



# Sustainable Living



## Tales of the New Urban Pioneers

Two visions of transforming the City, both inside and out.



BY SUSAN CARDOZA

The sustainable American Dream is alive and growing in Pittsburgh, attracting a group of urban pioneers that are characterized by creative thinking and a sense of community. Two great resources that help them realize results are Cool Space Locator, a non-profit that works to help them find just the right alternative business space in an urban environment, and Community Partnerships with the Western PA Conservancy, a non-profit which develops urban gardens where they can maintain a connection to nature and build community awareness.

Cool Space Locator was created in 2000 by a partnership of three of Pittsburgh's community development corporations, to address the disconnection between traditional real estate brokerage practices and companies desiring economical urban spaces. Their mission is to combat urban blight and decay by recycling, renewing, and

reusing vacant and under utilized buildings. By matching forward-thinking businesses with forgotten buildings in the heart of the city, they attract and retain our region's creative youth and create a model for sustainable growth. Partners Kyra Straussman, Deborah Baron, and Kilolo Luckett, along with intern Robyn Barber are committed to revitalizing Pittsburgh and its surrounding communities; one relationship at a time. They work with companies that desire a Cool Space, building owners with Cool Space to offer, and communities that understand the value of responsible development.

As an urban commercial real estate brokerage which focuses on creativity and sustainability, Cool Space Locator has assisted more than 200 companies in finding Cool Spaces which enhance their business presence, establish their leadership, and connect them with the community. An additional service they provide is to gather market intelligence in order to redirect demand back into the urban core. This research is available to clients, along with educational seminars on how to make effective choices. A project of the Tides Center (PA), Cool Space Locator is generally able to offer its services at no cost to the client due to the generous support of a number of different foundations.

According to partner Kyra Straussman, Cool Space clients are often first time business owners or businesses experiencing expansion, and seeking something other than the standard office space. They include artists, chiropractors, and retailers who embrace a community-service orientation. Most clients have established some kind of track record with their business and are at their point of growth. Working with each individual client's unique work patterns and addressing their needs, produces a sustainable business model that is often well served with the unique spaces available in Pittsburgh's older communities. The client's sustainable model then becomes a transformational catalyst as it weaves its identity into the fabric of a neighborhood, and serves to attract responsible development.

Unlike traditional real estate brokers, Cool Space Locator is able to offer an extremely high level of commitment to clients, providing them with the tools they need to evaluate their readiness to relocate and match their requirements with a Cool Space. Education is an important part of their platform of services, empowering clients to make more informed choices and

thus have a much greater chance to succeed. Cool Space Locator must be the sole provider of brokerage services, working as such on the client's behalf, for a contracted period of one year.

In addition to individual clients, Cool Space Locator reaches out to community development groups, business organizations, and economic development groups offering them "...real-world knowledge that will enable them to work together to make effective choices in developing their cities." Seminar topics include: Life/Business in a Cool Space; Recognizing Cool Space; Economic Development and Space; Stemming Business Erosion and Attracting Investment; Community Development and Smart Growth; Space as a Business Recruitment/Retention Tool; and Marketing Your Cool Space. Cool Space Locator will also design a seminar to address a group's unique needs.

Each of the three partners at Cool Space Locator has a compelling story of what drew them to the business, which they share on their website. Also available on the web is information about their do-it-yourself toolkit for companies looking for a space, called Cool Space in a Box®. The partners' living philosophy is accessible in a free monthly e-newsletter, and coming soon, some stories of client companies that are already living the new, sustainable American Dream. As partner Deborah Baron states, "There is a feeling you get from the city. A feeling of being part of something bigger than yourself." Certainly this feeling is critical to carving out a vision of how Pittsburgh needs to grow. The dream of urban revitalization is becoming a viable part of Pittsburgh's future.

Cool Space Locator can be found at 279 45th Street, Pittsburgh, PA 15201 and reached by phone at 412 683-5790, or [coolspacelocator.com](http://coolspacelocator.com).

Kyra Straussman (top photo, left) of Cool Space Locator chats with the author in their own cool space, the rooftop garden over their Lawrenceville office. Mexican War Street resident Jana (below) works a plot in the Old Allegheny Garden.



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**Urban Gardens Add To Quality of Life**

Revitalizing urban communities is also the mission of another regional non-profit, whose focus on green spaces and homegrown vegetables is essential to the integrated lifestyle sought by urban pioneers. The Western PA Conservancy has been a tremendous resource in the development of community gardens, improving neighborhoods and contributing a sense of renewal, with projects in 20 counties throughout Western Pennsylvania, primarily in distressed urban areas. Their mission embraces a broad range of community greening initiatives, which connect people and nature through all-volunteer projects. Community floral and vegetable gardens are part of a grassroots program designed to engage people in cooperative partnerships that promote community development, local empowerment and vibrant neighborhoods.

The first WPC community vegetable garden was started twenty-two years ago, in a section of Homewood Cemetery on the east end of Pittsburgh. Since then, the program, which is funded by the City of Pittsburgh Community Development Block Grant, has produced nearly two million pounds of produce for gardeners throughout the city.



A WPC vegetable garden gets started through a joint effort of neighbors and friends in a residential area. A plot is identified by the residents, who then call WPC to see if the land meets the criteria for a vegetable garden. Once a site is approved, and funding and gardeners

are confirmed, WPC will prepare it for planting. Each team of gardeners is supplied by WPC with the materials for a picket fence, hand tools, a watering hose and vegetable seeds. Although each gardener is free

to decide what to plant in his or her own individual plot, an overall garden captain is established, and all participants are responsible for building the fence and maintaining the common areas.

Although the current status of Conservancy-sponsored urban gardens is under complete revision, according to Judy Wagner, Director of Community Partnerships with the Western PA Conservancy, there are many examples of existing gardens throughout the city of Pittsburgh and its surrounding communi-

ties that witness the commitment of their residents to bring new life to their old neighborhoods.

A wonderful example of how gardens can impact a neighborhood is found in the Mexican War Streets community. Started in 1982 as a simple collection of whiskey barrel container gardens, through the efforts of resident Randy Gilson, the inspiration of a garden design grew, with pathways constructed of discarded building materials. A self-taught gardener, Randy devoted much of the next two decades teaching his neighbors the diversity of gardening as art form, as connection with local history, as personal expression, as recycling, and as a venue of peace and tranquility where people could come together.

The community sought assistance from the Western PA Conservancy to start a flower and vegetable garden located at the 1300 block of Sherman Avenue. The Old Allegheny Garden Society was reborn. Today, residents can apply for one of 35 to 50 plots and half-

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plots, renewable each year for a minimal fee, to grow gardens from their own imaginations. Each individual supplies their own materials and plants or seeds for their space. Brightly painted fences and gates delineate differ-

ent areas and walking paths connect the individual plots.

The garden captain this year is Laura Winter, who also coordinates and initiated the Green Millennium Children's Garden on Sherman Avenue and North Taylor. Now used as an educational outreach in cooperation with Doug Oster's "Cultivating Success" program, the children's garden hosts children between the ages of 7 and 10 years, from inner-city neighborhoods, to participate in planting

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**THE GREAT  
INVOCATION**

*From the point of Light  
within the Mind of God  
Let Light stream forth  
into the minds of men.  
Let Light descend on Earth.*

*From the point of Love  
within the Heart of God  
Let Love stream forth into the hearts of men.  
May Christ return to Earth.*

*From the centre  
where the Will of God is known  
Let purpose guide the little wills of men -  
The purpose which the Masters know  
and serve.*

*From the centre  
which we call the race of men  
Let the Plan of Love and Light work out.  
And may it seal the door  
where evil dwells.*

*Let Light and Love and Power restore  
the Plan on Earth.*

The Great Invocation is a very potent non-denominational prayer used by Transmission meditation groups all over the world to invoke the energies of the Christ and the Masters of Hierarchy. The Pittsburgh Transmission Meditation Group meets Mondays at 7:00 pm at 4836 Ellsworth Ave. (Friend's Meeting House) in Oakland, PA.

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activities four times a year. Those who live in the neighborhood, from toddlers to teens, can also share in the greening initiative.

Adjacent to the garden, you can witness the creation of a mural, which is being funded through a grant from the Sprout Fund Public Art Program. Murals liven up the local scenery in a number of different locations, as well as gardens that residents have created on their own properties. According to one of the local gardening enthusiasts, Robyn Macerelli, who happens to be a Penn State Master Gardener, the green spaces have become integral to what holds the community together.

This fall, the neighborhood will hold a Mexican War Streets Rave benefiting their public green spaces on September 10th, followed by their 35th Annual House and Garden Tour, which is set for September 12, 2004 (info. 412-323-9030).

Resident Katherine Smitherman,

Director of Public Policy for the WPC, views the success of the green spaces in the Mexican War Streets area to be a result of the neighbors' commitment to developing and maintaining a true community. The key to holding this eclectic neighborhood

together, with diverse residents of different ages, races, lifestyles and economic backgrounds, is found in the forums they establish to meet and talk – from the community garden, to the weekly “stoop club” gatherings, to dog-walking in West Park or society membership meetings at the Unitarian Church, or even the visits to their local Monterey Pub. Urban renewal is alive and well here.



Although community greening initiatives on their own cannot solve the problems associated with urban blight, they are an effective way of creating momentum and change. As demonstrated by the Mexican War Streets community, WPC projects are designed to embrace

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partnerships with individuals and organizations across all age, economic and ethnic groups. Sometimes overlooked by large-scale plans for urban redevelopment, community greening initiatives represent the deter-

mination of residents to improve their overall quality of life in the face of often overwhelming obstacles.

To learn more about urban renewal through community gardens, sponsor a garden, or learn what other volunteer opportunities exist with the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, call Judy Wagner at 412-586-2390, or email [judy.wagner@paconserve.org](mailto:judy.wagner@paconserve.org)



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