Urban Voids: Grounds for Change
Reimagining Philadelphia’s Vacant Lands
Dispersal is most often regarded as an upshot of population rises as the demographic grows and spreads outwards of the city centre. Cities, though, can simultaneously experience contraction and expansion. Despite being the sixth largest city in the US, Philadelphia is a ‘shrinking city’; deindustrialisation has prompted urban abandonment at the same time as the growth of urban sprawl. Deenah Loeb, executive director of the City Parks Association of Philadelphia, describes how the URBAN VOIDS competition was launched in order to trigger public discussion and the reimagining of a greened city.

What does a city do to respond to its vacancy crisis? Decreasing populations in many American cities during the last 40 years have shifted the dynamics of the built environment across the nation. Philadelphia is an example of a cityscape that has been greatly impacted by both deindustrialisation and suburbanisation: the city currently has more than 30,000 vacant plots totalling around 405 hectares (1,000 acres), an area roughly the same size as its city centre. Philadelphia’s present vacancy crisis is a result of urban abandonment and extensive sprawl. It is a place where the ‘economy is drifting as it responds incoherently to continued industrial restructuring’1 – concerns that are shared by cities throughout the country.

The City Parks Association launched URBAN VOIDS: grounds for change2 in September 2005 as the second phase of the Philadelphia LANDvisions initiative (www.landvisions.org). This multiphase programme was created to generate new thinking about the future of Philadelphia’s vacant lands and to act as a catalyst for implementation: vacancy could be an opportunity to imagine a new future for the city that had lost its population, resulting in lower urban density.

The URBAN VOIDS: grounds for change international ideas competition attracted 220 entries from 27 countries, and challenged entrants to propose new visions and possibilities for Philadelphia’s extensive inventory of vacant land by responding to the city’s unique ecological infrastructure. It offered an opportunity to design in relation to shifting human and urban marks on the land. Similar to the way that land and water resources have historically drawn people to settle, the ecology of a place can again be a force that can shape urban form.

The competition entries featured here investigate and illustrate how this low-density urban environment can be reoccupied, instilling the voids with a wide range of new uses. Δ

Notes
2. Competition advisor, Van Alen Institute, New York.

Front Studio (Yen Ha and Ostap Rudakevych), Farmadelphia, 2006

Front Studio’s entry proposes transforming the city's urban fabric with the introduction of farmlands – incongruous rural elements that create a juxtaposition between farm and city. The conversion of vacant sites would provide employment and encourage entrepreneurship: the act of farming seeks to empower residents to take charge of their land while creating localised centres of activity. Farm and city begin to function as one integral machine combining the pleasure of open sky and land with the richness of city living.
Thaddeus Pawlowski and Srdjan Jovanovic, Hilltopia: new topographies, new communities, 2005

The Hilltopia team suggest taking the excess soil from rapidly developing suburban areas to build new topographies in the city. These new landforms – hill-bounded neighbourhoods – would guide the city's evolution of new boundaries providing spaciousness and privacy. The mounded forms could also support new energy-efficient housing models, employ sustainable practices for managing storm-water treatment or, at their summits, turbines for new energy.
Anuradha Mathur and Dillip da Cunha, Bio-Philadelphia.com: engineering a new surface, 2005
Bio-Philadelphia is poised to champion the transition from technology to biotechnology, from making inert things (such as manufacturing) to making living things. This shift of industry will open new frontiers in science and in the nature of human settlement. Philadelphia will sculpt new multifaceted working landscapes that support greenhouses, experimental fields for energy, environment and economy, and dynamic living surfaces. The new landscape will blur boundaries between industry and habitation in every sense, ‘reactivating the American frontier toward the cultivation of a new living surface’.
Jill Desimini and Danilo Martic, Timescapes: densifying community activities, 2006
Timescapes proposes to stimulate discourse between the vacant lots of the inner-city neighbourhood and the adjacent open space of Fairmount Park, while looking skyward as a strategy to cultivate density. The 3-D sidewalk is a specific development of this investigation, gathering together a range of activities in a vertical spatial element that engages the edges of the neighbourhood.