

A Patch of Green Earth

Lydia Lobenthal talks to Felicia Young

Manhattan can seem a cascade of gray. But stroll through the island's lower east side and you will see blue, because many of the buildings are still low here, and, more surprising, green. There are some 50 community gardens nestled—sometimes wedged—between buildings in the two small adjacent neighborhoods known as the Lower East Side and the East Village.

The gardens reflect the eclectic, eccentric, fierce and whimsical nature of these two neighborhoods. A bright aqua plastic bird twirls in the breezes over the Creative Little Garden; the garden at 6th and B is guarded by a towering sculpture some 20 feet high made up of miscellany and sundry, from wooden planks to plastic horse heads. La Plaza, founded by former gang members, features performance space and has a children's sandbox designed to look like a bird's nest. Brises del Caribe garden, East Side Story garden, Miracle Garden, the names are as diverse as the gardens and the communities they cultivate.

But there are battle scars below the blossoms and bricks. In Manhattan, where the population is ever-expanding and real estate is worth its weight in platinum, the lots on which the gardens reside have been the center of fierce urban politics for decades. One of those in the center of the movement to preserve the gardens is Felicia Young, of the nonprofit organization Earth Celebrations. This is the story of how these gardens grew, as she told it to me.

In the 1970s, the Lower East Side was completely neglected. Buildings burned down and weren't rebuilt; vacant lots became rubble-strewn drug havens where you found everything from car parts to dead bodies.

People in the neighborhood decided to do something.

At first the intention was just to clear the lots to get rid of the menace. But then people started planting gardens, and these incredible green

spaces grew. Little local gardens brought people in this eclectic neighborhood together: Dominican and Puerto Rican old-timers, disadvantaged kids, the artists who started to arrive in the early 1980s. Normally they wouldn't have any way to communicate with each other.

Over time, the gardens became centers offering everything from art classes to film series. They gave kids a chance for some fresh air and an alternative to making trouble. Some gar-

dens developed therapy programs for people dying of AIDS. Everything was being done for free by the people themselves.

By the early 1990s, cities around the world started looking at these home-grown gardens and saying: how can we create this? It was an urban improvisation that provided a glimpse of the way future cities should be.

The gardens flourished for decades, but in the years after the 1987 economic crash, developers slowly started to become interested in the City again, and they started going after the gardens. Lots were being put on the auction block, listed as vacant lands, identified only by number. Gardeners weren't notified, and they didn't understand the processes. The whole thing had been a series of small independent movements; it was a big shift to start thinking about saving the gardens permanently.

A Seed

I got involved in 1990. I had seen the Garden of Eden destroyed. It was one of the first gardens in New York City and was intricately designed. It was a very sad moment. I thought: we have to do something.

I had been organizing theatrical pageant parades to raise awareness on different issues.



Earth Celebrations Director Felicia Young with costume garden characters in a Lower East Side garden

I organized a parade that would visit all the gardens in the neighborhood. I went up and down the streets inviting the people in each space individually. Everybody was enthusiastic.

We made giant puppets and costumes representing each species of plant in the gardens and got a marching band. The idea was that on this day the garden species come to life in human form to honor the gardens and thank the gardeners. The parade stopped at every garden, which in those days meant about every other block. Each garden gave us a flower. We gave them a bulb to plant, a sculpture we called Gaiam, and a green pen they used to color in their garden on a giant ceremonial map, because we were trying to get the City to recognize the gardens.

It took about ten hours, and afterwards people immediately started planning what they wanted to be next year. The parade became an annual event. The Earth Celebrations organization stemmed from that. The whole thing grew and grew.

In 1994, the battle against the neighborhood gardens intensified. This led to the creation of the Lower East Side Garden Preservation Coalition, which gathered the energy of all these talented individuals and generated a lot of media attention. It grew beyond the neighborhood.

In November 1996, there was a big article in *The New York Times* about gardens across the City being destroyed. That's how we found out about the others. I looked up the phone numbers of the people mentioned in the article and called. I said, "Listen, we heard about what is happening to you. We should meet."

A Miracle

We met at the Coalition's office in the Lower East Side. More than 200 people showed up. Many old people came, people on crutches, people from the most remote parts of the City who had never in their lives been to Manhattan. It was like a scene from a movie.



Winter garden

"It was an urban improvisation that provided a glimpse of the way future cities should be."

From that meeting, we created the New York City Garden Preservation Coalition. We organized a rally at City Hall to deliver letters of support to the various officials. Many City officials who had been ignoring the issue started to get it. Philanthropists started offering financial support and helping us negotiate. Celebrities got involved.

And that was the miracle. You go from a grassroots movement to having powerful people fighting for you who knew who to call, and whose own names meant their calls would go through.

In 1999, 114 gardens were being put on the auction block, many of them tiny spaces in the Bronx and Brooklyn. People put together money and cut a deal—\$4.2 million for the group. Now

these gardens are part of the New York Restoration Project founded by Bette Midler, and they are permanently protected.

When Mike Bloomberg was elected mayor, one of the first things he did was transfer more than 200 gardens—many of them in the Lower East Side—to the Parks Department, which gave them protected status.

Unfortunately a lot of other neighborhoods didn't luck out. In the Lower East Side, we lost some gardens but we saved some, including large ones on premium developing spots.

After all that, after more than three decades, it just took one person, one signature, to make that happen. □

Earth Celebrations is a nonprofit organization which fosters ecological awareness and builds community through the arts.

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