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The Invention of Urban Farming – Crisis Management or Sustainable Future? An Examination of Urban Farming Approaches to Detroit’s Post-Industrial Problems

Urban Gardening as a solution to sociopolitical and economic challenges has a long tradition in the city of Detroit, Michigan. From the economic crisis in 1893 to the Great Depression Era to World War II, the idea of growing food in the city has always been essential to the people who lived through these times of existential distress.

Recently the demise of the city of Detroit has been much discussed in the news. This was especially so when the city filed for bankruptcy in July 2013. Additionally, social tragedies like the shockingly high crime rates have been sensationalized and together—at least to the outsider—they form the image of a broken city.

But there is another side of the story where citizens of Detroit have been working towards finding solutions to the multi-faceted issues they are facing. Urban community garden initiatives have played an important part in this and have been growing continuously in number and in size all over the city. Prominent features of other cityscapes like in New York City, urban gardens have taken on a new quality in post-industrial cities like Detroit where space and time are in abundance and social and economic pressures are high: They have grown into farms, have become part of food networks, and some of them have even developed their own educational programs.

In 2009 these “American stories” of struggle and opportunity gained a counterpart when former Wall Street investor John Hantz announced that his for-profit initiative would construct the world’s largest urban farm in Detroit. The reactions have been mixed. While his supporters point to the much-needed revenue his venture could provide for the city, his critics have called out a number of problems ranging from health concerns to social issues and even to allegations of land-grabbing.

As these examples demonstrate, urban farming provides a range of opportunities in post-industrial cities like Detroit. In my dissertation I will examine the diverse ways people are using urban farming to create a future for their city. I am particularly interested in the way the originally subversive idea of urban farming is becoming part of the mainstream in Detroit. New networks inspired by new urban food markets are changing the city and its people. Sustainability has become part of the urban everyday life. But how long will this last? Are the initiatives long-term transformations or just transitional solutions? These are the core questions of my dissertation.