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Each garden in the Kleingarten,
an urban garden in Munich,
can be designed to meet
the user's needs and tastes.
Photo by Mark Francis.

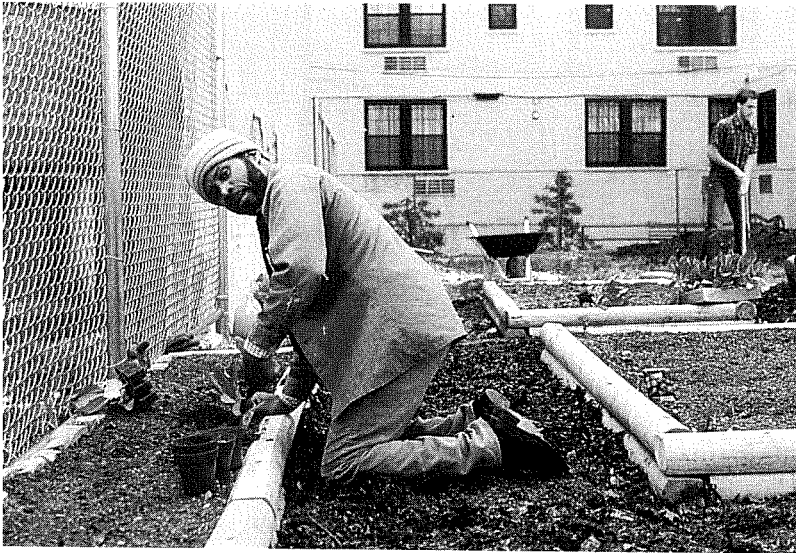
THE URBAN GARDEN AS PUBLIC SPACE

A garden is a powerful metaphor for our relationship to ourselves, to nature, and to our everyday environment. The urban garden often serves as an archetype—an icon through which people come to identify with and attach meaning to the landscape. When people become directly involved in landscapes, responsible for designing, building, managing, or maintaining gardens, a deeper meaning may be attached to them than to professionally designed and maintained places. The garden becomes an extension of the gardeners and the infrequent visitor or occasional passerby. When the garden becomes part of what Lyn Lofland calls the “public realm,”¹ it takes on significant meaning for both users and non-users. It becomes part of the public life of a neighborhood or downtown, offering important individual and group benefits. The garden takes on a “spirit of place”—a connectedness to the built and natural world.

In recent years, urban garden projects have expanded in influence and importance. They are a central part of what has been characterized as the “community open space” or “urban greening” movement. The growth of urban gardens has been inspired by dual opportunities of enormous areas of vacant land in cities and the failure of traditional open spaces, such as parks and playgrounds, to meet the full range of recreational and community needs.

The impact of the movement has been significant both in number and quality of new gardens created in the past two decades. In New York City more than 600 community gardens totalling more than 143 acres were identified in 1987.² In San Francisco, more than 60 community garden projects have been assisted by the San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners with a goal of establishing 100 gardens by 1996. Philadelphia has more than 1,000 community greening projects developed by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society’s Philadelphia Green Program. In some cities the number of community gardens are starting to rival the number of projects included in the official city park system.

The garden has expanded beyond the home to become part of the neighborhood, the park, the workplace, the condominium, the everyday housing project, the school, the prison, and even the hospital and hospice. Community gardens, urban forests, school gardens, nature parks, and wildlife habitat are examples of the expanding community open space movement.



**Above, a homeless shelter garden in Washington, D.C..
Photo by Suzanne Wells.**

Below, residents in New York's Clinton neighborhood organized to protect this garden against redevelopment.

Gardens in Public Life

Our growing public appetite for gardens and gardening is a reflection of the changing nature of public life. Urban gardens result from a reaction to the privatization of public life, from the need for spaces that support social contact and publicness, and from an interest in urban spaces that invite ongoing change and modifications through public stewardship and local involvement.

Urban gardens differ from other types of public open spaces in several significant ways. Gardens frequently are designed, built, or managed by the people who use them. Gardens are valued by their users as places to work, meet people, and socialize as well as places to grow vegetables or flowers. To discourage misuse or overuse, gardens often limit access, using devices such as signs, gates, and locks. Yet the amount of use gardens receive is not substantially different than nearby parks receive, and a greater variety of activities often takes place there. Gardens often take on a diverse and ever changing set of aesthetics with a greater variety of materials and plants used than in traditional parks and open spaces.

Changing Types of Urban Gardens

Changes in public life have given rise to new and expanded types of gardens, which illustrate the changing nature of urban open space in cities. These projects exist at a variety of scales and in diverse settings, including the neighborhood, the downtown, the workplace, as city-wide networks of open space, as regional gardens, or as arboretums.

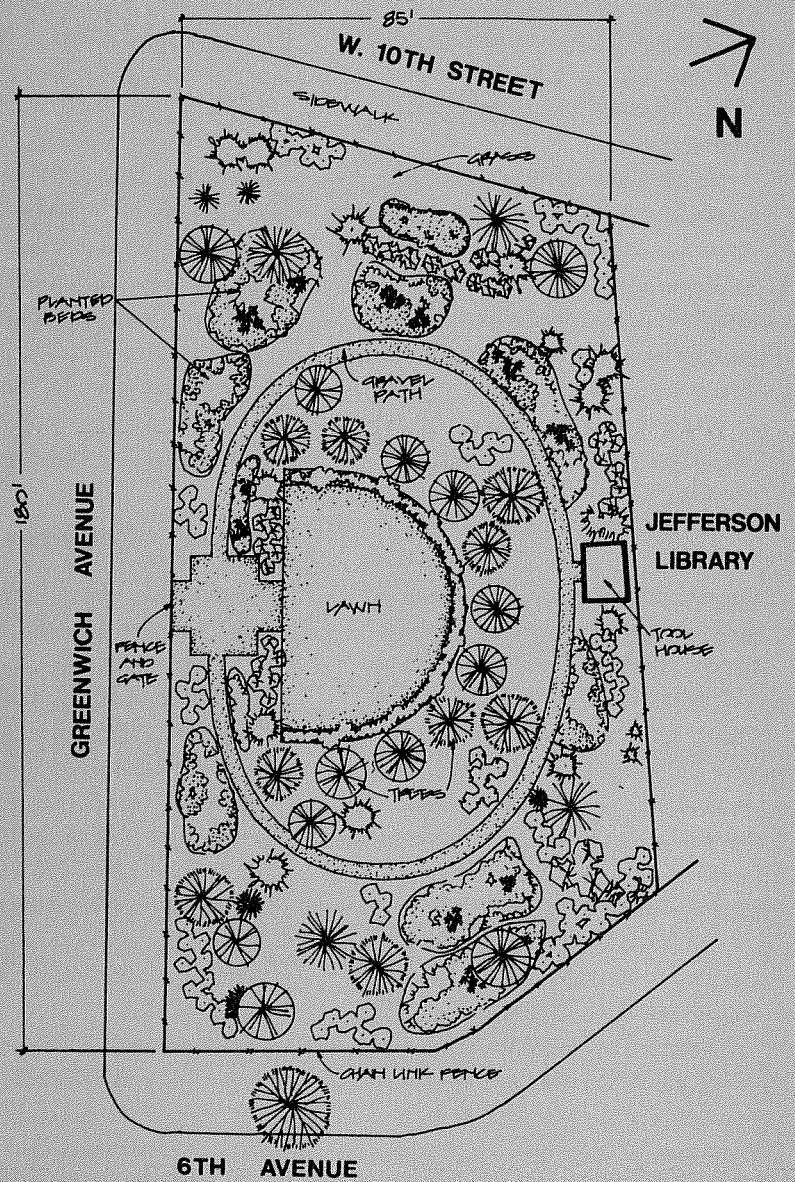
The Garden as a Nearby Neighborhood Place: The neighborhood garden is one of the most established and refined forms of urban gardens. With names like El Sol Brillante Garden in the Lower East Side in New York City, the Dogpatch Garden in San Francisco, and the Ron Mandella Community Garden

in Sacramento, these neighborhood projects are now valued parts of their local landscape.

Neighborhood gardens can include a variety of elements, such as individual or community vegetable areas, flower beds, lawns, sitting or socializing areas, areas for ball play, and play areas for children. They range in size from a small lot sandwiched in between buildings to a multi-acre garden. Such gardens often become a valued element in the neighborhood, increasing residents' attachment to their neighborhood.

The Garden in the Workplace: The "corporate garden" is a new type of urban garden created by corporations that modify their grounds to provide gardening space for employees. Examples include Fireman's Fund and Amex Life Assurance Company in Marin County; the Hewlett Packard Headquarters in Palo Alto, where more than 450 employees garden on six acres; and the MITRE Corporation in Bedford, Massachusetts, which has 450 garden plots for its employees. According to one employee at the Fireman's Fund, "the garden is one of the reasons I work here." At Reader's Digest headquarters in Pleasantville, New York, a vice-president states, "community gardens have proven to be a visible benefit which returns high dividends of employee satisfaction."³ While the benefits of these corporate gardens need to be more systematically investigated, they reflect the expansion of the garden into the workplace.

The Garden in the Park: The urban garden also is slowly moving into the public park, with some park areas being made into gardens in which residents plant, maintain, and control space. For example, Chicago Botanical Garden is working with the Chicago Parks Department to transform some areas of city parks into community garden areas. In many cities, "Friends of Parks"



Plan of Jefferson Market Garden, a community controlled and maintained garden in New York's Greenwich Village.

groups have created garden areas within parks. Imagine the impact on the urban landscape if city park systems provided gardening spaces for all residents that requested them.

The Garden in the Plaza: The garden is becoming part of some downtown plazas, where garden elements replace hardscape elements as the dominant design form. Many plazas now have planting areas with seasonal color and diverse vegetation. There is a potential to expand the garden into new or existing plazas by allowing building occupants to participate in both decision making and actual gardening.

The School Garden: The garden is transforming some schoolyards into green settings for environmental learning and education. Robin Moore, Susan Goltsman, Daniel Iacofano, and Moura Quayle have successfully transformed school grounds into gardens where students participate in construction and gardening. Several European countries have a tradition of school gardening programs on school property.

The Hospital in the Garden: Gardens can play an important role in the healing process. R. C. Ulrich, in one of the few empirical studies of the relationship of vegetation to health, studied open-heart surgery in a Maryland hospital, comparing recovery rates for patients who had views of trees from their hospital windows with the rates of patients who did not have views. He found that patients looking out on a natural scene had shorter post-operative stays, received fewer negative evaluation comments, and took fewer drugs.⁴

It may be a wise investment to reduce hospital and health costs by having hospitals surrounded by gardens. Hospital design could visually connect rooms with the landscape, providing green and colorful views for patients. Plants in containers or small planting areas could even be provided for

patients who desire to care for plants.

The Garden as Home: Some community gardening programs in cities such as Washington, D.C., Seattle, and New York, are actively involved in the problem of homelessness by providing food, involving homeless people in growing food, and even letting people set up temporary shelter in the gardens. Since the setting of choice for some homeless people is the vacant lot, transforming lots into garden homes may be one way to provide appropriate shelter until livable housing can be provided.

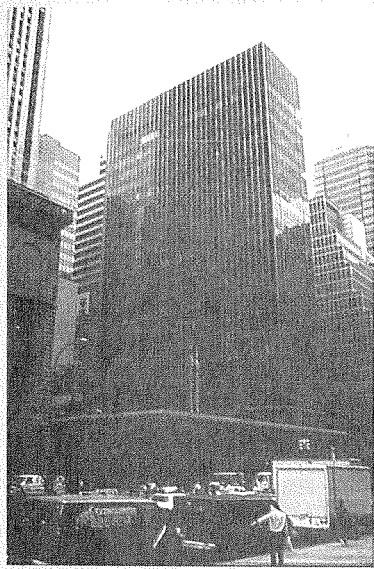
The Urban Garden and its Meanings

The urban garden has different meanings that can be examined along individual, group, neighborhood, city-wide, regional, and aesthetic dimensions. On a conceptual level, urban gardens exist as democratic space—reflections of local culture and values. They invite direct participation for some, while for others they become valued visual elements in the workplace or community. Gardens can be democratic reflections of conflict and change in neighborhood and urban life.

Gardens also contribute to what Brower has called “familiar place,” a mark of local identity and pride. Gardens provide individual benefits, such as reduction of stress and contribution to wellness. For example, the activity of gardening involves exercise, can result in weight loss, and can contribute to an individual’s sense of peacefulness or tranquility. Urban gardens also can provide a recreation resource for people desiring more active engagement with the public environment. In our Sacramento study, we found that while park users use other parks, garden users typically do not use parks.⁵

For non-users, people who may only pass by as outside viewers of the garden, there may also be important benefits.





Lever House, in New York, is a landmark example of a garden in the workplace. The roof garden is solely for employees of Lever Brothers. Photos by Todd W. Bressi.

The garden serves as what psychologists Rachel and Steve Kaplan have called a “restorative experience,” or an opportunity to recover from the fatigue resulting from “the everyday demands of living in the modern world.”⁶ Gardens offer residents an opportunity for passive engagement through looking at and viewing nature. Part of the high ratings gardens receive from non-users may be attributed to gardens being “cared for places” that communicate a sense of stewardship to outsiders. There is some evidence to suggest that gardens may also contribute a perception of safety for neighborhood residents, especially for children and women.

Finally, gardens offer urban residents a connection to nature. Vegetation of the kind found in community gardens has been highly valued in a number of studies comparing different types of urban form.⁷ The people-plant relation, as some call this interaction between nature and people, is an important value of gardens for both users and non-users.

The Future Urban Garden

Gardens as public space raise several critical research, design, and policy issues. One of the most critical needs is for management policies and designs that establish gardens as permanent open space. Because many garden projects are not considered part of official open space systems, their long term future is often in doubt. Increasingly, urban gardens are being recognized as part of the official city park and recreation master plans and policy. Boston, San Francisco, and New York have made significant progress in this direction. Bond issues and park acts may be excellent vehicles to expand the number of gardens and public access to them.

Design has an important role to play in creating meaningful urban gardens. Designers can avoid creating cute and

superficial gardens by directly engaging the users of the garden in their design and planning process and providing ways for them to control the sites once they are completed.

An expanded research agenda for urban gardens also needs to be developed and adequately funded. Some of the agenda items for research include systematic investigation of the benefits of urban gardens. By their very nature, gardens are fragile places in need of extra care and loving. How these qualities can be preserved and expanded within the limited resources of garden managers needs to be addressed. Horticultural training along the lines of that provided by technical assistance groups has proved successful in addressing this need.

I do not mean to suggest that the urban garden become the dominant form of future open space. The urban garden is only one of a number of open space types that will make up the future urban landscape. The complete network of open spaces such as the street, the square and park, the sidewalk, the street corner, and the garden must comprise the open space system of cities.

Urban gardens will contribute increasingly to the quality of future urban life. We will need to continue to examine their meaning. To be successful, they must extend their tradition of inviting use and participation, providing a connection for people to nature and natural processes, and being beautiful places near where people live, work, and play.

Notes

1. Lyn H. Lofland, “Social Life in the Public Realm,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, (January 1989).
2. New York City Open Space Task Force, *Open Space and the Future of New York City: Summary and Recommendations* (New York, 1987).
3. L. Sommers, *The Employee Gardening Handbook*, (Burlington, VT: National Gardening Association, 1984).
4. R. C. Ulrich, “View Through a Window May Influence Recovery from Surgery,” *Science*, 224.
5. Mark Francis, “Some Different Meanings Attached to a City Park and Community Gardens,” *Landscape Journal*, 6:2 (101-112), 1987.
6. Rachel and Steve Kaplan, “The Garden as Restorative Experience,” in Mark Francis and Randy Hester, *Proceedings of the Garden Conference*, (Davis, CA: University of California Center for Design Research, 1987).
7. H. Schroeder, “Research on Urban Forests,” in E. Zube and G. Moore, *Advances in Environment, Behavior and Design, Vol. 2*, (New York: Plenum, 1989).