

The R/UDAT as Urban Theater: A Planning Alternative for North Philadelphia

Sally Harrison

In October of 1990, a cluster of neighborhoods in the center of North Philadelphia was the subject of an unusual urban design study. A volunteer team of urban experts from around the country gathered there, seeking to forge a vision for revitalizing this deteriorating inner-city community. Neither the community's grim statistical profile, nor its image as portrayed in the press, nor the abundance of its decaying and abandoned structures would suggest that there was much reason to hope for a healthy future. Over the course of a highly charged four-day visit, however, the visiting team was engaged in a process which has helped to alter dramatically some of the entrenched negative perceptions of the community. It has given its disenfranchised residents a voice and has provided the imagery and agenda for positive change.

The team is known as a R/UDAT (Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team), and was fielded by the national American Institute of Architects (AIA) and invited by a local coalition of architects, planners and community leaders. The eleven-member R/UDAT team included architects and urban planners, a sociologist, an economist, an assistant chief of police, and specialists in housing, transportation, youth programs, and inner-city neighborhood development. Their visit consisted of a marathon program of on-site research, broad community outreach, brainstorming, debate, and synthesis. At the end of four days, the R/UDAT produced a fifty-page report which documented their findings, offering proposals for the neighborhoods' future development and new insight as to how the community might generate change from within.

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The R/UDAT Program

The North Philadelphia R/UDAT was one of over 100 such visiting teams which have provided planning and urban design assistance to communities around the country. The R/UDAT program has been successful in places of widely divergent character--from Lynn, Massachusetts to Denver, Colorado, to Ely, Minnesota, to Birmingham, Alabama--and has dealt with a correspondingly broad range of issues. Always brought in by local request, a R/UDAT is formed to address a set of problems which have persistently eluded the community's best efforts at resolution. Each team is carefully selected to include participants who possess the kinds of expertise required to address the specific problems of the community. As objective outsiders working within a compressed time-frame, the team's combined perspectives can bring the incisive vision that is needed to break the critical impasse.

While the circumstances and concerns of each R/UDAT may vary, the process and governing principals have remained much the same as when the first R/UDAT was organized in 1967. Many of the values associated with the activism of the 1960s find coherent expression in all the events of a R/UDAT visit. North Philadelphia R/UDAT is unique, as Philadelphia is the largest urban center to have hosted a R/UDAT, and because its focus is exclusively on the issues of inner-city decay that face many cities in the U.S. Yet the cornerstones of the R/UDAT process in Philadelphia were the same as those in Ely, Minnesota: community participation, interdisciplinary problem-solving, professional volunteerism, and the power of "the happening."

A R/UDAT for North Philadelphia

The idea of bringing a R/UDAT to North Philadelphia was first conceived by the Philadelphia Chapter of the AIA in

1988. Many in the architectural community had begun to express a wish to see the profession re-energize its role in the area of public service. To a profession essentially concerned with the quality of human life in the built environment, the magnitude of existing decay and the growing rate of deterioration in North Philadelphia was particularly alarming.

With the hope that the AIA might be constructive in helping to effect change, the chapter considered a number of programs through which the skills of its practitioners might

be employed. After some consideration, it was determined that offering traditional design and programming services at the building project scale, while incidentally useful, was necessarily limited in value. It was unable to address the broader contextual issues which have exerted the most deleterious influence on the conditions of North Philadelphia. The urban design scale could permit a more comprehensive approach and provide a physical matrix and a social network in which subsequent smaller architectural initiatives might have a greater significance. The R/UDAT program, with its two decades of success in American cities, was perceived to be an excellent vehicle for bringing stronger visualization to the planning processes already underway in North Philadelphia.

The Philadelphia City Planning Commission had recently produced a planning document for the entire district of North Philadelphia. The first of its kind for the area, *The North Philadelphia Plan* was necessarily broad, giving more attention to social and economic issues than to physical development proposals. The commission enthusiastically endorsed the AIA's idea, and began to work with the chapter to focus a project study area and to provide informational resources and a network of individuals who would help direct the process.

Defining the Study Area

In a district the size of a small city which is so profoundly beset with problems of poverty, unemployment, and an aging and widely deteriorating physical infrastructure, it was essential to limit the project's geographic scope. The focus on a particular place within the whole of North Philadelphia ultimately enabled a deeper and more complex exploration of issues common to the broader population.

The city planning commission recommended that the study area involve roughly forty blocks at the center of North Philadelphia. It is home to an important but underutilized multi-modal transportation hub, and includes an extensive district of old industrial buildings, and fragments of the several surrounding residential neighborhoods. This area had been envisioned by the Planning Commission as a district center for North Philadelphia, because of its strategic location at the geographic heart of the district and visual prominence on Broad Street, the city's major axis. It is accessible to and from all points in the city, the region and the northeast corridor, and it offers a wealth of potential



This aerial view of North Philadelphia shows the industrial core of the R/UDAT study area. The Glenwood Community Garden is in the lower right hand corner.

low-cost development sites. Furthermore, at the time, the area's key landmark, the North Philadelphia Amtrak Station, had just been granted federal funds to rehabilitate its facility, and a local developer had begun to formulate plans for a neighborhood shopping center to be developed on the adjacent Amtrak-owned properties. Indeed, it seemed that in the district center area, the R/UDAT process might have the potential to reinforce existing strengths and new growth, and could bring vision to the problem of how to reverse the established pattern of disinvestment and decay. The critical first step would be to bring the idea to the stakeholders in the community.

Planning and Outreach--Surfacing the Issues

In a process which took place over 1½ years, the local AIA R/UDAT committee began outreach to a broad constituency composed of political and city agency representatives, neighborhood leaders, residents, and leaders of local institutions, businesses, and transportation agencies. The R/UDAT idea was met with a range of reactions, from enthusiastic endorsement, to conditional interest and outright skepticism. Among the concerns expressed initially and throughout the process were the general disbelief that the area could ever be "turned around," anxieties about the definition of the study area itself, and skepticism about the enduring value of outsiders' contribution and commitment. The issues are related, and they eventually surfaced in several forms as foci of the R/UDAT team's findings at the time of the visit.

Those who found the idea of bringing a R/UDAT to North Philadelphia most immediately acceptable were, not surprisingly, members of planning and urban design communities, and the development and the transportation agencies. Many in this group had already been involved with the original formulation of the district center idea. Analytically derived, the district center notion held a powerful appeal to those who plan for the future and problem-solve at the macro scale. Either individually or collectively, the R/UDAT process, relatively well-known, was seen as an excellent vehicle for focusing intense public attention on the area, bolstering the hard-fought gains in redevelopment.

By contrast, the local business and industrial community was the most broadly inaccessible and cynical, although, of all the important interest groups in the area, they collectively occupied the greatest share of the land in question. Even among the few industrialists who agreed to become involved in the pre-R/UDAT planning process, most saw little hope for the future of the area, claiming that they would gladly leave if they were able to sell their properties. Operating without links to the other elements of the community, they felt as if they existed in a state of siege within their barbed wire compounds, fending off criminal activity, struggling to find and retain an eligible work force. They felt demoralized by the relentless process of disinvestment in the area. Nowhere else did the conflicts between the interests of non-resident

and resident stakeholders seem so charged with hostility and mistrust.

Discussion with the residential community revealed the antipodal view of the district center idea. The logic of it providing a valuable central service locus for the surrounding neighborhoods was not lost on the residents, but neither did it excite their vital interest, since the active centers of their neighborhoods were outside the bounds of the proposed district center. They saw the great "node" created by the intersections of Lehigh and Glenwood Avenues with Broad Street not as a place of encounter, but a no-man's land, the crossing of several neighborhood back boundaries. Moreover, the large industries and institutions within this zone had never been owned or controlled by the working-class residents of the surrounding neighborhoods. In their heyday, the industries had provided jobs, transportation and recreational opportunities for the local residents. However, when it was economically propitious for a plant to close or an institution to redirect its funds or activities to other locations, it was done, leaving unemployment and environmental decay in its wake. Historically disenfranchised and divided, the residents felt little instinctive territorial claim to the district in question. Yet despite their lack of passionate interest, they remained involved, sensing that in some way their local agendas might eventually find a place in the R/UDAT process.

Focus on the Neighborhoods

A turning point came several months into the pre-R/UDAT outreach process. The commercial developer for the Amtrak site had declared bankruptcy as the local real estate market's boom came to an abrupt end, all but extinguishing hope that market-driven private reinvestment might stimulate the area's renaissance. Concurrently, Philadelphia's municipal financial structure was approaching collapse, a condition rendered all the more ominous following a decade of dramatically reduced state and federal support for urban centers. As alarming as these circumstances were, they ultimately proved to be profoundly fortuitous. It was now inescapably apparent that the energy and commitment to change were not to be found either within the forty blocks sanguinely envisioned as the district center or among the traditional public and private agents of urban redevelopment. The project was compelled to revise its focus, seeking a fundamentally new iteration of the inner-city revitalization process. The local AIA began to redirect its attention more deeply into the neighborhoods surrounding the district center.

There exists within and among the neighborhoods of central North Philadelphia an astonishing range of environmental texture and habitability. Abrupt juxtapositions abound. A block of beautifully maintained owner-occupied dwellings will exist literally around the corner from a block with seventy percent abandonment. An energetic pedestrian-scaled neigh-

borhood shopping street, ten blocks long, erodes dramatically as it approaches the railroad zone, then gathers strength again in the next neighborhood. Vegetable gardens, monumental wall murals and sculpture parks flourish in empty lots--an open challenge to the proliferating local drug trade. Existing amid widespread poverty and environmental decay, these acts of community spirit were impressive, yet nearly invisible to the broader Philadelphia community.

As the project shifted its focus, a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the five neighborhoods in the study began to emerge, and unexpected tensions among the different neighborhoods began to manifest themselves. Negotiations over precisely where and how to describe the boundaries of the study, where to locate planning meetings and the public events during the R/UDAT visit, the route for the team's tour of the study area, all brought to the surface the deep divisions among the neighborhoods themselves. Physical separations created by major traffic arteries, rail lines, and industrial tracts had been reinforced over the years by patterns of political districting, competition for scarce redevelopment

funds, and residual antipathy from the gang turf battles of an earlier generation.

Morale among the residential community was also low at the time of the project. The epidemic of crack abuse and its attendant criminal activity had risen dramatically. North Philadelphia had been the target of a spate of newspaper and magazine articles sensationalizing the problem. Neighbors were both deeply suspicious of the consistently negative outsiders' view and internally distraught about the realities which deeply affected their lives.

In this light, the AIA's outreach efforts were greeted at first with considerable ambivalence--here were outsiders promoting the involvement of yet another rank of outsiders in the affairs of their community. Compounding this were the racial and cultural differences between the residents who are almost exclusively African American and poor, and the architects who were predominately white and middle-class. But beyond this obvious distinction the architects were, to their credit, a virtually unknown quantity. A private sector professional volunteer group with almost no track record in the

The Experience of a R/UDAT Volunteer

Cathie Dopkin

I began my involvement in the R/UDAT process with very little experience in urban planning. As an intern architect from a rural area and a new resident of Philadelphia, the R/UDAT was a crash course in urban issues. This experience led me to take a closer look at the deteriorating areas of the city that I had previously believed were beyond hope, and to consider the possibilities for change. By helping to research the North Philadelphia area, observing and working with the R/UDAT team members, and seeing the community's positive response, I found much to hope for.

We need to come together as concerned individuals to form a community with a focus, a community of Philadelphians, planners, city employees, politicians, and design professionals in order to reverse the deterioration of our urban fabric.

I volunteered to work on the data and outreach subcommittees to gather information about the study area. Through this research and many site visits, I gained a familiarity and new appreciation for the strengths of the area. Small street

lights at each porch bring life to the "good" blocks at night. A well-tended community garden, formerly several acres of industrial "wasteland," is now a community gathering point. Strong community and church leaders are investing energy in developing the potential of the people, especially the children, through recreation and education programs. A small business incubator aids new businesses. These are just a few of the positive forces at work in North Philadelphia.

I was interested in understanding the physical evolution of this area and why the existing urban fabric does not work for the residents today. Studying the industrial history reveals some of the problems. The railroads came first, prompting the development of factories. As the factories thrived, the city extended its grid around them. Systematic infill of narrow brick row houses for the workers created the basic fabric of the area. Economic and social life, as well as the physical environment, was centered around the factories.

Now, with the transformation to a service economy, the North Philadelphia neighborhoods are left without a center for daily activity and livelihood. Vacant factories loom over each neighborhood as a reminder of a more prosperous past. This situation is not an uncommon one and I hope that what I experienced over the study weekend can be applied to future urban designs. The parameters of the R/UDAT study were a "road map" for a diverse community with few economic resources to revitalize a crumbling urban landscape.

Thursday and Friday of the R/UDAT weekend were orientation days and included a reception Thursday night, presentations from community organizations Friday morning, and a bus tour of the area Friday afternoon. Saturday was a day to focus on the specific issues the design team would address and began with a "town meeting." The publicly televised

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community, the team had the advantage of being tied neither to the city nor to industry and of being viewed mostly a curiosity. As a result, the residential community gave their support for the R/UDAT slowly, through a process of exploring and correcting misperceptions on both sides and discovering the strengths and opportunities in places where they did not appear to reside.

The R/UDAT Steering Committee

As a result of the preliminary outreach, a broad-based steering committee was formed. Its purpose was to define the issues of importance for R/UDAT to address and to begin establishing a network of leaders committed to the on-going revitalization of the area. The first steering committee meeting was held a year before the R/UDAT visit. Seated around the table, together in most cases for the first time, were stakeholders representing all the interests of the community--individuals who, working collectively, could help effect change.

Each steering committee meeting was loosely structured

forum was a key factor in the success of the R/UDAT. Without the public's involvement, support, and airing of their own goals for their community, the suggestions of the R/UDAT team could go nowhere. One might think that with the limited time frame for the R/UDAT, it would be more productive to spend the time designing, but the interaction between community and team members built trust in the R/UDAT process and helped those involved to understand that this process would be a dynamic one and not a detached academic study.

Coming from the town meeting with a long list of the community's goals, the team began to brainstorm for ideas. Several members were interested in a second look at the study area, and I acted as tour guide. In addition to getting a better feel for the area, team members wanted to look at the potential of the train stations as a focus for renewal in the area. How could they be connected to the primary arteries, the surrounding neighborhood, and to one another to create a new center for North Philadelphia? Currently, there are three regional rail lines, whose stations are all within view of one another, and a subway station with a direct link to Center City. None of these stations are safe, nor are they thriving as transportation nodes. As if to emphasize the dilemma, we had great difficulty finding the entrance to one of the stations. The only entrance to this station was through an unmarked tunnel opening at the back of a building along Broad Street.

Transit police on watch described what happens when they leave: gangs move in to drink alcohol and smoke crack. The evidence of this was scattered about the feet of our group. Prostitutes bring their customers there. Anyone getting off the train late at night is fair game for attack. The police simply cannot respond before the muggers have scattered. This honest conversation gave a sense of gravity and urgency to the

around a discussion topic such as local job-training and employment opportunities, financing physical development projects, social programs and the future of youth, and so on. Well before the R/UDAT visit was to occur, the committee and community were forging essential bonds and bridging traditional bureaucratic, professional and cultural divides. Though sometimes awkward and unpredictable, a fundamentally new community-building process was initiated.

A certain mystique and excitement surrounding the impending R/UDAT visit was also responsible for cementing this diverse and unlikely group, and generating broad public interest in the project. The nature of the team's visit as a distinct public event inspired and even compelled active participation and cooperation in its planning. In an editorial, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* described the pre-R/UDAT planning process as "the urban equivalent to an Amish barn-raising."

By the time of the R/UDAT visit, more than 150 volunteers were involved in making the project happen. Architects, community activists, city personnel, clergy, local busi-

design task.

Sunday began with the team in conference, hashing out a design direction. The essential concept was presented to the support team late in the morning. The focus of the design was a civic/economic/entertainment/transit center around the train station. A greenbelt was proposed along the Amtrak rail line and an industrial zone along the SEPTA (Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority) line. The residential areas would be transformed into "urban villages."

By this point everyone involved had assimilated enough information about the study area to form passionate opinions on the proposals. There were heated debates between team members, students, and AIA organizers regarding the appropriateness of the various alternatives. Throughout the day, specific designs were sketched, discussed, and discarded as the team struggled to apply the design concept to each area of the site. There were frequent team conferences to keep things on track. Finally, around one o'clock in the morning, things began to coalesce into a cohesive urban design. I left the study site about three o'clock in the morning and between that time and the time of the presentation, final drawings were made and photographed, the report was written, typed, and printed, and I assume the team members got some sleep.

The community came together again Monday evening and expressed overwhelming support for the design ideas and efforts of the team. I had expected controversy similar to that which had occurred among the team members, but the residents looked beyond specific design solutions and saw a goal toward which to work. The R/UDAT team gave the residents a rallying point. Any future effort to realize a transformation of North Philadelphia can now build on these design ideas and on the coalition of residents and professionals which has formed as a result of the R/UDAT weekend.

ness people and residents, students and planners lent their time and skills to subcommittees dedicated to gathering information, raising funds, and producing and publicizing the events of the four day "R/UDAT weekend." The local chapter of the AIA served as the central clearinghouse for project, with volunteer architects leading the various subcommittees.

Selecting a Team

Since the idea for a R/UDAT had emerged in early 1989, the national AIA had closely monitored the preliminary planning process and helped the local committee to form a statement of mission. The project was officially approved a year later when the national R/UDAT task group was satisfied that the breadth and depth of local commitment, essential to the eventual success of the project, had been achieved. Their search for the specialists who would make up the R/UDAT team began immediately.

Clifford Graves, AICP, an urban planner from San Diego with extensive experience in both public and private sector work and a veteran of many previous R/UDATs, agreed to lead the team. He made two preliminary visits to Philadelphia. The first trip was to assess "the lay of the land," help determine the composition of the team, and further shape its mission. The second trip, a month before the event, was to review the final logistical preparations. He strongly affirmed the local committee's wish to see a substantial African-American representation on the team, and emphasized the need for the inclusion of specialists in the social/human resource professions. His observation that the study area contained in it many issues generic to all of North Philadelphia and to many older industrial inner-city neighborhoods helped to permit a broader interpretation of its specific problems.

His vision of the report was that it be brief, open-ended, and comprehensible to a wide range of readers.

The R/UDAT Visit

When the team arrived on Thursday evening, October 18, 1990, the stage was set for an event of public theater which was to unfold in dynamic uncertainty over the next four days and involve hundreds of players. The event captured the imagination of the city at large. The advance work performed by scores of local volunteers amounted to an act of collective faith. The volunteers were the orchestrators for the R/UDAT and provided the facts and background for the more creative and chaotic activities of the weekend. They ensured that the inarticulate voices were heard and that the less obvious places were seen amidst the clamor of publicity.

The team members had received a briefing document describing the area and outlining the issues to be addressed in advance of their arrival. They came from Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, San Diego, Cincinnati, Dayton, and New York, each with extensive experience with communities in similar situations. They were welcomed by the steering committee at a reception held in the North Philadelphia community center that would house the R/UDAT workshop. Afterwards, they retreated to dinner to get to know one another, trade initial impressions, and begin to form the camaraderie which would make eleven individuals a working team.

Discovering the Community

On Friday the team heard from agencies and institutions with a stake in North Philadelphia: the city planning commission, the school district, housing agencies, the police force, Temple University, social service providers, business leaders, transit agencies, and many others. These groups, all willing participants in the community revitalization process, discussed existing programs--some that were succeeding, others that had failed--and ideas for new and perhaps better ones. Their stories were more often about the deep and on-going frustrations experienced in trying to effect positive change with diminishing resources in an area of dramatically increasing need.

The team emerged sobered from this first round of hearings. After a lunch at the worksite, spirits rose as they embarked on a community-led walking and bus tour of the neighborhoods, where the team could experience first-hand a sense of the people and the place. The team with its dozen tour guides and additional hangers-on wound their way through trash-strewn back alleys and up vibrant shopping streets. They were greeted by excited preschoolers at a city-run day-care center, and spoke with the artists and residents who had labored together to create a Gaudiesque sculpture garden in an abandoned lot. They met with a coalition of community activists and retailers in their modest storefront head-



Team member Rosie Greer talks to a neighborhood youth near the site of a new housing project during the bus tour.



Two children at the Greenwood Community Garden.

quarters. These individuals told of their efforts to combat crime and to reinforce the small, community-based economic initiatives.

Once aboard the bus they negotiated a labyrinth of desolate streets in one of the area's most blighted and drug-infested residential neighborhoods. The bus turned a corner, and the team discovered a "typical anomaly," the thriving block. They gathered in the tiny front room of a local community organization, and while a daily food distribution program was being conducted, the organization presented its bold dreams for transforming North Philadelphia's civic identity.

Even among the impossibly immense vacant lots and the abandoned industrial buildings that surround the major thoroughfares and railroad right-of ways, the team was shown evidence of new growth. At the deteriorated Amtrak Station on Broad Street, they met with neighbors and political representatives and learned that, despite recent set-backs for the commercial development, federally funded renovations were about to commence. The team also met local entrepreneurs whose burgeoning businesses were housed in a nearby converted garment manufacturing building where they also received management training as a part of Temple University's new Small Business Incubator. The tour passed the site of the demolished Connie Mack Stadium, where the construction of a 5,000-seat church was underway. The construction was financed primarily through funds raised by its parishioners, which signified the tremendous power of the church to gather and anchor the community.

Perhaps most impressive of these large-scale initiatives was a vast and beautiful community vegetable garden near the railroad tracks. Its organizers told how several years before an angry group of neighbors had laid claim to the vacant industrial site that had become an illegal dumping

ground, polluting the air and the views from their homes. Supported by the city, and working with a local greening organization, they transformed an environmental atrocity into a flourishing collective garden with one hundred individual plots. Although they are still squatters on this abandoned property, the gardeners' effective ownership is and will remain unchallenged.

The team was profoundly moved by what they saw of the local initiatives. Already they had met with scores of dedicated leaders at both the public and grassroots level. But their next event was truly a public forum open to any citizen. On Saturday morning, over 300 people gathered in the auditorium of a local elementary school. Full of humanity and optimism, North Philadelphians eloquently shared their concerns and dreams for improving their lives and remaking their neighborhoods. The forum was broadcast live on local public radio and television, bringing these stories to larger audiences, many of whom were ignorant and often fearful of the community. In the frontispiece of their final report, the R/UDAT team recalled the messages they heard that Saturday morning as "The

Words We Worked By:"

The future is in our children.

We want to improve North Philadelphia ourselves,
for ourselves.

North Philadelphia is where we intend to stay.

North Philadelphia should symbolize our pride and
our power.

When the meeting concluded on Saturday afternoon, the R/UDAT visit was almost half over. The team had an arduous two-and-a-half days before them. Inundated with vast amounts of information in the form of oral testimony, visual images, statistics, and first-hand experience of the place, the team began to sort out their impressions and form a structure for accomplishing their mission.

Debate and Synthesis

Acadre of students and volunteer architects had set up the worksite, organized a resource library, and assisted throughout the weekend as typists, drafters, chauffeurs and go-fers. Members of the steering committee made themselves available to answer questions or to provide a sounding board for the team's emerging concepts.

As specific issues emerged, the team members tackled tasks appropriate to their individual expertise, some dispersing into the neighborhoods, others working at the site with clusters of students and steering committee members. Periodically, the team would gather in closed-door sessions to work out the overall direction of their proposals. As the hours wore on, these sessions became more frequent and were characterized by vigorous dialogue, cycling through free-flowing generation of ideas to intensely focused problem-solving to decision and synthesis.

Working through Sunday night, the R/UDAT and its assistants produced and published a fifty-page report, entitled *A Vision for North Philadelphia*. Through maps, sketches and text, they presented a cogent if multi-faceted vision of what North Philadelphia's future could be and a new process for how this might be achieved.

Presentation to the Community

The weekend's finale came on Monday evening when the R/UDAT presented its conclusions at a second public meeting. Publicity surrounding the R/UDAT visit had generated tremendous excitement in the North Philadelphia community, and the school auditorium overflowed with eager, curious and proud citizens. One by one, the team members described the parts of the total vision, explaining that the ideas came directly from what they had seen and heard in their four days in North Philadelphia--a reinvention of a place whose strengths and community identity lie just below the surface.

Their ideas ranged from the grand to the practical, and took the form of urban design schemes, broad strategies for social and economic development, and detailed programs for neighborhood action. They emphasized that the people must claim their own community, exert their power collectively, and cultivate partnerships with city agencies, institutions and industry as a means of realizing their own agenda. Committed to the principle that community revitalization presumes a holistic treatment, they addressed the gamut of issues, including housing, education, jobs, public safety, recreation, and policy-making.

The team told its audience of having been profoundly moved by the resourcefulness of this structurally disenfranchised community. Small neighborhood groups had helped residents maintain a foothold in a chaotic environment, but they also noted that the profusion of such organizations has led to "Balkanization," and that the broader issues common to all were not being consistently addressed. Having also heard repeatedly that the established leadership does not "walk their talk," the R/UDAT proposed the creation of a truly grassroots coalition called the North Philadelphia Unifying Committee. The committee would be made of the effective informal leaders of the community: block captains, grassroots activists, elder leaders of the community, etc. The committee would also include local business owners, clergy, and educators. These leaders, not the politicians and agency heads, would be the voice of the community. They would confirm and prioritize issues that confront North Philadelphia, and plan a process to influence the "formal" leadership.

Many of the proposals formed around the team's observation of incoherence both within and among the various residential neighborhoods, many of which are overbuilt, yet teeming with vacant lots and abandoned houses. To promote a stronger sense of place, the R/UDAT envisioned a new pattern for inner-city dwelling that they called the *urban*

village. This concept would evolve from old patterns and introduce elements needed to reinforce contemporary family living, by modifying the existing fabric where it is strong, while broadly redeveloping it where it is most fragile.

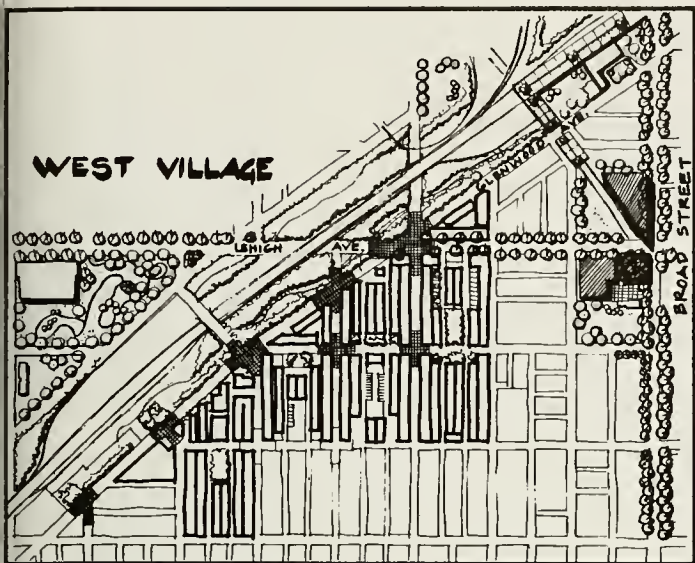
In the urban villages, new dwelling types that are more flexible and have more private open space would provide an alternative to suburban housing choices. Central neighborhood greens with play spaces, convenience stores and community rooms, and a hierarchy of local and through streets, would give the individual village its own identity. A sense of belonging to a definable social structure beyond that of the existing residential block would enhance neighborhood activism and help to combat crime, deter dumping, and control the blighting influence of physical decay and abandonment. A village could then be "adopted" by major corporations, to augment local resources and forge ongoing bonds with commerce and industry.

Again and again the team emphasized the importance of self-empowerment and of recasting entrenched images and preconceptions about their community and its potentials. Even in the large-scale urban design proposals, the subtext of their ideas was "for the people and by the people." The R/UDAT proposed a "Grand Design for a Civic Center" at the Broad, Lehigh and Glenwood intersection, effectively revisiting the district center idea, but investing it with a vision of vital civic activity. The team recommended creating a great urban plaza by connecting a new school for the performing arts, a North Philadelphia town hall, and an integrated transit hub transformed into a kind of "crystal palace." As the audience absorbed the lavish reinvention of the desolate center of their community, they expressed excitement, but also disbelief. The team was persistent, encouraging the community to permit themselves to dream big dreams. For only through the process where hopes were raised and "reality" imaginatively redefined can a community achieve a better future.

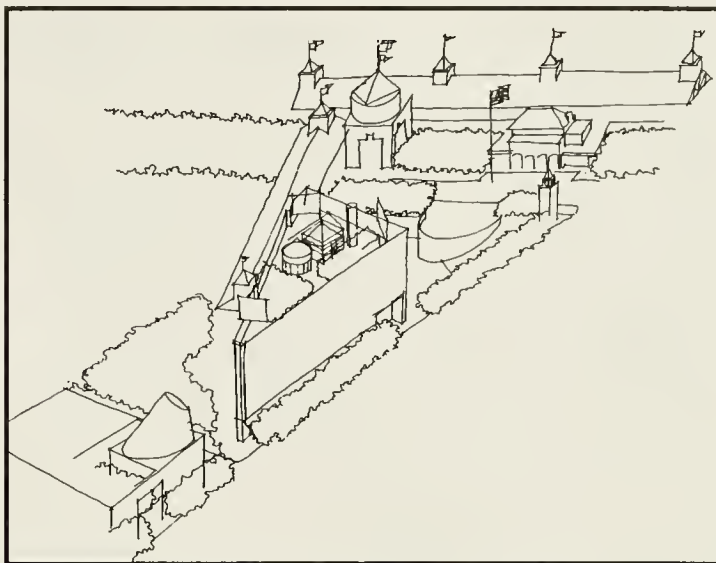
Aftermath

In the months since the R/UDAT, the interest in revitalizing North Philadelphia has grown in both breadth and depth. The media, especially the Public Broadcasting Service, had covered the event so completely and responsibly that the awareness that positive change can occur in North Philadelphia has grown significantly. Offers of help have come from many quarters, including some where the project initially had been viewed with skepticism.

The greatest surge of enthusiasm has come, not surprisingly, from North Philadelphians themselves. Having been accorded respect for their collective strengths and shown how they might regain control over the fate of their community, the residents in North Philadelphia are working together to reinforce one another's efforts. Seeing the benefits of cooperative neighborhood politics, several historically competitive neighborhoods joined forces. This coalition successfully lobbied the Philadelphia Housing Office to gain



The proposed plan for the west side of Broad Street is based on the "urban village" concept, and includes the Amtrak station and civic center (far right).



Concept drawing of the civic center, looking north on Broad Street toward the Amtrak station. The civic center idea has provided the community with a vision of vitality.

its share of the federal funds to be distributed this year. New partnerships with entities outside North Philadelphia also have begun to emerge. Community meetings have been organized in several neighborhoods to distribute copies of the report and discuss and interpret its content. A number of these meetings have been unusually well-attended not only by residents, but also by influential outsiders who previously have had little to do with the neighborhoods, such as bank executives with branch offices in the area, senior city officials, mayoral candidates and members of the press.

The R/UDAT steering committee remains intact and is somewhat larger and even more broad-based than it was originally. Its role now is to help shape the process for implementing the R/UDAT's recommendations and to transfer leadership from the AIA to the community. An informal poll of the members' priorities revealed overwhelming interest in the North Philadelphia Unifying Committee idea. A R/UDAT team member who had been the progenitor of the concept has agreed to return to North Philadelphia to conduct a workshop on how the community can put the idea into action.

Meanwhile, important planning and development initiatives representing aspects of the R/UDAT's civic center design have gone forward. Amtrak has selected a new commercial developer for the site near the railroad station, and the residents are organized to participate in the planning of this project. The Philadelphia City Planning Commission and the regional transportation authority, together with the political representatives, are making efforts to secure special federal funds for integrating and improving the various transit modes in the hub. These developments have stimulated the Philadelphia AIA to consider organizing a "mini-R/UDAT," which would involve organizing a locally fielded

multi-disciplinary team to study and provide a more comprehensive and detailed set of design guidelines for that particular area. Inspired by the R/UDAT, the leaders of the architectural community are also now planning an ongoing program, whereby its practitioners can offer *pro bono* design services to small community organizations.

Postscript

The power of the R/UDAT process as applied to North Philadelphia lies less in its particular plans and recommendations than in the results of the self-revelatory ritual enacted during the four-day visit. The strengths of a profoundly disparaged community were made dramatically present. From this, a vision of the possibilities for change emerged. Although this image is neither complete nor rigorously accurate, it is suffused with life, and completes one act in the evolution of urban theater. An alternative to traditional planning practice, the R/UDAT invited the citizens of North Philadelphia to participate in the creative process, to celebrate, to suspend disbelief, and to enter into the future fully empowered by their own imagination.

North Philadelphia is not a compilation of statistics or charts. It is thousands of people in an area that is an integral part of Philadelphia's past, present and future. No one concerned about the city's future can ignore North Philadelphia's problems and potential. North Philadelphians deserve to live with dignity, to raise their children safely, and to have access to the same economic opportunities enjoyed by all Philadelphians. They deserve nothing less.

From *A Vision for North Philadelphia*