

Abstract

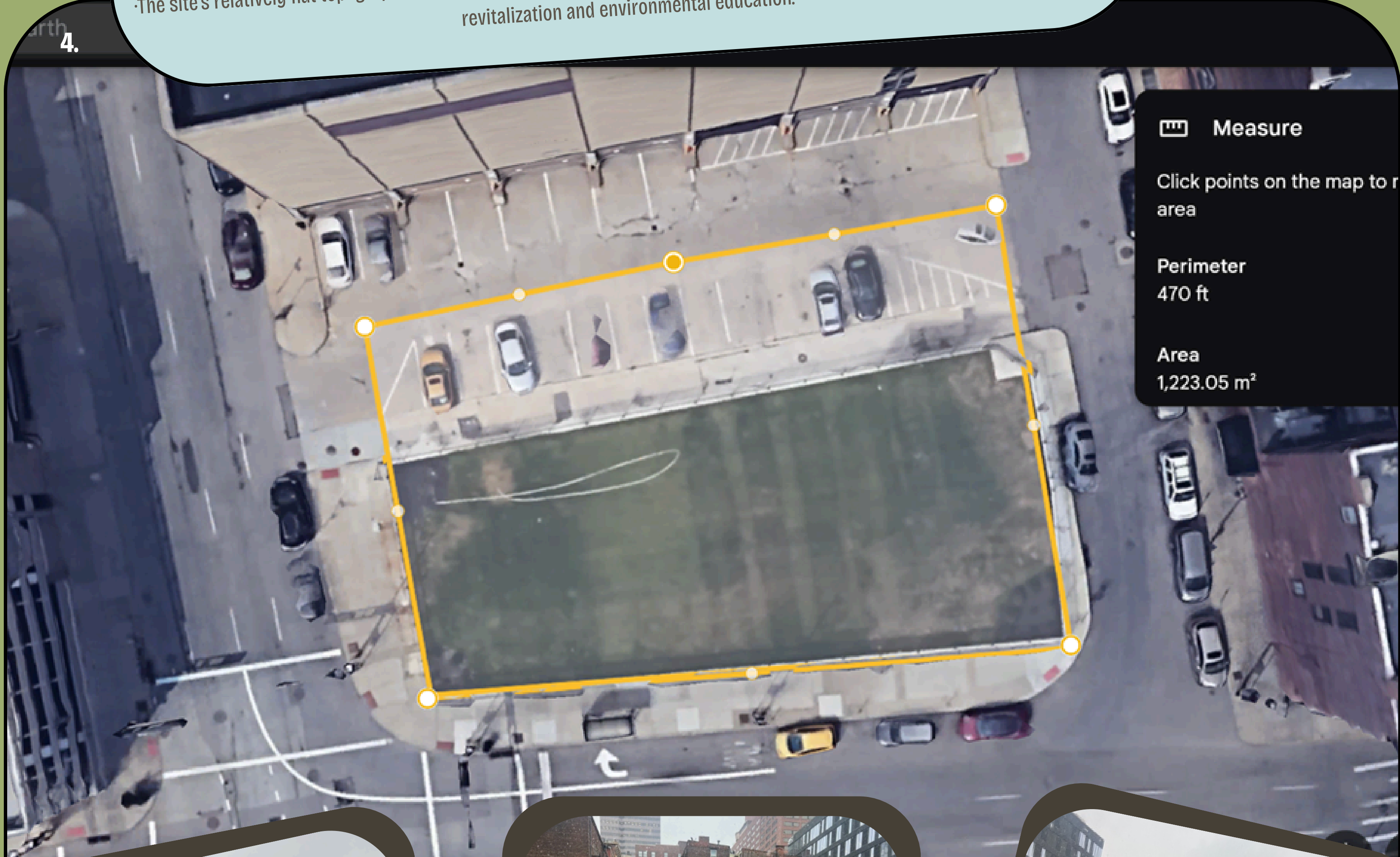
Access to fresh, nutritious food and green spaces is essential for both physical and emotional well-being, yet many urban areas, including downtown Cincinnati, remain food deserts with limited access to these resources. Food deserts “describe neighborhoods and communities that have limited access to affordable and nutritious food,” as defined by the National Library of Medicine (National Research Council). This capstone explores how incorporating living art and food-producing plants into urban spaces can improve Cincinnati residents’ nutritional and emotional health. Through the design of a community garden in downtown Cincinnati and the creation of a living art installation, this project examines the intersection of horticulture, public health, and artistic expression.

Green spaces provide numerous benefits, including reducing stress, improving air quality, fostering social connections, and encouraging physical activity (Barton and Rogerson). They have been linked to enhanced mental health and overall well-being, making them vital in urban planning. The design of a community garden in downtown Cincinnati, incorporating living art, provides residents with access to fresh produce while creating a visually engaging and restorative environment. By blending art and horticulture, the space serves as both a functional and cultural hub, promoting food security, environmental awareness, and community engagement.



Site Overview/Existing Site Conditions: 6th and Elm Street, Central Business District, Cincinnati, OH

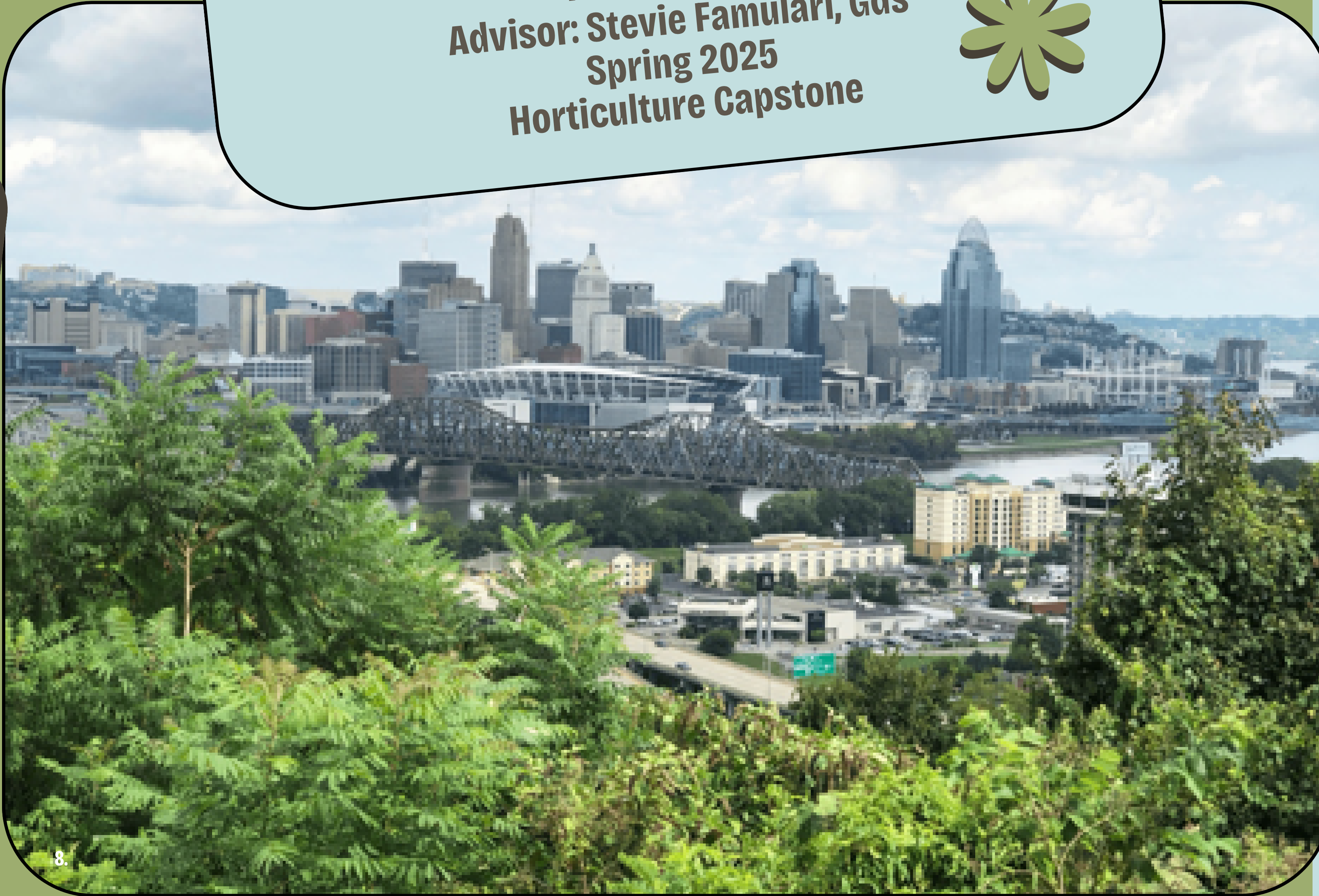
- Located behind 500 Elm Street at the corner of W. 6th and Rusconi Place, the site is highly accessible via public transit (bus lines 21 & 64), street parking, and a nearby parking garage.
- The area is surrounded by restaurants, residential buildings, shops, and cultural landmarks like Fountain Square and the Contemporary Arts Center, making the site ideal for public engagement.
- Classified as a food desert by the USDA due to its distance from supermarkets and the high number of households without vehicles (USDA Food Access Research Atlas).
- Once a parking lot, the site became a small green space with turf grass and shrubs in 2022. It's publicly owned, relatively flat, and contains compacted urban soil that may need remediation.
- The site receives full sun most of the day, is in Plant Hardiness Zone 6b, and has access to water via an on-site pump. It is partially shaded and shielded by a 17-story apartment building during the early evening hours.
- Soil and air may contain urban pollutants like heavy metals and emissions from nearby traffic and construction.
- Current vegetation is minimal, however, introducing diverse plants could improve biodiversity and attract pollinators and wildlife.
- Challenges include soil health, noise pollution, and lack of inviting features, but the space has strong potential for a community garden that supports sustainability, food access, and public well-being.
- The site's relatively flat topography and the central location make it accessible to people using mobility aids and ideal for urban revitalization and environmental education.



Sustaining Health: The Role of Green Spaces in Improving Nutrition and Mental Wellness in Cincinnati

How Can Incorporating Living Art and Food Plants Improve Cincinnati Residents' Nutritional and Emotional Health?

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Horticulture Capstone



User/Client Description

This community garden and living art piece primarily serves residents of downtown Cincinnati, especially those experiencing food insecurity, as the area is classified as a food desert (USDA Food Access Research Atlas). It is also designed to support urban gardeners, artists, educators, and community groups by providing space for growing food, learning, and creative expression.

Primary User Groups

1. Local Residents

- Needs: Access to fresh produce, gardening education, and a relaxing social space.
- Stats: The site is in a highly walkable area (Walk Score 98) with over 900 residents living within 0.25 miles of the site (Cubit).

-Usage: Daily, with the most usage in the evenings and weekends.

2. Urban Gardeners & Volunteers

- Needs: Raised beds, composting station, water access, and tool storage.
- Stats: 2 full-time, and 2 part-time gardeners, plus 5-10 regular volunteers.
- Usage: Gardeners will have shifts and a flexible schedule depending on weather, events, and specific gardening needs.

3. Artists & Educators

- Needs: Space for workshops, art installations, and educational events.
- Stats: Space supports up to 50 active gardens (for events) and up to 200 attendees.
- Usage: Scheduled programs and special events.

4. Community Organizations & Schools

- Needs: Spaces for school visits, teaching beds, and outreach events.
- Stats: Programs may serve 100-200 students/attendees per visit.
- Usage: School hours (for field trips), weekends, and summer.

5. Accessibility

- ADA-compliant pathways, raised beds, and inclusive seating ensure access for users with mobility issues.
- The garden promotes mental wellness by offering a quiet reflective space in the urban core.

6. Social, Cultural & Economic Considerations

- Inclusive to all socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.
- Signage has QR codes that link users to different language options online.
- Food is distributed to residents or used in healthy eating programs.

This collaborative project involves local government, nonprofits, and residents, aiming to foster a sense of community ownership and long-term sustainability.

Case Study & Literature Review



Viridian Landscape Studio in Collaboration with The Pennsylvania Horticultural Society: The Farm for the City (2018)

One in five Philadelphians faces food insecurity, prompting Viridian Landscape Studio and the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) to create The Farm for the City in 2018. This 2,000-square-foot temporary community garden built in Thomas Paine Plaza across from City Hall, aimed to demonstrate how urban horticulture can strengthen communities and improve access to healthy food (Viridian Landscape Studio). In a single growing season, the garden produced 1,200 pounds of food, feeding 8,600 people. Designed as a model of sustainability, the garden used locally sourced, repurposed materials, like plastic barrels, produce boxes, and metal troughs, and ensured that all components were redistributed to local gardens afterward (Viridian Landscape Studio). Special care was taken to meet structural and environmental needs. Because the plaza sits atop city offices, the team used a lightweight soil blend to prevent damage while enhancing drainage (Viridian Landscape Studio). To reduce noise pollution, an often-overlooked environmental concern linked to stress and sleep disturbances, construction took place off-site, and noise-reducing plants were used to buffer city sounds (Berg and Nathanson; Viridian Landscape Studio). Artists created vibrant flags to visually engage visitors, while trees and greenery offered both aesthetic and psychological benefits. Educational and community-focused programming was central to the garden's mission. Over four months, it hosted daily talks, gardening workshops, performances, and two large community dinners, bringing together 150 people from diverse backgrounds to discuss food justice (Viridian Landscape Studio; The Pew Center for Arts and Heritage). Outside organizations also used the site for education (Hall). The project, described as a “temporary farm-as-art project” transformed a concrete plaza into a vibrant gathering space, proving how quickly a site can become a community asset (Viridian Landscape Studio). The garden's layout was inspired by a nautilus shell, a symbol of growth and order amidst chaos, with the design spiraling around existing chess sculptures (Beaton). A central amphitheater hosted community events and creatively featured oversized checker pieces. Heritage crops, plants passed down through generations, often sourced from. Immigrant seed banks were chosen to reflect cultural diversity and enrich the garden's means. Over 50 crops, including kale, rosemary, and squash, were planted, reinforcing the garden's mission of education and sustainability.



Sophie Parker is an artist who lives in Brooklyn, New York. Sophie is originally from the Ozark Mountains, and “draws from her roots in the land as a point of contrast in the urban experience,” (Sophie Parker). Parker's art blends plants, ecology, and design, using a variety of natural materials, like flowers, moss, and foliage, to create immersive installations. Her work explores the relationship between humans and nature, often incorporating seasonal and foraged plants to highlight cycles of growth and decay. Sophie Parker's work transforms urban environments into living, breathing works of art.



Project Goals

This project transforms an underutilized urban lot into a vibrant community garden and living art space that addresses food insecurity, promotes wellness, and fosters community connections.

- **Fresh Food Access:** The space grows heritage crops and staple produce to serve residents living in a designated food desert.
- **Education:** The garden offers workshops on sustainable gardening, cooking, and self-sufficiency to empower residents with essential skills.
- **Community Engagement:** The garden hosts events like harvest festivals, art workshops, and cooking demos to unite and celebrate the community.
 - **Mental & Physical Health:** Provides a peaceful, restorative green space proven to support well-being.
- **Art & Symbolism:** Features a large watering can installation with plants growing from it, symbolizing growth, movement, and nature's nurturing power.
- **Sustainability & Accessibility:** Designed with ADA-compliant pathways and seating, with seasonal staff and volunteers maintaining the space. Together, these elements create a dynamic, inclusive space for resilience, creativity, and nourishment in downtown Cincinnati.

Image 5: Tanner, Avery. Bus Stop. 11 Feb. 2025. West 6th Street, Cincinnati, OH.

Image 6:Tanner, Avery. Full site images. 11 Feb. 2025. West 6th Street, Cincinnati, OH.

Image 7: Tanner, Avery, Full site images. 11 Feb. 2025. West 6th Street, Cincinnati, OH.

Image 8: Lost With Lydia. Skyline of Cincinnati. Top 10 Things to Do in Cincinnati, Lost With Lydia, <https://www.lostwithlydia.com/destinations/usa/oh/top-10-things-to-do-in-cincinnati/>. Accessed 27 Feb. 2025.

Image 9: Viridian Landscape Studio. Perspective image of the farm. American Society of Landscape Architects. 2021. <https://www.asla.org/2021awards/2693.html>. Accessed 3 Feb. 2025.

Image 10: Viridian Landscape Studio. The Farm for the City. Viridian Landscape Studio. <https://www.viridianla.com/farm-for-the-city>. Accessed 3 Feb. 2025

Image 11: Parker, Sophie. Speaking in Tongues. 2017. <https://www.sophieparker.net/2017/7/5/b7x04xb6hwd7a52hazcu4ky47muctb>

Image 12:Sophie, Parker. Mating Dance. 2017. <https://www.sophieparker.net/2017/7/5/b7x04xb6hwd7a52hazcu4ky47muctb>

Image 13 :Parker, Sophie. A Serpent in the garden. 2017. <https://www.sophieparker.net/2017/7/5/b7x04xb6hwd7a52hazcu4ky47muctb>



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Image 1: "Parents Hands and His Child Helping Gardening on Arbor Day in Springtime." iStock. <https://www.iStockphoto.com/photo/parents-hands-and-his-child-helping-gardening-on-arbor-day-in-springtime-gml148820807-310370493>. Accessed 2 Mar. 2025.

Image 2:Nourishing Neighbors. www.nourishingneighbors.com/articles/32-community-gardens-find. Accessed 2 Mar. 2025.

Image 3: "Image from Top 6 Kids' Farm Fascinating Features." Oxbow Farm & Conservation Center. www.oxbow.org/blog/top-6-kids-farm-fascinating-features/. Accessed 3 Mar. 2025.

Image 4: Satellite Image of 6th & Elm Street. Google Earth. Edited by Avery Tanner. Google. Accessed 10 Mar. 2025. earth.google.com

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