

NYCHA'S DELICIOUS FOREST

Ecological Community Gardens
and Deliciousness

To Address the Needs of
Public Housing and
Recreational Areas

in Brownsville

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STRATEGY** 7

prepared by Alan Waxman



Brownsville
neighborhood

1. SOCIAL CONTEXT

The landscape of public housing, unlocked by deliciousness, must ecologically meet the needs of its residents.

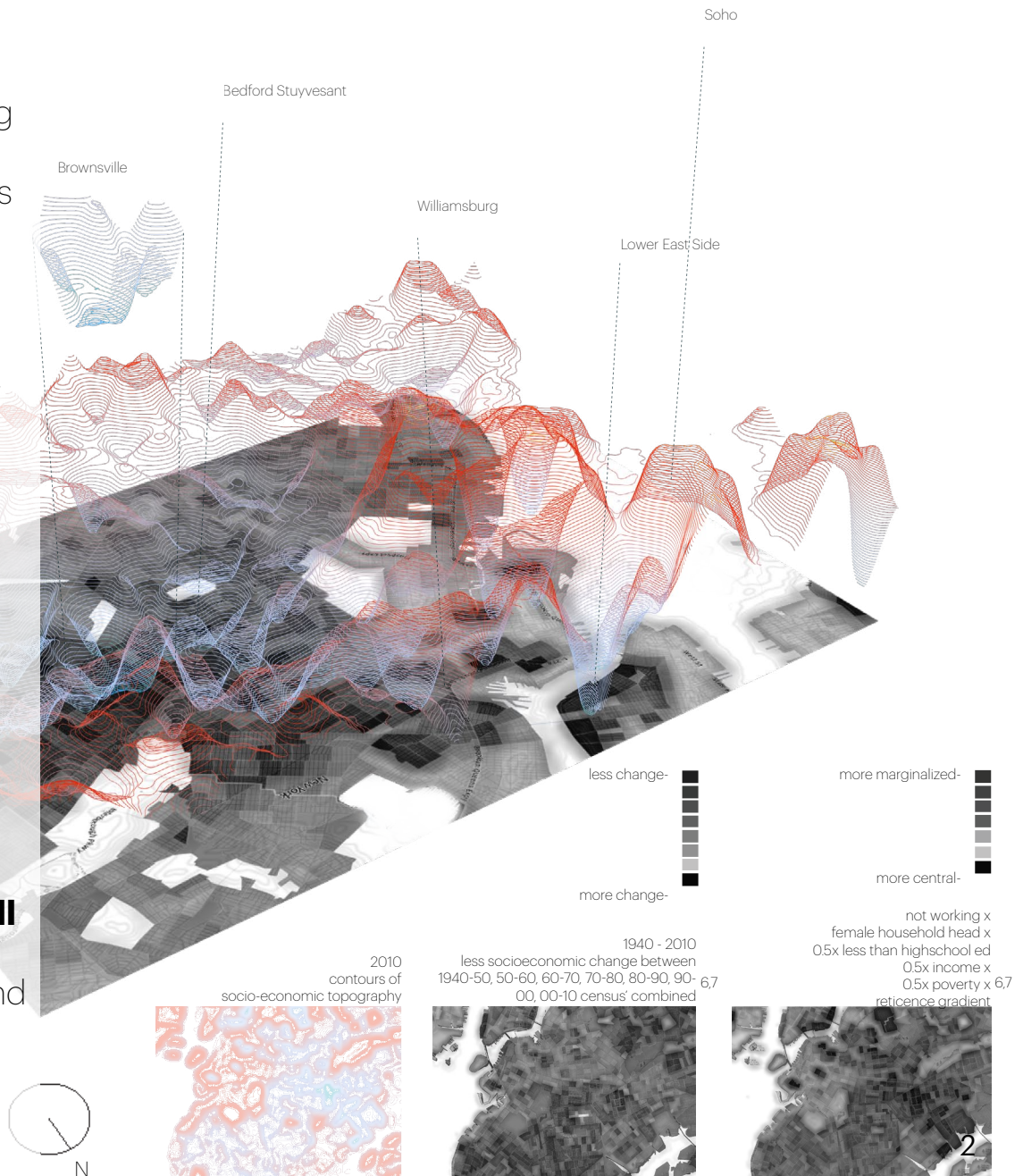
In the urban US, where parks have largely become aestheticized expressions of wealth, public housing represents a unique ground of human nature. Rather than a problem to be ignored, these spaces are living testament to society's social commons.

Public housing was originally built to remediate conditions of disease and violence. It exists in a clearly defined area to be owned and managed by the public, for the public welfare. Charles Abrams set down this legal mandate for NYCHA* in 1936:

"The cure [of the slums] is to be wrought, not through the regulated ownership of the individual, but through the ownership and operation by or under the direct control of the public itself."

This urban public commons, our shared environment, has come to be recognized as the primary cause of, and solution to, health equity issues (CDC 2014**). **It is by way of this shared commons and its adaptive ecology that we will reveal the deliciousness of this unique space.** Beyond rhetoric, this will be tested through data and twenty first century ecological health science.

Socioeconomic topography in Brooklyn showing areas of greatest need in blue. lifted focus area is the Brownsville area.



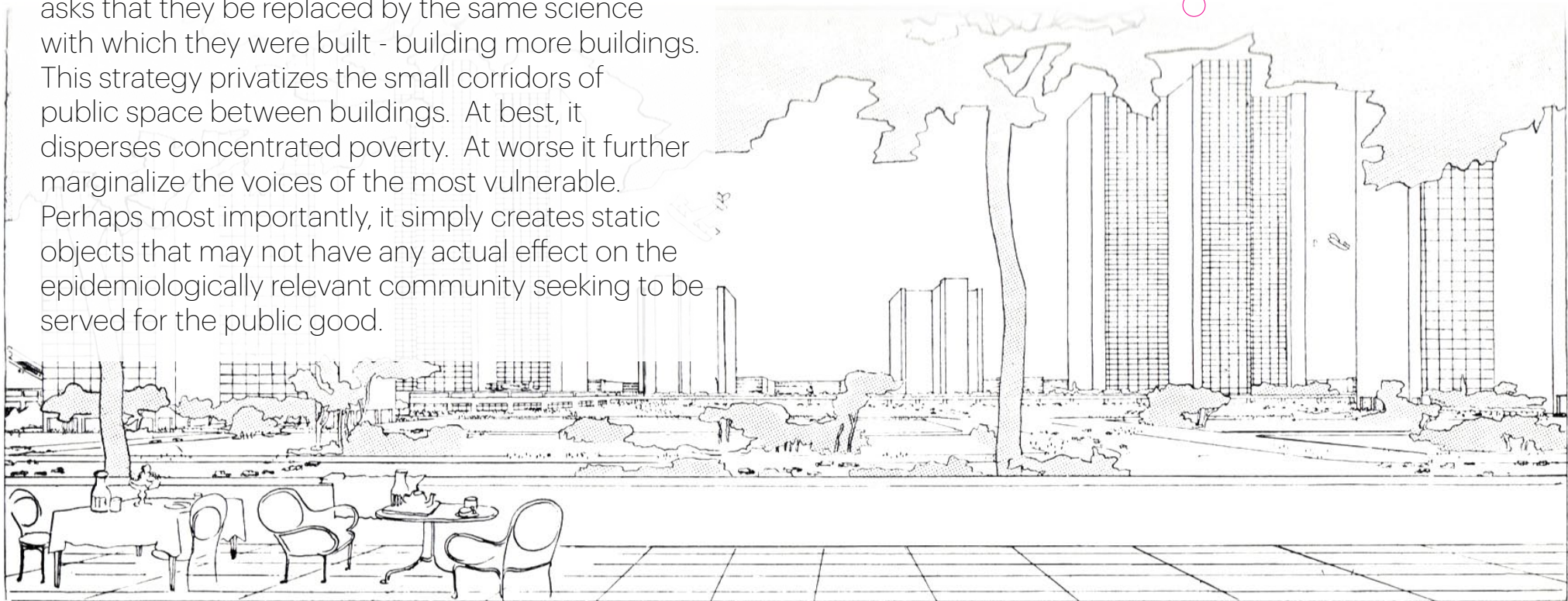
* NYCHA is the New York City Housing Authority

** US Center for Disease Control Environmental Approach and US Surgeon General's National Prevention Strategy

The housing projects of the mid twentieth century were constructed according to the sanitary and ecological knowledge of the day. It follows that today we adapt the projects according to the most developed sanitary and ecological knowledge of our day. We know that disease and violence are as ever shifting as the human and ecological reality within the static-seeming building forms.

The only thing unchanging about public housing is outside perception. To the outsider, the buildings are old and outdated. The outsider, concerned more with economics than daily life, asks that they be replaced by the same science with which they were built - building more buildings. This strategy privatizes the small corridors of public space between buildings. At best, it disperses concentrated poverty. At worst it further marginalize the voices of the most vulnerable. Perhaps most importantly, it simply creates static objects that may not have any actual effect on the epidemiologically relevant community seeking to be served for the public good.

Beautiful view.
Now, what's for dinner?

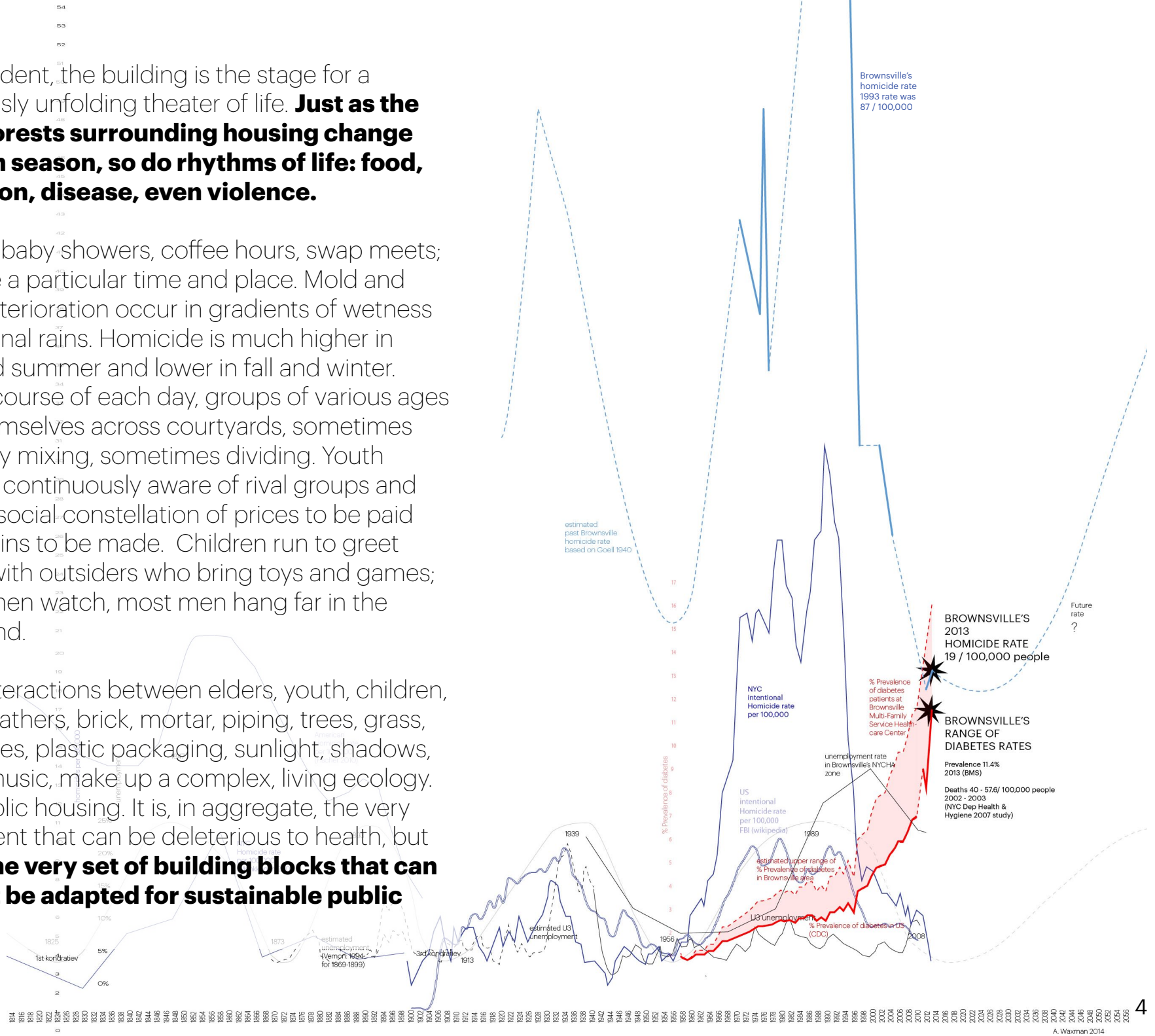


Une ville contemporaine: Le centre de la Cité vu de la terrasse de l'un des cafés à gradins qui entourent la place de la gare. On voit la gare entre les deux gratte-ciel de gauche, peu élevée au-dessus du sol. Sortant de la gare, on voit l'autodrome filant à droite vers le Jardin Anglais. Nous sommes au centre même de la ville, là où la densité et la circulation sont les plus fortes. Les terrasses des cafés à gradins constituent les boulevards fréquentés. Les théâtres, salles publiques, etc., sont parmi les espaces entre les gratte-ciel, au milieu des arbres.

To the resident, the building is the stage for a continuously unfolding theater of life. **Just as the garden forests surrounding housing change with each season, so do rhythms of life: food, celebration, disease, even violence.**

Birthdays, baby showers, coffee hours, swap meets; each have a particular time and place. Mold and interior deterioration occur in gradients of wetness and seasonal rains. Homicide is much higher in spring and summer and lower in fall and winter. Over the course of each day, groups of various ages space themselves across courtyards, sometimes completely mixing, sometimes dividing. Youth gangs are continuously aware of rival groups and know the social constellation of prices to be paid and bargains to be made. Children run to greet and play with outsiders who bring toys and games; while women watch, most men hang far in the background.

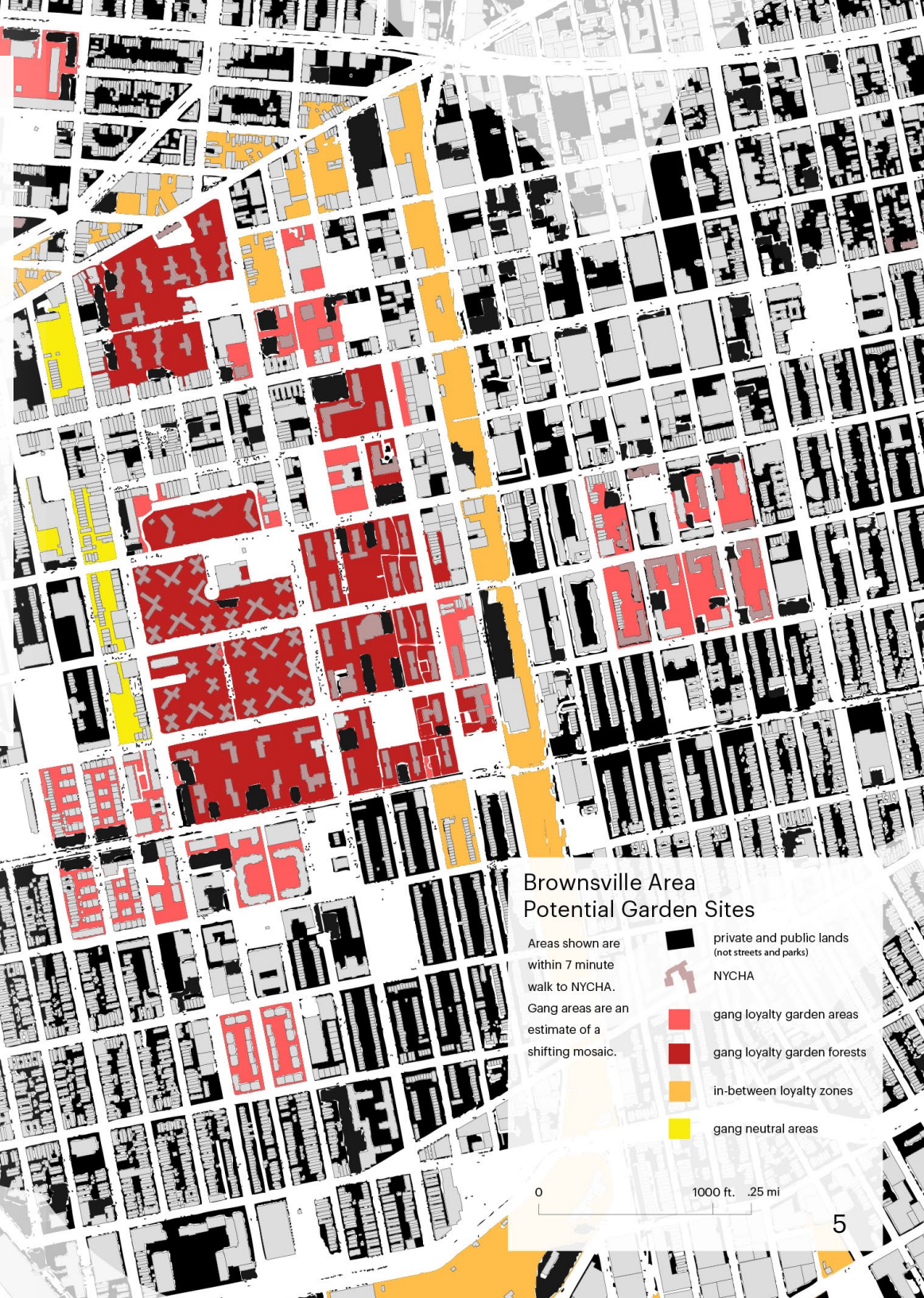
Various interactions between elders, youth, children, mothers, fathers, brick, mortar, piping, trees, grass, cans, fences, plastic packaging, sunlight, shadows, air, even music, make up a complex, living ecology. This is public housing. It is, in aggregate, the very environment that can be deleterious to health, but it is also **the very set of building blocks that can and must be adapted for sustainable public health.**



Public Housing is a veritable forest of public gardens. These gardens must be adaptively managed so they correlate with the social lives of residents and provide delicious food. **The American urban food revolution is a social revolution**, one that empowers the landscape held in common as much as the people who make their lives within this shared landscape.

In Brownsville, over 19,000 people live on public land in 20 separate developments. Gang rivalry is a tough reality that separates communities that otherwise share so much. Words used frequently to describe these places are “wild,” “crazy,” “ignorant,” “unhealthy,” “bad,” and “beautiful.”

A unique landscape calls for a unique cuisine.
Are you up to the challenge?



Brownsville Area
Potential Garden Sites

- Areas shown are within 7 minute walk to NYCHA.
- Gang areas are an estimate of a shifting mosaic.
- private and public lands (not streets and parks)
- NYCHA
- gang loyalty garden areas
- gang loyalty garden forests
- in-between loyalty zones
- gang neutral areas

0 1000 ft .25 mi

The public good requires reading this fluctuating health landscape and proposing food management, harvest, and celebration in real time according to specifications in time and space.

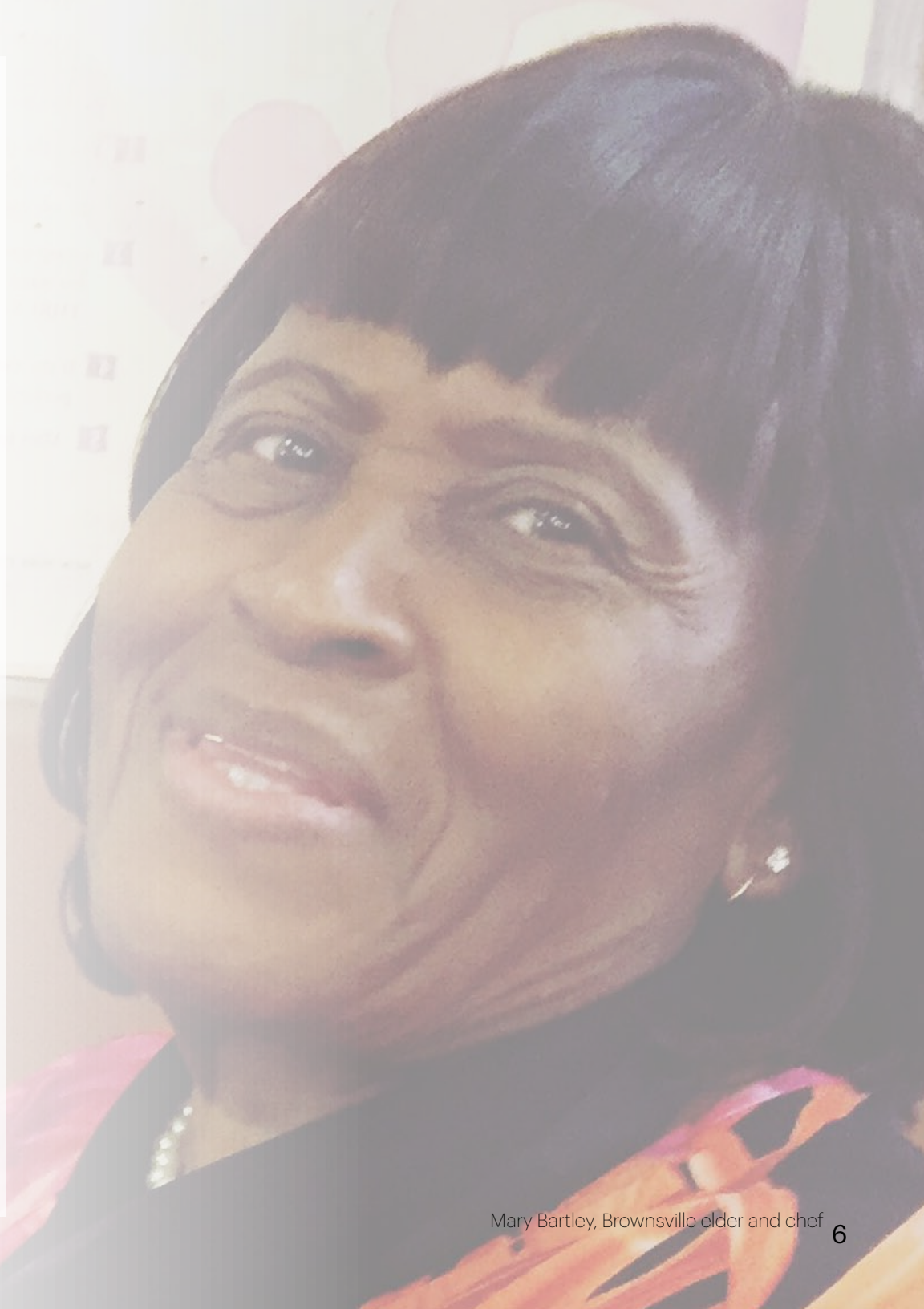
Here in New York we are lucky to have some of the world's most advanced big data pattern mining experts as well as some of the vanguard of tactical urban strategists.

- work with the Brownsville Community Justice Center and the Melting Pot to employ local youths to build and execute our adaptive management plan for place based projects including public garden spaces in and around public housing. This will be continuously tested with correlated health data.

- work with elder residents and senior centers to train youth in local culinary and stewardship traditions.

- work with clinics to read ongoing health data patterns to fine tune correlations in space and time for particular food programs.

These efforts, together, **will work towards the science and cuisine of changing health outcomes ecologically** to meet the needs of the city's most vulnerable residents. The time is now. The place is Brownsville.



2. FOREST AND GARDEN STRATEGY

The NYCHA public housing areas are home to a vibrant cultural forest, mostly of mature sycamore trees. **Residents have used this forest for decades to relax, share stories with peers and children, and find meaning in cuisine.**

Today, “official” maintenance crews and police regulate use of the spaces and mow the forest according to main stream standards of cleanliness and order. Men are frequently stopped by police and checked for drugs at the entrance of the landscape area. The food forest has been reduced through state maintenance into a belittled English garden - parterres and diminutive brass spiked fences divide up the commons - or asphalt it into a parking lot. Ecology in the “ghetto” is highly criminalized.

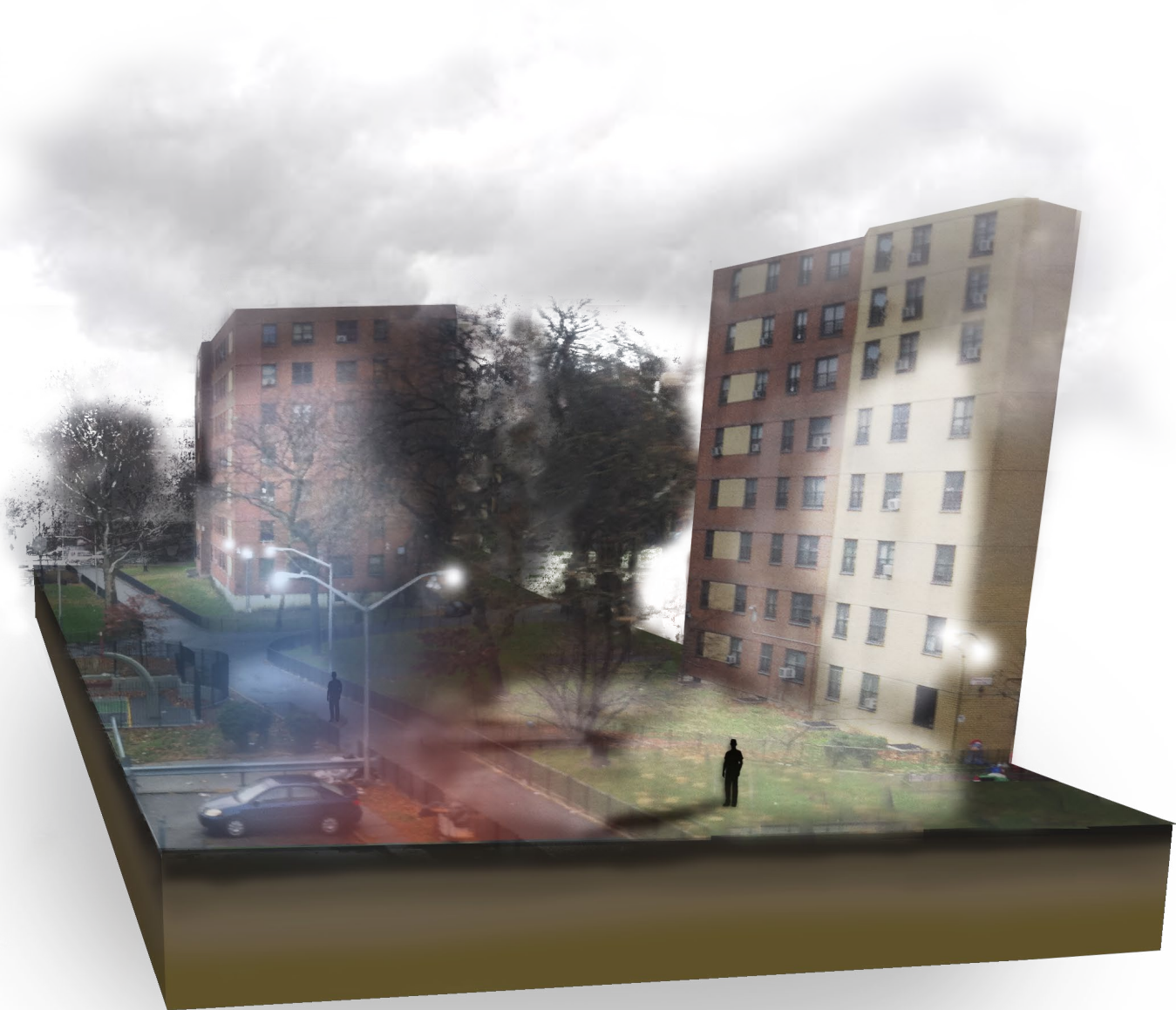
But residents know a deeper landscape. These same spaces are places of celebration, places of life, and places of death. These are grounds for friendship and even grounds for conflict. These are **grounds for a unique cuisine that celebrates life, a cuisine showcased in a series of culinary challenges.**

The food forest will be restored according to cycles of resident use and social structure. The existing monoculture of sycamore trees will be restored to a heterogeneous mix of fruit trees, nut trees, berry bushes, and seed plants.



1. **Criminalized Landscape:**

The existing condition.



2. **Restoration process initiated, now → 5 years.**

Local social groups start to be legitimized, forest begins to be diversified. To prepare for culinary competitions local youth groups begin to restore diversity of food forest.

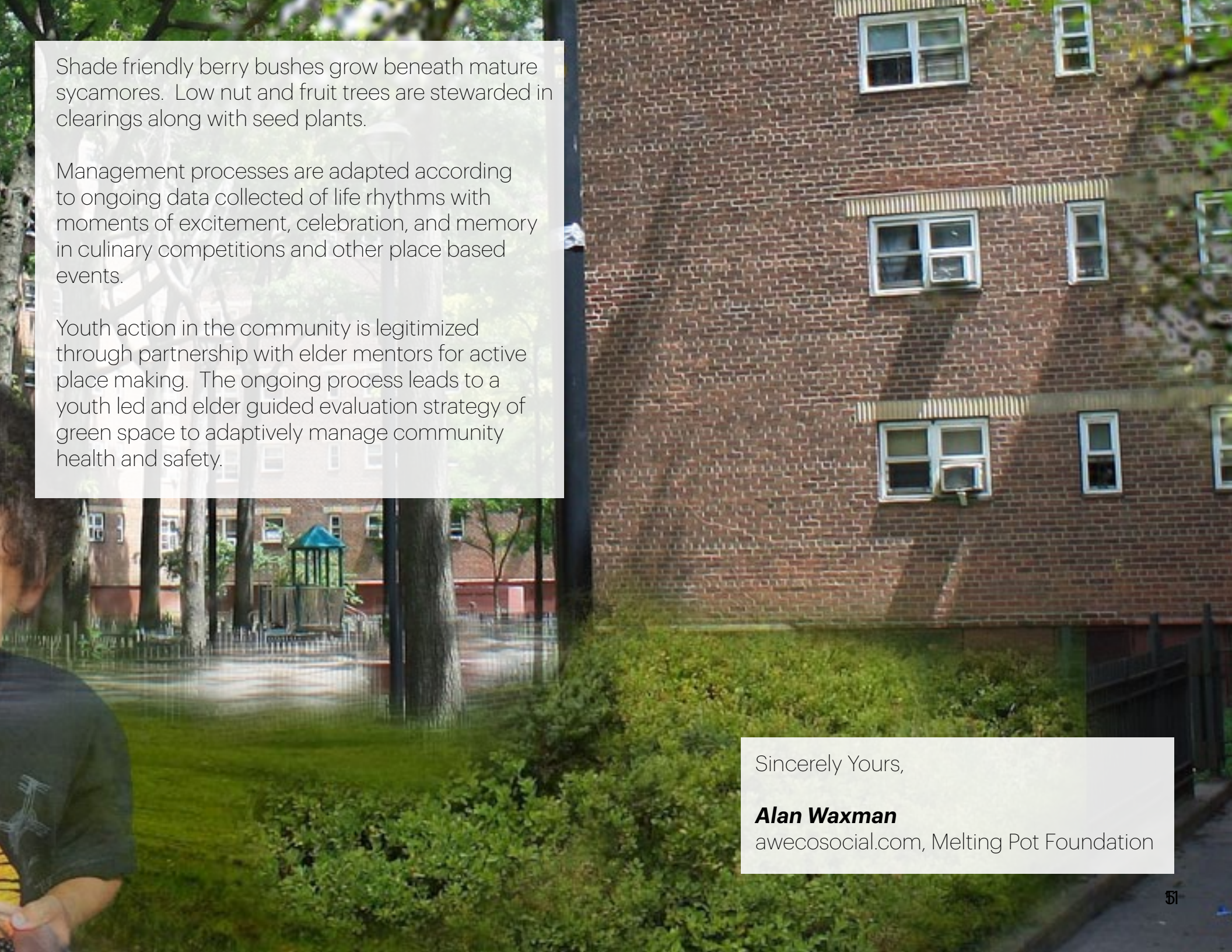


3. **Forest restored, 5 years onward:**

Social groups have been legitimized and the forest diversified to produce full crops of fruits, nuts, berries, and seeds according to a full yearly cycle of celebrations.

Culinary challenges become friendly cross rivalry competitions. Tree care, harvest, and preparation each have specific cultural moments.





Shade friendly berry bushes grow beneath mature sycamores. Low nut and fruit trees are stewarded in clearings along with seed plants.

Management processes are adapted according to ongoing data collected of life rhythms with moments of excitement, celebration, and memory in culinary competitions and other place based events.

Youth action in the community is legitimized through partnership with elder mentors for active place making. The ongoing process leads to a youth led and elder guided evaluation strategy of green space to adaptively manage community health and safety.

Sincerely Yours,

Alan Waxman

awecosocial.com, Melting Pot Foundation