Cultivating Urban Spaces: The Community Garden Movement in New York City¹

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Abstract
The community garden movement in New York City, which began with individuals designing and planting gardens on abandoned lots, grew into an urban environmental movement that has created over 600 community gardens, making green space commons an integral part of the city’s landscape. Looking at the community garden movement and what it takes to maintain gardens in Manhattan, I argue that the long-term success of community gardens has been made possible by an organisational structure that includes volunteers taking leadership positions. Drawing from some of the new developments in social movement studies, I explore how garden participants who do not necessarily see themselves as activists contribute toward bringing changes to their communities and society. Based on my participant observation in two gardens, I show that everyday garden management and activities exemplify what comes after activism: the work it takes to nurture and maintain community gardens.

¹ This article is based on the author’s dissertational research and work, and its contents were drawn from the dissertation.
Key words: community garden movement, urban environmental movement, New York City, volunteerism, institutionalisation, the United States, urban anthropology

Introduction

While walking down the streets in New York City, especially on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, one is likely to come across patches of green behind gates and fences between apartment buildings or in street corners. New York City is one of the most densely populated cities in the United States. It has highly valued property and land. Community gardens in New York City, many of which were created in the 1970s and 1980s by individuals hoping to improve their neighbourhoods, have become community-run green spaces that are now integral to the city’s landscape. Today, there are over 600 volunteer-maintained community gardens across the city (Green Guerillas n.d.), each with its own beginnings.

Community gardens are a product of grassroots community and environmental activism. Their bottom-up approach to individual community gardens has turned into a community garden movement that involves garden-related institutions, lawsuits, activism, and daily operations and activities. Many community gardens in the city were started by squatters who had taken over neglected or empty city lots that appeared to have been abandoned by their owners. Others were planted in plots that would eventually be built on. These gardens have survived with a variety of legal statuses: private, land trusts, incorporated, or land that is part of the City’s park system. Sharing attributes of the commons and private land, they have a ‘hybrid’ identity that affects how they are used and perceived. They are a
commons maintained by neighbours, staying open for people in the neighbourhood to enjoy or to help operate. At the same time, they can be a private-like space with fences and locked gates with varying opening hours.

Community gardens usually start with an individual or a group that simply wants to turn a lot into a green space for community betterment. Making the individual act of transformation long-lasting requires an organisational structure, volunteers who are available and willing to assume leadership positions, and an available and accessible web of support. I argue that community gardens are both the product and site of social transformation and that the longevity of a successfully maintained garden is the result of the institutionalisation of the community garden movement and the gardens themselves. Community gardens require supporting organisations and an organisational structure in which core members address issues that arise in managing a community garden. Core members encourage others to join the garden and participate in gardening. Day-to-day operations and management to run a garden are an example of after-activism reality, of what it takes to defend, nurture, and maintain community gardens in highly urbanised and commercially valuable areas.

This article is based on fieldwork I conducted, mostly between 2004 and 2007 at two sites in New York City’s Manhattan Borough. I pseudonymously dub them ‘East Garden’ and ‘West Garden’. They were my main sites for participant observation, although I visited many other gardens across the city. I became an active member at both gardens to explore what happens to environmental and community activism as they evolve into everyday institutions. Besides joining gardening activities, I regularly attended organisational meetings, carried out formal and informal interviews, and conducted
a survey to learn about the day-to-day operations of the gardens. The oral history narratives I collected have allowed me to reconstruct both gardens’ past narratives. Looking at the two gardens over time, I show garden participants bringing changes to their communities through garden-making, urban greening, and the work involved in creating and nurturing community gardens.

Framing the Community Garden Movement

The place of nature created in the city reflects social ideals and visions (Ikeda 2009). Scholars studying community gardens often depict them as symbolically reflecting theoretical and pragmatic socioeconomic issues. Scholars concerned with the neoliberalisation of urban space argue that community gardens are a form of resistance to the loss of the commons—communally-managed land—under neoliberal capitalism (Smith and Kurtz 2003; Peña 2006; Eizenberg 2016). Smith and Kurtz (2003: 210), for example, view garden advocates mobilising to defend the gardens as confronting ‘the neoliberal privatisation of urban space’. Eizenberg (2016: 175) recognises that many community gardeners join gardens to enjoy them, but gardeners can experience personal political development by being involved in ‘the evolving institution of gardens’. These gardeners, ‘the truly local people’, (as opposed to ‘the mobile elite’) in her view, produce the garden, the space that ‘contests, negates, and clashes with the dominant space’ (Eizenberg 2016: 177, 185). Without providing more details on how gardening as resistance to neoliberalism manifests itself in daily activities, scholars depict community gardens as a utopia-like space with unified actors and set goals. They unintentionally underestimate the inner-complexity, divisions, and negotiation among participants who have different
interests and ideals. For Aptekar (2015: 211), differences among New York City community gardeners is not simply a matter of diversity that is to be celebrated, but rather the manifestation of social hierarchies within neighbourhoods where ‘cultural and economic storms of gentrification’ rage. She depicts the garden, as being ‘embedded in powerful institutional hierarchies characterising the neoliberal city’ and argues that the gardens and their gardeners are as much affected by institutional hierarchies as they resist them (Aptekar 2015: 211). In her discussion on the reproduction of garden hierarchies, Aptekar draws on the aesthetics of the green space, arguing that ‘a lush green, orderly space’ is associated with ‘the aesthetic preferences of high-end developers’ and affluent, white, urban visions of public space. She argues that, in contrast, African American and Puerto Rican public housing residents as gardeners hold a vision of the garden as the community space. Like Aptekar, I found during my fieldwork that gardeners have diverse visions of what gardens should be like and how they should look. Aptekar’s categorisation associating an aesthetic preference to a specific socioeconomic class, however, does not explain the diverse aesthetics and organisation of New York City’s community gardens.

Scholars interested in the issue of empowering people or community-building tend to focus on the role of community gardens in bringing people together and providing various benefits. Sokolovsky (2009) argues that community greening is an act of ‘civic ecology’ not only ushering in environmental and health benefits but also nurturing social inclusion. Scholars associate community gardens with environmental and social justice, which increases food security and open spaces in low-income communities (Hassell 2002). The gardens help ‘damaged neighbourhoods’ regain ecological and social health (Ferris et al. 2001: 567) and empower women and children in
disadvantaged communities with the knowledge and experience of growing food (Mello, King, and Adams 2017). Baker (2004) studied community gardens in Toronto and found them to be cultural and political spaces in which marginalised groups gain appreciation for the environment and empowering experiences as citizens. He views community gardens as reflective of cultural pluralism and urban diversity. In Baltimore, Maryland, participants saw benefits in community gardens and believed that, through participation, they were revitalising their environment, increasing their physical activity, and consuming more fresh produce (Poulsen et al. 2014). Participants often associated gardening with psychological benefits such as a sense of accomplishment (Poulsen et al. 2014). Conducting research on community gardens in an African American community in Florida, Hite et al. (2017: 64) argue that built environments affect social interactions and ‘people’s sense of place’ to see beyond boundaries of race, class, and ethnicity. Mello, King, and Adams (2017: 147) discuss gardening and social justice and argue that social change related to poverty and racism begins with ‘raising consciousness around the causes of inequality’. They show that growing food helps raise the agency of marginalised people.

Glover et al. (2005) argue that leisure is an important source of attraction for garden participants. They look at community gardens as ‘leisure-oriented grassroots associations’ and use the concept of resource mobilisation to explain the organisational survival of a gardens. According to them, leisure-driven social networking is an asset and that neighbours bring together their collective resources to the community garden. They mention that gardeners fight urban decay but depict maintaining a garden as an end in itself.

Different understandings of community gardens reflect researchers’ perceptions and observations of particular gardens at particular times.
Conflicting images co-exist in many community gardens. Community gardens are dynamic places and are always in flux with members and neighbours coming and going. The diversity of garden participants has been a topic of interest at both gardens I studied. As Aptekar (2015) points out, gentrification in the surrounding neighbourhood may affect diversity within the garden (see also Ikeda 2012), but, at least, the garden provides a space to talk about and reflect on these issues.

The community garden movement has increased communally-managed green spaces in the city. According to the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation (2019), ‘community gardens account for more than 100 acres of public open space in the city.’ Anthropologists engaged in examining social movement theories are also paying renewed attention to the diversity of participants and collective action styles. For example, Susser (2016: 189, 196) recognises ‘horizontality in social movements’ and the fragmented nature of their participants and goals, although she still focuses on the roles of classes and class alliances in understanding social movements. Edelman (2001: 309), in his review of post-1960s paradigm shifts in theories of collective action, argues that the emergence of new protest repertoires requires ethnographic analyses of social movements that pay attention to ‘the lived experience of activists and nonactivists, as well as … informal networks’ to see the broader context of the political and social fields within which collective actions take place. Reviewing various grand theories of social movements, he points out that there is a disconnect between grand theory advocates and case studies of social movements. He notes that social movements do not necessarily look like old-fashioned direct action.

Barthel et al. (2015: 1328) point out that urban space is politically
and culturally contested. They argue that urban environmental movements put forth ‘alternative imaginaries of urban land use’ and that network structures and meaningful frameworks are necessary in sustaining collective action. This understanding fits the case of New York City’s community garden movement. People involved in the movement did not come together seeking to engage in a social movement, nor did they gather based on a group identity like belonging to the same class. However, the framework of the movement explains the collective nature of everyday community gardening and its claim to the urban commons. In my study, the participants hardly ever referred to themselves as activists or saw themselves as resisting the loss of the commons. Instead, they mentioned the positive feelings of having a community garden in their neighbourhood. They indicated that cleaner air, noise reduction, community-building, and personal fulfilment were among the benefits of having a garden in their neighbourhoods. Many saw gardening as a personal experience rather than collective action. Haenfler et al. (2012) conceptualise social movements broadly as ‘lifestyle movements’ and argue that individuals’ daily actions foster social change. Their conceptualisation addresses why many participants in the community garden movement do not necessarily see themselves as activists but still contribute to the transformation of urban social and physical landscapes through urban gardening.

Anthropological studies of community-based approaches to environmental conservation have pointed out, mostly in international contexts, that a community-based approach is often poorly executed and may fall short of achieving the intended conservation goal (Brosius et al. 1998; Novellino 2004; Sullivan 2004). My research (Ikeda 2009) looked at an example of community-based resource management focusing on local context and people. The community
garden movement is an urban environmental movement that spread the idea that common urban green spaces are a necessary public asset. Despite the social and economic benefits associated with improving and maintaining green amenities like urban gardens, the market and government often lack strong incentives to provide them (Maruo, Nishigaya, Ochiai 1997). New York City’s community garden movement has not only increased green space in the densely populated parts of the city but has also given ordinary people a voice in deciding urban land use in the highly commercialised city.

Theoretical frameworks employed in the literature on American community gardens are diverse, but they tend to ignore the governance of community gardens. My research contributes to the literature by exploring the emergence of community gardens and their inner working and provides a case study of an urban environment movement in the United States. Community gardens are usually created on seemingly neglected and unused land that is in between different forms of development, and they do not always last long (Langegger 2013). Their survival as a common space cannot be taken for granted. I explore why community gardens have remained in New York City.

**New York City’s Community Garden Movement**

Historically, there have been surges in urban gardens during periods of national mobilisation, for example, Relief Gardens during the Depression and Victory Gardens during the Second World War. These urban gardens were created mainly to increase food supply at a time of economic and social hardship (Hassell 2002). In contrast, although vegetables have been grown in many gardens alongside flowering plants, the community garden movement that emerged in
the 1970s mainly aimed at greening urban areas for the betterment of neighbourhoods and the environment. As a community space, many community gardens in New York City, especially in the summer, offer non-gardening activities and events such as poetry readings, theatre, yoga lessons, live music performances, educational programmes, and barbeques. Some events raise money for the gardens, but many events are free.

There are as many stories about how gardens began and grew over time as there are gardens. Yet most gardens share similar initial neighbourhood conditions and circumstances that motivated people to start gardens: an abandoned lot filled with garbage and a person or a few people who wanted to change it. The New York City fiscal crisis of 1973 to 1975 resulted in a reduction in basic city services, as the city cut back on garbage collection and firefighting capacity. The crisis partially resulted from the structural shift in the city economy from manufacturing to corporate finance and a shift in bank investments, which took away investments from the city, only to reinvest later in real estate (Susser 1982: 11). Mollenkopf (1977: 120) blames fragmentation among city agencies at the time for their inability to make ‘cohesive and efficient policy’. On the Lower East Side, the owners’ failure to pay taxes and an increase in arson resulted in the ‘disinvestment and abandonment’ of buildings (Abu-Lughod 1994; Zimmerman et al. 1995: 20). These neighbourhood conditions combined with poor city planning created empty lots on the Lower East Side and across the city. Such was the backdrop of New York’s community garden movement, which began in 1973 with the Liz Christy Bowery Houston Community Garden, which was originally named Bowery Houston Community Farm and Garden (Loggins 2007).

Individual community gardens may cease to exist for different reasons including both a decline in interest and the end to the lease of
a city lot, but the greatest threat to community gardens in the city came in the 1990s. Thriving community gardens on land leased from the city had been labelled in city records as mere ‘vacant lots’ that had not yet been slated for housing or economic development (Raver 1999). The city had already demolished over two dozen gardens between 1995 and 1998 (Coleman 1998), when, in 1999, the Giuliani administration announced plans to auction off 114 city-owned lots, on which gardens had been created, for development, with an indication that more could come later.

Various institutions and organisations got involved to address the situation, organising protests or filing lawsuits to slow down and stop the auction. In 1997, for example, the New York City Coalition for the Preservation of Gardens colourfully protested city plans to bulldoze gardens. Two hundred gardeners presented large puppets handing in letters along with vegetables and flowers (Raver 1997). More rallies and theatrical protests followed the announcement of the auction (Herszenhorn 1999). Over 20 organisations worked to stop the auction, filing four separate lawsuits before state and federal courts (Stapleton 1999). One lawsuit alleged that the city had failed to fulfil the environmental review required by the State Environmental Quality Review Act (Smith and Kurtz 2003). The State Supreme Court ruling required the city to show the environmental impact of closing community gardens down, which delayed the city’s plan to auction lots. The court order gave organisations supporting the gardens time to mobilise and gain negotiating leverage. The Trust for Public Land (TPL) and the New York Restoration Project generated funds and stopped the auction of 112 gardens by purchasing them.² The situation turned for the

² The TPL itself did not participate in any of the lawsuits.
better for the garden movement when a far more garden-friendly mayor, Michael Bloomberg, came into office and the city agreed to let over 400 lots remain as community gardens in 2002. Under the arrangement, 200 community gardens were saved, and another 200 became GreenThumb gardens, that is, community gardens that became a part of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation.\(^3\)

The major components of the community garden movement include lawsuits, institutions, and activism/daily activities. Focusing on just one of the components does not entirely reveal why many community gardens in the city with different land statuses have survived decades of political and economic shifts in New York City. Activism explains why many gardens were originally created. Lawsuits and interventions explain how some gardens avoided demolition. Lawsuits end and activism may subside, but the gardens need to be maintained. Institutionalisation, which has given the community garden movement and each garden a structure to depend on is a key factor in ensuring long-term garden success. Many garden-related organisations have emerged since, providing funding, materials, educational programmes, technical support, and community outreach for community gardens (see Table 1 for examples). The emergence of new and pre-existing organisations to support gardens or to pursue garden advocacy exemplifies one of the two kinds of institutionalisation working toward keeping community gardens in the city. The other kind of institutionalisation is the tendency for individual community gardens to adopt formal membership and decision-making processes. Once a community garden is established

\(^3\) This agreement made over 150 community garden lots available for development.
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Table 1. Examples of Organizations Associated with Community Gardens in New York City

City’s or City-related Organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name, Year established</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The City Office of Housing Preservation and Development</td>
<td>Leased lots to community gardens in the 1970s</td>
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<tr>
<td>GreenThumb, since 1978</td>
<td>Oversees the leasing of city lots for community gardens. Under the jurisdiction of the Parks Department since 1995. Provides licensing, materials and offers technical and educational assistance</td>
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<tr>
<td>NYC Service GreenSpace, since 2009</td>
<td>Supports volunteer opportunities for community gardens and develops green infrastructure</td>
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Garden Advocacy Organizations

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<th>Name, Year established</th>
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<tr>
<td>GrowNYC, since 1970</td>
<td>(Formerly known as the Council on the Environment of New York City) Environmental organization aiming to improve city’s quality of life. Coordinates corporate groups’ support for outdoor volunteer project, hosts volunteers to build community gardens and urban farms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green Guerillas, since 1973</td>
<td>Provides assistance, educational programs, materials, events, and advocacy for gardens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Open Space Coalition, since 1981</td>
<td>Advocates for public space needs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Earth Celebrations, since 1991</td>
<td>Uses programs like art and ecology workshops to address ecological and social issues. Put on annual theatrical pageant Procession to Save Our Gardens between 1991 and 2005.</td>
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Philanthropic and Non-Profit Organizations

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<th>Name, Year established</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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<tr>
<td>The Greenacre Foundation, since 1968</td>
<td>Provides funding to community gardens</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Trust for Public Land, since 1972</td>
<td>U.S.-wide land conservation organization. Purchased land for 64 community gardens to stop the City auction of garden lots in 1999.</td>
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or secured, activism to create or save a garden is replaced with everyday activities to maintain the garden such as gardening, chores, events, meetings, and various other efforts to keep the garden running semi-permanently. In the rest of this article, I focus on the activism and efforts that created and have maintained both the East and West Gardens, respectively. I explore the factors that have made them long-lasting and vibrant. By examining the day-to-day management efforts, I show that institutionalisation is necessary to ensure the longevity of gardens and the garden movement after the initial phase of activism.

The East Garden

The Lower East Side in the 1960s and the 1970s was still largely an impoverished and drug-infested neighbourhood, but it was also diverse and lively. People mobilised in order to demand public housing (Sites 1994), and counterculture youth gathered on weekends in the mid-1960s (Mele 2000) and led the New York punk scene in the 1970s. Appreciation for the counterculture and the presence of abandoned lots at the time of economic and financial hardship were the context for the spread of community gardens in the area. Looking back at the 1970s, garden members and neighbours in the area have told me that back then, they did not feel safe walking alone in their own neighbourhoods. A woman mentioned that her apartment had been burglarised. Despite the sense of insecurity, the neighbourhood, with its affordable rent, attracted newcomers, including those who are now long-term East Garden members.
The Beginning and the Organisation

In 1972, Georgia, a German Irish-American woman, moved into an apartment across the street from a set of neglected buildings that were barely standing and were later lost to fire. Seeing the deterioration of these vacant lots in front of her apartment, she began cleaning out the lots and set up the East Garden with two Latina friends. The neighbours, many of whom were Puerto Rican, soon joined in the efforts to create the garden. Georgia’s son, Matt, said, ‘It was just a time and age when there were so many abandoned lots in New York City and people were just trying to spruce up their neighbourhoods.’ Georgia and her friends envisioned the East Garden as a place to gather and counter the widespread apathy in the deteriorating neighbourhood. The East Garden had existed informally until it was incorporated in 1978. According to a long-time member, Karen, the TPL helped purchase the lots from the city in 1980 for $2,500 under the stipulation that the land would remain a garden for the community.

The East Garden has 40 to 50 members today. Community members can join by paying an annual membership fee of $25 and spending a year as a trial member. A full member is given a key to the garden gate and has unlimited access to the premises. Visitors are allowed inside when a member is present in the garden. Monthly meetings are held between April and October each year, and all members are welcome to attend, but only about a dozen people.

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4 Garden members referred to by their first name are pseudonyms (pseudonyms have not been used for public figures).
5 The founder of the garden, Georgia, passed away during my fieldwork. I had not had a chance to meet her. I learned about her story from her son, Matt.
6 As of 2005.
attend regularly. Every year in early spring, members select, by either election or nomination, the president, vice president, treasurer, and secretary of the garden. A person can self-nominate or be nominated by fellow members. Many members are hesitant to run for positions as they simply wish to enjoy gardening without taking up a position or are too busy to serve.

During my fieldwork, the president expressed her desire to retire from the position, so garden members casually nominated the next president. The person accepted and requested the other members to help him out. In one election, two candidates—a long-time member and a newcomer, the owner of a nearby store—decided to run for the post of treasurer. Both candidates with experience in finance and accounting seemed qualified for the position, but right before voting, a question was raised about the newcomer’s eligibility to run. He had not completed his trial membership period. Although his supporters argued that he had been a frequent visitor to the garden and that they all knew him, eventually, he was declared ineligible until the next year. The newly elected treasurer told him that he would have made a good treasurer and was more than welcome to run for the position the following year after becoming a full member. As is sometimes the case with a newcomer, however, the man lost interest and hardly returned to the garden meetings afterwards. This episode reveals the difficulty encountered in recruiting members who will stick around and who are willing to assume leadership and administrative positions. Group dynamics are at play and newcomers and old-timers alike need to find a way to work out differences in opinions in the everyday management of the garden.

In spring, when the garden is especially beautiful, more potential members attend meetings in the hope of joining. It is not unusual to stop seeing newcomers within a couple of months. The waiting
period to get a plot and to find a mentor-like gardener to figure out the area on which to work and the change in season all could undermine the initial enthusiasm. Newcomers also come to understand the extent of time and effort that are involved in volunteering to maintain a garden. Some people simply decide that they are better off being a visitor than a volunteer to enjoy the gardens in the neighbourhood.

**Keeping the Garden Attractive**

Community gardens are meant as places to gather at, as much as places to grow plants. In the middle of the East Garden, there is a round table that a member decorated with colourful tiles. Another member with carpentry skills made benches. The maintenance of the items inside the East Garden, such as repainting the fence and gate and repairing benches, is carried out by members. Gardeners must sweep and shovel snow off the sidewalks in winter. Since the East Garden is an incorporated entity, like any other property owners in the city, it is the responsibility of the members to ensure the maintenance of the sidewalk in front of the property. Filling water barrels is another task that needs to be done frequently during the summer. With no water source in the garden, there is an informal arrangement with a nearby playground to obtain water from it. At the East Garden, instead of assigning people to do these tasks, each member volunteers whenever the need arises.

East Garden members put a lot of their own time and money in making and keeping the garden a beautiful place. Maintaining it involves a variety of additional expenses besides buying plants. Gardening costs include costs incurred in purchasing soil, fertiliser, tools, plants, and trees. Maintenance outlays include buying paint
supplies, fixing the sidewalk outside the garden (occasionally), insurance fees, and so on. Sidewalk repairs can amount to $7,500 or more, and annual insurance costs for the East Garden account for more than $2,500. These expenses are covered by membership fees, money acquired through fundraising events, and grants from garden-support foundations such as the TPL and the Greenacre Foundation.

The East Garden usually holds fundraising events once or twice a year. Members and their friends prepare food and provide entertainment, and local restaurants donate food for such events. In the process of striving to make the event a success, the details of the event, such as what to drink, can lead to heated discussions. In an event-planning meeting, Diego, the president, explained that the fundraiser was aimed at raising funds and promoting the garden in the community. In the meeting, the members discussed charging an admission fee (technically, a voluntary contribution). Some argued that collecting a cover charge at the gate would make the event a mere fundraiser and make the garden seem elitist. Eventually, to emphasise the openness of the garden to the public, they decided to raise money by selling food instead of having a cover charge at the entrance.

The Department of Parks and Recreation’s GreenThumb gardens are obligated to be open for a minimum of 20 hours a week between April and October each year, and the opening hours have to be posted. The East Garden as an independent garden has no such obligations. The East Garden’s rule is to be open to the public whenever a garden member is present inside. How open the garden should be was one of the recurring topics at the meetings I attended. Sometimes, the members suggested bending or changing the rules to allow a friend (or friends), or even strangers, to stay in the garden without any members being present. At one meeting, a member
argued that the garden should be more open and flexible, or ‘We may be seen as a little private club.’ Others objected, saying, ‘If anything happens, the garden could be held responsible,’ which was a real concern (as well as a great excuse for inaction, perhaps) in the lawsuit-prone United States. Members sometimes explored setting open hours, but the idea was always voted down because coordinating a schedule was overly burdensome. Members knew that the East Garden was not a mere place for them to enjoy gardening but a place for the community to enjoy and appreciate. The dilemma of the East Garden was how to balance the community garden’s role as a commons and the responsibility and liability that the garden bore as an incorporated organisation, while also balancing the ideal of freedom and necessary control.

THE WEST GARDEN

The Beginning

Like the East Garden, the West Garden was created through grassroots activism and dedicated volunteerism. The West Garden on the Upper West Side, with a board of directors, several committees, and higher operating costs than the East Garden, has a more formal structure and decision-making body than the East Garden. Today, the Upper West Side has become one of the city’s high-income neighbourhoods, but in the 1970s, the location of the West Garden was still a junkyard-like empty lot. A middle-class woman of Scotch-Irish-English descent, Elise, was about 40 years old and was taking time off from her work as a film editor in around 1974 to raise her children. She initiated the idea of starting a community garden for her children’s school. She found out that a nearby senior centre had just rented the space from the city but had not put it to use yet.
After receiving permission from the senior centre, Elise began transforming the lot. The site was a part of the Upper West Side Urban Renewal Area under the federal urban renewal programme but looked like a junkyard waiting to be developed. Elise contacted the area’s Community Planning Board (now known as the Community Board⁷), a representative body of the community district, which had a say in the development of the site. Sally, the chair of the Board at the time, supported the idea of turning the space into an interim garden. As an interim site for the project, Elise discovered that the city would provide funding to the extent of $25,000, but the garden had to be for the entire community in order for the city to fund the project. She contacted block associations to get the community involved in planning the garden. About 20 people showed up to the first meeting to discuss ideas. Elise also had to get insurance for the garden and find a way to pay for it. She recalled that the amount was around $600 at the time. She persuaded the block and street associations to donate the amount.

The West Garden was in its early stages when the city’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) selected developers through bidding to start housing development on the lot. After a call from HPD informing her that a community garden could not be built there anymore, Elise decided to speak up at a public hearing organised by the Community Planning Board to save the garden project. She argued that the interim garden could still be built for a few years until housing construction began. Within a few years, by the time the developers were ready to build the housing

⁷ The Community Board consists of unpaid members appointed by the borough president to represent the community district. It is an advisory body that advocates for neighbourhood interests and helps shape the district’s land use and budget.
complex, the garden had become so important to the community that many opposed the act of bulldozing it. In 1981, Sally explored saving the garden, including making it an integral part of the development plan for the site. The developers’ initial plan was to construct a 330-unit building using a government subsidy that required the developers to set aside 20% of the housing units for low-income tenants, but the developers’ plans had changed. Unable to secure sufficient tax credits to erect a 330-unit building, the developers sought a 16-townhouse complex instead. Under the federal regulations, however, the developers still had to set aside 20% of the townhouses as low-income housing.

Sally was aware of the need for affordable housing in the area, but as the development plan changed from building a large apartment complex to building townhouses, she saw the possibility for a compromise. She suggested that the developers set aside land for the community garden in exchange for an exemption from the 20% rule. Sally told me that she thought that having the garden there was a positive influence for the neighbourhood not only for aesthetic reasons but also for attracting people from various racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds to come together. She helped the developers succeed in receiving the one-time exemption of the 20% rule for the townhouses by first convincing a local tenant association, which was the sponsor for the low-income housing system, to support the idea. With tenacity and miraculous luck, she secured an appointment to meet with the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to discuss the exemption.8 She made a

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8 In August 1981, during the federal air traffic controllers’ strike, a reduction in air travel meant that the HUD Secretary had an open schedule. Sally managed to secure a meeting with the secretary.
convincing presentation and gained the support of the Secretary. Eventually, the exemption was granted, and the community garden became an integral part of the development project. Elise and Sally both helped save the garden with their leadership and ability to persuade others. The 1970s was a time when communities began getting involved in the development of neighbourhoods in a deep and unprecedented fashion (Lamberg 1981). Sally referred to the power of the community, which led to the making of the West Garden as ‘a new era of civic participation’.

Maintaining the Garden as a Community Space

The West Garden welcomes visitors and members of different age groups, races, ethnicities, and income levels throughout the year, keeping the gate open daily from around 8 a.m. until dark. Maria, a member, expressed her concern that ‘there are fewer and fewer people of colour and fewer and fewer people of lower socioeconomic class’ joining the garden. She felt that the issue of declining diversity was not sufficiently addressed, ironically, because liberal people, as she saw other members of the garden, often hesitated to talk about race and related issues in general. She acknowledged that the change in the demographics of the neighbourhood could be a factor, too.

Just as in the East Garden, the West Garden was also interested in community outreach and recruiting neighbours to become garden members. The vice president of the garden, Charles, told me that one of his most important tasks was to involve people in the garden and to get to know them. Besides taking care of their own garden plot, members must agree to devote at least four hours a month to common area gardening, handling tasks such as weeding. However, there was no real enforcement mechanism in place. Charles said that phone calls were one of the ways in which he could encourage people
to come out to work.

For the West Garden, holding events was a means to involve the community in the garden and raise funds. Kathy, the president of the garden, once told me that the West Garden was not just a garden but much more, and a variety of activities and events in the garden premises attest to her view. The annual fundraising dinner held in mid-June is the garden’s biggest fundraising event. Guests enjoy an evening of food, music, and a flower-filled garden for a donation of $60 (for garden members, the suggested donation is $30). Members bring home-cooked food and local restaurants donate food. Free events include picnics, theatrical performances, the Arts and Crafts Festival, book sales, the annual tulip planting festival, and a holiday party open to the public. Attendees can leave donations in jars in the garden as they like. Garden members prepare and serve food for picnics and parties, and over a hundred people enjoy popular events like the summer picnic and performances of Shakespeare’s plays in the garden every year. During the annual Arts and Crafts Festival, a two-day weekend event, musicians perform and local writers and poets of various ages share their work. Planting tulip bulbs is for those who want to gain hands-on experience in gardening. At the annual bulb planting event, held in November on a weekend before Thanksgiving, members welcome neighbourhood volunteers with home-cooked Thanksgiving specialty food, such as roast turkey, turkey chili with side dishes of corn bread, and coleslaw, as well as coffee and dessert. All these events are planned and carried out by garden members and the board to maintain the garden as a place for the community and to raise interest in and funds for it. These events show that various kinds of leisure activities, in addition to gardening, are central attractions at community gardens.
The Board

A significant amount of work around decision-making is necessary to make these events happen. Some of these decisions, for example, include deciding on the details of events and what food and drinks to be served at them. At the West Garden, an elected board of directors makes these decisions and manages finances, in addition to addressing troubles and issues and other decisions that are necessary for the operation of the garden. Its governing body comprises a board of directors, several committees, general members with plots, and associate members without plots. The board consists of 13 members: a president, vice president, treasurer, recording secretary, corresponding secretary, newsletter staff, and other committee members. The board members tend to hold their positions for several years at a time. Charles had been the vice president for at least five years when I interviewed him. He said that he had run for the position because others did not want the job. As it is a volunteer-based organisation, holding a position means long-hours of unpaid work, attending meetings, and negotiating with people. Charles said that he drew satisfaction from the feeling that he was doing a good thing for the community. However, he was also worried that it was becoming harder to find people who wanted to run for the board.

The board holds monthly meetings throughout the year and organises an annual general meeting in spring with guest speakers. In the year I attended, a state assembly member, Scott M. Stringer (who later became New York City comptroller), was the guest and expressed his appreciation that the garden had kept the neighbourhood beautiful. City figures attending the garden event attested to the status that the West Garden had earned over the years. While the annual meeting is open to all garden members, monthly
meetings are attended only by board members, who are often retirees from professional jobs with specialised knowledge and are a great asset to managing the garden. The board members handle tasks such as fundraising and balancing the budget. The annual budget is around $40,000, and the commonly incurred expenses include plant purchases, monthly electricity and water bills, printing and mailing newsletters, paying for insurance, and annual expenses such as tulip bulbs for the festival. Like the East Garden, the West Garden is responsible for maintaining the kerb and sidewalk, incurring occasional costs that can cross $8,000. Funding comes from fundraising events, grants from governmental and philanthropic sources, for example, from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, Greenacre, TPL, and the Arbor Foundation, donations from individuals, and membership fees—which is $30 for full members and $15 for associate members who have no plots of their own. The membership, especially for associate members, fluctuates from year to year. During my fieldwork, there were approximately 100 members. The garden may occasionally receive a grant from private corporations that are interested in community improvement. Grassroots donations from individuals residing in nearby buildings are an important source of funding as well.

In some of the meetings, the members expressed their concern that few new recruits were joining the board. A board member said, ‘I am in my sixties, and I am the youngest one here!’ Another board member with great fundraising and grant-writing skills as well as experience was in her eighties at the time of my fieldwork. Many of the core garden members who had both gardening skills and knowledge of the group dynamics of the garden have aged with the garden, having been active since the late 1970s or the early 1980s to
the present day. Recruiting a younger generation to handle the garden and to join the board appeared to be an urgent issue. Charles said:

You know, there are a group of people (in the West Garden) who are in their sixties, seventies, and eighties. They started out with the garden, and they are sort of like the backbone. One of the problems we have for the future is that these people, who have really done all the work, which is not a big group of people, are no longer able to do it. So we need younger people to be able to move in and do this (to continue the work).

Victor, another original member, was concerned about the future of the garden. He said, ‘Truthfully, I feel that the garden is now very much at a crossroads because we live in a different time.’ Compared to the time when he joined the garden, which was ‘counter-culturally active’, he felt that economic pressure today has grown far higher for younger people in the area, as they are engaged in careers that require long working hours or are coping with high neighbourhood rents. He wondered if young people could afford the time to do volunteer work for the neighbourhood. Charles and Victor both mentioned the tendency of young volunteers to come and go as they relocate within a year or two of joining. Sokolovsky (2009), in his study of a community garden in New York City, notes that older adults tend to be more active in gardens as they have more free time and gardening experience than younger ones.

Communally managing the garden means making decisions through discussion and enforcing them through persuasion. Board meetings can heat up on issues such as what drinks to serve at an event and on what to do with people letting a dog loose or plucking flowers or feeding pigeons in the garden. Intense board discussions
reflect devotion to the garden and ideals of what the garden should be, how it should be maintained, and how it should relate to the community. Katie, a member of the West Garden, told me that the board often had long passionate discussions because members were expressing their vision for the garden. She said that she likes that they speak up for the garden and that she feels empowered knowing that she is part of the movement that runs the West Garden.

**Distribution and Maintenance of Plots**

The East and West Gardens differ in organisational structure and style with the former having a less intensive structure. Despite differences in style and operational size, both gardens are run by volunteers and decisions in both are made democratically but without any real enforcing mechanism to implement rules.

In both gardens, a recurring theme in meetings and a source of contention is the allocation and maintenance of individual garden plots, which lies at the heart of these community gardens. In both gardens, plot holders are responsible for maintaining their plots, and the general rule is that no one intervenes in another’s plot. However, it is unclear what one can do with members who fail to fulfil their obligations, a topic that comes up each year in both the East and the West Gardens. At a meeting in the East Garden, members discussed what to do with a member who had stopped being active and had stopped paying her dues while still holding onto her plot. They agreed that the first step was for a member who knew the inactive member well to contact her to see what was going on. When that did not work, there was no manual or rule indicating subsequent action. For example, there were no details on how much grace period should be given before any further action could be taken. Then, the
members passed a motion to make it a rule to take away a plot from a member who has neglected it. A long-term member warned, however, that to do so, the garden must have an official, up-to-date document on plot allocation indicating the available plots. According to her, such documentation was necessary for the garden to defend itself in case someone took it to court. While people thought that it was unlikely, she said that there was a case in the past in which a plot holder said, ‘If they’re voting me out of my plot, I will go to court’ and sued the garden to regain access to her plot.

There are no sanctions for breaking garden rules. The consensus is that when someone breaks a rule, garden members must use persuasion to change behaviours. Many gardeners mentioned to me that they preferred staying out of the politics of the garden and concentrating on caring for their own plots instead. That can partially be accomplished by avoiding meetings, but for those who are elected to administrative positions, that is not an option. They work hard to build a consensus through communication and then work hard to enforce rules through persuasion and their communication skills.

In the West Garden, there are flower and vegetable plots assigned to individuals. Flower plots display seasonal flowers of the gardeners’ choice (in spring, all tulips but different colours and kinds). They are one of the main attractions of the garden. It is each plot holder’s responsibility to take care of the plot. When a long-term member neglected her plot and left it with nothing but weeds, the board first contacted her. Then, instead of taking the plot away, the board decided to assign a caretaker for it while giving the long-term member another chance to work on the plot. Some board members expressed their frustration saying, ‘Why do we bend over like that for people who do not maintain the garden?’ Kathy replied, ‘Because they’re nice people!’ The board of directors generally considers the act
of taking away a plot from a plot-holding member as the absolute last resort. There are people on the waiting list for both flower and vegetable plots, and there is no shortage of people who want a plot. It can take up to several years before a new member can get an individual plot in the West Garden. Nonetheless, assigning a caretaker for a plot until the plot holder can take care of the plot again is seen as the best solution. When the problem of neglect persists, however, the board must respond more firmly, reminding plot holders of the board’s right to remove plot owners. When the situation arose during my fieldwork, the board agreed on writing a plot maintenance policy and letter to ‘twist the arms of people who refuse to work on their plots more effectively’, and created a by-law committee to carry out the task.

Forcibly implementing the garden by-law to evict someone from his or her plot for neglecting it is not easy, especially when board members know the plot holders in question personally. No one wants to be the police enforcing the rules or checking on others’ plots. While written bylaws exist on how to address neglected plots, the implementation involves the delicate act of communicating with and persuading members with problematic behaviours. The board of directors mostly tries to accommodate people with problems. At both the East and the West Gardens, when problems arise, they are discussed in meetings, and motions are passed, if necessary, to make new rules to address the problem. However, very often, rules created during meetings in one season are forgotten by the next, and the same issues are discussed again the next year. A lapse in meetings during the winter, especially in the East Garden, changes in membership, and direct-democracy style meetings, in which all who want to join in can, make it more likely that old topics are discussed afresh in the next season. Discussions of recurring topics are a part
and practice of maintaining community gardens through a bottom-up approach. As voluntarily run gardens, the East and the West Gardens have thrived year after year through the efforts of those members, especially the core members, who make gardening a part of their lifestyle. In addition to all these gardening activities, they engage in tasks such as decision-making, implementation, and negotiation in planning events and enforcing garden rules. I have observed that making decisions pertaining to the garden involves more than merely dealing with gardening alone. It is an act of envisioning the role of the garden in the community and imagining the ideal community.

**Conclusion**

Community gardens in New York City were started by ordinary individuals with a vision of improving their neighbourhoods. They have now grown into semi-permanent green spaces that provide the much-needed open space. This article looked at the city’s community garden movement to explore factors that contributed to the rise of the movement, including lawsuits, institutionalisation, activism, and post-activism, that is, the everyday operation of gardens. It focused on decision-making processes in two gardens and how the gardens managed the post-activist reality of an urban environmental movement, that is, what it takes to manage the urban green commons communally. Even for well-established community gardens like the East and West Gardens, continuous and effective resource mobilisation are essential to maintain them year after year. They require a form of institutionalisation—formalised decision-making processes and building an organisational structure—to mobilise resources. My research shed light on the collective engagement of community gardens. It takes a coordinated effort to allocate plots,
raise funds, attract and retain volunteer members, build organisations with skilled, capable, and willing leaders, and imagine what the place should be like not only for planting flowers and trees but also for building relationships within the community.

The literature on community gardens discusses the issue of diversity within gardens and the positive effects that gardens have for the people and the community (e.g., Christen, Malberg, and Allenberg 2019; Shan and Walter 2015). For cultivating the space of the common among profit-driven landscapes, community gardens have been depicted as resistance to neoliberal capitalism. At the same time, being built behind gates and fences, gardens can also be seen as private and exclusive spaces. A community garden can indeed become exclusive, if not for the efforts of many participants to make the garden a community space. Community gardens are a location of social transformation, but individuals usually join a community garden for personal fulfilment because they like to engage in gardening. They do not usually see themselves as activists. Their day-to-day activities in the garden are not likely to be seen as activism by others or themselves. Some of the new literature on social movement theory sheds light on the role of personal action in bringing about social transformation and can be useful in understanding the actions of urban gardeners that make changes in their own neighbourhoods and society. There have been moments in New York's community garden movement in which protests and demonstrations have saved gardens from the threat of demolition and have drawn people's attention to the movement-like nature of community gardens. However, gardens will not thrive in the city without everyday and voluntary activities. Ordinary gardeners and garden volunteers, not necessarily seeing themselves as activists, are the main actors in the community garden movement. They spread
and attest to the notion that the communal green space is an important asset to the city.

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