

## Esperanza, Garden of Hope

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Tenant

<http://www.tenant.net/tengroup/Metcounc/Mar00/Esperanza.html>

The phone started ringing about 11 PM Monday night, Feb. 21. I had put my name on the phone tree as one of the “arrestables,” willing to use my body to block bulldozers from destroying the Esperanza community garden.

Tomorrow would be the day, the messages confirmed.

El Jardin de la Esperanza (Garden of Hope) had grown from the rubble of a neighborhood reeling from the 1970s fiscal crisis. Alicia Torres turned a vacant lot on East Seventh Street between Avenues B and C into a glorious garden where two generations of her extended family had celebrated birthdays, weddings, holidays, hot-dog roasts, and the change of seasons. It was a safe place for children to get off the streets of a Lower East Side once overrun with drug dealers.

And now that the land was cleaned up, the Giuliani administration wanted to make a buck with it. Developer Donald Capoccia, who had donated some \$50,000 to the mayor’s campaigns, acquired the garden site from the city without any fair bidding process for it. Giuliani claimed that Capoccia was going to construct “low-income housing” on the site, and that garden supporters were “not living in the real world.” In reality, the 79 apartments Capoccia is slated to build are “80/20 housing”—80% market-rate, luxury apartments, with a token 20% set aside for low-income tenants. Lower East Side Councilmember Margarita Lopez had helped broker a deal giving Capoccia the Esperanza site in exchange for sparing a nearby garden on Avenue C.

Some 100 people were at the garden when I arrived at 6 AM, 150 by 8 AM. There had been false bulldozer alarms before, but this morning felt different. The whole of Seventh Street was empty. A police car blocked traffic at the corner of Avenue C. Pre-action butterflies, excitement, and nervousness loomed.

Inside the garden were activists from Reclaim the Streets, the Church of Stop-Shopping, Time’s Up, the Lower East Side Collective, and More Gardens!, as well as three generations of Alicia Torres’ family. Most had been there all night. The coqui, the giant tree frog of Puerto Rican lore that activists had erected to vanquish larger foes, watched from above.

“Can you help me distract the driver so I can get under the bulldozer,” my friend Brad asked when I arrived. That seemed like a worthwhile strategy. To add a sense of urgency, after months of effort by garden activists, state Attorney General Elliot Spitzer was filing papers calling for an injunction barring the destruction of all gardens that morning.

No injunction could go into effect until 2 PM that afternoon at the earliest—but if activists could stall the police and bulldozers all morning, there was a chance the garden could be saved. Some activists locked themselves to the surrounding fence with bicycle locks around their necks, others locked down to “sleeping dragons,” pipes connected to concrete blocks buried deep in the ground. Another group locked themselves to a 45-foot high steel tower of a sunflower and tripods. And, of course, five activists locked themselves inside the coqui, hoping to save Esperanza.

Police swarmed the front of the garden, while a bulldozer loomed in the distance to the back of the garden. The activists were locked inside. “Protect and serve the garden, protest and serve the people,” we chanted. The police moved in, tearing down the fence in front of the garden, sawing off an activist who’d chained herself to it. Then, one by one, the police arrested 25 activists who had locked themselves down to the garden or formed human chains with each other. In all, 31 people were arrested, many for the first time.

It took the bulldozers 15 minutes to demolish the 22-year-old garden. Those arrested were put through the system, many of us spending some 30 hours in jail, mostly in the holding cells in the basement of the Manhattan jail. In jail, we heard that Attorney General Spitzer had successfully procured a temporary restraining order on development of all Greenthumb gardens, (except Esperanza, which as it was already destroyed, was left out of the deal). Spitzer later remarked that the Mayor had “subverted the legal process” by going ahead to bulldoze the garden just as the case was being heard in court.

Giuliani played to the usual debate that the city has to decide between housing vs. gardens. Garden activists soundly reject that assumption, arguing that with thousands of vacant lots and dilapidated buildings to rebuild in the five boroughs, there is room for both gardens and housing. (Later, a Giuliani spokesman would claim that Capoccia’s contributions had nothing to do with him winning city development contracts for the Esperanza site, the sites of the gardens bulldozed in December 1998, and the evicted squats on East 13th Street. Instead, the aide said, the developer gave money to the mayor because of his support on gay-rights issues.)

The night in jail was long and ugly, but I was glad to be inside, instead of on the streets where the destruction of the garden was taking place. I thought of my friends putting their bodies on the line, saying they would do anything to necessary to save this small community space, the coqui. Never have I felt more joy and connection with New Yorkers from all walks of life than standing in a blizzard, smiling by a bonfire during the winter encampment, sharing stories at Esperanza. The community built fighting for the garden is something no one can ever take away; the energy of defending this space is something that does not go away.

### **Cops Attack Esperanza Protesters**

Early in the morning of March 5, police attacked a crowd of protesters who tore down the wood fence surrounding the bulldozed Esperanza Garden. The confrontation began when about 200 people—part of a floating party/demonstration that began on the L train a few hours earlier—broke into the garden and planted flowers.

“Police clubbed passers-by on the sidewalk, causing at least three people to bleed in the face, one person to lose vision (we hope only temporarily), while a pool of blood collected at the intersection of Avenue C and Seventh Street,” a protester named Mario posted on an activist e-mail list. “The NYPD presence was in even larger numbers than on the day of Esperanza’s eviction, with hundreds of officers in riot gear swinging clubs and the police helicopter again circling above.”

Police told the New York Times that eight people were arrested, and seven officers and one protester injured. Protesters said at least four of them were seriously injured, including a woman who had her jaw fractured when police threw her to the ground. The woman with the broken jaw, described by a friend as a sympathetic bystander, was held in Bellevue Hospital’s prison ward for over 48 hours.

“The police made it quite clear Saturday night that the interests of the developers of luxury housing are in direct cooperation with this city’s administration and police force,” wrote Mario.