

SPADES AND THE CITY

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Farming only happens in the countryside where state-of-the-art equipment, pesticides and fertilizers maximise the productivity of large tracts of land, right? Wrong! Increasingly, city dwellers around the world are farming their neighbourhoods, producing healthy food in the heart of cities.

The first time I heard the term ‘urban farming’ was at a talk by the Cuban permaculturalist, Roberto Perez, in Melbourne back in 2008. Permaculture, the brainchild of Australians David Holmgren and Bill Mollison, promotes farming practices that harmonise with nature, on the basis that where nature is respected its response is bountiful.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union when Cuba suddenly found itself bereft of oil - one of the staples of conventional large-scale agriculture – many Cubans turned to permaculture. Integral to the approach is the notion that impediments can often be turned to advantage, and as the majority of the Cuban population (76%) live in cities, Cuba has transformed itself into a nation of urban farming specialists.

As you might expect, farms in cities rarely look like their rural counterparts. In Havana, for example, food is grown on every centimetre of free space – footpaths, balconies, bathtubs, windowsills, even buckets, and in community gardens of every description – with the result that more than 70% of Havana’s food is now produced within city limits.

Meanwhile, across the Gulf of Mexico, urban farming USA-style is on the rise.

The recently-released French documentary *Detroit Wild City*, by director Florent Tillon, captures the post-apocalyptic atmosphere of downtown Detroit. In the one-time automobile capital of the world, now Mad Max central, falcons of the feathered variety wheel between the abandoned skyscrapers. Yet more than 800 community gardens and even several small-scale farms flourish amidst the skeletons of Detroit's auto plants, while beehives dot vacant lots turned meadows.

Locals are banding together to feed themselves real (and free) food, 'turning Motown into Growtown', initiatives that are being replicated in decaying cities across America, like Buffalo and Cleveland.

But what is happening on the other side of the tracks?

In richer cities in America there is increasing support from the top down, as well as the bottom up, for a range of experimental urban farming initiatives. New York City is a prime example.

Given that it takes an acreage the size of Wyoming to keep the Big Apple's citizens fed, perhaps it is no surprise that New York is abuzz with ideas about city-based food production. Nowadays the Hudson River is home to a floating urban farm, which produces a range of fruit and vegetables for visitors and for sale at local farmers markets and restaurants.

The 'Science Barge' uses no pesticides, or even soil for that matter; everything is grown aquaponically with recirculated water. The farm is powered by solar and wind turbines and generates zero carbon dioxide emissions. Designed by the non-profit organisation New York Sun Works, the hope is that the barge will serve as a prototype for other water-based urban agricultural initiatives.

Back on dry land, there is increasing interest in ‘vertical farming’, a concept devised by Professor Dickson Despommier of Columbia University. Despommier has developed a plan to dedicate a 30 storey skyscraper in New York covering one full city block to producing veggies, fish, crustaceans, molluscs, chickens, ducks and geese, which have the potential to feed 50,000 people annually. All, according to the professor, with no fossil fuel involvement.

Seen by some as a mere pipe dream, Despommier’s plan nonetheless has passionate advocates in high places. As one of them, Manhattan Borough President, Scott Stringer, comments, ‘We will find a place in New York to do this. I still marvel that people 20 years ago said: “We are going to build green buildings, with solar energy and cogeneration.” There were people who looked at these folks and thought they were crazy. Just like 20 years ago when they talked about green buildings, we need to bring the green movement into our food system.’

Elsewhere in the world, other affluent cities are also championing urban farming. Paris, for example, is now a renowned urban honey producer. With hives atop icons like the Grand Palais, Louis Vuitton’s store on the Champs-Elysees, the tower at La Defense and the Paris Opera House, honey, Parisian-style, is très chic.

After French beekeepers took to the streets of Paris in 1999 demanding an end to the use of pesticides, the French capital became a pesticide free zone. Since then it has been joined by many other cities around the world, which is good news for their bees. City bees also have access to parks and gardens that typically feature more flowers than are found in agricultural regions, so pollen is readily available. And since city bees don’t

need to fly far to forage, it turns out they have a far easier time than their country cousins. No wonder town bees are less stressed and more productive.

Back in Australia, honey is one of the most sought-after items at ‘food swaps’, a predominantly metropolitan phenomenon that is an offshoot of urban farming. No money changes hands at swaps. Instead, people exchange their excess produce while getting to know their neighbours. So if you have a glut of lemons and your family and friends are pleading ‘No more!’, or if wild parsley is pushing up your pavers, head down to your food swap - it’s easier than you might imagine.

Although there are occasional food swaps elsewhere in the world, in Australia they are mushrooming. There were at least fifteen at last count, making us the undisputed epicentre of the global food swap movement. This should come as no surprise really – perhaps because we live in the most highly urbanised country in the world, Australians are proving particularly innovative and enthusiastic when it comes to urban farming. Michael Mobbs is a good example.

Mobbs, who lives in the inner-Sydney suburb of Chippendale, is well known for building the first self-sufficient house in the city. He started out by growing his own fruit and vegetables and keeping chooks in the family’s small terrace courtyard, but when he moved into the street to farm, his neighbours became inspired. Together they went on to plant over 2000 edible seedlings in their street alone, nourished by soil from the public compost bins they also established.

In the end the council came on board, asking Mobbs to consult on a sustainability plan for the whole suburb, with the result that Chippendale has become a showcase for urban farming. As Mobbs told ‘The Big Issue’: ‘What motivates me is that I’m sure that

within the next 10 years we are going to run out of food sometimes. It will be very expensive and we will have food scarcity in Australia. I need to grow food where I live and work, as does every Australian.'

An increasing number of us are discovering that, along with our own courtyards and traditional community gardens, planter boxes, horse troughs, rooftops, verges, public parks and schoolyards can all prove ideal spots for growing food. And we can easily learn how to make rich compost, 'convert our lawns to lunch', propagate freeway-loving bush foods and produce big harvests in small spaces - there are now resources galore out there for aspiring urban farmers.

It may look very different in Paris or Havana, in Detroit or Sydney, but urban farming is on the rise world-wide. And Australia is in the vanguard of this powerful example of predominantly 'bottom-up' initiated social change.

So farewell briefcase, hello spade.