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# Cities, Gardening, and Urban Citizenship: Transforming Vacant Acres into Community Resources

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# Cities, Gardening, and Urban Citizenship: Transforming Vacant Acres into Community Resources

What does the urban gardener do, in the process of reclaiming and transforming previously vacant and abandoned land? What are the political, social, and ecological implications of creating community managed and owned spaces through urban agriculture? To address such questions, in the context of work that is being done across the world to transform vacant land into community resources, this article investigates the powerful potential of community managed gardening projects from the perspective of urban citizenship. First, the term “urban citizenship” is explored, with particular emphasis on the distinction between passive and active forms of citizenship. The article then explores the kind of city that gardening practices produce when they aspire toward their radical potential as manifestations of urban citizenship, with cases from Boston, New York, and Philadelphia that unearth empowering and effective fields of action. Insights from theory and practice reveal how community managed gardening projects can create opportunities for creative political participation, the development of local leadership, and ultimately a resilient social infrastructure that top down policy or business models are unlikely to achieve. Finally, the article suggests that organizing gardening and sustainability initiatives as a project of urban citizenship could fundamentally remake urban society—in a way that is more equitable and responsive to local contexts—as it generates community capacity in the age of 21st century urbanization.

## **Keywords**

urban ecology, social infrastructure, citizenship, vacant land, public space, urban agriculture, community planning

## INTRODUCTION

In response to rising concerns related to contemporary urbanization from poverty to pollution, residents in cities around the world are turning to a diverse array of community land management and urban agriculture practices.<sup>1</sup> Policy makers and community organizations have also noted that farmers markets, gardens, local food production, are becoming increasingly common in cities (e.g. USDA, 2014; National Gardening Association, 2014; Smit, Nasr, and Ratta, 2001). While much attention has been given to the rising local and urban agriculture movements (e.g. Tornaghi, 2014; Lyson 2004; Ladner 2011), less has been done to investigate the kinds of social relationships and participation that actually maintain community managed spaces, especially urban gardens, over the long term. For example, what does the urban gardener do, in the process of reclaiming and transforming previously vacant and abandoned land? What are the political, social, and ecological implications of creating community managed or owned spaces through urban agriculture?

Examples from practice demonstrate that gardening is much more than a green hobby or an ornamental pursuit, and the urban gardener, as a potentially transformative urban actor, may prove to be critically important for the future of cities. When gardening creates shared or community managed spaces, it involves participation in the plant and political ecologies of cities, where the urban gardener is potentially a citizen and city-maker—an engaged participant in the social and spatial production of the city.

Exploring the connection between urban gardening and citizenship in the era of contemporary urbanization radically reframes the urban garden as a field of transformative action—a task that requires critical engagement with current theory and practice. On one hand, the theory of an emergent urban citizenship can inform empowering community practices and fields of action. In another sense, urban gardening and community land management practices—unfolding now—are redefining theoretical understandings of what cities, gardening, and urban citizenship can be in the 21st century.

## REIMAGINING CITIZENSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY URBANIZATION

Citizenship has historically been a relationship between legally documented citizens and a nation-state that secures basic living conditions for its citizens—from public safety and waste

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<sup>1</sup> Urban agriculture and community land management practitioners voiced such concerns and solutions when they assembled at the “Turning Vacant Acres into Community Resources” symposium held in April 2014 in New York City at The New School. This symposium—organized by NYC land access advocacy organization 596 Acres and The New School’s Center for Environment and Design—engaged more than 30 advocates, policy makers and organizations from 7 countries in a discussion of practices for community access to land in New York City and around the world. Examples of urban gardens in later pages are meant to illustrate the connection between cities, gardening and urban citizenship that emerged through the presentations of practitioners represented at the conference. There are many excellent garden programs and projects beyond these studies that embody urban citizenship. Accordingly, this essay uses case studies to provide illustrative examples of possible fields of action—not a complete survey or definitive best practices—for participatory urban citizenship in a variety of local urban contexts.

management to water and mobility. This long-standing conception of citizenship seems weak in the face of contemporary urbanization and uneven growth, which radically re-situates the locus of global power, culture, and economic growth around a new “urban regime” (Sassen, 1991; Brenner and Keil, 2006). Similarly, in many regions the nation-state faces declining resources and diminished political will to facilitate community projects or public infrastructures for the common good (Gadanhó, 2014). Under such conditions, what is to become of citizenship? How can the creation of community resources and public spaces be facilitated, even at a time when bureaucratic management and large-scale private interests exert powerful influences over urban development?

While conventional discourse about citizenship points towards a relatively passive understanding of citizenship based on legal status or documentation, citizenship has equally important, and emerging, meanings that are more participatory, empowering, and adequate to represent the conditions of contemporary urbanization. For example James Holston and Arjun Appadurai (1996), in their essay “Cities and Citizenship,” argue that formal membership of a particular society through legal status or documentation does not necessarily lead to substantive citizenship. Formal citizenship can be designated with a piece of paper, but the authors suggest that the true test for citizenship in the future will be the performative dimension of citizenship.

The distinction between formal and performative citizenship is critically important for the future of cities. While a piece of paper may affirm legal citizen status, the productivity, and perhaps very existence, of urban society depends on citizens asserting themselves—socio-economically, culturally, politically, socially. Accordingly, Holston and Appadurai (1996) notice a redefinition of citizenship emerging in the context of an increasingly urbanized world, an urban citizenship.

Their basic premise is that more engaged urban citizenship will become the dominant model of social organization as the nation-state model of citizenship continues to disintegrate. According to Holston and Appadurai (1996, page 192), the nation state model assumes that the national community is “committed to constituting a common good and to shaping a common life well-suited to the conditions of modernity,” sustaining itself through performances of national citizenship. Today as inequalities widen and nation-state governments inadequately respond, the performances of this national citizenship are failing. There are large groups of people across the globe that are not represented in the rituals and proceedings of a national government—for example, in the urban neighborhoods of the United States full of vacant buildings and land, or in informally built “illegal” settlements without access to basic infrastructure.<sup>2</sup>

When the nation-state fails to represent its citizens, Holston and Appadurai (1996) explain how advocacy groups, marginalized residents, and people formerly excluded by the nation-state are asserting a new kind of citizenship as a right to difference. This is an urban citizenship that supplements the nation’s ideal of universal equality with everyday practices of

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<sup>2</sup> Mike Davis (2006) describes this failure of democratic representation, where entire regions of the urban poor are not counted as part of the nation-state or are considered illegal. The United States has its own failings of representation in the extreme political and economic disinvestment of the post-industrial urban condition—with increasing vacancies driven by government authored slum clearance policy and market driven displacement.

inclusion—practices that include claiming public space, organizing communities, or producing social, economic, or political relationships. Urban citizenship here emerges as a process of inclusion that produces social and spatial structures, constitutes a public, and creates an urban commons. Organizers, activists, marginalized groups, and those not adequately represented by national governments are creating a new social contract, a new mode of operating that is more politically democratic, socially just, and overall representative of the diversity of lived experiences.

Urban theorist Andy Merrifield (2013, page 32) similarly traces the development of an activist urban citizenship from Rousseau to the present day, recalling Rousseau’s reflection on cities and the social contract: “buildings make a city, but citizens make *la cite* [the urban].” For Merrifield, this means that a city is both a physical space and also “the totality of political and economic space in which one now belongs” in an urbanized society. Accordingly, urban citizenship goes beyond mere existence to include the possibility of inhabiting a co-produced vision of what the city can be. The urban is both a concrete place and an expressed ideal of what life can be.

Merrifield here is reflecting on Rousseau in the context of critical urban theory in the last fifty years, which has emphasized the importance of social and spatial processes of urbanization, instead of idealizing the city as an already-built product (Castells, 1979; Harvey 1973; Lefebvre, 1970). This perspective is helpful in trying to grasp what kind of “urban” spaces are actually being made through new modes of participatory urban citizenship. For example in *Beyond Zuccotti Park*, Jeffrey Hou (2012) builds on insights of critical urban theory to redefine the new kinds of urban publics that are being produced through urban social movements. He argues that social movements like Occupy Wall Street demonstrate that urban publics are social *and* spatial structures. In other words, the urban public realm is that which is produced in common—not just institutions and spaces that are technically “accessible” to people, but the active democratic participation in the making of the urban citizenship.

Accordingly, urban citizenship is not about identifying a singular “public” or “city” to which some abstract urban citizenry must belong. Rather, urban citizenship is the process through which specific groups vie for contention, contest conventional ideologies, and collectively produce space that reflects their existence. As Nancy Fraser (1990) explains, there are multiple publics and counter-publics, not one universal abstract conception of public. Every particular public has a history of specific groups advocating and co-producing space. Public space, she suggests, is not something that is already made; it is an urban practice in the making.

For example, this concept of multiple urban publics is key because it requires a new understanding of urban public space beyond the long-dominant Eurocentric approach to public—epitomized for Fraser in the writings of Habermas (1962)—which produces passive spaces for leisure or consumption. The singular vision of public space that prioritizes leisure and consumption (which has manifested in modern societies, from Habermas’ coffee shop through to today’s privately owned and managed public spaces) does not reflect the on-the-ground realities of “actually existing democracy,” and it inadequately addresses the ways that diverse populations might participate in shaping the spaces of democracy. This contribution to emerging theories of urban citizenship suggests that conventional public and private responses to the modern urban

crisis (from “business improvement” zones and manicured plazas to large scale public infrastructure projects) may no longer be viable as the forces of urbanization impact more lives and the public infrastructures crumble under the weight of corporate and bureaucratic (mis)management or neglect.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, active urban citizenship has enormous potential as an act of public expression of diverse groups that create the conditions for their urban existence. What will make the urban spaces of the 21st century will not be their “pure physicality or centrality,” but their existence as meeting places for different levels of encounter, where people can get to know their neighbors, work through their competing visions, and grow something new (Merrifield, 2013). In other words, urban citizenship properly understood and practiced could produce active community spaces of public encounter and production, such as the collectively managed urban garden. The urban garden, is therefore representative of a powerful new urban citizenship that has the potential to fundamentally remake urban society.<sup>4</sup>

<b>CONVENTIONAL CITIZENSHIP</b>	<b>EMERGING URBAN CITIZENSHIP</b>
based on excluding those who are not citizens	based on increasing opportunities for inclusion
legal right to “universal equality”	socio-economic and cultural right to difference
proved through documentation	actively produced
granted by the nation-state	asserted and performed
people are passive recipients	people are political participants
universal or singular vision of public	multiple publics
defined by residing within national boundaries	defined by regions of co-generative activity

**Figure 1.** There is a growing movement of people and organizations asserting their right to difference as they make urban spaces that reflect their dreams, desires, and needs—representative of an emerging urban citizenship. This differs markedly from more conventional definitions of modern citizenship, that create rules or structures for documentation and secure a variety of legal rights.

<sup>3</sup> Privately owned public spaces and business improvement districts have been two dominant approaches to public space, for example, in New York there are 525 of these privately owned public spaces, according to the Municipal Art Society of New York, NYC Department of City Planning and Jerold Kayden (2000).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2004) theorize the emergence of a global civil society as a “multitude.” The multitude, a manifestation of an active citizenship, is their explanation of a kind of democracy that has risen with networked coalitions since the end of the 20th century. This emergent urban society represents diverse actors who produce the conditions of life, as a active collection of groups that work towards a common good. Hardt and Negri (2004, page 159) further argue that, in contrast to the the traditional conception of citizenship and democratic society where individuals become an abstract notion of “the people” when they set aside their differences and identities, the multitude forms in the expression of difference.

## GARDENING AND URBAN CITIZENSHIP

Vandana Shiva's work and writing is a reminder that a vision for civic engagement and citizenship must also include the non-human systems of cities and the Earth. She powerfully articulates this vision for global citizenship in her book *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability and Peace*. For Shiva (2005), *Earth Democracy* brings ancient wisdom about our fundamental connectedness to all of life to a modern 21st century society of rapid urbanization, top-down bureaucratic management, and corporate presence in everyday life. In the midst of such forces, *Earth Democracy* is about defending resources of the planet as a commons and protecting human rights.

Shiva points out that while protests can be productive, for example, to draw attention to the deleterious impacts of water privatization or privatization of seeds, *Earth Democracy* is about “what we do in-between.” This daily work of making local change in a global context—in a way that works with the planets ongoing fluctuations and human possibilities—creates living cultures, living democracies, and living economies. Shiva (2005) explains that *living* democracy is more empowering and effective than the conventional practice of a representative democracy. Living democracy reflects the peculiarities of place and culture, as its development flows from the essential engagement of citizens seeking solutions together and evolving with lessons learned.<sup>5</sup> This differs from representative democracy, because as citizens participate in the movement for *Earth Democracy*, evolving with lessons learned in their work for the common good, they are at the intersection of an urban and environmental citizenship—working towards community stewardship of the larger human and non-human systems of an urbanizing planet.<sup>6</sup>

In this sense, the concept of active urban citizenship developed above can be refined to include participation in both human and non-human systems, which brings the example of the urban gardener to mind. The design, management, and growth of a formerly built or vacant space is often the work of an urban gardener. While it can be fun and healthy, it is also a messy, dirty, and contested process of interrelating with the local ecological and political conditions. The tasks of a gardener—preparing the earth, tilling the soil, planting the seed, watering, weeding—are applicable in both plant and political contexts. The work is ongoing and everyday. The urban gardener collectively cultivates the productive potential of the land year after year.

The serious urban gardener does not typically harbor idealistic visions of an unspoiled nature. Although environmentalists have long cherished their “wilderness,” which theoretically stands apart from the influences of urban society (Cronon, 1996), the act of gardening is a highly selective, cultural, collective, and human production of an environment. Accordingly, the symbolic image of the gardener might be a more adequate representation of environmentalism in an age of large scale urbanization—a more participatory and active approach to built and non-built environments. In many ways gardening provides a distinct orientation towards urban

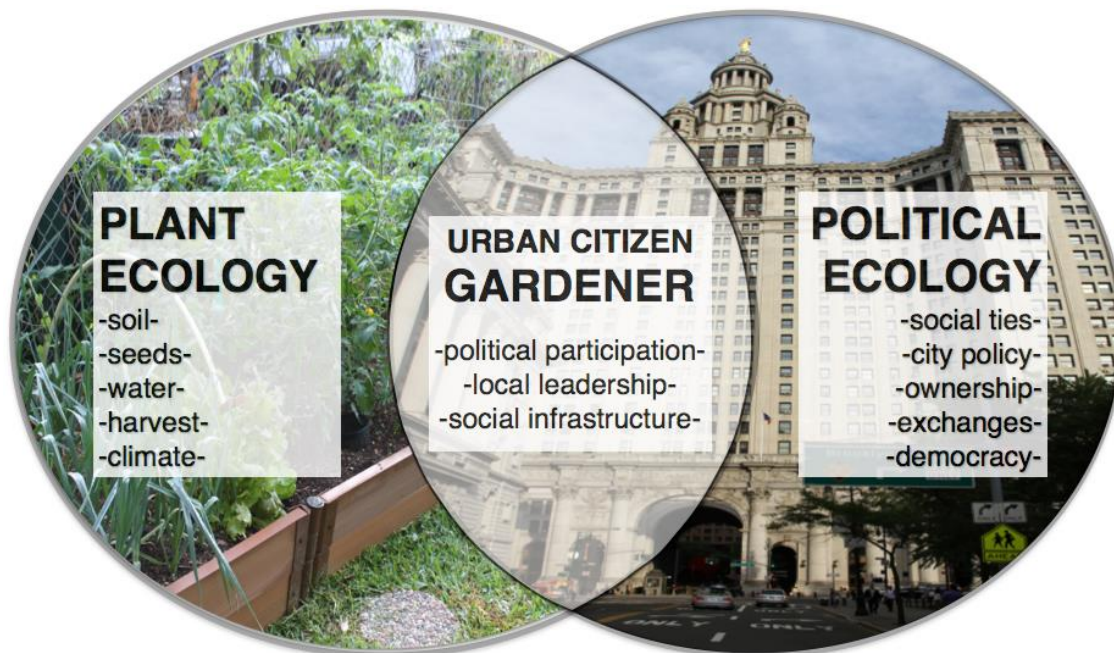
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<sup>5</sup> Principles of *Earth Democracy* are also represented in a report from the International Commission on the Future of Food and Agriculture (chaired by Vandana Shiva) titled, “Manifesto on the Future of Food.” The report was published in a book edited by Vandana Shiva (2007).

<sup>6</sup> Andrew Dobson (2007) suggests that sustainable development outcomes can be enhanced through the inclusion of increasing numbers of people as part of a collective action.

citizenship at the nexus of conventional definitions of non-human nature and the political entity of the city, which has much in common with the activist urban citizenship that Jane Jacobs promoted throughout her life.

From the very beginning of her writing Jacobs insists that urbanists ought to produce cities in a way that respects the similarities between human created systems and “the rest of nature.” The last chapter of *Life and Death of Great American Cities* explores the “kind of problem a city is.” Cities, Jacobs claims (1961, page 438), are “problems in organized complexity—organisms that are replete with unexamined, but obviously intricately interconnected” relationships. Like elements of a community in the scientific field of ecology, the elements of the city are part of an interrelated organic whole. This is a reality that requires the citizen to engage with environments as an urban ecologist, seeing social, ecological, and political institutions as possibilities for action like a gardener tills the land seeking possibilities for growth.



**Figure 2.** The urban citizen gardener is at the nexus of living plant and political ecologies.

The interrelated ecologies of urbanization would inspire much of Jacobs’ subsequent writing, until it became a central concern in one of her final books, *The Nature of Economies* (2001). In this book, she asserts that urban economic development operates under principles similar to those that describe the development of an organism. Therefore, the urban citizen is acting within a web of both human and non-human ecologies—not as separated entities, but with a simultaneous, coordinated, and place-based response to local conditions.

Jacobs’ insights about the ecological nature of human systems are useful for understanding how gardening is connected to urban citizenship. Urban gardeners who transform vacant land into community resources demonstrate that the effective urban gardener must manage both the horticultural ecosystems related to plant development and the political



ecosystems related to land access, use, and tenure. This endeavor is an act of the next generation of urban citizenship.

The focus on urban ecology and overlapping relationships within the city orients urban citizenship within the processes of urbanization (facilitated by citizens-in-the-making), as opposed to the product-oriented city object (filled with passive documented citizens). While urban gardeners may find it important to develop collective vision for shared space, if they lose sight of the daily task of gardening, the plants will die and the cultivated landscape will fall into disrepair.

Through the gardening and urban citizenship perspective, the gardener becomes a symbol of the city steward, especially in the urbanizing areas where conventional market economies and governments fail. The engaged, hands-on work of gardening also makes it clear that urban sustainability must be more than a series of reactions to environmental problems, and instead be framed as an active project of city making. Accordingly, a gardening approach to urban citizenship—demonstrated in the following sections through a review of cases where vacant land was transformed into community managed space—emphasizes the development of creative political participation, local leadership, and social infrastructure.

## **GARDENING AS A CATALYST FOR POLITICAL AND CULTURAL PARTICIPATION**

In New York City, the Green Guerrillas emerged in the 1970s as groups of gardeners who sometimes literally broke through fences to access vacant parcels of land. During this time New York City gardeners were especially resurgent in areas that had faced particularly strong economic disinvestment, for example in The Bronx, Lower East Side of Manhattan, and East New York. The initial goal of these gardeners was to clean vacant parcels, cultivate land, or increase food access in neighborhoods ravaged by political and economic disinvestment. The vision was at once simple but also politically contested. Gardeners did not typically have land tenure, and were often evicted as the housing markets changed in the surrounding neighborhood (DelSesto, 2013). The Green Guerrillas grew from a single garden project to an organization that sought to provide resources to other activists.

Pairing guerrilla with garden demonstrates both the orientation towards the urgent creation of a different kind of city and the long-term work of actually producing this new urban environment. It is through the vision of “guerrilla gardening” that gardening is clearly much more than a passive hobby or ornamental project. The guerrilla gardening model, although not prescriptive or perfect, suggests that gardens can become spaces for creative self-organized intervention where local residents grow their community through political participation.

Guerrilla gardeners show how the production of a garden can be a creative political act in response to urgent needs for community, expression, encounter, or food. It is through political and socio-cultural orientation, that gardens cease to be a green design object and become an evolving process of citizen participation and city-making. Urbanist Aseem Inam (2013) argues that approaching urbanism projects as “creative political acts” can create radical transformations in the material and social structures of cities. Inam draws on cases from around the world to

demonstrate that designing and building cities is a highly political and contested project, even if planners, policymakers, or designers do not always recognize it as such.

Accordingly, approaching urbanism as an opportunity for creative political participation is potentially revolutionary because it invites urbanists (e.g. the urban citizen gardener) to “imaginatively and creatively engage with the political reality of the city to create alternative processes for designing and building cities” (Inam, 2013, pages 206-207). The gardener is well poised to re-imagine the processes for designing and building cities at the intersection of living plant ecologies and living political ecologies—to subvert conventional models of urban design, planning, and policy with more empowering, collaborative, and radically inclusive tactics. Gardening in this sense can be a substantive citizenship practice of inclusion, where different socio-economic groups assert their right to difference. For example, research is now indicating that food production and gardening can provide important links to cultural memory and political participation for diverse cultures living in United States (Alkon and Agyeman, 2011).

Practitioners in tune with on-the-ground realities have long known this, as the gardeners of a Puerto Rican community in North Philadelphia demonstrate. “Las Parcelas,” founded about 25 years ago in partnership with collaboration with the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society serves as a neighborhood hub of gardens. The founders of the initial “Las Parcelas” space saw the gardens—which are full of native Puerto Rican herbs and indigenous plants that connect gardeners to their culinary roots and cultural traditions—as a way to express their Puerto Rican culture in a city of the United States, while also educating the next generation about important aspects of Puerto Rican culture. The garden spaces include beautiful murals, a model of a Puerto Rican farm house called “La Casita,” and a number of cultural programs to engage local neighbors (Nairn, 2007).

Through participation in the production of a neighborhood space, these Philadelphia gardeners are asserting their political and cultural right to difference, even as their gardens became part of the neighborhood and more formalized institutions of the city. Participation in the social and physical structures in the neighborhood is an act of substantive citizenship, a way for gardeners to create a social and physical space. The locally founded “Noris Square Neighborhood Project,” of which the Las Parcelas gardens are a part, produces cultural, political, economic, and social value level with a wide range of public and private collaborations. The gardeners promote positive neighborhood change through culturally-themed youth education, green spaces, and the arts. Gardening is used as a creative political process to inspire the next generation of young people to participate in the making of their city, from the perspective of their cultural origins.

Whether through the expression of socio-economic and cultural difference or through the act of using vacant land for the assertion of political and democratic rights, gardening proves a valuable tactic for creative political and cultural participation. This context of gardening suggests that the next generations of city-makers are not removed from the daily experience urban neighborhoods; they are participating directly in their immediate environments.

## GARDENING AND THE CULTIVATION OF ORGANIC LOCAL LEADERSHIP

While participation is important for substantive urban citizenship, developing local organic leadership is also critical. Local leaders are people who live in the communities they represent and are able to speak directly to their neighbors, inspiring them to act and participate in their city. A local leader also emerges, because she or he is able to connect local conditions with larger structures and systems—for example linking local problems of vacant land to systemic injustice in the food system. The Boston-based nationally recognized sustainable agriculture organization, The Food Project, produces many examples of local leadership, including Wil Bullock.

In 1995 at the age of 14, Wil joined The Food Project's flagship summer youth program. At the time it was just a summer job, and he had only a slight interest in urban agriculture.<sup>7</sup> But the sense of community, purpose and orientation towards justice kept him coming back each year. In 2004, Bullock was still with The Food Project, and applied for a \$40,000 grant with the Kellogg Foundation to work on a project related to youth obesity issues. He won that grant and used part of the money to buy recording equipment and create a four-track CD of his own music that fused his talent singing R&B and hip-hop (Black, 2006). Upon the release of this CD, Bullock traveled around the country performing for diverse groups of young people and encouraging policy makers to invest in the development of local leaders. At home, he trained youth as part of a fellowship program associated with The Food Project.

To many urbanists, planners, or public health advocates, music may seem like an unlikely vehicle to research and communicate a message about obesity and the food system. But for Bullock, music is a key method of understanding and responding to youth obesity in cities because, "The average person can't afford to go to a conference for a week to learn about this stuff... There's a lot of information out there but it's not being conveyed in a way that my younger brother, who loves to eat at McDonald's, can understand... Music is my tool to get young people involved in changing the food system" (Black, 2006). Music here is used as a leadership style and method of communication.

Bullock's insight also points to a much larger issue within many specialized fields of urban planning and design that typically ignore the larger question of substantive urban citizenship. Due to funding of urban development and regulatory power structures (for example, credentialed experts trained by large universities who have the power to disperse funds), assessments of local conditions are often made by outsiders, and little attempt is made to cultivate a genuine local leadership. What's too often missing from traditional practices is the organic kind of urban leadership that gardening education and food justice programs can cultivate—to empower people to build community and engage directly with their local environments. The Food Project and Wil Bullock's music represent the possibility of creating a new urban culture to engage historically marginalized communities in the everyday production of healthy environments.

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<sup>7</sup> For further investigation of the connections between local leadership, hip hop and urban sustainability, see Cermak (2012).

In his writings on organic intellectuals, social theorist Antonio Gramsci identifies the necessity of local leadership to sustain and advance empowering social practices, with the founding premise that “Every group, coming into existence on the original terrain of an essential function in the world of economic production, creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals” (Gramsci, 2012 edition, page 5). Gramsci later describes how effective change in urban society requires the development of organic intellectuals that embody an organic quality of thought and produce “organizational stability and central cultural direction” (Gramsci, 330). These organic intellectuals are leaders of networked social movements that give voice to already existing practices and activities rather than imposing new mechanical scientific theories on urban reality.

This organic local leadership is a performed urban citizenship that embraces an active and critical relationship to the urban environment. The organic intellectual embodies urban citizenship because he or she gathers people to a cause and a way of participating in the city. For example, a verse from Wil Bullock’s track “Time for Change” (2006) suggests both systemic critique and local call to action:

*Its time for change now;  
I'm making a plan,  
People holler stand up but ain't taking a stand,  
We should boycott Mickey Ds and Burger Kings,  
Assume logic,  
Hit The Food Project and learn a thing or two,  
Target our youth,  
Teach them how to grow food in their own  
back yards make the future old school,  
And it's so true,  
Go down the street in any hood,  
There ain't a decent supermarket  
How is that any good  
But you got your L spots and your  
Corner bodegas,  
Conspiracy they're playing us like  
Portable Segas,  
But we gotta catch a cab ride the  
Bus with heavy bags,  
Just to buy fruits and vegetables  
Plenty sad,  
I'm a product of this unfortunately reality,  
And its not all right with me I'm trying to  
Rid this tragedy,  
Get the Mayor and Governor and  
All the big wigs,  
To put more money into school lunch  
And not the Big Dig  
Scholar*

When Bullock explains the need to “make the future old school” he is suggesting that cities do not necessarily need complex solutions invented by policy makers, designers or planners, because many neighborhoods are full of people who have been responding to waves of urban crisis for decades as they take matters creatively into their own hands. If developers or governments really want to make a difference they could invest in the local leaders who might become the new generation of farmers.<sup>8</sup> These farmers will be urban leaders, citizens, and city-makers who grow healthy food and communities. In addition, Bullock notices that there is clearly an availability of resources for large urban mobilizations, like Boston’s multi-billion dollar Big Dig project. What if cities were able to also use these resources to help shape active urban citizenship projects, with private and public funding structures to invest in the development of local leadership?

## URBAN GARDEN AS VITAL SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Recent super storms in the United States including Sandy and Katrina have brought attention to the critical importance of investing in urban infrastructures. Community-based responses to such events, including Occupy Sandy, demonstrate that infrastructure is more than a technical achievement of engineers; it is an evolving system that meets specific local needs and expresses the shared aspirations of a society.

Although the word infrastructure typically evokes large engineering projects, urban gardens are an excellent example of a powerful social infrastructure—a set of social resources, spaces, and connections that foster urban citizenship.<sup>9</sup> The importance of social infrastructure suggests that a main priority of infrastructure for the 21st century city needs to focus on building the social relationships and shared resources that make urban society possible.

While gardeners have long known the numerous benefits of their work, the ways that gardens can function as a vital social infrastructure is becoming clearer as researchers identify the specific kinds of activities and benefits that gardens generate. For example, a recent project of New York City’s *Design Trust for Public Space* conducted a multi-year survey of NYC’s urban gardens and their gardeners from 2009 to 2014. The research, published in the “Five Borough Farm” report, found that there are more than 700 active urban gardens growing food in New York City. In these gardens, researchers identified 28 different “urban agriculture activities,” from seed saving and rainwater harvesting to environmental education and community-based research. In the study, connections were then made from these activities to a variety of health, social, ecological, and economic benefits that make up a vital social infrastructure—outlining how urban gardeners are improving access to healthy food, fostering

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<sup>8</sup> Will Allen, from Milwaukee-based organization Growing Power, has been one leader in the urban farming and food movement who writes that “In order to build a new food system, we’re going to need a world without fences... we’re going to need a new generation of farmers” (Allen, 2012, page 236).

<sup>9</sup> This understanding of infrastructure is social and relational in the sense that infrastructure is not taken to mean something that operates externally from the individuals who use it; there is no dualism between the so-called “user” and the infrastructure itself. See Bret M. Frischmann (2012). Similarly, contemporary social theorist Anthony Giddens (1984) has developed a related concept he calls the “duality of structure” in his articulation of a social structure that is both constraining and enabling.

youth development, creating opportunities for vocational training or job growth, or improving the local soil (Cohen, Reynolds and Sanghvi, 2012).

Another recent research report, “The Potential for Urban Agriculture in New York City,” concluded that urban farms and gardens act as a critical urban “green infrastructure.” Through extensive survey of urban agriculture in NYC the authors reveal the critical environmental services—including storm water runoff mitigation, soil remediation, and energy use reduction—that productive green spaces can create. The report also cited the human and community importance of urban agriculture as a “means of transforming underutilized or neglected space into a public resource” (Plunz et al., 2012). It was concluded that urban agriculture has many long-term benefits, which are not always physical but address social and environmental challenges. The report concluded that the social and ecological benefits of urban agriculture could be an effective catalyst for larger positive transformations in the food system.

Organizations, especially in under-resourced or neglected neighborhoods, are increasingly designing garden programs for the purpose of growing both healthy food and social infrastructure. One example of this has been the expansion of the Bed-Stuy Campaign Against Hunger in Brooklyn. Since 1998, the Bed-Stuy Campaign Against Hunger has grown to be the largest food pantry in Brooklyn, providing meals to more than 1.8 million Brooklyn residents. While it began as a small food charity, the programming has grown with active work for health, youth development, community outreach, financial assistance, food access programs, and growing spaces. The food outreach efforts expand across several neighborhoods in Brooklyn and offer clients the opportunity to select fresh fruits, vegetables, meats, and staple items, including food that has been grown in local urban agriculture sites. Through food and gardening related activities, the Campaign Against Hunger has begun to produce a vital social infrastructure across Brooklyn—a set of social resources, spaces, and connections that foster urban citizenship. In this sense social infrastructure increases community capacity to create resources and connect increasing numbers of people to these resources.

Andrew White, the Deputy Commissioner of Children’s Services in New York City, has written about the potential of this kind of social infrastructure as the creation of community capacity, or an overlapping support network of neighborhood-based systems and services (White, 2013). While city agencies often approach problems associated with poverty with fragmented funding structures and centralized organization, services rooted directly in communities have the possibility to build partnerships and “mobilize communities to make decisions for themselves about resources” (White, 2013, page 13). Accordingly, the most effective and empowering municipal management of issues such as education, health, disaster recovery or public safety, require a well-funded neighborhood-based social infrastructure. Neighborhood here is used not as a boundary marker, but rather as a representation of local units of organization and activity that are necessary for cities to address poverty or respond to disaster.

For example, after Hurricane Katrina, Sociologist Eric Klinenberg (2013)—seeking to identify the sources of resilience after the storm—argues that, “Whether they come from governments or from civil society, the best techniques for safeguarding cities don’t just mitigate disaster damage; they also strengthen the networks that promote health and prosperity during ordinary times.” In other words, people and cities can better respond to stress and disaster—

whether this stress is an extreme weather event or severe economic inequality—when a neighborhood has many different kinds of social relationships. In this context, organizations that work with urban agriculture activities may be an exemplary technique to foster vital social infrastructure.

Michael Nairn and Domenic Vitiello’s survey of Philadelphia urban gardeners and farmers found that community gardeners were often informally helping to provide food security to neighborhoods of extreme poverty through a web of social networks. Some gardeners gave away substantial quantities of food to a local organization, like a church, while others helped to feed their financially struggling neighbors. Nairn and Vitiello (2010, page 7) identified this as an “everyday agriculture” because the urban gardeners they interviewed were creating an “everyday, organic urbanism in which people alter their own neighborhoods in both surprising and mundane ways” that was overcoming the devastating ills of deindustrialization, from poverty, unemployment, hunger, obesity, asthma, and crime.

These, sometimes informal, horizontal networks within communities—which together constitute a social infrastructure—have great implications for a city’s ability to respond to disturbances including social inequality, global migration and displacement, or severe weather events. In this sense, growing an urban garden can foster the participatory social infrastructure that builds vibrant community resources and addresses contemporary urban problems.

## **URBAN CITIZENSHIP AND THE REMAKING OF URBAN SOCIETY**

The Brazilian organization Cities Without Hunger, a group that uses gardens as method to engage marginalized favela residents in food cultivation and community development, insists, “everything begins with a garden” (*Tudo começa com uma horta*). This is not a naïve hope that gardens will save the most desperate corners of our cities. It is an acknowledgement that community managed spaces and food cultivation can make important contributions to the livelihood of urban neighborhoods. The connection between cities, gardening, and citizenship is aspiration to locally participate in a coordinated way that might remake urban society.

While many possibilities may begin with the cultivation of a garden, implementation of urban agriculture remains somewhat contradictory. Many urban gardeners advocate for a better food system and just city, even while their actions may maintain the status quo—providing food, green space, or support that is necessary because of previous political disinvestment (McClintock, 2014). Urban gardens can engage with structural and everyday contradictions through both spontaneous action and a coordinated effort. In this sense, gardening approach to urban citizenship points toward a more active understanding of the city as a set of social and spatial relationships in the making. Most importantly, the garden provides a window into the kind of daily work, collaboration, and creativity required to make urban society.

Gardening is a serious mechanism for participatory urban citizenship that can produce living spaces maintained through vital social infrastructure. In addition to the ecological value that gardens can provide in an increasingly urbanizing world, the social benefits of gardening suggest that the most empowering and effective approach to urban gardens is one that aspires to remake the foundations of urban society.

As evidence presented here suggests, growing a garden can be a process of cultural and political participation, where diverse newcomers bring their past experiences to create the social and economic benefits of a city. Programs affiliated with the creation of a garden also can develop local leadership—the voices that give some sense of direction, meaning, and purpose for urban agriculture practices. Similarly, gardening programs can operate as a vibrant social infrastructure that produces local value and shared resources in times of stress or disturbance.

A gardening and urban citizenship approach to cities, specifically in the kinds of examples presented here, points towards the kind of urban society—created through political participation, local leadership, and dispersed networks of social infrastructure—that is necessary to support large urban areas. In the garden, a diverse multitude of engaged citizens can converge towards a common production of social and spatial structures in the making of 21st century urban society.

Right now, the next generation of urban citizens is going to work, growing food and resilient social infrastructure in gardens around the world. And these gardeners allow us to remember that a sustainable future is not a cleanly packaged vision of a futuristic green city, because a city's future is found nowhere other than the minds, hearts, and practices of its citizens. As this common ground and inherent possibility is uncovered, gardens will unleash their powerful potential for the remaking of urban society.

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