Promoting Access to Food in Contagem, Brazil

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City’s food system, along with its medical infrastructure, has been especially slow to rebound. This is particularly true of urban agriculture and community gardens, and the subsequent March 2008 report offered recommendations to city government related to food retailing, but not inner-city food production. This reflected a primary focus on food retailing as a mechanism to support both food security and commercial economic revitalisation in the most distressed neighbourhoods.

It did not take long, however, for a growing urban agricultural scene to become evident in neighbourhoods all across New Orleans. This occurred not through any focused government renewal policy, but through the energy of numerous individuals and grassroots organisations seizing on urban agriculture as a tool of empowerment and community self-determination – in a context of slower progress in areas involving governmental intervention; for example, the return of public services like libraries. Through the following examples, organisations are channelling community interest in urban farming into several new projects.

An Update from New Orleans

Martin Bailkey

Of all American cities, present-day New Orleans best exemplifies the concept of resilience in its ongoing struggle to recover its position as the urban centre of the central Gulf Coast region, and as a city of national significance in tourism, shipping and biomedicine. Two trips to the city in autumn 2008, more than three years after 80 per cent of the city was under water and the entire population had to flee for weeks or months, convinced the author (a New Orleans native) that much that was once considered “normal” has returned.

Streets and expressways were clogged with traffic, popular restaurants had long been reopened, the major annual festivals had returned stronger than ever. And schools in the city of New Orleans itself, many reopened under the independent, charter school model (in which a new school is created and managed independently of a local school district, but under a state-granted charter), have shown marked improvements in student performance over schools run under the pre-storm (pre-Katrina) model. Although local politics again display the dysfunctional character that characterised the pre-K city, many residents are heartened by improvements in other aspects of urban life.

Resilience in New Orleans is commonly marked by comparisons of post-K counts of various social and economic indices with corresponding pre-K numbers. Few of these indices are at or above what they were before the storm in mid-2005. The city’s food system, along with its medical infrastructure, has been especially slow to rebound. This is particularly true of the most evident representative of any US city’s food system – full-service supermarkets. In spring 2008, 18 full-service markets (down from the pre-K number of 38) served an average of 18,000 residents per store; the national average in the US being 8,800.2

In this context, it would seem that urban agriculture advocates and practitioners would see a unique opportunity to establish urban farming as a critical part of a rebuilt food infrastructure. But urban agriculture has not necessarily been the sole focus of the activist organisations – working outside of government – that started envisioning a new food system for New Orleans in late 2005. An early leadership role was assumed by the New Orleans Food and Farm Network (NOFFN), a small non-profit organisation formed not long before Katrina. By early 2006, NOFFN had created the NOLA Food Map Project, an attempt to help the residents of particularly hard-hit neighbourhoods simply access food – whether from grocery stores, farmers’ markets, reopened restaurants or emergency food providers. At this point, urban gardening sites were inactive, either because gardeners had not returned to New Orleans or because of contaminated soils. Later, in spring 2007, a consortium of stakeholders began meeting to study food access issues in the city. No one in this group directly represented urban agriculture and community gardens, and the subsequent March 2008 report offered recommendations to city government related to food retailing, but not inner-city food production. This reflected a primary focus on food retailing as a mechanism to support both food security and commercial economic revitalisation in the most distressed neighbourhoods.

It did not take long, however, for a growing urban agricultural scene to become evident in neighbourhoods all across New Orleans. This occurred not through any focused government renewal policy, but through the energy of numerous individuals and grassroots organisations seizing on urban agriculture as a tool of empowerment and community self-determination – in a context of slower progress in areas involving governmental intervention; for example, the return of public services like libraries. Through the following examples, organisations are channelling community interest in urban farming into several new projects.

NOFFN, for example, now incorporates urban agriculture into its leadership role by building the production capacity of urban farmers and gardeners. It directs them to practical resources such as compost, conducts a series of well-attended public workshops on various urban farming topics, and has promoted the attendance of urban growers at community meetings where locals seek input into the city’s post-K master plan. NOFFN staff member Pam Broom reports that NOFFN is further extending its reach by partnering with other organisations involved in the city’s recovery, such as the Make It Right Foundation, founded by actor Brad Pitt to build sustainably designed homes in the Lower Ninth Ward. Now that houses are being completed and more are on the way, Foundation representatives are looking for other approaches to promote a sustainable recovery, and have identified urban
garden as an important dimension of a green, socially vital neighbourhood.

The focus of much of NOFFN’s current efforts is the 0.5-hectare Hollygrove Growers Market and Farm, now well on its way to becoming an outlet for fresh food to the residents of this partially restored neighbourhood, as well as becoming a centre for urban agriculture education and practice. Amidst a collection of growing and composting spaces sits a new “Green Grocery,” the headquarters of a 175-member neighbourhood buying club that will pool the resources of its members into a single market for food grown by small farmers in New Orleans and the rich farmlands outside of the city.

In New Orleans East, the MQVN (Mary Queen of Vietnam) Community Development Corporation is creating 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-K, quickly and independently 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 is transforming 11 hectares of undeveloped land at the community’s edge into small garden plots, commercial farming plots, a livestock farm, and structures to house weekly markets and special festivals for the region’s Asian refugees.

The Viet Village site plan, jointly developed by the MQVN CDC, the Tulane University City Center outreach program (also a Hollygrove Farm partner) and the Louisiana State University Department of Landscape Architecture, contains a number of innovative practices, including bioswales to address the ongoing drainage issues across a site that was once wetland. According to Project Manager Peter Nguyen, once the necessary permits are issued fundraising will begin with the intent of completing the farm and gardens by 2012, and the market structure a year or so later.

New Orleans is a city characterised by strong neighbourhood identity. Some neighbourhoods were devastated by the 2005 flooding. Others, such as those on high ground along the Mississippi River, were untouched by floodwaters. Thus, signs of resilience are not evenly spread across New Orleans. One can gauge overall resilience at a city-wide scale, but it is perhaps more accurate to assess the resiliency of New Orleans at the scale of individual neighbourhoods – the scale at which active, grassroots, non-governmental organisations are restoring homes and businesses. The new urban agriculture projects in Hollygrove and New Orleans East are part of this larger movement of neighbourhood self-determination.

Also evident within New Orleans neighbourhoods is the resumption of the more traditional role of community gardens in New Orleans. Parkway Partners, a local NGO and the city’s long-time provider of community gardens, currently manages 29 garden sites across New Orleans. While this number is low compared to the number of such gardens in comparably sized US cities, Parkway Partners Executive Director Jean Fahr considers this a legitimate accomplishment in the city’s overall renewal. She proudly notes that each garden has a waiting list, and is of “superior quality” – a testament to both the new value placed on gardening in post-K New Orleans, and to the fact that a number of gardeners are new, post-K New Orleanians with significant gardening experience.

Parkway Partners’ Garden Coordinator, Macon Fry, himself a veteran local gardener, sees an abundance of new energy and ideas among the city’s new urban farmers, but also wishes that his organisation had adequate resources to dedicate to this renewal. His concerns are echoed by others – with govern-
ment money earmarked for large-scale infrastructure and building projects, the high level of dedication to the incremental rebuilding of New Orleans on the part of individuals and small community organisations is not matched by the amount of available funding from private and philanthropic sources.

Along with community gardeners, the independent city farmer also has an important role to play in the return of urban agriculture to New Orleans neighbourhoods. In 2008, on a vacant 280 sq. metre corner lot in the city’s Mid-City neighbourhood, NOFFN Program Director Marilyn Yank created, in her spare time, the Little Sparrow Farm. After determining that this corner lot which is located three blocks from her home and was formerly used primarily for drug dealing, was largely free of contaminants, Yank planted a variety of vegetables and edible ornamentals, bordered by a flowering fence. Pedestrians became interested and learned more about the garden from an explanatory sign Yank set up on the corner, and she began selling her vegetables to neighbours on Sunday mornings. The Ruby Slipper Café is conveniently located across the street, and it began purchasing whatever was appropriate to its menu.

When asked what motivated her to create Little Sparrow Farm, Yank quickly explains that she sees herself as part of “something bigger”, an example for others to follow. And true to her hope, other entrepreneurs around town are creating a network of individual farms and gardens, accompanied by the slower development of an infrastructure centre on technical assistance, soil assessment and remediation, and wide availability of manufactured organic compost.

Perhaps the most interesting entrepreneurial example is the Lower Ninth Ward Urban Farming Coalition, which continues its efforts to act on the opportunity presented by the hundreds of vacant land parcels not likely to be developed in the foreseeable future. Neighbourhood landowners, many of them elderly, typically lack the resources to build on their properties and are unwilling to sell to speculators, but are open to leasing the sites to a community organisation at little or no cost. Recently, a 615 sq. metre site on North Villere Street, once the site of a “double shotgun” home characteristic of older New Orleans neighbourhoods, was acquired by the Urban Farming Coalition to establish the first in what Coalition member Brennan Dougherty envisions as a linked network of food production sites scattered among homes. The community-supported agriculture model, where stakeholders pay a farmer upfront for a season’s worth of food, and which normally involves one or perhaps two farms, is being adapted by the Coalition to multiple Ninth Ward residential properties. A lease has just been established for a second site, and the Coalition has verbal agreements for eight others. Dougherty also hopes to join NOFFN in partnering with the Make It Right Foundation to create food-producing gardens across the Lower Ninth Ward.

Any city is a complicated web of interactive systems: ecology, economy, transport, education, public health, recreation, food, etc. Each of these was severely stressed in New Orleans in 2005, and they have recovered at different rates over the past four years. This article has attempted to describe the role of urban agriculture in the rebuilding of the city’s food system. Along with new or returning grocery stores, farmers’ markets and the traditional vending of fruits, vegetables and seafood from small trucks parked on major avenues, the population is now also served by newly restored community gardens and urban farms and will soon, advocates hope, have access to an infrastructure of training, markets and composting sites. Certain local obstacles to urban agriculture practice – limited access to land, the need to raise needed funds to start and maintain projects, contaminated land, and limited availability of compost – are not endemic to New Orleans. But the opportunity exists for the city to become a national model for an increased role of urban agriculture alongside other distribution mechanisms for locally produced food. Urban farming is strengthening the New Orleans food system and creating in the process a healthier, more sustainable community. But the future of New Orleans remains dependent on the reliability of the network of protection levees and barriers now being strengthened by the US Army Corps of Engineers, and the restoration of Louisiana’s coastal wetlands. Urban agriculture is not a means of protecting New Orleans from further catastrophe. But it is part of a larger blueprint for rebuilding and renewal.

City government has been slow to create a supportive environment for urban farming, such as allowing farmers access to the city’s land bank of properties. Not surprisingly, therefore, ever since rebuilding began in the autumn of 2005 urban agriculture practitioners and advocates have not waited for municipal actions to proceed. They understand that the availability of needed philanthropic grants dedicated to renewal will lessen as time goes on, and that even a small grant to start an urban farm can be leveraged into multiple community benefits. As long as some funds are available – along with land and compost – the 12-month growing season in New Orleans promises to yield a rich harvest of fruits and vegetables to nourish the city’s rebirth.

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Notes
1) In this article “New Orleans” refers to the city itself – Orleans Parish – and not the other five metropolitan parishes (counties) in the area. These incurred much less damage from Hurricane Katrina.