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Using Vacant Land to Reshape American Cities

The revitalization of vacant land in cities is a new frontier for landscape architecture. It also is a new frontier for real estate developers, urban planners, municipal managers, and elected officials.

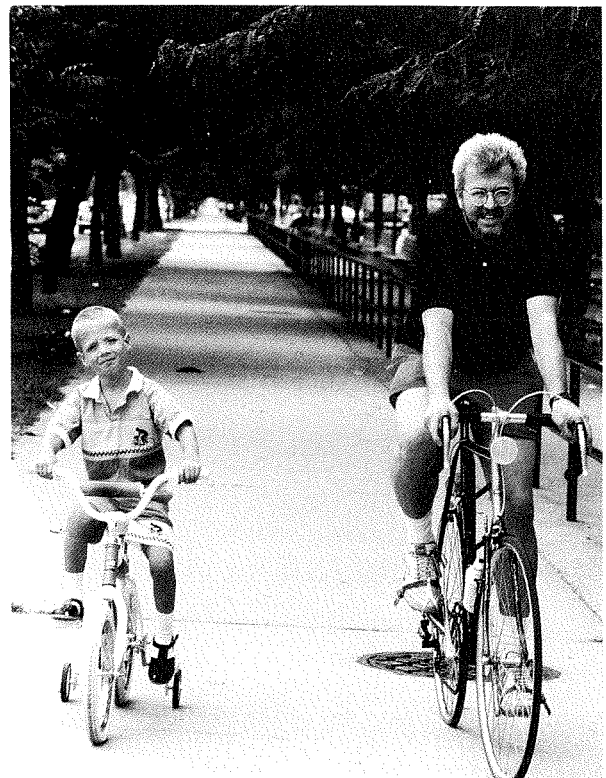
Most American cities have “filled their development envelope” and most will not be expanding their boundaries. However, urban renewal, changing land use patterns, and urban flight have created an incredible resource that provides a new opportunity for reshaping cities: vacant land.

At the turn of the next century there probably will be a new dynamic between cities and suburbs. Suburbanites are experiencing the same pressures that pushed them from cities: increased density, traffic congestion, crime, and air pollution. The resurgence of interest in many cities, gentrification, is evidence of this new dynamic.

Cities already are developed for greater density. Many have mass transit, sewers, water systems, hospitals, and schools that represent centuries of public investment. They generally are located on waterways, which allow for alternative forms of both transportation and energy generation.

But cities aren't as livable as the suburbs. One of the major differences is the amount of green, open space.

Using vacant urban land to create a wide variety of open spaces would complement the redevelopment of many cities, reduce some of the pressure on surrounding metropolitan suburbs, and provide a more benign environment for urban residents. The open space system is a major organ of the city, affecting the desirability of housing, the health of residents, and the quality of water and air.



The Open Space System

What comprises an open space system?¹ In New York City, the open space system is parks and parkways—more than 26,000 acres—zoos, botanical gardens and community gardens, plazas and promenades, playgrounds and beaches. It is streets and sidewalks, vacant lots, sandlot baseball diamonds, and schoolyards.

And there is more: it is sports stadia and the grounds around housing projects, hospitals, and other institutions. It is all the back yards and front yards, terraces and rooftop gardens, the cemeteries, more than 500 miles of shoreline, the harbor islands, the natural areas that are still with us, and the dozens of rivers and streams that flow through and around the five boroughs.

In short, open space is all those thousands of outdoor places, designated and informal, where people congregate to relax, to exercise, and to restore themselves.

What makes open space so important? It is well known that active and passive recreation—jogging, ball playing, biking, tennis, and swimming; relaxing, sunbathing, hanging out with friends and family; quiet contemplation; and communion with nature—are important factors in reducing health care costs.

It is well known that the availability of parks and open space affects decisions that families and corporations make about where to locate. It is no coincidence that the most desirable address in New York City is Park Avenue. It is also well-known that great parks and open spaces draw tourists in droves, and that tourism is increasingly important to the economic health of New York and other American cities.

But it is not as well known that properly designed and maintained open spaces function as places where city residents can encounter people of different social, economic, and ethnic groups, and begin to see the common humanity in strangers around them.

Nor is it widely known that open space can save the city millions of dollars. For example, the capacity of open space to absorb storm water and provide natural drainage means that preserving a system of parks and natural streams can substitute for or supplement sewer systems. The urban forest cools city streets in the summer and acts as a windbreak in the winter, cutting energy consumption. Urban street trees and parks absorb glare, reduce noise pollution, and clean the air. A mature, one-acre stand of trees can filter 20 tons of particulate matter from the air each year. In New York City, there are more than 2.6 million trees.

**The author and his son
bicycle on the Brooklyn/
Queens Greenway.
Photo by Misha Erwit.**

Working in a Partnership

To reap the benefits of an urban open space system we will have to forge new partnerships. This became apparent to New Yorkers in the late 1960s and the 1970s, when long-delayed urban renewal plans, followed by the fiscal crisis and widespread disinvestment in neighborhoods like the South Bronx, had devastating effects on open spaces and on people's lives. Many neighborhood parks were abandoned, maintenance in larger traditional parks was severely reduced, rubble-strewn vacant lots became commonplace, and street trees—unpruned, unwatered, and unfed—died by the thousands.

The impact of this neglect did more than decrease real estate values, create public health risks, and deprive young and old alike of recreational resources: it caused neighborhoods to lose hope, and even made the whole city, for a time, begin to assume that the only choice was to leave or to endure.

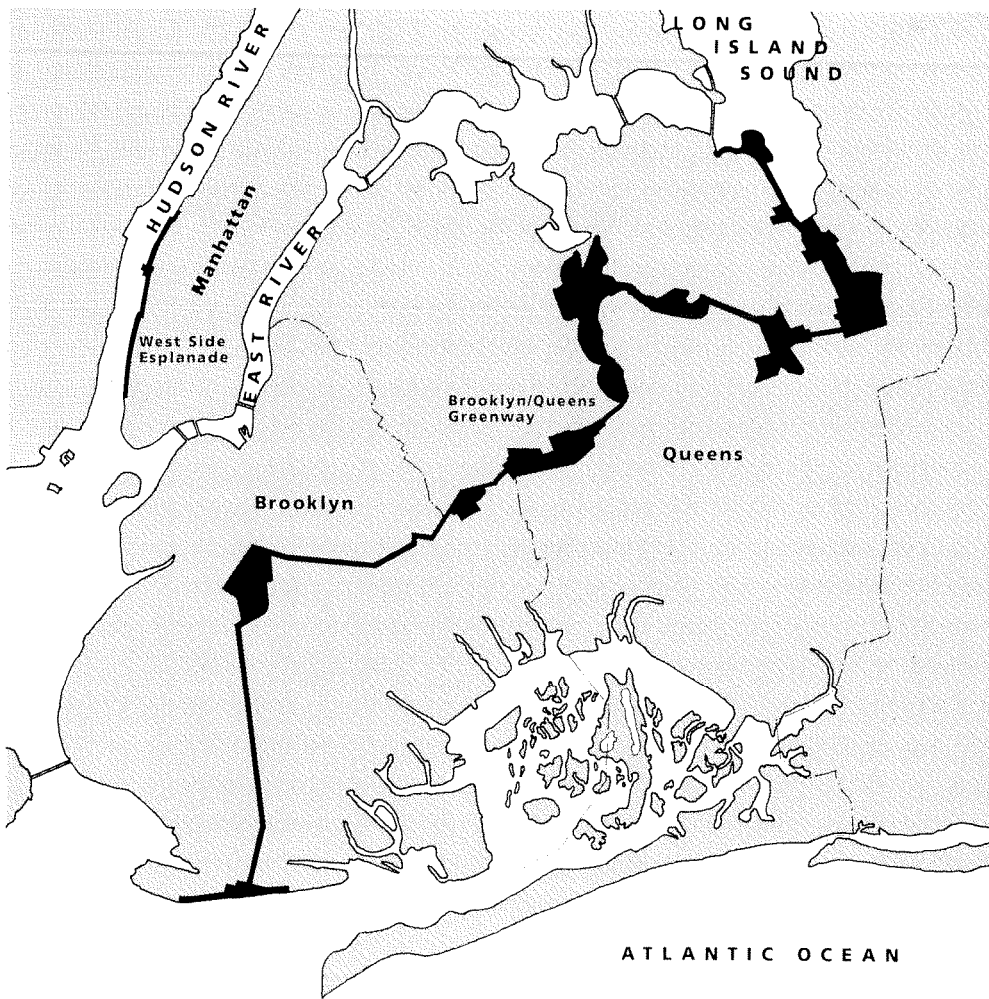
But the spirit of New Yorkers reasserted itself. Neighborhood residents—supported first by non-profit organizations, then by the city and federal programs—banded together to start clearing the junk from vacant lots and turning them into community gardens. In the cultivation of fruits, vegetables, and ornamentals, they rediscovered the ability to take control of, and pride in, their own neighborhoods.

New organizations began to clean and take care of abandoned parks and to replant street trees. Traditional park and garden groups helped local communities with organizing, fund raising, site planning, horticulture, construction, and land acquisition. With the generous support of foundations, corporations, and government; technical assistance and local community groups have shaped a citizens' support network and eased the impact of fiscal crisis on the city's open spaces.

Building the System

Twelve years were spent planning Westway, a highway that would have been built by dumping landfill in the Hudson River and tunnelling a new road through it, creating land for a park and commercial and residential development. The landfill, however, would have destroyed marine habitat, and environmental and neighborhood advocates filed lawsuits that stalled the project. The city and state, facing federal deadlines for trading Westway funds for mass transit funds, feared they would lose all the money and abandoned the project.

In 1986, Governor Mario Cuomo and Mayor Edward Koch established the West Side Task Force to recommend an alternative to Westway. This 22-member panel, led by Arthur Levitt, then chair of the American Stock Exchange, worked with business, civic, environmental, business, and neighborhood representatives. Within six months they reached consen-



The West Side Esplanade and Brooklyn/Queens Greenway.

sus and recommended a surface boulevard with a 60-acre, four-mile esplanade between the boulevard and the river. Cuomo and Koch accepted the recommendations but waited a year to proceed, and then only with the boulevard. Developers began to eye 150 acres of underwater property and piers along the river's edge.

More than 50 civic organizations joined together, arguing that the esplanade should be combined with the piers and underwater property, protecting the shore and giving New York a new world-class waterfront park. The governor and mayor established a panel to design the esplanade and determine the future of the underwater property. Recently, Cuomo suggested to Koch he would be willing to establish a scenic easement over portions of the underwater property to prevent development there.

In Brooklyn and Queens a similar partnership has been instrumental in creating a new open space system. Three years ago the Neighborhood Open Space Coalition proposed the Brooklyn/Queens Greenway, a 40-mile bicycle and pedestrian path that would run from Coney Island to Fort Totten, connecting 13 major parks and a host of cultural facilities along the way. The idea is not new; rather, it continues the work Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux began a century ago when they built Eastern and Ocean Parkways, which extend from Brooklyn's Prospect Park into surrounding

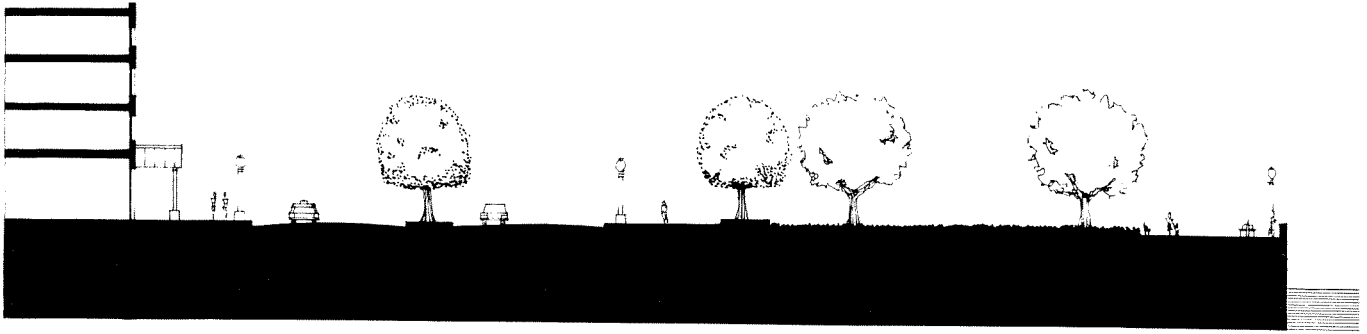
neighborhoods. Robert Moses expanded the concept when he created Flushing Meadow-Corona Park, Kissena Park, and the corridors connecting these two facilities to Cunningham Park. The Greenway would build on their visionary work, completing a chain of green from the Atlantic Ocean to Long Island Sound.

Support for the Greenway has been overwhelming. The city's parks and transportation departments have allocated a total of \$10 million to implement the greenway, and last November Mayor Edward Koch officially opened the first ten miles, which connect Coney Island and Brighton Beach to Grand Army Plaza, on Prospect Park's northern edge. A *New York Daily News* editorial called it "the urban equivalent of the Appalachian Trail."

The Challenge for Landscape Architecture

Landscape architects are playing a role in this process of reclaiming vacant land and reshaping American cities. However, to strengthen their role, they must adapt to the realities of contemporary urban development. Function is as important as form. The client is everyone and the process can be as important as the product.

The design of the future is an interdisciplinary one. Professionals who understand the strengths and weakness of



Graphics by Suzi Marzuola.

other professions are most successful and useful. Yet, landscape architects, engineers, architects, and planners seldom interact in educational institutions.

My observation is that landscape architecture students are overworked and insular, seldom getting the time or the push from their institution to get out to reality and solve problems. Design is important, but without understanding economics, community dynamics, and the realities of substandard plant material, tardy contractors, and regulatory restrictions, the carefully prepared studio designs will never become reality.

Therefore, it might be useful if students could become involved in one municipal or non-profit project during the three years they are studying for their degrees. This might give them a more realistic sense of the constraints (financial, social and political) that influence design.

Another role for landscape architecture schools is to research the contributions that open space systems make to the viability of cities. Once we understand the value of the system, we must market it better. We must convince municipal managers, corporate executives, homeowners, and elected officials that open space is worth the investment. New York, for example, spends only 0.7 percent of its budget to manage the 13 percent of the city that is mapped as parks. The open space system must be packaged and sold, and kept high on the public and private sector agendas, if we are going to reshape cities.

Most landscape architects have not excelled at public participation, though the profession has improved in the last 15 years. Involving the public is a long and cumbersome process, but worth it. The final designs will work better, the local residents will understand the function of the landscape in their lives, and, if people are really involved in creating a landscape, they will protect the site from fire, vandals, and all other forces. Public participation is the insurance that what we create today will be there tomorrow.

Finally, we must approach urban open space as an interrelated system. The downtown plaza and traditional park, cemetery and schoolyard, vacant lot and playground, shoreline and city street are all part of an open space system. If this system were expanded and nurtured by a partnership of government, business, and community, then we could truly reshape American cities.



Cross sections of the West Side Esplanade. Photo courtesy of the Environmental Simulation Laboratory, University of California, Berkeley.

Note

1. This description is taken from the Mayor's Open Space Task Force report Open Space and the Future of New York, which the author helped draft in 1987.