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The Garden of Hua Mei

Andrew Wiley-Schwartz



From their apartment on the second floor, Federico Savini and Anna Magenta would look out the window into New York City's Sara Delano Roosevelt Park and watch. At first, it was the Dominican kids playing baseball in the old wading pool. Then the Dominicans showed the Chinese kids how to play baseball, and then there were teams. In the mornings, older Chinese men would come with their songbirds and put the cages in the central area where shrubs and plants had given way to dirt and garbage. In the evenings, the heroin dealers and their customers would take over. All day long, homeless men traded places and slept on the benches along the park's perimeter.

Sara Delano Roosevelt Park is a long, narrow, Depression-era park on New York City's Lower East Side. It was built on the site of some of the city's most notorious tenement slums to bring light, air and recreation to this overcrowded, multicultural, often contested neighborhood. Some blocks were renovated in the early 1990s, but Savini and Magenta's block remained neglected, dirty and unfriendly.

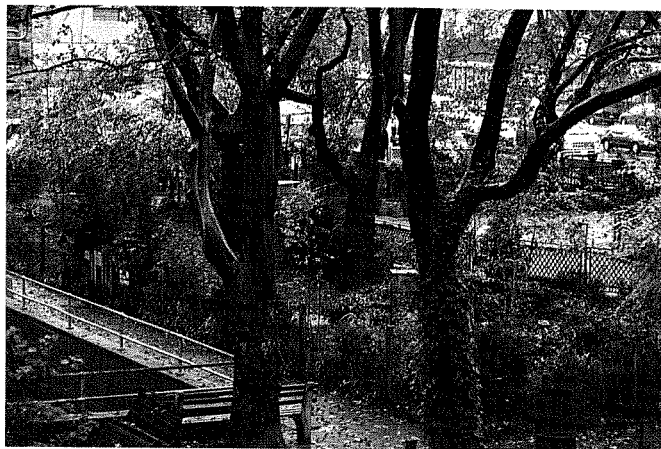
In the summer of 1995, Savini, a photographer, and Magenta, a filmmaker, decided to stop watching and do something. They approached the local community board and obtained permission to do landscaping work on the park's border gardens. Resourcefulness was key to getting

anything done. They obtained leftover fencing materials from a nearby improvement project. When several river birch trees were torn out of Central Park to make way for the infamous Pocohantas launch celebration, Savini provided them with a new home.

On her visits to the park each morning to water the thirsty birches, Magenta got to know the men sleeping on the benches. "They were actually the police of the park," she said. "They would yell at the dealers to keep them away from the garden." The outspoken Magenta had several confrontations herself with the drug dealers and addicts, who were angry they might no longer be allowed to congregate there.

Savini and Magenta were soon joined in the garden by neighbors and the local children. "We wouldn't have had a chance of surviving if [the kids] hadn't helped," said Magenta, who noted that while their labor was useful, their stewardship was essential. As more community members joined, "it [became] like a happening," said Magenta. "It's not about being in control and dominating, it's about looking at what people are doing and helping them do it."

Savini began thinking about the central garden area where the Chinese men had been bringing their birds every morning to sing. The birds were a special kind of thrush known in Chinese as *hua mei*. "I had my eye on



them because they were in the space that I really wanted to be working in, and I wanted to work with them to improve it," she said.

One day, while she was planting small evergreen trees, one of the men approached and asked if she would build a garden for their birds. He explained that if the birds were surrounded by low, lush plants, they would feel more at home and sing more sweetly. "It was the chance I had been waiting for," she said.

In the spring of 1995, the group, aided by a \$1,750 grant from the Trust for Public Land (and officially organized as the Forsythe Street Garden Conservancy), built the bird garden with the help of neighborhood children. Today the garden takes the form of a semicircular area of about 2,000 sq.ft., dense with stone paths, boulders, lush perennials, and small native and Asiatic shrubs, particularly berry-producing plants that attract wild birds. Posts made from old plumbing pipes and planted with clematis vines accommodate the bird cages. A paved area in front of the garden is used for morning *tai chi*.

In nice weather the garden may be filled with as many as thirty singing birds, along with the men that own them and other residents. The singing nearly drowns out the rumble of traffic on busy Delancey Street, and the dense foliage provides visual protection for the birds and the watchers. As the garden's reputation has grown, people bring their *bua mei* from miles away; one participant regularly drives three hours from Albany. Magenta and Savini believe they have the only garden in the country dedicated to *bua mei*.

Today, the garden is maintained by volunteers, including school groups, teens from a transitional facility, and others referred to by New York Cares, a citywide nonprofit agency. Less receptive to the group's work has been the Parks Department, with whom park volunteers have feuded over everything from "official" vehicle parking in the play area to a proposed dog run. (Magenta opposed the dog run because she believed the park's flexible design should accommodate many constituencies, not just one).

Savini looks out his window at a progression of activities in the block-long space. It continues to amaze him even after years of watching. A day-care group comes in the morning, then Chinese ballet and fan dancing. Theater, *tai chi* and badminton clubs, along with baseball and casual play are all in evidence — one activity flowing into the next with little or no conflict. The garden has even become a regular stop on official walking tours of the Lower East Side.

This article was adapted from a previous case study of the park which appeared on the Project for Public Spaces Website: www.pps.org.

Opposite: Hua mei birds nestle in their cages among shrubs.

Top left: The garden after its cleaning, but before its renovation.

Top right: The garden from the same view as left, but one year after renovations.

Bottom left: Every morning Chinese men from all over the region bring their birds to the garden.

Bottom right: The hua mei, a kind of thrush, sings beautifully, but only under the care of a knowing owner.

Photos courtesy Federico Savini.