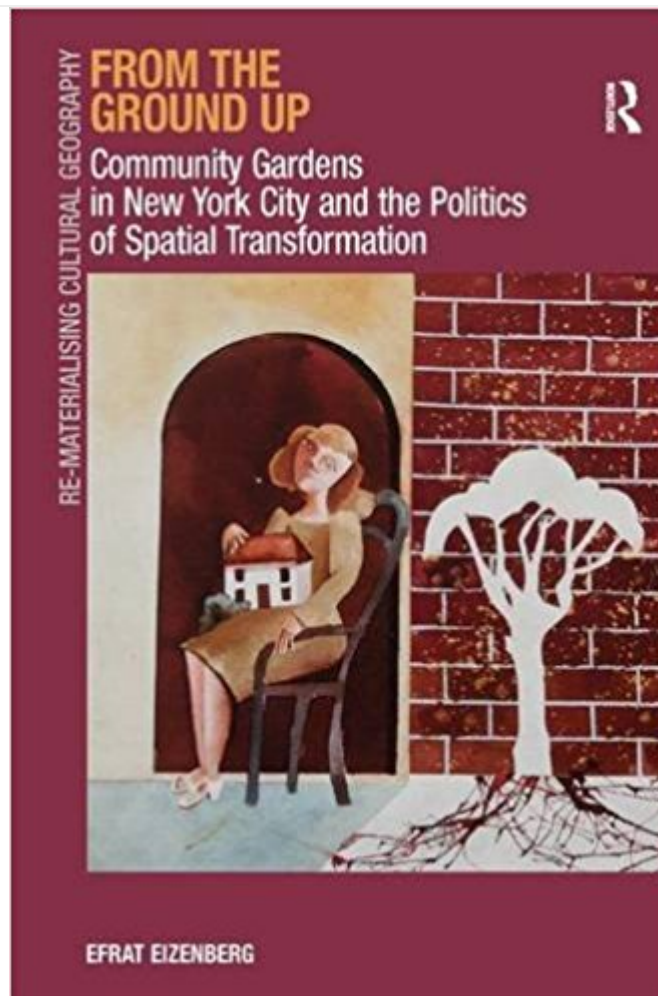


# {essays in history}

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## From the Ground Up: Community Gardens in New York City and the Politics of Spatial Transformation



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### Reviewed Work(s)

*From the Ground Up: Community Gardens in New York City and the Politics of Spatial Transformation*. Efrat Eizenberg (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013). Pp. 208. Hardcover, \$97.00.

Today's cities are increasingly shaped by opaque, extra-local forces. In the U.S. this phenomenon is manifested mostly in New York City, which has witnessed a style of urban governance reflecting the ascendancy of neoliberal policies since the mid-1970s. From backlash politics against the Great Society to a renewed commitment to the private sector, successive administrations have striven to rebrand the "Big Apple" as sanitized—an environment catering to upper-class consumer needs and tourism, prioritizing global business interests over those of the local public. Assertions that alternatives to this restructuring no longer exist attend these neoliberal reforms.<sup>[1]</sup>

In *From the Ground Up: Community Gardens in New York City and the Politics of Spatial Transformation*, Efrat Eizenberg argues that cracks in what politicians have presented as "inevitable" appear in the unevenly developed spaces demarcating marginalized urban neighborhoods. For the author, this is particularly true within community gardens—once abandoned spaces transformed by area residents to serve local needs. Evoking Henri Lefebvre and David Harvey, Eizenberg suggests that it is in the margins of modern capitalism where real autonomy, and the ability to say "No!," most exists. (170) By transforming space, locals develop the potential to create a countervailing politics stressing use-over exchange-values. But, the author laments, it is in community gardeners' very success that lies their greatest obstacle: as grassroots politics institutionalize and gain stability, their revolutionary capacities tame.

*From the Ground Up* guides readers through three levels where productions of space occur: the individual, collective, and institutional.. By reworking actual earth, individuals better understand the urban environment as an *oeuvre*, or work, and claim their right to the city. Like

Lefebvre, the author centers reproductions of power in the everyday, noting that space “constitutes, produces, and reproduces social arrangements” and “therefore also [holds] the potential for social transformation.” (3-4) Altering their surroundings, gardeners find “...ways to make it a supportive environment for their collective needs...” (3) For Eizenberg, this is formative in producing radical political alternatives through (counter-hegemonic) spatial practices. These gardens too are powerful precisely because of their celebratory and aesthetic qualities—in the flowers and vegetables, garden sculptures, barbeques and harvest festivals, marginalized residents reintegrate “their lost history and their culture...back into space.” (38) Produced in the open and by nature a collective effort, passersby can observe “differential spaces” in the gardens, allowing even non-gardeners the chance to witness, and ponder, the “cracks.” This experience exposes discrepancies between the commonwealth of the gardens and the lack thereof in other realms of life. (47)

While this budding consciousness can sow the seeds of a “counter-politics,” the author notes that specific, historical catalysts tend to propel politics of a larger scale. For New York’s community gardeners, it was the Giuliani administration’s unremitting onslaught against their plots which spurred a citywide gardening coalition and eventually led to the movement’s institutionalization. But in this process the participatory politics and autonomous spatial practices cultivated through the gardens’ creation were restricted by new bureaucratic guidelines. (167)

An environmental psychologist, Eizenberg derives much of her analysis from participant-observation and extensive interviews with gardeners and non-gardeners, leading activists, and representatives from both greening nonprofits and municipal agencies. These are supplemented with a less robust array of pamphlets, coalition minutes, and government documents. The book’s strengths are in its wealth of testimonies—gardeners often recount how remaking past landscapes engendered a sense of “psychological ownership” over the land, piquing interest in local issues—and in its critique of institutionalized community gardening organizations.

For historians, the latter contribution is most bountiful. While volumes are devoted to the oral history of gardeners, there is a dearth of critical insight concerning the institutionalization of community gardening. An

overriding question is, “what happens when the public sector transfers responsibility to civil society?” (75) In the age of neoliberalism, the nonprofit “shadow state” is increasingly expected to act as the steward of social justice. Yet, as in the case of the New York Restoration Project, the actions of nonprofits are often circumscribed by their moneyed benefactors. After purchasing over 50 to-be-auctioned gardens in the spring of 1999, the Project professionally redesigned them to the suiting of their donors. While becoming more “public” than ever—largely due to their open, park-like settings—area residents described the gardens as alienating “flower museums.” (68-73) At the opposite end are the gardens saved from auctioning by the Trust for Public Land, which placed garden ownership in the hands of local land trusts whose boards abound with neighborhood residents. Yet this grassroots model of ownership “demanded that gardeners develop a whole new set of skills and knowledge” and repositioned their collective action within a rigid structure. (67) Problematically, both organizations reaffirmed “the importance of ownership *per se* as the only means of protecting public space from market forces” while diminishing the responsibility of city agencies. (74) Meanwhile most community gardens gained precarious protection from Green Thumb, a municipal program whose bureaucratic proscriptions often foment tensions among grassroots gardeners.

*From the Ground Up* is useful for scholars studying everyday practices of resistance and will more broadly appeal to those interested in sustainability and urban agriculture. While highly provocative, the author’s politics can, at times, suffuse her subjects with a seemingly disproportionate radicalism; for example, have most of these community gardeners gained an alternative political consciousness, or does their collective politicization extend only as far as the garden? The demographics of garden preservation leadership (largely white, young professionals) receive too little attention as well. Conceptually, “community gardens” might be further complicated by addressing the ways in which preservation leadership crafted this very image. Notwithstanding, *From the Ground Up* is a well written, thoughtful work.

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[1] For example, see Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992).



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