

Planning for Urban Agriculture in Suburban Development in Canada

An examination of suburban development plans and official plan documents revealed that planning for urban agriculture in suburban development planning is non-existent in North American cities. While proponents of urban agriculture seek land for food production on remnants and left-over spaces in the core, built up areas of cities, they ignore the potential to include spaces for urban food production in the settlements of the future, from the outset.

The Greater Toronto Area (GTA), is the fastest growing city in Canada, adding 100,000 new people a year.

Between 1976 and 1996, the GTA lost 62,000 hectares of farmland to development, with another 40,000 hectares designated for development. It is projected that by the year 2026, 40% of all agricultural land in the GTA will have been lost to development (Toronto Food Policy Council 2000).

TORONTO'S ETHNICALLY DIVERSE SUBURBS

Toronto is often described as one of the most ethnically diverse cities in North America. In 1996, 48 percent of the population of the city of Toronto were immigrants, and one in five residents arrived in Canada after 1991. Growing numbers of these recent immigrants have settled directly in suburban municipalities outside the core areas of the city. They seem to concentrate in particular suburban areas. For instance in Vaughan (north of Toronto) 42 percent of all immigrants are from Italy, while in Markham, one third of the residents claim Chinese as their ethnic origin.

Next to large single family houses with wide green lawns (the stereotype of suburban North America), new suburban housing developments include a wider range of housing types, like single family



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Sara Kerr, co-founder, Garden of Friends

houses on smaller lots, townhouses, condominiums, and multi-unit housing. These new types of housing provide limited or no private outdoor space for gardening and a scarcity of public open space.

This raises questions about suburban development plans taking into account both the ethnic diversity of residents and their traditions of food production against the reduction of both private and public open space. However, little thought has been given to this aspect of land use either by municipal planners or by private land developers.

It is only recently that natural features such as woods or ponds have begun to be viewed by developers as elements of the landscape to be preserved rather than bulldozed. On the outskirts of Toronto, billboards advertise future housing developments with images of nature and names of new housing developments include "forest", "wood", and "lake". These elements of the natural environment contribute to the desirability and marketability of building lots which developers sell at a premium (Marsden 2000). However, site plans for suburban housing developments in the GTA do not include space for community gardens or urban agriculture. Space for growing

food is not seen as an environmental amenity that would appeal to new homebuyers, despite the fact that genetically modified foods and food security is the subject of daily media reports, and gardening is the fastest growing recreational activity amongst urban residents.

In a recent study by the author, 30 immigrant gardeners living in the GTA were asked about their gardening histories and practices¹. While planners and housing developers continue to assume that suburban gardens are primarily ornamental or for recreational use, it was found that immigrant gardeners often put their gardens to productive use for growing ethno-specific vegetables and herbs.

In some Toronto suburbs, social housing units in high-rise apartment buildings, accommodate new immigrants who have no access to private land for growing food. In a neighbourhood near York University, two of my undergraduate students developed a community garden in the vacant lot of a local church. In the Garden of Friends, now in its third year, twenty low-income high-rise residents from diverse parts of the world grow vegetables, which include herbs from Thailand, chillies from Mexico and bitter melon from China. A few blocks away, the African Food Basket,

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an organisation, which provides Afro-Caribbean food to subscribers, is housed in what looks from the street like a typical suburban single family house. The backyard is intensively farmed by a community of gardeners who live in nearby apartment buildings. They experiment with growing foods that are Afro-Caribbean in their origins, including callaloo, okra, and yams. This intensification of low-density suburban open space, which is a recent phenomenon in Toronto, is hampered by suburban developments like smaller housing lots, more multi-units, and more limited private and public open space.

STEPS TO ENCOURAGE URBAN AGRICULTURE IN SUBURBAN DEVELOPMENT

As a first step, urban agriculture and community gardens need to be incorporated into suburban development plans² (2), addressing the preservation of prime agricultural land for future generations as community farms or small market farms and demonstration projects. Brian Donahue's recent book, *Reclaiming the Commons* (Donahue 1999), describes a community farm, in a suburb in Massachusetts, which provides training for youth as well as local produce. Some outer London authorities own farms which are run as commercial enterprises next to accommodating school visits (Garnett 2000).

Second, the popularity of condominium developments in North American cities as a form of housing tenure that includes communally owned and managed common spaces, may also provide opportunities to incorporate community farms or gardens. These could become sub-urban-based models for urban agriculture, especially if concerns about food security and access to organic produce intensify.

Third, planners could accommodate the adaptive reuse of existing and mature



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Chinese gardener harvesting long squash

suburbs. Large backyards could become community gardens, providing space to grow food. Empty lots beside libraries or churches can become community gardens and public parks can provide allotments for growing food. Such changes would require a rethinking of the traditional suburban landscape with private open space that is primarily recreational or ornamental rather than productive.

Finally, incorporating urban agriculture into suburban development requires outreach by advocacy groups to suburban planners, politicians, and especially to housing developers, to educate them about the desirability and long-term feasibility of preserving productive land for growing food within suburban housing developments. Urban-based advocacy groups for urban agriculture and food security must extend their interests into undeveloped and newly developed areas on the urban periphery. This means taking a regional perspective and becoming involved in the development of regional plans, which outline long-term growth patterns and land-use planning objectives. Advocacy groups for urban agriculture must get involved in closely scrutinising development proposals for new suburban developments. Citizens, working in conjunction with municipal planners, can point out the desirability of setting aside land for community gardens as a way to meet public open space requirements and to preserve natural heritage.

(This means that planners must expand their definition of both open space and the preservation of nature: not only playing fields but gardens, and not only woodlots but agricultural land for locally grown vegetables.)

CONCLUSION

In North American cities, including Toronto, food security, urban agriculture, and community gardening advocacy

An Italian gardener from Calabria who moved to Canada in the 1960s, lives in a single family house with a large backyard. He can grow beans, tomatoes, and other vegetables for his extended family. In contrast, a Chinese gardener (see photo) who immigrated in the 1980s lives in a townhouse with a backyard about one third the size of that of the Italian gardener. She grows Chinese herbs and long squash, which she overwinters in the basement. A recent Punjabi resident has an even smaller backyard, which only allows her to grow Indian herbs and spices in raised beds.

groups have focused primarily on finding land for food production in the central core areas and in established neighbourhoods of the city. Almost no attention has been paid to the new settlements that are being planned on the rural-urban fringe. Yet these are settlements that will absorb population growth and increasingly are the immigrant reception areas for new immigrants.

Paying attention to the potential for urban agriculture in new suburban developments involves taking a long-term view - twenty years into the future - and learning how to use the planning system. It involves working with planners, politicians, developers and local communities to incorporate principles and objectives into official plans, making input to development plans, and creating guidelines, models, and educational tools directed at suburban populations living on the urban fringe. Suburban developments continue to be built at a rapid rate on the edges of our cities. Unless we incorporate urban agriculture and space for community gardens, these residents and their children will not have the opportunities to grow their own food or to achieve any form of food security in the future.

NOTES

1) This research is presented as an exhibit, *Growing Cultures*, at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, May 2000 to January 2002 and is co-produced with photographer Vincenzo Pietropaolo.

2) The city of Seattle approved a resolution in 1992 that community gardens be part of the comprehensive plan of the city, particularly in medium and high density areas. In Austin (Texas), Minneapolis (Minnesota) and Boston (Massachusetts), there are zoning provisions for community gardens (Raja, 2000).

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