

Capitol Hill Backyards

Then and Now

BY CHERYL CORSON

Living History

Visualizing a typical Capitol Hill street about a hundred years ago is not hard to do since many still look the same today. Iron hair pin fences enclosed gardens filled with roses, peonies, lilacs, rose of Sharon and crape myrtle. Neighbors visited one another on their porches or front steps. While essentially private, front yards were, and still are, transitional spaces between public and private domains.

We know less about historic backyard spaces, which have been largely transformed in recent years into private gardens surrounded by various types of solid fences. What we do know might help us understand and perhaps preserve valuable aspects of community life on the Hill. Stroll down your alley sometime, and you may see clues from the past.

Historically, backyards were the working end of households where coal was stored and laundry hung out to dry. In fact, turn-of-the-century landscape plans usually designated a “Laundry Yard” somewhere in back, usually near the kitchen garden. On Capitol Hill, some people had modest vegetable gardens (as

some still do). According to Nancy Metzger, Historic Preservation Committee chair of the Capitol Hill Restoration Society, many also had fruit trees in back. You can still see evidence of this: an old, single fig tree filling an entire back yard, or a colony of peach, apricot or plum trees. Now considered the bane of a backyard garden, Metzger says that black walnuts were a special delicacy and were used in cakes at the turn of the last century. People actually planted them on purpose!

In earlier times women used their backyards during the day, and Metzger says that alleys became the playground while women were occupied with laundry and other chores. “Moms could watch each others’ children, and it made the alley a safe place,” says Metzger.

How these spaces were enclosed facilitated their use as “semi-public” playgrounds. While some had solid board fencing, most were enclosed by the precursor of chain link fence, called by various names – “ornamental loop fencing,” “double loop ornamental fence,” “crimped, or woven wire fence.” It was first made in America in 1873, and production con-

tinued into the 1940s. Backyards that have not been renovated will sometimes have rusty ornamental loop fencing behind stockade and even chain link fences as the earliest fencing material separating one property from the next. Today this fencing is making a comeback with homeowners who fancy an authentic early-20th century look for their gardens. It can be purchased new from American Fence and Supply Company (www.afence.com/).

Chain link fence was a mid-19th century British invention, based on textile technology of the early Industrial Revolution. Using machinery imported from Belgium, it was introduced in North America by Anchor Fence Company of New Jersey in 1891. Although technically “historic,” chain link has not achieved the revived cache of the earlier ornamental loop fencing. Still, you can see plenty of it across the alleys and backyards of Capitol Hill. Other older DC neighborhoods, such as Ledroit Park, still have 3-foot-high chain link as the predominant mode of backyard separation. It is fascinating to walk in these alleys and experience the open and friendly spatial and social setting now largely gone from the District.



Both rear patios use the same stone in different ways. The open fencing gives a park-like feeling.



Wooden alternating board fencing for privacy is combined with iron hairpin fencing for openness.



Historic Double Loop ornamental fence pre-dates chain link in the US.

Gains and Losses

As times changed, so did backyard spaces. The advent of air conditioning, inexpensive canned and frozen fruits and vegetables, electric clothes dryers and the move away from coal heat all changed how backyards functioned. The demise of trolleys and proliferation of automobiles and construction of garages in alley spaces changed them further. Crime and public safety concerns from the mid-20th century on, particularly after the 1968 DC riots, also affected public perception of backyards and alley spaces on the Hill and around the District. More and more residents opted for complete physical and visual separation between their backyards and the alley and between one another's adjacent row houses. Inexpensive wooden stockade fencing facilitated this transition.

And while heightened crime prevention may have been achieved, there were arguably social costs. Regular casual encounters between neighbors, especially between those of different ethnic groups and generations, help knit a neighborhood together. The physical arrangement of outdoor space won't guarantee this, but it can subtly foster important social interaction.

Contemporary backyard spaces that reflect values of an earlier time by design can provide valuable examples of how to address the need for privacy and security while re-introducing some of the social benefit inherent in earlier Capitol Hill backyards. Here are some examples.

Modern Interpretations

On North Carolina Avenue near Lincoln Park, about six homeowners completely eliminated the fencing between their backyards, creating a virtual park for their children. Three adjacent homeowners near the Lovejoy School have done the same.

A pair of longtime neighbors near the 14th Street Safeway had a two-way gate incorporated into their new shared solid-board backyard fence. They could then visit more easily and keep only one barbecue grill, saving precious space and promoting shared evening meals.

Two couples living near Lincoln Park simultaneously renovated adjacent backyards this year. As the designer of both spaces, I had the unique opportunity of coordinating

their plantings and patios. Both yards had garages and were unusually deep. Interestingly, separating the next two connected yards were iron hairpin fences that appeared original, which is unusual in backyards.

About 15 years ago, one couple emulated this open fencing by replacing their solid wooden fence in the back half of their yard with iron hairpin fencing mimicking the adjacent three spaces. They retained the solid fence closest to their back door. "Our neighbors at the time were master gardeners, and with the new fencing we enjoyed their beautiful flowers," says the homeowner. Since then, they have had three different neighbors, including the current couple and their 3-year-old son. She reflects, "...the opening up of the yards illustrates the maxim 'good fences make good neighbors.' We have enough privacy around the seating areas and are not visually distracted when dining al fresco, but we have the feeling of an expansive yard when sitting around the patio dining table. There's a lot of talking and occasionally jumping over the fence."

Her husband adds, "Lowering the fence also allowed us to share in the highjinks of the neighbor's kids, all of which we have enjoyed."

As their designer, I honored this 4-yard-wide open space by suggesting flowering trees that bloomed sequentially during the growing season. Two small patios near the garages in both gardens were built using the same paving stone in slightly different configurations, providing visual consistency without being too repetitive.

In a highly unusual move, one neighbor's mature weeping Japanese maple was relocated to a raised planter in the other neighbor's yard, hoisted over the iron fence by strong and dedicated landscape contractors. The tree, doing well, looks much better in its new location where it is enjoyed by both families.

Intrigued by the changes next door, the third and fourth neighbors installed new sod at the same time. In the end, all four yards retained their individuality while giving an overall park-like feel, demonstrating how cues from the past can inspire a new generation.

Cheryl Corson is a local landscape architect in private practice. www.cherylcorsan.com. ★

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