

What Does a Garden Show? Vacant Lot Gardens in North Lawndale

Christine Dunford

Christine Dunford works in education and is an ensemble member of the Lookingglass Theatre Company in Chicago. She is a student in the Anthropology Doctoral Program at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Garden. n. 1. An enclosed piece of ground devoted to the cultivation of flowers, fruit, or vegetables; often with defining word, as flower-, fruit-, kitchen-, etc. 2. Ornamental grounds, used as a place of public resort.

Gardener. n. One who tends, lays out or cultivates a garden.

Gardens do not just happen. By definition they are created by a gardener who does not haphazardly build a garden, but purposefully, over time, “lays out or cultivates” a “piece of ground devoted” to the garden. Land, time, money and thought are “devoted” to carefully construct a garden that expresses a gardener’s personal aesthetic tastes and practical needs.

Most gardens have a private and a public aspect. They are privately created by a gardener and, at the same time, “used as a place of public resort” or are at least outside and visible to the passing public. Because they are visible, gardens are a public expression of the gardener’s values, tastes and needs for all to see.

Gardens can be thought of, to use Erving Goffman’s metaphor, as a kind of human behavior, specifically, a kind of performance. Gardeners use gardens, consciously or unconsciously, to shape and maintain a self-image, as well as a public image. Gardens, like all performance, are a form of image or impression management (Goffman 1959). By looking at a garden “performance,” we can tell much about a gardener’s personal values, tastes and needs. By looking at community’s garden “performances,” we can tell much about a community’s cultural values, tastes and needs.

The guiding question of this study is, what do gardens mean? Specifically, what do the vacant lot gardens in North Lawndale mean? We can and should ask this question in relation to each of the stakeholders involved in this study...the vacant lot gardeners, outside greening agencies working in the community, developers, public officials and the non-gardening residents of North



Lawndale are just a few...but we will focus first on the principal actors, the gardeners.

Ten North Lawndale gardeners, and their gardens, were studied. I will profile only one in this paper, although I will draw on other gardeners’ accounts as well. The meaning of the gardens is “performed” by gardeners in the physical aspects of the gardens themselves, in the gardeners’ stories, and in the gardeners’ interaction with other area gardeners, residents and greening agency staff.

The ultimate goal of this paper is to contribute to deeper understanding of the complexity of challenges faced and hopes held at this time by some of the residents of the North Lawndale community. I will also briefly discuss the unique role of the gardens in changes that are happening in North Lawndale, and the role that outside greening agencies have in the gardens and the change.

Project Rationale

During the summer of 1999, as an anthropology intern with the Center for Cultural Understanding and Change (CCUC) at the Field Museum of Natural History, I conducted research for Openlands Project, a not-for-profit greening agency.

CCUC was interested in the project because it contributed to the work of their Urban Research Initiative and supported their mission “to further the rich tradition of urban research in Chicago by documenting and analyzing the social and cultural processes occurring in the city.” The gardens in North Lawndale are, of course, a “social and cultural process.”

Staff at Openlands wanted a profile of the North Lawndale vacant lot gardens and gardeners and a collection of oral histories. In addition, staff wanted to know about name recognition in the area and, more important, to better understand how the vacant lot gardens and the North Lawndale Greening Committee, a group (started under the leadership of Openlands staff) of gardeners that meets monthly at the local library to discuss garden issues, are impacting the community.

Staff at Openlands and other agencies believe that urban greening projects work to both increase urban green space and to “build community,” or to “build community capacity.” Openlands staff wanted to know if this is happening in North Lawndale. The staff’s personal experience in the community and their intuition told them it was, but they wanted outside confirmation and clarification. This was my job.

Methodology

I conducted research over a nine-week period, focusing on ten vacant lot gardens in North Lawndale, using participant observation, interviews, mapping of the gardens and one informal focus group to collect data. Participant

observation included hours of gardening and participation in meetings of the North Lawndale Greening Committee. I spoke with resident gardeners, high school students, contacts at agencies funding projects in North Lawndale, Openlands staff, and staff with other not-for-profit agencies involved in urban greening projects around Chicago. The high school students I interviewed (the North Lawndale Garden Corp) work through a coalition of public and non-profit agencies including Openlands Project. I attended area block club meetings and CAPS meetings, as well one Alderman’s monthly community meeting. Interviews with gardeners were most often conducted in gardener’s homes and concluded with a walk through their gardens. I prompted gardeners by saying, “I would like to hear your story and the story of your garden.” These interviews were informal and generally lasted two to three hours.

Gardener Profile and Brief History of North Lawndale

The North Lawndale gardeners are gardening in a social and political context that includes both their personal histories and the history of the North Lawndale area. The predominantly African American population in the neighborhood, contrary to typical images portrayed in the press, is diverse. Not all the residents of North Lawndale are young and poor, or young and involved in gangs, drugs and crime. The gardeners are an example of this diversity. The vacant lot gardeners are primarily elderly African Americans in or near retirement. They own property, are secure in their incomes and have established social networks. Finally, they have lived in North Lawndale, and been a part of the community, for over forty years.

Waves of immigrant populations helped build North Lawndale. They came looking for jobs and opportunity and found both. Over the past century, North Lawndale was the site of the McCormick Reaper Company, the Western Electric Company, Sears, Roebuck & Co., the International Harvester Company, Zenith and Sunbeam factories, a Copenhagen snuff plant, and Alden’s catalogue store. The old “Sears Tower” still stands in North Lawndale today, one of many reminders of the area’s prosperous past.

The first groups of immigrants in the area were Polish and Czechoslovakians. Russian Jews followed them, and by the 1920s North Lawndale was one of the most densely populated areas in Chicago with over 100,000 residents. In the 1940s and 1950s the Russian Jews moved north in Chicago and African Americans, in a latter wave of the “great migration” from the south, moved in. (Grossman 1989) By the 1960s African American people made up 91% of the nearly 125,000 residents. By the early 1990s, however, the population of North Lawndale shrank to just over 47,000.

African Americans moved north in search of good jobs and a good life. But, beginning about the time they started to arrive in North Lawndale in the 1940s and 1950s the industry, and the jobs, began to leave the area. What happened in North Lawndale is an example of ways we begin to see institutionalized racism played out in the urban settings across the United States at this time (Wilson 1996). A steady decline in jobs continued for over four decades until, in the 1980s Western Electric closed, and, finally, Sears, Roebuck closed completely in 1987.

In the late 80s and much of the 90s, no major grocery store, no major shopping area, and no movie theatre existed in North Lawndale. Once beautiful brick and brownstone buildings, burnt or damaged in the political actions of the 60s, were not repaired. Sidewalks and streets were decrepit. Vacant lots were used as dumping sites. One visitor to the area gave an impression, “It looks like a war zone.” Local residents believed that the City of Chicago, including their own alderman, did not care about them. In the first half of the 1990s local residents, and the rest of Chicago, perceived North Lawndale as economically depressed, dilapidated, dirty and dangerous, with a high incidence of gang participation, high crime rates and high levels of drug-related activity

The reasons for the decline are complex. Political, social and economic factors are involved. The situation in North Lawndale was similar to the situation in other American cities in the 1970s and 1980s. Industry-related jobs diminished with the beginning of the “information age” and African Americans and other minorities were affected. One person explained the situation simply, “The collapse came at the moment when political action and civil rights activities were finally allowing blacks to move into the job market...when now there was no job market. At the same time drugs hit. Young, professional people...blue

collar workers...drugs and unemployment took them out. So only the older ones survived.”

Some of the older North Lawndale residents indeed “survived” and, in many ways, flourished. For forty years, through all the changes in the community, these residents stayed active and connected to each other, doing what they could working through block clubs and formal and informal networks to address personal and local issues. These are among the residents who today attend or run block club meetings, alderman’s meetings, CAPS meetings, and who organized to get the current alderman, Michael Chandler, into office. Some of these residents participated, to a degree, in discussion groups organized by the staff of developer Charles Shaw after he teamed up with Sears to develop a large housing project, called Homan Square, on the old Sears property. These are also among the residents who started vacant lot gardens. The gardens and the development are related on a number of levels.

The “greening” activity in North Lawndale was actually begun in earnest by a developer. Homan Square staff brought Openlands into North Lawndale, indirectly, through a resident. The resident explained how he learned about Openlands and got the idea and resources to start a vacant lot garden, “[A Homan Square developer representative] got in touch with me. He had asked around the neighborhood to find out who a leader was and somehow got my number. Before that he would go around the neighborhood with garbage bags and a work crew picking up trash. He went to meetings. The Homan Square project was in Phase One and they were ‘looking at the whole neighborhood’ trying to clean things up. This was in ‘95 or ‘96. He put me in touch with Openlands.” This gardener became the first president of the North Lawndale Greening Committee.

Since the mid-1990s North Lawndale has been experiencing “revitalization,” including a dramatic increase in attention, activity and resources from outside agents including developers, foundations, non-for-profit groups, media, and government programs in North Lawndale. A person working with one of these groups exclaimed, “Everyone is in North Lawndale! Isn’t someone doing a study of that?” That study should be done to contribute to understanding of urban revitalization. Simply, the combination of outside attention and

resources and inside support from some of the residents is bringing about change in North Lawndale.

Today, new housing is being built, existing housing is being renovated, property value is increasing, stores and a movie theatre have opened, jobs have been created, crime rates are going down, public services are improving, and population in North Lawndale is once again increasing.

Many residents see Homan Square as the primary catalyst for the change. One resident explained, "After all these years I was going to move, but then things started happening in the neighborhood... Homan Square came in and the neighborhood has changed. Since Homan Square came in there has been a 90% change. Now there is the theatre and a shopping center." A high school student said, "My neighborhood turned flipping upside down. It was a field of vacant lots. Now it's more serene since I first moved over there. Now we have Homan Square and extra security in the neighborhood."

The term "revitalization" and other terms, like "rejuvenation," "building community capacity" and "gentrification," used in relation to urban "development," are never, perhaps never can be, fully defined. Indicators of these things happening are unclear. What is "revitalization?" How do we know when it is happening? What will we see? And, perhaps more important to consider, who is it happening for and towards what ends? Each of the stakeholders in a community will have a different perspective. Developers, city officials, store owners, bankers, civic leaders, church leaders, school teachers and administrators, public health and housing agents, social service agents, police, staff at staff at greening agencies, staff at not-for-profit agencies of all kinds, residents who own property, residents who rent, residents who are old, residents who are young, and children will all have a different perspective. Community or urban "revitalization," "development" or "rejuvenation" is considered by most people as a positive thing...a benefit. But what benefits one stakeholder may not benefit all. Our task is to understand the perspective of the gardeners. How are the vacant lot gardens involved in the change happening in North Lawndale, the "revitalization?" What do the gardeners think and feel about it?

A part of the goal of Openlands staff is to "use greening to build community capacity." Openlands staff and the gardeners I met agree that building community capacity is

related first and foremost to increasing the day-to-day quality of life for residents of North Lawndale. They believe that gardens and green spaces build community capacity by making the community a more beautiful, peaceful and safe place to live. This is, of course, an oversimplification of a complex question. The quality of life for one resident may or may not increase the quality of life for a resident next door. The next-door neighbor might, for instance, get inspiration or enjoyment from a garden, but the property value on their land may go up and their landlord may increase rent. Some residents believe that vacant lot gardens and green spaces increase community capacity by raising property values. Most of the elderly residents I met did not seem to mind if property values went up. One resident, perhaps representing an extreme opinion, said that she did not care who moved in or who moved out. She wanted to buy as much as she could and sell as high as she could. One local businessperson, however, worried that the development and the gardens will drive people out of the area. She mentioned that she sees lots of people moving back to the city from the suburbs, and that North Lawndale is inviting because it is affordable and just ten minutes drive from downtown. She sees "an area of changing demographics. The older people will die off or have problems with property taxes. There will be gentrification. Ten years from now the same people will not live in the neighborhood. Soon, if you can't afford to live here, you won't be here."

Right now, most of the change in North Lawndale is being experienced as positive change. The old Sears land that Homan Square built on and the "vacant lot" land used for the gardens is not yet contested space. But many of the residents, and certainly the gardeners, are involved in a larger "development" strategy over which, one day, they may not have control.

Most of the gardeners are aware of this larger context. Everyone interviewed (the developer was not) expressed an understanding that the efforts of the developers in gardening were to "clean up the neighborhood" in order to make the area more attractive to investors. Vacant lot gardeners seem to support the developer's efforts and rationale for participation in the gardens. Area politicians, specifically the local commissioner and alderman, support the gardens with the understanding that the

greening initiative helps to clean up vacant lots that might otherwise be places for people or garbage to gather. Local police officers at a C.A.P.S. meeting supported gardening activity because, again, the gardens prevent people from gathering outside and contribute to the general cleanliness and safety of the neighborhood.

Expectations

When I began this project I expected that the gardeners would be working with plants and methods that reflect their rural backgrounds. And I expected that the gardeners would like to talk about their plants and gardening techniques. However, few of my expectations were realized. In just a few weeks of gardening and talking with residents, I realized that about half of the gardeners I interviewed had never gardened before and did not garden for produce or pleasure. Also, the stories the gardeners shared as they watched me pull weeds or as we sat on their front steps had little to do with gardens or gardening. What did this mean?

I came to believe that the meaning of the gardens for the gardeners was closely connected to the history, present change, and future of North Lawndale. But how was it connected to North Lawndale and why? When asked to talk about why they started or expanded their vacant lot garden, every person mentioned in one way or another that they saw the garden as a way to improve the neighborhood. This raises a number of questions. How do the vacant lot gardens serve to improve the neighborhood? Who are they being improved for? And why, at great expense of time and often money, are the gardeners involved? Some of these questions can begin to be answered by looking at the name given to and used for the gardens, “vacant lot gardens.”

What’s In A Name?

The meaning of the gardens to the gardeners is not related to gardening so much as it is related to change in the neighborhood...or to residents changing the neighborhood and to their need for control and asserting an image and identity in the context of that change.

Before I began fieldwork, I used the term “community gardens” to describe the gardens included in the study. While conducting research, however, I began to use the

term “vacant lot gardens.” It is the term that the gardeners themselves use and it specifically describes the gardens in North Lawndale. The North Lawndale gardens were created, literally, on vacant city lots where the remains of a building, often abandoned and demolished, was pushed into its own basement and covered by a thin layer of topsoil. Vacant lots in North Lawndale are perceived by residents, police, and especially the current alderman, as undesirable, dangerous places where “people and trash gather.” Actually, abandoned buildings are more undesirable, but vacant lots are a close second. It is not uncommon to hear someone talk about how they have been working for years to get an abandoned building torn down but then they lament, there is the vacant lot to deal with.

Part of the meaning of the vacant lot gardens to the gardeners is related to the gardeners’ self image. The gardeners want to experience themselves, and to be experienced by others, as people who are concerned with and take responsible action to improve the neighborhood.

Choosing and using names are a “performance” of meaning. The expression “vacant lot garden,” first, most directly suggests what the space was before it was made into a garden. It was a “vacant lot.” However, the expression also suggests something about the meaning of the gardens to the gardeners. The gardeners, and the not-for-profit and city agencies that work with the gardeners, are claiming credit for the transformation of the space. The gardeners do not commonly call their creations “community” gardens, or “neighborhood” gardens, or even “lot” gardens. Some of the gardens do have specific names like the “Slumbusters’ Garden,” the “Legacy Garden,” the “Reading Garden,” and the “Seniors Garden,” but these names are seldom used in every day conversation or in garden-related literature. The most commonly used name for the gardens, “vacant lot gardens,” contains a reminder of the undesirable past...the undesirable vacant lot...the lot that the gardeners and agencies have successfully replaced with a beautiful, inspiring and safe garden. But if the “vacant lot” part were no longer in the name, it would no longer be clear what kind of meaningful action was taken by creating the garden. So “vacant lot” is maintained as part of the name of the present “garden” as a performance of the meaning and value of the creation.

A Vacant Lot Gardener: Mrs. J

I selected Mrs. J as an example of the gardeners because she and her garden represent a kind of “average” of the range of aspects of vacant lot gardeners and gardens in North Lawndale. Each of the gardeners and gardens has remarkable and unique aspects. It is indeed comparing the unique aspects of the gardeners and gardens that give the fullest picture of the complexity of challenges faced and hopes held at this time by some of the residents of the North Lawndale community. In the interest of space and time, however, I will limit discussion to Mrs. J and her vacant lot garden.



I first spoke with Mrs. J over the telephone. I called to ask if we could get together to talk about her garden. She said yes and asked which garden. It turns out that she has a vacant lot garden with members of her block club as well as a “garden in my own yard.” I asked her what kind of garden she had in her own yard. She did not answer directly, but told me that she was looking for water lilies and asked, did I know where she could find some? I asked her why she wanted water lilies. She said, “A young man was starting a business last summer.” It was a business that built small ponds for people in their yards. She thought she would help him out by buying one. But now, this year, she had a pond with no water lilies. A neighbor drained the pond because it was starting to smell. “Maybe I will let it go for this year.” I told her I would ask around about the water lilies and asked if she could meet on Monday. She told me that Monday was not a good day to meet because it is her “woman’s day at church” on Sunday, and she goes to two services so she is tired on Monday. She never meets anyone when she is “tired and not fit for company.” She suggested that I come to the garden on Saturday when there would be a “work group” from Green Corp. (She meant the North

Lawndale Garden Corp, a group of high school students working for pay in an educational program funded by a coalition of public agencies and non-profits including the Steans Family Foundation and Openlands.) She told me that the plan for the day was to “cut grass, lay out flowers, water, and put out wood chips.”

Saturday morning I met her and the North Lawndale Garden Corp at her garden, located half a block down from her home. I parked across the street and as I walked up I noticed that it is on a corner lot with a chain link fence around it. Garden beds, raised two feet off the ground and formed with railroad ties line the perimeter of the garden on the two sides closest to the streets and are planted with flowers and shrubs. Two-thirds of the garden is covered with grass. A garden plot with rows of vegetables lies in the middle of the grass. The remaining third of the garden is covered with wood chips. There is a new, wooden gazebo in the wood chip area. A red brick path winds through the grass. In the corner of the garden is a hand-painted sign that reads, “Neighborhood watch. Block club. Help keep it beautiful. No ball playing. No loud music. No loitering. No drinking. (The list goes on.) May God bless you.” Shade is created along one side of the garden by a two-flat building. Through the morning people sat on railroad ties along this wall to rest out of the sun.

When I arrived I saw four high school age young people, all African American, a white woman in her early thirties and two elderly African American women in the garden. It turns out that the young people are the Garden Corp and the white woman is their group leader. One of the other women is Mrs. J. and the fourth woman is another block club member. I watched the gardening activity for about five minutes, feeling awkward, and finally asked, “what should I do?” Mrs. J said with some surprise, “Oh, you want to help!” And without hesitation said, “there...start weeding.” Over the next two and half-hours I weeded, occasionally taking a moment to cool off in the shade. Before leaving, Mrs. J and I agreed that I would come to her house later in the week to talk.

I was five minutes late. She answered the door with a smile and, “You’re right on time,” as she walked slowly in front of me up stairs to the second floor. I said, “Actually I’m a little late.” She laughed like she knew I was a little late and appreciated that I knew it too. We sat in her front room. I told her a little about myself and asked her to tell me her story and the story of her garden. We talked for over two hours.

She talked about herself first. Mrs. J is 77 years old. She lives on the second floor of a two-flat that she has owned for fifty years. She came to North Lawndale as a young woman from Hope, Arkansas. She talked about her past jobs and her education. She has a college degree in home economics and “lots of postgraduate education.” She took classes part time at a number of places including the “Jane Adams School of Social Work,” but she did not get a graduate degree. She would get far in a program, she explained, working part time and going to school part time, then it would get to a point when she would have to finish up school full time and she would have to quit the program. She had to work.

Mrs. J asked me what I studied in college. I told her that in undergraduate school I studied theatre and performance. She asked if I like Shakespeare. “Yes, I love Shakespeare.” She asked, “Do you have any memorized?”

“Yes, a little,” I replied. “Do you?”

She smiled, “Yes, would you like to hear a passage from *Tempest*?” She recited, and when she finished one passage or poem, she went on to another, four pieces in all. She told me that she used to recite when she was little. She recited beautifully. I began to like Mrs. J very much. She told me that she wants to find an old poem that she loves, but cannot remember fully, “The Gate at the End of Things.” We talked about bridge. She gave her table and chairs away and declines invitations to join regular games because it is too consuming. We talked about her two sons. Both live in Arizona. She had a visit planned for the fall. She told me about her trip to Jerusalem in 1992 and showed me two beautiful T-shirts that she bought as souvenirs. And she told me that she took a cruise in the Caribbean for six days once. I asked her what happened. She said she ate the whole time. Finally, I asked her again how she got into gardening.

Her mother had a garden. It was an “eye sore” so she started working on it. About her garden, the block club’s garden, she said that the block club got together five years ago. Everybody decided together what to plant. They share all the produce. They just go and get what they want. I asked her how many people work in the garden. She said that they are seniors and depend a lot on labor, but there are nine active members of the block club. They pay \$5 a month, which she says can add up. \$60 a year is a lot. Only 3–5 people actively work the garden. But with

nine members, she said, the block club has \$540, enough money to do some things. I asked her what they do with the money. She said they need the money to hire people, because Openlands and Steans (Family Foundation) say that they cannot use their grant money to hire people. I asked her how the garden got started. She told me that there was a building on the garden spot, a big corner lot. After the building was demolished they wanted to do something with the spot. She heard about the money for gardening (through Openlands) and talked to her block club. I asked her how the block club was involved in the garden and the community. She said that they meet every first Saturday of the month. They have a Christmas party. Last year it was at Leona’s, but it does not have anything to do with the garden. Besides that, they host a big “back to school” party in the garden for the kids each year, one day in late summer from 8am to 8pm. They have games and competitions. Mrs. J explained, “Competition is good for kids.” They have a dance contest, hula-hoop, jump rope, and skate board contests as well as a report card contest.

I asked her if she had plans for the future of the garden. It turns out there is another vacant lot that they want to do something with. She has called the Bureau of Forestry and they are bringing wood chips over, which the Garden Corp will help to spread. I asked her about her participation in the North Lawndale Greening Committee meetings. Mrs. J regularly attends but she will not go in the winter anymore because it gets dark early. She has arthritis, walks with a cane and does not feel safe walking to and from her car in the dark. I asked Mrs. J what the garden means to her and why it is important. She did not answer directly, but instead talked about change, “the whole neighborhood is changing.” I asked how, and she answered by talking about the increasing value of property and about the ways things were different from when she was young.

What can we tell about Mrs. J’s personal values, tastes and needs by looking at her garden, listening to her conversation and observing her behavior? What do these suggest about the community’s values, tastes and needs? First, what do the physical aspects of the garden suggest? The most obvious physical aspects of Mrs. J’s garden are a fence, a sign, raised beds, and a vegetable garden plot.

Many of the gardens have raised beds. They are necessary because the dirt on the ground is poor or nonexistent. The raised beds in Mrs. J's garden were carefully designed and built in a creative pattern. In addition, Mrs. J tells us, they were created especially for easy access by seniors. It is interesting, however, that the center of the garden has non-raised beds and is one of only three vacant lot gardens with a significant amount of vegetables. The garden is neatly kept. This is true in spite of the fact that the residents cannot easily do much physical work. This, combined with the complexity of the raised bed design suggest that Mrs. J is very concerned about the appearance of her garden. This concern is expressed also in her own appearance. She told me, for example, that she never meets anyone when she is "tired and not fit for company." Appearances are important to Mrs. J.

Next, we come to the question of the fence. Mrs. J's fence is six feet high and encloses the garden completely except on one side that is bordered by the side of a building. Mrs. J did not mention the fence in our talk and I did not ask about it. From staff at Openlands, I found out later that she had a garden "in the front" before Openlands came into the area, but that her garden was small, and she did not have a fence. With funding and resources from Openlands she and the members of her block club got labor, landscaping, plants, a gazebo and a six-foot high fence that she keeps locked. She and the other three to five active gardeners in the block club hold a key. This suggests that control of access to the space is important to Mrs. J. Again, a staff member at Openlands suggests a possible meaning. "It is the 'prima donna' syndrome and competition and being able to say, 'look how nice my garden is,' and 'I've been able to get all this stuff,' or 'I am a good person because I can do these things.' Mrs. J never had a fence (before Openlands began to work in the community and other gardeners started getting fences) and it wasn't locked!" If this is accurate, then it indicates Mrs. J's sense of identity and self worth are related in some part to 'how nice' her garden is and all the 'stuff' she has for her garden.

Fences are both the most visible aspects of many of the gardens and the most discussed aspect of the gardens by the gardeners when they narrate the story of creating their gardens. In seven of ten cases, the fence was the most important first item of business for the gardener. In one case, a gardener has spent three years and over two thousand dol-



lars working on just getting a fence. At the end of three years there is a fence and eight very small (not raised) beds of young plants in the garden.

Residents explain that the fences are for safety (one gardener) and preventing vandalism (seven gardeners). Most gardeners say that the fences are necessary or people will destroy the plants, dump garbage or cars, or gather. Gathering is perceived as being dangerous or threatening activity. More than one gardener mentioned that fences create an obstacle for easy traffic of people doing drug business.

The vacant lots that existed before the gardens were often the sites of illegal dumping or a place for cars. Most of the gardeners believed that this would happen to the gardens unless they were protected. This research could not determine if this projection is true, however. One outside agency representative conjectured that, if it happened at all, dumping would have diminished as gardens grew and became viable. There were very few stories of actual vandalism to the gardens. One gardener with a large plot of vegetables explained that before the fence, people who had not helped make the garden would sometimes come and take what they wanted. Another gardener told of how Christmas decorations were damaged once, laughingly suggesting that maybe the person did not like the decorations. One garden existed safely for many years without a fence. One garden exists today with only a fence at the back (to encourage use but discourage through traffic).

One gardener did have trouble with harassment and vandalism before there was a fence. This garden is on a block that had and has a high level of drug-related traffic. The changes happening in the North Lawndale and increased developer and outside agency interest in the gardens was

bringing attention to the block that the people involved in the drug business did not like. As it happened, the gardener spoke to the individuals involved in the harassment, explaining that she knew their mothers and that she cared about them and their future and that the garden was for them too. The harassment stopped. On the other hand, a representative with an outside greening agency who has worked with gardens across the city did say that he had reluctantly come to believe that in some few cases, gardens would not succeed without a fence.

The existence of fences begs the questions, who or what do they keep in and who or what do they keep out? In North Lawndale are the new garden fences keeping some residents in and some out? Why did the fences go up when Openlands and the Homan Square development activity entered the neighborhood?

I would propose that the fences are not just about protecting the gardens, but also relate to authority, ownership and control of space. Representatives from more than one outside agency talked about the fences. One representative who has been working in North Lawndale for years explained the control issue; "Fences in the community are to barricade [the gardeners] from the community at large. They have the tape [playing in their minds]... 'We don't want to improve the lot because it will make things worse. People will gather. We need a fence to keep out the wrong people so the good people can use it.' These are people who feel they have lost control and need to say 'This is my space...my community.' So, [outside agencies] say sure [to the fences]. Maybe over time there won't be a need for a fence...as fires of open space spread...it all goes hand in hand." Perhaps it is even larger than this.

For Mrs. J and vacant lot gardeners in North Lawndale, the fences suggest that the gardeners have authority and power in their community and that they are serving as responsible community members by keeping gardens safe from vandals and keeping the block safe from unwanted collecting of trash or people. The fences are an expression of and a safeguard for the gardeners' image of themselves and their image or identity in the community. The fences say "respect this space, respect me."

Final Reflections and Further Research

The vacant lot gardens are more than gardens. The majority of North Lawndale vacant lot gardeners are not gardening only for the love of gardens or the desire for fresh, homegrown produce. When asked directly, gardeners give cleaning up the neighborhood, beautification, inspiration, example to others and personal pleasure as the top five reasons for gardening. When asked why they want to clean up the neighborhood many respond that it makes the area safer. In extended conversation with gardeners, however, the meaning of the gardens to the gardeners becomes more complex. Many gardeners experience their vacant lot garden as an opportunity to make a positive difference, to feel good about themselves, and to gain in authority and personal control on their block and in their community.

My interpretation of the performance of Mrs. J and the other gardeners is similar to the experience of a greening agency staff member who explains that the meaning of the gardens to the gardeners is related to three things: "control, vanity and networking." I take out "vanity" and add "identity" to this list.

We have seen the importance of the gardens to constructing identity in the story of Mrs. J. Regarding control, individuals control access to the gardens and maintain a highly visible and unique position on their block. The gardener is a person of consequence who is making a difference and helping to improve the quality of life for North Lawndale residents. In addition to a sense of accomplishment and pride, a sense of power and control is involved. More than one resident appreciates that the garden is theirs alone, that they can deny others access and that they privately control what is perceived as public space.

We must look at the unique history of the residents to understand this fully. Race and racial issues are involved. Yes, many residents have taken responsibility for their lives in North Lawndale over the years, but there were many things that they could not control. They could not control the jobs leaving the area. They could not control the fact that it was difficult to get insurance for buildings after the riots of the 60s. They could not control the fact that the City of Chicago for a long time let their streets and sidewalks fall into such disrepair that a local resident felt the need to stage

a “highlights of North Lawndale” tour where he led City of Chicago officials down impassable sidewalks to see some of the largest gaping holes in North Lawndale’s streets. One resident offered that she had not controlled much in her life and that she liked having the garden because it gave her more authority on her block. Another resident proudly stated that since she started her garden she gets more respect and can “report” people for leaving their garbage cans in front of their building instead of in the alley. Some residents, recognizing that gardens and green spaces in an area can contribute to raising property values even view cultivating gardens as a way of controlling their financial futures. Gardens are an investment.

The gardeners’ sense of ownership and appreciation of control has potential positive and negative aspects. On the one hand, it empowers a community resident to take on responsibility and a position of leadership. Some gardeners testify that since the start of their gardens, their street has been cleaner in general and that more people are taking care of their houses and yards. On the other hand, it potentially excludes or diminishes the participation of others. Some gardeners do not want others to work in their gardens simply because they feel tremendous pride and ownership in their work. In the end, for the vast majority of residents in North Lawndale, the gardens exist to be experienced passively from a distance. Even if residents were willing, there is little opportunity for participation in most cases except at an annual picnic or by starting another garden.

Further research would include discussion with residents who are not gardening. The meaning of the gardens and the impact of the vacant lot gardens on the quality of life for these people are not known. We do know, however, that they will be impacted, at least financially, as property values and taxes rise, in the future.

When asked if the gardens were having any affect on North Lawndale residents, a representative with an outside agency brings the question of meaning back again to the gardeners, “It’s happening. It’s in small ways I’m not thinking of...more subtle.” He went on to explain, “The biggest things about their program affecting change is...people who have not worked with an agency before for help...they get courage to go out and look for other ways to improve their neighborhood.”

To the outside greening agencies, the gardens serve two primary purposes. First, they help improve the environment and the quality of life of residents. Second, and more important to almost all interviewed, they serve as a vehicle for “building community capacity.” To most greening agencies this means creating networks where none existed or strengthening old networks. It includes providing a forum for people to come together to talk about issues that effect their lives. It includes building people’s communication and networking skills so they can come together to participate more fully in their present and future. In North Lawndale this goal is being pursued through the creation and nurturing of groups like the North Lawndale Greening Committee and the North Lawndale Garden Corp.

In a cursory review of literature put out by various greening agencies, it is clear that for many agencies the primary concern is not greening and gardening. These issues are considered tools for a larger purpose which materials for the American Community Garden Association Conference describe as, “groups (coming) together to address environmental/social problems and build local capacity through community gardening.” Part of the agenda of this organization is “using community gardens to cultivate local leadership.”

The North Lawndale Greening Committee offers an opportunity for building vacant lot gardens, community networks and local leaders. Perhaps one of the reasons that the efforts of Openlands and other agencies have been successful in North Lawndale, however, is because strong networks and leadership already existed. We know that networks exist in all communities. They are often not easily visible from the outside, but they do exist. Some greening agency representatives say that the networks in North Lawndale were unusually strong. Perhaps this simply means that they were unusually visible, but nonetheless, gardeners in this area know each other, and some say they knew each other before the North Lawndale Greening Committee brought them together as gardeners.

This study began to explore the meaning of the gardens for the gardeners. Further research is needed to get a complete picture of the meaning of the gardens for the gardeners as well as for the other residents and stakeholders in North Lawndale. Continued research would also

contribute to understanding the role the greening efforts of organizations like Openlands in the process of urban change in Chicago and other cities.

Further research about change in North Lawndale might include a study of the many outside agencies working in the community, including questions about how they came, why they came, what their goals are, how they are working toward their goals, and when, if ever, they plan to leave.

Finally, research about constructs of concepts of nature might include an examination of images, understandings and feelings relating to gardens and gardening and how these are articulated and/or used by stakeholders in North Lawndale.

It is too soon to speculate what the gardens will mean in the long run to residents of North Lawndale. With Homan Square, the massive new housing development, the new Dominicks, the new movie theatre and the vacant lot gardens has come a sense of something happening in the area and a sense of hope for a better future. A teenager working with the North Lawndale Garden Corp voiced a general sentiment, "I don't know if the gardens are making a difference, but we need the gardens over here."



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