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Feeding Citizenship: strategies for accessing and transforming spaces

Since 2003, Alternatives' Feeding Citizenship program has been developing new ways to interact with urban man-made environments and the food cycle, towards a greener city and healthier communities. It does this by encouraging public participation in the creation of new green collective and edible spaces. The program has contributed to *identifying opportunities* in vacant land by expanding the scope of adequate growing space and it has *facilitated transformation* by actively bolstering public participation in the creation and investment of these spaces. This paper describes the context and issues surrounding community land access in Montreal. It tells the story of the development of Feeding Citizenship and recounts the program's main challenges, as well as the successful strategies that emerged to overcome them.

Keywords

urban agriculture, urban planning, green, biodiversity, citizenship, public participation

INTRODUCTION

Alternatives¹ is a Montreal-based international organization that focuses on a diversity of issues, including human rights, social justice and citizenship. Since 2003, Alternatives' Feeding Citizenship² program has been developing new ways to interact with urban man-made environments and the food system, towards a greener city and healthier communities. Grounded in Alternatives' attitude, our program seeks to offer food production models that are simple, affordable, environmentally-friendly and easy to adapt for use both in the Global South and North.

Feeding Citizenship encourages public participation in the creation of new green spaces that are shared and edible. Towards this objective, we have been advocating for the recuperation of unused and underutilized spaces such as rooftops, terraces and balconies in order to develop productive gardens that contribute positively to the urban ecosystem. Our program has contributed to *identifying opportunities* on vacant land by expanding the scope of adequate growing space, and it has *facilitated transformation* by actively bolstering public participation in the creation of and investment in these spaces.

We accomplish our goals by building innovative partnerships with community groups, municipal governments, companies and other institutions. We provide support to these partners in fields as diverse as education, policy and resources, so our program involves varied activities: we conduct research; publish information and guides; give technical assistance and training; and offer consultation services for collective and community gardens. Over the last 12 years, we have developed 30 projects in Montreal and hundreds more internationally. The program received the *Phénix de l'Environnement* award, the highest environmental distinction in Quebec, in recognition of our expertise and excellence in environmental protection and sustainability.

This paper provides information about the context and issues surrounding community land access in Montreal. We tell the story of the development of Feeding Citizenship and recount some of its main challenges, as well as the successful strategies that we developed to overcome them.

Growing in Montreal

Starting in the mid-1970's, the City of Montreal began creating allotment gardens (referred to as *Community Gardens*) for public use. By 2008, they numbered almost 100, totaling about 26 acres and were mostly zoned by the city as park space.³ Although this municipal program responded to many citizens' need to access public space, there were many limiting factors, some of which persist to this day. Community gardens are often locked; restricting access to newcomers and waiting lists for registration can be dissuasively long. In some central neighborhoods, one can expect to wait up to three years for an allotment.

¹ For more information see <https://www.alternatives.ca/>

² The program was previously known as the Rooftop Garden Project

³ City of Montreal, 2012, *État de L'Agriculture Urbaine à Montréal*. Online. [PDF] http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/CHANTIER_DEMOCRATIE_FR/MEDIA/DOCUMENTS/AGRI_CULTUREURBAINEMONTREAL_2012.PDF

Regulations were created by the city to standardize and ensure safety. In addition, the volunteer garden committees, responsible for managing the garden spaces, implemented their own rules to suit their unique gardening needs. These regulations accumulated over time, limiting what could be grown, what techniques could be used and who was allowed in the space. The particularities of the community garden program eventually pushed certain urban agriculture enthusiasts to create new spaces that were more welcoming to all and that would be more flexible in allowing more technical growing and horticulture experimentation.

For these reasons, the 1990s saw many *collective* gardens appear in Montreal, created mainly by local non-governmental organizations (NGO's). They sought a flexible model where management of space would be shared more broadly amongst citizens. The projects that emerged had varied objectives: social reintegration of youth; integration of new immigrants; food production; and popular education. This model continues to be particularly interesting in terms of access to space, because local endeavors do not need to be controlled as strictly. This means agreements between landowners and local organizations or interested citizens are more informal and the spaces are more diversified. Feeding citizenship has helped this model spread in Montreal and continues to do so by accompanying groups in finding vacant spaces, identifying common objectives and designing projects.

In 2007 the city counted 45 collective gardens and today, we estimate that the number has grown to over 80⁴. However, counting the number of urban gardens at any given time is a difficult task because these sites often develop spontaneously. Moreover, the image of urban agriculture and use of vacant land in Montreal has changed over the last decade; today, citizens and government officials better understand the benefits and appeal of these sites. New spaces that were not accessible to growers are now opening up.

Over the past 5 years, many new and informal citizen groups have emerged, with the purpose of optimizing the use of urban spaces. For example they grow food in small gardens in lots on sidewalks, often planting around existing trees. These informal groups have appropriated the city's garden boxes and in some cases, established partnerships between fruit tree owners and volunteer pickers in order to harvest fruit and reduce food waste.

Scarcity of Space

The main challenge involved with accessing public land in Montreal is scarcity of space. Large portions of urban space are paved or contaminated and citizens rarely have the technical means or the resources to decontaminate or to excavate soil on their own. Alternatives launched The Rooftop Garden Project in 2003 to actively seek a solution to these barriers to creating and sustaining urban gardens. We devoted the first three years to conducting research with the help of volunteer community members, focused on developing a productive technique for gardening in containers. To do so, we partnered with local community NGO Santropol Roulant and created a low-cost experimentation garden. The *Université du Québec à Montréal* agreed to allow us to use the vacant rooftop of their music school for this initiative indefinitely, and each harvest, the

⁴Meyer, A. 2011. *Entrevue avec M. Éric Duchemin pour parler d'agriculture urbaine*, *Oeconomia Humana*, 8(7).

vegetables grown by the NGO's volunteers went back to Santropol's Meals On Wheels program⁵.

After studying the food growing potential of a variety of containers and substrates, and after taking account of the challenges and successes experienced by the volunteers, we were able to refine a sustainable model for managing an urban garden. Our model can be easily replicated in a variety of environments because gardens are cultivated above ground, in an out-of-soil substrate, using self-watering containers. These containers have a 14-liter reservoir at the bottom which gives plants a constant supply of water that can last up to four days. The self-watering system keeps the soil light and the roots hydrated, which in turn, increases growth and crop yield. We designed the model so that it could be constructed from recycled materials, making it an accessible, inexpensive, and environmentally friendly solution. These out-of-ground containers also provided a solution to problems of insecure land tenure: collective gardens sometimes rely on informal agreements, whereby landowners will allow citizens or local organizations to use their space for an undefined amount of time. These partnerships can end, or alternatively, spaces can become unsuitable for plants or people. The containers we developed enable the relocation of gardens. After we completed our research in 2006, the roof of the conservatory became unsafe due to a fire that damaged the building and Alternatives began looking for a new space to house the Santropol garden.

Invisible Gardens

Low visibility and misconceptions were yet another obstacle to transformation of urban sites into gardens. In 2003, few people in Montreal knew what urban agriculture was, and moreover, it was not viewed as a legitimate use for urban space. Our organization understood this misconception and through our projects, we sought to contribute to making urban agriculture a widespread, legitimate, even fashionable practice. In 2007 for example, while seeking the future Santropol garden location, we focused on finding a highly visible, striking space. We wanted to make it a successful showpiece that would open doors for further urban agriculture projects in the city. With some perseverance, we secured a partnership with the prestigious McGill University and gained access to their downtown Montreal campus.

Producing nutritious food for Santropol's Meals on Wheels program, the edible campus garden accumulated support and accolades as years went on. Feeding Citizenship earned the 2008 National Urban Design Award for its collaborative project with Santropol and McGill University's Minimum Cost Housing Group. Today the garden is run autonomously by Santropol Roulant and produces 1.2 tons of vegetables annually. It still attracts much media attention and the university has made the project their own, proudly displaying it on their website and in promotional materials. Ultimately, this garden serves as a showpiece and contributes to making this type of transformation of space an accessible and acceptable idea to a wide audience throughout the city.

Partnering with a university was a successful strategy because universities are often high-traffic places that provide great visibility to greening initiatives. They are also helpful in terms of

⁵ See details of the program in Santropol website: <http://santropolroulant.org/fr/what-we-do/meals-on-wheels/>

land access; the buildings and surrounding property of these institutions often have built-in spaces designed for public use, many of which are underutilized. They also have the benefit of being considerably spacious and meeting safety standards. The same advantages apply to many business and corporate spaces. The Canadian shoe company, Aldo, is one example: Alternatives partnered with them to transform their grassy unused terrain into an employee-run garden in the heart of the Saint-Laurent industrial sector in Montreal.

At the same time, institutional bureaucracy is still a considerable barrier. For such collaborations to work, it is important to be patient, and able to articulate the project and its benefits to different audiences: managers; engineers; lawyers; and potential users. While these partnerships are not always immediately intuitive, they can be beneficial in the long run. Institutions can become active stakeholders in the project by providing spaces, funds and volunteers; they can also include the project in courses for students and trainings for employees.

Knowledge Sharing

It is important to keep in mind that people and social interactions are at the heart of transforming spaces. Therefore, an additional challenge in transforming spaces is that individuals do not necessarily have the social skills, such as managing interpersonal conflicts, creating consensus or collective decision-making, needed to share responsibilities with perfect strangers. Many city dwellers also do not have basic experience in creating and maintaining a garden, so even if they gain access to space, access to knowledge is just as critical for transformation.

Alternatives promotes knowledge sharing through conferences, workshops and community meetings; we offer information and free books online, seeking to support citizens in these new experiences and ensure the *durability* of the new spaces created. In recent years we have also created new learning programs where we train garden animators and project coordinators for organizations seeking to transform and manage new spaces. When resources are available, we typically work alongside groups for one or two years in order to ensure a successful group dynamic and communication.

NGO managed demonstration gardens, like the Edible Campus garden at McGill are one of the central tools we use for capacity building. In these community learning spaces, there are opportunities for formal and informal knowledge sharing and training. Horticulture animators (garden facilitators and organizers) give advice, so that participating citizens leave with enough knowledge that they can replicate what they learn in other spaces. We used the same approach in 2010 to create residential gardens with our Haitian partner organization APROSIFA⁶ in Port-au-Prince. Here, the demonstration garden was located at our partner organization's headquarters. During this four-year project, families were invited to attend workshops and try the diverse techniques showcased in the training. In total, we distributed seeds and containers to 600 families so that they could replicate what they learned at home.

Whether the gardening project is in Montreal or abroad, our goal has always been to create leaders within the community and empower them to be local agents of change.

⁶ *Association pour la Promotion de la Santé Intégrale de la Famille*

Political Support

Over the last 5 years, Feeding Citizenship has been advocating for urban agriculture policies, to help consolidate existing garden spaces and facilitate the creation of new ones. However, after a decade of rising public interest for urban agriculture, the city of Montreal still does not seem fully committed to establishing a solid partnership and dialogue with citizens on this topic. The grassroots movement in the city is now lively and booming, with some 42% of households practicing urban agriculture⁷. At the same time, the City of Montreal does not have a comprehensive strategy for how to support these practices.

With this in mind, we spearheaded a mission to mobilize organizations involved in urban agriculture to get the attention of our city officials. We participated in bringing together 30 organizations under the umbrella of the *Groupe de Travail en Agriculture Urbaine*⁸ (GTAU) and in 2012 we sought to commit elected officials to hold a public consultation on urban agriculture. During this public hearing, citizens would be invited to share opinions, concerns and testimony, which would then be distilled into a final report and formally handed to the mayor, the city council and executive committee. To obtain the consultation, we used the citizen's Right of Initiative to Public Consultations. This process required us to gather 15,000 signatures in favor of a public consultation on the subject in 90 days, in order to show it has the support of the community and deserves attention. By the deadline, we succeeded in collecting 30,000 signatures and a consultation on urban agriculture was held. The *Office de Consultation Publique de Montreal* produced a report from all the citizen's testimonies, which contained a series of recommendations, amongst which a clear demand for a formal coordination body.

In March 2012, city officials publicly announced the creation of a permanent committee, the *Comité de travail de la collectivité montréalaise sur l'agriculture urbaine*⁹. The group is composed of an elected official, a civil servant, and urban agriculture representatives invited by the city. The committee is tasked with reflecting on how to most effectively expand urban growing spaces on both public and private land. Although the process of developing the committee was beneficial in promoting urban agriculture, the permanent committee itself has yet to fulfill its mediating role between urban agriculture groups and the city.

CONCLUSION

Creating new green spaces in the city is challenging, and involving public participation in the process of gaining access to land and building programs around these spaces adds a level of complexity. From our program's decade-long experience with urban agriculture projects, we can share our successful strategies. We want to underscore that the most important lesson is *using gardens as a space for fundamental social change*. We share knowledge through the demonstration gardens, workshops and by providing support to the citizen gardeners. These individuals can, in turn, become leaders that advocate for their own planning needs within the

⁷ City of Montreal, 2013, *L'Agriculture Urbaine chez les Montréalais*. Online. http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?_pageid=7017,111991580&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL

⁸ Urban Agriculture Working Group

⁹ Montreal Community's Urban Agriculture Working Group

city and teach others what they have learned. While these are not new strategies, they have amplified the effect of Feeding Citizenship's work.

We also want to emphasize the importance of creating and maintaining partnerships. Whether with volunteers, other organizations, or city officials, increasing and diversifying partnerships has helped our program to fulfill its mandate. Partners have been essential to research, gaining access to space for gardening, promoting visibility for our work and ultimately opening doors to new projects. The key has been maintaining these partnerships, so that changes set in motion by partners are sustainable and long-term.

Feeding Citizenship continues to develop innovative ways to improve urban agriculture practices through capacity building projects and demonstration sites. There are still many vacant acres and growing numbers of citizens seeking support to transform them. We hope that the insights we offer in this paper can assist others with similar goals.

About the authors: Gaëlle Janvier is a project manager at the Montreal based international organization Alternatives. She has studied environmental design, urban planning and international project management and has practical experience in ecological horticulture. She is a member of the board of directors at Food Secure Canada and Vigilance OGM. She is particularly interested in food security and urban agriculture and has coordinated and participated in food security projects in African and Latin American countries.

Justin Doucet is a translator and redactor based in Montreal. He has studied Communications and Politics and is involved in food related projects in Montreal. He currently studies organizational communications as a graduate student at Université de Montréal.