

Detroit - Regrowth? A question of Justice in Urban Agriculture

1. Introduction

In recent years, urban agriculture (UA) has become increasingly popular among urban residents as a lifestyle and individual contribution to food systems (FS) change, whereas in certain urban areas, people *depend* on finding sustainable paths to escape the immediate danger of food insecurity, malnutrition and existential threat. Hence, residents work on establishing a healthy, sovereign community with UA (McClintock, 2014).

This is observable in Detroit, a city that rapidly grew until the 1950s and has since experienced a tremendous outflow of capital, becoming a “poster child of urban decay” (Davison, 2017). Today, Detroiters face scarcities in local fresh food retail and production. Detroit not only became known for its (sub)urbanization but also for its manifold stories of sustainable transitions through UA. Nevertheless, from a justice perspective, the inequalities along this transition within an urban space that has been shaped by systematic racism need further inquiry. Therefore, the paper’s research questions investigate 1) to what extent the contextual urbanism is affecting peoples’ food security unevenly, 2.1) how far UA can be seen as a broadly sustainable solution to transform Detroit’s food supply, 2.2) and for whom.

2. Theoretical Framework

Recent discourses reveal different disciplines’ narratives about the failure of *the* hegemonic ‘food system’ and consequential attempts to meet environmental protection, food security, health, or social justice (Béné et al., 2019). Hence, one of many discussed pathways towards a sustainable food system is UA, which will be the focus of the following.

There are several framings in regards to UA. Maassen (2017) describes how - in academia - it is seen as a small-scale approach to reclaim urban land for food production instead of surface ceiling and as an alternative to the dependence on extensive agricultural practices that lead to severe soil degradation in rural areas (Maassen, 2017). McClintock emphasizes that UA “at a household [...] level may serve as a subversive food production strategy, allowing people to operate outside of the market logic of the industrial agri-food system” (McClintock, 2014, p. 160) with multiple socio-economic and environmental benefits (Diekmann & Ostrom, 2020). Since, in the context of urban-rural food interrelations and their distinct functions, urban areas mainly act as receivers, UA also attempts to reintegrate food production into urban residents’ consumption to reinforce their connectivity to food, countering the metabolic rift (Repp et al.,

2012). Furthermore, the potential of UA for food justice in the sense of equal availability and accessibility of nutritious food (Mirzabaev et al., 2021) are at the core of FS approaches. Nevertheless, for the justice analysis in Detroit's UA, an FS discourse approach is not sufficiently integrating a perspective on urban areas as heterogeneous spaces. They may have continuously been shaped by uneven development (Smith, 2010) during their (sub)urbanization, as apparent in the case of Detroit (Peck & Whiteside, 2016). Not only do the capitalist cycles of booms and busts "enable and constrain urban agriculture's possibilities" (McClintock, 2014, p. 161), they generally affect urban citizens unequally along districts, where inequalities are manifested in patterns of investment and housing policies that determine which activities and urban functions are present in certain areas. (McClintock, 2014, p. 161). An important example for such processes is Redlining, a historical urban planning tool to segregate Black folk as they were excluded from the mortgage market and property ownership. These institutionalized discriminatory policies mapped urban neighbourhoods of lower value due to population characteristics and hence reduced their chances for investments (Xu, 2022).

A framework that is applicable to the variety of the above mentioned approaches to UA in tandem with an investigation of injustice is Urban Political Ecology (UPE). On one hand, it engages with a city's dependency on inward resource flows and understands urbanization itself as a process that pressures socio-ecological problems. On the other hand, it considers the inequities experienced in urban development and highlights the role of social agents in (re)producing unjust urban spaces in alliance with economic, political and cultural processes of discrimination (Heynen et al., 2006; Orum, 2005).

UPE seeks to understand urban societies' power structures and to identify who has access to benefits from the urban environment and who does not (BCNUEJ, n.d.). Its branch of 'abolitionist ecology' investigates the (re)production of inequitable urban environments from a postcolonial, antiracist standpoint and allows to elaborate on land use and value being affected by racialized urban spaces and economy (Heynen, 2016). This perspective opens up the perception of the effect and consequences of, for example, redlining, as already briefly mentioned above.

So seen, besides its potential to foster a sustainable and just urban FS, UA is understood to potentially also maintain existing inequity (Horst et al., 2017). Through this lens on justice in UA, the paper analyzes the effects of Detroit's past and present urban planning on Black peoples' access to food (production).

3. Methodology

To investigate the Detroiters' food security, the present UA practices and to be able to set those in relation to a justice perspective in terms of accessibility of nutritious food and the residents' opportunity to pursue UA in Detroit, public statistical and spatial data on the distribution of grocery stores (City of Detroit, 2015), the Redlining of districts (Nelson et al., n.d.), the City's future land use plan (City of Detroit, 2021) as well as data on food desert statistics (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2019) were retrieved. The data was then processed, visualized and interpreted in maps using QGIS. Furthermore, stories and interviews of local UA actors from the Black community as stated in newspapers and on their homepages were used to supplement and also qualitatively assess experienced struggles in Detroit's UA.

4. The case of Detroit

The following sections give a brief overview over the characteristics of Detroit's urbanism, which is necessary to - in a further step - contextually investigate the local food security and to introduce the link of the application of the above mentioned methods.

4.1.1 Urbanization

To stem the increasing demand in labor and space during its industrialization, the city of Detroit experienced rapid urban growth, both in its area and population, during the 'Great Migration'. This term refers to the movement of Black folk who were encouraged to find work in Detroit's rising automobile industry when restrictive immigration legislation and WWI were causing worker shortages in Detroit. Between 1900 and 1930, the number of Black inhabitants increased 30 times and "over 79% of Detroit's male, Black workers were employed in manufacturing and mechanical jobs" (Peterson, 1979, p. 177). In contrast to the expected socio-economic improvement, Black people experienced a racist job sector and were denied access to higher classifications, training and wages. Additionally, Redlining - as in many other US-american cities - has impeded Black people from equally accessible housing and livelihoods.

4.1.2. Shrinking

With the local decline of the automobile industry and a deindustrialization, a majority of wealthy, white citizens left the city. The number of residents decreased rapidly from 1.86 million (1950) to 639,111 residents (Ishag-Osman, 2021). In 2020, 77.1% of Detroit's residents were Black (United States Census Bureau, 2021). The municipality's bankruptcy in 2013 resulted in even more flight of people, businesses, a high vacancy and a poor tax base of

the municipality (Peck & Whiteside, 2016). In 2017, 29% of Detroit's area was vacant, a spatial extent as large as Boston, Manhattan and San Francisco together (Davison, 2017).

Between 2016 and 2020, the share of inhabitants living in poverty was 33.2%, being the highest of the U.S. (United States Census Bureau, 2021).

The socially uneven consequences of Detroit's decay in turn affect(ed) the urban services for fresh food (Davison, 2017). The following section hence discusses for whom healthy nutrition became financially and spatially less accessible and why Detroiters partially face the consequences of a food desert (Walker, 2011, 2016).

4.2. State of Detroit's Food System

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (2019) declared 25 neighbourhoods of Detroit to be urban food deserts.

Food deserts are defined by an area's inability to comprehensively provide opportunities to buy "healthy, affordable, and culturally sensitive food" (Bastian & Napieralski, 2016, p. 462) and its residents' lack of financial capacity to do so. From an urban planning perspective, a suggested distance of food stores to be within a walkable distance is a half-mile (Bastian and Napieralski, 2016). Figure 1 gives an overview over the accessibility of grocery stores in so defined dense residential areas according to the Current Master Plan for Future Land Use (City of Detroit, 2021) and highlights in red the zones of high density in which residents are situated outside of the radius of a walkable distance to grocery stores.

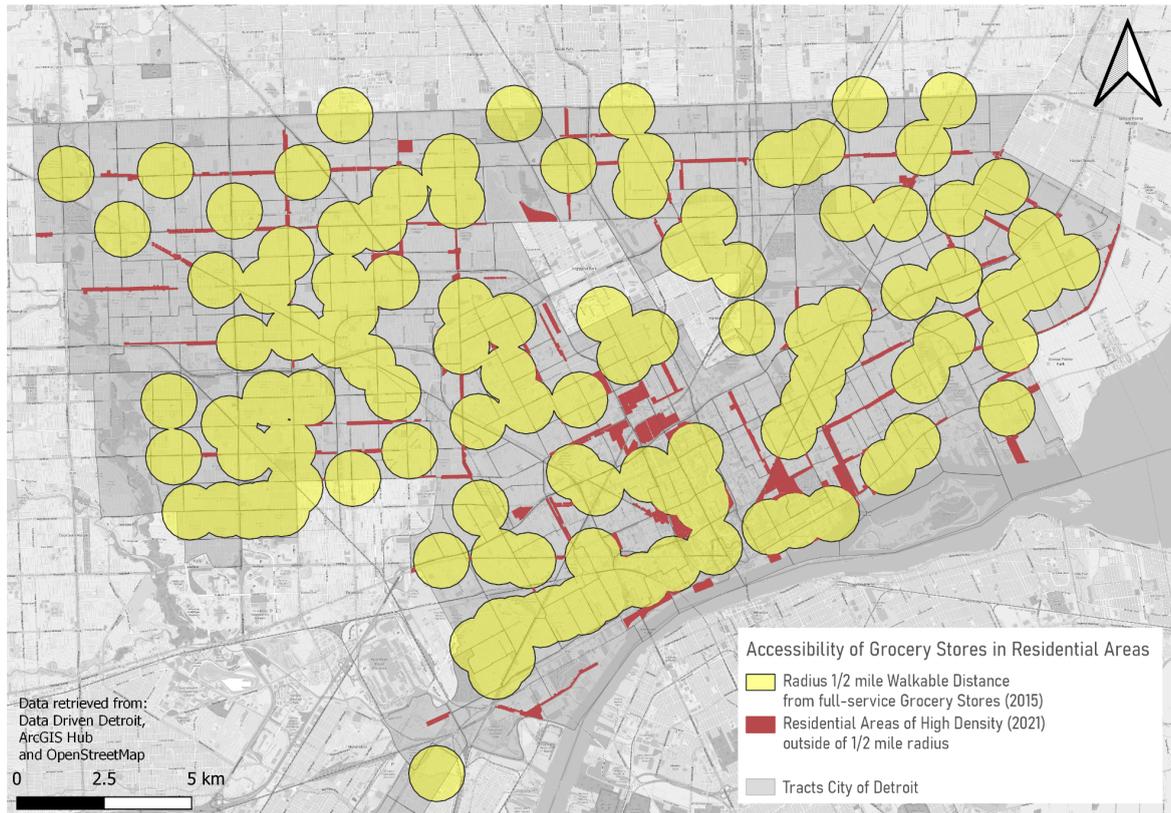


Figure 1 - Accessibility of Grocery Stores in Residential Areas

The consequences that people face if full-service grocery stores or alternatives to purchase nutritious food (such as UA, farmers’ markets etc.) are not easily accessible, are obesity and thus health risks (Shipp et al., 2020) that are associated with the “socioeconomic and food-related physical characteristics of the neighbourhood environment” (Wang et al., 2007, p. 491). In Detroit’s food deserts only 7.3% of residents consumed (Shipp et al., 2020, p. 328) the recommended amounts of fruits and vegetables. Additionally, food insecurity is experienced unequally since ethnic minorities and low-income populations are exposed more severely (Bastian & Napieralski, 2016; Weatherspoon et al., 2015). Figure 2 shows the different experiences of Black and white Detroiters in regards to food accessibility within the 25 ‘Food Desert’ Districts of Detroit and indicates socio-economic reasons for experienced food scarcity. The median share of white Detroiters who experience low accessibility of food was 5.93% in 2019 whereas 87.39% (median) of the Black people in Detroit experienced low access to food. Besides, food stamps were received by 44.9% Black compared to 24.6% white people in 2010. (PolicyLink et al., 2015; U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2019). Hence, Detroit’s mainly Black, poor communities are affected intersectional.

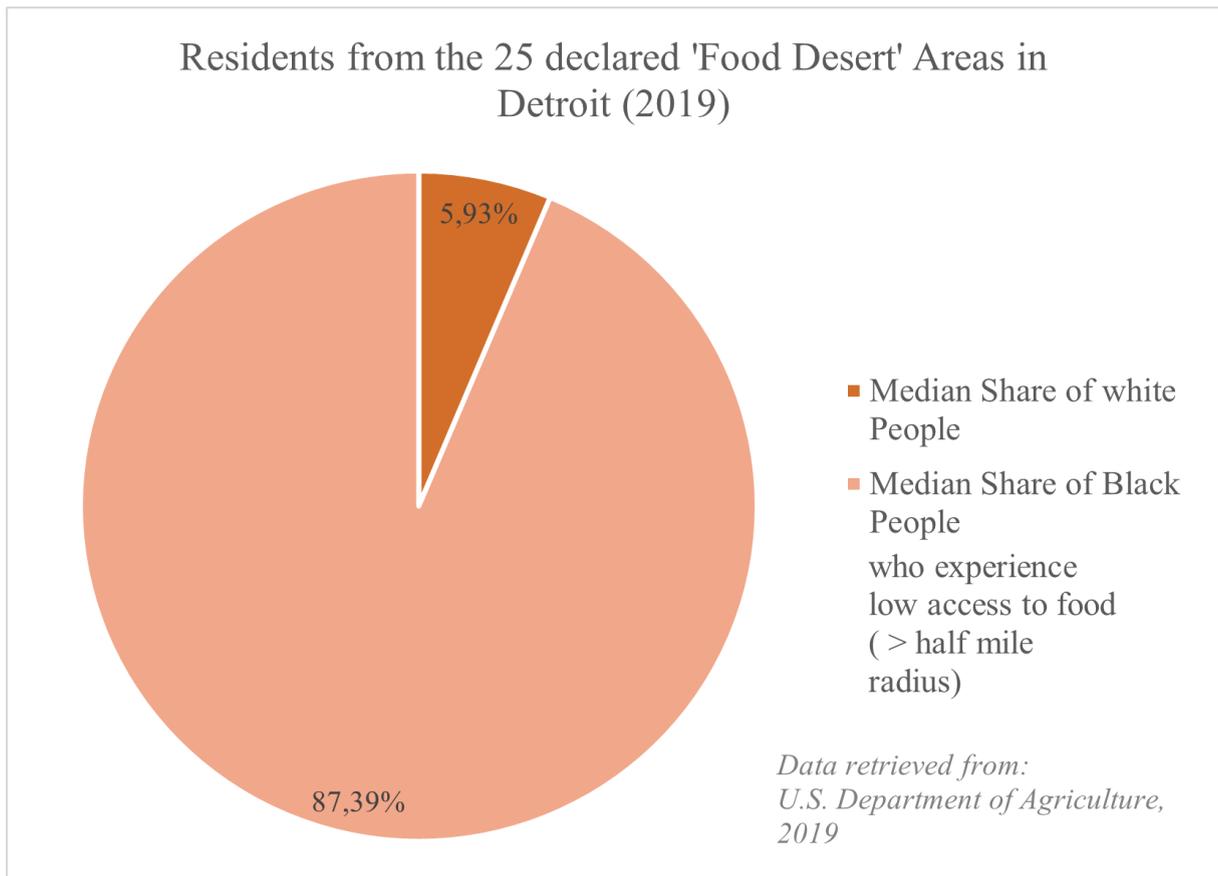


Figure 2 - Residents from the 25 declared 'Food Desert' Areas in Detroit

4.3. Urban Agriculture in Detroit

Whereas this demonstrates that a certain share of Detroiters does not have adequate access to fresh food retail, Detroit as a city owns relevant resources to expand UA, namely “open land, fertile soil, proximity to water, willing labour” (Davison, 2017). In this context, the spatiality of historical and contemporary urban planning must be brought into focus. Figure 3 shows the relationship between formerly redlined districts (1939) and vacant land defined as suitable for urban farming (not including urban gardening) in 2020. A visual evaluation shows that formerly disadvantaged districts (red and yellow outlines), which experienced lower investment throughout the 20th century, contain a high share of small to large parcels suitable for urban farms and also indicate a relatively high population density - among both, Black and white folk. Hence, land for potential urban farms lies in relative proximity to the majority of Detroit’s residents (Statistical Atlas, 2018). On the other hand, since publicly retrievable and processable spatial data on the distribution of Black and white folk on the level of Detroit’s districts was not available, this has to be mentioned as a partial limitation to answering the research question about the equity of accessible urban farm land among Black and white folk. The lack of data on the racial and ethnic divide of residents within the city of Detroit reveals the need for an improved transparency of the population census of the city.

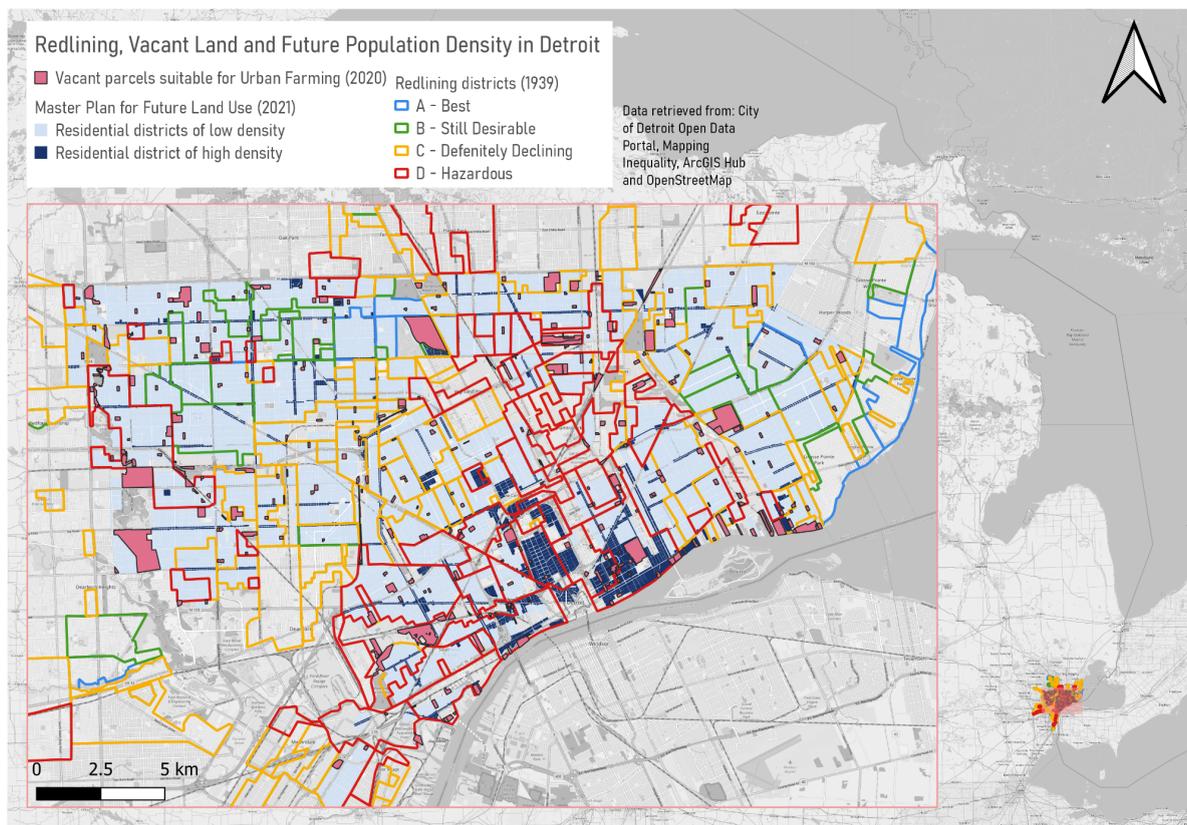


Figure 3 - The Spatial Relation of Redlining, Vacant Land and Future Population Density in Detroit

Nethertheless, and in the context of a general presence of vacant land that is suitable for urban farming (Figure 3), several UA projects arose as bottom up movements especially from the Black community in Detroit: in 2017, 1,500 urban gardens and more than 20 urban farms existed (Davison, 2017). These grassroots actors of UA envision places of social cohesion and community.

Selected examples are the Oakland Avenue Farms (OAF) (six acres), the D-Town Farm (seven acres; organic food) run by the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN), Keep Growing Detroit (KGD), and FoodLab.

In their mission, KGD aims to achieve a sovereign, sustainable food system within the city's limits. As an institution, they want to achieve that food production should be happening in every neighbourhood and that the sale of self-grown food at local retails is eased and direct (Keep Growing Detroit, n.d.). Therefore, KGD and OAF offer leadership training, gardening workshops, bureaucratic assistance and are active in "creating cultural gathering spaces and generating jobs [...] for a vibrant civic commons" and new, sustainable market practices (Oakland Avenue Urban Farm, n.d.). They recently transferred their farmland to the Land

Trust to contribute to permanent structures and act against gentrification and displacement. The DBCFSN understands itself as an advocate for sustainably grown food as a basic human right (DBCFSN, n.d.). Together, with OAF and KGD, in 2021 it helped 40 Black farmers to purchase land in Detroit (Oakland Avenue Urban Farm, n.d.). FoodLab finances a fellowship to support entrepreneurs in the food sector with expertise and collaborations (FoodLab, n.d.). However, in the course of the municipality's efforts to reframe the city's image, UA, although initiated as a "counter-movement to urbanized inequalities [...] has more recently been enrolled as a device by the local state through which sustainability planning is seen to enhance economic competitiveness" (Walker, 2011, p. ii).

This is why, at the intersection of urban planning, agriculture and food justice, it is critical to investigate if the systematically disadvantaged Black Detroiters benefit from UA (Horst et al., 2017; Paddeu, 2017).

4.4. Discussion of inequalities in Urban Agriculture

Economic racism affects the self-determination in Detroit's neighbourhoods; for instance, 42% Black folk in metro Detroit and 45% in the city are homeowners, compared to 78% and 53% among white residents (Nushrat, n.d.).

Whereas the legal access and permission to use land for UA has been eased by the Urban Agriculture Ordinance (2012), this did not improve the state of property ownership in Detroit (Paddeu, 2017). Many UA projects were initiated on vacant land that was not owned by the operators, where ownership was often not even traceable (Hand & Gregory, 2017). In the political context "of a disempowered city government largely indebted", where projects rely heavily on "entrepreneurial private-public partnerships and [...] urban pioneer gentrifiers" (Paddeu, 2017, p. 116), many community members cannot afford to purchase property they farm on. Rushdan, director of KGD states: "For several years I've found that it's just easier for white growers to purchase land. It's easier for them to navigate the system" (Houck, 2020).

An example for a large-scale, white entrepreneur and landowner - who contrasts with the majority of Detroit's community members - stands behind Hantz Woodlands. In 2013, the Detroit City Council approved its plan to buy 1,500 parcels for an urban forest (Neavling, 2021). A documentary film is devoted to this case of Hantz Woodlands' land grabbing in detail and emphasizes the need of small-scale, bottom up projects and landownership in Detroit for the local benefit (O'Grady, 2016). In the same course and with reference to quotes from their ethnographic fieldwork such as: "It's about having an ability to develop our own

plan”, Safransky (2017, p. 1092) argues that “land struggles in Detroit are more than distributional conflicts over resources. They are inextricable from debates over notions of race, property, and citizenship that undergird modern liberal democracies and ongoing struggles for decolonization”.

Additionally, a recent example of the intersectionality in Detroit is apparent in the Covid-19 pandemic and its deterioration of food access. As the ‘Local Difference’ (Michigan food consulting agency) cites, the co-owner of the Ambassador Fridge farm illustrated how the guarantee of fresh food gained even more relevance during the pandemic and that the fresh food accessibility and supply have been tightened in Detroit during the lockdown(s). As a solution, Detroit’s farms and food businesses offered an alternative to meet the need for local fresh food (Wojcik, 2021). For these reasons, policies must target and initiate a just food production as a human right and public good (McClintock, 2014).

Eventually, since UA is rooted in Detroit’s urban crisis of economic racism and decay, solutions need to tackle these structures for a just, sustainable food system. Such solutions are in progress. KGD guides individuals through the applications for parcels, the Detroit Black Farmer Land Fund aims for Black farmers to have access to just purchases (Houck, 2020) and attempts to improve participation are made by the Community Development Advocates of Detroit’s (CDAD) Strategic Framework. They aim for power-shift towards residents and designed a toolkit to enable residents to envision their future neighbourhoods (CDAD, 2017a, 2017b).

5. Conclusion

Urban Agriculture in Detroit - a city shaped by racist economic and urban structures - is thus both a witness to and reflection of racialization and structural discrimination in urban space, as well as a potential escape from established structures. The findings suggest that the lack of availability, accessibility and utility of fresh food and land for UA are experienced more severely by Black than by white folk in Detroit which is based on historical and present discrimination in the city’s urban development. Efforts to address inequities in access to UA have so far seemed less pronounced at the structural and institutional level than by the initiators of bottom-up solutions which target the improvement of funding and bureaucratic support within the Black community. The possibility of UA to overcome prevailing discrimination and inequalities therefore also depends on action at the level of administration and urban planning, as well as on the effectiveness and support of the aforementioned citizen initiatives. Finally, additional research is needed both 1) to answer the question of whether

UA can overcome the inequitable manifestations that are currently inherent to act as environmentally, economic and socially sustainable solution for all of Detroit's residents 2) and to initiate and test the effectiveness of policies and forms of integrative, participatory urban planning that can strengthen Urban Agriculture's social sustainability. This paper is also clearly limited in terms of qualitative insights into perceptions and experiential knowledge and gives little information about impressions, knowledge, concern, learning and needs of citizens and activists on the ground. This should also be emphasized in future studies.

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