

A Report from New Orleans: Growing food in a recovering city

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Over three years have passed since Hurricane Katrina flooded 80 percent of New Orleans in August 2005. While the population of the metropolitan region is close to the pre-Katrina total, that of the city itself is approximately 70 percent of its former level. Flooded neighbourhoods, such as Hollygrove, Gentilly, and particularly the Lower Ninth Ward, are far from their former vibrancy.

Those who have returned, however, are preparing the paths for others to follow. With large government-funded rebuilding projects slow to begin, the physical restoration of New Orleans is being driven by the efforts of many non-governmental organisations. In this context of grassroots activism, urban agriculture advocates have seized the opportunity to create a healthier, better-nourished city.

The New Orleans Food and Farm Network (NOFFN), a small organisation created before Katrina, has become a particularly prominent urban agriculture actor, with projects across the city. In a neighbourhood once under two metres of water, NOFFN has partnered with the Carrollton Hollygrove Community Development Corporation to develop the future Hollygrove Growers Market and Farm. The 0.5-hectare site of a former nursery business will soon contain greenhouses, composting areas, training areas, and a “Green Grocery” store to sell food to Hollygrove neighbours, restaurants and other outlets. Students and staff from Tulane University and Louisiana State University have engaged in renewal projects throughout New Orleans.

In New Orleans East, the MQVN (1) Community Development Corporation is laying the groundwork for an ambitious farm and market project amidst New Orleans’s active community of Vietnamese refugees. The Vietnamese were among the first to return to New Orleans post-Katrina, quickly re-establishing a self-sufficient system of urban agriculture based on growing traditional fruits and vegetables in residential yards and along protection levees. To encourage economic development around food production, the Viet Village Urban Farm will transform 11 hectares of undeveloped land at the community’s edge into small garden plots, structures to house weekly markets and special festivals, commercial farming plots, and a livestock farm.

The Lower Ninth Ward experienced great devastation in 2005, and remains largely empty after three years. Urban



Laurentine Ernst community garden in New Orleans
Photo: Martin Bailkey

planning proposals to leave the flood-prone land green and open have been ignored in favour of restoring the Ninth Ward to the tightly-knit neighbourhood it once was. Urban agriculture advocates are working to integrate food production within a fabric of physical and social renewal. Under the auspices of the two-year-old grassroots organisation, lower-nine.org, the Lower Ninth Ward Urban Farming Coalition is taking a community-based urban agriculture approach by uniting individual backyard gardeners into a working unit, and creating a community-supported agriculture operation across several dispersed vacant parcels instead of a single farm site.

Despite these positive efforts, urban agriculture has not been established as a vital and necessary mechanism in the recovery of New Orleans, where urban agriculture projects and community gardens did exist, but not to a significant degree compared to other US cities. In the crisis days of autumn 2005, efforts to restore the food system focused on re-opening existing grocery stores, and not on establishing emergency food-growing sites. Concerns about contaminated soils in flooded areas played a role, and there were early efforts at bioremediation.

What urban agriculture does represent is the resiliency of New Orleanians – best exhibited in the speed with which the Vietnamese re-established their gardens, and their expansion of the role played by urban agriculture in the community through the Viet Village Farm. Similarly, those who have returned to Hollygrove and the Ninth Ward are acting on the opportunity to employ urban agriculture in the collective effort to create a better New Orleans.

1) An acronym for “Mary, Queen of Vietnam.”

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