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Book chapter

## Identity and the Natural Environment

### The Psychological Significance of Nature

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## 10

### Identity, Involvement, and Expertise in the Inner City: Some Benefits of Tree-Planting Projects

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Vacant lots rarely make a neighborhood look attractive. Passersby might make inferences about the residents—that they do not care, perhaps are not even aware of the physical appearance of their neighborhood. The residents may indeed have more pressing concerns than how their neighborhood looks to others. Alternatively, the vacant lots may be painful and constant reminders of the personal and communal deprivations of these residents. The context for this chapter is vacant lots in Detroit, Michigan, or more accurately, tree-planting projects that have transformed both these lots and the appearance of the neighborhoods. Along with these physical transformations came many other changes: citizens who engaged in community activities, people who learned from playing leadership roles, and individuals who came to have a new sense of who they are and what they can contribute. Thus the tree-planting projects serve to explicate the interplay among involvement, expertise, and identity.

It is not difficult to imagine that the transformation of overgrown vacant lots into well-kept community green spaces might affect how a neighborhood looks. Perhaps less self-evident is that it also changes how the residents come to see themselves. Our discussion draws on interviews with leaders in eleven Detroit neighborhoods as well as the lot keepers whose efforts sustained the projects for the months and years after the planting (Austin, 1999). From descriptions of their participation in organizing and maintaining neighborhood vacant lot projects emerged evidence of just how strong the connections between people and the physical setting can be. Indeed both place and people were transformed by the events.

Before turning to the interviews, we provide a brief historical overview of Detroit, its neighborhoods, its vacant lots, and the tree-planting

program. This overview is useful in understanding present-day neighborhood settings. We then turn to insights gained from the interviews with leaders and lot keepers. Their reflections make tangible much that is invisible, both in terms of their own efforts and ideals, and in how the changes in the vacant lot also change the neighborhood and its residents. The interviews also tell us that not all efforts are successful; success, which is often the result of experience, is a key ingredient in forging pride and uplifting the residents.

### **Detroit: Then and Now**

Detroit, “The Motor City,” has long been identified with the automobile industry. The city has, however, seen major changes since the automobile assembly line first attracted many newcomers prior to World War I. From early on Detroit has had a reputation for being a city of neighborhoods. The steady flow of people moving to the city to work in its factories led to the creation of neighborhoods densely stocked with homes for working-class families.

This neighborhood structure persisted even with major changes in demographics after World War II. By then, as Darden, Hill, Thomas, and Thomas (1987) describe it, the decentralization of businesses and manufacturing as well as the increasing migration of middle-class residents to the suburbs were accompanied by a substantial immigration of Blacks from the South. In the process, the old neighborhoods changed radically, becoming areas where the “poorest of the poor” were struggling to make a living. Between the mid-1960s and 1990, Detroit lost well over one-quarter of its population as citizens left their homes and moved out of the inner city, leaving more than 65,000 vacant lots in the city (Grove, Vachta, McDonough & Burch, 1993).

Formerly known as “The City of Trees,” Detroit was once home to hundreds of thousands of American elm trees, which added a graceful elegance to the city’s streetscape. Not so long ago the city was full of neighborhoods teeming with families, living in homes packed side by side along streets lined with graceful trees. Today we find a starkly different scene. Falling victim to disease, old age, and development, many of the elm trees are long gone. Many neighborhood streets now have more vacant lots than homes, and more empty tree wells than trees. With city services strained by a shrinking budget, the lots receive little and only

sporadic maintenance and quickly become overgrown, weedy sites of illegal dumping.

Vacant lots are not only an eyesore, they are also unsafe. Without regular maintenance, they turn into a sea of tall weeds that hide from view whatever may be taking place there (figure 10.1). A neighborhood resident, a participant in our study, shared her concern for the safety of children having to walk through these lots on the way to school:

There were weeds, or I should say grass that had grown about five feet tall. And I was at a meeting one time with the Chief of Police, and I told him you’re not going to stop the crime and you’re going to find bodies of children. We have five schools in our boundary and you’re going to find children in [those lots]. But it was on the east side. It happened the very next year after that meeting. There was someone, a child, found in those weeds.

Despite the physical and social changes, a strong sense of neighborhood identity persists. Most neighborhoods have an established group or organization and local leaders who help ensure that neighborhood interests are heard and manifested in social advocacy programs such as



**Figure 10.1**

While some might consider this vacant lot in a southwest Detroit neighborhood a lovely setting filled with wildflowers, to a local resident it is a reminder of neighborhood decline, and a setting for illegal dumping and crime.

housing and development. Names for these neighborhood organizations sometimes correspond to their local street; in many instances, however, the name depicts the solidarity of its residents or a local cause, such as fighting blight or drugs. In many neighborhoods where local resident organizations are active, colorful signs bearing the neighborhood name are located at the neighborhood's entrance. Despite much hardship—poverty, crime, home demolition, and garbage-filled vacant lots—the residents identify with their neighborhood.

Neighborhood organizations can take it upon themselves to do something with the overgrown vacant lots in their neighborhood. Working with the city's forestry department and a local nonprofit tree-planting organization, neighborhood residents turn vacant lots into islands of green. A representative from the neighborhood group assumes a leadership role in this process, completing application paperwork and meeting with personnel from both the tree-planting organization and the city forestry department to ensure that the planting project details are attended to and local residents are kept informed. The leaders also sign a maintenance agreement, assuming responsibility on behalf of their organization for maintaining the vacant lot project after planting day.

The focus of this chapter is on tree-planting projects for vacant lots that took place between 1994 and 1997. Semistructured interviews were conducted with fourteen leaders and thirty-eight lot keepers. The leaders were asked to reflect on the planting process, their role in organizing local residents, use of the lot before and after planting day, lot maintenance efforts, and the neighborhood's sense of community. The lot keepers were asked about their participation in lot maintenance, as well as their perspective on lot use by neighborhood residents. While identity was not an explicit objective of the research, it emerged from the interview process as participants spoke of their involvement, experience, and the neighborhood. The quotes incorporated in our discussion, which were recorded during the taped sessions, provide a glimpse of the individual identities of almost all the leaders and many of the lot keepers.

### Study Sites

The eleven neighborhood organizations included in this study are scattered throughout Detroit and serve different purposes. Four are con-

cerned with neighborhood improvement and development, encompassing several blocks. Three are neighborhood block clubs involving a single block and approximately fifteen to thirty households. The remaining four are nonprofit community service agencies serving the needs of local residents. They include a men's homeless shelter, a community mental health agency, and two housing organizations.

There is no set form or structure to tree-planting projects for vacant lots. The neighborhood group or agency often identifies a special purpose or function for the lot, which is reflected in the finished project. Descriptions of three such projects illustrate how a completed project can be adapted to the neighborhood's needs.

### An Eastside Block Club Pocket Park

This lot project is the result of countless hours invested over a number of years by members of a neighborhood block club on Detroit's east side. The site was an abandoned house that neighbors feared was unsafe and could provide a place for illegal activities. The residents of the neighborhood worked together to convince the city to demolish the house. In its place there is now a small pocket park nestled between two houses and cared for by members of the block club. A small white fence crosses the front of the lot and a winding brick pathway invites one to enter. In the center of the lot are benches facing one another so residents can sit and chat. The lot contains two shade trees, one flowering tree, numerous shrubs, and a sign bearing the block club's name. Since planting day the neighbors have wasted no time in making this site an integral part of their local neighborhood scene; numerous events have been held there, including barbecues, a retirement party, and a graduation party.

### A Symbol of Neighborhood Improvement

On the city's north side is a planting project that is equally important to local residents yet serves a more formal function. Located along a busy thoroughfare transecting the neighborhood, the project is a symbol of neighborhood commitment to improvement and beautification. This large project consists of several contiguous lots bounded by two side streets. Topsoil was added to the site, giving it a slightly rolling topography. Railroad ties have been placed on either side of a wide woodchip pathway running diagonally through the lots, offering residents a place

to sit when they visit the site. This lot also has a sign bearing the name of the neighborhood association. Instead of impromptu barbecues and social gatherings, formal events such as a dedication ceremony and association fundraisers are held here.

### Beautifying a Neighborhood while Deterring Crime

A southwest Detroit neighborhood experiences considerable gang activity within its borders. The neighborhood has numerous vacant lots that are routinely used by local gang members as shortcuts for vehicles. The destructive use of these lots prompted a neighborhood nonprofit housing agency to sponsor a yearly lot beautification program. The vacant lot project consists of two adjacent lots, with a woodchip pathway leading through the lots and exiting into a small city park containing swing sets, a jungle gym, and a picnic table. Flowerbeds and trees have been planted strategically to each side of a metal pole gate in order to discourage entrance by vehicles. Discarded telephone poles placed horizontally along the rear border of the lots also prevent vehicles from coming in and serve as sitting areas. A community bulletin board placed at the front of the lots near the sidewalk is used to post notices of neighborhood meetings, garage sales, and other social events. The lots offer a beautiful entrance to the city park where neighbors can walk their dogs and watch their children playing safely in the park beyond (figure 10.2).

### Neighborhood Leaders: Inspiration, Persistence, and Action

Planting day must be preceded by a great deal of planning and effort. The initiative taken by the neighborhood leader is critical to many phases of the process. While it is simple enough to make a telephone call and request an application for funds, planning and organizing the planting project requires a depth of commitment that many residents are not willing to make. The way in which leaders see themselves and relate to the neighborhood can have important ramifications for the outcome of the project.

With three projects having co-leaders, a total of fourteen individuals served in a leadership capacity for the eleven vacant lot planting projects. The majority (nine) of the leaders were African American. Four of the six agency leaders were male; seven of the eight neighborhood leaders were

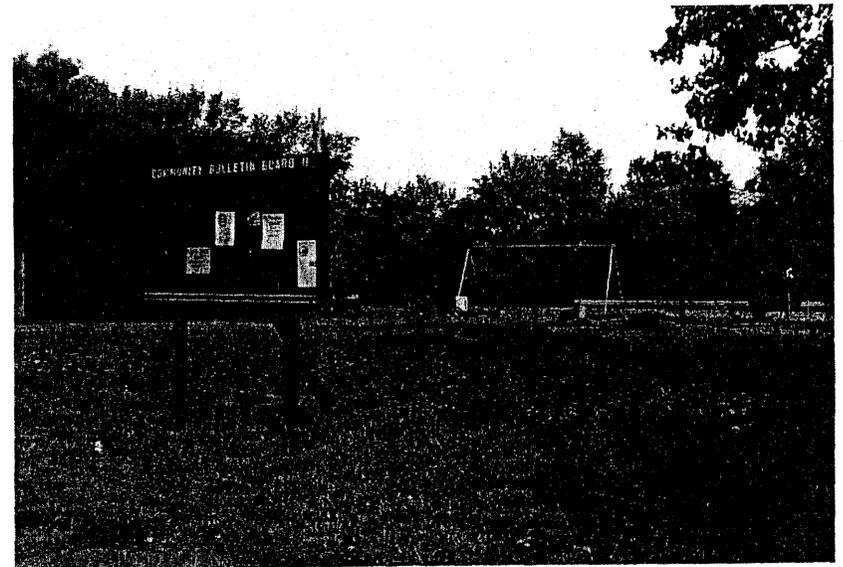


Figure 10.2

With care and commitment, a vacant lot changes from a liability to a neighborhood park and focal point.

female. While they were not compensated directly for their leadership in the planting process, the agency leaders by virtue of their employment were paid for their efforts. The involvement of neighborhood leaders, on the other hand, was voluntary and they received no compensation.

Some of the vacant lot projects were the brainchild of the neighborhood leader. These were generally leaders who had successfully directed previous neighborhood improvement initiatives. In other cases the leaders were assigned this task, not unwillingly, as part of their service to the community. Regardless of prior experience with this type of neighborhood improvement project, the leaders seemed quite comfortable with their title and role because they had served in a similar capacity as either president of the local block club or neighborhood association, or director of a local nonprofit service agency.

### Leaders Envision Community Identity

Leaders understand that it is difficult for many residents to believe their neighborhood can become transformed. It takes considerable foresight

to see what overgrown, weedy, garbage-filled lots might be transformed into, and then be able to apply skills, talents, and dedication to make that transformation happen. Two neighborhood leaders described the powerful impacts the local environment can have on how nearby residents perceive their neighborhood:

When you wake up and you turn the corner and you see trash, you see lots not cut, homes burned out and everything, you can't feel good about that. And so when you feel good about where you are, you do more.

The problem is that when you are used to, when you are growing up looking at garbage, you don't have any, you don't have no sense of what it could be. And I think people say yeah, it's such a dump, but they never did anything about it.

Many of the leaders shared descriptions of what they had envisioned at the onset of planning their neighborhood vacant lot project. Some leaders envisioned a neighborhood park, a green space, a place for families to picnic or where neighbors could visit with one another and interact with nature. Others envisioned the lots as gardens and sources of beauty for local residents. Both agency and neighborhood leaders shared their visions for the vacant lot project:

We could do our block sale over there, I mean I had wanted to see people use it, like maybe families come, they could picnic over there. There's a lot of things I had envisioned using that lot for.

Our goal was to put swings up there and to get a butterfly garden.

We wanted the park edible. With . . . an edible landscape, architecturally designed with fruit trees, boysenberry trees, raspberry trees, and everything that was in the park would be edible. I feel that the garden is a wholesome thing.

To help shape community identity, leaders need to see beyond the current circumstances and envision what is possible. The vision, however, is not enough; it must be articulated to local residents, and leaders must obtain the support necessary from residents to turn that vision into reality.

### Neighborhood Leaders and Expertise

Organizing neighborhood planting projects requires diverse leadership qualities such as commitment, organization, and the ability to attend to details and navigate the city's bureaucratic channels. The leaders varied considerably in their styles, approaches, and strengths with respect to these qualities. Some leaders handled the details of project organization

with ease; for others these were more perplexing. Some were close to the neighborhood concerns while others were less able to tap into local neighborhood interests. The differences among the leaders' abilities to some extent reflect the types of organizations they represented.

The leaders who were employed by local nonprofit service agencies had an internal support structure consisting of staff and telephones and other office equipment, as well as budget dollars. They were also more likely to have had experience in navigating various bureaucratic channels and in networking to gain funding and support for projects. When these project leaders explained how they went about the business of organizing the planting project, their language showed an awareness of what would be necessary and it reflected this agency-level expertise:

Well first we called a person with the city that gave us some information on who owned the lots and how many were city owned and basically whether we could build on them. So that was one thing to start working on. The second thing was really getting the building demolished and we worked with another person there from the neighborhood city hall office on the east side to just hound the city, to get the building demolished. Then once that was done, then we began to identify our donors and to have the actual [planting] design drawn.

It seems like a simple task to green up a space but in fact it's not. It's something that takes money, dedication, commitment, and then that ability to maintain the property.

Leaders from local neighborhood organizations with a history of community service also had certain advantages. Past experience with successfully completed neighborhood projects gave these individuals credibility with local residents. Their faces were familiar and their methods for organizing neighbors well tested. Unlike the agency-level leaders who merely worked in the neighborhood, these leaders lived in the neighborhood and had a better sense of how to organize neighborhood residents. In addition, their track record of successfully completed projects gave them a sense of competence. Being residents themselves, they had a connection to the area that agency leaders lacked. This was reflected by a passion in their voices when they described local neighborhood concerns:

I started that block club. I lived there so I saw it deteriorating and I started this block club, which took about six meetings before people started coming out. I started knocking on doors and trying to convince the people to come on out, we can change this block.

I believe that grassroots leaders can change their own environment, . . . they could change a lot of things, believe me, cause they live there, they know where the movers and shakers are, you know, where the drug dealers are. You know, we know where the people that will give are. We know that because we live there.

We wanted the vacant lots for beautification and we didn't want the blight there and we didn't want the crime there. So what I did, I talked to the Mayor, the Mayor had a meeting, rather, and I had to stand and I said to him that, concerning the ugly sites. He said "well if the organization can perform the work, I'll give you the opportunity. Send in a written proposal to the DPW." I got together with my recording secretary and we sit down and give it to the Board and they agreed. We sent the letter in with the proposal and it was accepted.

By contrast, leaders from neighborhoods with no history of successfully completed projects, regular meetings, or other group undertakings had more difficulties in organizing their neighborhood tree-planting project. For these individuals, every step taken in organizing the project was a learning experience. Without an internal support structure in place, it was often difficult to overcome a sense of inertia in getting people to participate. In these cases, it seemed that even the connection these leaders shared with their neighbors was not enough to motivate involvement.

[We meet] once a month and we just have a few people coming. If they think there's gonna be some money for the neighborhood, they'll come out in droves, but otherwise just have a few people. We just meet and have a discussion and serve refreshments afterward. Whenever there was discussion they felt that the city was supposed to come in with some money, we had a lot of people, but otherwise they just stay away. It's hard to get people interested.

To a passerby it may appear that a tree-planting project begins and ends on planting day; vital but not visible is the considerable activity that goes on behind the scenes to make it happen. The leaders assume a lion's share of the work and responsibility for making the day a success, yet the approaches they take differ in many respects. These differences are reflected in project outcomes, which can shape how local residents see themselves and their neighborhood. The experience of agency leaders gave them advantages in terms of easily navigating bureaucratic channels or securing funding for the project. Local neighborhood leaders had the advantages of being familiar faces in the neighborhood and knowing local neighborhood concerns. Those with greater organizing experience knew which neighborhood residents to call upon for help. Prior success with other neighborhood projects gave them a foundation from which to conduct additional neighborhood improvement projects.

### Follow-up to Planting Day

Seeing that the trees are planted takes substantial effort and makes a perceptible difference at a site. Once planted, however, the trees and the surrounding site need considerable care. Existing grasses and weeds will quickly become overgrown if they are not mowed and if pathways are not mulched regularly. Water must be carried to the site on a regular basis to maintain the trees, shrubs, and flowers planted there. Litter must be picked up. If a neighborhood group cannot give sustained attention to these tasks, the lot will quickly revert to its former condition.

Neighborhood leaders continue to play an important role in ensuring the maintenance of the lots. By signing the maintenance agreement on behalf of the neighborhood organization, their efforts become central to mobilizing resources, motivating local residents, and keeping the lots as positive neighborhood landmarks. Here again leadership differences were quite evident, reflecting how the leaders viewed the project, themselves, and the neighborhood.

The leaders from informally organized neighborhood groups that had participated in few previous group projects voiced frustration and sadness in seeing their good intentions fall short of the mark after planting day was over and the vacant lots returned to their overgrown appearance. A neighborhood leader shared her realization of the amount of effort needed to sustain a lot project:

Well right now it's overgrown with weeds. . . . The big problem is the mowing, the weeds have grown. . . . I would not deal with a vacant lot unless there was a person on that block that was willing to take charge because I mean I live on this street and you know, I'm always mustering people up to do it. I mean I can deal with it now, but I don't know how much longer I can keep doing it.

The situation for leaders with agency support is quite different. Not only do they have a clearer sense of what is involved in maintaining the lots, they have the resources in place to oversee lot maintenance programs. Their projects were maintained either by hired maintenance crews or as part of the agency's program (e.g., a community mental health agency has developed a tree-watering program that is run by their day clients).

Working with the [planting organization], [neighborhood organization], and friends, I've been able to clear that lot, spruce it up, clean it up. We've been able to bring in approximately \$3000 worth of trees, shrubs, and bushes that we really wouldn't have been able to afford any other way. . . . We have a crew on

a weekly basis maintain that lot and others in northwest Detroit as we work together to stabilize and revitalize Detroit's neighborhoods.

The more experienced neighborhood leaders mobilized local maintenance efforts with ease. Their experience from prior neighborhood projects most likely provided them with knowledge of which residents would take part in maintenance efforts. A reliable means of enlisting neighborhood involvement not only supports ongoing lot care, it sets the stage for residents to see themselves in the activity of tending the lots. The following quotes, from seasoned female neighborhood leaders, provide examples of the investment of local residents in lot care:

As a matter of fact, someone just came and told me yesterday, a guy was doing some work for me here who lives not too far from the [lot], was telling me I need to get somebody over there to cut the grass. I've got to call our president and see if he's found anybody to cut the grass this year.

The children keep it maintained. [A grant] pays the children a volunteer stipend. After they're out of school, all summer, and we use our woodchips. We do still get woodchips from the city.

The last couple years we had the kids do it, we had the kids for they get school supplies. They do it about four times in the summer, pull weeds, you know, clean it up. They do it about three or four times during the summer and they get school supplies for doing it.

While the leaders have a continued role in seeing that planting day is more than a happy moment in the life of the neighborhood, many of them also expressed their appreciation of what the lot keepers accomplish. Not only can we see these individuals as unsung heroes, we see from the leaders' perspective evidence of the identification of workers with the work they perform on behalf of the neighborhood.

Well there's a guy across the street, matter of fact he came here right after I got back and said he "I'm on my way, about 7 o'clock, and the other two guys from the block. I'm on my way down to the park to cut it." You know they just, they just, you know because they feel that [lot] is theirs, because they're the watchers on the block in terms of helping to maintain it and so forth. They look at that as part of their, you know, their job.

Right now the volunteer through [our] greening committee has kind of accepted that [work] and is doing that himself and getting other people involved in caring for [the lot]. . . . Yeah, one person is kind of doing that [maintenance]. He's doing the most difficult task and that's the lawn.

### Lot Keepers: The Unsung Heroes

In the months and years after planting day, it is the lot keepers who sustain the lots. As a group, these individuals tended to be less visible than the leaders and often less loquacious. Theirs is not an easy task; many toil for hours on end in their neighborhood lot, often using their own equipment, and with little or no financial compensation.

The thirty-eight lot keepers who participated in the study covered a large range of ages. One maintenance crew consisted entirely of neighborhood youths. Teens were also involved in maintenance work at two other sites. Thus sixteen (42 percent) persons in our sample were under the age of 19. Half that many (21 percent) were individuals over 50, and the remaining 37 percent were between the ages of 20 and 49. Eight of the eleven vacant lot projects were maintained by local neighborhood residents.

### Lot Keepers and Expertise

Maintenance work demands a vast array of abilities and knowledge. There are issues of timing, equipment maintenance, nurturing different kinds of plants. Many of those tending the lots had prior experience that enabled their work to progress smoothly. As a group they enjoyed sharing their knowledge:

If a neighborhood or organization wanted to do [a vacant lot project], make sure the commitment is there to follow up through it. Otherwise the whole thing is really a waste of time in the first place. There's gotta be an active commitment to, you know, you can't just do something and leave it and expect it to happen. It won't, you know, and that's what happens time and time in this neighborhood. Someone will get an idea and start something and then it's dead in the water.

You have to give yourself plenty of time. You can't wait until the last minute and say well we'll clean this lot today, because it doesn't work that way. Same applies with mowing of the grass and the upkeep of the grass. You have to go around each and every time and pick up rocks and sticks because they come to the top, the ground swells and the more you water it to keep it nice, to keep the grass growing, the more rocks and sticks come up to the top and then you gotta go around and pick them up. Otherwise you're buying a lawnmower blade or a new motor or something.

Often maintenance work is a way for local residents to apply their interests and talents in service to their neighborhood. Men from three

different neighborhoods talk about the technical side of keeping grass and weeds in check:

They need a good lawn mower and make sure the blades are very sharp on it. Cut it [the lot] not too low, say around two and a half, three inches.

That's a John Deere with a 48-inch blade on it, but really you still need larger equipment. You need something with at least a 60-inch cut to handle a lot that size.

See what I do, I have a mulcher, a 5 horse mulcher and I put it on high. I adjust my wheels up, so consequently the grass will grow faster if it's not being cut all the way down, but that way, you know, I don't strain the mower or nothing, you know. And I always just make sure it's good and dry, of course, you know.

### Lot Keepers and Identity

Maintaining the lots is much more than the sum of the tasks that need to be completed. For many of the lot keepers their work is a labor of love. Their descriptions of their work include references to the social benefits the neighborhood gains. They see their work on the lots as important, not only in determining who they are, but also as an integral part of shaping the neighborhood scene.

The average block, block club, got a vacant lot. They would want to keep the grass cut. They wouldn't want weeds to grow up on it. I wouldn't want to live next door to a vacant lot, you know I'd be less than a man not to cut it, you know, that's the way I feel.

We even took care of the yard next door. We took care of that, you know, because that building is vacant so nobody's in there and it would make this [lot] look bad. See what I'm saying? If yours is neat and trim and that [one] isn't we would still take care of the yard next door. We try to help the neighborhood look better.

The words of the lot keepers often reflect their strong sense of connection to the local neighborhood and to how their neighbors see and appreciate the work they do. This was true whether one worked as part of the neighborhood or in the context of an agency. What did seem to matter, however, is whether they saw their efforts as successful. If they were experiencing some success in their maintenance efforts, their words underscored the importance of that work to their own neighborhood and to the community in general. The quotes here are from interviews with lot keepers. These four middle-aged men and the young woman are all local residents.

[This is] a big difference to what it was. I mean you'd be surprised. When we're out here cutting [the lot] everyone just slows up and looks . . . and the purpose

of that community bulletin board is to get people's attention to what's going on here.

We try to keep it cut, and either end you looking from, it looks nice. And it's really nice too with the trees. I seen a couple people sitting in there one day. That was really nice, you know.

Yeah me and Billie try to be role models for all the other youngsters in the block and try to make them be dependable. Actually me and Billie are the two male role models on the block. I try to be and that give me a lot of inspiration 'cuz a lot of times I be tired 'cuz I try to keep this end [of the block] in order too. So it's rewarding because when you fulfill within yourself, it's rewarding. The park is looking better because the trees are growing. I'd have never dreamed they would be that beautiful.

The neighbors, they appreciate the way we keep the place up. And see, the neighborhood is coming back in terms of the church down there, the great big one down there owns a lot of these homes and they're renovating them. So they're glad because they're putting in new lawns and stuff, so they're glad to see a place like this [lot]. They're glad to see when we put out flowers and stuff, they're glad to see that because that makes the whole neighborhood look better. We try to be good neighbors.

When we were working there [on the lot] a few kids came by and started helping out. And they said well we play here and, you know, things like that. So that was pretty cool. So we actually, we knew why we were doing it, who we were doing it for.

The thirty-eight lot keepers interviewed for this study ranged widely in age, knowledge, and personality. There was the quiet, reserved middle-aged man who took it upon himself to care for a vast stretch of neighborhood vacant lots using his own tools and John Deere riding mower. He did not say much, yet his words reflected an awareness of the way these green spaces connected local residents to the natural world. There were the young charges all dressed in their purple tee shirts who worked with an elderly African-American woman. Their work provided them with something wholesome to do under the direction of a wonderful mentor. There were the two men on the city's east side who took great pride in their work and identified themselves as the male role models on their block. As a group the lot keepers represented such great variety that it is difficult to capture their diverse talents and abilities. Yet their involvement in lot maintenance allowed each of them a context in which to express themselves. Through their efforts, the local stewardship projects flourished, and they in turn found meaning and satisfaction in their contributions.

### Community and Identity

The stories told by the leaders and lot keepers tell of complex relationships between personal identity and physical place. The transformation of place, a vacant lot, leads to changes in the neighborhood and the people who live there. Transformation in the people in turn leads to further changes in the neighborhood. To begin the cycle, however, it was necessary for someone to take the initiative. There had to be an individual who had a vision of change; a sense of how to make things happen; and enough patience, persistence, and charisma to lead the way.

In this section we reflect on what we have learned from this and other environmental stewardship programs (Grese, Kaplan, Ryan, & Buxton, 2000; Ryan, 2000; Ryan, Kaplan, & Grese, 2001). In the latter studies, for example, we also found close relationships among transformed places, identity, and involvement. In some instances, the decision to participate in activities such as removal of invasive plant species or river monitoring is based on the volunteer's conviction about helping the environment. In other instances, it is through increasing experience that stewardship volunteers discover a sense of purpose and clarity that provides new directions and identity. In the context of the vacant lot projects, it is too soon to know whether for the younger lot keepers their involvement, which generally began as happenstance, might turn into life-transforming missions.

### Transformation of Place and Person

The process of greening a local vacant lot is cyclical in nature. Just as the project changes over time, so too do those who tend it and use it. The lots provide physical examples of the interplay among involvement, expertise, and identity. The circumstances under which one chooses to participate in a project and the outcomes of that participation can affect both continued involvement and how individuals feel about the work they do.

In some neighborhoods the vacant lot project is one of the first projects undertaken, so the cyclical pattern is less evident. It is easier to see the cycle in neighborhoods where the vacant lot project is one in a long line of successful projects that have shaped present-day neighborhood identity. This is nicely illustrated by the following quote from a neigh-

borhood leader who has spent more than a decade organizing projects in her community:

I think the first project that we worked on was the lawn lights. Everybody wanted one of those lawn lights. I had someone come out from one of the companies and talk about the lawn lights at the next meeting. That really started bringing people together. The day they installed those lawn lights was the day I knew there could be unity on that block because everybody started coming out and looking at them installing lights. 'I'm gonna put bricks around mine.' 'I'm gonna put flowers around mine, and gravels here.' It really brought the people together. . . . And you know signs went up, and we started painting the curbs. Everybody started noticing that one block.

The cyclical nature involves other facets as well. Pride in the neighborhood increases, along with self-esteem. People become more willing to participate, leading to changes even beyond the vacant lot. It is characteristic of many environmental stewardship projects that participation in the tangible changes to the setting—tree planting, removal of invasive species, river cleanups—is accompanied by personal changes.

The underlying relationships among these qualities are difficult to document. However, it is less difficult to believe that these transformations are happening when one hears local residents reflect on the changes they have witnessed. One of the agency leaders clearly understood these relationships:

So the neighborhood, what we've been trying to do with the whole neighborhood is to kind of lift it up and to improve it and to rebuild and to be a part of the rebuilding that's coming this whole way. 'Cause it just makes a difference, your environment, how you act and how you feel about yourself.

### Leadership-Driven Outcomes

Vacant lot planting projects involve more than trees, shrubs, and flowers. They are part of a local neighborhood social scene and are shaped by the efforts of many individuals. The methods used for planning, planting, and maintaining these projects can have profound consequences for the local community. Thus the expertise of the leaders and their approaches to implementing the project have substantial impact on community identity.

Leaders from agency-led projects make good use of organizational skills and support in carrying out their projects and attending to follow-up maintenance. This agency expertise is quite successful at

transforming weedy, overgrown lots into well-kept neighborhood parks and green spaces. At the same time, however, the lack of a local neighborhood presence or connection to local neighborhood concerns lessens the opportunities for involvement by local citizens. This lack of connection to surrounding neighborhood residents can mean missed opportunities for bolstering community identity as the project evolves.

By contrast, leaders from locally established neighborhood organizations, using tried-and-true methods of community organizing and representation, set the stage for neighborhood involvement in these projects before, during, and after planting day. Planned with an eye toward neighborhood wishes and uses, these projects are more inclined to become highly valued community spaces. Involvement by local residents, particularly in lot maintenance, further increases opportunities for weaving the project into the existing social identity of the neighborhood.

Reliance on local leadership, however, provides no assurance of positive outcomes. A local leadership that lacks strong organization and a history of successfully completed projects may ultimately defeat the project. The highly visible nature of these projects, both before and after planting day, broadcasts failure that extends beyond the loss of trees (see chapter 9).

### **An Invisible Process**

Many aspects of the failure or success of these projects, including the multitude of steps needed to make a project happen and the sustained effort required to maintain it, are hidden from view. Decisions to undertake planting projects may be made without knowing the demands that they will entail. Yet success, with all its ramifications for the neighborhood, often depends on many unforeseen factors.

If it takes so much skill and effort to nurture a planting project, ideally the individuals with experience would share their knowledge and provide assistance to others. Unfortunately this is rarely the case because leaders and lot keepers tend to underestimate their role and understanding; they may feel that they contributed little, that anyone could have done it. This pattern is characteristic of many experts. In gaining expertise, involvement and experience change how we see things (Kaplan and Kaplan, 1982). People tend to be unaware of these subtle but powerful changes; the new way of seeing seems so obvious. Thus while leaders may recognize activities that require support from governmental agencies and those

that will gain momentum through informal networking, they may not recognize that this takes special knowledge. Similarly, experienced lot keepers can anticipate how much effort is needed to maintain a project without appreciating that being able to do this is indicative of their expertise.

The invisibility of expertise to the expert thus leads to the tendency to take one's knowledge for granted and makes it more difficult to transfer it to others. The leaders' and lot keepers' expertise is essential to their own identity and to the success of the project; the failure to recognize it, however, can mislead others into thinking that a tree-planting project is a simple and straightforward solution to neighborhood malaise.

### **Success and Identity**

Success has many positive implications, but projects are not always successful. Failed projects are not only damaging to the neighborhood, they are deeply painful to those involved. We heard it in the voices of leaders whose visions for the project did not match the outcomes. We also heard it as lot keepers described the futility of trying to reclaim a vacant lot that all too quickly became overgrown and unattractive. The process of trying and then failing, especially when repeated again and again in a neighborhood, can have profound impacts upon how those involved come to think of themselves and their neighborhood. It is not surprising that local residents are often reluctant to become involved in projects like these, particularly when they are undertaken by outside agencies or occur in neighborhoods that have experienced few successes.

The lesson here goes beyond the impacts of a failed project upon local neighborhood residents. There are risks and dangers in carrying out a project without careful consideration of how it will be tended after planting day or how it will be woven into the fabric of a local neighborhood. To focus solely on projects that work or are successful is as dangerous as it is irresponsible. The powerful effect of a project that falls short of the mark provides ample evidence of why these ventures should not be undertaken lightly.

With sufficient examples of failed efforts around the city, it is all the more remarkable to see so many instances of planting projects that have many of the marks of success. Some of these once-vacant lots have become important foci for the neighborhood. They are places residents seek for quiet moments, where they know they will meet others or learn

about local happenings, or where local events take place. The residents see local, familiar faces tending and using the lots, and this reinforces their belief that the lot belongs to the neighborhood.

### Concluding Thoughts

The process of transforming vacant lots into neighborhood oases appears to have important psychological benefits. By contrast, failed efforts to create a new and valued neighborhood place may unfortunately undermine both personal and community identity. This study suggests a number of hypotheses concerning the roles these places play when the attempted transformation is successful.

### The Lot as Community Landmark

The open space itself provides a visual resource that is a frequently encountered part of the local scene. As residents see what is happening on the lots and watch them thrive under local care, they come to consider them a vital part of the neighborhood. The lots thus become more than a place to notice; they become locally significant places to share and use. The presence of an attractive, shared, and highly visible location is hypothesized to enhance the community's sense of identity.

### Linking Involvement and Identity

Personal identity is intimately related to the place where one lives and how its transformation is perceived by the self and others. This is augmented by the degree to which one has been personally active and involved in the transformation. Participation in creating the place or in sustaining it as a local resource is hypothesized to enhance personal identity through an increased sense of connection and ownership, as well as through receiving the respect of the community.

### Toward Continued Changes

The involvement itself is also a source of psychological benefits that are self-supporting. Participation is hypothesized to promote further involvement that ramifies and extends to other projects, further enriching the neighborhood and possibly encouraging others to participate in the process. Involvement, expertise, and identity are thus closely inter-

twined. The success of tree-planting programs depends on them and helps foster them as well.

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