

Chasing Green in Concrete Jungles

Rui Xu

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Lauren Krauze

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Gardening can sometimes seem like an idealistic concept. It is good for the Earth because it enables the lives of more plants and is often lauded for its physical and mental health benefits. Yet raising living organisms is a difficult feat; one must find an unoccupied patch of land, prepare the soil, select seeds or already-potted foliage to plant according to the season and climate of their location, and keep track of how much water to provide to the plant on a schedule.

Gardening can definitely be doable for those who live out in the country or in the suburbs. However, considering that as of 2014, over 54% of the world's population lives in cities¹, it can be hard for city-dwellers to get the same things out of gardening as others. Those concerned about this lack of opportunity banded together to create community gardens. Therefore, the community gardens of New York City act as public spaces where communities are built and thrive in the impersonal bustle of the city. They are places where people, connected by the bare thread of the location of their habitat, can be still, communicate with and support neighbors, to reconnect with one's spirit and with the Earth, and relax in peacefully, in safety and security.

Community gardens can be classified as semi-public spaces. Semi-public spaces are spaces in which theoretically anyone can access and enjoy, but must be there for a specific reason. Most of these places are institutions where one must pay to be inside. For example, the subway is a semi-public place. Subway users pay to access the subway in order to transport themselves from place to place. Another example is a store. Anyone may go into the store, but

¹ "World's Population Increasingly Urban with More than Half Living in Urban Areas | UN DESA | United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs." UN News Center. Accessed April 19, 2016. <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/news/population/world-urbanization-prospects-2014.html>.

activities unrelated to shopping are generally not allowed. Many of New York City's community gardens allow the general public in to enjoy the green space, although only members of the garden's community may care for the plants and the inside area. Many gardens require one to pay a membership fee to be a member as well as provide proof that the person lives in the neighborhood by way of their address². Regardless of accessibility, community gardens act as gathering places for people to congregate and interact in an open, yet familiar and safe, environment.

Aesthetically pleasing places like these stem from the City Beautiful Movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s. In 1893, the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago presented the city of Chicago -- formerly known as a stinky, dirty, dangerous city symbolizing industrialization and economic success -- as a potentially beautiful environment that could enrich the lives of its inhabitants through urban planning and landscaping³. The city of Chicago revamped its "look" by tearing down unsightly structures and building grand monuments their place. The concept later evolved to include parks and organic areas as well, leading places like Central Park to be constructed in a way that the plants and pathways seem natural; one could assume they grew in their places by informally or chance instead of by urban architects carefully planning which trees go near which shrub. The City Beautiful Movement encouraged local and state governments to consider the welfare of the general public over private interests, allowing the creation of more

² "An Idea Book for Placemaking: Semi Public Zone - Project for Public Spaces." Project for Public Spaces. 2009. Accessed April 20, 2016. http://www.pps.org/blog/semi_public_zone/.

³ Lawson, Erik (2003). *The Devil in the White City: Murder, Magic, and Madness at the Fair that Changed America*. New York: Vintage Books. ISBN 0-609-60844-4.

projects directly benefiting the people⁴. In fact, Frederick Law Olmsted, the first superintendent of the area intended to be Central Park, thought that “parks and open space were essential to the mental health of city dwellers as a place for leisure activities outside the crowded tenements and unpaved streets,” and that the plants in the park would be the ““lungs of the city.”⁵”

In his book *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, published in 1898, urban planner Ebenezer Howard wrote “there must inevitably arise a widespread demand for an extension of methods so healthy and so advantageous⁶.” His ideas regarding the integration of gardens and cities were highly influential and gave rise to the garden city movement. This could be seen in the first garden city of Letchworth, designed by architects and town planners Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin⁷. Founded in 1904, Letchworth is located in England, about 34 miles away from London. The city was designed in accordance with most of Howard’s ideas. Though it seemed successful initially, the home prices quickly became too high for working class people to afford, leaving mostly skilled middle class residents. While the concept of a utopian city centered around gardening is interesting and environmentally sustainable, it is not sustainable socially or economically, and thus has not become widespread in execution.

Around this time period, the local and state governments of the United States began to sponsor unoccupied plots of land to be used as gardens for the lower social classes during times of financial hardship. They were called “relief gardens” or “victory gardens.” In this manner,

⁴ "City Beautiful Movement." The New York Preservation Archive Project |. Accessed April 20, 2016. <http://www.nypap.org/content/city-beautiful-movement>.

⁵ Elmer, Vicki, and Adam Leigland. *Infrastructure Planning and Finance: A Smart and Sustainable Guide for Local Practitioners*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

⁶ Howard, Ebenezer, and Frederic J. Osborn. *Garden Cities of To-morrow*. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1965.

⁷ Hall, P (2002), *Cities of Tomorrow* (3rd ed.), Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell.

underprivileged poor folk could grow food to supplement their meager groceries and keep themselves afloat. These gardens were especially prevalent during the Great Depression, starting in 1930. When financially difficult times ended for the upper classes, the gardens would then be abandoned in favor of gaining and selling real estate, even though the lower classes were still in very much the same situations that they were in prior to the establishment of the gardens⁸. This situation occurred when federal funding for relief gardens were cut in 1935 because government officials saw them as defunct, now useless to the public. What the United States was doing throughout the twentieth century was almost directly contrary to Ebenezer Howard's garden city philosophy. As always, state and city governments value money over its people's well being.

As people walk throughout New York City, they may notice multiple fenced enclosures along the sidewalks, often paved with stone on the inside. Each enclosure has its own distinct atmosphere, embodying the essence of those who have created, used, and maintained the space over the years. These are New York City's community gardens. There are over 80 in Manhattan alone; throughout the five boroughs, there are more than 600⁹. Community gardens aid in the creation of communities. Neighbors meet, tend to the plants, provide general upkeep, and forge connections with others beyond the walls of their own apartments, which is almost impossible to do in the city. Jane Jacobs has asserted similar claims: "privacy is precious in cities. It is indispensable . . . In small settlements everyone knows your affairs. In the city everyone does not - only those you choose to tell will know much about you."¹⁰ Community gardens help in

⁸ Pasquali, Michela. *Loisaida: NYC Community Gardens*. Milano: M Bookstore, 2006.

⁹ "Community Gardens." GrowNYC |. Accessed April 19, 2016.

<http://www.grownyc.org/gardens/our-community-gardens>.

¹⁰ Jacobs, Jane. *The Uses of Sidewalks: Contact*. New York: Push Pin Studios, 1966.

breaking down the emotional barriers that prevent communication which is common amongst city dwellers.

Community gardens formed directly as a result of citizen demand. They began these gardens in the light of urban unrest and uncertainty in terms of financial security and safety in the city. In the 1970, New York City saw a multitude of riots and crime. Coupled with the city's fiscal crisis, the social climate of the era was dark and bleak. At the same time, many spots of land were vacant. Regular citizens broke through abandoned, locked fences, cleared away trash and rubble, kept drug dealers out, and got to using the spare land to create little patches of hopeful green. These actions served a variety of purposes: they provided supplementary produce, beautified run-down neighborhoods, and helped band neighbors together¹¹.

On a street corner in the Lower East Side, a curious enclosure proudly stands surrounded by a calming green metal fence. The fence has a gate with a plaque on it. The plaque says, in silver letters, "Sixth Street and Avenue B Community Garden." Above the words are a set of child-sized handprints, also printed silver. This particular garden is closed to the public during the fall and winter seasons, when it was cluttered with objects including but not limited to a fountain, a bird feeder, a children's slide, multiple benches, piles of leaves, and lots and lots of plants with bare branches. The soft rustling of leaves and petals join murmurs of words and sighs, creating a dynamic soundscape. The garden reopened this April. There is space for children to play, as there is space for adults to relax, hold meetings, and do leisurely activities,

¹¹ Eizenberg, Efrat. *From the Ground Up: Community Gardens in New York City and the Politics of Spatial Transformation*. Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2013.

like play chess, or nap. It regularly holds events and classes for all ages. It is a space meant for the members of the garden's community.

The area now occupied by the Sixth Street and Avenue B garden used to be a salt marsh. When New York became a colony in 1845, the marsh was filled into make room for housing buildings where artisans and tradesmen lived. By the 1890s, people had moved out to make way for tenements, where the immigrants of the 1890s suffered from inadequate living space. Later on, in the 1960, students, Latinas, and working class people filled the buildings. Twenty years later, New York's energy crisis caused landlords and tenants alike to abandon the buildings and they had to be knocked down for safety reasons. The neighborhood people then sprang into action, removing waste from the area after obtaining a lease from the City's Operation Green Thumb, thereby rescuing the area from becoming a parking lot. In April of 1984, garden members began planting shrubs and trees and have not stopped since¹².

Community gardens are a force to be reckoned with. Created by and for members of New York City neighborhoods, these gardens are glimmers of green peace in the hectic grey jungle of the city, providing places to relax and be with fellow citizens.

¹² "6 & B Garden." 6 B Garden. Accessed April 20, 2016. <http://newsite.6bgarden.org/home/about-the-garden/>.

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