

# Designing the New American Frontier: The Culture of Inner-city Landscapes

BALDEV LAMBA

Baldev Lamba, RLA, ASLA,  
is an Associate Professor of Landscape  
Architecture at Temple University,  
Ambler, PA., United States of America.

He is also Principal of Lamba  
Associates, Landscape Architects  
in Doylestown, PA.

Email: [blamba@temple.edu](mailto:blamba@temple.edu)

In the aftershock of deindustrialisation, restructuring of inner-city neighbourhoods around the United States of America has emerged as one of the biggest challenges facing our modern society. The revitalisation process in Norris Square, Philadelphia, the subject of a recent pilot project for Temple University and the main focus of this paper, reveals a possible model for fostering socially and culturally responsive patterns of inhabitation that could be adapted in similar communities.

## RESTRUCTURING THE URBAN LANDSCAPE

POST-WAR ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SHIFTS have resulted in the creation of 'urban wildernesses' in cities across the nation. The urban landscape became a feared habitat of decay and danger, reminiscent of the American frontier, which was described by Frederick Jackson Turner in 1863 as the "meeting point between savagery and civilization".

Turner's frontier involved advancing waves of European pioneers who rolled back the savage wilderness in the creation of new forms of settlement. Early post-war urban renewal echoed the pioneers' settlement strategies. Just as the Native American dwellings were cleared, in the 1950s and 1960s entire urban neighbourhoods were levelled and rebuilt. This massive 'slum clearance' and 'blight removal' model, based on the ideals of the city-beautiful movement, resulted in the displacement of the working class and urban poor.

A backlash was inevitable. Jane Jacobs, with the publication of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), led the shift to a more consultative process of urban development. This paradigm shift precipitated the formation of grassroots and community-based organisations that are now playing a critical role in restructuring poor and at-risk, inner-city neighbourhoods.

## CASE STUDY: NORRIS SQUARE, PHILADELPHIA

### KEY WORDS

*Inner cities*

*Urban revitalisation*

*University-community partnership*

*Case study*

*Multidisciplinary collaboration*

Philadelphia can be conceptually visualised as a vibrant downtown core surrounded by the 'wilderness' of new American frontiers – ethnic spaces at various stages of development, stabilisation or restructuring by new waves of immigrant populations.

Norris Square, located in the West Kensington section of North Philadelphia, is an ethnic enclave embodying the classic signs of post-industrial decline. It comprises an area of approximately 60 city blocks with a large historic square as its symbolic centre. Norris Square, once a thriving industrial centre with a key railroad terminal,

has become home to a predominantly Puerto Rican population. Other minority inhabitants include non-Puerto Rican Latinos, African Americans, Koreans, Asians and Palestinians. Armed with its culture and a pioneering spirit, Norris Square represents a compelling prototype for those who are shaping frontiers into settlement patterns that absorb, reflect and celebrate their identity.

## TWO DECADES OF PROGRESS

Steered primarily by the Puerto Rican community, Norris Square followed a complex restructuring process. The community faced numerous challenges, including a history of race and class discrimination, uprooting because of gentrification, language barriers, a lack of resources and organisational expertise, and a lack of experience in interacting with bureaucratic and institutional systems. These struggles flavour vision and actions as residents aspire to create a distinct place of their own.

Over the last 20 years, Norris Square has been transforming itself from the once dangerous frontier known as the 'badlands' into a thriving barrio with the sights, sounds and rhythms of Latino culture. Cultural strategies are at the heart of this revitalisation. Central to these are the rhetoric of cultural identity and the promotion of a positive sense of place and belonging.

Idealised images of Puerto Rican landscapes, history and aspirations are depicted in numerous murals, giving meaning to ubiquitous blank walls. Modest grassroots efforts include displaying Puerto Rican flags, building small gardens, and painting brick facades with traditional bright colours. Puerto Rican identity and indigenous creativity is best expressed in Las Parcelas (the parcels), part of the community's "Latino greene towne countrie", which recalls William Penn's original concept for Philadelphia. The neighbourhood is using gardening to reclaim a sense of bucolic countryside: a number of vacant lots, acquired from the city to control future development pressures, have been transformed into a small 'village' with community gardens, village square, and a replica of a Puerto Rican house dubbed "grandma's house" that also doubles as a small museum. Vernacular charm can be seen in the use of painted rocks, benches and collected artefacts. Racial diversity is expressed in African motifs used as decorative features. A wall mural depicting local activists completes this place of pride and celebrations. It has become a popular destination for many in university programmes and others seeking an experience of urban culture. Neighbourhood residents have also established a mercado, or market place, in an old industrial building that includes Mexican, Salvadoran and Puerto Rican eateries, attracting visitors and resources to the neighbourhood and adding to the image of Norris Square as a new cultural attraction.

This volunteer-driven, opportunistic and pragmatic approach to revitalisation, with an undeniable vernacular charm and creativity, is arguably a much-needed first step in empowering the community and setting the stage for future developments. Nonetheless, it has resulted in piecemeal and uncoordinated patterns of improvements of questionable quality, undoubtedly a familiar situation in other inner-city neighbourhoods. Although Las Parcelas demonstrates the essence of what

the community would like to create in its neighbourhood, the results are tenuous in their realisation. The layout is inefficient, resulting in spaces that are poorly organised and used. “Grandma’s house”, though a much-loved concept, was poorly constructed and is already in a state of disrepair. These problems are rooted in lack of funding for, and awareness of, the design and planning services necessary to enforce quality in specific and immediate projects. The community also lacks a long-term comprehensive plan and vision for the entire geographic area.

## UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

Temple University, located in the midst of inner-city neighbourhoods, is responding to challenges of urban revitalisation by creating collaborations with communities, such as Norris Square, while expanding its educational, research and outreach missions.

The Urban Design Workshop, an interdisciplinary group of faculty and students from landscape architecture, architecture, sculpture, and geography and urban studies at Temple, aims to build on the momentum created in Norris Square. The workshop is developing a long-term holistic approach to restructuring the area by weaving together the residual historic elements and the present and emerging needs and aspirations of the community. Studios and seminars addressed community needs based on the knowledge unique to each of the workshop participants. The workshop generated neighbourhood research, master planning, building and open-space design, art installations, and proposals for effecting public-policy changes to support community-centred expressions of place.

The Norris Square Civic Association (NSCA), with a long history in the neighbourhood, emerged as the best organised, most influential community group. It became the workshop’s primary community partner and facilitator. NSCA helped to articulate the community vision by providing venues for public meetings and other forms of interactions with local groups and individuals. Total community participation, a critical part of the neighbourhood design process, proved to be a little lacking. The workshop’s future goal is to engage the wider community, possibly by including experts in the fields of anthropology and sociology.

Prior to Temple’s involvement, community improvements were mostly concentrated in the vicinity of Norris Square Park. The park is surrounded by many beautiful historic churches and houses, and is a vibrant activity centre for the entire neighbourhood. Away from the square, however, extensive spatial discontinuities, in the form of empty buildings and trashed vacant lots, erode the sense of place and undermine social cohesion. The workshop aimed to transform these gaps in the physical fabric in order to expand and reinforce the sense of neighbourhood identity more deeply and widely in design and planning proposals.

Workshop proposals investigated a variety of scenarios and themes based on the need for affordable housing, the expansion of educational and cultural institutions, increased commercial spaces, providing recreational facilities, expanding pedestrian access, and enhancing nodal community institutions such as schools, churches, parks and service centres. The understanding of the cultural aspects of the community

was reflected in the programme, forms, colours or spirit of each proposal. Students were encouraged to explore new ideas that combined formal designs (as prescribed by the 'experts') with informal and indigenous expressions (as desired by community residents).

Open-space design, the greatest challenge and opportunity for landscape architects, will determine the overall character of new settlement patterns. Providing a system of linked public and private open spaces was considered important to enhance the lifestyle of the Puerto Rican community, which values open space. Housing layouts provided ample yard spaces to meet the needs of growing vegetables, housing small animals, parking and outdoor dining. The tradition of extended families living together also required housing options that could be expanded over time.

## CONCLUSIONS

The workshop provided students with the opportunity to apply their knowledge to a multidisciplinary, 'real-world' planning and design problem. The workshop also provided Norris Square with an extensive database, documenting neighbourhood patterns, which can be used for future development proposals. Support from experienced and dedicated community organisations, an understanding of the culture and history of the neighbourhood, and the 'pioneering' spirit of the immigrant settlers were critical for this collaboration.

After more than half a century, the aftershock of deindustrialisation still haunts inner cities across the nation, with no end in sight. Revitalisation is often stalled because of a lack of design resources and long-term planning. Developing lasting community-university partnerships should be a key component in our search for ways of restructuring inner-city neighbourhoods. Collaborations among universities can bring greater focus and vitality to this process. Working together, we can meet the challenge of settling the new American frontiers.

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