

## **Factors Impacting the Community Management of Urban Open Space: An Analysis of Three Restoration Projects in New Haven, Connecticut**

### **Abstract**

*Abandoned urban lands are a persistent problem in many cities. Communities need tools and techniques to transform these spaces into opportunities. The Urban Resource initiative's experience in working alongside community groups in New Haven, Connecticut offers insight into key factors which impact the short-term and long-term success of community-based open space restoration projects. Understanding these factors can help community groups and resource providers (including university partnerships, not-for-profits and city agencies) better select and manage urban open space restoration activities.*

### **Introduction**

Cities in the eastern half of the United States are experiencing unprecedented rates of land abandonment. Many small, non-contiguous areas in urban centers are degrading as illegal dumping creates pockets of debris and hazardous waste. One of the most pressing concerns for urban forestry in the next millennium will be this problem of abandoned urban lands. Since 1989 the Urban Resources Initiative (URI), a program at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, has worked in partnership with municipalities, local greening groups, not-for-profit organizations and university researchers to adapt social ecology methods to urban areas. Our goal has been to develop tools and techniques that enable urban land managers to convert problems, such as abandoned urban lands, into opportunities (Burch and Grove, 1992).

Community leadership is the critical factor in successfully managing urban space (McDonough et al., 1994). Most urban municipalities in the northeast lack the person power to manage the growing open space acreage (Baltimore Dept of Parks and Recreation and the Urban Resources Initiative, Strategic Plan for Action, 1991). Traditional top-down

management will not suffice in reclaiming and maintaining the growing volume of urban open spaces. Municipalities must look to alternatives which rely upon developing and supporting community leadership. Community management of urban lands is not merely a fall back: involvement of local residents can lead to greater community cohesion and participation (Argenta, 1998).

In New Haven, Connecticut, the Urban Resources Initiative has worked in concert with neighborhood groups and city managers to reclaim abandoned urban areas. In our work with over two hundred community groups over the past four years (see Map 1) we have determined several factors that impact the community management of urban open space. This paper attempts to document this experience and target the key factors which impact community management of urban open space.

### **Heterogeneity of Urban Sites**

Urban land reclamation projects vary tremendously by social and biophysical factors. Sites have widely varying scales, both physical and temporal. Demographics of a site, which can vary block by block in some cities, influence the type of project that will be supported neighborhood-wide. Urban infrastructure creates dozens of microenvironments so varied that two sites on the same block may have widely different slope, aspect, and soil conditions.

These differences make it clear that ultimately each site will demand its own inventory, analysis, site plan and implementation strategy. Nonetheless, several types of factors can be highlighted which influence the overall effectiveness of the restoration activities.

### **Case Study: The Neighborhood Forest Project**

In order to determine such factors, and to minimize the variability among sites, researchers at the Urban Resources Initiative studied three sites with similar characteristics over a two-year period. From 1996 - 1998 the Urban Resources Initiative, funded by the Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust, collaborated with local groups on the Neighborhood Forests Project. In this project community residents applied for funding and technical support from the Urban Resources Initiative. Three groups were selected based upon their community plan and the appropriateness of the site. All sites were blighted areas where community members had made some progress, with earlier URI support, in reclaiming the open space for residents' use. All three groups hoped to make further progress and transform their sites into positive and productive spaces.

Communication and technical support was provided through several channels. Each resident group selected a community liaison, an active member of the group who served as the point person for the project and received compensation for her work. URI community foresters worked alongside residents for the entire project. The community foresters provided technical support and made contact with other potential resources (including the local utility

and water companies, an architectural cooperative, landscape designers and other donors). Graduate students in Professor William R. Burch, Jr.'s community forestry class devoted one academic term to fieldwork and research on the three communities. Students worked with residents to develop an ecosystem analysis of each neighborhood. Products from this work were widely distributed among community members and provided neighborhood leaders with valuable in-depth site analysis and assessment tools.

The three community groups include Arch Street, Watson and Bassett and Wolcott and Lloyd Blockwatch.

The Arch Street group was initially drawn together to combat extensive drug dealing and violence in their area. In 1995 the Arch Street Blockwatch reached out to the Urban Resources Initiative to augment this social rehabilitation of their community with environmental restoration. Over the past three years their commitment and expertise has grown immensely as the Arch Street residents, the Urban Resources Initiative and city government have worked together to tear down three abandoned buildings and create a vital and sustainable community open space from amid the rubble.

The Watson and Bassett group is a team of homeowners who have strong roots in their community. In 1996 the Watson and Bassett group first partnered with the Urban Resources Initiative to reclaim a vacant corner lot that anchors their street. This open space, now a shared community meeting area, used to be a trash-filled lot where 12 foot high bamboo hid all sorts of illegal dumping and illicit activities. The lot was a social and environmental disaster. Now converted into a glorious pocket park, the restoration has become a focal point of pride for the entire Newhallville community.

The neighborhood surrounding Wolcott and Lloyd has suffered from tremendous blight, with over ten abandoned spaces in a one-block radius. Drug dealing has been an ongoing problem as several different gangs vie for control of the area. The Wolcott and Lloyd Blockwatch worked with the Urban Resources Initiative to regain control of a busy corner site and create a garden oasis for neighbors and children. The group then expanded their goal to include the revitalization of several more of the abandoned spaces surrounding the block.

## **Methods**

URI staff and student researchers used a variety of social ecology methods in working with local residents. The primary method was participatory outreach and dialogue. Our staff worked alongside residents in all aspects of site analysis, planning, and implementation. We emphasized participatory research and shared responsibility. Residents and URI staff formed relationships and trust in working alongside one another over the two year period. All participants developed a strong sense of ownership and pride in the sites. The approach was to create a community revitalization project that, in addition to the transformations in the neighborhood, also yielded key research data. Other techniques included methodologies

such as key informant interviewing, focus group interviewing, user surveys and mapping.

### **Lessons learned: Key Factors**

Several key factors emerged from these studies. Taken as a whole, these factors can be used as a matrix to assess and select urban sites for successful restoration efforts.

**Location.** The mantra in real estate is location, location, location and that holds true for urban open space development as well. The site must be large and visible. This affects perceptions of safety and ownership. A corner site is ideal in this respect. If a corner site is not available then the site must be large (larger than one house site) and located towards the middle of the community/ block. Corner sites offer visibility and sense of shared ownership. Larger sites can have the same effect. Conversely, a site that is too small can create a tunnel effect which creates a sense of closure. In many inner city communities isolated sites attract illicit activities. Site reclamation must reduce opportunities for such activities and also reduce the perception that such actions occur on the site. A sense of community ownership is critical to the long-term success of the project. Small sites tucked away between two residences are often perceived to benefit the adjoining residents more than the community at large. These smaller sites can be better restored by adjacent private landowners. In New Haven, neighbors often split these single sites and residents create side yards or off street parking, both of which are in short supply in the inner city.

*The Arch Street site, located mid point along the street, is a wide, large and visible site. Both Watson and Bassett and Wolcott and Lloyd are corner areas with open site lines. In all three sites community members have continued to have and maintain the open spaces. In contrast, one of the newer sites in the Wolcott and Lloyd area is a narrow single lot. This site has fallen back into misuse and disrepair as community members argue about ownership and worry about safety.*

**Traffic.** A well-trafficked side street, preferably with some pedestrian activity, makes for an ideal siting. Successful sites require high traffic volume to ensure a sense of visibility and ward against perceptions of isolation and danger. However, too much traffic can also bring safety problems, particularly in regard to young children accessing the site.

*The Watson and Bassett site, located just off of a busy commercial area, has an unusual amount of foot traffic, due to the social services provided in the immediate areas (The State Department of Social Services and a neighborhood school). This foot traffic ensures that many people see and use the site.*

**Crime.** Both the reality and perception of crime impacts the success of a community project. High crime rates and community management of open space is a poor mix. Inevitably, residents fear using the open space and the drug dealers can take over the actual site. In all three neighborhoods the environmental restoration was predicated on a sense that social order was also in the process of being restored. In sites where crime (drug dealing in particular) is rampant, the forestry projects usually fail. URI foresters often work in areas where crime and dealing persist, but the key issue is that the worst is perceived to be over and the forestry project is seen as part of a general plan of revitalization.

*Drug dealing on Arch Street had been so intense in the early 1990's that residents feared even venturing outdoors. When one long time resident finally tried to move he discovered that he could not sell his house. He dug in, spoke with neighbors, formed a Blockwatch and together the residents worked with the police to curb the open drug dealing. Residents from Wolcott and Lloyd experienced a similar low point, followed by community resistance. In both cases, a citywide strengthening of police efforts coupled with stricter sentencing for drug offenders was a key element in restoring stability. It was only after the drug warfare subsided that residents could begin to envision other elements of a healthy and vital neighborhood, such as greenspaces and environmental restoration.*

**Ownership: Land Tenure.** The question of who owns the site is critical. In New Haven, site ownership often has a tortuous past. The city is currently selling liens on vacant lands in order to raise capital. Much of the open space is now owned by a holding company which does not maintain their properties. Community management depends upon community ownership. A privately owned site that is "lent" to a community group offers little sense of security for the long term and participation in restoring such a site is often low. Local ownership, in a neighborhood not-for-profit, is the most secure type of situation. This type of local ownership is also the most difficult to achieve as inner city community groups often lack the resources to transfer title and pay the taxes and otherwise take control of the sites. URI is currently collaborating with community development corporations, which traditionally have focussed on housing, to take ownership of some sites. Municipalities are the next best landlord for vacant lands. However, the current situation in New York City, where long term gardens are being bulldozed for housing, raises concerns about the long-term viability of city-owned community spaces.

*The City of New Haven has taken title to the three housing lots on Arch Street and is committed to maintaining the pocket park. This provides Arch Street residents with security and stability. In contrast, one of the satellite sites in the Wolcott and Lloyd neighborhood was found to be privately owned. This disclosure came after community members had already cleaned and begun restoring the site. Although the owner promised open access, neighbors felt that their work was compromised*

**Ownership: Historical.** Urban sites, by their nature, have a long and often complex history. In New England cities the history of sites can reach back hundreds of years and offer glimpses into the changing settlement and employment patterns of the region. The sites often have vibrant oral histories- a community's shared knowledge of events and prior owners that may influence site development. Some of the histories can be used to impart greater meaning on the site. In one current project a URI forester dug up old commemorative spoons. Residents explained that a spoon factory has once stood near the site. Such interesting and specific histories can be used by a community group to highlight unique aspects of their collective past. Some sites have less benign histories. Vacant lots can be the scene for illicit activity and the effects of this can linger as the following example indicates.

*The Wolcott and Lloyd corner lot had been a drug dealing hot spot for over a decade. At one point activists from outside the community worked to create a children's park on the site. Large cement barriers were placed on the edge of the property and low-tech children's play equipment, such as old tractor tires, were set up. Within months drug dealers who used the tires to stash their drugs and adorned the cement barriers with gang graffiti had retaken the site. This negative history plagued the site as neighbors were resigned to the presence of the drug dealers. Even once residents determined that they could reclaim the site they had to convince others. The City's Department of Public Works were hesitant to come in and remove the cement barriers, as they feared angering the gangs. The Department finally acquiesced to neighbors' requests but demanded a police escort before they would enter the site. Such a legacy of fear is extremely difficult to overcome.*

**Stability of residency.** Restoring an abandoned space is hard work. These sites are often called vacant lots -- but they are hardly empty. These areas are usually filled with debris, some of it toxic, that needs to be gathered and hauled away, often by the tons. It is tough work to bring in compost and soil, plant new trees, landscape the site, build fences and signs and then maintain all of this. People will only volunteer for such backbreaking work if they are invested in the area over the long term.

*The impetus for the formation of the Arch Street Blockwatch came from the frustration of one resident who could not sell his house. In the succeeding years this impulse to flee has been replaced by a strong pride in the street and the community. There are no homes for sale on Arch Street and renovations are increasing. Residents speak with pride about their street.*

**Capacity of Group.** One criteria for selecting the community groups in the project was group capacity. The projects demanded a long term commitment from assessment and planning through implementation and ongoing maintenance. All groups experienced obstacles and needed to draw upon the creativity, enthusiasm and endurance of group members. Groups benefited from having both strong central coordinators and many members willing to take leadership roles. Groups with less depth of leadership struggled as the projects progressed.

*The Watson and Basset group benefited from a strong and well respected central coordinator and great depth of leadership within the whole group. Tasks were divided and accomplished. Members kept others on task and rewarded progress with lavish community praise. The Wolcott and Lloyd group, in contrast, did not have the same depth of leadership. Most tasks fell solely on the central leader and she grew increasingly frustrated with lack of support. Her vision and energy were such that the project was completed, but continued maintenance and use have lagged behind the efforts of the other groups.*

## **Conclusion**

Each urban restoration project has unique features yet commonalities across sites exist. These features include location, traffic, crime, land tenure, historical background, stability of residency and capacity of group. Community leaders, foresters and others can draw upon these factors to guide the selection, design, implementation and maintenance to increase the success of community management of urban open spaces.

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