

# From Front Yards to Street Corners: Revitalizing Neighborhoods through Community- Based Land Stewardship

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New Haven Urban Resources Initiative (URI), a nonprofit organization partner of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies founded in 1989, works in collaboration with community groups to reclaim our city's environment. Our dual mission is to foster community-based land stewardship, promote environmental education, and advance the practice of urban forestry, as well as provide Yale students with clinical learning opportunities. Our approach through URI's Community Greenspace program combines resident-envisioned urban natural resource rehabilitation, stewardship, and community organizing.

Since 1995, URI'S Community Greenspace program has provided material supplies, technical advice, and classroom-based and hands-on training, delivered by URI staff and Yale graduate student interns, to support inner city New Haven residents who wish to reclaim and then maintain their urban neighborhoods. The interns' learning experiences start months before they ever meet the community. Building upon their course work at Yale, the URI staff augments the interns' knowledge with weekly trainings in local flora, planting techniques, and facilitation skills. In the Greenspace program, URI has paired 97 interns with community groups in the past 13 years. **URI interns** have gone on to work in both the public and nonprofit sector, creating a generation of urban forestry leaders.

Each year URI works with approximately 50 citizen groups to restore their physical environment, build community, and become stewards of their urban ecosystem. When the program began, URI undertook broad-based community outreach to identify potential stewardship groups, taking out advertisements in local and neighborhood newspapers, conducting mailings to churches and area organizations, and doing presentations at monthly Empowerment Zone meetings. Now that

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Greening the streetscape  
of Cedar Hill, New Haven.  
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the program has been running for more than a decade, recruitment is less of a challenge and our active outreach efforts have declined. All of the Greenspace sites that URI serves have signage with URI's phone number. We also work through local city Aldermen's offices, performing seasonal outreach. When applications are received, we vet the group to ensure that they are not just single households, but do represent at least an informal group of neighbors, which helps to ensure that groups are committed to site maintenance beyond their own property.

Once groups are identified, community volunteers identify where they wish to work, initiate the greening activity, and undertake all the physical work to implement the planting efforts. Site selection is entirely resident driven and includes historically neglected areas of the city, such as vacant lots, derelict streetscapes, public housing, park land, and even front yards in federally designated Empowerment Zone neighborhoods. The only role that URI plays in site assessment is to ensure that we are serving our priority areas. URI resources are used to support greening efforts on public lands citywide, but are only dedicated to private properties in low income areas.

We support the restoration of this open-ended range of parcels because we are dedicated to community participation in urban ecosystem management, and because all of these parcels make up the urban ecosystem. Furthermore, we are dedicated to broadly engaging citizens across the full spectrum of our populace. Far too often, environmental professionals have set the agenda defining priority areas for restoration and conservation. Doing so has been to the detriment of both the environmental movement, as well as impoverished communities in our society. **Creating an opportunity for citizens to define for themselves their environmental priorities is crucial to supporting environmental stewardship as part of citizens' daily life.** Yale Forestry and Environmental Studies Professor William R. Burch, the founder of URI, said, "URI takes populations not typically thought of as part of environmental decision-making and shows them that they are."

Reflecting on how participants develop their environmental aesthetic and preferences, I believe it comes from multiple sources. Although community volunteers may not have formal design skills or sensibilities, they universally have a sense of wanting beauty, of wanting a safe place for their kids to play. The housing stock in New Haven is

very dense, and often residents do not have substantial private yards on which their children can play, which motivates them to invest in and care for nearby public spaces. Others draw upon their heritage and cultural traditions. For example, many African Americans in the Newhallville neighborhood have extended families in the Carolinas, and some reference the agricultural tradition of the South in their current gardening works. Other residents are immigrants who bring the traditions of their places of origin to their current greening efforts, such as Puerto Ricans in New Haven who select certain colors and plants that remind them of the island. To expand our participants' understanding of what is possible on their sites, we set up tours of other Greenspace sites. In this way, volunteers learn from each other as peers, share information, get ideas, and engage in social networking. We have also taken Greenspace participants to visit local parks, and have used print media — like gardening magazines — just to offer inspiration and starting points for dialogue.

New Haven is home to six Enterprise Zone communities, a federal designation of poverty. Just as there is an economic disparity between these low-income neighborhoods and wealthier neighborhoods, there are also stark differences in educational attainment. Low-income urban communities, in particular, face many challenges and are often characterized by drug dealing, high rates of incarceration, high school truancy and high drop-out rates, type 2 diabetes, asthma, unemployment, and prostitution. These same communities are often physically described by blight, graffiti, and derelict structures. While a causal relationship between many physical and social attributes are difficult to establish, anecdotal evidence exists on improving human health and well-being by improving the physical condition of neighborhoods.

The small New Haven neighborhood known as Cedar Hill by those who live there is not well known by those who don't. In 1960, the construction of Interstate 91 suddenly isolated the community. In 2004, a small group of neighbors from the Cedar Hill blockwatch mobilized to plant street trees. Illicit activities occur at some of the nearby business establishments, and prostitution occurs in cars parked in Cedar Hill that come off of State Street. Despite these challenges, the group takes great pride in both their work and in their neighborhood. While they

are very serious about combating the illegal activities that diminish the quality of life in their neighborhood, they carry out their planting work in a playful way. Perhaps it is the laughter and joy that is always present when they work together that seems to heal the social ills as well as the personal health struggles some of their members' face. There is a growing body of evidence that the experience of being in nature, even urban 'nearby nature', is healing on many levels. Feelings of safety and interconnectedness allow the flow of laughter and personal joy that so often spontaneously occur when working on nature projects. Sociologist Eric Klinenberg's (2003) research on the 1995 Chicago heat wave found that the most socially isolated individuals — particularly shut-ins and seniors — had the highest morbidity and mortality rates. These processes that were magnified and made clear through an extreme weather event may indeed be at work on a day-to-day basis. Klinenberg discovered what we know intuitively to be true in neighborhoods where URI works: social bonds, social capital, and social cohesion affect individual and community health.

Or, perhaps it is the tangible, visible changes they have accomplished that are at the root of their healing. Their accomplishments include creating a median planting as the gateway from the park into their neighborhood; planting street trees where prostitutes formerly worked; and planting a garden area at a former dumping ground near the highway (they refer to this area as 219 — because there is a sign posting a \$219 fine for dumping at the site). Compost piles are strategically placed where previously cars parked to allow for quick sex acts to be carried out. Likely these physical transformations have helped the neighbors feel better about their community. This is clear to any visitor to their website, which one of their blockwatch members developed. Indeed, it is hard to miss the "I Love Cedar Hill" mugs and t-shirts for sale in local businesses.

In general, many groups talk about how much better they feel about their communities because they are able to make positive change — even if it is only aesthetic. They say that they feel more in control — a word that can be taken in many contexts. First, it is important to recognize that many stewards do engage in community greening work out of basic concern for the safety and security of themselves, their family, and their property. A large proportion of the



Greening the streetscape of Cedar Hill, New Haven.  
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neighborhood groups with which we work are blockwatch groups, which are essentially community networks that were created to control crime. These block groups see controlling the visual landscape as one more effort to reduce crime. Secondly, and perhaps more universally applicable to the question of health, we are talking about the need to have control in the social environment, using the physical environment as a means to gain that control. I have observed that when people feel victims of their surroundings, or their medical diagnosis, they may feel they have lost some control over their life. Moreover, broad social and environmental trends, such as the economic downturn and the energy crisis, will affect these places the most, causing more people to live in situations without control, essentially as 'victims of their environment.' Even if neighborhood greening is only a symbolic gesture, they feel better because they can see they have affected change. As Burch has said, "One of URI's major outputs is human dignity and empowerment."

In the summer of 2007, I conducted an interview with two members of the Cedar Hill Blockwatch Association to discuss why there were involved in the Community Greenspace program and what impact it had on their lives. Both women are senior citizens, African American, and both are cancer survivors. It is clear that they find comfort in the physical labor of gardening as well in the social interactions of working to improve their own neighborhood. Despite both women having lifting restrictions placed on them by their doctors due to their cancerous lymph nodes, they engage in vigorous planting activities weekly. Throughout the phase of diagnoses, treatments, and recovery, these women looked after each other and their neighborhood streets in reciprocal acts of caring.

Sue<sup>2</sup> is a lifelong gardener and community volunteer who has been involved with a variety of church and school groups. Her environmental stewardship work is embedded in and linked to other acts of community organizing and civic engagement; she regularly attends city hall meetings to advocate for a number of neighborhood concerns. She became aware of the URI program through her work pushing the city to install new sidewalks in the neighborhood. Since URI's Community Greenspace application requires a minimum of four neighbors as

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2. Name has been changed.

sponsors, Sue engaged her neighbor, Karen, in the group.

Karen<sup>2</sup> said that Fridays, planting days, always brighten up her week. Planting keeps her going, happy, and inspired, at a time when her illness could do just the opposite. She felt that seeing the look of surprise and appreciation on her neighbors' faces had a positive impact on her health. She said "gardening, to me, is wellness." Karen wrote the following narrative — with the help of her daughter — about her experience in battling cancer. She believes that gardening, battling cancer, and life in general are all acts that require strength and faith:

**"I was asked to remember about a period in my life when I was in a full-fledged battle against an invasion inside my body. A body that I worked hard to keep safe from certain attacks (or so I thought). I never smoked, drank or practiced certain behaviors that society has taught us may harm this precious temple we call the body. But, it was always hidden way, way back in that place in our minds where we place the scary items. The fears, the things we never hope to face and definitely not have to fight. Then, I embraced a walk with two old friends I had known all my life, Grace and Faith. Grace to get through and Faith to believe I would. And then healing began. I walked out on Faith, led by Grace. I'm still here, and it must show. God picked me out of his garden, tore away the weeds and started afresh. It began with my own gardens. At first it was hard to discern what weeds were, what needed to be plucked away, what could be saved?"**

**And just as gardens grow, others in my neighborhood with like minds joined together and we have started to beautify with great stewardship, areas that were neglected. My favorite quote is 'gardeners are people who believe in tomorrow.'"**

Karen is helping to bring that future-oriented outlook to the development of the URI program, by serving on the board of directors. Her input and insights will grow the Community Greenspace program for many other neighborhoods and groups like her own.

### **Future/Frontier**

The complex and multifaceted relationship between individual health (both physical and mental), community cohesion, and urban design is still being explored — both in academia and in field projects like ours.

However, even in the case of environmental health issues with known causal relationships, the implementation of new programs to address those issues is far from finished. For example, URI recently tested soils for contaminants at 50 community project sites. We found 90 percent of sites have both lead and arsenic present beyond acceptable federal standards (for lead, the Environmental Protection Agency [EPA] standards are 400 ppm for play areas, and 1200 ppm yard wide). Contaminated soil is commonly found in barren urban locations and easily transforms into dust, which can be tracked into houses or suspended in the air. The dust can be inhaled or ingested by hand-to-mouth contact, contributing to heavy metal and/or pesticide poisonings, asthma, and even diseases such as ringworm, roundworm, and *E. coli* from pet fecal matter in the soil. There is a known relationship between lead exposure and negative affects on human brain development, particularly among children.

New Haven has the highest number of reported cases of children with elevated blood lead levels in Connecticut, which is due to both the age of the housing stock in the community combined with the prevalence of poverty. The city has over 400 current cases of lead poisoning 10 micrograms per deciliter or higher. New Haven's Health Department tracks these children, documenting their blood lead levels by census tract and age. Unsurprisingly, the census tracts with highest numbers of cases of children with lead poisoning coincide with the neighborhoods where URI actively partners with community groups to recover their degraded landscape. Currently we are conducting outreach to renters and homeowners to raise awareness of the problems associated with polluted soils, sampling and testing soil in 50 front yards, and conducting remediation where needed. Following this testing program, we developed an effort to remediate sites and educate residents about exposure reduction techniques. We've nearly completed the remediation phase, and have learned alongside the neighbors how difficult this task is.

There are limitations, however, as to what can be accomplished through actions led by URI and our community partners. Operating in a city of scarce resources, our program does not have the capacity to test, let alone remediate, all of the yards and play spaces in New Haven that are exceeding federal standards for lead. While we intend

to raise awareness, provide testing, and develop broadly applicable field protocols for remediation, there is a need for public resources to address these environmental conditions at a larger scale. Contamination on private, currently occupied residential lands may be the next frontier in the already complicated realm of brownfield sites, Superfund sites, and other toxic sites.

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The Oscar-winning film “An Inconvenient Truth” was a brilliant tool to increase the public’s *understanding* of global warming. Yet, changing *behaviors* and *lifestyles* is a more difficult step that must be taken. The now-old adage of “think globally, act locally” continues to resonate. Again, environmental professionals will not solve such ecological crises with only policy tools. Finding ways to engage individuals to be stewards of their community — or “building a cadre of nature stewards” in the words of William Burch — is our means. If we can connect people to their landscape, and support their healthy relationship to the land, we can hope to solve both global concerns as well as support the human community.