AN ACTION-RESEARCH PROJECT ON SOUTH PHILADELPHIA

COHABITATION STRATEGIES

THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA MURAL ARTS PROGRAM’S RESTORED SPACES INITIATIVE
PLAYGROUNDS FOR USEFUL KNOWLEDGE
AN ACTION-RESEARCH PROJECT ON SOUTH PHILADELPHIA

BY COHABITATION STRATEGIES
WITH THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA MURAL ARTS PROGRAM’S
RESTORED SPACES INITIATIVE
CURATED BY LUCIA SANDOZ
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CITY OF PHILADELPHIA MURAL ARTS PROGRAM
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Our work is also a complex journey that requires an investment of time that prioritizes people, and we are always striving to improve upon our processes. We were thrilled to receive a grant from The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage to work with curator Lucia Pessin and with Cohabitation Strategies (CoStra), a nonprofit collective that engages radical planning processes, prioritizing relationships to activate communities.

It has been a privilege and an extraordinary learning experience. Their work is done with discipline and integrity and helps us to re-think our role in communities and the ways we gather and share knowledge in an area marked by its diversity. CoStra works in ways that are radically different from the traditional relationships, garnering trust, gaining respect, and generating ideas. They have successfully woven together a large group of partners and collaborators, many of whom have never communicated or worked together, in order to re-imagine collectively the future of their community.

We are so pleased to have been a part of this partnership, and to watch the process transform into something vibrant and unexpected.

NOTES ON CHANGE
Lucia Pessin

Cohabitation Strategies (CoStra), itself constituted of diverse practitioners, chose to focus their project Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge in this area. Core members Lucia Babia and Emiliano Gandolfi are Italians living in Spain, while Gabriela Rendón and Miguel Roberto-Duran are Mexicans living in Brooklyn, and all are familiar with the process of migration. It seems in hindsight natural that they would feel most comfortable in a neighborhood identified with this phenomenon.

Thus, over the course of an intense year of learning and interaction, South Philadelphia has slowly come into focus as the subject of this complex urban action-research project. Framed ambitiously between a work of social justice engaged public art and an urban research report, this project is meant to provide new tools for future artistic and environmental projects in the area produced by the Restored Spaces Initiative of the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program.

Created and organized in collaboration with Shari Hersh, Restored Spaces’ tireless and incisive director, Playgrounds has been demanding, confusing, and frustrating, and also generative, unspoken, and enlightening. As curator for this still ongoing process, the first challenge I have faced is one of representation. What exactly is Cohabitation Strategies? How can this collective help generate new models of inclusion and social participation for Restored Spaces? To answer questions it is useful to remember CoStra’s origins. Founded in 2008 in response to the financial crisis, this cooperative of socio-spatial research—as they describe themselves—works across the disciplines of planning, urban theory, art, and activism and consciously frames its work as a Marxist critique of the pressures and exploitation of financial capitalism on urban centers. CoSira contends that, rather than addressing the desires and needs of its inhabitants, capital functions to transform cities into commodities for speculation. Their collective’s purpose is to investigate and elucidate the concept of the “right to the city” as developed by Henry Lefebvre in 1968, and more recently by David Harvey who writes, “the right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to project themselves into a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.”

In this statement Harvey poetically draws the limits of our freedoms in terms of defining the city, and challenges us to reclaim our right to create our environment as we do ourselves. By linking the self with the city, Harvey opens a space for everyone to reflect what it might be. CoSira’s approach takes on this challenge, and its impetus for change, by enmeshing four parallel tactics with unspoken results. First, through artist Lucia Babia’s community-based work, they embed themselves in existing social networks to gain trust from individuals and communities and understand the conditions of a place from within. After closely observing Lucia at work for the better part of a year, I believe

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"David Harvey, "The Right to the City," pp. 44-55."
her methodology is solely based on a model of community organizing or social work, and actually engages through empathy and connection, identification, intuition, and friendship, rather than by appealing to the promise of "help" too often implicit in the relationship between an external organizer or social worker and an under-represented community. As an Italian invited to work in Philadelphia, Lucia's idiosyncratic way of weaving fine threads of solidarity has resulted in a firm and hopefully resilient social network that is for her a "relational object" of her own and her artistic form. Working closely with Enfriadora Candell and project assistant Beth Urschick, Lucia created a comprehensive and innovative program of public events at the project's South Philadelphia space to synthesize the social component of Playgrounds.

Second, Colbri's has consistently positioned its work as a mediator between urban planning theory and practice in the realm of academia and the communities it purports to address. Two of its members, Gabriela Rendón and Miguel Robles-Durán, are planners, and Gabriela in particular emphasizes quantitative analysis using traditional and non-traditional planning methodologies, and the developed research on ownership to map the invisible but progressive real estate speculation in the area. This is gathered in this report through textual analysis and maps created to give a bird's-eye view of South Philadelphia. One of our aims from the inception has been to deliver a document that can give Restored Spaces the information necessary to work long term in an area of the city. This report is that document. Lucia's on-the-ground social engagement provided the information necessary for Colbri's to suggest South Philadelphia, and specifically the seven adjacent neighborhoods that they call the "South Sixes," as the focus for their project and their recommended area for future Restored Spaces engagement. But Colbri's exhaustive analysis provides the external and more objective view of the area's inhabitants and the public policies that impact them.

The third element of Colbri's work is more speculative and seeks to provide practical solutions to endemic urban problems. In several previous projects they have proposed new systems to redress unyielding inequities, such as the "Biggest Housing Crisis in the Modern History of New York City," very early on in its research process. Colbri's distinctive and grounded development in South Philadelphia as a serious threat in a persistently under-favored community. This threatened the formation of a new prototype for the use of existing lots by creating a network of "linked Playgrounds.

Useful Knowledge" where South Philadelphia's diverse community members and organizations define the design and uses of these spaces, utilizing both the existing land forms and the hundreds of empty lots in the area to provide physical spaces where community voices can be heard through community ownership. In this year-long project's accelerated timeline, it has not been possible to fully explore this experimental proposal's viability with neighborhood participants; however, it is Miguel's testament that further developing such a groundwork system as public artwork can boldly push the boundary of the emerging notion of "useful" art into policy and urban planning.

The fourth element that makes Colbri's approach unique is perhaps best understood through Enfriadora, who provides a conceptual and critical framework for Colbri's projects, by exploring the discursive areas their work encompasses and establishing a strategic foundation that unites disparate approaches and points of view. In addition, he is often charged with defining the design elements, especially the built components, as an aspect of their practice that is carefully compared to symbiotic the "Cartagena" at the heart of the project and to delineate the existing imagery from the history of leftist and communist aesthetics.

Colbri's like other collectives operating in the field of art, utilizes aesthetics as an ability to create ambitious, multi-layered, and slippery projects that come in and out of artistic focus. They exercise the autonomy allowed artists within simultaneously articulating other disciplinary approaches to provide useful solutions grounded on more scientific and objective analysis of urban conditions intertwined with the artist's subjectivity. Their practice is extra-disciplinary in that it uses the means of the discipline to challenge the institutional sites within which it functions. Thus, while working in the academy and creating more concrete and established institutions, their work critiques these institutions, crossing through disciplines to another space, often founded on the utopic reimagining of realty that we trust art as a means to challenge. However, if we take a point of view where the "art" in this project is, I would say that it lies in the subtle forms of engagement that took place in a particular way but within a relatively short time frame from South Philadelphia to the United States. Created a migrant community with great influence, Africa, and a great desire to questions, together with those whom they encountered, the same goal.

It has become a trope in social practice to say that discourse itself is the medium, and that communities are the medium, and participation and engagement are the means. Yet, in both Colbri's projects, the category of "something remains hidden behind the façade of art: the institution that funds and organizes, brings artists together and, in the case of Mural Arts, public and private resources to an area through art. Restored Spaces project, with support of a PWSA Catalyst Grant. I first joined MAP in 2013 as cultural-in-residence, and this project, inspired by this program's dedication to creating infrastructural and environment, arts and culture projects in schools and community centers. I believe Restored Spaces can and should make more meaningful improvements in the urban fabric of the city. Yet, I also found that the project is a rare, rare kind of resilient and self-sustaining processes, future Restored Spaces projects need to emerge from the history of leftist and communist aesthetics, themselves, using grassroots research and exploratory cultural experiences to engage the interest, intensity, and challenges of people, rather than respecting policy and institutional priorities, while also cultivating the political leadership necessary for significant long-term change.

From its inception, my curatorial proposal was conceived as a tool for institutional learning and self-reflection—in other words, as a facilitator for change. I believe Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge has fulfilled that challenge and that the information and social networks created during this process promise to lead to more resilient, self-sustaining, and endogenous ways for the Restored Spaces Initiative to work with, and not only in, South Philadelphia, making more horizontal collaboration with its inhabitants possible while extending the considerable resources and expertise of Mural Arts to that community.

Thank you, Colbri, for accepting the invitation to participate in this project, which you have evolved well beyond my original idea, and for having the endurance to work through its trials.

In closing, I should say that none of this would have been possible without the seamless, patient, and deep commitment of Shari and her team, Juliette Ferrara and Margaret Kenney. Shari generously made available her knowledge of Philadelphia, enabling me to harness MAP's network of collaborators and peers; they organized every aspect of the project, from selecting the curators to accompanying events, aside from managing the behind-the-scenes impact that took place the bane of any artistic project. Together with MAP Director Anne Golden, Shari put her considerable knowledge and deep political connections at the service of this project. It has been a privilege to receive their trust. But I am grateful, above all, for their willingness to change.
INTRODUCTION

Cohabitation Strategies

Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge is an urban research and artistic intervention project in South Philadelphia that evolved from an invitation by curator Lucia Simonard to collaborate with project manager Shari Hersh and the Restored Spaces Initiative of the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program. Cohabitation Strategies (CoHStrS) was asked to create parameters for future artistic urban and infrastructural interventions by Restored Spaces that can lead to deeper, longer-term investment in the needs and geographies of specific communities. As a community-fed, process-based approach marks an evolution in the forms of participation and co-production historically deployed by Mural Arts that allows for a more sustained and resilient interaction by the Restored Spaces Initiative with a rapidly changing city. Therefore, our main goal has been to create an action platform for strategic socio-spatial interventions at the scale of the neighborhood that aim to reveal, produce, share, and politicize local knowledge in response to the contradictory and unjust realities of contemporary urbanization. Playgrounds seeks the medium- and long-term restructuring of physical spaces parallel to the promotion of new cultural, social, and economic dynamics, in order to produce more just and sustainable forms of collective inhabiting.

We have looked at the concept of playgrounds in the historical tradition of ludic imaginaries, drawing on examples such as Charles Fourier’s 19th century utopian experiments with playful alternatives to regular work; the Dadaists’ insistent desire to undermine the oppressive structures of social order through play; the Situationists’ playful protests against modern bureaucracy’s alienating forms of urbanization; Constant Nieuwenhuys’ anti-capitalist urban visions for the Homo Ludens, or man at play; Henri Lefebvre’s critique of the persistent production of urban everydayness (beredem) in confrontation with the unfulfilled vocal promises of more free time, leisure, and play; Alva van Eyck’s vision for giving urban spaces to civic imagination in the more than 700 playgrounds that he designed; as well as empires of collective protest and their capacity to interrupt daily life and produce new political subjectivities through playful confrontations in urban spaces.

In line with these imaginaries, we believe that urban play can break the ordinary into moments of shared collectivity, enabling participants to imagine a radically different urban daily life. Urban play is not about “games”; repetitive activities where strict rules are set and followed with the end goal of winning. On the contrary, urban play is a source of original, unrestricted, and dynamic “useful knowledge,” where the core reward becomes the evolution of the activity itself, as it begins in a socio-spatial configuration that is ever evolving. In Section 5, Cohabitation Strategies seeks to entries and support neighborhood organizations, community elders, and inhabitants to become urban players in the production of new neighborhood spaces. Taking this into consideration, one of our proposals is that by tapping into the advantages of the hundreds of vacant lots and underutilized spaces in South Philadelphia and strategically developing them, the project can support collective programs that challenge conflict within the neighborhood while staging productive social confrontation.

The concept of “useful knowledge” has allowed us to gather a catalogue of the diverse skills, experiences, and insights of various civic organizations and citizens involved with the project. We understand “useful knowledge” as forms of understanding, skills, and experience that can be placed at the service of social emancipation, justice, and equality in our daily lives. It is mundane, assumable knowledge, which can be culturally specific but can also be translated across social, economic, and ethnic divides. A central component of our project is a catalogue of “useful knowledge” that has been gathered through collaborative play with neighbors and organizations in workshops, events, artistic performances, and actions.

After months of quantitative and qualitative research on Philadelphia’s many neighborhoods, we decided to pilot a project based on qualitative and action research combined with activities and actions out of a hub space at 612 Jackson Street in Philadelphia that operated from June to November 2013. Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge focuses on an area of South Philadelphia east of Broad Street, in which we have come to call “the South Seven,” which comprises seven interconnected neighborhoods—Passyunk Square, East Passyunk, Dickerson Narrows, Greenwich, Passaport, Lower Moyamensing, and Whittier. Our investigation has shown that this area possesses many attributes that we believe are important for this project’s success. According to the South Seven, the area’s large concentration of vacant land; its medium-term vulnerability towards structured gentrification; the wide ethnic diversity of its inhabitants; and the large number of small, micro entrepreneurs and economies operating in the area, which are an immense reservoir of not yet unified useful knowledge. The highly active heterogeneous groups that call South Philadelphia home have become the main co-creators of Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge. They have worked with us to generate transformative links within the community by sharing culturally and organizationally specific useful knowledge within a context that encourages urban play and visionary imagination over profit and competition. To this end, Playgrounds builds upon the following available resources and conditions:

1. The universe of useful knowledge that numerous civic organizations, residents, and non-profit entities hold and are ready to share.
2. The political, artistic, logistical assets and experience that Mural Arts and its Restored Spaces Initiative bring as the project’s partners and co-organizers.
3. The economic and political support of diverse organizations such as The Pew Charitable Trust, the Department of Parks and Recreation, the city, the state, and the federal government.
4. The cultural support of diverse local and non-local artists and cultural producers.
5. The accessibility of public land currently under the jurisdiction of the newly formed Philadelphia Land Bank Initiative.
6. The urgent need for urban play.
COHABITATION STRATEGIES’ ACTION-RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

Cohabitation Strategies is a cooperative primarily pursuing sociospatial investigations that lead to transformative projects and actions. The aim of the cooperative is three-fold:

1. Facilitating the production and exchange of scientific and popular knowledge through transdisciplinary research methods.
2. Understanding and disseminating complex urban processes through collective practices and the development of pedagogical instruments.
3. Responding to the conditions of urban decline, inequality, and segregation via the design of strategic processes and urban interventions.

The cooperative’s co-founders, Lucia Rubina, Emiliano Garetti, Gabriela Rendón, and Miguel Robles-Esparza, have expertise in architectural design, urban theory, spatial planning and strategy, curatorial practice, and cultural and art production. This core team expands to include collaborators with knowledge in other fields such as political economy, geography, anthropology, ethnography, sociology, environmental sciences, and other areas where a project demands additional perspectives. Cohabitation Strategies does not have a fixed center of operation because its research and working structures are participatory. A working space is typically established in the investigation area in order to work collaboratively with residents as well as public and private institutions involved in the area’s social, economic, and physical development.

Cohabitation Strategies’ research framework seeks an urban understanding at both macro and micro scales through strategic and action research. These macro and micro inquiry components are interconnected and feed each other. Our research goal is to generate a thorough diagnosis of areas by those who live and work there, with the assistance of innovative tools. The macro level of our research is centered on scientific knowledge—academic understanding produced through transdisciplinary and dialectic research studies that use quantitative and qualitative research methods. The micro inquiry component, on the other hand, focuses on popular knowledge and wisdom from the local community, which is mostly revealed through local initiatives and projects using creative participatory research tools and methods. The proposed dialectical research framework is key to combining theoretical and popular knowledge to bridge the divide between conceptual and empirical understandings of urban dynamics in transformative projects that involve the public.

The action-research framework developed for Playgrounds for Utter Knowledge is introduced first, including its different phases, methods, and participants, to provide an understanding of this twelve-month project. Later, each phase will be described thoroughly, including outcomes. The research process comprises six interrelated research components that do not follow a strict sequence. Due to the complexity of action-research, most of these processes develop in parallel.

1. PRELIMINARY RESEARCH CITYWIDE QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

The first research phase focused on targeted qualitative and quantitative investigations both to construct a preliminary understanding of Philadelphia’s socio-spatial dynamics and to select potential locations for intervention by anticipating specific areas’ urgency and needs for transformation.

These two goals were achieved using common quantitative and qualitative research methods. Quantitative research was conducted from October to December 2014. Census data and key spatial data was from public and private libraries.
were used to measure and visualize the distribution of specific social, economic, and spatial conditions. We initially looked at the city in terms of districts as defined by the Philadelphia City Planning Commission.

**2. INTERVENTION AREA: SITE SELECTION PARAMETERS AND THE SOUTH SEVEN AREA**

An area of eastern South Philadelphia that we named the South Sevens due to the fact that it comprises seven neighborhoods, was selected as the focus area for this action-research project. From January to March 2015, we considered fifteen parameters in our site selection, which included: (1) density, ethnic diversity, localized organizational capacity, neighborhood vitality, gentrification, new organization in the area, and the active involvement of the Mental Arts Program in the area.

**3. EXPLORING LOCAL NEEDS, AGENCY PRACTICES, AND ASSETS IN THE SOUTH SEVEN**

A more focused urban investigation began once the area of intervention was strategically selected. A second residency, which took place during the last two weeks of March 2015, marked the onset of this research phase, which lasted until June 2015. During this period, the work focused on building relationships with residents, community members, and local neighborhood organizations, as well as pursuing local narratives to learn about social, economic, environmental, and political issues, as well as latent threats. We had two main tasks: first, understanding local agency, practices, and assets—determining the nature of existing issues and latent threats. These two ambitious lines of research were developed simultaneously using different research methods, including ethnographic techniques with participant observation, key informant interviews, and other forms of fieldwork. We also conducted a survey of the neighborhoods, including key informant interviews. Research included structured, semi-structured, and informal interviews, as well as informal interactions with community members and leaders. This fieldwork was complemented with secondary research, spatial analysis, and other urban investigations. Research on real estate trends, ownership changes, local economies, and community gardens was conducted in correlation and comparison to the interviews.

In order to understand community needs, agency, and assets, a number of aspects were investigated: (1) community needs, services and convergence; (2) local practices and cultural values; and (3) territorial assets and potentials. We engaged with local residents to participate in the study.

**4. AUTO-DIAGNOSIS: CURRENT ISSUES AND LATENT THREATS IN THE SOUTH SEVEN**

While building relationships, we had the chance to discover community agencies, local initiatives, and territorial assets. The fieldwork research and our committee meetings at the hub on Jackson Street revealed several local narratives and concerns that were shared with us. The main themes include the following:

1. Lack of opportunities: scarcity of conditions for the emergence of new businesses
2. Lack of communication among communities: the existence of cultural barriers and need for public space
3. Lack of sense of ownership: social insecurity and litter in the streets
4. Lack of resources: disinvestment in facilities and services
5. Lack of power: voting abstention

and disappointment related to the neighborhood's future development.

We diagnosed current issues and latent threats in the South Seven through personal accounts collected from March to June 2015 that were corroborated during the following research phase, during which we fostered awareness of the issues to help develop visions to respond to such conditions and risks.

**5. PROJECT DEFINITION: PLAYGROUNDS FOR USEFUL KNOWLEDGE**

Nurturing the scientific and popular knowledge produced over the previous research phases enabled us to define the project and design an operational framework for the long-term engagement of the Restored Spaces Initiative in South Philadelphia. The knowledge produced up to this point allowed the following (in no particular order):

1. To identify and define a network of governmental and non-governmental institutions, local associations, grass-roots groups, and citizens that can become project partners and build up the ongoing action research
2. To define potential spaces to be activated as locations for future Restored Spaces projects, and to share and transfer priorities and solutions to generate a sustainable and just neighborhood through the reproduction of useful knowledge. We envisioned a neighborhood hub to create a neutral and safe space where community members could feel free to express themselves despite differences in background, race, and citizenship status.
3. To develop tools and processes created to foster sustainable and equitable participation and to engage community members and leaders in the subsequent project steps. These tools and processes include participatory games, participatory performances, neighborhood committees,
neighbourhood assemblies, workshops, and a public festival.

to define an overall engagement framework to mobilize physical, economic, and social aspects, from the grassroots up and from the parishioner in. These may include, without being limited to, processes for trans-generational production/exchange of local knowledge, collective production of local economic activities; appropriation and management of underutilized public and private spaces; and production of alternative community-controlled models of development to provide new recreational, living, working, and/or learning spaces for the community.

6. CREATING AWARENESS AND PRIORITIZING NEEDS: ACTIVATING LAND, ENGAGING CITIZENSHIP, AND MOBILIZING PEOPLE

From May through September 2015, Dusable for Useful Knowledge occupied a vacant lot at 622 Jackson Street, creating a temporary public art space where the demands of daily life were interrupted through play to inspire new spatial imaginaries and political subjectivities. Working in close collaboration with a variety of neighborhood partners, Cahill and Mabry modeled the creation of a temporary community space as a participatory pilot project that activities were ways of critically thinking about local neighborhood issues that were then continued in small committees. Although each committee had a different focus, cultural and economic—of all the conversations centered on issues related to safety, gentrification, and neighborhood issues, among other issues.

The useful knowledge disseminated and discussed in Action 1 was transformed into shared visions in Action 2: A Space for Urban Reappropriation, which took place on July 18. While committees were convened during the first meeting to address issues related to South Seven's space, economy, and housing, the committees met during the second meeting to discuss the possibility of working together towards a single larger event that could bring the various community organizations and disparate cultural groups together in pursuit of a common goal. The use and rehabilitation of SHF's Square became a focus, and the committees discussed various ways to address persistent neighborhood problems such as litter through the creation of a "Trash Academy." The focus emerged from the Urban Reappropriation meeting was to work on a "night market" as an event to engage public attention on the area's emergent shadow economies. However, it was clear that there was too little time to work on such an ambitious aim, and during the planning process, the night market evolved into a collaborative festival that could lay the foundation for more structured strategies for neighborhood interventions.

This final action was always intended as the largest in ambition and scope. Yet the strength of community representatives during Action 2 raised the bar to develop a public event in Mifflin Square that included the efforts of an extensive number of civic organizations and individuals. Action 3 (intended for Mifflin Square Alliance Festival, a public event with a focus on cultural exchange, communal activities, and knowledge sharing). The general feeling of the committees was to try to find the idea that in an area where the fragmentation of social space has been exacerbated by recent events, the possibility of becoming a theater of true social cohesion: a festival could become the right occasion for working collectively on a common goal, while testing the possibilities of cooperation and building a common vision for the development of the area. The Mifflin Square Alliance Festival was organized in three programs representing some of the most relevant themes that emerged from the committee meetings. The central part of the festival consisted of a program called Powerhouse, a stage on which performance, music, dance, and storytelling could represent the area's diversity and become the base for discussions about the neighborhood's development. Another important aspect of the festival was the Useful Knowledge Working Group, local initiatives that could showcase their programs and ideas.

Union became the area for youth recreation activities. All these activities came together with a focus on the role of local foods through the establishment of an extensive public area and an art installation that represented the diversity of the neighborhood through a variety of fairs and events coming together in a communal circle.

This project has involved work with committees focused on different aspects, social, spatial, and economical, that formed at the first session and worked over a period of three months, addressing local needs, priorities, and visions. It is important to mention that the project's activities—actions, community meetings, and informal gatherings—were facilitated by members of CoHabitation Strategies but entirely led by community members and leaders. The neighborhood had utilized creative tools, communication tools, awareness, and engagement. One main collaborator, Philadelphia Theatre of the Oppressed, gave life to the first Playground of Useful Knowledge. Through forum theatre, participatory performances, community gatherings, interactive games, and other socially engaged artistic activities, community stakeholders enjoyed themselves while learning about important issues facing their community and communiting localized solutions.

This report provides a detailed account of the different research phases, including aims and outcomes. This dossier is meant to be used by the Restored Spaces Initiative and future artistic collaborators, working in South Philadelphia and involved in long-term addressing the needs and aspirations of its inhabitants. Therefore, this report is conceived as a tool for artists, activists, local officials, and community stakeholders in the social, economic, and spatial development of the South Seven.
1. CITYWIDE QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AND ANALYSIS

Combining Strategies’ initial introduction to the City of Philadelphia was unusual one: it took place through visualization and analysis of a series of maps we produced in order both to generate a preliminary understanding of the city’s social, economic, and urban challenges and to prepare for a productive first residency. This first residency in November 2015 was a challenge, since its ultimate goal was the selection and investigation of a number of potential localities where we could eventually conduct participatory action research, envision a long-term project, and promote a number of community-based interventions for the coming years. The combination of quantitative and qualitative research was key for this endeavor.

This section describes the qualitative and quantitative research and outlines their results. The quantitative research was conducted using census data, geospatial data from different public and private digital libraries, and spatial analysis, while the qualitative research was conducted mainly through interviews, spatial analysis, and participant observation. Additionally, we conducted research through use of secondary source research to learn about current city plans, initiatives, and instruments that the city is promoting for urban and housing development.

To select our area of interest, we used the district axes as defined by the Philadelphia City Planning Commission’s Philadelphia 2035 Plan.

1.1 PHILADELPHIA BY THE NUMBERS

This section is the result of a two-month citywide quantitative investigation. The analysis of targeted census data and its spatial distribution exposes important challenges facing the city and specific districts. Selected key data sets, taken from the Pennsylvania Spatial Data Access as well as other public and private digital libraries, enabled a thorough analysis of factors related to Philadelphia’s people, economy, and built environment. By crossing a number of data sets, we generated citywide visualizations that revealed three key areas of interest defined during this preliminary work. These areas include the Lower North, West, and South districts (Figure 1.1.1).

PEOPLE

A study of population figures reveals that Philadelphia, unlike most post-industrial American cities, has a growing population, having experienced 2.2% growth from 2010 to 2014. Out of the city’s 1,550,246 inhabitants, 23.2% are under 18, and only 12.4% are over 65 years old. Therefore, Philadelphia is a young city, but is growing slowly but steadily (US Census Bureau 2015).

Philadelphia contains almost the same percentage of African-American (41.2%) and white inhabitants (45.5%), with the Latino population comprising the third largest demographic (13.3%). The Latino population is rapidly growing, with a 45% increase from 2000 to 2010 (US Census Bureau 2000, 2010). Like most North American cities with diverse populations, Philadelphia is remarkably spatially segregated in terms of race and income level.

By mapping the spatial distribution of race and income, we identified three city areas where spatial segregation is particularly stark. The first such area is the Lower North District, where both African-American and Latino populations are concentrated...
LATINO POPULATION

In a streamer-bed locality (see figures 1.1, 1.2, and 1.3). Compared with the rest of the city, the Lower North's income level is extremely low (see Figure 1.1). This area has been home to Latino families since they first settled in the city, and is historically seen as a place of struggle with strong organized efforts aimed at creating a sense of community to help fight against systemic problems.

The second area identified is the West District, where larger concentrations of African Americans were identified. This area seems more segregated in terms of race but less in terms of income level, making it more consolidated and stable (see figures 1.2.1 and 1.2.2).

The third area, the South District, is the most interesting for our purposes, as it is home to a remarkable concentration of immigrants, foreign-born residents, and newcomers from diverse parts of the world (see Figure 1.1). In this neighborhood, segregation is low in terms of race, since whites, African Americans, Latinos, and an increasing number of Asians live side by side. However, spatial segregation in terms of income level can be traced in the district's central area (see Figure 1.1.5). The South District, originally populated by Irish and Italian families, has changed over the years with an influx of Latino and Asian families as well as other minority groups. Undocumented Mexicans and refugees from South Asia make up two new key ethnic groups (see figures 1.1.3 and 1.1.5). The remainder of the population is composed of African Americans in the district's western area and whites in its northern area near Center City, although this demographic is further spread across the southern neighborhood (see Figure 1.1.4).

According to US Census data, 88.7% of Philadelphia's population over 25 years old has a high school degree or higher, and 37.1% has a bachelor's degree or higher. The spatial distribution of people with at least a bachelor's degree reveals a clear correlation between income and education levels in the Lower North, West, and South Districts (see figure 1.1.6).
ECONOMY

This section looks at Philadelphia industry and employment data in order to gain an understanding of the local economic realities of the city’s inhabitants.

Philadelphians are employed mostly in four main industries: 30.5% work in educational services, and health care and social assistance; 11.4% in professional, scientific, and management, and administrative and waste management services; 10.4% in retail trade; and 9.7% in arts, entertainment and recreation. The rest of the employed population works in the other nine industries that are identified in the city, including agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting; and mining (9.2%); construction (4.0%); manufacturing (6.9%); wholesale trade (21.4%); transportation and warehousing, and utilities (5.3%); information (2.9%), finance and insurance, and real estate and rental and leasing (6.3%); public administration (6.4%); and other services (4.3%) (U.S. Census 2013).

According to the US Census Bureau (2013), over 15.7% of Philadelphia’s population works in management, business, science and arts; 24.5% in trade; 15.4% in service; 16.8% in production, transportation, and material moving; and 5.8% in fields related to natural resources, construction, and maintenance.

Only 3.5% of the city’s entire employed population is self-employed. The great majority of workers, 53.7%, are private wage and salary workers, and 13.7% of employed city residents are government workers. This research also reveals that over 15% percent of the labor force is unemployed (see figure 1.1.3) and that the city’s median annual income is extremely low ($37,392) compared to the state ($52,344) and national ($51,944) median incomes (see figure 1.1.7).

Additionally, from 2009-2013, an average of 26% of all residents lived below the poverty line (U.S. Census 2013) (see figure 1.1.2).

Poverty is not an isolated variable, and an understanding of poverty requires investigation of...
related conditions such as crime, unemployment, and other parameters measuring social issues (see Figure 1.1.3 and 1.1.4). The North and West Districts are some of Philadelphia’s poorest inner city areas with low wages, high unemployment, a lack of economic stability, and a high rate of health and mental health problems. These characteristics are accompanied by high crime rates and drug-related incidents. In the South District, lower (10-20% of the population) live under the poverty line than in the North and West Districts (20-30% of the population). However, unemployment is high in the South District, and immigrants, particularly undocumented ones, lack access to welfare. Thus, though unemployment appears to be a structural issue in all three areas, Lower North and West District residents have better public assistance than those in the South District, mainly due to citizenship status.

Looking at the distributions of race, median income, poverty, education, occupation, unemployment, and other key data sets, the South District became an area of particular interest for the project. This area, which faces complex and interrelated issues, has been further investigated through interviews.

**BUILT ENVIRONMENT**

In Philadelphia, owner-occupied housing makes up 53.3% of all occupied housing units. Owner- and renter-occupied housing are spread evenly across the city (see Figures 1.1.1 and 1.1.2). Spatial analysis revealed that owner-occupied housing is common even in districts with a high percentage of poverty.

The median housing value is $143,096, and the median gross rent is $953. When analyzing this data against the local median household income ($37,192/year), the median gross rent, and the monthly owner costs ($1,240), the city’s unaffordability is exposed (US Census Bureau 2011). This conclusion is based on the standard guideline for housing affordability, which requires housing expenditure not to exceed 30% of the household’s income.
The Philadelphia Housing Authority is the largest landlord in Pennsylvania. It provides 81,000 people with affordable housing in over 50 developments, mainly located in the city’s northern, southern, and western areas.

The housing market in the South District is in flux, with the most expensive properties in the city located to the area’s north and gradually affecting property values further south within the district. Median home values in and around Center City are over $500,000, and such costs are spreading to the South District’s northern area, which combines renters- and owner-occupied housing (see Figure 3.2.3). Understanding the South District’s ownership structure is important, as speculation is increasing in this area, thus affecting low-income renters and long-standing community members who have begun to be pushed out by high prices and rentals. Though informal encounters with community members we learned that Mexicans and other Hispanic groups have already been displaced further South.

The large number of vacant lots located in the South District suggests that there is significant opportunity for future development (see Figure 3.2.1). There are already a substantial number of new buildings in the district’s northern area that are profiting from proximity to Center City and the surrounding thriving neighborhoods. As the district experiences rapid change, attention must be paid to its existing communities.
1.2 AREAS OF INTEREST: WEST, NORTH AND SOUTH PHILADELPHIA

After considering the city’s overall socio-spatial structure, we focused on determining which specific areas could be more interesting as an experiential ground for a long-term cultural research project. We analyzed different areas with a particular focus on districts with inhabitants living partially under the poverty line. After a first analysis, we detected three neighborhood areas that could offer the needed social sustainability for guaranteeing some form of endurance for the project.

The three areas that gained our interest were Norris Square and its surroundings in the Lower North District, the east side of the South District, and a large portion of the West District (see Figures 1.2.1, 1.2.2, and 1.2.3). In contrast with the first two areas, it seemed more accurate to define a focal point in the West District.

DEFINITION OF AN AREA

The definition of these three areas led us to conduct a preliminary analysis based on urban characteristics and an ethnographic study of local perceptions. On one side we conducted extensive research on demographic, social, economic, and spatial conditions, on the other we achieved a fuller understanding of city dynamics through interviews with local stakeholders, residents, social workers, and other citizens we define as “local experts”: people who have a partial understanding of the forces molding their neighborhood, but who have much better perception, at the street level, of each community and even household’s local tensions and sensibilities. The superimposition of these two perspectives provided us with a wider angle of observation, at times highlighting the contradictions between an eminently professional understanding of the city and more subjective perceptions of how things truly work.
In fact, each of the three defined areas is a good potential site for intervention; however, we attempted to prioritize the work and focus it within an area where we think the conditions exist for a sustainable intervention in the project’s limited available timeframe.

What became clear during our conversations to define the area of focus was that each of the three observed areas required a completely different intervention strategy. Our priority was to determine the most urgent topics the project could address and each area’s latent potentials. To address the most urgent topics means to understand what are the underlying forces at play and the municipality’s plans, and what directions in real-estate market development heading, what are the environmental conditions, and other parameters.

Our approach to determining a neighborhood’s “latent potentials” was more subtle but just as important, as it indicates which topics, concerns, and issues can emerge from the communities with whom we will be working. Often, identifying latent potentials is a sensitive topic, as it leads to a more intimate conversation about what unspoken cultural baggage and community carries, its members’ interests and passions, and in the case of immigrants, their background in their native countries, etc.

These qualitative and quantitative forms of urban research led us to determine a specific area of the South District as the project’s space of operation. At the moment, the area we selected does not have a specific official denomination, but it is commonly known as the east side of the South District or the area east of South Broad Street (see Figure 126). This part of South Philadelphia is evidently going through transformation, but has not received attention from large developers comparable to that in neighborhoods west of South Broad Street such as Point Breeze.

We believe such conditions allow us to anticipate the risk of eviction that the changing urban dynamics towards gentrification usually lead to.
1.3 PUBLIC CITY PLANS, INITIATIVES, AND INSTRUMENTS FOSTERING URBAN RESTRUCTURING

Housing development, urban revitalization, and economic and community development have long been coveted in Philadelphia. Since private investment is rare in most cities that have experienced severe declines—whether due to decentralization, depopulation, depression, decline, or all of the above—governmental institutions, at different levels, have created and implemented policies, programs, and tools to foster development in accordance with local priorities and needs. As part of this research, we have studied a number of these instruments, especially those directly or indirectly affecting the project's area of interest: the eastern side of the South District.

We learned that a number of these efforts have focused on economic and community development and the rehabilitation of vacant and derelict properties in blighted and post-industrial neighborhoods, especially those located in the southern and western parts of the city, as well as along the river front. Figure 1.3. We investigated some of the area-based initiatives, including the Improvement Zones, Enterprise Zones, and Redevelopment Certified Zones, and discovered that their outcomes are still uncertain. Long-term transformations in some zones are yet to be seen, even after millions of federal dollars have been poured into some of these areas. We also learned that only one of these area-based initiatives addresses the project's area of interest in the South District. City plans, district plans, and other targeted initiatives were also examined. Those contributing to development in the project's area of interest are described below.

PHILADELPHIA CITY PLANS

There are a significant number of plans that the city has formulated and implemented over the years with the assistance of City Council members, the Philadelphia City Planning Commission, community development corporations, community-based organizations, local experts, community stakeholders, and citizens. The following outlines some current key plans:

**PHILADELPHIA 2035**

This is a two-phase comprehensive plan developed by the Philadelphia City Planning Commission (PCPC). It is intended as a blueprint for physical development in the city, using a number of public policies and instruments. The plan provides recommendations at both the city and district levels. The first phase is the City-wide Vision, which forecasts an additional 100,000 residents and 40,000 jobs in the city by 2035. The plan has three future-looking themes: Thrive, Connect, and Renew. Each theme addresses different topics and goals. “Thrive” looks at neighborhoods, economic development, and land management, “Connect” addresses transportation and utilities, “Renew” focuses on open space, environmental resources, historic preservation, and the public realm.

**South District Plan**

This plan officially began in September 2014, one month before we started our investigation. The planning team organized two public meetings where residents were invited to participate and were encouraged to get involved in shaping the district's development. The plan's development process initially seemed like an opportunity for this project, but then we realized that the planning process was quite accelerated. We were present at the two public meetings. Additionally, as we became more and more interested in working in this district, we interviewed Nicole Oztener, the South District Planning Team’s project manager. In the preliminary reports of those meetings, the eastern area of the South District was barely addressed. Colstro asked Oztener if the area’s minority groups had participated in the public meetings or if they were contacted to have an individual voice in the plan. The project manager informed us that the main local groups were invited but didn’t attend, and were contacted afterwards but without much result. She acknowledged that it was difficult to yet minority groups involved.

The PCPC’s analysis and recommendations were published in April 2015, and soon after, in June 2015, the South District plan was approved. The plan’s focus areas addressed for investment and improvements are along South Broad Street.
Street, Point Breeze Avenue, and the complex municipal located in East Passyunk.


Coverta studied the plan’s analysis and recommendations according to different themes: Thrive, Connect, and Renew. Each theme addresses a number of aspects. Outlined below are only those that directly relate to the project’s aim and the issues and threats identified during the action-research portion of our investigation in eastern South Philadelphia.

** NEIGHBORHOOD CENTERS**

The plan addresses the 29 commercial corridors and centers located in the South District. It states that public-private cooperation is needed in commercial corridors with high vacancy rates and proposes the organization and creation of business associations and business improvement districts (BIDs) and designates an executive coordinator. The plan recommends commercial zoning to support growth of existing pedestrian corridors in neighborhoods and walk-oriented corridors along the edges of the district. Additionally, the plan proposes corridor management programs and sidewalk and streetscape improvements along pedestrian corridors, including South 7th Street and East Passyunk Avenue, which are identified as some of the area’s main business corridors (see figure 6-5.1). The plan describes three financial assistance programs for commercial corridors: the Storefront Improvement Program, Javion, and the Merchant’s Fund.

** HOUSING**

The PCPC’s recommendations are to downzone residential blocks where single-family use is dominant to promote conversion to multi-family units, especially along smaller streets. Increasing the supply of affordable housing by redeveloping obsolete institutional and industrial buildings and using city inventory land is another recommendation. The discouraged sale of public land through the Land Bank would be required (see Land Bank on page 34). The final recommendation is the conversion of the parking facades at South 12th and Jackson Streets from industrial to residential to encourage reuse. The main transit streets and avenues are addressed for rezoning and development of multi-family housing, including Grays Avenue in eastern South Philadelphia.

** INSTITUTIONAL AND INDUSTRIAL BUILDINGS**

The plan addresses the 29 commercial corridors and centers located in the South District. It states that public-private cooperation is needed in commercial corridors with high vacancy rates and proposes the organization and creation of business associations and business improvement districts (BIDs) and designates an executive coordinator. The plan recommends commercial zoning to support growth of existing pedestrian corridors in neighborhoods and walk-oriented corridors along the edges of the district. Additionally, the plan proposes corridor management programs and sidewalk and streetscape improvements along pedestrian corridors, including South 7th Street and East Passyunk Avenue, which are identified as some of the area’s main business corridors (see figure 6-5.1). The plan describes three financial assistance programs for commercial corridors: the Storefront Improvement Program, Javion, and the Merchant’s Fund.

** PUBLIC REALM**

The plan addresses the three main diagonal avenues—Point Breeze, Passyunk, and Moyamensing— that cut across the grid of the district, creating dynamic spaces and providing room for commercial corridors. The recommendations include the creation and enhancement of pedestrian spaces to support public use and increase pedestrian safety in high-traffic areas, the creation of gateways to demarcate commercial corridors, and beautification and safety improvements beneath major transportation infrastructure. Specific areas are addressed outside the scope of the project’s area of interest, such as Broad Street, Washington Avenue, and Moyamensing Avenue between Washington Avenue and Greenwich Street.

** OPEN SPACE**

The recommendations for recreation centers and parks include improving greenways, and activating spaces currently in need. Within the project’s area of interest, Grays Square and Weisberg Park have been prioritized for investment. The first has been prioritized because of its need for repair, and the second for greening. The final recommendation is the greenew of the park.

** ENVIRONMENTAL RESOURCES**

The plan includes the building of green infrastructure at public facilities, the expansion of stormwater management to reduce runoff and flooding, the establishment of wetland parks, the planting of trees to improve green cover and improve air quality, and the preservation of established community gardens on public and privately-owned land through ownership transfer to the city through the Neighborhood Greenways and Parks and Recreation. The plan builds upon the goals set in the Philadelphia Greenworks and Green Plan, which will be outlined below.
GREEN CITY PLANS
The City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program’s Restored Spaces Initiative is aimed at aligning the overlapping goals of the City of Philadelphia’s greenways plan in several ways. The City of Philadelphia has developed a number of plans and policy initiatives to continue developing ways to improve the city. These plans include Greensworks Philadelphia, 2009; Mayor’s Office of Sustainability, Green City, Clean Waters, 2009; Philadelphia Water Department, Green Plan Philadelphia, 2000; Office of the Managing Director, Green 2015, 2010; Philadelphia Parks and Recreation; Philadelphia 2035: A Comprehensive Plan, 2011; City Planning Commission, and Philadelphia Trails Master Plan, 2013, City Planning Commission.

The City of Philadelphia can, and in some cases does, work on building a sustainable urban environment hand-in-hand with the Restored Spaces Initiative. Some goals that can be collectively addressed includes building a greener stormwater infrastructure system, improving access to green infrastructure and increasing the number of residents within walking distance of public green space, and reducing vacancies through transforming vacant lots into community resources.

The Philadelphia Water Department plans to implement incentives for a green stormwater infrastructure system that would address the overflow sewer system (Philadelphia Parks and Recreation 2010). As highlighted in the Green 2015 Report (2010), this provides the opportunity to alter the Green 2015 goal of equal access to parks with a site’s environmental performance when identifying future sites for city park space. Here the urban environment can be improved by connecting park access with stormwater management. Another productive, efficient, and sustainable way of implementing these goals can be addressed includes identifying existing public resources such as vacant rail corridors, recreation centers, and underused Philadelphia Parks and Recreation (PFR) sites such as underused public land and schoolyards. These sites can be easily transformed into public green spaces useful for community access to Philadelphia and particularly for those in South Philadelphia, which has the highest population density and lowest access to green space. As described in the Green 2015 Report, the Department of Public Property has stated that it welcomes serious inquiries from city agencies and members of the public who wish to convert vacant parcels under its jurisdiction into productive uses for the city.

As drawing on these shared goals, Restored Spaces works where there is momentum for varied improvements, including new or underused stormwater infrastructure, schoolyards, green spaces, and public art. This work serves multiple purposes to address the goals outlined above. First, by creating environmental art, Restored Spaces directly affects the environment. Second, highlighting sites of the main issues and targets within Philadelphia’s greening plan can generate greater public awareness and engagement around green initiatives. Third, through the use of socially-engaged public art as a platform, Restored Spaces connects to diverse partners to harness the capacity of a broad spectrum of local stakeholders to share the responsibility for driving neighborhood change.

One of Green 2015’s primary aims is finding opportunity sites for new city park space in areas where people lack green space within a half-mile of their homes. The area with the highest population density and lowest access to green space is South Philadelphia.

An area of work is ongoing with the Department of Public Health to create new fitness programs and install exercise equipment in recreation centers citywide. This is an initiative already underway with other key sites for implementation in South Philadelphia. Recreation Centers and underused OPPR Opportunity Sites include: Tolentine Community Center, 1023 Mifflin Street, 0.72 acres; Burke Playground, 30th St. and Jackson Streets, 0.74 acres; Ford PAL Recreation Center, Mercy Street between South 6th and 7th Streets, 0.6 acres; Nitoro Rimi, Frost and Washington Streets, 2.3 acres.

OPPORTUNITY SITES FOR GREENER SPACES

- South Seventh
  - Parks
  - Recreational Centers and Underused Opportunity Sites
  - Opportunity to convert existing underused public land
  - Schoolyards

1. Tolentine Community Center
2. Klise Rink
3. Ford PAL Recreation Center
4. Burke Playground
5. South Philadelphia High School
6. Southwark School
7. South Philadelphia High School
8. Broad Street and Snyder Avenue
9. 3117 South Columbus Boulevard

As mentioned above, the Department of Public Property will continue to receive inquiries from city agencies and members of the public who wish to convert vacant parcels under its jurisdiction into productive uses for the city. Here lies another opportunity area, with the following underused public land with potential to be transformed into green space for the South Philadelphia community:

- Broad Street Avenue:
  - 1117 South Columbus Boulevard, 29.3 acres
  - Schoolyards include: South Philadelphia High School, Broad Street Avenue, 2.5 acres; South School, Nineteenth Street and Mifflin Street, 1.2 acres; Edward Dahl School, Streets, 0.37 acres (see figure 1.2.2)

INDEPENDENT COMMUNITY-BASED PLANS

Independent Community-Based Plans, which are area-based advisory plans with links to the City, have been developed in a number of districts. Even though the OPPR is not obligated to support local recommendations, these independent plans have been considered by the PCPP in recent District Plans. These plans have been developed by a cohort of community leaders and supported by public fates and even private financial institutions. Further research is required to learn about the planning process, partners, and funding. However, something that caught our attention was looking at the three preliminary areas of interest in this initial investigation is that, unlike the West and Lower North Districts, the South District does not have independent community-based plans (see figure 1.2.3). This fact made the South District even more attractive for this research project.

VACANT PROPERTY STRATEGY AND VACANT LOT PROGRAM

Vacant lots and buildings are the product of indifference and disinterest. The disparity and economic opportunities, middle-income flight to suburbs, redlining, drainage, and property neglect are just a few of the agents that contributed...
The deterioration of structures and the demolition of one- and two-family homes serve the city giving way to vacant land.

According to the Vacant Lot Program, there are approximately 40,000 vacant lots in the city, over 74% of which are privately owned. (See Figure 1.3.1.) This initiative, which is part of the Community Life Improvement Program, is in charge of inspecting and maintaining vacant lots. It is the responsibility of the owner to secure and maintain their vacant property. Unfortunately, not all vacant lot owners take care of their property. Property owner neglect, combined with careless tossing of trash and illegal dumping of bulky trash, is common in some areas, including South Philadelphia. Vacant properties in unsanitary condition lower property values and add to the perception of blight in neighborhoods. Thus, when owners improperly maintain lots, the program cleans them and bills all costs to the owner. If the cost is not paid, a lien is placed against the property. According to the program, the Community Life Improvement Programs' crew cleaned 11,700 lots in fiscal year 2013. However, questions about the Vacant Lot Program’s effectiveness in South Philadelphia emerged in this preliminary research phase, since litter is clearly a significant health and environmental problem in the area (See Figure 1.3.1).

For more information visit: http://www.phila.gov/qualityoflife/vacantlot-program/ Pages/default.aspx.

According to the Vacant Property Strategy, approximately 25,000 structures are believed to be vacant because the owner either had obtained a vacant property license, or had been cited for violations that are likely indicators of vacancy. The Vacant Property Strategy was initiated by the Philadelphia Department of Licenses and Inspections in the fall of 2011, and is part of a larger program led by the Managing Director’s Office and the Finance Director’s Office to address the way city-owned and privately-owned property is bought, sold, and maintained. According to the Philadelphia Citizen Planning Institute (2011), one quarter of the city’s vacant properties are owned by public agencies. Having identified vacant properties, this initiative has three main objectives: finding the properties’ owners, utilizing new enforcement measures to make the properties safe, following the “doers and windows” mandate, and reducing crime.

Out of the 25,000 vacant structures in the program’s database, 12,072 have been inspected; of these properties, 43% cited for “doers and windows” are taking action to either register, sell, or rehabilitate the property (Philadelphia Department of Licenses and Inspections 2013). The consolidation of city-owned vacant properties into one agency (the Land Bank, outlined below) and the acquisition of long-term tax-delinquent properties by the same agency, which represents half of all vacant properties, is some of this Institute’s recommendations.

For more information visit: http://www.phila.gov/qualityoflife/vacantlot-program/ Pages/default.aspx.

LAND BANK

The city has worked hard to keep properties up to code and to make vacant lots and properties safe. However, properties experiencing structural abandonment, code violations, or significant tax liens have gradually been acquired by different public entities: the city, the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority, and the Philadelphia Housing Development Corporation. In recent decades, city-owned land has often been transferred to responsible landlords, sometimes neighbors, to put such properties in use, but many times this is done without any city visage or community plan.

According to the Philadelphia Citizen Planning Institute (2011), one quarter of the city’s vacant properties are owned by public agencies.
guide the acquisition, maintenance, and disposition of property. The recently published 2015 Strategic Plan sets up the groundwork for the Land Bank by following these initiatives (Philadelphia Land Bank 2014):
- Identifying market conditions across the city.
- Providing an inventory of vacant land and tax-delinquent properties that the Land Bank could take.
- Establishing goals to guide Land Bank activity.
- Identifying priority acquisition areas.
- Defining annual targets against which to measure progress.

According to the Land Bank (2015), there are roughly 8,000 city-owned vacant properties and an additional 24,000 privately-owned properties that are both vacant and tax delinquent. Thus, in total, there are about 32,000 potential Land Bank properties. In our view, the Land Bank represents a double-edged sword when facilitating the acquisition of land, as it provides tax incentives and other subsidies to attract private investment and its benefits won’t be directed towards low-income and vulnerable populations and future generations.

Months before the publication of the Strategic Plan, we visited John Carpenter, the executive director of this initiative, and expressed our concerns and initial vision and ideas for the South District. The City Council had recently passed its ordinance, and coordination of land was underway. He explained the initiative was eager to transfer or lease public land to responsible landlords who would use land for the benefit of the community, especially in low-income urban areas such as the eastern part of the South District. He answered some of our inquiries at the meeting, and others were clarified when the plan was officially published. We identified potential opportunities for our project within the goals of this plan.

**GOAL 1: RETURN INDIVIDUAL VACANT LOTS AND BUILDINGS ACROSS THE CITY TO PRODUCTIVE USE.** The strategic plan states that, from the 32,000 potential Land Bank properties, about 25,000 are individual lots. This condition is representative of the eastern South District. The plan presents a dual development opportunity for these lots: the transfer of vacant lots to adjacent homeowners for use as a side yard or parking space, as well as the preservation of existing gardens that have community support and a track record of maintenance.

The Land Bank will consolidate property ownership wherein gardens are using land in the hands of multiple proprietors and will work with leaders to determine the best entity for preservation. This is an incredible opportunity for community groups to save and expand at-risk community gardens and other spaces in east South Philadelphia.

**GOAL 2: PROMOTE EQUITABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT.** The strategic plan aims to support the City Council’s 2,800 Affordable Housing Units Initiative, especially in areas undergoing change. The eastern part of South Philadelphia is considered a priority area for expansion of affordable housing and promotion of equitable development, but mostly in the northern area above Washington Avenue.

Public land is concentrated mostly in the blocks above and below Snyder Avenue. These are potential areas for affordable housing development, but also for community facilities and green spaces highly coveted by the community.

**GOAL 3: EXTEND PRIVATE INVESTMENT.** The plan aims to help remove land for viable, market-rate investment, especially in developments incorporating affordable housing.

Private investment could revitalise the area and provide housing opportunities to long-term residents only if affordable housing is made mandatory for developers acquiring Land Bank properties. Otherwise, market-rate development will continue raising prices and displacing low-income residents. Market-rate housing development already exists in this area, what is needed is affordable housing.

**EXTEND**, **Litter in South Philadelphia**
GOAL 5: REINFORCE OPEN SPACE AND URBAN AGRICULTURE

The Land Bank plans to meet the needs of urban agriculture by promoting the use of vacant land for community gardens, urban farms, and other agricultural activities. The Land Bank is working with local community organizations to identify suitable sites and provide support and resources for these initiatives. This goal is aligned with the broader vision of creating a more resilient, sustainable, and equitable city for all residents.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATIONS AND REGISTERED COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

The Land Bank is committed to supporting community development corporations (CDCs) and registered community organizations (RCOs) in the South District and beyond. These organizations play a critical role in addressing the needs of the community, from providing affordable housing to supporting local businesses and cultural initiatives. By investing in these partnerships, the Land Bank is ensuring that the South District and other areas of the city are better equipped to meet the challenges of the future.

Corporations and Registered Community Organizations (CROs) are active in affordable housing development in many city districts. Unfortunately, the research revealed that there is no CDC actively involved in the eastern side of the South District.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT CORPORATIONS AND REGISTERED COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

The Land Bank has actively sought partnerships with these organizations to leverage their expertise and resources. By working together, the Land Bank and its partners are able to create more effective and sustainable solutions to the housing and economic challenges facing the South District and other areas of the city.
2. CONCENTRATED MINORITIES

When an area hosts various concentrated minorities, this signals its membership in a diverse set of economic, cultural, and civic activities. This conciliates the greater flexibility and access to shared agency over common resources, rather than putting forth a single dominating vision for the neighborhood.

These existing networks and organizational structures provide a strong foundation for partnerships on any future Restored Spaces projects with sustained engagement and impact. Diverse groups and memberships also create favorable conditions for fostering projects living and reflecting Philadelphia's heterogeneity, stepping away from homogenous cultural representations. "Mural Arts" focus on projects that service a larger movement around equity, fairness, and progress across all of society can be particularly relevant in areas like the South Seven that serve a wealth of cultural and ethnic difference.

4. ORGANIZED (SMALL) ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES, ENTREPRENEURSHIP

The presence of a local economy, one not necessarily tied to larger cycles of capital, can benefit new art projects, as a local economy can reflect in existing network of self-sustaining entrepreneurship.

A local economy can be harnessed and expanded to reach