The Suburban Farm: An innovative model for civic agriculture

Innovative US developers are integrating farmland into their residential areas (subdivisions), providing space for food production and linking residents to their farmer-neighbours, with positive consequences for both. Suburban farms can be an important part of a sustainable regional food system.

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Farming is an integral part of Prairie Crossing

Growing concerns about the negative environmental and social impacts of the agro-industrial food system have led to the rise of an oppositional movement promoting alternative food systems, shortened food chains, or what is broadly defined as civic agriculture (Feagan, 2007; Lyson, 2000). Civic agriculture implies a commitment on the part of producers and consumers to developing and strengthening a sustainable system of agriculture and food production and distribution that relies on local resources and serves local markets. The institutions that make up a civic agriculture system are a part of the local economy, produce and sell food that matches the ecological and cultural needs of the community, are small-scale, not capital intensive, and rely on the knowledge of the individuals who live in a particular place (DeLind, 2002).

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Civic agriculture includes flexibly organised farms and food producers, including urban farms. On the retail side, civic agriculture comprises various forms of direct marketing, such as farmers' markets, community supported agriculture (CSA), or cooperative production and distribution, all of which closely connect food producers and consumers.

CIVIC AGRICULTURE AND CIVIC SPACE

This civic engagement is critical and is related to the locality in which civic agriculture occurs. Specific spaces that bring producers and consumers together, like a weekly farmers' market, can help restore a sense of community to a city or town (Feenstra, 2002; Norberg-Hodge et al., 2002; Allen, 2004). Creating social spaces for civic interaction is an important part of fostering civic agriculture and the creation of successful food system alternatives (Feenstra, 2002). And, according to DeLind (2002), civic agriculture has the potential for "grounding people in common purpose" and for "nurturing a sense of belonging to a place and an organic sense of citizenship."

THE FARMING SUBDIVISION

The farming subdivision is an innovative response to the desire to foster civic agriculture. A small but growing number of residential developers are producing housing subdivisions designed from the start to include working farms (Munoz, 2007). These farmland subdivisions are geographically dispersed, and are built in both suburban and more rural locations. The type of farming practiced varies, too, from simple haying to diversified organic vegetable farming. In comparison to traditional subdivisions, they have numerous potential environmental benefits, including land conservation, land restoration (if organic growing methods are used), and production of food destined for local markets. They also provide social benefits as well. Residents in developments with common spaces report that the shared open space in these communities enables them to meet and connect with other people (Plas and Lewis, 1996).

By bringing homeowners and farmers together in a cohesive community, these types of developments also have the potential to reduce the physical and emotional distance that has grown between consumers and food producers.

By carving out farmland and farm markets in the midst of homes, these communities offer spaces for individuals to interact with their neighbours and with the people growing and selling food, thus contributing to the development of a civic agriculture system.

FARMING VENTURES AT PRAIRIE CROSSING

Prairie Crossing is a 267 ha residential development with 359 single-family homes and 36 condominiums, located 60 km north of Chicago (but considered suburban, since many commuters live here). It is an excellent example of the farming subdivision. The project was built on farmland. Designed from the start as a conservation development, it features clustered homes and approximately two-thirds of the land is set aside for open space, ecologically-restored wetlands and prairie grasslands, two commuter rail stations that connect to Chicago, and (62 ha) organic farming activities (Prairie Crossing, 2007).

The area supports Sandhill Organics, which is a small, organic, family farm enterprise, on approximately 16 ha. Sandhill Organics relies on a CSA model to sell its produce, with CSA shares providing approximately 60% of its annual $300,000 revenue, and farmers' market sales accounting for another one-third. In addition to leasing land to Sandhill Organics, the subdivision also supports a 1.2 ha educational farm on the site that works with 375 students from two local schools. An additional area of farmland has been set aside as a beginning farmer incubator programme, enabling individuals interested in becoming farmers to develop business skills and gain experience on relatively small parcels. The incubator programme is in its second year, with five beginning farmers who have been recruited through informal networks growing food on approximately 2 ha parcels a piece.

Farming in Prairie Crossing, as in many suburbanising communities, presents logistical challenges. One common concern, according to Sandhill Organics, is that the agricultural infrastructure does not exist in this community in the way it would in a more rural community. On the other hand, farming in a more densely populated community also has its advantages. Among the biggest advantage is Sandhill Organics' proximity to its markets.

Residents interact with the farm in a variety of ways because the farm is a point of interest in the Prairie Crossing landscape. A walking trail on a rise separating the homes from the farm enables residents to look over the working landscape. The farmers' market has become an important meeting place for the community. Residents can interact more actively by helping with farm chores. A little over one-quarter of those residents surveyed reported that they had volunteered on the farm at least once (Watson, 2006).

The owners of Sandhill Organics go so far as to say that they have more in common with the people who live in Prairie Crossing than with the handful of nearby farmers they know. They think of themselves first as neighbours to the people who live in Prairie Crossing and second as the community's farmers.

CONCLUSIONS

As a farming subdivision, Prairie Crossing embodies many of the values of civic agriculture. Farming is an integral part of Prairie Crossing, with homeowners and farmers interacting as neighbours, friends, and food producers and consumers. Residents have a close physical connection to the farmland through trails and roads that border and cross the farm, and have a connection to the process of farming. The farm itself is embedded in the identity of the community, serving as an important common space. In addition, Sandhill Organics is clearly part of the economy of the development itself. By growing food organically, the farmers are meeting the conservation goals of the community as well as satisfying the tastes of Sandhill's customers.

An important feature of civic agriculture is that it is a system of food production "characterised by networks of producers who are bound together by place (Lyson, 2004)". As one of a growing number of organic produce farms in Northern Illinois, Sandhill Organics is an integral part of the region's diverse, civic network of family farmers.

If Prairie Crossing does nothing more than to increase the connection of residents to their food system and demonstrate the feasibility of integrating organic farmland into the growing number of suburban and exurban residential communities being developed across the nation, it is likely to move us a small, incremental step towards food system reform. By participating in and supporting alternative agricultural models, such as communities built around small farms, both consumers and farmers help to create an opening for more significant restructuring and transformation.

Prairie Crossing is a unique project, the challenge for planners and developers is to design truly affordable versions of the farming subdivision that accommodate a diverse population and fit into a wider variety of residential communities, including older suburbs and urban neighbourhoods undergoing redevelopment.

Diffusing the farming subdivision innovation throughout the residential development industry would require the education of planners and developers about the financial feasibility, marketing advantages, and public benefits of these types of developments. The US Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design programme for Neighbourhood Development (LEED-ND) has taken a step in that direction by awarding a credit for projects designed with permanent farms and gardens, helping to legitimise and promote the idea of farming subdivisions. Other organisations, from cooperative extension offices to non-profit land trusts, can educate developers about the value of integrating farmland into their projects, and the methods by which they can do so.

Spreading the concept of a farming subdivision is important, but public policies are also necessary to make it easy, and cost-effective, for a developer to build farmland into a residential project. At the federal level, federal farm subsidies should be shifted to smaller-scale fruit and vegetable growers. State and local governments should set stricter limits on the development of prime farmland surrounding cities, update zoning ordinances so that they encourage conservation developments, and provide financial assistance to developers who preserve, restore and enhance the value of the farmland on their properties.

References

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Although the water of rivers and streams is often polluted, many poorer livestock-keepers use these sources, but they prefer to use springs. Some have innovated by feeding residues from local beer-making, which have high water content.

Most urban farmers of rural origin have traditional knowledge about treating animal diseases, e.g. chopping and mixing local plants to control lice in chickens; or using the flesh of Ire (an Aloe species) to treat bloat in cattle. Some farmers without traditional knowledge use modern (chemical) human medicines such as Ampicillin and Tetracycline as an immediate measure for sick sheep or goats.

People who keep large ruminants (especially cattle) sell the manure for use as fuel or compost, or use it at home to reduce their fuel expenses. Youth groups collect manure and other urban waste from city streets and compounds and make compost that they either use in gardening or sell to other growers of vegetables or flowers.

RURAL LEARNING FROM URBAN LIVESTOCK-KEEPERS

Innovations made by urban people are showing also rural people new possibilities. Grazing by unattended livestock is a problem in many parts of rural Ethiopia. Without extension support, urban livestock-keepers have developed systems of tethering and cut-and-carry feeding. Government extension agencies use these urban examples to show farmers living near towns the importance of controlled grazing. Also the innovative feedstuffs such as vegetable wastes provide examples to rural farmers.

In some cases, the women's and youth groups keeping livestock in towns, e.g. in Addis Ababa and in some municipalities in Tigray Region, have been successful in building up their animal numbers. Some youth have accumulated so many animals that they want to go back to rural areas to have easier access to feed and more space for the livestock. This illustrates the cycles of innovation and development in urban farming that can even lead to urban-to-rural migration.

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Yilma Getachew 1950-2007

Yilma Getachew, sharing experiences on vegetable farming in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

It is with great sadness that we announce the loss of Yilma Getachew who passed away in 2007. For all those of us who were fortunate enough to have worked with such a dignified and knowledgeable practitioner, there is no questioning the prolific role that Yilma played in the development of urban agriculture, as an activist, researcher, teacher, innovator and pioneer of the urban field. With over thirty years of work experience as a researcher, lecturer, rural development practitioner and writer Yilma dedicated his life to food security issues and in particular the development of innovative grass root technologies in both the rural and urban settings. But his greatest passion was the small food-producing garden. Growing walls, container gardening, intercropping with legumes, basket composting, manure tea and organic waste recycling were some of the technologies that he promoted but always holistically and in one garden or on one plot. Yilma's greatest challenge was to develop gardens that could sustain poor families on the smallest possible plot size, using an approach that Yilma referred to as bio-intensive gardening. His own homegarden in Addis Ababa bore testament to this approach.

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