

# Rebuild, redesign and restore

Neighborhood Design Center offers hope and beautification

Each fall, residents of McElderry Park and parishioners of the Amazing Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church join hands to celebrate The Amazing Port Street Sacred Commons – a meditative garden and labyrinth on what was a vacant lot behind the church. Made from recycled bricks and telephone poles and planted and decorated by children in the neighborhood, this new community space offers a quiet oasis in the middle of East Baltimore.

The creation of the garden began in 2000, when community leaders in McElderry Park asked the Neighborhood Design Center (NDC) to help them prepare plans and drawings that would illustrate their vision of what the vacant lot behind the church could be. NDC brought together volunteer architects, landscape architects and artists to work with residents and youth to create a plan for the area that convinced the Housing Department to demolish a row of substandard housing, helped neighbors raise funds from local foundations to create the garden and built the confidence of community leaders to tackle other neighborhood issues.

This story is just one of many that the NDC has helped to realize. Since our founding in 1968, NDC has assisted over 1,800 neighborhood revitalization projects in Maryland. We have helped to save historic structures, replace unsafe playgrounds, replace commercial districts, create neighborhood revitalization plans and reclaim vacant buildings and lots. These projects have engaged thousands of people in grassroots efforts, helped community leaders become educated participants in community development and attracted millions of dollars of new investment in low-income and underserved communities.

Unfortunately, there are neighborhoods like McElderry Park throughout the Baltimore area that are grappling with decreasing housing value and business investment, vacant and blighted properties, a lack of recreational space, poorly maintained schools and

drug trafficking in public spaces. And while residents and community development corporations are trying to improve these conditions, most grassroots organizations do not have the resources or expertise to get such community development projects off the ground.

This is where the NDC fulfills a critical need. To help people improve their neighborhoods, the NDC provides pro-bono project design and planning assistance – offering a range of services that are currently not available to community groups and non-profits in the Baltimore area, including schematic building and site plans, preliminary feasibility studies and cost estimates, neighborhood master plans and community development guidance. Our mission is to improve the livability and viability of low and moderate-income communities, and we believe that by engaging people in the design and planning of neighborhood places, we are also:

- Strengthen citizen involvement in neighborhood improvement initiatives;
- Educate the public about the essential value of good design, planning and preservation practices as community revitalization tools; and
- Serve as a catalyst for increased investment for neighborhood development.

Improving the physical fabric of a neighborhood improves the quality of life for people who live there. Plans for the renovation and reuse of abandoned or blighted properties increase their investment value and that of the surrounding areas. Improved parks

and playgrounds create much needed recreation opportunities for children in under-served areas. Revitalized commercial districts attract businesses and create jobs, while affordable housing meets the needs of working families and new immigrant populations.

As public dollars become tighter, community-based organizations are being asked to partner in revitalization efforts. It is increasingly necessary for these groups to have maps, drawings, cost estimates and implementation plans in place to receive both funding and political support. The assistance provided by NDC equips average people with the tools to build community and political support, secure funding from public and private sources and create action steps for moving their projects forward.

In the past four years alone, the NDC has worked on over 130 community revitalization projects in the Baltimore area. To accomplish this, we recruited nearly 270 volunteer architects, planners, landscape architects, graphic artists and other design professionals who donated 9,300 hours, totaling over \$300,000 in professional services. As a result of the plans, drawings and technical assistance provided by NDC, groups were able to leverage \$2.5 million in grants and public funding toward realizing their projects. This means that for every dollar NDC receives in funding we are able to raise an additional \$2 that goes directly to the communities we assist. We have improved the future of communities throughout the area by:



PHOTO COURTESY OF NDC

A labyrinth park with totem poles made possible by NDC.

- Preparing plans for 10 vacant rowhouses in the Washington Village/Pigtown neighborhood that were renovated by Chesapeake Habitat for Humanity.

- Working with students and teachers at a dozen public schools to create outdoor classrooms, playgrounds, and habitat gardens.

- Developing community design guidelines and architectural renderings for exterior home and yard improvement projects that have improved the housing value and marketability of neighborhoods participating in the Healthy Neighborhoods Initiative.

- Helping residents create new community open spaces, including a Peace Park in Irvington, Bruce Street Park in Sandtown-Winchester, Calvert Street Park in the Old Goucher neighborhood and the Mt. Washington Outdoor Classroom.

- Creating community art projects in five Baltimore neighborhoods – Wallbrook, Midtown Edmondson, Harlem Park, Coldstream-Homestead-Montebello and Patterson Park –

that have reclaimed vacant lots and renovated neglected parks.

Assisting several non-profit organizations develop plans for building renovation and expansion, including the Center for Cultural Education, the McElderry Park Community Association and Metro Delta Headquarters.

For 39 years, the NDC has been helping to make community dreams a reality. We believe that design and planning can be powerful tools for positive community change – improving the health and safety of neighborhoods, promoting interest in how places look and function, giving people a voice in how to best preserve and celebrate the character of their communities, building a sense of stewardship by engaging people in design and planning activities and increasing investment in some of the city's most under-served communities. In the words of Margaret Mead, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world." •