



Place Keepers

Tending the Green Spaces that Shape a Community

Close your eyes and think back to a time when you had a special place, a place where you could dream or think or explore the world around you. It might be a limb high in a favorite climbing tree. Or a sledding hill where you learned what speed is all about. Was it a fishing spot? Or a rock from which you could see for miles around? Maybe your special place was a farm, where you felt the flow of the year's seasons.

Almost everyone has such special places in their lives. Mine included trees that I sat under and climbed, making spaces for reading and imagination, and a creek where I encountered small creatures and never tired of redirecting the water's flow.

This workbook is designed to help you discover such essential places in your own community, to appreciate them better, and to learn how to help everyone have access to them. As part of the process, you may want to explore at least one local place in depth. Once you understand why you love it so much, my hope is that you will become one of those special people entrusted to keeping its unique features available for years to come.

*"Great public spaces are what memories are made of."
– Kari McGinnis*

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What is green space?

A community needs more than backyards to have a vibrant green infrastructure. It needs many different kinds of places and spaces where people can gather and nature can flourish.

Terms like open space, green space, and public space are sometimes used interchangeably, but they don't mean the same thing. Not all green space is public. Not all public space is green, nor is all open space public.

Public space consists of places where any member of the public is welcome to gather. It can include parks and wilderness areas, but also constructed spaces like town squares, plazas, and stadiums.

Open space is a natural area, often undeveloped or developed just a little bit to provide roads and hiking, bike,

or horse trails for access. It usually is public land, but also can include private land where the owner has pledged not to erect buildings. The key factor is that it is open to the eye.

Green infrastructure includes both natural areas and landscaped areas where nature plays a role. A tree-lined street is green infrastructure, but so are a wilderness park and an undeveloped flood plain or wetland.

This workbook considers both natural and landscaped spaces and both public and private spaces, because they all contribute to the health of the community. We'll just call it **green space** for short. Most such green spaces are publicly owned areas with significant natural elements, but they may also include private land that is protected from development.



“People have always turned to wilderness to become whole again.” – Steven Harper

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Where can you find green space?



- Public parks
 - School grounds
 - Landscaped spaces associated with buildings and other developments
 - Wilderness preserves
 - Cemeteries
 - Landscaped streets and boulevards
 - Farms and ranches
 - Land that is privately owned, but protected from development by conservation easements
 - Waterways, lakes, and wetlands
 - Other areas unsuitable for development, such as steep slopes, erosion hazard areas, and flood plains
 - Can you think of other places to find green space?
-

Looking for Green Space

Where do you find green space? If you think of only parks as green space, you may be missing some of the green spaces all around you!

The list on the left suggests different types of green space that may be present in your community. Use the check boxes to mark those you can find locally.

How many are available within a 10-minute walk from your home? Within a 15-minute drive?





What are the benefits of green space?

Green space can serve many purposes. One way to learn to appreciate green space is to look closely at all the different needs that it meets in the community.

Visit a neighborhood park or other green space at different times of the day and on different days of the week. With the checklist below, record the various activities that you see

there? What time is the park at its busiest? At its quietest? What types of people visit? How about animals?

Think, too, about the way that this space interacts with other green spaces nearby, with the community as a whole, and with the entire region and record those roles, too, on the checklist.

“No one among us wants to be a member of the last generation to pass on to its children the joy of playing outside in nature.” – Richard Louv

No One Left Inside

When people have access to parks, they get more exercise. Contact with the natural world provides many people with a greater feeling of well-being as well.

Spurred by Richard Louv’s book *Last Child in the Woods*, movements to get children back into nature have been starting up all over the country. Some use the phrase “No Child Left Inside,” to emphasize the need for balance with the “No Child Left Behind” Act.

Green space roles & purposes

- Recreation and fitness
- Community gathering places
- Inspiration, beauty, and engagement with nature
- Wildlife habitat and migration corridors
- Sense of community pride and responsibility
- Learning experiences
- Historic preservation and commemoration
- Quality-of-life factor in attracting businesses, employees, and tourists
- Increased property values
- Community gardens
- Better air and water quality and reduced stormwater runoff
- Buffer zone for extreme weather events, such as floods and coastal erosion
- Preservation of unique geological formations and scenic vistas



Good People to Know, Good Questions to Ask

Visit the Web site for your local parks department to get maps and statistics about how green space is distributed in your community. Some questions to ask:

How much total land area is devoted to park land or open space?

Are green spaces distributed evenly so that all cultural, age, and socio-economic groups have access?

Is there a community standard for having a park within walking distance of every resident?

You can use page 11 to take notes on what you learn.

Who is welcome in your local green spaces?

Is green space easily accessible to everyone in the community. Ideally, a child riding a bicycle or a parent pushing a stroller should be no more than 5–10 minutes from a park.

Well placed signs, connections to the local streetscape, and attractive entrances can help people feel invited to enjoy public green spaces. Too many rules can turn people away. Respect for others and respect for the space's facilities and natural features should be the basic rules.

Green spaces also should allow for differences. Where some segments of the community enjoy soccer and others baseball, are there enough playing fields for both? If substantial space is available for hiking and biking, are ATV enthusiasts also accommodated?

Consider physical challenges, too. People who have difficulty walking can still enjoy the outdoors if walkways are provided that aren't too steep.

“Going out together to discover new places is the surest way to be reminded that we do not see the land with the same eyes, nor smell it with the same nose.” – Gary Paul Nabhan



What connects people to local green spaces?

Each area of green space has a story to tell. What people and animals, what natural and technological forces helped it evolve into its current state? What purposes does it serve for the community?

Nature doesn't grow in grids. Think about the topography of the green space that you observed using the checklists on pages 3-4. How does that space reflect the natural lay of the land? Look at the way that space is connected with its surrounding spaces. For example, culverts and canals might suggest that a stream once flowed through the space—or that it might still be there, hidden under the land.

“The stronger our sense of place, the more we care about it and for it.” – Timothy Beatley & Kristy Manning

Linking Green Spaces

Where multiple parcels of green space are linked, they can be more valuable for recreation and wildlife habitat. Cities may invest in greenbelts to provide a natural ring around denser urban areas. Joining parks with walking and bicycle trails can open them to more users. Corridors between wildlife preserves can be important to animals' migration, mating, and food needs. What connections can you find among the green spaces near you?

Who were the first people to use that particular space? What about animals—did they make any of the original trails? Your local planning office or historical society may have maps or photographs showing how that space looked in years past, enabling you to trace how attitudes toward that green space may have changed over the years. Battlefield parks and other historic sites are examples of green spaces specifically linked to past events. Does your community have any such sites? What other green spaces might shed light on days gone by?

When strangers meet in a public green space, community happens. Where a lot of strangers gather, it's a festival! Sports events, farmers markets, concerts, outdoor film showings, and art exhibitions are examples of community events that need public spaces. When these take place in green spaces rather than parking lots, participants can enjoy a feeling of belonging to the land where they live.





Does one size fit all?

Shape and size turn generic green space into a place for different uses and moods. Every community needs public spaces large enough for festivals. It also needs green spaces intimate enough for contemplation or for a child to turn over a rock and marvel at the variety of life beneath it. A large park can harbor “rooms” of many shapes and sizes. Smaller green spaces may have fewer activity areas, but still need attention to scale and form.

The mood of a green space depends a lot on the quality of light, which in turn depends on the shape of the space, its size, and the rocks, plant, and structures it contains. Depending on the local climate, either sun or shade may be the key to an inviting path. In many urban areas, rows of shade trees and other elements of nature, together with adequate sidewalks, are the keys to creating a pedestrian environment that people will really use.

“I want people to think about how feeling and form come together to create a wonderful space.” – Julie Moir Messervy

Green Space “Floor Plans”

Page 10 provides a grid where you can sketch the green space that you evaluated with the check lists on pages 3–4. Can you identify its outdoor “rooms”? Pay special attention to its boundaries, inside and outside, both natural and constructed. What do they tell you about the shape of the “rooms” and how they can be entered? What views are available from each “room”? Do lines of sight provide a sense of security for people visiting each area?



How do we get and keep green spaces?

Green spaces can come from many sources. Almost all government entities can buy land or obtain easements, as can private land trusts, but funds are limited. Conservation easements are a voluntary way to preserve private ownership but limit the way the land can be used. Some communities require dedicated green space as part of new housing and com-

mercial developments. Bequests and donations are always welcome, too, of course.

Some green space land has never had structures built upon it. However, just because land has been developed doesn't mean that it can't turn into green space. Large parcels may become available through reclamation of industrial land, military bases, and landfills.

“In recent years, 80% of land conservation in Virginia has been done through conservation easements.” – Sarah Richardson

Tending Your Green Space

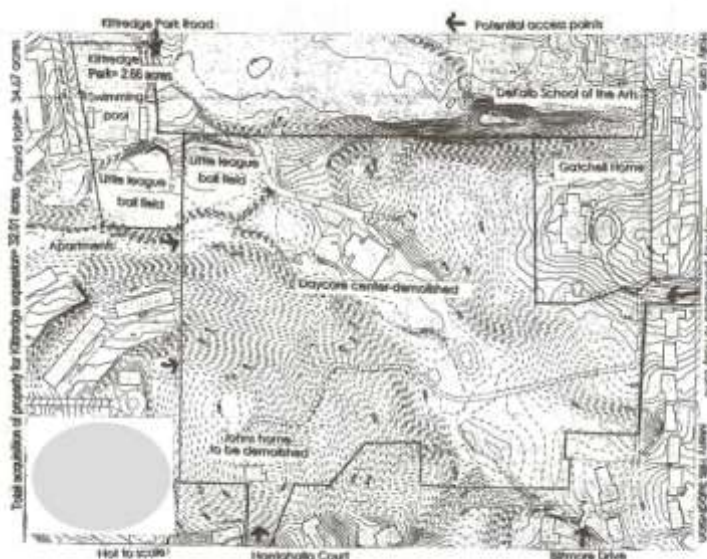
If you've been making notes about that special green space near you, it's time to consider what care it needs. Is there grass to be mowed? Are there trees and shrubs to trim? Who maintains the playground or recreational facilities? Who cleans the restrooms? Do trails get repaired in a timely manner? Are invasive plant species removed? Maybe there is a local “friends of the park” organization that you can join to get training and help out.

What does it take to maintain green spaces?

Green space isn't free space. Even wilderness areas have costs, such as maintaining access roads and fighting fires. Landscaped spaces need more maintenance than natural places and also likely have costs for equipment replacement and storm damage repair.

Another cost that you might not immediately associate with green spaces is people. The presence of uniformed park rangers and volunteers can contribute to an atmosphere of safety. Police on Segways, bicycles, or horses in large parks draw attention and friendly interest. Naturalists, archeologists, landscape designers, planners, and other specialists enrich the value of green space to the community.

Some localities have found that new parks pay for part of their ongoing costs, because they generate new revenue as property values go up near the park, bringing in extra property tax dollars. Remember, though, that not all green space has scenic beauty or recreational value. Some green infrastructure makes its major contribution as wildlife habitat or through cleaner water and air, creating an overall more livable environment. Therefore, green space costs should be evaluated as a necessary and beneficial part of the local infrastructure, just like roads and sewers.



What is your community doing about green space?

Each community should have a **greenprint** or a master plan for open space and park land, integrated with other community plans. Periodic reviews and updates provide opportunities for citizen input. To help create the greenprint, planners may use **geographic information systems** (GIS) mapping. With GIS software, planners can build detailed maps of open space and compare it with property values, crime rates, and other benchmarks.

Neighborhood association meetings and community-wide “visioning” events provide opportunities to talk about the value and availability of green space. When a significant tract of land becomes available for public use, the community must decide among the competing possibilities. This is potentially the most difficult part of building a green infrastructure—balancing the needs and desires of different segments of the community. Dozens of citizen input meetings may take place before plans for acquisition and development can be finalized.

With regard to existing green space, ongoing outreach can help spread the word about what green space contributes to the community. When people share their delight in the local green space, the enthusiasm is contagious. Well placed notices for clean-up days and festivals can help people discover the spaces next door, as well as those across town. If your community doesn’t have an annual parks and streams clean-up day, maybe it’s time to start one!

Your First Charette

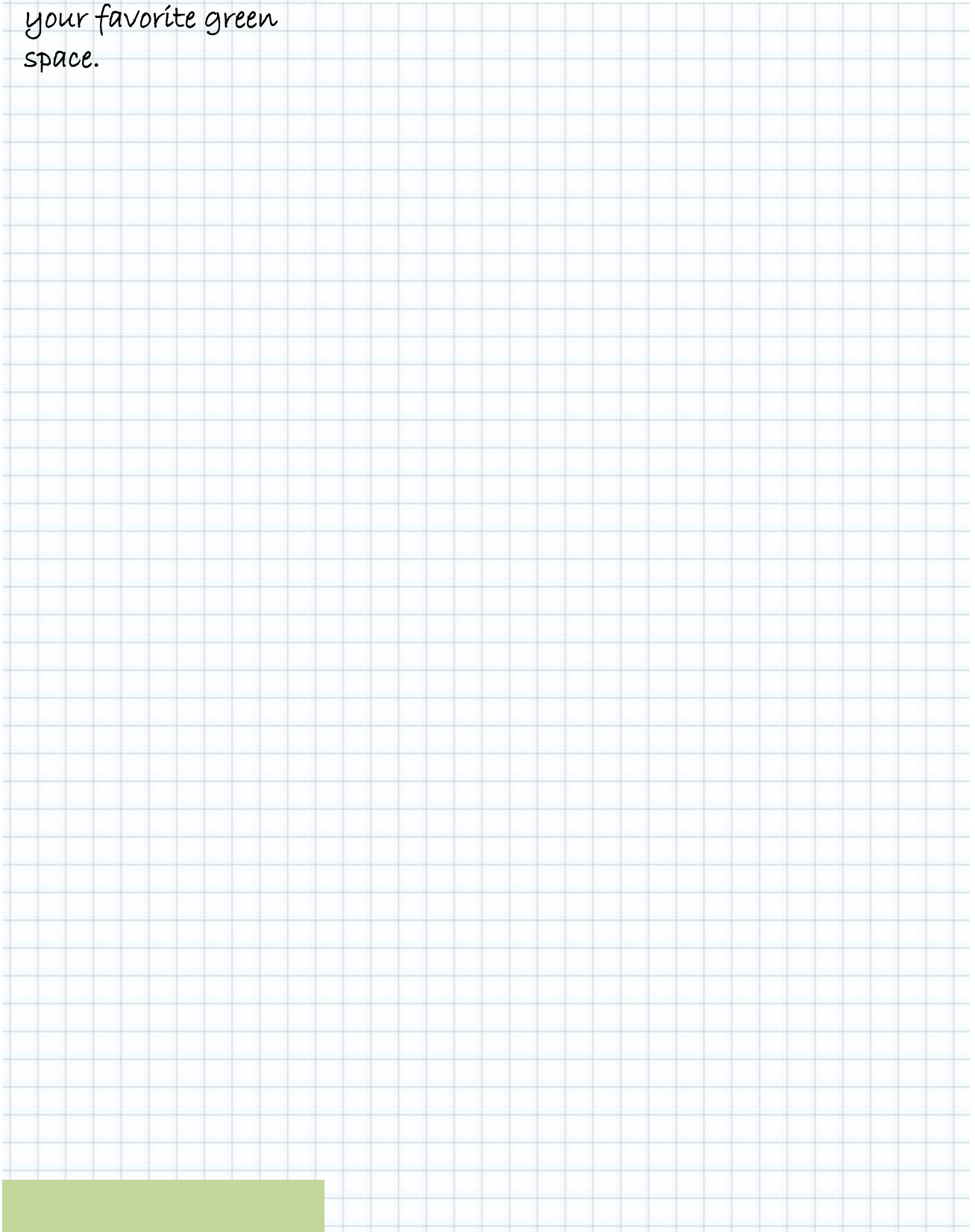
A **charette** is a design workshop that involves local residents in gathering information, setting priorities, and brainstorming solutions. Often, it is an opportunity to interact directly with planners and decision-makers and shape the future of existing or potential green space.

Attending a charette can be exciting but also exhausting. It requires patience to let each participant have a fair say, so that all viewpoints can have an opportunity to be heard. A voting process usually will help clarify which viewpoints are most crucial to the community.

Come prepared to share what you know about the land being discussed and the community that relates to it, what you hope for its future, and what concrete solutions you think might work. Bring any sketches, maps, photos, or stories you’d like to offer.

Use this grid to
draw a sketch of
your favorite green
space.

Green Space Map Grid



Green Space Notes

Lined writing area with a vertical margin line on the left and a horizontal margin line at the bottom.



“Each generation should meet its needs without jeopardizing the prospects for future generations to meet their own needs.” – Alan Thein Durning

A daily dose of nature

By exploring a favorite local green space using the aids and questions in this workbook, you should have learned what you love about that space. That’s a good first step toward having a constant awareness of the natural world around you, even if you live in an urban area. Nature isn’t something boxed up in a wilderness area or parkland. It’s everywhere you look—on city streets and on farms, in parks and by streams. I hope you’ve also learned that green space takes effort to acquire and maintain. Everyone can participate in the planning and caring actions that make a difference.

Where can you learn more about green space?

These resources on the Internet can help you learn how to evaluate green space efforts in your local community and become a better “place keeper”:

Project for Public Spaces

<http://www.pps.org>

Articles, tools, and other resources for making public space the centerpiece of a vibrant community

The Trust for Public Land

<http://www.tpl.org>

Articles, reports, regional programs, and other resources, including research papers on the economic and health benefits of land conservation

Lincoln Institute of Land Policy

<http://www.lincolninst.edu>

Articles, online courses, and other resources on land use, with a concentration on the fiscal impact of planning; particularly good information on visualizing the impact of green space on density perceptions in development projects

Yes! Magazine

<http://www.yesmagazine.org>

Articles on grassroots efforts to build sustainable communities

Local Open Space Planning Guide

New York State Department of Environmental Conservation and Department of State

<http://www.dos.state.ny.us/lgss/pdfs/openspaces.pdf>

Guide to the benefits of setting aside green space, what types of land resources should be preserved, and the policy tools available to help make that happen. While specific to New York, most other states have similar policies.