



**RESEARCH ESSAY &
PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

GREEN COMMUNITY

**2008-2009 INTERNATIONAL
STUDENT DESIGN COMPETITION**

**Submitted to Terri Meyer Boake
April 28, 2009
Masters Level Competition Elective
ARCH 684
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Introduction

A 1.5 acre parking lot separates Lawrence street's sidewalk from the businesses serving the community, and the more distant Torontonians it reaches to serve. Walking along this sidewalk reminds one of the auto-centric planning practice that designed the strip mall. Contrasting the speed at which motorists pass by, the walker's glance is left enough time to develop into a resentful stare. Rows of houses populate the street east and west of this 1.5 acre parking lot, that opens up like a gash in the psychogeography of the individuals that inhabit the neighbourhood. One is overwhelmed by the scale of the big-box construction. In addition, the dead, basic construction of the asphalt surface and painted lines directly flanks the sidewalk, like a giant welcome mat. The Lawrence street walker, pushing a collapsible aluminum cart endures the distance, waits for the passing cars and manages the inner conflict between feelings of complete inhospitality, and a brimming excitement for the bountiful grocery store that lies ahead. Negotiating this conflict is the stuff mental maps are made of.

This paper invites a re-imagining of this Toronto parking lot, and others like it, as a collection of plots of agricultural farmland, producing fresh vegetables, fruits and spices, distributed by the grocery store that stands a one-minute walk away. This essay introduces a design proposal for a polycentric network of urban farms located in the parking lots of big box grocery stores, replacing the surface parking that currently exists in these spaces. The design introduction presents a series of urban farming projects in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, and Seattle, comparable in terms of community impact and acreage. The precedent studies seek to maintain an angle of approach that highlights the effects of the agricultural land on the community's health and self-image. In addition to the environmental benefits of farming in urban areas, an agricultural place can have a positive psychological effect on the individual and their image of the city. This essay argues for the potential healing effects of an agricultural urban place, and it's ability to build a harmonic psychogeography within the individual city-dweller. Pointing to the work of Jeff Chapman, Liane Lefaivre, and

the Lettrist International, a case is built in favour of a dimension of urban farming that is not often studied from an architectural perspective: the ways in which productive landscapes such as agricultural gardens can positively affect individuals' mental maps, their relationship to their urban environment, and how this can permeate beyond the individual into improving the social well-being of communities.

A Green Heart in the City

One third of Toronto's ecological footprint is due to a reliance on importing food from industrial farms.¹ Farming in the city can directly effect our footprint by reducing the food-mile value of the food that we eat. Urban Agriculture encompasses a wide variety of practices involving the production, processing, marketing and distribution of edibles. Less often acknowledged by statistically driven arguments is the spectrum of unquantifiable benefits such as recreation and leisure, landscape beautification, individual health and well-being, and community health and well-being.² Well-being, a state characterized by health, happiness, and prosperity,³ is also a broad philosophical concept, but for the purposes of this paper can be associated with a degree of longevity that is rooted with the crops. The well-being imparted by urban agriculture exists insofar as the farm is producing, the individual and the community are involved, and a prosperous future is foreseen for the project. This intangible quality, while both universally understood yet difficult to pinpoint specifically, indisputably establishes a direct emotional connection between the individual and the place where the food grows. Although less often acknowledged⁴, this resulting relationship is the conduit through which the potential healing effects of an agricultural urban place can have on the individual's image of the city.

¹ Wilcox (2007, 226).

² Partial definition of urban farming by The Council on Agriculture, Science and Technology.

³ Well-Being (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

⁴ According to The Council on Agriculture, Science and Technology.

“The park was the green heart. It gave the children dangerous bushes and heroic landscapes so they could imagine bravery. It gave the nurses and maids winding walks so they could imagine beauty. It gave the young merchant-princes leaf-hid necking benches, views of factories to they could imagine power. It gave the retired brokers vignettes of Scottish lanes where loving couples walked, so they lean on their canes and imagine poetry. It was the best part of everyone’s life.”⁵

-Leonard Cohen



*The South-Central Farms in Los Angeles, before and after.*⁶

In expressing how the repossessed urban farms in Los Angeles would be missed, an evicted urban farmer likens the now bulldozed South-Central Farms to another vital human organ, the lungs: “two green lungs in the middle of all this concrete, and you feel that as soon as you walk around here.”⁷ Cohen’s green heart is not a portrait of a community or a place, but of a relationship between a community and their park and how through that bond the individual is relaxed enough to be transported by their imagination. As will be demonstrated further along in this paper, current movements in urban agriculture demonstrate that the farm forms an even stronger bond between individual and place. Cohen could write of the farm, giving

⁵ Cohen (1963, 70)

⁶ Image sources: flickr user ‘jon meza’ and Google Earth

⁷ South Central Farm – Part 1

the urban farmers gracious, living beds of cilantro nestled within the city, so they could imagine harmony.

Less acknowledged, but hardly unacknowledged, the positive psychological effects of urban agriculture have had remarkable effects on many downtrodden and poor communities. Implementing urban agriculture in communities suffering from crime and violence has both changed the character of the community and the perception of that community by outsiders.⁸ The nurturing that goes on in the garden transcends its gates and influences the interactions between individuals that may have otherwise reacted more aggressively to obstacles in their life.⁹ The aforementioned relationship between individual and place begins to build an image that permeates into the perceptions of outsiders. Whether they be outside of the farm project, or inhabitants of a neighboring community, the 'transcendence' of the values upheld in the garden to the community at large is an effect that will long struggle to become fully discernable. Resistant to quantification yet clearly abundant, the psychological effects of urban agriculture on both the individual and the collective relate in part to a larger understanding of how people develop a sense of place from space. How does one make a space that fosters a 'transcendence' of positive energy? What does it mean for the evicted urban farmer to 'feel' the comparison of the South-Central farms to a set of lungs?

Questions related to this problem are posed frequently by contemporary architects interested in the individual perception of place. Popular experiments in reading the city have been carried out by the Situationistes Internationales, who posited that one can learn about their environment from the act of drifting aimlessly through the city.¹⁰ The architecture firm Döll with Liane Lefaivre have investigated the act of playing, from a phenomenological perspective, and its ties to the personal perception of space. The commonality here is in situating the experience of the individual as a primary concern. An appreciation of the individual's perception of

⁸ Ramsay (2007, 84).

⁹ Ramsay (2007, 84).

¹⁰ Andreotti (1996, 22): *Theory of the Dérive* by G.E. Debord

place establishes direction for a connection to a larger framework. It is from this standpoint that the design proposal presented in this paper is grounded.

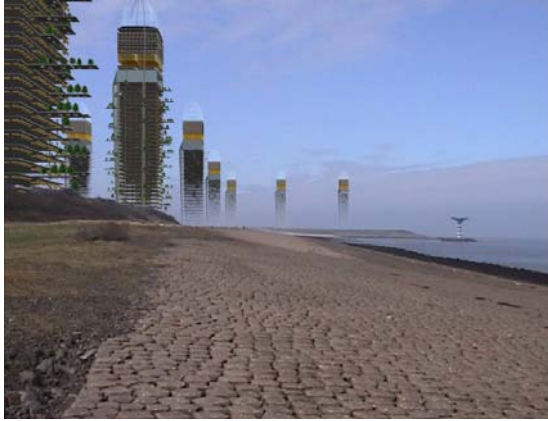
Agri-tecture

Often with different intentions than those stated above, architects all over the world excitedly tackle the problem of integrating building systems with the practice of agriculture. Two groupings of urban farming precedents are here shown; the first, mostly unbuilt experiments that explore ideas like vertical farming, technological systems integration, and smaller scale architectural implementation; the second, existing urban agriculture projects formed mostly through grass-roots movements and supported by a community-administered personnel structure. UW architecture graduate, Michael Ramsay's thesis work entitled "Urban Agriculture: Redefining Urban Communities Through Local Growing" is a thorough investigation into many of the facets of urban agriculture, including the positive effects on communities. Regarding the following precedents, Ramsay's words may be echoed: "it was too much architecture and not enough about the simple needs of urban agriculture."¹¹ Economic realities aside, there are honest and potent benefits in an urban farming project that many of these first projects overlook, or at least overshadow, with a preferred emphasis on tectonic and aesthetic expression.

The following projects are somewhat convincing in their ability to deliver the harvest, however the destruction of a place like the South-Central farms triggers an alarm that should encourage designers to not only speculate on what the future holds in integrating agriculture and the city, but to investigate the realities of community farming. Architects and designers can perhaps approach this challenge as members of their own community, rather than as part of the top-down political infrastructure within which architects often experience creative paralysis. After introducing the

¹¹ Ramsay (2007, 194).

following precedents, the paper returns to questions that are currently reshaping the architects' scope of considerations.



1. Pig City, MVRDV¹²

Fascinating and ground-breaking in the date of its conception, this project focuses directly on an aspect of farming that is hitherto not specifically mentioned: raising livestock. Without specifically accommodating it, the design presented at the end of the paper does nothing to restrict the possibility of using some land to raise livestock.



2. Agro-Housing, Knafo Klimor Architects¹³

Beautifully presented and set for completion by 2011, this project is actually being built in Wuhan China. The building houses 150 apartments, with shared green houses on multiple levels, taking advantage of the sunlight with an open façade, until a larger building is erected next to it.

¹² Image source: MVRDV firm website

¹³ Image source: Knafo Klimor firm website



3. Work Architecture Company, Vertical Urban Farm, Public Farm 1¹⁴

This firm has succeeded in producing several eye-catching public structures that implement farming. Both are completely outdoors, in fact without much interior space at all, these projects are both simple in their overall programme, and sophisticated in their formal execution.



4. Chris Jacobs Vertical Farming¹⁵

This project is convincing in its ability to yield a decent harvest, but the appearance of a hermetic seal combined with the height of the project puts one at a distance comparable to some industrial farming practice. However, the restraint and simplicity

¹⁴ Image source: Work Architecture Company firm website

¹⁵ Image source: Chris Jacobs firm website

of the design produces a convincing image of a high-rise building that can facilitate an agricultural production.



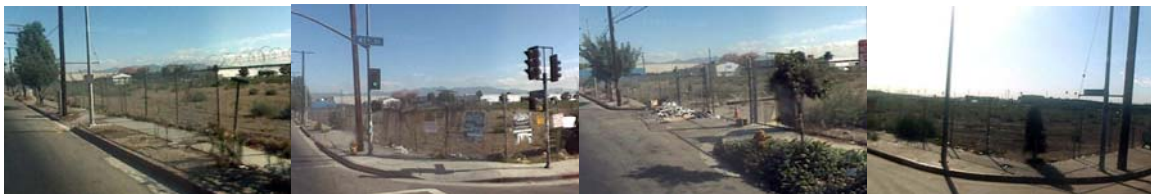
5. The Living Tower by SOA

This tower, designed and presented with ingenuity, has become an icon for the future's urban agriculture. The nocturnal images depicting the split personality of the high-rise generate a mystery in the possibilities of both the city and of agriculture. Despite this, the project seems to be "too much architecture and not enough about the simple needs of urban agriculture."¹⁶

¹⁶ Ramsay (2007, 194).

Agri-culture

The following projects demonstrate a variety of ways in which urban agricultural projects adopt available space in established urban centers. It isn't hard to imagine where these nooks may be found. The prevalence of online satellite aerial photography facilitates many to wonder why so much unused space exists in the city. In GreenTOpia, a collection of essays investigating Toronto's future as a sustainable city, RVTR succinctly illustrates 6 types of unused surface area possibilities and how they can transform Toronto into a platform for reinforcing community involvement through farming, and connecting city-dwellers to the natural world.¹⁷ Furthermore, the open-loop model of understanding cycles of food production and consumption in urban areas can mend, to a degree, with exposure to agricultural practice. Consistent among the following projects is a sense of accessibility by the public to the farming practice, while maintaining a reasonable level of security. This is not a study of architectural precedents, however the projects reviewed here are successful in achieving (among many things) a harmonic community environment, thus overlapping an arena of discussion so prevalent in architectural theory.

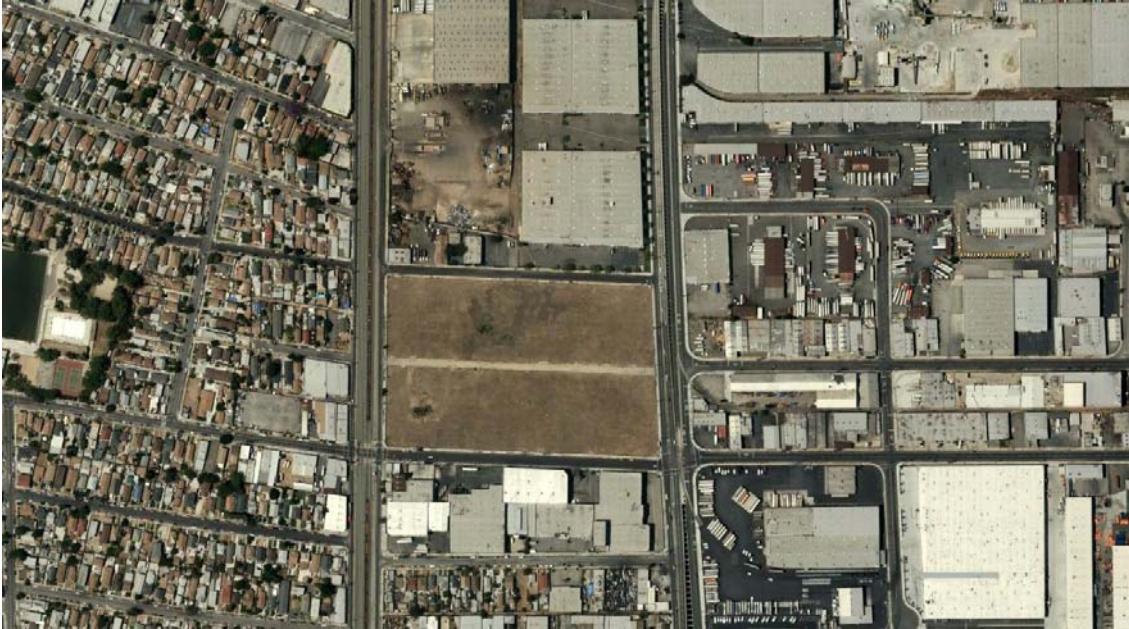


South Central Farm, Los Angeles¹⁸

From 1992 to 2006, this 14-acre lot was one of the largest urban farming projects in the United States.* The farm provided food for over 350 families and operated a farmer's market on Sundays where organic fresh produce was available to South-Central residents.* Dedicated by the city as a public garden in 1992, the

¹⁷ Wilcox (2007, 226). *Eat the City to Save the Planet* by rvtr

¹⁸ image source: Google Earth Street View



*South Central Farms after demolition.*¹⁹

eventual repossession of the land by private owner Ralph Horowitz led a community protest that ended in the physical removal of many local farmers. This event saddened so many Los Angelenos, and stands as an unfortunate example of how agricultural land establishes a different bond than the relatively higher-turnover rate of many building developments.



Chicago city farm²⁰

The City Farm has been operational for the past 3 years, administered by a non-profit environmental education organization. The organizers pride themselves in

¹⁹ Image source: Google Earth

²⁰ Image source: Google Earth Street View



*Chicago City Farm*²¹

being the catalyst for new experiences and new relationships in the city. The City Farm is a completely closed cycle, managing food waste with compost and providing produce for local restaurants and distributors.²²

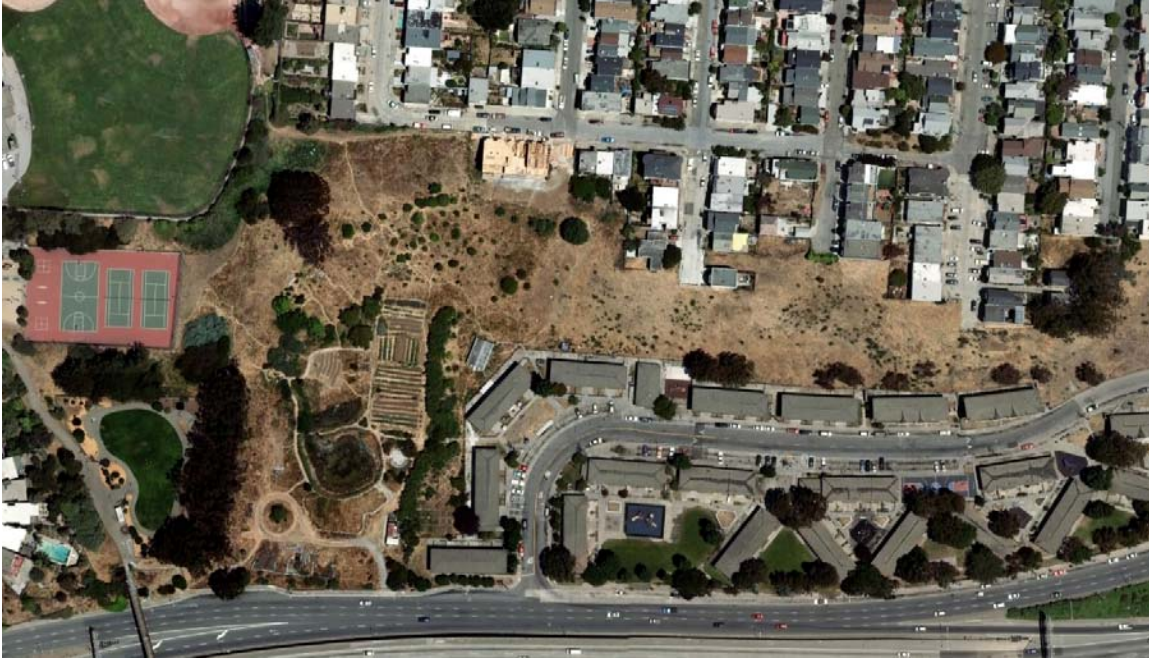
Aleman Farm, San Francisco

Run by the Alemany Resident Management Corporation, a non-profit organization focused on improving community life, the Alemany Farm has operated since 1994, frequently partnering with groups involved with San Francisco's youth. The farm practices a variety of environmental educational programs, and seeks to "engage residents in decision-making processes and activities that foster community involvement to organize for social, economic, and environmental justice."²³

²¹ Image source: Google Earth

²² The Resource Center City Farm

²³ Who We Are at Alemany Farms



*Alemany Farms, San Francisco*²⁴



2 P-patches in Seattle²⁵

P-Patch, Seattle

Seattle's urban farming program is unique among this list of precedents due to its dispersed network spread throughout the city. Some patches harvesting since 1973, the P-Patches have grown into a group of 55 individual farms, each turning neglected land into small productive landscapes.²⁶

²⁴ Image Source: Google Earth

²⁵ Image Source: Google Earth

²⁶ P-Patch Community Gardens

The questions put forth by urban farming projects presented here challenge perceptions of the image and purposes of cities. Urban centers such as Toronto are characterized by a continuous re-development, the goal of which is typically to increase density. As documented in the recent disappointing turn of events for the South-Central farmers, urban agriculture doesn't fit into the current economic equations that drive land-use. Urban farms require immunity from constant growth and development. The consequences of bulldozing a community farm are regressive for the individual's image of the city. How can a portion of what is considered rural productive farmland be reborn and effectively remain within a dense urban fabric? Of all the open spaces in the metropolis, of all the opportunities to reclaim pavement for the production of food, which can be integrated most effectively into an urban environment that is described from the perspective of the engaged individual?

Psychogeography

The roots of the term 'psychogeography' are in the work of the collective Lettrist International, a Paris-based group of radical urban theorists formed in the 1950's. The term has recently seen a resurgence as city-dwellers long for pedestrian-centric thinking in urban planning practice. Spacing Toronto magazine's Shawn Micallef regularly publishes accounts of walks through Toronto's historic districts in a column entitled 'The Toronto Flâneur'.²⁷ The Annex neighbourhood, where the late Jane Jacobs resided, is the site of annual 'Jane's Walk', a group exercise in engaging the city from the ground up. Each *dérive* reminds people to look at the city, and how to remain actively observant. Furthermore, through active engagement, the walks are necessary in shaping the psychogeography of each individual, constantly refreshed and reshaped by experiences that carry with it some meaning. The benefits of nurturing one's psychogeography are difficult to identify, as it is necessarily a subjective arena of experience. However, in describing the simple joy of exploring an

²⁷ Spacing Toronto

abandoned hospital wing, Jeff Chapman effectively identifies the knowledge base upon which a personal psychogeography contributes. The benefit is a deeper understanding of your environment.²⁸

The multiple layers of experience in the metropolis is what attracts the pedestrian to be without vehicle, to experience a “transient passage through varied ambiances” through the city via simple ambulation.²⁹ As with active-listening in music and sonic arts, there is a celebration among flaneurs, urban explorers, and city walkers for an active-engagement of the urban environment. The ‘activity’ occurs on a level of deliberate sensorial focus. The practice of active engagement is challenged by distractions and reflexes that can encroach upon the intent of the individual. These encroachments can be seen as an unconscious blocking out of information that is deemed unfavourable. The scenario drawn at the very beginning of this paper recalls a place that can generate a tipping point between remaining actively engaged and succumbing to a gray-zone of distraction and disconnect. Simple exercises such as the group walks mentioned above are effective means to maintain activity by creating platform for playful interaction. The mental freedom in a state of playfulness allows Cohen’s young merchant-princes to imagine power, for “man is never so serious as when he plays”³⁰

“Playgrounds offer little playing space. As demarcated areas that are exclusively intended for child’s games, they restrict the essence of play as part of human nature. Expanding regulations have replaced spontaneous discovery by putting the emphasis on – apparent – safety. Instead of stimulating spontaneity and creativity, most playgrounds offer a configuration of prescriptive items that only hinder a child’s imagination. There is a need for an inspiring alternative that cultivates the potential for homo ludens in an urban

²⁸ Chapman (2005, 12)

²⁹ *Theory of the dérive* by Guy Debord

³⁰ Lefaivre (2007, 74), quoting Friedrich Schiller

context. A small change in a word, from playground to play space, opens the door to a new perspective. Play space represents mental freedom, and leeway to deviate from the rules. Play space also has a significance as a physical margin that enables movement between the different components of a construction or a machine. Play space is something that is for all ages and all places."³¹

- Studio Döll

Described abstractly in an essay by the architecture firm Döll, a physical play space is the remaining open volume surrounding an object, residual space seen as a potential site for momentary installations or performance. The other half of the concept, the psychological play space describes a 'mental freedom' from boundaries separating public and private property, to undo an understanding that every border exists for our own good. Mental play space is the constant curiosity towards what lies beyond the surface of our physical environment. In her work *Ground-Up City: Play as a Design Tool*, Liane Lefaivre introduces urban design strategies with an essay demonstrating the significance of play in the production of art and in the health of social life. She uses a broad definition of the term play, to include any activity that values or utilizes Döll's concept of play space. This vocabulary exhibits an alignment with the Lettrist International's positions regarding psychogeography, and develops it further to investigate the nature of play. In an introductory set of images exploring 'the nature of play', Lefaivre points to an urban agriculture project in Detroit, and describes the suburban migration of city centers as an opportunity to establish farmland.³² Farming is reframed as a game with a space, a set of rules, and a flow of results that maintains an active engagement with a part of the city. Through playful farming, a sense of place is established within the individual.

Architects and urbanists such as Lefaivre are operating with a diverse toolset that increasingly recognizes the possibilities of urban agriculture as means to place-

³¹ Lefaivre & Döll (2007, 28)

³² Lefaivre & Döll (2007, 29)

making. Here, architecture can implement urban agriculture with a focus on the potential healing effects of an agricultural urban place (such as the second precedent study) rather than on its ability to function as a yield maximizer (such as the first precedent study), thus aiding the development of a harmonic psychogeography within the individual city-dweller.

The Big Box

This essay argues for the potential healing effects of urban farms, and seeks to identify the precise thing that requires healing. The scenario described at the beginning of this paper echoes a growing resistance to big-box development in and around communities that would be effected. Such concerns by communities have led to the successful stoppage of development plans as a result of volunteer organizations. The popularization of the term 'big-box' comes with a negative connotation that has become widespread in Toronto in part due to the current 'No Big Box in Leslieville' campaign to shield the burgeoning Leslieville community from a Wal-Mart.

How can farming gain immunity from the rapid timeframe of commercial developments? There is an opportunity for corporate grocers to gain respectable positions in public relations by partnering with local communities and supporting agricultural production in their own front yards. The following proposed urban agriculture project imagines this partnership and serves as a business model to new construction: big box grocers next to big community farms. Loblaws Companies, (while trying to compete with Wal-Mart) is keen on building a responsible image of community involvement and environmental friendliness, the fruits of which can be seen at it's 'eco' superstore in Scarborough. However unlikely it may seem, the benefits of an uplifted corporate image via partnering with community non-profit groups could be enormous. This speculation signals the introduction of the design component.



OuT.O. {out – oh}

OuT.O. is a design proposal that locates farming plots in the parking lots of the major grocer's in Toronto. The imagined scenario presents a partnership between grass-roots local farming efforts and established corporate scale grocers, envisions the physical transformation of the big-box style grocery store, and speculated on the effect it would have on the communities it serves. Inheriting the existing big box constructions in Toronto, the OuT.O. scenario imagines treating a psychogeographic gash by providing a green heart within big box parking lots. Five sites have been chosen from around the city, totaling an area of 11.2 acres of farmland, providing the fruit and vegetable intake per year for approximately 350 people.³³ Functionally supported by the existing architecture of the grocery store, the contribution of the urban farm would drastically decrease the food-miles of the produce, and transform the outdoor environment of the commercial center into a valued productive place. Below the agricultural surface, the parking lot would remain functional with the same number of parking spaces, but the vehicles would be out of sight, hence the title. 'OuT.O.' means 'out with the autos', adopting the alchemical nomenclature trend of combining the capitalized TO (Toronto, Ontario) with the name of a work or event (as noticed in *GreenTOpia* and *LuminaTO*).

³³ Based on Ramsay's *Food Metrics* study (2007, 310)

The big-box typology is considered here to be a large scale commercial property (multiple residential blocks) that has an adjacent parking lot of equal area or larger. It is a 'style' familiar to most. The big-box store generates a strong repulsion to many urban dwellers and main street advocates, for good reasons. Big boxes are reminders of big companies, automobile dependency and suburban sprawl. After-hours, the front facing mega parking lots empty out and remain lit, looking and feeling like nocturnal wastelands. Big boxes can even provoke guilt within the consumers it serves with its reputation for destroying main street, under-pricing established local businesses. Big Boxes are a painful gash in the psychogeography of the individual community dweller. This proposal does not build a detailed argument for the economic advantages for all people involved, nor does it lay out the best interests of a corporation or dwell on the obvious green benefits of urban farming. The development of this scenario was actually motivated by the potential healing psychological effects that the architecture could have on the community that uses it and lives around it.

Site Selection

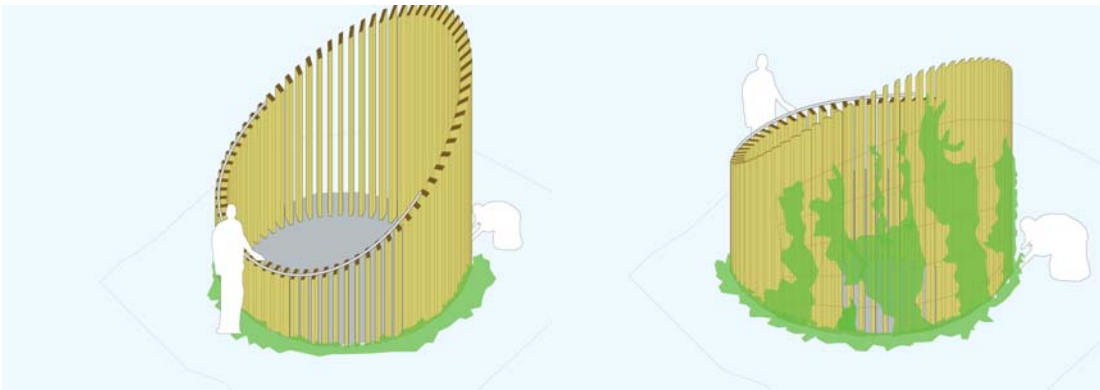
Within the core of Toronto, 5 corporate grocery centers were selected as sites of intervention. Each site fits into the general big-box type, and is endowed with a single level parking space that at least equals the footprint of the actual grocery store.

Allotments

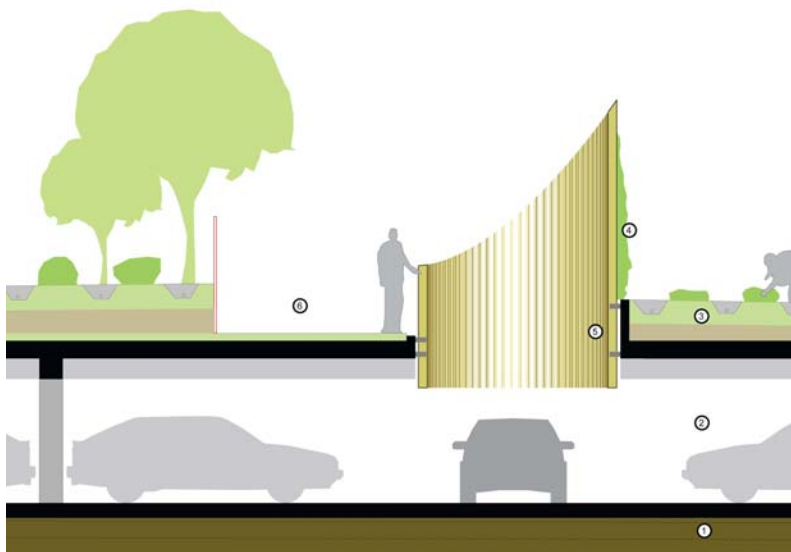
The proposal suggests a pattern of divisions, however the more detailed organizational elements such as this will inevitably be distributed organically amongst users by the administration.

Growlights

Each allotment is punctuated by a set of openings in the supporting slabs that act as skylights, providing natural light to the parking structures below. The perimeter of the openings are lined with a cylindrical enclosure supporting a south-facing grow wall.



Typical Axonometric Conditions



- ① DRAINAGE RESERVOIR
- ② PARKING LEVEL
- ③ SOIL ASSEMBLY, WEEPING
- ④ GROW WALL
- ⑤ 2x4 WITH FASTENERS
- ⑥ SUNKEN PUBLIC PATH

Typical Section

The wall tapers down to railing height on the north side, opening lines of sight down to the parking garage. The repeated forms of the sliced cylindrical extrusions act as beacons and meeting points within the urban farms, tying the network together with a consistent expression.

Public Access Paths

On each allotment, one or two paths meander through the allotment gardens. In each case, the paths intersect with the Growlights, generating a confluence between the 3 different realms of the site: underground parking, farming, and public space.

Conclusion

A 1.5 acre lot of active farmland directly flanks the sidewalk along Lawrence street west where, through a thin veil of chicken wire, a dozen people are busy harvesting a variety of edibles. A walk along an open pathway takes one deeper into the activities, where through the sudden hollers and garden tool activity, a car horn is heard through an opening in the ground between two farms.

Like with the improvisational and unregulated formations of the Favelas in South America, there is an attraction among architects towards what has been labeled 'organic' growth and development. It tends to exhibit a degree of inventiveness, an exercise in mental freedom, where one can playfully interact with a physical dimension of one's environment. Lefavre's investigation into the nature of play, Cohen's depiction of the peaceful wandering minds of a community, and Chapman's visceral response to a genuinely new place, all touch common ground in psychogeography. Echoing the words of Daryl Hannah, interviewed at the South-Central Farms before it's demolition, "This is a shining example of what communities should be copying and duplicating again and again, rather than destroying". In light of the unfortunate closure of one of the great urban farming projects in North America, this design proposal was inspired to be a minimal intervention, as compared to the high-rise vertical farming projects that populate the news-reel. Urban farming can be thought of not only as the production of fresh food, but the 'farming' of new conceptions of urbanity.

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Online Resources

City Of Toronto: Parking Space Dimensions

<http://www.toronto.ca/zoning/parking.htm>

The Resource Center City Farm

<http://www.familyfarmed.org/resourcecentercityfarm.html>

Who We Are at Alemany Farm

<http://www.alemanyfarm.org/who-we-are/>

Well-Being (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/well-being/>

P-Patch Community Gardens

<http://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/ppatch/locations.htm>

In Seattle P-Patches, young urbanites are growing veggies and a community

http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/pacificnw/2008817652_pacificplife15.html

Toronto's Agricultural Potential

<http://torontosagriculture.wordpress.com/>

South Central Farm – Part 1

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=28DfU912t2E>

South Central Farm – Part 2- Eviction!

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ETHkWFDxnlc&feature=related>

Spacing Toronto

<http://spacing.ca/wire/>