The unsurmountable necessity of gardens

Katalin Balog

Image courtesy of Friends of Elizabeth Street Garden

The threat to erase the beautiful Elizabeth Street Garden, a quirky and much beloved community space in a neighborhood and city that is rapidly losing its edge and character is the latest example of how that process is precipitated by bureaucratic decisions far removed from facts on the ground. The Garden is on the chopping block of city planners who, with the support of Council Member Chin and Mayor de Blasio, have designated it to be paved over. Their announced plan is to create affordable housing for seniors – when in fact more appropriate sites exist in the neighborhood.

Image: Courtesy of Curtis + Ginsberg Architects

The development would essentially destroy the Garden leaving only a small, shaded area accessible through a privately owned tunnel through the building. There is no question that the city needs more affordable housing, and Mayor de Blasio’s support of it is laudable. But the idea that affordable housing must come at the expense of quality of life, that the neighborhood must sacrifice
this “popular amenity”, as the Mayor recently put it, is wrongheaded; the considerations that bear on this decision are far more complicated than this way of framing the issue lets on. For one thing, in casting this choice as hard but inevitable, Council Member Chin and the Mayor have long ignored thousands of petitions, and the pleas of Friends of Elizabeth Street Garden, to consider nearby, available, empty lots that have potential for far more housing development than the Elizabeth Street Garden lot allows (see here how broad the support for these alternative plans is from a who’s who of local elected officials and community organizations; and see here the Community Board 2 resolution in favor of building on an alternative site on condition of saving Elizabeth Street Garden). The City’s plan to erase Elizabeth Street Garden is opposed by just about every local elected official (see here their press release to this effect).

Furthermore, this way of casting the decision in the bureaucratic language of affordable housing versus “popular amenity” allows decision makers to ignore the very set of factors that point in the direction of moving the housing to an alternative location. Parks are protected from development by law for the reason that they are necessary for a good life in a city, and that their loss, once destroyed, is practically irreversible. So building on Central Park, for example, is not only unimaginable, but impossible. Though one can imagine, in some extreme situation, good reasons to bulldoze a magnificent garden to make room for affordable housing, a decision like that cannot adequately be framed in the language of “amenities”.

When Jane Jacobs opposed and successfully fought Robert Moses’s plan to run a “Lower Manhattan Expressway” through Greenwich Village, Soho and Little Italy 50 years ago, she didn’t merely avert catastrophe for Downtown Manhattan and win a local – although hugely important and consequential – battle, but won against, more generally, impoverished ideas and pseudo-scientific formulas in city planning. Through her advocacy and her wildly influential book The Death and Life of great American cities, she garnered widespread support for the idea that the life of a city consists of more than can be summed up in the abstract categories of transportation efficiency, affordable housing, economic development, environmental planning, recreational space, etc. It includes factors such as a sense of community and belonging, the opportunity to reflect and to participate. Above all, she understood that city planning is at its best when it doesn’t set various priorities against each other, and when it disrupts the organic life of neighborhoods as little as possible by heavy handed interventions.

Maybe if the choice was whether to develop a burnt-out lot into a park or affordable housing, relying solely on categories such as recreational space vs affordable housing per square mile would be appropriate – though even then, it would seem, the numbers add up to a strong case for park space. Soho/Little Italy where Elizabeth Street Garden is located has just about the lowest open space ratio per resident.

But here we do not have a vacant lot; we have the Garden that has been uniformly described by its users and supporters as the soul of the community and the neighborhood. Gardens are not dime a dozen; and this one in particular, unlike many other “green spaces” the city have created, has been woven into the life of the neighborhood deeply and extensively, connecting with small businesses and social service organizations, offering people countless ways to meet each other in a neighborhood otherwise too busy and inhospitable for unstructured human contact. The Garden has hosted art shows, yoga and tai chi classes, hands-on gardening lessons for children, meditation, concerts, performances, winter fests, and regular movie nights in the summer. It has provided uplift and served as a reminder that life depends on something more elemental than technology.
So the choice is not whether to create garden or housing – it is whether to destroy a garden that has enhanced life in this neighborhood in a thousand ways, in order to create housing. Framing the decision as one between housing and garden tends to conceal the fact that among the costs of construction is the additional one of the loss of something that already exists; something of great value.

Thinking about it only in objective, abstract terms allow the Mayor and Council Member to miss the real significance of the Garden for the people in the neighborhood. Supporters – so far in vain – have pointed to the intangibles of what it means to have something so beautiful and so beloved as the Garden in the neighborhood. Those intangibles cannot properly be quantified and they are hard to fit into a city planning matrix; but they are there for people – even city officials – to see and acknowledge if they want to. The Mayor has declined every invitation to visit the Garden so far; but people should come and see it, before it is too late.

Our mind is tethered to our environment and it stamps its meaning, mood and emotion on us. We are different beings in a garden and in a busy street. In a small scale, the City’s decision reflects the same indifference to meaning and beauty that goes into Trump’s decision to withdraw land from national monuments in Utah and authorize oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. What makes these decisions so agonizing is that the decision to destroy cannot be undone.

May all those in positions of power heed Jane Jacobs’ warning:

It may be that we have become so feckless as a people that we no longer care how things do work, but only what kind of quick, easy outer impression they give. If so, there is little hope for our cities or probably for much else in our society. But I do not think this is so.

Jane Jacobs, The Death and Life of Great American Cities, 1961