

# LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT as COMMUNITY TRANSFORMER



## “ONE OF THE HALLMARKS OF CITIES WITH HIGH POVERTY RATES

like Philadelphia is that children are profoundly disconnected from nature,” notes **Kimberlee Douglas, MLandArch**, associate professor of landscape architecture and Anton Germishuizen Stantec Term Chair in Landscape Architecture. “My colleagues and I are investigating ways to recreate that connection and then observe the effects on health, community engagement and other key metrics.”

Douglas believes that each landscape project must consider natural systems as well as social, historic and economic frameworks. This approach has driven her award-winning designs for projects such as the Cynwyd Heritage Trail—a rehabilitated brownfield rail corridor in Bala Cynwyd, PA—and the innovative, sustainable Linwood Avenue Neighborhood Park, in Ardmore, PA. It is also central to her applied research on ecological revitalization of urban neighborhoods and the benefits of nature for children in cities.

## Developing “Green Networks”

Her current project is testing the development of “green networks,” a series of small neighborhood nature parks that harness a hidden asset in many low-income neighborhoods—vacant lots. The project’s ultimate objective is two-fold: enable every child to live within a 30-second walk of a green space; and create a verdant necklace running throughout the city’s most economically depressed communities. Combining education and community engagement with research, Douglas employs local students to develop and use survey tools to observe and record characteristics of community strength and weakness and to photograph and map physical changes in the neighborhood.





Kimberlee Douglass, MLandArch, works with community members to set up small parks as part of a "green network" in Philadelphia.

"Philadelphia has roughly 40,000 parcels of open space," Douglas says. "They represent 40,000 chances to build safe green places, raise neighborhood property values and improve the health of children and adults alike." These parcels—and Douglas's initiative—also represent a model that can be adopted by cities across the country and around the globe.

Many of her colleagues agree: In 2019, Douglas earned the American Society of Landscape Architects' *Community Service Award*. "Her enduring and sustained community service has made a lasting impact on many neighborhoods in Philadelphia in providing quality green spaces in low-income neighborhoods," says **Barbara Klinkhammer, Dipl.-Ing.**, executive dean of the College of Architecture and the Built Environment. "She serves as an enthusiastic ambassador of the power of landscape architecture in transforming the urban environment." ■