

LINDA – Fieldnotes – Saturday, June 30, 2007

Subject: Dorothy Omega and Paul at Unity Park (Community Garden)

Location: 53-55 128th Street, between 5th and Lenox

Time: 1:15-2:17

[After I wrote these notes I found out that Varenne has been here, although I did not see what he saw:

several signs and pamphlets. This is the "Rev. Linette C. Williamson Memorial Park Association" described as a "non-sectarian non-profit ... partnership with Bank Street." It is written that volunteers are welcome. There is also a "job-announcement" for the "Summer Youth Program."

It sounds like Bank Street is not particularly involved, at least not according to one of the Board Members Dorothy Omega. Perhaps they continue to provide funding. However, this certainly is an Organization in the sense that they learned to become a 501(c)(3) and to solicit funding and volunteers, including inclusion on "The Mayor's Volunteer Center of NYC, <http://www.nyc.gov/html/mvc/html/home/home.shtml>.]

Today I went to find churches on 128th Street between 5th and Lenox Aves based on Varenne's directory (showing that this block had 4 churches). I walked by three churches. Before I reached the fourth church closest to Lenox, I came across a garden. The gate was open and I saw at least two people sitting inside: a black woman on a bench in the shade, and a white man in a gazebo.

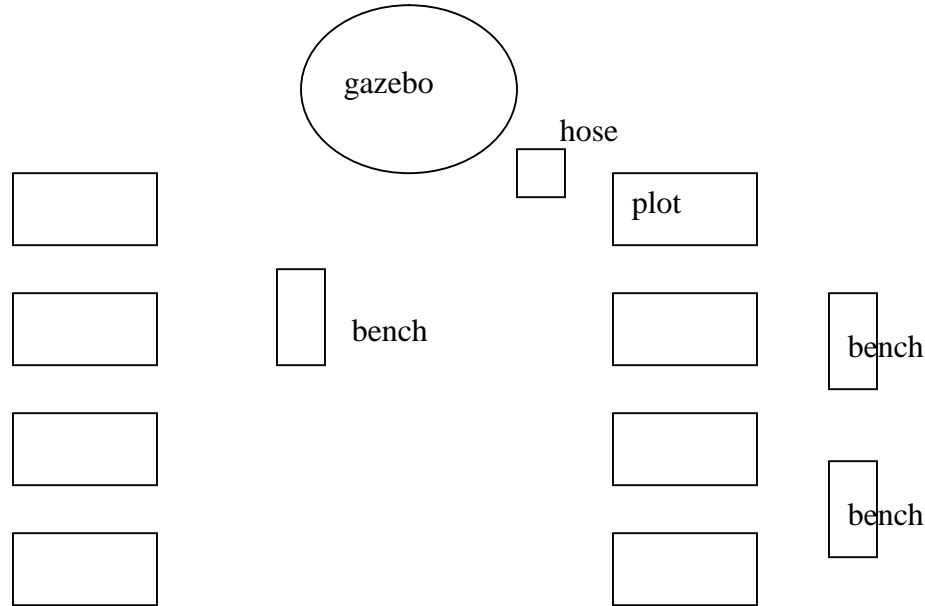
I saw a faded white sign that read, "Community Garden," so I walked in. The garden has a chain link fence facing the street. The east side of the garden has a low metal fence that I think is attached to the building next to it. The west side of the garden is the wall of the building next door. I think the north side also has a chain link fence. Orange lilies planted on the south side beckon the visitor into the garden. Inside there are several raised beds (maybe four on each side) planted with collard greens, herbs, and a few flowers. There are also benches and a gazebo. A light green hose is coiled onto a stand, the kind that has a handle to wind up the hose.

I linger over the flowers and plots on the east side, admiring the robust-looking plants. I say hello to the woman sitting in the shade and she says hello back. I try to strike up a conversation, but she is reserved. In answer to my questions she tells me that "the community" plants and takes care of the garden and that they get their water from the church. She shows me an herb that grows closely to the ground, something like "origanum" or "Greek Oregano." She breaks off a leaf and smells it. I do the same, and pop it into my mouth as she explains it can be used for cooking. She has a faint accent, I can't tell from where. [This is proving to be a liability. As I get to know people I hope to familiarize myself with the differences between the various Caribbean and West African liltts.]

30P
89P
90P

267
497
498
499
500
102
268
501
502
264
282
283

The diagram below is probably incorrect (wrong number of benches), but it gives an idea of the layout of the place.



I leave her alone and wander towards the gazebo. I can hear the man talking to someone else. As I had hoped, I get invited to stop and chat. The man, whose name I later find out is Paul, starts telling me that people come to garden. He talks for a bit, explaining that people are given plots. He says gardeners come from France, Japan, and names a few other countries. The woman, whose name I later find out is Dorothy Omega, tells me that the garden used to be mostly African American but has become very multicultural. Paul adds that this is also due to gentrification. Ms. Dorothy [I don't get her name until much later, and call her Dorothy, but she calls me Ms. Linda] tells me that people plant plants that she has no idea what they are (clumsy sentence to establish the sense of "learning" that comes with "gardening" and "multiculturalism"). I tell her that the woman outside showed me a Greek oregano plant that I had never seen before. Ms. Dorothy also tells me that she's a Floridian, which means from Florida [perhaps I looked confused?], and something like she missed the gardens there. This is to make the point that people who come to the gardens may have left verdant areas. At some point I said that I had had a garden for two years when I was teaching, and that luckily I planted radishes because the carrots came out like this, holding my index fingers about 5 inches apart.

Paul is middle-aged and balding, perhaps in forties or fifties. Something about the way he holds himself, gestures, and speaks signals "gay" to me. He is trim without being skinny. I think he is wearing beige cargo shorts and a teal-ish faded cotton t shirt. I believe he also had a black backpack. Ms. Dorothy is in her sixties (or maybe even older), with grey in her hair. Her dreadlocks are tied in a low ponytail, under a hat. She wears a white

blouse with a burgundy design and a matching cotton skirt. Her shoes are fabric glittery Mary Janes in light blue, pink, and yellow, flat and sneaker-like like Keds. She is thin. There are 2 or 3 teeth missing on her right side. Both are sitting in white plastic chairs, the molded kind that stack on top of each other. Inside the gazebo about seven of these chairs are arranged in a circle with a gap at the door. An eighth chair leans against another chair. The gazebo only has one opening, where I stand until Paul leaves.

Paul explains that there are three other gardens, and that they are a “[Something] Land Trust,” with this particular garden a city park. I ask what a Land Trust, and he explains that this land cannot be developed (for the time being). This group established itself as a 501(c)(3) organization and fought to preserve this garden. He says that Guilani had gotten rid of a lot of gardens. Ms. Dorothy explains how “the community” came out to support the garden, filling the room at a Community Board meeting.

Paul introduced himself and shook my hand. I mentioned that I was working with “a professor at Teachers College” on education in Harlem, and that a garden must be a place where there is a lot of education going on, including how to organize to keep the garden.

Ms. Dorothy began explaining the summer youth program offered by the group. Paul excused himself, inviting me again to join in the gardening. She explained that the Board of Directors really wanted to offer something to the young people. They were bringing “baggage” into the gardens, baggage from home. Children turn to the street, she explained, because they do not want to stay at home. She reported that children entered the summer program expressing anger and frustration and left happy.

So the Board hired a **consultant from Bank Street** to help them put together a program, and hired 5 staff members. She alluded to this as a tough process. I ventured that these staff members must be able to approach these children without judgment. This prompted her to say something like, “I don’t know about you, but I was raised with love. Two parents. A mother and a father, and seven brothers and sisters. We each had our own bed.” She then explains that she can’t judge these children in [Harlem], some of whom sleep 6 to one bed. She talks about the children coming in and doing a lot of writing. One of the instructors had the children keep a journal. They also go into the garden (the one we are sitting in), and they take fieldtrips.

She mentions something about the makeup of the Board changing, from housekeepers to “people with different skills.” I say there is nothing wrong with this [a board of housekeepers] and ask what skills she is talking about. She says, like making a website. I conceded this. She mentioned that she used to be the secretary of the organization, but she “burned out.” Paul is the treasurer, and works very hard. She says that the new person serving as secretary makes all these wonderful things, such as the application forms for the summer program. She hands me one, and I ooh and aah over it. She also shows me the flyer that was posted [need to find out where], and I ooh and ahh over that as she reads from it: “Art, gardening, literacy, recreation, science.” According to the flyer, someone was slated to sit in the garden and hand out applications from noon to 2pm and also 5-7pm today, “Rain or Shine.” I ask if this is all volunteer efforts and she says yes,

and repeats that everyone helps how they can, doing what they are good at. I take this as a pitch for me to help out.

I ask more about funders, and she mentions ConEdison and mom-and-pop stores. She tells me that she found some in the Yellow pages. I exhibit surprise, and she tells me that she prayed to God to help her. She wrote a letter to **Riverside Church**, and they told her they don't give out money, but they put her in touch with an organization that does. She wrote a proposal and this organization gave them \$5000. They can't give out money to the same groups each year, but they told her to apply the following year and every other year after that. Funders pay for the seeds they hand out for free, manure, and mulch. I ask about water, and she says that they pay "X dollars a month" to the church for their water. At some point I ask if they take city funding, since they are a park, and she says no. First, the implication is that the city should but doesn't. Then, she says that they probably would not take city funding because then they would want to control who, what, when, where. [Learning to become a nonprofit; learning to write for grants]

She mentions that Paul goes to the library to write his proposals. She says that if she went to the library she wouldn't find anything. I allude to the idea of each person contributes from their skill set.

She talked about how the garden got started. The Reverend Linnette C. Williamson, who the organization is named after, started a drug and alcohol abuse program at the church (she gestures next door), where she is a member. [I would like to enter churches this way, as a guest of somebody I meet.] The city got a whiff of this program (my words) and sent them money and people recently released from jail. Apparently Pastor Linnette was quite respected. One of her efforts was establishing the "vest-pocket garden" under Mayor Lindsay, because it's as big as a vest-pocket, which was the first of the association's gardens. I find out later online that it is credited as the very first in a movement called "vest-pocket park," established in 1965:

http://www.nycgovparks.org/sub_your_park/historical_signs/hs_historical_sign.php?id=12811

She points behind me and ask if I can see the awning two (or three) lots down. The children sit under the awning, and if it is raining they go into the church. The church also has an office. [I don't get the point of this.]

Pastor Linnette appears to have been an organizing force in the community. Apparently the Pastor wanted people to march and protest deteriorating conditions. [She does not give specifics.] Ms. Dorothy didn't want to go, but her parents made her. She was embarrassed carrying a sign and chanting, calling herself "a shy African American girl." This got the Kennedys to come visit, along with some other famous people.

She mentions that after Pastor Linnette passed, not everyone has her "vision," and that apparently was the case with the subsequent pastors. But everyone loved Pastor Linnette so much and remembered what she accomplished, and thus named this group after her.

[I'm not sure if I understood this correctly; the website above shows that there is an actual memorial to her. I also wonder if this is a religious group. Ms. Dorothy certainly refers to him in her speech.]

As we are talking, a postal worker comes into the garden. "Yes?" Ms. Dorothy calls, confused as I am as to why she is coming into a garden. The postal worker, a very dark-skinned woman with a lilt (again, don't know how to ID), wanted two applications. Ms. Dorothy opened the envelope back up and gave her two, exclaiming that she might have been gone, that we (she and I) must have been waiting for her (the postal worker). What I am trying to express, is that Ms. Dorothy was kept there (by me and by God?) for the purpose of giving the postal worker the applications. The postal worker said that she came off her route, gesturing toward 129th Street, to see if she could get applications. She said that she lived in Brooklyn, but it was difficult for people like her who have children in Brooklyn but work in Manhattan, because you have to rush to drop them off and pick them up. [This makes me wonder if the children need to be Harlem residents, since there is a question about this on the application. Or, is funding tied to how many Harlem residents they serve?]

Before the postal worker arrived, Ms. Dorothy had been slowly packing up, putting the applications into a large manila folder. After she left, she asked me what I did, and I told her I was a researcher at Teachers College. She said something about remembering something like that. I asked her for her name. I told her I'd be interested in seeing the youth program, and she told me to come on July 9. I asked if I could say that I spoke with her, and she said yes. She told me she could show me where it was (in the church), and we began to walk out of the garden together.

She also gave me the name of the director, Barbara Smith. I asked if this was the director of the organization or of the summer program. She said the summer program. As we walked out of the garden, she said they invite people to come back, but people don't always stay. The last director they had stayed three years, "which was good." She also mentioned Joy, but I neglected to write down who this was (if she told me) and do not remember who this is. [Sounds like the directorship is a lot of work and stress, if there is such high turnover. Also the changing makeup of the board and of the gardeners—that she is one of the longtime gardeners and worshippers at the church through all kinds of changes. I wonder if she is a resident as well.]

She also invited me to come to a Board meeting, saying that they meet every third Thursday at 6pm in the garden. She couldn't remember a phone number, so I gave her my card. She promised to call with the information, which I did not write down. She showed me the church, which began with Christ Community and I believe is Christ Community Church of Harlem (from Varenne's list). We walked together to Lenox, where she grasped my hands and told me, "God works in mysterious ways, if I may say that," for me to come by the garden.

Information on the organization:

<http://www.volunteersolutions.org/uwnyc/org/25987846.html>
<http://www.volunteersolutions.org/uwnyc/org/opp/25988188.html>

I crossed Lenox and continued walking on 128th to Powell, where I was definitely noticed by the various people on the block. One man cursed as I was passing by, “Motherfucker,” unaware that I was there. He said, “Excuse me.” The other, an elderly gentleman, stared and nodded when I did. A man about my age said hello and I responded. A group of men stood outside the church at Powell and 128th, one yelling to another down the block. I also saw interesting storefronts on that block, listed on Varenne’s walk on May 9.

- N: West Harlem Head Start Pre-School Program
- N: Soul Brothers Boutique
- N: Freedom Hall (I can't tell what is in this

The last two were boarded up when Varenne was there (at 11am on a Tuesday!). Today, the Soul Brothers Boutique was open but the display was mostly empty. The Freedom Hall had papers and posterboard in the window about socialism and freedom of the press. I’d be interested to go back another day.