Ending a Long Battle, New York
Lets Housing and Gardens Grow

By JENNIFER STEINHAUER

A protracted dispute between New York City and hundreds of community gardeners ended yesterday when the city agreed to preserve some 500 community gardens and use others to build more than 2,000 apartments during the next year, a 20 percent increase over the normal production of city-sponsored housing.

Under the agreement announced yesterday between Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and the New York State Attorney general, Eliot Spitzer, community gardens in neighborhoods around the city will be left alone to sprout grass, violets and the random ear of corn, while scores of others will be razed, with new low-income housing units going up in their place.

"Our hope is that this satisfies everybody to the extent that they can be satisfied," Mr. Bloomberg said yesterday during a news conference at City Hall.

Garden advocates, who have battled the city for years to keep community gardens from being turned over to developers, by and large echoed the sentiment.

"It is not perfect," said Rose Har-vey, the senior vice president at the Trust for Public Land, a conservation organization that purchased some community gardens in 1999, in a telephone interview. "But perfect is usually the enemy of the possible."

The compromise marks the end of a quintessential New York drama, pitting the two most common objects of longing for many New Yorkers — housing and unfettered green spaces — against each other, and featuring some of the city's most irascible characters. The key protagonist was former Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, who wanted to put an end to the hundreds of gardens that dot the city's landscape, arguing that what the city needed was housing on those plots of land.

On the other side were the garden supporters, belonging to organizations with names like Green Guerrillas, whose love of plants was so intense that they were willing to descend on City Hall dressed as vegetables or insects to make their point. That group has its own heroes — Mr. Spitzer, who brought his own lawsuit.

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against the city in 1999 to prevent it from auctioning garden land to the highest bidder, and the singer Bette Midler, who stepped in with millions of dollars to save scores of gardens that same year.

But the Bloomberg administration, which has made setting the last administration's lawsuit a priority, was more concerned with the green thumb crowd, which helped pave the way for yesterday's agreement, Mr. Spitzer said.

"I will say affirmatively that we have had a good working relationship with Mayor Bloomberg and his counsel," Mr. Spitzer said.

More than two decades ago community groups were granted permission to transform vacant lots, which over the years had become city property, into garden spaces. Hundreds of gardens sprouted around the city in many forms, ranging from the successful, spectacular stretches of kale-sized rosebushes to the failures, garbage-strewn, rodent-infested eyesores that attracted unsavory activities. Many gardens provided an oasis in the city's crowded neighborhoods, where there are few city parks.

But the agreement between community groups and the city was not permanent, and Mr. Giuliani let it be known that he thought the lots ought to be turned over to the highest bidder, which was unlikely to be a group of urban gardeners.

The result was a series of lawsuits, a restraining order against the city that prevented it from auctioning several gardens and Mr. Spitzer's suit, which essentially paralyzed any development the city had planned.

The New York Restoration Project — Ms. Midler's group — and the Trust for Public Land purchased more than 100 sites in 1999 for $4.2 million, which will be maintained as community gardens. The settlement yesterday concludes all the current litigation against the city on matters of gardening, city officials said.

Under the agreement, roughly 200 city gardeners owned and run by city agencies (mostly the Parks Department and the Department of Education) will remain gardens, in addition to those run by the nonprofit groups.
Ending Battle, City Lets Housing and Gardens Grow

Alexia Sievers, 4, playing in a community garden at 632 East Ninth Street in the East Village. The city will preserve the garden from development.

Quiet time in a community garden at 713 East Sixth Street in Manhattan. It is to be developed for housing under an agreement announced by Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer.
Sudden Deal Saves Gardens Set for Auction

By DAN BARRY

A day before the Giuliani administration was to auction off city-owned lots that had been transformed into community gardens, the performance artist Bette Midler had her private, non-profit conservation organization agree to buy dozens of the less ornamental parcels, providing the final funding to preserve all 112 gardens that were set for sale.

The 110-hour announcement ended a long-running dispute between city officials who said the parcels were ripe for sale and residents who viewed themselves as gardeners threatening to vendem caves in neighborhoods of concrete and steel. But the fate of more than 600 others lots that were not part of the auction remains unclear.

Nevertheless, the $1.3 million purchase of 21 lots by the New York Restoration Project — arranged by a singer and actress better known for her engaging flamboyance than for her diplomatic skills — provided a vital piece in the city's negotiations with environmental groups.

The offer cleared the way for another conservation group, the Trust for Public Land, to buy the rest of the 112 parcels for $1 million, a figure that included on additional $1 million from Ms. Midler's organization.

According to the deal, the two organizations are to work out plans to turn over the properties to the community groups that tend to the gardens. If the properties are ever used for anything other than gardens, ownership would revert to the city, said Deputy Mayor Randy Levine, who helped in the negotiations.

"We're thrilled," Ms. Midler said in a prepared statement. "This is a joyful occasion and means that these gardens will stay in perpetuity."

"It's a win-win for everyone," Ms. Levine said. "The city gets market value for these properties, which will go into the general treasury to be used to enhance other city services. The gardens will remain gardens." The agreements end, at least for now, what had been a daunting public relations challenge for Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani and his aides, who were faced with demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience by protesters wearing colorful garb. No matter how principled their stand, city officials learned, it can be difficult to remain dignified when faced with an adversary dressed as a sunflower — or a baby doll or a tomato plant.

But the central issue was not irrelevant to any of the involved parties. The administration contended that the city lots were provided to neighborhoods two decades ago as part of a temporary agreement, but should now be used for housing or economic development or put up for sale. If the gardeners were interested, the officials said, they could make a bid. But the environmentalists saw the gardens as havens of green, often in the city's poorest neighborhoods.

It turned out that the auction — characterized by gardeners as an act of aggression — would not have taken place today anyway. A Supreme Court judge in Brooklyn temporarily barred the auction yesterday, after lawyers for several environmental groups and the state Attorney General's office had argued that the city had violated various local and state regulations in putting the properties up for sale.

City officials had hoped that the purchase agreements would make most of the lawsuits that have been filed by more than a dozen environmental organizations and neighborhood groups seeking to block the city's sale of the lots. In fact, the city usually sought to make the sale to the Trust for Public Land contingent on the end to the lawsuits, even though the trust was not a part of them.

But some of the environmental groups continued their legal battles, saying that they were concerned with the fate of several hundred other community gardens throughout the city.

"For us, it was never a question of only saving a few gardens," said Leslie Lowe, the executive director of the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance. "This is the city's lack of policy on open space equity."

"Almost all the gardens that were to be auctioned were in neighborhoods of color," Ms. Levine continued.

Under the deal, the lots cannot be used for anything other than gardens.

Richard Kassol, a lawyer for the Natural Resources Defense Council who presented some of the environmentalists' arguments yesterday, agreed that there were outstanding issues, and said "We are going to wait and see the details of the proposed sales before we pop any champagne."

Ms. Midler, meanwhile, had always been a player in the efforts to salvage the community gardens. Although a native of Hawaii, she first gained notice as an actress by singing in the gay bath houses of New York City. She and her family later moved to Los Angeles, but returned to New York in 1994 after a devastating earthquake in California.

Since then, she has been an integral member of the city's environmental coalition. She founded the New York Restoration Project with $350,000 of her own money, and has since raised money for conservation causes with elaborate fund-raising events. At last October's "Swallow'em" party, which raised about $1.2 million, costumed dancers appeared as caterpillars, children dressed as butterflies and Ms. Midler made her entrance as a spider.

Roberta Greene, a spokesperson for Ms. Midler's organization, said that the performer was up well into the night trying to figure out a resolution. She finally decided to offer to buy the properties, Ms. Greene said. "So early this morning, phone calls went back and forth."

That process — and that cash flow — clearly impressed Deputy Mayor Levine. "I think she's a great behavior and she's done a lot for New York," he said.

"I think she wanted to do what she can to save these things," he added.

Mr. Levine also said that the city would be negotiating with the Land for Public Trust about another 21 gardens. But there are hundreds of other gardens whose faces were not affected by Ms. Midler's beneficence and which Mr. Levine did not discuss.

Rose Harvey, the senior vice president of the Land for Public Trust, expressed caution about any suggestion by city officials that they had won a victory in the fight over community gardens.

"It's a victory if it's the end of private purchases of public space," she said. "And a beginning of a process in which the city protects open space on its own."
Back to Nature, in a City Setting

Gardeners who opposed the planned sale of 112 community gardens on city-owned property celebrated their victory in stopping development of the lots by marching yesterday to several of them, including one on East Second Street near the Bowery. Some revelers dressed as garden spirits.
BETTE AND RUDY: THE DUET

YOU SAY "FLOWERS BUNDDING,"
I SAY "BUYER'S BIDDING..."

YOU SAY "PUBLIC AUCTION,"
WE SAY "CIVIL ACTION!"

CITY HALL

MIDLER!
MEDDLER?

SKINFINT!
SPENDER!

LET'S CALL THE
WHOLE THING OFF!

MISS M, DID
I EVER TELL YOU
YOU'RE MY
HERO?

YOU'RE JUST
LUCKY I HAVE
TWO GREEN
THUMBS...
Selling the People's Gardens

Despite months of discussions and last week's highly public arrest of a demonstrator dressed as a sunflower, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani is ready to auction off more than 100 community gardens, many in the poorest neighborhoods in New York. Odd lots, strange sizes, these bits and pieces of city territory have become makeshift mini-parks, garden plots or community meeting grounds in areas where such amenities are scarce.

So why does Mr. Giuliani want to deprive the already deprived of a few patches of green? New York City owns too much land, he has said, and the lots could earn revenues, from the auction that might add $3 million to the city's $2.1 billion surplus and also by returning these lots to the tax rolls. Selling 100 of the 700 gardens may make sense on the budget charts in City Hall, but in the neighborhoods, where these plots can be like an oasis in a tarmac desert, this sale is shortsighted in the extreme.

Most community gardens were lent to neighborhoods years ago with the understanding that the city would take them back someday for housing or other civic needs. Giving up gardens for much-needed public housing was a hard enough choice. That has already been done. Now communities fear that these next plots will be bought by speculators who will convert flower beds into parking lots or dumps. So, the Trust for Public Lands has offered $2 million for 75 lots, about 27 of which are headed for the auction block on May 13.

Mr. Giuliani should halt the auction and either pursue negotiations with private groups like the trust or find other ways to keep these edens blooming. This cavalier sale would add a mite to the city's lush budget, but only by subtracting vital open spaces in the very neighborhoods that need them.
Flower puppets led a procession at Bryant Park yesterday. The purpose of the event, which culminated in a rally, was to protest the Giuliani administration's decision to auction off next month more than 100 city-owned lots that neighborhood groups had converted to community gar...
GARDEN NOTEBOOK
Is This City Big Enough For Gardens And Houses?

By ANNE RAYER

FEW weeks ago, two gardeners sat in the freezing sleet under a pergola in the Garden of the Golden Lions in central Harlem. They were grappling with the news that three community gardens on 121st Street, between Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard and St. Nicholas Avenue, would have to close by the end of this month.

Mary Emma Harris, an art historian and landscape designer, recalled how she showed up at the neighboring Public School 76 four years ago just to give advice, and never left. She helped the children turn a dumping ground into a place of beauty full of native trees.

It took more than a year to build a winding path out of brick and stone pulled from the rubble. They called it the Garden of Love because it is the opposite of what one student wrote when her teacher asked her to choose a color for her emotions: “Roses are red, violence is blue.”

That still sends a chill through Ms. Harris’s heart. “I’m not going to dig up those plants,” Ms. Harris said, setting her jaw. “It’s not over until the fat lady sings.”

If the fat lady isn’t singing yet, she has drawn a deep breath. Early next month, New York City will start building 27 gardens in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn, in central Harlem and in the Bronx to make way for low- and moderate-income housing. Green Thumb, the city office that has leased land to gardeners since 1978, is expected to close about 360 of its 750 gardens over the next few years as the city develops the land or sells it to the highest bidder.

And in neighborhoods like Mount Hope, in the South Bronx, with only 0.2 acres of parkland to every 1,000 residents, or the Lower East Side, with 0.7 acres for 1,000 residents, more and more people are asking the obvious question: Why can’t much-needed housing and community gardens coexist?

City officials say there are no other suitable sites to build housing. But the Department of Citywide Administrative Services has begun to release about 1,000 vacant lots for the approval process that leads to the auction block.

“We’ve been directed to either develop those lots or give them back to D.C.A.S.,” for sale, said Lillian Barries-Paul, who formerly headed the Housing Preservation and Develop-

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GARDEN NOTEBOOK

Is This City Big Enough For Homes And Roses?

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The city's drive to put this land back on the tax rolls will free many parcels in the same neighborhoods where community gardens are slated for clearing. The imminent sale of vacant land has prompted city gardeners, green space advocates and community members to mobilize.

Last month, about 227 gardeners, members of the New York City Coalition for the Preservation of Open Space, called for a moratorium on all such sales. Accompanied by 12-foot tall signs of celery in their street, they delivered gifts of flowers and letters to the Parks Department, led by party's President, who was then the Deputy Mayor for economic development and planning, and other city officials.

The coalition offered to help the City Planning Department inventory all gardens and to offer solutions for preserving the best of them. It also asked the city to avoid clearing the gardens in a way that would damage the value of these gardens - former dumping grounds and data dens that now produce vegetables and flowers in bloom. Providing safe havens for the elderly and children and offering free recreation and community services, these gardens are the only ones that the city has failed to respond to any of these demands.

It has, however, extended the lives of about half the 27 gardens slated for demolition to 2020. But the essential heartbeat is the same: the gardens will be destroyed.

I t was gardeners who first took over these wastelands left in the wake of the old greenhouses that were torn down, and sold junked cars and in the name of preservation. In 1979, the open space coalition surveyed the gardens in the city and assessed the services they provided.

"We found 446 gardens on 121 acres with over 11,000 people involved," Mr. Fox said. "The average price of constructing a city park at the time was $50 a square foot. The cost of a community garden was $5 a square foot, and maintenance was sweat equity.

Creating these little cases for next to nothing, Mr. Fox said, helped people understand that they could change their fate.

In 1994, Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani's administration ordered a survey of the city's vast holdings of 11,000 lots to earmark them for uses for garages for the Sanitation Department to housing. Housing Preservation

Some gardens, but not many, have had the bulldozer postponed.

like access to the community, productivity and public programs.

The trust has also set up a blue ribbon committee of donors like the Louis and Anne Bronson Foundation and the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, which funds $500,000 every year for New York community gardens. This committee is using its clout to help garden groups gain access to city officials and developers.

"You have to set up a workable plan to show how many green spaces can be saved and made permanent with some concrete benefits to the city," said Andy Stone, director of the trustee's New York chapter. A good garden raises property values as Central Park turns adjacent real estate to gold, he continued, adding: "We're playing with the city, to encourage developers to support city gardens, to show that in extreme circumstances a lot of them can be saved and made permanent for the public's use."
NEW HOUSING COULD MEAN THE END OF LOWER EAST SIDE GARDENS

Green Acres

BY SARAH FERGUSON

For Maitey Villarum gardening is more than a hobby. “It’s about power,” she says, standing in the garden at the Green Oasis Community Garden on the Lower East Side. “I like the idea of having a place where we can create something that’s our own.”

But now that the market is coming back, higher income housing is being championed by City Councilman Antonio Pagan and his more-conservative allies on CB 3, who have long argued that the neighborhood is over-saturated with housing projects and social services. “We believe that the tax base and stability of middle-income housing would provide for a healthier neighborhood,” says CB 3 chair Susan Vaughn, a Pagan appointee.

Exactly when the development will begin is unclear. In March, the city began soliciting construction bids for five of the Cross-Subsidy sites. Included were gardens on 10th and 11th streets and Suffolk Street, though Green Oasis and the other more-established gardens were spared. Partnership president Steve Brown predicts it could be a year or two before the bulldozers arrive.

Ironically, the Cross-Subsidy Plan was originally conceived in the mid ’80s by progressives as a way of preserving the neighborhood at a time when the Koch administration was auctioning off the most valuable properties to the highest bidder. Under the plan, the city agreed to rehabilitate buildings for low- and moderate-income housing in exchange for selling off the vacant lots to private developers for market-rate housing.

While more than 1000 units of low-income housing have already been built, the market-rate component was stalled when the real estate market bottomed out in the late ’80s. Since then, the gardens have flourished in legal limbo; 57 have been awarded Green Thumb leases by the city, though they can be revoked at any time.

But now that the market is coming back, higher income housing is being championed by City Councilman Antonio Pagan and his more-conservative allies on CB 3, who have long argued that the neighborhood is over-saturated with housing projects and social services. “We believe that the tax base and stability of middle-income housing would provide for a healthier neighborhood,” says CB 3 chair Susan Vaughn, a Pagan appointee, adding, “The gardeners have always known their position on this land was temporary.”

Pagan, who declined to comment to the Voice, has been more adamant about using the lots for housing. “I am a big green person, but I will not allow these interlopers to dictate what’s going on,” he said of the gardeners. “They can put these on a three-year contract and go out into the country.”

The gardeners maintain that the Cross-Subsidy Plan is out of sync with the current needs of the community, and besides, there are other vacant lots that could be developed first. “It’s a false conflict,” says Alice O’Malley, of Green Oasis. “It’s not a question of housing versus green space. It’s about power and about all these nonprofit agencies getting federal and city money to build housing.” While none of the local groups have ties to the Partnership, many work for nonprofit groups that could be hired as local sponsors for the development.

“People don’t have a clue as to what these spaces mean to the community,” says Felicia Young of Earth Celebrations, which has been organizing pageants to celebrate and preserve the gardens over the past five years. “More than performance, Earth Celebrations has become the focus of a budding green movement on the Lower East Side.”

Since 1994, Young and a coalition of gardeners and local activists have been working to create a land trust as a means of gaining permanent status for a majority of the gardens. The movement attracted surprisingly diverse support from students and squatters to architects and even a few landlords concerned that raising the density of the neighborhood might actually lower property values.

Last month, the 6th Street and Avenue B community garden was designated a park by the city, thanks largely to the lobbying efforts of the Trust for Public Land, a national conservation group. Other gardens are expanding their hours and memberships and developing programs with local schools to confront the charge that they exist as private clubs.

“This is a low-income neighborhood. People don’t have access to backyards or houses in the Hamptons,” says Xavier Rodriguez, watering a bed of roses in the 9th Street Community Garden, a sprawling sloped oasis on Avenue C. “It’s our nightmare, our paradise, our school, our playground, our part of the world that’s ours.”

“Yet if you think of the green movement as a political movement, it’s not a movement for the poor,” says Rodriguez. “We have 19 to 20 years in this movement. You can’t really dismiss that.”
Precarious Jewels Among the Ruins
The Community Gardens of the Lower East Side

By Elizabeth Kemler

The myriad community gardens of the Lower East Side are not merely pleasant to look at — offering oases of color worth the effort of crossing the streets. Once garbage-strewn empty lots, they are now treasure troves of green plants, flowers, vegetable gardens and art work. From within the tender folds of this fractious, disconsolate society have emerged such collaborative creations as the masterfully-crafted, sky-high community garbage sculpture shadowing the sidewalk in front of the 6th and B garden.

The average city resident lives in relative anonymity, having long been subjected to the proliferation of the hard-drug culture making its presence known on the corners and in the crevices of nearly every local block. This necessitates the sort of large-scale changes the gardens address, using a variety of cultural arts programs, performances, art exhibits, educational workshops, video documentaries, and community assistance projects.

Proponents of the effort towards social and environmental change, Earth Celebrations was founded in 1990 as a non-profit organization devoted to the education of communities on issues of environmental and social relevance. Earth Celebrations is one of many forces inspired by the emerging community gardens. The efforts of founder, festival artist, and community organizer Felicia Young have gone a long way toward increasing local awareness of urban ecology, and designating community members to further essential progress and preservation. Some of her projects include Ecofest in 1983, the Festival to Save McCarron Pool in Greenpoint, Brooklyn in 1990, and most recently, the creation of The Rites of Spring: Procession to Save Our Gardens — four years old this May. Young is the voice of a community rife with artistic ingenuity, enmeshed in a diverse cultural history, and it is with her organizational ability and artistic inspiration, along with the help of numerous volunteer organizers and assistants, that that voice has come to be heard. In a recent interview, she said: "The gardens are a place where people who would otherwise have no reason to, now come to gather to create an ecotopia. An urban improvement that could be used as a model for urban planning in the future."

An arts-based community garden and social awareness, it is the intent, and has been the function of such projects as Earth Celebrations' annual Rites of Spring pageant. The pageant is filled with giant puppets, mobile sculptures, and costumed characters, spread throughout the sixty local gardens over the course of twelve hours — with theater, ceremonies, and mythic dramas offered at each. Much to the dismay of community members, however, the Rites of Spring celebration has taken on greater implications as the beginning of the life of the gardens grows. Since its inception in 1991 the festival has attracted wide media coverage, eventually encouraging the support of Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger. She announced at last year's festival her investment for the permanent preservation of the El Jardin Paradiso garden on East Fourth Street with funds for the Trust for Public Land.

In an effort to raise money for the production of the festival and raise awareness of the gardens' plight, Earth Celebrations sponsored a benefit dance party in a loft space donated by the Stella Adler Conservatory of Acting. As would be expected at such an affair, the mood was festive, with music and costumed dancers filling with room. The attendance was as impressive as it was diverse, bringing in an unprecedented six thousand dollars for the cause. When asked what drew her to the event, one garden resident offered: "We are surrounded by harshness in this city, the gardens are vital means of relief which must be preserved."

(That sentiment will take on cinematic proportions this summer with the Green Oasis project, a documentary film depicting the role the gardens have played in the community, with specific attention given to the Rites of Spring festival and the debate over use of public lands.)

Though the work of Earth Celebrations and local members has inspired these efforts on behalf of the gardens, the fact remains that the city is able to revoke the leases of any one of the gardens — for subsequent development — with no more than thirty days notice. As the leases are renewed on an yearly basis, the gardens exist under the persistent threat of destruction.

These local oases serve as necessary respites from an often oppressive urban environment. They have the potential to divest children away from the constant temptation and influence of drugs and crime, improve the quality of life for local citizens, and perhaps eventually bring about by example a city-wide movement towards rehabilitation. These larger ideals, however, do not seem as great a concern as does the potential profit to be made by the sales of city-owned land. Such was the case when the garden that once emblazoned a decrepit Forsyth Street was demolished in favor of a 160-unit housing project.

As I amble past the flowers reaching their blooming heads towards the fence around Avenue D's "Green Oasis" — one of many gardens which could soon become jewels of the past — I wonder whether we will ever close the chasm in our society's consciousness through which such beauty has been allowed to slip.

If you would like to become involved in one of Earth Celebrations' projects, or would just like more information on garden activities, Felicia Young encourages people to contact her. Her number is (212) 727-8263. Elizabeth Kemler is Assistant Producer of On the Line on WNYC radio and an environmental activist.
Community Gardens Form Coalition

One of the beautiful things about community gardens is their independence, the way they seem to float like green (ideally) islands sort of adrift in the city. They're separate from the din. That's also been a problem. Since most of the gardens are on a month-to-month lease, they're all technically in danger. And while the Green Guerrillas have worked on many, other than the Guerrillas, there hasn't been a coalition designed to link gardens in different boroughs and give gardeners clout.

That's changing and some evidence of it is the formation of the New York City Garden Preservation Coalition. Designed to connect a patchwork of gardens - 16 gardens on the Lower East Side, 10 in Harlem and nine in Coney Island are close to the auction block - the group is trying to mobilize so that they can protect the gardens citywide.

"We formed a citywide coalition," says Felicia Young, of Earth Celebrations, which advocates for preservation of gardens. The (coalition) has joined together as a unified voice of diverse gardens and people form the five boroughs of New York City."

The group, which has started meeting, talks about gardens as "ecological treasures" and Young says she's trying to get the City to give more gardens a more permanent presence.

"The City has failed to acknowledge that after 20 years," she says, "these gardens have become more than temporary use of vacant land."

She says that many have turned into cultural centers, with theaters presenting plays, art centers and science classrooms that study the gardens. In addition, they become "healing centers."

She also points to the destruction of gardens such as ABC Garden (8th St. between Aves. B and C) downtown in early '96 and Pegasus Garden (Amsterdam and 89th St.) just last month.

Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) is in charge and the coalition wants to convince them that a garden is a type of development. You don't need walls to have something there. For the moment, they're trying to mobilize Community Boards can help protect gardens. But the gardens frequently end up targeted for housing, another pressing need. Garden advocates say the housing could be provided, possibly more cheaply, simply by renovating existing buildings.

Just last month, Community Board 3 voted to approve giving up several gardens on 2nd St and Umbrella Garden on Ave. C between 2nd and 3rd Sts. for housing. They've been put up for sale. Jardin Los Amigos, on 3rd St. between Aves. B and C, was approved for sale by the board's housing committee. But after protests, the board voted to recommend continuing the Greenthumb lease.
Rudy urged to leaf gardens

By CHRISENA COLEMAN
Daily News Staff Writer

In an attempt to keep their community gardens alive, a group of city residents will hold a candlelight vigil tonight to protest plans by the Giuliani administration to replace the greenery with affordable housing.

Felicia Young, executive director of Earth Celebrations, said her organization has worked on beautifying neighborhoods for years, and it is unfair for the city to bulldoze the gardens.

So far, the city has eyed several gardens in Harlem and the lower East Side.

"More housing is needed, but the city does not have to take the gardens away," said Young. "There are plenty of abandoned and vacant buildings that could be utilized."

Green Thumb, the city agency that has offered gardeners yearly leases in vacant lots for the last two decades, expects to lose half of its 750 gardens to development over the next few years. The city has 11,000 non-taxable vacant lots.

Deputy Mayor Fran Reiter said the city needs more housing and plans to build wherever possible.

But Young said the gardens have become an integral part of the community.

"The gardens have helped push out drugs and crime," Young said. "The kids have become very involved with planting and there are ongoing cultural activities for the community."

"The community created these gardens and now the city is trying to take them away," Young continued. "The people cleared out lots and created the gardens and they serve the community well."

In addition to tomorrow's vigil — which begins at 7 p.m. at 638 E. 6th St. and will proceed around Tompkins Square Park — Earth Celebrations is planning a rally on the steps of City Hall next week.
SAVE THE GARDENS
THE CITY AGAINST THE PEOPLE

By Susanne Oppitz

A scent of flowers lingers in the air on a sunny February day, it's the day before Valentine's Day. A few hundred people carry bunches of flowers and glittering signs. They march in a parade behind colorful tall puppets that stick out of the crowd. Passers-by watch with curiosity and smiles on their faces as the pageant comes its way from City Hall park to offices of city officials in the area.

The participants of the parade are members of the citywide coalition for the preservation of the community gardens in New York. They chose this date for their "Save our Gardens Day and rally" at City Hall. They deliver flowers and gifts from their community gardens, like preserves and strawberry wine, along with hundreds of petition letters to city officials.

With their colorful parade, the gardeners and community activists protest against the city’s plan to build on many of the community gardens and sell low for the construction of market-rate housing. At the fountain in City Hall Park, where the pageant formed, activists from all over the city pick up signs that in colorful artwork spell out themes of threatened gardens.

Other participants are hidden under the gowns of 15-feet tall wildflower puppets at the head of the parade. Next in the procession, memorials follow with pictures of community gardens that have already been destroyed. Some members of the garden coalition ask passers-by to sign a petition for the preservation of the gardens, they don't hesitate to give their signatures. The procession arrives at 100 Gold Street and delivers a bag full of petition letters, garden gifts and flowers to the office of Housing Preservation and Development.

The next destination is the Municipal Building. With another bag full of letters and flowers a delivery group with children in flower gowns visits the office of Housing Preservation and Development.

To the people of our neighborhoods.

More creative, commented a pedestrian when she watched the garden procession marching by at City Hall Park. The tradition of the gardens goes back more than 20 years, when residents cleaned up rubble-strewn abandoned lots and planted gardens where illegal dumping and drug dealing had reigned before. Over the years a network of green oases emerged in the concrete desert of New York. In densely populated neighborhoods like the Lower East Side they provide valuable open green spaces, places where children can play and get in touch with nature.

Many gardens serve as outdoor community centers and offer cultural programs. Gardeners grow vegetables and other food supplements. They don’t use chemicals but try to create an ecological balance: The gardens attract birds that eat the bugs, so that no pesticides are necessary. To fertilize the soil the gardeners produce compost from leaves and kitchen trash, which not only helps the gardens but also reduces the amount of garbage at the city’s landfills.

The community gardens have improved the quality of life in their neighborhoods, and they have become famous. Tourists from all over the world come to have a look at this unique culture of urban gardening. Moreover, the gardens provide a considerable amount of social and educational services that otherwise would fall in the responsibility of the city. But as the gardeners are sustained by the work of volunteers, they don’t cost the city anything. So the city gets a lot of positive effect simply by providing empty lots for the use as gardens.

But with the city being under financial pressure and with the current real estate boom, the city plans to sell off many lots, without considering if they are just empty lots or community gardens. The city’s main argument is that it needs money and housing. The gardens don’t bring revenue, and their services can’t be counted in Dollars and Cents. So the lots are sold for development. The developers build market-rate luxury apartments with a certain percentage of each building reserved for affordable or low-income housing. The problem for the city is that it will not get revenue from these lots during the next ten years due to the tax exemption, which is granted to the developers.

The community activists from the garden coalition fear that the construction of luxury apartments will fuel the displacement of low-income communities in neighborhoods like the Lower East Side. Even if a part of the buildings is planned for low-income housing or community use, they are not willing to sacrifice gardens to the builders. They argue that there are still enough empty lots and abandoned buildings left to provide space for the construction of housing.

They want to be involved in the development decisions for their neighborhoods. For these reasons they chose colorful spectacles like the Save our Gardens Day as creative forms of nonviolent protest to convince the city that both sides could gain from cooperation. They rally for the preservation of one of the things that make New York unique and attractive. This could be to the best for both the city and the people in the affected neighborhoods.

In spite of hundreds of petition letters, protests and alternative suggestions, Community Board 3 voted on February 25 to release the Plaza Cultural Garden at East 59th Street and Avenue C, where a 12 million Dollar building is planned. Moreover, the City Planning Commission on February 19 approved the auction of nine Lower East Side lots — including three gardens.

To get more information, to sign the petition for the preservation of the garden or to volunteer, visit Earth Celebrations at 77-7965, email earthcel@interport.net or visit http://www.interport.net/-earthcel/.
by Diane Spodarek

Sometimes you stumble upon a magic moment or a moment of magic like Feb. 1st, a Saturday night, when I was out for a leisure stroll on the Lower East Side. The night was clear and cold as I walked down Avenue B listening to the sounds of music, bells, clapping, cheers and laughter. A long line of people, adults and children both, in various stages of glittering costumes were marching, strolling and dancing around Tompkins Square Park celebrating our city gardens. They were illuminated with glowing lanterns and some carried giant garden and nature puppets. I soon recognized fellow performer and writer Judith Bruce Weber and Joanne Pagan who were dressed in white and silver costumes and visual artist Bob Dombrowski, who was not, since he already is a walking visual sight.

I joined them in my drab black coat with the falling lining and followed the hundreds of New Yorkers back to the garden at Avenue B and Sixth Street, where the celebration continued with performances, poetry, song, rituals and an impressive fire show that delighted everyone, especially the children. This march and celebration was the third annual protest against New York City’s efforts to bulldoze community gardens. The event ended with complimentary hot cider and hot baked apples.

Although I stumbled upon this event, and was too late to volunteer to be dressed for the pageant, the protest does not end with one celebration. Almost all of the 50 gardens on the Lower East Side, 25 gardens in Harlem and Coney Island and 20 gardens in Brooklyn and the South Bronx are slated to be bulldozed. Half of the 750 community gardens are now under threat of destruction as the city sells off 11,000 lots. The New York City Garden Preservation Coalition was formed in November, 1996 in response to the bulldozing of several gardens throughout New York City and the threat of destruction to numerous other gardens by development plans. According to the Coalition, and what many residents know, the city has failed to acknowledge that after 20 years, these gardens have become more than temporary use of vacant land. The gardens have transformed neighborhoods riddled with abandoned buildings and neglected lots that were dens of crime, drugs and toxic waste to beautiful magical sites by residents working together out of their own volunteer initiative. The gardens have become living multicultural community centers bringing people from diverse backgrounds together including outdoor theater and cultural programs with concerts, performance, arts and crafts, and poetry to the community for free, as well as outdoor environmental science classrooms for schools. Many artists, writers and poets, including myself, have performed in these gardens.

What is perhaps not as well known is that these gardens have also served as healing centers for the elderly and those struggling with AIDS, and as sacred churches for weddings, funerals and the practice of native religions, festivals and ceremonies.

From a Coalition press release: “These gardens are more than open space, they are the pride and soul of the people and the neighborhood. To destroy the gardens would have more far reaching effects on the entire neighborhood, than the loss of open space. The gardens are an exemplary model of urban improvisation that should become an urban plan for a future ecological city in the 21st Century. The gardens in New York City are our ecological treasures that must be preserved for generations to come.”

For further information contact the New York City Garden Preservation Coalition, Felicia Young at 212-777-7969.

An event like that Saturday night makes me feel sad when I think about the possibility of leaving this city, and in particular, this community, my neighborhood, which is rich in creative life for so many. Despite all the isms of this nation (under god) where else can I go and see and experience a basically earthy pagan ritual for all to enjoy? (I didn’t hear one child whine about wanting to go home.)
¡PRESERVEMOS LOS JARDINES DE NUEVA YORK!- Diversos planes urbanísticos que incluyen construcción de edificios en lugares donde hoy hay jardines públicos en el área metropolitana de Nueva York, amenazan con hacer desaparecer esos pulmones citadinos, por lo que la Coalición de la Ciudad de Nueva York para la Preservación de los Jardines, ha intensificado una campaña, con el respaldo de miles de neoyorquinos que se oponen a que desaparezcan esos lugares de salud y de recreo. En la gráfica, algunos de los niños que participaron en una protesta efectuada el jueves, en el parque de la Alcaldía.
WENDELL HEDDON

New Housing May Uproot
Lower East Side Garden

Gardeners are ready to stick their green thumbs in the eyes of Community Board 3, because the Lower East Side board has opted to support new housing rather than an existing community garden on the same spot.

Chlorophyll's advocates were already upset because the ABC Garden, on Eighth Street between avenues B and C, was bulldozed just two months ago, and last month the City Planning Commission approved the auction of lots on the Lower East Side, meaning that three other gardens may be pushed daisies.

Now, La Plaza Cultural Garden is one step closer to being uprooted, with the board's vote at a meeting Feb. 25 for housing at Ninth Street and Avenue C. The board voted 20 to 10 to support plans that would oust the gardeners. The Lower Eastside Girls Club Inc. would like to build a seven-story building of 80 housing units there and about 7,000 feet of retail space and a girls club that would feature a theater, gymnasium, classrooms and health clinic.

The garden's friends displayed some flower power at the board meeting. Armand Ruhlman, a local playwright, said, "I'm not against girls, I'm not against girls clubs ... but (the proposed facility) does not belong on the La Plaza site. Historically, the La Plaza site has been used for decades as a park space by the community. Earlier buildings on the site had to be torn down because of damage from an underground stream that continues to flow beneath the surface."

Ross Martin, a landscape architect and local resident, said, "Construction of a new building will alter the water table to such an extent that the foundations of older ones will either be filled or destroyed."

Board member Estelle Rubin, however, dismissed the threat posed by see page: "We are all in areas of water. My parents met at 606 East Ninth Street, and that building is still standing," she told the board. "It hasn't shrunk, it hasn't sunk, it looks better than ever."

Her colleague Lisa Ramaci said the girls club could make the best year-round use of the site. "The garden, due to weather conditions, is off-limits approximately six months of the year... A girls club is open all year round for the benefit of the children of this community."

Club spokeswoman Lyn Pentecost told The Observer that the site's development is inevitable, and that the club's offer of 20 percent of its residential units at below-market rates is a concession to the community that other developers would not propose.

Board member Herman Hewitt told his colleagues that market-rate housing is a necessary component of the project: "Most social services and community programs won't survive if there is not a companion collaboration between the private sector and the nonprofit program in the neighborhood."

The club has promised to preserve some of the site's willow trees, develop an environmental and garden education program for the girls, and invite the community to help design and operate them. The next step toward construction is to get a go-ahead from the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development.

Former Board 3 member Steven Vincent told the board that the gardeners were being selfish: "They're here to assert their claim that a vacant lot is more important that housing," He reminded the gardeners that their claim had always been temporary: "They knew that when housing came, they had to leave—and the housing is here."

"It's no bed of roses for the gardeners. The New York City Coalition for the Preservation of Gardens has warned that the city's development plans for vacant lots threaten to permanently whack the weeds of 50 or so community gardens on the Lower East Side, and more in other parts of the city. The coalition protested at City Hall last month and is asking that some of the gardens be made permanent."

Waning days of flower power? La Plaza Cultural Garden in full bloom last June, at Ninth Street and Avenue C, Community Board 3 has voted to support plans for a seven-story building where the garden grows.
Girls vs. Gardeners: On Ninth St., Two Into One Won't Go

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, MARCH 2, 1997

Girls vs. Gardeners: On Ninth St., Two Into One Won't Go

The gardeners say they will keep developing the site as a community resource. One would remain, including the willow trees and some green space and still host some garden clubs. The city's Housing Preservation and Development Department would remain, including the willow trees, the garden clubs and some green space. The city's Housing Preservation and Development Department would remain, including the willow trees, the garden clubs and some green space. The city's Housing Preservation and Development Department would remain, including the willow trees, the garden clubs and some green space.

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Where Garden Grew, Store May Take Root

Sometimes there is not enough space in a crowded city, and that fact gave a band of neighborhood gardeners pause last week as they spent what may be one of their last afternoons enjoying the birch trees and winter blossoms that have sprung from a former dumping ground.

Last December, government officials notified the group that their 15-year-old community garden, which is owned by the city, would likely be paved over to make room for a P. C. Richard & Son electronics store, 40 parking spaces and an additional 20,000 square feet of retail space.

The garden, at the corner of Pacific Street and Flatbush Avenue, is across the street from the new Atlantic Center mall and is now a hot shopping zone. The project will consume the garden and a larger adjoining space used by the Brooklyn Academy of Music for parking spaces.

"I feel it's terrible," said 17-year-old Yesenia Romero, who has been planting tomatoes, chili peppers and jalapenos here for four years — ever since her landlord told her to stop growing vegetables on her fire escape. "I'm in shock. Shock. We are doing the good thing here. People don't realize what is going on here."

Using the garden as their battle station, the gardeners have placed posters along the fence surrounding the park and gathered names on a petition to save it. A ribbon is tied to the garden's fence for each signature they get. Last week, 2,000 gold, blue, green and crimson ribbons fluttered in the wind, as if waving for help to the stream of buses and cars that passed by. Occasionally, a rider or driver would get out of a bus or car and sign the petition. With yet another name came another ribbon.

But the petition drive had not altered the situation by Thursday. Joyce Baumgarten, a spokeswoman for Forest City Ratner, the developer of Atlantic Center, said: "We've been designated to develop it by the city. We expect P. C. Richard will occupy the space by late fall. We hope to be in construction by mid-spring."

The garden is precious to many in the area. Once a vacant lot overrun by abandoned cars and unsavory characters, the area was turned into a neighborhood space by residents of apartments across the street who cleared the debris. The gardeners dubbed the space the Bear, and themselves the Bears, after an old teddy bear they found amid the debris.

Today, there are grapevines, dogwood trees, bird baths and wood-chipped pathways on the site. Hundreds of varieties of flowers bloom throughout the year. The gardeners compost, relax on the stone and wooden benches, stroll over the bridge or teach local schoolchildren the wonder of gardening. The people who mingle here call it the community's town square, where Cuban immigrants, Haitian immigrants, lifelong Brooklynites and their children work side by side.

"We just want to save our garden," said Suzanne Chambers, who came to the garden last week with a cloth bag decorated with sunflowers. "We'll lose each other if we don't have this."

With that, she looked at the familiar face of Yesenia Romero and said, "She's going to cry."

MARK FRANCIS COHEN
UPDATE:

Half a Garden Better Than None

Like many green spaces throughout the city, the community garden at Pacific Street and Flatbush Avenue was recently handed over for development and was expected to be demolished. But in a deal that could become a model for other threatened gardens, more than half of this one will be saved.

When members of the Bears, an organization that maintains the garden, got word that the developer, Forrest City Ratner, had acquired the space and would raze it to make room for a P. C. Richards electronic store, they started a petition drive, enlisted the support of the Brooklyn Borough President, Howard Golden, and for dramatic flair, tied 4,000 gold, blue, green and crimson ribbons to the chain-link fence surrounding the garden. Last week, their work appeared to pay off. After weeks of negotiating with the developer, Mr. Golden worked out an agreement under which 5,000 square feet of the current 8,000 square foot garden will be saved. Mr. Golden also promised to allocate about $250,000 for pavement and other site improvements.

The garden, which has grapevines, dogwood trees, wood-chipped pathways and dozens of varieties of flowers, will be torn down during the construction. Building will likely begin in the next few months, and the Bears should be able to reclaim their space in about a year. "This is a model for the 185 gardens that are in trouble right now," said Suzanne Chambers, a member of the Bears. "This is really a big thing," she said. "We were the first on the list, and we were half saved."

MARK FRANCIS COHEN

Protests seem to have paid off as most of the garden will be preserved.
Houses Before Gardens, The City Decides

By ANNE RAVER

In its drive to build affordable homes in some of the city's poorest neighborhoods, the Giuliani administration has sounded the death knell for hundreds of community gardens that have, over the last 20 years, risen out of the rubble and rats of bankrupt, abandoned land.

Starting this spring, 25 gardens in Harlem and Coney Island will be bulldozed as construction begins for low- and moderate-income housing. Another 20 gardens in Brooklyn and the South Bronx will soon be destroyed for either housing or commercial development, said Greenthumb, the city agency that for two decades has been offering gardeners yearly leases in vacant lots at no charge. Greenthumb also expects to lose at least half of its 750 gardens to development over the next few years, as the city sells off its inventory of 11,000 nontaxable vacant lots and cancels the yearlong leases that gardeners have obtained.

In a city desperate for housing, "the bottom line is, we're going to build wherever we can, whenever we can," said Fran Reiter, the Deputy Mayor for economic development and planning.

"Do we sacrifice gardens to build housing?" she said. "You're damn right we do."

If a community board makes a strong case for a garden, she said, the city will try to find an alternative development site. But more often, as in the case of the 15-year-old Dome Garden, on West 84th Street, bulldozed two years ago for public housing, the city offers gardeners another site.

But it's not so easy to move a garden that has rooted itself in the community's heart. About 200 community gardens are more than 10 years old.

"The reality is, once you've had a garden over 10 years, and the trees are up to the sky, you establish roots — literally and figuratively," said Jon Crow, 38, the coordinator of the 15-year-old Bears Garden on Flatbush Avenue and Pacific Street, who learned the garden was scheduled for development only days before a tractor rolled over the new herb garden to take test borings.

Led by a community action group called the

Continued on Page C4

Point, neighbors in the Hunts Point section of the Bronx have been farming for 10 years on a two-acre plot that was once buried under abandoned cars and garbage. Teenagers who knew all about selling drugs on the street learned how to sell the basil and mint they grew on land they had cleared. They composted, built garden beds and picnic tables, cut and sold firewood.

"It kept me out of trouble," said Ralph Acebedo, 23, who now drives a truck for Hunts Point Fuel Oil. "We learned a lot about agriculture and teamwork." And it helped guide Leighton Wynter, 24, who started "farming" at 14, into law school by giving him a window onto the larger world.

On West 122d Street in Harlem, neighbors have planted fruit trees, dogwoods and hundreds of bulbs on a lot that 11 years ago was given over to rubble and rats. With a $10,000 grant from the New York Women's Foundation, the group, called Project Harmony, bought a small greenhouse and started teaching unemployed women and their children how to grow sturdy plants from seeds.

Today, they are a cottage industry, canning tomatoes, drying flowers and herbs, and making herb vinegar and wine.

These are just two of the gardens that will be sacrificed this year as the city gains some 800 units of affordable housing to be built under the New York City Partnership's New Homes Program, which funnels $100 million a year of public and private money into building houses in blighted neighborhoods. The two and three-family houses will sell for $155,000 to $230,000.

In Coney Island, about a dozen gardens thriving in the wide-open spaces of Mermaid and Surf Avenues will be bulldozed for much-needed neighborhood stores and services, to be built this spring with the help of $18 million of city, state and Federal money.

"I don't understand why, out of all the other lots on Coney Island, they single out our particular garden," said Frank Minors, 67, who helped create the Youth and Senior Garden on Mermaid Avenue out of the rubble of a collapsed bowling alley eight years ago. "I was riding around the other day, counting the lots. There are a million of them, for God's sake."

All he does is garden, he said, and he loves to plant collards, tomatoes, okra and the like. "There are a lot of poor people out here, and we give most of the stuff away to people who need it," Mr. Minors said.

Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger said the city is disposing of its vacant land "willy-nilly, with no regard to the surrounding context or long-term development goals."

"I don't think you can save a garden, as important as it is, if there's a clear contract to develop housing," she said. "It's important for government to keep its word."

But if the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development has a number of buldozed lots in a neighborhood and one has become an important community garden, Ms. Messinger added, and somebody says they have dollars to put housing in that neighborhood, I would hope that H.P.D. would work with the community board and elected officials to identify other sites."

Ms. Messinger, who three years ago pushed to find another home for the Dome Garden, is now opposing the city's moves to auction off nine lots on the Lower East Side.
Harlem gardeners from Project Harmony, whose 11-year-old community garden on city land is about to be destroyed to make way for much-needed housing.

LINDA ROSTER FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

unless it defines appropriate uses for each, like gardens, commercial development or housing. As many as 20 gardens in the East Village and the Lower East Side have been designated for eventual affordable and market-rate development.

A handful of gardens have won permanent status, and recently, Housing Preservation and Development agreed to take some gardens off its development list. One, on West 132d Street in Harlem, had won the backing of Community Board 10 and the Trust for Public Land, which is one of several greening groups lobbying to preserve the city's most valuable gardens. More important, the developer was willing to relinquish the site. "We actually lost 12 units," said Victor R. Nova, whose company, Novalex Contracting, is building 60 units in the neighborhood. Mr. Nova looks down on the garden from the bedroom of his own brownstone on 131st Street.

Something happens to people who work a piece of land.

Ten years ago, Jon Crow, a Brooklyn Bear, helped plant a grove of five white birch trees, which are now 30 feet high. Another Bear, Edward Lincoln, 73, says he has planted 5,000 bulbs over the years. Robins raise their young in the grapevines covering the gazebo; migrating monarchs sip nectar from the butterfly bushes, pausing in the middle of the rush of cars.

"We're all for development," Mr. Crow said, "but when community gardeners go in and make a neighborhood livable, I think that needs to be respected and rewarded. I think we need to start landmarking the gardens that have been active.

"Here you have an active community group, which is exactly what you need to encourage. You don't just disband them and shoo them away. You try to accommodate them.

He continued: "We always thought we'd be part of the process of any future development. But we weren't even given a chance to pitch the idea."

The city's position has always been that a Greenthumb garden is temporary. "For years, Greenthumb was where you could park land for interim use," said Henry J. Stern, the Park Commissioner, who has jurisdiction over the program. "There were sites of abandoned buildings that were torn down, leaving a gaptooth in the block."

And until the city finds money to rebuild, Mr. Stern added, "You don't want a rubble-strewn area, so you park it in Greenthumb and let it be used as a garden. But the key word is interim."

Deputy Mayor Reiter said: "We have lots of places where people can plant gardens. If you lose one, you put one somewhere else."

But the four-year-old children's garden in Bushwick, on the corner of Halsey Street and Central Avenue, is the only safe green space for blocks — and it too must make way for housing.

"Before we cleaned up the lot, people were afraid to wait for the bus at the corner because rats the size of cats would run out of the trash piles," Janus Barton, 44, said. She started the garden, called the Rock Garden, an acronym for Reclaim Our City's Kids, as an extension of an after-school program at the nearby junior high school.

"There was a crack house and a brothel across the street," she said. "Until one of the prostitutes moved away, her children gardened with us."

Other cities, like Philadelphia, which has 15,000 vacant lots, are actively working with community development corporations to use some of this open land for gardens, which are consciously incorporated into housing plans.

"It's just an afterthought, it's part of the planning of the neighborhood," said J. Blaine Bonham Jr., the vice president of programs for the Philadelphia Horticultural Society, which runs the Philadelphia Green Program. The group's open-space plats, which incorporate hundreds of vegetable gardens right into housing developments, have attracted large sums of grant money, including $2.75 million from the Pew Charitable Trust and $3 million from the William Penn Foundation.

A community development corporation in the South Bronx called the Mid Bronx Desperadoes has insured their garden's future by choosing an unbuildable site — a block-long rock ledge that runs along Longfellow Avenue, between 173d and 174th Streets. And because its plan includes a basketball court, a park with benches, a wildflower meadow and an amphitheater, the community project managed to attract $200,000 in Federal money, bolstered through the Urban Resources Partnership, a coalition of seven Federal agencies interested in incorporating green space into community activities.

The Desperadoes had lost their Greenthumb site to housing a few years ago, and it was quite a loss. "A lot of people just hung around because we could go over early in the morning and have our coffee and forget the horrors of the winter, when you didn't have no heat, or no hot water," said Dave Reid, 64, who has lived in the neighborhood for 35 years. "You could watch your vegetables grow, and it made life kind of interesting. It's a cool escape. Maybe the whole house is getting ready to fall down, but look at the green corn, it's nice."
Garden News

Good News for The Dome Garden

It has been a tough uphill battle for many of our neighbors for well over a year now to obtain a replacement park garden for the original DOME Garden which was razed a year ago last May.

However, The Beat is proud to report that hard work, perseverance and dedication pays off. Thanks to the unyielding efforts of the members of the West 84th Street Preservation Association, and neighborhood groups, in conjunction with Brandeis High School and the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), The Dome Replacement Park Garden, which sits on the northeast corner of West 84th Street and Amsterdam is near completion.

A special ceremony will be held within the next six weeks to welcome our new green space and to thank the many folks from all walks of life who are responsible for ensuring a beautiful garden remains in our midst for all to enjoy.

Stay tuned for the details and the listing of this very special ceremony in an upcoming issue of The Beat!

Pegasus Garden Razed
A Commentary

By Mary Atwood

Early in the morning hours, toward the end of October, the Pegasus Garden, between 89th and 90th Streets on Amsterdam Avenue was silently razed to the ground.

Gone the little bridge and the enchanting children's play area; the curving brick pathways; the tiny, sometimes funky little homemead plots. Gone the flowers, the herbs, the tomatoes, corn and eggplants. Gone the connection with the earth, the pride in community.

"We need housing!" our elected representatives cry. We need housing too, we might say in turn for our dreams, for our industry, for our souls and the souls of our children. So another massive luxury complex will come into being, jeopardizing the adjacent landmark stables, and with all probability, the good, honest smell of its inhabitants offending upscale sensibilities.

The next time a developer barters for that 20% "extra" airspace by offering something back to the community, let's see that we get a commensurate amount of earth below - no bogus public spaces which remain locked "for renovations" and then mysteriously turn into noodle shops, no added entrances or extra coats of enamel for the local subway, but just a piece of God's green earth, with a "for sale" sign prominently displayed.

A Few Words About The New York City Coalition For The Preservation Of Gardens

The New York City Coalition For The Preservation of Gardens is a city-wide network of gardeners, community members, local schools, religious institutions, community centers and organizations working together to preserve the community gardens located throughout the five Boroughs of New York City.

The New York City Garden Preservation Coalition was founded in November, 1996 in response to the bulldozing of several gardens throughout New York City and the threat of destruction to numerous other gardens by development plans. The citywide coalition grew out of the work of the Lower East Side Garden Preservation Coalition, which was founded in November, 1994 to explore the possibility of forming a Land Trust and other preservation options, such as Permanent Site Status for the Lower East Side gardens. The New York City Coalition For The Preservation of Gardens has joined together as a united force of diverse gardens and people from the five Boroughs of New York City. Together they offer various approaches to preserving the gardens, and provide the necessary powerful constituency of thousands of people that is needed to preserve the gardens and the ecological and cultural heritage of neighborhoods throughout New York City.

Why Are The Gardens Threatened With Destruction?

It is a fact that many of the gardens in New York City are currently threatened by development plans. Almost all the 50 gardens on the Lower East Side of New York City alone are threatened by city auctions and the HPD cross-subsidy plan that is slated to destroy the largest and most magnificent gardens for market rate luxury development.

On January 7, 1986, the city destroyed Adam Purple's Garden of Eden known worldwide for its spectacular design of colorful concentric circles of flowers, plants and trees, with a yin-yang central. Since the destruction of the Garden of Eden, the movement of community gardens has continued to grow, but always under the impending doom of the bulldozer. The destruction of our DOME Garden on May 24, 1994, and the Amsterdam Garden in November, 1996 here on the Upper West Side, as well as the recent demolition of the ABC Garden on the Lower East Side in January 1996 signaled the increasing threat to these vital green spaces. Other gardens like Project Harmony in Harlem, and numerous Lower East Side Gardens are now threatened by market-rate and luxury development that will raze the gardens, as well as displace the low-income population and destroy the ecological and cultural heritage of these neighborhoods.

These gardens have become more than simply temporary use of vacant land. The gardens have totally transformed neighborhoods riddled with abandoned buildings and neglected rubble-strewn vacant lots that had become dens of crime, drugs and toxic waste. People worked together out of their own voluteer initiative to improve their neighborhood, clearing away the rubble and planting trees, flowers and vegetable gardens in its place. Over the past quarter of a century, these gardens have also grown into more than needed open space, they have become living multi-cultural community centers bringing people from diverse backgrounds together in a neighborhood that is often divided racially and culturally. The gardens also have become outdoor theaters and art centers providing numerous free cultural programs including concerts, arts and crafts, and poetry to the community. In addition, the gardens have also become outdoor environmental science classrooms for schools. Gardens serve as healing centers for the elderly and for those struggling with AIDS. Gardens serve too as sacred churches for weddings, funerals and the practice of native religions, festivals and ceremonies. The gardens have already cut down on drug trafficking and crime. Their green presence serves to engage children who might otherwise get involved with drugs and crime, in a positive, life affirming activity. Yes, these gardens are more than open space; they are the pride and soul of the people and the neighborhood.

In sum, gardens are an exemplary model of urban improvisation that should become an urban plan for a future ecological city in the 21st century. The gardens of New York City are our ecological treasures that must be preserved for generations to come. So, in closing, whether you are an elected official, a community board member or a land developer, think twice before you cast that vote to raze a long standing community garden. Whatever you replace it with will never fill the void in the hearts and souls of children, parents, and grandparents who live in the neighborhood. Yes, there is a vast difference between a vacant lot and a community garden.

New York City Coalition For The Preservation Of Gardens Planning Meeting

Wednesday, December 11, 7pm
638 East 6th Street - 3rd Floor
(between Avenues B & C)

For more information on neighborhood gardens or to attend the meeting
telephone (212) 777-7969

December 6, 1996
Walking The Beat

In our last issue we noted that there were no outdoor phones above 86th Street and Columbus since the completion of the Columbus Avenue Construction. We were bombarded with phone calls from UWS residents who remarked that many of the phones below 86th Street were not replaced after the construction either. This tiny publication likes to report facts, first hand.

To that end, a colleague of mine, who prides himself on being a natural born counter, and I took advantage of the recent spurt of spring-like weather and walked up and down the strip. And doing what comes naturally, he counted. Here's what we found - first hand:

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We hope this grid proves useful.

- Have any information about our neighborhood you'd like to share with our readers?
- Anything you'd like to see researched pertaining to our neighborhood? Write Walking The Beat, West Side Beat PO Box 42, Planetarium Station, 10024, or fax us at 212-721-8033; or e-mail wsb@quicklink.com

JHW

Citywide Garden Coalition Update

by Mary Artwood

The New York City Coalition of Gardens was formed in December 1996. Gardeners from all five boroughs who had never before met or known each other gathered together to address a common need.

As is well known despite the many hundreds of blighted, garbage-filled lots owned by the city it is the city gardens that are being singled out for development.

The community groups that reclaimed filthy drug havens and dumping grounds, who circumvented years of neglect by the very city which now finds these spaces "attractive for development" are devastated.

Information on particular gardens slated for "redevelopment" is difficult to come by and, according to attendees, shrouded in secrecy. Several participants raised the idea that if the city is in a severe fiscal crisis, why are the gardens merely being shifted from one non-revenue generating source (gardens) to another (the city). Either way, one participant called it "a game of semantics," since neither entity, presumably, would generate revenue for the city.

The Coalition is gaining momentum. A second "meeting" was standing room only. And a "Save Our Gardens" Rally held at City Hall, Park February 13, attracted more than 300 participants despite it being at 3:00 on a freezing weekday afternoon. Some city officials, such as Deputy Mayor Fran Reiter have a strong record protecting green spaces although this is not a widely held perception and she is firmly committed to new construction. Others are beginning to have their awareness heightened by the unforeseen coalitions of borough gardeners.

The garden community is most opposed to development. City planning is necessary to the workings of the city and its economy. The New York City Coalition of Gardens comes to the table offering an olive branch. This is not a game, "them" (the developers and the city) against "us" (community parks and gardens) but rather an offering to work together to preserve and enhance the much needed green space amidst the proposed skyscrapers.

For more information on the Coalition, Telephone (212) 777-7969.

Funny Faces on the UWS

Have you ever taken a close look at the entrance to 233 West 83rd ("The Amundsen") just west of Broadway? Artist Gerald Lynam, a resident, has topped its columns with quirky little sculptures — people he admires (Lincoln, Mark Twain, Helen Keller, Mother Theresa), Animals (a rhinoceros, an eagle, an orangutan) and fantasy figures. He uses an impermanent material and they won’t last forever — so see them while they last. (How many can you identify?)

If we have a blizzard, also look for Mr. Lynam’s snow sculptures. He likes ephemeral media.

Rosanne T. Klats

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NEW HOUSING COULD MEAN THE END OF LOWER EAST SIDE GARDENS

Green Acres

BY SARAH FERGUSON

For Mairevi Villaman gardening is more than a hobby. “It’s about power,” she says, sitting inside the gazebo at the Green Oasis Community Garden on East 8th Street between avenues C and D where she’s set up an altar for the Fiesta del Cruz, a Puerto Rican prayer service celebrating the return of life. “It’s having something that belongs to me, because I create it with my hands. It gives me something of belonging,” she adds, gesturing to the blossoming rose bushes and fruit trees that she and her fellow gardeners have tended over the years.

Carved out of a heap of rubble and garbage after the wave of arson and abandonment that swept the Lower East Side in the late ’70s, Green Oasis is a neighborhood institution. It was founded in 1980 by Puerto Rican poet Renaldo Arana as a children’s performance space, and its large community stage is still used by schools and neighborhood groups for plays, workshops, and poetry events. There have been weddings and baptisms here, memorials for the dead; folks have even had their ashes spread amid the fragrant herbs and glowing rose petals.

But now the garden is at the center of a turf battle that is set to divide the Lower East Side. Last September, the Community Board 3 voted to release 10 sites—including Green Oasis and five of the more-established gardens—to the nonprofit New York City Housing Partnership, which plans to build townhouses for families earning up to $70,000 a year.

The vote outraged the gardeners, who say they never even found out until months later. They’ve vowed to challenge the sale along with the rest of the Lower East Side Cross-Subsidy Plan, a long-standing scheme to develop 22 sites, including at least eight other neighborhood gardens.

But now that the market is coming back, higher-income housing is being championed by City Councilman Antonio Fagan and his more-conservative allies on CB 3, who have long argued that the neighborhood is over-saturated with housing projects and social services. “We believe that the tax base and stability of middle-income housing would provide for a healthier neighborhood,” says acting CB 3 chair Susan Vaught, a Fagan appointee, adding, “The gardeners have always known their position on this land was temporary.”

Fagan, who declined to comment to the Voice has even more adamant about using the lots for housing. “I am a big green person, but I will not allow these interlopers to dictate what’s going on,” he said of the gardeners. “They can pack up their Forty-two-tours and go out into the country.”

The gardeners maintain that the Cross-Subsidy Plan is out of sync with the current needs of the community, and besides, there are other vacant lots that could be developed first. It’s a false conflict,” says Alice O’Malley, of Green Oasis. “It’s not a question of housing versus green space. It’s about power and about all these nonprofit agencies getting federal and city money to build housing.” While some of the board members have ties to the Partnership, many work for nonprofit groups that could be hired as local sponsors for the development.

“People don’t have a clue as to what these spaces mean to the community,” says Felicia Young, director of Earth Celebrations, which has been organizing pageants to celebrate and preserve the gardens over the past five years.

More than performance, Earth Celebrations has become the locus of a fledgling green movement on the Lower East Side.

Since 1994, Young and a coalition of gardeners and local activists have been working to create a land trust as a means of gaining permanent status for a majority of the gardens. The movement attracted surprisingly diverse support from students and squatters to architects and even a few landlords concerned that raising the density of the neighborhood might actually lower property values.

Last month, the 6th Street and Avenue B community garden was designated a park by the city, thanks largely to the lobbying efforts of the Trust for Public Land, a national conservation group. Other gardens are expanding their hours and memberships and developing programs with local schools to confront the charge that they exist as private clubs.

“This is a low-income neighborhood. People don’t have access to backyards or houses in the Hamptons,” says Xavier Rodriguez, watering a bed of roses in the 9th Street Community Garden, a sprawling six-acre oasis on Avenue C. “The fact that we can be in contact with nature and provide a place where people can come and relax and doesn’t cost the city anything. The politicians should recognize our efforts and keep the gardens as landmarks.”

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Gardeners Squash Roach Movie Plan

They dressed up like roaches and chained themselves to a fence. They battled a film company and a city agency, all to preserve a community garden for one last season. And in the end, the gardeners won.

The film company, Roachco Inc., had planned to shoot a movie called "Joe's Apartment" in the ABC Garden on Eighth Street between Avenues B and C. The film, about a Midwesterner who moves to the Lower East Side and, with the help of animated roaches, builds a garden on a vacant lot would have required the demolition of the garden.

But on Tuesday, the company agreed to look for another location, after a monthlong struggle capped by a contentious meeting with the gardeners on Monday night.

"At the meeting, the gardeners made it clear — no, ifs, ands or buts — that they didn't want us in there," said Nina Baron, a spokeswoman for the movie. "Even though legally we had the right to be there, we didn't want to deal with people protesting."

The garden was once a rubble-strewn shantytown inhabited by homeless people evicted from Tompkins Square Park. In 1991, the city gave 30 gardeners a Green Thumb license, and they cleared it and planted flowers. "Our blood and sweat went into clearing that lot," said Janice Sullivan. "It's sacred."

The gardeners' lease was not renewed in 1994, and the city announced plans to begin work in the fall on housing for the elderly. "They were told to start dismantling their plots in February," said Mara Neville, a housing spokeswoman. But the gardeners say they had a verbal agreement letting them stay until ground was broken.

On April 2, 15 gardeners with roach masks and video cameras rushed into the garden, while other gardeners pretended to exterminate them. Another day the gardeners chained themselves to the fence.

The film company is now scouting abandoned lots in the neighborhood. "All we want," Ms. Sullivan said, "is to let our garden die with dignity."
TROUBLED GARDENS

The giant cockroach was unstoppable. The old folks aren't.

When word got out this summer that a much-used community garden on Eighth Street on the Lower East Side was slated for demolition to facilitate the filming of a movie featuring la cucaracha, angry residents did a little exterminating of their own. After a deluge of phone calls, letters and demonstrations, the roach invasion was successfully turned back and the ABC Garden was saved.

But the victory appears short-lived. The community garden is now scheduled to be razed for Casa Victoria, a housing project for low-income seniors, and open space activists admit their situation looks bleak. "This may be the martyr garden," says Felicia Young, director of Earth Celebrations, a Lower East Side environmental group. "The loss of ABC may be what galvanizes the community to fight for all the gardens."

With renewed development pressures in this community, a number of gardens built on once-abandoned lots are facing imminent demolition. Young and other activists are organizing around a strategy that might save some of the gardens by creating a land trust that would raise money from private contributors and purchase as many of the properties as possible. The lots are currently owned by the city.

In September, Community Board 3 sent a list to the city of supposedly vacant lots that they had approved for possible development. Some are expected to be used for low income housing, others sold to private developers for market-rate projects.

Some of the lots on the list include community gardens, such as Albert's Garden on Second Street and another on Fourth Street. "It was done somewhat maliciously in that the community board knew that a couple of sites on that list were very active community gardens and not vacant lots," says Phyllis Reich, a project manager with the Trust for Public Land. "But I think it's understood by the political community that there are a lot of voices on the Lower East Side and the community board doesn't have the only vision for the neighborhood." The TPL is advising the gardeners on developing their own trust.

Kelly Caldwell
Community England in Housing Crisis

Protests on the Lower East Side last weekend in display against eviction.

Support of ABC No 5 in a performance space occupied by the Lower East Side Community Coalition.

Housing plans spark East Side protests
TROUBLED GARDENS

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Kelly Caldwell
By Michael Haberman

On the Lower East Side, housing always has always a high priority and always seems to be a source of disagreement. Community Board 3 meetings often turn into debates about which group should manage a building, should a new project be market rate or subsidized, or how to get rid of a corrupt management company. But almost everyone seems to agree on the basic issue — the area needs more housing.

But now some people are taking a step back and are saying "not so fast." While not denying the need for housing, they say the Lower East Side, like the rest of the city, needs park space and gardens. People who move into the new buildings, they say, need a place to congregate and need to see grass, flowers and bushes.

So a group, led by Felicia Young of Earth Celebrations, have started a campaign to preserve some of the neighborhood's open spaces that are listed as sites for housing units.

"To have more housing and no open space doesn't benefit anyone," Young said.

With a coalition of community members and local organizations, Young has formed the Lower East Side Garden Land Trust, "an organization of community representatives legally empowered to act on behalf of the community, to campaign for the transfer of lands to the trust for permanent protection and preservation."

Throughout the Lower East Side, there are gardens participating in the Green Thumb program. The program leases city owned, vacant property to a local community group and allows them to use the property as a garden until it is sold to a developer or until the city is ready to build city owned housing on the property. Sometimes, the gardeners know the property will be reclaimed by the city very soon and they are prepared. However, on other occasions, the gardeners have invested years of their time and are not ready to give up the land.

Some gardens, like one located at Sixth St. and Avenue B, has become much more than a garden. It hosts poetry readings, music performances and yoga classes. Last Saturday, the annual Harvest Fest celebration was held that included games, music and food for the community.

Others, like the Green Oasis on Ninth St. between Avenues C and D, also provide similar services like a performance stage for community people to show their talents.

Young does not want to eliminate the Green Thumb program, but she said some gardens should be permanent. And she said the city should not be selling off property until they have a use for them. For example, the Dept. of General Services was auctioning off Albert's Garden, located on Second St. between Bowery and Second Ave. The garden has existed since 1974 and there were no plans for the property.

With the help of Freed and Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger, Young got Albert's taken off the list. But another garden, the Winner's Circle on Fourth St. between Avenues B and C, is still on the Oct. 19 auction list, even though there are no plans for what will be going there. The Dept. of General Services, Young said, probably has no idea that a Head Start program across the street brings children into the garden every morning.

"It's a place of beauty in the middle of this horrible slum," Sage Payton who is a leader of the garden said.

Meanwhile, Young said they are moving right along with their plan for a land trust and the concept is also beginning to get support from elected officials.

"It's very blind not to recognize that some green space is as integral, if not more integral to the community than a couple of units of housing," Councilmember Kathryn Freed said.

But not all of the area's elected officials are enthusiastic about the idea.

"There is nothing wrong with gardens but they can't stand in the way of housing," Ann Hayes, an aide to Councilmember Antonio Pagan, said.
NEW YORK, SUNDAY, MAY 15, 1994

Trouble in the Gardens?

They certainly don't rival the Watts Towers, the Los Angeles landmark of fantasy, folk art and a lot of glass, but the community gardens of the Lower East Side have long been places where New Yorkers have turned a lot of found material into their own artistic obsessions.

In the garden at Sixth Street and Avenue B is the Toy Tower, built 10 years ago by a man named Eddy Boros, destroyed by a snowstorm two years ago and rebuilt from scratch.

And on Eighth Street, between Avenues C and D, is Gilbert's Sculpture Garden, a neighborhood Rushmore of masks and statues by John Gilbert Ingraham and his art students.

But many garden lovers are afraid that the art and the more than 50 community gardens in the East Village are in trouble because they are on city land and most have only one-year leases.

Last week, Jane Weissman, director of Operation Greenthumb, the city agency that leases land to community groups, said "none of the gardens is currently threatened by housing."

But then came the news that the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development was planning to turn a garden on Ninth Street between Avenues C and D over to a nonprofit group to build housing for 80 elderly poor people. The public review process will now begin.

"Almost all the community gardens on the Lower East Side are endangered, but we generally learn they are lost when it's too late," said Felicia Young, director of Earth Celebrations, a nonprofit organization.

On May 29, the gardens will be on display during an annual pageant called the Rites of Spring: Procession to Save Our Gardens.

MARVINE HOWE