

A Public Interest in Community Gardens: Planning Policy, Environmental Justice, and Real Estate Speculation in U.S. Cities

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U.S. community gardens – national significance



American Community Garden Association (ACGA) Bi-National Map of registered gardens lists 1937 entries in 2013.

U.S. community gardens – national significance

- Although they developed from longer traditions of public relief gardens and guerilla gardens, community gardens have become powerful political symbols of environmental justice in the U.S. since the 1990s.



First Lady Michelle Obama addressed the 2010 annual meeting of the ACGA.

Environmental Justice: definitions and practices

- Term defined as positive quality by scholars opposed to environmental racism or the disproportionate pollution of minority communities (Bullard, 1990 & 2005; Adamson & Evans, 2002; Schlosberg, 2007)
- EJ framework's 3 parts: risks, amenities, & meaningful participation in decision-making
- President Clinton (1993) created National Environmental Justice Advisory Council

Environmental Justice: a powerful concept?

- NEJAC officially is an advisory council of the Environmental Protection Agency—it has no regulatory or enforcement authority
- EPA enforcement of Clean Air and Water Acts depends on state-level Departments of Environmental Quality
- Environmental justice is not regulatory policy, but the concept rooted in community activism has influenced NGOs, local governments, and researchers
- Small EPA EJ grants for “model projects” (1994-)

Structural dynamics of U.S. urban gardens

- Regional and local dynamics as well as the underlying political economy (major cities dominated by finance-real estate elite) and political culture (libertarian, regionalist, with agrarian populist traditions) structure the emergence of U.S. urban gardens



Poster: Herbert Bayer, Rural Electrification Administration, USDA, New York City. 1941-1943.

Four types of U.S. urban gardens

1. Guerilla gardens
2. Sanctioned urban community gardens
3. Community supported agriculture and urban farms in de-industrialized cities
4. High-tech greenspaces



1-2 Guerilla gardens & official community gardens— response to urban decay



Photograph by Mel Rosenthal from *In the South Bronx of America*.

South Bronx, 1975

- Empty lots appeared through vicious cycle:
 - when industrial economy declined, landowners stopped paying taxes
 - cash-poor cities reduced services (fire, police)
 - empty buildings burned (arson in Bronx)
 - City fenced off empty lots, which filled with garbage, junkies, and became „missing teeth“ in neighborhoods (Kleiman n.d.; Spirn 1998)



Photograph by Mel Rosenthal from
In the South Bronx of America.


Urban environmental policy

- Environmental policy is also defined by what policy-makers decide *not* to do
- In 1975, President Ford refused to bail out NYC, deepening its decline
- Urban environmental policy is shaped by national party politics
- Urban issues are environmental: air, water, food, greenspace, health

NASSAU SUFFOLK FINAL **DAILY NEWS** **15¢**
NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER ©
Vol. 67, No. 107 New York, N.Y. 10017, Thursday, October 30, 1975* Home, incl. 47-58 Details p. 118

FORD TO CITY: DROP DEAD

Vows He'll Veto Any Bail-Out



**Abe, Carey
Rip Stand**

**Stocks Skid,
Dow Down 12**

Three pages of stories begin on page 2; full text of Ford's speech on page 26

Associated Press Wirephoto
President Ford gives his message at Washington's National Press Club yesterday.

NYC's community gardens were insurgent gardens appropriated by residents from vacant public lots in the 1970s, legitimated by a city program with annual leases, then incorporated as neighborhood parks (50+) or razed.



Liz Christy Garden, 1972, the first guerilla garden in NYC.

Liz Christy Garden, Bowery & Houston , 1973. [Sources: Little, Gilian. "Urban Arcadia," and Don Loggins. Loisaida: New York City Community Gardens, Michela Pasquali, Milan, Italy: Linaria Press, 2006: 42.]

Community gardens and environmental justice

- Representation of community gardens as in the public interest involves recognition of socio-economic inequality
- Community gardens require all the elements necessary to creating environmental justice: air, water, land, labor, social relations
- Their uncertain land tenure demands gardener & resident political participation
- See also: Emmett, 2011.
- Detroit, 2009-present. city program and MI urban farming initiative replaces vacant lots with acres of gardens



Michigan State Farming Initiative, Detroit gardens.

The Michigan Urban Farming Initiative
7432 Brush St, Detroit, MI 48202
www.miufo.org • 313.444.6324

Figure 4: Percent Change in Housing Prices (1974–1980)

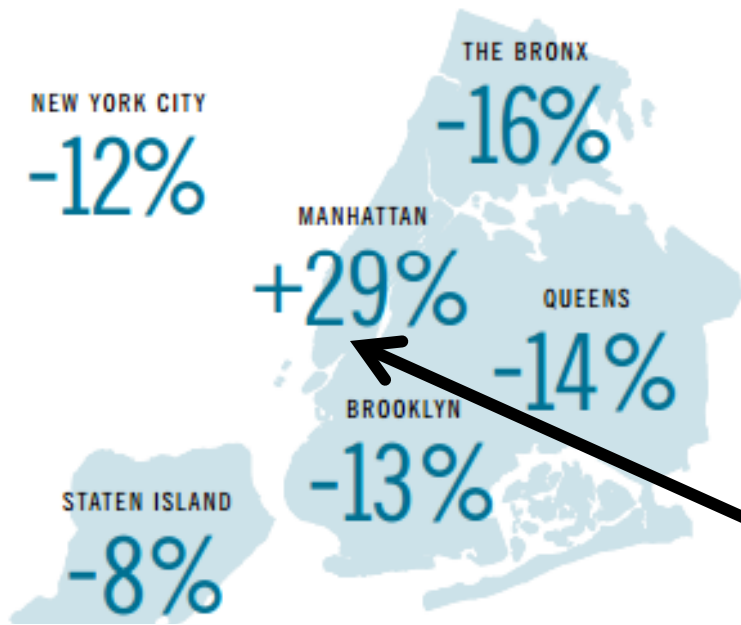


Figure 6: Percent Change in Housing Prices (1989–1996)

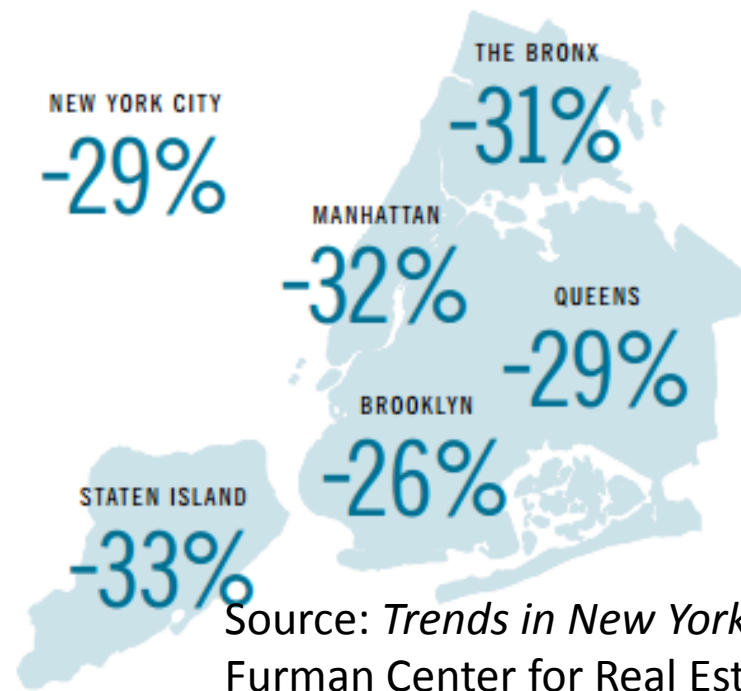


Figure 5: Percent Change in Housing Prices (1980–1989)

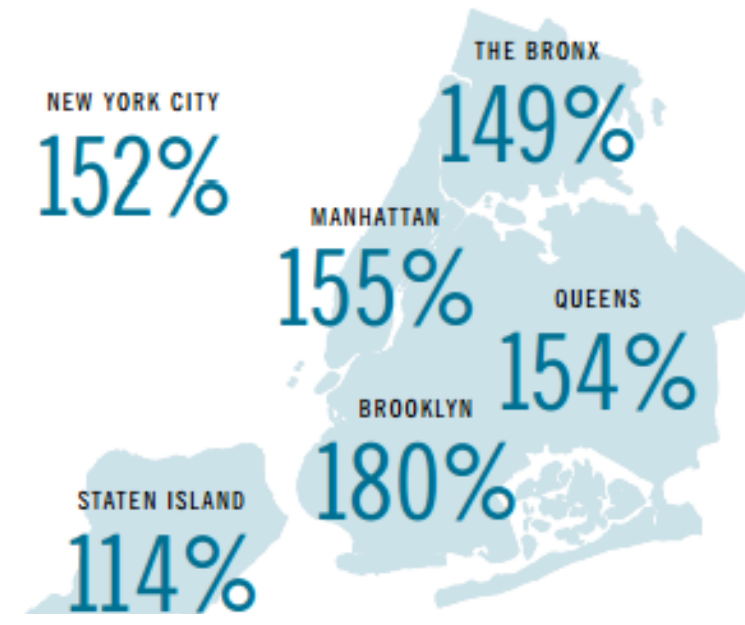
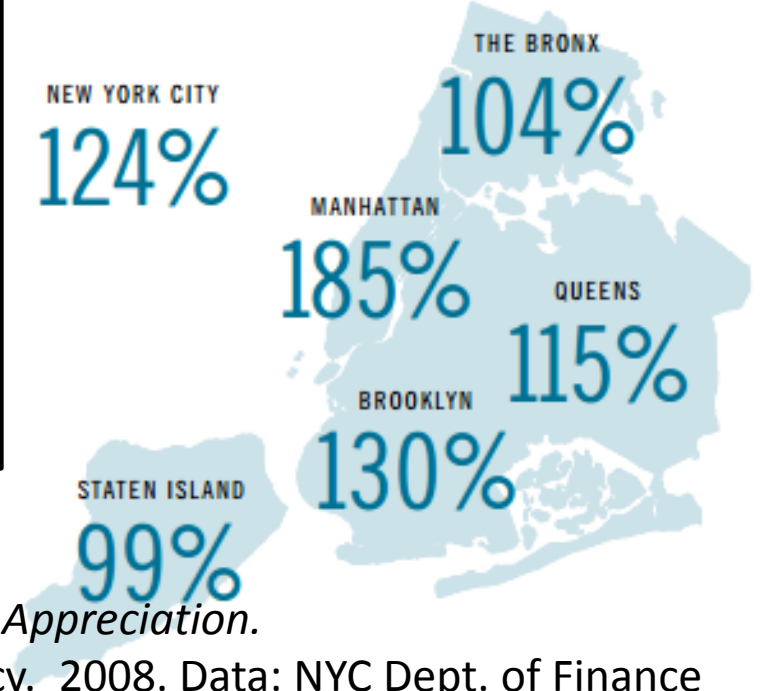


Figure 7: Percent Change in Housing Prices (1996–2006)



Prices **did not increase** on Lower East Side, & Chinatown, where unemployment rates did not drop from 1970 levels until after 2000.

Source: *Trends in New York City Housing price Appreciation*.

Furman Center for Real Estate and Public Policy. 2008. Data: NYC Dept. of Finance

“Gardens of the Homeless”: Pixie’s sitting garden in 1991



[Source: Morton, Margaret. “Eighth Street Garden.” Transitory Gardens, Uprooted Lives
By Diana Balmori and Margaret Morton. New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 1993: 27.]



[Source: Morton, Margaret. "Eighth Street Garden." Transitory Gardens, Uprooted Lives
By Diana Balmori and Margaret Morton. New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 1993: 28.]



Community Gardens & Marginality

- *Transitory Gardens, Uprooted Lives* captures the operation of symbolic power in seeing and making gardens--and unmaking others
- Symbolic power is “that invisible power...exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it” (Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 164).

NYC urban gardens and public land policy: when real estate values rise

- Rising land values and housing shortage in NYC pressured city to develop gardens in Green Thumb program.
- 1997 NY Supreme Court Justice Atlas in *NYC Coalition vs. Giuliani* dismisses coalition request for injunction on development of gardens:

“Clearly, without a license to property or with only a license revocable at will, **one lacks a legally cognizable interest** upon which to base standing to complain of decisions affecting the use of that property”
- In 1999, Mayor Giuliani auctions 115 gardens to highest bidder—several sold to personal friends.



El Jardín de la Esperanza, 7th St. & Ave. C (1978-2000)

- Started by Puerto Rican immigrants as “squat” garden on vacant lot in Losaida/Lower East Side
- Legitimized in 1978 through “Operation Green Thumb” city program with \$1 annual leases; sought by residents
- Razed on Giuliani’s authority to build “mixed income” housing, condos with security cameras



- Home pricing index : “neighborhood quality”
- Unintended consequence of recognition and appreciating gardens’ value: hastening their redevelopment?

[Source: http://www.earthcelebrations.com/gardens/7bc_esperanza.html]

El Jardín de la Esperanza's last chapter: guerilla theater, aestheticized resistance vs. police power



“We built a giant *coquí* [Puerto Rican tree frog] guardian in the front...with room inside for three to sleep, raised up ten feet with window watchtower eyes and concrete-sealed lock-boxes. In the back...rose a twenty-six foot sunflower made of steel with a lock-box on top” (Brad Will, 2003).

Environmental activist
Brad Will at Esperanza

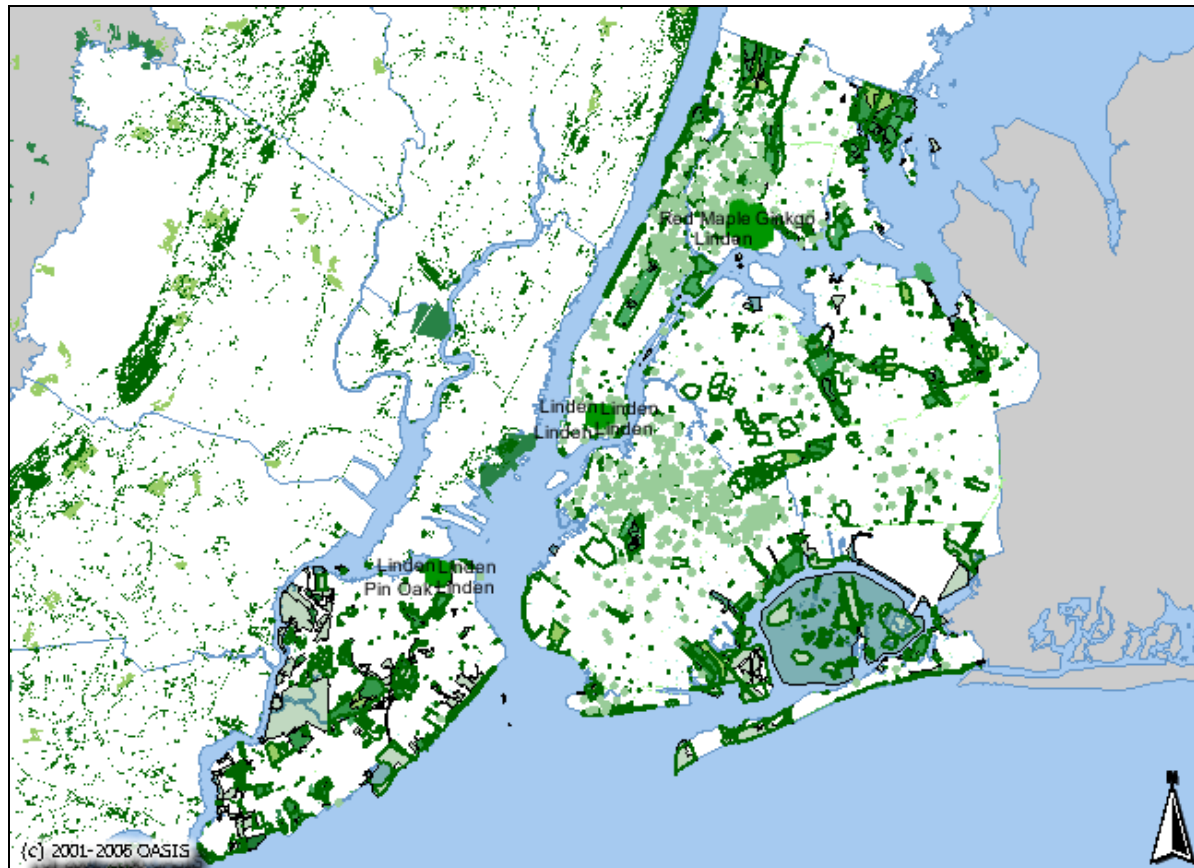
NYC urban gardens and gentrification

- Robert Fitch (1996): NY greening obscured the real agenda of “urban renewal” projects: to aid real estate interests
- Triangle of influence: city planners-philanthropic boards-FIRE elite
- Rockefeller Foundation, Pratt Institute are major garden donors—but they cannot entirely control the shape or growth of community gardens through charity.



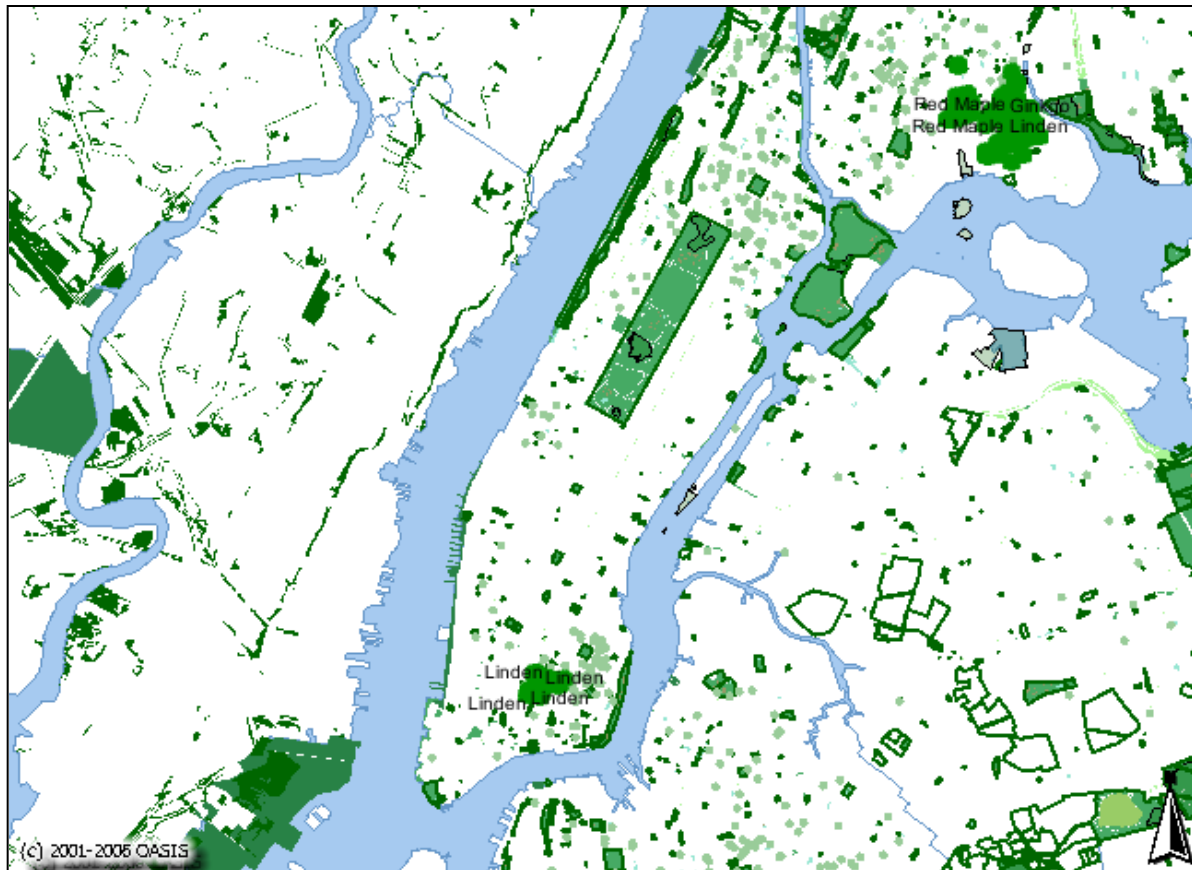
Worlds away from New York’s funky, small community gardens—the Rockefeller Rose Pavillion, New York Botanical Garden.

New York City greenspace mapped by OASISNYC project (2006)



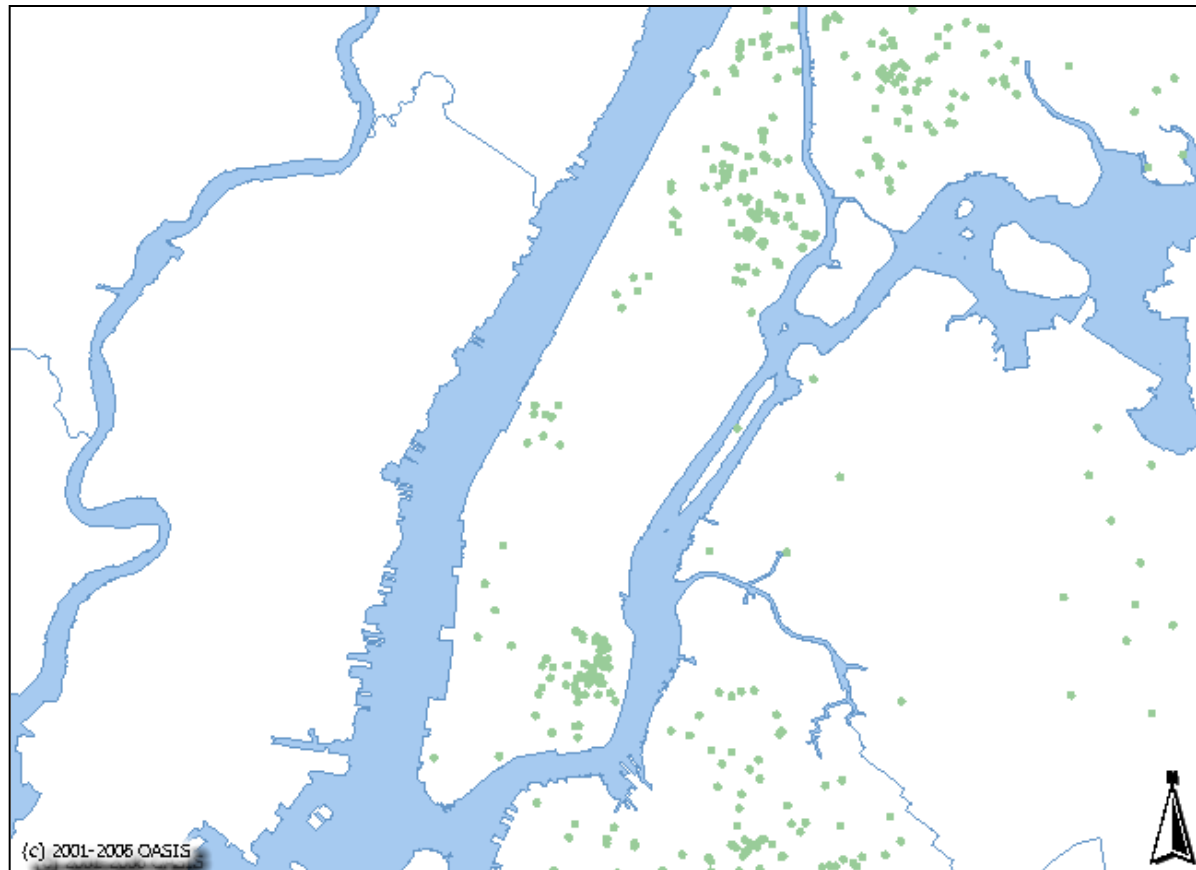
[Source: www.oasisnyc.net]

Manhattan: Greenspace (2006)



[Source: www.oasisnyc.net]

Manhattan: Community Gardens (2006)



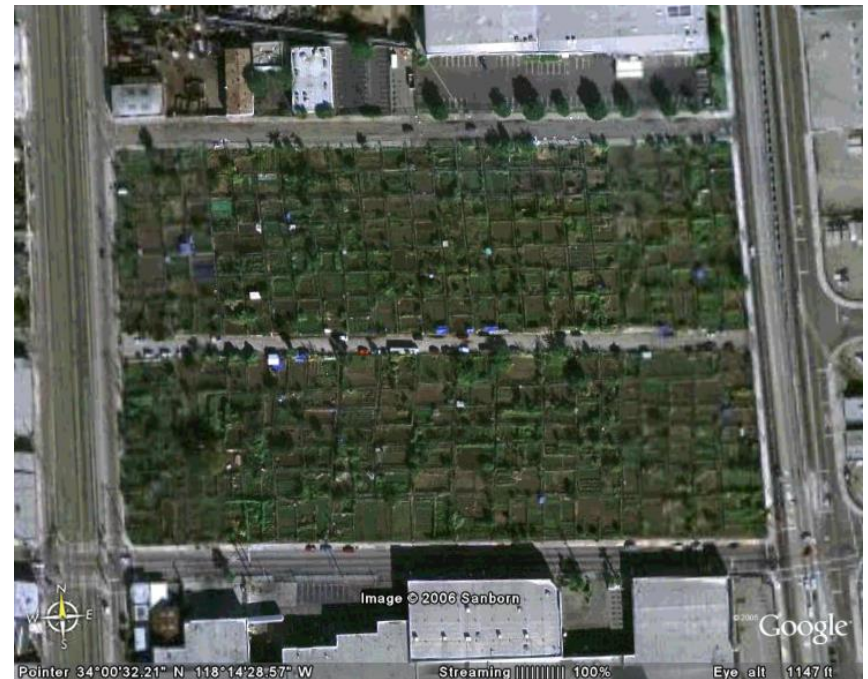
[Source: www.oasisnyc.net]



The appearance and meaning of a garden change over its lifetime and institutional context: Liz Christy's original "Green Guerilla" Garden, Bowery & Houston in 2008 appears to be ornamental greenspace in a gentrified Lower East Side area.

Los Angeles: South Central Farm (1992-2006)

- One of the most polluted zip codes in the U.S.
- 1986-a planned garbage incinerator is contested by African-American Concerned Citizens of South-Central, site vacant
- 1994-allotments licensed through local food bank
- Demographic trends



Further Reading: see Devon G. Peña's work on Environment & Food Justice.

Los Angeles: South Central Farm (1992-2006)

- Became largest single community garden in the U.S. at 14 acres, 350 families
- Majority Latino/a (Chicano/a) gardeners who cultivated acres of market produce, ran on-site kitchen, held community parties



South Central Farm is a test of policy relevance of environmental justice



- *Campeño* populism, EJ claims outweighed by speculative real estate development and racialized urban politics
- An L.A. story: Hollywood stars, civil rights lawyers, corrupt politicians

Garden drew national attention: celebrity environmentalism

- NYC and L.A. gardeners met to trade tactics
- Villaraigosa: first Latino mayor in L.A. since U.S. statehood elected by multiracial
- Annenberg Foundation raised \$10 million to “save the farm”
- Hollywood actors visited; *The Garden*, Scott H. Kennedy.



L.A. garden public land policy

- Municipal court stayed city from evicting gardeners: L.A. council violated its charter when it did not review existing land use prior to land sale
- Previous owner (until 1986) won his right to purchase land back at below market value, paid \$5 million
- Private property rights trumped EJ claims



Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa visited the South Central Farm running for office in 2005, then presided over their eviction In 2006.



Seeing community gardens as charity: a competition for victimhood



South Central Farm. Child gardener offers beans and corn to the cameraman, n.d.

Developer Ralph Horowitz: "Where does this kind of 'you owe me' mentality end? How good is that for America? What they should have said to the taxpayers of LA and to me is, 'This is a gracious country. Thank you for letting us have our garden here, but we realize our time is up. We've had our 14 years.'" (Interview, local NBC news, 2006)

Liberal fantasies about urban gardens

“3'-By-4' Plot Of Green Space Rejuvenates Neighborhood”

DETROIT—Notorious for its abandoned buildings, industrial warehouses, and gray, dilapidated roads, **Detroit's Warrendale neighborhood was miraculously revitalized this week by the installation of a single, three-by-four-foot plot of green space.**

The green space, a rectangular patch of crabgrass located on a busy median divider, has by all accounts turned what was once a rundown community into a thriving, picturesque oasis, filled with charming shops, luxury condominiums, and, for the first time ever, hope.

(The Onion, A1, February 11, 2008)



What about other U.S. urban gardens?



American Community Garden Association (ACGA) Bi-National Map of registered gardens lists 1937 entries in 2013.

3. Rustbelt cities: de-industrialized utopias of urban agriculture



- Decreasing real estate values? Decrease food miles!
- Subverting the conventional food system through local production & consumption
- Supporting local farms & local subsistence economies

3. Rustbelt urban gardens mimic and supplement CSAs

- Rustbelt “farm cities”
- Seasonality: hoophouses, rooftop apiaries, vertical farms, aquaculture
- Lower cost: working poor and middle-class residents lease annual allotments or join associations to grow good food



3. Urban agriculture-structural dynamics in Rustbelt cities

- De-population in mid-sized cities formerly dominated by heavy industry (Brookings Institute, *State of Metro. America*)
- Eroding markets, existing unequal social geography creates food deserts: areas where residents have no access to fresh fruits, vegetables, and groceries

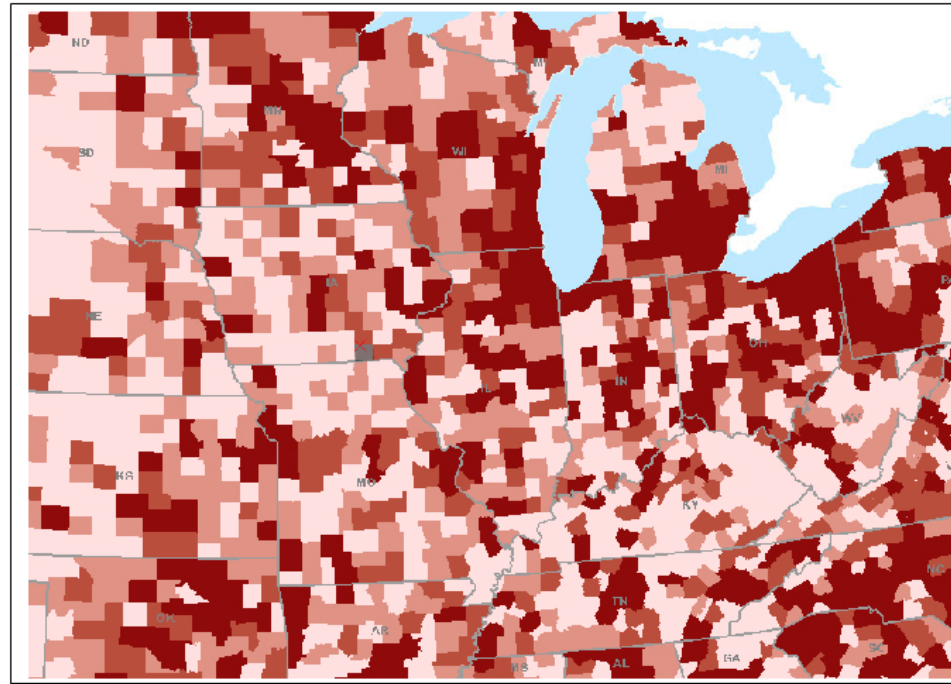


Image: Food Access Research Atlas.
Deep red indicates census tract with low access to full food market for residents.

3. Urban agriculture-structural dynamics

- Health: obesity epidemic and growing awareness of food politics
- “Gardens feeding families” idea re-connects Midwest to agricultural traditions



Milwaukee: Growing Power, Inc.



- Last farm (zoning) located in one of top 10 most racially segregated U.S. cities
- Founder Will Allen, MacArthur Fellow, national leader of “good food movement”
- Annual conference attracts 100s of gardeners from across U.S.

Milwaukee: Growing Power, Inc.

- A food system that is labor-intensive rather than capital-intensive
- Business depends on low labor costs (interns, students, volunteers, grants), upscale marketing of microgreens and tilapia from aquaculture system



Will Allen, *The Good Food Revolution*



Nigel Parry for The New York Times

- “Growing Power is not a community garden, it’s an urban farm. It’s productive agriculture.”
- Urban community greenspaces build resilience—ability of city neighborhoods to absorb economic shock (Tidball and Krasny, 2006)

Urban gardens produce little of Americans' food, but they *are* influencing post-industrial urban planning.



U.S. urban community gardens are vernacular landscapes, but have residual symbolic power as public space.

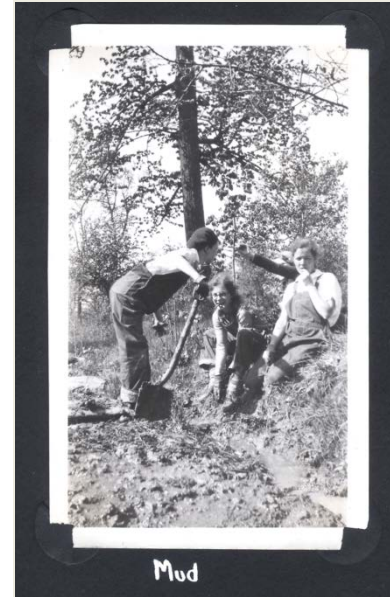
- J.B. Jackson's contrast between political and vernacular landscapes
- Gardens connect symbolically with U.S. liberal ideals: agrarian republicanism, civic environmentalism, anti-racism



Japanese-American gardeners,
Allotment gardens, New York City, 1917.

Urban community gardens and universities

- Gardens also resonate with public service mandate of public universities (land-grants)
- Surveys of gardeners report health, empowerment, new skills, intergenerational connections (ACGA; Hynes, 1996)



UWM University Archive. Education students making campus garden, c. 1917. Retrieved by Kayla Smith of UWM Food Garden Club, 2011.



Dr. Mai Phillips at UWM campus garden, 2011. K. Nelson

Urban gardens & education: from school gardens to community-based design

- Vlasky and Tidball (2006) frame gardens as tools for urban resilience: inspiring adaptation, building community assets, and social capital
- Precedents: school gardens, such as Berkeley „Edible Schoolyard“
- Jeff Hou (2011) aligns urban gardens with strengthening of cultural memory, community-based design, and policy change, Seattle



Urban campus garden – Univ. Wisconsin, Milwaukee

College Begins Victory Gardens

*Faculty, Students Repeat Activities of World War I
In Planting, Cultivating Crops on Campus Plots*

Victory gardens of MSTC will again grow on part of the campus across Maryland avenue, announces Samuel Thorn, biology instructor. Mr. Thorn and Dr. Harvey Uber, head of the geography department, will be in charge of dividing the ground into 12 by 15 foot plots and distributing them to the amateur gardeners.

Plowing, fertilizing, and disking the land will be problems of the college, Mr. Thorn said. Those applying for plots will have to plan the garden, plant the seeds, and then keep the garden in good condition.

Employees to Have Gardens

All school employees—instructors, librarians, custodians—as well as training school pupils may obtain a plot by agreeing to “properly and carefully work” the garden. In the case of training school pupils, an application must be filled in which will insure the tending of the garden. Signatures of the child, his parents, and his teacher must appear on the application.

A number of teachers in the college will remember when the first gardens were started on the campus in 1910, not victory gardens at that time, but simply vegetable gardens.

Formerly Only for Training School

The project was exclusively for training school pupils, who did all of the work including spading the ground and furnishing the fertilizer. As in the present program, the gardens had to be taken care of during the summer months.

The second planting of gardens took place during the last war. Then, as now, the school plowed a part of the land west of Maryland avenue, and school employees cultivated vegetables.

A chart, “Garden Planting Information,” has been compiled by Mr. Thorn. The chart contains information on the distance between plants in a row, the distance between rows, the amount of space needed for one person, the amount of seed to plant in 100 feet, and the number of days needed for the plants to grow. Charts may be obtained from Mr. Thorn.

Dean Advises Women To Uphold Standards

“Standards of good taste don't change because of a war,” emphasized Miss Cecelia Werner, dean of women, at the fourth mass meeting of women in the auditorium Tuesday. “Any new regulations that have been imposed are for the greatest good for the greatest number of people,” she added.

“Throughout the whole situation an impersonal friendliness should prevail,” she told the coeds. “Any concentrated group in uniform creates a natural excitement, but we should think the situation through and not interfere with the army,” she continued. Social situations for meeting the men will be provided, Miss Werner said. Meaningful friendships need roots and time for expression, she continued.

Admonitions concerning army regulations were also mentioned, and students were reminded that they should not use the library after 6 o'clock in the evening.

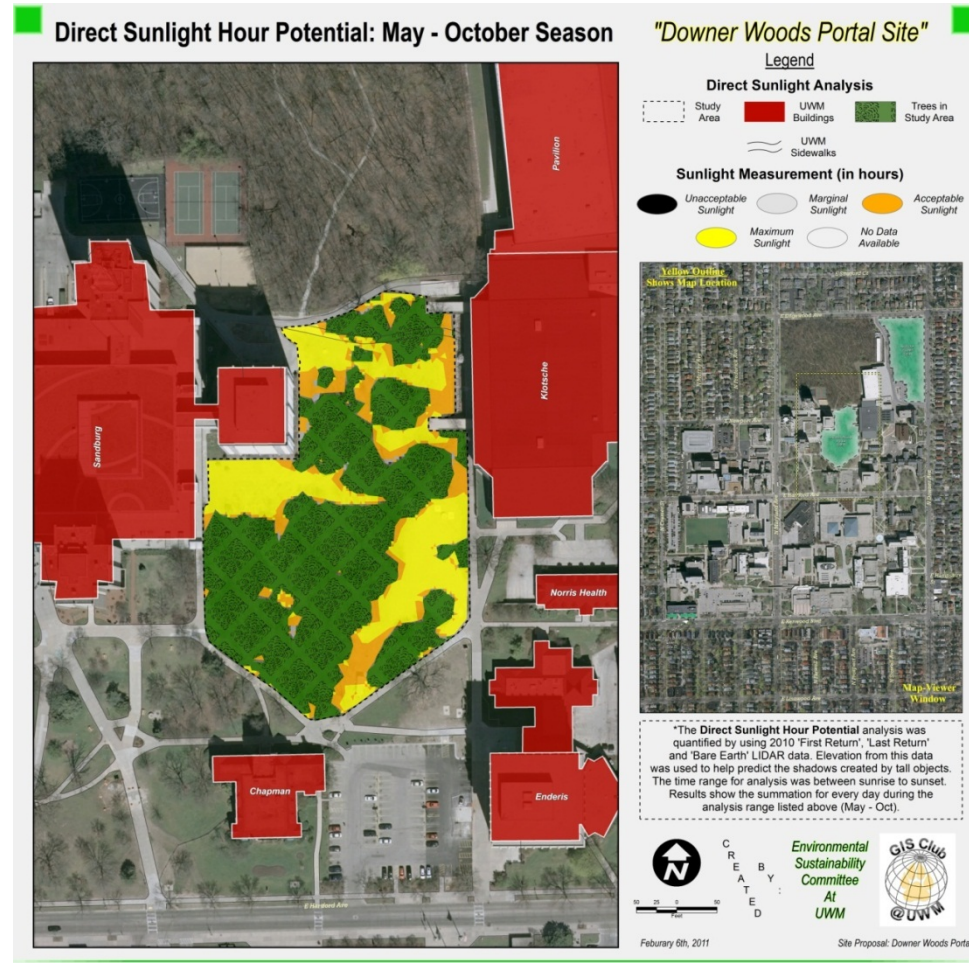
Later the forum turned to a discussion of the college reception for air crew students, which coeds voted informal in dress.

- Historical research in the archives yields:
- Precedents
- Lessons: how and why
- Traditions or values still active in the community

Urban campus garden – Univ. Wisconsin, Milwaukee

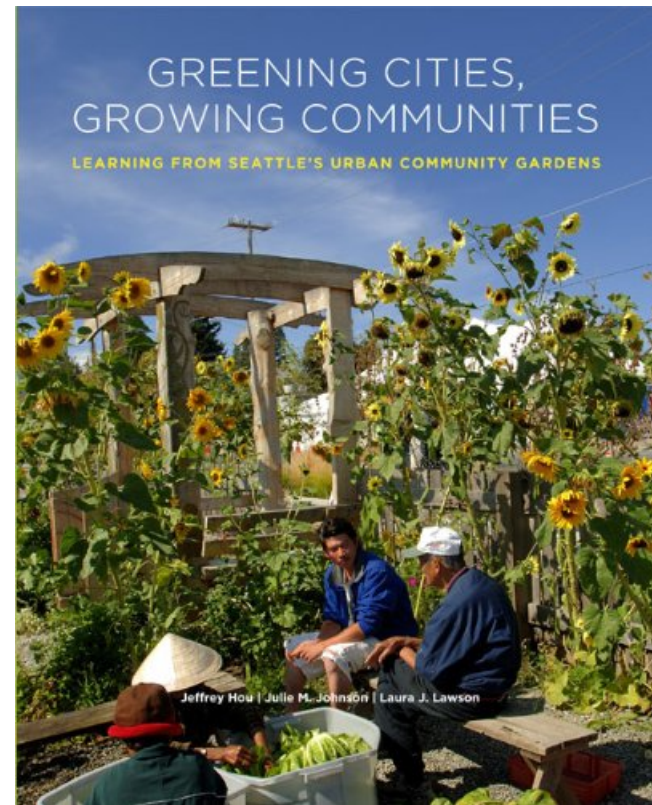
- Where are the conditions sufficient for growing vegetables?
- Where is it politically allowable?
- What forms of gardens are aesthetically or culturally acceptable?
- Who ensures maintenance?

Image: UWM GIS Club. Student project analyzing LIDAR data to find areas with adequate sunlight on campus as potential garden sites.



Urban campus collaboration: Seattle

- Jeff Hou, U Wash. landscape architecture and urban planning, leads students in design-build projects in neighborhoods
- Broad political support and citywide policy supporting urban gardens, including food gardens
- Seattle: high tech, educated, medium-sized, politically progressive



Seattle's P-Patch Program (1973-)

- Residual agrarianism: Picardo family farm allowed in 1973 city zoning (bucking trend)
- Gardens proliferate, local city-neighborhood P-Patch funded by volunteer labor & special levy for Parks
- Pilot project to lease public land to farmers for commercial food production



4. High-tech greenspace: future cities



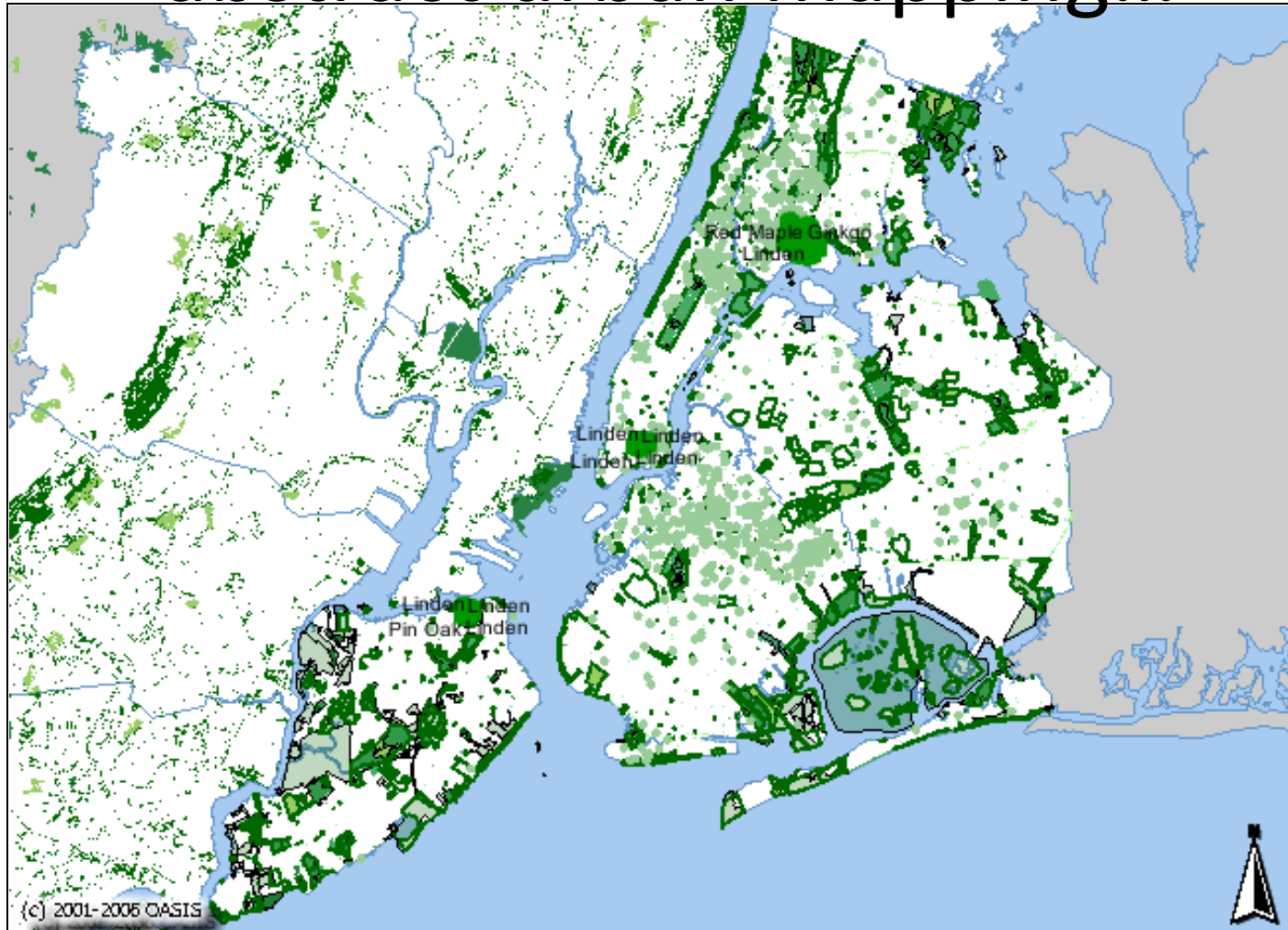
- Chicago's green city initiative (under Mayors Daley and Emmanuel) includes community garden demonstration projects as well as this hydroponic installation in the O'Hare airport terminal in 2012.

4. High-tech greenspace: future cities

- The Highline, NYC, 2009
- Monumental civic landscaping to de-industrialization
- Joint private-public partnerships of city elites: prestige spaces for a gentrified city of higher property values (and speculative building)



4. High-tech greenspace fit well in abstract urban mapping...



OASISNYC.net GIS mapping of greenspace: connecting the dots, moving from the streets into the lab and back.

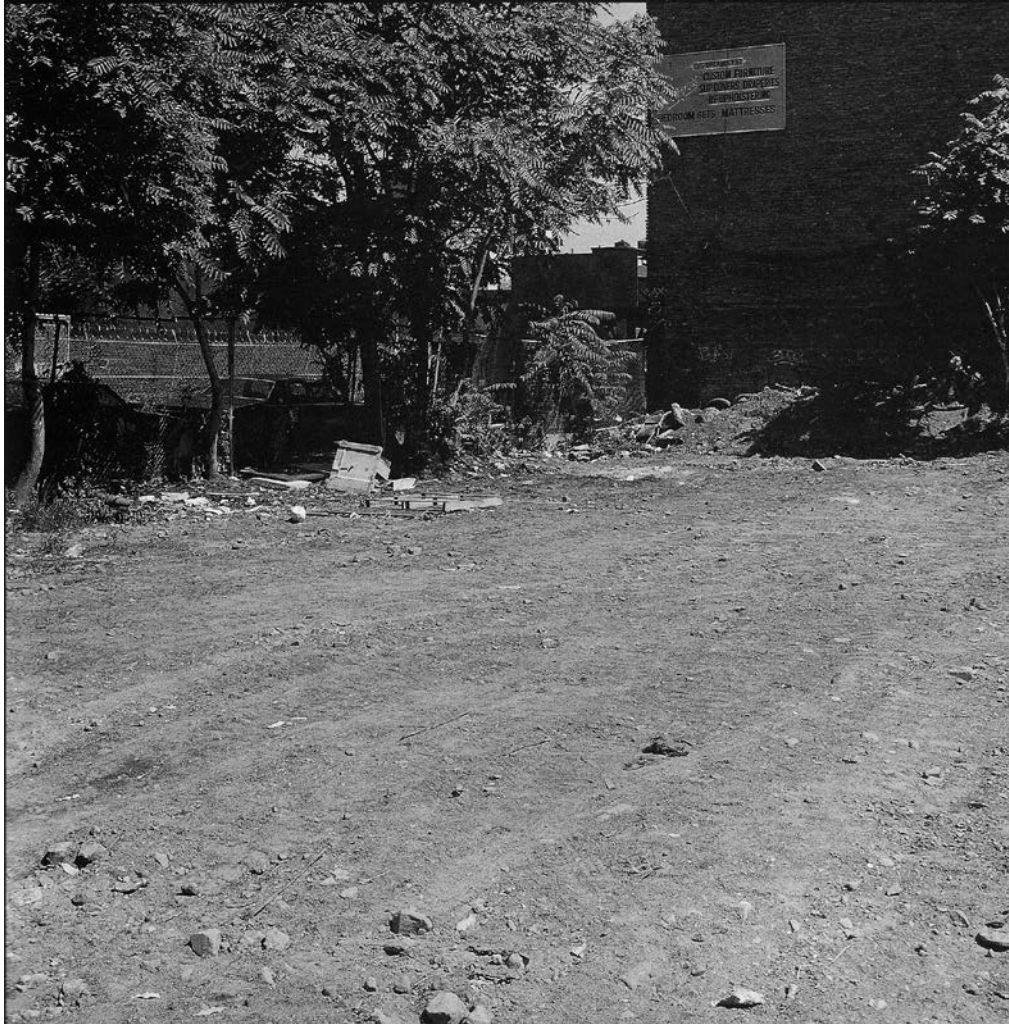


...while guerilla gardens began on the (vacant) ground and improvised.

But they rarely last: they leave traces sometimes in sanctioned community gardens.

“Jimmy’s garden was bulldozed about eight days after this photo was taken” (Morton 62).

[Source: Morton, Margaret. “Jimmy’s Garden.” 1992. Transitory Gardens, Uprooted Lives. By Diana Balmori and Margaret Morton. New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 1993: 63.]



Interpreting the symbolic power of such images helps us see how the history of U.S. community gardens is structured by a struggle to assert a public interest in urban gardens among competing private interests, including converting public land to valuable real estate.

[Source: Morton, Margaret. "Jimmy's Garden." 1992. Transitory Gardens, Uprooted Lives.
By Diana Balmori and Margaret Morton. New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 1993: 61.]



End