



## **PIECING TOGETHER THE FRAGMENTS: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF LEADERSHIP FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN NORTH CENTRAL PHILADELPHIA 2004-2005 THE VILLAGE OF ARTS & HUMANITIES (VAH)**



Figure 1

This ethnography was written by Mary Hufford and Rosina Miller for Leadership for a Changing World Research & Documentation Component at the Research Center for Leadership in Action, housed at New York University's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. The ethnography is intended solely as a vehicle for classroom discussion, and is not intended to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of the situation described.

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## **Legacies and Current Practices: An Executive Summary**

This ethnography explores leadership as an ongoing, emergent process in the neighborhoods of North Philadelphia. Responding to the question posed by New York University's Leadership for a Changing World's Research and Documentation team: "In what ways do communities seeking to make social change engage the work of leadership?" we identified a set of core principles and practices that shaped a visionary planning process entitled "Shared Prosperity in North Philadelphia." Through this process the Village of Arts and Humanities staff engaged with surrounding neighborhoods in a struggle for social and economic survival against overwhelming odds.

We explored leadership as a meaning-making process that emerges in communities of practice—groups of people working together (Ospina and Schall 2001). The Shared Prosperity project necessitated a shift from individual leadership, in which "a single person emerges ... to offer a way for the group to understand itself and its challenges" — exemplified by Lily Yeh during her early years at the Village — to a more collaborative style of leadership, wherein citizens "choose to work through the meaning-making process as a group." (Ospina and Schall 2001).

To further the goals of Shared Prosperity, the Village radically democratized its methods of planning and decision-making, while adhering to four principles that have distinguished Village practice from the beginning: 1) keeping the process open; 2) leveraging support; 3) building relationships around sense of place; and 4) articulating alternatives to dominant economic practices and social policies.

### **1. Keeping the Process Open**

#### **Background**

Though not explicitly committed to consensus building, the Village has always invited participation in its projects. As Shared Prosperity Steering Committee Member John Ballard said of early Village projects, "Everybody and anybody in the community that wanted to help actually could participate. And that was unusual there. Because most of the time they only pick certain people. But anybody in the neighborhood that wanted to come help was welcome."

Shared Prosperity project formalized an open process by constituting a steering committee of leaders from surrounding neighborhoods. These political, religious, and community leaders kept the process itself open and on the table for discussion. Their active engagement with Shared Prosperity initiatives drew community members into the process, eased competing interests, and enabled members of diverse groups to work together.

## **Key to the Shared Prosperity Process: Cultivating Resident Leadership**

Shared Prosperity Project Manager Brian Kelly worked to keep the process open by continually seeking resident input and participation. As Pastor Donna Jones argued, it is important for community residents to be able to express their needs, and in so doing, develop the capacity for leadership from within. The danger of relying on leadership from the outside, she explained, is that “the people who are going to be here long after me and Skip [Biddle] and everybody else is gone, including Lily, including the Village, the community may not get what they want because the community’s needs may not be solicited or heard by people making decisions without them.” Thus, cultivating resident leadership and building community consensus were goals of the project from the outset.

### **Examples from the Ethnography:**

1. Block captain mobilization
2. Identifying community residents for inclusion on Steering Committee
3. The Environmental Justice Planning Group

## **2. Leveraging Support**

### **Background**

What the Village of Arts and Humanities brought to the Shared Prosperity project was a visibility outside of the community and a reputation that had attracted outside funding for years. Yeh generated interest in the Village among funders and city officials who saw the organization as a model for community revitalization. In addition, the Village has a long history of collaboration with a wide variety of organizations, including public agencies and programs, community organizations, and universities.

## **Key to Shared Prosperity Process: Equalizing Relationships**

Outside support for resource development is crucial to this community. Shared Prosperity’s innovation has been to engage people from different sectors to in collaborative problem solving, placing residents on an equal footing with professional “experts.” Yeh first sought to equalize the relationship between experts and clients by working with Universities to engage their students in planning that relies on residents for information and continual feedback. Describing a Shared Prosperity planning meeting, El Sawyer pointed out: “At the table were Steve and Juan. Steve lives in the neighborhood and works in the barbershop. Juan, you know, he’s a union guy. And, you had Temple representation there, you had other organizations, WCRP, Fairhill Burial Ground, and a guy from Drexel or Penn there at the table, and a number of other people there also ... [Steve and Juan] were sitting at the table and felt like they should be at the table.” This process involves recognizing and respecting the expertise that accrues through the experience of living and working in the neighborhoods.

### **Examples from the Ethnography:**

1. Steering Committee composition
2. Engaging university students and faculty as consultants to work with neighborhood residents as clients
3. The structure of the March 17, 2004 community meeting at Hartfranft
4. The AmeriCorps volunteer project

### **3. Building Relationships through Shared Commitment to Place**

#### **Background**

The Village is often said to have grown organically, one relationship at a time. Building social relationships by working together to produce and sustain community space is key. Sally Hammerman described the Health Empowerment Project as one designed to restore the sense of connection between individuals and their environments. Working on that connection together, people develop the social relationships that make community and environment mutually supportive. Village practices that not only build but celebrate the relationships among community members and between the community and its places include sharing food at nearly every event, producing place-based art (visual, dance, theater, poetry) that recognizes and celebrates particular individuals and groups in the community, and designing rituals that reflect upon and validate this community in this time and place.

#### **Keys to Shared Prosperity Process: Building Trust and Respect on Very Personal Levels**

Brian Kelly's dedication models a leadership that begins by listening deeply. He built trust among community members by being there constantly; following through on agreements reached in conversation, and continually engaging residents whose voices had not been heard. He built relationships around activities that kept people talking about and connected to their neighborhoods. Shared Prosperity projects build social relationships through remembering, talking about, sharing food in, walking through, and celebrating community space.

### **Examples from the Ethnography:**

1. Chat and Chew sessions at public meetings
2. Painting security screens on Germantown Avenue
3. Neighborhood Walks
4. Back in the Day oral history and storytelling workshops

#### **4. Articulating Alternatives to Dominant Economic Practices and Social Policies**

##### **Background**

As Lily Yeh points out, the way the rest of the city sees North Philadelphia forms a backdrop of chronic negation. “The world sees us,” says Lily. “We have abandoned lots, we have crime, we have trash – we have all that. Yeah, we do. That is our strength.” Stigmatizing an area of the city, the stereotype blinds us to the humanized spaces within the neighborhoods: the gardens, churches, stoops where neighbors congregate and talk, streets that bring neighbors together, and, in unexpected places, many flashpoints that jog the memories of elders. Humanized spaces are the holdfasts for community life. Recognizing these spaces, while seeking ways to retrieve spaces and people who have fallen out of community life, has been a vital practice of the Village. These are the foundations for urban revitalization.

In contrast to market-centered development, which destroys the humanized spaces while clearing away the devastated ones, Village practice has been to strengthen spaces that are already humanized by community life and presence. Transforming wasted lots and abandoned buildings into parks, gardens, and affordable housing, the Village creates spaces that enable public life, and that backtalk the negative stereotype. Land transformation is inseparable from community building: community health and environmental health are equally the effects of respect and gratitude, ritually celebrated through *Kujenga Pomoja*.

##### **Key to Shared Prosperity Process: Backtalking Business as Usual.**

Lyon-Callo and Hyatt (2003) argue that dominant social policies and economic practices make it difficult to envision grassroots alternatives to the kinds of privatist and market-based reforms advanced by those in power. Community activists are hard pressed to imagine, they assert, “possibilities for action at the local level that might address the systemic conditions responsible for heightening the material inequalities that compromise so many people’s lives.” The Shared Prosperity planning process has attempted to confront these systemic conditions and structure the redevelopment plan to counter dominant practices and ways of seeing. Village projects have deliberately sought “to turn the disadvantages facing the community into advantages, the weaknesses into strengths, division into cohesion, and despair and apathy into hope and action.” In addition, a commitment to just and equitable development, “retain[ing] area residents’ limited economic resources within the neighborhood while simultaneously leveraging additional investment in a way that seeks to avoid the displacement of existing businesses and residents,” drives the process in a comprehensive way.

As Brian Kelly explains to residents at a community meeting:

The whole purpose was to say, ‘Often times folks come into the community and buy property and make money off of the community, and the community: one, doesn’t actually know who’s coming in; and two, actually isn’t benefiting from

what's going on.' So the idea of Shared Prosperity is, like, 'Who is doing what in the area?' Trying to pull all the folks together and make sure it's the community that's in control. So that's where the Shared Prosperity idea is – there's no sense in one person coming in and making a whole lot of money, it's the idea of people working together so that that gets spread out and make sure that the whole community is benefiting from anything that happens. So that's where the name comes from.

### **Examples from the Ethnography:**

1. Challenging expert consultants to envision alternative planning models
2. Continuously directing plans back to community for feedback
3. Structuring the plan for holistic community capacity building and development

### **Scope and Methodology for the Ethnography**

This is an ethnographic study of the nature of leadership at the Village of Arts and Humanities and beyond, into the surrounding community. This study comes at a time of major transition for the Village. In June of 2004, Founder and Executive Director Lily Yeh retired after 18 years, leaving an organization ready to be guided by a new director, Baltimore theater artist Kumani Gantt. This turn of events posed an ethnographic challenge: our collaborative Leadership for a Changing World study would focus on an organization moving ahead under new leadership, in the absence of the leader whose award occasioned the study. Yeh, who had been planning to leave prior to winning the award, quickly recognized an opportunity to study what for her is an ultimate goal of leadership: the handing on of the founder's mantle during the founder's lifetime. "I thought, 'Leadership transition is a critical part of leadership. Why don't I make this award about leadership transition, and understanding how to be a good leader in passing on the torch?'" To do this, the ethnography would have to focus on the initiative that pivots between the time of her leadership and the beginning of a new relationship between the Village and the surrounding communities. "For me," Lily explained later, "It's about sense of place, and the creative act is to launch this project. I could see the future of the whole Village being tied to the neighborhood. Instead of building a million dollar center, you build the Village horizontally." Launched by the Village in the fall of 2003, Shared Prosperity is Yeh's last major endeavor at the Village, the fruition of 18 years of arts-based community-building activities. Our ethnography would study the emergence of new leadership in and around the spaces she had created and the project that Lily Yeh left as her parting gift.

We relied on participant-observation and interviews for this study. We attended many kinds of events over the course of the study, including planning meetings, after-school programs, conversations and participation in workspaces and community spaces in and around the Village, neighborhood walks, health empowerment workshops and conversations, celebrations and theater productions, and the funeral of James "Big Man" Maxton. Through attending meetings, hanging out in the neighborhood, informal conversations and tape recorded interviews, we explored many of the issues with which

Village staff and members of the broader community grapple as they explore a future for Shared Prosperity, as the explicit alternative to inequitable development-as-usual.

Because Shared Prosperity repositions the Village within a larger context, it changes the function and identity of the Village in North Philadelphia. Shared Prosperity marks an important shift from individual to shared community leadership. This shift is not seamless and it is not without conflict and struggle. It is happening through the engagement of veteran activist leaders in North Philadelphia, as well as emergent activists, and it is happening through painstaking attention to the building of new relationships founded on mutual trust. We could say that Shared Prosperity has entailed shifting from a focus on personal and social transformation through greening and the arts to a focus on political and cultural transformation through community-based planning. Village practice has made it clear that greening and the arts play a significant role in personal growth and transformation, as well as in the expression of community life. Shared Prosperity has challenged Village staff to cultivate new connections with communities beyond the Village neighborhood, while at the same time remaining attentive to the maintenance of the thirty-two parks, community gardens, and the cultural programming on Alder Street, the Village office. Our interviews and observations focus on the microcosmic work of cultivating and maintaining connections and nurturing them into community life and practice. In this report we will examine the cultivation of Shared Prosperity on the foundations that the Village has helped to put in place since 2003, when a representative of the Wachovia Regional Foundation appeared at the Kujenga Pomoja for that year and placed a check for \$100,000 in the hands of Lily Yeh.

We have positioned our writing in relationship to Shared Prosperity in two ways. One is by lending the ethnography to the process of meaning-making that is evident in all of the activities that fall under the Shared Prosperity umbrella. The ways in which community members create and represent meaning through dialogue and an array of artistic and political practices continually generate a dynamic form of leadership in North Philadelphia, and we add this ethnography to the mix in hopes that it will further the work of Shared Prosperity. A second way of positioning this ethnography in relation to Shared Prosperity is through emulation of the process of piecing together found fragments, which is a hallmark of Village art and social practice. In an effort to lend the ethnography to the remarkable discourse on social change that is emerging in North Philadelphia, we have mixed fragments of Lily Yeh's farewell speech, along with comments by members of the Steering Committee and the community at large into the cement that holds together voices and perspectives on Shared Prosperity. It should be remembered that the cement and the fragments are mutually framing, and the spaces between them are liable to give way to sprouting green things.



Figure 2 Vaughn Alaxander, repairing a mosaic in Ile Ife Park. (Miller)

### In the Light of the Torch: Two Moments

“This is not about me or the Village. I need to know, is there a way to have prosperity  
that can be shared?”

Lily Yeh, June 30, 2004

### October 2, 2004

Passengers riding north just after sunset on the regional rail line that runs through the site of an old ceramic factory near Fotherall Square might have seen something amazing, had they been looking east. A slight, middle-aged Asian woman standing atop a knoll, holding aloft a flaming torch. Following a winding trail up the knoll, an African American woman moves slowly toward the center defined in the deepening dusk by the torch, impelled there by the voices all around singing “This Little Light of Mine.” Kumani Gantt reaches the top and center of the labyrinth and takes the torch extended to her by Lily Yeh. By the light of this torch, Kumani Gantt delivers her poem, “Psalm for an Impending Rapture,” about the perilous and joyous struggle underlying the continual rebirth and renewal of community life:

#### *Psalm for an Impending Rapture*

*When we finally tumble to earth --  
stretched haphazardly  
from heavenly places,  
it is the motion, not the light  
which requires us to breathe.*

*Involuntarily, yet with care*



*we conspire to you love.*

*Our tiny lungs meet the morning with mere survival,*

*the parting stains sweet. . . .*

*I do not recall when I staggered from god's grace to yours,  
but I am held inside the walls of many countries  
carved by many wombs.*

*In a room shaped by placenta, I gather my weapons,  
ready to make war no more,  
and conspire. . . .*

*On the battlefield,  
a prism of dark hands comes to greet me, and  
we strain to make language, but  
there is little choice now.*

*Against the abyss of our tarnished armaments  
I breathe you in.*

*Endure.*

*Ashay.*

Set in a North Philadelphia brownfield-turned-tree-farm and sculpture garden, this rite of passage culminated *Kujenga Pamoja*, the annual harvest celebration at the Village of Arts and Humanities; and it marked the moment in which Lily Yeh, Village founder and director, symbolically turned over her leadership role after 18 years to a new director.



Figure 3 Village youth standing on top of the labyrinth at the conclusion of the Kujenga Pamoja ceremonies, October 2, 2004. (Hufford)

What Lily conveyed through the torch, and what became of that, is the subject of this ethnography: a particular kind of leadership, an effect of people working collaboratively

for social change, the leadership that Lily Yeh unwittingly stepped into when she accepted Arthur Hall's invitation and ended up, as she says, following the neighborhood children. We ask what becomes of this leadership when she is no longer present. Stepping into a space she threw into their path, how do community members seeking to transform a one hundred block section of North Philadelphia into a zone of Shared Prosperity engage the work of leadership? For a fuller view of what was in the torch that Lily Yeh passed to Kumani Gantt, we turn to one of the last moments of Lily's final official day of work at the Village on June 30, 2004.

### **June 30, 2004**

In the auditorium of Cookman United Methodist Church at 12th and Lehigh, a hundred or so residents of the area defined by Allegheny and Diamond, and Broad and Fifth assembled to learn of the progress and prognosis for the Shared Prosperity initiative. From 4:30 to 5:30 p.m. they work in small groups to clarify issues most pressing to them:

1. Community organizing and mobilization
2. Greening/physical environment
3. Health and safety
4. Youth and families
5. Housing
6. Economic development

While the groups deliberate, some health professionals, police officers, and Village staff begin assembling onstage, preparing for a formal question and answer session. At 5:30 pm Dr. Jim Plumb, of Thomas Jefferson University Hospital, reads to the community the results of a survey and a review of statistics on North Philadelphia. In the Village area, he says, 50 percent of the people surveyed state that their health is fair or poor, compared to the whole city of Philadelphia, where 25 percent say the same. He adds that in the Village area, 71 percent of the children are either obese or at risk for obesity – that's three in four kids, he emphasizes, who are at risk for being overweight. Other data show that strokes, cancer, and diabetes are all much higher in this neighborhood compared to others within the city.

Sally Hammerman, a community nurse, describes the projects she is running through the Health Empowerment Center, a Thomas Jefferson/Village project, and invites everyone to take advantage of the "Ask a Nurse Program" and to come and participate in "Back in the Day," an emerging oral history project that is using recipes and home remedies as thresholds to collective historical memory.

There are questions from the floor: What about a health and fitness center for our area? What about mobile units that would bring doctors into the community on a regular basis? Several members of the community voice discouragement, frustration, and skepticism, citing the way in which the resources and benefits of such studies tend to be distributed. "Every time we come to a gathering like this, we end up supporting other people," said one woman. "We don't get zip." Then, softening, she says, "I understand that you're

trying to solve our problems.” Sally Hammerman quickly clarifies that she’s not trying to solve the community’s problems, but to provide services that the community has requested, in response to requests from community members.

After a bit more discussion along these lines, Lily Yeh stands up and in an uncharacteristic move, takes the microphone and addresses the crowd. “Hello,” she says. “My name is Lily Yeh.”

I guess I have been the founder and director of the Village of Arts and Humanities for the past 18 years. Today is my last day at the Village, so to have the Shared Prosperity meeting, to hear you, to see how you’re engaged, and tell your concern, this is a tremendous parting gift for me. I’m walking out, not bringing anything with me, because I feel that it has been a gift for me to work in this beautiful neighborhood, lots of beautiful parks and gardens were created and children in our program, and health, and now we see officers sitting on the stage, you know?

And I feel the reason we launched Shared Prosperity, it is not for the Village. I do not say we have a future if we always say what we cannot do. We have to say what we, as a group together, what we can do now. That’s how Village started, from an abandoned lot. I came because there was a light. I came. People were laughing. “You’re Chinese. You’re an outsider.” But who came to my rescue? Children. They saw me and Jojo working on the street. I don’t know how many of you remember Jojo. Arthur Hall, he invited me. But Jojo was there. I convinced him. He came. He helped me.

What did we have? We didn’t have money. We’re poking in the ground. Recycle. Looking for bricks. We didn’t even have money to buy trees. But with children we make trees more beautiful, more colorful, and when the paint fall off, we repaint them. And so we recreate them [the trees]. And so Shared Prosperity, I feel, the people of North Philadelphia, together, together, we have a tremendous future. And it’s critical, because if we are not together, the outside world is going to come and divide us and we will be lost. For me, this is not about Village, or this or that, it’s about people: people taking power to make things better for themselves. If we wait for city to do things for us, it will not happen. (Applause.) Like, the Fire Department has been laid off.

And do you have to know a lot? No! Look at me. I did not know much. I only know how to paint. But with the desire to do something, and to transform the deficits into resources, that’s how we begin. North Philadelphia, the world sees us: we have abandoned lots, we have trash, we have crime – we have all that. Yeah, we do. That is our strength. Now the Village turned 150 lots into tree park, tree garden. You look at our tree park. It’s not for the Village. It’s completely open. It’s for whoever wants to come and be with the Village. It’s all for the community. Then we realize that to do that just on our own, we would never make it. It’s too much pressure. Then many dedicated people in Shared

Prosperity, we have the support of Senator Kitchen and Thomas and so forth. I see Michael there, he is a committed activist and passionate and going to lead for the Arthur Hall museum.

Our challenges are our strength. We are so close. We are together and for me, as a gift for this parting director, please, please, under all circumstance, hold this place together. And when things happen, we start getting into “Why does she get that? We don’t get that,” and so forth, always ask what you can do to make a contribution to your community, and not taking from that, because before you know it the world will separate us. For me this is not about North Philadelphia, or about the Village. We are part of the force in that global movement. Because now the world is against diversity, [for] homogenization – look at our media. And also its profit – market price for profit. This is not about me or the Village. I need to know, is there a way to have prosperity that can be shared? We have development, but not an equitable and a just development, and how can we reach there? We’re not going to do all the things you want. What will come out is what you put in. It’s not what other people do. Parents got to organize. Demand school to give us quality education. We can have Town Watch start to take action. We have to stay together. We have got to be a building block, because . . . from the examples I saw . . . artists come develop place, people come develop place, and then for market price they slough us off. For me, the bottom line is that together we fight for what we leave here. We want to keep something good for our children so that they learn from your wisdom. And from what the elder has struggled and learned, we’ve got to pass that on to our children. That will contribute to our health. (Applause.) And with that, when the world says, “Yes, these people are together, and they have better houses.” And I see John Ballard there – our merchants are struggling. We need to support them. In return, we will say, “We need bookstores. We need quality stores. We need food that can make us healthy.” We need to work together, and don’t wait for other people. We are powerful. We have our hands, we have our minds, we are together, and our heart is bright and together the world will feel our heart beat.

In a few strokes, sweepingly and urgently, Lily evokes the needs, desires, perils, and possibilities facing citizens of North Central Philadelphia gathered at Cookman that afternoon. Every principle of human and economic development that Lily enunciated to us in our interviews with her appears in this impromptu speech, as do the key outlines of what was a struggle for her and for those who engaged with her. As she speaks, El Sawyer videotapes the attentive faces in the room, in which many kinds of emotion are registered: weariness, hope, skepticism, keen interest, ambivalence, respect. This is a community accustomed to academic studies that mirror deprivation and presage broken promises from the city. This community is too well acquainted with the obstacles to development in a city of Brotherly Love deeply driven by racism.

## Setting the Stage for Shared Prosperity

“We have development, but not an equitable and a just development.”

Lily Yeh

El Sawyer said he had never seen Lily Yeh make such a speech. After 18 years in their midst, Lily Yeh addressed the community as an artist whose work had been to transform people, land, and rubble into a place with a different future. The community she encountered was rich in culture, history, and human resources, but broken and struggling in the wake of decades of disinvestment and unjust neglect from the city. North Philadelphia was once the setting for Quaker farms on the outskirts of the city. During the first half of the 20th century it had been “the workshop to the world” (Hyatt 2003), a manufacturing center with scores of factories surrounded by worker housing. In the 1950s factories closed and moved away. The subway advanced along Broad Street, destroying a swath of community spaces in its path. Civil rights riots in the 1960s drove many merchants and residents away. Federal housing funds, promised to the area in the 1980s, were diverted by city officials into other projects elsewhere. In the sweep of the long cycles of industrial development, capital flight, urban decay and renewal, such areas are commonly reenchanting by an advance guard of artists, attracted there by the potential for transformation and the prospect of remaining on the fringes where art can happen.

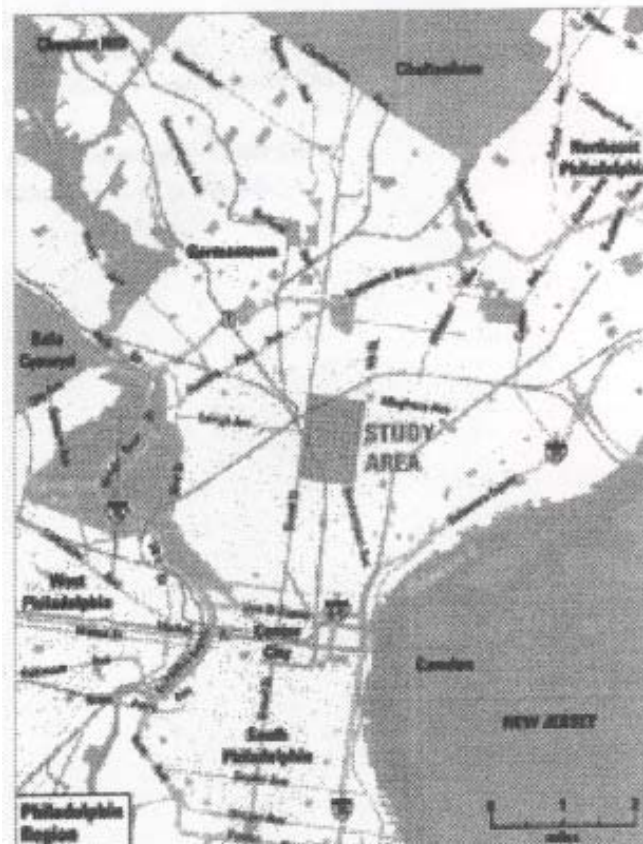


Figure 4 Locator map of the Shared Prosperity Study Area in North Central Philadelphia

The North Philadelphia that Lily Yeh stepped into was not at that stage in the cycle. But it beckoned irresistibly to Yeh as a space shining with the potential for transformation – material, social, and personal.

The reason I did the Village is because there was broken land. Nobody claimed it. I did not need permission. Nobody would come there. And so, all the wrong reasons were why the Village lived. All the weaknesses that I had became my strength. The broken people like Big Man and Jojo, they stood on their strength and their life was changed, and in the process, I found my life.

What Arthur Hall, Lily Yeh, Jojo, James Maxton, the children, teenagers, neighbors and volunteers set in motion was a feat and feast of transformation that eventually came to a crisis, a point at which the Village process of transformation demanded a qualitative shift, a quantum leap. Lily Yeh was in her element when the task involved retrieving what had been discarded, transforming it into art suffused with vision and an energy vitalizing to people and spaces around it, including herself. But the question of what kind of history the Village spaces and processes will enable under pressure to develop has grown into a haunting specter. As the forces of gentrification mobilize from nearby Temple University and move from Northern Liberties toward North Philadelphia, the possibility that the Village could hasten the kind of development that displaces struggling communities had to be confronted. Temple University's plans for expansion form the most urgent backdrop for the work toward Shared Prosperity. Is it possible that when the process of gentrification crosses Girard Avenue and pushes through nine more blocks to arrive at the Shared Prosperity area, it will find the communities of North Central Philadelphia prepared to negotiate on their own terms?

This ethnography looks at what becomes of Lily Yeh's challenge to prepare for and disarm the forces of inequitable development during the first year in the life of the Shared Prosperity initiative. The peculiar challenge of this ethnography, which was triggered by an award to Yeh and the Village of Arts and Humanities, is to produce a story that is *not* Village centered, but rather to further the goals of Shared Prosperity by engaging with the community in meaning making. As Steering Committee member Reverend Donna Jones put it, "There are people at the table who've been at the table before Lily got there, and they will be there after Lily's gone, and how we develop the leadership necessary at the same time the Village retools for leadership is important." This ethnography, then, deliberately sets out to understand Shared Prosperity from perspectives outside the Village as well as from within it, and in so doing, to articulate the emergent place of the Village in the unfolding history of North Central Philadelphia's struggle for social, economic, and environmental justice.

Before describing the work of Shared Prosperity, we want to offer an overview of the Village and the work that led the Village and its surrounding neighborhoods to the brink of Shared Prosperity.



Figure 5 Storyteller Linda Goss assembling children for Kujenga Pomoja ceremonies. (Miller)

### **A Brief Orientation to the Village of Arts and Humanities**

“Oh it was so beautiful, it would keep you spellbound! And I was just praying that it would come up to Lehigh. All that art.”

Miss Mazie Tucker

“This is a blessed place.”

Vaughn Alexander

Turning left from Cumberland onto the 2500 block of North Alder Street, one enters the heart of the Village of Arts and Humanities. This isn't just a public street, one of the small side streets in Philadelphia that run between the larger ones (in this case, between North 10th and 11th Streets). This is the Village office. The 2500 block of North Alder Street is the location of several parks, the numerous small row homes that have been renovated to serve as Village offices and other multiuse spaces, several private homes and abandoned buildings, and the large Education building that sits at the top of the street. But Alder Street also serves literally as the hallway of the Village as an organization, at least in the summertime. Here, on the sidewalks and narrow street, in good weather (and even in not so good weather), one is likely to see staff members walking between buildings or standing around stoops for informal meetings or discussions; neighbors walking up or down the street, using it as access to Germantown Avenue, the commercial corridor of the neighborhood; seasonal grounds employees shunting lawnmowers or wheelbarrows to or from the numerous parks and gardens



served by the Village; teens and children, either engaged in their educational activities, or on break, walking, laughing, perhaps dancing on the sidewalks and in the street's main park, Ile Ife Park. The Village as an organization lives on this street and in the buildings of the 2500 block of North Alder Street. The Village as a community, however, extends far beyond this block.



Figure 6 Alder Street during Kujenga Pomoja, October 2, 2004. Banners by Sally Hammerman and Brenda Kennedy. (Photo by Rosina Miller)

### **An Archipelago of Parks and Gardens**

The Village of Arts and Humanities began as a spontaneous construction of place. In the summer of 1986, Arthur Hall invited Lily Yeh to clean up an abandoned lot in North Philadelphia and transform it into an art park. What began as a summer project funded by a small grant grew over time and space as first neighborhood children and then adults became involved. Yeh returned summer after summer. What was first born of this effort was *Ile Ife Park*. The name of this park, translated from the Ibo language of Nigeria as “house of love,” pays homage to Arthur Hall, the renowned African American cultural worker who first invited Yeh to the neighborhood. His Ile Ife Black Humanitarian Center (1969 to 1989) once existed on the site now occupied by the Village. Today Ile Ife Park contains mosaic sculptures, gardens, pathways, an outdoor stage, and a dominating, three-story mural that depicts Yeh’s first guardian spirit.





Figure 7 Ile Ife Mural, next to Ile Ife Park. Photo by Rosina Miller.

Out of this project, the Village of Arts and Humanities grew into a multifaceted community greening and arts-based organization. What is called the Heart of the Village now encompasses multiple blocks in a neighborhood that once contained primarily trash-strewn empty lots, abandoned buildings, and drug-ridden, dangerous streets. Now these same blocks are home to art parks, mosaic mural-lined alleyways, community gardens, a vegetable farm and a tree farm, new-construction homes, rehabbed houses that contain administrative offices and other multiuse spaces, and a main arts and education building. The Village provides art, education and neighborhood development programs, social services, and many other services all through an emphasis on the arts and a mission to “do justice to the humanity of people who live in inner-city North Philadelphia and similar urban situations” (1).

Space at the Village of Arts and Humanities is constantly being remade and revisioned in the reconstruction of locality. In speaking about the inner drive that inspired her to found the Village, Yeh, who was born in China and raised in Taiwan, says she was seeking “the sense of what the tradition calls a *luminous place*, a place where I could locate the sacred in the mundane” (quoted in Leggiere 2000:32). Here Yeh is speaking of the tradition of Chinese landscape painting that imagines space in relation to time. She says: “In Chinese landscape painting they talk about the dustless world – *wu chen shih jie* – a world of pristine beauty, tranquility and time that transcends temporal time. In the North Philadelphia project, I’m able to rebuild that place. It’s a spiritual thing for me” (quoted in Boasberg 1996: D3).

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1 The mission statement of the Village of Arts and Humanities reads: “The Village’s mission is to build community through innovative arts-based programs in education, land transformation, construction and economic development. In all of its projects and activities, the Village seeks to do justice to the humanity of people who live in inner-city North Philadelphia and similar urban situations.”



Figure 8 Village parks, gardens, and rehabilitated dwellings.

And, indeed, the Village art parks are serene. In the midst of overwhelming abandonment and decay, a pedestrian turns the corner or crosses the street and comes upon a park of arresting beauty. The feet stop, the breath is taken away, and one is overwhelmed with feelings of tranquility, awe, and security. Truly, the sacred in the mundane. The difference is accentuated by references to world mythologies that Yeh exuberantly related to deep historical roots and spiritual needs of the community. For example, Meditation Park alludes to Chinese gardens, Islamic courtyards, and West African architecture. Village staff, artists, and neighbors made up the construction crew that created the Village's signature undulating walls, the tile and stone inlaid floor, and the extraordinary mosaic "Tree of Life" mural that are a part of the park. Another example, Angel Alley, consists of a large mural that depicts "nine powerful Ethiopian angel icons who stand protective watch over the community. The tiles and mirrors of Angel Alley shimmer magically in the night, reflecting the moon and street lights" (<http://www.villagearts.org>). While these examples reveal the evocative serenity and beauty of many of the sites, other parks transmit a feeling of life and energy, with boisterous murals of active subjects in primary colors and sculptural animals majestically guarding the entrances. Still other parks emphasize floral and vegetable gardens. The Village manages a two and a half-acre tree farm, which provides the city with young trees.

### **Village and the Space of Encounter**

The foundation for Village leadership has been built one relationship at a time, over the past 18 years. "The Village has built community leadership," observed Kelly Tannen, director of development, "through individual relationships." Lily Yeh had no desire to be



Figure 9 Looking toward the Village from Miss Mazie Tucker's block. (Hufford)

a leader, and never intended to be a community organizer. “I think I am a reluctant leader,” Lily reflected, after reading a draft of this ethnography.

I really don't like to manage other people. I just want to do my work. And I was given a vision. I went there to do a park, so I asked people for advice, and I got people around to help me. Then I realized there were a lot of problems. People helped me. That's how you build community: get people to participate in a meaningful way. But it was a broken community. There was no sense of direction. No way out. And here comes a crazy artist, not wanting to address any problems, but wanting to build a park. I had no idea of working with the community, so if I get credit for community building, it's totally accidental.

The parks that Lily Yeh built with the help of people in the community opened up a space of difference within North Philadelphia. This space became a place of encounter for people within the neighborhoods and also between residents of the neighborhoods and growing numbers of non-resident volunteers, professionals, and even tourists, a meeting ground for people interested in alternatives to dominant models for human and economic development that also serves as a buffer zone. There is much groundwork that needs to be laid to help structure and develop this kind of space in many communities, and we'll return to this issue in the concluding section of the ethnography.

### **Leadership through Vernacular Performance: Big Man's Story**

Through the stories told by those whose lives were transformed, the Village also became more deeply implicated within the neighborhoods, but again, at the level of personal relationships forming a domino effect. “Through these relationships there are other relationships,” Kelly Tannen pointed out, citing the story of James “Big Man” Maxton. “Because of the investment in Big Man, there are various people in the community that we probably aren't even aware of that are growing and learning out of the Village, because they know Big Man, and they see what the Village is doing. And I think that's



hard to measure and hard to describe.” Big Man, a former drug addict of 22 years, was an early neighborhood participant in Village activities. Largely through his work with Lily Yeh and the Village, Big Man was able to overcome his addiction and discover his enormous potential as an artist. Most of the sculptural mosaic work created at the Village was done by Big Man, who became an internationally acclaimed artist, and who served as the Village’s Operations Director and Tenured Artist until his death in February of 2005.



Figure 10 James Maxton, known as Big Man, in front of his home on Alder Street. Photo by Rosina Miller

Big Man’s stories of his life were secular stories of conversion, moving through a sequence in which the community sees him first as a drug addict, then as a hard-working member of the community, and then finally as an artist. This kind of account is fashioned out of a traditional narrative structure known to the community, and provides an example of how crucial the vernacular arts can be in the leadership process. The conversion narrative or testimony (confession of fallen condition, experience of a life-changing encounter, description of subsequent transformation of life and self) is a resource for community-building in African American churches. Big Man was aware that narrating his experiences offered potential for transforming his witnesses on the street. Through his art and his stories, he became a sign that continues to inspire hope.

In Big Man’s testimony, it is his work on the Tree of Life that retrieves him from the brink of death:

Just like when I had kidney failure, back in ’93. It was kind of devastating for a minute, but I worked until I couldn’t work no more. I got extremely weak because they had failed and I really didn’t know that, and I was almost just a dying man,

and when I went into dialysis and came out -- you see the piece around here, Meditation Park -- as soon as I came out I started working on the Tree of Life. And it became that for me. It became the reason to get up in the morning and come out and do stuff and I felt so much better, so much enlightened. And when I go to dialysis I was already a star because they had seen a couple videos, specials of me and the work that I do at the Village and carrying on. The acclaim and the real positive feel about what I do, you know how people perceive that, always put me in the best possible light. (Interview, April 4, 2002)

Until she interacted with Big Man, Jojo, the children, and other members of the community, Lily Yeh's artwork was like one hand clapping. Her transformation of space was like that of any other developer, until community members moved into those spaces and made them meaningful. Communities bring vernacular forms of communication to bear on the work of meaning making. In North Philadelphia, the vernacular arts that are most powerful are the verbal and gestural arts – styles of speaking, storytelling, preaching, witnessing, singing, dancing and so forth. Intensifying the meaning of his experience at the Village through the form of conversion narratives, it was Big Man who completed the work of leadership. We will return to the crucial role of vernacular arts in the work of leadership in a later section of this report.

### **A History of Social Activism in North Philadelphia**

The history of the Village also emerged in tandem with other histories in progress. In Village narratives, the deep dawn of time begins with Arthur Hall's invitation to Lily Yeh to clean up the vacant lot next to his building and create an art park, which began with trees made of concrete and broken glass and became *Ile Ife* Park. The term "*Ile Ife*" is sedimented, pivoting between the time of the Village and the time when Arthur Hall's dance studio was a center for community activism.

John Ballard told Rosina Miller:

I go back to *Ile Ife* at a time we were organizing, we worked for the Philadelphia Tutorial Program, we were organized by a fellow now who's the deputy director of Commerce. It was James Maxton, Hasann Nawood, Jeffrey Robinson and myself. We were four community organizers and we worked out of Arthur's place. And we worked out of the Antioch United Church of Christ. So I've actually been involved for about 35 years now.

It was within this history that the history of the Village took root, and with which Village history has become entangled, providing another support structure for a vital activism already in place, anchored in churches and cultural institutions and community initiatives. An opening was created by Arthur Hall's departure, the deterioration of the building at *Ile Ife* and the vacancy of the lot, which a visionary, people-centered artist would embrace with gusto as an opportunity to transform. But the transformation held surprises for Lily. "I finished my project," she said, remembering the first year, "And then something else happened that I had never experienced before: it was the interaction

among people.” People were inhabiting the spaces and transforming them into commons in which they had a creative stake and a sense of ownership. As the Village grew, it began providing after-school and summer camp arts and educational activities for youth; health awareness programs; economic development activities; and community festivals, performances, community gardening, tree farming, and other services.



Figure 11 Teens creating a labyrinth at the Village Tree Farm, August 2004. Photo by Mary Hufford.

For many years, Lily was able to grow with the organization by changing her concept of how to locate artistic practice.

In a way I became a conceptual artist, because the idea came, and proposal writing helped me to clarify my ideas, and to communicate to others and to give it a methodology and a time sequence. . . I feel that when I engaged with the community, my whole palette changed. Instead of the clay glazes or color palettes, my palette became negotiating with others, and about talking to funders and trying to understand what the funder will support, and how to deliver my vision without compromising its essence.

Following her vision led Lily to cultivate a place that had not existed before. It is a place that has been created out of social relationships, and which now requires interaction with other places to firm up its identity.

For me, it's about sense of place, and the creative act is to launch this project. I could see the future of the whole Village being tied to the neighborhood; instead

of building a million dollar center, you build the Village horizontally. The bigger goal is to try to create something so deeply rooted that it can stand firm against the global takeover by interest groups.

Shared Prosperity is the next step, but to enable the necessary change in identity, Lily had to write herself out of the formal proceedings. “If I am there,” she reasoned, “It will intimidate other people. But when I pull myself out, suddenly the field is wide open.”

### **The Shared Prosperity Initiative: Equalizing Relationships**

“The University needs us.”

Lily Yeh

“You bring them to the table.”

James “Big Man” Maxton

In preparation for her retirement, Lily Yeh threw herself into the ambitious project that would culminate her work at the Village, the Shared Prosperity initiative. In this initiative, the Village would take the plunge into the task of building community for the purpose of revitalizing North Central Philadelphia. This was not something the Village could do alone. Rather, it would need significant backing from outside funders, an unusual kind of engagement with experts in urban planning and design, and a steering committee composed of North Philadelphia community leaders. Having persuaded the Wachovia Regional Foundation to support the effort in spite of the Village’s lack of planning experience, Yeh engaged two teams of experts to serve as consultants: one from the urban planning program at the University of Pennsylvania, the other from the School of Architecture at Temple University.

The object of this planning effort, the Shared Prosperity Area, is bounded by 5th Street on the east, Broad Street on the west, Allegheny Avenue on the north, and Diamond Street on the south. Measuring 99-square blocks and just under one square mile, it serves as home to about 19,000 residents. As the Village wrote at the end of the North Philadelphia Green Corridor Plan, the Shared Prosperity planning project “aims to weld the various grassroots revitalization efforts of many community groups in our area into a unified force. Guided by a shared vision for one future and supported by a clearly defined methodology, this unified force will focus on the transformation of this inner city area into a place of great vitality and joy.” A \$100,000 one-year planning grant from the Wachovia Regional Foundation supported the development of a comprehensive plan to revitalize the area. (Subsequently, grants from the Ford Foundation, through NYU’s Leadership for a Changing World program, and the National Endowment for the Arts also supported this planning process.)

Though the Wachovia Regional Foundation does not typically fund arts organizations, they supported the Village because of its long-term engagement with local residents—an essential element of the planning. Evaluation Officer Lois Greco commented, “Their relationship with the residents is so genuine and compelling” (interview, Allen and

Greco, September 22). It was a harder sell, however, to convince the Wachovia Regional Foundation that instead of contracting with a planning firm, Shared Prosperity would work with faculty and students from the University of Pennsylvania (Penn Praxis) and Temple University's Urban Design Studio. This bold move, which we might call "academic inreach," is a cornerstone of Yeh's approach: incorporating into the process a training component that produces the next generation of professionals through their engagement with communities, in a way that allows communities and professionals to learn from each other. Lily recalled,

I felt it would be good to engage so many young people under the supervision of professionals in two universities. The enthusiasm and eagerness of the students gave opportunities for community residents to really express and define ourselves. Under the guidance of professionals, the two studios turned up many drawings and ideas which were stimulating and exciting to the community. These actions made community people realize that this planning process is not just talking, it is creating results. This helped to cut through some of the hesitation and cynicism. It generated hope and open discussion and actions among the participating stake holders.

Wachovia bought into this because, as Greco commented, technical skills and experience can be brought in, "whereas you can't bring in the relationship with residents. That trust has to be there to begin with" (interview, Allen and Greco, September 22).

In the months leading up to the start of this ethnography, Lily Yeh laid the groundwork for Shared Prosperity through a series of meetings with local, municipal, and state leadership. Local leaders of community educational and social service institutions, community development corporations (CDCs), churches, and community residents were identified and invited to participate. Out of these meetings emerged the steering committee that would drive the process of creating a community-based plan for Shared Prosperity. The Steering Committee has evolved over the past year and a half, and those listed in the most recent planning document include:

- Altania Shepherd, 12th and Cambria Recreation Center
- Andre Roualet, Temple U. Center for Social Policy and Community Development
- Brandon Young, Emerging Ministries
- Brian Kelly, Shared Prosperity Staff
- Captain Anna Frazer, Salvation Army
- Diane Bridges
- Dr. James Plumb, Thomas Jefferson University Community Health Department
- El Sawyer, Environmental Justice Working Group
- Esther Wideman, Friends of Fotteral Square
- Jackie Green, Philadelphia Parent Child Center
- Javier Mojica, Philadelphia Commercial Development Corp
- Jean Warrington, Fairhill Burial Grounds
- John Ballard, Germantown Merchants Association
- Juan Coreano, Faith Enterprises, Inc.



- Kumani Gantt, Village of Arts and Humanities
- Lawrence Clark
- Leslie Baker, F.O.A.M.S. General Contracting
- Marcela Franco, Lehigh Branch of the Free Library of Philadelphia
- Pastor Van Moore, Vision of Mission Church
- Rachel Brooks, City Planning Commission
- Reverend Clarence Hester, Glenwood CDC
- Reverend Donna Jones, Cookman United Methodist Church
- Robert Ellis
- Sally Hammerman, Health Empowerment Center
- Skip Biddle, North Philadelphia Community Help

This Steering Committee, which Brian Kelly assembled out of the neighborhoods, cultural institutions, and governing bodies of city and state, engaged with faculty and students from Penn and Temple to develop a five-year community development plan that could be used to leverage the necessary resources for this target area. Faculty and students, in turn, were expected to base their plan on extensive input from residents of the Shared Prosperity area. The students who did the research were dedicated, observed Esther Wideman.

They were very nice. I liked them because they were hyped, they were really excited about what was going on around here. I remember one day they walked me for like three hours, asking me what was this, what was that. They were young and they were very excited. And what I liked about them, they didn't want to put their words down, they asked everybody in the community questions. I think they went to almost every block and asked the block captains what was going on. They were very excited.

And they worked hard, she pointed out. "They called us on the phone a thousand times."

After six months of research, fieldwork, and meetings, the Steering Committee and the planning and design teams convened a large public meeting at Hartranft elementary school. In the days before the meeting, Village staff distributed 5,000 flyers throughout the Shared Prosperity area, advertised through the newspapers, and organized a potluck supper for those who would attend. Several hundred people turned up at Hartranft, and the reception they got was not what they had expected. Following the dinner, the residents seated in the school gymnasium were greeted by members of the Steering Committee—leaders from their communities—who urged them to participate in the Shared Prosperity planning process, and to begin that evening by visiting one of the four tables in the back of the hall. At each table were students from the planning and design teams, with maps and materials related to a particular quadrant of the Shared Prosperity area. As residents arose from their seats and dispersed to the four stations at the rear of the hall, the sound of people talking about where they live began to grow until it filled the auditorium.



Figure 12 Community meeting with students from Penn Praxis. Hartranft School, April 2004. (Hufford)

Moving from table to table, we heard the conversations between team members and residents: “How do you feel about this area for senior citizens?” “Do you go up to this area much?” A woman describes the process of disintegration that takes the neighborhood down: “The way it works is that when buildings are abandoned, drug users move in.” Listening to the lively cacophony, a member of Metamorphosis Community Development Corporation comments, “This is unprecedented.” Sally Harrison attributes the promising start to “Lily’s incremental way of doing things.” Jim Kise marvels at the brilliance of launching the meeting with the Steering Committee, while placing the “experts” in the background. And Esther Wideman comments that this program has been so successful because it was the first time a planning group asked the residents, “What do *you* want? What do you need?” and really took the time to listen.

This meeting models three key principles used in Shared Prosperity for community-based planning:

- equalize the relationship between experts and clients;
- engage the organic leaders of the community in the planning process; and
- stimulate a flow of talk that will connect people and keep them connected.

This meeting kicked off the series of Shared Prosperity meetings and actions that unfolded over the next year and provided additional data for the revitalization plan produced by the consultants and the Steering Committee.

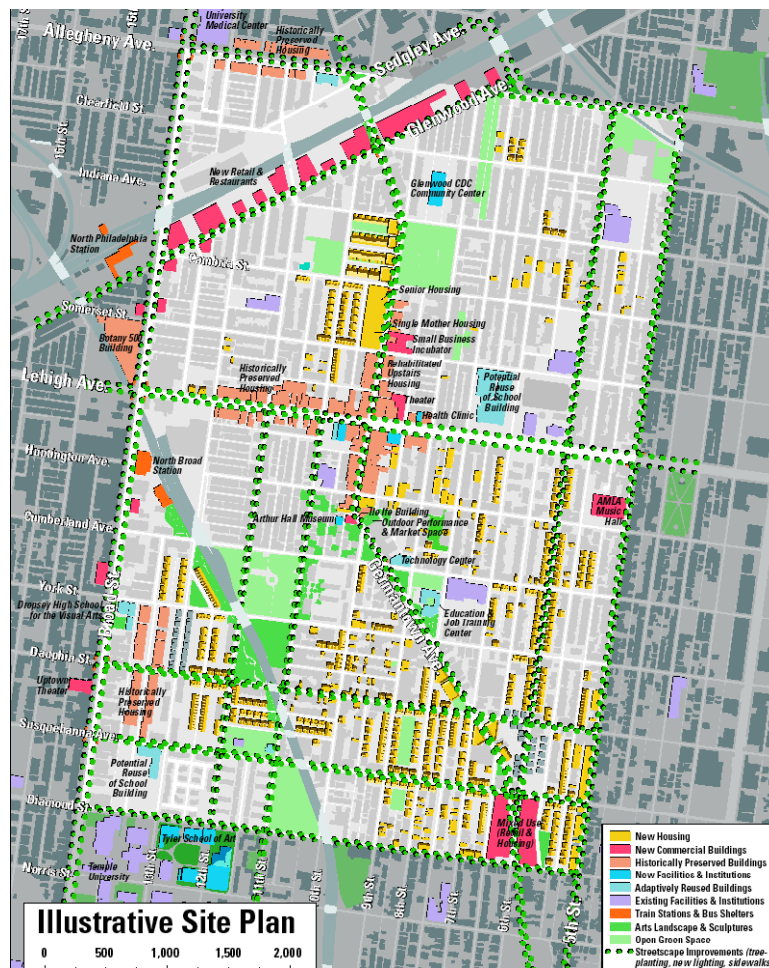


Figure 13 Shared Prosperity development plan. July 2005.

## Changing History by Changing the Times

Yeh's approach, also evident in her farewell speech quoted at the beginning of this report, alludes to the kind of history that Shared Prosperity intends to change. North Philadelphia represents the nadir in capitalist cycles of development, undevelopment, and redevelopment. Typically the way *up* for individuals is *out*, while the way up for a neighborhood is to attract outside investment. In the sequence of inequitable development, environment is detachable from community. At Shared Prosperity meetings, Coordinator Brian Kelly continually brought to life typical moments in the process of inequitable development as the history in which Shared Prosperity seeks to intervene:

What's been happening over the past 20, 30, 40 years, developers come from outside and say, 'Okay, we want to buy this block.' And so they might buy houses here and houses there, and then after they have the whole block, the city might help them. What's happening down south of Lehigh right now is they're building student housing for Temple. Now each Temple student is going to pay \$300 or \$400 a month, and for a three or four bedroom apartment, that's over a thousand dollars a month. So developers come in and say, 'We can make a lot of money,'

where a family of three isn't going to pay a thousand dollars a month. (October 7, 2004)

In the months that followed the event at Hartranft, the Village worked with the Steering Committee to pull a group of neighborhoods together into a regional political force, which is essential in order to gain a place at tables where decisions are made. The task of Shared Prosperity is to build a collectivity, a social body that will participate in the larger body politic, that will gain cultural recognition and be able to assemble the resources it needs to revitalize economically from *within*, with support from without.

One challenge for the Village, as David Gooch pointed out, has been engaging in the work of Shared Prosperity while at the same time maintaining the parks and programs to which the Village has become committed. Village employees engaged in Shared Prosperity activities, including Sally Hammerman, Dave Gooch, and El Sawyer, have risen to this challenge in part by adapting some of what they do to the needs of Shared Prosperity, and in part by thinking seriously about how to shift more of the responsibility (and the resources) for Village operations to residents. Brian Kelly, whose office is located in the Village, has been dedicated completely to the Shared Prosperity effort, and his work has immersed the Village in community organizing in an unprecedented way. Of the shift in focus from the personal to the communal, Kelly Tannen observed, "That community organizing, grassroots empowerment model, the way Brian is approaching Shared Prosperity, is really participatory, a lot of input. I would say that's not how the Village has operated."

The ethnographic problem defined by the Leadership for a Changing World program, how do communities in North Central Philadelphia engage the work of leadership for social change, has to be specifically restated in the context of Shared Prosperity: How do the Village's initiatives in land transformation, health empowerment, community self-assessment, and volunteer services engage the work of the social change that North Philadelphians envision through the Shared Prosperity process? And how are Village methodologies of greening and the arts, applied effectively over the past 18 years at the level of personal relationships and neighborhood renewal, adapted to the work of the Shared Prosperity Steering Committee, which for the past year has focused on developing consensus among the neighborhoods that make up the Shared Prosperity area?

### **Seeing North Philadelphia: Metaphors and Models for Healing the Social Body**

"You know, you just sit and you see everything go down. It's like a dream...And you see, so many strangers have moved in. You can't explain these people. They don't care for nothing. They don't want nothing. They don't want nobody to have nothing. You know. And it hurts. The older people, it hurts  
Miss Mazie Tucker

"North Philadelphia, the world sees us: we have abandoned lots, we have trash, we have crime – we have all that. Yeah, we do. That is our strength."  
Lily Yeh

Dr. Jim Plumb's reading of the grim health statistics for the Village neighborhood during the June 30th meeting captures the view of North Philadelphia as seen from the outside, and as ratified by its residents when reduced to numbers. Yet what the grim statistics obscure is what North Philadelphians value most about their neighborhoods: community life and the deeply humanized spaces to which community life is tethered. The planning process for Shared Prosperity has taken stock of such spaces, in ways that continue to build on them. In the language about this process, people often resort to the image of the social body. The problem of weaving North Philadelphia more equitably into the society of city and nation is a double-edged version of the problem of the body politic in modernity: are those who aren't benefitting part of it or not?

This question hovers behind the sense of outrage that people express over having been abandoned by the city. While the United States was at war with itself over slavery, while Quakers in North Philadelphia were making stops on the underground railroad, economists were theorizing the necessity of the poor for the system of capitalism, a turn of thought that has been conveniently served by the idea of race (Poovey). Against this backdrop, poverty persists as the expression of continuing racial oppression in North Philadelphia, an expression internalized as the conviction that poor people of color do not deserve quite the same privileges as people living in better neighborhoods or even poor white people. "What the Village is doing," David Gooch reflected, "is trying to deconstruct some of the bad things about society and our nation and the world we live in that are making it so that there are these people living in poverty" (interview, April 8, 2005).

Each staff member and each leader articulated social change from his or her own life experience and perspective on the endeavor. For Lily Yeh, it is creating an environment through which people give and receive respect; for Brian Kelly, it is mobilizing the community residents to deal politically with the city; for Sally Hammerman, health empowerment is repairing that rupture that alienates body from self and environment; for Dave Gooch and for El Sawyer, land transformation is, at heart, about undoing the searing effects of systematized racism and poverty. Society is the object of transformation, an object that is made more palpable through recourse to the metaphor of the body. In the practice of Shared Prosperity, however, the social body is radically remapped onto the city.

In inequitable development, blight is thought of as something that needs to be surgically removed, excised to create a space for new development, disjunct from its surroundings. In the Shared Prosperity approach to community development, leaders tend the life that is already there, life that, given the right kind of support from without, can still develop organically as part of a system that can heal itself from within.

The social body most often invoked in the course of inequitable development is centered around the immune system. When the human body is treated as an immune system, the healthy part is prompted to attack the source of the disease and discharge it from the system. When the social body is treated as an immune system, the powerful part destroys and discharges something designated as blight. In the case of the city, planners and

developers designate neighborhoods as blighted and recommend surgery: cut out the blight by razing the area, relocating its residents, and then revitalizing it. Blight is disease: it has no sovereign subject, and no voice. Smothered and hidden within the fog of the concept of blight are citizens who are unrecognized, or misrecognized, and treated as people who are somehow to blame for their condition.

Shared Prosperity invokes a different image: the body politic as a system of collective individuals. To participate in this system, North Central Philadelphia has to gather itself into a collective that the city will recognize and work with. Boundaries are essential to such an identity, which requires recognition from something outside in order to complete the work of identity making. As Mrs. Ellen Arttaway put it, talking with Brian Kelly during a Back-in-the-Day meeting,

We're going to disagree, but we have to do that in-house. Whenever we go out-house, we have to stand as a united body. If we go to the city, we have to all be on one accord. No matter how bad we feel, we have to agree that we're going on one accord. We're not going down there with fifty different things .... Because once anybody finds a split—

“They're going to take advantage of it,” predicted Brian Kelly.

“They will pull it apart,” Mrs. Arttaway affirmed.

“That's what good politicians do,” reflected Brian.

“Right,” said Mrs. Arttaway. “And that's why you have to be just as good a politician. As a group. You have to be just as politically motivated, too, but you don't let them see your division. Divide and conquer. They can divide, they're going to conquer you.”

Sally Hammerman, a community nurse, artist, and steering committee member, draws on the metaphor of the collective individual in her assessment of community health. What the city may see as a blighted region becomes a suicidal client in need of treatment. Such treatment includes recognition, support, and affirmation, not additional destruction. Elucidating the metaphor of the community as a social body, Hammerman commented:

I as a nurse look at the community as though I were looking at a single person in a hospital, and I assess their benefits in terms of health, and what their barriers are in terms of health, and look to support and to educate, and before I do that I kind of diagnose what's happening, attach a diagnosis and then, giving the diagnosis then opens up a whole bunch of ideas for what you need to do to administer to that diagnosis. And there you support the positive and eliminate the negative and don't mess with Mr. In-Between.



Figure 14 Ellen Arttaway, Doretha Bigsby, Ann Hayes, and Brian Kelly, May 2005. Photo by Rosina Miller

What treatment is prescribed for a patient who exhibits self-destructive, even suicidal tendencies? Hammerman argues that what such a person lacks is hope for the future. Art is one way of infusing such a person with a dose of hope. Miss Mazie's hope that the art would come up to Lehigh Avenue exemplifies this dynamic, as do the stories of Big Man that have inspired his witnesses. Art is needed to renew the broken connection between self and body, a connection broken when the environment is degraded. Art works because it, as Sally Hammerman explained, "does not have any yes or no to it:"

You can work with art and you can always feel that you are creating and empowering yourself and being able to bring something from the inside out into a tangible form...And that's real, real, real powerful. In order to achieve anything else you need to be in touch with yourself. So that's the area that I build on with health in the same way. You need to be able to connect with this wonderful machine called a body in order to access health.

Extending the body metaphor, Steering Committee Member Reverend Clarence Hester referred to Yeh's dosage of neighborhood transformation as "a shot of B12." Such images as the shot of B12 and the big bang are ways of constituting North Central Philadelphia as a collectivity engaging with other collectivities in the production of Philadelphia. The patient is not a condition to be removed through surgery, but a site for healing through work on social relationships by reversing abandonment, rather than completing it.

Elaborating on Hammerman's diagnosis of the suicidal patient, David Gooch names the malady: society-wide internalized racial oppression. This is, he points out, the logical outcome of a national history anchored in slavery, and which continues through the



capitalist theft of self-worth in black children, via messages blared incessantly through mainstream media: “You don’t deserve the benefits that other people have.” And this relates to the underlying rationale for inequitable development: poverty is the fault of poor people (Hyatt 2003). In this classic approach, the social body is threatened by the blight that could spread from impoverished sections, and the treatment is surgical: eradicate the threat by cutting out the blight. What happens in this approach is that the very resources that could be used to revitalize the “blighted” area from within are destroyed, and the seeds for future “blight” are carried into another area, because the underlying cause, cultural misrecognition has not been treated.

The Shared Prosperity planning process has tackled the diagnosis from within, proceeding not from a pathology report that diagnoses blight and prescribes removal, but from an assessment of health that locates the foundations for renewal. Through a S.W.O.T. analysis, planners and the Steering Committee identified the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats found within the Shared Prosperity zone. Initiatives carried out during the planning period attacked the weaknesses and threats while simultaneously exploiting the strengths and opportunities. The strengths and opportunities become the fragments that are caught up and held together through the process of community building. The work of leadership involves retrieving those pieces and assigning them meanings in a newly-emerging context.

### **Connecting the Fragments as Metaphor**

Among the strengths and opportunities of North Philadelphia are the spaces that support community life. Steering committee members worked to identify and connect the spaces that support community life, while retrieving and reclaiming spaces that have lost community value. Focusing simultaneously on land transformation and personal transformation, the Village participates in a deep and complex process of regenerating cosmos – turning parts of the environment that have been dehumanized into a rich medium for personal and communal growth, a medium in which people can cultivate positive identities. The mosaics that are the Village’s hallmark dramatize this process by salvaging the fragments of a world in ruins and refashioning them into new wholes. Eric Hancock reflected:

The way Lily would put it, as metaphor, when I say ‘start with the concrete’ she would say, ‘start with the fragments.’ Not as isolated fragments, but that’s your material. That’s where you begin. That’s actually the starting point .... That’s what you have to have to make a mosaic. You can’t do anything else. You can’t start anywhere else and end up in mosaic but with fragments.

Sally Hammerman alluded to the net effect of the mosaics as the “Big Bang”:

I feel that with a suicidal client you have to have a big bang. Because the energy is all going downhill and you’ve got to find the energy to turn around and push back uphill. So bringing in wonderful sculpture and wonderful big beauty and walls and pieces of mosaic, that was the big bang here, and that provided a



definition for the community of their environment. 'I can look at my environment and enjoy it.'

But that connection can't happen automatically when the alienation from the environment is happening through the withdrawal of children from their surroundings at a very young age. "These little tiny ones," reflected Miss Mazie to Rosina Miller, "like three and four, are very withdrawn." The children themselves are seen as fragments, needing to be drawn out and incorporated into the community. They are what give community-based development its purpose.

The process precipitated by the Big Bang resembles what anthropologist Betsy Taylor calls "cosmogenesis:" the work of piecing together a cultural milieu that has been blown to fragments in a space that has landed outside the mainstream. Taylor defines cosmogenesis as "the symbolic creation of the architectonics of meaning that turns the flatness of 'universe' into the proportionalities of 'cosmos,' that allows things to nestle within each other, to co-inhabit, to be a matrix for each other, to make a 'place' out of neutral 'space', or to be cast out as anti-matrixial" (in press). In the Shared Prosperity activities place was recreated not out of neutral but out of negative space. Recalling Lily Yeh's comment that she is a sculptor of the spaces between objects, Shared Prosperity modeled ways in which to wrest negative space back into community life, creating the grounds for contradicting negative messages about the neighborhood.

Cosmogenesis offers one way of thinking about how art and related forms of public communication and practice generate the meanings that build community life. Guardian Angel Park exemplifies an act of cosmogenesis. Addressing resident fear about the dangerous neighborhood, and the fear of vulnerability that comes with communication, Yeh designed an educational project for Hartranft elementary school that conjured guardian angels to help the children communicate. Not cute little cherubs either, but high-powered guardian angels inspired by world mythologies who could cast out the fear that gets in the way of community life and replace it with trust.

The teacher came to us and said, "We have a hard time with the children, can you try to teach them through the arts?" . . . And I felt they couldn't learn. They're resistant to learning because they are kind of choked up inside.... So I said, "Got to get the children to express themselves, tell their stories." And I was thinking, well, if you get them to tell their stories, open them up, then they become very vulnerable. So I said, "How do you get them to create some space inside, and at the same time be protected?" So that's when I think of guardian angel, personal guardian angel. And so, I was thinking, this is an African American community. Usually we think of very cute angels, and I said, "Let's introduce some really powerful angels – African angels, Chinese angels, Buddhist angels, ancient Mesopotamian angels, and so forth. (Interview, June 2004)



Figure 15 Guardian Angels Mural, Guardian Angel Park. (Katherine Oaks)

Cosmogenesis is a process of reconnecting community and environment. It humanizes space, and places humans by changing the narrative of development with attention to such minute details: learning that there is a place where it is safe to express themselves, children re-enter a time of human development. In the following sections of this ethnography, we look at how five resident-led Shared Prosperity initiatives worked to humanize spaces that had been dehumanized, while building community life through creative action and artistic practice. We examine fragments that the Shared Prosperity process is piecing into a new context with new meanings including: the four quadrants (meetings at Cookman); neighbors separated by fear of drugs and violence (block captains and neighborhood walks); body and environment (health empowerment project); ecology and economy (land transformation, paintings on security screens); professional life and civic engagement (Americorps volunteers, merchants).

### **Piecing Together the Four Quadrants**

“The reality is, somebody over here ain’t really overly concerned about what’s going to happen at Germantown and Clearfield or Percy and Clearfield.... My concern is to help get my people something here now. So I can get them encouraged and get them excited.”

Clarence Hester, Steering Committee member

“Shared Prosperity has been that connection – bringing people together, making people feel like they do have options and there is something bigger than what they’ve been doing.”

El Sawyer, Steering Committee member

In order to form a bloc that can influence city hall, communities need to unite. Yet the one-hundred-block area of the Shared Prosperity zone is far larger than what people are accustomed to inhabiting as a neighborhood. But by what process do people living in the



Figure 16 Brian Kelly's mosaic of pastel post-its, inscribed with names and contact information for residents he's spoken with, and mapped onto the Shared Prosperity area on a wall in his office. Photo by Mary Hufford.

southeast quadrant come to care about what happens to people in the northwest quadrant, not to mention people just beyond the pale of their own neighborhoods? To work on the grounds for shared identity and commitment to shared prosperity, the Shared Prosperity Steering Committee held a series of public meetings at Cookman United Methodist Church, during which people identified major areas of concern that transcend neighborhood boundaries, and reported on progress made in tackling the problems from within. These included the problems of drugs, abandoned buildings, trash-strewn lots, noise pollution, air and soil pollution, lack of affordable housing and jobs, lack of services from the city, and lack of civic infrastructure. They also identified community assets and amenities. Many of these had been written up by the planning teams from Temple and Penn, but the process of identifying and prioritizing actions continued during the months following the completion of those contracts. Outside of the monthly Shared Prosperity meetings at Cookman United Methodist Church, several resident-led initiatives took shape:

1. Painting the Security Screens on Germantown Avenue (with GAMA)
2. "Back in the Day:" Oral History and Community Health (HEC)
3. Environmental Justice Working Group (with Americorps and EPA)
4. Neighborhood Walks (Block Captains)
5. Community Self Assessment, Planning, and Management of Resources (with Americorps)

These initiatives, conceived during small group planning meetings, exemplify ways in which some Village principles and practices were adapted to the aims of Shared

Prosperity, and each exemplifies ways in which Village staff found new ways to engage leadership for social change. Evident in all five initiatives are such hallmarks of Village practice such as:

- turning deficits into assets,
- rehumanizing spaces that have been dehumanized,
- adding value to spaces that are already humanized,
- inclusiveness, collaboration, and openness to serendipity
- leveraging of a variety of resources, and
- self-documentation

Added to these is an increased effort, noted by Kelly Tannen above, to empower residents of the four Shared Prosperity quadrants to make and implement decisions about their neighborhoods and to monitor outcomes of those decisions.

Members of the Steering Committee actively engaged other members of the community in each of the five initiatives. In each initiative we can see the continuation of the principles engaged at the Hartranft meeting:

- the continual generation of talk that articulates and strengthens the communal attachment to places in the Shared Prosperity area;
- the continual effort to humanize spaces that have been dehumanized by bringing them into community life through practices of retrieval, habitation, and celebration;
- the continual location of power and authority within the community; and
- the continual effort to secure participation from all four quadrants.

These actions worked, like the shot of B12, or the Big Bang, to keep Shared Prosperity in the public eye during the planning period. The actions themselves, then, painting, walking, interviewing, and lot clearing, exemplify forms taken by leadership for social change, and were particularly effective in engaging people who don't like to sit at meetings, but want to participate in civic life. Exemplifying the activist slogan, "we must be the change we wish to see," these actions functioned at multiple levels to strengthen grassroots leadership and build community, while furthering the planning for Shared Prosperity.

### **Painting the Security Screens on Germantown Avenue**

"Sometimes you need good examples. One garden, more people join in."  
Lily Yeh to Merchants of Germantown Avenue. 6/3/2004

"There is a lot of talent in these neighborhoods,"  
Mike Clark, Steering Committee member

Germantown Avenue is the heart of the Shared Prosperity area. At lunch time, Germantown Avenue is a bustling place. The main commercial corridor for the area, it

teems throughout the day with people walking up and down the Avenue. At the top of Alder, the street bears to the right to run perpendicular into Germantown Avenue. To the right on the Avenue is the main entrance to the Village. In the block to the left of Alder is, first, a Chinese food restaurant, then an abandoned lot, then a one-level building housing Lee's Cleaners (1 Hr). The next four buildings are three-story; in each building, the second and third floor windows are boarded up (except for the first building, which has open windows up top). The second and third buildings have bay windows on the second floor. The first of these buildings contains a store that has several Live Poultry signs on it but looks to be abandoned. Next door is a salon with the name Hott Headz on a red awning. Beside this the Best Fresh Fish Market (Crab and Fish) announces its name on an awning and also on a vintage sign from an earlier era. Empire Food Market, the last building on the block, is a small store on the corner of Germantown Avenue and Huntingdon.



Figure 17 Germantown Avenue, near its intersection with Alder and Tenth Streets. Photo by Rosina Miller.

Directly across Germantown Avenue at the corner is the Neighborhood Action Bureau (NAB), Community Economic Development Center. Going south again, a clothing store is next to NAB, an empty lot, and then another store. The next block north on Germantown Avenue contains many more small stores, usually in two- or three-story buildings that look abandoned on the second and third floors. There are dollar stores, nail salons, check cashing facilities, delis, stores that sell jewelry and electronics, clothing stores, variety stores, and more. The next cross street to the north is Lehigh Avenue, a large four-lane street that is the area's main commercial intersection. This intersection contains a Rite Aid (southeast corner) one of the few signs of the presence of Corporate America here, Sigy's Electronics (southwest corner), SunPay, a variety store (northwest corner), and Nino's, a pizza parlor (northeast corner), a notorious drug market that residents were trying to shut down.

At twilight, the merchants are closing the stores, pulling down the utilitarian corrugated metal security screens, knowing, as they drive home to an Elsewhere that they are protecting their investment in a marginal area for another night. But who *are* the merchants? What do they know of their neighbors? What do their neighbors know of

them? One merchant, Steering Committee member John Ballard, began as a vendor with a street cart, and his business grew eventually into a store, “Watches, Rings, and Things.” Two years later he was elected president of the merchants’ association.

After I became the president, I really became involved in the Village then, because we wanted to see some things happen with the Village and the Germantown Avenue Merchants Association at the Neighborhood Action Bureau, provided those things for me. So that’s how I really became involved with the Village and got on their board.

Ballard saw that stores were beginning to leave.

It seemed like nobody wanted to put any time or any money into the Avenue, and everybody knows in the community that everything centers around Germantown Avenue. Without that, we wouldn’t have very much of a community in that we would have to go outside of our community to do our basic shopping needs, for food, for clothing and stuff like that. So we figured we had to come up with something that everybody could participate in, and each go our individual way, but we would move as one group.

At a meeting with the merchants association on June 3, 2004, the merchants and the Village staff talk about how to engage in the revitalization of Germantown Avenue. Visions appear and coalesce: Germantown Avenue could be a place where the lights are bright, the storefronts are renovated, the trash is in the trash cans, there are benches to sit on, in the shade of trees that need to be planted, and there are things for the teenagers to do. “Our own Avenue of the Arts,” Steering Committee member Diane Bridges interjects. Lily details a proposal to paint the security screens. As Lily’s proposals tend to be, this one is rich in social complexity: the screens will be designed and painted by teens from the community in close consultation with merchants and professional artists. “To fill the Avenue with our own images, with what we feel is valuable,” Lily had said at an earlier meeting. “So the unknown people become known. To get the merchants who aren’t part of the community to be a part,” she argued. Who among the merchants would lend their security screens to this project?

In the discussion that follows, some merchants wonder whether it will look good, especially if not everyone goes along with it. John Ballard announces that he has one hundred percent participation from his side of the street. The merchants agree that this would be good for the Avenue. Then Lily goes for the crux: “We don’t want to just go and paint it. We want to engage you. This will be a process of working together.”

This is far more than a cosmetic plan to decorate the Avenue. It is not focused simply on appearances. It is a plan that will turn the painting of security screens into only the most visible part of a process of building relationships. The screens will be transformed from mere barriers to surfaces that express the positive interaction between merchants and the youth of the community. In the process, the security screens are transformed from





Figure 18 Painted security screens at Germantown and Lehigh Avenue. Photo by El Sawyer.

barriers to buffer zones, serving like Robert Frost's "Mending Wall" as a boundary that grows into a meeting place. Tending this space together, the neighborhood and business community build a relationship. The painted screens articulate, protect, and celebrated the relationship that has been transformed through artistic engagement.



Figure 19 Security screens near intersection of 10th and Germantown Avenue, designed by Cookman teens, and painted by graffiti artist Daniel "Pose II" Hopkins. Photo by Mary Hufford.

Two screens were painted in the summer of 2004. To get the screens painted, teens from the Village and from Cookman United Methodist Church interviewed the merchants who owned the stores, and developed a concept for each painting with an artist named Daniel Hopkins (Pose II). A graffiti artist in his younger days, Pose II incorporated the 23 bus that goes down Germantown Avenue into the backdrop, with a young boy in the foreground pointing to graffiti-style letters that spell out Promise – an allusion to the hope of Shared Prosperity, according to Steering Committee member Brandon Young, who mentored the teens.

It gives the avenue color at night," Young explained. "The kids talked about how when the avenue closes it's dead and this gives it some life. It's not visible during the daytime -- it's something that's there mostly for the people who live there. . .

It means, 'Keep the promise to take it to the next level' – so it really is about Shared Prosperity.

The product of dialogue with the community youth, the security screens become the merchants' representations of themselves to the community, channeled through the eyes and ears of the teens from Cookman. The screens materialize a dialogue between inside and outside, between self and other, that is foundational to human and community development. Lily alludes to the possibility of bringing the market place under the sign of community when she suggests, toward the end of the planning meeting with the merchants, that community members negotiate with the owner of a particular store to sell it to the leasing merchant at a price the merchant can afford. The logic of this intervention is that the absentee landlords who benefit from the revitalization can in turn support it by working with tenants to make ownership possible.

The interaction between neighborhood teens and merchants asserts and holds open a space of affirmation: the screens are an artifact of positive recognition between different groups with a stake in the neighborhood. The screens register a dynamic that the social theorist Mikhail Bakhtin speaks of: *I cannot manage without another. I cannot become myself without another*. If to be is to communicate, such art radiates collective being where it has not been recognized.

The decision to use graffiti intensifies the meaning of the painted screens. Like Big Man's conversion narratives, the painted screens draw on a vernacular form of visual art rooted in urban African American neighborhoods. What has been elsewhere a criminalized form of writing has been located here with permission on the public side of private enterprise. Like Lily Yeh's paintings, this painting is not for sale, but for public consumption. Graffiti writers address the meaninglessness of corporate-style planning and architecture for those who live with the results. Cultural critic and poet Susan Stewart notes that:

To these buildings characterized by height and anonymity, the graffiti writer attaches the personal name written by hand on a scale perceptible to the individual viewer. . . . Here the presence of the writer is posited against absenteeism and neglect; graffiti writers espouse an antimonumental politics, contrasting to the monument's abstraction and stasis, the signature's personality, mobility, and vernacular, localized audience.

The teens who worked on the security screen painting project are creating a video about it. El Sawyer, who supervises the videos, pointed out that the documentation itself is a strategy for enhancing self-worth, getting the teens to recognize a disparity between the lament that nobody cares and the actions that belie it:

Through the footage, they would look and they kind of take note of how everyone's complaint is like 'No one cares,' and yet someone must care because people are out there making something happen. And the fact that instead of



worrying about what other people are caring about, actually if you see something, take the initiative to make a difference.



Figure 20 “Dreams come true on the Avenue.” Mural on Sunpay security screen, at the corner of Germantown and Lehigh. Photo by El Sawyer.

What Sawyer has in mind then, goes beyond self-documentation for the record. Sawyer is using self-documentation to challenge habits of thinking that could undermine Shared Prosperity.

### **Community Health and Oral History: “Back in the Day”**

“We want to keep something good for our children so that they learn from your wisdom. And from what the elder has struggled and learned, we’ve got to pass that on to our children. That will contribute to our health.”  
Lily Yeh

“Wisdom comes from your surroundings, not just from experience.”  
Vaughn Alexander

“There is no agony like the agony of bearing an untold story inside you.”  
Zora Neal Hurston, quoted by Linda Goss during storytelling workshop

“Haunted places are the only ones worth living in.”  
Michel de Certeau

As we’ve pointed out above, the city’s model for redevelopment often proceeds by destroying the blocks that look devastated. In doing so, the city squanders the very resources that could heal the social body through re-membling it. As El Sawyer pointed out, urban spaces eloquently memorialize human life. Erected to serve as dwelling places, the deteriorating forms of houses poignantly preserve spaces from which known people viewed the world. Viewing those spaces we are haunted by the perspectives they evoke.

“All the houses that were torn down,” El remarked, “I think every one of those houses has a life in it, you know, spirit of that family or generations of families that have been there -- the people who have been pushed out due to whatever the case may be.”

Without places and people to serve as prompts, much valuable social memory is irretrievable. Through the Health Empowerment Center’s Back in the Day workshops, elders were encouraged to explore their memories of North Philadelphia, scanning places remembered for signs of continuity, conferring value on what might yet become the foundations for revitalization from within. On a hot evening in August, in the Philadelphia Parent Child Center on Germantown Avenue, elders examine the history sedimented all over the Shared Prosperity area. What does Germantown Avenue remember? It remembers Doc’s Drug Store “where you could get a fountain soda for less than a dollar.” It remembers Marty’s children’s clothing store, where one of the women got her first job at the age of 14. The Castle Bar, the concrete corner, the old fashioned butcher shop. The names of the places summon up a time when Steering Committee member Esther Wideman had to put on Mary Janes, hats, dresses, and gloves in order to visit Germantown Avenue with her grandmother.

By that time, the old Quaker graveyard across from Doctor Cohen’s office had already become disjunct from its surroundings, an outcropping of an earlier time that nobody remembers now. Kids used to tell people it was a pet cemetery. This part of North Philadelphia formed a hub for the underground railroad. Next to the Village Tree Farm, Fotteral Square was once the site of the green house where Lewis and Clark brought back bulbs from their expedition, bulbs that would produce the plants used by Benjamin Baniker to landscape Washington, D.C. “Right here at 11th and York,” marveled Steering Committee member Esther Wideman. “When Lewis and Clark came to Philadelphia to pick up their tools and stuff, they left their bulbs in that park right there. That’s a lot of history.” She hopes to have Fotteral Square placed on the National Register.

Etymology creeps in. Years ago the ground that now holds Fairhill Apartments was called Oakdale, and that’s where Fotterral (for whom Fotteral Square is named) was buried. Whose names are inscribed on the gold plates embedded in the ground on Susquehanna? “I’m going to walk one day and take the names off and see if there’s somebody important who might have stood here or walked there or been there,” Esther promised. This is a process of re-enchantment, of revaluation, during which spaces gleaned from the rubble become a coral reef on which the conversation feeds. In this conversational practice, the mere mention of vanished spaces can still work to trigger vivid memories and stories.

An inventory of historic sites begins to take shape. A church on the other side of Cecil B. Moore was a stop on the underground railroad. Church of the Advocate, at 18th and Diamond, is not technically in the Shared Prosperity area, but this is, as one woman argued, an *old* church in the black community, where churches are the central social institution. It turns out that the meaning of Ile Ife, the humanitarian center founded by Arthur Hall, is “house of love.” “I always thought it meant ‘together we build,’” said one woman. No,” replied Esther. “That’s Kujenga Pomoja.”

Esther Wideman is retrieving Fotteral Square, wresting it out of a space of cultural dormancy, into a space of public visibility and significance. “We used to landscape Washington, D.C. from North Philly! I mean, think about it. That’s heritage.” Reinserting the park in the sweep of national history, she reenchants it and invigorates it with meaning, integrating North Philadelphia into the National story. Other sites so integrated include Memorial Park, which honors the sixty four young men from Edison High School killed in Vietnam. More young men from Edison High School, El tells visitors, were killed in Vietnam than from any other high school in the country.



Figure 21 Names of graduates of Edison High School who died in Vietnam, enshrined on the wall of a building adjacent to Memorial Park. Photo by Mary Hufford.

In the talk at Back in the Day workshops, crumbling buildings are hauled back from the brink of amnesia. All of the musicians that ever made it big from North Philadelphia came through the Uptown Theater at Susquehanna and Broad Streets. There were so many factories that jobs were easy to come by. “Right here on the corner of Broad and Lehigh,” remembers Marian Santiago, “Used to be Botany 500, the garment factory, and a lot of people from the neighborhood used to work there. Some follow the factories; some people go with the jobs. I remember my mother could stop working here, and the next morning she’d have a job somewhere else. She was like that all the time.” The night the candy factory burned down, people stood outside half the night, watching the flames shoot across Edison, fearful that the fire, caused by arson, would claim their homes.

Remembrance can heal by reconnecting pieces of the dismembered social body within a new whole that becomes a context for continuing human development. Finding those pieces and putting them together is a fundamental move. El Sawyer finds the wisdom of elders in paintings by prisoners from Graterford that graced Memorial Park during the

2003 Kujenga Pamoja festival. He told Rosina Miller,

A lot of people that did those paintings, are elders from this particular community. And I think that there is a gap, and one thing that ills our community is pretty much the breaking of the lineage. For whatever reasons, whatever the case may be, that they went to jail or whatever, there's a gap there nonetheless. So, we can't forget about people. They might be in prison, but they're still alive.

Reincorporating members into the community after they have served time in prison is one of the stated objectives in the five-year plan for Shared Prosperity.

At the culminating event for Back in the Day, in May 2005, community members gathered in the auditorium at Cookman United Methodist Church to hear the stories of elders and to ponder the meanings of these memories for the future. Miss Mazie Tucker stands before the community and talks about how it has changed since 1959, when she first arrived. "I'm a former evangelist," she tells us. "I can preach. I can teach. But when you get old, you slow down. I've slowed down physically, but not spiritually. I love our community very much. I've watched it from 1959 until now. Our community is going down."



Figure 22 Miss Mazie Tucker. Photo by Mary Hufford.

She then shares three stories of healing and one of conversion. The healing stories are wrapped around home remedies. Red vinegar or apple cider vinegar can be used to cure fever, headache, high blood pressure, obesity. "Some women call it 'Hot Flashes, say good-bye,' and 'Stress, say good-bye,'" she observes. "That's my first remedy." She then tells of the use of mullet, an herb remembered from her childhood in North Carolina. Using this herb as a poultice, Miss Mazie's mother could make headaches vanish. She tells of the mysterious curative power in a frog that her father caught and filleted and used to draw the infection out of a head wound she incurred as a toddler.



Figure 23 Miss Mazie Tucker, addressing the assemblage in Cookman Auditorium. Photo by Rosina Miller.

Miss Mazie herself holds the listening community spellbound, caught in the memory of a world in which elders commanded respect for their knowledge, experience, and wisdom, a condition that leaps from the stories into the present setting, elevating the status of elders in their midst.

Gene Rucker, a businessman who owns Furniture Artisans on York Street, comes to the front after Miss Mazie. He smiles and shakes his head. “That is a hard act to follow,” he comments. He faces the community and begins to relate another part of its history, and moves toward a diagnosis. “Thirty years ago, it was mixed,” he said. “The neighborhood was peaceful, there were no gangs yet, but people were too busy making a living, and began neglecting their kids.” He received his training on the job, working his way up through Minden’s Furniture Place on York, and opening his own company next door when Minden’s folded. “You were one of the first black business owners,” Esther Wideman points out. “Maybe one of the only ones.” Furniture Artisans is a community resource, the place Brenda Kennedy calls for advice about furniture, the place kids go to fix their bikes and pump up the tires. Where else does the community express its stock in its kids? “The Village has really made a difference,” says one of the employees with Furniture Artisans. “The Village is a haven for young people,” another man will comment later. “You go there, you see young people enjoying themselves.” Esther Wideman reads a poem by her mother, in which the garden becomes a metaphor for raising children. Wideman shares memories lodged in an assortment of artifacts: a cuckoo clock, an old fashioned meat-grinder, a handful of cotton from the south, and she remembers a time when the community shared responsibility for children, watching out for their development, correcting those whose behavior called for correction. Her stories of times remembered hold the artifacts together like the cement that holds mosaics in place. The stories add up to a future bright with hope: “We can get it back!” she declares with conviction.

Ellen Arttaway reads a poem, crafted with the help of Kumani Gantt out of words she uttered at a meeting. Entitled, “Can we talk?” it is about communicating with neighbors and building on that communication to make a difference. After these presentations, Brian Kelly reassembles everyone into a circle, and launches a discussion that will arrive at the meaning of the memories of elders for Shared Prosperity. “It’s all well and good,” he says, “To talk about the past, but what does it have to do with the future of this community?”

Brenda Kennedy is ready with an answer: “If you didn’t watch the heartbeat of Philly growing up, you aren’t going to know where to lay the next brick!” With determination she tells the community its future: “We’re going to make something out of this community, and it’s not going to be a dirt road!”

### **Town Watch: Block Captains and the Neighborhood Walks**

“People are realizing that our community is a great resource. We are a gold mine. We are like a piece of coal. Diamond in the rough.”  
Rev. Clarence Hester

“I’ve lived on the West side for 18 years and I’ve seen a lot of changes from those years, because there were so many drugs on the corners. You couldn’t walk through, the kids couldn’t move around in that area, everybody was afraid. They were mobbing us. Then we formed Operation Sunrise. I learned through one of my community members, Peaches Ramos. I would attend meetings at her home and we would get together and sit on the corner and refuse to let them have the corner that night. Wear the hat with a badge on it. Ladies came from way up Germantown Avenue. We didn’t know them, but they knew about this organization and we worked together.”  
Marian Santiago, Shared Prosperity meeting, October 7, 2004

A key objective of the Shared Prosperity Steering Committee was to activate a network of block captains throughout the Shared Prosperity area. This network would provide the civic infrastructure for getting the city’s attention. Brian Kelly, urging residents to use the network, explained during a public meeting, “The block captains are trying to get together to say that as residents and homeowners and taxpayers, you have the rights to say to the city, ‘Look, we are paying our taxes, we want the city services that are due us.’ And the problem is that the city has not followed through with their responsibilities.” Currently, there are about 20 active block captains on the mailing list. The block captains developed the idea for neighborhood health walks during the summer of 2004, following several meetings at which police officers advised community members that one of the most effective ways to deal with drugs is to take back the streets. Walk in them. Sit on the corners. Sit on the stoops. At the organizational meeting for the walks, held one evening in the Village, a group of residents, block captains, and police officers negotiated the structure and meanings for the series of walks, which would be an exercise of the Town Watch they formed that evening as well.



Walking becomes a political act, a strategy for tying together the quadrants of Shared Prosperity, and for incorporating lapsed public space back into the community, for re-occupying the commons of the street. During the first planning meeting for the health walks, held at the Village, the block captains work out the meanings of walking through the neighborhood. In addition to tackling issues of safety, trust, and guardianship, they are connecting personal health with community well-being.

From Mary Hufford's field notes:

Brian Kelly brings everybody back to the walk. What's the purpose? When will it happen? Who's going? Where do they meet?

A councilman who is present comments, "The walk is educational. People are announcing 'enough is enough'! That's a tool of empowerment." The officer points out that the purpose is to be the eyes and ears for the community. Educating yourselves. Someone asked about turning in tips on drug use and dealing. A man who ratted out drug dealers at 18th and Bellefield was killed. The officer said that they can't tell where the tip is coming from unless it's a pay phone. A second police officer says that "eye and ear" training is available to help people know what to look for in order to turn in the most effective tips.

The Rev. Donna Jones observes that health can be a purpose for the walking, even as they are forming "an alert walking club."

Diane Bridges asks Brian whether they can use the Village as a base station for the walks. Brian says yes. The officer suggests they use the village as an address for the town watch also.

The first walk will be next Tuesday from 6 to 7 p.m. People are to show up at Cookman with peaches, pears, and water. (Brian: "I like cherries.") What will be the boundaries? Someone asks. "What are the hotspots?" Thomas inquires. The police officer mentions Dauphin Street, 9th and 11th, Boston and York and 12th. So the walk on Tuesday will be from Dauphin to Susquehanna and from 9th to 8th, then zigzag back via Susquehanna, Dauphin, Huntington, and York. "So many people will see us in that one hour," says Eleanor, "because they'll be sitting outside."

The officer offers a police escort for the group, "the first time out of the chute." The discussion turns to the potential for interaction with people the walkers encounter. Thomas suggests distributing Shared Prosperity literature. Then he jokes, "We should have the police there – we've got the clergy and the politicians." (this precipitates joshing and hooting). "You can campaign while you walk!" Diane offers. Donna Jones suggests giving out health brochures. Eleanor says this is going to end up being an Information Walk. "We're going to have real fun, giggling and laughing. Turn back the clock." Someone else says they could

try to sign people up to vote. The Deacon sees it as a way to get all 12 block captains together.

Eleanor Brown: “In my backpack, I’m taking health information, voter registration sign up information, and information on rat patrol.”

The Deacon remembers that there is also a problem with people putting out trash after trash has been collected.

“What are we doing?” asks Eleanor. “We’re switching ‘hoods’!”

The Second Neighborhood Walk: (from Rosina Miller’s field notes)

For the second neighborhood walk, about 10 people end up participating. It’s a beautiful August evening, around 6:00 pm. The first person Esther Wideman stops to talk to is a 92-year-old man who has lived in the neighborhood for 75 years, he says. Esther tells him about Back-in-the-Day, and asks if she can come interview him.

We walk south on 10th Street to York, over to 12th Street, and then south again to Dauphin, turning west. We walk around handing out flyers. Eleanor, Esther, and Diane draw out the people who live in the houses along the way. Some of them they clearly know, having been friends for years, perhaps. Others are obviously strangers, but they go right up to them, talk to them, tell them about Shared Prosperity and the things going on in the neighborhood. The mood is great; everyone is jovial, joking around having a good time.



Figure 24 Eleanor Brown, representative for the 37th Ward, visiting a community elder during the second Neighborhood Walk, organized by the Block Captains. (Miller)

When we reach 13th and Dauphin, we pass a full block of new construction duplex homes. It is eerie on this block; the houses seem empty. We make a joke about the Stepford Wives! People clearly live in them, but there is no activity in the front of the houses (as opposed to other blocks where people are sitting out on stoops, children playing on the sidewalks). Turning north on 13th Street we walk a couple blocks and pass under the train track bridge; the street is filled with trash. The trash stops where the new pavement begins on the other side of the bridge.

The walkers comment on the fact that the street corner of 13th and Cumberland is quiet tonight, empty. This is usually a crowded corner; someone asks, “Where are the hookers?”

On Huntingdon Street we make a right. This is the busiest street so far. Many people are sitting out on their stoops, children are playing on the sidewalks. Johann is videotaping and the children gather around to take turns looking through the viewfinder, taping the street’s activities.



Figure 25 Walking the Neighborhood: Esther Wideman, Brian Kelly, Rosina Miller, Diane Bridges, Rev. Donna Jones. Photo by Johann.

Steering Committee member Brandon Young, reporting on the walks at the September 2 Shared Prosperity meeting said, “Now you say, ‘Well, walking four blocks.’ We call it health walking. We call it health walking because our health is involved. We’re looking for different drug spots and trying to get something done about it. So we do this every Tuesday and Thursday.’”

The group is walking with the intention of deliberately reclaiming public space by occupying and enlarging it. “Mike could tell you,” Brandon goes on, “There’s some people in the group that can tell you about medical stuff, somebody can tell you about welfare, some people can tell you about what’s going on in the community. They all have something to give to a person that they talk to.”

A collaborative story emerges: “Since we were out walking, we came up on this guy at 11th and Dauphin that turned this little drug house into a computer refurbishing place. So we got to talking to the guy, and he said that what he started doing was playing gospel music...”

“And it kept the drug people away,” Sally Hammerman said. “The gospel music kept the drug people away.”

What he did,” Esther Wideman elaborates.

He got a black church and a Spanish Church last Friday. We waited until it got dark, and all the drug dealers were in the area. We had a praise and worship service on the corner. And they ran! The louder he got the praise and worship service, the faster they ran. And in the end we did have two souls that came into the kingdom.

“Amen!” exclaims someone else, to whistling, stomping, and clapping.

This interruption of secular time by salvation history is, for the community, an exuberantly luminous moment: the wholesale disruption of the profane by the sacred. Here we find yet another vernacular style of communication, the intensely dialogical and democratic genre of testifying, serving as a resource for the meaning-making that is leadership.

### **Land Transformation: Greening in the Time of Shared Prosperity**

“Gardening does something to your sense of time  
El Sawyer

“Take some of the blight and change it into vessels of hope.”  
Rev. Clarence Hester



Figure 26 Dave Gooch and Reggie Maxton. Photo by Mary Hufford.

2509 Alder Street is the Land Transformation Office, headquarters of the Village greening effort. The tiny row house, which supports a banister designed and hand-built by architect Rex Ingram, contains Dave Gooch’s desk, a bookshelf stuffed with volumes on gardening, horticulture, birds, urban forestry, and ecology, and in early spring, racks of fragile seedlings flourishing under grow lights. The back door opens onto a postage stamp of a patio, surrounded with chain-link fencing, and piled with perennials, saplings, hoses, rakes, shovels, and wheelbarrows. Organic life continually circulates through 2509 Alder Street en route to destinations in Village parks and neighborhood yards. Dave

Gooch, who grew up in a rural community near Portland, Maine, has a degree in human ecology from College of the Atlantic. As an undergraduate, he spent time studying post-Soviet agriculture in Cuba. El Sawyer grew up in North Carolina, in a tobacco-growing region, where families all helped each other at harvest time. He is a videographer by profession, but gardening is his passion. “Gardening,” he said, “is life.”



Figure 27 El Sawyer, center, introduces volunteers from North Carolina to weeds in the community vegetable garden.  
Photo by Mary Hufford

In spite of a widespread sense that North Philadelphia, as planning consultant Jim Kise observed, “is off of everyone’s map,” sometime in the 1990s an interesting change appeared on the official street maps of Philadelphia. The former brownfield next to Fottrell Square now appears as a patch of forest. This is cultural visibility, a place in the public sphere. A new meaning: a space that signified the end of development is now at the beginning of another cycle: a space for replenishing the urban forest. This urban forest, however, will be an effect of a process directed toward healing the social body, not a technical process of forestry severely reduced to managing trees.

This is not textbook ecological reclamation. “It would be selfish of me to be a strict environmentalist in the role that I have.” Dave Gooch commented, offering his view of the relationship between experts and communities.

Planting the tree is just a dot along this line of activities that we’re doing. It’s more about the social things that are going on. There’s all this that leads up to the planting of that tree and then that carries on after it. There’s so many opportunities to address social issues that really if we were talking about planting a tree as having some benefit to the environment and even if we got really complex, saying how it’s really going to cool the buildings in the summertime, and it’s gonna reduce rainfall and absorb that, sure you can look at it from an environmental perspective, but that’s really, I think a very minor piece of what we do. ... There’s other things that we’re talking about, the social benefits of the acts of planting the trees and the people that can come together to plant the trees in the

community from different communities, those are the things that are definitely a lot larger, and far more important.

How is it that the planting of a tree, the cleaning of a lot, the sharing of vegetables from the garden are social and political acts? Consider the meanings that Sally Hammerman and Marian Santiago assigned to littering during one Back in the Day meeting:

**MS:** Some of the communities, they have a lot of litter. People come from different neighborhoods and you tell them, ‘Don’t put the trash there, and they still dump it!’ Like I took a piece of cardboard and I painted a sign on it, and I had my son-in-law nail it to the telephone pole, you know, telling the people, “Look this is not a city dump.”

**SH:** About a week ago on the bus, some kid on the bus had a soda, he was done with it, and when the bus door opened in the back—

**MS:** —he just throws it

**SH:** he threw it out! I said, ‘What are you doing that for? You live in the city, you’re treating the city like it’s a garbage pail!’ He said, ‘I don’t live here. What difference does it make?’

If littering where you don’t live is a sign of disrespect for others, littering where you live becomes a sign of disrespect for one’s self and one’s neighbors. The EPA funded environmental justice project led by El Sawyer confronted trash in the abandoned lots as a solid waste disposal issue. Gooch pointed out in an interview that they had to define the problem in this way in order to get the grant. The root of the problem is that while the trash does not *appear* to be coming from a source outside the community, it is an expression of an internalized racial oppression that is society-wide. Viewed in this way, lot cleaning and greening are practices that could help to heal the deep wounds of cultural misrecognition, but only if done as part of a much broader effort to dismantle racism in our society at large.

### **Greening as Social Action**

Greening, Village-style, locates land transformation at the nexus of social relations. Restoring the environment is a means of healing the social body; and vice versa. “Lot stabilization,” for example, is not only directed toward arresting the deterioration of buildings and the accumulation of trash, but toward reversing the disintegration of community life by enticing former neighbors to return and remain. Americorps volunteer Rodñeyl Smith recalled a conversation with a woman who passed by a lot that the volunteers were clearing. “She said that she appreciates it because she’s been in the neighborhood for so long, and the neighborhood that she grew up with has died down. And for the people to be helping to clean up the lots that are so trashed up make a very good difference. She said that more people are going to come back to this side of Philadelphia.”



What happens when people spend time gardening? They talk to their neighbors, who begin to choose their routes in relation to the gardens or trees or parks they will pass through. Greening cultivates social interaction. Planting is part of the project of wresting brownlands and abandoned lots back into community life. It not only works to expunge trash and weeds, but to repel drug activity; it produces the ground for community life – it attracts people and it is conducive to social interaction, communicating respect, it evokes the foundational sentiment of gratitude. As Dave Gooch took us on a tour of the gardens, a pedestrian walking briskly by the garden called out, “Thank you for making our community beautiful.”

People who cultivate wildlife sanctuaries create the environment and then watch hopefully for signs of wildlife. The finches that come to the feeder. The pair of cardinals that comes to build a nest. The rabbit that comes to drink at the fish pond. The raccoon that eats the koi. But this would not be enough in North Philadelphia. John Dewey observed that “Through the culture of nature, the community appropriates itself as art.” The cultivation of community space is not complete until the space is vivified by the community life that *is* the effect of art in North Central Philadelphia.

From Rosina Miller’s field notes, June 15, 2004:

Alder Street feels rather like a small town street: that is, the way one walks down this street is different compared to Germantown Avenue or other busy city streets. I have come to realize that you don’t put your head down or walk resolutely toward your destination on this street. Most people tend to greet you and say hello as you walk by. Is this because I am an obvious outsider? But then I notice sitting with Big Man or walking down the street with Lily, they both greet everyone they see along this street. They say hello and how are you? As I sit on the stoop with Big Man outside his house, people are walking down the street; kids come by and say hi to Big Man. One girl comes by and high fives Big – then me. Another runs up. A girl rides by on a bike and says “Hi Mr. Big Man!”

Such interactions are the hallmarks of richly humanized space.

Land transformation begins with the demolition of abandoned buildings, which are packed into their own basements, sealed with four inches of clay-like soil, covered with two inches of topsoil, and planted in grass. Dave Gooch points out that over the past 18 years, the gardens in the Village lots have improved the soil so that there is 12 to 18 inches of loam.

A lot of the gardens that have been around for a while have a lot of organic matter. We’ve done a lot of mulching with wood chips, which isn’t great in the short term, it robs a lot of nitrogen. But we’ve been around for a while now. If you look in Children’s Alley and Angel Alley there’s like a foot of loam that primarily consisted of decomposed wood chips, and that’s like really rich fertile soil.

How does the enhanced soil generate social capital, and how does this social capital engender the real capital required to sustain and grow the community where it is? Gardening begets the desire for more gardening. As Rosina stood talking with Big Man on Alder Street, a man came by to ask Big Man whether the Village could help him fix up his yard. “You’re one of my heroes,” the man told Big Man. “You have showed me how to deal with adversity.” A bit later he said, “I want my lot to look like this,” and pointed to an area across from Angel Alley, landscaped with woodchips and grass.

But how can patches of earth ruined by industry, laced with lead and rendered untillable by rubble, be integrated into a metropolitan service economy? That is precisely Dave Gooch’s dream: to leverage the land transformation initiative into a training ground that prepares residents to operate an income-generating landscaping service out of the Village.



Figure 28 Tyrell pushing produce from the Community Vegetable Garden to distribute to neighbors during Kujenga Pomoja, October 2, 2004. Photo by Rosina Miller.

### **The Environmental Justice Working Group**

The Environmental Justice working group became the Village’s contribution to the “greening/physical environment” concern identified at the Shared Prosperity meeting. The Environmental Justice working group cleaned and stabilized 14 spaces, distributed fairly evenly throughout the Shared Prosperity area.

El Sawyer updates the people assembled at Cookman about the environmental justice grant. “My name’s El. Everybody don’t know me. Myself, Dave, and Brian coordinate environmental justice. It’s one part of Shared Prosperity. Vacant lots are the number one issue for most people.” He reports that the Glenwood Avenue clean-up drew forty volunteers, while not one person showed up for lot cleanings on 10th and 11th. They have volunteers that they have connected with tools. What do people want to see on their cleaned and greened lots? Trees?

A chaos of talk erupts and an idea floats to the front.

“Did you hear what she just said?” El asked. “She would like to see a recreation center. Right now we have a blank slate. It can be whatever you want it to be.”

A chaos of talk.

In the time of Shared Prosperity, Village staff has worked to place volunteers at the service of people in the communities, as a way of channeling power. “We have a list of volunteers,” El Sawyer explained, “and the idea is to get the volunteers to the people who have maintenance plans.” He named three people who have their maintenance plans completed: Hazel Stroman, on York Street, Diane Bridges (where?), and “Miss Boatwright, on Lehigh.” We were upstairs in the Land Transformation office, plotting the lots that had been cleared by the Environmental Justice working group on a map of the Shared Prosperity area. Highlighted in red, the fourteen lots that have been cleaned and greened mark the physical emergence of the Shared Prosperity zone. Leadership here takes the form of weaving the four quadrants together through lot cleaning and greening.

### **Lots Cleaned and Greened as of May 2005**

- Northwest Quadrant
  - Glenwood Avenue from Broad to Camac
  - Both sides of Silver at 12th Street
- Northeast Quadrant
  - Indiana, between Mayfield and 7th
- Southwest Quadrant
  - Corner of Huntington and 13th
  - Lehigh between 11th and 12th
  - Corner of 12th and Dauphin
  - Block between Nevada and Colona and 10th and 11th
  - SW corner of Nevada and 11th
  - Middle of block on 12th between Susquehanna and Dauphin
- Southeast Quadrant
  - Dauphin between 10th and 11th
  - Corner of 9th and Dauphin
  - Corner of 8th and Dauphin
  - Huntington between Darien and 8th
  - Vacant lot at Cumberland, between Fairhill and Reese

The land transformation resonates with Lily’s vision of an urban alchemy: “At the village, we turn bad stuff into good stuff through art and culture. I call this process of turning dark and destructive materials (lead) into positive, nurturing substance, and into beauty and joy (gold), urban ecology.” (Lily Yeh, quoted in Moskin and Jackson, p. 25) The magic of this metaphor is that it relates people and environment into players in a startling new narrative: it is a magic that changes space by changing times. The time of dissolution is turned into a time of human development, into which anyone may enter.

### **“Share What?”: Replacing Fear with Trust**

“You said, ‘Shared Prosperity.’ Share what?”  
Woman at Shared Prosperity meeting, October 7, 2004

Perhaps the greatest challenge for Shared Prosperity has been winning and sustaining the trust of residents and steering committee members. An undercurrent of distrust surfaced frequently throughout the ethnographic fieldwork. Distrust among the Steering Committee members, distrust among community residents, distrust of Village leadership, distrust of the motives of volunteers, and of the ethnographers for the LCW project. Shared Prosperity leadership continually worked to win the trust of residents by being as open and transparent as possible. The Shared Prosperity leadership tirelessly encouraged new leadership beyond a small group of active and over-committed volunteers and won enough trust from Steering Committee members so that plans could be shared and developed for the greater good of the group.

John Ballard recalled that people were quite guarded during the initial meetings of the Steering Committee: “Well, it was a lot of confusion. It was a lot of confusion because people didn’t want to put their plans on the table for fear of someone stealing their ideas or sharing in their little bit of grant money that they had from different organizations. They didn’t want to expose who gave them the money and stuff like that.” As Big Man and others have pointed out, one of the great successes of Shared Prosperity has been the coming together in the form of the Steering Committee of so many diverse and at times conflicting interests.

Diane Bridges is a local community activist who worked briefly at the Village many years ago, has been active in community-related issues for many years, and is now a member of the Shared Prosperity Steering Committee. Initially she was skeptical that the Shared Prosperity initiative would benefit the larger community, but she changed her mind. She worried that Shared Prosperity would mostly benefit the Village:

After conferring with the ward leader and the state senator, I got a better understanding of what was going on. It was explained to me that it was really not about the Village. Instead, it was about coming together as a community, organizing in order to become independent. I had a lot of conversations with Mike Clark and since we are both community activists, we knew the whole story. So, I decided to give Shared Prosperity a try (Diane Bridges, interview, December 10, 2004).

Esther Wideman described the suspicion with which residents first greeted the project:

That was the problem. Even when the block captains got together and we did the surveys, to see what was actually needed, door-by-door. First thing they were, ‘Why do y’all want a survey? What are you going to do with the information? Who’s going to hold our information? Where are y’all going to keep it at?’ All of those questions had to be answered. Because so many people have come and

taken surveys, take the information, and we heard nothing from it. We don't know what happened to that information. So that's why it was good we did it at a block captain level. They could explain to each person on their block what we were trying to do.



Figure 29 Steering Committee member, Reverend Donna Jones, facilitating a break-out session at Cookman United Methodist Church, June 30, 2004. (Miller)

A dynamic of not participating out of fear and suspicion has tended to breed resentment among those who then feel excluded. Lily Yeh related that her response to the vandalism of Village art was to track down the vandals and invite them to come and fix the art with her. Continuing along these lines, Shared Prosperity worked to maximize participation, bringing critics into the fold, on the theory that feelings of exclusion and resentment can be overcome through engagement. As Big Man put it,

The kind of energy that is generated by those who are disenchanted and somehow left out of that becomes almost like an irritant and a cancer within the community. You know, those people who are somehow disenfranchised begin to make loud noises and somehow prevent the process from growing and developing in a natural and organic manner.”

“So,” replied Rosina. “You need to bring--”

“You bring them to the table,” said Big Man.

People trusted Lily, observed Donna Jones, *even though she had access to resources*. Lily emphasized that she did not gain that access by herself. She, along with the children in the community, and along with Big Man, Jojo, Brenda Toler, Esther Wideman, Donna Jones, John Ballard, and many others, built that access out of relationships, one conversation at a time, one after another. The building blocks are that basic: the words, utterances, smiles, gestures, and glances exchanged; tiles glued into place, weeds

extracted, vegetables planted, lots cleared, meetings attended, stoops sat upon, piñatas busted, barbecue smelled and consumed, rhythms beaten and clapped, steps taken up and down Alder Street over the time it takes for a generation to come of age.

### **Community-Based Art and Vernacular Structures of Leadership**

“The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals, and its suppression in the broad mass which is bound up with this, is a consequence of the division of labor.”

Karl Marx

“Through the culture of nature, the community appropriates itself as art.”

John Dewey

“There is a lot of talent in these neighborhoods.”

Mike Clark

Lily Yeh’s leadership, which builds community through the production of art, raises profound questions about the role of art in society, and the potential for artistic communication to change the practice of community development. We need to remember here that Lily Yeh is a professionally-trained artist whose vision and practice is influenced by Chinese landscape painting. While she drew freely on a variety of world artistic traditions to create places in North Philadelphia, her work is not much influenced by vernacular arts, particularly verbal arts, performed in the African American neighborhoods surrounding the Village. Lily Yeh’s leadership through art prompts us to ask three questions. First, what styles of leadership are embedded in the community’s forms of artistic communication? Second, what role are these art forms playing in the work of Shared Prosperity? And third, what are the theoretical implications for the Leadership for a Changing World program?

We found Lily Yeh’s creation of Guardian Angel Park to help children feel safe enough to express themselves resonates with the stylized support that this community offers to its storytellers. As Yeh observed, artistic communication is founded on willingness to take risks, which in turn requires a certain amount of trust. Communication, a foundation of community life, entails risk. Art, an intensified form of risk taking, entails a kind of self-exposure. The powerful protecting spirits depicted on the sculptures in Guardian Angel Park were Lily’s way of addressing this in order to draw children out of themselves through art. Distrust and suspicion, the legacy of betrayal and abandonment, extinguishes whatever hope can issue from the big bang, the shot of Vitamin B12. The fear of abandonment on a dwindling island in a sea of shared prosperity is difficult to overcome. Yet there cannot be community life without trust, and therefore, it is worthwhile looking at where and how the community cultivates its own grounds for trust and artistic risk taking.

We asked, how does the community deal with self-expression as a form of risk-taking, and what are the cultural mechanisms for safeguarding people who take those risks, and



in so doing generate leadership? Brian Kelly's insight, that in North Philadelphia some of the most important communication happens through stories, is key. Three artistic events from our fieldwork convey leadership lessons from an African American aesthetic.

### **1. The Funeral of James Big Man Maxton**

At the funeral of James Maxton, Bishop Aiken ascended the pulpit at Cookman United Methodist Church to tackle what we could think of as a planning project: preparing the community for a future without Big Man. What did he do first, when faced with hundreds of mourners, black and white? He professed his inadequacy. He asked for their help. He primed the pump: "I've never seen a group of people from this community so quiet," he commented. "You know, I can't do this alone." Help was not long in coming. "Well, come on!" exhorted a woman from the middle of the church. "Tell it!" declared another from the back. He came on. "Big Man left architecture on your lives," he told the community. And a surge of affirmation rippled through the sanctuary. Shortly after this, the bishop belted out a spine-tingling rendition of "If I Can Help Somebody."

Getting wound up, Bishop Aiken invoked the passage from John 1:46, wherein Nathaniel, hearing of Jesus, asks, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" "How often," Bishop Aiken asked, "Have you heard, 'Can anything good come out of North Philadelphia?'" ("Hello!" exclaimed a woman in the row behind us.) He then fashioned Big Man into the consummate exemplar of the good that comes from a place where the world least expects it. "What did Big Man do for us?" he asked. "He decorated our neighborhood." But the value was not simply cosmetic, for it represents what Big Man left of himself. "He left his fingerprints all over the community," exclaimed Bishop Aiken. "He left his footprints up and down the corridor of Germantown Avenue." Big Man didn't do this for money or fame. He did it, said Aiken, for other reasons. When you work for God, Bishop Aiken reminded us, "There's more in your paycheck than comes with green stamps."

He then turned to the business at hand. "How can you put a Big Man to rest?" he asked, and then answered: "You can't." Big Man was too Big for that. He wasn't as big as Goliath, but he was a giant who wore size 16 shoes. Bishop Aiken then told the congregation the only thing that would console them: a story. He told about how God brought Big Man into heaven himself. On February 1, 2005, he told his angels to go down and collect what was left of Big Man. "Chief," they said, "There's not that much of him left, but he's too much for us." So God went down himself, and said, "Come on up, Big Man. Got a big room for you. Built a new wing for you." ("m-hm, m-hm" the voices all around us were saying). "Go to sleep, Big Man," said the preacher. "Sleep the sleep of Angels."

The sermon emerges as a collaborative event, supported throughout by vocal affirmation. The relationship between speaker and community of listeners is sustained through a continual exchange of energy. Out of that exchange, which in some ways is the substance of leadership, comes the story.



Figure 30 Big Man's front stoop from Alder Street, enshrined in Memorial Park. Mary Hufford

The incubation of such accomplished storytelling begins early in life, through recurrent moments like the one that opened up during the Jubilee Arts Celebration, the concluding event for the Village After School program in June of 2004.

## 2. The Jubilee Arts Celebration

The Jubilee Arts Celebration culminated the Village's after school program for fledglings (children aged 6-12) and teens with a barbecue and potluck supper, a display of artwork by young people for sale in the art gallery, and a performance of dance, music, and theater for parents and other members of the community. Early on in the program, German Wilson, who directs the theater program, introduces Jamile Wilson, a boy who has become like a son to him. When he was young, Wilson tells us, Jamile was overweight and disinclined to dance at first, but now he can't stop dancing, and he's graduating from CHAD, the Charter High School for Architecture and Design.

Jamile's fledglings come out for their dance routine called "Hip Hops." Jamile positions them in two rows, and turns on the music. The room hums with soft conversation as people wait. The dance begins. Jamile dances with the fledglings, whose heads bob around at the level of his waist. At the end of the dance the audience whoops and hollers and applauds. Excited, the kids discharge energy vertically, breaking out of the disciplined moves they'd done with Jamile. Jamile folds them into a larger group of children, and they form a circle. The music heats up and Jamile gets into the center, where he performs a sequence of moves and steps out of the circle with a challenging attitude. A boy immediately jumps in and performs his own sequence. A girl comes in, moves in rhythm to the music, and leaves looking defiantly at a particular girl. The audience, revving up, shouts exultantly, applauding and encouraging the dancers: "Alright Tyrese!" A boy dances in another boy's face, waving his hands in the space in front of it. "Go Randy!" That boy then struts around a girl, getting thoroughly in her space, goading her. "Okay Kyle!" She dances across the center of the circle and shimmies at another boy. The crowd is delighted. "Come on! Come on!" The boy sprawls on the

floor, shaking his hands over his head. The music stops, and the protective cocoon of vocal affirmation issued by adults in the community around the young dancers gradually dissolves. German Wilson reclaims the floor. Jovially, he asks people to calm down over there, and then introduces a male singer whose stage name is Young Razor.

We might see both of these events as artistic stagings of leadership, in which a member of the community takes a risk, steps forward into the limelight, and is upheld by the community. Both events interrupt the larger event in which they are embedded to create a space in which the community reconfigures itself as a protective surrounding and structure of support for a person speaking on its behalf. The unspoken contract is: we will not abandon you as long as you are performing us.

### **3. Back in the Day: Hastening Labor with Black Pepper and Ginger Tea**

At a Back in the Day meeting in March of 2005, Philadelphia storyteller Linda Goss gave a workshop on using recipes and remedies in stories. With little prompting, the women began telling about the home remedies they still rely on. Marian Santiago's account of how a tea made of ginger and black pepper accelerated her labor was heavily punctuated with affirmations and laughter conveying recognition, agreement, amazement, and appreciation from the women listening to her.



Figure 31 Marian Santiago and Miss Mazie Tucker during a Back in the Day workshop at the Philadelphia Parent-Child Center on Germantown Avenue. Photo by Mary Hufford.

“My daughter’s pregnant now,” Marian Santiago began. “She’s had labor she’s having contractions, but she won’t dilate, so I said, “You have to get you some ginger tea!” (chorus of recognition from listeners acquainted with this remedy)

And she’s like, ‘no, no, no’ – cause I did it for my grandkids and when I was pregnant with my daughter, the second one, I did it, and I remember the lady said, “You just drink you a little cup of tea and put a little bit of black pepper and some sugar so you won’t taste the bitterness.” I couldn’t do that, I wanted to just have

this baby (laughter) and I was greedy. I took – it was a tall glass, I think it was over 8 ounces and I just fixed me a big old glass. And I took and I put -- she said a little bit of black pepper—I put a lot of black pepper, a lot of ginger, and I remember putting the sugar in there, and I drank it. Because I was having pains, but I said, “Oh I’m gonna have this baby today.” I was so disgusted. (mm!) So I go into labor. (mmh) Only four hours in labor. I was gone. (mmmmm!) I said, “Thank you, Jesus.” (affirmations between every utterance here)  
“Alright!” exclaimed Linda Goss, the storyteller leading the workshop. “Now that’s a story! (laughter) That is a story!”

Like the conspiring that Kumani Gantt writes of in “Psalm for an Impending Rapture,” what is accomplished is akin to breathing together. The affirmation that wells up as communal expression is a profound form of cultural recognition, a powerful antidote to the cultural misrecognition that too often accompanies resources from the outside. There is no more powerful example of what philosophers call the “chiasm” – the reciprocal embrace, or mutual clasping, here accomplished through social communication elevated to art. But where, at the collective level, is this chorus of affirmation? Can neighborhoods interact in this way with each other and with the city? The styles of communication that shape the communities of North Philadelphia have shaped Shared Prosperity. Styles of communication that are so dialogic are usually suppressed in the realm of planning by experts. But Shared Prosperity taps the wellsprings of leadership in North Philadelphia by taking the dialogue to another level, mixing not only voices, but styles of communication. Here is where making meaning coincides with making place.

### **Rechanneling Power and Authority: The Place of Volunteers**

“I think that one of the things that I have learned here is a different approach to community building. It has to come from within a community. We came in and were like, ‘OK, we’re going to do this and this and this.’ And we really had to take a step back and say, ‘OK, we’re not here to help you. . .’”  
Kaija McIntosh, Americorps Volunteer

“People were laughing. ‘You’re Chinese. You’re an outsider.’ But who came to my rescue? Children.”  
Lily Yeh

A significant part of the leadership of Shared Prosperity has been the leadership exercised by Steering Committee members in the leveraging of outside resources and the integration of those resources into community life. An important aspect of this work involves modeling volunteerism from within. At public meetings, members of the Steering Committee spoke of the importance of a personal commitment to getting out and picking up trash on their blocks. Even so, the magnitude of the clean-up required is daunting, and cleaning up and maintaining vacant lots relies heavily on volunteers who come to the Village from outside the community. While some in the community welcome the volunteers, there is a great deal of ambivalence and even hostility as well, toward volunteers whose motives in general are highly suspect.

It really is volunteers getting to feel good,” commented David Gooch, voicing a widespread sentiment about volunteers who show up for a few days and then leave. “That they helped the poor people. And whether the people in this neighborhood feel like they were actually helped or whether they even feel like they sort of got spit on. You know? When we’re doing projects we need to have better relations with the community, more inclusive processes, and that’s where we could begin to have a process of engaging outsiders in work in this neighborhood and it would be a much more meaningful experience for both parties.

So many volunteers are clamoring to be involved that the Village cannot meet the demand because the organization and supervision of volunteers is so time-consuming. “So,” Dave explained,

We’re connecting. We’ll get all these tools and volunteers, and we say—mainly because we don’t have the capacity to be supervising all these volunteers — ‘This is the process, this is all available to you, all you need to do is be there and let the volunteers know what they need to do. Volunteers are willing to help you with your project. But it really needs to be your project. It can’t be our [i.e. Village’s] project.

Recall, in this vein, Sally Hammerman’s response to the woman at the Shared Prosperity meeting who observed that outsiders get the resources while the community gets nothing: “I’m not trying to help you solve your problems. I’m providing services that the community has requested.” Hammerman’s critical repositioning of herself as the one responding to requests, not the outsider determining what the community needs, encapsulates the rechanneling of power and authority that the Village is attempting. During the first year of Shared Prosperity, Village staff and the Steering Committee worked on the problem of the place for volunteers in North Philadelphia.

The Americorps Volunteers, who worked for six weeks under the supervision of Steering Committee member Brandon Young, provide an example of an emerging refiguration of the relationship between volunteers and area residents. Brian Kelly lays it out at the Shared Prosperity meeting on October 7, rehearsing the development practices they are trying to change. He announces that the Americorps team will do a survey of the entire area

to document what are everybody’s issues on the particular blocks, so that when the city comes in, when a developer comes in and buys something we say, ‘Well, actually, we already know what’s in our community here, we already know that these abandoned lots are right here on our block. What we want is to make sure that these abandoned lots are the ones that are fixed up and that people from the community are able to buy houses in the community at affordable prices.

The woman who commented at the Shared Prosperity meeting that people from outside get the money for the schemes to improve conditions in North Philadelphia voiced a

widely expressed sentiment. The presence of outsiders who come into the community to work or to volunteer, but who live elsewhere, is a thumb in the eye to the community. Changing the relationship between residents and volunteers is something that Village Staff and Steering Committee members accomplish through work at the boundaries – orienting volunteers and drawing members of the community into interactions with them.

Brandon Young, describing the orientation they gave to the Americorps Volunteers, warned that many in the community would be less than welcoming:

We did a lot of work with them when they first got here, talking about what are the issues, and basically told them that they're not really wanted in this community, because like, 'Here comes another group of people, looking at and surveying our community, and you don't look like us, and what are you going to use this information for, and such and such, and the community isn't going to be holding out its arms to embrace you.

The Americorps Volunteers talked about the experience of having to convince residents that they were not students from Temple, whose surveys are early warning signs of the tearing down of houses and the building of dormitories. "I might look like a little white kid that goes to Temple, and a college student," said Maggie Carr. "But actually, I'm here and I'm working—"

"—for your community," Michelle Boyd interjected.

Often times what happens, I think, is people from outside this community come in and try to assess or try to provide help to the needy, and what this project does, it has the community in charge. It keeps the community in charge of its information. And trying to convince people that that is what our mission, as white kids in the 'hood – it was hard to convince them that we were here on behalf of their own community.

Providing a space where volunteers from *within* the community can gain access to volunteers from elsewhere, the Village is in a critical position to change the way in which volunteers encounter North Philadelphia, and vice versa. As Americorps volunteer Kaija Metosh reflected, "There's all these different things that you don't even think about before you come into a situation like this. And we had to sit down for one day and: 'You don't say this, and you don't say this, but you can say this.' It was just really interesting to find your place and figure out how you're going to get your job done without stepping on boundaries."

Boundaries are essential to identity making at the individual and the corporate level. The Shared Prosperity zone is bounded, and within those boundaries, people are working to develop an identity that will allow the neighborhoods to be a visible player in the life of the city. At the level of the Village, Lily Yeh eschewed many conventional boundaries. She railed against the fences that the city told her she had to put around the vacant lots. "I





Figure 32 AmeriCorps Volunteers, Christmas on Alder Street, 2004. Photo by Rosina Miller

am trying to build community, and you are telling me to put up a fence!” She also eschewed the boundary between insiders and outsiders, excluding no one from participating in the work of the Village. But she was clear on the need to draw a line between the kind of development that would erase the community by alienating it from its community spaces and assets, and the kind of development that builds on those spaces and assets: human and community development. There is a difference here between boundaries that are barriers, obstacles to communication, and boundaries that are buffer zones, that help to preserve a sense of self while providing a space for the communication that builds relationships, that reaches toward chiasm, toward, as Kumani Gantt writes, cutting the cord and breathing in the other.

Like when Esther Wideman brings children and volunteers together each summer for her camp in Fotteral Square. “The counselors come from down south,” Esther explained.

They’re doing their inner city experience. Most of them are studying sociology or Christian sciences, and they come, they give these kids a lot of love. . . And it’s really nice, because the kids become – when they first come, they’re angry, a bit of anger, but by the time you see camps going, they have a lot of love. The last day is the hardest. They cry. They’re hanging on to the van when they’re pulling off.... The best thing is on the first day, when the van pulls up. The kids know the van. The park’s empty, and all of sudden you see like a thousand kids come running into the park .... They’re jumping on the van. “They’re here, they’re here, Miss Esther! They’re here!

### **Vernacular Arts and Place-Based Leadership: Lessons from the Village**

We began with questions about how Lily Yeh's practice of artistic communication could grow into a movement for social change in North Philadelphia. We found that the murals, parks, gardens, and rehabilitated houses form only the most visible portion of the artistic communication that undergirds place-based leadership in North Central Philadelphia. Producing locality as a world in which everyone may belong is the work of vernacular practice: narratives, ritual, shared customs and daily routines. Through these kinds of practices, it was the residents of the neighborhoods who produced the leadership that integrated the Village into North Philadelphia. Lily Yeh's eagerness to engage distinguishes her from other artists, designers, and planners: "I guess that's where you call it public art," Lily reflected, in an interview about the draft ethnography. "Engage the people rather than do it in a studio, just do what I want and don't have to answer to anybody."

Diffusing the leadership function through a large number of institutions, Shared Prosperity amplified this philosophy and practice. The Steering Committee members then engaged community members in a process of meaning making that drew upon the community's own forms of artistic communication: storytelling, witnessing, gospel singing, foodways, needlework, graffiti, hip-hop, home remedies, and so forth. Through her art, Lily gave form to what she saw as the positive forces at work within North Philadelphia, forces which might never become visible to the disengaged planner. As philosopher John McDermott notes, "A neighborhood, a block, a tenement is not simply an external setting. Rather it is a complex field of relationships that form and ecological network, the strength of which is often beneath the surface." People form community, he argues, by building themselves into their environments,

establishing confidence in a number of relational ties. . . .landmarks – a candy store, a playground, a house of worship, a merchant tradition, or perhaps vicarious participation in the passing scene. Such relations become internalized, that is, taken for granted. Their full power, their function as lifelines become manifest only when they are uprooted. The problem thus becomes obvious. With the cutting of these inexplicit yet deeply felt ties, people become estranged, and while thrashing about in search of a recognizable hold, they tend to reject a new and comparatively alien environment. . . . Little if any growth is achieved if by our social changes we truncate these relations, especially in view of the failure of contemporary pedagogy to develop in many of our people the ability to make new ones from scratch. (p. 119)

The meetings of various committees were most often held at the Village or at Cookman, and occasionally at other places like Hartnraft Elementary School, Temple University, and the Philadelphia Parent/Child Center. These provided spaces of assembly for the community that has formed around the Shared Prosperity initiative. But space is only part of what's needed. The vernacular arts are needed for people to be able to share time. It is through the sharing of time as well as space that people form community. Vernacular forms like Big Man's stories of his transformation insert the Village process into

community time, and these lie at the nexus of Lily Yeh's art and the work of Shared Prosperity. The full story of leadership has to take into account how the residents appropriated the spaces of the Village into community life: Mrs. Bigsby, knitting on her front stoop across Warnock Street from the parks where Zakiyyah Ali, a new gardener/educator on the Village staff, directs volunteers planting spring bulbs and Hostas; greeting Esther Wideman who chooses her route with such conversations in mind; soon they will go to visit Miss Mazie who is in the Brookside nursing home in Jenkintown, hoping she'll come home soon; Omar Mays, 13, after school in the teen room, arguing with Brenda Kennedy over whether his science fiction fantasy characters can die with no afterlife; the palpable absence of Big Man billowing out of his house, and the resolve to keep his work alive. The deep aesthetic ecology of place-based leadership beckons luminously as a topic of continuing shared inquiry.

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## Piecing Together the Fragments: Ethnography

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