

*In 2001, the state took over the School District of Philadelphia, resulting in the consolidation and closing of numerous public schools and the creation of publicly funded, privately owned charter schools in their stead.*

The research on property changes and these three specific cases illustrates the fate of community gardens. Even long-standing gardens initiated by the Nationalities Services Center are facing problems. [see section 3.2](#). According to Adam Forbes, it is becoming difficult to retain the leases and secure these community spaces. Relying upon private owners has been problematic, but it has also been challenging to rely upon the city. For instance, the Emily Street gardens have six different owners. Some of them have neglected their properties for years, and some have significant tax arrears. There is hope that the Land Bank would assist in transferring these lots to NSC, since they have leased city-owned land for years, get year-to-year leases, and have proven themselves responsible occupants. However, this may not be the case. Forbes approached the city to secure the lots for gardening this year, but the city was hesitant. The increasing development in the area has made the city more careful regarding public land leases. As a result, garden dwellers have found themselves in a very vulnerable position.

### 4.3 PUBLIC EDUCATION AND LEARNING SPACES

Learning spaces and other community spaces where residents can gather and socialize are similarly scarce in the core of the South Seven. There are nine public elementary schools and two public high schools in eastern South Philadelphia as well as religious institutions that provide diverse educational services to their own constituencies. [see section 3.2](#). In 2001, the state took over the School District of Philadelphia, resulting in the consolidation and closing of numerous public schools and the creation of publicly funded, privately owned charter schools in their stead [\(see figure 4.3.1\)](#). Many remaining public schools are operating with bare-bones resources, often without music or art teachers, libraries and librarians, counselors, nurses, or administrative staff. Thousands of teachers and school support staff have been laid off.

Pennsylvania ranks significantly below the state average in the percentage of state taxes devoted to

public education. As a result, the School District has relied on local property taxes to fund schools, a situation that has produced gross inequities in per pupil spending. In 1993, the state froze funds so that the amount of money it provided each district no longer increased in response to enrollment, proportion of students with special needs, or the district's ability to raise local taxes. Property values in Philadelphia are so low that the school district was unable to compensate for the loss of state funds, resulting in massive inequalities between schools and a loss of funding overall.

Since the state takeover in 2001, the School Reform Commission (SRC) has overseen a massive expansion of charter schools and the takeover of struggling schools by private third parties. Charter schools are independently run public schools paid for by tax dollars. Charter schools now account for 30 percent of the Philadelphia School District's operating budget (Hardy 2015). By law, charter schools are not subject to the governance of the school district except for the negotiation and renewal of their charters. In 2011, Philadelphia lost nearly \$200 million in funding due to federal aid budget cuts (Sanchez 2013). In 2012, the SRC announced plans to close 60 Philadelphia public schools over five years, reorganize all other schools, and continue the expansion of charter schools.

In 2013, the SRC closed 24 public schools in Philadelphia, including three in eastern South Philadelphia: George Washington Elementary, Abigail Vare School, and Bok Technical High School, a technical school housed an enormous Art Deco building at 10th and Mifflin Streets with once-vibrant culinary arts, automotive, technical, and entrepreneurial training programs [\(see figure 4.3.2\)](#). Many of Bok's former students have been funneled into South Philadelphia or Furness High Schools. A private developer recently bought the Bok property and has plans to turn it into a "creative hub offering pioneering maker space for innovators, artisans, and entrepreneurs." At a neighborhood zoning meeting, residents expressed myriad reactions to the Bok development plans from excitement to concerns about increased traffic and

### EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES

— Neighborhoods  
- - - South Seven

- Elementary School
- Elementary-middle school
- Middle School
- High School
- Closed School
- Charter School
- Libraries

#### Public Schools

1. Andrew Jackson School
2. Annunciation School
3. Eliza B. Kirkbride School
4. George Washington Elementary School
5. St. Casimir School
6. Sacred Heart of Jesus School
7. Vare Washington Elementary School
8. Horace Howard Furness High School
9. St. Nicholas of Tolentine School
10. St. John Neumann and Maria Goretti High School
11. Southwark Elementary School
12. Bok Technical High School
13. South Philadelphia High School
14. Epiphany of Our Lord School
15. Messiah Early Childhood Center
16. A.S. Jenks Academics Plus School
17. Francis Scott Key School
18. Our Lady of Mt. Carmel School
19. George W. Sharswood Elementary School
20. John H. Taggart School
21. Christopher Columbus Charter School
22. Philadelphia Performing Arts Charter School
23. Mastery Charter School - Thomas Campus



parking to questions about whether any of the businesses will offer services and programs for existing residents or elderly people living in the immediate neighborhood.

Several charter schools have opened in South Philadelphia, including Mastery Charter on the 900 block of Johnson Street [\(see figure 4.3.1\)](#). In 2014-2015, no further public schools in South Philadelphia were closed nor were any new charter schools opened. According to Andrew Lukov, the principal of Southwark Elementary School, this breathing space gives existing public schools "a chance to grow."

While school "reform" marks an economic divestment in public education, the innovation of school leaders and the dedication of public

school staff continue. Both Furness and South Philadelphia High Schools intentionally strive to be safe places for multicultural students; they are places where children from vastly different backgrounds interact. The principals of Furness High School, Daniel Peou, and Ogo Okoye-Johnson, steward programs that cater to the school's diverse immigrant and refugee populations who speak more than 30 languages. With the reduction in public school funding, there has been a rise in OST (out-of-school time) programming. While connected to the larger mechanism of privatization, OST programs provide opportunities for local organizations to house after-school programming and to receive funding for these programs. United Communities Southeast Philadelphia, Migrant Education, and the Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia are

*While school "reform" marks an economic divestment in public education, the innovation of school leaders and the dedication of public school staff continue.*





*Schools are potential spaces for community groups to meet each other. However, schoolyards and facilities are often in bad shape and underutilized.*

some of the many organizations that provide OST services.

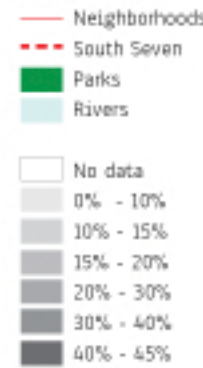
According to community members, schools are potential spaces for community groups to meet each other. However, schoolyards and facilities are often in bad shape and underutilized. Learning and community spaces for adults and families such as libraries and recreational spaces are scarce and distributed unevenly in the South Seven. The Free Library of Philadelphia operates four branches in this area: Charles Santore, Fumo Family, South Philadelphia, and Whitman. However, all the branches are located on the periphery, which means that residents living in the core of the South Seven would have to walk over a mile, or 20 minutes, to access these services (see figure 4.3.1). Recreation centers are also located in the area's periphery with the exception of the Ford Recreation Center, which provides recreational spaces to different community groups at Snyder Avenue and is where members of the 7th Street Community Civic Association hold meetings and events (see figure 4.2.1).

TOP LEFT: 4.3.2  
Former Bok Technical High School building

#### 4.4 RACIAL AND ECONOMIC TENSIONS

Before the economic recession of the late 1970s, Jewish and Italian families owned most of the businesses along South 7th Street. From hosiery and toy stores to butcher and yarn shops, residents did not have to travel far to meet everyday needs. There were local movie theaters, restaurants, and nightclubs. According to a former Vietnamese refugee, business owners were often welcoming to newcomers during the first wave of immigration from Southeast Asia in 1975. Many shops, such as the then-existent Village Thrift Store, offered free clothing, while other businesses provided jobs and a place for refugees to interact with local residents. A former refugee from Cambodia and principal of Furness High School, said that refugees at this time also faced discrimination and threats of violence from community members and quickly learned not to walk on certain blocks or patronize certain establishments.

#### POPULATION BELOW THE POVERTY LINE



The second wave of immigration from Southeast Asia (1978 through the mid-1980s) coincided with a nationwide economic downturn. Businesses shut down seemingly overnight, leaving a large swath of vacant storefronts in their wake, an economic collapse from which the neighborhood never fully recovered. The city's subsequent depopulation meant readily available housing for new immigrants, but often amid racial and economic tension. Over time, refugee and immigrant families were able to rent or buy vacant spaces and start their own businesses, but these stores and restaurants often catered to the needs of specific communities with less opportunity for cross-racial or cross-ethnic interaction.

According to a member of the 7th Street Community Civic Association, the economic recession of the 1980s increased poverty and unemployment, and so drug dealing, sex work, and gang membership became logical choices for some people in the area. This association has advocated for the rights of African Americans, including ensuring access to fair housing, and has provided

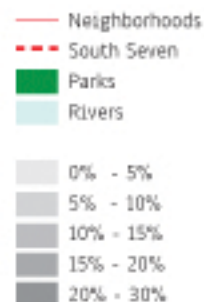
social programming and support for youth and families. The 7th Street Community Civic Association is currently working with several citywide coalitions to reduce gun violence and incarceration rates in the area and to increase employment and educational opportunities. Long-term African-American residents report that the area was segregated for many decades: "white people knew where to walk and shop and black people knew where to walk and shop."

For some residents, drug activity remains a concern, as does the long-standing territorial dispute between two gangs, one that runs on 5th Street and one that runs on 7th Street. When Southeast Asians began to move into the area, some young people who were attempting to adjust to life in the US after surviving war and related traumas also became involved in these gangs. Resident Dai Lai Htoo, who used to rent an apartment near 7th and Jackson Streets, explained that the area was once called the "red zone" because it falls between 5th and 7th Streets. Block captain Bonnie Lucas shared that, in recent years, the police and the

*As the economic recession of the 1980s increased poverty and unemployment, drug dealing, sex work, and gang membership became logical choices for some people in the area.*

TOP RIGHT: 4.4.1  
Population below the Poverty Line

## UNEMPLOYMENT RATE



*Immigrants and refugees who have prior education or training may have difficulty obtaining employment due to their lack of the equivalent US credentials.*

FBI have drastically reduced drug-related activities in collaboration with neighbors. Poverty, underemployment, and discrimination remain issues of grave concern to African-American residents. According to 7th Street Civic Association member Russell Maven, "Racism is less visible, but it is still here. It is definitely still here."

Problems such as high incarceration rates and the lack of access to opportunities and funds for higher education remain entrenched. For this reason, some long-term residents have struggled to accommodate demographic changes due to different refugee and immigrant groups that have settled in the area, beginning with newcomers from Southeast Asia in the 70s and 80s. Although many of these groups are now multigenerational, newer immigrants from China and groups of refugees from Burma, Bhutan, and Nepal bring up longstanding concerns about access to resources. As Melissa Fogg from the Philadelphia Refugee Mental Health Collaborative explained during an interview, when community-based and social service organizations provide programs

and resources aimed at specific communities, it can seem as though other communities are excluded. Some local organizations are aware of these perceptions and are working toward providing more inclusive programming.

According to those who work with immigrant and refugee populations, in the past some long-term residents worked to block immigrants from coming into the area. However, similar concerns plague newcomers and long-term residents alike, such as underemployment. According to a member of the Bhutanese American Organization, many refugees were guaranteed job training in the United States while they were still in refugee camps. In actuality, few job-training opportunities are available. Despite this, a 2008 report from the Brookings Institution indicates that nearly 75 percent of labor force growth in the greater Philadelphia region since 2000 is attributable to immigrants (Singer et al. 2008).

Immigrants and refugees who have prior education or training may have difficulty obtaining employment

due to their lack of the equivalent US credentials. As a result, many Bhutanese work in low-wage factory jobs in New Jersey or in agricultural jobs (mushroom industry) in Kennett Square. Similarly, Dai Lai Htoo from the Karen Community explained that many Burmese residents work in factories and at Walmart. Government assistance for refugees is time-limited (usually eight months), and it is very difficult to obtain a job that makes more than minimum wage (see figure 4.4.1 and 4.4.2).

Beginning in the 1990s, US Chinese immigration included both professional and working classes who settled in historic downtown Chinatown; Cherry Hill, New Jersey; and South and Northeast Philadelphia. After the 1994 passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the subsequent collapse of the Mexican economy, Mexican and Central American immigration to the United States also increased; many of Philadelphia's Mexican community members have roots in Puebla and Michoacán. Over the past ten years, Mexican business owners have opened shops on 9th Street and the surrounding blocks. For new immigrants, particularly those from Mexico and Central America without documentation, opportunities for economic assistance are limited. (see section 3.2) The vast majority of Mexican immigrants in Philadelphia work in the restaurant and service industries. Others who work in construction and landscaping often have to commute great distances outside of the city. Like other immigrant populations, newly arrived Mexicans with weaker English language skills also work in factories. After several years learning English, people may then seek jobs in local restaurants. In the South Seven area, travel to factories and construction sites is provided by those who can obtain driver's licenses and who then charge car fare; many Mexican residents are unable to obtain driver's licenses because they do not have documentation. Some Latino community members are involved in a state-wide campaign to change the process of obtaining driver's licenses. This campaign seeks to create new policies for undocumented residents to obtain licenses; with state-issued identification, residents can open bank accounts, rent cars, and have access to

myriad other services.

Despite increasing diversity in the South Seven area, community members have limited opportunities to interact with one another. One place where people come together, however, is in schools. The past ten years have seen a dramatic increase in student diversity, with over 30 languages and dialects spoken at neighborhood schools. Latent tensions in the wider community erupted in December 2009 at South Philadelphia High School when several dozen Asian students walked out of school to protest the ongoing hostile anti-immigrant environment. During the months leading up to the student boycott, over 25 immigrant Asian students were attacked by fellow students, 13 of whom were sent to the hospital for care.

Asian students organized against ongoing hostility in collaboration with local organizations. Students held a press conference and refused to return to school until the administration addressed the ongoing violence. The boycott lasted for eight days. For more than a year prior to the walkout, the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF), Asian Americans United (AAU), Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation, Boat People SOS (BPSOS), Victim/Witness Services of South Philadelphia, Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia (CAPG), and Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Associations Coalition (SEAMAAC) had been working with students to urge the school district to address the increasingly hostile environment for Asian students.

Some disagreement ensued among these different organizations about whether to call these attacks "racist." For some involved in the case, the attacks were racially motivated, as they were largely perpetrated by African-American students against Asian immigrant students. Others felt that using the terms "racism" or "racist" to describe the attacks ignores the fact that racism is institutional and that both Asian-American and African-American students must deal with institutional racism from society at large. Calling the attacks simply "racist" diverts attention from the fact that both Asian-American and African-American students are "minorities." In addition to their

*The student attacks reflected a lack of guidance and safety from the school itself, and a scarcity of opportunity for the students to learn about cultural, linguistic, national, ethnic, and other differences.*



racially motivated character, the student attacks reflected a lack of guidance and safety from the school itself, and a scarcity of opportunity for the students to learn about cultural, linguistic, national, ethnic, and other differences. The attacks, while anti-Asian and anti-immigrant, were at least in part a result of an underfunded urban school district and its neoliberal shift to privatization.

Ultimately, students, along with the collaborating agencies, decided to hold the School District responsible rather than the individual students who perpetrated the violence. They filed a federal civil rights complaint with the US Department of Justice and won. The federal investigation found that the district was “deliberately indifferent” to violence and harassment against Asian students, and the ruling stipulated that the school district must provide ongoing diversity training for its staff. For two years following the boycott, SEAMAAC, BPSOS, and AAU worked in the school to bring immigrant and American-born students together to discuss cultural differences and to build solidarity. All of these organizations continue to work with youth at the school.

After the ruling, South Philadelphia High School brought in a new principal, Otis Hackney, who has transformed the climate of the school. He has worked to bring students together and to improve the school’s overall academic performance. He explained that before the boycott, American-born and immigrant groups were at times physically separated in the building, with part of the second floor designated as the “ESL corridor” and thus off limits to non-ESL students. In his opinion, this kind of segregation only increased group isolation and decreased opportunities for students to interact. Now all students have access to every part of the school. He supports his teachers in teaching cultural competencies and talking about misunderstandings between students. He believes the key is to explore tensions between African-American and immigrant communities as they arise and to share differences in life experiences. While it is important for American-born students to learn about the diverse experiences and cultural practices of different immigrant groups, it is also important for immigrant

students to understand the history of African Americans in the United States. In his opinion, the “immigrant narrative” may not resonate with African-American students because they do not share that narrative, as they understand their “arrival” stories in the United States are simultaneously about the history of slavery.

#### 4.5 EQUITABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The Storefront Improvement Program, InStore, and the Merchant’s Fund are the three financial assistance programs proposed to help grow and revitalize commercial corridors in the Philadelphia City Planning Commission’s South District Plan (2015) (see figure 4.5.1). Beyond identifying these programs, the plan recommends the creation of business associations and business improvement districts (BID) and the designation of corridor managers.

The Office of Neighborhood Economic Development, which is part of the Department of Commerce, employs a number of strategies to revitalize and strengthen commercial areas and corridors in city neighborhoods. The Storefront Improvement Program and InStore are two such strategies. The Storefront Improvement Program (SIP) is an initiative that reimburses owners of commercial buildings and businesses who make storefront improvements within a designated area. The program can reimburse up to 75% of the cost to a maximum of \$10,000 for a single commercial property, or up to \$15,000 for a multiple-address or corner business property, provided the improvements are eligible.

For more information, visit: <http://www.phila.gov/commerce/neighborhoods/Pages/RevitalizingCorridors.aspx>

The Philadelphia City Council plans to dedicate \$535,000 towards the SIP. The majority of the funds, \$400,000, come from federal dollars, through the Community Development Block Grant Program. Another \$100,000 comes from the state, and the rest is awarded by the Office of Neighborhood Economic Development to the Community Design Collaborative to

#### SOUTH DISTRICT COMMERCIAL CORRIDORS

- South Seven
- Parks
- Rivers
- Auto Corridor
- Pedestrian Corridor
- Corridor in strong condition



provide free design services. Beyond helping business owners improve their spaces, the Store Improvement Program has the potential to help small construction businesses. However, advocates for small business owners have realized that the source of the money adds complicated paperwork to the process, and paying the area’s prevailing wage, a new policy requirement of the program, implies higher costs and the elimination of local contractors. According to Beth McConnell, Policy Director of the Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations, most of the contractors working on storefront renovations are small neighborhood contractors who are discouraged from competing for these jobs due to the complicated paperwork they have to submit to the federal government (Burdo 2015).

The Asian American Chamber of Commerce of Greater Philadelphia encouraged business owners in the South Seven area to participate in the SIP. In an interview, Beth McConnell explained that storeowners are sometimes suspicious of the program because the requirements to get reimbursed for federal funds are so cumbersome that they don’t want to get involved. In South Philadelphia, a number of Cambodian businesses had used this assistance program, but with the new requirements, some small contractors have become disqualified. For the most part, only contractors without a language barrier and who

pay the area’s prevailing wage can get the jobs done. McConnell states that the best way for the program to run effectively is to replace the source of the funds with money from the city’s general fund. The Nutter administration acknowledges the benefits of the SIP and is taking a closer look at the ideas offered by the Council members.

InStore is a forgivable loan program developed by the Department of Commerce in partnership with the Office of Arts, Culture and the Creative Economy. The program assists eligible retail, food, and creative for-profit and nonprofit businesses in purchasing equipment and materials associated with establishing a new location or expanding an existing one (Philadelphia Department of Commerce 2015). The loans amount to between \$15,000 and \$50,000. Eligible commercial corridors have been set up for this program. In the South Seven, the strongest pedestrian corridors have mostly been targeted with the exception of South 7th Street, which is in development. The following corridors can benefit from the program in this area (see figure 4.5.2):

- 1200-1900 East Passyunk Avenue
- 1900-2500 South 7th Street
- 800-1200 South 9th Street
- 700-1000 Washington Avenue
- 1900-2100 South Broad Street
- 600-1500 Snyder Avenue

For more information, visit: <https://business.phila.gov/Pages/InStore.aspx?stage=Start&type=A1%20Business%20Types&section=Financing%20%26%20>

Storeowners are sometimes suspicious of the program because the requirements to get reimbursed for federal funds are so cumbersome that they don’t want to get involved.

*The Store Improvement Program has the potential to help small construction businesses. However, advocates for small business owners have realized that the source of the money adds complicated paperwork to the process, and paying the area’s prevailing wage, a new policy requirement of the program, implies higher costs and the elimination of local contractors.*

### IN STORE ELEGIBLE CORRIDORS AND BIDS

- Neighborhoods and South Seven
- Parks
- Rivers
- InStore Program Corridors
- BID Areas
  - East Passyunk Avenue BID
  - S 9th St / Washington Av BID
  - Proposed Cambodian Town



Another way to improve local business is through the Merchant's Fund, a private foundation that offers financial assistance to current Philadelphia merchants who demonstrate legitimate financial need. It provides grants up to \$10,000 and loan matches up to \$20,000 to local businesses open for at least three years. For more information, visit: <http://www.merchantsfund.org>

The Department of Commerce also supports Business Improvement Districts (BID), which are non-profit management associations created by neighborhood property owners and businesses to provide services, activities, and initiatives to improve and preserve local economies and to increase public safety and street surveillance. Organizational change in local governance and cooperation among businesses, property owners, public officials, and other community stakeholders have been key in the establishment of BIDs across the city. Funds for BID programs and services

are generated from a special assessment paid by the benefited property owners directly to the organization that manages the BID's activities. Because they are authorized by the City of Philadelphia, the assessment levied by the BID becomes a legal obligation of the property owner and failure to pay can result in the filing of a lien" (Philadelphia Department of Commerce and Drexel University's Center for Public Policy 2012). Since 1990, a number of BIDs have been established citywide by the Municipal Authorities Act and the Neighborhood Improvement District Act (from 2000 onwards).

The East Passyunk Avenue Business Improvement District, with over 270 commercial businesses, has been key to the urban revitalization of South Philadelphia's northeastern side (see figure 4.5.2). However, this BID—with its flourishing hip local businesses and community development initiatives and events—increasingly caters to young and financially secure residents rather than the long-standing

working-class community. "In East Passyunk, a poor and predominantly white community, BID activities have prompted division between long-standing property owners/businesses and newcomers who express a greater degree of support for collective improvement efforts" (Garnett 2010).

Two additional BIDs have recently been envisioned in the area (see figure 4.5.2). In the north, the South 9th Street and Washington Avenue Business Improvement District is already in the development process for serving the commercial areas in and around these thriving roadways, while in the core of eastern South Philadelphia, business owners have envisioned another BID along South 6th and 7th Streets. The boundaries have not yet been officially delineated, but this BID aims to brand the area as Cambodian Town. Active members of the Cambodian community consider this area, including Mifflin Square, the heart of their culture. Food vendors proudly celebrate their cuisine by selling food along the park, while small business owners make a living championing their culture and food in restaurants and groceries along these commercial corridors. (see section 3.2)

Although the formation of these BIDs appears to improve a neighborhood's economic and security conditions, they mostly manifest the unevenness of power relations among the many ethnic groups that live around it, as well as structure urban development around the views of the few with the economic capacity to integrate their businesses in these programs. Using BIDs as a primary directive for the restructuring of neighborhoods has consequently created more segregation between the more organized and powerful ethnic groups, such as the Cambodians and those with limited organizational abilities; it gives too much decision power to owners and marginalizes the voices of wage laborers, the elderly, and the handicapped who together compose the majority of the area's population. It is imperative that new mechanisms for encouraging democratic decision making and rewarding participation are prioritized beyond those of the exclusive groups of economic power.

### 4.6 7TH STREET IS "NO MAN'S LAND"

According to Beth McConnell from the Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations, the core area of the South Seven, which includes the South 7th Street commercial corridor, was called a "no man's land" by other area civic groups because "it was not under the direct providence of any civic association." However, the term "no man's land" is a bit of a misnomer.

Recent changes in the Philadelphia Zoning Code established provisions that ensure neighbors of proposed developments have an opportunity to provide input regarding zoning decisions. Community input happens both through a standardized system of direct notification and through public meetings convened by Registered Community Organizations (RCOs). When these changes occurred, many existing civic association applied to become RCOs. RCOs receive notice from the Planning Commission whenever a zoning variance or special exception is requested within their geographic boundaries. The RCO then convenes a public meeting. Where there is more than one RCO in an area, the District Councilperson has the option to select one or more RCO as the responsible party in cooperation with all other affected RCOs.

Beth McConnell pointed out that when many civic associations became RCOs, there was no civic association covering South 7th Street. In response, Councilman Squilla first contacted United Communities of Southeast Philadelphia to see if they could take on role of RCO. When this did not pan out, he contacted both the East Passyunk Civic Association (EPX) and the Lower Moyamensing Civic Association (LoMo) and asked them to extend their boundaries to account for the uncovered area (figure 4.6.1). According to McConnell, this proposal was problematic because it "[did] not grow civic leadership from the ground up" but took over from the top down. Additionally, unbeknownst to other community entities, the 7th Street Community Civic Association was operating in the area presumed to be unrepresented. A public meeting was called to discuss the confusion.

*When many civic associations became RCOs, there was no civic association covering South 7th Street.*

*Unbeknownst to other community entities, the 7th Street Community Civic Association was operating in the area presumed to be unrepresented.*



**REGISTERED COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS**

- Neighborhoods
- - - South Seven
- Parks
- Rivers
- 1st Republican Ward
- 2nd Republican Ward
- Bella Vista Neighbors Association
- Dickinson Square West Civic Association
- East Passyunk Crossing Civic Association
- Hawthorne Empowerment Coalition
- Lower Moyamensing Civic Association
- Passyunk Square Civic Association
- Pennsport Civic Association
- Queen Village Neighbors Association
- Seventh Street Community Civic Association
- Whitman Council Incorporated

According to many residents who attended, this meeting was very contentious, with members of the 7th Street Community Civic Association expressing anger and fear that the area in which they had long held community power was going to be “taken over” by people not from the area.

During the meeting, both EPX and LoMo suggested that the 7th Street Community Civic Association form its own RCO. According to a member from EPX, the civic associations gave them a year to obtain RCO status, and after that year was up, “EPX and LoMo went ahead and extended their boundaries.” EPX and LoMo members said that they were “transparent” about this process and that any information about boundary changes was available online. However, in interviews we were told that since the community meeting nearly two years ago, EPX and LoMo have had no contact with the 7th Street Community Civic Association. Some members were unaware that the 7th Street Community Civic Association applied for and was granted RCO status in the interim. Confusion about the existence and boundaries of these civic associations reveals community fragmentation, an increasing need for zoning hearings due to development, and ongoing tensions between long-standing and newer residents.

As with any volunteer-run organization, there are different opinions on the roles and responsibilities of civic associations. According to some members, as civic associations are largely focused on concerns of homeowners in the area, they want to “shut down on corner stores and multi-family houses, as well as trash, crime, and drug sales.” Other members seek inclusivity but face barriers when attempting to involve new members. For example, Todd Schwartz from LoMo described involving any immigrant or refugee community members as “a challenge.” While everyone is welcome, LoMo is a volunteer-run organization and lacks resources for language translation. Similarly, LoMo is open to renters, but few have become members “because their concerns are different.” Ridding the streets of loiterers and trash is, in some residents’ minds, part of what makes neighborhoods “safe” and increases property values. To other

residents, these practices may also “police” older/more established and informal ways of creating community (people gathering on front stoops, for example).

Additionally, some long-term residents express concern about civic associations wanting to “change the neighborhood” rather than getting to know the community as it is. Some older residents express reluctance to get involved with civic associations because they see them as advocating for “dog parks instead of community centers.” This sentiment is not universally shared, however, and there are successful examples of civic associations that have created partnerships with local schools and long-term community members.

*Confusion about the existence and boundaries of these civic associations reveals community fragmentation, an increasing need for zoning hearings due to development, and ongoing tensions between long-standing and newer residents.*

*Some long-term residents express concern about civic associations wanting to “change the neighborhood” rather than getting to know the community as it is.*





## 5. ENVISIONING PLAYGROUNDS FOR USEFUL KNOWLEDGE: COLLECTIVE LEARNING, KNOWLEDGE, OWNERSHIP, AND DEVELOPMENT

After seven months of in-depth secondary source research and concentrated fieldwork, we gained a more developed understanding of the neighborhood, its residents, and its representative associations, as well as its attributes, contradictions, problems, and relationship to the city as a whole. Ultimately, we felt comfortable taking a step toward defining a project that directly engaged the community. The *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* project was envisioned as a series of spatial interventions in tandem with the structuring of social and cultural programs that, together with the Restored Spaces Initiative, aims to catalyze a positive transformation of the neighborhood and the lives of those who inhabit it.

The first phase of *Playgrounds* entailed developing a pilot project around three connected one-day events, each structured as community actions in urban play. The purpose of these community actions has been to involve specific stakeholders, and neighbors as participants who feel resonance with the platform proposal and are motivated to participate in the project. The first two actions were designed as semi-public experimental workshops that would take place in the *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* hub on Jackson Street. Key participants played together towards the development of specific ideas that could potentially transform the neighborhood in short-, medium-, and long-term initiatives. The performance group Philadelphia Theatre of the Oppressed was invited to elicit ideas and mediate different moments of the workshops.

Additional workshops took place from June to September to build community involvement and the co-creation process. The third and final action was conceived as a moment of engagement in a public space with wider audiences as well as a broader discussion on the future direction of ideas from the two first workshops and the future direction of the platform as a whole.

*see section 6*

This pilot project allowed us to investigate and showcase the Playgrounds project's capacity for:

1. Providing environmentally sustainable meeting, working, and learning spaces to engage in cooperative practices and to host recreational activities and other community programs that stimulate "urban play" while acknowledging local cultures and values (*see figure 5.1.1*).

The area of study comprises a monotonous set of housing blocks where learning, recreational, and community spaces are scarce. Learning and meeting spaces are limited to public schools and religious institutions and organizations, all of which serve their own constituencies. Most of the neighborhoods located in the study area have a small park with some sports and recreational facilities, except for the Greenwich and Lower Moyamensing neighborhoods. Families, individuals, and local groups from these neighborhoods use Mifflin Square during the warm months. Other than Weinberg Park, a small public space located a few blocks from this popular square, and the Ford Recreation Center, which mainly serves the African-American community on Snyder Avenue, there are few open sites to for community activities.

2. Developing Useful Knowledge Committees that draw on the diverse skills, experiences, and insights of various civic organizations and citizens involved with the project. Useful Knowledge is understood as that which can be of service to social emancipation and the people's struggle for justice and equality in their daily lives. The purpose of these committees is to

work collaboratively and to transfer specific knowledge from different neighbors and organizations, which could happen through the development urban campaigns, collective workshops, events, and artistic performances, as exemplified throughout the pilot.

A diagram with some types of Useful Knowledge in the South Seven area was developed as part of Cohabitation Strategies' ethnographic work (*see figure 2.1*). Although it mostly focused on different non-profit and civic organizations, it illustrates the immense depository of Useful Knowledge that could be networked and transferred in subsequent phases of the Playgrounds platform.

3. Stimulating the production of urban interventions and serving the knowledge platform while producing social and spatial restructuring between sites and the surrounding areas. These interventions are intended to develop organically throughout the central area of eastern South Philadelphia rather than in one specific site. The pilot assemblage of *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* not only aspires to improve the neighborhood's physical and environmental condition but also acts as a catalyst of cooperative practices in education, food accessibility, social services, housing, and urban development. New social and spatial relations would be built through participatory programs (*see figure 5.1.2*).

Deindustrialization, redlining, and eventually decreased tax revenues to maintain city infrastructure were major agents of the depopulation and urban decline South Philadelphia experienced. Postwar suburbanization incited white working-class residents' exodus to the suburbs. Better-off families gradually left South Philadelphia, and eventually an influx of foreign immigrants gave life back to the district. Families of Irish, Italian, and Eastern European descent, as well as those African Americans who had arrived during the Great Migration, have been joined in recent years by families from

Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Mexico and other Latin American countries. The district has become vibrant and diverse. However, newcomers face obstacles to thriving in the central area of eastern South Philadelphia, contained by Washington Avenue and West Oregon Avenue from north to south and 9th Street and 4th Street from west to east, where poverty, unemployment, structural vacancies, and decline are concentrated.

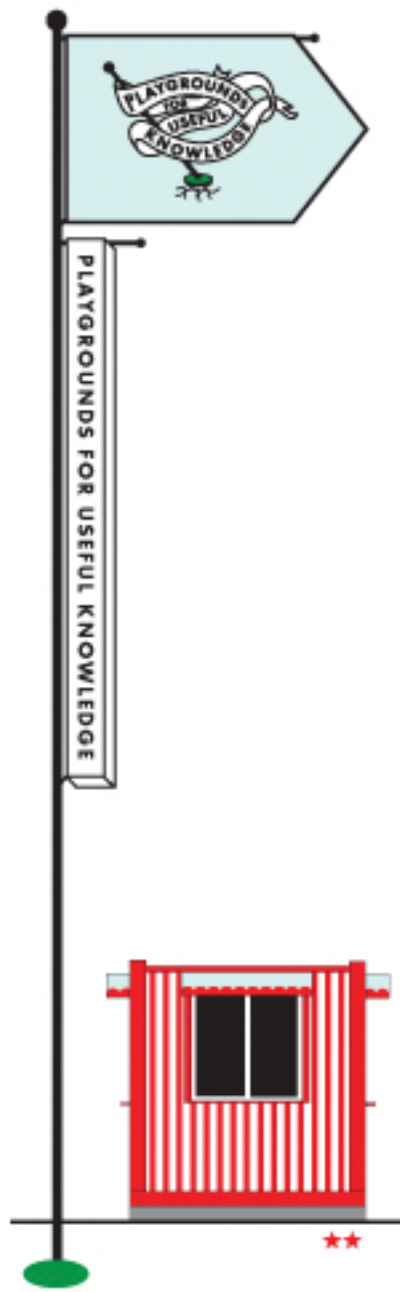
4. Turning public vacant and abandoned lots into *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge*. The process would begin by claiming lots from the Philadelphia Land Bank, which can eventually move the conversation towards non-speculative development models, shared community ownership, and collectivized management.

Potential sites were identified and a specific program for each site will need to be planned according to the needs and priorities of the neighborhood's *Playgrounds* platform. The community would restore these sites in partnership with the Restored Spaces Initiative and with the assistance of an external collaborator (e.g. artist, designer, activist, etc).

In future, the creation and expansion of *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* is envisioned through the constitution of a Community Land Trust with a tripartite body of governance, or board. The ownership and management of the sites will be neither public nor private, but collective. The Community Land Trust board will gradually be formed by building trust and engagement among local stakeholders and will have equal representation by: (1) local public authorities and agencies; (2) local non-profits, cultural institutions, and grassroots groups; and (3) "knowledge committees," neighbors, and users. The restoration and activation of these sites will be developed strategically with the Restored Spaces Initiative, working with the Philadelphia Land Bank and other local partners such as the Philadelphia Water Department, the City Planning Commission, the Mural Arts Program, etc.



TOP RIGHT: 5.1.2  
Participatory neighborhood survey with teens from Asian Americans United summer camp



## 6. PLAYGROUND #1: ACTIVATING LAND, ENGAGING CITIZENSHIP, MOBILIZING PEOPLE!

### 6.1 IN SEARCH OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

From its very inception, *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* has had the ambition to create the conditions for a prolific exchange between professionals in the fields of art and urbanism and local experts. Cohabitation Strategies has always tried to establish a dialogue between these two different worlds, influenced on the one hand by a theoretical and pragmatic understanding of the forces that shape our cities, and on the other by the grassroots dimension, people who perceive moods and daily occurrences on the street level. In Philadelphia, our team mostly comprised experts—urbanists, cultural producers, designers, anthropologists, etc.—and we had to create the conditions for an exchange with a circle of people with a more rooted sense of the neighborhood's social, political, and economic relations. Although it might sound like an undemanding process, obtaining insider information about a neighborhood is always a very delicate operation. Inhabitants of the area don't open up easily to professionals asking questions, especially if they don't directly understand how the information they are sharing will be used. While we had no direct contact with local organizations and residents at the beginning of the project, it was imperative from the outset to create conditions to establish true collaboration.

During our years of practice, we have tested many different approaches to establishing local relations. In the case of Philadelphia, having a restricted amount of time available, we decided to follow a twofold strategy. The entry point was interviewing community leaders and searching for people whom we could define as local experts. These

experts are not necessarily people who have made an overall analysis of the neighborhood, but rather are residents or people working in the district who have an important yet subjective view of the relations at play in the area. Neighborhoods like the South Seven that have a complex and fragmented social fabric, that are sustained partly by shadow economies, and that are in rapid evolution cannot be understood without patiently heeding the gut feelings of their inhabitants. After recording all interpretations of the area, the following phase was defining a space for common interaction. While the idea of creating a "hub" had been established from the project's origin, it was fully developed in response to the process and the dialogue that had been locally established.

The hub was initially defined as a space, but not necessarily a physical one. Although eventually established at 632 Jackson Street, a hub could have been alternatively defined as purely mental space, as a common goal to pursue. However, considering the apparent availability of vacant land, it seemed particularly interesting to build a project around the opportunity of temporarily occupying a lot to build a space for social interaction. Having a space in the area made us stakeholders and entitled us to have an opinion and care for the neighborhood. Being direct participants in the life of the block gave us the right to care for it and an understandable purpose for our interest in improving the local livelihood. Moreover, while our conversations with locals were previously aimed at specific interviewees, having a space allowed us to open up the conversation with neighbors, such as the one who offered to plug us into the electric grid illegally, or the people who were accidentally passing by.

Importantly, having a small patch of ground opened up the possibility of defining a common project. In a neighborhood that suffers a great deficiency of public space, this small plot became a sort of "relational device" that allowed us to start investigating what should or could be done with available space. Opening up a space for exchange and collaboration with local residents and stakeholders made it clear how rare this opportunity is in a neighborhood where most resources

are focused on achieving basic means of survival. The first *Playground for Useful Knowledge* was intended to be a prototype, as a space where everyone could exchange ideas and strategies for improving the neighborhood. Even beyond that, the idea was to create a proactive grassroots cell where participants could unravel the challenges that the South Seven is facing and put forward projects created with local skills, competences, and passions.

The notion of the "playground" became key for encouraging playfulness and freedom in the interactions that we wanted to establish. We do not have solutions for this neighborhood, and we are genuinely convinced that the only way for a neighborhood like this to combat the financial forces that want to maximize profit while evicting local residents is to develop local, endogenous neighborhood improvement strategies generated from local skills. This is where the concept of "useful knowledge" becomes relevant. Our aim has been to generate a space for social interaction where different stakeholders in the South Seven can convene to assess the intellectual and physical resources available to improve this area. Once these resources are surveyed, the next step is to start looking at a series of small grassroots interventions that

could create the conditions for the neighborhood to improve from within. Our long-term proposal is, therefore, to establish a series of *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* across the South Seven, as an artistic project that can become public policy and planning.

Over the course of our residency, the *Playground for Useful Knowledge* at 632 Jackson Street became a preferential research space that hosted committee meetings, workshops, and recreational activities. While there, we progressively came to better understand what sort of useful knowledge was available and the fears and preoccupations of our neighbors, and it became also evident how fragmented the social and political texture of the South Seven is. In an area of Philadelphia that has hosted a marginal population and newcomers for over a century, the common culture is the development of small homogeneous civic groups that generally do not collaborate and are hardly aware of one another's work. In this context, the hub soon became an impartial space. More than once, directors of local neighboring civic associations met for the first time during one of our committee meetings. As an example of this neutrality, the hub in Jackson Street has also been chosen for a meeting organized by the Seventh Street

*"If a neighborhood stands and speaks up it might ignite change."\**

*\*Quote from gathering with committee members*





*“Lack of votes  
brings disinvestment in  
this community.”\**

Community Civic Association with the block captain, Ms. Bonnie Lucas, the Police Department, and residents to remove the red flag that has been on the block for the past ten years since acts of violence erupted during a block party. During this meeting, signatures of the residents were collected and the red flag was finally removed.

## 6.2 BUILDING LOCAL TRUST

Fieldwork research has been an essential tool for Cohabitation Strategies to define the local assets of initiatives, practices, and agencies; to assemble narratives about the most relevant neighborhood issues; and to start building a network of organizations and inhabitants active in the South Seven. This phase, which took place from November to June and continues to this day, has allowed us to map and contact a large number of associations, initiatives, and individuals that represent the area’s wide range of cultural communities. To establish a fruitful conversation and start a collaboration, it was fundamental to develop reciprocal trust and an understanding of how CohStra’s role can complement and catalyze local needs and preoccupations. Regularity and persistence has proven to be an essential ingredient in keeping the conversation alive.

Attaining trust is a long and at times arduous process. Developing a proposal for a participatory project like *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* allowed us to start reinforcing a conversation that progressively led to a deeper understanding of the participants’ intentions, interests, and modes of operation. As part of the project, we devised different kinds of engagement. We scheduled regular meetings at the hub on Jackson Street, and in particular we established three public appointments that we defined as Actions. The Actions were intended to create momentum and progressively lead to spreading the project’s findings to a wider audience. Also, we established what we called “committee meetings” during Action 1, gathering a core group of spontaneous and at times emerging leaders who demonstrated a desire to build a better sense of community and to

face together some of the main issues troubling the area through a collective effort (see figure 6.2.1).

These “committee meetings” have led to exchanging views, becoming more aware of other cultural groups’ perceptions, and affirming a new public awareness about: (1) divisions and frictions in the community and the lack of social cohesion; (2) the wide range of capabilities, skills, and knowledge within the community, yet also its lack of spaces for sharing; (3) the need to overcome differences and build a common horizon; (4) consciousness of the relations between larger systematic issues and local effects; and (5) the emergence of new leaders.

As of today, the core group that formed around the Playground who can guarantee the project’s future development and the continuity of Restored Spaces Initiative with MAP in the area is made up of the following people:

Brooke Allen/Friends of Mifflin Square; Bruce Baldwin/Seventh Street Community Civic Association; Karisa Barlow/Bethanna Community Umbrella Agency; Wei Chen/Asian Americans United; Sokmala Chy/Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia; Laura Deutch/artist; Andrea Di Mola/United Communities Southeast Philadelphia and Southeast Philadelphia Collaborative; Teresa Engst/Asian Americans United; Anthony Fasano/Lower Moyamensing Civic Association; Linda Fernandez/Amber Art; Adam Forbes/PA Migrant Education; David and Lisa Grainge/Snyder Avenue Congregational Church; Sovannary Heang/Friendly Market; Amy Jones/SEAMAAC; Leela Kuikel/Bhutanese Community Organization; Adina Lieberman/Puentes de Salud; Bonnie Lucas/Block Captain Jackson Street; Nora Mazapantli/Puentes de Salud; Beth McConnell/Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations; Thoai Nguyen/SEAMAAC; Carlos Pascual Sanchez/Puentes de Salud and Fleisher Art Memorial; Nicole Prum/PA Migrant Education; Eddy Saeksith/Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia; Todd Schwartz/Lower Moyamensing Civic Association; Shira Walinski/Southeast by Southeast; Rebecca Wanner/Friends of Mifflin Square.

## 6.3 IN SEARCH OF LAND

The search for land for the first *Playground of Useful Knowledge* began in mid-March. We started investigating land ownership in the area of South Philadelphia that has the greatest concentration of vacant land, and we envisioned different ways to acquire public as well as private land permanently or temporarily. The viable avenues we identified were the following: (1) lease agreements with the Philadelphia Land Bank; (2) lease agreements with private landowners; (3) coalitions with current community gardens; and (4) agreements for temporary occupation with local non-profit organizations and neighbors.

After conducting research on land ownership in one of the areas with the greatest number of vacant lots, we realized that there was a significant amount of public land with the potential to accommodate a number of *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* (see section 4.1). Since public land owned by different city entities was in the process of being transferred to and merged into the Philadelphia Land Bank, we reached out the executive director of this initiative. He informed us about this new city ordinance and potential ways to obtain temporary leases on public land. He stated that specific activities benefiting community members had to be specified in the lease agreements, and most importantly, a committed group of people had to take responsibility for the land’s maintenance and use. These renewable agreements, which usually last from two to five years, have taken place for years, especially in neglected areas where public investment is rare. However, we found these agreements were going to be held until the completion of the agency’s formation and organization. Agreements would be offered afterwards following the goals of the agency’s recently approved strategic plan, which are quite favorable for the objectives of this project. (see section 1.3)

Transferring public properties to individuals, grassroots groups, and community-based organizations for specific purposes is not unusual. A number of sweat equity and tenant-based public programs have facilitated the revitalization of city-owned vacant properties in recent decades.





However, city officials have been careful to hand over these properties to responsible entities. For the purposes of this project, we realized that acquiring public land would be feasible in the short-term future (following the Philadelphia Land Bank scope and goals), though we acknowledged that we were early in the process of forming a strong base to take care of the land. Soon after, other options were sought and we were able to lease temporarily two adjacent vacant and neglected lots located at 632-634 Jackson Street and owned by an Asian family living in South Philadelphia. Shari Hersh was key in obtaining and restoring the lots.

The lots were covered with debris, yet a large tree at the back provided shade for most of the day. Thanks to the organization and efforts of the Restored Spaces Initiative, the two vacant lots were cleaned, leveled, and opened to the public shortly after the lease agreement was signed (see [figure 6.3.1](#)). Scott Quitel and Rachel Griffith of the Land Health Institute, a nonprofit dedicated to environmental education, ecological design, and research, saw treasure in the debris. Led by Shari Hersh and Margaret Kearney of Restored Spaces, reentry workers from Mural Arts' Youth Violence Reduction Partnership (YVRP) program sorted out what would later become small meandering walls and gardens. After leveling the terrain and covering the dirt ground of the lots with smooth river stone, a transformed shipping container previously used in another Mural Arts project was brought to the site and colored with white and red stripes, following the graphic identity designed by Heidi Chisholm and painted by Kearney, neighbor and local artist Soumya Dhulekar, and the YVRP over the course of a week. The container, which was designed by Ahn-Robinson Studios, brought with it front and back porches as well as seating and picnic tables for over 35 people. It turned the site into an outpost (see [figure 6.3.2](#)). Soon after, Restored Spaces and the Land Health Institute began a series of community workshops to teach neighbors from Jackson Street and adjacent blocks about their local ecology and how to select urban debris from the site and reuse it in urban landscaping (see [figure 6.3.3](#)).



The transformation of the site was noticeable to everyone. As soon as the gates were opened, children, adults, and the elderly looked at the site when passing by, and the less shy asked questions and even participated during the cleaning day. During the restoration of the neglected lots and the first interactions between the Restored Spaces Initiative's staff, Cohabitation Strategies' team members, and residents, neighbors started talking about the two houses that used to be there, which were torn down by the city due to neglect and safety issues. They also talked about current drug activities taking place at the back entrance of our site on Tree Street and shootings that used to be a regular soundtrack of the area before the turn of the century. Most importantly, they expressed how proud they were to have pushed those activities away, and showed interest in the project's ambitions, especially in bringing community groups closer. The block captain, Bonnie Lucas, has been a key source for learning about the social and urban transformations at Jackson Street between South 7th and 6th Streets.

#### 6.4 ACTION 1: SHARING KNOWLEDGE

As part of the startup of the Jackson Street hub, *Action 1: Sharing Knowledge* became the real activation of the relations that had been built over the previous months, particularly during the research phase. On June 28, 2015, Action 1 gathered more than a dozen community organizers, representatives of civic organizations, and artists. The intention was to organize a first meeting with experts and community leaders who could progressively work collaboratively in small groups and become part of the *Playground for Useful Knowledge* creative process. In order to get people to work together actively, the first challenge was to bring together organizations that historically had not collaborated and that often saw other organizations as competitors for the same resources (see [figure 6.4.1](#)).

The key entry point for spurring exchange was requesting perceptions, interpretations, and forms of knowledge of the area. We had already met all the invitees during our initial research, and we knew what they saw as the most crucial issues affecting the South Seven. To break the ice, Philadelphia Theatre of the Oppressed (T.O. Philly)

*"When your block is clean you feel good... maybe feel like going out and meeting people."\**

\*Quote from gathering with committee members

TOP LEFT: 6.3.2 Shipping container adapted for the first Playground for Useful Knowledge

BOTTOM LEFT: 6.3.3 Land Health Institute using site's debris for the restoration of the first Playground for Useful Knowledge

TOP RIGHT: 6.4.1 Breaking the ice at the beginning of Action 1



TOP LEFT 6.4.2  
Image Theatre at Action 1

TOP RIGHT: 6.4.3  
The tree exercise during Action 1

BOTTOM RIGHT: 6.4.4  
The Social Committee at Action 1



opened Action 1 with an interactive theater workshop, performing stories drawn from months of community research through Image Theater (see figure 6.4.2). Image is the first expression in Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, consisting of physical representation through the expression of the body. Participants explored issues of oppression through nonverbal expression and using their own and other participants' bodies to form static physical images depicting feelings, issues, or recurring situations that connect them to their neighborhood. Participants were invited to interpret these images, opening up conversations about vital neighborhood issues. The work of Morgan Andrews and his team of actors from T.O. Philly has been an essential component of the project. It allowed visualization of issues that are apparent to all community leaders but that are often complex to express in their implications. While Image Theater immediately added a very important component of group work, it also brought ludic and playful connotations to Action 1.

Another important aspect of Action 1 was the request to visualize all the concerns, aspirations, challenges, and goals that the group perceived as crucial for the community. In order to do so, we drew a large tree, and after the Image Theater, the group was asked to define keywords summarizing their conception of the area. The tree, as designed by Heidi Chisholm for the identity of the project, had three branches, each representing an area of concern: social, spatial, and economic (see figure 6.4.3). The branches were quickly crowded with keywords clearly representing the group's fears, worries, and aspirations. Words such as crime, gentrification, and segregation neighbored their counterparts: sense of belonging, endogenous development, spaces for encounter.

To end the action, the group was divided into three committees, focusing on economic, spatial, and social issues. The topics are obviously interrelated, but the ambition was to look at each more specifically to facilitate in-depth conversations. The Economy Committee discussed power structures and how to



TOP LEFT: 6.4.5  
The Economy Committee at Action 1.

create more equal opportunities (see figure 6.4.5). The Space Committee focused its attention on how to address the area's lack of spaces for cultural exchange, mostly needed to counteract social frictions. The Social Committee talked about how to break through cultural barriers and create a feeling of community and sense of belonging (see figure 6.4.4). During each conversation, participants expressed their concerns, and their words were visualized in an impromptu diagram drawn on a paper. These separate meetings took the conversation to a greater level of detail. At the end of this process, the main issues identified and thoroughly discussed by the committee members were summed up in a list of major challenges faced by the South Seven:

- lack of opportunities: scarcity of conditions for the emergence of new businesses;
- lack of communication among communities: the existence of cultural barriers and need for public space;
- lack of sense of ownership: social insecurity and litter in the streets;
- lack of resources: disinvestment in terms of facilities and services;
- lack of power: voting abstention and disempowerment related to the neighborhood's future development;

- lack of identity: suffering from being disregarded as a community, from the stigma of poverty and criminality.

*Action 1: Sharing Knowledge* had the ultimate goal of building the right environment for community leaders to exchange understandings of their neighborhood. Once this exchange was established, the next objective was to make the committees active participants in defining the possible potentials of this playground. Part of this process was identifying available community capacities and resources to build this space as well as defining a common vision for the priorities. The committees were asked to hold regular meetings to continue the work of defining the forms of useful knowledge they could identify in their networks. After looking at the challenges the South Seven was facing and determining its resources, the next step has been to work at the conception of strategies and common actions that can address these issues. This entire process also had the ambition of working progressively in circles that ripple outward. Each community leader could identify collaborators or friends who could be progressively involved as they thought they could bring important contributions and new

voices to the project. In this way, the progressive work of the Committee Meetings had the intention to pick up momentum, strength, and the involvement of citizens in shaping their own neighborhood.

## 6.5 ACTION 2: A SPACE FOR URBAN REAPPROPRIATION AND COMMITTEE MEETINGS

The discussion that took place in Action 1 was followed by two Committee Meetings on July 9th and 16th at the hub at 632 Jackson Street. After this first event, a reasonable effort was made to keep the group together and to motivate community members to participate in the next two meetings, as a cohesive group was not yet established. In order to trust each other, to agree on ideas, and to achieve a clear formulation of common intents, we needed to go through a collective process of creation, which implies confrontation and at times dispute. Over time the potentials of these group endeavors started to emerge, and participants began to express excitement as they saw new ideas, larger involvement, and possible collaborations develop through group discussions. During the Committee Meetings on July 9th, the group imagined possible scenarios and thought of strategies to overcome current neighborhood deficiencies and dysfunctions, such as:

- celebrating and sharing local skills, competencies, and knowledge;
- re-appropriation of collective spaces in order to break divisions;
- building a sense of community and a collective neighborhood asset;
- manifestation of a sense of belonging in order to improve the quality of the neighborhood and to take care of it;
- bringing out uniqueness instead of division by capitalizing on local resources;
- breaking out walls generated by segregation and stigma through local pride and a sense of ownership;
- speaking up and taking action as a community in order to ignite change.

This was a major step forward to prepare us for the next Committee

Meeting on July 16th. We understood that to consolidate our collaboration we needed to go beyond collective acknowledgement of problematic conditions and visions alone. At this phase of the process, it was important to translate the strategies into concrete actions that would characterize Action 3. Our shared purpose thus allowed three dominant proposals to emerge: (1) a night market in Mifflin Square to test new forms of economies and the possibilities of endogenous development; (2) a Trash Academy to develop forms of awareness and self-organization for the area's shared spaces; (3) a street parade that could manifest the fears, hopes, and protests of the neighborhood. The night market was intended to become a larger event that would simultaneously help local shadow economies emerge at a public event and also be a showcase of the neighborhood's useful knowledge.

During the Committee Meeting on July 16th, the group expressed such a clear urgency to deal with Mifflin Square Park that the project's entire focus shifted to creating a night market in this location. Mifflin Square seemed the ideal space for a collective project for the neighborhood. The park is a green public plaza patronized for leisure, sports, family gatherings, and informal cooking, but also for illegal activities such as illegal vending, drinking, gambling, and drug dealing. Widespread negative perceptions of the park and its prevalent use by the Cambodian community made it undeniably important for all citizens to regain its shared ownership and to turn the park into a safe space.

The committee members and CohStra presented three proposals to a larger audience during *Action 2: A Space for Urban Reappropriation*, which took place on July 18th. This gathering aimed to disseminate and elaborate on the proposals as well as to start planning forms of urban appropriation through experimental projects. The event started with a Forum Theatre session by T.O. Philly, which—unlike activities in Action 1—consisted of performing scenes inspired by real situations (see figure 6.5.1). The audience was encouraged to give feedback, to come on stage, and literally to act out the change. This intervention had a cathartic impact on the audience

*"Image Theatre can help bring people together, in a common space, to creatively, nonverbally, and dialogically express and develop their perceptions of their world, power structures, and oppressions."<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Quote by L.M. Bogad

<sup>1</sup> Bogad, L.M. "Social movements, demonstrations, and dialogical performance." Cohen-Cruz, Jan and Mady Schutzman. *A Real Companion: Dialogues on theatre and cultural politics*. New York: Routledge, 2006. 46-58.



members, who were called on to experience the challenges of achieving improvements and were empowered to break the cycle of oppressive conditions. One of the scenarios presented by T.O. Philly was about the overwhelming street litter, which was the subject of several committee discussions (see figure 6.5.2). Many participants engaged in re-enacting the scenes, bringing to the group's attention different approaches to improve the situation (see figure 6.5.3 and 6.5.4). The discussion around litter unfolded beyond expectations as it revealed not only a hygienic problem, but also brought up questions related to different cultural conceptions and the lack of public investment and maintenance in the area. It touched on the diverse cultural habits in South Philly, the lack of a sense of belonging that results in indifference, and at last the stigma marking the neighborhood and the local government's carelessness (see figure 6.5.5).

The outcomes of this session, which encouraged the attendees to take an active and transformative role in the neighborhood, led us to the second phase of the event, which consisted of the presentation of the ideas produced in previous Committee Meetings. For this occasion, CohStra fabricated a detailed 20-foot-wide map of Mifflin Square, which was laid down on the floor. The contentious space of Mifflin Square served as a common ground for discussion. All the ideas related to the night market, the Trash Academy, the street parade, and many other proposals were symbolized by cardboard signs assembled on top of the map (see figure 6.5.6). The entire group played and conversed for several hours, imagining possible developments and potentials for Action 3. The signs were rearranged on the map, regrouped, and in some cases discarded in order finally to develop a coherent idea for a project approved and supported by a large group of community members. The interactive discussion/game around the map of Mifflin Square was so successful in visualizing the potential of various projects that several community members asked us to start working on larger maps of the entire neighborhood (see figure 6.5.7).

The last Committee Meeting on July 23rd served to reconsider ideas



in terms of the time and resources available. With this new shift, the project faced several insurmountable challenges. The first one was obviously the ambition to create an experimental project in such a short time that had been conceived for a small courtyard but now envisioned taking over a very large public park! This jump in scale would have serious consequences in terms of CohStra and Mural Arts' capacity to coordinate and produce the event. Furthermore, the night market made us subject to an extremely complex legal condition, as obtaining permission for such a large manifestation in under two months seemed nonviable. After a thorough consideration, CohStra, Mural Arts, and several of our partners reached the conclusion that it was counterproductive to organize such an event without the time and resources to succeed. After numerous exchanges, we jettisoned the night market and decided to transform the event into a festival focused on cultural exchange and knowledge sharing. The ultimate goal, however, was still to achieve political unity and a common endeavor that would allow

the neighborhood for once to have a common voice. The street parade was dropped, but the Trash Academy found some enthusiastic leaders and followers who expressed the intention to work together with MAP on a long-term basis, and it began meetings shortly thereafter through workshops at the hub on Jackson Street.

### 6.6 ACTION 3: MIFFLIN SQUARE ALLIANCE FESTIVAL

After the last committee meeting on July 23rd, the entire team entered a very productive operative phase. Working closely with curator Lucía Sanromán, CohStra curated the event, while Shari Hersh and the Restored Spaces team organized and managed every aspect of production and permits. Committee members and other partners provided specific contributions, ideas, and support. Each organization and individual involved was asked to contribute, and we had several conversations to define the most effective way to voice the programs

TOP LEFT: 6.5.1  
*The Theatre Forum about litter during Action 2.*

MIDDLE LEFT: 6.5.2  
*Block captain Bonnie Lucas reacting to the scenario during Action 2.*

BOTTOM LEFT: 6.5.3  
*Block captain Bonnie Lucas acting out changes to the scenario during Action 2.*

RIGHT, CLOCKWISE:  
6.5.4  
*Another participant coming on stage during Action 2.*  
6.5.5  
*T.O. Philly drawing conclusions after Action 2's Theatre Forum session.*  
6.5.6  
*The map of Mifflin Square from Action 2.*  
6.5.7  
*Playing with signs on the map during Action 2.*



and aspirations of each participant. Considering the short time frame, the ambition was to reveal the best expression of the activities present in the South Seven. The festival was the result of an alliance of organizations and individuals—our partners—who chose Mifflin Square both as a concrete possibility for the re-appropriation of a shared space and as a symbolic gesture of the reunion of diverse cultures and forms of knowledge. The event was called *Mifflin Square Alliance Festival* to emphasize a collective imaginative endeavor for attaining social cohesion in a neighborhood that is traditionally torn by racial divisions and in a space known for being contentious.

All the partners whom we directly involved responded by suggesting contributions to the program and involving their own networks in the event. Word of the festival spread quickly in the neighborhood, and more people and organizations who hadn't taken part in the Committee Meetings asked to participate. The festival's program was initially conceived with four areas in order to provide structure

to all the ideas that had emerged from the partners: the PowerHouse, the Useful Knowledge Workshops, the Kids' Union, and the Picnic area. These areas represented activities that were already present in our partners' programs and that were discussed at Action 2 on the large map of Mifflin Square.

The PowerHouse became the central engine of the entire event and was placed in the central circular fountain of Mifflin Square (*see figure 6.6.1*). It featured music and dance performances from various cultural groups, a food contest awarding the best cook in South Philly, and a talk show about the potential of vacant lots in the area. In a way the central space was devoted to bringing together the most public expressions of the program, extremely different forms of performing arts alongside political debates and group activities (*see figure 6.6.2*). Our partners offered help finding performers from different background, which gave us the possibility to show the variety of cultural expression present in South Philly (*see figure 6.6.3*). Performances included African-American hip-hop,

Cambodian psychedelic rock, Karen and Cambodian dance, and Aztec music (*see figure 6.6.4*).

Food is a very important element for a neighborhood with both large cultural assets and high rates of poverty and malnutrition. Cooking carries a community's identity and can take many variations based on cultural influences. During one of our committee meetings, we assisted in an animated conversation between Thoi Nguyen, the director of SEAMAAC of Vietnamese origins, and the Cambodian Sovannary Heang, owner of the Friendly Market on 7th Street, about whose culture pho belonged to and its different versions. The food contest seemed to be the best way to shed light on local food production from informal activities, individuals, and also local restaurants and food businesses, particularly those on 7th Street. The park traditionally hosts daily informal food sellers, and as such food can be used both to validate difference as well as to legitimize economic activities that have always been perceived as detrimental rather than potentials for the development

of new neighborhood businesses. The *South Philly Food Contest* had a jury composed of three experts: two board members of the Philadelphia Food Trust, and a renowned gourmand member of CohStra. The wide spontaneous participation in this event showed how food is a strong vehicle for expressing cultural values in the area and how it can become a means for cultural exchange and dialogue (*see figure 6.6.5*).

It was equally important to debate future development of the area and its many vacant lots with the presence of the main three civic associations that deal with zoning in the area: East Passyunk Crossing Civic Association, Lower Moyamensing Civic Association, and the 7th Street Community Civic Association. These groups had never before sat at a table together. This subject, a primary interest of CohStra's since the project's beginning due to the area's imminent risk of gentrification, came as a specific request from our partners, who saw the urgency of calling attention to a crucial threat. As expected, the

*LEFT, CLOCKWISE:*  
 6.6.1 *The PowerHouse at Action 3.*  
 6.6.2 *Karen traditional dance troupe in the PowerHouse.*  
 6.6.3 *Cambodian dance troupe in the PowerHouse.*  
 6.6.4 *Cambodian psychedelic band in the PowerHouse.*

*RIGHT, CLOCKWISE:*  
 6.6.5 *The South Philly Food Contest at Action 3.*  
 6.6.6 *The public discussion about vacant lots in the PowerHouse.*  
 6.6.7 *The Useful Knowledge Workshops area at Action 3.*  
 6.6.8 *Yoga class in the Useful Knowledge Workshops area.*

conversation was less attended than the performances, but nevertheless it introduced a larger audience to the risks of gentrification and a number of possible strategies to counteract the threats of financial speculation, rise in house values, and risk of evictions with civic participation (*see figure 6.6.6*). T.O. Philly acted as Master of Ceremonies for the PowerHouse, and while introducing the next show, it promoted the various other events that were simultaneously happening in other parts of the park.

The Useful Knowledge Workshops offered an array of short, informal seminars led by local civic organizations and individuals eager to share their knowledge and expertise and to present their program of activities and services (*see figure 6.6.7 and 6.6.8*). Thirteen short workshops were available in the program, running for free every half hour in five different time slots and touching various subjects:



In another part of the park, the Kids' Union was conceived as a platform for artistic and recreational activities for children (*see figure 6.6.9*). Several organizations that care for the cultural and artistic education of young people contributed. Most of South Philly's young population can afford only public schools, which across Philadelphia are at risk of closure. As a consequence, the budget for more creative subjects has been drastically reduced in recent years. Many local organizations see their mission as extending after-school and weekend programs and trying to diminish school dropouts by offering an alternative to street life and crime to these young people (*see figure 6.6.10*). During the festival we offered a compendium of the most relevant initiatives in the neighborhood, such as a video workshop to record neighborhood stories with the artist Laura Deutch; a Color Wheel project from Fleisher Art Memorial, whose aim is to diffuse art to a wider public and especially to the most deprived; sidewalk drawings and physical activities such as an obstacle course, soccer goals, balls, and hula hoops with Friends of Mifflin Square Park; face painting with Bethanna; and a soccer tournament with Snyder Avenue Congregational Church (*see figure 6.6.11*).

We also added another area of interest to the program, the Exhibition area, which came from two different organizations and which showed one more time the urgent need to use the platform offered by the festival to nurture the debate around urgent topics in Philadelphia. Puentes de Salud and the Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia approached us with the idea to display two projects they had been busy with in recent years and that by serendipity matched in terms of purposes. Both projects address the question of migration, displacement, cultural trauma, and the complex identity of young Americans of foreign origins born in the US or abroad. It is a subject of great interest for South Philly's mixed community, but also for a wider audience who can better understand the struggles that minorities suffered to reach the United States. The two exhibitions we displayed had already been exhibited in other venues within the country and abroad. The first one was entitled *El Viaje de los Niños*



(The Children's Journey) by Puentes de Salud. It tells the stories of Mexican immigrant children who have crossed the border to come to Philadelphia. Through visual art sessions, the children created large-scale dioramas illustrating their journeys and the distress migration created in their lives and identities. Narrating their stories in accompanying audio tracks, the children take the listeners through their migration (*see figure 6.6.12*). The second exhibition is a long-term project by the New York City-based artist Pete Pin in collaboration with the Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia. Sokkala Chy, the director of CAGP, was very generous in offering and diffusing this artwork, which we couldn't afford in terms of logistics and resources, and was on view at Preah Buddha Rangsey Temple right next to the park (*see figure 6.6.13*). Every half hour guided tours would lead people to visit the exhibition at the temple. *I am Khmer* explores memory and identity in Cambodian American communities across the country. By means of workshops with young generations, the project reconstructs family histories

through civil war, genocide, and refugee resettlement. In this Exhibition area we integrated two additional projects: the design concept for the proposed schoolyard at Taggart Elementary by the Trust for Public Land and design consultant TEND landscape inc, and the interactive research project Penn Center for Public Health Initiatives by the University of Pennsylvania in partnership with the Free Library of Philadelphia, which assembles interviews with community members about their health needs.

In order to keep unity and cohesion between all these different programs, the Festival had a homogeneous identity, which manifested itself mostly through two installation elements. The various sections of the Park devoted to the PowerHouse, the Useful Knowledge Workshops, the Kids' Union, and the Picnic were identified with large wooden signs that clearly named each area of the park (*see figure 6.6.9*). Moreover, it seemed necessary to work on a larger installation that would spatially manifest the union of the efforts to build the Alliance

4:15-4:45

1. Keep the Neighborhood Clean with Trash Academy

5-5:30

2. How to create a Community Land Trust with Cohabitation Strategies

3. Yoga with Adina Lieberman from Puentes de Salud

4. Ballin Up Scholastic & Sports Project with Rickey Ducan from Ballin Up

5:30-6

5. Map Your Vision for an Ideal Neighborhood School, an interactive workshop with Southeast Philadelphia Collaborative

6. The Joy of Learning: Reading and Writing as a Mighty Writer, a program with Gosia Sanchez from Mighty Writers

7. Growing Resilient Families: Children's mental health services, becoming a foster family, and support for parents, with Bethanna Community Umbrella Agency

USEFUL KNOWLEDGE WORKSHOPS 5-7 P.M.

6-6:30

8. Building Stronger Communities in Southeast Philadelphia with SEAMAAC

9. Bugs! Bugs! Bugs! Ideas for (prize) fighting, purging and preventing bedbugs, head lice and cockroaches with Lisa Grange from Snyder Avenue Congregational Church

10. Mifflin Square Park: Past & Present with Friends of Mifflin Square Park

6:30-7

11. Language Lab: Make a postcard and learn a word in another language, an art workshop with Shira Wallinsky from Southeast by Southeast

12. Learn how to install weatherization materials to keep your house warm this winter with United Communities Southeast Philadelphia

13. Eligibility & Services with Kamal Adhikari from PA Migrant Education

RIGHT, CLOCKWISE:  
6.6.9  
The Kids' Union area at Action 3.  
6.6.10  
Children playing in the Kids' Union area.  
6.6.11  
Children playing in the park during Action 3.  
6.6.12  
The exhibition Los viajes de los niños during Action 3.



Festival and the neighborhood's diverse cultural fabric. We therefore decided to build a large wooden structure that completely embraced the central fountain and therefore the space of the PowerHouse. Hundreds of Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Mexican, and Indian lanterns hung from this structure (see figure 6.6.14). This installation, while metaphorically expressing the neighborhood's alliance in respect for all its differences, also allowed creation of a more intimate and enclosed space at the center of the park and a natural choreography for all the shows. The structure, which was visible from any corner of the park, also represented a beautiful, strange object that dignified the park and created a clearly festive environment. While the installation was made with simple elements, its impressive scale provided all our partners a certain level of pride. At

the end of the event, T.O. Philly led a final closing ceremony asking the participants to come together in a circle to express what positive experiences they would retain from the day (see figure 6.6.15). In a climate of great jubilation, the lanterns were gifted to the participants. Several of the lanterns had statements taken from the committee meetings, such as "Gentrification is coming!", "Where are the resources for our community?", or even "Vote abstention = disinvestment!", that went back peacefully to the houses of event participants.

The entire event was marked by an atmosphere of great excitement, as all the participants recognized the festival as their own event. The group effort to organize an event that seemed too ambitious to be true led to a general feeling of satisfaction and recognition.

It has surely been rewarding to see that the festival was so well attended, but more importantly, that the people who convened came from all the community's diverse groups and that the general atmosphere made it natural to mingle and exchange. This success was the direct consequence of the ownership our partnering civic organizations took of the Mifflin Square Alliance Festival and their strenuous work in involving their own networks and expressing the event's symbolic importance.

The idea of organizing a large public event to close a phase of Cohabitation Strategies' work in South Philly was conceived as an opportunity to test the collaborations that were initiated during the Committee Meetings and that needed a tangible outcome to solidify and to be challenged. None of the organizations that have been involved, neither we nor MAP, could ever have reached such a socially and racially diverse group of people alone. Together, though, we achieved something beyond our individual limits, and more importantly, we had the chance to work closely with people and organizations with great qualities and potential. The festival's favorable outcome was apparent when several community leaders were asking us excitedly: This is wonderful, but what is next? Once collaboration is initiated, things that at first seemed impossible become immediately feasible. Importantly, this common awareness and appreciation had its roots in shared processes and understanding that have been developing during the group activities at the Jackson Street hub. A certain shared background emerged among us, and seeing the local problems together also unified a certain belief that common strategies can become a reality. The most ambitious aim that a collective process can achieve is to politicize its participants and to involve them in starting to foresee possibilities unapproachable at the origin of the process. *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* is far from reaching this goal, yet it introduced a first indication that new collaborations, public actions, and common strategies can emerge from this initial work.



TOP RIGHT: 6.6.13  
The exhibition *I am Khmer in the Preah Buddha Rangsey Temple* during Action 3.

MIDDLE RIGHT: 6.6.14  
Structure with lanterns embracing the PowerHouse.

BOTTOM RIGHT: 6.6.15  
The final ceremony led by T.O. Philly at the end of Action 3.



## 7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDED DIRECTIONS

The Restored Spaces Initiative of the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program invited Cohabitation Strategies to develop an action research project with the purpose of supporting the growth and effectiveness of Restored Spaces to work long-term in a neighborhood, and to achieve the following main goals:

1. To define a neighborhood in Philadelphia through thorough quantitative and qualitative research in which the Restored Spaces Initiative could more effectively serve as a *platform for community action through art and planning in shaping the urban landscape*<sup>1</sup>.

2. To develop a socio-spatial platform by integrating a diverse local base of residents, community activists, civic associations, and cultural producers with whom the Restored Spaces Initiative, together with their city and nonprofit partners, can form long-term alliances for working towards envisioning socially just and sustainable ways of developing the defined neighborhood and the livelihoods of those who call it home.

3. To create a strategic knowledge toolkit for supporting the Restored Spaces Initiative's decision-making processes, while offering an expanded understanding of the urban dynamics at play in any of the projects it decides to take on in its future operations, whether they are in the defined neighborhood or in any other area of the city.

4. To pilot community-based forms of direct engagement and transformation through the co-production (by the local community base, CohStra, Restored Spaces, and other

possible partners) of a series of temporary projects or interventions in the defined neighborhood.

5. To put forward a clear set of short-, medium-, and long-term recommendations for future directions that can be followed by the Restored Spaces Initiative as it seeks a more sustainable and long-term engagement with the neighborhood and its inhabitants.

As has been illustrated throughout this report, Cohabitation Strategies developed *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* with these five general goals in mind, beginning with citywide ethnographic work and spatial analysis that led to the selection of an area in South Philadelphia that we call the South Seven, which provides a strong community base and necessary components for the Restored Spaces Initiative to achieve a successful sustainable engagement. This was followed by the development of an in-depth ethnographic, spatial, economic, and statistical knowledge base of the South Seven, which helped CohStra begin weaving a delicate new network of social relations that will later constitute the knowledge platform of the *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge*. Finally, this knowledge platform allowed us to co-produce the actions and interventions that were piloted at the Jackson Street hub and in Mifflin Square, which demonstrated a range of possible future directions for furthering Restored Spaces' sustained engagement in the South Seven.

### 7.1 DESIRED OUTCOMES OF PLAYGROUNDS FOR USEFUL KNOWLEDGE

The *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* action-research project allowed us to pilot a series of investigations, actions, and interventions to test the feasibility of a sustainable engagement in South Philadelphia. Considering the previous five goals as well as the project's projected agency to build capacity for the Restored Spaces Initiative's future involvement, Cohabitation Strategies acknowledges the following outcomes: **see section 5**

#### 1. PROVISION OF SUSTAINABLE MEETING, WORKING, AND LEARNING SPACES TO ENGAGE COOPERATIVE PRACTICES AND HOST COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES ACKNOWLEDGING LOCAL CULTURES AND VALUES.

The transformation of two private vacant lots into a neighborhood hub open to the entire community allowed us to confirm one of our initial premises: the urgency of creating neutral, communal, and safe spaces where community members from different backgrounds and with diverse languages can meet each other, work together, and learn from each other's needs, priorities, and visions for their district. The pilot playground stimulated trans-generational and cross-ethnic interactions and conversations that in many instances took place for the first time in this highly diverse district (see figure 7.1.1). Additionally, the expansion of the pilot playground's territory from private to public spaces asserted the need and search for spaces of encounter where practices of inclusivity and solidarity can take place, acknowledging and embracing the diverse local cultures and values as well as the differences and communalities between community groups.

#### 2. DEVELOPMENT OF USEFUL KNOWLEDGE COMMITTEES TO DRAW ON THE DIVERSE SKILLS, EXPERIENCE, AND INSIGHTS OF LOCAL RESIDENTS AND CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT.

The development of committees composed of a diverse cohort of community members and individuals engaged in different local grassroots groups and community organizations confirmed the willingness of residents and community leaders to share and exchange their own and their communities' knowledge and expertise for the benefit of the community as a whole (see figure 7.1.2). These committees, which focused on spatial, economic, and social aspects, were the leading voice of each experimental action, workshop, and discussion, as well as the driving force of the inception of the envisioned district-based knowledge platform, which was showcased at the *Mifflin Square Alliance Festival*. The festival became the live manifestation of the project's envisioned assemblage of useful knowledge.



<sup>1</sup> Paraphrasing the Restored Spaces Initiative Director, Shari Hersh <http://muralarts.org/programs/restored-spaces-environmental-projects>



**3. STIMULATING THE PRODUCTION OF URBAN INTERVENTIONS TO PROVIDE SPACE FOR THE KNOWLEDGE PLATFORM AND TO GENERATE SOCIAL AND SPATIAL TRANSFORMATIONS.** The feasibility of urban interventions across the district was tested by using private and public spaces for experimental actions. The first two participatory events were planned to take place in two neglected private lots that were leased, restored, and put in service for neighbors and community members. The impact at the block level and eventually beyond was obvious from the day the gate doors opened and cleaning began. Neighbors got curious, asked questions, approached the site, and eventually became part of the project: children, adults, and the elderly. Owners of vacant lots in the community began asking questions about transforming their sites into playgrounds. Families and community members engaged in public education in one way or another started envisioning playgrounds in neglected schoolyards and underutilized parks. Non-profit organizations began acknowledging the need to break down spatial and language barriers by building community spaces. A small urban intervention opened the possibility of using Mifflin Square, a public space overlooked by the city but precious to residents, to undertake the last and most participatory action. Mifflin Square became an inclusive and unifying site for the *Mifflin Square Alliance Festival* (see figure 7.1.3). This project corroborated the appreciation and willingness from community stakeholders to restore and take ownership of underutilized, vacant, or underfunded private and public spaces to satisfy collective demands and interests. The community needs are many, but so are the spaces available to house transformative programs.

**4. TURNING VACANT AND ABANDONED LOTS INTO PLAYGROUNDS FOR USEFUL KNOWLEDGE.** The initial plan for this pilot project was to use underutilized and vacant lots for the development of playgrounds. The pilot playground was selected and accessed by the project's team, while subsequent playgrounds would be chosen by community members involved in the knowledge platform. The temporary acquisition of

sites for the playground was possible in a relatively short period. In the case of the first playground, it was through a lease agreement, while in the case of the *Mifflin Square Alliance Festival*, it was through an application permit for use of recreation facilities submitted to the Philadelphia Parks and Recreation Department. In both instances, this was feasible at such a rapid pace thanks to Shari Hersh and the Philadelphia Mural Arts' exceptional efforts and close relations with city departments.

Despite the shift, which led us not to pursue vacant land for the last intervention, we investigated and measured the permanent occupation of public vacant land for future playgrounds using public instruments. This project coincided with the inception of an unprecedented city agency, the Philadelphia Land Bank. Meeting with the agency's executive director and studying its strategic plan and goals corroborated that temporary and permanent access to public land is feasible in the South Seven. According to the Philadelphia Land Bank (2015), the agency aims to promote individual development opportunities for neglected public lots, then transfer these lots to adjacent homeowners for use as a side yard, as well as to preserve existing gardens that have community support and a track record of maintenance. Additionally, the agency aims to maximize opportunities for partnerships in greening in order to improve and repurpose vacant land and to identify, acquire, and/or dispose of vacant land where there is demonstrated need for more or improved space. Finally, it seeks to provide means for public engagement in decision-making. This public instrument can be key for this project's continuation, since community members have a say in the programing and use of public land. The Restored Spaces Initiative has the opportunity to partner with this new agency and support community members together with the assistance of RCOs serving their area. We are certain that the development of community programs for a number of public vacant lots will be more feasible if partnership with the Land Bank is pursued parallel to the active integration of the many actors who were part of the *Playgrounds* knowledge platform in the management and care of the lots.





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## 7.2 RECOMMENDED DIRECTIONS

Strengthening the relationships formed during the action-research project and building up new alliances are fundamental to keep the already-formed knowledge platform alive and to create new *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge*. Perhaps there are no specific sites yet for the creation of a new playground, but there is a vibrant cohort of individuals, civic groups, and nonprofits willing to share their knowledge and expertise for the benefit of the South Seven. This project proved that community members are interested and willing to collaborate and to break down walls that have kept them isolated. Thus, for the Restored Spaces Initiative to catalyze social change across different community groups and enact spatial transformations across the South Seven, it is fundamental to continue dialog with residents, local grassroots groups, non-profit organizations, and Registered Community Organizations. This can be done through a number of small-, medium-, and large-scale projects across the district, targeting sites of opportunity.

There is a need to guide community members through site-specific projects and the search for and acquisition of sites for new *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge*. During the action-research, community members

acknowledged the need for collective spaces for recreation, exchanging knowledge, and building relations across community groups. They showed particular interest in transforming and improving vacant land, pedestrian corridors, neglected public school yards that are locked after school hours, informal markets, and public spaces underfunded and overlooked by the city. These transformations can be potential projects for the Restored Spaces Program. These projects can be achieved by building strategic partnerships with community stakeholders engaged in the knowledge platform, RCOs, and city agencies and by using public instruments such as the Philadelphia Land Bank and the South District Plan.

Acquiring a long-term and sustained stream of funds to develop projects with three- to five-year commitments is one of the biggest challenges that the Restored Spaces Initiative faces. Engaged sustainability cannot ensue when the common funding stream focuses its resources on the production of an end-project after which the resources disappear, whether it is a mural or a landscaping project. This was the most sounding critique of neighbors and associations when they refer to the work of Philadelphia Mural Arts, claiming that though there was a clear commitment to maintaining the integrity and display of the art products, the commitment to maintaining the social relations and dynamics generated during the production of the art works was unclear. Since the very beginnings of this project, *Cohabitation Strategies* emphasized that *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* would focus on the development of social processes and relations rather than concrete visual art works; what was produced was an amazing network of new social relations with a clear awareness of the problems and challenges facing the neighborhood, which is ready to act and participate in its urgent transformation. This network is the most important asset of the project, which cannot be abandoned or taken for granted: the risks are too high, and therefore new and inventive ways of long-term funding and support should be a top priority in restructuring the Restored Spaces Initiative, including the integration of a local community organizer with ethnographic experience who is able to provide constant ground

support as new initiatives are formed.

If the *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* platform is to be embraced, the Restored Spaces Initiative needs to expand its team with the objective of creating a transdisciplinary base group with wider skills and expertise in community organizing, ethnographic research, policy, and planning. The risk of not doing so will not only jeopardize the network of social relations that has been created, but most importantly will again signal what Philadelphia Mural Arts has been criticized for as described in the previous paragraph, a lack of a sustained engagement. A claim to producing sustainability in restoring environments and empowering livelihoods will be very difficult to achieve with a team of three; our recommendation is that Philadelphia Mural Arts increase the Restored Spaces Initiative human capacity with at least two new hires and that it continue to consider strategically the constant involvement of other artists, researchers, and activists in every project they decide to pursue. The selection of these new collaborators and employees is a delicate and important process in which *Cohabitation Strategies* will be glad to assist.

The Mifflin Square Alliance and other neighborhood relations that were created during the development of *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* will require the careful co-production of an action plan for the coming months and years. This action plan needs to be generated in conjunction with local partners, but facilitated by the Restored Spaces Initiative and communicated through different media to all the participants, collaborators, and spectators. The *Mifflin Square Alliance Festival* can be embraced as a new neighborhood tradition that has already begun to foster the integration of more local partners in the process of looking for socially and environmentally just ways to improve the South Seven area and the city at large. Therefore, a specific plan should be put in place as soon as possible, in order to continue to support the co-production of the Alliance Festival for the following year, with new, larger, and wider strategic visions.

Restored Spaces should guide local residents, civic organizations,

nonprofits and community stakeholders to facilitate the creation of a Community Land Trust to use public vacant land to serve the needs and interests of community members rather than those of real estate companies and speculators. The South Seven has a significant amount of vacant land. However, it is gradually shrinking. Even vacant lots holding community gardens and playgrounds are being sold. Market-rate housing development is increasing, but there is not interest from the public or private sectors to provide community facilities, recreation spaces, community gardens, and affordable living, working, and learning spaces for long-term residents. This project would have the potential to strengthen the local community while providing community facilities in perpetuity to satisfy community needs for this district's current and future generations. Some of the benefits the CLT would bring are the following:

1. Allowing community ownership and democratic control of land. Decisions on how to use land are made not on the basis of economic returns but on community interests.
2. Strengthening the local community through the interdependency of CLT partners (tenants/users, community stakeholders, and public servants). Sharing resources, knowledge, and expertise, along with active participation are key in building communities.
3. Providing flexibility to respond to different community needs and interests. CLTs are capable of accommodating community gardens and facilities; learning, commercial, and working spaces; and different models of housing, such as coops, rentals, owner-occupied units, and even senior and supportive housing.
4. Keeping assets in the community by facilitating the transfer of private and public ownership to community ownership, sometimes at below-market rates. CLTs can receive and manage donations of land and capital to purchase and develop land. The Philadelphia Land Bank, a new city agency, can become a partner and donor.
5. Preserving and protecting public investment by allowing one subsidy to keep operating for a century or longer, rather than the average 20-year span of most public subsidies.



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## AUTHOR BIOS

### COHABITATION STRATEGIES

(CohStra) is a non-profit cooperative for socio-spatial research, design, and development based in New York City, Rotterdam, and Ibiza. CohStra was founded in the city of Rotterdam right after the 2008 financial crash by Lucia Babina, Emiliano Gandolfi, Gabriela Rendón, and Miguel Robles-Durán. Since then, CohStra has initiated operation centers in various cities across Europe and South and North America. Its action research endeavors to facilitate transformative and progressive urban intervention projects. This is undertaken through active engagement with a range of locally embedded actors from governments, municipalities, cultural institutions, non-profit organizations, and civic groups to researchers, artists, designers, and independent activists who coalesce around the desire for social, spatial, and environmental justice – in short, the Right to the City.

### LUCIA BABINA

is a cultural activist whose focus is on research and reactivation of sustainable ways of cohabitation and coexistence. Her aim is to reflect on the current global inequity and injustice by means of collective and artistic processes. She is the co-founder of iStrike and Strike.ultd in Rotterdam, an environmental organization aimed at creating multidisciplinary platforms of analysis, comparison, and international exchange. She is co-author of several projects such as *The Cook, the Farmer, His Wife and Their Neighbour* as part of Stedelijk Goes West (Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 2009); and TheBrantClub as part of Musagetes' Guelph Program (Guelph, Canada, 2012).

### EMILIANO GANDOLFI

is an architect and independent curator, Director of the Curry Stone Design Prize, and co-founder of Cohabitation Strategies. Gandolfi was co-curator of the 11th International Architecture Exhibition – Biennale di Venezia, and before this role, he was curator at the Netherlands Architecture Institute in Rotterdam. Gandolfi has been involved in a wide range of projects, exhibitions, and conferences dealing with methodologies and strategies for urban transformation, on both theoretical and practical levels.

### JANE GOLDEN

has been Executive Director of the City of Philadelphia Mural Arts program for thirty years. Under Golden's direction, the Mural Arts Program has grown from a small city agency into the largest mural program in the United States. She is the co-author of *Philadelphia Murals and the Stories They Tell*, *More Philadelphia Murals*, and *Mural Arts @ 30*. Golden holds a Master of Fine Arts from the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University and degrees in Fine Arts and Political Science from Stanford University.

### GABRIELA RENDÓN

is an architect and urban planner committed to social and spatial justice. Her work combines participatory action research, spatial planning, and design strategies. Neighborhood decline and restructuring processes as well as collective and non-speculative housing models that provide equitable development in profit-driven urban environments are among her areas of interest and expertise. Rendón's current study centers on the politics, practices, and constraints of socio-spatial restructuring through citizen participation in low-income districts in America and Western Europe. She is an Assistant Professor of Urban Planning at Parsons The New School for Design in New York City.

### MIGUEL ROBLES-DURÁN

is an urbanist, professor, and lead faculty member of the graduate program in Design and Urban Ecologies at The New School/Parsons in New York and Senior fellow at "Civic City," a post-graduate design/research program based at the Haute École d'Art et de Design (HEAD) Geneva, Switzerland. Among his direct engagements in the field, he co-directs with David Harvey the National Strategy Center for the Right to the Territory (CENEDET) in the Republic of Ecuador. Robles-Durán has wide international experience in the strategic definition/coordination of trans-disciplinary urban projects, as well as in the development of tactical design strategies and civic engagement platforms that confront the contradictions of neoliberal urbanization.

### LUCÍA SANROMÁN

is a curator and writer and the Director of Visual Arts at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, CA. Her work investigates aesthetics in relation to efficacy in social, participatory, and process-based art practice, focusing on the correlation between art history and theory with disciplines outside of the arts. Sanromán was awarded the 2012 Warhol Foundation Curatorial Fellowship and a 2013 Warhol Exhibition Grant for *Citizen Culture: Art and Architecture Shape Policy* at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 2014.

### BETH UZWIAK

is an artist and researcher. She has been involved in a range of projects addressing civic engagement and urban change in Philadelphia. Her current art project investigates the impact of racial discrimination and state violence on social movement mobilization. Uzwiak has held full-time faculty positions at American University and Bryn Mawr College. She is co-founder of Envision Imprint, a collective of artistic researchers who use sensory ethnography and participatory art methods to address social inequities. Her art and research have been exhibited and published internationally. She holds a Ph.D. in anthropology from Temple University. In addition to co-writing sections of this publication, Uzwiak was fieldwork researcher and community organizer for Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge.

## CREDITS

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