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# Synergistic Green networks to transform Lonsdale Suburbia

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## **Synergistic Green networks to transform Lonsdale Suburbia**

Archana Sharma, Associate ASLA

Every place has a personality. We just get a glimpse of it in our busy lives hurried by speed of technology, for its true self can be experienced only through careful, sensitive unraveling, layer by layer. Lonsdale, a seemingly quiet neighborhood, northwest of Knoxville city, bound by Sharp's ridge and bird music to the North, and Tennessee river with its lyrical songs to its far South, projected an intriguing personality which I and my team of graduate landscape students decided to look at through the lens of landscape architectural design.

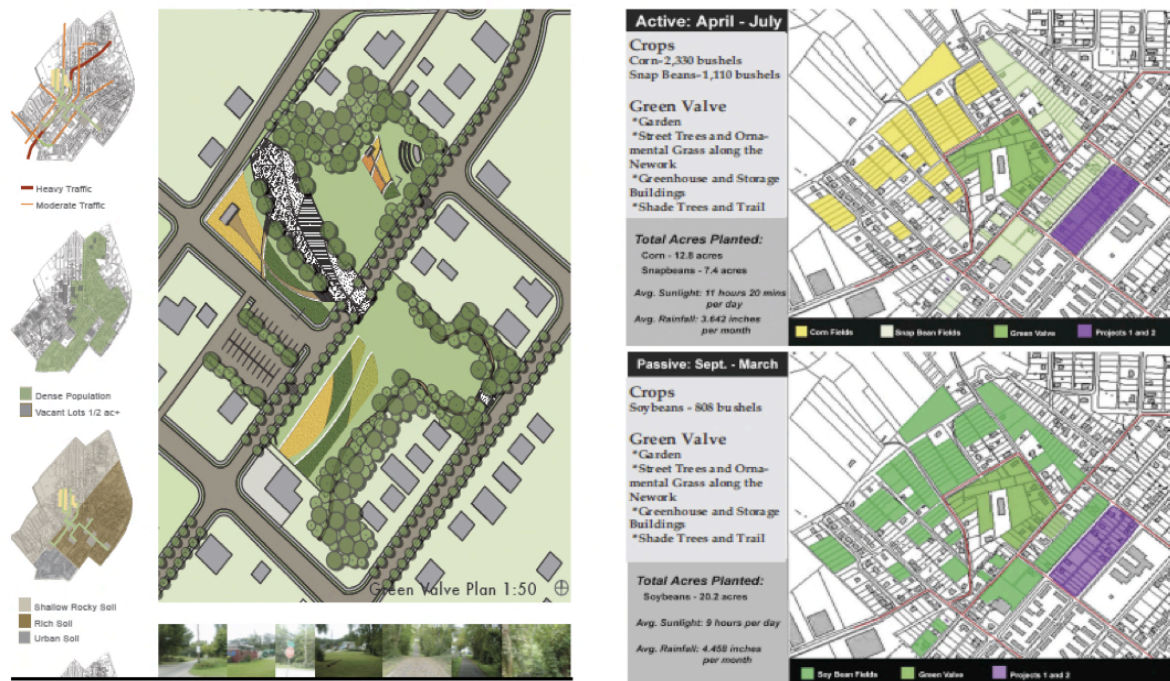
How do you design for a place steeped in history, with socio-cultural character in constant flux? How do you redress and ecology that is sandwiched between the luxurious nature in north and industrial developments on the south with a creek running through, and a land that has seen a good number of economic glories and depressions, post-industrialization and post-world wars, immigrations and emigrations, uses and abuses? We had to pick our question. The question that eventually worked with was more in tune with our strengths and limitations, and I state: could the currently neglected and underused urban landscape occupied by approximately 5,550 citizens with average annual income of \$25,000 be transformed into a socially, economically and ecologically healthy place by through landscape design strategy of green networks? The question had been asked before in different forms resulting in some seminal outcomes.

The Lonsdale redevelopment and urban renewal plan was prepared by Knoxville Community Development Corporation-KCDC under supervision of Mark Donaldson with input from University of Tennessee Professors Dr David Fox and Mark Schimmenti and adopted by Knoxville-Knox County Metropolitan Planning Commission-KMPC on Nov 10 2005. The report primarily dealt with the statutory aspects and outlined land acquisition, disposition and property management guidelines (KCDC, 2005, 11, 17,18). Lonsdale neighborhood plan was also developed in the same year and it was more elaborate in terms of urban planning and design guidelines. Land use zoning proposal emphasized on conservation strategies such as a greenbelt and open space system, separating the neighborhood from the adjacent industrial uses and the conservation of the slopes on Sharps Ridge, among others (Carberry, Wallace et al, 2005,5).

To our critical eyes, the proposal of greenways along the creek and a superblock park were lacking a system or a matrix that could integrate the neighborhood rather than by-passing it and somehow fell short in effectively contributing to the sustainable development of the place. Our critical investigative journey kick-started with an introductory talk by Alvin Nance, then Director of Knoxville Community Development Corporation outlaying the tenuous land tenure, economic and political stratifications operating within the neighborhood. Our subsequent attempts to understand the place stemmed off our approach to the neighborhood as a dynamic part of the whole- a sub-system of broader socio-cultural and ecological context, a nested system of built and un-built, tangible and intangible, landscape and architecture, socio-cultural and ecological aspects. Other attempts to unravel the soul of the place included interpersonal conversations with neighborhood residents, and active community engagement through volunteering- planting gardens for Mechanicsville families with the group of Dave Craig, the enthusiastic leader of Habitat Urban Garden branch of Knoxville Habitat for Humanity.

Analyses led to design concepts. It was now the time to reflect upon the critical issues, or holes in the personality of Lonsdale neighborhood, and think of judicious location and design of green networks threading through the neighborhood to make a difference. The exercise was driven by the idea of Synergy- inspired by the tenet of mutual symbiosis in natural ecosystems. *Synergistic landscape* was used more as an attitude to consciously design green networks as facilitators of harmonious co-habitation of natural and built landscape, biotic and abiotic inhabitants. A range of localized multifunctional green networks were designed in response, by J.Allen, C.Breeding, J.Bundy, D.Dalton, V.Friedman, J.Golbrecht, M.Payne, B.Smith, E.Tharp and L.Sullivan. A combination of private gardens, public parks, vacant lots, rights of ways naturalistic infrastructure and

conservation easements were acted upon to facilitate land area required for these green networks. The design explorations indicated possible positive impacts of synergistic green networks on the community in terms of (a) food production (b) educational awareness regarding alternative energy resource (c) conservation of natural resources such as water, floodplains, native vegetation, associated biodiversity (d) enhanced visual aesthetics (e) crime prevention and (f) other creative social enterprises such as community fishing and healing gardens.



**Figure 1. Lonsdale transformation studio outcome – A connective food producing landscape of crops selected based on soils, seasonal rotation considerations to address partial produce needs of the neighborhood and to educate people on sustainable living through social collaboration. Design concept and drawings by Valerie Friedman (left) and Jessica Bundy (right), Sharma, A. Studio LandWeave, 2009.**

Are these good answers? and resolute solutions? Maybe not! But these attempts that dared to dream certainly set out some sustainability oriented visions for Lonsdale in specific and suburban development in Knoxville, in general. It has now been five years since the Lonsdale redevelopment plan was adopted and two years since the synergistic landscape visions for Lonsdale transformation, yet, some questions still beg attention:

- what extent of the 2005 Lonsdale redevelopment plan was executed on ground? key facilitators and impediments in the process?
- how can we ensure that ongoing initiatives such as Plan East Tennessee (PlanET) - result in getting visions built on ground rather than more visions on redevelopment?

#### References:

Carberry, M., Wallace, A., et al, *Lonsdale Neighborhood Plan*, Knoxville- Knoxville County Metropolitan Planning Commission, Aug 2005

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Neely, J., *Knoxville, TN: This Obscure Prismatic City*, The History Press, 2009