

Mark Kilmer

Project 3: Programming Research Paper

Final Draft

**Why do people use Community Gardens? To bolster their sense of community, of course!**

### **Introduction:**

Urban farming has been utilized in cities across the world producing sustenance for the local populations basically since the dawn of civilization. Food production on small plots of land with in an urban context still occurs to this day in backyards, community gardens, rooftops, vacant lots and window boxes. In some countries like Cuba and China it is seen as crucial to the survival of people within the urban context. In Chinese cities, 85% of produce consumed by citizens is grown within the city. In Cuba, urban farm density is even higher. Today in the United States however, farming is generally seen as something reserved for rural areas, vast plots of farmland cover most of the country and are run by small number of people (fewer than 1% of the population). These farms carry a very high economical and environmental cost in terms of transportation, land utilization, chemical runoff etc. There was a time when the urban farms were utilized in the United States, as well. During world war two, two million “victory gardens” were established throughout the country to reduce the nations vulnerability to severed transportation routes, sieges, etc.

Today, Urban Farming in Portland is practiced largely in community gardens. Community gardens are nestled in neighborhoods, on old vacant lots, in parks or on land set aside by neighborhoods, individuals, or the city for just such a purpose. Portland Public Parks alone runs 32 gardens. Anyone can pay about 50 dollars a year for individual plots, and can grow whatever they want. Participation in a community gardening program allows people to meet others with similar interests, develop community ties, feel as though you are a part of something, have a more positive impact on the environment and produce their own food that is healthy and inexpensive. The purpose of this paper is to find out which of these are primary motivations.

## **Thesis Summary:**

For my thesis I am designing a Vertical Farm urban farming community center that will encourage the practice of agriculture both at home and in the community and seeks to promote the establishment of community gardens in local neighborhoods. One important question that needs to be asked is “Why do people use urban farms, specifically community gardens?”

I have done plenty of research on the reasons to build a vertical farm, the potential socio-economic benefits of urban farming, as well as environmental reasons. But as it is generally suggested by organizations and by periodicals that urban farming is great for communities and healthy community activity, I have assumed that people who utilize urban agriculture/community gardens did so because of these community benefits. I was surprised to find my research indicating that this is not the case. While certainly, communities are strengthened by urban farming, it is not a factor in why most people decide to undertake such activities.

## **Research Process:**

I conducted my research through personal user interviews at community gardens. The process was to visit community gardens on sunny days when people were more likely to show up. I would then ask a series of questions, and enter into discussion with users who were present and assess their motivations for tending to a plot in a community garden. Some people declined to interview but agreed to respond if I would email them the questions.

The interviews consisted of a series of standardized questions and whatever follow up question arose from user responses. The questions were as follows:

- How long have you been gardening in community gardens?
- Do you also garden at home?
- Why did you start?
- What is the frequency of activity that you observe in the garden when you come to your plot?
- How frequently do you tend to your plot?
- What do you grow? (i.e. Crops or flowers or both)

- In what ways if any does community gardening contribute to your sense of community?
- Would you consider social aspects of farming a key reason for your having a plot in a community garden?
  - o Would you say it is a bonus?
  - o Or would you say it doesn't really apply?
  - o Please explain.
- Do you have close friends that you have made because of the garden?
- Anything else you would like to add?

It should be noted that there were a few problems with this method of locating users. First of all, due to the late season, cold, wet weather, and scarce daylight, users were not often available for interview and much time was spent just seeking them out. Secondly, more users were available in the wealthier neighborhoods, and only one user was ever located in a low-income neighborhood. Finally, not a single email response was completed. Therefore, the amount of data I was able to collect is fairly low and not well distributed among classes and thus may not accurately reflect actual morals and values of all community garden users. Despite the small number of people I interviewed, the results were surprising.

**Data:**

The following are interview summaries from each of the interviewees. Each question is followed by the users' respective answers.

Lucas – Sewallcrest Community Gardens

Sharon – Sewallcrest Community Gardens

Ron – Colonel Summers Community Gardens

Nancy – Portsmouth Community Gardens

Doug – U.C. Davis Community Gardens

- How long have you been gardening in community gardens?

- L. Many Years
  - S. 4 years
  - R. 6<sup>th</sup> year at this plot, been farming all my life. Some of these folks have had these plots for 20 years or more.
  - N. 4<sup>th</sup> year
  - D. 2<sup>nd</sup> year
- Do you also garden at home?
- L. Yes I do.
  - S. Yes
  - R. Just a little.
  - N. A little.
  - D. We grow a couple herbs in a flower box.
- Why did you start?
- L. I like to eat from the earth. I think it is a great outlet.
  - S. I love to grow things
  - R. No space at home, big trees block sun and cover ground, like to have fresh veggies.
  - N. I just love to garden. Have flowerbeds at home but don't grow crops in them, just flowers. I like to grow my food because I am very frugal.
  - D. I enjoy it.
- What is the frequency of activity that you observe in the garden when you come to your plot?
- L. Everyday I am here I see a number of people here actively working. In the summer sometimes we are all here.
  - S. I see people every time I'm here.
  - N. Very little. More than the average person I guess but I'm here more than everyone else.
  - D. People are there everyday, Davis has nice weather all the time.
- How frequently do you tend to your plot?
- L. Pretty much every nice day I can, during summer 2 or 3 times a week.
  - S. Once or twice a week
  - R. Now 2 times a week, spring 4 times a week.

- N. Whenever I can. More than anyone else here. Everyday in summer, up to 5 hours a day.
- D. Couple times a week.
- What do you grow?
  - L. I only grow produce. A lot of people grow flowers in addition to their crops, to attract the right kinds of insects or repel the wrong kinds.
  - S. Crops and flowers.
  - R. Crops only
  - N. My husband grows flowers at home I only grow crops [at the community gardens].
  - D. I grow flowers if I have them. Mostly I like to grow food.
- In what ways if any does community gardening contribute to your sense of community?
  - L. You get to know people. the community garden donates food to the community. We share bulbs and plants with each other. A few of us tend the school plot when it is out of season, or tend to others plots if they are unable to maintain them so they don't get too messy.
  - S. Good conversation with familiar faces. We get to know new people, trade items.
  - R. We all get together, help out one another, trading, communicating. Two times a year we donate a lot of food.
  - N. "I'm proud to say that I garden over there – that that's my crop... we give crops to people in local houses because we grow more than we can eat... I plant herbs on the other side of the fence for anybody to take." I bring my grandchildren out and they all enjoy it too, and they bring their friends. It is a very healthy thing for them.
  - D. It's a little social but mostly I like that to grow my own stuff, and eat delicious produce.
- Would you consider social aspects of farming a key reason for your having a plot in a community garden?
  - Would you say it is a bonus? Or would you say it doesn't really apply?
    - L. No. Bonus

- S. No. Bonus
  - R. No, not a key reason. Definitely a bonus.
  - N. No. Bonus.
  - D. No. Bonus.
- Do you have close friends that you have made because of the garden?
- L. Yes, I have made friends [at the community garden], but there are also personalities that I don't mix well with. Just like anywhere else.
  - S. Yes
  - R. Not Close friends but acquaintances.
  - N. I'd say they are more of acquaintances.
  - D. Not really.

### **Conclusions:**

Based on the conversations I have had with users of the community gardens. Most people come to the community gardens to farm. They see farming as an outlet for them from their daily lives, a healthy decision that will supply them with healthy food, but not as a social function. Community Farmers seem to share a desire to eat from the earth, which precedes their desire to be part of community. All of them described a desire to grow their own produce, as opposed to simply gardening for the sake of garden, or for flowers and aesthetic reasons. None of them listed community/social aspects as key reasons for their community garden usage. Some even reporting days when the gardens were full and nobody really talked to anyone else at all, each concerned with their own plots.

However this does not preclude that the sense of community is not bolstered by these gardens. I personally witnessed people helping other people - one user donating bulbs to another user - introductions and discussions about occupations and life outside of the garden. Every user listed some type of pleasant social or community aspects and all but one discussed sharing, trading of supplies and crops with other members of the garden and or community. One user informed me that there were a few group plots including one run by the nearby middle school. This plot gets neglected during the summer months when the schools are out of session. A few of the other users volunteer to tend to the middle schools' plot to ensure that it doesn't get to messy, while everyone is away. Each year the gardens organize donation drives where crops are

donated. And people donated crops or gave them to neighbors on their own as well. It would seem that even though the simple act of bringing people to the same place to garden doesn't necessarily give them a sense of community. Community can't help but to happen anyway.

### **Where do we go from here?**

This study has given me some pretty critical insight into the morals, values and goals of the users of community gardens, and will affect thus will affect the form of prototype gardens designed for the my terminal project.

A critical question that is raised at this point is this: if users are making the initial moves to participate in community gardens not because of their desire to improve the community, but because of a desire to eat from the earth, how does one instill such values in those for whom these ideas are not a priority? How can a community garden develop successfully if the community itself is not interested in producing their own crops.

## Bibliography

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