

The Potential of Urban Agriculture

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Recently the local food movement seems to have sprung up from nowhere. Yuppies are flocking to farmer's markets and community gardens across the nation to help the environment and local farmers. But this movement is not at all inclusive; urban agriculture has often been actively suppressed amongst low income populations. This is not always the case, however, especially in times of economic crisis. For example, in the seventies, urban agriculture was promoted in New York's Lower East Side as a productive way to use land that served no other purpose. But when the gentrification of SoHo spread in the eighties as the economy improved, land prices shot up and gardens which had been tolerated previously were bulldozed with nary a thought to the people who relied on them for access to healthy food.

It's hard to find healthy food in low income urban areas; food insecurity, defined by the USDA as "limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways," is often a catalyst for participation in urban agriculture for these communities. Not helping the earth, not helping local farmers, and perhaps most importantly, not making a profit. These things often go against the power structures that typify the modern city.

One of the most well-known examples is LA's South Central Farm. The fourteen acre garden was cultivated by some of the city's low income residents, mostly immigrants. For many, the medicinal plants grown there served as their only form of healthcare. After fourteen years of cultivation, the former owner tried to buy the land back from the city, citing the fact that it was not being used for what it had been bought for (a trash incineration plant). During lengthy court battles, protestors and gardeners were forced off the land by heavily armed police officers, and the farm was bulldozed, even though only an unquestioned owner can legally order demolition. To this day, all fourteen acres still lie fallow.

One way urban agriculture subverts urban power structures is by dealienating participants. In this context, alienation refers to one viewing themselves as external to the environment. An oft-used example is children who don't know that plants come from seeds, but alienation is much more pervasive than that. The way urban agriculture de-alienates people is twofold. First, it brings participants in direct contact with the environment. Second, they control the product of their labor (food). This is supremely important. In her essay "If Only They Knew," Julie Guthman discusses an urban garden in a housing project that one of her students did research on. The workers, mostly teens who pulled weeds and were uninvolved in harvesting, hated it. De-alienation necessitates that the participants get to see the whole process through.

Urban agriculture also blurs the divide between public and private property—reclaimed urban spaces become the new commons. Use of these commons partially returns the means of (agricultural) production to marginalized communities. But the commons are not limited to land

alone, as Nathan McClintock stresses in “Why Farm the City? Theorizing Urban Agriculture through a Lens of Metabolic Rift;” they include “all agricultural resources and foodways that have been commodified.” Seeds, water, fertile soil, knowledge, and biodiversity are all parts of this new commons. Women involved in the Siyakhana Food Garden project in Johannesburg got more than food out of it; they were also able to learn of and share remedies for common medical ailments, using plants grown in the garden. Not only do urban farmers reclaim the physical commons, they also reclaim other aspects of agriculture and community that have been systematically taken away.

Many of these issues stem from the differences between traditional and contemporary localism, something conceptualized by Jesse McEntee. Traditional localism refers to the procurement of local food for the purpose of acquiring fresh, affordable food, keeping with tradition, etc., while contemporary localism refers to the procurement of local food with the explicit intention to help local farmers, or the environment, often by paying higher prices. When gentrifiers participate in urban agriculture, it is almost always contemporary localism, which does not clash in any way with the mainstream, profit driven food system. While urban agriculture practiced by marginalized communities may share some of the same motives of contemporary localism, it is traditional at heart. The informal economic systems that typically arise around traditional localism challenge the hegemonic presence of the capitalist food market in urban spaces. As J. I. Guyer says in the introduction to *Feeding African Cities*, such informal exchanges of food and small scale urban agriculture undermine the expansion of more formal markets.

And these small exchanges often explicitly reject the rules of running a “proper” business. Many urban agricultural projects, such as City Slicker Farm in Oakland, use sliding scales for their pricing so that everyone is able to afford fresh food and no one is turned away, even when this results in losses. Additionally, extralegal “guerrilla gardens”—gardens planted without official permission from the landowner, immediately draw attention to questions of land use and ownership.

However, it would be absurd to posit urban agriculture as a perfect solution to issues of food access. Under the current system, no one thing can permanently eradicate food insecurity. But it goes beyond that; it could be argued that such projects actually speed up the process of gentrification by making neighborhoods that had formerly been avoided by gentrifiers appear more appealing.

This is an issue that must be confronted. Organizations such as Black to Our Roots and Growing Power do so by using names that code them as black spaces, both to participants and outsiders. As Guthman also notes, this may sometimes involve turning away well-meaning members of the “anarchist/hippy/crust sector” of the city. This not only keeps those urban agricultural projects in the hands of the communities they serve, but also prevents potential gentrifiers from gaining a foothold in the area, which could lead to an influx of new residents.

Even when these measures are not taken, urban agricultural projects and the communities that form around them can serve as a strong force against gentrification. Boston’s Dudley neighborhood was a victim of redlining and white flight during the sixties and seventies. In the early eighties, one third of the land there was vacant, ripe for gentrification. But it wasn’t gentrified, due to the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI), which organized community members who eventually pressured Boston to give DSNI the power of eminent domain over sixty acres of vacant land in the middle of the neighborhood, which otherwise would have become hotels and offices serving downtown Boston. Now, among other things, that land boasts affordable housing, a community greenhouse, and several gardens. Additionally, as part of the agreement that DSNI negotiated, housing prices are kept artificially low, meaning no one was pushed out despite a rise in standard of living.

In this scenario, a strong community came together to stop gentrification and eventually launched several urban agricultural projects. But it could also happen the other way around. Projects like

urban farms and the bonds that formed through them help to strengthen communities. So when gentrification threatens to encroach upon their neighborhoods, they already have a strong community organization ready to organize against it.

Urban agriculture is more than people growing food to feed themselves. It constitutes an explicit rejection of the food insecurity that has been forced on urban communities and a radical reassertion of agency. When practiced as traditional localism, urban agriculture is the polar opposite of its gentrified cousin. These projects move beyond lifestyle politics; through their struggle to reach food security, marginalized communities highlight the fact that truly achieving food justice is incompatible with the very nature of our economic system. These projects should be supported and protected, but it is important not to intrude on these new autonomous spaces; control must be kept in the hands of the communities that created them. When communities lose control of what they've created and lose access to organizational structures that can aid in collective action, gentrification only becomes easier.