A New Tool for Strengthening Urban Neighborhoods

Robert B. Inerfeld and Brenda Bratton Blom

Developing a sense of community and improving quality of life at the neighborhood level are goals of community development that are often more elusive than more pressing objectives such as providing affordable housing and helping people to find jobs. However, there is broad agreement that quality of life is an important component of community development. Increasingly, community development corporations and other community-based organizations are working on neighborhood planning efforts to improve the quality of life in their communities and set strategic goals.

This article describes an innovative strategy for improving the physical fabric of neighborhoods that has many potential benefits related to the quality of life in the community. Unlike other physical approaches for neighborhood improvement, this strategy focuses on the interior of the urban block, i.e., backyards, rather than the more public spaces in front of the houses. This approach, which we are calling "community greens," encourages urban dwellers to merge parts of their backyards into shared spaces that become new green amenities for these residents.

Alleys and Backyards: From Eyesores to Eden

The insides of urban blocks are often very negative spaces. In rowhouse neighborhoods in Baltimore, many alleys are littered with garbage that provides a steady food supply for rats. Drug dealers also use the alleys as stashing places and escape routes. The alleys drag down the rest of the inside of the block because residents have no incentive to enjoy spending time in backyards. In many neighborhoods, the entire inside of the block, both alleys and yards, is paved over with concrete. Street trees often are the only trees on the entire block.

We propose the concept of community greens as an alternative paradigm for the urban block. Community greens are shared spaces inside blocks that are bounded by the rears of the dwelling units and the units'

Robert B. Inerfeld, AICP (rob@communitygreens.org), is Director, Community Greens: Shared Parks in Urban Blocks, in Arlington, Virginia. Brenda Bratton Blom (bblom@law.umaryland.edu) is an assistant law professor at the University of Maryland School of Law.

backyards, patios, decks, and/or balconies. There is no one agreed-upon name for these kinds of spaces; they have been called courtyards, parks, yards, and squares. We chose the name community greens because it suggests that these spaces have a green element and that they also facilitate development of community fabric.

One of the authors directs a new program that was created to help develop such spaces. Community Greens: Shared Parks in Urban Blocks is a partnership of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and Ashoka: Innovators for the Public that was started in early 2001.[1] It is supported through grants from the HUD Office of Policy Development and Research and the Fannie Mae Foundation.

The inspiration for Community Greens came about when Ashoka founder and CEO Bill Drayton lived in the MacDougal-Sullivan Garden Historic District in the early 1970s. New York businessman William Sloane Coffin, who was disturbed by the flight of the middle class from New York, created the MacDougal-Sullivan garden in the 1920s. Coffin bought twenty-one adjacent townhouses on Sullivan and MacDougal Streets in Greenwich Village, rehabilitated them, and merged part of each backyard into a communal green. He then sold the individual houses to homeowners along with a share in the common space.

When Drayton lived on the block, renting an accessory unit from one of the homeowners, he observed the strong sense of community among the residents. He describes the garden in glowing terms: "For children the MacDougal-Sullivan garden—which measures about forty by 200 feet and occupies the full interior of a city block—is a private playground; for parents it is a godsend; for busy professionals it is a civilized bit of Europe in the concrete jungle."[2]

Because the fences between the backyards and shared space can be no higher than four-and-a-half feet, the private yards merge visually with the common green, a rectangle of grass shaded by tall trees. At one end of the green is a children's play area and basketball court, and at the other is a flower garden.

We have looked across the country for the best examples of communities with shared spaces that are enclosed by homes and yards. Among the many excellent examples are Chandlers Yard in Baltimore and Montgomery Park in Boston (dense rowhouse neighborhoods); Village Homes in Davis, California (an ecologically sensitive community); St. Francis Square in San Francisco (limited equity cooperative); and Matsusaka Townhomes in Tacoma, Washington (affordable rental development).

A Green Oasis in Boston's South End

Montgomery Park, in Boston's South End neighborhood, is a lush one-third of an acre green space surrounded by eighty-five housing units contained in thirty-five townhouses. The park was originally created in the 1860s as a fenced private garden that was owned by the owners of the

surrounding houses. By the 1960s, Montgomery Park had declined along with the rest of the South End.

As new homeowners began to renovate the historic townhouses as either single- or two-family residences, some of them were intrigued by the garden space, even though it was filled with rubbish. During the past thirty years, residents have reclaimed this space and gradually improved it to where it is now the heart of a diverse community of neighbors who, according to one resident, have become "the best of friends." During this period, residents gated the alleys and moved garbage collection to the front of the houses, replaced the alley surrounding the park with a brick path, and successfully lobbied the utility companies to bury the utility lines. The formal fence around the park was taken away, and most residents removed the rear fences of their small yards to better enjoy the view.

Led by a core group of six gardeners, the residents garden together, maintaining several large perennial beds, a dozen trees, walkways, and a lawn. Beyond the sweat equity, households make a yearly voluntary contribution of $75 to the Montgomery Park Association for maintenance and improvements. Although Montgomery Park has lost some of its diversity as the property values in the South End have skyrocketed, one of the townhouses was long ago converted into five public housing units that are managed by a local nonprofit. So there are still public housing residents on a block where houses sometimes sell for more than $1 million.

Community Greens and Affordable Housing

St. Francis Square in San Francisco, a limited equity cooperative developed in the early 1960s, is one of many well-designed affordable housing developments on the West Coast that contain shared outdoor spaces that are bounded by the dwelling units. The development consists of 299 units in three-story apartment buildings that were built around three courtyards. Each unit has either a balcony or fenced backyard that looks onto the shared space. The courtyards were largely responsible for the strong sense of community that quickly developed at St. Francis Square and that exists to this day. They also provide a safe and attractive landscape for children's play within sight and calling distance of home.[3]

A more recent example is Matsusaka Townhomes, a twenty-six-unit affordable rental development in Tacoma, Washington, built in 1994. According to the resident manager, "all the back doors face the courtyard, so we can all see one another. People interact a lot because of this." Windows in the rear walls of each townhouse allow parents to watch their children in the play area without going outside.[4]

HUD's Affordable Housing Design Advisor website is an excellent resource.[5] The website contains a Gallery of High Quality Affordable Housing that showcases exemplary affordable housing developments from across the United States. The Special Characteristics Index[6] includes courtyard housing; twenty-eight affordable housing developments built around courtyards are listed. The developments with courtyards, including Mat-

susaka Townhomes, are concentrated on the West Coast and in the Northeast: fifteen in California, four in Massachusetts, and three each in New York and Washington State.

Why Develop Community Greens?

Residents in the immediate neighborhood and the broader community benefit from the existence of community greens in many ways. We have observed that community greens:

(1) Encourage the development of a much stronger sense of community on the blocks that share them;

(2) Provide a safe play space for young children, thus making such urban blocks and the neighborhoods in which they are located more attractive to families with young children;

(3) Facilitate the development of block-level community organizations that foster new community leaders and become the building blocks of broader community efforts;

(4) Contribute to greater stability on the block because residents who have stronger social bonds in their community are likely to move less often;

(5) Increase safety and security inside the block because neighbors now know one another and can look after each other in the absence of tall privacy fences;

(6) Help in the fight against sprawl by making urban living more attractive, especially to families with children;

(7) Increase the city's tree canopy, which counters the urban heat island effect[7] and provides habitat for birds and other small animals; and

(8) Reduce the quantity of stormwater runoff by increasing the amount of tree cover and replacing impervious surfaces such as concrete with soil and plantings.

Many problems associated with the interiors of traditional urban blocks could be addressed by development of community greens:

(1) Paved-over alleys and backyards contribute to a number of ecological problems, including stormwater runoff and the urban heat island effect.

(2) Many urban neighborhoods lack a strong sense of community. Affordable housing developments generally are not designed to encourage either casual or more familiar social interactions.

(3) Community development corporations have access to few physical design tools to facilitate the building of social connections, especially between new and existing residents, on blocks under redevelopment.

(4) Many urban homes lack good quality outdoor recreational space for young children or backyards that can be used for such purposes.

(5) New development continues to sprawl into exurban areas partially because older urban neighborhoods are perceived as not having adequate private green space. In other words, many families want usable, high-quality backyards.

(6) Thieves often break into the rears of houses. To prevent robberies, residents build large privacy fences for protection. Such fences cut down on natural surveillance because residents cannot see if someone is trying to break into a neighbor's house. The fences also discourage the development of neighborliness inside the block.

How to Develop Community Greens

As the examples above illustrate, community greens can be developed in several different ways:

(1) Develop as part of new construction—single- or multifamily, rental or homeowner.

(2) Redevelop an existing block through site control and merge parts of existing backyards.

(3) Merge parts of backyards by existing residents, property owners, or both.

(4) Start by using the alley as the common space.

(5) Redesign existing shared spaces that are poorly designed and maintained, such as barracks-style public housing courtyards.

Clearly, it is a greater challenge to develop community greens on existing blocks than to incorporate them in new development. Buying an entire block, as in the case of the MacDougal-Sullivan garden, is rarely feasible or desirable. This leaves two other approaches for existing blocks: encourage residents to merge together parts of their backyards into a shared space or transform a dysfunctional alley into a commons.

Some of the specific challenges for developing community greens on existing blocks include:

(1) Promoting the benefits of this kind of space to property owners and public officials;

(2) Helping residents to understand the process of merging parts of their yards into a shared space;

(3) Changing laws and policies to allow and facilitate development of shared spaces inside blocks;

(4) Creating incentives and access to financing for property owners; and

(5) Setting up ownership entities and management and maintenance plans.

Merging Theory and Practice to Solve Legal Problems

Baltimore is an excellent laboratory for testing out different strategies for developing community greens for several reasons. The city has suffered from disinvestment and population loss and is in need of innovative solutions for attracting new residents. In many neighborhoods, the alleys are dysfunctional and only used for utilities and trash pickup. Paved-over backyards and alleys contribute significant amounts of stormwater runoff into Baltimore Harbor and the Chesapeake Bay.

A spring 2002 seminar (Legal Theory and Practice: Community Development—Community Greening in Baltimore) at the University of Mary-

land School of Law will explore the legal issues related to how to develop community greens in Baltimore, both on existing blocks and on vacant land. Students will perform predevelopment work for five specific blocks where residents or community development corporations believe the community greens approach could enhance their quality of life. We will combine the work of students with the participation of residents, technical assistance providers, and attorneys with skills in community development and real estate.

The five blocks identified are as varied as the city itself. One is in an area already well into a revitalization phase, where a city lot is available for incorporation into a community building scheme. One is a neighborhood that has a comprehensive strategic development plan, but has a long way to go. One is a stable moderately priced neighborhood where a few neighbors are already sharing some space and want to formalize and expand the common space. The last two are in two of Baltimore's most challenging neighborhoods. Two community development corporations, one on Baltimore's east side and one on the west side, are looking to develop a mix of homeownership and rental units by working with existing blocks.

The ambitious seminar will be divided into three parts. The first six weeks will consist of primarily classroom study and include the history of the commons (historic and modern land trusts, easements, etc.); zoning and eminent domain; real estate transfer; defensible space; requirements for city services; and possible ownership entities. Students will become familiar with the properties themselves by reviewing title work and plats, conducting site visits, and performing mapping activities.

During the following four weeks, class time will be devoted to working through complex questions that might arise. These could include foreseeable issues such as:

(1) Does a community green that serves just the enclosed block serve enough of a public purpose to invoke the eminent domain process for neighbors who choose not to participate?

(2) If residents want to use a land trust for the shared space, can residents who opt out at first later participate?

(3) What forms of ownership best serve community greens, and can they include more than a single block?

Our hypothesis is that these working sessions will provide an opportunity for sharing across project lines and provide insight into potential ways to organize and solve these problems.

Students will spend the last four weeks presenting their findings. Our hope is that, after fourteen weeks of work, some of the projects will be ready to proceed. Some may need further study, but community groups should have a much better grasp of both the concepts that they intend to pursue and the steps necessary to proceed.

We plan to share the lessons learned during the seminar in later publications. We hope to address the substantive legal issues related to implementation of a community greens project in an urban rowhouse commu-

nity. But we also look forward to sharing the insights of this unique collaboration.

---

1. *See* www.communitygreens.org.

2. Bill Drayton, *Secret Gardens*, ATLANTIC MONTHLY, June 2000, at 103, *available at* www.theatlantic.com/issues/2000/06/drayton.htm.

3. Clare Cooper Marcus, *The Neighborhood Approach to Building Community: A Different Perspective on Smart Growth*, WESTERN CITY MAG., Mar. 2001.

4. MICHAEL PYATOK, GOOD NEIGHBORS: AFFORDABLE FAMILY HOUSING, 92 (1995).

5. *See* www.designadvisor.org.

6. *See* www.designadvisor.org/tools/characteristics_index.html.

7. On warm summer days, the air in a city can be six to eight degrees hotter than its surrounding areas. Scientists call these cities urban heat islands. The urban heat island effect happens because there are fewer trees, shrubs, and other plants to shade buildings, intercept solar radiation, and cool the air by "evapotranspiration." Buildings and pavement made of dark materials absorb the sun's rays instead of reflecting them away, causing the temperature of the surfaces and the air around them to rise. *See* http://eetd.lbl.gov/HeatIsland/HighTemps.