

Chapter 14

Reflections: Lessons Learned, Limitations, and the Way Forward for Urban Agriculture in Public Space



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The authors of this volume have contributed a diversity of viewpoints on urban agriculture, its definition, goals, practices, and policy implementation. While there is a range of the types of projects and approaches presented, there seem to be some commonalities in this diversity. First and foremost, our case studies, either in the practical or discursive realm, seem to suggest that food production alone is seldom a major motive for the integration of urban agriculture in today's cities. This calls for the integration of urban agriculture in a system of multifunctional productive spaces, each making distinct contributions to the well-being of urban dwellers and nonhuman nature – some more focused on individual needs, community-building, education, and health, others focused on reducing the impact of the food systems and increasing the affordability of good quality, locally grown food, some enhancing diversity of urban ecosystems.

In our project, we focused on the role urban agriculture can play in enhancing individual and communal well-being of urban dwellers. On the individual level, it can provide multiple affordances for sustaining capabilities—ways of being and doing people have reasons to value—and offer settings for development of virtues—excellences of character and understanding. On the collective level, urban agriculture can play a crucial role in the realm of community-building, by sustaining civic friendship and activating the kind of mutualism, cooperation, and partnership necessary for the advancement of the right to a humane, livable city.

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We started the project with perspectives of philosophy and ethics, envisioning urban agriculture as an arena for human flourishing, and further developed our discussion around the potential for urban agriculture to become an instigator and activator of a transition to a more sustainable and resilient urban society, through the cultivation of livability, health, identity, and community cohesion in every neighborhood. The experiences synthesized in this book seem to suggest that to fully be transformative of a society's capabilities, and those of its individuals, urban agriculture must not only remain accessible to its primary users on the level of a neighbourhood, but able to connect with an audience of secondary and tertiary users of diverse cultural backgrounds, ages, and degrees of abilities through a variety of expressions and ambitions. To illustrate this, the authors in this book assembled a rich kaleidoscope of urban agriculture practices motivated by a variety of goals, beyond yield and consumption of healthy food.

Public space has a unique role to play in actualizing the plethora of benefits of urban agriculture to individual and communal well-being of urban dwellers. Given the role we are asking urban agriculture to play, funding and institutional support needs to be available to integrate it in urban development in a systematic way, on a broad scale. As in some of the cases we have discussed here, the key to the long-term success of urban agriculture is the adequate and stable supply of land, knowledge, and materials. When seen from the point of view of policies and strategic planning, urban agriculture has the advantage to be relatively inexpensive to seed and initiate from the bottom up but harder to sustain without the flow of resources from the top down. This is even more true in public spaces, where professional expertise may be needed to manage the spaces, ensure their productivity, sustain people's participation, and foster continued stewardship. As experiences from some of urban agriculture projects presented in our book suggest, participation of local communities makes the difference in terms of long-term success of urban gardens, increasing their resilience and motivating stewardship. Yet we should not consider permanence of urban agriculture projects as their main criterion of success. Failure may also yield benefits, granting the opportunity to evolve, adapt to changing conditions, or pivot to different cultivation practices for both food and community cultivation.

The Covid-19 pandemic was the ultimate test of urban agriculture and its community and food growing ambitions. Evidence from the CPS research partners seems to suggest that urban agriculture has, in the time of this unprecedented health crisis, strengthened and solidified its presence in the city—at some locations offering opportunities for socially distanced restorative activities, at other locations providing boxes of local produce to the elderly or those most at risk, integrating moments of socially distanced community building and engagement.

We started the project with the goal to find a way to systematically integrate urban agriculture in the dense, Norwegian city. What emerged from the research of the Cultivating Public Space project team were unique stories representing a variety of perspectives and voices on the potentials of urban agriculture to enhance well-being in today's cities, including researchers, policy-makers, educators, activists, growers, managers, and diverse users of urban gardens. Rather than a toolkit of transferable solutions, we have showed the versatility of urban agriculture, its

adaptability, and its contribution to urban resilience in the face of uncertainties and challenges like climate change, environmental degradation, growing inequalities, threats to food security, increasing social isolation, and mental health problems in cities, to list but a few.

The findings from our project have demonstrated urban agriculture's impact on people's lives, telling a story of a collective practice that bridges across user groups, giving voice to the marginalized, and helping them exercise, through their hands-on engagement in urban cultivation, their right to landscape. This exemplifies the potential of urban agriculture to reclaim public space and redefine what might be acceptable and even desirable future for it, and for our society.

Urban agriculture is evolving quickly, and there is no way for researchers to keep up with the pace of the change it is facing in our cities and a continuous evolution of its forms. This book represents a milestone in this evolution and a much-needed moment of reflection, storytelling, and documentation. We hope more researchers will pick up where our authors left off and help advance urban agriculture toward becoming even more diverse, integrated, synergistic, and impactful.



Urban agriculture at Schouss Plaza, Oslo. Photo: B. Sirowy

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