

# GREENING LEGACY CITIES

## Recent Research on Local Strategies for Reclaiming Vacant Land

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### SUPPLEMENT: RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

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#### I. Translation—Leveraging Current and Future Research on Urban Greening Policy, Programs, and Practice

Below we offer general observations and insights on how practitioners and policymakers can leverage current urban greening research to expand and further refine their current urban greening strategies and practices. We recognize this list includes a few suggestions which merely confirm effective practices already in play in many communities. Our goal is not to brainstorm a comprehensive list of novel ideas but to offer a common framework that can help practitioners and policymakers better understand the complexities and power of urban greening research and also help researchers recognize the emerging community of practice around urban greening as valid subjects for academic inquiry within the context of legacy cities.

Note that our observations and recommendations apply at different scales, from the “macro level” (e.g., policy, planning and program implications) to the “micro level” (e.g., project site or neighborhood). We recognize, however, that ideas at one scale can and should influence and feed into the others. Our goal in providing this list is to illustrate the possible ways of applying the research and to stimulate readers to develop their own approaches.

- **Engage in Collaborative and Holistic Planning Processes:** Much of the research discussed in this brief documents what practitioners know first-hand—that planning and implementation of urban greening projects is complex, difficult, and sometimes controversial; thus urban greening initiatives require the meaningful engagement from various levels of government, the private sector, and local NGOs. [1] Ecological and social outcomes of greening projects may vary greatly across neighborhoods and thus should be managed through informed planning policies. [74] Given the wide range of urban greening strategies and the complex and dynamic nature of implementing initiative for greening vacant land in urban areas (e.g., the community, political, strategic, and technical dimensions of urban greening initiatives, etc.) holistic planning processes can help ensure that green reuse of urban vacant areas will happen in ways that are suitable and useful for the entire community. [32]
  - Researchers have developed decision-support tools to assist municipal planning staff, private and public land owners and community groups in clarifying the trade-offs between various design alternatives, given a specified life-cycle length. [75] For example, a design and costing tool called “DECO” is designed to allow the user to perform a series of “what-if” scenarios/sensitivity analyses to aid in well-informed green infrastructure investment decisions.
  - A community-based planning tool is also available for evaluating vacant lots suitability for temporary reuse strategies versus redevelopment options. [76]

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As a corollary to holistic planning, urban greening research seems to support the notion that effective planning processes and technical tools can help practitioners in making decisions about which lands/sites should be or are more suitable for permanent greening treatments and interventions and which ones make more sense for temporary green reuse— a critical juncture in virtually every urban greening initiative.

- o Interventions on vacant lands are typically decided on a case by case basis, with specific greening strategies depending upon environmental and social characteristics of the community. Every parcel of land and community have unique characteristics that determine what types of green strategies can be implemented. As a result, some strategies and vacant lots are best suited for short-term time approaches and low resources investment, while others are more suitable for long-term and higher resources investments. [77, 78]
  - o Urban agriculture and other community greening approaches have been often regarded as temporary practices on temporarily available land and substitute for the more permanent option such as redevelopment. [79, 80]
  - o Temporary use of sites for basic greening can in some situations keep all development options open for property owners and local authorities while improving the situation in the short term. In other circumstances communities get so accustomed to what was originally thought of as a temporary green use that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to change the use or redevelop the property. In addition, this low intensity resources approach can respond quickly to changing conditions and demands. This approach has been adopted by the municipality of Leipzig (Germany), which developed an informal tool that allows undeveloped sites to be temporarily planted with the aid of an authorization agreement. [81]
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- **Develop Mechanisms for Documenting, Tracking and Disseminating the Multiple Benefits Derived from Urban Greening:** Since a large share of the urban greening research discusses the multiple environmental/ecosystem and socio-economic benefits from different interventions, strategies and treatments, local governments and community-based organizations (the primary leaders of many urban greening initiatives) to document, track and disseminate the short and long term benefits of their urban greening projects, policies, and programs. In the short-term practitioners and policymakers can certainly rely on research from other places that generally document and discusses these benefits; however, at some point it may be critical to the long term success to establish mechanisms for enumerating those benefits for local greening projects and programs.

Perhaps a good template for review is the [report card developed by the Groundwork USA Network](#), which compiles the outputs and outcomes of various urban greening efforts led by their local trusts. Urban greening groups should also consider working collaboratively with local researchers to develop performance metrics or a portfolio of urban greening strategies and track them over time; thus, practitioners should not only acknowledge the need for such evaluation and feedback in the design of their urban

greening programs, but also allocate sufficient resources for program and policy evaluation.

- **Tailor Outreach and Communication on Urban Greening Research to Match Regional and Local Political and Community Priorities:** Urban greening proponents would be wise to highlight those relevant socio-economic and environmental benefits discussed in the current research that seem more relevant for local policymakers. For example, where economic development appears to be a major priority, proponents/advocates might want to lead with how urban greening research documents increases in property values to adjacent properties. Proponents should also discuss how emerging research discusses the breadth and potential of urban greening strategies to provide multiple social, psychological, and public health benefits.

This approach could also assist practitioners in seeking policy changes to overcome or address several of the barriers that make urban greening more difficult, such as land banking and other legal structures for assisting CBOs in acquiring, maintaining and managing vacant lots and vacant land. Getting consistent and legal access to vacant lots remains a huge barrier to taking individual urban greening strategies to scale. Many local governments and community-based organizations may not have sufficient legal systems or even the legal authority to acquire, maintain and dispose of multiple properties. Advocates could leverage the research on the positive socio-economic and environmental benefits from current greening initiatives to support the necessary state and local reforms.

- **Expand Resources and Capacity for Urban Greening Intermediaries and Community Based Organizations (CBOs):** Current research highlights that a wide range of CBOs along with national NGOs and regional intermediaries are leading many of the urban greening initiatives in collaboration with local government and community/civic leaders. Such CBO capacity comes at a time when public funding and capacity for managing and maintaining green spaces continues to decrease; thus, policymakers should consider new and creative ways for expanding CBO capacity and perhaps develop a learning network of green CBOs.
  - Expand approaches for the inventory (and mapping) of urban greening sites to better understand the spatial and neighborhood implications of various urban greening intervention;
  - Establish training and education programs for key stakeholders and interests group to drive urban greening projects.
  - Dedicate local government staff with appropriate expertise to provide technical guidance, oversee and coordinate green policy changes impacting vacant lots, and harmonize the work of city departments, communities, NGO's and other stakeholders.

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- o Cultivate strong local leadership and knowledge of necessary changes to current building codes and zoning regulations, conflicting agency policies, and other uniquely local constraints to steer urban greening projects.
  
- **Establish Pilot Project(s) BEFORE taking Urban Greening Strategies to Scale:** A common approach identified in the research is CBOs and local governments developing pilot projects for testing particular urban greening strategies. These projects can experiment with different conditions in different neighborhoods in order to gain experience and determine ideal conditions for replication. For example, reclaiming vacant lots for neighborhood stabilization (clearing of debris, disposing of waste, planting trees and grass to improve blighted conditions). These stabilization strategies are a critical first step for converting vacant lots to more long-term green space. A pilot program should implement a stabilization strategy in one neighborhood and encourage partnerships with neighborhood groups to further invest in green strategies on chosen lots. By doing so, the pilot project could create a planning model that could be applied to other areas in the city, identify institutional barriers to implementation, and develop strategies to overcome these institutional barriers.
  
- **Overcome Environmental and Local Land Use/ Land Development Policy and Program Barriers:** Community based organizations and nonprofits leading urban greening initiatives confront a wide range of barriers, but some of the most common obstacles to expanding urban greening efforts—taking it to scale—involve various land use and environmental policies and programs that can inhibit their ability to acquire the vacant or underused land and/or restrict the potential green uses of the vacant land. Thus, urban greening organizations should develop more internal land use expertise and/or partners with organizations that can offer that expertise. They should consider engaging in state and local policy discussions to change and reform existing policies and programs so they can better accommodate and eventually encourage urban greening efforts. Many of the articles and studies we found confirm that greening in legacy cities is hindered by a variety of obstacles, including land acquisition. [1] Below we highlight a few of those barriers mentioned in the research:
  - o As many urban community gardeners do not have titles to the land, they risk losing it if it is taken back for other purposes. Common land tenure arrangements for community gardens to address the issue include long-term leases, land trusts and partnerships. [82, 83]
  - o Existing landscape regulations or zoning provisions may conflict with agricultural uses of vacant lots. To address this issue, several cities, such as Cleveland, are now adopting a specific zoning category for urban gardens. [5]
  - o Ongoing maintenance and stewardship of urban greening interventions may be a barrier to program success. Green infrastructure projects, for example, require monitoring and adaptive management approach, which could create budgeting and operational issues. [6]

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- o Overall lack of education, knowledge, and experience with greening strategies, such as green infrastructure design and maintenance, may be a barrier to community-led urban greening projects implementation and upkeep. Successful greening projects involve provisions of technical, logistic and training assistance from public and private organizations to community members involved. [84]
  
- o Given the contamination problems common in urban soils, for example, a soil quality assessment is necessary and not all land parcels may be suitable for crop production and functional green space. [63]

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