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DISPATCH  
UNITED STATES

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## Open Spaces

### Abstract

After mapping Brooklyn's unused lots, 596 Acres is reclaiming the land for community use.

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**UNTIL RECENTLY**, the three narrow lots along a block of Bergen Street in Brooklyn were an unkempt bunch. Weeds blanketed them, and old coffee cups washed up along their fence. One Saturday in early April, though, the weeds and trash vanished, and the soil was leveled. Volunteers were remaking one of the 20-by-100-foot lots into a community space and a second into an urban farming laboratory. The ground at the third was prepped to grow Japanese Indigo, Hopi Sunflower, and other plants for a textile dye CSA (Community-Supported Agriculture).

This is how 596 Acres wants things to go. Two years ago, the group started mapping all the unused, city-owned land in Brooklyn. They found 596 acres of it (hence the name) and now help communities reclaim empty space—with three projects up and running so far. With so much empty land on hand, the team is strategic about which lots they go for. “We spend a

lot of time figuring out which spots don't have plans for them,” says Paula Segal, a young lawyer focused on land use and social justice.

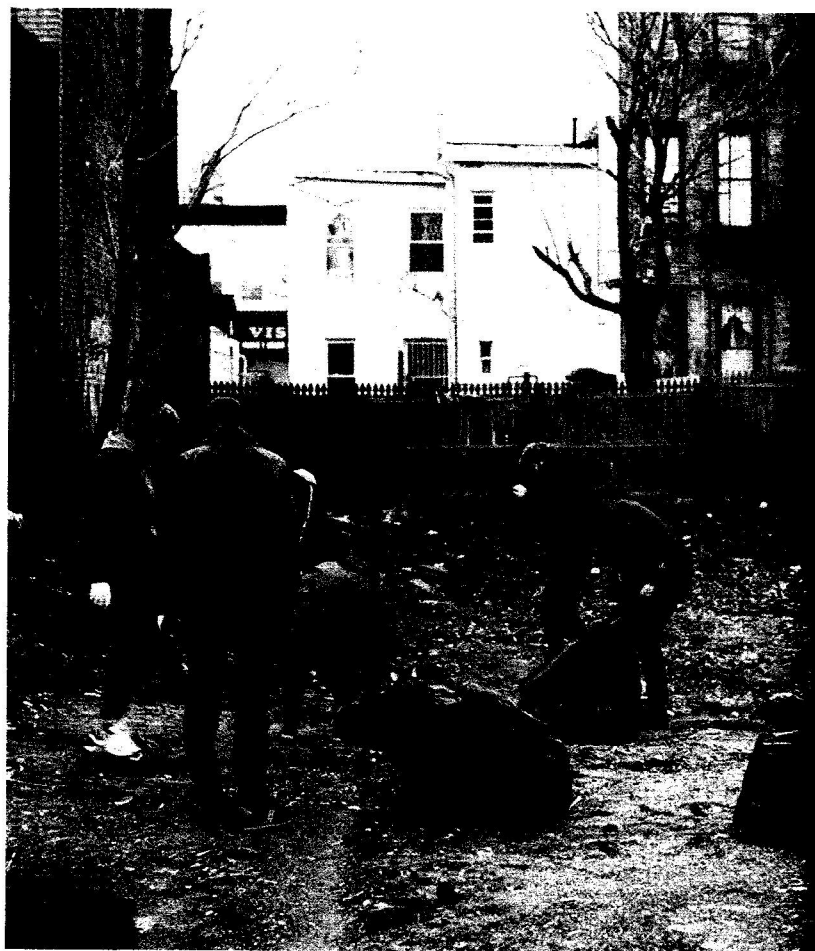
596 Acres gets the word out on the Internet. It publishes information about each lot—address, area, the city agency that owns the land—in a searchable map format on their website. Neighbors can leave notes and find others interested in the lot. 596 Acres rallies the newly inspired into lot rehabilitation with just a few clicks.

When interested neighbors send an email to 596 Acres, the group's four-person team works with them to figure out how to use the land. Then they petition the City. There are nearly 20 city agencies that own the mapped parcels, so reaching the right bureaucrat's extension can take tenacity. The City's Housing Preservation and Development Agency is a major one, and Segal says they've been receptive. The New York Police Department (NYPD) owns a few too, and they've

been less so. 596 Acres got early, positive response on a NYPD-owned lot deeper into Brooklyn, only to discover that the Department was going to hold onto the long-vacant lot to use for parking someday.

596 Acres also posts signs on lots with contact information and words of encouragement—“This is Public Land! Onwards!” It was a message like this that got Tia Jackson involved. Five generations of her family have lived in Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, and it seems like the vacant lot near her great-grandmother's house has been there nearly as long.

“One day I was walking by and I saw there was a sign put up,” Jackson says. “There was a huge map talking about the 596 acres of vacant land in Brooklyn, and how you can reclaim it.” She got in touch with 596 Acres, which put her in touch with another interested neighbor. In late April, they celebrated the grand opening of a community garden. ●



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Volunteers clean an abandoned lot for use by 596 Acres (1,2).