and can be acquired at modest cost. Many other vacant lots are owned by absentee landlords who may have fallen behind in taxes and be willing to sell the property or give permission for its reuse. Some vacant lots, however, particularly those in commercial areas, near large institutions, or in gentrifying neighborhoods may be the property of speculators or owners who intend to develop the land sometime in the future.

The following descriptions are intended to stimulate thinking about potential future uses for vacant urban land. They represent a range of uses for different types of owners or users. Private gardens and community gardens, for example, are likely to be initiated by nearby residents, while a flood control project would be implemented by a public agency. Although described separately here, these potential uses are not mutually exclusive, but could be integrated with one another. An owner who wished to hold land for future use, for example, could use the land for a parking lot or playfield in the meantime. A community garden can also function as a meeting place and may include a playlot.

RECLAIMING VACANT LAND

New Buildings

Vacant land affords an opportunity for the construction of new buildings for housing, institutions, and businesses. New construction for institutions and business is most likely to occur near existing institutions like the University of Pennsylvania, the University City Science Center, Presbyterian Hospital, or adjacent to existing churches and other local organizations. Construction of new stores, office buildings, small factories and warehouses may be built in existing commercial and industrial areas. The vast majority of vacant land in West Philadelphia, however, is in low-income, residential neighborhoods. The construction of new, low-income housing will depend upon the sponsorship of public agencies and private organizations.

Whatever their purpose, new buildings represent an opportunity to repair and restore the neighborhoods within which they are built; they should therefore be designed to fit within that context. As part of urban renewal during the 1960's, many blocks of rowhouses in the Mill Creek neighborhood were demolished and replaced by public housing projects. Some of these projects are large, free-standing apartment towers that give residents little contact with the ground or with each other, and that have created environments alien and separate from the surrounding neighborhood.

Features of New Buildings. New buildings in residential neighborhoods should be similar in scale to existing buildings and should reflect the qualities of the block or blocks within which they fit. *Shaping the Block*, a report in this series, describes the types of blocks that occur in West Philadelphia, their features and social qualities.

Features such as porches, stoops, and front yards, for example, provide settings for sitting and watching, for meeting, and for claiming territory that are important contributions to the social character of a block.

Establishing New Buildings. Most often new buildings will be built by institutions like universities or hospitals, by city agencies like the Philadelphia Housing Development Corporation, or by private developers who own the vacant land.

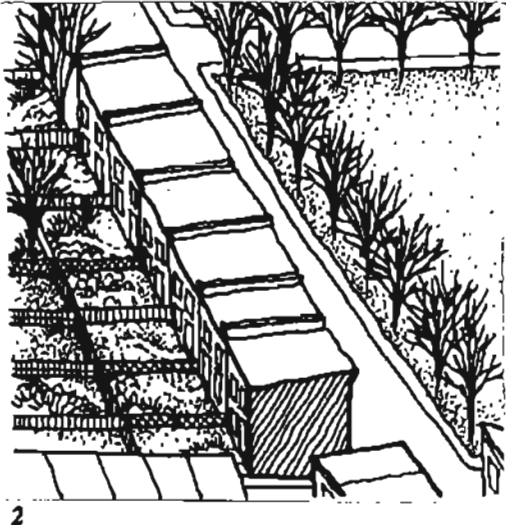
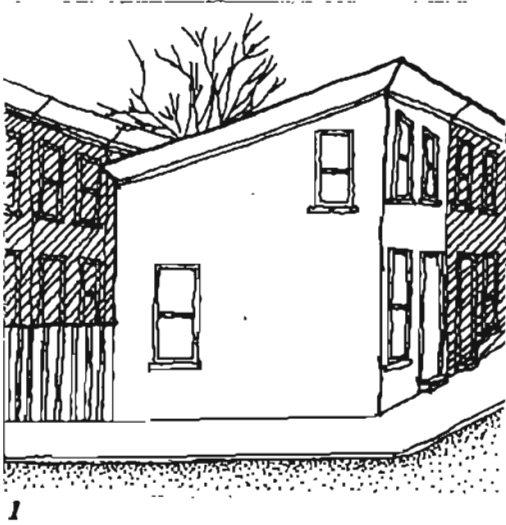
Examples. In the 1970s, a fire destroyed a large detached house on the corner of Baring and 36th Streets. In this neighborhood of large, detached houses with yards and with a playground just two blocks away, there was no need for additional open space. In the mid 1980s, Drexel University built a new house on the corner lot. The size and the shape of the house is similar to others in the neighborhood. Its style is modern, but it is in keeping with the nineteenth century homes.

Carriage Lane is a development of twenty-two townhouses on the mostly vacant block south of Hamilton Street between 31st and 32nd Streets. The three-story, townhouses are of similar scale and character as surrounding houses. The development includes garages and shared parking to the rear of the units, although this results in a lack of private yards.

New townhouses on a former vacant block on Market Street between 39th and 40th Streets were arranged to form interior courts that open onto the street, each with a playlot and place to meet. The front doors and windows of each house face this court and overlook the play area.

The Haddington Townhouses occupy several adjacent blocks between 54th and 55th Streets and Poplar, Wyalusing, and Westminster Streets that were once occupied by houses and mills. The brick rowhouses are two stories high, with front doors facing the street. Behind the houses, on the interior of each block, are parking lots and landscaped meeting places, playlots, and common lawn.

An Unsuccessful Example. The Mill Creek Public Housing is an example of poorly located and poorly designed new buildings. In the 1950s, several blocks of rowhouses and vacant lots between Brown and Westminster and 47th and 49th Streets were torn down and replaced by low-rise and high-rise public housing. The units include none of the features of houses on the surrounding blocks, such as porches or clearly defined yards. They provide no intermediate place like a porch or a stoop between the private space of the house and the public space of the street, no refuge from which to sit and watch the street. They provide no place to garden. Even worse, the new housing was built over the old Mill Creek floodplain, which was filled in during the late nineteenth century. Although the creek itself was buried in a sewer, the land around it is still subject to subsidence and flooding. These conditions led to deterioration and abandonment of the previous buildings in this area and have continued to affect the new buildings over the past thirty years. Today much of the "new" housing is deteriorated or abandoned (for more information see the section on "Multiple Contiguous Vacant Blocks" in this report).



- 1. *New rowhouse on a vacant corner*
- 2. *New buildings on a vacant block*
- 3. *New buildings and other uses on multiple vacant blocks*
- 4. *New rowhouse on a missing tooth*

RECLAIMING VACANT LAND

Private Garden

A private garden provides its owners with a private place to be outside which they can shape to their own needs and taste. In neighborhoods of single houses and duplexes, like Powelton, Spruce Hill, and Garden Court, many homes have private gardens. But in other neighborhoods, primarily those with rowhouses and large apartment buildings, there may be no private outdoor space except for a porch or a stoop. In neighborhoods of rowhouses with tiny yards or no yards at all, the use of a vacant lot for a private garden fills an important need. Although the benefit is primarily to one household, the neighbors also benefit from the removal of a nuisance and its replacement with an attractive garden. In blocks with detached houses and larger yards, it is less likely that adjacent owners will wish to extend their yard to include the vacant property, especially if the lot is large and subject to substantial taxes. A single missing tooth or corner lot is more likely to be adopted for a private garden than large vacancies that include multiple properties.

Features of the Private Garden. A private garden is the territory of a single person or family and reflects their activities, hobbies, and habits. It may be filled with flower beds or it may have a large lawn or patio. It may contain swings, a swimming pool, a barbecue, or picnic tables.

Establishing a Private Garden. Given the time, energy, and money required to transform a vacant lot into a garden, it is best to acquire ownership. If the city owns the lot or if the owner has not paid taxes for many years, the transfer of ownership may be accomplished relatively easily at a modest cost. One of the first things most new owners do is to construct a fence. This signals

that the land is no longer semi-public and is part of someone's yard. The next steps will depend on the use of the garden. If a vegetable or flower garden is to be planted, the lot will need to be cleared of any trash or rubble, the soil turned and worked, and, depending on how long the lot has been vacant, young trees may need to be removed. A sitting garden or patio requires less work in reconditioning the soil, and existing trees kept for shade. Other additions will depend on the imagination and desire of the owner.

Examples. The 2500 block of Hope Street, with its three-story rowhouses, each with a stoop on the sidewalk, is home to small group of families. Hope Street is in North Philadelphia. In 1984, this block was like many of the others in the neighborhood, with half of the house lots abandoned and collecting trash. In 1985, residents of Hope Street cleaned up the vacant lots on their block, installed chain-link fences, and planted gardens. For improving this previously vacant property, they received the lots for the cost of the paperwork involved in processing them, a total of about forty dollars.

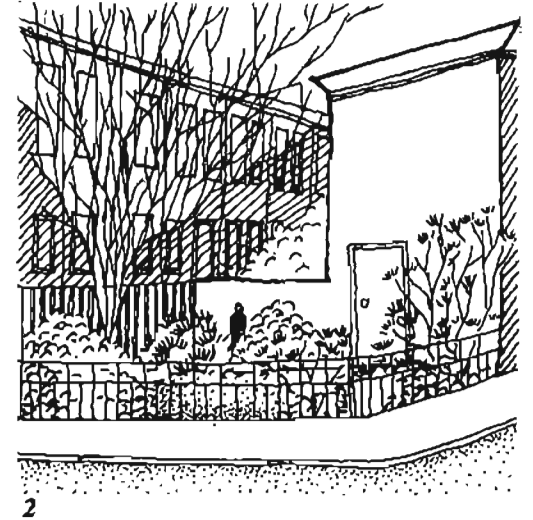
Hope Street is now a block of houses and gardens. Some of the lots have vegetable gardens, others have a playlot, a swimming pool, or a picnic table. Murals have been painted on the blank walls overlooking some gardens. Although the gardens are a refuge for individual families, they have not replaced the activity and life on the street. Instead, they are open and connected to the street. After creating these private gardens, residents of Hope Street applied to the West Kensington Neighborhood Advisory Council for funds to improve the curbs and sidewalk on the

block and their proposal was successful (see *"This Garden is a Town"* and *Models of Success: Landscape Improvements and Community Development* for more details on Hope Street).

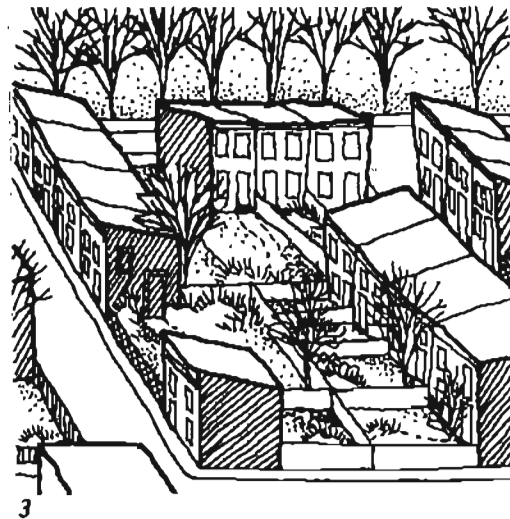
In West Philadelphia, two doors down from the Westminster community garden on the 4700 block of Westminster Street, Jean Reid has recently claimed a vacant lot as her own. The lot was a missing tooth, filled with building rubble and other debris and bounded on either side by the blank walls of adjacent houses. Over a couple of days, Jean Reid cleared the front part of the lot and erected a fence and gate along the edge of the sidewalk. At the entrance to the garden, she built a small gravel path edged with brick and rubble found on the lot, and planted flowers on both sides. Further back in the garden, Mrs. Reid planted tomato and pepper plants. She plans to finish clearing the back portion of the lot next year and to plant a larger garden.



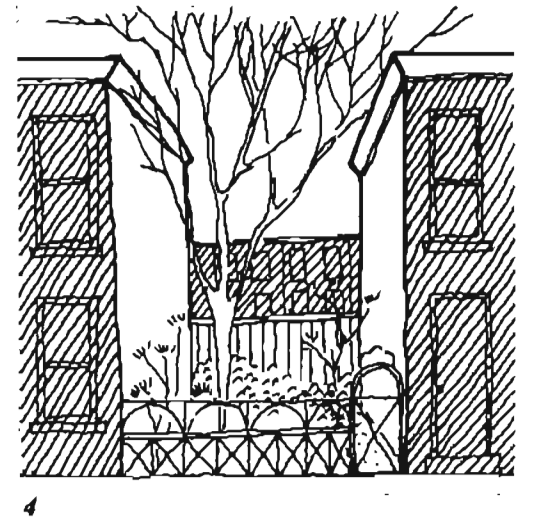
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1. *Private gardens on multiple lots*
2. *Private garden on a vacant corner*
3. *Private gardens and new buildings*
4. *Private garden on a missing tooth*

RECLAIMING VACANT LAND

Community Garden

A community garden is a microcosm of community. Typically, a community garden is where a group of people garden together, each maintaining an individual or family plot, while dividing responsibility for maintenance of common areas including planting and weeding flower beds, cleaning paths, or filling water barrels. Community gardens range in size from those that occupy a single lot to gardens that take up an entire city block. They may be tended by one or two individuals or accommodate fifty or more gardeners (see *"This Garden is a Town"* for more details about community gardens).

Features of the Community Garden.

Community gardens are usually bounded by an inexpensive fence, such as turkey-wire or chain-link, and a locked gate to which the gardeners have keys. The common areas include paths, a water source, a compost pile, and perhaps a flower bed within the interior of the garden or along the exterior fence. They may also include a bulletin board, meeting place, and a cold-frame or greenhouse. Gardeners are makers and builders, and community gardens therefore often include hand-crafted signs, gates, borders, planters, trellises, arbors, and benches. The forms these common features take convey information about the values of those who garden there and reflect the individuality of the garden's "community." Community gardens evolve over time. They may look rather simple after the initial construction, but as individual gardeners contribute their ideas, possessions, and constructions, each garden takes on its own identity.

Establishing a Community Garden. A community garden is usually initiated by a small

group of individuals, often spurred on by the desire to eliminate a vacant lot that has become a nuisance and an eyesore. ("It was an eyesore, had been for years, smack dab in the center of our neighborhood. We just got sick of looking at it!" said Esther Williams describing the beginning of Aspen Farms, a community garden founded in 1975.) Even on vacant vacant lots, community gardens often start with a small group, then gradually expand with growing experience, interest, and enthusiasm.

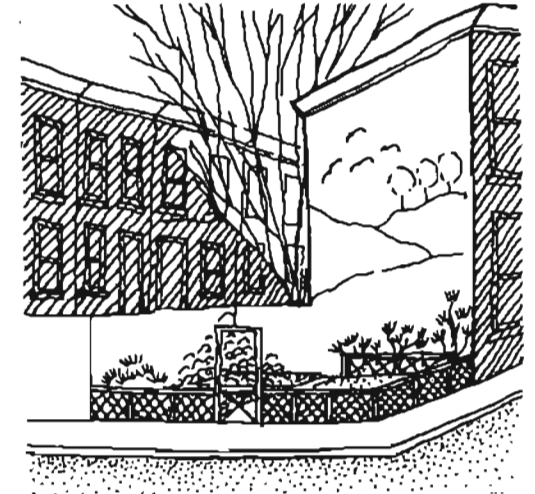
The first step for many is to contact Philadelphia Green or the Urban Gardening Program at the Penn State Cooperative Extension Office, two organizations which provide technical advice, materials and construction, and a network of other community gardeners. After a group makes an application to one of these organizations, staff will meet with residents to determine the project's feasibility, and whether permission can be secured to use the property. If accepted in Philadelphia Green's Lotscape Program, the group will meet several times to discuss what features they would like to include in the garden and to decide upon its design. The construction budget for a community garden is usually extremely small, just enough to build a fence and gate, to lay out the paths, the individual garden plots, to prepare the soil, plant common flower beds and perhaps add a small meeting place. The gardeners usually help in construction, plant their own vegetables and flowers, and gradually embellish the garden. The more ambitious community gardens take on new projects every year: the painting of a mural on an adjacent building wall, the construction of a cold-frame or a greenhouse, the decoration of a meeting place, the addition of a

common herb garden, or the construction of an irrigation system. "If you can't improve each year, why be here?" says Hayward Ford, President of Aspen Farms.

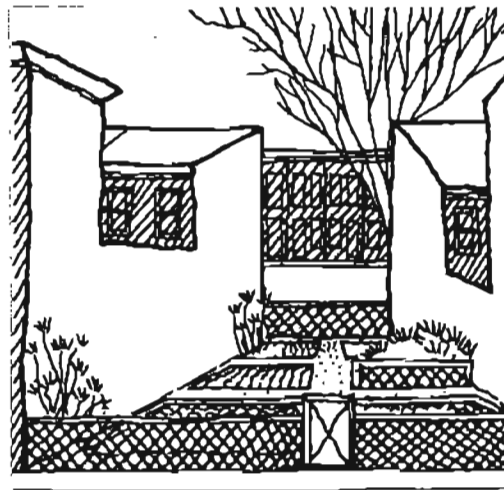
Examples. There are many examples of successful community gardens in West Philadelphia, and eight of these are described in the report that is part of this series entitled *"This Garden is a Town."* Community gardens have been established on virtually every type of vacant land, including missing teeth, corner lots, lots connecting blocks, and vacant blocks.



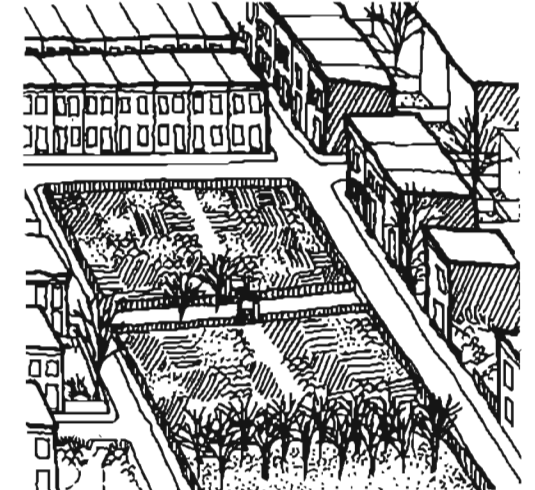
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1. *Community garden on a vacant block*
2. *Community garden on a vacant corner*
3. *Community garden on a connector*
4. *Community garden as one of multiple uses*

RECLAIMING VACANT LAND

Meeting Place

A meeting place is a social space where people come together. It may be as simple as a bench or as elaborate as a large plaza with many benches and tables. Community gardens, playgrounds, playfields, and outdoor workshops are also meeting places. Most community gardens have a special place set aside for gardeners to come together to rest, sit, talk, and to hold occasional social events. Who the meeting place is for will depend upon its location. A meeting place developed on a "missing tooth" in a residential block will be used only by residents of that block and their guests; a meeting place developed on a large corner lot is likely to be far more public. Lots that connect blocks, that are developed as pathways, also provide a place for people to meet as they walk to and from their homes.

Features of the Meeting Place. A meeting place provides a shared territory where people can come together. It is also a place to see and be seen. While meeting places may be many sizes and shapes, two common features are boundaries and seating areas. A meeting place can be as formal as benches under a trellis structure or gazebo, or as informal as a place to pull up a few folding chairs beneath the shade of some trees. A low fence that forms a boundary between the meeting place and the street can serve as a meeting place between a person inside the garden and a person passing by.

Establishing a Meeting Place. A few neighborhood residents who wish to eliminate a derelict "missing tooth" may decide to create a small meeting place as an expedient, low-maintenance solution. In other cases, a meeting

place may evolve within a community garden as a place to gather with friends and neighbors. It is best to acquire ownership of the land, especially if the group plans to invest a lot of time and materials. If the city owns the lot or if the owner has not paid taxes for many years, the transfer of ownership may be accomplished relatively easily at a modest cost.

One of the first things to do is to clean the lot and construct a fence. This signals that the land is someone's territory. Neighborhood groups may also want to contact Philadelphia Green or Penn State Urban Gardeners, organizations which provide technical advice, materials and construction, and a network with other people doing similar projects in their own neighborhoods. The group should make an application to one of these organizations and, once accepted, will meet with the staff to discuss what features they would like to include in the meeting place and decide upon its design. The gardeners usually help in the construction and do the planting themselves.

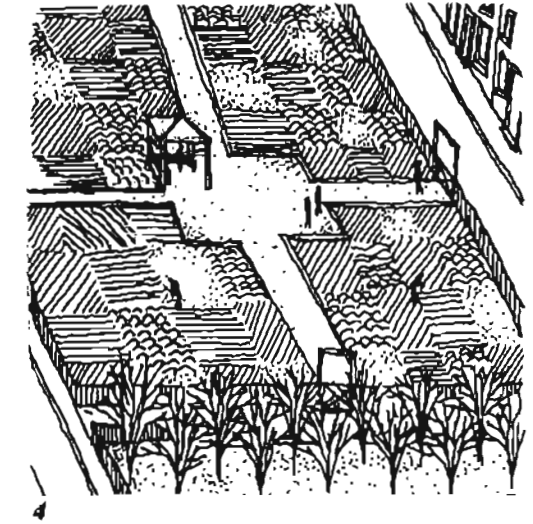
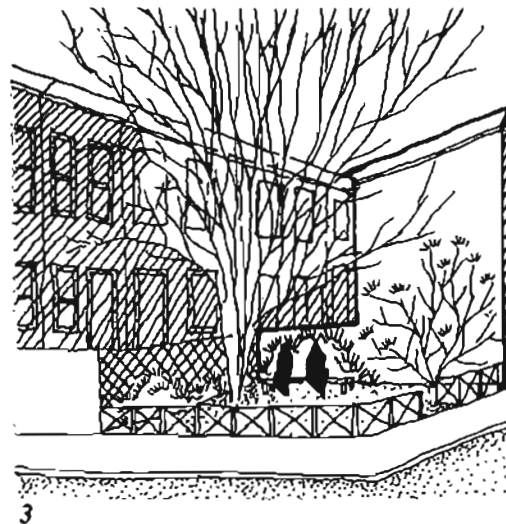
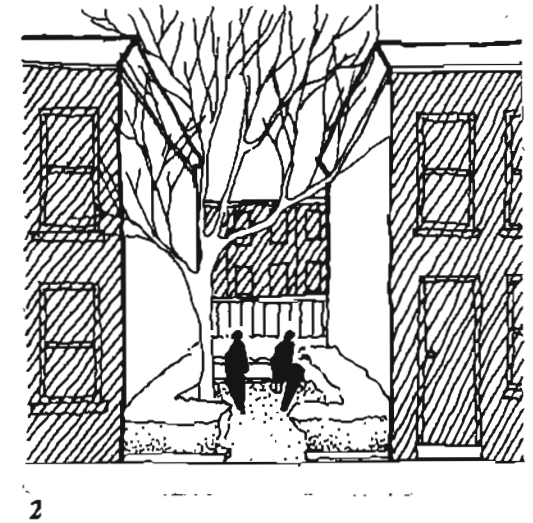
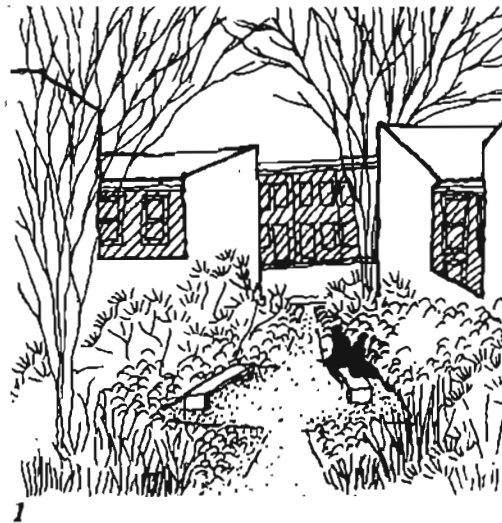
Examples. In 1988-89 gardeners at Aspen Farms worked with students and faculty from the University of Pennsylvania's Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning and staff of Philadelphia Green to redesign and reconstruct the central area of their community garden. The gardeners asked for a meeting place for themselves and for visitors. After each student presented a proposal, the gardeners chose a design that created a "main street" meeting place by widening the central path. The central path is now like a small street with benches where people can come out of their gardens to sit, rest, watch, and talk.

Vegetables and flowers are grown at the Westminster Community Garden, but the main feature of the garden is the meeting place. The corner garden is like an outdoor room, enclosed by a wooden frame draped with wisteria. Within the open walls and vine-covered roof are many treasured objects: a ceramic dragon, a birdbath, a concrete bench with a lion-claw base, old porch chairs, and a grill. The Westminster garden was designed by a student in Penn's Department of Landscape Architecture and built as part of the West Philadelphia Landscape Plan and Greening Project.

A small flower garden with places to sit was built as part of the West Philadelphia Landscape Plan and Greening Project on two vacant lots on the 400 block of Dearborn Street in the Mill Creek neighborhood. Although Mill Creek Park is only a couple of blocks away, the residents of the street, many of whom are elderly, wanted to create a garden where they felt more secure and which they could care for themselves. The garden has raised flower beds with edges of wooden railroad ties wide enough for sitting, a bench, and a meeting area with a picnic table in the rear of the garden.

The Top o' 46th Street Sitting Garden and the Sun Community Vegetable Garden are side by side on Linmore Street in the the West Shore neighborhood. The rear of the vegetable garden looks down over the railroad tracks. Trees are planted at the back of the sitting garden. The trees protect the small meeting area from the railroad tracks behind and give the place a sense of refuge. Someone sitting on a bench in the Top o' 46th Street garden commands a prospect down 46th

Street to Woodland Avenue beyond. Further down Linmore Street is the West Shore Sitting Garden. A gazebo sits in the center of this garden, surrounded by flowerbeds and flowering shrubs. These gardens were all built under the auspices of Philadelphia Green. The OK Corral, the Leo Donald Memorial Sitting Garden, and the 47th and Upland Community Sitting Garden are other small meeting places on former vacant corners in the West Shore neighborhood. All have benches and plants, but each has its own character, a reflection of the people who created each place and meet there. These are but a few of dozens of examples in the West Shore Greene Countrie Towne (for a more detailed description of West Shore see *Models of Success: Landscape Improvements and Community Development*).



1. Meeting place and path on a connector
2. Meeting place on a missing tooth
3. Meeting place on a vacant corner
4. Meeting place in a community garden

RECLAIMING VACANT LAND

Playlot

In most West Philadelphia neighborhoods there is little suitable play space for small children. Many rowhouses have no front yards and only tiny paved back yards. Playgrounds are few and far between and most are unsuitable for very small children. Finding a safe place to play is difficult for young children who cannot travel far. Small "missing-teeth" vacant lots represents an opportunity to provide a territory off the street where children can play. A block with similar-age children who know each other is an ideal location for a playlot. Parents know who belongs and who does not and all can cooperate in supervising the playlot.

Features of a Playlot. A playlot is a small area that "belongs" to a group of children. The playlot is a refuge from the busy street, a place that is easily monitored. It should be recognizable as belonging to a particular group of children in order to keep older children and outsiders from taking over the space. A boundary will help to establish the lot as a territory. This could be done with a low fence or a border of brightly painted rocks or poles. A playlot may also have some sort of structure to climb on or hide within. This can be made inexpensively from lumber or old tires, or it could be more costly, like a jungle gym or swings. A shady meeting place with seats provides a place for adults. A path is another important feature of a playlot, for children love to follow paths, whether running, riding, or pushing toys.

Establishing a Playlot. A playlot is small, and can be established by several parents. Because of the time and investment involved, it may be best to acquire ownership of the land. If the city owns the lot or if the owner has not paid taxes for many

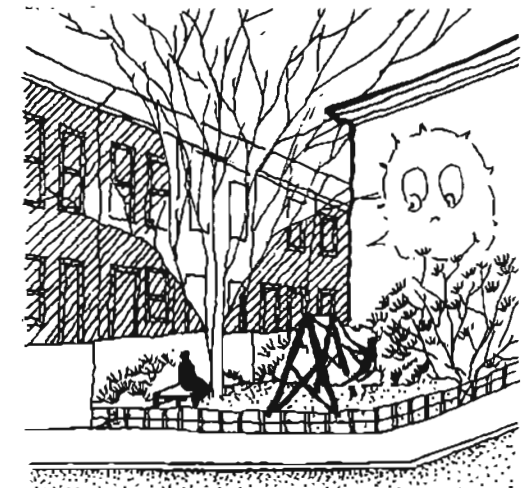
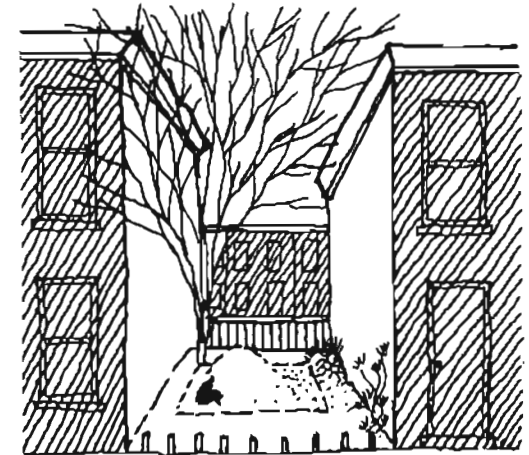
years, the transfer of ownership may be accomplished relatively easily at a modest cost.

In the planning and construction of the playlot, it is important that neighborhood children be involved. In this way, they will feel that the playlot is truly theirs and will be more willing to help maintain and care for the space.

A playlot may be a relatively temporary use, depending upon the population of the block. Children may outgrow a playlot within a few years, and unless there are younger children on the block, the playlot may be turned into another use, such as a ball court, outdoor workshop, meeting place, or community garden.

Examples. Behind Aspen Village, a Philadelphia Housing Authority project bounded by Aspen, 49th, and Folsom Streets, is a children's garden. The garden occupies a lot on Folsom, a short narrow alley that connects 49th and 50th Streets. It was once the site of a row of garages and is bounded at the rear by the backyards of houses from another block. The lot contains play equipment, several wooden containers planted with flowers, and a paved play surface. These clearly mark the lot as the territory of children. The children also planted a garden at the edge of Aspen Village which leads to the playlot.

New townhouses on a former vacant block on Market between 39th and 40th Streets were arranged to form interior courts that open onto the street, each with a playlot and place to meet. The front doors of each house face this court and the front windows overlook the play area.



Playground and Ball Court

Playgrounds and ball courts are places for active play. Playgrounds are often associated with a school, and are for school children. Community ball courts are often used by adults on evenings and weekends. Unlike the small scale and intimate character of the playlot, playgrounds and ball courts are more public and are likely to be used by an entire neighborhood, rather than a single block.

There is a special kind of playground, called an "adventure" playground, where children can make and build things. These usually have an adult who supervises the play and keeps track of hammers, saws, and shovels. Adventure playgrounds are messy and may be controversial, but children love them.

Features of Playgrounds and Ball Courts.

Playgrounds usually have large, paved areas and play equipment, like swings and climbing structures. Adventure playgrounds are unpaved and are full of old wood, tires, and other materials for children to build with. Ball courts include special equipment like tennis nets or basketball hoops; lines painted on pavement usually mark the boundaries of the court. Fences around playgrounds protect children by preventing them from running into the street; fences around ball courts to keep balls within the court.

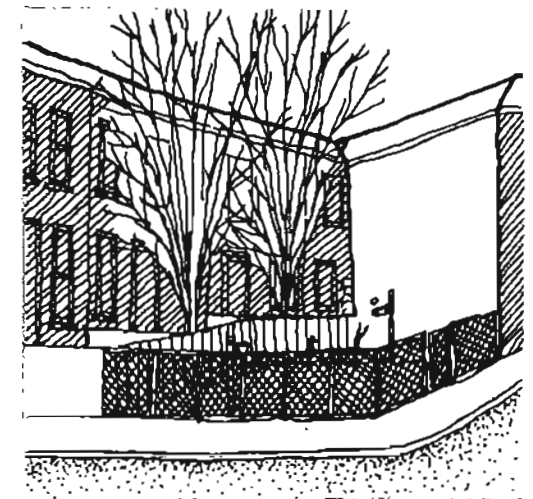
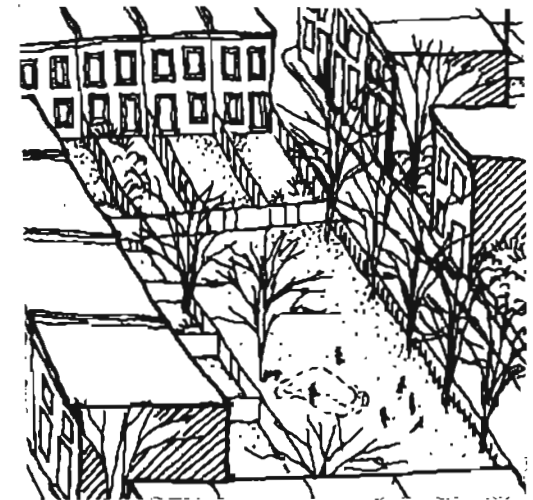
Establishing Playgrounds and Ball Courts. A playground or ball court may be established by a small group of people, but are most likely to be built by some sort of organization like a school, church, day-care center, or public agency. Given the investment of time and energy, it is best to obtain ownership of the lot. Playgrounds can be on hilly ground, but ball courts need to be flat.

The land must be graded with enough slope to drain it or there will be puddles after rainstorms. If the playground or ball court is located in a low-lying area prone to flooding, it can also serve as a stormwater detention area (see "Stormwater Drainage and Flood Control").

Examples. A sign over the entrance forms a gateway to a small park on the corner of 36th and Wallace Streets. The sign announces that the park was dedicated to the people of Mantua in July 1972, as a project jointly supported by the Mantua Community Planners, the Department of Recreation, the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Underneath several large, shady trees are grass, a metal climbing structure for children, and a small open shelter.

A small playground and enormous community garden fill a large block on N. 52nd between Poplar and Wyalusing Streets. The playground has swings and other play equipment, as well as several benches. It has a hard asphalt surface and is surrounded by a fence, except for an area next to the corner. On weekdays, vendors sell fruits and vegetables on the corner, using part of the playground's fence to secure their stands.

The Haddington Townhouses occupy several adjacent blocks between 54th and 55th Streets and Poplar, and Westminster Streets that were once occupied by houses and mills. The brick rowhouses are two stories high, with front doors facing the street. Behind the houses, on the interior of each block, are parking lots and landscaped meeting places, playlots, and common lawn.



RECLAIMING VACANT LAND

Playfield

Playfields are large open lots which children and adults use for active sports, such as tag and frisbee or organized sports like soccer and baseball. Because of the large size requirements for certain types of sports fields, only vacant blocks will be suitable. Unlike the small scale and intimate character of the playlot, the playfield is public and may be used by an entire neighborhood.

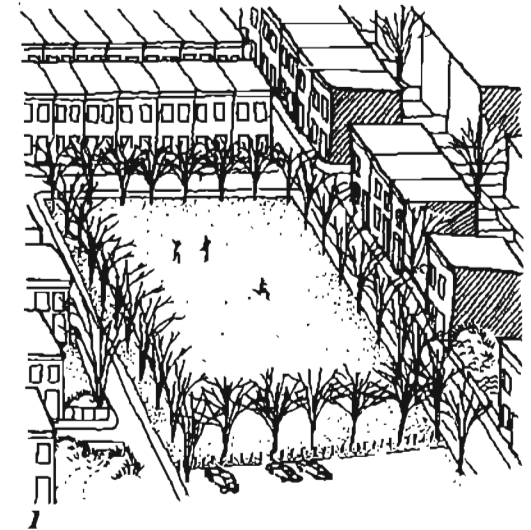
Features of a Playfield. The dominant feature of a playfield is its large, open character. Usually playfields have mown grass. Often a playfield will have some type of boundary, such as a low fence with occasional openings, shrubs, or a row of trees.

Establishing a Playfield. Playfields are highly public. They take up a whole block or several contiguous blocks and affect an entire neighborhood. Establishing a playfield is a large undertaking. Given the size of land required for playfields, the vacant properties may belong to more than one owner. The land must be graded relatively flat, but with enough slope to drain it, and seeded with grass. Playfields require frequent mowing during summer months and trash removal. Given the complexities of establishing a playfield and the maintenance required, such projects will probably be undertaken by a public agency, institution, or perhaps by a group of people or several groups working together. If the playfield is located in a low-lying area prone to flooding, it can also serve as a stormwater detention area (see section on Storm Drainage and Flood Control in this report).

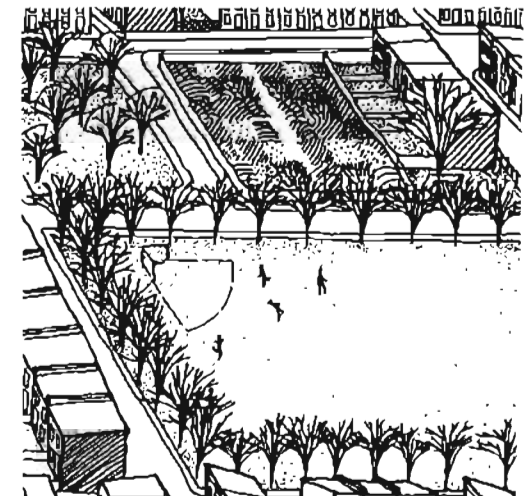
Examples. The Mill Creek Park cuts a diagonal path across several blocks of the Mill Creek

neighborhood, following the underground course of the Mill Creek sewer. This land was once occupied with rowhouses much like those still standing on adjacent streets. When the park was built, streets were realigned, and some streets now dead-end into the park. The park includes playgrounds for small children, basketball courts, large grassy playfields, and paved areas for bicycle riding and skateboarding. Benches, covered shelters, and other areas for meeting are also included, in addition to paths that serve as short cuts for people in the surrounding blocks.

A large municipal playfield with lights for nighttime play occupies a large block between Woodland and Grays Ferry Avenues and 47th and 48th Streets. The block was once occupied by the large buildings of a Home for Incurables.



1. Playfield and parking on a vacant block



2. Playfield as one of many new uses on multiple vacant blocks

Outdoor Workshop

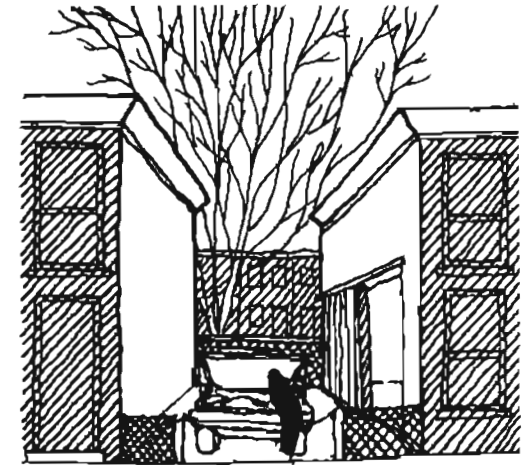
An outdoor workshop is a place where a single person or several people can work. Often this activity revolves around the automobile and needs to be large enough to accommodate car washing, maintenance, and repair. In neighborhoods of rowhouses without driveways or garages, the street may be the only place for such activities. This can be a problem if there is too much traffic or inadequate space to work. A single missing tooth can accommodate a workshop for one or two people, while a larger vacant lot can include workspace for several individuals. An outdoor workshop not only provides a more convenient place to work than the street, but can also serve as a meeting place for people with common interests where they can work together and socialize, sharing companionship and expertise.

Features of an Outdoor Workshop. An outdoor workshop is a place of work and reflects the type of activity that takes place there. An outdoor workspace is usually enclosed by a fence and locked gate to which the users have a key. If the workshop is used by a single person, the lot may simply include a few chairs and a space to work. If the workshop is shared by a group of people there may be individual workspaces, as well as common areas with benches, a sheltered meeting place, or a storage space that can be locked.

Establishing an Outdoor Workshop. One of the first things to do is to find out who owns the lot and to either get permission to use it or obtain ownership. If the city owns the lot, or if the owner has not paid taxes for many years, the transfer of ownership may be accomplished relatively easily at a modest cost

Preparation of the lot may be as simple as cleaning it up and removing rubble and trash. This may be all that is necessary in the beginning. The construction of a fence and gate will also secure the lot and prevent dumping.

Example. Cooper's Place is a community garden created on several vacant lots in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston. At the back of the lot are several garages that were left standing when the houses that previously occupied the lots were torn down. These are used as a workshop by a young man who fixes old cars. At any one time there are usually several cars being worked on. When no one is in the community garden, the mechanic keeps an eye on it.



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1. Outdoor workshop on a missing tooth

2. Outdoor workshop along a path connecting multiple lots

RECLAIMING VACANT LAND

Outdoor Market

An outdoor market is a place where merchandise can be bought, sold, or traded. It may be as simple as a place where a single entrepreneur can pull up a truck and sell vegetables or it may be a site for a regular flea market or farmers' market. A busy corner is an ideal place for an outdoor market.

There were once many corner stores throughout West Philadelphia, particularly in residential neighborhoods of rowhouses and apartment buildings. Some of these neighborhood stores still exist, but many have vanished, leaving numerous abandoned corner buildings and vacant corner lots. While the local corner store has been displaced by supermarkets and "chain" convenience stores, some vacant corner lots, particularly those on major streets, are appropriate places for outdoor markets.

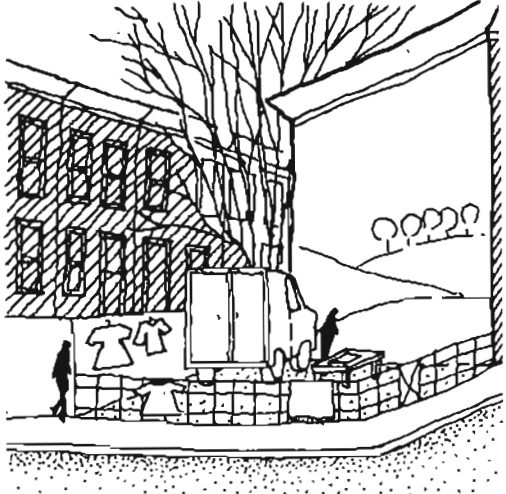
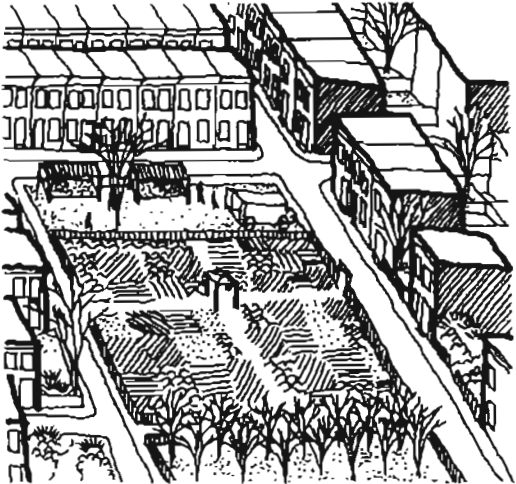
Features of an Outdoor Market. Outdoor markets can be many sizes and types. A single vendor may require little space, while a market that involves many vendors must be larger. To be successful, outdoor markets must be visible and accessible. A corner location permits both visibility and access from two directions. If the site is large or on a busy street, surrounded by other businesses, the market may be bounded by sidewalk and street on one side only. In order to protect the lot from dumping, it may be necessary to establish a definite boundary, such as bollards, a row of trees, or a fence. When the market is open, however, it is important for customers to be able to move freely. While many outdoor markets are known by word of mouth, a sign can announce the name of the market, what is sold there, and the days and hours even when the market is closed. A

border of trees, shrubs, or flowers will improve the appearance of the lot considerably and will also signal that something is happening here. If the market attracts a large number of customers and the size of the lot permits, some space may be set aside for parking.

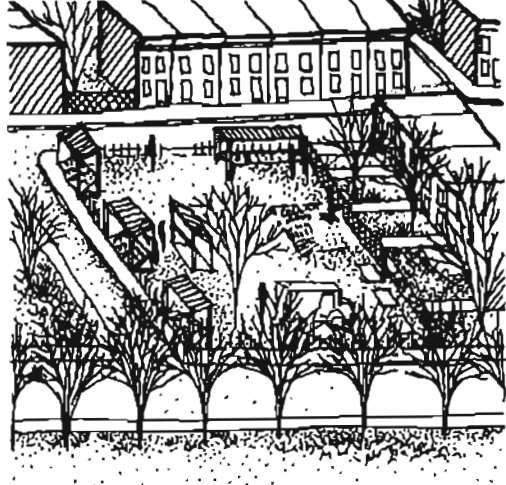
Establishing an Outdoor Market. A single person, a small group of vendors, or some other organization can establish an outdoor market. The most important thing is to find an appropriate site to locate the market and then get permission to use it. Preparation of the lot may be as simple as removing rubble, trash and weeds. This may be all that is necessary in the beginning. At some point, however, if the market is successful, covering the surface with wood chips or gravel will reduce dust and mud.

Examples. The corner of Mantua Avenue and 34th Streets, just south of the Philadelphia Zoo and over the railroad bridge, is a major gateway into West Philadelphia through which many commuters and West Philadelphia residents pass everyday. On the southwest corner is an outdoor market usually tended by a single gentleman whose merchandise changes with the season—Christmas trees in December and t-shirts in summer. The grass on the lot is neatly mowed, and a trailer parked in the middle of the lot provides storage. The lot is enclosed by a chainlink fence and gate from which the proprietor hangs signs and merchandise. Presiding over the whole scene is the imposing, three-story high figure of Patti La Belle painted on the windowless wall of the rowhouse nextdoor.

In London, England, a large block of vacant land on a corner of a busy street in the Camden Town neighborhood afforded the opportunity for a special type of outdoor market. The Camden Garden Centre is both a place to buy plants and garden supplies and a training center for unemployed youths. A tall, dense, green hedge forms the outer boundary of the market. Inside, plants on display are arranged as part of a garden, organized by types of garden environments: plants for shade, plants for sun, plants to climb walls and trellises, plants for water, etc. The staff of the garden center are trainees who take classes two days a week in horticulture and garden construction and maintenance. A large parking lot at the rear of the garden center accommodates customers with cars and delivery trucks (see *Models of Success: Landscape Improvements and Community Development* for a more detailed description of the Camden Garden Centre).



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1. Outdoor market on a vacant corner

2. Outdoor flea market on part of a vacant block

RECLAIMING VACANT LAND

Parking Lot

Most of West Philadelphia was built in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before the automobile became so common. Few neighborhoods have houses with garages or even driveways, so the street is often the only place to park. In many parts of West Philadelphia, on-street parking is inadequate, especially on or near commercial blocks along Baltimore, Chestnut, Market, Lancaster, and 52nd Street. A parking lot can be a temporary or a permanent use for a vacant lot. In residential neighborhoods, off-street parking can relieve congestion on narrow streets.

Even a small missing tooth vacant lot can work as a place to park one or more cars. Cars will be more protected on a missing tooth in the middle of the block and will be less so on a corner lot. Parking lots are a common use on land that has been cleared and is being held for future development. This pattern tends to satisfy the needs of a private investor rather than the long-term needs of the community.

Features of a Parking Lot. Parking lots can be many sizes and types. They may be as simple as a small lot covered with gravel for the use of one or more neighborhood residents, or as formal as a privately owned and operated enterprise with a paved surface and entry gate and/or guard. A parking lot usually has a definite boundary, whether it is adjacent buildings, a simple fence, or a row of trees. Parking lots can be ugly to look at, especially in a residential neighborhood. A border of shrubs or flowers along the sidewalk can improve the appearance of the lot greatly. Any effort to improve the lot beyond simple paving or fence is a sign of goodwill to those who live and work in the area.

Establishing a Parking Lot. A single person or a small group can establish a small parking lot. Larger lots may be established by businessmen or by an institution like a church or hospital. One of the first things to do is to find out who owns the lot and to either get permission to use it or obtain ownership. If the city owns the lot, or if the owner has not paid taxes for many years, the transfer of ownership may be accomplished relatively easily at modest cost (see the story of Hope Street in *Models of Success*). Preparation of the lot may be as simple as removing rubble, trash, and weeds and then spreading gravel. The construction of a fence and gate will secure the lot.

Some thought should be given to potential future uses for the lot, since cars drip toxic fluids that contaminate the soil and that could make the lot unsuitable for a garden.

Examples. There are several small parking lots on former missing teeth on North 33rd Street between Spring Garden and Fairmount Streets in the Mantua neighborhood. On the 400 block of North 33rd Street in Mantua, residents have made two adjacent vacant lots into a secure place to park their cars. The parking area, which holds 6-8 cars, is bounded on either side by rowhouses and enclosed in the front by a low fence and locked gate. The surface of the parking area is covered with gravel. Between the sidewalk and the fence, is a small space filled with flowers and evergreen shrubs. Another lot further down the street is only one houselot wide and is used by the small church next door to park the church's bus. The lot is covered with gravel and secured with a fence and gate.

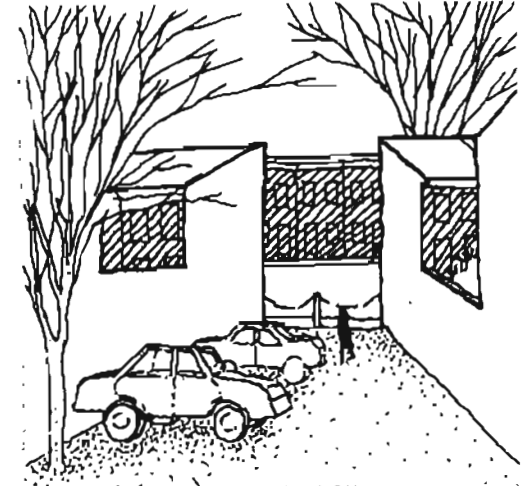
Along the 4000-4400 blocks of Ludlow Street, there are many vacant lots that serve as parking for churches and for the businesses on adjacent commercial streets. These include grassy lots with only a few cars parked on them, gravel lots with cars parked around trees, and paved areas next to specific businesses.

A parking lot at the corner of 36th and Warren Streets just south of Lancaster Avenue provides parking for approximately fifteen cars. The lot is paved with asphalt. A narrow border of grass and trees separates the lot from the sidewalk and improves the appearance of the lot considerably.

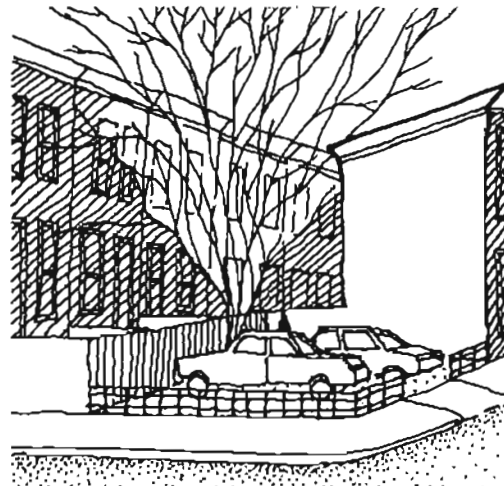
The Haddington Townhouses occupy several adjacent blocks between 54th and 55th Streets and Poplar, Wyalusing, and Westminster Streets that were once occupied by houses and mills. The new housing was developed with off-street parking in the interior of each block, with back windows overlooking the parking lots and landscaped meeting places and common lawn.



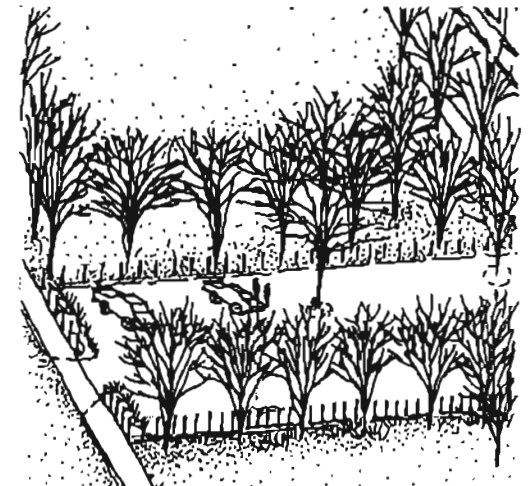
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1. *Parking as one of many uses in a Swiss cheese pattern*

2. *Parking on a connector*

3. *Parking on a vacant corner*

4. *Parking and playfield on a vacant block*

RECLAIMING VACANT LAND

Path

A path is a place for movement from one place to another. It is also a place to meet people and to see and be seen. A sidewalk is a public path that also separates pedestrians from cars on the street. Sometimes a path across a vacant lot provides a shortcut for people in a neighborhood. Such paths tend to be less public than a sidewalk and may provide a more pleasant place to walk than the street. Some types of vacant lots make new connections between streets, through the middle of a block (see "connectors"), across the corner of a block (see "vacant corners"), or across empty blocks (see "vacant blocks"). Many such paths start as a line trampled among tall grasses, others are deliberately planted and maintained. The success of such paths and whether neighbors wish to encourage or discourage their use, depends upon who uses the path and whether people feel safe walking on it.

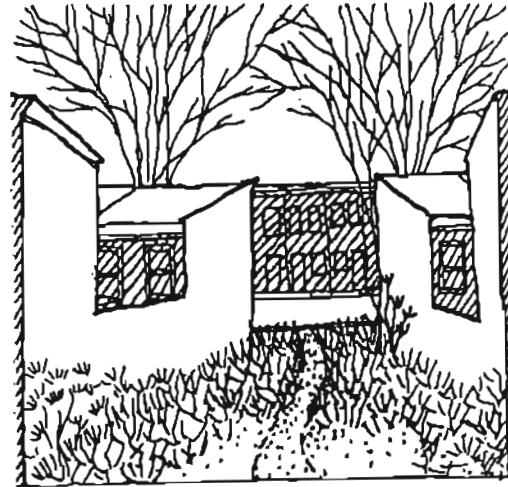
Features of a Path. When paths have distinct boundaries, people are more likely to stay on the path and less likely to wander off the edges. When a path crosses a private or semi-private territory like a yard or a meeting place that belongs to residents of a block, a gate at the entrance to the path signals that this is not a public thoroughfare. When the borders of a path are planted with flowers, shrubs, or trees, this is a sign that the path is more than just a short-cut; it is something that someone is taking care of and monitoring. The surface of a path may be made of many materials, like woodchips, gravel, mown grass, or concrete, brick, or stone. Benches or seats along a path will encourage people to linger.

Establishing a path. Paths often establish themselves, emerging as short-cuts through vacant

lots that connect two or more blocks. If the path is to be more than a dirt footpath, someone will need to maintain the path and the surrounding lot. The land on either side of the path should be cleaned to discourage littering by those walking through. If the path is part of a much larger pedestrian walkway through one or more neighborhoods, it will require the involvement of a public agency to maintain its entire length.

Examples. When residents of Powelton Village established a community garden on the corner of 33rd and Race Streets, one of the first things they decided was to keep an existing path that cut diagonally across the vacant block so that neighbors could continue to use it as a shortcut. Gardeners maintain the path and spread woodchips each year to keep it from getting muddy and weedy. As the garden has grown, boundaries have been established along the path, including planting beds, railroad ties, trees, and fences with gates. These boundaries make clear what is public (the path) and what is private (the garden).

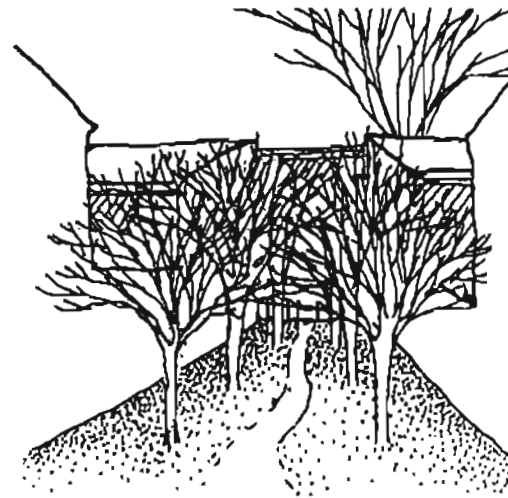
When new rowhouses were built on the corner of North 33rd Street and Mantua Avenue, one "missing tooth" was left unbuilt upon and a path was created between 33rd Street and the parking off Mantua Street at the rear.



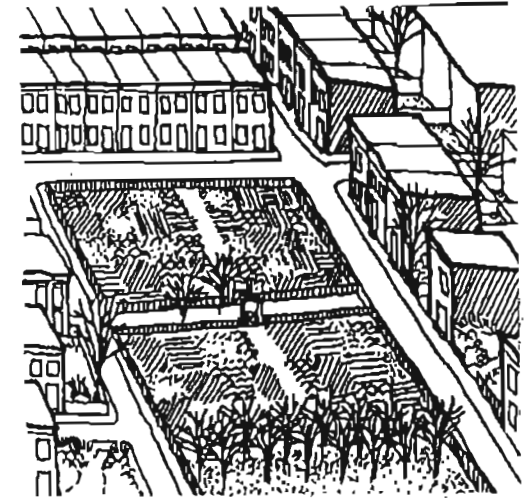
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1. *Path on a connector*
2. *Path, meeting place, and playlot on a connector*
3. *Path and orchard on a connector*
4. *Path through a community garden on a vacant block*

RECLAIMING VACANT LAND

Orchard

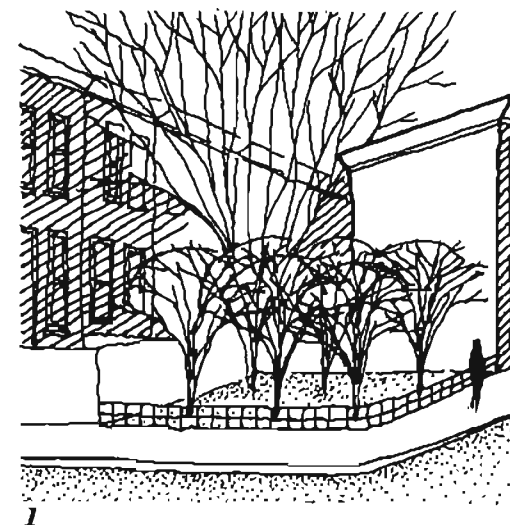
An orchard is a planted grove of fruit trees, such as peach, cherry, or apple. An orchard may be small, just several trees maintained by a few people, or it may be quite large. Orchards are often part of a community garden, but a small orchard could also be planted on an entire lot or in a private yard. Fruit trees require a lot of sun, so a vacant corner or a large missing tooth with southern exposure would be a good site for an orchard. Although orchards bear fruit, they also provide shade and can be combined with other uses besides community and private gardens, such as meeting places and paths.

Features of an Orchard. Fruit trees can be delicate, especially when small. Until the trees grow large, orchards should be protected by a fence with a gate. It is also important to have a source of water for nurturing the trees when they are first planted.

Establishing an Orchard. An orchard can be established by a few individuals or by a neighborhood group. Since an orchard is a long term project in which the trees need a number of years before they will bear fruit, the gardeners should gain ownership of the land or at least a long-term lease. If the city owns the lot or if the owner has not paid taxes for many years, the transfer of ownership may be accomplished relatively easily at a modest cost. Although an orchard may be small enough to be planted and cared for by a few residents, technical advice is available from Philadelphia Green or Penn State Urban Gardeners Extension.

Examples. Many community gardens in West Philadelphia contain fruit trees. In Aspen Farms,

peach trees have been planted along the eastern edge of the garden, adjacent to the wall of a neighboring building. The trees are planted so that they do not shade the flower and vegetable plots. Although the trees are small, they produce ample fruit for the gardeners. In the Powelton/Summer-Winter Garden, a small grove of fruit trees, mainly cherry, were planted by one of the gardeners opposite his house. On late summer evenings his children can be seen climbing the trees in search of ripe cherries.



1. Orchard on a vacant corner

2. Orchard on a vacant block and fruit trees lining a playfield

Meadow

A meadow is an open field of tall grasses, forbes, and wildflowers. Many people think wildflower meadows are beautiful when they see them in the countryside; but when they see the same kind of meadow on an urban vacant lot, they don't like it. Urban meadows have an image problem. They appear to be abandoned and derelict. In order for an urban meadow to be successful, it should look intentional and cared for.

Features of a Meadow. The boundary is the most important feature in making an urban meadow appear like a deliberate use. A well-maintained edge signals that someone is caring for the meadow. A fence or row of trees along the border of the lot will deter people from dumping trash on the site. A meadow can take many shapes and forms; it can be treated as a single territory or it may have paths mown through it or a meeting place within. It can be shaped into islands with clumps of vegetation surrounded by a mown area. Mown paths are simple features that can be changed frequently. Gravel or woodchips make more permanent paths. A meeting place can be a temporary feature, like a mown clearing, or a more permanent built structure. Meadows require sun; the orientation of a lot and its size are important when choosing a site.

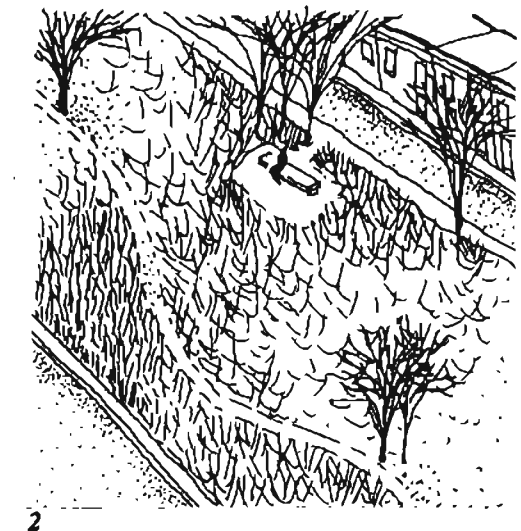
Establishing a Meadow. Meadows can be planted intentionally on a prepared site. They have also established themselves on vacant sites throughout West Philadelphia. Meadows are a successional landscape, part of the process through which the landscape changes without human intervention, from bare ground to meadows and then, finally, into woodlands. They can be managed to make them more attractive. In an

urban neighborhood, when neighbors do not want a wooded landscape, the meadow can be maintained by mowing it once a year.

Examples. There are successful wildflower meadows that have been planted on vacant land in a number of American cities as well as Philadelphia.

The entrance road to the Morris Arboretum in Philadelphia passes through a large meadow. The meadow is composed of islands of wildflowers and grasses that are bounded and separated by paths of mown grass, so that it almost seems like the meadow islands are floating. This is clearly a meadow that is being intentionally managed.

Bartram's Garden, on the west bank of the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia, has recently developed a wildflower meadow on the site of a former incinerator. The triangular site is immediately adjacent to the historic gardens and bounded on the other two sides by the Schuylkill and the open right of way of a SEPTA rail line. Like a true meadow, this one dramatically changes colors every month; blue and white give way to gold, then purple, then bronze and straw. Pheasants nest in the meadow.



1. Meadow connecting two blocks

2. Meadow and path on a vacant corner

RECLAIMING VACANT LAND

Woodland

A woodland is a stand of trees that grow close together. Most people do not think of woodlands when they think of cities, but there are many woods in West Philadelphia, not only in Fairmount and Cobbs Creek Parks, but also along the railroad tracks and on vacant lots that have been abandoned for many years. Many lots that have been vacant for ten years or more and that have not been mowed during that time have a stand of tall ailanthus, sumac, and perhaps Norway maple trees. Trees on vacant lots were not planted intentionally, but grew up on their own, their seeds transported to the vacant lot by the wind or by animals or birds. In a dense neighborhood of rowhouses and few street trees, a woodland helps cool the surrounding blocks.

Features of a Woodland. The boundary is one of the most important features in making a woodland appear attractive. A well-maintained edge signals that someone is caring for the woodland. A fence or a straight row of trees planted along the sidewalk will deter people from dumping trash on the lot. If the lot is large enough, a clearing in the woods can be a meeting place. Neighborhood residents may bring things into the woodland like chairs, a bird feeder, a picnic table, or a swing.

Establishing a Woodland. Woodlands establish themselves on vacant lots throughout West Philadelphia, but they can be managed to make them more attractive. A woodland can also be planted intentionally, in order to create a shady place that does not require much maintenance. If mature trees already exist on the lot, the task is to simply clear out smaller plants and prune the trees. An oldfield with shrubs and small trees will eventually grow into a woodland, but neighbors

wishing to speed up the process may choose to mow all herbaceous plants and thin out the existing young trees. On a bare or grassy lot, residents can plant saplings, but this will require a lot of maintenance to protect and water the trees until they grow larger.

In neighborhoods where residents are fearful of people who might hide behind shrubbery and low tree branches, the ground can be kept clear by spreading gravel or wood chips and the lowest tree branches can be pruned up above five or six feet.

Residents can also apply to the U.S. Forest Service Northeast Research Station or the Morris Arboretum for technical advice and assistance.

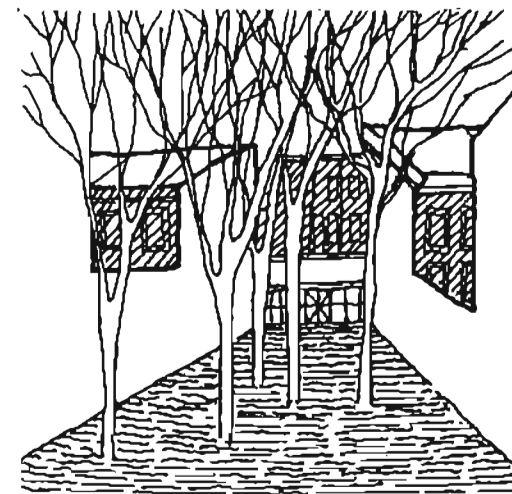
Example. Small woodlands have been planted on vacant lots in several American cities. In Oakland, California and Boston, Massachusetts, such projects have been part of educational programs for elementary school students. In Oakland, the program was an outgrowth of earlier, unsuccessful projects in the 1970s where neighborhood children had destroyed trees planted by a city-wide organization. Following this failure, the group approached the principal and teachers of the local school and proposed that the children plant and care for the trees as part of their curriculum. Several class sessions introduced the children to how trees grow and reproduce, the importance of trees and forests, and how to plant and care for trees. Following these classes, the children formed small teams and created a woodland on a vacant lot near the school. Each team had the responsibility for planting one tree and caring for

it over the following year. This time the woodland not only survived, but was also a source of learning throughout the year.

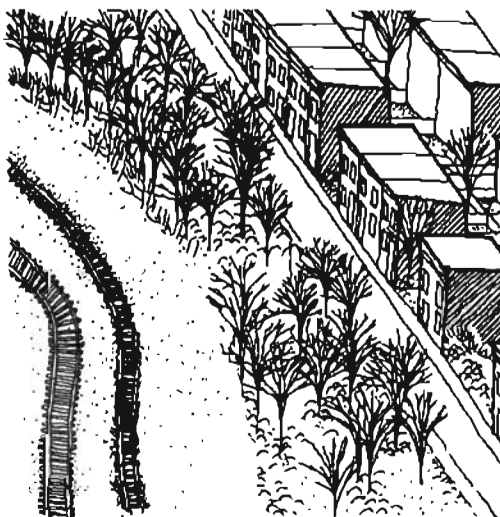
Along the edges of the Powelton/Summer-Winter Community Garden several maturing honey locust, ailanthus, and maple trees provide both shade to the sidewalk and to the gardeners on hot summer days and define the edge of the garden, providing a sense of privacy to the garden plots within. These trees have seeded themselves; the gardeners have only thinned them. While this is not really big enough to be a woodland, nevertheless it shows how "volunteer" trees can be thinned and trimmed.



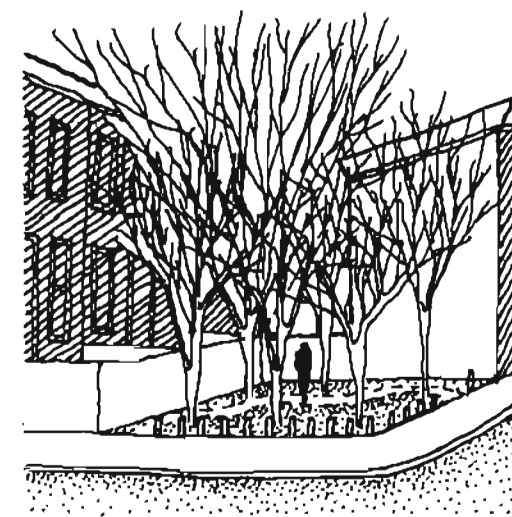
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2



3



4

1. *Woodland on a large connector*

2. *Woodland on a missing tooth*

3. *Woodland as one of many uses on a Swiss-cheese pattern*

4. *Woodland on a vacant corner*

RECLAIMING VACANT LAND

Flood Control and Storm Drainage

The use of low-lying, vacant land for flood control and storm drainage involves draining rainwater from streets, sidewalks, and parking lots and preventing it from entering sewers right away by holding it in small detention ponds. This is important for several reasons. It will help prevent flooding and improve water quality in the Schuylkill River and it will make sewage treatment more economical.

Like many other older, eastern cities, Philadelphia has combined sanitary and storm sewers. This means that rainfall washed off rooftops and streets runs in the same pipes as sanitary sewage from kitchens and bathrooms. When neighborhoods like West Philadelphia were built, streams like the Mill Creek were buried in underground sewers and connected to waste pipes from homes and businesses. When it rains, the sewers fill up with stormwater, and the flow is too large and too rapid for sewage treatment plants to handle. As a result, combined sanitary and storm sewage flow untreated into the Schuylkill River after every rainstorm. This is why the river looks like an open sewer for a few days after major storms. One solution to this problem is to build much larger sewage treatment plants, but this would be very expensive. Another solution is to slow down the time it takes for rainwater to reach the sewer, so that the sewage overflows do not occur. In this way, the increased flow through the sewage treatment plant is spread out over a period of days.

Low-lying, open land affords space to hold rainwater before it reaches the sewer. In the Mill Creek watershed in West Philadelphia, much of the low-lying land is already open, either in

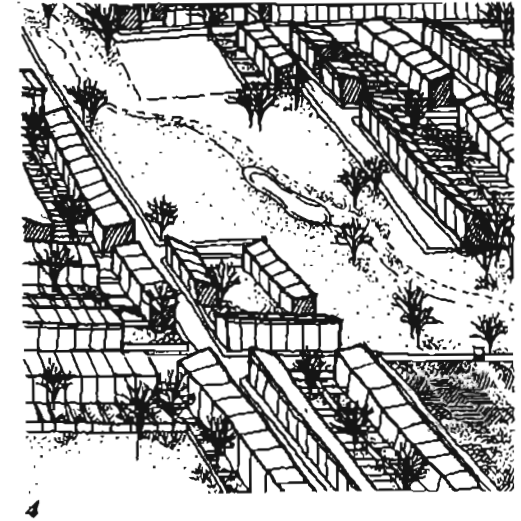
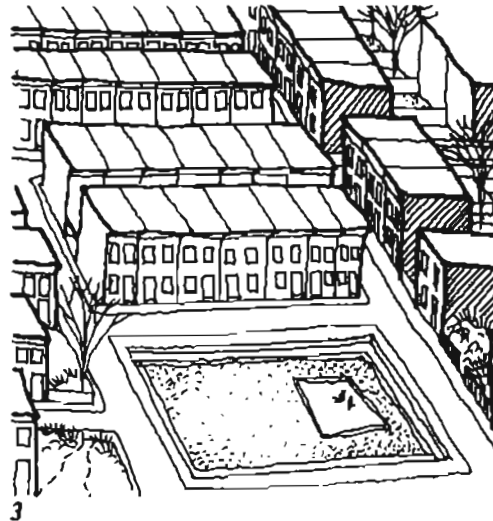
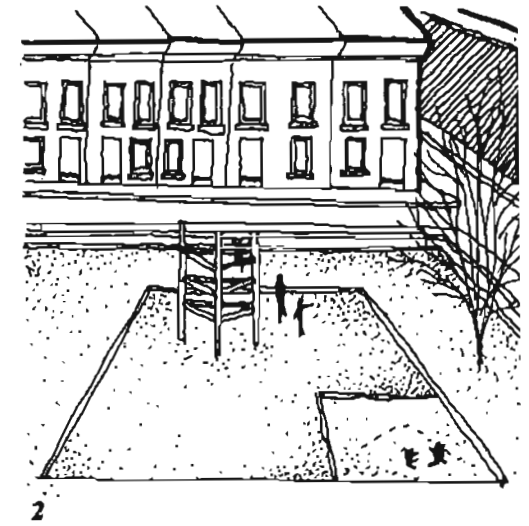
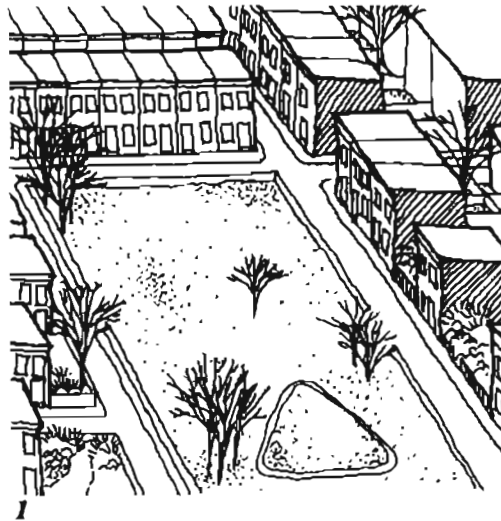
parks or in vacant lots. Since these areas are prone to flooding anyway, they are not suitable for new buildings. Land used for flood control and storm drainage can also be used for parks, playfields, parking lots, meadows, land or other uses which can tolerate standing water every once in a while. Large blocks of open land work best for storm drainage; small, missing teeth are not appropriate due to their small size and proximity to buildings.

Features of Land for Storm Drainage and Flood Control. Land for storm drainage will be a relatively large, low-lying, open territory. Since land set aside for storm drainage is likely to have another use during dry periods, it will share many features that apply to that land use in other locations.

Establishing Land for Storm Drainage and Flood Control. Storm drainage and flood control are public works, implemented and managed by public agencies for the benefit of the city and region as a whole. Establishing such a land use requires a comprehensive overview of the city's water systems. This is not a land use that can be implemented by individuals or small groups; the undertaking is too large and requires too much technical knowledge. Yet such projects can benefit the neighborhoods in which they occur and may even be initiated by local residents in an effort to promote the reclamation of large blocks of vacant land in their neighborhood. Ultimately, the city must determine what land can be used for storm drainage and flood control, but residents of adjacent neighborhoods should be involved in decisions about alternative land uses and what shape they will take. When choosing a compatible

use for storm drainage and flood control land, planners and designers should remember that low-lying areas will be subject to periodic flooding.

Example. There are many examples of storm drainage and flood control projects that are also used for other activities, such as sports, play, and parking. The cities of Chicago and Denver are particularly well-recognized for their leadership in this area. Denver has a whole system of parks whose construction and maintenance are paid for by funds for storm drainage and flood control. These were planned and built over the past twenty-five years, and they have proven their effectiveness and viability many times over. Weir Gulch is a linear park that is part of this larger, city-wide system. It is located in a neighborhood much like Mill Creek. A public housing project borders on side of the park, and warehouses border the other side. The park slopes to a small drainageway that runs through the center, with a path, picnic tables, and a sitting area on higher ground. The long wall of the warehouse that faces the park is covered by a colorful mural with a theme familiar to the residents of the adjacent housing who are largely Mexican-Americans.



1. Flood control as part of a park on a vacant block
2. Playground incorporating storm drainage
3. Playlot and storm drainage on a vacant block
4. Flood control and park on multiple contiguous blocks

RECLAIMING VACANT LAND

Holding Land for Future Use

Many vacant lots in West Philadelphia are not yet ready for reuse. Those adjacent to newly developed lots may be targeted as expansion space, while others may be waiting for activity within the neighborhood to accommodate a new landscape or building use. Holding land is a temporary use that can benefit the community in the short term while waiting for a more needed and longer lasting use. Some may be temporarily used as parking lots, small gardens, or playfields while waiting for another use. Those that are likely candidates for future landscape projects like parkland, can prepare for that future use by improving the soil. Wildflower meadows create an attractive temporary landscape if they have well maintained borders (see "Meadow"). Clover fields will also improve the soil and do not require mowing.

Features of Holding Land for Future Use. The primary feature of holding land is its temporary quality. Without some sign, this temporary quality is invisible. In the 1960s, the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority erected white rail fences around property awaiting redevelopment. Unfortunately, to many people, these fences had a bad association, reminding them of the neighborhoods that had once stood on the land cleared by the Authority. To others, however, they signalled that new investment by government and private developers was on its way. Regardless of how one felt about them, the fences were effective signs that also prevented dumping on the cleared territory.

Land being held for future use should be treated in such a way that it is at least attractive and possibly also serves to enhance the surrounding neighborhood. Since its current use

is temporary, such land will probably not receive much investment in the interim. A meadow or mown field may be the most appropriate treatment. Depending on the tenure of the temporary use, small structures may also be built.

Establishing an Interim Use for Holding Land. Typically this type of land is earmarked for a certain type of project, but not yet ready for development. The city or an absentee landlord are likely owners. In either case, the owner should be required to keep the land neat and to secure its boundaries to prevent dumping. If someone other than the owner has a proposal for interim use of the land, they will have to obtain permission. If the owner of the land is also the future developer, some agreement may be reached with residents of the adjacent blocks or neighborhood. It is possible that the developer may only want to build on a portion of the property and may be willing to let the remainder of the lot be used by neighborhood residents for any of the potential uses discussed in this report.

Example. A large vacant lot of mown grass on the corner of 32nd and Spring Garden Streets is bounded by a chain-link fence. A sign at the corner announces that the lot is for sale and lists the broker's name and telephone number. While this property is currently not serving the community in any way, nevertheless, it does not detract as it would if it were filled with rubble and trash.

Implementation and Management

No matter how small or large the project, successful implementation and sustainability are essential. Given the diversity of types of vacant land and the challenges and opportunities they pose and given the many different types of potential new uses described in this report, there is no single way of accomplishing implementation and sustainability. Small projects sponsored by local residents, institutions, or businesses will be maintained privately, whether by those individuals responsible for initiating and implementing the improvements or by other individuals who became involved later. Public works projects will likely be implemented and maintained by a public agency, though public agencies in some cities have experimented with contracting the maintenance of open space to local groups.

The issues of implementation and management are addressed more thoroughly in the accompanying report, *Models of Success: Landscape Improvements and Community Development*.

VACANT LAND AND THE CITY

How can communities be designed to meet basic human physical and social needs and to express the values and dreams of the people who live there? How can individuals shape the neighborhoods within which they live? What are the respective roles of individual citizens and public agencies in shaping the city and how can the energy and knowledge of individuals be tapped? What role can landscape change play in addressing the social, economic, and environmental problems of the inner city?

Cities change constantly in response to changing social needs and values, political and economic conditions, and new technology. Some of these changes occur rapidly, while others evolve over decades. In older cities like Philadelphia, the opportunity to reshape the city seems constrained by the vast investment that already exists in the form of buildings, streets, sewer and water lines, railroad tracks, and bridges. Yet there have been dramatic changes in the city over the past few decades. Quite obvious to most Philadelphians are the changes in Center City, where new, large-scale, office buildings now occupy entire city blocks. These new buildings have changed the character of many streets and created a new skyline. Other, less benign changes have also occurred. In many inner-city neighborhoods the number of abandoned businesses and homes has grown, and vacant land has increased.

Vacant lands are not evenly distributed throughout West Philadelphia. While most neighborhoods have a few vacant lots, four neighborhoods: Mill Creek, Belmont, Mantua, and the Market-Walnut corridor between 43rd and 47th

Streets, have high concentrations of vacant land. The physical disintegration in these neighborhoods is a reflection of larger social, economic, and environmental problems, but it may also be a sign that the physical environment is not well-matched to the needs and desires of contemporary society. The neighborhoods where vacant land is most prevalent were built in the late nineteenth century. Block upon block of rowhouses with little or no yard and very few playgrounds occupied much of the land now vacant. Many of the buildings that were demolished were built in poor locations—over the Mill Creek sewer or in low-lying wet areas, for example.

Vacant lands represent an opportunity to reshape these neighborhoods to remedy past mistakes, to resolve larger metropolitan problems, such as flooding and water quality, and, at the same time, to address local social problems, such as inadequate housing and unemployment. At another level, these vacant lands also provide the chance for a person to have a small piece of ground, a place for enjoyment and self expression.

Cities are built through a combination of collective and individual visions and actions. Large-scale public works, like sewers, utilities, streets and highways, subways, and park systems, form the framework or infrastructure within which individual, smaller-scale projects, like new businesses, churches, hospitals, houses, and gardens, fit. It is difficult for individual citizens to reclaim whole vacant blocks, especially where these are numerous and vast. This requires an overview of the neighborhood and city as a whole and substantial technical and financial resources.

On the other hand, public agencies alone cannot redevelop all the many vacant corners and missing teeth throughout West Philadelphia. This is better accomplished through the efforts of people who know these places intimately.

Although there is a limit to what an individual or small group can accomplish, the cumulative impact of incremental efforts can be enormous. This is already evident. There are a remarkable number of successful examples in West Philadelphia where individuals and organizations have reclaimed vacant land for a variety of new uses to meet their needs. These demonstrate invention, energy, and enterprise. Where these projects are concentrated, such as in West Shore, they have transformed the neighborhood. The city could facilitate such individual initiatives through programs that provide incentives and reduce bureaucratic "red tape." There are models for such programs. Some of these are described in the accompanying report, *Models of Success: Landscape Improvements and Community Development*.

A redesigned and reconstructed urban landscape will not solve all or even many of the problems in the neighborhoods where vacant lands occur, for the problems are not merely physical. There are serious, underlying social and economic problems that must be addressed as well. The failure of many, well-intentioned urban renewal projects of the 1960s and 1970s that provided new buildings and landscapes, but that failed to address these social and economic problems is testimony to the importance of combining physical improvements and community development.

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APPENDICES

1. Award-winning Gardens in West Philadelphia
2. For Individuals and Small Groups: How to Get Started
3. Who Can Help

APPENDIX 1: AWARD-WINNING GARDENS IN WEST PHILADELPHIA

Philadelphia City Gardens Contest*

"Community Flower/Sitting Garden"

13 N. Conestoga Street (1st prize, 1987; 3rd prize, 1988)

Spruce Hill Garden: 44th & Locust Streets (1st prize, 1989, 1990; 2nd prize, 1987, 1988)

41st and Cambridge Streets (3rd prize, 1987)

5918 Arch Street (3rd prize, 1987)

49th and Florence Streets (3rd prize, 1990)

"Community Garden: Children"

Junior Garden of Gethsemene: Pearl and Conestoga Streets (1st prize, 1987, 1988; 2nd prize, 1989; 3rd prize, 1990)

ISI Caring Center (2nd prize, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990)

"Community Vegetable Garden"

46th and Linmore Streets (1st prize, 1988, 1989; 2nd prize, 1987, 1990)

44th and Parrish Streets (2nd prize, 1989; 3rd prize, 1988, 1990)

Gethsemene: Pearl and Conestoga Streets (1st prize, 1987; 2nd prize, 1988, 1990; 3rd prize 1989)

1500 N. 58th Street (1st prize, 1989)

3730 Mellon Street (3rd prize, 1989)

4900 Brown Street (3rd prize, 1989)

"Community Flower/Vegetable Garden"

Aspen Farms (1st Prize, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990)

46th and Wyalusung Streets (1st prize, 1988; 2nd prize, 1987, 1990; 3rd prize, 1989)

4641 Westminster Avenue (2nd prize, 1989, 1990)

Garden Club of Parkside: 41st Street and Parkside Avenue (2nd prize, 1989, 1990; 3rd prize, 1988)

4243-45 Sansom Street (1st prize 1987)

6118 Callowhill Street (1st prize, 1989)

4115-19 Pennsgrove Street (1st prize, 1989)

Squirrel Hill Garden Club (2nd prize, 1987)

4713-15 Chester Avenue (2nd prize, 1988)

355 N. 61st Street (3rd prize, 1988)

FOR INDIVIDUALS AND SMALL GROUPS: HOW TO GET STARTED

General Recommendations

Getting started on a project is often the most difficult step. While interest in reclaiming a vacant lot may already exist within the block or neighborhood, a way of organizing the project may not. This is the function of the workshop process described below which was developed for Philadelphia Green's Blockscape Program by Philadelphia Green staff and faculty and students from Penn's Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning.

The term "workshop" refers to both a type of meeting and a type of process. While most people are familiar with a workshop as a meeting for brainstorming ideas and then taking some kind of action, a workshop is also a way of running a meeting. In planning and running actual blockscape and vacant lot workshops eight steps seem to recur:

1. Organize the block/neighbors
2. Set an agenda for the meeting
3. Identify needs and desires
4. Determine key players
5. Understand the opportunities and limitations
6. Make a design
7. Discuss the design
8. Implement the design

There are several types of workshop meetings: one to decide what the residents want to do, who will do it, and what can be done; another to design the improvements; and a third to plan how to implement them. The following section outlines the workshop process as it might be encompassed by two meetings of the entire group and one design session. In order to maintain interest and participation, this number seems to be optimal.

Depending on who might be involved, however, more than two meetings may be needed. This can only be determined in the case of an individual vacant lot.

Participation of a whole block is crucial to a successful project. Although there may only be a few, core organizers, each resident must feel that his or her opinion and help is important. As it is also necessary to maintain a high degree of momentum and interest in reclaiming a vacant lot. The time between the initial meeting and implementation should be as short as possible. Attendance seems to be best when meetings are either Saturday morning or weekdays in the early evenings, when people are most likely to be home with no other specific plans. Finally, it is helpful to have an incentive to attend the meeting. Philadelphia Green sometimes gives away plants and flowers to all who attend. A barbecue is another way of getting residents together in an informal setting. A successful workshop is the first step toward a successful project.

The Workshop Process

Meeting No. 1: Planning Session

1. Organize the residents

The first steps in reclaiming a vacant lot are to set up a meeting and set an agenda. This can be done by block captains or a small group of residents. A place to hold the meeting should be found, and a date and time determined. Fliers can then be posted or placed in the mailboxes of all residents on the block where the vacant lot is located with ample notice of the meeting to help insure that everyone is invited and feels welcome.

2. Set an agenda for the meeting

The agenda should define the structure, order, and time frame of the meeting. In organizing an agenda, determine what you want to talk about and in what order. An initial idea session should run no more than one hour; it is important to follow the agenda to cover all important items, as well as to reduce irrelevant side discussions which may get the meeting sidetracked. The meeting should be run by two or three people, one being solely responsible for taking notes during the discussion. It is helpful to have a large pad of paper and a fat marker to write down ideas and issues so that everyone can see them. If possible, have a drawing of the block with houses and the vacant land identified so that residents can orient themselves by where they live. Finally, make sure there are enough chairs for everyone.

The meeting should begin with a review of why the meeting was called and an introduction. Next, ask residents to introduce themselves and

where they live (you may be surprised how many neighbors do not know each other). Outline the agenda and time frame so that everyone understands the time constraints and topics of discussion. The remainder of the meeting should be spent in discussion, with a summary at the end. Before the meeting is adjourned, determine what the next step will be, who will be involved, and when.

During the discussion, elicit the residents' needs and desires and identify key players. These are the next two steps of the process.

3. Identify needs and desires

Residents may know that they want to do something with a vacant lot, but not know exactly what. By talking about how they use their yards, where they garden or talk with each other, or what parks or play areas are nearby, a clearer picture of potential uses can be formulated. Determine if the vacant lot is to be a community garden, meeting place, outdoor workshop, or a combination of these (see section on potential uses). Participation and cooperation are important to this step. Each resident should have the chance to express an opinion and to be heard; no idea or problem is too dumb, too small, or too trivial. Many people find it difficult to describe how they interact with their block and their neighbors. Often this attempt leads to complaining about problems such as trash, noise, and pot holes. Although these problems are important, valuable time is wasted by reiterating these concerns. A good strategy is to deal with tangible, concrete examples and infer from those. For example, answers to questions concerning use of space or territoriality can be gotten by asking

people what their favorite community garden or play lot is, to describe their front garden, or where they like to talk to their neighbors. At one workshop for the 4500 and 4600 block of Spruce Street, residents identified some raised flowerbeds along a nearby apartment block that they liked. We were able to visit these planting beds and get a clearer picture of what the residents wanted and were having trouble describing. Discussion of the "likes" and "dislikes" yields many ideas which are more clearly understood by everyone. A list of potential questions and categories to consider during a workshop is included at the end of this appendix.

4. Identify key players

Closely related to identifying needs and desires is determining to what extent there is interest in reclaiming a vacant lot. A small turnout at the initial meeting may require some additional recruiting of residents or a rethinking of the scope of the work. Key players should be identified during these discussions. These are the residents who will lead in the latter stages of the project--the design, implementation, and maintenance. Without the active participation of key players, the project is not likely to succeed.

5. Understand opportunities and limitations

What were major topics of discussion? Was play space for small children an issue? Were residents concerned with safety? Trash? Noise? Was there a strong interest in additional planting space? Is the vacant lot narrow or large? Is it shady? Was money a concern? The bridge between the idea session and the design involves

understanding the opportunities and limitations of a vacant block--what the residents want and what is possible. It may be helpful to list the opportunities and the limitations on the particular vacant lot under discussion. This can serve as both a summation to the first meeting and an outline for the design session. Opportunities and limitations are not black-and-white issues. Much overlap exists; a limitation for one person may be an opportunity for another. Limitations should not be considered barriers, but neither can they be ignored. They, along with opportunities, must be thought through in a creative manner during the design of the vacant lot.

Meeting No. 2: Design Session

6. Make a design

The design session should consist of a smaller group of people, generally those key players identified at the first meeting. It is their responsibility to translate the ideas of the group into a drawn proposal or design. Begin with a review of the last meeting, including the notes taken during the discussion and the list of opportunities and limitations. These can serve as a guide and checklist during the design of the vacant lot. Most importantly, have a rough plan of the vacant lot, drawn to a scale (such as 1/8"=1'0") that is easy to see and work with. Include adjoining buildings with addresses, sidewalks, yards, existing street trees, or any other plantings. This will serve as a base to work from.

Overlay the base plan with a sheet of tracing paper. Work out the design ideas on this

FOR INDIVIDUALS AND SMALL GROUPS: HOW TO GET STARTED

sheet. Don't be afraid to use more than one sheet, ideas may only become clear after many tries. Don't throw away any ideas either; they may be useful in the end. When a consensus of the group is reached, draw a final plan, identifying what the new work or changes will be. This should be clear and legible since the vacant lot will be constructed from this drawing.

Meeting No. 3: Discussing the Design

7. Discuss the design

Call a third meeting to present the plan to all interested residents. Final agreement and any additional changes can be made at this time, along with setting the date and determining work assignments for implementation.

Meeting No. 4: Implementation

8. Implement the design

The final phase of the workshop process is implementing the design. As with the initial planning session, it is important to have many residents involved, since they will be doing most of the work. Depending on the scope of the work (play equipment, planting beds, built structures) an outside contractor or city agency might be involved. Try to make the work day a community event or party, with some people responsible for beverages and food. An annual block party might grow from this, celebrating the work done. Satisfaction and pride will come from everyone being able to say "I built this."

Workshop Questions

The purpose of a workshop is both to brainstorm ideas and to come to a better understanding of how the lot can be used. It is important to ask questions that will identify the concerns and wishes of the residents. Listed below are a few questions to consider during a workshop. These can be divided into four categories: identity/image; daily life/use; territory/boundary; and gardening/maintenance. Many more questions can be asked; these are only a place to start.

Identity/Image:

What are your favorite parks/outdoor spaces in West Philadelphia? ...Philadelphia? ...elsewhere? Why? Describe what you like.

What specific yard/garden do you like or admire? Why? Describe it.

What do you think makes your block/neighborhood special?

What would you change about the vacant lot if you could do anything?

Daily Life:

Do you have a backyard? How do you use it?

Where do you socialize?

Where do you hang out?

Where do the children play?

Are there parks or playgrounds nearby?

Where do you garden?

Territory/Boundary:

What do you consider "your space?"
the sidewalk or the curb?
the front yard?
porch?
steps/stoop?

What do you feel is shared space? With whom do you share it?

Do you have a fence/hedge/wall?

Do you have a gate?

Do you have a shrub or flower border?

What are the boundaries to your block/neighborhood?

Gardening/Maintenance:

Do you consider yourself an active gardener?
...a sporadic gardener?

Would you like to garden, but don't have a place to? ...or could you care less about gardening?

Do you have friends that garden?

What do you garden or plant? Why?

Do you like/want street trees?

Would you be willing to care for street trees?

APPENDIX 3: WHO CAN HELP

Streets Department		Philadelphia Green	625-8280
Alley and Driveway Paving	686-5511		
Trash Collection	686-5560	Urban Gardening Program, Penn State Cooperative	
Garbage	686-5564	Extension	569-4150
Pot holes/Street repair	868-5508		
Street lights fixed	592-5683		
Fairmount Park (District#4)			
Street trees planted/removed	352-6844		
Tree Inspector	686-8646		
Recycling Center	686-0108		
Water Department			
Fire Hydrants	686-1641		
Water Problems	592-6300		
Health Services			
Rat Control	686-1919		
Anti-Graffiti Network	686-4570		
Neighborhood Services (Managing Director's Office)	686-3488		
Sewer Repair	592-6300		
Abandoned Car	686-3180		
Parks Clean-Up	686-2254		
Abandoned Houses/Vacant Lots	685-2463		
Mayor's Office of Community Services	686-9022		
Philadelphia More Beautiful Committee	978-3969		
Philadelphia Electric Co.	841-4000		

- 1. New rowhouse on a vacant corner*
- 2. New buildings on a vacant block*
- 3. New buildings and other uses on multiple vacant blocks*
- 4. New rowhouse on a missing tooth*

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