

One Block at a Time: Improving Lives through Urban and Social Innovation in Philadelphia

The Built Environment Matters

An increasing body of evidence suggests that public health is impacted by the quality of the built environment.¹ The general definition of the built environment usually refers to the micro- and macro-scale of the human-made environment including buildings, parks, transportation and infrastructure systems. It encompasses all spaces and places in which people live, work and play.² More recently, public health has expanded the definition to include access to healthy food, community gardens, access to education and health care.

While major public health issues in the developing world include infectious diseases, overcrowded urban areas or unsanitary conditions, public health issues are mostly associated in the Western societies with chronic diseases such as diabetes, cancer, coronary vascular disease and asthma. Sedentary life style, coupled with automobile-dependent environments in our neighborhoods and cities, the lack of sidewalks and destinations to which to walk, and other environmental factors (such as air-pollution and environmental toxins) contribute to physical inactivity and to the rise of chronic diseases. Research has shown that health-promotive environments (neighborhoods that include a mix of residential areas, work and educational places and retail with high levels of proximity, green spaces and good street connectivity) encourage physical activity and lead to better health outcomes.³

The Current State in Philadelphia

Philadelphia has some of the nation's worst health outcomes, with a life-expectancy that is well below the national average in some neighborhoods. Philadelphia ranks last in the overall ranking of health outcomes of

counties in the state of Pennsylvania⁴ and scores at the bottom of the chart in five categories: Health Behavior, Health Factors, Social and Economic Factors, Quality of Life and Length of Life. The average life expectancy for babies born to mothers in different neighborhoods in Philadelphia can vary by as much as 20 years⁵ and can be traced back to multiple factors that influence the health gap across neighborhoods. Access to health care, education and healthy food, walkability of neighborhoods, and the quality of the housing stock are some of the major drivers behind the health disparity.

Lab for Urban and Social Innovation

The [Jefferson College of Architecture and the Built Environment \(CABE\)](#) has a long-standing tradition of working with underserved communities in Philadelphia to improve the built environment by uniting community leaders, stakeholders, faculty and students. Design projects focus on improvements such as reduced dependence on vehicular transportation, walkable and bike-friendly communities, and redevelopment of mixed-use areas that promote walking. Based on its successful collaborative model, CABE founded the [Lab for Urban and Social Innovation \(LUSI\)](#) in 2016. Working collaboratively with neighborhoods and stakeholders, LUSI facilitates creating a vision of the built environment to strengthen the well-being of the community. Our process includes community workshops, design studios, design charrettes, funded research and consulting services. Using the [National Charrette Institute \(NCI\)](#) stakeholder approach, the collaborative process encourages participants to envision the unique and specific needs of their neighborhood and gives them a voice

in the neighborhood's transformation. Through this process, LUSI helps to develop a shared vision and a broad network of stakeholders, connects communities with experts needed to implement the vision and helps find funding for the projects. As a result, communities will have greater access to green spaces and improved environment, increased social capital, improved local economy, better health equity and outcomes and reduction in crime. Drawing from its expert faculty and students in architecture, landscape architecture, interior design, geodesign, sustainable design, real estate development and allied disciplines, LUSI has been able to bring real change to Philadelphia's neighborhoods that are most in need.⁶

Open Space Initiative: Cecil Street Community Park

Through LUSI, the [Landscape Architecture Program](#) at Jefferson is proposing a network of block-by-block green spaces linking adjacent vacant lots to create green corridors of high quality outdoor spaces. With over 40,000 empty parcels, Philadelphia provides an unprecedented opportunity for the development of green spaces and community gardens. Living next to a green space or park boosts social well-being and mental health beyond just physical activity. The first pilot, transforming a vacant lot into a community-owned green space was launched two years ago as a collaboration with the community of Kingsessing in Philadelphia and the Jefferson Landscape Architecture Program in partnership with the [John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge](#) and [Audubon Pennsylvania](#). Under the guidance of Professor Kim Douglas, landscape architecture students co-created a shared vision with the community and embarked on a design process that spanned the full semester. Over the summer, students and faculty worked with the

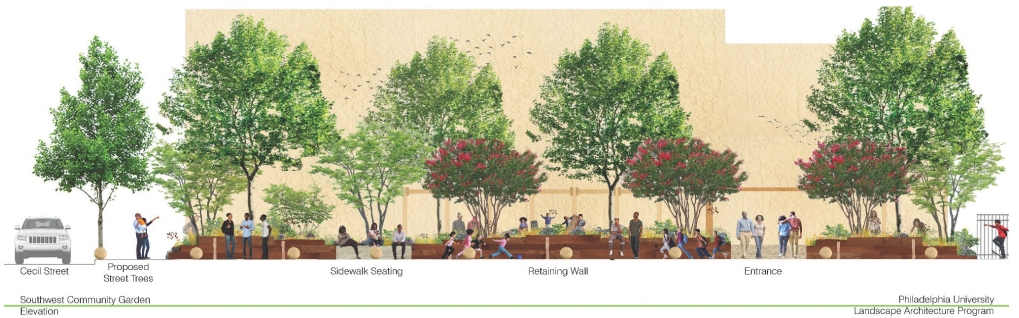
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community to determine the three sites for the intervention and to fully design the pocket park. Supported by the City of Philadelphia, Cecil Street Community Park is slated to be installed this year. A pre-and post-assessment developed in collaboration with the Jefferson Center for Urban Health and the Jefferson College of Population Health (JCPH), will measure the public health outcomes focusing on physical activity, community cohesion and connectedness and social well-being.

The next step will be to scale this intervention by building a robust process that involves local residents and entire neighborhoods in the planning and implementation process converting one block at a time into a linked system of green corridors.⁷



View from Kingessing Avenue



Cecil Street Community Park: Before and After

“Rewilding” Cities

Building on the one block-at-a-time Open Space Initiative, landscape architecture students (under the guidance of Professor Kim Douglas, and in partnership with the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge and Audubon Pennsylvania) designed, in a collaborative effort with the neighborhood of Eastwick in Southwest Philadelphia, a pollinator corridor eventually connecting the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge, Fairmount Park and Cobbs Creek Park. This proposed contiguous green network will provide community members in underserved neighborhoods with access to green space within walking distance in a safe and engaging environment.

Mill Creek Center for Arts and Innovation

This collaborative project between the Jefferson Landscape Architecture, Sustainable Design and Geodesign programs focused on the former Mill Creek Arts and Cultural Center site in the Mill Creek area of West Philadelphia. It included the redevelopment of a small, mixed-use urban district that promotes

the growth of art, technology, and design and reduced dependence on vehicular transportation. The clients, West Philadelphia Financial Services Institute and Progressive Community Development Corporation, were committed to working with the community to ensure their vision was realized. The development of the neighborhood around the Center focused on curtailed access between schools, churches and parks and the walkability and bikeability of the small neighborhood became essential parameters for the community. The design analysis built on guiding principles and initial concepts were developed using principles of sustainable design, landscape ecology, and transit-oriented-development. The design team used advanced geospatial technology and 3D parametric modeling to demonstrate specific ‘what-if’ design scenarios to enable stakeholder and community members to engage in the decision process. During intensive ‘rapid iteration’ design sessions, all done live in real-time using 3D technology, community members could view in real time the designs and comment on what had been developed. A LUSI project, the design process included a broad network of stakeholders

and community partners including Mill Creek Advisory Council (MCAC); the Business Association of West Parkside; LA21; Parkside Association; Cathedral Park Association; and Centennial Parkside Community Development Corporation. While this project was not implemented, it positively impacted the creation of social capital and community building in this neighborhood.

Moving Forward

LUSI helps change the narrative of underserved communities by identifying their strength and assets that can be used to increase positive outcomes and enable communities to address environmental, economic and social conditions of their neighborhoods that lead to better public health. When developers come knocking, neighborhoods can be ready with a plan in hand of what they want for their community and can negotiate accordingly.

In combatting health disparity in Philadelphia’s neighborhoods, stakeholders have to partner in collaborative action to build healthier and more equitable communities. Jefferson recently formed

the Philadelphia Collaborative for Health Equity to help establish partnerships across the city aimed at better serving Philadelphia communities. As educators in the architecture fields, we need to tie into the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Design and Health Initiative⁸ and

educate our students to become advocates and stewards of a built environment that facilitates healthy behaviors. Working closely together with JCPH, the College of Architecture and the Built Environment is committed to driving the change. Let's change the city one block at a time.

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5. Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Center on Society and Health. <https://societyhealth.vcu.edu/work/the-projects/mapsphiladelphia.html>. Accessed July 6, 2018.
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