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. According to Adam Forbes, it is becoming difficult to retain the tenures and secure these community spaces. Relying on some 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 these need their properties for ventures, and some have significant tax arrears. There is hope that the Land Bank would assist in transferring these lots to NHC, since they have leased city-owned land for ventures, 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 challenges in 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.

4.2 PUBLIC EDUCATION AND EDUCATIONAL SPACES

Learning spaces and other community centers where residents can gather and socialize are noticeably scarce in the core of the South Seven. There are no 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 constituents. **Located 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.

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 its schools, a situation that has produced gross inequity in per pupil spending. In 1995, 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 carried out a massive expansion of charter schools and the takeover of struggling schools by private management. Charter schools are independently run public schools paid for by tax dollars. 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 (Sánchez 2013). In 2012, the SRC announced plans to close 26 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 Vase School, and Hox Technical High School. In 2014, the school housed an enormous Art Basel event at 10th and Milk Street. Since the vibrant market for art, automotive, technical, and entrepreneurial training programs (see figure 4.2.3) 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.

While school “reform” marks an economic divestment in public education, the innovation of school leaders and the dedication of public school staff continue. Both Forbes and South Philadelphia High School’s intentionally strive to be safe places for multicultural students. They are places where children from vastly different backgrounds interact. The principals of Thomas Jefferson School and South Philadelphia High School 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 OET (out-of-school time) programming. While connected to the larger mechanism of privatization, OET 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
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 11th Street. From infancy and toy stores to butchers and yarmulkes, 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 Threat 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 Parrish 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 patronise certain establishments.

The second wave of immigration from Southeast Asia (1979 through the mid-1980s) coincides 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 reduced dealing, sex work, and gang membership. Some people in the area have described the community as "the red zone" because it falls between 7th and 11th Streets and has provided social programming and support for youth and families. The 7th Street Community Civic Association is currently working with several citywide organizations to reduce gang violence and incarceration rates in the area and to increase employment and educational opportunities. Long-time African-American residents report that the area was segregated for many decades, "while people knew where so 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-Asian began to move into the area, some young people were attempting to adjust to life in the US after surviving war and related traumas. The area also became involved in these gangs. Resident Da Lai Loos, who used to run an apartment near 7th and Jackson Streets, explained that the area was once called the “red zone” because it falls between 7th and 11th Streets. Block captain Bonnie Louis said that, in recent years, the police and the
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 (fruit farm industry) in Kenton Square. Similarly, Dai Lai Ho from the Korea Community explained that many Hmong 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 6.1 and 6.2).

Beginning in the 1990s, US Chinese immigration included both professional and working classes who settled in historic downtown Chinatowns, Cherry Hill, New Jersey, and South and Northeast Philadelphia. After the 1993 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 Yucatan and Michoacan. 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. However, the vast majority of Mexican immigrants in Philadelphia work in the retail 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 Jersey area, travel to factories and construction sites is provided by those who can obtain driver’s licenses and who then change car faces; 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 many other services.

Despite increasing diversity in the South Jersey 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 40 languages and dialects spoken at neighborhood schools. Latest research is the wider community gathered 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 protest, 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 (BPPOS), Vietnamese Women’s Services of South Philadelphia, Cambodian American Citizens Association of Philadelphia (CACPA), and Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Coalition (SEAMAAC) had been working with students to engage the school district to address the increasingly hostile environment for Asian students. Some disagreements ensured 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 “race” to describe the attacks ignores the fact that racism is institutional and that both African American and Asian American students must deal with institutional racism from society at large. Calling the attacks “racist” redirects attention from the fact that both Asian American and African American students are “minorities.” In addition to their...
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 the area’s prevailing wage, a new policy requirement of the program, implies higher costs and the elimination of local contractors.

The South District Commercial Corridors:

- South Street
- Passyunk
- Arrott Corridor
- Pedestrian Corridor
- Conner in strong conditions

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 2013). The loans amount to between $15,000 and $50,000. Eligible commercial corridors have been set up for this program. In the South Street, the strongest pedestrian corridors have mostly been targeted with the exception of South 7th Street, which is in development. The following benefits are linked to this corridor:

- Increased economic activity
- Enhanced aesthetics
- Improved public safety
- Enhanced commercial activity

The Asian American Chamber of Commerce of Greater Philadelphia encouraged business owners in the South Street area to participate in the SFP. In an interview, dich McConnell explained that small businesses are sometimes stymied by the program because the requirements to get reimbursed for federal funds are so cumbersome. She doesn’t want to get involved. In South Street, a number of Cambodian businesses have used this assistance program, but with the new requirements, some small contractors have become disenchanted. For the most part, only contractors without a language barrier and who can provide free design services. Beyond helping businesses improve their storefronts, 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 the area’s prevailing wage, a new policy requirement of the program, implies higher costs and the elimination of local contractors.

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.
Another way to improve local business is through the Merchant’s Fund, a private foundation that offers financial assistance to certain 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 (BIDs), 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 to 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 may 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 of 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 4.2.1]. However, this BID – with its branching hip local businesses and community development initiatives and events – increasingly strung to young and financially secure residents rather than the longstanding working-class community. In East Passyunk, a poor and predominantly white community, BID activities have prompted division between long-standing property owners and newcomers who express a greater degree of support for collective improvement efforts” (Current, 2010).

Two additional BIDs have recently been envisioned in the area [see Figure 4.2.2]. To the north, the South 7th Street and Washington Avenue Business Improvement District is already in the development process for serving the commercial areas in and around these thriving midways, while in the core of eastern South Philadelphia, business owners have envisioned another BID along South 60th and 7th Streets. The boundaries have not yet been officially delineated, but this BID aims to brand the area as Cambodian Town. Neighbors members of the Cambodian community consider this area, including Millin 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 grocery along these commercial corridors.

4.6 7TH STREET IS “NO MAN’S LAND”

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

Recent changes in the Philadelphia Zoning Code established provisions that ensure neighborhoods of proposed development have an opportunity to provide input regarding zoning decisions. Community input happens both through a standardized system of direct notifications and through public meetings convened by Registered Community Organizations (RCOs). When these changes occurred, many existing civic associations 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 Council person has the option to select one or more RCOs 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, Councilwoman Squilla first contacted United Communities of Southeast Philadelphia to see if they could take on role of RCO. Since this did not pan out, he contacted both the East Passyunk Civic Association (EPCA) and the Southwest Center City Civic Association (LoMa) and asked them to extend their boundaries to account for the encompassed area [see Figure 4.5.2]. According to McConnell, this proposal was problematic because it “had not quite civic leadership from the ground up,” but took over from the top down. Additionally, unknown 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.
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 create RCO status, and after that year was up, “EPX and LoMo went ahead and extended their boundaries.” EPX and LoMa 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-based 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 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 an immigrant 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 seniors, but few have become members “because their concerns are different.” Raising the streets of historian 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 “dry 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.

Some long-term residents express concern about civic associations wanting to “change the neighborhood” rather than getting to know the community as it is.
Additional workshops took place from June to September to build community involvement and the co-creation of the project. The third and final session 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.

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

1. Providing environmentally sustainable pedestrian gathering 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 5.14).

The area of study comprises a noncontiguous set of housing blocks where learning, recreational, and community spaces are scarce. Learning and meeting spaces are limited to public schools and various religious institutions and organizations, all of which serve their own constituencies. Most of the residents migrated recently to 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 warmer months. Other than Weir Park, a small public space, residents report a few blocks from this popular square, and the Ford Recreation Center, which mainly serves the African American community on Sayre Avenue, there are few open spaces in for community use.

2. Developing Useful Knowledge Committees that draw on the diverse skills, experiences, and insights of various civic organizations and activists involved with the project. Useful Knowledge is understood as that which is not currently in place, that which is being called into question, 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 neighborhoods and organizations, which could happen through the development of urban campaigns, collaborative 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 Habilitation Strategies’ ethnographic work (see Figure 5.14). Although it is mostly focused on different government and civic organizations, it illustrates the immense diversity 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 superior and spatial contrasting between sites and the surrounding areas. These interventions are intended to develop organically throughout the central area of South Philadelphia rather than in one specific site. The pilot assemblage of Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge not only extends to improve the neighborhood’s physical and environmental conditions 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 5.12).

Deindustrialization, redlining, and eventually increased tax developments to maintain city infrastructure were major agents of the depopulation and urban decline South Philadelphia experienced. Postindustrial transformation induced white-collar job losses to ride the suburbs. Better-off families, especially in South Philadelphia, and eventually an influx of foreign immigrants gave life to the changes. 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, Haiti, 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 I-95 and E Girard Avenue from north to south, 5th and 6th Streets, 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 be begun by claiming lots from the Philadelphia Land Bank, which can eventually move the conversation towards non-speculative development models, shared community ownership, and collective 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 negotiate these issues in partnership with the Real Estate 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 transformation of a Community Land Trust with a corporate board of governance, or board. The ownership and management of the sites will be neither public nor private, but local. The Community Land Trust board will gradually be formed by building trust and engagement among local residents and local stakeholders and will have equal representation by (1) local public authorities and agencies; (2) local non-profits, cultural institutions, and governments; and (3) knowledge communities,” neighbors, and users.

The restoration and activation of these sites will be developed simultaneously with the Real Estate 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.
6. PLAYGROUND #1: ACTIVATING LAND, ENGAGING CITIZENSHIP, MOBILIZING PEOPLE!

6.1 IN SEARCH OF PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

From its very inception, Playground+for+Useful+Knowledge+has had the ambition to create the conditions for a public exchange between professionals in the fields of art and urbanism and local experts. Our target was always to establish a collective understanding of the forces that shape our cities, and on the other by the grassroots dimension, people who perceive trends and daily occurrences on the street level. In Philadelphia, our team comprised experts in urbanism, cultural producers, designers, anthropologists, etc.-and we had to create the conditions for an exchange with a circle of people. The idea of creating a physical space was thus redefined as a physical space as a means to an end. The idea was to create a “hub” where people could come together and exchange ideas and strategies for improving the neighborhood. Over the course of our residency, the Playground+for+Useful+Knowledge+project was the catalyst for the creation of a new neighborhood, the South Seven, which has become a focal point for community engagement and neighborhood initiatives.

The hub was initially defined as a space, but it became clear that it would need to be more than a physical space. It would need to be a place where people could come together and exchange ideas and strategies for improving the neighborhood. The hub was then redefined as a physical space as a means to an end. The idea was to create a “hub” where people could come together and exchange ideas and strategies for improving the neighborhood. Over the course of our residency, the Playground+for+Useful+Knowledge+project was the catalyst for the creation of a new neighborhood, the South Seven, which has become a focal point for community engagement and neighborhood initiatives.

In the South Seven, we have focused on creating a space for public engagement that is accessible to all members of the community. This space is not just a physical location, but a network of connections and relationships that enable people to come together and share ideas and resources. The aim is to create a space that is not just a physical location, but a network of connections and relationships that enable people to come together and share ideas and resources. The aim is to create a space that is not just a physical location, but a network of connections and relationships that enable people to come together and share ideas and resources. The aim is to create a space that is not just a physical location, but a network of connections and relationships that enable people to come together and share ideas and resources.
Community Civic Association with the block captains, Ms. Bonnie Leon, 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 black 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 collaboration. Strategies to define the local assets of initiatives, practices, and organizations to assemble narratives about the most relevant neighborhood issues; and to start building a network of organizations and inhabitants active in the South Seventh. 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 organizations, 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 each group’s role can complement and catalyze local needs and preoccupations. Regularity and persistence have 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 Social 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 gatherings 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 which 1, gathering a core group of stakeholders 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 4.2.

These “committee meetings” have led to exchanging views, becoming more aware of other cultural groups’ perceptions, and affirming a new public awareness about: (1) diversity and friction 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 space for sharing; (3) the need to overcome differences and build a common horizon; (4) consciousness of the relations between larger systemic issues and local effects; and (5) the emergence of new leaders.

As of today, the core group that formed around the Playground 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:

Briana Allen-Friends of Mifflin Square; Brece Easton-Ninth Street Community Civic Association; Karen Houle-Bertha Community Indebted Agency; Wei Chen/Asian Americans United; Society for Civic Association of Greater Philadelphia; Laura derantiy; Andrew De Mola/United Communities Northeast Philadelphia and Southeast Philadelphia Collaborative; Teresa Ippoliti/Asian Americans United; Anthony Tamayo/Loader Muyamwey/Civic Association; Linda Fernandez/Amber Art, Adam Forbes/PH-7 Migrant Education; David and Lisa Rogers/Snyder Avenue Congregational Church; Sooyae Hwang Friendly Market, Amy Jonas/SEAMAAC; Generations/Kerikolei/Immigrant Community Organization; Adina Lieberman Points of Sale; Annie Laskie/Black Captain Jackson Street; Nou Moua/Peers of the Sacred, Beth McConnell/Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations; Toshi Nguyen/SEAMAAC, Carlos Paredes Sanchez/Puente de Salud; Ronnie Laskie/Black Captain Jackson Street; Nou Moua/Peers of the Sacred, Beth McConnell/Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations; Toshi Nguyen/SEAMAAC, Carlos Paredes Sanchez/Puente de Salud; Ronnie Laskie/Black Captain Jackson Street; Nou Moua/Peers of the Sacred, Beth McConnell/Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations; Toshi Nguyen/SEAMAAC, Carlos Paredes Sanchez/Puente de Salud; Ronnie Laskie/Black Captain Jackson Street.

6.3 IN SEARCH OF LAND

The search for land for the first Playground of Social Knowledge began in mid-March. We started researching and visiting the area of South Philadelphia that has the highest concentration of vacant land, and we explored different ways to acquire public as well as private land permanently or temporarily. The table above identifies the following: (1) lease agreements with the Philadelphia Land Bank; (2) lease agreements with private landowners; (3) agreements with current community gardens; and (4) agreements for temporary occupation with local nonprofits 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 Social Knowledge. We identified opportunities to acquire the land temporarily or permanently, and we started the process of negotiating leases for vacant lots. We 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 scarce. However, we found that the agreements were going to be held until the completion of the agency’s formation and organizational plan. Agreements could be offered to other organizations as well as government agencies to use the vacant lots. The agreements would be subject to the agency’s newly approved strategic plan, which are quite favorable for the objectives of this project.

Transferring public properties to individuals, grassroots groups, and community-based organizations for specific purposes on a temporary basis. A number of sweat equity and partially funded public programs have facilitated the revitalization of city-owned vacant properties in recent decades.
However, city officials have been careful to lead and ensure these processes are reasonably consistent. For the purposes of this project, we realized that acquiring public land would be feasible in the short-term future (following a Philadelphia Land Bank surplus and funds), 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 Hered was key in choosing and restoring the lots.

The lots were covered with debris, yet a large tree at the back provided shade for most of the site. Thanks to the organization’s good efforts, the Restored Spaces Initiative, the two vacant lots were cleaned, leveled, and spread with the public shortly after the lease agreement was signed (see Figure 6.3.1). Scott Quittel and Rachel Griffiths of the Land Health Institute, a nonprofit dedicated to environmental health, ecological design, and research, transformed the debris. Led by Shari Hered and Margaret Kelley of Restored Spaces, city workers from Manu Arts’ Youth Violence Reduction Partnership (YVRP) program sorted out what would later become small flower beds and gardens. After leveling the terrain and covering the site with the dirt with a smooth stone, a transformed shipping container previously used in another Manu Arts project was brought to the site and colored with white and red stripes, following the graphic identity designed by Heidi O’Hara and painted by Shari Hered, neighbor and local artist Sophia Blau and the YVRP over the course of a week. The container, which was designed by Akin Robin Studio, brought it forward and became a welcoming place. It served as an entrance (see Figure 6.3.3). Soon after, Restored Spaces and the Land Health Institute began a series of community workshops to teach neighbors from Jackson Street and the adjacent blocks their local ecology and how to select urban debris from the site and create it into 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 local 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 and community members, the process of designing became a collaborative effort. Over time, a shared identity was created and shared knowledge with other community organizers, representatives of civic organizations, and artists.

The museum was to organize a first meeting with experts and community leaders who could progressively work collaboratively in small groups and become part of the neighborhood. The process of creating knowledge and sharing knowledge is based on the idea of creating a shared understanding and a sense of ownership, especially bringing community groups closer. This process is called the “experiment,” and it involves the creation of a new community space that is used by the local community. This is not only a shared experience but also a shared understanding.

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 20 civic community organizers, representatives of civic organizations, and artists. The museum was to organize a first meeting with experts and community leaders who could progressively work collaboratively in small groups and become part of the neighborhood. The process of creating knowledge and sharing knowledge is based on the idea of creating a shared understanding and a sense of ownership, especially bringing community groups closer. This process is called the “experiment,” and it involves the creation of a new community space that is used by the local community. This is not only a shared experience but also a shared understanding.

The key event for sparking exchange was reenacting perceptions, incorporations, and forms of knowledge of the area. We had already met all the members 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 (P. Temple) performed "When Your Block Is Clean, You Feel Good... May Feel Like Going Out and Meeting People.

"Quote from gathering with community members.

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

BOTTOM LEFT: 6.3.3 Local schools’ children visit the site during the month of the first playground for Useful Knowledge.

TOP RIGHT: 6.6.1 Breaking the Ice at the Beginning of Action 3.

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opened Action 1 with an interactive theater workshop, performing stories drawn from months of community research through Image Theater (see figure 6.4.17). Image Theater 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 conversational expression and using their own and other participants’ bodies to form static physical images depicting feelings, issues, or recurrent 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 conversations 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 central for the community. In order to do so, we drew a large map and after the Image Theater, the group was asked to define key words summarizing their conception of the area. The tree was designed by Heidi Chisholm for the identity of the project, with three branches, each representing an area of concern: social, spatial, and economic (see figure 6.4.18). The branches were quickly crowded with key words clearly representing the group’s fears, worries, and aspirations. Words such as crime, gentrification, and segregation neighbor their counterparts: sense of belonging, emergent 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 abundantly interconnected, but the ambition was to look at each more specifically to facilitate in-depth conversations. The Economy Committee discussed power structures and how to
create more equal opportunities (see Figure 6.4.4). The Space Committee focused its attention on how to address the area’s lack of space for cultural exchange, mostly needed to counteract social services. 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 immersive diagram drawn on a paper. These separate meetings took the conversation to a greater level of detail. At the end of this process, the team was identified and thoroughly discussed by the committee members. The next step was to make the committee active participants in defining the possible potentials of this playground. The process was identifying available community capacities and resources to build this space as well as defining a common vision for the people. 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 lawmaker was facing and determining its resources, the next step has been to work on the concepts of strategies and common actions that can address these issues. This entire process also had the ambition of working progressively in circles that rarely overlap. Each community leader could identify collaborators or programs that 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 new Committee Meetings on July 9th and 10th at the hub at 512 Jackson Street. After this first event, a reasonable effort was made to keep the group together and to motive community members to participate in the next two meetings, as a collective group was not yet established. In order to treat 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 cultural expressions, 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 case of it;
- bringing up structures instead of dividing 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 identification and acknowledge of problematic conditions and visions closer. At this phase of the process, it was important to translate the strategies into concrete actions that would characterize Action 3. Our shared purpose was also to define three dominant proposals to emerge:

(1) a night market in Millin Square to test new forms of economies and the possibilities of endogenous development;
(2) a Trash Alley 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 at the same time 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 Millin Square Park that the project’s active forces shifted to creating a night market in this location. Millin Square seemed the ideal space for a collective project for the neighborhood. The park is a green public plaza patrolled for lessness, sports, family gatherings, and informal betting, 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 Caucasian community made it undeniable important for all citizens to regain its shared ownership and to turn the park into a safe space.

The committee members and CoolSara 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 elicit feedback on the proposals as well as to start planning forms of urban appropriation through experimental projects. The event started with a Form Theatre session by T.O. Philly, which—unlike activities in Action 1—consisted of performing success inspired by real situations (see Figure 6.5.3). The audience was encouraged to give feedback to the proposals feedback and to act out the changes. This intervention had a catalytic impact on the audience.

*Note by L.K. Bagal


The Economic Committee in Action 1...
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. Phillips was about the overwhelming street litter, which was the subject of several committee discussions (see Figure 6.5). Many participants engaged in re-enacting the scenes, bringing to the group’s attention different approaches to improve the situation (see Figure 6.5.1 and 6.5.2).

The discussion around litter exceeded 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 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 last the stigma marking the neighborhood and the local government’s callousness (see Figure 6.5.3).

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, Connolly 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 colorful signs scattered on top of the map (see Figure 6.5.4). The entire group played and converged for several hours, imagining possible developments and potentials for Action 3. The signs were rearranged on the map, superimposed, and discarded in order to develop a coherent idea for a project, as 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 proposals 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 a experimental project in such a short time that had been conceived for a small campaign but now envisioned taking over a very large public park! This jump in scale would have serious consequences in terms of CoMM and MuralArts’ capacity to coordinate and produce the event. Furthermore, the night market makes us subject to an extremely complex legal condition, as obtaining permission for such a large manifestation in under two months seemed impossible. After a thorough consideration, CoMM, MuralArts, and several of our partners reached the conclusion that it was unfeasible to organize such an event within the time and resources available. After numerous exchanges, we jetisoned 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 to move 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 current leader Isaac Shaffer, CoMM curated the event, while Shari Zwerth and the RSO 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.
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 Philly. 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 renewal 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 who were 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 been 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 PowHowse, 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 PowHowse became the central engine of the entire event and was placed in the central location of Mifflin Square (see Figure 5.6). 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 designed to bring together the most public expressions of the program, with extremely different forms of performing arts alongside political debates and group activities (see Figure 5.6). Our partners offered help finding performers from different backgrounds, which gave us the possibility to show the variety of cultural expressions present in South Philly (see Figure 6.6). Performances included African-American hip-hop, Cambodian psychodelic rock, Karen and Cambodian dance, and Artic media (see Figure 6.6).

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 identity and can take many variations based on cultural influences. During one of our committee meetings, we assisted in an informal conversation between Laurel Brace, the director of TEAMMAK, the Vietnamese origin, and the Cambodian Cambodian banners, owner of the Friendly Market on 7th Street, about whose culture she belongs to and its different versions. The food contest seemed to be the best way to shed light on local food production from informal activities, individually, 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 legitimate economic activities that have always been perceived as detrimental rather than pointers for the development of new neighborhood businesses.

The South Philly Food Council had a jury composed of three experts: two board members of the Philadelphia Food Trust, and a renowned gourmand member of Cohns. 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).

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 Pennsauken Crossing Civic Association, Lower Montgomery Civic Association, and the 7th Street Community Civic Association. These groups did not ever before get together. This subject, a primary interest of Cohns 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 agency as calling attention to a crucial threat. As expected, the
In another part of the park, the Kids’ Union was conceived as a platform for artistic and recreational activities for children (see figure 6.2.9). Several organizations that care for the cultural and artistic education of young people contributed. Most of South Philly’s young people can afford only public schools, which access across Philadelphia are at risk of closing. 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 dropout by offering an alternative to street life and crime to these young people (see figure 6.2.10). During the festival, it was offered a composite of the most relevant initiatives in the neighborhood, such as a video workshop to record neighboring stories with the artist lasers, Dragon; Color Wheel project from Nothing Art Memorial, which aims to illustrate 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 Delphina; and a soccer tournament with Snyder Avenue Congregational Church (see figure 6.2.10).

We also added another area of interest in the program: the Exhibition area, which came from two different organizations and which showed the most creative young people to use the platform of the festival to nurture the debate around urgent topics such as immigration, racism, and the inequality of young Americans of foreign origin born in the US or abroad. It is a collection of great interest for both Community Exchange Philadelphia and the Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia. The director of the Cambodian Association, Sokhina Cie, created the food festival where distinct foods are offered and for which we organized a food market and for which the community organized a food festival. The two exhibitions displayed had previously been exhibited in other venues within the city and abroad. The first one was entitled La Jornada de los Niños (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 slowdowns illustrating their journeys and the distance migration created between parents and children. Nurturing their stories in accompanying audio tours, the children take the listeners through their migration (see figure 6.2.10). The second exhibition in a long-term project by the New York City-based artist Pete Pao in collaboration with the Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia. Sokhina Cie, the director of the Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia,قد تم إضافة أخرى من الاهتمام في البرنامج: من المحتمل أن تأتي من منظمتيين مختلفتين، وتم عرضها في الخريطة الافتراضية للمهرجان لتغذية المناظرة حول القضايا الحاسمة، مثل الهجرة والتمييز والمساواة بين الشباب الأميركيين من الأصول أجنبية مولودين في الولايات المتحدة أو خارجها. تحتوي هذه القائمة على مجموعة من الاهتمامات الهامة لدى كل من مجتمع زيارة فلوريدا وجمعية كمبودية بوسطن. وتعتبر الطورين المعرضين بالفعل قد تم عرضهما في أماكن أخرى في المدينة والعالم. الأولى كانت بعنوان La Jornada de los Niños (Children’s Journey) بواسطة Puentes de Salud. تروي القصص من الأطفال المهاجرين المكسيكيين الذين قاموا ب переезд عبر الحدود لأتي إلى فلبيند. من خلال جلسات الرسم الفنية، أنشئ الأطفال رسومات كبيرة تبرز رحلاتهم ومسافاتهم بين الوالدين والمهاجرين. نضج أصواتهم في أوراق مصاحبة صوتية، حيث يأخذ السمعاء السمعاء دورًا في محاولة البحث عن المهاجرين. ويعتبر الطور الثاني جزءًا من مشروع طويل الأمد من قبل الفنان الجديد Pete Pao في إضافة تعاون مع جمعية كمبودية بوسطن. ولديها روابط اقتصادية ودينية، ووصلت إلى مراكز الحرم الذي تديره Sokhina Cie، مدير جمعية كمبودية بوسطن، وقد تم تضمينهم في قائمة الخريطة.
The Mifflin Square Alliance Festival was held on a beautiful summer evening, attracting visitors from all over the vicinity. The festival showcased a variety of cultural performances, including music, dance, and traditional food, providing a platform for the community to come together and celebrate diversity.

Among the highlights of the festival were the performances by the local dance troupe, which captivated the audience with their vibrant and rhythmic movements. The music, ranging from traditional folk tunes to contemporary beats, added to the festive atmosphere.

Food stalls were set up around the plaza, offering a range of dishes from different cultures. Visitors could sample international cuisines, from Indian curries to Mexican tacos, all expertly prepared by local chefs.

Artists from various disciplines also participated in the event, creating live paintings and showcasing their crafts. The festival's atmosphere was enhanced by the presence of local artisans, selling their work to passersby.

The event was well-organized, with clear signage and volunteers assisting festival-goers. The Mifflin Square Alliance, along with the event's sponsors, ensured that the event ran smoothly, contributing to its success.

The Mifflin Square Alliance Festival was not just a celebration of culture and music; it was also an opportunity for the community to come together and strengthen its bonds. The festival demonstrated the power of community engagement in fostering inclusivity and mutual understanding.

In conclusion, the Mifflin Square Alliance Festival was a resounding success, providing a platform for cultural exchange and community building. The event's impact on the community was evident in the smiles on the faces of all who attended, and the festival's legacy will continue to inspire future events of similar scale and importance.
7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDED DIRECTIONS

The Restored Spaces Initiative of the City of Philadelphia’s Mural Arts Program invited collaboration 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 a 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.

2. To develop a socio-spatial platform by integrating a diverse local base of residents, community activists, arts 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 redeveloping 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 inter-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, Cobra, Restored Spaces, and other possible partners of a series of experimental 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, Co-Generation 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 Co-creation 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 Midlin Square, which demonstrated a range of possible futures 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 process 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 potential and capacity to build capacity for the Restored Spaces Initiative’s future involvement, Cobertura Strategies acknowledges the following outcomes:

1. PROVISION OF SUSTAINABLE MEETING, WORKING, AND LEARNING SPACES TO ENGAGE COOPERATIVE PRACTICES AND MOST Community ACTIVITIES ACKNOWLEDGING LOCAL CULTURES AND VALUES. The transformation of two vacant lots into a neighborhood hub open to the entire community allowed us to confirm one of our initial premises: the capacity 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 playgrounds introduced trans-generational and trans-ethnic interactions and conversations that in many instances took place for the first time in this high-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, acknowledge and embracing the diverse local cultures and values as well as the differences, similarities, and commonalities between community groups.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF USEFUL KNOWLEDGE COMMITTED TO DRAW ON THE DIVERSE SKILLS, EXPERIENCES, 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 governance 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 assets, were the leading voices of each experimental action, workshop, and discussion, as well as the driving force of the translation of the envisioned district-based knowledge platform, which was showcased at the Midlin Square Advance Festival. The festival became the live manifestation of the project’s envisioned ensemble of useful knowledge.
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 privately owned public spaces for experimental actions. The first two participatory events were planned to take place in two exploited 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 to 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, as described in Figure 7.1.3. This project demonstrated the appreciation and willingness of 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 realize transformative programs.

4. TURNING VACANT AND ABANDONED LOTS INTO PLAYGROUNDS FOR USEFUL KNOWLEDGE. The initial plans 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 Stunt Hero 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 Sector. According to the Philadelphia Land Bank (2015), the agency aims to promote individual development opportunities for neglected public lands, to 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 programming and use of public land. The Reformed Spaces Initiative has the opportunity to partner with this new agency and support community members together with the assistance of ROCs serving their area.

We are certain that the development of community programs for a number of public vacant lots will be more feasible if partnered with the Land Bank in pursuit 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.
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 \textit{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 knowledgeable and willing to collaborate and to break down walls that have kept them isolated. Thus, for the Restored Spaces Initiative, it is necessary to analyze 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, nonprofits, small businesses, and registered community organizations. This can be done through a number of small-scale projects across the district targeting sites of opportunity.

There is a need to guide community members through specific projects and the search for and acquisition of sites for new \textit{Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge}. During the action-research, community members acknowledged the need for collective spaces for recreation, exchanging knowledge, and building relationships across community groups. They showed particular interest in transforming and improving vacant, pedestrian corridors, neglected public school yards that are looked after school hours, interior market places, and public spaces underused and overlooked by the city. These transformations can be achieved through partnerships with community stakeholders engaged in the knowledge platform. NGOs, civic groups, and nonprofits can fund projects with these five-year commitments in one of the biggest challenges facing the city today. The \textit{Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge} initiative is a way to engage residents in the production of an end-product after which the resources disappear, whether it is a mural or a landscaping project. This was the most astounding example of neighborhood communications when they refer to the work of Philadelphia Mural Arts, claiming that through this work, there was a clarion call for maintaining the integrity and display of the art products. The commitment to maintaining the social relations and dynamics enabled through the production of the art work was unique. Since the very beginnings of this project, collaboration strategies emphasized collaboration among residents, neighborhood organizations, and community members.

A new neighborhood realized the project that was already started to foster the integration of more local partners in the process of looking for the social and environmental joint 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 \textit{Alliance for the following year with next, 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 ensure public vacant land serves 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 no interest from the public or private sectors to provide community facilities, recreation spaces, community gardens, and affordable housing, working, and learning opportunities for long-term residents. This project would have the potential to strengthen the local community and provide new opportunities. Some of the benefits the CLT could bring are the following:

1. Allowing community ownership and democratic control of land. Decisions on how to use land are made by the existing residents.
2. Strengthening the local community through the diversity of legal and social means that complement each other and are capable of accommodating community gardens and facilities. Learning, commercial, and social spaces; and different models of housing, such as coops, rentals, and cooperatives, are provided.
3. Providing flexibility to respond to different community needs and interests. CLTs are capable of accommodating community gardens and facilities: learning, commercial, and social spaces; and different models of housing, such as coops, rentals, and cooperatives, are provided.
4. Keeping assets in the community by facilitating the transfer of public and private ownership to community stakeholders, sometimes at below-market rates. CLTs can acquire, purchase, and manage properties or land for public use and design, and then develop it for public benefit. The Philadelphia Land Bank, now a new city agency, can become a partner or owner.
5. Preserving and protecting public investment by allowing one subsidy to keep spending for a century or larger, rather than the average 25-year span of most public subsidies.
The credits section acknowledges various organizations and individuals who contributed to the success of the project. It highlights the City of Philadelphia's support and the contributions of numerous partners and sponsors. The text thanks specific individuals and organizations for their support and collaboration, recognizing their role in the project's success. The list includes various community groups, arts organizations, and local partnerships, showcasing a broad network of support for the initiative. The text ends with a note of gratitude to the community members and public officials involved, expressing the importance of their contributions and the impact of their efforts.