

**Preserving Radishes and Snapdragons in the City:
A Historical Perspective of Community Gardens in Milwaukee**

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Often tucked between apartment buildings and rows of houses, either secluded or fully visible to the public gaze, community gardens have become familiar elements of today's American urban landscape. Indeed, according to the latest figures issued by the American Community Garden Association, a bi-national nonprofit membership organization of professionals and volunteers, there are about 18,000 Community Gardens throughout the United States and Canada.¹ The National Gardening Association, a national nonprofit leader in garden-based education located in Vermont, reports a much higher figure. It indicates that the number of community gardens in the United States alone exceeds one million and that an estimated three million people would like to become community gardeners.² In Milwaukee County, there were 1,811 plots in 2011 spread across twelve community gardens.³

Community gardens are complex urban entities resulting from a tight nexus of social, economic and political forces. They are loosely defined as semi-public patches of urban land on which community members can grow flowers and food for personal or collective benefit.⁴ They are also considered community open spaces providing an alternative to publicly-managed parks.⁵ Beyond the collective satisfaction of harvesting fruits and vegetables or growing flowers in a concrete-dominated urban world, the existence and permanence of community gardens in a city are indicators of specific socio-economic factors and political decisions which can vary greatly over the years. In the United States, community gardening

¹ American Community Gardening Association, accessed December 6, 2013, <http://www.communitygarden.org/learn/faq.php>.

² "Community Gardens at all USDA Facilities," The National Gardening Association, accessed December 6, 2013, <http://www.garden.org/articles/articles.php?q=show&id=3123>.

³ "Milwaukee County Cooperative Extension Community Gardens," accessed December 7, 2013, <http://milwaukee.uwex.edu/files/2010/08/tinymapxJ20122.pdf>.

⁴ Karen Christensen and David Levinson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Community: From the Village to the Virtual World* (Sage, 2003), 264.

⁵ Mark Francis, Lisa Cashdan and Lynn Paxson, *Community Open Spaces: Greening Neighborhoods Through Community Action and Land Conservation* (Washington D.C., 1984), 9.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

emerged in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution, the rapid growth of American cities at the turn of the nineteenth century⁶ and the recession which crippled America's economy in the 1890s.⁷

The city of Milwaukee has a vibrant, rich history of community gardening. As many American cities throughout the country it has witnessed the transformation of vacant lots into gardens where various communities have successfully managed to grow food for their own subsistence. However, Milwaukee has experienced the disappearance of many garden plots over time – a situation mostly due to economic pressures from recent neoliberal policies which give priority to business investment over community gardening.⁸ As a result, community gardens reflect past and present urban policies and do not sprout only from the good will of urban gardeners. Deeply rooted in history, they also function as a mirror of the American urban society because they reflect historical factors which have influenced the American people's awareness of environmental issues.

What were these historical factors in Milwaukee? How was urban vacant land used in the past, and how does this specific approach to the transformation of empty urban spaces account for later attitudes towards community gardening? Given that community gardeners are not the only participants in the decision-making process regarding the creation of gardens, who are the actors who have played a role in the community garden experience in Milwaukee? And on the other hand, what are the forces which have hindered the development of community gardens in the city?

This analysis will be divided into two main parts. The first part will focus on a historical perspective of community gardening in the United States to highlight the permanence of the urban gardening motif in the history of American cities. It will also reveal

⁶ Laura J. Lawson, *City Bountiful: A Century of Community Gardening in America* (University of California Press, 2005), 17-110.

⁷ Robert Gottlieb and Anupama Joshi, *Food Justice* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2010), 146.

⁸ Parama Roy, "Urban Environmental Inequality and the Rise of Civil Society: the Case of Walnut Way Neighborhood in Milwaukee" (Ph.D diss., University of Milwaukee, 2008), 47.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

the variety of uses of community gardens from food relief and patriotism in periods of economic depression and in wartimes to community empowerment in recent years. The purpose of the second part is to link these historical factors to the political decisions taken in Milwaukee concerning community gardens in the 1970s and early 1980s when the environmental and community gardening movement gained momentum in the United States. This second part will also rely on the specific case of Milwaukee to reveal that despite the widespread recognition of the benefits of community gardens in terms of health, environmental improvement and community capacity enhancement,⁹ these spaces have always been characterized by an intrinsic ambivalence. Praised for the multiple advantages they provide, urban gardens are constantly threatened by destruction and disappearance and have never officially been on Milwaukee's past or present political agenda. Natural and urban, permanent and ephemeral, ideologically meaningful and economically viable but only in times of turmoil, community gardens can be considered ambiguous spaces. An in-depth analysis of the history of urban gardening in Milwaukee will help decipher the role and meaning of these spaces and to highlight this fundamental ambiguity.

Modern community gardening – the shared use of land which resembles today's community gardens – first appeared in England in the eighteenth century following the private enclosure of common land. As a consequence of this new rural practice, many

⁹ Melvin Delgado, *Community Social Work Practice in an Urban Context: The Potential of a Capacity-Enhancement Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 91.

¹¹ James L. Machor, *Pastoral Cities: Urban Ideals and the Symbolic Landscape of America* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 3-21.

¹² Benjamin Kline, *First Along the River: A Brief History of the U.S. Environmental Movement* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2011), 17.

¹³ Michael Burgan, *John Winthrop: Colonial Governor of Massachusetts* (Compass Point Books, 2006), 12.

¹⁴ Helen Sheumaker and Shirley Teresa Wajda, ed., *Material Culture in America: Understanding Everyday Life* (ABC-CLIO, 2008), 97.

¹⁵ Kline, op.cit., p. 26.

¹⁶ Ted R. Vaughan, Gideon Sjoberg and Larry T. Reynolds, ed., *A Critique of Contemporary American Sociology* (General Hall, 1993), 125.

¹⁷ Thomas Jefferson, "The Declaration of Independence," in Daniel J. Boorstin, ed., *An American Primer* (Chicago: Penguin, 1968), 86.

¹⁸ Jason A. Edwards and David Weiss, ed., *The Rhetoric of American Exceptionalism: Critical Essays* (McFarland, 2011), 12.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

families became impoverished and village allotments were created as a form of public remedy. At the same time, English cities started to boom and urbanites had to face an increasing dearth of natural land and open space. As a result, city dwellers started renting family gardens on the edge of towns.¹⁹

In America, community gardens appeared on the cusp of the twentieth century when three types of urban gardens emerged: the vacant-lot cultivation association, the children's school garden and the civic garden campaign.²⁰ Each time, the creation of community gardens coincided with a period of socio-economic hardship. The vacant-lot cultivation association consisted in providing land for the poor to grow food and was first pioneered in Detroit in 1894 by Mayor Hazen Pingree. Known as "Pingree's Potato Patches"²¹ this form of urban gardening became an alternative to charity in the wake of the economic recession of 1893 which started when a prominent banking house went bankrupt in England in 1890.²² During the same period, the idea of gardening as economical assistance was also used by social reformers who considered school gardens a potential remedy to rescue poor children from the dangers of a grim cityscape. Due to changes in child labor laws, children had more unsupervised free time and reformers thought that educational experiences based on nature in children's school gardens could prevent the city youth from engaging in criminal activities.²³

The third type of community garden which sprang up in the twentieth century was part of the civic garden campaigns which were launched during the First and Second World Wars. Indeed, "War Gardens" were initiated in Europe during World War I as an attempt to mitigate food shortages and the destruction of crops and farmland. In the United States, the

¹⁹ Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *To Dwell is to Garden: A History of Boston's Community Gardens* (Northeastern University Press, 1987), 7-11.

²⁰ Lawson, op.cit., p. 17.

²¹ James, H. Madison, ed., *Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States* (Indiana University Press, 1988), 47.

²² Lawson, op.cit., p. 23-24.

²³ Lawson, op.cit., p. 55.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

purpose of urban war gardens from 1917 to 1919 was to increase food exports to Europe.²⁴ Through patriotic slogans and pictures produced by the National War Garden Commission, Americans were encouraged to consume fruits and vegetables that they could grow themselves and to garden every empty patch of land ranging from backyards to playgrounds and railroad rights-of-way. These patriotic advertisements often equated gardening tools used on urban vacant lots with war weapons. Every American citizen was expected to participate in the war effort including companies, women and children.²⁵ In the State of Wisconsin, it was reported that 10,000,000 acres of land were unoccupied in 1917 and that the lands available for agricultural purposes were only one-third developed. The organization of Women's clubs was encouraged and individuals were asked to preserve food for storage. When the Great Depression crippled the American economy in the 1930s, a variety of garden programs were developed under the aegis of the federal government as a way to provide economic relief and to keep people busy in the face of a skyrocketing unemployment rate.²⁶ These programs were called "relief garden programs" but were abandoned in 1937 when the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) implemented a food stamp program for farm-surplus products.²⁷

During the Second World War, the idea of civic garden campaigns materialized again in the form of "Victory Gardens." As during the First World War, the American military strategy relied on a healthy flow of exports, more specifically to the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union. The first victory garden program was initiated in 1941 in the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor. By 1942, about fifteen million victory gardeners produced 7.5 billion pounds of food. The federal government used a language of self-sufficiency which blended

²⁴ Sam Bass Warner, Jr., *op.cit.*, p.17.

²⁵ Lawson, *op.cit.*, p. 117-143. A poster from the War Garden Committee of the Illinois State Council of Defense dating back to 1918 indicated patriotic slogans such as "Food will win the war" or "Be a soldier of the soil."

²⁶ Lawson, *op.cit.*, p. 145.

²⁷ H. Patricia Hynes, *A Patch of Eden: American Inner-City Gardeners* (Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 1996), xi.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

patriotism with personal motivation: victory gardeners were encouraged to grow fruits and vegetables to benefit the country at large.²⁸ The idea of tilling the land in an effort of self-sustenance echoes the notion of American freedom as it was conceptualized in the Frontier era.²⁹

The emergence of victory gardens changed the nature of community gardening. While in the 1910s community gardens were cultivated to alleviate the European food crisis, the promotion of victory community gardens during the Second World War started to emphasize the physical, psychological and recreational benefits of gardening.³⁰ In addition, garden advocates often praised victory gardens for their democratic functions because they brought together people from different social backgrounds.³¹ The utilitarian approach to the natural environment remained significant because nature had to meet human needs, but this approach started to encompass various political and ideological dimensions which paved the way for the societal changes of the 1960s and 1970s and their emphasis on small urban space areas as alternative places within congested cities. Certainly previous forms of community gardens such as vacant-lot cultivation associations, school gardens and war gardens were already symbolic spaces which promoted values such as goodness towards the dispossessed, civic engagement and patriotism. However, victory gardens captured the sociological transformations of the period and became the repository of a wide range of political and ideological constructs which heralded the post-war garden movements and the related claims for more democracy and social justice.

Indeed, urban renewal and the morphological transformation of the city in the 1950s and 1960s implied various social and visual changes linked with urban phenomena such as suburban growth, the decline of central business districts and the subsequent abandonment of

²⁸ Lawson, op.cit., p. 202.

²⁹ Char Miller, "In the Sweat of Our Brow: Citizenship in American Domestic Practice During WWII – Victory Gardens," *The Journal of American Culture*, Vol.26, No. 3 (September 2003): 395-409.

³⁰ Lawson, op.cit., p.170-211.

³¹ Lawson, op.cit., p. 189.

American inner cities resulting in thousands of acres of surplus vacant land.³² As a result of the “flight” of the middle-class to the suburbs, the use of public space started to change. The backyard, the high school playfield or tennis court replaced the city public park that was previously enjoyed for family relaxation.³³ Spurred by the rise in private car usage which enabled suburbanites to commute every day from the city to their “safe” communities, a gradual dichotomy between suburban space and core city areas developed from the 1950s onward, leaving some inner city neighborhoods in an advanced state of decay.³⁴

When the civil rights movement reached its apex in the 1960s, urban gardens and community gardens, more specifically, were seen as a viable response to inner city blight and abandoned city land. Once again, community gardening was considered a way to bring relief to the dispossessed and to alleviate urban conditions. Contrary to the gardens created during the Great Depression and victory gardens during the Second World War, community gardens in the 1960s were built in the vacant spaces left after white people moved out of cities into the suburbs.³⁵ Community gardens thus became a potential solution to the racial issue of urban discrimination and crystalized the ideological and political claims of the time for more equality and social justice.

The 1960s was a decade marked by social upheavals in the United States as well as in other industrialized countries. Many people, especially the younger generation, sought to counter American traditional values and openly supported issues such as the civil rights movement, sexual freedom, feminism, alternative lifestyles such as hippies’ communal living, and the end of the Vietnam War. The protection of the natural environment also

³² Francis, Cashdan and Paxson, op.cit., p. 2.

³³ Stephen Carr, Mark Francis, Leanne G. Rivlin and Andrew M. Stone, *Public Space* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 5.

³⁴ Kevern Verney, *The Debate on Black Civil Rights in America* (Manchester University Press, 2006), 139.

³⁵ Sam Bass Warner, Jr., op.cit., p. 20.

became a crucial issue for the many activists who laid the groundwork for today's environmental movement and the community garden movement of the 1970s and 1980s.³⁶

As a result of these new political and ideological orientations, garden politics emerged due to a coalition of black and white community leaders dedicated to the rehabilitation of the inner city's abandoned land. In fact, abandoned vacant lots started to symbolize the decline of inner city neighborhoods and the failure of the country's governing bodies to address this problem seriously.³⁷ The civil rights era spawned a wave of community garden initiatives in cities such as New York, Boston and Chicago. Community organizers who had cut their teeth in the civil rights movement used community gardening as a means to empower disenfranchised urban neighborhood in cities across the country.³⁸

Grassroots activism was not the only response provided to address environmental concerns and the issue of derelict urban lots in decaying inner cities in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, federal initiatives also launched a wide array of programs towards urban improvement: the Johnson administration's "New Conservation" tackled urban-based environmental issues at the national level and no less than nine task forces focused on environmental problems ranging from land policy to air and water pollution, including urban open space.³⁹

In the 1970s, the Conservation Movement came to maturity and the decade witnessed a plethora of new environmental legislations: President Nixon signed the National Environment Policy Act in 1970, followed by the Clean Water Act in 1972, and the Endangered Species Act was passed by Congress in 1973.⁴⁰ The question of community gardens as a way to deal with urban problems came to the fore in 1976 when the federal

³⁶ Kline, *op.cit.*, p. 89.

³⁷ Sam Bass Warner, Jr. *op.cit.*, p. 20-23.

³⁸ Charles A. French, "The Social Production of Community Garden Space: Case Studies of Boston, Massachusetts and Havana, Cuba" (Phd diss., University of New Hampshire, 2008), 4.

³⁹ Otis L. Graham, *Environmental Politics and Policy, 1960s-1990s* (Penn State University Press, 2000), 58.

⁴⁰ Kline, *op.cit.*, p. 103-105.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

government announced the creation of the Urban Garden Program under the aegis of the Department of Agriculture's Cooperative Extension Service. The program recommended the use of federal money to assist in teaching and demonstrating gardening, 4-H work and promoted nutrition assistance in large cities. However, the federal government was not supposed to provide land for community gardens, and gardening materials had to be acquired from other types of sponsorship.⁴¹

How did Milwaukee benefit from that federal program and from the momentum that the community garden movement was gaining at that time? Who were the actors who either initiated community gardening programs or contributed to their permanence in Milwaukee's cityscape in the 1970s and early 1980s? What were the obstacles along the urban gardening path, and what did these obstacles reveal in terms of political and ideological priorities? What were the discrepancies between what community garden advocates endeavored to accomplish and what was feasible? The answers to these questions will be provided in the second part of this analysis.

As was the case in other American cities during the same period, the shape of Milwaukee's urban landscape underwent rapid transformations in the 1960s and early 1970s as the result of two interlocking principles. First, the racial composition of Milwaukee's population altered dramatically from 8.4 percent black in 1960 to 25.3 percent in 1985. In Milwaukee's inner city, the black population increased from 8.1 percent in 1950 to 86.9 percent in 1985. This coincided with the massive suburbanization of the city's white population: core cities hemorrhaged white residents whose number decreased 33 percent from 1960 to 1985. Second, factory employment started to decline as a result of deindustrialization, a factor which contributed to growing poverty in inner city

⁴¹ Lawson, *op.cit.*, p. 225-26.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

communities.⁴² As in the past, community gardens were seen as a potential solution to urban problems. Due to the context of the 1960s and early 1970s, community gardening was heavily imbued with social and racial overtones.

In order to help revitalize poor inner city neighborhoods, a few urban gardening programs had already been established in Milwaukee in the late 1960s. These programs were implemented by an initiative of the Milwaukee County Extension Office, one of the county offices of the University of Wisconsin-Extension – the outreach body of the University of Wisconsin System which was created in 1907 to serve the needs of Wisconsin people.⁴³ The University of Wisconsin Extension-Milwaukee County Office gardening program started as early as 1966 with the help of 62 participants. This program continued to expand and by 1971 it counted 410 contributors who grew gardens on county-owned land or vacant lots in Milwaukee’s inner city. By 1973, two family garden sites with 680 plots were available for community gardens.⁴⁴ At that time, the program emphasized education and encouraged cooperation through gardening activities.⁴⁵

One of the corollaries of suburbanization was the development of highways and freeways in the mid-1950s which dramatically modified the urban landscape of American cities in the following decades. In 1956, Congress passed the Interstate Highway Act which authorized the largest public works project in the history of the country. Highways were deemed a public good at that time because they were thought to serve the most “democratic” of transportation choices – the automobile.⁴⁶ In Milwaukee, the Park East Freeway was planned as early as 1952 to be part of a loop of freeways encircling downtown Milwaukee. In

⁴² John L. Rury and Franck A. Cassell, ed., *Seeds of Crisis: Public Schooling in Milwaukee since 1920* (The University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 55.

⁴³ “History of UW-Extension,” accessed December 9, 2013, <http://www.uwex.edu/about/uw-extension-history.html#timeline>.

⁴⁴ 1973 Milwaukee County Family Garden Project Evaluation, Reuss, Henry S. Papers, 1839-1982, Milwaukee Manuscript Collection 112, Milwaukee, box 59, folder 17.

⁴⁵ Stanley Rynearson, Cooperative Extension Programs – University Extension to Mr. Dannheisser, letter, March 13, 1972, Henry S. Papers, box 59, folder 17.

⁴⁶ *TCRP Report 42 Consequences of the Interstate Highway System for Transit: Summary of Findings* (Transportation Research Board, National Research Council, 1998), 1.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

1965, property was acquired for the right-of-way and hundreds of homes and businesses were bulldozed. In the early 1970s, the Park East Freeway planned an incursion into an existing park and neighborhood activists managed to convince Mayor Henry Maier to stop the project in 1972.⁴⁷

Consequently, the construction of the freeway in Milwaukee and the threat it posed to its green areas prompted grassroots activism at the local level to resist a phenomenon which, at the national level, had already provoked the “Freeway Revolt.” This movement was organized by groups of citizen activists who challenged the routing decisions made by the federal government⁴⁸ and who were clearly inspired by the countercultural ideas of the 1960s to oppose governmental decisions. Interestingly, the residents of an inner city neighborhood located where a section of the Milwaukee Park Freeway had been planned – in the area between North 16th and North 47th Street – resisted the construction of the freeway, but in a different way than “freeway fighters” across the county. They decided to sign a petition which requested the tidying up and improvement of the land cleared for the freeway,⁴⁹ which meant that urban vacant lots were available.

However, the use of vacant land to create community gardens or any other form of non-for-profit activities required more than a simple idea to ignite the spark for action. While victory gardens were widely used during the Second World War, they responded to specific needs in times of food shortages. In the 1960s and 1970s, the creation and permanence of community gardens was less obvious and implied a constant interplay of forces and a tight network of actors and partnerships. In the early 1970s, one of the prominent political figures who supported “freeway gardens” – the creation of community gardens using vacant land

⁴⁷ Paul Hardin Kapp and Paul J. Armstrong, ed., *Synergicity: Reinventing the Postindustrial City* (University of Illinois Press, 2012), p.88.

⁴⁸ Mark H. Rose and Raymond A. Mohl, *Interstate: Highway Politics and Policy since 1939* (Third Edition, The University of Tennessee Press, 201), p.135.

⁴⁹ Henry S. Reuss, Member of Congress to George J. Pazik, Chairman of the Milwaukee County Expressway and Transportation Commission, letter, June 14, 1972, Henry S. Reuss Papers, box 59, folder 17.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

cleared along freeways – was Henry S. Reuss, a Democratic U.S Representative from Wisconsin. With a keen interest in the transformation of vacant land into urban gardens, he started to consider the possibility of turning plots into gardens in the alignment of the Park Freeway, arguing to the Milwaukee County Expressway and Transportation Commission that “radishes and snapdragons belong in the central city as much as in the suburbs.”⁵⁰

Despite the powerful arguments he developed, Henry S. Reuss had trouble convincing Gordon King, a member of the Commission, that community gardens were as useful for urban beautification as for improving the lives of inner city residents. King objected that the gardens would probably be vandalized. As a result, the case was referred to the Commission staff for further evaluation.⁵¹ However, the project continued to grow and the idea to turn the waste lands along the construction sites of the Park Freeway into green areas was further explored by associations and cooperatives such as the Sherman Park Community Association and the Cooperation Westside Association. Eventually, the Land for Life Garden Cooperative managed to convince the Expressway Commission to accept the community garden idea.⁵² This decision emphasizes the crucial role played by non-profit organizations in the decision-making process at that time.

As it is still the case today, the process of transforming unused or abandoned land into community gardens requires the intervention of a complex nexus of social, political and economic actors whose decisions have an immediate impact on the permanence or disappearance of a garden. In Milwaukee, the creation and tenure of community gardens in the 1970s and early 1980s relied on a network of partnerships between community organizations, public institutions and the local and federal government. Originally, the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program for urban gardening was a pilot project

⁵⁰ Henry S. Reuss to George J. Pazik, letter, March 1, 1972, Henry S. Reuss Papers, box 59, folder 17.

⁵¹ “Freeway Panel Swerves Around Radishes,” newspaper clipping, untitled, December 1972, Henry S. Reuss Papers, box 59, folder 1.

⁵² “Park West Freeway To Bloom Again,” *The Sherman Park News*, vol.4, no.4, April 1974, Henry S. Reuss Papers, box 16, folder 14.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

established under the Smith-Lever Act of May 8, 1914 with a strong emphasis on nutritional education. In 1969, the Department of Agriculture implemented an Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program which mostly targeted low-income families.⁵³

In the 1970s during the Carter Administration, the Expanded Urban Gardening Program came out of the 1977 Appropriations Act.⁵⁴ This program was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and was introduced by Congressman Frederick W. Richmond, a member of the Appropriations Subcommittee. It was intended to provide \$1.5 million for urban gardening according to two main criteria: the total population and the number of low-income residents in each city.⁵⁵ Half a million dollars was allocated to New York City and the rest was distributed to five other cities: Philadelphia, Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles and Houston.⁵⁶

The guidelines provided by the Department of Agriculture in 1976 regarding this program recommended that primary emphasis be placed on the development and improvement of urban gardening for low-income urban families, including young people. In addition, professionals, paraprofessionals and volunteers were expected to be recruited to supervise, teach and demonstrate urban gardening for the purpose of food production and preservation.⁵⁷

At the local level, the existence of this federal program piqued the interest of city officials in Milwaukee. These officials wanted federal assistance for the creation of

⁵³ Susan Schjelderup, Research Assistant to Henry S. Reuss, letter, April 5, 1977, Henry S. Reuss Papers, box 74, folder 27.

⁵⁴ The Economic Stimulus Appropriations Act, which provided \$20.0 billion in supplemental 1977 funds. The largest sum, \$9.4 billion, was allocated to the Employment and Training Administration to expand public service employment, start new youth and veteran programs and to experiment with improved training programs. William Mirengoff, Lester Rindler, Harry Greenspan and Scott Seablom, *CETA: Assessment of Public Service Employment Programs* (Washington, D.C: National Academy of Sciences, 1980), 43.

⁵⁵ James Nielson, Department of Agriculture to Henry Reuss, letter, July 21, 1977, Henry S. Reuss Papers, box 74, folder 27.

⁵⁶ Representative Fred Richmond before the House Subcommittee on Agriculture Appropriations of the House Appropriations Committee, April 5, 1977, folder 29, box 8, Henry S. Reuss Papers.

⁵⁷ "Guidelines for Special EFNEP Program with Emphasis on Urban Gardening for Food Production," United States Department of Agriculture, November 16, 1976, Henry S. Reuss Papers, box 74, folder 27.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

community gardens out of vacant tracts of city-owned land to be extended to Milwaukee. The main argument put forward by the Department of City Development to initiate a City of Milwaukee Expanded Garden Program was that community gardens would simultaneously help reduce youth unemployment in Milwaukee's inner cities and provide low-income families with fresh produce.⁵⁸ In an effort to bridge the gap between federal policies and the specific needs of the city of Milwaukee, especially in its low-income areas, Henry S. Reuss showed his dogged allegiance to urban gardening projects and wholehearted belief in the possibility that Milwaukee could benefit from the Expanded Urban Gardening Program federal funding.

As a Member of Congress, Reuss acted as an intermediary between the U.S Department of Agriculture and the City of Milwaukee. He developed convincing arguments to meet the requirements established by the Subcommittee on Agriculture of the House Appropriations Committee: Milwaukee was the twelfth largest city in the country, youth unemployment was over 40 percent at that time and Milwaukee's elderly population was financially vulnerable.⁵⁹ He also underscored that Milwaukee had more than 200 acres of municipal vacant land ready to be transformed into gardens.⁶⁰ In fact, Milwaukee benefited from the Congress's decision to earmark \$3 million for the 1978 urban gardening program, compared to the \$1.5 million allocated for the 1977 fiscal year. It meant that more cities could be covered by the program.⁶¹

In November of 1977, Henry S. Reuss was informed by the Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development and Related Agencies that Milwaukee had

⁵⁸ William Ryan Drew, Commissioner, Department of City Development to Henry S. Reuss, letter, June 9, 1977, Henry S. Reuss Papers, box 74, folder 27.

⁵⁹ Henry S. Reuss to M. Rupert Cutler, Department of Agriculture, letter, June 23, 1977, Henry S. Reuss Papers, box 74, folder 27.

⁶⁰ Henry S. Reuss to Ovid U. Bay, Director, Information Services Extension Service, U.S Department of Agriculture, letter, June 15, 1977, Henry S. Reuss Papers, box 74, folder 27.

⁶¹ Joseph H. Sisk, Legislative Assistant to Congressman Reuss to William R. Dew, Department of City Development, letter, August 8, 1977, Henry S. Reuss Papers, box 74, folder 27.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

been selected as one of the additional cities to be included in the Urban Gardening Program.⁶²

Reuss happily informed the Commissioner of the Department of City Development that Milwaukee was now part of the Expanded Urban Gardening Program.⁶³

The money allocated to Milwaukee was given by the Department of Agriculture to the University of Wisconsin-Extension in the form of an Urban Garden Grant, with the same emphasis on using this grant to help low-income families grow gardens.⁶⁴ The Urban Gardening Program for the city of Milwaukee was named the “Shoots n’ Roots Urban Garden Program” and was placed under the auspices of the University-Extension in Milwaukee County to encourage “low-income people to grow, serve, and preserve fresh vegetables.” This was to be accomplished through educational methods such as one-to-one gardening counseling, information on nutrition and food preservation, workshops and group presentations. By 1979, more than 5,000 gardeners participated in the Shoots n’ Roots program, with a total number of 1,700 gardens in Milwaukee and over \$150,000 worth of garden produce raised. It represented a substantial increase when compared to the previous year.⁶⁵ The role of the City of Milwaukee mostly consisted in coordinating the organization and implementation of this community garden program.⁶⁶

The creation of community gardens in Milwaukee in the 1970s was thus a highly institutionalized process implying a multiplicity of actors willing to turn urban vacant land into community open spaces. From the initial petition from a group of residents worried about the impact of the construction of a freeway on their immediate environment to the

⁶² Jamie L. Whitten, Chairman to Henry S. Reuss, letter, November 1, 1977, folder 27, box 74, Henry S. Reuss Papers.

⁶³ Henry S. Reuss to William R. Drew, Department of City Development, letter, December 9, 1977, Henry S. Reuss Papers box 74, folder 27.

⁶⁴ Richard C. Schneider and Erna K. Carmichael, Cooperative Extension Programs, University of Wisconsin-Extension, letter, name of the addressee unknown, January 31, 1978, Henry S. Reuss Papers, box 16, folder 14.

⁶⁵ Steven D. Brachmar, Mary L. Dahlman and Laverne B. Forest, *An Evaluation of Urban Gardening in Milwaukee*, Shoots n’ Roots Urban Garden Program Community Programs University of Wisconsin-Extension, undated, Henry S. Reuss Papers, box 8, folder 29.

⁶⁶ Ben Sklar to William Ryan Drew, letter, December 15, 1977, Milwaukee (Wis.) Mayor. Records of the Henry W. Maier Administration, 1960-1988, Milwaukee Series 44, Milwaukee, box 86, folder 30.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

concrete implementation of community gardens projects, various actors at the federal and local level had to get involved and maintain their interest in community gardening.

The benefits of community gardens were emphasized in the literature about the Shoots n' Roots program available at the time. One of these benefits was economic as the estimated yield of produce on improved vacant lots exceeded \$1,000 in 1979 and required minimum maintenance once established. Another benefit was the enhancement of community pride and spirit. Gardening provided a recreational opportunity for people of all ages, and a chance for families and neighbors to share both experience and food. Finally, there were the nutritional and health benefits of the gardens, especially for low-income people in inner cities who usually have limited access to fresh produce.⁶⁷

However, in spite of these encouraging results and the number of actors, urban gardening in Milwaukee and the creation of community gardens out of vacant lands were continuously subjected to the critical question of funding. In 1979, Henry S. Reuss was informed that the Department of Agriculture had no intention of ensuring the continued existence of the Urban Gardening Program after the month of September.⁶⁸ It seemed that urban gardening appropriations heavily depended on whatever was left from the President's budget, and that the Urban Gardening Program was never officially on the political agenda.⁶⁹

This unfortunate outcome is confusing, even paradoxical. If one examines the context of the late 1970s and early 1980s, they would find it was a period when the federal government sponsored community gardening through the Urban Garden Program implemented in 1976. Between 1979 and 1985, the number of cities benefiting from the

⁶⁷ "Text of Presentation Given Before the Policy Committee, by Steven D. Brachman, Urban Garden Agent, Milwaukee County", January 30, 1979, Milwaukee (Wis.). Mayor. Records of the Henry W. Maier Administration, 1960-1988.

⁶⁸ Henry S. Reuss, letter, name of the addressee unknown, March 30, 1979, Henry S. Reuss Papers, box 74, folder 27.

⁶⁹ "According to Steve Dewhurst of the Ag. Dept's Budget Office and Bob Foster of the Ag Subcommittee of Appropriations, there has never been money for the Urban Gardening program in the President's budget [...]." Louis to Henry S. Reuss, last name of the sender unknown, informal letter, 3/20/1979, Henry S. Reuss Papers, box 74, folder 27.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

USDA Cooperative Extension Urban Garden Program went from 6 to 21. The number of participants also increased from 88,238 in 1979 to 222,777 in 1985. In Milwaukee alone, the number of participants rose from 3,357 gardeners in 1979 to 5,639 in 1985.⁷⁰ 1979 also marked the foundation of the American Community Gardening Association (ACGA), whose mission was to promote community gardening, to help establish new programs and to facilitate networking between garden organizations.⁷¹ Far more radical in their approach to gardening and largely inspired by the countercultural tactics of resistance of the previous decade, Green Guerillas began forming in New York City in the early 1970s. They differed from more “mainstream” community gardeners because they did not ask permission or seek legitimization from landowners before using vacant lots.⁷²

With so many community garden enthusiasts across the nation, including Congressmen and city officials, what can account for the precarious nature of community gardens at that time? Indeed, in 1982 alone, about \$17 million worth of food was produced on urban vacant lands turned into gardens. However, a \$3.6 million-ceiling was placed on the federal budget in spite of the new cities which swelled the ranks of community gardening participants. The Department of Agriculture officials frequently also omitted the Urban Garden Program from their budget requests.⁷³

This situation reveals an intrinsic duality regarding community gardens. Although permanent as history has shown that they have been part of America’s urban landscape since at least the 1890s, and certainly since the first establishments in the seventeenth century, community gardens are also ephemeral because of the precariousness of the federal and municipal programs upon which they rely. Praised for their benefits as spaces of education, cooperation and community empowerment, they are highly dependent on the ebb and flow of

⁷⁰ Lawson, op.cit., p. 227.

⁷¹ Lawson, op.cit., p. 231-232.

⁷² Richard Reynolds, *On Guerilla Gardening : A Handbook for Gardening Without Boundaries* (Bloomsbury, 2009), 174.

⁷³ Lawson, op.cit., p. 228.

both public opinion and political support. The Reagan era in the 1980s provides an example of a reversal in the move toward environmental protection. In the public mind, environmental issues became subordinate to material living standards and economic security.⁷⁴

Community gardens are mirrors reflecting the social and political orientations of a city. They act as catalysts of past and present policies and their current status is an indicator of the choices that were made at the local and national level. In the 1980s, the neoliberalism paradigm reigned supreme⁷⁵ and its emphasis on economic growth may explain why the federal government's involvement in long-lasting community garden programs was so timorous. Neoliberal practices and community gardening seem antithetical because community gardens imply non-for-profit activities that can be enjoyed as a form of passive engagement with the environment, even if active participation is primarily sought.⁷⁶ The neoliberal approach, which is still prevalent today, tends to sacrifice community gardens by selling urban vacant land for economic reasons such as urban redevelopment.⁷⁷

Thus, community gardens are fragile urban ecosystems. They are considered essential but can be easily jeopardized if more pressing economic issues come to the fore. This conception of the land as private property expected to yield profits echoes the first American settlers' lust for land and the subsequent conquest of westward territories in the nineteenth century. This idea corroborates the argument that community gardens are much more than patches of vegetables and flowers. They serve as a link between the present and the past; they crystalize the complex and often ambiguous relationship that American people have

⁷⁴ Kline, op.cit., p. 113.

⁷⁵ John Ehrman and Michael W. Flamm, *Debating the Reagan Presidency* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 56.

⁷⁶ Carr, Francis, Rivlin and Stone, op.cit., p. 105. According to these authors, passive engagement with the environment can lead to a sense of relaxation. This category includes the interest and enjoyment people derive from watching the passing scene. We argue that community gardens open to the public can also lead to a form of passive engagement for those who visit the garden.

⁷⁷ Karl Linn, *Building Commons and Community* (New Village Press, 2008), 205.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

developed toward nature since the establishment of the first settlements along the coast of New England in the seventeenth century.

Ironically, the hurdles that gardeners face on a daily basis to either create or maintain community gardens in cities provide various opportunities for oppressed and disenfranchised people to reclaim their rights through the reclamation of land. Recently, urban community gardens have been associated with movements to democratize global food systems which are closely related to social and environmental justice movements.⁷⁸ For many activists, community gardens have come to epitomize an ideological fight for basic human rights, and the act of reclaiming the land is tantamount to the repossession of these rights. For marginalized African-American populations, this fight for the re-appropriation of land through community gardens is a step toward more self-assertion and freedom. It echoes the message delivered by Malcolm X on November 10, 1963 according to which “Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality.”⁷⁹

In Milwaukee, Walnut Way Conservation Corp. (WWCC) is a predominantly African-American community gardening effort located in Walnut Way, one of Milwaukee’s historically deprived neighborhoods. One of the main goals of WWCC is to empower poor communities by giving them access to the land.⁸⁰ Created in 2000, WWCC is a non-profit community organization dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of the neighborhood which traces its early beginnings to the 19th century. Through a wide array of initiatives, such as housing restoration and the development of gardens in both public and private spaces, the organization has become the symbol of the neighborhood’s resistance to the forces of

⁷⁸ Margaret W. Pettygrove, “Spaces of Resistance: Urban Community Gardens in Inner City Milwaukee,” (Phd diss., University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, May 2011), 1.

⁷⁹ Clea, ed., *Urban Wilds: Gardeners’ Stories of the Struggle for Land and Justice* (Water/Under/Ground publications, 2001), 3 (Special Collections Department, Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee).

⁸⁰ Parama Roy, op.cit., p.78.

e.polis Volume VII, Spring 2015

neoliberalism. When urban planning practices in the 1980s led to the demolition of over 100 homes in the area, resulting in abandoned vacant lots, residents responded to this crisis by encouraging the restoration of existing homes and the development of market gardens on vacant lots.⁸¹

Even more recently, Will Allen, a former basketball player-turned urban farmer founded a thriving program, Growing Power, in Milwaukee. Based on a concept of “Community Food Systems,” much of the work of Growing Power is dedicated to education and the involvement of youth through gardening activities to grow food.⁸²

These recent endeavors to rehabilitate disenfranchised neighborhoods through urban gardening are testimonies of the enduring quality of the community garden motif in the American urban landscape. They also reflect a tremendous potential for community empowerment through a grassroots activism inherited from previous decades, more specifically from the 1960s. They are also considered viable solutions to fight against “environmental racism”⁸³ and to move toward a fairer distribution of environmental risks in cities.⁸⁴ However – and this contributes to the paradox surrounding community gardens analyzed in the previous paragraphs – the flip side of the coin of community revitalization through community gardens is “gentrification” which consists in the rise of property value due to the visual enhancement of a neighborhood and the subsequent displacement of the poorest segments of the population.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Golda Meir Library, University Manuscript Collections, Walnut way Conservation Corp. (Milwaukee, Wis.), Records, 2001-[ongoing], UWM Manuscript Collection 190, box 1, folder 2.

⁸² William F. Hewitt, *A Newer World: Politics, Money, Technology, And What’s Really Being Done to Solve the Climate Crisis* (University of New Hampshire Press, 2013), 223.

⁸³ Kline, *op.cit.*, p.151. Environmental racism refers to the disproportionate impact of environmental hazards on ethnic minorities.

⁸⁴ Robert Emmett, “Community Gardens, Ghetto Pastoral, and Environmental Justice,” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 18.1 (Winter 2011): 67-86.

⁸⁵ Efrat Eizenberg, “The Production of Contesting Space : Community Gardens and the Cultivation of Social Change,” Open Space Conference, Edinburgh, UK (October 29, 2004), online at <http://www.openspace.eca.ac.uk/conference/proceedings/PDF/Eizenberg.pdf> (accessed December 10, 2013).

Community gardening has been part of America's landscape since the establishments of the first settlers in America in the seventeenth century. Community gardens are bound to the historical evolution of American cities and the intricate interplay of social, economic and political forces which result in either their permanence or disappearance. Beyond street beautification and mere visual enhancement, community gardens are the repository of hundreds of years of urban gardening in America, and have crystalized the unique relationship that American people have developed towards nature since the foundation of the first cities – an ideological inheritance bequeathed by the first Pilgrims and the Founding Fathers.

This relationship is ambiguous. Indeed, community gardening is deemed useful and beneficial in times of economic or political turmoil, as was the case during the Great Depression or the First and Second World Wars. Today, community gardens have come to embody ideological values such as environmental justice and community empowerment among disenfranchised populations. However, they are constantly threatened by the real estate sector, which responds to the logic of supply and demand in the housing market and whose driving force rarely includes the use of vacant land for non-business activities.

The precariousness of community gardens and the failure of governmental agencies to consider them as sustainable solutions to contemporary urban problems may be due to the protean form of community gardens themselves: in times of war or economic downturn, the purpose of community gardens may appear more clearly because they focus on simple objectives such as food production or the reduction of unemployment. Since the 1960s and its swirling pace of events, the world has become more complex. Community gardens have reflected this complexity by addressing multiple problems at the same time, such as health and nutrition, decaying urban neighborhoods, social isolation, youth unemployment, education, environmental racism and community empowerment.

In Milwaukee, many community organizations, such as WWCC, Growing Power and the Victory Garden Initiative continue to implement community gardens projects, perpetuating an enduring American tradition and a very specific link with the land. However, as confirmed recently in an interview with Gretchen Mead, Executive Director of the Victory Garden Initiative,⁸⁶ the creation and permanence of community gardens in Milwaukee still rely on negotiating with various actors and developing multiple partnerships to make sure that urban vacant land can be used for urban gardening and the production of better quality food. The “HOME GR/OWN” program, launched by Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett and led by the Office of Environmental Sustainability, is another example of a recent initiative. By turning foreclosed properties into community assets, this program addresses critical issues faced by Milwaukee’s most vulnerable residents, such as foreclosures and access to healthy food, favoring community empowerment and sparking new economic activities in low-income neighborhoods.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Interview conducted on December 6, 2013. The Victory Garden Initiative was founded in 2008 and its premises are located on 1845 N Farwell Avenue in Milwaukee.

⁸⁷ “HOME GR/OWN Milwaukee,” accessed December 16, 2013.
<http://city.milwaukee.gov/sustainability/HOMEGR/OWN.htm>.