Cultivating Resistance? Urban Sustainability, Neoliberalism, and Community Gardens

by

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Abstract

In the past two decades sustainability has emerged as an important agenda in urban planning, with increasing international interest in urban compactness, smart growth, and healthy and sustainable communities. Drawing upon policies and practices implemented in major North American cities, particularly Vancouver, this thesis explores the various ends to which urban sustainability is being appropriated in practice. In particular, this study identifies an economistic and entrepreneurial ethos underlying municipal policy-making which reinforces a narrow, neo-liberal form of sustainability. It then explores the application of this ethos to community gardens, identifying a significant tension between grassroots practices of community gardening (which tend to pull sustainability in a more radical direction which fosters principles of social and environmental justice) and a developer/municipal government-led appropriation of such practices (which are often built around maximizing profit and the privatization of urban space). This contextual exploration of sustainability policies, practices, and politics adds to our understanding of neo-liberal urban responses to social and ecological crises, and the civic strategies that resist them.

Keywords: Urban Sustainability; Urban Neoliberalism; Everyday Life; Community Gardens; Urban Social Movements; Vancouver
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Introduction

This thesis begins with a cookie. This is no home-made cookie reminding you of things passed, rather it is a mass-produced chocolate-chip cookie you can go and purchase at any convenience store. It was while I was eating this cookie that my roommate decided to prepare a salad using the fresh vegetables he just picked up from his community garden plot. The contrast could not have been starker: here was I, suddenly positioned as the poster child of mass consumption and unhealthy lifestyles, facing my roommate, who was obviously making more responsible choices. Inadvertently, my roommate and his garden-grown salad had incurred a sense of guilt and self-loathing upon me. My moral inferiority was out in the open, there, on the kitchen table, cookie facing leafy greens. To help and cleanse my guilt I interpreted the situation as expressive of the violent nature of socially produced moral hierarchies and the ways they work to devalue and condemn modes of practice and subjectivity that do not adhere to universal ideals. Identifying my roommate’s garden-grown salad as expressive of environmental ideals, I worked to de-construct the hierarchy at play through an attack on all things labeled environmental. Much thought was put into formulating a critique of environmental ethics, environmental practices, environmental governance, and urban environmentalism, all in order to question the morality of these trends and condemn the agents who propagated them (my roommate included). Environmental movements, green political parties, community gardeners, and even recycling bins and hybrid cars, were all considered part of the ploy to make me feel less worthy and responsible, and their vices therefore had to be exposed.

Initially motivated by strong feelings of guilt, this thesis has somewhat problematic origins. Initially conceived out of spite, it pursued a narrow, one-way path, ultimately trying to define everything environmental as inherently immoral. Nonetheless, such a starting point also initiated a process of transformation, ultimately turning a straightforward attack into a more balanced consideration. Indeed, the thesis before you is the product of such a process. If my initial aim was to produce a kind of anti-environmentalist manifesto, then the end result stands far from such totalizing claims. Instead, it strives to acknowledge and explore the trend of greening cities as a much more complex and contested issue.
My aim here is to present the idea that policies and practices of sustainability are appropriated in various, often contradicting, ways. I argue that sustainability, in different geographical contexts and by different social actors, is being pulled in both progressive and regressive directions – thus cultivating different degrees of resistance to current socio-economic orders. I choose to explore this idea through focusing on the spaces of urban community gardens. On the one hand, struggles to preserve spaces for community gardening in various cities around the world, such as New York City, Los Angeles, and Vancouver, expose the potential of producing a community-led and socially progressive approach to sustainability. On the other hand, community gardens are also where strategies of neoliberalization take place and produce forms of sustainability that reiterate neoliberal agendas and ideology. In this sense, this thesis does not present a systematic study of the policies, practices, or literature around community gardening. Instead, my priority is to use community gardening as a tool through which to explore sustainability as a complex set of practices upon which a set of contradictory forces act simultaneously.

The first chapter will trace the emergence of sustainability and its theoretical conceptualization. Sustainability will be characterized by definition as a contested concept. On the one hand, social scientists, politicians, and economists have been articulating sustainability with the same socio-economic structures that maintain ecological exploitation and social injustice. On the other hand, sustainability has also been articulated with notions of social and environmental transformation. As such, a discussion opens up as to what forms of sustainability should be identified as regressive and what forms should be identified as progressive. The focus of this thesis will be to empirically examine this on an urban scale.

The second chapter will focus on one side of this discussion, examining how contemporary urban political economy produces a regressive appropriation of sustainability. It will include a brief introduction to the emergence of urban neoliberalism and entrepreneurialism and the implications of articulating this political credo with sustainability goals. In this context, a notion of sustainability has emerged that is more of a tool for intensifying competition and economic development rather than promoting social and environmental change. Here, the city of Vancouver and its implementation of sustainability initiatives will serve as a case study that shows how the process of regressive appropriation takes place in practice.
The third chapter will challenge the co-opted language of sustainability under neoliberalism by focusing on the spaces of urban community gardens and how they struggle to generate a progressive variant of sustainability. It begins with a brief introduction to the emergence of the contemporary community garden movement. Then, based on theories of everyday life, it will present the forms of cultural and social resistance these practices introduce into urban space. In this context, sustainability becomes associated with grassroots movements and struggles that fight against neoliberal imperatives and call for social and environmental justice. Coalitions of community gardeners from New York City, Los Angeles, and Vancouver serve as exemplars of this articulation process.

The fourth and final chapter will show how these contradicting appropriations, as presented in chapters two and three, are far from being isolated from one another. They rather occur simultaneously in the same spatial and temporal contexts. As such they often challenge one another in attempts to re-appropriate the language of sustainability for their own ends. Here, community gardens are presented as contested spaces in which sustainability can be re-appropriated for regressive ends by various agents and discourses. Revisiting community gardens in New York City, Los Angeles, and Vancouver helps to understand how this re-appropriation process takes place.

In pursuing these ideas, I hope to achieve a number of goals. First, to show that sustainability carries with it the capacity to strengthen current socio-economic structures and challenge them, both at the same time, thus problematizing an essential understanding of sustainability as either regressive or progressive. Second, to recognize sustainability as an open-ended concept that is constantly being negotiated and re-appropriated by different agents in different times. In other words, one form of appropriation can always be colonized by another: the concept of sustainability is constantly in a process of becoming. Third, to identify and strengthen the contexts and conditions that help produce progressive and meaningful forms of sustainability, while warning about those that lead to regressive and superficial ones. This last point, I believe, is the most important contribution this thesis has to offer to discussions of sustainability, particularly in its urban context. This distinction is essential to grasp if one desires a sustainability which transcends a narrow, economic definition. A sustainability that is both socially and environmentally just.
Chapter 1. Contested Definitions of Sustainability

This chapter looks at the emergence and evolution of discourses of sustainability and sustainable development. Over the last 25 years, a variety of definitions of sustainability have been developed, each responding in its own way to ecological and human crises. While some consider such crises to be easily solvable, others believe a more radical approach is required. It is therefore useful to categorize these responses into distinct groups, and thereby develop a typology of sustainability. The chapter begins with the emergence of sustainability as marked by the publication of two distinct reports: The Club of Rome’s *Limits to Growth* in 1972 and the UN’s *Brundtland Report* in 1987. This brief introduction leads to a discussion of the various ways sustainability could be appropriated. First, there are responses that seek to strengthen and maintain the socio-economic status quo. In this sense, the path to sustainability is driven by businesses and entrepreneurs through the innovation of techno-corporate solutions. Second, there are more critical responses that seek major reforms that will create large shifts in policy and lifestyles, nonetheless, within existing social, political and economic structures. Third, the most critical responses demand a thorough transformation of socio-economic relations. Here, sustainability is predicated on overthrowing the exploitative system of capitalism and re-constituting our relationships to humanity and the environment. Ultimately, these three distinct formulations of sustainability help us to understand how and why it is contested, both as an idea and as a set of social and material practices.

Sustainability and Sustainable Development: Origins

The concept of ecological limits is comparatively new. Up until the early 1960s the depletion of natural resources on a global scale due to human innovation and progress was a fact yet to be popularized. While Western economies were predicated on limitless and endless development and growth, the idea that planetary eco-systems are deteriorating – marked by processes such as climate change, ocean acidification, stratospheric ozone depletion, and biodiversity loss – was voiced mainly in closed
scientific circles. However, in 1962, Rachel Carson, an American marine biologist and a scientific writer, published the book *Silent Spring* which studied the effects of synthetic pesticides on the environment and, subsequently, humans. Once these pesticides entered the biosphere, Carson argued, they not only killed bugs but also made their way up the food chain to threaten bird and fish populations and could eventually sicken children. Carson’s study managed to capture the public imagination and to galvanize a nation into demanding concrete change in the form of banning the use of DDT. But *Silent Spring* was more than a study of the effects of synthetic pesticides; it was an indictment of the modern and scientific project of the West – with its ‘exuberant belief in the capacity of humanity to conquer nature, to split atoms, feed the hungry, send rockets to the moon, and reverse the flow of water’\(^1\). As Bill McKibben notes, ‘[Carson] was the very first person to knock some of the shine off modernity\(^2\). Humans, Carson argued, should not seek to dominate nature through chemistry, in the name of progress. In her view, technological innovation could easily and irrevocably disrupt the natural system and its ability to sustain human life. Carson articulated this view during her testimony before the Senate subcommittee on pesticides in 1963, saying: ‘Our heedless and destructive acts enter into the vast cycles of the earth and in time return to bring hazard to ourselves’\(^3\). As such, Carson made a powerful case for the idea that if humankind poisoned nature, nature would in turn poison humankind.

The success of *Silent Spring* incorporated ecological concerns into mainstream debates and forged America’s environmental consciousness. It is attributed for spawning contemporary environmental movements, for founding the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970, and for passing the Clear Air and Water acts in the early 1970s. More importantly, it jump-started the field of environmental science that increasingly provided more concrete and totalizing evidence of the detrimental effects of economic development on planetary eco-systems. Hence, it assisted in the process of clarifying to activists and public officials alike that the current state of affairs was not compatible with a finite world with finite resources. They had to face the fact that there were limits to humanity’s conduct, limits that perhaps were already being exceeded. An environmental crisis was beginning to unfold – a realization that the planet was sick, maybe even dying.

The process of incorporating this realization into global politics, according to Roger Keil, is marked by the publication of two distinct reports – The Club of Rome’s the *Limits
to Growth in 1972 and the UN’s Brundtland Report in 1987. In Limits to Growth a group of natural scientists headed by Donella Meadows used new and improved computer modeling capacities in order to project how the rate of economic and population growth would affect the earth’s ecological system and its ability to sustain human life. The current rates and scale of growth, the report concluded, were actually damaging the environment and would lead humanity down a path of catastrophic decline if not halted. The projections made by Meadows et al. delivered a shocking challenge to the prevailing tendency to conceive of growth as both infinite and necessarily leading to the satisfaction of human needs and the provision of well-being. In fact, the opposite was true: the failure to limit growth would put our own existence at risk. Securing the stability of global human civilization – in such a way that would not overshoot the earth’s ecological limits and subsequently collapse – demanded the systematic capping of economic and population growth.

Limits to Growth provided scientific validation to Carson’s grand narrative. Its scientific discussion of ecological problems in planetary terms helped to further frame the issue as globally and dynamically interconnected. Resource depletion and pollution – hitherto perceived as geographically local and isolated issues – were reframed as affecting humanity as a whole. For environmentalists, scientists, and policy makers, this meant that environmental action and accountability is ultimately a matter of global, as opposed to local, concern. Nonetheless, the report’s acknowledgment of global interconnectedness ignored some of the real issues at stake. First, it did not address the unequal distribution of ecological consumption. In other words, it lacked an analysis of how ‘the threat of pollution is not driven by the total number of people so much as by the number of rich and wasteful people’4. The fact is that it is mostly developed countries that are the engines of growth and therefore primarily responsible for most of the ecological damage. As such, limiting the economic growth of developed countries ought to have been prioritized over more general restrictions addressed to global society as a whole (such as population control). Second, the report did not address the unequal distribution of ecological harms. In other words, ecological degradation and pollution is not spread equally across the globe but rather tends to bear down disproportionately upon the planet’s most vulnerable citizens. Regions that are already economically and politically battered are now being put on the front line of climate catastrophe, facing devastating droughts and other weather aberrations that create a shortage of arable land and resources. As such, speaking of
environmental and economic collapse ought to be discussed vis-à-vis the ones who will suffer from this collapse the most. These two points suggest that *Limits to Growth* largely avoided questions of political economy, but rather preferred to frame its message in a ‘non-political’ form. In reality, the world human community is a social system, regulated by power, ideas and violence – a reality that the report mostly failed to address. This failure may partly explain why, despite its popularity and commercial success, *Limits to Growth* didn’t have a greater impact on real policy ‘as capitalist growth, the growth of global populations, and the use of resources spun further out of control’⁵.

Enter the *Brundtland Report*, defining both the problem and the solution in broader, more complex, terms. For the Brundtland Commission, much like the Club of Rome, ‘development as it was known…was not delivering the goods’⁶. However, contrary to Meadows et al., the Brundtland Report did not consider growth as inherently unsustainable, rather it recognized more conciliatory forms capable of successfully managing the contradiction between ecological sustainability and human development. It created a distinction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’, or sustainable and unsustainable, forms of development. Therefore, rather than dismissing growth, the Brundtland Report argued for its transformation so that it would (finally) deliver the social promise of human progress while also preserving the health of the earth’s ecological systems. Moreover, Brundtland included in its definition of the problem not only ecological but also social concerns. The current form of development was accused of not only increasing the potential for irreversibly damaging the world’s environment, but also of exacerbating global poverty and inequality. The report explicitly mentioned ‘the need to stave off the detrimental effects of competitive striving for “survival and prosperity with little regard for its impact on others”’⁷. It emphasized the role of prevailing patterns of development in reinforcing and exacerbating existing patterns of socio-economic inequality and injustice. Therefore, it prioritized the need for development to meet the essential human needs of the world’s poor. Consequently, the term *sustainable development* was coined: a form of ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’⁸. Through avoiding the totalizing claims against human development posed by *Limits to Growth*, sustainable development – sensitive to both environmental and human development – became a household term in political and popular discussions pertaining to the issue of ecological sustainability.
However, mostly due to its conciliatory tone, the definition of sustainable development offered by the Brundtland commission left a certain amount of ambiguity: What exactly are the needs of the present? What are the needs of future generations? Whose needs are they? What should be sustained and what should be developed – by whom and for whom? This created the space for interpreting sustainable development in multiple, even contradicting, ways. On the one hand, the concept of sustainable development posits that economic growth can be deemed justifiable only if it meets the human needs of the world’s poor and minimizes environmental disruption. As such, it demands accountability from organizations that are hitherto inattentive to their social and environmental effects, thereby offering a direct challenge to the increased integration of the world in a capitalist economy dominated by exploitative multinationals. On the other hand, it opens the door for businesses and multinational corporations to justify continued economic growth by publicly making it seem as if they meet human needs, whereas in fact their growth further perpetuates social and environmental harm. Central to this is the concept of ‘Greenwashing’ and the role of public relations in presenting a green and humane corporate image while concealing the continued abuse of society and the environment. Incorporated as such, sustainable development then becomes a tool that ‘allows businesses and governments to be in favor of sustainability without any fundamental challenge to their present course’.

Recognizing that such a spectrum exists – that sustainable development can be used by exploitative corporations as much as by ecological revolutionaries – calls for a more detailed investigation of this spectrum. In what is presented below, sustainable development is classified into three distinct categories, each promoting a different approach for achieving sustainability.

**Maintaining the Status Quo: Technological Dreams and Green Facades**

‘Nonsense!’ was my employer’s careful choice of words after skimming the short piece that was left open on my screen. The piece cited a research study that predicts, based on the current rates of resource exploitation, a gloomy environmental future: before the end of the century most human beings on earth will suffer from the detrimental effects of climate change. The reason for easily dismissing such ‘doomsday predictions’, according to my employer, was a belief in the human ability to come up with technological solutions that will be able to maintain and eventually eradicate climate change and its
effects. My employer’s view is no anomaly, it rather expresses a common belief that is shared by many. As Naomi Klein argues: ‘In our desire to deal with climate change without questioning the logic of growth, we’ve been eager to look both to technology and the market for saviors’\textsuperscript{10}. Indeed, implementing solutions to the problems raised by reports such as Limits to Growth and Brundtland begins too often with an affirmation of the virtues of our existing economic system and the default set of tools it offers – that is, private entrepreneurship, technological innovation, and new forms of consumption – all of which are adjustments that ‘can be made without any fundamental changes to society, means of decision making or power relations’\textsuperscript{11}. The fact that the greatest success stories of the capitalist order – e.g. Richard Branson, Bill Gates, and Michael Bloomberg – are also the greatest advocates for sustainability solutions is a case in point: sustainable development has come to be inextricably tied to private innovation and economic accumulation.

There is no better way to examine this view than by unpacking the term Green Capitalism – that is, the belief in a market-led transformation of corporate industry and civil society toward greener, supposedly more sustainable, forms of production and consumption. On the production side, the discourse of ecological modernization was central in advancing this form of free market environmentalism. Initially conceived as a way to ‘redirect and transform free market capitalism in such a way that it less and less obstructs, and increasingly contributes to, the preservation of society’s sustenance base in a fundamental/structural way’\textsuperscript{12}, ecological modernization proposes a green industrial revolution rooted in technological innovation and efficiency. In other words, using Joseph Huber’s famous metaphor, the environmental crisis is seen as an opportunity to transform ‘the dirty and ugly industrial caterpillar…into an ecological butterfly’\textsuperscript{13}. Ecological modernizers such as Spaargaren and Mol thus call for ‘superindustrialization rather than de-industrialization’\textsuperscript{14} – whereby industries will be at the forefront of ecological transformation by introducing new technologies, new management techniques, and more efficient forms of production to help produce a green society. The corporate world was fast to adopt the language of ecological modernization only after diluting, or weakening, its critical dimensions. If the theory initially spoke of the centrality of state regulation and negative incentives in achieving the so-called green industrial revolution, the corporate version of ecological modernization chose to emphasize only the centrality of positive market incentives associated with prices, profits, and entrepreneurship (e.g. emissions trading).
The field of public relations and advertising plays here a central role as it becomes responsible for communicating these supposed shifts in industrial ethics. Corporations incorporate into their marketing language the ways in which they cope with environmental problems – be it more efficient and less polluting production methods and/or voluntary environmental stewardship programs. Oil and gas companies excel in producing such rhetoric: Chevron has its own comprehensive plan to manage its greenhouse gas emissions\(^\text{15}\), BP claims its ‘technical edge’ can help solve the world’s energy problems\(^\text{16}\), and Shell aims to promote understanding, appreciation and conservation of the natural environment through its nature education camps\(^\text{17}\). As such, ecological modernization is appropriated by the corporate world as a way to show how ‘human ingenuity stimulated by market forces finds ways to cope with natural resource constraints’\(^\text{18}\), thereby further supporting the neoliberal ideology of a self-correcting, self-regulating marketplace.

Accordingly, under this distorted version of ecological modernization, ecology will ostensibly no longer represent a hindrance to the economy but rather serve as a channel for creating new markets and a source of future economic growth, which ultimately remains the real objective. Indeed, technological fantasies such as those that aim to ‘dematerialize economic production so that the capitalist economy can then walk on air’\(^\text{19}\) serve as clear indications of this common perspective. Savings in materials and energy in the process of production are ultimately used to promote new capital formations and the further proliferation of commodities. As stated in The Weight of the Nations, an important empirical study of material outflows in recent decades in major industrial nations: ‘efficiency gains brought by technology and new management practices have been offset by [increases in] the scale of economic growth’\(^\text{20}\).

The other side of the same coin is the growing market in sustainable consumer goods, suggesting that adjustments in personal lifestyles through ‘green’ consumerism is an effective means of achieving environmental goals while simultaneously increasing profits. Popular examples include eco-brands such as Toyota’s Prius, Whole Foods Market, and Toms Shoes, all of which offer consumers more ‘sustainable’ and ‘responsible’ consumption choices. Green consumerism thus offers both corporations and individual consumers a neat, clean, and profitable resolution to the problematic coupling of ecological deterioration and economic growth. On the one hand it is environmentally
sensible as it represents a conscious attempt to exploit less resources, and, on the other hand, it is economically sensible as it represents a direct route to profits.

In green capitalism, therefore, the move toward sustainable development is guided by the implementation of market-based solutions that would supposedly provide a greener, more sustainable, form of economic growth. Instead of instituting rules and regulations that would limit the capitalist exploitation of the environment, sustainable development is to be achieved by the corporate implementation of new management techniques and new technologies that will offer both producers and consumers more sustainable choices. Naturally, this is the dominant view held by businesses and neoliberal governments that are interested in further liberalizing society and the market from any regulatory shackles.

However, the belief in such win-win situations – where economic growth goes with rather than against nature – has been challenged by critical theorists. For John Bellamy Foster, green capitalism is simply a reiteration of an economic system that is the root of the problem as opposed to offering any solutions. The marketization of ecology and the continued reign of economic growth dismiss, according to Foster, ‘the unavoidable fact that an expanding economic system is placing additional burdens on a fixed earth system to the point of planetary overload’\(^{21}\). If we simply accept the notion of green capitalism then the environmental problem becomes delinked from the systemic features of capitalism that make the system inherently wasteful and unmanageable. As a consequence, Foster cautions, there would seem to be ‘no need to address the relentless drive that constitutes the global system of monopoly-finance capital and its processes of rapacious exploitation of the earth, propelled forward by a speculative system of asset-based accumulation’\(^{22}\).

Additionally, this notion of capitalism speaks much about the environment but leaves little room for considerations of social inequality. Indeed, as David Harvey notes:

Such a discourse can rather too easily be corrupted into yet another discursive representation of dominant forms of economic power. It can be appropriated by multinational corporations to legitimize a global grab to manage all of the world’s resources. Indeed, it is not impossible to imagine a world in which big industry (certain segments), big government (including the World Bank), and establishment, high-tech big science can get to dominate the world even more than they currently do in the name of
“sustainability”, ecological modernization, and appropriate global management of the supposedly fragile health of planet Earth.

As such, green capitalism might disregard or even exacerbate the ways in which capitalist societies further sustain the prolonged domination of elites over the marginalized and the poor. Instead of confronting social injustice and inequality, green capitalism might further support the same power structures, social relations, institutional configurations, discourses, and belief systems that generate them in the first place.

**Calls for Reform: Shifting Policies and Incorporating Concern**

A relatively more progressive interpretation of sustainable development comes from those who seek a more balanced perspective on the role of state and market forces in the process of sustainability. Advocates of such strategies are ‘critical of current policies of most businesses and governments and trends within society, but do not consider that a collapse in ecological or social systems is likely or that fundamental change is necessary’. To them, reaching sustainable development may necessitate large shifts in policy and lifestyle, but it is assumed that ‘these can be achieved over time within the present social and economic structures’. They therefore work toward broad changes to current institutional and economic structures with the aim of incorporating ecological and social concern from within. In this sense, the discussion about sustainability is no longer guided by the sweeping prioritization of economic growth, but rather acknowledges a more complex system of balances which includes ecological and social priorities as well. Accordingly, governments and international organizations have a much more central role in achieving sustainable development. Not only do they encourage and enable green market solutions (through policy carrots such as subsidies and grants), but they also command and control the market where it fails to address environmental issues (through policy sticks such as carbon taxes and increased environmental regulations).

Here, a different approach to ecological modernization has been developed. If the corporate world heavily emphasized the role of technological innovation, a critical attitude toward the state, and a belief in the power of market forces, this more critical version pays more attention to constraining, regulating, and channeling markets toward ecological and social goals. Peter Christoff characterized this as a shift from ‘weak’ to ‘strong’ ecological
modernization: one that ‘not only stresses changes in production and consumption, but does so through greater democratization, redistribution, and social justice’\(^\text{25}\). Albert Weale for example suggests that ‘the systemic realization of ecological modernization requires a pro-active, interventionist state supporting a well-developed culture of environmental policy innovation and offering significant public investment as a means of achieving environmental outcomes’\(^\text{26}\). Likewise, Maarten Hajer calls for a ‘reflexive ecological modernization, whereby political and economic development proceed on the basis of critical self-awareness involving public scrutiny and democratic control’\(^\text{27}\). As such, ecological modernization involves more than a techno-corporatist solution, it rather works to re-conceptualize the ways in which current institutional structures might encourage and enforce the incorporation of ecological and social goals.

A case in point is James Gustave Speth, who has been called the ‘ultimate insider’ within the environmental movement. Speth served as chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality under President Jimmy Carter, founded the World Resources Institute, co-founded the Natural Resources Defense Council, was a senior advisor in Bill Clinton’s transition team, and administered the United Nations Development Program from 1993 to 1999. With the publication in 2008 of his book *Bridge at the Edge of the World*, Speth has emerged as a trenchant critic of modern capitalism’s destruction of the environment. ‘Capitalism as we know it today’, Speth declares, ‘is incapable of sustaining the environment’\(^\text{28}\) – a problem that must be resolved by identifying alternative ways to reinvent capitalism. These alternatives, according to Speth, are to emerge from:

(1) questioning the notion that GDP growth is an unalloyed good; (2) insisting that markets are to be increasingly regulated in the public interest; (3) making sure that the corporate model is shifted from one ownership and motivation model to many; and (4) ensuring that consumption is transformed from consumerism to mindful consumption.\(^\text{29}\)

Here, Speth envisions a possible reconciliation between sustainability and the capitalist system, resulting from a string of regulatory practices that will channel market competition and capitalist innovation toward a more sustainable path. As such, Speth relies not on technological solutions offered by private entrepreneurs, but rather on the power invested by regulators to restrict and direct market practices and to ensure a sustainable rate of economic, social, and environmental development within the current structures of society.
For some, such as Hajer and Weale, this notion of ecological modernization offers the potential of realizing more radical forms of systemic change. ‘Once the conventional wisdom of the relationship between the environment and economy is challenged’, as Weale comments, ‘other elements of the implicit belief system [which sees them in opposition] might also begin to unravel’. Ecological modernization, in this sense, might generate a broader transformation in social relations, one which leads to the ecologization of the markets and the state as opposed to the marketization of ecology. As institutions further internalize ecological concerns as a matter of attitude rather than finance, the line from mechanical to moral reform is steadily being crossed.

However, for others, reforms may in some isolated instances have relatively positive effects, but they ultimately ‘under-gird, strengthen, and re-legitimize the main institutions in dynamics in the system that caused the climate change problem, and thus weaken and demobilize environmental and social justice advocacy communities through co-option’. While strong forms of ecological modernization offer greater participation, they still operate based on a universal drive toward the domination of human and nature through science, technology, and professional expertise. Therefore, they tend to leave decision-making power in the hands of current institutions and maintain the distancing of other, more radical, voices from traditional politics. As Christoff suggests:

Insofar as EM focuses on the state and industry in terms which are narrowly technocratic and instrumental rather than on social processes in ways which are broadly integrative, communicative, and deliberative, it is less likely to lead the sorts of embedded cultural transformations which could sustain substantial reductions in material consumption levels, significant and rapid structural transformations in industrialized countries, and major international redistributions of wealth and technological capacity.

As such, reforms – which work through, rather than against, current structures – fail to question the domination of science and professionalism over alternative forms of knowledge and practice.

In addition, strong forms of ecological modernization do not question the instrumental and alienated relationship between humans and nature. They still express a desire to control nature for the sake of efficiency improvements and human progress as opposed to more intrinsic conceptions of nature. As such, reforms fail to challenge the underlying instrumental rationality leading to the continued exploitation of natural
resources. Indeed, as Naomi Klein suggests, global reforms ‘steered us in directions that have yielded very poor results’:

I think if we look at the track record of Kyoto, of the UN Clean Development Mechanism, the European Union’s emissions trading scheme – we now have close to a decade that we can measure these schemes against, and it’s disastrous. Not only are emissions up, but we are anywhere near what scientists are saying we need to do to lower emissions.33

These conclusions serve as evidence to how working through a political-economic model that regards nature as instrumental proved failing – both environmentally and socially.

**Transformation Approaches: Overthrowing and Re-imagining Social Structures**

While sustainability-themed world summits and common-sense reformist politics have largely failed to address the acceleration of climate change and social inequality, calls for more radical interpretations of sustainability have arisen. The technological and political corrections provided thus far by corporations, private entrepreneurs, and political leaders are dismissed by the proponents of this view as incapable of challenging ‘many of the problems practically located within the very economic and power structures of society’34. Genuine sustainable development requires ‘a transformation of society and/or human relations with the environment’35. What is needed, in other words, is a green cultural revolution, in which humanity as a whole radically redefines its needs in relation to community, equality, and sustainability. Such a transformation requires overthrowing current social structures and giving those outside the centers of power – e.g. indigenous groups, third world masses, and the poor – control over their own lives and resources.

The two theoretical frameworks that are most prevalent in this revolutionary context are eco-socialism and environmental justice. Eco-socialism has been primarily oriented toward ‘understanding the ways in which capitalist imperatives drive and intensify the climate crisis, shape the range of political responses put forth to confront it, and perpetuate interconnected forms of social and ecological dislocation and immiseration’36. Indeed, most eco-socialist critiques focus on the system of capitalism as the root cause for both environmental degradation and social injustice. ‘The problem’, according to John Bellamy Foster ‘can be called “the global ecological rift”, referring to the overall break in

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the human relation to nature arising from an alienated system of capital accumulation without end. Defined as such, the way to obliterate the ecological crisis must begin with dismantling capitalism and developing a reconsideration of the nature-society dialectic, premised upon the reciprocal constitution and historical co-evolution of the human and non-human world. In other words, as Foster suggests:

What we need to strive for is a Holoanthropocene – an epoch of the “New Whole Human” based on transcending the alienation of humanity and nature. The rift in ecology and society can only be healed through a new revolutionary transformation in human social and ecological relations. “Nature’s revolution” and social revolution need to be made one. Humanity must at long last reach a new stage in its real historical development, in which the earth is a boundary and life is respected.

This transformation according to eco-socialists can be achieved through reasserting collective control over the conditions of human existence. Such formulations usually call for bringing the means of production, and its material exchanges with nature under conscious, rational, democratic control. Recapturing Marx’ own vision of socialism, eco-socialism hopes to construct a society where ‘the associated producers govern the human metabolism with nature in a rational way, bringing it under their collective control...accomplishing it with the least expenditure of energy and in conditions most worthy and appropriate for their human nature”.

However, the effort to rationally manage our interactions with nature, argues Dennis Soron, ‘bear onto larger unresolved questions about eco-socialism’s complicated relationship to scientific authority and technical expertise’. The authority wielded by rational-scientific discourse is typically beyond the lay understanding of the general population, whose collective mobilization and participation will be required to steer society in a more sustainable direction. Without devoting attention to developing more democratic strategies of social transformation, the responses of eco-socialists will tend to be technical and managerial in nature, working within a constrained horizon of political possibility. Moreover, eco-socialists stand accused of devoting little attention to ‘the contingent and conflict-ridden terrain of social struggle on which actual historical change inevitably takes place’. The broad general principles and ideals underlying eco-socialist utopias – such as a socialized economy, participatory state structures, an expanded public sphere, and forms of human development liberated from the compulsions of exploitation and commodification – are pitched at society in general, without acknowledging the inner
conflicts and tensions within society itself. Taking such critiques into consideration, contemporary eco-socialist literature, as Soron says, presents ‘a poorly developed sense of the practical strategies and mobilized constituencies required to initiate radical change and create the basis for a new socio-economic order’.

The limitations of eco-socialism are partly addressed in ideas expressed by the environmental justice movement. The movement has emerged in response to concerns about the inequitable impacts of environmental problems. It originally evolved out of the experiences of people of color in the United States, who often lived in close proximity to environmental hazards and thus tend to bear a larger share of the burden from environmental pollution and degradation. Consider, for example, the location of incinerators, landfills, expressways, and other polluting operations and facilities in urban areas where racial and ethnic communities usually live, work, and play. The neighborhood of South Bronx in New York City is a case in point: encompassed by two expressways, it has constant industrial activity, and accounts for 50% of the city’s commercial waste and 30% of its overall garbage concentrated in waste transfer stations. Consequently, according to an NYU study, in the South Bronx around 25% of children suffer from asthma and they are hospitalized for their condition at a rate 250% higher than the rate for children in other parts of New York City and 1000% higher than the New York State rate. Recognizing such inextricable links between environmental quality and human (in)equality had led environmental justice advocates to the broader understanding that ‘unless society strives for a greater level of social and economic equity, both within and between nations, the long term objective of a more sustainable world is unlikely to be secured’. In other words, a prerequisite for sustainability is a more equal and just distribution of social, economic, and environmental benefits and resources. This transformation, according to advocates of this view, is to be gained through changing power relations and enabling local grassroots initiatives that fight for equal opportunities and greater community autonomy. Efforts to ensure the active participation of marginalized and poor communities in social and environmental decision making will ultimately enable them to engage in coordinated joint actions and serve as a means of adopting a social justice perspective on environmental issues at the state, regional, and national scales as well.
However, according to Andrew Dobson, ‘social justice and environmental sustainability are not always compatible objectives’. The view that policies and movements for social justice will result automatically in greater environmental sustainability is a mistaken belief. For example, there is no guarantee that dividing up landfill sites more fairly between rich and poor communities will result in an overall decrease in the volume of waste consigned to such sites. ‘The answer,’ according to Dobson, ‘to the question of whether justice is functional for sustainability is: it depends. It depends on the type of justice we are talking about and on the conception of sustainability at stake.’ If justice is limited to human beings – that is, only human beings can properly be regarded as distributors and recipients of justice – then it would be unjust to deprive human beings of the means of survival but it would not be unjust to do so for non-human species. Once non-human animals and the non-human natural world are excluded from the community of justice recipients, there is no ‘justice to the environment’ but only justice for human beings. Are factory-farmed animals not victims of injustice? What about harvested trees? From this point of view, social justice and sustainability are not inherently compatible for the notion of justice predicated upon human-beings excludes notions of sustainability predicated of non-human species. In other words, the demand of environmental justice advocates to bring the human back into environmental politics might marginalize the importance of the non-human world. In this sense, the implementation of social justice principles might not necessarily lead to an increase in environmental sustainability.

Conclusion

The typology depicted above indicates that defining and achieving sustainable development is negotiable and contested, encapsulating both reactionary and progressive responses. While some, such as green capitalists, promote a form of sustainability that does not offer much change to current socio-economic structures, others, such as eco-socialists, try to promote a search for sustainability that begins from re-imagining our societal relationships with nature and humanity. In support of the latter view, the fundamental assumption underlying this thesis is that a meaningful form of sustainability necessarily entails transformation. That is, it entails de-legitimizing the main institutions in the system that cause the environmental crisis and, simultaneously, it entails enabling a platform for participatory environmental and social politics which would strengthen and
mobilize environmental and social advocacy communities. Indeed, as Hopwood et al. conclude: ‘given the need for fundamental change, a deep connection between human life and the environment and a common linkage of power structures that exploit both people and planet…transformation is essential’\(^{47}\). Therefore, borrowing selected elements from eco-socialism and environmental justice, this thesis aims to promote a kind of sustainability that opposes capitalist (mainly neoliberal) appropriations of the ecological crisis, all the while calling for a more just distribution of social and environmental benefits and a greater participation of marginalized and poor communities in environmental and social decision making. In other words, this thesis calls for a sustainability that, on the one hand, is not driven by narrow economic interests and, on the other hand, incorporates principles of social and environmental justice. Given this conceptual framework, it becomes necessary to empirically examine the ends to which sustainability is being appropriated in practice. Do ‘actually existing sustainabilities’ reinforce the status quo or do they create a transformative form of sustainability? Perhaps they do both at the same time? It is this empirical examination that might assist in guiding decisions as to which sustainability initiatives should be critically discarded and which should be expanded.

What better way to perform such examination than through an analysis of urban space – for it is ‘the urban context where much of today’s socioecological problems are produced but where also many of the solutions to these problems may have to be found’\(^{48}\). Virtually no one should be surprised to learn that most international and national debates about sustainability had been systematically ineffectual in advancing the implementation of a meaningful – i.e. transformative – form of sustainability. In a recent article in the Huffington Post, Tom Zeller Jr. points toward this systematic failure when he writes: ‘what’s clear is that while nations have dickered, bickered, ducked and weaved over the last two decades, global emissions of greenhouse gasses have ticked steadily upward’\(^{49}\). Zeller’s remark joins the circle of other critical voices who believe that the ‘talk about sustainability…seems to keep us from the dramatic actions needed to actually sustain the natural processes that keep us alive in the long term’\(^{50}\). In this practical vacuum, it is cities around the world that are increasingly taking the lead in the practical implementation of sustainability principles. Major cities such as New York City, San Francisco, Stockholm, Melbourne and Bogota, along with smaller cities such as Austin, Portland, Freiburg, Copenhagen and Curitiba, have all adopted sustainability initiatives as part of their official urban plans. It is increasingly difficult to find a city that is not in favor of sustainability.
This rise of interest in sustainability in cities all across the world creates the opportunity to re-conceptualize the international and national debates about sustainability at the local and urban levels as well.

I begin this exploration from the top – that is, from the sphere of official urban politics. If, following John Bellamy Foster, the environmental problem is indeed in the end ‘primarily a problem of political economy’\textsuperscript{51}, then today’s urban political economy presents a real challenge to transformative forms of sustainability. Here I refer to the state of contemporary urban politics driven mostly by competition for global capital and economic development, which impedes the capacity to articulate between sustainability and progressive ends. Current top-down planning and design proposals – e.g. ‘smart growth’, ‘new urbanism’ and ‘transit-centered development’ – claim to cultivate urban sustainability yet many scholars, such as Roger Keil, are skeptical of the extent to which such proposals could ‘reach deeply enough to fundamentally redirect the destructive dynamics of today’s urbanism’\textsuperscript{52}. As the following chapter suggests, Keil’s skeptical outlook is all too often true. Under urban neoliberalism, sustainability is all too easily appropriated as a tool for economic, rather than environmental and human, development.

Notes

3 \textit{ibid}
5 Egon Becker and Thomas Jahn, as quoted in Kiel, \textit{Sustaining Modernity}, 44
6 Keil, \textit{Sustaining Modernity}, 45
7 ibid

Hopwood et al., Sustainable Development, 42


Gert Spaargaren and Arthur P.J Mol, as quoted in Sonnenfeld, Contradictions of Ecological Modernisation, 235


Terry L. Anderson and Donald R. Leal, Free Market Environmentalism (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 3

Foster et al., The Ecological Rift, 21

Matthews et al., as quoted in Foster et al., The Ecological Rift, 146

Foster et al., The Ecological Rift, 1

Foster et al., The Ecological Rift, 7


Hopwood et al., Sustainable Development, 43


Albert Weale, as quoted in Peter Christoff, “Ecological Modernization, Ecological Modernities”, Environmental Politics 5:3 (August 1996): 488

Gibbs, Prospects for an Environmental Economic Geography, 197

James G. Speth, as quoted in Foster et al., The Ecological Rift, 152

Foster et al., The Ecological Rift, 154

Albert Weale, as quoted in Christoff, Ecological Modernization, 484

Patrick Bond, as quoted in Dennis Soron, “Capitalism versus Nature: Eco-Socialist Approaches to the Climate Crisis”, in Constance Lever-Tracy ed., Routledge Handbook of Climate Change and Society (New York: Routledge, 2010), 91

Christoff, Ecological Modernization, 489-490

Naomi Klein, as quoted in Jason Mark, “Conversation: Naomi Klein”, Earth Island Journal 28:3 (September 2013): 46

Hopwood et al., Sustainable Development, 45

ibid

Soron, Capitalism versus Nature, 87

Foster et al., The Ecological Rift, 7

Foster et al., The Ecological Rift, 25

Karl Marx, as quoted in Foster et al., The Ecological Rift, 386
40 Soron, *Capitalism versus Nature*, 88
41 Soron, *Capitalism versus Nature*, 90
42 Ibid
46 Dobson, *Social Justice and Environmental Sustainability*, 91
47 Hopwood et al., *Sustainable Development*, 45
48 Kiel, *Sustaining Modernity*, 43
50 Kiel, *Sustaining Modernity*, 47
51 Foster et al., *The Ecological Rift*, 150
52 Kiel, *Sustaining Modernity*, 56
Chapter 2. Articulating Urban Neoliberalism and Sustainability

This chapter looks at regressive appropriations of sustainability in urban space. Sustainability, it will be argued, is often used as part of a strategy to intensify urban competition and economic growth, thereby dismissing necessary environmental and social transformations. As such, it is essential to recognize what characterizes these kinds of appropriations and how they are manifested in urban space. The chapter begins with the emergence of urban neoliberalism and entrepreneurialism since the 1980s, whereby urban governance increasingly prioritized private investments in urban space as a means of urban (re)development. It then explores how notions of urban sustainability are articulated with such entrepreneurial goals – chiefly adopting them as part of a strategy to create a more attractive image of city life for prospective investors and residents. Evidence to support this argument will be drawn particularly from the city of Vancouver, where burnishing a sustainable image has helped produce one of the least affordable cities in the world, ultimately showing how regressive appropriations of sustainability lead to undesirable and unjust social consequences.

Introduction to Neoliberalism and Urban Entrepreneurialism

The hill next to the house I grew up in overlooks the Israeli city of Tel Aviv in its entirety. The younger version of me used to climb up the hill and gaze at the city, waiting for it to become something bigger and better. I had a dream for Tel Aviv, a dream that one day this tangled and antiquated city would evolve to become an urban juggernaut, a city like other major cities in the modern world. I dreamed of high-rises occupying the skyline from north to south, of tourists bustling through its streets and gaping through their cameras, of vibrant art scenes and nightlife, of worldwide conventions and mega-events. I dreamed it would become the first city in Israel to erase and detach itself from any religious or conflictual pasts. I dreamed it would transcend any Israeli, Hebrew or
Mediterranean label and instead become a cosmopolitan center. I dreamed it would become a world city.

As I grew older this dream slowly became a reality. Every time I returned to that hill a new high-rise had been erected and a new crane signaled more to come. A walk along the beaches and boulevards was increasingly accompanied with hearing and seeing unfamiliar languages and styles. Young musicians, photographers, designers and actors moved from all across Israel and crowded the city with improvised studio spaces, galleries and music venues. It became known as a ‘non-stop city’, and for Tel Avivians such as myself, apart from being a great marketing slogan, this statement really meant something. We filled the beaches as the sun came out, we crowded the boulevards at noon, we sat at cafes at dinner time, we crowded the bars at night, and we partied at clubs till sunrise. Together with me, Tel Aviv matured and became the economic and cultural hub I dreamed it would be.

But we were not the only ones infatuated by this urban experience. Tel Aviv was increasingly being flooded with new flows of economic capital – young professionals from the thriving high-tech industry, affluent families looking for an authentic yet modern Mediterranean resort, national and international corporations looking for a talented workforce, and real-estate investors looking to capitalize on the rising market value. The landscape of the city was changing and it started catering to the incoming population with its more expensive tastes and standards. Boulevards were repaved and redesigned, residential glass towers were built on top of low-rise apartment buildings, holes-in-the-wall were replaced by chic cafes and restaurants, gritty venues were becoming sparkling halls, and bars were covered with leather and touch-screen menus.

In front of our eyes, Tel Aviv was turning into a city that was no longer interested in our lifestyles. Our pockets were not deep enough, our culture was not organized and predictable enough, and our looks were not clean enough. We, the children of Tel Aviv’s revival, found ourselves excluded from the party we had started. Increasing living costs forced us to relocate again and again. Real-estate speculators were following our moves, hunting for the next desirable neighborhood, and looking for our vibrant meeting spots only to evict us later on. It was a chase and we felt like instruments, like decoys, in our own displacement. We woke up from our dreams to find a city that was not ours any more. We wished it would stop, we wished the city would take a break and look at what it was
doing to us and at how it was pushing us farther and farther away. We occupied the streets, we protested in thousands, and we demanded attention.

Nonetheless, we forgot that we were partly to blame. We and our dreams of change pushed Tel Aviv toward a larger and more modern future. We happily enrolled ourselves as ‘never sleeping’ troops in the marketing of our city on the international stage. We romanticized the globalizing world with its diverse possibilities and invited it into our homes. We bought into a modern dream without ever considering its darker side, and when these ‘unpredictable’ consequences came we were struck by our own creations. This realization was not unique to Tel Aviv. What began in Tel Aviv in the 1990s similarly transformed other major cities around the Western world, and the consequences of this process were becoming too important to ignore. It seemed like cities, in their attempts to become bigger and better, became occupied with the narrow interests of a few rather than those of the greater public. Disenchanted young adults such as myself and my fellow Tel Avivians are now asking – what went wrong?

For many, the story begins with the global shift toward neoliberalism. The economic recession and oil crisis of 1973 led to the severe destabilization of capitalist economies. David Harvey points to difficulties such as ‘deindustrialization, widespread and seemingly ‘structural’ unemployment, [and] fiscal austerity at both the national and local level’\(^1\) as instigators of a political-economic change. The Fordist-Keynesian model, based on a centralized welfare-state, had lost its legitimacy in maintaining popular consent to the capitalist project, and for those seeking to restore the conditions of profitable accumulation an alternative had to be found. The shift toward this alternative was ‘coupled with a rising tide of neo-conservatism and much stronger appeal…to market rationality and privatization’\(^2\). Underwritten by the philosophical project of Hayek and Friedman – promoting ‘the restoration of a form of free-market thinking within the economic profession’\(^3\) – neoliberalism ‘was established as the dominant political and ideological form of capitalist globalization’\(^4\). By the early 1980s two of the largest capitalist nations – United States and Britain – were led by governments which explicitly adopted the privatized and market-driven rationale of the neoliberal regime.

Bold statements such as Thatcher’s ‘There is no such thing as society’, and Reagan’s ‘All great change in America begins at the dinner table’, symbolized a logic that promoted the transference of social, environmental and economic management from
centralized governments on to individual men and women or private entrepreneurs. Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell call this the era of ‘roll-back neoliberalism’ – an era that was characterized by political efforts ‘to dismantle the institutional foundations of the post-war settlement and to mobilize a range of policies intended to extend the reach of market discipline, competition and commodification’. Governments came to be ‘concerned with the de(con)struction of “anticompetitive” institutions like labor unions, social welfare programs, and interventionist arms of the governmental apparatus’.

In the United States, Reagan ‘construed all regulation (except of labor) as bad’, and therefore promoted policies that were centered on ‘an across the board drive to reduce the scope and content of federal regulation of industry, the environment, the workplace, health care, and the relationship between buyer and seller’. These policies included: scrapping regulations that were not cost-effective, reducing corporate taxes and the top tax rate for individuals, transferring public assets into the private domain, and the disempowerment of unionized labor through the promotion of de-industrialized and non-unionized labor activities (as in the finance and telecommunications sector). In Britain, despite a stronger and longer legacy of government welfare than in the US, Thatcher also succeeded in cultivating neoliberal change. This included the privatization of state enterprises (such as British Telecom, British Airways along with electricity, gas, water and transportation services), reducing union power ‘by opening up the UK to foreign competition and foreign investment’ (in the process also demolishing many traditional British industries along with their trade unions), and forcing a culture of entrepreneurialism, financial accountability and productivity on to institutions that were still under the purview of the welfare state (such as universities and health care centers). By the end of the 1980s, Reagan and Thatcher ‘took what had hitherto been minority political, ideological, and intellectual positions and made them mainstream’.

The neoliberalization process was not exclusive to national governments. National efforts both took cues from and served as the inspiration for the neoliberalization of cities. Harvey, for example, considers New York City during the 1970s to be one of the major experiments for neoliberal restructuring. Due to reduced federal aid, de-industrialization, rapid suburbanization, and the refusal of investment bankers to roll over the city’s increasing debt, New York City was pushed into technical bankruptcy in 1975. Teetering on the brink of bankruptcy after being denied a bail-out from the federal government, the
city was eventually bailed-out by its financial institutions. The latter seized the opportunity and ‘took over the management of the city budget’ for their own interests and implemented a regressive redistribution of income, wealth, and power. This coup d’état by the financial institutions against the government of New York City initially led to widespread austerity measures and the deterioration of the social and physical infrastructure of the city. Commenting on this deteriorated urban landscape, Luc Santé writes:

Avenue C [in the East Village] was a lunar landscape of vacant blocks and hollow tenements shells. Over there commerce – in food or clothing, say – was often conducted out of car trunks, but the most thriving industry was junk, and it alone made use of marginally viable specimens of the building stock. The charred stairwells, the gaping floorboards, the lack of lighting, the entryways consisting of holes torn in ground-floor walls – all served the psychological imperatives of the heroin trade.

However, investment bankers later realized that these blighted and deteriorated conditions were an ideal ‘opportunity to restructure [New York City] in ways that suited their agenda’. New York City was to become a financial command and control center where connections to global circuits of capital were made possible by directing urban politics and culture toward market liberalization. Harvey outlines this restructuring process:

This meant using public resources to build appropriate infrastructures for business (particularly in telecommunications) coupled with subsidies and tax incentives for capitalist enterprises. Corporate welfare substituted for people welfare. The city’s elite institutions were mobilized to sell the image of the city as a cultural centre and tourist destination (inventing the famous logo ‘I Love New York’). The ruling elites moved, often fractiously, to support the opening up of the cultural field to all manner of diverse cosmopolitan currents. The narcissistic exploration of self, sexuality, and identity became the leitmotif of bourgeois urban culture. Artistic freedom and artistic license, promoted by the city’s powerful cultural institutions, led, in effect, to the neoliberalization of culture…New York became the epicenter of postmodern cultural and intellectual experimentation.

Harvey’s description tells the story of how New York City was transformed into an ideal space for making business – where urban politics, for the most part, were concerned with economic development, the integrity of the city’s financial institutions, and the dictates of the global marketplace (as opposed to other political goals of a perhaps more redistributive intent – e.g. the needs and well-being of the urban population at large). As the financial
elite laid down the political infrastructure best for capitalist enterprises, the cultural institutions took charge of urban place promotion strategies to intensify the 'globalness' of the city and lure in new forms of economic activity. New York City – with its urban governance reforms, place promotion campaigns and transformations in the built environment – had therefore served as a prototype for the implementation of neoliberalism on national and international scales. The politics of Reagan and Thatcher in the 1980s ‘became merely the New York Scenario of the 1970s writ large’

Soon enough, other cities had begun to take cue from the 'successful' regeneration of New York City and responded to their own economic distress in similar ways. According to Harvey, during the 1980s a general consensus emerged ‘that positive benefits are to be had by cities taking an entrepreneurial stance to economic developments’. Seeing the fruits of the market liberalization strategy in New York, municipal governments began acting as entrepreneurs competing for private investments to spur their own economic development. To do so, urban officials tried to create an attractive business environment with which to lure investors. This included: subsidies, tax breaks, and cheap credit to new incoming enterprises; investments to attract labor power of the ‘right quality’ through place promotion campaigns that make the city appear as an innovative, exciting, creative, and safe place to live; investments in transport and communications infrastructure in order to minimize transaction times and costs; and, finally, investments to attract consumer dollars through consumer attractions and entertainment (e.g. convention and shopping centers, boardwalks, and exotic ethnic enclaves). ‘Urban governance’, Harvey says, ‘has thus became more oriented to the provision of a “good business climate” and to the construction of all sorts of lures to bring capital into town’ than it was attuned to the will and needs of, for instance, the urban electorate.

What began then as an externally engineered coup d’état (in the case of New York City) had become internalized as the norm in urban politics as urban officials enthusiastically engaged in economic and cultural transformations designed to promote competitiveness. The rise of neo-conservative mayors in major North American cities during the 1990s – e.g. Rudy Giuliani in New York City, Richard Riordan in Los Angeles, and Mel Lastman in Toronto – was expressive of this sea change in urban political economy. As more and more cities caught on to this trend, the assumption that all cities are, to some degree, entrepreneurial became common sense. Based upon my own
experience in Tel-Aviv, this was certainly true: the catchy slogans, the rising skyline, the upscaling of the promenades and boulevards – all were simply a part of the corporate welfare package urban officials offered to prospective corporations and investors to lure them into town. Contemporary urban politics (be it in Tel Aviv or New York) appeared to be so utterly infused with an ideology of economic development and market liberalization that for many the 'differences between cities in terms of politics and policy outcomes were matters of degree rather than substance'\textsuperscript{18}.

Vancouver was no exception. The city's bid to host the 1986 World Exposition (or Expo 86) is widely credited as a catalyst for the city's urban transformations that eventually put it on the international investment map. Leading up to Expo 86, Vancouver experienced a string of massive developments planned and financed by the local government: the inflatable roof of BC Place, the sails of Canada Place, the geodesic dome of Science World, and the elevated platforms of SkyTrain. All of these developments signified a desire on the part of the City to invest in the built environment as a means ‘to market Vancouver to the rest of the world and reviv[e] the city’s economic fortunes’\textsuperscript{19}. The success of Expo 86 and the ensuing growth in the international reputation of the city were followed by a self-consciously international strategy of urban regeneration aimed at making it easier for investors to maximize profit potential.

The most prominent example of this regeneration strategy is the development of Vancouver’s residential real-estate market. Riding the wave of Expo 86 success, a newly elected developer-turned-mayor, Gordon Campbell, transformed Vancouver into a Mecca for real-estate developers and investors. Derelict lands were sold to private developers to facilitate megaprojects throughout the downtown peninsula. Such was the case with the former Expo lands on the northern shore of False Creek, which were sold to the Hong Kong development firm Concord Pacific (a move that also marked ‘the globalization of Vancouver’s economy and of Asian inroads into the city’s commercial and residential property markets’\textsuperscript{20}). In addition, the adoption of new zoning regulations in the Central Area Plan (1991), combined with a reform in the permit process for new developments, promoted the rejuvenation of the downtown peninsula and allowed property owners to easily convert Vancouver’s urban space into a forest of market-rate condominium towers.

Changes to the city’s image and urban imaginary were quick to follow. What planners and politicians described as ‘livable residential complexes’ became a mechanism
for radical transformations in the built form of the city and the restructuring of its economic base away from traditional manufacturing toward property development. From an area historically characterized by industrial labor and resource exploitation, Vancouver – with its Cascadian mild temperatures, ocean and mountain views, outdoor activities, and lively, safe, and attractive street scene – was repositioned as one of the most livable cities in the world, turning a Vancouver condo into one of the hottest stocks on the market. Concord Pacific’s Yaletown is a prominent example of this transformation. The privately-financed construction of a master-planned mixed-use neighborhood transformed the once shoddy area into a desirable locale. A meticulous design plan ensured that 'low-rise buildings, public spaces, small parks and pedestrian-friendly streetscape and facades' were interspersed between tall slender towers to create a dense, clean, and modern neighborhood which ‘cleansed’ the area of its gritty industrial past. Traditional industry was only included as an aesthetic gesture: the restoration of industrial streetscapes characterized by brick warehouses (e.g. Hamilton and Mainland Streets) was made mainly for housing the young professionals of the thriving creative industries in spacey loft-style apartments and offices. For these planning and design principles, Yaletown was hailed as symbolic of the return of walkable cities, urban villages, neighborhood feel and buildings that connect to the street. It was the promotion of projects like these that successfully marketed Vancouver as an innovative, exciting, creative, and safe place to live or visit.

Yet, apart from creating a more livable and upscale image of Vancouver, the city’s dramatic transformations had also brought its share of economic and social problems. New developments and the promotion of livability attracted waves of gentrification that dramatically shifted the ratio of working-class and poor residents to professionals and the wealthy. By the turn of the century, Vancouver’s inner-city had turned into ‘an economic, social, political and ideological space dominated by the new middle class’. The local real-estate market was boosted to a degree where many Vancouverites found themselves unable to even rent a downtown condo, not to mention buying one. Exponential increases in housing prices for the last two decades have earned the city the dubious title as one of the least affordable cities in the world, where space has become reserved only for the few who could afford it.
Issues of affordability were also accompanied by problems of social segregation and exclusion. Commenting on the paradoxical nature of urban regeneration projects, geographer Loretta Lees notes how ‘gentrification is deeply ambivalent in its stance to urban life. Its attempts to foster genuine public culture in the street subvert that very goal, as efforts to secure urban space stifle its celebrated diversity and vitality’\textsuperscript{24}. In other words, underlying the attempts to make urban space safer for the middle-class is the drive to domesticate the vitality, diversity, freedom, and choice of the busiest city streets. This observation by Lees is extremely relevant in the context of Vancouver’s new developments, many of which have been accused of creating a sanitized urban landscape in which the pursuit of a formal and behavioral perfection overrode a concern for social equity and diversity. Indeed, as John Punter observes, ‘there are times when it [Yaletown] does resemble a high-density version of \textit{The Truman Show} with its pristine public realm, its exciting architectural backdrops, and its lightly populated stage-scenery feel’\textsuperscript{25}. Equally significant is the extremely privatized nature of these developments, whereby each complex is complemented by facilities such as private cinemas, bars, and entertainment rooms where residents can socialize in private. As Punter points out, these and similar strategies seem to cater to a middle-class desire ‘of being within the city but detached from its negative aspects’\textsuperscript{26}, or as Vancouver’s real-estate marketers like to put it – ‘in it, away from it’.

Throughout the past two decades, Vancouver has undergone a political, economic, and social transformation from a peripheral regional industrial center into a major cultural and economic hub. This was done mainly through entrepreneurial strategies that attracted private developers and real-estate marketers and helped them to easily modify urban space according to middle-class ideals and boost the city’s image to a whole new level. Yet, as most entrepreneurial strategies do, these interventions have also helped exacerbate urban inequality and lack of affordability, as less capable Vancouverites are forced to live under ever increasing housing costs and more exclusionary urban spaces. As such, Vancouver is a testament to the growing presence of entrepreneurialism in contemporary urban politics and its regressive effects on social justice in the city.
Urban Sustainability and the Competitive City

Around the same time cities shifted toward more entrepreneurial forms of governance, they also, paradoxically, began introducing sustainability initiatives. It was in 1992, at the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, that local governments were beginning to be perceived as key players in the promotion of sustainable development. Chapter 28 of Agenda 21 – a document prepared for the conference that lays out an action plan that addresses the environmental, social, and economic issues we face as a global community – specifically calls for each community to formulate its own local Agenda 21:

Each local authority should enter into a dialogue with its citizens, local organizations, and private enterprises and adopt ‘a local Agenda 21.’ Through consultation and consensus-building, local authorities would learn from citizens and from local, civic, community, business and industrial organizations and acquire the information needed for formulating the best strategies.27

Four years later in 1996, the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) prepared for Habitat II – the UN Conference on Human Settlement in Istanbul – The Local Agenda 21 Planning Guide. The guide offers local governments and communities a step-by-step planning framework for sustainable development at the local level. Realizing their central role, municipalities began embracing sustainability initiatives as part of their governing mandate. From only a handful of cities participating in a pilot project in the early 1990s, the urban movement toward advancing sustainability, according to ICLEI, has grown to more than 1,000 local governments worldwide – members ranging from small rural towns to bustling metropolises28. Ultimately, ‘sustainability has emerged as an important agenda in urban planning, with increasing international interest in redensification, urban compactness, smart growth, green suburbs, healthy and sustainable communities and new urbanism’29.

Vancouver is one of such local governments, and since the 2000s it has increasingly incorporated – albeit selectively – discourses and, to some extent, also policies on social inclusion and sustainability. One of the major catalysts for this was the city’s bid to host the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. City officials and politicians followed the agenda of making the most sustainable Olympic Games to date, thereby leaving a strong mark on the political and physical landscape of the city. In 2005 the city passed a
mandate that all civic buildings in Vancouver achieve LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) gold certification. The West building of the Vancouver Convention Center – with its ‘living’ roof, restored marine habitat, seawater heating and cooling system, and an extensive recycling program – became an icon of this mandate as it surpassed expectations and achieved a platinum designation. A year later, in 2006, the city hosted the United Nations World Urban Forum, where a special emphasis was put on the importance of cities as vehicles for social inclusion, good governance, and sustainability. In 2007, the city introduced its EcoDensity plan, which aimed at implementing principles of urban compactness and social cohesion, while at the same time reducing the city’s ecological footprint. This also meant increased density in areas beyond downtown such as the South East False Creek lands. The year 2009 marked the beginning of the Greenest City 2020 initiative, boasting the vision of ‘building a strong local economy, vibrant and inclusive neighborhoods, and an internationally recognized city that meets the needs of generations to come’\textsuperscript{30}. In short, Vancouver was taking practical steps toward putting the city on the path to sustainability.

In the context of this thesis, the implementation of such initiatives requires critical examination as to whether the politics and practices of urban sustainability offer real alternatives to those of neoliberal urbanism. In some instances, as Andrew Jonas and Aidan While suggest, there is enough evidence to conclude that ‘many so-called entrepreneurial cities are in fact engaged in various environmental and social improvements…designed to make urban spaces more habitable for all residents (including non-human) rather than competitive for the benefit of a few’\textsuperscript{31}. In Vancouver, for example, Wendy Mendes has shown how a broad coalition of progressive interests was assembled with the aim of creating a more just and sustainable urban food system\textsuperscript{32}. This led to a municipal strategy that was constructed around values of social and environmental sustainability rather than a strict and narrow economic perspective. Interventions such as these signify the possibility of a broader, deeper and more transformative form of sustainability politics which seeks a more just distribution of social and environmental benefits. Perhaps there could be more to urban politics than the narrow economic reading of urban entrepreneurialism as it aims to socially benefit the urban populace as a whole. Here, the role of entrepreneurialism in governing the city may be overstated, ignoring the possibility that ‘urban politics is as much about sustainability as it is about competition’\textsuperscript{33}. 
However, more critical readings of urban sustainability openly question the extent to which sustainability initiatives actually challenge contemporary conditions of urban neoliberalism. Processes that link economic and environmental objectives, or, in other words, marry entrepreneurialism with sustainability, are regarded as producing new patterns of inter-urban competition. For example, the adoption of new green infrastructure such as green transportation may draw highly mobile capital and residents from other places based on concerns about the impacts of ecological change. Similarly, local regulation and conditions such as selective development incentives or training programs may draw firms and individuals providing green or low carbon products or services. The acceleration of inter-urban competition is also evident in what Jonas et al. recognize as representational strategies around ‘self-congratulatory low-carbon boosterism’\(^{34}\). Low-carbon lifestyle promotion, new branding campaigns, international trade missions, and green events and conference facilities are examples of strategies to attract particular residents and investment. These practices evoke the urban boosterism identified by Harvey during the 1980s, while incorporating the low-carbon and environmental policy dimension characteristic of the new sustainable politics of urban development.

Through this viewpoint ‘it appears that urban managers are being steered toward at best a rather selective vision of urban sustainability in which “light-green” policies aimed at making cities more livable can substitute for more radical actions on the environment that could by implication threaten the competitive approach to urban economic growth’\(^ {35}\). As the imperatives of economic growth and competition remain central, urban politics produces mainstreamed or normalized versions of urban sustainability. What we are left with is a form of sustainability that does not offer any alternatives to the neoliberal model and thus loses any transformative potential. Instead of mobilizing for social and environmental change, urban sustainability becomes conflated with concerns for livability and competitiveness, leaving issues of social and environmental justice aside. As a consequence, critics often find that urban sustainability initiatives involve regressive appropriations of the term, leaving an unjust and largely unsustainable status quo untouched.

The City of Vancouver’s Greenest City Action Plan (GCAP) and its preliminary reports is indicative of this tension between the two readings. On the one hand, the plan incorporates elements of social and environmental justice. The plan was devised through
an extensive process of community consultation, engaging around 45,000 people in generating ideas for the strategy. It includes goals designed to make Vancouver more habitable for all residents (including non-human) such as reducing everyone’s ecological footprint by one third, making all new housing zero carbon, and planting 150,000 trees. The local food section of the plan explicitly identifies the gaps in access to fresh produce and aims to ensure ‘that Vancouver’s neighborhoods have equal access to healthy, local food’ through an increase of 54% in local ‘food assets’ (e.g. community gardens, urban farms, and farmers markets), specifically among low-income and culturally diverse populations. All these make a strong case for considering the GCAP as a progressive policy anchored in concerns for social justice and equality. On the other hand, one can also recognize an ‘economistic and entrepreneurial ethos in the project’s discourse and proposal’. According to Michael Soron, who dedicated his Masters thesis to an in-depth analysis of Vancouver’s GCAP, there is ample evidence to suggest that the plan also manifests a persistent concern with competitiveness and economic growth.

On an aesthetic level, the GCAP’s visual language speaks of its role in advancing Vancouver’s livability brand and the valorization of its urban space. Sustainability is communicated through the use of spectacular images of some of Vancouver’s flagship developments such as the Vancouver Convention Centre and projects on the South East False Creek lands. The emphasis in these images is not on the people occupying these developments, but rather on the contours of sustainable architecture and design and its connection to pristine natural landscapes. Like architectural models, these images present monuments of sustainability devoid of human activity, where empty and sterile street scenes substitute for more meaningful forms of public and collective participation. Here, the GCAP articulates sustainability with a developer-friendly version of Vancouver through representing sustainability as an aesthetic experience – one which tends to be focused more on the qualities of the physical environment rather than on the rights of urban dwellers. Suggesting that sustainability can be achieved merely through good urban design and changes to the fabric of urban areas marginalizes more structural forms of transformation. In this sense, sustainability is easily attached to spectacular and choreographed images of ‘public’ life consisting of totally predictable and manageable ‘public’ spaces created by private developers. This vision signals that the greenest city is no place for transformation or radical dissent, it is rather a place for consensus, contentment, and passivity – the hotbeds of status quo.
The promotional language of Vancouver’s real-estate market today serves as evidence to this aesthetic appropriation. The neighborhood complex – ‘The Village on False Creek’ (hereafter the Village) – located on the South East False Creek lands is a case in point. Once a shipyard and industrial wasteland, the Village is now ‘a hub for outdoor enthusiasts of cycling, strolling, and rolling variety, as well as those who prefer to sit on a sunny patio with an ice-cold beer’⁹⁸. This transformation was enabled through the implementation of sustainable design principles on a neighborhood scale: energy efficient buildings with close to net-zero carbon emissions, over six acres of green space, playgrounds and parks, a neighborhood utility system which provides local residents space heating and hot water by using sewage heat recovery, a local community center serving an engaging and dynamic ‘village’ community, and supermarkets and restaurants offering a wide selection of gourmet, organic, and local foods. In many respects, these characteristics are exemplary of a more sustainable approach to urban space. But they have also become an inseparable part of the sales pitch. For marketers such as Bob Rennie, Vancouver’s foremost condominium promoter and the man in charge of the Village’s marketing plan, sustainability features were a valuable part of the marketing strategy. ‘Green’, Rennie argued, ‘is going to sell condos…it is our new lemon fresh’⁹⁹. Sustainability features were reconfigured as luxurious, exclusive amenities that helped magnify the desirability of the development, where ordered, green streets and upscale organic retail spaces cater to the aesthetic tastes and consumption practices of prospective affluent residents.

Beyond its visual language, the GCAP’s entrepreneurial ethos is also expressed through the promotion of competition as a normative value and practice. The title itself, engaging in a self-conceived competition to become the ‘greenest city in the world’, is evidence of this discursive strategy. The initial document produced by the Greenest City Action Team (GCAT) foregrounds the competitive foundations of capitalist urban space: ‘as our international neighbors grow more innovative, our prosperity relies on our ability to attract and retain creative people and innovative businesses that energize our economy’⁴⁰. Throughout, the documents frequently refer to the overall objective as a challenge, a competition, and a race, implying the possibility and desirability of victory – not over the ecological crisis, but rather over other cities. Being the ‘greenest city’ will position Vancouver as ‘one of the best places in the world in which to live in’⁴¹, capable of attracting highly mobile capital and residents at the expense of other places.
Throughout the GCAP, a general desire for economic growth is evident, primarily through actions that propose new and experimental combinations of private and public efforts to attract and generate economic opportunities, create jobs, and reduce costs for the city, residents, and local firms. The central role given to business highlights the dominance of private enterprise and ownership, commercial exchange, and profits in advancing this growth agenda. The GCAP’s chapter about green economy is most directly related to this market-led economic orientation. The green economy goal is ‘to secure Vancouver’s international reputation as a mecca of green enterprise’\textsuperscript{42}. In particular, the GCAP strongly and repeatedly encourages the participation of local firms in this economy noting that ‘there’s a strong business case for going green’\textsuperscript{43}. Highlighting the cost-effectiveness of green production techniques and the economic opportunities that such a shift enables, Vancouver companies are urged to ‘maximize their efforts to green their operations as well as grow jobs’\textsuperscript{44}. Moreover, the strategic use of prices and innovative finance is invoked throughout, suggesting a plan that is predicated upon the naturalization of market principles. The plan proposes ‘green incentives and financing mechanisms’\textsuperscript{45} with attention to strategically aligning these incentives with programs offered by other levels of government. The crucial role of involving nongovernmental resources in producing local change further points to the adoption of neoliberal market principles as the blueprint for transformation.

The GCAP also manifests the growing centrality of sustainability in discourses and strategies around place promotion. Indeed, the image of comparatively favorable urban conditions for green enterprise and investment are emphasized throughout the Greenest City documents. These include language and initiatives that promote local ‘lifestyles’ with lower environmental impact and improved health and recreational opportunities, while also highlighting Vancouver’s natural environment. The GCAP explains the need for this approach by claiming that ‘strategies for the global context are… essential, to attract the best and the brightest to Vancouver and build strong export markets’\textsuperscript{46}. The \textit{Bright Green Future} report explained the place promotion element of the Greenest City initiative as a ‘savvy economic strategy’ that will help attract ‘highly mobile investment dollars, entrepreneurs, and talented workers’\textsuperscript{47}. Similarly, Vancouver is repeatedly represented as a prime destination for entrepreneurship, a ‘go to’ place for aspiring green entrepreneurs\textsuperscript{48}. Many of the GCAP’s recommendations are identified as playing part in
this promotional strategy. As an example, the green transportation section promotes their actions as follows:

Sustainable transportation choices support a strong economy by enabling the exchange of goods, services, and ideas throughout the city. This positions Vancouver as a place where the world wants to live, work and do business, and supports our role as a Pacific gateway. It also increases our reputation as a tourism destination, creating jobs, and opportunities for residents.49

This is similarly evident in the green economy section, where proposed Green Enterprise Zones are labelled ‘the greenest place to work’ in the world50. In this way, the GCAP is a clear place-promotion strategy, reacting to inter-urban pressures and strategically using environmental policies to achieve competitive advantages. It is a carefully planned promotional work, which targets a selective audience of highly skilled, affluent workers and businesses.

In conclusion, the GCAP’s underlying ethos emphasizes public spectacle, entrepreneurial urbanism, competition, public-private partnership, and economic growth. It is emblematic of the ways in which sustainability is incorporated in contemporary urban politics. Coupled with increasing competition and market-based economic growth, sustainability, albeit offering social and environmental improvements, quickly becomes articulated as part of a wider political and economic strategy to make urban space more attractive for investment and development dollars. In other words, the entrepreneurial ethos of urban politics leads to a selective, neoliberal framing of sustainability, where it is incorporated into the existing desire to increase the potential for profitable development of urban space.

Ultimately, the conditions of green economic growth that projects such as the GCAP propose, too easily ignore the fundamental contradiction between growth and scarcity. They conveniently naturalize the neoliberal ethos of market liberalization and an economy centered on growth. However, as Tim Jackson notes, the ‘simplistic assumptions that capitalism’s propensity for efficiency will allow us to stabilize the climate or protect against resource scarcity are nothing short of delusional’51. Suggesting that change will be driven through adopting the principles that are also the key causes of the ecological crisis would seem to constitute a rather significant leap of faith. Without more
structural forms of contestation, to both the concept of growth and the market, reductions in material use and pollution will be only relative, as opposed to absolute.

Moreover, when sustainability is framed as a way to valorize urban space and intensify competition it ultimately glosses over the social consequences of this strategy, chiefly the deepening of urban inequality and lack of affordability. In Vancouver, this is manifested through what Noah Quastel describes as ecological gentrification (or eco-gentrification) – a process in which ‘new developments in Vancouver increasingly contribute to gentrification using languages of sustainability and green consumption’\textsuperscript{52}. Similar to the Village, promoters of future projects such as ‘Telus Garden’ on Georgia and Richards streets or ‘MC²’ on Marine and Cambie streets boast about their energy efficient buildings, organically designed streetscapes, boutique-style retail shops, and other sustainable amenities such as green roofs and garden plots as a way to justify high price tags. Consequently, condos in the Village, for example, are sold starting from $500,000 for a one bedroom apartment. As such, the appropriation of sustainability by real-estate promoters glosses over larger social concerns of affordability and unequal access to green amenities and serve as a clear manifestation of the emerging correlation between urban sustainability and neoliberal gentrification. These versions of sustainability, in other words, are largely devoid of concerns about social and environmental justice, and are instead being used, strategically, to sustain economic growth within Vancouver’s real-estate market. As the new centerpiece in efforts to bring more affluent condo buyers and consumers into the city center, sustainability has been transformed into empty rhetoric which has the principal effect of further inflating housing and living costs and deepening Vancouver’s affordability crisis. As such, the appropriation and commodification of sustainability by Vancouver’s political and economic elites has largely nullified the socially progressive potential underlying urban sustainability – eventually limiting, rather than expanding, opportunities for lower-class residents to live, work, and play in the sustainable city.

**Conclusion**

Planning, architecture, and public spectacle have been the main tools for promoting sustainability in Vancouver. From sustainability-themed-mega events such as the 2010 Olympics, through sustainable mega-structures such as the Vancouver
Convention Center, to sustainable neighborhoods such as the Village, the city’s planners, architects, and real-estate promoters all joined hands in order to reinvent the city as a haven of sustainability. While such interventions have incorporated principles of urban sustainability, they have also helped to intensify existing tendencies of gentrification, redevelopment, inequality, and lack of affordability. In effect displacing and excluding the socially marginalized and the poor from areas of the city undergoing so-called environmental improvements. That is the inevitable result when sustainability and competitiveness converge: one gets a form of sustainability that is deployed and reinterpreted in ways that challenge the legitimacy of social issues, and promote market-driven development agendas.

But thus far we have only focused on one side of the issue – that is, how economic and political elites have colonized the idea of sustainability and used it as a centerpiece in constructing a new regime of capital accumulation. I have presented an image of Vancouver as the site of political reaction in which sustainability is marshaled in favor of an entrepreneurial and socially regressive urban policy. However, there is also evidence that the increasing emphasis upon sustainability can open ‘up possibilities for an urban-scaled politics constructed around a stronger and more socially just “sustainability fix”. Here we find a more complex relationship between the sustainable city and the entrepreneurial city. Instead of the former simply being subordinated to the latter, the sustainable city preserves an autonomy from (and even a resistance to) its entrepreneurial counterpart. This vision of sustainability offers genuine contestation to the developer-friendly versions which have emerged out of urban entrepreneurialism.

In the next chapter, I will explore these alternative forms of sustainability politics in more detail. However, unlike approaches which focus upon the level of planning and policy, my emphasis will be on the sphere of everyday life as a space in which the sustainable city can be imagined, designed and implemented. Appropriations of sustainability do not simply occur at city hall or in the boardrooms of developers; they also occur in the places where all of us live, work and play. Street corners, back alleys, public parks, and vacant lots: more than simply the backdrop of our everyday lives, these are the spaces in which transformative forms of sustainability are cultivated, nurtured and protected. Such efforts are not the product of planners or politicians, but everyday people who take charge of urban spaces in order to build a city that is more socially and
environmentally just. Our next stop? Urban community gardens and the people who make them possible.

Notes

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12 Luc Santé, as quoted in Sharon Zukin, Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 199
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17 Harvey, From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism, 11
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24 Loretta Lees, as quoted in Punter, The Vancouver Achievement, 287
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29 Jonas and While, *Greening the Entrepreneurial City?*, 128


31 Jonas and While, *Greening the Entrepreneurial City?*, 127

32 Wendy Mendes, “Creating a Just and Sustainable Food System in the City of Vancouver: The Role of Governance, Partnerships and Policy-Making” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Simon Fraser University, 2006)

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35 Jonas and While, *Greening the Entrepreneurial City?*, 130


37 Michael B. Soron, “The Urban Politics of Vancouver’s ‘Greenest City’ Agenda” (M.A. Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2012)


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47 City of Vancouver, *Vancouver 2020: A Bright Green Future* (Vancouver: City of Vancouver, 2009), 11

48 City of Vancouver, *A Bright Green Future*, 22

49 City of Vancouver, *Greenest City Action Plan*, 58

50 City of Vancouver, *Greenest City Action Plan*, 5


52 Quastel, *Political Ecologies of Gentrification*, 694

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Chapter 3. Community Gardens and the Potential of Everyday Life

This chapter looks at the progressive appropriations of sustainability through the practice of community gardening. Community gardens, it will be argued, are spaces that help resist and transform neoliberal politics and offer instead a collective and socially just realization of sustainability and urban space. As such, they ultimately help imbue the concept of sustainability with more socially and environmentally just goals. The chapter begins with the emergence of the contemporary community garden movement. Then, articulating concrete examples from New York City and Los Angeles with theoretical concepts of everyday life, it lays out the forms of cultural and social resistance produced by these garden movements. Finally, focusing on the community garden movement in Vancouver, it shows how such forms of resistance are articulated with the notion of sustainability – ultimately producing a social justice perspective on environmental issues.

Sprouting Gardens: The Emergence of the Contemporary Community Garden Movement

A peculiar thing was happening in the bankrupt and neglected city of New York in 1973. Liz Christy – a young oil painter living in the Lower East Side – ‘noticed tomato plants growing in the mounds of trash that littered derelict lots in her neighborhood’\(^1\). The plants had clearly sprouted coincidentally from fruit in the discarded rubbish, but Liz saw this coincidence as an inspiration for something bigger. Together with like-minded friends, Liz began throwing ‘seed-bombs’ over the fences of vacant lots, planting seeds in the center meridians of streets, and putting flower boxes on the window ledges of abandoned buildings\(^2\). New York City and its abandoned inner-city neighborhoods became a playground for young environmental activists looking to exploit any opportunity the city had in order to transform their neighborhoods and germinate their green agenda.

As the group’s small efforts flourished, so did their ambitions. Their playful subversions turned more audacious in time. On the northeast corner of Bowery and
Houston streets, in what was yet another debris-filled vacant lot, the group (by now called Green Guerillas) jointly decided to create a garden. Ignoring any questions of legal ownership the Green Guerillas prepared the ground for what would become the first community garden in New York City. Over the course of one year, ‘out went the old fridges, bed frames, burnt-out cars and rubble, and in came fresh topsoil, plants, donations from nurseries and horse manure begged from the local police station’³.

Liz Christy Garden is widely regarded as the beginning of the contemporary community garden movement in the United States. What distinguished this movement from its predecessors was a strong sense of local autonomy as well as an admirable resilience in the face of constant attempts to erase it from the urban landscape. Throughout the twentieth century, community gardens were mostly a state-led strategy introduced to alleviate austerity during periods of social and economic distress. Relief Gardens during the 1930s economic depression and Victory Gardens during World War II were two examples of this trend as they both were intended to provide food and purpose for American people in times of trouble. However, once the crisis was over, federal and civil interest waned, and community gardens largely disappeared from urban memory and landscape. In her analysis of community gardens in Columbus, Ohio, Sarah Moore associates this pattern with ‘the city’s colonization of extant practices as “relief measures” result[ing] in the loss of local autonomy and control in garden spaces’⁴. Like many other municipalities in the US, Columbus characterized gardening as a practice that relieves social and/or economic stress, thereby justifying its erasure in times of prosperity. As soon as the city had recuperated from the crisis, garden spaces made way for more legitimate forms of urban development. Gardening space was viewed as a stop-gap measure, a temporary pause in the march toward a more modern metropolis.

Contemporary community gardens reflect a very different trend. What Liz, her friends, and followers introduced was a re-conceptualization of how gardens evolve and what role they serve in urban space. No longer were gardens created and managed by local state departments as part of a ‘relief package’, but rather by local residents seeking autonomy over their immediate environment. No longer were gardens characterized as a form of underdevelopment, but rather as an alternative – more environmentally and socially just – form of urban development. These shifts enabled the legitimization and
continued growth of community gardens in urban spaces – a process that had broader implications on the relationship between urban politics and sustainability.

More than simply growing food, community gardeners are cultivating an alternative model of urban sustainability. According to Eizenberg, the creation of this alternative can be understood on two different levels. First, such gardens are ‘the practices of subaltern class actors [that] struggle over the appropriation of material and symbolic goods. That is, a collective action aimed at receiving a greater share of goods without challenging the social mechanisms and institutions that produce inequality’\(^5\). Second, they represent ‘a collective action that challenges the hegemonic social order and follows instead an alternative logic of justice...It is an alternative to the logic of organization and planning of space, to the distribution of control over it, and to its meaning and experience’\(^6\). We will explore both levels through the stories of community gardeners and their gardens in various urban contexts, looking at case studies from New York City, Los Angeles, and Vancouver.

**Carriers of Culture: Community Gardens and the Culture of Marginalized Citizens**

In the 1970s and 1980s, Liz’s neighborhood – the Lower East Side (or Loisaida in its Latino abbreviation) – was home to a large and mostly poor Puerto Rican community. Their desire and attachment to community gardens arose out of the opportunity to reconnect with their cultural heritage as opposed to the more radical, environmental agenda of groups such as the Green Guerillas. They transformed the space of the garden into a community gathering place. Gardeners in Loisaida used the gardens to revive Puerto Rican culture by reproducing the aesthetic and social characteristics of traditional rural Puerto Rican homes. Puerto Rican flags were prominently displayed, small shacks – also known as ‘casitas’ – were constructed in order ‘to store food and musical equipment for cultural celebrations’\(^7\), and Puerto Rican men would gather during the evenings to ‘drink beer, play dominos, socialize, and sometimes even sleep’\(^8\). As such, community gardens in Loisaida were generally perceived as ‘important mostly for community development and as a space for social and cultural gatherings over preservation of open space and civic agriculture’\(^9\). They were elaborate clubhouses for community development more so than serving as ‘proper’ gardens. And they served primarily as a
backdrop to the social and cultural gatherings that turned the wasted spaces of New York City into Puerto Rican havens.

In a very similar way, community gardens offer citizens the ability to manifest their culture through the very practice of gardening. In the neighborhood of South Central Los Angeles, a 14-acre farm cultivated by 360 Latino families produced ‘a veritable Mesoamerican agroecological landscape in the inner city’\textsuperscript{10}. Through the cultivation of vegetables such as guavas and guajes, plants such as cactuses, and herbs such as cilantro, the gardeners at ‘South Central Farm’ transformed a blighted piece of land in an impoverished neighborhood into a site resurrecting Latino culture and cuisine. The farm served as a vehicle for cultural transmission and reproduction as traditional agricultural knowledge and techniques were passed from generation to generation. As one gardener explained in a documentary film made about the farm, ‘The Garden’,

My parents raised us in a very poor environment and I always say that they had left me a million in inheritance. Everyone thinks I am talking about money, but the actual inheritance that my parents left me is working the land.\textsuperscript{11}

Community gardens therefore grant citizens the opportunity to practice traditional gardening techniques and cultivate plants as a way to reflect their cultural backgrounds and culinary preferences. For Latino immigrants in American cities, they help transplant landscape meaning from their “home” countries into their contemporary urban landscape.

As these examples suggest, community gardens are often much more than simply a place for the preservation of open space and civic agriculture. In Loisaida and South Central they served as a home away from home. They allow gardeners to inscribe their own stories into urban space and introduce the city to experiences from another time and another place. They are where marginalized citizens take control over their immediate environments and turn them into something more familiar and secure. It is these functions that ultimately turn community gardens into spaces that reflect alternative and oppositional logics to an otherwise dominant neo-liberal order.

Michel de Certeau’s conception of ‘tactics’ provides a useful means of theorizing the logic of resistance at play in many community gardens. In his analysis of everyday life - \textit{The Practice of Everyday Life} - de Certeau conceptualizes the sphere of everyday life
as double-sided: on the one hand, it is where mechanisms of discipline are reproduced, but on the other hand, it is also where society manipulates these very same mechanisms and resists being reduced to their disciplining power. The everyday, then, is a dynamic structure composed of both a disciplinary terrain that is imposed upon it and a multitude of miniscule and quotidian actions – de Certeau’s ‘tactics’ – that play on and with that terrain. They are the practices that manage to evade the restrictions of a given order and express alternative ways of appropriating that same order. Tactics ‘accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing of possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment. [They] vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the propriety power.’ In other words, tactics poach within the given order and create surprises in it through systematically taking advantage of the opportunities that the order itself provides. All the loose ends, the hidden corners, and the tiny cracks of a system are the places where the popular procedures of the everyday are able to resist the order they operate in.

This definition of tactics well describes the spaces of ethnic community gardens. The gardens offer a form of everyday resistance to the systematic disinvestment of urban spaces occupied by marginalized communities (such as the Lower East Side and South Central). Working within spaces of blight and neglect for the benefit of the local community, community gardeners opportunistically turn disadvantage into advantage. They use the unjust and uneven development of urban space in order to produce their own environments in accord with their own culture, history, desire, and vision. Casitas and guajes are much more than simply cultural symbols: they are the instruments through which the poor and the marginalized appropriate an order – one that consistently excludes and neglects them – in ways which undermine it. They use an order that is disempowering in order to produce their own empowerment.

Even more important, however, is how the spontaneous appropriations of space made by community gardeners hold the potential for producing alternative representations of urban space. The process through which a community cooperates and communicates to produce a collective resource in an everyday setting follows a significantly different path than the one drawn by the scientific gaze of planners, engineers, and urbanists. Here, urban space is a site for spontaneous learning and the sharing of skills and knowledge, which stands in stark contradiction to neoliberal representations that
fetishize the exchange-value of space. The gardens enable the re-imagination of urban space in ways that transcend and transgress its existence as commodity. They present an alternative logic to the reduction of urban space to the logic of capital accumulation. They offer ways in which urban space can exist as a shared resource which benefits and strengthens the local community.

These functions highlight the subversive potential of community gardening as an everyday practice. First, the gardens produce a landscape that is unique to the local community and emerges from the everyday context of their lives. As such they offer disadvantaged citizens a space of their own in a city that repeatedly excludes such citizens from its plans. Second, community gardens produce alternative representations of urban space in which the needs, visions, and desires of the local community trump the logic of economic growth and capital accumulation. Community gardeners confront an urban order that works against them and carve out spaces of autonomy within their immediate environment. Such appropriations allow us to re-imagine urban space as a site for environmental, social, and cultural development. By making do with what the city has to offer them, the gardeners in neighborhoods such as Loisaida and South Central are forcing the neoliberal city to ‘function in another register’13.

But framing community gardening as a ‘soft’ form of everyday resistance suggests that these subversions never fundamentally challenge the order of power. And this disregards the potential of this practice to directly challenge the social mechanisms and institutions that produce inequality in the first place. Indeed, critics of de Certeau’s position, such as John Frow and Meaghan Morris, are quick to dismiss such tactics as ‘defeatist’, pointing out that ‘a meaningful politics of cultural change can hardly be based on so weak a foundation as the glancing blows de Certeau catalogued as ‘tactics’”14. My own position, however, is that such a dismissal is overhasty, especially in the context of community gardening. While community gardens offer local, small-scale forms of empowerment, they also allow for an alternative experience of everyday life. The ‘glancing blows’ of community gardeners support the creation of new perceptions of urban space, which in turn serve as inspirations for more direct forms of political opposition. Struggles to preserve community garden spaces in cities such as New York and Los Angeles serve as strong evidence to this position.
Realizing Latent Potential: The Role of Community Gardens in Uncovering and Transforming the Political-Economy of the City

In addition to being spaces of cultural subversion, community gardens are also where stronger, more political, forms of resistance are cultivated. For the most part, this resistance emerges in response to state and corporate efforts to remove garden spaces in favor of more economically lucrative uses. In such instances, community gardens become sites of struggle for political recognition and a more equal and just distribution of urban resources. Beyond serving simply as cultural havens, community gardens can also serve to incubate more radical visions for the social and environmental transformation of urban space.

As wealthier citizens entered New York City’s Lower East Side in the 1990s, opportunities for investment and redevelopment of the area once again arose. The influx of more affluent populations had shifted the neighborhood’s appeal, positioning it as a space for economic growth. Urban renewal and redevelopment projects were framed as meeting the needs and desires of newcomers. This vision also fit well with the goals of the newly elected mayor – Rudolph Giuliani – who sought to leave behind the image of a city in decline and, instead, ‘clean up the city through beautification projects, gentrification, and economic development’\(^\text{15}\). The local government, which until then had not invested many resources in the neighborhood, began to actively intervene in its spatial and social organization in order to reclaim unused and underdeveloped lands and hand them over to private developers.

In this context, community gardens were a hindrance. The main characteristics of community gardens – impromptu spaces where communities collectively produce their own use and meaning of space – were not hospitable to an administration whose principal intent was to free urban space for market-based developments. If real-estate appraisals of space provided monetary market-rate valuation, the economic benefits of community gardens were much more difficult to measure: quantifying values such as community empowerment and a sense of place is not easily done. Accordingly, the community gardens of the Lower East Side were regarded as incommensurable with (capitalist) economic development. They were marked as one of the many things that had to be eliminated if the neighborhood was to be properly developed.
And so the attack against community gardens began, as Giuliani moved to sell off all city-owned lots which were occupied by community gardens to private developers and investors. Social agencies and public policy were quickly subordinated to this goal. As Sharon Zukin notes:

Soon after taking office Mayor Giuliani directed the Department of General Services (DGS) to make an inventory of the lots. All requests to create new gardens were denied. As Koch had tried to do in the mid-1980s, Giuliani began to transfer management of the community gardens from the Parks Department to other city agencies, especially HPD…Giuliani [then] moved toward auctioning off hundreds of lots occupied by community gardens to the highest bidder, without informing the bidders about the gardens or informing the gardeners about the impending sales. Neither did the mayor consult with local community boards, which was legally required…In 1996 Giuliani gave DGS five years to sell off all the vacant lots in its inventory.16

Such interventions were reflective of urban governance geared to the marketization of urban space. Giuliani’s priority was the transformation of ‘underdeveloped’ spaces into spaces suitable for economic development and the maximization of private profits. The loss of community gardens was justified based on the economic gains that market-rate housing developments would generate. Local residents who dared to oppose the initiative and preserve the gardens were accused by Giuliani of being stuck in the era of communism: “this is a free-market economy”, the mayor said. “Welcome to the era after communism.” Community gardens were antithetical to Giuliani’s urban development plans. They were an impediment to the economic rejuvenation of the city, and that justified their removal. Between 1984 and 2000 ninety community gardens were destroyed: most were bulldozed and turned over to developers during the Giuliani years.

Similar attitudes were evident in the case of the South Central Farm in Los Angeles. In 2003, the city sold the farm’s land to a private developer who planned the construction of a distribution center on the site. As in New York, the social and cultural benefits of the farm were ignored in order to clear the way for private investments in urban space. In this case, city officials provided favorable treatment to the developer, including selling the property at below-market value and behind closed doors, without required public notice and participation. Just as in New York City, local community members and their self-organized cultural landscapes were discounted by a municipality that prioritized privately-financed developments.
In both cases, the emergence of market-driven politics signaled the exclusion of community gardens from urban development plans. City officials framed community gardens as temporary relief measures, which enabled the dismissal and devaluation of the gardens’ importance as soon as investment interest returned. Framing the gardens as playful and opportunistic – i.e. tactical – increased their vulnerability to neoliberal attacks. In light of such threats, however, community gardeners worked to change this perception. Instead of accepting the characterization of their spaces as merely temporary, they sought to characterize their gardens as a legitimate component of their own urban development plan. They fought to save the community gardens and prioritize their own spaces over market-based developments, thereby resisting the neoliberalization of urban space.

Another theoretical account of everyday life is helpful in making sense of this struggle. It proposes a much more critical role for the sphere of everyday life. In his seminal work, the *Critique of Everyday Life*, Henri Lefebvre offers a dialectical account of everyday life which both recognizes the alienation present within it, as well as the utopian fragments which it also contains. For Lefebvre, alienation is a consequence of the thorough penetration of capitalism and commodification into the details of everyday life. The commodified structures or forms of everyday life work to perpetuate a false consciousness that suspends the realization of human potentiality. These forms are grounded upon the parcelization of social praxis and the shredding of participatory contexts:

In the realm of work, it is passivity, the unavoidable acceptance of decisions made elsewhere; in the realm of private life, there are the many forces which manufacture the consumer through the manufacture of objects; in the realm of leisure, it is the transformation of the “world” into images and spectacles. In short, everywhere one finds passivity, non-participation.18

The critique of everyday life is therefore understood as a critique of the alienation and inauthenticity inherent in a culture of consumption. But Lefebvre also recognizes that these alienating forms contain within them real, if unconscious and fragmented, desires to resist and transcend ideological regimes – desires that work to ‘awaken us from the dream of commodification’19. As Michael Gardiner puts it: ‘it is the everyday world itself that is open to redemption, to positive and empowering transformation…[because] the everyday exhibits a certain strength and resilience that enables it to resist domination by identity-
thinking’. The urban everyday, then, contains the conditions of possibility for its own transformation. The potential to recognize everyday life as an alienated reality and to ultimately resist, transform, and even overthrow that reality, lies within the realm of everyday life itself. Lefebvre’s project had been committed to the revolutionary transformation of everyday life for the sake of realizing that latent potential. A utopian project that seeks to bring to consciousness a non-conscious and non-apparent everyday – a politicized and de-alienated everyday that eventually overcomes and obliterates the commodified everydayness of everyday life under capitalism. Such a recovery of meaning is possible through the persistent production of participatory, collective, non-commodified forms of everyday life. These forms promote the kind of politics that allow for the transgressive potential of everyday life to be fully realized or, in other words, to ultimately overthrow that which the everyday disrupts.

This transformative process well describes the appropriation practiced through community gardens. Using urban lands as community gardens throughout New York and Los Angeles produced participatory, collective, and non-commodified forms of everyday life. These gardens, as the following paragraphs suggest, came to serve as a vehicle through which communities get a sense of themselves, their political power, and common interest in democratizing and de-commodifying the regulation of urban space. Through a collective struggle to retain a right to space, community gardeners worked to bring to consciousness a politicized and de-alienated everyday life, one which stands in stark contrast to that produced by bureaucrats, technocrats, and developers. By doing so, the coalition of garden advocates underlined the potential of everyday life in mobilizing urban citizens in support of a socially and environmentally just cause, all the while uncovering the market-centric framework of neoliberal urban administrations.

First, garden advocates staged public demonstrations in public city spaces with the intent of raising awareness and support for their struggle. Lacking the opportunities to meet urban officials face-to-face and gain political traction from within the formal system, activists decided to ‘use symbolic public spaces to create their political opportunities’.[21] In New York, ‘nearly all of the actions took place at, within, or near city offices in downtown Manhattan, symbolically locating the struggle near the seat of decision-making power’.[22] Similarly, in Los Angeles, garden advocates repeatedly raised ‘pickets to the Mayor and other public figures at public appearances’.[23] These actions
showed that advocates were not only seeking political recognition, but were also holding the municipality accountable for devaluing community gardens in the first place.

Traditional forms of demonstration were supplemented with more dramatized and creative ones. Community gardeners publicly celebrated the importance of their gardens through participatory tactics and festivities, thereby including artistic creativity as a part of the transformation of everyday life. In New York, this included ‘everything from letter-writing campaigns to annual garden tours, to festivals, to street theatre’\textsuperscript{24}. In Los Angeles, during weekends, the space of the farm was turned into a community center that hosted ‘panels, concerts, religious ceremonies and vigils; health, arts and crafts, and anti-consumption fairs; produce markets, and more’\textsuperscript{25}.

Second, garden advocates used the internet to interact with local groups and patch together a stronger city-wide coalition. In New York, ‘localized listservs were used as a forum for discussing issues related to the gardens, formulating strategies for marches and demonstrations, and building networks of garden advocates throughout the city’\textsuperscript{26}. The internet was also highly effective in extending the struggle beyond the jurisdictional boundaries of the city and reaching out for support from extra-local groups – such as community gardeners from other American cities – who could bring extra pressure to bear on the local government.

Third, community gardens coalitions reached out for support from popular media outlets and celebrity figures. \textit{The New York Times} offered critical coverage of the struggle that clearly supported the gardeners in New York. \textit{National Public Radio} broadcast a piece praising the struggle of the South Central farmers in Los Angeles. As the head and founder of the New York Restoration Project, Bette Midler became ‘the saving grace of the threatened gardens’\textsuperscript{27} in New York when her organization offered to fund half of the purchase of the gardens from the city. In Los Angeles, celebrity environmental activists such as Darryl Hanna, Joan Baez, Danny Glover, Martin Sheen, and Willie Nelson all visited the farm and publicly stated their support.

Fourth, advocates broadened the scope of their struggle to include more formal forms of contestation such as lawsuits. In New York, the lobbying efforts of the Green Guerillas got the newly elected New York State Attorney General, Eliot Spitzer, on board. On behalf of the state, ‘Spitzer sued the Giuliani administration for violating New York’s
environmental laws, notably laws requiring environmental review of land-use changes through the sale of public property. The New York Supreme Court ruled in favor of Spitzer and the gardeners, forcing Giuliani to indefinitely postpone any auctions until such a review was done.

In Los Angeles, an esteemed civil rights attorney, Dan Stormer, took up the farmers’ case. On behalf of the farmers, Stormer sued the city ‘alleging that the 2003 sale of the land to Horowitz [the developer] should be nullified on the grounds that there was no prior public notice of the transaction, that there was a lack of transparency in the sale, and that taxpayers were unduly hurt by the below-market price given to Horowitz’. Stormer succeeded in obtaining a preliminary injunction (which was reversed by the court of appeal a year later), but failed to win the lawsuit. Consequently, the South Central Farm remained under a threat of eviction.

Finally, advocates ultimately accepted the rule of exchange-value over urban space, realizing that they could only claim their rights to garden if they ‘began to amass a war chest with which to purchase the gardens’. In New York, activists managed to gain the support of private foundations – the New York Restoration Project and the Trust for Public Land – that struck a deal with the mayor’s office to purchase 114 gardens for $4.2 million. In Los Angeles too, private foundations came to the rescue – the Annenberg Foundation and the Trust for Public Land – making a generous offer of $16 million to buy the farm’s site back from the developer. Even though this was the value that he himself had quoted for the site (after purchasing it for only $5 million three years prior), the developer ultimately rejected the offer and demanded the farmers’ removal.

The struggle in New York was eventually settled in September 2002, when Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the state attorney general’s office agreed to preserve most of the gardens. The settlement also required garden advocates to compromise and agree to the bulldozing of 100 gardens (out of approximately 700 sites) to build housing – including affordable apartments. In Los Angeles, however, such consensual settlement was not achieved. On June 13, 2006, the farmers of South Central Farm were forcefully evicted by city authorities and ‘prevented from re-entering the fenced-off farm’. In a symbolic expression of hope and protest, ‘farmers and supporters kept vigil around the dying garden for days, planting crops and flowers around the perimeter of the site’. Ultimately, on July
5, 2006, the farm was bulldozed amidst protest and acts of civil disobedience. As of today, the land remains an empty lot.

The struggle to preserve community garden spaces in New York and Los Angeles offers insight into the realization of what Lefebvre considered to be the latent potential of everyday life. First, the practice of gardening itself exposed other, more passive, individualized, and commodified, forms of everyday life as an alienated reality. Second, the oppositional actions conducted by the local coalitions of community gardeners – including both formal and informal forms of contestation – offered ways in which to resist that reality. Public demonstrations, festivals, media coverage, legal battles, and economic support, all serve as evidence to how everyday life can become the sphere where urban citizens make sense of their political agency and mobilize to resist a market-centric local government for the sake of their own needs and wants. The realization that municipal decisions and the regulation of space were guided by narrow economic interests, led garden advocates to bring to consciousness a transformation of the everyday – one that is not guided by the dictates of capital but rather by the experiences, needs and desires of citizens.

Earlier in this chapter, community gardens were conceived as places that offered marginalized citizens the ability to freely practice and express their cultures. Here, community gardens are also considered spaces of engagement where urbanites mobilize against the neoliberalization of their cities. They are where citizens demand control over urban space in order to ensure that it serves public, rather than private, interests. Thus, community gardens ultimately represent a much different ideal than that promoted by neoliberal urban administrations. They openly contest the market-driven logic of urban governance and offer instead a more socially just understanding of urban space based on communal ownership and the need to preserve social and cultural wealth. Haja Worly, the president of the NYC Garden Coalition, sums up this transition best, noting: ‘we used to think of ourselves as just gardeners. Now we also think of ourselves as community preservationists’. In addition to fresh produce and a space of cultural belonging, community gardens also cultivate agents of social and political transformation.
Re-appropriating Sustainability: A Progressive Interpretation of Sustainability in Strathcona Community Gardens

For much of the past forty years, community gardens have been positioned in opposition to municipal plans, a barrier to making urban space available for private developments. However, the increasing amount of attention given to sustainability since the turn of the century has provided community gardeners an opportunity to develop different strategies for legitimization. The oft-celebrated turn to ‘sustainable development’ in many North American cities has enabled them to lay claim to urban space based on the very goals established by municipal administrations themselves. Instead of being framed as an impediment to urban development, community gardeners increasingly position themselves as inseparable from it. Vancouver’s community gardeners, in particular, have recently mobilized in this way to justify their right to space. And, in the process, community gardeners articulate the relationship between sustainability and social and cultural goals, thereby broadening, deepening and transforming the concept of sustainability – one that associates ecological integrity with notions of social justice.

Much like Liz Christie’s garden in New York, Vancouver’s community garden movement can be traced back to a specific garden. In 1985, after a prolonged debate over the land-use of a vacant lot near the low-income neighborhood of Strathcona, the City of Vancouver Parks Board approved an application submitted by a local non-profit society – City Farmer – for a community garden on site. City Farmer and a few local residents started to transform what was an informal industrial dump into a 3.4 acre community garden. The construction of the garden included the creative re-use of the waste products of industrial activity: a contractor gladly piled fill on the northern edge of the gardens to shield plots from noise and vehicle emissions; builders putting in basements provided excess fill from their excavations to help mold a pond area; and workers tearing down houses were asked to remove the joists first so they could be used by the gardeners. From a disadvantaged position the citizens of Strathcona transformed an urban landscape that epitomized municipal neglect into a community-operated garden space.34

Increasing demand for more gardening plots led Strathcona residents to search for ways to expand the garden. In the early spring of 1991, in an area adjacent to the
main gardens, they began to arrange rectangular areas made of stones and broken concrete that served as improvised garden plots. The initiative was named Cottonwood Gardens (in reference to the cottonwood trees that grew nearby) and it became the impromptu annex of the already officially recognized Strathcona Garden. Oliver Kellhammer, one of Cottonwood’s pioneering gardeners and a Canadian land artist, describes the hard and communal process of constructing the garden:

These first days were heady with excitement but also quite hard going. The land had been used as an informal dump site for years and the ground was littered with garbage and construction debris as well as the detritus from the neighborhood’s thriving sex and drug trades including the empty Lysol cans drained by alcoholics, discarded condoms and hypodermic syringes. To make things worse, grey market building contractors and landscapers were still dumping their waste at night, sometimes right on top or [sic] our gardens, as the city authorities were then lax in enforcing anti-littering bylaws in the city’s East end. Consequently our ad hoc group spent a lot of time cleaning up, filling dumpsters with the garbage we collected and enlisting various churches and volunteer societies to help us in this task.35

Finally, in December 1991, the Parks Board agreed to extend the Strathcona Community Gardens’ lease to include the new Cottonwood site. After receiving grants from local NGOs the humble guerilla garden had evolved into a fully operational 4 acre community garden including: 140 garden plots, an irrigation system, a garden shed, a pond, and large communal areas available to all people in the community – including seniors, youth, and people with disabilities.36

As both gardens matured, they became centers for ecological stewardship in the neighborhood. Today, the gardens offer programs that reach out to the community in hopes of inspiring citizens to have a stronger and more knowledgeable connection to nature. Activities in the gardens, such as those offered by the Environmental Youth Alliance, aim ‘to inspire children, youth, and young adults to connect with the natural world and become sustainability leaders in their communities’37. Other activities include special events where Vancouverites are invited to tour the gardens, sway to live music, learn from free gardening and sustainability workshops (e.g. permaculture, compost making, and bee-keeping), sample local garden produce, and celebrate the gardens’ legacy as community-based urban green spaces. Therefore, there is a coherent agenda that underlines the activity in both gardens, one that seeks to cultivate environmental consciousness and strengthen socio-ecological relationships in the community.
This agenda is what community gardeners in Strathcona are capitalizing on today in order to legitimize their right to space, as new development plans might lead to partial eviction of the gardens. The plan for the False Creek Flats – an area that stretches from Northeast False Creek to Clark Drive – includes the removal of the Georgia and Dunsmuir viaducts. As the plan slowly evolves, some alternatives suggest the need to make way for road expansions along Malkin Avenue to ensure the flow of goods to the downtown area will not be affected by the viaducts’ removal. Such an expansion will necessitate the removal of large portions of the gardening area in Cottonwood and the forestry area in Strathcona. In light of this possible threat, the community gardeners of Strathcona began campaigning to prevent any such expansion plans and to assure the long-term preservation of their gardens. They have chosen to do so by appropriating the language of sustainability for their own ends.

Since city officials came to the gardens in the summer of 2012 and presented the gardeners with the possibility of widening Malkin Avenue, Jill Weiss, a long-time gardener at Cottonwood and the vice-president of the Strathcona Community Gardeners Society, has found herself on the public front that tries to save Strathcona Community Gardens from possible eviction. An ‘integrated sustainability center’ she likes to call it. A ‘shining example of the green world we need to have’ where people are connected to each other and the earth. A sane place. ‘It would be different if it was just a community garden with plots’, she said to Vancouver Courier’s reporter, implying that it stands for so much more other than just a gardening space. She explained how the gardens also serve as a site for the ecological preservation of both plants and animals, for social inclusion, for youth education, for cultural celebration, and for community development. It comes then as no surprise when Weiss reaches a simple yet unequivocal conclusion regarding the garden – that ‘it can’t be replaced’.

Weiss’ position guides both her and her fellow advocates in their public attempts to challenge the looming threat of eviction. Through recruiting local media outlets, local activists, and political allies from city hall, the gardeners of Strathcona push to recognize their gardens as more than ‘just community gardens’. This strategy relies on promoting a more complex image of community gardens – one that portrays the gardens as sites that sustain and integrate social, cultural, and ecological goals. But more importantly, this strategy highlights the possibility of re-appropriating the language of sustainability as an
umbrella for the promotion of such goals. By framing their gardens as ‘integrated sustainability centers’, Strathcona’s community gardeners help broaden the concept of sustainability to include notions of social and environmental justice.

The process begins in media appearances such as the one depicted above. If Weiss’s interview conveyed only a brief description of what the gardens have to offer, Oliver Kellhammer’s piece in the Vancouver Observer, a local web-based magazine, produced a much lengthier and detailed account of Cottonwood and its importance in Vancouver’s urban context. Being one of its founders, Kellhammer not only shares his experiences from the early days of construction, but he also details the social and ecological roles that the garden fills in the everyday lives of Strathcona residents. Amidst the ‘dreary vista of sterile playing fields and low-rise industrial buildings’, Kellhammer says, the garden stands out as ‘an oasis of biodiversity’. Housing exotic trees and carefully tended allotments along with extensive plantings and a variety of bird species, the garden provides an ecological haven ‘where weary passers-by can sit and enjoy the slow resurgence of nature’ in what was long one of the city’s most deprived and green-space deficient areas. The garden also serves the community as ‘a thriving center for youth-focused environmental education’ and simply as a place where ‘people from all walks of life coax forth a bounty of blooms, fruits and vegetables…sharing the food and recipes with their friends and neighbors’. It is where the members of the community interact both between themselves and with nature. It is indeed, as Kellhammer concludes, ‘a living paradigm of what a green, inclusive city is supposed to be…an open-source landscape that continuously evolves as a function of those who participate in it, with no real need for the top-down ministrations of bureaucrats, engineers and other members of the professional class’.

Kellhammer’s celebration of self-reliance and community development later turns into a potent critique of political opportunism and instrumentality. Many had expected that, with the rise of Vision Vancouver and their explicit advocacy of sustainability initiatives such as urban agriculture, community gardeners were – at last – ‘home free’. Accordingly, Vision’s proposal to evict Cottonwood for the sake of road expansion initially caught gardeners such as Kellhammer off guard:

Imagine my shock then, when I found out last month that Cottonwood – despite all the accolades, the myriad hours of embodied volunteer energy
and the many politicians who have schmoozed with us there, getting their pictures taken with babies and flowers – is once again on the chopping block… I was doubly surprised to learn that Vision Vancouver was behind the new spin on this same bad, old idea.40

Trashing a beloved oasis of urban nature for the sake of more vehicles? Such plans bring into question the standard of sustainability guiding Vancouver’s political actors. As Kellhammer points out: ‘Vision got a substantial mandate on their pledge to make Vancouver the greenest city in the world. How they deal with Cottonwood will show us all how committed to their values they truly are’. In this, Kellhammer holds the city’s political leaders accountable to their own promises. He is looking for meaning behind their words. For him, ‘a world-class, “green” city deserves world-class design that is both environmentally and socially at the cutting edge’. The starkly unimaginative solution of bulldozing a community garden in favor of a roadway necessarily violates such an objective. Indeed, it blatantly contradicts a more environmentally and socially progressive interpretation of urban sustainability.

As it turns out, stressing this contradiction – demolishing gardens while promoting sustainability – served as the centerpiece in the gardeners’ struggle against city hall. Their campaign is now focused not only on the benefits of the garden, but also on how those benefits are a perfect fit with the broader goals of sustainability. For them, community gardens must be an inseparable part of any city planning which is geared to achieving sustainability. As a result, gardeners now consistently link the fate of the gardens to the city’s objective of becoming ‘the greenest city’. This strategy is evident in the way gardeners, such as Rose-Marie Larsson and Bara Hladikova, respond to media stories about the garden: ‘Good of the Sun to give the Cottonwood-Malkin issue some attention, as it’s the test case for whether the Vision team means to carry out its Greenest City 2020 mandate or not.’41 ‘We should capitalize on this aspect and continue our alleged goal of “Greenest City by 2020” rather than destroy the exact gardens that are boasted on Vision Vancouver’s website’42.

The connections between community gardens and sustainability plans were made more explicit with the support of local political allies who are identified with environmental goals. After visiting Strathcona gardens, Adriane Carr, the single representative of the Green Party in Vancouver’s city council, joined the gardeners’ struggle. In November 2011 she started championing a policy that will ensure the long term security of community

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gardens on lands owned by the city or the Parks Board (such as Strathcona and Cottonwood). In her motion, Carr reminded the council that ‘Vancouver’s Greenest City 2020 Action Plan includes increasing the number of community gardens and garden plots’, thus foregrounding the contradiction that will arise if the city decides to execute plans that will reduce rather than increase garden space. While Carr’s motion was an important political achievement in and of itself, its real significance lay in how it set the stage for gardeners to express their thoughts about the garden in city hall.

In November 28, 2011, citizens from a wide spectrum of socio-economic backgrounds spoke in front of city council to support Carr’s motion and articulate what the garden meant to them. Each with his or her personal connection to the garden, but all carry the same sentiment: that community gardens should be a major part in any sustainability related plans. What began in local media outlets continued in city hall as citizens faced their elected representatives and demanded accountability. Sandi Smith, a gardener at Strathcona and the initiator of a social media campaign to preserve the gardens, explained the endless social and environmental benefits that community gardens provide to surrounding neighborhoods: they provide food security by helping to feed some of the poorest people in the city, they increase biodiversity by creating forest-like green spaces in the middle of the city, they strengthen community ties by hosting myriad of social activities and events, and, ultimately, they build collaborative neighborhoods of people who are part of something larger. In light of all these benefits, Smith concluded, ‘these beautiful gardens should really be the center of Vision’s plan for a green city…A commitment for a green city has to be real and I would like you – Mayor – to recognize our passions, our efforts, the goals we have, and our commitments’43. With similar passion, Wayne Mercier, a local performing artist and a gardener at Cottonwood, argued that ‘the Greenest City 2020 Plan promotes just the kind of things that Cottonwood represents, with democratically-organized directly-managed community efforts to integrate urban life with sustainable ecological practices’44.

The language of these pleas highlight the Strathcona community gardeners’ unique contributions to the discussion about urban sustainability. First, by identifying the complementarity of community gardens to sustainability goals they were able to hold their local government accountable for its broader political commitments to sustainability. The gardeners emphasized that the proposal to remove community gardens made such
commitments appear hollow and empty. Hence, Vision’s formal commitments to sustainability provided leverage points for citizens to demand accountability and action, thereby forcing their local government to reflect upon the meaning of sustainability and the kind of practices it should include.

Second, it was the gardeners’ objective to include social and environmental development, as practiced in community garden spaces, at the heart of sustainability goals. Here, the crucial link between sustainability and social and environmental goals was successfully made by constantly connecting between the benefits of the gardens and municipal policies aimed toward sustainability. Sustainability plans, it was argued, ought to recognize the unequal development of social and environmental benefits in urban space and ‘address local food insecurity, lack of biodiversity and green space, and the need for land reclamation in particular in low-income neighborhoods’. Community gardens, particularly in Strathcona, enhance the ability of cities to address social and environmental injustices and provide some of their least capable citizens a space for empowerment and a sense of inclusion. As such, the gardeners imbue the concept of sustainability with notions of social and environmental justice with the recognition that in order to become a sustainable city you must first become a just city.

Finally, by emphasizing self-reliance, community gardeners signaled to urban officials that sustainability could also be achieved through community-led, as opposed to city-led, efforts. Given the freedom and opportunity to democratically mould urban space according to their own passions and goals, the Strathcona community managed to integrate urban life with sustainable practices and promote from below what local administrations are trying to promote from above. As such, community garden spaces offer a grassroots alternative to top-down sustainability initiatives. This alternative, as evident in Vancouver’s case, is more attuned to the social and environmental needs of the local community than any other master planned policy document.

These focal points that were expressed throughout Strathcona’s community gardeners’ struggle are the crux of my argument for a more progressive appropriation of urban sustainability. For it is these principles – community empowerment and the elimination of uneven urban development – that truly makes a city sustainable. Sustainable cities should not be driven by mega-projects such as a high-tech convention center or an articulately planned neighborhood, but rather by community efforts conducted
to increase autonomy over space and promote the kind of practices that foster both social and environmental justice. Sustainability is not a poster child that should be used for electoral politics, rather it is an actual process that is occurring, right here and now, on our streets, in our communities, and we should be attuned to this process, and figure out how to protect, intensify and expand these efforts beyond the local. The spectacle of sustainability is the easiest of achievements; it is the scaling up of community efforts which strive to create justice that is the real challenge of urban sustainability.

**Conclusion**

In community gardens lies a potential to start re-imagining and transforming our understating of both urban space and sustainability. The community gardeners of New York, Los Angeles, and Vancouver had created and maintained their own spaces of cultural and social engagement, thereby producing an alternative vision of what the sustainable city might look like. On a cultural level, community gardens enable citizens to autonomously inscribe their own stories into the city. The Puerto Ricans in Loisaida and the Latinos in South Central used the gardens as a way to adjust and re-appropriate urban space according to their own cultural values and symbols, thereby creating a place in the city they could recognize as their own. On a social level, the gardens are spaces of engagement that enable citizens to strengthen community ties and work toward claiming their right to the city. Such was the case of the struggle to maintain garden spaces in New York and Los Angeles, where community gardeners mobilized coalitions against private and market-oriented forces. On an environmental level, community gardens are spaces of ecological stewardship. By increasing biodiversity and educating the community on ecologically sustainable practices, the gardeners of Strathcona had transformed to the better the community’s relationship with nature.

As was exemplified by Vancouver’s community gardeners, linking all these benefits with the concept of sustainability imbues the concept with cultural, social and environmental goals. In doing so, urban citizens re-appropriated the sustainable city – guiding it toward the interest of the greater public rather than those of a few. Thus, Strathcona community gardeners created not only an umbrella under which their claims could be legitimized, but they also took sustainability out of the realm of market relations and into the realm of environmental and social justice. To this date, the fate of the viaducts
and Strathcona’s community gardens remains undetermined. But regardless of the result, the language used throughout Strathcona community gardeners’ struggle provided a community-driven alternative to the co-opted language of sustainability under urban entrepreneurialism and replaced an empty rhetoric with a meaningful and progressive vision.

But appropriations can go both ways. Community practices, such as community gardening, are also increasingly becoming levers for the proliferation of market-based developments and ideologies. In such instances, community gardens are re-appropriated – both intentionally and unwittingly – to support the very principles, practices and ideas they proclaim to go against. In this chapter, I have ascribed a progressive and even overly romanticized role for community gardens within urban politics insofar as they foster and promote a more just distribution of urban resources. In the next chapter, I will trace a different path in which such gardens are marshaled in favor of much more regressive ends.

Notes

2 Green Guerillas, Our History, Green Guerillas (http://www.greenguerillas.org/history)
3 Reynolds, On Guerilla Gardening, 109
5 Efrat Eizenberg, “Actually Existing Commons: Three Moments of Space of Community Gardens in New York City”, Antipode 44:3 (June 2012): 779
6 ibid
7 Eizenberg, Actually Existing Commons, 771
9 Eizenberg, Actually Existing Commons, 771
10 Teresa M. Mares and Devon G. Peña, “Urban Agriculture in the Making of Insurgent Spaces in Los Angeles and Seattle”, in Jeffrey Hou ed., Insurgent Public Spaces: Guerilla Urbanism and the Remaking of Contemporary Cities (New York: Routledge, 2010), 244
11 Scott Hamilton Kennedy dir., The Garden (United States: Oscilloscope Laboratories, 2008), 01:09:05-01:09:20

64
Claire Colebrook, "Certeau and Foucault: Tactics and Strategic Essentialism", *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 100:2 (April 2001): 556


Zukin, *Naked City*, 204


ibid


Irazábal and Punja, *Cultivating Just Planning*, 13

Smith and Kurtz, *Community Gardens and Politics of Scale*, 207

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Irazábal and Punja, *Cultivating Just Planning*, 14

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ibid

Haja Worly, as quoted in Schmelzkopf, *Incommensurability*, 336

Nedjo Rogers, "Modern Commons: Place, Nature, and Revolution at the Strathcona Community Gardens" (M.A. Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 1995), 97


Environmental Youth Alliance, “Mission & Vision”, Environmental Youth Alliance (http://www.eya.ca/mandatevision.html)


40 ibid [emphasis in the original]
42 ibid
43 Sandi Smith, as quoted in City of Vancouver, Standing Committee of Council on Planning, Transportation and Environment, Agenda Item II: Long Term Security for Community Gardens, *Vancouver City Council*, Nov. 28, 2012 (http://former.vancouver.ca/cyclerk/cyclerk/20121128/ptec20121128ag.htm), Part I – 00:38:00
44 Wayne Mercier, as quoted in City of Vancouver, *Long Term Security for Community Gardens*, Part II – 00:42:50
45 Peter Driftmeier, as quoted in City of Vancouver, *Long Term Security for Community Gardens*, Part I – 01:10:00
Chapter 4. Community Gardens and Neoliberal Cooptation

This chapter looks at various regressive appropriations of the practice of community gardening. If the previous chapter celebrated the gardens’ ability to resist and transform neoliberal politics, then this chapter highlights the ways in which they can be pulled back into neoliberal discourse and ideology. Once co-opted, community gardens lose much of their ability to successfully articulate sustainability with socially and environmentally just goals. The chapter constructs a list of various agents – real-estate promoters, urban officials, and incoming affluent residents – who appropriate community gardens for economic and entrepreneurial ends and, consequently, exacerbate the detrimental effects of urban neoliberalism. Instead of producing grassroots resistance and progressive alternatives, community gardening becomes linked to inter-urban competition, gentrification, displacement, social antagonisms, and the marketization of urban space. As such, not only do community gardens lose their progressive capacities, they also nullify the potential to realize them.

Like Swimming Pools or Health Clubs: The Marketization of Community Gardens

In 2007, a peculiar thing was happening in downtown Vancouver. A vacant building owned by a private real estate developer – Onni Group – was demolished and transformed into a community garden. The developer had the land divided into sixty small garden plots and advertised a contact number for anyone interested to call in order to reserve a plot for growing plants or flowers. Not long after, a number of those plots were sprouting onions and crocuses. On the face of it, Onni’s seemingly charitable act may have appeared to support and enhance the practice of community gardening. Ulterior motives, however, were clearly at work. Indeed, Chris Evans, Onni’s vice-president, admitted that the garden not only burnishes the developer’s image, but it also eliminates public safety problems such as squatters. The garden thus represented a growing trend
by real estate developers to use sustainable practices, such as ‘community’ gardening, for the benefit of their own developments. And so community gardens become a tool to get a lead in Vancouver’s high-octane real-estate market.

This trend, according to Vancouver Courier reporter Allen Garr, has two parts. ‘The first part is using vacant private space for public use until the development goes ahead’\(^2\). During that period – in which developers are waiting to jump an array of regulatory hurdles (e.g. permits and rezoning) – gardens serve a myriad of purposes. The first and most obvious one is the cultivation of an environmentally and socially responsible brand image. By creating a green public space for the local community, the developer can acquire a progressive and desirable reputation. Second, gardens help to maintain and even increase land values. Studies have suggested that community gardens ‘may have a beneficial effect on adjacent property owners’\(^3\). Beyond the obvious attraction of having fruits and vegetables growing nearby, the gardens create spaces which invite more ‘responsible’ and ‘caring’ people to the area. In (Jane) Jacobsian terms – they provide more ‘positive’ eyes on the street. They help exclude ‘negative’ (e.g. poor and homeless) populations from the area, thereby increasing a locale’s desirability and value. For example, the Downtown Eastside’s Hastings Folk Garden located on 117 East Hastings St. (privately owned by Concord Pacific) might have accounted for some percentage of the 400% increase in the property’s value since 2005\(^4\). Finally, community gardens can help alleviate property taxes. Under the provincial tax code, properties awaiting development on formerly commercial lands would normally be designated class six: ‘business or other’, with a taxation rate of 1.75%. By turning a vacant lot into a community garden, the developer ‘re-designates the lot to class eight, or “recreation and non-profit,” which lowers the tax rate to 0.56% – less than a third of the original rate’\(^5\). As such, gardens like Davie Village Community Garden (built on top of a Shell gas station), or the former Seymour Community Garden (built on top of a Tex-Mex restaurant), decrease expenditures for developers by relieving them of property taxes.

The second part of this trend involves the inclusion of community gardens as part of the development itself, turning gardens into ‘a marketable amenity like swimming pools or health clubs’\(^6\). New development projects in Vancouver offer their tenants exclusive in-house features such as fitness centers and entertainment areas. The set of standard features was lately expanded to include gardening areas reserved for the project’s
community. The Mark – built on top of Onni’s community garden – offers its tenants an area reserved for a garden with communal plots for urban agriculture. As the project’s website proclaims, these plots encourage the growing of fruits and vegetables, as well as a sense of community. This trend is also evident in other downtown developments such as the Freesia building on Seymour and Helmcken and the Atelier on Homer and Robson. Marketed as a ‘place for quiet reflection and a model of sustainability’, community gardens are ultimately recast as an urban consumer good. And just like other amenities on the site, these ‘community’ gardens are not accessible to the public but rather exclusively available to those who can afford to live in one of the projects’ high-priced condos. Hence, ‘community’ here only refers to the vertical community in the project, a designation that works to actively exclude the urban population living outside. This is why, as the promotional literature observes, as a gardener in these spaces, ‘you barely notice you’re in the heart of a busy city’. The community garden functions as an exclusive gardening club which leaves the urban community at large unnoticed and uninvited, further segregating and alienating the urban population from each other.

The increasing popularity of community gardening and its perceived benefits has led real-estate developers to capitalize upon the practice to increase the desirability and profitability of particular developments. Beyond their use as a marketing strategy or even as a clever strategy for reducing taxes, these appropriations carry a deeper impact. By commodifying the practice and transforming it into yet another exclusive recreational activity, developers evacuate the meaning of community from community gardens and null the gardens’ subversive potential. Without a sense of communal ownership over space and absent a diverse and inclusive community of gardeners that engages with its surroundings, community gardens lose much of their potential to create progressive forms of resistance. Instead, they become ‘a tool for financial gains under the disguise of an environmental agenda’.

The Garden State: Linking Community Gardens and Entrepreneurial Goals

‘2,010 by 2010’ was the slogan attached in 2006 to the symbolic plan to ‘create 2,010 new food-producing garden plots in the city by January 1, 2010’11. In order to meet the desired target, the City of Vancouver recruited the help of the Vancouver School
Board, the Board of Parks and Recreation, local community groups, neighborhood organizations, non-profit groups, and individual citizens. The carefully orchestrated operation not only met its target but exceeded it. In less than four years, Vancouver tripled its garden plot quantities from approximately 900 to almost 3,000 plots. Part of this surge could be accounted to popular demand. As Mary Clare Zak, director of social planning for Vancouver, explained in the Vancouver Sun: ‘none of these [community gardens] came about because we ordered it to happen, the city is just supporting what people are already doing’\textsuperscript{12}. However, the timing made it clear that other motives were also in play. The ‘2,010 by 2010’ plan was included as part of the efforts to ensure that the 2010 Winter Olympic Games hosted in Vancouver would become part of the Olympic legacy as ‘the most advanced sustainable Olympic Games to date’\textsuperscript{13}. Community gardens were used to promote Vancouver’s leading role in the implementation of sustainability initiatives to the rest of the world. As such, the ‘2,010 by 2010’ plan marked the process through which community gardens, like other sustainability initiatives, were appropriated by the local government to advance entrepreneurial goals.

As noted in the second chapter, the remaking of Vancouver as a sustainable city was interwoven with competitive interests. The municipal promotion of sustainability goals, it was argued, was partly an attempt to get a lead in the inter-urban competition. The more sustainable and green the city could represent itself, the more effective it could be in luring capital into town. In this light, consider how city officials framed community gardens through the prism of competitiveness. The City has become fixated upon quantitative, comparative assessments of the growth of plots and gardens. In a news release from June 2012, titled ‘Community gardens growing at record pace across the city’, Mayor Gregor Robertson provides the following update:

> With a goal of reaching 5,000 garden plots by 2020, there are currently 3,700 in Vancouver; Of the cities that keep track of the overall number of gardens, Vancouver is ahead of the curve: with 85 community gardens in Vancouver, we exceed Seattle (76) and Portland (43)\textsuperscript{14}

Here is concrete evidence of Vancouver’s lead in the race to become the greenest city of them all. Vancouver administrators are thus investing in the creation of gardening space not only for the good of the city’s communities, but also as a means of promoting the city as an exciting hub for sustainable living.
A consequence of this municipal push has been a growing distinction between two different kinds of community gardens. As part of the justification to preserve Strathcona community gardens, Sandi Smith explains this distinction as follows:

These two sacred spaces [Strathcona and Cottonwood community gardens] are not pop-up gardens. They are the result of a group of thoughtful committed people coming together to build and be part of something beautiful.15

The term ‘pop-up gardens’ refers to the increasing number of community gardens created as part of a synthetic and rapid top-down effort. As compared to gardens where the community invests both time and effort in transforming the space according to their own wants and needs, ‘pop-up gardens’ are ready-made gardens that are created overnight and then served to the community as a completed, finalized space. Such standardized versions of community gardens could be traced across Vancouver from plots in The Village of False Creek, to those on 2nd and Commercial, and all the way up Burnaby Mountain to SFU’s sustainable learning garden. While these gardens do offer citizens the chance to cultivate their own plants and food, they lack the important element of community control over space and the accompanying ability to set roots and evolve over time. As such, these gardens do not allow communities to fully invest themselves in these urban spaces: they offer a space to garden, but not a space to call one’s own.

In sum, as part of a place-making rhetoric, community gardens help to further intensify inter-urban competition. The city’s emphasis upon expanding the quantities of gardens has come at the expense of the qualities of autonomy and self-governance, enabling the incorporation of such gardens as part of Vancouver’s entrepreneurial strategies. This process has sponsored the creation of instant, ready-made, gardens where communities are invited to experience gardening without the sense of ownership such spaces usually bestow. Such standardized versions of community gardens diminish their subversive potential as they do not foster a civil right to inhabit urban space, but rather only to consume it as an experience.
Governing through Gardening: Communitarianism and its Discontents

The process of neoliberalizing cities does not only entail entrepreneurial strategies, but it is also where ‘civic engagement gains importance as a substitute for welfarist functions of the local state’\(^{16}\). In his interrogation of this fundamental transition Nikolas Rose notes how “the social” may be giving way to “the community” as a new territory for the administration of individual and collective existence:

…it seems as if we are seeing the emergence of a range of rationalities and techniques that seek to govern without governing society, to govern through regulated choices made by discrete and autonomous actors in the context of their particular commitments to families and communities\(^{17}\)

‘Government through community’ has become a salient characteristic of both national and urban governance as local communities are increasingly encouraged to voluntarily participate and take responsibility for the provision of functions such as education, security, and health. Consider the increasing numbers of community-based institutions and organizations such as community centers, community policing, and, of course, community gardens, all of which can be understood as a social response to the diminishing capacity of the state to protect and provide social needs.

Increasing the involvement of communities in the planning, production, and management of urban space can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, neo-communitarians such as Amitai Etzioni support this transition because of the potential that civic society and communities have in creating an alternative to market-led and competition-oriented politics\(^{18}\). Indeed, the discussion in the previous chapter, where communities of gardeners worked to oppose market-led politics, exemplified how such potential could be realized in practice. On the other hand, there is an expanding body of literature which criticizes community participation ‘as a mechanism for further neoliberalization of cities and as means to suppress possible resistance from below’\(^{19}\). The downloading of responsibility on community groups, the argument goes, corresponds with neoliberal goals such as the outsourcing and privatization of state services and the fostering of greater institutional efficiency. Therefore, the shift to community involvement is regarded as facilitating the neoliberalization of urban landscapes as it compensates for the dissolution of publicly-managed security nets.
This latter view has often served as the theoretical framework for analyzing the practice of community gardening. In her empirical research of Berlin’s community gardens, Marit Rosol examines how ‘the recent promotion and support of community gardening in Berlin (Germany) by the local state can be understood as a form of outsourcing of former local state responsibilities for public services and urban infrastructure’\textsuperscript{20}. Lack of public resources to maintain public green space has led to campaigns seeking volunteer gardeners to rescue Berlin’s parks. The campaign asked residents to adopt local parks in order to support the local parks department and avoid selling off public green spaces or the introduction of entrance fees\textsuperscript{21}. In this sense, community gardening facilitated the outsourcing of maintenance labor from city employees to city citizens. The responsibility for local beautification and environmental preservation was downloaded on to community gardeners, unburdening the municipality from some of its environmental and social responsibilities, thereby justifying its continuous downsizing.

An additional example of the harmonization of community gardening and neoliberalism emerges from Mary Beth Pudup’s analysis of educational community gardens in the San Francisco Bay area. Pudup regards such community gardens

...as spaces of neoliberal governmentality, that is, spaces in which gardening puts individuals in charge of their own adjustment(s) to economic restructuring and social dislocation through self-help technologies centered on personal contact with nature.\textsuperscript{22}

Pudup argues that what clearly marks community gardens today ‘is their emphasis on individual change and self-actualization\textsuperscript{23} and that this emphasis helps to cultivate citizens who are in keeping with neoliberal political rationalities. Pudup’s example of The Edible School Yard in Berkeley highlights the precedence given to individual rather than collective transformation. Through the practice of gardening and tending their own plots, middle-school students are expected to learn about the cardinal virtues of eating simply, organically, seasonally, and locally. Ultimately, the stated goal is that students ‘will come to appreciate and enjoy simply prepared organic and locally grown food whose availability is determined by the cycle of seasons’\textsuperscript{24}. Instead of fostering a collective consciousness, the garden works as a center for individual ethical development – producing savvy food consumer subjects who ‘expect and demand organically and locally produced food as a right of their consumer citizenship’\textsuperscript{25}. It thus cultivates personal rather than collective accountability, where active citizenship becomes centered upon individual consumption
choices while drifting farther away from a collective engagement with the public sector. Notwithstanding its historic association with anti-capitalist social movements, community gardening (in some variants) has become a disciplinary strategy through which citizens are trained to conform to individualized and market-driven neoliberal rationalities. More than simply an absence of the local state, the calls for personal responsibility, empowerment, and individual choice at play in some community garden projects, mark the disciplining presence of state power and authority which steers us toward further neoliberalization.

An analysis of the policies and guides which regulate community gardening in Vancouver further substantiates these claims. First, as a precondition to get a lease for a community garden on city-owned property, citizens are asked to assume a variety of social and environmental responsibilities. The ‘Operational Guidelines for Community Gardens’ provided by the City of Vancouver outline a list of responsibilities that should be part of all community garden projects. In addition to producing edible and ornamental plants for the personal use of community members, community gardens should also be responsible for the provision of community development programs, environmental enrichment programs, and/or the charitable contribution of food. As such, community gardens in Vancouver – which are developed, maintained, and operated by volunteers at no cost to the city – are expected to serve as sites for the provision of social and environmental services, thereby intensifying the devolution of responsibilities to local communities. Second, gardeners in Vancouver are approached through a set of empowering imperatives aimed to enhance the active capacities of the entrepreneurial individual. In one of the guides on how to start a community garden provided on the City of Vancouver’s website, gardeners are expected to ‘boost’ development, ‘create’ opportunities, ‘encourage’ self-reliance, ‘enhance’ biodiversity, and ‘embrace’ new ideas. More than an arena for collective actualization, the practice of community gardening becomes a tool for transforming the moral and psychological obligations of citizenship in the direction of active self-advancement.

The critical perspective of scholars such as Rosol and Pudup exemplify how community-based efforts such as community gardens can be appropriated by the local state as a mechanism for neoliberalizing urban politics. The voluntary assumption of former state-led responsibilities and the individual transformation of subjectivities toward self-actualization are both an expression of what Peck and Tickel call ‘roll-out’
neoliberalism – whereby municipalities are ‘focused on the purposeful construction and consolidation of neoliberalized state forms, modes of governance, and regulatory relations’\textsuperscript{28}. Therefore, an active and responsible community of gardeners might not be opposed to neoliberal restructuring but, instead, actually support its implementation in urban space and politics.

Appropriating community gardens in such ways – as sites for the cultivation of active and responsible citizenship – has problematic implications for urban communities. Communities which do not actively participate in the governance of their own spaces will be hurt the most from the decline of traditional state welfare activities. Replacing direct municipal support with active citizenship means that communities – especially low-income and working-class areas – that have neither time nor funds to volunteer as active citizens, will simply lose support for community services and environmental improvement. Relying on active citizenship can further aggravate the decline of urban areas with the greatest social and environmental needs. Additionally, integrating local residents into the service of upgrading urban space – as occurs in community gardens – can serve as the harbinger of gentrification. Indeed, as Rosol states:

If strategies to improve living conditions in a neighborhood are not combined with mechanisms that prevent displacement of residents and keep housing affordable, even the most well-meaning projects can become the engine of gentrification.

Through turning spaces of benign neglect into flourishing gardens, community gardeners conform to the entrepreneurial goals of local government and assist in rearranging the public realm according to middle-class values. In this sense, the empowering work done by community gardeners can, perversely, function to attract increasing waves of gentrification, ironically turning gardeners into accomplices in their own future displacement.

**Shifting Growth: Community Gardens and Deterritorialization**

For some, displacement is an inevitable and even liberating process. Theories of ‘liquid modernity’, as conceptualized by Zygmunt Bauman, redirect us from the static, heavy, and solid structures of the modern world toward light and liquid structures in which speed of movement of people, money, image, and information is paramount.\textsuperscript{29} Indeed,
the condition of contemporary cities characterized by increased mobility and interconnectedness can be seen as an epitome of this shift, where the incessant flow of populations and capital move beyond both geographical borders and disciplinary boundaries. Consider mass migrations of mobile people that constantly change the demographics of cities. Consider travelers and tourists who stream through urban space only to make ephemeral connections that lack any rooted experience. Consider multinational corporations with an operational structure designed to transfer commodities and capital across geographical borders. Consider urban landscapes such as bus stops, motorways, and airports that act as immobile platforms of flow, dynamism and mobility. All these seem to signal that the static and rooted experience of urban space may be giving way to a mobile and liquid experience, whereby the notion of ‘place’ becomes increasingly irrelevant.

Nonetheless, such mobilities should not be simplistically embraced as a form of freedom or liberation from space and place. Rather they also need to be considered as control mechanisms that both reflect and reinforce power. On the one hand, the idealization of movement and placelessness, as Sara Ahmed argues, ‘depends upon the exclusion of others who are already positioned as not free in the same way’³⁰. Indeed, the privilege of mobility is most often linked to a bourgeois masculine subjectivity that describes itself as cosmopolitan. On the other hand, the same idealized discourse is used to justify the morality of displacement and subsequent tearing of social and cultural fabrics. In this sense the language of mobility forces movement upon those who do not consider it desirable, becoming less of an emancipatory privilege and more of a confining necessity. Models of community gardening that are not invested in any particular place help to conceptualize this discussion in more concrete terms.

Chris Reed, head and founder of the Vancouver-based organization Shifting Growth, spent the past few years scouting for vacant lots in Vancouver with the aim of transforming them into community gardens. In cooperation mostly with private property owners, Reed works to temporarily use under-utilized sites in order ‘to foster community engagement through accessible green spaces’ and ‘increase awareness about the growing environment’³¹. However, unlike other garden entrepreneurs such as Liz Christie or Oliver Kellhammer, Reed produces a different model of spatial occupation. As Reed stated to City Council: ‘A key distinction is that all of our gardens are mobile. We can
move them all around, and they can easily be relocated. As such, Shifting Growth had accepted the proposition that gardens cannot be static structures in urban space. Through developing technologies that assist in making community gardens mobile – such as movable planting beds and instant construction plans – they conform to the transient and ephemeral nature of urban mobility.

For some, like journalist and author Chris Turner, such mobility and transience can, in time, become subversive. The impromptu and ephemeral popping up of initiatives such as Reed’s mobile gardens mark a grassroots trend in the form of ‘bottom-up urban design, small scale and provisional, incremental and easily replicable’. Over time, such interventions – which are local in scale, short term in duration, and low in risk – suggest the possibility of something larger and more lasting. In other words, civil pop-up initiatives, which are initially governed by time limits and spatial restrictions, might potentially evolve into a permanent feature in urban landscape. Indeed, the fact that local guerilla efforts conducted by community gardeners in New York City and Vancouver eventually managed to ‘get a much wider, more systemic change in the city’, clearly supports this line of argument.

However, the fact that such practices inherently accept the ever-present possibility of displacement is reflective or, at the very least, accommodating of neoliberal ideology. Organizations such as Shifting Growth help to further naturalize and bolster an increasingly mobile, deterritorialized, and decentered urban reality that lacks any fixed boundaries and barriers. They yield to the direct effects of increased deregulation and marketization of urban space, to high speed mobility and constant flux, to repeated waves of restructuring, to geographical transcendence and the lack of roots. They become a manifestation of ideology that strives to leave the physical world of territorial rootedness behind. In doing so they cultivate an urban culture that deems an authentic sense of place – based on commitment, attachment and involvement – as unimportant, thereby devaluing the importance of setting roots and claiming rights to space. Ultimately, the lack of such capacities may help smooth processes of social and cultural displacement and force the least capable communities of our cities to repeatedly suffer from the dream of mobility.
For Whom the Garden Grows: Community Gardens and Civic Confrontations

An almost unavoidable consequence of intensified civic participation in cities is a conflict of interests and motivations between different community groups over the organization and purpose of public space. The spaces of community gardens become spaces of contestation between different interests, each seeking to inscribe their own values in space. Ultimately, in most cases, the stronger groups are likely to win, appropriating these projects and spaces for their own ends, as they are able to better articulate and press their demands and needs. That which is one day a cultural haven for marginalized communities, can the next become a monument of further marginalization and displacement.

Consider the community gardens in New York City’s Lower East Side. By the mid-1980s the Lower East Side saw ‘a constant stream of college students, recent graduates, and young, single workers on Wall Street and in the arts’\(^\text{35}\). Other than increasing rents, the shifting demographics were also challenging the function and organization of community garden spaces: ‘if Puerto Ricans defended their right to a community garden as a place to exercise their ethnic identities, their new neighbors called on a different kind of authenticity, one based on artistic expression and environmental values’\(^\text{36}\). Out went the casitas, dominos, and traditional Puerto Rican songs and in came solar panels, folk concerts, and poetry programs. This process was accompanied with explicit attacks by new residents on the ‘ugly’ and ‘unwelcoming’ aesthetics of Puerto Rican community gardens. Gardeners in Loisaida were accustomed to install wood and chicken wire structures around their plots in order to protect their produce from theft and rats. For white gardeners, these cage-like structures reflected ‘the mistrust, danger and social disorganization of the neighborhood at their arrival’\(^\text{37}\). And they fought to get these ‘cages’ removed under the claim that this change would make ‘the garden (and by extensions the block or neighborhood) more “open”, aesthetically and socially’\(^\text{38}\). Gradually, the Lower East Side was dominated by a new ethic of community gardening, one better suited to the values and rituals of incoming middle-class residents.

In response, ‘Puerto Rican gardeners used cultural practices and nationalist meanings encoded in garden spaces to assert their moral superiority, and to problematize the middle-class whiteness of newcomer gardeners’\(^\text{39}\). Such strategies included public
expressions of contempt for the store-bought Halloween decorations of white gardeners as compared to those made by hand or from recycled materials, as well as confrontations with white gardeners who were reluctant to harvest their surplus produce instead of seeking alternatives such as freezing, donating, or sharing. The Puerto Rican gardeners of Loisaida used the gardens to emphasize the superiority of their moral values over that of the affluent, hedonistic, and white newcomers. They were exercising resistance against what they perceived as the colonization of ‘materialistic’ and ‘careless’ lifestyles over their garden spaces and, by extension, their neighborhood. These resistance strategies, however, were largely futile in the face of ongoing gentrification. As increasing rents and eroding stocks of affordable housing forced many Puerto Rican residents out of the neighborhood, treasured community markers of Puerto Rican cultural and political presence were progressively erased. The steady transformation of community gardens to include much whiter and affluent membership served as a painful marker of the steady displacement of Puerto Ricans from the Lower East Side as a whole.

There are also instances in which newcomers inscribe their own values and rituals by simply creating safe havens of their own – free of the ethnic practices and symbols of immigrant communities. Here, instead of attempting local integration, gentrifiers prefer to exercise spatial segregation as means to appropriate space for their own ends. Marit Rosol shows how community gardens – such as the Kids’ Garden in the ethnically diverse and gentrifying neighborhood of Neukolln in Berlin – may promote such exclusionary spaces. The Kids’ Garden was self-organized by white, middle-class German parents in order ‘to create outdoor facilities for their children, and provide environmental education and exposure’40. To cater to the specific needs of small children, the space of the garden became restricted from public usage using locked gates, making it accessible only for the children, their educators, parents and their parents’ friends. However, migrant inhabitants, who had no representation in the parents association that established the garden, were not able to use the garden’s facilities for the sake of their own children. The gentrifying community had thus turned a potentially public green space into an exclusive middle-class clubhouse. In this sense, The Kids’ Garden is symptomatic of the ways in which a community garden space can become ‘fundamentally concerned with the ordering of social interactions…and (un)desirable social practices’ other than an amenity that benefits the community as a whole. It enables gentrifiers to segregate themselves from what they perceive to be ‘deviant citizens who fail to take responsibility for their own actions and
undermine community well-being and harmony". It becomes, in short, a revanchist garden space aimed at excluding local poor migrant populations from claiming spaces of their own.

The appropriation of community gardens by stronger community groups problematizes the use of the term community. The inner struggles between gentrifiers and the gentrified in neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side and Neukölln suggest that efforts to locate a fixed and unified sense of community are prone to fail. Different communities hold different sets of moral and aesthetic values that push toward the creation of different experiences of space. As such, the ‘community’ in ‘community gardens’ does not necessarily refer to a specific community, but is rather a flexible and fluid term that can be filled by many other communities over time. The fluxing pace of urban restructuring and an increased reliance on private investments in urban space ensure that such flexibility and fluidity will be capitalized. What one day was a community of residents of lower means can quickly be transformed into a ‘community’ of white middle class professionals – erasing much of the former’s cultural and political presence from space. The tactics of the weak are replaced by those of the strong. This lack of continuity in the social and cultural composition of urban communities is what ultimately reduces the probability of collective actualization. When a community repeatedly transforms and renegotiates its values it loses its ability to recognize itself as one. Instead, it becomes focused on reconciling inner struggles. Without mechanisms that ensure communities will be capable of occupying space over time, community-based constructs such as community gardens are prone to antagonism and division that ultimately corrode the capacity for collective solidarity and social transformation.

**Divide and Garden: Community Gardens and Dividing Communities**

Antagonisms over the use of community garden spaces are not produced only between different communities of gardeners, but also between gardeners and other community groups who consider garden spaces as an impediment to other, more important, social benefits – e.g. social housing and employment opportunities. This is especially true in working class neighborhoods where the combination of high rates of poverty and scarcity of social resources creates a fierce competition within the community.
over basic needs and rights. In such urban contexts, community gardens become the battleground between different marginalized communities over the prioritization of social benefits. Urban officials, advertently or not, often intensify these conflicts and further divide urban communities from within. Instead of recognizing and addressing the dire need for the provision of social services for the entire neighborhood, urban officials tend to choose sides and enforce the interests of one community at the expense of another. As such, community gardens can become spaces through which urban administrators inflame civic conflicts and further alienate urban communities from one another.

Amidst the struggle to maintain New York City’s community gardens in the late 1990s, a pressing issue emerged which complicated matters: the desperate need for low-income housing in gentrifying neighborhoods such as the Lower East Side. While the city was encouraging gentrification and market rate developments, low-income housing-advocacy groups were fighting to preserve the dwindling reservoir of moderate to low-income housing. If the city was going to encourage gentrification, these groups argued, ‘it should also have a strategy for preserving the Lower East Side for the “ethnically diverse lower income residents who had characterized the neighborhood since the mid-1800s”’42. These groups eventually succeeded in getting the city to agree to a cross-subsidy plan that ensured the building or rehabilitation of 1,000 units of low-to-moderate-income housing. However, many of the potential sites for developing this housing were already occupied by community gardens. While housing-advocacy groups recognized the benefits of the gardens, they argued that low-income housing had first priority. This view was articulated by Val Orselli, head of a housing-advocacy group, when he stated that ‘at times, gardeners have lost the original vision, that they were there to beautify a neighborhood that needed beauty for lack of housing’43. Indeed, many of the gardeners who tilled Loisaida’s community gardens were desperately in need of low-income housing, and yet they were not inclined to give up on their own stakes in urban space.

Surprisingly, gentrification and market development aficionado Mayor Giuliani, decided to publicly side with the housing advocacy groups. In his attempts to deflect criticism from community gardeners, Giuliani blamed garden advocates for being unresponsive to the real needs of the local community: “the reality is, we need more housing in the city. If you keep these properties tied up, [minority neighborhoods] will never move to a higher level of more housing, more commercial development, more
jobs. Giuliani strategically framed his opposition to community gardens as a socially progressive agenda, claiming that his fight against community gardens was actually a fight for social housing. In order to weaken the moral claims of garden advocates he supported and strengthened those of housing advocates. The conflicting and legitimate claims made by both advocacy groups served Giuliani as a mechanism to intensify moral competition among local residents and, consequently, reduce the potential for social reconciliation and collective actualization.

In Los Angeles, the struggle of the South Central farmers was contrasted with the pressing need for more jobs. In this case, the Latinos’ struggle was opposed by a local African-American nonprofit – Concerned Citizens for South Central Los Angeles – which supported the removal of the garden and the construction of a distribution center on site. It was argued that the new development would offer new employment opportunities for the local community and would assist in remediating the neighborhood’s high rates of unemployment and poverty. Here too, urban officials took sides. Jan Perry, LA councilwoman from the 9th district (where the farm was located), associated herself with Concerned Citizens and was dismissive of the moral claims for space raised by the South Central gardeners. In line with Concerned Citizens, Perry ‘was astute at playing “the jobs card” in order to defend her development decisions for the 9th district’, justifying the removal of the farm to make way for more job opportunities.

However, unlike the New York scenario, opposition to the South Central gardeners was disrespectfully dismissive of any benefits the garden had to offer. Instead it portrayed the garden as a site of social misconduct and corruption. Capitalizing on the popular image of Latino illegal immigration, Concerned Citizens stressed the illegality of the gardeners’ occupation of space by referencing the court decision that handed the site over to the developer. As Juanita Tate, founder and head of Concerned Citizens, tried to explain to a Latino protester: ‘the legal issue has been solved, the court has ruled – what happens when the court rule baby?’ The morality of gardeners was further questioned by accenting the fact that some people had more than one plot of land. Tate used this fact to portray the garden as a ‘business enterprise’: ‘why would one farmer need twenty plots? Some of them got twenty some of them got ten. You don’t understand that there is money involved in this?’ Concerned Citizens argued that rather than being a service to the community, the farm was actually governed by unlawful and greedy citizens. Another
representative of Concerned Citizens, Mark Williams, argued that ‘there is no community garden as such on site, the time is up for the gardeners to be perceived as the community – they are not’. This demeaning attitude, directed from one minority community to another reflects the alienating effects of systemic disinvestment in neighborhoods such as South Central. When communities are forced to compete with one another over scarce resources, land-use conflicts can easily exacerbate already existing tensions within the community. More than instigators of conflict, struggles for community garden spaces could serve as sad reminders of antagonisms born from neglect.

In Vancouver, criticism of Strathcona’s garden advocates came from residents who were concerned with calming the traffic that poured through the neighborhood. In a letter to Mayor Gregor Robertson on February, 2013, the Strathcona Residents’ Association expressed its support for the viaducts removal and the subsequent Malkin Avenue expansion – the same plan that the gardeners of Strathcona were fighting against. This support arose out of the fact that expanding Malkin Avenue would necessarily divert traffic and its hazards from a residential to a commercial street. Therefore, the Strathcona Residents’ Association declared traffic calming, and not maintaining gardening space, as the neighborhood’s top priority – finally ‘returning Prior Street to the neighborhood it was designed to be’. For them, the gardeners of Strathcona had to compromise and accept alternative solutions – such as the relocation of their gardens to other areas of Strathcona Park which would not be affected by the road expansion – instead of strictly opposing a plan that will help eliminate the externalities of traffic in the neighborhood.

The Strathcona Residents’ Association gained support from Councilor Geoff Meggs of Vision Vancouver. Meggs capitalized on the city’s right of way in order to justify taking traffic from the downtown core along Malkin Avenue. This was articulated in his response to concerned gardeners who had written to him on the topic:

As you are aware, I’m sure, Malkin has been part of the city’s plans to protect Strathcona from traffic for many years… I share your concern to protect the values and achievements of your organization, but I am confident we can find solutions that open up opportunities to improve the surrounding neighborhoods, provide appropriate traffic options and make Cottonwood a permanent part of our city’s future. As long as Cottonwood is on a strategic road right-of-way, that security won’t be available.
Meggs used the city’s legitimate legal authority over space to side with traffic calming advocates and deflect the criticisms coming from gardeners, leaving the residents of Strathcona with the (false) choice of either calming traffic or preserving the original shape of the gardens. Presented as such, Meggs ignored more creative solutions that might have helped to promote both causes simultaneously, including efforts to reduce traffic overall. Indeed, as Oliver Kellhammer comments:

What Geoff Meggs doesn’t seem to understand is that the city isn’t just a machine for moving traffic and money through an architectural grid. It is a system also of places, each of which are full of culture, embedded history and deep cultural attachments. Would we move Commercial Drive to North Shore? How about Stanley Park to Burnaby? Of course not. Because unlike traffic, places can not be simply swapped around or re-routed.51

Giving precedence to places over traffic, to setting roots over increased mobility, to longevity over ephemerality, is what is missing from Meggs’ restrictive set of choices. Meggs’ aim of bettering Strathcona’s quality of life is commendable. But it should come hand in hand with strategies to preserve the integrity of cultural institutions intact and enable the community to maintain its connection to space.

As these cases in New York, Los Angeles, and Vancouver exemplify, urban communities, especially in poor areas, need to constantly negotiate over the prioritization of social and environmental benefits. Municipal governments repeatedly force communities to choose between competing benefits, and often end up setting one marginalized group against another. This intensifies local antagonisms, thereby diminishing the potential for urban communities to consolidate as a collective force of resistance. Moreover, this ‘divide-and-conquer’ strategy suggests that city officials often fail to see the true potential of urban sustainability, namely, the legitimation and provision of social and environmental benefits (e.g. community gardens, low-income housing, more jobs, and less traffic) in a unified and comprehensive manner. It is this potential that should be harnessed to ultimately transform cities to be more socially and environmentally just and thereby transform the auto-centric, market-driven, sprawled, segregated, and unjust urban design and development of the past fifty years.
Conclusion

There are myriad of ways in which community gardens can be re-appropriated for neoliberal ends. Real-estate developers, urban administrations, non-governmental organizations, and even urban citizens, create community garden forms or use community gardens in ways that accord with neoliberal goals. Here, the cultural, social, and environmental efforts of community gardeners to resist urban neoliberalism – as was shown in the previous chapter – are repeatedly pulled back into that same political and ideological system. As such, the capacity of community garden movements to articulate sustainability with social and environmental goals is impeded as they are recruited to support the ills that produce injustice in the first place: competition, gentrification, displacement, social antagonisms, and the marketization of urban space.

The question of whether community gardens, and by extension sustainability, are inherently progressive or regressive cannot be answered in a simple, straightforward or universal manner. The fact that regressive and progressive appropriations occur in the same spatial and temporal contexts demands a more nuanced and ambiguous understanding. Such ambiguity is present in cities such as Vancouver, where progressive community gardens such as Strathcona Community Gardens sit side-by-side with more regressive garden forms such as those located in new developments. These circumstances suggest a dialectical conclusion – that the potential for transformation is always accompanied by the dangers of co-optation.

Notes

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Conclusion: Drawing the Line between Status Quo and Transformation

The discussion presented above shows how urban sustainability creates opportunities to both confront and legitimize the neoliberalization of cities. As nearly every urban organization today proclaims to promote some degree of sustainability principles – from local communities and environmental movements to municipalities and multinational corporations – it becomes necessary to try and organize the myriad of appropriations and identify what characterizes those which are more progressive.

Sustainability was initially discussed as a strategy for capital accumulation. Vancouver served as an example of how urban administrations and private developers use the language of sustainability to lure private investors and affluent residents into town. Formal municipal plans such as the GCAP and the promotional language of new urban developments such as The Village on False Creek, produce sterile, spectacular, and consensual representations of sustainability to minimize disruption to imperatives of indefinite growth, efficiency, private profit, and expanded global trade. Framing sustainability as such, by implication, fails to confront the most fundamental features of neoliberalism that prevent an effective response to social and environmental problems. In particular, it glosses over the unequal distribution of environmental goods and bads, and the perpetuation of an affordability crisis.

Counter to these neoliberal forms of sustainability, community gardens were presented as a transformative alternative emerging from the context of everyday life. Community gardens in the Lower East Side, South Central, and Strathcona exemplified the ways in which sustainability can also be instrumentalized by urban citizens to legitimize local claims to space and promote social and environmental justice. Struggles to maintain autonomy over green urban spaces such as community gardens produce collective and civil representations of sustainability that openly oppose market-led urban development and the privatization of urban space. Framing sustainability as such, directly challenges neoliberalization and offers a more democratic response to social and environmental
problems. Rooted in the everyday experiences of marginalized communities, it fosters collective actualization, cultural preservation, environmental stewardship, and social justice.

Finally, it was shown how the transformative potential of community gardens can be co-opted back into the discourse of neoliberalism. Real-estate promoters and urban officials who appropriate the gardens as part of a glossy representation of sustainability, NGOs that through the practice of gardening help produce active, individualized, and mobile subjectivities, citizens who use gardens as exclusionary spaces and further segregate urban communities from one another, all of which are examples of how the product of everyday life is turned in a neoliberal direction. These appropriations articulate community gardens with market principles and social antagonisms, thereby nullifying the potential of everyday life to produce transformative, more collective and non-commodified, forms of sustainability. Framing community gardens as such, capitalizes on the sphere of everyday life to justify the perpetuation of a neoliberal ethos, namely through the production of a marketized, individualized, and alienated everyday.

This discussion helps us to identify what characteristics make a particular practice more likely to be turned in a transformative direction, or, in other words, what constitutes a sustainability that is not an event of neoliberal discourse. On the level of everyday life, this entails forming joint networks of community coordination that are responsible for increasing urban communities’ participation in social and environmental decision-making and hold local governments accountable in cases where they fail to adhere to socially and environmentally just goals. The coalition of social activists and community advocates in the struggles for community gardens in New York City, Los Angeles, and Vancouver had shown us that these types of networks are essential to receive greater recognition and ultimately resist regressive and market-based appropriations of urban space. Given the capacity to coordinate, communities get a sense of themselves, their political power, and common interest in democratizing and de-commodifying the regulation of urban space. On the level of public policy, this entails weakening competitive tendencies and re-asserting the redistributive role of local governments. Vancouver’s food policy is only one example of how municipalities can engage in various environmental and social improvements designed to make urban spaces more habitable for all residents (including non-human) rather than competitive for the benefit of a few. Governmental interventions
such as these signify the possibility of a broader, deeper and more transformative form of sustainability politics which seeks a more just distribution of social and environmental benefits.

Accordingly, this discussion helps us to identify what characteristics make a particular practice more likely to be turned in a neoliberal direction. On the level of everyday life, this entails producing individualized and entrepreneurial subjectivities responsible for their own well-being and which are alienated from collective and institutional concerns. Educational community gardens in the San Francisco Bay area and social conflicts between different community groups in New York, Los Angeles, and Vancouver had shown us how such subjectivities impede on the potential to think institutionally, thereby supporting a society fragmented into distinct communities and individuals who compete for scarce resources. On the level of public policy, this entails strategies to intensify inter-urban competition and make way for market-based solutions. In Vancouver, municipal plans such as the GCAP and mega-projects such as The Village on False Creek are mainly designed to attract more investment dollars and transfer the management of social and environmental concerns into the hands of the marketplace.

Nevertheless, the distinction between transformative and neoliberal directions is partly problematized by the fact that particular practices easily cross that line of separation. This suggests a process where sustainability initiatives are continuously negotiated and can turn in both directions. What is perceived and practiced as transformative can also be regressive at the same time. The appropriation of community gardens for both transformative and neoliberal ends manifests this fluidity, as the practice zigzags in and out of neoliberal discourse. If on the one hand community gardens serve as spaces for collective and political actualization against neoliberal forces, on the other hand, they serve as tools to further intensify and legitimize the conditions of urban neoliberalism. Similarly, if on the one hand the language of initiatives such as Vancouver’s GCAP work to support entrepreneurial tendencies, on the other hand they can also be used by citizens as political levers against processes of neoliberalization. Framing sustainability initiatives as such – always in the process of becoming – problematizes attempts to produce clear cut distinctions between progressive and regressive practices, as the line of separation between status quo and transformation is constantly crossed. As one of Berlin’s community gardeners notes: ‘I think all these projects...are moving along a very thin line.'
A very thin line between social change on the one hand and, on the other hand, complete cooptation by the system'1.

The dialectical qualities of sustainability point to the larger implications of this work in urban politics as it becomes difficult to praise or condemn forms of sustainability as either progressive or regressive outside the particular context or flow of social forces. Sustainability initiatives provide openings for both transformation and co-optation and their outcomes depend on the social forces that work to appropriate these abstract initiatives to different ends. The political-economic context in Vancouver has shown us that under a regime of entrepreneurialism, sustainability policies fail to confront the most fundamental features of neoliberalization that prevent an effective response to social and environmental injustices. However, this context also provides political opportunities for citizens to re-claim entrepreneurial initiatives to more just ends. Accordingly, community gardens have shown us that in the context of greater community autonomy and control over urban space, sustainability is guided toward a more just and equal provision of social and environmental benefits. However, the same social conditions also provide opportunities for the production of self-reliant, active, and competing citizen-subjects that adhere to further neoliberalization. Therefore, the push to introduce sustainability initiatives must be coupled with an examination of the social, political, and economic contexts that guide the implementation of these initiatives in practice – or in other words, the ‘actually existing sustainabilities’ that turn different practices, policies, and texts to different directions. The scale and pace of social and economic transformations in many urban contexts makes this task an even greater challenge as sustainability is constantly re-routed according to an ever-changing set of social, political, and economic conditions.

The initial aim of this thesis was to politicize urban sustainability and present it as having both radical and conservative forms. In so doing, I provided tools to differentiate between the two and identify the characteristics that might lead us toward the former. While drawing this distinction, I also identified the ways in which these two forms are articulated simultaneously with particular practices. Ultimately, this leads me to two concluding remarks. First, urban sustainability can and should be transformative. If emerging from the needs and values of marginalized communities, sustainability can offer direct challenges to urban neoliberal politics and promote social and environmental benefits for all. Realized as such, urban sustainability holds the capacity to articulate
together environmental betterment, social justice, and collective actualization, thereby producing a radical urban political ecology. Second, finding the particular practices through which such transformation might occur is the real challenge of sustainability. The high response rate of neoliberal capitalism works to instantly neutralize its opposition, a fact that makes it difficult to point at any practice as the harbinger of transformation. Such is the case of community gardens: together with serving as tools for collective actualization they are also used as part of a strategy for capital accumulation. Therefore, advancing urban sustainability is as much as expanding the creation of more grounded forms of transformation, as it is about identifying and condemning the ways in which neoliberalism works to articulate itself with sustainability.

Notes

1 A community gardener in Berlin, as quoted in Marit Rosol, “Community Volunteering as Neoliberal Strategy? Green Space Production in Berlin”, *Antipode* 44:1 (January 2012): 249
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