



David Goldberg

Job training is a goal of the San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners. The group's director, Mohammed Nuru, is at right.

Dig These Gardens

Nature in the city is making a comeback, with the help of a few good friends.

By Ruth Eckdish Knack

Not so long ago, community gardeners were routinely dismissed in the same way that historic preservationists used to be—as "little old ladies in tennis shoes." Yet this month, the Seattle city council is reviewing the draft of a new comprehensive plan whose land-use element considers community gardens as permanent open space. Like historic preservation, this movement is finally being taken seriously.

It's about time, says Anne Whiston Spirn. Spirn, a professor of landscape architecture and regional planning at the University of Pennsylvania, is one of a growing number of people around the country who are pointing to the importance of urban gardening as a community development tool.

Spirn is the movement's academic guru. In 1990 she and her students produced the West Philadelphia Landscape Plan, which is based on her work with community gardeners near the Penn campus,

where she has taught since 1986. "I'm interested in the gardens as a vehicle for reshaping entire neighborhoods," she says.

Students in two of Spirn's studios analyzed local gardens and redesigned one, Aspen Farms, later carrying out the improvements. Their "greening project," which concluded with a set of recommendations for the area, was undertaken in collaboration with Philadelphia Green, the community gardening group attached to the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, and the Organization and Management Group, which seeks to develop leadership capacity in low-income neighborhoods. The Pew Charitable Trusts provided grants totaling about \$750,000.



West Philadelphia Landscape Plan

In the West Philadelphia Landscape Plan, Anne Spirn and her students proposed alternatives for reclaimed vacant land; here, an orchard on a vacant block. Below, Spirn is being interviewed in Aspen Farms by Steve Curwood, host of "Living on Earth" on National Public Radio.



Nature first

"For me," says Spirn, "a community garden is a wedge into a neighborhood," an important point for someone who notes that she has always tried to bridge the gap between theory and practice. A native of Cincinnati and a 1969 graduate of Radcliffe, she began graduate work in art history at Penn, switching to landscape architecture when she picked up a roommate's catalog and read about the program, which was then headed by Ian McHarg.

Later, she worked for McHarg's firm, Wallace McHarg Roberts & Todd, on plans for the Woodlands, the Texas new town, and Sanibel Island, Florida. "But I got frustrated," she says, "because we were designing these very ecologically sensitive resort communities and new towns at the same time that our cities were beginning to empty out."

In 1984, while teaching at Harvard, Spirn published *The Granite Garden*, her award-winning exploration of the relationship between "urban nature and human design." She also met Charlotte Kahn, a founder of Boston Urban Gardeners, one of the earliest such "greening groups," and now director of a project studying persistent poverty at the Boston Foundation.

The two collaborated on a community garden design, working with students from Spirn's class. "Charlotte had a much larger vision that went way beyond 'beautification,'" says Spirn. "She saw community gardens as a way of bringing people together and of building skills in people in the neighborhoods."

At Penn, where Spirn became the second chairman in the history of the landscape architecture and regional planning department after McHarg's retirement,

she renewed her interest in her old West Philadelphia neighborhood, which been the subject of her master's thesis.

Spirn's students documented the area's shortage of accessible parkland, lack of yard space, and abundance of vacant lots. The students, using geographic information system software, also verified what Spirn had already guessed—that the area's most deteriorated housing and most of its vacant land were on the blocks that followed the Mill Creek floodplain. The creek had long ago been channeled into a sewer, but Spirn had found many examples of cracked foundations and building settlement that she traced to the creek.

A microcosm

Hayward Ford, the former president of Aspen Farms, has described his garden as a town ("we have everything but a penal colony"), an analogy that Spirn often quotes. In a talk at the 1993 American Planning Association conference, she noted that "the phenomenon of the community garden contains lessons for the design of larger neighborhoods."

The first lesson is about differences. Spirn's students, who began each studio with an overnight stay with a neighborhood family, classified West Philadelphia's community gardens into several types: dictatorial (although benevolently so); anarchic (a "topsy turvy garden with a wild edge that upsets many neighbors"); and democratic. A fourth category, "colonial," applies to the perfectly symmetrical gardens established by city agencies.

The democratic garden, Aspen Farms, is the one that was redesigned in the three-week studio. "The students had \$5,000 to work with, which just doesn't go very far," says Spirn. "So they talked to the gardeners about what they needed, and they said they needed a meeting place. In the end, the gardeners chose the design that made the path a meeting place."

"The gardeners soon get the idea that the patterns that they are creating in their garden are very much like the patterns of their block, their neighborhood, and their city," she adds. "And with this understanding they can communicate with others about what they want for their community."

What's special about the West Philadelphia project, says Spirn, "is that we designed and built things, and that influenced us in the planning process, in what data we collected. And in the end, we didn't just have a paper plan. We had a framework for action."

Spirn has been on sabbatical much of the last year, since stepping down as department chair in June 1993. This fall, she says, she will be picking up some loose threads, including working with a new batch of students to try to implement some of the plan's recommendations for reuse of the area's large stock of vacant land.

"Most planners tend to treat vacant lands as being a kind of monolithic thing," she says. "But we identified five or six different types of vacant lots, and that very much influences how you think about reuse. One is the missing tooth, the gap. Another is the vacant corner, and there are many in inner-city neighborhoods. Another is what we call the connector, where a couple of missing teeth have established a new connection between blocks."

As Spirn had discovered earlier, most of the vacant land is in the lower part of the Mill Creek floodplain, an area ill-suited for new housing. Thus, the plan recommends that some of the large parcels be used for stormwater detention—and more community gardens. This year, Spirn hopes to work with a local arboretum to create street tree nurseries on some of the contiguous vacant lots. Hayward Ford, the linchpin of Aspen Farms, says he's willing and ready to work with a new batch of students.

Serious stuff

"Community gardens don't figure in most open space plans or most land-use maps," notes Spirn. This month, though, the Seattle city council is reviewing a draft of a new citywide comprehensive plan that officially encourages the creation of community gardens. Stephen Antupit, an urban designer in the city's planning department, explains that the growth management act passed by the state of Washington in 1991 mandates comprehensive planning to manage growth in the state's largest cities and urbanizing counties.

Seattle's response was an "urban village" strategy, aimed at creating denser, pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods, with open space—including community gardens—as an armature. "We are working with the idea that community gardens are essential public facilities," Antupit says.

The planning department has plotted the city's 32 existing gardens on GIS maps in preparation for creating new gardens in urban villages. The plan's goal is to have at least one dedicated community garden site in each of the



George Henry, "Working on Earth"

38 urban villages. Exact locations will be pinpointed in neighborhood plans, which will be begun next year, says Antupit.

He is working with a 21-year-old Seattle group called P-Patch (the P stands for the name of the family that owned the truck farm that occupied the first site). Although originally a private venture, P-Patch is now a city program, run by the Department of Housing and Human Services in partnership with the nonprofit P-Patch advisory council.

Comanager Barbara Donnette describes P-Patch as a success story. It was started by volunteers during a time when the city was in a severe economic slump. In 1973, the city took it over, using workers funded by the federal Comprehensive Employment Training Act to expand to other sites. A few years later, the advisory council successfully lobbied against an increase in plot fees. Today, there are 32 garden sites, offering 1,400 individual plots, with some 700 potential gardeners on the waiting list.

In May, Donnette reports, P-Patch received \$650,000 from a local bond issue to buy land for new gardens in the densely developed Capitol Hill-First Hill area. "We have a potential list of sites, and we are now working out the logistics," she says.

Another new garden is now under construction north of Pike Place Market, the result of the passage about four years ago of an open space bond measure that included \$3 million for 10 inner city projects, two of them community gardens. One is already completed.

Social agenda

"What the West Philadelphia project is about," says Anne Spirn, "is harnessing the energy and resources represented by the people who live in the neighborhoods." Boston Urban Gardeners, the group that influenced Spirn, has always emphasized job training, says its current director, Patricia King. And in other areas, too, gardens have played an increasingly important social role.

In Oakland, California, for instance, urban gardens are included as a community goal in the strategic plan that

was to be submitted to HUD last month as part of the city's empowerment zone application.

"We are now seeing gardens used to accomplish other community needs," says Cynthia Hall, community conservation adviser with the San Francisco office of the Trust for Public Land. She spots the beginning of a "green industry" that is creating new employment opportunities in landscaping and gardening work. The trust also nurtures new groups like the six-month-old East Bay Urban Gardeners in Oakland.

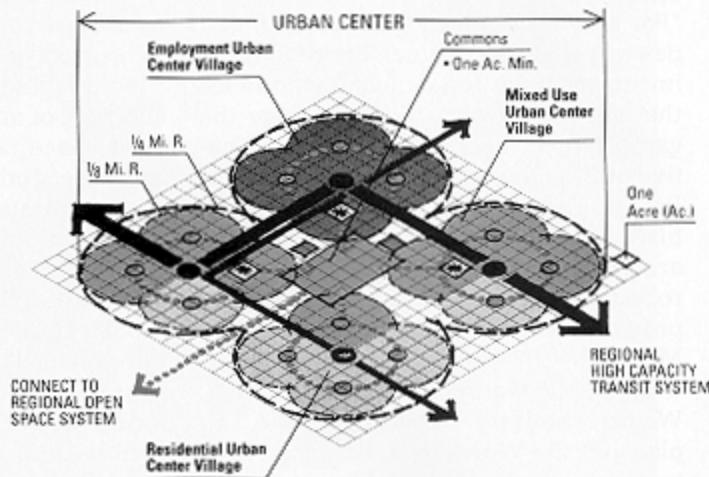
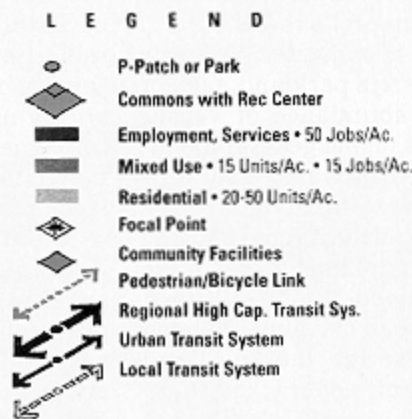
A leader in such efforts is SLUG—the San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners. Its director, Mohammed Nuru, is a Nigerian landscape architect with a back-

ground in planning who has been with the group since 1991. "When I started, SLUG was a gardening group, with only three people on the staff," says Nuru. A year ago, he started focusing on job training, particularly for young adults.

Today, there are 10 full-time staffers and an annual budget of \$1.4 million, most from community development block grant and other city funds. The newest program, the "Green Team," is for youths who have been sentenced by the courts to some form of community service.

A Chicago group has an even broader social agenda centered on community gardens. The Resource Center is a 20-year-old nonprofit recycling center with a long record of providing jobs for its

Bill Elmendorf, Seattle Planning Department



Community gardens are part of the mix of an ideal urban center in Seattle's new comprehensive plan.

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Gardening can turn "a lot" around, believes Chicago's Ken Dunn. Here, Resource Center staff, volunteers, and residents of the Grand Crossing neighborhood on the South Side prepare for planting.

low-income neighbors. Last year, the group began a new project, Turn A Lot Around, which focuses on vacant lots as the centerpieces of community renewal efforts. The work has been funded by the city's Department of the Environment and the Richard H. Driehaus Foundation.

University of Pennsylvania landscape architecture students redesigned Aspen Farms to provide a gathering space for the gardeners.



Blaine Boehman

Since last spring the group has assembled on Saturday mornings at several neighborhood vacant lots. Volunteers and neighborhood residents have worked together to clear debris, dig gardens, and build playgrounds. In one case, the group won a city contract to demolish an abandoned building that was being used as a drug house, recycling whatever material it could. A garden is planned for the site.

Ken Dunn, the Resource Center's founder and director, says the current effort "is premised on the idea that the poorest of urban neighborhoods are rich in resources. Among the things we have learned," he adds, "is that shared physical work is deeply democratic. In a sense, our work crews function as a visible expression of the possibility of civic life."

The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless has similarly lofty ambitions—four solar-heated greenhouses where

its clients would grow vegetables organically year round. Program policy director Les Brown says the coalition is negotiating with city officials to nail down a site for its venture. The group had put in a claim for an abandoned Coast Guard building adjacent to Navy Pier; it would have been eligible under the McKinney Act, which gives homeless organizations dibs on abandoned federal sites. But the city had other uses in mind for the pier, which is now being restored as a festival and marketplace venue.

A near west side alternative now looks likely, Brown says. The city has offered the group a stall on Navy Pier to sell its produce.

Rooftops of New York

"Three years ago," says Sanford Beldon, "I was a volunteer for a homeless center in midtown Manhattan. The center was

For three years, homeless gardeners have made this New York rooftop bloom. Their crops are grown in 102 containers.





Gardeners from Cape Verde in Boston's Roxbury section.

in a seven-story building directly across the street from our New York offices." Beldon is senior vice-president of the Rodale Press, the publisher of *Prevention* magazine and *Organic Farming*, among other titles. The company is headquartered in Emmaus, Pennsylvania, where it also has a large demonstration farm.

One day, he continues, he went up to the roof of the building housing the center, which was run by the Grand Central Partnership. The roof was in full sun, and Beldon immediately thought of a container garden. Last year, a second crop of gardeners, all recruited from the homeless center, sold their produce in Bryant Park next to the public library. "This year," says Beldon, "they are specializing in herbs and flowers."

Beldon also helped start another garden for the homeless in 1993, this one in Washington three blocks from the Capitol. "We did that because we wanted to capture the attention of congressmen," he says, "with the thought of spreading this idea across the country." This spring, a third project was launched, in Jersey City. In June, Beldon was to meet with Andrew Cuomo, who is in charge of homeless projects at HUD, to solicit his support for similar programs.

Manhattan, not so surprisingly, is also the site of a confrontation involving community gardens. In late May, a long-

established neighborhood garden was bulldozed on the Upper West Side. The abandoned buildings on the site had been cleared several years ago and the lot planted by its West 84th Street neighbors. But the land was claimed by the city housing authority, over strong protest from the office of Manhattan borough president Ruth Messinger.

"It's a sad story because nobody—even the housing advocates—wanted to lose the garden," says Richard Bass, AICP, director of land-use planning for the borough president. In the end, however, the authority would not accept an alternative site. On the bright side, Bass says, community gardens will be recommended as a "stabilizing use" in a report his office is now preparing on the interim use of city-owned land.

A growing movement

In the late 1970s, Mark Francis, now a professor of environmental design at the University of California at Davis, did a survey of community gardens around the country. "We predicted then that those gardens would not be around long," he says today. "Yet nine out of 10 are still in use, and some have been made into permanent open spaces."

In another study, Francis asked both traditional park users and community gardeners—and city officials—in Sacra-

mento about their feelings. "One thing I learned is that the people who used the gardens were not park users," he says. "Another thing is that a lot of public officials don't recognize the value of gardens as open space."

Despite the fact that the sites he studied were later demolished, Francis is hopeful about the future of urban gardens in the U.S. And certainly the numbers are growing. The Philadelphia-based American Community Gardening Association now has nearly 400 members and will be holding its 15th annual conference in Chicago late next month (fax 215-625-9392). In addition to technical talk about seeds and soil, says program coordinator Elizabeth Tyler, who is the director of the gardening effort called Green Chicago (sponsored by the Chicago Botanic Garden), the event will feature updates on new ventures like L.A. Harvest (which is administering a \$3.5 million U.S. Forest Service job training grant in Compton).

And back in Philadelphia, gardeners throughout the city are getting ready for the annual competition sponsored by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. Hayward Ford says he is confident that the vegetables and flowers grown by his neighbors at Aspen Farms will walk away with some blue ribbons.

Ruth Knack is the executive editor of *Planning*.