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**‘Green Veneers:  
Home Edens, Cement Gardens, and Segregation in Puerto Rico’s Gated Communities**

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Abstract:

Residential community gates have resulted in new physical imageries that support a segregated city. Based on ethnographic and quantitative data from four residential communities in Ponce, Puerto Rico—two private, two public, and one of each gated—this study compares the often overlooked gated communities of the poor to the widely studied gated communities of the rich. I specifically focus on “gardens” as physical and symbolic mechanisms that enforce class and race exclusion through gating.

Landscape writer J. B. Jackson noted that “garden comes from an Indo European word, *gher*, which appears...for...disparate things....[and][a]ll these words clearly imply enclosure or an enclosed place...”<sup>1</sup>. For the rich of Ponce, gardens threatened by urban complexity, proximity to public housing and fear of crime, are recovered and protected behind gated walls. The gardens are literal, but their flowers and fruits are symbolic of a lifestyle of privilege, security, and order, painstakingly cultivated and defended behind gates. The protected lifestyle, at home or in members-only social clubs, is the setting for private social community events that complement family and home. In contrast, the poor in multi-family gated public housing are denied individual gardens and funneled to regulated community centers or the city’s renewed urban public spaces, with private and public overseers. Locked community centers and beautified public “cement gardens” renovated as part of neoliberal urban improvement projects, become the axis of a regulated community life, where residents are disciplined and monitored. As spaces (fauna, flora, or urban renewal planning projects) are crafted into botanical Edens for the rich or public spaces for the poor, a city of segregated and class-designated spaces is created and maintained; one, of home and club gardens, the other of concrete basketball courts and noisy public spaces.

Gardens have become a common way to beautify and improve spaces in the modern city, the focus of an urban greening movement that sees them as barriers to decay and abandonment, to make communities more “humane,” “more *green*, more *healthy and safe*, more *people friendly*,

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and more *equitable*,” suggests Rutherford H. Platt.<sup>2</sup> But “greening” movements fail to recognize that nature is already in the city; the city, for the poor, is already a garden, but not one of green, carefully landscaped “cement gardens” that symbolize disciplining, controlling, managing, and tidying-up of the poor in the name of beauty and order.<sup>3</sup> Carolyn Merchant writes that “Edenic spaces ostracized those ‘others’ of different classes and colors who did not fit into the story. The green veneer became a cover for the actual corruption of the earth and neglect of its poor; that green false consciousness threatened the hoped-for redemption of all people...”<sup>4</sup> Urban improvement projects in homes and public spaces segregate people and impede the very integration social idealists had in mind when public and private housing was built next to each other in Puerto Rico. As gardens are purported to be an extension of life, and urban renewal projects are deemed to make life in the city better, they can also limit and stagnate the life of a city, segregating communities behind perverted symbols of beauty and order.

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<sup>1</sup> J. B Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins, and Other Topics* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 20.

<sup>2</sup> See Rutherford H. Platt, ed., *The Humane Metropolis: People and Nature in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century City* (US: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 15).

<sup>3</sup> Anne Whiston Spirn, *The Granite Garden: Urban Nature and Human Design* (New York: Basic Books, 1984). This is one of the themes underlying the novel by Ian McEwan, *The Cement Garden* (New York: Anchor, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Merchant, *Reinventing Eden*, 3.