

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE MAGAZINE

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTS

“YOUR BRAIN IS MORE POWERFUL THAN YOUR EYE.”

—ERIK DHONT, P. 172

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**CONCRETE
CROPS**



FARM FOR THE CITY GROWS FOOD THAT REFLECTS PHILADELPHIA'S DIVERSITY AND FEEDS ITS HOMELESS TOO.

BY JARED BREY

It had been storming periodically throughout the day, and a little after 5:00 p.m., as the offices were emptying in Center City, the sky turned dark again and the wind picked up. Lights were switching off in the buildings surrounding Thomas Paine Plaza. Workers crossing the plaza were calling their spouses or queuing up music for the ride home. A group of demonstrators was camped out across the street, calling for the abolition of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and another group of demonstrators was

gathered around the 10-foot-high statue of former Philadelphia Mayor Frank Rizzo on the south side of the plaza, calling for an end to police abuse.

In the middle of the plaza, swirled among the hardscape and the oversized replicas of bingo and Monopoly game pieces, trellises of tomatoes and beds of collard greens, African eggplants, Thai red chilis, Scotch bonnets, sorrel, sweet potatoes, and beets were soaking up the light rain. People were checking out bikes from

the plaza bike-share station, and a passerby was preaching to no one in particular: "God is everywhere. God is everything. God is technology."

"It's a very active and energetic space," Stan Morgan, one of the farmers working the garden, had said the day before. "We've been experiencing that since we've been here. That's just the climate of our society right now. Everything is high-energy. And we're trying to figure out how to be in community together with all of that."

ABOVE
A four-month farm installation from the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society has taken over one of three prominent public plazas in Center City Philadelphia.

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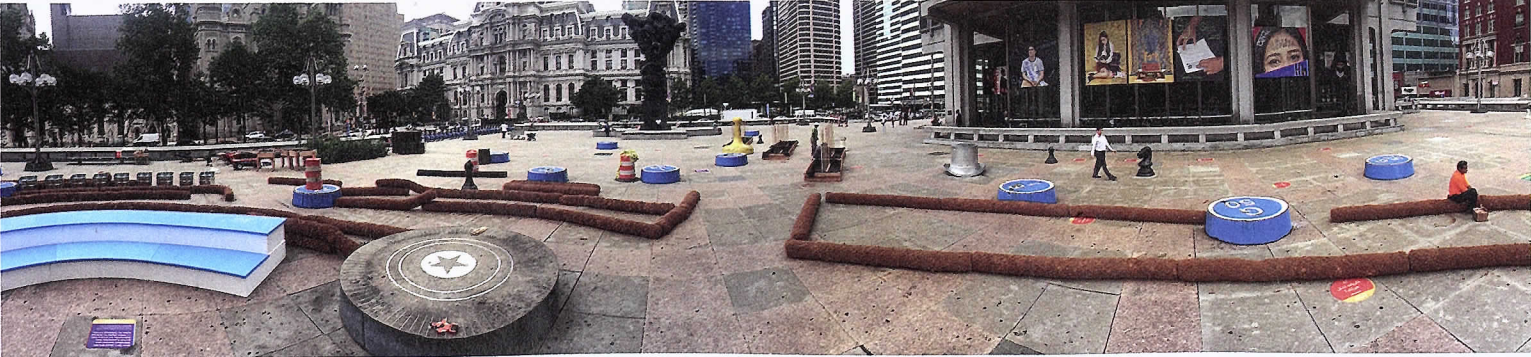
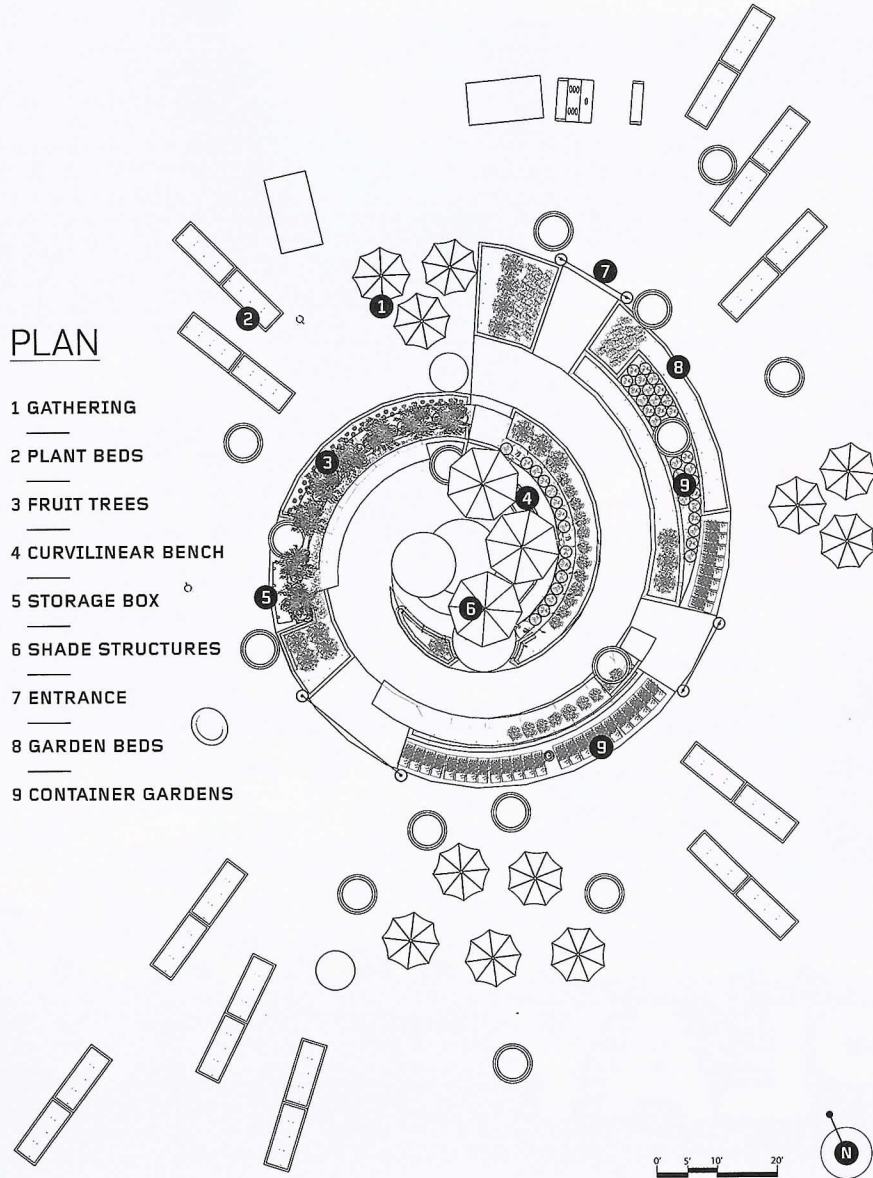
VIRIDIAN LANDSCAPE STUDIO

FARM FOR THE CITY — THOMAS PAINE PLAZA



Thomas Paine Plaza is a granite square directly across the street from city hall in the heart of Philadelphia. It's a mostly blank space except for the game pieces and various other public artworks, and, raised above the sidewalk to about eye level, it forms the podium of the 18-story Municipal Services Building.

Since June, the plaza has been home to Farm for the City, a four-month community garden installation hosted by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS). The project involves the cultivation of some 40 crops that can be found in various community



PENNSYLVANIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY, TOP LEFT; VIRIDIAN LANDSCAPE STUDIO, TOP RIGHT AND BOTTOM

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Signage marks the site; the farm is staffed seven days a week (from left are Keshia Medina, Samuel Harris, Darnell Drayton, Stanley Morgan, Charlyn Griffith, and Dylan DeVlieger); crop beds are organized in the shape of a nautilus to draw visitors in.

gardens around the city. And the produce is all being shared with Broad Street Ministry, which serves free lunch to around 200 homeless and low-income guests a day at its church building five blocks south. PHS expects the farm to produce at least 1,000 pounds of fruit and vegetables for the program. And it hopes that the installation will raise awareness about community gardens in Philadelphia, many of which have been sticking it out for decades only to find themselves threatened by development pressures in gentrifying neighborhoods.

"We decided [what to grow] based on conversations with Broad Street guests about what they want to eat,

conversations with the chef about what we could do to supplement what they have, and then conversations with gardeners, so we could feature some cool crops that our gardeners are growing that really speak to their cultures across the city," says Julianne Schrader Ortega, a vice president and the chief of programs at PHS.

The farm occupies 2,000 square feet in the middle of the plaza. It was designed and built by Viridian Landscape Studio and ThinkGreen LLC on a budget of around \$80,000, in response to a request for proposals issued last fall by PHS. The whole project, which includes frequent programming from June through Sep-

tember, was funded by a \$300,000 grant from the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage.

The trellises and beds are formed into a chambered nautilus shape meant to invite people into the garden space. "We started, like all designers do, with a piece of trace, and we kept sort of getting drawn to this nautilus shape," says Tavis Dockwiller, ASLA, the founder and principal of Viridian Landscape Studio. "We're sitting in a nautilus. The nautilus is the sign of renewal and ever growing, making the nautilus stronger and stronger. We really liked that idea, because community gardens are made by communities and lots of players."

THE CROPS INCLUDE COMMON HERBS AND VEGETABLES BUT ALSO PRODUCTS THAT REFLECT THE AFRICAN AMERICAN, PUERTO RICAN, AND IMMIGRANT COMMUNITIES.



The shape came out of a trace over an aerial shot of the plaza, with the lines winding around the stuck-in-place game pieces. And there were other constraints. The plaza itself forms the roof of the city's Department of Licenses and Inspection, so the designers had to mind strict weight requirements. Everything had to be built and inspected off-site and carried up to the plaza by hand. The soil is a split mix of compost, topsoil, and composted pine bark, says Dylan DeVlieger, one of the farmers; the pine bark was added to assist in drainage and prevent root rot, but DeVlieger says he's not sure it ended up being necessary.

"It's really hot up here, so everything just feels so dry," says Keshia

Medina, another farmer. "It's just a different level of paying attention to the plants. And the way they react to this space is also different. They took a while to green up and get full because of adapting to this space. And the lighting is different with all the buildings. If it's a sunny day in the afternoon, sometime after one o'clock, there is no sunlight," because the Municipal Services Building blocks it.

The crops include common herbs and vegetables but also products that reflect the African American, Puerto Rican, and immigrant communities that tend many of the city's community gardens: bitter melon, roselle, Thai basil, green pigeon peas, huau-

zontle, and Nigerian spinach. And the farmers have been careful to respect the community of people who were already spending time on the plaza when they arrived, DeVlieger says. They keep ice water available for anyone all day; they try not to overly police the space.

"I think, too, as a lot of areas in Center City have been developed, a lot of housing-insecure folks have been pushed out, and pushed, and pushed, and all those spaces are disappearing," DeVlieger says. "And as all that money is being poured into those projects, I don't think there's an equally large enough amount of money being poured into providing more services for folks."

ABOVE LEFT
The farm holds a range of crops planted in Philadelphia's diverse community gardens.

ABOVE RIGHT
Because of weight limits, all the materials had to be built off-site and carried up to the plaza by hand.

ROB CARDILLO, PENNSYLVANIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY. TOP LEFT: VIRIDIAN LANDSCAPE STUDIO. BOTTOM LEFT: PENNSYLVANIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY, RIGHT

VIRIDIAN LANDSCAPE STUDIO. LEFT: ROB CARDILLO, PENNSYLVANIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY, RIGHT

THE FARMERS HOPE THE PROJECT CAN INSPIRE A FUTURE FOR THE PLAZA THAT IS GREENER AND COOLER.

Public space in Center City is being transformed as well. In the past several years, two other half-century-old plazas within sight of Paine have been completely redesigned: Dilworth Plaza on the west side of city hall (now Dilworth Park, managed by the quasi-public Center City District) and the iconic LOVE Park across the street. Both formerly had sunken hardscape plazas that have now been leveled and partially vegetated. They're now regularly programmed, and the homeless people who used to rest there have had to find other places to go.

Thomas Paine Plaza's time is coming, too. Recent controversies surrounding the placement of the Rizzo statue have dovetailed with conversations about the long-range future of the space. A spokesman for Mayor Jim Kenney says that funds for a redesign of the plaza are included in the current fiscal year's capital budget, and the Department of Public Property plans to issue a request for qualifications for the redesign this fall. Reconstruction could begin in 2021.



PHS and the design team hope that, although it's temporary, the project will support a long-term future for other community gardens by raising awareness and getting more advocates involved when garden plots are going to sheriff's sale. And the farm-



ers hope the project can inspire a future for the plaza that is greener and cooler, but respects the people who have already been making use of it.

"I don't feel like we're setting an example," Morgan says. "I feel like we're bringing out an example that has been set for a number of years. This has been the way of life for a lot of marginalized communities and folks that have had nothing for quite a long time, specifically speaking about some of the black and brown communities we see across America. This is how they've been surviving for a long time—growing their own food, figuring out how to be in community with all the differences that we're facing on a political level and on a communal level." •

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