

CONSTITUENTS

- MEXICAN COMMUNITY
- ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY
- CAMBODIAN COMMUNITY
- VIETNAMESE COMMUNITY
- BURMESE COMMUNITY
- BHUTANESE COMMUNITY
- NEPALI COMMUNITY
- CONGOLESE COMMUNITY
- AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

- FRIENDS OF MIFLIN SQUARE
- EAST PASSYUNK CROSSING CIVIC ASSOCIATION
- KAREN COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION
- SEAMAAC
- UNITED COMMUNITIES OF SOUTHEAST PHILADELPHIA
- 7TH STREET COMMUNITY CIVIC ASSOCIATION
- PHILADELPHIA LAND BANK
- PHILADELPHIA COALITION FOR AFFORDABLE COMMUNITIES
- LOWER MOYAMENING CIVIC ASSOCIATION
- BETHANNA COMMUNITY UMBRELLA AGENCY
- PACDC
- FLEISHER ART MEMORIAL
- 215 PEOPLE'S ALLIANCE
- LAOS IN THE HOUSE
- SCRIBE VIDEO CENTER
- SEXSE COMMUNITY ART SPACE
- SOUTHWARD ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
- BHUTANESE COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION-PHILADELPHIA
- CASA MONARCA
- FURNESS HIGH SCHOOL
- CAMBODIAN ASSOCIATION OF GREATER PHILADELPHIA (CAGP)
- BOAT PEOPLE SOS (BPSOS) MEDIA MOVILIZING PROJECT
- NATIONALITIES SERVICE CENTER
- MIGHTY WRITERS, EL FUTURO OFFICE
- PUBLIC CITIZENS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH
- BAO-P CENTER
- PUNTES DE SALUD
- SOUTH PHILADELPHIA HIGH SCHOOL
- PAL CENTER
- ASIAN AMERICANS UNITED NATIONALITIES SERVICES CENTER
- JUNTOS
- SOUTHEAST PHILADELPHIA COLLABORATIVE
- AQUINAS CENTER
- SENIOR CENTER ON JACKSON
- PHILADELPHIA REFUGEE MENTAL HEALTH COLLABORATIVE
- PA MIGRANT EDUCATION
- LUTHERAN SETTLEMENT HOUSE/MENTAL HEALTH COLLABORATIVE
- ASIAN AMERICANS UNITED
- UNITED COMMUNITIES OF SOUTHEAST PHILADELPHIA



USEFUL KNOWLEDGE

	PARKS AND PUBLIC SPACE	HOUSING & LAND DEVELOPMENT	EDUCATION	SOCIAL SERVICES	TRAINING AND JOB CREATION
ADVOCACY					
SERVICES					
POLICY					

Graphic representation of people by Iconoclasts



populations on the margins of such economic activity and can lead to a project with greater long-term social sustainability. Such entrepreneurship also represents a commitment on the part of local stakeholders to remain and invest in their neighborhood. Furthermore, these activities often take place in public spaces, exposing various cultures and bringing alternative exchanges to the fore. Such activity can be productive for Mural Arts interventions, as residents are better equipped to participate in the community engagement phase of the process. The presence of existing resources makes a community better equipped to partake in arts initiatives. Resources can be financial, knowledge-based, and time-based, all of which require a level of security and agency within the community (see figure 2.1.1).

5. EXISTING STREET/FARMERS' MARKETS

Existing street and farmers' markets reflect a neighborhood that hosts a vibrant community that values a culture of exchange and encounter. This sense of community can provide a fertile foundation for a Mural Arts project. Farmers' markets and in particular ethnic food markets have great potential to partner with Restored Spaces on their joint goals of sustainability, connectivity between groups, and accessibility to fresh produce. Such markets also greatly contribute to street life and vibrancy, which are key for a Restored Spaces project. Cultural differences and values within a community can only truly be shared when public spaces exist that are inclusive to, and activated by, different populations. Markets work towards producing such participatory spaces. Furthermore, the economic activity associated with these markets offers employment opportunities both within these spaces and beyond through the economic ripple effect they generate. Again, the presence of markets demonstrates a population's available resources that will help it take part in Mural Arts projects and initiatives that work to promote the community's sustainable growth.

6. RISING REAL ESTATE VALUES

Rising real estate values are an indicator of incoming gentrification, or the class restructuring of an area. Once initiated, this phenomenon has the potential to grow exponentially, rapidly transforming the fabric of a neighborhood and displacing the existing residents that comprise its community. Communities can look for a number of identifiable signifiers before the process is fully initiated and then organize resistance and counter-action. This early juncture is an important moment in time for Restored Spaces and Mural Arts to work with communities towards such concerted mobilizing. Creeping gentrification works to shift the socio-spatial boundaries that define neighborhoods and communities, leading to constant negotiation and insecurity. For example, the South Seven is a demonstration of this kind of area in flux as its clear buffer boundary, Washington Avenue, has thus far managed to abate sweeping gentrification, making it a prime site for a Restored Spaces intervention and for Mural Arts projects. Signs of gentrification also indicate renewed private and public interest in an area. Some of this can take the form of incentives and funding for arts and culture initiatives in an area, which can be harnessed by the residents and by Mural Arts. In light of anticipated changes to a neighborhood, Restored Spaces has the opportunity to work with communities to mobilize long-term public agency over their neighborhood's development (see figure 2.1.2).

7. DEVELOPMENT PRESSURE AND INCENTIVES

Development pressure and incentives emerge from a similar process of rising real estate values and gentrification. As aforementioned, such changes demonstrate interest in an area from a variety of stakeholders including the city, whether they are incentives, tax breaks, rezoning proposals, citywide plans, local projects, or federal funds channeled towards specific area-based initiatives such as Empowerment Zones and Enterprise Communities. The incentives that the city has put to use, such as those described above, utilize fiscal instruments to incentivize development in a specific area. These

incentives, along with Redevelopment Certified Areas, expose the limited ability of the urban planning department and City Council to have a positive impact on populations in distressed areas. Here lies a critical moment to align Restored Spaces and Mural Arts' goals with the vision of the city for funding and sustained collaboration. Mural Arts, as an established citywide organization, has the potential to act as a mediator between the city and smaller local civic organizations. This kind of positioning allows for greater agency and representation of the public (see figure 2.1.2).

8. PUBLIC TRANSPORT CONNECTIVITY

Well-developed public transportation often correlates with rising real estate values, economic pressures, and gentrification. A certain level of public transport connectivity, however, is necessary for mobility and enables greater access to employment, social services, and amenities. An area that is neither fully connected to main transportation lines nor completely geographically isolated achieves the fine balance between accessibility and gentrification. The South Seven is one such area, as it is centrally located but does not benefit from a wide variety of public transportation options. Such a situation also provides Mural Arts projects with a good level of exposure but means such projects will not necessarily work alongside and enhance the gentrification process.

9. ECONOMIC DISTRESS WITH POTENTIAL FOR RESILIENCE

An area of economic distress signals disinvestment by both the city and private interests, but areas like the South Seven, which border rapidly-developing neighborhoods and existing affluent communities, are poised for renewed investment. Such development is a threat to existing populations but can also be an impetus for organized resilience. In this area, most of the parameters align, since concentrated civic organizations, existing street activity, city-owned properties, and vacant land can all help develop new modes of cooperation, coexistence, and

counteraction. Such at-risk communities are an opportunity for Mural Arts to build alliances and networks for sustained resilience (see figure 2.1.2).

10. CITY-OWNED PROPERTIES

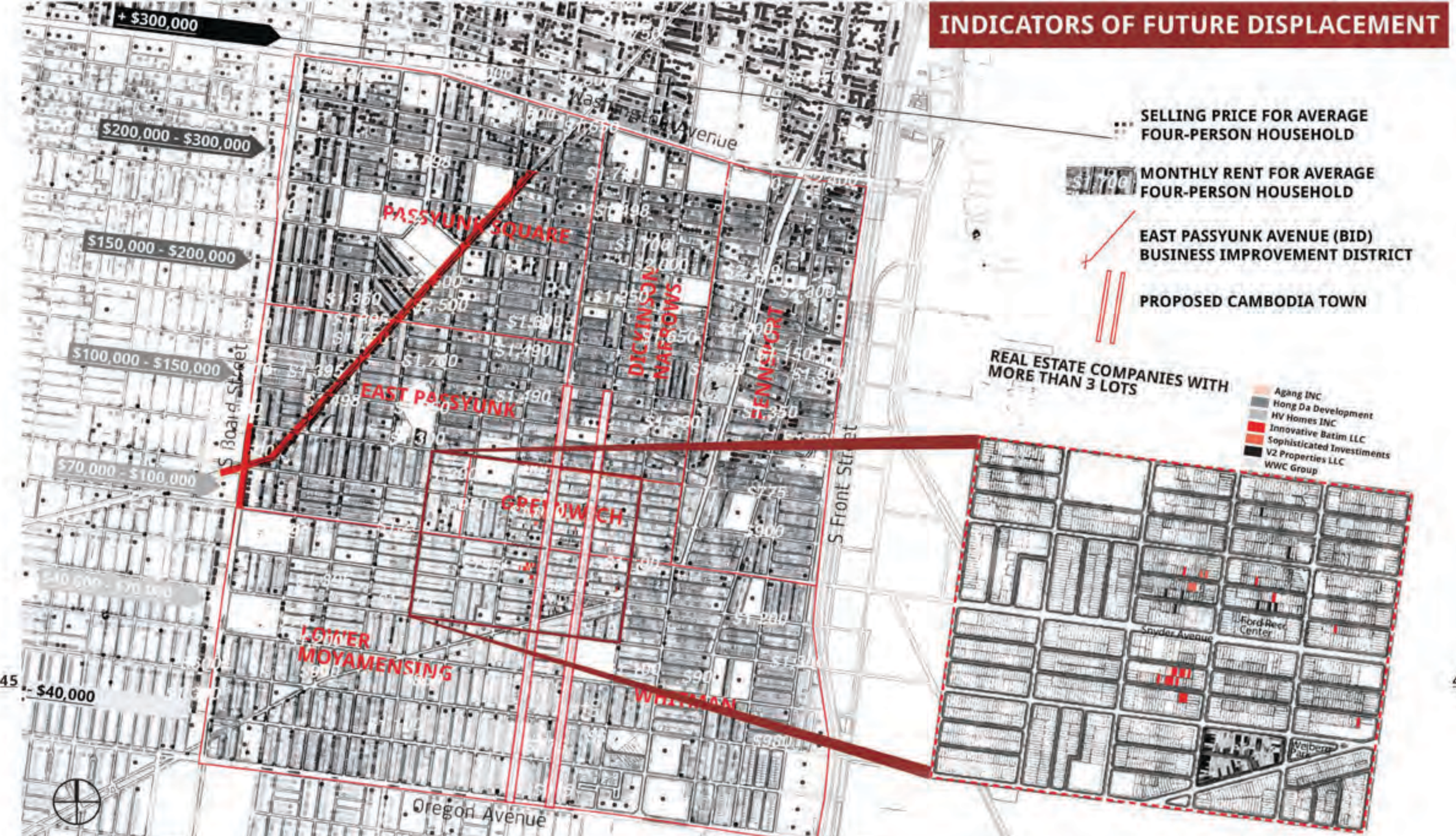
City-owned properties are an important resource for an area, as they can be developed differently than privately-owned properties. New strategies are needed to preserve and activate this public resource. With the involvement of the community, Restored Spaces and Mural Arts can be at the forefront for pushing an agenda that promotes a sustainable, long-term plan of action. Maintaining public ownership is critical to retaining democratic influence over decisions around land use and community planning. When city-owned properties are sold at a rapid pace, the ensuing loss of control experienced by the community can ultimately result in reactive rather than proactive engagement. The South Seven currently has a number of city-owned properties, but in recent years this number has been declining at a rapid rate. This is a timely issue for Mural Arts' engagement. Action and public involvement are of the utmost importance to secure agency over this decision-making process affecting Philadelphia's neighborhoods. Art can be a vital tool to instigate dialogue around alternative development strategies.

11. AVAILABLE VACANT LAND

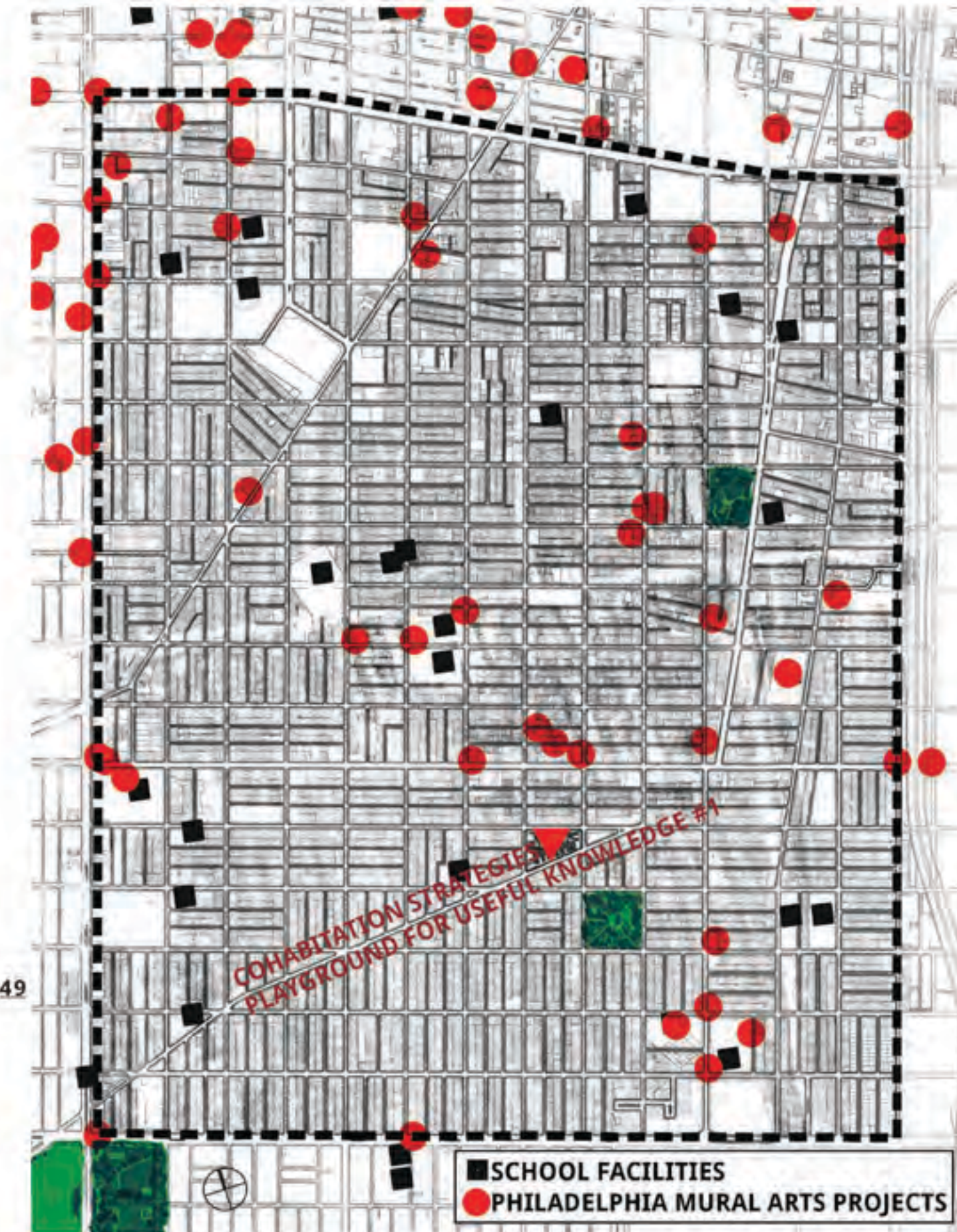
Vacant land in a neighborhood can have negative implications for an area and its residents, but also represents positive possibilities. Vacant land signals disinvestment and economic distress; when inactive, these spaces represent abandonment, fragmentation, and insecurity. However, these very same spaces can also be transformed into public assets for community gain. Their vacancy means economic gain need not be the main driver of their development. Such flexibility allows communities to engage with proposals for alternative ways to manage communal or common space that can translate into wider neighborhood benefits. Some examples of the types of projects that can be initiated on vacant land include art installations, community gardens,



INDICATORS OF FUTURE DISPLACEMENT







temporary playgrounds, public performance spaces and theatres, community kitchens, alternative markets, educational spaces, etc. The Restored Spaces Initiative can lead the way in activating such spaces by bringing together a variety of stakeholders and diverse community groups. A network of these kinds of activated spaces can dramatically change an area's dynamics, affecting everyday experiences and interactions (see figure 2.1.3).

12. IMPACTFUL CULTURAL MANIFESTATIONS

Areas like the South Seven that host multiple minority populations represent Philadelphia's everyday lived culture. This can disrupt the more popular, homogenous culture promoted in redevelopment strategies. Overlapping minority expressions of difference and injustice reproduce cultural traditions that are new, under-represented, or repressed in the environments where such groups reside. A Mural Arts project can harness this multiplicity and provide a platform for equitable cultural representation of such diversity. Here lies an important opportunity for interventions to take on an increasingly participatory role in bringing varied cultural initiatives to the fore. Having more critical, alternative minority voices in the public realm can counter the cooptation of difference that often takes place in tandem with gentrification processes (see figure 2.1.4).

13. RECENT/ACTIVE PHILADELPHIA MURAL ARTS INVOLVEMENT

Working in areas in which the organization already has a presence is a great asset for Mural Arts, as it enables it to draw on existing resources, alliances, and networks it has built over time with local communities, stakeholders, businesses, and small entrepreneurial initiatives. Having an established foundation at a project's outset allows the bulk of the organization's resources to be directed for the greatest effect rather than expending energy on logistics, coordination, and outreach. In areas such as the South Seven, the Restored

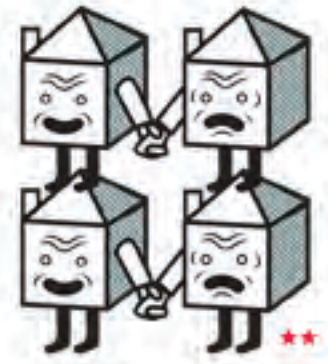
Spaces Initiative can continue its involvement in highlighting the ongoing cultural and economic struggles of distressed minorities, many of whom are non-citizens. Having a concentration of projects in an area allows Mural Arts to develop a network of artistic interventions like Journeys South and Southeast by Southeast, for example, that showcase the layered and evolving immigrant histories of South Philadelphia (see figure 2.1.4).

14. TENURE SECURITY

Tenure security is an important condition for Restored Spaces and Mural Arts involvement, as the instability associated with a continuous rotation of renters, inhabitants, and squatters impedes a project's potential long-term social impact. Some areas of Philadelphia such as those in the north have experienced frequent turnover in tenants due to affordability issues and lack of economic and social security. This is also reflected by a shortage of structural policy measures that ensure greater housing security for low-income tenants. Therefore, the criteria of ownership and secured tenure, though not absolute, is beneficial for the type of work Mural Arts engages in, as it requires on-the-ground established communities and networks. Such security offers a cohesive structure for sustained engagement.

15. PUBLIC HOUSING SHORTAGE

A public housing shortage in an area enables advocacy and experimentation with alternative housing models. Low-income housing that is not public is at risk of being bought by an incoming population and can jeopardize the affordability of existing housing stock. This represents an opportunity for Mural Arts to further expose this issue through public art interventions and community engagement. One such initiative can involve envisioning alternative housing models.



3. EXPLORING LOCAL NEEDS, AGENCY, PRACTICES, AND ASSETS IN THE SOUTH SEVEN

Over a five-month period, from February to June 2015, we conducted ethnographic research in the South Seven area and its surrounding environs with the goal of understanding the everyday conditions and relations between people living and working in the area. Research included more than 50 structured and semi-structured interviews, numerous informal interviews, and participant observation of community meetings, public forums, cultural activities, city-sponsored events, and everyday interactions at the *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* hub on 632 Jackson Street, on the streets, and in public places. This research was supported by and complemented with census data, secondary source research, and, in some cases, spatial analysis and other urban investigations.

These narratives give context to divergent experiences and illuminate how the area has changed over the past 40 years. Shifts in population include: immigration of white ethnic communities such as Italian and Irish Americans to western suburbs and New Jersey due to deindustrialization; emigration of African Americans to the city due to the "Great Migration" from the South to northern cities; a diverse influx of refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia due to US military intervention in Southeast Asia starting in the 1970s; ongoing immigration of Chinese, Mexican, and Central American people to the area; and waves of refugees from Nepal, Burma, and Bhutan.

This section illustrates some of the challenges produced by these changes by focusing on community needs, services, and convergences. Additionally, it outlines some of the local practices and cultural values mostly related to religious, community, and economic activities. Finally, we describe territorial assets and potentials

identified during the ethnographic research. These aspects were determined by looking at the inter-relations between individuals and groups of people as well as differences between access to, use of, and perceptions of public resources such as parks, recreations centers, public schools, and services provided through community-based organizations.

3.1 COMMUNITY NEEDS, SERVICES, AND CONVERGENCES

COMMUNITY NEEDS

While the South Seven area boasts an economically and socially diverse population, it also faces challenges inherent to an urban area that has more needs than resources. Monies for public programs such as libraries, recreation centers, and city parks are in short supply. Tensions persist between native South Philadelphians and newer immigrants as well as between different immigrant groups. Often people seek community through particular organizations, churches, or cultural group activities, which provide little opportunity for cross-cultural interactions. According to a youth organizer from Asian Americans United, linguistic and cultural barriers remain difficult to surmount. For recent immigrants, children who learn English often act as translators for parents attempting to navigate new US relationships. According to Nicole Prum at Migrant Education, newly arrived refugees are given a giant stack of paperwork but little time to figure out how to manage the bureaucracy of social benefits.

During one conversation, the principal of South Philadelphia High School, Otis Hackney, remarked, "While people say that they are getting along in South Philly, in reality they are not talking to each other." Francis Carney, Director of United Communities of Southeast Philadelphia, believes that in this neighborhood, "having community members at the table" has always been a missing piece. It is challenging to have conversations "that are inclusive of all of the communities within our community." Similarly, it is difficult to bring community members and service providers into the same conversation. For example, despite collaborative efforts at the organizational level,

there is no sustained neighborhood-level response to recent housing inflation and gentrification, in part because of the challenge of overcoming barriers between native populations and newcomers. The closure of the Edward Bok Technical High School and its purchase by a private developer has generated some community response and concern about housing and "redevelopment." [See section 4.1](#). Yet without an active community development corporation, affordability conversations remain difficult.

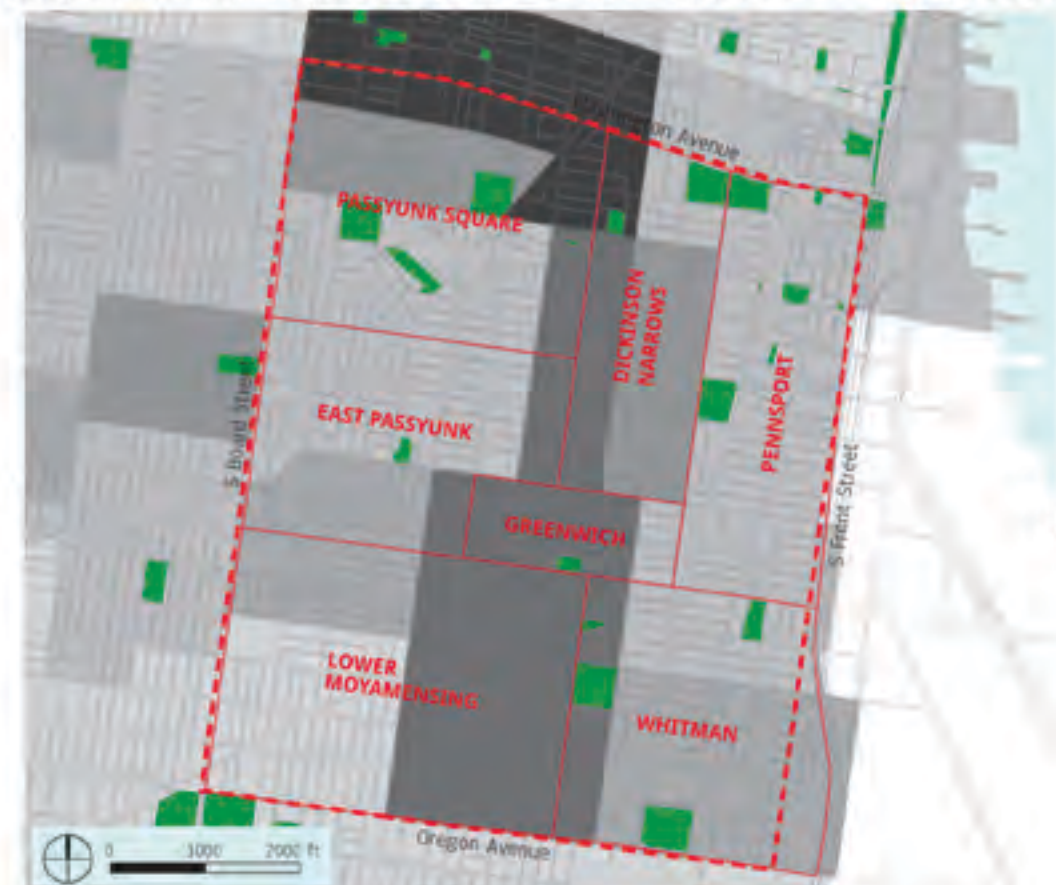
Local community organizations are very cognizant of how a lack of community space affects their constituencies' wellbeing. Many organizations formed out of a need to establish a physical space for face-to-face meetings between community members, as well as providing programs to combat social isolation, especially for elderly people. Local service providers are concerned about how social isolation can create and contribute to mental health challenges. According to Shekar Bastola, an organizer in the Bhutanese community, Nepali and Bhutanese refugees have a nationwide suicide rate twice the national average.

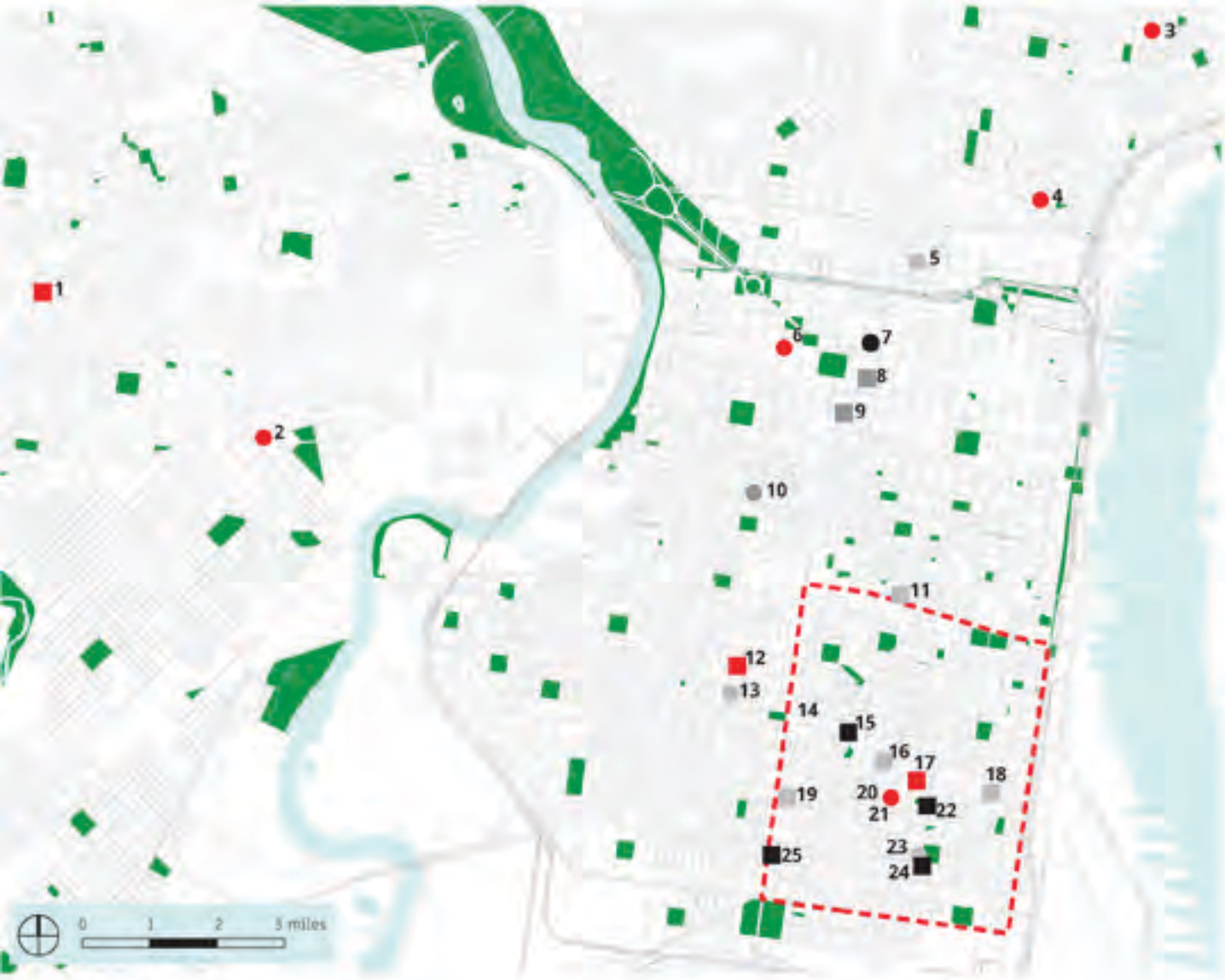
Programs for children and elderly community members at Southeast by Southeast reduce isolation for Nepali and other newcomers. Similarly, Dalia O'Gorman, director of Casa Monarca, believes that programming at this organization helps reduce feelings of isolation in the Mexican community.

Promoting physical and emotional well-being is especially vital for community members who have little to no access to the formal health care system. Many immigrant communities and undocumented residents lack health insurance ([see figure 3.1.1](#)). Local hospital emergency rooms are obligated to help those without documentation, and Puentes de Salud provides health services at their clinic. Other organizations have dedicated staff members who assist newcomers and those with language barriers in enrolling in the Affordable Care Act. Newcomers can then access care at Refugee Health Partners at Jefferson Hospital or a local health clinic. However, language and literacy barriers remain challenging even for those who have insurance.



UNINSURED RESIDENTS





COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

- - - South Seven
- Parks
- Rivers
- Activism
- Arts/Cultural Organizations
- Community-based
- Education
- Health
- Policy
- Social Service Organizations
- Volunteer/Civic Engagement

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Scribe Video Center | 14. SEAMAAC |
| 2. Media Mobilizing Project | 15. East Passyunk Crossing Civic Association |
| 3. Philadelphia Coalition for Affordable Communities | 16. Southwark Elementary School |
| 4. Women's Community Revitalization Project | 17. SE+SE Community Art Space |
| 5. Asian Americans United | 18. Furness High School |
| 6. 215 People's Alliance | 19. South Philadelphia High School |
| 7. Nationalities Service Center | 20. Juntos |
| 8. Philadelphia Land Bank | 21. United Communities Southeast Philadelphia |
| 9. PACDC | 22. Friends of Mifflin Square |
| 10. Puertes de Salud | 23. BAO-P Center |
| 11. Might Writers El Futuro Office | 24. Lower Moyamensing Civic Association |
| 12. Casa Monarca | 25. Seventh Street Community Civic Association |
| 13. Aquinas Center | |

COMMUNITY SERVICES

A significant concentration of social service organizations operates in this small area (see figure 3.1.2). While there are many points of convergence between these agencies, community needs tend to overwhelm, leaving less time and fewer resources to build alliances between organizations. According to Andrea DiMola at United Communities of Southeast Philadelphia (UCSEP), there is an urgent need for basic social services and often a lack of funding for organizations to do much more than provide these services. As one of the oldest organizations in the area, UCSEP has witnessed significant community change from its time serving Irish and Italian immigrants to now.

UCSEP's main office is housed in the Houston Center, a historic building on the corner of South 8th Street and Snyder Avenue, and is a hub of community activity (see figure 3.1.3). UCSEP convenes monthly meetings at their office for the Southeast Philadelphia Collaborative (SEPC), a consortium of seven core organizations (UCSEP, Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia, Caring People Alliance, Pennsylvania Migrant Education, Fleisher Art Memorial, Sunrise of Philadelphia, and Variety) and numerous affiliated agencies. According to SEPC members, increased diversity in the area has inspired discussions among service providers about how best to meet the needs of newcomers and to find solutions to language and literacy barriers.

UCSEP also convenes a monthly Equal Partners in Change (EPIC) meeting at the Houston Center to bring community members together around shared concerns. In addition to UCSEP, there are several long-standing community-based organizations that operate in the area. The Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia (CAGP), Boat People SOS (BPSOS), and the Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Associations Coalition (SEAMAAC) emerged to serve the different needs of newly arrived Southeast Asian refugees (Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Hmong, and Ethnic Chinese) in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

CAPG provides bilingual programs and services to meet the combined social, economic, health, and educational needs of Cambodians in Philadelphia, many of whom are survivors of the Cambodian genocide or are descendants of survivors. BPSOS is the local, community-based branch office of a national Vietnamese-American non-profit organization established in 1980 to address the plight of Vietnamese "boat people." BPSOS now provides health promotion, civic engagement, and youth organizing, among other programs. SEAMAAC provides services to all refugee groups, including recently arrived Bhutanese, Nepalese, Burmese, and Congolese families, as well as all other groups in Philadelphia regardless of race or national origin. Their health and social service department, for example, provides ESL classes, health promotion, case management, advocacy, community programs, and collaboration with other providers.

To differing degrees, these organizations have evolved from providing services to their respective communities to providing services to the general population. Over the years, these agencies have worked together in various capacities, reflecting the changing needs of the community and leadership at the organizational level. Nearly all are involved to some extent with the SEPC. Some have partnered with other institutions to provide unique programs. In addition, some of these organizations ally with other citywide initiatives on issue-based concerns including the I Love Movement, which started in Philadelphia in 2010 in response to the city deporting and detaining Cambodian-Americans, and the 215 People's Alliance, a multi-racial collaborative dedicated to fighting for fully funded public education, raising the minimum wage, and ending stop-and-frisk. Several organizations, including UCSEP, are members of the Philadelphia Coalition for Affordable Communities (PCAC), a citywide coalition of groups fighting for accessible affordable housing through legislative change. These alliances suggest a strategic use of limited resources, sophisticated analysis of city politics and power, and an overarching concern with social justice.



LEFT: 3.1.2
Community Stakeholders

There are three refugee resettlement agencies in Philadelphia: Nationalities Service Center (NSC), Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), and Lutheran Children and Family Services (LCFS), all of which have a strong presence in the neighborhood due to their collaborative work with refugee populations. LCFS, NSC, and HIAS are all participating members of the Philadelphia Refugee Mental Health Collaborative (PRMHC), a group of resettlement agencies, mental health providers, physicians, and arts organizations that work to link refugees to culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health care.

PRMHC supports Southeast by Southeast, a Mural Arts project created and organized by artist Shira Walinsky that operates from a storefront on South 8th Street (see figure 3.1.3). Developed in 2012 in partnership with the city's Department of Behavioral Health and Intellectual Disability Services, Southeast by Southeast provides a supportive community space for immigrant and refugee families to access social programs, including language classes, weekly gatherings for elderly persons, and afterschool art programs for neighborhood children. This space serves as a hub for the refugee community.

Three organizations—Juntos, Puentes de Salud, and Casa Monarca—each take a different approach to advocating for the Latino community. Juntos, a Latino immigrant community-led organization, combines leadership development, community organizing, and focused collaborations with other community-based and advocacy organizations. Casa Monarca promotes and preserves Mexican culture and traditions through social, cultural, and educational programs on topics including Mexican folk dance, music, and history. Puentes de Salud is a community-based health service organization that provides health and educational programs.

COMMUNITY CONVERGENCES

Art and greening initiatives, inclusive collaborations between organizations, and innovative community programs work to reduce isolation within and between different constituencies. Continuous engagement

from community-based organizations and schools creates opportunities for long-term and newly arrived residents to learn from one another. Creating a home and sense of belonging, making a safe space in a new country, is vital to individuals and groups who have left their country of origin never to return, experienced trauma or genocide before leaving, crossed international borders under duress and left family members behind, or lived for many years at refugee camps prior to moving to Philadelphia. Casa Monarca's Dalia O'Gorman shared that she started her organization to "create a space for people from Mexico to come together and feel safe." This need for safety, community continuity, and cultural identity in a new place remains important, as evidenced, for example, by the Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia's Legacy Project, which brings together elderly people who survived the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia and first generation American-born Asian youth. Similarly, a project by local Lao artist Catzie Vilayphonh, Laos in the House, collects and archives digital stories about the Lao diaspora in America and showcases performances in Philadelphia by Lao-American artists.

Likewise, it is vital for newly arrived residents to learn about each other as well as the history of different groups in South Philadelphia. Some community-based organizations, including SEAMAAC and BPSOS, generate programs that serve the interests of multiple groups. BPSOS has a summer program for Vietnamese high school students with the goal of educating them about US imperialism and connecting the legacies of the Vietnam War to the American Black Power movement. As a staff member from BPSOS explained, one purpose of this program is "to have students understand the importance of Asian-Black cooperation and shared anti-racist work."

In an interview, Thoai Nguyen, CEO of SEAMAAC, suggested that the succession of ethnic/racial groups as they immigrate to South Philadelphia is inevitable. However, the way that other residents, including former refugees, treat newly arrived immigrants, is not predetermined. Among other programs, SEAMAAC

convenes a multi-ethnic elders group for immigrants from different countries, many of whom learned English in order to speak and interact with each other. In addition, they created the Hip Hop Heritage afterschool program, which brings together students from across the city with interests in hip-hop culture including emceeing, deejaying, breakdancing, and graffiti writing.

While community needs are vast, organizations collaborate to secure basic resources for South Seven residents and to provide innovative solutions to barriers that tend to create inter-group isolation. Social programs work to build community power and civic engagement. Despite points of convergence, racial and ethnic tensions as well as tensions between newcomers and long-term residents persist. See section 4.4. Furthermore, some organizations and associations work in isolation from each other and report that they have little idea about the actions or even presence of other area groups. This is especially apparent with the civic associations that operate in this neighborhood. See section 4.6.

3.2 LOCAL PRACTICES AND CULTURAL VALUES

Local practices are highly related to cultural values in South Philadelphia. During our ethnographic research, we discovered that diversity is manifested in religious venues and represented in local business and other spaces created by community groups to satisfy their own needs. This section describes some of the local religious practices that take place in the over 40 temples and churches located in the South Seven, as well as community gardens and other green initiatives generated by locals out of necessity (see figure 3.2.1). Additionally, local practices related to small economic initiatives and representing hidden local skills and knowledge are described. Some local economies, beyond celebrating culture, have the potential to generate economic power.

RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

According to a community organizer with years of experience in South Philadelphia, descendants



★★



★★

TOP RIGHT: 3.1.3
Houston Center and the former
storefront of Southeast by Southeast



CHURCHES AND TEMPLES

- Neighborhoods
- - - South Seven
- Parks
- Rivers
- Churches and Temples serving the area of interest
- Churches and Temples outside the area of interest

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Circle of Hope, Broad and Washington 2. Chua Bo De Buddhist Temple 3. St. Maron's Catholic Church 4. St. Maron Church Rectory 5. Grace Settlement House 6. Emmanuel Chapel 7. New City Church 8. Annunciation Church 9. Calvary AME Church 10. Russell Tabernacle CME 11. Mt. Moriah Temple Baptist Church 12. Prophetic Church of Christ 13. Rainbow Covenant Family Worship 14. St. Casimir's Lithuanian Catholic Church 15. Sacred Heart of Jesus Church 16. Whole Truth Church of Deliverance 17. Congregation Shivtei Yeshuron Ezras Israel 18. St. John's Baptist Church 19. International Bethel Church 20. Bethany Indonesian Church-God 21. First Christian Assembly | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 22. St. Nicholas of Tolentine Church 23. IFGF 24. Sino American Buddhist Assoc. 25. Abundant Harvest House of Prayer 26. Little David Baptist Church 27. Epiphany of Our Lord Church 28. South Philadelphia Prayer 29. Lovely Baptist Church 30. Young People's Congregation 31. Preah Buddha Rangsey Temple 32. Three Jewels Buddhist Temple 33. Bhutanese American Organization 34. Nahum Pentecostal 35. Galilee Christian Hope Baptist 36. Mt. Enon Baptist Church 37. Snyder Avenue Congregational Church 38. Iglesia Pentecostal Sube Aca 39. Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church 40. New Greenwich Light Baptist Church 41. St. Thomas Aquinas 42. Wat Lao Phouthathammam Temple |
|--|---|

of Italian and Irish immigrants have long held political power in the area through churches, local governance, and organized labor. Before many Jewish families left the area, Jewish business owners also held considerable economic power. At this point, Congregation Shivtei Yeshuron Ezras Israel on 4th and Emily is the only remaining "row house shul," or storefront synagogue, a type of establishment once prevalent in South Philly. In 2011, the Jacob and Esther Stiffel Senior Center, the last vestige of a once vibrant Jewish community, closed its doors.

At one time, Catholic residents identified where they lived by their local parish. Nowadays, with shifts in demographics and the closing and merging of many parishes by the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, residents are more likely to identify with the nearest park or school. Catholic schools and churches, however, remain a vital source of community for many residents, including a majority of recent immigrants from Mexico and Central America, many of whom worship at Annunciation Church at 10th and Dickinson. Due to economic necessity, this parish recently leased some of its property, thereby eliminating its capacity to hold community events. Catholic residents who live on the east side of Broad also worship at St. Thomas Aquinas at 17th and Morris and attend events there. In 2013 the Aquinas Center, a nonprofit organization, opened in the former convent at St. Thomas and has become an integral and vibrant space for community-building, in particular for Catholic residents who live in or near the South 7th Street corridor. According to Director Bethany Welch, the Aquinas Center is a "generative space," one that brings together long-term and more recent residents around shared interests.

Communities, as well as some places of worship, host religious diversity. For example, the Snyder Avenue Congregational Church houses three ministries; the Cambodian Baptist Church, the Iglesia de Dios Pentecostal Church, and the New Life Church (Laotian & Nepalese). For Buddhist Cambodians, the Preah Buddha Rangsey Temple on South 6th Street and Ritner is a place to worship as well as a mainstay of Cambodian cultural practices. Likewise, Buddhist



LEFT: 3.2.1 Churches and Temples

RIGHT: 3.2.2 Churches and temples in the South Seven

Vietnamese residents can worship at Chua Bo De Buddhist Temple on 13th and Washington Avenue, while Lao Buddhists can worship at Wat Lao Phouphammarm Temple on 20th and Washington Avenue. Bhutanese and Nepali community members also recently opened a temple on South 7th Street (see figure 3.2.2).

For many African-American community members, churches have served as means for community building. The area boasts several churches important to locals, including Mt. Enon Baptist Church at South 5th Street and Snyder Avenue, and, although outside of the immediate neighborhood at South 6th Street and Lombard Street, Mother Bethel AME Church also serves this function. African-American families have long lived in South Philadelphia, once concentrating in what is now Society Hill and then extending south into the Southwark and Moyamensing neighborhoods. Many members of the African-American community here have been involved in politics and local organizing. For example, in 1985, a group of African-American residents who live near South 7th Street and Snyder Avenue came together to form what they called the "Seventh Street Youth Community." Over time, this group became the 7th Street Community Civic Association, holding meetings and community events at the Ford Recreation Center at 631 Snyder Avenue.

COMMUNITY GARDENS

Gardens have long been important to South Philadelphia residents, providing supplemental food and a space for community gatherings. The tradition of community gardens in the area extended to newly arrived populations, many of whom arrive in the United States malnourished. A staff member from the Nationalities Service Center (NSC), one of the refugee resettlement agencies, shared that the first "Growing Home Garden" in the South Seven area was intended to support newly arrived refugees from Burma. By 2009, the garden expanded to include Bhutanese and Nepalese groups arriving in the area. Along with providing food, these gardens became an avenue to build community, improve mental health, and increase financial stability.

Adam Forbes, who assisted in the creation of the first six gardens and worked for NSC, commented in an interview that they asked refugee families in a survey what they wanted to see in their neighborhood, and many of them said, "I want a space to garden," or "We want to get our hands in the dirt." At that time, Forbes was also working for the PHS City Harvest program and pushed for the gardens. Community gardens started as a collaboration between NSC and PHS. According to Forbes, the initial idea was to create a much larger farm in a South Philadelphia park next to the stadium, but Forbes, with his connections in the neighborhood, obtained support from the community and managed to activate small gardens, starting from Emily Street between South 7th and 8th Streets, where all the drug dealers have been pushed out, and most of the houses that were then abandoned are now renovated.

When the first gardens emerged, there was a lot of isolation in the neighborhood with large sections of the population newly arrived. The gardens broke through this isolation. According to Forbes, they were expecting 20 families at the first garden meeting, but 80 families showed up, in particular ones of Nepalese and Burmese origin. The gardens were eventually organized into lots, with each family working a small lot. According to Forbes, 104 families are currently involved, many of whom bring seeds from their original countries. Food from the gardens is distributed equally: people grow their food and bring the produce home, but they are required to provide 10-15% of their produce to newcomers. Forbes was going to city farms to collect extra vegetables because he knew the gardens' produce was insufficient to cover the refugees' needs, and he obtained food donations every week for three years to supply this need. Trucks were driving to the gardens and food was distributed, but it was time consuming. Community leaders began organizing the food redistribution for each family and organizing the hand out. The vegetables were also distributed to elderly African-American. Word about the work they were doing eventually spread so far that over 250 people were coming each Monday. The demand was too high, and so frictions reignited





between communities when there was not enough food for them all.

Forbes is currently working to involve what he terms “garden leaders” in South Philadelphia, but because of language barriers, garden leaders have struggled to take part in long discussion meetings and simply want to grow their plants. Regardless of the difficulties, Forbes prefers the small community garden model to the model proposed by Weavers Way Farms, a co-op that operates working farms in Northwest Philadelphia. From Forbes’s perspective, they have never managed to involve neighbors, as their food is often sold in farmers’ markets or brought to other neighborhoods. He believes the South Philadelphia gardens are better organized even if they are small community gardens. In the summer many extra vegetables are produced, and refugees give them to new families or newcomers in need but don’t oversee a farmers market. For example, Burmese community members have been able to organize a system that provides food to new families even before the food stamp process starts.

Following the gardens, more diverse projects emerged, including Southeast by Southeast, the Nepalese community center, Burmese churches, after school programs, etc. Unfortunately, in recent years the expansion of community gardens has not been easy. In fact, community gardens are currently at risk.

see section 4.2 It is hard to keep leases on public land, and private land is being sold at a rapid pace. **see section 4.1** Recently, in an effort to combat the threat of encroaching new development, NSC began working with the National Garden Trust to permanently secure vacant properties they have been gardening as a trust.

For more information visit: <http://ngtrust.org>

In addition, NSC started a new community garden this year in the Point Breeze neighborhood west of Broad Street. Refugee and immigrant families from the South Seven will travel to this garden. Burmese, Nepalese, and Bhutanese families will garden there alongside Point Breeze residents as well as a new group of refugees from the Congo who have settled in Point Breeze.

In July 2015, a participatory neighborhood survey was organized in collaboration with Asian Americans United and their summer-camp youth group in order to learn more about the current condition of community gardens. Summer camp students, mostly young Asians recently arrived to the city, investigated different aspects of formal and informal gardens occupying formerly neglected lots in a sample area from Pierce to Ritner Streets and from South 4th to 8th Streets (*see figure 3.2.3*). They discovered that of all area lots without construction, around 35% are actively growing food, housing community and private gardens, and providing safe spaces for playgrounds. They also found that around 30% of the lots are in good condition/well maintained, 45% are in bad condition/neglected, and 20% in very bad condition/abandoned. This means that most of the lots holding private and community gardens are promoting a clean and healthy environment. The survey revealed that although 74 out of the 101 surveyed lots are fenced and 14 partially fenced, litter is a problem on 72 of the properties. Most of the inactive lots represent a problem to community members.

LOCAL GREEN INITIATIVES

Beyond community gardens, the field interviews revealed further local initiatives addressing green spaces. Both South Philadelphia High School and Southwark Elementary School are working with their respective civic associations to create publicly accessible green spaces on school properties. Lower Moyamensing Civic Association and South Philly High collaborated on a greening plan, received a stormwater improvement grant through the city’s water department, crowdfunded additional money, and consulted with architects to complete initial plans. They expect to break ground in the coming months on a new public park on school grounds. Other plans for a rooftop garden are in development. According to South Philadelphia High School Principal Otis Hackney, partnerships with civic associations and other community organizations fit with his vision for the school; he is trying to build a place that attracts different community members, not just students. Currently over 15 local organizations provide

programming at the school. Hackney envisages a greening plan that will also engage the school’s culinary and carpentry programs. Additionally, he has had meetings with other communities including those with interest in car and bike share programs and people who want to build a community playground. Similarly, Southwark Elementary School’s Principal Andrew Lukov is working with the East Passyunk Crossing Civic Association on the school’s greening plan. They received a pro bono grant from the Community Design Collaborative to design the plan and are now raising funds to implement it. Finally, Francis Scott Key Elementary School recently reserved a space on school grounds to create garden plots for students. Plans are in development to have students garden alongside community members.

LOCAL ECONOMIES

Informal economies and what we call “shadow economies” are quite active in the South Seven. Shadow economies are developed individually, collectively, and sometimes by entire households, mostly in homes, due to a lack of commercial space or economic resources. These are activities that operate illegally, “under the table” or without permits, including childcare, domestic work, household maintenance, and the buying and selling of goods such as handbags or bottled water. These activities also include drug sales and sex work. Household shadow economies often find their way into public spaces, as is the case with vendors who sell food in Mifflin Square (*see figure 3.2.4*). Starting in the late 1990s, families (mostly Cambodian) began to sell home-cooked food in the park without city permits (*see figure 3.2.5*). Over the years, local social service organizations have attempted to organize the vendors in an effort to legalize their activities. According to Eddy Saksith at CAGP, most park vendors get fined by the city but are uninterested in obtaining permits as these cost more than paying the fines.

The reluctance of vendors in Mifflin Square to legalize raises questions about the area’s path for future economic development. In an interview, Thoai Nguyen pointed out how members of the local Mexican business community have formalized investments, creating a base of



RIGHT: 3.2.4
Informal food vendors in Mifflin Square



economic power. Community organizer Carlos Pascual Sanchez corroborates that having an association for Mexican business owners provides them an avenue to organize in response to rising real estate costs. [see section 4.1](#) Nguyen suggests that a similar process is possible with Mifflin Square vendors. These vendors have great potential to appeal to newer area residents, specifically those who are interested in experiencing the multicultural elements of a diverse neighborhood. Much like the plethora of area Mexican restaurants that did not exist ten years ago, the Mifflin Square vendors could establish a legal economic niche in a rapidly changing local economy. This niche, in turn, could provide a source of economic power against potential displacement.

The local economies stimulating community development have become established mostly along South 7th Street and South 9th Street. A participatory neighborhood survey on local economies organized in collaboration with Asian Americans United was conducted simultaneously with the community garden survey (see Community Gardens on page 59) to learn more about the local businesses along South 7th Street [\(see figure 3.2.6\)](#). Asian students from a summer camp organized by AAU became actively involved in investigating a sample area from Pierce to Porter Streets. This stretch is one of the most active pedestrian commercial corridors in the area. Small markets represent half of the surveyed commercial spaces. Some of them identify as selling ethnic goods, while the remaining businesses offer a diversity of products, including a plumbing/heating supply store, a home door/window store, and other home product stores. A travel agency, a day care, a nail salon, a coffee shop, as well as a number of laundromats, pharmacies, and restaurants were identified. During our neighborhood survey, participating youth found that 40 of the 47 commercial spaces surveyed are active, and that families own over half of those businesses. Moreover, more than half of business owners live in South Philadelphia, but most of them are not natives. The survey showed that 15 business owners who responded declared themselves as originally from Cambodia. Another 15 business owners declared themselves as

from other Asian countries, including China, Korea, Laos, and South Vietnam. A significant number of business owners, seven in total, declared themselves to be from a Hispanic background, mostly from Mexico. 30% of the surveyed facades were in bad condition, and 20% of the surveyed interiors were not well maintained. Only two facades and seven interior spaces were recently renovated. This participatory neighborhood survey incited us to inquire for public plans, programs, and funds provided to stimulate economic development through the revitalization of commercial corridors in the South Seven. [see section 4.5](#)

3.3 TERRITORIAL ASSETS AND POTENTIALS

Vacant land has been an important issue citywide for city officials for decades. In the South District, there are approximately 104 acres of vacant land, comprising 4% of all land use (Philadelphia City Planning Commission 2015). Within the South Seven, vacant land is spread across most neighborhoods, but there is a notorious north-south axis of vacant lots with a significant concentration of over 300 undeveloped lots in its central area [\(see figure 3.3.1\)](#). However, this does not mean that these lots are not in use since residents and local groups have transformed some vacant, neglected, and underutilized lots into community gardens.

Community members have looked after vacant land along their blocks in recent years. Neighbors already taking care of vacant lots adjacent to their properties were granted property titles. Other vacant properties were squatted on in a friendly manner for community purposes, and others were acquired through agreements with city officials and with private owners unwilling or unable to maintain their own properties. Over time a few small collective gardens, playgrounds, and other community spaces have emerged as alternative spaces for the community. [see section 3.2](#)

Today, there are still hundreds of vacant lots in this changing area. These spaces could serve to increase the number of community gardens, but most importantly, they also have the



LEFT: 3.2.5
Food sold at Mifflin Square

RIGHT: 3.2.6
Local economies on South 7th Street

VACANT LAND

- Neighborhoods
- - - South Seven
- Parks
- Rivers
- Vacant Land



potential to provide affordable housing, community and recreation centers, spaces for local businesses, learning facilities, as well as other services that are not sufficient in the area (see figure 3.3.2). Research we conducted on land ownership in one specific census tract, the one with the highest amount of vacant land in the area, showed that about 15% of the properties are owned by city entities (see figure 4.1.1). Public land can be considered an important asset for South Seven residents if the different community groups work together to define local needs, priorities, and visions and collaborate with city officials. We identified two key public instruments with the potential to stimulate equitable development in the area, the South District Plan and the Land Bank.

The South District Plan represented a potential tool for engagement when it was announced, see section 1.3. However, city officials did not truly engage in community-based planning to stimulate an inclusive process or wide participation, though two-way communication took place through public meetings. Participation

from immigrant residents and community groups was low, most likely due to language barriers and lack of awareness about the plan, see section 3.1. Economic, social, and physical changes in the area are a reality but latent for many residents, especially immigrants. Creating awareness of local assets and threats is necessary to stimulate civic engagement. In this case, the plan, which was developed and approved in only ten months, represents voices from only part of the community, and although it addresses some key improvement and development areas for the South Seven, it does not tackle some of the current issues and potential threats, see sections 1.3 & 4.1.

The Land Bank, a new agency that seeks to consolidate public land owned by different entities and return vacant and tax-delinquent properties to productive use, was identified as another powerful tool to plan and stimulate equitable development, see section 1.3. The South District Plan is considering the Land Bank for affordable housing development. However, there is neither a specific plan nor partners looking at public

land in this area yet. Envisioning the development of public land and working with the Land Bank and other public institutions is crucial, since most of the private land is being acquired by private developers for the development of market-rate housing, see section 4.1. Urban development spreading from Center City towards this area has attracted the attention of developers and investors, often with visions different from those of community members. These entities do not have interest in or responsibility for the development of affordable housing, green spaces, community centers, recreational spaces, or other facilities to satisfy community needs.

The city must step forward and use its resources, in this case public land, according to local demands, especially in this area that is growing, already crowded, and in need of community facilities and affordable living and working spaces. The Land Bank and some of the South District Plan's recommendations represent a great opportunity for non-profit housing corporations, community based organizations, grassroots groups, and residents to formulate their own, community-based plans for the development of public land. If these initiatives give priority to community needs and visions rather than those of the real estate industry, they would stimulate and facilitate collaboration between local stakeholders and city officials to create just, diverse, and sustainable neighborhoods.



Gentrification and displacement are no longer a distant concern for community members but have become a reality.

Increased housing costs are a major concern for residents across the board, from long-term homeowners to renters. Some long-term residents are afraid that their children will be unable to afford to buy houses in the area, thus breaking up generational continuity.

4. CURRENT ISSUES AND LATENT THREATS IN THE SOUTH SEVEN

Current issues and latent threats in the South Seven were revealed mostly through ethnographic research, participant observation, informal encounters with locals, and the Actions organized in relation to the *Playgrounds for Useful Knowledge* hub space and programs. This section exposes the perceptions, opinions, and concerns of residents, community leaders, and city officials in regard to six main aspects: socio-spatial development; green and community spaces; education and sites for learning; racial and economic tensions; economic development; and local governance. Additionally, spatial analysis and targeted urban investigations were conducted to create a better understanding of these different aspects as revealed by locals.

4.1 DEVELOPMENT IMPACTING HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

The eastern side of South Philadelphia is an area in transformation. Urban development and investment from Center City have spread south and crossed Washington Avenue, an important east-west artery dividing Center City and South Philadelphia. Gentrification and displacement are no longer a distant concern for community members but have become a reality. Housing prices have skyrocketed with the development of both the East Passyunk and Pennsport neighborhoods. In the past 10 years, Passyunk Avenue has transformed from a working-class commercial corridor with mom-and-pop clothing stores and pizza shops to an upscale destination shopping district, replete with coffee shops, yoga studios, and fine dining. The area retains some of its original businesses, but its transformation has attracted hundreds of new residents who have purchased homes or are renting apartments in the surrounding blocks. The majority of home-buying newcomers are white, middle to upper-

middle class, and not originally from Philadelphia. These changes have extended south on Passyunk Avenue into what is now being called "Newhold," an area of the Point Breeze neighborhood west of South Broad Street.

Residents in the South Seven are feeling the impact of these nearby changes, with increased housing prices and property taxes along with ownership changes and speculation of vacant lots. Several residents described the development on nearby Passyunk Avenue as "pushing down" on the area. Housing prices are rising and unevenly distributed in the South Seven area. While median housing prices in central and southern neighborhoods range from \$100,000 to \$250,000, in Passyunk Square and the northern area of East Passyunk, prices range from \$200,000 to \$250,000 (US Census). Housing values in the northern neighborhoods are rising rapidly. From 2013 to 2014, the median square foot value increased from \$150 to over \$175, while the value in the southern neighborhoods remained low; the median square foot cost there is estimated between \$25 and \$50, less than half the price of the northern neighborhoods (see *figure 2.2*) (Fels Institute of Government 2014).

Interviews reveal that increased housing costs are a major concern for residents across the board, from long-term homeowners to renters. Some long-term residents are afraid that their children will be unable to afford to buy houses in the area, thus breaking up generational continuity. Long-term residents are worried that rising house prices will attract wealthier newcomers while displacing existing community members. Rental prices are also on the rise and uneven in the South Seven area, following a pattern similar to home prices. The highest rental rates were identified in the northwestern area ranging from \$2,000 to \$3,000, while the lowest rates in the central and southwestern area range from \$600 to \$900, both for 2-bedroom units (see *figure 2.2*). Many long-term renters can't afford to buy in the area where they live.

According to Nicole Prum from Migrant Education, the lack of affordable housing also means that some families who rent must double or triple up, with an entire family living

in each room of an apartment. Even though resettlement agencies set up arrangements for newly arrived refugees with South Philadelphia landlords, rent and utilities are often very expensive, the conditions of the rental properties are poor, and these families cannot afford rent even if working full time.

Francis Carney, UCSEP's executive director, sees rising prices as an emerging challenge. "As we see more private development, as we see housing values go up, we are going to see more people going into foreclosure for tax reasons because they are not going to be able to afford what is going to happen." Carney, along with other service providers and community leaders, expresses concerns that development will push out some of the native community at the same time as the resettlement of refugees in the area decreases.

The rise in housing prices is coupled with an increase in taxes due to the recent Actual Value Initiative (AVI), a citywide reassessment of property taxes. Property taxes are remarkably uneven in the city. The highest property taxes are within the southern area of Central Philadelphia and the northern area of South Philadelphia. While the median property taxes for residents from these areas is estimated to be between \$1,000 to \$2,110 per year, in other city areas it is estimated to be between \$1 and \$249. In the South Seven, property taxes range from \$500 to \$2,000, depending on the property's location (Fels Institute of Government 2014). While a significant increase in taxes is a concern for anyone who owns property, it is of particular concern for working-class residents and those on a fixed income, including the elderly. The city instituted programs that exempt some elderly and long-term residents from this increase, but according to Bruce Baldwin of the 7th Street Community Civic Association, these populations often do not know about the programs or need assistance filling out the requisite paperwork.

Sustainable and equitable development is desired and needed, but current trends may lead to a different outcome. In an interview, Francis Carney pointed out that the South Seven area lacks an organized response to aggressive housing development; there

is little to no community engagement around protecting affordability. In his opinion, this lack of a cohesive response is in part due to the fact that there is no community development organization or Neighborhood Advisory Committee in the area. Furthermore, the area's tremendous linguistic and cultural diversity, while in many ways an asset, increases the challenge of bringing people together around shared concerns.

Additionally, interviews with community members reveal that the lack of affordable housing is pushing people out of the area, starting with the most economically vulnerable. According to Teresa Engst at Asian Americans United, some Chinese families in South Philadelphia are relocating to Northeast Philadelphia. Similarly, some Latino residents have already begun relocating to less expensive apartments in the Point Breeze neighborhood west of South Broad Street.

The number of Latino immigrants in Philadelphia has risen from 6,220 in 2000 to more than 15,500 at present (US Census 2010). Over the past ten years, the Mexican community has developed a commercial corridor on South 9th Street in what is known as the Italian Market area. Mexicans run an array of businesses on the street, including restaurants, flower shops, and bakeries. According to Carlos Pascual Sanchez, an activist and organizer in the Latino community, business owners are very aware of the rising cost of properties. To protect its businesses, South Philadelphia's Latino business community has educated itself about how to purchase properties before they are sold to new developers. Nevertheless, business owners remain concerned about the commercial district's vitality if residents move from the area.

The rising cost of housing has also increased concern about discriminatory rental practices. In an interview, Dalia O'Gorman, Casa Monarca's director, shared that if landlords know that Mexicans do not have proper papers, they charge higher rent, knowing that occupants will be afraid to report landlords and thus bring attention to themselves. Discrimination also remains a concern for African-American residents; during

The lack of affordable housing also means that some families who rent must double or triple up, with an entire family living in each room of an apartment.

Service providers and community leaders express concerns that development will push out some of the native community at the same time as the resettlement of refugees in the area decreases.



The South Seven's increasing housing prices and vitality, as well as its strategic location and development capacity, have generated real estate speculation in recent years even in the most undeveloped areas.



fieldwork we heard of incidents where African-American residents were denied leases. The 7th Street Community Civic Association has filed several cases of discrimination against landlords in the 7th Street area.

The South Seven's increasing housing prices and vitality, as well as its strategic location and development capacity, have generated real estate speculation in recent years even in the most undeveloped areas. We researched land ownership in the core area of the South Seven that proved that vacant lots owned by long-term community members or Philadelphians have recently been sold to private developers, investors, and Limited Liability Companies. This research was focused on one specific census tract, which covers sections of the Greenwich, Lower Moyamensing, and Whitman neighborhoods. This census tract holds the largest concentration of vacant lots in the area.

The research showed that 72 of the 336 vacant lots in this area are owned by real estate entities (21.4%), 36 by non-profit organizations (10.7%), 52 by public entities (15.5%) and 176 by individuals (52.4%) (see figure 4.1.1). Ownership changes were also investigated. We discovered that 66 (19.6%) of the lots in this small area have been bought within the last two years (see figure 4.1.2). Additionally, we found that of these 66 lots, 47 were acquired by entities associated with the real estate industry and 24 were sold by similar entities. Some real estate companies are buying connected lots to increase profits when developing these properties.

This information prompted us to look at the top landowners in this specific area, private entities that own from three to 18 lots (see figure 4.1.3). Innovative Batim LLC, a New York limited liability company, has bought 18 vacant lots in the last two years. Another eight vacant lots have been bought in the same period by V2 Properties LLC, a Philadelphia-based real estate development company, which, according to its website, provides "investors with investment options that couple risk tolerance with income objectives to consistently deliver high rates of return that far exceed other investment vehicles with

similar or higher levels of risk." Other companies associated with housing development such as AGANG Inc., Hong Da Development, HV Homes Inc., WWC Group, and Sophisticated Investments each own between three and eight vacant lots in the same area. It would require extensive research to ascertain how many more properties these companies own in South Philadelphia or citywide, but it could be many more. For instance, we discovered HV Homes Inc., with over 50 properties in Philadelphia, was ranked as one of the top 100 property owners in Philadelphia in 2013 by Philadelphia Delinquency (Philadelphia Delinquency 2013). Land is experiencing rapid development and/or transfer, sometimes between the same entities. According to online public information from Philadelphia's Office of Property Assessment, HV Homes Inc. sold six vacant lots to V2 Properties LLC in our research area over the last two years, while AGANG Inc. sold ten lots to Innovative Batim LLC in the same period. Vacant land is becoming a precious asset for the portfolio of some development companies, and prices are rising with the increasing demand.

Our research on land ownership also revealed that in most new sales, land has been sold for two, three, and even four times the estimated market value. This is happening not only in vacant lots, but also in old housing structures. Residents refer to this process as "flipping" houses: buying, gutting, refurbishing, and reselling homes for multiple times the original price. During a conversation with neighbors on the 700 block of Jackson Street, homeowners expressed shock that newly constructed houses two blocks away were on the market for more than \$300,000. Long-term residents shared that they had bought their homes for less than \$40,000 thirty years ago. Several community residents expressed the opinion that new and "flipped" houses were not intended for people who already live in the neighborhood, but to attract new, higher-income residents. Additionally, during an interview members of a local Registered Community Organization (RCO), the entity responsible for hearing zoning ordinances, shared the opinion that some development is bypassing RCO channels and thus any avenues for community input. In

OWNERSHIP CATEGORIES

- Area of Interest
- Parks
- Companies, Corporations, Developers, LLC or Inc.
- Individuals
- Nonprofit Organizations and Churches
- Public Institutions



OWNERSHIP CHANGES AFTER JULY 2013

- Area of Interest
- Parks
- New owner
- Same owner



REAL ESTATE COMPANIES WITH OVER 3 LOTS

- Area of Interest
- Parks
- Agang Inc.
- Hong Da Development
- HV Homes Inc.
- Innovative Batam LLC
- Sophisticated Investments
- V2 Properties LLC
- WNC Group



PARKS AND RECREATION SPACES

- Neighborhoods
- South Seven
- Parks & Recreation Spaces
- Rivers

1. Columbus Square
2. Capitol Playground
3. South Philadelphia Older Adult Center
4. Pacione Park
5. Gold Star Park
6. Sacks Playground
7. Jefferson Square Park
8. Herron Playground
9. Howard and Reed Park
10. Donnelly Park
11. Dickinson Square Park
12. Tolentine Community Center
13. Ford Recreation Center
14. Weinberg Park
15. Burke Playground
16. Mifflin Square Park
17. Murphy Recreation Center



other words, residents feel that some private development is happening without proper permits from the city. This and other conversations with community members reveal a sense of disconnection between residents and the recent development boom. In this densely settled area, construction vehicles, hammering, ladders, and masonry work is present on every block, yet residents feel this construction is not for them.

The main issue we identified was the city and citizens' tolerant position towards this accelerated development and speculation. While development is highly desirable, it needs to be equitable. The city is not directly involved in this area's housing development, but it is supporting non-profit and for-profit developers in construction and rehabilitation of housing through zoning and tax abatements. A councilperson shared that tax abatements allow developers to sell at lower costs. However, this is not always the rule: these properties are likely to be unaffordable for future generations, and they can easily be

flipped in the coming years. In reality, current housing development is mostly market rate with prices far above what community members can afford. If we consider that affordable housing should cost no more than 30% of median household income, housing should not cost more than \$900 per month based on the area's median household income of about \$36,600 (The Pew Charitable Trust 2013). Additionally, although the recently approved South District Plan recommends housing development and the transformation of abandoned institutional and industrial buildings into affordable housing, affordable housing is not the actual trend. In fact, two abandoned structures, an institutional and an industrial one, have been sold to develop spaces for a "makerspace" and "luxury housing," respectively. [see section 4.3 and 4.3](#). These spaces are targeting young "creative" professionals and middle-class young families. Therefore, new residents will most likely be from other areas in and outside the city rather than community members.

4.2 SCARCITY OF GREEN AND COMMUNITY SPACES

The core area of the South Seven comprises a heterogeneous set of housing blocks holding one and two family "rowhomes," where green, community, and recreation spaces are scarce ([see figure 4.2.1](#)). Small-scale parks, with an area under 2.5 acres, provide spaces for the community to meet and spend time together mostly in the area's periphery. There are very limited public spaces in the central neighborhoods, especially in Greenwich, the northern area of Lower Moyamensing, and the southern area of East Passyunk. Mifflin Square and Weinberg Park, which is a small square formed by the intersection of two main streets, are the only public spaces at a comfortable walking distance of under ten minutes ([see figure 4.2.2](#)). In seeking green space, people may visit Marconi Plaza at Broad Street and Oregon Avenue, or travel further south to FDR Park at Pattison Avenue to access playing fields there.

Long neglected by the city and provided with minimal funding, Mifflin Square is an important asset to community members as well as a site of contention. Despite its aging infrastructure, the park remains a popular gathering place during the warm months for pick-up soccer games and sepak takraw (a sport similar to volleyball played with the feet). Residents of the surrounding neighborhoods—mainly people from Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, China, Mexico, Burma, Bhutan, and Nepal—use this space for family events and cultural gatherings ([see figure 4.2.3](#)). Buying food from local vendors at the park is a popular activity for some local residents. [see section 3.2](#). Mifflin Square is also the site of the largest Cambodian New Year's Celebration on the East Coast. Friends of Mifflin Square Park, a volunteer group of residents, collaborates with local community-based organizations and churches to organize events for children, cleanup days, gardening, and other workshops. Many residents expressed that interactions between different groups of people in the neighborhood

There are very limited public spaces in the central neighborhoods, especially in Greenwich, the northern area of Lower Moyamensing, and the southern area of East Passyunk.



have improved in the past five years in part because of Mifflin Square. Local resident and organizer Carlos Pascual Sanchez believes Mifflin Square is key to the community, a "place that is essential to learn cultural difference, and learn to get along." At the same time, other residents express frustration that it is difficult to keep the park clean and safe, a place where children can play, and where all locals feel equally welcome.

Due to the lack of green spaces, residents from this area have responded to their own needs by occupying vacant land and developing community gardens. [see section 3.2](#) These gardens have been important to long-term residents and newcomers alike. For example, during an interview Nicole Pram from Migrant Education expressed that local gardens have had a huge positive impact on different refugee communities as a place of "connection across difference." Outside of gardens, churches, and events at Southeast by Southeast, an art program that provides services and education for refugees, there are few opportunities for refugee community members to interact with

each other, let alone with non-refugee communities.

Community and green spaces are not only limited but are also declining in large numbers. Urban development spreading south from Center City is threatening collective green spaces, especially those located in Greenwich and its southern neighbors. This core area currently holds the highest concentration of vacant lots and community gardens in eastern South Philadelphia. However, the status of vacant land is changing. Through observation, interviews, and research on land ownership, we confirmed that the increasing real estate speculation has recently spread to the gardens. The research on land ownership, which was conducted in the census tract with the highest concentration of vacant land, already shows ten lots that were formerly gardens have been sold. Residents have expressed concern about the rapid disappearance of community gardens ([see figure 4.2.4](#)).



Due to the lack of green spaces, residents from this area have responded to their own needs by occupying vacant land and developing community gardens. These gardens have been important to long-term residents and newcomers alike.

RECENTLY SOLD COMMUNITY GARDENS

- Parks
- Community gardens sold after July 2013
- Vacant Lots



**CASE STUDIES:
COMMUNITY GARDENS
RECENTLY SOLD**

In most new sales, land has been sold for two, three, and even four times the estimated market value.

CASE STUDY 1: COMMUNITY GARDEN PRODUCING FOOD AND PROVIDING COMMUNITY SPACE

Location: 715 and 727 Mercy Street

Former Owner(s): David Wasser and Unknown

New Owner(s): V2 Properties LLC

Story: This community garden served the area for many years. Neighbors grew up taking care of it, and the whole block enjoyed its use. Even school-aged children visited the garden for hands-on learning projects, and it was open to anyone who wanted to participate. Patricia Banks, a resident born and raised in the neighborhood, proudly explained that she loved growing her own vegetables and that

grocery store vegetables could not compare. Unfortunately, some of the lots have been sold for housing development, destroying most of the garden. Without notice, neighbors lost their community space. They were unable to prevent construction or have a say in the use of the land. Houses are now under construction by a company that is developing market-rate housing in the area using the same housing typology. These single-family houses constructed on Marcy Street are on sale for \$279,900 each (see figure 4.2.5). **Threats:** This community garden is made up of a number of lots owned by diverse entities, such as a non-profit organization, the city, and private owners. Speculation is pushing owners to sell their properties.



CASE STUDY 2: COMMUNITY GARDEN PRODUCING FOOD

Location: 704, 706, 708, and 710 Cantrell Street

Former Owner(s): AGANG Inc. and South Philadelphia Area Redevelopment

New Owner: Innovative Batim LLC

Story: For over nine years these lots have been used by an Asian family for growing bok choy, former owner John Tallarida explained. Mr Tallarida owns the business John Tallarida Glass on Cantrell Street. Lots number 704, 708, and 710 were sold by AGANG Inc. to Innovative Batim LLC, a New York-based real estate company that has bought 18 lots in the area over the last 2.5 years; South Philadelphia Area Redevelopment recently sold lot 706 to AGANG Inc. If it follows the trend, this property will likely be sold to Innovative Batim LLC soon (see figure 4.2.6).

Threats: Community members are not aware of ownership changes in most of the cases. They keep using the land while lots are sold one by one until construction disrupts their use of the property.



CASE STUDY 3: COMMUNITY GARDEN WITH A PLAYGROUND

Location: 715, 717, 719 and 725 Winton Street

Former Owner: AGANG Inc.
New Owner: Innovative Batim LLC

Story: Long-term residents Florence and Jerry revealed the history and importance of these lots. Abandoned houses stood in these lots until the city tore them down in the seventies. The lots remained vacant for a long time until about ten years ago, when a city representative made some improvements in the space that allowed it to be used by community children. Since then, children living on this street and the surrounding blocks have enjoyed the playground. Neighbors from Asia and Mexico, and long-term residents have worked together to keep it clean and safe. For many years, this space has been the neighborhood playground. After a shooting earlier this year on South 5th Street, children and parents had a sleepover on the playground to show that it was a safe place. Unfortunately, it will not be around for very long. Most of the lots have been recently sold, and only a few community members are aware of this and are worried about the fate of this community space. The remaining two lots have been owned by the same residents since the 1970s (see figure 4.2.7).

Threats: These lots were sold by AGANG Inc. to Innovative Batim LLC in the last 2.5 years. It is likely that these real estate companies are pushing owners to sell. Neighbors have been asked to sell their houses, but they refuse to do so.



LEFT: 4.2.6
Community garden on Cantrell Street

RIGHT: 4.2.7
Community garden on Winton Street