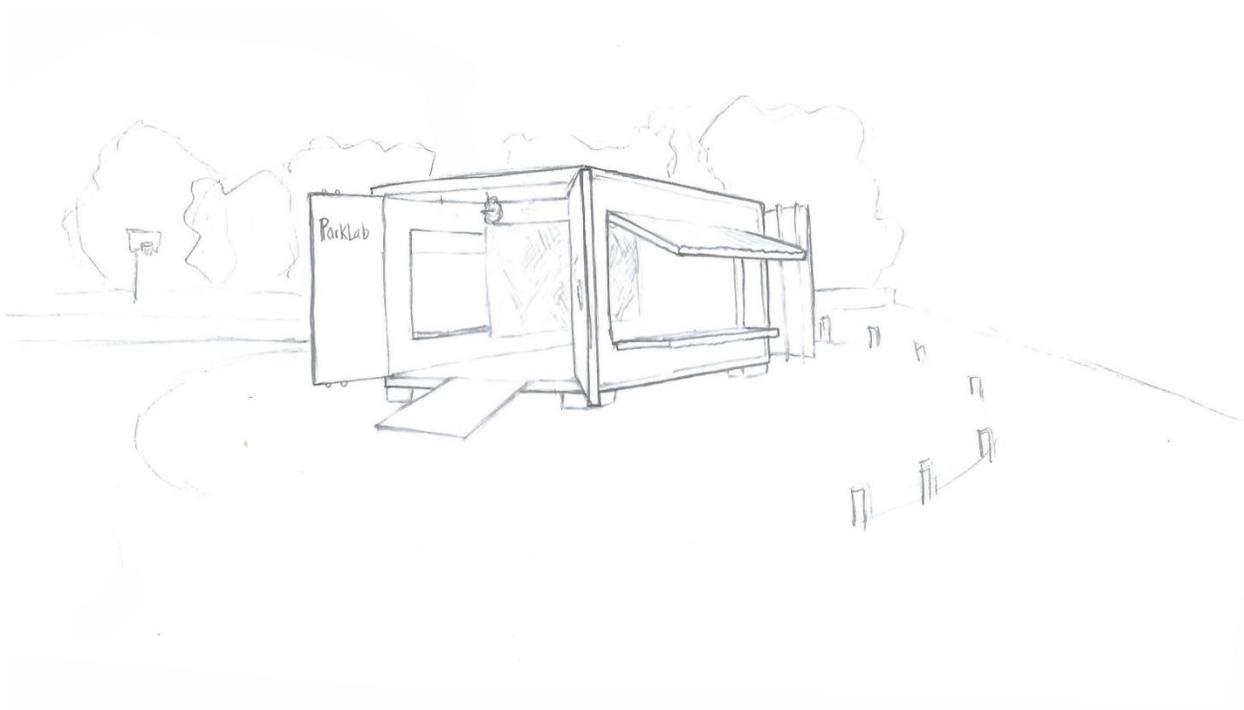


Park Lab



Project proposal by Charlotte Matthai for 4.213 Ecological Urbanism
with Anne Whiston Spirn, Frances Walker, and TA Lizzie Yarina

May 24, 2021

Project description

In 2021, Rebuild Philadelphia released a Request for Proposals (RFP) to redesign the West Mill Creek Park; however, the RFP did not include any indication of community involvement in the project. How can designers know what is needed if they don't start by talking to the community? The site itself is situated where Mill Creek used to flow – now a major sewer line – in an area that experiences significant flooding and subsidence so extreme that it has caused human casualties. Denise Carey, a volunteer at the West Mill Creek Recreation Center and founder of nonprofit Friends of West Mill Creek, noted that residents of this area have seen many promises broken to their community before, and feel like their needs are not being heard or respected. Without listening to the residents of Mill Creek, will this be another example of top-down, ineffective design? And what will be the long-term repercussions? This redevelopment could be a powerful and needed investment for a historically underserved community, but greening efforts have also been shown to cause gentrification, already underway in this area as evidenced by vulture-like developers and “We Buy Houses” signs posted on streets. This park redesign needs to be conducted with the community and for the community, for the short-term as well as through actively fighting threats of displacement and gentrification that this greening will cause.

ParkLab proposes a hub that centralizes a physical space for the community to voice their ideas for the park – a design-office for architects and residents to work together. But ParkLab is also a space for two-way communication. An offshoot of Monument's Labs 2017 project that, through ten locations organized around the city asked, “what is an appropriate monument for the city of Philadelphia?”, ParkLab asks: “How can a park serve your community?” Through a site-specific community engagement center, the Lab will ask for design input but also present site-specific exhibitions to share history and distribute resources. Working in close collaboration with the West Mill Creek Park Recreation Center, the ParkLab could be the bridge where community and architects can meet, physically and through the language of the engagement activities and stories being recorded.

Site

Based on discussions with Frances Walker and Denise Carey, there are three potential sites identified to place the ParkLab hub. There is also the potential that the lab could be moved to different sites depending on the season and/or exhibition.



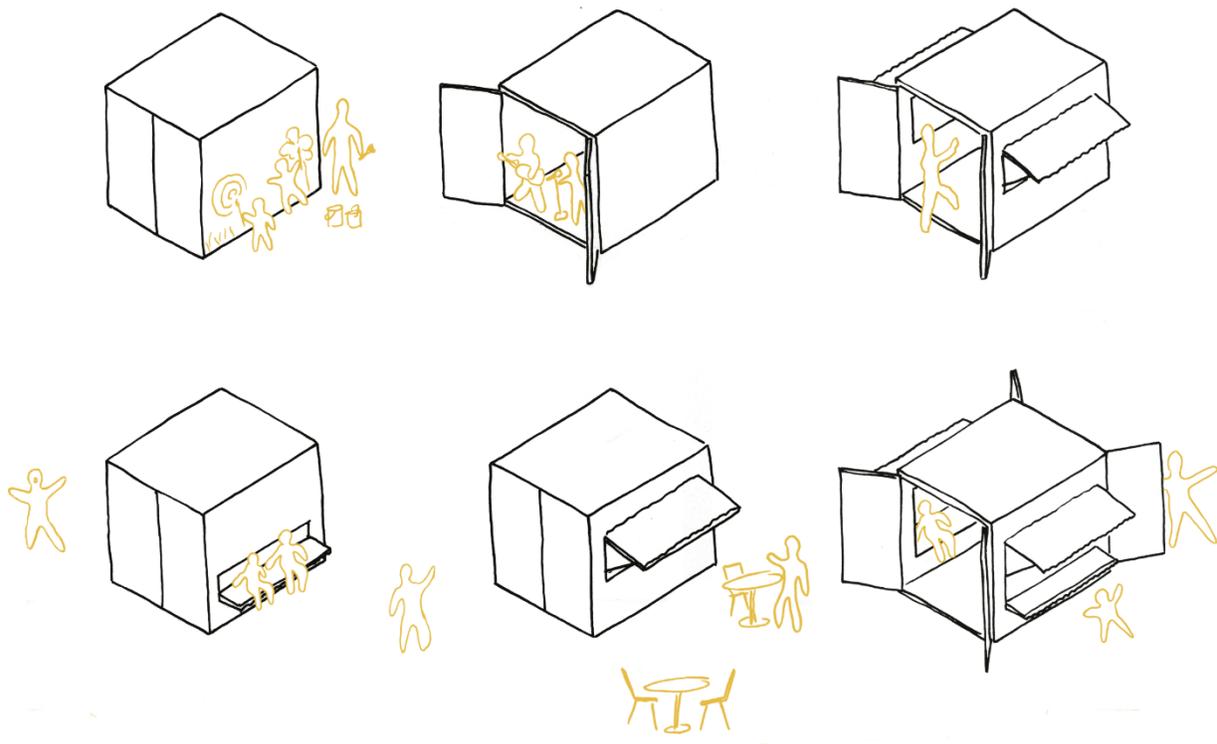
Site B describes a set of overgrown and unused tennis courts. This area sees little use, so the ParkLab would be able to more effectively energize this space situated at a highly trafficked intersection.

Sites E and F surround the West Mill Creek Recreation Center. This center serves an important role in the community as the center of programs, many of which are targeted for children and adolescents, ranging from help with job applications to Girl Scouts. The ParkLab could be sited in two locations in this area. The first option would be in front of the rec center. The advantages of this location is that the ParkLab could easily collaborate and share materials with the rec center, and it would intersect the traffic of those using the rec center as well as children and families at the nearby playground. While this is a nice option because the Lab would be in a more sheltered location (from buildings and trees), it could also obstruct regular activities. The second option locates the ParkLab behind the rec center and north of the basketball courts on a defunct spray

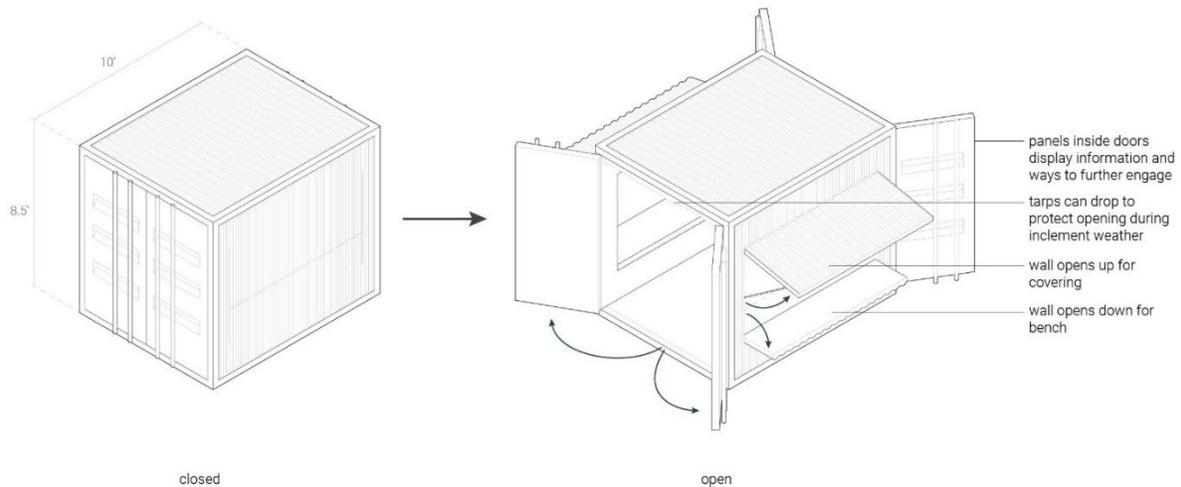
ground. This area is more exposed but also might intersect more traffic from the streets and activity areas nearby. Neither of these options would likely have as a diverse a group of visitors because it would capture the same people using the facilities at regular intervals, as opposed to an intersection that has a higher rate of unpredictability.

The last site option, **Site G**, located on the southernmost parcel of the park, currently hosts a grassy plaza. This area also hosts a decent amount of foot traffic.

Design



The design of the ParkLab hub is simple and sturdy but with adaptations in order to increase the programmatic flexibility of the space. The basic form is a 10' x 8' x 8' container, such as what Monument Lab used for its 2017 project, so the form is familiar to their organization. The structure is also very secure – while opened during the day, at night, all the materials can be stored inside and locked. Even in this locked state, the ParkLab can contribute to the landscape, integrated through additional seating, or I propose that the exterior can be painted as a project for local elementary school children or local artists. The structure is not meant to be spectacular; it's a frame, malleable to host a space for people to come together. With adaptations to open up the walls into a covering and bench in addition to the doors on both sides, the container becomes a highly flexible space that can accommodate many programs.



Organization

While this project is being proposed as a branch of Monument Lab, funding should come from Rebuild Philadelphia and community engagement should be included as part of the fundraising goal. Funding would cover the construction and transportation of the hub, materials for the exhibitions, and compensation for those managing the daily operations as well as the long-term planning of how information gathered by the hub is stored or activated. This project will only work if done in collaboration or with the support of the recreation center. Not only could the programs support and build off each other, but the hub could share materials or equipment like seating for if they were to host an event.

The ParkLab will be staffed by interns from [Trinity's Intern Program](#) – high school students who would receive fair compensation for their work. ParkLab hours and staffing will accommodate student schedules and take into account high traffic periods. Hours will run in the afternoons on weekdays until sunset, and will be open longer during the weekends, perhaps from noon to sunset. There will always be two students operating the ParkLab at a time, and one adult on hand at the Recreation Center. ParkLab will benefit from the input of the students who have local knowledge of the site and operations and who are invested in the area. In addition, the students will benefit from ParkLab, gaining valuable experience in communication, practice responsible management, and gain recommendations for future job and school applications.

The students' tasks will vary depending on the exhibit. Day-to-day operations will include opening, maintaining, and closing the hub itself, monitoring and refreshing materials, and communicating with visitors to explain the purpose of the ParkLab and help them engage with the exhibits. As a larger and longer-scale project, the students will record ideas for the future of the park through a digital platform that they develop and maintain.

Programming

There are parts of the hub that will stay constant and parts that will change with each exhibit. Three door panels will always be there to explain the ParkLab project, the history of Mill Creek and the West Mill Creek Park, and to record the public's ideas for the future of the park and the neighborhood. The exhibit will occupy the fourth door panel as well as the interior and/or surrounding space of the hub.

ParkLab

ParkLab was activated in 2021 in response to the call for redevelopment of West Mill Creek Park. ParkLab is a branch of Monument Lab and an extension of the project that asked: "What is an appropriate monument for the city of Philadelphia?" We want to ask: "How can a park serve your community?"

Design should start with the people who use the space. ParkLab serves as a central hub where you can bring and record ideas, talk to architects, and give feedback — consider it like a design office on the site itself.

But this neighborhood is more than the park. Through a series of rotating exhibitions, this hub will also be a place to learn about the landscape and history as well as a place to gather and share resources.

With your help, we can fight to ensure that the West Mill Creek Park will be a resource for the community and an investment that remains by the community.

This project is a collaboration between Monument Lab and the West Mill Creek Park recreation center.

learn about Mill Creek

1825 Topographical map showing the Philadelphia water works and original Mill Creek. The flow from the mountains was split by horse and plow, and the creek was straightened to reduce the risk of flooding.

1832 1832 map showing the creek and the location of the water works.

1849 1849 map showing the creek and the location of the water works.

1893 1893 map showing the creek and the location of the water works.

1919 1919 map showing the creek and the location of the water works.

1961 1961 map showing the creek and the location of the water works.

present-day present-day map showing the creek and the location of the water works.

The West Philadelphia landscape design research project shows the creek and the location of the water works.

ideas for the future

Use the QR code to submit your ideas for the park design, or ask a manager for a paper form.

UPCOMING EVENTS:

June 7 - Meet the architects!
All day at the ParkLab hub. In the case of inclement weather, we will meet in the re center.

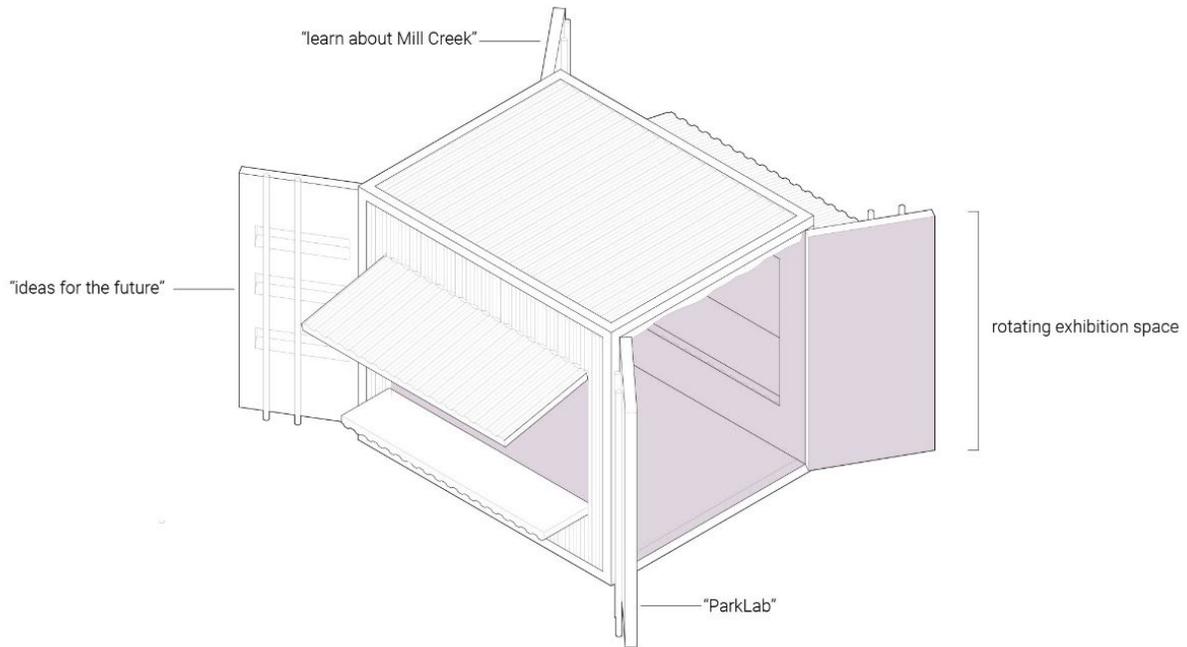
9 - Greening 101 with the Friends of West Mill Creek
Meet at the ParkLab at 11am and wear closed-toed shoes.

14 - Meet the architects!
All day at the ParkLab hub. In the case of inclement weather, we will meet in the re center.

19 - Learn about Flood Resilience
7pm at the Rec Center.

21 - Meet the architects!
All day at the ParkLab hub. In the case of inclement weather, we will meet in the re center.

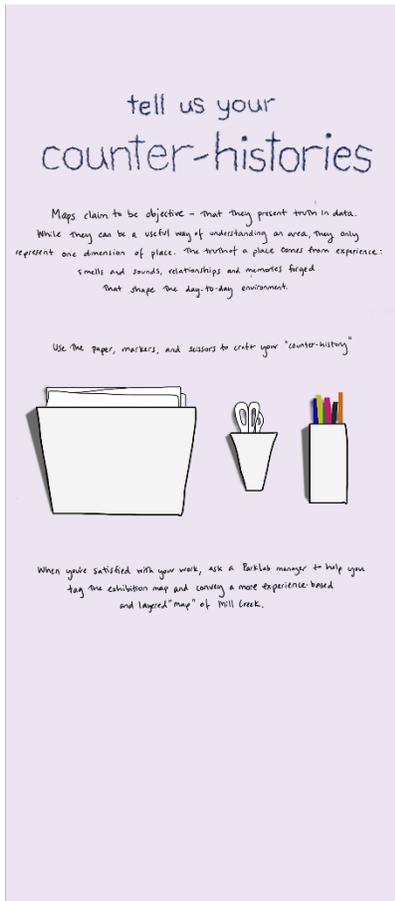
28 - Meet the architects!
All day at the ParkLab hub. In the case of inclement weather, we will meet in the re center.



In order to keep the ParkLab relevant and exciting for the community, the programming will change every three months and stand for a year, with the potential for extension. Its programming and existence correlates with the research and design period for the redevelopment of the park, sponsored by Rebuild Philadelphia. The sequence of exhibit programming will include topics such as:

- History of creek and housing development, building off of the work of the [West Philadelphia Landscape Project](#)
- Vacant land and foreclosures, building off of [Patricia's project](#)
- Tangled deeds, building off of [Amber's project](#)

The exhibits will not just be information blocks, but rather interesting ways to engage with the topics. The ParkLab does not exist solely to gather information for the designers of the park, but bring people together to engage with the rich history and community of the neighborhood.



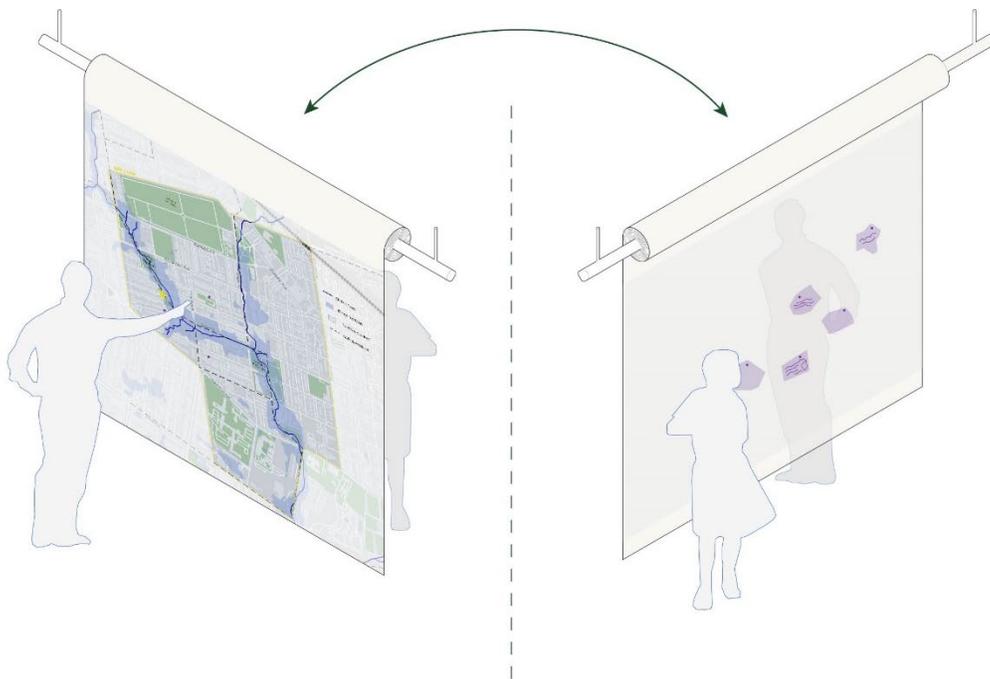
Sample exhibition: COUNTER-HISTORIES

Exhibits will have to be season specific; this sample exhibition would be suitable for the summer months because it utilizes the full flexibility of the structure to open up of the hub. It will engage the topic of the history of the creek and housing development in the Mill Creek neighborhood through engagement with maps that present information and prompt visitors to re-draw them through a system of tagging.

Maps claim to be objective – that they present truth in data. While they are a useful way of understanding an area, they can only represent one dimension of a place. The truth of a place comes from experience – smells and sounds, relationships and memories forged that shape the day-to-day environment. These experiences, or counter-histories, paint a more vibrant picture of a neighborhood that defies the “objectivity” of a traditional map, instead representing a layered history.

This exhibit begins officially at the exhibition panel that hosts instructions and materials for tagging: thick paper, scissors, and markers. Inside of the hub is a map hanging from the ceiling, printed with an image of a map on one side and suspended from a larger role of the mesh, translucent canvas. Visitors are

instructed to enter into the hub and view the map on the printed side. Taking a seat on the bench or going outside to sit on one of the stools, they can use the scissors and markers to write, illustrate, and design their counter-history tag. Once they are satisfied with their design, a student operator will help them tag the map by locating the place from where the counter-history most closely originates. They will place one side of the tag on the printed side of the map, puncturing through the mesh, translucent canvas. Then, they will locate their tag on the non-printed side of the map and attach the counter-history. Through the windows of the hub, from one side people will see a map with tags on it, like a google map with certain places pinned. However, on the other side of the canvas emerges a map of counter-histories – however people want to share them, as drawings, text, and shapes – that work together to convey a new image of the Mill Creek neighborhood – one that derives from experience and is rooted in the values and memories of its residents.



Once the counter-history is full, or after one month, the map is cut off and the roll is extended to show a new map, ready to be tagged. The recently removed map can be displayed at the recreation center or in a more public place, depending on the scope of the project and the desires of the contributors.

Future

Depending on the success of this engagement project, the hub could be used again at another site.

Bibliography

Gould, Kenneth and Tammy Lewis. *Green Gentrification: Urban Sustainability and the Struggle for Environmental Justice*. Routledge, 2017.

"Mapping Inequality." Accessed May 20, 2021. <https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/>.

Office of the Controller. "Mapping the Legacy of Structural Racism in Philadelphia." Accessed May 20, 2021. <https://controller.phila.gov/philadelphia-audits/mapping-the-legacy-of-structural-racism-in-philadelphia/>.

Spirn, Anne Whiston. *The Granite Garden: Urban Nature and Human Design*. Basic Books, 1984.

Spirn, Anne Whiston. "Restoring Mill Creek: Landscape Literacy, Environmental Justice and City Planning and Design." *Landscape Research* 30, no. 3 (July 1, 2005): 395–413. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01426390500171193>.

"West Philadelphia Collaborative History." <https://collaborativehistory.gse.upenn.edu>.

"WPLP Map Explorer." <https://wplp.net/maps-mill-creek/#>.