Gaining our freedom is, in the first place, ripping off a few acres from the face of a domesticated planet. - ATTILA KOTANYI AND RAOUL VANEIGEM, MANIFESTO OF UNITARY URBANISM

Invisible structures and invisible histories make cities as we know them, see them, smell them and dig in their soils. We invite you on a tour of tax lot lines, leases, settled court cases, City-agency jurisdiction assignments, histories of organizing, memories of long meetings, cleared garbage heaps, community land trusts and New Yorkers struggling and succeeding to create and control the space of the City together.
The COOPER SQUARE COMMITTEE (CSC) is a non-profit organization of Lower East Side residents preserving and developing affordable housing, community and cultural spaces. CSC formed in 1969 to fight the City of New York’s Cooper Square Slum Clearance plan, one of the first of the over 150 Urban Renewal Area Plans created and adopted for NYC’s “blighted” neighborhoods. The City’s plan was to bulldoze the buildings, move the residents and start over with a higher income population living in a less densely populated neighborhood. The CSC succeeded in resisting that plan and forced the City to adopt their alternative plan, aimed at keeping the neighborhood racially, economically, and culturally diverse instead. The adoption of the community plan prevented the displacement of several thousand people as well as the demolition of over 300 buildings. In 1991, CSC created the Cooper Square Mutual Housing Association (MHA) now managing nearly 400 low-income cooperative apartments. The MHA owns the 21 buildings that these apartments are in; the Cooper Square Community Land Trust owns the land beneath the buildings and leases to the MHA on a renewable 99-year term. The mission of the Community Land Trust is to make sure these 21 lots are used for affordable housing for low and moderate income people; covenants in the deeds to these lots give the Community Land Trust oversight power over the renter. Residents own shares in the MHA that give them access to their units. This balanced system is the tool that CSC has used to permanently preserve affordable housing on some of the most expensive land in NYC.

In 2012, residents of the Lower East Side gained access to two parcels of city-owned vacant land near the corner of Stanton and Attorney Streets. The parcels are in the inventory of Housing Preservation and Development. The lots had previously been a garden in the 1980s and 1990s, 596 Acres, New York’s community land access advocacy organization, had posted signs on the rusty fences surrounding the lots announcing that the land was publicly owned and that recreating the garden was possible. Neighbors who saw the signs connected with one another through 596 Acres and organized to get an interim use license through the New York City Parks Department Green Thumb program. SIEMPRE VERDE provides an inclusive recreational open space in an otherwise densely developed area.

The gardeners are in the midst of efforts to make the garden whole by having the City acquire a privately owned lot that divides the two garden parcels. This could happen through a purchase, a condemnation via eminent domain or a donation from the owner of that parcel. The development company that owns that lot is simultaneously campaigning to have the City parcel that the garden is on transferred to itself for new housing construction. The gardeners have so far been successful in preventing City approval of the developer’s plan and instead getting the local Community Board to unanimously request that the garden parcels be transferred to the Parks Department’s jurisdiction, where they will be more likely to be protected by state public trust doctrine. The City has not yet heeded the Community Board’s request; the lots continue to be sites of speculation and insecurity while the garden thrives.