

SURROUNDINGS

A long-buried creek in West Philadelphia

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INQUIRER ARCHITECTURE CRITIC

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

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

awareness of it.

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

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

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

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

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View

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The plan provides a reminder that