

2001 Rudy Bruner Award

GOLD
medal winner



THE VILLAGE OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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PLACEMAKING FOR CHANGE: 2001 RUDY BRUNER AWARD FOR URBAN EXCELLENCE

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2001 RUDY BRUNER AWARD FOR URBAN EXCELLENCE

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GOLD MEDAL WINNER

The Village of Arts and Humanities



Project location



Project location (detail)

THE VILLAGE OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES AT A GLANCE

SUBMITTED BY:

The Village of Arts and Humanities, Lily Yeh, *Executive Director*

WHAT IS THE VILLAGE OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES?

- An urban neighborhood in inner city North Philadelphia, consisting of a series of art parks, renovated buildings and social programs.
- A community revitalization program in which art is used as a vehicle to create place, build self-esteem, and engender mutual respect.
- A series of inter-connected programs, built through an “organic,” grassroots democratic process, serving neighborhood youth and adults.
- An identifiable place in distressed North Philadelphia, where a consistent vocabulary of design, color, and streetscape signifies a neighborhood that is special and cared for.
- “A living piece of sculpture, in which sculpture is a communal event.” (Lily Yeh)

MAJOR GOALS OF THE VILLAGE OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES

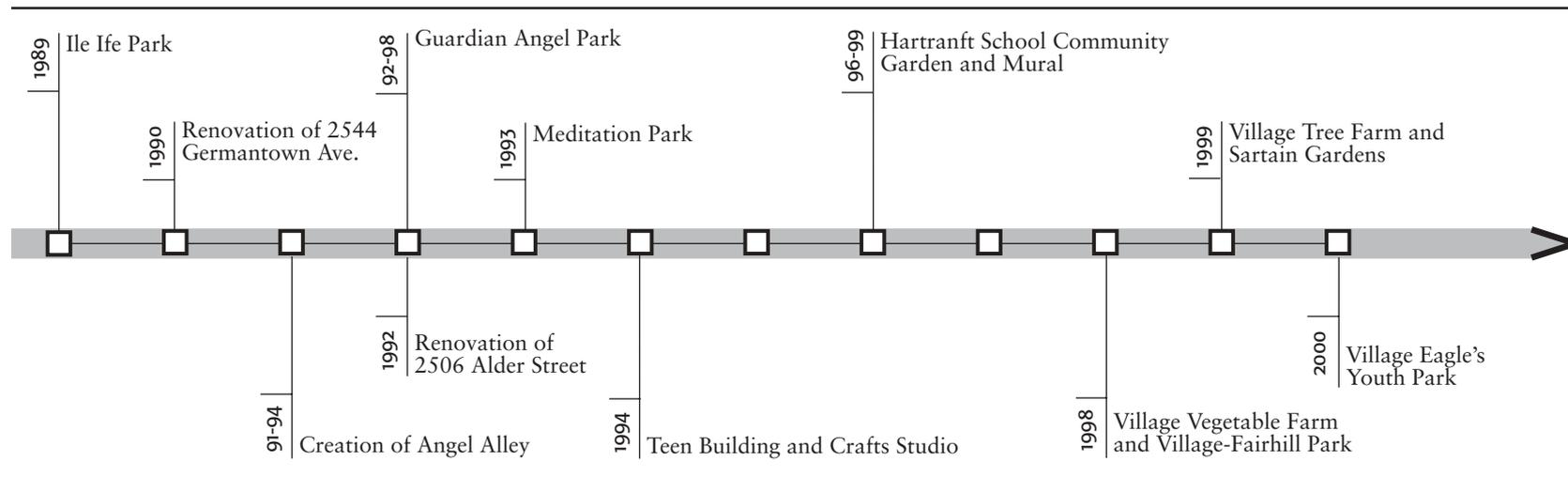
- “To complete the process of transforming [The Village] neighborhood into a vital urban village in which people are reconnected with their families, sheltered in decent housing, sustained by meaningful work, nurtured by each other’s care, and together educate and raise their children.” (From *Mission Statement*.)
- “To build community through innovative arts, educational, social, construction and economic development programs and to do justice to the humanity of people who live in inner city North Philadelphia or similar urban situations.” (From *Mission Statement*.)
- To embrace what society disdains and throws away, thereby creating a new sense of possibility and hope in the community.
- To build democracy through a renewed sense of participation in the community.

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The Village of Arts and Humanities

CHRONOLOGY

- 1989
Completion of Ile Ife Park
- 1990
Renovation of 2544 Germantown Avenue into Arts & Education Center
- 1991-1994
Creation of Angel Alley and Angel Eyes mosaic mural
- 1992-1998
Creation of Magical Garden
- 1992
Renovation of 2506 Alder Street for administrative offices
- 1993
Creation of Community Vegetable Garden
- 1993
Creation of Meditation Park
- 1994
Renovation of 2526 and 2536 North Alder Street to Teen Building and Crafts Studio
- 1992-1998
Construction of Guardian Angel Park
- 1996-1999
Development of Hartranft School Community Garden and Mural
- 1998
Creation of Village Vegetable Farm
- 1998
Completion of Village-Fairhill Park
- 1999
Creation of Village Tree Farm
- 1999
Completion of Sartain Gardens with painted mural
- 2000
Creation of Village Eagles Youth Park with five painted and tile murals



PROJECT DESCRIPTION

URBAN CONTEXT

To appreciate The Village of Arts and Humanities (The Village), it is important to understand its urban context. Philadelphia, like many other American urban centers, has experienced significant population loss in its recent history. In 1950, the city boasted a population of 2.3 million and a lively manufacturing-based economy. Following World War II, a large number of Philadelphia residents, like their counterparts across the country, began moving outside the city to suburban locations. This trend has continued over the years and was most recently confirmed by the 2000 US Census, which counted Philadelphia's population as 1.5 million, a drop of 34%. Nowhere is the impact of that population loss more evident than in North Philadelphia.

Data from the Philadelphia City Planning Commission underscores the situation. In North Philadelphia, between 1970 and 1980, the population declined more than 33%, from about 7,300 to 4,900. By 1990, it had further declined to 3,815, with 80% of that population consisting of low to moderate income households. Ninety-five percent of the residents were African-American. Median household income in 1990 was \$9,898, with over 56% of the population living below the poverty level and 32% of the neighborhood labor force unemployed. As of the 2000 data, the population of the neighborhood was 94% African-American, with 43.4% of all homes having a single female as head of household.



Vacant lot, North Philadelphia

The Village, and in particular its core blocks, known as The Village Heart, is a microcosm of these conditions. The Village Long Range Plan states that there were once 105 row houses in The Village Heart, primarily two-story 13' x 25' brick structures. By 1990, all but 10 had been abandoned, many as long as 25 years ago. An additional 59 units were condemned and torn down, leaving gaping holes between the 56 row houses left standing. By 1995, only 10 row houses in The Village Heart had been continuously maintained by residents or landlords; 19 were restored by the Philadelphia Housing Authority, seven by The Village of Arts and Humanities, and 19 were vacant and boarded up. Thirty-six households in The Village neighborhood had no electricity, heat or water.



Abandoned houses, Village neighborhood

Depopulation, abandonment, and bleak demographics have brought the attendant urban ills: high crime rates, including drug trafficking and violent crime; at risk youth, high levels of incarceration, low skill levels, health problems, and low self-esteem. In the early 1980s, resident Terry Harrison, now an employee of The Village, reported that the drug wars between Dominicans, Puerto Ricans, and Black Muslims made the neighborhood so unsafe that residents were afraid to go outdoors. Public parks went unused and neighborhood residents remained virtually trapped in their homes.

In recent years, however, a variety of small businesses have begun attracting shoppers to the commercial strip on Germantown Avenue adjacent to The Village. Other community based organizations have also become active in the area. The Association of Puerto Ricans on the March has 50 units of housing under construction and has completed 90 townhouses and a new supermarket. It also has two major parcels about to begin construction. A women-owned community development corporation (CDC), the Women's Community Revitalization Project, has also completed several blocks of affordable housing in the same area. There are, however, virtually no private housing starts in the neighborhood.

The role of city government in North Philadelphia is also changing. The City of Philadelphia is now more actively helping North Philadelphia turn itself around. A recent bond issue for \$250 million, known as the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative, will focus on the removal of blighted properties. In addition, Temple University, located adjacent to The Village, has formed relationships with the

community to provide expertise and guidance in health care and legal matters.

There is anecdotal evidence that the population decline has also slowed. Some neighborhood residents whom we met returned to the neighborhood in recent years, largely because of improved safety. Others report that friends and family members, many of whom are now employed and self sufficient, are also interested in moving back.

HISTORY OF THE VILLAGE

The Village of Arts and Humanities evolved from the vision, spirit, and creative methodology of artist Lily Yeh. In 1986, Yeh was invited by African-American dancer Arthur Hall to create an art park on the vacant lot adjacent to his studio. When Yeh accepted Hall's offer and came to North Philadelphia in the summer of 1986, she was an established artist, teaching at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia and showing her work successfully in local galleries. The invitation came at a crucial moment in Yeh's development, as she had been searching for a way to connect her art to social issues outside the traditional gallery and classroom world. Armed with a \$2,500 grant from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, Yeh embarked upon the creation of Ile Ife Park, literally translated (from Swahili) as "House of Love." Her intention at that time was to complete the summer project and return to her life of fine arts and teaching, but in her words, "Something grabbed hold of me; I thought of this place whenever I wasn't here. I experienced something so profound here...it drew me in."



Building Ile Ife Park

That's not to say it was easy for Yeh to gain neighborhood acceptance and support. As a Chinese woman in an African-American world, her efforts were initially met with suspicion and distrust. But as she began to work at Ile Ife, Joseph (JoJo) Williams, the first adult in the neighborhood to join Yeh, lent assistance to her effort and became a staunch protector of this building project. The children in the neighborhood were also attracted to Yeh, and they became the initial core group of workers. Over time, Yeh was joined by other pivotal people in the neighborhood such as James "Big Man" Maxton, who, although a drug dealer himself at the time, provided a critical link between Yeh and the community.

In the summer of 1987, Yeh returned to continue her work on Ile Ife Park, armed with an additional \$4,000 from the Pennsylvania



After school program in renovated building

Council on the Arts. With each new effort came a new corps of supporters, residents intrigued by the physical changes they saw in their neighborhood and by the excitement and involvement of their children. For Yeh, the challenge and spiritual importance of working in this area deepened. Her work with neighborhood residents became a vehicle for “catching the ‘living flame’” in each person, communicating to each person that “you are okay as you are.” As more and more people joined Yeh in her work, one lot after another was transformed by sculpture and murals.

Part of the Ile Ife effort was the renovation of what is now The Village’s education building. For this effort, Yeh was joined by Stephen Sayre, writer, builder and Harvard Law School graduate. Sayre’s expertise and commitment led to the transformation of a 25’

x 90’ three-story abandoned warehouse next to Ile Ife into a simple and spacious education facility. JoJo, Big Man, and several other adult residents participated in the restoration.

Yeh is motivated in part by the belief that the most serious deficits of the community can also serve as resources. She noted that, “Because of the extreme poverty and abandonment in the neighborhood, we were blessed with many vacant lots...We embrace what this society disdains, throws away, trashes to create a new sense of possibility and hope. By transforming deficits into resources, we deepen our understanding of ourselves.”

The Village has grown steadily since the meager days of 1986. It now encompasses a variety of different kinds of outdoor spaces and parks. Some provide settings for ritual celebrations and others offer space to enjoy colorful sculpture created by artists, including Yeh and Maxton. Some offer contemplative spaces for moments of quiet. The parks in The Village neighborhood include Ile Ife, Angel Alley, Magical Garden, Meditation Park, Guardian Angel Park, Family Park, Hartranft School Community Garden and Mural, Happy Alley, Village Vegetable Farm, Village-Fairhill Park, Village Tree Farm, Fawn St. Gardens, Sartain Gardens, and — the most recent addition — Village Eagles’ Youth Park, completed through a collaboration with the Philadelphia Eagles football team. Renovated buildings in The Village Heart include the Arts and Education Center, Teen Building, Crafts Studio, Silk Screen Studio, a health program office and general office space. These modest buildings host a variety of programs for children and adults. (See “Programs,” pg. 17.)

The concept underlying The Village Heart is one of “living sculpture” — that is, art objects that do not remain static and apart. Rather, their space and form are occupied by individuals and cultivated by the community. The spaces and forms in The Village Heart continually change and evolve as buildings are renovated and as new parks and gardens emerge out of abandoned lots. But the spirit and participatory character of the place remains consistent, validating and implementing concepts developed by the community for the ongoing transformation of its urban village.



Lily Yeh, Founder

PHILOSOPHY AND VISION

For Yeh, the motivating force behind the design and programs of The Village is inherently spiritual. Yeh defines The Village as “a group of people looking for meaning.” It has been Yeh’s goal to rekindle a spirit of humanity in this inner-city neighborhood and to build a true community in which people are reconnected to each other. In her view, this commitment is a perfect reflection of the Taoist understanding that “our strength lies in our weakness and our vulnerability is our protection.” In so defining her work, Yeh has created a unique approach to urban revitalization.

The theme of art and the importance of art in rebuilding the human spirit and in creating place remains consistent. According to Yeh:

The Village is where art and society and politics and social work are all merging into one, and this is where the arts are the skeleton and the backbone of everything we deliver. I always say that art is not just the product that we produce, like a mural, a park, and a performance. It’s much more essential to our daily activities. Art is creativity in thinking, in methodology, in implementation. That’s what we call art. (Local Heroes.)

Village Board Member Donald Kelly suggests that in traditional revitalization programs, physical change (“bricks and mortar”) and economic programs (such as job training) have not been effective in fostering community change because they fail to address the motivations and spiritual needs of residents. The Village’s mission is to revitalize the neighborhood by rebuilding the spirit of its people and, through that transformative work, creating a place that reflects a new sense of beauty and caring.

Phil Laggiere, through his association with Con Kenney, director of reengineering at Fannie Mae, notes that “successful grassroots projects like The Village should be seen as crucial incubators for social innovation. There seems to be a growing consensus that The Village has made important discoveries about community revitalization that takes root not so much in buildings or training programs, but in a sense of trust and commitment that comes from hands-on involvement in rebuilding their neighborhood.” (*Penn Gazette*, alumnae magazine for University of Pennsylvania, August 2000.)

Yeh realized early on in the development of The Village that there was a basic paradox within this and other poor communities. Success was defined as ultimately gaining an economic position that would allow residents to leave the community for other neighborhoods or for the suburbs. She felt that the community could not rebuild itself if its best citizens were constantly leaving it behind. Consequently, her work in The Village has tried to help reconnect residents to their community by building self-esteem and pride of place. The goal is to encourage residents to stay in or to return to the neighborhood, thus forming a strong core of people who live in the area by choice and who bring to it skills, stability, and community pride.

Grass Roots Organizing

Yeh and The Village staff maintain a deep commitment to grassroots democratic processes. Village projects from social programs to the creation of parks, educational space, and housing, have grown out

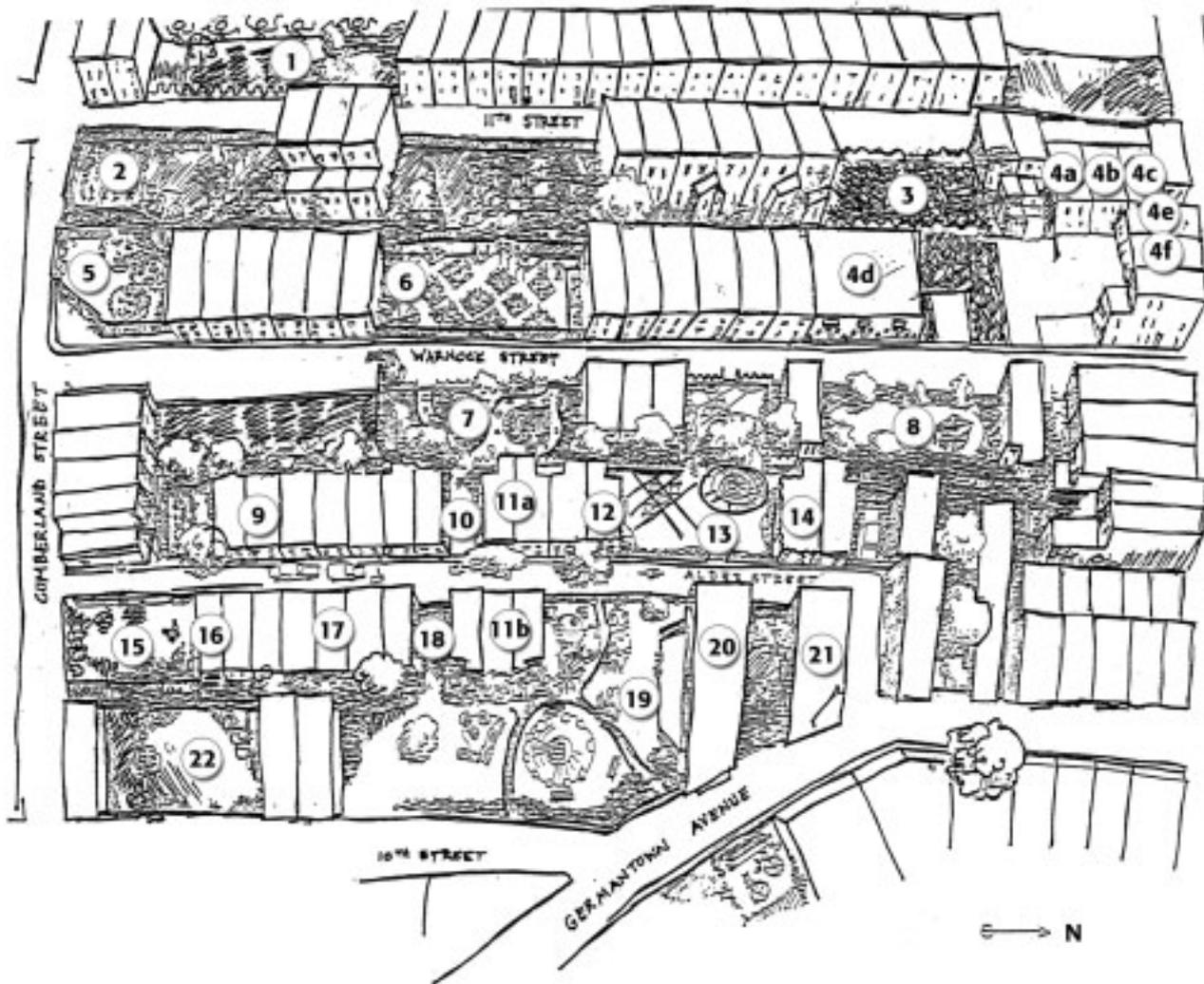
of the needs and concerns of community members. In the staff’s view, the process of community-based conceptualization and goal setting establishes a meaningful connection to the place. Staff members strive for a sense of connection with members of the neighborhood and with each other, believing that this will nurture community and create mutual respect and responsibility. While community participation can be complex, slow, and difficult; Village staff see it as “profound and deeply rewarding” when it works. In the view of neighborhood residents and State Senator Shirley Kitchen, it is difficult, if not impossible to bring about meaningful change through a top-down approach.

PLACE

The brief trip from the center of Philadelphia to The Village is a journey from one world to another. The physical manifestations of abandonment are everywhere — boarded up buildings, trash-filled streets, and vacant lots filled with toxic debris. But traveling down Germantown Avenue, there are signs of hope. Although the physical buildings are modest and in disrepair, grocery, clothing, electronics, and furniture stores on Germantown Avenue are busy and filled with shoppers. People of all ages, including young mothers with children, are on the streets and in the restaurants.

Moving along Germantown Avenue not far from the commercial strip, the first glimpse of The Village is of the education building, a modest, brown, wooden structure whose exterior trim has been painted bright blue. The building is flanked by Ile Ife Park, the first of The Village’s art parks. The color, mosaic sculpture, and mural

THE VILLAGE "HEART" NEIGHBORHOOD



- 1 11th Street Youth Construction Park
- 2 Village Vegetable Farm
- 3 Kujenga Pamoja Park
- 4 a-f Village Homes
- 5 Children's Garden
- 6 Community Vegetable Garden
- 7 Magical Garden
- 8 Family Park
- 9 2509 Alder Street (Administration Building)
- 10 Angel Alley
- 11 Alder 4 - buildings targeted for renovation
 - a. Crafts workshop and Teen Building
 - b. Teen Building
- 12 Teen Building and Computer Lab
- 13 Meditation Park
- 14 Crafts Building
- 15 Guardian Angel Park
- 16 2501 Alder Street (Staff Offices)
- 17 2509 Alder Street (Kitchen and Silk Screen Studio)
- 18 Happy Alley
- 19 Ile Ife Park
- 20 Educational Building
- 21 Abandoned Building - future renovation site for expanded education building
- 22 Vacant Lot - future site of the Village Garden Center

that define the park, signal an arrival to a place that is very different from its surrounding urban context. This area is the northernmost tip of The Village Heart.

Fifteen years ago, when The Village started, three quarters of its area consisted of vacant lots and abandoned properties. Today, over 100 garbage-strewn lots have been transformed into parks, gardens, murals and sculptures. Six dilapidated buildings have been converted into studios, education centers, and offices. The heart of The Village is readily identifiable through the consistent use of color and materials which differentiate it from neighboring streets and buildings. The low decorative walls surrounding the parks are all painted in a warm buff color and adorned with bits of mosaic tile. Brightly colored mosaic sculptures, larger-than-life figures, and



Restored Housing, Village Heart

murals depicting guardian angels in African-American motifs are startling in contrast to their stark surroundings. Although modest in budget and landscaping, the parks send a clear message that something important is happening.

The small, narrow, modestly-renovated buildings that house Village programs are painted the same buff color and are easily recognized by tile motifs on their facades and rooftops, decorated with the same undulating form as the park walls. The park spaces are open, not gated, and although simple in planting and “hardscape” materials, they bear no signs of vandalism or graffiti. The cornerstone building that is the main education facility was among the first spaces to be renovated. That first renovation team included Steve Sayre, a builder and writer who worked closely with Yeh in the early years, JoJo Williams, and Maxton. Rex Ingram, a local architect and dedicated volunteer, designed some early schemes for The Village Cultural Center.

The experience of walking the streets of The Village Heart stands in marked contrast to the devastation in nearby areas where abandoned buildings filled with trash and large expanses of vacant land have served as a repository for decades of neglect. Here, there is beauty in the bold murals and sculptures that adorn The Village parks. Guardian angels of colorful glass mosaics watch over an alley formerly used for drug deals, now clean and lit. Neighbors know and greet each other by name, and front stoops are swept and tended with planters.

The Parks

Ile Ife Park

Each park within The Village Heart has its own personality and history. Begun by Yeh in 1986 when funds were virtually nonexistent, Ile Ife was the first of The Village parks. The design revolves around a center circle created after the lot was cleared. Within this circle, Yeh and neighborhood children created a sculptural stand of trees made with bits of glass and debris cleared from the site and turned into a mosaic sculpture. To introduce color, the wall of the education center was transformed into a mural, and later a performance stage was added. Tanbark paths and simple plantings of shrubbery and trees added greenery.



Ile Ife Park

Angel Alley

Angel Alley, an overlooked space between two buildings, was once a favorite hiding place for dealers and muggers. After clearing the alley, which is only about 10 feet across, it became a gallery space of sorts, with mosaic angels along one wall and mosaic faces along the other. In an inner city full of danger, Yeh evoked Ethiopian angels as guardians to protect The Village.



Angel Alley mosaic mural

Meditation Park

In Meditation Park, completed in 1993, Yeh wanted to create a place for neighbors to relax and reflect, to become “re-centered.” By this time, she was able to rely on the many local workers committed to The Village. Yeh created a design concept, discussed it with community residents, and formed a neighborhood team to build it. The mosaic tree mural reflects Islamic influences, as does the mosaic pattern of the pavement. The undulating walls that contain the park are characterized by undulating, decorative details from Mali architecture. Though some of the parks are seen as transitory, possibly giving way to future development, this one at the center of The Village has become the location for an annual Rites of Passage ceremony and has a special quality of tranquility. Yeh says that, “To save this park, I would lie down in front of the bulldozers.”



Meditation Park

Warnock Street Park

Warnock Street Park is a vegetable garden, producing fresh vegetables that are distributed throughout The Village at the August harvest. Since soil in the neighborhood is typically contaminated with arsenic and lead, soil was imported and planting beds were built. Residents have raised vegetables for use in nutrition and cooking programs.

Guardian Angel Park

At the foot of a key corner on Alder Street, Guardian Angel Park is one of the more dramatic sculpture gardens. The murals here are particularly bright and can be seen from several vantage points along adjacent streets. It is here that Big Man has created his colorful and powerful “larger-than-life” mosaic figures. These were



Guardian Angel Park

built by the children from nearby Harntraft Elementary School and The Village construction crew some years ago. Neighbors bring chairs and evening meals into this park, and children play protected by the low Village walls.

Village Eagles Youth Park

A recent collaboration with the Philadelphia Eagles Youth Partnership, the philanthropy wing of the Philadelphia Eagles football team, has brought a potentially powerful partner to The Village. In the summer of 2000, team members came to The Village to work with residents on building the Village Eagles Youth Park. New play equipment for young children was donated by the team, and murals and design details, consistent with The Village’s design vocabulary, were developed by Yeh, Big Man, Andre Chamorro (artist and manager of Village Crafts), and Village crews. The excitement generated by the visit of Philadelphia’s NFL team to the neighborhood was enormous and bodes well for future collaborations. The Philadelphia Eagles and The Village are both eager to make this an annual event.

DESIGN

The design concept of The Village is “organic,” emerging through the aesthetic sense, values, and identity of the local community. It is based upon the premise that ordinary people can take things into their own hands and change them for the better. Over time the builders, artists and community groups who participate in the creation of each place in The Village leave their own mark on the work and integrate it further into the fabric of the community.

Although Yeh oversees the design, it is, in the language of The Village, “architecture without architects.”

In the last three years Cicada Architects has been engaged to develop an informal series of design guidelines for The Village. The guidelines were intended to formalize the design vocabulary that had been established over the years, addressing such questions as “How do you know when you’ve entered The Village?” and “What makes it different from the surrounding neighborhood?” The guidelines will ensure that what has been established as the visual character of The Village will be understood and respected in the years to come.



Meditation Park mural



Village Crafts Building

The design vocabulary that emerged through the efforts of Yeh and of community members who participated over time is straightforward but surprisingly effective. Walls surrounding the parks and Village buildings are painted in a warm buff color that sets them off from neighboring buildings that are often brick or dark wood. Village buildings and walls are topped by an undulating pattern that draws on influences from Mali architecture. They also feature inset tiles that give a distinctive, colorful look to walls and facades. Mosaic themes continue on sidewalks, and mosaic inlay on the facades of Village buildings further announce a connection to each other. The mosaic motifs are consistent with the murals in Angel Alley and with the sculptures in several parks. Open spaces have been cultivated and are characterized by murals and sculptures built by community members. Together these elements create a beautiful and identifiable place.

PROGRAMS

While a great deal of emphasis has been placed on Village parks and murals, in many ways its true heart is in social programs that have grown out of the building projects. Each program that has been developed addresses a multitude of needs. For example, when Yeh began working with neighborhood children, she discovered that many of them were hungry. As a result, The Village Community Vegetable Garden was conceived. In creating the garden, the community learned about soil and horticulture, and a program was developed to teach nutrition and cooking. Similarly, The Village Theater was born as a way to help children and families share history and to come to terms with their personal stories and the

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Planting Village garden

losses many had suffered. Under the leadership of German Wilson, children and adults learn to enact their stories while improving their self-expression and writing skills.

Programs are organized into nine areas, each with a full-time manager as well as a clearly defined mandate.

- *Education through the Arts* encompasses after-school, weekend, and summer programs for youth of all ages. Programs include art for the “fledglings “ (six to twelve year old children), homework assistance for the older children, and a series of after-school cooking, art, and drama classes. In addition, The Village partners with local public schools and housing projects to teach art and to create art-based open spaces at or near the



Village student learning Chinese letters



Village children model hats they made

schools themselves. Recently, services for children have expanded to address the needs of those who are learning disabled.

- *Land Transformation and Environmental Programs* include park building on abandoned land, environmental education, and The Village Tree Farm, which has begun to grow trees and plants on a former brownfield site adjacent to Fotteral Square. The Tree Farm teaches environmental education to youth working there, grows trees for the greening outreach program, and hopes ultimately to become a profit center for The Village by selling trees to other organizations. The Grassroots Transformation Task Force mobilizes for lot clean-up and garden projects. The Outreach Greening Program, headed by Ken



Tree planting at farm

Kolodziej, has gone further, reaching out to the broader neighborhood to do simple planting and seeding on key vacant lots throughout North Philadelphia.

- *The Village Theater* grew out of an early realization by Yeh that the people in North Philadelphia had painful but important personal stories to tell, and through self-expression, they would begin to heal. Yeh felt that “we must do theater for our survival.” Common topics include rape, murder, and abandonment. “Dead Children Speaking,” one of the plays put together by Wilson and the community, deals with loss due to drugs and violence. The Village Theater has toured nationally.
- *Village Hands on Health* combines health education and promotion with art. Nutrition education, health care, pregnancy

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Village theater



Annual harvest

prevention, cooking, and a myriad of related programs including Narcotics Anonymous help teach residents to care for themselves and their families.

- *Festivals, Events, and Exhibitions*, including a harvest celebration and a rites of passage festival, enable the community to come together to share accomplishments and to celebrate individual members. The Village commemorates the progression of each year during these special ceremonies. During Rites of Passage, Meditation Park is transformed into ritual space “in which we try to understand the meaning of our existence and come closer to each other.”

During Kujenga Pamoja, according to Yeh, “Love, energy, and life force are celebrated at the end of each year. Kojenga Pomoja, the annual Village arts and harvest festival, is literally translated as ‘together we build.’” During this celebration, Villagers stop at each household and offer fresh vegetables from the garden with the message “May the Spirit bless this house. And may the Spirit bless the children.”

- *Village Crafts* encompasses several programs for young people in pottery, silk-screening, painting, and drawing, and is working toward production of Village crafts for sale. Currently the program is being redesigned to provide a better method of delivering products to market. This will help promote knowledge about running small businesses and other employment opportunities in the community.



Village crafts

- **Construction/Renovation** refers to the collective set of efforts required to return abandoned properties to community use. Reclaimed properties now provide space for The Village’s education programs in the arts, a teen center, Village offices, and resident housing. These properties have been improved by community residents and the community is planning for the addition of new Village facilities.
- **Outreach Activities** include projects with community groups including prison inmates in the region and around the country, as well as greening projects in vacant lots around North Philadelphia. To date, The Village has “cleaned and greened” over 100 vacant lots in areas surrounding The Village. This group plans to bid on city contracts for lot maintenance and

rehabilitation, using Village youth and neighborhood residents as staff, who will receive training in urban ecology as part of their work.

At a recent conference sponsored by the Philadelphia University of the Arts and Painted Bride Center, The Village presented “Unimaginable Isolation: Stories from Graterford.” This project helps long-term prison inmates “escape into creativity.” A parallel project features thirteen self-portraits hung in cells at Eastern State Penitentiary.

- **The Village Press** focuses on the publication of books, newsletters, and curricula, and it hopes ultimately to publish program manuals about The Village’s methods and philosophy.

ORGANIZATION/LEADERSHIP

Staff in Transition

Like many projects organized by a visionary leader, The Village is deeply intertwined with the philosophy, methodology, and spirit of Yeh. In its initial stages, The Village organization was characterized by what Yeh termed “organized chaos” and by an iterative process which seemed to recognize multiple outcomes from every new venture. Projects such as vegetable gardening, mural painting and theatre productions developed as ways to address multiple community issues through shared artistic experience.

The Village staff and board recognize, however, that to succeed in the long-term, it must learn to thrive without the leadership and

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Village staff

presence of Yeh. Yeh is trying to adjust her schedule so that it is not structured so rigidly by the needs of The Village. The organizational goal is to free her of day-to-day operating responsibilities but retain her creative input as “Director of Ideas.”

As the organization has grown in scope and stature, it has by necessity become more formalized in structure. The Village is professional and accountable for a broad range of services and programs and for dispensing the more than \$1 million that comes to the organization. What was once one woman working in a vacant lot with a few neighborhood children now has a \$1.2 million operating budget and a staff of 20 full-time equivalent workers. Staff members know they must continue the transition from a structure that revolves around Yeh, to an organization that is more decentralized and clear in its sense of purpose.

The staff has recently engaged in a series of retreats to build and strengthen the administration of The Village. The aim is to refine the goals of each program group and to further empower the professional program managers who have joined the staff in recent years. The retreats were developed in response to unrest among managers who did not feel empowered to act and were frustrated by vague job descriptions. At the same time, The Village is trying to devise self-evaluation systems to help it better measure the outcomes of its efforts and provide feedback to improve programs.

The mission statement that came out of the staff retreat reaffirms the goal that is manifest in The Village and its programs: “To build

community through innovative arts, educational, social, construction, and economic development programs and to do justice to the humanity of people who live in inner city North Philadelphia or similar urban situations.”

The retreat also resulted in an articulation of key principles centered around valuing each individual human being. Village staff identified essential outcomes for the organization which include:

- Maintaining a fiscally responsible and viable budget.
- Developing a nurturing, dynamic, and effective administrative structure.
- Engaging and supporting participants’ efforts to understand and deepen their investment in their community, their spirituality, and their emotional and physical well-being.
- Providing workshops and activities that foster self-esteem, inspire innate creativity, build skills, nurture individual aspirations, preserve the natural environment, and strengthen cultural heritage.

A series of specific standards guides the process of realizing these “essential outcomes.”

Board of Directors

The Board of Directors, like the staff, is currently in a period of transition. Historically, the Board has been composed of community

members and a few outsiders who Yeh had known through her previous work. All agree, however, that in order to “grow the organization,” the Board has to expand to encompass skills and talents that cannot be found in the inner circle.

The challenge is to help restructure the Board to assume more of a governing role and to launch an estimated \$11 million capital campaign to build an endowment for The Village. While the Board has historically served in an advisory role, it must now assume a more active supervisory role, keeping The Village from growing too quickly and determining how it will move forward when Yeh is no longer in charge.

FINANCES

The accompanying chart shows a steady progression in operating expenses in the past decade. Since the 1995 fiscal year, significant investment has been made in capital improvements such as the Education Center, Crafts Studio, Teen Building, and other projects. Earlier projects reflect low-cost renovations of existing abandoned buildings. More recent capital expenditures reflect the construction of six new units of Village Homes, scheduled for occupancy in 2001.

As the operating and capital expenses have increased, so too have the variety and diversity of funding sources. Foundation grants from a wide variety of supporters constitute the largest single group of donors. The Village has on staff a full-time development officer whose job it is to write grants and obtain funding. While the Knight and Wallace-Reader’s Digest Funds provided the largest fund

THE VILLAGE OF ARTS AND HUMANITIES

STATEMENT OF ACTIVITIES FOR THE YEAR ENDED AUGUST 31, 2001

REVENUE, GAINS, AND OTHER SUPPORT:	2000	2001	EXPENSES:		
GRANTS	730,944	1,740,679	PROGRAM SERVICES		
GOVERNMENT FUNDING	165,574	335,991	COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT	80,590	389,197
CONTRIBUTIONS	83,544	70,593	EDUCATION	384,236	401,207
PROGRAM INCOME	142,025	362,309	PERFORMANCE AND EVENTS	47,400	130,398
INTEREST AND DIVIDEND INCOME	17,496	41,215	PARKS AND GARDENS	373,425	501,353
			TOTAL PROGRAM SERVICES	885,651	1,422,155
TOTAL REVENUES, GAINS, AND OTHER SUPPORT*	1,139,583	2,550,787	SUPPORTING SERVICES		
			MANAGEMENT AND GENERAL	87,952	157,279
			FUNDRAISING	84,793	60,951
			TOTAL SUPPORTING SERVICES	172,745	218,230
			TOTAL EXPENSES	1,058,396	1,640,385
			INCREASE IN NET ASSETS	81,187	910,402
			NET ASSETS AT BEGINNING OF YEAR	916,663	997,850
			NET ASSETS AT END OF YEAR	997,850	1,908,252

* REVENUE FIGURES INCLUDE ALL NEW REVENUE RECORDED DURING THE FISCAL YEAR ACCORDING TO ACCEPTED ACCOUNTING PRINCIPLES. THEREFORE THIS FIGURE INCLUDES MULTI-YEAR GRANTS TO BE SPENT IN SUBSEQUENT YEARS.

amounts for fiscal year 2001, the William Penn Foundation, the First Union Bank, the Independence Foundation, Pew Charitable Trusts, and the Rockefeller PACT have made multi-year commitments which provide The Village with a degree of autonomy in planning its activities. Funding from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, which has supported The Village in increasing amounts since its inception, is virtually unrestricted, reflecting trust and confidence in the project. The National Endowment for the Arts has also contributed to The Village continuously for many years.

Village Homes, the recent housing initiative in The Village Heart, consists of six three-bedroom units (each 1,632 square feet) of affordable housing, including one handicapped-accessible home. The funding for Village Homes includes a \$638,000 grant from the State Office of Housing and Community Development through the Philadelphia Redevelopment Authority. Additional grants for housing have come through local banks and foundations. The per-unit cost to build is \$133,996. Although the Authority's per square foot goal was \$75, Village Homes are costing closer to \$84 dollars a foot, which the Authority feels is typical for the timing of construction in a busy real estate market. Each three-bedroom unit will sell for \$35,000 to an individual who qualifies as a low-income buyer.

Although first mortgages are obtained through conventional banks, "soft" second mortgages are available through the Redevelopment Authority. These second mortgages last for 10 years and will be forgiven at a rate of 10% per year as long as low-income individuals occupy the units. This is a standard Department of Housing and Urban

Development mechanism for supporting affordable housing, one that has worked successfully throughout Philadelphia. Both city and state representatives acknowledged that the main problem of first-time, low-income homebuyers is to secure the initial bank loan. In this area, the typical first-time homebuyer is a single woman with two children and an annual income of \$18,000. Although monthly expenses in one of these units will be less than average rents, it is often difficult for potential buyers to establish credit and procure a down payment.

Since the site visit, two three-story buildings have become available in The Village Heart. Although in the long run The Village does not wish to retain ownership of land, it recently decided to acquire those buildings and renovate them over time. This decision was based upon the importance of ensuring that any redevelopment of those parcels will not result in demolition and will respect the scale, character, and mix of uses critical to protecting the character of The Village Heart.

IMPACT ON THE CITY

Testimonials

As with many projects of this kind, measuring impact is difficult. Although there are beginning to be some quantitative measures, much of the evidence of impact is anecdotal, such as the comments of people who have lived in the neighborhood for years.

□ *Ester Wideman, Friends of Fotteral Square, Village Board:*

Ester Wideman became involved in the neighborhood when she decided to clean up Fotteral Square, a large public park across from Fairhill Housing which was at the time dominated by drug dealers and crime. She turned to The Village for help and was ultimately connected to city agencies that funded clean-up and assisted in maintenance and patrols. Wideman has since become a Board member and remains active in the community.

Although she grew up in The Village neighborhood, for many years Wideman lived outside the community. She recently moved back because of the changes going on in the neighborhood. She attests that others she knew from the neighborhood are also looking to come back because they now feel secure here. In Wideman's words, "There are now safe places to sit. There is color and beauty and brightness where there used to be trash. If you walk through trash you feel like trash; if you walk through beauty, you feel beautiful."

Wideman also felt that you could pick out The Village kids out on the street: "They have a different attitude; they feel good about themselves. Village kids walk tall, talk tall, and aim high."

She pointed out that the improvements have lasted and have been cared for, which "says a lot in this neighborhood where everything gets ruined."

□ *Terry Harrison, Vietnam Vet, Lifelong Resident, Village Maintenance Manager:*

Terry Harrison became involved with The Village by working as a volunteer to clean up Fotteral Square, and he is now maintenance manager for the entire project. He credits The Village with a large part of the neighborhood turnaround. In his words, he cannot believe that in North Philadelphia you "can now sit outside on a bench instead of ducking bullets. Before, if you weren't from the neighborhood, you couldn't come in; it was completely controlled by the drug trade."

Harrison, a Vietnam veteran, also has a personal reason for his loyalty to The Village. He openly discusses the fact that he had "a lot of anger" coming out of Vietnam and that in working with Yeh, he has managed to channel that anger into constructive actions: "I learned from Lily to manage myself and my anger, how to be diplomatic." It was with great pride that he told the site visit team, "I haven't been violent in 10 years."

□ *Elnor Dawkins, Fairhill Weed & Seed Committee, Fairhill Resident:*

Elnor Dawkins is a moving force at Fairhill Housing where she has lived for many years. She is deeply grateful to The Village. As she notes, "The Village took my kids off the street — offered them a choice for the first time. If given a choice, kids will choose what's positive."

Dawkins appreciates the fact that people come from all over the world to see The Village and the change in her neighborhood. Through its work, she noted, The Village took away the dealers' hiding places and anonymity. Then cops joined in and started "doing their job."

□ **James "Big Man" Maxton, Operations Director, The Village:**

In the Village's Long-Range Plan, James Maxton makes the following statement:

I have watched as so many different races and nationalities of people have come to this once hell-hole and speak about its beauty...I've seen the light in the eyes of planners and developers from other urban areas who hope to export a piece of this



James "Big Man" Maxton

particular concept to their community. It has given me a great sense of pride to read in the newspaper and see on TV people talking about my community in relation to beauty and hope rather than drugs and death. To see the little kids run and play happily at The Village through a maze of colored sculpture-filled gardens as though they were in another place and time...

□ **Heidi Warren, former managing director of The Village:**

Heidi Warren, The Village's first managing director, provided the following testimony of the program's impact:

I witnessed and became an advocate for the power of art to build hope, pride, and a sense of possibility for the future. We knew that we couldn't solve people's problems, but we could inspire individuals with their own innate creativity. We could create beauty that changed people's attitudes about their neighborhoods and their neighbors. Making murals, building parks, and creating theater productions and festivals enabled people of very different backgrounds and perspectives to connect with and learn from each other. The result for many was heightened pride and a new, more optimistic view of the future. This led some participants to make major changes in their lives, to break free from addiction, to gain economic independence, to buy their own home, to improve their education, to seek new opportunities for their children. I learned that one doesn't have to confront those large societal problems head-on to make a difference. Simple answers can have a powerful impact. Ultimately change comes from within. Nurturing people by "feeding their spirit" is the real tool for building a just, empowered, and visionary society.

Other Measures of Impact

Residents indicated that they feel that the number of unsupervised children roaming the neighborhood and the number of incidents

GOLD MEDAL WINNER

The Village of Arts and Humanities

involving such children has decreased dramatically over the past five years. Over 1,300 children and teens have participated in the lead poisoning prevention and awareness programs, and there is a reported increase in parents seeking lead testing for their children at the health centers in The Village area compared to the rest of the city.

Despite relatively modest program enrollment figures, The Village estimates that, broadly defined, it interacts with or becomes known to about 13,000 people annually. Through after-school programs and extensive outreach in Philadelphia, nationally, and internationally, as well as through employment and summer programs, adult activities and meetings, Village theatrical productions, collaborative ventures with other organizations, and speaking engagements around the country. Total enrollment in Village programs has increased over

30% from last year. Similarly, parental involvement in 1999 showed a 300% increase over previous years.

The Fledglings Program for the youngest children (six to 12 years) enrolls about 35 children per semester and involves about 20 parents. Within that group, 18 children are returning and 17 are coming for the first time. In 1999, 57% of the fledglings in the core program showed improvement on their report cards between the beginning and end of the school year. They greet their Fledglings teacher with a hug, get a snack when they come in, and are welcomed into a place that is safe.

Teen programs meet three days a week and have enrolled 38 young people. The teens have a Monday meeting in which they talk about



Village teens



Young Village artist

issues of concern to them; on other days they attend theater workshops, cooking class and other programs. In 1999, two teens graduated high school and won scholarships to attend college at Indiana University and the University of Pennsylvania. Teens can also access summer internships through this program. They get paid minimum wage to work in Village programs, learning horticulture, building repair, maintenance, and other skills. Summer programs will enroll about 25 teens and 60 fledglings and hire Village youth as counselors and tree farm staff. In 1999, summer programs had a waiting list of 75. It is also interesting to note that 90% of participants re-enroll. All paid jobs are minimum wage positions.

The Deputy Director of the Pennsylvania Council of the Arts, Heather Dougherty, feels that what The Village has done is “almost impossible,” given the initial scarcity of resources and the overwhelming social forces that conspire against this kind of project. In the Council’s view, The Village is more about revitalizing community than it is about the arts, although the aesthetics and social programs are not separable. According to the Council, The Village has had a greater effect on the community than most “arts” programs and has done more with fewer resources than any other group in the state. “This program,” says Philip Horn, Executive Director of the Council, “is about saving lives.”

Board and staff members feel that The Village’s impact goes far beyond North Philadelphia. Yeh’s work is well known at both the state and national level, and she has received a Governor’s Award

for her work. Yeh has spoken at the National Assembly of Arts Agencies and at other national conferences around the country. Recently Dean Gary Hack of the Graduate School of Fine Arts at the University of Pennsylvania included Yeh in an international conference in Bilbao, and in Hack’s words, “Lily stole the show with her account of The Village.”

The amount of national publicity received by The Village is unusual for a project of this size and scope. A National Public Radio documentary television series in which The Village is featured has made it relatively well known and has made residents feel proud of their community. Other national publications, such as *Reader’s Digest*, the *Pennsylvania Gazette* and *Shelterforce Magazine*, have done feature articles on this unusual place.

The reach of The Village also extends both nationally and internationally. Yeh has presented The Village at numerous national meetings around the country, most recently at the U.S. Conference of Mayors. In 1994, supported by a grant from the Lila Wallace Reader’s Digest Foundation, Yeh, Warren and Glenn Jolsten adapted The Village model to Nairobi’s Korogocho area—a vast slum of 100,000 people located next to a garbage dump. During this visit, Yeh and her staff worked in this impoverished village to create a new park/plaza in front of the bleak village church, with sculpture created by Korogocho residents and murals painted by Yeh and village children. In 2000 and 2001, Yeh and Wilson visited Korogocho again, and together with Father Alex, a local priest, continued the transformation of the church courtyard

GOLD MEDAL WINNER

The Village of Arts and Humanities

into a garden with painted guardian angels and sculpture. With Wilson's theater skills, they organized performances and festivals for local people to celebrate their accomplishments.

FUTURE PLANS

The Village has ambitious plans for the future. According to Yeh, it is essential to have two things firmly in place to ensure the future of The Village: 1) the successful completion of a capital campaign for close to \$11 million—enough to create an endowment and to complete the new performing arts venue, cafe, and headquarters

and 2) an endowment-based cash flow and income stream. Staff and Board are also pursuing income generation through the development of effective markets for Village crafts; the marketing of Village methods of urban revitalization; and the provision of technical assistance on horticulture and placemaking throughout the city. Finally, with the recent availability of two three-story buildings in The Village Heart, the organization is planning on acquiring, renovating and expanding gradually to ensure that the improved buildings remain consistent with the neighborhood and retain the small scale and mix of uses that characterize The Village Heart.



Guardian Angel Park

ASSESSING PROJECT SUCCESS

HOW WELL THE PROJECT MET ITS GOALS

Transforming a neighborhood into a “vital urban village in which people are reconnected with their families, sheltered in decent housing, sustained by meaningful work, nurtured by each other's care, and together educate their children.”

There is no doubt that The Village has had an important impact on the lives of many local residents. Community residents we talked to all attest to the impact of The Village on their perceptions of their own community and on the degree of safety and connection they now feel. As a result of The Village, people feel safe enough to use the parks and open spaces they have created; they note that their children have a new sense of possibility in their lives and that they “walk with their heads held high.” Drug dealers are no longer

operating on the streets and alleys of The Village. Observing interactions in after-school classes at the Village, and in talking with staff, it is clear that important bonds of caring and mutual respect have been established. This is, however, a goal whose completion is ultimately difficult to quantify.

Building community through innovative arts, educational, social, construction and economic development programs.

Clearly, the processes of reclaiming parks and alleys, the construction work that community residents have joined together to accomplish, and the extensive after-school and outreach programs have all reached many adults and children. The theatre program has given national recognition to the talents and stories of the people of this place that has been so long neglected. The Village's ongoing commitment to a grassroots approach to facility and program development represents a sustained determination to further this goal and to continue to build community.

Creating a new sense of possibility and hope in the community.

The approach of The Village to the creation of parks, art, and programs remains consistent with this philosophy. The parks have literally been created out of "what society has disdained and thrown away." The transformation of debris ridden lots into places of beauty and community pride is the physical manifestation of this philosophy. Similarly, the reclaiming of abandoned buildings and their transformation into centers for art and crafts programs, and more recently low-income housing, is a dramatic representation of this goal in action.

Building democracy through a renewed sense of participation in the community.

There is a strong commitment to grassroots organizing as the basis for decisions about which park will gain community attention and how it will be developed. Similarly, the staff has recently reorganized to continue to decentralize responsibility in a way that reflects The Village's mission. As more successful places are created and good programs continue to grow and be effective, more people will be attracted to The Village community, and that will create expanded opportunities for further democratization.

SELECTION COMMITTEE COMMENTS

The Selection Committee found The Village to be "bold...absolutely spectacular" in how it looks, what it has achieved, and the process it has used to get there. Committee members commented that it is the synergy of elements that makes The Village so exciting; it is visually striking while unpretentious and remaining a grassroots, hands-on effort. It involves people doing things with their own hands in their own community, "local people creating their neighborhood...and that is a spectacular achievement."

In the view of the Committee, the design and development work has been responsive to community needs yet has developed slowly and thoughtfully from a modest lot beautification effort into a community-based program. Although The Village is based in art and landscape design, its founders understood that other community needs could be addressed by the project and have helped

it expand to include a series of social and economic programs that address a wide variety of community issues.

The scale of The Village, for the Selection Committee members, was a strength and strongly connected to its achievement. They suggested that there is a need for alternatives to big projects with their potential dangers and inequities: “If it’s possible to make a difference on this small a scale, it is possible to make a difference anywhere.” They noted, in fact, that the relatively small scale of the project enabled The Village to remain nimble and responsive to the input of community members.

The Selection Committee admired the ability of the project to have an immediate visible impact on neighborhood blocks by clearing a lot and planting grass and trees, for instance, without wading through city bureaucracy. Projects that focus on housing, Committee members noted, often endure long waits for approvals and financing before they can do something that has a noticeable impact on the nature of the setting. “You can’t wait... if you’re going to wait for the buildings before you do anything, you’re not going to be able to capture opportunities that require a quick response.”

The small scale of The Village also creates limitations. The Selection Committee questioned whether the programs sponsored by The Village were comprehensive enough to have a long-term impact on the neighborhood. Members noted that with the scale and depth of devastation, in terms of both human spirit and physical infrastructure, a sustained and comprehensive effort is needed.

Similarly, Committee members both praised and raised questions concerning the origins and nature of The Village’s leadership. Often, truly unique and creative projects come from the inspiration of a single person — in this case, Yeh. Her special genius gave The Village its form and gave the community its inspiration. As always in the case of an innovative project such as The Village, the presence of an inspired and visionary leader raises concerns about the future of the project when the founder moves on. Fortunately, The Village has been far sighted in addressing this issue directly while Yeh is still involved.

The Committee was especially impressed by the unique approach to urban change embodied in The Village. The Committee noted that using art as a tool of urban redevelopment is unusual and praised the spiritual and creative nature of the project — aspects that many other good urban projects ignore (“the work is poetic”). Committee members also commended the ability of The Village to work with limited funds, suggesting that its impact might be greater in the long run because it is modeling the ability to take action with scarce resources. The Village has taken discarded land and buildings and transformed them, creating hope and pride of place. “Doin’ with what ya got” is an approach that allows progress even in lean times. Vacant land, they noted, was a common and under-used problem/resource in poor neighborhoods, and The Village provided a model for transforming that deficit into an asset. While they acknowledged the possibility that some of these improvements may not be lasting, they felt that the permanence of the physical improvements was not critical to changing lives and outlooks.

Finally, Committee members questioned how much The Village is an island — a small area of change in a very big ocean of poverty and decay — and hence how much of an impact it was having. They noted that it was not yet proven as a replicable model. Even so, however, they saw The Village as “the physical manifestation of hope and possibility within an abandoned place... [It] brought life and soul and creativity to a place in a way that can be replicated anywhere there are people wishing to bring visible and immediate change in their own neighborhoods and communities.”

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Csaszar, T. (1994, September). “On Paul Keene and Lily Yeh: The Village of Arts and Humanities.” *New Art Examiner*, 22, 40.

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RELATED RUDY BRUNER AWARD WINNERS

Readers who are interested in The Village of Arts and Humanities may also wish to read about these Gold and Silver Medal winners from previous years:

ARTScorpsLA, Inc., Los Angeles, CA (1999)

National AIDS Memorial Grove,

Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, CA (1999)

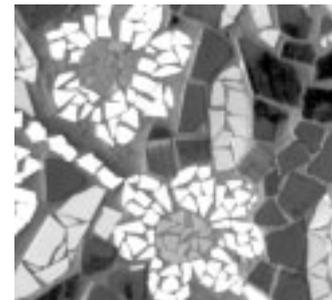
Project Row Houses, Houston, TX (1997)

Maya Angelou Community Initiative, Portland, OR (1995)

(For full bibliographic citations, please see Introduction. Information on all RBA winning projects is available at www.BrunerFoundation.org.)

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GOLD MEDAL WINNER

The Village of Arts and Humanities