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Community Gardens in the City*

BY MOLLY GARFINKEL

New York community gardens are by nature impermanent; they are established on land that does not belong to their creators, and therefore, exist under constant threat of demolition. Since 1994, the city has acted several times on the conviction that community gardens built on city-owned parcels are “vacant lots,” which can and should be more productively used for housing or commercial development (Schmelzkopf 2002, 327). Time and again, garden advocates have contested and mobilized against the city’s actions to develop these community green spaces. Activists maintain that the gardens *are* productive—they provide densely developed neighborhoods with important benefits to quality of life, like light, air, food, and cultural activities. They argue that the tranquil and often quirky gardens bring neighbors together and increase the assessed property values of adjacent buildings. On a more basic level, gardeners are frustrated, because the lots clearly are not vacant—they contain gardens, and many also host *casitas*. Before the gardens grew, the lots *were* vacant, because the city divested from low-income

neighborhoods and allowed empty parcels to be used as dumping grounds and open-air drug markets. Then, residents did what the city would not—they anchored and revitalized their communities. And they did it with just seeds and sweat equity. As Karen Schmelzkopf notes:

Because community gardens enable residents to produce food, local and federal governments often subsidize them during difficult times. Once the crisis is over and community garden plots increase in market rate value, there has been a tendency for gardens to be reevaluated as impractical and inefficient uses of land. Support is withdrawn, and the land allocated for other, more lucrative economic uses. (Schmelzkopf 2002, 326–7)

The New York City community garden movement was born of a confluence of the environmental conservation and community participation movements of the 1960s, and the dire fiscal circumstances of the 1970s. Liz Christy and the Green Guerrillas are generally credited with galvanizing interest in self-help urban horticulture by throwing

“seed bombs” (seeds, soil, and water) over the locked fences of the city’s nearly 10,000 vacant lots.¹ Founded in 1975, the group’s Liz Christy Bowery–Houston Community Garden is widely considered the city’s oldest. At the same time in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Hattie Carthan founded the Magnolia Tree Earth Center, an environmental education center that teaches and motivates youth and community residents to garden and conserve the surrounding natural environment (Reaven 2006, 270). In addition to these and other grassroots efforts, in 1976, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) supported the development of an Urban Agriculture program by Cornell University Cooperative Extension to begin providing New Yorkers with expertise on cultivating backyards and local gardens.²

Highly typical community garden origin stories begin with empty lots in overlooked neighborhoods, which became the only positive outcomes of New York City’s decline in the mid-1960s and subsequent financial collapse in the mid-1970s. As New York City struggled to meet its budgetary needs, the administration scaled back on “soft” city services, including sanitation, park maintenance, and police and fire protection, especially to low-income communities. Fires destroyed buildings, and the empty lots were soon filled with garbage, because regular city trash collection was suspended. The city reclaimed the abandoned, burned, and foreclosed properties, demolished the structures, and walked away, leaving the rubble-filled parcels open to dumping and drug trafficking (Regis 2017). The lots were more than an eyesore on the block—they were dangerous for whole neighborhoods.

Local residents were horrified by the crime, drugs, violence, and tensions within the city. Eventually, they decided to take a stand by creating gardens. By the hundreds, New York City communities cleaned out abandoned, city-owned lots in preparation for building gardens. On a purely volunteer-



Diamante Garden, East Harlem, 2018. Photo by Molly Garfinkel.



Jardín La Roca in the Bronx, 2017. Photo by Molly Garfinkel.

basis, they cleared refrigerators, car chassis, and hypodermic needles by hand. Because the volunteers were technically squatters, the city government refused to legitimize their gardens without liability insurance. In 1978, the city realized, however, that it was in its own best interest to support the gardeners' efforts, and Operation GreenThumb was initiated as an inexpensive liability and garden assistance program (Schmelzkopf 2002, 327). It took legal control over all of New York City's community gardens by issuing short-term leases to the gardeners and encouraging creation of new gardens on city-owned lots. At the time, GreenThumb was established as part of the Department of General Services (then known as DGS, now called the Department of Citywide Administrative Services, or DCAS), which managed city property. GreenThumb continues to serve the United States' largest body of community gardens (nearly 700) with materials, programming, arbitration, and other support services.

In the 1980s, over 800 community gardens joined the GreenThumb program (Regis 2017). Jane Weissman took over directorship of the program in 1984, becoming a key figure in ensuring the survival of many

GreenThumb garden casitas. Despite their dubious legal status, Weissman recognized their valuable social function, and a verbal agreement enabled casitas in GreenThumb gardens to remain in situ, provided the members actively maintained the property and opened it to the wider community at regular, specified hours each week. The agreement stipulated that casitas be structurally adjusted to resemble open gazebos rather than enclosed houses, but blind eyes relieved the pressure on casita remodeling.

A decade after GreenThumb was created, New York City's political and economic climate shifted, and community gardens have been both the subject and the sites of intense public debate ever since. In the mid-1980s, the city suffered from a low-income housing shortage. Adam Purple's Garden of Eden in the Lower East Side was the first garden destroyed for subsidized residential development (Librizzi 2015, 88). The 1987 stock market scare rendered the sale of vacant lots for low-income housing untenable, such that little affordable housing was constructed (or improved) until the mid-1990s. However, the real estate market recovered just as Rudolph Giuliani took office as mayor in 1994.

Giuliani, who had campaigned on a platform that focused primarily on crime, ushered in a period of authoritarianism and zero tolerance. When he took office, his administration issued *Police Strategy No. 5: Reclaiming the Public Spaces of New York*, which championed an aggressive crime prevention policy, based on the "broken-windows theory" that unchecked minor infractions and "signs of disorder in the public spaces of the city" leads to serious crimes.³ Giuliani's administration initiated a citywide misdemeanor sweep and arrested scores of graffiti artists, squeegee cleaners, panhandlers, prostitutes, turnstile jumpers, and squatters.

At the same time, the Giuliani administration first began to aggressively pursue public, then private, development of city-owned lots, many of which contained community gardens, which in turn often included casitas. By then, very few gardens had long-term protection. Requests to start new gardens were no longer approved, and several gardens were bulldozed. Other gardens, labeled as squats or "disposable" property were slated for demolition on the grounds that their removal would make room for affordable housing.

In 1994, gardens were transferred from the DGS to the Department of Parks and Recreation and the Department of Housing, Preservation, and Development (HPD). Some were not mapped as parkland, and the city canceled the licenses of many others, allowing the properties to be developed for housing. Two years later, HPD was charged with surveying and disposing of the vacant properties in its inventory, so that the lots could also be developed for affordable housing. By 1997, 25 gardens had been destroyed. Giuliani's policy soon shifted from public housing to privatization of city-owned property. In May 1999, the city announced that 114 of the city's 700 community gardens would be auctioned off to the highest bidder, no matter what the developer planned for the site (Schmelzkopf 2002, 328–30).

The citywide garden community mobilized, demonstrated, and filed a series of lawsuits to block the sales. Among other charges, the suits claimed that the sales were

a form of discrimination, because the gardens in question were in the neighborhoods with the highest concentration of African American, Asian, and Latino residents (Schmelzkopf 2002, 329). They participated in efforts to save their own gardens, as well as those across the city; they attended public hearings to voice their opposition to the sales and chained themselves to fences and furniture to prevent bulldozing.

The night before the auction, New York State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer filed for an injunction against the sale, and the next day, two private foundations—the Trust for Public Land and the New York Restoration Project—purchased the 114 threatened lots from City Hall (Englander 2001, 2). Although these lots were saved, other gardens were sold to developers for both affordable and market-rate housing (Librizzi 2015, 89). Observing the onslaught in real time, one writer suggested that at least 10 percent of the HPD properties contained casitas (other casitas were and are located on private land) (Woodward 1998).

In 2000, Giuliani attempted to sell an additional 40 gardens. The Attorney General's office secured a temporary restraining order that prevented the sales until the State determined whether or not the State Environmental Quality Review Act required an environmental review of the gardens before demolition. A 2002 agreement (known as "The Agreement") negotiated by Spitzer and Mayor Michael Bloomberg placed 400 gardens in the protective jurisdiction of the Parks Department and prevented the city from auctioning another 198 lots until September 2012. However, as part of the deal, 150 gardens were allocated for redevelopment (Baird-Remba 2017). The Agreement stipulated that before development could take place in these gardens, a garden review process was required and the community gardeners were offered a site to relocate the garden (Librizzi 2015, 1989).

However, in 2010, Mayor Bloomberg's administration reassessed the terms of the agreement, and the official promise of protection was ended. The 2010 reassessment includes more explicit language, pledging

that gardens will be preserved *if* they are well-maintained and if the groups running them are in good standing. To qualify, gardens must operate for 20 hours each week and open their gates to the public (Hernández 2010). Not surprisingly, meeting these standards is no problem for most, but gardens, particularly those run by long-standing minority communities, are increasingly sites of contestation as neighborhoods gentrify and property values increase. As of 2019, most gardens find themselves in tenuous situations that ultimately can be construed as a tacit truce with the city.

In the late spring of 2019, GreenThumb made significant changes to the standard community garden license, placing greater restrictions and regulations on gardens, their members, and their activities. Vis-à-vis these new regulations, some gardeners feel that although the Spitzer agreement temporarily saved many of the gardens, the deal reduced the momentum of City Council members, who were advocating for a true process by which community gardens could be preserved in perpetuity through legislation. As of this writing, gardens and garden coalitions across the city are debating what to do about the new licenses. The general consensus is that gardens should not sign until GreenThumb is able to provide clarity and definitive answers to questions about the new rules. ▼

Notes

*This article is an excerpt from a draft of the Las Casitas Survey Project, an ongoing historic preservation initiative, undertaken in collaboration with New York State's Historic Preservation Office.

¹ Green Guerillas. "Our History." <http://www.greenguerillas.org/history>

² Urban Agriculture. <https://harvestny.cce.cornell.edu/topic.php?id=7>

³ National Criminal Justice Service, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/Photocopy/167807NCJRS.pdf>, accessed May 20, 2019.

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