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THE CITY AS AN “AGRICULTURAL POWERHOUSE”? PERSPECTIVES ON EXPANDING URBAN AGRICULTURE FROM DETROIT, MICHIGAN1

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Abstract: In recent years urban agriculture has received increasing support as a strategy for food security and urban sustainability. Scholars have explored motivations for and experiences of individual community gardens, but there is little understanding of how more extensive urban agriculture activities might be perceived among residents or might integrate with the cityscape. This research explores ways in which urban agriculture might be perceived in relation to the urban ecosystem and sociopolitical context through semi-structured interviews and focus groups in Detroit, Michigan. Results reveal widespread support for expanding urban agriculture and highlight the lines along which such expansion may be contested, including the extent to which it should occur, the purpose it would serve, and the people it would involve.

INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades urban agriculture (UA) activities have continued to grow in scope and extent across the United States. Urban farms and gardens now find support from a broadening group of stakeholders, including planners (Balmer et al., 2005; Kaethler, 2006; Mendes et al., 2008), architects (Park et al., 2005; Viljoen, 2005) and public health professionals (Armstrong, 2000; Brown and Jameton, 2000; Twiss et al., 2003). This widening circle of support for UA and the recent proliferation of local zoning and ordinance changes to legalize UA activities (Goldstein et al., 2011; Keen, 2011; Neuner et al., 2011) indicate an expansion in the overarching forms and purposes of UA in U.S. cities. While the community development discourse of the community garden movement, which saw a resurgence beginning in the 1970s as a means of combating urban blight and fostering stronger neighbor social ties (Hynes, 1996), remains prominent, the argument for UA as a broadly applicable strategy for food security and urban sustainability within municipalities

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(Mendes et al., 2008) is appearing more frequently along with a growing number of entrepreneurial urban farm ventures (Kaufman and Bailkey, 2000; McMillan, 2008). UA activists and practitioners often argue that cities should condone significant UA expansion. Yet while scholars have attributed numerous social and ecological benefits to individual garden spaces, there is little critical understanding of how widespread UA activities would relate to the broader cityscape or be perceived by urban residents.

The recent proliferation of debates around local zoning and ordinances related to UA (e.g., Crossfield, 2009; Elinson, 2010; Choo, 2011; McWilliams, 2011; Roman, 2011) reveal an underlying societal uncertainty regarding the appropriate role of UA spaces and activities in urban areas. Scholarly efforts are needed to understand the desirability of UA on a scale many practitioners advocate and its appropriate role within the city. First, for example, does UA have inherent and lasting value or is it merely instrumental, filling temporary market gaps as needed? Should UA be a means to establish alternative food distribution and procurement practices in the city or an infrequent and insignificant supplemental food source? And if preservation of an urban aesthetic should serve as an upper bound to the scale of UA, what and who should define where this line is drawn?

Answering these questions depends on more thoroughly understanding the distinct purposes and roles for UA, as perceived by both practitioners and non-engaged residents, than has been treated in the literature to date. As a way to narrow this gap in the literature and to inform the debate on how UA should be regulated, this research offers perspectives from residents of Detroit, Michigan on how and to what extent UA should integrate into the cityscape. Our research asks: what are the perspectives of practitioners, residents who are not engaged in UA, and stakeholders with a role in Detroit’s UA movement on: (1) the perceptions of what UA is and could be; (2) the various purposes of UA; (3) the expected participants in UA; and (4) the socio-cultural influences of UA? In light of the assumption in UA activist-practitioner literature that UA could be a significant supplier of a city’s food needs, special attention is paid throughout to research participant perspectives on the relationship between UA and how food is distributed and obtained in the city.

THE ROLE OF URBAN AGRICULTURE IN URBAN SPACE

UA can be defined simply as food production that occurs within city limits (FAO, 1996). Other definitions, however, recognize that the uniqueness of UA relates more to the degree it is embedded in an “urban economic and ecological system” (Mougeot, 2000, p. 1) than to its specific location:

UA is an industry located within (intraurban) or on the fringe (periurban) of a town, a city or a metropolis, which grows or raises, processes and distributes a diversity of food and non-food products, (re-)using largely human and material resources, products and services found in and around that urban area, and in turn supplying human and material resources products and services largely to that urban area (Mougeot, 2000, p. 10).

Much research on UA documents benefits and motivations community gardeners experience (Blair et al., 1991; Patel, 1994, 1996; Schmelzkopf, 1995; Hanna and Oh, 2000; Pothukuchi, 2004; Wakefield et al., 2007), including increased fruit and vegetable
consumption (Alaimo et al., 2008), enjoyment of nature (Kaplan, 1973), improved self-esteem (Walczek et al., 1996), and ability to maintain cultural identity and traditions (Graham and Connell, 2006). Other research looks at UA in terms of its role in neighborhood beautification and community empowerment (Warner, 1987; Hynes, 1996; Armstrong, 2000; Glover, 2003; Wakefield et al., 2007).

An increasing body of activist-practitioner literature (Sommers and Smit, 1994; Garnett, 1996, 1999; Rees, 1997; Brown and Carter, 2003), a small number of municipal initiatives (City of Vancouver, 2006; Capital Growth, 2008; President of the Philippines, 2009), and the work of a handful of scholars (Smit and Nasr, 1992; Howe and Wheeler, 1999; Viljoen, 2005; Mullinix et al., 2008) reveal, in their promotion of UA as a means of sustainable urbanization, the assumption that individual and neighborhood-level benefits of community gardens will simply replicate themselves as UA expands in scope and extent across a city.

Howe and Wheeler (1999, p. 15), for example, claim “urban food growing provides a powerful vehicle for helping to move towards more sustainable patterns of urban living.” Similarly, Smit and Nasr (1992, p. 152) conclude that UA “is the largest and most efficient tool available to transform urban wastes into food and jobs, with by-products of an improved living environment, better public health, energy savings, natural resources savings, land and water savings and urban management cost reductions.” These examples may indicate a shift away from the UA framework documented in previous research: a market economy discourse that relegates UA spaces and activities to the fringes of capitalist society and subordinates such practices in order to preserve an abstract notion of the “urban” (Schmelzkopf, 2002; Moore, 2006; McClintock, 2010).

Yet if, as activists call for, UA is to move beyond a niche role occupying interstitial spaces left behind by market forces (Schmelzkopf, 1995; de Zeeuw et al., 2000; McClintock, 2010), then we must ask how it will relate to the urban economic, ecological, and socio-cultural systems in which it is embedded. Understanding how UA can contribute to the social and spatial structure of cities requires a more complete exploration of citizen perspectives on this relationship than the literature has provided to date. Kurtz (2001) shows how garden spaces embody distinct meanings of both garden and community and Domene and Sauri (2007) reveal how different power structures formed around income and class lines influence what forms of UA do and do not become institutionally accepted. Yet no research we are aware of attempts to solicit citizen visions of the role UA should play in the production of urban space.

Scholarly efforts in this vein can contribute to the “right to the city” literature which aims to understand the ways in which local residents seek to reclaim control over urban socio-landscapes and determine the future of the city (Purcell, 2002; Harvey, 2003; Marcuse, 2009). If urban ecologies are produced through the influence of political and economic processes in ways that result in unequal distribution of costs and benefits among actors (Keil, 2003; Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003; Robbins, 2004), uncovering the potential breadth of such visions across demographic lines is critical. And if society determines both the generation of urban nature and who in society gets to benefit from such spaces (Ernstson, 2008), the first imperative is to understand competing visions for what spaces should be created and for whose benefit.
Detroit, the nation’s “laboratory for urban farming” (Whitford, 2010), presents an ideal research site for exploring perceptions of UA. The city has historically been a leader in UA, beginning in the late 19th century with the nation’s first officially recognized community garden initiative (Gopakumar and Hess, 2005). Today the city is once again leading the nation’s UA movement, with more than 200 community garden sites (Bear, 2008; The Greening of Detroit, 2010) and several multi-acre urban farms taking shape (Welch, 2010), including a proposal for “the world’s largest urban farm” (Hantz Farms Detroit, 2009).

In addition to the extensive UA practices occurring, Detroit continues to grapple with widespread urban decay that forces city officials and residents to think creatively about how to utilize city land and re-envision the city’s future. The decline of Detroit’s auto industry, the city’s 1967 race riots, and urban policy favoring sprawl have combined to create 50 years of population out-migration, leaving acres upon acres of abandoned land within the urban boundary. Estimates put the quantity of abandoned property in Detroit at one-third of the city’s 139 square miles, or approximately the footprint of San Francisco (Gopakumar and Hess, 2005; Gallagher, 2008). One study estimates more than 4,800 acres are owned by city, county, or state government (Colasanti and Hamm, 2010) and therefore conceivably relatively available for cultivation (see Figs. 1 and 2 for illustrations of the
extent of Detroit’s vacant land). Together these conditions present a unique opportunity to abstract beyond single small-scale garden spaces and envision the broader meaning and potential of UA spaces and activities.

The African-American community is an 82% majority in the city. Race relations are a constant and prominent thread in the fabric of city life and UA is no exception. Criticisms have been leveled at white-dominated UA organizations (e.g., Bienkowski, 2011) and reactions to the proposals of John Hantz (the white owner of an investment and financial services company) to create a multi-thousand acre urban farm in Detroit are often racially charged. At the same time, many UA practitioners participate in a group called “Undoing Racism in the Detroit Food System” to explicitly address such challenges. While race is not the primary analytical lens used in this research, there is no doubt that racial-ethnic dynamics shape the diversity of perspectives on UA in Detroit and other cities.
URBAN AGRICULTURE AND VACANT LAND IN U.S. CITIES

While Detroit has received significant press regarding its vacant land, other cities, particularly those that have suffered similar declines in the manufacturing sector, also have large quantities of vacant land. A national survey from 2000 (Bowman and Pagano, 2000) found that U.S. cities with populations greater than 100,000 have 12,309 acres of vacant land on average (including parcels with abandoned structures), or 18.1% of their total land area. The more modest median of 4,857 acres and the standard deviation of 21,057 indicate a subset of cities with particularly vast quantities of vacant land (Bowman and Pagano, 2000). Indeed, other cities with land and socioeconomic conditions similar to Detroit’s, such as Philadelphia, Milwaukee, and Cleveland have been able to utilize vacant land to cultivate food and reinvest in neighborhoods (McGuire, 2007; McMillan, 2008; Sterpka, 2009; Herzog, 2011). However, as a growing literature on green infrastructure (e.g., Viljoen, 2005; Schilling and Logan, 2008) in urban areas recognizes, urban agriculture is only one of many strategies for revitalizing vacated spaces through creation of “naturalized” places. Such places clearly have a role to play in Detroit and other cities. However, our current research does not attempt to uncover perspectives on other types of green infrastructure and how desires for other conceptions of urban nature may compete with UA.

METHODS

This research consisted of a series of semi-structured interviews (Rubin and Rubin, 2005) and focus groups (Krueger, 1994) with questions on urban agriculture practices, perceptions regarding scaling-up urban agriculture, and potential for utilizing vacant land. All data collections occurred in Detroit between June and December 2008. Because we were interested in the opportunities for UA on Detroit’s public land, considering the actors with a role in the use of vacant property helped us identify appropriate research participants. The main actors in the discussion of property reuse in Detroit are the city, county, and state governments, along with the land banks at each of these governmental levels; the Planning and Development Department; community development corporations; economic development agencies; developers; UA practitioners; and city residents. As an exploratory project, we sought out those aligned or exposed to the UA activities in Detroit, which included representatives of many of the aforementioned actor groups.

A purposive sampling strategy, in which information-rich cases are strategically sought based on their ability to provide in-depth understanding (Patton, 2002), was used to identify a total of 10 interviewees, who were either part of urban agriculture organizations or who were affiliated with urban agriculture in their professional work. This allowed us to gain insight both from those seeking to advance the movement in Detroit and those who are slightly removed but still generally familiar with these efforts. Five interviewees (three black, two white) were leaders of organizations engaged in urban agriculture. These UA practitioners represented organizations that collectively support over a thousand school, community, and family gardens, a farm that provides produce to a soup kitchen, and two farms (one of which includes animals) that sell produce on site and at a Detroit farmers’ market. An additional five interviewees (three white, two black) represented economic
A purposive maximum variation sampling strategy (Patton, 2002) was used to identify participants for five focus groups with a total of 72 people. Organizations through which focus group participants could be recruited were sought out on the basis of the ability to include both those active in urban farm and garden activities and those not actively gardening as well as the greatest extent of demographic diversity feasible. The focus groups were formed from: (1) an urban agriculture group focused on community development (mix of black and white attendees); (2) an urban agriculture group focused on empowerment of Detroit’s black community (black attendees); (3) a senior services center (mix of black and white attendees); (4) a neighborhood organization for Hmong immigrants (first and second generation Hmong immigrant attendees); and (5) a high school for girls who are pregnant or have young children (black attendees). Attempts to hold a focus group with the Latino residents of Detroit’s Mexican Town neighborhood were unsuccessful.

All data collections were audio-recorded and transcribed for later analysis. Initial transcripts were inductively coded for dominant themes relevant to the research questions by the primary author using ATLAS.ti 6.0. The coding scheme was successively adjusted with subsequent transcripts as necessary to reflect new themes (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). The coding scheme was applied to two transcripts by a secondary author who provided critiques on the clarity and reliability of the coding scheme as well as its appropriateness for the data, which were used to make further adjustments. Each data collection was analyzed, first by code and then by research question, as a way to build summary statements that accounted for dominant themes, that answered the research questions, and that maintained the context of the specific interview or focus group. The resulting summary statements were then compared across data collections for each research question, which provided the basis for the final analysis (Miles and Huberman, 1994) while maintaining fidelity to the verbatim transcripts.

RESULTS

The following sections present the general perception of UA in the city, its range of purposes, the expected level of interest in participation, and the associated socio-cultural influences revealed in the research. Throughout these sections, particular attention is paid to research participants’ notions of the relationship between UA and the agrifood system, meaning the people, processes, and places involved with moving food from seed to table (Colasanti et al., 2010) that serves Detroit residents. See Table 1 for a summary of focus group themes.

Perceptions of UA

Several individuals spoke of the vacant land as an asset and offered their vision for an agriculturally based city:

Developers and city administrators are unrepresented in this sample. These groups would certainly play a major role in and likely have strong opinions on how UA would shape the city. The absence of their perspective, therefore, should be borne in mind through the presentation of our results.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus group</th>
<th>Relationship to UA</th>
<th>Perceptions of UA</th>
<th>Purposes of UA</th>
<th>Participants in UA</th>
<th>Sociocultural influences of UA</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UA-affiliated, black empowerment focus group</td>
<td>All garden; many involved in garden outreach programs</td>
<td>Vacant land as opportunity for black community to reclaim ownership of food system</td>
<td>Source of better food; opportunity to resist perceived racism in retail venues; opportunity to create food system owned by black community</td>
<td>Believe that youth are especially important to reach; connection between black community and ag is both asset and barrier</td>
<td>Venue for instilling leadership capacity in youth; connection with food through garden can lead to shift in consciousness, reshaping of food system ultimately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UA-affiliated, community development focus group</td>
<td>All garden; several approach self-sufficiency during growing season</td>
<td>See vacant land as presenting a unique opportunity for Detroit to become a sustainable city</td>
<td>Connect with food source; foster diversity and community ties; move toward sustainable, local food system</td>
<td>Believe that youth are easier to reach; do not believe that everyone will garden or eat locally</td>
<td>Can influence food culture and eating patterns; can deepen connection to food system and understanding of full value of food</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniors focus group</td>
<td>Roughly half garden or have gardened but UA not a major food source</td>
<td>See vacant lots as projecting negative image, would prefer gardens; not interested in widespread UA</td>
<td>Means to obtain healthy food outside of distrusted retail channels; still prefer improved retail over UA</td>
<td>Some interest in UA as a hobby; more interest in improving food retail landscape</td>
<td>(Theme not present)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth focus group</td>
<td>All garden through school; few have home gardens; several thought school farm was absurd initially; majority had never before thought about food source</td>
<td>Some see farming as better suited to the country; others see vacant land as opportunity to provide for themselves</td>
<td>Source of better quality produce; financial savings; mitigates reliance on stores</td>
<td>Don’t believe that garden programs would work in traditional high schools</td>
<td>Increases willingness to try new foods; teaches responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hmong community focus group</td>
<td>Strong cultural ties to farming and many currently obtain a substantial portion of their food from UA</td>
<td>Feel agrarian heritage is not respected; would like to feel safer in gardens; would like large blocks of land</td>
<td>Maintain agrarian heritage; access trusted food; meet nutritional needs; enable seniors to stay active</td>
<td>Younger generation less inclined to garden, see UA as less necessary politically, economically than older generation</td>
<td>Feel that if UA was sanctioned by city, could gain respect for their agrarian culture from others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I’ve had this vision for 20 years—of turning Detroit into an agricultural powerhouse. Because, again, all these lots that … it’s like, if we use them for something, you could provide employment, you can take black folks back into the days when we were an agricultural people. Land is capital! And that land could be used to—I mean, Detroit could be known worldwide for being an inner-city that grows food in the community then —boom! Big Time.

—Participant in UA-affiliated, black empowerment focus group

Detroit could feed itself, Detroit could actually distinguish itself from any other metropolitan area in North America; it’s one of the truly unique things about Detroit, and I tell you they could do it in a way that would actually encourage development that might actually, at one point, come to reduce the amount of land that’s available for urban agriculture, but that’s about the only way we’d get to that point as far as I can tell.

—Professionally affiliated interviewee

On the other hand, many research participants recognized that many people in the city do not value UA:

I think there’s a lot of inertia that, you know, as we talk about land use planning and zoning and urban agriculture there’s still a hell of a lot of inertia to overcome from people who think that that’s sort of somehow beneath the city to be considering those kinds of things … There’s a higher, better use than growing chickens and sheep.

—UA practitioner interviewee

Even the research participants who articulated the most far-reaching vision for UA recognized that a city is fundamentally an urban environment where agriculture should play a more limited role than in a rural setting. Numerous participants were reluctant to embrace a predominantly agrarian landscape:

Well, you know what, I’m not against [UA organization], I’m just against the way they do it. They put down wildflowers as they call them, I call them weeds, everywhere, they want to put that everywhere, they want to just grow trees and I’m not against [UA organization], but this is an urban area city. I do not want to walk past a field of wildflowers. Because that’s just, you know …

—Participant in seniors focus group

I just think it’s better to go in the country, because you have more room. It just seems like the city is so high-polluted and, I just feel like it’s not a good place to grow food.

—Participant in youth focus group
I think you need to give the people a choice, to expect that the whole city becomes an agricultural area is asking too much, but I think set apart some areas, for those people who want to do that would be wonderful.

—Participant in UA-affiliated, community development focus group

These quotations evince both a desire to live in what would traditionally be considered an urban environment and the realization that not everyone will want to engage in UA activities.

One of the professionally affiliated interviewees likewise felt that as UA expands it will be important to minimize undue impact on neighborhood character and to also honor the desire of residents who want to live in an urban area:

A lot of times what happens, the people that support urban agriculture or are into it look at the people that don’t as “they just don’t get it.” We have to not have that attitude. We have to figure out a way to embrace those folks and help them to be comfortable with it, but also respect that there are people who just want the urban feel in an urban area.

One UA practitioner felt that a paradigm shift in terms of how society conceptualizes the city is necessary in order for more people to be open to the possibilities of UA. Another member of a UA-affiliated group thought that the image of UA, which for some “is a sign that the city of Detroit has died and it’s going back to its native landscape,” would impede the expansion of farms and gardens.

Several practitioners had visions of revamping food production in a way that tilts much more heavily toward the urban setting and goals of transitioning unutilized spaces, whether vacant parcels or rooftops, into productive areas. Other people, however, simply saw UA as a good way to make use of otherwise idle and unmaintained spaces, which projected a negative image of the community. Several of the professionally affiliated interviewees felt that UA was just the best way to productively use vacant land in what they saw as an interim period in the city’s growth, especially because it can be undertaken with minimal resources and because it does not limit future development. This idea of UA as a transitional activity was exemplified by one person who said “[urban agriculture] puts land and people into productive use, perhaps not as intensely as we would like from the city-building standpoint, but far more intensely than the market might otherwise be for a while.”

On the other hand, one person in the UA-affiliated, community development focus group commented “… they look at us as oddballs now, but twenty years from now we’re going to be the ones that teach others to survive,” demonstrating the belief UA will be increasingly necessary for household livelihoods in the future.

**Purposes of UA**

Focus group participants differed significantly in experiences and expectations of how UA contributes to their lives and their community. Within the Hmong community, group members desired to cultivate large blocks of land as a way to provide for themselves, to reclaim their agrarian heritage and to regain access to culturally appropriate foods in an affordable manner from a source they trust. Their goal is to have enough land for each
family to both provide for themselves and sell extra produce. This would also enable them to fulfill their desire for increased control over the source of their food, as indicated by this summary from the group translator:4 “And they, they don’t trust the food that they buy from the stores; that’s why they make [their own] here … ’cause that’s what they expect—what they eat, nothing wrong.”

Several in the group of seniors shared that more UA opportunities would be a good way to obtain food outside of the distrusted conventional market channels and also expressed a desire for healthier food access within walking distance.5 At the same time many in this group expressed a strong desire for mainstream, full-service grocers in Detroit, indicating that either efforts to improve the structure of the conventional food system should occur simultaneously with UA expansion or distribution points for UA would need to have an equivalent level of functionality. On the other hand, many in this group could recall the time period of Victory Gardens when relative self-sufficiency was much more common. And at least a couple individuals pondered whether gardening might run counter to corporate interests in the food system:

Well, do you think that that could be fitting into somebody’s conspiracy theory? They make you have to walk in that store and spend their money?

Yeah, ’cause you know back when my mother and them had a garden, greens, tomatoes, peppers, onions, strawberries and blackberries—you didn’t buy those things.

The youth represented a unique perspective among the focus group participants because they were gardening not by choice but because it was a required part of their high-school curriculum and their interest in engaging in UA beyond their current setting varied. The youth who were interested in using vacant land to garden felt that growing one’s own food made sense in terms of the higher quality of produce, economic savings, and reduced reliance on stores. Other youths, however, expressed reluctance to garden on vacant land due to concerns of soil toxicity. In response to one person who expressed doubt regarding growing food in cities, another said:

Um, I don’t agree with what you said. Because if there was no stores, how would ya’ll be eatin’? … I’m sayin’, if we had no stores, we’d have to grow food. We’d have to eat from the garden.

Yet another responded:

And I feel the food is more natural than the ones in the grocery store, with all pesticides and whatever all stuff in there. So it’s better to grow it.

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4This quotation comes from a member of the Hmong community who was serving as a translator for the other focus group participants.
5On the issue of access to outlets for healthy retail food in the inner city more generally, see Hillier et al (2011)—Ed.
The vision for the purpose of UA was, not surprisingly, much stronger and much more overtly political within the groups affiliated with UA organizations. The individuals from the community development–focused group articulated a vision of being able to reconnect with food sources through gardening, of fostering diversity by tapping into the agrarian roots of different ethnicities, of moving toward increasingly sustainable food systems, and of decentralizing food retail toward neighborhood produce markets in ways that enable those interested in growing or purchasing local food to do so. The black empowerment–focused group envisioned using the cultivatable spaces as an opportunity for the community to address its own problems and create its own solutions in the food system: “We can help solve this problem because we have access to grow … I don’t think it has to be a [national health food retailer], you know, a commercial line store as a solution.” This group emphasized the need to create a fundamentally different food system model that would be community-based, vertically integrated, and most importantly, owned by and created by the black community. They saw UA as the entry point into this vision.

Collectively, interview respondents envisioned UA as a means of developing a local agrifood system that is more responsive to community needs, reduces food insecurity, achieves greater urban sustainability, grants citizen ownership in the agrifood system, reduces vulnerability to crises, and reinvigorates education through outdoor classrooms that enable students to experience the joy of discovery. One UA practitioner noted that efforts to grow the UA movement in Detroit should parallel efforts to address pressing social issues such as joblessness, poverty, and the lack of educational opportunities. Another professionally affiliated interviewee felt it was precisely those issues that justify expanding UA in the city; as an enterprise that demands comparatively few resources and prior skill sets, it can effectively engage marginalized populations.

While the two UA-affiliated focus groups and many of the UA practitioner interviewees spoke of UA’s role in reshaping the local food system, many of the interviewees gave numerous caveats. Several professionally affiliated interviewees also emphasized that as UA expands it should integrate with, rather than hinder or supplant, more traditional urban development as well as be explicitly linked to economic development through connections with food processing, food retailing, workforce development, and on-farm employment opportunities. But, as the economic development professionals in particular recognized, such links necessitate determining appropriate distribution mechanisms and market outlets for UA, beyond simply addressing the cultivation component. One of the UA practitioners spoke of three broad categories of people: those who value buying local food and growing their own, those who prefer the convenience of mainstream retailers, and those who are just trying to get by. She argued that as UA becomes a larger part of the Detroit agrifood system, it will also be necessary to ensure there are systems in place to support people in all of these situations.

Participants in UA

When conceiving of scaling up urban food production in a city like Detroit, one of the fundamental considerations is who will be involved in urban farm and garden sites. While some research participants felt that the younger generation is the furthest removed from food cultivation, others shared their experiences with members of the older generation who have no desire to return to the hard agricultural work of their earlier years: “I was
trying to get my mother to help me in the garden, she’s like, ‘been there, done that, I’m not doing it anymore. The food market is right down the street.’” On the other hand, one of the UA practitioners spoke of the agrarian heritage of Detroiters as an asset for the city’s UA movement: “We have a culture, a farming culture in the city, much of the population that remained are from down South and the seniors in the city who are aging, but they’re here and they’re staying here, have a lot of history and skills in terms of food production.”

Despite disagreement over generational interest in UA, most participants across the focus groups agreed that the young people are the easiest to reach through gardening because they tend to be most open to new experiences. The focus group with the Hmong community was the exception to this; gardening was a common activity among the older individuals but many of the young people were becoming increasingly acculturated to American society and abandoning their agrarian heritage. The youth focus group participants also felt that the school gardening model they are exposed to would not necessarily work at other high schools because typical high school students have not taken on the same responsibility level that they have through pregnancy and motherhood.

Several interviewees also made clear that neither the capacity nor the desire to participate in food cultivation are absolute among Detroit residents. Even participating in UA by purchasing produce grown in the city may be limited according to several interviewees. For example, one of the professionally affiliated interviewees commented:

> Then on the other end, a person like me, I understand to buy from the local Detroit Eastern Market, you know the urban ag. people there; but a lot of people like me are at Plum Market or Salvagio’s [high-end grocers] or whatever in the ‘burbs and getting what they think is the higher end better quality product. I think for the customer base the concept of quality is going to be important. Locally grown tomatoes do not look like hot house tomatoes. And it freaks people out sometimes to know what that is, they’re like ‘what is that?’ What does that matter, it’s tasty!

Several focus group participants showed that the context of an urban environment can dissuade people from engaging in UA because it does not seem like a necessary activity in a commercially developed area. The participants in the youth focus group suggested that many people take food for granted and do not consider growing food in the city because it is not necessary for survival, for example:

> I think people, like, they come to the city so they can be more—I don’t know—like country people feel like they gotta do more stuff because they in the country, city people want people to, like, do stuff for them, they wanna be like taken care of. So basically you don’t have to grow nothing, because the city has everything.

Likewise, the younger generation in the Hmong community is much less inclined to grow their own food than the first-generation immigrants because they see it as less economically and politically necessary. Other interviewees also noted the dependence on corporations for food access, the prevalence of a “fast food culture” and the dominance of TV and media, which together build patterns of processed food consumption, create expectations of instant gratification, and discourage residents from realizing their own ability to access food through cultivation.
Sociocultural Influences of UA

As focus group participants revealed the benefits they experience through the activity of gardening or farming, we can begin to look at the sociocultural influences of UA. The groups connected to UA organizations discussed how being in a city, and particularly one underserved by the grocery sector, obscures the possibility of eating fresh, garden produce:

You can’t get no produce. And the children, it’s just, they don’t even know what produce is. I was picking a pea pod this morning and none of the children knew what a pea pod was. Never heard of it.

—Participant in UA-affiliated, community development focus group

The focus group participants active in UA organizations saw involving people in UA as a way to introduce new foods and new ways of eating that could shape the relationship to food and expressed a strong belief that youth gardening programs are among the more effective ways to influence food culture and eating patterns. One comment made during the youth focus group exemplified a general theme consistent with this idea:

My granddaddy, he bought it [farm produce] all the time, but I wasn’t as interested. Just like the regular tomatoes and stuff like that, I’d eat that, but he used to be there with like the curly kale, or all the, you know, and he’d be like, this is good for you. And I be like, no, I ain’t tryin’ it. But then I got here [the school at which she participates in gardening], and I was like, okay, I’ll have some of that … really, bring me some.

Similarly, many of the interviewees also noted that participation in UA can encourage consumption of unfamiliar fruits and vegetables and start to foster “a different connection to food.”

As several UA-affiliated focus group participants emphasized, gardens can be a venue for instilling leadership capacity and food system ownership:

It’s not just about food. It makes a difference as to how you educate those who are coming on, as to whether they want to learn, and once you open that up to those that are in the leadership, then those of us that are seniors can then pass that on to them. So that they can be prideful. I don’t want to overemphasize the pride thing, but it’s that kind of thing that makes a difference, and, then establishing the foods they eat, and how it affects their lives, and for them to become a better person. With a voice.

—Participant in UA-affiliated, black empowerment focus group

Several interviewees similarly saw the workforce development capacity of UA as one of its primary benefits, particularly because of its accessibility to marginalized groups. As one of the professionally affiliated interview participants put it:

It [food] provides so many simple starting points that it—if people in leadership positions are really serious about creating opportunity for everybody, agriculture
is one of the few sectors in society that really can be grabbed onto by anybody. Another, another sector that would be comparable would be music and the arts, okay. But, but food is really that type of very big canvas to paint on and there are lots and lots of opportunities.

One of the UA practitioners engaged with youth also spoke of how UA can provide opportunities to not only instill a work ethic and a sense of responsibility, but to also teach life lessons such as recovering from mistakes. According to interviewees, it can be a way for people, in the midst of a consumer culture, to understand that they have the power to produce something of value. Another focus group participant in a UA-affiliated group articulated the influence of UA on neighborhood relationships:

I think also that for residents currently living in the city, to participate in gardens with their neighborhoods is also, I think it improves the quality of life for those citizens already living in the city ‘cause there’s a platform for their community involvement and in terms of if other issues come around, that come out of knowing your neighbor and the safety in your neighborhood, and there’s these social networks that are especially important I think in neighborhoods like ours in Detroit, I think that in terms of people already living here it has that kind of, more resounding qualities, are a lot of what’s important.

—Participant in UA-affiliated, community development focus group

DISCUSSION

The wide range of perceptions of UA and perspectives on the purpose, participants, and sociocultural influences of UA seen in these results reveal at least three underlying debates that can be framed by three streams of literature. The first of these debates involves the role of UA in the urban imaginary—the “multiple and pluralistic perspectives that go to make up a city’s imaginative projections of its future” (Bloomfield, 2006, p. 49)—and the extent of adherence to what Moore (2006, p. 175) calls the urban normative, “a discourse that ruralizes subsistence garden landscapes, contrasting them to more recognizable “urban spaces.” At one end of a conceptual spectrum revealed in this research, UA is seen as progressive and is embraced to the point that it defines the city—“turning Detroit into an agricultural powerhouse.” On the other end, UA runs contrary to the essence of what a city should be and is seen as regressive—“a sign that the city of Detroit has died.” The majority of research participants appear to fall closer to the middle of this spectrum and express a fundamental desire to preserve a level of distinction between urban and rural settings within any efforts to scale up urban production. A related dichotomy regarding the permanency and economic significance of UA was revealed between those who see UA as a driving force behind the future of the city and an opportunity for a new primary industry and those who, as described by one interviewee, think “there’s a higher, better use than growing chickens and sheep” and UA is sanctioned only as an interim use.

Bloomfield (2006) argues for research to uncover the urban imaginary underlying civic policy. In the case of UA, in which new policy is in developmental stages in many cases, this research reveals a need to more explicitly identify the pluralism of urban imaginaries
in relation to UA in order to forge a more democratic approach to the governance of urban space. By showcasing the diversity of motivations for UA among Detroiter, this research bolsters Moore’s (2006) critique of discursive subordination of UA practices to a confined, and historically inaccurate, role of responding to political-economic crises. The resistance to UA as anything beyond a stopgap activity in weak real estate markets shown by Detroit city officials, which several research participants described, indicates a need to more completely chronicle the spectrum of current and past UA activities to better ground political responses in an historically accurate understanding of the relationship between food cultivation and urban spaces.

Moving from uncovering diverse urban imaginaries to revealing whose vision for the city dominates harkens to the “right to the city” literature, which has reacted to the disenfranchisement of urban residents, stemming from neoliberal globalization, in shaping the production of urban and suburban space (Peck, 2011). Research participants who advocate for UA as a means to reshape the trajectory of the city and the spaces of UA as opportunities to initiate and strengthen community organizing for broader social change are aligning themselves with Lefebvre’s idea that urban inhabitants have the right to occupy and produce urban space that meets their needs (Purcell, 2002). Conversely, those who see UA as appropriate only for the leftover spaces and its social benefits as a way to pacify urban ills in the context of a flagging economy are implicitly opposed to “restructure[ing] the power relations that underlie the production of urban space” called for by the right to the city movement (Purcell, 2002, p. 101).

The third stream of literature evidenced in our results is that of civic agriculture, described by Lyson (2004) as networks of producers and consumers who are bound together in place, whose activities are mediated by a commitment to economic, environmental, and social sustainability, and who are actively involved in understanding and co-creating a mutually supporting system. Earlier work has also found evidence of a connection between UA as alternative food production spaces for underserved communities and occasions for agricultural literacy (Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny, 2004). In this research, some Detroiter explicitly saw UA as an entry point to a reformed, community-based agrifood system. For others, including some of those actively participating in UA, however, some level of UA in the city was acceptable, but conventional food retail channels remained their priority and they saw UA playing little more than an ancillary role in food provision. Furthermore, as many focus group participants noted, expanding urban production to a level in which it contributed significantly to the city’s food supply would necessitate diet changes, food preparation and food sourcing changes.

Within the frame of civic agriculture, another dynamic that surfaced in the research was whether or not participants saw self-provision as superfluous given that “the food market is right down the street” or, in the eyes of the second generation Hmong community, growing food is no longer a matter of survival, as it may have been in Laos. On the other side of this dynamic are the research participants who see growing food as a way to reclaim their connection to the food system, to transcend their roles as passive consumers, and to inspire broader neighborhood-level organizing. In the latter sentiments, we see echoes of the multifaceted integration and engagement with the food system that characterize civic agriculture (DeLind, 2002; Wright and Middendorf, 2008; Colasanti et al., 2009). These echoes are not as evident in the perspectives of research participants more interested in prioritizing conventional food retail channels.
CONCLUSION

This research sought to uncover the heterogeneity of visions, goals, and desires for UA and to identify the major lines along which perspectives diverge. Clearly, the visions for urban agriculture held by Detroit residents are far from homogenous. While this research sought to maximize the variation in perspectives, the results demonstrate precisely how wide the range of perspectives is, on everything from personal interest in garden and farm activities, to how permanent cultivation sites should be, to the degree to which urban agriculture should affect the perceived essence of the urban environment. Even so, Detroiters expressed strong interest in expanding urban agriculture in their city. Yet the focus groups and interviews revealed a number of ways in which divergent visions and expectations for UA signal tensions surrounding the reasons for and the value of moving toward more numerous and more prominent UA spaces.

While some people envision an agrarian city, others want to safeguard an urban look and feel. And while some see UA as a strategy for new levels of urban sustainability, food security, and agrifood system ownership, others see a pragmatic opportunity in the face of a poor economy. Participants disagreed on generational interest levels in UA but agreed that not everyone would want to cultivate their own food. What was consistent was, first, the openness to expanding UA in Detroit in some way and, second, the recognition that UA needs to integrate not only with other food system sectors but the socio-economic dimensions of the city.

The following debates found in the research results reveal the specific ways in which scaling up UA practices may be socially divisive: (1) whether UA is seen as progressive or regressive in relation to how the city is defined; (2) whether UA is an opportunity for a new primary industry or merely an interim land use when economic opportunities are otherwise scarce; (3) whether UA is an opportunity to reclaim who has a “right to the city” or whether it must fit into otherwise unutilized spaces determined by market forces; (4) whether UA is a foundation for organizing for social change or whether it is a temporary band-aid for fundamentally unchanged structural inequities; (5) whether UA is a foundation for a “civic agriculture” or an ancillary piece of a conventional food system; and, finally, (6) whether self-provision through UA is extraneous or a way to reclaim individual means of production and a connection to food that is crucial for a just and resilient food system. The literature on urban imaginaries, the right to the city, and civic agriculture can help illuminate the conceptual roots of these debates and reveal implicit conflicts in order to enable better informed dialogue on the best way to integrate UA spaces and practices into the city.

As the activist-practitioner literature continues to advocate expansion of UA practices, as the scholarly literature continues to explore the dimensions of UA as a mass movement, and as municipalities endorse city-wide farms and gardens, awareness of the ways in which UA affects the everyday lives of urban dwellers, such as those revealed here, will be increasingly crucial. Clearly, the potential impacts of UA are not insignificant in the minds of residents and clearly the possibility of major changes to the urban landscape or the urban agrifood system will not be wholeheartedly welcomed by all communities. It will be important, therefore, to further understand the nuances of these perceptions and to work to include diverse perspectives in locales where efforts to expand UA are occurring.
By presenting the myriad citizen visions for urban agriculture that emerged in the research, we hope as academics to lay groundwork for further research on the possibilities for and perspectives on urban agriculture as a strategy for food security and urban sustainability. As advocates, we hope to inspire citizen inclusion in shaping the spaces and activities of urban agriculture as they unfold in new ways.

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