

# Codesigning a Workshop Garden

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Rather than being abandoned, a waterfront garden was upgraded and expanded after Hurricane Sandy damaged much of the Rockaway Peninsula in Queens, New York City in 2012. While the garden transformation was undertaken by the landscape architecture practice Till Design,<sup>3</sup> and coordinated by a larger team called Landscapes of Resilience,<sup>4</sup> the role of the gardeners is equally important to bring forward. We are a landscape architect and educator (Marshall, principal of Till Design) and a project coordinator and urbanist (Reynolds) and we participated with gardeners during a recovery process following Hurricane Sandy. In this chapter we show that the upgrading and expansion of the garden can best be seen as emerging from the situated efforts of the gardeners.

The garden is located at Beach 41st Houses, which is a New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) complex built in 1973 and it is now home to approximately 1,700 people. The Houses are part of Edgemere, a neighborhood on the Rockaway Peninsula. Notably, the Houses are located on the low lying Jamaica Bay side of the peninsula. They are not alongside the iconic boardwalk that characterizes the Atlantic Ocean, which was more urgently renovated with dunes as a recovery and resiliency measure after Hurricane Sandy. The garden is a private, community garden and is composed of a long row of personal garden plots arranged parallel to the shore. All of the plots were destroyed by Hurricane Sandy and the gardeners sought to rebuild them in the same location. The Landscapes of Resilience team (hereafter referred to as the Team) was funded by the TKF Foundation<sup>5</sup> to assist in this rebuilding work and to expand the garden area so that more residents might use it. The designed features of the expanded garden include a reliable and accessible fresh water source for each plot, a shared lawn area, planting beds with flowering plants and trees, a swale, additional gardening plots, signage, benches, and a pergola.

The TKF Foundation supports the building of gardens as sacred spaces. The Team interpreted the notion of the sacred as emergent, through action and interaction. Entitled the Workshop Garden, the design concept for the upgraded and expanded garden came from an observation that the gardeners solve problems and generate ideas through “workshopping,” which is something broadly defined to include humans and nature. Till Design aimed to build more comfortable spaces for such interaction to occur thus, fostering the possibility that a sense of sacredness might arise. Settings were designed for events and meetings as well as chit-chat for productive dissent and consensus. The Workshop Garden was, therefore, conceived as something that is never finished. It is a productive and dynamic space that is constantly codesigned by people as well as nonhumans. By

3. <http://tilldesign.com>

4. [https://www.nrs.fs.fed.us/nyc/focus/resilience\\_health\\_well\\_being/landscapes\\_resilience](https://www.nrs.fs.fed.us/nyc/focus/resilience_health_well_being/landscapes_resilience)

5. <http://naturesacred.org>

codesign we refer to design action that is both diffuse and shared and can be found outside of human agency.

When we began the project in 2012, we elicited the knowledge and experience of the gardeners and grounds staff of the Houses. Rather than focusing on consensus building alone, our approach was intentionally open and flexible to expression, contention, and negotiation. What we found, over time, was that the recovery and rebuilding process was generally supported by collaboration. Importantly, we also found that collaboration was sometimes undermined by everyday tensions. We have chosen to bring these everyday tensions forward because they illustrate how the gardeners shaped this project.

In an image essay format, we lay bare the ways that everyday disturbances occur amidst larger disturbances, such as the Hurricane, and how these more benign or routine tensions presented challenges to recovery. We have chosen to pair text and image vignettes evenly as this allows us to best communicate the variety of granular tensions we encountered, and shaped. We believe that this format demonstrates how our work was impactful and genuinely fostered social and social-ecological resilience within a recovery process. Ultimately, we aim to give recognition to the persistence and resilience of the gardeners as they continue work together to strengthen social ties and develop collective mechanisms for recovery amidst a demanding coastal setting in New York City.

During an earlier project conducted by coauthor Reynolds,<sup>6</sup> a small intergenerational group of women was convened to reflect on the history and present state of their Rockaway neighborhoods. They were senior women who had chosen to move to the Rockaways between 1970 and 1978 as well as young women in their sophomore and junior years of high school. The older generation shared personal stories about moving to the peninsula. One woman moved from the U.S. South in search of economic opportunity. Another sought safety for her daughters after witnessing harassing encounters between them and men in her Harlem neighborhood; this woman remarked on the different lifestyle Rockaway offered. Yet another spoke about a chance excursion to Rockaway with her fisherman husband. When they came across the newly built Ocean Village, now renamed Arverne View (a housing estate that was developed after many beachside hotels and bungalows were demolished), they decided to live there so they could go fishing together. Accordingly, they were a part of a wave of African Americans moving to areas that were previously settled by Irish and German-Jewish immigrants.

In addition, the older generation described Playland, a much-loved amusement park that was located in the Rockaway Beach and Seaside neighborhoods

6. "Towards a Collective Future: Collectively curating alternative narratives of the past" was Reynold's 2015 MA thesis submitted to the Theories of Urban Practice program at Parsons School of Design. Marshall was Reynolds' thesis supervisor.



Figure 1: Joy.

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of the peninsula (Figures 1A, 1B, 1C, 1D). The park was closed in 1987 due to disinvestment and increased insurance premiums. Prior to the closing, the park had been bifurcated by Robert Moses' development of Shorefront Parkway. The older women described Playland as a place of community. The social life of the Rockaways in the 1950s–1970s was fraught with racial tension and spatial conflict (Kaplan and Kaplan 2003). Playland however, allowed for *joy*, comingling, and connection. Long after it was dismantled, memories of the amusement park shaped a sense of loss that resonated among the younger generation. They described feeling jealous for never having known that version of Rockaway. Thus, we assert that the demolition of Playland and other such disturbances have been profoundly disorienting, and are as resonant within the collective memory of the Rockaways as the 2012 Hurricane disturbance.

Hurricane Sandy made landfall in the Rockaways on October 29, 2012, and the Beach 41st Houses' residents experienced approximately 4 feet of



**Figure 2: Refusal.**

Photos A and B by Victoria Marshall; photos C and D by Elizabeth Gilchrist; all used with permission.

flooding across the grounds and in the first-floor building lobbies. The residents lost power for 2 weeks and had to rely on back-up generators. Some residents reported sporadic power outages for a month. In a response to the storm, NYCHA closed the Houses' community garden because officials feared that the soil was contaminated due to the inflow of water from Jamaica Bay. One year after the closure, NYCHA tests proved the soil was safe, and the garden was reopened. In the meantime, most gardeners abided by the closure rule. Their unattended plots became overgrown and filled with windblown trash (Figures 2C and 2D). However, in the midst of the sense of uncertainty about the future of the community garden, two gardeners refused to stop gardening. This is because those gardeners grow vegetables and they form an important part of their diet and household budget (Figures 2A and 2B).

The Houses' community garden was founded in the early 1990s by residents and it is composed of 32 plots. Each plot is enclosed by a chain link fence and secured by a padlocked gate. In addition, each plot is numbered and



**Figure 3: Desirable.**

All photos by Victoria Marshall, used with permission.

registered to a specific gardener. Residents reapply every year for permission to manage their plot and in general, one or two plots become available for new owners each year. The garden is a setting that allows for a pleasant experience of the mostly still waters of Jamaica Bay. In addition, the Houses' shoreline is enlivened by the presence of dogs and their owners, fishermen, and a group of residents who relax in a shelter made of found materials (Figures 3A and 3B).

In response to the prevalence of chain link fences around and within the Houses, an initial design idea for the expansion of the garden was to remove part of the fence and open an access point from the garden to the bay. In addition, a “workshopping” setting was proposed under an adjacent mature tree that cast a deep, welcoming shade. This idea was rejected by the gardeners. The response ranged from a view that a gate would be a nuisance and for some, it was undesirable. There was a perceived fear that strangers might come through the gate and steal plants and or tools from the gardens. Although there emerged an agreement that the gate was possible, there was



**Figure 4: Inside.**

All photos by Elizabeth Gilchrist, used with permission.

consensus that it needed to remain locked. Consequently, coauthor Marshall decided to change this design concept. She removed the gate to the bay and relocated the “workshopping” setting into its present location in a new pergola. This is one of many redesigns that were made to uphold a collective vision for the expanded garden (Figures 3C and 3D).

Gardening restarted, officially, in the summer of 2014 and the Team hired a community organizer to support the gardeners in their efforts to clear their overgrown plots (Figures 4A, 4B, and 4C). The everyday presence of community organizer, Elizabeth Gilchrist, brought to our attention many tensions. In particular, there was contention about the appropriate use of the lawn, which was to become part of the expanded garden area. Dog owners were using it as a space to exercise their dogs however, dog waste was consistently left behind (Figure 4D). There was a fear of encountering an unleashed, large breed dog such as, a pitbull. For example, gardeners had experienced their smaller pets feeling threatened when out for a walk, and sometimes the



**Figure 5: Pond.**

All photos by Victoria Marshall, used with permission.

gardeners themselves feared being attacked. For these reasons many gardeners felt irritated by dog owners' behavior, would not walk on the grass, and discouraged their children from playing there.

The gardeners convened to develop a solution to this problem and there was a design outcome. In the spring of 2015 the Team coordinated a series of weekend signage workshops. Signs were created by the gardeners to express the meaning and personal sentiment they held for their garden plots. In addition, the signs were designed to counter the vernacular style set by NYCHA. Rather than the use of 'NO!', the new signs engaged messages that supported positive decision making about the appropriate use of the lawn.

Within the expanded garden area water pools when it rains. In addition, when high tide and storm events coincide, further waterlogging occurs. It mostly collects in two large areas; the first area is characterized by an emerging saltmarsh-like environment. A member of the NYCHA grounds staff stopped mowing this area in 2014 because it was consistently so wet that





Figure 6: Listen.

All photos by Victoria Marshall, used with permission.

her mower would get stuck. The second area was more critical for Till Design to address because the waterlogging regularly made that lawn area muddy and unusable. The design solution was to build a pergola on elevated ground (a covered shelter with a picnic table for events and meetings) and construct a swale to direct and absorb surface water flow (Figures 5A, 5B, 5C, and 5D).

The swale concept initially generated much chit-chat among gardeners and grounds staff alike; “We don’t want a pond!”, “Who will maintain it?—not us!” Ultimately contention about this proposed change allowed us to engage in a meaningful conversation about sea level rise. Rather than building a wall or a levee, a swale is a design element that ameliorates everyday waterlogging as it absorbs surface water and allows it to infiltrate slowly after a storm passes or the tide subsides. The bay is encroaching on the grounds at the same time as the gardeners are elevating their plots and embedding their gardening practices deeper into the shoreline. Our approach for engaging this situation



**Figure 7: Privacy.**

All photos by Lindsay K. Campbell, USDA Forest Service, used with permission.

was to find a material solution that will help the gardeners live better with the everyday flux of water rather than, trying to keep it out.

As the expanded garden design project moved forward, our codesign process became an increasingly embedded experience (Figures 6A, 6B, 6C, and 6D). We operated from the standpoint that the gardeners should have an opportunity to make close connections with us. In order to support the development of trust and mutual understanding about our intentions, we continually met with the gardeners to build a garden that was reflective of their values, experiences, and sense of meaning. Coauthor Reynolds and the contractor Craig Desmond became people to whom the gardeners could ask questions and convey creative ideas or feedback on a particular design element. This became an essential role after Gilcrist departed the project to begin her studies.

An example of this occurred when Desmond demarcated the boundaries of a new planting bed with spray paint. The gardeners had seen the

approved design in the form of drawings many times but, as lines were painted on the grass, everything became more real. One gardener sounded the alarm vociferously because the garden beds were perceived as “too big” and overlapped with an area where children sometimes play. After listening, coauthor Marshall revised the planting bed layout.

While this might be understood as an example of the limits of representation and a reflection on the limited ability of the gardeners to read a plan, which is an abstraction of a place they are familiar with. We share this moment of tension in order to reflect upon the garden codesign process more generally. The chit-chat with Reynolds and Desmond, which continued until there was a consensus about the appropriate extent of the expanded garden, was an important moment that brought the gardeners closer together.

In the spring of 2013, in the midst of an impending storm, the residents and the NYCHA Green Team planted chrysanthemums and ornamental cabbages under an ominous grey sky (Figures 7A, 7B, 7C, and 7D). The planting workshop was as an initiative supported by NYCHA. We saw it as an opportunity for the gardeners to be together outside of their individual plots and to create something jointly. During this workshop a theft occurred. Gilcrist exclaimed that someone had been in an avid gardener’s garden and stolen her vegetables. The gardener, in a moment of anger and frustration, then began to pull her plants out at the root, ripping them from the soil and discarding them all. She was defiantly letting us know that she’d rather quit gardening than have her produce stolen.

The Houses are part of a neighborhood where many people are resource poor. It is not a stretch to imagine that a hungry resident would help themselves to food. Nevertheless, the gardener felt a distinct sense of trespass—a feeling shared by all of the gardeners. The private quality of garden plots is evident in their layout, selection of materials, and arrangement of plants. For example, more valuable plants are located away from the shared path and some are covered in protective string. Valuable items such as gardening tools are stored in gardeners’ apartments and they are transported using hand carts. The theft of the gardener’s private vegetables reinforced assumptions about what exactly is shared or not in this community garden. Her fellow garden members rallied around her and with their consolation, she recovered from the disappointment of the moment.

The Houses’ gardeners were an informal garden collective at the start of the Workshop Garden project (Figures 8A, 8B, 8C, and 8D). After they felt supported in their efforts to organize, they coalesced into an official NYCHA Resident Green Committee (RGC) in the winter of 2016. As an RGC the gardeners entered under an institutional umbrella, which allowed them to apply for small grants for self-led beautification and community engagement



**Figure 8: Collaborate.**

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**workshops. At this time, a group of local organizations and individuals came together to support greening in the surrounding neighborhood and raise the profile of the already existing resilience activities of the residents.**

**Three greening sites—Edgemere Farm, Seagirt Community Garden, and The Rockaway Youth Task Force Garden—joined forces with coauthor Reynolds and the Beach 41st RGC secretary. The group became known as the East Rockaway Growing Coalition (ERGC). The name intentionally emphasizes the east end of the peninsula, as the locus of their network, in order to differentiate their work from those groups on the west end. This is because the east end has received the least attention, historically, and does not figure in the summer beachfront showcase, which signifies the west end. The ERGC participated in the many community meetings throughout 2012–2016 that were about the redevelopment of the peninsula after Hurricane Sandy. The group acted to fortify the community and request access to the promised new resources. In this way, the workshop approach expanded its focus of concern**



Figure 9: Picnic.

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from the immediate garden space and into the surrounding neighborhood, toward a collaboration with other community gardeners, and beyond.

In the early summer of 2015, the Houses' residents were concerned about being outside because a shooting incident had occurred one recent afternoon. During this tense summer, we were joined by artist Carmen Bouyer for a series of weekend signage workshops. We later realized that our playful presence helped the gardeners to be outside more, and so we planned more events for the next year. Although gatherings are discouraged by NYCHA, in the summer of 2016 the Team hosted a potluck picnic in the pergola, even though the roof had yet to be installed (Figures 9A and 9B). There were also two picnics in the fall of 2016 after the roof had been completed.

During these events, people create spaces anew. For example, the contractor team at Natural Garden Landscapes rigged up two stoves and cooked for everyone (Figure 9D), while some gardeners hosted separate small gatherings in their garden plots. The garden secretary was inspired by these events



**Figure 10: Care.**

All photos by Carmen Bouyer, used with permission.

and in the fall of 2016 she hosted a workshop of her own initiative. Supported by a community block grant, she hosted art classes where participants were invited to tour the gardens with her and then paint something that inspired them. Looking forward, a gardener shared with us that she would like to host weekly church group meetings in the pergola. Another gardener was planning for her daughter’s birthday party in the garden. A third gardener set up a semi-permanent shade structure across the path so that his partner, who is not a gardener, can join him outside on the weekend (Figure 9C).

The planting beds that surround the pergola were built by volunteers in the summer of 2016. Relying on the collaborative networks established during our time of engagement, we elicited support from neighbors, including a tenant association and resident green committees in other nearby public housing complexes, the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, NYCHA’s Green City Force, and local community organizations including the members of the East Rockaway Growing Coalition. One hundred people

participated in this event however, the question remains who will care for the Workshop Garden going forward? And how will the Workshop Garden continue to support resilience?

While the expanded garden codesign process and the project of constructing it brought more community connections and beauty to the Houses, it also created new tasks for an already understaffed NYCHA grounds crew (Figures 10A, 10B). Our goal therefore, has been to encourage the gardeners to continue to care for the spaces beyond their plots, in partnership with the grounds staff. We were inspired by the gardeners who had already ‘jumped the path’ and planted decorative plants in the lawn opposite their garden plot. In response, Till Design added five new gardening plots in the lawn so that more gardeners could join. The new plots include painted flags, which signal that the expanded garden area is a specially cared for place (Figures 10C, 10D). Lastly, funding from a small grant supported ongoing garden making and maintenance in the 2017 growing season.

## Conclusion

While Hurricane Sandy was the initiator of our presence at the garden, we have emphasized the important historical context of the Rockaways, which has experienced both social and natural forms of disaster. New York City Urban Renewal in the 1960s and 1970s is an example of a devastating redevelopment project that removed entire neighborhoods on the Rockaway peninsula. It left a patchwork of vacant lots, historical beach bungalows, single-family homes, as well as, public and private housing estates. In spite of the challenges, Rockaway’s decentralized networks of activists and advocates play a critical role in supporting the resilience of the residents today.

The legacy of African American religious organizations of the mid 20th century, which fought to ensure the right to adequate housing for communities of color under great racial tension and discrimination, persists (Davies 1966). This is linked with today’s local nonprofit efforts to politically engage diverse communities of young people, and to support healthier environments through care. The east end of the peninsula is anything but inactive and accordingly, we worked to connect residents of the Houses with the current group of activists and advocates. As such, the Workshop Garden now functions as a type of public space. It affords the opportunity for encounters that range from a personal sense of the sacred to heated chit-chat. In addition, the garden has better spaces for structured dialogue aimed at specific directives like producing food as well as, community building and participation in debates about the next round of redevelopment on the peninsula.

Embedded engagement helped us to join with the gardeners and their gardens, and to learn with them how to practice amidst everyday disturbances, which stand on top of historical disturbances. Our codesign role in the Workshop Garden was completed in the fall of 2016 and we found that the gardener-led process allowed us to shape a garden that is actively supporting the transformation of the peninsula in an ongoing way. We also found that it is only because of the gardeners practices that this type of public space in a private community garden is possible, and sustainable. Finally, we found like the gardeners themselves, we have a deep attraction to the individual garden plots, which help to make the Workshop Garden and this shoreline so active.

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