The Guerrilla in the Garden

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Abstract

Guerrilla gardening is the practice of illicitly cultivating land that does not belong to the gardener. In New York City, it emerged in the context of disinvestment and urban renewal in the 1970s as a means to clean up vacant lots, improve safety, and build social networks within neighborhoods. This study examines contemporary guerrilla gardening projects in New York and addresses the questions of whether guerrilla gardening today can still offer advantages over gardening with permission, and if there are situations in which it makes more sense to garden without permission, versus the alternate position that gardeners should always seek permission to use the land they cultivate in order to protect their interests and investment.

The projects studied range from artistic to political, personal to ideological, outside to inside the system of land ownership. They fall along a continuum of sanctioned and unsanctioned work and, to varying degrees of success, exercise strategies of engagement, permission, and advocacy to achieve their goals. Although the importance of permission depends on the context and objectives of a given project, guerrilla gardening offers real advantages: it is flexible, presents a low barrier to entry, disrupts patterns of thought, raises awareness of alternative options for action, and allows actors to learn from experience. These findings raise questions regarding whether and how cities should accommodate such efforts.

Thesis Supervisor: Anne Whiston Spirn

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Table of Contents

Prologue

Participation Park (2007-present)

Participation Park in Baltimore, Maryland, is an unsanctioned half-acre garden comprised of 14 vacant lots, half publicly owned and half privately owned. The garden has gone through different physical iterations and welcomed different groups of participants since its establishment in 2007. The founders, Scott Berzofsky, Dane Nester, and Nicholas Wisniewski—also known as the Baltimore Development Cooperative—are graduates of Baltimore's Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). There, they became invested in the right to the city, described by David Harvey as "a right to change ourselves by changing the city,"[1] and spatial politics, which concerns how the distribution and use of space relate to power and social justice: "[the struggle over geography] revolves centrally around struggles over urbanized space between those seeking continuing advantage and the disadvantaged fighting to take greater control over how space is socially produced in order to make major transformation to better meet their basic needs."[2] To exercise these ideas, Berzofsky, Nester, and Wisniewski decided to take control of a parcel of land, squatting on it rather than requesting permission to use it through Baltimore's Adopt-A-Lot program. They intended to establish a consistent presence, build a garden, and eventually hand it off to neighborhood residents. They would act as a catalyst for the project, but even the name and the uses of the land would emerge collectively from the input of all participants.

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[1] David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *New Left Review* 53 (2008), http://newleftreview.org/II/53/david-harvey-the-right-to-the-city.

[2] Edward Soja, *Seeking Spatial Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 98.

Sensitive to their positions as outsiders in the neighborhood, the group began by attending a meeting of a local community development corporation, Johnston CDC, to propose the idea, and also spoke to neighbors who they encountered around the proposed garden site. According to Berzofsky, "people were indifferent or supportive, but skeptical."[3] He also noted that the most common feedback they received was that the garden needed a fence for security. After encountering no opposition to the plan, the group visited the site daily to pick up trash, till, and prepare the soil. Through this work, they gained recognition from neighbors for their time and labor commitment.

While establishing the garden, the group applied for grants to cover start-up costs and developed relationships with city agencies to gain additional support. Participation Park secured approximately $10,000 in grants over four years to pay for tools and soil regeneration. The garden received soil and wood chips from Baltimore's Department of Recreation and Parks, assistance with tree removal from that department's Forestry Division, and access to the fire hydrant from the Baltimore City Fire Department. While pursuing these grants and services, Participation Park often claimed to have permission to be on its land:

> But we also had a letter from the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension saying we had permission to use the fire hydrant, which was based us lying to them about having permission to use the land. All of the grants we received were based on this lie. It was like this process of constructing an image of legitimacy, these layers of fiction that reinforced each other.[4]

This strategy to create an "image of legitimacy" was functionally helpful to gain access to city resources, but philosophically at odds with the Baltimore Development Cooperative's desire to assert the essential legitimacy of citizen use of vacant land even

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[3] Scott Berzofsky (co-founder, Participation Park), in discussion with the author, March 13, 2012.
[4] Baltimore Development Cooperative, "Amy Fransceschini in Conversation with the BDC (2008)," http://www.baltimoredevelopmentco-op.org/index.php?/texts/interview-with-amy-franceschini/.

without permission. However, the ruse might be considered a pragmatic intermediate step in demonstrating the commitment of citizens to work the land and the benefits of allowing and enabling such citizen action.

The garden's physical form has evolved over the years as different people have joined the project. The founders started the project with a vision of a utopian, collective garden, but that ideal gave way to individual plots in which gardeners have a personal stake. The first year, an out-of-work neighbor named Mac worked frequently, and elementary- and middle-school-aged children from the playground across the street often spent time in the garden. The second year, Berzofsky, Nester, and Wisniewski enlisted the help of art-teacher friends to develop activities and lessons to engage the schoolchildren. The adults and children also farmed a large communal plot, which produced vegetables that were used in lessons, given away to neighbors, and sold locally. The third year, the children lost interest but Ms. Lee, a senior Korean woman living nearby, appeared while foraging for berries and took over a large plot to garden individually. Now, four local residents and a handful of MICA friends garden at Participation Park, and a local contractor named Vere has taken on a leadership role in running the garden.

An interesting consideration here is the gardeners' understanding of Participation Park's unsanctioned status and the risk of cultivating land without permission—that, without warning, they might lose the garden in which they had invested so much work. As Scott Berzofsky explained,

> Initially we were not fully transparent about our lack of permission to be on the land, because we didn't want to discourage participation. But over time as we built relationships with gardeners we talked openly about the land security circumstances. I'm not sure what the kids understood about the situation, but I can

> say confidently that Mac, Vere, and Ms. Lee are all well aware of the risk of eviction and see the garden as part of a larger struggle against land speculation and gentrification.[5]

This honesty with the gardeners was essential to ensuring full equity among participants. Despite its uncertain future, Participation Park remains a site dedicated to action and experimentation in which each year of its operation reveals new potential for the collectively operated communal space.

The way in which Participation Park transitioned in its first five years from a communally operated garden to a hands-on educational garden to a space for individual gardeners to tend their plots illustrates central tensions in the discussion of guerrilla gardening. Although the garden—unaccountable to anyone but its founders and those in the community who wished to be involved—enjoyed the freedom, as well as the sustained engagement, to adapt to different visions within the community, it also lacked stability. Additionally, those involved chose to operate the garden explicitly without permission and in so doing pre-determined its illegitimacy by Baltimore's official standards. Through this delicate balance, Participation Park serves as an ideal example of how guerrilla gardens come into being and how they respond to the contexts in which they are situated, offering gardeners the opportunity to learn by doing, respond with flexibility as new needs arise, and raise local awareness about gardening and other affiliated issues. By prioritizing action over sanction, guerrilla gardeners are testing new ideas, responding with immediacy to community needs, and developing models for gardening in urban spaces.

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[5] Scott Berzofsky, email message to author, August 29, 2012.

Introduction

The History of Guerrilla and Community Gardening in New York City

Guerrilla gardening is the practice of illicitly cultivating land that does not belong to the gardener. This phenomenon can be traced to precedents including the 1649 Diggers movement to farm on common land in England and the early nineteenth century wanderings of Johnny Appleseed in the United States.[6] Guerrilla gardening emerged in the context of disinvestment and urban renewal in New York City in the 1970s as a means to clean up vacant lots, improve safety, and build social networks within neighborhoods.[7] These gardens took on various forms, from agricultural to social to artistic. In 1973, Liz Christy and a group that dubbed themselves the Green Guerillas started a garden on a trash-strewn empty lot at the corner of Bowery and Houston Street, inspiring the creation of hundreds of other gardens on vacant land in the city.[8] In 1975, Adam Purple began his Garden of Eden on the site of a recently demolished building behind the Lower East Side tenement where he lived. This circular garden, recognized as a piece of landscape art and widely documented, expanded over the next decade to encompass five empty lots.[9]

As more guerrilla gardens sprang up, they attracted the notice of the city government. Many negotiated for permission to remain on the out-of-use lots; the legal protection of a lease distinguished community gardens from guerrilla gardens. Garden

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[6] Richard Reynolds, On Guerrilla Gardening: A Handbook for Gardening Without Boundaries (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008).
[7] Laura Lawson, *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 206.
[8] Lawson, City Bountiful.
[9] Reynolds, On Guerrilla Gardening.

groups leased lots from the cash-strapped city, relieving pressure to manage the land.[10] Community gardening is thought to have played a role in community revitalization by empowering participants to engage in other local improvement activities.[11] However, as the city's financial circumstances improved, the gardens were in danger of losing their lots. In the mid-1980s, New York City's push to develop affordable housing threatened gardens on vacant land; many were already formalized as community gardens through the GreenThumb program and held renewable one-year leases from the city, but lacked long-term security.[12] The Liz Christy garden was saved, but in 1986 the Garden of Eden, which never held a lease, was the first garden razed to make room for affordable housing.[13] Many other gardens were removed to make way for subsidized housing development.[14] In 1999, the Giuliani administration attempted to put 113 garden lots up for public auction. Courts stopped the action and the city ultimately sold the lots to the Trust for Public Land and New York Restoration, two groups that would maintain the sites as community gardens.[15] This struggle to protect gardens continues today. GreenThumb, the city agency that provides interim-use licenses, programming, and material support to community gardens on city-owned land, can extend permanent protection to gardens by transferring them to the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR).[16] A 2010 change to DPR's *Rules for Community Gardens* continued this protection as long as a garden remains in good standing, but introduced a mechanism for

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[10] Lawson, *City Bountiful*, 214.
[11] Lawson, *City Bountiful*, 219.
[12] Lawson, City Bountiful.
[13] Edie Stone, New York City Community Garden Preservation Timeline.
[14] Lawson, *City Bountiful*, 259.
[15] Lawson, *City Bountiful*, 262.
[16] "Community Land Access Summary," 596 Acres, accessed August 30, 2012, http://596acres.org/en/resources/community-land-access-summary/.

declaring a garden in default that, the New York City Community Garden Coalition complained, was vague and left gardens vulnerable to development.[17]

This battle over city-owned land has left city agencies wary of approving interim use of their land. According to an April 27, 2012, *New York Times* article, "Letitia James, a Brooklyn city councilwoman [. . .], said that city agencies were wary of community gardens becoming permanent institutions, difficult to displace, as happened in the East Village. And often, agencies face competing requests from groups that want affordable housing on empty lots."[18]

Tessa Huxley, who directed the Green Guerillas from 1981 to 1985, recently wondered whether citizens might ever undertake the same kind of action to reclaim and improve their city that guerrilla gardeners undertook in the 1970s and 1980s. She concluded that simple economic circumstances would prevent such a movement from arising; it now costs too much to live in New York City for residents to have sufficient time to devote to such outside pursuits. Additionally, she observed that today, citizens seem to rely more on city agencies to provide services as opposed to taking on such tasks themselves.[19] As illustrated herein, New Yorkers are still undertaking these pursuits, and are reaching a new level of advocacy through their approaches to engagement with city agencies and their use of the internet to invite participation and raise funds.

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[17] "New York City Community Garden Coalition's Response to NYC Dept. of Parks and Recreation's *Rules for Community Gardens*," New York City Community Garden Coalition, http://www.nyccgc.org/Docs/2010/NYCCGC-Response-to-Rules-Nov2010.pdf.
[18]John Leland, "Turning Unused Acres Green," New York Times, April 27, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/29/nyregion/a-plan-to-turn-brooklyns-unused-acres-green.html.
[19]Tessa Huxley (Executive Director, Battery Park City Parks Conservancy; former director, Battery Park City Parks Conservancy [1980-85]), in discussion with the author, March 19, 2012.

Research Questions

Does guerrilla gardening offer advantages over gardening with permission? Are there situations in which it makes more sense to garden without sanction, or should gardeners always seek permission to use the land they cultivate?

Methods

Internet research was conducted on contemporary guerrilla gardening in New York City, with a focus on articles in the *New York Times* or local newspapers in order to identify interviewees engaged in contemporary guerrilla gardening projects. Recommendations were also solicited from people engaged in gardening in the city, yielding a connection with Aazam Otero of Morning Glory Community Garden; Paula Z. Segal of 596 Acres was also suggested, but had already been contacted. People with pertinent projects were contacted via email. There was an approximately 75% response rate, and those who responded were interviewed. Interviews were conducted primarily over the phone, except where otherwise noted. A general meeting of one organization, 596 Acres, was attended on March 24, 2012, and Paula Z. Segal was interviewed in person immediately afterward.

To identify interviewees with longer-standing experience in guerrilla gardening and New York City government, recommendations were solicited from DUSP alumni currently working in New York City municipal agencies or land use organizations. Interviewees were initially contacted via email and interviewed by phone, except where otherwise noted. Tessa Huxley, a former director of the Green Guerillas and current executive director of the Battery Park City Parks Conservancy, was recommended by

thesis advisor Anne Whiston Spirn, DUSP alumnus Andy Stone at the Trust for Public Land, and Joyce Rosenthal at the Harvard Graduate School of Design. Edie Stone, an activist for community gardeners since 1998 and executive director of GreenThumb since 2001, was recommended by DUSP alumnae Lindsay Campbell at the United States Forest Service and Carrie Grassi at the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation, and was interviewed in person. Laura Lawson, a scholar of community gardening in the United States and the author of *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America*, was selected based on readings of her work in 2011 and an introduction when she lectured in Lawrence Vale's class, Qualitative Methods for Planners and Designers.

The Guerrilla Gardening Landscape Today

Guerrilla gardening, in its classic forms, is a means of resistance to both government and private control of land. The projects in this chapter range from artistic to political, personal to ideological, outside to inside the system of land ownership. Some do not technically qualify as guerrilla gardening efforts; these engage directly with city agencies and private owners to gain permission to use the land in question. However, even these sanctioned projects are informed by the legacy of guerrilla gardening in New York City. They follow in the footsteps of the Green Guerillas and individual gardeners who took over vacant lots to improve safety, aesthetics, and personal relationships in their neighborhoods. They have also inherited complicated relationships with city agencies that may hesitate to grant temporary access to their land for fear of difficulty in reclaiming it later. In response to these goals and hurdles, projects such as 596 Acres, discussed below, engage in a dual approach: resistance to traditional notions of land control, and advocacy for those with less experience in navigating bureaucracy, allowing them to participate in reshaping the landscape of New York City. Further complicating this issue is the question of who has the right to be and to work in a given place. At its core, guerrilla gardening is about the concepts of rights versus permission. These concepts are typically discussed in the legal sense, but they are also socially relevant. Sensitivity over who is entitled to determine the appearance of open space emerges and is compounded by the socioeconomic and ethnic diversity in New York City neighborhoods.

Morning Glory Community Garden (2010-2011)

Morning Glory Community Garden was a guerrilla garden cultivated without permission on a 14.5-acre South Bronx lot owned by the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD). The garden's founders, Elliott Liu, Rafael Mutis, Aazam Otero, and Anistla Rugama, considered working with GreenThumb to formally secure permission for the garden, but ultimately chose not to because they thought they would not succeed. They anticipated that the lot, though vacant since 1968 and the site of illegal dumping, would likely be redeveloped due to its large size and proximity to public transportation. They were also aware of HPD's difficult history with community gardens and expected the agency to be reluctant to grant a lease for a garden on such a potentially valuable lot. Beyond that, they were skeptical that a lease would offer meaningful protection because a 2010 change to licensing terms for GreenThumb gardens had left gardens more vulnerable to development.[20] The Morning Glory group sidestepped these concerns and chose to garden the site illegally for as long as they could.

The group's desire to start a garden arose from their commitment to food justice and their concern with the Mott Haven neighborhood's status as a food desert; their decision to start a guerrilla garden was influenced by their anarchist politics. The Morning Glory founders envisioned a multiuse space that would include both private plots and a collectively worked, high-production urban farm, as well as a large common area for political and art activities. A small-scale Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program would distribute produce to members who purchased shares in the garden, helping to finance it. Morning Glory would foster connections with other

[20] "NYCGC's Response to NYC Dept. of Parks and Recreation's *Rules for Community Gardens*," NYCGC.

neighborhood gardens through programming such as a tool share, educational series, and movie nights with rotating host gardens. In their short tenure, the Morning Glory gardeners took steps toward these goals. They raised 16 individual garden beds to encourage a sense of ownership for garden members. They also started a small memorial garden for a neighborhood resident, Luis Soto, who had been shot and killed by police. Finally, the gardeners built a small seating area with tables, where they hosted two open mic events.

The response from Morning Glory's neighbors ranged from apathetic to positive. When investigating the possibilities of the site, the Morning Glory founders spoke with neighbors and found no objection to the garden, but also did not garner the buy-in necessary to establish strong participation in the neighborhood. Passersby who asked if the gardeners had permission to use the land responded enthusiastically to the guerrilla occupation of the space. Neighbors occasionally used the seating area. A group of students from nearby Samuel Gompers High School, on the other hand, was excited about gardening and joined the Morning Glory group, which maintains contact with a core set of those students and may collaborate with them in the future.

The official response to Morning Glory Community Garden, in contrast, ranged from apathetic to negative. The garden's founders were wary of official attention at first and disguised themselves in orange contractor vests when they began working the lot, but neither the police nor city agencies interfered. The Department of Sanitation, which was responsible for maintaining the site, initially told the group not to enter the lot, but then provided trash bags for the clean-up effort. Morning Glory was about to receive 200 cubic yards of soil from the department's compost program when the garden was shut

down. In October 2011, the Department of Housing Preservation and Development pulled down Morning Glory's signs, posted No Trespassing signs, installed gates in the fence, and started clearing the site. The agency said it had no way to contact the Morning Glory group to inform them of these plans, but according to gardener Aazam Otero, contact information was available on the tables and bulletin board in the garden.[21] When Morning Glory contacted the Community Board, a local representative body that has an advisory role in land use and zoning issues and presents residents' concerns and needs to the city government, the group met with resistance. The head of the Community Board, district manager Cedric Loftin, would not acknowledge the garden's existence because it was not formally sanctioned, and stated, "It's not a community garden because it's not a GreenThumb garden."[22] Otero asserted that Loftin did not perform his official function of representing citizens' interests to the municipal government: he would not set up a meeting between the gardeners and HPD, and he offered the group only five minutes to speak during the public comments period at the next Community Board meeting, which was later cancelled.[23] Relations quickly devolved from there. Morning Glory occupied and disrupted the Community Board offices for an afternoon[24] and, on another day, staged a protest outside the garden that resulted in five arrests.[25] The group ultimately lost the garden.

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[21] Aazam Otero (co-founder, Morning Glory Community Garden), in discussion with the author, April 2, 2012.
[22] Elizabeth Chen, "Residents Clash over Use of Lot," *Mott Haven Herald*, November 12, 2011, http://motthavenherald.com/2011/11/12/residents-city-clash-over-use-of-lot/.
[23] Otero, discussion.
[24] Elizabeth Chen, "Gardeners Occupy Community Board," *Mott Haven Herald*, November 25, 2011, http://motthavenherald.com/2011/11/25/gardeners-occupy-community-board/.
[25] Elizabeth Chen, "Cops Occupy the Bronx Rally," *Mott Haven Herald*, December 4, 2011, http://motthavenherald.com/2011/12/04/cops-break-up-occupy-the-bronx-rally/.

The current plan for the site's redevelopment, called Crossroads Plaza, will include commercial space, a daycare center, and 430 housing units reserved for low- and middle-income tenants.[26] The project's developers made a deal with HPD 15 years ago,[27] and the site has essentially been warehoused since then. Community members question the affordability of the planned housing because rents are based on a citywide average salary that far outpaces that in Mott Haven, leading to concern over the extent to which the housing will serve current neighborhood residents.[28] Otero questioned both the feasibility of Crossroads Plaza and the fairness of allowing publicly owned land to be controlled by a developer for so long without action.[29]

With the benefit of hindsight, Otero pinpointed things he would have done differently in establishing Morning Glory Community Garden. He would have at least explored the possibility of working with GreenThumb to secure a lease, and he would have started out smaller—the group was working on too many fronts at once, underestimated the amount of labor required for their projects, and was unaware of the need for participants to develop skills over time.[30] Ultimately, however, Morning Glory learned from its frustration with the level of information, access, and control over public land that citizens have, as well as from its frustration with the Community Board's perceived unwillingness to work with the group to address the community's desires and needs. Out of these frustrations, two core policy concerns have arisen: how to institute

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[26] Patrick Wall, "South Bronx Apartment Towers Approved for Former Mott Haven Community Garden Site," *DNA Info*, March 2, 2012, http://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20120302/south-bronx/apartment-towers-approved-for-former-mott-haven-community-garden-site.
[27] Sean Carlson, "No Bid Deal could Enrich Political Fixer," *Mott Haven Herald*, August 23, 2012, http://motthavenherald.com/2012/08/23/no-bid-deal-could-enrich-political-fixer/.
[28] Joe Hirsch, "City Plans Tall Buildings on Former Building Site," *Mott Haven Herald*, February 17, 2012, http://motthavenherald.com/2012/02/17/city-plans-tall-buildings-on-former-garden-site/.
[29] Otero, discussion.
[30] Otero, discussion.

more concerted planning around food, and how to raise the visibility of the need for a change in zoning to accommodate both urban farming and interim land uses.[31]

Bed Stuy Meadow (2009)

In April 2009, Deborah Fisher and a group of around 100 volunteers set out on a rainy morning to spread wildflower seeds in all the vacant lots and untended slivers of public land in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn. Fisher envisioned a partial return to the area's natural landscape, a meadow blanketing otherwise unused land that would unify the neighborhood visually. She intended the project to foster community engagement and, in the process, erase her own authorship. This intent is a reflection of her professional concerns as executive director of A Blade of Grass, a non-profit organization that funds social practice art. Bed Stuy Meadow was not supposed to be about one person's artwork. Rather, it was an environmentally focused communal work meant to pay homage to the neighborhood's history of community gardening.

Though Fisher was unfamiliar with guerrilla gardening, she re-created a classic version of it: seed-bombing vacant land. She also approached it conscientiously, instituting two ground rules: no planting on land that someone was maintaining, and no planting invasive species. On her website, she states that tended tree pits—technically public land—should not be disturbed, and outlines how to identify them: "Tended tree pits have boxes, fences, signs about dog poop, and other signs that someone cares." She also offers to give non-invasive seeds to anybody who requests them.[32]

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[31] Otero, discussion.
[32] "Bed Stuy Meadow," 21st Century Plowshare, http://www.21stcenturyplowshare.com/bed-stuy-meadow.html.

To seed Bed Stuy Meadow, Fisher reached out to potential volunteers and funders online, where she initially wrote about her plan and intentions on her blog, 21st Century Plowshare. Real estate and art blogs spread the word about the project. Volunteers could sign up via email. In an interview, Fisher said she thought that the 200 volunteers who signed up online represented a wide demographic. She estimated that about half were Bedford-Stuyvesant residents and one-third had grown up in the neighborhood,[33] which has traditionally been heavily African American, though that majority decreased from 75% to 60% between 2000 and 2010.[34] However, she estimated that the approximately 100 volunteers who took part in the seeding event were primarily white, with some Asian and Latino participants, and in their 20s. In hindsight she noted that her method of outreach, along with timing and physical circumstances—the seeding took place on the cold, rainy day before Easter—limited the age and racial diversity of participants.[35]

This method of outreach did, however, expand her potential audience. Bed Stuy Meadow garnered media attention from blogs, newspapers, and television. With this attention came negative feedback, which focused primarily on the aesthetics of the project and the question of who has the right to determine the neighborhood's landscape. One critic asserted that Fisher should have approached the Community Board to get more local residents involved.[36] Ava Barnett, president of local organization Brownstoners of Bedford-Stuyvesant, noted that wildflowers would look unkempt in an urban

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[33] Deborah Fisher (founder, Bed Stuy Meadow), in discussion with author, March 12, 2012.
[34] Sam Roberts, "Striking Change in Bedford-Stuyvesant as White Population Soars," *New York Times*, August 4, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/05/nyregion/in-bedford-stuyvesant-a-black-stronghold-a-growing-pool-of-whites.html.
[35] Fisher, discussion.
[36] Siddhartha Mitter, "Bed-Stuy Meadow," WNYC News radio broadcast audio, April 13, 2009, http://www.wnyc.org/articles/wnyc-news/2009/apr/13/bed-stuy-meadow/.

environment and would detract from the well-kept homes and gardens of the neighborhood.[37]

Fisher explained in an interview that she rejects the notion that a relative newcomer or even a non-resident does not have the right to implement a project like Bed Stuy Meadow. At the same time, she acknowledged that she has not "lived there long enough to have a voice or a sense of ownership because of having lived through something so bad," that "gentrification is frightening," and the newcomers and outsiders who represent it "have the responsibility to work around it." Were she to plant Bed Stuy Meadow again, Fisher said she would do more organizing in person, attend Community Board and block association meetings, and put up flyers, all with the goal of giving participants more ownership of the project.[38]

The 2009 seeding of Bed Stuy Meadow culminated in a party tinged with excitement about making change happen without formal organization. A core group of five or six participants continued to meet to discuss other possibilities for vacant lot use. Ultimately they settled on an idea for social entrepreneurship that they dubbed the Urban Farm Syndicate (UFS): a modular farming system to make temporary use of vacant lots with permission of landowners. Crops would be cultivated in dumpsters that could be moved when lot owners chose to make alternate use of their land. UFS would be a business, employing neighborhood residents and selling to neighborhood markets and restaurants, and would not allow public access to the farms. The group has developed a business plan for UFS and is currently seeking funding and a committed developer to do

[37] Annie Correal, "Art Project Brings Seed Sowing Volunteers," *New York Times*, April 11, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/12/nyregion/12flowers.html.
[38] Fisher, discussion.

a pilot project, and has also discussed the possibility of an advocacy wing to press for changes in city zoning laws to accommodate urban agriculture.[39]

While Fisher's project was to meant to be an act of beautification that harkened back to Bedford-Stuyvesant's historical landscape, it received a good deal of criticism. Within the community, complaints centered on limited ability to contribute to the discussion of the best use of empty lots; although Fisher did reach out to members of the community for input and volunteers, her focus on online media as an avenue of outreach limited respondents to those with access to the internet and either a connection to the project or the luck to have it brought to their attention. A positive outcome, however, was the blueprint for a business. Urban Farm Syndicate is uniquely suited to the vacant lot—or lots-in-transition—landscape that characterizes a neighborhood in the midst of gentrification by offering a landowner-permitted modular gardening system, and is a direct result of Fisher's and other volunteers' experience with Bed Stuy Meadow.

Trees Not Trash (2005-2010?)

Trees Not Trash started as a neighborhood beautification project in Bushwick, Brooklyn, in 2005, when its founder, Kate Gilliam, moved to the formerly industrial area and noted its lack of trees. She began by planting street trees and seed-bombing vacant lots herself, then posted flyers to invite volunteers to join her each Sunday, later started a website to reach more participants, and eventually founded several community gardens, all in order to "transform this neighborhood into a community with green space, where people can take pride in their streets."[40] Over time, the organization attracted several hundred volunteers and gained support from the Department of Parks and Recreation and

[39] Fisher, discussion.
[40] Trees Not Trash, http://treesnottrash.org/.

the Department of Sanitation. Since Gilliam moved out of the country in late 2010, the organization's website has not been updated, and it is unclear whether Trees Not Trash has survived its founder's departure.

While the organization conducted an increasing amount of sanctioned work, Gilliam maintained a connection with guerrilla work by seed-bombing lots and conducting a seed-bombing workshop at an event sponsored by BUST magazine in 2009.[41] At the same time, Trees Not Trash approached the city directly to acquire additional resources. In an early effort, volunteers worked on a block of Bogart Street adjacent to the Morgan Avenue station on the L line of the subway, building benches with planters for local businesses and working with the Department of Sanitation to install trashcans on the street. Matt Lorenz, who joined Gilliam when he moved to Bushwick in 2006, recalled in an interview that in their effort to obtain street trees they "kept 311 on speed dial" and eventually met with and started collaborating with the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR).[42] They continued to collaborate with DPR on Million Trees NYC, an initiative that distributes trees to citizens to plant on private property. As of early 2011, Trees Not Trash had gotten over 2000 trees planted in the neighborhood.[43] The group also founded four gardens. At the Little Bosjwick Garden, a donation of evergreen shrubs prompted the group to scale a fence, clean up a vacant lot Gilliam had been eyeing on Bogart Street, and create a public green space in 2005. In the same year they built the Trees Not Trash Community Garden, which now includes raised beds, composting, a tool shed, and a public seating area, at the corner of McKibben and

[41] "Trees Not Trash Teach Guerrilla Gardening," BUST.com, May 13, 2009, http://bust.com/blog/trees-not-trash-teach-guerilla-gardeninghtml.html.
[42] Matt Lorenz (early member, Trees Not Trash) in discussion with author, March 23, 2012.
[43] "Trees Not Trash," Brooklyn Spaces, January 20, 2011, http://brooklyn-spaces.com/2011/01/trees-not-trash/#content.

Bogart streets. The group worked with neighborhood children in 2008 and 2009 to develop the Trees Not Trash Community Kids Garden, which features plantings, low wooden fences, and a mural on a long strip of land between the sidewalk and the brick wall of an industrial building on Jefferson Street, where the children previously gathered regularly to play handball.[44] Finally, in 2010, the group built the Bushwick Library Garden in the 1000-square-foot yard of the local public library. To fund the garden and a young gardeners program at the library, Trees Not Trash worked with "ioby.org, an online 'micro-philanthropic' initiative that connects donors with various environmental projects around the city."[45] This garden has also benefitted from city support, receiving leftover trees from a Million Trees NYC distribution day and a visit from a city horticulturalist.[46]

According to both Gilliam and Lorenz, Trees Not Trash sparked further civic action in the neighborhood, notably among long-time residents. As Lorenz said in an interview, "if you grew up in a place without trees, why would it occur to you to plant trees?"[47] But the tree planting being done by newcomers was a call to arms for long-time residents to get involved. In this sense, the work of new residents was essential to spark change in the neighborhood. Gilliam explains, "When there are no trees in your neighborhood, you become accustomed to it, and where you live becomes somewhere you travel through but rarely engage or care about. . . . But when people see someone cleaning up the garbage and putting greenery in its place, their relationship to their

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[44] Trees Not Trash, *Trees Not Trash: Putting the Bush Back in Bushwick*. http://topophilia.org/files/TreesNotTrash.pdf.
[45] Diego Cupolo, "Trees Not Trash Grows Up," *Bushwick BK*, March 25, 2010, http://bushwickbk.com/2010/03/25/trees-not-trash-grows-up/.
[46] Lorenz, discussion.
[47] Lorenz, discussion.

surroundings, or at least their perception of it, changes."[48] Through flyers, sign-up sheets, the consistent physical presence of volunteers each Sunday, the regular development of new projects, and a website, Trees Not Trash gathered a roster of over 400 volunteers by 2010.[49]

The importance of permanence, however, is in dispute. Lorenz has heard of cases where people have gotten permission from owners of vacant lots to work the land, only to have the owner lock the lot up again once it is cleaned up. As a result, he said, "it's generally silly to put work into something until you have a lock on it."[50] Even with permission, it may be unwise to work without an assurance of continued tenure. Gilliam, on the other hand, is more comfortable with the potential impermanence of her work.

> Some spaces Trees Not Trash has transformed will most likely be reabsorbed as the neighborhood changes; for instance, we planted trees and bulbs in a tiny triangle of land in the middle of Flushing Avenue, but if road work had to be done, or the city decided to expand the road, our little garden triangle would most likely be destroyed. In the interim though we have created a little bit of greenery and the neighborhood can only benefit from that.
>
> The impermanence of guerilla gardening has its benefits. In many ways, empty or abandoned urban space is like a blank canvas, and there is definitely that appeal in metropolitan areas like New York and Berlin. I support the reclaiming of public space by planting or seed bombing, largely because it demonstrates to the general public that they have the ability to instigate change in the city they live in. Too often we are confined to our little apartments or offices and don't interact with the streets and space around us; if there is a bare stretch of land that is being unused, plant an armful of daffodil or tulip bulbs in it. There is no harm in making something bloom.[51]

Gilliam's assumption that long-term residents of Bushwick did not engage with the space around them before her arrival is certainly problematic, and again illustrates that one

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[48] Cupolo, "Trees Not Trash Grows Up."
[49] Lorenz, discussion.
[50] Lorenz, discussion.
[51] Kaarin Patterson, "Trees Not Trash: An Interview with Kate Gilliam, Founder and Director," *Topophilia*, April 22, 2012, http://www.topophilia.org/features/trees-not-trash-an-interview-with-kate-gilliam-founder-and-director.

resident's goal to raise consciousness around an issue can be an outright insult to other residents. Gilliam's clear narrative about the purpose of Trees Not Trash, however, is a likely byproduct of her decision to expand the work of Trees Not Trash to sanctioned projects; applications for city funding and materials require the articulation of need as well as a mission statement that outlines goals and strategy, which can add to an organization's legitimacy. In this case, such legitimacy led to increased participation in projects by neighborhood children and long-term residents, while the tenets of guerrilla gardening—its fluidity and focus on action—allowed Trees Not Trash to continue an array of gardening and greening work in Bushwick over a five-year period.

The Seed Project (2006-present)

Participants in the Seed Project, a global environmental artwork, plant seeds, photograph what grows, and upload these images to a "virtual field" online.[52] The project's creator, David Cohen, explained in an interview that he believes that "we're all artists . . . [and] can use creativity to change the world," and he sees seeds as a "metaphor for creating something from nothing."[53] The Seed Project is a means of encouraging people to enact the world that they would like to see. Yet Cohen has set an interesting ground rule that could frustrate that goal by reducing participants' seed-sowing options: in the project's instructions, he states that seeds must be grown legally.[54]

Paradoxically, this rule is intended to expand rather than limit the scope of the project. Cohen said that he likes guerrilla gardening but finds that, despite the militaristic terminology that accompanies it, "it is not violent or really that subversive . . . [it is the]

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[52] The Seed Project, http://the-seed-project.org/.
[53] David Cohen (founder, The Seed Project), in discussion with author, March 14, 2012.
[54] "About," The Seed Project, http://the-seed-project.org/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=12.

terminology that adds excitement to the act." Moreover, he said he sees that terminology as "self-limiting," and he instead "wanted to make something bigger than a rebellion . . . a part of life, something that would last, not a fad." The aim is to improve the accessibility and, in a sense, the ordinariness of the project. Spatially, Cohen said he wants to advance the idea that there are "no boundaries to what we think of as the environment"; he plants mostly in his own apartment. While he ultimately has "no problem with planting in public space," his goal is to support a broader cultural shift in both environmental and artistic awareness.[55]

The Seed Project's other cardinal rule is to plant no invasive species.[56] To promote the project's expansion while mitigating its potential negative impacts, Cohen designed packets of non-invasive seeds to sell at Whole Foods and on the Seed Project website.[57] Profits from seed sales support implementation of the Seed Project in New York City schools.[58] Additionally, Cohen has collaborated with the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) to run street-fair booths where children make planters out of plastic bottles.[59] Most recently, he launched a Kickstarter campaign to fund his effort to transport overstock seeds from seed companies to schools across the nation, but failed to reach his funding goal.[60]

While Gilliam expanded Trees for Trash and gained support for its projects with strong terminology about reclaiming and re-envisioning Bushwick, Cohen acknowledges

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[55] Cohen, discussion.
[56] "About," The Seed Project.
[57] Joey Roth, "The Seed Project," *Tree Hugger*, November 8, 2007, http://www.treehugger.com/culture/the-seed-project.html.
[58] "Participate," The Seed Project, http://the-seed-project.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=section&id=11&Itemid=43.
[59] Cohen, discussion.
[60] "The Seed Project," Kickstarter, accessed August 30, 2012, http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/341003970/the-seed-project.

that the terminology often associated with guerrilla gardening can limit one's vision of how others interact with the natural and built environment. With the Seed Project, he fosters an online community while also administering a rather different public service arm in conjunction with large city-run institutions. These experiences have encouraged him to attempt to expand his public service project to facilitate the distribution of overstock seeds to schools throughout the nation.

596 Acres (2011-present)

596 Acres is a non-profit organization that provides information on publicly owned vacant land in New York City and assists interested residents in making use of that land. Paula Z. Segal, an activist and lawyer, founded the organization—named for the amount of publicly owned vacant land in Brooklyn as of April 2010—as a byproduct of her own attempt to turn a fenced-off vacant lot owned by the New York City Department of Environmental Protection in the Clinton Hill neighborhood of Brooklyn into public space. While researching ownership information on that lot, she discovered the Department of City Planning (DCP)'s Primary Land Use Tax Lot Output (PLUTO) database, which contains ownership information for all lots in New York City. Segal and colleagues then worked with GIS specialists at the Center for the Study of Brooklyn at Brooklyn College to develop a map of all publicly owned vacant land in Brooklyn in order to share the information with other citizens. The group designed a broadsheet—with a map of vacant lots on the front and a flowchart for developing a vacant-lot project on the back—and posted it at a few vacant lots on June 21, 2011, as a pilot project. After receiving an immediate response from interested citizens, the group was encouraged to move forward with the project.

The organization expanded its efforts to include Manhattan and Queens in June 2012, and plans eventually to cover all five boroughs. The 596 Acres website[61] provides an interactive map with information on which city agencies own which lots, whether any projects are being organized on a site, and contact information for agencies and project organizers. The map also facilitates organization efforts: people can register their interest by leaving a virtual note or by signing up to watch or organize a lot, which in turn grants access to an email listserv that alerts users to activity on that lot and delivers information on how to contact and lobby officials who control the lot. A team of six volunteers comprised of programmers, designers, artists, and advocates maintains the site, sends out weekly electronic newsletters, and holds monthly meetings for member projects. The group also posts handsome printed signs identifying publicly owned vacant lots in neighborhoods it deems underserved by public space. As of August 2012, 596 Acres had helped to found six licensed projects on public land, including community gardens, a movable urban farming pilot project, a natural dye collective, and public green space, in neighborhoods sprinkled throughout Brooklyn. The group had gained media attention and secured financial support from the Citizens' Committee for New York City, the Awesome Foundation, F.E.A.S.T. Brooklyn, the NYC BigApps competition, and individual donations through ioby.org.

596 Acres has also been developing relationships with city agencies. GreenThumb director Edie Stone was at first overwhelmed by requests from the organization; she said in an interview that the organization did not initially understand GreenThumb's resource limitations and also lacked information on city projects already planned on certain lots. The relationship between GreenThumb and 596 Acres took a turn

[61] http://596acres.org/

for the better, however, when Segal spoke at a City Council Parks Budget hearing in March 2012, in support of increased funding for GreenThumb.[62] Segal also reported a positive relationship with the Department of Housing Preservation and Development.[63] An employee of GrowNYC, a non-profit organization that provides resources and labor to new community gardens, attended a 596 Acres general meeting on March 24, 2012, to encourage gardeners to take advantage of GrowNYC's services. In developing these relationships with city agencies and non-profits, 596 Acres helps to build better connections between the municipal government and citizens and move toward a more collaborative process for determining the use of publicly owned land.

Segal described 596 Acres' goals and methods in an interview. She considers 596 Acres a civic education project that takes back the city from 311, to which civic information provision has been outsourced. The project aims to encourage transparency in governance and improve citizens' sovereignty over public land. 596 Acres also facilitates connections amongst citizens. Its two-pronged approach to information distribution—online via an interactive map and in the physical world via maps posted on vacant lots—captures a wider audience, reaching both people searching for information on their neighborhoods or on vacant land and people simply walking past an unused lot in their neighborhood. This method has proven effective as, for each project, Segal has been able to connect people interested in the same site who learn about it by different means. Once there is sufficient interest in a given lot, Segal provides guidance on how to secure permission to use the land. She ensures that applications for use of city-owned land incorporate language as specific to the proposed project as possible, but avoids certain

[62] Edie Stone (Executive director of GreenThumb), in conversation with author, March 26, 2012.
[63] Paula Z. Segal (founder, 596 Acres), in conversation with author, March 24, 2012.

terminology, preferring "community-determined project" to "community garden," a more politically fraught term. When a project is established, Segal encourages that it be kept as open to the public as possible, rather than simply enjoyed by the founding participants. Both Segal and Stone[64] pointed out that community gardens often feel exclusive and unwelcoming even when they are on public land. To that end, Segal encourages extensive open hours and would prefer that projects not be fenced in.[65]

In facilitating the officially sanctioned interim use of publicly owned land, 596 Acres not only protects a project's tenure on the site, but, as Segal pointed out, provides legal protection for members of marginalized communities who otherwise might not be able to engage in guerrilla gardening without facing legal repercussions.[66] The organization's work provides projects that might otherwise go guerrilla with stability and access to legal and material support. Although the temporary availability of vacant land is publicized from the outset, the maps, in representing the empty lots of the city as one great grid of vacancies, convey an overall sense of abundance that might last even as individual lots are closed, reclaimed, and redeveloped.

Though 596 Acres provides a more formal approach to using vacant public land by navigating bureaucracy, researching available land, advising on projects, and helping establish sustainability, its connection to the guerrilla gardening movement is evident in its goal to serve as an advocate. By providing the public with information about vacant public land and then assisting in the development of projects that exhibit public utility, the project aids in increasing access—among marginalized communities in particular—to open space. By assisting with the initial administration of many projects, 596 Acres can

[64] Stone, discussion.
[65] Segal, discussion.
[66] Segal, discussion.

navigate the legal terrain while allowing individuals and communities to work more freely on the ground.

Conclusion

In examining whether guerrilla gardening offers advantages over sanctioned gardening, it becomes clear that the type of gardening that is preferable is a matter of context and objectives. Guerrilla gardening does offer some real advantages, however: it is typically more flexible and presents a lower barrier to entry than gardening with permission; it disrupts ingrained patterns of thinking about urban space and raises awareness of alternative options and opportunities for action; and it allows guerrilla actors to learn from experience. In the cases discussed above, several gardeners saw flaws in their first efforts or discovered new interests to explore, and subsequently developed new projects that were informed by their previous experiences. Further exploration of these initial cases, however, offers lessons that provide a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and benefits of key strategies that guerrilla gardeners employ.

Table 1. Comparing the Cases

Name	Years Active	Size	Intent	Instigation	Official sanction	Response	Outcome / Catalytic Effect	Funding
Participation Park *Baltimore, MD*	2007-present	0.5 acre	Community garden, right to city, food justice	Group, visited CDCs and community groups beforehand, welcomed interested parties including children	No, but worked with city agencies	Positive or neutral but skeptical; common comment on need for fence; initial interest from neighborhood children, later interest from adults	Garden has been taken over by several neighborhood residents	Self-funded; sale of vegetables one season; grants; soil donations from employee of Department of Recreation and Parks
Morning Glory Community Garden *South Bronx, NYC*	2009-2011	14.5 acres	Community garden, right to city, food justice	Group, limited networking, welcomed interested parties including high school students	No	Limited community buy-in; enthusiasm from high school students; positive response when people learned garden was guerrilla; contentious response from Community Board 1 and Dept of Housing and Preservation Development	Garden was cleared by HPD to make way for a new affordable housing development; core members of group, including some high schoolers, are looking for other potential garden sites in the neighborhood	Self-funded
Bed Stuy Meadow Bedford-Stuyvesant *Brooklyn, NYC*	2009		Art, environmental awareness, community engagement	Individual, solicited participants	No	Some negative response around aesthetics of project and question of who has the right to determine the neighborhood's landscape; Fisher only received positive responses when speaking face-to-face	Core participants are developing a business plan for moveable urban farming to be done in containers/dumpsters on vacant lots	Paypal donations

Table 1. Comparing the Cases (Cont.)

Name	Years Active	Size	Intent	Instigation	Official sanction	Response	Outcome / Catalytic Effect	Funding
Trees Not Trash *Bushwick, Brooklyn, NYC*	2005-2010?		Neighborhood beautification	Individual, solicited participants, established a group	Varied by project	Initial work done primarily by relative newcomers to neighborhood, joined by long-time residents; some concern over potential gentrifying effects	Organization may be inactive after departure of founder; started 4 community gardens; garnered participation from new and long-term residents; brought over 2000 trees into the neighborhood	IOBY campaign, donations from Sprout Home, trees from Department of Parks and Recreation, support from Citizens for NYC
The Seed Project *Global*	2006-present		Art, environmental awareness	Individual, solicits participants	No	Positive press coverage; as of 2010, had distributed 3500 free packets of seeds in addition to selling packets through Whole Foods, but does not know how many have been planted	Project continues; founder has introduced project to many NYC schools, and is currently working to develop a system to distribute overstock from seed companies to educational institutions around the country	Seed sales, Kickstarter campaign underway
596 Acres *NYC*	2011-present		Advocacy, access to publicly owned land, community engagement	Individual, formed group, solicits participants	Yes	positive press coverage; developing positive relationships with GreenThumb, Dept of Housing Preservation and Development, and GrowNYC	Project is expanding to document publicly owned vacant lots in all NYC boroughs; has helped start 6 projects on public land; founder has advocated for increased funding for GreenThumb	Volunteer time, support from Citizens for NYC, $1000 Awesome Foundation for the Arts and Sciences grant, winner of $4000 prize for Best Green App in NYC Big Apps contest, $1200 F.E.A.S.T. Brooklyn grant, ongoing IOBY campaign

Lessons Learned

A comparison of these projects offers pragmatic lessons on the ways in which projects create physical and social change, and complicates the concept of guerrilla gardening, its purpose, and its benefits. The projects can be compared along several key dimensions: their use of community and civic engagement, their approach to permission, and their advocacy work. The differences between these projects reveal the practical value that specific strategies may or may not have for achieving a variety of aims. For example, the use of unsanctioned tactics may hinder projects seeking to achieve permanent physical change in their community. On the other hand, unsanctioned tactics may benefit projects seeking to disrupt existing relationships between local residents and urban spaces. Their shared attributes, however, reinforce the notion that guerrilla gardening challenges preconceived understandings of urban space. Furthermore, all of the projects confirm the value of engaging local residents and working closely with city agencies as advocates.

Engaging with Neighbors and City Agencies

These projects substantiate the generally accepted idea that authentic community engagement, such as person-to-person partnerships as well as working relationships with like-minded organizations or city agencies, is advisable. A lack of engagement with neighbors and city agencies contributed to the demise of Morning Glory Community Garden and the apparently limited impact of Bed Stuy Meadow, whereas such engagement has allowed Participation Park and Trees Not Trash to thrive and to regularly reinvent their activities. Civic engagement is the broader goal of 596 Acres, which is explicitly concerned with helping citizens navigate bureaucracy and, in the long term,

developing more streamlined mechanisms for the municipal government to help citizens access public land. Engagement can be considered an end in itself or can be harnessed to achieve a project's goals; often, both cases are true. However, the level of a project's investment in engagement is linked to the project's success in meeting its other goals.

In Baltimore, the founders of Participation Park deliberately brought their plan to a local community development corporation, spoke with neighbors they encountered, demonstrated their commitment through their consistent presence and work over several years, and adjusted the garden's programming to match the interests of those involved, from children to adults. The very name of the garden, Participation Park, was collectively chosen and represents the founders' desires and the common ground they found with the neighbors who joined and ultimately adopted the garden, which is still active.

Trees Not Trash solicited volunteers from its early days in 2005, first with flyers posted in neighborhood establishments and, eventually, with a website and formalized organizational structure. Volunteers have been essential to pursuing the project's original goals—cleaning the streets and planting trees—and have also helped to expand the project to meet additional neighborhood desires for gardens and green spaces. Engagement with city agencies has been vital as well; in collaboration with the Department of Parks and Recreation and the Million Trees NYC initiative, Trees Not Trash has brought over 2000 trees to Bushwick.

596 Acres, by the nature of its mission to facilitate citizen use of publicly owned land, collaborates closely with both citizens and city agencies. Over the course of supporting several projects, the group has had the opportunity to improve relationships with city representatives through improved understanding and reciprocal action. As Edie

Stone of GreenThumb described in an interview, 596 Acres at first submitted unsuitable projects for assistance and overwhelmed the agency, not fully understanding its limitations or mission. Over time, the organization has improved its approach to the agency and supported its quest for increased city funding.[67] 596 Acres has also developed positive relationships with the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) and the non-profit organization GrowNYC.

The Seed Project, by its nature as an online forum, primarily requires continued website maintenance and publicity. Participants can submit as many photographs as they wish, but the project does not depend on continued engagement; if each participant uploaded only one photograph, the project would still survive. Related projects, however, do provide continued engagement with city agencies and city residents. Founder David Cohen has conducted workshops in New York City public schools and run street-fair booths for children in collaboration with the Department of Parks and Recreation. He is currently attempting to organize donations of overstock seed to public schools around the country, and shows how participation in an online environmental art project can connect to action in a real-world public forum.

Morning Glory Community Garden, by contrast, did not reach out to neighbors or city agencies, though the group welcomed any interest and embraced high school volunteers when they arrived. While the group developed a tenuous unofficial relationship with the Department of Sanitation, it never allied itself with any municipal entities well enough to have an advocate for its work. Morning Glory developed an antagonistic relationship with the Community Board that worked to its detriment in its

[67] Stone, discussion.

losing fight to retain the garden site. The group did, however, emerge with specific recommendations for a city protocol for the interim use of vacant lots.

Bed Stuy Meadow, as a one-time event, required the recruitment of volunteers but did not provide for ongoing engagement. The organizer, Deborah Fisher, learned through experience what she could have done differently to better engage her neighbors in the project: met with the Community Board, enlisted others to reach out to participants in person rather than exclusively finding volunteers online, avoided scheduling the event on a holiday weekend. As a result of this experience, she and a core group of volunteers continued to discuss potential uses for vacant lots and developed a business plan for a modular farming system, which they may further support by advocating city zoning changes to accommodate urban agriculture.

Getting Permission

In an interview, Laura Lawson asserted that that garden founders should always pursue permission to use the land, even if they have already started an unsanctioned garden, for the sake of participants even more so than the project itself: permission protects gardeners' investment of time, energy, and funds.[68] Sanctioned work affords a better opportunity to achieve long-term land tenure, particularly in cities where the high value and scarcity of land places development pressure on available lots. As a matter of pragmatism, it may be necessary in contemporary New York City to get permission for gardens to ensure their survival. In turn, the security that permission offers may encourage gardeners to participate in new projects. Unsanctioned work, on the other hand, can offer flexibility and agility that provide an opportunity to disrupt patterns of the

[68] Laura Lawson (Community gardening scholar; Professor and Chair, Department of Landscape Architecture at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey) in discussion with author, March 20, 2012.

perception and use of public land. The projects described above represent varying levels of sanction, and as such have experienced distinct advantages and drawbacks related to permission.

Morning Glory Community Garden suffered a short life due to its unsanctioned work on a lot that was ripe for development. 596 Acres, recognizing the reality of development pressures, seeks permission not necessarily in pursuit of permanence but simply for the ability to use public land, even temporarily, without interference or fear of criminal repercussions. As Paula Z. Segal noted in an interview, she works with members of marginalized communities who might be subject to arrest if noticed working on public land without permission[69] and thereby addresses an unseen but serious barrier to the ability of all communities to respond to local needs through innovative use of vacant land. Beyond legal concerns, however, 596 Acres aims to create a system that allows citizens to make use of public land rather than leaving vacant lots untended until the owner agencies are ready to use them. In this case, the development of systematic permission can smooth the way for future projects to take root more easily and successfully, even if their life spans are limited, thereby ensuring some level of protection for participants as well as the assurance that they will have the ability to start a new project should their current project site be redeveloped. This assurance in itself provides protection of participants' investment—learning and relationships can carry over to new projects.

Trees Not Trash founder Kate Gilliam, however, sees advantages to the agility afforded by guerrilla work, even if the tradeoff is impermanence and uncertainty. In addition to its sanctioned work, Trees Not Trash has applied a flexible approach to

[69] Segal, discussion.

neglected lots and leftover pockets of public land, tossing seed bombs or cultivating public green space without permission. Such projects require relatively little effort and make visible the potential for physical change. They offer a low-risk, low-effort means to break a negative perception of the neighborhood by outsiders and, for residents, to encourage new thoughts about how they might be able to shape their surroundings in pursuit of a particular goal.

While guerrilla gardening may still be rewarding for those willing to accept its impermanence, and permission may not be necessary for every project's success, ultimately participants must have the necessary information to develop a clear understanding of the potential outcomes of their investment in time, relationship building, equipment, and plants. In the absence of permission, information remains essential so participants can assess the risk as well as the long-term and short-term results of their efforts.

Advocacy

In their strongest incarnations, gardening projects become advocacy work. Not everybody has the time or inclination to learn how to navigate the system to get permission or supplies or funding to develop gardens. These projects assist and inspire others to make their own projects happen, and in the process collaborate with city agencies and private organizations. Even groups carrying out unsanctioned projects might work with official institutions—perhaps counter to expectations that guerrilla gardeners, in their defiance of rules, work against the establishment at all costs. Both sanctioned and unsanctioned projects can bridge the gap between local residents and local government, using municipal resources to achieve success.

To assist citizens in starting their own projects, 596 Acres provides information about available public land, offers guidance on securing permission to use vacant lots, and connects individuals interested in working on the same site. Founder Paula Z. Segal, while researching a vacant lot in her own neighborhood, discovered both the availability of information regarding public land and the importance of distributing that information, both to simplify the process for others and to assist marginalized communities to gain permission and thus engage safely in projects on public land.

These kinds of organizations help bridge the divide between citizens and city agencies, and may be effective in reconciling communication and resource issues by providing clearer information on process and resource limitations to citizens while assisting city agencies to understand and meet the needs of their constituents. Such advocacy work then distributes knowledge beyond the original physical site of its acquisition, extending the benefits of a given garden.

The projects studied range from artistic to political, personal to ideological, outside to inside the system of land ownership. They fall along a continuum of sanctioned and unsanctioned work and, to varying degrees of success, exercise strategies of engagement, permission, and advocacy to achieve their goals. Although the importance of permission depends on the context and objectives of a given project, guerrilla gardening offers real advantages: it is flexible, presents a low barrier to entry, disrupts patterns of thought, raises awareness of alternative options for action, and allows actors to learn from experience. These findings raise questions regarding whether and how cities should accommodate such efforts.

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List of Interviews

Scott Berzofsky
Co-founder, Participation Park
March 13, 2012 (Cambridge, MA)

David Cohen
Founder, The Seed Project
March 14, 2012 (phone)

Deborah Fisher
Founder, Bed Stuy Meadow
March 12, 2012 (phone)

Tessa Huxley
Executive director, Battery Park City Parks Commission
Former director, Green Guerillas (1981-5)
March 19, 2012 (phone)

Laura Lawson
Community gardening scholar
Professor and Chair, Department of Landscape Architecture; Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey
March 20, 2012 (phone)

Matt Lorenz
Early member, Trees Not Trash
March 23, 2012 (phone)

Aazam Otero
Co-founder, Morning Glory Community Garden
April 2, 2012 (phone)

Paula Z. Segal
Founder, 596 Acres
March 24, 2012 (Brooklyn, NY)

Madeleine Stern
Art teacher, VOICE Charter School
January 14, 2012 (Brooklyn, NY)

Edie Stone
Executive Director, GreenThumb
March 26, 2012 (New York, NY)

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