



# Actually Existing Commons: Three Moments of Space of Community Gardens in New York City

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes an urban space that functions, it is argued, as the commons in the neoliberal city. The space of community gardens in New York City is “unpacked” according to three Lefebvrian moments of space: the material space, representations of space, and the lived space. Engaging alternative conceptualizations of social relations in the urban space, it complicates and explicates the notion of the commons and its actually existing manifestations.

**Keywords:** commons, community gardens, neoliberal city, moments of space

... simultaneously present in any landscape are multiple enunciations of distinct forms of space—and these may be reconnected to the process of re-visioning and remembering the spatialities of counter-hegemonic cultural practices (Keith and Pile 1993:6).

The neoliberal political project is proceeding continually towards creating “actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner and Theodore 2002) targeting the urban environment as a primary tool of expansion (Harvey 1989a). Various manifestations of local entrepreneurial culture (Peck and Tickell 2002) are clearly evident, such as the transition from managerialism to entrepreneurialism in urban governance (Harvey 1989b). In this urban restructuring the city government is assisting, collaborating with, or otherwise functioning like the private market with far-reaching implications for the provision of social services and regulation of public space (Hackworth 2007). As a result, since the 1970s urban centers worldwide have undergone an intensive erosion of public spaces: streets, parks, and squares (Harvey 2006). This urban restructuring, ruled by the hegemony of property ownership (Blomley 2004), resulted in the dissolving of the social and cultural textures of vivid neighborhoods, local residents being dispossessed of common resources that sustained their lives in the city, and even in the residents’ displacement (Hackworth 2007).

However, such processes have not gone unchallenged; this article wishes to identify manifestations of an alternative political project through the examination of the actually existing commons emerging within the urban space. Consequently, it also revises and updates the notion of the commons. The commons is a way of thinking and operating in the world, a way of organizing social relations and resources. Actually existing commons, just like actually existing neoliberalism, have multiple modalities, mechanisms of development and “diverse socio-political effects” (Brenner and Theodore 2002:353). Actually existing commons are live relics of the ideal of the commons; they are never complete and perfect and may even have components that contradict the ideal type. Nevertheless, even in the face of pervasive neoliberal ideology and practices, “alternatives do *exist*” and they pave the road to new politics and another possible world (De Angelis 2003:2).

There are urban systems that might be considered actually existing commons such as the collective ownership of housing designated for, and managed by, poor urban populations in the form of limited equity cooperatives (Saegert and Benitez 2005), or workers’ cooperatives that act as a common resource of livelihood (DeFilippis 2004). This article examines New York City community gardens as another manifestation of actually existing urban commons, portrays their components, considers the challenges they face and the mechanisms that augment their sustainability in the midst of neoliberal urban space. Community gardens in New York City are a paradigmatic example of counter hegemonic spaces. They had been produced collectively by residents of the most neglected locales only to later become a target for capitalist development. These attempts to enclose the gardens initiated a counter-reaction by local residents. In order to “unpack” and reconstruct these particularities of the urban commons, I use Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) critical analysis of space. First, because Lefebvre’s framework of the production of space is particularly useful for examining urban space the production of which (not only its consumption through management and regulation) is constantly and publically negotiated. And second, Lefebvre’s project of unpacking space into three co-existing moments allows the integration of socio-political praxis into the political economy of space and complicates our understanding of the urban commons.

The remainder of the introduction briefly presents the academic debate over the commons since the 1950s to date. The contemporary literature critical of the capitalist mode of production, mainly the work of De Angelis (2007) and Hardt and Negri (2009), informs the development of the argument. The main section of the article—“unpacking the commons”—presents the analytical framework and the case of community gardens in New York City, and proceeds with the analysis of community gardens according to Lefebvre’s three moments

of space. Finally, the conclusion ties together the components of actually existing commons and offers reflections on their future production.

The conceptualization of the commons as a property with no rights allocation and regulation, and as belonging to everybody and hence to nobody (Gordon 1954 in Mansfield 2004) underlined the debate over the commons for the last six decades. But this debate goes back to the commons in England that sustained the livelihood of landless serfs. These commons were criticized already in the fourteenth century as obstacles to more *productive* forms of agriculture (and were eventually enclosed in the eighteenth century) (Goldman 1997). Half a millennium later Hardin's (1968) "The tragedy of the commons" continues this thread of thought, suggesting that both population growth and the motor of human behavior—of productivity and competitiveness, and of maximization of short-term individual gains—make a property which is everybody's and nobody's unsustainable. This predicament could be resolved through the allocation of property rights; either nationalizing or privatizing common resources (Hardin 1968).

Responding to Hardin, Monbiot (1994) suggests that the tragedy of the commons became the tragedy of their disappearance. Nationalizing or privatizing the commons (which entails enclosing them) actually eliminates the complex systems of self regulation that local people constructed over many years devising sustainable ways of using common resources (Monbiot 1994). Analyzing the history of neoliberalizing the North Pacific ocean, Mansfield examines the various privatization and nationalization mechanisms deployed over fisheries and concludes that "all of the forms [of regulation] entail reducing the options of those who once relied on public fisheries, while giving to those who qualify a form of wealth that can then be used for further gain" (Mansfield 2004:323). Thus, neoliberal practices of commercialization destroy the commons (Hardt and Negri 2004) and practices of enclosure continue to serve as a generative force for capital expansion (not only as an historical pre-condition for the development of capitalism) (De Angelis 2007).

While the contradicting political ideologies of capitalism and socialism both propel a property regime designating space to be either private or public, respectively, the commons are neither of these (Hardt and Negri 2009). Rather than devising "strategies for improving social and ecological conditions", a critical debate of the commons would examine neoliberal control over the knowledge that determines the workings of society and ultimately "the realm of what is defined as the commons" (Goldman 1997:3). This requires moving away from thinking of the commons only as a material and finite resource (to be either freely consumed or regulated from overconsumption), and reconstructing the prevailing ownership model in a way that accentuates the multiple and contradicting possibilities embedded in *property* (Blomley 2004). The

task at hand is to re-envision the commons outside of the public–private dichotomy and introduce the social, cultural, and political practices that allow new possibilities, thus reconstituting the commons as an object of thought (Hardt and Negri 2009). The commons can then serve as a platform for envisioning and developing an alternative framework for social relations and social practices (De Angelis 2003).

The urban commons follow several core characteristics. First, the urban commons are produced. Second, they offer a set of livelihood qualities over which rights are negotiated: dwelling, open space, recreational and social space, movement in space, and control over space, to name just a few. Third, the urban commons fulfill these and other social needs in a non-commodified manner. Fourth, they necessitate communities (De Angelis 2003) to operate them through collaboration, cooperation and communication (Hardt and Negri 2004) rather than through private interest and competition. All together, the commons provide the opportunity “to obtain social wealth and to organize social production” (De Angelis 2003:6).

## Unpacking the Commons

The deconstruction of space, any type of space, to its constitutive elements uncovers the social relations, everyday experiences, material values and struggles that reproduce space (Lefebvre 1991). The following sections deconstruct the space of community gardens, thereby exposing the potentialities of this space as actually existing commons.

According to Lefebvre (1991), space envelops a triad of interlocking elements: material space—the actual space and its forms and objects; representations of space—the knowledge about space and its production; and lived space—the emotional experience of space and the subjective practices that are attached to space. Space, then, is at once a physical environment to be perceived; a semiotic abstraction that informs both common and scientific knowledge; and a medium through which the body lives out its life in interaction with other bodies (Lefebvre 2003). The unpacking of space, which is not only an intellectual, but also a political task—one which might support social change through space (Lefebvre 1991)—reveals the social relations that produce it as well as the social relations it produces, and helps explicate the mechanisms by which people organize collectively in order to produce, manage, and sustain the urban commons. The following analysis uses the triad moments of space to unravel the workings of community gardens, weaving together the image of the urban commons.

The literature on community gardens analyzes them in (at least) three different manners: first, as spaces of contestation, a spatial embodiment of the reaction to social and environmental injustices afflicted by the progression of the neoliberalization of urban space (Eizenberg 2008;

Staeheli, Mitchell and Gibson 2002); second, as controlled space in which the gardens and gardening itself are used as a control mechanism by municipal governments and other institutions to “produce” citizen-subjects (Pudup 2008); and third, as a neoliberalizing space— set within the paradigm of ecological gentrification, the garden is viewed as a tool for financial gains under the guise of an environmental agenda (Quastel 2009). While in the first type, the gardens are viewed as a platform to formalize and express critique, in the latter two they are seen as a mechanism for suppressing critique on social and environmental injustices, and for advancing urban neoliberalization. Notwithstanding this recent top-down cooptation of community gardening, this article perceives community gardens in New York City as part of a wider phenomenon of urban contestation by which space is utilized to voice and fight for alternative socio-political arrangements.

Community gardens in New York City are green open spaces located on urban lots once occupied by buildings that were abandoned and dismantled during the economic crisis of the 1970s. Dealing with a devastated environment and the social and physical problems that it attracted, resident groups cleared the lots and cultivated the land.<sup>1</sup> At its peak during the early 1990s, the number of gardens reached a thousand. Today, about 650 gardens are left, 550 of which have some type of preservation status.<sup>2</sup> This article is based on a larger grounded theory research on community gardens in New York City conducted by the author in 2003–2007. This research was pursued through ethnographic methodologies of in-depth interviews, numerous observations, and a quantitative analysis of data files provided by the municipality and organizations.

### *The Material Space of the Commons*

Lefebvre (1991) refers to material space as an actual space of fixed, identified, and discrete entities. It is a space of experiences and practices and is therefore defined by its use-value—its non-commodified and non-commercialized qualities (Harvey 2006). It is the actual space of the garden with the soil, plants, animals, and people. In New York City today, this material space amounts to about 650 community gardens. Karl Linn (1999) suggests that community gardens in the United States (re)produce the space of the commons. Most notably, he points to the gardens being communally and locally managed and enabling some self-sufficiency for their participants. Linn’s account of community gardens as the commons emphasizes the materiality of the commons, that is, the actual space and its actual usage. The gardens offer some material resources such as land, air, healthy food, community, and “land-based enterprises, such as cooperative market” (Linn 1999:43). To this list we can add recreational and cultural facilities. However, Linn’s account of

community gardens as the commons lacks two major components that this article is set to address. First, a theoretical framework that enables the examination of other actually existing commons. Second, examining the commons also requires scrutinizing the new thinking, practices, lived experiences, social relations and subjectivities that are contingent to the commons.

The very idea of communal authority of space challenges contemporary common sense. Hence, protecting the space of the gardens requires an almost perennial struggle, new conceptualizations, and legal solutions. For years community gardens had no legal status; they were considered vacant lots in the municipality procedures of urban development. The assault on New York City's community gardens, led by the Giuliani Administration in the late 1990s, blatantly defined the gardens as an irrelevant phenomenon, belonging to a by-gone era and as one that should therefore be uprooted to make way for progress and development.<sup>3</sup> Due to a massive public outcry, the Administration failed to annihilate the gardens and three different schemes for protecting the space from privatization were put in place. None of them offers a permanent solution but all three are means to sustain the material space of community gardens in the neoliberal city.

In the first scheme, about 400 gardens were preserved under the Parks and Recreation Department of New York City. According to the City's law, the land under this jurisdiction cannot be "de-parked" without a very complicated process of approval involving also state-level intervention, and if a garden is taken away, a similar-sized piece of land must be offered to compensate for it. Another reassurance for preserving the gardens is the informal commitment of the municipality based on their *modus operandi*. "If it walks like a duck and it quacks like a duck, it is a duck . . . [the] commitment on the part of the City . . . is just as strong as your commitment to gardening. If you continue gardening we protect your garden"<sup>4</sup> the Assistant Parks Commissioner assured gardeners advocating for an official community gardens policy. This informal commitment suggests that as long as there is a community that maintains the garden it will be protected. However, the history of destruction of beautiful, well-maintained gardens by the City makes this statement, which is not anchored in policy, questionable.

In a second scheme, 67 gardens were purchased by the national nonprofit organization Trust for Public Land (TPL) and preserved as land trusts. At the end of a process now in motion, members of these gardens will be entitled for a collective legal ownership over the space<sup>5</sup> as long as the gardens are maintained as an inclusive community resource. By transferring the gardens to Land Trusts, TPL ensures that the property is taken out of the market system, however not permanently; ongoing community participation in the production of gardens as spaces that serve the commonwealth conditions their sustainability.

The model of community gardens that is developed by TPL emphasizes the organizational infrastructure that is needed to sustain the space: if the gardens are underused and do not operate as a collective resource or are no longer needed and appreciated by the community, they lose their purpose and their right to be preserved. This model takes most closely after the ideal of the commons as serving a wide variety of public purposes and needs through communal authority and maintenance. It also echoes De Angelis' (2007) main assertion that the commons necessitate a community—the commoners—that holds the authority to manage the gardens. For the commons to succeed, a TPL representative asserts, “it is crucial that there will be an organization that can run [the gardens] for public benefit . . . Community gardeners will play a significant role in governing the organizations and the gardens will become increasingly important for their neighborhoods as a result of being as public as possible”.

The third scheme for sustaining the material space of the gardens is proposed by the New York Restoration Project (NYRP), a nonprofit organization that purchased 59 gardens in order to expropriate the land from the market. Unlike TPL, NYRP emphasizes land rescue over community participation and runs the gardens with a vision of maintaining them as enduring beautiful green spaces. To bring this vision to life, NYRP hired professional designers, who redesigned each of the gardens. In some of the gardens the community was successfully integrated after the fact, but in many gardens the community remains alienated from the space, which was not produced by them and according to their needs and vision, and requires a paid staff member to regularly maintain it (similarly to urban parks). It is therefore difficult to evaluate the number of NYRP gardens that can be thought of as instances of the commons any more than public parks. Although the organization protects these spaces from the market, many of the gardens fail to serve the needs of the community and are perceived by many residents and activists as uninviting, elitist spaces. In addition, the centralized management of these community spaces by NYRP makes their ongoing existence overly dependent on the organization's funding.

These are the three solutions that were set up between 1999 and 2002 to protect and secure community gardens as a common resource in New York City. Although each of these solutions contains caveats that challenge the future status of community gardens, none of the three falls strictly within the private or public definitions of urban space and they do not inspire the rethinking of alternative constellations of the urban commons. These schemes emphasize the co-existence of the local-material space *and* a collective—a community that maintains the space collectively—as the two key coordinates which make community gardens commons.

The intervention of civil society via nongovernmental organizations (TPL and NYRP) in protecting the commons reflects not only the eroding capacity of state and local governments to protect public space in the face of economic pressure to privatize it, but also—as the different interpretations given to the gardens by these two organizations highlight—raises questions about who holds the power to control and define the commons (Goldman 1997; see also Eizenberg's (2011, forthcoming) analysis of community gardens under these two organizations).

Nevertheless, space-centralists such as Lefebvre and Harvey emphasize the prominence of the material space in the evolution of any alternative, set to transform the dominant social structure. They insist that real and meaningful alternatives could only flourish from a collective action rooted in the reworking of the material space (Harvey 2006). The gardens are actually existing spaces, present in absolute space and time. The collective actions of gardeners are aimed at protecting and controlling the material space. However, protecting the material space is not enough; it must be intertwined with mechanisms of cooperation and communication that activate the community of users, produce alternative knowledge, and offer alternative experiences of space. The other two facets of space—lived and representations—reveal the mechanisms that not only produce the material space but also change the meaning and value of its materiality.

### *Gardens as Carriers of Culture: Lived Space*

Lived space is space as experienced through images and symbols which do not submit to quantifiable rules. It is the emotional quality that is exerted from space—emotional values and meanings which are immaterial but objective. It is the realm of collective memories, cultural symbols, and personal history (Harvey 2006; Lefebvre 1991). “As a space of ‘subjects’ rather than of calculations, as a representational space, it has an origin, and that origin is childhood, with its hardships, its achievements, and its lacks” (Lefebvre 1991:362).

The lived facet of the space of community gardens has multiple expressions in images, memories, emotions, identity, and everyday practice. As most gardeners are external or internal immigrants to New York City, the gardens are experienced as symbolizing the landscapes of childhood which they left behind. With those past landscapes are also various practices that get reenacted in the gardens. A strong place attachment and identification with the living environment as well as a sense of ownership and control over it are developed in the gardens (Eizenberg 2010). The space of the gardens is an important common resource for making meaning and enhancing a positive emotional experience of the living environment.



The most physically salient aspect of the symbolic meaning of the gardens is their constitution as carriers of cultures within the city. The hegemonic culture expresses itself in space, deploying mechanisms that marginalize the expressions of other cultures. In spite of that, the space of the gardens is re-appropriated and used to celebrate these silenced cultures. Most of the gardeners in New York City define themselves as Latinos (coming mostly from Puerto Rico) or as African Americans (first or second generation in the city arriving from the rural South). Since gardens are very local sites that are established by members of the surrounding building blocks, ethnic segregation—or what Thabit (2003) defines as ghettoization<sup>6</sup>—explains why many of the gardens are clustered as single-ethnicity gardens (either Latino or African American). Community gardens that are located in more ethnically diverse neighborhoods reflect this diversity in their membership.

One of the signature characteristics of the pool of community gardens is their variety. Each garden allows for a uniquely different experience of space with its own arrangement, aesthetic, usage, and colors. This diversity is possible because gardens are spatial expressions of a specific group that was not formally trained in urban planning or landscape architecture and does not attempt to implement principles from these disciplines. This enables gardeners to express and experience their culture collectively (rather than privately, in the confines of their own homes). And indeed, various aspects of culture are realized in the gardens through a rich experience that engages aesthetic and culinary preferences, rituals, customs, artistic expressions, and social interactions. While presenting an impressive diversity, gardens could be roughly divided into three types: the casita gardens, the farm gardens, and the eclectic culture gardens.

“Casita gardens” are predominantly Latino in population, and are epitomized by the casita—literally a “small house” in Spanish—that “imitates traditional rural Puerto Rican homes, [the design of which] has been traced back to the indigenous Tainos . . . [it is] brightly painted to evoke dwellings on the island” (Martinez 2002:67). The casitas are used to store food and musical equipment for cultural celebrations and serve as a cozy seating place for the gardeners. Latino gardeners generally perceive the garden as important mostly for community development and as a space for social and cultural gathering over preservation of open space and civic agriculture (Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny 2004).

In some casita gardens, gardeners realized the strength of the garden as a space for cultural transmission and officially transformed it to a cultural center. A successful example is the Rincon Criollo (literally: Creole Corner) Cultural Center in the South Bronx. Ilya, a gardener from the Bronx, describes it like this:

Now we have Rincon Criollo that is very amazing. It is basically a cultural and music center. They have enhanced their own Bomba and Plena which are the music and dance of Puerto Rico which are dying out there, but are very fresh over here. And groups are using it, people all over the world know about that.

The effort to revive the Puerto Rican working class music and dances within the context of the Casita garden is eloquently explained in the *NY Latino Journal*:

For Puerto Ricans, whose immigrant experience has been one of displacement rather than assimilation, the creation of casitas like the one at Rincon Criollo, has enabled us to take control of our immediate environment and, in the process, to rediscover and reconnect with our cultural heritage.<sup>7</sup>

The second type of garden, “Farm gardens”, are predominantly African American in population and their space is organized mainly for food production. African American gardeners manifest their culture in the very practice of gardening and the level of self sufficiency that it provides. The story of an African American gardener from Harlem connects his family background with the present experience of the garden:

I come from NJ which is the garden state and I worked on farms and stuff like that in the past. And when I was young, when I was growing up, my parents always had a garden in the backyard and we had a grape vine and peach tree and we grow collard and peppers and tomatoes. And my mother did a lot of canning of vegetable and fruits because they came from the South, you know, so it was really important for them having a stable community, taking the crops and storing them. We become self sufficient. They pass some of that along to me.

In most cases farm gardens are community oriented, though somewhat differently from the casita gardens. Many gardens organize food giveaways and community feed-ins several times during the gardening season. Another form of community engagement is weekly distributions of donated food and fresh produce to the community’s poor. Some farm gardens also organize free workshops on food canning, knitting, papier-mâché hat-making and so forth.

Most prominent in farm and casita gardens is the cultivation of vegetables and herbs that are part of the ethnic cuisine but either unavailable or unaffordable. For the African American kitchen, farm gardens produce many leafy vegetables such as collard and kale, and a variety of corn and tomatoes. Casita gardens are known for their hot and sweet peppers and various herbs. Thomas, from East New York, Brooklyn speaks about this aspect of gardens as carriers and educators of culture:

because there are multi-cultures in this neighborhood some of the gardeners plant specifically for people's personal [use] . . . so I get to hear about things like Kulolo and all these different things that I would never hear about if I would . . . go to the supermarket to get my produce, I wouldn't know about all of this.

The third type of gardens, the “eclectic culture gardens”, are characterized by a predominantly White membership and are located mostly in areas that went through or are undergoing gentrification. Membership in these gardens is generally younger than in the other two types. Eclectic culture gardens usually present a mixture of social space and gardening space with more areas of plants display. This difference is probably related to the higher socio-economic status of the gardeners; unlike in the other two types of gardens, here food production is less of a necessity. Eclectic culture gardens in the Lower East Side, Manhattan, an area that faced intensive gentrification since the mid 1980s, are better connected to various green and neighborhood organizations that support the gardens than the casita gardens in the same neighborhood. They therefore have more resources to invest both in the design of the garden and in the quantity and type of events that they offer (Martinez 2002).

As the name suggests, eclectic gardens feature a variety of cultures. Underlying many of these cultures is a sensibility that stretches from environmentalism to Paganism (Hassell 2002). The annual Earth Day festival and the bi-annual Solstice event, celebrated in these gardens, are among the festivities that manifest these sensibilities. In the event calendar of these gardens one would find yoga and Tai-Chi classes, lectures on nature, eclectic music performances, and movie screenings.

It is interesting to note that the first historical phase of community gardens in the USA was a government-initiated poor relief program (inaugurated in 1894 in Detroit). Designed with cultural assimilation in mind, the program served, according to its proponents, as a melting pot in which new immigrants would assume an industrious persona and learn the American way (Bassett 1979; Lawson 2005). The program was widely adopted in the USA because of its financial success as “welfare-to-work” program but faded away after the Second World War (Bassett 1979). In contrast, the contemporary phase of community gardens reflects an opposite trend to cultural assimilation. While the mechanism of a melting pot *de facto* aims at flattening differences and at assimilation into the hegemonic culture, in their current phase community gardens celebrate past experiences and revive cultural practices rather than repressing them.

Community gardens as the commons offer a daily and direct experience of a multiplicity of cultures, expressed in the physical environment and the social practices that are engraved into the landscape

of the city. Beyond this opportunity to voice suppressed cultures, they afford and actualize a lived experience of space that emphasizes diversity, celebration, aesthetic expressions, attachment and belonging, and connection to collective and individual history. Understood through the lens of lived space, the gardens support the ongoing production of a community of residents and afford an alternative lived experience within the modern urban environment; by integrating historical and cultural experiences into daily lives, this lived experience de-alienates the physical and social environments of the city.<sup>8</sup>

### *New Framework, New Discourse: Representations of Space*

Representations of space are dependent on the gaze, on “the frame of reference of the observer” (Harvey 2006:122). These are the abstract perceptions of space that are determined by, or relative to the tools and frameworks used to formulate them. Representations of space belong mainly to the realm of knowledge (*savoir*)<sup>9</sup> where understanding is interwoven with ideology and power (Lefebvre 1991). According to Harvey (2006), capitalism progresses by effecting how we perceive space (as a commodity) and changing its materiality. Neoliberal representations of space are produced by the scientific gaze of planners, engineers, and urbanists. These representations revolve on the exchange-value of space—its quantifiable and commodifiable qualities (Harvey 2006; Lefebvre 1991).

Representations of space are the result of cognitive acts; schemes, ideas, and understandings forming a body of knowledge that is imbued in formal (ie education) and informal (ie culture/media, common sense) ways. Following Vygotskiï (1978) I understand the production of knowledge in community gardens as a social activity that encompasses both learning and communicating ideas about the world. Representations of the gardens do not follow the neoliberal rationale. They develop as the gardeners learn “to see together, exchange their feelings, values, categories, memories, hopes and observations as they go about their everyday affairs” (Lynch 1976 in Pile 1996: 24). The gardens are sites where local knowledge (Sandercock 1998), the knowledge of a multiplicity of groups that is unique to them and is created in the everyday context of their lives, surfaces and becomes conscious and voiced.

There are various ways by which the exchange of memories, values, feelings, and daily practices allow for knowledge to develop, percolate and deep-root itself among its producers in community gardens. Some of these mechanisms are formal, while others are informal and spontaneous. This knowledge is practical, skill-based as well as discursive and abstract. From the rich and diverse scope of new representations of space that develop within community gardens, this

article will focus on two examples: the development of practical skills, and the production of alternative representations of community and of the urban. Both practical and discursive bodies of knowledge serve as important collective resources for the gardeners, and both, as we shall see, are crucial for the reproduction of the space as the commons.

*Practical Knowledge: The Know-How of Production of Space*

There are formal ways for producing practical knowledge which are orchestrated by gardeners in community gardens. These include free workshops, lectures, afternoon programs and summer camps. A self-report survey of 114 gardens in 2007, for example, indicates that 42% of the gardens are working with schools in the neighborhood, teaching students about plants, animals, and gardening. Some gardens are involved with sustainable food programs where young people are taught about locally produced fresh fruits and vegetables. Other gardens have programs for women and youth facilitating environmental awareness and neighborhood empowerment and offer some skills to improve their competence in dealing with the urban environment. At the same time these programs offer an alternative set of representations, starting from questioning the prevailing ones and proceeding to re-thinking the place and role of gardens within the urban environment.

In addition to offering formal learning programs, the gardens also constitute an informal urban resource for learning; they serve as a forum for a variety of spontaneous learning that is facilitated by the ongoing interaction with nature and the people that tend to it. One example is the “play gardens” where children can incorporate natural elements (such as sand, water, twigs) into their play while interacting with people of various ages that work in the garden as an alternative to a secluded, age-designated, gated playground (Hart 2002).

More subtly, a spontaneous production and sharing of knowledge occurs in those daily unplanned interactions in the garden. Edie Stone, the executive director of Green Thumb, provides an example:

... by being involved in the garden, [gardeners] learn a lot of skills that they can translate to the world outside of the garden. A lot of the new gardeners are Mexican and they don't speak English and they get involved with the older gardeners and the older gardeners end up doing a lot of things for them. Translating bills and telling them what they need to do. It is just a way, a really good way to mix people together in a way that I think is actually significant... To bring people together for a rally that is great, they had a great time but would they be connected after that?

Stone captures the three significant potentialities of spaces like community gardens: the *diverse* collective *cooperating and*

*communicating* to produce a collective resource in an *everyday setting*. The relative absence of spaces that are safe and open enough for such spontaneous learning and sharing of skills and knowledge underscores the unique contribution of community gardens.

In addition to practical knowledge, the collective production of space propels the development of the socio-spatial gaze of residents that amounts to a conceptual framework regarding space and its users. The space of the commons allows for an alternative experience of the everyday life which clashes with the dominant experience. As a result, a new consciousness is developed. From a wider scope of alternative representations of gardeners in New York City,<sup>10</sup> this article briefly reviews one analytical field—community and urban political economy. This field exposes the vision held by gardeners regarding the kinds of social relations and spatial practices they would like to accentuate in their urban life, alternatives visions which are constructive elements of the commons.

*New Representations of Community and the Urban* New knowledge and understandings regarding the meaning and practicalities of *community* are evident in the discourse of gardeners. Gardeners acknowledge the contribution of gardens to the safety and beautification of neighborhoods, and for social cohesion and social capital of communities (as research indeed has shown, see for example, Hancock 2001; Kingsley and Townsend 2006; Schmelzkopf 1995). But in addition, gardeners develop new representations of space that rely on critical examinations of notions of neighborhoods, communities, the city, uncovering their unjust and uneven development.

Claudia from Harlem alludes to critical ideas regarding community and urban life, such as Jane Jacobs's (1961), when asserting that, "neighborhoods that got gardens in them are safer because there are more eyes on the street". Mike from the East Village compares the gardens to other public spaces in the neighborhood, suggesting that the gardens provide a unique space that does not exist elsewhere:

This garden . . . provides a truly interactive public space. Not only is it a community garden in the sense that members come here and garden in their little plots, have their BBQs and meetings, and all their social events. These are really important, especially in a neighborhood like this, because there aren't many venues for that. We tend to be really introverted in our lifestyle now . . . I didn't know anyone in my building when I got involved in the garden, I certainly didn't know anybody on the block. So there is that, but also having this public arena for performance and gathering I think it is incredibly valuable and it doesn't happen anywhere else.

The gardens offer a certain experience that has been eroded from modern urban life; an experience that was overpowered by the importance of hyperspace, work, and well orchestrated spectacles. Mike's description should not be viewed as a nostalgic longing for past days; rather, he describes experiences that take place concurrent with the dominant ones. The gardens negotiate this dominance of experiences by putting forth an alternative daily experience of a strong and supporting community.

Ilya from the Bronx thinks within the paradigm of participatory and organically grown community as he presents the strength of community gardens in his neighborhood:

[The] garden does that naturally; it grows, people plant things, we have sculptures, we got performances, kids grow up in it. And so it is all the people who are the community sharing their vision of what they believe and what they want . . . so when that happened and these communities came about, a community of strong nurturing people came about.

Bell, a gardener from the Lower East Side, explains what connects people and defines them as a community:

. . . here you interact with the people and there are many people with many different personalities, it is really like a neighborhood community, and it's everybody in a joint effort, and because everybody is caring for something that is just greater than himself, it is not just about having a plot and growing a few things, you know, it's actually making something beautiful for the whole community and sharing that with the whole community.

This discussion presents an alternative vision of community and encompasses a critique on the condition of community in the contemporary neoliberal city. According to this new meaning, they constitute a community not because they share a common characteristic, such as living environment, belief, or profession. Rather, they are a community because they cooperate, collaborate and communicate on the usage, production, and maintenance of a common resource (De Angelis 2003). Rather than accepting the prevailing modality of competition and self-interest that inevitably leads to atomization and hollows out the essence of community, gardeners are facilitating a new modality and definition of community that enhance their social cohesion, level of autonomy, and the intensity of social bonds.

According to these new representations of space, the production of space and the definition of a community are tightly interlocked; the community is not a group of people that occupy a designated environment and operate within it according to its established purpose (such as clubs, religious institutions, parks) or even one that exhibits some resistance practices towards that environment (à la De Certeau

1988); rather, it is a group that participates in the production of its own material environment according to its own culture, history, desire and vision and is thus constructed as a community.

Much of the knowledge about the city's political economy is produced and circulated as a result of the struggle, which has been waged since 1999, to preserve the gardens. New representations of space were produced by garden groups and coalitions of gardens that fought for their gardens at community board meetings, mobilized support from the community and politicians, worked with lawyers to challenge decisions in courts, and joined protests, rallies, and demonstrations. A new body of knowledge emerges as gardeners realize their own position within the urban power structure and processes of (uneven) development.<sup>11</sup> Billy from Brooklyn explains their realization sarcastically:

What happened to the idea of green space? Why take away the community gardens when the City owns the lots? Because they are poor neighborhoods, they don't deserve parks [laughing]. That is what Giuliani was basically saying by taking away the community gardens, "these neighborhoods don't deserve green space; they deserve crap housing, and still more crap housing".

Gardeners realized that their neighborhoods are overly dense, and have the least open space per capita in the city and fewer public amenities than better-off neighborhoods. They realized that despite their contribution to their neighborhoods they are perceived by the municipality as a menace. They also learned that public or private investments are not intended to improve their conditions but actually further marginalize them. Gardeners protest the over-ghettoization of their neighborhoods resulting from the construction of public and senior housing and rehabilitation centers (which are abundant in their neighborhoods); the lack of groceries, schools, and parks; and the gentrification fueled by the municipality and the local growth machine that threatens their gardens and themselves with displacement.

Claudia from the Green Guerillas<sup>12</sup> talks about this production of knowledge as a process of "dis-naivete" through which the gardeners realized the real mechanisms that underlie the political structures: "I think those gardeners are pretty savvy and they know too that [the] Parks [Department] could arrange some kind of official signing of papers and transfer them back [for development]." A representative from the Council on the Environment of New York City refers to it as "collective wisdom", crucial to the future of gardens:

... we also have all this experience of the struggle that we had for those years with Giuliani that people know what needs to be done ... I think that there is enough collective wisdom and knowledge and experience of the gardeners themselves and of all the greening groups and people who supported community gardens over the years monetarily, and as



long as there is an ongoing dialogue about where we are going, you know we don't stop talking about that, I think that is the key—to communicate. As long as communication continues to go on between all the people who are interested and supportive I don't think there is any danger of community gardens disappearing.

The collectively produced knowledge is translated into power; it is a resource for the community in protecting its interests, and it transforms the position of gardeners in the local political structure. For years they were perceived simply as gardeners rather than activists; they belonged to social groups with no means and little political clout. Developing a better gaze at the urban power structure was the first necessary step towards developing their agency, becoming activists and more significant social actors.

Realizing the position of gardens in the broader context of urban political-economy developed into a well constructed critical understanding of the partnership between the City Administration and the private market. Gardeners learned a new set of concepts and practices that would enable them to fight for their gardens and develop an alternative vision for urban development. A representative from the Green Guerillas reflects on the process in which gardeners develop into a stronger collective that disseminates knowledge and organizes action:

The importance of the coalitions is related to political changes that happened in the city in the late 1990s when gardeners were isolated from each other. It wasn't helping them to preserve their gardens for the future. By working in coalitions, they still fight for their garden with their peers but also helping each other out. It was the progression of time and New York City politics when it become more of a necessity for gardens to interact with each other more, on some levels, not all. They are still independent, different from each other, run different programs. Somehow, the coalitions that we helped to start in the different neighborhoods were a political act to straighten the voice of the gardens in a time that they were assaulted by City Hall.

Rene, from the Bronx, recalls this transition from gardening to activism:

In the Bronx we were gardening for years until we were threatened. We had to change our mindset and become activists. We had to learn how the city works. We had to look for gardens in the neighborhood since we realized that it is up to us—the community—that gardens would not be neglected. This was the reason that we needed neighborhood coalitions. If we worry only about our own garden we will lose. Our coalition, La Familia Verde, formed a farmers market and established relations with schools and the church . . .

A dialectical process of action and knowledge, whereby one enhances the production of the other, was activated in the face of enclosing the

material space of the gardens. Gardeners had to learn the intricacies of the city in order to outsmart it. They developed skills and a critical knowledge and became aware citizens that could read into the local political machine and counter it with claims for social and procedural justice. Gardeners developed a broad understanding of the dominant representations of space as well as alternative representations. They also developed the mechanisms that keep the production of knowledge going in order to translate it to power and protect the gardens in the future. They organized themselves in neighborhood coalitions and in a citywide coalition of gardeners (New York City Community Gardens Coalition), the main role of which was to keep the dialogue on community gardens in motion, develop a strong collective and educate it and the general public, and network with existing organizations that act in the interests of gardens.

These new representations of space challenge some well-established notions of (uneven) urban development and reverse historically unjust distribution of resources among urban neighborhoods. They propose instead an alternative set of values based on the use-value of the space rather than its exchange-value, such as the high value that gardens offer for the livelihood of people, their contribution for social and cultural life, their role in improving neighborhoods and in creating meaningful spaces for residents; with that they also discharge principles of accumulation and capitalist practice values. This new knowledge is both a collective resource for protecting the commons and a mechanism that defines, shapes, and produces the commons.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to revisit the notion of the commons not just as an utopia but as an actually existing space amidst the neoliberal city. I showed the commons to be reproduced by three interconnected elements: material space, knowledge, and meaning. The material space of the commons is produced, maintained, and protected collectively by its users. The value exerted from space compensates for and supplements needed but unavailable resources. The knowledge pertains both to the practical knowledge that enables the ongoing production of the commons and to the discursive framework that defines the commons. The lived space of the commons, exemplified here through the reinstitution and celebration of various cultures, also encompasses alternative aesthetic experience that challenges aesthetics norms; alternative social experience that challenges the prevailing alienation of people from their physical and social environments; and alternative psychological experience that thrives on enhanced sense of control and belonging. The existence and persistence of the commons depend on these three interrelated elements; each element constitutes

and propels the others, together they enable urbanites to constitute an alternative urban experience.

The existence of actually existing commons side by side with “actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner and Theodore 2002) constitutes the locale as a contested arena of opposites, ambiguities, and as a paradigmatic site for the examination of struggles over space and the spatially embedded potentialities for social change. We can understand the practices of producing the commons on two different levels. First, they can be understood as the practices of “subaltern class actors [that] struggle over the appropriation of material and symbolic goods”. That is, a collective action aimed at receiving a greater share of goods without challenging the social mechanisms and institutions that produce inequality (Aronowitz 2003:51). Goods and rights, such as open space, clean neighborhoods, healthy food, and ownership, were unevenly distributed and deprived of the collective of gardeners. The commons, then, is a mechanism for redistribution through which underprivileged residents compensate themselves for uneven urban development.

The second level at which to understand the production of the commons is as a collective action that challenges the hegemonic social order and follows instead an alternative logic of justice (Aronowitz 2003). I argue that by producing the space of the gardens, gardeners present a defiant and provocative alternative to the dominant social space; an alternative that redresses the right to public space, not only in its concrete sense but in the Lefebvrian sense of “the right to the city” (Mitchell 2003). It is an alternative to the logic of organization and planning of space, to the distribution of control over it, and to its meaning and experience. By introducing alternative practices and values to capitalism, the commons are de-enclosed and the dominant mode of production is challenged (De Angelis 2007).

As De Angelis (2007) maintains, alternatives to capitalism, such as the commons, are constantly under threat of being enclosed and become a generative force of capitalist reproduction. The works of Quastel (2009) and Pudup (2008) provide examples of how gardens are stripped off of their critical potential and become mechanisms for social reproducing rather than transformation. Nevertheless, both De Angelis (2007) and Hardt and Negri (2009) argue that we now stand at a threshold of a new era. Increasingly, they maintain, we see alternative modalities of social reproduction that take after the model of the commons. Community gardens as actually existing commons offer a glimpse of the kind of social relations and spatial practices and values that can bring back the commons to our everyday urban life. They facilitate a cooperating and participating community, gathered around non-commodified activities, collectively producing space according to their needs and visions.

This paper presents community gardens as sites for re-visioning, in Keith and Pile's (1993) words, the urban environment as "the commons". Actually existing commons then should not be seen as a "return" of some noble but possibly archaic ideal but as a springboard for critiquing contemporary social relations and as the production of new spatiality, initiating the transformation of some fundamental aspects of everyday life, social practices and organization, and thinking.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For an elaborated history of community gardens, see Francis, Cashdan and Paxson (1984); Schmelzkopf (1995); Eizenberg (2008).

<sup>2</sup> For more detailed information on various preservation statuses of gardens, see Eizenberg (2008).

<sup>3</sup> In a confrontation with protesting gardeners against plans to auction off many gardens, Mayor Giuliani addressed the crowd: "This is a free-market economy. Welcome to the era after communism" (Shepard and Hayduk 2002:200).

<sup>4</sup> Jack Linn, 22 April 2006, addressing gardeners at the Second Annual Gardeners Forum, New York City.

<sup>5</sup> TPL works with gardeners to establish boards of directors of independent land trusts that will address the needs of the gardens in each borough.

<sup>6</sup> Ghettoization refers to the process in which various policies prevent minority populations from living in white communities and force them into communities that are slated for minority occupancy in which deprivation of infrastructure maintenance, policing, and education reifies their marginality.

<sup>7</sup> Carlos Torres, *NY Latino Journal* (2006) [http://nylatinojournal.com/home/culture\\_education/ny\\_region/rincon\\_criollo\\_more\\_than\\_just\\_a\\_little\\_house\\_in\\_the\\_south\\_bronx.html](http://nylatinojournal.com/home/culture_education/ny_region/rincon_criollo_more_than_just_a_little_house_in_the_south_bronx.html) (last accessed 5 September 2010).

<sup>8</sup> In Lefebvre's (2002) *Critique of Everyday Life*, the reintegration socio-cultural events to the daily experience will bring about the decolonization and de-alienation of the everyday life. According to Lefebvre any transformation of the prevailing social system must begin with de-alienating the everyday life and constituting an alternative lived experience that is dominated by used value (over exchange value).

<sup>9</sup> Lefebvre distinguishes between two types of knowledge: *savoir*, the hegemonic knowledge that is used by the hegemonic power to maintain its status, and *connaissance*, a critical and subversive knowledge "which refuses to acknowledge power" (Lefebvre 1991:10).

<sup>10</sup> See Eizenberg (2008:chapter 5) for an elaborated analysis of representations of space that also includes the themes of environmental sustainability and the construction of class.

<sup>11</sup> Laclau and Mouffe (2001) define antagonism as a first step towards awareness and articulation of needs and demands.

<sup>12</sup> The Green Guerillas is a nonprofit organization that grew out of a group of activists that established the first community garden in 1973. The organization provides educational and material support to community gardens in the city.

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