

# Attack of the Butterfly Spirits: The Impact of Movement Framing by Community Garden Preservation Activists

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**ABSTRACT** *This study of the community garden preservation movement on the Lower East Side of New York examines the role of movement framing by activists in their struggle to save hundreds of gardens from destruction. In repeated confrontations with the Giuliani administration, gardeners successfully de-routinized the process of urban redevelopment by portraying the loss of a garden as an unimaginable violation against themselves, and the city. This process of re-framing urban development helped activists to compensate for their disempowered political status, and was instrumental in forcing the Giuliani administration to negotiate to save the gardens. Focusing on framing by movement activists demonstrates the purposive and strategic character of neighborhood identity. Emphasizing the strategy of neighborhood identities is a useful corrective to the many studies of community movements that emphasize their emergence from a relational, presumably non-strategic, local reality.*

**KEY WORDS:** Community gardens, Lower East Side, New York City, community movements, framing, social movements

## Introduction

In 1996, New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani announced that a priority of his second term would be the auctioning of thousands of city-owned properties to the private market, as a means of raising revenue for the city's coffers. Among the city's inventory of property were over 700 community gardens, scattered in inner city neighborhoods in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Brooklyn. The community gardens, cooperatively-run local green spaces, provide critically needed recreational space in inner city neighborhoods, and the Mayor's announcement started a movement to preserve the gardens from harm.

These spaces are a focus of intense attachment for the people that use them, and community gardeners became vocal opponents of the Giuliani administration. Since community gardens are concentrated in minority neighborhoods, the garden preservation movement became an environmental justice movement that confronted the city with demonstrations, civil disobedience and law suits.

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In this paper, I examine the symbolic struggle waged by gardeners as a corrective to the often simplistic portrayals of community-based movements as non-strategic products of local relationships and experiences. In particular, I apply the language of frame alignment theory to capture how community gardeners elaborated the sentiments and visions they held for their spaces into a potent political challenge to the Giuliani administration. In the study of social movements, frame alignment theory is used to analyze how movement actors in social movement make meanings that enable action (Snow *et al.*, 1986; Snow & Benford, 1988; Snow & Benford, 1992). Possessing a grievance does not lead to collective action until actors within the aggrieved group perform symbolic work that overcomes embedded obstacles to collective action. Effective symbolic framing of an issue allows movement actors to make the case that existing power arrangements are wrong and to articulate visions for new arrangements (Gamson *et al.*, 1982; Snow & Benford, 1992).

Framing is a contentious interactive process that involves people taking experience, emotions, ideologies, and political perceptions and elaborating them into a system of meaning. In the study of neighborhood-based urban movements, the concept of framing is generally underused. Instead, there is a general emphasis on local praxis as a basis for movement organizations and meaning (Castells, 1983; Lefebvre, 1996). Local customs, historical memory, social networks, place and ethnic identifications are held to be the basis for common action among neighbors who organize via localized social networks and organizations. In this paper I argue that community gardeners have a distinct local praxis that is relational, historical, and deeply tactile, in that it is directly linked to the experience of the garden. The result of that praxis was very much in evidence during much of the mobilization to challenge Mayor Giuliani's planned auctions. However, framing offers a better vocabulary to capture how activists put their praxis and identity as gardeners to work in overcoming a problematic political position and an initial lack of public support to save the gardens.

Research for this article is based on participant observation I conducted from 1997 to 1999. My research concentrated on Lower East Side community garden preservation struggles, linking them to the politics of gentrification. To learn about gardens, I volunteered at three different gardens, and attended member meetings. To understand the political struggles over gardens, I attended meetings for Lower East Side, and city-wide, activist organizations that were focused on the garden preservation question, and I subscribed to Internet discussion groups for community gardeners. I conducted 18 sit-down interviews with gardeners and preservation activists, in addition to observation and conversation at meetings and political events. In addition, I attended meetings of the Lower East Side community board, and city Council hearings and land use deliberations. I used press accounts to fill in details about litigation and political process, and to gauge the public response to gardener activities. I used newspaper articles on the gardening issue to document both a rise in visibility of the garden preservation issue over time, and a change in the tone of coverage, from generally sympathetic to a more politicized coverage treating the gardeners as a test of Mayor Giuliani's openness to challenge.

### **Framing Community Resistance**

Community-based movements, their origins, and their transformative potential are a central focus of urban research, but in general urban studies has not made much use of the sociological literature on social movements. Instead the conceptualization of movements

in urban studies remains deeply indebted to the structural Marxist direction laid out by Castells and Lefebvre. In the powerful and elegant formulation of Lefebvre urban struggles are a struggle by individuals and communities to assert use value over exchange values. The ultimate goal of the confrontation is 'the right to the city', the ability of citizens to achieve an active citizenship that allows for the reclamation of space for democratic and creative purposes (Tajbakhsh, 2001; McCann, 2002). The garden controversy of the late 1990s was a classic example of a constituency claiming a right to the city. The treatments of the garden movement of the late 1990s all emphasize this confrontation of use versus exchange (Schmelzkopf, 2002; Staeheli *et al.*, 2002). In essence, the gardens had grown over 20 years as free spaces, removed from the market, and creating a distinct internal culture, or praxis, based on the close natural connection between gardeners and their plants. As with many movements, this praxis came very much to the fore in gardener demonstrations and public statements. The way that gardeners made their case, began with their dramatizations of their relationship to the spaces, and a description of its transformative potential. However, I will argue that as vital as gardener praxis was, what ultimately created a positive outcome for gardeners was the way they transformed those meanings in a complex political field in order to draw new allies and resources. The decisive political leverage that gardeners needed came when they became broadly identified as exemplars of an ideal citizen, whose contributions and virtues were devalued by Mayor Giuliani's authoritarianism and free market radicalism. These transformations of meaning do not receive much attention in studies of movements like the gardeners. Too often, local meanings within urban movements are presumed to come from an unproblematic, broadly unified and organically related realm of the 'local' that stands in a structural juxtaposition to the commodified, surveilled realm of neo-liberal capitalist experience.

Recent studies of urban politics demonstrate the many gaps left by this formulation. Urban life is characterized by so much rupture and discontinuity that the generation and deployment of meaning can be intensely complex and contested. The most evident and interesting problem is the widely-noticed phenomenon of spatial and symbolic commodification. Study after study on urban politics center the problems that confront communities trying to deploy local meaning as a basis for solidarity, but find that their locally-generated meanings are constantly seized and recoded for consumption. This has been well documented for the Lower East Side in the work of Smith (1996), Abu-Lughod (1994), and Mele (2000). These studies show how the radical working class praxis, the immigrant solidarity, and the artistic ferment that characterize the area have been repurposed into a generalized 'funky ambiance' that helps to market the area. The observed result is that the 'authentic local' is substantially interpenetrated by commodified meanings, and even resistance can produce contradictory results (Merrifield, 2002).

In addition, the political landscape of the late capitalist city holds unprecedented challenges to effective political action. The political mechanisms of redevelopment are complex, opaque and tend to involve actors and interests well beyond the realm of localized government bodies. Recent work on the impact of rescaling on localities brings attention to the degree to which neo-liberal development policies elude confrontation by moving relevant decision making beyond the local level, and 'hollows out the state' so that it is no longer an arena in which citizens can press demands (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). To be effective, local movements actors must be prepared to 'jump scale' beyond the local, a feat that requires more than a locality bound notion of 'praxis' can encompass: citizens must be politically and media savvy, and they must have a handle on the technical and

legislative processes affecting them. These challenges spurred the growth of the large community-based non-profit sector, and substantially altered the tenor of community politics (Mayer, 2003). More than ever before the relational, authentic local is a site where politically knowing activists must *enact* a drama of community as a means to political influence in a complex field. Specificity about the strategies local people use to be heard helps us to move away from a naïve view of the role of local relationships and experiences in spatial struggles (Gregory, 1998).

In social movement studies, framing was a response to resource mobilization theories that were too instrumentalist and purposive in their construction of activist activity (Johnston & Klandermans, 1995). Framing turned researcher attention to the cognitive and cultural dimensions of movements, by explaining how activists generated meanings that accomplished tasks important to movements. However, framing in turn has been criticized as being too ‘voluntaristic’, too pragmatic and strategic to capture the meanings within movements. By emphasizing the knowing, strategic ways that actors use culture and meaning against movement opponents, framing can ignore other ways that culture operates within movements. Jasper (1997) has criticized framing as a concept that is ‘overstretched’ in the analysis of social movements, as it detracts attention from the many other motivations for activist and movement work. Individuals participate and form movement cultures for a myriad of reasons: as a way of expressing agency and ‘artfulness’; to derive a sense of inner purpose; and to find concrete ways of living out alternative social visions. Others criticize framing studies for being too directed at looking at how movement actors direct meanings at a wider public, to the detriment of explaining identity formation and meaning-making within movements, or across different movement factions (Benford, 1997; Payerhin & Zirakzadeh, 2006).

However, I would argue that it is precisely the voluntarism and ‘thinner’ notion of culture that may rescue studies of community-based movements from an over-reliance on a self-evidently dated notion of an organic, unitary community movement that emerges from an authentic, local realm of experience. The language of the framing literature has a richer vocabulary to describe how local people repurpose local sentiments for combat in complex political terrain. Terms like ‘frame bridging’ and ‘frame amplification’ refer to ways that activists stretch meanings to make new connections in the public sphere, and the ways that they reinforce aspects of their message by reinforcing its emotional impact through symbolic activity. These strategic, specific terms do a better job of capturing the process of the *elaboration* of local themes that spur collective organization and that can attract attention and sympathy in non-local realms of political activity.

The re-framing that gardeners accomplished worked with the local praxis evolved in gardens. The praxis of Lower East Side community gardens is unique, grounded in the Lower East Side’s radical history, and in the natural experience afforded by the gardens. Gardeners took elements of this praxis and forged them into a successful campaign that centered the person of the gardener as the best representative of a generalized local citizen who was silenced and disempowered by an overly entrepreneurial city.

## **Lower East Side Community Gardeners and the Roots of the Citywide Movement**

### *Gardens and the resistive praxis of the Lower East Side*

The language and symbolism that gardening activists eventually used in later confrontations with Mayor Giuliani evolved from the highly specific context and culture

of the community gardening movement. The Lower East Side is traditionally a contentious neighborhood with a history of radical political activism and artistic ferment. This tradition informed how the neighborhood responded to the urban crisis, and is the fundament from which the unique praxis of community gardeners evolved. Community gardening started on the Lower East Side, during the urban crisis of the 1970s that devastated the neighborhood, as well as other neighborhoods in New York City. The Lower East Side is a large area, covering the traditional ethnic neighborhoods of Little Italy, Chinatown, the Jewish Lower East Side south of Houston Street, and the largely Puerto Rican area to the north and east, known as 'Loisaida'. It was this latter area, with its low income population and traditionally cheap tenement housing that was hit hardest by the urban crisis, as Neil Smith has documented. Large scale disinvestment by landlords and businesses left an area that was depopulated, and struggling with poverty, crime, and low-quality housing. The city's policy of fiscal austerity concentrated budget cuts in fire and policing services to the poorest city neighborhood, a policy which facilitated a wave of arson as landlords torched buildings on which they could no longer pay taxes (Smith, 1996). The result was scores of abandoned buildings and vacant lots which the city could not secure, and which became havens for drug users and illegal dumping.

Local groups organized 'homesteading' groups that used self-help to reclaim uninhabited buildings, and community gardeners went to work creating beautiful open spaces out of the city-owned lots that blighted the neighborhood. Community self-determination, de-commodified housing and services, creative freedom, and racial and economic justice were the most important tenets of the Lower East Side movement to rescue the neighborhood from deterioration. Marginality fostered intense creativity: artists and activists collaborated in artistic and political experimentation, honing their skills on repeated confrontations with the city to fight for schools, services, and control of available land (Mele, 2000). The community arts movement was fundamental to this effort, including street theater, spoken work and dance, and the Nuyorican movement documented the community's struggle against racism and exclusion. Besides community gardens, the Lower East Side developed and still has numerous community-controlled organizations from this period including homesteads, mutual housing associations, food co-ops, arts centers, and financial institutions.

All of these influences conjoined within the membership and ideals of the gardening movement, influencing the praxis they evolved. Throughout history, gardens have served as spaces of social vision, and in the American cities they have a long association with moral reform of the poor, civic uplift and New Deal liberalism (Lawson, 2005). In contrast, Lower East Side gardens exist to challenge dominant structures of power. With names like 'Garden of Poor People in Action', 'Harmony Garden', 'Chico Mendez', gardens are designed and organized to act as 'free spaces'. They are strongly participatory and democratic, emphasizing bottom-up voice, consensual decision-making, and collective control of the space (Mele, 2000). More fundamentally, community gardens offer users a heightened sense of attachment to place via a tactile relationship to the land and nature. Long-time gardeners have a noticeably strong connection to the city as a natural space. They notice soil quality and how light falls between buildings; they know what plant species are native to the now-filled marshlands that comprise the Lower East Side, and they can trace the subterranean streams that run underneath the streets. The most fundamental aim of the gardening movement is to effect a total transformation of the urban, into a natural space offering creativity and freedom: '... the avant gardener raises

the stakes, adds meaning to action, sets a standard, and joins deliberately with others in a common cause... radical gardening involves tangible ground-level 'material-bodily principle' issues'. (Wilson, 1999, pp. 26–27). A gardener I interviewed described how the confluence of natural connection, pleasure and political transformation fostered political commitment:

It's about the community [people]... and that – I'm involved with something that is making the world a better place... And what it boils down to – we're talking about egos, and the essence of your being... there's a lot invested in the garden... To a person that's not interested in plants, they just don't see plants. But somebody that put their heart into it, and they put their hands in the ground, and they paid for it, that's something that you've invested in (Interview, 8 March 1998).

The tactility and sensuality of gardens are the bedrock qualities that give community gardens such a central role in preserving even now the local praxis that emerged from the movements of the 1970s. The membership of community gardens has evolved along with gentrification, but the experience they offer new users remains remarkably consistent with their original vision. New arrivals have the opportunity to reconnect with nature, and experience their urban neighborhood through fresh eyes. Community gardens can be remarkably rigorous social environments, forcing people with disparate social positions to make consensual decisions about a space's uses and meaning. Even more importantly, the tactility of gardens has a critical mnemonic dimension. If praxis is composed through the power of collective memory, the community gardens are one of the most powerful sites for replenishing the utopian impulse behind the original movement. Every garden has an often-repeated 'origin story' describing the collective struggle to create the space, gardeners can trace the lineage of different bulbs and cuttings back through the hands of now vanished neighbors, and walkways are lined with the bricks of a tenement that fell on the site, often as a result of city neglect (Martinez, 2001).

Community gardeners began as squatters, but in 1973 the city began giving gardeners provisional leases for the spaces, and an official garden program, Operation Green Thumb, was created with federal funding (Lawson, 2005). The leases were given to individuals and organizations who agreed to tend the gardens and maintain some public access to the spaces. However, the leases also stipulated that the gardens were a 'temporary use' for the vacant land, and could be removed at will by the city if opportunities for development arose. Of course, gardeners never understood their spaces to be temporary or vacant, but while the Lower East Side remained undeveloped, conflicts rarely arose. Twenty years went by, as gardens grew increasingly entrenched and sophisticated, assisted by a web of local and national non-profit environmental organizations. The long stretch of time, during which the official construction of gardens as 'temporary' went unchallenged, created a gulf in perception between gardeners and city officials.

After the disinvestment and abandonment of the 1970s, gentrification of the Lower East Side began in the early 1980s, and continues today. In response, a community movement arose to resist rising rents and widespread land speculation (Mele, 2000). Local politicians and activists met and drafted a plan for creating a sustainable stock of affordable housing to balance out the new market rate development. This plan, known as the 'Three Part Plan', proposed unit-for-unit parity in development of low income and market-rate housing. Proceeds from the sale of city properties for market-rate development would be

used to develop affordable housing. United under the slogan ‘This Land is Ours’, community people mobilized to force the city accept the plan, which it finally did in 1986. The Three Part Plan created a pool of affordable rental housing that along with public housing anchors the neighborhood’s low and moderate income population. However, other factors, including the end of tenant protections and rent regulations have led to an almost absolute displacement of low income tenants from private housing (Mele, 2000).

The Three Part Plan was a pyrrhic victory for gardeners. Neither the city nor local housing activists distinguished garden lots from actual vacant lots, and a large number of local gardens were listed as available for development. As a result, a rift between housing activists and gardeners developed that grew over time as development pressure increased. By the beginning of the 1990s, Lower East Side community gardeners understood the need to organize a voice in opposition to the city that was independent of the neighborhood’s traditional progressive political establishment. However the momentum to create that voice only emerged in the face of direct threats to specific gardens.

An overview of garden history demonstrates gardeners’ disempowerment and formal exclusion from land-use processes that affected the spaces they loved. The Green Thumb program gave gardeners important technical assistance, but in return the city held the power of recognition. There were certain important administrative exclusions that preserved the gardeners’ powerless position that later on became central grievances for the gardeners. Principal among these was the practice among city agencies of not distinguishing garden lots from empty lots. Gardens were officially on the city’s property rolls as ‘empty lots’, sometimes with an additional note of a ‘temporary structure’ if the gardeners had added a shelter or water feature. In city council land-use hearings, or in official correspondence, gardens were only discussed by their official block and lot number, even where there was a long-standing garden that was widely known by a given name. This meant that gardeners could attend hearings and still not be sure if a decision was affecting their site, and in several cases local politicians unknowingly voted to destroy a site because the agenda referred to a numbered lot, rather than a named garden. The arrangement suited the city, which used obscure administrative language and other methods to make citizen participation in land-use decisions as difficult as possible. A second point to make is that while community gardeners argue they are representing ‘the community’, what they have developed is a rather specialized local identity – cooperative, ecological, and somewhat pantheistic – that is linked to the entity of the garden that has its own spatial form, organization, and moral order. In these spaces gardeners enact their own version of what it means to be local and of the community, but it is not always the same vision as that held by other local progressives or other power brokers. These two structural issues – the powerlessness of gardeners, and their specialized niche in the political ecology of the Lower East Side – are the main concerns that drive the need for symbolic framing as a political strategy.

### *The Emergence of the Lower East Side Garden Movement*

The 1986 destruction of a renowned Lower East Side space – the Garden of Eden – to make way for a low-income housing development, was the initial catalyst for organizing among gardeners. After this loss, followed soon after by news of the Three Part Plan, gardeners understood their spaces were vulnerable to destruction. Beginning in 1991, a small arts organization known as Earth Celebrations inaugurated a local ceremony of

remembrance for the Garden of Eden, the ‘Rites of Spring’ that became an annual ritual. Earth Celebrations, and the Rites became a central point of organizing among gardeners. Initially there were few opportunities to mobilize in a sustained way, since opportunities only opened up during the struggle for specific gardens. The recession of the 1990s slowed gardener organization, but by the mid-1990s, gardeners were organizing citywide. At a meeting at a Lower East Side church in November 1994, the Lower East Side Garden Preservation Coalition was founded apart from Earth Celebrations; it became a ‘unified forum and network to share information, preservation strategies, and gain support from each other and the many gardens, organizations, and individuals who would like to help with the effort’ (NOSC, 1998).

As of 1996, the danger of garden destruction was not quickening local development, but rather a sweeping plan to end them throughout the city. One of the campaign promises of the second Giuliani administration was to improve the city’s fiscal health by auctioning auction off 11,000 city-owned properties which were under the control of the City’s Department of Housing, Preservation, and Development (HPD). The auctions proposal placed in jeopardy 300 gardens, out of over 750 citywide. The auctions would include a minimum of local input. The process gave community boards and the city council a limited role in compiling lists of available properties. These bodies could only recommend that some properties be added or removed, but the Mayor’s office could alter the lists at will, without consultation. Aside from harm done to community gardens, the auction process was nothing less than an end run around the city’s already weak local participatory structures.

### **Strategies of Frame Alignment in Gardener Activism**

Framing activity by movement participants is often described as a process of ‘frame alignment’. In order to involve new adherents and to motivate people towards protest, movement actors make rhetorical linkages that aid in mobilization and common identification (Snow *et al.*, 1986). There are distinct framing strategies associated with frame alignment, including frame amplification and frame bridging. The former ‘refers to the clarification and invigoration of an interpretive frame that bears on a particular issue’ (Snow *et al.*, 1986). In that process, activists elevate specific beliefs, values and emotions that are ‘presumed basic to prospective constituents but which have not inspired collection action for any number of reasons’ (Snow *et al.*, 1986).

Many emotional and motivational themes that gardeners used in their interpretive frames were taken directly from the themes and symbols they developed in the Rites of Spring. As a kind of template for gardener symbolism, I refer to it often, although the ritual does not have exactly the same character as other political demonstrations. Its main creator, Felicia Young, the director of Earth Celebrations, was an artist, who was consciously experimenting with the power of ritual, and its relationship to community life (Interview, March 10, 1998). The Rites was structured as a music-led procession of revelers that wound its way to deliver a fertility blessing to every garden past and present on the Lower East Side. At different stages of the process, costumed participants enacted a pageant depicting the ‘kidnapping of Gaia’ by developers, followed by her ultimate rescue by the combined forces of nature and community. As community-based theater, the Rites straddled the line between a ritual of solidarity and a performance; its goal was to foster



mutuality, common identification and political self-consciousness among its members (Cohen-Cruz, 2005).

### *Loss and Rage*

At their core, the Rites were a ritual of remembrance. They began with a blessing of the place where the Garden of Eden once grew, and in the march to individual gardens, the procession stops to bless both existing and destroyed gardens. Remembrance is maintained in other ways: Earth Celebrations' online map of community gardens never removes a bulldozed garden; the garden remains marked with the addition of the red letters 'BULLDOZED' and the date. At its base, remembrance of a destroyed garden is about anthropomorphically transforming a garden from a place into an entity whose life has been taken. Usage by Coalition activists emphasized this linkage, by referring to a garden demolition as being 'whacked', and the list of auctionable gardens as the 'hit list'. Once defined as a death (or more strongly, a murder), the loss of a garden ceases to be routine; it is a bereavement, whose deeper emotional implications can be felt and respected. That new framing of a garden destruction accomplished several tasks. First, it challenged the City's construction of gardens as temporary and fungible when better options come along. Second, it increases the indignation that gardeners would feel when their spaces were destroyed. HPD tried very hard to make garden demolitions impersonal, and inevitable. The bureaucratic use of block and lot numbers meant that gardeners could remain unaware until the end their spaces were slated for destruction. Gardeners were rarely given much advance notice of destruction, and it sometimes came indirectly, in the form of a notice posted on a garden fence. The effect was to both trivialize and privatize the distress of a garden demolition. In contrast, activists used the experience of bereavement to re-translate the destruction in a source of collective action. At a Coalition meeting, an organizer described the process by which she used empathy over loss to move people to action with the Coalition:

... You have to tell [gardeners] that they don't have to just chain up the gate. That's how HPD would like it, just chain it up and walk away, but then people are really upset and hurt. Like, why me? When there are real vacant lots to take first. You have to listen and tell them about the process and what they can still do. And when you talk for a while, they get... mad, they want to do something' (Notes of Coalition meeting, 5 August 1998)

In some instances, remembrance and grief helped to overcome insularity, and race and class differences that complicated organization across neighborhoods. For example, the most active preservation activists during my period of observation were young, white and educated Lower East Siders, while Harlem and Bronx gardeners were elderly, low-income African Americans or Latinos. At the point that Lower East Side activists began city wide coordinating, some were conscious of their lack of credibility as white activists in those other neighborhoods. In one action in October 1998, they established a relationship with a group of elderly Harlem gardeners by attending a 'funeral' on the day their space was to be bulldozed. The preservation activists went up to Harlem, and stood in silence as the gardeners took turns praying, lighting candles and recalling good moments they enjoyed there. In preparation for the funeral, Coalition activists coached visiting participants to

respect the reality of the funeral, to refrain from demonstration style invective, and to concentrate on offering sympathy. By centering their common experience as grief stricken gardeners, white activists demonstrated respect, so that information about how to fight for remaining gardens could be presented without appearing to condescend.

Closely connected with the use of grief, was the amplification of anger in connection with the destruction of gardens. The most ready, and effective device for amplifying anger was the bulldozer, which over the course of several years gardeners transformed into a potent symbol of the destructive power of development. As opportunities for frame amplification, bulldozings were critical, being the palpable moment of destruction. A bulldozing is the moment that crystallizes – in the form of an enormous, diesel-belching machine – the agent of the transformation from garden to developable lot. Witnesses to a bulldozing hear the roar of the machine, smell the smoke, and see its blades hacking green plants into the earth. To see a beautiful green oasis transformed within half an hour into a featureless brown lot delivered an unsettling shock that de-normalized the process of development.

There were a number of examples when gardeners used bulldozers to inspire empathy in the wider public. The most literal was at a June 1998 Coalition fundraiser, where activists created a ‘virtual’ bulldozing. An entire room was carpeted with lawn turf, and arranged into a lush garden using potted plants and trees. Projected on one wall was larger than life video footage of a bulldozer ripping into the earth, so that participants could walk through and see the reality of a garden’s destruction, complete with a high-decibel roar on the soundtrack. A widely-circulated Coalition leaflet was printed with a picture of a bulldozer, and a quote from a New York Times editorial (14 January 1999) that had called the destruction of community gardens ‘an act of neighborhood violence’.

The characteristic struggle over bulldozings was a constant effort by gardeners to make them as visible, contentious and emotional as possible. In nearly all cases, there were contingents of gardeners who attempted to block the bulldozers by barricading or occupying the lot. On the other side, the city and developers tried to keep them unexpected and quiet. HPD often scheduled garden demolitions in the dead of winter (especially around holidays) so that gardens were unoccupied, as well as less telegenic. The struggles between them make clear that both sides understood the symbolic power of garden bulldozings. Prior to the 1998 bulldozing of the Lower East Side’s Chico Mendez garden, the developer urged the gardeners to go in and remove plants so that the bulldozing could proceed. The gardeners refused, and the developer delayed the bulldozing, asked them again to remove the plants, and made a point of telling the local paper that he had given the gardeners the opportunity to clear their plants (Anderson, 1997). When he finally bulldozed the garden, gardeners made leaflets, organized a fax jam and attended public meetings denouncing him as a garden killer. (Shortly after the developer lodged a suit against gardeners for defamation of character; the case was dismissed). The Mendez gardeners’ refusal to clear the lot was briefly controversial within the Coalition, because of their willingness to sacrifice living plants in order to make the garden’s destruction more ‘real’. When challenged at a Coalition meeting, Mendez gardeners argued clearing the lot would mean that they were toiling to ‘unmake’ their space in order to confirm a systemic life that the garden was just another vacant lot. In their view, the developer needed to ‘take the hit’ for killing a living garden, and he did (Notes of Coalition meeting, 18 September 1997). That controversy was a moment when praxis and framing visibly diverged: the Mendez gardeners made a choice to express their relationship to the garden in a way that would leverage greater media attention and sympathy.

When covered by the press, bulldozings were invariably covered in a manner sympathetic to gardeners, even where reporters contextualized the garden controversy in terms of the need for more housing. The ‘human interest’ bias of the media meant that stories on the issue included a ‘paradise lost’ angle, coverage of a garden’s history, and its role in the neighborhood. In addition, there were city missteps – especially the October 1998 bulldozing-by-mistake of a Harlem school garden done while the children were lined up outside to go work in the garden – that gave more exposure to the claim that bulldozings constituted an act of violence against communities and local people (Wilgoren, 1998).

### *‘Nature in Revolt’*

In its conception of a linkage between protest and human and ecological transformation, the community garden preservation movement had many similarities with the global justice movement that surged into visibility after the WTO demonstrations. ‘Seattle movement’ activists link understanding of the human relationship with nature with the decentralized, consensual mobilization tactics they use in demonstrations. For example, the activist Starhawk (2002) uses the images of the tree trunk, and the web as examples of the strength the new activism derives its rejection of rigid hierarchies. The Rites of Spring used similar imagery in its allegorical presentation of community resistance to the evil forces of redevelopment. In the pageant story, enacted almost exactly the same way during its fifteen year run, Gaia is born, meets and marries the Green Man. As the wedding is celebrated evil, black-suited developers carry Gaia away to captivity. The earth mourns, but slowly the spirits of resistance rise and overturn the evil, restoring Gaia as keeper of the Earth. The culmination of the pageant was a mock battle: dozens of children dressed as ‘butterfly spirits’ surrounded the developers and pelted them with packets of flour until they lay, writhing and defeated, on the ground.

The enactment of Gaia’s abduction, occurring midway through the Rites of Spring, was the emotional crescendo of the pageant. Surrounded by developers’ minions, blindfolded and about to be snatched away, Gaia raised her face and screamed in pain and defiance. If Gaia’s scream and the wild mourning that follow her abduction represent the inconsolable pain of bereavement, the summoning and the uprising that follows are the proposed remedy. This portion of the Rites is a template for political action: armed with love of community, gardeners are a force of nature moving forward in battle.

Gardener protests were rich with ‘force of nature’ symbolism and pageantry, executed with maximum noise, spontaneity, and individual creativity. Many activists came costumed as plants or flowers, or wore leaf crowns, representing themselves as partners with nature. At high points of confrontation with the Giuliani administration gardener demonstrations had a swarm like intensity, most visibly during the July 1998 land auction that activists disrupted by surreptitiously releasing thousands of live crickets into the audience. The ‘force of nature’ imagery of gardener protests was an assertion of ‘the right to the city’; it was a demand in Lefebvrian terms for a recognition of free spaces, and their role in the city.

However, an examination of the 1999 culmination of the garden preservation struggle shows that it was not the radical challenge launched by gardeners that ultimately succeeded. In the course of mobilizing against a land auction in May 1999 that would include over a hundred gardens, gardeners accomplished a feat of ‘frame bridging’ when

they linked their concerns with public disquiet about the character of Mayor Giuliani, and his anti-citizen, pro-market regime. Frame bridging is concerned with linking ‘ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames so as to tap into unmobilized public sentiment’ (Snow *et al.*, 1986, p. 467). What came to the fore in 1999 was not the transformative or antagonistic praxis of gardeners, rather it was an image of gardeners as ‘model citizens’, victimized and driven to extremes by the contracting space for democratic expression in Giuliani’s New York.

### **Giuliani, Land Auctions and the Public Good**

‘If you were totally unrealistic you could say everything should be a garden. This is a free-market economy: welcome to the era after communism.’ (Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, January 1999)

Mayor Giuliani became an American folk hero after 9/11 but in 1999 he was at war with the City Council, the press, and increasingly, the citizenry of New York. The Mayor was notorious for ugly retaliatory tactics against political enemies, while offering his campaign donors broad access to his favor (Hicks, 1999). Growing levels of police violence, the killing of unarmed African immigrant Amadou Diallou, and Giuliani’s total lack of interest in dialogue with the city’s African American and Latino populations created a sense of racial crisis (Smith, 1998). Characteristically, Giuliani’s defense of the auctions was a surly dismissal of gardeners themselves. Despite mounting concern that auctions harmed local communities, the mayor focused on demonizing gardeners as ‘unrealistic’ hippie throwbacks, who refused to accept the realities of capitalism. His refusal extended to a rejection of the environmental non-profits who offered to purchase the gardens for preservation for \$2 million. A mayoral aide dismissed the offer, saying ‘If they’re so interested . . . they ought to go buy them on the open market, at auction’ (Raver, 1999).

A property list published in January 1999 was debated and scrutinized several times at the City Council level, giving gardeners time to organize an escalating series of protests and confrontations. Activists protested when the properties were announced in January, and again during a March orientation of auction participants. In April, the Garden Preservation Coalition sponsored a two day conference called ‘Standing Our Ground’ that brought in open space advocates from around the country to pledge support for gardeners, and included a rally that brought 500 participants (Raver, 1999). In addition, gardeners held their largest rally, the ‘Earth Shaking Demonstration’ in the week immediately prior to the auction. That rally resulted in several arrests, and other demonstrations and public events followed during Earth Week.

Press coverage of the May 1999 auction demonstrates the growing visibility of and sympathy towards gardeners. The 1997 and 1998 auctions received sparse coverage, although the latter gained attention because of the cricket-release stunt and protests against the sale of a Lower East Side community center. The 1999 auction received consistent and sympathetic coverage (Schmelzkopf, 2002; Staeheli *et al.*, 2002; Lawson, 2005). In these reports, reporters widely accept the emotionally charged words and images used by gardeners such as ‘garden death’, ‘bulldozings’, ‘Eden’, and gardener protest as a ‘blooming’. In addition, the tone of the coverage shifted from a sympathetic human interest tone, to one that was more politicized. Editorials and columns linked the plight of the community gardeners to denouncements of Mayor Giuliani’s hostility to citizen

challenge. The ‘era after communism’ remark drew attention for its taunting tone (Powell, 1999; Lobbia, 1999), and because of an extreme economism that was belied by Giuliani’s frequent corporate givebacks and sweetheart development deals to cronies (Nader, 1999). Others accused the Mayor treating gardeners ‘as if they’re something he needs to form an elite street squad to eliminate’, instead of celebrating their good citizenship (Hinckley, 14 March 1999). *The New York Times* (14 January 1999), denouncing the ‘abysmal secrecy’ of the auction process, and calling bulldozing ‘an act of neighborhood violence’, called for an examination of garden spaces to see which could be preserved. Another reporter denounced the bunkered mentality at City Hall after watching a guard impound signs drawn by second graders who were testifying for their garden (Daly, 1999). These attacks and appeals to the Mayor were effective precisely because of the symbolic labor that gardeners had accomplished that placed them in a sympathetic position as good citizens whose contributions made the city a better place to live (Hinckley, 1999). The use of the person of the Mayor was critical; his authoritarian stance appeared more extreme when juxtaposed against joyfully demonstrating people dressed as flowers. By a feat of extension, Giuliani’s personal irrationality called into question the rationality of the auctions, and his pursuit of market-based solutions at all costs. As a demonstrator at the Earth Shaking Demonstration explained: ‘People really get it now . . . if he’ll go after *us* like this, who *won’t* he come for?’ (Fieldnotes, 5 May 1999).

#### *New Allies, and the ‘Saturday Matinee Save’*

As the garden issue received more press, other politicians who disliked the auction process offered their support. State Attorney General Elliott Spitzer sued to stop the auction, demanding that the city undertake an environmental impact review of the garden sale. Two other lawsuits were launched to block the auction, with as many as two dozen organizations listed as plaintiffs. Survey and land-use data amassed by gardeners and environmental groups showing the benefits provided by community gardens, as well as an audit of auctioned property equally brought to the fore ways of calculating benefit and harm in ways that challenged the stark economism of the Giuliani administration. A study of auctioned property was especially damning, since it demonstrated that of 440 Brooklyn lots and gardens auctioned between January 1990 and December 1995, 423 remained vacant in 1998, and 240 were strewn with garbage (Office of Brooklyn Borough President Howard Goldin, 1999). Speculators, not local communities, were the main beneficiaries of the city’s land auctions. As a result of these new appeals, the City Council prior to the May 1999 auction considered, but did not pass, a vote to pull the gardens off the auction list.

The evolution of Lower East Side City Council representative Margarita Lopez on this topic is instructive. Many gardeners considered her a disappointment because her support for gardens was always qualified by assertions that gardeners would have to sacrifice in exchange for more affordable housing. In earlier years she made these assertions at Lower East Side garden rallies, pointing out that she herself loved gardens and worked in them sometimes, but ‘some of them will have to go, because our people need the housing’ (Public statement at garden rally, 22 November 1998). However, during the spring 1999 demonstrations, Lopez reluctantly dropped her efforts to get gardeners to acknowledge the need for sacrifice. She co-sponsored the anti-auction legislation, and appeared frequently at demonstrations alongside other representatives from neighborhoods with threatened

gardens. At a demonstration, Lopez acknowledged that at that point, the garden cause was for the time being the best vehicle for fighting against the auction process:

We don't all agree on what will happen with the gardens, but we need to have the right to work it out as a community. So right now let's talk about the gardens, everybody loves the gardens, everybody loves gardeners, fine, let's work together. What we have to do, is we have to stop this auction, because this auction shows the hatred this Mayor has for the community, and for listening to the community. (Personal exchange at rally, 11 April 1999)

Facing resistance, Mayor Giuliani quietly re-opened negotiations with the Trust for Public Land (Barry, 1999). In the end, 112 gardens were bought off the block the night before the May 1999 auction. The Trust for Public Land, along with the New York Restoration Project paid \$4.2 million to assume control of the garden lots so that they could be incorporated under a land trust (Barry, 1999). The Restoration Project, a city-based non-profit has as one of its main benefactors the actor and singer Bette Midler, who contributed a portion of her own income. The late hour, and the involvement of the well-known Midler gave the whole affair a dramatic resolution. The national press, without an insider's perspective on the May 1999 land auction credited Bette Midler, because of the irresistible drama of the story (*The New York Times*, 1999). The Giuliani Administration took credit for having brought matters to a satisfactory conclusion that saved green space and increased the city's revenues. However, all New York City accounts centered the uproar created by gardeners, and they publicized the sale as an instance of Midler's money saved *the Mayor* – not just the gardens – from his own intransigence. A *New York Times* Op-Art cartoon by Ward Sutton makes this point amusingly, showing Giuliani holding a newspaper that says 'Public Relations Crisis Averted' while saying, 'Miss M, did I ever tell you you're my hero?' Midler, holding flowers in one hand and dollars in another responds, 'You're just lucky I have TWO green thumbs...' (Sutton, 1999).

## Conclusion

A number of skirmishes over garden spaces that were not included in the sale followed later in the year. Most explosive was a January 2000 battle between police and demonstrators trying to protect the Lower East Side's Esperanza Garden from the bulldozer. Thirty-one demonstrators were arrested, and the garden was bulldozed (Ferguson, 2000) at the same moment as Attorney General Elliott Spitzer argued his case for an injunction against demolitions of remaining unprotected gardens. Angered by the city's precipitous action prior to a decision, the court granted the injunction, and Mayor Giuliani never succeeded in having it lifted. In 2001 newly elected Mayor Bloomberg negotiated an agreement with Spitzer to drop the suit in exchange for an agreement to preserve some gardens, and open others for land-use review. The Spitzer stay on garden demolitions was extended until 2010; at that time the performance and condition of the city's community gardens will be subject to review (Steinhauer, 2002).

An editorial in *The New York Times* (17 February 2000) about the Esperanza Garden demolition captures how onlookers who would not embrace the transformative goals of the gardening movement still accepted gardener resistance as justified, and reflective of a deeper struggle about the nature of community life:

The conflict underlying the destruction of Esperanza Garden seems more fundamental than a struggle between gardeners and developers, green space and housing... Not every community garden will survive in an economic climate as ebullient and a housing market as tight as this one. But the most meaningful definition of public value is not always the broadest or most economically justifiable one. A patch of green or a plot of flowers can often do more for a neighborhood than new apartments and retail establishments.

Through frame bridging, gardeners linked the particularity of their gardens to worries about the fate of democratic practice in a free-market economy. Through amplification of their grief and outrage, gardeners engendered in the public a sense of empathy with their cause. Deploying that narrative in a period of crisis, gardeners accomplished a difficult trick: for four months they managed to be both extremely sympathetic, and extremely disruptive in a manner that brought them new allies and bad press for Mayor Giuliani. As a result their local concerns linked successfully to public debate about the fate of local communities in Giuliani's New York. The main practical benefit of their efforts was to bring in more powerful political actors, especially Attorney General Spitzer, who moved on behalf of the gardens.

In addition, the final agreement that saved almost all the city's gardens was far in excess of what gardeners would have achieved had the decision been left to politicians at the local level. Gardens received legal recognition and protection under a formalized land trust structure removed from redevelopment pressure. Certainly on the Lower East Side, affordable housing advocates were nonplussed to see sites they considered potential housing placed into a land trust structure they could do little to access. Margarita Lopez said repeatedly that simply taking all garden sites out of circulation was not a good outcome for the Lower East Side, which needed more low-income housing. Bearing in mind their lack of access to the system, and a widespread acceptance of a 'temporary' notion of gardens, it is striking how effectively gardeners used protest to compensate for their political marginality. Far from speaking as a concerned fringe interest group, they indeed created a widespread appreciation for the gardens' importance in the life of the city.

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