

It's Radical Being Green

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As the COVID-19 pandemic raged across the United States, scientists and health care workers made it clear that there was only one way to avoid the virus: stay home. But as weeks turned into months, the health and safety of isolating at home started to come into question. While it is still the best way to stay clear of COVID-19, there are other aspects of health that can suffer when isolated indoors, and those risks are not distributed equally across all populations. The places we used to find solace, distraction, or relaxation—coffee shops, libraries, museums, movie theaters, churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples—all shuttered. As a result, there has been an unprecedented appreciation and utilization of hyper-local green space.

During this time Americans' relationship with their outdoor space changed radically, especially for those residing in densely populated areas. For many, public parks became an extension of "home"—a place where they could run, walk, or even work remotely, while staying safe from shared spaces and potential infection.¹ The outdoors became the only safe setting outside of people's own homes. In many urban and low-income areas, however, outdoor space is a luxury few can afford. As such, when public parks and communal green space took centre stage last year, the unequal accessibility of these sites was brought into sharp focus. The concept of "public" versus "private" land has its roots in white settler colonialism, and this relationship with the land and land ownership is one that must be addressed in the broader conversation on environmental justice. Public parks are an essential part of this conversation to create not just public space, but areas of communal ownership. Our parks could be transformed from static, grassy open spaces to centres of community peacebuilding. This article will outline how several intertwined issues intersect to create unequal and unjust access to green spaces, and one potential avenue for radically changing our relationship

with this public good.

PROBLEMS WITH PARKS

The first issue is that there are simply not enough public-access green spaces. A recent nation-wide survey found that approximately two-thirds of people surveyed agree that "local parks and green spaces are important in maintaining physical (68%) and mental health (65%) during COVID-19."² Despite this acknowledgment, the non-profit organization 10 Minute Walk has found that "over 100 million people across the country, including 28 million children, don't have a park within a 10-minute walk of home."³

Secondly, our current green space is highly directive in its use. Park visitors may walk, run, bike, picnic, and play, but you cannot, for example, sleep there overnight. Many green spaces also engage in what is known as "hostile architecture"—the specific inclusion or exclusion of design elements to guide or restrict public behavior. For example, many public benches have immovable armrests so as to limit users' ability to lay on the bench, or, more aggressively, the installation of metal spikes on landscaping walls to prohibit people from sitting.⁴ Limiting outdoor use as to what is deemed 'acceptable' does not allow the park to fulfill the needs of the broadest spectrum of the community.

The third issue is that the green spaces we do have are not equally accessible to all people. In urban and suburban areas, research has proven that parks tend to be clustered in higher income areas, which in many places corresponds to traditionally white areas.⁵ For example, Central Park was famously built over the

1 Campbell et al., "Quarantine Fatigue and the Power of Activating Public Lands as Social Infrastructure."

2 "Our Research."

3 "10 Minute Walk."

4 Winnie Hu, "Hostile Architecture: How Public Spaces Keep the Public Out."

5 Grove et al., "The Legacy Effect"; Schwarz et al., "Trees Grow on Money"; Watkins and Gerrish, "The Relationship between Urban Forests and Race."

It's Radical Being Green

bulldozed Seneca Village, one of the first free Black communities in New York City.⁶ Given the racist police practices prevalent throughout the United States, Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour are not able to utilize and enjoy public space to the same capacity as their white counterparts. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this has manifested in violent and racially asymmetrical arrests for violations of social distancing laws.⁷ In May 2020, the mainly white New Yorkers gathered in Central Park were given free masks by NYPD officers; that same weekend a video posted on Twitter showed an NYPD officer in the East Village in Manhattan tasing and beating a Black man who allegedly did not follow social distancing procedures.⁸ Other identity groups are also limited in their ability to use public green space.⁹ For example, women are often afraid to utilize park space alone, especially after dark. Additionally, persons with disabilities often face barriers to accessibility or integration that would allow their equal participation in park facilities.¹⁰ These spaces are not equitably open to the public if there are limitations on who can safely use the park.

The final issue is that some outdoor spaces, public or private, are not healthy to occupy. Air quality varies widely across the United States, even fifty years after the landmark Clean Air Act.¹¹ Fenceline communities (neighborhoods that border chemical and industrial sites) are subject to near constantly venting of poisonous gases, with Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour making up the majority of these communities.¹² For those in "Cancer Alley" in Louisiana or living between petrochemical plants in Houston, Texas, outdoor space is not a viable safe option for spending time.¹³ Families residing in these and other similar areas are forced to

make judgements daily on environmental safety, over which they have little to no control, before engaging in outdoor activities.¹⁴

A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

The way in which we plan, build, and utilize our current green spaces is not currently working for the greatest good. Even after we have a handle on the COVID-19 pandemic, our current public park system will continue to be inefficient and unjust. This proposal argues for the use of public parks as spaces of sustainable community agriculture, and has the potential to expand to include rooftops, sidewalks, medians, and even vertical space. In this proposal, the community itself would be responsible for the management and use of the land, with the support and subsidy of national, state, and local government. The concept of community gardens is not new; urban and suburban areas all over the world have utilized this idea of tending a plot of land off-site from your own home. Many of these, though, continue in the traditions of ownership and real estate scarcity, with long waiting lists for city-dwellers to occupy high priced land allotments.

Community gardens could subsidize community kitchens, where those who struggle with food security could work, volunteer, or simply eat. Communities under their own hyper-local leadership could choose what kind of food would be grown in their gardens with an acknowledgement of cultural identity, community needs, historical significance, and geographic feasibility. For example, my family might recommend to our community to develop elderberry bushes. In addition to being a native plant to our region, our family has harvested and canned elderberries for generations to make syrup and jelly. This syrup is delicious, important to our inter-generational bond, and, more recently, has been shown to support immune health and reduce inflammation. For other neighborhoods, staples such as sweet potatoes and fast-growing tomatoes might be favored over "non-essential" foods like elderberries. Still other neighborhoods may work to replace decorative trees on their streets with agricultural producers like apple or avocado trees. The idea is to engage each group to meet their needs and create unique gardens that can literally grow with the community.

For many communities, especially in urban centres, high rise buildings and businesses are part of the

6 Maddie Capron and Christina Zdanowicz, "A Black Community Was Displaced to Build Central Park. Now a Monument Will Honor Them."

7 "'Caravan for Justice' Protests Violent Social Distancing Arrests in NYC."

8 Marquise Francis, "A Tale of Two Parks."

9 Heynen, "The Scalar Production of Injustice within the Urban Forest."

10 Perry et al., "Accessibility and Usability of Parks and Playgrounds."

11 The Clean Air Act is the law that defines the Environmental Protection Agency's responsibilities for protecting and improving the nation's air quality and the stratospheric ozone layer. For more, see "U.S. Clean Air Act."

12 U.S. General Accounting Office, "Siting of Hazardous Waste Landfills and Their Correlation with Racial and Economic Status of Surrounding Communities."

13 Sample, "Environmental In/Justice: Peacebuilding in the Anthropocene."

14 Singer, "Down Cancer Alley."

neighborhood. This agricultural project does not exclude them—indeed roof gardens, vertical green spaces, and balcony gardens have all become important parts of modern, eco-friendly city architecture. Balconies and vertical spaces can be ideal settings for herbs, strawberries, or other annual plants with shallow root-bases. Rooftop gardens provide a space for plants that soak up high levels of sun and water, like ornamental grasses and low shrubs. Increasing the green coverage of a city through a combination of parks, tree coverage, and rooftop gardens reduces other major environmental

climate change makes weather disasters more intense and more frequent, the delicate food supply chain may see further disruption.

These gardens can also act as learning tools. At a time when fewer children know where their food comes from, locally based agriculture can help reconnect Americans to their sources of nutrition. This educational deficit is not only an issue in children; in a recent survey of American adults, almost seven percent answered that they believed chocolate milk came from brown

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issues, such as rainwater runoff, urban heat pockets, and air pollution. Chonggyecheon Stream in downtown Seoul, South Korea is one example of radical urban renewal that rejuvenated an existing stream while integrating the neighboring homes and businesses into a larger green city project.¹⁵

Additionally, parks that are communally owned, embraced, and maintained by grassroots leadership are less likely to need to be heavily policed. Since these gardens are centrally placed in the community, there is also a reduced risk of the opportunistic violence that can take place in infrequently visited corners of large parks. This reduction in overall violence is essential to the continued mental and physical health of the community members.

If integrated into the community and spread widely, these community gardens can provide an important supplement in growing food deserts, and a source of resilience against food shortages in the face of disasters. The COVID-19 pandemic illustrated that even the limited national lockdowns in March 2020 had the ability to disrupt the national food supply chain. As

cows.¹⁶ Communities can use their gardens, and the gardens of their neighbors, to host lessons on cooking, dietary health, and nutrition. These lessons can also be an important space to pass on intergenerational recipes and cultural knowledge, as well as the almost lost art of jarring and canning. Neighbors sharing a meal, sharing recipes, and connecting over the joys of cooking and eating is one of the central tenets of Gastrodiplomacy, which has been utilized in conflict resolution and community-building settings worldwide, from President Obama's Beer Summit¹⁷ to Arab-Jewish relations in the Middle East.¹⁸ While coming together over a meal may not solve community-level tensions on its own, it creates a neutral space for mending ties and building relationships.

Government encouraged—and subsidized—growing of your own supplementary produce is not a radical idea. During both World War I and World War II, the United States government encouraged its citizenry to grow their own produce so the food supply could be diverted

15 Misty Edgecomb et al., "Envisioning a Great Green City."

16 Dewey, "The Surprising Number of American Adults Who Think Chocolate Milk Comes from Brown Cows."

17 "Obama's 'Beer Summit' Effort to End Racial Dispute."

18 "Chefs for Peace."

It's Radical Being Green

to emergency use. Simultaneously, other countries involved in the wars' citizens utilized public land to grow food—the city of Leningrad famously filled their public gardens with cabbages during the siege of 1941. There is no reason these same tactics could not be utilized during peacetime.

Key to this proposal is the aspect of sustainability. While organic agriculture may not be feasible at first due to soil degradation and urban pests, as the gardens become more established, they will rejuvenate the soil and specific plants can be cultivated to deter pests without toxic chemicals. Fruits, vegetables, and other native plants can be specifically planted to emphasize their symbiotic relationship, and encourage visitation by bees, butterflies, and other natural pollinators. This will emphasize the feedback relationship in the community between clean air, clean water, and clean food, and create an additional avenue for lobbying to state and federal governments for increased environmental protections.

CONCLUSION

None of the aspects of this proposal are radical in and of themselves, but together they require a transformation of our fundamental relationship with our environment. By driving us to spend more time outside, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp relief the unequal and unjust relationship Americans have with their public green spaces. This moment has highlighted who has access to the outdoors and why. We can use this momentum to change how we envision the future of outdoor space. In creating spaces that are the responsibility, and for the benefit, of the community as a whole, new opportunities for peaceful governance and hyper local resilience emerge. By reframing public parks as community spaces that are for our communal use, we begin to transition from the zero-sum game of nature versus city, and see a path forward towards a healthier, more equitable ecosystem for insects, plants, animals, and ourselves.

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