



January 2014

Tending the Flowers, Cultivating Community: Gardening on New York City Public Housing Sites

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Recommended Citation

Sepanski, Lauren FCRH '12 (2014) "Tending the Flowers, Cultivating Community: Gardening on New York City Public Housing Sites," *The Fordham Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.
Available at: <https://fordham.bepress.com/furj/vol2/iss1/7>

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Lauren Sepanski, FCRH '12

Tending the Flowers, Cultivating Community

Gardening on New York City Public Housing Sites

Introduction

Founded in 1934, The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) is the nation's oldest and largest public housing agency. Nearly half a million people live in NYCHA's 334 housing developments located throughout the five boroughs. If a NYCHA resident wants to garden, he or she may submit a garden application to his or her development's management office and begin to garden in a place approved by the development's manager. Some developments have preordained places for their residents to garden, complete with fences. In other developments, residents simply choose a place on the development's grounds, such as a part of a lawn close to their apartment, and begin to garden. NYCHA will reimburse the gardener for up to \$40 of his or her gardening expenses and will also provide seeds, bulbs, starter plants, compost, and some technical assistance. NYCHA is supportive of resident gardening because it is an economically efficient means of grounds beautification, as well as being environmentally beneficial and connected to a decrease in crime and vandalism on development grounds (Bennaton, 2009; Lewis, 1988). Currently, there are over 600 public housing residents gardening on NYCHA grounds (Bennaton, 2009). The table below offers basic information on different types of gardens in New York City.

Table 1. *Types of Gardens in New York City*

	Community Gardens	Home Gardens	NYCHA Resident Gardens
Who gardens?	Maintained by a collaborative community group	Maintained by an individual	Maintained by an individual
Where?	On community grounds	On private property	On community grounds
Why?	Shared goal for benefit of community	Individual and household needs	?

While working part-time in NYCHA's downtown office for the past two years, I received many calls from resident gardeners seeking help for the problems they were experiencing with their gardens: gardens were vandalized, plants were stolen, and requested flowers were not received. Hearing how much of a struggle it was to plant and maintain gardens on development grounds made me wonder why these individuals continued to garden.

Methods

To answer this question, I spent the summer of 2011 conducting ethnographic research at three different NYCHA sites in New York City, focusing on the activities of five gardeners. All of the gardeners I spent time with were women (as are most NYCHA gardeners), ranging from 30 to 90 years old, none of whom had higher than a high school education. Julia (50 years old) is of

Puerto Rican and Italian descent, Maria (30) is Dominican, and Gloria (79) is Puerto Rican. All three were born and raised in the New York City area and had no prior knowledge of gardening before they began gardening on NYCHA grounds. Josephine (60) and Sarah (90), on the other hand, are African-American and lived as children on farms in the rural South where they had participated in farming and gardening before moving to New York City as teenagers.*

The Garden as Personal Space for Creative Self-Expression

In *Taste for Gardening: Classed and Gendered Practices* (2008), Lisa Taylor argues that there are intrinsic differences in the processes and goals of gardening for the middle and working classes; these, Taylor argues, are the direct result of class differences. One particularly striking point that Taylor makes equates working-class gardening with providing a feeling and expression of self-worth. Taylor writes that by keeping a "tidy" garden, members of the working class are able to "refuse pejorative associations about being working-class and to ensure that others recognize their respectability" (p. 117). Taylor's finding is in keeping with what my gardeners experienced. When I asked why Julia thinks more people do not garden, she said, "It's a lot easier to sit on the couch all day and watch novelas." She viewed herself as different from residents who did not garden, and wanted to distance herself from the negative stereotype of lower-class people as lazy and unproductive. However, she also resented that other residents might think of her as different or that she was trying to show she was better by gardening. Julia told me that one time she was protecting her daughter's friend from her boyfriend's abusive mother, and the mother shouted at Julia, "You just think you're special because you have a garden." Julia was angered, hurt, and baffled by that accusation. For her—and for other gardeners as well—the purpose of gardening is not to show other housing residents that they are superior; rather, gardening serves as both a way of defying stereotypes and a form of self-expression.

Just as social class is important to the community garden experience, so too is gender. The garden in Western culture is traditionally considered a "private, domestic, feminine space" because of its proximity to the home, as opposed to the "male sphere of waged work and politics" (Rose, 1993, p. 18). Gardening is indeed a gendered leisure activity. Raisborough and Bhatti (2007) argue that although much feminist analysis of leisure reads resistance as "a counter to power relations that aim to maintain, reproduce, or repackage oppressive gender relations," empowerment does not necessarily come from resistance; it can also "stem from an active repositioning to contextualized gender-norms that escapes an

Thanks to the gardeners who allowed me to work with them and to share their gardening lives in the summer of 2011. My thanks also go to Professors E. Doyle McCarthy, Oneka LaBennett, and Julie Kim for their guidance and encouragement on this project and paper. I would also like to acknowledge the FCRH Undergraduate Research Grant Program for the funding which made my research possible.

*All gardener names have been changed to maintain anonymity.

easy categorization as resisting or reproducing gender relations” (p. 460-461). Furthermore, in their analysis of a woman’s written autobiography as a gardener, they argue:

[the gardener’s] story of creative positioning is also one of her empowerment. The garden becomes a site and source of her empowered agency as demonstrated through self-expression; rewards of commitment and discipline; pleasure; control of space and time and, importantly, a social recognition as she takes up her position to the socially intelligible identities of gardener, wife, mother and neighbor (Rainsborough & Bhatti, 2007, p. 473).

In this way, the NYCHA women gardeners embrace the domestic act of gardening while they are also empowered by it. Julia, a mother of ten, admits to being “the domestic type.” At the same time, however, she values her time in the garden as a way to escape

plants, but also taking care of the self, and others” (p. 69-70). Although this usually presents itself as “home-making” (p. 69), as Bhatti is referring to home gardens, what happens when the “care and concern” (p. 70) generated by gardening takes place in a public setting? Their “care and concern,” then, does not flow into the adjacent home, but is directed toward the surrounding community. The resident gardeners often take it upon themselves to better the community by cleaning up public spaces beyond their gardens, holding special events on development grounds for their residents, and joining community improvement organizations.

Josephine told me that she started gardening to “stay out of the way”—she was raising “too much trouble” being on community boards and tenant organizations. However, she tends to her gar-



(clockwise, from above left) Julia’s vegetable garden (she also has a large flower garden, similarly enclosed); Gloria’s flower garden; Josephine’s flower garden; Sarah’s vegetable garden. Photos used with permission of photographer Lloyd Carter, NYCHA.



her family and have some peaceful time alone. Maria told me that, since she started gardening, she loves to spend time in her garden, but her family started complaining that she spends too much time there and not enough time tending to them and their needs. Thus, Julia and Maria’s gardens, while being feminine, domestic spaces, serve as an alternative option to disempowering situations.

The Garden as Location within Public Sphere

The resident gardeners have come to embrace their public position. It seems that for them, being comfortable enough to garden on public grounds also gave them confidence to be community leaders, and vice versa. Bhatti and colleagues (2009) claim that “in ‘doing gardening’ gardeners are not just taking care of their

den all day, from daybreak until the afternoon, and to everyone that passes by she shouts out, “Hi darlin’!” and has a brief conversation before continuing with her hoeing, weeding, and watering. In this way she stays on top of the local news and gossip while also serving as a watchdog and messenger for her community. The very first day I met her, the first words out of her mouth were, “There was a predator in my building.” She then spent the rest of the day in her garden warning all the women and girls who passed by to be extra careful.

Julia, who claims that her garden is “not a community garden,” still uses her garden as a space through which she can benefit the community. For example, when she is watering her garden,

sometimes she will move beyond its fence and spray down the playground area, clearing away the cigarette butts and bottle caps so that “the kids will have a clean place to play.” She reprimands people for smoking marijuana by the development’s playground and has confronted children for harassing passing drivers. Without the access to her garden, she would not have been able to do that. Indeed, the gardens play a central role in the gardeners’ ability to help and care for their community.

Conclusion

It could be said that the gardeners consider their work a source of beauty, relaxation, exercise, food production, and self-worth. On a deeper level, the gardens are places of the gardeners’ own personal expression as they position themselves within a society full of expectations and stereotypes regarding class and gender. In gardening, they have a place for relaxation and solitude, and as such it is an “escape” from their daily lives as mothers and nurturers—lives that allow very little time spent for themselves. While they are sources of beauty, exercise, and accomplishment, resident gardens also allow their keepers to be active and productive, and to create a beautiful place, thus allowing them to defy negative stereotypes of class and gender. How they choose to garden is linked to how they see themselves as people, and this statement of identity is made even more powerful as they make it on public grounds. Regardless of whether they garden for themselves or for the community, it is clear that there is a responsibility the gardeners feel to take care of their community, generated by and/or expressed in their gardening on community grounds. In that way, their gardens on community grounds are invaluable places to them, not only as places for themselves but also as self-designed outlets for community involvement and improvement. By gardening on NYHCA grounds, they are cultivating community.

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