The Garden: Los Angeles urban farmers struggle against corporate interests

Contributed by Culture Change
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The Garden, a film by Scott Hamilton Kennedy, vividly reveals a world of healthy community gardening forgotten by many urban dwellers, fighting the encroachment of backroom political deals, ...
moneyed interests, the state and corporations. One of many struggles worldwide for the basics of food and shelter, a dramatic fight between the people connected to the earth and the people abusing power and money.

"Rising from the ashes of the LA riots..."

"We have not found a larger inner city garden anywhere in the U.S."

"In the middle of downtown, you have thirteen acres, people growing food!"

"it's a pretty simple idea, land, people, food, happy days!"

...and then comes the notice to vacate, and the struggle continues.

The Garden
A film by Scott Hamilton Kennedy

Trailer

TheGardenFilm.com

Screenings

Order DVD

South Central Farmers

There is a saying in our Pledge of Allegiance, "justice for all". Where is our justice?

Synopsis

The fourteen-acre community garden at 41st and Alameda in South Central Los Angeles is the largest of its kind in the United States. Started as a form of healing after the devastating L.A. riots in 1992, the South Central Farmers have since created a miracle in one of the country’s most blighted neighborhoods. Growing their own food. Feeding their families. Creating a community.

But now, bulldozers are poised to level their 14-acre oasis.

The Garden follows the plight of the farmers, from the tilled soil of this urban farm to the polished marble of City Hall. Mostly immigrants from Latin America, from countries where they feared for their lives if they were to speak out, we watch them organize, fight back, and demand answers:

Why was the land sold to a wealthy developer for millions less than fair-market value? Why was the transaction done in a closed-door session of the LA City Council? Why has it never been made public?

And the powers-that-be have the same response: “The garden is wonderful, but there is nothing more we can do.”

If everyone told you nothing more could be done, would you give up?

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The Garden has the pulse of verité with the narrative pull of fiction, telling the story of the country’s largest urban farm, backroom deals, land developers, green politics, money, poverty, power, and racial discord. The film explores and exposes the fault lines in American society and raises crucial and challenging questions about liberty, equality, and justice for the poorest and most vulnerable among us.

Director's Statement

There are so many reasons I was inspired to pick up my camera and follow this story. The first time I stepped onto the garden at 41st and Alameda, the city of Los Angeles seemed to vanish. Surrounded by varieties of fruits, vegetables and herbs, the smell, the air was different immediately. And the people: warm, humble, generous in spirit and with the bounty of their plots. But there was another characteristic to the farmers that is essential to this story: while most had never done anything political before, they found a way to get organized, ask questions, do research, and not give up without a fair assessment of what happened here.

So with the threat of bulldozers only weeks away, my journey with The Garden began.

At every turn, we were faced with more and more complex questions, like what is the best use of our limited lands, and how do we make sure that all parties are equally represented in that discussion? Do any of us rise to such challenges as ‘Justice for all,’ or are we more often derailed by things like bias, self-interest, greed, and ego?

To me it is both simple and wickedly complex, timeless and timely: a fascinating story about the many layers of America.

At a moment when economic insecurity abounds -- as rising food prices, energy and environmental crisis confront us at seemingly every turn -- The Garden tells an essential story and serves as a powerful symbol of the larger world around us.

Related Stories:

DC Petrocollapse Conference / L.A.'s "Havana farm" threatened

L.A.’s “Havana Experiment” Farm Threatened by Industry and Government - A Model for Adaptation to Peak Oil - 350 Poor Families Fed From Farm in So. Central LA

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Take Back the Land Works to Use Land for the Benefit of the Miami Community

Take Back the Land is the name of a book, a web site, an extensive collection of documentary videos, and a blog.

Mission of Take Back the Land

People of African descent have been systematically denied control of land in their communities -- from slavery to sharecropping to segregation to the current gentrification and displacement of our communities.

Elected officials and high ranking bureaucrats have sold out the black community in favor of enriching already wealthy and politically connected developers.

We assert our right to the land in our community and to use public space for the public good -- specifically, to house, feed and provide community space for the poor, particularly in low income black communities. As such, we are Taking Back the Land and empowering the black community, not the politicians, to determine how to use land for the benefit of the community.

Our struggle is fundamentally one of land, and control over that land. We take inspiration from and support our sisters and brothers across the globe engaged in similar struggles for control over land for the benefit of the people.

Objectives

Take Back the Land pursues three core political objectives:

First, feed and house people. Taking control of land to feed and house those impacted by the crisis of gentrification and low-income housing is the ultimate in public space for public good.

As such, the Umoja Village provides free food and modest housing for 50 people. While the housing is not “up to code,” it is far better than conditions under local bridges and even some of the nearby slum housing. We strive to consistently improve conditions and the quality of life on the land, including regular delivery of food and other goods, as well as upgrading housing and amenities.

Second, assert our right to control the land in our community. This movement is not fundamentally about homelessness or even housing: it is about land. We contend that the land in the black community is not the domain of wealthy developers or the politicians who do their bidding. The land belongs to the people in the black community. As such, the people have the right to control the land and its uses.

Instead of giveaways to wealthy developers to build high cost, high profit condos which do not serve the needs of the community, the land on which the Umoja Village sits is used to benefit the community. Particularly during land related crisis, such as gentrification and housing, public land should not be used for the enrichment of wealthy, politically connected interests. Instead, the land must be used to solve problems to the benefit of the community. Our communities must determine its own priorities and the appropriate use of land in accordance with those priorities.

Third, build a new society. Instead of replicating the power and social relationships of the broader society in a smaller setting, we build a new society in which people relate to one another differently and the power to make decisions about the Village is centered on them, not the politicians.

While critics charge we are anti-development, nothing could be further from the truth. However, development is not about buildings, technology and the latest consumer products. Development is fundamentally about human beings. The building of structures without the development of human beings is nothing more than a profit making venture, something not worthy of the social status attached to “development” projects.

Links

takebacktheland.org

Buy the book: Take Back the Land: Land, Gentrification, and the Umoja Village Shantytown by Max Rameau (Nia Press)

Videos from The Pan African - Take Back the Land