

S I T E L I N E S

A Journal of Place

Volume vi | Number ii | Spring 2011

A Publication of the
Foundation
for Landscape Studies

Essays: Cities Going Green, The Urban
Landscape as Food 3

Timothy Beatley: *Inventing the New Urban
Farm: Field Notes From Detroit*

Ben Helphand and Laura Lawson: *The
Culture of Food and Chicago's Community
Gardens*

Jane Garmey: *Rooftop Revolution: Culinary
Gardening Aloft in New York City*

Jane Roy Brown: *They Built a Fahm
in Hahvud Yahd: A Tiny Garden Strives for
Global Impact*

Katherine Harmon: *Lessons in the Dirt:
School Gardens Grow in Brooklyn*

Place Keeper 16

Paula Deitz: *Twin Maples, Litchfield County,
Connecticut*

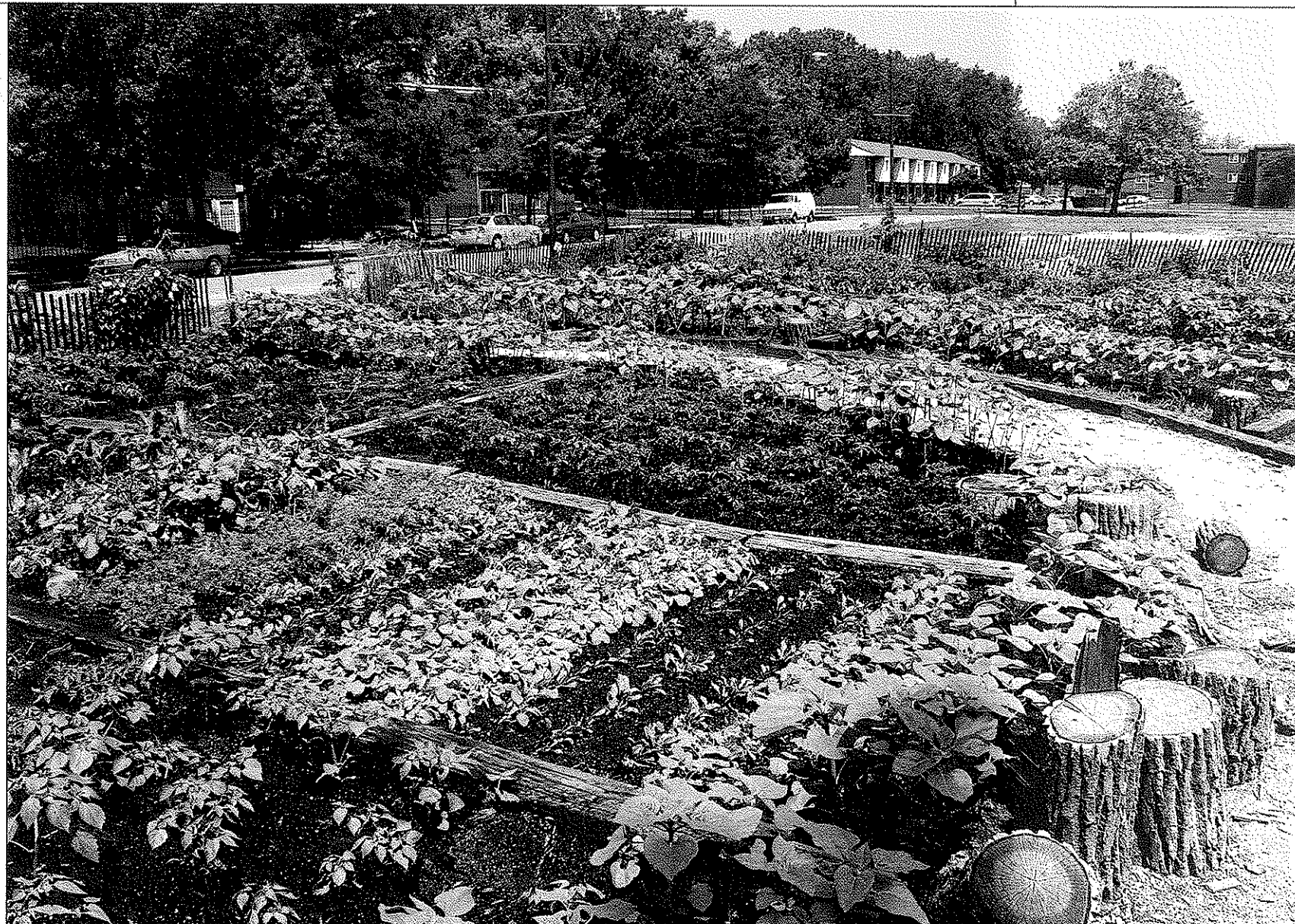
Book Reviews 18

Elihu Rubin: *Delirious New Orleans:
Manifesto for an Extraordinary American City*
By Stephen Verderber

Alice Truax: *Farm City: The Education
of an Urban Farmer*
By Novella Carpenter

Elizabeth Barlow Rogers: *Parks, Plants,
and People*
By Lynden B. Miller

Contributors 23



Inventing the New Urban Farm: Field Notes From Detroit

Few American cities have fallen as far or as hard as Detroit. Once the fourth largest city in the country, an iconic example of American ingenuity and productivity, over the last half century it became instead an emblem of cronyism, corruption, and despair. The population, once close to two million, now hovers at around half that. Unemployment is at 14 percent. A *Time* article in 2009 cited the median home sale price at less than \$6,000 – and no one was buying. Today, roughly a third of the city's acreage lies vacant – about forty square miles. And yet even these statistics don't fully prepare a visitor for the extent of the devastation. Driving around Detroit, one sees large empty spaces that once contained entire neighborhoods and commercial strips reminiscent of battle-scarred Iraq or Lebanon. Many homes and businesses have been deliberately set on fire; others are crumbling to the ground.

These ruins are punctuated by relics of an earlier, more vibrant time, when the automobile literally defined Motor City. Here, still, are the enormous factories, the Edsel Ford Expressway, the twelve-ton, eighty-foot tire looming over the highway near the airport. But unfortunately, despite the recent positive economic bulletins from General Motors and Ford, it is nature rather than industry that appears to be reshaping the city, as lawns grow wild and bushes invade the houses they once ornamented. On the east side of town, where the decline has been greatest, pheasants have become a common sight. Some, however, see in nature's regenerative force not the destruction of Detroit's past but the key to its future. Both business leaders and government officials are exploring city farming on a grand scale as a serious possibility.

In fact, urban agriculture has come to Detroit's aid before, as today's farming proponents are quick to point out. When its inhabitants were battling hunger and poverty during the depression of the 1890s, the city's progressive mayor, Hazen S. Pingree, instituted the use of vacant lots for gardens. The gardens became known as "Pingree's potato patches," and by all accounts they were quite successful, feeding many in desperate times. At the height of the program some seventeen hundred families farmed half-acre plots, producing food for both sale and family consumption. Laura Lawson, in her excellent book



Much of the east side of Detroit is a mix of abandoned houses and vacant lots. Some 40 square miles of vacant land exists in the city, offering new opportunities for food production as well as the restoration of natural habitats.

City Bountiful, describes how the Pingree program was emulated in other cities, including New York and Philadelphia.

One of the reasons that urban agriculture is being viewed as an appealing possibility is that, for the time being, the city's aim is not to repopulate its dwindling neighborhoods but to depopulate them even further. Mayor Dave Bing has introduced a bold master plan called Detroit Works, which will identify existing population clusters in the city and then densify and reinvest in those areas – essentially giving up on areas that don't appear to be socially or economically viable in the short run. This idea has been controversial, as some residents are afraid that they will be forced to relocate, but doing nothing to address Detroit's shrinking population is not an option. With a crippled tax base, the city simply can't afford to protect its remaining citizens and supply them with basic services like water and road repair. By one estimate, each vacant lot costs the city about \$2,400 per year in public services and maintenance – an annual bill in the hundreds of millions and a major reason for the city's operating deficits.

As many neighborhoods continue to empty, and as Detroit Works speeds this process along, there are remarkable opportunities to repurpose the vacant swaths of this city, and perhaps more than in any other American city today, urban

agriculture is poised to be a catalyst for renewal and reuse. At the same time, there is considerable angst about how Detroit's food-growing potential should be exploited, and competing models and perspectives have emerged. At one end of the continuum is a proposal by local millionaire John Hantz to transform large areas of the city into intensive and commercially viable farms. This proposal has captured the imagination of many outside of Detroit and received considerable national press coverage. Hantz, with a net worth of some \$100 million, has made a personal commitment to invest \$30 million in commercial urban farming in Detroit over the next ten years – a pledge that has given him immediate credibility. He is seen as a native son whose ideas should be taken seriously.

Hantz has described his depressing daily commute from his home in Indian Village to his Southfield office in numerous interviews. "I'd look out the window," he told a staff editor at *The Atlantic*, "and I'd tell myself, something has to happen. Something has to change. One day I was sitting at a traffic light, thinking this through from an economics point of view, and I thought, 'What's our problem? Why doesn't it get better?' Well, we have multiple problems, but one comes down to real estate. We don't have scarcity." There is too much available land in Detroit, so nobody wants it. "We need to create scarcity," Hantz reasoned, "because until we get a stabilized market, there's no reason for entrepreneurs or other people to start buying. I thought, 'What could do that in a positive way? What's a development that people would want to be associated with?'" And that's when he came up with the idea of farming: a business enterprise that takes up a great deal of space. "People often think you have to have a big solution to a big problem – why not keep it simple and start with a simple solution?" And so he founded Hantz Farms, LLC, and hired Mike Score as its president.

Score was a good choice. He grew up in Detroit and attended Michigan State University (MSU), where he obtained a degree in crop and soil sciences; it turned out that for many years he, too, had harbored a dream of converting some of the city's vacant acreage into farmland. After a stint working on agricultural development in Zaire and another teaching in Kentucky, where he received his master's degree, he returned to MSU to work at its extension service as an innovation counselor. It was there, while helping fledgling entrepreneurs develop business plans for new food businesses and products, that he met Hantz. After he helped the entrepreneur come up with a financial plan, Hantz offered him a job.



Mike Score is president of Hantz Farms LLC, and is spearheading efforts to bring large-scale commercial farming to Detroit. Here, he and the author visit the site of the "proof of concept" farm, on the east side of the city.

to cobble together lots – most now owned by the city as a result of foreclosure – that Hantz Farms is negotiating to buy. Nevertheless, assembling a viable farm in an area that would still include hundreds of individual lot owners remains a challenge. Although we drove by large, empty parcels of land, the checkerboard pattern of Score's site map indicated that a considerable number of local residents are expected to stay put. In fact, the Hantz Farm staff began its efforts by going door to door in the neighborhood to explain what they were envisioning, and that no one would be forcibly evicted. Score claims that local support has been high, with some 95 percent of the residents signing a petition that will eventually be presented to City Council, asking them to approve the sale of the city-owned parcels. Score believes that over time similar "pods" of large-scale agriculture could be established around the city, eventually resulting in perhaps five thousand to ten thousand acres in commercial production.

What kinds of commercial farming are imagined? Score talks in terms of stages, beginning with somewhat easier and more familiar strategies. The first would probably include

hardwood trees (an especially good option if significant soil contamination is discovered), apple trees and other fruit trees, and even pick-your-own Christmas trees, along with field crops like lettuce and heirloom tomatoes. A second phase would include more intensive indoor production, including the notion of an innovation center demonstrating many different indoor production systems. Score maintains that just about every new farming idea will be on display and tested – aquaculture, aquaponics, aeroponics – and that many of these technologies will probably be designed in vertical shapes to take up less space. Education and tourism would be added to the mix, targeting students of all ages, senior citizens, and community organizations.

The third phase, which would be the most ambitious, would invest in renewable-energy technologies to power all of this pro-

duction sustainably. Although Hantz Farms is a commercial enterprise, its founder believes that it can also serve to educate others and draw tourists to Detroit. Indeed, at several points in our conversation, Score mentioned the possibility that people from around the world might one day come there not to celebrate the city's automotive past but to learn about leading urban-farming ideas and technologies. "We believe we can be a global center for research and innovation in urban agriculture and we can give birth to a new industry," he explained. Score and Hantz would like to see a time in the near future when, in one trip, a visitor could learn about soil remediation, compare and contrast different growing systems, and observe the sociological impact of integrating agriculture into an urban setting. In this scenario, Score says, "many of the lessons that will be of interest to urban planners and urban leaders could be addressed by traveling to Detroit."

We have no model in the United States for what such an immensely ambitious agricultural project might look like. "Don't think a farm with tractors," Hantz has said. "That's old." When *Fortune* magazine did a story on the project in 2009, the editors asked if they could commission an illustrator to imagine such a landscape. The result was whimsical and conceptual – multiple elevated growing beds, geodesic-dome greenhouses, and wind turbines – but not that far from Score's own conception of the future.

There have been frustrations, Score admits, and many hurdles remain. The city has shifted the projected site of the farm several times. And there remains uncertainty about the legal status of commercial farming in the city (there is currently no agricultural zone or category under the city's zoning ordinance). Discussions about the necessity of extending the state's right-to-farm law within the city's boundaries are ongoing. But resources and capital to get started, which are so often the major stumbling blocks, do not appear to be issues in this case.

Some city residents are leery of the Hantz proposal, fearing that it is motivated by profit and opportunism, and referring to Hantz's efforts to buy the city's foreclosed properties as a land grab. Ironically, Hantz Farms may be most vocally resisted by those who are already involved in producing food within the city limits. By one estimate, there are more than one thousand small gardens now operating in Detroit, and their supporters represent a dramatically different philosophy and practice of urban agriculture. One of them is Dr. Kami Pothukuchi, who teaches in the urban studies and planning program at Wayne State University. In Pothukuchi's view, the Hantz proposal has suffered from the beginning from a failure to connect with the city's robust and growing urban agriculture movement.

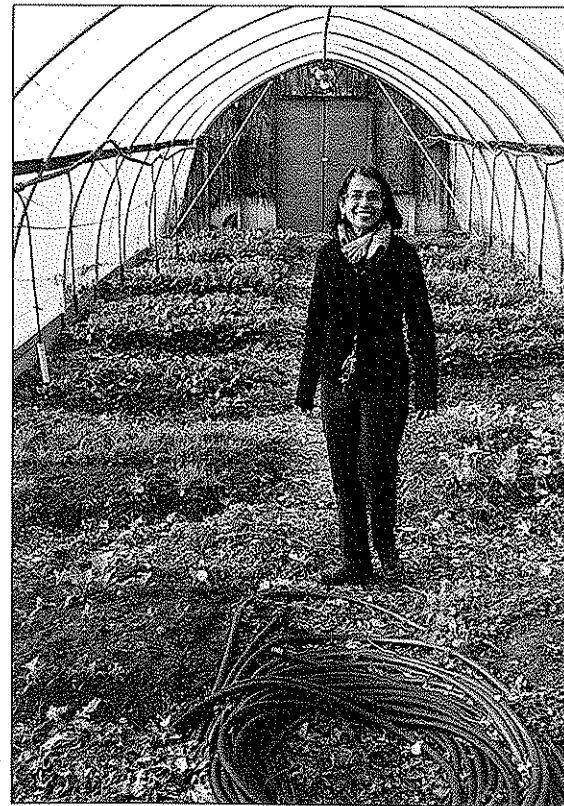
Pothukuchi would like to see many more small gardens scattered throughout the city rather than the development of one big, privately owned enterprise. During our meeting, she emphasized the many benefits of community gardens, and the profound ways in which they help to strengthen neighborhoods. Hantz, she argued, sees his project merely as a "convenient use of land," whereas "people who are in urban agriculture talk about the possibility of abundance, about sharing, about all the multiple community benefits that can be obtained from agriculture – involving young people and inspiring neighborhoods."

There is no question that Detroit suffers from a disintegrating and dysfunctional community food system; there are many places on Detroit's east side where residents have no easy access to a grocery store. The commercial establishments that remain in these neighborhoods are often liquor stores or tiny convenience shops. Pothukuchi has developed a program called Detroit FRESH to help the owners of these stores stock at least some fresh fruits and vegetables for their customers. Pothukuchi took me to one such store – a little market on Mack Avenue, where the owners are proud that they have resisted the alienating trend of installing bulletproof glass to shield themselves from their customers. This store already offers more foodstuffs than most, but front and center, I noticed, were bananas and apples and pears.

For Pothukuchi, this is just a beginning; she and the owner discussed plans already under way to establish a garden on an adjacent empty lot, which could then provide the store with extremely fresh produce during the growing season. Pothukuchi also mentioned the possibility of organizing a special event to counsel nearby residents suffering from diabetes, and the store owner seemed interested in participating. Lots of small-scale efforts such as these are in progress throughout the city, and increasingly they identify themselves as part of a larger movement. Many of the gardens are connected by the Detroit Garden Resource Collaborative, a joint effort of The Greening of Detroit, Detroit Agriculture Network, Earthworks Urban Farm, and Michigan State University. These organizations provide technical support, training, and planting materials to representatives of the hundreds of individual gardens scattered around Detroit. In so doing, they also nourish a network of community activists who are, in their own ways, building a different kind of city.

One impressive example of urban farming of a different sort can be seen at Earthworks Urban Farm, which was started by a Franciscan brother in 1997 to provide food for the Capuchin Soup Kitchen. A member of the collaborative, Earthworks Farm has blossomed into a hub of urban gardening activity. Its greenhouse now produces some one hundred thousand vegetable seedlings, many of which are donated to other community gardening efforts around the city. On the day I visited, Patrick Crouch, program manager for the farm, was busy laying out a passive solar hoop house that will expand the production and training space even further. Earthworks maintains more than thirty beehives and produces honey and beeswax hand balm in addition to jam and canned foods. It also runs two youth-farming ini-

Kami Pothukuchi is a professor at Wayne State University and believes the future lies in smaller, neighborhood-based urban agriculture. Here, she and the author visit one of the greenhouses run by Earthworks Urban Farm.



tiatives, which teach kids about food and agricultural issues. The farm is a highly grassroots, neighborhood- and community-embedded venture, and it exists to combat poverty, social equity, and food insecurity. These are goals and objectives not often mentioned when the Hantz Farms proposal is described, and therein lies part of the schism that has emerged in the Detroit urban-farming community.

In some ways, this seems a predictable clash of values. Hantz is a businessman. He has a diversified portfolio that includes ownership of a corporate airline, a bowling alley, a bank, and a lot of real estate. This latest venture has been from the beginning a commercial one – Hantz's civic concerns about the health of his native city notwithstanding. This is one of the reasons that Score objects strongly to criticisms that Hantz did not reach out sufficiently to the city's urban-gardening community. "John's perspective is a business perspective," Score said. "When Apple wanted to build their desktop computers they didn't go to IBM and say, 'You were here first – would it be all right with you if we put this in the marketplace? They took millions of dollars and put it at risk, and if the market doesn't like the idea the business will fail. For John, he never felt compelled to sit down with other groups in the city and find out whether they liked his idea. He was just willing to put his money at risk and see how the market responded." Score believes that the commercial marketplace must be the primary catalytic force that moves the city forward.

Part of the resistance to the Hantz proposal is certainly due to the immense amount of national publicity Hantz has received when smaller-scale urban agriculturalists have been working in the trenches for decade or longer with little recognition. But it also stems from the scope of the project, and the difficulty of anticipating its negative consequences before it will be too late to prevent them. In fairness to Hantz's detractors, corporations rarely feel beholden to the communities in which they do business, whereas for Pothukuchi and others in Detroit's urban gardening movement, it is the neighborhood and the community that must be the primary point of focus. As Patrick Crouch told one reporter, smaller farms "fit within the fabric of a neighbor-

hood,” whereas a large operation like Hantz Farm becomes “a substitute for community redevelopment instead of being a catalyst for community redevelopment.” And as John Gallagher, a longtime reporter for the *Detroit Free Press*, points out in his recent book, *Reimagining Detroit*, there are many reasons urban farmers might feel suspicious of corporate power and influence – “because the banks and big business redlined Detroit and other cities, or because of the horror stories they hear about the way corporate farmers treat livestock, or because of the intensive use of pesticides and other chemicals corporate farmers use to make huge single-crop farms profitable.”

How irreconcilable are these competing visions of a greener Detroit? Score believes that there is plenty of room in Detroit for both of them. Certainly, the city bureaucracy has been galvanized to develop an institutional framework supportive of urban agriculture. A committee appointed by the

One of the garden sites at Earthworks Urban Farm. This farm serves as an important hub for small-scale neighborhood gardening and food production in Detroit.



city planning commission is drafting a new urban agriculture policy and looking carefully at the code and zoning changes that are needed, including provisions for keep-

ing poultry and bees in the city – activities which are currently illegal. A food policy council has also been formed. Perhaps these new urban food initiatives will create opportunities for the various constituencies to speak and work together. With an extension of good will from both sides, it might also be possible to craft synergies to advance neighborhood cohesion and community food security as well as larger-scale economic food production, but whether that good will is forthcoming remains to be seen.

Hazen Pingree’s statue now sits in Grand Circus Park, and although most residents probably could not identify this figure, who later served two terms as governor of Michigan, he is an important historical reference point for Detroit’s supporters of urban agriculture. It is interesting to ponder what Pingree would have thought about the rift between the neighborhood gardeners and the proponents of larger-scale, commercial farms in the city. The potato-patch gardens were rather small, to be sure, and born out of concerns about justice and poverty and health. As Melvin G. Hollis, in his comprehensive book about the reformer notes, a main goal of the program was to “eliminate the stigma of pauperism attached to [public] relief.” Give the poor the skills, material, and land, and they, even in cities, will feed themselves. But then again, Pin-

gree was himself a Republican, albeit a progressive one, and the owner of a shoe factory, so one could imagine that he might approve of the capitalist sensibilities behind Hantz’s vision. My guess is that Pingree would certainly approve of a government agricultural policy that accommodated a spectrum of philosophies and approaches: both small-scale and large-scale, local and corporate. The one thing that all sides agree upon is that Detroit needs a diversified and resilient mix of food producers and production systems.

Perhaps most exciting is the possibility for Detroit that John Gallagher suggests in his book – that his hometown might emerge as an example of how other American cities can adapt themselves to a postindustrial (postcarbon) identity in the twenty-first century. There is room to restore nature, to explore new economic models, and, ironically, to create the conditions for a less car-dependent society. Especially intriguing are current arguments for an ambitious greening agenda: more trees and forests – something the local group the Greening of Detroit has already been working on for years; more stream restoration and native hydrology; and a celebration of the returning wildlife, such as the beavers that have apparently moved back into town after many decades. To embrace these possibilities, however, Americans must begin by realizing that smaller need not mean lesser but instead can signal a sustainable, innovative city with a higher quality of life. As Gallagher reminds us, “a city can shrink and grow at the same time.” – Timothy Beatley

The Culture of Food and Chicago’s Community Gardens

America is in the midst of a food crisis. The number of obese children in this country has tripled in the last thirty years. Hundreds of thousands live in so-called food deserts, neighborhoods with limited access to supermarkets or other sources of healthy food. Food pantries are faced with higher demand and declining donations. Fresh produce is prohibitively expensive for many and often loaded with pesticides. And our current food system is inextricably linked to our dependence upon fossil fuels: the average meal travels fifteen hundred miles to our plate.

Partly in response to this crisis, interest in community gardens has blossomed in cities across the country. Longtime organizations that support gardens, from the Boston Natural Areas Network and Denver Urban Gardens to Seattle’s P-Patch and New York City’s GreenThumb, have noted an increased demand for garden space. And newer organizations have taken root in places like the Twin Cities, Pittsburgh, and Salt Lake City, breathing new life into unused properties. City parks and recreation departments are setting aside corners of parkland for gardening, and churches, hospitals and schools are reimagining institutional land as a place for vegetable plots.

Though some garden projects are purely ornamental or focused on restoring animal habitat, most are conceived as a response to some aspect of the food crisis. Community gardens are established with the promise of saving money, feeding the hungry, and relieving food deserts. What’s more, the locally grown food they provide needs only travel down the block, not across the country.