

REIMAGINING CITIES: CAN NYC FEED ITSELF THROUGH URBAN FARMING?

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In preparation for a discussion on the developments and viability of urban agriculture, our Urban Political Ecology course attended the Jane Jacobs Forum Tuesday evening. There is a remarkable amount of interest in local food and farming at Vassar as indicated by the popularity of our farmers' markets and growing participation in the Poughkeepsie Farm Project, located on campus. The panel was representative of all aspects of urban agriculture necessary for implementation of the plans, from university professors managing the project to a landscape designer handling the architecture to a hydroponics and greenhouse specialist tackling the actual agriculture. The panelists addressed the basics of urban agriculture by addressing why we need it, justifying the movement by proposing stronger connections to our food sources and the impacts of transport. They also validated the potential projects by offering up humanitarian reasoning and fringe benefits, such as the creation of jobs for urban teens and farmers who had lost their land due to economic conglomeration. The panel recognized that in order for urban agriculture, and specifically vertical farming, to take off these structures needed to be commercially viable. A panel member suggested using the current buzz surrounding local foods by building a café at the top of a greenhouse or vertical farm structure. Imagine the chef dicing eggplant and mushrooms in front of you that you picked yourself from the floor below! These ideas are part of a larger initiative for resilience of our food source that in recent years, one panelist argued, our supply has succumbed to the pressures of globalization, industrialization, and concentration from the corporate machine. The end result is a tomato with an enormous carbon footprint and less caloric value than it used in flying from Xinjiang to New York City. Bringing our food source closer to home will benefit everyone and make for a healthier, more sustainable population.

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It was wonderful to have a mix of ideas and viewpoints represented in last night's panel, "Designing Urban Farms to Feed New York." Of the topics discussed, I found vertical farming to be an exciting idea that challenges conventional notions of agriculture and is a visually arresting idea; its ability to function in actuality is something I am curious about, and am looking forward to seeing develop. I would have liked to have heard more about Jenn Nelkin's work with Gotham Greens, Kiss and Cathcart's work on green buildings, Weber Thompson's plans to integrate agriculture into their net zero, "living buildings," and even the most obvious, Professor Cohen pointing out that we cannot ignore "horizontal agriculture." Albert and Cathcart both emphasized the reestablishment of a connection between people, nature, and their food source, and 'getting dirt under our fingernails' as Pierce mentioned, and clearly the audience understood and appreciated this connection, as evidenced by the overwhelming number of hands that shot up when asked who in the audience had grown their own food. This connection, however, may suffer if our food production is enclosed within buildings. I sensed from some of the panelist's comments that this issue of connectivity may cause a divide between proponents of vertical and horizontal farming; and those who espouse hydroponics and those who believe we need to show concern for the quality of soil. As Nelkin pointed out, however, 'making room for food doesn't take away from anyone.' I hope that the Municipal Arts Society cultivates this discussion about the emerging innovations in the buildings designed to house urban agriculture, the renovations and integrations of greenhouses and rooftop gardens

into the metabolisms of existing buildings, as well as traditional forms of growing food in cities.

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Urban agriculture is something I've developed an interest in over the past two years at Vassar, and it's really exciting to see that not only are organizations like the Municipal Arts Society thinking about this idea seriously, but that people engaged in various fields of work are developing those ideas into realities. Because urban agriculture seems to be in its infancy as a collective movement or political/social action, I was surprised to find out that there are many different techniques, opinions and controversies that play into what I thought was a pretty simple idea: provide fresh, local food for people living in urban centers. I was also surprised to find out that, in fact, urban farming isn't a new idea. On an individual level, I was shocked to see that the vast majority of audience members grow or have grown some of their own food. Unfortunately, most of the areas around New York City have become sprawling suburbs, so perhaps we could repurpose unused land within the five boroughs as farmland. I imagine the municipal government creating incentives and programs to encourage local residents to start gardening on their roofs and in their front and backyards. Right now one off-putting trend in Forest Hills, where I live, is for many homeowners to pave over their lawns. Not only does this cause more runoff from precipitation, it precludes the possibility of those residents growing food on their property. Perhaps a New York City seed bank could be established where residents could receive seeds each year as a neighborhood restoration project. It could be coupled with existing block-beautification projects. Also, what I was disappointed by was that not much was said about increasing ties with farms in the Hudson valley. It is a highly productive region which could potentially source a lot of food for NYC and less than 100 miles away. What I don't think is the answer are vertical farms- I think they are a nice concept but they take both the natural and human connections of farming away and make farming a sterile, closed system. Also, I don't believe that they are more immune to disease. I think crops need to come into contact with the ecosystem and I also think the amount of energy needed to build and maintain vertical farms is a large and unnecessary strain on the budget of the city and on the environment. The bottom line is: I don't think New York City will be totally food-secure in its own right, but I do think that between rooftop, community and personal gardens, and developing stronger ties to farms in the larger foodshed (a.k.a. produce from the Hudson valley becomes available to more people than just those who shop at expensive farmers markets), we can really make a big dent in the amount of food shipped in from afar, while connecting people with the food they eat.

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The Municipal Arts Society forum, "Re-Imagining New York: Designing Urban Farms to Feed New York City", highlighted the revolutionary movement of urban agriculture by emphasizing its contemporary significance and its recent progress. This dual approach, coupled with the panelists' use of New York City as a viable model, effectively enlightened the audience to the need for the successful development of urban farming. Consequently, one left the discussion with an educated understanding of the tangible potential for such a phenomenon in the midst of a metropolis like New York.

A powerful theme that resonated throughout the discussion was a desire to reconnect people to their food. The fact is, we (as members of the growing urban population) no longer connect the food we eat to a distinct place – thus, we fail to consider the environmental impact of consumption. Urban farming has the potential to change this. It can reconnect the urban individual to a resilient and sustainable food system.

Consequently, the panelists strove for action from the audience, not reflection, by stressing that this reality is within reach. It soon became stunningly apparent that the biggest hurdle is one of design, not technology. Urban design must develop a focus on nature, not people, even in a city like New York.

Yet the question remains: can New York ever feed itself? It appears that urban farming is a part of a more secure, resilient, and sustainable urban food supply, rather than the answer. Urban agricultural development is key for the integration of local and regional food supply, especially in New York City, as it eliminates a vast, fossil fuel dependent food hinterland. As such, it is clear that we can move to a more sustainable future, and we can do it by reconnecting with our food.

[Anna Weisberg](#)

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While all the panelists in the “Designing Urban Farms to Feed Our City” were clearly pro-urban farming, they all brought different perspectives. Columbia Professor Dickson Despommier seems to be vertical farming’s biggest advocate and believes that it will solve many of the problems we face in our current agricultural system, such as problems of fertilizer, adverse weather events, water scarcity, water contamination and transportation. I was excited to see him in person as I had read some of his material before and found it quite compelling and rather controversial. For me, one of the most important aspects of urban farming is the fact that it is able to fill holes in the food system, or food deserts, connecting people to their food who are generally systematically ignored. I think we need to be careful that we do not ignore that history of urban agriculture, even when we are thinking of scaling it up. To that respect, I appreciated the well-rounded and insightful position of Nevin Cohen. Cohen spoke about aggregated urban micro farms and peer-to-peer agriculture, that is, small farms in backyards that form a network with each other. He pointed out that horizontal farms can provide social benefits, and that organic farming also provides many of the benefits that were touted for indoor farming by Despommier and Jenn Nelkin, greenhouse director at Gotham Greens. I thought Nelkin’s project was realistic and compelling in that it is actually being carried out at this moment, rather than just being an innovative design that has yet to make its way into reality. That said, I also appreciated landscape designer Dan Albert’s perspective on his project, the Eco-laboratory, which incorporates many creative designs and ends up being completely net-zero. While most of the panelists spoke at length about their respective projects, there was a short discussion on how to restructure the food system in order to jumpstart such projects. Architect Colin Cathcart asserted it would be a huge step in the right direction if we could redirect even part of the money that is pumped into the conventional agricultural system into urban agriculture. It seems that there are a lot of ways that we could better spend our money in this country. While I do find indoor farming somewhat compelling there is also a part of me that finds it a bit unsettling, as I am attached to farming in the soil, and can’t quite believe that we’ve come to this. There is something important about having a vegetable be a product of the soil conditions of a local area instead of nutrients infused into water, but perhaps that is too nostalgic and I should be looking forward to innovating and revolutionary designs. I thought one of the best points was made by Jenn Nelkin when she said that there are many right ways to go about farming, and the future of urban farming shouldn’t be either/or.