

Nothing But Flowers

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In 1988 the Talking Heads described a post apocalyptic world in which modern technology and industry had been eliminated, leaving *Nothing But Flowers*. The lyrics, which blur the line between irony and social commentary, reveal a protagonist who yearns for the pre-apocalyptic conveniences associated with the common American landscape.

"There was a factory - Now there are mountains and rivers - This used to be real estate - Now it's only fields and trees - Where, where is the town? - Now, it's nothing but flowers - The highways and cars - Were sacrificed for agriculture - I thought that we'd start over - But I guess I was wrong - Once there was a parking lot - now it's a peaceful oasis -I miss the honky tonks, Dairy Queens, and 7-Elevens - And as things fell apart - Nobody paid much attention - Don't leave me here, I can't get used to this lifestyle"
David Byrne: excerpt, *Nothing But Flowers*

The apocalypse envisioned in the song is not the revelatory variety, but an incremental decline; one that transforms and devolves the familiar condition. The lyrics are largely open to interpretation; each individual can construct a narrative for the cause of disparity described. The constant element in all narratives is time – there is clearly a “*before*” and an “*after*,” regardless of the narrative applied. Twenty years after *Nothing But Flowers* peaked at number 67 on the Billboard Charts, it is very easy to assign a narrative about the demise of the Post Industrial American City.

The song offers a vision of extremes – one characterized by the presence of built environment, and the other of absence. At a time when municipalities throughout the country are dealing with the challenges that result from the widespread increase

in residential and commercial vacancies, the lyric content is particularly resonant. Vacancy and abandonment drive property values down, reduce safety, create urban blight and promote social ills such as crime and fire. These factors reduce incentive for private and public investment and lead to the erosion of municipal tax bases. As a municipality's financial capacity to remediate the problems is reduced, reductions in local quality of life lead to further population loss – perpetuating the cycle of urban decline.

The Borough of Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania, a historically vital urban enclave located on the eastern periphery of Pittsburgh's City Limits, is one representative community that is actively striving to determine the direction of its future in the face of these challenges (Figure 1). Elected Officials, community organizations, and stakeholder partners in Wilkinsburg have worked to assess, inventory, and recommend action in a number of blighted Borough sectors. These efforts are represented in numerous published reports and studies that have made strategic recommendations regarding the built environment. All have included selective building restoration, targeted building demolition, calibrated infill construction, development of green space, structural retrofitting, and material repurposing. While each has identified clear planning strategies for the development and revitalization, there has been limited advancement of implementation strategies that demonstrate viable paths to realization. As a result, the community has seen little to no improvement in the physical environment and the stable resident population is suffering from plan fatigue.

The *Urban Design Build Studio* (UDBS), a university affiliated outreach entity, was established in 2008 with the specific mission of empowering dis-invested communities through the development of catalytic demonstration projects that synthesize critical components of future oriented urban frameworks and masterplans. A primary objective of the UDBS is to manifest a physical “place” as a result of the participatory design process. The aspiration in the construction of the project two fold: one, it establishes faith among citizens who have participated in the planning process that “something” will in fact “happen” as a result of the effort; two, it enables the testing and monitoring of broad scale planning strategies at a discrete scale – with an eye towards preventing catastrophic failures that have often plagued visionary planning strategies.

The UDBS pilot project is the *Hamnett Homestead Sustainable Living Center* (HHSCL), a multiuse/

multi-function community center and urban farm that tangibly demonstrates potential strategies for an appropriate recalibration of Wilkinsburg’s urban context. The HHSCL is the result of a strong partnership between the *Urban Design Build Studio* (UDBS), *Urban Laboratory* (UL), the *Remaking Cities Institute* (RCI) and the *Institute for Ecological Innovation* (IEI), a regionally based, non-profit 501c3 corporation, focused on the modeling, teaching, and promotion of accessible regenerative technologies. The pilot project was programmed in collaboration with the citizens of Wilkinsburg and represents the efforts of a four month long participatory design process. The participatory process focused specifically on urban issues resulting from extreme vacancy. A hierarchical framework with a forty year projected trajectory resulted, establishing a strategic ordered hierarchy for action: 1) Eliminate Blight in the Physical Environment through Deconstruction, Material Harvesting, and Material Repurposing, 2)

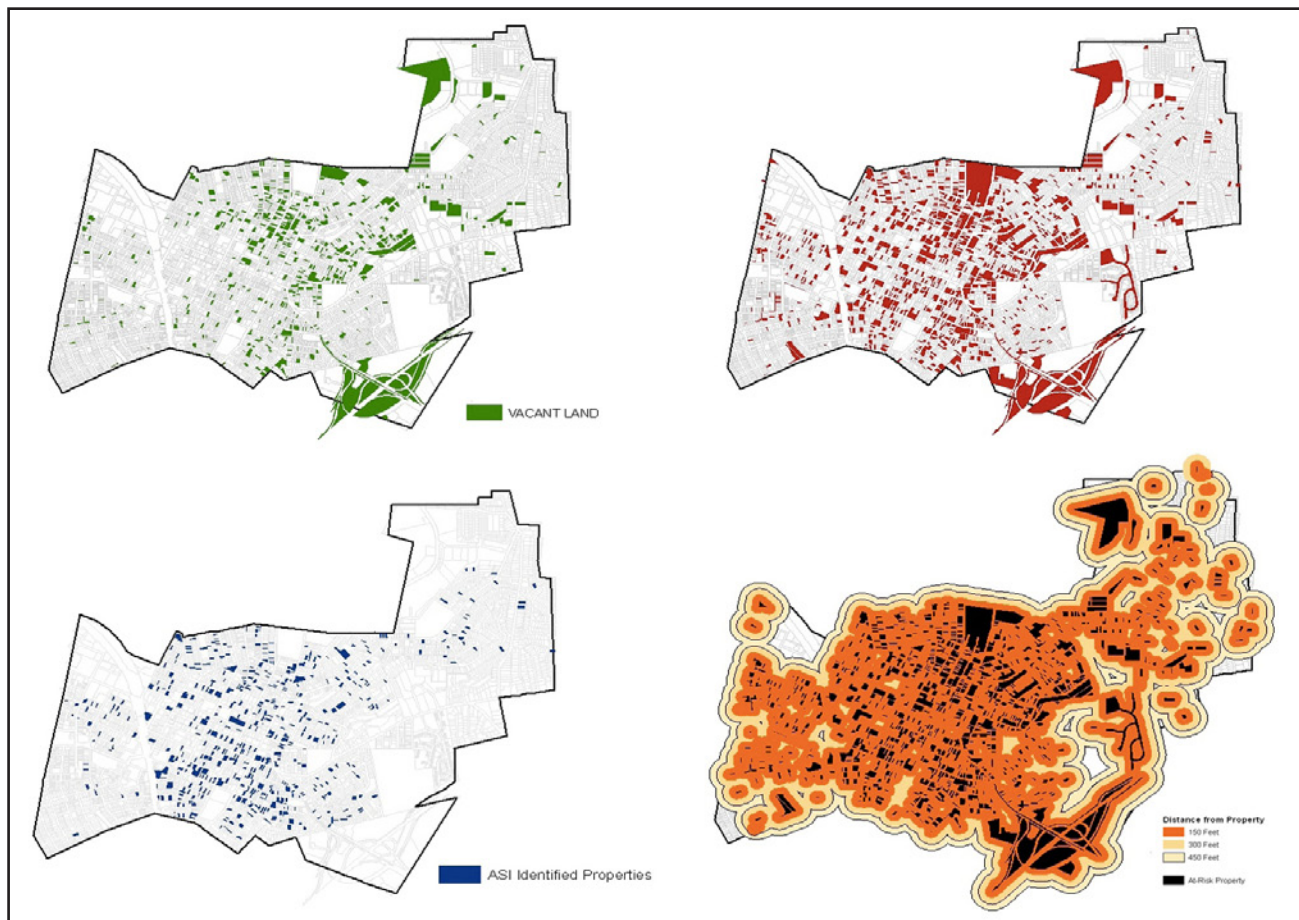


Figure 1: Student mappings of (upper left) vacant land in Wilkinsburg, PA - 2008; (upper right) abandoned, borough owned, distressed, and/or vacant property in Wilkinsburg, PA - 2008; (lower left) abandoned structure inventory in Wilkinsburg, PA - 2008; (lower right) property value loss risk areas in Wilkinsburg, PA - 2008.

Amplify Natural Physiography for the Reconciliation of the Geological Heritage, 3) Leverage Regionally Significant Infrastructure as a Mechanism for Re-Investment. The HHSLC program is a derivative of the larger urban framework and is structured to incorporate the objectives outlined. It also reflects a collective understanding of the multi-variant contexts – social, physical, economic, and historic.

THERE WAS A FACTORY

There was much more there than “a”, or one factory in Wilkesburg – there were four prosperous steel mills, two glass manufactories, an automobile manufacturing plant and dozens of spin off industries. Pennsylvania Avenue, the primary surface artery serving the Borough, was once a vital urban corridor with international banks, the exclusive twelve-story Penn-Lincoln Hotel, and numerous multi-story speculative office buildings designed by celebrated architects of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The borough is internationally recognized for its contributions to the development of the broadcast industry. Wilkesburg hosted the world’s first commercial radio station, 8XK, and is home to Zworykin’s Laboratory where the iconoscope (the first “eye” of all early television cameras) was designed, patented and mass-produced. Founded and developed by Protestant European immigrants, it is a dry town; the sale and public consumption of liquor has been prohibited within the borough limits since its founding in 1871. That policy, in conjunction with an unparalleled proliferation of ecclesiastical architecture, has earned Wilkesburg the regional designation as “*The Holy City*”. Unfortunately, despite this unique identity and rich history, today Wilkesburg is more often associated with the infamous *LAW* (Larimer Avenue Wilkesburg) Gang and mass murderer Ronald Taylor.

Located in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, Wilkesburg’s trajectory has consistently paralleled that of the once dominant, but almost extinct industrial base of Western Pennsylvania. Covering an area of 2.2 square miles, Wilkesburg was the most densely populated borough in the country with a peak population of 57,000 in 1960. After 1960, the steel industry began to decline, and with it Wilkesburg’s population. The most recent US Census data reveals that the population had declined to 19,196 residents in 2000 - and more recent data gathered in 2007 indicates that the decline has continued.

The largely transitional population base of the past fifty years has further exacerbated related social and economic challenges.

Economic decline is a significant issue. The data obtained in 2007 indicates that over sixty percent of the Borough’s residents are living below the notional poverty line. The estimated per capita income in 2007 was \$19,644 compared with \$26,228 in all of Pennsylvania. Similarly, the estimated median house or condominium value in 2007 was \$43,300 Compared with \$155,000 in all of Pennsylvania. And, ironically, because of the Borough’s former prosperity and desire for singular identity, property taxes in Wilkesburg, which are based on millage rates, remain the highest in all of Western Pennsylvania. The disproportionately high tax rates have translated to the complete elimination of new private development. Since 1971, only a handful of foundation subsidized retrofit and restoration projects aimed at stabilizing structures important to the Borough’s heritage have been executed.

The elevated tax rates have contributed to an enormous tax delinquency and tax evasion problem. A grossly underperforming school district, inability to enforce code violation penalties, and regional dumping further threaten Wilkesburg’s future. The Borough is at a fulcrum point in its trajectory. It can either re-orient in the context of the vacancy issues, or continue to look back to the former prosperity and continue a negative spiral into further decay.

WHERE, WHERE IS THE TOWN?

Fortunately, a positive collective psyche is still maintained by the Borough’s people and key constituencies –ultimately the “*town*” is defined by its people. There are a number of neighborhood advocacy and transformation initiative groups being lead by long term residents and progressively minded council members; strong grass roots leadership is in place. The leadership in Wilkesburg is complimented by privileged geographic position. The borough possesses specific geomorphic, infrastructural, and economic assets that have tremendous potential in defining its future (Figure 2). Wilkesburg lies almost entirely in the *Nine Mile Run Watershed*. *Nine Mile Run* is a small stream that flows through east Pittsburgh and the eastern periphery boroughs of Edgewood, Swissvale, and Wilkesburg. The most substantial portion of the run and associated watershed

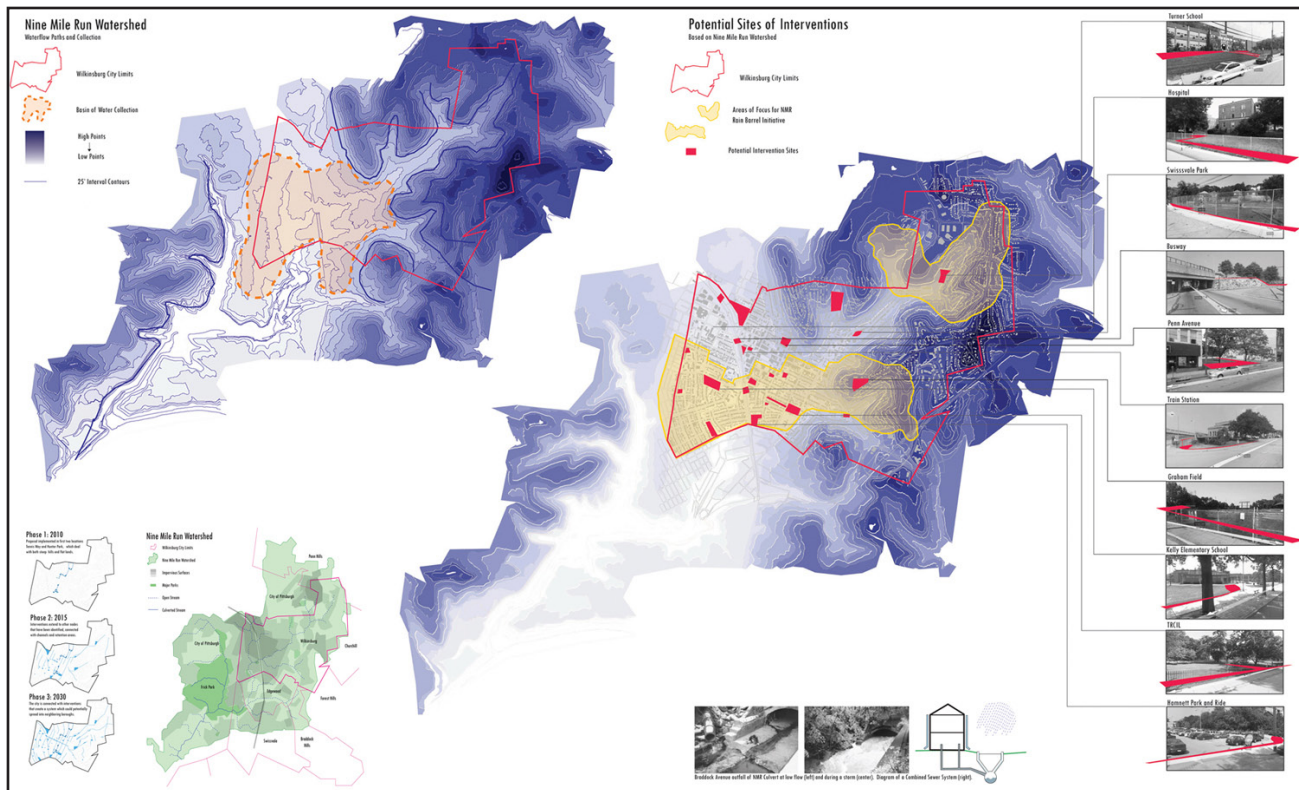


Figure 2: Student work illustrating strategic framework for selective node development and navigation network established from vacant lots and proposed vacant building deconstruction projects. Framework depicted in context of watershed intensity; Intervention typologies included in lexicon at right

is located in Wilkinsburg. Its headway exists in Hunter Park, which forms the northeastern boundary of Wilkinsburg and occupies a plateau with the greatest vertical elevation in the basin. Currently, *Nine Mile Run* is almost entirely underground, a condition that is not unusual for urban streams. Prior to the late twentieth century, open water was not viewed as an asset to the community or industrial cities at large. Streams were often utilized as a means to transport trash and sewage away from homes and into tributary rivers. They were also viewed as hindrances to infrastructural ordering systems associated with urban development. For those reasons alone, *Nine Mile Run* was culverted underground as Pittsburgh and the outlying boroughs were developed.

Like many older Pittsburgh neighborhoods, Wilkinsburg utilizes a combined sewer system. The pipes for storm water runoff and sanitary sewage are not separated. The system is designed to overflow during heavy rains. During wet weather, *Nine Mile Run* is quickly overloaded with water and is responsible

for non-point source pollution at multiple outlets along the edge of the Monongahela River.

Today, approximately 27% of surfaces in the watershed are impervious. Water flows quickly over these impermeable surfaces and into storm drains. The pipes, made of terracotta are not watertight and are often located in wetlands or near open streams polluting and threatening the viability of those environments.

The land and building vacancy rate in Wilkinsburg, along with its geographic significance to the *Nine Mile Run Watershed* provide an opportunity for the remediation of this regional environmental problem and the redefinition of the local physical environment. As a component of the collaborative Urban Framework developed by the *Urban Laboratory* (UL), students collaborated with the community to identify vacant parcels and buildings that were beyond viability for use and/or restoration. A study was developed that identified materials and quantities of

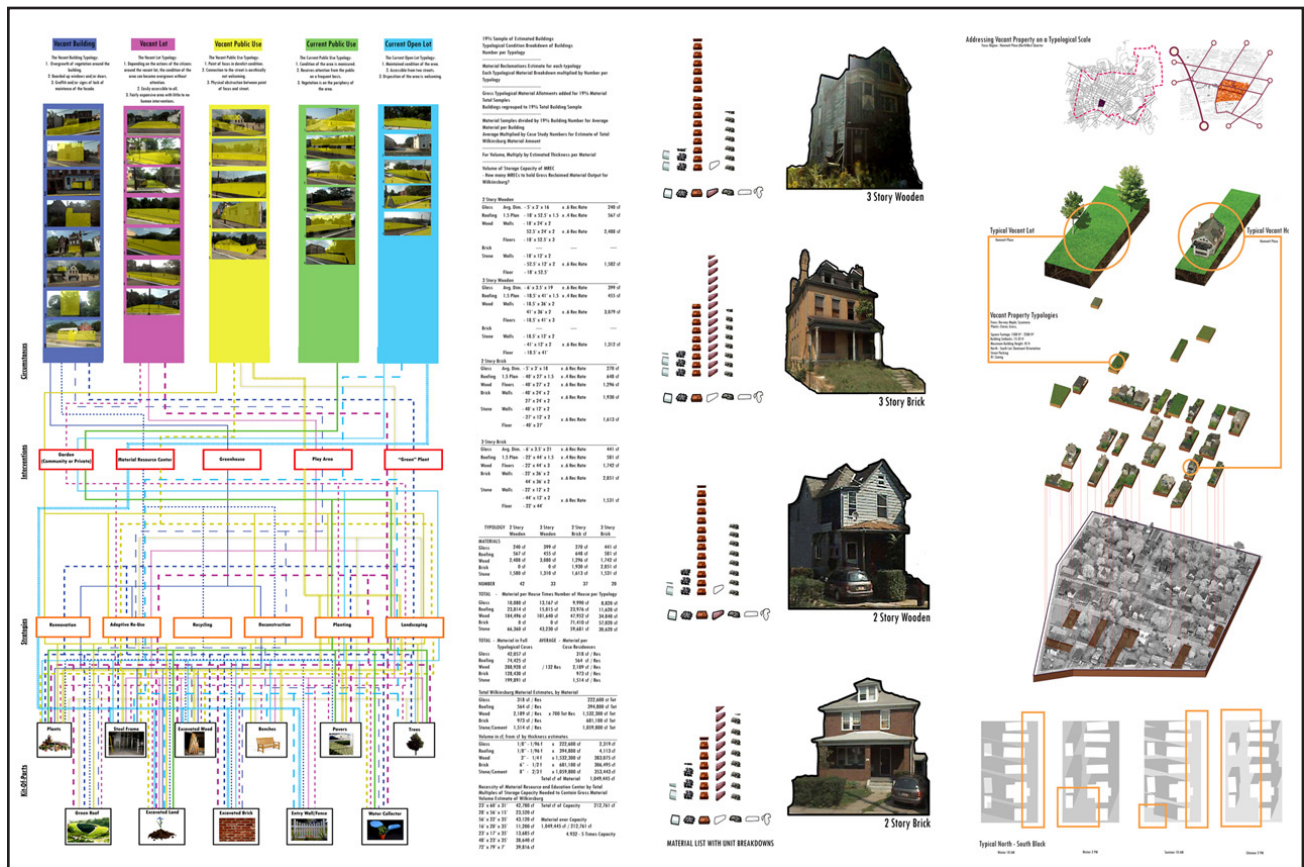


Figure 3: Student work illustrating strategic framework for selective deconstruction, material harvesting output and material repurposing. Vacancy and building typology study focused on the Hamnett Place Neighborhood, location of the HHSCL located at right side of image.

materials that could be harvested from the deconstruction of those buildings. (Figure 3) The benefit of this aggressive strategy to the community would be three fold. One, the number of vacant dwellings would require a substantial trained workforce for the deconstruction effort. The initiative would create jobs and enable skill training that is of value in the region. Two, the materials yielded, in high demand regionally and nationally, would provide a revenue source for the Borough through shared profit on tax delinquent properties taken into municipal receivership. And Three, the reduction in impermeable surface created by roof structures would be diminished greatly – potentially reducing the impermeable surface ratio by as much as thirty-six percent.

The framework for addressing the problem vacancy goes beyond approaching a restoration of the natural physiography; it provides a distinct opportunity to link the community through a series of commu-

nal amenities such as parks, gardens and urban farms. Once vacant parcels, clustered into nodes via a series of water daylighting, channeling, and retention interventions would establish a valuable wayfinding/orientation network for the Borough while enhancing filtration of water entering the watershed and drastically reducing non-point source pollution. An important goal of the framework was to identify the most appropriate use for each lot, ensuring that the lots could be utilized and converted into assets for the community. As a result of the identification process a decision was made to focus on the consolidation of lots for purposes that would either benefit the community, or generate income for individual residents through organic food production.

I THOUGHT THAT WE'D START OVER

The development of the *Hamnett Homestead Sustainable Living Center* (HHSCL) reflects the syn-

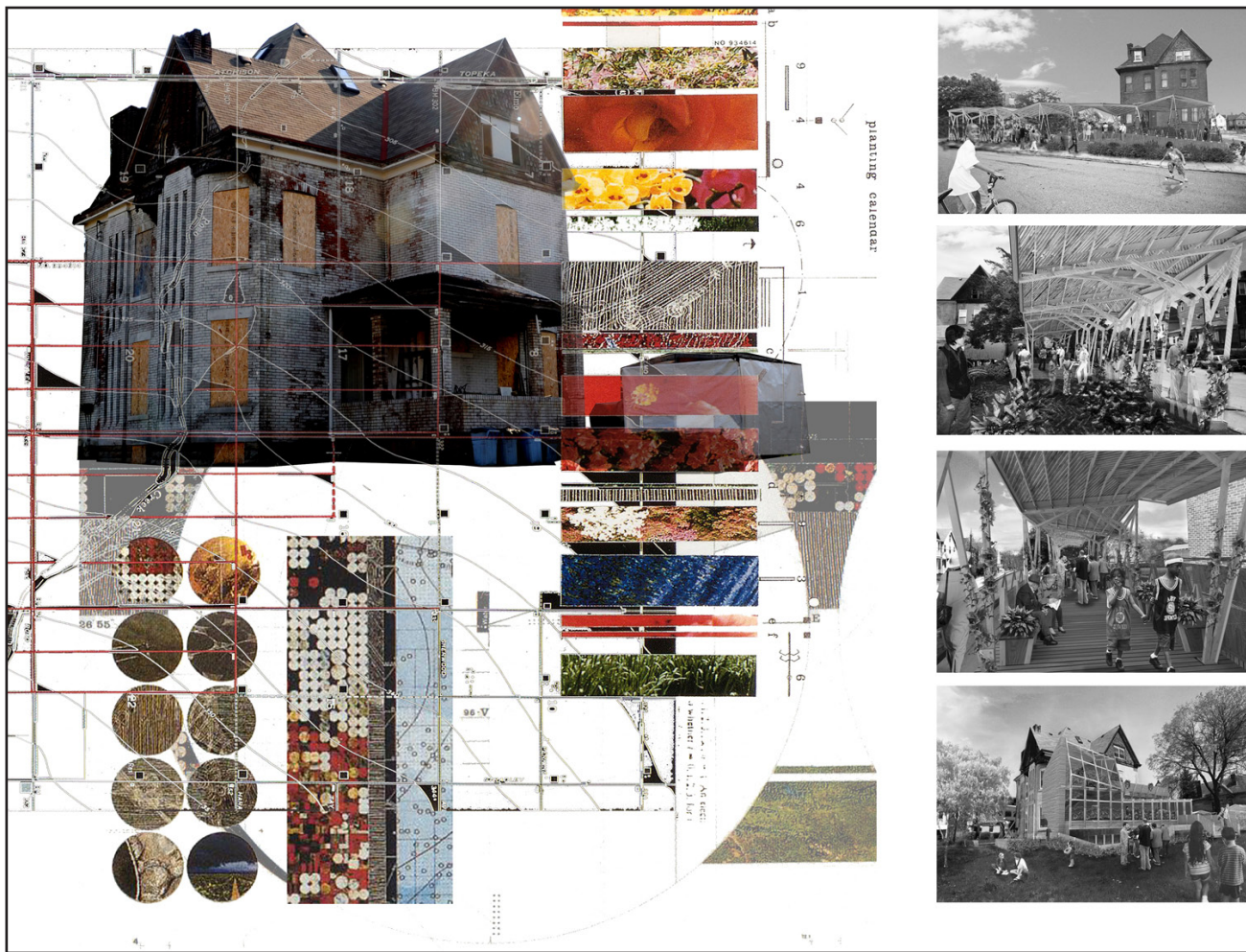


Figure 4: (left) collaboratively generated programming montage for the HSLC urban farm, executed at completion of the participatory design process - December 2008; the Jane Hamnett Residence, subject of the adaptive re-use, is depicted in the background; (right) initial spatial/conditional lexicon for altered urban territories, developed by students during design development for the HSLC in the spring of 2009.

thesis of strategies employed in a larger urban framework developed with the community. Helping residents accept the fact that the population of Wilkinsburg will not resume previous levels in the near term was essential to the project identification and programming. Located in the Hamnett Place Neighborhood of Wilkinsburg, the HSLC aspires to be a multi-faceted neighborhood resource center and homestead for community building. The design of the HSLC is informed by a comprehensive systems based approach that includes consideration of food, transportation, shelter and landscape components. The relative relationships and dependencies established between each of the components

enables the infrastructure at HSLC to tangibly demonstrate methods of importing less into, and exporting less from, an immediate environment; effectively bolstering the ecosystem through a bias toward production over consumption.

The full development of the HSLC will be phased over a five-year period, with the primary focus being the adaptive re-use and expansion of an existing 4,200GSF late 19th Century masonry residence. Programmatically, initial stages of adaptive re-use have been oriented toward the maximization of near term occupancy and outreach. Subsequent phases will be focused on sustenance of broader

global aspirations and the expansion of the homestead's urban farming capabilities and demonstration capacity. Paralleling the trajectory and success of regional *Neighborhood Transformation Initiatives* (NTI), the *Urban Design Build Studio* (UDBS) and community partner, the *Institute for Ecological Innovation* (IEI), anticipate that the *Hamnett Homestead Sustainable Living Center* (HHS LC) will be an anchor for further development of the Hamnett Place Neighborhood through the demonstration of innovative sustainable revitalization and community building strategies; realistic strategies that may be replicated to reinvigorate other inner city urban cores suffering from population loss and abandonment. To that end, the HHS LC project strives to represent a diverse ecology; a complex assemblage of climate, species, and resources operating in multiple cyclical loops (Figure 4).

In the spring of 2009, the UDBS began the design development phase of work. The site for the project is four contiguous parcels, each with a 42'-0" street frontage. The two western parcels have a depth of 90'-0" and the two eastern lots have depth of 71'-0". The parcels are located at the intersection of two vibrant streets, Holland Avenue and Center Street. At the beginning of design development there were two existing structures on the four lots – one, the former Jane Hamnett Residence which is being adaptively re-used, and the other a three story wood frame structure. Both buildings are currently vacant and the latter is a center for nefarious activity. Both were liabilities to the neighborhood. Currently, there is a prosperous organic farm being operated on the parcels in between the two buildings that has been run by a long term resident for seventeen years. The farm represents one of the great assets in Wilkinsburg today, drawing in residents from surrounding affluent communities to purchase seasonal produce.

After meeting with community stakeholders it was determined that this representative site provided the best opportunity for the testing of strategies employed in the development of the Urban Framework. There was a positively oriented sector of the city, two substantial liabilities, and a significant asset that had been the result of a vacant site transformation. An additional parameter influencing the selection of the site was its proximity to the Martin Luther King Busway, a significant piece of urban infrastructure that physically creates a barrier between Wilkinsburg and

Pittsburgh while simultaneously providing the community with the most rapid transportation connection to the CBD and expanded region.

As a part of the preliminary planning process, the sites were consolidated and re-zoned from R-2 to R-2 T.O.D. which provides greater flexibility in programming and provides a number of more liberal setback/height restrictions. A decision was made to eliminate one of the site's liabilities and expand the capacity of the proven asset. The wood frame structure at the west end of the site was deconstructed and the salvageable materials from the project were harvested for use in the current and future phases of planned construction. The soil was processed and the planting beds for the urban farm expanded into the plot once occupied by the residence.

One of the challenges associated with vacancy and deconstruction is the lack of continuity in the urban fabric. The streetscape in the residential sector of Wilkinsburg is characterized by a regular solid void relationship that reinforces the street as a room and maintains the viability of the regional porch culture. The relationship of solid to void is traditionally maintained by a 35'-0" built street frontage and a 7'-0" right of way or combined setback providing separation/void. The initial planning of the HHS LC was creating a condition where there was a residential street frontage being provided by the Jane Hamnett Residence, but then deconstruction and the planting beds were creating a 133'-0" void in the urban fabric.

This condition provided an opportunity for the UDBS to calibrate a prototypical intervention that would reinforce the urban edge, provide a sheltered place to enhance community activity (a porch), and clearly define an edge to the urban farm. The resulting design for the community porch/pavilion is located along the northern periphery of the site. The structure extends 120'-0" in length and varies in width from twenty feet at the deepest portions, and six feet at the shallowest portions (Figure 5). The project considers the relationship of the sidewalk to the boundary of the site and inflects to suggest specific modes of ergonomic interface. The structural system is both scalable and modular. The geometries employed in the structure were developed and scaled in response to the roof geometries and patterns that exist in the built streetscape. The spacing and inclination of the columnar truss el-

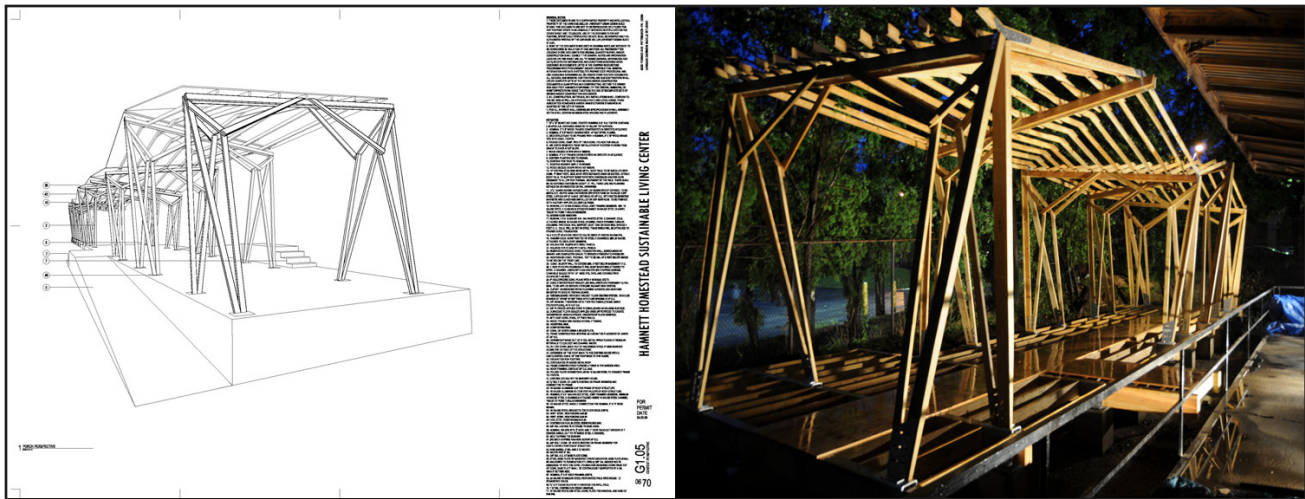


Figure 5: (left) Sheet G1.05 of the construction documents executed by students for Phase One construction of the catalytic demonstration project – documents completed May 2009; (right) implementation - phase one construction photo; view of community porch/pavilion taken from northeast corner of site.

ements were derived to minimize the amount of material employed and maximize material efficiencies. One hundred percent of the sheet flow from the roof will be collected in cisterns and utilized for irrigation of the urban farm. Water from the *Nine Mile Run* present on site just below the surface of the soil will be day lit and utilized in a seasonal passive cooling strategy.

DON'T LEAVE ME HERE, I CAN'T GET USED TO THIS LIFESTYLE

Phase One of the HHSLC, completed in August of 2009, provides a built prototype for urban intervention in a specific community suffering from population loss and vacancy. Pedagogically, The realization of the project represents the abilities of an undergraduate studio to address a complex set of issues across the full spectrum of scale within a one-year time frame. In application, the efforts of those students have provided a tangible lens for the community to understand whether or not their ideas about the Borough's future and vacancy issue remediation are appropriate.

The effectiveness of the intervention in enhancing assets and remediating liabilities will remain to be seen. It may very well be that the project illustrates new issues yet to be understood. But the modesty of the intervention enables residents dedicated to the community to evaluate the form of intervention before committing to wholesale changes that

may alter the environment irrevocably to a place where they feel alien and want to leave – because they can't get used to the lifestyle imposed by an experimental urban strategy. Residents living in communities impacted by vacancy and outmigration already face challenges, they can't afford the challenge of leveraged risk.

ENDNOTES

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