Building Nature in Detroit: Ruin Aesthetics, Historical Gaps, and the Urban Agricultural Imagination

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Abstract

Urban Agriculture is increasingly forwarded as a tool for social and ecological renewal in the post-industrial city. However, much of the enthusiasm (and increasingly, scholarly analysis) of this phenomenon focuses on its civic role rather than its actual impact on urban food production. This gap between presence and action suggests that there is a great deal of ideological investment not just in the practice of urban agriculture, but in what its visual culture and broader social imagination have to offer to the city. This paper makes these connections explicit by attending to the representations of farming in Detroit through two case studies: the 2014 television show, Cosmos, and a 2015 art installation, Flower House. It finds that, while the visions of urban agriculture depicted in these works can productively trouble categories between the cultural and the natural in a way that is constructive towards meeting the challenges of a climate-insecure future, these utopian imaginaries are often predicated upon a dystopian vision of the present. As a result, the temporal politics of green futurism can actually work against racial and classed struggles for the right to the city, creating a disconnect between ecological and social justice.

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There are many frames with which to approach the critical study of sustainability in the urban environment. Slavoj Žižek's claim that “ecology is the crucial field of ideology today” is certainly a provocative one (2009, 441). Yet, the further one investigates the political economy and visual culture of one of the more celebrated and visible sites of green possibility within the city—that of urban agriculture—the more Žižek's invective can unpack the forms of social belief and political investments that give credence to these practices above and beyond their economic or environmental impact. Urban agriculture is an important site of study, not just for interrogating urban food systems, but also for tracing developments of a wider urban imaginary in the contemporary reconfigurations of the nature/culture divide and the historicity of urban space and social struggle.

This paper investigates the ideological work of urban agriculture through two relations. Firstly, in bringing the countryside into the city and in creating highly visual forms of ecological management, urban agriculture presents a hopeful example of seemingly harmonious socio-natural cohabitation, one that inspires a great deal of cultural investment regardless of the success of its actual practices. Secondly, the celebration of urban agriculture is also predicated upon a deeply temporal relation that bridges imagined agrarian pasts to future visions of green enterprise. This construction does not always attend to present questions of socio-economic justice, even as contemporary deindustrialization and so-called urban blight create the material conditions necessary for the rapid growth of American urban agriculture in the first place.

As an analysis of the economic scales and successes of urban agriculture demonstrates, social investment in urban food production and gardening depends less on actually altering large-scale food system dynamics than on creating novel forms of urban agrarian community. These communities in turn perform political work on concepts such as of environment and history. Because of the ideological nature of this phenomena and the support it enjoys far outside its immediate stakeholders, it is important to look beyond the tangible practices of farming and gardening in the city in order to consider mediated representations of urban agriculture and their cultural circulation. This paper uniquely addresses the status of urban agriculture through existing literatures and new cultural objects, specifically the 2014 television program *Cosmos* and the 2015 Detroit art installation *Flower House*. These sites of analysis, while representing only a selection of the many different discourses and investments in urban agriculture, are particularly resonant with ideological claims echoed in large-scale developments in the city, and thus merit particular scrutiny.

This paper further focuses its analysis specifically on Detroit, a city that is exemplary in both its leadership in American urban agricultural development as well as the forms of historically and racially located economic violence that make imagining its fresh start as a green city such a socially-charged vision for the future. There is a risk that privileging the role of Detroit in the larger cultural politics of urban agriculture may risk eliding locally-specific dynamics within different contexts, such as commercial rooftop farming or established grassroots activism. However, a clear focus on Detroit crucially locates the conversation about urban sustainability within important historical dynamics and social locations that are too often ignored in cultural and academic visions of the green city. If urban agriculture is to deliver on its promise for a universal green future, it must first attend
to the issues that are so vividly at hand in Detroit.

**Delimiting the Promises of Urban Agriculture**

Within the current practices and future ambitions of urban agriculture, or indeed within large-scale experiments of all kinds that seek to redefine the form and practices of the declining American city, Detroit has long been a model case and a key site of debate. Following massive deindustrialization and white flight over the course of the late twentieth century, the city’s population has shrunk and its building-occupancy rates have plummeted, resulting in an abundance of empty lots, decaying structures, and returning urban prairie. These sites of deterioration, rendered spectacular through the city’s famous ruin photography and tourism practices, seem to index the political economy of the region, conflating the historical loss of industrial and urban development with a moral vocabulary of fallen empire and an inevitable return to nature (Millington 2013, 287, 290). In this context, the development of urban agricultural practices is to many both an economically and socially viable way to reinhabit the contemporary landscape of Detroit. A community, individual, or a corporation can repurpose vacant lots in the service of sustainable food production in order to revitalize a city and its people, however variously understood (Colasanti, Hamm, and Litjens 2012, 363). There are presently over 1,300 farms in Detroit producing approximately 400,000 pounds of produce every year, and these numbers show steady signs of further growth. Given the continued media attention and both government and NGO support of urban agriculture in Detroit, prospects seem bright for the city’s agrarian leaders (Royte 2015; Chambers 2015).

For all this enthusiasm gathered around the subject of Detroit urban agriculture, one would think that its practice would hold powerful policy solutions to carbon and food inequities concentrated in the cities of the Global North. However, assessments of the impacts of urban food cultivation reveal a significant gap between the transformative promises expressed in the media attention afforded to urban agriculture in Detroit and that of its actual measurable outcomes. There is simply more enthusiasm than answers. As Domenic Vitiello and Laura Wolf-Powers have argued, the seeming success stories of Detroit urban farms are difficult to justify in standard economic terms, as financial and labor subsidies from land allotments, grant programs, and volunteer labor often disguise the actual costs of food production, while urban limits on economies of scale further inhibit the potential for broader impacts on local job growth or true food sovereignty (2014, 4–6; see also Royte 2015). Furthermore, as demonstrated in interviews with Detroit urban farmers and community gardeners, these projects are driven by concerns that are often only tangentially about food. Within the heterogeneous perspectives on urban agriculture, one finds conflicting discourses about economic revitalization, community organization, and the collective exercise of the right to the city (Colasanti, Hamm, and Litjens 2012, 363). Increasingly, civics is forwarded as a more appropriate lens of analysis than agriculture proper, one that invites a deeper investigation into the kind of future promised by visions of a sustainable agrarian Detroit.

In assessments of urban agriculture that look beyond food systems, an urban “imaginary” is increasingly referred to as the key site on which urban agriculture works and aspires (Mayes 2014). Underdeveloped in this understanding, however, is the precise
kind of urban imaginary that this mix of stakeholders and projects are working towards, particularly in the historically resonant landscape of Detroit. What cultural anxieties, across what scales, are being mediated through the celebrated return of agriculture within the post-industrial urban environment? What relations between time and place, moreover, underlie the contested nature of nature within Detroit’s city limits?

The urban imaginary, especially in its more radical articulations, can be understood as an aggregate of discourses, representations, unconscious yearnings, and political struggles around the meaning and limits of the city that in turn mediate relationships between citizens and projects acting in this sphere (Koelble and LiPuma 2015, 154; Harvey 2008, 23; Taylor 2003, 23). It is a question of what is thought to be both possible and desirable under the auspices of civic practice, celebration, and contestation. Within the broader genealogy of the concept, the urban imaginary is frequently traced to tensions between globalizing economic relations and resistant local specificities. These tensions, more often than not, seem to require a sort of psychic defense of the local that could be. The local that already is, conversely, may not inspire such regard (Bloomfield 2006, 46).

It is not hard to see parallels between these inquiries into the urban effects of late capitalism and the current tide of concern that links the global and local through the mechanisms of anthropogenic climate change. More and more, the urban imaginary is preoccupied with questions of sustainability, whether it be through the imperative to “think global, act local,” or the municipal race to build visually spectacular Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED)–certified buildings and rebrand as a green city (Cidell 2009, 631). As an environment in its own right, the city is a site of prototyping large-scale changes that could extend globally, or might merely stand in exception to current norms. It is in this context that the promise of Detroit’s urban agricultural renewal, with its visual conflation of economic and ecological recovery, becomes a powerful cultural actor for anxieties and collective dreams far beyond Detroit’s borders.

**Cosmos’ Bright Green City**

In the case of urban agriculture and the visual culture that circulates around it, it can be alleged that the urban imaginary is often more preoccupied with spaces of food production than the actual food that is produced. In the cultural accounts of Detroit’s urban farms, emphasis tends to lie on the renegotiated relations of space that agriculture makes possible within the city; there is evident novelty and delight in the co-presence of fertile plants and biomes within sites that were formerly given over to sterile concrete and lawns (Solnit 2007). These hybrid spaces of industry and wildness surprise because, as Bruno Latour suggests, modern sensibilities have been structured around a stark division of nature and culture (2004, 57). As he has argued, this prohibition strongly exacerbates our shared capacity to think through complex chains of agency and joint formation, such as those so forcefully posed by the Anthropocene (2014, 17). In this framework of categorical divisions, the presence of the natural within the urban represents the laudable potential for a new socio–natural concord.1

1 Latour’s call to arms, of course, is leveled principally at the distribution of agency rather than the physical arrangements between spaces perceived to be natural and spaces perceived to be cultural. Nevertheless, in the representation-driven logics of the urban imaginary the emphasis on cohabitation points the way towards similar ends.
Given its abundance of urban farms and media attention directed thereon, it is thus no coincidence that Detroit was selected by the producers of *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* (2014) to serve as the prototype city for imagining such an optimistically green urban future. The primetime show, which combines dramatic visual effects with scientific history and education, devotes considerable energy to encouraging viewers to cultivate a practiced sense of wonder. In its episode on climate change, the program concludes with a stirring presentation of the sustainable city as the end goal and driver of global carbon reduction. In an orchestrated sequence of computer-rendered images, the program’s viewers are first presented with an astronaut’s perspective on accelerated atmospheric carbon mitigation (or even repair). Firstly, the deeply worrying sights of African desertification and polar ice losses are reversed, restoring the globe to comforting familiarity. The program then cuts to the driver of this action: the transformed landscape of the American city. The music swells and the camera pans over a wheat field growing on the roof of the futuristic skyscraper “Detroit Agricultural Center.” Audio of John F. Kennedy’s famous space program speech joins the scene, charging the city with promise—a collective mandate to achieve the incredible “because it is hard”—presenting the city as a new moonshot for a generation facing ecological crisis. Amid the biodomes, transit rails, and sleek architectural forms that fuse forest, field, and skyscraper, this imagined Detroit has been designed anew to make room for new kinds of nature within the city (fig. 1). In doing so, *Cosmos’* Detroit puts urban agriculture at the center of its way of imagining the path forward to resolve both ecological and urban decline.

These visual politics of hybridity and harmony are foregrounded in this futurist vision of Detroit: trees and towers stretch uniformly towards the sun, while vines wind their way around fresh steel lattices. These seem to be designed to equally support both buildings and greenery. In this way, the presence of the natural in the city is not merely additive or instrumentalized; the urban grid has been widened to allow for

*Figure 1: Cosmos’s CGI-rendered vision for a green future in Detroit.*
sunny pastures between buildings, which are, themselves, far fewer in number than one would expect of a major metropolitan center. Perhaps the most telling indicator of the shared priority of plants and people is the form of the skyscrapers themselves, which bend and splay in order to elevate gardens and forests into the air without trapping them in shadow. One therefore wonders at the omission of the word ‘urban’ within the “Detroit Agricultural Center”—perhaps the designation is no longer necessary or appropriate in a city thus transformed? Its design tells a story of Detroit’s solarized planning and the mutual shaping of space for human and nonhuman inhabitants to the point at which it has become something else entirely. The country has been let into the city, not merely as a guest, but as a citizen with equal rights to design and govern the environment therein.

This hybrid relation has great importance; as studies of the urban imaginary argue, the kinds of stories we tell about cities matter both as a cultural diagnostic and shaping force in their own right. To its credit, imagining Detroit as a green utopia both gives credence to current urban agricultural practices and stands against the possibility of nihilism in the face of global climate change. Although urban food production is the first and central component within this optimistic vision, farming’s principle effects within this utopia seem more visibly lie in changing the urban form to better accommodate and acknowledge natural systems. Although cities have always been hybrid socio-natural environments, the visibility and needs of plants that urban agriculture foregrounds serve to express this fact with greater legibility (Cidell 2009, 622; Millington 2013, 291).

Locating urban agriculture at the heart of the green city, therefore, might be more indicative of the strength of current cultural anxieties over the loss of nature than the expected ecological benefits of urban farming within the built environment. Consequently, for all the luster of this vision and the ecological imperative that undergirds its role in a larger collective dream about reversing climate change, the gap between Detroit’s present conditions and the reassuring future promised by Cosmos’ vision invites one to hesitate at what its achievement would really demand. Given the weight of Detroit’s past on its present urban state, interpretive caution is paramount.

Histories of Ruin; Histories of Dispossession

In this bright green vision of the futuristic city, one may be forgiven for failing to recognize it as Detroit at all. There are no familiar buildings within this view; all have seemingly been razed and rebuilt in a Year Zero vision of the city. Given that, by most estimates, in the year 2030 approximately 85% of all the buildings that will be standing in North American cities are already standing today (and so with 50% of all buildings by 2050), to reimagine the city as a radically new built environment is first to plan for its complete demolition (PlaNYC 2014; Raman 2009).

Here again is cause to set the scene in Detroit because this hidden crisis of destroying the old to build the new vividly animates the city’s present reality. After decades of population decline and the largest financial municipal bankruptcy case in history, bulldozing Detroit in order to remake it from scratch seems chillingly within grasp, particularly with the assistance of urban agriculture. Since 2013, the city has rapidly privatized key public infrastructure assets and spaces,
including the cheap sale of 1,500 parcels of “blighted” land to agricultural entrepreneur John Hantz in support of a for-profit forestry project. More recently, 22 blocks of largely vacant housing (accounting for 35 acres of land in total) have been promised to RecoveryPark Farms for a large urban agriculture initiative that would seek to provide local produce to upscale restaurants in the city (Chambers 2015). Both initiatives have been inaugurated by months-long demolitions of the existing structures in their quarters of the city, slowly remaking the face of Detroit through the green erasure of its industrial and residential past.

This process is repeated in both large and small scales across the city. Lisa Waud, for example, is a small business owner and entrepreneur who sought to transform abandoned housing into agricultural productivity in the form of two old houses sold to her at auction for $500. A florist by trade, she planed to demolish the houses and establish a seasonal farm on the lots that would provide locally grown flowers to her business and others within the city. Uniquely, however, Waud’s process of transforming old housing into green industry involved an interim step that opens up the relations between Detroit’s history and urban agricultural present to both a large, mediated public and greater critical analysis.

Before demolishing the structures she had purchased, Waud assembled a group of florists and volunteers to reassemble one of the houses as an art installation (fig. 2). For a weekend in October, the Detroit public could purchase $15 tickets to tour the house dramatically transformed by floral inhabitants or $75 for a dinner prepared with locally sourced ingredients within the fantastic mise-en-scène.² By all accounts, it was a fantastic sight. With a playful mimicry and powerful sensory presence, ferns emerged from the peeling wallpaper. Moss formed curtains and the contents of bookshelves. Flowers wound their way through broken floorboards and rafters,

2 There is a striking parallel to this discussion in the role of local food and ‘food porn’ within urban scenes and urban imaginaries. This can be further contrasted with black urban food access and historical food ways (see, for instance, the work of Seitu Jones and Frederick Douglas Opie). Examining this distinction fully would be beyond the scope of this paper, yet it certainly merits further thought. I thank the anonymous reviewer and editor of this article for these insights.
and vegetables carved new architectural flourishes in the space. Just as *Cosmos* envisions a city in which natural systems have become active forces shaping urban space, *Flower House* presents a vision of the home domesticated and transformed by vegetation within.

This fanciful reimagining of Detroit’s empty houses proved to be an immensely popular one, albeit with several cultural problems. Volunteers and donations were mobilized to execute the project, and tickets sold out long in advance of its opening. Press coverage locally and nationally was extensive, reaching as far as Japan. In addition to the simple novelty of a floral installation, there were multiple extant cultural frames into which the project could easily be understood. For example, The New York Times’ coverage, filed under ‘Entrepreneurship,’ simultaneously presents *Flower House* as a smart business venture and a wonder-inducing tourist attraction (Cowley 2015). Either frame, however, entails dramatically different temporal modes of spectatorship; the site’s green future only coexists with its attractively ruined past through several aesthetic slights of hand.

Most noticeably, the visual vocabulary of *Flower House* stands in relation to Detroit’s famous ruined building photographs and the political work at play in these images of social erasure. As *Flower House*’s collaborators confirm, “it’s a beautiful ruin;” constructed with the desire that it “look like the world ended and nature took things back within seconds” (Cowley 2015). The co-presence of urban decay and agricultural renewal occupies several valences of potential analysis. The fantasy of human historical destruction and the reclamation of industry by nature is part of the long-standing aesthetic, moral, and narrative traditions of Romanticism, one that is increasingly in vogue due to contemporary climate anxieties (Weisman 2007). In a mixture of the moral economies of deep ecology and agrarian virtue ethics, the fall of the city to nature’s hand presents a fantasy of ecological justice, which can be pleasantly observed from a safe narrative distance. At the same time this process of destruction and renaturalization provides a renewed wilderness upon which economic extraction may be newly justified (Mayes 2014, 281). The simultaneous presence of these two logics makes for a complex and deeply seductive way in which to mediate the relationship between historical losses and future capital investments.

This formula is most famously expressed in the photographic work of Yves Marchand, Romain Meffre, Andrew Moore, and others whose images of Detroit’s decrepit and empty buildings have formed a distinct genre of “ruin porn.” This immensely popular, if increasingly critiqued trope presents a world in which nature takes over the transformative role of constructing a city whose present inhabitants cannot be located in the frame of the image or anywhere in its implied narrative (Marchand and Meffre 2010; Moore 2010; Cialdella 2014, 113–114). The city has been simply abandoned or lost, and nascent wilderness takes the role of its subject and urban explorer. Whether through creeping mold or trees taking root within damaged theatres, the tropes of ruin porn depend upon the mutual relations of material entropy and biological growth.

This narrative of the city is both destructive and troubling in the way it mobilizes visual pleasure. In naturalizing the urban decline expressed in such images, and in disguising these buildings’ continued use by living people and communities, ruin porn engages the aesthetic tropes of the sublime whereby viewers can enjoy the thrill of immense
scales and historical distance without any risk of danger from—or responsibility towards—the past or the present. Because this aesthetic privileges the partial, the distant, and the already ahistorical, there is no imperative to investigate or explain the visual pleasures at hand (Burke 1834, 38; Cialdella 2014, 114). In this way, the nomenclature of pornography can be explained; there is a lust for ruin but not for an entangled relationship to place.

As critics of ruin porn have argued, these images of Detroit’s emptied past also contribute to the city’s shifting urban imaginary. By foregrounding the agency of natural systems in empty scenes over the historically-situated economic violence borne by those who have been and those who yet still remain, the deleterious effects of failed governance, privatization, and systemic racism in Detroit are hidden from view (Millington 2013, 288). The power of history to act upon the present is thus suspended. The viewer is interpellated, not unpleasantly, as a visitor within a landscape devoid of human actors or responsibility. All sense of resolution comes from the moral claims of the natural world to purify the remains of culture. Within the mythologies of the West, this represents a return of, but not to, Eden (Millington 2013, 290).

At the same time, this moral narrative is currently being enacted through the violence of urban displacement. Detroit’s black residents, firstly affected by long-term de-industrialization and public disinvestment in their communities, are now increasingly being driven out by the rapidly accelerating and unequal urban development of white gentrification (Moskowitz 2015). Rising rents and property values profoundly change the demographic character of a neighborhood, reducing affordable housing stock and profoundly fracturing its sense of history and cultural rootedness (Zukin 1987). This process, which is frequently thought of in terms of an implicit pioneering ethos (Smith 1996, xiv), is well served by cultural motifs of emptiness and wildness. Ruin porn sets the stage for a new frontier.

*Flower House*’s creeping green growth and dilapidated charm thus borrow all of the aesthetic strategies and political problems of ruin porn, yet domesticates the force of natural agency through the cosmetics of flowers. Far friendlier and brighter than the typical Detroit ruin, the house gentrifies the genre, repurposing and selling its motifs for a class of clients and tourists. This repurposing of ruin aesthetics serves as a bridge between the unfathomable past and the bright, enterprising future without the need to examine or engage in the conditions of the present. Tellingly, only one object from the former owners of the house remains: a decorative plate mounted on the wall featuring a pastoral country cottage and the words “It’s my house and I’ll do as I darn please” (fig. 3). This fragmentary voice, appropriated by white cultural producers, is mobilized with seemingly no awareness of the violent irony at play in its histories of dispossession.

![Figure 3: Plate from Flower House. Source: Max Ortiz, The Detroit News, 2015.](image-url)
This all serves to cast a troubling perspective on the cultural and economic role of Flower House and the larger trends of urban agriculture within Detroit’s urban imaginary. What is unspoken in the pursuit of many commercial farms and new community gardens is the lack of a commitment to social equity or a reparative relationship with the dispossessed. This absence troubles even basic media accounts of the project. The Detroit Times, for example, boasts that Waud “doesn’t see a dilapidated old house. She sees a blank canvas” (Cowley 2015). Gone from this narrative are the (likely black) lives that built the house, inhabited it for decades, and were forced away from it due to economic decline. After all, urban agriculture and art can both be powerful forces of gentrification (DeLind 2015, 5; Mayes 2014, 281).

Conclusions and Directions

When dreaming about the future, be it on the scale of cities or within the domestic sphere of one’s garden, it is imperative to retain a hold on the multiple demands of the present. Urban agriculture and its cultural forms are powerful drivers within the urban imaginary of Detroit and aspiring green cities more broadly. The capacities of media, art, and agriculture to challenge rigid divides between nature and culture could serve very positive ends in making the cognitive and planning shifts necessary to meet the demands of global climate change. Green utopias, however, are more often predicated upon a parallel dystopian imagination of the present, authorizing a deep disconnect between the ecological requirements of sustainability and what must be parallel commitments to social equity. In the business plans and visual politics of Waud’s Flower House and more subtly in absence of the past within Cosmos’ vision of Detroit’s future, an agential urban nature is only possible at the expense of the poor’s right to the city, even a city so dramatically transformed.

This is not to say that urban agriculture is always necessarily complicit in processes of gentrification and racial erasure. Indeed, a closer analysis of the plurality of growing practices in Detroit easily provides counter examples. Many city gardens and farms have been created by long-term residents in order to literally and figuratively put down roots in the face of cultural change and economic uncertainty. The Freedom Freedom Growers, to name just one such group, are led by former members of the Black Panther Party and embrace a community-oriented approach to agriculture and cooperative economics. Their efforts go beyond farming, including initiatives to fight low-income tenant evictions, provide youth mentorship, and teach black history. These efforts are precisely what it called for in the collective contestation of gentrification’s economic and cultural impacts.

Local practices, however, don’t always accord with wider ideological frames or mediated accounts of the city. A black radical tradition of food sovereignty and economic self-determination has not been the making of prime-time television or international news coverage, at least so far. As such, the impact of these examples can be regrettably minimal on the wider cultural forms gathered around the urban imaginary and its political effects on the present. As Bruno Latour pithily surmises, “without mediation, no access” (2013, 78).

Herein lies a challenge for how we write about the urban imaginary: dominant aspirations for the city may well conceal present sites of economic violence and social contestation. The urban imaginary is a way of speaking about the city that could be, and
as such, it impacts the visibility of the city that is. Urban and rural spaces, along with classed and racially distinct neighborhoods, have long been defined through divisions mediated by capitalist markets (Cronon 1991, 51). In order to remake the urban imaginary in the service of reparative carbon and social structures, it is increasingly important that the political priority of the market cede to other logics and concerns (Cohen 2016). Rather than considering the urban imaginary as an always already progressive site of aspiration, we might better approach it as the site of a vital second order struggle over these divisions—one waged by both natural systems and the economically and racially dispossessed.
References


Building Nature in Detroit


