

Check out our website
to learn more about the
extraordinary impacts of other
existing community greens.
www.communitygreens.org

What are community greens?

Community greens are shared parks tucked away on the inside of residential blocks. They are collectively owned and managed by the neighbors whose homes and backyards, decks, patios, and balconies enclose the green.

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CHANDLER'S YARD Baltimore, MD

A few homeowners in the Federal Hill neighborhood of Baltimore have discovered that they can enjoy all the amenities of city living without the usual anonymity or lack of green space. Hidden behind eleven narrow row houses, Chandler's Yard is a tree-shaded courtyard that was carved out of the backyards of the surrounding houses by developer Bill Struever who wanted to make living on the block more attractive to potential buyers of those homes. Here, the neighbors of Chandler's Yard are assured a pleasant green view from their homes and private yards. It is a quiet place, perfect for reading the morning paper and enjoying a cup of coffee. It is also a crossroads, where neighbors sometimes stop and talk about their day, or catch up on each other's news.



STONEY CREEK APARTMENTS Livermore, CA

Stoney Creek Apartments draws both would be residents and design critics. Built in 1993 in Livermore, California to address a need for affordable housing, the cheerful red and white exteriors of the flats and townhomes catch the eyes of passersby. The homes' orientation around interconnected courtyards dotted with flowering trees invites a stroll around the property. With the help of front porches, back patios, and shared courtyards, neighbors often linger outside, chatting and enjoying the California weather. The orientation of patios facing the courtyards allows parents to keep an eye on their children as they play, which gives the parents more flexibility and the children independence and an opportunity to explore.



MONTGOMERY PARK Boston, MA

On summer evenings, the glow of candlelight illuminates the lush plantings of Montgomery Park, a third of an acre backyard shared by 85 households in Boston's South End. This community green is the heart of a diverse community of neighbors who have grown to be "the best of friends." Here, they garden together, maintaining several large perennial borders, trees, walkways, and a lawn. Neighbors gather here to play, lounge, and dine. From the 1860s, when the block was developed, until the 1970s, the shared interior-block park was separated from residents' backyards by an alley and fence. Over the years, residents have worked to connect the park to their yards by covering the alley with a brick walkway, tearing down the fence, persuading the utility companies to bury their lines, and shifting garbage pick-up to the fronts of their homes. Through their efforts, residents of Montgomery Park now have easy access to a green oasis in the midst of an otherwise dense urban neighborhood.

Why should you develop community greens in your city?

Whether they are incorporated into new developments or become part of the fabric of existing neighborhoods, community greens have a number of remarkable benefits:

Community greens...

- * Provide easily **accessible and safe play spaces** for children.
- * Build **strong communities** as neighbors enjoy, manage, and protect their shared garden.
- * Are places where all residents can interact on a casual basis and form friendships that **improve the quality of their lives.**
- * Unite the block visually, provide a **substantial natural respite**, and offer many opportunities for relaxing—quietly alone or with others.

Community greens benefit the surrounding neighborhood as well as the residents by...

- * **Increasing property values.**
- * **Increasing safety and security** because neighbors know who does and does not belong and can look after each other, especially in the absence of tall privacy fences.
- * **Adding stability** because people on blocks with community greens move less often.
- * **Fostering the development of new community leaders and organizations.**

Cities benefit from community greens because they...

- * **Increase property tax revenues** as home values rise.
- * **Stimulate home improvement investments.**
- * **Increase the city's tree canopy**, which counters the urban heat island effect, reduces stormwater runoff, and provides habitat for birds and other small animals.
- * **Are a prime antidote to sprawl** by making city living more attractive, especially to families with children.

URBAN PLANNING



Secret Gardens

*How to turn patchwork urban
back yards into neighborly communal parks*

EVERYONE bemoans the loss of community in our lives, but a powerful tool for rebuilding it has been overlooked: the creation of private gardens that unify the interiors of city blocks. These are hidden places, but they are also communal—secret squares of green and light and flowers tucked into the hearts of city blocks, invisible

by William Drayton

to all but those whose back doors open onto the glory of a one-block commons.

One of the earliest and most famous of these secret gardens is the Macdougall-Sullivan Gardens Historic District, in New York City's Greenwich Village. This gorgeous park, hidden from passersby, has for seven decades molded a community

spirit in its neighborhood that, if it were duplicated around the country, would make city living far more attractive and also safer. Delicious as it is, however, the garden has had only a few imitators in Manhattan—chiefly the much smaller Bleecker Street Gardens, at Eleventh Street, and the famed Turtle Bay Gardens. For children

the Macdougall-Sullivan garden—which measures about forty by 200 feet and occupies the full interior of a city block—is a private playground; for parents it is a godsend; for busy professionals it is a civilized bit of Europe in the concrete jungle. Owners of the twenty-one townhouses surrounding the garden retain

small private areas that they can plant as they choose, but fences higher than four and a half feet are prohibited. The private greens merge visually with the common green, a rectangle of grass shaded by tall trees. At one end is a children's play area and a basketball court, at the other end a garden planted with flowers. Here the residents have children's birthday parties, charity cocktail parties, egg hunts, trick-or-treating, visits from Santa (who travels over the garden in a sleigh drawn along a wire, showering candy onto squealing children below), caroling, and ice skating when they decide to flood the green.

Given the obvious attractiveness of these secret gardens, why aren't cities across America filled with blocks of row houses built around a verdant heart? The explanation lies in a quirk of the English property laws that the early Colonists brought with them. These laws were the result of a long struggle by the English to free the country of the tangle of overlapping claims that made it impossible for most property to change hands in the medieval period. American property laws

were from the start stacked firmly against multiple claims that might inhibit any property's sale or development.

The political leader and Bank of New York director Nicholas Low bought the Macdougall-Sullivan property in 1796. His heirs built its fashionable Greek Revival townhouses beginning in 1844. Their heirs, rather than demolishing the houses to build tenements, enjoyed the rents and let the properties deteriorate.

The garden was created by one man, William Sloane Coffin, a New York businessman and the heir to W. & J. Sloane & Co., the home-furnishings business, who was disturbed by the decline and by the flight of the middle class from New York. Coffin believed that providing attractive, affordable housing to the middle class through the renovation of old buildings was a solution. He wanted to give homes to "writers, businessmen, artists, actors, and musicians." Coffin's real-estate company, Hearth and Home, bought the block in 1920 from Low's heirs and joined its back yards into one communal garden. Four years later the houses were made available for purchase by the people who were renting them.

Alden Cohen, one resident, told *The New York Times* in 1974 that because it belonged to the community, the garden taught many lessons in cooperation. This spirit began as an "economic necessity," she recalled. "No one had very much money." Residents had to agree on how to plant the garden (a committee still decides each spring, and everyone turns out on Digging Day to touch up paint and to plant flowers and grass). They also had to decide such issues as whether to allow touch football and whether to give small children bicycle rights. Mothers grew close as their children played together. There have been lapses in neighborliness: once a kid threw a rock through the window of fellow resident Bob Dylan's house and caught hell; once an owner tried to build a wall. However, in general the communal feeling is so strong that sociologists have descended to measure it. The garden's merits are now so clear that houses abutting it sell for several million dollars.

Turtle Bay Gardens, created around the time of Macdougall-Sullivan, is a fancier, Italianate garden with a central fountain, cool shade, and a tree celebrated by E. B. White. Nora Ephron grew up on Turtle Bay and received visits through the

garden from Katharine Hepburn. Turtle Bay, between Forty-eighth and Forty-ninth Streets and Second and Third Avenues, was the creation of a Mrs. Walton Martin, who bought the surrounding twenty houses in 1919 and 1920. She altered each one so that all the living rooms faced the garden, tore down fences that separated back yards, and filled in swampy areas for a plan based on group housing she had seen in Italy and France. Rare trees were planted and a central path was set down between low garden walls. Homeowners voluntarily agree to submit to some control over both the houses' exteriors and the upkeep of private terraces; the original covenant stipulates that no fences be built in the rear, no laundry lines or garbage cans be visible, and no building be used as a boardinghouse. Today Turtle Bay is one of New York's most sought-after addresses.

DESPITE the enormous success of these pioneering gardens on every level from human to financial, they haven't multiplied. It is hopelessly expensive to buy twenty houses in a city block in order to tear down their backyard fences. What should be an essential part of cities' ability to compete with the suburbs never came to be. But an urban paradise is surprisingly feasible. All that is required is a modest and relatively simple change in property law. In cities such as Boston, San Francisco, Baltimore, Washington, Chicago, and even Los Angeles thousands of blocks with hollow centers could renew themselves—and in the process strengthen their surrounding neighborhoods. The magnitude of the opportunity is startling, because the housing codes in most cities have long required that the rear walls of homes be set back from the center of their blocks. The resulting hollows make up, in fact, the largest available open space in our cities. Robert Wagner Jr., at one time the chairman of the New York City Planning Commission, estimated in the early eighties that up to three fifths of Manhattan's city blocks (there are approximately 3,200) could have central gardens.

New York's co-op law provides the key. It stipulates that if 51 percent of the tenants in a building that is being transformed from a rental into a cooperative agree to buy their apartments, the minor-

ity can be forced to buy or leave. Modern law favors such conversions, even if they create complex patterns of shared ownership, because they advance a number of public goals—including better building maintenance and more homeownership.

The same principle could easily extend to creating co-op gardens. New legislation could make it easy for a majority of a block's owners to negotiate a communal open space. Such an agreement would increase both the value of their property and the quality of their life. The helter-skelter back yards that now divide neighbors would become a crime-stopping, neighborhood-creating common. The new laws could also reward real-estate agents and community organizers with a piece of the action. Thus motivated, these groups would learn how to negotiate attractive designs, speedily resolve problems, ensure that minority rights are protected, and, ultimately, win the required majority support of homeowners.

Once a garden was launched, its beauty and the sense of community it fostered would work their magic. Americans' deep-rooted love of voluntary associations—every bit as distinctive as their individualism—would manifest itself, and everything from new friendships among children to new neighborhood customs to the sharing of names of plumbers and electricians would follow. Disputes could be handled as they are in apartment co-ops—by voting.

Municipal legislatures would have to decide how to balance what a majority of neighbors could mandate for their block and what safeguards were necessary to protect the minority. They might also want to experiment with added incentives—for example, providing reserved on-street parking for residents who give up back-yard garages for the sake of a block garden.

In time, as urban gardens became widespread, the idea could easily be applied to other settings. Owners of lakefront property, for example, could use similar legislation to create or preserve common waterfront access and a green strip. As the world becomes more crowded, people must learn to share limited resources intelligently. Modernizing property laws to enable urban residents to create their own magical gardens would strengthen cities, limit sprawl, and help build communities in a too-divided world. ☪



City of Cambridge

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IN CITY COUNCIL

May 6, 2002

VICE MAYOR DAVIS
COUNCILLOR DECKER
COUNCILLOR GALLUCCIO
COUNCILLOR MAHER
COUNCILLOR MURPHY
COUNCILLOR REEVES
COUNCILLOR SIMMONS
MAYOR SULLIVAN
COUNCILLOR TOOMEY

WHEREAS: It is an expressed goal of this City Council to foster community, and a community value to promote a healthy environment; and

WHEREAS: Communities throughout the United States, including Montgomery Park in Boston, are promoting community, open space, and a healthy environment through an initiative known as Community Greens, which encourages creation of shared parks in urban blocks (see attached information); now therefore be it

ORDERED: That the City Manager be and hereby is requested to look into the Community Greens Program for possible implementation in Cambridge neighborhoods; and be it further

ORDERED: That the City Manager be and hereby is requested to report back to the City Council on this matter; and be it further

ORDERED: That this matter be referred to the Neighborhood Long Term Committee.

In City Council May 6, 2002.

Adopted as amended by the affirmative vote of nine members.

Attest:- D. Margaret Drury, City Clerk.

A true copy;

ATTEST:- *D. Margaret Drury*

D. Margaret Drury
City Clerk

CM-108

ORDER #2

City Manager is requested to look into the Community Greens Program for possible implementation in Cambridge neighborhoods.

Vice Mayor Davis

In City Council May 6, 2002

**ORDER ADOPTED AS
AMENDED.**