When It’s Green Space vs. Living Space

Readers sent in letters concerning Gina Bellafante’s Big City column last Sunday about opposition to a plan to erect residential towers across from Brooklyn Botanic Garden. Letters have been edited for length and clarity.

The column misrepresents Brooklyn Botanic Garden’s opposition to a developer’s proposal to rezone an area adjacent to the Garden. For good reason, zoning was put in place 30 years ago to protect the garden and its living collections from the shadows of buildings taller than seven stories. Two massive towers would have a dire, permanent effect on the garden’s greenhouses, nurseries, and conservatories. The garden has not resisted all local development in the area, but rather is opposed to the one that adversely affects the collections. As stewards of this world-renowned urban garden we are obligated to ensure that it will continue to enrich and improve the lives of our community. This is hardly NIMBYism.

Diane Steinberg, Board Chairperson, Brooklyn Botanic Garden

Why create a false dichotomy between the need for housing and parks in cities? Both are essential for a healthy polis. Smart planning and zoning that reduces the height of buildings that shade our parks, plazas, and botanical gardens is needed before any more treasured spaces are compromised.

New York City needs a proactive plan for public housing that goes beyond enabling private developers to go bigger if they include affordable units. Policies that incentivize growth with holistic planning are needed to ensure adequate infrastructure for fighting fires, managing waste water, educating kids, buying healthy food, and allowing access to public space for recreation, gardening, and passive enjoyment citywide.

Smart development such as the Rose Company/L&M project Sendero Verde relocates community gardens on the ground, in areas that will get enough sun to grow food and allow flowers to bloom. Community gardens on vacant lots, like those created through the efforts of the New York Restoration Project, Trust for Public Land and the city’s Green Thumb program, have proven to reduce crime and improve public health. Allowing developments to fill in open space is a short-term approach with limited impact. A bigger vision is needed.

Susannah C. Drake

As the executive director of the New York City Community Garden Coalition, I am quite familiar with the argument that affordable housing takes precedence over open space.

This is a false narrative, a wedge issue that the city and developers have perpetuated for decades.

In the case of Elizabeth Street Garden, there is a better site that will provide more affordable housing units while still preserving the last open green space in the neighborhood.

There is more than enough housing in New York to house everyone right now. Nearly 250,000 rental apartments sit vacant, according to the Census Bureau’s Housing and Vacancy Survey. The Department of Housing and Preservation owns many vacant buildings, and lots that could be turned into affordable housing on property that is not a green space.

We need to bring to light the power of landlords to charge whatever they want, warehouse vacant properties, and for real estate and finance capital to buy, sell and speculate land and housing like any other commodity.

Destroying and building on open space is not the answer. Open green spaces are vital, vibrant, and alive, critical contributors to the livability, health, and sustenance of the people of the Big City which Ms. Bellafante writes about.

What advocates of open space and community gardens believe is that a great city cannot have an either/or situation on affordable housing. We want a resilient sustainable city where we can all afford to live. We envision a modern city that looks to innovative ideas, and that doesn’t fabricate an unnecessary wedge between green open spaces and affordable housing.

Aziz Dehkan

None of us, except the homeless on occasion, live in a green space; we all share it. What will become of us when all our green space is gone and covered in housing? There is in fact much vacant and, criminally, underused housing space in New York. Maybe we should try Soviet-style expropriation of unused expat billionaires pieds-à-terre before we irreversibly pave over the rest of paradise to build housing. Expropriate the undeserving rather than destroy our common green home; that’s the progressive angle on this.

Johann Moore-Goldring