

# Urban agriculture as a community builder

How farming can make prosperous communities



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## 1. Factors Shaping Urban Shelter Design and Community based urban agriculture.

I believe that when talking about urban shelter design in an international context, with a general perspective, the main thing is politics and administrative measures. But to give the complete responsibility concerning housing processes would be to reduce the people's own ability and opportunity to influence. To hold on to the belief that we all can make a difference for someone or something is really important even if political and economical crisis like corruption often is a part of every day life. The need for basing all decision on primarily human-centered values when dealing with Urban Shelter Design is crucial.

One essential part when creating sustainable urban shelter design is the building of communities. This was highly visible during our field trip in Manila when visiting different housing areas. Problems with for example the maintenance of the outside spaces were often described as a result of a lacking participation and influence and sense of connection to the neighbourhood. In this paper, I will argue, for how urban agriculture can work as a community builder.

Initially, I will introduce a short concept explanation:

Food system: A food system can be broken down into a couple of smaller pieces. First up is all the biological processes and all essential activities that it brings, for example sowing and harvesting. Secondly comes the activities coupled with getting food on the tables, which means processing, transporting. Finally, a food system also includes the consumption of food and subsequent waste disposal. The food system is the subject of a complex mix of relationships between social, political, economic and environmental conditions (Forster 2011:15)

Community: A community is a group of people that share some common features and acknowledge these as sources of connectedness, whilst still being a part of the rest of the society. Some different sources of connectedness can be distinguished, for example; communities of interest (music, belief), communities of circumstance (ethnicity, military service), and communities of place (city, subdivision) (van Veenhuizen 2006:146).

Urban Agriculture UA: The practice of growing, processing and distribution of food within or around a village, town or city. The raising of animals, aquaculture, agroforestry and horticulture can also be included (van Veenhuizen 2006:2). Cities have never existed without the involvement of UA and they grow bigger alongside each other (FAO 2007)

Community-based urban agriculture CBUA:

CBUA means urban agriculture with the main focus on social aspects and ultimately the building of communities. When UA is intentionally used as a tool to strengthen a place-based community.

CBUA address a broad range of different elements regarding a community's capital (van Veenhuizen 2006:147). The list of things to take into account could be almost endless so in this paper I'm going to focus on how to increase community capital through urban agriculture and how these capitals interact with a focus on the social outcomes.

When working with community building projects it is crucial to first identify what type of community is considered; is it a community of interest, a community of place or maybe both? By specifying the basis and the extent of the concerned community, will make the work more conceivable. To then identify and map the factors involved in the process makes it possible to in a later stage measure the improvements. This mapping is the basis when analysing the social communities (van Veenhuizen 2006:151). You find these factors in part 2.

## GENERAL:

When looking at factors concerning the practising of CBUA these are often the same conditions concerning Urban shelter design in general.

To begin with its important to recognize urban agriculture as an essential piece in the mission to feed the growing amount of urban citizens. And to view it as an part of the agricultural output system as a whole. (FAO 2013). An overall focus on empowerment, growth of the people of the community must be regarded as one of the keys to av thriving CBUA (Cohen 2012).

The mere fact that act of farming implies a location (is location based) causes people to meet. Some observed effects in different CBUA projects has been the unifying of groups when operating the farming (van Veenhuizen 2006:149). It's also been observed that UA makes people from a wide spectrum of ages come together, and enables interactions over generational boundaries (Cohen 2012:46).

## INCOME GENERATOR:

CBUA can be a way out poverty. This povertyreduction can be achieved with the incomegenerating possibilities CBUA offers and through the development of entrepreneurial skills (de Zeeuw 2009:15),

## HEALTH:

The basis for successful human prosperity is healthy individuals (van Veenhuizen 2006:151). A good health status starts with physical activity and good nutrition. Malnutrition among urban citizens is a severe issue (FAO 2013), and locally grown produce is proven to be more nutritious in general than equivalent that have been handled days in the commercial food system. It's therefore important to raise questions about conections between food and health issues and to increase the common knowledge and understanding on the area. Many reasons, on why nutritious food is important, can be found and among them is the impact in children's brain development and the fact that nutrient poor diets affects how effective the medicines will be (van Veenhuizen 2006:151).

By presenting children in an urban environment to the cultivating and cooking traditions can create a sense of belonging and a new and deeper meaning and

connection to the community in general. Another point to stress is the introduction of gardening as a way to include physical activity in the daily life (Cohen 2012:44).

### **FOOD SECURITY:**

The main impact that UA can do for a community is to strengthen the food security by giving access to food that before hasn't been the case due to either availability or cost, since the CBUA often is a part in the informal economy (van Veenhuizen 2006:151). Additionally, in times with a growing demand for fast and cheap food, the awareness of changed eating habits and providing access to both healthy and sustainable diet is crucial when talking about public health issues (Forster 2011). In a community where the supply of fresh produce is limited in the commercial shops, the growing of vegetables on site can be a vital element in the process (Cohen 2012:44).

The limited access to certain food can also have a negative influence on the possibilities to practise traditional cuisine. Instead of being dependant on commercial grocery stores and international food suppliers being in charge our own food system allows the urban community to maintain various traditions associated with farming for example harvest feast.

The question of food security also needs to be brought up in this section. While a community gains a greater control over the food system it can also bring proud feelings of mutual achievements and empowerment together with the others involved. (van Veenhuizen 2006:152).

### **SKILLS:**

If the desired and required competences for operating UA is not to be found in the community some form of external education can be needed. The above mentioned can advantageously be introduced in youth training and development (Cohen 2012:48). To take advantage of the mapped expertise already in the community can ease the demand for outside help.

## INCLUSION OF MARGINALISED GROUPS:

Women living in urban areas is a vital contributor to the urban foodsystem, but their roles look very different depending on the social and political conditions in the community. Urban agriculture enables women around the world to combine the responsibilities of the household with a potential income generating activity. But this situation is far from perfect and is not freed from complications. There is a urgent need to establish a gender mainstreaming when it comes to policy making to get rid of limiting structural oppressions (*RUAF*). To be aware of, and actively work hard with the issues of gender-, class-, race- and age-relations in the community is one of the key solutions when building a community.

Urban agriculture has proven to be an inclusive platform for everyone to thrive Räkna upp exempel? (*RUAF*). While being a force of social inclusion it is also an opportunity to strengthen ones social capital (Rutt 2007).

## 2 Criteria's for a sustainable CBUA

The following is an attempt to gather some important factors and criterias concerning the community and its inhabitants. Furthermore, it is try to map out some of the distinctive qualities that helps in the forming a functional CBUA.

- Health status of those concerned
- Educational status of those concerned
- Abilities of those concerned
- Status and dynamics of the groups involved?
- Any clear leadership individuals?
- Strengths of the networks throughout the community?
- Shared vision in the community? (van Veenhuizen 2006:151-154)
- Access to healthy foods
- Civilsociety stability
- Social-cultural background of those concerned
- Socio-economic situation
- What traditions, customs and practises in the community?
- How is the living patterns and lifestyles of the community members?
- Gender-, class-, race- and age-relations (equality – inequality)

### 3 The Role of Architects

As an architect you have some knowledge about a lot of things. In every field there is always someone else that is an expert in that particular field. The task for an architect is often to stitch all this knowledge together to an complete entity and a cohesive whole. To evaluate, reevaluate and to have the control over the big picture as well as insight and understanding of the details. Of course this varies a lot, and its possible to specialize in a field. I think the role of an architect in Sweden is quite different from colleagues in other countries. For an architect to have the total responsibility over a building site is not as common here. As an architect you are more a part of a team that together work towards the goal. As Geraldine at TAO-philippines mentioned a big part can be to working and designing together with the users if they are known. To open up minds new ideas and with your expertise sometime “make them realize”. Dante R. Marinas, professional at NHA talked about the importance of working together with other professionals like for ex socialworkers. This is especially important when it’s a question about upgrading or relocation projects. He also referred to a proverb saying; “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime” I think that this can be some guiding words when dealing with urban shelter design.

It can be argued that the questions of community-based activities can not be forced upon a community from outside. To be coming from outside with all the good will in the world I think it’s important to constantly reflect upon the fundamental values of your profession. I also strongly believe that you have to be aware of how the organisation you are a part of is built up. All to avoid a top-down decision-making process without a involvement of community members.

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