

Saving Esperanza Garden: the struggle over community gardens in New York City

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The Esperanza coqui

Walking down my street, I sometimes get the feeling that I don't belong. Between all the concrete paths and advertising billboards, genuine contact with other people often slips through the cracks. I eat in private – whether at home or at secluded tables in restaurants. I live with one roommate, whom I hardly see. And I when I go to work, I sit in a cubicle, by myself. Ironically, I am not alone in this. Being alone is par for the course in most large urban centers. In fact, it seems that cities are more and more designed for people to live very alienated lives. New York City is one of them. There are almost no public spaces in this city. Socializing is based around cafés, bars, restaurants, and shopping – private spaces where you need to pay a fee (whether a cup of coffee or a drink) to stay. They are commercial spaces designed to make a profit. And if you cannot afford endless \$4 cappuccinos or \$7 drinks, you find yourself with not a lot of places to go. Even the public parks – of which there are not many – are full of vendors, fences, and curfews. And I rarely have an encounter with someone else in the park.

That's why I was amazed to find myself sitting in front a campfire in a garden in the middle of Manhattan one night last winter, surrounded by strangers who were talking to me as though I were sitting in their own kitchen. The garden was called El Jardin de la Esperanza, Spanish for "The Garden of Hope." It was a community garden on the Lower East Side, a garden created and enjoyed by neighbors. It was destroyed by the city of New York.

Many of the gardens on the Lower East Side began in the 1970s. At that time the neighborhood was full of empty lots left by buildings burnt to the ground by landlords when the housing market crashed. These lots were full of trash and debris from the crumbled buildings, and the city made no effort to reuse them. The rubble-strewn lots threatened the safety of and demoralized the residents. The people in the community decided to do something about the situation. They went out and reclaimed the land that the city was wasting, clearing away the rubble to make room for something new and entirely their own. They cleaned up the trash, prepared the soil, and planted seeds. One by one, the old abandoned lots were covered in new greenery.

Esperanza was one of the most active community gardens developed in this period. It was planted in 1977 by Alicia Torres, her family, and the neighbors who lived next door to the empty lot at 221 East 7th Street. It took them an entire year to clear the trash and prepare the ground, but the result was well worth the effort. The birth of the gardens helped to transform the Lower East Side from a burnt-out ghetto into a vibrant, attractive community. This new beauty became a double-edged sword, though, because by the early 1980s the neighborhood began to attract real estate developers. New York City's government created the cross-subsidy plan, which allowed the gardens to be sold off for luxury developments so long as a small, flexible percentage of the housing was designated for low-income tenants.

Housing is a pressing concern in New York City. However, what is being built is primarily luxury rate housing, with rents out of reach of the people who actually live in the Lower East Side. And the city targeted lots where the gardens were growing for development, even though there are plenty of vacant lots available in the same neighborhoods, often on the same streets. Esperanza was one of these gardens.

Esperanza was first threatened in August of 1999, when the city offered to sell the garden to Donald Cappocia, a real estate developer who had donated more money than legally allowed to Mayor Giuliani's election campaign and whose company had already built luxury housing on top of the ruins of three other local community gardens.

The gardeners at Esperanza immediately began a campaign to save their 22-year-old piece of urban paradise. The fight against the city's development plans took many forms, from letter writing to direct action protests, but the heart of the struggle took shape with the construction of the giant coqui frog towering above the garden.

The thumb-sized coqui frog is native to Puerto Rico, and its history on that island makes it a perfect representation of the spirit of the garden. The coqui is so loyal to its community that it cannot survive outside of Puerto Rico, and it will do anything to protect the environment it lives in. In one story, the tiny creature defended an entire village from a monster.

Inside the coqui!

The coqui built at Esperanza was a larger-than-life representation, soaring fifteen foot above the ground and large enough for two people (or three or four children) to fit in comfortably. It took the gardeners and activists from the More Gardens! coalition three weeks just to build the foundation, and several more to cover the frame and complete the painting. Many of the local children who played in the garden helped with the construction, reminding the adults of all the fun and joy that the frog represented.

By early November 1999, the coqui was more than just a symbol of resistance. Faced with the threat of the city's bulldozers, activists and gardeners began sleeping in the frog every night. Every morning from 7 a.m. to 10 a.m., local residents and community activists gathered for a "stop the bulldozers party" with breakfast, coffee, and yoga sessions to keep up the spirits in the garden and support the dedicated souls sleeping outside through the freezing winter months.

The encampment protected the garden for much longer than the city would have liked, but the lot was sold and the developer demanded a return on his investment. On February 14, the blocks of 7th and 8th Streets between avenues B and C were covered in "No Parking"

**WHICH KIND OF WORM
WOULD YOU RATHER HAVE
IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD?**



FIG. 1: Common Earthworm



FIG. 2: Real-Estate Developer

R E A L
ESTATE DEVELOPER DONALD CAPOCCIA (WHO LIVES AT 74 EAST 3RD STREET) BULLDOZED FOUR LOWER EAST SIDE COMMUNITY GARDENS ON DECEMBER 30.

ON FEBRUARY 23, HE HAD A COMMUNITY GARDENER TAKEN FROM HER HOME AND CHARGED WITH CRIMINAL TRESPASS FOR THE "CRIME" OF TRYING TO RESCUE A FEW FLOWER BULBS FROM THE RUINS OF THE CHICO MENDEZ MURAL GARDEN.

Don't let Donald Capoccia worm his way out of this one.

HIS OFFICE PHONE (212) 732-3671
HIS OFFICE FAX (212) 534-5021

**DONALD CAPOCCIA
MUST BE STOPPED**

From bulldozing gardens

Real-estate developer Donald Capoccia (who lives at 74 East 3rd Street) bulldozed four Lower East Side community gardens on December 30. Now, in his greed, he wants to bulldoze two more — so he can make a huge profit building exorbitantly priced apartments on Avenue C.

From damaging homes

On March 4, while working on the development project to which our community gardens were sacrificed, Donald Capoccia's construction crew severely damaged a residential building on Avenue B at East 11th — forcing all the tenants to be evacuated from their homes.

From bullying critics

Far from showing remorse for the injury he has done to this community, Donald Capoccia has sought to intimidate his critics into silence. He is suing three prominent garden activists for \$2 million each — for having done nothing other than exercise their First Amendment rights.

lower east side collective
(212) 774-4192 home.earthlink.net/~alicem/lesc

Two years before he bulldozed Esperanza, Cappoccia bulldozed four community gardens. LESC borrowed from ACT UP's old know-your-scumbag flyer to make this comparison.



Viva el Jardin de la Esperanza!
Outside the garden with the coqui.

signs. The people keeping watch over the garden realized that the bulldozers would be coming the next day, and started calling the numbers on the emergency phone tree, letting people know that the garden needed urgent protection.

I was at a Valentine's Day party that night, where many of the guests were Esperanza supporters. One by one, or in small groups, people left the party to go to the garden. Some went home first to pick up sleeping bags or camera equipment, and I left with a neighbor to gather some wood from her apartment building to keep the campfire burning all night. The goal was to hold off the bulldozers long enough

for the New York Supreme Court to issue a temporary stay against any further destruction of the gardens, but we knew that our chances were slim at best. As the night turned into dawn, more and more people came out to stand in the cold, support their community, and fight for their garden.

The bulldozers finally came at around eight in the morning. By then, hundreds of people were gathered inside and around the gates of Esperanza. The protesters shouted "Shame on you! Shame on you!" as the police arrested thirty-one people, several of whom were locked inside the coqui or chained to the fence, and pushed back the crowds to make room for the demolition crew. When the bulldozers tore the coqui off its steel perch and smashed the beautifully painted sculpture into the ground, several people in the crowd began to cry.

The temporary stay that would have protected Esperanza was issued at 11 a.m., three hours after the coqui was torn down and the garden was bulldozed. The front of the garden was covered with a tall plywood wall, as though people might forget what had once been behind it. But the next day "Viva Esperanza!" was painted across the wall in bold writing, and candles and flowers created a makeshift shrine.

"Walking home from jail, it all began to hit me," Ben Shepard, one of the thirty-one activists arrested said, "the photo of Brooke fighting off the cops, of the coqui, all the beauty of community courage, and of our loss. I'll say this much – never have I felt more joy and connection with New Yorkers from all walks of life ... than standing in a blizzard, smiling by a bonfire, sharing stories at Esperanza.... After some eight years of HIV/AIDS work, I'm reminded of the simple point: loss lays fertile ground for community regeneration.... Let a thousand seeds bloom!"

These words are a direct call to action for all of us – a challenge to find new ways of bringing the spirit of community gardening to our own lives. When you walk down the street where you live tomorrow, try to see it with new eyes. Look for the cracks in the concrete where seeds could be squeezed in, and a community could start to grow. You don't have to plant a thousand at once, and you don't have to be a seasoned gardener or community activist to start. All you have to do is find a friend, or reach out to a stranger, and believe in your own power to make something beautiful for everyone to share.

