The politics of urban agriculture:  
Sustainability, governance, and contestation

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Introduction

The Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House (DTES NH) is a community services centre in a low-income neighbourhood of Vancouver, British Columbia. Like many organizations of its type, its programs are based on a set of principles – an ‘operating philosophy’ – of inclusivity and activism. Unlike most, the neighbourhood house also articulates a separate, if related, ‘food philosophy:’

Food is a key determinant of individual and community health – physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. We take every modest opportunity to remind DTES Residents of our Right to quality food. We use the offering of food to reflect back upon our neighbours their inherent dignity, deservedness and welcome within the DTES NH. (Right To Food Zine, 2016)

Food, in its production, its consumption, and its associated meanings, is clearly central to sustenance for the DTES NH, as it is for all of us. What their food philosophy makes clear, furthermore, is that food is also fundamentally political.

This chapter explores food production and, specifically, urban agriculture (UA) as a set of fundamentally political practices, both in terms of their role in neoliberal governance and ‘sustainability’ policy-making, and also as objects of contestation. We provide a brief overview of UA with a focus on the changing nature of urban food production in the global North, then engage with UA’s role in supporting food security, its contributions to environmental and social sustainability, as well as its entanglement in processes of gentrification. In particular, we use case studies from Portland, Oregon and Vancouver, British Columbia to highlight the contentious nature of UA in cities that explicitly frame their policy-making in terms of sustainability, resilience, and ‘greenness’.

While the practice of UA, which we broadly define as the production of food in cities, is as old as urbanization itself (Lawson, 2005), it has enjoyed a striking resurgence in recent years in the global North. This has been due in part to widespread assertions of its transformative contributions to food security and urban sustainability. Yet, the distribution of UA is socio-spatially uneven, benefiting some and excluding others. Therefore we ask, how do these differential – and inequitable – patterns both arise from and contribute to the fundamental tensions between economic growth, environmental regulation, and social equity that define sustainability? And how do municipal policies mediate these processes? Can and do these UA

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policies open new spaces for more equitable models of sustainability? We will detail the role that both municipal policies and activist politics have played in shaping where and for whom UA is integrated into the urban landscape. In turn, we ask whether spaces of food production are part of a right to the city and if they can produce alternative visions of urban life and economic relationships. Our aim is to problematise the often-uncritical celebration of UA, highlight spaces of conflict within this growing movement and, at the same time, emphasize the social, health, and environmental benefits of urban food production.

Approaching Urban Agriculture

Widely hailed as a key component of urban sustainability, and taking a prominent place in municipal planning efforts, UA is fast becoming entangled in the contradictions of sustainable urbanism in the global North and is developing new forms and functions in the neoliberal city. New gardens are cropping up at a furious pace in a variety of types: residential gardens, community or allotment gardens, organizational gardens working for ‘food justice’ in so-called ‘food deserts’ (low-income areas with limited access to fresh produce), and market gardens and larger-scale urban farms that provide restaurants and residents with ‘ultra-local’ produce.

At the same time, UA is coming under scrutiny by community activists questioning who it is actually serving, raising concerns that this new wave of UA primarily caters and appeals to the affluent and opens the door to predominantly white gentrifiers (Crouch, 2012; Markham, 2014). In response, some UA advocates are organizing against gentrification and expanding their focus to broader struggles for social justice (Phat Beets Produce, 2013; SFUAA, 2013). Some are engaging in policy-making, bringing equity concerns to the fore. UA has, then, become a key site of political contestation over urban sustainability. It has become both a driver of and reaction to on-going neoliberal urban transformations.

Early scholarship on UA tended to emphasize either its benefits or shortcomings, leading to a dichotomizing perspective on the practice as either radical or neoliberal. But these benefits and shortcomings actually co-exist as a function of UA's diverse motivations and forms (McClintock, 2014). Often manifest at different scales, such contradictions cannot be fully understood without treating UA as a process operating within broader contradictory tensions of the ‘uneven development’ of the city, i.e., how flows of capital shape the city differentially for the benefit of on-going accumulation of capital, regardless of impacts on urban residents (Smith, 2008). This analytical lens brings into focus the relationship between political economic cycles of disinvestment and reinvestment (Hackworth, 2007; Harvey, 1989) and UA’s emergence as a socio-spatial phenomenon that both reproduces and contests capitalist urbanization (McClintock, 2014; Sbicca, 2014).

Critical perspectives on urban agriculture

Urban agriculture’s renaissance over the past decade has been accompanied by a groundswell of new UA organizations, projects, media attention, and scholarship. Scholars have documented the multiple attributes of UA, including its provision of a suite of environmental and social benefits. These include: enhancing biodiversity, managing stormwater infiltration, improving nutritional and mental health; fostering community interactions and cohesion; mitigating urban food insecurity; and serving as an ethical alternative – albeit limited in scale – to the dominant industrial agri-food system (Barthel et al., 2015; Draper and Freedman, 2010; Taylor and Lovell, 2014).
Yet, critical food scholars in geography, sociology, and anthropology have increasingly challenged UA’s progressive potential on several grounds. One line of critique sheds light on how UA activists are inadvertently complicit in neoliberal restructuring, despite their radical intentions. Drawing on agrarian political economy, scholars demonstrate how alternative food networks, including UA and other “interstitial food spaces” (Galt et al., 2014), arise from political economic restructuring (Jarosz, 2008). Some of these networks ultimately subsidize capital by shifting a portion of the responsibility for social reproduction onto volunteer-run groups, such as those organizing UA projects, since they replace services once provided by the welfare state (Allen and Guthman, 2006; Rosol, 2010). Further, many UA efforts ultimately instil a ‘neoliberal governmentality’ that encourages both personal responsibility for coping with economic restructuring, and market-based consumption-oriented approaches to food politics over collective action (Drake, 2014; Pudup, 2008; Weissman, 2015).

A second relevant line of critique challenges ‘the local’ as a normative scale of intervention, and warns against reducing food justice to a spatial problem that can be easily ameliorated by constructing a garden or grocery store in a food desert (Shannon, 2014). Falling into this ‘local trap’ prevents practitioners from addressing macro-scale structures mediating food access (Born and Purcell, 2006), and the historical processes and contingencies that mediate access in particular neighbourhoods (Bedore, 2013; McClintock, 2011). Some scholars have therefore advocated for a more ‘reflexive localism’ (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Levkoe, 2011) that situates alternative food efforts within broader food systems and political economic contexts.

Finally, a third relevant critique draws on critical race theory to argue that alternative food networks (including UA) are often constructed as ‘white spaces’, where “bringing good food to others” (Guthman, 2009) re-inscribes paternalistic, colonial patterns of oppression of people of colour. Disproportionate funding of white-led UA programs further fuels this trend (Reynolds and Cohen, 2016). Frequently, the motivations of well-meaning UA advocates who pursue work in communities with limited access to healthy food do not correspond to the expressed needs of community members themselves (Lyson, 2014; Ramírez, 2015; Slocum, 2007). Some scholars parallel this critique by applying the concept of ‘food sovereignty’ to urban contexts in North America. Food sovereignty not only underscores resistance to the hegemony of the global agrifood system, but also the need for low-income communities of colour to determine what and how to eat (Bradley and Galt, 2014; Roman-Alcalá, 2015). How people frame UA – in terms of ‘food justice’, ‘food sovereignty’, ‘community’, or other frames – can differ greatly within cities and even within gardens.

While each of these lines of critique offers important insights into the politics and practice of UA, a discussion of UA from the perspective of urban theory in general and urban political theory in particular is only just beginning to gain traction (Eizenberg, 2012; McClintock, 2014; Purcell and Tyman, 2014). Much of this discussion builds on a handful of foundational studies addressing tensions between UA and gardens in New York City (Schmelzkopf, 2002; Smith and Kurtz, 2003). It is crucial to foreground the political economic processes that shape the built environment and UA if we are to better differentiate UA’s multiple and sometimes contradictory manifestations.

Neoliberal urbanization and the political economy of sustainability

Sustainability is never politically neutral. Popular narratives suggest that everyone benefits from the implementation of sustainable or ‘green’ infrastructure and amenities. Yet, these narratives tend to obscure both the spatial disparities in access to such benefits and the
socioeconomic inequities that are exacerbated by differential or uneven investment in this infrastructure. Geographic scholarship on ‘eco-gentrification’ emphasizes how investment in green infrastructure in the urban core – LEED buildings, bike lanes, walkable neighbourhoods, farmers markets, urban gardens, etc. – further entrenches inequity by serving some at the expense of others. Beneath a veil of environmentalist rhetoric, sustainable development fuels rising property values and rents, green spaces become commodified for consumption, and local residents are forced out of their neighbourhoods by more affluent newcomers seeking these amenities (Anguelovski, 2016; Dooling, 2009; Quastel, 2009; Tretter, 2013). Such processes are illustrative of the contradictions emerging from the ‘urban sustainability fix’ (While et al., 2004), the selective implementation by cities of environmental goals and values (often under the banner of sustainability) to legitimate and advance longstanding neoliberal entrepreneurial development strategies (Goodling et al., 2015; Temenos and McCann, 2012; Walker, 2015).

The geographic literature on neoliberal urban restructuring of the post-industrial global North city (Hackworth, 2007; Peck and Tickell, 2002) can help us relate UA motivations and practices to (uneven) processes of urbanization. This literature explains how restructuring has reorganized urban space by examining how capital reinvestment in the urban core over the past few decades has transformed industrial ‘wastelands’ and inner-city ‘ghettos’ into new spaces of consumption, typified by the service economy, luxury condos, boutique shops, tourism, hotels and conference centres. A related body of work on gentrification examines how the return of capital has led to widespread displacement of low-income residents from the urban core (Blomley, 2003; Lees, 2012). For a key theorist of capital’s return to the urban core, gentrification is a “consummate expression of neoliberal urbanism” (Smith, 2002: 446).

Urban agriculture and the sustainable city

Since certain forms of UA – notably large community gardens, collective gardens run by non-profits, and commercial market farms on vacant lots – arise opportunistically in economically devalued urban areas (McClintock, 2014), we must attend to how variegated processes of neoliberal development (Brenner et al., 2010) shape the form and distribution of UA and how UA, in turn, both contributes to and challenges these processes. In particular, we must critically examine the relationship between these processes and the recent resurgence of interest in UA – both large-scale and residential – in gentrifying areas. A useful starting point is to examine the sustainability fix employed by many cities in the neoliberal era. Investment in sustainability is a means of responding to both widespread environmental concern (particularly in politically progressive urban centres) and the entrepreneurial logic driving economic growth. Investment in green infrastructure appeals to green consumers and investors alike, both assuaging public anxiety and laying the groundwork for ongoing accumulation of capital. Mainstream sustainability goals thus tend to privilege profit-motivated development over equity (Temenos and McCann, 2012).

Since it is such a broad and ambiguous concept with a generally positive connotation, sustainability is often shielded from critique and politicization. It frequently operates in a ‘post-political’ framework that focuses on technicalities (for example, how best to rework zoning ordinances to allow and encourage UA, or to draft building codes for green roofs) and, thus, downplays questions about rights and interests and, in turn, stifles collective mobilization for more radical change (Davidson and Iveson, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2009). Celebratory and post-political sustainability discourse frequently obscures the growing inequality in purportedly
sustainable cities, as well as the historical processes of uneven development that make sustainability investments possible in the urban core (Goodling et al., 2015).

There is still significant work that needs to be done to clarify the particular dynamics linking UA and eco-gentrification, however. For instance, UA projects often take root in vacant lots in the urban core, places awaiting the next wave of redevelopment. As investment returns under banners of ‘smart growth’ or ‘livability’, UA sites either become coveted for their development potential and gardens are resultanty displaced alongside the residents who created them (Schmelzkopf, 2002; Smith and Kurtz, 2003). Or, these UA sites become internalized by the gentrification process and are marketed by developers as signs of middle class conviviality in ways that add value to new, high-end construction projects (Quastel, 2009). In cities where vacant and cheap land abounds (e.g., Detroit and other Rust Belt cities), ‘land-grabbing’ by nascent urban agribusiness has fuelled bitter debates over whose interests UA ultimately serves (Colasanti et al., 2012; Safransky, 2014). Research in Portland, Oregon, for example, reveals that residential UA may also be enmeshed in the gentrification process, as young, educated newcomers, drawn to cities renowned for green amenities, move into cheaper neighbourhoods (McClintock et al., 2016). Furthermore, the motivations of practitioners vary along socioeconomic lines, with sustainability and environmental concerns resonating more with more affluent and educated gardeners, suggesting a class-based ‘eco-habitus’ (Carfagna et al., 2014) that motivates them to garden. Urban agriculture thus appears to take on a particular socio-spatial form in the neoliberal city, and has become an increasingly important space of politics.

Urban Agriculture Governance and Contestations in Portland, Oregon and Vancouver, British Columbia

We turn now to a case study of two cities – Portland and Vancouver – to begin to understand how such processes unfold. While Portland and Vancouver are both known for their green infrastructure, policies, and lifestyles, they have different economies, social histories, demographics, and regulatory frameworks. For instance, while the population of both municipalities is similar (594,000 and 603,000 respectively in 2011), Vancouver has nearly three times the population density and significantly higher property values. Further, while Portland is a majority white city with long-established African American and Latino communities, less than half of Vancouver’s population is white and over one-third is of Asian descent. Vancouver’s economy is more oriented toward the global market, and is a major hub of international resource trade and real estate investment (Berelowitz, 2010). Portland, on the other hand, is “a regional city” (Abbott, 2001: 40) historically tied to domestic markets, but has recently capitalized on its ability to export its models of sustainability planning and green economic development around the world (Temenos and McCann, 2013).

Despite these fundamental differences, common regional, cross-border narratives have highlighted similarities in order to construct a shared identity, premised on: a common physical geography between the Cascade mountain range and the Pacific Ocean; a history of environmental activism that laid the foundation for innovations in sustainability and green infrastructure (from light rail and bike lanes to green buildings and farmers markets); and even an elite dream of economic integration (Sparke, 2000). Both cities have topped various sustainability and livability rankings over the past decade, garnering worldwide attention and accolades. Municipal officials in both cities have begun to recognize the range of benefits that UA can provide and have taken interest in expanding its functional role in local food systems by adopting new ordinances and zoning updates in efforts to expand residential food production.
(McClintock and Simpson, 2016). At the same time, sustainability’s unevenness in both cities has served as a rallying point for food systems activism and other social justice struggles, particularly as food takes a more prominent role in the revitalization and, some would argue, gentrification of urban neighbourhoods (Burnett, 2014).

Both cities use UA to further their sustainability goals in ways that both promote and manage urban food production. At the same time, UA is increasingly squeezed out, both in terms of economics and space, as a result of a municipal commitment to increased building density. Furthermore, the two cities have been engaged in a relatively long-term relationship around policy-making, particularly in relationship to food. As we might expect in a neoliberal context, their learning engagements with each other and associated sharing and borrowing of certain policies and practices with other cities around sustainability are also tinged with a compulsion to compete (McCann, 2013). Finally, in Vancouver and Portland, UA is unevenly implemented and embraced. Affluent neighbourhoods often reject an UA aesthetic that prioritizes food production over manicured lawns, which suggests a lesser concern with the environmental ethics of sustainability. At the same time, residents of low-income neighbourhoods often lack the necessary resources – notably land and time – to be involved in UA. Moreover, current models of individual plot ownership replicate hegemonic property relations that may be incommensurate with collective land stewardship models, which are often tied to culturally specific value systems. The ability of UA to go beyond the creation of ‘feel good’ projects to provide alternative models of urban existence is constrained by which projects are sanctioned and which are marginalized by city policies, land use constraints, and by the sometimes divergent goals and motivations of UA practitioners.

Despite the dominance of the sustainability narrative that undergirds UA in these two cities, there continue to be contestations around the application of UA that unfold along various lines, from the institutional to spatialized class and racial/ethnic divisions. First, while we might consider UA to be a relatively low-cost sustainability fix (compared to more structural interventions such as bioswales or green roofs) and one that is often celebrated for its health, social and environmental benefits, it has not been without detractors within cities themselves. For example, municipal staff in Portland and Vancouver were initially reluctant to allow food production in parks. This resistance came from an entrenched perspective within Vancouver’s Parks Board and Portland’s Department of Parks and Recreation that park space should be primarily used for recreation, not food production. Additionally, there was concern that by assigning plots to individuals and charging a fee; public space was essentially closed off to the public. People from both cities who were involved with developing community gardening programs remember the resistance they faced. Portland’s first director of the city’s Community Gardening program, explains,

> When Parks [and Recreation] originally started doing the community gardens it was definitely recreation, and a couple of years after that they said, ‘Well okay maybe we can be a part of this food access question,’ but they had to be dragged kicking and screaming to that because they were unsure about a program that subsidizes individuals in what usually turns out to be [in] perpetuity once you get your plot.

Similarly, an early champion for UA in Vancouver, recalls, “A lot of the Parks Board staff, especially those who are kinda more horticulturalists, were asking, ‘Why are food and gardens being talked about in the Parks Board – that should all be private, public land should only be open green space.’”
In Portland, this tension was largely resolved with the advent of the Community Gardens program in 1975 but it took another two decades for the Vancouver Parks Board to institutionalize community gardens on city greenspace. Today, however, tensions remain despite the formalization of food production. Because parks (as well as school grounds) are some of the few remaining places in the city where open space is protected from market forces, questions over how public greenspace should be used figure centrally into activists’ efforts to increase urban food production. However, the public has not welcomed the encroachment of food production onto park space in every instance. In Vancouver, one attempt by the Parks Board to turn an unused parking lot into a community garden was met with resistance by neighbourhood residents who were concerned about privatization of public space.

Beyond challenging gardening in public parks, some within municipal government simply question municipal involvement in questions of food production, more broadly. Resistance to UA was evident in a recent Vancouver mayoral election, when the City’s UA initiatives, including a bylaw allowing backyard chickens and providing funding to a non-profit organization to encourage the growing of wheat in residential yards, were used, unsuccessfully in the end, to discredit the incumbent Vision Vancouver party. In particular, the opposition argued that food production is outside of the City’s mandate. One member of the Vancouver Food Policy Council, a local government advisory board, explained, “The opposing party to Vision Vancouver has used urban farming and community gardens and wheat being grown in the city as ways of trying to poke holes in the mayor’s agenda. You know, just saying that that’s not actual city business, and that’s hippy fluff.”

Second, such debates highlight the ways in which the politics of UA take shape along cultural and class divides within cities as well as related spatial divides. In both Portland and Vancouver, UA’s visibility often corresponds to the concentration of a particular demographic group. Food production in front yards, for example, tends to occur more frequently in middle-income neighbourhoods where levels of education attainment are high (McClintock et al., 2016). Here, people may be more likely to challenge conventional landscape norms of the manicured front lawn and a garden relegated to the backyard where it is out of sight. Indeed, in green cities, where gardens are well entrenched in the sustainability imaginary, front yard gardens may instead signal adherence to a particular set of environmental values that may not resonate in the most affluent neighbourhoods where such practice might be seen as a transgression of social norms (Naylor, 2012).

According to one urban farmer, for example, residents of the more affluent Westside of Vancouver tend to maintain this more traditional aesthetic of “manicured lawns” over one transgressed by “chickens and vegetables”, whereas Eastside neighbourhoods are more likely to have visible food production, from front-yard gardens to gardens on boulevards and traffic circles (on general east-west differences in

Photo 1. A front yard garden in a gentrifying neighbourhood of Portland, Oregon. Photo by N. McClintock.
Vancouver, see Proudfoot and McCann, 2008). Community and school gardens follow a similar pattern in Vancouver. In the affluent Shaughnessy neighbourhood, for example, there are neither, whereas the lower-income yet trendy neighbourhood of Grandview-Woodland has at least seventeen such gardens.

Residential gardening in Portland follows similar patterns. Front yard gardens are most common in neighbourhoods closest to the median income, in gentrifying and recently gentrified neighbourhoods (see Photo 1), whereas most gardens in both the affluent southwest neighbourhoods and low-income neighbourhoods of East Portland tend to be hidden from view. The motivation to garden also differs in line with this uneven socioeconomic geography (on east-west differences in Portland, see Goodling et al., 2015). In East Portland, gardeners tend to be less affluent than the surrounding population and rely on their gardens for more of their produce, whereas gardeners living in inner Northeast and Southeast tend to be more affluent, have higher levels of educational attainment than their neighbours, and emphasize environmental sustainability to a greater extent (McClintock et al., 2016).

Third, contestations over how urban space should be used are often highly racialized. Increasingly, UA is viewed as a space of young, white, middle-class residents, with immigrants and people of colour frequently excluded from participation in more public forms of gardening because of language and other barriers (Reynolds and Cohen, 2016). In Portland, many of the city’s green amenities have become flashpoints over long histories of racial dispossession. Many African American residents see the arrival of green infrastructure such as bike lanes, bioswales, and gardens as both a driver and result of the gentrification and displacement that has gutted the black community over the past decade, as well as the most recent example of top-down planning decisions imposed on the city’s black community (Lubitow and Miller, 2013). Given the proliferation of gardens within the broader context of wholesale gentrification of Portland’s historically black Albina district, certain types of UA – especially collective and community gardens – are increasingly ‘coded’ or ‘read’ as white, a marker of the influx of white hipsters and the loss of African American culture. According to a leader of black business association in Albina, the emergence of community gardens was a “bad sign for the African American community. We always gardened. We always shared our gardens and our food. We didn’t need ‘community gardens’, that’s a white invention” (quoted in Hern, 2016). Indeed, the way UA is currently implemented and managed is reflective of a certain notion of food production that may not reflect the diverse ways in which communities may connect with agriculture. In Vancouver, this process is less evidently racialized, but nevertheless cuts along class lines. Embodying the City of Vancouver’s Greenest City claims, UA is entrenched in the green entrepreneurial logic undergirding municipal economic development strategies, which inevitably lead to gentrification and displacement as housing prices rise.

**Contesting the Sustainability Fix?**

As the cases of Portland and Vancouver demonstrate, understanding UA as a sustainability fix can help us to better recognize UA as a space of politics in the neoliberal city. Central to development of the green city, UA therefore enjoys a prominent role in municipal governance of sustainability. Food system localization is heralded as a central tenet of such policy work. But the belief that “fresh, local, and usually organic foods produced by small-scale farms [is] the alternative to the industrial food system and its environmental ills” (Bradley and Galt, 2014: 172) has been critiqued for conflating local with ethical, for being exclusionary, and
for failing to acknowledge structural inequalities that inhibit food access (Born and Purcell, 2006; Ramírez, 2015; Sbicca, 2014).

Urban agriculture is a way of performing sustainability without addressing who actually benefits from the increasingly common municipal drive toward a neoliberal version of sustainability. While UA projects in both cities aim to address issues of sustainability, they are not necessarily designed to address issues of food security and inequality, especially when these projects are heavily managed by the City or constrained by funding parameters. Indeed, urban farms and community gardens often do not have an explicit social justice mandate, nor do equity concerns motivate all practitioners of UA. One urban farmer from Vancouver remarked, “I don't know that urban farming is so much an activist activity. Like, for a lot of people, it's small business, it's entrepreneurial.” Both in Portland and Vancouver, community gardens and urban farms are viewed as spaces for community building and food production and are, largely, not sites from which to critique structural issues that contribute to food insecurity.

Other alternative UA models, such as social enterprises that do attempt to address issues like barriers to employment and social exclusion, are also entangled in the entrepreneurial logic of the sustainable city. For example, Sole Food Street Farms, which sells its produce at farmers markets and restaurants, has an explicit mandate to support low-income Downtown Eastside Vancouver residents through employment opportunities. Partially supported by the City through funding and access to land, the organization is a keystone within the wider food systems localization efforts. Its sprawling farm, located in the shadow of glittering apartment towers, two sports arenas, and major highway viaducts, is emblematic of the Greenest City brand and the sustainability fix it supports (see Photo 2). Furthermore, by emphasizing the personal transformation through employment, the project, like many similar ones (Pudup, 2008; Weissman, 2015), unintentionally bolsters the neoliberal agenda emphasizing individual responsibility and the formation of “useful” citizens, rather than challenging systems of economic oppression that result in their poverty and exclusion in the first place.

Nevertheless, UA does hold a radical potential for reimagining urban living or supporting alternatives to capitalism through the creation of alternative economies. In some instances, there are small-scale efforts at implementing bartering systems or work-shares for produce boxes, that point to the potential for UA to be subversive (see Galt et al., 2014). For example, Portland’s Urban Farm Collective has land and water sharing agreements among its members. Volunteers are also paid in barter bucks called “slugs” that can then be exchanged for produce from the farm. Such an arrangement is central to their effort, as noted on their website, to “strive to exit completely from the cash for goods, market economy” through their

Photo 2. Sole Food Street Farms, a large social enterprise located in downtown Vancouver, British Columbia. Photo by N. McClintock.
barter system. This system provides an alternative economic system that allows for greater participation of people in farming without being tied to a capitalist system.

Embarking on UA using an explicit framework of food justice or social justice can also help transform – or at least push back against – dominant sustainability discourse. While sustainability is clear in its concern for intergenerational equity, i.e., balancing the needs of the present with those of future generations, its concern with intragenerational equity is less evident (Agyeman, 2013). An explicit food justice orientation, on the other hand, clearly places concerns over structural inequities and oppression at the forefront of UA practice. Food justice, with its roots in the civil rights and environmental justice struggles of people of colour in the US (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010), in general holds greater traction in Portland, but is increasingly informing the missions of Canadian UA organizations, as well.

As UA practitioners and activists increasingly engage a food justice framework, their insights have the potential to draw equity concerns into policymaking and planning conversations. That justice and equity will take centre stage in these efforts is not a foregone conclusion, however, given the lack of participation by people other than the ‘usual suspects’, described by the former director of the Vancouver Urban Farming Society (VUFS), as “young, white, twenty, thirty-something, educated, middle class” urban agriculturalists. She recognizes that attention to justice is “not something that as an overarching organization or community that I would say we’ve been as intentional about as we could be. Activists must therefore be conscientious and continue not only to create these spaces for discussion, but also actively incorporate social justice into their organizational missions, goals, and strategies.

As part of the neoliberal sustainability fix, urban agriculture has clearly become a flashpoint, where tensions between exchange value and multiple, often divergent use values come to a head along class and racial lines, as well as within and across municipal agencies. UA is a product of negotiation among various interests and institutions. At the same time, the outcomes of its negotiation, which are heavily influenced by dominant political-economic interests and hegemonic sustainability discourses, are nonetheless open and emergent to a certain degree. Urban agriculture is nothing if not thoroughly political.

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Glossary

**Eco-gentrification** is a particular type of gentrification that is characterized by a green’ aesthetic and is abetted by design and planning agendas that value green spaces and ‘green’ infrastructure, including spaces for urban agriculture of one sort or another. This largely class- and race-specific ecological agenda, or environmental ethic, facilitates the exclusion and displacement of low-income and vulnerable populations from neighbourhoods where it is implemented in favour of their replacement by largely white middle class residents.

**Food justice** views food as a central component to creating an equitable society. Food justice programs seek to address disparities in access to affordable, healthy, culturally appropriate food that disproportionately impact people based on race and class. Food justice does more than increase access to healthy food; it works to dismantle the structural inequalities that cause food insecurity and social marginalization.

**Sustainability fix.** A set of political discourses, practices and institutional capacities that partially mitigate economic and ecological crises while assuaging related popular concerns and opposition in order to allow development to proceed for the benefit of hegemonic interests. This particular ‘fix’ appeals to mainstream notions of ecological stewardship and concerns about environmental futures and tends to propose solutions that are technical and certainly not radical (see While et al., 2004).

**Uneven development** is the process by which ebbs and flows of capital differentially shape the built environment over time. The investment of capital is concentrated in certain areas, while other areas are neglected. As rates of profit fall over time, however, owners of capital seek new spaces where a higher return on investment may be possible. These new sites of investment tend to be those areas previously neglected by capital, where the costs of land and labour are likely to be lower. Capital thus ‘seesaws’ back and forth between such spaces, both within and between cities and regions (see Smith, 2008). Urban agriculture often arises in devalued, neglected spaces, preceding the return of capital. Increasingly, however, it actually accompanies such investment.

**Urban agriculture** (UA) consists of variety of food growing practices and spaces – including household and community gardening, urban farming, orchards, animal husbandry (e.g., chickens, goats), and aviaries – found in urban and suburban areas. Unlike traditional agriculture, urban agriculture is usually operates at a relatively small scale and can be motivated by other purposes, outside of strictly food production, such as community building, civic-engagement and environmental sustainability.
Bibliography


