

Los Amigos Garden and Casita: "*Mi casa es su casa.*"

By Elena Martínez

"*Mi casa es su casa.*" Most people have probably heard the phrase. But tucked away in a corner of East Harlem is a small garden *casita* ("little house") whose caretakers and visitors take that expression literally. If you stop by the Los Amigos Garden and Casita and they happen to be cooking or barbecuing dinner—*arroz con gandules* (rice and pigeon peas) or, for special occasions, *lechón* (roast pig)—you'll be welcomed inside and offered a plateful of food.

The garden, like many throughout Manhattan, the Bronx, and Brooklyn, was originally a city-owned vacant lot, which was cleaned up and cultivated by community members. Some of these lots have been or are currently in danger of being sold by the City. Although Los Amigos is now owned by the New York Restoration Project, for a time it led a precarious existence like many city gardens and casitas.

Gardens and casitas in New York City

The concept of community gardens in New York City dates back to the turn of the 20th century and has emerged every so often in times of crisis. Following Detroit's lead in the 1890s, community growing spaces in New York were created as part of a remedy for social and economic problems. They didn't last long, but during World War I the idea was revived in the form of the Liberty Gardens program.

Still, the idea of community gardens did not gain wide appeal until the Depression, when city-owned land was made available for 5,000 "relief" gardens through the City's welfare department and the federal Works Project Administration.¹ Though the WPA's project was canceled in 1937, gardens again gained popularity during World War II, when people were encouraged to create Victory Gardens. After the war these gardens gradually fell into disuse (as food rationing ended) or the space was utilized for other purposes.²

While early gardens were encouraged through various forms of government sponsorship, the City's current gardens, casitas, and green spaces are the legacy created by concerned community members in the early 1970s when New York City was in economic crisis. Throughout the City—especially in poor communities in parts of the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan—buildings were razed or burned down, leaving vacant lots strewn with rubble and garbage. As of 1977, there were an estimated 25,000 vacant lots in New York City.³ Community members, tired of looking at the mess, took it upon themselves to clean up the spaces and plant greenery or vegetable gardens and, in some cases, to build casitas on the lots.

As this trend increased, the City started its own garden program in 1978—Operation Green Thumb (which is the largest community gardening program in the country)—in order to make the vacant lots accessible to communities by charging \$1 for the city-owned property. This program was so popular that by 1991 five hundred new gardens had been planted in the City.

Since the community gardeners do not own the lots on which they establish their gardens and casitas, there is always the danger of the City selling these properties at auction. The City, instead of rewarding the individuals who refashion the lots using their own initiative and funds,

tends to see the gardeners as squatters. Folklorist Joseph Sciorra describes the City's perspective: It "[v]iews the innovative use of public land for community gardens not as a long-term improvement of inner-city neighborhoods but as a form of temporary custodianship of its neglected property. Community gardens are expendable."⁴

In 1996 the City's Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD) announced it would put half of Green Thumb's gardens on the auction block, which led to the organization of a large grassroots opposition. The gardens are important to their surrounding communities, not only for their aesthetic quality and improvement to the overall environment of the neighborhood but also for their capacity to bring community members together.

Community gardens can help make neighborhoods safer and more secure. They are also a source of vital open space which is desperately needed in New York City. As of 1999, there were about 700 community gardens, which occupied 200 acres (four times the size of the Brooklyn Botanical Garden).⁵ Activists for the gardens point out that if the City needs to develop lots for housing, why choose these gardens when they represent only a tenth of the 11,000 vacant lots available to the City?

History of Los Amigos Garden

Despite the challenges, many gardens have survived and thrived. East Harlem, or El Barrio as many of the residents call it, has about twenty gardens between 103rd and 120th Streets, many of which have been there for more than twenty years. The community gardens in East Harlem make up close to 75% of the green space in that neighborhood.⁶

One of these gardens is Los Amigos. It was one of the 114 gardens "rescued" from the City's auction in 1999 by a consortium of organizations, including New York Restoration Project (NYRP). To ensure that these gardens remained secure, NYRP established the New York Garden Trust, which works closely with community gardeners to maintain these sites.

Located at 3256 Pleasant Avenue, between 117th and 118th Streets, the garden was established in 1982 by John Mendez. There were many reasons why the site was cleared. John's cousin and current Los Amigos Garden Manager Belén Mendez remembers:

We felt that it was a garbage dump because everyone was throwing garbage in there when the building was torn down. So the guys took it upon themselves to clean it up, fence it up, and then they got the lease from Green Thumb. But they had to fight for that because they didn't want to give it to them.

[My cousin] liked to hang out there with his friends, and that was the time when we didn't have that many places to go nearby. So they would just sit there in the summer and play their dominoes. They liked their music. They'd play congas. Then we ladies decided to come in. The ladies are the ones that do the gardening, except for the men, who turn over the soil and do the building. Like building the casita.

The casita at Los Amigos was built by community members including John Mendez and Ramón "Flaco" Santos. Later after being leased through Green Thumb, the garden was christened *Los Amigos*.

Belén Mendez took over managing the garden when her cousin John became ill and later died

in 2002. Belén is originally from Santurce, Puerto Rico, but moved here when she was about six years old in the early 1950s. She has lived in El Barrio ever since. Her neighborhood is very important to her and she is quite active in neighborhood issues. In addition to the garden, Belén is treasurer for her building's Tenant Association. As manager of Los Amigos Garden, she attends Green Thumb and NYRP meetings, joins in demonstrations, does administrative work, cooks food at the gatherings, and is the garden liaison.

Along with flowers and fruit trees, the gardeners grow a variety of produce varying from year to year, including cantaloupe, tomatoes, jalapeños, peppers, broccoli, lettuce, cilantro, oregano, and mint. Until recently, wild grapes grew along the whole length of the lot's fence. Fatima Lanzilotta, a neighborhood resident for 34 years, stops by a few times a week to pick mint that she uses in Arabic foods such as tabouli, as well as in teas and salads. The garden visits are a way for her to get fresh air. Since she can't get around much anymore, her visits are important. The people in the garden, "*la gente buena*," have become like family: "Todo es lindo. Es como una familia."

Tradition of decorating the garden for holidays

Aside from planting flowers, one of Belén's favorite activities in the garden is decorating the site for holidays. Even during winter, when it is too cold to actually gather at the garden and casita, she makes sure there are decorations. Belén started this tradition at Los Amigos early on, but in the last five years she has made a special effort to decorate and has truly delighted in getting the casita ready for the holidays.

We try to celebrate as many holidays as we can. We have a celebration for Mother's Day; if it's nice in May we go outside. Father's Day is another one that we do. And we do the Fourth of July, Labor Day, Puerto Rican Day Parade, and the Saturday before the parade, when there's a big festivity on 116th St. And Halloween when it's nice. Nobody may necessarily go in there after Christmas; it is definitely too cold. But at least they know that we are celebrating these occasions even if we are not there—we're there in spirit. That's the way I feel. That's why I go out of my way and try to dress it up for every occasion.

The casita and garden are also decorated for special functions, such as community member birthdays and baptisms. "People always ask if they can do it. And I say, of course—this is open," says Belén. There is also a gathering for Our Lady of Mount Carmel feast day in July. Because this particular religious symbol has a long history in El Barrio, an icon of the Virgin has been placed atop the casita. When the annual parade comes by, the participants stop in front of the garden and say prayers.

Casitas...architectural, aesthetic, and cultural features

There are an estimated 500 casitas, or *casitas de madera*, in New York City. Most of these are located in Manhattan's Lower East Side and El Barrio, and in the southern neighborhoods of the Bronx. The casitas are based on vernacular housing from Puerto Rico's countryside, which is itself a "descendant" of the *bohíos*—timber and thatched rounded structures used by the Taínos, the indigenous inhabitants of the island. Gradually the *bohíos* integrated Spanish influences and became rectilinear structures having a veranda or porch. Similar dwellings can be seen throughout the Caribbean.

Casitas also refer to the balloon-frame shanty houses constructed in the 1920s and 1930s in

rural regions of Puerto Rico. At this time, many inhabitants were forced off their lands by the large sugar companies, which were set up following the 1898 takeover of the island by the United States. Though it was illegal to build these houses, there was a law maintaining that if the house was completed it could not be demolished.⁷

The houses tended to be constructed of scrap material and were easily put up and taken down, if necessary. This history is reflected in the casitas that dot vacant lots throughout the Bronx, Manhattan, and Brooklyn. They are not funded by any organization or institution but consist of whatever materials community members can find or afford. Their transitory nature is echoed in the ephemeral quality of the City's community gardens, since many may have to be abandoned or relocated if they are in the way of housing development.

As with the community gardens that emerged in neighborhoods due to the economic and social crises of the 1970s, so too were casitas built in neighborhoods where local institutions had broken down. As nostalgic symbols of cultural identity, the use of these structures evokes the Puerto Rican landscape for the many migrants who have made New York City their home. These structures also reaffirm an attachment to the community and provide a sense of identity and belonging that is often absent otherwise. Similar to the flags and murals that adorn walls, store gates, and playgrounds throughout Puerto Rican neighborhoods, the casitas similarly announce, "We are here." In his study of casitas, Luis Aponte-Parés writes:

. . . in reshaping landscapes of despair into landscapes of hope: transforming fragmented and discontinuous urban landscapes into 'cultural forms with continuity,' rich in values, and bringing forth a sense of 'attachment'—a feeling of 'congruence of culture and landscape'—while perhaps providing them a sense of regional identity (Riley 1992:17). Key to this attachment is the ability to take possession of the environment simultaneously through physical orientation and through a more profound identification.⁸

Process of cultural identity at Los Amigos Garden and Casita

Though casitas are associated with Puerto Rican communities and neighborhoods throughout the City—and East Harlem has a long history as a Puerto Rican community (though current migration trends are changing that)—the community caretakers of Los Amigos Garden and Casita do not feel this is an essential part of its identity.

True, the individuals who hang out, attend parties, and help are more likely to be Puerto Rican. But this has more to do with the fact that the garden is located in a predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood. Belén feels that the casita is about family, not cultural identity: "It's in part keeping the community intact, especially with the seniors and the people that have lived here a long time and are like a family. They feel the casita is part of their home."

In fact, the community members were originally going to build a gazebo but decided for practical reasons that a structure with walls would work better. The garden itself is more reminiscent of their nostalgia for Puerto Rico than the casita itself. Belén comments:

The growing of the fruits and vegetables in the garden—tomatoes, green peppers, squash, whatever—is what makes us think about our homeland. Because over here in New York, you never saw that in the City. You didn't actually pick anything from a garden; you had to buy it in the stores. And now everybody has a garden, and everybody

grows their own.

For many different reasons—cultural, economic, and recreational—Los Amigos Garden and Casita is an important part of the neighborhood, fulfilling many roles for the many different people who live in the surrounding community.

Notes:

1. Sarah Ferguson, "A Brief History of Grassroots Greening in NYC." http://mail.interactivist.net/gardens/h_1.html. Originally published in the book, *Avant Gardening*, Automeia, 1999.
 2. Craig D. Bida, "Community Gardens," pg. 270. In *Encyclopedia of New York City*, by Kenneth T. Jackson. Yale University Press: New Haven, 1995.
 3. Mark Francis, Lisa Cashdan, and Lynn Paxson, *Community Open Spaces: Greening Neighborhoods through Community Action and Land Conservation*, p. 4. Island Press: Washington, 1984.
 4. Joseph Sciorra, "We're not here just to plant. We have culture.": An Ethnography of the South Bronx Casita Rincón Criollo," *New York Folklore*, vol. XX, nos. 3-4, 1994, pg. 19-41. Pg. 28.
 5. Sarah Ferguson, "The Death of Little Puerto Rico: NYC Gardens Plowed Under by a New Wave of Urban Development." *New Village: Building Sustainable Cultures*, Issue 1, 1999, <http://www.newvillage.net/Journal/Issue1/1littlepuertorico.html>
 6. Carlos Rodríguez, "Salvemos los jardines," pg. 37s. *El Diario/La Prensa*. Sunday, June 13, 2004.
 7. Carol Jopling, "Las Casitas: An Urban Cultural Alternative," Exhibit Review, pg. 500. *Journal of American Folklore*, 1991, 104:500-502.
 8. "What's Yellow and White and Has Land all Around It? Appropriating Place in Puerto Rican Barrios," *Centro*, vol. vii, #1, p. 8-19. Pg. 13.
- Belén Mendez interview, March 9, 2004.
Fatima Lanzilotta interview, July 4, 2004.