

Validating verdancy or vacancy? The relationship of community gardens and vacant lands in the U.S.

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Highlights

- Community gardens are often seen as temporary uses of vacant land.
- Gardeners see them as important parts of neighborhoods and cities.
- Local governments and organizations historically planned gardens to be temporary.
- Increasingly, gardeners reproduce those dominant narratives as well.
- Rethinking these transformations can lead to better policy toward vacant land.

Abstract

Community gardens have gained attention and support in recent years because of a range of expected benefits and outcomes, and they are one of many examples of transformations of vacant land into green space. While the improvements to vacant or underutilized land are lauded, the practice of community gardening is underpinned by the assumption that it is a temporary practice on temporarily-available land. This assumption, which is at times implicit and at others explicit, maintains that support for community gardens—technical assistance and especially access to land—can be temporary. Through a genealogy of community garden advocacy in the U.S., we find that a dominant narrative of community gardening as a means to an end has been continuously reproduced for more than a century in large part by government agencies and philanthropic organizations. In recent decades, community gardeners have become key actors in advocacy, and although they portray gardening as a meaningful part of everyday city life, they also reproduce that narrative of temporariness by promoting it as a means to address various issues. We argue that this tension between means and ends—especially coming from community gardeners—is problematic. It is a challenge for community gardeners and the many other producers of green space on supposedly vacant land because their means-oriented discourse takes precedence in the public imagination; it perpetuates the notion that the land is ultimately still vacant.

Keywords: community gardens, urban gardening, urban space, discourse, genealogy

In a 2009 article in *National Civic Review*, the authors discuss how local governments can engage community gardening; they start out by stating “the term *community garden* evokes the image of a blighted, debris-laden corner becoming a green sanctuary (Henderson & Hartsfield, 2009, p. 12, emphasis in original). This statement contains not-so-subtle hints about how community gardens are often imagined—as spaces that only become possible once

something else goes wrong, such as blight and vacancy. It also brings into view the need to examine the tensions between innovative transformations of vacant land into green space and the status of such land remaining “vacant.”

Community gardens and vacant land are increasingly at the confluence of a range of urban policy and planning issues across cities in North America, Europe, and Australia. As sites where residents produce food, build social capital, and even generate income, community gardens are celebrated as addressing many urgent concerns related to food security, urban sustainability, and neighborhood revitalization. Vacant land, it seems, is the natural location for community gardens. Indeed, a large body of literature has documented how grassroots groups take advantage of vacant lots to produce community gardens (Lawson, 2005, 2007; Schmelzkopf, 1995, 2002). Proposals to transform vacant land into community gardens have recently entered planning and policy discourse (Bonham et al., 2002; Grewal & Grewal, 2012; Schilling & Logan, 2008).

Yet, the longevity and permanence of community gardens is fragile and insecure given their siting on land that continues to be classified as “open” or “vacant” because it implies an ongoing trajectory toward development of “higher and better use” than gardening (Irazábal & Punja, 2009; Schmelzkopf, 2002; Smith & Kurtz, 2003). Even though community gardening has long been a part of U.S. cities, it continues to be difficult to secure legal status for them (Lawson, 2005; Masson-Minock & Stockmann, 2010). Still, scholars, policymakers, and advocacy groups continue to promote community gardens on vacant land while justifying them through the multitude of expected outcomes.

This tension between the merits of community gardening and often insecure land tenure accompanies conflicting discourses about whether community gardens are means to ends, or

ends in themselves. Community gardens are praised for the work they do, and members express delight in the practice of gardening where it formerly did not take place (Saldivar-Tanaka & Krasny, 2004; Schmelzkopf, 1995). There has long been a tendency, however, to see community gardening as a short-term activity to achieve certain goals. Government agencies and philanthropic groups have historically planned community gardens as intentionally temporary projects; they have particularly been successful in recasting community gardens as only needed during economic downturns, and thus removing support for them when the need for them has ended (Lawson, 2005; Moore, 2006; Schmelzkopf, 2002). As such, there is often the implicit assumption that community gardens are aberrations of the urban landscape, much like the idea of vacancy itself (Bowman & Pagano, 2004). Aberration in this context suggests that the garden is a bandage for some underlying problem and is only needed until that problem is resolved.

Yet, if we shift to community gardeners' perspective, it is evident that they see these sites as meaningful parts of their neighborhoods with ongoing benefits—they do not see gardens as merely temporary solutions to the problem of vacant land (Eizenberg, 2013; Hou et al., 2009; Saldivar-Tanaka & Krasny, 2004). Knigge and Cope point out how “the term ‘vacant’ implies a lack or absence, but... [community garden sites] instead reflected the presence, action, and commitment of those who created the community gardens” (Knigge & Cope, 2009, p. 108). Even though there are some examples of cities making more permanent measures for community gardens, and of individual gardens gaining permanence, there is a persistent discourse in which community gardening is framed as being relative to some shortcoming in the urban landscape.

How did this common assumption about community gardens—as evident in the opening quotation of this paper—become so prevalent and persistent? Perhaps the obstacles to securing permanence for community gardens do not just involve legal frameworks and property

development but also rethinking community gardening in terms of means and ends. The role of community gardeners in redefining their place in the city is thus very important. As one scholar previously wrote, “in the past, [community garden] programs were developed to be temporary, so that with each new crisis, new organizations and procedures had to be invented, even though similar appeals were used each time to obtain public support and land. Today, as advocates assert that gardens should be permanent community resources, we are poised to change this legacy” Lawson (2005, p. 287). In this special issue that examines how vacant land is used and imagined in a variety of informal ways, this paper critically examines the tension between the seemingly overburdened expectations of community gardens and their identities as temporary sites located on vacant land.

In this paper we present a Foucauldian genealogy to investigate how this common sense view has become so pervasive in spite of such repeated exception. First, we review how community gardens are consistently linked to notions of temporariness in a diverse range of scholarly literature. We then elaborate on the discourse analysis method and materials. After reviewing the contemporary literature on community gardens in which they are often underpinned by objective-driven assumptions of temporariness, we examine key discursive moments in community garden advocacy to present the ways that gardens and gardening have been portrayed relative to vacant land. We then discuss how the identification of community gardening with vacancy, and thus as a temporary activity, is not an immutable truth but an idea that has persisted through its continuous discursive reproduction. It reaches a point where community gardeners also use contradictory discourses of means and ends. We conclude by arguing that while it is exciting to see innovative uses of vacant land, the persistence of historical narratives makes it difficult to look beyond vacant land.

Literature Review: Community Gardening, Vacancy, and Means versus Ends

Community gardening embodies a diverse set of practices that vary over time and space; they are not merely instrumental interventions but become complexly interwoven into neighborhood and broader urban processes. Although numerous studies have shown how community gardening has assisted residents in times of crisis (Bassett, 1981; Lawson, 2005), many others show how community gardens become more than simply a stopgap measure. Empirical research indicates that community gardening facilitates many different processes and practices, including fruit and vegetable cultivation, social capital formation, civic participation, recreation, environmental education, and income generation (Alaimo et al., 2008; Alaimo et al., 2010; Armstrong, 2000; Ferris et al., 2001). These multiple and overlapping outcomes make it difficult to classify community gardens by sets of fixed purposes since multiple activities and outcomes occur within and through community gardens, changing over time (Saldivar-Tanaka & Krasny, 2004). In short, community gardens can vastly exceed the expectations and intentions of those individuals and institutions that advocate and plan community gardens (Hobson & Hill, 2010).

Contemporary scholarly literature, however, often invokes community gardens as a temporary solution to the vacant land problem (Németh & Langhorst, 2013). Currently, for instance, they are increasingly part of the suite of interventions addressing community food security (American Planning Association, 2007; Grewal & Grewal, 2012; McCullum et al., 2005; Short et al., 2007). They are also seen as part of a strategic toolset in the face of pressures to “green” cities, adapt to the process of “shrinking” cities, and alleviate the burdens brought on by foreclosures (Lawson & Miller, 2013; Rosol, 2005; Schilling & Logan, 2008). Yet, such proposals only justify community gardens as a use of vacant land; they only marginally address

ways to create legal frameworks for long-term status. For instance, this tension is evident in Flint, Michigan, where the Genesee County Land Bank has become very adept at demolishing abandoned buildings and creating community gardens, but gardeners still face numerous legal obstacles in their efforts to classify community gardening as a permanent land use (Masson-Minock & Stockmann, 2010; Shigley & Cleaver, 2008). In turn, struggles of community gardeners against redevelopment have been documented in New York, Los Angeles, and elsewhere (see, for example, Irazábal & Punja, 2009; Lawson, 2007; Schmelzkopf, 2002; Smith & Kurtz, 2003). Given these persistent dilemmas, there are a range of critiques as a counterweight to the more celebratory accounts. Such critical assessments argue that community gardens are stopgap remedies for the effects of neoliberal policies, and as such, transfer risk and responsibility from the state to disadvantaged communities (Allen, 1999; Pudup, 2008; Rosol, 2012).

These representations link community gardens and vacant land into the following chain of logic: for various reasons, vacant land emerges—this new supply of land, which cannot be filled with “normal” use, can be temporarily filled with something that serves an immediate need, but ultimately and eventually will be replaced as the socio-economic conditions return to normal. We certainly recognize that the history of community gardening in the U.S. is one in which advocacy and practice have increased dramatically because of political, social, and economic contexts. Clearly, community gardens have had ameliorative effects in counteracting local manifestations of social, environmental, and economic concerns (Bassett, 1981). We neither claim that such contexts are irrelevant, nor argue that community gardens should not be responses to inequities. In fact, as the historical material reveals, the speed, breadth, and scope of these efforts reinforce the powerful will behind the efforts that drew in leadership, organization,

land, and other resources. Instead, we draw attention to how framing community gardens as a means to an end produces knowledge of them as aberrations in the urban landscape and thus merely temporary or emergency land uses.

We aim, then, to extend critical discussions of how community gardens have been seen as a temporary land use in cities through a genealogy that traces the discourse that perpetuates this assumption. Three themes in particular explain the tenuous relationship between community gardens and urban space. First, community gardens have at times been the center of struggles over the right to urban space, are sites of resistance to disinvestment, and can challenge the status quo favored by the state (Eizenberg, 2013). Community gardens were central to struggles over public space in New York City during the 1990s (Schmelzkopf, 2002; Staeheli et al., 2002). As grassroots social hubs, community gardens challenged the Giuliani administration's control of social space and orientation toward market-friendly policies. In order to restore the status quo of market-based land development, the Giuliani administration aimed to demolish garden sites but had to first discursively cast community gardens as relics of a bygone era and out of line with the time "after communism." The South Central Farm in Los Angeles brought in the role of race and class in struggles over garden space. Tensions between gardeners, local government, and real estate developers showed that application and interpretation of the law favored the status quo of development over the user-managed open space of the garden site (Irazábal & Punja, 2009; Lawson, 2007).

Second, community gardens challenge assumptions about the essential characteristics of urban space. The notion of public gardening in cities has long conflicted with planners' ideas: "parks are not areas for market gardens for individual profit but are places of recreation, of inspiration, and enjoyment for all" (1920 editorial in *The Park International*, quoted in Lawson,

2004). Moore (2006) explains such sentiments in that community gardens challenge the ideals of a capitalist urban landscape—ideals constructed through the influence of the Chicago School of sociology. Through her case of urban gardens in early 20th century Columbus, Ohio, she finds that not only were they sites of non-capitalist commodity production, but they were also places of productive nature—not merely recreational or decorative—within cities. These two characteristics were dissonant with emerging norms about what constitutes the urban. Although once supported by local government, after the Great Depression city leaders thus no longer saw Columbus’ gardens as something the city should support. In turn, they redefined gardening from being a livelihood to being a recreational activity. As Moore illustrates, through this discursive shift by the local state, “the ‘normal’ preexisting practice of gardening became a ‘relief measure’ and vanished, both from public memory and from the landscape itself, with the passing of the crisis” (Moore, 2006, p. 187). As the state reframed community gardening as an activity meant to address unemployment, it followed and perpetuated a historical pattern in which urban gardening was mainly valued through its intended outcomes; and as Lawson (2005, p. 288) argues, “if it is a means to other ends, the [community] garden is only useful until those other goals are met.”

Third, the planning field has historically found it difficult to consider community gardens a public good. Urban theorists in the first decade of the 20th century—like Charles Mulford Robinson—were not averse to gardening in cities *per se*, just gardening on public land and the planning of space for such activities (Lawson, 2004). They described community-managed spaces such as gardens to be outside the purview of professional planners, did not consider them to be “public goods,” and “this perspective framed gardening as a good temporary use of derelict land...but not necessarily a permanent land use” for cities to consider (Lawson, 2004, p. 166).

Examining why city officials in Sacramento preferred parks over community gardens, Francis found that they “saw the chief benefit of the gardens as being ‘the property is maintained versus leaving it vacant,’” and community gardening as thus was not seen as a legitimate long-term part of the city (Francis, 1987, p. 106).

In sum, it is clear that the relationship between community gardens and cities has been tenuous; this paper foregrounds the role of discourse through a genealogy that traces how this understanding of community gardens as emerging from vacancy has become a dominant narrative. These descriptions of what counts as legitimate land uses do not reflect an essential state of cities, however, but must be continuously reproduced and reaffirmed by obscuring alternative practices such as the cultivation and harvesting of food (Gabriel, 2011). Likewise, community gardens, long associated with the existence of vacant land, increasingly gain attention through efforts of garden activities to gain permanence for individual sites. Still, community gardening as a broad activity is largely considered to be a means to an end. A Foucauldian approach to knowledge can thus shed light on how this assumed characteristic of community gardens persists in spite of the nearly continuous practice over the past several decades and the increasing attention of community gardeners to its integral role in city life.

Methods and Materials

We believe that a historical perspective can shed light on the processes through which community gardening has often come to be identified as a temporary practice—an interim use of vacant land. Below, we engage the interpretive frame of genealogy, which is useful in tracing the complicated histories of taken-for-granted assumptions (Elden, 2009; Foucault, 1984). This form of analysis particularly focuses on the ways that dominant narratives persist even though

exceptions repeatedly appear (Campbell, 2009). We draw on the contention that discourse is not a neutral reflection of reality but actively shapes it (Foucault, 1981; Lees, 2004; Lefebvre, 1991). In sum, we aim to understand how the knowledge of community gardening as temporary has been formed.

We use Foucauldian discourse analysis to understand those aspects of the contemporary community gardening movement that we discussed in the introduction and literature review (Dittmer, 2010; Jacobs, 2006). Our empirical data include reports, promotional materials, and media articles published around the U.S. from the late 1890s to the 2000s by non-governmental organizations; municipal, state and federal government agencies; private industry; and garden advocacy groups. We accessed them through many sources—the Library of Congress, National Agricultural Library, university libraries, horticultural society libraries, newspapers, and blogs. These documents reveal advocacy efforts in many cities across the U.S., but they all were incorporated into national and regional efforts. Due to our specific focus on community garden discourse, we selected periods of intensive community garden advocacy in the U.S. that have been previously identified (Bassett, 1981; Lawson, 2005). Due to the similarities in the contexts of advocacy efforts, we organize our analysis into the following categories—the 1890s and 1930s depressions, World Wars I and II, and the 1970s to present. Following established methods, we pay close attention to two aspects of these documents (Dittmer, 2010; Jacobs, 2006; Lees, 2004). The first aspect is the context in which they were produced—these documents were written for specific audiences by people with power to shape discussions over the allocation of space for community gardens. Second, we take note of the text itself—how community gardens and vacant land are portrayed in relation to broader society.

Economic Depression, Gardening, and Vacant Land

Vacant Lot Cultivation in the 1890s

In the American city of the 1890s, gardening was an attractive solution for a range of economic, social, and environmental concerns and spurred inter-connected efforts in income-generating vacant gardens, school gardening, and beautification efforts (Lawson, 2005). Of particular interest to this paper is the effort to engage unemployed workers in gardening for food and income, known as Vacant Lot Cultivation Associations (VLCAs). Advocacy directed toward the unemployed during this period centered on the survival of individual families—allowing poor residents to grow a wide variety of food for household consumption, including food that could be stored for winter, and to sell surplus produce. Starting in Detroit in 1894, the success of “Pingree’s Potato Patches” inspired other charitable organizations in many U.S. cities to develop VLCAs that would access land, provide supervision and materials, and enlist unemployed workers. Via the circulation of correspondence between charity organizations in many of the nation’s cities, putting the unemployed to work on vacant land became a common method of providing social aid. By the end of the decade there were reports of 22 vacant lot cultivation associations across the country (AICP, 1898; Speirs et al., 1898).¹

Annual reports and articles in newspapers, magazines, and charity journals made a case for gardening to help the poor; they also justified gardening as a form of efficient charity that satisfied concerns about the worthiness of recipients and avoiding dependency of government and charity aid. As charity organizations increasingly came to dominate gardening advocacy, the terms of reference shifted from merely helping the poor to grow food toward mantras of self-help

¹ Boston, Brooklyn, Buffalo, Chicago, Dayton, Denver, Detroit, Duluth, Kansas City, Minneapolis, New York, Omaha, Philadelphia, Providence, Reading PA, Rochester, Seattle, Springfield MA, St Louis, St Paul, Toledo, and Washington, D.C.

(PVLC (Philadelphia Vacant Lots Cultivation Association), 1898, (Philadelphia Vacant Lots Cultivation Association); Speirs et al., 1898). For instance, the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor (AICP) formed through discussions between Bolton Hall, a back-to-the-land activist, and other groups such as the United Hebrew Charities and the Charity Organization Society.² As stated in a report of the first year, “the cultivation of the city lots by the unemployed was not a mere charity, but a relief scheme which aimed to establish habits of self-reliance, to teach the poor to become prosperous, to make farming more profitable, and to increase the sum of wealth...” (AICP, 1898, p. 3). The report also stresses to potential VLCAs in other cities that “any who are able but will not work should not be helped at all. It is easier to get the people back to the land than the land back to the people” (AICP, 1898, pp. 8-9).

As the AICP exchanged correspondence with organizations and governments around the country, normative ideas of self-help and “willing and capable” gardeners were entwined with assumptions about urban land. Both scholarly and popular literature of the time characterized urban gardening as occurring on “waste land” and “idle land,” which needed to be “put to use” (“Detroit plan for the cultivation of waste land,” 1895; Flowers, 1896). As one observer of urban gardening in the late 19th and early 20th century, “both idle men and idle land exist in every American city of any size, and bringing them together will benefit the land, the men, and the community” (Annin Jr., 1915, p. 346).

However, “vacant lot gardening” at that time referred to large undeveloped tracts at the urban edge or outside of the city—not the abandoned parcels within cities as they would be known as today. Typically, organizations made arrangements with land owners for temporary use of a site being held in speculation, often with a stipulation that the land would be given back to

² For information on the AICP, see (Coble, 2010).

the owner in as short a time as 10 days. The Philadelphia Vacant Lots Cultivation Association, which ran from 1897 until around 1927, experienced frequent shifting of garden sites over time due to land development patterns. When the program began, the organization used information from an assessor to develop a list of available plots of land in each ward. In the first year, about 40 people offered their land in lots that varied in size from a single building lot to a sixty-acre tract, mostly in the western and northwestern parts of the city about five miles from city hall. As the economy improved and urban land development resumed, the program had to seek new properties, moving further out to sites in line for future development (Fig. 1).

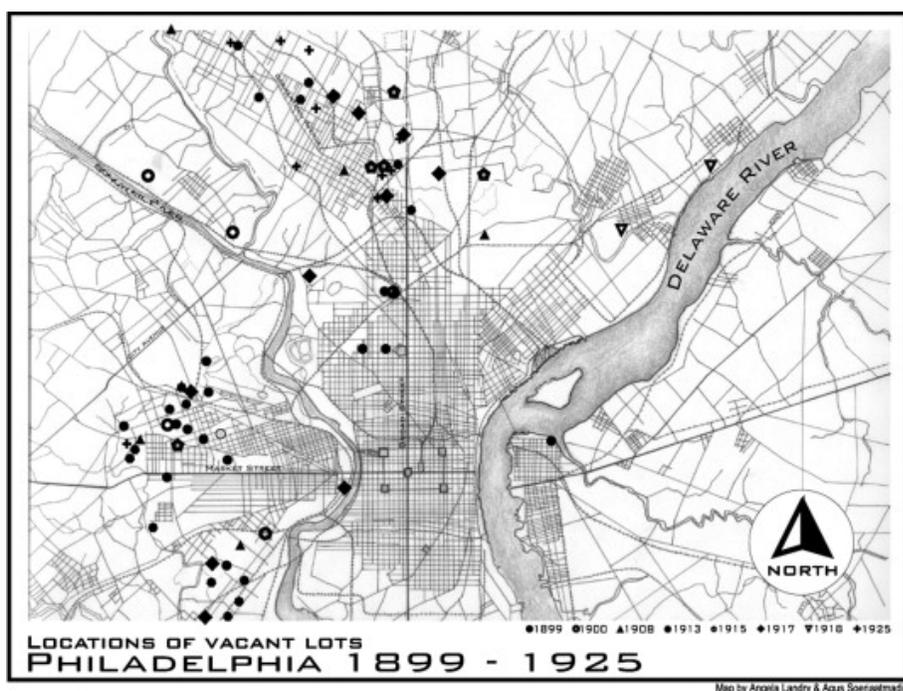


Figure 1. Composite map of all Philadelphia Vacant Lots Cultivation Association gardens, based on data 1899–1925. Drawn by Angela Landry and Agus Soeriaatmadja, under direction of L. Lawson.

In New York, when organizers first proposed the AICP effort they documented over 17,000 vacant lots (more than 1,400 acres) south of West 145 Street and the Harlem River; however the land was considered unsuitable because lots were too spread out, of poor quality,

hard to supervise and secure, and difficult to yield from the “rapacity of speculators” (AICP, 1898). Rather, the well-connected AICP Committee was able to arrange a donation of 138 acres in Long Island for their efforts; although ultimately the “farm” had to move multiple times through the duration of the program (Hall, 1910; NYVLGA (New York Vacant Lot Gardening Association), 1907).

Relying on temporarily donated land, the “experiment” had to move often, undervaluing the gardeners’ investment into site cultivability. Furthermore, the garden organizers expected the newly-trained gardeners to move out of the city and take up farming. Outspoken garden advocate Bolton Hall of New York, emphasized this ambition by stating “the way to cure both [congestion and high food prices] is to make it easy for people to go to the country and to teach them how to support themselves there” (Hall, 1910, p. 1). Vacant lot gardening was not about creating an urban land resource but a training ground that would move people out.

Subsistence and Work Relief Gardens of the Great Depression

We now shift to the 1930s, when unemployment again soared and local communities and organizations mobilized gardening efforts in collaboration with federal relief programs. These local efforts became the foundation for municipal, state, and ultimately federally supported relief garden programs (Wolfe, 1935). As the scale of gardening discourse and implementation matched that of federal relief efforts, many Americans experienced urban gardening as part of their relief packets. These relief packets often provided materials and seeds to start a “subsistence garden” at home or on a vacant lot, or gave wages for work in a cooperative garden project growing food for institutional use. Indeed, aid recipients were often required to prove they maintained subsistence gardens in order to receive aid (Rehder, 1933; Young, 1933).

Vacant land was the locus of efforts to implement such relief efforts. The emphasis to, at the very least, “utilize desirable and suitable idle plots of ground,” extended to back yards and vacant lots (POUR (The President's Organization on Unemployment Relief) 1932, p. 2). A relief aid application form from Birmingham, Alabama, for example, asked whether applicants would like to have land provided for them or if “there is a vacant lot near me I would like to work” (Colcord & Johnston, 1933, p. 67). In some accounts, back yard and vacant lot gardens were even classified together (PECE (The President's Emergency Committee for Employment) 1931; Wolfe, 1935). Vacant lot gardening during the Great Depression implied decentralized, family-scaled endeavor, while the term “community garden” was associated with centrally organized projects on larger tracts with individual assignments (Wolfe, 1935, p. 5). As Colcord and Johnston (1933, p. 30) of the Russell Sage Foundation point out, “[since] it is found that vacant lots scattered over the city cannot be secured, a partial solution of the difficulty may be effected by providing a large-area garden for each of the larger districts of the city.” As in the 1890s depression, gardening advocates preferred obtaining large tracts of land in order to manage funding and monitor gardeners’ behavior (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. The Federal Emergency Relief Association Airport Farm, in Seattle, illustrates a large-scale work-relief program in which the participants earned income growing food for institutional use. Courtesy of Manuscripts, Special Collections, University Archives, University of Washington Libraries, UW 18910.

Through these tensions in managing both land and gardeners, it is evident that program managers—who themselves experienced temporary shifts to responsibilities associated with relief efforts such as these—saw relief gardening as an aberration. Federal and industrial sources quite clearly labeled gardens as a resource to address emergency food supply. Gardening advocates emphatically stressed the problem was that most people could not afford to buy the food that was available. Federal documents explicitly stated that garden-produced food would not compete with the food industry and was "not for sale on an already-oversupplied market" (PECE (The President's Emergency Committee for Employment), 1931, p. 1).³ Industrial gardens, such as those at the Goodrich Tire plant in Akron, Ohio, specifically prohibited workers from selling *or* bartering food, even with other gardeners (B.F. Goodrich Company, 1933). The

³ See also (Harmon et al., 1936; U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 1932).

Russell Sage Foundation most clearly stated the role of gardening to address the immediate emergency of food access: "it is the duty of any group sponsoring a subsistence garden plan to take every precaution that legitimate trade, for which a market exists, be not interfered with by the sale for cash of any of the foodstuffs produced" (Colcord & Johnston, 1933, p. 7). Gardening, then, was organized through a discursive link between vacancy and temporariness—it was about food for the family and the land was temporarily provided for the emergency and not beyond it.

This said, advocates also framed gardening as a means to serve a wider role in the psychological impacts of unemployment and poverty. According to a U.S. Department of Commerce report, "Not only is gardening a means of supplying adequate food at low cost, but there is always the added advantage of preserving self-reliance and self-support of the family" (U.S. Dept. of Commerce, 1932, p. 1). As such, gardening-as-aid built on the notion that direct welfare has "demoralizing" effects on citizens (Colcord, 1931, p. 5). Harry Hopkins, head of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, explains it this way: "When you get a man out of the house and into the open, with spade and rake and hoe, you lift him out of a bad mental state into which enforced idleness inevitably plunges him" (FERA (Federal Emergency Relief Administration), 1935, p. 56). A 1932 editorial in *Nature Magazine* succinctly frames vacant-lot gardening as a temporary activity in a temporary space. It explains why people would garden in the first place ("work for the unemployed simply did not exist"), informs that the primary site for what it calls "food gardens" are vacant lots ("vacant land about the town was leased or contributed and divided into small plots"), and describes the type of subject that is produced through vacant-lot gardening ("as the gardens grew, so also grew the saving grace of self-respect among those who cultivated and labored there. Men and women might indeed still be charges on the community, but at least they had honest work to do, and by the very measure in which they

did that work well they and their families would raise food for themselves” (Nature Magazine, 1932, p. 5).

The Domestic War Front: Gardening and Vacant Land

During both World Wars I and II, federal agencies and national organizations framed gardening as a popular aspect of domestic war preparedness, addressing a strained food system, drawing people together, and encouraging health. In World War I, the message was that people were starving and Americans must grow food so more could be sent overseas. As President Woodrow Wilson stated, “everyone who creates or cultivates a garden helps, and helps greatly, to solve the problem of the feeding of nations” (Wilson, 1917, p. 220). By World War II, there was more confidence in large-scale agriculture bumping up production; however, gardening was seen as a way to improve domestic nutrition. The importance of gardening was not just in the material production of food, but also in the symbolic linkage of U.S. civilians and soldiers abroad, because as the National Victory Garden Institute put it, “food will be one of our major weapons of war” (NVGI (National Victory Garden Institute), 1943, p. 3). Campaigns thus promoted gardening in any available space from backyards to public land and vacant lots, emphasizing food production and an ethic of collaboration, collective welfare, and national morale.

During World War I, rhetoric again personified vacant lots as “idle” or “slacker” land. The National War Garden Institute referred to vacant lots as “slacker lands, as useless as the human loafer” (Pack, 1919, p. 10). This narrative is similar to that of Vacant Lot Cultivation Associations in the previous century, which equated “idle land” with unemployment. Yet, it is evident that people also understood vacant lots as potential garden sites simply because there was

often no other option for a place to garden in the city. In a New York Botanical Garden report about urban gardening, Parsons (1917, p. 10) describes that “for the flat-dweller the problem of a city farm is difficult.” He gives the example of a New York City librarian who is “seeking to organize the people in her neighborhood who live in apartments and endeavor to get the use of the vacant lots in the vicinity for city garden purposes” (Parsons, 1917, p. 10).

Some gardening land was made available in parks, on school grounds, and company and railroad lands, neighborhood clubs and volunteers were encouraged to identify and establish gardens in back yards and vacant lots that required less centralized control (Conolly, 1918; U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1918). An issue of the magazine *The American City* presents vacant-lot gardening as the most effective way to address the war-related food shortage: “This peculiar situation can be met more effectively by vacant lot gardening--and by home gardening--than in any other way” (Stoddard, 1917, p. 472). Through these calls for decentralized gardening, and without the need to manage land, seeds, and other garden materials, wartime garden advocates focused on motivating Americans to seize any available space (Fig. 3).



Figure 3. Image from Charles Lathrop Pack's *War Garden Victorious* (Philadelphia: Lippincott Company 1919, p. 155).

During World War II—after two decades and the interlude of Depression gardens--vacant lots remained on people's minds but were downplayed for a number of reasons. Gardening was still paired with notions of food production and national morale; what differed was that the strong tones of work ethic and idleness were replaced with notions of gardening as a health and leisure activity (e.g. Moersch, 1944). Mobilizing idle land was not as urgent as in previous periods of garden advocacy, and more care was given to finding the appropriate site and level of work so that the experience would be enjoyable. We thus find gardening documents that, although strongly calling for all Americans to create victory gardens, caution about its viability in cities:

Large-town and city dwellers generally are in no position to undertake gardening successfully. Those living in outlying or suburban areas and having large sunny lots, away from interfering buildings, structures, trees, and industrial smoke or gaseous wastes, have a better chance of growing successful gardens than large-

town or city dwellers...If a person insists upon making a garden under such adverse conditions, for exercise or pleasure, he should realize the odds against profitable yields (Boswell, 1942, p. 3).

In addition to these material difficulties to food production, the Greater New York Victory Garden Council (GNYVGC) also reflects this pessimistic view of vacant lots in light of social barriers. Mayor LaGuardia offered few legal protections for Victory Gardens, and so the GNYVGC advises “Victory Gardening on vacant land should not be attempted unless it can be effectively protected by the community itself or is in a community where such damage is unlikely” (New York State College of Agriculture, 1943, p. 4). In sum, attitudes toward vacant lots ranged from opportunistic use of land during crises to the grudging acceptance of the physical and political realities of securing productive urban garden space; in any case, gardening outside of one’s private property never registers as anything more than a temporary activity.

1970s to Present: Community Gardeners Setting the Tone

From the 1970s onward, community gardeners and garden interest groups became key figures in community garden discourse. They talked about how community gardens are integral parts of their lives, but characterized vacant lots as the locations for such activities. By the 1970s, the nation faced very different social and economic picture than in previous decades. Political movements were often grassroots-oriented; community garden advocates included environmental groups, education groups, and non-profit organizations, for instance.⁴ Gardeners’ voices began to be heard, unlike in previous periods. For example, in a publication about community gardening

⁴ Garden advocacy organizations established during this time include P-Patch (1973), Green Guerillas (1973), Boston Urban Gardeners (1977), and the American Community Gardening Association (1978) (Lawson, 2005).

there are statements like, “gardening is a pure joy during good times and an absolute necessity during bad times” (Young, 1973, p. 4). This simple claim marked a change to garden discourse; urban gardening is not *just* something to be done during emergencies. As a proponent remarked, “urban agriculture has finally come into its own...[but] like many other currently popular responses to this decade of crises, urban agriculture is really a very old idea masquerading as a novelty. Food production has long been a traditional part of the activities of city dwellers” (Friend, 1975 n.p.). Recognizing the multiple uses of community gardening, gardeners portrayed it as both a routine and an emergency activity (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. The Southwark-Queen Village Community Garden in Philadelphia, established in the mid-1970s on a site cleared for urban renewal. The site was slated for development and the garden was nearly lost until it was assured more security as a demonstration garden for the Penn State Urban Gardening Program, and eventually purchased by the city. Photograph by L. Lawson, 1999.

The combination of the gardeners’ voices and the tumultuous context in which these voices became heard on a wide scale likely set the tone for the community garden discourse of the 1980s and 1990s. The emergence of this new community garden discourse—that of garden

activists—did indeed result from a specific urban experience, as described in the first issue of the *Journal of Community Gardening*:

“Many of us began to do this sort of work because we lived in urban neighborhoods caught in a cycle of disinvestment, arson, and demolition; because we could see the possibilities for a new, productive kind of urban space; or because we knew people who wanted to grow food but had no access to land... Hundreds of garden organizations sprouted up in the mid-1970s, in response to rising food prices, the flow of people born in agrarian societies into the country’s cities, the end of free-form 1960s activities, the end of the Vietnam War, the demolition of entire urban neighborhoods at the end of a cycle begun with the suburban exodus in the 1950s, the energy crisis, and who knows what else?” (Kahn, 1982).

Seemingly, out of an immense array of devastating social, political, and economic changes there were many people that saw a dire need for community gardens—not just for food, but to reclaim and remake urban space.

Members of the urban agriculture movement of the 1970s used vacant land as the reference point for discussions of gardening: “the backbone of the typical urban agriculture system is the vacant lot garden” (Smith, 1977, p. 5). Moreover, the meaning of vacancy changed from earlier in the 20th century—not just unused land, but land that had been abandoned. As municipalities began rent-a-lot programs that garden activists could take advantage of (Lawson & Miller, 2013), there seemed to be a recognition that community gardens become a possibility when the state and capital had found no other use for a piece of land. This logic, for instance, is evident in the following statements: “Vacant lots are everywhere, in every city and every town.

Much of this vacant land is created by the economic and tax realities of a neighborhood. Some vacant land is created by geography. Many lots are available for use as gardens” (Jobb, 1979, p. 68).

These experiences shaped what it meant to be a community gardener, the ways that community gardeners encouraged and recruited volunteers, and how they lobbied public and private actors for resources. The next stage in the development of this understanding was the recognition of the need to sustain garden access. After the flurry of gardening advocacy by activists in the 1970s, by the early 1980s gardeners voiced concerns about the place of community gardens in the city:

“Many community gardens began as an interim use for vacant land or as experimental projects with short-lived funding...Community gardens are now a vital part of hundreds of North American communities. Yet, more often than not, those who decide how to use the land in our cities rarely take community gardens into account. They remain invisible to planners, architects, politicians, and policy makers. The end result is that community gardens are treated like carpets that can be rolled up and moved elsewhere at will, or simply eliminated as insignificant to a community’s well-being” (Gonsalves, 1982, p. 111).

While activists recognized the results of their efforts had become a “vital part” of cities, the underlying identity of vacancy lingered and continued to mark those spaces as still awaiting other uses.

As community garden activists came to realize that policymakers, not just residents, must be persuaded of the merits of community gardening, advocacy remained focused on gardening as a means to an end. Repurposing vacant land through community gardens to address broader

concerns became a common way for garden activists to promote their efforts, just as state- and charity-led advocacy during previous periods. Among themselves, gardeners appreciated their activities as an end in itself; discussions continued to be framed, however, as if there were a continual need to justify the existence of community gardens. By the mid-80s, for example, articles appeared in the *Journal of Community Gardening* on horticultural therapy—“the manipulation of plants not as an end in itself, but rather as a means of achieving specific benefits for people” (Lewis, 1985, p. 31) as well as food security. “Two gardeners feed forty people,” written in the 1980s is strikingly similar in tone to the promises of food production in WWI-era pamphlets (Adams, 1985).

By the 1990s, community gardeners developed agendas for addressing food access, job training, and the environment. The Community Food Security Coalition emerged from an annual meeting of the ACGA in 1994 (Fisher, 1996). The ideals that had previously been voiced by charity groups and relief agencies in the early 1900s were then modified by garden groups: “community gardening and greening groups are broadening their focus to address the emerging issue of food security” (Cook, 1997, p. 75). Toward the close of the 20th century, community gardeners had come full circle, incorporating economic justifications for gardening similar to those used by the state decades earlier—“it is important to look at land not only as additional passive open space, but as a place where one can create employment, training, and economic opportunities for local residents” (Riddell, 1998, p. 65). Environmental concerns are evident in the 1991 renaming of the *Journal of Community Gardening* to *Community Greening Review*.

Community gardeners recognized the integral role of these spaces in cities, and yet they still justified them in ways that portrayed community gardens as a means to an end. Despite the multiple purposes and outcomes that gardeners made visible when they lobbied for space and

resources, there remained a recognition that, “in general, people don’t recognize that using city land for a garden is a legitimate use of so-called valuable property” (Breslav, 1992, p. 114). Indeed, in the 25th anniversary edition of the *Community Greening Review* in 2005, the first section is titled “What Good are Gardens?”

In the era of online media, community gardeners increasingly voice their opinions and experiences. By writing blog posts and reports, and contributing to news articles available online, local outlets receive broad scale readership. And yet, community gardeners send mixed and contradictory messages. On the one hand there are exceptions to the dominant narrative of community gardening as a temporary practice. Community gardeners write about the long-term benefits of community gardening—“this is more than a hobby. It’s an attitude, a way of life” (American Community Gardening Association, 2007). They were talking about gardens as permanent sites; some even attained permanence to this day and have evolved into local institutions of their own, like Seattle’s P-Patch program. This discourse has, in turn, seemingly affected non-gardening stakeholders to a small degree. Many U.S. cities have proposed zoning for community garden space, although the legislation passed has so far favored commercial urban agriculture instead of community-managed projects (Goldstein et al., 2011; Mees & Stone, 2012). The magazine *Sustainable Chicago* reported on a citywide program to make vacant lots available for urban farming, stating “that land’s not vacant, it’s fallow,” showing one way that gardeners have rethought the meanings of vacancy (Baker, 2013). Rather than struggling to secure borrowed land, whether public or private, some communities benefit from community open space land trusts that hold properties and provide insurance, such as Chicago’s NeighborSpace, an innovative program that engages key public land owners in the process of securing community garden sites. These examples provide a crisper divergence toward this idea

of permanence, of not being driven by a short-term goals but seeing intrinsic value in the garden (Hou et al., 2009).

On the other hand, gardeners reproduced that dominant discourse through explaining why people would join a community garden and the purposes gardens serve. Here, we see a current-day example of how in each period of community garden advocacy, people promote these activities in relation to the major crises or perceived problems of the time—except that it is community gardeners who are highly involved more recently. Examples include gardeners writing about how community gardens “transform food deserts into oases” (Sher, 2010), and “tackle modern problems” such as pollution, reduce landfill waste through composting, help to “bridge the hunger gap,” and address the obesity epidemic (Ross, 2013). One community gardener, interviewed by the *Denver Post* about why community gardens have increased in recent years, explained that “when times are tough—like the mortgage crisis, the financial crisis and the energy crisis—people tend to think a little bit more about covering their bases and being self-sufficient where they can” (Clotfelder et al., 2008).

Discussion: The difficulty of means to ends *and* end in itself

There is a long history of understanding community gardening as a temporary practice. The previous critical examination reveals how a taken-for-granted assumption that links community gardens and vacant land came to be so prevalent. It continues to underpin many people’s thoughts about gardening and vacant lots, particularly those organizations that are not made up of community gardeners. Yet, as gardeners have become key actors in community garden discourse in recent decades they continue to justify gardening relative to crises even while recognizing their importance in day-to-day life; they continue to reproduce that dominant

narrative even as they offer alternative discourses. The crux of this tension seems to be that for community gardeners, these activities are both a means to an end and an end in itself. Perhaps gardens should not be seen as a *solution* to vacancy, but a *replacement* of vacancy. When framed as a solution, community gardens are possible only when there is a previous vacant condition. As a replacement of vacancy, community gardens would instead be possible in a number of circumstances and represent a commitment to the garden itself instead of the intended outcomes. This subtle shift could open up possibilities for a garden to be just as appropriate as other new land uses, such as housing, parks, or even parking lots.

This analysis extends from community gardens to a variety of other green space transformations, because it is not simply a matter of providing legal protections in the form of zoning, but also one of recognizing how the informal uses of vacant land can be more than one-off projects. Turning to Lefebvre (1991), it is important to understand the production of space through the interrelationships between representations of space, the meanings people attribute to space, and spatial practice (the physical movements and practices that take place in and through space). We focus here on two kinds of representations—not only those of space (community gardens) but also spatial practice (community gardening). They are consequential in shaping how people see community gardens in relation to broader urban spatial processes. It is clear that state-driven discourses have been powerful (Irazábal & Punja, 2009; Moore, 2006; Schmelzkopf, 2002); yet, as Eizenberg (2012) has shown, gardeners produce their own representations of garden space and practice as meaningful, normal parts of their lives.

Our analysis of broader advocacy efforts, however, shows that community gardeners are also complicit in representing their work as a temporary use of vacant land. Working out this paradox is, then, a challenge for community gardeners and the many other producers of green

space on supposedly vacant land. The use of the term “vacant land” to refer to the surface on which a diversity of informal, often unsanctioned, but meaningful and productive activities take place has its own discursive power. It is a representation that puts any practices and meanings associated with those spaces into an a priori subordinate position. These alternative discourses of urban space are perhaps more easily obscured when the actors producing such alternatives also reproduce, in other ways, the dominant narrative. To this end, we do not mean to suggest that we can simply talk our way out such issues, but instead that discourse matters as constitutive part of cities.

Conclusion

Community gardening is an effective lens through which to examine how vacant land is being repurposed in a variety of ways. Our genealogy highlights the historical trajectory of garden advocacy that has produced knowledge of community gardens as temporary uses of temporarily-available spaces and how advocates, and some gardeners themselves, reproduce that dominant narrative. By doing so, we seek to open a space of possibility in rethinking who gets to decide when land is “vacant” and also raise awareness of the unequal outcomes of gardeners’ multiple representations of their activities. Reconsidering the long-term place of gardening and other user-initiated green space activities in cities suggests making visible the importance of it to routine daily life, and not just how it might address major issues. People have proven that, when provided land, they can transform it into productive landscapes that becomes entwined in neighborhood fabric.

But we also have to face it—transforming urban land into gardens is hard work, and already-overburdened residents should not just be given land and expected to solve a multitude

of problems. Since gardening is continuous work, providing land does not guarantee successful gardens (Lawson, 2005). As such, recognizing that community gardens require more than just vacant land opens up new questions; land must not only be available but also accessible, and people must be interested in gardening, for example. Reconfiguring the management of vacant land thus involves a great deal of participation and listening to the existing users of that land.

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