

Tusculum Square: A Healing Gateway to Kensington

Alex Baum*, Mariela Hernandez† and Park Sinchaisri‡

December 5, 2018

1 Introduction

Kensington, once the textile workshop of the world, has suffered from the loss of industry and the resulting unemployment, poverty, crime, vacancy, low educational attainment, and high percentage of single-parent households. Neighborhood groups like the New Kensington Community Development Corporation (NKCDC), Somerset Neighbors for Better Living (SNBL), and Impact Services work tirelessly to bring hope and opportunity to the people of Kensington who have experienced generations of trauma. The idea of using the improvement of a site as a vehicle for healing and developing social cohesion emerged from a partnership between NKCDC, PennPraxis, PennDesign, and OLIN. A vacant lot at the intersection of Kensington Avenue and Tusculum Street was the perfect opportunity to test out this theory and see if it could be replicated throughout the neighborhood.

2 Trauma-Informed Planning

Trauma has been defined as a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress; a deeply distressing or disturbing experience. The American Psychiatric Association states that a person must have experienced or witnessed an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others, and which involved fear, helplessness, or horror. Trauma can also affect a larger community as a reaction to extreme stress that overwhelms a group's ability to cope. It can be caused by a single event (i.e. natural disaster, physical assault) or a series of events or a chronic condition. (i.e. housing insecurity, ongoing domestic violence)

According to SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administrations), the concept of a trauma-informed approach is implemented by a program, organization, or system that aims to accomplish four main criteria. First, it realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery. Secondly, it recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system. Third, it responds by fully

*Department of City and Regional Planning, PennDesign. baumawb@design.upenn.edu

†Department of Architecture, PennDesign. marielah@design.upenn.edu

‡Operations, Information and Decisions Department, The Wharton School. swich@wharton.upenn.edu

integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices. Lastly, it seeks to actively resist re-traumatization. According to SAMHSA's Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative, a trauma-informed approach can be implemented in any type of service setting or organization.

Trauma-Informed Planning is directly related to these principles and is applied on a larger scale to promote a healthier community. Planners focus on the four principles. First, planners aim to build community resilience to encourage the capacity to believe that some better future might exist. Secondly, collective efficacy is encouraged through planned activities of cohesion among neighbors create combined willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good. This is a key generator for members of a community to control the behavior linked to reduced violence. Third, they plan for social cohesion to motivate the willingness of members of a society to cooperate with each other in order to survive and prosper. Lastly, the planner creates underlays for trust through managing shared expectations of control. In time, there is an increase in levels of trust that each neighbor will act on another's behalf to regulate community management.

Trauma-Informed Design can be applied on a project-to-project basis when working on interventions within communities which have experienced chronic stress. Designers should be inclined to realize how the physical environment affects an individual's sense of identity, worth, dignity, and empowerment. This can be achieved by provide ways for the individual to exhibit their self-reliance and practice the ability to do things for himself or herself. Another important principle is recognizing that the physical environment has an impact on attitude, mood, and behavior, and that there is a strong link between our physiological state, our emotional state, and the physical environment. In this case, the plan should aim to reduce or remove known adverse stimuli / environmental stressors. Finally, designers should focus on responding by designing and maintaining supportive and healing environments for trauma-experienced residents or clients to resist re-traumatization. Methods of implementation include promoting the opportunity for choice while balancing program needs and the safety/comfort of the majority as well as providing connectedness to the natural world.

3 Tusculum Square Project

3.1 History

The site that is now Tusculum Square was once occupied by four row buildings of 3-4 stories with commercial activity on the ground floor. At least two of these buildings had been torn down by 1978 and the remaining two followed not long after. The site eventually became a PHS Land Care site, managed by NKCDC, and was ringed by a fence. At some point in the early 2010s, the fence was knocked down by a car that rolled through as a result of the driver overdosing. Litter, needles, and excrement filled the site, especially as the neighborhood transformed into an open-air heroin market. The idea for Tusculum Square first originated as a landscape architecture studio idea through a collaboration between PennDesign, Penn Praxis, and OLIN. NKCDC recommended using the site and the eventual owner, Shift Capital, supported the idea and agreed not to build on it for five years. NKCDC received a Knight Foundation grant and partnered with Hinge Collective following the completion of the studio to put the scaled-back plan into action.

3.2 Goals

Three main objectives were listed in our assignment. The first goal is to document how people act around and think about the site. Are there reactions positive or negative? Do they find the site to be a welcoming addition to the neighborhood or feel that it is not for them. Second, how can we draw conclusions whether greater social cohesion, healing, and community ownership/pride are a result of the site improvement. Lastly, what are the lessons we can apply to other small scale sites. Our conversation with Andrew Goodman from NKCDC confirmed two major priorities for the project. First, we should focus on logistical questions of how to improve the study design and observation procedure. It is not feasible to staff on-site volunteers to give out questionnaires the entire day. What are potential methods that can be implemented? Also, what kind of outcomes are considered successful? For example, just counting the number of passersby is not the most important. Another question is how to capture the feeling components of the feedback. How to balance qualitative and quantitative feedback? Discussions with Hinge Collective also provided further goals to keep in mind. We should be careful in using a language regarding the site and think about how to attract the right types of users to the space without putting up fences or as we refer to as *soft exclusionary*.

4 Strategies and Observations

Strategizing for this project began with a conversation with Andrew Goodman of NKCDC in which we discussed the specificity of this site's contextual history, the sensitivity of the community experiencing trauma, and the intentions of the planned intervention. In order to gain perspective of the site that could lead to user observations and social conclusions, we established three methods of interaction: 1) observe, 2) visit and 3) converse. The observation component was key in collecting speculative and quantitative data but required some discretion on our part in order to not disturb naturally occurring behaviors. This meant concealing our presence by both constantly moving around as well as sitting in and inconspicuous location. We also committed to visiting often and intermittently in order to understand behaviors at different times of the day and week. The visitation of surrounding sites (Hope Park, McPherson Square, Hissey Park, Oakdale St.) allowed us to compare the qualities of public space in this area and the potential future of the Tusculum site. It also provided us with exposure to the contextual dynamics and specific issues in reality. The conversation aspect of our strategy was geared toward creating naturally-flowing discussions with surrounding residents and focused on interaction through the planned, collaborative activity of the Build-day.

4.1 Timeline

The frame of this project was divided into Pre-build observations and visits, a Build-day organized by Shift Capital, Hinge Collective and NKCDC, and Post-build follow-ups. We spent most of our time conducting site visits which were a critical opportunity to immerse ourselves into the public spaces as well as determining engagement. The Build-day was scheduled to begin from 9:00AM to 2:00PM and the goals were set to assemble pre-cut planters, paint, fill with soil and plantings. Since the Build-day was postponed from November 17th to December 1st, our team was only able to observe the built intervention for the few days that immediately followed the Build-day as well

as follow-up with the social media presence of Tusculum. Figure 1 illustrates the timeline of our project.

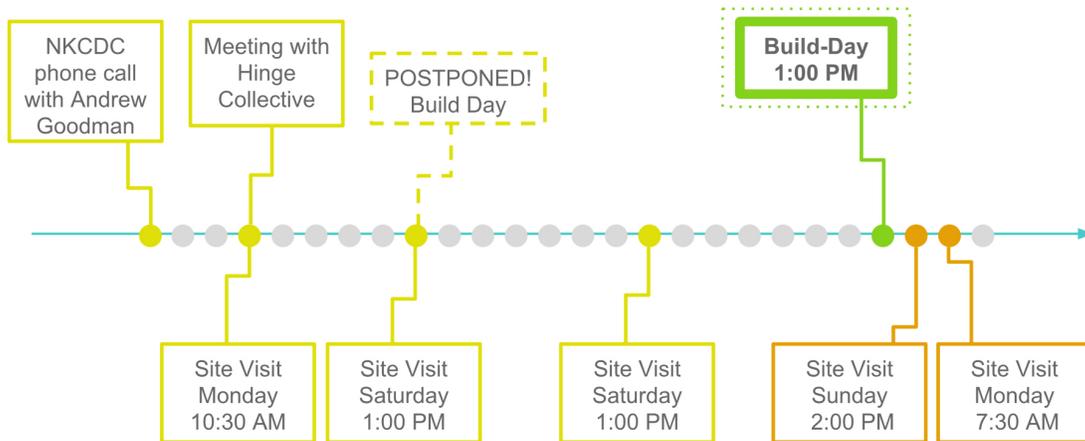


Figure 1: Timeline of Our Project

4.2 Pre-Build Day

Observations were recorded on a day-to-day basis with details of the site’s physical conditions as well as reactions to the clearing and preparation of the site. During this time, we observed the anticipation of what is to come on the site and witnessed the curiosity of a passerby who stopped to ask questions. Three visits were organized before the Build-day one on a Monday morning and two on Saturday afternoons:

- Monday 10:30 AM - NKCDC started clearing the site which generated a lot of activity on and around the space. The large equipment on the site (large dumpster, small bobcat machine and NKCDC truck) sparked the curiosity of onlookers as they walked by and wondered what was happening here. One man stopped walking on the sidewalk to enter the site and talk to one of the workers. Another man stood drinking from a coffee cup at the corner of the bike shop as a man and woman came together to take a look at the photo gallery wall and discuss the changes. However, the throes of Kensington’s struggle with drug-use remained ever present as a man came to the same corner from East of Kensington Avenue to hide from avenue along Tusculum, and use a needle. We witnessed that most of the activity of pedestrians, homelessness and drug related activity remained closest to the MFL station at Somerset (North of the site) compared to the less active space around the Allegheny and Huntingdon stations.
- Saturday 1:00 PM - Overall, engagement was mainly limited to quick glances toward site from passersby. The site was still being cleared as the dumpster, a mound of rocky soil, and a large tarp remained on site. We walked past the Rock Ministries gym, the Last Stop Clubhouse at Somerset (which had a table set-up for handouts) and the new Orinoka Civic House with space for NKCDC’s offices.

- Saturday 3:00 PM - The site is cleared of the dumpster and demolition tools and some litter is scattered within and around the site. Activity was sparse on a rainy holiday weekend as we only observed one couple who stopped at corner of bike shop to talk for a few minutes.

Visitations of the surrounding areas consisted of photographing and comparing the general essence the public space. We went to Hope Park which was surrounded by very loud and bustling activity from children walking to school to drug-dealers openly calling out to people walking by. McPherson Square is a beautiful, well-maintained park with Free Library of Philadelphia branch in the middle. It is surrounded by residential buildings and was activated by people passing through and a new playground. Here we also spoke with a church leader who sets up a table and speakers to give hand-outs every week in front of park. Hissey Park had a new iron fence with a large mural, newly renovated basketball court, baseball field and playing and exercise equipment. Surrounding it were well-maintained residence, a few churches and a PHS fenced lot. On the corner of Oakdale Street (south of Tusculum along Kensington Ave) there is a green lot comparable scale to Tusculum site. It has a fenced-in garden with trees, low planters, and a Mural Arts painting on the adjacent wall. Sterner Street also had a large empty lot (behind the Tusculum site) which is well maintained with no litter and added decorative elements along its chain link fence.

Conversations included a discussion with Blockchain Gallery next to bike shop. The organizer, Chrissy, explained their relation to the NA+AA recovery house at “Last Stop”, and was collecting signatures to clean the Delaware using the labor of recovering addicts. She was excited to share their future developments to the gallery and was looking forward to the new space coming to the Tusculum lot. We also spent time preparing conversation topics that were not-threatening or triggering for the community. These were related to the idea of social cohesion planned in anticipation to the Build-day which we established as key questions to keep in mind when interacting with volunteers and people walking by. They were related to safety (Would you hang out here?), Trust (Would you bring your friends/family?), Familiarity (Do you frequent this block?), and Ownership (Would you keep this place clean?).

4.3 Build Day: December 1, 2018

The Build Day brought together a diverse array of groups on an unusually warm day for early December. Representatives from Hinge Collective, Shift Capital, NKCDC, the original PennDesign landscape studio, Tusculum Street residents, and Last Stop came out to help in addition to various community members throughout the day. The plan was to site, build, paint, and plant seven planter boxes at the border of the site and erect the official sign at the corner. Additional work was done to try and stabilize the hill on the eastern edge of the site. With a hard stop at 3pm due to forecasted rain storms, everyone worked tirelessly throughout the day to see the construction through to completion. The activity on the site drew lots of attention from neighbors, pedestrians, and those in vehicles. There was a real energy on the site - many of the members of Last Stop especially were enthusiastic to be able to play such a big role in the improvement of their neighborhood. Everyone who walked past wanted to know what was going on and many wanted to know if they could help. The primary expressions from passersby were “Thank You” or “You are doing great work to improve Kensington.”

4.4 Post-Build Day

Two visits were organized after the Build Day. The first visit happened exactly 24 hours after the Build Day was over. Our observation strategy remains the same as our Pre-Build visits: observing passersby and their reactions and levels of engagement with the site. The site remained clean and intact. Over one hour of the observation (2:30-3:30pm on Sunday), there were 58 passersby (35 coming from the north, 23 coming from the south), 20 of them at least glanced at the site, and 6 stopped by to read the sign. A couple of community members showed up and were significantly more engaged than the others. They picked up trash on the ground, checked whether the joints of the planters were intact, and kept their eyes on passersby interacting with the space. Similar patterns were observed during the rush hours of the following day. One volunteer from the Build Day walked by the site, stopped to throw a couple rocks at the site, and left with a huge smile on his face. We consider our observation procedure to be quite successful in the sense that we were able to count the number of passersby, capture different types of engagement, and infer their feelings towards the site and the community.

4.5 Insights from Our Observations

Across a few weeks we have been involved with the project, we have drawn various insights regarding planning, building, and monitoring feedback about the site. Here, we summarize them into five major points.

Sense of ownership and accomplishment: Having residents actively involved in the process can help promote sustainability of the site because it induces the feeling of mutual ownership of the site among the volunteers. We have observed volunteers and residents of Tusculum Street came back to and maintained the cleanliness of the site. Many of them during the Build Day also expressed their voluntary commitment to keep their eyes on the site to make sure it remains clean and welcoming. The volunteers also feel better about themselves and the community. Jose who recently got over his alcoholism mentioned how he felt useful and regained his sense of belonging to the community. Several other volunteers had similar experiences and they found the Build Day to be a new beginning of their brighter lives. Unlike the other recent development in Kensington that some residents felt that they were build for a very exclusive group of people, Tusculum Square was regarded as the true community space.

Familiar faces bring in more: Another positive phenomenon that arises from involving the residents in the process is a significantly increased level of engagement and interactions. During the Build Day, several passersby stopped at the site to talk to the volunteers that they knew from the community. Compared to having contractors or outsiders working at the space, knowing someone at the site raises an individual's curiosity about the site and induces a higher likelihood to interact. One of the volunteers also actively looked out for any passersby he knew. When they showed up, he paused what he was doing and went over to engage them to participate and advocate positive changes in the neighborhood. We also noticed that on our other observation days, where there was at least one person working on at the site, it seemed to attract interactions from the passersby. To amplify such positive network effect, it might be a good idea to appoint active residents as ambassadors for the project to build a stronger core of the community going forward.

Optimize first impressions: First impressions have long been proven to be extremely important in human perception. Making sure that residents associate the site with positive feelings early on can go a long way. One example would be the fact that the volunteer group during the Build Day was diverse in terms of age, gender, race, and organization they represented. It was also clear that everyone was not from the same outsider group. Such diversity instills the sense of approachability of the site among the residents. To also accomplish the goal of soft exclusionary, we should encourage local residents to make the first move by using the space for their community events. If the space is perceived as community-driven, it signals to the rest of the community who is welcome at the space.

Planning the changes: Being careful in planning the changes affects the success of the project. All features of the plan should be evaluated whether they are appropriate for a particular community. Giving out food or installing benches could be ideal for some other locations, but for Tusculum Square, it is better to avoid them. Understanding the local atmosphere such as trauma can help better inform the planning process. Another important part of planning is to maintain consistent and incremental changes. Not only it takes time for the community to absorb and accept the changes, but also the changes would appear as less disruptive or shocking, leading to better reception.

Early sign of social cohesion: During the Build Day, we observed certain members of the community who had been in a non-friendly relationship worked together at the site. This proves that by working together towards the same mutual goals can lead to victories over pre-existing hostilities and them putting aside differences for the social good. Other volunteers also reported that they had long been looking for local space to spend time with their friends and families. One of the Tusculum Street residents, Jonathan, planned to create a social media channel for the site to connect the community and strengthen the ties among them.

5 Social Cohesion

5.1 Social Cohesion Research

Social cohesion is a common goal in trauma-informed community development, but many find it difficult to define specifically. Summarizing definitions from the National Academy of Sciences (2014), Jensen (1998), and Forrest and Kearns (2001) yields a set of primary themes including belonging, cooperation, participation, and communication or interaction.

Measuring social cohesion and the impact spaces and placemaking can have on it is even trickier. University City District used a variety of spatial assessment tools to analyze the usage of The Porch at 30th Street Station. Their survey tool examined where in the space people were, what they were doing, what equipment they were using (tables, chairs, swings), and their demographics. With this data, they were able to measure movement and usage patterns, the impact of programming on the number and diversity of users, and how the porch can better serve and integrate with the surrounding community.

The Urban Institute prepared a measurement tool - the Validating Arts and Livability Indicator - for the National Endowment of the Arts that used a different strategy for measuring the impact of a space on social cohesion. Instead of using short-term observational data, the tool uses four

categories of data - Resident Attachment to Community, Quality of Life, Arts and Cultural Activity, and Economic Conditions - about the surrounding neighborhood. Much of the data comes from the Census / American Community Survey, but other sources include election turnout, crime statistics, and employment data. The data points serve as proxies for the different facets of social cohesion. This tool is more helpful in measuring longer term impacts of a space on a neighborhood and its residents and is less useful for immediate impact.

5.2 Designing a Healing Space

Penn Medicine found that “exposure to more natural environments can be part of restoring mental health, particularly for people living in stressful and chaotic urban environments”. Through a collaboration with PHS in which they conducted a controlled experiment of stress levels related to the cleaning and greening of abandoned lots. Their research found that feeling depressed significantly decreased by about 42% for people who were living near the vacant lots and linked decreased crime rates to newly greened vacant lots. These improvements to the physical environment show that green space can be an effective and affordable tool, especially in low-income neighborhoods where conventional treatments are less accessible.

Healing spaces are also prominent in hospitals which are geared toward recovery. This has generated certain design guidelines to aid in patient cases of traumatic experiences. Recommendations given by the Committee on Temporary Shelter dealing with trauma of homelessness and housing insecurity include criteria for Aesthetics, Color, Furniture, Plants, and Spatial layouts. Overall, they suggest keeping organization simple, using natural materials and cool colors, encourage social connections and independence with moveable furniture, and include plants.

One case study found in Chicago’s North Lawndale neighborhood reflects the above research and is comparable to the conditions at Tusculum Square. Avers Avenue had an empty lot, strewn with broken bottles and weeds that had become a haven for loiterers and drug dealers. After recruiting neighbors, the residents set to work clearing the space of litter, painting colorful signs, and installing planters for the new garden. Community members were supportive of the idea, it was easy to get others to roll up their sleeves and pitch in. Some of the child residents made a sign that reads, “Be the change you want to see in the world” which serves as a motto for those who maintain the space and proclaims to passersby that the residents of Avers care about their block and the people living there similar to the Tusculum Square sign which reads “Treat this space like you would your own home”. The Avers Community Garden has seen success in partnering with nearby nonprofits to create an after-school program for the children living on the block and instilling within the young residents a sense of pride and ownership that comes from their self-reliance and investment in hard work.

5.3 Insights from Business World

Customer feedback and satisfaction are key measures marketers are constantly collecting for their brands. As social media engagement moves at lightning speed, there are more data than ever to analyze. We introduce several techniques that the planners can borrow from the business world.

Join existing crowd: The easiest way to collect feedback is to become part of the existing community with a personal touch. When companies launch new products, they personally send an email to their very first customers not only to show how much they would love to hear feedback

but also to actually get the feedback. This can be done electronically through online forums and Facebook groups or in person such as attending local meetup events or community meetings. Another strategy is to find the densest concentration of potential users and share about the project with anyone there.

Ask different questions: Instead of asking the residents direct questions like whether they enjoy or how they feel about the space, we can take a marketing approach of measuring customer loyalty through Net Promoter Scores (NPS). It begs the following question: “on a scale of 1 to 10, how likely are you to recommend our product/service to a friend?”. In our context, we can ask questions that, instead of focusing on each individual’s preference, encourage the residents to think about a larger public. This scheme is straightforward and easy to answer and it helps reduce noises in their responses. The NPS can be calculated by subtracting the percentage of detractors (0-6) from that of promoters (9-10). The higher the score, the better. Detractors are the most likely demographic to respond to this question; however, it is an opportunity to zero in on areas needing improvement, and make a great impression on a dissatisfied resident.

Social media analytics: Engagement across social channels has been a great way for marketers to take an instant customer sentiment pulse. Sentiment analysis from social media data identifies and extracts subjective information in source material such as tweets or comments on a Facebook post. It assigns a metric (“polarity”) to a piece of text that details how positive or negative said text is and returns a value along a single dimension ranging from +1 (extremely positive) to -1 (extremely negative). Thanks to the recent advances in deep learning and artificial intelligence, algorithms are now capable to effectively capture key aspects of the new space that the community cares about and each individual’s intentions and reactions concerning those aspects. Besides the sentiment of text, other useful measures include comment velocity (how quickly conversation is moving around), comment tone (whether the space influences the community’s tone in a positive or negative way), and shares and mentions (how fast and wide the words get spread).

Google provides several great tools to track time trends and real-time activities. While Google Keyword Planner shows absolute search volume data, Google Trends shows the relative popularity of a search query and adjusts search data to make comparisons between terms easier. Each data point is divided by the total searches of the geography and time range it represents, to compare relative popularity. More recently, Google feature popular times and real-time busyness of places listed on Google Maps. They monitor everyone who uses the Maps app and can provide useful information about how long people tend to visit particular spaces. This will be useful once the site has gained more popularity and attracted regular visitors.

6 Discussion

Our recommendations and research were largely informed by examples provided in class readings and through speakers. The idea of neighborhood trauma was first introduced through the reading of Root Shock by Dr. Mindy Fullilove. Fullilove discusses the traumatic impact that people suffer as a result of displacement and the loss of one’s emotional ecosystem. The connection she makes to gardening - of plants being uprooted and torn up and the impact it has on them - makes the planting that people did on build day that much more powerful and symbolic - putting down roots

in order to try and re-grow. Later, we heard from Pati Codina from Impact Services who spoke about trauma-informed care and trauma-informed community development. She described the difficulties residents face - poverty, unemployment, low educational attainment, and crime - and how groups like Impact Services try to talk with people not about what is wrong with them, but what happened to them. Andrew Stober, from UCD, addressed the importance of public space and making people feel welcome. He described how spaces like The Porch can be gathering spaces, but also questioned who does not use public spaces and why. He described the audit tool they use for public spaces in addition to some of the methods used to analyze usage of The Porch. Finally, Alexa Bosse spoke about the impact of Frankford Pause Park and how it can change perceptions about a space. She discussed how neighbors didn't want benches at first, but after seeing the space, they wanted benches. The exact same thing happened on Build Day at Tusculum Square. The Tusculum Street neighbors had specifically stated that they did not want benches, but once Lisa saw the space coming alive on build day, she asked Alexa whether benches could be installed.

7 Conclusions

After completing our observations and research, we came up with the following recommendations for measuring the impact of the site improvement on social cohesion:

- Observe people at the site: do they look at the site? Do they stop? How long? Do they point to something? Do they say something to their friend?
- Ownership: Do people clean the site themselves? How often? Who?
- Ownership: Do they make the site their own? I.e. hanging holiday lights on trees. How can this be encouraged?

Does this site succeed in creating social cohesion?: Based on limited data collection, observations and literature review, we did sense the beginning of what we perceived as social cohesion. The early stages of healing and a sense of ownership and pride for the neighborhood.

What's next for Tusculum Square?: The space will be completed by the end of the year. The next steps are to lay down sodding and paint the sidewalk. There is also an Information Pillar which has already been constructed by the PennDesign students and will be transported on site to be secured into a new concrete casting. Finally, we were pleased to learn that the Tusculum Street residents have been planning to organize a Christmas party with lights and decorations at their new Tusculum Square!