

Interpretive Statement – Troy Gardens

Background

In October 1995, the state of Wisconsin announced it would sell a 31-acre parcel next to a mental health facility. Area residents had been gardening on part of this site for many years, with the rest of the land used for bird watching, walking their dogs, and enjoying fresh air.

Alarmed at the prospect of losing this valuable resource, concerned gardeners and neighbors banded together to save this neighborhood treasure. Their numbers were augmented by representatives from the Northside Planning Council, the Madison Area Community Land Trust, the Urban Open Space Foundation, the University of Wisconsin, and the Community Action Coalition -- and together they formed the Troy Gardens Coalition. The Coalition developed an innovative proposal for integrated land use that combined housing with open space and agricultural uses, and which, most importantly, reflected the desires of the surrounding neighborhood.

In December 2001, after years of fundraising and development work, the Madison Area Community Land Trust (MACLT) purchased the property from the State of Wisconsin. MACLT leased 26 acres to the Friends of Troy Gardens, the long-term steward of the natural areas. MACLT reserved 5 acres for the development of a 30-unit mixed-income cohousing community, 20 of which are permanently affordable.

Design Concept and Goals

In 2002, The Madison Area Community Land Trust (MACLT) established five major goals for our work at Troy Gardens:

1) Maximizing Community Involvement in the Decision-Making Process: All major decisions about the site plan were made by the neighbors and users of Troy Gardens. This resulted in an agreement to limit the density of the housing site to 30 units and to include a market-rate component. Community charettes were held to address a variety of issues, including:

- ❖ *Defining permitted uses* in the different sections of the conservancy lands (farm, prairie, community gardens, and interpretive trail system);
- ❖ *Laying out buildings and roadways* to reduce paved areas and to push cars to the periphery of the site; and
- ❖ *Designing building exteriors* to make sure they harmonized with existing residential housing in the neighborhood as well as the adjacent natural areas.

2) Protecting Open Spaces: The 26 acres of open space at Troy Gardens are permanently protected by a conservation easement held by the Urban Open Space Foundation. This easement defines 4 distinct use zones: organic farm, community gardens, prairie, and wildlife habitat.

The Friends of Troy Gardens (FTG) serves as the steward for these open spaces, managing the farm and community gardens, restoring the prairie and wildlife habitat, and running summer education programs focused on conservation and sustainable agriculture practices.

3) Minimizing the Impact of Cars: Roadways are limited to the eastern and southeastern edges of the site, with a few penetrations to provide accessible parking spaces. One-third of the homes back onto the natural areas, away from parking and roads.

Because of (a) easy access to public transportation (bus stop right in front), and (b) being within biking distance of downtown, many homeowners have one car per household.

4) Maximizing Accessibility: A specific design program for accessibility at Troy Gardens was established in 2003 and successfully accomplished:

- ❖ All units, whether 1 or 2-story, are “livable” for a person who uses a wheelchair;
- ❖ All primary pathways are accessible (including a connector to the bus stop);
- ❖ MACLT affirmatively sought buyers with disabilities before construction in order to adapt our designs to meet their individualized needs;
- ❖ Basements were included (in all units) that can easily be turned into living space for attendants;
- ❖ Additional elements are described in “*Production Information*”.

5) Fostering a Sense of Community: MACLT’s strategy involved both design and people components.

- ❖ Design: We grouped all homes around two central courtyards, orienting all front doors/porches toward the other homes (and away from cars). And in our next phase of development (fall 2008), we will be constructing a community center, which will serve as a gathering place for shared meals and childcare, meetings, and special events.
- ❖ People: From the moment we broke ground, we began doing two things: (a) holding monthly potlucks for persons interested in living at Troy Gardens, and (b) creating working groups to prepare homebuyers for self-governance. By the time homeowners assumed control of the condo association, they already had a year of experience working together.

Driving Force for the Project

The driving force for this project has always been the neighborhood residents and the community gardeners, a group that has expanded to include the Friends of Troy Gardens and the new homeowners at Troy Gardens.

Long into the future, Troy Gardens will continue to meet the following community-identified goals of:

- ❖ Permanently protecting natural areas that are open to all;
- ❖ Managing community gardens and an organic CSA farm to provide a source of healthy and affordable food for all;
- ❖ Teaching young people about conservation and sustainable agriculture;
- ❖ Providing mixed-income owner-occupied housing;
- ❖ Safeguarding access for all, regardless of age, income or physical ability.

Community Features

Accessibility is the hallmark of Troy Gardens, as described above and in the “Production Information” document.

It is a walkable community, where pedestrians come first and cars come second. There are miles of walkways at Troy Gardens – both paved as well as unpaved (mowed grass or crushed rock).

Safety is best accomplished by having a tight-knit community. MACLT’s emphasis on community-building, clustering buildings around central courtyards, and the wide range of ages (newborns to age 70) means that there are people watching out for each other at all times of the day and night.

Unique Innovations and Solutions

Initially, the neighborhood just wanted to preserve a 14-acre space that included community gardens and a place to walk their dogs. Over a 12-year period, this vision evolved into something far more grand than anyone ever imagined.

The lesson is that a combination of neighborhood-based planning, strong community organizing, and the willingness of outside collaborators to participate (but not dominate) in the planning process -- can result in extraordinary things.