

Detroit's Edible Gardens Art and Agriculture in a Post-Environmental World

Terri Weissman

This article is about an aesthetic reinvention of urban space. Specifically, it is about Detroit's urban farming movement and how that movement has re-organized the sensible order of things, how it has shifted the way Detroit is perceived and challenged the city's prevailing political, social and economic order. While the farms and gardens I write about produce and provide food to some of Detroit's citizens – indeed the farms fulfil an incredibly important function in this regard – it would be a mistake to understand them solely in terms of use-value. For the hundreds of gardens and farms in Detroit also stand as representations of a different possible world, as spatial and visual disruptions to society's common order.

SURVIVAL

In the mid-twentieth century, Detroit, Michigan – the MotorCity – was a rising metropolis. Capital of the American automotive industry and home to the Big Three (General Motors, Chrysler, and Ford), the city could also claim cultural cachet as the place where Motown records established its headquarters in 1960. But if you have read anything about Detroit over the past twenty years you will have encountered a story of decline, not ascent. And if you have read anything about Detroit in the past year, there is a good chance it went something like this: Detroit to cut \$250 million from its budget by eliminating the Department of Human Services, disregarding union contracts, abolishing thousands of city jobs and making severe cuts to firefighters, EMS (emergency medical services), parks, public transportation and many other services, such as street lighting.¹ The severity of these cuts results from a consent agreement that the city signed with the state to avoid the appointment of an emergency manager. The agreement leaves the real power to make financial decisions with the mayor and the city's appointed financial advisory board, as opposed to the democratically elected City Council. The effect of these proposed cuts on the city's residents will be harsh. The decision to ration street lighting, for instance, and to provide basic services only to regions of the city considered 'viable' means that whole parts of Detroit deemed distressed will essentially be ignored and residents forced out; parts of the city will be shut down.² The image is bleak.

But there is another story about Detroit that you may also have come across. This one too is haunted by the dark facts of a city in decline, but the narrative contains moments of resistance and community in which citizens have begun to reclaim their surroundings and redefine (or revitalize) the meaning and appearance of communal space. This is the story of Detroit's diverse and vibrant urban farming movement. The dark beginning goes like this: Detroit city covers a huge geographical expanse – 138.8 square miles to be exact – it is bigger than San

Francisco, Manhattan and Boston combined. In the 1950s nearly two million people called Detroit home; that number is now just a little more than 700,000. This means a significant portion of the city's nearly 139 square miles is abandoned; there is a thirty-three per cent foreclosure rate and more than 70,000 vacated homes punctuate neighbourhood streets. The post-industrial abandonment of Detroit has led to a vacant, dying landscape where grass, trees and dirt encroach upon and at times completely occupy the city's formerly urban spaces – capitalism's detritus.



Western part of the abandoned Packard Automobile Factory, Detroit, Michigan, 2009, photo: Albert Duce, creative commons license

The environmental dynamic here can be described as a kind of anthropogenic pathology. And yet these urban prairies – these new used-spaces – are not entirely empty. Hundreds of community, school and family gardens have appeared as increasing numbers of citizens recover deserted land to grow food and thus contribute – wittingly or not – to the formation of an environmental movement that addresses the failures of the present while also working to establish a true public ecology. Here are just some examples: Earthworks Urban Farm, run by the Capuchins of the Province of Saint Joseph, started up in the late 1990s, was the first certified organic urban garden in Detroit. Much of the food from Earthworks is prepared in the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, though some is also sold at the garden's Youth Farm Stand programme.³ D-Town Farm, founded in 2006 as a project of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network (DBCFSN), began as a quarter acre garden. It is now a two-acre urban farm located on an abandoned tree nursery (formerly run by the city) in an area called RougePark.⁴



Earthworks Farm, 2010, photo: Eric Benson

Brother Nature Produce, founded by Greg Willerer in 2009, is a thriving farm located in Corktown, one of Detroit's oldest neighbourhoods. Brother Nature also hosts periodic guerrilla cafes, serving members of the community with food from its farm. And finally Freedom-Freedom Growers (FFG), which began in 2008 when Myrtle Thompson-Curtis and Wayne Curtis set up a garden to improve community spirit. What began with a single garden bed has grown to include many parcels of land.

Local farms like these (and many more could be named) provide a real service to Detroit residents by making fresh food accessible and affordable. But what Earthworks, D-Town, Brother Nature and Freedom-Freedom also have in common is a commitment on the part of their founders and workers not only to the creation of an alternative food system (that is, a food system that is ecologically sustainable, affordable, participatory and nourishing), but also to an alternative (and reinvigorated) public sphere.⁵ To these ends, the farms discussed here can be thought of as initiating a transaction of politics through space by refusing to conform to a set of prescribed codes that dictate how the city's landscape is organized and communities formed. They challenge what species or *actants* have a right to exist in Detroit, and what forms of property are consistent with democracy and prosperity.⁶

Malik Yakini, founder of the DBCFSN and D-Town Farm, is clear about his Farm's mission: 'What we're doing is reframing agriculture for African Americans as an act of self-determination and empowerment.'⁷

Willerer, from Brother Nature Produce, is equally explicit about how he views his role:

The industrial food system has failed us... [first by providing unhealthy food, then by abandoning Detroit altogether]. We have to figure out how to feed ourselves, and Brother Nature is part of that.⁸

Thompson-Curtis from FFG also speaks about food justice, though she does so in slightly different terms:

If I see someone walking down the street, and if I see them enough times and I'm out in this garden and they're looking, I invite them in. I let them know this is your garden, you can shop here, you can come pick here and if you spend some time here you can pick all you want.'⁹

The political urgency of these positions resonates even more powerfully after learning that every major grocery store in Detroit has shut its doors, leaving many parts of the city food insecure.¹⁰



D-town Farms, 2012, photo: Terri Weissman

But Thompson-Curtis' comment suggests that she understands her garden to be doing something more than just delivering food to members of the community. She speaks of herself and the garden together, as one entity, calling out to spectators, the neighbourhood pedestrian, or anyone walking by. She and the garden invite these outside viewers in; Thompson-Curtis asks if they would like food, if they would like to participate in or work with her on this project; in other words, she helps shuttle the neighbourhood passer-by from a space of observation – a space outside of community and politics – back into a world that demands engagement, thought and negotiation with others. FFG and the other farms discussed here thus mark locations where bodies join together in space to form a collectivity. And out of these congregations moments of recognition emerge, in which individuals not only recognize themselves as visual objects to be seen by others, but also understand that being seen can be deliberately engaged to communicate a critique of the status quo in order to generate a new kind of political subject. In Detroit, a city so often forgotten or already declared failed, this kind of engagement in and with public space functions as a demand to be seen and included, and ultimately, I think, as a visual expression of a political self. As poet, performer and storyteller Jessica Care Moore declares, 'Somebody's got to tell them... We are not ghosts... that we are in this city. We are not ghosts and we are alive.'¹¹

The claim to political and economic life that arises out of the urban farming movement, and the construction (even if only partial) of a visible, alternative economic system that provides clean, healthy, affordable, accessible food to Detroit residents situates the city's urban farms in what someone like Gar Alperovitz identifies as the new



Brother Nature Produce Urban Farm in Detroit, 2011, photo: Michigan Municipal League (MML), creative commons license

economy. That is, within an economy that, due to the ecological challenges facing the planet and economic recession, rethinks the nature of ownership and the growth paradigm that has guided conventional US economic policy in the past.¹² But it also means that Detroit's grassroots urban farms throw into relief the border between biological life and political life, between survival and participation. Borrowing these terms from Hannah Arendt: by biological life (or what Arendt would call labour) I mean life determined by the kind of repetitive work that produces all those things we need to survive and that get consumed, such as food and shelter – the material conditions of life; the stuff produced in Detroit's farms. By political life (or what Arendt would call action), I mean life that moves beyond necessity and enters into the public sphere where individuals are able to distinguish themselves as individuals and where democratic action can occur. Detroit's community gardens and farms make the boundary between biological and political life visible not by highlighting the difference between these two spheres, but rather the opposite, that is, by blurring the border and showing just how porous the division between them is.¹³ The labouring body here is not relegated to the pre-political sphere, it does not exist in order to relieve others from the mundane tasks and maintenance of bare life. Not a structuring absence that frees others to participate in society, the labouring body – visible – itself constitutes participation in society. In short, Detroit's community gardens transport those who work in them and use them from a space of pure survival into a space of appearance, a shared space that depends on plurality and calls for action; in other words, a political space.¹⁴

LAND GRAB

Often placed on land owned by the city or private individuals, Detroit's urban farms seek not only to create self-sufficient food systems but also to challenge the sanctity of private property – a challenge that has not gone unnoticed by capital. In 2009, for instance, Detroit-native and financial-services entrepreneur John Hantz proposed that he purchase 10,000 acres of vacant and city-owned property in Detroit and convert it into the largest private for-profit urban mega-farm in the world.¹⁵

Hantz claims that his project would be 'Detroit's saving grace' as it would push up property values (property that Hantz would now own) by transforming the city's land surplus problem into one of land scarcity. For, according to Hantz, Detroit 'cannot create value until [it] create[s] scarcity'.¹⁶ Thus, as food activist Eric Holt-Giménez observes,

The Hantz Farms project openly prioritizes creating wealth by appreciating real estate rather than creating value through productive activities. If successful, the urban mega-farm will clearly lead to an impressive accumulation of private wealth on what was public land.¹⁷

Driving up the price of land in underserved neighbourhoods may or may not lead to gentrification, seemingly Hantz's goal – but what it certainly will not do is solve the problems facing the majority of Detroit's citizens, such as access to healthy food, good education and basic public services.¹⁸ If urban farms like D-Town, Freedom-Freedom Growers, Earthworks and Brother Nature rearrange the sensible order of things, if they help create the perceptual conditions that lead to the formation of a political community where none before existed, then Hantz Farms proposes to reinforce the governing social, political and economic structure.



John Hantz, owner and CEO of Hantz Farms, stands in the pilot tree farm near the intersection of St Louis and Brimson on Detroit's east side, Tuesday afternoon, 5 June 2012, photo: Brian Widdis

Not surprisingly, local groups, such as the Urban Ag Work Group, Yakini's DBCFSN, and even Detroit's own City Planning Commission, raised concerns about the Hantz Farm plan, and Hantz scaled back. Instead of 10,000 acres, the project now seeks 200; instead of growing food crops, it now plans to focus on trees – at first for beautification purposes, later for timber. In what was meant to be a show of goodwill to the citizens of Detroit, Hantz, in a recent demonstration project, bought three acres on a mostly deserted block, cleared away a significant amount of debris and then planted hundreds of bur oak saplings. One of the few residents left on the block responded positively to the change: 'It's a pleasure to look at,' she said, 'It feels like it's a circle, coming back to what it once was.'¹⁹ But the plan to grow trees is not just about beautification; historically (particularly in the global South), such plantings are the go-to crop for land grabbers. Tree farms are low-cost ways for big corporations to mark new territory because trees require little maintenance and, as Holt-Giménez points out, 'if global carbon markets ever really kick in, [these spaces] could pay dividends'.²⁰

Whether or not Hantz is motivated by real estate speculation or a sincere desire to address the problem of food security in underserved communities, at stake in the discussion is not just a difference of opinion concerning the appropriation of urban space, but more fundamentally a question regarding how one understands nature. For example, while Hantz's beautification project forms an aesthetic veneer in a blighted neighbourhood – and in this sense truly improves the daily living conditions of residents ('It's a pleasure to look at') – the impetus to focus on beautification suggests a conception of nature or the environment as an external reality vis-à-vis society. Nature is posited as something that needs to be saved from negligent governments, restored and protected from human destruction. Moreover – and this is where the real danger lies – this bifurcation of the natural and the social paradoxically entails the possibility of producing 'nature' as an object that is embedded in financial networks, in other words, as a commodity. 'Capitalism', Neil Smith argues, 'is more voracious than ever in vacuuming a supposedly external nature in search of commodifiable use values.'²¹



Mike Score, President of Hantz Farms, looks at a map detailing parcel information within Hantz's proposed area of development on the east of Detroit on Tuesday afternoon, 5 June 2012, photo: Brian Widdis

But if we do not distinguish between the transactions among non-human actants such as plants, animals, the weather, the built environment in ecological systems and the interactions among human actors in social networks, then the production and financialization of nature immediately presents itself as an act of domination and expropriation incompatible with democracy. And so it is in opposition to exactly this kind of financialization of nature that Detroit's grassroots urban farms seek to restructure the natural world, circumvent institutional capitalist structures, and develop both a more democratic food distribution system, as well as a more democratic landscape where biological life intermingles with political life. Neil Smith, at the end of his essay 'Nature as Accumulation Strategy', asks: 'What would a truly democratic production of nature look like?' 'The chance is there,' he says, '...to think how nature ought to change. And to think what kind of social power it will take to democratize that production of nature.'²² Detroit's grassroots urban farms present one place, one possible answer to Smith's call. Yet as these sites create a landscape that speaks outward to citizens and that advocates the (often unauthorized) occupation of the public sphere, whether or not they possess the social power to combat large-scale well-funded corporate interests remains to be seen.²³

ART AND ECOLOGY

In 2004 Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus released their report 'The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post-Environmental World', now famously controversial for its attack on the mainstream environmental movement as out of touch with mainstream America. In their report and subsequent book, *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility* (2007), Shellenberger and Nordhaus argue that environmentalism has ceased to be a workable social movement in the United States.²⁴ Their claim is that the narrow focus on carbon emissions as the sole cause of global warming has prevented policy-makers – and all citizens – from thinking about the environment in holistic terms as a network of socio-political, economic and natural forces. Against the rational positivism of this kind of policy literalism, Shellenberger and Nordhaus argue for a visionary yet practical approach, one in which science and other depictions of reality are assessed not for their supposed truth value in corresponding to the world – or not solely for this – but also for their social usefulness and for the way in which they imagine another possible world.²⁵ For Shellenberger and Nordhaus, this is the hope of a post-environmentalism that will encourage and provide space for inspiring creative and pragmatic visions instead of simply repeating conventional dystopian warnings.²⁶ As others have pointed out, Shellenberger and Nordhaus conclude their 2004 report with a plea to the cultural sphere, precisely the space in which questions of seeing, framing and meaning might be addressed. 'Environmentalists need to tap into the creative worlds,' Shellenberger and Nordhaus write, 'not to better sell narrow and technical policy proposals but rather to figure out who we are and who we need to be.' They ask:

Are existing environmental institutions up to the task of imagining the post-global warming world? Or do we now need a set of new institutions founded around a more expansive vision and set of values?²⁷

Urban farms at their most radical are about de-privatization, the re-establishment of a commons, and the restructuring of the established food economy. But certain risks arise out of the culture and work of urban farms,

particularly when they appear economically successful – as they have in Detroit. There is the danger of more conservative practices, such as those promoted by companies like Hantz Farms, which seek to re-establish the same old economic framework as before and to recolonize urban space in the name of green capitalism with the ultimate goal of gentrification. In 1992, during the Rio de Janeiro UN Earth Summit, Greenpeace activists dropped a massive banner from Sugarloaf Mountain painted with an image of the earth rotated so as to emphasize the Southern Hemisphere and marked with the word SOLD. The message was clear: the governing relationship between the economy, society and nature was benefiting the North at the expense of the South, and nowhere was there any kind of democratic accountability to those affected by policies found to be simultaneously environmentally, socially and economically intolerable.²⁸ Twenty years later, in 2012, it is not difficult to imagine a similar sentiment about Detroit: a Google Earth map illustrating Detroit's vacant lots with the word SOLD scrawled across it. And the message would be equally clear: who is being held accountable to those affected environmentally, socially and economically by Detroit's post-industrial demise?

All of this is to say that art, at its best and most compelling, can offer a space of the speculative and experimental and radical; it can provide a space where different kinds of gardens, urbanism and economies can be linked in ways that are ecologically sustainable, and people rather than profit orientated. And, if we are willing to blur the distinction between art, agriculture and activism, we can understand community gardens and urban farms not only as important aesthetic participants in the reorganization of cities, but also as avenues by which new types of collectives are formed or as alternative institutions that teach us how to think differently about the connection between ecology and the political and economic worlds we live in, as well as between ecology and creative liberation.

¹ Although Detroit's decline is often cited as beginning in the 1980s or 1990s, the city already showed serious signs of distress in the late 1960s, particularly along racial lines, as was made evident by the now famous Detroit Riots of 1967.

² Shannon Jones, 'Detroit City approves brutal cuts', *World Socialist Web Site*, 26 May 2012, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2012/may2012/detr-m26.shtml>

³ Monica White, 'D-Town Farm: African American Resistance to Food Insecurity and the Transformation of Detroit', *Environmental Practice*, December 2011, vol 13, no 4, p 406

⁴ Malik Yakini, founder of the DBCFSN and D-Town Farm, gives the following context for these initiatives: 'Most of the people involved in the community food-security work are young White people, and I do believe that they are well meaning. But what we have seen in Detroit and other urban areas is that they move to the city and because they are already well connected with other White people who are doing this work and have the resources, they end up having a degree of control over urban agriculture in the city of Detroit – control which is inordinate to their actual members in the population, and that is a problem.' Quoted in White, op cit, p 411

⁵ Alternative food systems are differently defined by different communities. See, for example, Jack Kloppenburg Jr et al, 'Tasting Food, Tasting Sustainability: Defining the Attributes of an Alternative Food System with Competent, Ordinary People', *Human Organization*, vol 59, no 2, 2000, pp 178–186.

⁶ On the theory of ‘actants’, including human and non-human agents, see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford University, Oxford, 2005.

⁷ Tom Philpott, ‘Three projects that are watering Detroit’s “food desert”’, *Grist*, 11 September 2010, <http://grist.org/article/food-three-projects-that-are-watering-detroits-food-desert/>

Yakini’s statement is particularly powerful in the context of Detroit, a city whose population, at roughly eighty-five per cent African American, commonly associates agricultural work with slavery or share-cropping.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Myrtle Thompson-Curtis, interview in *We Are Not Ghosts*, a film directed by Mark Dworkin and Melissa Young, 52 mins, 2012. *We Are Not Ghosts* follows a number of Detroiters, community activists and artists, as they seek to create a new revitalized and human-scaled city for a post-industrial world. Among those featured are performance artist Jessica Care Moore and long time Detroit activist Grace Lee Boggs.

¹⁰ Every major grocery store has left the city, yet only about one-fifth of Detroiters have access to a car that might carry them to a suburban store – leaving many parts of Detroit food insecure. According to Mike W Hamm and Anne C Bellows, food security is defined as ‘a condition in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice’. Mike W Hamm and Anne C Bellows, ‘Community Food Security and Nutrition Educations’, *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, vol 35, no 1, January 2003, pp 37–43

¹¹ Jessica Care Moore, recorded performance in *We Are Not Ghosts*, op cit

¹² See Gar Alperovitz, ‘Neither Revolution nor Reform: A New Shape for Progressive Politics’, *Dissent*, 4 October 2011; or Alperovitz, *America Beyond Capitalism: Reclaiming our Wealth, Our Liberty and Our Democracy*, Democracy Collaborative Press/Dollars and Sense, Boston, Massachusetts, 2011.

¹³ The idea of blurring the division between biological life and political life also connects with Bruno Latour’s recent proposals to define political ecology not via ‘nature’ but rather as a new way of uniting life and politics. See Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, Catherine Porter, trans, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2004.

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, 1998. Also see Jacques Rancière and Davide Panagia and Rachel Bowlby, ‘Ten Theses on Politics’, *Theory & Event*, vol 5, no 3, 2001, <http://muse.jhu.edu/>.

¹⁵ See Eric Holt-Giménez, ‘Detroit: A Tale of Two... Farms?’, 10 July 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-holt-gimenez/a-tale-of-two-farms_b_1660019.html. Also see Matthew Dolan, ‘New Detroit Farm Plan Taking Root’, *The Wall Street Journal* online, 5 July 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304898704577479090390757800.html>.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Holt-Giménez, op cit

¹⁸ Ibid. See also Eric Holt-Giménez, Yi Wang and Annie Shattuck, ‘Grabbing the Food Deserts: Large-scale Land Acquisitions and the Expansion of Retail Monopolies’, *Food First Background/Institute for Food and Development Policy*, vol 17, no 1, spring 2011, pp 1–3.

¹⁹ Ruth Moucha quoted in Dolan, op cit

²⁰ Holt-Giménez, ‘Detroit: A Tale of Two... Farms?’, op cit

²¹ Neil Smith, ‘Nature as Accumulation Strategy’, *Socialist Register*, 2007, p 11

²² Ibid, p 19

²³ On the unauthorized taking of the political public sphere see Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, Zone, New York, 2005.

²⁴ See Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus, 'The Death of Environmentalism: Global Warming Politics in a Post-environmental World', October 2004, <http://grist.org/article/doe-reprint/>; and Nordhaus and Shellenberger, *Break Through: From the Death of Environmentalism to the Politics of Possibility*, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, Boston, Massachusetts, 2007.

²⁵ See Douglas A Kysar, 'The Consultants' Republic', *Harvard Law Review*, vol 121, no 8, June 2008, p 2044.

²⁶ Ibid, p 2056. Kysar describes how for Shellenberger and Nordhaus "Postenvironmentalism" will provide an optimistic, life-affirming "politics of pragmatism", one that is centred around 'the liberal imagination' and a 'metaphysics of becoming' rather than a "metaphysics of stasis" ...this utopian vision, the authors believe, will sell environmental policies with far greater effectiveness than the movement's conventional dystopian approach.'

²⁷ Shellenberger and Nordhaus, 'The Death of Environmentalism', op cit, p 34. Also see Yates McKee, 'Art and the Ends of Environmentalism: From Biosphere to the Right to Survival', in Michel Feher, ed, with Gaëlle Krikorian and Yates McKee, *Nongovernmental Politics*, Zone, New York, 2007; as well as TJ Demos' introduction to this special edition of *Third Text*, in which he discusses this idea.

²⁸ McKee, 'Art and the Ends of Environmentalism', op cit, pp 553–554

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Terri Weissman is Assistant Professor of Art History, University of Illinois. Her book, *The Realisms of Berenice Abbott: Documentary Photography and Political Action*, was published by University of California Press in 2011. Her article, "Freedom's Just Another Word", appears in *Contemporary Art: 1989 to the Present* and is part of her current project on the visual culture of protest movements.