Community Gardens: An Exploration of Urban Agriculture in the Bronx, New York City

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“MillionTreesNYC, Green Infrastructure and Urban Ecology: A Research Symposium, March 5-6, 2010”

Introduction

Urban agriculture/community gardening in the Bronx has multiple roles, including health-promoting, economic, environmental, and cultural. These roles are particularly important in light of urban sustainability issues and environmental justice concerns, such as differential access to open space, recreation, and fresh produce in poorer communities and communities of color, as well as differential health and health impacts of unsustainable practices on these communities. The gardens generally help promote a sense of place—a focus for communities which often have little access to safe parks or recreational spaces within their neighborhoods, and create a center for community cultural and educational activities. The Bronx currently has about 175 community gardens administered by Operation Green Thumb, as well as many other community gardens operated by nonprofit entities, such as the Parks Council, and community gardens on private property (Maantay, accessed 2000).

In view of these facts, the scope of this project is to study, explore and describe the Urban Agriculture and Productive Landscaping as an alternative way to face urban problems and to reveal the gardeners’ perceptions of quality of life improvements. The work is focused in the Community Gardens of the Bronx, New York, and is part of a comparative multi case study of different urban realities: the Bronx, New York, and the Fanny Neighborhood community, located in Curitiba, PR, Brazil. In this Brown Neighborhood the study targeted urban agriculture as practiced in home gardens.

Methodology

The study is being conducted through semi-structured interviews with the gardeners and by visiting and observing the Community Gardens. The analyzed domain will be a self-selection sample (only the gardeners willing to accept being interviewed) out of the 20 active community gardens. Community Gardens listed as under the jurisdiction of the NYC Park Department’s Operation Green Thumb. In addition, survey data (bibliographic research, analysis of documentation [reports, laws, etc.], and mapping and spatial analysis of the Community Gardens’ practices) neighborhood/sociodemographic characteristics using GIS (Geographic Information Systems), are included as parts of the research. The study is currently on-going and presents the data from the 20 Community Gardens visited and interviews with 32 gardeners.

Results

For the Community Gardens that have been visited so far in the Bronx (n=18): 53% of them grow predominately vegetables, 52% cultivate many flowers, 11% grow flowers and vegetables in approximately the same amounts, and 3% have mostly trees in the garden. Just half of the 19 Community Gardens visited sell their produce in farmers markets located in the community. Most of the 33 gardeners interviewed (82%) share out less than half of their harvests, and 31% of the interviewed gardeners shared more than half. Usually they share with friends, neighbors, people from community or other members of the garden. When asked about the benefits they have in their lives by participating in urban agriculture in the Community Gardens, 36% of the gardeners answered “easy closer to the family,” “neighborhood beautification,” and “family health.” The gardeners’ perception about how the Community Gardens have improved their quality-of-life is very positive, indicating that they can use the gardens for many purposes growing food, enjoyable nature, and active recreation. When they were asked about the challenges they are facing to keep the gardens viable, most of them answered that they have problems with maintaining the vegetation, vandalism and the constant threat of potential eviction from the gardens by the city. The lack of secure tenure and long-term protection of many Community Gardens was also pointed as a problem by Teakle and Keesey (2000) in a study about the Latin Community Gardens in NY.

The socio-demographic analysis of the community gardens yields some interesting results as well. While some of the variables seem not to suggest any potential relationships with respect to proximity to community gardens (such as commuting distance and city streets, other variables, such as ethnicity, linguistic isolation, educational attainment, and poverty, are worth further exploration. There is a significantly higher frequency/larger population living in proximity to community gardens, while higher linguistic isolation living further away from them. Linguistic isolation and poverty are both higher within walking distance to the community gardens, and a large part of the population living within walking distance to the gardens did not finish high school.

Conclusion

The study is on-going, but so far we can conclude that the activity of growing vegetables and other plants is also a way to socialize within their neighborhood, and it is very important for the social reproduction of the community in the Bronx. Regarding the gardeners’ perceptions on the activity, it was intentional that the garden is a space to stay together, enjoy nature, and it is “therapy.” Some gardeners have spoken about their fear of losing their garden due to noise, humans. The Community Gardens program is beneficial for the community, not only by growing plants and contribute to the urban environment but also to create a place where the gardeners and others in the community “feel at home.” There is a strong need to continue the conversation with all the stake-holders involved about how these places can be protected and how the community can appropriate them.

Socio-demographic variables that characterize areas in close proximity to community gardens may also help to better understand who uses community gardens and why. Further analysis of these data may offer additional resources critical for promoting and protecting these important community spaces.

References

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