

Planning and Designing Meaningful Public Spaces

Jayoung Koo, Landscape Architecture

Public Space, Public Place, and Public Life

Public spaces are areas that are open to the public. Spaces that are used most frequently tend to be valued highly in the community. These public spaces often have personal meanings associated with them that transform them into memorable places. Therefore, public places are not only locations in our society, but they tend to have an additional special identity linked to the public spaces. Great public places in communities should be destinations for both locals and visitors.

Not all public spaces act as public places. The idea of public life has the potential to elevate the success of a public space into a place where people create experiences. Individuals become more a part of public life when they are active in public places. In the past, public life often took place in traditional public spaces, such as streets and sidewalks, where behaviors and attitudes generally conform to appropriate public behavior. Public life is shaped by the culture (social, functional, symbolic), technology, physical structure, nature, size, and diversity of the community. Public life is a product of societal values that reflect the needs, rights, and quests of individuals in the public spaces beyond private spaces.

The goal for this publication is to focus on guiding the development of a sustainable public space into a public life place that is also connected with other parts of the community and accessible and open to all people. The size and scope of a public space can vary depending on the size and location of a community. This publication aims to inform and illustrate how public placemaking projects can be initiated in partnership with residents and the broader community. In the end, public space projects can improve the

overall health and recreational experience of all community members. Each local government and community needs to determine its own goals for a successful public space project. Once goals are established, each community can prepare, plan and implement appropriate public space plans and designs suitable to their geographic context and scope of project.

Placemaking and the Importance of the Community Engagement Process

The placemaking movement builds on the work of mid-twentieth century activists, designers, and planners who emphasized that cities and towns should be designed for people, not just cars. Placemaking practice emphasizes the social and cultural importance of lively neighborhoods, inviting public spaces and attention to the activities taking

place in the public spaces. Placemaking is a concept and process that emphasizes the importance of public spaces and stresses that places become stronger when created with people in mind and with people involved throughout the process. Non-profit organizations like Project for Public Spaces offer a variety of tools and resources to enhance the collaborative process in a community.

Planning and Design of Public Spaces

Public space projects require community members to work together with local governments and other relevant agencies to create and manage various types of public spaces (Figure 1). The planning process provides opportunities for meaningful interaction and strengthens community capacity by encouraging discussion of visions for the project,



Figure 1. Community members participating in a community design workshop discussing a range of goals and objectives for parks and public space network project in Princeton, Kentucky

space, and/or function. To be resourceful, working groups need to interact, partner and collaborate with people of diverse backgrounds and skills. During initial discussions, members should think about how to effectively and efficiently address public space project goals, needs, issues, and visions. Depending on the specific type of public space project, it might be necessary to address more than a single goal and tackle multiple goals such as enhancing recreation, education, safety, economic activity, socializing, or creating tourism destinations. A combination of short-term and long-term goals and needs can benefit everyone involved. Common goals such as improving streetscapes can also contribute to lasting impressions of communities and places.

Public space projects may address goals and objectives for individuals and communities at different scales and levels (for example, parks, plazas, farmers markets or community gardens). The development of well-planned places can encourage community members to become more physically active and to engage in more outdoor endeavors, which will ultimately impact their quality of life. Well-designed public spaces not only enhance the physical environment but also help develop a sense of place.

This document will examine key aspects of planning public spaces with a focus on parks, plazas, and farmers markets.

How to Get Started

There are two general ways to begin a public space project in a community. The first method is when a community hires design or planning professionals such as landscape architects to lead a project on behalf of the community. The second method involves a grassroots approach where community members get the project started and develop the conceptual ideas on their own before bringing in the required professionals. This publication focuses on the latter method to help facilitate project start-up in the community. Collaboration, coordination, and partnerships are essential for the success of a public space project as the uses, functions, and visions depend not only on those who influence the creation of the space but also on those who will use the public space.

Developing an inventory of an existing public space as well as the physical, cultural, and socio-economic resources in and around the project area will help inform community members about the potential for and suitability of appropriate public space designs. The gathered

information will provide insight to community members and professionals throughout the decision-making and design processes. Often, historical information on the uses, trends, incidents, and issues of the public space will help resolve potential problems as well as identify and envision appropriate and relevant considerations that would be most suitable and feasible for the community within the site's geographic context.

There are various factors to consider when planning and designing public spaces (Table 1). The working group, stakeholders, partners, and the public should all be involved to envision the ideal project. Public spaces should be welcoming and pleasant for both community members and visitors. Appropriate wayfinding features should inform users of rules and guidelines that will not only support the experience but also aid in managing the space for all beneficiaries. Furthermore, there may be adjacent property owners affected directly or indirectly by the project. These property owners should be consulted in advance to address their concerns and gain their support. This approach will allow the project to focus on the design and not the logistics of getting approved for the public space function. When done well, public spaces can function as community hubs and provide a sense of identity.

Table 1. Example of features and aspects to consider for public space planning and design

	Parks	Plazas	Farmers Markets
Goal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide areas for active recreation, relaxation, gatherings, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide safe and pleasant areas for social activities and passive recreation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance space for market and social functions
Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Areas for active recreation • Areas for passive recreation • Areas for events • Amenities and features to support a range of uses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safe central locations • Balance of natural features and hardscape areas • Amenities and features to support a range of uses • Attractive or pleasant aesthetics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Efficient access to farm stands for producers • Ample space for customers • Multi-use space for other events and activities
Users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active recreationists • Passive recreationists • Event participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Passers by • Passive recreationists • Event participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Event participants • Passive recreationists • Visitors
Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fields, sports facilities, event spaces, etc. • Restroom, fountains, seating, shade, tables, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-purpose event spaces, etc. • Water features, seating, shade, public art, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Farm stands, vendor structures, etc. • Restroom, seating, shade, etc.
Example of Other Aspects: ADA Compliance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mix of same type of amenities to accommodate different abilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusion of ramps or lifts along with stairways for accessibility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide range of accessible means to central market space

Inventory

To pursue the goals of a public space project, key leaders should gather information for the project area and define the scope of the project. Community leaders, extension agents, volunteers, and partners can then seek out, identify, and inventory a range of data that will inform the decision makers of potential visions for the proposed public space(s).

The working group needs to research the regulatory aspects related to the type of public space project being considered. Local land use and zoning ordinances will indicate whether certain aspects of the community's vision may be restricted or limited or subject to negotiation. This information is often readily available at relevant offices in the local community such as the county or city office of planning and zoning, fiscal court, historical societies, public libraries, or community newspapers as well as from individuals. The types of inventory information required can be classified into the following categories: biological/physical, social/economic, and historical/cultural (Table 2). This information includes topography, demographics, comprehensive plans, land use and zoning maps and ordinances, property boundaries, existing plans and design documents, and transportation planning documents as well as photographs, news articles, and so on. Once the relevant information is collected, the working group will better understand the opportunities/potentials and the constraints/limitations of a particular public space project.

Biological and Physical Information

Biological and physical information includes data on natural resources, human influenced features, and infrastructure, either historical or currently existing in the community and project area. Biological information includes types of local vegetation and wildlife species. Examples of physical data include built environment information such as roads, sidewalk networks, buildings, parking lots, utility lines, topography, and water-sewer systems as well as natural environmental elements such as hydrology, and other infrastructure (Figure 2).

These biological/physical infrastructure data are publicly available and accessible through local, regional, state, and federal level public offices and entities such as the Kentucky Energy and Environment Cabinet, Kentucky Transportation Cabinet, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and U.S. Geological Survey. Typically, the information is in the form of maps, aerial images, reports, or other documents and lists that can support decision-making (Figure 3). Biological/physical data can inform the user whether certain sites, locations, or

properties are suitable or problematic. Communities should avoid developing public spaces in areas such as sensitive habitats, those close to major arterial roads, railroads, or steep slopes existing within or in proximity to a potential site. Public spaces may include sections of streams or flood prone zones, but safety concerns must be addressed in these areas. Overall, this type of data details where biotic or abiotic resources physically exist, which can directly affect the potential plans for public space(s) or vice-versa.



Figure 2. Map of Walter Bradley Park in Midway, Kentucky, depicting existing physical and biological features of the park to aid in discussions about issues, needs, and potentials
Source: Base imagery GoogleEarth.com 2016

Table 2. Inventory information for public space projects

Biological/Physical	Social/Economic	Historical/Cultural
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maps of project location, restrictions, property boundaries, topography, etc. • Physical condition of features and elements (amenities, structures, etc.) • Existing vegetation and wildlife • Climate factors (local, regional) • Preservation opportunities • Signs of deterioration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demographics of the community, county, region • Economic indicators of the community, county, region • Documentation of planning, land use, zoning, ordinances, etc. • Types, locations and numbers of businesses in proximity to the project area • Transportation documents, traffic counts, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical documents: maps, photos, newspaper articles, etc. • Community programs, regular or special events • Activity/use trends • Landmarks, preserved elements • Valued spaces, places, locations • Historical/registered buildings/districts

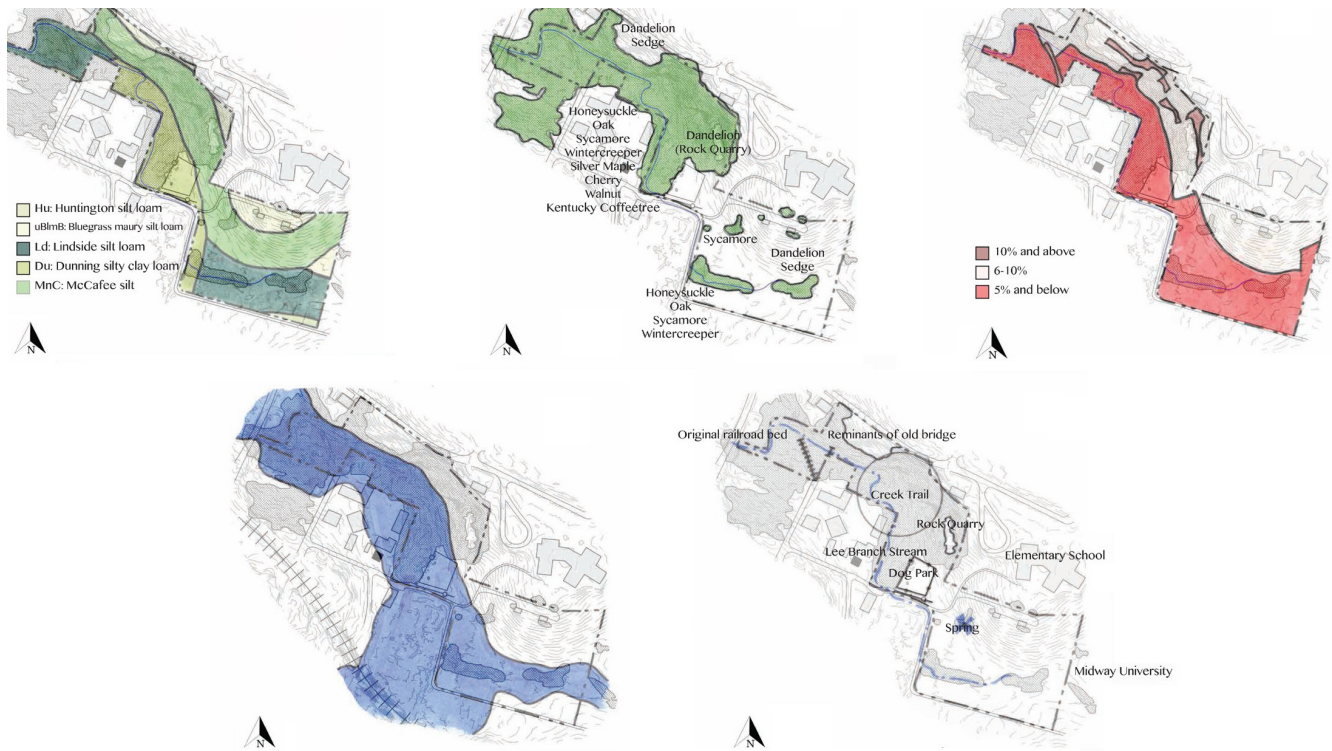


Figure 3. Inventory of soils, vegetation, percentage slope, flood zone, and site features of Walter Bradley Park in Midway, Kentucky, illustrating biological and physical elements and considerations to interpret and use to develop a vision to effectively connect features
Illustration by Charlie Hall

Social and Economic Information

Social and economic data includes information about people and households, such as changes in demographics, trends in economic performance, development activities, and land use decisions.

Factors such as the distribution of population, associated income, housing occupancy, and property ownership are just some examples of social and economic data (Figure 4). Such information can be found through sources such as the U.S. Census Bureau, Kentucky State Data Center, and Kentucky Geography Network. Information from these sources enables effective interpretation of the potential success of the community's public space(s), user forecasts, and other indirect economic activities that can be generated or strengthened in the vicinity of the public spaces. In addition, local level data can be found in reports and documents available through local planning departments, community and economic development organizations, or research groups.

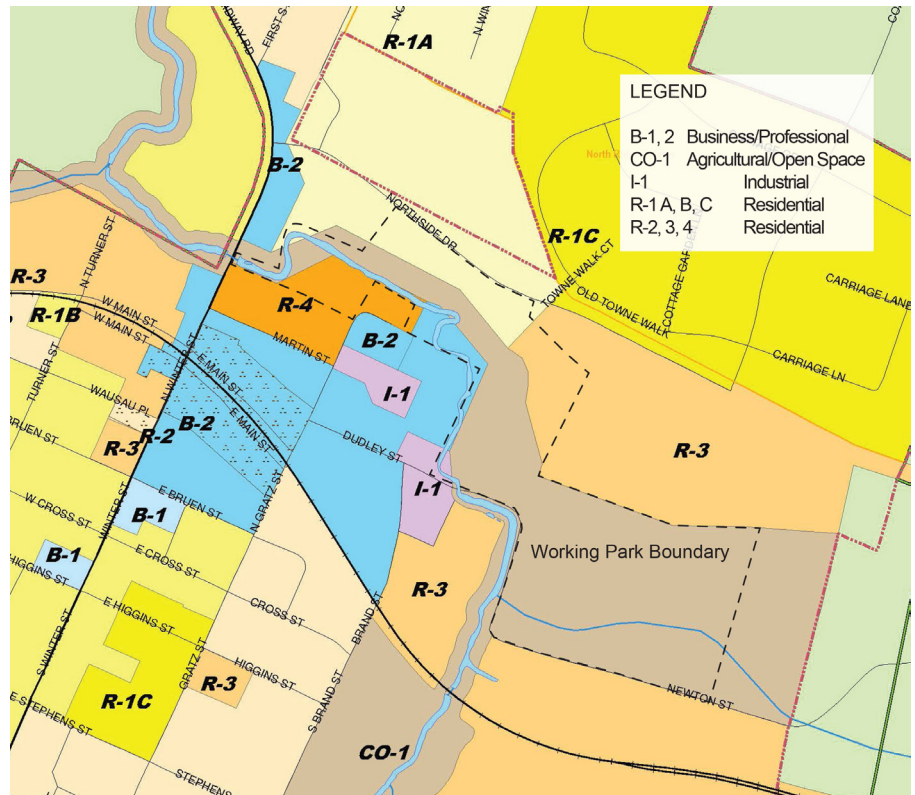


Figure 4. Zoning map of Midway, Kentucky, illustrating zoning of property, including Walter Bradley Park, that may influence the vision/inclusion of features
Source: Versailles-Midway-Woodford County Planning Commission 2016

Historical and Cultural Information

Historical and cultural information provides background concerning how and what has changed or remained the same in a community. Valuable resources such as historic buildings, photos of events and festivals, and excerpts from journals provide detailed information that may not be available through other sources. Events or places that might seem unimportant to some members of the community, such as locations of demolished buildings, heritage trees, or cultural activities, can add depth to the community project analysis or design (Figure 5). Historical and cultural information can be acquired through historical societies, libraries, and personal collections. Community working groups can be proactive and seek such information from their community members as requests or interviews. Although some information may seem personal to a certain degree, it actually provides a sense of identity for the community. These qualitative types of information can indicate assets as well as strengths and weaknesses of the community.

Analysis

Information gathered for the planning and design of potential public space projects can highlight important assets a community already has or would like to reinstate. An analysis of inventory data enables the working group to further understand how the community has changed physically, socially, and culturally. Similarly, it can help the group understand how the community has not changed which can be just as important. The analysis process will better prepare the working group to address the future needs of their community. Once all relevant and available information is gathered and missing information is identified, the working group will be able to analyze opportunities and constraints for the proposed public space project. An effective analysis can lead to the identification of potential uses for the public space as well as how the project can be effectively and efficiently implemented. Inventoried data such as wildlife habitat, geological surveys, pedestrian traffic and

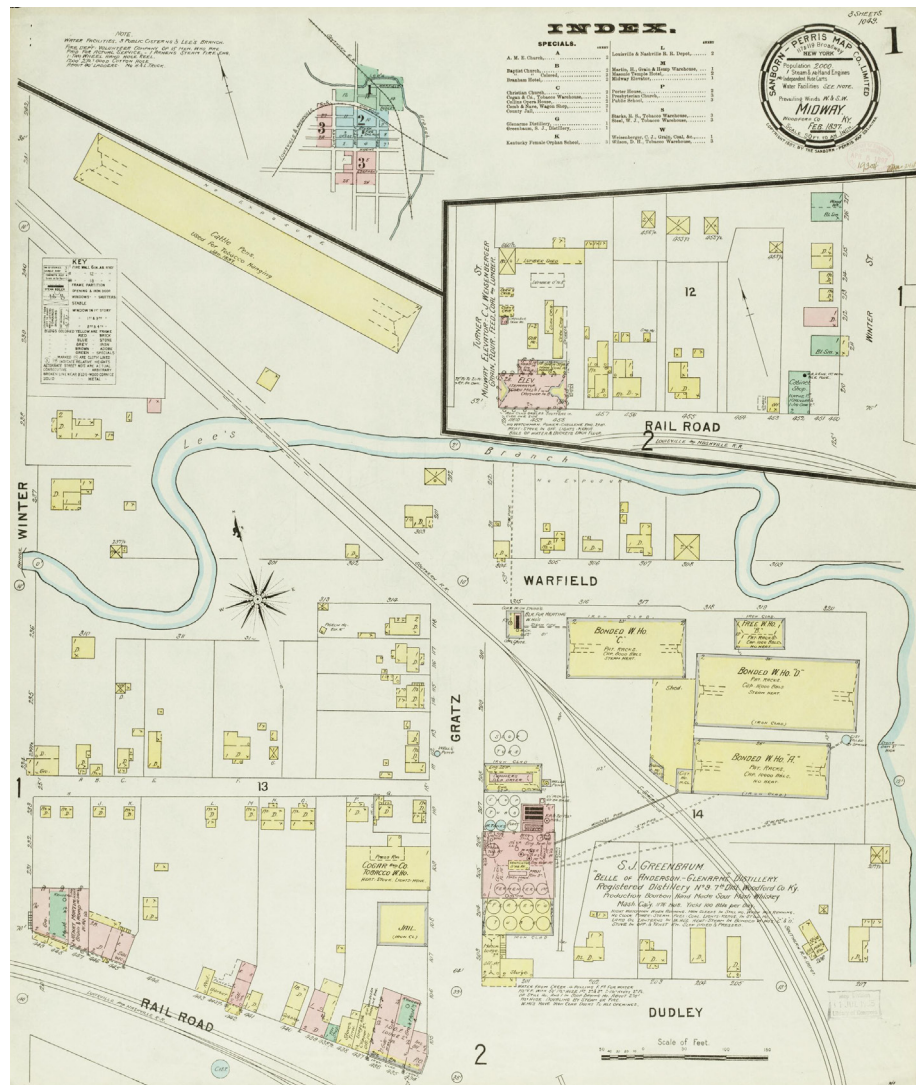


Figure 5. Sanborn insurance map of Midway, Kentucky, showing the original street names
Source: Sanborn Map Company 1897

circulation, and surrounding building/property uses will help identify opportunities or constraints for a public space project proposal (Figure 6).

Through the analysis, working groups and stakeholders have the opportunity to develop proposals regarding the public space features and amenities in addition to connections to and throughout the surrounding context. Participants can engage in meaningful discussions to make decisions that reflect and benefit the extended community space. A thorough analysis can lead to a more effective plan or design for a public space that is more likely to be used regularly and become a destination in its own right for residents and visitors (Figure 7).

Conclusion

Through an informative project preparation and analysis process, communities can develop sustainable public spaces that serve as meaningful public life places. Whether large or small, urban or rural, public space projects should connect the community and be accessible and open to all people. Well thought out and inclusive decision making leads to public space projects that improve the overall health, recreational experience, and quality of life for all community members.

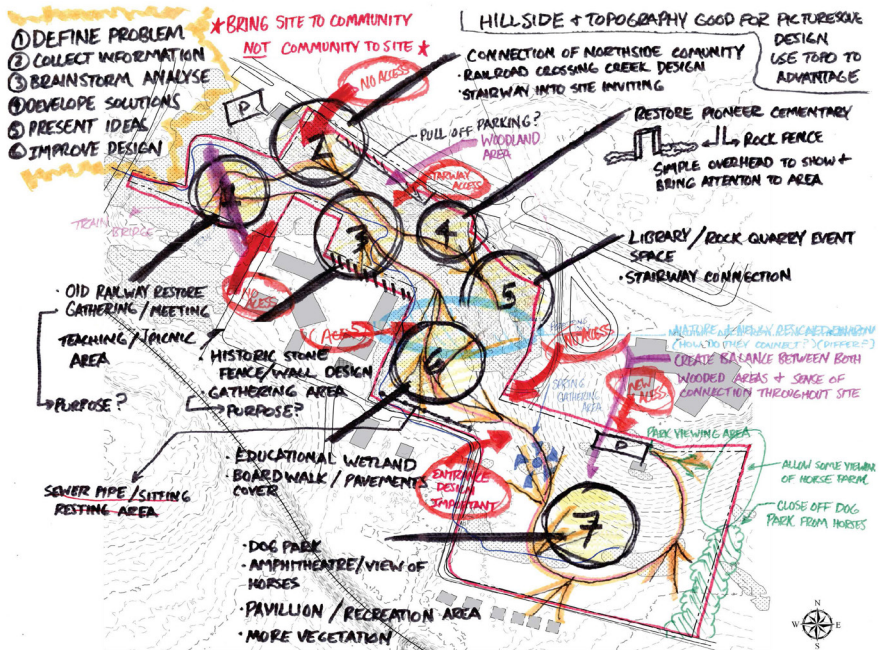


Figure 6. Analysis of Walter Bradley Park and its context in Midway, Kentucky
Illustration by Joseph Elder

References

Carr, S., M. Francis, L.G. Rivlin, and A.M. Stone (1992). *Public Space*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Forsyth, A., and L. Musacchio (2005). *Designing Small Parks: A Manual for Addressing Social and Ecological Concerns*. New York: Wiley.

Francis, M. (2003). *Urban Open Space: Designing for user needs*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, Landscape Architecture Foundation.

Gehl, J. and B. Svarre (2013). *How to Study Public Life*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press.

Sanborn Map Company (1897). Sheet 1 of Midway, Woodford County, Kentucky. http://kdl.kyvl.org/catalog/xt741n7xkw5c_1?

Versailles-Midway-Woodford County Planning Commission (2016). *Midway-Zoning*. <http://planning.woodfordcountyky.com/Maps.htm>.

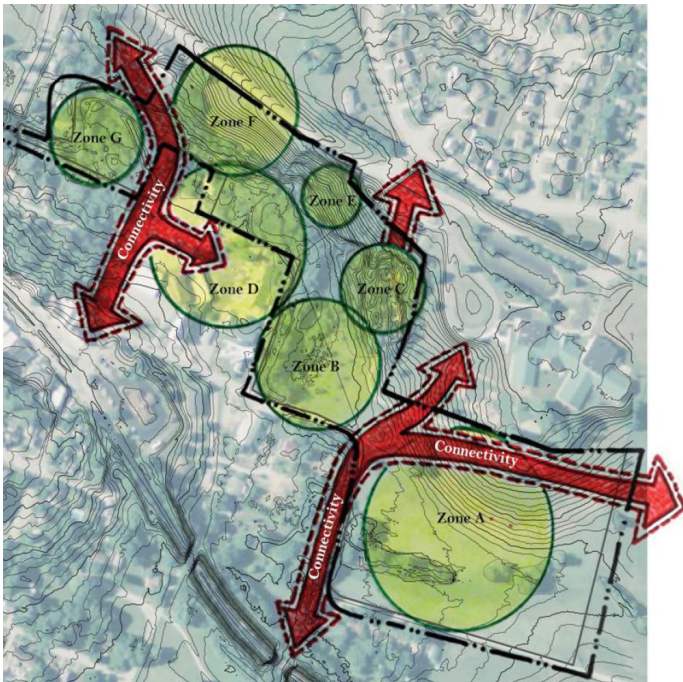


Figure 7. Conceptual plan illustrating areas of opportunity for different uses, connections, and areas of Walter Bradley Park in Midway, Kentucky
Illustration by Joseph Elder



To contact the author or to request technical assistance with wayfinding or community design, visit the CEDIK website: cedik.ca.uky.edu.

Educational programs of Kentucky Cooperative Extension serve all people regardless of economic or social status and will not discriminate on the basis of race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, creed, religion, political belief, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pregnancy, marital status, genetic information, age, veteran status, or physical or mental disability. Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Nancy M. Cox, Director, Land Grant Programs, University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, Food and Environment, Lexington, and Kentucky State University, Frankfort. Copyright © 2017 for materials developed by University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension. This publication may be reproduced in portions or its entirety for educational or nonprofit purposes only. Permitted users shall give credit to the author(s) and include this copyright notice. Publications are also available on the World Wide Web at www.ca.uky.edu.

Issued 10-2017