A photograph of a community garden with several people working. A woman in a yellow shirt is in the center, looking down at something in her hands. To her left, a person is bent over, working in the soil. In the foreground, there are rows of young tomato plants in raised garden beds. A brick building is visible in the background on the left, and a blue structure is on the right. The overall tone is warm and sunny.

MAY 2024

HISTORY REIMAGINED

**BRIDGING PAST & PRESENT
AT COMMUNITY GARDEN**

PREPARED FOR

CommUnity @ The Creek

BY

Olivia Fiol & Mena Mohamed

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Anne Spirn

Frances Walker

Jared Beck

Charles Miller

The students at Alain Locke School

Scott Winfree

Alex Epstein

Derrick Long

Our Ecological Urbanism classmates

Front page image credit: <https://communitygardenatthecreek.org/>

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our final project includes two sets of proposals for the CommUnity Garden @ the Creek and the broader community. The first set of proposals explores the potential for a Mill Creek community garden network that brings together the various community gardens and farms and their leadership throughout the neighborhood. The network could work on developing shared resources, cultivating new community leaders, hosting events like shared harvests or neighborhood cleanups, and sharing outreach mechanisms for growing the future of the gardens. As part of this partnership, we propose that the network could collaborate on a collective history audio project that would be hosted on a web platform, with QR codes and placards at each site – creating a shared identity for the network. The audio project would share the histories of the development and leadership of each garden, sounds and stories about the history of Mill Creek, and oral histories collected from key community members.

The second set of proposals all feature the wall within the CommUnity Garden @ the Creek. We envision a summer movie series with screenings projected on the brick wall

adjacent to the labyrinth. At the kickoff event, we recommend screening films that honor the history of Mill Creek and West Philadelphia, featuring relevant Precious Places documentaries from the Scribe Video Center. We would also encourage community members to apply to create their own Precious Places film for Mill Creek. The rest of the film series would consist of family friendly movies over the rest of the summer. We hope that this movie series would put the CommUnity Garden on the map, activating the space. In the future, the wall could also serve as the backdrop for a mural project that visualizes the history of the Mill Creek neighborhood and its community, with elements including row houses, flowering trees, and the course of the buried river.

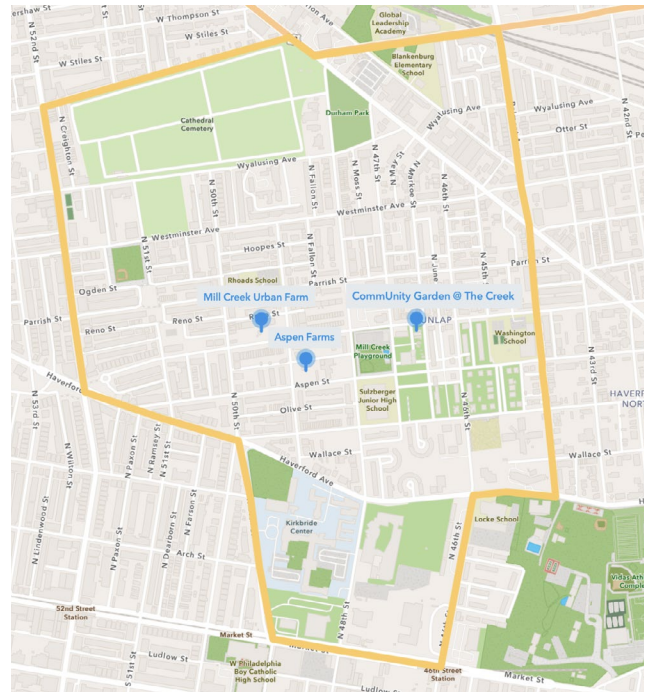
A NETWORK OF COMMUNITIES GARDEN

WORK

MUNITY

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There are three community gardens within the Mill Creek neighborhood, each rooted within community histories. These gardens are **Aspen Farms**, **Mill Creek Urban Farm**, and most recently, **CommUnity Garden @ The Creek**.



Source: <https://arcg.is/1nrffG0>

ASPEN FARMS



Credit: <https://www.ngtrust.org/aspen-farms/>

Prior to 1975, Aspen Farms was another empty lot in West Philadelphia. In 1975, neighbors came together, cleaned up the space, and set up plots for a community garden covering half the vacant lot. Just five years later, the

entire lot was populated by garden space. Additionally, neighbors accomplished a number of improvements, including a mural, an irrigation system, a greenhouse, and a butterfly garden. These changes were made possible by strategically gathering resources from city agencies, non-profits, fundraising events, and individual contributions. Since the 1970s, Aspen has been operated democratically. In 2000, there were fifty gardeners who voted on rules for the space and for those in governing positions. The garden continues to evolve, as a result of informal negotiations, group decisions, and initiatives spearheaded by individuals. The garden hosts about 30 plots on 0.65 acres of land.¹

¹ <https://www.ngtrust.org/aspen-farms/>

MILL CREEK URBAN FARM

The Mill Creek Urban Farm (MCF) was also established on a vacant lot. Before the garden, this lot was occupied by housing, which was torn down in the 1970s due to the unstable soil conditions beneath the buildings but above the buried river. The lot remained empty until 2005, when the Philadelphia Water Department awarded the land to the non-profit organization, A Little Taste of Everything (ALTOE). ALTOE's work increases access to "nutritious, affordable foods and provide[s] food system education for low-income populations in Philadelphia."

Since MCF's first successful harvest in 2006, the farm has educated community members on nutritious, healthy foods, accessing affordable food, and successful strategies for growing food. The farm sells harvested produce on site and at a farmers market two blocks away; they also donate produce to local West Philly mission-oriented organizations (like church-based food pantries and women's shelters). MCF has a board of directors consisting of four members, and a staff of five people who manage the farm and community education efforts. MCF operates on 1.5 acres of land.²



Credit: <https://www.millcreekurbanfarm.org/gallery>

2 <https://www.millcreekurbanfarm.org/about-7>

COMMUNITY GARDEN @ THE CREEK



CommUnity Garden @ The Creek was planned and designed in 2023 through a collaborative and intergenerational design process involving community members. Before the garden and community space, this plot of land was also vacant, left behind after the demolition of public housing on the site in the 90s. This garden is also located on top of what was formerly Mill Creek, leaving the ground unstable for development.

Due to the proximity of three public schools, many youth pass through this area, making it a great location for an outdoor classroom that extends their educational opportunities. The land is owned by the Philadelphia Housing Authority. While this space is growing and in progress, leadership is keeping in mind the following

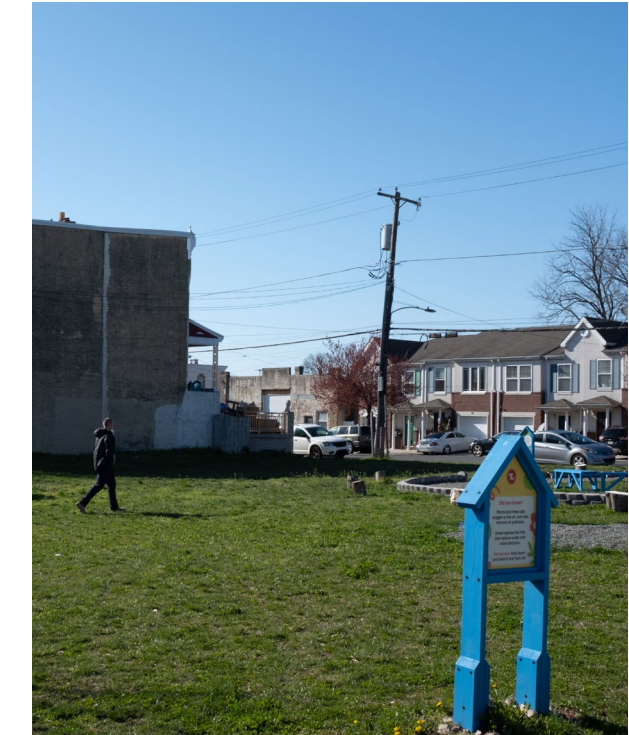
priorities surfaced through the collaborative design process:

- “A space that expands curiosity
- Building meaningful connections across generations and with the earth
- Increasing the accessibility of public greenspace and fresh produce in West Philadelphia
- Honoring the history of the Mill Creek neighborhood and watershed
- Nurturing youth leadership, civic engagement, and environmental stewardship
- A safe space for community to gather, relax, and feel a sense of calmness
- An outdoor classroom for environmental education, literacy, mindfulness, and the arts
- Supporting physical, mental and spiritual wellness
- A space that can connect and unify surrounding West Philly blocks”¹

¹ History and text on priorities provided by Alex Epstein.

COMMUNITY GARDEN NETWORK

Under current operation, the gardens exist independently of one another. There is limited sharing of knowledge production; work exists in siloes. We recommend that the individual gardens form a network of gardens: the Mill Creek Community Garden Network (MCCGN). This network would not change the individual governing structures of each garden. Rather, it would strengthen the power of the coalition of community gardens. Through this proposed overarching structure to connect the spaces, the gardens could share resources to increase capacity of the gardens and availability of resources, hold increased political power



in the neighborhood in the face of private investment, and coordinate across gardens for programming.

For example, the outdoor education space at CommUnity Garden @ The Creek could also be utilized by MCF, where outdoor education is provided as well. Further, excess produce grown at Aspen or CommUnity could be redistributed via MCF, where they donate produce to local, mission-oriented organizations in West Philadelphia. By joining forces and compiling resources, gardening tools could also be shared across gardens.

The collective garden network's purchasing power could be utilized to make larger, more expensive purchases, or to purchase tools that could be shared with the broader Mill Creek community. A relevant avenue for community members may be a tool library of supplies for preserving the exteriors and interiors of housing or other home improvement projects that may have previously been cost prohibitive.



social, economic, cultural, and racial equity. Towards these goals, BBAR's Bridge Park Plots is a network of six gardens and urban farms, all of which are supported by the broader organization. Through this network, BBAR offers educational workshops on agriculture, gardening, and nutrition, as well as a shared seed library. The plots are supported by local faith-based organizations, a public housing community, and an early childhood learning center.²

Another avenue that this network could pursue is joining the existing network of community gardens across Philadelphia – Farm Philly.³ This organization is operated through Philadelphia's Parks and Recreation department and supports a network of 18 gardens across Philadelphia, helping gardens offer space to grow food and host community-led programming. Currently, only two of the registered 18 gardens are in West Philly. Our proposed network could strengthen the broader program and bring more city resources into the Mill Creek neighborhood. Please see attachment B for the application and interest form to be filled out.

Other networks of gardens exist across the US. An example in alignment with this proposal and Mill Creek's community is in Anacostia, a neighborhood of Washington, DC, called Bridge Park Plots. This network of gardens is connected to the Building Bridges Across the River organization (BBAR), whose goal is to connect the communities east of the Anacostia River to resources and programs for arts and culture, economic opportunity, health and well-being, education, and recreation to enable pathways for success, confidence, and empowerment. BBAR's long term future for the community east of the river is one with



2 <https://buildingbridgesdc.org/building-bridges-farm/farm-locations/>

3 <https://farmphilly.org/community-gardens-network/>

COMMUNITY LAND TRUST OPPORTUNITIES

Given the rapidly evolving real estate ecosystem in Mill Creek, where outside private investment is surging, gentrification in the neighborhood is imminent. A network of community gardens' increased political power enables further ownership of the community by community members currently in place. This broader assertion of power by the garden can be realized through a community land trust (CLT). A CLT is a non-profit organization governed by members and leaders of a local community, which owns property and in many cases, leases the land below market rate for housing or to other local organizations to maintain affordability of the land, and thus, the neighborhood. CLTs can also absorb previously vacant lots used for community gardens to limit private investment and support affordability of the neighborhood.¹



In Chicago, Neighborspace is a CLT for community open space that owns the land for over 100 gardens across 33 wards of Chicago, and is managed collectively. The organization provides the following services for the gardens:

- Providing permanent protection against potential development

- Establishing local partnerships that ensure community management and control
- Covering basic liability insurance for gardeners and volunteers
- Developing resources and opportunities through the Stewardship Mini Grant Program
- Providing stewardship support and technical assistance²

Neighborspace's sites are often former vacant lots, drawing further parallels to the Mill Creek context. Through an established network of gardens with pooled resources, the MCCGN could consider forming a CLT and claiming ownership of the space. This work could expand beyond the gardens, especially to other vacant lots, to prevent inequitable patterns of private investment in the neighborhood and to attempt to maintain affordability.

Some CLTs already exist in Philadelphia, including the Community Justice Land Trust (CJLT). At CJLT, the organization has purchased a number of previously vacant lots and now uses them for affordable housing. Given other community precedents for including community garden space in CLTs, there is an opportunity to form coalitions with other strong organizations deeply invested in maintaining neighborhood affordability and resisting gentrification. We recommend that MCCGN reach out to CJLT to assess whether collaboration might be possible.

1 <https://groundedsolutions.org/strengthening-neighborhoods/community-land-trusts/>
 2 <http://neighbor-space.org/about/>



DAYLIGHT

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A key initial project for MCCGN could be a historical audio project hosted on a public web platform that has a physical connection to each garden in the network, which we have initially named The Daylighting Dialogue Project. The term *daylighting* refers to the uncovering and restoration of buried waterways like Mill Creek. This project will ‘daylight’ the stories of the Mill Creek neighborhood and its gardens through various sounds and oral histories.

Daylighting Dialogue will be hosted on an interactive web platform that describes histories of each garden, relevant narratives about the history of Mill Creek, and oral histories with key community members. The website would be divided into four sections of content:

1

LOCAL GARDEN HISTORIES

In each garden, MCCGN would install a physical placard that displays the name of the garden or farm, the year it was established, the MCCGN logo, and a QR code that connects to the “Local Garden Histories” section of the web platform as the entry point to the site.

This page would provide a brief introduction to MCCGN and then provide a fuller picture of the history of each garden, with accompanying images for each. The StoryMaps at the link below provides a template for how this section of the website could be developed.

[Local Garden Histories](#)

2

THE STORY OF MILL CREEK

This part of the website would showcase different audio recordings that visitors can play that explore the story of Mill Creek through sound. Each audio story would have two components, a sound accompanied by a historical narrative. For greater accessibility, the website should also provide a transcript version of the stories. The table on the following page shows potential stories that MCCGN could develop with audio and narrative, which is followed by a full example of what this form of content could encompass.

Theme	Audio	Narrative
The Lenape	Sound of Lenape drum circle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> History of the Lenape and the land exchange with William Penn The contemporary organizing of the Lenape Nation of Pennsylvania
The Buried River	Sound of rushing Mill Creek	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overview of the story of Mill Creek How the neighborhood got its name Why the creek was buried and what impact it has had today
The Great Migration	Sound of birds chirping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The arrival of Black southerners to Philadelphia and Mill Creek in the 20th century The new opportunities in Philadelphia and early challenges of the Black community in Mill Creek
Cultural Contributions	Jazz music from Mill Creek native McCoy Tyner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Story of McCoy Tyner Recognizing any significant restaurants, businesses, and cultural leaders in Mill Creek
Housing Development	Construction sounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stories of significant housing projects in Mill Creek, including row houses, the Mill Creek housing projects, and West Park
Cave-ins	Sounds of things breaking or falling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connecting the cave-ins to the buried river Commemorating the victims and survivors of the cave-ins and exploring their long-term impact in Mill Creek
Community Organizing	Sounds of people protesting or chanting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stories of community activism in West Philadelphia, which could include the work of the Mill Creek Council, the neighboring protests against the expansion of the UPenn campus, and organizing around health, education, and community safety

The Buried River

Sound: Recording of Mill Creek (can be recorded at the manhole cover)

“Welcome to the Mill Creek neighborhood! Do you know how Mill Creek got its name? While it’s hard to believe today, there once was a river running straight through this community.

In the 1800s, Mill Creek and West Philadelphia began to quickly develop, with new people moving in, new housing developments, and new transportation networks. However, this increase in population led to several issues, especially around public health. The neighborhood’s river was quickly becoming polluted, creating health risks for the surrounding community. As a solution, the city decided to bury the river by containing it into a sewer in the 1880s. At the time, the sewer construction was one of the largest projects of its kind in the world. While this created a temporary fix to the problem, the long-term impact of this decision would be felt by the landscape and the communities that called it home for years to come.

Underneath the ground of Mill Creek, the buried river still rushes to this day and reminds us of this important history that continues to shape West Philadelphia.”

3 ORAL HISTORIES: LEARNING FROM OUR COMMUNITY

Another section of the website could also have an oral history component where key community figures are interviewed about the Mill Creek neighborhood and community. The recordings of the interviews would then be posted on the web platform in a section called “Oral Histories: Learning from our Community.”

Potential Interviewees

- Frances Walker – Community Activist & Leader
- Derrick Long – Men of Mill Creek
- Dawn Wilkerson – A New Dawn
- Jared Beck – Locke School
- Scott Winfree – Housing Counselor

Potential Interview Questions

- What does the Mill Creek community mean to you? Why is it special?
- What was it like to grow up in the Mill Creek neighborhood? (if applicable)
- What are your favorite memories in the neighborhood? What do you enjoy the most now about the neighborhood?
- What are the most significant challenges you’ve experienced or seen the community experience in the neighborhood?
- What are you most proud of working on or contributing to in Mill Creek?
- What do you want youth to know about the history of Mill Creek and why?
- What do you want youth to know about the future of Mill Creek and why?

Locke School Partnership

The Locke students are currently working on a historical book project about the history of Mill Creek. As a continued partnership with the Locke School, this project could ask for students to support in developing the narratives around each historical theme and to record themselves reading the narratives for the sound project. The students could use the materials collected from the Ecological Urbanism course as well as resources from West Philadelphia Collaborative History to develop the narratives.

Parkway West Partnership

In a new partnership with the Parkway West High School, this project could recruit students to plan for, conduct, and record the oral history projects with the different community members as part of a history or civic studies course project.

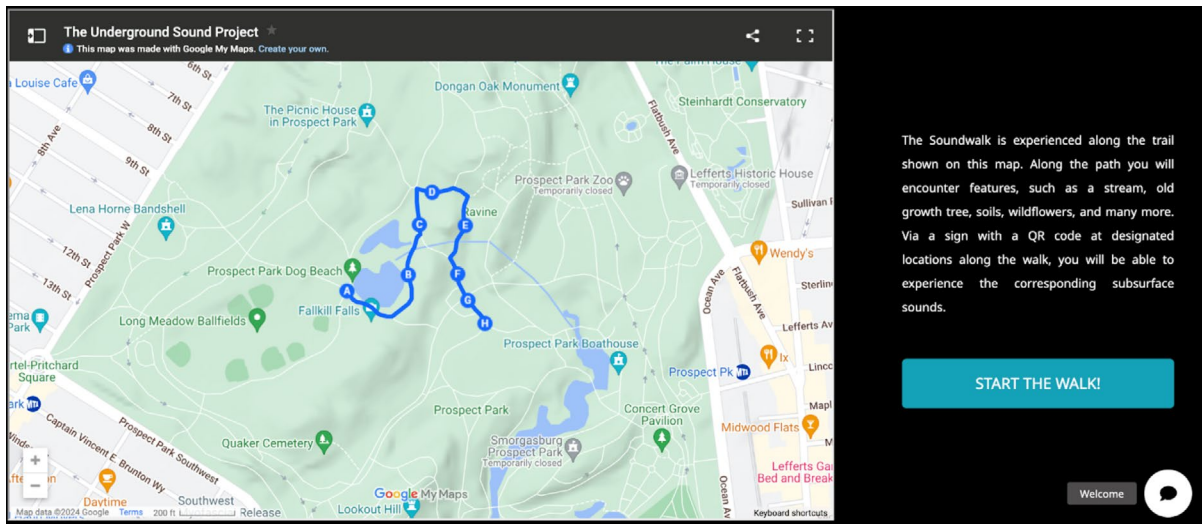
4 VISITOR VOICES

The website could also provide an opportunity for visitors to record and share what the Mill Creek neighborhood and the different gardens mean to them and what they appreciated learning about the history through the project.

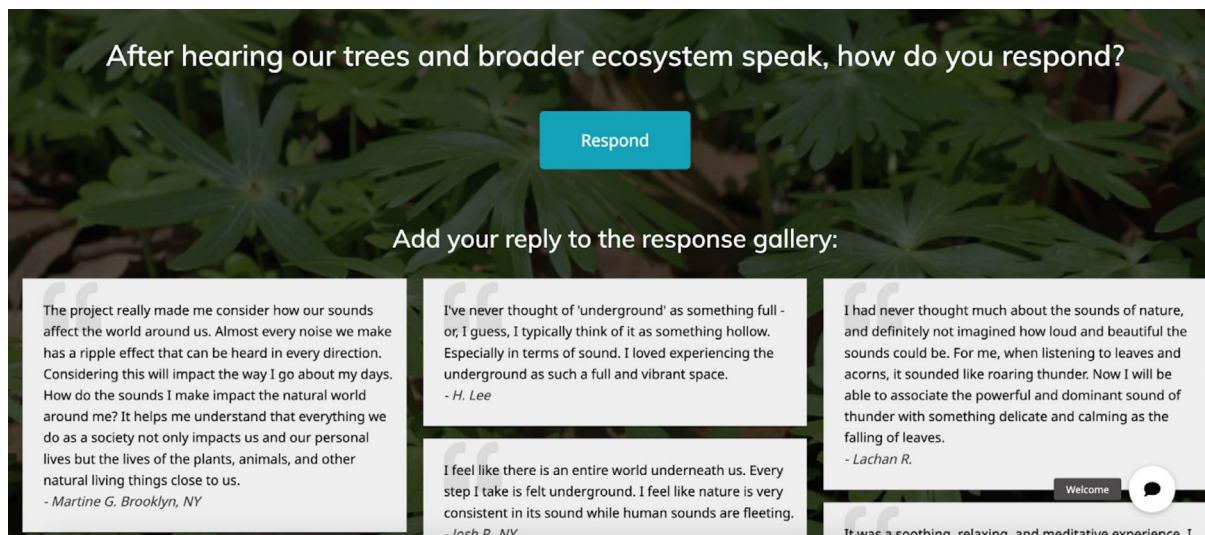
The question prompt for the “Visitor Voices” section could be: Thank you for exploring the history and gardens of Mill Creek! How did these stories impact you? Please share your reflections with us and your vision for the future of Mill Creek.

Project Precedent: The Underground Sound Project (New York City)

The Underground Sound Project was an audio project and web platform created by artist Nikki Lindt for visitors to Prospect Park in New York City. Lindt recorded underground sounds in nature and then created a soundwalk that allowed visitors to scan QR codes throughout the park and listen to the various audio recordings. The tour can also be visited remotely through the virtual map feature. At the bottom of the page, the web platform includes an interactive portion that allows people to contribute to a response gallery on their experiences with the soundwalk.



Soundwalk Map Feature. Screenshot from: [The Underground Sound Project](#).



Response Gallery. Screenshot from: [The Underground Sound Project](#).

**SUMMER
MOVIE
@ THE G**

MER

SERIES

GARDEN

To encourage community investment in CommUnity Garden @ The Creek, events that provide opportunities for social engagement and entertainment are essential. These kinds of events are essential for putting a place on the map – literally and in neighbors’ mental maps. This takes the form of critical public space activation. One way to do this would be to host a summer movie series, located in the garden. Once a week, the garden could screen a family-friendly movie. Movies could be projected onto the brick wall adjacent to the garden and families would bring lawn chairs or picnic blankets for the screening. This series of screenings would be more complete with the addition of food or snacks, possibly using produce grown in the garden to advertise the gardening space and offer a nutritious snack.

SCRIBE VIDEO CENTER

To commemorate the history of Mill Creek and the community members of West Philly, we propose that the kick-off (or perhaps concluding) screening feature work from Scribe Video Center. Scribe’s mission is to “explore, develop and advance the use of electronic media, including video and audio, as artistic media and as tools for progressive social change.”¹ Through this work, they

encourage and accept proposals from community members, often with little to no prior experience in video production, and support them through the production of their short film or long-form movies with training and electronic resources. A partnership with Scribe could be further strengthened by advertising its services or promoting it as a resource to Mill Creek residents.

1 <https://scribe.org/mission-and-history-scribe>

PROPOSED SCREENING SCHEDULE

Throughout our semester, we’ve had many conversations with the students from Alain Locke Middle School about their favorite movies and TV shows, as well as what they’re currently watching. Informed by those conversations, we propose the movies on the following page for screening during the summer movie series.

Another way to increase engagement with the movie series with the community would be to put the decision of what movie to screen next to a vote, perhaps on social media or at the end of the previous week’s screening. Either way, please see attachment A for a sample poster and post that could be used to publicize the summer movie series.

Week 1**Historical/Cultural Commemoration OR Blockbuster Night**

Scribe videos OR Pirates of the Caribbean, Transformers, or another action blockbuster

Week 2**Anime Night**

A selection of episodes from Jujutsu Kaisen, an anime series we heard lots about (or Spirited Away for a long-form movie)

Week 3**Pixar Night**

Toy Story, Soul, or another Pixar movie

Week 4**Musical Night**

Trolls, Sing, Shrek

Week 5**Throwback Night**

Men in Black, ET: The Extra-Terrestrial, Space Jam

Week 6**Crowd Pleaser OR Historical/Cultural Commemoration**

Lego Movie, Spider-Man: Into the Spideverse OR Scribe videos



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The wall adjacent to the labyrinth at CommUnity Garden @ The Creek would also be an ideal location for a mural that honors the history of the Mill Creek neighborhood and community over time. We propose that the mural be conceptualized and produced in a participatory process that allows for community input and design.

FUNDING To begin this process, the CommUnity Garden @ The Creek board would first need to find a local artist that would be willing to engage in a participatory design process and ideally has a connection to West Philadelphia. The board would then need to apply for funding and confirm approval with the building owners to develop a mural on the wall. Potential mural arts funding could come from the following sources or partnerships:

- **Mural Arts Philadelphia** provides funding for murals that celebrate community history and focuses on public art and placemaking to showcase important narratives in Philadelphia. Interested community members can submit a mural idea at the following link: www.muralarts.org/about/apply-for-a-mural. The board could also

reach out specifically about the [Community Murals](#) program and share the interest in telling the story of Mill Creek through the project.

- The **Velocity Fund** provides up to \$5,000 in project grants to support Philadelphia-based artists in producing work that has public impact. Applications for Spring 2024 are opening and can be found here: velocityfund.org.
- The **Art Works Grant** is a program that supports community-based arts with a focus on underserved communities in Philadelphia. The CommUnity Garden could have a mural supported by proposing the project with an artist applying for the grant in upcoming phases. More information can be found here: formanartsinitiative.org/initiative/art-works-grant/.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT The community engagement process for designing the mural




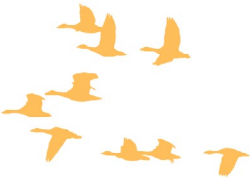
should be facilitated by the chosen artist and would likely be developed over several gatherings. These design sessions would include discussions around what story to tell through the mural and how to visually represent it. Community members and students could also be invited to participate in the painting process and the unveiling of the mural. Resources for designing a participatory mural design process are below and include

precedents from other communities:

- Cruces Creatives: [Participatory Murals - How to Organize Paint-by-Numbers Murals That Your Community Can Create](#)
- Greenpeace Canada: [Organize a Community Street Mural](#)
- The What's Good Project/Iowa State University: [Community Mural Toolkit](#)
- The What's Good Project/Iowa State University: POW: [A Plan of Work Template for Creative Community Projects](#)

POTENTIAL MURAL ELEMENTS

Working with the selected artist, we propose that the CommUnity Garden @ The Creek team cultivate a community engagement and co-design process for this mural. As a starting point for the team, from our own experiences on the field visit in March and through learning about the history of Mill Creek, the following are potential elements to consider as part of the mural:

Element	Significance	Potential Visual
Mill Creek row houses and porches	Represents neighborhood character and history of housing development over time	
The buried river	Represents the historical path of Mill Creek before it was buried	
Flowering trees	Represents growth, community roots, and the aesthetic of the neighborhood	
Birds	Represent migration stories in the neighborhood, both historically during the Great Migration and new migration waves today	
Community leader portraits	Honors the expertise and legacy of activists, educators, and leaders who have made an impact on the Mill Creek neighborhood	Portraits of selected community leaders
Intergenerational gardening	Demonstrates the power of community gardening in cultivating intergenerational connections	Images from CommUnity Garden @ The Creek website with community members and students

ATTACH

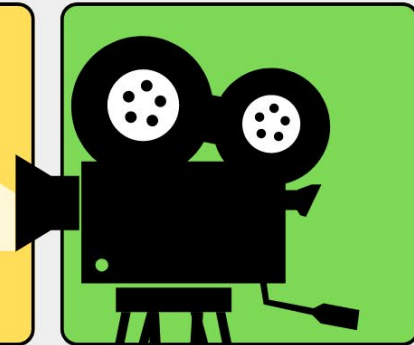
IMENTS

A. MOVIE POSTER

PRESENTED BY COMMUNITY GARDEN @ THE CREEK

SUMMER MOVIE SERIES

FILL IN DATE
FRIDAYS @ 7PM



INTERSECTION OF BROWN ST
AND N MARKOE ST

MOVIES THAT WILL BE PLAYED:

Pirates of the	DATE
Caribbean	DATE
Jujutsu Kaisen	DATE
Toy Story	DATE
Trolls	DATE
E.T. The Extra	DATE
Terrestrial	
Lego Movie	

FREE ENTRY FOR PUBLIC

SCAN
HERE

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
@TEMPORARY

B. CLT APPLICATION

Interest form
Application