

**Few cities are** as desperately in need of transformation as New York. This became even more evident during the eight-year reign of Mayor Rudolph 'zero tolerance' Giuliani, who rigorously applied neoliberal principles to the city. He slashed university funding, criminalized the homeless, gentrified neighbourhoods faster than eviction notices could be delivered, and waged a concerted campaign against the urban poor's last bastion against hunger and misery: their colourful and productive gardens, vehicles for social organizing, cultural renaissance, ecological recovery, and spiritual regeneration.

For politicians, city planners, landowners and developers alike, food growing as a land use is never going to take priority over housing developments, shopping centres, parking lots and hotels. After all, food can never hope to compete with this form of 'development' in terms of financial returns. By cultivating unused derelict land without consent of local authorities and other landowners we present a positive demonstration of community initiative and resistance to the set of priorities that sees our local environment as just another tradable commodity.

This is why illicit, or 'guerrilla' gardening is not just about planting vegetables in cities and towns, nor limited to one-off, symbolic stunts, such as planting in locations like Parliament Square, or the White House lawn. At its deepest level, gardening is a way of reconnecting people to land, teaching children that carrots come from the earth, not the supermarket; it's a way of reminding us of our incredible power to plant seeds and create sustenance autonomously, to experiment, to build connections with other gardeners which cross generations and borders. It's remembering that we also can be pollinators, fusing ideas together to make new ones, collecting and broadcasting seeds and shared visions.

## Cultivating Hope: the community gardens of New York City

by Brad Will

*"Here's a story that you may not understand,  
but the parking lots will crack and bloom again.  
There's a world beneath the pavement that will never end.  
Seeds are lying dormant, they will never end."  
– songwriter Dana Lyons, "Willy Says"*

In New York City in the 1970s, while the white flight flew and the city coffers choked up blood, a procession of torched buildings tumbled down, block after block, at the same time that firehouses were closed, trash services cut off, police retreated. The public face of NYC hung its head and caved in. These rubble-strewn lots were magnets for trash, rats, prostitution, drug dealing, dirty needles, hepatitis. The city's only response was to spend thousands on fences. But then, something really amazing happened. Realizing the government was not interested in helping them, people took back their neighbourhoods, one lot at a time. They cultivated unique community greenscapes. They brought their homes with them: from the rural south to Harlem; from Puerto Rico to the Lower East Side; from Jamaica to East New York; from the Dominican Republic to the South Bronx. They disregarded property rights and did what was right for their neighbours. The story of the community gardens is thousands of stories. I can tell a few.

I moved to the big shitty as Giuliani-time kicked in. Hard times for the fiscally disinclined. Hardest of all for communities of colour. Land under your feet grew more expensive by the minute – they still call it real estate, even under a garden. Down at the 5th Street squat, we cleared out the adjacent lot of rubble, junk carts, piss bottles, and rot. We started a green space. The neighbourhood kids ran wild between the fragile beds. The nuns from the Cabrini old folks home came across the street to praise our goodly green emergence. The year before they were lobbying for our eviction. We turned the ghost fragments of rubble into elaborate brick walkways and stone-raised beds. I heard the tale of the cobblestones, cut in debtors' prison in England, used as ballast for the rough sea, and dumped on the docks in exchange for old growth white pines. They became streets, then were ripped up and poured black. We tried to set them right. Getting your hands in the soil is such a simple and human thing. You are moving contrary to the concrete.

A crew of us went out to the Liz Christy garden for the Green Guerrilla annual plant give-away. In the 1970s, the

Green Guerrillas formed a band of night-time raiders, kick-starting the gardening movement with bolt cutters, trainings on appropriate trespass tactics, 'seed bombs', direct support. Natural allies. We cleaned house: a rickety wheelbarrow, shovels, dozens of plants, and a compost bin. It took three trips to haul it away. We planted a row of thorny bushes whose berries would attract birds and doubled as security. We planted a pear tree for sweet Sammy the plumber who passed away. Never got to see it come to fruit.

When they came for our building there weren't any eviction papers, and they came with a wrecking crane. I snuck inside, felt the rumble when the ball pierced the wall. I was alone. From the roof I watched them dump a chunk of my home on my garden. Everyone screaming from behind police lines. When it was all over: a rubble heap. And later, it returned to a junkie's trash den.

I was feeling displaced. The good people at Chico Mendez Mural garden wanted to fight. I shared some Earth First! blockade techniques. It was a brand new confrontational stance for the gardeners. It became Fort

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Mourning, also known as Thanksgiving, Native Americans converge in Plymouth, Massachusetts and bury Plymouth Rock to protest against the celebration of genocide.

>> **December** >> The culmination of a year-long campaign against GMOs by German eco-anarchists results in prevention of one third of all test sites nationwide being sown, and the sabotage of many more.

Squatted protest camps sprout throughout the nations' fields; the squatters experience unprecedented support from inhabitants of the surrounding villages and small towns. People from all ages and social groups give money, bring food, and live there for days or weeks at a time. One camp produces its own electricity with donated solar panels from a local company. Prior to the occupations of many of the plots, a broad coalition of

activists and local citizens collected thousands of signatures in order to prevent the experiment.

>> **December 16** >> Two Sanyo Universal Electric PLC buildings are torched by Thai workers after wage negotiations break down, marking a break in Thailand's record of relatively harmonious labour negotiations. Labour disputes have more than doubled since 1991, and strikes and lockouts are becoming more confrontational.

Chico. Barricades went up. We had pre-dawn bike reconnaissance, patrolling for police mobilizations. Squatters from the Tompkins Square riot days dropped by. The city got nervous.

Chico Mendez Mural garden was a miracle. Neighbours dug in next to the most notorious crack house in the city – a tenement fortress dubbed ‘The Rock’. The kids with negligible parents were almost adopted by Agi, the garden saint. They didn’t understand when Don Garcia from Little Puerto Rico garden walked up to me on the stoop of a friend’s squat and offered to buy us beer. The next day I was in his beautiful garden where the sound of merengue charged the cool night air. This small liberated piece of land brought us together; I never thought I could set foot there, and I was welcomed as an honoured guest.

The Angels’ garden had a little *casita* with old men playing dominos with a bottle of rum. Maria’s garden had an intricate *nyuyorican* (Puerto Rican New Yorker) shrine. A rooster called me as I biked past at the crack of dawn. All were destroyed one day before New Year’s, 1999, when most were out of town. They were turned into government subsidized condos. The developer, Donald Capoccia, showed up as the bulldozer finished off lovely Chico. About a dozen community members lunged with a volley of spit. The police turned the other way.

Rapid response. Activists chained themselves across a rush hour street in front of the Manhattan Institute, the right-wing think tank that was the Dr Frankenstein behind the Giuliani monster and had shaped the neoliberal policy

sweeping the city. NAFTA for the South Bronx, bringing all of the five boroughs under the thumb of Wall Street wizards, making nothing out of nothing and the bubble was yet to burst. People were making the connections.

It was a non-profit shell game. They called them “blighted vacant lots”. Public-private partnership. And the spin was that they would be low-income housing, even though only 20 per cent were lower than market rate, and only for ten years. After that they were sitting pretty. Gentrify your portfolio. And it is never enough.

Giuliani went for the jugular. No more pretence of ‘affordable’ anything: “This is a free-market economy – welcome to the era after communism.” One hundred and nineteen gardens going to the auction block. This was an act of war.

### **More Gardens!**

*“Even in this city where the shadows seem victorious,  
Sunflowers stand tall and put them all to shame.”*

– **songwriter Casey Neil, ‘Emma’s Garden’**

In a green space between the towering dark projects in the South Bronx, the More Gardens! Coalition was formed. Gardeners, squatters, and young activists changed the language of the struggle. Sharing food cooked over an open fire, we strategized a fresh mix of direct action (with puppets) and lobbying with love for the land.

The smell of garlic, greens, and tomatillos in an old squat. A gang of friends making puppets by candlelight. Standing in a circle for the solstice. We were a new

communication of dissent. Proactive element – not only protection, but extension of green space. We fought before the execution was imminent. We brought the gardeners together to decide for themselves what to do.

Talking democracy while walking to the hearings at City Hall. Whole classrooms coming downtown to tell the truth. We came dressed as flowers and bugs. My testimony was a song. Went to the gardeners on their block to gather information for the court battle. Helped get the court actions moving. Sweet escalation. I stole a kiss in the paddy wagon leaving city hall, and when they lined us up, boys versus girls, we did the hokey-pokey at the station house. The cops were impressed.

Training folks to sit down and get busted for the first time. I got hauled away with granny gardeners and a preacher. And still that day was coming. We came at them from all sides. Actions in their offices, up in a tree, down in their courthouse with a lawyer playing for real. One sister compiled all the information needed for a court challenge against the auction and, dressed like a sunflower, delivered it to the State Attorney General Eliot

Spitzer in Albany.

I stumbled out of jail, bleary-eyed at dawn, and stumbled to another rally to support the legal battle at the federal courthouse. They raised the money for my fine on the spot. Just days to go. Right down to the wire with many interesting plans for the auction and a photo finish. The mayor conceded defeat. May 1999. Every garden on the auction protected. He should have known better.

### **El Jardín de la Esperanza**

There is a myth in Puerto Rico. A monster approaches the forest intending to destroy it. The tiny thumbnail-sized *coquí* tree frog steps up, and is able to scare away the monster with the loudness of its voice. This was the perfect analogy for a community facing off against bulldozers.

Alicia Torres, a saintly grandma, came from the embattled island of Vieques, Puerto Rico and started *El Jardín de la Esperanza* (The Garden of Hope) in 1977. Across the street there was a line down the block for the dope shop for years. It took the Drug Enforcement Agency with machine guns to put an end to it. But the Torres family just kept digging,

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>> **December 23** >> Subcomandante Marcos receives a used pipe in the mail from Denmark. A group of activists occupying the Parliament building and the office of the Minister of Foreign Relations took the pipe from the Minister's desk and mailed it to the mountains of the Mexican southeast.

>> **December 26-29** >> The largest series of strikes and walkouts in South Korean history, involving

hundreds of thousands of workers, takes place to protest against new labour legislation that allows companies to lay off and fire workers more easily and to avoid paying overtime in a more flexible work system.



>> **January** >> South Korea is rocked by a three week wave of massive general strikes – the largest in the country's history – as workers protest new casualization

laws. The strikes costs \$3 billion in lost production. The government backs down and withdraws the new laws.  
>> **February** >> A leaked copy of the draft Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) text – secretly being negotiated at the 'rich-man's club', the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) – is posted onto the internet. Up to this point negotiations are conducted in relative isolation – the revelation

clearing out their lot and building up a *casita* through it all. They grew medicinal plants for healing teas. A 22 year old rose bush, and lots of changes in the 'hood. But there was a plan to destroy hope.

Doña Alicia talked to the plants and prayed for them. She even prayed for the developer, that he would have a change of heart. With the go-ahead from Doña Alicia, we started a full time encampment. We built a giant *coquí* guardian in the front of the garden, with room inside for three to sleep, raised up ten feet with window watchtower eyes and concrete-sealed lock-boxes. In the back of the garden rose a twenty-six foot sunflower made of steel with a lock-box on top, nested between the petals, which read: "*Esperanza/Hope, Lindo/Beauty, Comunidad/Community, Oxygeno/Oxygen, Comida/Food.*"

We recycled Christmas trees to feed the fire and pitched tents to stay warm as winter drove in hard. They always come in winter. Our day in court had come, and Giuliani sent in his troops to steal it. We had 12 hours notice. Over 100 people gathered. We filled the lock-downs on the fence and buried in the ground. We sang to gather strength. Dawn came quick, with the special Emergency Service *gestapo* cutting open the front fence. Sudden surge of police. Yelling, scrambling, friends dragged away. Cold wet smother from the fire. Soon the taste of burning steel close to my lips, and a burn on my wrist. I asked the cop if he was going to tell his kids what he did today. He didn't answer. On the other side of town, the State Attorney General was arguing a case that would put a temporary

restraining order (TRO) on the destruction of any garden in the city. We held on to the ground. The TRO came 40 minutes too late. But it protected all of the gardens in the city, for the time being. When asked why he took the case Spitzer said, "A sunflower asked me to."

In Washington DC, we inspired actions during the World Bank meetings. The A16 Guerilla Gardening Collective hit the streets armed with seedlings and kale seeds. These anarchists didn't come to break windows, they came to break the ground.

Mayday 2000. The kids in NYC Reclaim the Streets marched in solidarity with immigrant workers, then broke off and beelined it for a neglected spot by the East River, where they pulled the chain and cleaned and cleared and got the green rolling with hundreds of NYPD watching. The only thing we smashed was a *piñata* in the shape of a bulldozer. Inside were seeds I had saved from destroyed gardens. They scattered on the opened ground.

### **Under your feet**

A quiet moment in Melrose neighbourhood of the South Bronx. It is Luis' fourth garden, *Cabo Rojo*. This is one of the poorest congressional districts in the US – they can't afford to leave their job for a week, let alone summer in the Hamptons. The neighbourhood has the highest rate of asthma in the country. The gardeners saved their blocks from blight but they don't get awards for all their hard work – they don't even get notice of demolition. These are the real heroes of the city.

A shock wave. An endless cloud of dust. The financial district burning for months. A new tourist attraction downtown. A new billionaire mayor. A cold winter by the wood stove in the *Cabo Rojo* encampment. I remember the smell of squash baking in the coals. The garden was destroyed, another death in the family. I watched the kids walking home from school stop in horror. The work crew clearing out the garden was doing 'community service' to pay off fines owed the courts.

At the time of this writing [2002] the TRO is about to be lifted. Either the city will sell out half of the gardens to a land trust, or city council legislation will establish a process for community boards to decide their fate one by one. A big shift is under way, and 200 plus gardens definitely will be put at risk. But one thing is certain: whatever deals they try to swing, people will fight for the land. Now we are connected.

I shared a meal with the *Movimento Sem Terra* in the countryside of Brazil. I slept with eco-warriors in the high canopy of an old growth forest. I joined in a sweat lodge at an occupation with the American Indian Movement. I sat in

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sparks off a world-wide campaign, which scuppers the agreement before it can pass.

>> **February-May** >> In Thailand, a coalition of 20,000 disenfranchised farmers, refugees of dam flooding, and other rural people from the Assembly of the Poor stage a 99-day protest camp in front of Government House in Bangkok.

>> **February 5** >> IMF restructuring in Ecuador forces

overnight price rises of electricity (500 per cent), gas (340 per cent) and telephone charges (700 per cent), among others. A general strike brings over two million people into the streets under the slogan, "No one stays home." Leaflets circulating before the event declare: "We invite all Ecuadorians to the giant going-away party for [President] Bucaram... This event will take place in the country's plaza and streets... Dress

a circle and decided together with my friends that we would not obey. Luis began his fifth garden. We are dreaming the same dream.

The humble story of stones returning to the ground. A family growing their food, and growing with their food. This is a quiet revolution. The soil churns. And lead turns to gold in a sunflower. Simple alchemy of days. Because there is no such thing as 'nature'. It is always under your feet.

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**Resources:**

» **Coalition of New York community garden activists:** [www.moregardens.org](http://www.moregardens.org)

» **Network protecting biodiversity and creating local food security:** <http://primalseeds.nologic.org/>

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informally. The entrance fee is a street barricade, a burning tyre, and the will to save the country's dignity." President Bucaram flees and is dismissed by Congress two days later.

>> **March 9** >> In Glasgow, Scotland over 50 people occupy the City Council chambers for 19 hours, in an attempt to prevent the Council from announcing nearly \$131 million worth of cuts, 1,500 redundancies, the