Urban Gleaning: Promoting Food Security Through Opportunistic Design Strategies

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Introduction

In an effort to improve food literacy, food security, and food access, concerned citizens have, over the course of the past several decades, developed new types of landscapes for urban gleaning. While these design interventions vary in scope and approach, they share a common fundamental desire: to invite others to join in a harvest picked from the city. This paper addresses the broad context of urban gleaning through the specific lens of two case studies in Northampton, MA, and suggests that these types of nontraditional agricultural sites have the potential to radically restructure cityscapes. Moreover, while urban gleaning efforts rarely engage the design and planning disciplines in a formal way, this paper argues that future urban agriculture efforts could benefit from a more integrated design approach. In so doing, new types of food provisioning systems, designed to fit into urban wastescapes, might offer even more productive returns for the community engagement, food culture, and food security of the future city.

Informal urbanism has gained important disciplinary ground in the past decade, emerging as a popular design method that encourages, among other things, engaged citizenship, visionary planning, utopian social processes and radical self-reliance (Douglas, 2011; Hou, 2010). Within this emergent disciplinary sphere, the design, planting and stewardship of informal gardens in the public realm can be understood as a sub-genre with unique applications for urban engagement. Unlike the highly specialized and formalized urban farming approaches of cities and towns, informal agriculture efforts on urban lands tend to be fueled by ground-up, opportunistic, and unsanctioned interventions (Reynolds, 2008). Because of these qualities, the design and organizational structure of these informal interventions remain relatively underexplored within the realm of planning and design disciplines, and inherently more difficult to locate, quantify and understand (Douglas, 2014).

The impulse to thread gleaning gardens into the fabric of the city is rooted in the desire to create opportunities to share food across an urban scale, drawing on volunteer efforts and incorporating leftover or unproductive landscapes (Finn, 2014; McLain et al., 2014). This type of farming can occur on both

public and private land, and regardless of ownership structure, informal growing efforts produce food that can be harvested by the broader public. In this context, design interventions that support urban gleaning could be viewed as an example of a grass-roots, community-centered sharing economy.

These efforts make the argument that informal design interventions for urban gleaning could effectively bolster community food security. In charting the brief history and structure of the urban foraging movement, however, the limited role of the design and planning disciplines is highlighted. Recognizing that the integration of design guidance might also lead to a more robust city-wide system for urban gleaning, this paper considers the implementation of a design and planning process that could facilitate shared agricultural goals.

Two contemporary case studies located in Northampton, MA help to anchor this discussion: *Help Yourself,* a guerilla gardening organization planting foodscapes on public land and *Abundance Farm,* a collaborative which plants crops on private land and donates the harvest to the public. These two distinct approaches explore the practice of producing gleaning gardens on urban land under different conditions and organizational structures. Finally, the paper situates this work within a broader global context, and advocates for the integration of design thinking into informal agricultural efforts.

Background

Productive planting schemes regularly find traction in urban areas; indeed, regardless of context, culture, or climate, agriculture has historically been shaped to fit into a diverse range of urban conditions (Clouse, 2014; Nordahl, 2009). From the kitchen gardens and Victory Gardens of the past, to the Edible Schoolyards and Edible Estates of today, agriculture continues to be layered over cities and towns in an endless variety of configurations (Haeg, 2008; Lawson, 2005; Taylor and Lovell, 2014). The integration of agriculture and urban planning, too, is often inextricably linked to the physical dimensions of urban form, as well as non-physical factors such as place names and conceptions of group identity. As an example, the legacy of Johnny Appleseed in North America supports the mythology of an edible frontier, an approach to the development of towns through methodical, anticipatory orchard planning (Pollan, 2001). Across all manner of public and private sites, farming has been used as a means of claiming space, expressing culture, and bolstering food security.

The town of Northampton, in Western Massachusetts, is a particularly rich site for the study of agriculture. Located in the fertile Connecticut River Valley and first settled in 1654, the town developed on an agricultural foundation that

persists to this day. Among other things, the town is known for its locavore culture, food literacy, and Five College academic collaborations that advance a progressive attitude toward food security. The town is also deeply commited to sustainability planning, with community groups such as the Transition Town network that consistently increase awareness around food system planning.

In the Pioneer Valley and beyond, food security initiatives carried out through the practices of informal urbanism are becoming more visible and widespread. Proponents of this movement draw upon theory addressing collective agency and the "right to the city" (Harvey, 2013). An accompanying diversity of design explorations in this arena incorporate guerilla greening, DIY urbanism, and radical notions of self-sufficiency within the city, often manifested through built experiments rather than publication (Finn 2014; Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006).

Goals and Objectives

Today, urban food activists such as those participating in *Help Yourself* and *Abundance Farm* are contributing to the body of design explorations that represent the physical investigation of food security through informal foraging networks. This paper uses case studies to highlight some of the new work occuring in the arena of gleaning gardens, and to make a connection between these efforts and the specific skills and processes offered by the disciplines of landscape architecture and urban design.

Methods

The two case studies from Northampton, MA were selected for their radical shift away from traditional planting typologies towards new models for urban self-provisioning. Unlike relatively well-known urban garden strategies such as community farms or food forests, public urban gleaning gardens remain a relatively underexplored territory. This research aggregates information from informal interviews, field visits and a literature review.

Gleaning Gardens

Abundance Farm is a one-acre food justice farm and outdoor classroom. The project forms an innovative collaboration between three neighboring institutions - Congregation B'nai Israel - a Jewish synagogue, which owns the land and provides staff, utilities, and programming; the Northampton Survival Center - a food pantry which receives the food and serves 4,500 people a year from eighteen communities; and Lander Grinspoon Academy - an elementary school which uses the farm as a classroom and provides farm labor.

In 2013, a volunteer leadership team drawn from the three institutions began working on a vision for expanding an existing garden to create a food justice farm and classroom. The team established new plantings the next year—fifty fruit trees, forty berry bushes, and a variety of new planting beds—with a gathering of over two hundred and fifty people. This initial event, and all subsequent events integrate land-based agricultural programming with the community's ritual life while simultaneously developing the community's agricultural skills. During its first two seasons, the farm hosted over two thousand people for classes, festivals, and work parties while donating over one thousand pounds of produce. (Figures 1 and 2)

The farm's design has sought to render Jewish concepts of social justice in spatial terms. For example, the biblical Jewish law of "Pe-ah" required farmers to leave the corners of their fields unharvested so that those who are hungry could pick with dignity. To operationalize this concept in the farm master plan, the design team located a pick-your-own orchard visibly and publicly along the site's sidewalk and street frontage. The orchard provides much needed perennial fruits, and berries while forming a welcoming space for visitors who may be intimidated by the deer fence needed to protect the crops.

Figures 1.and 2. Community members digging beds at the first site preparation workshop held at Abundance Farm. The orchard one year later— signage doubles as a kiosk for fresh-picked produce. Photo: Caryn Brause

Help Yourself is a non-profit organization established in 2013 by a group of social activists with a mission to transform underused land in the Pioneer Valley into productive agricultural use. Fueled by volunteers, the group provides edible perennials and trees in the public domain for anyone to harvest. While the group is based in Northampton, their range extends to nearby areas, depending on the needs of their garden partners. The group primarily plants native edibles on public lands, such as rail trails and parks, but will support private gardens where produce is made accessible to the public.

Although this group operates outside the legal boundaries of land ownership and permitting, it provides an instructive example for designers in its systematic approach to food provisioning. For instance, the group plants specific crops that it believes will provide high value for the climate and cultural context of New England, and has a list, a nursery, and specific planting instructions for each of these varietals. Before planting, *Help Yourself* asks partners to provide on-site volunteers to monitor and nurture the plants. Like *Abundance Farm*, the group improves food literacy and foregrounds a sharing economy, which it reinforces through visible signage.

Discussion: Why Urban Gleaning Needs Design

It could be argued that planners and designers are uniquely positioned to participate in the emergent movement of urban food provisioning. Their skills in interpreting land use, zoning, and local code requirements, coupled with their experience with planting design and visualization, could be particularly effective in the planning and execution of these novel agricultural spaces. Designers and planners working within established governance structures might also find ways to scale up growing efforts across cities or regions, as well as to fit a largely unsanctioned grassroots practice into established legal frameworks. Finally, in shepherding a process involving diverse stakeholder groups, design experts could also help to reduce the conflict and miscommunication that is so common in built work.

Although evidence of designers collaborating with activists to develop urban foraging systems appear to be rare, their input can be instrumental. For instance, the UK-based landscape architecture firm Roundfield used their expertise in food systems design thinking to call attention to urban food security in their recent proposal called "Street Foraging." (Figures 3 and 4) In this example, the firm's evocative renderings and written proposal helped to galvanize support for this work, which can now critically assist in funding and implementation. In the case of *Abundance Farm*, co-author Caryn Brause designed and fabricated a highly visual outreach component—a farmstand—to invite community members to share in the harvest. Without this design intervention, the project would lack a valuable piece of the project: signage and display.

While the integration of planners and designers into public gleaning efforts might streamline an otherwise informal work process, such involvement could also threaten the fundamental autonomous structure of this grassroots movement. The DIY culture that characterizes many urban gleaning efforts relies on certain levels of individual investment, spontaneity, and volunteerism.

The impulse to share food through a common urban agriculture system has roots in the social construct of gift-giving: a characteristic not easily transferred to civic programming.
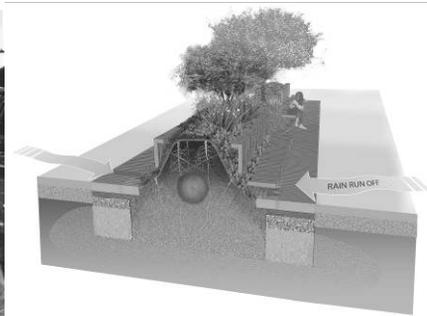
Figures 3 and 4. A rendering and section of a town common under agricultural production, as visualized by the designers from Roundfield. Photo: Tom Barnsley

However, by inviting designers and planners to help restructure urban gleaning efforts, food activists might also make their work more accesssible. Scott Burnham suggests, for instance, that the "new street-level language of design—non-commissioned, non-invited interventions in the urban landscape—transforms the fixed landscape of the city into a platform for a design dialogue" (Burnham, 2010: 137). Designers and planners have the opportunity to engage in the dialogue, and possibly, improve systemic design thinking.

Conclusion

Cities are in a continual state of becoming; landscapes, buildings and urban infrastructure undergo persistent, if imperceptible change. Perhaps one of the most visible manifestations of this constant unfolding can be seen in urban plant life, and in the seasonal and life cycle shifts that characterize urban greenery. As designers and planners look for new opportunities to build resilience and self-sufficiency into the city, this evolving living landscape offers both a site and a system for intervention. In addition to these extant greenways, other types of urban wastelands vastly increase the productive capacity of cities and towns. Urban gleaning organizations recognize the value of this leftover landscape, and effectively use it to satisfy goals for radically accessible food provisioning. Such an approach reinforces concepts of self-provisioning and self-sufficiency in the urban realm, bolstering community cohesion and resilience through informal means.

When facilitating a new urban planting plan, designers and planners often consider factors such as maintenance, cost, color, shape, growth rate, and local fit. Rarely, however, do the interests of food production and collective engagement factor into decision-making. This paper's two case studies chart an emergent path to producing new food sources in the urban world. Paired with the resources and expertise of the design and planning professions, these urban harvests could become much more robust, effective, and ubiquitous; and in the process, help communities become more food secure.

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