UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF URBAN SCHOOL GARDENS THROUGH DIAGRAMMING

INTRODUCTION

Farming is undergoing change, especially in urbanized state like New Jersey. It’s a creative time for agriculture—new farmers, new partnerships, and new strategies. Ag x Landscape, an interdisciplinary undergraduate seminar, investigates new urban farming typologies at different scales in different cities in NJ. Can a diagram reveal the relationship between urban agriculture and the people it touches?

COLLABORATIONS & METHODS

Using the urban school garden as a unit of study, students created case studies for the newly-form NGDO, Ag in the City’s website. In collaboration with New Jersey Farm to School Network and FoodCorps, students visited urban school gardens in four FoodCorps cities (Newark, New Brunswick, Trenton, and Camden). This service experience provided a context to work with community partners while helping to advance urban agriculture in New Jersey. Students augmented their knowledge of broader agricultural issues through readings, documentaries, and class discussions. Experiential learning, conversations with urban growers, field trips, and a humanities-based lens provided the tools for reading the urban agricultural landscape.

Students visited urban school gardens weekly and produced diagrams that demonstrate the physical and social products of the garden - what we called the “ecosystem”. Diagrams were produced to show food products, people-to-garden, people-to-people, and economic relationships. Students were encouraged to think about the inputs and outputs of the system, with the garden often serving as the centerpieces of the structure. Diagrams are advantageous as a means of observation and study because they consistently explain who is involved, how the gardens are funded, the spaces in which the gardens exist, and the ways in which communities benefit.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Become familiar with traditional roles of land stewardship and develop new modality.
- Develop agricultural literacy by direct experience and through literature and film
- Observe ways to engage the public in issues of agriculture, stewardship, and sustainability in an urban school garden
- Consider how agriculture can contribute to social and ecological justice.
- Work in an interdisciplinary team to synthesize scientific and creative ways of thinking
- Approach a project from a variety of scales, from the experiential, human scale to the school garden network

ANALYSIS

After reviewing the urban garden diagrams, clear groups and associated patterns emerged. In order for urban gardens to be successful, organizations and garden stewards must come together to care for the space and provide funding. Urban gardens perform differently with public schools than they do in private and charter schools. For example, it is much easier to integrate home grown vegetables into school lunches in private and charter schools than it is in public schools. However, urban gardens in public schools can still be used to demonstrate science lessons, learn geometry, and inspire poetry. Still distinct from these two categories is urban gardens attached to community development/environmental organizations.

LESSONS LEARNED

Urban gardens provide green oases in inner city vacant lots. In addition to providing fresh food, they also serve as educational tools (jobs training, nutrition, sustainability, environmental and social justice), community builders, and a place where a neighborhood gains territorial control. Don’t misjudge a weedy garden—its positive effects can run deep, and aesthetics may not be a primary goal! Often these gardens are about the power of mentoring and stewardship at work, and you need to pay close attention to “see” that. It’s not just about the place; it’s about the connection between people and place and people creating community.

In addition to broadening an information-sharing platform for urban gardeners, we hope to provide information through the Ag in the City website to the general public and to influence New Jersey policy-makers to better understand the multi-faceted outputs from urban gardens.

THE TEAM:

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