

MOTHER EARTH NEWS

Local Self Reliance: Building a Community Park

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By the MOTHER EARTH NEWS editors



Input from local residents is one key to turning a vacant lot into a successful community park.

ILLUSTRATION: MATTHEW
COLE/FOTOLIA

Three years ago, New York City spent several million dollars on the rehabilitation of the 147-acre Crotona Park in the South Bronx. Crewmen planted hundreds of trees, resurfaced basketball courts, replaced hoops that had been torn down long before, and added new facilities, including a swimming pool.

But—within one short year—the new courts were littered with broken glass, the hoops had vanished again, most of the young trees had been uprooted, and the pool was destroyed. Millions of taxpayers' dollars were completely wasted.

A New Kind of Park

Several blocks north of this urban disaster, a community park was built at a cost of only a few *hundred* dollars. A group called the Community Involvement Program covered a small corner of a vacant lot with topsoil, named it "A Farm in the Bronx," and invited about 20 residents to raise vegetables on the site. A fence, built by local teenagers, helped the crops grow unharmed all summer. And this year—as more and

more area residents want gardens of their own—the group plans to expand the "inner city farm" concept.

There are at least two reasons why one park was ruined, while the other thrives: 1) residents themselves planned the community garden with the understanding that the project wouldn't succeed without strong community support, and 2) the cooperation of local teenagers. Also, they organized a security network that included senior citizens watching the park from their windows, so small problems never had a chance to become big ones.

The Idea Spreads

Based on this kind of grassroots experience, a new urban parks program has started in the South Bronx that may become an inspiration to other cities throughout the country. During the next year and a half, at least 20 community groups in this ravaged section of New York City will turn 15 vacant and rubble-strewn lots into gardens, parks, and playgrounds, which local citizens will design, construct, and maintain themselves. The individual neighborhoods have committed almost a million dollars in volunteer labor ("sweat equity") and have donated material and tools to match government support. Some of the sites will eventually be converted to land trusts owned by non-profit organizations made up of the people who actually use the new facilities.

Furthermore, every one of these South Bronx communities has *already* undertaken at least one modest park and garden venture of its own. The Bronx River Restoration Project, for example, spent an entire summer clearing a river bank of accumulated old cars and trash. Then during the following summer, the volunteers grassed over the area against erosion and built a walkway (reinforced with a plentiful supply of old tires) between the bank and the river.

A Little Help From ILSR

The Institute for Local Self-Reliance helps these groups get as many neighborhood residents as possible involved in the programs, and tries to make the organizations aware of what they can and can't do.

Many of the sites, for example, are quite small. But by grading the land into different levels, a small park can be made to appear less crowded. Activities are also planned to take advantage of the sun and soil conditions, and to assure that park sports and activities won't annoy nearby residents. The Institute's program also helps local groups acquire government funds for composting equipment, earthworms, windmills, and—in some cases—for setting up recycling centers and tree nurseries.

"The government people nearly fell off their seats when we started talking about earthworms," says Tom Fox of the Self-Reliance staff, "but we explained that worms are essential to *any* successful gardening project, particularly on poor city soil."

As a result, government funds have provided an earthworm harvester, which will increase the "wiggler" production that's already underway in the basement of a building owned by the People's Development Corporation. In addition to participants' kitchen waste, compost for the gardens is being provided by the Bronx Frontier Development Corporation, which runs the largest composting operation in New York City.

Community participation in open-space planning has never before been attempted in such a comprehensive manner, and the results of this "experiment" will probably benefit other American cities in the future.

"If we can pull it off here in the South Bronx," explained one enthusiastic government official, "then it can be done *anywhere!*"

For the past several years, the good folks at the Institute for Local Self-Reliance in Washington, D.C. have worked to help urban residents gain greater control over their lives through the use of low-technology, decentralist tools and concepts. We strongly believe that more people (city dwellers and country folk alike) should be exposed to the Institute's admirable efforts ... which is why we've made this "what's happening where" report by ILSR staffers one of MOTHER EARTH NEWS' regular features.