Christina D. Rosan and Hamil Pearsall, *Growing a Sustainable City? The Question of Urban Agriculture.*

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Overall

Growing a Sustainable City? engages with critical questions about the connections between urban agriculture in sustainable cities and explores the complexities of place making and decision making around urban land. Using the case of Philadelphia, the authors explore the historical linkages between the vacant lot cultivation of the late 1890s, the urban agriculture resurgence of the 1990s, and the way we understand urban agriculture today. A core tension that has existed during all of these iterations of urban agriculture is between the "use" and "exchange" value of these vacant lots. This is a complicated dynamic, because as urban farmers reclaim vacant lots and engage in place making, they simultaneously increase the exchange value of the land which can trigger a process of rapid development and garden eradication. While city officials balance support for urban agriculture with competing land uses, urban farmers want to make sure their gardens have a permanent place in the Philadelphia landscape.

Philadelphia provides an interesting case because both urban farmers and city officials have taken steps to institutionalize urban agriculture. This process has come with its own set of challenges that are exacerbated by complicated race and class dimensions of farming across the city. Rosan and Pearsall provide a critical perspective on the long-term possibilities of urban agriculture in sustainability planning. They raise important points about the racial and socioeconomic tensions that arose between the "new wave" of urban farmers and the community members who had been in these neighborhoods for generations. Finally- of great use to anyone considering the possibilities of urban agriculture in their own context- Rosan and Pearsall pull out a set of lessons from the Philadelphia case that can be applied to other post-industrial cities interested in connecting urban agriculture and urban sustainability.

Authors

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Research methods

To understand the relationship between urban agriculture and urban planning in Philadelphia, Rosan and Pearsall conducted archival research, media content analysis of newspapers and magazines, semi-structured interviews, and an analysis of current planning policies. Using the archival research and the media content analysis, the authors were able to provide historical accounts of urban agriculture. In addition, the authors conducted thirty-five semi-structured interviews with urban garden stakeholders and enthusiasts, which gave readers a sense of what urban agriculture was like in Philadelphia today. Both authors were also involved in the planning process around urban agriculture and served on the Food Policy Advisory Council (FPAC) Subcommittee on Vacant Land and the FPAC's Soil Safety Working Group.

Context

Philadelphia serves as an interesting and complex case to explore the relationship between urban agriculture and urban sustainability for many reasons. As a post-industrial city that lost a quarter of its population between 1950 and 2000, Philadelphia is a city in transition. Philadelphia also has an estimated 40,000 vacant lots available, meaning the scope, scale, and possibility of urban agriculture was quite large. This book explores the ways in which urban agriculture has become a component of the city's sustainability policy as it attempts to reinvent itself after decades of large-scale abandonment and vacancy.

In 2008, two-term mayor Michael Nutter promised to make Philadelphia "the Greenest City in America." Following this proclamation, the city released its first municipal sustainability plan called *Greenworks* in 2009. This plan signaled a serious commitment from the city to include urban agriculture in city policy-making and in many ways serves as an important and imperfect attempt at institutionalizing urban agriculture. Drawing some lessons from Detroit, politicians in Philadelphia made it clear that while urban agriculture would play a part in the city's resurgence, they would not give up a large number of vacant lots for permanent farms. In Philadelphia, urban agriculture was a small part of a larger, complex web of land usage and farming was often considered a temporary solution. To fully tease out the complexities of urban agriculture in Philadelphia, Rosan and Pearsall first unpack the histories of urban farming in the city and counter the commonly heard sentiment that growing in the city was something "brand new."

The History of Urban Agriculture

As a longstanding part of Philadelphia's social and physical landscape, urban agriculture is not new. While new growers have flocked to the city in recent years and city officials have taken steps to institutionalize urban agriculture, to ignore the history of gardening in the city is to draw an incomplete picture. In describing the role urban agriculture has played in the city for decades, the authors complicate the idea that the recent upsurge of urban farming in the last ten years represents something entirely new.

Vacant Lot Cultivation: 1890s-1930s

Born out of the economic depression of 1893-1894, the vacant lot cultivation movement was seen as a temporary solution for the unemployment numbers and economic hardships faced by many people in Philadelphia. In theory, unemployed people would grow their own food and become more self-reliant. The Philadelphia Vacant Lots Cultivation Association (PVLCA) launched in 1897. The PVLCA provided seeds, fertilizer, technical assistance and assigned one sixth of an acre of land to each household enrolled. The popularity of the PVLCA and the cultivation of vacant lots increased through the early 20th century. Around 1924, there were reports that developers were looking to snatch up cheap parcels of land. This had a direct impact on the gardens, which were seen as a short-term solution that came second to development. By 1928, the vacant lots cultivation program had ended in Philadelphia.

Community Gardening: 1970s-1980s

By the 1970s, another boom of urban agriculture had taken place in Philadelphia. Various organizations, institutions, and residents saw community gardens as a way to reclaim their communities and address food insecurity. Gardens were seen as a site to bring community members together and build community power. Non-profits such as the Neighborhood Gardens Association (NGA) and the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS) played important support roles in building community capacity.

To this day, Philadelphia Green – a program developed by PHS – supports urban agriculture across the city. Philadelphia Green was created to help support urban agriculture as a form of community development *and* to build bridges between different communities. While many gardens were created across the city during this time, the competition between urban agriculture as a space to build community and vacant lots as attractive to developers made it difficult for any gardens to maintain their presence long term.

The Agendas of Urban Agriculture at its Peak: 1990-2000s

Building off the work done in the 1970s and 1980s, urban agriculture reached another peak between the 1990s and the 2000s. People all across the city of Philadelphia had high hopes for the possibilities of urban agriculture.

- *Gardening as an approach to urban economic development:* Because of the drastic population lost between 1950 and 2000, there were a growing number of vacant lots by the 1990s. The city saw urban agriculture as a major opportunity to incentivize communities to reclaim and revitalize vacant lots, which would in turn catalyze large-scale capital improvement projects. Many community members disagreed with this strategy that prioritized development over the gardens.

- *Gardening as a social service for youth:* Advocates of youth gardening programs promoted urban agriculture as a way for youth to learn responsibility, life skills, and develop healthy eating habits, all while being outside in the dirt. Additionally, organizations like Teens 4 Good, the Walnut Hill Community Farm, and the Urban Tree Connection hired youth in the planting season to maintain the farm, harvest the produce, and sell produce at farmers markets. These programs claim to help youth learn business skills and develop financial literacy. This focus on economic opportunities and viable employment options reflects attempts to professionalize urban agriculture, but have been met with challenges.

- *Gardening as a part of Philadelphia's green identity:* From this perspective, urban agriculture can have a positive impact beyond the actual garden. The garden itself serves as a community anchor and a change agent. Groups like PHS, which provide garden training and tips for assembling a supportive community of growers, support this perspective.

While these various agendas have played an important role in the current understanding of urban agriculture in Philadelphia, the authors challenge the assumptions that urban agriculture is something new or that any of these perspectives are simple solutions. A core issue faced by all proponents of urban agriculture is the permanence of the projects. Are community gardens temporary solutions to greening vacant lots or permanent anchors in the local community? This question is at the center of the challenges faced by proponents of urban agriculture.

Permanent Fixture or Temporary Solution?

As seen in this historical overview, the debate around the permanence of community gardens has been an issue since the late 1800s. While community members see these projects as permanent, the city had often viewed them as temporary. In both the 1920s and the 2000s, community gardens were destroyed to make room for residential and commercial buildings. These conflicting perspectives around the purpose of urban agriculture prove to be challenging for advocates of community gardens.

Exchange value vs. use value

Drawing from Logan and Molotch, *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place* (1987), the authors explore the reasons urban agriculture can be difficult because in many ways it works against traditional urban financing and urban policymaking. From the traditional perspective of city leaders, maximizing the exchange value of a city's property is vital to the growth of a city and the quickest way to do that is to bring in more development. This emphasis on the exchange value can be at odds with urban agriculture because community gardens typically privilege the use value of the land.

Gardeners are not interested in raising the value of the land; they just want to use it. This tension is especially challenging because just as urban agriculture takes advantage of the use value of the land, it simultaneously increases the exchange value as it cleans up vacant

lots and "greens" the neighborhood. This means that the more successful a garden is, the riskier its long-term future can become, as developers move in and attempt to snatch up land. The city also stands to reap greater tax revenues from development, which can also fund other public goods and services.

The 2100 Fitzwater garden, which was demolished in 2002 by a developer, highlights the tension between the exchange value of the land and the use value of the garden. This privileging of exchange value over use value is something urban gardeners frequently run into. Unless institutional supports for urban agriculture are built into city policy and land management practices, this cycle of encouraging urban agriculture in times of economic downturn only to demolish them in times of growth will continue.

Institutionalizing Urban Agriculture

One core takeaway that the authors provide is that to secure the permanent status of community gardens, advocates must find ways to institutionalize urban agriculture in city policies. While urban agriculture has been a part of the city landscape for many decades, it was only very recently that the city began to integrate these projects into official city policy. In his attempt to make Philadelphia the "Greenest City in America," Mayor Nutter provided official recognition of the role that urban agriculture could play in supporting a sustainable city agenda. While urban politics, competing demands on city resources and land, and preexisting governance and decision-making arrangements make efforts to promote urban agriculture quite complicated, activists have worked to keep these projects on the policy agenda and, as a result, have made significant progress in tying sustainable city planning and growing together.

Greenworks

After the election of Mayor Michael Nutter in 2007, the creation of the Mayor's Office of Sustainability in 2009 served as a catalyst to launch citywide official support for greening initiatives and urban agriculture. In many ways, the 2009 *Greenworks* plan was seen as a win for activists interested in urban agriculture and food justice. The plan adopted the Philadelphia Food Charter, which pointed specifically to urban agriculture as a way to achieve the city's food access goals. *Greenworks* itself provided many specific sustainable targets that are directly related to urban agriculture. While this planning document played an important role in institutionalizing urban agriculture into the larger city planning process, growers still faced challenges around gaining and maintaining access to land for gardens.

Philly Landworks and the Land Bank

In response to the challenges around accessing vacant city owned land, a collection of city agencies worked together to develop Philly Landworks and the Land Bank. Philly Landworks serves as an online database of vacant land that streamlined the process of finding out who owns vacant land. While this online database has removed some of the red tape around finding vacant land, it has made the land more accessible to both urban

farmers and developers. An unintended consequence of this tool is that while it democratizes access to land ownership data, it does not address the financial leg-up that commercial and residential developers have over growers.

To address some of the shortcomings of Philly Landworks, state and city officials alongside activists set out to develop a Land Bank that would streamline access to and redevelopment of vacant land. This required policy changes at the state and local levels. In 2012, city councilors proposed a city ordinance to create a Land Bank Authority. The ordinance passed in 2013 and the Land Bank Authority was officially approved in 2015. The Land Bank streamlines the acquisition process by establishing one authority designed to have community representation and transparency around the city's vacant land disposition process. While the Land Bank was designed to make it easier for both developers and communities to access vacant land, urban farmers were encouraged by the 2017 Land Bank Strategic Plan and Performance Report, in which the Land Bank recommitted to including urban agriculture as a valued community land use that was eligible for below market prices. The 2017 report also stated that the Land Bank planned to offer five year leases to some approved community gardens.

While the authors point to some of the success the Land Bank has had, they do not ignore the challenges. It is possible that because garden demolition happens so quickly, the Land Bank maybe too late to protect many gardens and farms. Additionally, as urban agriculture is institutionalized, it is harder to fly under the radar, as many community members have been doing for generations. The challenge remains that while institutionalization is an important part of preserving these gardens long term, when these processes do not consider the voices and perspective of marginalized communities, their wants and needs around urban agriculture are subsumed by the typically young, white wave of "new growers".

"New Growers" and Soil Generation

While the institutionalization of urban agriculture is vitally important to these projects long-term success, it is important to consider whose voices get prioritized and heard during the process. As history shows us, urban agriculture is not something new. In fact, community gardens have been a part of the local landscape of Philadelphia for decades, if not centuries. When looking at urban agriculture as something that is brand new, as many of the "new growers" do, the perspectives and knowledge of longtime residents and community members can be marginalized and erased. This tension between "new growers" and community members around who gets to speak on behalf of gardeners is a complicated dynamic that plays out across lines of race and class. To consider the full implications of the "new wave" of urban agriculture, the authors tease out the complexities of young, white millennials coming to the city of Philadelphia with the intention to farm in the ways that they see fit.

In response to this wave of "new growers", a group of young farmers of color have created an organization called Soil Generation. Soil Generation has pushed back against white farmers who are outsiders in the community and have often ignored the needs, expertise, and desires of long term community members. Members of this group see urban agriculture as part of a larger,

ongoing, multi-generational struggle for racial and economic justice. These young farmers of color have been encouraging young white farmers and growers to explicitly address race and class in their work. Some of these white farmers have even joined Soil Generation, and now host meetings to specifically discuss race and class issues. In Philadelphia, these young farmers of color who started Soil Generation have raised important points around the disproportionate influence a group of young white farmers has on land use policy in communities that are not their own.

Lessons Learned for Other Cities

A key contribution of this book is that it provides a rich array of lessons for other post-industrial cities who are interested in bridging urban agriculture and sustainability. These lessons include:

1. Efforts to professionalize urban farming has had limited success and most urban farms rely on grants to succeed.

2. Urban farming and gardening activists have played a large role in ensuring that urban agriculture is a part of policy change. It is important to consider the representativeness of these activists and be sure to include marginalized perspectives in these discussions.

3. It is vital to contextualize urban agriculture within the city's history.

4. Process equity is important for maintaining an inclusive approach to urban agriculture. This includes creating policies that support the work of farmers and gardeners from diverse socio-economic and racial background.

In Conclusion

Growing A Sustainable City? raises important questions about the possibilities and challenges of urban agriculture. While they do not dismiss urban agriculture outright, the authors critically examine community gardens and farms in Philadelphia and ask challenging questions about the role growing can play in urban development. They argue that there needs to be a more realistic approach to urban agriculture that sees it not as the single fix all for all urban problems, but rather as a critical part of larger greening and sustainability initiatives. Rosan and Pearsall also draw the reader's attention to the important role institutionalization plays in the long-term success of urban agriculture, but also emphasize the need to include a diverse array of community voices in these institutionalization efforts. This book provides rich historical detail around the role of urban agriculture in the city of Philadelphia and is an important read for anyone interested in the possibilities of growing in their own city.

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