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Grief and Resistance: Social Responses to American Gun Violence

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Community Grief Gardens

Problem

An unconscionable amount of the United States' marginalized communities face cyclical neighborhood gun violence. The death resulting from this violence leads to communal grief, caused by the physical, intrapsychic, and role loss of a lost loved one. This grief is often disenfranchised by social feeling rules, preventing the bereaved from fully processing and healing from it.

Mission of the Organization

In an effort to promote grief responses and to advance preventive resistance efforts, I am conceptualizing an organization that partners with the loved ones of gun violence victims to support them in creating green spaces within their communities. The envisioned program encourages community gardens as a place of memorial, providing a sacred space of remembrance and allowing for communal grieving. Moreover, these gardens will function in accordance with place based prevention principles, working to prevent future gun violence.

The broad mission is to empower grief and resistance towards cycles of violence, accomplishing this goal by utilizing green spaces. The organization will collaborate with families and friends to plan and construct a green space that aids them in expressing their grief and that becomes a place to reflect on it. The role of the organization is to actualize the loved ones' vision; it will acquire the land and all of the plants, coordinate members of the community, and organize planting days. I've envisioned these spaces primarily as gardens, though other options include parks, lawns, and fountains.

Activities

The green spaces can be built on vacant lots, public land, or land donated to the cause. One of the main tasks of the organization is to legally acquire the land intended to be cultivated, as to prevent any additional headache for the bereaved. Another route, with the permission of the loved ones, is guerilla gardening, “gardening on land that the gardeners do not have the legal right to cultivate” (Lenier). Gardening then becomes a form of protest and direct action, and it builds joy, food security, and climate resilience.

Once the location is secured, the next action is constructing the green space. The primary goal is to create spaces that are cherished by the communities that they are located within and to empower the communities within the creation process. No two spaces may be the same due to the different desires of their creators. Some of the options for spaces include trees, flowers, produce plots, and benches, each of which may be chosen because of a special memory or in dedication to a victim. Water, color, wood, and stone can be included for their symbolic and psychological significance (Ross). Inspiration can be drawn from the Memory Creation Garden in West Baltimore, where the loved ones of gun violence victims planted flowers and laid *personalized memorial stones* (Miller). The gardens could also include art installations, like kinetic sculptures, wind chimes, or of hopeful images, or have quantitatively-planned art, like the installation of forty thousand flowers on the National Mall in April 2021 to remember the forty thousand victims of gun violence every year (Staff).

Once constructed, the gardens will be sacred places to process grief. This will be realized in the more passive form of resting and taking in the natural beauty of the garden or in the more active form of planting and upkeeping it. The passive approach was appreciated by Marlene Miller Pratt, who helped to design the Botanical Garden of Healing Dedicated to Victims of Gun Violence in New Haven, Connecticut in honor of her son Gary Miller. Pratt felt that a garden was the best way to honor her son’s memory and to give other grieving families *a place to go* to reflect (Pierce). For those who choose to be more active, the green spaces will allow them a reflective outlet to channel their energy, while still processing their grief so as to not disenfranchise it. Rather than becoming immobilized by grief, gardeners will empower their grief and work towards healing. As horticulturist Chris Felhaber puts it, “Any time

you put your heart and soul into something, the love that underlies it can help with the healing process. That love and spirit are what resonate with people in a garden” (Ross). Grief gardens can act as horticultural therapy; they work by harnessing the energy input by the griever and the healing power of nature.

The gardens will also be community gathering places. Should the creators of the park desire to take on a more active role in their community, activities will be created, modeled after those of existing organizations that recognize the benefits of urban green spaces. Conscious Connect, located in Springfield, Ohio, focuses on neighborhood revitalization, “so that zip codes do not define the success of children, youth, and families” (*The Conscious Connect, Inc.*). One of the ways in which they pursue this mission is through their Reading Parks initiative, a movement creating neighborhood pocket parks, each with “little free libraries”. These small book houses can be placed in the grief gardens to welcome youth and excite reading at a young age. Philly Peace Park, created by Culture Works of Greater Philadelphia, is a *charitable eco-campus and passive park*. It runs a free produce program supported by the on-site gardens and by local providers and leads ecologically-based school curriculum units that include planting, harvesting, composting, and pollinators (*Philly Peace Park*). The grief garden program can follow Philly Peace Park’s lead by hosting lesson, planting, and harvesting days for children, teaching them the worth of food and nature. If space permits, the gardens may also be developed into neighborhood compost sites to tackle food waste. The grief gardens can also donate their harvests, replicating the Philly Peace Park’s initiative. Food deserts - geographic areas where residents’ access to affordable, healthy food options is restricted or nonexistent due to the absence of grocery stores within convenient traveling distance - and crime hot spots are often located in the same, under-resourced communities (“Food Deserts.”). The gardens have the potential to become a small, but not negligible, source of fresh produce for their communities.

Theory of Change

Public Grieving

The proposed grief community gardens bring mourning out into the public. They will encourage the processing of grief and work to normalize it within communities. The current American understanding of death is sterile; it is compartmentalized from everyday life. Likewise, grief is marginalized by our society (Cann). There is immense pressure from *feeling rules* about the appropriate ways to grieve, causing people to suppress or self-disenfranchise their grief as a means of endurance and acceptance. The community grief gardens will work to change this social rule, encouraging grief reflection.

People need to be publicly recognized as bereaved. As Anderson Cooper illustrated in a conversation about grief with Stephen Colbert, “I wish that I had a scar that's unavoidable for people to see because it would be a silent signal to everybody that I meet that I'm not the person that I was meant to be or started out being” (“Stephen Colbert Opens up on Loss”). *Legibility* is incredibly important for healthy grief processing. The grief gardens are a space in which the bereaved can mourn together, recognizing and validating each others' grief.

The gardens are spaces for *communal grieving*. Grief does not have to be alienating; in fact, the pain and vulnerability caused by grief has the potential to bond. When someone dies in a community, especially in cases of unjust loss like the deaths caused by gun violence, it is not just the immediate loved ones who grieve the loss of that person. Grief ripples through communities, and in communities that face cyclical violence, that grief is disenfranchised - *suffocated* even - and is heightened by anticipatory grief. The gardens can act as places where grief is publicly recognized and where communal support is built. This support benefits the individuals of that community and strengthens the social network that brings them together.

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design

Gardens are an excellent tool for processing grief and building community in the wake of tragedy, and they also target the cause of that grief - the gun violence itself. Often, communities plagued with high violent crime rates have suffered from decades of divestment and physical and economic decline due to structural racism (South). Focused investments in effective design of the built environment, like the

revitalization of vacant land into green spaces, leads to a reduction in the amount of crimes and an improvement in community safety.

There are four main principles of crime prevention through environmental design. The first three are access control and territorial enforcement, which emphasize clear transitions between public and private areas, and natural surveillance, which focuses on visibility. The final principle is maintenance, addressing the management of space and its proper upkeep. This principle is utilized by the grief gardens. Maintenance works by interrupting the *labeling* that stereotypes under-resourced, physically-deteriorating neighborhoods. Neighborhoods viewed by outsiders as more conducive to crime, possibly due to a “primary deviance” or simply due to its physical state, are labeled as “ghetto” and unsafe. People within the neighborhood then internalize that “deviant” label and are more likely to commit a “second deviance” of more violence. If this labeling were to be interrupted by physically rejuvenating the neighborhood and taking away the opportunity to apply the “unsafe” label, violence can be prevented. Maintenance efforts apply a new label that signals that the location is well cared for and inhospitable to criminals. It indicates ownership and pride in the property, leading to a reduction in crime (National Crime Prevention Council, 2009).

Individual members of a neighborhood internalize the label applied to their community. Dr. Eugenia South, director of the Urban Health Lab at the University of Pennsylvania spells out the efficacy of place based prevention: “Each time we leave our homes and traverse our neighborhoods, the environment is getting under our skin to influence our physical functioning, our thoughts, our behaviors and our interactions” (South). People feel valued and safe when living in places with greenery and without physical evidence of neglect. Community gardens have the potential to lessen mental fatigue, aggression, and depression among residents, improving their quality of life. There is a greater sense of security in well-maintained neighborhoods, which leads neighbors to socialize with each other more often, forming stronger social bonds.

There is an element of resistance in choosing to express grief in the form of a garden. By doing so, the loved ones alter the environmental and social conditions that perpetuate cycles of violence.

Moreover, by declaring their grief in public and reinvigorating a communal space, the bereaved are effectively resisting and taking power from gun violence. That is powerful.

Environmental Justice

The neighborhoods that the garden program targets are structurally marginalized communities. These majority-minority and under-resourced communities often face environmental racism, as they are used as dumping grounds and have poor air and water quality. The effort to provide these communities with more green space is therefore environmental justice work.

The grief gardens promote a healthier environment. In urban environments, natural ground cover is replaced by “dense concentrations of pavement, buildings, and other sources that absorb and retain heat” (*EPA*). This creates the urban heat island effect, by which a city can be three to ten degrees celsius warmer than a local rural area. Heat islands generate higher levels of air pollution, heat-related illness, and energy costs. Urban green spaces, like the proposed grief islands, reduce the heat island effect. Vegetation cools the environment actively by evaporation and transpiration and passively by shading surfaces that otherwise would have absorbed short-wave radiation. During the night, the high sky view factor of open fields allows heat to escape fast through long-wave radiation. (Kleerekoper, et al., 2011). Urban parks have lower air and surface temperatures, forming PCIs (Park Cool Islands). PCIs reduce air pollution effects, both due to the lower temperature and through carbon sequestration, which reduces premature death in cities.

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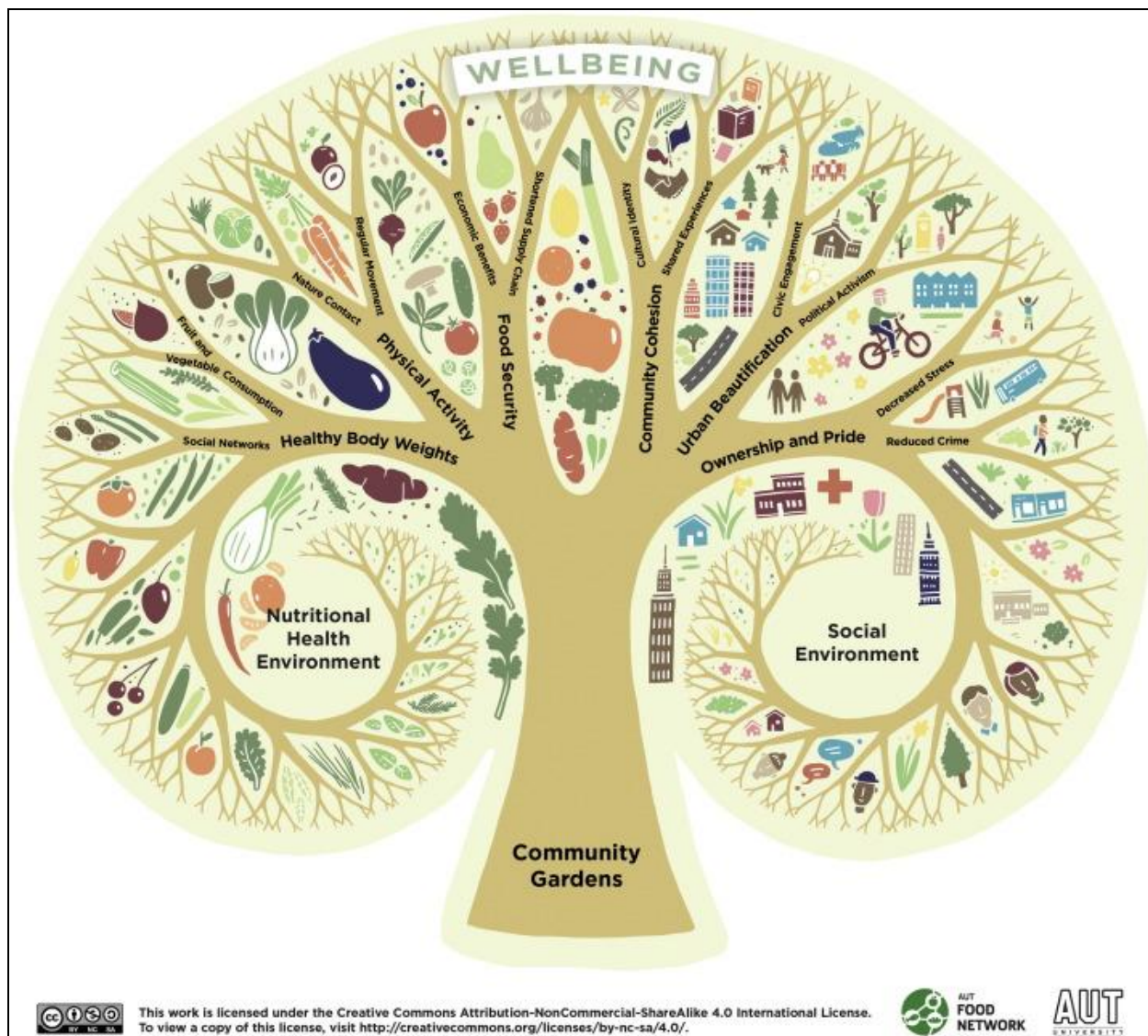
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In my research I came across this advocacy model for community gardens, created by Victoria Egli, Melody Oliver, and El-Shadan Tautolo. I felt that it was best as an image rather than a description and still wanted to share.