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Issue 1: Community Revitalization

Reclaiming the Sacred Commons

by Karl Linn

An inherently sacred relationship exists between living creatures and nature. From time immemorial, people of indigenous or land-based cultures have celebrated their connectedness with nature as an integral part of their daily lives. Free and enduring access to their natural habitats of air, water, and land assured their sustenance and survival. These shared natural environments are referred to as “the commons.” In the days before mercantilism and industrialization, before private property rights were instituted, local people held the land in common and knew how to harvest, manage, and sustain the natural resources of forests, fields, and fishing grounds.

The Enclosure of the Commons

A lineage of robber barons, from feudal landlords to multinational corporations, began to enclose the commons by force in order to profit from the land. Asserting their right to private property, these ruling cliques wrested control of the commons from the majority of the world’s indigenous and village populations, disregarding controls on the use of natural resources by which the peasant common holders had protected and perpetuated their subsistence economy. The goal of ever-increasing profit justified the plundering of natural resources and the ruthless exploitation of labor sources. Industrialization, with its focus on the production of cash crops for markets, displaced self-sufficient local economies, which were organized around communal management of the commons. Peasants uprooted from their land became members of a disposable labor force.

Today, sophisticated labor-displacing cybernetic technologies are creating masses of “superfluous” people the world over. The progressive globalization of the world’s economies, reinforced by the creation of the European Economic Community, the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and the endorsement of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), strengthens the power-base of the wealthy elite who represent national governments but are not truly accountable to their constituent populations, whom they manipulate. The proposed Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI) extends the dominance of giant multinational corporations, global banks, and speculators even farther, declaring local efforts to protect the environment and human rights from exploitation an illegal obstruction of free trade. So-called economic progress and development generate huge profits for a few while dispossessing masses of people leaving them culturally traumatized, and often homeless and destitute.

Reclaiming the Commons

In reaction to the enclosure of the commons, people have asserted their inalienable rights to land, air, and water. Today a ground swell of community gardening, backyard gardening, and other greening activities is permeating the fabric of urban life. Interest in growing plants, especially for food, is so

pervasive that one cannot help but experience urban gardening as an idea whose time has come at last. During the 1990s community gardening has become more and more widely acknowledged as an integral part of our urban existence. California State Superintendent of Schools, Delaine Eastin, for example, initiated a program to create “a Garden in Every School.” According to the National Gardening Association Gallup Poll in 1994, 30 million households were gardening in some form, and 300,000 people were involved in community gardening.

The downsizing of industry in the United States with resulting unemployment, as corporations seek cheap labor abroad, is leading to a pauperization of the middle class. At the same time curtailment of social programs continues to cause tremendous suffering with increased poverty, hunger, and homelessness. As the economic safety net unravels and the dream of winning, or even waging, a war against poverty disintegrates, community gardening becomes a survival strategy for more and more people. The prospect of future large-scale economic dislocation underscores the need for local agricultural systems that will be able to deliver food to urban dwellers without depending on fossil-fuel-based transportation systems. Land-based enterprises, such as cooperative market farming on larger tracts of vacant urban land, can contribute to the economic health of grassroots communities while providing opportunities for training and employment.

Community gardening not only produces healthy food close to home but also cultivates community among neighbors. Many surveys indicate that people participate in community gardening because they enjoy the opportunity to meet and make friends. Many community gardens incorporate sociability settings — arbors, picnic tables, benches, and barbecues. The growing sense of community fostered by these modern-day commons empowers neighborhood residents and strengthens their social, physical, and mental health. The increasingly widespread network of grassroots gardeners working together contributes to the building of a more democratic society.

Securing Land for Community Gardening

The bottleneck that confronts the burgeoning community gardening movement is the lack of secure public land. In general, institutional response to community gardening has been piecemeal, like a handing out of green band-aids. Public land is made available by municipal governments to neighborhood organizations and private agencies who lease it on a temporary basis, usually for one year. Extensive public pressure has compelled some city agencies to extend leases by a few years. A few community gardens which enjoyed special public prominence have been designated as permanent amenities, such as the Liz Christy Memorial Community Garden in New York City, preserved through the persistent effort of New York’s Green Guerillas, founded by Christy.

Public land for community gardens has also been secured nationwide by the Trust for Public Land. TPL helps community organizations establish themselves legally as non-profit organizations to purchase and administer open space for community gardens. However, the growing demand for vacant land cannot be met financially by the private sector, which cannot be expected to fill a role that government should play.

Public land that has been made available for community gardening, especially larger tracts, has usually been marginal land located next to railroad tracks or industrial sites. The land is often leftover and considered unusable because of its location and configuration. Large tracts resulting from urban demolition of abandoned housing have also been a source of vacant land for community gardening, but the remote location of such parcels often makes access to them difficult and dangerous. Being in remote locations away from a concentration of people, the crops of these gardens are also more vulnerable to vandalism and theft. Recently public agencies and private non-profit corporations such as public housing authorities, public schools, churches, and settlement houses have made growing amounts of land available for community gardening by their own constituencies.

The use of private land for community gardens is more precarious since it is impossible to guarantee

ongoing use of the property. Many vacant lots scattered in run-down urban neighborhoods have become sites for community gardens as well-meaning owners have made them available for use by the neighbors. In many instances these lots are filled with mountains of debris that has to be cleared and hauled away before residents can till the land. After years of toil during which community gardeners succeed in transforming barren soil into productive fields, the land can easily be lost when owners decide to move away from the area and sell the vacant lot or to use it for other purposes. Cultivating community gardens on privately owned land should be considered only as a last resort.

The deepened economic crisis compels municipal governments to attract high-revenue-producing enterprises which makes their vacant land a precious resource. Municipal governments are so eager to hold land in reserve that so far they have only been willing to issue temporary leases for community gardening. In Manhattan for example the economic pressure is so intense that many well-established community gardens have been sacrificed. New Yorkers joke sadly about the new endangered species, "gardenus Manhattanii." Drawing upon the strength of the organization that community gardeners have been able to create after their many years of cooperatively tilling the land, compromises are being wrought in long struggles with developers. For example, a large community garden in Manhattan on 96th Street and Broadway ended up on a small section of a shady roof of the building that displaced it.

The American Community Gardening Association (ACGA) reports in "The Struggle to Preserve Gardens in New York City" in its January 1998 Multilogue that New York City is home to a system of about 750 community gardens that have sprouted since the mid-1970s on vacant city-owned lots in low-to-moderate income neighborhoods.... And, after existing for more than 20 years, many community gardens have come to be seen by community development corporations as a key aspect of "community building"... Despite this growing recognition of their importance, these gardens have a very tenuous hold on their land. Most have short-term license agreements with the Parks Department's GreenThumb Program.... However in late 1996, gardeners learned for the first time that large numbers of gardens were facing extinction. Fifty Green Thumb gardens were targeted by the City's Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) for housing and commercial development to occur in 1997.

An ACGA survey conducted in 1997 by Monroe and Santos revealed that fewer than 2% of community gardens are considered permanent by their managers. Rather than using every vacant lot or every lot that might become vacant in a residential neighborhood for new infill housing or other speculative building, at least one lot within convenient walking distance of all residences should be preserved as an open space. Such lots should become public spaces in which residents can meet casually as part of their daily routine. Using a neighborhood open space is quite different from making a special trip to a more remote park or playground. Without nearby open space in which to interact, many neighbors will remain strangers and fearful of one another. Growing familiarity and friendship among residents make blocks safer by strengthening programs like Neighborhood Watch. The urgent need for affordable housing should be carefully balanced with the need for open spaces in the neighborhood. Such open spaces, especially community gardens that include spaces for face-to-face interaction, are becoming the new neighborhood commons.

Accessible public land must be made available permanently to people close to their places of residence. To start out, a group can establish a land bank by compiling a list of the land holdings of various public agencies. Often the group will discover new sources of public land. During 1962, when I founded a community design center, the Neighborhood Commons Non-Profit Corporation of Washington, D.C., I conducted a land-bank survey. We discovered that the entire open space of an inner-city block, surrounded by private residences, belonged, not to an absentee landlord, as the neighbors had assumed, but to the city, which had once conducted a small-scale playground program on it. The land had accumulated debris and become a disturbing eyesore over the years. Once the neighbors found out that it was public land, they negotiated a lease with the city and developed an attractive neighborhood commons.

Comprehensive city planning can and must secure open spaces for ongoing community gardening activities. New standards should be developed designating public open spaces accessible to all

neighborhood residents, especially children and the elderly. Considering the growing green consciousness of young people involved in school and youth gardening programs, more and more land will need to be made available for greening and gardening as they become adults. Incorporating decentralized small-scale open spaces in urban neighborhoods through the comprehensive planning process would secure public land for ongoing community gardening.

Seattle, Washington was the first city in the United States to incorporate policy recommendations concerning community gardens into its General Plan. Five other U.S. cities are considering following its lead. In Berkeley, after three years of negotiations, we were able to incorporate policy recommendations for community gardening into the draft of the new General Plan which is now circulating for public comments (see text below). Once the policy recommendations are accepted, securing land for community gardens will become easier. The existence of community gardens as a permanent open-space amenity will make Berkeley a more livable city for all its citizens. Policy 2.05: recognize and encourage community gardens as a high priority use of open-space resources, particularly in higher-density residential areas.

Community gardening is a way for people who lack yards to grow flowers, fruits and vegetables, but more than that it is also a way for people to work together, socialize, and talk with their neighbors. Users plan, construct, and manage the space, thus building community relations at the same time as they save the City money and can help lower their own cost of living.

Actions

- A. Secure more land and create long-term stability for community garden through purchase of land and long-term leases or other agreements.
- B. Increase support for community gardens through partnerships with other government agencies, neighborhood groups, businesses, civic and gardening organizations.
- C. Integrate community gardens into existing open spaces near areas of higher density residences that do not currently have community garden space, while balancing other open space needs.
- D. Provide administrative resources and agreements that enable community gardening groups to manage the gardens to the extent practicable.
- E. Include community gardening as part of the open space planning for the remaining sections of the Santa Fe Right of Way.

Gentrification

Community gardeners, landscape architects, house painters, and mural artists, in contrast to many other professions and trades, are able to rapidly and dramatically transform the appearance of spaces. A vacant lot transformed into a community garden filled with vegetable crops and blossoming flowers or the vibrant colors of a mural painted on the wall of a dilapidated building instantly, almost magically, transform the image of a rundown urban area. Unfortunately these inspiring restoration efforts are often overshadowed by prevailing market forces which can unleash socially devastating chain reactions. Visible seeds of renewal and regeneration, new sparks of life, can initiate “gentrification processes” which improve and upgrade sections of a city so that they eventually become affordable only to more affluent populations, the new “urban gentry.”

Community gardens can be seen as forerunners of urban gentrification — Trojan Horses setting in motion processes that will displace people of lesser means. For example a seemingly innocent project

was initiated in Philadelphia in the 1960s by Mrs. Bush Brown who assisted residents of lower-income neighborhoods in beautifying their blocks with flower boxes. The brilliant colors of flowers improved the appearance of these blocks considerably which inspired the absentee landlords to increase the rents to levels which tenants could not afford.

Gentrification uproots low-income urban dwellers and severs their connection to land for production of food and other needs. It is the contemporary manifestation of enclosure, where profit takes precedence over human needs. New York City, for example, inexpensively transforms acres of barren land into colorful wildflower meadows, but unfortunately, not even small parcels of these large expanses of wildflower meadows are thought of as permanent green spaces to raise people's spirits and improve their health. If plowed under as cover crops, the wildflowers would gradually create fertile soil for community gardening and market farming, strengthening the economic base of grassroots communities. Instead these wildflower meadows are used as an advertising gimmick to attract developers.

Community gardening appears to be an easily accomplished creative response to staggering social and environmental ills. It contributes to the growth of the multicultural and economically diverse urban communities in which the gardens exist. In actuality though, when it initiates gentrification, it also contributes to racial and economic segregation, homogenization, and ultimately to the destruction of the very grassroots communities who brought it into being.

Unfortunately the mere availability of public open space will not stop the gentrification process. A telling case study is the fate of New York's Neighborhood Open Space Coalition. Initially many residents of multicultural grassroots neighborhoods were members of its Board of Directors. At its inception the Coalition was an advocate for economically disenfranchised grassroots communities. Now the Board is composed of developers who are strong advocates of urban open space in general and who particularly enjoy and protect the green spaces in their own gentrified and gated neighborhoods. The road to gaining community control over land within the framework of prevailing, so-called "free," market forces is full of pitfalls, unexpected hazards, and contradictions which the evolving community garden movement encounters.

Neighborhood Commons and Gentrification

In my own efforts "barnraising" neighborhood commons during the last 40 years, I inadvertently contributed to the gentrification of inner-city neighborhoods. Working with people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds and economic classes, we transformed vacant lots in run-down neighborhoods into small-scale open spaces combining the function of neighborhood parks, playgrounds, sitting areas, and community gardens. These "commons" were designed to enable young and old to be in each others' presence but not in each others' way. We constructed spaces for gatherings, sitting, and play, which included retaining walls, steps, and terraces. This involved much grading and the use of recycled building materials. The self-help building of these neighborhood commons nurtured a growing sense of community based on mutual aid among neighbors and inter-generational support. We envisioned neighborhood commons permeating the fabric of the city with a decentralized network of community-managed and controlled public spaces. It was an effort to reclaim the commons in an urban setting.

The demand from the grassroots and from non-profit organizations and government agencies was so great that I founded and directed the Neighborhood Renewal Corps of Philadelphia and the Neighborhood Commons Non-Profit Corporation of Washington, D.C. and inspired into being neighborhood commons non-profit corporations in eight other American cities. These organizations provided voluntary design service to economically disadvantaged inner-city neighborhoods and coordinated the self-help building of about 75 neighborhood commons.

The Neighborhood Commons of Chicago was the most politically sophisticated among them. It was conceived by Milton Kotler, myself, and members of the Meadville Theological Seminary. Milton Kotler was at that time a fellow of the Institute of Policy Studies in Washington D.C. and later founded

the National Association of Neighborhoods, the first national multicultural grassroots organization. He envisioned Chicago's Neighborhood Commons as the seat of neighborhood government, contributing to the restoration of Jeffersonian democracy through decentralization of power — another thrust in reclaiming the commons. The Neighborhood Commons of Chicago managed community-based enterprises and contributed significantly to the upgrading of the run-down neighborhood in which it was based. In the long run it fell prey to the forces of gentrification, which it helped to unleash.

These early neighborhood commons had some but not much vegetation. The emphasis was more on creating spaces for outdoor furnishings and play equipment rather than on providing places to grow food and flowers. Without the need for taking care of plants, neighborhood residents, especially in deteriorating inner-city areas, were less motivated to clean, repair, and maintain the spaces. City agencies, such as recreation departments, were reluctant to assume responsibility for the commons since they had not built them. In fact they often assumed a competitive stance and threw monkey wrenches in our way.

In 1993 at a surprise 70th birthday party, a community garden in North Berkeley was dedicated in my name for “lifelong service to community and peace.” Since the garden was overgrown and its two dilapidated tool sheds had become an eyesore, I collaborated with friends, neighbors, students, and AmeriCorps teams during the next two years, transforming the garden and adding a beautifully hand-crafted commons and tool shed made of recycled lumber. Funding for building materials was provided by the city. As we worked together on the garden, the waiting list of neighbors wanting plots, especially those who live in nearby landless apartment complexes, grew larger and larger. Looking across the street, I noticed a vacant lot fenced in with barbed wire, filled with weeds during the summer and barren during the winter. It had accumulated debris over the years and was an affront to the neighborhood. That lot and an adjacent one had been purchased by the Bay Area Rapid Transit System (BART) and used as a construction site for the building of one of its tunnels. Seeing this large area of vacant land I imagined it becoming another community garden, providing ample space for eager gardeners on the waiting list to stake out their plots.

After a year and a half of negotiations, the City of Berkeley and BART signed a lease allowing the lots to be developed as community gardens. During the following year neighbors came together to design and construct the two new gardens, assisted by AmeriCorps teams who worked for five weeks doing heavy construction. Funding for construction material was supplied by the City of Berkeley. On October 5, 1997, we celebrated the dedication of these unique community gardens in which works of art intermingle with lush vegetation. Both the Peralta and the Northside Community Gardens feature a commons. An extensive network of pathways made of compacted, sandlike, decomposed granite (DG) provides easy wheelchair accessibility. The gardens also demonstrate a range of ecological innovations such as a bamboo trellis, a solar-powered Flowform fountain, and a high-temperature compost bin. The gardens will also accommodate ongoing outdoor art exhibits on an 18-foot-wide access road reserved for possible use by BART's repair equipment. The gardens have become a showcase for local artists, bringing their work to the attention of contractors who wish to involve them in creating art in buildings under construction. The city provided funds for construction materials. A 52-foot-tall bamboo pole bearing colorful, fluttering Tibetan prayer flags, which the gardeners refer to as the “happy flags,” arches over the garden expressing the spirit of growing community and celebration.

The three community gardens contribute much to the growth of neighborhood community. People who lived for years as strangers adjacent to one another become friends as they work together and meet face to face. The sense of personal connection with their individual plots inspires people to have a sense of ownership, caring, and responsibility for the gardens. Since they are eager not only to grow crops and flowers but also to socialize, adding meeting places to community gardens, makes them function successfully as neighborhood commons.

As much as I delight in the growth of friendship and community and the joy that the heightened aesthetic appeal brings to neighbors and passers-by, I am deeply concerned about the consequences of the gentrification process these three gardens have accelerated. I was alarmed to learn from the owner of

a dilapidated vacant house abutting the Karl Linn Community Garden that he had raised its selling price considerably each time we finished building another garden.

The gentrification process homogenized the inner-city neighborhoods where I worked over the past forty years, displacing working class and poor people. To name a few: Society Hill of Philadelphia, Adams Morgan of Washington, D.C., and New York City's Manhattan — all suffered the same fate that forced the majority of its child-rearing families to leave San Francisco. The people who were displaced despite enormous efforts in restoring their urban habitats — their hopes of becoming part of a multicultural urban community dashed — always asked why no one had warned them about the overriding might of market forces that govern our lives.

It took considerable time and energy to build neighborhood commons through self-help efforts and the creative recycling of salvageable building material. For many years, with much excitement and a sense of anticipation, people worked together restoring neighborhoods, raising their children together, and building multicultural, inter-racial, and economically mixed urban communities. These efforts in building neighborhood commons, along with other restoration efforts, seemed to be very successful. Young professional couples would buy and fix up dilapidated buildings from absentee landlords or homestead vacant buildings taken over by the city. Over the years many residents participated actively in the restoration of open spaces on their neighborhood blocks. The sweat of the young, primarily white, home-owners definitely accrued to and increased their equity as the area, along with their houses, increased in value.

Unfortunately the less affluent members of the neighborhood, primarily people of color, who also participated actively in the restoration efforts, were tenants. Not only did they receive no reward, but they were gradually displaced from their homes, not being able to afford the increasing rents. Even some families who succeeded in acquiring and restoring their first homes were relegated to the role of “transition caretakers.” They had to sell their houses, no longer being able to afford the pricier goods and services that filtered into the newly gentrified neighborhood. In New York City, groups of young people acquired six-story buildings which they gutted and rehabilitated using mostly recycled materials. Unfortunately, in the long run, their lack of secure employment made it impossible for them to meet the mortgage payments, and they lost their buildings.

Neighborhood commons that were located in neighborhoods with little local home ownership often fell prey to the forerunners of gentrification — city-wide policies of “planned shrinkage,” “redlining” by banks which undermined and discouraged restoration efforts, and arson. The demolition and clearing of hazardously dilapidated and burnt-out buildings created large tracts of vacant land that were used for urban renewal projects or offered cheaply to entice developers. Many neighborhood residents were forced to leave the area as their buildings were bulldozed to the ground along with the neighborhood commons they had helped to create.

None of us anticipated at that time the devastating uprooting impact of gentrification and the rupturing of personal relationships that our restoration work ultimately caused. On the contrary, we believed that we were pioneers creating lasting models of complex, multicultural communities. Today we might use the word sustainable instead of lasting. Most likely people cling to the word sustainable because of their uncertainty about the future. They proclaim that they are developing sustainable projects which implies an assurance that they are contributing to the building of a sustainable society for future generations. Considering the overriding social and economic forces of political systems, it is irresponsible and dangerous to assume that sustainable results will inevitably occur. Inspiring visions are wonderful, but they become counterproductive when they sidetrack people and keep them from engaging in struggles which are necessary to create change. When, because of a sense of false security or false hopes, things don't work out as anticipated, discouragement and disillusionment ensue. We should always preface the word sustainable with phrases such as “aspiring to” or “working towards.”

A Call to Action

Alerted to the potential dangers of gentrification, community gardeners and other social activists engaged in democratizing society must take active steps to protect and preserve the diverse character of the neighborhood as well as the gardens themselves and to participate actively in political campaigns to permanently secure land for community use. All of us social activists who inspired people to participate in the restoration of land and buildings must be keenly aware and feel the burden of responsibility for having functioned, albeit unintentionally, as agents of gentrification. To be responsible as social activists we need to understand the complexity, implications, and consequences of the economic forces which we help to unleash.

Today community gardening organizations can join with others aspiring for economic, social, and environmental justice to research and support counter-gentrification measures that discourage windfall profits in land speculation. Community corporations, grassroots economic enterprises, and equity arrangements for home ownership by tenants are examples of safeguards that can help sustain the existence of economically and culturally diverse grassroots communities.

A global groundswell of empowering social visions, strategies, and actions is infusing networks of grassroots movements with new vitality and solidarity. As co-founder with Carl Anthony of the Urban Habitat Program whose mission is the development of multicultural environmental leadership, I witnessed the emergence of promising multicultural grassroots movements guided by leaders who had done their homework and learned from their struggles, maturing into a new level of political sophistication.

They emphasize how important it is for all of us to get to know one another in depth. Taking the time to understand everyone's unique histories generates compassion for each other's personal and communal traumas, vulnerabilities, and struggles. Such empathetic familiarity will safeguard the movement from being divided, conquered, and destroyed. Unlike the factionalizing and dogmatic infighting of earlier progressive political movements, the respect, caring, and compassion extended to fellow human beings promises to create a global movement of people united in their struggle to reclaim the commons.

Note: Some text in this article is reprinted from "Securing Land for Community Gardening," The Urban Ecologist, Summer, 1992.

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