

## **The New York Community Gardens as Seen by a Berlin Activist**

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Dear Community Gardeners,

What have I learned from the New York community gardens as a Berliner? They show us, in an exemplary fashion, how a crisis can turn into an opportunity. In order to understand this, we must first see the full extent of the structural crisis in our cities. Since the Berlin wall came down in 1989, we have had budget cuts everywhere and the privatization of public institutions, of what some have called 'the commons'. This evolution, called today globalization, has not been confined to the global South, it started simultaneously in the poor districts of rich North American cities. Already 30 years ago Harlem and East New York began to experience a process of unequal development. This process has been challenged since in the early 1990s, culminating in the large protests in 1999 in Seattle against the World Trade Organization.

The well-known community garden activist Karl Linn, who died a year and a half ago, was active in three gardens in Berkeley during his last twenty years. But he also worked to anchor the local community gardens into the city's urban planning scheme. Together with his friend Carl Anthony he created the Urban Habitat Program for the Bay Area. This was visionary. Community gardens focus on green plants, earth and water, air. But they are first of all a thoroughly urban phenomenon.

The background of the exploding phenomenon of community gardens in North America and of the new problems we face today in our societies is the financial misery of the cities, making it more and more difficult for them to provide for their citizens. The main reason for this is that the North-American tax system passes on the burden of an economic downturn to the municipalities. Growing industrial unemployment since the 1970s has therefore especially resulted in urban decay. In 1975 the global city of New York was facing bankruptcy. The administration in Washington, dominated by the upper middle-class from suburbs and medium-sized cities, refused to help. The harsh "structural programs" that were then imposed on the unloved metropolis were in fact not different from those imposed on South America since the 1970's and on indebted developing countries worldwide since the early 1980's.

This means that economic growth must now come at the expense of the caretaking efforts of the municipality, through the reduction of social benefits and of social work, the privatization of public services and the sale of public property. The result is the growing misery of the needy. This misery is also provoked by rising prices that are now having an impact on the middle-classes as well. In the end, only a very small minority profits from so called "economic recovery", the famous growth without jobs.

The gap between rich and poor is widening and more and more people are being pushed into the informal sector. The effective "provider" in the South, as well as in the Eastern bloc before the wall came down, was typically a sort of underground economy, the shadow economy to the official one. This is now more and more true for the rich North as well, especially for the United States and its large cities.

At the brink of bankruptcy, the city of New York was compelled to collaborate with private investors and to find potential big taxpayers. New York became a pioneer in the sad story of the exclusion of the poor and of public subsidizing of private investors – in the interest of real estate speculators.

Since that period, New York's policies have been dictated by an advisory board dominated by bankers. This board was forced on Democratic Mayor Ed Koch in 1975 in order to rescue the city's finances. This advisory board recommended the withdrawal of the city from a long list of social programs and indeed from entire districts that were then deliberately left to decay.<sup>1</sup> For example in East New York, the administration stopped fixing the roads and planting trees. Public property was not maintained and garbage was left on the streets. In this way "no man's lands" were created, open to later large-scale speculation - as the late New Yorker city planner Walter Thabit showed in his study on East New York.<sup>2</sup>

That is one side of the story. But these sorts of heavy crises bring new opportunities as well. A municipality that can no longer afford to sustain itself must honor and support the efforts of citizens to help themselves. If it can do nothing against the shrinking process of the city, it is in the city's own interest to acknowledge the growing willingness of citizens to create, for example, gardens on empty lots.

Thus even a municipality as large as New York City pragmatically adopted a sort of subsistence perspective of its own. It was a question of daily survival. This self-subsistence perspective found favor within the administration because this new kind of self-help was seen as preventing urban decay and related criminality. The mayors of the boroughs realized the ability of community gardens to promote social peace, since they provide an excellent protection against attacks and violence, and they create a new feeling of safety for the people, they offer a healing process for both body and soul.

The policy of the administration regarding community gardens remains unfortunately ambivalent. Several interest groups, as well as short-term, medium-term and long-term interests compete with each other. This becomes apparent when community gardens are supported in one case while being threatened elsewhere. Self-initiative and self-help remain welcome in parts of the city no one is economically interested in. But the speculators appear on the scene again as soon as people have succeeded substantially in improving their neighborhood.

The need to find meaningful uses for vacant lots, plus people and the shrinking incomes while costs exploded, especially in the housing sector, the rents, led to the commitment of the authorities to an expansion of urban farming in Philadelphia, Boston, Detroit, Chicago and many other urban areas and towns all over. The aim was and still is to turn vacant lots into open green spaces with fresh air, sunlight and shade and the twitter of birds.

New York City created since 1975 the "Open Space Greening" and the "Plant a Lot" Programs, two self-greening programs of the "Council on the Environment", to support community gardens. The Council is still financed by sponsoring today, but stands directly under the authority of the mayor. Liz Christy, the founder of the first community garden in New York, was chosen as the first head of the new advisory board.

The Council on the Environment still supports the greening of new vacant lots, in addition to fighting waste proliferation and promoting environmental education and new farmers' markets. Another key organization in New York City, "Operation Green Thumb", was founded shortly afterwards in 1978. Its main task was to help with the creation of new community gardens and with communication between gardeners and the city. Green Thumb has belonged since 1995 to the Parks and Recreation Administration. Its salaries are paid for out of the federal budget. (The fact that Edie Stone is today the fifth director of this little semi-administration shows how difficult and potentially conflictual its tasks are.)

By "adopting" Green Thumb into City Hall, federal and local governments have acknowledged that community gardeners improve the urban environment for everybody, not just for themselves. It is a proven fact that gardeners and their supporters contribute to healthier living

<sup>1</sup> See William Sites, *Remaking New York - Primitive Globalization and the Politics of Urban Community*, Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Thabit, *How East New York Became a Ghetto*, New York University Press, New York and London 2003

conditions.<sup>3</sup> Small green spaces are enough to reduce pollution from car exhaust, offer pleasure, healthy work and rest for all. Urban green reduces stress, trees and bushes reduce noise and are refreshing in the hot summer. Community gardens are an important part of the environmental movement worldwide, probably one of its most effective components, even if they have enjoyed little notice so far. They are a landmark on the way to a sustainable environmental policy in the sense of the Rio de Janeiro 1992 Agenda 21 agreement. There municipalities committed themselves to contribute to the reduction of greenhouse gases that are apparently responsible for global warming and for the long droughts that increasingly threaten small farmers in the South.

This success would not have been possible without a struggle and without the permanent readiness to defend the community gardens. A few idealists, nearly two-thirds of them women and today probably most of them immigrants and people of color, have kept working in the gardens during all these years. Many have also devoted much of their time to work in the necessary citizens' initiatives, mostly as volunteers.

New York City Hall: "11 000 vacant lots – only 800 community gardens" read posters at protest rallies that took place between 1998 and 2002 against the policies of Mayor Giuliani. Of all these lots, those 800 with gardens were to be sold to investors! The plots all belonged to the city. They had had houses on them until the owners could not afford the taxes any more.

The mayor had ordered that the lots with community gardens should be sold, until the protests resulted in a ruling by the Attorney General prohibiting the destruction of more gardens without an environmental assessment. This was only a respite for all the gardens in the 10 million city, so a newly created Garden Coalition managed to raise a full \$ 4.2 million in a short period, among others \$1.2 million from actress Bette Midler. This money saved 114 gardens in the last minute during May 1999. Many of the other gardens have been saved since by other means.

Community neighborhood gardens have appeared everywhere in North America, just like in New York City, in the last 30 years, run by smaller or larger groups of neighbours. Whereas the first gardens were often the achievements of single "artists and activists", as soon as they had to be defended larger groups became involved. The gardens were on lots that were originally individually owned but that had stopped being profitable due to rising costs and real-estate taxes. (One might ask: have one-family houses become politically undesirable? Did making one-family properties impossible correspond to the "war against subsistence", as Ivan Illich called it, that was beginning in the developing countries?) If the owner could not or did not want to pay taxes, the lot became public property after three years. Abandoned houses were regularly torched during the early 1970s, especially in 1973, in a sort of worldwide wave of attempts at insurance fraud. The city had to clear away the wreckage. The lots became informal garbage dumps, especially in those areas where the municipality had more or less stopped cleaning the streets. Residents were taking revenge for their neglect by the ruling majority.

A few people, artists and activists, students, young people who had moved to the desolate areas, began to remove the garbage from a few lots and to cultivate them, first around Tompkins Square in Lower Manhattan. It all began in the Lower East Side, which today has the highest density of community gardens. The gardens transformed the area into a highly attractive, charming neighborhood, that would soon be rediscovered by speculators and housing associations.<sup>4</sup>

This is a threat to the gardens. „Reclaim the commons“, said the earlier quoted landscape architect and community gardener Karl Linn again and again.<sup>5</sup> The fight for socially and ecologically sustainable land use is again at the top of the agenda of world politics, even if the rich countries pretend to ignore the fact. Neighborhood gardeners must continually defend their lots against the greed of investors and developers. They must keep reminding the "city elders"

<sup>3</sup> see Howard-Yana Shapiro, John Harrisson, Eds., *Gardening for the Future of the Earth*, New York/Toronto/London/Sydney/Auckland: Bantam 2000

<sup>4</sup> *Avant Gardening, Ecological Struggle in the City and the World*, ed. by Peter Lamborn Wilson & Bill Weinberg, Brooklyn NY: Autonomedia 1999

<sup>5</sup> Karl Linn, *Reclaiming the Sacred Commons*, in: *New Village*, Vol. 1999, No. 1, 45

that all appeals to serve the community are useless if the outcomes of that work are arbitrarily sacrificed to land and real estate speculation. Urban peace requires that the exemplary work of those who have transformed their neighborhoods into green oases be appreciated and respected.

“Reclaim the commons!”, “roll up your sleeves and question land ownership!” This is emerging as a focus of discussion for community gardeners in North America and elsewhere in the world. No panel in the world food organization FAO would deny that land reforms are the solution to the problem of hunger in the Third World. But the poor need vacant areas to grow their food even in the rich cities of North America. Many of them receive no social benefits after years of unemployment, whereas others have no rights at all.

These people need to grow their own food. They need to have some open spaces near their homes. Active groups of retirees, such as those I met in East New York, grow food for local soup kitchens. Urban farming as self-help and voluntary work, as an answer in times of growing unemployment, needs land. The successful sustainable rooftop movements can't meet the growing demand for gardening alone. The municipalities must put vacant land at the disposal of those who are interested and needy. When this happens, it happens mostly on a temporary basis, as a loan discontinued as soon as an investor comes in sight. Municipalities facing a decision will most often throw lush vegetable and community gardens functioning as little urban oases as prey to real estate predators.

Reclaiming the commons refers to the municipal grasslands and woods where the members of village communities used to raise their cattle and grow their food, in Europe as well. “Absolute ownership” of land became a reality in Europe with the reintroduction of Roman Law during Early Modern Times. Until then, municipal meadows and fields were held in common, especially in villages but also in towns. In England, in East Prussia, in South and North America large estates concentrated in a few hands appeared as a result of the privatization of land. This created land speculation, which pushed the cost of land upwards until farming was made generally speaking hardly “profitable”. New forms of territorial conflict have appeared that were previously unknown in history. They pit the necessity of producing food on farmland against the speculative urge to cover all available land with real estate construction.<sup>6</sup> The speculators ignore that we are human beings of blood and flesh. Community gardens in North America and the wave of urban farming all over the world raise again with vigour the issue of the missing debate on land reform. The time may have come again to remember the Indian saying: “Only when the last tree has been felled will people recognize that you cannot eat money.”

Thank you for your attention.

Some related websites:

<http://www.cityfarmers.org>  
<http://userpage.fu-berlin.de/~garten/>  
<http://www.greenguerillas.org>  
<http://www.urbanacker.net>  
<http://www.lizchristygarden.org>  
<http://www.berlin-gleisdreieck.de>

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<sup>6</sup> The Homestead Act, that had been called for by the Free Land Party in the US since 1848 and edicted 1862 at the cost of the native nations, resulted in land distribution for subsistence purposes. Everyone cultivating his land could claim ownership. A similar law has now been renewed in Brasil more than 20 years ago, legalizing the occupation by landless people of unused land. The American Henry George became famous in the second half of the 19th century after publishing Progress and Poverty, a book about the rise of poverty in the midst of an increasingly affluent society. The book was translated in many languages. George saw rents as the cause for all poverty including urban poverty, and proposed a tax on the rents to eliminate private profit from land ownership. His conferences in England triggered the creation of several land reform societies. In 1870, the Land Tenure Association of the socialist John Stuart Mill demanded in addition public ownership of all land.

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