

DESIGN TRUST FOR PUBLIC

35 west 9th street, no. 8a, new york city, new york 10011

SPACE

and the  
Children's Environments Research Group  
of the City University of New York

## Designing for Children in Community Gardens



# DESIGN TRUST FOR PUBLIC SPACE

## DESIGNING FOR CHILDREN IN COMMUNITY GARDENS

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1997 **Designing for Children in Community Gardens**

*with the Children's Environments Research Group of the City University of New York and with Operation Green Thumb of the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation*

**Introduction.** In November of 1996, the Children's Environments Research Group (CERG), a CUNY program with widely-acknowledged expertise on children, environmental design and psychology, asked the Design Trust for Public Space to help in their efforts to develop "children's play areas" in New York City community gardens. Over the previous few years, CERG had been experimenting in New York City, developing "creative-play" alternatives to playgrounds that focus on gross motor activities. They discovered that in many low-income urban neighborhoods the best locations for children's imaginative play are in community gardens. Not only are they safe places, but, as neighborhood "backyards," they also encourage much-needed contact with the natural environment.

CERG planned a concerted effort to build intimately-scaled and well-defined play spaces for young children in New York City community gardens, and turned to the Design Trust for help in transforming their research into a systematic, city-wide program. Originally, CERG proposed that the Design Trust fund a series of workshops for community gardeners and a design manual based on CERG's in-house designs. The Design Trust wanted to use CERG's experience, but broaden the design abilities brought to bear on the children's areas. Therefore, the Design Trust proposed that it invite three designers to design and build demonstration children's areas which would then be described in a "how-to" manual co-published by CERG and the Design Trust. CERG agreed to the Design Trust's counterproposal, asking that the designers focus on solving the specific design problems surrounding sand play, water play and shelter/clubhouse play.

Three Design Trust Fellows, selected in April of 1997 through a juried competition, have each been working over the past year, in separate community gardens, to create affordable designs that will provide neighborhood children with the chance for real outdoor fun (making mudpies, building dams to control the flow of rivulets, creating forts and hideaways, etc.) and for experimentation with the natural processes that are often hidden in the urban environment. Two of these prototypes have been completed, while the third is scheduled to open late in the Fall of 1998.

Each of the prototypes will ultimately be judged by three criteria: first, by its *popularity with children*; second, by its use as an *armature for imaginative play*, and third, by its success as a *model for replication* in other community gardens around the city. The unveiling of the first children's areas, actually a group of three interlocking mobile carts (one for each of the three play elements) seems to indicate that they will be a great success. The kids at the opening were swarming over the carts and really using them as they were intended: for experimentation with the elements and for social play. And the carts even held their own against the ever-popular pony ride!



Sand Play



Water Play



Play Shelter

**Site Selection Process.** With the three prototypes as the basis of the project, the Design Trust and CERG began working with Operation GreenThumb of the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation to find three appropriate sites for the project. GreenThumb suggested approximately fifteen possible gardens scattered across the city. Selim Iltus, an architect and researcher at CERG, developed a set of criteria that we used to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the various gardens during our site visits. Was there easy access to water and electricity? Did the garden have a strong and democratic leadership? Was the garden kid-friendly already? Was there an appropriate place for a children's area?

In addition, as the sites would be serving as "prototypes," we intended to find gardens that represented three very different site conditions (in terms of the size and type of garden, organizational structure, urban context, etc.) and that were geographically dispersed across New York City. In short, we needed to find sites that would be good case studies, providing three separate models for replication.

At the same time as the Design Trust and CERG were conducting these interviews with the GreenThumb gardeners, we were approached by two groups, the Parks Council and Astoria Residents Reclaiming Our World (ARROW), both of which had heard about the project and wanted to offer, as sites for the prototypes, their respective gardens in East New York, Brooklyn and Astoria, Queens. Both gardens were part of a new trend in the development of small parks and open spaces in New York City: they are owned by the Parks Department, but managed by not-for-profit organizations or local community groups. They offered significant advantages as sites for the children's area. Because the land for both had been acquired by the Parks Department, neither faced the GreenThumb gardens' problem of living under the constant threat of destruction for redevelopment. In addition, the Parks Council and ARROW are highly organized, capable of bringing additional resources to bear on the project, and are without the typical community garden's precarious dependence on one or two key individuals. We visited, evaluated, and chose these two gardens using the same criteria that we used for the fifteen GreenThumb gardens. An additional benefit of this selection process was that the Design Trust was able to help create a dialogue between the Parks Council and CERG, organizations which had deep mutual interests but little prior connection. The third site we chose was a small, beautiful GreenThumb garden in the mid-Bronx.

**Selection of Design Trust Fellows.** The Design Trust organized a portfolio-based competition open to local architects, artists, landscape architects, sculptors, and other designers. An invited jury (see right) selected three fellows from 115 applicants based on slides of previous work, a short artist's statement, and a résumé. The 115 statements themselves (which we have kept on file) are a fascinating commentary on children and the built environment.

The jury selected the following Fellows: Susan Crowder, a sculptor and landscape artist from Pennsylvania with considerable experience in public art whose straw-bale structures were universally admired by the jury; Katie Winter, a young New York architect with an excellent design sensibility; and Bill and Mary Buchen, self-described "sonic architects" with a great deal of experience with building for children.



*Kids in NYC community gardens*

#### **The Jury**

Deborah Berke, *Architect*  
 Sam Borenzweig, *4th grader*  
 Selim Iltus, *Architect*  
 Nicholas Quennell, *Landscape Architect*  
 Owen Serra, *5th grader*  
 Suzanne Shaker, *Photographer*  
 Ken Smith, *Landscape Architect*  
 Peter Stevens, *Sculptor*  
 Donna Walcavage, *Landscape Architect*

**Children as Jurors.** The Design Trust sought children's input on the previous work of the applicants and included both a 4th and 5th grader on the jury. Owen and Sam joined the panel of professional designers for the slide viewing of the semifinalists. This experiment was a qualified success. The children's comments were insightful and often helpful. We learned through this experience that the children's influence on the jury could have been more profound if they had had a dedicated, non-jury adult facilitator to answer their questions and to encourage their comments during the discussion.

**Matching Gardens with Designers.** After the Jury awarded the three Fellowships, the Design Trust organized a field trip to introduce the designers to each other and to all three sites. The Design Trust had had a serious internal debate about whether to assign designers to gardens or to let them choose by consensus, and in the end we decided on the latter. Despite the potential for discontent, the more open process allowed the Design Trust to facilitate the exchange of ideas between the designers; to create appropriate matches between the designers' interests and abilities and the three sites; and to set the tone for the project from the outset by demonstrating to the designers the value that the Design Trust places on participatory decisions. In the end, everyone was happy with their choice (see right).

**Program Notes.** CERG and the Design Trust developed a set of Program Notes (please find attached) which, as an addendum to the designers' contracts, directed them as to the scope of work, the basic requirements for each prototype, and the intentions behind the project. With these Notes, we charged the designers with their task: to design and build a children's area, including a sand component, a water component and a children's shelter/structure.

**Liability Issues.** The Fellows were now ready to design the prototypical children's areas. Unfortunately, in the process of negotiating contracts with the Fellows, the question of the designers' legal liability emerged as an unexpectedly troublesome and important issue. Discussions and negotiations about liability dominated the project for the next few months, and at some points threatened to derail it entirely. The Design Trust and CERG had both seriously underestimated the designers' concern with the potential for litigation.

We dealt with each of the Fellows' concerns in a different way. The Buchens were the most comfortable with the risk, mostly because they had a corporation, Son Arc Inc., with which to shield themselves. The Design Trust agreed to purchase liability insurance for their garden through a program of the Neighborhood Open Space Coalition. The policy provided a million dollars of coverage for less than three hundred dollars a year. Given this coverage, the insignificant rate of claims in gardens, and the security of their corporate shield, the Buchens agreed to begin work in July of 1997, only two months after they had been selected.

Katie Winter, although seriously concerned about exposing herself to suit, was willing to continue work on the project without signing a contract, with the assumption that

#### The Matches

- 1 Katie Winter with  
*the ARROW garden in Queens*
- 2 Bill and Mary Buchen with  
*the Fordham/Bedford Lotbusters garden in the Bron*
- 3 Susan Crowder with  
*the East New York Success Garden in Brooklyn*

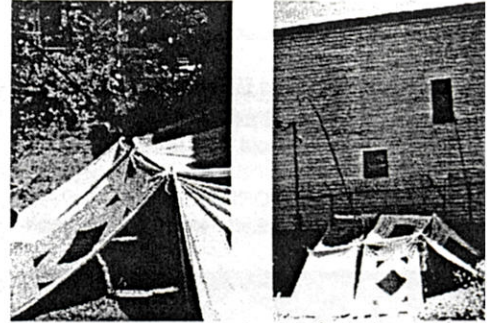


*Kids playing with water*

we could work out the liability issue. Through a series of negotiations with the Parks Department, we are able to convince them to indemnify Katie Winter in the management agreement that they were signing with ARROW. Katie finally signed the contract in January of 1998.

Unfortunately, the final designer, Susan Crowder, was unwilling to accept any risk whatsoever. After long and fruitless discussions, and considerable *pro-bono* legal counsel, we finally realized that we would not be able to provide her with the assurances she needed to continue. Susan dropped out of the project at the end of July of 1997. Rather than sponsor only two prototypes, the Design Trust decided to contact one of the other finalists and see if she was still interested in accepting the Fellowship.

**The Replacement Designer.** We met with Kate Dodd, an outstanding sculptor who had come in a very close fourth place after the interviews. We explained what had transpired over the past few months and very clearly presented the legal liability that she would face as the designer of a children's area. She accepted the Fellowship with the knowledge that we would not be able to provide her with complete protection from a lawsuit. This was the biggest lesson that we drew from the struggle with the liability issue: if we had recognized the problem earlier and presented the risk in a straightforward manner during the interviews, those designers who were uncomfortable with the risk could have bowed out without delaying the project.



Tenthouse built by kids in Fordham/Bedford Lotbusters Garden



Kids in Fordham/Bedford Lotbusters Garden

**Prototype #1: ARROW Garden.** Astoria Residents Reclaiming Our World (ARROW), a Queens community group, founded their garden in an old storage yard in an ethnically-mixed industrial/residential neighborhood with very little existing open space. In addition to garden plots, the site has an old garage with high ceilings and big bay doors running across the rear. The Borough President and local Councilmember have allocated \$800,000 to renovate the site, including the big garage, which ARROW plans to turn into a community center with children's art studios. This is an incredibly interesting garden, not only because it is one the new wave of City-owned parks managed by local community groups, but also because of its unusual architectural characteristics, its multitude of non-traditional uses (park, community garden, and community center all rolled into one), and its special focus on children (garden plots for kids, a children's play area, and children's art studios).

Because of the imminent plans to completely renovate the site, Katie had to provide a unique solution to the children's area program: she built a children's area on wheels so that it can be moved out of the construction zone. Katie designed a sand cart, a water cart, and a playhouse/stage on wheels that children can use as separate elements or link together in a number of different ways, an activity which in and of itself affords the children a rich spatial experience. In addition, these mobile elements can be stored in the rear garage, preventing unsupervised play and night-time shennanigans. They can also be used inside the garage/art studios during cold or wet weather, but on pleasant days they can easily be moved outside and wheeled to wherever parents were working or hanging out. The carts are made of brightly-painted marine-grade plywood using very simple construction techniques (to make them easy for other gardeners to replicate). Katie topped one the carts with an arrow-shaped weather-vane to link it to the identity of the garden.

On 2 May of 1998, ARROW held its annual spring opening gala, which this year had as its central event the dedication of the new children's play area. Scores of people, including a crowd of local children and Parks' Commissioner Henry Stern came to celebrate the three children's carts. Commissioner Stern gave a short speech lauding the play carts, cut the necessary ribbon, and bestowed a 'park name' on Katie Winter (everyone in the Parks Department has a nickname, Katie chose "Igloo.>"). Overall the opening was a tremendous success. As the photographs demonstrate, the carts were overwhelmingly popular with children of all ages. Katie's intention had been to stimulate the children's curiosity about physics and mechanics and that is exactly what the sand and water carts did. On the water cart, the kids poured water back and forth, using the various tubes, pumps, funnels and containers. On the sand cart, they pushed sand around, modeling it into shapes and experimenting with the different chutes, buckets and sieves. Meanwhile, in the mobile playhouse, children gathered, talked, play-acted, and made the little clubhouse their own. The undeniable interest that these children showed in the types of playing afforded by the three carts was a great demonstration of the validity of CERG's ideas: about children's need for imaginative play and about the potential of community gardens to providing the space for it.

location  
35th Street and 35th & 36th Aves. in Astoria, Queens  
directions by subway  
R to 36th St., 2 and 1/2 blocks North on 35th St  
N to 36th Ave., 4 blocks East on 36th Ave.,  
left on 35th St., 1/2 block.

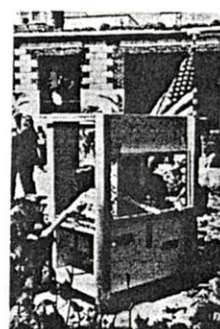
contacts  
Leslie Rubenstein, ARROW, tel.718.728.7631  
Katie Winter, Fellow, tel.212.255.1876



Water Cart



Sand Cart



Clubhouse Cart



Parks Commissioner Stern inaugurates the children's area

**Prototype #2: Fordham/Bedford Lotbusters Garden.** This is a traditional community garden, run under the auspices of Operation GreenThumb on city-owned land. It is located in a heavily built-up residential neighborhood right off the Grand Concourse and East Fordham Road commercial district. It is fairly small and very beautiful, with a wild and romantic look. It is run by two neighborhood women, each of whom have at least six children (many of them adopted). This garden's shoestring nature makes it more typical of New York City community gardens than the ARROW garden and East New York Success Garden, which both have much more sophisticated organizations behind them, and makes it especially useful as we try to understand the obstacles we will face in advocating for the creation of children's areas in gardens across the City.

Bill and Mary Buchen worked very closely with the kids who already use the garden, leading drawing and model-building classes on site, and eventually developed a structure like an abstracted boat. They were determined not to give it a literal boat form, but instead allow for the projection of various identities on the area (depending on the deployment of various sheets of fabric and fold-out gangways). The three prototypical elements are housed in three separate wooden boxes/low platforms (a larger rectangle and two triangles, one on either end of the rectangle) and two "masts" with whirly-gigs on top of them. The tops of the boxes fold out: in the rectangle revealing a sandy area and boxes for storing tools and toys; in one of the triangles, a host of colorful sheets that can be attached in unending combinations to the boxes, masts, and nearby hooks using bungee cords; and in the last triangle, a water play area. When the tops are folded-out, the three boxes can all be connected to form a large platform/stage, and when folded-in, they look like covered gardening beds. Overall it is a very simple and successful design. They are easily constructed. The Buchens were able to finish building their children's area in mid-October of 1997, but we decided to delay the inauguration until the spring. We are still planning an official dedication party late in the summer of 1998.

location

Bainbridge Avenue & East 193rd Street in the Bron

directions by subway

C or D to Fordham Rd., 3 blocks East on Fordham left on Bainbridge, 1 block North

contacts

Jeanie, gardener, tel.718.295.7067

Bill & Mary Buchen, Fellows, tel.212.982.1743



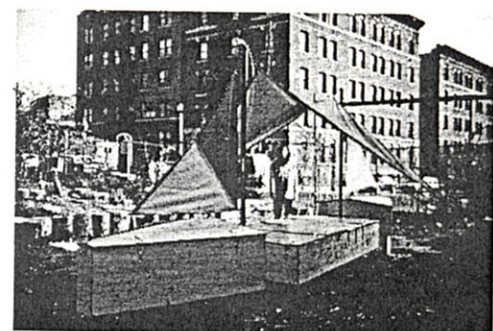
*The Fordham/Bedford Lotbusters Garden*



*The Buchens and garden kids building models*



*The "boat" under construction*



*Sails up and ready to go!*

**Prototype #3: East New York Success Garden.** The Parks Council, working with a local partner, the East New York Urban Youth Corps, founded one of their Success Gardens in East New York. Several adjacent empty blocks are slated for development as Nehemiah Housing, and the Parks Council and Urban Youth Corps are determined to make their garden, which is immediately adjacent to an elementary school, the center of the newly redeveloped residential neighborhood. The L-shaped Success Garden lot is huge, and because it is surrounded by block after block of vacant lots, the sky is absolutely expansive. Like the ARROW garden, it is actually a real New York City Park under the management of a not-for-profit organization, in this case the Parks Council. The Parks Council has already developed a master plan for the lot and built a large pond/natural area on one the arms of the "L" and a stage/picnic area on the other. The community garden and the children's area are being built in the middle, in the joint of the "L."

Kate Dodd began work later than the other Fellows and she plans to finish this fall. She has the most spacious site, and her children's area is very ambitious. Her design is a biomorphic combination of landscaped slopes, berms and circuitous pathways which create a separate world for the children. Her design contains many intriguing elements, including a maze for water, fossils buried under the sand, sifters and funnels rotating around a pole, grade changes, and a children's garden. She put in the foundations late in the Fall of 1997 and worked in the woodshop and with local school children during the winter of the same year. She plans to finish construction over the summer, in time for a late fall opening.

location

Alabama & Livonia Aves. in East New York, Brook

directions

by subway

3 train to Pennsylvania Avenue, 3 blocks West on Livonia (follow el train to Alabama Ave).

contacts

Sean Andrews, Parks Council, tel.212.838.9410

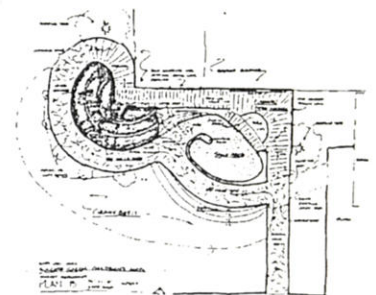
Kate Dodd, Fellow, tel.973.762.6275



Rotating Sieves for Sand



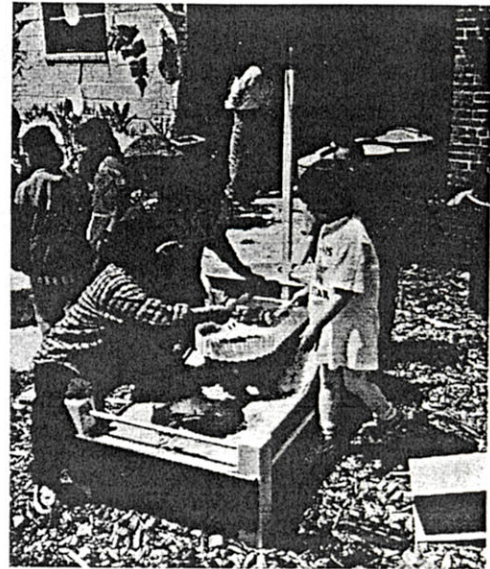
Sandbox



Kate Dodd's biomorphic plan

**Still in the Works: a Manual and Evaluation.** The Design Trust and CERG are planning to publish a simple, illustrated, how-to manual which uses the prototypes as case studies and describes exactly how people can design, plan, and build these types of inexpensive children's areas in their local community gardens. We will make these booklets available to community gardeners throughout New York City (and, hopefully, elsewhere). Selim Iltus of CERG and Simon Bertrang of the Design Trust are in the process of producing an outline for the manual, which will not be published until after Kate Dodd finishes her East New York prototype.

An evaluation of the entire project, including a frank examination of the successes and failures of project implementation and the prototypes' success at engaging the children for which they are designed, will be critical to the success of this booklet. CERG, with the Design Trust's assistance, is hoping to oversee this evaluation, perhaps using CUNY environmental psychology students to collect data and interview participants.



*A scene from community gardens everywhere?*



DESIGN TRUST FOR PUBLIC SPACE

Sand Cart  
by Design Trust Fellow Katie Winter  
ARROW Garden in Astoria, Queens



**DESIGN TRUST FOR PUBLIC SPACE**

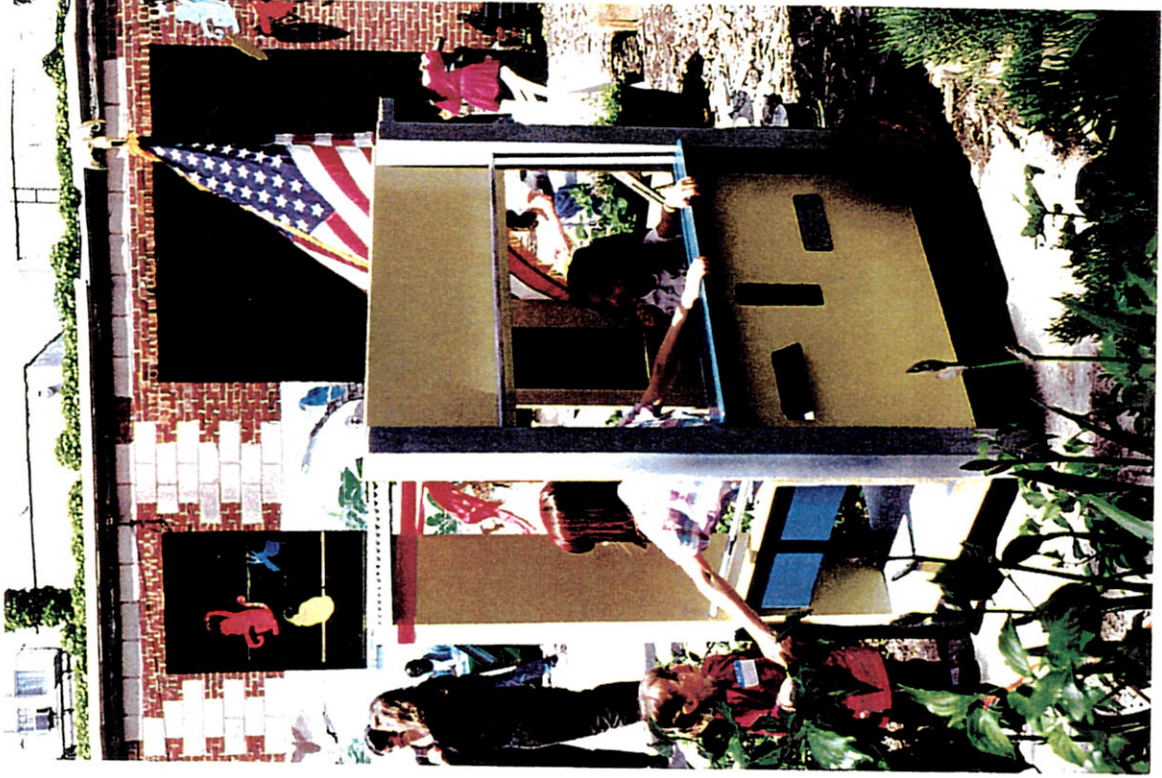
**Water Cart**

by Design Trust Fellow Katie Winter  
ARROW Garden in Astoria, Queens



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Ribboncutting by Commissioner Stern  
by Design Trust Fellow Katie Winter



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Clubhouse Cart

by Design Trust Fellow Katie Winter  
ARROW Garden in Astoria, Queens