



Felicia Young, director of Earth Celebrations, leads a procession of gardeners in an annual Rites of Spring festival that celebrates New York City's community gardens.

Vince Eng

**O**n a warm fall day in New York's Lower East Side, a pack of skeptical teenage boys in requisite baseball caps, backpacks, and earrings follow a dark-haired woman into a largish garden next to their school on East 11th Street. A few youths have pulled their shirts over their heads in an exaggerated gesture of disgust with some swarming, but non-biting, insects. The woman, a volunteer named Maddalena, asks the boys if they have any ideas on what they'd like to do with the garden, since the space is going to be their baby for the next year. "Let's put crabs in the pond," cracks one gangly Hispanic youth. Another quickly proposes piranhas. The escort sighs and moves on, reciting a possible laundry list of projects that could improve the space, then quizzes them

on how many projects she's just mentioned. "None!" says one kid cheerfully, clearly thrilled to be out of doors on a school day, if oblivious to the objectives.

Before long, though, after a little time soaking up the fragrant scent of mint, and crunching brick, wood chip, and a bit of mud underfoot, the teens' wiseguy facades begin to melt. "What's that, growing on top?" one kid wants to know, pointing at an arbor. "Those are grape vines," explains their guide. "Grapes!" exults the kid, literally clapping his hands with delight and licking his lips.

A casual wanderer through New York's Lower East Side might share these students' pleasure and amazement in encountering such an unexpected space of tranquillity and natural splendor. Amid the neighborhood's drab, pockmarked tenement buildings,

double-parked rusting hulks, and sputtering radios, a spectacular array of gardens have sprouted in vacant lots and other once-neglected spaces.

With more than fifty disparate and unique patches of foliage, the Lower East Side has more gardens per square foot than any urban neighborhood in New York City, the country, and, perhaps, the world. Even Philadelphia, Boston, and Berlin, known for their community gardens, don't pack so many green spaces into so small an area. This statistic is at once logical and improbable, for there are few places where such oases are so desperately needed. These gardens support a staggering array of human- and bio-diversity; they are places to stretch, to think, to unburden, to breathe, to romance, and to dream. Providing succor and solace, they are a testament to the human capacity to fashion solutions under the most daunting conditions.



# Sidewalks End

The Lower East Side's community gardens are a surprise and a delight. But now, like other urban oases throughout the city, many may disappear.

by RUSS BAKER



*Cultivators of the earth are  
the most valuable citizens.*

—Thomas Jefferson

Yet as valuable as these gardens are to neighborhood residents, the city government has a more mixed view of the land's relative importance and potential use. On a city zoning map, the gardens appear not as lush and lovely places, but as prospective building sites. Many of the gardens were created on vacant lots, leased from the city for a dollar a year. While not all gardeners have signed leases, those who did made a devil's bargain—they agreed that the city could withdraw the lease at any time. Now the city is forging ahead with a long-dormant plan to sell 11,000 vacant lots, primarily to build mixed-income housing. The concept, though it promises affordable housing, makes little sense to residents if it means uprooting the gardens. "What makes people want to live there is the gardens," says garden advocate Felicia Young. "Who wants middle-

and market-rate housing with no open space?"

As New York City officials struggle to balance the need for open space with other pressing concerns like housing and tax revenue, scores of community gardens on vacant lots could be eradicated. GreenThumb, the City of New York/ Parks & Recreation program that leases vacant lots to gardeners, estimates that upwards of 300 community gardens could be destroyed to make way for development over the next several years. Up to twenty gardens in the East Village and the Lower East Side have been targeted for development, according to a recent article in *The New York Times*. What's at stake is more than the opportunity for neighbors to get acquainted as they share in the basic human impulse to turn the soil and make things blossom. These grassroots ventures play a crucial role in times

of dwindling social services, as places for kids to keep busy after school, as sanctuaries and silent shrinks for the poor who cannot afford psychological counseling, and as recreation spots for those who cannot journey to places like Florida or Vermont.

Long famed for housing the impoverished, from the great immigrant waves of American history to, more recently, junkies, starving artists, and a smattering of the voluntarily bohemian, the Lower East Side is colorful, but it hardly evokes pastoral images. Dominican groceries abut Polish butcher shops and vegetarian cafes waitressed by collegiate nosering-bearers. On Houston Street, a mural covers the bricked-up entrance to an abandoned synagogue. "Live by the Gun, Die by the Gun," it avows. "RIP Tupac Shakur. Stop the Violence."



Next door is the Yonah Shimmel Knish Bakery, "Original Since 1910," where dour ladies dispense potato, spinach, or mushroom-filled pastries.

Like the rest of the city, it is full of isolated people living cheek-to-jowl, solitary peas in a pod, each, by design or happenstance, virtually unaware of the other. But also, like poor neighborhoods elsewhere, there is a powerful draw to share lives. Old men from Spanish-speaking Caribbean nations that comprise the neighborhood majority plant themselves and their wobbly chairs outside shops in all but the most unbearable weather. Mothers monitor their children and parcel out morsels of wisdom and virulent gossip from the stoop. Plenty of folks do talk to each other, and watch out for one another.

Recent generations have been lucky for a few hardy honey locusts along the curb. But back in the fall of 1748, Peter Kalm, a Swedish naturalist visiting New York City, wrote: "I found it exceedingly pleasant to walk in the town, for it seemed quite like a garden." By 1807, however, a commission was declaring: "It may to many be a matter of surprise that so few vacant spaces have been left, and those so small, for the benefit of fresh air and consequent preservation of health."

In the 1930s, New York City got back into the nature business—of sorts. Robert Moses, the master builder of modern Gotham, created 255 new parks, mostly in middle- and upper-



Above: Planting a seed—New York City's community gardens, some of which are planted on vacant lots next door to schools, serve as living classrooms. Below and right: Spectacular puppets representing flowers and water spirits enliven the Rites of Spring pageant and procession.

income areas, but they were seas of asphalt, with benches, iron fences, and just a few shade trees. In the 1960s, a spate of equally barren parks sprang up in poorer neighborhoods, spaces that would be disintegrating less than a decade later. Meanwhile, during the economic downturn of the 1970s, landlords abandoned buildings, fire—often set by those same landlords in order to collect insurance money—raged unchecked, and vacant lots became as common as busted pay phones. Spiritual desolation typically follows on the heels of physical abandonment, and the lots soon accommodated prostitutes, drug dealers, and, on occasion, murderers.

The Lower East Side was littered with such bleak wastelands until a local artist named Liz Christy started doing something about them. Christy, with the considerable help of sympathizers, initiated the greening of the Lower East Side (see sidebar). She also

convinced New York City to adopt several supportive programs that would enable people in the neighborhood to reclaim the spaces. Christy, who died a decade ago, believed gardens would pay all kinds of dividends: "Noise is screened out by barriers and other more tranquil decibels such as birds chirping, water gurgling, trees rustling; sounds that preceded the sounds of the city's great mechanized, industrialized roar."

A sense of purpose might follow. "So many people in an urban context are deprived of the opportunity of contributing because they are not needed," Christy once said. Gardens, however, meant all hands on deck.

Back at the schoolsite garden on East 11th Street, everyone is expected to contribute ideas for redesigning and sprucing up the garden. The students need to think of a design for a footpath. Maybe a maze? "A yellow brick road," votes one lanky boy. What to do with the big area? Put in a ball field? Or a performance space? And the problem with the slope and the runoff—they'll have to move a lot of dirt. They also learn that tomatoes may be taken only from one central community plot, the others are private. The kids are told that to prevent junkies from shooting up or sleeping in the greenhouse, they'll need to use designs with an unobstructed line of sight.

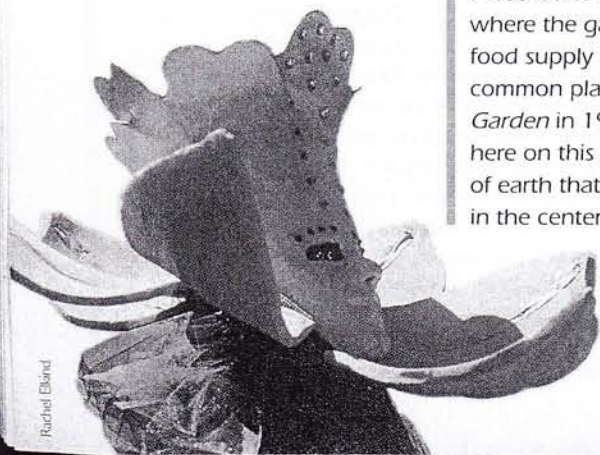
Incredibly, before this space was a garden, it was a school bus garage. Fuel tanks that couldn't be removed are still underground. For a while, gas had been leaking from the tanks into the school next door, although that problem has, for the most part, been resolved. "When you're digging, be sure you don't puncture a liner," says Madalena, who nevertheless notes that the plants are not harmed.

The relationship between the garden and the school next door is symbiotic. In 1992, Open Road, a local organization, worked with the school, then plagued with heavy street fighting and

#### I was born on a dairy farm in Wisconsin

where the garden was a major source of our food supply and wide open spaces were common place.... When I joined the 6BC Garden in 1992, my first thought was that here on this huge planet I again have a piece of earth that I can nurture and care for—and in the center of New York City, no less.

Mark Schmidtke  
6BC Botanical Garden  
Lower East Side, Manhattan



Rachel Blain



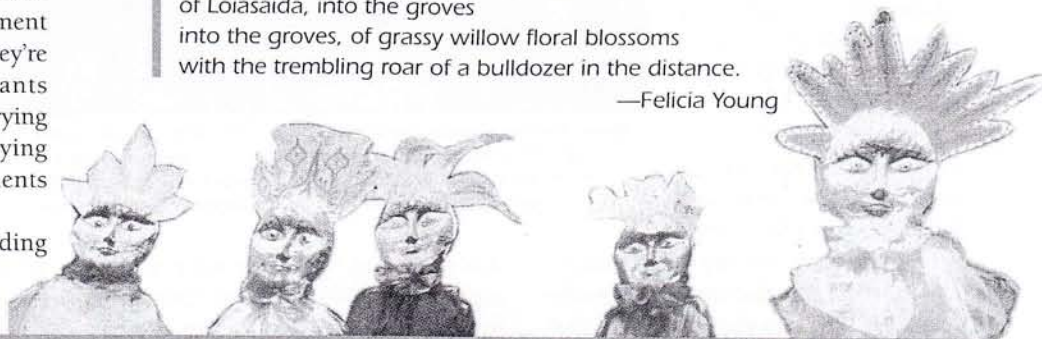
other discord, to redefine its mission, focusing on the garden as a key component for stimulating restless students. "I'd been a neighbor for fifteen years, and was afraid to walk down the block," says Open Road founder Paula Hewitt.

In the past year, teen-aged hands that might otherwise have been stealing hubcaps were instead wrist-deep in compost. Earlier inductees monitor a sophisticated system for turning waste into wonder, providing the Department of Sanitation with research data. They're also busy teaching local restaurants about the benefits of composting, trying to show them it's cheaper than paying garbage haulers. A couple of students actually work as paid consultants.

The kids' inaugural tour is winding

**Butterfly children, wings fluttering on 9th street past the bodega**  
 conch shells drone deep through the earth  
 between concrete cracks, daisies defy the next brick  
 tribal beats of drums and dancing spirits,  
 their faces looming over crowds,  
 painting the sky and pavement with shocks of pink, yellow, green.  
 Gaia, ancient goddess of the earth, weeps with her open womb  
 rose petals dry, bearing tulip bulbs  
 each gardener receives to bury in the earth,  
 they have mined through a hardened shell.  
 The rose snaps, its sacrificial beauty  
 to adorn her journey in the hot tar plains  
 of Loiasaida, into the groves  
 into the groves, of grassy willow floral blossoms  
 with the trembling roar of a bulldozer in the distance.

—Felicia Young



## THE GREEN MUSE

How one woman's garden in a vacant lot inspired an entire city

Christopher Burt

Liz Christy, a Greenwich Village painter who died of lung cancer at age thirty-nine in 1985, was a true visionary who transformed the way her fellow urbanites looked at vacant lots. She planted the first of the Lower East Side's community gardens in 1974. Today, the concept has spread throughout New York City, and more than 1,000 such gardens adorn the five boroughs.

That crucial first lot was located on the corner of Bowery and Houston Streets in a particularly dilapidated section of Manhattan. Once part of a grand seventeenth-century Dutch farm, the space was overflowing with garbage and debris when Christy and some friends turned their attention to it. The lush, sixty-plot garden still stands today.

From this effort emerged a new group, the Green Guerrillas. At first, this motley crew made its mark by tossing balloons filled with water and seeds over fences into vacant lots. Eventually, the Guerrillas started venturing inside the lots. In 1978, realizing that they were, in effect, illegal squatters, the gardeners approached the city for its blessing. City Hall responded by starting a small program, GreenThumb—with one part-time staffer and no budget—that issued short-term leases. "It really was a guerrilla effort," says Jane Weissman, GreenThumb's executive director.

Today, the 800 members of the Green Guerrillas assist with drawing up plans, answer technical questions, supply tools and shrubs and seeds, and go into the gardens wherever they are wanted or needed to lend a hand. The city's program, GreenThumb, which provided the Green Guerrillas with fencing material and soil in the

early days, now offers residents a panoply of support services, including the guidance of its landscape designer on how to plan and build a garden. During a recent week, GreenThumb staffers were delivering evergreen, apple, apricot, and peach trees to community gardens.

"All gardens in New York City, even today, show some sign of [Christy's] influence," says Phil Tietz of Green Guerrillas. Christy didn't just influence gardens, she inspired gardeners. One was a familiar, if eccentric, figure, with long white hair and beard floating on the wind. Known locally as Adam Purple for the color of his garb, he frequently rode a purple bicycle up to Central Park, accompanied by female friends, his "Eves," to collect horse patties and compost for fertilizer.

Purple followed Christy's lead and started his own space, dubbed the *Garden of Eden*. It no longer exists. Recently, a mystery figure has heroically trekked all over Manhattan, and, striking in the nighttime hours, painted a trail of purple footprints leading to the site of Adam's destroyed paradise.

Having influenced people like Purple, Christy went on to launch new projects that profoundly enhanced the quality of life in a number of neighborhoods. When office workers pause from their hectic schedules to shop for deliriously sweet, hot blueberry cider and an abundant variety of crunchy, spicy organic sprouts in greenmarkets throughout the city, they have no idea they are benefiting from a Liz Christy brainstorm. Thanks to her, quintessential big-city folk buy produce trucked in directly from small farms in rural New York and New Jersey to the city's two dozen greenmarkets.

—RB

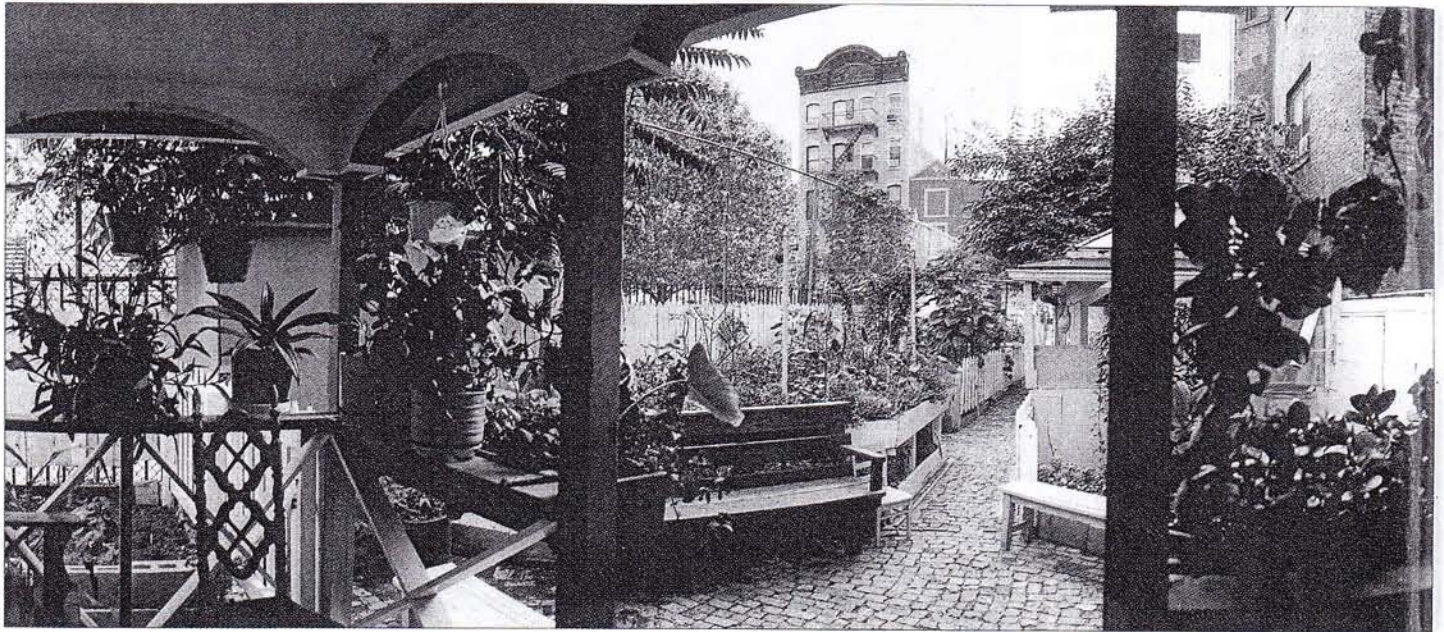


The history of the garden *brisas del Caribe* is truly a Cinderella story from ugly to beautiful. When my husband Angel and I were cleaning the lot I came across a little sprig in the ground. I left it, put stones around it, watered it, took care of it. As time went on, this little sprig grew into a bush and, to my amazement, it was a raspberry bush. Angel, with his hands of gold, made a trellis walkway, paths with brick siding, and a beautiful greenhouse that looks like a chapel. It is absolutely beautiful.

Mary Aponte  
Brisas del Caribe  
Lower East Side, Manhattan



Katherine McGlynn



Katherine McGlynn

Angel and Mary Aponte (top) have recreated a tiny slice of the tropics on the Lower East Side. *Brisas del Caribe* (Caribbean Breezes)—complete with a bright yellow casita, raised beds, and a greenhouse—is as much a tiny universe as it is a garden.

down—it's time for lunch, so Mark, a consultant with Open Road, decides to test the progress of the group of newcomers, the once-reluctant gardeners. Quick, he says, name some projects we have to work on. "Compost!" Hollers one boy. "The wall!" says another, and soon everyone is chiming in: "Open space!" "The greenhouse!" "Fix the swamp!"

In addition to serving as living classrooms, the gardens of the Lower East Side function as democracy labs, personal works of art, multicultural centers, performance spaces, and even spiritual havens. A few blocks from the East 11th Street garden, older, but no less rambunctious, garden enthusiasts can be found practicing democracy in full bloom. The garden,

known modestly as *6th and B*, is one of the biggest and most active in the neighborhood. With 100 individually-assigned vegetable and flower plots, and a lengthy waiting list, *6th and B* boasts an events program like that of a large town, with arts and crafts festivals, slide shows, and dinners. Something occurs nearly every night when the weather is good. One member, known to everyone just as "Eddie," not content with the allotted single four-by-eight-foot plot, got around the limit by building upward. Today, his precarious-looking but solid tower of rescued junk extends several stories high, and is featured in guide books and articles. Eddie likes to climb up and sit on top.

On one Sunday, the assembled membership is deliberating, dealing with the unpleasant task of cutting

down trees that block sun. One man rises to urge passage of a motion to save a particular specimen. "It's been around as long as any of us have," he says. The vote is taken, and most concur, but several officially abstain, and this troubles the moderator. "Hey folks," she grunts. "This is your garden, and this is democracy. Why are you abstaining?" From the back, comes a voice, perhaps from the sizable anarchist component in the area: "'Cause we don't give a shit!" Actually, even those members who aren't fond of conventional institutions do care a great deal, which is exactly why they're there.

While gardens like *6th and B* are massive communal efforts, others tend to take on the character of their primary muse, and become living works of art. At *Brisas del Caribe* (Caribbean



Breezes), on East 3rd Street, Angel Aponte, a sixty-year-old Puerto Rican native who works as a mover, has got a slice of Puerto Rico rigged up, a garden as much dominated by his casita, a bright yellow little house for daytime use, as by foliage. The casita is jammed with fragile treasures he's rescued from the trash, including pictures, ceramic figurines, white wire Christmas tree, trophies, even steer horns. Angel, who lives next door, is planting tulips in a raised bed; he's already got beans and tomatoes and medicinal plants. "This here," he says, "if you get stomach problems, this makes a good tea."

That type of old-world influence abounds. In some gardens, one finds examples of polyculture, an ancient practice, where salutary plant species are sown in close proximity. Marigolds, for example, are planted near tomatoes to repel a grub that attacks them, and to attract bees that help pollinate the tomato plants.

Cultural education unfolds spontaneously. The Bengalis and Pakistanis are astonished to find that the blonde and blue-eyed folks toiling nearby are Muslims, too, if from Bosnia. Passersby on the southern end of the Lower East Side, on Grand Street, in Chinatown, can admire a huge Chinese garden, *Hong Ning*, with smooth green bitter gourds and "yard-long" beans (actually a foot long), and a Tai Chi area. Elderly, Yiddish-speaking Jews, living in nearby housing projects, have increasingly ventured into the gardens established by the Latinos, now the neighborhood's dominant group. From one garden, members spotted a family, clad in the saris and panjabis of Bangladesh, peering down at them from a balcony, and waved for them to come down. Today, the clan tends its own plot, and participates in the communal decisions.

Manu Sassoonian, a soft-spoken



The greenhouse and well-tended plots of the Penn South Children's Garden make a statement and provide a patch of green against a backdrop of towering apartment buildings.

photographer from Iran, has seen cultural barriers melt in his twelve years of working the soil in *Green Oasis*. "Ethnic groups are constantly fighting for their share of a shrinking pie," he says. "With a garden like this where all ethnicities come and work together, it helps a lot. It doesn't happen in a public park."

*Green Oasis* is open on weekends, or whenever a member is there, and anybody can join for five dollars and get a key. A fig tree, symbolic to Persians and others, struggles on despite the cold. The day I was there, children and adults, black, Persian, Anglo-Saxon, and Latino, walked along a small, stone-lined pond filled with Koi fish, and admired elevated flowerbeds built high so kids in wheelchairs can cultivate them. The beds were brimming

with fruit, flowers, and vegetables including wild strawberries and green Mexican tomatillos, which taste almost like pomegranates.

At a time when government is cutting way back on social services, a nurturing entity like *Green Oasis* fills the void. Gardeners who grow their own produce lower their food costs and boost their nutritional intake. Visitors find a place to unwind, learn, and express themselves. There's a huge stage and rows of benches; anyone can—and everyone does—put on performances, teach puppet and mask-making, hold seminars, and even exchange wedding vows.

Felicia Young was married in *Green Oasis*. A slim blonde with a Modigliani face, Young is director of Earth Celebrations, a non-profit group that addresses environmental issues through the arts and sponsors all manner of festivals, pageants, and programs that celebrate both the Lower East Side's gardens and its diverse

community. Clad in traditional Indian wedding suits, Young and her groom traveled from *Green Oasis* by rickshaw in a procession with a jazz band to the 6th & B garden, where an accordionist she'd originally met on the subway serenaded her with French, Italian, and Polish songs. A gardener from *La Plaza* made a fresh bouquet, and her head wreath came from the 6th & B garden.

Many other Lower East Side residents use the gardens as open-air chapels and spiritual centers. An Hispanic church holds its novena, a nine-day period of prayer and singing, in *Bello Amanecer Borincano* (*Beautiful Borinquen Dawn*), from which gardener Carmen Pabon—a "Mother Teresa" of the Lower East Side—also feeds the homeless. Some gardens function as healing centers for people with AIDS.



**One of the founders of our garden was a warm and friendly man** from Puerto Rico.... He was a constant presence in front of the garden, with a smile and friendly word for all. When he passed away last year everyone who had known him felt the loss. As his wife was unable to pay for the funeral, garden members, block residents, and neighbors from the building where he lived took up a collection. It was quite unbelievable to see such an outpouring of feeling and sense of community. *El Sol Brillante* has really contributed to the sense of the neighborhood and I am thankful for founding members like him. His work continues to bear fruit in many ways and his wife, now in her eighties, continues to garden.

Gregory Montreuil

*El Sol Brillante*

*Lower East Side, Manhattan*

And in others, gardeners practice the rites of Catholicism mixed with the indigenous religious practices of the islands; plots often include Santeria shrines, with their attendant candles, religious medallions, and fragrances.

On a larger scale, residents for the past several years have feted the gardens and advocated their preservation through a festival called the Rites of Spring on Memorial Day weekend. Sponsored by Young's Earth Celebrations, the procession and twelve-hour pageant features 5,000 gardeners and community members. Young designs spectacular giant puppets and masks representing water spirits and wildflowers, heavily influenced by the Caribbean tradition of magical fantasy. A gardener dressed as a giant bluebird flies down from a tree. Celebrants don extravagant costumes and paint their faces and bodies. An opera singer performs from atop stilts, resplendent in a fifteen-foot iridescent gown. Last year, the entire side of one building along the route was festooned with umbrellas. The parade, which features trishaws, converges with the Loisaída festival, the biggest Latino fest of its kind.

**G**reen Oasis, with its fish pond, raised beds, parties, and pageants sits on a lot slated for development. So does the two-year-old *Chico Mendez Garden*. The city plans to build fifty-one affordable condominium units on the site, once a crime- and trash-ridden vacant lot where residents created a community garden of forty-four plots, plus trees, lawn, and a picnic area. "I think what's happening right now is really scary because people see the real estate money, but they

forget about the quality of life for people who live here," says artist and Mendez gardener Leslie Heathcote. So far, six locations have been selected to get the chop. The *ABC garden*, (at 8th between B and C) a more recent venture, has already been demolished.

The enormous physical and emotional investment that could be wiped out in a moment is evident in *All People's Garden* on 3rd Street between Avenues C and D. Sitting beneath an overhang surrounded by tribal carvings and old furniture, Olean For, a seventy-six-year-old African American woman, welcomes neighbor and stranger alike. Fingering her green "gimme" cap, she gazes out on the rows of foliage she has heroically tended, every day, for seventeen years and points to a building across the street: "Drugs were coming out of there like water," says Olean. "People were lined up from Avenue B to Avenue D. They used to threaten me. It was horrible."

But now, Olean cheerily reports on the transformation through a dearth of lower teeth. "This is a lovely block," she exclaims, as a young Latino man calls out a greeting. "Hi, baby," Olean warbles back.

She points across the street at an abandoned building occupied by squatters. The words "Bullet Space" adorn the structure's bright facade. "Them's nice people," she chuckles. "Been there seven, eight years." The spirit is infectious: Two buildings east is an elaborate mural of birds, leopards and flowers. On her own garden wall, Olean has painted: "I love the roses, I love the trees, I love all God's air that we breathe. Love thy neighbor as thyself."

Olean is certain her labors have not

been in vain. "I did so much work with no one helping me, so they will take care of it." Felicia Young, who spends her days and nights organizing the gardeners politically, looks considerably less confident of that.

To defend the gardens, Young's group and several others are organizing gardeners into a united front, a tough task given the fierce individualism of many members. Still, even in a violent storm, fifty gardeners lined up to speak before the local advisory panel, a peculiarly New York institution called a "community board." Highly politicized bodies, the boards are often controlled by local elected officials whose campaigns are dependent on developers. The residents who addressed the board did not know that the decision to kill several of the gardens had already been reached, wedged into a multipart proposal so dense even garden supporters unwittingly voted for it.

GreenThumb Director Jane Weissman and others are working to persuade city officials to allow them to participate in the planning process as the city forges ahead on developing the vacant lots. While Weissman acknowledges that not all the gardens can be saved, she plans to ask city officials to take a second look at some of them. "We [want] to go to the administration and say that among these 300 gardens are some incredible resources to the community," she says. The only way to ensure a garden's survival is for it either to become a Land Trust (a permanent open space), or receive Permanent Site Status (PSS) with Parks Department protection (turned into a park or placed under parks jurisdiction). Among the threatened gardens on the Lower East Side, only 6th & B has gotten Parks protection.

From the early days of the garden movement in the 1970s, the city has exhibited a reluctance to accept the spaces as permanent fixtures. To many, the city government's ambivalence about the gardens reflects a pattern characterized by changing zoning ordinances to attract megastores (K-Mart just opened in the area) that critics say wipe out the distinctive small shops that make New York unique, keep money in the community, and bind neighborhoods together. As for the





Former Green Guerrillas intern and staffer Lisa Schriebman visits with Norman Ferrer in a lush community garden in South Bronx.

housing shortage, activists argue that New York has enormous amounts of abandoned, bricked-up housing that could be rehabilitated. To be sure, on practically every block where there is a garden, there is an abandoned building. And New York City has 12,000 vacant lots, according to Gerard Lordahl, of the quasi-governmental Council on the Environment.

Still, the city does support Green-Thumb, which, in addition to leasing the lots to community gardeners also provides tools and supplies. "We very much support the use of underutilized vacant city-owned spaces as community gardens or for other positive community uses," says Craig Muraskin, Special Assistant to Deputy Mayor Fran Reiter. "However, it's important to be clear that when and if funds become available, or an opportunity arises to develop these sites into housing or other developments, those developments must take priority."

But Hugo Herrera, a fifty-four-year-old claims adjuster from Colombia who is active in *Tranquilidad*, one of three gardens on 4th between C and D, sees a thread between housing, gardening, and self-determination. He is among the many gardeners who argue that

what they have created is itself revitalizing the community. Herrera was a homesteader (squatter, if you prefer), but once he and the other inhabitants repaired the derelict structure they lived in, they bought it with a bank loan. "Today," Herrera says, "it is one of the most successful, financially, and well-kept-up on the whole block."

As the gardens have flourished, they have benefited both humans and wildlife. Gardeners report many bird species including kestrels, mockingbirds, owls, house and garden finches, and mourning doves. Cardinals and bluejays nest there, falcons have been trying to establish a presence, and flocks of goldfinches rest and feed on their way south. And perhaps the most skittish breed of all, the kid of the mean streets, is taking to the whole thing. A one-year controlled study revealed that with the rise of the gardens, children at Lower East Side schools are (gasp) choosing to eat more fresh vegetables.

The gardens are a testament to tenacity. After one of the first, appropriately named *The Garden of Eden*, was featured in *National Geographic*, the city bulldozed it. But soon another garden appeared nearby.

Then a third, and a fourth. And a dozen. And a score, and finally, in the Lower East Side, almost every scary, dirty, dispiriting vacant lot seemed to have been transformed. That's why Young's group and many others united last November to form the New York City Coalition for the Preservation of Gardens. And that's why the gardeners of the Lower East Side, along with gardeners from Harlem, South Bronx, the Upper West Side, and Brooklyn were outside on a cold night in February, gathered for a winter candle-lantern pageant to protest the demolition of the gardens.

To many, what exists on the Lower East Side is a model for Twenty-First Century urban living—an ecological city, of steel girders and hot cement but also of people fortified by and replenished by, and thoughtful of, the earth. And maybe, just maybe, this phenomenon is a sign that, when the terrain is fertile enough, even human cooperation can blossom. ▲

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