

DETROIT: LIVING LOT CITY URBAN AGRIHOODS POLICY BRIEF

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Transitions to urban agrihoods: tackling food security, land vacancy and wellness education

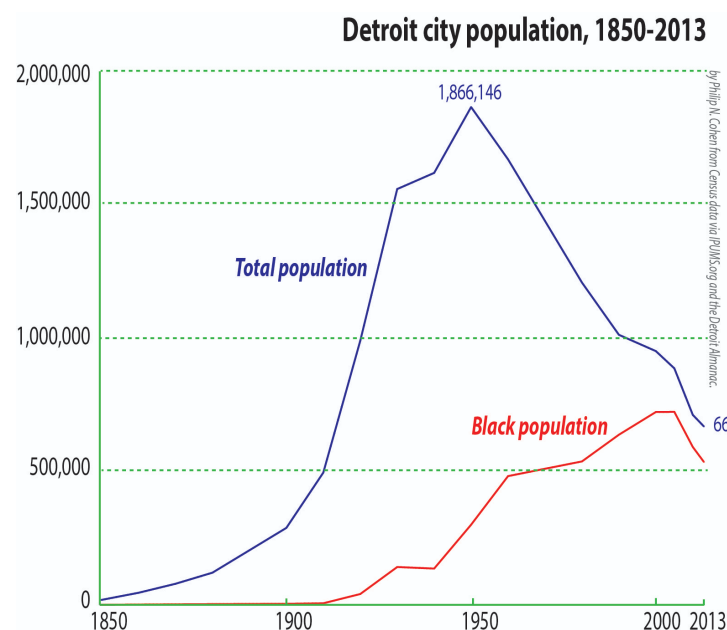


Policy Question

How can an urban city, whose population is majority low income create, sustain and build urban agrihoods; an alternative neighborhood growth model that positions agriculture as the centerpiece of a mixed-use urban development, with a vast amount of vacant land but limited funding resources at the city and state level?

Introduction

Detroit's population peaked in the 1950's at upwards of over 1.8 million people residing in the city. 1967 came, as it was the start of the Detroit Riots. Detroit's predominantly African-American neighborhood of Virginia Park was a simmering pot of racial tension. About 60,000 low-income residents were crammed into the neighborhood's 460 acres, living mostly in small, sub-divided apartments. The Detroit Police Department, which had only about 50 African American officers at the time, was viewed as a white occupying army. Accusations of racial profiling and police brutality were common among Detroit's black residents. The only other whites in Virginia Park commuted in from the suburbs to run the businesses on 12th Street, then commuted home to affluent neighborhoods outside Detroit.



“The entire city was in a state of economic despair: As the Motor City’s famed automobile industry shed jobs and moved out of the city center, freeways and suburban amenities beckoned middle-class residents away, which further gutted Detroit’s vitality and left behind vacant storefronts, widespread unemployment and impoverished despair”(1). Over the years Detroit has faced many other obstacles such as foreclosure, school closures, the 2013 20 billion dollar state of emergency bankruptcy which all led

to more poverty, more jobs lost, more crime, and more vacancies from home owners and business owners. Detroiters’ median household income was \$28,099 in 2016, 40% poverty rate (US Census).

Figure 1. Depicts the decline of population over the years.

A similar scenario played out in metropolitan areas across America, where “white flight” reduced the tax base in formerly prosperous cities, causing urban blight, poverty and racial discord. From 1967 to present time the population continues to decrease each year. Detroit now has a little over 672,000 residents. This 139 square mile city now has 40 square miles of it vacant (which includes neighborhoods, gardens, parks, and vacant buildings and schools).

VACANT LAND



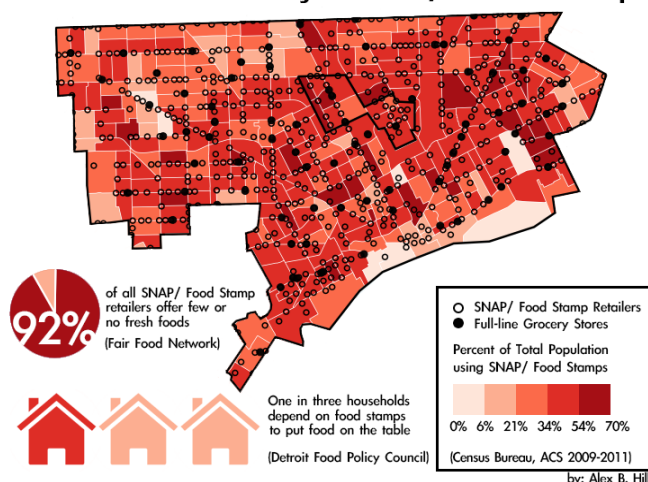
Figure 2. Source Data Drive Detroit. Shows all green areas as part of the 40 square miles of Detroit considered vacant land

The recovery that followed has been slow and high unemployment rates persist. The recession contributed to increased food insecurity according to the U.S.

Department of Agriculture. The Detroit Metropolitan Area was much harder hit by the 2008 recession than many other areas. As a result, food insecurity has remained

quite high in the region. “In the county of Detroit, Wayne County, food insecurity rates in 2009

Detroit Food Security: SNAP/ Food Stamps



were 23.8% for Wayne County. The city's African American farming movement first sprung to life in the 1980s, as supermarkets began closing their doors. But it was galvanized by the 2007 closure of Farmer Jack, the city's last large grocery store chain” (2). Fast-food and corner stores selling junk food became a much easier mealtime solution. It was found that 80 percent of city residents rely on these "fringe" food retailers for their food purchases. City residents began working together to advance their shared political

and social ideas about the lack of healthy, culturally appropriate food.

Figure 3 above. Source Graphic Designer Alex B. Hill. Shows the number of full line grocery stores(stores who carry a wide assortment of groceries) versus SNAP/Food Stamp retail grocery stores similar to store like (deli's or

Bodega's that carry limited amounts of groceries often times not fresh produce) in the city of Detroit comparative to the statistic that 1 in 3 households depend on food stamps in Detroit.

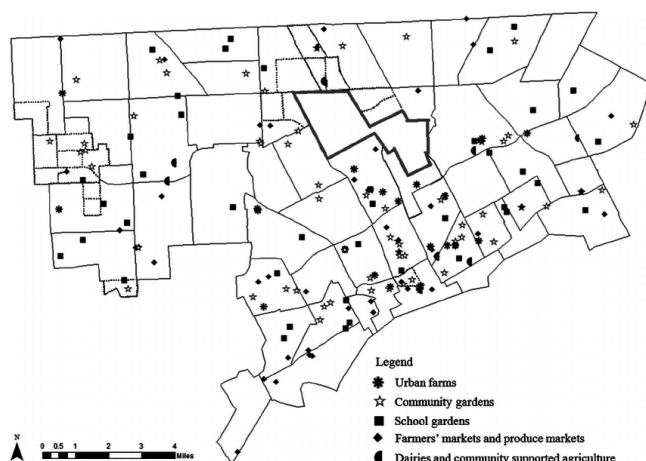


Figure 4 to the left. Source Data Driven Detroit. Showcases all of the types of farming happening around the city.

Urban Agrihoods



Figure 5. Source MUFI. Michigan Urban Farming Initiative (MUFI) urban agrihood Detroit

“An alternative neighborhood growth model that positions agriculture as the centerpiece of a mixed-use urban development”⁽³⁾.

-Tyson Gersh

Many of the lots up for auction in October won't sell, and many of those that do will end up in the hands of speculators”.⁽¹⁾ Initiatives such as “Build Detroit” allows homeowners who live next door to a vacant lot to purchase the lot for \$100 serves an an effort, however for many urban farmers and NGO’s who are now homeowners are constantly faced with challenges to acquire vacant land to further develop into the new trend of “Agrihoods”. Short for Agriculture Neighborhood; Agrihoods involve neighborhoods built within strolling distance of small working farms, where produce matures under the hungry gaze of residents, where people can venture out and pick greens for their salads. Political leaders and candidates have suggested ideas such as shrinking the city, turning vacant land into urban farms, setting up land banks, revitalize and repopulate.

Muifi and Oakland Ave Urban Farm are two Urban Agrihoods that have developed in Detroit's Downtown North End area. They have focused on creating models that promote programmatic common goals of productive land, local food provision, community empowerment, teaching skills, and developing social enterprise.

MUFI Agrihood



Figure 6. Source MUFI. MUFI future development of their three story community education farmhouse that will be providing educational opportunities to people in the neighborhood about urban farming, health & wellness, nutrition and other employment/volunteer opportunities.

MUFI successfully harvests fruits and vegetables to families that reside in the city of Detroit. This organization is rare because the urban farm is even more central, located in the downtown North End area in an up and coming neighborhood called Brush Park. Contrary to other statewide agrihoods positioned in more secluded suburban and or rural areas; typically where one would imagine where traditional farming is occupied. “MUFI is a two-acre urban farm that produces 300 kinds of fruits and vegetables, totaling over 20,000 pounds of produce annually, and over the last 5 years over 50,000 pounds of produce has been sent out over 2,000 households, churches, and food pantries within two square miles” (4) (all harvested and run by all volunteers with no strings attached. Yes, no strings attached; no CSA memberships, no bought shares like the Food Co-op model, all community driven and self efficient to better the needs to the community.

MUFI targets all demographics from young to old as its positioned as a community revitalization model that seeks to prioritize healthy food access over other luxuries such as new condos or golf courses. MUFI is working on renovating a three-story blighted building into a community center near the farm (Figure 6).

Oakland Ave Urban Farm Agrihood



Figure 7. Owners of Oakland Ave Agrihood Urban Farm

The largest urban farm also located in Detroit’s North End will transform into a five-acre agrihood combining art, architecture, sustainable ecologies, and new market practices while exploring methods for equitable, art-centered redevelopment with the grant they were just awarded in the amount of \$500,000 from ArtPlace America, “as one of 29 creative placemaking grants across the country, and only one of three to receive funding for \$500,000 or more” (5). Oakland Ave Urban Farm seeks to venture into the Agrihood model by launching the following programs and initiatives:

- Creating the Art Farm House—an exhibition space and mini art school for children and adults set in a neo-rural landscape—and an irrigation infrastructure that will serve as an “urban marker” and other energy-efficient systems.

- Turn a vacant residence into a convivial community dining hall and hostel accommodating visiting artists, agriculture specialists, and chefs.
- Launching of the North End Superette, a farm-fresh convenience store and retail space for the farm's value-added products.
- Hosting a series of culinary happenings and developing arts programming in conversation with residents by providing neighbors with space for creative experimentation.



Figure 8. (left) rendering of the development of Oakland Ave's Agrihood with the new funding provided by Art Place America*

“The Oakland Avenue Urban Farm is a place where we’re not only growing food, but we’re cultivating youth, art and music,” (6) says Jerry Hebron, the Farm’s Executive Director. “We host many performances where diverse groups of people come together; we offer a range of workshops and activities. All of this is about cultivating community. The Farm has

become about so much more than fruits and vegetables”(7). The North End, a predominantly African American neighborhood which once was a cultural nexus that drew innovative artists from across the country, has continued to survive - despite challenges - through the work of many grass-roots initiatives and neighborhood programs. The North End is becoming a premiere location for creative land use and agriculture in the country. As mentioned prior, the nearby Michigan Urban Farming Initiative announced their plans for expanding their agrihood by redeveloping properties around their farm.

Changes

Urban farming is nothing new to Detroit. Detroiters have always turned to agriculture during tough times. Most African American Detroiters have Southern roots. By 1960, more than 400,000 African Americans had moved to Detroit as part of the Great Migration. Black Southern sharecroppers and tenant farmers brought their agricultural know-how to urban centers. During the economic downturn of the 1890s, Mayor Hazen Pingree urged poor people to grow food on public land, including parks and the lawn of City Hall. He was laughed at, but, within a couple of years, his program was copied across the country.

Agrihoods can play a big part in addressing the food scarcity issue in the city of Detroit and decrease the number of food deserts of areas who don't have as much access to healthy foods. They can also address harsh inner city conditions like social isolation due to the amount of vacant land spread throughout the neighborhoods and lack of greenery. The ambition is that this model over time can help show a pathway for urban agriculture in a different light with regard to urban planning; which can really capture the want to live amongst something so deeply rooted into the community; all to help educate and feed the community.



Currently there are over 1400 urban farmers in Detroit producing over 400,000 pounds of fresh produce each year however the access to owning land in the city is accessible while also not accessible as it could be.

Figure 9. A vacant lot overgrown with native grasses in the historic brush park with a view facing south to downtown Detroit. According to the USDA, in 1910 African Americans owned nearly 20

million acres of land in the United States, much of it rural farmland. Today, that figure has dropped to less than eight million acres.

The Detroit Land Bank controls and owns over 90,000 vacant land parcels in the city. Through the Side Lot initiative, homeowners are able to purchase vacant side lots next door to their homes for as little as \$100 a lot. Homeowners in many communities are coming together to purchase these lots in the dozens to then develop things such as urban farms. Although this program exist there are still many stipulations to the program as it is not open to all interested

parties and there are larger vacant parcels owned by the Detroit Land Bank that aren't for sale to the public but only marketed for new developers which has caused some backlash in the urban farming community.

“Craig Fahle, director of public affairs at the Detroit Land Bank Authority, says that they are trying to create a program for residents to lease parcels of land with permission from their local block clubs. It would cost just \$25 per year to lease the land for gardening and recreation. The program, however, has yet to be put in front of the city council” (8).

Expanding an initiatives like The Detroit Land Bank side lot program to grant access to community members to purchase lots for sale who are non-homeowners perhaps for a higher rate could be a solution to challenges that are faced, as land, access and space is always an issue and a pivotal commodity that is needed to get anything started at a larger level.

NYC can learn from DETROIT: Policy Considerations & Recommendations

NYC has over 600 community gardens and several Food co-ops, local farmers markets and several non-profits whose mission is to serve public school students with health and nutrition education. These are all great efforts and the city needs more, however NYC can learn from Detroit by exploring how limited resources, zero to no funding, free programming and the power of volunteers can start change in an urban city. The issue lies in the “ideology” of “wanting to be a green city. NYC has lots of programs that one can get involved in; however these programs are only for the “select”. Programs such as Food-Co ops that require participants to purchase shares and dedicate a required amount of time in order to have membership, of being a member of a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) that require participants to pay monthly tier based payments are examples of stipulations placed on the participant that automatically eliminates an entire population of people who might not have the money to pay for these memberships or schedules to accommodate the hours needs to work in order to be part of these programs.

This brings up the topic of to whom are organization is serving, as one could argue that people who have open availability to donate and commit to hours weekly come from upper-middle class who have resources and free time to dedicate to healthy living, contrary to reality.

NYC can learn from Detroit by understanding the true needs of urban communities to whom are low income that entices community members to want to get involved with urban farming/gardening. NYC can learn how to take its plethora of resources, that include

departments who specialize in sustainability, political leaders, funding, organizations who go into schools to promote urban farming, and community gardens and learn how to strip down it's "faced beauty of trendiness" that often times are promoted to society but is catered to a demographic that can afford these resources as stated above. Examples include private schools who can pay nonprofits to come in and do programming to students, schools who have the funding and support of families whose kids attend that school to help support and fundraise for school gardens, living in a neighborhood where healthy foods are already accessible and families can afford purchasing healthy foods i.e. Whole Foods, farmers markets, Food-Co Ops, and urban farming locations positioned in vibrantly wealthy areas, government agencies promoting health and nutrition through ads that encourage people to follow "steps" but not understanding that it's their job to actually go, physically to the community and education its residents during times and at locations they frequent and are available to sit on on courses.

"In the 1970s, when urban flight left the city pockmarked with thousands of vacant lots, Mayor Coleman Young instituted the Farm-A-Lot program, in which the city supplied seeds and some technical aid to citizens who were willing to put in the work of gardening those lots" (9). Which in turn increased funding for programs that provide urban farmers and community gardeners with training and technical assistance. If the urban agriculture movement is successful in changing the food culture in Detroit, it will be due to the start that Farm-A-Lot gave it.

"The urban agriculture movement is not just about growing food. It's about creating a just and equitable food system. That means it's trying to grow jobs for people in the communities where they live. "Many gardeners have organized through groups such as the Detroit Food Policy Council, Keep Growing Detroit and the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network to create markets for selling produce, gain access to store shelves, work on developing food processing businesses, and train people to work in restaurants" (10). These groups are even looking at opening hardware stores and creating composting businesses – every possible job that can be had from seed to plate.

Detroit Public Schools is getting involved; as the second largest landowner in Detroit next to the city itself. In 2012 DPS kicked off an agriculture program by establishing gardens at 45 schools. The gardens are the focus of an agriculture-based education that foresees future jobs growing food in the city.

Contrary what we often see in NYC is community gardens that are gated and might be esthetically pretty for the community but its not accessible. There are over 600+ community gardens across all 5 boroughs, and in NYC 25% of community gardens are under the jurisdiction of the NYC Department of Parks and Recreation. Organizations like 596 acres are

supports resident stewardship of land to build more just and equitable cities. In April of 2011 founder of 596 Acres, Paula Z. Segal came across a spreadsheet and a map that showed all the vacant public land in Brooklyn, according to the NYC Department of City Planning. Adding up the rows in the spreadsheet, I came up with the number 596 acres for vacant public land in Brooklyn alone—an astoundingly large total area slightly bigger than Prospect Park, the borough’s celebrated oasis. I thought people needed to know; and so “596 Acres” was born.

They started as an experiment in getting information about land ownership into the hands of

people who really were ready to make change.

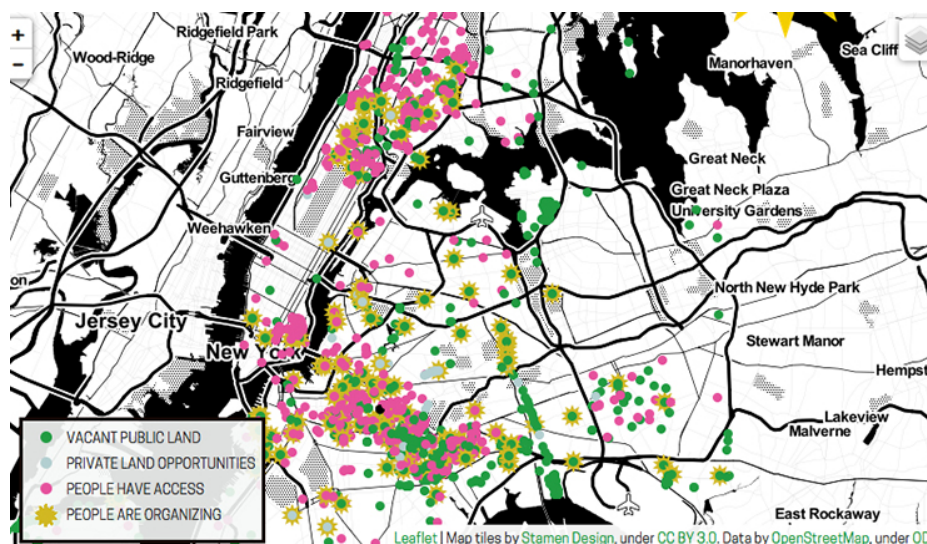
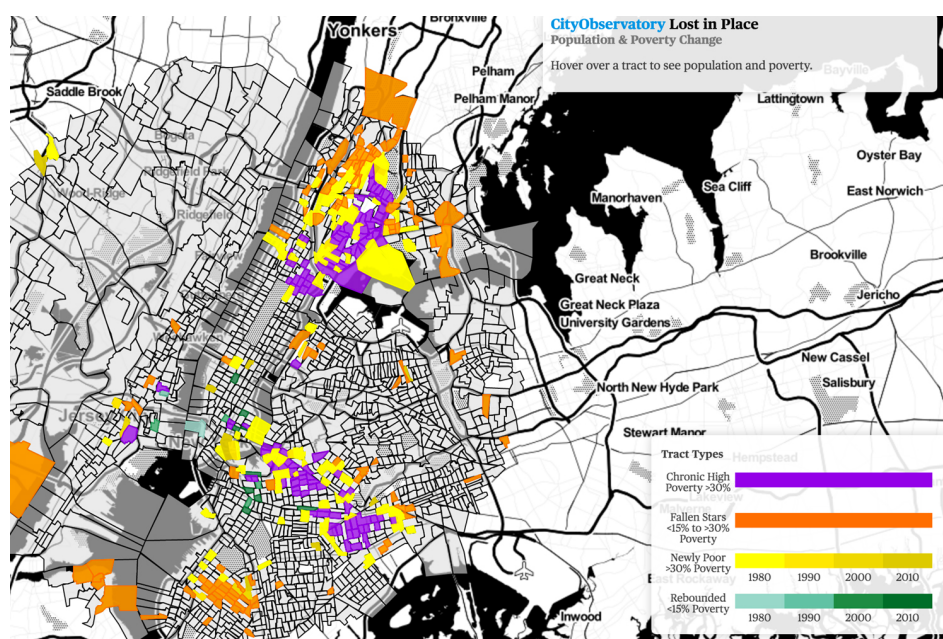


Figure 10. Source 596 Acres. Displays public vacant land in NYC.

Through the support of elected officials, and public policy these vacant parcels can be allocated to allow a certain

percent of these vacancies to be purchased and or obtained by the community specifically in low income communities that need access to healthy foods, educational opportunities to learn about nutrition and opportunities to learn and grow their own food; using the same



agrihood model as Detroit; while also having financial support for start-up or operating costs through grants on a variety of issues and low-interest loans, available at the local, state, or federal levels.

Figure 9. Source 596 Acres. Shows the percentage of poverty

throughout neighborhoods in NYC and surrounding boroughs.

NYC can help identify and provide land and facilities for farming. Local governments eager to identify ways to make productive use of vacant land often turn to urban agriculture. Cities can inventory public and private land, authorize leasing agreements with private landowners, clear contaminated land, and authorize use of municipal land.

Conclusion



Figure 10. A mural on Vernor Hwy. in Detroit, Michigan. The city's poorest neighborhoods have ready access to fast food, but lack fresh produce and healthy eating options.

Credit: Cybelle Codish

The issue of accessible and equitable food production must be rooted firmly at the centre of all efforts to improve food security and advance human development. Some indices are available in respect of food availability, land ownerships, access and utilization, but key indicators that signal future trends in food security overall are difficult to identify.

With so much vacant land and buildings, a decline in population and a need for economic development, health and nutrition education, and affordable foods, Detroit, MI has been labeled as a city with agricultural vitality. Organizations, elected officials, and agencies have been highlighting the city's initiatives to launch agrihoods.

While a composite index that combines some elements of food availability, access and utilization with measures of economic development and political stability could be useful, it needs to be recognized that trade-offs exist between these elements. The challenges of creating urban agrihoods call for urban cities to renew their efforts to work together in the management of dictating nonprofits and community leaders to obtain resources to educate, grow, and strengthen the residents in communities. This includes greater cross-system coherence and integrated planning across institutional frameworks. New institutional arrangements are needed to promote cooperation between public and private investors in food systems, food justice, economic development and to recognize the rapidly expanding role of community residents being the key stakeholders.

Many urban farms offer exciting opportunities for advancing equity and for helping to provide these benefits, among many others, to low-income communities and communities of color.

Detroit may contain a lot of concrete and steel, and industrial production is still the mainstay of the economy. But we're also digging into the dirt and making things a little greener and more self-sufficient. That's something we can share with outstate Michigan residents. Let's eat. It might be what brings us all together. The time is ripe for policymakers, stakeholders, farmers, and community members alike to leverage the power of urban agriculture to encourage communities of opportunity for all.

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