

New York Times

NEW YORK, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 19, 2002

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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

Continued on Page B8

Ending Battle, City Lets

Continued From Page A1

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 settling the last administration's lawsuits a priority, was more open to a compromise 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-toned respite, to the failures: garbage-strewn, rodent-infested eyesores that attracted unsavory activities. Many gardens provided an oasis in the city's poorest 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 gardens 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.



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.

Another 200 gardens will be offered to the Parks Department without charge, or to nonprofit groups for what the city described as a "nominal fee." Those groups will be compelled to raise the money needed to maintain the gardens and to complete any capital projects needed.

But more than 150 parcels are slated for private development of low-income housing, some of it immediately. The New York City Partnership, for instance, was waiting to develop 546 units at eight sites affected by the lawsuit. All but 83 of those units can now move forward in their partnership with the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development. "After a delay of more than three years, we are pleased that 463 units of affordable homes in the Housing Partnership pipeline can move forward as a result of this settlement," said Kathryn S. Wyld, president of the partnership.

Residents near a garden slated for development on East Sixth Street between Avenues C and D were displeased to hear of its fate, and offered their own theories as to why it would soon be replaced with 75 units of housing.

Manuel Valentine stared forlornly at a chicken strutting around the Sixth Street garden, where other neighbors were busy cooking dinner. "We're going to find you a new home now," he told the chicken. Godofredo Crespo, 50, for instance, said he suspected that a neighboring garden on Ninth Street might have been spared because of its rare willow trees.

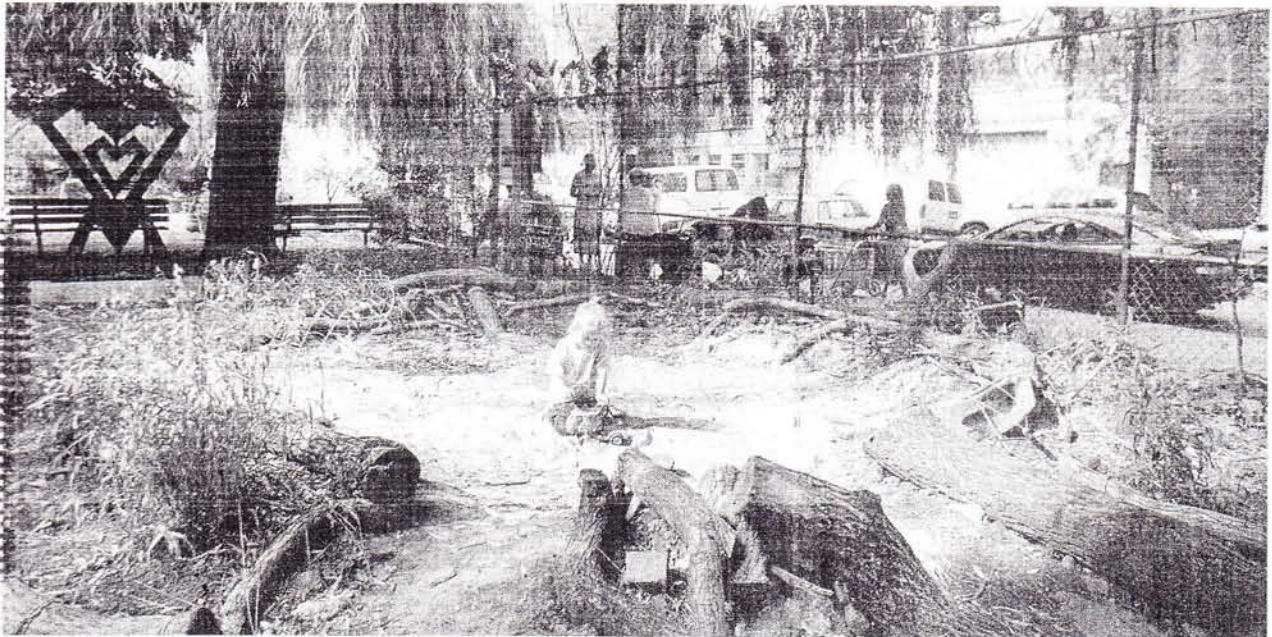
Christine Thaleman stood with her 7-week-old baby and 2-year-old in the Ninth Street spot, at Avenue C, and said that it provided a bit of countryside in the middle of the East Village. "I think the garden is the only reason I am in this area," she said of the land, where it costs \$25 a year to be a

member. Ms. Thaleman grows tomatoes and arugula and asparagus there.

Any plots to be developed will go through a public review process, officials said. That Mr. Bloomberg able to settle a long term street in a matter of months is in keeping with the administration's penchant for forming cozy relationships, at least at the outset — with son Mr. Giuliani's adversaries. Weissman, former director of CityThumb, the city's community gardening program, said yesterday the settlement's provision for a review process at least sets the tone for any future fights.

"It preserves almost 200 community gardens," she said, "but more important, it sets out a principle that's fair, that's equitable, that's going to provide notification and give gardeners a chance to find support for their gardens."

Ending Battle, City Lets Housing and Gardens Grow



Photographs by Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

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.

L B1

B6

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REGION

THURSDAY, MAY 13, 1999

Sudden Deal Saves Community Gardens Set for Auction

Continued From Page B1

Sudden Deal Saves Gardens Set for Auction

Bette Midler Clears Way For Purchase of 112 Lots

By DAN BARRY

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

The 11th-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 tending to verdant oases in neighborhoods of concrete and steel. But the fate of more than 600 other lots that were not part of the auction remains unclear.

Nevertheless, the \$1.2 million purchase of 51 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 \$3 million, a figure that included an 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 joyous occasion and means that these gardens will stay in perpetuity."

"It's a win-win for everybody," Mr. 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 become 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 often 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 ladybug or a tomato plant.

But the central issue was not frivolous to any of the involved parties. The administra-

tion 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.

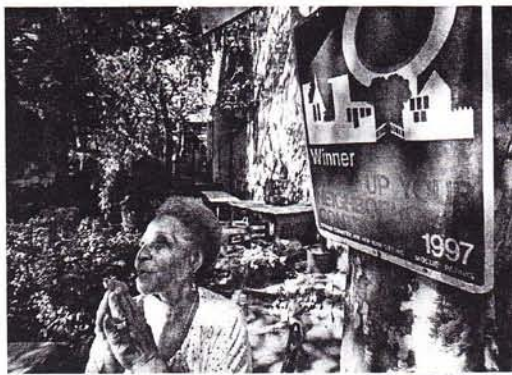
It turned out that the auction — characterized by gardeners as an act of aggression — would not have taken place today anyway. A Supreme Court Judge in Brooklyn temporarily barred the auction yesterday, after lawyers for several environmental groups and the state Attorney General's office had argued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

City officials had hoped that the purchase agreements would make moot several lawsuits that have been filed by more than two dozen environmental organizations and neighborhood groups seeking to block the city's sale of the lots. In fact, the city initially 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 vowed to continue 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. "The issue 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. Lowe con-



Fred R. Conrad/The New York Times



Reuters

Olean For, 78, pressed her hands together in gratitude when she heard that her community garden on East Third Street would be preserved. Bette Midler helped to organize a deal to buy 112 lots from the city.

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

tended.

Richard Kassel, 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 \$250,000 of her own money, and has since raised money for conservation causes with elaborate fund-raising events. At last October's "Hulaween" 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 spokeswoman 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 51 properties, Ms. Greene said. "So early this morning, phone calls went back and forth."

That resolve — and that cash flow

— clearly impressed Deputy Mayor Levine. "I think she's a great believer and she's done a lot for New York," he said.

"I think she wanted to do what she can to try 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 fates 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."

Continued on Page B6

"All the News
That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES **METRO** SUNDAY, MAY 23, 1999

R E G I O N



Nancy Siesel/The New York Times

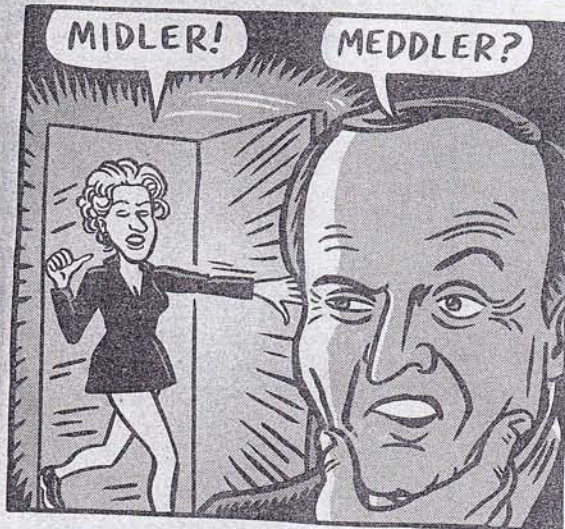
Back to Nature, in a City Setting

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.

The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES **OP-ED** SATURDAY, MAY 15, 1999

BETTE AND RUDY: THE DUET



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.

CITY



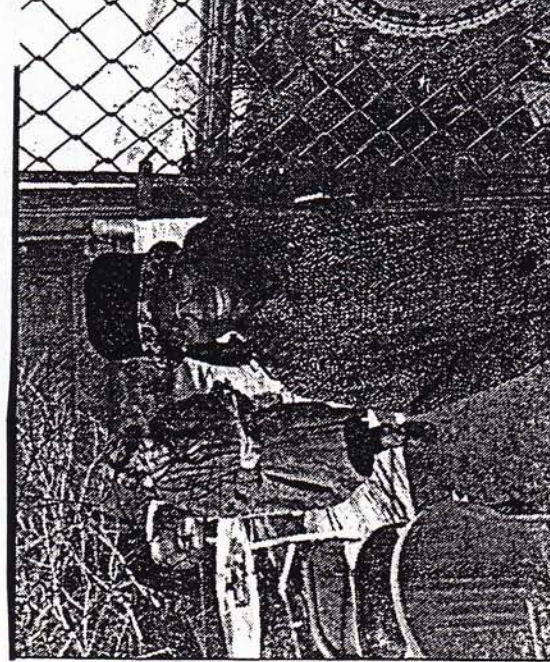
Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Guardians of the Gardens

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 gardens.

More than 200 garden supporters rallied at City Hall in February, bearing gifts of celery and flowers, right and bottom right, along with demands.

GARDENS ARE THE ONLY WAY TO LIVE!



Paul G. Burnett/The New York Times (above); Frances Roberts for The New York Times (top and right)

Classic Parker, who founded the Five Star Garden on West 121st Street seven years ago, is now fighting to preserve it.

GARDEN NOTEBOOK

Is This City Big Enough For Gardens And Houses?

By ANNE RAVER

A 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."

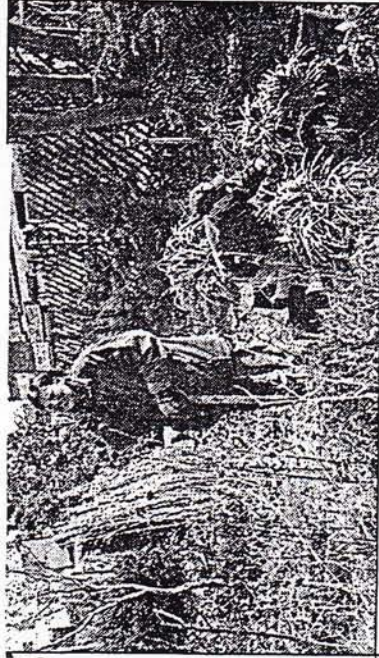
That still sends a chill through Ms. Harris's heart. "I'm not going to dig up those plants," Ms. Harris said, setting her jaw. "It's not over until the fat lady sings."

If the fat lady isn't singing yet, she has drawn a deep breath. Early next month, New York City will start bulldozing 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 300 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?

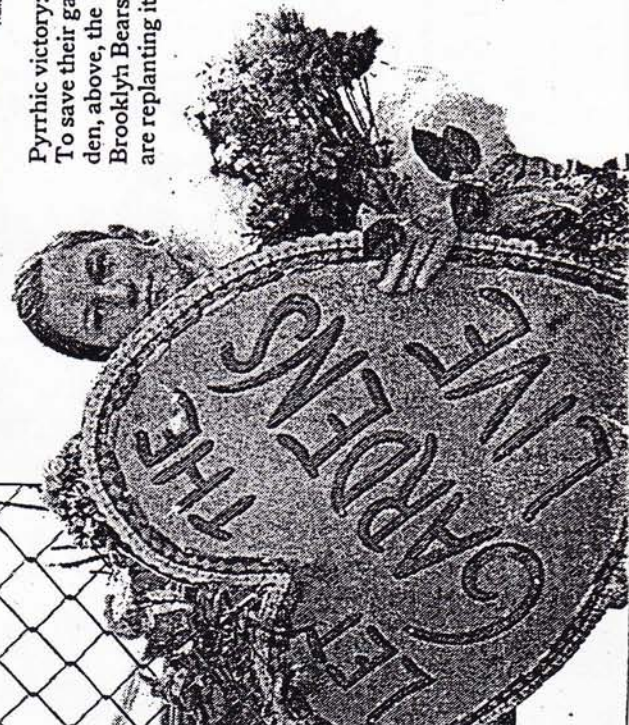
City officials say there are no other suitable sites to build housing. But the Department of Citywide Administrative Services has begun to release about 1,000 vacant lots for the approval process that leads to the auction block.

"We've been directed to either develop those lots or give them back to D.C.A.S." for sale, said Lilliam Barrios-Paoli, who formerly headed the Housing Preservation and Develop-



Nancy Sheff/The New York Times

**Pyrrhic victory:
To save their garden, above, the Brooklyn Bears are replanting it.**



Is This City Big Enough For Homes And Roses?

Continued From Page C1

ment Department. "These properties should go for some useful purpose, rather than lying fallow."

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 200 gardeners, members of the new New York City Coalition for the Preservation of Gardens, rallied at City Hall Park to demand a moratorium on all vacant closings. Accompanied by 12-foot puppets that towered over toddlers clapping stalks of celery in their strophs, they delivered gifts of flowers and flowers and letters from their supporters to Frank Reiter, 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 acknowledge the value of these gardens — former dumping grounds and drug dens that now produce vegetables and flowers while providing safe havens for the elderly and children and offering free recreation and community services. Thus far, the city has not responded to any of these demands.

It has, however, extended the lives of about half the 27 gardens slated for demolition this spring, until July 1 or October. But the essential heartbreak is the same: The gardens will be destroyed.

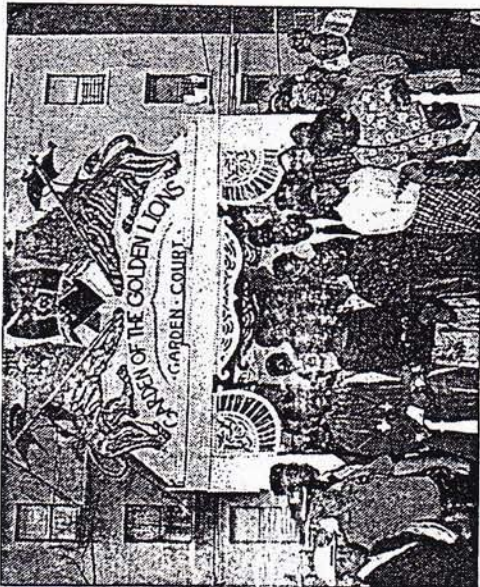
It was gardeners who first took over these wastelands left in the wake of the red-lining, arson and failed urban-renewal projects of the 1960's, pulling out garbage and junked cars and chasing off drug dealers.

In 1978, Green Thumb began issuing yearly leases to the feisty squatters who were cleaning up their neighborhoods. "We did not have any permits," said Tom Fox, one of



Paul G. Burnett/The New York Times

Garden of Love Asia
Victoria, above left, and April Rutherford of P.S. 76.



Clyde Cook Collection

the original members of the Green Guerrillas, who soon after also started the Neighborhood Open Space Coalition. "We cut fences open with wire cutters, and took sledgehammers to sidewalks to plant trees. It was a reaction to government apathy."

In the 80's, the open space coalition inventoried all the community 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 oases 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 from 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 Abrons Foundation and the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, which funnel \$500,000 every year into New York's community gardens. This committee is using its clout to help greening groups gain access to city officials and developers.

"Our big focus is how green space can be saved and made permanent with some concrete benefits to the city," said Andy Stone, the director of the trust's New York chapter. A good community garden raises property values as Central Park turns adjacent real estate to gold, he continued, adding: "We're playing with ways to encourage developers to support city gardens, like zoning changes that would allow developers to contribute to open space in exchange for height and bulk. If the city will make some policy decisions, we will commit more money to a garden- and park-preservation program."

In central Harlem, home of the Garden of Love, one developer, echoing the experiences of many, said he was surprised by how haphazard site selection could be. Desmond Emmanuel said he was never told by the city that lots offered for development have gardens on them. The Housing Department lists them as vacant.

Mr. Emmanuel, the president of Santa Fe Construction, which has an office at 225 Park Avenue South, won the contract to develop two- to three-family houses on empty lots between 118th and 128th Streets. The Housing Department, he explained, issues a request for a proposal. "They ask you to submit choices in terms of preference," he said. "But nothing they give you tells you if there are gardens there. It's just blocks and lot numbers." He added that he would consider alternative sites if they were comparable in size and viability.

"We're not tied to any site," he said. "Three community gardens have been told to evacuate for his development, but he says he has not decided which sites to build on."

"We don't have a design yet. We haven't hired an architect. I don't have any idea what they'll cost," Mr. Emmanuel said. Community gardeners in Harlem and elsewhere in the city say they never had a chance to lobby for their gardens.

When Ms. Harris heard that the Garden of Love might go up for sale, she said that Green Thumb's director, Jane Weissman, "told us that there were four gardens in Harlem she would fight for, and ours was one," but later, Ms. Harris said, "she said

there was nothing she could do."

News of the March 31 deadline to vacate galvanized the community. One teacher called the press. Children wrote letters to the Mayor. Ms. Harris sent packets of before and after pictures of the Garden of Love to politicians and city officials.

And last week, she got on the phone and didn't stop calling until she reached someone at the Housing Department. "Literally 15 minutes later, Green Thumb called and said, 'We're going to extend your lease until June 30.'"

It was Ms. Harris's bulldog tenacity that brought the temporary stay of execution for about half the 27 gardens slated for bulldozing this year.

ONE city leader has suggested an obvious way to avoid the strife that results from pitting the need for housing against green space. "What the city needs is to treat all vacant city-owned land as a resource and work with community boards and local officials and garden groups to see what makes sense," said Ruth Mesinger, the Manhattan Borough President. In theory, community boards and borough presidents are given the chance to recommend that specific vacant lots be reserved for open space, gardens, housing or commercial use.

Ms. Reiter, who is now running the Mayor's re-election campaign, said that when the city has an opportunity to build housing, it goes to the community board and asks if the board wants to save any gardens. "And they'll say: 'We want the housing, but these three gardens are most important.' And we'll work it out." Sometimes, she added, "you can't work it out, and the ultimate decision lies with H.P.D."

Ned Ames, a trustee for the Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust, which pours \$850,000 yearly into the urban environment, credits gardeners with safeguarding sites when the city abandoned them years ago.

"Then the economics of the situation changed, and it's lucrative to build," he said, "so the city does a flipflop and goes in and begins to sell them off with about the same sensibility it displayed when it abandoned them in the first place — which is to say, none."

The Brooklyn Bears, who have gardened a triangle of land between Flatbush Avenue and Pacific Street for more than 10 years, learned that a P.C. Richards was going up on the site only days before a tractor crashed through their fence. They stood outside the garden in the dead of winter, gathered 4,000 signatures and lobbied Borough President Howard Golden of Brooklyn. They won an agreement from the developer, Bruce Ratner, to reduce his retail space by 5,000 square feet, saving that much land for a garden. But it is a pyrrhic victory: the gardeners have to remove 5,000 bulbs, rare shrubs and perennials, and abandon a grove of 30-foot white birch trees because the site must first be excavated.

July 2, 1996 ♦ Vol. XLI No.27

NEW HOUSING COULD MEAN THE END OF LOWER EAST SIDE GARDENS

Green Acres

BY SARAH FERGUSON

For Maitreyi 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 a sense 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 irises.

But now the garden is at the center of a turf battle that is set to divide the Lower East Side. Last September, 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.

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 vice president Steve Brown predicts it could be a year "minimum" 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 in rem properties to the highest bidder. Under the plan, the city agreed to rehab vacant buildings for low- and

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 oversaturated 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 Vaughn, a Pagan appointee, adding, "The gardeners have always known their position on this land was tenuous."

Pagan, who declined to comment to the *Voice*, has been 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 Four-by-fours and go out into the country."

The gardeners maintain that the Cross-Subsidy Plan is out of synch 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 board members have ties to the Partnership, many work for nonprofit groups that could be hired as local sponsors for the development.

"These 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 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-lot 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 effort and keep the gardens as landmarks."

"This is history," Rodriguez adds. "We have 19 to 20 years in this movement. You can't really dismiss that."



Earth celebrations: the final act for the Lower East Side's green movement?

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.

O'Malley points out that her garden and several others were actually founded well before the Cross-Subsidy Plan, yet they were never included in the planning negotiations. City maps still list the gardens as vacant lots, despite the fact that many have been in existence for more than 20 years.

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 inhalations-worth of floral scents for passersby — they are the evolving expressions of a community committed to the restoration of natural beauty and cultural integrity to the neighborhood. Once garbage-strewn empty lots, they are now treasure troves of weeping willows, flowers, vegetable gardens and artwork. 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 complacency, 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 and arts programs, performances, art exhibitions, 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 inspiring the evolution of 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 1989; the Festival to Save McCarren 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 together to create an ecotopia. An urban improvisation that could be used as a model for urban planning in the future."

Art that serves ecology, community and social awareness, 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 structures 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 threat to 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 him to the event, one village resident offered: "We are surrounded by harshness in this city, the gardens are a 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 a 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 divert children away from the consistent 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 embellished a decrepit Forsyth Street was demolished in favor of a 180-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) 727-8283.

Elizabeth Kemler is Assistant Producer of On the Line on WNYC radio and an environmental activist. ■

Ingrid's Flight, continued from page 7

speaking out for the animals because I knew there were many other kind and caring people out there like the ones I had recently met. There was hope for change and I knew I had to reach out to them for the animals.

Long ago, a flyer such as the one I give out now changed my respect for the animals. Now I think often that it could happen again and change another person's life for the better. We owe it to the animals to be their voice and stop the victimization that goes on every day, no matter if it's called a cat, or a dog, or bird. I believe most people are ready for that change and can live an unselfish, non-violent lifestyle. If we can begin to do that, we'll realize how desperately the animals need us and how desperately we need them to live peaceful and harmonious lives. As long as we have hope and believe in the power of prayer, then miracles, as I found out, will happen. ■



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.



Not every garden is on City land. This was part of a sculpture garden -- on land recently bulldozed.

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 nontaxable 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.

Point of View

Little Italy/Soho Humanist Newspaper

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 commences 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 bulldoze many of the community gardens and sell the lots 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 the names of threatened gardens. Other participants are hidden under the gowns of 15-foot tall wildflower puppets at the head of the parade. Next in the process-

sion, memorials follow with pictures of community gardens that have already been destroyed.

When 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 (HPD).

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 Deputy Mayor, Fran Reiter. But a security off-

Continued on page 5

SAVE THE GARDENS THE CITY AGAINST THE PEOPLE

continued from Page 1

cial, who refuses to give his name or identify his position, does not accept the letters and flowers and urges the group to leave. The children, now scared, begin to cry.

They cheer up when the group moves on to deliver their package for Ruth Messinger, the Manhattan Borough President. Representatives at her office welcome the delivery group. Ruth Messinger is in a meeting and cannot greet the group in person. But her assistant David Wang later hands out a xeroxed statement, in which she points out that the garden issue is not "a conflict about housing versus open space". She continues: "I strongly urge the Mayor to start working with the community to ensure that gardeners are given the opportunity to continue making important contributions to the quality of life of our neighborhoods and city."

The procession delivers further packages to the secretary for Commissioner William Diamond, of Citywide Administrative Services, to Joseph Rose of the City Planning Commission at 22 Reade Street and Peter Vallone of the City Council at 250 Broadway. The final stop of the parade is City Hall. The delivery group is refused entry, but after a half-hour wait a representative accepts the package for Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who later comes out and greets the delivery group.

After the parade, garden representatives from various neighborhoods, supporters and elected officials like Adam Clayton Powell Jr. IV, City council member for Harlem and the Upper West Side, speak in a rally. The Save our Gardens Day and the rally were organized by Earthcelebrations, a nonprofit environmental arts organization at East 6th Street. Festival artist Felicia Young, the director of Earthcelebrations, also played a crucial role in forming the citywide coalition for the preservation of the gardens last November.

She emphasizes the positive, creative element in the "joyful protests", as she calls it. To make people aware of the threat to the gardens, she organized a colorful Winter Pageant with hundreds of costumes, lanterns and puppets on February 1 (see last issue of Point of View). It took her and groups of volunteers months to create the signs, puppets and gowns, but such events generate more attention and sympathy than a conventional rally. "This is so much

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 out-door 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 leaf 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 gardens 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 still 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 dislocation of low-income communities in neighborhoods like the Lower East Side. Even if a part of the new buildings is planned for low-income housing or community use, they are not willing to sacrifice gardens to the bulldozers. 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.

But 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 9th 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 gardens or to volunteer, call Earth Celebrations at 777-7969, e-mail earthcel@interport.net or visit <http://www.interport.net/~earthcel/>.

AQUARIAN[®]

Weekly

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Celebrate Our City Gardens

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 writers Jushi, Bruce Weber and Joanne Pagano 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 of 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.)



Foto: HUMBERTO ARELLANO

¡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 ciudadanos, 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 millares de neuyorquinos 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.

MARCH 17, 1997

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 pushing up 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 East-side Girls Club Inc. would like to build a seven-story building of 80 housing units there, 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 seepage: "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 than 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.

The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, MARCH 2, 1997

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

On the southwest corner of Ninth Street and Avenue C, two apparently wholesome neighborhood constituencies, girls and gardeners, are engaged in a fierce fight over land.

The Lower East Side Girls Club, which has about 135 girls ages 10 to 15 and has lacked a home since it began in 1995, has joined with AF & F Community Builders. They want to build a seven-story, mixed-use development, including 10,000 square feet for the Girls Club. The site is La Plaza Cultural and 9BC Garden, a well-loved community garden and outdoor cultural center on what was once a rubble-strewn lot.

At a raucous meeting with Community Board 3 last week, both sides displayed placards and gave passionate testimony. Green signs, borne by those fighting to save the garden, read, "Commit this color to

memory because after our community gardens are demolished, that's all it will be."

A yellow sign carried by a proponent of the Girls Club said: "Gardens: 50, Girls: 0," referring to the existence of about 50 community gardens on the Lower East Side but no Girls Clubs. Meanwhile, they add, three sites are devoted exclusively to activities for boys.

Construction of a permanent home for the Girls Club would correct a longstanding inequity, Lyn Pentecost, director of the club, said.

Some neighbors of La Plaza refused to see the conflict as one between girls and green. "I'm not against girls or girls' clubs," said Armand Rublman, a playwright. "But the residents of East Ninth Street are really attempting to preserve a community resource." Others

A marshy corner lot is sought for a club site.

ers defended the garden as a place where girls from the surrounding community participate in gardening and cultural programs.

The proposed building would have 80 apartments, 16 of them for low-income residents, 7,000 square feet of retail space and the Girls Club, which would include a theater, gymnasium, art studios, computer lab and health clinic. Some green space would remain, including the willow trees now in the garden.

Neighbors of La Plaza voiced another concern about the site. Two underground streams converge under the land, making it difficult to build on, they said, displaying maps of the site drawn in the 1870's. In fact, several people said, many of the neighboring buildings are tilted, sinking and often flooded.

Ross Martin, a landscape architect who lives across the street from the site, said that what makes the site a great park would make it a bad place for a building. "The land is wet," he said. "It lies on wetland."

The Community Board voted 20-10 to give control of the site to the Girls Club. The club and AF & F Builders need to have their plans approved by the city's Housing Preservation and Development Department.

The gardeners say they will keep fighting.

JANET ALLON

The New York Times

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NEW YORK, SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 1997

\$3 beyond the greater New York metropol...



Frances Roberts for The New York Times

Lovers of the threatened garden have gathered signatures and tied a ribbon to the fence for each one.

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 jalapeños 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 in 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, birdbaths 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

The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, MARCH 9, 1997

UPDATE

Half a Garden Better Than None

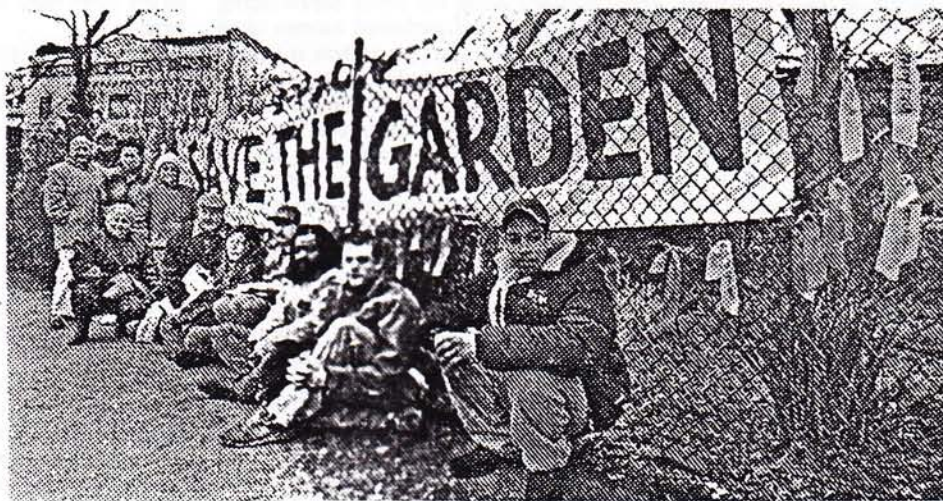
Like many green spaces throughout the city, the community garden at Pacific Street and Flatbush Avenue was recently handed over for development and was expected to be demolished. But in a deal that could become a model for other threatened gardens, more than half of this one will be saved.

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."

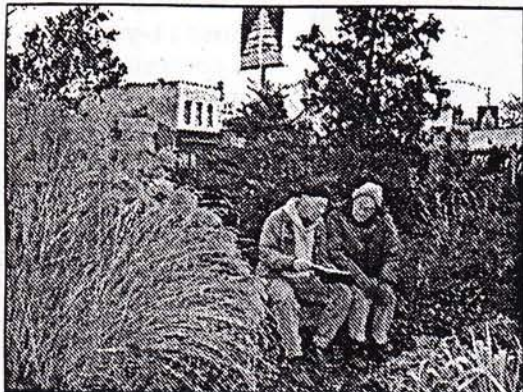
MARK FRANCIS COHEN



Frances Roberts for The New York Times

Protests seem to have paid off as most of the garden will be preserved.

Houses Before Gardens, The City Decides



Andrea Mohin/The New York Times

Jon Crow, left, and Edward Lincoln, in their endangered garden in Brooklyn.

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 10-year-old Brooklyn 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 From Page C1

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 Mer-

maid and Surf Avenues will be bulldozed for much-needed neighborhood stores and services, to be built this spring with the help of \$16 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 buildable 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,



Lenore Victoria Davis for The New York Times

Soon to be bulldozed: community garden in Hunts Point, the Bronx.

Continued on Page C4



Linda Rosier for The New York Times

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.

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 a 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. "These 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 not 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 plans, 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, funneled 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. You could 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 undying 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 homestead 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 barbers 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 'not 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 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. 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 of 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 volunteer 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 green 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 directly 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
phone (212) 777-7969

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:

Columbus	Gone	New Post	New In, Old	Other
77	X			
78		NW		
79	X	SW		
80		NW		
81		NE		
82			NW double	Ray's Pizza
82/83 mid block			NW single	True Value
83		NE		
84		SW	NW single	Sloan's
85		SE old post		
85/86 mid block			double	
86			SW single	
86		NW & SE	SW single	
87		SE		
88		NW & SE		
91		SE		
93		SE double		
95		NW		
96		SW		
97		NW double	SE Rite Aid	
100		SW	SW C-Town Market	
104-105			14 in this 2-block area — 4 don't work — All are inside of sidewalk near building.	

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

Funny Faces on the UWS

Have you ever taken a close look at the entrance to 233 West 83rd ("The Amidon") just west of Broadway? Artist Gerald Lynas, 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



Citywide Garden Coalition Update

by Mary Atwood

The New York City Coalition of Gardens was formed in December, 1996. Gardeners from all five boroughs who had never before met or known of 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 coalescing of borough gardeners.

The garden communities are not 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.

see them while they last.
(How many can you identify?)

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

Rosanne T. Klass



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July 2, 1996 ♦ Vol. XLI No.27

NEW HOUSING COULD MEAN THE END OF LOWER EAST SIDE GARDENS

Green Acres

BY SARAH FERGUSON

For Maitreyi 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 a sense 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 irises.

But now the garden is at the center of a turf battle that is set to divide the Lower East Side. Last September, 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.

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 vice president Steve Brown predicts it could be a year "minimum" 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 in rem properties to the highest bidder. Under the plan, the city agreed to rehab vacant buildings for low- and

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 oversaturated 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 Vaughn, a Pagan appointee, adding, "The gardeners have always known their position on this land was tenuous."

Pagan, who declined to comment to the *Voice*, has been 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 Four-by-fours and go out into the country."

The gardeners maintain that the Cross-Subsidy Plan is out of synch 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 board members have ties to the Partnership, many work for nonprofit groups that could be hired as local sponsors for the development.



Earth celebrations: the final act for the Lower East Side's green movement?

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 bot-

tommed 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.

O'Malley points out that her garden and several others were actually founded well before the Cross-Subsidy Plan, yet they were never included in the planning negotiations. City maps still list the gardens as vacant lots, despite the fact that many have been in existence for more than 20 years.

"These 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 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 back yards or houses in the Hamptons," says Xavier Rodriguez, watering a bed of roses in the 9th Street Community Garden, a sprawling six-lot 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 effort and keep the gardens as landmarks."

"This is history," Rodriguez adds. "We have 19 to 20 years in this movement. You can't really dismiss that."



Frances Roberts for The New York Times

The swarm of angry "cockroaches" who evicted "Joe's Apartment."

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."

M.W.

City Limits

NEW YORK'S URBAN AFFAIRS NEWS MAGAZINE

DECEMBER 1981

TROUBLED GARDENS

The giant cockroach was stoppable. 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

The Villager

Inside

- 8 Editorial, Letters, Talking Point
- 9 Blending dance and theater
- 13-18 Villager Guide
- 23 A taste of Sardinia

Housing plans spark East Side protests

Supporters of ABC No Rio, a performance space being evicted from a city-owned building on Rivington St., brought a Community Board 3 housing committee meeting to an end last Thursday when their yelling and screaming prevented Asian Americans for Equality from presenting their plans for renovating the building. The protesters returned last night to make their voices heard at the full board meeting.

"No one could hear the man from A.A.F.E., and there was nothing on the agenda that needed an immediate vote so we disbanded the meeting," Susan Vaughn, the chairperson of the committee, said.

The building at 156 Rivington St. was enrolled in the city's enterprise program last October. The program provides funds to community-based organizations to rehabilitate city owned buildings into low-income housing and own and manage the buildings. A.A.F.E. was chosen by the Dept. of Housing Preservation and Development as the agency for this project. Last week's meeting was to decide if C.B. 3, which approved enrolling the building in the enterprise program, would support A.A.F.E. as the supervising agency.

"The question of it going into the program was not at issue," Vaughn said. "I don't know where the protesters were last year."

ABC No Rio had a month to month lease with H.P.D. and was notified the lease was being terminated. Since August, Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger's office has been serving as an intermediary to see if



Villager photo by John Perito

Protestors on the Lower East Side last weekend in display against turning community gardens into housing sites.

the performance space occupy the basement and first floor of the building while the rest of the building is converted.

"Our hope is to keep the performance space in the Lower East Side and provide low-income housing," David Wong of Messinger's office said.

The two groups met yesterday to decide if they should continue to negotiate. Borough President Ruth Messinger's office said after the meeting that it was likely ABC No Rio

renovations. But ABC No Rio supporters showed up at Community Board 3's meeting last night, still protesting. They were joined in their demonstration by Chinatown residents opposing a proposed Off Track Betting parlor on the Bowery and pro-community garden

activists.

Some who protested at the meeting also participated last weekend in the "Save Our Neighborhood! Harvest Festival" in a community garden on E. Eighth St. between Avenue B and C. The gardeners were protesting their eviction from the ABC garden so housing can be built on the site, as well as pending evictions from other gardens.

"To replace these spaces with parking lots and housing projects will be a tremendous loss to the residents of the Lower East Side," a release announcing the protest says.

But most of the gardens, including ABC, are enrolled in the Green Thumb program. Green Thumb leases vacant lots to community groups until the city is ready to use the land for housing. On Sept. 27, the City Planning Commission approved a plan to allow Casa Victoria Housing Development Company to build a seven-story elevator building with 79 units for elderly, low-income people, on the ABC site.

Earth Celebrations is trying to form a land trust to take control of some of the gardens and make them permanent. While most elected officials in the area are not opposed to the idea of green space, some, like Councilmember Antonio Pagan, say gardens cannot stand in the way of housing.

City Limits

NEW YORK'S URBAN AFFAIRS NEWS MAGAZINE

DECEMBER

TROUBLED GARDENS

The giant cockroach was stoppable. 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

The Villager

West Village, East Village, Soho, Tribeca and Lower East Side

Vacant lot gardeners seek to save their turf

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



Village photo by Brad Ricketts

BEE OR NOT A BEE, THAT'S THE QUESTION: Four-year-old Ezra Brown prepares to pet Nina (10-ish), who is dressed up as a bumble bee for her appearance in the Petting Zoo at a community garden party on E. Sixth St. and Avenue B last Saturday.

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.

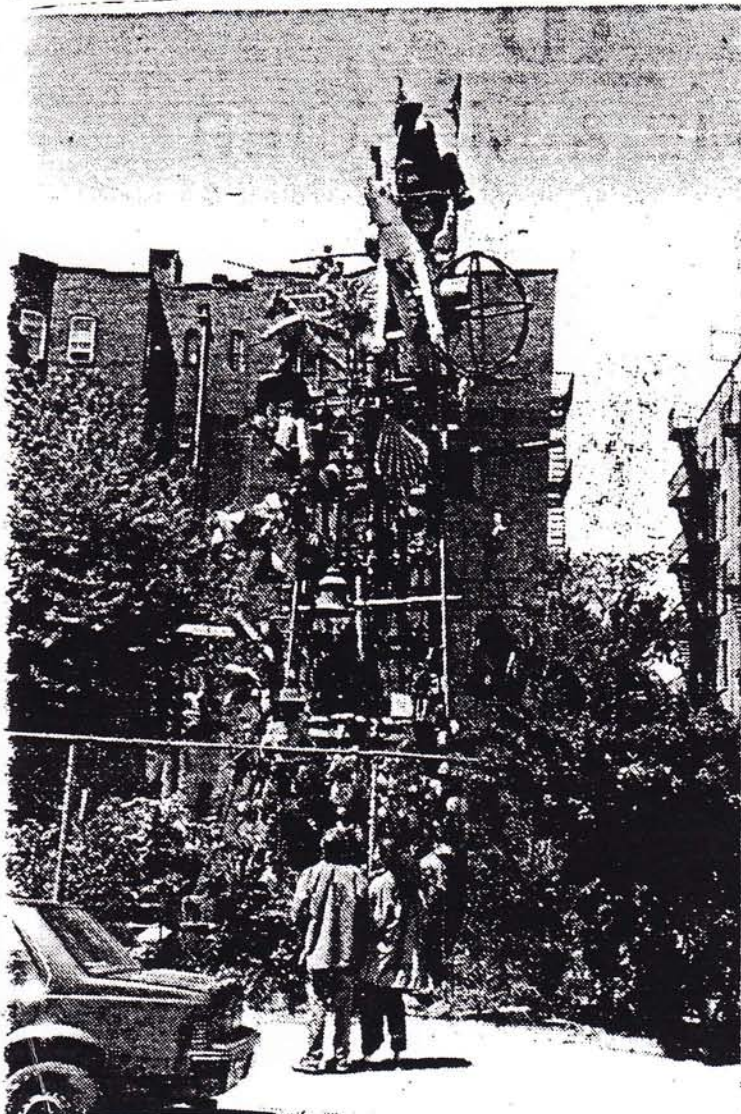
"There is nothing wrong with gardens but they can't stand in the way of housing," Ann Hayes, an aide to Councilmember Antonio Pagan, said.

The New York Times

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NEW YORK, SUNDAY, MAY 15, 1994

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Photographs by Jack Manning/The New York Times



The Toy Tower, left, at the Sixth Street and Avenue B Community Garden. John Gilbert Ingraham and some of his students in Gilbert's Sculpture Garden on East Eighth Street between Avenues C and D.

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