

Adam Purple, Grandfather of Sustainable Urbanism and the Greening of New York City

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Best known for his incredible Garden of Eden, an “eARTHWORK” which he began creating in 1975 in a vacant, garbage-filled lot between Forsyth and Eldridge Streets, Adam Purple, born David Wilkie in 1930 in Missouri, was a white-bearded and purple-clad fixture of the Lower East Side of Manhattan and Williamsburg, Brooklyn. His Garden of Eden, destroyed in 1986, covered 15,000 square feet with growing beds planted in Taoist, concentric circles featuring a staggering variety of vegetables and 45 trees. It was so luminous, that according to urban legend it was seen by NASA from outer space.

I never saw it. But my neighbor Norman Green did. And he wrote about it in New York magazine (“The Purple People,” 27 August 1979). Some time ago, we talked about the old article sitting out on a stoop here in Brooklyn. So I rode my bike up to meet Mr Purple, then residing in a closet in the Brooklyn space of the Times Up! radical bicycle space. I’d spent countless nights there through the years, hanging out, organizing, planning, conspiring, picking up supplies for our own garden down the street. But I never saw Purple. At Norman’s son’s Bar Mitzvah, I met Harvey Wang, who took those majestic photos of Purple and the Garden of Eden.

I finally met Adam Purple in 2012 at the opening of the Museum of Reclaimed Urban Space, located in the storefront of C Squat. During those events, Adam Purple gave a very funny rant about gardening and deep ecology with a Lenny Bruce twist. “Everybody shits,” he explained. “The question is where you shit.” There is a law of return. Take food out of the ground and put it back. Purple told a story explaining that for years, once a week, he would take a bowel movement and bury it in his garden. “No one ever bothered me about that. They were following the squatters bill of rights: LEAVE MY SHIT ALONE!” The room filled with laughter. It was not the only laugh elicited from a man who suggested we read books by looking at what is left out.

Two years later, I caught up with Adam Purple at the Brooklyn space of Times Up!. There he was, the man often credited with starting the New York City community gardening movement, dressed simply in a pair of shorts, cleaning out a beer can for recycling. I introduced myself, asking if he had a minute to talk. He said he was busy. A minute later he paused, asking me if I had ever taken my own bowel movement and buried it and watched bugs take it over.

Sure, I told him. “Good. It’s the law of return,” explained Purple. “You take something from the land, you’d better put something back. It’s a law that you dare not break. Any civilization which compulsively shits in its drinking water will not survive. Some people freak out when I ask them that,” he said. “The City certainly freaked out when they heard that I buried one there once a week. I’m not stupid enough to ride my bike up to Central Park and back, three miles to get horse shit every day and not bury my own.” This was all part of the efforts to create the wondrous Garden of Eden, which spanned five city blocks in the Lower East Side until it was bulldozed on January 8, 1986.

“It was what was called an earth work or land art. By definition, it’s subversive because the rich cannot buy it and put it away in a museum. It’s also subversive because it goes in circles, which are anathema to the grid system. “That’s enough for today. I’ll interview

more if we can keep the interview to shit..." The next week, Purple talked about the ways gardens and libraries are really alike. They both open up ideas and secrets. He asked that I go to the New York public library and find one of his books. Come back when you find the book, he told me. I never found the book. But the connection between the flowering of ideas, from the trees, the ground, the books, the ideas, the dialectic between nature and civilization, our head and the body, intellect and feeling, that always stuck with me.

I loved talking with friends about Purple. The photographer Harvey Wang recognized the importance of Purple's art and documented it for decades. Wang recalled those books and the days in the garden. He also heard about Purple's passing. I had heard from the Times Up! grapevine that he was gone as we rode to a Public Space Party meeting. "Some sad news...Adam Purple died yesterday; a heart attack while biking across the Williamsburg Bridge. It's hard to imagine NYC without Adam. Most recently, he was working and living at Time's Up Brooklyn, 99 South 6th Street, where there's already a sidewalk memorial."

It doesn't make me sad to think of him gone, said one of the bike mechanics. I was just glad to know him, this legend. It was like seeing a ghost to run into him at Times Up! He was one of the great artists of New York, said another Times Up! volunteer. I remember seeing him when I was a kid in Central Park, recalled Catherine. I was like nine and there he was in his purple tie-died outfit, picking up horse manure. He was like a hundred then and that was 1979. And then I saw him at Times Up! years later.

Everyone had stories about Adam Purple. And we loved to tell them. His commitment to a sustainable lifestyle was unrelenting and all-encompassing. The community garden that he created with his own hands was lush and grandiose. "The gates remained unlocked. It was truly a community garden," recalled Adam.

Today, stories about sustainable urbanism are everywhere. This is the idea that cities can be mutable works of art, as the Garden of Eden demonstrated. They can be places to slow down and just live. Today, as a new mayor plans to sell off gardens to make way for housing few can afford, the story of the Garden of Eden is worth recalling. This garden/work of art, brought community resilience and care, green space and ideas. It was a place for water to seep back into the earth, opening a model of cross-class contact, recycling and green community development. It should still be there. But its legacy lingers.

As Sarah Ferguson recalled in her "Brief History of Grassroots Gardening in NYC", "By the early 1990s, some 850 gardens had been established — more than 60 of them on the Lower East Side. Yet these plots were becoming increasingly threatened as the neighborhood gentrified, and the city revived long-standing development plans. Inspired by the destruction of Adam Purple's world-renowned Garden of Eden, in 1994 another Lower East Side woman named Felicia Young began hosting pageants to dramatize the plight of the area's green spaces. Every spring, throngs of glitter-and-gauze wrapped dancers, giant puppets, and mud-caked performers wind their way through the neighborhood's eclectic spaces, re-enacting the gardeners struggle to keep their land. Today, that dance still continues, so does the struggle for the gardens. But we always remember Adam Purple. He reminds us that, cities are more than spaces for accumulation and over development. They can be places to conserve, reuse, and renew.

John Penley: "One of the things I remember about Adam Purple... is that he was recycling things in large quantities before most people had even thought about doing it or even called it recycling. He was a true pioneer in this respect. I remember that after he was

evicted from his Forsyth Street building the word got around that there was a party there and people could come and take anything they wanted. I went and was amazed at all the different things he had in the building and it was separated into different rooms. There was a room packed with magazines, a room with bike and other spare parts, a room with bottles, plates, eating utensils and on and on. It was pretty amazing and things were orderly and separated but there was a massive amount of stuff he had collected over the years and people were blown away and took a lot of the things but it must have been very sad for him to lose his garden and his building and all the things he had collected over many years. One thing for sure there will never be another New Yorker like him. Too bad because he was a visionary and a creative genius. His garden was like no garden I have ever seen before and he used organic garden techniques before any of us had even heard the phrase 'organic gardening' used. Adios, Adam and the cosmos must be spinning faster because you are part of it now."

"People thought he was crazy," Mr. Wang said, recalling Purple. "But Adam was speaking the truth when the truth couldn't be heard." In between interviews with Purple, I read up on some of the history of the garden and his efforts to create a livable space within the laboratory of the streets of New York City, eschewing electricity or paid work, in favor of a life organized around recycling, reusing wastes, and creating compost. I remember the labyrinth of ideas flowing through his mind as we talked last summer.

Purple talked about the ways gardens and libraries are really alike. They both open up ideas and secrets. "Put down zentences.com," he recommended, pointing me to a site full of number games and back histories of the Garden of Eden. As others have noted encountering Purple, knowledge extends across fields from radical ecology to literature, philosophy to conspiracy theories. "Aldous Huxley used the phrase, general enlightenment," explained Purple, referring to a sort of cultural soma. "Better than willful ignorance. Keep em ignorant. Keep em sick so they can be exploited." Yet, there are ways to see another world. He points out texts for me to look up: "Go to the Harper's Dictionary of Classical Literature and Antiquities and look up under mysteries."

"Look up LIFE with les(s) ego," he counsels, "of separateness of all else expectations." His point is that we, as humans, ask for too much; we hope to have more than we need. We "overshoot. The species overshoots, the environment we live in is caused to die off with our species. Look up homo colossus."

Purple gave supporters poems if they contributed to the garden.

Purple suggested his work had more to do with a view of the world. Frank Lloyd Wright said, "the box puts you in prison; it's square." Yet, you'll find no straight lines in nature, none on the body. Lines are not straight. They are fractured, he suggested.

"Consciousness means being aware of the environment. Wright said there is no pillar in the corner of a window. You are at liberty to look at one corner at a time. This is an idea that traveled around the world. You can look in more than one direction at a time. There is another system." Through composting, reusing waste, and gardening, Purple was pointing to another kind of a system. "Get your shit together. There is meaning in these idioms." Referring to his "law of return," he said "ignorance of the law is no excuse. It's a parasitic species," humans who take without giving back to the land. "Our consciousness can expand. We can imagine something else," he mused. That's the only difference between you and I, consciousness. Go the library, see if it's there. LIFE with les(s) ego. You may have to move the book because the sea is rising, two miles of ice is melting. Gaia principle. The earth takes care of itself."

That interview was the last time I saw Adam. During the Harvest Festival, marching bands romped through the Lower East Side and we remembered lost heroes of the movement. I sat in El Jardin Paraiso and thought of Michael Shenker who died five years

before. I spent weeks wondering why the city was not able to find the heart to save the garden when it could. Sure I know the reasons. Real estate is the permanent government of New York City. But couldn't we see a way to incorporate this majestic testament to sustainable urbanism? And if not, why not? More than a garden, the space felt like a new way of looking at the city, one we're still fighting to achieve today.

That question was on everyone's mind as the memorial speak out began. But so were the poems. While the evening was organized as a memorial, the poems for Purple were many. Adam told me purple was a majestic color. His colors inspired generations of gardeners and urban ecologists. "It felt like the old times, painting those purple footsteps," Bill and George Bliss mused. Many had no idea what they meant; others understood completely. We all live in a labyrinth in the city, leading us between ourselves and the unknown, a labyrinth of interconnecting tales.

Timesup Bill asked me to MC the memorial for Mr Purple. The Public Space Party was on hand in the tie dye they'd made the Friday before. [Adam Purple, and his onetime partner Eve, always wore purple tie-died clothing.] Ray Figueroa of the New York City Garden Coalition welcomed everyone, and set the stage. "How many of you are feeling good in this garden?" he asked. Everyone raised their hands. "As you enjoy it, remember, this happened because visionary lovers of the earth were out organizing, getting arrested...we need not forget this history. We need to stay vigilant in the face of those who say affordable housing is at odds with community gardens. Today, we need more sustainable models of development. If it means anything to you, you have to come out. Thank you for your love and affirmation. This is a romance." George Bliss groaned thinking about the false debate between housing and gardens. "I am horrified to hear that the same ploy is being used today." When the garden was finally destroyed, Bliss saw Purple standing looking at the last tree. "We are dealing with reptiles here," he said. "We have to understand that." He summarized the lesson of Purple's life: "We have to create what is right, not react to it. But create it, connecting with everything... Bringing it here was a gift." "So I decided to paint footprints to remind the world about the garden," George explained. "They were a metaphor to follow him. The gardens that remain are a testament to his work."

Wendy Brawer of Green Map System noted: "So sad to see this. Adam's purple footprints drew us to the neighborhood in 1986, and he taught deep ecology at the very first Green Map event in 1992. Special thanks to Times Up! for housing him, and helping us all stay in contact with this learned activist." Howard Branstein [who runs the 6th Street Community Center, and was active in land trusts on the LES in the 1970s] said that Purple insisted, "I'm not going to deal with the city. They stole the land from the Indians in the first place. I'm not going to deal with them." Those listening at La Plaza broke out in applause. Howard pointed out that Purple was not always practical. When he stayed in his building after the owner left, he was unable to organize the remaining tenants, many of whom were vegetarians. Many around him left or were turned away for ideological reasons. "They would not shit in the garden," Purple told him.

"Well that's not helpful," recalled Howard. Still, "He was a messiah and inspiration for the garden movement. In 1984, when beauty died, a stronger garden movement was born. When El Jardin's fate was put up for a vote, the whole community board supported it, as a consequence of the loss" of the Garden of Eden. "Reclaiming urban land, that was Adam's idea," explained Bill Weinberg, a radical historian and editor of Avant Gardening who got to know Purple in 1985. He described the destruction of the garden as a "political hit." The city went after this garden. "There were vacant lots [owned by the City] everywhere. It was chosen for political reasons. Finally, they came in the dead of winter and took the garden. It was a political crime. They tried to do the same thing with La Plaza and the community fought back. We need to keep organic culture here in the Lower East Side."

Father Frank Morales said, “Adam was the most thorough revolutionary that I know. He was all of it, one part Karl, another Groucho Marx. I’m still in denial that he’s gone. I keep thinking he’ll be coming back on the third day.”

“He was an urban survivalist,” noted Chris Flash, editor of the Shadow newspaper. Flash was frustrated that Purple did not organize more to save his home, but that was for the Michael Shenkers of the garden movement, who helped outline a model for organizing to save the gardens, connecting direct action and legal advocacy. Countless lawyers who followed this model were there to support these efforts. More Gardens and the Lower East Side Collective, Times Up!, 596 Acres, and Public Space Party were all born of this ethos. Joel Kupferman, a long time garden lawyer, confessed that people like Purple made it all worth while.

[This editor was also there, and listened to a man speaking quietly among the trees of the garden. He didn’t expect to address the assembly, although he’d lived in Purple’s squat when he first came to the city. He slept in a back room, just off the garden, and was scared at night someone might come in the building, which was largely abandoned. Purple told him not to worry as long as he could hear the crickets. When they stopped chirping, then someone might be coming.]

This text combines and redacts posts from Shepard’s blog “Play and Ideas” posted during September of 2015; see benjaminheimshepard.blogspot.com.

REFERENCES & FURTHER READING

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As of 12/15, Adam Purple’s website at zentences.com is still online

Harvey Wang and Amy Brost, *Adam Purple and the Garden of Eden* (Traveling Light Books, 2012); fine essay, extensive bibliography

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