



Park in a Truck By Tim Beatley

Kim Douglas, a landscape architecture professor at Jefferson University in Philadelphia, has been developing and experimenting with a unique idea for urban greening. What if you could develop a set of pre-built site design elements -- garden boxes, benches, chairs, plants -- that make up a kit of parts that a neighborhood can select and mix and match to create the kind of pocket park that best serves their needs? All of these site improvements will sit right on the surface of the lot with no need for digging or for laying concrete. They are quickly installed. The materials to build the park literally arrive on a truck. Thus, *Park in a Truck*.

The idea has also been called IKEA for parks, born from a desire to green as many vacant lots as possible in the City of Philadelphia for as little cost as possible. There are an estimated 40,000 vacant lots, so the potential to change cities, and indeed the city as a whole, is significant indeed. The City of

Philadelphia had been interested in the idea, Douglas told me in a recent interview, in part to address the common problem of “[short dumping](#),” where vacant lots become receptacles for construction waste.

Douglas and colleague Drew Harris, who teaches population health, floated the idea initially in an [op-ed piece](#) in the Philadelphia Inquirer in 2019. “Let’s bring nature back into everyday,” Douglas and Harris argue in this op-ed, “by using adjacent vacant lots to create a network of block-by-block green links—corridors of high quality outdoor spaces.” Such a program would help to address the health and economic disparities in Philadelphia and provide a small but significant opportunity for residents to take a degree of control over and improve their urban neighborhoods. “Our proposal would build community capital in a way no program run by and with outside groups

can,” say Douglas and Harris. The response to the initial op-ed was quite positive.

Douglas told me she believes strongly that urban neighborhoods need much more nature, closer by, and these vacant lots throughout the city represent a real asset. Philadelphia does well when it comes to more conventional parks with more than 94% of its population living within a 10-minute walk of a park, which is a common target now embraced in many cities. But this is not enough, and she thinks we are setting our sights too low. “If I’m 85 or I’m 5 that’s too far to go,” she told me. After all, a ten-minute walk still amounts to a walk of about a kilometer. These smaller, more frequent and closer-by mini-parks represent “stepping stones” to larger parks and greenspaces. In their op-ed article, Douglas and Harris advocate for a more radical goal for cities: “Can we imagine a

city where every child or adult lives within 30 seconds of a green space? An oasis of calm, where they can walk, run, play or just relax.” Everyone within 30 seconds of a park!

These parks could also provide a network of ecological stepping-stones throughout the city. Douglas tells me there is an emphasis on planting native plants and plants important for local wildlife.

Parks in a Truck is meant to be a highly inclusive model of transforming vacant lots, where neighbors and the surrounding community decide on what they want in their park. Here residents get a direct say in the design elements that they want and then are involved in the building of the park as well as its long

term care.

The first of these parks in a truck has been built by Douglas and a team of volunteers in the Philly neighborhood of Mantua. Impressively, the park was built in only six weeks with labor from the neighborhood, like a neighborhood barn raising. Volunteers reflecting a variety of age groups from quite young to old, met for a few hours each Saturday morning. It’s important for neighborhoods to design, build and maintain their own parks, she says: “That way they’re invested. It’s their park. I’m not doing it, they’re doing it.”

To make it easier for neighborhoods, Douglas has developed four prototypes: event parks, nature parks, sanctuary parks and edible parks (though

it is possible to mix and match features between them). She describes these pre-established design elements as “puzzle pieces that you can interchange.” They are delivered as modules, eventually accessed, she hopes, from a network of warehouses around the city (something like IKEA stores she thinks). For a 16 ft by 70 ft lot, maybe 15 pre-assembled modules would be needed. Each will have its own price, and Douglas will be able to provide the neighborhood with a rough estimate of the time requirements to maintain the resulting park.

The cost of building even a small neighborhood park remains a real challenge. Parks in a truck are going to be much less expensive than a conventional conversion of a vacant lot to



Image Credit: Thomas Jefferson University

Four Potential Park Designs



a park: they can be done for \$50,000 each (rather than the more typical \$300,000). And Douglas hopes that eventually they will be able to lower the cost, down to \$10,000 a piece, a price she thinks is possible. Presumably, these parks will allow for a redesign or reconfiguration over time as the needs and desires of the neighborhood may change. They could be additive as well: installing the basic elements that make the park safe and attractive first, then adding other elements on the neighborhood wish-list as more funding is found.

Kim Douglas has other rewilding aspirations for her city and is currently working with her Landscape Architecture students on a pollinator corridor that would connect the John Heinz National Wildlife Refuge to the city zoo. It is another example of testing out a new idea for the ecological city of the future. In 2019, [Douglas won the Community Service Award](#) from the American Society of Landscape Architects, a well-deserved recognition for her work, and for the work of her [Lab for Urban and Social Innovation](#). The Lab and the studios she runs represent an important model for design education; one that emphasizes community partnerships and the seeding of ecological innovations that hold potential for improving the urban life and ecology of this city, and especially its deep and lasting inequalities across neighborhoods.

Resources:

Bederka, Mike (July 11, 2019). Landscape Architecture Director Wins ASLA's Community Service Award. Thomas Jefferson University. <https://www.jefferson.edu/about/news-and-events/2019/7/landscape-architecture-director-wins-award.html>.

Bond, Michaelle (Aug. 30, 2019). Philly is trying to stop illegal dumping by tracking who hauls contractors' trash. *Philadelphia Inquirer*. <https://www.inquirer.com/news/short-dumping-illegal-philadelphia-trash-contractor-construction-permit-litter-20190830.html>.

Douglas, Kim and Harris, Drew (June 29, 2018). Let's promote health and green space one empty lot at a time." *Philadelphia Inquirer*. <https://www.inquirer.com/philly/health/health-cents/lets-promote-health-and-green-space-one-empty-lot-at-a-time-20180629.html>.

