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In CHARLESTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS, on the far side of the famous Revolutionary battleground, on the back slope next to the site of the former elevated railway terminal, the city streets converge into an industrial crossroads. Here still stands the giant Schrafft's candy factory, now awaiting new tenants, and although weeds have grown up on the traffic rotary and have overrun many vacant properties nearby, this intersection, Sullivan Square, remains an industrial thoroughfare for the trucks and business of Boston harbor. In one of the triangles formed by the convergence of Medford and Bunker Hill streets, the Boston Redevelopment Authority seized a large parcel of land, about two acres, and tore down the nest of old houses that formerly had crowded the site. For years thereafter the property stood vacant, gathering trash, weeds, and rats. No private purchaser for the cleared land appeared to renew the property. House restoration and construction in Charlestown was taking place on the other side of the hill, where attractive old houses and a historic aura still lingered.

In the spring of 1976 a newcomer to Charlestown, Nina Gomez Ibanez began to garden on this vacant lot. Ms. Ibanez was a woman of suburban gardening experience who had no land next to her apartment on Concord Street. She enlisted as her gardening partner James Hall, a Polaroid employee, who had a backyard garden at his home on Green Street and who was an avid cultivator. Together during the spring and summer of 1976 Ms. Ibanez and Mr. Hall cleared off one former houselot and set out ten plots to begin a community vegetable garden. Year by year the Sullivan Square gardeners buried more and more of the builders' rubble that had been dumped on the site, and cleared and planted more land. In 1978 the group took the name Gardeners for Charlestown, and they began to expand their functions by supplying local residents with soil for window-boxes and vegetable seedlings.

Today there are seventy 10 x 10-foot plots and sixty-five gardeners cultivating the one-third-acre corner of the unused parcel. Ms. Ibanez has returned to the suburbs and Mr. Hall has succeeded to the leadership of the project, where he has carried out an ambitious planting program, setting out lawn borders, planting fruit trees and vines, and even starting a small nursery. His fellow gardeners reflect the recent history of this section of Boston: some are old residents of Irish descent like Mr. Hall, others are newcomers from the suburbs, and others are immigrants from Korea and the Philippines.

For twenty-one years these two acres in Sullivan Square have stood vacant, the property of the Boston Redevelopment Authority. Nearby are weedy, abandoned lots and some derelict tenements which cry out for rebuilding or replacement. For ten years one corner of this land has been in active use by local community gardeners. The gardeners, however, have done their work without any security of tenure, without any lease or formal agreement from the municipal owner. Two years ago the BRA decided that the reconstruction of Charlestown had advanced far enough so that a private developer could
be sought to purchase the land. The Bricklayers’ Union responded with a proposal to
destroy the garden and to cover the entire lot with housing. Mr. Hall and his gardeners
responded with a signature campaign; the city-wide league of community gardeners, Bos­
ton Urban Gardeners, joined in the defense; there was television and newspaper cover­
age; and after a public hearing in Charlestown the bricklayers’ proposal was rejected.
The Redevelopment Authority then adjusted its request for proposals, saying that future
designs for new housing should include a community garden. At this writing proposals
are being submitted, some of which leave the garden at its present site, others of which
require that it be begun again in a different corner of the parcel.¹

This Charlestown case is unusual only to the degree that the garden has been land­
scaped and long-term plantings instituted. It is not the sort of annual vegetable garden
that can be easily relocated. Indeed, the case resembles the garden of Adam Purple in
the lower East Side of New York City.² There an eccentric gardener built an elaborate
garden on an abandoned lot, and the municipal authorities wantonly destroyed it in order
to demonstrate their power. As in Charlestown so in New York: nearby lots stood vacant,
offering ample space for the construction of new housing. In Charlestown the garden sits
at the apex of a triangle of land that is next to the heaviest truck traffic and therefore is
the least desirable location for houses. To require the garden to be moved therefore does
not serve to improve a housing site plan. But more important than the formal criteria of
site design, moving the garden will not meet the most important goal of making Charles­
town more habitable. This small corner of land has been for the past decade the site of
Charlestown residents’ own voluntary urban renewal. To refuse to recognize the worth
and the legitimacy of their activities, and to refuse to grant formal security of tenure to
the garden association is to use the state and municipal powers of eminent domain
to make the city less habitable than it was prior to public intervention twenty-one
years ago.

The Charlestown gardeners are a small group among millions of city dwellers around
the world. Everywhere landless people are seeking space to grow food for their families
and a place to put up a shelter. They find room on the wastes and fringes of cities—in
vacant lots, along railroads and highways, in rough land unfit for commercial agriculture,
and on the cast-offs at the outer edges of urban expansion.

To control this land, which commonly they do not own or lease, the gardeners band
together into informal associations that establish the lot boundaries, streets, and paths,
obtain water, and often, as well, govern what becomes a squatter settlement.

In a few nations land for vegetable plots is provided by public authorities through
leases to gardeners’ associations, but most commonly the gardeners are temporary occu­
pants of unused land who depend upon government toleration or after-the-fact consent.
Often, too, gardening and squatting are part of an ongoing urban warfare in which the police and the army are called in to devastate the gardens and to drive off the gardeners.

Throughout Asia there is intense cultivation of urban land, but apparently no informal associations of gardeners as in Latin America or Europe. In Central and South America, and in Africa—paradoxically, all continents where land abounds—the community gardeners are rural migrants struggling to find places for themselves in settings of explosive urbanization. Northern Europe faced a similar political and social situation one and two centuries ago. There popular programs of self-help merged with the programs of philanthropists to establish government policies for public support of urban gardening.

Today the United States stands in confusion between the two extremes of Latin America and northern Europe. Across the nation landless people have taken up the cultivation of vegetables on the vacant lots of their cities and suburbs. Public response to this self-help has been mixed. As a rich nation which does not respect those of its citizens who are poor, many Americans dismiss these city gardens as insignificant activities: temporary uses to be tolerated only during the interval between land clearance and new construction. Government officials and private landowning citizens deny the legitimacy of vegetable and flower gardens as permanent uses for urban land. On the other hand, most Americans are suburbanites, and most of these citizens have lawns and gardens to tend. The American suburbs, also, are home to many active participants in world ecological campaigns. From these sources come sympathy for urban community gardening and some of the same philanthropic energies that fostered the garden policies of northern Europe.

There are as well two special elements in the current position of the United States. The political force of community gardening does not rest upon philanthropy but springs from a new kind of local politics that grew out of the civil rights movement. This politics emphasizes self-help, and it insists on the dignity of all participants. The civil rights tradition has made it possible for welfare mothers, newcomers from the suburbs, and overseas immigrants to join together in garden associations. The second special element in the current position pertains to the condition of center-city land itself. Community gardening is most often vacant lot gardening. It follows after twenty-five years of abandonment of inner-city properties. Until the very recent revival of inner-city real estate markets the nation enjoyed a double opportunity that did not exist in the European past. First, there was the opportunity to recognize the new gardening politics as part of an American tradition of personal dignity and self-help, and, second, there was a chance to use the gardens themselves as elements in urban reconstruction. Although public authorities across the nation have lately been closing out community gardens, there is still time to recognize and to encourage the gardeners' politics, and there is still plenty of inner-city land for both new gardens and new houses.
Even as we observe these fresh opportunities, we are appalled by the ignorance of the general public and their public authorities concerning both the history of cities and the history of urban gardening. Neither the general public nor the mayors and their staffs know enough of the past to realize that cities without gardens are the products of exceptional circumstances, a sort of bad mutation brought on by the land rush of the 1750–1930 era. The past cities of brick, asphalt, and concrete that they hold up to us all as the models of human prosperity are in fact the junkyards of shortsighted land profiteering, a take-the-money-and-run approach to city building. An example from Boston's experience reveals the false premises that are currently used to attack the open spaces which gardeners cultivate. This case involves a politically invisible garden—a small, informal vegetable garden which is fenced about with scrap wire and old boards. Passersby can scarcely notice it because it stands behind a row of parked cars and next to an abandoned factory amidst the vacant industrial lots of Boston's South End. As in the Charlestown case, this garden uses one vacant lot in an area of many vacant lots. The gardeners are politically as invisible as their garden because they are Puerto Ricans who dwell in the housing project across the street. They are not the sort of people television crews and newspaper reporters find easily.

The current history of the garden began in 1949 with a housing project. Two blocks of old brick tenements which had been the unwelcoming reception houses for Boston's turn-of-the-century immigrants were cleared away. The project, located between Washington Street and Harrison Avenue, stands next to the Cathedral of the Holy Cross (built between 1867 and 1875), from which it gets its name, Cathedral South End Housing Project. Although it was intended as an aid to the poor of the city and was one of several projects constructed to relieve the post-World War II housing shortage, federal specifications required that it be built at a level below the commonplace standards of its day. It is, accordingly, short of usable open space, and it offers its 508 families no place for sports, car repair, or gardening, all everyday activities of Boston residents.5

In 1965 the Boston Redevelopment Authority began tearing down old buildings in the South End to clear off sites for the private construction of new housing. In the process it leveled the ends of several city blocks adjacent to the Cathedral project. Then, as in Charlestown, satisfactory private developers did not come forward, so that these lots commenced a decade of accumulation of builders' rubble, trash, weeds, and rats. The unused land also attracted speculators who began purchasing such properties at low prices to hold for later development or resale. Since such speculations deprived the Redevelopment Authority of full control over future development, the authority instituted a policy of developer designation to forestall the speculators. By this practice a particular firm was designated as the developer, the BRA set a price for the land, and it began to enter into planning agreements with the named party.

Meanwhile the land stood vacant, a nuisance and a hazard to those who lived nearby.
A decade later, a decade after the land had been seized by the City, in the spring and summer of 1976, civil rights, antiwar, and environmental activists formed a coalition in Boston for the construction of community gardens in the South End. The small garden at the end of the Harrison Avenue, Plympton, East Dedham, and Albany streets block was one of these initial community gardens. The Massachusetts National Guard trucked in topsoil as a volunteer activity, and Don Rico, a blind resident of the Cathedral project, took charge as the first garden leader. The coalition arranged for a water spigot, the gardeners found scraps for a fence, and gardening began that summer. Since then the twenty-odd plots of the garden have served the Cathedral project residents as an important source of food and as a place to exercise their competence as gardeners.

A vegetable garden of annuals, a place of beans, peppers, tomatoes, eggplant, cilantro, and potatoes can easily be relocated. Many lots stand vacant near the Cathedral project, several of which could serve as open spaces and gardens for the project residents. Yet the way the public authorities have been managing the vacant land next to the project for the past twenty years suggests that they do not hold the values of making the city habitable high in their minds. Despite the underdesign of the project, no formal action has been taken to develop vacant parcels for residents’ use. Instead, an industrial corporation was named as the designated developer. First, New England Nuclear was designated and that company proposed to construct an office building on the garden site. Then E. I. Du Pont of Wilmington, Delaware, purchased New England Nuclear and paved over its own open land to make large parking lots. At this writing the Boston Redevelopment Authority has written the new corporation to ask what its intentions for the development of the garden site might be. Surely the needs of inner-city residents for garden space and open space next to their homes should take precedence over parking. Yet in a political contest a giant industrial corporation seemingly has the advantage over a group of Puerto Rican migrants and public housing residents, no matter how legitimate their case.6

Such examples as these, the elaborate garden of Charlestown and the modest one of the South End, are now repeated across the nation. During the past decade community gardeners in American cities cleared acres of vacant trash-filled land and returned it to useful activity. Most of these gardens now lack the protection of ownership, long-term leases, or an established favorable municipal policy. Most are threatened by the same city-destructive policies that threaten the community gardens of Boston.7

The Origins of Community Gardens in England

Modern community gardening first appeared in England, during the eighteenth century, because that country was the world’s first modern nation. There the countryside was transformed into a totally fenced land of commercial farms. Simultaneously the cities of
England were constructed as blocks upon blocks of built-up streets of narrow workers' houses, unrelieved by open spaces or gardens. Both the rural and the urban changes denied thousands of people access to land that they had formerly depended upon for food and pleasure. This denial, in turn, brought forward two modern social responses: philanthropy and self-help. In the countryside wealthy landowners began to offer small parcels for lease to farm laborers as community gardens; and in the cities artisans banded together to rent fringe land so that they could raise vegetables and flowers. After a century the two movements merged into a national policy for the municipal provision of land for community gardening.

The philanthropic side of community gardening was a response to the devastating results of a new rural practice—the private enclosure of what had formerly been common land. In the eighteenth century rural England was covered with farm villages, each one of which combined several sorts of land. There were fenced forests and farms that belonged to private owners, there were open fields to which a number of families had cultivation rights, and there were village commons and village pastures, waste lands, fields, marshes, and forests that all village residents were entitled to use.

According to long-standing customs, village residents—landless laborers as well as small tenants—had the right to keep a cow or pig and to cut wood for fuel or timbers for housebuilding in the nearby commons and waste lands. Often as well they tended small patches of potatoes and vegetables in the open village fields. The patchwork of cultivated and waste lands of the typical English village included both the undocumented customary practices of the lesser families and the documented titles of the large farmers and landlords.

Then, in the face of new techniques for systematic commercial agriculture, the large farmers began to petition Parliament for enclosure acts, which authorized the division of open fields, waste lands, and commons into separate private parcels. To receive a share in these divisions a person had to prove some established title. The laborers and the small tenants who used the commons and the waste lands by custom, without written leases or titles, received nothing. Many others were granted such small bits and pieces that they gladly sold their fragments to the large farmers for a little cash.

Thus rural land in England was fenced during the decades when the United States first began as a separate nation. In the span of years from the French and Indian Wars of 1754 to the termination of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, England went through its first great convulsions of agricultural transformation, urbanization, and industrialization. Eight thousand square miles of land were enclosed by special parliamentary acts—an area equivalent to one-seventh of all of England, an area the size of all the land in Massachusetts! Young people flocked to the new industrial towns and to London, while many of those who could afford passage to America emigrated to seek a fresh start here. But
Community Gardening

thousands of formerly self-sufficient families remained stranded in the villages of England, reduced to seasonal farm labor and local poor relief. The welfare statistics of the day told of the massive destruction of human resources: in 1750 the local relief bill for all of England totaled £700,000, but by 1818 it had soared to £8,000,000.9

The impoverishment of so many rural families set off a ceaseless, grinding, and progressively demeaning debate, the very sort of debate we still carry on today. Having turned rural society upside down and uprooted thousands of families, the very country landowners who initiated the rural revolution complained of the rising costs of welfare and its burden upon local property taxes. Fearful for the future, England experienced a wave of nostalgia, and both radical and conservative politicians joined in lamenting the loss of the good old days of village England prior to the enclosures. That was a time, they imagined, when everyone had a place, and lord, farmer, tenant, and laborer each knew his duties and his privileges.10

Charitable organizations sprang up to propose public remedies. William Wilberforce, England's leader in the campaign to abolish slavery in the empire's colonies, established a Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor in 1796. His society proposed that landless villagers be given small parcels of land to cultivate.11 Twenty years later a similar organization, the Laborers' Friend Society, was founded to continue this campaign for the creation of village allotments of a size sufficient to allow a man to feed an entire family on the produce.12

Farmers, the men who hired the rural poor, stood in opposition to such proposals for making even little plots available to the landless. They feared that their laborers would spend too much time gardening on their own account, or that they would become independent enough to force up their wages. In this opposition to village gardens the farmers were joined by contemporary economic publicists. For example, the public health reformer Edwin Chadwick opposed gardens because he thought they would encourage the poor to remain in their home villages instead of moving about in search of employment.13

The famous political economist John Stuart Mill opposed allotment gardens because he saw them as rewarding the least ambitious young country families. He thought the little village gardens would cause the shiftless to rest in their villages, to garden, and to have babies, and thereby so to multiply that in time they would impoverish all of England by their incontinence and their improvidence.14

Mill's was an early expression of the same anger we hear expressed toward the poor and the unfortunate results of their poverty and ignorance. He could not see the poor people of rural England as part of the harvest of the new commercial agriculture, any more than most of us can now see poor, young welfare mothers as part of the output of our metropolitan offices and factories. Yet so they were in Mill's time; and so they are in ours. Shoved to the edges of villages, and to the alleys and courts of cities, neglected,
their labor devalued, ill-trained and unrewarded, they made human lives as best they could from the leftovers of a hard-driving society that was running away from them.  

At first, during the late eighteenth century, a few very wealthy peers, men with vast estates who had observed the consequences of their own enclosures, began to set aside patches of small gardens which they rented cheaply to their villagers. These were the first allotment gardens, gardens separate from people's cottages, gardens “allotted” to villagers. These were the rural ancestors of today's urban community gardens. Such examples, set as they were by aristocratic landowners, encouraged local charity boards to rent and divide small fields to sublet to poor families as a supplement to the village cash relief. It proved a practical, if ungenerous, charity, and in 1819 Parliament passed an act that encouraged the poor wardens of England to lease up to twenty acres of land for the purpose of subletting as garden plots, or “potato gardens,” as they were sometimes called.

Village gardens were never freely offered. Instead, the charitable allotments always included expressions of public anger at the poor. And they were restricted by special rules. A typical example of commonplace regulations were those governing these allotments of one-eighth acre:

No occupier will be allowed to plow his land, but be required to cultivate it solely by spade husbandry.

No occupier who is at work for the parish, or for any employer, will be allowed to work upon his land after six o'clock in the morning, or before six o'clock in the evening without permission from his master.

All occupiers will be expected to attend regularly at Divine service, to conduct themselves with propriety at all times; and to bring up their families in a decent and orderly manner.

And, of course, the rent had to be paid yearly. Yet so widespread was the desire of the poor of England for land that thousands took up gardens and small plots under such demeaning terms. No matter how many left for the mill towns and cities of England, or emigrated to the United States, there were not jobs enough to maintain the country people remaining. Rioting by angry farm laborers during the 1830s, and then devastating failures of the potato crop in Ireland and on the Continent, brought starvation and suffering to millions. As a consequence, in England rural allotments became a regular feature of village charity. Indeed, in 1845 Parliament required that thereafter fields of allotment gardens be established as a precondition attending all subsequent enclosures. A survey in 1873 counted 244,000 allotments, a third of these the large size advocated by the Laborers' Friend Society, plots of one-quarter to four acres in size.

After a century of enclosures, a century of refashioning commercial farms, a century of growth of mill towns and industrial cities, and a century of charity politics, the rural population of England ceased to be either a significant fraction of the nation’s population
or a significant political force. The attention of business, politics, and charity now shifted to the city. Here allotment gardens faced different circumstances and even for a time flourished outside the politics of charity.

**Urban Self-Help**

During the same decades of rural enclosures, the cities of England boomed with the stimulation of new industrial practices and new factory production. This urban expansion called forth the second element in community gardening's history—the tradition of self-help. In England, as throughout the world and throughout history, town dwellers had always been gardeners. Kitchen gardens, fruit trees, and vines, were necessary elements in town and city life. Until the tidal waves of population flows and the great urban real estate booms of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, most city blocks held patches of open spaces, backyards of sorts, which residents cultivated as kitchen gardens. These open spaces were the common places of traditional modes of bit-by-bit city building. In 1794 Thomas Pemberton described Boston as being just such a place: “Few houses are without them [garden spots] in which vegetables and flowers are raised, [and] in some fruit trees planted.”

At the time no one appreciated the important contributions these open spaces made to the ecologies of towns. We now know that these rear yards helped to absorb a good deal of the human and animal wastes of the city, that they provided significant amounts of food, milk, and eggs, and that they helped to offset the bad drainage and coal-fouled air that prevailed in these centuries. Then during the late eighteenth century the yards and open spaces disappeared when landlords filled them with dark courts and alleys, and when developers ran up row after row of small attached houses, each one with a tiny rear yard scarcely large enough to afford a privy and a coal bin. These new building practices made the city into a death trap for poor people, and it took a century of public reform—massive and costly water, sewer, and street engineering—to overcome these public consequences of private ignorance and greed.

Confronted by the new city landlessness, city dwellers clubbed together to rent plots on the edge of town where they tended family gardens. The manufacturing city of Birmingham was famous for its neat and carefully laid out “guinea gardens,” gardens so named for the price of their annual rent. A newspaper in 1812 carried an advertisement for the sale of one of these gardens, “well planted with gooseberry and currant trees, fine raspberries, flowers, shrubs, etc., and stocked with asparagus and vegetables of various kinds [and] containing a summer house.” Nottingham, another mill city, had a development parallel to Birmingham’s. That town now claims that its hosiery workers held England’s first rose show at an inn next to their gardens. The shortcomings in these arrangements lay in their vulnerability. As cities grew, the landlords sold off the gardens
Community Gardening for railway yards, roads, and housing developments. Thus, in time the gardeners had to seek land ever farther from the center of town, and land for gardening often became impossible to find. 29

The public benefits that flowed from the commonplace activities of ordinary city dwellers were not discovered. The late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century workingmen's gardens added a much needed variety to the public spaces and domestic life of town dwellers, but no public action that recognized these general benefits was forthcoming. The garden associations had to contend as best they could with increasing land shortages and rising rents. Rather than coming to their fellow citizens' aid, municipal authorities directed their activities to landscaping for passive appreciation: the beautification of city squares, the erecting of monuments, and the laying out of parks for promenading.

Only the old nasty motives of saving tax money on poor relief and disciplining the working poor convinced municipal governments to undertake allotment programs. During the late nineteenth century several English cities, following earlier village precedents, experimented with welfare allotment gardens. Finally, in 1907 Parliament passed a law calling upon the local governments of England to set up allotment gardens for the "laboring population" where such land could not be obtained by private agreement. 30 This 1907 statute served as the foundation for Britain's now extensive allotment system.

The example of allotment gardens spread from England across northern Europe so that by 1900 all the nations from Switzerland to Norway had garden programs. In Germany the campaign was led by a physician, Daniel G. M. Schreber (1808–61), who wanted fresh air and exercise to promote the health of city children. He formed an alliance with industrialists who were seeking ways to reduce the Sunday drinking of their employees. Factory owners often contributed land for gardens, and they thereby solved a persistent problem of community gardening—finding space for gardens near where the gardeners worked or lived. The Germans laid out generous allotments, 15 x 30 meters (49.2 x 98.4 feet). Here many gardeners eventually built small summer houses for family outings and vacation days. Today these gardens are in keen demand and are known in Germany as "leisure gardens." 31

In France the promise of garden land for urban workers was also part of a campaign for the reform of the manners and morals of the common people. During the late nineteenth century conservative politicians in France deplored as moral decay the popular habits of late marriage and small families. They saw early marriage, many children, and home ownership as antidotes to labor unions, strikes, and socialist politics. A Christian Democratic movement arose to promote these moral sentiments. Two of its major promises were land for a home and land for a garden for every worker. The houselots were never seriously advanced, but the movement's garden federation, Ligue Française du Coin de Terre et Foyer, did succeed in becoming the recipient of government subsidies for allotment gardens. 32
In Belgium allotment gardening was also tied to home ownership goals, but in that nation its ties were to workingmen’s cooperative banks. In Sweden and Norway large allotment gardens with summer houses became the precedents for municipal schemes for the provision of suburban houseslots for city workers. Italy, however, never adopted a national or a municipal allotment garden policy. As in the United States, large manufacturers sometimes built housing with garden space for their workers, but Italy still struggles today to define a policy for urban community gardens in the face of a movement that has sprung up without official sanction. 33

Beginnings in the United States

The United States started its allotment gardening out of the same desires both to feed and to control the poor as those of England and northern Europe. In our case the trigger was the economic depression of 1893–97. The depression had begun with a rush of money out of the United States, a financial crisis that caused 491 bank failures the first year. As the bad years continued, they affected railroad traffic, and by 1894 one-third of the mileage of American railroads had sunk into bankruptcy. In the late nineteenth century railroads were the core industry of the nation, and when they faltered thousands lost their jobs—just as we have seen a faltering automobile industry send waves of unemployment across the nation. So in 1894–97 armies of young native and immigrant laborers were stranded in cities without work.

Detroit, then a manufacturing city with a specialty in building railroad cars, was one of the cities hard hit by unemployment. Its mayor, Hazen S. Pingree, noticed during the spring of 1894 that few jobs were being posted. He called for owners of vacant land at the edge of the city to lend their property so that the unemployed might at least raise sufficient potatoes to carry their families through the next winter. The real estate business also being slack, 600 acres were promptly tendered. The City of Detroit appropriated money to plow and harrow 430 acres, and the mayor hired a retired U.S. Army officer to supervise the project. That spring 945 families took up allotments, gardens of one-quarter to one-half an acre in size. Each family was issued seed potatoes with instructions to plant at least half the land to that crop. In the fall the gardeners harvested 14,000 bushels of potatoes, and an uncounted crop of beans, turnips, and other vegetables.

Detroit’s experience with what were then called Pingree’s Potato Patches captured national attention, and a number of cities planned to imitate it the following year. Detroit’s first report boasted of the same sort of economies that the wardens of late eighteenth-century England took pleasure in announcing. The city had invested $3,000 in land preparation and supervision, $12,000 worth of crops had been raised, so presumably $9,000 in relief expenditures had been saved for the taxpayers.

The next few years a number of cities offered such potato patches: Boston, Brooklyn,
Buffalo, Chicago, Dayton, Denver, Kansas City, Minneapolis, New York, Omaha, Providence, Reading (Pennsylvania), Seattle, Springfield (Massachusetts), and Toledo. Only Detroit and Buffalo mounted large programs that served one and two thousand families per season; in the other cities the undertakings were small and the number of families given gardens few.\footnote{34}

In the United States this first allotment garden movement was trapped within a self-defeating outlook. Both city officials and private charity officers who administered these programs accepted the idea that the American city was first and foremost a real estate proposition, a place where the highest and best use of land was not the raising of human beings but the piling up of profits on rents and sales. It was a time of widespread immigration into cities, the tearing down of old houses to replace them with tall tenements, and the removal of old downtown buildings to erect the first skyscrapers. Density, the sheer crowding of people, was the landlord’s profit and the driving idea of city building. Contemporaries, of course, noticed the harsh decline in the habitability of their cities and the attacks on the health and well-being of city families. Reformers saw deconcentration as the only sure remedy and advocated rapid transit construction to open up the suburbs to workingmen’s families.\footnote{35} Given such times and such an outlook, garden officials could offer neither convenient locations for their gardens nor security of tenure. In this important respect the Americans had yet to understand what the Germans had already mastered: putting the gardens where the people were.

In the United States landowners allowed their land to be plowed and cultivated only on the condition that, should the land be subsequently sold or leased for development, the gardens would be immediately forfeited. Moreover, to their surprise, the managers of the potato patches discovered that their applicants, both native and immigrant, were not predominantly farm people, and many did not know how to grow vegetables. From this necessity for teaching, the charitable committees reasoned that small sites could not be gardened because they could not be supervised conveniently, and therefore that big tracts were required. They could not imagine that the gardeners would be able to teach each other, the novice learning from the experienced. As a consequence of such imperfect specifications, urban land for gardens proved hard to find, especially land near the homes of the unemployed.

Boston’s experience showed how such an ill-conceived preference for large plots prevented the philanthropists from establishing a successful program. In 1895 one of the city’s oldest private charities, the Industrial Aid Society for the Prevention of Pauperism (founded in 1835), undertook to imitate Mayor Pingree’s example. The society, whose specialty was running an employment office, set aside a special fund and set up a special subcommittee, the Committee on the Cultivation of Vacant Lots. Through the committee’s appeals many small lots were offered, but the committee chose instead the
one large plot scheme. It leased a sixty-acre farm, the Morton Farm, at what was then the outer edge of the city of Boston. The farm was located at the corner of Morton and Canterbury streets, between the Forest Hills Cemetery and the brand-new Franklin Park.

The land had not been farmed for at least twenty-five years, so a “practical farmer,” George Starratt, was hired to plow, harrow, and spread phosphate on the land, and to supervise the gardeners for the coming season. Next the subcommittee placed advertisements in the newspapers, and arranged with fifteen offices about the city to receive applications. In the end fifty-two men and two women showed up at Morton Farm and were assigned one-third-acre plots. Planting began May 20 and lasted until June 10. Each gardener was required to sow a row of beans at the outer edges of his garden to mark the boundary, and then to put in many rows of potatoes. The other vegetables raised were corn, peas, turnips, cabbage, cucumbers, tomatoes, and melons.

Most of the gardeners turned out to be “men physically unable to do a full day’s work, which fact prevented them from taking permanent employment.” Comments in this first 1895 report and those of the following years suggest that most of these gardeners were old men. As in other cities, most of the gardeners were native born, and the national origins of the immigrants reflected a city’s particular migration history. So, in Boston those gardeners who were immigrants came from Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Canada, Russia, and Switzerland. Like the other cities, too, “few had had previous experience at farm work,” and most “had to be taught every detail from the planting to the harvesting of the crops.” In any event, the gardens were a success. After a season of doping up the potato plants with Paris Green (a commonly used chemical of the era, a mixture of trioxide of arsenic and copper acetate) to fight off the beetles and the blight, the gardeners harvested 20 to 55 bushels of potatoes per plot. Paris Green is now known to be too toxic to human beings for safe agricultural use.

The Industrial Aid Society’s experiment at Morton Farm continued two more years, during 1896 and 1897, despite mounting losses caused by a potato blight that was then sweeping through New England. Many of the gardeners continued from year to year, and the number of applications rose to one hundred. The project, however, was terminated after 1897 for want of fresh land. The Vacant Lots Committee had hoped to secure land from the Boston Park Department, but the commissioners of that day, then aggressively expanding their chain of public open lands, must have believed that vegetable gardening by poor people was not a suitable sport to add to their facilities for tennis, golf, cricket, baseball, bowling, skating, and swimming. In 1898 the Industrial Aid Society reaffirmed its belief in such charity gardens, but it was unable to find the necessary land at a price it considered reasonable. Boston’s small experiment with allotment gardens then died, not from the Colorado beetle but from lack of imagination.
Control of land has always been the rock that smashed American urban garden projects. Even though gardeners might organize for mutual aid, unless they could get a lease or title to their plots, the land would soon be taken from them. And how could an organization of low-income families lease or purchase expensive city land? A ten-year Chicago experiment with these early potato gardens tells the story directly. Here a gardeners' organization advanced further toward self-help than the members of any other contemporary community garden, but in the end their garden was destroyed by the philanthropic patrons.

In the spring of 1897, in imitation of other cities, Chicago's private philanthropic agency, the Bureau of Associated Charities, plowed up a forty-acre tract on the south-west side of the city (Englewood) and parcelled out one-quarter-acre lots to 148 families. The Cook County Board of Commissioners appropriated $500 for seed. That first season the gardeners, who were native and immigrant, black and white, formed a "People's Friendly Club" to give mutual aid and to deal with the garden supervisor who had been appointed by the Associated Charities. A brief abstract of one meeting of the gardeners has been printed. It consisted of crop reports and an appeal for more cooperation among the gardeners in tending each others’ plots, and it concluded with the appointment of a committee to supervise the parceling out of the allotments for the next season.

The program lasted for ten years with over two hundred families participating each year. The philanthropists regarded the gardens as an exemplary bit of encouragement to the poor. In a typical report they wrote, "It is safe to say that the money return was considerably larger than the total money expenditure, while the return in the way of healthful and stimulating employment and in preventing poor families from going upon the charity lists was itself ample to justify the continuance of the gardens."

Despite the fact that the gardeners paid fees sufficient to cover the costs of the plowing and harrowing, and despite the popularity of the two forty-acre "farms" that Associated Charities had established, the philanthropists lost interest and the poor lost their gardens. City beautification replaced self-help as a charity enthusiasm. First Chicago's South Park Commission seized part of one of the gardens to make it into a public park; then the philanthropists turned their attention to planting trees and ornamenting vacant lots, thereby closing out their vegetable garden program.

The idea of a city that would provide open spaces to those who wished to garden was a concept quite beyond the American imagination. A poor man might enjoy a walk in the new public parks which were being laid out in cities across the nation, and his son might even be furnished with a baseball diamond for his games, but voters, politicians, and philanthropists all agreed that it would be wrong for a poor father or mother to have some claim on a small plot of city land for raising vegetables. Free land and homesteads
were farm policies, while yards and open ground in the city were facilities for the well-settled and the prosperous only.

War Gardens

The food shortages of World War I exposed the folly of people who reckoned their town to be a city because it was all built up, or who saw in every vacant lot a chance to raise up another building. The massive drafts of men into armies, the blockades of food shipments, and the destruction of crops and farmland during the fighting caused severe food shortages across Europe. To cope with rationing and high prices, city dwellers planted thousands of community gardens in the vacant open spaces of their cities. In England, 1,300,000 urban gardeners saved their nation from malnutrition, if not starvation, during the submarine blockade. The fact that they could accomplish so much, and so quickly, led some observers to speculate about peacetime problems and possibilities. An English author surmised that high prices for city foodstuffs resulted from monopoly practices: the inability of urban gardeners to get long-term access to land and the collusion of railroads and wholesalers to control city market prices.  

No less startling than the huge volume of output was the sudden wartime elevation of the social standing of urban gardeners. Formerly thought of as poor people in want of food and instruction, they became full-fledged, patriotic citizens. The leader of the United States campaign for war gardens imagined the gardeners to be people who, unable to serve in the army, wanted to “take an active part in some effort which would show tangible results in the struggle for right and justice.”

In the United States the planting of urban war gardens during 1917, 1918, and 1919 went forward in a climate of patriotic slogans put forth by a national organization set up for the very purpose. The National War Garden Committee, an affiliate of the American Forestry Association, issued press releases and posters to encourage people to grow vegetables—“Every Garden a Munitions Plant,” “Sow the Seeds of Victory,” “War Gardens Over the Top,” “Slacker Land,” “The Kaiser Is Canned.” The leader of this organization, Charles Lathrop Pack (1857–1937), was a wealthy lumberman from Cleveland, Ohio, an advocate and promoter of scientific forestry and national resource conservation. President of the American Forestry Association from 1916 to 1922, Pack used his position to establish a national campaign for home food production. As in Europe, the effort was successful. In 1918 an estimated 5 million gardeners produced $520,000,000 worth of food, thereby releasing American farm supplies for shipment overseas.

Exact records of Boston’s participation do not survive, but it was estimated in 1919 that three thousand Bostonians were at work in gardens during 1918. The Park Depart-
ment even loaned some of its land, plowing up a section of Franklin Park in Dorchester, and it also offered plots elsewhere. The downtown Women's City Club set out a very elaborate demonstration garden on the baseball fields at the southwest corner of Boston Common (at Charles and Boylston streets), where they grew thirty-five varieties of vegetables, everything then imaginable except corn.52

Pack's 1919 review of this wartime effort casts an informative light upon our present community gardens. He, like the gardeners of today, knew nothing of the history of previous gardens, and he, like so many garden promoters, was quite unaware of the political consequences of his proposals. Therefore, he repeated the past: yet one more time the established and the powerful of a city were to organize the gardeners: yet one more time the gardeners were not able to organize themselves or to achieve their own ends.

We owe the popular label “victory garden” to Pack and his organization. He used it after the armistice to urge people to continue their war gardens as victory gardens so that the food supplies of the United States could be supplemented and more food made available for the starving peoples of Europe and Russia.53 The term became the promotional slogan for gardens during World War II and it has continued as a popular American name for allotment gardens ever since.

Pack also made an attack on vacant urban land, but his was strictly a wartime campaign and therefore the overtones of his reasoning did not carry on into years of peace. In order to encourage or embarrass owners of vacant land into lending it to gardeners, Pack's campaign called vacant lots “slacker land,” land not contributing to the war effort. By his estimate there were at least fifty acres of tillable land in every city.54

In seeking the land, and especially in proposing large community gardens of many plots, Pack proposed the sort of top-down civic campaign that was commonplace in his era and that continues today in the form of United Fund campaigns and many city-wide charitable drives. He did not conceive of giving the gardeners themselves any voice, or of seeking out their interests.55 Since no one consulted any of the gardeners' wishes, all their land eventually reverted to its former uses. Yet both the European examples and the wartime experience did linger in the back of people's minds as precedents to be called forth in exceptional circumstances.

For example, in 1922 the Boston-based city planner John Nolen (1869–1937) was commissioned to design a model industrial suburb for Cincinnati, Ohio. Because Nolen was an admirer of English town planning, his Mariemont scheme called for the provision of three sets of allotment gardens for resident working-class families.56 During the Great Depression of the 1930s a number of cities in the United States, and a number of railroad and industrial corporations, established “relief gardens,” temporary potato patches that repeated the experiments of the 1890s. There is no record that the City of Boston undertook such a program, although it is probable that individual landowners let poor people
make gardens on some unused land. In New York City the welfare department, aided by the federal Works Progress Administration, ran an ambitious vacant lot garden project of five thousand gardens. In 1937, however, the program had to be closed because support for urban vegetable gardening conflicted with the Department of Agriculture's new idea—a food stamp distribution of surplus farm products.57

The New Deal also experimented with a very ambitious “subsistence homestead” program for urban industrial workers. On the fringes of Chicago, Wilmington, and Los Angeles it built small houses on one- to three-acre lots that were themselves planted with fruit trees and vegetables. The hope was that by part-time gardening workers and their families could supplement their incomes and thereby attain a decent standard of living and adequate financial security. At the time of the 1935 report 22,000 people had applied for 5,000 proposed homesteads.58

When World War II came, many recalled the gardens of the First World War. During the peak year, 1944, 20 million victory gardeners produced 44 percent of the fresh vegetables in the United States. In Boston the Boston Globe, the Advertising Club, the School Department, and the Department of Parks and Recreation sponsored a Victory Garden Committee and its activities. The Boston Common was plowed and planted once more, and a number of industrial firms loaned land near their plants. The Parks Department plowed up forty-nine sites around the city, and the School Department undertook to give horticultural instruction to any who wished it. An estimated 2,600 families grew vegetables in these wartime gardens. Since all the sites were mere loans, all the victory gardens disappeared with the armistice except one, the Fenway Victory Gardens.59

The Fenway gardens were established on seven and a half acres of Parks Department land in the spring of 1942. The plots averaged 15 × 25 feet, a size typical of the small American allotment. Today there are four hundred active gardeners. In the late fall of 1944 the Fenway group set themselves up as a formal club, the Fenway Garden Society. The society elects a superintendent who parcels out the plots and is responsible to the Commissioner of Parks and Recreation of the City of Boston. Any resident of the city may apply for space and, if there is an opening, may garden for a season upon payment of a small annual fee. The revenues from the annual dues go to maintain an elaborate water system. By the judicious courting of politicians the Fenway Garden Society has been able to continue its free use of its park land from World War II to the present.

On several occasions the gardens were threatened by proposals for alternative uses for the land. At one moment a candidate for the state senate, John J. Moakley of South Boston, proposed that the garden land be paved over for a parking lot to serve the baseball patrons of nearby Fenway Park. At that time one of the active Fenway gardeners was Senator John E. Powers, also of South Boston, a man who had promised, when he ran for mayor of Boston in 1955, that he would turn every vacant lot in the city into a
garden. Senator Powers defeated Representative Moakley’s bill by tabling it on its second reading when it came up to the senate. This fortunate convergence of a strong gardeners’ organization with political support saved the Fenway gardens, and, indeed, it foreshadowed a new era in urban community gardening that would begin in various city neighborhoods across the United States some time between Earth Day, 22 April 1970, and the summer of 1975 when the U.S. Department of Agriculture began its Food and Nutrition Education experiment.60

New Garden Politics

Today’s American urban community garden is the child of new politics and abandoned city land. The new politics arose out of the Afro-American civil rights movement of the 1960s. The vacant lots came from the emptying out of the centers of American cities when they were rebuilt in their current low-density suburban-metropolitan forms.61 Together the empowerment of new politics and the opportunities of vacant land have created a historically unprecedented series of class and racial coalitions—organizations of blacks and whites, poor and well-to-do, longtime city residents and newcomers from the suburbs. These new coalitions bring urban neighbors together to plant and maintain community gardens, to manage neighborhood land, and to set fresh goals for the rebuilding of the American city.

The prime force in the new garden politics comes from the cooperation of black and white community leaders. On the Afro-American side the slow but steady advance of civil rights that began with the discrediting of racism by World War II brought forward a group of men and women who were effective advocates of the politics of dignity and self-help. Some received their training in civil rights organizations like the NAACP and the Urban League. More gained experience in a variety of city organizations and committees concerned with nutrition, child care, schools, juvenile delinquency, and housing. During the sixties many federal programs required the formation of local boards as part of their mode of operation. As a consequence of all these changes new voices were heard in City Hall as well as next door.62

The first activists on the white side of the community gardening coalitions were recruited by a thousand frustrations and political disagreements with the directions in which the United States was being led during the sixties and early seventies. A short list might include the Vietnam War, atomic bomb testing, environmental pollution, U.S. food gluts amidst domestic malnutrition and starvation overseas, the Arab oil embargo, and, like their Afro-American partners, the civil rights campaigns and their conflicts with established municipal politics. The pioneer community organizers were Peace Corps graduates, antiwar activists, out-of-work architects and landscape professionals. All had
been drawn by one cause or another into living in the inner city at the very moment when most of their fellows were heading for the suburbs. Once settled in the city, they confronted the tensions between the opportunities for rebuilding that the abandoned land offered and a series of practices and policies that attacked inner-city residents.\(^\text{63}\)

A slow transition that advanced through many different programs carried the nation from its old habits of intermittent philanthropy to a position of responding to the needs expressed by the gardeners themselves. It took ten to fifteen years for the new approach to receive widespread attention. Since there was no national organization of community gardeners in 1960, no national history of the transition survives. Today's garden activists, however, recall a sequence of events that they say began with public housing gardens, then shifted to the provision of community open spaces and gardens in new suburban subdivisions, and finally turned to projects that sought neighborhood approval, construction, and maintenance for inner city open spaces.

In Virginia the Norfolk Housing Authority seems to have been the national pioneer in organizing its tenants into garden clubs and in awarding prizes for the best flowerbeds. During World War II Cleveland followed Norfolk's example but, of course, emphasized vegetable growing. In Seattle the local district federation of garden clubs initiated a gardening program for public housing tenants. In 1958 the Chicago Housing Authority commenced an annual contest for the “most beautiful housing project in Chicago” in an attempt to stimulate its maintenance employees and to reduce tenant littering and vandalism.\(^\text{64}\)

In 1963 the New York City Housing Authority imitated the Chicago program but transformed it into a competition among tenant flower gardeners. Under the New York rules the tenants had to form themselves into groups. The groups might be composed of either children or adults. Each spring the groups apply for gardening space and thereafter they are given free lectures by experts, a gardening book, and free seeds. In mid-August the flower beds are judged and prizes awarded. In none of these cases—Norfolk, Chicago, New York, or elsewhere—was there any evidence that the gardens emerged from tenant initiatives. The housing authority gardens, however, have been very popular, and tenants have returned to their same plots year after year.\(^\text{65}\)

The victory gardens of Davis, California, proved very influential for suburban subdivision design. They continued as community gardens after the war, setting an example for the layout of several new subdivisions that reserved common land for community garden space. Because Davis was the location of the School of Agriculture of the University of California, its precedents traveled quickly around the country and joined other experimental designs for common land in suburban layouts.\(^\text{66}\)

In 1961 the city of Philadelphia, then nationally prominent for its ambitious urban renewal program, decided to get control of its tax-delinquent parcels, in part to keep them
from becoming nuisances, and in part to use them to establish a land bank for later public use and development. The next year the city hired a social worker, Eve Asner, to begin a program of small park development using such lots. Aided by a U.S. Housing and Urban Development beautification grant, she built sixty small parks and play spaces during the years 1965–67. The most significant aspect of Asner's program was not its many cleaned-up public spaces, desirable though they were, but her use of the new political outlook. As she reported later, "A project is begun only at the request of a neighborhood group, and residents are required to participate in planning and construction, and to assume total responsibility for maintenance."67

This approach fostered a new outlook upon public parks and playgrounds. A distinction began to be drawn between nineteenth-century–style parks that the municipal authorities attempted to maintain, and land that nearby residents continually refashioned. In 1966 Robin Moore's Lenox-Camden Playground in Boston's lower Roxbury section attracted a lot of professional attention as another example of the new approach. Here, on a junk-filled lot between two housing projects, he led a team of local children and adults in the construction of a playground. Construction mixed play with building: the goal was making activity spaces, not a finished installation.68

The basic shift in the political situation of community gardening, however, came only when the general public adopted an outlook of self-help. Ordinary city dwellers and landless suburbanites stopped waiting for public institutions to provide land for them and began, instead, to demand land and services from their municipalities. This tidal change took place sometime between 1968 and 1976. The implications of that shift, and the emotions that propelled it, can be estimated by recalling the ten-year public drama over the so-called People's Park which opened in Berkeley, California, in 1969. At this writing the People's Park is still part parking lot, part university field, part straggly garden. Both the memory of its past and its present state serve as reminders of civic failure and frustration in the management of vacant lots.69

The ten years of confrontations represent a breakdown in local institutions' ability to share power. At the outset the empty lot became a symbol of public frustration with the prolonging of the Vietnam War. But the fact that a vacant lot could serve as such a lightning rod showed that beneath the moment's extreme tensions of war and race conflict the control of urban land by big institutions had become an important citizen grievance. The muddy, car-filled lot, the chain-link fence, the paved parking spaces, all stood in opposition to the public desire to use city land directly—to gather together, to party, to make noise, to debate, and to garden. Such informal and personal land uses were the very antitheses of war, interstate highways, and urban renewal land takings.

While Berkeley offered its continuing People's Park drama, cities across the nation faced the problems of more and more abandoned lots, more and more trash-filled and rat-
infested eyesores. Abandoned land became a symbol of the American city's inability to keep its own house in order. In New York City, the center of the United States' television and newspaper attention, Mayor John Lindsay launched an ambitious "vest-pocket park" program in an attempt to combat the evil. Many lots were cleared of rubble, paved, and given play equipment, but since the program was not based on prior neighborhood consultation and response it soon fell victim to vandals.  

By 1972 local initiatives stemming from the new garden outlook began to multiply rapidly. In that year the mayor of Syracuse, N.Y., began his "adopt-a-lot" scheme whereby he encouraged local residents to garden on abandoned property. In Boston, at the outer edge of the city, a group began a community garden on the grounds of a little-used state mental hospital. Ironically, their site was very close to the charity potato fields of 1895. In Burlington, Vermont, B. H. Thompson laid out a community garden that soon became the nursery of an important national gardening organization. And in New York City a group of landscape professionals set up an informal organization, the Green Guerrillas, to give assistance to people who wanted to start gardens in vacant lots. By 1975 the Green Guerrillas had 35 members and a big corps of volunteers, and they had succeeded in capturing public attention and sympathy. That same year the New York Botanic Garden called together a conference of experts from a number of American cities to discuss urban gardening technique. These meetings gave professional legitimacy to a movement that had been, until then, a scattered series of independent initiatives.  

Suddenly, in the spring and summer of 1976, all across the nation, community groups organized and started new community vegetable and flower gardens. That same summer the U.S. Department of Agriculture, encouraged by Congressman Frederick Richmond of Brooklyn, N.Y., started an experiment in New York City. Congressman Richmond had been president of the New York Urban League from 1959 to 1964, and New York City Human Rights Commissioner from 1964 to 1970. In this experiment the USDA employed its extension staff to train inner-city citizens in the arts of vacant lot vegetable gardening. Two years later, in 1978, the organizers of community gardens from many American cities came together in Chicago to meet each other for the first time, to compare experiences, and to form a national organization, the American Community Garden Association.  

The New Politics in Boston  

The postwar changes in the American city traced patterns in Boston similar to many others. First came the suburban exodus, then the taking up of old neighborhoods by Afro-Americans and Hispanics. The newcomers, however, were too few to replace the emigrants: rents fell, landlords abandoned their properties, tax revenues failed to keep pace with rising costs, and municipal services were cut back and compromised. The decline in
the public quality of the inner city went forward at the same moment as expectations for
comfort and services in the suburban metropolis bounded upward. The city then coun-
tered with ambitious urban renewal projects which themselves carried off still more build-
ings, and the federal government added its gigantic highway clearances. Out of the fru-
strations and conflicts of these massive changes there emerged a new politics of land and
the new community gardening.

Because it was a small and densely packed city that was surrounded by vast tracts of
open suburban land, Boston underwent three decades of massive population transfers.
Thousands of resident families took up houses in the suburbs, and their places were taken
by a much smaller immigration of Afro-Americans from other United States cities and
from the South Atlantic states, by small communities of Hispanics, particularly from
Puerto Rico and the Caribbean, and by small numbers of Asians from China, Vietnam,
and Cambodia.

In 1950 the city of Boston held 801,444 inhabitants, of whom 5 percent were black and
a very few Hispanic or Chinese. By 1980 the city showed a net loss of 30 percent of its
population. Of the 563,000 who remained, 20 percent were Afro-Americans, 3 to 5 percent
were Hispanic, and 3 percent were Oriental.

These population shifts sharply reduced the density of the old, inner working-class
sections of the city: Charlestown, East Boston, West End, South End, and Roxbury. Low
rents in these sections attracted new settlers, but low rents and low incomes also brought
extensive landlord abandonment. Abandonment, failing tax collections, arson, and cheap
properties turned these areas into municipal real estate liabilities, and once they became
real estate problems they became targets for Boston's urban renewal and highway clear-
ance.

Soon after the passage of federal urban renewal legislation, the Boston City Planning
Board proposed what was, in the 1950s, a typical plan: it recommended clearing eleven
hundred acres of inner-city land of its existing structures. Accordingly, the entire West
End was flattened and, beginning in 1958, replaced with expensive apartment towers.
The callousness of this West End project, the city's first major undertaking, the ignoring
of the West End residents, the excessive clearance, and the sudden replacement of low-
and moderate-income families by the well-to-do was shocking.

In 1960 a new mayor, John F. Collins, imported a fresh administrator, Edward J.
Logue, from New Haven, Connecticut, to direct a very extensive series of urban renewal
projects for the city. Logue had been relatively responsive to local groups in his New
Haven renewal work, and he set up a social planning agency, Action for Boston Commu-
nity Development. His administration inaugurated two decades of neighborhood bar-
gaining and neighborhood defense, which to this day are a prominent feature of the city's
politics.
Among the innumerable conflicts of the ensuing years, the 1968 "Tent City" protests of a coalition of black and white South End residents stands out because of the clarity of its issues. In the course of carrying out its renewal plans, the Boston Redevelopment Authority tore down a block of houses that were home to a hundred poor families. At that time the authority had not built any nearby low-rent housing suitable for the residents it displaced. Instead, it leased the cleared Dartmouth Street lot to a parking operator who catered to nearby office workers. The neighborhood activists, drawn together in an ad hoc group named CAUSE (Community Assembly for a United South End), regarded this transfer as the last straw in a series of similar events. They staged a sit-in at the local Redevelopment Authority offices. However, the all-day Thursday, 25 April, sit-in failed to attract public notice, so the group attempted on Friday to block off the parking lot itself. The ensuing traffic jam brought police, police brought arrests, and arrests brought lots of reporters and cameramen. On Sunday CAUSE set up tents and occupied the lot once more. This time their presence brought the promise of more regular neighborhood consultation, and some time later the Boston Redevelopment Authority established an elected South End Project Area Committee (SEPAC). At this writing housing is at last being built on the Tent City lot.76

Such neighborhood militancy in Boston and other cities did slowly influence federal legislation and guidelines, and it did alter local land and housing bargains. In a few cases Boston urban renewal projects became models of community participation and design. Particularly notable were the designs of architect John Sharratt: Villa Victoria (1968–76) for a Hispanic group in the South End; Madison Park (1967–80) cluster housing for an Afro-American coalition in Roxbury; and Mission Park (1969–76) for a racially mixed organization near the Harvard University hospitals in Roxbury.77

Community organization for urban renewal participation and defense merged easily with highway politics. By 1967, through expanding existing road and railway alignments, Massachusetts had completed large segments of its metropolitan interstate highway system. Standard American designs of those years called for constructing a metropolitan spiderweb of freeways, radials from the center city, and two or more circumferentials running around the metropolis. In Boston the program called for adding an inner belt route to the already built outer Route 128 and the contemplated distant Route 495.

The inner belt had to traverse densely built old residential sections. Moreover, since it would connect all the radial highways, it required giant multi-level interchanges. Highway planners designed an elevated highway which would be built on top of cleared land in the Charlestown, East Boston, Roxbury, and Jamaica Plain sections of Boston and in the adjacent cities of Cambridge and Somerville. A group of academics, city activists, and Cambridge politicians began the opposition when the highway authorizations and clearances were announced in 1967 and 1968. Soon they were joined by Mayor Kevin
White of Boston and his staff, and by a group of volunteer city planners and neighborhood organizers who contacted groups in Roxbury and Jamaica Plain. The coalition finally succeeded in persuading Governor Francis Sargent to call off construction in February 1970, and later to request, successfully, that U.S. Highway Trust funds be made available for public transit construction. This anti-highway coalition stopped the building of much of the proposed elevated highway, but not before an eight-and-a-half mile strip of land had been cleared of homes and businesses. A good deal of the former highway-designated land in the Southwest Corridor of Jamaica Plain and Roxbury stands vacant to this day.\textsuperscript{78}

Although housing abandonment, arson, urban renewal, and highways had cleared several thousand acres of inner-city land, it took the leadership and experiences of the civil rights campaigns to transform the rubble-strewn lots into community gardens. In Boston civil rights conflicts took on a particularly bitter quality because the Afro-American community was relatively small and politically under-represented. Also, it was opposed by a group of white politicians who saw that their self-interest lay in encouraging white racism and in maintaining their own control of a segregated public school system and its patronage. In addition, unlike other cities where business and union leadership joined to support civil rights, Boston leaders remained apathetic or even hostile to Afro-American demands.

Boston's particular civil rights campaign had begun in 1963 when a group of residents requested an interview with the Boston School Committee to discuss the inadequate education that was then being offered to their children. School Committee Chairperson Louise Day Hicks rebuffed the request and subsequently led an extended campaign against reform and accommodation. In June 1963 eight thousand schoolchildren boycotted the Boston public schools.\textsuperscript{79}

Next, the local NAACP filed a lawsuit requesting that the City of Boston cease operating segregated public schools, and the case then dragged through the federal courts. Hearings, investigations, protests, and marches ensued. The same sorts of rising frustrations and brief rebellions seized Boston as other American cities.\textsuperscript{80}

On Friday, 2 June 1967, while Senators Robert and Edward Kennedy conducted day-long hearings on the adequacy of federal social legislation downtown at Faneuil Hall, at Grove Hall, in the Afro-American section of Roxbury, a women's welfare rights organization, Mothers for Adequate Welfare, occupied the offices of the local welfare office. The women of this organization had been protesting welfare policies and practices for five years, and they hoped that the presence of the senators might attract attention and sympathy for their cause. Their platform particularly objected to the current practice that paid too few benefits to support a family and simultaneously forbade recipients' working to supplement their income. The sit-in brought out a large contingent of nervous white policemen, and the policemen's presence, in turn, attracted a large black crowd. As the
afternoon wore on, the police and the crowd multiplied until at 5:15, when the police broke into the welfare offices and started to drag out the protesters, the crowd attacked the police with fists and stones. A long evening of police and neighborhood violence followed. And the next two nights brought more fighting and harassment, until on Sunday night the heavily armed and much hated tactical police force was withdrawn from the ghetto.  

Violence moved into some of the white quarters of Boston in 1974 when a U.S. District Court judge ordered white and black children to be driven back and forth across the city to establish racially mixed classrooms. South Boston and Charlestown attempted violent opposition, while elsewhere in the city there were nasty racial incidents, racial attacks, house bombings, and even racial murders. Neither the federal judge nor the elected school committee was able to establish a satisfactory multi-racial public school system. At the same time the rebuilding of the central city under urban renewal did not soften the iron divisions between ill-paying and well-paying jobs. Forty-four percent of Boston's population, black and white, continued to live at the lowest income level, or below the poverty line, and predictions foretold a worsening future. Faced with such bitter racial conflict and such a failure of community effort to relieve the economic injustices of the city, one quarter of the white population of Boston fled the city during the decade from 1970 to 1980. Most were families with school-age children.  

In such a political maelstrom the two thousand-odd acres of cleared and abandoned city land stood as open wounds reminding the passerby of Boston's defeat. Yet, for a few citizens the land nobody wanted offered a fresh opportunity. As in other cities the most immediate opportunity lay in gardening, turning the nearby ugly and often dangerous lots into a source of family food and personal accomplishment.

The gardening responses themselves drew from both political traditions: sometimes from the new politics of neighborhood self-determination, sometimes from the tradition of public philanthropy. Today's community gardeners recall that in the early 1970s people began gardening on lots adjacent to their homes without formal organization or formal permission. Only on those few lots that were not buried with rubble and contractors' trash, or stripped of topsoil by bulldozers, could such small beginnings advance. Already in 1970, however, the people living next to Cedar Square in Roxbury Highlands had taken up gardening on a vacant lot, and some years later this success carried them forward to build a “survival garden,” as they called it, nearby on Linwood Street.  

Across Roxbury, in the Grove Hall section, Mrs. Augusta Bailey of 73 Wayne Street had for years been running an old-fashioned beautification program, but with the impoverishment of her neighborhood she had, in addition, turned to teaching nutrition to poor families and to feeding children in a housing project. In this work she was aided by a youth worker and community organizer from suburban Weston, William McElwain. Mr.
McElwain had established his Green Power Farm in 1970 as part of a youth program for Weston young people, but he had worked in the South End and he wanted to use food to help establish a new politics and new social relations. He sold his vegetables to food cooperatives and gave food to Mrs. Bailey. Both shared the idea that poor families should be able to get access to land so that they could raise their own food if they wished to.\textsuperscript{86}

The first formal public step toward a new politics of community gardening came with the election of Melvin H. King to the state legislature in 1972. Representative King was a former director of the Eastern Massachusetts Urban League and had tried repeatedly to get elected to a seat on the Boston School Committee in 1961, 1963, and 1965. An advocate of black nationalism and a man who was deeply committed to the issue of local control of land, he had been a leader in the Tent City action of 1968 and was a severe critic of top-down planning. In 1971 he joined the Massachusetts Institute of Technology faculty as an adjunct professor to assist its Department of Urban Studies and Planning with its community fellows program. As a state representative Mr. King successfully sponsored the Massachusetts Gardening and Farm Act of 1974, legislation which stated that gardeners and farmers might use vacant public land at no cost. As has always been the custom in the United States, however, the use of the land was subject to termination on short notice.\textsuperscript{87}

Such legislation might give permission to some, but it could not build urban gardens. Two-thirds of Boston’s vacant parcels were held by private owners, and, public or private, most were unsuitable for cultivation because of insufficient soil or pollution by lead and other poisons. In most parts of the city making a new urban garden required sustained effort to clean up the lot, to find fresh topsoil, to secure water, and to enclose the garden. Representative King’s Gardening and Farm Act did at least remove some legal barriers, and it evoked some sensible public recognition to the embarrassing absurdity of the city’s vacant lots.

During the winter of 1976 Mayor Kevin White’s administration decided to allocate some of the federal government’s new Community Development Block Grant funds to a gardening program. For the first year the city earmarked $500,000 for twenty gardens whose combined acreage came to a little less than six acres. Seeking quick success for its “Revival Gardens,” as it named them, it urged some existing community gardens to join the municipal effort, and it organized a few new gardens. Fresh soil, mulch, fencing, water, shrubs, and trees were promised, but the city’s project better served its contractors than its gardeners. The contractors did not deliver on time for the planting season, and often their materials proved inferior. Moreover, the Revival Gardens offered the enrolled gardeners neither control over the program nor leases or other security of tenure for their gardens.\textsuperscript{88}

While the Revival Gardens went forward, the Boston Redevelopment Authority
launched an Open Space Management effort which continued from 1977 through 1981. The city spent $2,266,000 to clean up 178 acres of land it owned. But the same defects that plagued the Revival Garden effort handicapped this cleanup. The work was expensive ($83,000 per acre for Revival Gardens, $12,722 per acre for Open Space Management), contractors were unreliable, and the cleaned lot was not usually a piece of land lending itself to community-affirming use.

These public vacant lot programs stimulated the same sort of responses as urban renewal and New York City's vest-pocket parks: local residents felt left out of the planning and were often not pleased with what have been given to them. Immediately after the Revival Gardens had been announced, the proponents of the new politics in community gardening began to organize. In April 1976 Augusta Bailey organized a one-day conference on the inner city environment.

The active participants of this first conference represented in their persons many of the streams of experience and outlook that were then converging in cities across the United States: Representative King was a civil rights leader, youth worker, and community organizer; Augusta Bailey was an old-style beautification advocate who had turned her attention to poverty and nutrition; William McElwain was a former school teacher and farmer who was organizing young people around the politics of food; Morell Baber was a Mississippi migrant to Boston, a welfare mother, and a member of the South End Project Area Committee; Charlotte Kahn, also of SEPAC, was a resident of the South End who had planted a garden for children in her neighborhood; and Mark Anderson was a former upstate New York farmer who was then working as activities director for the Salvation Army's Harbor Light Center in the South End. They were joined at their first conference by the Green Guerrillas, veterans of the garden campaigns of New York.

Some weeks later Representative King called a meeting of residents of the South End and lower Roxbury who were interested in organizing community gardens. With the help of his legislative aide, Judith Wagner, he located 3,000 square yards of topsoil, which belonged to the Metropolitan District Commission. It was, however, located in Marlborough, twenty-five miles from Boston. Charlotte Kahn then persuaded the National Guard to truck the dirt into the city, while Mark Anderson and his Harbor Light group stayed up all night making meatballs and sauce to serve the Guardsmen spaghetti dinners the next day. Six gardens were established that summer. Indeed, one of them was on Columbus Avenue in Lower Roxbury, very near the site of Boston's first school garden of 1891. In addition, through SEPAC, the group secured a small grant to hire a full-time gardener and two carpenters to help local residents fence and begin tending the many plots at the gardens.

Despite the lateness of the season a passable crop was planted and harvested. Volunteer organizers worked very hard that first summer and the following spring securing
more sites, organizing neighborhood gardeners, finding water and fencing for the plots, and looking for more soil and mulch. They began calling themselves Boston Urban Gardeners. By the summer of 1977 the core group of the South End Garden Project had enlisted the support and cooperation of many groups interested in community gardens: Edward L. Cooper and John Ellertson of the Highland Park gardens, garden groups in Jamaica Plain, Dorchester, and Brighton, and the staffs of Action for Boston Community Development and the Massachusetts Department of Food and Agriculture. In August 1977 they incorporated as a permanent nonprofit organization with Judith Wagner and Charlotte Kahn serving as volunteer co-directors. Boston Urban Gardeners is an umbrella organization designed to facilitate the activities of city gardeners and to enlarge their voice in Boston and Massachusetts politics.

The Boston Urban Gardeners’ Coalitions

Except for the occasional garden that is started by a resident on a lot adjacent to his or her home, community gardens come into being only through processes that embrace both neighborhood and city-wide politics. The costs of land preparation, especially in lead-contaminated Boston soils, exceed the resources of most garden groups, so that public funds must be found and alliances must be made if a workable set of plots is to be secured. Once the sites are cleared and the new soil furnished, the community gardeners can care for themselves. To understand the political dynamics of community gardening, it is useful to review two cases, the Highland Park 400 Survival Garden of Roxbury, and the Southwest Corridor Community Farm of Jamaica Plain. The first is the lengthened shadow of one man, Edward L. Cooper, a longtime community activist who devoted several years to establishing this garden in his neighborhood. It is now a handsome garden where the elderly can grow their own vegetables. The second project is located on land once cleared for an interstate highway. Here the gardeners operate a greenhouse to grow plants for Boston’s community gardens, train urban gardeners, and provide some neighborhood plots.91

In 1975, when the oil crisis and rising farm prices combined to confront low-income Americans with stark “heat or eat” alternatives, Edward Cooper organized the Highland Park 400 Survival Garden in Roxbury. The “400” represented the number of senior citizens in this predominantly black neighborhood in the first natural rise of land about two and a half miles south of downtown Boston.

Once the location of prosperous summer mansions overlooking the waters of the now-filled Back Bay and Fens, the neighborhood had been gradually developed until, with the advent of mass transit at the end of the nineteenth century, it rapidly joined the era of the streetcar suburbs of Boston. Since then, following the slow decline of Boston’s industr-
trial economy and the devastating exodus to the suburbs following World War II, the neighborhood first lost population and then lost its structures to insurance and bank redlining, landlord disinvestment, arson, abandonment, and demolition.

The garden itself sits at the top of Highland Park on ground that once contained three houses. The neighborhood still reflects its varied architectural past: colonial era farmhouses and mansions share the streetscape with later mansard-roofed, wooden, worker housing and attached brick townhouses. Everywhere the neighborhood is dotted with vacant lots, quite a few of which have been transformed into household and community gardens by new residents who learned how to grow vegetables in the rural American South and the Caribbean, or by younger residents eager to create a healthy environment in which to raise their families.

The Highland Park 400 Survival Garden was the first of the community gardens in this part of Boston, and it remains one of the finest in the city. The former director of both the Urban League and the NAACP in Boston, and retired project manager for the Boston Redevelopment Authority, Edward Cooper used the garden to organize black senior citizens—his neighbors—who were suffering from poverty, lack of exercise, and the inaccessibility of affordable fresh produce and other foods. The neighborhood had been abandoned by a supermarket chain some years earlier: it was not a profitable location. In the spring of 1976 Cooper began single-handedly to purchase and to distribute eggs and meat in bulk from the wholesale markets to help his neighbors cut their food bills. He also applied to the City of Boston’s Revival Program for assistance in constructing a community garden.

The Revival Program was funded with federal Community Development Block Grant moneys, administered by the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Designed to fund major capital improvement projects in blighted urban areas, the funds carried with them requirements for closed bids, union-scale wages, and other regulations that prolonged the length of projects and created confusion and a sense of helplessness on the part of local participants. Accordingly, once construction finally was underway, Ed Cooper began to look for additional allies and support.

In December of 1976 garden organizers from four Boston neighborhoods met to discuss common frustrations and plans and to share resources. At first the talk centered on practical issues such as the availability of seeds and tools. Very quickly, however, the conversation turned to the need to join forces to negotiate with the City of Boston about delays and confusion in the Revival Program. By the end of the meeting the five people present, including Ed Cooper, had decided to establish a city-wide gardening organization—Boston Urban Gardeners.

The first newsletter of the fledgling group was photocopied on two sides of an 8½ × 11-inch page:
ANNOUNCING! THE FORMATION OF BOSTON URBAN GARDENERS

The Boston Urban Gardeners was created last December 6th by a group of people who have been active in community gardening projects such as the South End Garden Project and the City’s REVIVAL Victory Gardening program. We believe that a coalition of resident gardeners from every section of the city can work together to improve our existing gardens as well as introducing this creative activity to more and more Bostonians.

Even during this abnormally cold winter, we have been active and can point to some accomplishments: we have arranged for two large loads of Suffolk Downs manure to be dumped at two gardens, one in the South End and one in Roxbury; we submitted a draft evaluation of the REVIVAL Victory Garden program to the Little City Hall Managers to further inform their discussion in December of that program.

At the next meeting, at Ed Cooper’s house, there were more gardeners. A host of urgent activities carried the Boston Urban Gardeners organization forward: deliveries of donated soil and horse manure, distribution of free seeds donated by the Department of Agriculture, and monitoring the city’s Revival Program. By mid-spring there were weekly ad hoc Steering Committee meetings at which participants offered to the group the use of resources, several hours of trucking, fence supplies, perennials, and even, occasionally, real staff time or money. By scraping resources together and cementing them with the glue of determination, more gardens were created and existing gardens improved.

The Highland Park 400 Survival Garden, working from the base of new topsoil, fencing, and water supplied through the Revival Program, now had added about 120 yards of horse manure from the Suffolk Downs racetrack, a colorful display of annuals, and several fruit trees. The twenty-five senior citizens of Highland Park brought together by Ed Cooper were by now producing hundreds of pounds of fresh produce on a luxuriant hilltop site.

Beginning in 1979, Boston Urban Gardeners itself was funded in part by Community Development Block Grant funds of the federal government. With a grant of $90,000 Boston Urban Gardeners was able to work on thirty-eight individual garden sites at less than $2,000 per project, thereby circumventing the tangle of requirements that had undermined the Revival Garden Program. In 1979, therefore, Boston Urban Gardeners was able to support the Highland Park gardeners’ requests for assistance with rototilling, garden expansion, and other tasks beyond the means of a senior citizens’ garden group.

The garden itself began to be perceived as a solid element and symbol of hope in a community still subject to redlining and disinvestment. Yet as the residents improved their neighborhood, the threat to their garden increased. The land on which it sat was slated, according to the Boston Redevelopment Authority’s initial plans, for new housing. Through the persuasive arguments of Ed Cooper, neighborhood leaders who were work-
ing for critically needed housing dollars nevertheless began to support preservation of the garden as a green oasis and as one symbol of a better future for the neighborhood.

In 1981 the 8,000-square-foot garden and an adjoining vacant parcel were purchased on behalf of the Highland Park 400 by the Boston Natural Areas Fund, a new ecology-minded organization dedicated to the preservation of green and open land in the city.

During the next few years (1982–84) Ed Cooper and Boston Urban Gardeners turned their attention to training young people for jobs in landscape contracting. The Highland Park garden served as one of the training grounds. The project went forward in two stages: first, the preparation of a formal garden design by professionals with the gardeners themselves as clients; and second, the in-training construction of the new design.

Anne Whiston Spirn’s class in landscape architecture at the Harvard Graduate School of Design drew proposals for an expanded Highland Park garden. Drawings and models of each design were presented at an open and well-attended community meeting and were left on display for the next week, as gardeners and residents discussed their preferences, made notes on options, and informed neighbors of the second meeting.

The second gathering of the community produced an unexpected result. While the Harvard students had reserved a week to “mesh” the elements of various designs preferred by the community residents, the community quickly came to a full consensus for the designs of each site. Community members and gardeners suggested a few minor changes in the selected designs, and construction began the following day.

The construction was done as the “on-site” portion of Boston Urban Gardeners’ recently initiated Landscape Skills Training Program, an activity funded with federal money through the city’s Neighborhood Development and Employment Agency and held at Roxbury Community College. The twenty trainees worked with local landscape contractors and designers to upgrade the vegetable plots, install a new perennial garden and flower border, plant an allée of trees, install arbors for roses, and create a meadow for nursery plants. Ed Cooper’s vision was to create a garden spot to rival the Boston Parks Department’s Fenway Rose Garden. In his words:

Open space is as much a part of urban design as zoning, buildings and streets. When I work, as I have, in the field of civil rights, and when I work, as I have, in the field of open space, it’s always in the interest of making the overall community a better place to live. Our beautiful garden demonstrates a lot of things that blacks feel they can’t do and whites feel can’t be done in the black community. This garden serves as an inspiration to everybody of what is possible.

In August 1984 residents of the community and staff and board members of Boston Urban Gardeners, the Landscape Training Program trainees, staff from the Boston Natural Areas Fund, staff from the city’s Neighborhood Development and Employment Agency, Anne Spirn, the students from the Harvard Graduate School of Design (including
Beth Arndtsen, whose design had been selected by the residents and who was subsequently hired as Boston Urban Gardeners' first staff landscape architect) gathered at the Highland Park site. The new rose and community gardens were rededicated as “Cooper's Place” in recognition of Edward L. Cooper's commitment to the community, his untiring dedication, and his aesthetic vision.

The very successes of the city's community gardeners threatened to undermine their existence. The positive effects of a community garden's social organization, the cooperation of neighbors, and the cleanup of the immediate neighborhood, transformed these vacant parcels into attractive sites for new construction. Only a few gardens like the large Fenway Victory Garden, which was sponsored by the Parks Department, or the still larger garden at the site of the former Boston State Mental Hospital, and Cooper's Place were secure. Most of the hundred-odd gardens around the city went forward without a title or lease. These gardens now occupy about twenty-five of the two thousand acres of vacant city lots. Although some agencies in the municipal government see the gardens as worthwhile additions to the city, old real estate policies still dominate City Hall thinking.

For example, in 1985 a long-standing and very successful small garden in Boston's South Cove was assigned to a syndicate of Chinese real estate developers. Ironically, these pocket-sized gardens had been some of the few places where Chinese immigrants and the American-born worked cooperatively together. Rather than preserve the garden and require the developers to select a site a few blocks farther from Boston's Chinatown, the municipal government now proposes to destroy this small bit of successful urban community life.

The South Cove case, following as it did similar actions in New York and other cities, brought forth yet another coalition for the defense of gardens and city open land. In August of 1985 several dozen Boston neighborhood organizations joined together with the Parks Department and some utilities and foundations to form an umbrella organization for the improvement of parks and open spaces in the city. Edward Cooper was elected to serve as the first president of the Boston Greenspace Alliance.92

The Southwest Corridor is a swath of land cleared during the mid-1960s for the proposed interstate highway I-95. The corridor runs through the low-income communities of Roxbury and cuts in two the residential valley streets between the rising uplands of Roxbury and Mission Hill on the one side and Jamaica Plain on the other. The issue symbolizes both the destructive power of large bureaucratic decisions and the counterforce of concerted community action. In 1968 a united five-community front succeeded in persuading Governor Francis Sargent to order a moratorium on highway construction within the area encompassed by metropolitan Boston's Route 128 circumferential road. Soon thereafter planning began for a massive development process, to begin with the relocation of Boston's turn-of-the-century elevated Orange Line rail transit to the Rox-
bury valley. As envisioned in the early 1970s, development would follow the relocated line and its adjacent commuter railroad so that one of the city's lowest-income areas might become the heart of the revitalization of the southern quarter of the city.

By the mid-1970s the land lay like a wide, unattended scar through neighborhoods reeling under the combined pressures of school busing, the energy crisis, and rapid downtown development and inner-city gentrification. The wide strip of land was being held by the City of Boston for future industrial and office development, but few purchasers or tenants could be attracted to these sites until the cheap land and old buildings close to the downtown had been taken up. While hundreds of thousands of hours had been expended by community residents at planning and design meetings conducted by public agencies, and as maps, charts, and models began to detail future projects, the bulldozed land itself was a barren reminder of former homes, businesses, and busy neighborhoods.

In the spring of 1976, when community gardens were sprouting on vacant land throughout the city, several longtime community leaders who had been living with the desolation and unfulfilled promise of the corridor for too many years decided to act. Mark Levine, director of Jamaica Plain's Ecumenical Social Action Committee, Lloyd King, director of the Roxbury Action Program, Charlotte Kahn and Mark Anderson of the South End Garden Project, and Jon Ellertson, a former farmer and Ph.D. candidate living in Roxbury with his family, met to write a proposal for use of a large parcel of state-owned land in the corridor.

The proposal was written in response to a request for proposals from the city's Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) program and included plans for a large community garden, solar greenhouse, and educational programs. While the city assessed the proposal's feasibility, the small group incorporated as the Southwest Corridor Community Farm, Inc.

Twenty-one unemployed people eligible for CETA jobs were hired under the terms of the one-year contract, and Jon Ellertson was hired as the farm's director. The group included a broad spectrum of the unemployed: they ranged from young people for whom this was a first job to laid-off union workers nearing retirement age. There were public housing tenants, a Chinese man who had immigrated to the United States via Latin America (he was fluent in both Chinese and Spanish but spoke hardly a word of English), former clerical workers, and several people who had not yet completed their college degrees. The CETA workers represented most of Boston's neighborhoods, most ethnic groups, and reflected most of the city's problems.

Since the project came on the heels of the city's first year of full-fledged school busing, the tensions erupting throughout the neighborhoods tore into the group of CETA workers. One young white woman from Charlestown's Bunker Hill housing project was stoned by neighbors when her picture appeared in a newspaper photograph of the multi-racial
group. Relationships among the workers on the site were relatively good, but it was impossible to protect the project and its participants from the often terrifying pressures facing its participants: violence in the streets and sometimes at home, illness of parents and children, and car accidents. One time a car driving by the work site skidded into four cars parked alongside and disappeared, thereby disabling the program's entire fleet. And CETA wages were low.

Without much support from the city's CETA bureaucracy, the project ended 1977 with a miraculous amount of work accomplished: a large community garden had been constructed on the acre site, and it was bordered in back by the first solar-heated community greenhouse in Boston. Some of the program participants went on to jobs in fields related to the program, the most notable success being a laid-off factory worker in his fifties who was so taken by the food preservation workshops that he was later hired by the instructors at the local Extension Service.

The tragedy of the CETA experience was that participants were eligible for only one year. Just as peace, harmony, and efficiency descended on the work site, the program was over and the CETA workers were thrown back on their own resources at a time when jobs and housing were scarce and racial tensions drew sharp lines around neighborhoods, transit corridors, and, therefore, opportunities.

The small group from three neighborhoods who had incorporated to form the Southwest Corridor Farm resigned to enable a more locally based board of directors to be elected. By the end of the summer of 1978 a community of ten people (including several of the former CETA workers) had taken firm control of the greenhouse, the garden plots, and the project's future.

As people joined the farm, claiming plots, planting borders of flowers, and improving the greenhouse, some of the tensions of the underlying community life surfaced: the farm straddled a district of black, white, and Hispanic neighborhoods. Yet the new board consisted primarily of young black and white families, almost all better educated and more instantly committed to the concept of the farm than the predominantly Hispanic residents who lived adjacent to the site. At this juncture the organization needed some way to publicize its commitment to serving the three communities and all their residents. Femke Rosenbaum, the Dutch wife of one of the new board members, began to organize a spring celebration to which residents of the three neighborhoods and the site's abutters would be drawn. Rosenbaum worked with a friend and folklorist to research multi-cultural rituals of spring. Weaving together the myths and traditions of ethnic groups represented in the Southwest Corridor (as well as those whose footsteps hardly touched New England soil—like the Norsemen), she inaugurated the annual “Wake Up the Earth Festival” at the farm.

The first festival, in 1978, began with a children's parade which originated in the three neighborhoods and then emerged at the farm. There followed ethnic dances, maypole
dances, the sale of seedling vegetables and flowers from the greenhouse, and booths with food and crafts that represented the local communities.

Each year subsequently the Wake Up the Earth Festival has evolved afresh. One year it attracted Japanese Buddhist monks in Boston on an international peace tour; their banners and simple drumbeats dominated the slow, colorful children's parade. The next year an enormous dragon appeared, dancing to a beat known only to itself and its centipedes.

Over the years the Southwest Corridor Farm expanded its scope, its membership, and its impact. Under the direction of first Susan Naimark and then Leroy Stoddard, and with the assistance of Boston Urban Gardeners and local charitable foundations, the farm has rebuilt the original greenhouse, offered educational programs to nearby public elementary schools, and supported five satellite community gardens in the surrounding neighborhoods. The greenhouse has become more and more efficient, producing thousands of seedlings for sale to community gardeners.

As the farm staff and the board's expertise grew, the organization turned to contracted work as a source of additional income. By 1984 the farm crew was clearing brush and mowing entrances to Boston's historic Franklin Park, and had undertaken a contract with the transportation authority to mow newly seeded grass and clover planted along the Southwest Corridor. In 1985 the farm was able to hire one of the graduates of Boston Urban Gardeners' Landscape Construction Training Program.

Uncertainty about long-term tenure of the land, however, always shadowed the farm's progress. Its parcel was owned by the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, which did not show "community gardening" on its maps of projected land use. Located adjacent to the now almost completed and speculatively "hot" Southwest Corridor, and abutting a neighborhood that suffered from a severe housing shortage, its acre was viewed as highly "developable" by both housing advocates and for-profit development interests. Caught between an ideological commitment to housing for its low-income neighbors and the need for productive open space for community use and new private market employers, the farm's staff struggled to be sensitive to other community demands while publicizing its own claims.

In 1985, through a grant from the local Parker Foundation, the Jamaica Plain Community Planning Coalition was formed to provide a forum for the discussion and resolution of these and related issues. The recommendations of its Open Space Committee clearly recognized the importance of open spaces and, if enacted, would protect the farm.

Green space is vital to a liveable city. Greenery provides a balance between the built environment and the natural world. The existence of urban wilds help us appreciate this natural world. Community gardens teach us the value of productive and cooperative work. Neighborhoods where residents are able to gather on the grass are friendlier and healthier. Landscaped sitting areas in commercial districts encourage us to relax, talk to each other, and use our local stores.
In the spring of 1986 the Wake Up the Earth Festival parade traveled the length of the new linear Southwest Corridor parkland, marking the beginning of new life and activity for Corridor communities. Whether the farm will survive on its acre is still uncertain; yet there is every indication that members and supporters have successfully made their case and that the Southwest Corridor Community Farm will emerge from its roots as a one-time-only CETA project to fulfill its promise as a permanent model of active community gardening in the city.

Over the past decade Boston Urban Gardeners (BUG) has grown to be the coordinator of a hundred or so garden associations across the city, associations whose members number five thousand gardeners. These community gardens range in size from a few side-yard plots of four or five gardeners to the large fields of plots in outer Dorchester. BUG's work continues to be both political and technical. It assists gardeners in organizing themselves and in finding lots, it defends existing gardens against plans to sell off the land by calling out the gardeners to protest, it promotes neighborhood farmers' markets, and it carries out educational programs for gardening and home food preservation. On the technical side, it manages a large mulch pile in Hyde Park, seeks soil and water for community gardens, runs a greenhouse to propagate plants and flowers, offers design consulting to community groups, and trains young people in landscaping skills. In the ten years of its existence BUG has become an important social and political institution in the city. The meaning of the community garden movement that BUG embodies and promotes is, however, much larger than an institution, even such a useful and successful one. The meaning of the gardens derives from their role as vehicles for the many traditions which they carry into the city, and from their simultaneous function as propagators of new hopes and new ideas for the design and management of city land.

Visions for a Better Future

The social and political processes of neighborhood organizing for use of vacant land have now been at work in Boston for about a decade. The gardens are the concrete results but by no means the most significant products of people's labor. Out of the experiences of ordinary city dwellers has come a series of goals that propose new directions for the city and its suburbs. The ideas for the future can be arranged in clusters, each grouping organized by the activities that are the main focus of its adherents. The visions range in scale from the intense issues of families, food, and nearby open space, to an intermediate range of neighborhood control of land and housing, to a comprehensive approach to an integrated local and metropolitan design.

The first group keeps the immediate concerns of families, food, raising children, care for the elderly, and neighborhood sociability as its essential targets. Its goals are the...
Community Gardening

empowerment of ordinary citizens who live in the city. Boston Urban Gardeners and its members best characterize this set of goals. For them the community gardens not only provide food but through their politics they help people to organize food cooperatives, farmers’ markets, local playgrounds, health facilities, and neighborhood social and educational activities. The garden movement for this group is a program for social reconstruction, a way to increase the power and efficiency of neighborhood self-help activities so that fewer American families will live stranded and helpless within the commercial metropolis.

A second group builds its hopes for the future upon neighborhood redevelopment, especially on the control of land and housing. They see community gardening as an alternative that arose in the face of landlord and municipal neglect, housing abandonment and arson, trash-filled lots, and the threat of resident displacement by public redevelopment and private gentrification. These neighborhood housing groups imagine a future in which land and housing will be controlled by local community development corporations. Such organizations would have a veto power over private development plans, and would be partners in public projects. Their present goals are to see that the elderly are not driven from their apartments and their houses, that low-income families are able to furnish themselves with decent housing, and that redevelopment does not destroy the public spaces of the neighborhoods as private development had done many years before.

The Roxbury Action Program and the Lower Roxbury Development Corporation’s success with architect John Sharratt’s Mission Park cluster housing are excellent examples of this sort of organization and its activities. The Alianza Hispana and its sister organization, Nuestra Communidad Development Corporation, recently formed in the Dudley Street–Columbia Road–Quincy Street triangle of Roxbury and Dorchester, represent other such groups. In terms of the history of the American metropolis, such undertakings are bringing to the old core city a long-established suburban land-planning technique: the design of new subdivisions as semi-autonomous neighborhood units. This current inner-city movement for local control of land envisions a future metropolis that is more equitable and more habitable because of a politics of neighborhood self-determination and self-reliance. These goals for locally managed redevelopment have found fresh opportunity in the joining together of the job training of Boston Urban Gardeners and Roxbury Community College with Mayor Raymond Flynn’s plans for the renovation of the parks of the city. Local contractors are to be favored in this rebuilding and future maintenance; the Afro-American and Hispanic communities will particularly benefit, since most of the city’s parks are adjacent to their homes.

The third group sees the community gardens as important elements to be included in designs for improving the natural and human ecologies of the entire metropolis. At present these advocates are landscape professionals, men and women well in advance of con-
ventional urban practices. This group’s experience lies with the failures of recent American city building and rebuilding, failures that make it more and more expensive to maintain the metropolis even at lowered and restricted levels of human existence. Good food, air, water, shelter, and recreation have been getting scarcer and scarcer.

For this group the community garden is an integral part of a system of metropolitan planning whose purpose is to design in such a way that the inherited land of the metropolis and the settlement patterns of its inhabitants complement each other. To summarize a complex and sensitive set of proposals, the procedures envision a process whereby community organizations make detailed proposals for land use. These proposals are then reviewed and adjusted in continuing bargaining to establish designs and guidelines that allow the inherited land forms and the human uses to come into mutually sustaining relationships. The goal is not to sacrifice the environment for short-term advantages, and it is not to sacrifice the residents for public and private constructions. Such a program sets norms for the reconstruction of the old core city’s abandoned lots, and it also establishes criteria for developing and redeveloping suburbs. The community garden is an important element in such a design, not because it requires much land, but because of what it demonstrates: how people can use land in common for their individual and mutual benefit. This is the essence of all three visions for the future."

Although they focus upon different aspects of today’s city, all three of these community garden-related visions rest upon a central truth about cities. All cities are a form of garden. Despite the dominance of streets, highways, and buildings, the city is an assembly of particular environments in which people favor some things and discourage others. What is special about a city is its product, its staple crop. The crop is not plants and animals, but the gardeners themselves.

NOTES TO PART ONE


6. Interview with Charlotte Kahn, Boston Urban Gardeners (hereinafter referred to as BUG), June 12, 1986; and information from Paul McCann, general counsel, and Maria Faria, of the Boston Redevelopment Authority, June 30, 1986; *Boston Sunday Globe*, June 29, 1986, p. 27.


23. Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York, 1938), 42–51; the gardens of the pre-industrial cities can be seen in the atlas of Jan Jansson, *Theatrum Urbium* (Amsterdam, 1657), 8 vols.


26. The guinea was a gold coin issued from 1663 to 1813. It had a value of 21 shillings under the former English monetary system, or 1.05 pounds by current reckoning.

27. *Inquiry into Allotments*, 10.


52. Pack, War Gardens, 6; Board of Commissioners, City of Boston Parks and Recreation Department, 43rd Annual Report for the Year Ending January 31, 1918 (Boston, 1919), 3.
57. Joanna C. Colcord and Mary Johnston, Community Programs for Subsistence Gardens (New York, 1933); Fox, Koeppel, and Kellam, 5–6.
62. Robert Fisher, Let the People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America (Boston, 1984), 110–12; Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, Regulating the Poor (New York, 1971).
63. The chronology of a list of important conflicts would order events in the following sequence: 1953, campaigns by Linus Pauling and Barry Commoner, to stop atomic testing on the grounds that it poisons the earth; 1953, U.S.–U.S.S.R. Test Ban Treaty; 1962, on chemical poisoning, Rachel Carson, Silent Spring; December 20, 1960, 350 U.S. military advisors in South Vietnam; April 30, 1975, Saigon evacuated; 1959, U.S. food surpluses in the midst of domestic malnutrition and overseas starvation: U.S. Department of Agriculture revives its Depression Food Stamp Program; May 21, 1968, Columbia Broadcasting System documentary “Hunger in America”; 1972, black national-


69. Details of the history of the People’s Park may be found in a memorandum of the University of California-Berkeley Public Information Office, “Chronology of Events and Decisions Concerning the Area Known as ‘People’s Park,’” typescript, November 1979, 14pp.; Alan Copeland, *People’s Park* (New York, 1969); and Robert Sommer, *Design Awareness* (San Francisco, 1972).

70. Fox, Koeppel, and Kellam, 7.


84. For example, Mr. Jesse Bird of 6 Oscar Street began a garden on the vacant lot next to his house in 1968 and has been developing it ever since (interview, July 30, 1984).


89. Tufts University, Land Resource Opportunity, 1, 19, 38–39.


91. These two case studies have been furnished by Charlotte Kahn, director of BUG, using materials from the organization’s files.


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