

# A Garden's Roots Grow Deep - A Brief History

Until the colonial era, this site was a salt marsh, an arm of the East River. Coastal wetlands provided cover for waterfowl. These marshes were later filled in, and by 1845 the first buildings had appeared on the site, providing housing for tradesmen and artisans. With the development of New York, the lower East Side has traditionally been the first home to all immigrant groups. It is also the birthplace of many social, cultural and political movements. By the 1890's, the lower East Side had become the home to hundreds of thousands of immigrants, densely concentrated into dank, airless tenements, lacking adequate light, air, or green space. As soon as they could afford to, each successive wave of immigrants would leave the neighborhood.

## MISSING WINDOWS

In the 1960's the outward movement of families began to change the neighborhood into the home of students, low-income working people, and a growing Latino population. In the late 70's and early 80's, New York City's boom and bust real estate market was in recession, as landlords in the lower East Side abandoned up to one quarter of the housing stock. The corner of Sixth Street and Avenue B was occupied by deteriorating, vacant buildings (5 tenements and a parking garage) that came to be used as shooting galleries by drug addicts. As the City removed the buildings from the six lots for safety reasons, the community was left with a vacant, debris-filled site that was both ugly and an invitation to criminal activity. At the same time, the East Village/lower East Side continued

to attract new residents who saw the neighborhood as an opportunity to gain a foothold in an energetic, if somewhat scruffy part of town. Groups of neighborhood residents began taking over buildings abandoned by their landlords and, seemingly, the City. Residents of

old-law tenements on the lower East Side were and are separated by 6-foot airshafts; many have no airshafts at all. Even in renovated buildings, interior rooms at best lack adequate light and air. At worst, they lack any windows at all.



City-owned buildings dug in, took over management of their buildings, and petitioned the City for financial help to fix them up. Others moved into abandoned buildings and using their own labor and resources, or obtained government assistance, made the buildings livable again. In response to neighborhood pressures, the City began tentatively, and then more resolutely in the 80's, to repair its tax-foreclosed housing stock.

Although a host of architects, engineers, contractors, and residents worked wonders to make buildings safe and sanitary, there is something they could not do for tenement buildings: they could not give them enough light and air. Most

Possessing a vision that the City's planners lacked, the residents of the lower East Side and Clinton adapted a proud European institution: the urban community garden. If windows were missing in the bedroom, the next best thing was to take the fresh air in a little garden down the block. Seeing the vacant lots as an important opportunity to restore some green to an overbuilt community, residents of the 6th and B neighborhood began to venture onto the vacant lots at the corner of 6th Street and Avenue B to claim them for the community and started the arduous task of hauling rubble and trash from the 17,000 square foot site.

In the early 1980's, as the last

buildings at the corner of 6th Street and Avenue B came down, an opportunity appeared to create a great community garden. Both Operation GreenThumb and neighborhood residents could see the possibilities of a great corner site. Among local residents, differing orientations to community development were manifest, depending chiefly upon attitudes about the extent of cooperation of the City administration. Some felt that one could expect cooperation from the City and were disposed to seek approval before taking over land or buildings. Others felt the City administration to be distant and were disposed to create a set of facts on the ground to compel the City to recognize property rights. Following the former approach, in early 1982, a committee — comprised of two homesteaders, a squatter, and a long-time E Village resident — petitioned the City's Operation Green Thumb for a lease and began the arduous task of hauling out rubbish and trash. Others, following the latter approach, laid out plots and invited others to do likewise, focusing on making a mark upon the land. A plot established in 1983 — “the Circle” — was built and survives to this day.

The energy that inspired these efforts is reflective of the contagious self-help spirit in the housing movement of the 70s and 80s and of an emerging cultural renaissance. A fledgling environmental movement was supporting alternative technologies, including wind and solar power experiments, while artists and musicians from the lower East Side were drawing media attention.

### **OPEN GATES**

Before the City could issue a lease, a local waste hauler petitioned the City to use the lots as a parking lot. Residents of Sixth Street marched

into the Community Board to voice support for the Garden and opposition to the parking lot. Throughout 1983 and 1984, garden members surveyed the site, drew up the plans for its optimal use, built over 100 4' x 8' plots and a large communal plot (“the Circle”), laid pathways, prepared for the installation of a fence, and laid out ornamental borders. In April of 1984, Green Thumb issued a one-year lease. Garden members were busy planting ornamental shrubs and trees. The Garden received important early technical assistance from the Citizens' Committee, Green Guerrillas and the Trust for Public Land .



In 1985, a new, more serious challenge loomed. The garden lies on City land taken from former owners in lieu of back taxes. The City held that the land should be sold at auction to the highest bidder. Arguing that housing was the highest and best use of the land, the City administration hatched a scheme to sell the site to high-end housing developers. The plan was officially adopted by the Community Board, backed by some housing advocates who took the short-sighted view that the land's potential value in a resurgent housing market should be

captured to fund low-income housing construction.

An aroused garden membership drew up an outreach program to steer the interest of the housing lobby away from this valuable and vital, much needed green space. They threw open the gates of the garden, holding their first annual Corn Roast and Harvest Festival, invited members of the local clergy and an Onondaga Chief to come bless the land, and unveiled a stunning garden trellis by a local sculptor. Alliances were made with a local garden coalition and community planners. An events committee was formed to tap the skills of the

many artist members, who staged programs of crafts, horticultural/science workshops, slide shows, multicultural festivals, and performances from around the world. The events program, now in its seventeenth year, runs all summer, featuring over 75 free events annually, drawing thousands of visitors. In addition, three preschool centers joined the garden; garden members developed an environmental curriculum to teach the children gardening and nature principles and skills. Challenged by the City so early in its existence, the Garden saw that broad neighborhood sup-

port was the key to its survival.

While garden users would eventually make their way onto decision-making bodies (community boards), their numbers will always be outweighed by nonusers. But even misanthropic garden-haters accept the existence of true public places — parks, playgrounds, and gardens with open gates. Sixth and B understood the importance of gates. There are two gates, on two sides of the garden, and there are paths linking one gate to the other, and the gates were often left open, encouraging the public to wander through. The community early came to appreciate that 6 and B was open to any and all (even to those who did not enter). By 1986, the Community Board was beginning to be won over.

### **CREATIVE PEOPLE**

By 1986, the Community Board was forced to take a more flexible stance. Although the Sixth and B Garden was easily the most valuable site, the extraordinary size of its membership and the growing awareness of its vitality among lower East Siders and greening organizations kept it off the auction block for 10 years. An economic downturn in the late 80s took the heat off the real estate market and gave the garden time to work out a strategy. (It is ironic that the inability of the City to propose affordable housing on the site also had much to do with saving the Garden from development). In 1996, a deal was worked out between the City of New York and the Trust for Public Land to give the garden permanent site status. Our garden was transferred to the NYC Parks Department as part of the City Spaces program. In keeping with the goals of the program, the garden constructed and maintains a children's adventure playground and children's garden. The children's activity area was designed by

the Children's Environments Research Group of the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York. Now two hundred children utilize the garden weekly.

The Garden is incorporated as the 6th Street and Avenue B Garden, Inc. and is a 501(c)3 corporation. We have a board of directors comprised of 2/3 garden members and executive committee members and 1/3 community leaders, contributing their skills, expertise and support. Everyday decisions are made by the general membership at monthly meetings. Each member, who must live between Delancey and 14th Street and Broadway and the East River, pays annual dues for a 4x8

Located in the heart of the Lower East Side, 6 and B has an extremely high percentage of members in the arts. The membership boasts artists, graphic designers, fashion designers, poets, actors, dancers, singers, crafts persons, web site designers as well as housewives, office workers, teachers and artisans. The artists have always generously given of their time for garden events, out of sheer energy, the desire to showcase their talents, and to entertain their friends and neighbors. The abundance of talent among members has contributed to the overall design of the garden.

We have more than 15 fruiting trees, more than 50 flowering shrubs and innumerable herbs,



Daniel Mackler

foot plot and must contribute 4 hours each month in service to the Garden.

Today this pioneering garden serves as an anchor for local community gardening groups and as a working model of preservation for an energetic greening movement. We are one of a network of community gardens which have transformed the environment of the Lower East Side.

flowers and vegetables. Our fence, also designed by garden members, represents the members' hands-on contributions in creating the garden. And we have a 37-foot internationally famous and always-controversial sculpture of NYC street treasures created by a garden member and lifelong neighborhood resident.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We would like to thank our many supporters. Among public bodies,

Operation GreenThumb and, more recently, the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation have given the garden crucial initial and ongoing support. Among non-profit organizations, Green Guerrillas and the Citizens Committee of New York provided early and important support. The Trust for Public Land has played a major role in the preservation of the garden, helping devise a successful strategy to achieve permanent status, funding its incorporation, workshops, key garden improvements, and linking us to supporters for our successful Events Program.

The Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust has provided crucial, ongoing support for the Events Program. Public support for the program has been made possible by the Fund for Creative Communities/NYS Council on the Arts Decentralization Program, administered by the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council. The City Parks Foundation/Mellon Foundation Grant Program, the Rockefeller Flow Fund and the Artists and Audience Exchange (a New York Foundation for the Arts Public Program) have provided additional support.

The New York City Environmental Fund of the Hudson River Foundation, the Met Life Foundation, the City Parks Foundation, and the Greenacre Foundation have made crucial support for garden improvements. The National Gardening Association has recognized us as an outstanding community garden. New York Care and Makor have help to keep the garden beautiful.

But above all, we are indebted to many members who have worked to make 6 and B a reality. To all those members who dreamed and schemed, planned and laid out, built and planted, hauled in and hauled out, organized and per-

formed, wrote and petitioned, called, e-mailed, held meetings, sold tickets, baked, postered, watered, monitored, or just watched and waited: thank you!

#### **A POSTSCRIPT ON GENTRIFICATION**

In 2003, as Lower Eastsiders look back on the transformation of their community, the first thing they mention is apt to be gentrification. While the neighborhood still retains a significant number of low-income families, the phasing out of rent regulation, the privatization of the housing market, and the increasing disparity of incomes (and resulting increased market power of an affluent middle class) are transforming the lower East Side into an increasingly Caucasian, well-educated and upwardly mobile community. While



Connie Berry and Mary Tyson at Harvest Fest 2004

the membership committee strives to preserve the diversity of garden membership, our members are beginning to mirror the changes that are taking place in the community. While artists are leading members of the community and the garden, we see more bankers, lawyers, and media specialists than ever before. Rents are skyrocketing. Were it not for rent stabilization,

the membership of the garden might encounter nearly complete turnover.

As the neighborhood changes, driven by large-scale market and demographic changes, the significance of the community initiatives and public investments of the 1980s and 1990s - including our garden - tend to be overlooked and taken for granted. And yet, the willingness of the City and community to rebuild a devastated neighborhood clearly prepared the way for today's prosperity.

But now, with greater prosperity for many, on the one hand, and the serious dislocations brought by the destruction of the World Trade Center, what is the continued significance of the Garden?

The fact is that larger trends are at work. Fifty years ago, Manhattan looked very different from today. New York was still a major industrial center, and Manhattan was a center of the garment trade, printing, and shipping. A working class population, with traditional families, was still in evidence. Except for the very rich, wealthier families tended

to live in the outer boroughs. Manhattan was the least affluent of the boroughs. Tiny apartments

(next to Staten Island), and the center of great wealth.

housing, building on the diverse strengths of lower Manhattan.



Kriss Roebing and Sharaz Scofield

As greeners and gardeners, it seems to us that for Manhattan to remain competitive - and prosperous - our fate may depend on how attractive we can make our community.

Community gardens have made an important difference in the quality of Manhattan. Future growth may depend on the creation of bike-ways, access to the waterfront, livable neighborhoods close to places of employment, well-planned and vital communities. In this light, the creation of the 6th and B Garden - like the creation of the other green oases of Manhattan - carries a broader significance. In fighting for a cleaner, more attractive environment, we may also be contributing to the economic health of our City.

housed entire families, and rents were relatively low. Manhattan was the least wealthy of the five boroughs.

The garden was born in a great real estate crash of the 70's that marked the mid-point of a great transformation. As traditional industries declined, white-collar occupations boomed in the fields of the media, finance, real estate, insurance, government, and the nonprofit sector. Working class families moved out to affordable family housing in the outer boroughs and the suburbs. In their place, young educated workers arrived, often deferring marriage and families until late in life. As single people arrived, they set up household individually, or tried to. As families of four left, scores of young single persons showed up, all needing and wanting their own place. With more disposable income, single folks were able to outbid families for scarce housing. Typical rents have shot up to \$2000 per month and up for one and two-bedroom apartments (or even studios). Manhattan has become the 2nd wealthiest of the boroughs

#### **OUR FUTURE, OUR WORLD: THE POST 9/11 WORLD**

The value and need for the Garden has proved its great significance in the wake of 9/11. It is evident how necessary our green refuge is for the human spirit. It is a place to be still, to reconnect with one's spirit and others, to speak with and support neighbors, to creatively express the spirit of humanity; a place for displaced former residents to come back and reconnect; a place for parents and children to relax in safety.

While lower Manhattan retains great economic strength, including its dense ethnic neighborhoods, dynamic culture and industrious labor force, the realities of global competition and the destruction of 9/11 present the City with peril and opportunity.

On the one hand, there is the temptation to recreate the scale and feel of the now-destroyed World Trade Center and building high-end housing to match. On the other hand, there is the option to create a mix of uses and mixed -income

# Garden Members 2003



General membership meeting April 2003