Philadelphia’s “Civic Commons”

What becomes possible when we see cities’ publicly-owned assets as a single network?
To spark a vibrant urban future, start with what’s there.

Today’s American cities confront a complex range of critical issues. From climate change to unemployment, housing to public safety, responding to these varied challenges can easily seem beyond municipal reach.

But our cities already have the foundation in place for their twenty-first-century renaissance, though it may be hiding in plain sight.

The public buildings, institutions, land, water bodies, and infrastructure inherited from earlier generations are ready for us to see them anew—as a powerful network of civic assets ready to be activated for the current needs, desires, and dreams of all the people who share and shape them.

This booklet offers a new look at the community anchors we have and the vibrant hubs our public spaces can become when we invest in collective urban life. Its vision focuses on positive transformation at the architectural scale—where personal experience and aspirations meet broad, long-range planning efforts—in order to spark the imagination and spur us to work together toward realizing the abundant potential of what we hold in common.
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“Civic Commons” Public Asset Networks: Detail Views

Chicago

Los Angeles

New York City
Civic assets like parks, libraries, and schools are more than physical spaces—they are democratizing places and forces that foster inclusion and opportunity. But today the key, unique contributions they bring to their cities are at risk due to decay, inattention, and even abandonment that undermines their abilities as community anchors. Seeking to build success in cities by reversing these trends of decline and disinvestment, in 2014 a group of national funders and local civic leaders launched Reimagining the Civic Commons. With five pilot cities across the US, this three-year initiative intends to make the first comprehensive demonstration of how a connected set of public assets can gain new purpose and relevance that yields greater, more equitable prosperity for communities. Importantly, the project’s approach is grounded in rethinking these assets as a single network—a commons—and re-tuning them to better operate together toward expanding their individual and collective capacities to do public good.

Much great work has already resulted from the Civic Commons initiative. This current moment is ripe for exploring how a creative and collaborative architectural approach can advance the project. Supported by our partners at the Knight and Kresge Foundations, and the City of Philadelphia, our studio’s inquiry involved three major components: 1) building a working understanding of the history and present condition of a city neighborhood’s civic assets, both physical and programmatic; 2) learning from the community about their neighborhood’s current strengths, challenges, and changes they’d like to see; and 3) developing design ideas, conveyed through exciting and accessible images, that describe how assets could collectively become more vibrant hubs of city life in the near-term and make these ideas tools that people can use to advocate for the kind of places they want to live in.

This booklet shares the process and potential of this approach to help communities everywhere activate their civic commons.

First, its Process section provides a guide for undertaking this kind of work in any American city. This section breaks down the process of identifying, studying, designing with, and building engagement and support for investing in civic assets. Second, its Strategies section presents our initial design ideas about how seven types of existing assets—parks, libraries, police stations, schools, recreation centers, streets, and transit—can be altered to better reveal their possibilities, connect for mutual benefit, and engage the public. As its diagrams explain, all of these design ideas are intended to be practical, flexible, cost-effective, and able to be adaptively sequenced and implemented over time. Third, its Possibilities section envisions how these ideas can be implemented in one particular neighborhood area. Responding directly to the people and places of Southwest Philadelphia, its proposed visions demonstrate how relatively simple design moves, when considered together, can support a more vibrant future for all who make cities their home. Finally, its Techniques section provides tools and tactics you can use to activate the civic commons in your city.
Process
What’s Possible?

People are the city. People make the city. And every city has a stake in the health and safety of its populace, the quality of its education system, the state of its economy, the impact of climate change, the need for infrastructure, and the engagement of its citizens as active participants in their future. These shared concerns serve as a starting point for envisioning cities that are responsive to their people and ever-changing conditions. They provide a foundation for engaging with existing assets, places, and relationships to imagine what is possible. They also act as touchstones that cities can return to as they evaluate and continue to shape their civic commons over time.

Health

Integrated Wellness
Holistic community health that addresses the physical, mental, and social needs and aspirations of society

Security

Public Safety
Relationships and environments that support productive encounters between people and institutions

Education

Open Opportunity
Multiple, accessible places and platforms for skill sharing, knowledge transfer, and talent discovery

Economy

Inclusive Growth
Economic development that makes socio-economic mobility possible for everyone

Environment

Sustainable Practices
Conscientious actions and behaviors that mutually support people, water, land, and wildlife

Infrastructure

Engaged Ownership
Partnerships formed to reclaim, invest in, manage, and repurpose shared systems to benefit everyone

Society

Social Solidarity
A sense of belonging and a commitment to cooperating for collective well-being
What’s in Your City?

Every city has a combination of public buildings, institutions, land, water, and infrastructure that affect everyone’s quality of life. These assets are collectively owned and operated for community benefit. In many American cities, they were created and constructed by different people at different points in time, and continue to be thought of as performing separate and specialized roles in society.

Reconsidering these assets today as part of a single, interconnected civic commons involves focusing on the relationships between them—building a kind of ecological understanding of how they operate together within the context of a particular city.

Examining how selected assets relate to one another spatially, functionally, and experientially makes it possible for you to identify how they do or do not currently work together to affect city life. This understanding makes it possible for you to speculate about how they might work together differently, both in the near future and longer term. With these ideas in mind, you can start to strategize about how current local initiatives can connect with existing assets to expand on their core capacities, combining in new ways that generate exciting spaces, uses, and experiences which benefit people and communities.

These civic assets represent only a selection of the wide variety available in American cities. Other types include cultural centers, plazas, fire stations, churches, post offices, homeless shelters, and water bodies.
What You Can Do

Envisioning how any city’s civic assets can become a vibrant commons involves identifying value in what already exists, actively engaging community stakeholders and other local experts, and creatively working through how each asset can be leveraged, both individually and collectively.

Involving community leaders and residents in this process from the very beginning is particularly key to successfully activating a commons. Their special knowledge and recommendations produce stronger physical and programmatic ideas that people are already invested in, and their partnerships are essential for making these ideas a reality.

You can reimagine your city’s assets as a powerful civic commons using three steps:

**SEE**
- **Start with what’s there**
  Research, observe, experience, and investigate
  Develop an understanding of the physical place and its condition

**HEAR**
- **Listen and learn**
  Have conversations, meet organizations, engage institutions, and pay attention
  Allow your thinking to be influenced by the knowledge and creativity of local people

**COMBINE**
- **Match what’s there with what’s possible**
  Combine meaningful ideas in exciting ways
  Recognize what’s working elsewhere, and originate new solutions
  Articulate specific, actionable ideas
  Make investments that demonstrate capacity and leverage partnerships
When civic assets push their programming and resources beyond their usual boundaries while simultaneously pulling in the offerings of other institutions, they generate new opportunities and energize their neighborhoods.
Strategies
The Commons

Parks, libraries, police stations, and other publicly-owned assets have historically operated independently and within their own systems, but when understood and developed as a collective they can better serve the needs of neighborhoods and benefit the city as a whole. Investing in these key shared spaces and linking them in new ways to make them more relevant to their communities allows the commons to reach and involve more people and to foster neighborhood identity and a sense of belonging. Over time, this network helps a community grow stronger and more empowered to inclusively and iteratively shape its own future.

Investing in assets in ways that reveal, connect, and engage can create positive radiating effects on their surroundings. Providing physical and programmatic means through which institutions can take overlapping ownership of the space in and between them reinforces the strength of their network and the integrity of commons as a whole.

**REVEAL**
Make activities and opportunities that already exist evident and available, illuminating possibilities and enhancing overall civic presence

**CONNECT**
Increase accessibility and synergy by concentrating and distributing programs and services, combining them in new ways and inviting in new programs

**ENGAGE**
Attract and involve many different people, generating social capital and empowering collective action

In the section that follows, we introduce seven types of civic assets from the perspective of their roles in society and their influences on people and places. This includes a brief discussion of their core functions, plus ideas for activating new programmatic and physical possibilities.
Civic Commons “Heat Map”

Activated as a network, civic assets pulse with energy that radiates outward into their neighborhoods, creating new and exciting spaces, experiences, activities, and social connectivity.
Open Libraries to Opportunity

Help libraries transition from inward-oriented spaces of storage and individual study to inviting places of growth and gathering

Public libraries have driven social mobility in the United States since Benjamin Franklin helped to establish lending libraries for public use. Today, with more than 120,000 public libraries across the country and over 90 million visits per year, the library system persists as a key means of access to an abundance of resources and public programming that improves people’s lives. Libraries everywhere have begun to re-tool and adapt their services to incorporate new and digital means of knowledge exchange. To support this evolution we now need to make their buildings follow suit.

Designed to house books and provide spaces in which to read them, the physical presence of most public libraries can be intimidating to potential users, for whom their interiors feel closed off and inaccessible. For example, libraries have become a critical resource for job training and employment services. But while nearly 90 percent of Americans agree this is an important role, most aren’t aware of the breadth of opportunities their local branch offers.

You can better connect people with the diversity of resources and programming inside libraries by opening them in a variety of ways to extend their physical reach, create more flexible program space, and improve their civic presence.

With simple, smart interventions you can leverage libraries’ unique ability to provide services that bring diverse groups of people together, aid the local workforce, benefit the economy by stimulating visitor spending in the surrounding neighborhood, and strengthen the community as a whole.
Reconfigure interior spaces to include meeting areas, fabrication tools, and technology rooms that will support workforce adaptation by better serving job seekers and small business owners.

Make activities happening on the inside more visible from the outside by opening the facade and reorienting the front door toward primary streets.

Invite the public inside with generous and accessible entrances that engage the street and offer welcoming places to gather.

Extend the library with a covered outdoor space that becomes a new neighborhood destination, customizable for a variety of programs and events.

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Shape Parks into Experiences

Magnify the power of parks by making open spaces exciting, inviting, and ecologically dynamic

Nearly 10 percent of city land in the US is park land, adding up to a total of almost two million acres nationwide. This vast constellation of open space is valuable for far more than the picturesque, pastoral qualities that parks were prized for in the 19th century.

For many city dwellers, urban parks are their main opportunity to experience nature, and today it is widely understood that engaging, functioning parks can make people healthier, happier, and more productive. Parks have been found to improve health, lower crime, and reduce ADHD symptoms in children. They also perform free “ecosystem services” that benefit cities, such as reducing strain on aging storm water systems, providing critical habitat for wildlife, and improving air quality.

Beyond these community-wide physical and mental health benefits, parks are a fundamental driver of economic development. In cities like Chicago, parks add an average of 1.5 percent in value to properties within a two-block radius. Small and even undeveloped parks together add 3.5 percent. That same Chicago park system brings in $1.4 billion—nearly 17 percent—of the city’s total annual tourism revenue.

Whether you’re addressing an underdeveloped park or even a vacant lot, there are many strategic physical and programmatic investments you can make that allow urban open spaces to live up to their full potential.
Spatial Diversity

Where's the park?

Let's play hide and seek!

**SHORT**
Create more diverse landscapes, welcoming areas to gather, and collaborative programming to attract more people and wildlife.

**MEDIUM**
Make edges beautiful and bold with art, furniture, and greenery that continues into the street to highlight parks' presence and extend their inviting reach.

**LONG**
Cut and fill to add texture and topography that multiplies experiences and manages storm water.
Move Recreation Centers Toward Wellness

Expand recreation centers’ programming and presence to support the whole person and engage a broader audience

Since the turn of the 20th century, recreation centers, or “field houses,” have served neighborhood needs not met by green space alone. When President Theodore Roosevelt visited the first US park with a field house in 1907, he declared it “the most notable achievement in any American city.” At their inception these buildings offered people a combination of year-round social, health, education, and recreation services. Their success as a public asset is reflected in the enduring sentiment in many cities that every “good” park must have a recreation center.

Despite this celebrated original role, today’s rec centers provide a narrower set of offerings, even as demand for a spectrum of wellness services and amenities has grown in response to increasing awareness of the necessity of a holistic approach to health.

We can activate rec centers’ broader potential in the 21st century and make them buzzing wellness hot spots by supplementing their recreation offerings with other community health opportunities, such as on-site medical care and information, nutrition classes and workshops, stress-relieving activities, and social events and gathering spaces where people can build friendships and combat isolation.

You can transform your rec center by making a variety of simple alterations. Through opening facades and interior walls, and renovating underutilized spaces so they can be rented by wellness tenants, you can remove physical barriers to participation and supervision, help park users and staff move more easily between inside and outside, and facilitate fruitful partnerships and leasing agreements with complementary service providers. This last possibility is especially exciting, because giving rec centers rentable space can bring in specialized health services, generate income, develop diverse programming that attracts a broader market, and keep programming dynamic by allowing municipalities (via contract terms) to find new tenants as community preferences change over time.
SHORT
Activate entrances and sidewalks by making space for mobile services and amenities like health trucks, food trucks, and library bookmobiles.

MEDIUM
Let in light and air by connecting indoor areas with outdoor gathering and activity spaces.

MEDIUM
Remove barriers to participation and supervision by combining closed, single-purpose rooms into larger open spaces.

LONG
Make room for holistic healthcare by adding new, leasable space.
Center Police Stations on Community

Transform urban stations into social hubs where officers and neighborhood residents can interact in positive ways

Since 17th-century watchmen checked in at small “watch boxes” while patrolling on foot, American policing has undergone continuous change, with police stations evolving from providing sleeping quarters for officers to including office space, file storage, and interrogation rooms. In the 20th century stations expanded into large-scale structures and police districts sprawled outward as patrolling by car replaced the traditional walking beat.

Today the vast dimensions of urban space work to isolate police and their stations from the communities they serve. Commuting long distances to large stations surrounded by parking lots, officers patrol their multi-neighborhood districts from their squad cars. Opportunities for meaningful daily engagement with their districts’ residents, as well as their fellow officers, are far too rare. Police stations have become fortress-like structures, buffered from the public by parked squad cars and often serving as little more than a jail. These buildings are no longer seen as part of the community or in service of it.

By looking past these connotations and reimagining police stations as civic assets waiting to become centers of their community, you can help transform them from hermetic fortresses into neighborhood hubs where many types of productive exchanges between police, residents, and city officials take place. Through identifying common needs and aspirations of officers and community members, and then making shared spaces where they can eat, work, play, and learn together, you can encourage beneficial relationships to grow—supporting familiarity and fellowship, building the reciprocal trust needed for public safety, and reinforcing the programming and social connectivity of the civic commons as a whole.
Use art, furniture, and paint at the entrance apron to welcome visitors and invite socializing on this new “front porch”

Insert ATM and offer free Wifi in lobby to bring people inside

Expand second level spaces with a green canopy for outdoor gathering, dining, gardening, and other shared activities

Open up lower level with lively retail such as a barber shop, bike shop, and outdoor cafe
Cultivate Schools into Innovation Campuses

Encourage the growth of healthy citizens and scientists by developing schools and school grounds into green laboratories

With an estimated 97,000 elementary and secondary schools across the US, serving nearly 50 million students, schools have an outsized influence on the education, health, and welfare of youth, families, and neighborhoods. Many city schools are grappling with a number of major challenges, including population shifts affecting enrollment; declining budgets; increasing debt and pension obligations; and providing social services beyond their core educational mission. Meanwhile, they continue to prepare students to participate in society and a global economy that requires fundamental skills and rewards exceptional ones. The latter is especially true for math and science, in which US students are catching up but still lag behind their international counterparts. Further, many of these students are affected by the health crisis that leaves one-third of children in the US overweight or obese, negatively impacting their mental health, economic future, and cognitive functions necessary for academic achievement.

Urban schools’ physical plant presents us with many opportunities to holistically address these challenges. Most schools were designed as indoor environments, surrounded by parking lots and other paved spaces not usable for learning. But when we reconsider the potential of all surfaces as an extension of the classroom, we can make underused spaces into laboratories for experiential learning that better connect students and the broader community with educational and wellness opportunities.

Converting schools into integrated science and agriculture campuses—where students help grow healthy food and learn biological, culinary, and healthy living skills—is one exciting direction you can invest in. By strategically planting school grounds and adjacent vacant land with gardens and other species you can add natural beauty to neighborhoods and give students the chance to observe, nurture, and experiment with natural systems every day. You can also partner with land management organizations to train and employ local residents to help maintain these new green spaces. As they grow, you’ll experience how they enhance the learning environment, reduce stress, improve the morale of students and teachers, and inspire neighborhood pride and investment.
Outfit kitchens and cafeterias to incorporate local and grown-on-site produce in lunches and lunch table socializing.

As green spaces extend into the surrounding neighborhood, collaborate with partner organizations to manage land as public open space for recreation and community gardening and gathering.

Adapt adjacent vacant land for agriculture and phenological science experiments by planting crops, orchards, and “sentinel” species that demonstrate the impact of climate change.

Convert roof surfaces to greenhouse and garden classrooms that can also be used for play, dining, and relaxation—and reduce the urban heat island effect.

Outfit kitchens and cafeterias to incorporate local and grown-on-site produce in lunches and lunch table socializing.
Make Streets into Places

Enliven neighborhood streets with activities and civic presence that inspire use, ownership, and community cohesion

Streets are the fabric that connect a city and its people. This ubiquitous urban system defines neighborhoods, enables movement, and knits together the civic realm. In physical terms, streets, sidewalks, and other rights-of-way constitute a significant portion of city land, ranging from just under 30 percent in New York City to over 40 percent in cities like Portland, Houston, and Washington, D.C. Annually, the US spends approximately $155 billion per year in federal, state, and local funds on building and maintaining our street and highway networks. But despite this significant share of land mass and investment, many streets fail to live up to their potential beyond supporting vehicular movement.

When we make streets work as places, not simply thoroughfares, they become civic assets that contribute to the well-being and prosperity of cities. They can improve public health through neighborhood walkability that is associated with decreasing risks for obesity and chronic disease. They influence economic growth by transforming dull commercial corridors into vibrant destinations that encourage local spending. They make cities more resilient when designed to manage storm water, reduce the urban heat island effect, and fill in gaps in the open space network. Their character and quality can inspire socializing and new relationships, express neighborhood identity and pride of place, and support the social networks that make collective community action possible.

Everyone in a city is a pedestrian every day. Starting with this fundamental perspective, you can make many different simple interventions that amplify the functionality and fulfill the promise inherent in streets’ civic fabric.
Develop and support events held along or on streets, linked with storefront shops, to stimulate commerce and provide more opportunities for neighbors to socialize.

Plant trees and other vegetation to manage storm water, create shade, and cultivate resiliency.

Add a dynamic roof canopy to provide shade and shelter, encouraging an active street life.

Alter the design and surface of the street to promote storm water management and a mix of transit options.
Public transportation systems offer huge benefits to cities, from affordable access to jobs and reducing road congestion, to bolstering property values and making it easy for residents to access the services they need. In the US, over 35 million people board public transportation every weekday. This act reduces driving by 4400 miles per household per year and saves Americans more than $10,000 per year on auto maintenance and operating costs, the largest household expenditure after housing. This positive economic impact extends to cities as a whole, as every 1 dollar invested in public transportation yields 4 dollars in returns. This includes the increase generated in property values, which perform an average of 42 percent better when located near public transit with high-frequency service.

Despite this quantifiable positive impact, many communities do not sufficiently benefit from public transit in their cities. With disproportionate access, gaps in routes, and infrastructure investments that divide or even destroy neighborhoods, the consequences of poor transit decisions can damage the socio-economic health of neighborhoods.

You can capitalize on the great opportunity latent in transit by positioning specific investments, like multi-modal stations, not simply as nodes in a system, but as civic anchors for neighborhoods. By rethinking concepts like “transit-oriented development,” which looks to maximize transit access within mixed-use development, you can instead move toward “community-oriented development,” which makes transit stations themselves serve individual communities as an inextricable part of the civic commons.
SHORT
Add new public transit stops on existing lines

LONG
Expand existing public transit routes to a new inter-modal transit hub

MEDIUM
Build infrastructure for new connections between local, national, and regional transit
Possibilities
This inventory map highlights Southwest Philadelphia’s parks, libraries, recreation centers, schools, police and fire stations, churches, vacant land, and other civic assets.
Our Neighborhood of Focus

The City of Philadelphia aspires to make its neighborhoods “more livable, healthy, and economically viable.” To explore how investing in the civic commons can realize these aims, at the suggestion of our partners at the Knight and Kresge Foundations and the City, our team engaged the area of Southwest Philadelphia to assess its current public assets; learn from local people about the area’s strengths, challenges, and their visions for its future; and develop specific ideas about how its assets and people can work together to create a more vital and vibrant neighborhood. These insights are grounded in the comprehensive planning process that the City of Philadelphia concluded in June of 2011 with the City Wide Vision and in May of 2015 with the Southwest District Plan.

Southwest Philadelphia is a post-industrial district south of University City and west of South Philadelphia. While well-served by transit and bounded by the Philadelphia International Airport at its most southern point, the major rail lines and sprawling industrial riverfront forming its eastern edge effectively isolate it from the Center City District and other thriving neighborhoods. Significant transit infrastructure also cuts across the district, presenting barriers to mobility, visual connectivity, and clear neighborhood boundaries and identity.

The neighborhoods of Elmwood and Paschall form the residential heart of the area. Defined by connected row houses and their conjoined front porches, these historically working-class neighborhoods are also characterized by large swaths of land left behind by vacated industry—most notably, a 30-acre site formerly occupied by a General Electric factory. Parks, breezeways, and waterways are found throughout the district, though some residents do not see these natural spaces as assets, due to their lack of programming, identity, and accessibility. The area is served by a strong number of public institutions that offer people innovative and relevant services despite their aging facilities and limited resources. That said, their imposing architecture and poorly located entrances are two of several physical obstacles preventing them from connecting with potential audiences.

Recent immigrants and long-time Philadelphians make Southwest Philadelphia their home and give their community a unique identity and entrepreneurial spirit. Though challenged by low property values, high unemployment, low graduation rates, and high obesity, the neighborhood will thrive when strategic investments in places and programming leverage its strengths and support local needs and dreams.

The following section envisions what is possible in Southwest Philadelphia by applying the process and strategies outlined in the previous sections to activate its civic commons.

† Philadelphia2035, City of Philadelphia
SEE: Program Analysis

An inventory of the public programs offered by Southwest Philadelphia’s civic assets over a four-week period, examined as a color-coded timeline, reveals gaps in current offerings. This information informs new, community-specific programming ideas and suggests how particular civic assets can work together to offer them.

A detail view of the library's individual programming timeline (above) and all assets’ programming collated into a single timeline (at left).
“Even if a park is close to where people live, without a recreation center, people are less likely to use it.”

**Kathryn Ott Lovell**  
Commissioner of Parks & Recreation  
City of Philadelphia

“Southwest Philadelphia has great history of diversity and resourcefulness. This is one of the best assets of the neighborhood.”

**Walter Licht**  
Walter H. Annenberg Professor of History  
University of Pennsylvania

“Simply cleaning and greening vacant lots improves the health and well-being of the people in the surrounding area.”

**Glen J. Abrams**  
Director of Sustainable Communities  
Pennsylvania Horticultural Society

“Philadelphia is already investing in green infrastructure to help mitigate some climate impacts, and additional strategies should be coordinated with leadership from the impacted communities.”

**Christine Knapp**  
Sustainability Director  
City of Philadelphia
HEAR: Local Perspectives

“Southwest Philadelphia is a very diverse and resourceful community with a strong entrepreneurial spirit.”

Mark Harrell
Community Organizer
Southwest CDC Philadelphia

“The key is thinking of civic assets as a campus and hives of activity that make the neighborhood strong on many levels, from health to economic success.”

Siobhan Reardon
President and Director
Free Library Philadelphia

Julie Wertheimer
Chief of Staff - Criminal Justice
City of Philadelphia

Andrew Frishkoff
Executive Director
Philadelphia LISC

Mark Harrell
Community Organizer
Southwest CDC

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Howard Neukrug
Former Commissioner
Philadelphia Water Department

Glen J. Abrams
Director of Sustainable Communities
Pennsylvania Horticultural Society

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RECREATION CENTER
Open, flexible spaces support expanded community wellness

POLICE STATION
Welcoming “front porch” with retail and community amenities provides opportunities for officers and residents to come together

STREETS
Creative interventions at roof- and ground-level activate neighborhood events, identity, and social connection

VACANT LAND
Vacant lots “cleaned and greened” into parks, community gardens, and supportive habitat

ARTS & CULTURE
Public-private partnership rehabilitates historic theater and activates street

LIBRARY
Opened structure highlights and expands forms of exchange and exciting community events
COMBINE: Civic Commons

**SCHOOL**
School grounds become green laboratories for hands-on learning in life sciences and agriculture, also serving neighborhoods for recreation, gardening, and gathering.

**PARKS**
Added topography and texture create dynamic ecology and outdoor experiences.

**OPEN SPACE**
Breezeway spaces adapted as an “eco-block” to manage heavy rainfall while beautifying the neighborhood and connecting fragmented open space system.

**TRANSIT**
New inter-modal hub connects regional and local train and bus routes at a station built to be a neighborhood destination.
Open Libraries to Opportunity

The Paschalville branch of the Philadelphia Public Library system provides a diverse set of services, from lending books for reading and ties for job interviews, to teaching languages and hosting cultural events. It is one of over 1600 Carnegie libraries in the US and a well-made, historic building, but it is closed off from the street, inaccessible, and oriented away from the main thoroughfare of the neighborhood. With simple interventions it can leverage its unique ability to provide services that bring people together, aid the local workforce, and strengthen the community as a whole.

Who Leads?
The Free Library of Philadelphia

Who Joins?
Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce (Job Training), Pennsylvania Department of Education (Programming), and Rising Sons (Young Adult Workforce Development)

Who Invests?
Knight Foundation, Finanta, Next Fab, Start Up PHL
OUTDOOR THEATER
Flexible open air venue for local events

PROGRAM NOOKS
Reconfigured spaces for tech, tools, and education

OPEN DOOR
Many accessible and welcoming entrances
With its expanded, welcoming spaces, the Paschalville branch library supports lively activity and exchange on Woodland Avenue.
Shape Parks into Experiences

Hobson Park and its adjacent breezeways are empty swaths of flat grass. These open spaces have enormous ecological and social potential, but in their existing form lack intrigue, program, and identity.

Who Leads?
Philadelphia Parks and Recreation

Who Joins?
Office of Sustainability (programs), Philadelphia Water Department (maintenance), and the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (education)

Who Invests?
Delaware River Watershed Initiative, Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership, Local Initiative Support Corporation
FILL HILL
Regraded soil creates exciting landscape feature

DEFINEd EDGES
Articulated perimeter invites people in and creates rooms for activities

OPEN SPACE
Breezeways adapted as an “eco-block” to manage heavy rainfall

STAY AND PLAY
Park investment spurs increase in property value
The new landscape of Hobson Park provides amazing spaces to play, socialize, relax, and enjoy nature in the city.
HEALTHY LIVING ROOM
Nutrition and health education in a welcoming, comfortable environment

COMMON GROUND
Gardens for cultivating food and relationships

HEALTH PROVIDER
Wellness services co-located with recreation

MOBILE CARE
Designated area for pop-up wellness services

FLUID OPEN PLAN
Connected indoor and outdoor rooms improve ease of supervision and use

HEALTHY LIVING ROOM
Nutrition and health education in a welcoming, comfortable environment
The Francis Myers Recreation Center is a sprawling complex made up of conjoined buildings. The facility is functional but closed off from the street and restricted by confined, difficult-to-access spaces that serve a limited range of uses. With a design that allows for more diverse programming, the center can reach more people and have a greater impact on overall community health.

Who Leads?
Philadelphia Parks and Recreation

Who Joins?
Department of Public Health (education), the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania (programming), Rite Aid (health services)

Who Invests?
The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, The Kresge Foundation, The Reinvestment Fund, retail health service providers

Move Recreation Centers Toward Wellness
A multipurpose Healthy Living Room, a variety of wellness vendors and amenities, a bright new changing area, and an “open gym” floor plan invites the neighborhood to join the fun at the Francis Myers Wellness Center.
DATA HUB
Free internet access and a place to connect

CIVIC KITCHEN
Shared industrial kitchen space for use by police, fire department, and community

FRONT PORCH
New platform for public life

PICK ONE TO START
Center Police Stations on Community

The 12th District police and fire station is more inviting than most police stations due to its accessible Main Street location, colorful mural, and well-used lobby ATM. These positive conditions can be built on to expand the station’s productive role in its community.

Who Leads?
Philadelphia Police and Fire Departments

Who Joins?
Department of Commerce (business development), local business association (retail), Philadelphia Parks and Recreation (neighbor spaces)

Who Invests?
Ford Foundation, Philadelphia Police Foundation, various private retailers
With new places to shop, socialize, work, and relax, the 12th District station encourages its community to engage with the police and fire departments in everyday, positive ways.
RAIN UP-CYCLING
Collection systems to capture and use rain water for agriculture and maintenance

OUTDOOR CLASSROOMS
Roof spaces used for experiential learning

EDU-KITCHEN
A learning kitchen to help kids eat well and feel good

LEARNING HABITAT
Outdoor living lab designed for studying climate change
Cultivate Schools into Innovation Campuses

John Bartram High School and Tilden Middle School are surrounded by parking lots. This underutilized exterior space has the potential to become an extension of the classroom that serves students, their families, and the neighborhood. Hosting integrated science and agricultural programs can address prevalent health issues, teach valuable skills, and provide healthy food. The natural beauty of these programs can elevate the identity of the schools, reduce stress, and inspire neighborhood pride and investment.

Who Leads?
Philadelphia Public Schools

Who Joins?
Vetri Foundation (program), Pennovation Works (incubator), Bartram’s Garden and the US Phenological Association (education)

Who Invests?
The Food Trust, William Penn Foundation, and The Reinvestment Fund
Greenhouses, culinary spaces, and fields planted for gardening and research welcome the community to engage with the school, providing healthy food, skills training, and education to students, their families, and neighbors.
CANOPY
A dynamic roof makes a neighborhood street a unique destination

STREET STYLE
Visually and physically distinct streetscape features a unique paving pattern and pedestrian lighting

MIXED TRANSIT
Coordinated streetcar, bus, vehicle, and bike infrastructure
Make Streets into Places

Woodland Avenue’s wide sidewalks have the potential to increase neighborhood walkability, manage storm water, encourage local spending, and inspire socializing. By developing the streetscape, canopy, and programming, this commercial corridor can become a more exciting and productive place to visit.

Who Leads?
Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority

Who Joins?
Philadelphia Water Department (water infrastructure), Pennsylvania Horticulture Society (programs and support), Open Streets PHL (events)

Who Invests?
Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority, Impact 100 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

NIGHT LIGHTS
Overhead light installation creates a safe, inviting nighttime experience

CLEAN AND GREEN
Trees, bioswales, and benches make streets more habitable
A greener and brighter Woodland Avenue becomes a walkable destination to gather, explore, and shop.
At night, beneath twinkling lights strung between the porches of row houses, neighbors share food and fellowship at a community dinner.
Sheltered from the weather, this row house street now bustles as a commercial arcade with a distinct identity.
Make *Transit Stops* a *Place to Go*

Southwest Philadelphia’s local, regional, and international transit networks currently do not connect in purposeful ways. A multimodal transit hub in Elmwood can connect these distinct networks to support one another and provide better service. A new station can not only make these connections, but serve as an important community hub.

**Who Leads?**
Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority

**Who Joins?**
Amtrak (infrastructure), Philadelphia International Airport (support), Eastern Pennsylvania Transportation Alliance for Clean Transportation (program)

**Who Invests?**
US Department of Transportation Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program, Sunoco, Transportation Alternatives Program
COME AND GO
Embankments, platforms, and station grounds function as parks and public open space

CIVIC TRAIL
Land adjacent to train lines converted to trails that connect to breezeways and park system

RAPID TRANSFER
Altered street car routes intersect civic node
The new multimodal transportation hub serves as a community center, retail location, and public space.
MOVING FORWARD

People are the city. People make the city. We can create a better future when we recognize the power of our relationships with each other and together take ownership of the material we share—our civic commons—to build stronger communities.

The work presented here belongs to everyone. It offers an approach, illustrated in a specific place, that you can use with your community as you decide how to collectively shape and invest in your city’s future.
Techniques
# Field Research

Develop a series of questions and a format that helps focus site visits and encourage participants to document what they see and hear.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>MEETING #</th>
<th>Notes / Comments / Sketches :</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact</td>
<td>Name, Title, Organization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Address</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Organizational Mission**
Mission Statement and any major projects of note

**Contact Background**
Experience :

Current Work :

Education :

**Important Questions**
What?
Why?
Where?
How?
Who should we connect with?
...

**Notes / Comments / Sketches :**

---
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 13

Time: 1:00 p.m.
Contact: Karen Fegley - Deputy Director / Department of Commerce
Location: 1515 Ann Street - 12th Floor

Organizational Mission
Building Social Coherence in Southwest
Real Estate Services, Business Attraction, Policy Analysis and Planning

Contact Background
Exhibiting: Director of the Office of Neighborhood Economic Development
Industrial Districts manager, 12th Industry Initiative - Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation
Senior Staff: Commercial Corridor Specialist, Community Development Manager, Market Research Analyst
Start-up Phils.
Education: B.A. Economics / University of Southern California

Important Questions
Is Woodland perceived as the "center" of the neighborhood if not, what else is?
Could you tell us about the process of creating the Orchestrate and Liberty Corridor Initiative?
What metrics do you use to measure community outcomes? Data points of interest? Consistent density?
Are there entrepreneurship programs in Philadelphia that focus on low-income communities?
How would you like to see the community achieve its potential?
Where to start?

Notes / Comments / Sketches:

TUESDAY, APRIL 12

Time: 10:00 a.m.
Contact: Donna Henry - Mark Harrell / Directors, Southwest CDC
Location: 4328 Passack Ave

Organizational Mission
A private non-profit organization, whose mission is to improve the quality of life in the Southwest Community through various programs and initiatives. The organization is dedicated to improving the quality of life for all residents, focusing on economic development, education, and community improvement.

Contact Background
- Director - Southwest CDC: since 1983 and has worked in the housing and community development field since 1970.
- Visionary of Southwest CDC's Development (1991). Raised over $2 million for services contracts in the last 10 years.
- Executive Director: Lincoln University

Important Questions
What do people say that "center" means?
What do people say that makes Woodland specific?
Where do most people cross Woodland? What is considered to be the main intersection?
Why is the location important?
Do people cross the railroad tracks?
Does the library have any stories of the development?
How is the relationship of the library to the commercial area on Woodland?
What are the experiences of getting on the bus?
Where do people go to get their day services - food, transportation, etc.?
Do they expect the transit line to be extended as well?
What are the transportation priorities of the neighborhood? (Traffic)
What is the major transportation improvement program in the neighborhood?

Notes / Comments / Sketches:

1976 Broadwood bench

Notes / Comments / Sketches:
- 1976 Black Captain - Philadelphia, chief
- 3 Black Captain - Spring Garden
- 3 Black Captain - Southwest CDC

CIVIC COMMONS 79
Due Diligence

Study the current and previous plans made for the area to understand the context and build from previous work in your city.

Philadelphia 2035 Comprehensive Plan

- Philadelphia 2035
- 2035 Lower Southwest Existing Conditions Report
- 2035 Lower Southwest District at a Glance

Transit and Trails

- SEPTA Cycle-Transit Plan
- Philadelphia Trail Masterplan Update
- Philadelphia Trail Masterplan
- Pedestrian and Bicycle Plan

**PEDESTRIAN AND BICYCLE PLAN**

- April 2012
- Promotes walking and biking as part of intermodal urban transportation system

**PHILADELPHIA TRAIL PLAN 2015 UPDATE**

- 2015
- Proposed Projects and Priority Level

**PHILADELPHIA TRAIL MASTER PLAN**

- Summer 2013
- Complete, expand, and connect watershed parks and trails in the City and the region.
- Create a citywide trails master plan to coordinate the planning and construction of trail systems within Philadelphia.
- Create a trail corridor network that connects parks, neighborhoods, and trails citywide.

**PHILADELPHIA CITY WIDE VISION 2035**

- June 2011
- City-wide vision + 18 District Plans

**2035 Lower Southwest**

- September 2015
- Areas of focus for 2035 District Plan

**In Progress**

- Demographics Overview
Southwest CDC Initiatives

Land Use and Zoning

Zoning Manual
- August 2012

Industrial Land Strategy
- September 2010

Land Bank Strategy
- 2015

Water and Ecology

Cobbs Watershed Management Plan
- June 2004
- Restore and protect the beneficial and designated uses of the waters of the Cobbs Creek basin.

Combined Sewer Overflow Plan
- September 2009

Greenworks Philadelphia
- 2009
- A vision for how Philadelphia can and should seize the moment, building upon the assets left to us by earlier Philadelphians and creating a better future for ourselves, our children and generations still to come.

Lower Schuylkill Masterplan
- May 2013

Climate-Ready Philadelphia
- November 2015
Street Composition

Look closely at the diversity and distribution of programs that make up your key commercial corridors. Street composition mappings are effective at revealing parcel spacing, retail character, block rhythm, and building pattern variation.
Building Typologies

Illustrate how zoning and building type shape the neighborhood and community. Look for unique patterns in the building fabric, street characteristics, or landscape plantings.

---

**Streetview**

**Axon**

**Urban Form**

**Zoning Overlay**

- Size
- Colloquialisms
- Permitted Building Type
- Uses Permitted as of right
- Uses requiring special exception approval
- Characteristics

**Dimensional Standards**

- Minimum lot width
- Minimum lot area
- Minimum open area
- Minimum front setback
- Minimum side yard width
- Minimum rear yard depth
- Max height
Late 19th-Century Row House Examples

**TYPE 03**

### Streetscene

Urban Farm

### Zoning Overlay

Size

Small

1,000 - 1,600 sf

### Collocation

Permitted Building Type

Detached; Semi-Detached; Attached; Multiple Buildings on a Lot

Uses permitted as of right

Single-Family; Two-Family; Multi-Family; Passive Recreation; Family Day Care; Religious Assembly; Safety Services; Transit Stations; Community Garden; Market or Community-Supported Farm

### Uses requiring special exception approval

Utilities and Services; Maintenance and Repair of Consumer Goods; On-Premise Dry Cleaning; Radio, Television, and Recording Services; Religious Assembly; Safety Services; Transit Stations; Community Garden; Market or Community-Supported Farm

### Characteristics

Brick with Stone Face, Entry vestibule, Shed kitchen, Bay windows, ceiling, Elaborate woodwork

**TYPE 04**

### Streetscene

Urban Farm

### Zoning Overlay

Size

Medium

2,500 - 3,000 sf

### Collocation

Permitted Building Type

Detached; Semi-Detached; Attached; Multiple Buildings on a Lot

Uses permitted as of right

Single-Family; Multi-Family; Residential Multi-family-1; Residence; Active Recreation; Group Day Care; Hospitals; Libraries and Cultural Exhibits; Utilities and Services, basic; Wireless Service Facility

### Uses requiring special exception approval

Safety Services; Transit Station; Wireless Freestanding Antenna; Personal Care Home; Active Recreation; Religious Assembly; Safety Services; Transit Stations; Community Garden; Market or Community-Supported Farm

### Characteristics

Brick with Stone Face, Front porch, Bay windows, ceiling, Elaborate woodwork
“Combine” Worksheet

Use a framework to understand the current conditions and connections between civic assets in your area of focus. Propose phased ideas that identify partners and desired effects.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEE, HEAR &amp; COMBINE</th>
<th>STRENGTHEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is there?</strong></td>
<td><strong>How to phase investment</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>YEAR 1 Spark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recreation Center</td>
<td>Ideas: What is the most feasible idea?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park</td>
<td>Reqs: What is physically needed to enact it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police/Fire</td>
<td>Partners: Who needs to be involved to make the idea a reality?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Street</td>
<td>Funding? Engagement? Ownership?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vacant Land</td>
<td>Effect: What effects can you expect to see from this idea?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>How can the outcome be measured?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>What is happening?</strong></th>
<th><strong>YEAR 5 Build</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is the physical condition of what is there?</td>
<td>Ideas: What built idea will have the most impact?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the spatial relationship of the assets?</td>
<td>Reqs: -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the formative history of the place?</td>
<td>Partners: -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the history of the assets?</td>
<td>Effect: -</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the economic profile of the community?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the economic state of the assets?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where do people work, shop, gather?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the demographics of the place?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What events take place?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the policy initiatives of political leaders?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What community groups are politically representing the neighborhood?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What discussions are taking place around the environment?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are there organizations that are working to improve the environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What environmental concerns exist in the neighborhood</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is the health profile of the community?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the key health issues for this community?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>YEAR 10 Sustain</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Idea:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partners:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sketch

Visualize ideas quickly, share, and discuss. Engage with your team as well as your community stakeholders. Sketching is a fun and easy activity for everyone to participate in.
FLAT SPACE SEEMS SMALL VS TOPOGRAPHY MAKES MORE DEPTH
MORE VARIETY OF EXPERIENCE

EDGE
Selected Bibliography

CITY COMMONS


PARKS AND RECREATION


Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, GA. http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpao.


LIBRARIES


SCHOOLS


POLICE STATIONS


STREETS AND TRANSIT


**PHILADELPHIA**


Acknowledgments

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