

# "ROOTED"

in the  
LOWER  
EAST  
SIDE

a collaboration between  
Fourth Arts Block  
and New York University





Above view of Adam Purple's "Urban Garden" on the Lower East Side of New York City in 1984.



# "ROOTED"

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# how to use this guide...

The Lower East Side (LES) in New York City has a rich history and is home to unique public spaces and community gardens. *This guide offers various ideas and resources for teaching and learning about social activism in community gardens in the LES as well as suggestions for how to implement these lessons.* Whether you are a teacher, a student, a community member, or just curious, there is something in here for you.

To start, the "Introduction" section frames the topics we explore in this guide and provides context to set the stage. The entire curriculum can be seen as one cohesive unit but can also be abbreviated or adapted depending on your goals. We have divided the curriculum into three sections, "Rooted," "Digging," and "Planting," which we have laid out above. In the same way that the residents, artists, and activists of the Lower East Side saw empty spaces as opportunities to create new worlds and communities, *approach the activities in this guide as invitations to remix, reinvent, and reclaim.*

**"ROOTED"** provides context, information and reflection. It presents students with types of experiences they may be unfamiliar with, histories, and ways of engaging with their environment.

**"DIGGING"** consists of activities designed to encourage students to research, ask questions, and explore within environments and look for voices and experiences that they may not have otherwise encountered.

**"PLANTING"** is the synthesis of the work, where students reflect through creation and create through reflecting, developing work that emerges from the ideas and questions they have encountered through the experiences in the process.

This curriculum offers the suggested sequence of lessons and activities but can be changed to suit the needs of your school or community. With that said, included in all the sections are links and resources that will help with implementing, reinventing, and adapting the lesson. You have the option to use these specific sources or see the "Resources" section at the end of the curriculum for more options and information. The "Resources" section is organized by category to make it easy to find what you are looking for.

*Field trips and fieldwork are an essential component of the Rooted curriculum and we strongly encourage participation in the community if possible.* However, we realize that this can be difficult to do depending on logistics and your location, so other options and alternatives are provided. This curriculum guide was created to allow you and your students to engage in relevant educational experiences inspired by your public spaces and community gardens. *We want you, the facilitator, to take these acts and questions and make them your own!*



# introduction

## THE BIG PICTURE

We live in a moment of increasing privatization, where corporate interests are taking control of public spaces and commodifying them for profit. Caught in the crosshairs are the communities that rely on public spaces and the creativity, innovation, debate, and more that thrive in those spaces. When public spaces are privatized and neighborhoods are gentrified, people that have lived there for generations are displaced and the unique histories, cultures, and communities within that space are demolished. But those unique histories, cultures, and communities also become the force of the resistance against privatization. They form a community identity, which flourishes and thrives as people interact with one another in free, public spaces, and serve as a call to action when communities are threatened.

In a storm, the trees with the deepest, strongest roots remain standing. In the same way, the roots of the Lower East Side are embedded deep in the history, culture, and political identities of these spaces and these movements. The Lower East Side has a long history of grassroots activism engaged in struggles over control of public spaces. Over the years, community members have reclaimed vacant lots and collapsed buildings and have transformed them into community gardens where people can plant flowers and crops, put on performances, converse with fellow community members, and more. These public spaces have become a foundation for the culture of the community. Public community gardens are open to all members of the Lower East Side as well as to any visitors to the neighborhood. As a result, these spaces become places where the roots of the community are planted and thrive, as well as artistic battlegrounds for control over the neighborhood.

## WHAT'S GOING ON IN LOWER EAST SIDE?



# Lesson! "rooted"

## INTRODUCTION:

*All of our neighborhoods and communities are rooted in history, culture, and power.* The history of the Lower East Side is a story of people coming together to claim and reclaim spaces for public use and community building. Public gardens in the Lower East Side have been spaces for community building through environmental activism and innovation, as well as accessible spaces for artistic performances, debates, and discussions. Bike lanes throughout the city were established through the advocacy work of Lower East Side members who wanted the environmentally conscious, low-cost form of travel to be safer for residents. And squatters have transformed buildings abandoned by the city into homes, art studios, performance venues, and more. These public spaces and community members' interactions within them are the historical, cultural, and political identity of the Lower East Side community. These roots have been the fuel for radical action against corporate and government forces that attempt to take community spaces and push out residents for redevelopment and profit. (See *How the East Village Grew to Have the Most Community Gardens in the Country*: <https://www.6sqft.com/how-the-east-village-grew-to-have-the-most-community-gardens-in-the-country/>).

*There are powerful forces threatening our communities and our public spaces.* When corporations notice that the Lower East Side is a profitable land development opportunity they begin to buy up land and turn it into luxury homes for wealthy residents and new restaurants and business where these residents can spend their money. This gentrification pushes people who make less money out of the neighborhood because they can no longer afford to live in their homes. In order to develop the Lower East Side, these corporations unite forces with the city to take control of the community's public spaces. Their combined power can destroy public gardens, evict squatters from their homes, and demolish spaces where community culture thrives. When these efforts are successful, they bulldoze over pieces of the vibrant history and culture of the neighborhood and push out people who have been rooted in the community for generations.

*The rootedness of our community is the key to resistance.* Members of the Lower East Side neighborhood have responded to these threats to their community in many ways. To curb the city's demolishing of public gardens, community members have occupied those spaces and prevented construction vehicles from entering the space. To advocate for protected and safer bike lanes, community members have staged performances where artists pretend to run into vehicles blocking the lane and act out the collision in a humorous way. To maintain public housing in the neighborhood, squatters have occupied buildings to stop demolition crews from tearing the buildings down. These struggles over land and public space have been occurring in the Lower East Side for generations. The history, culture, and politics of these spaces have been the foundation for continued actions to preserve the neighborhoods and the public spaces that allow the community to flourish and thrive.



# I "rooted" continued

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- Students explore what it means to be rooted in a community
- Students navigate the ways that history, culture, and politics strengthen the bonds of our communities, influence our identities as artists, and empower us in the struggle to maintain control of meaningful communal public spaces.

## KEY QUESTIONS:

- How is a community made?
- Who and what plays a part in making it?
- What does it mean for a space to be public?
- What is "power," and how are certain people and institutions able to use it to claim or reclaim public space?
- How do history, culture, and power construct, and influence, move within and around communities and their claim to public spheres?

## VOCABULARY:

- community
- culture
- gentrification
- power
- public Space



*Waterpod* (2009) was a public artwork by artist Mary Mattingly that converted a mobile barge into a city-sanctioned public park where volunteers lived and worked to create a self-sufficient ecosystem.

photo by J.H. Fearless  
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/jessicareeder/4005114958/>



## ACTIVITY I: MUSEUM VISIT

Take a field trip to the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space (if in NYC) or a similar museum in your area. If a field trip option is not available, find materials on the museum's website (<http://www.morusnyc.org/category/exhibits/>) and watch Play For Keeps: The Struggle to Save NYC Community Gardens (<http://interferencearchive.org/audio-interference-47-lower-east-side-community-gardens/>).

Facilitate a discussion about the Lower East Side's public spaces and how the creativity, innovation, and struggles resonate with the students. (For additional resources, videos, and information about the Lower East Side, see "Resources").

Break students into research groups based on different facets of public spaces in the Lower East Side (Public Gardens, Art, and Activism, for example). Ask students to create an art piece or put on a performance that explains their topic to the group. After presenting these projects, ask students what public spaces are important to them and how they could incorporate these spaces into art that is meaningful for them.

## FOLLOW-UP:

Provide students with art supplies and ask them to create something as an answer to the following questions:

- Why are public spaces valuable?
- Why are strong communities important?
- What is your history and why is it important?
- If someone or something tried to harm your community, what would you do to protect it?

And ask students to present their work and explain it to the class.

# I "rooted" continued

## ACTIVITY II: ARTIST CASE STUDY

Show students *Mary Mattingly's Swale* (Moveable Feast: Mary Mattingly's Floating Garden: <https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/movable-feast-mary-mattinglys-floating-garden/>).

Question why it is important to have public spaces and why/how Mattingly's work benefits the people. Designate a space in your classroom as a "public garden." If possible, ask students to bring a plant or to make an art piece to place in the garden. Have everyone share something about their offering, what they like about it, and what it means to them. Take "visits" to the "garden" throughout the year and incorporate it into other lesson plans. Make it a space where students can discuss their thoughts about classroom topics, share artistic and creative ideas, and ask important questions.

## ACTIVITY III: TREASURE HUNT

Send students on a treasure hunt by splitting them into groups and handing out flyers from different community activities, protests, and activist groups in the LES. Students spend time researching and looking for information behind the mysterious flyer (Who made this? What are they acting for? What are they acting against? Why? When? Where? Do they still exist?). Afterward, everyone will present about what they discovered and what was interesting about the discovery process. Together, they build a "tapestry" of histories and groups in the form of a map or a timeline of events. (See Green Map for examples (<https://www.greenmap.org/>))





<https://99percentinvisible.org/episode/squatters-lower-east-side/>



<https://www.dnainfo.com/new-york/20161221/lower-east-side/chrystie-street-bike-lane-completion/>



# Lesson II: "digging"



<http://www.brianrose.com/blog/2011/11/new-yorklower-east-sideeast-village/>

## INTRODUCTION:

In lesson II, "digging," students have the opportunity to participate in a variety of fieldwork activities. We have provided a few options that allow students to engage in documentary projects, from interviewing to collecting audio or video footage. *Through these activities, students will practice critical observation and meaning-making skills.* We recommend incorporating photographer and educator Wendy Ewald's book, *I Wanna Take Me a Picture*, to frame documentary work with a narrative and a social activism lens. Ewald's collaborations with children in various communities provide a strong model for teaching and implementing creative methods of documentation. With a focus on the intersection of history, land, identity, and community, students will ultimately gather primary research and materials to incorporate in a creative project.

We propose that facilitators and students collectively agree on a public space to visit as a class/group. Before starting the "digging" process, the facilitator will initiate a discussion that will help students situate themselves in the physical space and recontextualize what they had learned in the previous lesson.

In small groups, students may begin "digging" using any of the suggested media and strategies.

After students are done investigating and documenting the space, the class/group can convene to share what they had collected. Students can respond to the information they gathered through a homework assignment or through a creative project.



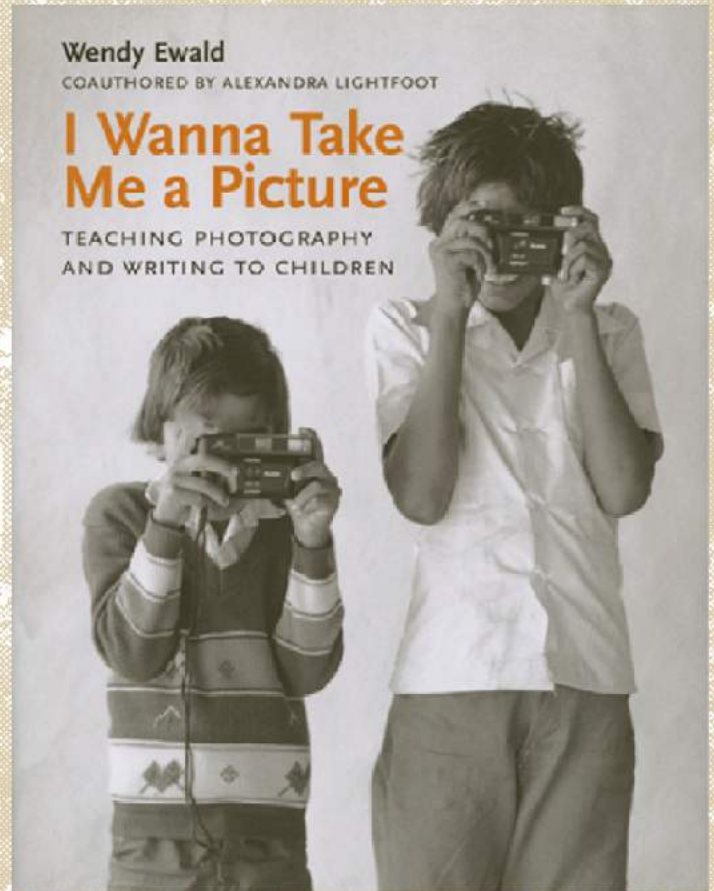
# II "digging" continued

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- Students take a closer look at their communities and think critically about public spaces and objects that may at first have seemed obvious or unimportant.
- Students see that, through asking questions, whole worlds of history tend to emerge.
- Students relentlessly keep their eyes open, constantly questioning their surroundings, moving beyond the "what" and into the "why" and "how", not forgetting the social, political, economic, and cultural dynamics that were discussed in lesson I.

## KEY QUESTIONS:

- How far and how deep can our observations take us?
- What and how do we learn through interviewing our community?
- What are the stories of the communities who have existed in this public space? Whose stories are left out, and why?
- How do community members utilize public spaces to organize and effect change?
- What do we miss by learning from a teacher in the classroom versus learning from other people in the real world?
- Using your senses, what do you notice about a public space? How does it make you feel?
- How do you think this space came to be? What kinds of conflict and community have defined this space?



*I Wanna Take Me a Picture, Wendy Ewald*

## VOCABULARY:

- contextualize
- documentation
- interview
- narrative
- sensory perception
- site visit



## ACTIVITY I: INTERVIEW PROJECT

*Equipped with writing utensils, paper, and a recording device, students ask people in the area about their relationship to the public space, including any monuments, art pieces, or other objects present in the space.*

It is imperative to hold a discussion with students prior to conducting interviews that addresses the ethical concerns when asking others to share information, especially when the information is personal. Young children should not be encouraged to approach strangers.

This activity can be adapted so that students can interview friends, family, and other members of their community off-site. We have provided sample questions to help start the interview process. (Feel free to reference this New York Times article on holding purposeful conversations: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/17/style/self-care/terry-gross-conversation-advice.html>)

### Sample Interview Questions:

- How often do you use this space? What do you use this space for?
- What purpose does this space serve for "the community?" Who is "the community?"
- Who does this space "belong to?" Who determines that and how?
- Have you noticed any changes since first visiting this space? What are they, and how do they affect you?
- How does this space foster a sense of community?

## II "digging" continued

## ACTIVITY II: DOCUMENTATION PROJECT

*Students use a variety of media -- photography, film, drawing, sound -- to capture the essence of a particular aspect of the public space. Facilitator should come to the lesson prepared with various tools for students to choose from. Pulling from the work of Wendy Ewald, facilitators should remind students that meaningful narratives can be created and/or exposed through documenting even the most mundane aspects of a space.*

We have provided an assortment of prompts to inspire students. Alternatively, facilitators can opt to keep this activity more open-ended, allowing students to document whatever they want with the intent of organizing and contextualizing their observations later.

### Sample Documentary Projects:

- "Untold Stories": Students observe and document various community members, animals, or even objects, then use their observations to create a fictional story about their/its relationship to the space.
- "Who started it?": Students search for and document remnants of the space's stages of life, making sure to investigate who was responsible for initially founding the space, their motives, and the culture they intended to create in this space.
- "Monuments, Icons, and Symbols": Students survey the public space for various iconography, whether it be a religious artifact, a tombstone, graffiti, or other art, situating the individuals and culture attached to the iconography to the public space.



# Lesson III: "planting" seeds

## INTRODUCTION:

*In this unit, students invent a future utopia or dystopia to critically discuss pressing issues of today, in the context of challenges presented by the NYC Lower East Side gardens communities.*

NOTE: This unit pairs nicely with exercises of either "rooted: or "digging". If you are planning to use it on its own, we recommend to place it either in the context of LES or a local grassroots community.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- Students will use futurology to look into some of their assumptions and think critically about the present.
- Students integrate information about history and research into the creation of artwork.

## KEY QUESTIONS:

- What would you like to see changed by the year 2099?
- What will happen to public spaces and community gardens if things stay the same?
- What could change in a city to give grassroots communities more power and influence?
- How can thinking about the future change the way we look at the present?
- What do we believe will be of value in the future? What will become irrelevant? What valuable things may be lost? What could be gained?

## VOCABULARY:

- dystopia
- futurology
- grassroots community
- utopia



# III "planting seeds" continued

## ACTIVITY: "NEIGHBORHOOD 2099"

*How does the future look like for our communities? What are the positive and negative forces of change? This set of activities invites the group to learn while thinking about how today's actions can impact distant futures.*

### *You choose the perspective!*

Thinking about the future can be done from a number of perspectives or points of view. Think of these as different sets of lenses to look through. For example, you can orient these activities to think about:

- Environmental issues (green spaces, consumerism, global warming)
- Social issues (food, money distribution, cultures)
- Political issues (power, control)

\*\*\*Let the students' concerns dictate the approach

## PART I: "MAPPING THE PRESENT"

You can set the stage by organizing a discussion about what forces may work in these futures through looking at the present. One way of doing this is by making a map of characters from the present, and the complex web of interactions that bind them.

Start by choosing a grassroots community (for example, the community around a LES garden, or at a garden near your school). Ask students: Who are the actors? Who are the people who create/take care/use this place? Together, make a short list of a few of these (maybe even draw them!). This community will be at the center of your map.

Discuss with students the community's objective: what do they want to preserve? Improve? Change? Choose one clear objective and write it at the top of the map. Who interacts with them? Who has a vested interest? Who has power? Have students write down on post-its the different actors who interact with the community (the mayor, a cop, an NGO, a real estate developer). *Encourage students to be super thorough.*

Use one color for actors who are local, and another for those who may have an influence but are not local (the mayor?).

Now, put them in a graph! Make a vertical axis of power (more-less) and a horizontal axis of help (do they want the same things the community wants? Or are they diametrically opposed?). Please refer to the last page of lesson III for an example.

Facilitate a discussion about how these forces interact and are connected. Note the insights students come up with. You can talk about power, systems, laws, social justice, government, community activism, etc.



# III "planting seeds" continued

## PART II: ALTERNATIVE FUTURES

If you completed the activity above, you can easily come up with a list of conflicts, tensions, and opportunities for the rooted community.

Now, have students project a future based on what is happening on the present. How will it look? What could change? Encourage them to be fanciful; exaggeration of current conflicts and contradictions is at the root of many good science fiction works (for example, *The Handmaid's Tale*).

Note: You can use the work of Mary Mattingly, such as "Wearable Home" and "Opera". For more, go to Resources page in this guide.

Discuss:

How does an ideal or utopian future look for this rooted community?  
How does a tragic or dystopic future look for

## SUMMARIZING:

Education thinkers John Dewey and Paulo Freire agree that deep learning doesn't happen without reflection. So, as learners develop the work, bring back the initial discussions and guiding questions that you chose at the beginning.

Discuss the assumptions that emerge in the futures the students' projects. What is valued an important, more than in the present? (for example, in George Orwell's *1984*, the State is valued above family or friends).

What does the future they created tell us about what is important to change in the present? (for example, Black Panther's futuristic "alternative present" encourages us to support underserved communities).

*Then, in groups, have students develop artwork that explores this utopia or dystopia of the future, the community in 2099.*

- Maybe it's a series of short stories that can be compiled?
- A painting of the community in the future?
- An installation?
- A sculpture that represents it abstractly?
- An illustrated map of the community?
- A short guerilla film? (an action film like *Black Panther*? Or a fake documentary about an "issue" in this future?)
- A soundscape that looks into how the neighborhood will sound? (is it all machines? Is there more nature?)
- The design of a series of objects that are used in the future and that can be exhibited together as an "anthropological exhibit" of the neighborhood 2099?
- An animation piece?
- A piece of fashion that people are using then?
- Maybe it's a board game set in the community in the future?
- A mural that would be in response to something that is happening in that future?
- A flyer of the activists of that time?
- A short piece of theatre?
- A set of found poems from the future?
- A piece of music that came from the future?
- A few minutes of a radio program or other media artifact from that future?

\*\*\*Extra points if the art is in some way developed with the community (using interviewees as actors or co-authors, making the mural in a space for someone, etc.).



1.

MAP

COMMUNITY



3.

GROCCER

THE MAYOR  
OR  
CITY

2.

NAP  
"THEY WANT TO MAKE GARDEN BIGGER"

COMMUNITY



4.

NAP  
"THEY WANT TO MAKE GARDEN BIGGER"

A POWER

THE MAYOR OR CITY

COMMUNITY



WANT

ALLY

groccer

LESS POWER



# ***glossary*** ...of useful terms

## **"Activist"**

A person who campaigns to bring about political or social change.

## **"Capitalism"**

An economic and political system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, rather than by the state.

## **"Community"**

All the people who live in a particular area, or a group of people who are considered as a unit because of their shared interests or background.

## **"Contextualize"**

To place or study in the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea.

## **"Displacement"**

the enforced departure of people from their homes, particularly because of gentrification (for the purposes of this curriculum).

## **"Documentation"**

The process of recording someone or something in written, photographic, or other form.

## **"Dystopia"**

The imagining or projection of a grim (negative) future. Many dystopias in literature are used to reveal some problems with the present (such as in George Orwell's "1984").

## **"Futurology"**

The study of possible, probable and preferable futures. It is a discipline part of social sciences, and it contributes to an understanding of past and present.

## **"Gentrification"**

The process of repairing and rebuilding homes and businesses in a deteriorating area (such as an urban neighborhood) accompanied by an influx of middle-class or affluent people which often results in the displacement of earlier, usually poorer residents.

## **"Grassroots Community"**

Movements and organizations that use collective action from the local level to effect change at the local, regional, national, or international level. Grassroots movements are associated with bottom-up, rather than top-down decision making.

## **"Identity"**

The qualities, beliefs, personality, looks and/or expressions that make a person or group.

## **"Interview"**

A meeting between people where questions are asked, answered, and discussed.

## **"Narrative"**

A commonly-held and collectively-generated understanding or perspective.

## **"Neoliberalism"**

An economic, political, and social ideology predicated on free-market capitalism, economic expansion, and privatization.

## **"Power"**

The capacity of individuals, groups, and/or institutions to advance particular interests.



# ***glossary*** ...of useful terms

## **"Primary Source/Research"**

*The study of an object, artifact, subject, or text that is an original source of information -- an autobiography or an interview, for example.*

## **"Privitization"**

*The co-opting of that which was once publicly owned and operated for the purposes of increasing revenue and profit.*

## **"Public Space"**

*An arena that is free and accessible for people to gather, share information, and work together to achieve common goals.*

## **"Secondary Source/Research"**

*The study of an object, artifact, subject, or text that interprets, comments on, analyzes, or critiques a primary source -- a biography or a textbook, for example.*

## **"Sensory Perception"**

*Using the five senses to observe, assess, and create an image about one's surroundings.*

## **"Site Visit"**

*A visit to a location to experience it firsthand, to collect primary research about it.*

## **"Utopia"**

*The projection of an idealized (positive) future.*



# resources

## LOWER EAST SIDE HISTORY

To learn more and connect with the Lower East End Gardens and its history, you can check the website of the **Museum of Reclaimed Urban Spaces**.

<http://www.morusnyc.org/>

This is also a number of places with information about the history of the gardens and their struggle.

An **article by The Guardian** about the gardens and their history

<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/aug/11/new-york-lower-east-side-community-gardens>

**Under The Asphalt** has a detailed history of the Gardens and their struggles

[http://skillshares.interactivist.net/gardens/h\\_1.html](http://skillshares.interactivist.net/gardens/h_1.html)

A different history of the Gardens at the LES from architecture site **6sqft**

<https://www.6sqft.com/how-the-east-village-grew-to-have-the-most-community-gardens-in-the-country/>

Here is **another history**, from the perspective of the Green Guerillas

<http://www.ecotippingpoints.org/our-stories/indepth/usa-new-york-community-garden-urban-renewal.html>

These two articles address the **influence of the Puerto Rican community** in the gardens, and talks about gentrification and displacement.

<https://voicesofny.org/2015/06/community-gardens-a-puerto-rican-legacy/>

<https://centopr.hunter.cuny.edu/centrovoices/barrios/re-discovering-community-gardens-and-puerto-rican-roots-new-york>

Here is the **timeline of the history** of the neighbourhood from the Lower East Side Preservation Initiative.

<http://www.lespi-nyc.org/history/timeline-of-the-lower-east-side.html>

This is the website of one of the gardens, **La Plaza Cultural**

<https://laplazacultural.com/>

## ARTISTS RELATED TO THE THEMES

Artists sometimes use futurology as a framework for their work.



For example, **Candy Chang**, I wish this was project. In it, she created signs that could be filled out to post messages of what one "wished" something in the city "was".

<http://candychang.com/work/i-wish-this-was/>

In **Park of Fiction**, communities and artists worked together to stop a development on a site, and ended with the creation of a park.

<http://park-fiction.net/tag/right-to-the-city/>



**Mary Mattingly** is referenced in some of the activities. She plays with ideas of futurology and ecology as part of her work (above, Pull, 2015).

<https://art21.org/artist/mary-mattingly/>

<http://www.abladeofgrass.org/fieldworks/fieldworks-mary-mattingly/>

<http://www.abladeofgrass.org/tag/mary-mattingly/>



# resources

## VIDEO RESOURCES

A number of documentarists and videographers have created pieces that can serve as an introduction for you and your students.



**Play For Keeps:** a 20 minute documentary about the struggle to maintain the gardens in the LES (above)

<http://papertiger.org/play-for-keeps-the-struggle-to-save-nyc-community-gardens/>



**The Building of a Community,** an activist documentary by Colectivo Piloto about the movement that saved the gardens.

<https://vimeo.com/64447385>



**Carmen Pabon** is a 3 minute excerpt from a longer bio from the LES Biography Project.  
<https://vimeo.com/59811859>



**Loisaida Gardens** is a 6 minute video about the history of this landmark LES garden  
<https://vimeo.com/13893063>

## PODCASTS

The Interference Archive does a lot of work in NYC collecting and creating artifacts that bear witness to the rich history of community social movements. The following is the link to Audio Interference episode 47, where various members of the community gardens history were interviewed.

<http://interferencearchive.org/audio-interference-47-lower-east-side-community-gardens/>

## GARDENS ACTIVISM SITES

**Green Thumb** community garden activists.  
<https://greenthumb.nycgovparks.org/gardenevents.html?qs=2018/02/15/mural-making-in-the-garden>

This is a coalition that **works supporting parks** and public gardens  
<http://sdrpc.mkgarden.org/>

The site of **Time's Up** environmental organization  
<https://times-up.org/index.php?page=community-gardens>