NEIGHBORHOOD AS REFUGE

Community Reconstruction, Place Remaking, and Environmental Justice in the City

Isabelle Anguelovski

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. . . (la forme d'une ville
Change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d'un mortel)
(The form of a city changes faster, alas, than the human heart.)

—Charles Baudelaire, "Le Cygne," *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857)

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1

Introduction

Two Vignettes on Loss, Trauma, and Survival

Experiences of Refugees in an Urban Greenhouse

Every Friday, a group of East African refugees walks energetically into the grounds of The Food Project greenhouse on Brook Avenue in the Dudley section of Roxbury, one of the twenty-one official neighborhoods of Boston, Massachusetts. The greenhouse is a 10,000-square-foot space that acts as a community space and learning center for residents and gardeners. Appearing shy and cautious at first, refugees soon engage in lively conversations about their raised beds, the workshop on safe farming they attended the previous week, and the growth of their greens and herbs in winter. These refugees are one of nine groups that have spaces in the twenty-seven community bays available at the greenhouse. The gardeners are not alone in the greenhouse but are supported by attentive Food Project staffers and clinicians from the Boston Center for Refugee Health and Human Rights, who are helping them to heal from traumas experienced in their home countries. Beyond the well-known benefits of urban agriculture for increasing access to healthy, fresh, and affordable food and for building stronger ties between people, the greenhouse project helps refugees deal with traumatic experiences, learn about their new city and neighborhood, and build a new home for themselves and their families in Dudley. It is a beautiful green bubble of tranquility and safety for the community and a nurturing space for residents.

While the participants plant seedlings, receive technical advice, and work in the greenhouse, they learn about themselves and each other. Every week, they walk with their clinician down Brook Avenue from the nearby Boston Medical Center and discover their neighborhood and its history. At the beginning of the project, many women felt unsafe in the neighborhood and uncomfortable walking alone. As they have learned about new

landmarks on their weekly walk, explored corners of the neighborhood, met friendly faces, and finally arrived at the greenhouse to work on their crops, their sense of safety has grown. The greenhouse also helped them strengthen their relationship with their clinician. In this space, they have developed a greater sense of security and nurturing and do not feel intimated or rushed, as they might be by the more impersonal atmosphere of a hospital. A feeling of greater trust and a sense of proximity have developed between the farmers and their clinician. The greenhouse project has thus played a therapeutic role for the refugees by helping them slowly feel at home in their new city and overcome traumatic experiences of war or crisis. It is a safe haven for them in multiple ways.

Because many gardeners have chosen to grow vegetables from their own country, they have also reconnected with their home cultures and traditional practices and shared them with other refugees and participants. Rather than feeling like outsiders and foreigners in a new country, they are learning how to live, survive, and thrive in a new city through the medium of food by growing food and by teaching others about food. In addition, growers share the space with other groups that have beds in the greenhouse, including senior resident groups, nonprofit organizations, a mosque, and local public schools, and these groups learn from one another. Some refugees have led workshops about Somalian cooking, and others have organized a tea celebration based on a Ugandan-type of lemongrass. By talking about their cultural roots, participants also recover from the loss of leaving their homeland or home region and build a new and stable life for themselves. These workshops are part of The Food Project's Grow Well, Eat Well, Be Well, Cook with Your Neighbor initiative. Its "Be Well" aspect embodies the vision of a greenhouse as a space for community members to come together, build closer bonds, and learn about each other through the medium of food production and preparation.

Experiences of Youth in an Urban Farm

The greenhouse is not the only project that The Food Project has developed to provide residents with a sense of nurturing and help them recover from traumatic life experiences and losses. The Academic Year Program (AYP), a follow-up to The Food Project's successful Summer Youth Program, welcomes local youth on Saturdays and after-school hours to a variety of training and mentoring activities. Youth participants farm in three lots in Dudley, help at biweekly farmers' market at the intersection of Dudley Street and Blue Hill Avenue, organize volunteers in the farms, and speak at different events and fundraisers. Participants learn about

food systems and farming and also develop leadership and public speaking skills. Most important, as Alexandra, the AYP coordinator, explains, the curriculum helps these young people to process trauma. She notes that many youth of color in Boston suffer from trauma—either at an individual level (through family tensions or uprooting) or at the collective level (through the degradation and abandonment of their neighborhoods and the territorial stigma attached to them). As young people develop and try to build a better future for themselves, they must overcome these negative feelings of placelessness and loss.

Historically, Dudley has welcomed large waves of African American migrants and immigrants, most recently from Cape Verde, Central America, and West and East Africa. However, the Dudley section of Boston's Roxbury neighborhood has been ravaged by decades of arson, illegal trash dumping, and abandonment by public authorities and investors. In the 1980s, Dudley had 1,300 empty lots and looked like a no-man's land devastated by an urban war. Fifty-four sites were considered hazardous, contributing to high rates of lead poisoning in children and other kinds of contamination (Shutkin 2000; Settles 1994). The neighborhood also lacked green space, playgrounds, and other recreational facilities. From a nutritional standpoint, the abandonment of the neighborhood by supermarkets and other grocery stores had converted it into a food desert. However, by the end of the 1980s, residents and organizations had begun to address these substandard environmental and health conditions. After organizing the Don't Dump on Us campaign and winning three lawsuits against businesses that were illegally contaminating the land, they worked to enhance the environmental quality and livability of their neighborhood.

The Food Project has been a major actor and activist throughout the reconstruction of this neighborhood. Its staff members have helped residents grow healthy and affordable food by producing 250,000 pounds of chemical-pesticide-free food. Most important, however, they have worked with youth. The leadership programs organized by The Food Project mentor children and adolescents in overcoming feelings of loss and grief, making conscious choices about their futures, and protecting the assets of their neighborhood—especially its land. In weekly activities, young participants learn to put negative experiences aside and focus on building new opportunities for themselves and their neighborhood. Being in a warm and caring environment in the urban farms or farmers' markets, they can process trauma and placelessness.

In other words, The Food Project's greenhouse and farming programs for youth help residents to collectively and individually heal their wounds

and rebuild their community for themselves and their families. Long-term residents overcome the traumatic experiences of having lived for many years in a decaying neighborhood, and newer residents can heal feelings of loss after having been uprooted from their homeland or community and resettled into a new (and fragile) community.

Overcoming Long-term Environmental Degradation and Abandonment

Life in historically distressed neighborhoods is often closely coupled with degraded infrastructure, substandard services, unhealthy housing structures, and severe environmental hazards. These low-income neighborhoods generally receive fewer environmental amenities (such as pleasant open spaces) and services (such as street cleaning) than wealthier communities receive. Those wealthier (and often whiter) communities tend to benefit from environmental privileges in the form of parks, coasts, and forests, often in a racially exclusive way (Landry and Chakraborty 2009; Park and Pellow 2011). To outside eyes, distressed neighborhoods often appear bleak and abandoned with much unused vacant space. Many storefronts are closed, sidewalks are deserted after dark, and open space is unused due to an experienced or a perceived lack of safety. In the United States, decades of government and private disinvestment together with urban-renewal policies have contributed to the decline of inner-city neighborhoods. In Europe, lower-income residents and immigrants often settle in older inner-city neighborhoods and low-income suburbs, where they have often been left behind by authorities. In some cases, their neighborhoods are redeveloped in ways that privileged demolition and rebuilding rather than revival. In the global south, dilapidated urban neighborhoods have often benefited from public attention and investment when they offer historic and touristic cultural options. Often, however, their residents have had to relocate.

Today activists within historically marginalized urban communities are organizing against long-term abandonment and neighborhood degradation. In their initiatives, residents, community groups, and nonprofit organizations prioritize accessible green and recreational spaces, urban gardens and farmers' markets, walkable communities, green and healthy housing, and improved waste management. This mobilization takes places in a variety of cities around the world, independent of levels of democratization, development, and urbanization. Examples include the growth of urban farms and community gardens in Detroit and Los Angeles where there once were foreclosed abandoned houses and vacant dirty lots; the

creation and enhancement of green and recreational spaces in the shantytown of Villa Maria del Triunfo in Lima, Peru; and the community initiatives for improved waste collection and composting in rapidly growing cities like Mumbai, India. Despite the fragile socioeconomic conditions of some communities and families, residents actively participate in the revitalization of their neighborhood and have received widespread support from local environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), community-based organizations, small neighborhood groups, and public and private funders.

Community organizing is not a short-term activity, and it requires a commitment to neighborhood engagement. Local activists fight "brown" contamination and unwanted waste sites, but also work to improve the overall environmental and health conditions of a neighborhood over the long term. Ongoing community-based and community-supported initiatives are vital for improving and sustaining environmental equity at the local urban level. In other words, in many instances residents are committed to improving long-term livability and unite to protect the environmental quality of their neighborhood beyond protests against specific threats, risks, and pollution sources.

Projects such as urban farms, community parks, fresh food markets, bike paths, green public transit, and playgrounds and sports grounds fulfill multiple roles at once. They are vehicles for improving the livability of urban neighborhoods, creating healthy communities, decreasing criminality, enhancing safety, and strengthening local urban planning and democracy practices (Bell, Wilson, and Liu 2008; Diaz 2005; Gottlieb 2005; Takano and Tokeshi 2007; Birch and Wachter 2008; Kuo and Sullivan 2001; Agyeman and Evans 2003; Corburn 2009; Shutkin 2000; Bullard 2007). Today it would be hard to find critics or opponents of initiatives that pursue these different components of urban just sustainability (Agyeman, Bullard, and Evans 2003; Agyeman and Evans 2003). However, in many cases, neighborhood transformation has taken many years, much advocacy and on-the-ground work, and the participation of a broad range of supporters. Sometimes neighborhood advocates have suffered setbacks. Today, "green gentrification" (the perceived or lived displacement of traditional residents from the neighborhood as it becomes more livable) is real in some cities (Checker 2011; Curran and Hamilton 2012; Gould and Lewis 2012; Pearsall 2012).

Community-based engagement in the global north and south suggests that caring for and enhancing the long-term environmental quality of one's home is not a function of wealth, political systems, or contexts of

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