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## Urban Places: Nature and Community in the City

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One of the key arguments in the original edition of *Forcing the Spring* was that the concept of *place* in environmental thought and action needed to include an urban component. New environmental movements emerging in the 1970s and 1980s focused on the connections between natural environments and their surrounding human communities. These areas included what was traditionally characterized as “Nature” or “wilderness areas.” But the notion that human and natural environments were “inseparable,” as Rachel Carson had argued more than forty years ago, could also mean that “Nature” had an *urban* face.

In the 1990s and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an “urban environment” movement established itself throughout the country, identifying a new kind of community-based environmentalism. This focus on community especially impacted environmental groups interested in park and open space development. Open space has long been an environmental buzzword, referring to places outside urban areas or at the urban edge where there is little or no development. Earlier open space battles sought to *preserve* environmental assets, such as habitat, wildlife, and other forms of bio-diversity. They had not been about built environments, where there is little or no existing green space, where density is high, where contamination of the land is often extensive, and where the acquisition of land for parks or recreation seems at best only a distant possibility.

That began to change significantly in the 1990s. Environmental advocates began to redefine the open space issue as the need to re-envision community spaces and to reclaim rather than simply preserve such places. Such programs as community gardens, farmers’ markets in low-income communities, re-landscaping projects, and park and recreational opportunities in dense areas were embraced by a wide variety of community and environmental groups.

The movement to revitalize urban rivers and streams was indicative of this change. In the mid-1980s in Los Angeles, one of the places where the urban river restoration movement first emerged, the Los Angeles River was considered a bleak, hostile place, a concrete channel fenced off from its surrounding neighborhoods. It was a River that had been straightened and (presumably) tamed, “an effluent dominated waterway” or “concrete freeway,” as some of its flood control engineer/managers vicariously described it. But led by poet and performance artist Lewis MacAdams, a new organization, Friends of the L.A. River (FoLAR), was created. Its initial goal was simply to insist that the L.A. River was indeed a river. MacAdams, whose activist roots were more bound up with his identity as poet and affinity for imaginative 1960s-style protest than any specific environmental lineage, tended to attract like-minded artists, planners, architects, designers, and neighborhood activists to his “40 year art project” to bring the River back to life, as he constantly proclaimed.<sup>1</sup>

In the late 1990s, as this effort spread and made cause with other urban river renewal movements around the country, MacAdams extended his River advocacy to address issues of community change. This “poet laureate of the River,” as he was called, teamed

up with a number of players, such as Chinatown political activist Chi Mui, who were interested in neighborhood as well as River revitalization. Along with a host of other neighborhood Asian and Latino neighborhood advocates, as well as environmental groups and public interest lawyers, these community/environmental advocates launched a battle against a powerful developer over a plan to develop warehouses and light industry in a large undeveloped lot adjacent to the River. The site, known as the Cornfield due to its earlier agricultural history, bridged Chinatown with other Latino neighborhoods just north and east of downtown. Employing traditional as well as unconventional strategies, the Cornfield fight (the developer eventually sold the site to the state of California to establish a new park) became emblematic of the power of this new community-environment alliance and the continuing desire to renew if not reinvent Nature in the City.<sup>2</sup>

As the Cornfield battle suggested, new constituencies, such as Latino and Asian immigrants, were becoming important advocates for the development of urban parks, community gardens, and other land uses that established both community and environmental benefits. This became especially pronounced in relation to Latino neighborhoods. A poll undertaken by the Latino Issues Forum in the late 1990s, for example, indicated that 91% of Latinos surveyed thought environmental issues were important. However, 61% of those surveyed also felt that whites were the ones who made the decisions about environmental questions. Those numbers were borne out by the large majorities that Latinos (and African-Americans) provided for two California state environmental bond issues that for the first time provided for some urban park development. But these same supporters did not necessarily call themselves “environmentalists,” a term still largely reserved for the national environmental groups. But neither for that matter did someone like Lewis MacAdams identify himself as an environmentalist, yet his affinity for community politics came directly out of his Urban Nature advocacy and vice versa.<sup>3</sup>

National environmental groups such as NRDC, Environmental Defense (formerly the Environmental Defense Fund) and the Audubon Society began themselves to embrace urban park advocacy as a basis for stretching and redefining their own agendas. Both NRDC and Environmental Defense established an environmental justice component as part of the focus in their Los Angeles (and in New York as well for NRDC) offices in the 1990s. The Audubon Society also established urban nature centers around the country, including its initiative at Debs Park in a low-income Latino neighborhood in

northeast Los Angeles that was also tied to efforts to renew the park through a variety of restoration projects, hiking trails, and guided tours. In 2003, Audubon hired long-time environmental justice activist Elsa Lopez as director of the Debs Park program. Lopez, who had been executive director of one of the first environmental justice groups in Los Angeles, Madres del Este de Los Angeles Santa Isabel (Mothers of East Los Angeles), had previously volunteered in the Debs Park program due to her concern that this inner city park had for too long been a neglected site. In her new position, Lopez sought to make accessible this slice of Nature in the City through outreach to low-income residents in the northeast and throughout the L.A. region. Inspired in part by the Debs Park project, other Audubon Society Urban Nature Center initiatives in the inner city were developed in East Palo Alto, California, Philadelphia, and Phoenix, in predominantly African-American and Latino neighborhoods.<sup>4</sup>

A number of environmental justice groups and advocates also came to see the importance of “urban nature” as part of a community renewal agenda that they began to embrace in the 1990s. Penny Newman, one of the environmental justice leaders profiled in *Forcing the Spring*, tells how her organization, the Center for Community Action and Environmental Justice, underwent a paradigm shift along these lines extending and transforming their long time environmental justice advocacy work. Since the 1970s, Newman and other members in her community of Glen Avon in Riverside County in California had been engaged in a classic “risk discrimination” battle related to the nearby Stringfellow Acid Pits hazardous waste site. After a long and arduous process of identifying the responsible parties and debates over what kind of clean up or remediation should occur, some funds became available for community input regarding what should happen to the land, including areas not immediately adjacent to the site. “Our entire community had been impacted by what had happened at Stringfellow,” Newman said of the new approach that evolved among the community participants. “We knew we wanted something that would help provide a kind of rebirth, a place we could come to appreciate and feel renewed.” Following a series of community meetings, the issue of a park kept coming up. A 13-acre site then vacant became available and a plan for hiking trails, a Nature center, a community garden, and for recreational activities was developed. By 2004, the community garden was operating, hiking trails had been established, and the more ambitious plans for the other park uses were close to realization. “It was a very different notion of remediation for

us,” Newman concluded. “We wanted to make the community whole.”<sup>5</sup>

While efforts by groups to promote and mobilize around open space/urban nature issues mushroomed in this period, they faced enormous obstacles in many urban areas associated with scarce land, concrete-dominated landscapes, auto-centered streetscapes, and contamination problems impacting both existing as well as vacant sites that could potentially become available for new land uses such as parks (or schools, or housing, or commercial and industrial activity). A critical problem community groups (including environmental justice groups) faced was how to address urban land uses when potentially competing needs, for economic development, housing, and new schools, or for urban park, community garden or recreational space development, clashed over what to do with particular sites.

One important breakthrough in efforts to overcome such divisions took place in Madison, Wisconsin regarding 26 acres of open land in a working class neighborhood in the north side of the city, as well as an additional five acres of land adjacent to the site. Both community food security, environmental and affordable housing advocates coveted the sites, for a possible community garden, a community farm, nature trails, woodland and prairie restoration, and affordable housing development. Through a complex process of negotiation between a Community Land Trust, some urban nature/environmental organizations, and a community food group, “Friends of Troy Gardens,” the different advocates sought to overcome contending agendas, distinctive ways of identifying issues and needs, and a complex political process governing the uses of the land. In addition, immigrant constituencies, including Hmong gardeners, were part of the mix of discussion, negotiation, and eventual decision-making about how to develop and manage the land. By 2004, Troy Gardens had become an integrated, multi-use site, with a series of food programs (a community food garden as well as a youth garden and a functioning urban farm that served several dozen Madison residents through a subscriber-based arrangement), an environmental and educational site, and 30 affordable co-housing units. The different goals and constituency needs had not fully disappeared, but the promise of expanding rather than conflicting agendas at Troy Gardens could be seen as one possible direction for environmentalists, community food advocates and affordable housing developers alike.<sup>6</sup>

A more cautionary example could be seen in the conflict that emerged in South Los Angeles when one of the first environmental justice groups in the

region, Concerned Citizens for South Central, took the side of a developer against a group of immigrant Latino community gardeners. Concerned Citizens had first been formed in the mid 1980s to battle a proposed solid waste incinerator (the LANCER Project) in South Los Angeles. Successful in its effort, Concerned Citizens expanded its reach over the next two decades to address housing and community economic development issues while maintaining an interest in urban environmental questions such as waste generation and recycling. The abandoned LANCER site, meanwhile, was turned into a flourishing community garden site (the largest in the city) linked to the nearby Los Angeles Regional Food Bank who initially made the site available to some of the recipients of the food bank. Over time, the former LANCER site became an immigrant garden, with the land tilled by more than 318 Latino immigrants. The gardeners built fences around their plots, and planted trees that in turn attracted birds and butterflies. Vines began to grow on the chain-link fences and formed canopies over the pathways. As this immigrant garden evolved, it became for some a magical urban landscape. The dense foliage created a near jungle like effect that also improved the overall ambient environment. And the gardeners began to grow many crops not found outside ethnic markets, also making the garden a horticultural exploration.

However, in 2003, due to a complex history of land acquisition and transfer, a developer claimed rights to the land and proposed a warehouse development on the site with a small park adjacent to it, eliminating the garden in the process. The developer enlisted the support of Concerned Citizens on the basis of the need for jobs in the community, though garden advocates, such as the Latino Urban Forum, argued that the garden not only provided an economic opportunity for the gardeners (who called themselves urban farmers) but had created a type of Urban Nature capable of renewing an urban landscape in an otherwise bleak urban environment.<sup>7</sup>

The Concerned Citizens/Latino immigrant farmer conflict and Troy Gardens success story are both representative examples of the difficulties and problems as well as the opportunities associated with seeking to expand agendas. This has been particularly the case in urban settings where multiple players and interests have vied for scarce resources while seeking to address huge needs. How such conflicts work themselves out is as critical as the need for establishing that marriage of community and environment.

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## (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Robert Gottlieb, Environmentalism Unbound: Exploring New Pathways for Change, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001

<sup>2</sup> Paul Stanton Kibel, "Los Angeles' Cornfield: An Old Blueprint for New Greenspace," *Stanford Environmental Law Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 2, June 2004, 275-348.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Gottlieb, "Rediscovering the River: A Community-Environmental Coalition Secures Urban Parkland in L.A.," *Orion* Afield, March 2002; Robert Gottlieb, "Expanding Environmental Horizons," *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 2000

<sup>4</sup> Personal communication with Gail Ruderman Feuer, July 30, 2004; Personal communication with Jerilyn Mendoza, September 30, 2003; Dan Koeppel, "High Hopes," *Audubon*, March 2004, available at [http://magazine.audubon.org/features0403/urban\\_oasis.html](http://magazine.audubon.org/features0403/urban_oasis.html); personal communication with Elsa Lopez, August 3, 2004

<sup>5</sup> Personal communication with Penny Newman, August 3, 2004

<sup>6</sup> Marcia Caton Campbell and Danielle A. Salus. 2003. Community and Conservation Land Trusts as Unlikely Partners? The Case of Troy Gardens, Madison, Wisconsin. *Land Use Policy* 20, 3: 169-180.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Gottlieb and James Rojas, "L.A. Should Cultivate this Rare Urban Seed," *Los Angeles Times*, March 23, 2004