

Making Space for Green

By: Ramona Victoria Fittipaldi

“Our ties to the green world are often subtle and unexpected... When people who garden find new friendships with neighbors, when a walk in the woods brings relief from pent-up tensions, or when a potted begonia restores vitality to a geriatric patient, we can begin to sense the power of these connections and their importance to physical and psychological well-being” (Lewis 1). Green spaces in an urban setting are the most important aspect of healthy cities. Though there are many aspects that form a healthy city, such as diversity, I will prove that green spaces are the most significant.

Community gardens are an excellent way to bring people out of their homes and into their community and city. They allow people to reconnect with nature, or in the case of children, form a relationship with nature for the first time. Community gardens provide the opportunities for “therapy, recreation, education, and cultural exchange” (Stuart 61). Numerous studies have indicated the positive physical, psychological and social benefits community gardening may produce (Stuart 61).

For example, Project GROW helps residents of a domestic violence shelter by creating gardens and healthy foods to enrich their lives. These women are recovering from emotional and physical trauma and had multiple sources of stress, such as looking for jobs and housing. Despite their stressful lives, the majority found the main effects of gardening to be psychologically and therapeutically beneficial (Stuart 69-70).

Another study of gardeners in NY found that community gardens provide a place for food and socializing as well as strengthening the sense of community and security. Research in Philadelphia found that adult gardeners consume more vegetables, have more of a sense of satisfaction and are more involved in community projects than those who do not garden. A study of U.S. entrepreneurial community gardeners concluded positive impacts, like increased self-esteem, personal satisfaction, and stability (Stuart 64).

Urban Farming is an organization that aims to eliminate hunger while “increasing diversity, motivating youth and seniors and optimizing the production of unused land for food and alternative energy” (Urban farming). In 2005, Urban Farming started with 3 farms in Detroit, and by 2008 they had over 600 farms throughout the United States and abroad, providing fresh foods to over 50,000 people. The food provides healthy choices, like fruits and vegetables, for those in need. Some cities involved in this project include Newark, Los Angeles, St. Louis, Detroit, St. Paul and New York City. The communities involved in Urban Farming have been greatly affected. Detroit Chief of Police, Ella M. Bully-Cummings, states, “... the Urban Farming community gardens help cut down on crime” (Urban farming). Another positive effect is the diverse group of participants from the community coming together to work towards a greater good.

For example, in The Harlem district of New York City, Blacks, Whites, Asians and Hispanics, both young and old, are working on farms. The community members are communicating more and forming friendships while reconnecting to the earth (Urban farming).



(Photo by Jennie Love)

“Food production and consumption have lost their interconnectedness with nature” (Andreatta 123). Several efforts, such as community gardens and direct marketing of fresh farm products, are helping to restore the urban connection to agriculture. Farmers are selling directly to the local public at roadside stands and farmers’ markets. Removing the middlemen keeps money within the area and provides a sense of security and connection (Andreatta 123). Consumers now know where their food was produced and are able to ask specific questions regarding how. They are able to question whether it “is organic?” and if “there any pesticides used?” (Edens Los Angeles Sample). Children also become more aware of where their food originally comes from and no longer think that it comes from the grocery store (Edens Los Angeles Sample). For instance the restaurant Sette Luna buys from Easton’s Farmers’ Market.

Joshua Palmer, the owner of Sette Luna, chooses his food carefully and changes the menu to focus on foods that are in season, to allow his food to be extremely fresh. Palmer stated that buying local, fresh ingredients makes a difference in the taste of his food. He enjoys being able to talk with the producers of the foods and finds the farmers’ market a great way to socialize, as do others (Palmer). Farmers’ markets are a wonderful way to interact with other community members, while making healthy food choices.



(Photo by Ken White)

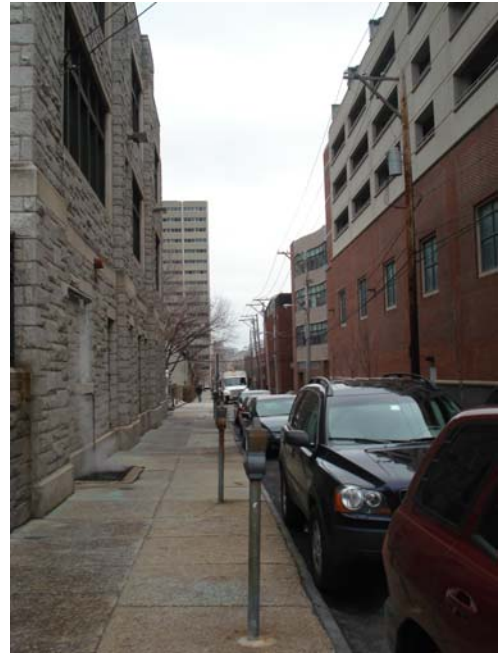
Farmers’ markets and community gardens have a range of positive outcomes on its residents, as do street trees in a community. Kuo, Sullivan and their associates created a series of studies that compared public housing residents based on the availability of nearby nature, such as street trees and lawns. The studies found the following as advantages to residents with nearby nature:

- * “more social interaction among youth and adults;
- * greater sense of community among older adults;

- * greater sense of safety and feeling of belonging;
- * better ability to cope with challenges;
- * lower level of fears, fewer incivilities, and less aggressive and violent behavior;
- * less chronic mental fatigue, which means less likely to be impulsive and irritable;
- * greater self-discipline and ability to concentrate on the part of girls” (Kaplan 281-282).

Trees draw residents from their nearby homes further into their community, where they get to know their neighbors. As they become more familiar with their environment and neighbors, residents build a strong sense of trust and togetherness. It’s remarkable what a few street trees and lawns can do for a community’s health (Kaplan 281-282).

I have experienced the effects of street trees, first hand, by going on “Jane Walks.” Jane Jacobs was an urban activist and writer. She used her observations of cities and her common sense to demonstrate why certain places in a city worked and what steps could be done to improve those that did not (“Jane Jacobs”). Jane Jacobs described Jane Walks as a “ballet of the good city sidewalk” (Russell). The street ballet is “an order composed of movement and change,” where everyone who goes, by plays “distinctive parts, which miraculously reinforce each other and compose an orderly whole” (Russell). As I walked through the city streets of Philadelphia and Easton during my Jane Walks, there was a noticeable distinction between the streets with trees and those without. Those with trees were more inviting to pedestrians and gave a sense of safety. These streets created a friendly atmosphere and were more attractive than the ones without trees.



Which street would you prefer to walk down?

Which creates a safer, friendlier, more inviting atmosphere?



(Photos by Ramona Fittipaldi)

Street trees go beyond beautifying the city; they lessen the effects of urbanization on the environment. Furthermore in the summertime, they reduce the air temperature and harmful effects of storm water runoff. Street trees provide oxygen, as well as habitats for birds, insects, and other small animals. They create a healthier urban environment for people as well as lands (Mylon 22-23).

Urban parks, especially those with nature and trees, stimulate social interaction and physical activities, when the community feels safe in them. Parks in “mixed-use neighborhoods” thrive because there is a assortment of buildings, which produce for the parks a mixture of users, who enter and leave the parks at different times (Frumkin 255). These parks are a safe place and create an atmosphere for socializing, relaxation, reflection, and physical activity. Parks encourage physical activity outside in nature, which is important because many urgent physical health related problems are connected to inactive, indoor urban lifestyles. Exercise is now known to be a “codeterminant of health” (Barlett 308). Physical activity decreases the risk of dying from heart disease and reduces the risk of developing diabetes, hypertension, and colon cancer. It creates healthy muscles and bones, helps maintain independence in the elderly, and has an influence on people’s sense of well-being (Barlett 300-308). Consequently, parks provide a diverse range of roles, including trails for nature walks and bicycling, peaceful areas for reading, and recreational facilities. There are a great variety of parks, such as small urban pocket parks and waterfronts (Frumkin 261-262). Waterfront parks provide additional facilities for physical activities, such as kayaking, canoeing and boating (Mylon 19).



(“The Top 3 Most Popular New York City Attractions”)

At times, it can be “difficult to survive cold urban life” with little money and unfriendly crowds (Ledden). However, green spaces relieve stress and promote physical activity and socializing. Ultimately, they address the physical and mental aspects of community members’ health. With health a primary issue for most people, forming a healthy city should begin with the development and further utilization of green spaces.

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