

THE HARLEM EDUCATION PROJECT
2547 Eighth Avenue
New York 30, New York
To 2 4100

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THE NEIGHBORHOOD COMMONS PROJECT

The purpose of the Neighborhood Commons pilot project is to demonstrate how scattered resources can be brought together in an old neighborhood to create a new reality. Specifically, the project is designed as an experiment to show how wasted vacant land can be converted into an attractive outdoor living space, using little money, relying on other resources which are generally available in a big city. A second purpose is to demonstrate how youth and other volunteers can be organized to carry out such a project. The project has tremendous implications for the creation of work opportunities for out-of-school youth.

The idea comes from the work of Karl Linn, Associate Professor of Landscape Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania. In the so-called slums of Philadelphia, working on sites generally composed of tax delinquent land, volunteer workers drawn from both the immediate neighborhood and other parts of the city, guided by professionals, created small parks and open spaces where neighborhood social life might develop. In Philadelphia, the program gradually won municipal acceptance and today is being continued with Professor Linn's counsel, co-sponsored by the Junior Chamber of Commerce. Professor Linn has, subsequently, gone to Washington, D.C. where he has established an organization which now has 27 similar projects underway.

In the spring of this year, at a conference on Our Urban Backyards, the Council on Parks and Playgrounds presented professor Linn in a lecture describing his work in Philadelphia and Washington. The response was immediately enthusiastic. It was felt, however, that in order to establish a similar program in New York City, a tangible demonstration of its feasibility would be needed. The Harlem Education Project, in cooperation with Klein, Munter, Schiff, volunteer architectural designers, has undertaken the project this summer.

The Harlem Education Project (HEP) came into being a year ago, as a tutoring service run by college students. Under a grant from the Marshall Field Foundation, a Board of Directors was set up, the tutoring service was expanded, and the HEP staff began to search for other ways that students could be useful in the Harlem community.

In April and May of this Year, with the cooperation of the City Planning Commission, HEP did a survey of 82 city-owned vacant lots in Central Harlem. On the basis of the enthusiasm of the people in the immediate neighborhood, the needs of the area, the functional and esthetic possibilities of the site, HEP selected the city-owned vacant lot at 303 West 147th Street as a pilot project. The lot has been made available for this project through the Department of Real Estate. The Harlem Education Project subsequently sent a letter to each of the landlords who own property in the square block immediately surrounding the lot, and they have responded warmly, indicating that their backyards would be made available for the project.

A survey of the immediate neighborhood was undertaken, a list of skilled volunteers was prepared, and plans for the use of the space have been made on the basis of the information obtained from the residents. A block party was staged, presented cooperatively by HEP and the Noble Gents Athletic and Social Club, to publicize the initial undertaking. Construction has begun, and we are presently searching for materials and equipment to complete the pilot project.