

*New York's Community Gardens—
A Resource at Risk*



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NEW YORK'S COMMUNITY GARDENS

New York's Community Gardens—A Resource at Risk

In the fall of 1998, New York City announced a plan to auction off to the highest bidders 114 of the city's more than 700 community gardens. These green oases on city land would have become whatever their buyers desired—apartment houses, stores, parking lots—or, as is most often the case, they would have been ignored and become wastelands.

The Trust for Public Land, other conservation groups, open space and garden coalitions, and individual gardeners all banded together to oppose the garden auction and to increase awareness of these precious, yet tenuous, community resources. Foundations and other donors helped put together a deal to purchase the gardens at auction at a fraction of fair market value. Lawsuits, public opposition, media pressure, and a viable alternative brought the city to the negotiating table as the auction neared.

The day before the auction, the Mayor's Office agreed to sell 63 gardens to TPL and the remainder to the nonprofit New York Restoration Project. In the end, all 114 gardens were spared.

But this last-minute reprieve left unprotected hundreds of gardens on city-owned land. Their caretakers may any moment find them diverted for sale or development. Despite the fact that these gardens have become more and more important to their neighborhoods over time, and in spite of the growing recognition of their value by community development organizations, many spaces remain at risk. No deliberative system governs the fate of the city-owned lots transformed into gardens; no comprehensive plan determines the disposition of the land; no guidelines protect the value these gardens bring to their neighborhoods.

For their many contributions to New York, gardens in all five boroughs deserve preservation. New York City's government needs to acknowledge successful community gardens as an essential part of local infrastructure, and to affirmatively incorporate them into city planning as a proven, cost-effective way to improve the quality of daily life.



Brooklyn Bears Garden - Downtown Brooklyn

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Cover Photo:
West Side Community Garden
89th Street, Manhattan

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Open Space and Quality of Life

Residents, politicians, and businesspeople all stress the importance of a city’s “quality of life.” A city enjoys obvious benefits from such indicators as low crime rates, clean streets, and attractive surroundings. Evidence is also accumulating that quality of life contributes to a city’s economy by boosting tourism and by generating a welcoming climate for businesses and workers. According to surveys of corporate CEOs, quality of life for employees is the third most important factor in deciding where to locate a business, ranking behind only access to domestic markets and availability of skilled labor.¹ And one 1998 real estate industry report calls livability “a litmus test for determining the strength of the real estate investment market. . . If people want to live in a place, companies, stores, hotels, and apartments will follow.”²

Parks and other open spaces make important contributions to quality of life. A 1995 Regional Plan Association poll of individuals nationwide found that the major components of a satisfactory quality of life are safe streets and access to greenery and open spaces.³ In another survey, owners of small companies ranked recreation, parks, and open space as their highest priority in choosing a new location for a business.⁴

While New York City scores high on many of the quality-of-life criteria—crime rates have dropped, streets are cleaner than in recent memory, new industries are attracting skilled workers, and culture is thriving—it has not done so well in offering open space to its citizens. Nearly half of the city’s 59 community board districts provide less than 1.5 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents, the lowest standard typically applied by cities around the country.⁵

Fortunately, New York’s city-owned vacant lots and established community gardens offer the city an opportunity to address this inadequacy in the very inner-city neighborhoods where green space is in shortest supply. Using these resources to create open space should be a matter of public policy in New York, as it is in many other cities, including Boston, Seattle, Chicago, and Philadelphia.

New York City has recognized the value of revitalized open space in such high-profile projects as the restoration of Manhattan’s Bryant Park and the development of a new Hudson River Park. Such transformations are understood to have dramatic positive effects, both on surrounding neighborhoods and on the perception of the city as a whole. With each restoration, something negative is removed, something wonderfully positive is provided.

Revitalization of city-owned lots as community gardens also has yielded dramatic positive effects for communities and should be promoted as a focus of public policy.



**West Side Community Garden
Upper West Side, Manhattan**

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Rev. Linnette Williamson Memorial Park - Central Harlem, Manhattan

Community Gardens from Vacant Lots

Since the 1970s, New Yorkers across the city have risen up to reclaim the empty, garbage-strewn lots that were degrading their neighborhoods.

Since the 1970s, New Yorkers across the city have risen up to reclaim the empty, garbage-strewn lots that were degrading their neighborhoods. Community gardens have taken root on city-owned land from the Lower East Side of Manhattan to Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, from Crotona in the Bronx to South Jamaica in Queens and St. George in Staten Island. Most of these properties fell into city hands after the owner had failed to pay taxes. As vacant lots, they had become eyesores or worse: havens for drug dealers and users, gangs, and rats.

Today, roughly 10,000 such lots remain. But currently, about 1,000 of these lots have been leased by groups of residents and converted into close to 700 community gardens. Many of those thriving today are ten, twenty, even twenty-five years old. What were once emblems of dereliction are now islands of green that anchor their communities.

Transforming a filth-filled empty lot into an orderly garden, and then into a vibrant community resource, requires imagination, determination, and hard work. Ella and Percy Heron began work on the Garden of Eden, two doors away from their two-story home in South Jamaica, Queens, in 1981, after Mr. Heron retired from an insurance company.

“We had to chase out the rats,” Ella Heron recalls. “The people of the neighborhood called it the ‘dump yard.’ There was an old trailer, old car fenders, stoves, refrigerators, and piles of junk.” Now children come from nearby P.S. 160 to work in the garden, and a sign reads, “It’s My Park and I Want to Make It Better.”⁶

Hard work was also the order of the day in the Bronx, at what is now Taqwa Community Garden, which began as a full-time commitment for Abu Talib and other garden founders. “I worked a solid month clearing away old tires and rusted-up automobiles,” Talib says. “We had to work seven days a week to keep the garbage from coming back in.”

The garden had no gate, so Mr. Talib used a cable to close off the property. “It was as if people were sleeping, didn’t see what we were doing. The garden was a spot for turning tricks, using drugs, selling drugs. But now we have over a hundred members; universities come to learn about what we are doing.”⁷

In their efforts to create community resources from vacant lots, New York’s community gardeners have enjoyed critical support from GreenThumb, the largest municipally run gardening program in the United States. Sponsored by the city’s Department of Parks & Recreation and funded by federal community development block grants, GreenThumb leases city-owned land to neighborhood groups for \$1 a year.

Since its beginning in 1978, GreenThumb has helped create more than 1,000 gardens on more than 125 acres of derelict land. It has trained gardening groups in garden design, construction, and horticultural techniques. The program also provides tools; fencing; lumber to build growing beds, picnic tables, gazebos and grape arbors; soil; ornamental and fruit trees; shrubs; seeds; and bulbs.⁸

Transforming a filth-filled empty lot into an orderly garden, and then into a vibrant community resource, requires imagination, determination, and hard work.



Unity Place - South Bronx

© SIMON BENEPE

We had to work seven days a week to keep the garbage from coming back in.

Abu Talib

Gardens Affiliated with the GreenThumb Program of the city of New York Parks & Recreation

Total Active Sites: 677

Gardens *with* permanent status

Sites under Parks jurisdiction: 88

Sites owned by the Trust for Public Land: 63

Sites owned by NY Restoration Project: 42

Gardens *without* permanent status

Sites under HPD jurisdiction: 334

School gardens, under Board of Education jurisdiction: 110*

Sites under other agency jurisdiction: 40

*Gardens on school property are, in most cases, subject to displacement for portable classrooms or other school-related use.
Source: GreenThumb Program, December 2000

Reducing Stress, Building Community



**Classon Ful-Gate Block Association Garden
Bedford - Stuyvesant, Brooklyn**

© KELLY BUGDEN

Just as Manhattan's restored Bryant Park has changed the image of its surroundings, so a good community garden can create a new, positive image for a neighborhood.

About the Magic Garden in East Harlem, gardener Lydia Roman says, "If you had seen that trash-filled lot, you'd have said it would take a miracle to make it a garden. Now when people walk by, they compliment the garden. One surprised person said, 'It's magic.' So we called it the Magic Garden. But in reality, the magic is within us."⁹

Beyond the sheer aesthetic joy a garden offers, the fundamental truth is that people like—and need—plants. Naturalist Edward O. Wilson tells us this affinity is programmed in us through evolution.¹⁰ Perhaps because of it, surgery patients with hospital windows overlooking natural scenes have been found to recover more quickly, and with less medication, than matched patients whose only view is a brick wall.¹¹ Similarly, prison inmates whose cells overlook greenery need less medical care and report fewer symptoms of stress than inmates without a view of growing things.¹²

Plants give us pleasure, reduce tension, and make us more productive at work. Or, as one gardener commented, "You forget about your problems. You watch the plants grow. That's what it's all about."¹³

And, of course, gardens clean the air, serve as wind-breaks, dull street noise, and cool the heat of summer—all benefits to peace of mind and physical well-being.

Gardens also create community, by giving residents an active role in the neighborhood and a sense of control over an important aspect of their lives—an advantage that traditional parks don't generally confer. Neighbors come together in gardens both to work the land and to socialize. A University of Illinois study concluded that inner-city residents living near common spaces with trees know one another and socialize more with neighbors, believe they can call on neighbors for support, and feel safer than residents living in barren areas.¹⁴



**Brooklyn Bears Carlton Avenue Garden
Fort Greene, Brooklyn**

© TPL

Now we have our community garden—a wonderful place where we can go and enjoy being outdoors with our family and friends—friends that only a short time ago were neighbors whom we would just see in passing.

Claire Blum

Certainly that has been the experience of Claire Blum of Project Eden in the Queens neighborhood of Rego Park. “Now we have our community garden—a wonderful place where we can go and enjoy being outdoors with our family and friends—friends that only a short time ago were neighbors whom we would just see in passing,” Blum says. “The garden has brought us all close together.”¹⁵

Gardens provide a natural and irresistible focus for neighborhood activities. A garden bench becomes a spot for a casual conversation. Weddings, block parties, crime-watch meetings, music classes, after-school tutoring—all take place in gardens simply for the joy of the surroundings. The “furniture” of community gardens reflects these varied uses. In addition to plants and trees, a New York community garden may offer a playground, water feature, stage, barbecue pit, picnic tables, beehives, veterans’ monuments, gazebo, or birdhouses.

And with these diverse uses, “the garden can take credit for bringing the neighborhood together,” says Annie Thompson of Garden of Union in Park Slope, Brooklyn.¹⁶

The same can be said of a community garden in Far Rockaway, according to Lucille Laird of the 104th Street Civic Association. “One gardener did not know her neighbors until the garden began. It was a pleasure to see her asking her neighbors’ names and addresses. They chatted and shared the in-experiences and experiences of gardening. . . Instead of people in fear of robbery, rushing to pass through the block, they now stop to view the garden.”¹⁷

And a thriving community garden supports activities and relationships that simply could not develop elsewhere. Elementary school children learn that carrots don’t start out in plastic bags. High school kids who might otherwise be unoccupied after school can be found in the garden helping to lay brick paths. Elderly people teach children how to plant. People in trouble with the law may be found working off their debt to society. People of many cultures come together there.



Riverside Valley Community Garden - West Harlem, Manhattan

© GERRY WANG

The garden can take credit for bringing the neighborhood together.

Annie Thompson

Instead of people in fear of robbery, rushing to pass through the block, they now stop to view the garden.

Lucille Laird



6th Street & Avenue B Garden - Lower East Side, Manhattan

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Nurturing Young Lives

Here they get a whole science system. Teachers can show them seeds growing, compost decomposing, habitats and ecosystems. That's why the teachers nearby are so interested.

Jestine Roper

Community gardens particularly benefit the lives of young New Yorkers by providing open space and a touch of nature close to home. “Visiting a public park has always been too much for my family and me—packing a picnic basket, traveling a distance, selecting a picnic area, locating the restroom,” says Vernice Akpan of Fort Greene, Brooklyn. “By the time I arrive home, I’m exhausted. Having a community garden allows us to give it the desired appearance and to enjoy it as well.”¹⁸

Certainly Harlem elementary school teacher Tom Goodridge understands the irreplaceable value of a garden to inner-city children. “These are kids who in their six or seven or ten years have assumed large responsibilities but have had almost no exposure to the natural world,” Goodridge says. “Several years ago I took a class to Morningside Park. One six-year-old stared and said, ‘Look at all the trees together!’ He had never seen more than a street tree.”¹⁹

With the help of a landscape architect, the larger community, and P.S. 76, where he teaches, Mr. Goodrich inspired and oversaw the creation of the Garden of Love, across the street from the school. The garden included a woodland area, a storytelling circle of tree stumps under a mulberry tree, a compost area, and, in the middle of Harlem, habitat for monarch butterflies. No wonder the garden came to be a refuge for the children and their neighbors. “This place told kids, ‘This is life,’” Mr. Goodrich says.

The Garden of Love was very much a community effort. “The Ethiopian Coptic Church helped build the fences we needed,” says Goodrich. “A Lakota Sioux introduced us to dreamcatchers, and we made two huge ones. Parents became involved through their children. Creating a garden raises community as well as plants.”

Science teacher Roy Arezzo of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, is another enthusiastic proponent of the garden classroom. Mr. Arezzo, who teaches at I.S. 318, has encouraged every student in the school to participate in the year-round composting program at Project Roots Community Garden. Both the students and the kitchen staff separate lunch garbage for composting.

“The garden provides opportunities to do things they might never do in New York City,” says Mr. Arezzo. “Maybe use a hammer for the first time. Or see garbage disposal as a serious issue and get excited about it. The wonderful part is not necessarily the things you would anticipate. If you go out in the hall and say, ‘Who wants to plant bulbs today?’ of course you’ll get a hundred volunteers. But shoveling wood chips when it’s cold out? Kids I don’t even know finding me in my classroom to ask if they can help carry kitchen waste over to the garden? These are the things you can’t predict.”²⁰

Some students take the garden lessons with them when they leave the school, Arezzo says. When one of his students brought him a bag of finished compost, he realized she had built her own composting bin at home. Another graduating student, who had been working in the garden since fifth grade, arranged his new school schedule so he could come back to the garden and work with fifth-graders.

Howard Avenue Garden - Brownsville, Brooklyn



Garden of Union - Park Slope, Brooklyn

Other gardens, while not formally linked to schools, make an obvious difference in the lives of children:

- The Taqwa Community Garden in the South Bronx attracts students from several nearby schools on Saturdays, Sundays, and after class. Twenty-three children have their own plots, and ten junior high students have expressed an interest in horticulture as a possible career. At the garden they learn not only about conventional outdoor cultivation but also about greenhouses and hydroponics. Each week during the growing season, a group of kids takes produce to the local farmers' market, where they learn about marketing their harvests as well.
- Jes Good Rewards Garden in Brownsville, Brooklyn, distinguishes itself as a children's garden that encourages leadership. The garden's board of directors always includes two teenagers, and its membership is made up almost entirely of children. When it won a New Yorkers for New York award from the Citizens Committee for New York, its children could take real pride in their honor. The garden offers an after-school program in which kids do homework together and then garden; a Saturday program; a summer employment program; and a summer day camp. And the garden serves as a laboratory for nearby schools. "Here they get a whole science system," says Jestine Roper, a garden founder. "Teachers can show them seeds growing, compost decomposing, habitats and ecosystems. That's why the teachers nearby are so interested."²¹
- Even in a garden without formal programs, children may catch a community's enthusiasm for green spaces. This happened at Essex Street Garden in Brooklyn, says gardener Nancy Marks. "We started to clean the lots with the adults in the neighborhood, but eventually the youth became curious and joined in to help. By the end of the summer, the ratio of youths to adults was five to one."²²



© MADDALENA POLLETTA

IS 318/Project Roots Garden - Williamsburg, Brooklyn

What would these young gardeners be doing if they weren't gardening? "Some would be in jail, most wouldn't know what to do in our neighborhood," says Abu Talib of Taqwa Garden in the Bronx.

Ruth Fergus of the Madison Community Garden in Bushwick, Brooklyn, believes that the garden "changed our mischievous teenagers to a positive junior block association, learning parliamentary procedure and conducting their own meetings instead of destroying the block."²³

And Sheronn Barbour, sixteen years old when he began helping out at Linden Bushwick Block Association Garden, says, "My family is proud of me and they love the things I grow. . . . Being in the garden is better than being in the streets."²⁴



Classon Ful-Gate Block Association Garden
Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn

© CESAR ALONSO

Connecting Cultures and Generations

Another contribution of gardens is their ability to attract and engage people from diverse backgrounds. The Brooklyn Bear's Community Gardens, for example, includes gardeners from El Salvador, Cuba, Romania, Africa, New England, Virginia, and many other places of origin, who range in age from children to senior citizens.²⁵

At La Perla in Manhattan Valley, the gardeners also come from across the globe: Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Sweden, Switzerland, Ghana, Ivory Coast, and India. And the group is equally diverse by occupation, including a horticulturist, a lawyer, a secretary, a chauffeur, a small business owner, a maintenance person, and a retail salesperson.

Bernard Payne, of Howard Gardens, in Brownsville, Brooklyn, explains that working on the garden has really brought people together. "To find different groups of people working together to arrange this lot into a garden is a

To find different groups of people working together to arrange this lot into a garden is a milestone.

Bernard Payne



Brooklyn Bears Garden - Downtown Brooklyn

© THEO COULOMBE

milestone,” Payne says. “We have Puerto Ricans, West Indians, and African Americans all giving their time to improve this block.”²⁶

Across the city, gardens supported by GreenThumb include gardeners from 45 countries and many regions of the United States.²⁷

But as diverse as they are, many community gardeners share a cultural heritage in agriculture. Perhaps they gardened as children with their grandparents, or they grew up on farms. Others garden to supply missing ingredients in their native cuisine. Growing the foods of their culture, using distinctive horticultural techniques, they share this heritage with younger gardeners and with their peers from other backgrounds. With their hands in the soil, people who might otherwise find little in common come together without friction.

Gardens also encourage sharing between generations. At Classon–Fulgate Garden in Brooklyn’s Bedford-Stuyvesant, Gloria Fashion (who helped found the garden in 1982) believes that young people benefit greatly from their contact with senior gardeners. During school visits, after school, or at block parties, the kids ask questions, help out, learn from their elders. And they learn about sharing, because at Classon–Fulgate, as at many of New York’s community gardens, produce is given out to passersby.

At Greene Garden, in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, one older man worked with the neighborhood children and a second-grade class from St. Angela Hall Academy. “He showed them how to plant petunias, water them, cover their roots with soil, and space them so they have room to grow,” says garden leader Susan Harmon. “He gave those kids a feel for real dirt and an opportunity to create real beauty in their own neighborhoods.”²⁸

Years ago, Jeff Dullea made a point of cultivating relationships among generations when he created the Penn South Children’s Garden at a housing development just south of midtown Manhattan. Every child who wanted a plot to tend had to find a partner aged 60 or older who was not a family member. Each plot thus became the hub of an extended family, as the seniors’ grown children visited and got involved, along with the children’s parents and siblings.²⁹

Says Sheila Negrón of Clinton Garden in the Bronx, “If every community had a garden there would be better relationships in the community. That’s why I think you should have a garden.”³⁰

Gardens Fight Crime

Community gardens also help reduce crime by serving as centers of activity at all times of day, and by encouraging bonds and recognition among neighbors. Abandoned areas that served as venues for drug dealers or provided cover for muggers are transformed into constructive and cheerful enterprises. Gardens also serve as symbols of order and neighborhood commitment, and, as political scientist James Q. Wilson has written, crime tends to decrease when people feel a sense of order in their communities.³¹

As Mayor Rudolph Giuliani said in his January 2000 State of the City address, the more people “who have a real stake in the community, the better off a city is . . . in terms of crime.”

Al Quiñones, a founder of Bill Rainey Garden in the South Bronx, agrees. “A garden creates a sense of stability in an area,” he says. “Before my space was made, it was a lot with mattresses and other garbage. Now we use the community garden as a positive force.”³²

Housing development professionals and youth organizers confirm the anticrime effect of community gardens. Karen Phillips, executive director of the Abyssinian Development Corporation (a Harlem-based community development organization) attributes the drop in crime not only to the activity generated by a garden, but to the evidence of community interest a garden represents—the sense of belonging and of knowing people.³³

Renee Muir of the East New York Urban Youth Corps in Brooklyn (which develops and manages housing as well as providing programs for youth) sees the clearest effect on youth crime. “[Without gardens] there is so much unsupervised time,” Muir says. “Supervised activity reduces the opportunity for illicit activity. In addition, youth programs in an informal garden setting are an effective way to encourage young people to have open dialogues about issues affecting their lives. Beyond that, though, a garden is a forum for relationships that affect crime rates. The more people know each other in a community, the less potential there is for anonymous crime.”³⁴

Similar evidence comes from other gardens. In the Holly Park neighborhood of Seattle, a resident comments that he used to hear gunshots many times. “[There were] gangs . . . lots of garbage and bottles. But since a community garden filled a vacant lot, the gangs have moved and crime has gone down.”³⁵ And in Philadelphia, burglaries and thefts in one precinct dropped by 90 percent after police helped residents clean up vacant lots and plant gardens.³⁶



Howard Avenue Garden - Brownsville, Brooklyn

© KEN SHERMAN



La Perla Garden
Upper West Side, Manhattan

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A Harvest of Health

Community gardens promote good health in several ways. Gardening is good exercise, which people of all ages need. And many community gardens provide fresh fruit and vegetables in neighborhoods where these may be hard to find or unaffordable for many residents.

In 1999, the fifteen New York gardens organized as the City Farms program of the organization Just Food grew close to 11,000 pounds of fresh vegetables and fruits. Nearly 50 percent was donated to nearby soup kitchens and food pantries.³⁷ The Fancy Flowers Community Association in the South Bronx alone produced about 200 pounds of tomatoes and about 75 pounds of green and red peppers in 1999.³⁸

As for affordability, at Taqwa, at Jes Good Rewards, at Classon-Fulgate, and at many other gardens citywide, gardeners put their produce out on long tables with signs inviting passersby to share their harvests.

Rebuilding Lives

Some community gardens have become places where people who have been in trouble with the law can remake their lives or pay their debt to society, according to Joel Copperman of CASES (Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services). CASES clients work in dozens of community gardens each year.

Typically these are people who have been repeatedly convicted of minor crimes and have been sentenced to community service rather than prison. Often they perform the heaviest labor—putting in new walks, installing railroad ties, deep digging—creating a garden for children, the elderly, and others to enjoy. Each year, New York community gardens receive from 10,000 to 20,000 hours of labor from CASES clients.³⁹

As a result of this program, CASES came to recognize the rehabilitative potential of work in gardens. In the mid-1990s, the organization acted on this recognition, taking over a garden in Harlem to rehabilitate another client group: teenagers who have committed serious crimes. These young felons study with CASES, train for employment, and attend drug education programs. For much of their recreation—another program component—they come to the garden. They have created two murals with the Green Guerrillas, planted vegetable boxes (alongside boxes tended by community members), had picnics, and just enjoyed the outdoors. For young people making a new start, planting seeds and nurturing growth is an activity full of apt symbolism.

Gardens are constructive settings for other types of rehabilitation as well. At La Perla Community Garden, participants from a nearby facility for the mentally disabled tend their own garden plot. And for patients at a rehabilitation center in East Harlem, the nearby La Nueva Vida garden “is one of life’s great experiences,” says Angel Ibanez, a gardener at La Nueva Vida.⁴

The Economic Benefits of Gardens

An active community garden does more than renew residential vitality and make people happier and safer: it produces economic benefits for the community and the city at large. “The key to restoring the economic vitality of depressed neighborhoods is restoring residential vitality,” says Paul Grogan, former president of Local Initiatives Support Corporation, a national housing group. “The residents of such communities regard quality open space as vital to the health of their community.”⁴¹

Peter Marcuse, an urban planning professor at Columbia University, agrees that “property values go up in a community that has a well-kept garden.”⁴² And real estate developer and planner Jonathan Rose maintains that community gardens are “amenities by their very nature, and . . . make the surrounding property more valuable.”⁴³

Similar testimony comes from across the city:

- Real estate developer Jerome Kretchmer included protection of the West Side Community Garden in his plan to develop an apartment building on Manhattan’s Upper West Side. The garden’s protection was financed both through Kretchmer’s project and through private fundraising, including additional donations from Kretchmer. “How could a green open space not be a good amenity?” Kretchmer asks. “I get my money’s worth a hundred times a year.”⁴⁴

“The key to restoring the economic vitality of depressed neighborhoods is restoring residential vitality,” says Paul Grogan, former president of Local Initiatives Support Corporation, a national housing group.



Riverside Valley Community Garden - West Harlem, Manhattan

© KEN SHERMAN



The League Garden
Washington Heights, Manhattan

© ERIC LESHINSKY

- In the opinion of Francis Greenburger, chairman and CEO of the real estate company Time Equities, Inc., “City life is enhanced by the presence of any green space. Man is not made for a concrete environment, so to the extent that you can integrate the green with the concrete, that’s a plus.” About community gardens specifically, Mr. Greenburger, too, believes that “a well-maintained and accessible garden is clearly an amenity.”⁴⁵
- Aubrey Jackson, Jr., a securities salesman, community volunteer, and homeowner near a community garden in Harlem, sees the

economic advantages firsthand. “Spending the time and money to create a garden out of a derelict space sends a signal of commitment and says the block is worth investing in,” Jackson says. “A nice, well-kept garden . . . not only stabilizes a block but also encourages investment.”⁴⁶

“I think the garden being here inspired some [other neighbors] to start their own gardens and to fix their homes,” says Ella Heron of the Garden of Eden in Queens.⁴⁷

- And Dorothy McGowan, from the Community League of West 159th Street Garden, says that before her local garden was built rats would pour from the empty lots to follow passersby. “But . . . since the garden has been there, a contractor has purchased a couple homes near the garden, and they are now able to sell [the homes].”⁴⁸

As neighborhoods across the city renew themselves through gardens, New York becomes simply a better



© KELLY BUGDEN

Bill Rainey Garden - Longwood, Bronx

place to live. Longtime residents welcome the change. And as neighborhoods stabilize, new residents are attracted by affordable housing. Increasing demand for housing in previously spurned neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side underlines the need to improve livability in other areas. The preservation and cultivation of garden spaces can help accomplish this, so long as these agents of revitalization—the gardens themselves—are not then bulldozed out of existence when property values rise.⁴⁹

As New York City cultivates new industries to replace manufacturing, it is critically important to increase the attractiveness of a wide range of neighborhoods. The city must accommodate skilled workers who cannot afford the exorbitant rents in Manhattan and therefore look to the other boroughs for their homes. The city’s own Strategic Policy Statement of June 1999 cites the danger that economic growth might outpace the city’s capacity to house workers.

The need for convenient, affordable residential space will only increase under the government’s new initiative to attract companies to special high-tech business districts outside Manhattan.⁵⁰ No matter how enticing the city’s other inducements, workers will prefer different cities if they cannot find the quality of life they want in those boroughs.

As a spokesperson for Con Edison said in the 1980s, “The well-being of New York City communities is our well-being.”⁵¹

While a lot of worthwhile effort has gone into revitalizing the city’s business districts, it can’t stop there. Attractive residential neighborhoods that encompass open space close to home also are essential to economic success—not just in Manhattan but throughout the five boroughs.



**Classon Ful-Gate Block Association Garden
Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn**

Attractive residential neighborhoods that encompass open space close to home also are essential to economic success.



Howard Avenue Garden - Brownsville, Brooklyn

© KEN SHERMAN

Gardens vs. Housing—A False Choice

As the conflict between housing and open space becomes more real through increasing density, the need for open space becomes even greater.

Renee Muir

In 1998, the City of New York consolidated control of community gardens on city-owned lots (those supported by GreenThumb) under the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD). This change underlines the greatest challenge to community gardens: the prospect that established gardens might be destroyed for housing development.

But the city can support successful gardens and new homes. Ample land for potential housing development already exists in the approximately 10,000 city-owned lots that do not host gardens. A rational policy would look first to such unplanted parcels for development. Through its Site Improvement Program and other efforts, HPD has since the 1970s supported the creation of small parks and plazas that complement housing initiatives. Yet, neither HPD nor City Hall has been willing to consider a comprehensive process for considering the value of existing community gardens when decisions are made on sites for new housing.

Instead, in some cases, gardeners have seen their green spaces bulldozed, while down the block another lot sprouted nothing but garbage and debris. And in some instances, the destruction of gardens in the name of housing has led not to housing but to the creation of yet another rubble-strewn lot.

On November 23, 1998, for example, bulldozers smashed without warning through the fence at Tom Goodridge’s Garden of Love at P.S. 76 and chewed up the trees the children had adopted. The butterfly habitat, the woodlands, the storytelling circle under the mulberry tree: all obliterated. Until the fall of 2000, the only replacement for this place of learning and poetry was a sign: “Site of future affordable housing.”⁵²

Other gardens are lost on the city’s auction block. When this happens, vegetable plots, picnic tables, and trees may be succeeded by nothing more than a parking lot, or worse. A study of Brooklyn properties (not specifically gardens) auctioned between January 1990 and December 1995 concluded that “returning city-owned properties to private ownership is a process that often results in the vacant lots being used illegally, and the lots often remaining a blight on the communities.”⁵³ In fact, of 470 properties auctioned, 423 of 440 originally vacant parcels remained vacant in 1998, and 240 were strewn with garbage.

New York neighborhoods need both housing and open space—a fact recognized by community development organizations, whose principal concern is housing development:

- “Of course there’s a need for both housing and open space,” says Beverly Smith of the Abyssinian Development Corporation. “For housing, we should work first with existing housing stock, including abandoned buildings that can be renovated.”⁵⁴
- East New York Urban Youth Corps, another housing developer, recognized early “the need for balance between housing and green space,” according to Assistant Executive Director Renee Muir. “All our new housing sites include open space.”⁵⁵
- In its own mission statement, HPD embraces the need for both “quality housing and viable neighborhoods”—and, as has been shown, many people do not consider a neighborhood to be “viable” without green space.
- Benjamin Ross of Pratt Area Community Council, a community development organization, asserts, “It’s important to improve the quality of life, and a very direct way is providing more green space. There is a real shortage, and community gardens are a substitute for parks.”⁵⁶
- And Renee Muir of East New York Urban Youth Corps points out that “as the conflict between housing and open space becomes more real through increasing density, the need for open space becomes even greater.”⁵⁷

In an area where there is not a lot of green space, the benefits of a garden are infinite.

Beverly Smith

Gardens inspire hope.

Gary Hattem



IS 318/Project Roots Garden - Williamsburg, Brooklyn

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In the face of this need and the many benefits gardens bring a neighborhood, the auctioning of gardens does not make economic sense. The gardens proposed for auction in 1999 constituted only about 1 percent of the city's 10,000 vacant lots. Their economic value was minuscule in the context of a 1998 city budget of \$34 billion, which included a \$2 billion surplus. And since the ultimate productive use of the land is not guaranteed, new uses may or may not offer continuing contributions to the tax base. Finally, most gardens are in areas of the city where property values and tax rates are low. The money the city might gain in auctioning gardens is therefore negligible compared to the value they bring as open space.

Learning from Other Cities



Parque de Tranquilidad
Lower East Side, Manhattan

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Unlike New York, other cities have wholeheartedly embraced their community gardens as part of the trend toward creating “livable” urban centers. Although New York was a leader in the early years of the community garden movement, with extensive nonprofit involvement and the nation's largest municipal support program, lately other cities have moved ahead as New York's efforts have flagged. For example, the city has recently instructed GreenThumb to offer no more garden leases.

This is not the situation in Boston, where since the 1980s the city has been conveying city-owned land to public-private partnerships for \$1 a garden. Boston continues to use

part of its federal community block grant money for the Grassroots Program, which in turn funds the creation and renovation of community gardens.

In 1992, Seattle adopted an open space plan that calls for one community garden for every 2,500 households. And Chicago, rather than eliminating existing gardens, budgets for annual acquisition of privately owned property to be converted into community gardens.

These cities, like New York, are enjoying good economic times, but their prosperity and attendant rise in real estate values have not moved them to destroy their gardens. They endorse strong gardens as an element of that success.

Looking Ahead

Community gardens provide space, greenery, recreation, education, and social opportunities at very small cost to New York City. “In an area where there is not a lot of green space, the benefits of a garden are infinite,” says Beverly Smith of the Abyssinian Development Corp.⁵⁸

Gary Hattem, managing director of the Community Development Group at Deutsche Bank, which supports gardens, agrees. “Community gardens permit residents to address their own needs, working together. They are a powerful symbol of how a community can change for the better. “Gardens,” Mr. Hattem says, “inspire hope.”⁵⁹

The importance of permitting hope to flourish, together with the many other gifts community gardens bestow, calls persuasively for a rational process that weighs the value of gardens in decisions to dispose of city-owned land. Today, no comprehensive land-use plan identifies gardens to sell; no deliberative system governs the fate of empty lots.

Margaret Johnson, from the Mid-Bronx Senior Council, sees what is required: “Developing gardens, like building day care centers or bringing in job resource centers, should be part of planning. Sometimes we get so wrapped up with survival needs that we forget about the quality-of-life issues that also sustain people. Quality-of-life issues must be part of all planning.”⁶⁰

Every city administration stresses economic development, but economic development is more than spurring new growth. It also requires preserving a city’s valuable assets. One asset this city has is successful community gardens. New York needs a thoughtful process to evaluate its property and to determine the best use for each lot, including the possible creation of new gardens. Such an approach will treat people with respect; it will preserve the many values inherent in those lots; and it will protect improvements in quality of life that residents themselves have achieved.

In place of the current frustration and uncertainty, a rational planning process will, like the gardens, plant hope.



West Side Community Garden
Upper West Side, Manhattan

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Developing gardens, like building day care centers or bringing in job resource centers, should be part of planning. Sometimes we get so wrapped up with survival needs that we forget about the quality-of-life issues that also sustain people. Quality-of-life issues must be part of all planning.

Margaret Johnson

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48. Interviews conducted by Jennifer Kao, TPL intern, summer 1999.
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Established in 1978, the New York City Program is the Trust for Public Land's oldest and largest urban initiative. Over the past 20 years the program has helped gain permanent protection for over 300 acres of scarce city land, and has provided organizational, outreach, real estate and construction assistance to hundreds of community groups. TPL's programs focus on three main areas: helping to create and sustain community-managed parks, playgrounds and community gardens in the City's most disadvantaged neighborhoods; providing environmental education to New York's young people; and conserving our remaining natural areas for future generations to enjoy.



Howard Avenue Garden - Brownsville, Brooklyn

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