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Reclaiming the Rubble:



The Casita Tradition in New York City

Fruit and Family Thrive in New York's *Casita* Gardens . . . But how much longer can these urban oases bloom?

NEW YORK, N.Y.

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Wedged alongside the Cross-Bronx Expressway just south of the Bronx Zoo, Tremont is a New York neighborhood with beats. You can walk down the cracked sidewalk in the gathering dusk, never losing step to the overlapping tunes that escape the window of each passing car. Men wearing work boots and untucked white dress shirts wheel stereos strapped to little carts, each of which infuses a small radius with the lively Puerto Rican rhythms of *plena* and *merengue* as it trundles across the street. But midst this musical patchwork, the loudest sound is coming from the corner

of Honeywell and East 179th, where drummers are packed on the rickety porch of the *Hispanos Unidos casita*, supplementing a galloping Spanish voice on tape with the resonating thump of conga drums.

The *Hispanos Unidos casita* (Spanish for "little house") is run by Jorge and Maria Torres, and is one of seven in a group, *La Familia Verde*, that surrounds Tremont's Crotona Park. This *casita* is a small turquoise building that sits square in the middle of a chain-linked lot, with a muddle of old buckets and bicycles and charcoal grills

hunched up to her lattice skirt like ducklings to their mother. The rest of the lot is buried beneath an impenetrable tangle of vines: plants of every description weave tendrils over stakes made of broom handles and snow plow reflectors, swelling here and there into fat, round gourds. Sugarcanes, avocados and a few wispy fig trees stand in pots, ready, with the onset of nippy weather, to be tucked into nearby apartments. A charred javelin balances between two posts in the center of a large, ashy pit.

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The New York *casita* tradition is an urban adaption of the rural *casita del campo*; sprinkled across the Puerto Rican countryside, these candy-colored huts surrounded by vibrant gardens serve as neighborhood gathering spots. The transplanted custom first began to re-root in the crumbling soil of neighborhood neglect that came with 1970's recession and real estate crisis in New York City. For newly immigrated Puerto Ricans, shanties painted in Caribbean pastels and beds blooming with exotic vegetables provided not only a supplementary food source, but stability and a sense of place as well. These sites of cultural memory also played an active role in garnering political power – not only as nodes for the dissemination of information or the signing of petitions, but as highly visible symbols of a population that was otherwise largely marginalized.

Casita gardens multiplied as part of the advancing trend of squatted community gardens that began to digest the rubble and trash of vacant lots – over 25,000 of them – left littering the city in the wake of economic recession. Farming where one “shouldn't” was seen as a form of dissent – a political move to wrest not only land, but also control, from those with the power to define landscapes, both physical and cultural. Many of the first gardeners coaxing blooms from cracked pavement were protesters and anarchists. For groups like the Green Guerillas, breaking into fenced-off New York lots with pickaxes and fertilizer was a way to counter the failed policies that led to such marked degradation in portions

of the city. According to Amos Taylor, an early Green Guerilla, “It was civil disobedience.”

The ranks of these Avant Gardeners swelled, and in 1978 the city attempted to gain a modicum of control over the burgeoning situation by establishing Operation Green Thumb, a program that formalized the lease of vacant land to gardeners for \$1 per year. While, to some, this was a valid way to legitimize urban farming, most bristled at the bureaucratic imposition — the attempt by the city to direct the ad-hoc appropriation of abandoned land, making it clear that the tomatoes were still growing on *their* turf.

This move affected not only overtly political groups like the Guerillas, but also the Puerto Rican community members who relied on *casita* gardens to preserve and assert their culture. Furthermore, as gardens became recognized as unique urban assets, there was a rush to conscript the community hubs into service for the government project of “greening” the city. At the same time, real estate prices rebounded, and vacant land once again became attractive to investors. A dual threat arose: the immediate risk of demolition to enable revenue-generating redevelopment, and the more subtle danger of deteriorating autonomy. The double-edged sword of protection and cooptation struck with the creation of Operation Green Thumb, and has been slowly pruning away at gardens ever since.

According to garden advocate Sarah Ferguson, who has written extensively on the subject in *The Village Voice* and elsewhere, the program does offer some sense of security for illegal plots, but the more gardeners are forced to rally to secure governmental protection, the more they become neutralized and vulnerable to government management.

The stakes for the *casita* are particularly high. While some gardening groups have benefitted from a relationship to the city (when Rudolph Giuliani incited an epic battle by mandating that the New York Department of General Services auction off its entire inventory of “disposable” land – including over 700 Green Thumb gardens and *casitas* – it was those who had worked most closely with Green Thumb who were able to help quietly develop a list of which spaces should be saved and which were “expendable”), the rabid quest to sweep *casitas* under the wide green mantle of city sponsorship denies their fundamental importance as claims staked in the city's landscape, defensible against outside forces.

According to scholar Dolores Hayden, these re-claimed sites provide for the production of an alternative social space for the Puerto Rican worker in America. As a locus of both memory and of the possibility for change, the *casita* attests to “the power of one cultural landscape to contradict another.” The process of governmental



Abuela (grandmother, in Spanish) rests behind the *casita*, knitting, while the family gardens.

Photos:
Emily Appelbaum

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recognition, assimilation, and finally legislation destroys the fluid responsiveness that made *casitas* successful, indeed, necessary, urban elements in the first place. While the *casita* can serve as a green space under city management, it loses its social and political function; the very proximity of the seven gardens in La Familia Verde (formed in response to Giuliani's 1998 mandate) to city-managed Crotona Park attests to the need for an urban space that is self-sponsored and distinct from the conventional urban lawn.

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Today, with everyone from chef-turned-author Alice Waters to author-turned-epicure Michael Pollan championing urban agriculture,

gardens like *Hispanos Unidos* are once again becoming politicized in the race to "green the city." Now members of Green Thumb, Jorge and Maria Torres must worry about losing the identity of their garden as a self-governed space. At the same time, they are up against the ever-present threat of development. Several years ago, when city planners wanted to build profitable condominiums along 178th street, *Hispanos Unidos* was forced to its current location from a plot two blocks east, near Daly Avenue.

"It's not that it's so far," Jorge explains to me as he lifts an old plastic washtub to reveal a gargantuan Puerto Rican squash nestled against the coming winter. "But look around you." He points to midrise housing units, surrounding the garden like fortress walls.

"There. There. There. In there. The people who come to the garden sleep in each of those, but *this* is where we live. If you move it, who is going to come?" I look around at people laying out cards and dominos, clustered together, singing

and preparing food, and I have the absurd image of someone's parlor, ripped from their apartment, floating away down the street.

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It's another evening at *Hispanos Unidos*, and the music hasn't stopped. But it's softer this time, sung by an old woman: "*Abuela! Abuela!*" shout her grandchildren as they alternately tug at her skirt, race the woodchip paths, and pop whole tomatoes (the last on withered vines) into their mouths. She winces with a familiar pain as she rises to meet me, stops to weed between *tomatillos*, and invites me in. She is quieter than Jorge, but as she curates the plot and everything in it (including the three small children), she is, like him, completely transparent in her pride.

She takes me back to where corn stalks form the border between each bed, and from here I can barely see the skyscrapers in the distance, just even with the tassels. The aisles are completely concealed from the street outside, and perfect for hiding in; I interrupt a game of what looks like *Sardines* to ask the two girls and little boy how often they come to the garden. Every day, is the reply. I ask the boy what his favorite food from the garden is, and together, we figure out that his answer – *durazno*—for me is "peach."

With sporadic predictions for the end of the current economic downtown already surfacing, it is unlikely



Jorge kisses his granddaughter on the cheek amidst dancing couples in the *Hispanos Unidos Casita*.

that anything like the massive, widespread property vacancies of the 70's will once again grip New York. If real estate values do indeed return to pre-recession figures, they could bring with them a new era of worry for Jorge and Maria Torres – but watching the couple now, it's hard to imagine that possibility. Jorge throws his head back in laughter as he thumps a friend on the back, and Maria grins in spite of herself as she talks me through a wall of Polaroids plastering one side of the little house, floor to ceiling. I see weddings, birthdays, and an

enormous pig, scorched crispy brown on a spit, which explains (I realize with just a touch of unease) the mystery of the ashy pit out front. Suddenly, I'm no longer looking at a rough wooden wall, spattered with mud and hung with tools and straw hats. Instead, I'm transported inside a family photo album – a walk-in version of the leather-bound book sitting on the mantle – for, more than just a green spot in the city, more than a political tool or a place to grow food, this garden is a living space.

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