

Case Study of Community Gardens

Detroit, Michigan

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Detroit more, than any other city in USA is a product of industrially driven urbanism: “Detroit is the largest factory town ever built.”¹ It thus had and has a larger sensitivity and susceptibility to economic cycles of boom and bust than many other cities of comparable size. Community gardens and urban farms have been tied very closely to that legacy. Detroit’s history of community gardens goes back to the late nineteenth century, and the city claims to have had the oldest officially recognized community gardens initiative. As a result of the economic depression in 1893-97, the city of Detroit began a vacant-lot garden program as a relief for the unemployed. Hazen Pingree, then mayor of Detroit, “urged owners of vacant lots to allow the urban unemployed to grow food.”² This official initiative was referred to as the “Detroit Experiment” or “Potato Patch Farms.” The success of this experiment led to its widespread adoption in other industrial cities. During the Depression the city government launched the Detroit Thrift Gardens Program as an organized urban gardening program to assist the poor and unemployed in meeting their nutrition needs. These relief gardens encouraged participants to grow produce for home consumption.

Urban gardens in Detroit received their next impetus with the announcement in 1976 of the federally funded Urban Garden Program, which was administered by the Department of Agriculture's cooperation extension service. The initial sum of \$1.5 million was provided to set up garden projects in Detroit and five other cities. The money was used in teaching and on demonstration gardening projects. However, the program was quietly buried during the early 1990s.³ Urban gardens, especially in industrial Detroit, have been seen as supplemental sources of production in times of economic stress. During such periods, interest in urban gardens peaks both in policy as well as community levels.

The renaissance of community gardening in Detroit began during the mid 1990s. It is associated with the decline (and demise) of the industrial paradigm, the third highest unemployment rate among the nation's largest cities,⁴ and the establishment of activist organizations. The latter include the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center (also known as the Boggs Center to Nurture Community Leadership (BCNCL)) and the Detroit Agriculture Network (DAN), which have ties to both the civil rights movement and the environmental movement. The BCNCL is a non-profit center founded in 1995 that helps people at the grassroots have the capacity to be agents of preferred social change. It aims to "help grassroots activists develop themselves into visionary leaders and critical thinkers who can devise pro-active strategies for rebuilding and respiration of our cities."⁵ The center has been active in a host of urban transformation efforts such as environmental justice, urban agriculture and youth leadership development. The center draws inspiration from Grace Boggs, a cultural worker and philosopher who was active in the major U.S. social movements of the twentieth century, and James Boggs, an African

American labor activist and writer. The recent surge in interest in urban community gardens parallels the previous episodes of interest in gardens as sources of sustenance. However, there is an important difference: Detroit community gardens in the 1990s and the early 2000s were not exclusively understood as sustenance providers; instead, they were also associated with enhancing neighborhood environmental quality as well as with building social capital. Community gardens are seen as an important component of the rebuilding and revitalizing of Detroit with a sustainable urban ethic. Other efforts include alternative approaches to housing such as cohousing, recycling and reconsumption, local livelihood opportunities, public mural art and intergenerational interaction. In other words, community gardens today are elements of a new vision for a post-industrial Detroit.⁶

On this issue Detroit is notable among other cities for its vision-guided effort that is rejuvenating urban agriculture through not just isolated community gardens but also through an integrated and interconnected comprehensive plan called Adamah (a Hebrew word meaning “of the earth”) where urban farming ventures are but one strand within the Adamah web. Adamah was conceived of in 1999 jointly by the James and Grace Lee Boggs Center, the Detroit Collaborative Design Center, and the School of Architecture, University of Detroit Mercy. The Detroit Collaborative Design Center was founded as a non-profit, multidisciplinary design center within the School of Architecture, University of Detroit Mercy. The mission of this center is to work exclusively with non-profit community development organizations in order to renew the city.⁷ At the heart of the Adamah plan is a message to foster grassroots community development that builds communities and enhances local environmental quality. This is a break from the top-

down hierarchical town planning approach. The Adamah plan envisions a number of efforts for a sustainable Detroit that range from energy generation to agriculture and sustainable consumption. The Adamah vision for urban farms is one of gardens and greenhouses for flowers and vegetables and farmers' markets, grazing land for livestock and a dairy, a tree farm, and a lumber mill. In addition, Adamah envisions windmills to generate electricity and ivy-covered freeway buffers for cleaning the air. The plan seeks to rehabilitate a city sewage canal and employ it for both irrigation of urban farms and for recreation. Through the efforts of a group of activists, the Adamah vision is guiding the disparate gardening, farming, and marketing efforts within Detroit.^{8,9,10} Thus, such diverse economic activities that contribute to sustainable local livelihoods such as the Cass Corridor Food Cooperative, Avalon International Breads (an organic bakery), as well as alternative mobility enhancers like the Back Alley Bikes, find a place within the encompassing Adamah vision.¹¹ The Adamah vision animated many people, but the practicalities of implementing the vision left many doing community work a little frustrated. It must be noted that outside a circle of activists, the Adamah plan has so far failed to evoke interest among the city bureaucrats or the elected officials. The plan has been categorized as impractical by city officials.¹² The Adamah vision has now been transformed into a network called Sustainable Detroit.

The Detroit Agriculture Network (DAN) arose in the mid-1990s from the "growing interest in using the vacant lots of Detroit for agricultural production." It was the brain-child of David Hacker, then director of the Hunger Action Coalition, a nonprofit, anti-hunger advocacy organization. It remained within the umbrella of the Hunger Action Coalition until 2003, when DAN constituted its board of directors and

initiated the process of becoming a 501(c)(3) organization. DAN is a loose coalition of activists, gardeners, and volunteers who are involved in providing support resources and educational opportunities that advance the related causes of urban food security and healthy communities. Since DAN was very active in the community gardening arena of Detroit, I decided to learn more about the activities of DAN. I therefore interviewed Ms. Ashley Atkinson, a member of the board of directors as well as former Project Coordinator of DAN. According to Ms. Atkinson, DAN sees as its mission “to promote and foster urban agriculture, sustainable use, and appreciation of urban natural resources. We encourage the establishment of resource support networks, experiential educational opportunities for youth and their families and collaborations that advance urban food security, good nutrition, healthy land, and communities.” This is reflected in the motto of DAN: “Growing People and Communities.” Sustainable urban development for DAN is about combining the “cultural roots of the community while creating self-sustaining neighborhoods”.¹³ The network tries to support neighborhoods that take over vacant lots for community gardens. The attempt is to see the “numerous vacant lots in Detroit transformed into community gardens, neighborhood farms, and outdoor farm markets.”¹⁴ DAN has an active array of programs and services that it offers.

In 2003, DAN received a USDA community grant that allowed the network to begin the Garden Resource Program for gardeners in the city of Detroit. As Atkinson explained, the program “provides not only all that they need to garden—seeds, plants, soils, composts and raised beds—but also support to become connected with residents and to build communities gardening in their same neighborhood.” The program attempts to strengthen not just local resources for gardeners but also to create city-wide resources.

About 115 family and community gardens in the city received support through DAN from the US Dept. of Agriculture.¹⁵ The DAN website mentions that in 2004, 33 community gardens are part of the network and receive support from it.¹⁶ In 2005 the Garden Resource Program has continued growing, with the number of community gardens more than doubling to 77. Atkinson added, “In 2004 we were gardening well over 30 acres in Detroit, and I believe that the number will probably double this year [2005].” For the purpose of organizing and outreach to community gardens spread all over the city, DAN has grouped gardens within ten planning clusters.¹⁷ Each of the clusters possesses a neighborhood leader as well as a neighborhood center, which will host a tool-bank and hold workshops. To be a part of the Garden Resource Program, each registered community garden has to fill an application form and pay a nominal membership fee of \$20 per annum. The fee serves the primary purpose of ensuring that the members take the responsibility of coming to plant-distribution dates and planting the plants. Program members receive three distributions for gardens. In March, forty-two packets of seeds such peas, beans, mustard, radishes, carrots and spinach are provided. Two distributions totaling 216 plants are made in April and then in May. These include plants such as collards, kale, cauliflower as well as tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, onions, squash and peppers. This compares very favorably with the city government sponsored program Farm-a-Lot whose distribution is often not very reliable.

DAN also conducts a nine-week training program called Urban Roots. As Atkinson explained, “The program covers not only the basics of plant science and soil science but also capacity building skills such as how to find resources in your neighborhood that you need: grant writing, community organizing, etc.” DAN also

conducts an educational workshop series, with classes held twice a month. Topics range from “vermicomposting, making rain barrels, to basic gardening and bio-intensive agriculture.” In addition, public outreach happens through potlucks, tours, and other social events that facilitate interactions with gardeners.

Equity and Sustainability

The focus of community gardens is on meeting the sustenance needs of marginalized and abandoned neighborhoods. The flight of industry from Detroit, along with troubled social circumstances (racial tensions and substance abuse), has resulted in an abundance of vacant and abandoned lots. The total number is estimated to be around 40,000; that is, roughly a third of the 139 square miles of the city is composed of abandoned and vacant lots. Many of the gardens and other community efforts at revitalization are located in abandoned neighborhoods in an effort to improve the physical environment, inject some energy into the community, and to improve the quality of life for the needy through better quality of diet.

DAN sees equity and sustainability as inseparably intertwined within the mission of creating community gardens within Detroit. The organization sees itself reshaping the fabric of the city. As Atkinson explained, “Urban agriculture will play a big role in making the city more self-sufficient, more environmentally friendly, and more green.” The equity focus in the programs emerges in two spheres. First, there is a close relation between the community gardens and food banks and other anti-hunger organizations. In addition, some gardens sell their produce in farmer’s markets, while others provide fresh produce to food banks. A second focus on equity emerges from the additional livelihood

and nutritional value that community gardens provide to poor and other socially marginalized communities.

Two other organizations of note have both contributed especially to the equity dimension of urban agriculture. Another example of an equity-related project in the city is the community garden run by the Capuchin Monastery. The garden has partnered with Project Fresh, an organization that supplies needy women and children with fresh fruits and vegetables.¹⁸ A second organization, the Foundation for Agricultural Resources (FARM), involves the city's underprivileged youth in urban agriculture as an opportunity for them to realize their potential. Managed by John Gruchala and Tris Richardson, the youth farm about an acre of vacant land and produce one ton of produce, including cabbages, tomatoes, kale, and peppers. Some of the produce is canned in a converted auto body shop. FARM sees the venture as a means of involving young people in all phases of the vegetable production process.¹⁹ Paul Weetz, a science teacher at Catherine Ferguson Academy, has provided a hands-on curriculum that teaches agriculture and gardening skills to pregnant teens and young mothers. In addition to acquiring math and science skills, students are being taught to raise farm animals, tend a community garden, and build a barn. As a result student drop-out rates have declined substantially, and students with little self-esteem have completed their education and in some cases gone into college.

In summary, community elders see gardening as a means to contribute to equity and sustainability considerations. Fresh produce from community gardens not only enhance projects for the poor like Forgotten Harvest but gardens also become safe spaces for intergenerational support groups and dialogs.²⁰ In all these cases, community gardens

are making explicit choices about how to grow produce—organic or non-organic—and how much to support a marginalized group or one’s own household.

Policy Issues and Recommendations

Detroit possesses a history of government intervention in community gardens and urban agriculture. The Farm-a-Lot program, which was supported by Mayor Coleman Young and is still administered by the Detroit Recreation Department, is a legacy of governmental activism. The city government has since had to scale back its commitment to the program, which appears less and less capable of handling the requests of residents even as the demand for agriculture services seems to be increasing. As Atkinson explained, “Because there are so many people wanting to garden, one has to either be lucky to know of the [Farm-a-Lot] distribution or be on some special list” to receive the plantings. The Farm-a-Lot program suffers from a further drawback, which arises from its inability to restrict the benefits of the program to legitimate community gardeners. As it is conceived, distribution of plantings is freely available from the local city center for anyone who walks in. The lack of screening criteria dilutes the responsibility of beneficiaries towards meeting the goals of the program.

Community gardens are of interest to the city government’s planning department. Most community gardens are situated on publicly held vacant lots, which often have alternative uses that are planned by the city. As Atkinson explained, “The city planning department has publicly said a number of times that while community gardens do have some positive benefits, when there is a choice between development and community gardens, the department would choose development all the time.” Alternate visions of the

city like Adamah see community gardens as central to a more environmentally, socially and economically sustainable Detroit. The Adamah vision was seen by the planning department as unrealistic and out of touch with economic and social realities.

Under such conditions, an organization like DAN has to tread a fine line by appearing supportive of the city government's developmental agenda and yet also attempting to educate the government about the value of community gardening. DAN thus interacts with the city government at a more personal level of individual contacts and friends. Turnover in staff often results in loss of biggest allies within the planning department, and as a result a constant effort is needed to reestablish friends and contacts. However, interaction at the personal rather than at an institutional level also exposes an organization like DAN to the need to appear studiously non-partisan on political issues and during elections.

According to Atkinson, DAN would like to see three major policy changes on community gardens. In the short term, the organization would like to see the city government come on as a major partner of the Garden Resource Program, Urban Roots, and education series services that DAN provides. These programs have been found to be effective, and the presence of the city government as a partner organization would further legitimate the program. In addition, a partnership would allow the government to maximize resources while minimizing the cost to the government for providing similar services. Another short-term policy prescription concerns the city-run Farm-a-Lot program. The program requires the community gardener to fill out a Farm-a-Lot permit that recognizes the applicant as a legitimate user of the land for the duration of one year. The security provided by a one year permit is insufficient to allow users to make the

investment in time and money that is required. Transforming the permit into a long-term lease would provide a greater guarantee. In the long term Atkinson suggests that DAN would like to see the planning department “not only recognize green space but also urban farming or community gardening as an icon of the master plan” and in addition incorporate into the master plan a recommendation for a certain amount of acreage as community gardening or urban farming/ green space in each of the ten planning clusters in the city.

Based on interview of Ms. Ashley Atkinson with Govind Gopakumar conducted on June 14, 2005.

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