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From Open Data to Open Space: Translating Public Information Into Collective Action

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From Open Data to Open Space: Translating Public Information Into Collective Action

Regular New Yorkers with access to accurate information, in context, provided together with support from a small, nimble and experienced staff, can and do organize collectively to create tangible results and real change in their neighborhoods. Together, they inspire grassroots change well beyond the boundaries of neighborhood vacant lots.

Keywords

open data, community gardens, vacant lots, open space, signs, online map, municipal data

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Thanks to the 596 Acres Team for making New York City better every day!

The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is...one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights. - David Harvey

WHERE IS THE LAND?

596 Acres is New York City's community land access program, helping neighbors organize around and gain access to the city's vacant land. We combine sophisticated online tools and grassroots outreach to turn municipal data into information useful to the public, help neighbors navigate city politics, and connect neighborhood organizers to one another through social networking and in-person collaboration. In the last three years, we have navigated the process of creating new community organizations and getting formal access to publicly owned land with 32 groups creating 32 new community spaces that now replace vacant lots.

596 Acres emerged out of a unique moment in a long history of community gardening and organizing for local control of land in New York City. By 2011, gardeners had been bound up in a fierce fight to keep existing spaces for over a decade. Mayor Rudy Giuliani had attempted-auctioning 112 City-owned garden sites in 1999. Gardeners and the State advocated against the auction and eventually the State Attorney General sued the City and got a settlement that preserved gardens. One of the terms of the preservation was that some would be acquired by Trust for Public Land and transferred to local community land trusts managed by gardeners. In 2011, these local trusts were just getting full title to the gardens they now steward. The settlement itself had expired and new regulations protecting existing gardens had been the subject of public controversy the year prior. In 2011, the relatively successful fight to keep what gardens New Yorkers had was coming to a mutedly triumphant end,¹ but the mechanisms for creating more gardens and more community spaces had faded from view. May the garden-making era was over.

Yet through the environmental justice movement and more widespread interest in community –based responses to global warming, activists from the El Puente Green Light District to the newly-formed Brooklyn Food Coalition, were all asking the same question: where is the land for the new community projects we know we need?² Where can we grow food? Where can we transform scrap into soil?

¹ I say “mutedly” particularly because of our experience with neighbors of one garden that were designated for housing development in the 2002 settlement and bulldozed as a demonstration of good faith: Ten Neighbors in Brownsville, Brooklyn. After the Parks Department took the gardeners keys away and cleared the beds and plantings away, the lots sat unused for the intervening years. Working with us, a local schoolteacher identified the site as an organizing opportunity and introduced himself to all the residents of the block; in the process he met the displaced gardeners, many of whom continue to live nearby. Last week, the newly constituted Ten Neighbors garden was again registered with the NYC Parks Department GreenThumb program. After a 12-year hiatus, Ten Neighbors is rebuilding. See <http://596acres.org/lot/3035360051/>.

² In my own neighborhood, Northern Bedford Stuyvesant, I had taken the reigns of a decades-long campaign to get the city to follow through on the creation of a park on a water tunnel shaft site whose construction had been facilitated by eminent domain. The disruption caused by years of major digging in the neighborhood was meant to be justified by the ultimate outcomes: more capacity for clean drinking water city-wide and a new park in a neighborhood where residents have to walk a mile to the nearest grass. As construction wound down, fifteen years after promises were made, our elected officials (none of whom had been in office at the beginning of the project) started to come forward with alternative visions for the same lots. Activists were tired - many groups had stopped

In 2011, the City budget was in better shape than in the 1970s, when most vacant public land was left un-fenced and many New Yorkers started transforming vacant lots into community spaces out of a combination of hope and necessity; 2011-era vacant lots, city-owned or not, have fences around them. And jumping fences in both Giuliani and Mayor Michael Bloomberg's New York was a clear first step to a night in jail for many New Yorkers, especially young people, immigrants and people of color.³

Still, even in this new New York City flush with construction cranes and bicycles lanes, hundreds of acres of potential public space lurk all around us in plain sight, nondescript fenced vacant lots unevenly distributed through New York City's neighborhoods. Located primarily in low-income communities of color that desperately lack green space, thousands of city-owned vacant lots languish, full of garbage, abscesses in the very neighborhoods that most need more healthy resources. These gaps only compound a history of urban renewal clearance and municipal neglect. Taken together, these forgotten spaces – inaccessible and lost to bureaucratic neglect – are larger than the High Line and Brooklyn Bridge Park combined. There are approximately 660 acres of vacant public land in New York City distributed across 1,800 vacant lots.⁴ These lots that could be gardens, play spaces, and sites of community gathering and cultural activity instead sit vacant, locked, and forgotten.

THE RIGHT TO THE CITY AND THE RIGHT TO UNDERSTAND THE CITY

The “Right to the City,” as first articulated by Henry Lefebvre in 1968, recognizes that the urban environment is akin to a work of art that is constantly being made anew by its inhabitants, a space of encounter that allows differences to flourish and generates the contemporary conditions for creative human communities.⁵ Groups and individuals prevented from fully participating in this collective, creative act, are denied the right to the city, a right that is grounded in the entitlement to physically occupy and influence urban space. The right to the city is the right to influence the environment that will, inevitably, shape you; therefore it is really a right to personal autonomy and community self-determination. The 596 Acres model is a grassroots strategy that allows residents to exercise this right to the city.

meeting all together. When I put up signs and called a meeting to gather our collective knowledge of the past and possible futures of the site, over 100 people came together. Elected officials came, too, and surprised everyone by proposing building housing as though no other place for new housing existed in our neighborhood, which was full of vacant lots. We needed to understand the holes in our neighborhoods to be able to protect the promise of the park. Although the park itself is still a potential future, the community did get access to the former water tunnel shaft construction site for the time being. Construction is completed. In August 2012, a local development corporation signed an interim use agreement on behalf of neighbors that allows over 100 people to co-manage the space as a community garden that grows food and provides a much-needed shared space in an overbuilt neighborhood, situated at the geographic intersection of several communities. See <http://www.myrtlevillagegreen.org/>

³ See White, M. D. (January 01, 2014). The New York City Police Department, its Crime Control Strategies and Organizational Changes, 1970-2009. *Justice Quarterly* : Jq, 31, 1, 74-95.

⁴ See 596acres.org / livinglotsnyc.org

⁵ Henry Lefebvre, *Right to the City* (1968), in *WRITING ON CITIES* 195 (ed. E. Kofman & E. Lebas 1996, Oxford).

The 596 Acres team started by hunting down the available information about city-owned land in New York City. We first approached the Center for the Study of Brooklyn at Brooklyn College,⁶ where staff gave us access to MapPLUTO data⁷ despite the paywall blocking it off from general public access. Then we turned to the NYC Open Data portal and in other city agency and non-profit organizations' records,⁸ using New York State Freedom of Information Law when we had to.

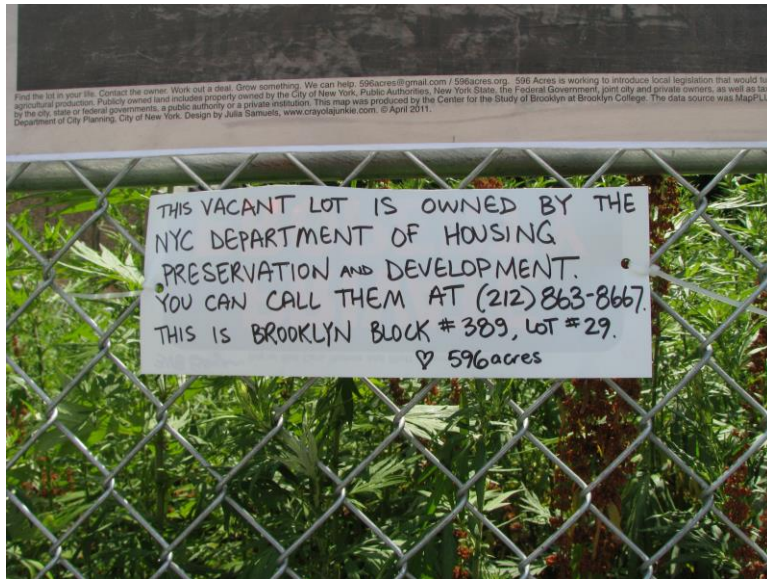


Figure 1. Prototype sign on a fence in Brooklyn.

These datasets needed a lot of work to be translated into information that makes sense in context. The NYC Department of City Planning marks all community gardens with the same “VACANT” code that it uses for truly empty lots; lots that have street access are lumped together with slivers of shared backyards that can’t be reached unless you go through the properties bounding the yards. We created a classification system that allowed us to use the City’s data to describe the world as New Yorkers actually experience it, at least in the narrow category of “What is a vacant lot?” For each publicly owned “vacant” lot, we found in the Open Data portal, we asked two questions: “Is this lot in use already?” and “Can you reach this lot from the street?” The first allowed us to classify community gardens accurately as lots that are developed and have a use; the second removed about 30% of the vacant “lots” that the City data points to because they are not places the public has access to. To do this analysis accurately, we used a combination of an automated script and a staff person who looked at the google street view for each property and the property shapefiles as available on OASISNYC.net. In addition, we relied on a survey of community gardens conducted and published by GrowNYC.

⁶ The Center for the Study of Brooklyn used to be housed at CUNY’s Brooklyn College. It has been closed since 2011.

⁷ See A Free MapPLUTO Makes Us All Information Rich, April 17, 2014, <http://596acres.org/en/news/2014/04/17/a-free-mappluto-makes-us-all-information-rich/>

⁸ See Data Collection and Processing, <http://596acres.org/en/about/our-data/>, last accessed Feb. 20, 2015.

One key to our success transforming open data into actual open space managed by locals is our practice of putting information about the city’s vacant land portfolio where people most impacted by vacant lots will find it -- on the fences that surround vacant lots. The signs announce clearly that the land is public and that neighbors, together, may be able to get permission to transform the vacant lot into a garden, a park or a farm.

By identifying which of the fenced-off vacant lots in our neighborhoods are actually public - and therefore all of ours in common - we identify potential sites for community-driven land-access campaigns, organizing success stories, and real, achievable change on the neighborhood level. We support land access campaigns run by people who live in the communities where this vacant space is located, and who otherwise might lack the resources to access municipal data and navigate the City bureaucracy.



Figure 2. “You’ve Found the Lot In Your Life”, design by Hannah Learner, and “This is Your Land”, designed by Partner & Partners. Installed on a City-owned vacant lot in the Bronx.

Our up-to-date online map broadcasts the same information. For each vacant public lot on the map, we have information about which agency actually has control over that property, the city’s parcel identifier (Borough, Block and Lot number or BBL) and information about the individual property manager that is handling the parcel for the agency. We developed this tool in order to be able to understand what to put on the signs and where to put them. The web-tool allows us to put very specific contextual information about that particular property directly on its fence.



Figure 3. LivingLotsNYC.org

Another key is creating a mechanism for different types of people to connect over a shared interest in the vacant lots in their lives. Taking these little pieces of public land that have been chained up behind fences and actually realizing them as something that can serve their communities requires building some political power. For this, our online map also helps neighbors connect with one another and keep track of their advocacy.⁹ People can sign up directly and say “I want to organize here!” and then they will get updates any time someone else signs up. They also get updates any time we add notes, and any time someone posts a picture or a file. A user can also subscribe to receive updates without positing their personal information.¹⁰ This online space for each garden-to-be serves as a meeting place and helps neighbors connect their efforts and form a community, even before getting access to an actual place to build together.

Figuring out how to work across different communication platforms and not remain abstracted on the internet or limited by only having face-to-face meetings has given us the ability to connect New Yorkers with different strengths and who represent different groups over a shared will to express their rights to the city. Not everybody we work with actually ever sees the online tool; many interact in person or over the phone with our staff and simply give us permission to add their information so that others can find them.

⁹ The pilot version of this tool, which we used August 21, 2011 - March 2015, is at <http://596acres.org>; the updated tool is at <http://livinglotsnyc.org>.

¹⁰ Since committed activists deliberately share their contact information on the tool connected to place, other people - elected officials' staff, oral historians and other organizations - also use it; for them, our tools serve as real-time directories of New Yorkers committed to particular neighborhoods.



Figure 4. Community map, for print distribution in the district.

596 Acres works to increase awareness within communities of the potential seemingly empty spaces hold. We see - and teach others to see - them as sites of opportunity, both for potential green spaces in neighborhoods that lack them, and as focal points for community organizing and civic engagement. The information on the signs and on the web is connected to staff that can steer and support residents who want to take advantage of opportunities to transform their neighborhoods. We work with each unique situation to figure out what is possible and then help people achieve it: where possible, the goal is a permanent transfer to the Parks Department. But sometimes a temporary space for a few years until other planned development moves forward is the only achievable outcome. Even a temporary space allows people an opportunity to shape the city, practice civic participation and self-government and become co-creators with their fellow New Yorkers.

Each of these spaces is transformed and maintained by volunteer neighbors and local community partners as spaces to gather, grow food, meet and play. 596 Acres acts in a supporting and advocacy role but each space, ultimately, is managed autonomously. In each instance, residents must navigate a unique bureaucratic maze: applying for approval from the local Community Board, winning endorsement from local elected officials, and negotiating with whichever agency holds title to the land. Along the way 596 Acres provides legal advice and technical assistance. We also maintain a network through which local organizers can share best practices from successful campaigns with one another, building bridges between neighborhoods. While New York City policy makers are making strides to prioritize urban agriculture and public space as beneficial land uses, 596 Acres fills the gap between policy and the people in our neighborhoods.

By raising awareness of land use policy, helping residents navigate the political and legal processes that shape public policy, and directly encouraging community involvement in

government land disposition decisions, we have built a constituency that is ready to engage with the mechanisms that shape the city and decide the fate of our shared assets. Accurate information available in context is the key to planning local campaigns that can result in creating and protecting new community-managed open spaces.

WHOSE LAND? WHOSE VOICES?

In January 2015, when NYC Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) published a list of 181 “hard to develop” properties they are willing to sell for \$1 to housing developers willing to build housing affordable within the federal definitions,¹¹ we were able to quickly analyze the list and find out that it included nearly 20 community gardens. Six of those were gardens that had formed through our support in the last three years. We were able to quickly use and expand our existing network to put community gardeners in the best position to respond to the list long before any particular garden is actually threatened with demolition. We connected the information about which lots were included in the published list with the information about which lots are actually gardens, published a map and called the impacted gardeners.

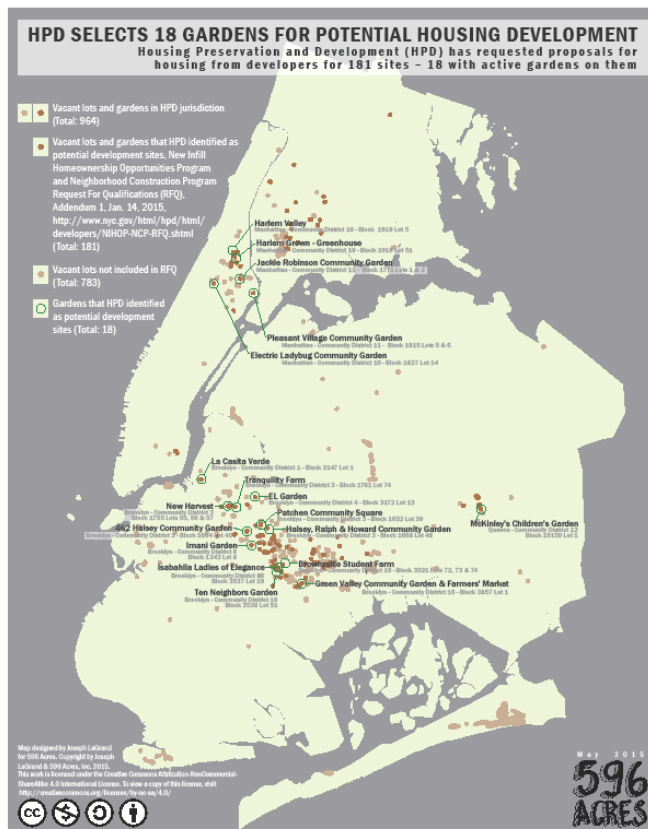


Figure 5. Map of HPD inventory and gardens included in request for developers to become qualified to purchase City-owned lots for \$1. 596 Acres, May 2015.

¹¹ That can be over \$3200 per month in rent for a family of four. See <http://www.nychdc.com/pages/Income-Eligibility.html>; http://welcometocup.org/file_columns/0000/0011/cup-fullbook.pdf

Within three weeks of the list's publication, over 150 New Yorkers, including four City Council members, rallied on the steps of City Hall.¹² Being able to track vacant public land using the same system of borough, block and lot numbers that the City uses was the key to getting the most impacted people into the center of decision-making about our shared resources. As this article is being written, gardeners continue to advocate with their local community boards, City Council and the Mayor's office to protect their hard won gardens and community spaces. Accurate information is also the key to campaigns that result in the creation of planned neighborhood assets where the plans' official execution is stalled.

In August 2012, 596 Acres posted a sign on what is now Keap Fourth Community Garden¹³ and shortly after neighbors began making plans for the space. This lot was designated as an "Open Space" in the Urban Renewal Area Plan for the neighborhood, which was adopted in 1992. It sat waiting for over twenty years until neighbors, working together, and in response to the specific information about the lot 596 Acres posted on its fence, were able to manifest this plan of open space by creating a community garden. In the interim, the lot simply languished in the inventory of the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD), which also serves as our local redevelopment authority for Urban Renewal Areas; HPD has neither the mandate nor the budget to make sure that planned open spaces in its inventory become real open spaces. Two years after we placed a sign directly on the lot and began to support the emerging local campaign, the ribbon was finally cut on the Keap Fourth Community Garden in June 2014. Neighborhood parents, a Latino-youth-led "Green Light" district campaign and the daycare center next door came together to gather the support needed to force the city agencies to do what was planned. The two lots on which the Keap Fourth Community Garden is located were transferred to the Parks Department from HPD; the new space is thriving (and hosting lots of sing-a-longs for preschoolers).

CONCLUSION

Regular New Yorkers with access to accurate information, in context, provided together with support from a small, nimble and experienced staff, can and do organize collectively to create tangible results and real change in their neighborhoods. Together, they inspire grassroots change well beyond the boundaries of neighborhood vacant lots. Ultimately, the 596 Acres model is driven by a belief in local power – data-driven, inclusive, and democratic – that is scalable to citywide and statewide issues around environmental justice and public space.¹⁴

About the author: Paula Z. Segal curated and co-organized the Vacant Acres Symposium upon which this special issue is based. She is the founding director of 596 Acres, New York City's only community land access advocates and a member of the interim facilitation team bringing a Real Estate Investment Cooperative to life for New York City. Paula is a graduate of City University of New York Law School at Queens College. Before joining the legal profession, Paula taught at CUNY and ran an all-volunteer adult English school on the Lower East Side and was a member of the Empty Vessel Project. She is an attorney admitted to practice in New York State and a partner in her own firm, Mohen & Segal, which focuses on legal services for entities working on our shared sustainable economy.

¹² See Michael Tortellano, "In Community Gardens, A New Weed," Feb 12, 2015, <http://nytimes.com/2015/02/12/garden/in-community-gardens-a-new-weed.html>

¹³ See <http://www.keapfourthgarden.org/>.

¹⁴ We have also implemented our modular open source platform for use by advocates in Philadelphia (groundedinphilly.org), New Orleans (livinglotsnola.org) and Los Angeles (laopenacres.org).

In 2016, she will be joining Fordham Law School as part of the Laboratory for the Governance of the Commons (LabGov) and as an adjunct instructor in the Community Economic Development Clinic.