

Oxnard Green Alleys Plan: *Interlacing Life and Infrastructure*

Location: Oxnard, California

Category: II. Planning and Analysis

Purpose: Setting a Precedent for Green Innovation

The Oxnard Green Alleys Plan pushed innovative ideas past skepticism, built neighborhood support, and uncovered unique funding strategies that had not been explored by the City. Why would a traditional community radically re-envision their alleyways? In the case of Oxnard, economic scarcity has been a catalyst for creative planning. Green infrastructure funding is not only providing economic assistance to underfunded cities, it is transforming the way citizens and cities engage with the process of improving their local neighborhoods. Through an examination of 86 miles of underutilized alleys, the planning process resulted in: 1) projects targeting the most underserved neighborhoods, where funding and revitalization will have the greatest positive impact; 2) strategies for using alleys to creatively appropriate open space to better serve the community; and 3) an emerging perspective that alleys can become a new polyfunctional communal domain for informal social networking, active transportation, and recreation.

Role of Landscape Architect: Guiding the Vision

The Landscape Architect served as the lead planning, design, and community outreach consultant; other members of the team included a grant administration consultant, a civil engineer, and a cost estimator.

The planning process included a series of working meetings between the Landscape Architect and a Green Alleys Planning and Advisory Group, composed of key City staff and concerned stakeholder groups. An early outcome of these sessions was a list of focused objectives, which all agreed the green alley projects should achieve. These objectives address the topics of: traffic safety, pedestrian and bike activity, community space and health, personal safety, local economy, efficient maintenance, water quality and conservation, air quality, and stewardship.

A typical alley is a dirty, neglected place. Catalyzing it into a new type of public space requires community support. The Landscape Architect kick-started this often arduous process through a community outreach program. Interested residents participated in activities at workshops, such as an alley tour, where they made their own observations about the problems and opportunities associated with alleys. The designers related green alley design to building a pizza, with stations where residents could select the “toppings” (design elements) that they would like on their “pizza alley.” The designers took the most popular elements from the residents’ “pizza alleys” to develop design visions for an alley in two of the high priority neighborhoods.

Oxnard’s City Corps, a youth employment program, provided support at the workshops. This opportunity not only gave the youth experience in community engagement, but also allowed them to learn about green alleys and provide their own input.

Significance: Crisis Equals Opportunity

In communities across the country, alleys represent an antiquated infrastructure that breeds vandalism, drug problems, and other illegal activities that threaten public health and safety. However, they are also frequently used as shortcuts by kids going to and from school, and by families walking to the grocery store, park, or other neighborhood destinations. Alleys are public spaces that are already in place and being used, but are rarely regarded as anything more than a utilitarian access route. Considering their intimate scale and proximity to homes and businesses, alleys hold potential to become more people-friendly spaces that enhance the community’s quality of life.

In spite of budget shortfalls, state grant funding allowed the City of Oxnard to hire landscape architects to produce a green alleys plan for converting standard alleys into a new multi-beneficial public space typology. Through a customizable green alley design template, the plan offers prospects for creating usable open space, promoting physical activity, reducing crime and blight, enhancing stormwater management practices, and fostering a sense of community. Direct interaction between the Landscape Architect and residents planted the seed of optimism for turning these neglected corners of the city into spaces that can be embraced.

Special Factors: Taking the Document off the Shelf

Thirty-eight percent of the projects in the Oxnard’s 2013-2018 Capital Improvement Program are unfunded. These unfunded projects consist primarily of basic infrastructure needs, such as parks, streets, alleys, and storm drains. There simply were not enough funds to continue typical levels of maintenance, nor invest in major public improvements.

Given this situation, it was not enough to develop an exciting vision for new types of open space with guidelines for their design; Oxnard also needed guidance on how to move from plan to capital project. The Oxnard Green Alleys Plan provides information on current sources of funds that could be applied to green alleys, and also identifies unorthodox sources the City may not have otherwise considered, such as green bonds. The plan recommends maintenance approaches as well, based on similar projects in other cities and adapting current maintenance programs in Oxnard to the context of green alleys.

Despite a challenging budget situation, Oxnard has had the foresight to look to new ideas to solve multiple problems at once, and the Green Alleys Plan develops a solid strategy for setting their goals in motion. While the City works to secure funding for their pilot projects, residents are encouraged to carry their enthusiasm forward with “D.I.Y.” projects and grassroots efforts that will be the first phase of making their alleys safer, more beautiful spaces in the neighborhood.

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Image Summary



Image: OxnardGreenAlleys-01

Oxnard's 86 miles of public alleys are simultaneously unclaimed, neglected spaces and convenient shortcuts frequented by residents walking through their neighborhoods. Like many American cities, Oxnard is looking for creative ways to improve its infrastructure and add community amenities, despite tough budget constraints.



Image: OxnardGreenAlleys-02

After an intensive community outreach program, the design team reflected the feedback for various programs and neighborhood improvements. From farm market stalls, cafe seating, to drought tolerant gardens and stormwater filtration, the community called for strategies that bring the alley to life.



Image: OxnardGreenAlleys-03

The green alley planning process passed through four phases, setting the course for a future in Oxnard where neighborhood revitalization, increased access and availability of public space, and environmental improvements have been achieved.



Image: OxnardGreenAlleys-04

The team mapped GIS data for physical and social conditions, and overlaid it with the city's alley network to identify meaningful relationships. It became evident that green alleys could help fill the gap in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Beyond addressing basic repair, Oxnard's alleys could bring green to its poorest neighborhoods.



Image: OxnardGreenAlleys-05

The objectives set the framework for prioritizing neighborhoods by green alley suitability. The design team developed four GIS models to evaluate conditions that varied between neighborhoods and were important to achieving the stated objectives. Each alley neighborhood was scored by the four objective-based models.

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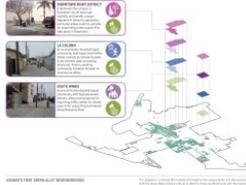


Image: OxnardGreenAlleys-06

The designers combined GIS analysis with experiential assessments and discussions with the Green Alleys Advisory Group to identify three neighborhoods with the highest potential for successful green alley demonstration projects. Each will focus on the environmental objectives in addition to one of the other objective categories.



Image: OxnardGreenAlleys-07

Direct community engagement is a key component for the success of alley improvements. The design team developed a playful metaphor that likened green alley design to pizza-making. Participants received an alley base sheet (pizza crust), and they selected stickers for their favorite green alley design elements (pizza toppings).



Image: OxnardGreenAlleys-08

To introduce residents to the possibilities for alleys, the outreach program included informational presentations with Q&A and alley observation tours. In response to residents' requests for information on how they can start making improvements to their alleys, the design team developed a "Green Alley DIY" brochure.

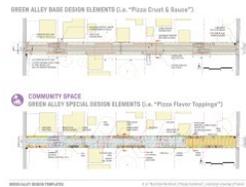


Image: OxnardGreenAlleys-09

In an "Illustrated Handbook of Design Guidelines", scaled plan drawings of typical alleys show city engineers how the design elements could fit into real alleys. The elements are grouped into templates for the base design, the foundation of every green alley project; and four special design categories, to be mix-and-matched.



Image: OxnardGreenAlleys-10

The designers developed this alley vision from the input received on the residents' "Green Alley Pizza" sheets. Through the planning process, the City of Oxnard and its residents gained an opportunity to collaborate on an optimistic future for transforming neglected alleys to new types of vital and lively infrastructure.