



## Demystifying urban agriculture in Detroit

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### Series: Shrinking Cities

*Urban agriculture projects in North American shrinking cities have been the subject of much media attention in recent years. Taking the example of Detroit as her starting point, Flaminia Paddeu asks what the real benefits of this practice are for the residents of cities in decline.*

The French documentary *Demain*<sup>1</sup>, showcasing a world tour of ecological alternatives and viewed by more than a million people to date, depicts the city of Detroit as a Mecca of urban-agriculture activism. It portrays urban agriculture as a radical proposal to relocate food systems and reclaim means of food production, in a city where the majority of the population lack access to healthy and affordable food. In the growing metropolises of wealthy countries, such as Berlin, Montreal, New York and Paris, urban agriculture is facing land shortages, threatened by large-scale urban development projects and property evictions; consequently, it is compelled to fight for its existence in public space, forced to squat urban interstices or occupy roofs, or is confined to pots and planters. But in the shrinking cities of the Rust Belt, where wastelands extend as far as the eye can see, a whole set of opportunities opens up for urban agriculture. In Detroit, vacant lots occupy a vast territory almost equivalent to the area of the city of Paris (40 sq. mi./104 km<sup>2</sup>), turning this shrinking city into a new frontier of urban agriculture.

Several Rust Belt city governments have recently promoted the greening of brownfields as a better way to shrink<sup>2</sup> (Schilling and Logan 2008). Based on a criticism of the urban growth dogma, many local authorities have adopted the principles of “smart shrinkage”, aimed at resizing the city (Béal, Fol and Rousseau 2016). According to this approach, urban planning is focused on decline rather than growth, concentrating on improving the quality of life of the residents of these partially deserted cities. In this unique urban context, the idea is that agriculture and degrowth will interact, with reciprocal benefits: on the one hand, the release of land paves the way to the extension of agriculture; on the other, urban agriculture helps to improve food security, as well as the economic, social, and environmental well-being of residents faced with the problems of decline. Yet, in the context of “austerity urbanism” (Peck 2012), in which cities and their residents bear the costs, risks, and sacrifices associated with austerity policies (cuts in federal endowments, reduction of state budgets, outsourcing of public services), urban agriculture is subject to substantial unequal land-related, racial, economic and social dynamics. While urban agriculture can be an opportunity to

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<sup>1</sup> Cyril Dion and Mélanie Laurent, *Demain* [“Tomorrow”], Move Movie Productions, France, 2015, 120 minutes.

<sup>2</sup> These strategies, experimented from the early 2000s in Detroit (Michigan), Cleveland (Ohio), Youngstown (Ohio), Flint (Michigan), St. Louis (Missouri), Buffalo (New York), Rochester (New York) and Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania), are based on three complementary key elements: the demolition of abandoned properties; land management through tools such as land banks; and the creation of new land uses such as urban agriculture (see Béal, Fol and Rousseau 2016).

participate in the transformation of how we inhabit, plan, and feed cities, it is not necessarily a beneficial or redeeming practice.

### **Urban agriculture in a shrinking city**

Detroit's population has declined from 1.8 million in 1960 to just 677,000 in 2016. The city faces significant social problems: the unemployment rate stands at 27.5%, and 38.1% of the population was living below the poverty line in 2012. Major political problems exacerbate this situation: tax delinquency and real-estate abandonment, municipal debt and budget cuts; meanwhile, urban services are shrinking. In 2013, in the event of a homicide, Detroit police took an average of 58 minutes to intervene, compared with 11 minutes in the rest of the United States. Some 40% of the city's public lighting was dysfunctional, leaving some neighborhoods in the dark. In 2013, Detroit experienced the largest municipal bankruptcy in the country's history, with a total debt close to \$19 billion.

In shrinking cities, urban decline, and particularly the proliferation of vacant spaces, has been analyzed in the literature as a scourge. It is portrayed as participating in the vicious circle of population loss, contributing to real-estate and property devaluation and speculation, and attracting undesirable, illegal, or criminal activities (Dewar, Seymour and Drută 2015). Yet, for some of the literature focusing on the ecological transition of cities (Mogk, Kwiatkowski and Weindorf 2008; Millington 2013), wastelands could allow the reintroduction of practices that have gradually disappeared from cities: cultivating vacant lots, reforesting wasteland, and establishing greenways, for instance.

Detroit now has 105,000 unoccupied parcels, which are home to an unusual biodiversity, including pioneer vegetation such as the "ghetto palm" (*Ailanthus altissima*), along with raccoons, foxes and pheasants. Once put to agricultural use through farming, these wastelands can create opportunities for social movements fighting for food justice, which aim to transform the food system by pushing for greater control of production and consumption by those who are socially marginalized. For example, between 350 and 1,600 community gardens (Figure 1) and urban farms (Figure 2) have been inventoried in Detroit, mostly managed by groups or organizations that have informally reclaimed vacant spaces (Paddeu 2015).

**Figure 1. Georgia Street Community Collective Garden, Detroit**



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**Figure 2. Greenhouse at Earthworks, an association-based urban farm in Detroit**



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These farming practices were included in the city's 2012 strategic plan, *Detroit Future City*, which promotes green and blue infrastructure, and supported by the 2012 legalization of urban agriculture. And this recent enthusiasm for urban agriculture in urban planning is not restricted to the city of Detroit: in Baltimore, food production has been integrated into the municipal sustainable-development plan; and in Cleveland, municipal ordinances have authorized the breeding of bees, chickens, ducks and rabbits.

### **A windfall for environmental, social and urban alternatives?**

Indeed, urban agriculture has emerged as one means to solve and mitigate a series of issues related to structural urban decline. Far from being limited to its nutritional purpose, it has found a role as a multifunctional practice that has impacts on education, economic development, social interactions, urban planning, and the health of inhabitants and ecosystems (Morgan 2015). In this way, it is likely to help combat “food deserts” (Gallagher 2007)—low-income areas devoid of food retail businesses where obesity rates are critically high. The creation of local food-supply chains, managed by the community, would not only provide employment opportunities, but also allow the emergence of more inclusive, ecological, and food-sensitive systems for minority ethnic groups (Pothukuchi 2015). Food-justice movements use urban agriculture as a strategy for championing the rights of the African-American community (White 2011). Urban agriculture would also provide employment opportunities in production, distribution and marketing.

In cities where small homeowners face problems of residential captivity, as their homes no longer have any value on the real-estate market, urban agriculture could help to give new value to land. In Philadelphia, for instance, the greening of vacant spaces has ostensibly increased the value of adjacent properties by up to 30% (Wachter 2005). Land occupation by urban agriculture could also slow down population decline in areas where departures are triggered by uses of wasteland that are considered harmful or undesirable (fly-dumping, drug dealing, scrap collecting, etc.).

Furthermore, it could be a way to combat the decline of solidarity (Figure 3) caused by the breakdown of professional and neighborhood social networks. Some authors have also argued that the greening of vacant lands could have an impact on inhabitants' sense of security. In Philadelphia, where brownfields have been sown, gun attacks and vandalism appear to have declined, while residents reported taking more outdoor exercise (Branas *et al.* 2011). Small-scale agroforestry and organic polyculture have also been promoted as a means of providing ecosystem services and beautifying dilapidated neighborhoods (Mogk, Kwiatkowski and Weindorf 2008). Urban agriculture could thus act as a remedy to heal the urban wounds opened by degrowth.

**Figure 3. Group debrief with volunteers at Earthworks**



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### **Hypothetical benefits, skeptical inhabitants**

In the academic literature and the media, urban agriculture is considered a universally beneficial practice, free of any downside. However, more and more researchers, often from the fields of radical and critical geography (Guthman 2008; Safransky 2014; Tornaghi 2014), have argued the opposite, recalling that the proclaimed benefits are more controversial than they seem at first glance, and are often insufficiently substantiated. Real economic benefits, the provision of ecosystem services, and job creation related to urban agriculture remain difficult to evaluate, and minimal to date. For example, there is little evidence of a direct link between vacant land occupation by urban agriculture and lower crime rates (Raleigh and Galster 2014).

In reality, the benefits are envisioned for people who actually have quite heterogeneous levels of commitment to, acceptance of, and interest in urban agriculture. Detroit residents consulted as part of the legalization process expressed widespread skepticism (Paddeu 2017), considering urban agriculture to be a source of uncertainty and nuisance (pesticides, GM crops, livestock, etc.). So, rather than being viewed as an attractive factor potentially able to revitalize emptied neighborhoods, urban agriculture could actually be seen as a negative factor that contributes to residents' departure for more "urban" neighborhoods. Another study conducted in a Detroit neighborhood shows that marginalized residents have limited faith in the power of urban agriculture to improve their daily lives or indeed to change the social dynamics of the neighborhood (Draus *et al.* 2014). In fact, there remains a substantial gap between the idealistic aspirations of activist residents, organized as a very dynamic but restricted network, and the commitment of the majority of residents.

## The resurgence of unfair dynamics

In shrinking cities, while urban agriculture is increasingly promoted, unfair dynamics of access to services and resources are exacerbated by planned shrinkage policies<sup>3</sup>. These cuts are part of “austerity urbanism” (Peck 2012), a neoliberal urban governance characterized by the growing dependence of local authorities on mostly private financial actors and their capital. In this context of entrepreneurial policies, land management is opaque and indebted municipalities are weakened in the face of often uncooperative state administrations and the growing private and philanthropic sector (Hackworth 2015).

In Detroit, the city’s shrinking strategy helps to buttress spatial and racial injustices, given the uneven *modus operandi* for determining which neighborhoods are to be safeguarded, transformed or demolished. Despite being promoted as a way of creating areas of urban density by sacrificing neighborhoods considered vulnerable, this strategy does not take into account the racial heterogeneity of neighborhoods, or the issue of the relocation of displaced individuals, either (Clement and Kanai 2015). Sara Safransky (2014) recalls that, in a city where 82.7% of the population is African-American, the greening policy of the *Detroit Future City* plan requires the displacement of part of the low-income African-American population, accompanied by a “neocolonial” narrative, glorifying a new residential and agricultural “frontier” for white gentrifiers.

Many issues concerning social inequalities and racial injustice currently stand as hot topics among the activist practitioners of urban agriculture. As Julie Guthman (2008) has shown in her study of the production and reproduction of “whiteness” in the alternative food movement, urban-agriculture activists in Detroit are very concerned about the growing influx of young, educated, affluent white stakeholders. With more resources than most small-scale and long-standing African-American or mixed organizations in Detroit, these new activists also benefit from economic support from various foundations. Above all, in a context of land grabbing and speculation, no measures whatsoever have been taken to promote access and tenure security for residents and urban-agriculture organizations. In 2012, for example, the municipality sold off 1,500 parcels of land, at a preferential rate, to an entrepreneurial consortium, Hantz, to be turned into a commercial farm. This deal triggered a major controversy, centered on the defense of a dense network of small-scale and collective polyculture farms against the messianic project of production-oriented urban megafarms.

## Demystifying urban agriculture

Shrinking cities offer tangible opportunities to make urban agriculture a tool for original and radical experiments. These aim to reconnect cities to agricultural production ecosystems and to build local food systems that integrate social justice and ecological relationships. But gaining a better understanding of these current transformations entails identifying the underlying processes that shape different models of urban agriculture, such as urban policy regimes and tensions between communities with contradictory commitments. Demystifying urban agriculture is one way of remaining sensitive to the issues it triggers and reveals, as well as the avenues it opens.

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<sup>3</sup> “Planned shrinkage” is a political measure first proposed in 1976, at the time of New York City’s bankruptcy, by Roger Starr, then director of the Department of Urban Planning. It is promoted as a way to solve financial distress through drastic cuts in welfare programs and municipal services.

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