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Growing Food and Community: Long Term Community Land Management in Boston

Sustainability has become a popular trend and policy tool for urban interventions in American cities, including the implementation of sustainable urban agriculture projects. In practice, effective urban agriculture projects require long term engagement in community management of land with a deep connection to the specific context and history of a neighborhood, as the case of The Food Project in Boston demonstrates. The strong presence of The Food Project in Boston's Dudley Street neighborhood today grew out of a larger neighborhood history that involved a series of unlikely but powerful collaborations. Part of this context is the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative's management of a long term local planning process based on the direct needs and aspirations of local residents—leading to the creation of many community managed resources, including sustainable urban agriculture. Overall, the work of The Food Project and the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative is a strong example of how sustainable urban agriculture can grow food and community as part of a larger strategy for the long term community management of land.

Keywords

urban agriculture, vacant land, sustainability, community land trusts

INTRODUCTION

A twenty-year collaboration between The Food Project and the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Boston demonstrates how sustainable agriculture and community land trusts can be part of a larger strategy for long term community land management. The lively presence of community managed land and urban agriculture spaces in the neighborhood today grew out of the neighborhood history that involved a series of unlikely but powerful collaborations.

The Food Project is a sustainable agriculture organization with agriculture production space in the city and in the towns surrounding Boston. Last year, 145 high school aged youth were employed through The Food Project farms. In collaboration with volunteers and staff, these youth harvested and sold 282,000 pounds of fresh produce from 41 acres of growing space in the Boston region. In 1994, The Food Project began a collaboration with the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative—an organization that had been extensively organizing in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood since the early 1980s. The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative developed a comprehensive community-based master plan, secured the power of eminent domain for dozens of blocks in the neighborhood, and created hundreds of community resources (from housing to gardens and public space) on previously vacant land.

While The Food Project now works in towns around the Boston region, its gardens, farms, greenhouse, market, and office space in Boston's Dudley Street neighborhood remain a focus of its work. Young people in the Dudley Street neighborhood take part in The Food Project's three youth programs— seed crew, dirt crew, and root crew—where they cultivate urban and suburban farmland, participate in workshops about sustainable agriculture and food justice, work with local hunger relief organizations, lead volunteers in the fields, and work to expand community food access. As young people move through the three programs they are given increasing responsibility and offered a paid internship.

In addition to working with volunteers and youth program participants in its Boston growing spaces, The Food Project has frequently built raised-bed gardens for local organizations and residents on a pay-what-you-can basis. In 2012 alone, 200 gardens were built. Residents and neighbors have the opportunity to continuously engage with The Food Project through a series of educational workshops, written guides in multiple languages, and other outreach efforts.¹ The impressive array of sustainable agriculture activity in the Dudley Street neighborhood is a result of many years of strategic political action and organizing work led by residents of the neighborhood.

ESTABLISHING LONG TERM COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT

It is important to contextualize the current scope of The Food Project's land in Boston as part of an evolving long-term collaboration with the Roxbury neighborhood and the ongoing work of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative.

¹ Learn more about The Food Project's programs at thefoodproject.org

In the early 1980s, more than 20% (1,300 parcels) of land in Boston's Dudley Street neighborhood was vacant. The vacant land was a result of two colluding factors: new subsidized suburban housing developments and highways in the Boston region, and exclusionary lending where banks refused to grant home improvement loans to the mostly non-white and African American neighborhood of Roxbury. Subsequently, many home owners torched their homes and apartment buildings to collect insurance money, leaving abandoned vacant lots that would begin to accumulate trash.^{2,3}

In response to this crisis several local groups collaborated, beginning to take back control over their neighborhood and laying an early groundwork for community land management. In 1981, students at the local Roxbury Community College conducted a survey of residents to identify the neighborhood challenges and opportunities, reporting the results as part of local visioning sessions with Roxbury residents and organizations. This led to an informal neighborhood coalition dedicated to creating lasting change. Some members of this coalition subsequently reached out to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology for help developing a community plan. Later in 1981, the MIT group published a report, "From the Ground Up" which suggested that the community develop strategies to acquire vacant land through a land trust for long term neighborhood development.⁴ These early visioning sessions would lead to the creation of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) in 1985.

At around the same time, The Riley Foundation, one of the largest private foundations in Massachusetts in the 1980s and 1990s, took an interest in the neighborhood. On a day-long field visit to the Dudley Street neighborhood with local residents and organizers in the 1984, Riley staff members were inspired to fund a project that would make a lasting difference for its struggling residents.⁵ After encountering initial community opposition to wealthy outsiders, the foundation agreed to fund neighborhood improvements that would give residents power to direct specific projects. The Riley Foundation encouraged residents to extend their vision to a much larger project, supporting the passion of neighborhood organizations with their financial resources, and opted to provide long term support so that the community could focus on effective action rather than fundraising. The initial urban revitalization grant to a single neighborhood organization was \$30,000, but by 1990 the Riley Foundation would invest more than two million dollars in the neighborhood.

As funding was being secured, neighborhood residents within DSNI drafted a community controlled revitalization plan in 1987. This plan envisioned using the vacant land to create community resources such as housing, parks, and employment. A major challenge for the plan

² More history of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative with a timeline can be found at <http://www.dsni.org/history>. The history of the neighborhood is also described in the film "Holding Ground: The Rebirth of Dudley Street," produced by Lipman, M. & Mahan, L. *Holding Ground Productions* (1996). A more detailed account of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Peter Medoff and Holly Sklar, *Streets of Hope: The Fall and Rise of an Urban Neighborhood* (1994). Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

³ More details of the community building process can be found in Greg Watson's lecture for the New Economics Institute, "The Wisdom that Builds Community" (1997), at <http://neweconomy.net/publications/lectures/watson/greg/the-wisdom-that-builds-community>

⁴ See Jay Walljasper's article "The Renaissance of Dudley Street," in *The Nation* (March 3, 1997).

⁵ See footnote 2.

was the high number of small lots owned by absentee land owners. As a pro bono project Boston law firm Rackemann, Sawyer & Brewster pointed out that the city of Boston could legally authorize DSNI to use eminent domain according to Chapter 121A of the Massachusetts State Statute. The city had typically used Chapter 121A only to create incentives for private developers, and it was unprecedented for a community-based organization to be granted this eminent domain power.⁶

DSNI realized it would need widespread public support both within the neighborhood and from political leaders in the city—leading to the creation of an urban redevelopment corporation (which was legally necessary under Chapter 121A), a campaign for local support called “Take a Stand, Own the Land,” and an intensive effort to win mayoral support. While key city agencies (including some members of Boston’s urban planning and economic development agency, the Boston Redevelopment Authority) were initially resistant, the momentum that Dudley Street organizers had built propelled the DSNI to become the first community-based organization to secure eminent domain powers.

According to the agreement, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative community land trust (under the name Dudley Neighbors Inc.) could obtain ownership of any land within the 60 acre “Dudley Triangle” bounded by three major streets, as long as they could provide compensation to the owner. The city had agreed to sell land within the triangle for \$1 per parcel, and for the private land DSNI secured an additional two million dollar grant from the Ford Foundation after a long approval process. The combination of local community organizing and support from external agencies had now put DSNI in the position to pursue its community-created master plan, which would include housing, public space, youth development, and sustainable agriculture.

COMMUNITY LAND MANAGEMENT AND URBAN AGRICULTURE

In the last twenty years sustainable agriculture has become an important strategy for DSNI to manage several of its lots in the community land trust. In 1993, staff from The Food Project began working with the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative to recruit urban youth for its summer youth programs outside of the city. As part of this early collaboration, The Food Project started a farmers market in the Dudley Street neighborhood. In 1995 when the city was remediating a parcel of land nearby the neighborhood, DSNI suggested that they work with The Food Project. The city negotiated a lease with The Food Project for \$1 per year, with the agreement that The Food Project would continue to maintain the land through an urban agriculture program.

DSNI began to realize that The Food Project (an external organization, with staff initially from outside the neighborhood) was able to manage community open space in a productive way that improved the quality of life and engaged local youth. Accordingly, DSNI decided to make The Food Project a more central part of the neighborhood and included urban agriculture in its master plan by giving The Food Project a 1.5 acre farm and office space within the Dudley

⁶ Eminent domain is the power of a state or city government to take private land for public use, with compensation. Pages 115-144 of *Streets of Hope* explain of how Dudley Street Neighborhood secured eminent domain powers.

Triangle. To this day, the office and meeting space are central place for young people in the neighborhood.⁷ The Food Project is able to recruit young people from the neighborhood into its programs because DSNI is well connected to families and youth in the community and because its 1.5 acre farm is a clear presence in the neighborhood. The fact that The Food Project offers paid internships is an especially significant incentive for young people from the neighborhood to get involved.

Some residents continue to be skeptical of sustainable agriculture in the Dudley Street Neighborhood because the activity of The Food Project continues to attract many outsiders. People come to volunteer in the urban farms from around the city, and youth from outside of the immediate neighborhood also to participate in the programs. While the diversity in participation is encouraged by The Food Projects and supports its ability to maintain the urban farms in the Dudley Street neighborhood, this presence of outsiders in the neighborhood also bolsters the residents who think that local food and urban agriculture are part of a white invasion of their mostly non-white neighborhood.⁸

Acknowledging occasional resistance, The Food Project works to address these concerns as it cultivates powerful relationships with local organizations and residents near all of its growing areas, seeking to include increasing numbers of local residents in programs and planning. DSNI, with a board made up of mostly local residents, continues to strongly support urban agriculture in its community owned land. For example, in 2004, The Food Project worked with DSNI to transform a vacant piece of land within the Dudley Triangle into a 10,000 square foot greenhouse. The greenhouse now grows local food year round and is the site of many educational workshops, community meetings, and activities for youth and local residents.⁹ While The Food Project has dozens of staff members in the Greater Boston region, the Boston urban agriculture spaces are organized by a farm manager, assistant grower, youth specialist, FoodCorps fellow, and a community outreach manager.

One of the benefits of sustainable urban agriculture as a long term land management strategy is the ongoing maintenance and presence that is required to maintain land for agriculture. The greenhouse, farmers market, office, and growing spaces are noticeable spaces of the neighborhood that generate activity, and continuously involve new residents in the production of a healthy urban environment. Sustainable urban agriculture in the neighborhood has also led to numerous cascading collaborations related to youth development programs, local elementary schools, a local food pantry, neighborhood small businesses, and the nearby Boston Medical Center. This web of collaborations generates social, economic, health, and ecological

⁷ Amanda Cather (2008) authored a report for The Food Project with more information about the establishment of sustainable agriculture in the Dudley neighborhood called "Urban Growers Manual."

⁸ The issue of race in sustainable urban agriculture demands further attention than can be provided in this short essay, with increased sensitivity to issues of race, class, and cultural diversity from practitioners. One further reference that explores these connections is the volume edited by Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman (2011), *Cultivating Food Justice: Race, Class and Sustainability*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

⁹ The Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative explains the real food hub online at "DSNI Community Greenhouse and the Dudley Real Food Hub," Dudley Neighbors Incorporated Commercial Property and Partnerships, accessed December 2014 at <http://www.dsni.org/dni-community-greenhouse-and-dudley-real-food-hub>

benefits that are sometimes difficult to quantify, even while they build momentum for long term land management and holistic community development.

More recently in 2012, DSNI and The Food Project have launched the Dudley Real Food Hub and a subsequent ongoing community visioning process. The purpose of the Real Food Hub is to engage residents in planning for a strong and healthy food system that can meet the needs of all residents. In this process, The Food Project and DSNI are currently reaching out to neighbors to determine community interest for potentially new spaces, foods, or programs that could be created to expand their sustainable agriculture work in the neighborhood. The “food hub” is also representation of the great transformation that the neighborhood has been through. A neighborhood that was once mostly vacant is now on its way to becoming a major hub for holistic community development—a process that has so far occurred with minimal displacement of long-time residents.

Today, in light of the 2008 housing crisis and persistent pockets of poverty, residents continue to engage politically in building community, even as the city around the Dudley Street neighborhood is decreasingly affordable. Although not perfect, the neighborhood is a model for community generation of affordable housing, public space, sustainable agriculture, and other resources that can grow out of previously vacant land. The case of The Food Project and the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative demonstrates that successful long term land management can be advanced through unconventional external collaborations, connections to local community organizing efforts, and an attention to the historical development of political, economic, and legal structures that govern and shape cities. While larger more centralized and bureaucratic organizations often provided assistance, the outcome of the evolving neighborhood plan was consistently reconnected with the direct needs of local residents. Ongoing visioning work of the Dudley Street neighborhood over the last thirty years serves as a reminder that creating community resources is a long term process of city building which must be closely attuned to local experiences, struggles, and triumphs.