

Park In a Truck

Executive Summary



Park in a Truck is an initiative of the Jefferson University Landscape Architecture Program and Laboratory for Social Innovation (LUSI) in association with the Philadelphia Collaborative for Health Equity (P-CHE).

The Vision

Cities where people create, build and live in sustainable, equitable, healthy and joyful communities.

The Mission

Reimagining how social, ecological and economic networks in cities are designed, built and maintained.

Simply living near a park makes you healthier. Exposure to green spaces boosts mental health and psychological well-being beyond the benefits of physical activity alone. Parks help reduce blood pressure, decrease cardiovascular disease mortality, increase social well-being, and promote positive health behaviors. Yet, inadequate access to safe and convenient green places is counted amongst the many disparities that divide many cities. People in affluent districts can live 20 years longer than their low-income neighbors. These same underprivileged neighborhoods are often 15-20 degrees hotter and less safe.

While the challenge of reducing high poverty rates and poor health outcomes is great, we can greatly improve overall quality of life by creating more parks close to where people live. Let's imagine cities where every child and adult lives within 30 seconds of a green space. An oasis of calm, where they can walk, run, play or just relax.

Park in a Truck harnesses the hidden asset of many low-income neighborhoods: vacant lots and other unused land. While these terms conjure images of weeds, trash and danger—spaces to be avoided rather than embraced—with imagination, under-utilized land is a precious opportunity. So let's call these places "open space." For example, in the city of Philadelphia, there are about 40,000 parcels of open space, primed for improvement. That's 40,000 chances to build safe green places for children to play and run, and everyone else to stroll and exercise. That's 40,000 projects that bring communities together to design and build spaces that meet local needs. And that's 40,000 economic catalysts that raise property values, lower health care costs and make Philadelphia a magnet for further investment.

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The Solution

A community-operated green network, established through low-cost, fast-turnaround renovations of vacant lots that not only improves environmental, social and physical health in under-resourced neighborhoods, but also unites efforts to keep them intact and helps residents lead revitalization and reinvestment efforts.

Park in a Truck (PiaT) will bring nature back into everyday life by linking adjacent available lots to create block-by-block green networks—corridors of high-quality, outdoor spaces. This open space initiative will build upon the ongoing community development work of many great organizations by repurposing underutilized spaces to fill in the gaps. No one should ever be far from a safe, high-quality green space.

Building parks is an expensive and complicated undertaking often conducted without local engagement and support. PiaT takes a different approach.

- To ensure real community buy-in, local residents are engaged at all phases of the planning, implementation and ongoing maintenance process.
- Local residents are taught the skills necessary to assess, plan, design, build and maintain their neighborhood parks.
- To keep costs down, communities select from pre-designed components; stages, benches, veggie gardens — for simple installation. No expensive or specialized in-ground features or construction is used.
- Once *selected*, all of the essentials are *loaded* on a truck and *delivered* to the site where community volunteers *build* their park — barn-raising style.
- Success is contagious and PiaT will establish a collaborative of park-building veterans willing to play it forward with those just beginning their park journey.
- All content and designs are open source and is available on Jefferson's website.

Our proposal builds upon community capital in a way no program run by and with outside groups can. Our role is to facilitate and support local efforts; design a network of outdoor environments that is specific to community needs and vision; and help find funding. We will work in collaboration with local public schools, churches, political leaders and community groups.

Our success at building a neighborhood open space network will be measured by the following criteria:

- Greater access to green spaces
- Improved environment
- Increased social capital
- Improved local economy
- Greater health equity and outcomes
- Safer neighborhoods
- Joy