

Case Study

The Octopus Garden

The Octopus Garden is a well-trafficked and loved community hub. It opened in 2009 and over time transformed from an impermeable vacant lot into raised garden beds—supporting life in many and often unexpected ways. Beyond growing fruits and veggies, this garden helps to grow community, inspires place-making and advocates for environmental sustainability, attracting hundreds of visitors from western PA and beyond each year.

Principal Investigator

Kristin Hughes

CMU School of Design

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Acts of vandalism

1

Octopus

\$20K

Crowd-funded

900+

Visitors annually

#1

Place to find a superhero



Welcome to the Octopus Garden

Opportunity

It is not often that a building behind your home burns down, and you have the means to purchase the land. But that is what happened to me. A large apartment complex behind my house burned down one evening, a man who was mentally disturbed set the building and himself on fire. I happened to be standing on the sidewalk at 5:30 AM and asked the gentleman beside me, “I wonder what they are going to do with this building?” He said, “I’ll sell it to you for cheap and throw in the vacant lot next to it.” Without thinking, I said yes.

Approach

The Octopus Garden officially took root in 2009 and, over time, transformed from an impermeable vacant lot into raised garden beds and soft ground, supporting life in many and often unexpected ways. Beyond growing fruits and veggies, the Garden is an excellent example of place-making, and advocates for environmental sustainability.

Octavia the Octopus and Doris the Sea Monster are important art features in the Garden. Pittsburgh-based artist Laura Jean McLaughlin created both of these charming beauties with

neighbors' help. Octavia, the Garden's namesake, holds court in the center of the Garden, visible to all who pass by. Doris lives in the back of the Garden—when it rains, she proudly squirts rainwater from her mouth, keeping flowers well-watered and vibrant. The public art lends a special kind of magic and whimsy and gives the Garden its identity.

Outcome

Today the Octopus Garden welcomes hundreds of people from all over the world every year. It was named one of Rick Seback's '25 Things That He Likes About Pittsburgh', and gardeners give many tours throughout the summer to various summer camps. The Garden has participated in Pittsburgh Home and Garden Tour, Friendship House Tour, and many other events that highlight a successful community-based endeavor. All of these events are free and run by volunteers who are passionate about the Garden.

Thank You

To everyone who has supported the creation of this magical place.



You never know what you might find in the garden. One day it is an outdoor classroom for local school groups, the next a place for dueling superheroes.