

# The Shrinking City: Real Estate Development Meets Community Activism in Philadelphia's Green Spaces

Aneta Dybska

University of Warsaw, Poland

## Abstract:

*This article discusses "The Holy Experiment," an episode of the 2006 Edens Lost & Found PBS documentary series, in the context of Philadelphia's urban renewal policies. By juxtaposing William Penn's seventeenth-century plan of the city with the redevelopment strategies of Philadelphia today, it points to the ways Penn's concept of the "green country towne" has become a useful byword that establishes a tradition of maintaining green spaces in the city. The central argument of the article is that by appealing to that tradition and the Philadelphians' sense of ownership of the city, the authorities deftly merge the demands of urban social justice movements for community self-control and self-improvement with their own real estate objectives expressed in the language of sustainable growth.*

## Keywords:

*Philadelphia, green infrastructure, shrinking city, "greene country towne," civic engagement, real estate*

*Beyond some civic and ethnic myths and a few family and neighborhood memories, Americans are not conscious that they have a past and that by their actions they participate in making their future. As they tackle today's problems, either with good will or anger, they have no sense of where cities came from, how they grew, or even what direction the large forces of history are taking them.*

-Sam Bass Warner Jr., *Urban Wilderness*, p. 4

*Edens Lost & Found* (2006) is a PBS four-episode documentary series that highlights the work of individuals and communities oriented towards reclaiming blighted urban neighborhoods in Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Chicago and Seattle, including abandoned housing and corporate buildings, vacant lots, and rights of way. The series takes us on a tour of successful projects that praise and put up a as model to emulate civic engagement in the rehabilitation of former industrial city centers heavily affected by the post-World War II shift to a service economy, the subsequent population and job loss, suburban flight, and waves of disinvestment. What the series does—and I will be referring specifically to the Philadelphia episode titled "Holy Experiment"—is to hail the transformation and improvement projects as a "revolution" in the making, a synergy

of the urban citizens' work to turn vacant/environmentally hazardous grounds in their immediate neighborhoods into thriving public spaces. In the film we see how vacant lots that decades before would have been prime real estate for private or commercial uses become sites of urban agriculture, such as community gardens, urban farms, or even arts villages. But regardless of how much credit we give to individual creativity and persistence, as the "Holy Experiment" does, the whole endeavor would have been significantly less effective and limited to random acts of civil disobedience were it not for the successful incorporation of the environmental and community-based activist agenda by municipal, state and national authorities as a viable economic strategy of rescaling of the shrinking cities through sustainable growth. The Philadelphia case aptly illustrates Stuart Hall's observation that "cultural breaks can be recuperated as a support to tomorrow's dominant system of values and meaning" ("Notes" 450).

Those restorative policies borrow from the experience of grassroots activist groups that, much like the Green Guerillas in the 1970s New York, triggered neighborhood rehabilitation by using the volunteer work of local residents. While this "backdoor" strategy of reclaiming vacant land for community gardening challenged the city's policies of growth by land privatization, it was soon realized that New Yorkers were willing to self-organize and invest "sweat equity" to improve their immediate surroundings in spite of the municipal authorities' abandonment and disinvestment. That the city eventually responded with its own gardening program Operation Green Thumb stands as a recognition of the local community as a powerful player in local politics (Zukin, *Naked City* 201)—a fact that the urban sustainability movement promoted in the PBS series seems to take for granted today.

The *Edens Lost & Found* documentary is accompanied by a promotional brochure that foregrounds community participation as essential to the urban make-over, as if conditioning the emergence of "thriving new urban environments" on public engagement. For as long as "public will and government action are galvanized," the brochure informs us, communities will be endowed with the power to restore not only the physical cities in their own right but also justice in city planning that until recently was conducted "from the top down, as if there were no social, economic, or environmental costs to these choices." The message that transpires from the brochure is that individuals—ordinary citizens featured in *Edens Lost & Found*—are walking proof of the reversal of this authoritarian trend. They are cast in the series as local heroes who revive the American community spirit and inspire their fellow citizens to self-organize and create new uses for vacant lots to best address their communal needs. On a practical plain, this empowerment of ordinary urban citizens has been taking place for several decades now, with resources, expertise and guidance provided by non-profit organizations such as the Philadelphia Horticultural Society (PHS). But it is only in recent years that municipal authorities have jumped on the bandwagon of more equalitarian city planning, making citizen participation an efficient strategy of, in fact, shrinking the city.

I am interested in the way the PBS documentary "Holy Experiment" spins a narrative of the city's historical uniqueness, with the phrase "greene country towne" as a byword for Philadelphia's long-standing tradition of social justice in planning to promote the municipal authorities' real-estate agenda. While innocuously bending historical facts, the documentary forges Philadelphia's "tradition" in a manner that fits Raymond Williams classic definition of the term as

an intentionally selective version of a shaping past and a pre-shaped present, which is then powerfully operative in the process of social and cultural definition and identification. . . . From a whole possible area of past and present, in a particular culture, certain meanings and practices are selected for emphasis and certain other meanings and practices are neglected or excluded. (*Marxism and Literature* 115-116)

The hegemonic cooptation of the discourse of social justice and community self-improvement is made possible precisely because the documentary uses the city's colonial past of a seventeenth-century "greene country towne" as a frame of "tradition" for Philadelphia's present and future. To explain why I find such a discursive and ideological tradition-making problematic, I would like first to elucidate key aspects of the seventeenth-century socio-spatial design that emerge from Penn's correspondence prior to his first landing in Pennsylvania in 1682 and the improved version of the plan "A Portraiture of the City of Philadelphia" (1683) that is regarded as the first recorded instance of formal city planning in America (see Fig.1). Penn is given credit for the comprehensive design of Philadelphia although it was surveyor Thomas Holme who drew the city's map and appended it with commentary.<sup>1</sup>

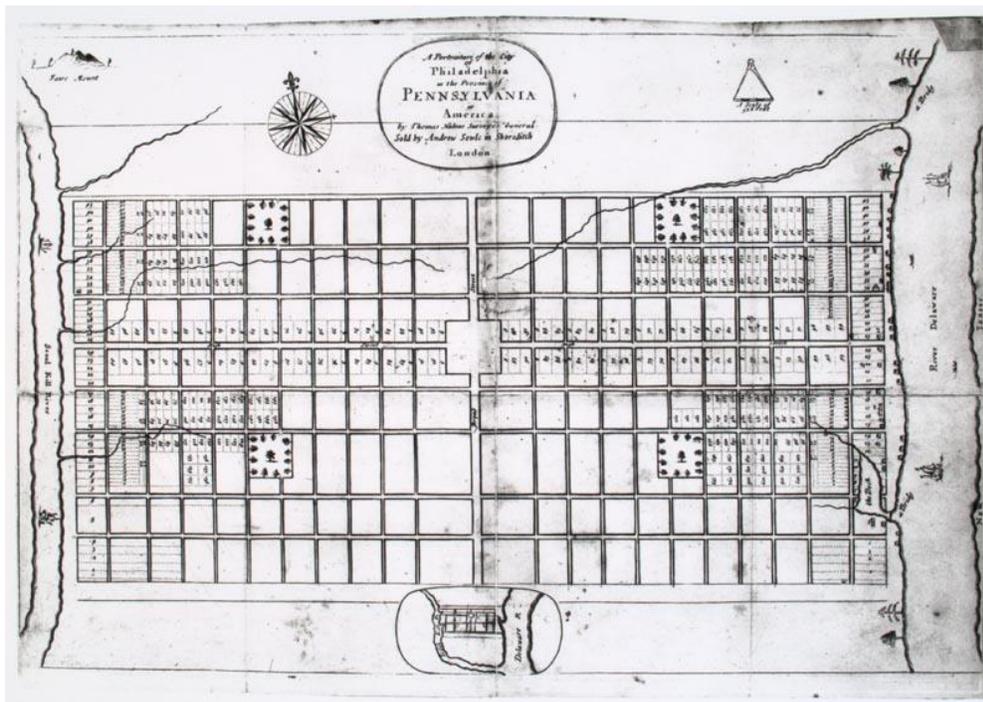


Fig. 1 "A Portraiture of the City of Philadelphia" (1683)

Soon after receiving the charter as Proprietor of Pennsylvania from King Charles II in March, 1681, Penn prepared an early promotional document, "Some Account of the Province of Pennsylvania" (1681), justifying the benefits of English colonization. Penn likened colonies to the "seeds of nations" (505) that would effectively improve the demographics and economy, generating commerce and profit for the mother country. Next to being "a free, just, and industrious colony" (510), as many scholars have observed, Pennsylvania was a well-designed real-estate deal. Penn imagined the colony as made up of separate townships of 50,000 acres

---

<sup>1</sup> This commentary is called a "A Short Advertisement" and accompanies Penn's *Letter . . . to the Committee of the Free Society of Traders* dated August 16, 1683.

divided into 100 shares of 5,000 acres valued at 100 pounds each<sup>2</sup>—a proportion of the land “by the navigable river” allocated for crops and pastures, the rest “backward into the country” (511). Whether sold or rented, land was to be a warrant of the “adventurers” future prosperity. Since Penn realized that a well functioning commercial economy needed a varied social structure to develop and prosper, he appealed to four groups of settlers. Among them were: “industrious husbandmen and day-labourers” struggling in England due to urbanization and a decline in farming; carpenters, masons and other craftsmen; “ingenious spirits,” “younger brothers of small inheritances,” and all other “men of universal spirits, that have an eye to good posterity, that both understand and delight to promote good discipline and just government among a plain and well-intending people” (511). In general, he appealed to all Christians willing to face the risks and inconveniences of transplantation in order to improve their station in life and contribute to the colony’s wealth. As regards its theological underpinnings, scholar J. William Frost observes, Penn conceived of Pennsylvania as a God-ordained scheme of building an improved (English) society, a “holy experiment.” It was his duty, with God’s providential guidance, to ensure the earthly success of God’s colony with “the religious quality of those who migrate” (584). In popular nationalistic discourse, though, Penn is credited with making Pennsylvania a testing ground for religious freedom, representative government, multicultural policies (respect for Native Americans), and economic opportunity—values and ideals that have been at the core of the post-colonial American project in the making.

A few months later, in July, 1681, Penn presented a revised plan of the colonial settlement in “Conditions or Concessions agreed upon by William Penn Proprietary and Governor of ye province of Pennsylvania and those who are ye Adventurers and Purchasers in ye same province.” Historian Hannah Benner Roach observes that probably due to pressure from potential investors he reoriented towards planning a “large town or city” rather than multiple rural settlements (8-9) akin to those established in New England at that time. The rules concerning the division and ownership of land were as follows: each purchaser would be allotted 2 per cent of the land purchased in town (100 acres for a full share of 5,000 acres); the remainder was to be laid out on the outskirts, with 20 per cent of one’s share left forested, preferably with oak (for shipbuilding) and mulberries (for silk) (519). In William E. Lingelbach’s words, from the plan’s inception Penn set out to attract wealthy landowners and make “a province of landed gentry with spacious townhouses” (402).

From the very outset Penn’s goal of creating a refuge for religious groups persecuted at home and abroad did not seem at odds with the earthly business: the First Purchasers<sup>3</sup> knew their investment options, the size of lots, and their intended uses, as well the value of quit-rent due. Roach notes that “what had begun as the first step in a holy experiment had become, in essence, a broadly conceived real estate development” (5). Next to being a Quaker leader and governor of the colony, Penn was also a landlord who hoped his enterprise would generate income. As a proprietor Penn reserved for himself the right to collect annual quit-rent set at varying rates depending on the person’s social status and the size of the lot: land owners at 1shilling per 100 acres, renters 1 penny per acre of up to 200 acres allowed (“Some Account” 510), and servants at 2 shillings for 50 acre lot (“Conditions” 528).<sup>4</sup> Although by the end of the seventeenth century

---

<sup>2</sup> 1 acre equals approximately 0.4 hectares; the size of one share in Penn’s estate, 5,000 acres equals approximately 2,023 hectares. This number gives us an idea about the scale of the project.

<sup>3</sup> The purchasers of the first 100 shares in the colony are referred to as First Purchasers. They were Quakers from England, Scotland, and Ireland, mostly merchants, storekeepers to tradesmen and farmers. See Donna B. Munger’s *Pennsylvania Land Records: A History and Guide for Research*, p. 11

<sup>4</sup> 50 acres equals 20 hectares.

Penn had invested 20,000 pounds in the colony, his returns were meager, primarily because the colonists refused to pay quit-rent or support the government with taxes; as an absentee landlord for fifteen years,<sup>5</sup> he struggled to control his finances to the point of sending letters pleading the freemen to settle their accounts (Bronner 97). A few years into the life of the new colony, as Edwin B. Bronner reveals, “the quit-rents were unpaid, the Council would not meet, the members of the government quarreled with one another, the courts did not command the respect of the colonists, his orders were flagrantly ignored, and some men had resorted to deliberate misinterpretation to deceive him” (100).

The premature “failure” of Penn’s experiment, as described by Bronner, should not overshadow the proprietor’s ambitious design to build a prosperous commercial center linked to the agricultural economy. In “Instructions given by me, William Penn. . . to my commissioners for the settling of the present colony. . .” (October, 1681), Penn advised them not to neglect such aspects of planning as easy access to waterways, fertile soil and, importantly, the location of a site that would be “dry and sound, and not swampy” (528), thus, in the words of Lingelbach, “anticipating by two hundred years the importance of the health of the community” (401). But what Penn is most frequently credited for today is his utopian vision of a city laid out on a grid plan whose regularity was punctuated by public squares.<sup>6</sup> Identified with the order and symmetry of rectilinear broad streets (100 ft and 50 ft wide), intersecting at right angles and regular distances, the grid became the paragon of town planning since the early years of the American Republic. While some praised the grid for the transparent and legible system of blocks, seeing it as harmonious and healthy (118-119), others were annoyed by its monotony and sameness.<sup>7</sup> But behind the grid’s uniformity stands a set of values, beliefs and assumption that Penn was guided by and expressed in spatial terms.

Penn conceived of Philadelphia as “a greene country towne, which will never be burnt and always be wholesome” (“Instructions” 530) divided into ample lots with houses placed centrally, each surrounded by gardens and orchards, separated from other buildings to prevent the spread of fire and disease. But instead of big investors the project attracted a disproportionately large number of smaller investors. As a result, Penn was prompted to adjust to the spatial limitations: the size of town lots would be much smaller, land ownership more dispersed, and the street grid denser (Lingelbach 402). He had to “shrink” the planned city to the size of a rectangular stretch of land between the Delaware River and the Schuylkill River, two miles in width and mile in length, amounting to just 1,200 acres in the place of the initial 10,000 acres.

Although rescaled to a rather modest size, Penn’s real estate development conscientiously reproduced social hierarchies in a spatial form rather than subverting them. The grid was a mirror reflection of the First Purchasers’ status and pecuniary investment. The most prestigious locations were to be retained on the waterfront; but instead of 100 acres extending 250 meters along the river (“Instructions”530), holders of a full share of 5,000 acres would be allotted a mere 1acre in

---

<sup>5</sup> Governor Penn left Pennsylvania in 1684 and came back only in 1699. Throughout that time his duties were in the hands of the elected Council. Then he appointed Commissioners to the displeasure of the freemen, and, finally, sent a Puritan deputy governor, which offended the Quaker colonists. See Edwin B. Bronner, “The Failure of the ‘Holy Experiment’ in Pennsylvania, 1684-1699.” *Pennsylvania History* 21.2 (1954): 93-108.

<sup>6</sup> For an extended discussion of city planning in the nineteenth century see Dell Upton’s “The Grid and the Republican Spatial Imagination,” a chapter of *Another City: Urban Life and Urban Spaces in the New American Republic* (2008).

<sup>7</sup> Dell Upton offers an interesting discussion of the grid as perceived by merchants and foreign travelers. His analysis of primary texts reveals lack of unanimity in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century concerning the regular street system. It turns out that many showed a preference for irregularity, unpredictability and novelty of experience in cities like Boston, and found Philadelphia’s grid “mediocre” and “tiresome” (120).

the Front, a 100-foot-broad street on the river (Holme, “A Short Advertisement” 243). Initially, the major streets were named after the First Purchasers; only after a disagreement over land use (they wanted to privatize the designated public areas) did Penn rename the streets after “the things that spontaneously grow in the country, as Vine, Mulberry, Chestnut, Walnut, Strawberry, Cranberry, Plum, Hickory, Pine, Oake, Beach, Ash, Poplar, Sassafras, and the like” (Upton 124; Penn, *Further Account* 265). Although smaller investors received lots averaging ½ acre and lacking access to the waterfront, situated in “the backward Streets” of the town, they could still enjoy an orchard or a garden (Holme, “A Short Advertisement” 243). What neither Holme nor Penn could have predicted was that “by the eighteenth century, as Elfreth’s Alley and many similar alleys remind us, the generous original blocks were subdivided by streets and alleys that reduced the living quarters to doll’s-house size, with open spaces correspondingly cribbed and cabined,” as historian Lewis Mumford explains (327).

Given the availability of land for various social classes (including those in a condition of servitude), Philadelphia, in a manner similar to the New England Puritan towns, freed its citizens from the feudal obligation of the past by conceiving of land ownership as a civil right. For many, then, land became a source of self-determination, political enfranchisement, as well as considerable social respect (Warner, *Urban Wilderness* 16).

In recent years, Philadelphia’s city plan has drawn the attention of scholars, planners, and ordinary citizens less for the grid plan than for Penn’s allocation of land for public spaces—five squares on a plan that broke down the monotony of the street system built around two intersecting axes: High Street (running from east to west) and Broad Street (north to south). The centre square of 10 acres, not unlike the Puritan village commons, sited major public institutions. A meeting house, a state house, a market house, and a school were to be built around the square. The remaining four subsidiary squares, each the size of 8 acres and ringed by trees, were to serve as the focal points of each quarter (Holme, “A Short Advertisement” 243). Interestingly, the waterfront had been also intended for public use, but soon it entered the path of successive privatization (Upton 115).

Taken together, the public squares constituted Philadelphia’s commons—open public land (parks) to be shared and used by all residents of the city, “for the like Uses, as the Moore-fields in London,” as Holme explained (243), off limits to privatization. In the early seventeenth century Moorfields were an open access forested park north of London’s city walls, laid out with walks and benches, so popular with Londoners that it was gradually expanded. Historian Elizabeth Milroy has recently noted that, by referring to Moorfields in “A Portraiture of the City of Philadelphia” (1683), Holme implied the squares would have a recreational value and their uses would be regulated by the city as owner of the land (266-7)—beautifully landscaped parks offering leisurely walks and solitary meditation rather than sites of communal activities and diversions. Already in *Frame of Government* (1682), Pennsylvania’s first constitution, Penn proclaimed that “all prizes, stage-plays, cards, dice, May-games, gamesters, masques, revels, bull-baitings, cock-fightings, bear-baitings, and the like, which excite the people to rudeness, cruelty, looseness, and irreligion shall be respectively discouraged, and severely punished” (qtd. in Milroy 280). But the presence of parks in each quarter also suggested that Philadelphia was designed with the physical health of the First Purchasers in mind. The prominence of green public spaces on the city plan, next to private gardens and orchards, communicated Penn’s preoccupation with clean air and preventing the spread of epidemics (275).

The ingenuity of setting aside public spaces turned out to have been of less importance to Penn’s contemporaries than he had assumed. Art historian Dell Upton reveals that the two squares located farthest east, though falling within the urbanized sections of the city, were not in

any way used for civic or recreational purposes. In the mid-eighteenth century the northeast square was used as a graveyard by German Calvinists, and degenerated into an eyesore of “stagnant waters, of dung, human excrement and . . . of filth.”<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, by the end of the eighteenth century the southern square became a grazing area, potter’s field and burying ground for yellow-fever casualties. The only use of the southernmost square that may have matched Penn’s intentions was as a dancing and meeting area for black people (qtd in. Upton 117). This long-lasting neglect of the parks stems from the fact that as proprietor Penn never legally ceded that responsibility onto the municipal government. Until 1820 no public funds were allocated for park maintenance. It was then that the citizens forced the local authorities to take responsibility for the landscaping and improvement of parks. (Milroy 281-2).

From today’s perspective, those unfamiliar with the multiple readjustments Penn had to make at the successive stages of city planning may find the meticulous reconstruction of his real-estate scheme a daunting task. But this is precisely where the details come into play, since they will allow us to confront historical facts with Philadelphia’s tradition as “a greene country towne” projected in the “Holy Experiment.” The PBS video draws on Philadelphia’s colonial beginnings and its seminal place in American town planning because this tradition can be easily appropriated to forward the ideological and economic goals of the municipal authorities today. By appealing to the Philadelphians’ sense of ownership of the city, the authorities deftly merge the demands of urban social justice movements for community self-control and self-improvement with their own real estate objectives expressed in the language of sustainable growth.

The building of green infrastructure within cities is becoming a popular strategy of urban renewal, especially in the former industrial Rust Belt. The so-called shrinking cities are characterized by “a special subset of older industrial cities (Vey, 2007) with significant and sustained population loss (25 % or greater over the past 40 years) and increasing levels of vacant and abandoned properties, including blighted residential, commercial and industrial buildings,” note planners Joseph Schilling and Jonathan Logan (452). Philadelphia is a case in point. A vibrant and prosperous metropolis of 2.1 million before World War II, it suffered a serious population loss of 25 per cent (0.5 mln) between 1950 and 2000. Some neighborhoods’ populations diminished by two thirds, “leaving a staggering 26,000 vacant homes, 31,000 vacant lots and 2,500 vacant industrial and commercial buildings” (“Holy Experiment”).

From the real-estate point of view, this loss of population and businesses drained the city’s tax base, the city became the owner of *in rem* properties with little or no tax money to prevent waste, neglect, and health and environmental hazards; many sites became illegal dumping grounds and centers of criminal activity. Also, the oversupply of land affects the market value of existing properties and the related property taxes; shrinking the city to the right size has been a recognized strategy of dealing with the land surplus, and preventing further decline. Schilling and Logan define “right sizing” as “stabilizing dysfunctional markets and distressed neighborhoods by more closely aligning a city’s built environment with the needs of existing and foreseeable future populations by adjusting the amount of land available for development” (453). In other words, cities that are hard pressed to rescale can successfully regenerate vacant properties, converting them into the green infrastructure: community gardens, neighborhood parks, urban farms, play and recreation areas, and other green spaces. Since “right-sizing” is a corrective act of urban planning, it seeks to engage community residents in the decision-making process so that they can “tailor” the land use to meet their immediate interests. Once the vacant lots have been cleared, landscaped and well-maintained, either as long-term or interim green

---

<sup>8</sup> The way Upton documents this passage, it is unclear what his sources are.

spaces, property is likely to appreciate. From the PHS Philadelphia Green's informational material on "the clean & green process," we learn about the market-driven motivations behind vacant land reclamation: "potential homeowners are more likely to buy in a community that has a nice appearance (increased 'curb appeal') than one scarred by symptoms of urban blight. . . . Likewise, potential investors are more likely to be interested in starting a business in a well-kept, stable community." Commonsensical as it sounds, land reclamation is a beautification project—a harbinger of economic growth—that has as its corollary in increased neighborhood cohesion, solidarity and community pride (3).

How is the goal of economic/spatial and demographic rescaling (shrinking cities) put to use by recourse to the discourse of community participation in the "holy experiment"? By drawing on the narrative of success, key to American mythmaking, the PBS documentary acknowledges the collective work of Philadelphians that "led to a renaissance in our nation's first city. This is the story of their sustainable success." This alluring vision of civic revival foregrounds the empowerment of the local community through gardening, as if to remind us that the uniqueness of their political system, as highlighted by Alexis de Tocqueville's in his seminal work *Democracy in America* (1835), rests on the voluntary associations that promote the culture of citizenship, solidarity and collective action. Philadelphia's "renaissance" would not have been possible without the support of the Philadelphia Horticultural Society (PHS), a well-established non-profit organization whose mission is to "motivate people to improve the quality of life and create a sense of community through horticulture." The building of social capital is defined by sociologist Robert Putnam as creating "connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (*Bowling Alone* 19).<sup>9</sup> Social capital is used to mitigate the consequences of "urbanism as a way of life"—superficial, calculated, and fleeting exchanges between interdependent, anonymous individuals.<sup>10</sup> Yet this strategy serves primarily a means of achieving larger economic goals.

The "Holy Experiment" praises the use of gardening as a strategy of reinstating ideals of civic virtue in decaying urban centers such as Philadelphia. For instance, we learn that community gardens like the Aspen Farms—the PHS pilot project started in 1974—not only "fuel the body" but also bring benefits that are more sustaining than good fresh food and flowers." Started 30 years ago, the PHS's Philadelphia Green lends expertise and resources to groups of citizens on condition that 85 per cent of the block's residents agree to join the greening program. But today, they partner with the local government,<sup>11</sup> businesses, and community-based organizations to develop the city's green infrastructure.<sup>12</sup>

What the documentary does, apparently in line with the official shrinking cities agenda, is to promote Philadelphia's revival with the language of sustainable growth that, in a seductive manner, elevates community-building to a desirable civic behavior. "Neighborhoods can only be saved if the people within those communities care enough to help make this change a real and

---

<sup>9</sup> Putnam goes on to say that: "In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called 'civic virtue.' The difference is that 'social capital' calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital" (*Bowling Alone* 19).

<sup>10</sup> See the classic text "Urbanism as a Way of Life" (1938) by the Chicago School sociologist Louis Wirth.

<sup>11</sup> The city's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative (NTI) was launched specifically to deal with vacant and abandoned property.

<sup>12</sup> See the PHS website at <http://pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org/phlgreen/about.html>.

lasting part of their lives” (“Holy Experiment”)— these are precisely the words with which interpellation is achieved.

Gardening as a means of civic revival empowers the people to make decisions about the uses of public land laying fallow (and thus restore the physical cities)—putting into practice the ideals of social justice expressed in Henri Lefebvre’s “right to the city” concept. More, the greening initiatives decommodify vacant and abandoned lots and make them a social resource that can improve the Philadelphians’ quality of life.<sup>13</sup> Parks, recreation sites, urban farms, community gardens, educational and communal facilities and other greening initiatives—are all features of good city planning. They can therefore be effectively used to rescale the shrinking cities to the changing economic, demographic and real estate circumstances.

On the one hand, gardening activities boost the community spirit and foster responsible urban citizenship; on the other, they are bound to generate real estate traffic and rising property values. For when the city’s potential for growth is severely limited, when the tax base has drastically diminished, then can it give away hundreds or even thousands of vacant lots, as a convenient way of transferring the burden of their maintenance onto the residents. Engaging the latter in planning decisions and capitalizing on their sweat equity (work and toil invested in the project) enhances the value of both the green lot and the contiguous property. By way of example, the only thing we learn from the documentary about the Spring Gardens Community Garden started in the mid-1990s is that prices of the real estate adjacent to the garden grew tenfold in a decade, reflecting, as one resident explained, “a confidence and positive attitude about the neighborhood that comes directly not only from the garden but the experience we’ve all had in the garden” (“Holy Experiment”). Other than that, this “down-to-earth” aspect of urban revival is mentioned in passing, overshadowed by success stories of neighborhood groups and enterprising individuals. Such is the case with the Norris Square gardens—a vibrant communal space in a Puerto Rican neighborhood that was transformed from “a nightmare,” as the project’s co-founder Iris Brown put it, “to a place where politicians are moving in.”

While focus on collectivities tends to deemphasize the work of individuals, the PBS documentary effectively reconciles the all-pervading discourse of community-building with myths of individual success. Iris Brown and Tamasita Romero are Puerto Rican activists who in the mid-1980s led a group of women to start the Norris Square garden Las Parcelas in North Philadelphia. Presented as determined warriors waging turf wars against drugs dealers and gangs to finally “take over” “the enemy territory,” those women are cast as a powerful force behind the regaining what had once been a “paradise.” They create a communal ethnic space around *a casita* (a small shed characteristic of Puerto Rican rural architecture) and a colorful mural depicting the island’s history; importantly, they plant a vegetable and flower garden, and fruit trees to cultivate their rural heritage.

This story of the Puerto Rican community garden is illustrative of the way the “Holy Experiment” structures its narrative around individuals. They are not put on the sidelines of the urban renewal discourse; rather, they are foregrounded as trendsetters and project leaders who “ignite the spirit of change”; they are credited with a vision, an idea or a mission that is transformative of the whole community.

---

<sup>13</sup> For many the “quality of life” campaigns are not a neutral term. It is enough to recall Mayor of New York Rudy Giuliani’s “Quality of Life” campaign in the 1990s targeting the poor and people of color, especially women and transgender people, youth, and the homeless by excessively policing and limiting uses of public spaces, or criminalizing various forms of public behavior. So in fact the groups whose “quality of life” gets improved are wealthy homeowners’ and gentrifiers. See Alex S. Vitale, *City of Disorder: How the Quality of Life Campaign Transformed New York Politics*, 2008.

What links the Las Parcelas garden to the Belgrade Garden in Fishtown is not only partnership with Philadelphia Green, which requires community involvement, but also, as the film emphasizes, the determination of individuals with a drive to regenerate a weeded junkyard or a dumping site into a community asset. As we learn from an interview, Ed Ellis—a retired Anglo-American grocer started the garden to commemorate his son Michael who died of an overdose. We find out that Ed used to be a reclusive person in the past and he initially retreated to gardening as a way of to get over his trauma but found himself increasingly involved in community work. Now the Belgrade Garden is not only a park but also an educational farm for school children. Channeling his grief through physical work, Ed tries, in his own words, to “make each day better than before” and to “keep fighting on.” Parallel to the lot’s improvement, Ed frames his own journey of self-improvement from an atomised individual to a man of civic virtue who, by opening himself up and giving to the community, has not only garnered its respect and recognition but has also exerted a transformative influence on the community itself.

Doris Gwaltney, an African American volunteer, is featured in the film as yet another example of civic engagement. With a \$30,000 grant from Philadelphia Green, she spearheaded the revitalization of Carroll Park. Once a vibrant though racially exclusive gathering place in the pre-World War II period,<sup>14</sup> by the 1990s the area shared the lot of both the Belgrade Gardens or Norris Square neighborhoods: it was “wilderness,” “deserted and forgotten” by the residents except for drug dealers and criminals. Doris, as the voiceover explains, was persistent about the park’s revitalization and used herself as a paragon of change. In a manner similar to Benjamin Franklin who styled himself into a model of hard work and frugality, pushing his wheelbarrow through the streets of Philadelphia (*The Autobiography* 62), Doris committed to a working routine that brought her to the park every Monday at 4 p.m., in all kinds of weather, to show her determination to improve the park and thus the quality of life in the neighborhood. “I wanted the neighbors to see that crazy woman pick up trash and she was here to stay,” recalls Doris in a self-righteous way.<sup>15</sup>

The above cases studies forward a vision of Philadelphia as a multiracial/ethnic city where Latinos, Blacks and Whites can coexist, each enjoying the “crops” of participatory citizenship and self-determination, individual and collective. Engaging communities in planning decisions and investing them with a sense of city ownership, Philadelphia’s policymakers have pursued the “right sizing” goals of stabilizing property values and neighborhood revitalization. Through cooperation with non-profit organizations like the PHS and capitalizing on volunteer sweat equity, the city made successful investments in the green infrastructure. By making a civic virtue of gardening, traditionally a private activity on private land,<sup>16</sup> they created incentives for community networks of trust and reciprocity to form and the city to grow.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> In the article “Carroll Park: The Neighbors Take Charge,” a long-term resident of Carroll Park, Timothy Kemp, recalls that in the 1940s “as a black man, I couldn’t walk through this park. They would run me like an animal or something. When I was a youngster, you name it, it happened.” This would change in the 1950s when the formally private park was turned over to the city. Interestingly, according to the 1970s Census, African Americans were a minority in the area (4.7 per cent of the overall population), but within the next decade those proportions changed drastically with blacks constituting an overwhelming 97.3 per cent of the neighborhood’s population.

<sup>15</sup> Until the completion of Carroll Park in 2010, the residents organized as the Carroll Park Neighbors received \$630,000 in grants for the park’s revitalization. But it would be interesting to learn about the value of sweat equity invested throughout the period in the project. See Ellen Parkins and Cory Popp, “Carroll Park: The Neighbors Take Charge.”

<sup>16</sup> In *Some Fruits of Solitude* (1693) Penn counted gardening among private leisure activities: “A Garden, an Elaboratory, a Work-house, Improvements and Breeding, are pleasant and Profitable Diversions to the Idle and

But “The Holy Experiment” documentary adds yet another layer of meaning to Philadelphia’s “renaissance”: it frames the successful greening initiatives in the “tradition” of Penn’s “greene country towne.” With the history of Penn’s shrinking city in mind, we need to recapitulate the past significations of this slogan before we allow ourselves to be seduced by the PBS documentary’s immensely appealing resuscitation of the phrase and the model of city planning it evokes.

Penn’s utopian vision of Philadelphia is put up as an example of good planning. Designing the city on a grid plan, he showed as much preoccupation with public health as with equitable distribution of land, proportionate to one’s share. The city was to be a “wholesome” urban environment, a colonial commercial hub whose survival and future prosperity would depend on the colony’s agrarian economy in the countryside and trade. The sheer scale of the town and the size of properties (100 acres in the first version), initially designed with 100 First Purchasers in mind, was nothing like that of the mediaeval towns Penn knew from Europe. Although the grid seemed like a just division of real estate, Philadelphia’s final location between two navigable rivers made the waterfront property most desirable, if only for its direct access to waterways communication. Social hierarchies were thus naturally imprinted on the grid: the most valuable lots were on the waterfront and around the neighborhood’s squares; minor investors were confined to the back alleys and side streets. Not counting the outlying countryside, where 20 per cent of land was to be forested, the city’s green infrastructure was to consist of private orchards and gardens, as well as five landscaped squares designed for leisurely walks and contemplation. Penn recognized the symbolic power of landscaped parks: their prominence supposedly tapped into the investors’ expectations of the city’s potential growth and prestige (Milroy 274). Tailored to appeal to the tastes of social elites, Philadelphia was, in essence, to be a profit-oriented development expected to yield regular income from quit-rent. When Penn had to shrink the city at the blueprint stage, due to limitations of the urban terrain and prior settlement, he only rescaled the plan without modifying the proportions of land allocated for development and public uses.

By contrast, the Philadelphia of the twenty-first century is a shrinking city of the post-industrial era that resorts to the right sizing strategies to revive the real estate market with the development of green infrastructure. The “Holy Experiment” sees the city’s public park system and urban agriculture today as keeping alive the tradition of “a greene country towne.” This insertion of the phrase into the popular discourse establishes ideological continuities with Penn’s project, which, upon inspection, prompt us to question the existence of the “tradition.” The major difference between the sustainable redevelopment of Philadelphia today and Penn’s master-plan for the development of Philadelphia in the seventeenth century, which limited the use of the city’s green squares and admitted no interventions, is that abandoned and vacant land is placed in the hands of the local community, mostly working- and lower-class people, who are empowered to treat this land as a social resource and invent new uses that would best meet their current needs, be it a playground, a community garden or tree planting. While Penn thought of working farms in the countryside as the mainstay of the colonial economy, the Philadelphia of today has been developing its green infrastructure within the city, including urban farming and neighborhood parks,<sup>18</sup> to further its economic growth. Yet, this would not have been possible

---

Ingenious: For here they miss Ill Company, and converse with Nature and Art; whose Variety are equally grateful and instructing; and preserve a good Constitution of Body and Mind” (345).

<sup>17</sup> While between 2000-2012, for the first time since 1950, the city recorded a population growth of 2 per cent, there is no direct proof that urban greening is the sole growth factor.

<sup>18</sup> Today, 40 out of Philadelphia’s 150 neighborhood parks are partnered with Philadelphia Green.

without the all-pervasive discourse of civic engagement that, along with a well-developed system of public and private grants, has effectively shifted the responsibility for neighborhood revitalization onto the residents themselves. In the process of vacant land re-development that necessitates solidarity, social connectedness, and trust, a more mundane goal is achieved: the increased “curb appeal” of the restored city block will likely stimulate the real estate market.

When in the mid-1990s urban historian Sam Bass Warner, Jr. criticized the American city as “the inhumane place it is because we cling to the formulations of the seventeenth century and the myths of a society of small proprietors” (*Urban Wilderness* 18), he could not have predicted that Penn’s idea of “a green country town” peopled by major and minor proprietors would be effectively resuscitated to promote the restoration of Philadelphia. In the five decades after World War II, this former industrial metropolis became an “inhumane place” to live, but the shrinking city is now on the rebound with its revival of civic virtue.

## References

- Bronner, Edwin B. “The Failure of the ‘Holy Experiment’ in Pennsylvania, 1684-1699.” *Pennsylvania History* 21.2 (April 1954): 93-108.
- Edens Lost and Found*. Brochure. Santa Monica, CA: Wiland Bell Productions. n. d.
- “Philadelphia: ‘The Holy Experiment.’” *Edens Lost and Found*. Dir. Harry Wiland. PBS, 2006.
- Hall, Stuart. “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular.” *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Ed. John Storey. Hempstead: Prentice Hall, 1998. 442-453.
- Holme, Thomas. “A Short Advertisement upon the Situation and Extent of the City of Philadelphia and the Ensuing Plat-form thereof, by the Surveyor General.” *Narratives of Early Pennsylvania, West New Jersey and Delaware, 1630-1707*. Ed. Albert Cook Myers. New York, 2012. 242-243.
- Franklin, Benjamin. *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. 1771. An Electronic Classics Series Publication. Ed. Jim Manis. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University, 1998. <[http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/franklin/a\\_b\\_benf.pdf](http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/franklin/a_b_benf.pdf)>. 1 May 2013.
- Frost, J. William. “William Penn’s Experiment in the Wilderness: Promise and Legend.” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 106.4 (Oct. 1983): 577-605.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *Writings to Cities*. 1996. Trans. and eds. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000.
- Lingelbach, William. “William Penn and City Planning.” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 68 (1994): 398-407.
- Milroy, Elizabeth. “‘For the like Uses as the Moore-fields’: The Politics of Penn’s Squares.” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*. 130.3 (July 2006): 257-282.
- Mumford, Lewis. *The City in History*. San Diego: Harcourt, 1961.
- Parkins, Ellen, and Cory Popp. “Carroll Park: The Neighbors Take Charge.” *Philadelphia Neighbors* 6 (Jun. 2012): n. pag. <<http://philadelphianeighborhoods.com/2012/06/06/carroll-park-the-neighbors-in-charge/>>. 1 May 2013.

- Penn, William "Certain Conditions or Concessions agreed upon by William Penn Proprietary and Governor of ye province of Pennsylvania and those who are ye Adventurers and Purchasers in ye same province." July 1691. *Annals of Pennsylvania, from the Discovery of the Delaware, 1609-1682*. Ed. Samuel Hazard. Philadelphia: Hazard and Mitchell, 1850. 516-520.
- "A Further Account the Province of Pennsylvania." 1685. *Narratives of Early Pennsylvania, West New Jersey and Delaware, 1630-1707*. Ed. Albert Cook Myers. New York, 2012. 255-278.
- "Instructions given by me, William Penn to my trusty and loving friends, William Crispin, John Bezar, and Nathaniel Allen, my commissioners for the settling of the present colony." October 1681. *Annals of Pennsylvania, from the Discovery of the Delaware, 1609-1682*. Ed. Samuel Hazard. Philadelphia: Hazard and Mitchell, 1850. 527-531.
- "Some Account of the Province of Pennsylvania in America; Lately Granted under the Great seal of England to William Penn." March 1681. *Annals of Pennsylvania, from the Discovery of the Delaware, 1609-1682*. Ed. Samuel Hazard. Philadelphia: Hazard and Mitchell, 1850. 505-513.
- "Some Fruits of Solitude." 1693. *Electronic Text Center*. University of Virginia Library. <<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu>>. 1 May 2013.
- Putnam, Robert. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- "Reclaiming Vacant Lots: A Philadelphia Green Guide." The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's Philadelphia Green. Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, 2002. <<http://pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org/phlgreen/about.html>>. 1 May 2013.
- Roach, Hannah Benner. "The Planting of Philadelphia: A Seventeenth-Century Real Estate Development." *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 92.1 (Jan. 1968): 3-47.
- Schilling, Joseph, and Jonathan Logan. "Greening the Rust Belt: A Green Infrastructure Model for Right Sizing America's Shrinking Cities." *Journal of the American Planning Association* 74.4 (Autumn 2008): 451-466.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Trans. and eds. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Upton, Dell. *Another City: Urban Life and Urban Spaces in the New American Republic*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008.
- Vitale, Alex S. *City of Disorder: How the Quality of Life Campaign Transformed New York Politics*. New York: New York University Press, 2008.
- Warner, Sam Bass. *The Urban Wilderness: A History of the American City*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Wirth, Louis. "Urbanism as a Way of Life." *The American Journal of Sociology* 44.1 (Jul. 1938): 1-24.
- Zukin, Sharon. *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.