

Infill Philadelphia: Promoting the Importance of Quality Design in the Community Development Field

Gertrude Spilka and Vivian Figueredo 21 February 2012

Summary

Founded two decades ago, the Community Design Collaborative has primarily focused on linking nonprofits with the services of volunteer architects. In 2005, the Collaborative determined to ratchet up its influence among a broader set of stakeholders in the community development arena through Infill Philadelphia, a multi-year initiative to help older communities rethink their neighborhoods by considering how existing assets might be redesigned to spark community revitalization.

Implemented in four phases between 2005 and 2010, with an emphasis on revitalizing existing neighborhood assets, Infill represented a sharp break with the Collaborative's traditional way of doing business.

In early 2011, the Collaborative engaged the OMG Center for Collaborative Learning to conduct a six-month summative evaluation of Infill Philadelphia, which revealed many successes. The Collaborative was able to implement the initiative on a larger scale, and with more partners,

than anything the organization had done to date. It successfully recruited respected and influential organizations to co-lead each phase of the initiative, and developed strong and durable collaborative relationships with a variety of other stakeholders. Selecting timely topics for each phase, involving influential partners, and facilitating high-profile public events helped raise the visibility of the Collaborative in the local community development field and increased its recognition as a thought leader in quality design for low-income neighborhoods. Infill Philadelphia's Design Challenge generated a set of high-quality, feasible design solutions that have been used by nonprofit clients for fundraising and project planning. Many of Infill's stakeholders gained a new or expanded understanding of the importance of design, resulting in increased consideration of design in their daily work and, in a few cases, in their implementation of policy and process changes.

The Community Design Collaborative in the Philadelphia Context

The Community Design Collaborative in the Philadelphia Context

Founded two decades ago, the Community Design Collaborative has traditionally focused on 1) providing pro bono pre-development design services to under-resourced nonprofit organizations, 2) offering unique

volunteer opportunities for design professionals, and 3) raising awareness about the importance of design in community revitalization. The Collaborative believes that early design assistance is a critical step in envisioning a better future for neighborhoods, and that little funding is available in the nonprofit sector for this stage of the development process. Understanding that many nonprofits cannot afford design services on their own, the Collaborative's primary niche during most of its history has been to link nonprofits with the services of volunteer architects.

Twenty years later, the context has shifted in our region. Philadelphia has re-emerged as a vigorous city with a higher valuing of the role of good design in creating sustainable, livable communities. Many factors have contributed to this growing consideration of design. The region's rich set of higher education design schools and an active community of local design professionals have generated a robust dialogue about the value of design. Penn Praxis, the Preservation Alliance, and the Design Advocacy Group are new, strong voices for quality design, each with its unique perspective. The William Penn Foundation's recent leadership has also been important, as has good journalistic coverage on relevant design issues. In parallel, the Collaborative has played a significant role in shining a light on the importance of quality design in reimagining and creating thriving affordable neighborhoods.

The field of community development has also shifted since the Collaborative's founding. Twenty years ago, community development was still primarily bricks and mortar, and project-based—largely focused on grassroots housing and commercial development undertaken by neighborhood-based community development corporations. At that time, the field was just beginning to move toward more comprehensive methods that incorporated social capital approaches into physical development strategies. After reflecting on the slow pace of neighborhood change, even after large investments of resources, the community development field today has shifted its approach. Like other social sector fields trying to increase scale, impact, and sustainability, community development has embraced collective action strategies that include cross-system alignment and policy change. Community development has also moved from a neighborhood to a regional frame.

The Collaborative's experience during this period aligned with these shifts. It learned that influencing quality design in communities on a broader scale would require more than a project-by-project approach. In 2005, as the Collaborative envisioned its future through a new strategic planning process, the organization was determined to ratchet up its influence among a broader set of stakeholders in the community development arena, raising its profile in this robust, yet sometimes turfy, design community. Through Infill Philadelphia, the Collaborative

aimed to do just that. In the more proactive style of this new initiative, the Collaborative expected to have greater and more lasting impact by moving from a project-by-project focus to a more systemic approach it hoped would lead to policy influence.

The Infill Philadelphia Strategy

The Infill Philadelphia Strategy

Infill Philadelphia was a multi-year initiative, implemented in four phases, to help older communities rethink their neighborhoods by considering how existing physical assets might be redesigned to spark community revitalization. Through the initiative, the Collaborative hoped to add the professional design community's voice to the broader public conversation around how Philadelphia can re-envision older neighborhoods.

The Phases and Partners of Infill Philadelphia

Pilot

Affordable Housing Design, 2005

Philadelphia Neighborhood Development Corporation

Phase I

Commercial Corridors, 2006-07

Philadelphia Local Initiatives Support Corporation

Phase II

Food Access, 2008-09

The Reinvestment Fund (TRF) and The Food Trust

Phase III

Industrial Sites, 2009-10

Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation

More specifically, Infill Philadelphia had three goals:

1. Generate workable design solutions for underutilized physical assets in Philadelphia neighborhoods in a way that contributes to social and economic community revitalization goals.
2. Promote systems change in the realm of community revitalization by developing exciting ideas that will help Philadelphia thought leaders rethink their vision for neighborhoods and the city as a whole.
3. Foster understanding among community leaders and nonprofit developers of the value of good design, and how best to utilize design professionals in the community revitalization process from beginning to end.

Each phase of the initiative followed a common model with the following core components:

- Together with partner organizations and city departments, identifying three sites with distinct design challenges in different Philadelphia neighborhoods.
- Recruiting three volunteer design teams and three community-based organizations to work together to

develop prototype solutions to address design challenges.

- Convening a cross-discipline jury of experts to review and critique the prototypes, helping the design teams deliver innovative, realizable design solutions.
- Developing and disseminating publications documenting the process and outcomes.
- Facilitating public events to provide opportunities for public dialogue.
- Gathering lessons learned from each phase and integrating these into the design of subsequent phases.

Infill Philadelphia was the Collaborative's flagship initiative as it sought to redefine its role in Philadelphia from that of broker between nonprofit organizations and design professionals to that of systems-level advocate and influencer for quality community design. Historically, the Collaborative had limited its role to responding to requests from nonprofit organizations seeking preliminary design assistance on particular projects. Infill Philadelphia, by contrast, required the Collaborative to seek out projects that could serve as prototypes for others, develop strong partnerships with city- and neighborhood-level stakeholders, and raise the visibility of community-design issues through public events, media coverage, and publications. With an average yearly cost of \$550,000, the initiative also represented a significant scaling up of efforts for the organization.

In early 2011, as Infill Philadelphia drew to a close, the Collaborative engaged the OMG Center to conduct a summative evaluation of the initiative. This article is based on that six-month study and presents findings around three of the initiative's primary strategy areas: 1) partnership development; 2) the Design Challenge model; and 3) communications and public engagement.

Partnership Development

Partnership Development

While the Collaborative had long-standing relationships with many players in the community development field, Infill Philadelphia challenged the Collaborative to build new relationships and expand the scope of old ones. The decision to partner with recognized intermediary organizations to co-lead the initiative was meant to raise the profile of the initiative, as well as to position the Collaborative as a key player in the field.

Through Infill Philadelphia, the Collaborative successfully attracted respected and influential intermediary organizations—some with which the Collaborative had not previously worked—to partner as co-leaders of the initiative. The involvement of respected partners such as Philadelphia Neighborhood Development Corporation (PNDC), Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), The Reinvestment Fund (TRF), and Philadelphia Industrial Development Corporation (PIDC) proved very important in

raising the visibility and credibility of the Collaborative in the field. The Collaborative's choice to focus each phase of Infill on current topics of interest in the field was an important factor in attracting and maintaining partner commitment. For example, the timing of the Commercial Corridors phase coincided with the City of Philadelphia's plan to increase commercial corridor revitalization through the Restore Philadelphia Corridors initiative, helping to attract the attention of LISC and the Philadelphia Commerce Department.

The structure the Collaborative chose for the partnership relationships proved important in maintaining partner engagement and advancing the timely implementation of the initiative. Most notably, the Collaborative required partners to put "some skin in the game" in the form of a financial commitment of around \$40,000. Roles and responsibilities were clearly delineated: partners were asked to contribute staff time to identify and recruit client organizations and to participate in Infill's public events, while the Collaborative was responsible for recruiting volunteer design professionals and implementing the Design Challenge.

Through Infill Philadelphia, the Collaborative had the ambitious goal of influencing a much broader set of stakeholders than it had previously targeted—design professionals, community-based organizations, funders, intermediaries, and policymakers. In addition to formal partners, Infill allowed the Collaborative to develop

relationships with an expanded base of organizations. A Collaborative board member said, "As a result of Infill, the Collaborative is much better known. We've diversified the type of people who consider working with us and diversified the types of projects that come to us." The expansion of the Collaborative's work into specific and timely topics in community development resulted in their ability to attract a broader range of clients than they have in the past: the Collaborative has more projects in industrial sites, food access, and commercial corridors than before. For example, after attending an Infill Food Access event, the Mariposa Food Co-op approached the Collaborative for help in planning a move to a new facility on Baltimore Avenue.

The majority of stakeholders interviewed for the evaluation—especially participating clients and design professionals—could identify concrete benefits enjoyed as a result of Infill, evidence that the Collaborative was successful in addressing the needs and interest of a broad audience. Partner organizations gained visibility and had the opportunity to be associated with something "cool." Nonprofit developers, even those with considerable experience working with architects, named several examples of how Infill Philadelphia helped them expand their understanding of the possibilities of design. An Infill client during the Affordable Housing Phase said, "Infill has broadened how we think about affordable housing. We're used to thinking 'it can't be this, it can't be

that.' Now we know it can." In addition to these very specific benefits, interviewees appreciated that the initiative brought together diverse stakeholders who might not interact otherwise.

One of Infill's long-term goals was to see city agencies, intermediaries, and developers begin incorporating principles of good design in their work and becoming advocates for good design. Significantly, as a result of Infill, several stakeholders implemented policy and process changes with increased attention to quality design. The Affordable Housing Pilot yielded an important policy-win for the Collaborative: representatives from the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency (PHFA) who had attended one of the panel presentations became interested in the notion of design excellence for affordable housing. The result was the creation in 2006 of a new \$1,500,000 statewide funding program to promote affordable housing design, the Excellence in Design Initiative.

While the PHFA victory was the most important example of Infill influencing systems-level players, there were others. The Commerce Department, a participating stakeholder during the Commercial Corridors phase, now includes design criteria as part of its proposal scoring formula for storefront improvement grants, and the Collaborative sits on the proposal review panel. Through the Weaver's Way project during the Food Access phase, The Food Trust realized the importance of grocers

displaying food outdoors in order to attract customers, and is now trying to address zoning barriers preventing the practice.

The Design Challenge Model

The Design Challenge Model

The Collaborative purposefully conceived of the Infill Philadelphia model as a Design Challenge to advance the broader goals of the initiative:

- Generate broad interest in Infill by focusing on themes of current interest and by choosing three distinct neighborhoods with three distinct design challenges;
- Allow design teams the freedom to experiment with innovative solutions by choosing projects that were not currently under development; and
- Develop workable design solutions that eventually might be built or might influence built projects in the city.

The Design Challenge model developed for Infill Philadelphia was generally recognized by stakeholders as successful. Several elements of the model were mentioned as particularly important to its success:

- The selection of timely themes for each phase of Infill: Many interviewees noted that the choice of

timely themes helped attract a broad audience and raise the profile of the initiative. For example, the timing of the Industrial Sites challenge coincided with PIDC's rollout of its Economic Recovery and Reinvestment Act plan, creating considerable interest in the project.

- The choice of working in three neighborhoods with three distinct challenges: By diversifying the types of neighborhoods and projects that each phase addressed, Infill generated interest and broadened the applicability of the design solutions. One interviewee noted that the three projects developed through the Commercial Corridors challenge—a restaurant retrofit, reuse of an abandoned theater, and design of a triangular corner lot—would be applicable to many sites throughout the city.
- The quality and relevance of the prototypes developed: Most interviewees noted strong satisfaction with the quality of the prototype designs developed as part of the challenge. A Collaborative board member said, "The designs produced were visionary yet still grounded in real-life user needs and site conditions. That made the whole thing more credible for people, rather than having done some kind of hypothetical design challenge." They described most designs as the right mix of innovative and feasible, and noted that two of the Infill projects had been honored with prestigious awards in the

field: Interface Studio Architects received the 2008 AIA Philadelphia Honor Award for the urban supermarket project (Food Access) and four separate AIA awards for the Sheridan Street project. The Sheridan Street project was also honored with the 2007 Merit Award from *Residential Architect Magazine*; it is unusual for this award to go to affordable housing projects. Interviewees noted the good fit of firms with projects as a factor in the success of the designs. The involvement of the clients on the design teams was also noted as important for ensuring that the designs were feasible.

- The involvement of cross-discipline juries of experts: The use of cross-discipline juries was one of the most mentioned successes of the model. For each phase, the Collaborative convened a panel of eight to ten professionals from a variety of disciplines relevant to the theme in question. Juries typically included architects, city planners, representatives from the mayor's office and government agencies, policymakers, real estate developers, media representatives, industry experts, intermediary representatives, business representatives (e.g., ShopRite and Reading Terminal for Food Access), community development corporations, and funders. Interviewees lauded the fact that jurists were engaged throughout the process, helping ensure that the prototypes developed were not only innovative,

but also feasible. Interviewees found the mid-review event—in which the design teams presented their progress about one-and-a-half months into the three-month process and received feedback—very beneficial to the quality of the projects. They noted that the projects presented at the end were typically very different, and much more grounded in reality, than those presented at the mid-review. For example, the mid-review of the urban supermarket project uncovered some tensions between the architects and the operator over the issue of parking that were successfully resolved in the final presentation.

Some interviewees thought that the initiative might have benefited from an even stronger presence of field experts and end users, perhaps even as part of the design teams, “to put economics in more strongly.” For example, for Commercial Corridors, one interviewee noted that it would have been beneficial to have included commercial realtors and brokers.

- Participation of larger nonprofit developers as clients: Traditionally, the Collaborative’s clients had been smaller nonprofits with very limited capacity to engage design services independently. Infill Philadelphia attracted the participation of larger community development corporations with considerable track records in development projects, including Asociación de Puertorriqueños en Marcha, People’s Emergency Center (PEC), Project H.O.M.E.,

and Women's Community Revitalization Project. Several interviewees credited the participation of recognized nonprofit developers with the initiative's ability to attract the attention of policy- and decision-makers from the City.

Infill participants, particularly clients, appreciated having the space to think innovatively. Nonprofit developers interviewed, although aware that few projects had been built, were supportive of Infill's strategy of targeting projects on the back burner to provide the opportunity for innovative designs, allowing them to be aspirational without the time and cost pressure of producing plans for more imminent projects.

The construction of the award-winning Sheridan Street project in North Philadelphia was the most mentioned "success" of Infill Philadelphia. While Sheridan Street is the only project to be built, most nonprofit clients interviewed expressed the intent, in some cases the certitude, that their Infill project would eventually be built. Some described making progress in the pre-development process—such as fundraising, gathering permits, conducting business plans—but being set back by the economic crisis. For example, during the Commercial Corridors phase, PEC and CICADA Architecture/Planning, Inc. designed a prototype for the expansion of a family-owned restaurant on Lancaster Avenue into a full-service restaurant and jazz club. Subsequently, PEC made progress toward the completion of the project—raising

funds, developing a business plan, bringing in consultants —only to have the economic downturn postpone their plans. A PEC interviewee said, “The project was phenomenal. It really drew attention to that building, to that corridor. I really believe that if we hadn’t had a big economic downturn, we would have gotten a lot further toward changing that business.” Most clients, including those who had not made substantial progress toward implementing the specific Infill design, described ways in which they continue to use the prototypes designs to fundraise, even for unrelated projects.

Interviewees praised Infill for generating quality, innovative design solutions, though many expressed mixed opinions on whether Infill was meant simply to generate ideas, or to result in built projects. Most interviewees seemed to hold the underlying assumption that the design prototypes developed through Infill would either be built or would influence other built projects. Nonprofit clients were the most content with having the process be primarily a visioning exercise. One client said, “Money like that doesn’t flow to nonprofits. We don’t get money to sit around and think about good ideas. Infill was a great tool to get an idea and then, later, try to get it funded.” Frustration with the lack of implementation was more prevalent among other stakeholders, particularly partners and funders. While nonprofit clients are getting some mileage out of the prototype designs in terms of fundraising, there is little evidence that the designs have

received traction at a broader level, which is disappointing to those stakeholders who had hoped to see the Infill prototypes used as a sort of menu of ideas with broad relevance in the community development field.

Communications and Public Engagement

Communications and Public Engagement

While the Collaborative had experience in organizing events and developing collateral materials, the Infill strategy required a much larger communications and public engagement effort than the Collaborative had previously undertaken. Through Infill's communications efforts, the Collaborative sought to:

- Influence a broad set of stakeholders, including policymakers, intermediaries, funders, and the broader community development field;
- Raise awareness of the importance of good design beyond those immediately involved in the design challenge;
- Generate demand for good design from neighborhood groups; and
- Stimulate systems and policy change from key decision-makers.

Infill's public events successfully raised the profile of the initiative; they generated excitement, and attracted large

and diverse audiences and media attention. Interviewees generally praised the quality of public events associated with Infill Philadelphia. They noted the high numbers of participants at Infill events—the kickoff and final events ranging from 125 to 225 people—and the diversity of audiences. One Collaborative staff member said, “The Planning Commission, Commerce, PHFA, RDA...they come to our events now. They wouldn’t have necessarily been here if it wasn’t for Infill.” Whereas Collaborative events had typically included primarily architects and clients, Infill events attracted City officials, funders, intermediaries, developers, and of course, design professionals, supporting the assumption that the focus on infill development and on timely topics in the field would attract a broad audience. Infill events also garnered the attention of various sources of print (architecture magazines, as well as neighborhood newspapers and the Philadelphia dailies), radio, and web media. Infill publications received wide distribution via the Collaborative’s mailing list, though it is not clear if partners and other stakeholders further distributed the publications within their own networks. All interviewees noted familiarity with the publications coming out of various phases, even those in which they did not participate directly, and considered them of high quality and accessible.

In addition to being enjoyable and “cool”—a word used frequently by interviewees to describe Infill events—

stakeholders identified some specific benefits of participation in Infill events. Most participants saw the primary benefit of Infill events as networking and public relations opportunities. Some participants reported gaining knowledge of the possibilities of design through the presentation of the Infill prototypes, and many appreciated having a space to discuss new ideas around community and civic design.

While interviewees praised Infill's communications efforts, some wondered if Infill was largely "preaching to the choir." While Infill helped broaden the Collaborative's audience beyond designers and nonprofit developers, many interviewees, including Collaborative staff, acknowledged that it remained a fairly small circle of those directly involved in the Design Challenge process and those with a preexisting interest in community design. For example, although Infill broadened the Collaborative's reach into the professional design community, some interviewees thought only a very narrow swath of that community was engaged in Infill. Some suggested that the composition of the Infill design teams—mostly junior architects—limited the initiative's cachet in the broader design community. When discussing Infill's policy-influencing goals, some interviewees noted that, while many City agencies were represented, political decision-makers—City Council members in particular—were not engaged in the process. Interviewees who had hoped Infill might generate demand and advocacy for good design

from Philadelphia neighborhoods regretted the absence of a broader audience of community development corporations, beyond those clients involved in the Design Challenge. In short, the assumption that a strong communications effort, including public events, publications geared to non-expert audiences, and press coverage, would raise awareness of design beyond the initiative's immediate stakeholders did not prove accurate.

Summary: Did Infill Meet Its Stated Goals?

Summary: Did Infill Meet Its Stated Goals?

- Raised the visibility of the Collaborative in the community development field and its recognition as a thought leader in quality design for low-income neighborhoods: The goal of building the Collaborative's recognition was embedded into several of Infill's strategies, most importantly that of identifying important and timely topics in sustainable community development, partnering with high-profile organizations, organizing large-scale public events, disseminating quality and accessible publications, and garnering media attention. Evidence suggests that these strategies succeeded in raising the Collaborative's visibility and its recognition as a thought leader in the field.
- Developed strong and durable relationships with both

old and new partners and stakeholders: Infill broadened the range of stakeholders the Collaborative reached—and hoped to influence—to City representatives, intermediaries, thought leaders, policymakers, large nonprofit developers, and a wider swath of design professionals. Importantly, the Collaborative was successful in recruiting respected and influential organizations to partner and co-lead each phase of the initiative, an achievement attributed by interviewees to the choice of timely topics as themes for each phase, the success of the Affordable Housing Pilot, and the high visibility of the initiative's public events. Most of the stakeholders interviewed were able to identify very concrete benefits from participation in Infill Philadelphia and planned to continue to work with the Collaborative in the future, evidence that the Collaborative was successful in addressing the needs and interests of a broad audience.

- Generated a set of high-quality, feasible design solutions for typical examples of underutilized assets in low-income neighborhoods that have been used by nonprofit clients for fundraising and project planning: Interviewees generally recognized the Design Challenge model as successful and the design solutions generated as both innovative and feasible. Interviewees credited the cross-discipline review juries with helping ensure that the designs

remained grounded in reality. Many interviewees hailed the Sheridan Street project, which came out of Infill's pilot phase, as having changed the face of the surrounding neighborhood, and—as the only affordable housing development in the country to be Gold LEED-certified—as a potential game-changer in affordable housing design. While none of the other design prototypes have been built, several nonprofit clients reported using the prototypes to fundraise and to plan projects.

- Experienced challenges in balancing the goal of spurring innovation with the expectation that Infill projects will eventually be built: While Infill Philadelphia succeeded in its goal of generating a set of workable design solutions, many stakeholders held the underlying expectation that some if not most of the projects would ultimately be built and Infill would have a tangible impact on neighborhoods. Nevertheless, beyond the Sheridan Street project there were no concrete achievements that interviewees could point to in terms of Infill's impact on communities. While interviewees expressed some ambivalence over whether the goal of innovation or of built projects should take priority in the initiative, most agreed that having projects built was important to demonstrate that it is possible to do things differently and to force attention to policy barriers.
- Promoted the notion of innovation in community

design to a broader audience than the Collaborative had previously targeted, including policy- and decision-makers from City departments and intermediaries agencies: Infill Philadelphia influenced the way client nonprofits, and some partner organizations, think about design. In general, stakeholders who had little previous knowledge of design expressed an increased understanding and consideration of the value of good design in their work. Still, even stakeholders who had previous experience working with architects and considering design issues noted thinking about design differently. Many interviewees identified the value of Infill as being its ability to create a space to generate innovative ideas. Nonprofit developers interviewed, although aware that only one project had been built, were supportive of Infill's strategy of targeting projects on the back burner to allow them to be aspirational without the time and cost pressure of more imminent projects.

- Several Infill Philadelphia stakeholders implemented policy and process changes giving increased attention to quality design: While few interviewees identified policy and systems change as a primary goal of Infill Philadelphia, when probed many referred to PHFA's Excellence in Design Initiative as an important policy-win for the initiative. Besides this high-profile win, interviews revealed some evidence

of intermediary and city agencies adopting design-friendly practices as a result of participating in Infill's Design Challenge or public events. For example, interviewees from the Philadelphia Commerce Department, the Philadelphia Housing Authority, and The Food Trust all gave specific examples of changed internal practices as a result of Infill, an important outcome.

To learn more about Infill Philadelphia, please visit <http://infillphiladelphia.org/>.

Gertrude Spilka is President of the OMG Center. A founding director of OMG, Spilka has over 25 years of experience advising the social sector on strategy, evaluation, organizational restructuring and development, and policy. She bring this deep experience combined with a background in urban planning, and organizational and system dynamics, to overseeing the growth and development of OMG and to all client work. The areas of her expertise include community development, civic engagement in the digital age, and effective philanthropic and nonprofit management. Much of her recent work has investigated effective scaling, and policy and systems change efforts across various fields.

Vivian Figueredo is Senior Project Manager of the OMG Center. Figueredo has a background in nonprofit program development, implementation, and

evaluation, as well as in fundraising, strategic planning, and capacity-building. She has experience with a range of domestic and international issues, including community development and urban revitalization, workforce development, K-16 education, and adult education and training.