

Land Lab Submission

STL Alley Lovers

December, 2012

We love this city. Some of us are natives, others are transplants. Each of us is engaged in the community, through design - as architects and educators; through production - as upcyclers of discarded treasures and fabricators of art installations; and recreationally - as backyard gardeners, art conservationists, entrepreneurs, and foodies. We have each, in our own way, staked out territory which allows us to use creative production to start a dialog with our neighbors. These overlapping interests are what brought us all together in the first place to work on projects in St. Louis over the past several months.

We are problem solvers, and St. Louis has a reputation of having its fair share of problems. But we think that the city holds enormous opportunity to unite and empower people through open space, infrastructure, and community based projects. A successful project would transform a previously underutilized system or space into an asset for the community by heightening local cohesion, giving space for new modes of transportation, making apparent our water and power infrastructure, and revealing the layers of policy which form our built environment.

A project that we think would be relevant in Old North St. Louis is a block specific infill of public space and amenities, latched onto the alley to create cohesion within a city block where there is little. In particular, we are interested in Site 4, located on a block divided by an alley. We believe that by embedding public space or public amenities along the alley, rear-adjacent neighbors, potentially the whole block, and ultimately neighborhood can share and absorb new communal assets. Expanding program and density across an alley is much easier than bridging across a street, because an alley as a local private lane between neighbors, rather than being primarily a site for infrastructure.

The public amenities can take many forms: a wifi hotspot, a temporary market that seasonally offers healthy food options to those with little access, an extended outdoor plaza (with shade structure) for church and community services, etc. The built form of this

intervention will be an armature capable of accommodating a changing scale and scope of neighborhood amenities on an as-needed basis (as defined by the local constituents) rather than a singular prescribed program. Having several uses layered into a single flexible intervention reduces the void of activity in the block by creating active scenarios at multiple times of the day and year.

In order to be successful in Old North, and to be applicable to other vacant lots, the amenity must at first be loosely defined and outfitted with certain universal characteristics. The spatial characteristics of the armature must be defined and clear. That it houses a variety of public functions should be obvious by the design. It should provide a microclimate year-round via passive systems. The amenity should be able to change and grow over time, as the community's dynamic and needs change. These qualities, in addition to being essential to Old North, are also ultimately sustainable ideas. The primary idea is that the amenity provides the most while requiring the least amount of material and producing the least amount of waste, even when it is converted and changed. Ideally, the amenity is generative, that is to say, capable of sustaining itself, both in terms of energy production and community involvement.

It is this notion of flexibility and growth that again makes the proximity to the alley so essential. The ability to occupy a relatively unused service corridor provides enormous potential to bridge gaps that exist within neighborhoods more easily than bridging gaps over major roads. It also opens up a dialog about how the public takes ownership and claims territory in existing and future city infrastructure.

This concept is scalable and replicable because St. Louis is a city of alleys - a consistent feature that identifies every neighborhood in the city. If we could develop a system to bridge this gap and find ways to increase the number of potential lots that citizens see as neighbors, we have the potential to create stronger bonds throughout the city.