

Lindsay K. Campbell, *City of Forests, City of Farms: Sustainability Planning for New York City's Nature*

Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017, 269 pages. For order info, click [here](#).

Overall

Campbell's book is a very readable, yet analytically rigorous comparative study of urban forestry and urban farming in New York City, particularly as these developed through PlaNYC, initiated in 2007 by the administration of mayor Michael Bloomberg. It is terrific resource for undergraduate and graduate teaching, as well as for urban planning. A model of engaged scholarship, rigorous and critical yet rooted in practice and within the range of realistic strategic choices that civic and institutional actors face.

Author

Lindsay Campbell is a research social scientist at the Urban Field Station, which is a partnership of the U.S. Forest Service and the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR). She is also coeditor of [*Restorative Commons: Creating Health and Well-being through Urban Landscapes*](#) (2011).

Research methods

These are available in [online appendices](#): interviews, field observation, participant observation, engaged research through government and civic groups, planning documents, network analysis, discourse analysis.

Broad perspective

The governance of “urban regimes” can benefit from deeper analysis of civil society groups (community organizations, nonprofits) and municipal bureaucracies. Incremental and progressive civic and policy changes can create the basis for more sustainable cities, despite some legitimate critiques from those who see need for grand-scale structural change. “Network governance” can be democratizing, yet there is still much room for improving forms of engagement and enriching urban ecosystem approaches.

Context

Campbell's study focuses on the period of 2007-2015, when the administration of Michael Bloomberg introduced PlaNYC as a broad sustainability strategy. She grounds this in an analysis of the crisis of urban governance in NYC going back to the 1970s, when the city faced severe economic, fiscal, housing, arson, and other crises, which in turn led to a crisis of open space management and the “production of nature.” Some areas of the city were particularly hard hit, such as the South Bronx, Bushwick, and the Lower East Side.

One response to this crisis was the proliferation of “civic environmental groups” with vigorous stewardship and environmental justice strategies and the emergence of increasing collaboration with public agencies, brokered often by citywide or borough-wide nonprofits.

Among the latter groups were: Green Guerrillas, Just Food, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Trust for Public Land, Bronx Land Trust, Park Slope Civic Council, Municipal Arts Society.

PlaNYC

This was a strategic plan to strengthen the economy, fight climate change, accommodate one million more residents, and make the city more livable. Some prominent environmental and environmental justice groups sat on the advisory board, but were not especially active in crafting the urban forestry goals. Six months of outreach and public forums did, however, generate broad democratic legitimacy, including for significant public expenditures. A regular four-year update of the sustainability plan became required by the city charter.

Urban forestry partnerships

DPR took the lead in crafting and winning support for the urban forestry initiative. It was a well-staffed agency with a long and distinguished history. It utilized the STRATUM model (produced from research of the U.S. Forest Service), which provided quantitative and monetized analysis of ecosystem services, to help convince the mayor and his staff that urban forestry was a sound investment. These were combined with quantifiable estimates of the value of tree planting to local real estate and commercial activity. Together these could be packaged in such a way to help attract and retain talent to live and work in the city.

Yet the strategy was also crafted with environmental justice goals to appeal to lower income and minority neighborhoods that were interested in mitigating urban heat island effects, improving air quality, creating more livable streets and commercial corridors, and more outdoor recreation and exercise opportunities. The Trees for Public Health program focused on such neighborhoods by planting whole blocks where incidences of childhood asthma and respiratory disease were highest.

As DPR was moving forward, the New York Restoration Partnership (NYRP, founded in 1995) announced that it wanted to plant one million trees in the city. Headed by Bette Midler, a famous actress and singer who may have gotten this idea from a similar campaign in Los Angeles, NYRP was able to develop a partnership with Bloomberg. The One Million Trees goal then (perhaps) “snuck through the editing process,” as one key planner suggested; it helped to sell the plan to the larger public and was released a day before the plan itself.

DPR and NYRP developed a productive division of labor through a Memorandum of Agreement (MOU): DPR directed work in public parks and right-of-ways, and NYRP engaged in further fundraising and negotiating for planting on private land, schoolyards, playgrounds, and other publicly accessible land, such as universities. Despite some challenges of mutual trust and relative capacity, the partnership generated significant mutual learning.

NYRP also negotiated with the New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA), which is a state public-benefit corporation, to plant trees on its 334 developments citywide, housing some half-million people. NYCHA encouraged the formation of Resident Green Committees as volunteer tenant groups that would engage in planting and stewardship after the trees were planted, in addition to energy conservation, recycling, and education. However, the environmental commissioner at NYCHA also argued for paid jobs for tenants doing such work.

DPR enlisted a volunteer coordinator through AmeriCorps, who later was hired in the department. *Sesame Street's* Big Bird helped plant the first tree.

PlaNYC referenced tree planting goals in several sections, since co-benefits included clean water, clean air, climate mitigation, and “reimagining the public realm,” so that all people in NYC would be within a ten-minute walk of a park.

Urban forestry movement

The Million Trees NYC campaign was also designed to build a “movement,” in its own framing of the project. It enlisted more than one hundred organizations on its advisory committee, many of them existing urban environmental and stewardship groups in the city. Not all groups welcomed the campaign, since it did not directly provide them funding, give them enough voice in overall direction, or because they had other priorities for sustainability. Some also saw the campaign as a form of public relations and greenwashing.

As the campaign reached its target and the new administration of Bill de Blasio came to office with other priorities, DPR shifted its civic emphasis to stewardship of the trees planted, and then expanded it to other street trees, natural forested areas, and wetlands. Successful completion of the Million Trees NYC was marked in November 2015.

Urban agriculture

The 1970s was a pivotal era for the development of community gardens in NYC, and they weathered a crisis under mayor Rudolf Giuliani in the late 1990s and early 2000s to auction off many of them for housing development. The Trust for Public Land (TPL) and NYRP helped purchase many of them as a defensive strategy.

While many community groups are active on urban gardens and “just food,” and while some operated under the umbrella of the Green Thumb program within DPR (receiving federal Community Development Block Grant funding), urban agriculture did not make it into the original PlaNYC. The local movement, with support from several political leaders, mobilized further in response, and planning for the revisions had considerably greater public outreach through community forums and online tools.

When urban agriculture did make it into the 2011 revisions (PlaNYC 2.0), however, there were no new capital investments, due to the city’s having entered a deep recession after the national housing and financial bust a few years earlier.

Among the three major clusters of advocates in the food arena, the “health people” (focused on nutrition and diet-related diseases) and the “hunger people” (focused on food security) were not nearly as enthusiastic about the promise of urban agriculture as were the “agriculture people” (focused on sustainable farming). The priorities of the hunger and health people were different, as were their estimation of the relative impact of various strategies.

Analytic challenge of the book

Why were urban forestry initiatives treated so differently in PlanNYC and hence why were they more successful than urban farming?

- **core explanations:** urban forestry in the One Million Trees campaign had several advantages:
 - *robust public-private partnership:* a savvy and administratively competent municipal agency (DPR) and a well-resourced nonprofit (NYRP), with prominent social, business, and philanthropic ties through actor Bette Midler and mayor Bloomberg, helped to build a broader movement. This enabled multi-stakeholder governance, innovative volunteer programming, and energetic public relations, but steered clear of other urban forestry models where civic groups exercised control over natural resource management decisions.

In comparison, no city agency comparable to the DPR existed to drive change for urban agriculture, and civic and movement groups had relatively loose coalitions.

- *metrics:* relatively simple *metrics* – number of trees planted and 10-minute walk to parks for all – could motivate volunteer planting and stewardships across the city and provide public accountability and political credit.

In comparison, city planners could assign no simple metrics for the impact of urban farming on people’s health and well-being, even in poorer neighborhoods. Other benefits, such as community engagement or environmental education, are harder to quantify. Relative employment opportunities are generally not credible in comparison to other job-generating strategies.

- *land:* was readily available in the sprawling park system and in public right-of-ways in front of homes and local businesses, where administrative mandates for planting could be enforced.

In comparison, land for urban agriculture is relatively scarce in such a built-out city, and opportunity costs are far more pronounced, since parcels of land could be credibly developed for commercial and residential uses, including for affordable housing, which could generate strong public support.

- *framing:* was consistent with a competitive city seeking to attract and retain skilled employees and enhance real estate values, while also able to target social

justice goals by giving priority to neighborhoods with less tree cover and greater vulnerability to health impacts of urban heat islands, poor air quality, and lack of appealing and affordable venues for exercise.

In comparison, framing for urban agriculture was more problematic, since the limited ability to produce food within city limits tended to displace credible discourse to regional, upstate-downstate solutions, or to other nutritional health and hunger strategies. In addition, food (in contrast to parks) was run largely by private sector actors and driven by the tastes and decisions among millions of food consumers.

- **Analytic perspectives:** in chapter 7, Campbell theorizes her study through three analytic lenses:

- *politics and governance:* these were fundamentally shaped by the mayor who set PlaNYC as an executive initiative, rather than one coming from the city council or civic groups. Nonetheless, greater participation in urban forestry emerged during implementation, and in urban farming during plan 2.0 revisions, despite lack of new financial resources at that stage. Hybrid governance was key to urban forestry (DPR and NYRP), as well as contracts with the private landscaping industry to supply the trees. But forestry lacked the “crisis” that urban agriculture had previously experienced under Giuliani, and has thus developed less as a social movement.
- *discourse:* urban forestry lent itself to a discourse of sound business investment in a competitive and entrepreneurial city, including measurable results such as real estate values, air quality, public health benefits, and stress reduction. “Counting practices,” such as periodic reports, a large red LED clock at city hall, and graphics of tree canopy levels by neighborhood further enabled implementation and legitimation. The metric of a ten-minute walk to a park for everyone enhanced the sense of distributional justice, even though procedural justice in terms of participation and devolution of power was limited. However, participation took the form of volunteer planting and ongoing stewardship. A Stewardship Corps, built around the major nonprofit nodes in each borough, provided training and various other mini-grant and organizational supports.

These types of metrics were generally lacking for urban agriculture, including numbers of people who might benefit. However, it did enjoy some advantages in terms of youth engagement.

- *spatiality and materiality:* city sustainability strategies must grapple with the fact that space is relatively limited by actual acres and competing uses. New York is not Detroit, with much vacant land due to deindustrialization, nor is it a city that can annex surrounding areas. Urban agriculture is disadvantaged by the need for more contiguous land area than urban forestry and by more dispersed ownership and a patchwork of land managers. However, rooftop farming has become more

popular because it adds area that is not competitive with other potential tax ratable land uses.

Opportunities and constraints on civic action and urban planning are determined also by various characteristics of trees as *actants*, eliciting direct tangible, physical, and emotional attachments, as well as ecological management strategies; and farms and gardens as *assemblages* of built environment, biotic actors, human labor, and institutions. “Land, water, and soil have voice in the policy arena” and through the various maps and tools and rationales we create.

Going forward:

- *green gentrification*: significant possibilities in a city like New York.
- *democratic dialogue and shared decision-making*: need to be more robust in considering potential co-benefits and tradeoffs of urban forestry of sustainability strategies
- *new governance forms in parks*: can help democratize the management of space
- *roof gardening, hydroponics, ties to regional farmers*: can strengthen urban agriculture
- *resilient city*: emerged as more important in the wake of Hurricane Sandy (2012), including in the successor report to PlaNYC; Jamaica Bay Restoration Corps as one form
- *Mayor Bill de Blasio*: as of the date of book going to press, the succeeding mayor continued some of these programs, but with greater emphasis on social justice

In conclusion

This is a very insightful book, a nice model of comparing sustainability strategies within a given city, especially the roles of city agencies and larger nonprofits.

Reviewed by Carmen Sirianni, editor-in-chief of **CivicGreen**

Last revised: 8/12/20