IMPACCT BROOKLYN
VISIONING SESSION WITH MYRTLE VILLAGE GREEN

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

SUNDAY OCTOBER 2, 2016 | 638 MYRTLE AVE, BROOKLYN NY
**ABOUT THE PROCESS:**
The New York City Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) owns a large lot along Kent and Myrtle Avenues made up of three parcels (A, B, and C). Parcel A is vital for DEP because it provides them access to a water tunnel. Parcel B cannot be built on, but can be released by DEP and used for passive surface activities, such as a garden. Parcel C, which has 102’ of frontage on Myrtle Ave with a commercial overlay, can be built on. DEP has indicated in prior meetings that they plan to dispose of Parcel C for the construction of affordable housing. To this end, IMPACCT Brooklyn in partnership with Architecture in Formation New York (AFNY) aims to establish a community-supported affordable housing development with mixed-income with commercial community facility space in addition to a permanent garden in Parcel B and C. IMPACCT envisions re-purposing parcel C into a mixed-use housing and community facility building and establishing parcel B into a permanent garden. IMPACCT is working with Hester Street Collaborative (HSC) to design and execute a community consensus and design visioning process with stakeholders to arrive at a unified vision for the future of the lot.

**HISTORICAL CONTEXT:**
In June 2002, the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCA), through its Percent for Arts Program, facilitated a landscape design by artist Jody Pinto for the Shaft 21B/Block 1912 Lot 3, encompassing the entire lot. This was to be a “a permanent public artwork” as mandated by the City’s percent for arts law, designed to “transform Shaft Site 21B into a green space upon completion of construction.” Ms. Pinto was selected by the Kent Avenue Stabilization Taskforce and her design reflected needs that the Taskforce identified when it surveyed hundreds of residents of the immediate neighborhood at the Department’s request and with Brooklyn Community Board Three’s cooperation between 2000 and 2001. Community members involved in the design and planning of the park requested that rocks found on site be saved and used in the landscaping and the City’s contractor agreed to keep them.

In September 2003, during a meeting with DCA, DEP and Ms. Pinto, NYC Department of Parks and Recreation agreed to take jurisdiction of the entire property and maintain the landscaped park for public use once construction was complete. Construction below ground was expected to be completed in Spring 2005 and the landscaping by the end of 2006. Unfortunately, the below-ground work of building the water tunnel was delayed and Ms. Pinto’s contract lapsed before landscaping work was able to begin.

In 2010 and 2011, DEP’s construction work ceased and neighbors revived efforts to create the long-awaited green space. A coalition was created, called Myrtle Village Green (MVG), to coordinate these efforts. Through it, local residents organized meetings, engaged elected officials, revived the Kent Avenue Stabilization Taskforce’s efforts, launched a petition drive and activated the press. MVG members met directly with DEP Commissioner Cas Halloway and Deputy Director Matthew Mahoney. Then-City Council Member Letitia James joined her constituents in advocacy. In February 2012, although DEP still needed access to a portion of the site, Mr. Mahoney and residents developed a Parcel system to facilitate immediate access to the area that faces Myrtle Avenue; the DEP agreed to put in fences to divide the lot into “Parcels” that could be
phased into community use. That same month, MVG developed a proposal for interim use of “Parcel C,” as requested by Mr. Mahoney.

In March 2012, Council Member James met with DEP, Community Board 3, representatives from the Brooklyn Borough President’s office, the Mayor’s Office, IMPACCT (then PACC), the Pratt Center for Community Development, and Brooklyn Community Foundation to discuss the disposition of the site.

In June 2012, MVG representatives organized a subsequent meeting at the Pratt Center with the same guest list to make their needs known. At that meeting, IMPACCT (then PACC) agreed to enter into a license agreement with NYC DEP to allow the Myrtle Village Green coalition to facilitate the creation of a community garden on “Parcel C.” Long-term disposition of the whole site was not resolved at that time. The agreement began in July 2012. Myrtle Village Green has occupied “Parcel C” since then.

**GARDEN OVERVIEW:**
The Myrtle Village Green (MVG), a 19,380 square feet volunteer-run community gathering space and garden, has brought hundreds of neighbors together to grow food and flowers, learn from each other, and build a thriving, diverse community organization. It is the only significant green space in the area and as such is widely enjoyed by the community. A core priority of the MVG has been bring people together. As such, in addition to growing food for over 100 households each season and composting over 20,000 pounds of donated kitchen scraps, the garden has been used as a space for numerous events, workshops, trainings, and gatherings.

The MVG is part of the BIC Pilot Community Composter Program and has a very good working relationship with the Department of Sanitation (where they have done a presentation outlining the MVG composting program), Ft. Greene Park, and several local businesses. The NYC Parks Department has invited the MVG to speak at an upcoming conference for urban community garners, showcasing the MVG handbook as a model of excellence in community gardening. The MVG has also hosted City Council Member Steve Levin and a participatory budgeting session, the Brooklyn Botanic Garden for composting workshops, local youth groups engaged in community service projects, multiple public art installations, and many special moments for neighborhood members such as a first communion celebration, a wedding, an egg hunt, and a few youth birthday parties.

The MVG also works in partnership with multiple local schools and preschools, including PS/IS 157 (The Benjamin Franklin Magnet School for Civic Leadership in Health and Science) and The Brooklyn High School for Leadership and Community Service. PS/IS 157 students have been using the MVG as an outdoor science lab since 2012, learning about compost and soil science, botany, astronomy, and weather while enjoying multiple dedicated plots for students to grow plants. They are currently working with the Brooklyn Botanic Garden’s Project Green Reach and in 2017 will be using MVG space for their Garden Lab in conjunction with BBG educators. The Brooklyn High School for Leadership and Community Service has
generously donated multiple grants to the garden, helping build a new community gathering table and using the garden as a space for engaging in community service projects. Additionally, hundreds of local preschoolers have visited the MVG for guided field trips and open exploration.

In the 2016 growing season, the MVG had over 100 key-holding households gardening in private and shared plots, composting, and enjoying the space together. Diverse immigrant communities come together at the MVG, growing hard-to-get crops common in places like Mexico and Bangladesh and sharing recipes. The MVG shed sometimes doubles as a place for evening prayers when gardening runs late. When the local Catholic Church services are done, well dressed children flood into the garden to play. Local Hasidic families visit the garden every weekend to enjoy the open space and learn more about urban gardening options. Pratt students and faculty garden at MVG, have used the space for various art and photography projects, and connect with the community beyond campus. The garden is regularly filled with community members—from babies in strollers to elderly neighbors in wheelchairs and everyone in between—enjoying the sun (or shade, depending on the season), learning and mentoring, munching on fresh fruits and vegetables, and sharing stories, recipes, and laughter.

**CHARRETTE WITH GARDENERS:**

On Sunday October 2, 2016, IMPACCT and HSC hosted a charrette with approximately 22 adult gardeners and several youth gardeners. Deborah Howard, Executive Director of IMPACCT, provided historical context and shared IMPACCT’s vision for the site’s future. Following the welcome, all gardeners introduced themselves and shared their concerns, fears, and aspirations regarding change in their current garden. Some gardeners expressed their wariness of housing development in a lot that has provided their community access to green space, community building, and locally grown food. Others provided additional historical context of the space, and expressed mistrust in yet another process to develop the previously empty DEP lot. After all gardeners had an opportunity to share their frustrations, and ask questions of IMPACCT, HSC introduced the goals of the visioning activities and divided the gardeners into three groups.

Although there was clear tension at the beginning of the session, the conversations about the current use of the temporary garden and their hopes for a new permanent garden were ultimately positive. The following pages summarizes the contributions from gardeners who participated in the charrette activities.

The charrette aimed to identify: the current uses of the garden and the desired physical components or elements they would like to see in a new garden space, as well as concerns that could be addressed in a new site.
GARDEN USES:
This activity was divided into three sections that asked gardeners:
- Weekly time spent at the garden
- Activities they partake at the garden
- Reasons they love the garden

WEEKLY TIME SPENT

1-3 HRS  7+ HRS  3-7 HRS

10 gardeners indicated they spent 1-3 hours at the garden, 8 spend more than 7 hours, and 5 spend 3-7 hours at the garden.

CURRENT ACTIVITIES
Gardeners placed a dot next to the activities they do at the garden.

Growing plants + food

Build community

Open space access
Reflect and relax

Gardeners were also asked to talk about what other activities they do in the garden.

**LEARNING**
- Place to learn and to teach one another
- Place for astronomy lessons and science experiments
- Carbon bank fertility, lead soil remediation

**NATURE AND OPEN SPACE**
- Observe pigeon coup next door
- Place to observe bird flight patterns and other wild life
- Place to relax and take mental health breaks
- Place for digging, playing, and for being in the dirt

**COMMUNITY BUILDING**
- Community beds draw people in and it results in a shared labor
- Place for conversations and advice
- Kids become friends because they use the garden as a space to play
- Neighbors meet each other and build relationships
- Gardeners work together to beautify community, such as getting a trash bin and other beautification efforts
- Place to gather and work together to feed families
As part of the activity on uses of the garden, gardeners were asked to talk about the reasons they love the garden.

I love the garden because...

COMMUNITY
- Members are very intentional and affirmative about making the garden a very open, welcoming space for all.
- Open facade is inviting, and accessible to all. Close to street, and open gate policy ($10 key fee is all it takes to join).
- It is culturally and ethnically diverse.
- It promotes building community bridges and overcoming differences.
- Older community residents (some who don’t garden) can come and sit in a beautiful space.

PLAY TIME
- We get a place to pretend that we are grown-ups.
- We play together- it’s like home (Nina age 8).
- It is a place where children grow and learn.
- Space provides essential unstructured green space for children to play.

FOOD ACCESS
- I am inspired by the amount of food grown to feed families and the savings it creates.
- It provides enough jobs for everyone, and we understand and celebrate that everyone is capable.
- It provides space to grow food that we can eat; we are able to grow a lot in a small space.

OPEN SPACE
- It provides us with green space that is a bit cooler in the summer (cooling center).
- I live in a concrete jungle, and this is the only green space I have.
- People are able to connect with nature.

STRUCTURE
- There is transparent governance and consensus based decision-making.
- There is the reusing of resources, partnering with organizations and being resourceful (i.e. finding soil on craigslist).
- We can have a direct impact on something, such as reducing waste through composting.
NEW GARDEN ASPIRATIONS
To inform future development, the gardeners were asked to identify what they would like to see, do and feel in a new garden space. This activity also provided an opportunity for gardeners to highlight the concerns they have about the current garden that may be addressed in a new space.

The gardeners answered the following questions:
- What activities do you want to be able to do?
- What elements would you like to see in the garden (i.e. greenhouse)?
- What kind of look and feel would you like?
- What concerns do you have about the current garden space?

ACTIVITIES
Gardeners were given options about what types of activities they would like to see in a potential new garden. Gardeners were generally in support of all options, and had additional suggestions.

Garden
- Fruit trees

Organize
- Roofed meeting and educational space
- Shed for storage

Socialize
- Communication strategies
- Structured sharing of harvest with neighborhood

Exercise
- Jungle gym and playground infrastructure for children
- Walking paths for recreation

Relax
- Indoor space for year-round meetings

What else?
- Chicken coup
- Bee hive box
- BBQ and cooking options
**ELEMENTS**

Gardeners were given options about what types of physical elements they would like to see in a potential new garden. Gardeners were generally in support of all options, and had few additional suggestions and comments.

- **Community Beds**
  - We need more shared harvest

- **Vertical Garden**
  - Could be beautiful, but these are not suitable for Bangladeshi vegetables

- **Composting**
  - Our current composting needs expansion

- **Mural**
  - Children gardeners could help to paint a mural

- **Shade Structure**
  - We need more shade

- **Greenhouse**
  - We used to have one, but it did not work out.

- **Film Screen**
  - There should be regular Hindi film screenings

- **Benches and Tables**
  - These should be separable and movable

- **What else?**
  - Bathroom
  - Permanent electricity and water source
  - Classroom space
  - Solar generator
  - Agreeable to kaboom playground and a recipe sharing kitchen space
LOOK & FEEL
Gardeners were given options about what type of design style they would like to see in a potential new garden. Gardeners overwhelmingly chose a *home-made with a rustic feel* out of the following options:

- Magical
- Rustic
- Modern
- Home-made

These are images used to exemplify gardens with a home-made look & feel.
GARDEN CONCERNS
Gardeners were given options about current concerns they faced in the current garden that could be addressed in a potential new garden.

Safety
- Important, but also important to have a welcoming feel

Lighting
- This would be nice, but it is not needed

Public Access
- Very important to have visibility from the street
- There is a clash between safety and access because gardeners have experienced harvest theft

Other?
- Mosquito control
- Need to remove residue infrastructure (i.e. wires on the walls)
- Bangladeshi families do not have individual/assigned beds yet, so the space where they share beds is not getting good water pressure