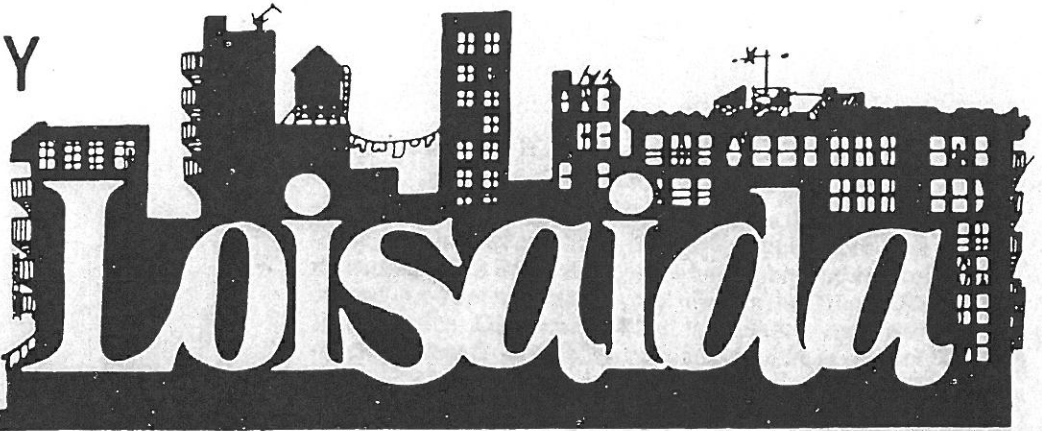


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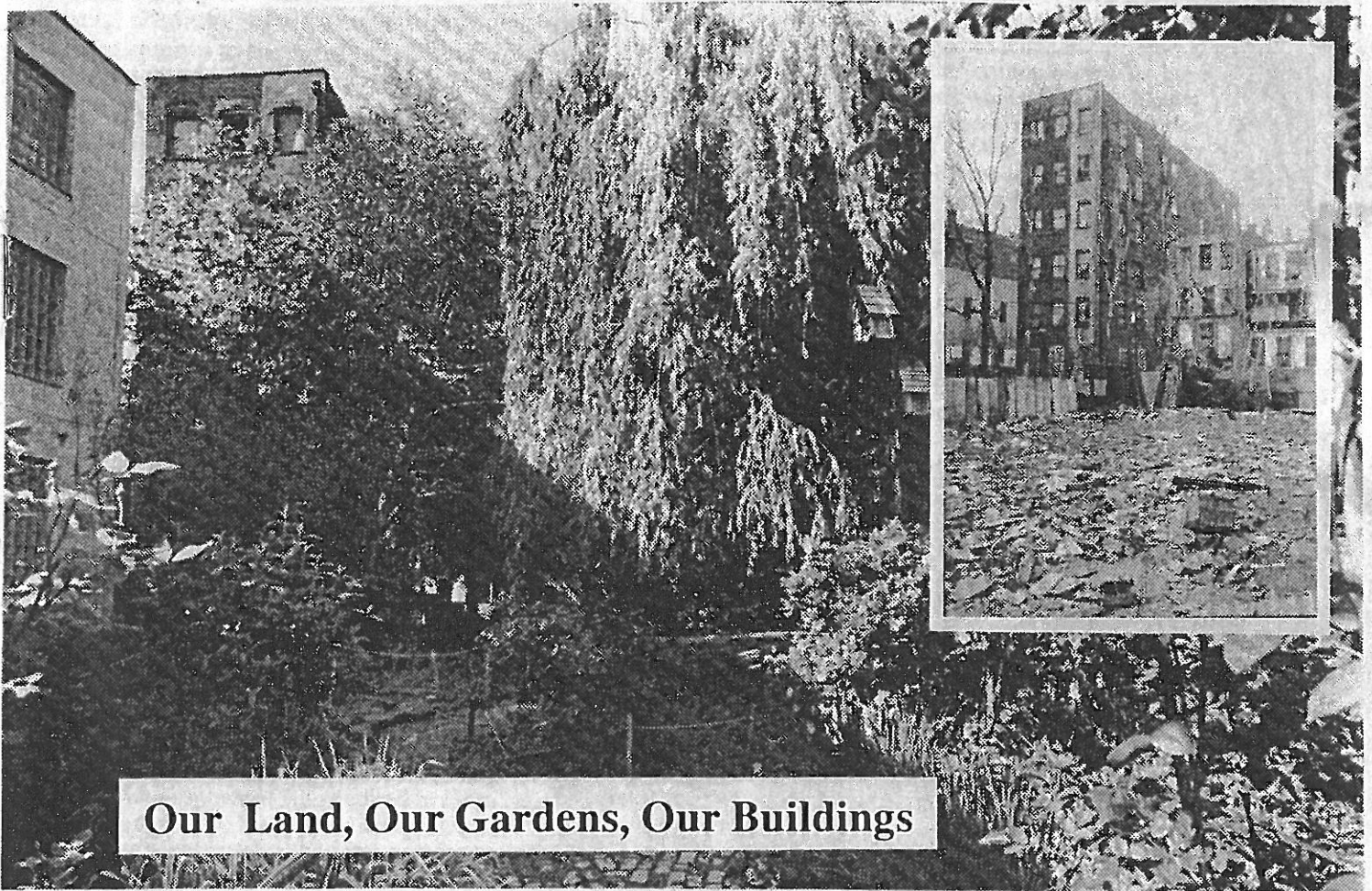


Loisaida

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Our Land, Our Gardens, Our Buildings

Photo by Marlis

El Parque de la Tranquilidad, Tranquility Park, was created on an empty lot, shown in the inset as it was in 1979. The larger picture shows the garden as it is now, at 4th Street between Avenues C and D, between two homestead buildings.

COMMUNITY LAND TRUST ON THE LOWER EAST SIDE

By Howard Brandstein
Housing Consultant

*"Land belongs to a large family of man
some of whom are dead, many of whom are
living, and most of whom are yet unborn"*
- Nigerian Chief

Social ecology proponents teach that our relationship to the land is a reflection of our relationship to each other. The wise stewardship of the land is usually reflective of a just society. The exploitation of the land and pollution of the earth, on the other hand, are inseparable from an exploitive social system where landlords displace tenants, bosses dominate workers and rich oppress poor. In Loisaida, beginning in the early seventies, the homesteading and gardening movements represented early efforts to restore the land and some balance of social justice in a neighborhood where historically little existed. The homesteading movement, in particular, by directly addressing the issue of ownership and control of land was, in the deepest sense, the first movement for land reform on the Lower East Side. The term homesteading dates to the Homesteading Act of 1862 when the government sought to encourage the settlement of the West by offering free land to settlers who fulfilled a commitment to work their new claim. Ironically, this first movement of "homesteaders" meant the displacement of the indigenous population of Native Americans. And furthermore, according to *Land Reform, American Style*, (edited by Geisler and Popper) even the land deeded to these poor settlers wound up for the most part in the hands of speculators and corporations within 20 years! So it is indeed ironic that this term has come closest to representing a movement for em-

powerment not only in Loisaida but in other low-income communities in New York City.

And yet it also remains significant because the lessons of those first homesteaders of the 1860's apply more than ever today. That is, the struggle for ownership and control of land does not necessarily coincide with the struggle for social justice. Displacement and speculation remain as much a threat from within a community as from without.

The development of the first community land trust (CLT) in Manhattan, RAIN CLT, was, first of all, an effort to join together the issues of social justice with the ownership, or more appropriate, stewardship, of land. A community land trust may be defined as a not-for-profit corporation organized in the interest of low- and moderate-income people permanently to remove land from the speculative market. For RAIN (which stands for Rehabilitation in Action to Improve Neighborhoods) this has meant the joining together currently of some 12 homesteading groups in the community who have pledged their land to common ownership through membership in the CLT. Each member building has one representative on RAIN's Board of Directors. Additionally, four non-resident members representing the interests of the broader community are appointed to the Board. Each member group of RAIN retains ownership of its building and manages its day-to-day affairs while RAIN collectively holds title to the land and sets broad policy around income eligibility and resale issues.

The concept and structure of the community land trust follows from three principles that together define it as a movement for social justice. First, it is empowering; that is, it represents those who live in a community and par-



Photo by Marliss
Some RAIN members at this year's Loisaida Fair.

ticularly those who are long-term community residents. At the same time it promotes cooperative structures where each resident or member has an equal voice in decision making. Second, it is socially integrative; that is, it includes the elderly, disabled, homeless and families receiving public assistance, as well as working people. CLT residents also reflect the ethnic diversity of a community. Third, it is sustainable; the CLT by developing collective approaches to management and maintenance among its member groups helps to maintain their affordability for future generations. Furthermore, and most significantly, through its ownership of the land, the CLT precludes for-profit sales of buildings or shares (in the case of a cooperative) through a ground lease agreement that specifies a limited-equity resale formula for member

groups.

In sum, the community land trust model by incorporating both collective and individual (or cooperative) ownership is a way to mediate the needs of the individual resident with those of the community. Empowerment of individuals and groups is balanced by the larger community's need for accountability. Legacy (the individual's right to pass his home or apartment to his heirs) is balanced by the need for social integration. Finally, equity (the individual's right to recapture his investment in his home or apartment) is balanced by the community's quest for sustainable housing for low- and moderate-income people.

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