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## Urban Agriculture and Localism in Cleveland, OH

*Abstract:* I aim to discuss the ways in which local agriculture differs in an urban setting, and find out how it affects social dynamics within a city, particularly Cleveland, Ohio. I look at different examples of urban farming initiatives in the city and distinguished the varying goals of these organizations and their respective methods of operation. The urban farming movement in Cleveland seems to be populated by operations that hold true local motivations (involving increased unity and sustainability), and farms that used the idea of urban/local agriculture for a universal agenda. The danger of this universalization of a local movement is that it takes away the independence given back to communities through local food production. To avoid this distraction, a renewed focus on the true goals of urban agriculture is necessary.

### **Politics of Scale in Local Food Movements**

In my research, I started out trying to answer a simple yet broad question: How do Urban Gardens/Farms affect social dynamics within the city of Cleveland? The urban farming movement has taken root throughout the United States and gained popularity in the past decade or so. In particular, cities throughout the Rust Belt have recently become known for a blooming urban agriculture movement. This region, which stretches from Pittsburgh to the Great Lakes and includes many areas in the Northeast and Midwest, is characterized by deterioration and urban decay. Following industrial booms and influxes in migration, these cities experienced rapid economic collapse and fell into disrepair. In recent years, the urban agriculture movement has 

grown out of a desire to re-claim the city and create prosperity again. Cleveland, OH is a city typical of the Rust Belt's description, and has been one of the leaders in urban agriculture over the last decades. (Fiskio, Scott, Shammin 18) Many local urban gardens and farms have been successful in bringing a new sustainability and unity to their communities, but individual operations within the urban farming movement vary greatly in their intents. In addition to its core goals, the idea of local agriculture in urban settings has become chic and stylish, as well as evangelistic in many cases. The ability of urban places to network and gain wide-scale attention has led to a fetishizing of local farming within these spheres. This discovery led me to another, much broader question: can local *movements* truly be local? Does the universal nature of a movement negate its ability to focus on small-scale issues? In particular, I've found that the national attention gained by the urban farming movement tends to obscure and hinder one of its true goals - that of creating strong, sustainable and independent communities in an increasingly dependent world. To re-focus on the core intentions of local agriculture and localism in general, we must learn to distinguish between wide-scale "local" movements and truly community-driven and oriented "local" movements.

### **Urban Agriculture: A History**

The idea of local agriculture is, in reality, a very old one. Centuries ago, food was almost universally grown and consumed within the same region. However, with the advent of long-distance transportation, humans began to be exposed to foods different from the ones that could grow in their own areas. These new and exotic foods were a commodity, and international trade blossomed with this prospect. In the U.S., the past

several centuries have seen a boom in large-scale and commercial agriculture because of rapidly increasing populations and uneven demographic distribution. Certain areas are more suited to agriculture, where other areas, i.e. urban areas, are much harder to grow crops in. The huge size of the United States, combined with its Capitalist economy, has allowed large corporations to take over much of the food market. Family farms simply can't compete financially and volumetrically with these large businesses. Because of this, produce and food are now transported miles from where they are grown before they are even sold. Problems associated with this are economic, social, and environmental. When a locality can't produce its own food, it loses its independence.

Urban farming is often seen as a way to bring healthy food back to areas that have become "food deserts", in which access to fresh food is limited or nonexistent. (Ott) However, the urban farms and gardens have been proven to provide more than just nutrition and health benefits. In fact, research has shown that the benefits most important to citizens are the cultural values and coherence that they create within communities. (Ott 20) Each community can have its own reason for wanting these spaces - whether it be to remember the value of hard work, to get outside, to connect with neighbors, or simply to create access to healthy food. It seems that what these centers of urban agriculture create is a sense of self-sufficiency and coherence within communities, and ultimately a sense of strength and dignity. When people can feed themselves, they suddenly depend less on the permission of the world around them, and suddenly feel a bit more deserving of their own life. (need sources)

### **The Politics of Local Food in Cleveland**

Within Cleveland, many different neighborhoods exist – each with their own history and some much more independent than others. In particular, many black and minority-populated neighborhoods have been neglected and allowed to deteriorate in infrastructure since their economic collapse. (Fiskio 27) Fires in the '60s and '70s cleared many districts and allowed for the formation of an “urban palimpsest”, a term from Andreas Huyssen’s *Present Pasts*. It describes the idea of a landscape characterized by new buildings and infrastructures built over old ones. The term stems from a word that describes a page that has been erased and written over. In an urban context, this palimpsest involves the erasure of the history of a certain area. (24) Neighborhoods and communities who have had their history “written over” have created urban farms and gardens to reclaim the landscape and create something that can, in essence, grow from the ashes. This reclamation through urban agriculture is an example of a way that local agriculture can serve its community directly. In looking for examples of urban farms in Cleveland, I looked for this type of focus on regional identity as a marker of true local intentions. ▾

In the evaluation of urban agriculture’s impact on social dynamics in Cleveland, an understanding of the city’s relationship to the movement was essential. I searched for legal policies regarding urban farming and gardening, and found an ordinance that outlined the basic terms involved in the movement, as well as the regulations and restrictions put in place. In 2007, the “Urban Garden District” was established as part of the Zoning Code to regulate spaces for urban agriculture. The definitions that surround the movement in Cleveland provide information on how the

citizens and government of the city view urban agriculture. While these spaces were created so that urban agriculture could become more officially integrated into the city, many physical limitations and conceptual barriers are still in place. Signs may not exceed certain dimensions, buildings must stay within height boundaries, and fences can only be constructed out of certain material. (“Urban Agriculture Policies”) While the city has attempted in some ways to get on board with the local farming movement, the fact that these regulations have to exist is an example of the inconsistency between truly local movements and universal localization. The city by definition is too big to really serve specific localities.

And yet, a larger-scale urban farming *movement* still exists. On a national scale and a city-wide scale, urban agriculture has become a chic and innovative trend among restaurants and online businesses. This wide-scale attention on local husbandry has been positive in that it has spread the movement among local initiatives, but it has also created a “local” urban farming movement more geared towards cutting-edge technology, upscale dining, and engineering experiments than actually localizing the production of food.

### **Case-Level Findings Reveal a “Universal” Localism**

In order to find what made the difference between local and universalized urban agriculture, I looked to examples of existing operations involving the urban agriculture movement in Cleveland. The Urban Farmer Steakhouse, located on East 6<sup>th</sup> Street in downtown Cleveland, aims to “redefine the modern Cleveland steakhouse.” It is an upscale restaurant with an emphasis on local sourcing and authenticity of ingredients.

Its website displays claims of building close relationships with the farms, ranches, and fisheries that they partner with. However, none of the head staff are from the area, and its modern atmosphere caters to a broad audience. On their “about” page, they describe their atmosphere as a “comfortable, stylish ambiance that is at once a tribute to the quaintness of a restored farmhouse and the urbane boldness of mid-20th century modernism.” At once, this description exploits the idea of local agriculture for a new, glamorous style that meshes new age trends with a romanticized version of the past. In an August 2016 blog post from the Urban Farmer Steakhouse website titled “paying homage to local farms,” executive chef Vishnu Nath describes his experience volunteering at an urban farm that provides food for the steakhouse. “It is a privileged opportunity for us to pay homage to the local farms and how hard they work,” he says, continuing, “I thought farming would be easy, trust me it is not!” (“Urban Farmer Steakhouse”) It’s evident through these exchanges and descriptions that the restaurant operates on a vastly different level than the farms which support it. No matter how much they claim to be part of a “local” movement, a popular East 6<sup>th</sup> Street does not exist within any of the immediate communities of these local farms.

Another operation involved with the urban agriculture movement in Cleveland is the Ohio City Farm, a 6-acre urban farm on Market Street in Ohio City, right outside downtown Cleveland. Its goal is to “incubate entrepreneurial farm businesses and support workforce development programs.” It also has initiatives to provide health and lifestyle outreach to underserved communities. (“Ohio City Farm”) The ideas behind this operation are decidedly widespread throughout the city of Cleveland. In addition,

the goals of the Ohio City Farm involve bringing change to certain areas of the city and using their own organization to spur the development of other businesses and neighborhoods. However, as Ott argues in “Making Sense of Urban Gardens”, in order for urban farms and gardens to positively impact local communities, the citizens themselves must operate and take control of the farm. Outreach, “armies of researchers,” and missionary tactics just end up “delineating social norms and imposing the values of the middle class.” (Ott 18, Fiskio 20)

### **Examples of Truly Local Urban Agriculture**

Successful local urban farming movements aim to create sustainability and independence within communities, and create unity and dignity within those same communities. These movements ultimately serve the people that they involve – and they do this by involving the people they serve. The farms I looked at that seemed to be doing this were places like the Rid-All Green Partnership and the BioCellar on Hough Avenue. What stands out about these organizations is that they employ people from their own neighborhoods, and they sell to the same community. The BioCellar employs formerly incarcerated adults and youth in the community to provide empowerment and reclaim conceptual dignity. The Rid-All Green Partnership is an urban farming initiative in the Kinsman neighborhood “offers opportunities for individuals and groups to get in touch with the land.” (RidAll Green Partnership) It’s run by three childhood friends who grew up in a nearby Cleveland neighborhood. Its goal is simple. Stated by founder Keymah Durden III, they ultimately aim to create “access to holistic, nutritional food for the development of the communities around the world”. (RidAll

Green Partnership) They've started with their own community in Cleveland, OH and while their vision is larger in scale, it still involves each locality maintaining individual purpose. There is no complicated, new age fantasy - only the desire to provide better access to good food and to strengthen communities through this.

Although in many ways the urban agriculture movement has provided meaningful ways for communities to come together and become more sustainable and self-sufficient, the universalized facet of local/urban farming is becoming a distracting fad. A renewed focus on the true goals of local agriculture within urban settings is necessary to recognize the benefits possible from these movements when applied on local scales by each community. The possibility of creating renewed self-sustainability and independence in an increasingly dependent world is crucial for the wellbeing of these communities and, really, of everyone. Urban agriculture is ultimately a statement that people living in cities can take care of themselves, and that in reality they aren't actually whores to big corporations and mainstream society.