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The Evergreen Challenges of Healing: an Evaluation of Urban Green Space in Harambee

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THE EVERGREEN CHALLENGES OF HEALING: AN EVALUATION OF URBAN GREEN SPACE IN
HARAMBEE

by

Kacee Ochalek

A Thesis Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science
in Urban Studies

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

December 2022

ABSTRACT

THE EVERGREEN CHALLENGES OF HEALING: AN EVALUATION OF URBAN GREEN SPACE IN HARAMBEE

by

Kacee Ochalek

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2022
Under the Supervision of Professor Joel Rast

Urban green space initiatives have emerged in low- and middle-income cities as a solution to disinvestment, the production of more positive public health metrics, and a tool of community engagement. While the production of urban greening provides ample room for applause, The City of Milwaukee's Healing Spaces Initiative model regarding the ongoing construction of green space and the implementation of maintenance creates challenges that perpetuate racist capitalistic notions of the neoliberal project. This paper presents reports from participant observation, document analysis, and 17 qualitative interviews with representatives of the City of Milwaukee, community partners, garden leaders, and residents. The data suggest that the needs of the residents are beyond what the City of Milwaukee can provide. Therefore, they use collaborative community partnerships and outside funding to piece together the social support to serve residents while maintaining control over decision-making, even when outside vendors do the work. The result of this is disjointed service and confused residents. Through the tenacity of individual actors and residents, Healing Spaces Initiative remains a success despite various challenges. Resolving these issues by engaging in a new strategic direction for neighborhood beautification is essential to preserving the right to green space.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CIP	Community Improvement Projects
DCD	Department of City Development
DPW	Department of Public Works
EOA	Economic Opportunity Act
FTE	Full-Time Employee
HIS	Healing Spaces Initiative
NIDC	Neighborhood Improvement Development Corporation

1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose

In this paper, I discuss the challenges of urban greening in low-income neighborhoods by reviewing government, nonprofit, and resident partnership dynamics through a case study on the City of Milwaukee, Department of City Development – Neighborhood Improvement Development Corporation’s pilot program, *Healing Spaces Initiative (HSI)*. The City of Milwaukee launched the Healing Space Initiative, an urban greening project, in January 2021, as a response to the isolation felt by City residents as a result of quarantine and social distancing practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Under the direction of the Neighborhood Improvement Development Corporation (NIDC), the Initiative “helps residents build relaxing natural environments on available city-owned vacant lots while, at the same time, eliminating blighted spaces and engaging residents” (Healing Spaces Initiative, 2022).

The City of Milwaukee recognized the need to work in community with other organizations to maximize community impact. The success of HSI relied on collaborative partnerships. The goal of creating these collaborations was to identify sources of local knowledge to understand the community's economic, public health, and social needs; assemble volunteers to help support the physical implementation and maintenance of the spaces, and; engage experts to design and build the Healing Spaces. In 2021, 8 Healing Spaces were installed and located in the City’s Harambee Neighborhood (as found in Figure 1 below). Program participants, including residents and community organizations, implement and maintain spaces.

In consideration of this project, this paper explores the City of Milwaukee's use of vacant lots for urban greening. Urban green space initiatives have emerged in low- and middle-income areas of cities as a solution to disinvestment, the production of more positive public

health metrics, and a tool of community engagement. While the production of urban greening provides ample room for applause, the ongoing implementation of maintenance creates challenges that perpetuate racist capitalistic notions of the neoliberal project. By using the Healing Spaces Initiative as a case study, this paper discusses how the competing interests of neighborhood residents, community organizations, and the interests of the City come together and contradict each other to make decisions around developing urban green space. Research methods include document analysis, interviews, and participant observation.

1.2 Research Questions

This master's thesis will address the following: How effective has Healing Spaces Initiative been in providing green space for rest and relaxation while also engaging residents and investing in the Harambee neighborhood?

HEALING SPACES INITIATIVE | 2021

Harambee Neighborhood

Prepared for the Department of City Development and Planning Division, 2/1/2022
Source: GIS Planning Division, City of Albuquerque Information Technology Management Division

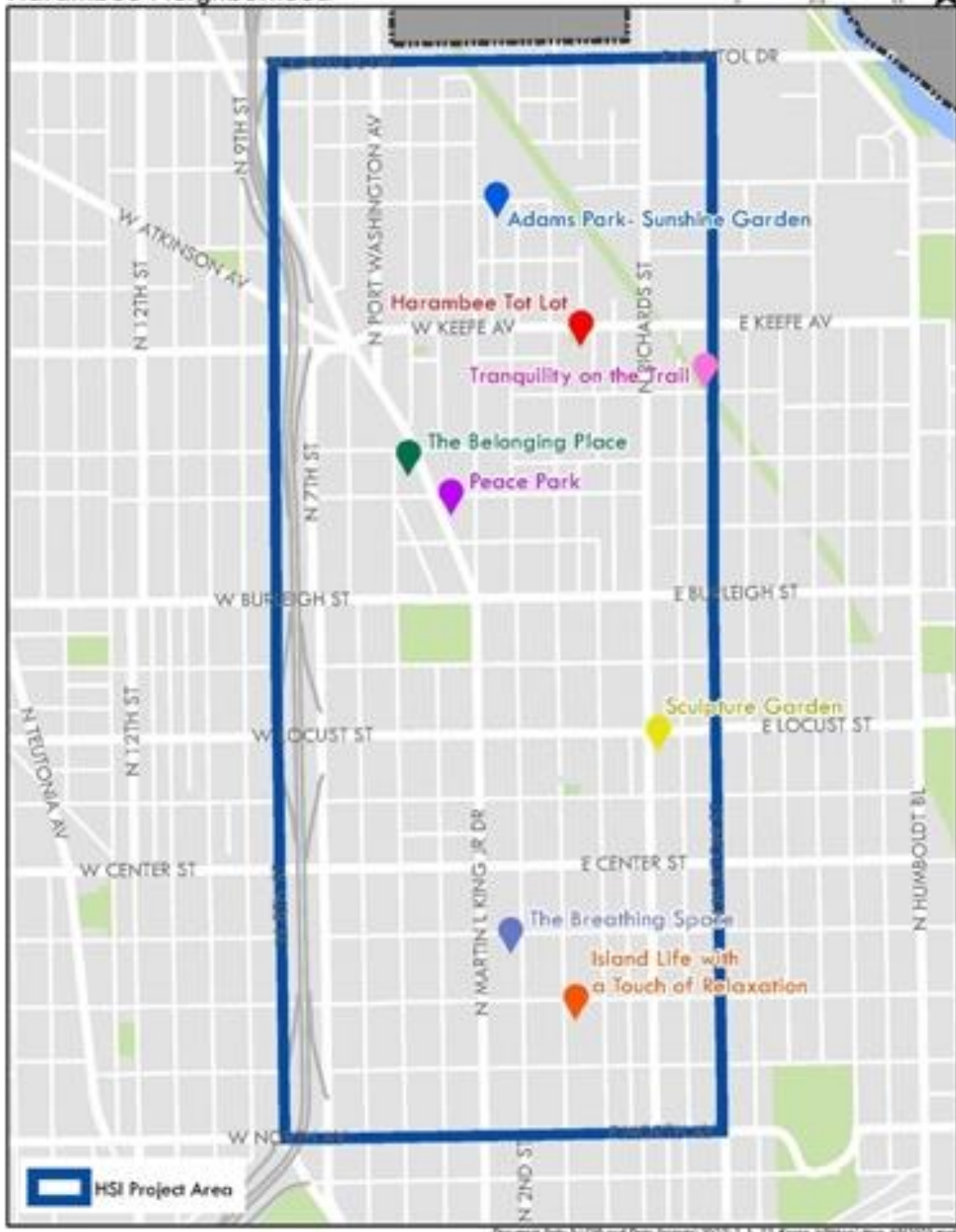


Figure 1: Healing Spaces Initiative Map, HSI 2021

2 Literature Review

Urban green space initiatives have emerged in low- and middle-income areas of cities as a solution to disinvestment, a means of improving quality of life, and a tool of community engagement. From lowering rates of gun violence (Branas et al., 2018) to ending food deserts, urban green space is seen as an opportunity by most. Urban greening is often emphasized as a solution to community problems, thus undermining the challenges these projects face. What follows is a review of some of the literature that highlights the challenges urban green space faces by examining the neoliberalization of such spaces.

2.1 The Neoliberal Project

Neoliberalism is a political project and current economic paradigm in the United States that prioritizes class power and wealth building over the well-being of its residents by way of market-driven socio-spatial transformation. Ghose and Pettygrove (2014a) describe this paradigm's outcome, wherein:

the erosion of the social wage under neoliberalization has exacerbated socioeconomic polarization and marginalization by increasing marginal employment and reducing social support for low-income populations. It has also heightened the demand for social services provided privately or through voluntary and grassroots organizations (pp. 94).

For the purposes of this paper, it is important to understand that the reliance on this paradigm has created an outcome wherein the production and upkeep of urban green spaces in low-income areas of cities are often subsidized by private organizations, nonprofits, and residents. This is because governments have divested from providing social support, instead emphasizing individual responsibility and community organizations as adequate aid.

2.2 What is a Green Space

While the relevance of urban green space is discussed below, this section is devoted to defining a green space. To assist in understanding, I have added figures 2, 3, and 4 as examples of Healing Spaces Initiative's urban green space. Green space is defined differently across disciplines. For the purpose of this paper, green space is defined as a publicly accessible space that makes contributions to the ecological, aesthetic, or public health needs of the urban environment. This might include vacant lots with grass and or other vegetation, public parks or spaces for gathering, or space for urban agriculture. NIDC's Healing Spaces Initiatives Living Manual (2022), a document created after the completion of the 2021 pilot program, also includes that "Healing Spaces consist of permanent amenities that require a low-level amount of maintenance. Additionally, perennial herbs and flowers enhance the space with aromatics and vibrant colors that bloom year after year" (Internal Document, 2022). Regarding the maintenance of such spaces, the document states that:

Garden leaders must be prepared to steward regular maintenance of the Healing Spaces. This includes regularly watering/caring for any plants, removing litter or debris, and minor repairs of amenities in the event of damage. The City of Milwaukee Department of Public Works (DPW) manages the basic upkeep of city-owned vacant land. This includes having contractors mow the lawn and clear snow from the sidewalks.

In 2021 NIDC staff and partners verbally communicated the stewardship expectations to garden leaders at various points in time, but it was not explicitly written until 2022.



*Figure 2: Tranquility on the Trail, HSI 2021
Garden Leader: Riverworks Development Corporation*



*Figure 3: The Belonging Place, HSI 2021
Garden Leader: Solomon Community Temple*



*Figure 4: Sculpture Garden, HSI 2021
Garden Leader: Cory, Harambee Resident*

2.3 The Benefits of Green Space

The benefits of green space make a strong case for their continued creation in urban areas. Studies have shown that there is a dearth of green space in dense, low-income urban areas, which leads to missed benefits for residents living in such areas. When able to be accessed, green space provides ecological, economic, and public health benefits to residents.

Ecological benefits are widely discussed in the literature. Urban green spaces may improve air quality, reduce urban temperatures, and mitigate heat waves—urban agriculture stores carbon which helps to alleviate the effects of climate change. Urban green spaces might also host wildlife, helping to support animals and by being a habitat for pollinators (Andersson et al., 2015; Escobedo, Kroeger, & Wagner, 2011; Groenewegen et al., 2006; Heidt & Neef, 2008).

Neighborhood stakeholders also support urban greening for the economic benefits and promise of neighborhood revitalization (Brander & Koetse, 2011; Conway et al., 2010; Dooling, 2009; Heidt & Neef, 2008; Immergluck & Balan, 2018; Quastel, 2009; Sander & Polasky, 2009). “New green spaces and parks tend to make neighborhoods more desirable for potential residents and real estate investment [plus] the conversion of vacant lots into green spaces has been particularly valuable for the increase in property values in moderately depressed neighborhoods” (Anguelovski et al., 2020, pp. 1746).

Public health benefits of urban green space make a case for its addition in neighborhoods, too. As demonstrated in the literature, Wolch et al. (2014) writes, “psychological well-being is empirically linked to urban parks and green space” (pp. 236). This includes the reduction of stress and greater opportunity to experience rest and relaxation. It is also noted that visits to green spaces can provide peace and tranquility, rejuvenate residents,

and enhance contemplation. Wolch, et al. (2014) also notes that “respondents with more green space near their homes were less affected by a stressful life event than those with low green space access, suggesting that green space buffers stress. Also, as a locus of social interaction, urban parks can increase perceptions of safety and belonging” (pp. 236).

2.4 Advancing Green Praxis

Well-intentioned decision-makers such as government employees, funders, private investors, and residents see the benefits outlined above and frame urban greening as inherently positive. This commonsense narrative of green as an unquestionable good makes it easy to glide over the potential costs and unintended consequences of activating new green space in low-income neighborhoods. In the literature this is discussed as green orthodoxy:

“green orthodoxy traditionally assumes the social and health benefits that individuals experience as well as the environmental and ecosystem benefits through pro-green development narratives and land development agendas and often utilizes democratic engagement to open up new green urban frontiers” (Anguelovski, et al., 2018, pp. 5).

Scholarship that defends green orthodoxy, the assumption of green space as unquestionably good, has influenced policy decisions. Thus, leveraging neighborhood revitalization in the name of seeing green space as morally good, attached to the smart and sustainable city in which it embraces so-called unproblematic benefits (Anguelovski, Connolly, and Brand, 2018; Immergluck & Balan 2018; Łaskiewicz, Czembrowski, and Kronenberg 2019; Wolch, Byrne, and Newell, 2014).

The emphasis on green orthodoxies over the actual physical condition of the spaces has led to a tendency for practitioners to depart from the reality of green spaces. Anecdotally, this might look like City leadership prioritizing positive press and exaggerated praise over discussing

the actual conditions of the spaces. As Greek-French philosopher, Castoriadis wrote, “Imaginarities—in our case visions, discourses, or renderings for a greened neighborhood or nature-centered intervention—play a central, often overlooked, role in advancing this green praxis” (Anguelovski et al., 2020, pp. 1751). In reference to HSI, a local news article published a piece writing, “Group aims to transform some 2,900 vacant lots into healing spaces” (WISN, 2022), overemphasizing the project's scope. In another article discussing the health disparities associated with green space in Milwaukee, the lead researcher oversimplified the projects by saying, “the good thing is these are manmade issues, so they have manmade solutions... and they’re not really difficult solutions. It’s just a matter of investment and community buy-in to change it. We know how to renovate neighborhoods... these things are within our grasp” (Martinez, 2022). Green is good, but negating the complexities of adding green space, like in the quote above, negates the on-the-ground reality. Imaginaries tell us how the world should or ought to be but do not always represent the way things actually are. It is thus important to take a critical look at the physical reality of a place versus the imagined reality of said beliefs to better understand the local actors, residents, and partners’ experience of the beliefs and the real-life products they create. The neoliberal has developed a certain belief system to collectively understand how the world, in this case, local government, works. Programs that are a result of these belief systems may not always match the imaginary (Anguelovski et al., 2020). This makes it especially necessary to keep a critical eye on the reality of urban green spaces.

2.5 Historical Positioning of Green Space

The spatial distribution of green space tends to favor whiter and wealthier neighborhoods over the urban poor (Lin, et al., 2015). Given the health, ecological and social benefits of such green space, this is sometimes framed as an environmental justice issue

(Heynen et al., 2006). In Milwaukee, an article released by researchers from Advocate Aurora Health (2022) linked a person's nearness to green space to a decreased risk of stroke. Dr. Richard Rovid, a lead researcher for the study was quoted as saying, "Neighborhood deprivation is a very strong predictor of stroke risk... The areas with the highest level of green space versus the lowest, it turns out, pretty much follow racial lines as you'd expect. So Brown and Black people live in neighborhoods of lowest green space compared to the white population in Milwaukee" (Martinez, 2022). More research should be done on green space inequity, but some scholars have contributed to the general process of urban forest inequity. This includes: "Talarchek (1990), Pedlowski et al. (2002), Heynen (2003), Heynen and Lindsey (2003), and Perkins, Heynen, and Wilson (2004)" (Heynen et al., 2006 pp. 6). Poor urban residents lack the financial resources to produce local and healthy urban ecologies for themselves. "Thus, they remain dependent on public investment in street trees and parks for their collective consumption of urban ecological amenities" (Heynen et al., 2006 pp. 5). The rest of the literature review explores the relationship between residents and the government via the production of green space.

Vacant lots in urban environments tend to be concentrated in low-income neighborhoods. "Sometimes called greenfields, wastelands, or abandoned, derelict or uncultivated land, these spaces comprise an extensive network in urban areas" (Anderson & Minor, 2017, p 146). Vacant lots are often assessed negatively and tend to correlate with increased crime and reduced property values (Hofmann et al., 2012). One study showed that vacant urban lots may elicit experiences such as fear, disgust, or uncomfortably (Bixler & Floyd, 1997).

One influence on the assessment of vacant lots to consider is the language being used to discuss potential investable space as well as how, and whom, that language impacts. While not the focus of this study, the rhetorical value of language used to discuss vacant spaces and urban greening can be an insightful tool to discuss the influence. The literature points to the racialization of disinvested spaces (Mock, 2017) by referring to them as blight or blighted spaces. A contested term, blight has no real definition but since the 20th century has been used as a metaphor to describe a vast number of problems in neighborhoods. As the Vacant Properties Research Network (Beautiful, 2015) shared:

Urban reformers in the first quarter of the 20th century started to use the language of blight as a metaphor in their descriptions of vast numbers of problems they noticed in cities. They borrowed the term from ecological studies of plant blight with the intent to make their studies of cities seem as rigorous as those of traditional sciences. The term stuck.

To this day, this rhetorical device helps practitioners condemn places of the city, thus offering them up as investment opportunities for the smart and sustainable city (Mock, 2017). Pritchett (2003) wrote, “while it purportedly assessed the state of urban infrastructure, blight was often used to describe the negative impact of certain residents on city neighborhoods” (pp.6).

Contemporary uses of the term reveal an antiquities lens and racial coding.

Vacant lots can be a clear indicator of disinvestment or for becoming areas for unwanted gatherings. Important for the City, vacant land represents lost economic opportunity and erosion of the city’s tax base. Today, as is seen in neighborhoods across Milwaukee and in public sector chatter, “It is commonplace that privately initiated building projects have first priority, and that whatever exist of public plans are modified accordingly” (Sager, 2011, p 172). Cities assume that physical manifestations of buildings and planning will thus lead to economic

and community prosperity (Sager, 2011, p 172). Therefore, city planners have shown that they are willing to wait for private investment. There is also the issue of cost. To understand this concept in its entirety one must also understand that the government rarely has the revenue available to invest its own money into the construction of a new building for the betterment of a neighborhood. Nor do they have money in the first place to invest in such a thing. There has been some movement to depart from this ethos by utilizing American Recovery Plan Act dollars to inject investment into vacant spaces but financial solvency remains an issue for the City of Milwaukee. As Ghose and Pettygrove (2014b) discuss, Milwaukee City policy is ambiguous towards community gardening (and urban greening) on City Owned vacant lots preferring to champion commercial development in an effort to capture more tax dollars.

2.6 Developing Urban Green Space

When Cities do invest dollars for social programming such as urban green space, they tend to do so in partnership with community organizations, residents, and additional private investment (DeFilippis & Saegert, 2012). One must consider the competing interests of the partners and the power each has in influencing decisions within partnerships, as they reflect larger paradigms of the neoliberal political project. One might explore community engagement, and how decisions are made within to review who influences the decision-making involved in creating and maintaining urban green space.

Since the 1960s, beginning with the Economic Opportunity Act (EOA) of 1964, community engagement has been a required component of social mobilization. The EOA established a frankly vague requirement for government-led groups to require “maximum feasible participation” by low-income people themselves to help determine what social programming they need (Day, 1997, pp. 424). But, because there is no clear definition or

outcome for what maximum feasible participation should look like, the idea of citizen participation is hotly contested in the literature (Day, 1997). As Day (1997) points out, there is also “considerable confusion about what participation looks like in practice, and little consensus about what participation is supposed to accomplish” (pp. 423). This leaves the door open for predatory planning practices that manipulate residents. Instead of lifting and taking their voice seriously, planners might only consider residents late in planning, attempting to fix the symptoms of their issues instead of dealing with systemic issues., and not allowing them any actual influence in planning Hou and Kinoshita (2007) discuss, “While participation remains critical for citizens to influence planning decision-making, the diverse interests, values, and identities of communities and the narrowing scope of participation together present a dual challenge to the effectiveness of participatory planning in local communities” (pp. 301). Of particular interest to this study, is the critique of methods of conflict resolution and consensus building, which have been deployed by planners over the last several decades. Lowry, Adler, and Milner (1996) note that planner-facilitated processes have been found to deflect discussion and manipulate the participatory process. “Some communicative action approaches have also been criticized for privileging communication at the expense of wider social and economic contexts” (Hou & Kinoshita, 2007, pp. 302). Hue and Kinoshita look to informal participation to build mutual trust and create genuine shared decision-making power. This might include “walking tours, design games, social events, and even just listening provide opportunities for informal interactions, experiential and social learning, and building of mutual trusts” (pp. 303). While informal participation can build citizen participation over time, researchers come back to the lack of a clear definition or proposed outcome of citizen participation.

On the other hand, we know that community engagement done well can result in mutual trust and stronger social ties. “Research suggests that civic engagement is a reinforcing cycle. Residents who participate in one area of civic engagement, like volunteering, are more likely to get involved in groups, contact public officials, or work with neighbors” (Report Shows, 2011). Thus, resident participation in government planning is a helpful social bond to civic engagement. This push towards the building of mutual trust via community engagement is reflected in an organizing strategy popularized by Saul Alinsky, an American community activist and political theorist. He argued that the best ideas for community organizing, which often results in development activity such as urban greening come from within the community that is doing the organizing. It is the responsibility of all involved, in-group members and out-group members, to respect the problems and theoretical solutions of the community. For out-group members, this means supporting as directed, using their skillset to enhance the group's outlook, and above all, allowing the group to be led from within. For in-group members, this means identifying problems and solutions, staying informed, and participating in the group. In-group leadership provides needed buy-in from the community, who trust them to get results (Alinsky, 2010). Within government programs, empowering in-group leadership and resident-led decision-making comes with its own set of challenges.

Public green spaces require ongoing funding from initial ideation, buildout, and long-term maintenance. These needs are constrained by the accessibility of funding, which reflects the current state of the neoliberal project. For this research specifically, it is key to understand the challenges the City of Milwaukee faces as it is reflected in the care of public urban green space. In Milwaukee, the constraints of funding to provide core services have been reported on

by the Wisconsin Policy Forum since 2009. Commissioned by the Greater Milwaukee Committee, the Forum's newest report *Nearing the Brink: An Independent, third party review of the City of Milwaukee's fiscal condition* discusses the risk to public safety and basic services if challenges linked to revenues, and pension aren't addressed (Henken & Stein, 2022).

First, the City hosts an unhealthy revenue mix, "between 2011 and 2021, the city's financial statements show revenues grew by only 12.8% in its tax-supported governmental funds, substantially less than the 20.5% increase in inflation during that period" (Henken & Stein, 2022, pp.1). This trend follows two factors: Intergovernmental revenues such as state aid were unchanged or lowered during the decade (before adjusting for inflation) and revenue growth was used to levy pension and debt. It's also important to note that the city has little control over how intergovernmental revenues are used. This leads to the second key challenge, the diminished capacity to sustain core services. "It is encouraging that the city was able to hold increases in tax-supported governmental fund spending to 14.8% during the 2011 to 2021 decade, which was lower than the 20.5% increase in inflation and largely consistent with its revenue growth" (Henken & Stein, 2022, pp. 13). To do so, the city made the decision to reduce FTEs (Full Time Employees) by 1.1% over the past decade and 12.4% since 2000, as is reflected in the figure below (Henken & Stein, 2022).

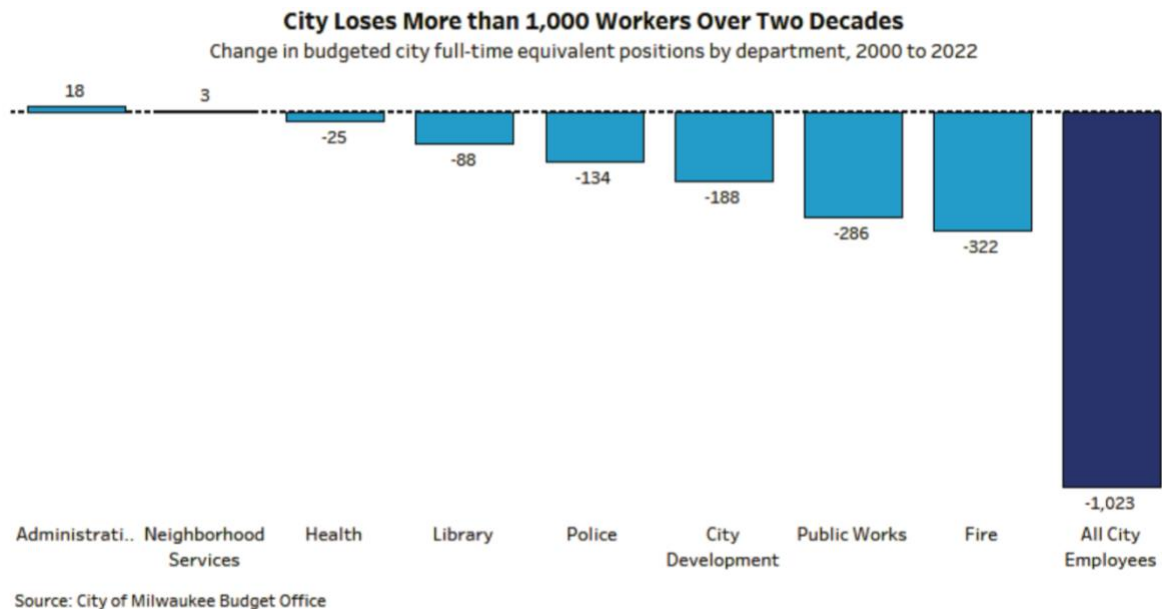


Figure 5: City Loses More than 1,000 Workers over Two Decades (Source: City of Milwaukee Budget Office)

The third key challenge is depleted reserves. As discussed in *Local Government Management Guide* (DiNapoli, 2022):

Reserve funds provide a mechanism for legally saving money to finance all or part of future infrastructure, equipment and other requirements. Reserve funds can also provide a degree of financial stability by reducing reliance on indebtedness to finance capital projects and acquisitions. In uncertain economic times, reserve funds can also provide officials with a welcomed budgetary option that can help mitigate the need to cut services or to raise taxes. In good times, money not needed for current purposes can often be set aside in reserves for future use (pp. 1).

In the case of the City of Milwaukee, liquidity deteriorated substantially in 2018 and 2019, before recovering in 2020 when a +\$100 million revenue anticipation note was issued (Henken & Stein, 2022). Finally, the fourth key challenge is suffocating long-term obligations. “To understand this, the Forum explained that pension systems make estimates about whether

they have enough assets to invest and then use to pay the benefits that will be owed to future retirees” (Henken & Stein, 2022). With the Great Recession, this started to change, and the plan’s investments took heavy losses, turning a surplus into an unfunded liability. Since then, “the city system has faced further headwinds, including investment losses in some years and a broader acknowledgment that the fund appears unlikely to achieve rates of return that it expected to earn on its investments during the 2000s” (Henken & Stein, 2022, pp. 19). Thus, with decreased revenues amongst other challenges highlighted above, the city finds itself without adequate funds to create and maintain green space. This makes for difficult decisions amongst urban greening stakeholders. It also explains why, since the 1970s and the genesis of neoliberalism, the production and upkeep of urban green spaces in low-income areas of cities are often put on residents. The erosion of the social wage under neoliberalization has exacerbated the strain put on low-income and marginalized residents. In return, it has necessitated an unreliable model of service by relying on unpaid labor.

The undertaking of maintenance also poses challenges for urban greening in low-income neighborhoods. “Ample research has revealed that green spaces and amenities in lower-income neighborhoods have historically been undermaintained, of poorer quality, sparser, and smaller in comparison with wealthier neighborhoods” (Dahmann, et al. 2010, 441). In many cases, administrations implementing urban green space might not consider long-term greening, and residents might not have the money, time, ability, or desire to maintain the spaces themselves. By depending on resident volunteers to fill welfare deficiencies that are left by public-private governance, resident are made to feel responsible for the failings of their own neighborhood and governance (Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014b). One study discussing the attractiveness of urban

gardens versus vacant lots found a striking conclusion related to the importance of property maintenance for both vacant lots and community gardens: “Maintenance, more so than any other factor, influenced the attractiveness ratings of the sites. The importance of maintenance held true regardless of season” (Morckel, 2015, pp. 719). This might even suggest that a poorly maintained green space could be less attractive than a poorly maintained vacant lot (which would lack regular trash cleanup and lawn mowing). As such, the study suggests that city planners and policymakers create clear maintenance standards and support. This support should also consider the capacity of stakeholders to maintain the space, and how race and class affect the maintenance process.

Volunteerism is a rhetoric of green space that perpetuates racist capitalistic notions by asking people of color to provide free labor to access certain amenities that are righted to them, such as the right to green space. As Ghose and Pettygrove (2014b) explain: “collaborative governance simultaneously obscures and reproduces race and racism as organizing principles of society through discourses about individual responsibility” (pp. 2). For urban greening models, this indicates that residents are asked to maintain greenspaces, rather than relying on public or private support to do so, as is consistent in whiter or wealthier neighborhoods. In the neoliberal society, the success of an individual is tied to their work output. This suggests that by tying the success of the green space to the individual resident’s capacity to successfully maintain the space, the neoliberalized society can influence feelings of shame or pride for said individual. Thus, as Roberts and Mahtani (2010) explain, the meritocracy of green space is racialized. The refusal to acknowledge the role racism plays in everyday structures, such as the ability to volunteer, is one example of this.

The ambiguity of community engagement, shrinking funding, and volunteerism as a maintenance model, lends itself to a power disparity wherein the government has more authority to make decisions over the residents. This is reflected in the concept of asymmetrical relationships. Uneven influence in decision-making is often reflected in the asymmetrical relationships commonly accepted in intergovernmental collaboration. Intergovernmental collaboration is deeply embedded into the neoliberal project and exemplified in urban public green spaces. DeFilippis and Saegert (2012) discuss that community development organizations that have formal relations with local governments are required to communicate all programming and intentions to all government stakeholders early in the planning process. It is posited that this collaboration allows resources and information to be shared and helpfully coordinated. This scope of communication exemplifies the asymmetrical relationship between community-based organizations and their government stakeholders:

The relationships between community organizations and the government are usually structured in such a way that community organizations are in a position of being responsible for the provision of social services, but not in a position of control over those services. It is the government that sets policy goals, rules, targets, and so forth, while it is the community organizations that have to meet them in order to both have services provided in their communities and obtain the contracts to do the providing (DeFilippis et al., 2010, pp. 90).

The constraints of neoliberalism are clear in partnerships such as the Healing Spaces Initiative.

2.7 Conclusion

As discussed above, the literature develops to discuss how decision-making influences the assembling of green space in cities. Green spaces are thus being abused as sites of neoliberal struggle by clearly emphasizing the tension between the resident's request for urban green space as a right and intergovernmental initiatives that levy green space as an earned space. Most early studies as well as current work focus on the influence of green praxis in

developing large numbers of green spaces without concern for long-term care. This is made clear in discussing the challenges of social solutions where the responsibility of green spaces is often put on under-resourced community organizations and residents, thus reiterating volunteerism as a rhetoric of green space that perpetuates racist capitalistic notions. Moreover, although research has illuminated how residents experience green space, this paper also addresses the stakeholders and decision-makers within the government and their partners. This illuminates the experience of key decision-makers within the neoliberal project, addressing the paradigm and potential shifts away from current structures.

This paper addresses the need for more research on how paid stakeholders experience the implementation of green space. More work is necessary to fully understand the efficacy of urban greening and the relationships between programs and stakeholders.

3 Methods

3.1 Methodology

The Healing Spaces Initiative is a typical representation of the practice of urban greening in low-income neighborhoods. Important stakeholders invested in this partnership were utilized for data extraction. The definition of “stakeholder” indicates several factions. It included Harambee residents, people who are interested in promoting certain productions of space and place that improve the quality of life in the Harambee neighborhood, private investors, and employees of Harambee-based institutions. Examples of these stakeholders in this qualitative study included residents, elected officials, city employees, community-based organization employees, and public organizations with formal partnerships with the City.

Qualitative methods were used: document analysis, interviews with stakeholders, and participant observation. Document analysis was used to review and evaluate documents to “elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge” Bowen, 2009, pp. 28). This method was used to provide evidence of past activities and help build the story of Healing Spaces Initiative while also admitting data related to the amount of community engagement, budgetary spending decisions, and relationships between partners, thus helping to interpret the depth and breadth of the project (What are archives). By reviewing the documents for the above themes, I was able to interpret the strengths and weaknesses of the program, the ways stakeholders were satisfied with the project, the challenges that the project faced, and proposed suggestions for the future. Accessed documents include Administrative Review Committee Memo - Healing Spaces Activation, Application Report (2021 and 2022), Grant Application Form (2021 and 2022), Impact Report, volunteer day photos and videos, Living Manual (2022), Proposal (2022), public meeting archives, Program Evaluation (2021) and the

City of Milwaukee website. Additionally, I used the Wayback Machine to access earlier iterations of webpages related to other City sponsored urban greening projects for historical review. For the purposes of this research, documents were accessed between February and December of 2022.

Interviews were conducted between May and June of 2022. I used this method to learn as much as possible about the stakeholders. On one hand, it is important to understand stakeholders' opinions, behaviors, and experiences related to Healing Spaces Initiative (Lareau, 2021, pp. 63). On the other hand, it is important to gauge their understanding of the efficacy of the project, future feasibility, and awareness of their own stake and condition as a byproduct of the neoliberal project in urban governance. Seventeen interviews were conducted for this project. I completed the interviews in person, at a Healing Space of the respondents choosing, a coffee shop of the respondents choosing, via phone, or virtual meeting. The participants included 1 City official, 3 City staff, 3 HSI nonprofit partners, 5 garden leaders, and 5 residents. Nine participants identified as women and 8 as men, 12 participants identified as Black, and 5 as white. Eight interviews were completed at a Healing Space, 6 were completed virtually or on the phone, and 3 were completed in a community setting. Most interviewees were easily reachable as I was aware of or have a professional relationship with many of the key stakeholders that were invited to interview. Additional interviews were granted by approaching residents who were using the spaces or via snowball sampling.

Participant observation methods also supported this project as I worked both as a researcher evaluating HSI and as a City of Milwaukee employee I, the Principal Investigator of this project, was employed as a Community Outreach Coordinator for the Healing Spaces

Initiative at the City of Milwaukee in 2021 and 2022. In this role, I stewarded creative direction and strategic planning under the management of NIDC leadership. Some of these duties included developing and administering the application process, evaluation tools, internal city partnerships, fundraising, and garden leader engagement. The documents, such as internal evaluations or strategic plans, are documents that I supported or authored. My dual involvement as a City employee and a University of Milwaukee-Wisconsin student researcher did propose a potential ethical dilemma. My employment allowed me to be privy to information that an outside researcher would not be. When conducting interviews, I explained the dual role and asked that the stakeholder treat me as if I were mostly unaware of the Healing Spaces Initiative. I also developed a list of scripted cues that will remind the stakeholder of the frame of understanding and information-gathering purposes for this project. It is likely that my identity as a white, young adult woman and researcher shaped data collection and analysis. Broadly conceived, the “insider/outsider” perspective suggests that the experience of having grown up in a community, having a shared racial or ethnic membership, or having some other kind of shared experience increases the quality, legitimacy, and value of a research project. “Researching Race and Racism” analyzes the insider-outsider debate to discuss the “extent to which being socially distant or dissimilar to the kinds of people under study affects both the richness or accuracy of the data being collected and the subsequent analysis that unfolds” (Bulmer & Solomos, 2004, pp. 187). Using historical and contemporary models, the author concludes that to do a satisfactory job, the researcher must work toward maintaining the values and perspectives associated with the inside group, while acknowledging what it means to be on the outside (pp. 201). Acknowledging my “outsider” status, I leaned on the high

level of rapport I built with most of the participants through the shared experience of working with the City to garner valuable interview data. Participant observation also allowed me to better interpret the data, leading to richer results based on my 3 years working at the City of Milwaukee. Most importantly, my position within the City allowed me to deeply understand the nuances of the partnerships developed as a part of HSI. Conversely, the research I did as a part of this thesis also informed the work and decisions the HSI team made as the project evolved.

This Master's Thesis has been approved by the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee's Human Research Protection Program (HRPP), as they are the acting authority of the IRB for the protection of human subjects. This determination was made as the research proposed is a systematic investigation designed to contribute to generalizable knowledge and will involve human subjects.

4 Project Origins

4.1 The City’s Urban Greening Landscape

After situating the Healing Spaces Initiative in the context of urban greening literature, the paper now develops to provide more particular background and context on the City of Milwaukee’s urban greening efforts over the last decade. Turning to HSI specifically, the below will also discuss the neighborhood affected by this program.

From around 2013 on, the City continues to provide a robust menu of options for creating green space over the last decade to “beautify green spaces and develop local food systems in neighborhoods with limited access to grocery stores” (Tran, 2022). This includes the following projects:

Table 1: City of Milwaukee Vacant Lot Beautification Projects

Title	Sponsoring Department	Timeline
STRONG Neighborhoods Plan	Department of Public Works	2014 – 2022
Vacant Lot Challenge	Department of Public Works	2015
Home Gr/own	Department of Administration – Environmental Collaboration Office	2013 – Present
Vacant Lot Lease - Community Garden - \$1 Vacant Side Lot	Department of City Development – Real Estate Division	2013 – Present
Community Improvement Projects	Department of City Development – NIDC	2015 – Present
MKE Plays	Department of Public Works – MKE Parks	2015 – Present
Love Your Block	Department of City Development – NIDC	2019 – 2020
Healing Spaces Initiative	Department of City Development – NIDC	2021 – Present

Throughout their tenure, these programs have been administered out of three different departments: The Department of City Development (DCD) – including the Real Estate division and Neighborhood Improvement Development Corporation (NIDC) – The Department of Administration (DOA) – including the Environmental Collaboration Office (ECO) – and the Department of Public Works (DPW). With sponsors such as former Mayor Barrett, Alderwoman Coggs, Alderman Rainey, and Alderman Stamper, the programs have received highly-regarded fanfare. Yet still, with so many resources and time spent on emphasizing the importance of urban green space over the years, this research demonstrates that the City continues to struggle to efficiently create and maintain urban green spaces. Programs tend to run parallel to each other, working to achieve the same goals but on different timelines, with different resources, often duplicating efforts. One may look to the Healing Spaces Initiative as an example of this type of urban greening project.

4.2 Project Mission

Healing Spaces Initiative is a vacant lot beautification program administered by NIDC.

The Neighborhood Improvement Development Corporation (“NIDC”) is a nonprofit corporation established by the City of Milwaukee in 1973 to promote reinvestment in housing and neighborhoods. It is housed within Milwaukee’s Department of City Development. For over 40 years, NIDC has worked with a range of partners (City Departments, community organizations, lenders, residents, developers, and the philanthropic community) to improve Milwaukee’s neighborhoods and the quality of life for residents.

In partnership with other City departments, community organizations, and residents, HSI works to build relaxing environments on available city-owned vacant lots while eliminating blighted spaces and engaging residents in one of the City of Milwaukee’s most disinvested

neighborhoods, Harambee. The pilot was developed and administered in 2021. In 2022 it received additional funds to continue as a city-wide effort (Robinson & Yaccarino, 2021).

The goal of Healing Spaces Initiative is to rehabilitate vacant, City-owned lots into usable urban green spaces for rest and relaxation. Projects include, among other things, pathways, benches, perennial herb and flower gardens, shade sails, solar lights, meditation signposts, and Little Free Libraries. All Healing Space Initiative projects are ADA accessible. For a vacant lot to receive funding for a Healing Space, a resident or community organization based in the neighborhood could apply.

When designing and implementing the healing spaces, four elements were used to guide the project, according to the Program Evaluation (2021). They are as follows:

Sense of Control: Neighbors know that the healing spaces exist and how to access it, they have control over how they engage with it, and that it can provide spaces for privacy and security.

Social support: Healing spaces provide an opportunity for small-group or large-group congregations. For example: community yoga sessions, health workshops, and more.

Physical movement and exercise: Spaces should have a universal design and equitable access features that allow neighbors to engage in stress-reducing physical activities. Examples of this include benches and signposting for guided meditation.

Access to nature and other positive distractions: Plant species that engage all the senses are often a good choice, as are plants that encourage wildlife. Additionally, Little Free Libraries were installed on-site for residents and visitors.

4.3 Project Parameters

To meet the mission, NIDC offered technical support and financial investment of about \$7,000 per project to build a Healing Space. NIDC saw its involvement as a one-time injection of

funds to an existing or new community greening project, with NIDC having no further obligations once the project was complete. To date, NIDC continues to support the projects with funding on a case-by-case basis for repairs but is unable to offer much more support due to funding and staff capacity constraints (Internal Communication).

Oppositely, the obligations of grant recipients are ongoing. In 2021 the application laid out some expected obligations, but the overall process lent to some confusion. While the intention was to ensure that garden leaders and resident volunteers would maintain the space, this was not made clear. The application obliged the following: promote a high level of community engagement throughout the neighborhood, attend an HSI orientation, and attend a sustainability meeting after project completion. The “Application Checklist” included the following: Work with Groundwork Milwaukee, choose a vacant lot in Harambee, submit signatures from residents showing support for the project, and make considerations for ADA accessibility. The applicant was also asked to give project information, including answering the following questions:

- Describe the project you are proposing, and what specifically will be done (further detail can be submitted after meeting with community partners)? How will the property/space be utilized? You may also submit a photo or drawing of the site plan.
- How will neighborhood members be involved in this project?
- How will this project be maintained in years to come? Be specific.

While the application, social media, and press for HSI alluded to it, applicants were officially notified that they would have to maintain the space during a required virtual kickoff event or orientation, when HSI staff included that garden leaders “be willing and able to sustain the

healing space in following years” as a part of their presentation (Internal communication). Chosen applicants were verbally told that they would be required to maintain the space in internal meetings, but no formal notice was written or completed (internal communication). Spaces are implemented and maintained by program participants, including residents and Groundwork Milwaukee. NIDC provides funding on a case-by-case basis for repairs.

4.4 Project Origins

The need for this initiative was first identified by a local alderperson, Alderwoman Coggs, and Bader Philanthropies Vice President, Frank Cumberbatch, both of whom serve as officers on the NIDC Board of Directors. To launch the program, the Alderwoman put a footnote in the 2021 City of Milwaukee Annual Budget. The footnote called for the Department of City Development (DCD) to develop a Healing Space Initiative using some of the approximately 3,000 city-owned vacant lots. “Introduced by Ald. Coggs, she said the proposal, suggested to her, would have the city install Little Free Libraries and benches in the vacant lots. She said outdoor space would play an important role both during the pandemic and after” (Jannene, 2020). The footnote requested the project be done in partnership with the Community Improvement Project grant, which is administered by NIDC, within DCD (City of Milwaukee, 2020). Footnotes attached to the budget don’t “carry the force of law that a city ordinance would” nor does it include funding to support the project but may include things like requests for reports to the creation of new programs, like HSI (Jannene, 2020).

4.5 Pilot Neighborhood: Harambee

The Harambee neighborhood was selected as the recipient of this pilot program. As discussed above, District 6 - Alderwoman Milele A. Coggs, initiated the project. Harambee is a premier neighborhood in her district and has received a lot of support over the last decade.

Different stakeholders give conflicting borders of the neighborhood, but for the purposes of the project, NIDC assumed the neighborhood of Harambee bounded by W Capitol Drive to the north, N Holton Street to the east, W North Ave to the South, and HWY 43 to the west (Internal Communication).

Built on Chippewa, Ottawa, and Potawatomi land (Rindfleisch), Harambee became a German farming district in the 1800s, giving way to manufacturing in the early 1900s. The neighborhood remained heavily German until the 1920s when Italian and Polish families arrived. Black families arrived in the 1930s and by the 1970s Black peoples were the largest racial group in the neighborhood (Drew, 1985). The decline of manufacturing jobs, which drew large numbers of Black workers to Milwaukee between 1940 and 1980, and "continued endemic racial segregation" has led to Milwaukee's racial affordability and homeownership gap (Nykiel, 2022, pp. 1) and racial and economic challenges.

Harambee is a neighborhood with a long tradition of community activism and many well-established community groups (Bonds, et al., 2015). The oldest community group, the Central North Community Council, was established in 1960. Their activities "ranged from band concerts and tree plantings to rallying support for improvements" (Drew, 1985 pp. 1). Several studies have discussed Harambee's motivated residents and successful community organizing (Bonds, et al., 2015; Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014a; Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014b) despite the racial and economic challenges that the community faces. These racial and economic challenges derive from racialized policies and programs that ravaged Black communities in support of racism and capitalism. While white and wealthy neighborhoods have always had the support of the government to build and maintain neighborhoods that served their emotional and physical

well-being, Black neighborhoods in the United States have been intentionally disinvested (Loyd & Bonds, 2018). A symptom of white supremacy, this aim was implemented via policy and emulsified in local and federal programming. In *Where do Black lives matter? Race, stigma, and place in Milwaukee, Wisconsin* Loyd and Bonds discuss territorial stigmatization, a phenomenon that helps show how stigmas of poverty and place are racialized and penalized within the state, and Milwaukee. Territorial stigmatization allows neighborhoods to be seen as the causes and multipliers of poverty, violence, and more, instead of looking at the policies and programs that are the true contributors to low-resourced neighborhoods. As Loyd and Bonds (2018) write, “The ‘colorblind’ discourse of race is conjoined tightly with popular and academic accounts of deindustrialization, globalization, and persistent poverty in ways that selectively forget racially specific histories and geographies of work and public investments in housing, education, and welfare” (902). Yet, to understand why low-income neighborhoods must rely on state agencies to provide green spaces, one must first look towards the racially specific policies and investments that shaped the city and Harambee.

In Milwaukee, Native American tribes such as the Potawatomi, Ojibwe, Odawa (Ottawa), Fox, Ho-Chunk, Menominee, Sauk, and Oneida have all called the city area their home at some point in the last three centuries (Rindfleisch). As discussed in *To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Justice* “the racial capitalism of the nineteenth century was founded upon the racialization and instrumentalization, the commodification and securitization, the expropriation and forcible transportation, the sexual violation and reproductive alienation of Africans and Native Americans” (Johnson, 2018 p. 12). As Jones discusses in his book, *The Selma of the North*, Milwaukee developed as a city divided by ethnic and religious groups, centered

around neighborhood churches. The post-war migration of African Americans out of the South altered this, as African Americans migrated in search of affordable and decent housing in Milwaukee and elsewhere (Jones, 2002). In the late 20th and early 21st century, Black residents were confined to the “inner core” while white residents moved freely to the suburbs with the support of urban and federal policies that limited Black mobility (Loyd & Bonds, 2018, 905). In similar research, Bonds discusses how white suburbs near the city encouraged racially restrictive housing covenants. Covenants were embedded in property deeds all over the country to keep people who were not white from buying or even occupying the land (Mapping Prejudice). Bonds discusses how “recent research identifies over 100... covenants in 16 of the 18 suburban areas in Milwaukee County, with 51 alone in the village of Wauwatosa, a wealthy suburb immediately to the west of the city” (Loyd & Bonds, 2018, 906). Racial covenants excluded Black residents, creating “almost exclusively white suburbs in the so-called WOW counties of Waukesha, Ozaukee, and Washington” (Loyd & Bonds, 2018, 905). Loyd and Bonds also draw attention to public policies that contributed to disinvestment in Black neighborhoods. They note that “a range of public policies and private economic decisions have fueled deindustrialization, concentrated public and private economic investments in the suburbs ringing Milwaukee, and worked to dismantle public education and social welfare” (2018, 906). These policies provide evidence for the statistics that follow. These statistics are provided to share context but please note – the policies discussed above are the direct cause of the following rates. They are presented here to share how closely connected local and federal policy is to the lived experience and challenges faced by Harambee residents and Milwaukeeans at large. Today, 74% of Harambee residents identify as Black alone, compared with 30% in the

City of Milwaukee as a whole. 39% of Harambee residents live below the poverty line, compared to 25% in the City of Milwaukee overall. “Almost a third (32%) of households in Harambee do not have access to a vehicle, almost double the percentage of the City of Milwaukee as a whole (17%)....11% of the labor force from Harambee are unemployed and looking for work, almost double the percentage in the City of Milwaukee as a whole (6%)...The Median household income in Harambee is \$25,485, compared to \$41,838 in the City of Milwaukee as a whole” (Harambee Neighborhood, 2022). Loyd and Bonds point to similar statistics.

4.6 Partners

Following a long-standing tradition of grassroots organizing and community leadership in Harambee, a key component of HSI is the collaborative effort between the City and its partners. To successfully administer the project in its pilot year, the City of Milwaukee, Department of City Development, NIDC, called on specialists from around Milwaukee for support. NIDC managed the program, relationships, and goals, but relied on specialists for expertise around urban greening. HSI was joined by grassroots partners whose collaboration offered higher quality community connection, volunteer support, and green infrastructure.

Groundwork Milwaukee is an environmental non-profit that works to establish and promote environmental equity by increasing access to healthy foods and green space, providing local green jobs, and caring for Milwaukee’s urban gardens; They are part of the Groundwork USA network of independent, not-for-profit, environmental businesses called Groundwork Trusts. Groundwork Milwaukee works to support urban green spaces in the City. As shared in an interview with Groundwork Milwaukee’s Deputy Director, one major component of their work is an unofficial partnership with the City to help residents transform City-owned vacant

lots into urban gardens. For several years Groundwork Milwaukee has acted as a liaison between residents who want to build or continue an urban garden and the City's Department of City Development – Real Estate Division, which formally grants the leases for residents to do so. While Groundwork Milwaukee and DCD have a positive working relationship, there is no codified agreement. Their already existing investment in urban green space made them a natural partner for this work. As a lead HSI partner, they were asked to co-host visioning sessions, design the sites with resident and garden leader input, and construct the sites as well. Funding was provided for this work.

Eras Senior Network supports and engages seniors and adults with disabilities to help them live meaningful lives and was also engaged as a paid partner for this project. As volunteer coordinator Eras developed a group of community volunteers who attended visioning sessions, volunteer build days, and bi-weekly maintenance days. The volunteers were recruited by Era's staff who canvassed at places of worship, grocery stores, and door-to-door literature drops in the Harambee neighborhood. The volunteers formed a strong connection to Eras Senior Network.

TRUE Skool uses urban arts as a tool to engage youth in social justice and humanities education, and leadership and workforce. They were engaged to help connect Milwaukee youth to the program and to support creative thinking on site designs and planning. TRUE Skool interns created the logo of Healing Spaces Initiative. Additionally, Co-Executive Directors and youth interns led the visioning sessions, helping to bring out the resident's and garden leader's ideas.

Bader Philanthropies is headquartered in Harambee and commits funds in a variety of issue areas that improve the quality of life of people in Milwaukee, rural Wisconsin, and abroad. Bader Philanthropies supported the HSI project under their “Community matters” umbrella, which provides opportunities for individuals to gather, learn, and share, as well as address communities’ most critical human needs (Community Matters, 2022). In 2021 they granted NIDC \$70,000 for HSI.

The City of Milwaukee recognizes the need to work in community with other organizations to maximize community impact. The success of HSI relied on collaborative partnerships. The goal of creating these collaborations was to identify sources of local knowledge to understand the economic, public health, and social needs of the community; assemble volunteers to help support physical implementation and maintenance of the spaces, and engage experts to design and build the Healing Spaces. In recognition of this work, the Healing Spaces Initiative was selected to receive the “Northwestern Mutual Foundation Collaboration Award” at the 2022 Milwaukee Awards for Neighborhood Development Innovation (MANDI).

4.7 Funding

The City of Milwaukee, NIDC, received \$70,000 from Bader Philanthropies to support the Healing Spaces Initiative in 2021. An additional \$25,000 from the City of Milwaukee, Community Improvement Project funding was provided due to increased costs related to labor and material supply shortage, due to COVID-19 (Helt, et al., 2022). The need for private investment reflects growing anxieties around the State of the City and the funding available to sustain such projects. Recently, in August 2022 Mayor Johnson responded to employee’s anxiety via YouTube video, stating:

As you may have heard, the city is facing some unprecedented budget challenges in the coming year. Rising costs, tight restrictions on our revenue and a substantial increase in our pension obligation have combined to create a very tight fiscal situation. Now, I am intensely focused on limiting the negative impacts. But it is clear the challenges will affect the services we provide and departments throughout city government will be asking more of our employees (MKE Common Council, 2021).

Without a clear path to fiscal stability, the growing concerns are reflected in the quality and quantity of City employees' work.

5 Strengths of the Program

5.1 Introduction

The accomplishments of HSI brought to life true collaboration that benefited the City, project partners, and residents alike. By involving residents in the process of transforming places of loss and sadness into usable green spaces, NIDC was able to steward programming that built trust and community. Thus, Chapter 5 develops to share the strengths of creating resident-led programming and working in community with experts. These findings demonstrate HSI's attempt to align resources and capacity toward a definitive goal to avoid duplication of effort, serve as examples to encourage others to collaborate, and share data and knowledge across organizations.

5.2 Project Accomplishments

Print and social media campaigns were used to reach residents and community organizations, alerting them of HSI. This campaign included literature drops with Safe & Sound, press releases by NIDC and the Common Council, interviews with *Riverwest Radio* and *Riverwest Currents*, as well as a daily social media campaign utilizing DCD's and NIDC's Facebook and Instagram accounts. After the application period, several news sources reported on the installation of the Healing Spaces (Volpenhein, 2021; TodayTMJ4, 2021). As one of the respondents shared, the media and press also reassured investors – such as Bader Philanthropies and other partners – of the value and popularity of the project.

Table 2: 2021 Healing Spaces Initiative Metrics

2021 Metrics (NIDC, Internal Document)	
# Of doors knocked	1,033
Applicants	21
Volunteers	61
Visioning Session Attendees	35
Avg. number of volunteers at each event	10
Avg. number of residents at each visioning session	7
# Of Healing Spaces	8
Average cost of materials and labor for 1 site, 2021	\$7,103
Average total project cost of 1 site, 2021	\$9,521

In 2021 NIDC received 21 applications; eight applicants were accepted into the program based on connection with the community and the viability of the vacant lot proposed. Thirteen were denied due to the lot proposed being on private property, between two homes of residents who did not approve of the project, or because the lot was outside of the Harambee boundaries. Out of the 8 spaces, 4 of the spaces are maintained by community organizations: Riverworks Development Corporation and HeartLove Place. Two are maintained by places of worship: All Peoples Church and Solomon Community Temple. Two are maintained by Harambee residents (NIDC Application Report).

In August 2022 the Healing Spaces Initiative was awarded the Collaboration Award at the Milwaukee Awards for Neighborhood Development Innovation (MANDI). This MANDI included a \$10,000 grant in recognition of a collaboration involving two or more organizations

that are maximizing community impact beyond what they could achieve alone. The nomination highlighted HSI's commitment to aligning resources, sharing knowledge, and prioritizing the voice of the community to foster sustainable outcomes (Department of City Development, 2022). The rest of the chapter shares insights gleaned from interviews with Harambee stakeholders.

5.3 City Level Impact

Milwaukee's landscape is littered with disinvested homes and vacant properties that highlight historical and contemporary inequities, social support failure, and more. It's easy to see how one Milwaukee alderperson affectionately refers to Milwaukee as "a smile with missing teeth", where holes dot the landscape where homes once rose, contributing to a sense of disinvestment and loss:

Blighted land is a major challenge in Milwaukee, particularly in my district...This is because you had the foreclosure crisis that hit really hard... As a result, there have been hundreds of demolitions over the last several years, which led to vacant spaces in neighborhoods that too often result in dumping, other activities, or even just the absence of anything. (Coggs)

Healing Spaces Initiative emerged to address these grievances. With a tagline of, "where flowers grow so does hope," the project aimed to empower residents to claim the spaces that contribute to the despair, holding space for the past and creating a present to be proud of. One volunteer and community leader, Gavin, attended almost every single volunteer build day. Gavin grew up in the Harambee neighborhood, and during his interview explained how one of the very locations we were transforming used to be a bar when he was growing up. When Gavin came back from college, he found the bar to be transformed into a place of loss, before eventually the building was torn down. Since then, the lot existed as a vacant space, representing the loss of community.

Before moving on, I want to clarify a theme that cuts across several respondents. When prodded, Gavin, and the other respondents, generally, would clarify that by a place of loss they meant that there was drug use, gang violence, or other unsafe activities. In general, respondents spoke about places like this by defining them as a loss to the neighborhood, a bad place, or a place you didn't want to be around. In my anecdotal experience of working in Black and Brown, low-income neighborhoods in Milwaukee over the last 7 years, I have come to understand what they meant. But, in an effort to utilize best interview practices, in the first few interviews, I pushed respondents to share what they meant by that. It was an uncomfortable question, and the responses brought a lot of distress to the interviewee. As such, I pulled from Jason Stanley's (2015) publication *How Propaganda Works*, wherein he explains that "in conversations between members of the dominant group and members of the subordinate group, the members of the subordinate group feel pressure to accept the negative stereotypes of their own group... So, there will be pressure, just for conversation ease, to accept the stereotype of one's group, and of course then to personally distance oneself from that stereotype." I came to understand and respect the definitions that they gave without having to push to understand further.

As much as Gavin hated to see the space being used negatively, he also felt the fact that the building was razed to be a punishment to the community. He explained:

It did two things: The individuals that was creating the issue went somewhere else. And the neighborhood suffered for it. Now there's this big hole in the neighborhood, on the block, and happening with it, and the people who created it isn't there. And the people who made a decision to create that space [a vacant lot] isn't doing anything to make it a positive space now. I felt it to be a punishment to the community.

By reinvesting in the neighborhood, HSI thus emerged as a small part of the reframing the City is developing in recognition of racial and spatial inequality or that punishment that Gavin, and other residents, shared. Darius Bernard of Groundwork Milwaukee, Deputy Director of Operations and Programs, shared his thoughts when asked about how HSI responds to challenges in the city, saying:

When I think about it, it's really this ecosystem. It's not just the place, it's how the people are engaging with the place, A place is worthless on its own. So, I guess when I think about things like poverty and violence, right, I think about how can... Like, what type of environmental response or our ecological response with the environment can help some of those things, you know, helping make them... I don't know, more tolerable, less frequent. And I feel like, you know, coming together as people on a block, and as a community in a space, does that... So being able to make it accessible to people and make it just get people out and enjoying their neighborhood and seeing the environment as something that's not down the block... not as something that, you know, you got to drive to the lake to get to or drive, you know, even further up to so. I mean, just like I think it helps people get invested in our neighborhood that has the positive effects that that can counteract violence. Yeah, and it's a piece right? Like it's definitely not a magic bullet. It's not you know, like it, but it's part of it.

When speaking to other City leaders, garden leaders, and residents, the magic bullet they were looking for was described as several things, but most often as housing. For the City, the most cost-effective and productive use of vacant land is housing. Homeownership is a way to increase tax revenue and build cohesive neighborhoods. As resident respondents discussed, it's the opportunity to buy a home, create space and grow roots in a community or contribute to the development of a community. When housing is not an option, residents and City leadership alike look towards stopgaps that give vacant lots a productive use. Alderwoman Coggs concurs; housing simply isn't a realistic or affordable option for all +3,000 vacant lots in the City of Milwaukee. When asked which vacant lots work best for HSI, she pointed to development opportunities, saying, "there are so many vacant lots, I mean you might as well have somebody

do something with it...” Here, Alderwoman Coggs recognizes that stopgap uses can be an effective alternative to ownership that creates health, economic, and social benefits.

The benefits of urban green space are innumerable, making their place within Milwaukee’s social and economic development landscape an easily accepted stopgap in developing a menu of “plan b” options when housing is not available. Environmentalism and greening solutions are often leveraged as an inoffensive solution to visible disinvestment. Residents welcome green space and City employees and other stakeholders are willing to build them. As discussed in the literature review, by not confronting the challenges of green space one furthers ideological green praxis. Residents, volunteers, garden leaders, City staff, officials, and funders reference the mental health benefits green space can create in individual interviews. With a title like “Healing Spaces”, the premise of the program speaks for itself. Many respondents referenced the simple act of creating a space to just sit in the neighborhood as a major reward of the project.

5.4 NIDC, Partners, and Collaboration

By acknowledging the ecological, economic, and public health debts in association with vacant lots, Healing Spaces addresses the “smile with missing teeth” grievances, which speaks to the changes the Department of City Development is making to be more actively anti-racist and better serve communities of color. The mission of the City of Milwaukee, Department of City Development (DCD) is to improve the quality of life in Milwaukee by guiding and promoting development that creates jobs, builds wealth, strengthens the urban environment, and at the same time respects equity, economy, and ecology.

In April 2021, DCD published the report “Breaking Down Barriers to Participation in Neighborhood Planning” with an explicit focus on reducing barriers that may be

disproportionately impacting residents of color. NIDC developed its engagement practice in reflection on the lessons learned as a part of the above-mentioned survey. This included multiple steps: First, ensuring traditional (non-digital) methods are being utilized for notifying residents who may not regularly use the internet about opportunities to participate. DCD staff also communicates how each recommendation will be implemented, specifically, which are action items that DCD is responsible for implementing, and which are longer-term recommendations requiring identifying future funding or developer interest. Finally, they “Co-host” planning meetings with neighborhood partners serving in leadership roles. By implementing these actions NIDC was able to further its engagement and ability to develop neighborhoods with neighbors. The NIDC Housing Manager shared in his interview, “I think the sixth district is the highest, maybe in volume next to the 15th for vacant lots, and that's because of a whole slew of issues from, you know, dating back decades, and racist policies that we are trying to get away from now, and very explicitly trying to fight.” After sharing how the programs are reviewed within a racial equity lens, he said, “every day we look to combat those, those policies and a lot of the programs that we have created over the last decade plus.” Thus, Healing Spaces emerges as a “plan B type, you know, activation of the space and smaller scale development that's open to the community.” By referring to the program as open to the community, the respondent alluded to sharing the planning and decision-making process with residents and partners.

To successfully administer the project in its pilot year, the City of Milwaukee, Department of City Development - NIDC, called on specialists from around Milwaukee for support. NIDC managed the program, relationships, and goals, but relied on specialists for

expertise around urban greening. The needs of the residents are beyond what the city of Milwaukee is capable of providing alone. HSI was joined by grassroots partners whose collaboration offered higher quality community connection, volunteer support, and green infrastructure. These partners helped bring in residents and community organizations who were interested or already invested in Urban Greening in the city, hoping to ensure continuity of care and future sustainability. As such, NIDC was able to stack resources and opportunities. This includes urban gardeners who were connected to Groundwork Milwaukee as residents or as Green Jobs and Education participants. Additionally, this work supported Era's RSVP program, where volunteers ages 55 and older are placed in community and government agencies to address pressing community needs. TRUE Skool, using their background in healing, meditation, and urban arts, along with Groundwork Milwaukee, and NIDC came together to facilitate public planning sessions, where resident's ideas were put to paper and translated to site designs and completed Healing Spaces that reflected the needs and visions of said residents. In the end, collaborative partnerships that centered on community voice were a rewarding part of the Healing Spaces Initiative. HSI utilized collaborative community partnerships to piece together the social support to serve residents, whilst still maintaining control, even when the work is done by outside vendors. As Alderwoman Coggs stated, "Community groups are critical because, as you know, it's neighbors who apply but it's often organizations who helped to shape and form the ideas and the whole application to even be able to do it." Alderwoman Coggs understands the importance of such collaboration.

5.5 Resident Level Impact

Challenges aside, these "plan b" support projects empower residents to create change in their neighborhood. Referring to the above discussion on DCD's change management

regarding racial and spatial equity, resident-led project management became a key component of Healing Spaces as a reflection of the values of the organizers, partners, and resident goals.

Alderwoman Coggs acknowledged this distinction, saying:

You know, like I know we could have picked lots to just do and just did it...but the fact that you know, neighbors applied, or organizations applied with it is, I think a strength. I think oftentimes with everything that's going on in the city, and the world, residents feel a little powerless, about anything they can do to change or positively impact their neighborhood, or anything that's going on [is something to be celebrated]. What I like about the healing spaces is that it is a visual representation of what residents can do and my hope is that the impact over time, is also a demonstration of what residents have the power to do. So, it's empowering experience, from application and visualization to implementation. And over time, hopefully, the impact will be such that those same residents kind of witness the impact of the work that they put in, the ideas that they have shared, you know, thing that they see in their neighborhood, we, oftentimes with government, it's like we're doing stuff for everybody, but to this process and setups and at least it allows an opportunity for the input from residents and engagement for residents. So, my hope is that there are some empowering aspects, I mean, that their residents feel and are inspired by and could potentially grow from to help impact other aspects of the neighborhood and the city.

Some garden leaders agreed, and the City recognized it as a step in the right direction as planning and implementation continues for current and future years. One garden leader noted how informative the sessions were, referencing the control she felt in drawing up the space with fellow neighbors and community partners. Another gardener elaborated on feeling thankful that it wasn't only her ideas that were represented in the design, noting how residents who benefit from her community programming attended the visioning session and provided feedback on the space implemented later, ensuring, at the very least, that a sample of the nearby residents was represented in its creation.

In addition to the work being done on-site, the opportunity for networking between residents, garden leaders, and city staff also lay the groundwork for further collaboration and social support. Groundwork Milwaukee Staff commented on how the more they work with

NIDC in true collaboration the more they begin to understand how closely connected the work is and how important it may be to efficiently supporting residents. Further, by engaging residents with community partners, the City continues to fill the gap in social needs and social services.

6 Shortcomings and Challenges

6.1 NIDC Responds to the Challenge

Understanding the need for urban green space, the City attempted a response with the tools available. The shortcomings discussed below do not represent a unique or targeted issue with the program itself, rather it represents systemic challenges facing the City across all departments. From initial ideation to ongoing maintenance, all respondents raised concerns about the investment in vacant lots. This touches everything from the quality of amenities installed, the funding to support ongoing maintenance, and the labor to staff it. I first discuss these shortcomings from within the program administration, moving then to the collaborative efforts that made the project possible and finally to the volunteers and residents whose support is necessary for the success of the project.

As the city turns a page toward racial and climate equity Healing Spaces Initiative emerged as one of the first chapters. However, from the way residents feel and describe their experience, to it outright being said by elected officials, such as Alderwoman Coggs, the evergreen challenges are the “limitations of funding, the limitations of staffing, and limitations of programming.”

The structural incapacity and lack of strategic direction of the City hurt individual actors' ability to provide long-term, innovative solutions. Led previously by Mayor Tom Barrett for over 17 years, the city elected Mayor Cavalier Johnson to the post after a special election in April 2021. While the Council has been wrought with changes and the City's financial situation is troubling, a new strategic direction has not yet been mobilized from the Mayor's office. What has been released (February 2022) is Johnson's economic plan, *Economic Prosperity A Vision for*

Milwaukee as well as the *Gathering Places Feasibility Study*, added to the City's Recreational Plan at the request of Johnson. These plans illustrate new intentions for urban greening in the City of Milwaukee. That said, the interviews and internal communication revealed that the City is not in a position to reimagine the strategic development of neighborhood beautification. It instead relies on a patchwork quilt of existing programmatic solutions.

One can look to Alderwoman Coggs to understand the patchwork solutions. As she explained, one way to introduce new projects or funding is by coupling new projects, programs, or ideas with existing programs, services and labor. For example, in the creation of HSI Alderwoman Coggs coupled the program with the Community Improvement Program, an existing NIDC line item in the City's budget. Explaining this idea, she says "I did that because new programs are hard to stand up solely on their own. So, if you take the synergy of existing programs, that can assist and help, it can make it more realistic, to be able to be accomplished. And to be more successful in a shorter period of time." This can be labeled as innovative, as it allows new ideas to reinvigorate existing solutions. The harm of this innovation is that it allows new ideas to be implemented without considering the feasibility of the project in relation to staff capacity and other existing programs within the City and the city in general. In the case of Healing Spaces Initiative, this resulted in strain within NIDC and concerns around ongoing labor to sustain the project. It also resulted in duplicative efforts across City departments engaging in green space.

In my own anecdotal experience of working for the City for the last three years, I have seen anxiety and burnout affect employees. Shrinking budgets have resulted in employees being expected to perform more work in less time. As the NIDC Community Outreach Liaison

and HSI program manager commented, referencing her and me “Just two girls working on this ain’t going to cut it.” As discussed later in this chapter, the lack of available labor and time increased reliance on project partners. The city is in a tough position, which is reflected in the need for programs such as HSI. The health of a city is tied to its tax base and with so many vacant lots and tax-free incentives for large companies, Milwaukee continues to flash that “smile with missing teeth”. As the DCD Real Estate Coordinator responded:

When you have a lot of vacant land, you can see a lot of stress on the financial situation of a city. So, if there were a way to get a house back on every single vacant lot in the city where there used to be a house before they could snap their fingers and do it. I think that would be a no-brainer. But, without the money for that type of investment, short-term, small-scale investments stand in as a way to recoup the culture and neighborhood feel that the lack of houses took away. That said, being in this position means finding funding, justifying that funding is difficult, and also that when you get that funding [It] is difficult.

The team working on HSI concurs. City funding for projects such as HSI is determined year-to-year, with no long-term commitment due to the City’s financial challenges. This, along with the bureaucracy associated, creates obstacles that take away from the work itself. As one HSI staffer said, the insecurity of funding “is the biggest obstacle in my mind, because I’m always focused on money.” This detracts from the work itself and future planning around long-term planning.

Unsurprisingly, this anxiety around funding happens in other City programs, too. For example, Home Gr/own, a similar vacant lot program, has begun to slow as funding dries up. There are several programs in the City that are vying for the same funding streams. No one is to say what happens to the existing small-scale investments once the program is sun downed. For this reason, HSI pivoted towards private funding for support.

In Harambee, Bader Philanthropies emerged in the physical and philanthropical, building new headquarters as well as investing dollars in the neighborhood. In connection with the Healing Spaces Initiative, Frank Cumberbatch, Vice President – Engagement of Bader Philanthropies, worked with his team to develop a project that brought Little Free Libraries to the Neighborhood. Frank sits on NIDC’s Board, along with Alderwoman Coggs. Together, they developed the Little Free Libraries project into the foundation of what would is now called Healing Spaces. Their advocacy is what brought this project to life, with the dollars to support it, at least for the first pilot year.

In a direct grant to NIDC, the funds from Bader Philanthropies were used to support the project with a goal to complete 10 Healing Spaces in the Harambee neighborhood for around \$5,000 each. Bader Philanthropies boasts itself as a quiet funder, with a propensity to allow beneficiaries to lead themselves. This idea was repeated to internal stakeholders throughout the duration of the program. In practice, NIDC staff felt pressure from Bader staff to perform towards their influence. According to respondent interviews and the internal Program Evaluation, this was mostly due to having Bader Philanthropies attend bi-weekly planning programs with collaborative partners. As one partner commented during an internal interview at the City, “It was made clear that the funder had a lot of influence on the project, and that the grand vision was mostly controlled by them.” While they didn’t have executive control, their participation in biweekly meetings with partners created some awkwardness. Further, Bader introduced requirements for working with specific community organizations throughout the grant year, causing some strife for NIDC staff and partners.

Some of the challenges confronted around funding responded to a need for a holistic and collaborative approach. Mr. Bernard, Deputy Director at Groundwork Milwaukee discussed this, saying: “Telling the story of the collective impact is what, hopefully, would be compelling for somebody to fund it a little bit more holistically.” The success of these programs is dependent on the partner’s ability to do the work. As such, their willingness to participate is wrapped up in the control and support they’re given. Alderwoman Coggs agrees, and points to true innovation in her response, saying:

It really should be some greater effort on the maintenance side to utilize it as an opportunity for some experience and training and stuff for folks who have interests in those areas, which, if you look at the agencies that I just named... I think it might be a way to fashion a program that both gives people experience and potentially pays people without it being an extra attack on the city’s bottom line.

All of this points to the fact that collaborative funding is necessary when considering the collective impact we make, together. Mr. Bernard responds, “But you know, like, there’s, there are so many people who are trying to do this work. And I think enough like enough people understand the problem and a nuanced way to capitalize on an opportunity to create a mechanism by which we can train and pay people to take care of green space.”

6.2 Partnerships

As discussed in the literature review, collaboration is deeply embedded into the neoliberal project and exemplified here. While HSI’s current model allows resources and information to be shared and helpfully coordinated, it also exemplifies asymmetrical relationships between community-based organizations and their government stakeholders. Within HSI, this played out in two ways: First, partners were expected to deliver more outcomes than they had the capacity to do; Second, it hurt garden leaders’ ability to establish themselves as a community organizer in the neighborhood. Not having direct access or

leadership over resident volunteers hurts their ability to continue maintenance and encourage support.

NIDC was joined by partners whose collaboration offered higher quality community connection, volunteer support, and green infrastructure. NIDC managed the program, relationships, and goals, but relied on specialists for expertise around urban greening.

Therefore, HSI utilized collaborative community partnerships to piece together the social support to serve residents. This collaborative partnership can be confusing to stakeholders. As Mr. Barnard, Groundwork Milwaukee, stated:

I'm still confused on what the government's role is in a lot of stuff is. But I think like people overthink the government's role...they give it too much responsibility. And it's also kind of sold that way. They're [the Government] is like, Oh, we're.... we're gonna do all these programs.... [the programs] are gonna help you. And it's like, that's not really what's happening. And it's tough for, I think, local governments to put money in people's hands to do what's best. I don't know why. But that mechanism just doesn't make sense.

What's happening is that groups such as Groundwork Milwaukee bore the burden of much of this work, even if that wasn't understood by City staff nor were they provided adequate funding for it. In 2021 Groundwork Milwaukee's role was to design and build out the Healing Spaces. Additionally, they ended up having a heavy hand in the strategic development of the project, especially as the teams looked to continue the project in 2022. Groundwork employees also ended up working with garden leaders directly throughout the actual buildout. They also co-led volunteer days.

City staff acknowledges this dissimilitude between expectation and reality. NIDC

Housing Manager stated:

Yeah, well, I mean, we can't do it. I mean, I think that's the biggest thing. We don't have the capacity to do the hands-on work. We don't have a Parks Department at the city for

being the thirtieth largest city in America. That's amazing to me, and then maybe that'll change but who knows... Because it literally can't happen by just the city... And nonprofits are strapped for cash. So...it's kind of a nice synergy of you know, someone who's got the capital, someone who's got the experience, bringing that together to make the project happen.

Community partnerships are necessary to get the work done. Groundwork Milwaukee is the sensible choice to help build the bridge between the work residents want to do and the capacity they need to do it. Mr. Bernard reacts, "Especially with gardens, not only does the operation of the garden have a learning curve associated with it, but then you're also dealing with like, engaging the city...[it's] intimidating, and you [residents] are going to be like, 'I'm gonna mess it up.'" Groundwork Milwaukee's reputation in the community and access to residents was a celebrated component of Healing Spaces Initiative.

In internal conversations with NIDC, partners also commented on the lack of communication and transparency between the groups. An internal evaluation by the NIDC team wrote, "Partners were brought in too late to the planning process, which led to miscoordination about expectations, role, and intention of the project. Representatives from Groundwork Milwaukee and True Skool made it clear that the timeline NIDC supplied did not have enough time to take the project from ideation to implementation (Internal Program Evaluation). In the same report, one partner was quoted saying, "The idea was a lot grander than the execution, the City and funders had big ideas and plans, but did not realize the amount of work and coordination needed to successfully pull off the project" (Internal Program Evaluation). Partners were chosen for their expertise in urban greening and community engagement but were not allowed to use that expertise to direct the project. This led to respondents commenting that they spent a lot of energy trying to shrink down the scale of the

project, as NIDC staff had an inadequate understanding of the amount of work and coordination that is needed to complete projects that met the City's, funders, and residents' expectations.

In some cases, the tight timeline and high expectations compromised the quality of work done. While the NIDC staff are seasoned community development professionals with decades of experience supporting urban greening efforts, there was a lack of expertise and understanding around the magnitude of the project that contributed to compromises. From start to finish, Healing Spaces cost more money, time, and maintenance than NIDC originally anticipated. Garden leaders commented on this, saying that they wish they had more time to bring in experts and set the space up for success. This resulted in sites sitting unfinished for months and lower-quality amenities. As ERAS Volunteer Coordinator shared:

It doesn't reflect good, because it shows that people could just say things and just be done with it, and it's okay. And it's not. It doesn't help the healing because it's like, half done. So, it's half healed, you know, so it's like, if you were to just continue with one until it's done, you know, then you don't have those half steps of trying to hurry up and finished up or running around everywhere trying to finish every one.

The unaccounted cost and time resulted in Groundwork Milwaukee overextending themselves. This meant that staff was spread thin and that they ate some of the costs of the project due to over-promising. Stakeholders from each partnership commented on the result of this phenomenon.

One might also look towards the way garden leaders were set up to further discuss collaborative efforts. First, in attempting to maintain control and alleviate the workload for garden leaders, NIDC and its partners coordinated much of the community engagement efforts. Garden leader and Riverworks Community Organizer shared, "I mean, honestly, I don't feel like

Riverworks did that much work. I don't, you know, like, it was mostly because ERAS was hired to find residents to take care of the books... I feel like we were a support team. Not the other way around." This resulted in a disconnect between residents/volunteers who wanted to support the project and the Garden leaders who were ultimately responsible for maintenance. Several Garden Leaders commented that it was a relief not to have to coordinate the efforts. It ultimately took control and ownership away from the Garden leaders.

While funding and overall City strategy created challenges in doing the work, HSI Partners continued to lead a collaborative and successful program toward completion. In contribution to the Program Evaluation, one partner shared:

We demonstrated with a little bit of time, and the will to make it happen, we can pull folks together and a little bit of time with a little bit of leeway, just get it started. I think it was a great example of community. But I think it's a testament also to be like, okay, we can get things done, we work together, we can be nimble, we can move and even without all the details, we can still get things done.

6.3 Resident Impact

While strategic planning informed the successful implementation of the program, less work was done to ensure continued maintenance and preservation of the project. The project assumed resident maintenance, resulting in frustration and resident burden. While residents and volunteers often have the best intentions, the findings show that reliance on their efforts often results in some disrepair. As such, maintenance and responsibility fall away as shame and blight return in their shadows. In an examination of these efforts, I first discuss the City's intentions for resident empowerment, resting on what is known about resident intention. I then turn towards how the responsibility of maintenance makes residents feel, before finally discussing the outcome of poor maintenance management on green space and future fears. Many of the Garden leaders involved in HSI are also Harambee residents.

The City created the Healing Spaces Initiative with the intention of creating a resident-led program that reflected the values and needs of residents in neighborhoods where the spaces were being created. Alderwoman Coggs reflected on this, saying:

We, oftentimes with government, it's like we're doing stuff for everybody... But this process and setup allow an opportunity for input from residents... So, my hope is that there are some empowering aspects, I mean, that their residents feel and are inspired by and could potentially grow from to help impact other aspects of the neighborhood and the city.

The hope that Alderwoman Coggs shared reflected the existing actions of residents in her neighborhood, touching on the predisposition towards community service that residents in Harambee already share. “I have a lot of residents [in my district] who cut the vacant lots all the time because it's next to their house and they just don't want to see tall grass next to their house. So, they, on a regular and consistent basis, cut it and take care of it anyway.” Residents agree, several of whom I spoke with discussed how they pick up the garbage, mow the vacant lots, or shovel the snow on their block.

Moving further than the simple act of volunteer labor, residents shared that they feel accountable for solving systemic challenges through their personal actions. Volunteer leaders commented on the reasons for working on this project such as curbing violence or stopping reckless driving. One volunteer stated, “A lot of people blame the city. Residents, we have a responsibility.” The results demonstrated that in practice, residents often act as individual actors without the tools necessary to provide solutions for the challenges they feel passionately about, resulting in feelings of shame. Healing Spaces Initiative’s intended to empower residents, but the lack of sustainable project management and access to necessary tools resulted in residents feeling burdened and resentful. I stood with one resident and Garden

leader, Melina, near the bench at a Healing Space for an interview. We realized that the space had been vandalized when we arrived that day. The door of the newly installed little free library was missing, some of the decorative bricks that lined the patio area had been broken, and the bench was caked with mud. She shared the following:

Like I said, I'm a single mother...so my hands are tired during the week. If I had, you know, another able-bodied person or if I, you know, if not even that... if I had somebody to watch my kids, I'll be able to come out here. mow the grass.... Like I even have plans on me and my mother coming back with my kids and wanting to go plant flowers. I'm like I'm itching to go.... It's just you know, everything is time-consuming.... Like I had an army of people behind, right? It'd be a different story.

Melina grew up in the Harambee neighborhood and wanted to participate in HSI to honor her father who passed away recently. I asked her what she thought he'd say about the space. She responded, "Yeah, and he'd say, 'you know... you gotta have more... not even patience... You gotta have more people.... that's able and willing to keep this park up.'" Residents and Garden Leaders like Melina felt that it was important for "good people" to take back the neighborhood but ultimately, they couldn't do it alone.

Comparisons revealed that resident enjoyment varies. Some garden leaders shared that they understood the challenges & delays facing the project, but others just felt let down. One Garden leader shared, "I mean, it depends on how you take it. It could be like [someone like] me knowing like, I know, the inner workings of it all. And I'm also a resident.... Or it could be 'they don't give a shit about us', or their capacity issues. Or 'they are failing us....' I mean, it could be a variety of things, you know, really depends on how people perceive things."

At the end of each interview, I asked each participant who they thought was in charge of the space, should there be a need for some type of repair. In almost every instance the respondent responded with silence before sharing that it's the City's responsibility. City

leadership has recognized this gap in services but is unable to offer a solution. Alderwoman Coggs shared,

I would love for us to have an unlimited fund and we could do all the programming that residents would love to see and finance it and make sure it gets done. I would love to be able to program the Healing Spaces, but I think even when we did the original aim, you know you cannot rely on the volunteers to figure out how to use the space.

I have detailed the various maintenance support below, but given what is discussed above one can draw the conclusion that what currently exists isn't enough:

1. DPW continues with snow removal, mowing, and litter pick-up (every two to three weeks).
2. Garbage Bins have been placed at each completed Healing Space
3. DPW will cure graffiti on a case-by-case basis. Garden leaders will notify NIDC of vandalism/issue, assess damages, and engage DPW when we can, on a case-by-case basis. A small budget has been organized to afford small repairs.

A key finding of this research is that Healing Spaces are vulnerable. When done correctly with the full support of residents, partners, and others, spaces such as Healing Spaces flourish. This can be seen in Healing Spaces such as Tranquility on the Trail, Sculpture Garden, and others. Tranquility on the Trail and the Belonging Place are maintained by community organizations that have the resources to provide maintenance. Sculpture Garden opted for long-lasting, low-maintenance amenities that make it easy for the garden leader, a Harambee resident, to maintain. But, if spaces face any issue at all, their delicate state and mismanaged responsibility leave them vulnerable to disrepair and abandonment. The result of this is a patchwork quilt of investment in various states of repair and disrepair. This inconsistency leaves residents confused, but they remain optimistic. For many of them, any investment is better than none at all.

7 Discussion

7.1 Research Problem & Questions

In consideration of the challenges of urban greening, this paper used the Healing Spaces Initiatives to discuss how the interests of neighborhood residents, community organizations, and the interests of the city come together and contradict each other to develop green spaces. By evaluating the effectiveness of the program, the results indicate that while effective in encouraging resident empowerment, participation, and access to green spaces, the challenges of maintenance and ongoing care limit the quality and impact of the work.

7.2 Key Findings

The findings are consistent with research discussing the erosion of the social wage under neoliberalism, suggesting that the needs of the residents are beyond what the city of Milwaukee can address. Therefore, they use collaborative community partnerships and outside funding to piece together the social support to serve residents, whilst still maintaining control, even when the work is done by outside vendors. The result of this is disjointed service and confused residents. Through the tenacity of individual actors and residents, Healing Spaces remains a success despite various challenges.

7.3 Results

Healing Spaces Initiative emerged deeply embedded in the neoliberal project. The findings show that while stakeholders identify urban greening as an important right, the strategy around collaboration and maintenance reflects the shrinking capacity of local government and expanding reliance on private funding, community groups, and volunteer labor to sustain initiatives.

All respondents interviewed for this study commented on the need for urban green space and its positive health, social, and economic impacts. In doing so, they acknowledge and take part in green orthodoxy. Sometimes missing a critical lens, this embrace of urban greening also embraces so-called unproblematic benefits, leaving out a menu of challenges that make the impact of these projects hard to enjoy.

While funding for urban greening projects is welcomed, the nature of these funding sources is complicated and drives anxiety for all involved. Residents and volunteers who support the project feel that the projects are owed funding, while the City simply does not have the funding to give.

NIDC's relationship with its partners reflected the successful coordination of resources and expertise, leading to successful collaboration. Even still, there is room to improve. The findings reflect that program partners were made responsible for the provision of services, but not in control of the goals, metrics, and so forth of those services. This created an asymmetrical relationship, constraining partners to agree to more than they could do, which compromised the program's results.

In support of resident empowerment, Healing Spaces relied on in-group leadership to envision and create spaces that reflected the needs of the residents. Existing research indicates that citizen engagement can be used to connect residents with other programs. Engaging residents with HSI also provided the opportunity to connect them with other city and community services.

The evolution of governance under the constraints of neoliberalism created a reliance on volunteer labor to maintain urban green spaces, as the social wage that afforded paid and

high-quality social services disappeared. Responses shared by residents and garden leaders interviewed for this study reflect the burden of this labor as they shared the weight of the responsibility they felt and their inability to provide the maintenance needed as they lack the skill, tools, and time. The emphasis put on volunteer maintenance can reproduce racism through discourse on individual responsibility. By relying on volunteer labor Healing Spaces Initiatives reinforces the meritocracy of green space. Here, green spaces are earned rather than righted.

7.4 Limitations

While this study provided an adequate evaluation of the Healing Spaces Initiative, it is important to acknowledge limitations that constrain and impact the interpretation of the findings for more generalizable uses regarding urban green space. First, my role as project administrator within NIDC for this project provided some bias as a primary investigator. Second, my pre-existing relationships with respondents through my work at the City of Milwaukee might have discouraged respondents from sharing negative opinions on the City or the project itself. When awkward moments did arise, I reminded respondents that their responses in no way impacted their relationship with the City. Lastly, the interviews and research is directly related to the 2021 Healing Spaces Initiative. While this program is similar to the 2022 pilot, and other City programs that funded short-term investments on City-owned lots, more research should be done comparing the overall feasibility and circumstances of each project.

7.5 2022 Changes to HSI

In recognition of the changes that were developed after the completion of the 2021 pilot year, this chapter shares a bird's eye view of the current state of the program, and changes that were implemented as a direct result of the interviews and evaluation.

2021 allowed NIDC to explore various partnerships in support of expert resident engagement, volunteerism, and urban greening. While it helped build a programmatic blueprint and engage artists, the project administrators pivoted to a smaller partnership base in 2022. The reason for this was to better connect partners, volunteers, and residents directly with the garden leader who was stewarding the project rather than partners who acted as a middleman to that work, creating disjointed service provision. Scaling down the partnerships to a smaller group, NIDC and Groundwork Milwaukee, also allowed the opportunity to build a more equitable leadership strategy, where Groundwork Milwaukee receives more funding and has more control over the projects.

We know that urban gardens have a higher success rate when in collaboration with fellow neighbors (Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014a). To lessen resident resentment, NIDC now requires that residents work directly with a community organization to apply and be accepted into the Healing Space program. As such, community-based organizations or neighborhood groups must underwrite applicants. Applicants must be invested in the neighborhood they intend to build a Healing Space in. Additionally, NIDC increased its transparency and communication around the amount of stewardship and maintenance required by the participating community group. As such, groups who accepted the grant were aware of and could commit to the ongoing maintenance. This was ensured by implementing a 1-year renewable lease of the vacant lot as well as a 1-time memorandum of understanding between NIDC and the garden leader.

NIDC is committed to installing permanent, durable amenities in Healing Spaces. Low-maintenance, long-lasting amenities provide a secure way forward for community

organizations, volunteers, and residents. Toward that effort, Groundwork Milwaukee subcontracted an expert landscape design and installation firm. This helped them elevate their skills and capacity, creating more sustainable options for residents. Additionally, 2% of the budget is now allocated to ongoing repairs.

Racial equity continues to be a leading driver of the changes made in 2022. In 2021 the DCD Planning Division developed an implementation plan to reduce barriers to participation in the City of Milwaukee’s neighborhood planning process, with an explicit focus on reducing barriers that may be disproportionately impacting residents of color. This plan was developed utilizing the Government Alliance on Race and Equity (GARE) Racial Equity Toolkit, including a review of existing data, national best practices, and internal and external stakeholder feedback. To continue and increase racial equity, NIDC has adopted the implementation plan with consideration of the Healing Spaces Initiative. As such, the following foundational recommendations were implemented in 2021 and 2022:

1. Partnering with and compensating community-based organizations with leadership and staff reflective of the racial makeup of the neighborhood to lead neighborhood engagement efforts on planning projects.
2. Providing food and refreshments at community meetings.
3. Facilitating one-on-one meetings and smaller focus groups with community representatives.
4. Ensure residents have access to the background knowledge on relevant DCD processes to effectively engage in the neighborhood planning process and advocate for neighborhood goals after plan adoption.
5. More clearly communicate what topics are being discussed at various meetings and where people can go for more information
6. Communicate how each recommendation will be implemented; specifically, which are action items that DCD is responsible for implementing, and which are longer-term recommendations requiring identifying future funding or developer interest.
7. “Co-host” planning meetings with neighborhood partners serving in lead roles
8. Proactively strengthen relationships with community organizations and residents through continuous information exchange

Additionally, Healing Space Activation will be implemented to sustain the Healing Spaces Initiative with needed maintenance and resident engagement. \$10,000, awarded by LISC via the MANDI awards, will be used to make small repairs and allow Garden Leaders to employ space activation on the existing lots in 2023.

The purpose of Site Activation is to bring public programming to Healing Spaces.

Healing Space Activation Objectives:

1. Allow NIDC to stay connected to the lots and support garden leaders
2. Connect residents with resources, tools, and education related to mental health
3. Link HSI to other rich and diverse community activities to improve its utilization
4. Attract area residents to use the space on their own time and attend scheduled programs

NIDC offers HSI Space Activation grants to support community events that engage community members in Milwaukee. Space Activation grants are not eligible to be used to start a non-profit business, do commercial or personal property improvements, or be used as a payroll subsidy for volunteer or youth stipends. Grants are reimbursed or paid directly to the vendor. The maximum grant request available for a project is \$800. Grants are limited to an existing Healing Space. The frame of this project reflects the existing CIP program, in that the applicant is obligated to plan and execute the activation. This frees up NIDC staff time and allows community partners to have full control of their events.

7.6 2023 and Beyond: Recommendations

The challenges and consequences of this project are by no means unique to the program, the individual actors, or the stakeholders who supported the program. Instead, the challenges faced represent systemic challenges and issues facing the City as a whole. As such, the following recommends a higher level of coordination and long-term strategy. The objective

of this policy recommendation is to encourage a city-wide, coordinated effort of beautification efforts on City-Owned vacant lots.

Rather than repeating Healing Spaces Initiative in its same form, a pause of project implementation in 2023 is recommended. This will allow NIDC and partners to work collaboratively across departments to strategize for long-term solutions. This policy recommendation responds to the intersection of multiple programs across multiple departments, all participating in the work of urban greening. While they differ in small ways, each program supports a similar mission of empowering residents to create improvements on Vacant Lots or city owned land to increase access to urban green space. Each program works independently from the other, with no clear strategic path for collaboration. The outcome of this is the repetition of staffing, funds, and disjointed service delivery and communication to residents.

Instead of HSI in its full form, it is recommended that NIDC sustain the Healing Spaces Initiative Healing Spaces Activation and with needed maintenance and resident engagement. In recognition of the sometimes competing and overlapping missions of City urban greening programs, 2023 should allow city Leadership to re-imagine city-wide strategy on urban greening.

Urban Greening implementation happens within several departments, with staff from each department donating valuable capacity towards overseeing such projects. Strategic planning efforts should identify a department and team to oversee the entirety of vacant lot beautification programs within the City of Milwaukee. This efficiency will proffer valuable city dollars for use for other services. It will also create a concerted effort for residents to easily be

able to navigate, helping to rid some of the confusion and resentment that often accompanies the resident experience.

The nature of capital dollars creates anxiety around long-term planning and urgency around short-term spending. Limited staff capacity also disallows needed time to implement programs. As such, in 2023 valuable time should be spent creating a long-term plan contingent on appropriate funding. Outside of capital dollars, 3 and 5-year investments from private philanthropy should be sought after. Grant stewardship should be contingent on resident buy-in and guarantee of continued resident decision-making. Metrics should be decided on alongside resident leaders.

Community partners should be directed to apply for Community Development Block Grant dollars to support their administrative and staff efforts on City-owned property and in partnership with City-owned programs. This allows them access to needed dollars to stay fiscally sound, while also increasing the capacity to engage residents interested in green education & green jobs. It also ensures a level of control over programming and decision-making. Additional funding must support Community partners' administrative leadership on program creation, strategic planning, and evaluation.

Ongoing maintenance on urban greening projects is disjointed and inadequate. Currently, DPW contracts out several private agencies to mow the lawn and provide routine maintenance on vacant lots and parks. The service providers are known for mowing over trash, herb gardens, and more. Outside of this, Groundwork Milwaukee provides some services and ongoing maintenance, but this is dependent on the staffing and funding available. Additionally, resident volunteers are asked to perform regular maintenance. This is unreliable. Resident

engagement and buy-in are crucial components of urban greening. Residents should be offered ample opportunity to direct the planning and implementation of new projects, without being burdened with the responsibility of maintaining these spaces. A dedicated service that is mission-driven and City directed might better suit urban greening efforts.

As the City confronts its financial crisis, more needs to be done to reduce repetitive efforts and costs incurred by the City. These recommendations are cost-neutral or cost-saving. Efforts to increase urban greening must be developed across city departments, resulting in a city-wide strategic plan that responds to the needs of residents and the constraints of neoliberal governance.

The issue of urban greening, as highlighted by the research above, begets action to create more efficient programming and successful resident engagement. Directed by the Mayor or Common Council, the Legislative Research Bureau should be engaged to direct a report on the history of urban greening programs and their outcomes throughout the years within the City of Milwaukee. As such, they should identify overlaps related to community partners, funding, and City staff capacity and responsibilities. Once complete, City leadership should be engaged to interpret the report and suggest the next steps. These next steps should reference the challenges above and lead to a city-wide urban greening strategy.

7.7 Conclusion

The present findings confirm that while HSI provides spaces for rest and relaxation, its long-term success is constrained by unreliable funding and stakeholder capacity, leaving the program vulnerable. This is an issue of cost and lack of long-term planning. Without access to reliable maintenance, the reality of the space on day 1 after completion cannot match the reality of the space days, weeks, or months after. The numerous green space programs

supported by the City of Milwaukee make it clear that access to green space is important but ultimately disordered. Specific to HSI, the reliance on resident labor resulted in emotions such as shame and guilt, far from the hoped experience of rest and relaxation to improve quality of life. This provides valuable information on volunteerism as a rhetoric of green space that perpetrates racist capitalistic notions by asking Black, low-income Harambee residents to maintain the space on their own time. To reconcile this conclusion, one must come face to face with the impact of green orthodoxy. The physical condition of the spaces is not reflective of the original intention given the degradation that happens with a lack of dependable maintenance.

The asymmetry evident in the relationships between stakeholders ultimately prioritized the City and funder over stakeholders with insider knowledge and leadership. The result of this is that the City and funder emphasized the benefits of installing green space over the insistent and long-term challenges of continued maintenance that other stakeholders warned of. That said, more consistent communication, transparency, and strategic planning between all stakeholders seem to improve over the pilot year, shifting the dynamics of the relationship. This aspect of the research suggests that awareness of the asymmetrical relationship may be considered a promising aspect of future change. This is consistent with respondents' calls for longer-term strategic planning.

Looking at residents, the results of community engagement demonstrated the needed buy-in of in-group leadership. Community meetings deployed in the Harambee neighborhood allowed for the physical build-out of the Healing Spaces to be rendered and reflective of resident needs. Once built, the lack of sustained maintenance damaged the potential for

mutual trust between residents and HSI partners that was potentially gained during the planning stage.

While constrained by funding and capacity, the collaborative efforts of City staff and their partners, namely Groundwork Milwaukee, created Healing Spaces that represented residents' needs. Additionally, the efforts of garden leaders and residents who dedicate valuable time and energy encourage the ongoing success of the project, making the Healing Spaces resilient within the paradigm of the neoliberal project. Further, NIDC and its partners have stayed critical of this work. NIDC and its partners continue to make changes that improve resident and partner experience, reflecting their commitment to taking on the responsibility for services provided.

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