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Urban Farming in Detroit as a Proxy for Both Justice and Gentrification

Introduction

In Detroit, planned urban farms and small-scale grassroots gardens have become increasingly popular, and they have been widely hailed as a solution to the city's economic, racial, and sociopolitical hardships. While the benefits of urban farming are plentiful, the practice also contributes to gentrification and the exploitation of free labor. In my research I have tried to grapple with the question of if, and where, urban agriculture belongs in an egalitarian metropolis given its dual products of both gentrification and food equity. In Detroit, urban farming is utilized by both black and white communities in entirely separate ways, which exacerbates racial divides in America's most segregated city. It is my belief that urban agriculture represents active citizenship in the face of governmental neglect, and that while urban farms play an important role in activism and self-sufficiency, agricultural movements alone cannot solve structural inequities posed by systemic racism.

My understanding of this issue has been informed by research, readings, and lectures for this course as well as Professor Yvette Perfecto's Globalization and its Discontents course and the Food Literacy for All speaker series. As I have learned more about urban farming, several themes have emerged and intersected to develop my perspective. The history of farming and urban agriculture provides context for generations of racist and classist land discrimination, while modern gentrification of the concept of urban farming in Detroit reflects the current environment.

Zoning limitations and governmental policy further explains the legal landscape of urban farms, and begins to explain how urban farms can help Detroit manage population decline. There are several clear benefits to urban agriculture, including the role of food sovereignty and community building in achieving justice. Ultimately, though, governmental policies shape the societies we live in, and they can be manipulated to either support to divide -- an egalitarian city model requires structural support for marginalized and disadvantaged people, and this is primarily achieved through policy changes. The factors that I examined are not comprehensive, and only begin to address some elements of the complex and often contradictory landscape that is present-day Detroit. It is my intention to continue expanding my own and my peers' understanding of the nuances of urban farming, food sovereignty, and urban planning, especially as it pertains to Detroit – this initial investigation is a spark but not the whole fire.

History

Farming and gardening are arguably the most basic forms of self-reliance known to man. The act of cultivating land to produce consumable food strengthens relationships between people, food, and the earth; not only is growing food necessary for survival, it also helps sustain our sense of humanity. It is no surprise, then, that farming has been used as a tool during times of distress -- from World War II Victory Gardens to 1970s counterculture to the modern day Urban Farming movement, conflict and strife often trigger a resurgence of farming practices.

Today, there are less than twenty thousand food-producing gardens in the United States, only one-thousandth of the number that existed at the height of the Victory Garden movement during the Second World War (Wendel 279). This number includes over 1500 farms and gardens within the city limits of Detroit, many of which are located on abandoned lots, publicly-owned parks, and other grey spaces (Jacobs 215). The prevalence of edible gardens has shifted over time,

with dramatic increases during times of political unrest and social upheaval. The nature of urban agriculture is one of communal effort, especially when said farms are located on public or semi-public property, and they serve to bring people together when social, political, and economic factors threaten to drive people apart.

While Detroit is home to primarily small scale urban farms, aspects of more traditional agriculture provide important context for the practices we see today. The history of farming in the United States is rife with both overt and inadvertent policies that have effectively removed farmland from the ownership and possession of Black farmers. In the past 100 years, over 90% of Black farmland has been lost or taken; compared with 14 million acres of Black-owned farmland in the 1910s, scarcely 1 million acres remain in possession of Black farmers today (Yakini). One of the factors contributing to this decline is policy enacted by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) during the Civil Rights movement, which punished Black farmers who advocated for voting rights and school desegregation by denying loans and reducing acreage allotments, systemically depleting Black farmers of their land and livelihood (Wills). Federally-driven disenfranchisement has reduced the number of large-scale farms owned by Black people, while concurrent local ordinances have limited poor and Black farmers in urban settings.

For almost as long as urban agriculture has existed, so too have restrictive covenants that weaponize such practices. Housing covenants that sought to exclude ‘lower class’ people sometimes banned vegetable gardens and urban animal husbandry because poor households, which were disproportionately Black, were far more likely to utilize one or both methods of reducing household grocery costs and increasing independence. This also gave rise to modern day lawns -- manicured grassy expanses without any edible plants became a sign of wealth because

they represented the homeowner's financial freedom not to use their land for profit and sustenance. In this way, productive gardens became stigmatized and are seen by some as a blight upon otherwise 'well-maintained' neighborhoods (Bouvier 212-213).

Ironically, urban farming has now begun to shift towards the opposite end of the spectrum. Local and organic food movements rely on wealth to sustain expensive growing practices, and many poor communities are effectively excluded from accessing the fresh produce grown in their cities due to high cost and limited geographic or temporal access to farmer's markets or coops.

Gentrification

The image of urban farms that is typically projected is that of small community gardens located on vacant lots or adjacent to abandoned buildings. While this type of farm is prevalent in Detroit, larger-scale operations run by corporations or wealthy individuals make up a larger proportion of the edible acreage in the city. These types of farms include the shipping-container based Cadillac Urban Gardens sponsored by General Motors and millionaire John Hantz' for-profit farming initiative designed in part to attract tourists with its high end technology (Hantz). These operations introduce further gentrification by participating in land grabs, emphasizing aesthetic value over utility, over-utilizing unpaid labor, and introducing capitalist market systems into spheres of food justice.

Hantz' plan deserves further scrutiny, as it encapsulates many of the issues posed by capitalist urban farming and can be used as a case study representing several similar operations in Detroit. Hantz Farms is the largest urban farm in the country, but it has only grown to such a scale with support from the municipal government. In 2012, the City of Detroit sold Hantz more than 1,500 clustered lots at $300 per lot -- lots that had been claimed by the city after non-payment, and many of which were actively being cultivated by Black residents at the time of sale (Smith).

According to a new study out of the University of Michigan's School for Environment and Sustainability, this form of clustered farming is less effective than scattered plots that provide social and environmental benefits to a greater proportion of residents (Erickson).

Not only does Hantz' project minimize potential community benefits, it also represents an ongoing pattern of racially prejudiced municipal land policy. While Detroit supported Hantz, who is already a millionaire and the head of a billion-dollar business conglomerate, the municipal government simultaneously authorized water shutoffs and home foreclosures, punishing Black communities for generations of financial deprivation. Originally proposed as a park and later converted to a hardwood orchard called 'Hantz Woodlands', the development is marketed as cleaner, safer, more beautiful areas in a blighted neighborhood. Their website proclaims that regular mowing and "36,000 trees in evenly spaced rows…add beauty and value to surrounding neighborhoods," but does not mention the thriving edible gardens or existing community landmarks that were forcibly removed to make room for the non-edible, purely aesthetic orchards (Hantz).

The emphasis placed on perfection and aesthetics is inherently based in colonialist ideals, similar to those referenced above in the movement for manicured front lawns. By prioritizing beauty and cleanliness, Hantz flaunts the fact that his operation functions without the income and subsistence provided by edible food products. The same land tended in a different way could produce thousands of pounds of food, but Hantz chooses instead to cater to tourists and business interests.

In order to maintain the regular mowing schedule, demolition of abandoned and dangerous structures, and planting of thousands of hardwood trees, the Hantz foundation relies on volunteers. This represents an exploitation of uncompensated labor that is pervasive throughout

the urban farming community -- the umbrella company owned by Hantz is worth more than 1.3 billion dollars, and yet takes advantage of volunteer service in a community known for its financial hardship (Whitford 1). The people that are able to contribute unpaid labor to a project such as this are likely already economically privileged, which means that the community created through Hantz Woodlands is limited and segregated by socioeconomic status.

Although Hantz' farm clearly does not involve farmers markets or produce stands as it cultivates only hardwood trees, other farming operations are often linked with increased urban agriculture; it is a capitalist intuition that demands the sale of all marketable products. Many independent farms and gardens operate on community-based models of reciprocity, and do so without the use of monetary trade. However, there is an increasing trend toward marketing urban farm products, in part because investors are motivated by financial opportunities, which traditional frameworks of reciprocity eliminate. The establishment of farmer's markets increases neighborhood value, which is good for investors but contributes to gentrification and can force people out of homes they have lived in for generations. Farmer's markets are also inherently limited by their structure; while the market must operate finitely in order to bring together enough vendors, many people are excluded temporarily due to conflicting work or childcare schedules.

Zoning

In the early 1900s, cities across the United States began to assign different portions of land to separate uses, falling primarily into the categories of industrial, commercial, and residential. Different zones allowed different permitted uses, including certain allowances for agricultural and livestock cultivation. Over time, extensive zoning regulation promoted urban sprawl as people had to search further from city centers to find land zoned for their desired use (Choo 46).

Post-World War II, zoning laws and public policy in many American cities shifted to support industrialization and discourage urban agriculture (Wendel 280).

Industrialization was critical in establishing Detroit's success in the automobile industry, but the subsequent desertion of the Big Three auto companies, collapse of the commercial scene, and bankruptcy of the city left gaping holes that the Big Three had once filled, with little leeway for replacement. Zoning laws in downtown neighborhoods supported commercial spaces, but high property taxes and strict building codes made these areas unappealing and many businesses fled the city in a tide of industrial decline. The economic development strategy that ensued built upon the 1947 Detroit Plan and was framed as a way to promote redevelopment and coax industries back to the city, but for the most part was ineffective. For example, Corktown was rezoned for industrial, rather than residential use, but after clearing 167 acres of land, plans for further construction and revitalization failed to materialize (Thomas 101).

Both federal and local policies supported investment in industrial and auto-centered infrastructure such as highways and commercial developments, while residential and public transit infrastructure was neglected. Theoretically, urban renewal would have brought businesses and jobs back into the city, counteracting the exodus of the Big Three. Instead, as rejuvenation projects met bureaucratic, financial, or structural ends, the population of Detroit continued to decline. Those who could leave, mainly white people with employment options and relative economic stability, did, while those who stayed behind witnessed the city's desertion. The abandonment of buildings and lots combined with the city's inability to pay for municipal services created 'urban blight,' the sociological term for the process of decay that occurs in cities as they are neglected.

Blight and disuse in residential neighborhoods is associated with lowered home values as well as increased risk of vandalism, theft, arson, and inhabitation by squatters, so residents of these neighborhoods develop defensive tactics to raise living standards and protect themselves (Kinder). One of these tactics is the creation of small gardens, farms, and parks in vacant lots. However, because of the shift in zoning laws that reduced provisions for agricultural use, and because most of these sites are formally owned by the city or by absent owners, such gardens are not entirely legal. Currently, the Michigan Right to Farm Act "renders commercial farms immune to nuisance lawsuits and exempt from local zoning codes," but does not apply to urban areas, where rural farming practices "might threaten the quality of life of residents unaccustomed to the smells and sounds of farms" (Choo 49). This restriction does not adequately represent urban farming, which rarely if ever includes the livestock or machinery found on rural farms.

The lack of zoning protections and the status of vacant lot ownership forces existing farms into a state of perpetual uncertainty -- at any point, a governmental employee or private citizen with legal rights to the land could reclaim it, destroying whatever garden infrastructure is there. This occurred with some of the land sold to John Hantz, and stories such as that one deter some residents from cultivating land. Detroit has mostly chosen not to enforce the zoning rules that don't allow agriculture, because the city "recognizes the unpermitted gardens and farms as 'good and beneficial use'" but this lack of action is informal, and the zoning laws could be enforced under new leadership, or in the case of an investor like Hantz (Choo 49).

Cities are disinclined to grant land use permits for urban farming because the longevity necessary for farming operations precludes future use for more lucrative projects, and this is especially true in cities such as Detroit that are in need of financial investment. Urban farms

require longevity and geographic stability in order to effectively employ organic farming practices and develop community support (Choo 48).

However, there is one compelling reason for cities to allow urban farming and gardening in vacant lots, and that is the reduction in municipal responsibility. As it is currently, Detroit lacks the financial ability to fully service the entire city, and vacant lots pose a liability due to the increased risk of crime. Cities must make calculations as to where their limited resources are spent, and too often this means that communities and neighborhoods are neglected. While community stewardship of these lands is a response to governmental abandonment, it can also be seen as an opportunity to informally shrink the size of the city by "reducing the areas of the city to which essential city services have to be provided" (Wendel 299). If a series of vacant lots becomes an urban farm and is consistently cared for by community members, the city no longer has to regard those areas as potential loci of crime. This approach allows governments to concentrate resources on those parts of the city that can benefit from them most, increasing the quality and consistency of municipal services.

Zoning regulations can be adjusted to allow for and even encourage urban agriculture, which would grant cities an avenue for distributing limited municipal funds and services more efficiently. This is especially important in Detroit, where the compounded issues of financial hardship and population decline have created a cumulative 7.6 square miles of vacant lots – almost the exact same area as Detroit's downtown core (White 15). Urban farming could be one method of managing vacancies, and would have the added benefit of simultaneously supporting community initiatives, food justice, and environmental activism.

Many of the advantages of urban farming are well known: fresh, local produce helps reduce food inequity, agriculture makes use of vacant lots, and gardens foster community building. There are myriad other benefits, however, including enabling food sovereignty and autonomy, reducing the effects of heat islands, bolstering soil quality, managing stormwater runoff, and providing educational and vocational opportunities. UofM's recent study found that "Lower Eastside residents said they planted gardens primarily to help build community, foster social cohesion and reduce blight, rather than for food production" (Erickson).

Conversations about food equity, justice, security, and sovereignty can sometimes be muddled by issues of differing language. In my experience, these are all highly interconnected terms, with definitions that vary based on speaker and context. For this discussion, I am using food equity and food justice interchangeably in reference to overarching movements toward systems that provide similar levels of access to food regardless of income, race, geographic location, physical ability, or other marginalizing factors. My definition of food security is the ability to reliably access and obtain enough food to adequately feed oneself and one's dependents. Food sovereignty, the term that I find most relevant to the topic of urban agriculture, I define using ideas sourced from La Via Campesina and Malik Yakini as the right of people to define what healthy and culturally appropriate means and to access foods and agricultural systems that fulfill these definitions entirely (Yakini). This distinction between security and sovereignty is important -- the issues that prevent access and those that prevent autonomy are different and must be examined as so in order to build ethical food systems.

Urban farms that are managed by individuals, families, neighborhoods, and communities are living representations of food sovereignty. The act of growing one's own food allows for

almost complete freedom in what one grows and how one grows it -- the very definition of food sovereignty. Beyond geographic limitations that exist due to climatic growing zones, there is a great degree of choice in starting one's own garden. Food is such a basic tenet of life that those who are in control of food systems effectively control consumers of food; by reclaiming control of food via farming, urban gardeners regain control over other aspects of their life. Especially for those who have been repeatedly failed by municipal support systems, self-reliance is far more dependable. The physical produce is important – access to fruit and vegetables is not guaranteed in areas without grocery stores – but even more critical is the ability to decide what produce to cultivate, how to grow it, and when to share it, free from the confines of social determinants.

Agency is a common theme in urban farming practices, and the Black women farmers who were interviewed as part of Monica White's 2011 study of Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN) exercised theirs in part by "rebuilding themselves while restoring their [polluted] environment" (White 17). This intersection of racial and environmental activism is critical to Detroit's urban farming movement. Detroit's environmental hazards include more than 200 landfills or abandoned areas contaminated with hazardous waste, lead-contaminated soil, nitrate-contaminated water, and air pollution that contributes to disproportionately high levels of asthma (Gatrell 58-60). All of these issues have disparate impacts upon Detroit's Black and low-income communities, who are more likely to live near hazardous waste sites, a pattern that is evidenced in several American cities and which has been extensively researched as a major indication of environmental racism.

Tending for the land, then, is an act of radical resistance. Instead of bowing to violence imposed by pollution, Detroit urban gardeners assume a stewardship role and begin to coax small pockets of the city back to health and vibrancy. Gardens not only enrich the soil by adding

nutrients and diluting existing chemicals, but they also help manage stormwater by “allowing rain to soak into the soil instead of running off concrete into sewers" (Choo 46). Gardens improve air quality by cycling more oxygen into the air and removing toxins, and plants mitigate the effects of heat islands by offsetting the heat-reflective nature of buildings and other urban infrastructure.

Beyond food and environmental impacts, urban farming has social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual effects. Collective action united communities, which is a core tenet of many urban farms. This social interaction and collaborative problem solving helps strengthen interpersonal relationships, which is particularly important when cooperative action is called for. For example, groups such as We the People of Detroit rely on community networks to spread awareness, garner support, and conduct research in order to lobby for political change. The connection to other activists in a politically neutral space fosters communication and allows for a greater degree of awareness about different, intersecting issues. Many of the Black women farmers that Monica White interviewed are advocates for separate social and political causes, but working together on DBCFSN projects brought them together and stimulated intersectional activism.

For some of these women, urban farms are a manifestation “of an agrarian tradition of African people and a legacy of African Americans who have connected food to life, liberty, and justice” that bridge Black Detroiters with their ancestors and history (White 20). For those who view participation in urban agriculture as an act of resistance, gardening can be an emotionally rejuvenating aspect of greater activism and serves to root present day causes in historical traditions. Furthermore, the act of growing plants strengthens the intimate bond between person and place, and can be a spiritual endeavor for many. As described by White’s interview subjects, community gardens are safe spaces where people can “give birth to concepts and to new ways of doing and being” (White 23).

Another key role of urban agriculture is that of a classroom and gateway to active citizenship. One of White's interview subjects summarized the importance of urban farms as spaces for education by saying, "Not only do [children] learn how to grow food, but they also learn the power of their own voices" (White 24). Investment in future generations is critical to creating strong communities, and Detroit has a particular need for establishing long-term connections to the land and city in order to retain the remaining population.

Conclusion

From zoning laws that permit urban agriculture to formal agreements between city services and private land stewards, there are many avenues for Detroit to adopt policy to better support urban agriculture. However, it is important to recognize that urban agriculture is not a permanent or comprehensive solution to issues of population decline, redlining, gentrification, water shutoffs, food apartheid, environmental racism, and so on. While I do think that urban farming as an institution is a net positive for cities, I also firmly believe that it would not be necessary if there was a stronger social safety net and governmental support system in place for marginalized people.

A modern egalitarian metropolis should include community-driven projects that meet the desires and needs of residents. Municipal support for these projects is one way of honoring people and their intimate understanding of how their own neighborhoods operate. Ideally, an egalitarian metropolis is also facilitated from the top down, with governmental policy structures that ensure rights to life, liberty, and happiness. These rights include access to water and food, protection from environmental hazards, housing and financial security, suffrage and political contribution, and more. Detroit in particular could start by recognizing the right to water and restoring water to those homes that have experienced water shutoffs, as well as establishing affordable housing and

protections from eviction and creating a public transit system that allows for more geographic mobility. Urban farming "evolved more naturally from the confluence of a variety of economic, social, and environmental conditions," and addressing the root causes of these conditions would create a city in which urban farming becomes an option rather than a compulsion (Wendel 281)"

I had hoped to discuss the future of urban farming as a method for coping with increasing global tensions and a critical tool for localization, and although I was unable to include a full exploration of this topic, I still believe it is important to mention. Political and social conflict across the world that has been building as a result of increased globalization has led some scholars and activists to promote localization. Turning in toward one's community and local networks is a radical idea in the age of technological interconnection, but I think it will become more appealing as global warming continues to wreak havoc on our societal systems. Climate change has particularly grave effects on crops and it is likely that our food systems will experience significant disruptions due to environmental disasters – in this case, localized farming will become more important than ever for food security and community resilience.

I have rarely completed an academic assignment for which there was such an overwhelming variety of relevant sources – urban farming has been thoroughly researched – and yet there was still a vast array of conclusions and proposals, suggesting that there is little scholarly or community consensus on the utility, longevity, and equality of urban agriculture. I found it difficult to focus my research, as each topic I explored seemed to be inextricably linked with several others, which speaks to the enduring relevance of this conversation and of ongoing explorations of egalitarianism. There is no right answer and no simple solution in creating an egalitarian metropolis, but rather a network of projects, perspectives, and people that together form the patchwork city we see today and that will shape the city of tomorrow.

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