

In 2010, Mansfield Frazier received a grant from ReImagine Cleveland to start Chateau Hough, a vineyard set on a formerly vacant lot in Cleveland's Hough neighborhood.

Why the 'Greening' of Vacant Land Is a Smart Long-Term Investment in Cities

In this excerpt from "The Empty House Next Door," author Alan Mallach challenges cities to reimagine vacant properties into pocket parks, urban farms and other green space as a permanent commitment to

sustainable infrastructure.

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*Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from **The Empty House Next Door: Understanding and Reducing Vacancy and Hypervacancy in the United States** (Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2018). In this policy report, city planner and housing advocate Alan Mallach assesses the problem of vacant properties in the United States and recommends creative mitigation strategies for local officials, nonprofits, and community leaders — particularly for America's legacy cities. In this excerpt, Mallach argues that converting vacant properties to community gardens and parks should not be seen as a temporary beautification strategy, but rather a long-term paradigm shift that prioritizes the “greening” of a city's infrastructure.*

Vacant and abandoned properties are a familiar part of the American landscape, from the boarded row house in North Philadelphia to the empty factory in Detroit to the collapsing farmhouse in rural Kansas. These structures can devastate the neighborhood, undermine the neighbors' quality of life, diminish the value of nearby properties, and reduce local tax revenue. Yet vacant properties can also become community assets. Thousands of vacant commercial and industrial buildings have been converted to apartments and condominiums, and vacant lots have found new lives as community gardens and parks.

Perhaps the most significant vacant property strategy to emerge over the past decade is what has come to be known as “greening” vacant lots: putting them to such environmentally friendly uses as community gardens, vineyards, and tree farms. It's not a fundamentally new idea. European allotment gardens — small plots for people living in high-density urban areas to cultivate — go back to the 19th century and are still widespread there. In the United States, the lineage of community gardens goes back to the “Victory Gardens” of World War II, if not earlier.



In this 1942 photo, children in New Orleans prepare and plant a World War II Victory Garden. The city had encouraged owners of vacant lots to loan their property to the cause. (AP Photo/Horace Cort)

Today's approach to community greening may not be new, but it is very different. While food security and recreation, which were uppermost in the minds of 19th-century European advocates of allotment gardens, still matter, today's explicit connection between urban greening and the strategic reuse of vacant properties represents a new and significant departure from previous thinking.

IMAGINING LAND USES BEYOND COMMUNITY GARDENS

As vacant lots proliferated in older American cities in the 1980s and 1990s, community gardening was actively promoted by community organizations and agricultural groups and often encouraged by local officials as a temporary use for properties awaiting redevelopment. Community gardens, however, while valuable and productive, depend on a critical mass of neighborhood residents eager to till the soil, something that is both uncertain and fluctuating over time. With vacant lots continuing to proliferate, particularly in legacy cities, people needed to find other ways to use lots.

A critical step in moving from community gardens to a broader approach to greening vacant lots was the collaboration between Cleveland Neighborhood Progress (CNP), a citywide nonprofit intermediary, and Kent State University School of Architecture's Cleveland Design Collaborative under the creative leadership of CNP's Bobbi Reichtell and Kent State's Terry Schwarz. This partnership provided Cleveland's officials, nonprofits, and community leaders with a vision of how the city's thousands of acres of vacant land could become an asset for their city's future. One part of this effort was the publication of the Cleveland Vacant Land Reuse Pattern Book, a catalog of alternative green uses for vacant land with information on the costs and the materials needed to carry out each alternative.

In 2009, using the options in the Pattern Book, CNP and the City of Cleveland initiated **Re-Imagining Cleveland**, a competitive vacant land reuse grant program, to empower neighborhood residents and other community stakeholders to turn vacant land bank property into community assets and pilot projects. With \$500,000 in grant funds, they awarded small grants to 56 projects on nearly 15 acres, including environmentally oriented projects such as pocket parks, rain gardens, and agricultural projects including gardens, orchards, and vineyards.

More recently, both Detroit and Baltimore have created even more detailed pattern books for reusing vacant land. Detroit Future City's **Field Guide for Working with Lots** and Baltimore's **Green Pattern Book**, created in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service, are invaluable resources for community organizations and activists not only in those two cities, but in any city in the United States.

Cleveland was not alone in exploring the potential of vacant lots. A second pioneering city was Philadelphia, where the nearly 200-year-old Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) took the leading role. Although PHS had supported community gardens in Philadelphia since the 1970s, in recent years their efforts have broadened to encompass a comprehensive and multifaceted citywide greening strategy. Two Philadelphia initiatives, one led by PHS, are particularly worth noting.

The **PHS LandCare program** recognizes that while vacant lots in legacy cities greatly outnumber the organizations or individuals willing or able to turn them into gardens, vineyards, or parks, allowing those lots to remain derelict condemns their surroundings to continued blight. To address this, PHS developed an inexpensive, low-maintenance approach to vacant lots that involves only basic sodding, tree planting, and erection of simple split-rail fencing on the lot. Today, PHS, with support from the city of Philadelphia, has installed and maintains LandCare treatments on more than 7,000 vacant lots across the city.



A second Philadelphia initiative addresses a concern shared by nearly all older American cities: combined sewer overflow (CSO) in sewerage systems where the same system handles both sanitary and stormwater flows. At times of heavy rainfall, sewer flows overwhelm the system's capacity, leading to discharges of untreated or partially treated sewerage into rivers and lakes. CSO is a major source of water pollution in violation of the Clean Water Act, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has aggressively pressed cities to comply with the act. Until recently, compliance was considered achievable by spending billions of dollars to build either separated sewer systems or massive underground tunnels and holding tanks.

Facing this problem, cities realized that their vacant land inventories offered an alternative. Instead of using the traditional method of channeling stormwater runoff into the sewers, the water could be channeled toward green spaces, where it could gradually filter through the ground and refill the aquifers under the city. Such a strategy would be far better environmentally and would also reduce the need for massive holding tanks and allow cities to comply with EPA requirements at lower cost. Philadelphia was the first city in the United States to turn the idea into a reality by developing a detailed plan and a 25-year implementation strategy, which was approved by the EPA in 2012.

As described on the city's Green City, Clean Waters website:

We're recreating the living landscapes that once slowed, filtered, and consumed rainfall by adding green to our streets, sidewalks, roofs, schools, parks, parking lots, and more—any impermeable surface that's currently funneling stormwater into our sewers and waterways is fair game for greening. It's going to take decades of work, but when it's all done, we'll have reduced the stormwater pollution entering our waterways by a *stunning 85 percent* (emphasis in original).

The city estimates that implementing this greening strategy will save Philadelphia \$5.6 billion, compared to complying with EPA mandates through conventional engineering solutions. Similar efforts are now underway elsewhere, including Milwaukee, Syracuse, Cleveland, and Detroit.

The strategies pioneered in Cleveland and Philadelphia have been embraced by hundreds of towns and cities across the United States, while research has identified clear benefits from greening in the form of improved health, healthier food, lower crime and higher property values. Unresolved questions remain, however, including the most fundamental — is this a long-term strategy for legacy cities or only a transitional effort? If the latter, what is the expected outcome?

THE RESOURCE CHALLENGES OF VACANT-LOT GREENING

In the few years since the start of Philadelphia's and Cleveland's pioneering efforts, greening has begun to come of age as a multifaceted response to using vacant land to improve residents' quality of life. Many cities, though, have barely scratched the surface; thousands of lots remain untreated and are at best intermittently mowed and cleaned. Looking to the future, two distinct, but closely related obstacles stand in the way of building sustainable greening efforts in legacy cities.

The first problem is lack of resources. Although the cost of greening or maintaining any individual lot is modest, the vast number of vacant lots in legacy cities means that the total cost can easily become substantial. The Cuyahoga County Land Bank spent \$2.23 million from 2011 to 2015 simply to clean and mow the vacant lots it created through demolition. The cost to turn each vacant lot into a garden, a park, or a vineyard under the Re-Imagining Cleveland grant program typically ran between \$3,000 and \$6,000 — not much, but substantial if multiplied by the number of lots awaiting greening in the typical legacy city. Cleveland is having difficulty raising enough funds to expand their program.

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Philadelphia devotes more public resources than almost any other city to greening, and yet the great majority of vacant lots in that city are still waiting their turn. In contrast to economic development projects, greening projects rarely yield direct cash returns and the benefits of increased property values, improved health, or reduced crime tend to be reflected indirectly if at all in municipal balance sheets.

Long-term sustainability of greening projects is another challenge. Maintaining attractive green spaces can be labor-intensive: While many neighborhood-based greening projects last for years, others tend to fade away as the individuals who provided the initial impetus move away or on to other things.

Many neighborhoods even lack the critical mass of concerned neighbors to get greening projects started in the first place. This is part of the reason that cities have begun selling side lots to individual homeowners, even while recognizing that these programs may have uncertain long-term outcomes. By the fall of 2017, the Detroit Land Bank had sold off more than 8,000 parcels to adjacent homeowners as side lots.

Cities have realized that to succeed, a greening infrastructure needs to be put in place to support the hundreds of individuals and groups that create and maintain green spaces around the city. Even in cities with strong support systems like Philadelphia and Baltimore, resources are limited and far more lots remain untouched than greened, while far too many cities lack even a basic citywide greening infrastructure.

Underlying these issues of cost and maintenance is a larger question: Should greening be seen as a short-term transitional activity or a long-term use of urban land? Cities like Detroit, Cleveland, and Baltimore have lost population for many decades and despite regrowth in some areas, they have no realistic prospect of regaining their peak population in the foreseeable future. Still, many local officials and others continue to see greening as, at most, a short-term interim step until “a more desirable type of investment presents itself, such as [the] construction of a new home,” as one Ohio land bank official

put it.

From that perspective, many public officials view committing formerly developed urban land to permanent green uses that lead neither to new construction nor to population regrowth as the equivalent of relegating the land to nonuse. As a result, greening is often undervalued compared to other forms of public investment.

Large inventories of vacant land, however, will be a long-term reality in all but a handful of America's legacy cities. Thus, viewing greening as no more than a short-term strategy handicaps the efforts of cities to rebuild their quality of life and ultimately their economy and market strength. At the same time, certain areas in each city have the potential for short- or medium-term regrowth. Planners in legacy cities need to assess which areas have the most potential for regrowth and ensure that vacant land in those areas is available for growth. They should also establish sound ground rules for long-term greening in other areas, recognizing that becoming a greener city can be a powerful impetus for economic and social revitalization.

A LONG-TERM STRATEGY FOR REUSE

In cities with few vacant lots where vacancy may be a temporary phenomenon, greening may be a short-term or transitional use. In others, greening should be viewed as a long-term strategy. As a recent report from Detroit Future City put it, "Too often, open space is thought of as a 'consolation prize' for disinvested neighborhoods that do not have the market to attract traditional brick-and-mortar development. Open space is a solution for Detroit's future, not an unwelcomed result of Detroit's past."

Cities need to evaluate to what extent — by looking at market conditions, financial realities, demographic data, and economic trends — their vacant lots, both present and projected, can be reused for development within 10 to 15 years. If the answer is, as it often will be, that many lots will not be developed, that city should begin to plan for long-term green reuse, making what DFC calls a "green culture shift." That demands thinking creatively about how long-term greening can be accomplished — reflecting the unique character of each area — and building the support system and infrastructure to ensure that green uses remain sustainable for the future.

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