

COMMUNITY GARDENS AND POLITICS OF SCALE IN NEW YORK CITY*

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ABSTRACT. New York City community gardens have been the subject of political contestation over the course of their thirty-year existence. In 1999, 114 gardens were slated for public auction and redevelopment. This article examines the controversy over the garden auction as a politics of scale in which garden advocates successively raised the scope of the controversy beyond the scale of individual gardens, and ultimately beyond that of the city. Analysis of this land-use conflict highlights the significance of politics of scale for grassroots organizations within a market-centric, neoliberal economic framework. *Keywords:* community gardens, grassroots activism, neoliberalism, New York City, politics of scale.

In the winter of 1998–1999, the city of New York put 114 community gardens on the auction block, scheduled to be sold in May 1999. Shortly after the auction was announced, community gardeners and an array of social and environmental activists began to formulate strategies for preventing the auction. In doing so, garden advocates confronted a neoliberalization of urban space (Peck and Tickell 2002) under the administration of Mayor Rudolph Giuliani. In order to overcome barriers to collective organizing posed both by the actions of city officials and by the spatial dispersion of gardens and gardeners across the five boroughs of New York (Figure 1), garden advocates drew on myriad strategies to link their efforts at different spatial scales. After sketching the context for the public auction that precipitated the garden controversy, we introduce a conceptual framework for examining the struggle to save the gardens as a politics of scale in which garden advocates contested the fragmentation of social urban space wrought by the application of neoliberal policies. The controversy over community gardens between the Giuliani administration and garden advocates has been examined before, with a focus on how the incommensurability between use and exchange values affected the terms of debate over the fate of the gardens (Schmelzkopf 2002). In this article we concentrate on the proposed (and canceled) public auction of 114 gardens in May 1999, with special emphasis on the issue of scale in grassroots politics to shed further light on this complex political conflict.¹

AN UNEVEN HISTORY OF GARDENS

New York City residents began building community gardens in the early 1970s as a means of creating small patches of green amid the crumbling walls that characterized the urban blight that afflicted the city at the time. In community gardens,

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