

Designing the New American Frontier: The Culture of Inner City Landscapes

BALDEV LAMBA*

*Baldev Lamba, Associate Professor of
Landscape Architecture, Temple
University, Philadelphia 19122,
United States of America.
Email: blamba@temple.edu*

Post-war deindustrialisation, decentralisation and suburbanisation has resulted in the creation of 'wild' inner-city landscapes recalling the American Frontiers to be civilised by brave pioneers and settlers. After the great immigration waves of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ended, cities changed from a population historically recognised as homogeneous to one of far greater ethnic and social diversity. Bringing new energy and vitality, these 'pioneers' are now engaged in re-settlement of the New American Frontier. Although faced with limited resources, they are exhibiting ingenuity and resolve to shape the urban landscape into patterns that absorb, reflect and celebrate their diverse identities.

URBAN RENEWAL of post-industrial inner cities around the world has emerged as one of the biggest challenges facing our modern society. However, this process also presents an opportunity to foster socially and culturally responsive patterns of inhabitation. Community-specific cultural strategies have become the primary means of urban revitalisation. Central to such strategies is the rhetoric of cultural identity and promotion of local distinctiveness to create a positive sense of place and belonging.

Located in the West Kensington section of North Philadelphia, the Norris Square neighbourhood has become home to a predominantly Puerto Rican population. Embodying the classic signs of post-industrial inner-city decline, this neighbourhood represents a compelling prototype for community-based revitalisation. Starting in the early 1980s, the Norris Square community has engaged in slowly building a sense of place expressive of the sights, sounds and rhythms of Latino culture, transforming the once dangerous 'frontier' or ghetto into a thriving 'barrio'.

Based upon multidisciplinary academic projects, including field work and key interviews undertaken in partnership with the community, this paper offers a framework for professionals engaged in the design of New Urban Frontiers. Starting with a brief overview of the frontier analogy and urban renewal strategies, the paper then focuses on specific processes that Norris Square has employed in its attempt to transform the abandoned inner-city landscape into a place of cultural pride and identity.