

DAGSpace articles are the opinions of their authors. While DAG hopes they will contribute to constructive public dialogue, the articles do not represent the opinion or position of the Design Advocacy Group.

DAGSpace: Urban Agriculture and Community Gardens: Design Challenges and Opportunities

October 2008

Michael Nairn and Domenic Vitiello

University of Pennsylvania and Philadelphia Orchard Project

Community gardens are “everyday” urbanism at its best. Established on vacant land in the wake of deindustrialization and white flight, African Americans from the South, Puerto Ricans, older Italian and more recent Asian immigrants have preserved agricultural traditions while remaking city neighborhoods in their own image. Architects and landscape architects have found little work in community gardens, as well as the emerging constellation of urban farms in Philadelphia.

Community gardens, by far the largest part of our urban agriculture sector, are perceived by policy makers and many urban residents as interim land uses. Our research this summer has found that of the over 500 community vegetable gardens supported by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society and Penn State Agricultural Extension in the mid-1990s, roughly 300 survive today as food producing gardens. These gardens come in varying shapes and sizes, from the typical gap tooth lot, to an entire city block where a large factory once stood, to acres of parkland. They range from one person colonizing a vacant site to large gardens with scores of gardeners. Many gardens in the latter category have been institutionalized through the efforts of support organizations. Some 30 gardens have been preserved as effectively permanent land uses through the Neighborhood Gardens Association Land Trust.

More traditional design opportunities exist at the larger, preserved sites, most of which are located in communities with the wealth and connections to preserve their gardens. These gardens are anchor institutions in their neighborhoods, and as such they must announce their permanence and status. As quasi-agricultural landscapes,

they have their busy season as well as their dormant one. In the summer, heirloom tomatoes and bushels of lancinate kale, arugula, and broccoli raab are tended and then harvested with loving care. In the winter, gardens look neglected and unattractive, much like other vacant lots in

the city. Architects can design structures like greenhouses that extend the growing season and grape or hardy kiwi arbors that do double duty as shade structures and support for food crops. Landscape architects can design orchards and other perennial plantings that produce fruit and flowers for at least three seasons. Artists can be of great help designing borders and landmarks that announce permanence, ownership, and citizenship, like the gorgeous custom fence at the Spring Gardens at 18th and Wallace Streets. This site is owned by the Redevelopment Authority, yet its gardeners, fence, and garden art suggest it will not be supplanted by condos any time soon.



Surrounding an entire city block, the custom-made fence at The Spring Gardens radiates permanence, ownership, and citizenship.

Gardeners in low-wealth communities rarely have the resources and political pull to preserve their gardens or hire design professionals. These gardens are more ephemeral and ad-hoc, and often more resistant to institutionalization. Yet many of these gardens have flourished for decades. In these gardens we found an abundance of collards, sweet potatoes, chilies, and okra. These gardens are more at-risk because of their ownership status. Many are owned by City agencies. They too are lovingly tended for food production, though often radiated a sense of transiency, as if they were waiting for some more permanent land use to happen along.

Consider for a moment Earl Johnson (a pseudonym), who gardens on an 800 square foot lot in Strawberry Mansion that is owned by the Department of Public Property. Earl is retired, grew up in rural Virginia, and has roots in the soil. He does not eat the food he grows, but gives it away to people who stop by because they are hungry and can't afford fresh produce from the local supermarket. Earl has gardened in the neighborhood for 20 years, though in three or four different places because city inspectors have a habit of discouraging such uses by bulldozing gardens in the dormant season. The first time we heard this type of story we nodded our heads in sympathy. By the fourth or fifth time, we were outraged. Earl, too, is a community



Earl Johnson's garden in Strawberry Mansion where he grows some of the best raspberries in Philadelphia and from where he gives away the food he grows to neighborhood residents.

institution, providing a valuable resource for the Strawberry Mansion neighborhood, and taking care of vacant land without outside support. There are hundreds of Earl Johnsons across North, West, and other sections of Philadelphia. They need help from planners in finding land on which to garden more permanently, where designers can begin making more significant contributions to food security.

Growing food for hungry people in low wealth communities is a viable, productive land use – one that we believe should be encouraged and enabled. The City has a role to play in giving people access to land. Designers can help make gardens both more productive and less vulnerable. This is why we help lead a young organization called the Philadelphia Orchard Project (www.phillyorchards.org). POP works with community-based organizations in low wealth neighborhoods to plant permaculture (permanent agriculture) orchards in community gardens, vacant lots, and schoolyards. Orchards complement vegetable gardening, and help establish food production as a lasting feature of healthier, more edible landscapes. This fall, we are planting at a park house next to Strawberry Mansion, our first experiment in encouraging more edible landscapes in Fairmount Park, much of which consists of historic farms that could once again feed much of our city.

As design professionals, however, we do not believe that all agriculture should be permanent. Designers should also be thinking about “impermaculture” that acknowledges that gardening and farming are at times ephemeral. City Farm in Chicago, for example, is designed as a mobile farm, whose fence, soils, and moveable buildings are transported and set up on a new site in about a week – on different sites waiting for multi-million dollar developments in and around the Loop. A year's lease protects the farm only for the growing season. Such strategies can render derelict land productive through annual agriculture, making significant contributions to local food economies while reducing urban ecological footprints and creating green-collar jobs accessible to low wealth Philadelphians. Imagine the large empty lots along the

DESIGN
ADVOCACY
GROUP
of Philadelphia

Delaware Riverfront, in Mantua or Brewerytown sprouting farms as they wait for future development. We invite our colleagues in the planning and design professions help us grow this place we like to call Farmadelphia.