

Where have all the houses (among other things) gone? Some critical reflections on urban agriculture

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Commentary for Themed Content: Urban Agriculture

Abstract

Urbandale Farm (Lansing, MI) has much in common with other urban agricultural projects throughout the US and especially those in the rust-belt cities of the Midwest. It raises food for an economically challenged neighborhood. It offers opportunities for local participation, education and job creation, and it is supported by diverse public and private institutions. By all official accounts, Urbandale Farm is good at what it does. Its acreage, production, income and entrepreneurial activities are all increasing, and it has become a poster child for urban agriculture throughout the city. However, despite its good work (or possibly because of it), Urbandale Farm, and urban agriculture more generally, may unwittingly be helping to rationalize the displacement and continued social and political inequity of urban neighbors rather than reinforcing greater place-making, neighborhood empowerment and sustainability. Using Urbandale Farm as a case in point, this paper critically explores how urban agriculture is being used by some scholars, activists, governmental offices and agencies to transform fragile neighborhoods. It questions some of the movement's underlying assumptions as well as some of its actual benefits and beneficiaries. The paper also offers suggestions—for the purpose of initiating a more nuanced conversation—on how urban agriculture can be reconfigured philosophically and practically to shed its neoliberal tendencies and contribute to a more structurally based social and political transformation.

Key words: urban agriculture, Midwest, critical reflection, neoliberal tendencies, social transformation

Introduction

Urban agriculture has been growing steadily over the past 20+ years in lock step with the local food movement. This pattern is especially pronounced in rust-belt cities throughout the US Midwest, places where lost industries and collapsed land values have hollowed out neighborhoods and city centers. Here, as elsewhere, urban agriculture has become a familiar solution for addressing the many problems that plague urban environments. It is being used to repurpose and beautify blighted and abandoned spaces. It provides a source of fresh produce for food-insecure and nutritionally compromised urban residents. It is felt to be responsible for creating new, place-based markets, for generating entrepreneurial opportunities, for stabilizing and revitalizing urban economies and communities. The media, public officials and civic organizations are quick to showcase the phoenix-like effects that agrifood projects are having on the urban

landscape and on the quality of life within the urban environment (e.g., ¹).

Despite the fact that urban agriculture has captured the popular imagination (or maybe because of it), we might ask if these transformative claims are fully justified. After all have we not been through this before? Have not the cities had an on-again/off-again relationship with urban agriculture for generations—appearing when times are tough and disappearing when the market economy improves^{2–6}? Has not urban agriculture also functioned as a strategic neoliberal tool as well as an attractive place holder on the road to gentrification, thus keeping power and privilege in its place^{7–11}?

Stated somewhat differently, if we (scholars, practitioners and citizens) are to take ourselves and our public work seriously, if we believe in the potential of urban agriculture to affect just and sustainable change, then we cannot be complacent, impressed by our own apparent good work. We are obligated to probe beneath urban

agriculture's currently bright and publicly sanctioned surface. This will require us to examine the assumptions that legitimate urban agricultural projects and to critically question some of their unintended as well as intended consequences. We may find that urban agricultural projects rely on premises and processes that reproduce the existing social and political inequity—the very things we would have hoped to transform. At the same time, we may learn something strengthening, something that will impart greater generative power to urban agriculture and urban residents. What follows is my attempt to ask a few questions based on my own involvement with an urban agriculture project in Lansing, Michigan. It is obviously only one case, one experience, among thousands, but it is not without larger structural and theoretical implications. As such, it may serve to jump-start a more nuanced discussion of both the possibility and the reality of urban agriculture.

Urbandale: A Neighborhood and an Urban Farm

The Lansing Urban Farm Project (LUF) is a 501c3 established in 2010 by two, middle-aged, middle-class, highly educated, white women, neither of whom lives in the city. Its mission, not unlike that of many urban agriculture projects, is to (1) raise and market locally grown produce to urban residents; (2) integrate neighbors into farming activities and farms into neighborhood activities; and (3) manage all this in a way that is sustainable and locally meaningful. Urbandale Farm is LUF's first major enterprise. The farm exists within Urbandale, an ethnically diverse and economically fragile neighborhood. The population identifies as African Americans (27%), Hispanics (11%), Whites (60%) and Others (2%) and is comprised of retirees, young families, college students, the employed and the unemployed.

Approximately 45% of Urbandale's 600 households report an income under \$20,000. Some 20% are without reliable transportation, and the neighborhood has been labeled a food desert¹². About half the homes are rented. Half are owner occupied. Several are red tagged and many more are in a state of disrepair, though just as many are carefully maintained. It is a neighborhood that suffers from public and private neglect and is not unacquainted with prostitution and drug dealing.

But these characteristics hide many local attributes. Urbandale is historically the city's oldest blue-collar subdivision and one of the only places left in Lansing where families of limited means can own their own homes. As a result, many families have lived in Urbandale for generations. Because the neighborhood is bounded on two sides by major freeways there is little through traffic. This, together with mature trees, numerous green spaces and occasional dirt roads, gives Urbandale a rural ambience and makes it a relatively quiet, scenic and

walkable/bikeable neighborhood. It is a place with lots of children and many eyes on the street.

Urbandale Farm, now in its fourth growing season, raises vegetables, herbs and flowers on over 2 acres of non-contiguous land, leased from the Ingham County Land Bank and the City's Office of Planning and Neighborhood Development. Grants from the United States Department of Agriculture underwrite a farm manager, a paid apprenticeship program and a farming curriculum. Ten unemployed or underemployed adults have served as apprentices, and eight of them remain actively engaged in their own local food and farming enterprises. The farm also operates a veggie wagon that delivers fresh produce to shut-ins and has ambitions to rival the ubiquitous ice-cream truck. An on-farm market, regular local customers and volunteers, a 30' × 60' hoop house (permitting year-round production), a live-in farm manager and three seasonal parties all suggest a successful operation. LUF's accomplishments have not gone unnoticed and Urbandale Farm has become a poster child for urban agriculture in the Lansing area.

Three Questions (Among Many)

The more time I spend in Urbandale, the more I find myself questioning the nature of 'our success.' It is true that we have invested personal resources and much sweat equity in the farm, but it is equally true that statistical poverty, the food desert label and the existence of abandoned land have all worked in our favor. Urbandale's deficits seem to be our good fortune.

Urbandale, according to the Land Bank and the City, has many empty lots—vacant, abandoned green spaces that are underutilized, eye sores and liabilities. Urban agriculture presents itself as a way to 'deploy' property—a verb used by the director of the Land Bank—and shift the cost of maintenance from governmental to private ledgers. Empty lots are dealt out to individuals willing to raise produce, especially commercially. When LUF first approached the Land Bank about a particular half-acre parcel, we were told 'Take it it's yours. You are not part of the problem; you're part of the solution.'

There is much to consider about this statement, but let us start with the question, 'What is an empty lot?' Empty of what? As I watch and listen to Urbandale residents I am convinced that empty lots do not exist. The neighborhood is full of history and memory and story, all grounded in a real place. At farm markets, residents volunteer, 'My father built that house.' 'We used to cut through the woods to swim in the Red Cedar;' 'I planted that tree when I was six.' To dismiss these attachments and to reduce lived spaces to a set of bureaucratic costs and concerns (e.g., mowing, snow removal) is to depoliticize whole communities, to disenfranchise residents and to dismiss much of what makes a neighborhood a neighborhood. It is language that frames a reality based on perceived

deficits and proposes fixes that complement this perception. To my knowledge, no one has ever told Urbandale residents, individually or collectively, 'Take it it's yours. ... You are part of the solution'. Neither have neighbors been encouraged to explore land trusts, cooperatives, nor less traditional forms of resource ownership and use. By contrast, in less than 3 years, over 40 parcels have been leased to sincere, mostly white, well-educated, young-adult farmer/gardeners, the majority of whom have had no previous ties to the neighborhood.

I am bothered by the fact that Urbandale Farm has taken a wild, 'empty' space where kids used to play, hiding in the brush, balancing on downed trees, discovering the contours and inhabitants of their immediate environment and turned it into neat rows of broccoli and summer squash. Neighbors, of course, are welcome to visit and to weed with us—as long as they keep to the paths, respect our schedule and obey the rules. Why are we surprised when they do not? And why, furthermore, does their response so neatly reinforce the prevailing deficit orientation (i.e., how do we change them)?

This leads me to my second question 'Who's in harm's way?' Urbandale lies in the city's 100 years flood plain. Flood insurance, when available, is expensive, and during the last major flood (1975) many residents lost their homes as well as their personal property when flood waters rose 8–9 feet above the street level. Today, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, inspired by Katrina, is intent on moving people out of 'harm's way.' To this end, it has prohibited any new construction in Urbandale, placed limits on home improvements (i.e., 50% of assessed value) and provided the City with about 2 million dollars worth of grants to purchase and then demolish existing homes. While home-owner participation in the latter program is purely voluntary, such dedicated displacement means that the downward spiral of property values is all but assured, especially for rental properties which account for half of Urbandale's housing stock. It also means that homeowners are ineligible for federal grants for critical repairs such as lead abatement. Somewhat ironically, it seems that keeping people, especially children, in lead-contaminated housing is the best way to save them from flooding. Equally ironic, the elimination of homes and residents from the area appears to be the best way to save the neighborhood.

I am concerned by the pattern that is emerging. For every house that is removed in the heart of the flood plain (and many are in better shape than those still inhabited), a garden site is made available. Urbandale Farm is now raising peppers and chard on one such parcel, and we have claims to several more. This pleases the City's Office of Planning and Neighborhood Development and also helps to rationalize the Community Development Block Grant funding they offer us to support our work.

There is, however, no accompanying program to relocate residents. There is no master plan or on-going

public discourse to thrash out the future of the neighborhood. Rather, removing people from harm's way appears to be synonymous with ridding the city of a serious liability and setting the stage for future, possibly more lucrative, resource investment. Land a half mile east of Urbandale in the very same flood plain, for instance, is being developed into student housing, restaurants and an assortment of high-end shops. On that side of the tracks, few if any urban gardens are being proposed.

And this leads me to my final question for now, 'Why is this Urbandale's problem?' To hear the experts and public officials tell it, Urbandale has a flooding problem—it belongs to Urbandale—just like Urbandale has a crime problem and an empty lot problem. But I have come to doubt that this is altogether true or that this is how we need to understand it.

The neighborhood does not cause its own flooding any more than it causes itself to be unsafe or undervalued. The causes extend well beyond the neighborhood and its sundry and hard-scrabble residents. With regard to flooding, for instance, much happens upstream. Sprawling subdivisions and shopping malls with acres of impermeable asphalt create run-off as well as pollution that first end up in the Red Cedar River and storm sewers and then overflow their natural and man-made containments. Why is this not considered an economic development problem, or a problem of regional planning, or a problem of consumerism, privatization and/or unrestricted market capitalism? Urbandale is held responsible, I think, because it is essentially powerless and because by doing so we are exempt from seeing our complicity in and how we may benefit from the processes and policies that feed and maintain inequity.

What is happening, I believe, is that urban agriculture has the capacity to rationalize and co-opt 'activist' work, allowing it to depoliticize real people and places. Seen from this perspective, urban agriculture easily fits within Swyngedouw's notion of post-political formation¹³. In his discussion of the many natures and the many futures that must (but do not now) inform sustainability, he argues that contemporary discourse is increasingly framed by a privileged elite in a manner that centers and silences any real political challenge to established capitalist structures. It builds a consensus around the inevitability of neoliberal capitalism and simultaneously 'prevents the politicization of particulars'¹³. Eliminating such things as 'crime,' 'obesity' or 'flood damage' become public objectives, while histories, place-based experiences and larger political contexts are lost in translation. Likewise, outright conflict (the stuff of activism), multiple voices and demands for the redistribution of resources and resource ownership have largely disappeared¹⁴.

The absence of any real political challenge is also consistent with what Boyte¹⁵ calls 'civic administration,' a managerial and distributive form of government. As he explains,

Simply, the dominant civil society approach . . . depoliticizes citizenship while it professionalizes politics. It assigns politics to the arena of government, consultants, lobbyists and experts, leaving ordinary citizens as helpers on the side. It also separates production, which it locates in the economic sector, from public life. As a result, citizenship is purified, stripped of power, interests and the institutional foundations needed for serious civic work; politics is defined in distributive terms associated with government, as who gets what; and the actual public wealth—disappears from view. The world threatens to become entirely privatized and the market to spin out of control (p. 58).

The focus here is on practical solutions and on wealth management (frequently the realm of outside experts) rather than on the empowerment of citizens and the exploration of alternative political possibility. In Urbandale, the Land Bank, the City and numerous nongovernmental organizations work cooperatively in this manner, ultimately equating the public good with market potential and capital efficiency.

I have seen this ‘professionalism’¹⁴ creep into LUPP’s operations and it worries me. With each grant we receive (and need and are thankful for), we concern ourselves a little more with vegetable production and income generation and a little less with the rhythms of the neighborhood and the paradoxes that define our neighbors’ lives. We have less unstructured time to spend with kids (or anyone) and more financial record keeping. We approach the neighborhood as though it should respond to our needs and good work (e.g., more land, more apprentices and more customers). At the same time, we are reluctant to involve ourselves in debates that probe local housing, education, policing or welfare reform. Despite our mission, we are reluctant to put residents—potentially inexperienced, uninformed and unreliable people—on our board. I am left to wonder, ‘where’s the transformation going to come from?’

Some Suggestions

I realize that no two urban agriculture projects are exactly alike. I realize that Urbandale and my work there cannot be replicated elsewhere. I realize that I am being provocative. That said, I also realize that if we (scholars, practitioners and citizens) want urban agriculture to become a vehicle for re-awakening a cacophony of diverse voices, participatory democracy and unsanitized political confrontation, then we will need to approach ourselves and our work differently. To this end, I offer seven suggestions for how we might reconfigure our philosophical and practical relationship to urban agriculture.

1. Urban agriculture requires continual and deep self-reflection. This means sincerely listening to the stories (words, language and logic) of others, questioning our own ‘pure’ assumptions, and confronting our

embedded positions within structures of power and privilege. This requires less teaching (and problem solving) and more engaged learning. It also takes time, far more time than raising vegetables.

2. Urban agriculture requires growing familiar with the daily rhythms, behaviors and lived experiences of real people and finding ways to bring these realities into the public realm as potential tools for dialogue and action. It means getting to know people in contexts other than food and farming (e.g., sharing sports obsessions, discussing Obamacare and repairing a porch railing). It also means seeing and using open spaces—walls, bus stops, curbsides, alleyways, fences—as venues and opportunities for public conversation. The creative work of Candy Chang (www.youtube.com/watch?v=uebxllrosiM) and Kemi Ilesanmi’s the Laundromat Project (www.laundromatproject.org.htm) resonate well here.
3. Urban agriculture requires growing good food, but it also requires growing new power. The concerns of food production and distribution should never trump human rights, not if greater social and political justice is the desired outcome. Urban agriculture is embedded within racial, class and political projects, and cannot be siloed off from other efforts dedicated to civil empowerment and social transformation. History, law, policies, education, housing, the media all connect to and inform urban agriculture (and vice versa). We need to be literate and active in these realms too if we are to facilitate change. The history of Jim Crow, the comfort of color blindness, the impact of citizens united, the absence of a farm bill, the presence of right to work legislation all have a bearing on food equity and on social justice (e.g., ^{11,16,17}).
4. Urban agriculture requires liberating the commons—those meaningful and open physical, social and mental spaces that belong to local residents and that encourage public use, interaction and debate. By engaging with ‘empty’ lots, block parties, micro loans, cooperative groceries, planning petitions, etc., as ‘great good places’¹⁸, urban agriculture has the capacity to rethink fences and locks and privatized solutions and thereby change the locus of resource distribution, ownership and responsibility.
5. Urban agriculture requires challenging the bureaucracies upon which its own survival depends. Changing the system means accepting discomfort ourselves and using discomfort to ‘push’ our economic and political partners. Since we have the most influence over the institutions we are closest to, that is where we begin. In Urbandale, for example, we have argued vigorously against the demolition of foreclosed housing and for the value of neighbors and neighborhood. The Land Bank, in response, has agreed to ‘save’ three houses, all of which are now rented. It is time to ‘push’ on the next level.

6. Urban agriculture in the words of LaDonna Redmond¹⁹ requires 'becoming organizers and not food science providers.' This means incorporating suggestions #1–#5 into our daily lives and recognizing, as Myles Horton did (and highlander does), the fullness and never-ending nature of this activist work²⁰.
7. Finally, urban agriculture requires knowing when to 'let go.' If we ourselves as we are not community members, if we are not living in the neighborhood on a 24/7 basis then we need to be willing to relinquish ownership of 'our' green and growing projects to those who are. We certainly can be invited back should we be asked, but ultimately the decision-making, the leadership and the ownership belong to others.

If we do our work well, it will no longer be our work. Hopefully, we will have captured the local imagination and helped to lay the ground work for greater equity (e.g., a local Board of Directors). This may not happen, of course. But if it does, and if urban agriculture is to remain embedded in the landscape, then it will need first to belong to the people and the place. From within this grounded context comes the power to challenge elite presumptions, bureaucratic rationality and charitable intentions. There can be no sustainability or food justice without this.

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