



Resident perceptions of urban alleys and alley greening

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While urban alleyways have long been associated with blight and crime, recent urban greening efforts have reconceptualized alleys as sites for alternative transportation networks, stormwater treatment, habitat restoration, and neighborhood social life. However, little is known about how alley-adjacent residents perceive greening projects in these rather ambiguous spaces, though greening projects have the potential to both benefit and inconvenience residents in significant ways. Using a series of focus groups, this paper investigates the perceptions of alley-adjacent residents in low-income Los Angeles neighborhoods regarding residential alleys and possible greening measures. Results highlight the utilitarian relationship residents have with local alleys, and the apprehensions they have about these spaces. Findings inform a discussion on undertaking greening projects in quasi-public spaces that are important to residents' daily lives.

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Introduction

Like freeway shoulders, train yards, abandoned waterfronts, and parking lots, alleyways are residual urban spaces, often associated with crime and rubbish, and otherwise hovering below the conscious sphere of most urban dwellers. Once significant sites of community life, alleys have receded from popular consciousness in the wake of urban renewal, suburban development, and popularization of the automobile (Martin, 2001; Wang & Taylor, 2006; Wolch et al., 2009). These types of underutilized, underdeveloped, and often deteriorating spaces have been referred to as “cracks in the city,” (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1996) and “lost space,” “making no positive contribution to the surrounds or users” (Trancik, 1986: pp. 3, 4). The closing or gating of alleys in countries around the world demonstrates the problematic nature of these spaces to local governments (Landman, 2003).

However, growing interest in greening the urban built environment has turned new attention to urban alleyways. Linked to the broader “complete streets” movement (LaPlante & McCann, 2008), these built environment features are being reconceptualized as sites with the potential to support alternative modes of transportation, increase physical activity levels, facilitate neighborhood social life, manage urban runoff, and recharge groundwater. Alleyway conversions have occurred in a number of U.S. cities, in commercial and mixed-use districts and in residential neighborhoods. Chicago's Green Alleys Program, perhaps the best-known alley greening program in the United States, is oriented toward stormwater management. Permeable pavement, high-albedo pavement, and surface regrading have been implemented in dozens of commercial and

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residential alleys, effectively addressing flooding issues and reducing maintenance costs. The program also suggests additional best management practices that residential property owners can implement (Cassidy, Newell, & Wolch, 2008; Chicago Department of Transportation, 2007).

Projects in Santa Cruz and Fullerton, CA, have redesigned downtown alleys into more pedestrian-friendly spaces abutting restaurants, retail shops, offices, and residential complexes (Zelinka & Beattie, 2003). Seattle's new Clear Alleys Program reduces waste container presence in downtown alleys to facilitate cleaner, safer alleys that are more pedestrian-friendly and more accessible to commercial delivery services (Seattle CAP, 2008). A recently approved redesign initiative in Detroit will target a Midtown alley flanked by restaurants, office buildings, and single- and multi-family dwellings; plans include permeable surfaces, native plant strips, off-the-grid lighting, and a bike- and walkway (Green Garage, 2009).

In Baltimore, the Alley Gating and Greening Program is oriented toward residential neighborhoods in order to eliminate crime and blight. In this two-tiered program, residents can request only to gate their alley, or may additionally submit greening plans for approval. The single project out of which the program developed confronted crime, garbage dumping, and rodent problems by developing a gated, restricted-access alleyway that residents populated with potted plants and seating (Baltimore City Department of General Services, n.d.; Cassidy et al., 2008). A Green Alleys subcommittee formed in late 2008 will focus on alleys in Los Angeles, which are largely concentrated in residential areas. The program is expected to address issues including stormwater management, recreational space, and alternative transportation options (Berg, 2009).

The residential alley is an enigmatic greening site in comparison to parks and other public lands in which greening projects are typically undertaken. Tinged with elements of the public and the private, and sitting both on the back side and the inside of a neighborhood, alleys are ambiguous spaces. Though in the public domain, alleys that are heavily used as community spaces are nonetheless strongly shaped by private interests (Martin, 1996). These landscapes unquestionably "belong" to the adjacent residents, regardless of legal ownership (Martin, 2002). A sense of protectiveness amongst abutting residents may emerge concerning "outsiders" parking in, playing in, or even walking through an alleyway. Martin (1996) suggests that the landscape of the residential alley may be understood by seeing it as the back side of a neighborhood, with qualities of hiddenness that can be both pleasant and fearsome (the "hidden landscape"), and with qualities of revealingness, or visual connection between the alley space and backyards (the "revealing landscape"). These elements, along with a third, utilitarian landscape quality related to the original service access function of alleyways, create a distinct social milieu.

Yet the context for an alley is broader than the block scale, beyond the residences that immediately surround it. The nature of the neighborhood or community appears also to have bearing on how the alley is experienced by its residents. Most studies of alleys have been set in middle- or higher-income neighborhoods. In these sites, alleys were found to be important social realms as well as recreational spaces. Alley residents socialized with neighbors, supervised children playing in the alley, and worked on cars or home improvement projects, while also regularly using alleys for ingress and egress. While some studies report that concerns surfaced amongst alley-adjacent residents – about alley safety and crime (speeding cars, prostitution, illegal dumping, general security concerns) – these were secondary to generally positive attitudes about alleys (Ford, 2001; Hess, 2008; Martin, 1996; Martin, 2002). However, elevated levels of fear and suspicion about alleyways are evident in lower-income Johannesburg and Liverpool neighborhoods, which implemented alley gating in response to chronic burglary problems (Landman, 2003). And in Los Angeles, recent newspaper coverage chronicled the illegal dumping issues and unsanitary conditions that plague alleys in one of the city's poorest neighborhoods, and residents' sense of frustration with chronically poor alley conditions (Lopez, 2008a, 2008b, 2008d, 2008c). In comparison to the broad literature on attitudes toward other controversial or noxious land uses (Dear & Taylor, 1982; Dunlap, Kraft, & Rosa, 1993), though, relatively little is known about resident's opinions of alleys.

Furthermore, very little is known about residents' opinions of greening strategies for these complex spaces. An integral part of urban greening projects is the incorporation of a solid understanding of the attitudes and values of local stakeholders, to learn how designs will be accepted and, therefore, maintained by local residents (Casagrande, 1996; Nassauer, 1997; Schauman & Salisbury, 1998; Zelinka & Beattie, 2003). Newspaper articles and unpublished reports about alley greening projects that have been undertaken suggest that residents' perceptions of pending projects are generally positive, with residents eager to eliminate crime and blight and realize the social potential of an alley. Some skepticism about the ability of non-residents to access the improved space, and about the burden of maintenance, is also alluded to (Cocks, n.d.; Shen, 2006). Reports on resident reactions to completed gating-only projects in the United States and U.K. indicate that a majority of residents were satisfied with the reduction in crime and garbage problems (Rogers, 2007; Sprecher, 2005). However, an in-depth perspective on perceptions of greening in residential alleys is not in the purview of these publications.

Research on reactions to proposed greening strategies in other urban spaces suggests that there are a number of stakeholder interests or concerns common to greening projects. Residents have described cleaner, garbage- and pollution-free sites as an important goal in the context of urban park and waterway restoration (Burger, 2003; Casagrande, 1997). Reducing crime rates and minimizing opportunities for criminals to conceal themselves is important to residents near urban marsh and stream greening projects (Casagrande, 1997; Purcell, Friedrich, & Resh, 2002). The ability of greening projects to enhance recreational or leisure opportunities (Burger, 2003; Chen & Jim, 2008; Gobster, 2001), increase habitat value (Gobster, 2001), maintain or enhance public health (Purcell et al., 2002), beautify the landscape (Nassauer, 2004; Salisbury, 1997), and to create a more pleasant user experience (Pincetl & Gearin, 2005) are also factors found to be important to resident or user approval of greening projects in other public spaces.

In this paper, we investigate perceptions of hypothetical and completed alley greening projects through a series of focus groups in five lower-income City of Los Angeles residential neighborhoods. The paper begins with a brief overview of the

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