The Futures Academy Community Garden Project
By
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Introduction

Futures Academy is a Pre-K through 8th Grade Magnet/Resident public school, located on Carlton Street between Orange and Peach Streets (Figure 1). The school is one of the neighborhood anchors of the Fruit Belt/ Medical Campus Planning and Community Development Project.

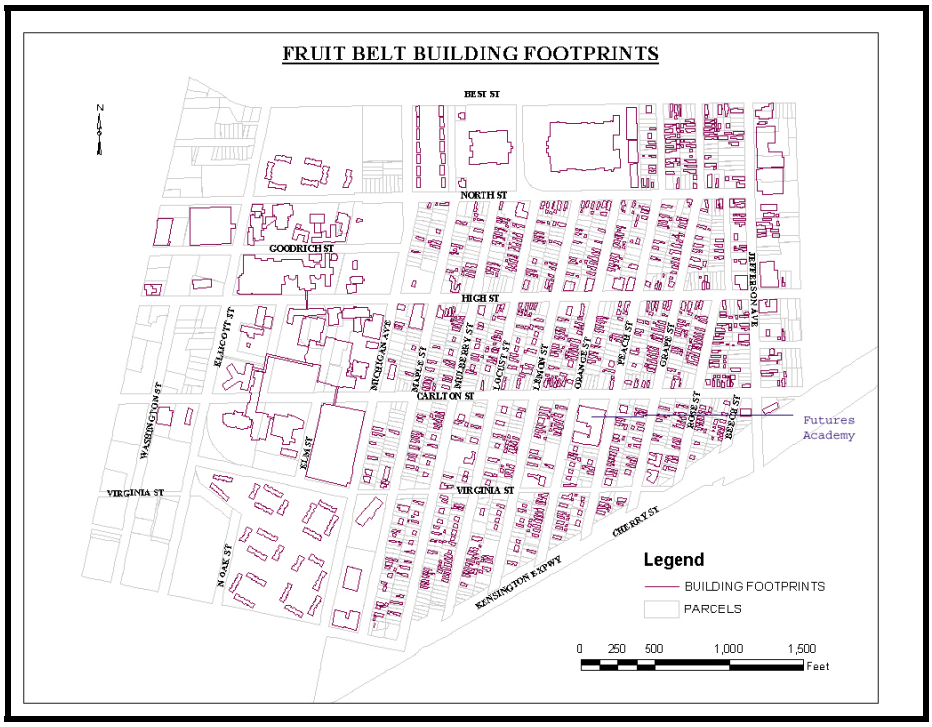

Figure 1: Futures Academy in the Neighborhood Context[1]

The Futures Academy Vacant Lot Project is based on the simple idea that the neighborhood context matters in the education of central city children. It is difficult to make children believe that knowledge has the power to shape the world and make it a better place when they live in a community that is dilapidated and rundown. It is difficult to make children believe they have the power to control their own destiny when they live

[1] Steve Watchorn, Center for Urban Studies, University at Buffalo

in a community that is dilapidated and rundown. For these reasons, schools should find creative ways to link education to the neighborhood transformation process.

Over that last three decades, the demolition of abandoned properties in the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus residential neighborhood has created a number of vacant lots that are unkept. This, combined with many poorly maintained houses, lawns, trees, sidewalks, streets, sidewalks and curbs gives the neighborhood a foreboding, neglected visual appearance that create barriers to neighborhood development and that negatively impacts on the schooling of children at Futures Academy.

Fronting Futures Academy on Carlton Street, between Orange and Peach, are a series of city-owned vacant lots and an abandoned building**.** Picture this: everyday, children walk to school in a neighborhood filled with dilapidated housing, unkept vacant lots, and a symbolic environment that says *you are a worthless person and no one cares about your existence* (Figure 2). They disappear into the school building, and for a short time life is different. Then, at 3:00, when school is out, they again confront reality: the first things they see when leaving the school building are unkept vacant lots and an abandoned building. In this foreboding and neglected environment, it is hard for children to believe they can change their lives; in a neglected world where adults cannot keep streets, sidewalks, and vacant lots cleaned or houses painted, it is hard to believe that education matters. In such a setting, most students will not reach their academic potential.

Figure 1: Unkept Vacant Lots and Abandoned Structures Fronting Futures Academy[2]

Increasingly, scholars and educators have come to believe that a powerful relationship exists between inner city public education and the dynamics of the immediate neighborhood.[3] So, without finding a way to link learning and instruction to neighborhood redevelopment, the majority of students of color will never reach their academic potential. Put another way, efforts to bolster the achievement of students and reach the lofty academic standards set forward by the New York State Commission of Education, instruction must be linked to neighborhood redevelopment and place-making activities in distress neighborhoods. This approach to education will enable students to

[2] Photos are by Henry Louis Taylor, Jr.

[3] Dennis Shirley, Community Organizing for Urban School Reform (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 1

gain insight into the relationship between knowledge and skill acquisition and the ability to transform and change the communities in which they live. The Futures Academy Vacant Lot Project, by developing links between instruction and neighborhood development and place making, represents the first step in building this type of approach to education.

The Context

The Futures Academy Vacant Lot Project is an outgrowth of the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus Neighborhood Planning and Community Development Initiative. Currently, there are numerous vacant lots in the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus resident neighborhood. Vacant land in Figure 3 is color-coded black. Most of the vacant land in the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus neighborhood is poorly maintained and represents an eyesore that devalues property and creates a demeaning and ominous physical environment. A major goal of the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus Planning and Community Development Project is to develop a vacant land management project that eliminates the blighting effect of vacant lots, while the planning and development process is underway. The idea is to find innovative ways to clean up, beautify, and reconnect these vacant lots to the neighborhood urban fabric until the detailed neighborhood plan is completed and the site development process starts.

The Strategy

The Futures Academy Vacant Lot Project is a public school education strategy, and the first step in the formulation of a vacant lot strategy for the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus Project. The idea is to develop a plan for *temporarily using* the vacant lots fronting Futures Academy (Figure 3) until the detailed neighborhood plan is completed. The ultimate use of the lots used in the Vacant Lot Project will be determined by the plan. In the meantime, the vacant lots and abandoned building fronting Futures will be transformed from an eyesore and symbol of economic and social marginalization into a monument of community pride and a symbol of the historic Fruit Belt's renaissance.

Select students at Futures Academy will carry out the design of the project. The Principal, Mrs. Marva Daniel, will determine the students and teachers who will participate in the project. Once selected, the students and teachers will formulate a strategy for designing a *passive* community garden. A professional landscaper will work with them in designing a low maintenance, natural garden with perennials and a wide assortment of plants and decorative stones. Because of liability issues, students will not participate in the actual construction of the garden. Instead, they will construct a scaled model of the garden, which the professional landscapers will follow in building the garden.

Teachers will develop the educational component of the project. For example, there might be a discussion of the social history of that site, including a listing of all past owners. Modules might designed on the mathematics of placing the various elements that are included in the garden. Science activities on the soil and biological and plant life

on the vacant lot could be developed. The driving idea behind the curriculum activities will be to use the development of the community garden to enhance the students' science, math, computer, art and language skills. The project team will work with the teachers to determine how these skills might be integrated into the project. Once the project design has been completed, the students will formally present their plan to parents and neighborhood residents. The principal, students, and teachers will work out the specific details of the presentation. A group of neighborhood residents and workers from the Medical Campus will be recruited to assist the landscapers in the garden's construction. Once completed, there will be a formal dedication and groups will be recruited to maintain the garden.

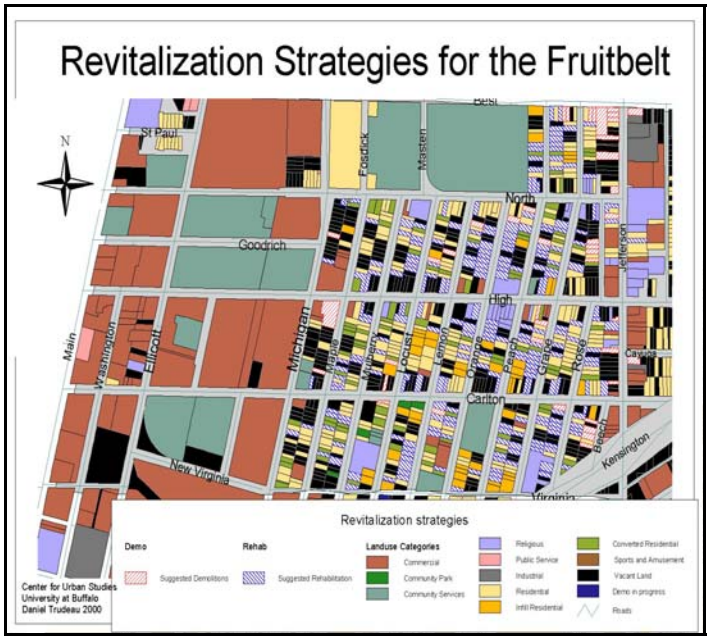

Figure 3: Land Use in the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus[4]

The project will have a twofold impact on the neighborhood development process. First, it will demonstrate to students and their parents that it is possible to change conditions in the Fruit Belt and that instruction and learning can be powerful tools in the neighborhood transformation process. Second, transformation of the lots will have an immediate impact on the condition of the area immediately surrounding the school (Figure 4). Improving the visual appearance of the neighborhood will bolster community pride and provide residents and visitors with a concrete example of the seriousness of the problem. In essence, the community garden will signal the beginning of a new era in the development of the Fruit Belt/Medical Campus neighborhood.

Conclusion

By linking inner city education with community revitalization efforts, the students at Futures Academy will learn first hand that they can, in fact, have a positive impact upon

[4] Professor Sam Cole, a research associate at the Center for Urban Studies, developed Figure 3.

their environment by beautifying vacant lots until the final usage of the lots is determined by a detailed neighborhood development plan.

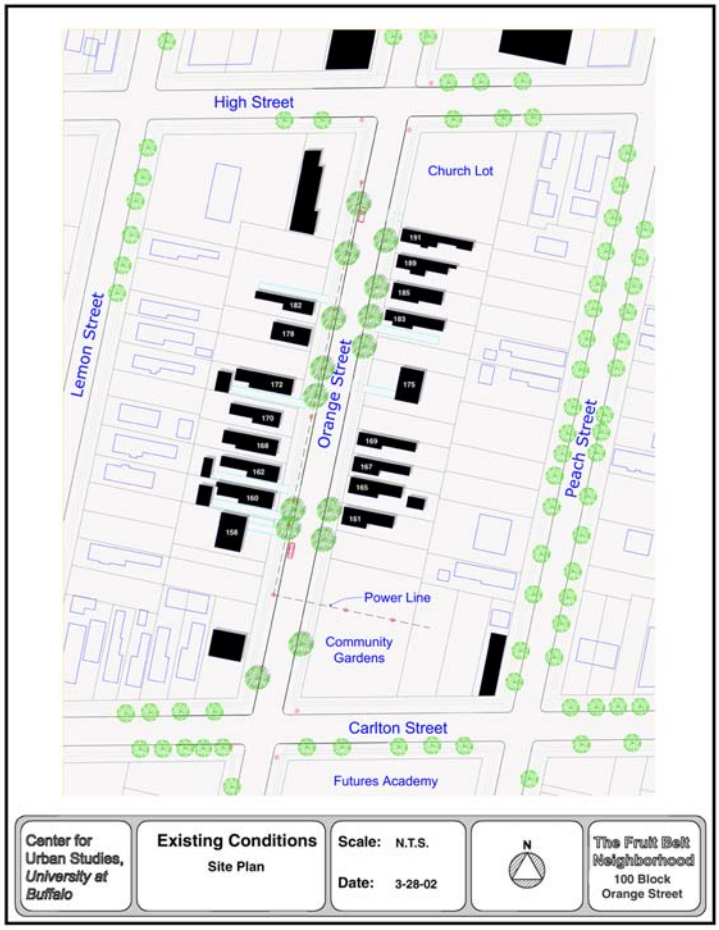

Figure 4: Futures Academy Community Garden in Context[5]

[5] The drawings and data gathering in Figure 4 were done by Steve Watchorn, Nate Wasnock, Mick Quinlan, Leanne Johnston and Corey Stewart.