

Book Review

Eizenberg, Efrat. 2013. *From the ground up: community gardens in New York City and the politics of spatial transformation*. Farnham: Ashgate. 196pp. ISBN 978-1-4094-2909-8.

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In Efrat Eizenberg's *From the Ground Up*, we are given an exploration of New York City (NYC)'s community gardens as spaces that provide an alternative to ongoing commodification of land with neoliberalization. As Eizenberg explains, through community gardens, resisting the ongoing allocation of land to private commercial, industrial and residential activities, local residents are able to interact and work together, creating common spaces and goals which solidify interpersonal ties as well as food that residents enjoy.

Eizenberg provides a detailed history of community gardens in NYC, including key events such as the economic crisis of the 1970s (Ch. 1). At that time, private disinvestment and an expansion of immigrant neighborhoods led primarily Black and Hispanic residents to slowly transform "rubble-strewn vacant land into communal green spaces for recreational gardening and even small-scale urban farming" (p. 20). As the real estate market started to recover in the 1980s, the value of land in NYC's various urban areas increased and many of the gardens were threatened by pressures of gentrification.

With the historical foundation laid, Eisenberg builds on three elements of Lefebvre's concept of space: "*material space*—the actual space and its forms and objects; *representational space*— the knowledge that is produced about space and its production; and *lived space*— the emotional experience of space and the subjective practices that are attached to the space" (p. 10). Engaging this conceptualization in relation to NYC's community gardens, the book provides a compelling discussion of the transformations that occur within three interrelated levels of analysis: individual (Ch. 2, 3), collective (Ch. 4, 5), and institutional (Ch. 6). Starting with the individual level of experience, Eizenberg details the personal experiences that people have in community gardens, as they create memories, develop a sense of control and ownership over the land, and use it as a creative outlet. The collective level is then examined through the lens of a social space. Here the gardeners' actions and experiences lead to the development of a multi-purpose space, where time, expertise and knowledge are exchanged for free, via workshops, parties, and everyday gardening practices. The gardeners work together and learn new gardening techniques, as well as the skills necessary to organize to defend the gardens from land use changes.

The institutional level is then explored by investigating social movements, across the spectrum from informal and formal organizations (including two existing organizations: More Gardens! and Times Up!). As well, Eizenberg focuses on city organizations such as the Parks and Recreation Department, Operation Green Thumb and the New York City Community Garden Coalition. Based on years of observation, experience, and countless interviews, Eizenberg explains how NYC gardeners have learned that the institutionalized groups provide a number of benefits, even demonstrating significant sway with political figures. Protesting government decisions on commercial development, however, is an action more suited to grassroots coalitions.

One other challenge that arises as groups become more institutionalized is that the interests of the many can be stomped out by the interests of the few. For example, the New York Restoration Project (NYRP) founded by actress Bette Midler purchased 57 community gardens that were set to be auctioned in the 1990s. The NYRP purchased the gardens and redesigned each one, utilizing the skills of "designers...on the cutting edge of open-space development and green design." Sadly, a result of this process is that those community members who previously tended these gardens and took pride in the creation and design process were often left feeling detached from the gardens that they were once an integral part of (p. 69). Examples like this are difficult because the funding from NYRP saved them from private development, but it seems that some become alienated in the process.

Significantly adding to the flow of this book, each section also includes excerpts from interviews with NYC community gardeners. These first-hand accounts bring the text to life, as they bridge the gap between the conceptual foundations and the more tangible realities that exist at each level of the discourse.

One thing I would have found useful would be a stronger sense of how this case study relates to the broader set of issues affecting other cities, whether related to community gardening, or the demographics of those participating gardeners. For instance, given that most gardeners in NYC are identified as Black or Hispanic, what might these findings mean for other communities characterized by more affluent or White communities? As well, given NYC is in many ways an exceptional city (in terms of land prices, size, etc.), what might be the implications of this work for other large, medium or small sized cities with residents interested in promoting urban food or community cohesion? Agency within individual gardeners is explained as developing through time within the garden community. I would be interested to learn more about the development of socially conscious actors outside of the garden context. Would we find that they become active in the same way or for the same reasons? Do the motivations for action vary between people focused on neo-liberal domination of space and people focused on other topics, such as climate justice, human rights or animal rights?

By delivering a firm theoretical foundation and building upon it with first hand stories of real gardeners in NYC, Eizenberg bridges the gap between theory and reality. This pairing creates a tangible and holistic picture of the phenomenon of community gardens in NYC, how they form and how – with much social struggle – they either evolve over time or disappear with land use change.

From the Ground Up might most appropriately be seen in the hands of a scholar, or a person working in the planning profession. Yet, given that the language employed throughout makes it highly accessible; it would also be a useful and compelling read for anyone with an interest in community gardens, or paths to inner city development of culture and community. Particularly for those involved with community gardens, whether local level organizers and gardeners to government officials, the book is an essential read.

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