

Urban Farming: Localizing Narratives

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This paper will look at the historical and contemporary narratives behind urban farming. It will start with the transcendentalists (for this short paper limited to Thoreau) and their manner of seeing in the return to the land the capacity for social reform, and end with an examination of the ideas that have not only blurred the distinction between the urban and the rural, but that in doing so have spawned a new awareness and appreciation in local culture, including local food and slow food movements. Today community gardens across the United States are busy forging relations with nearby outfits, including restaurants and schools, serving as stewards of social, economic and intellectual growth.

THOREAU AND THE ETHIC OF AMERICAN FARMING

Why did Thoreau spend two years in the woods? For one he wanted to cut the middleman and live off the land, enter into a direct relationship with nature. Might he be able to build a house for himself without the help of a builder and in the process learn an important lesson about construction, materials, climate, space? As he said he wanted to “suck the marrow out of life” and feel in his bones the way things work, including how to cultivate a garden large enough to sustain himself and perhaps a little more to earn a profit.

Starting from scratch isn't easy especially when you are alone and the tools you have are limited. But perhaps that is also precisely when you are at your most creative, your senses particularly alert to potentials lying in wait. When looking for siding to clad his prospective shelter, Thoreau, for instance, does not go straight for the tree but let's his imagination roam and see opportunity in other options. In a decayed shack nearby he does not see an ugly eyesore but an opportunity to cannibalize a useless entity and serve his end. “I took down this dwelling,” he says, “drawing the nails and removed it to the pond side by small cartloads, spreading the boards on the grass there to bleach and warp back in the sun.”¹ The event would bring him in contact with a neighbor, the owner of the shack, barter for the price of the boards, and learn the art of exchange, commercial and social.²

Indeed, the purpose and objective of *Walden* was first and foremost to prove that man can live in harmony with nature, that he is a better person when his needs are calibrated with nature's provisions nearby, not thousands of miles away but literally within a quarter, or even less. Yes *Walden* was a demonstration of our capacity to do precisely in measure what nature has given to us and are able to control with our own body. But there was more. Digging deeper we find that beyond sustenance Thoreau's experiment was staged against an even higher cause, namely the deep seated desire to live by one's own powers, remain independent of central agencies- government, banks, and generally predatory folks all around. In doing his own thing, he says, he “was more independent than any farmer in concord, for I was not anchored to a house or farm, but could follow the bent of my genius which is a very crooked one, every moment.”³

Thoreau was all too aware of the trick that a free capitalist society was playing on him and his fellow Americans; yes it may give them the freedom to move around and speak, but it also lulls them into group-think and complicity and this by scripting a narrative in which success is measured not by great ideas but by material acquisition, made possible through a credit system and a rule of law that before too long makes the individual forever at the mercy of others. A mind cannot think correctly, objectively, unless it is free of interest. Even the law must be questioned once in a while and never be taken at face value. “I think we should be men first and subjects afterwards,” Thoreau says. “It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think is right.” Otherwise “the mass of men [would] not serve the state [as men]... but as machines.”⁴

By god Thoreau was going to live by his own powers and not those of central administrations. All he needed was a modest abode and a way to grow his own garden. Food was his big challenge; if he could find the way to grow it, sufficient enough to feed himself he could relinquish attachment to society and chart his own independent life, define worth by those aspects *he* deems happy and important and not *others*. Even newspapers would outlive their purpose for him, now that he is away from the crowd and his social and political context retreated in scope. “Set aside for a moment his theory of legitimate government,” Wen Stephenson, the Thoreau scholar says. What drove Thoreau out to the woods was “quite simply, how to live authentically, as a human being,

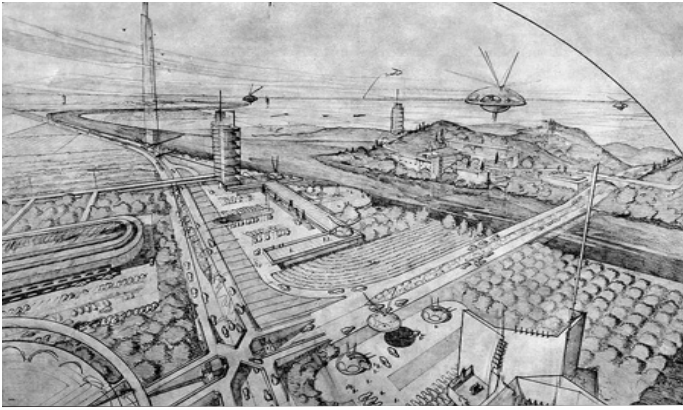


Figure 1: Ariel view of Wright's Broadacre city showing the extent to which the farm field takes over the texture and composition of the city.

in relationship both to nature and to other human beings—because the two, humanity and nature, human and wild, can't be separated.”⁵

BROADACRE CITY AND WRIGHT'S AGRARIAN CURE

Of those of his time he inspired, F.L.Wright was the only architect. Even Sullivan, while he talked a good transcendentalist talk, was in the end a European in allegiance who simply embossed a new American naturalism on the face of an old system. Wright, on the other hand, was from the start a man dubious about European principles which began and ended with a formal and unconditional allegiance to higher powers, be they king, queen or landlord. He would have none of that, not because he found the latter form of expression unattractive but because he felt people were too precious an entity to be discounted in favor of the few: no man should be denied the capacity to find his or her own voice, the opportunity to excel and be happy. Weren't these the values on which America had been found; to return to big monolithic palaces and domed buildings would be anathema to having traveled this far and sacrificed this much in the first place.

But the matter did not rest with a new style alone, by replacing the grand stone with brick, or the lofty roof with a more low-lying one. No the change had to come at a much more fundamental level, getting rid of the hierarchical, pompous and picturesque system on which the European past had been based and replacing it with a new one, indeed a Thoreauvian one, one in which the respect for hierarchy does not come through scale but through a respect for oneself first. Respecting the elder, the mayor and the teacher were all important but none would mean much without first having shored up one's internal self worth mechanism.

For that Wright started with the garden, in the same manner that Thoreau did. He would insist on it in his houses and in his other buildings but it was not until *Broadacre City* that he begins to think of it as a way of life, a wholesale revision of the way reality works, if by that we can mean a reciprocal relationship between Man and place. Here he would assign the household a one-acre parcel of land and devote a portion of it to building a house but the remainder to building a garden to sustain the family and maybe a little more to sell at

neighboring market shed. The city would go on to include small factories, civic amenities and an entertainment hub where presumably a local team can be seen playing some kind of a ball sport.

Interestingly and judging from the perspective drawings that Wright drew showcasing panoramic views of the city, there were hardly any sidewalks, but instead a curious situation where cultivated lands went all the way to the street. Indeed, *Broadacre* was designed to insist on a method of movement that was uniquely different from any other set by any former European formal standards.⁶ The grid, however much loved by Wright and on which *Broadacre* is based, would not dictate the movement of the American but simply serve as an organizational tool to lay out parcels of land and distribute functions. (Fig.1)

Even the vehicles Wright invented and which were to travel the grid of roads in the city would defy familiar urban mechanical conveyance; at once bicycle and flying saucer they could just as well fly and do loop-di-loops in the air as move in a linear manner and take where people wanted to go. More importantly walking was not to follow Baudelaire's *Flâneur*, whose pace and observational cadence was on measure with the rhythms of the urban scene unfolding before him, but assume an alternative ethic altogether, traversing the city not on paved surfaces but on productive fields, trudging presumably on growing plants, and not orthogonally but diagonally across town.

Whatever acreage previously taken up in places like New York to build skyscrapers and other monuments to finance and the state are here occupied by agriculture leaving space open and free for the eye to navigate largely unmitigated. Here food not only trumps formal expression of power but significantly keeps that expression forever at bay, forever out of reach. We all need to eat and by tying food to land use and real estate Wright constructs a self defensive argument that ensures the retention of agricultural land as agricultural land, for doing anything else would be tantamount, at least metaphorically, to denying one's own means to survival.

FARMING AND 20C POLITICAL RESISTANCE

Indeed, food for wright as for Thoreau was political, and so has it been since- in New York, Detroit, Seattle, Los Angeles and other cities and around the world. In Seattle alone it was the sympathizers of the local farm movement that initiated and led the fight to keep and resuscitate the pike place market in the 60s, now a major icon in the city.⁷ Having seen farms on the outskirts of the city lose the battle against creeping development, activists rose to resist plans by the city to let commensurate urban renewal schemes-pervasive across the country at the time-take over and replace it with a cleaned-up version of its past self. (Fig.2) For many the market represented at least the symbol of local culture as reinforced by food cultivated and harvested from nearby fields, very different from the by then emerging supermarkets that had come to signify homogeneity and indeed cultural sterility. Commenting on the plans for renewal, one woman said it was "horrible". Another remarked it would be "the slaughter of the pike place market" lamenting how different and unique the market is "from shopping in a supermarket of plastic bags and cardboard boxes." Jeffrey Sanders in his book on the history of the



Figure 2: Protesters marching to protect the Pike Place market from succumbing to the forces of urban renewal.

environmental movements in Seattle quotes one writer saying that the market provided Seattleites with the ability “to obtain food in fresh and unprocessed richness.”⁸

The success of the market would spawn similar movements around the city, saving precious property through urban farming, most famously starting with what has come to be known as the P-patch community gardens. The P in P-patch is a tribute to the retiring farmer, Rainie Picardo, who in the early 70s first donated a 3 acre parcel of land near the University of Washington to in effect preserve “prime agricultural soil for that purpose.”⁹ Since then the P-patch program has thrived and today oversees more than 80 urban gardens across the city, each serving as a magnet for community development, including employment, education and catering to nearby schools and restaurants. (Fig.3)

Elsewhere in the city around the same time, another group, led by an American Pilipino by the name of Bob Santos, would use urban farming as a way to build a coalition of people from Asian American background to protect his and their neighborhood and fight against forces of gentrification, including the building of a major concrete stadium in the area. As Sanders writes, “Santos and others saw their preservation and urban farming efforts not as an aid to gentrification but as active resistance to it, their principal goal being to prevent their neighborhood from succumbing to outside commercial influences...”¹⁰

FARMING AS THE ANSWER TO MILLENNIAL URBAN BLIGHT

Of all the cities that has used urban farming to turn matters around, there is no better story than Detroit. Having suffered the consequences of urban flight caused largely by the automation and globalization of the car industry, the city experienced gradual but certain decline in the last 60 years. In the 50s Detroit was home to some two million people but since then that number has shrunk to 800,000. With so many gone, including businesses which followed flight to the suburbs, tax revenues followed suit, ultimately reducing the city to a wasteland of neglected buildings and useless properties. Large swaths of vacant land strewn with debris became the resultant landscape, specifically “over 30,000 acres or 40 square miles,” as reported by Jennifer Cockrill-king in her book *Food and the City*.¹¹

But starting in 2008 things began to change when a self-made millionaire, well steeped in the art and mechanics of investment, decided to do something about the problem. His name is John Hantz and having grown tired of watching his city devolve year in and year out honed in on the idea of urban farming as a solution. The issue was not first and foremost a love for agriculture but as he says taking vacant land “out of circulation, in a good way,” namely restoring it back to productive use once again. If nothing else planting trees would be better than nothing, bringing visual attraction to an otherwise derelict and thus depressing part of the city. And sure thing, by 2014 that effort would be underway which according to a blog by Paul Barney in “The Fill” would start with “15,000 maple and oak saplings...planted on 20 acres...” and which five months later would be joined by “150 sugar maple trees” and “seven months after that, 5,000 tulip poplar trees.”¹²

Derelict land is doubly costly, first because it fends off investment and second costs the city some 10,000 dollars per lot a year just to maintain without anything to show for it in return. Repurposing it would put it back into positive circulation, including helping reduce unemployment and putting many marginalized individuals back to work, including ex-offenders who struggle to return to society, relieving unemployment, now hovering between 30 and 50%. The ripple effect would impact nearby schools, with the planted fields serving as laboratories, shedding light on lessons in biology, economics and urban planning. (Fig.4)

But the effort to replace derelict land in Detroit with farms was and still is more than a matter of economic value; rather it has to do with what food advocates call “food security,” the ability of the marginalized to find healthy food within a reasonable distance, two or three mile radius. When the city declined not all were able to flee, some stayed and because of either their age, employment status or physical capacity could not join the rest to the outlying suburbs. With the ensuing unemployment reaching as high as 50%, grocery stores gone, these people were in a real danger of being unable to continue on.

The subsequent move to take up urban farming was then a legitimate solution to save their plight, which besides growing food also included programs that offered lessons in understanding what nutrition means, what food to cook, how to get it and how to cook it. Jennifer Cockrill-king mentions Alethia Carr, a food justice advocate who with the help of local capitalists and activists made urban farming part of the mainstream strategic approach to correcting structural gaps in the social wellbeing of the city. She quotes her as saying that “our local health department has been concerned with poor access to food here in the city and what can be done. The planning commission in the city has had urban agriculture on their mind for the past eighteen months.” Cockrill-king goes on to say that as a result of both a grassroots push and encouragement from social and civic programs, “urban agriculture has taken off in Detroit.”¹³

Regaining strength through locally grown healthy produce soon turns into a strength of a different kind, political strength, recalling Thoreau’s thesis, empowering communities to first regain self worth and then a voice to resist that which towered over them. In fact, a good many of the urban farms in Detroit aren’t big and efficient enough yet to



Figure 3: Original site from which the Picardo P-Patch community garden program

completely replace large rural farms outside the city but they do remain critical as an expression of freedom and independence. “Some disenfranchised groups see community gardens as a path to political power” says Peter Lander, the author of *The Urban Food Revolution*. He goes on to quote a Wayne State professor of sociology arguing that

“in Detroit, a lot of gardeners do it for political reasons—it’s a slap on the face for agri-business, and a way to control their own food security. Growing food is a way for African Americans to engage in a struggle for freedom. Resistance usually acts against institutions. With gardening, we take the initiative into our own hands.”¹⁴

Decentralization lied at the heart of the solution, the ability to shift power from the corporation which, in this case, controls the flow of food, nutritious and otherwise, and into the hands of the locally organized groups. For as Naomi Klein says in her book *This Changes Everything*, “though often derided as the impractical fantasy of small is beautiful dreamers, decentralization delivers, and not on a small scale but on the largest scale of any model attempted thus far, and in highly developed postindustrial nations.”¹⁵ Robert Biel, in a paper on the role of urban food on future energy frames the subject through the lens of entropy, the balance between input energy and out performance and the degree to which our current food culture follows a sustainable loop between production and consumption, including the distance food is made to travel to get to those who need it.

For him as it is for the Wayne State professor the problem lies in reclaiming food sovereignty from the corporation and ensuring a society in which people consume right because they are in direct contact with the process that makes that consumption possible, indeed visible. This isn’t just about an adjunct effort to an ongoing status quo but an insurgent intervention that seeks to “break path dependencies,” whose whole purpose in life is to “[expand] business planning horizons.”¹⁶ Biel calls for a full fledged attack on capitalism, in effect subversively, by “unleashing societal free energies” overthrowing “class divisions and restructuring [associations] around commons and co-operatives.” Of these he takes great stock in harvesting, a simple act of picking food in one sense but in another “paradigmatic” in that it allows “humanity” to gather and see its own powers “ripening”, in effect establishing an alternative path, not of dependency but of co-operation.

OCCUPY WALL STREET AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT The will toward political action took on a new trajectory in 2010. This is when the occupy movement swept in and set up shop in Zuccoti Park in lower Manhattan. Inspired by the daringness of the Arab Spring, the movement started as a call to level the ground between the ungodly 1% rich and the remaining 99% who were either languishing in abject poverty or part of the vanishing middle class struggling to make ends meet. Since then it has splintered into different groups with varying agendas but which altogether can be lumped summed under the umbrella of economic and social justice.

This included the environment and a way of life that relied less on destructive source of energy and more on renewable forms of fuel such as those generated by wind, water and sun. As an article in *The Atlantic* would put it,

“Occupy...reshaped the US environmental movement, which had its rebirth in fall 2011 when 1200 people were arrested in Washington DC protesting the keystone XL pipeline. As people gravitated to Occupy encampments, teach-ins, and demonstrations across the country, that energy easily transferred into the fight against climate change.”¹⁷

Of which urban farming has been a major contributor, now helping communities reduce travel time between food source and food consumption and thus lowering the carbon footprint necessary to sustain a society. But also change the narrative of urban development, including the way we reintegrate derelict space laid to waste at least since the 50s when highways crisscrossed the country and cut up the landscape accordingly.

“At a dead end street in a blighted section of the city, crumbling roofs of old factories, smokestacks and the interstate 95 overpass loom overhead, casting long shadows on an October afternoon.” This is how one *New York Times* article on the subject starts, articulating in no uncertain terms the residue that has come down to us through 19th and 20th Cs urban expansions.¹⁸ This is hardly the space for a “garden spot,” the article goes on to say. And yet between all this mess a garden does indeed grow, that will eventually help local residents, where “seven out of ten are obese,” regain their health and get back on their feet. Much of social resuscitation happens not just through healthy food directly but in the communal work it takes to cultivate and harvest the food, stirring up important communal networks. This is where “sixty-three local families took part in New Haven farms free 20-week wellness programs, held three times a week from late may to mid-October.”

BECOMING PART OF THE ZONING NARRATIVE

Urban farming has indeed begun to sweep the country and is now considered important enough to be included in the regulatory and zoning codes of a city’s planning agenda. Embedded in Cleveland’s land use planning policy, for instance, there is now a section entirely devoted to urban agriculture. It starts by recognizing the ubiquity of the approach, saying that communities around the country are looking to promote healthier eating by encouraging urban agriculture, especially through backyard gardens, community gardens and urban farms. Few categories down and it goes on to make special room for a code devoted to an



Figure 4: As part of the Hantz Farm project, volunteers plant saplings in a once blighted part of Detroit.

urban garden district, stating that “an urban garden district is hereby established as part of a zoning code to ensure that urban garden areas are appropriately located and protected to meet needs for local food production, community health, community education, garden related job training, environmental enhancement, preservation of green space, and community enjoyment on sites for which urban gardens represent the best and highest use for the community.”¹⁹ Urban farming may not be solving every food crisis we have but it is helping mitigate close to three decades of global excesses; it has indeed changed the narrative.

ENDNOTES

- 1- Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and civil Disobedience*, New York: Harpers and Row, 1965, P34.
- 2- The need to live life and indeed understand by working and cultivating the very tools and conditions that will ultimately define your sustenance is a theme that runs through the literature of Emerson, Thoreau’s mentor and advocate, but especially his essay on “Man the Reformer,” in which he says at one point: But the doctrine of the farm is merely this; that every man ought to stand in primary relations with the work of the world; ought to do it himself...
- 3- *Walden and civil Disobedience*, P41.
- 4- *Ibid*, P253.
- 5- Wen Stephenson, “Civil Disobedience and Our Radical Moment,” <http://www.thoreausociety.org/news-article/wen-stephenson-civil-disobedience-and-our-radical-moment>
- 6- For a detailed historical analysis of Broadacre City See Neil Levine’s *The Urbanism of*

Frank Lloyd Wright, New York: Princeton University Press.

- 7- For a thorough account of the history of the movement that saved the Pike Place Market in Seattle, see Jeffery Sanders book entitled *Seattle and the Roots of Urban Sustainability*.
- 8- Jeffery Sanders, *Seattle and the Roots of Urban Sustainability*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010, P53.
- 9- *Ibid*, P151.
- 10- *Ibid*, P167.
- 11- Jennifer Cockrall-King, *Food and the City*, Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2012, P246.
- 12- Paul Barney, “Hantz Woodlands: Saving Detroit One Tree at a Time,” 12,2, 2015, <http://www.budgetdumpster.com/blog/community/detroit-mi/hantz-woodlands-project/>
- 13- *Food and the City*, P246.
- 14- Peter Lander, *The Urban Food Revolution*, Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2011, P187.
- 15- Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014, P132.
- 16- Robert Biel, “Visioning a Sustainable Energy Future: The Case of Urban Food Growing,” *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol.31, No.5, 2014.
- 17- Michael Levitin, “The Triumph of Occupy Wall Street,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 2015.
- 18- John Hanc, “What the Doctor Ordered: Urban farming,” *The New York Times*, November 6, 2014.
- 19- See “Urban Agriculture Policies: City of Cleveland, Ohio,” <http://www.sustainablecitiesinstitute.org/topics/food-systems/urban-agriculture/urban-agriculture-policies-city-of-cleveland-ohio>