

Julia Fredenburg, Doneliza Joaquin, Joshua Saal, and Francesca Camillo

Crowd Sourced City

Final Project Brief

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In an exercise to begin a discussion about optimal use for urban spaces and the viability of urban agriculture, our group worked with The Design Trust for Public Space on the [Five Borough Farm Project](#), an effort to develop strategies, evaluation tools, and policies to support urban agricultural activity on a city-wide scale. The long-term goals of the project are to improve public space, demonstrate the added value of and gather metrics to measure the impact of urban agriculture in neighborhoods throughout New York City. To explore more narrowly how crowd sourcing could be used towards those ends, Jerome Chou at The Design Trust for Public Space put us in contact with Ray Figueroa at Brook Park, an urban farm in the South Bronx.

Working with Ray Figueroa, Director of Social-Ecological Community Development Projects at Brook Park, we learned that urban farming is not limited to growing food. Brook Park is located in the Mott Heaven section of the South Bronx, and has community beds that people from the neighborhood use to grow food. However, this is only one component of many that Brook Park provides; it hosts indigenous cultural events, school groups, environmental awareness programs, and works on various social justice issues affecting the community. Brook Park's advocacy is focused on environmental justice issues, and its programs deal with many community development issues that extend beyond urban agriculture. Working within this framework, we created an experiential learning project that raises awareness of urban agriculture and uses participants' knowledge of their neighborhoods to identify under-utilized land.

Project Explanation

Urban farms have become increasingly commonplace in many urban neighborhoods throughout the US. They have started many conversations within neighborhoods as well as between residents and their governing bodies. In lower income neighborhoods, the need to make healthful foods accessible to city dwellers has become a focus of many advocates that frame it as a social justice issue. Food access has also been re-framed as a primary public health issue wherein city agencies play an active role through policy.

FARM THIS was originally conceived as a group project with multiple participants, preferably more than ten, and was to be comprised of people of varying ages that inhabit the neighborhood or area to be "farmed." Ultimately, we were able to connect with a high school teacher from the New York City Charter High School for Architecture, Engineering and Construction Industries located at 838 Brook Avenue Bronx, NY.

We created do-it-yourself FARM THIS signs that represent the most basic elements and shapes

of urban agriculture: produce, chickens, and bees. We considered having participants design the signs/installations but were unable to because of time constraints. Consequently, we cut out heavy card-stock signs and attached them to paint sticks. They were highly visible, printed in loud colors, easy to carry around, and easy to replicate at home with a printer and a wooden stake.

We intended for participants to walk through their neighborhood and re-imagine better uses for underused or uninviting spaces. After participants planted their FARM THIS signs, thereby manifesting their ideas for better uses of urban space, the crowd sourcing aspect of our project becomes apparent. We asked each person to take a picture of his or her “installation,” either with a smart phone camera or a digital camera. The next step was to text message or email (tapaib907@tumblr.com) the photo(s) taken so that they would appear on our online photoblog. We decided to use Tumblr as the medium for our photoblog. If the students (or any other participants) did not have access to a data plan, or did not have a smart phone, an alternative was to upload the photos taken onto a computer and manually email the photos to the Tumblr site.

Ultimately, this project was intended to yield a catalogue of geo-tagged, community-captured photos in blog format; it was to become a virtual manifestation of the participants’ imaginations of those areas thus illustrating what the community *would like to see*. FARM THIS is ultimately an exercise for all involved to imagine the possibilities of re-configuring the built environment from a novel perspective. In many ways, this project was a way to begin a conversation between neighbors about how to improve the environs, and whether or not urban farms can become a visual or physical amenity.

We created a Facebook page and Twitter account to make sure we were visible on many social media outlets. We also created a Frontline text message database, and used it as a way to both engage participants as well as possible passers-by that happened upon the FARM THIS installations. We researched information about the impacts of urban farming and entered them into the Frontline text message database as auto-replies programmed to deploy if someone were to text a number 1-9 into the number provided on the signs.

First, we created two press release documents to help the charter school understand our project because we were not able to schedule a time for all of our group members to meet with them. We also created a document for the students that we strove to make straight forward and easy to understand. In lieu of meeting with the teacher and with each of her multiple classes, we created a brief introductory and instructional video (<http://farmthis.tumblr.com/What>) on urban agriculture and FARM THIS based on her suggestion. The video delineated each step in the process, and animated the list of steps featured on our Tumblr site.

See Appendix for instructional slides

After everyone has planted their FARM THIS ideas, the crowd sourcing element becomes integral: we ask each person to take a picture of his or her installation, either with a smart phone camera or a digital camera, which they either text message (MMS) or email directly to our tumblr e-mail with the address or street intersection in the body of the message. Ultimately, this project will yield a geo-tagged, community photo blog of those areas that illustrate what the community would like to see.

Data Results

Explain the data that you were able to gather from the process. What did it tell you? Where you able to do anything with the data – why or why not? Analyze the information you were or were not able to gather.

To provide some examples for the students and other possible participants, we used Adobe Photoshop on some photos of underused spaces and posted them to our Tumblr site. The students were receptive and particularly excited about using the Tumblr interface.

The Frontline SMS Database was initially set up on November 22, 2011, but was not completed until December 1, 2011, the day before we handed the signs off to the high school teacher in the Bronx. On December 1st we entered nine urban farming facts into the database to ensure the auto-replies would be functioning for possible texts after the signs were “planted.” The high school teacher assigned FARM THIS as an extra credit assignment to her classes as part of a lesson on community development, offering students the aforementioned signs to “plant” throughout the neighborhood. She required that they take a picture of themselves with the sign(s) (which implied that they could do the assignment in pairs) in order to provide proof of completion. One lone student completed the task and posted his photo, though several others simply photographed a location and uploaded it to our site.

Time constraints did not allow for us to have multiple run-throughs with different groups of participants, although this could have been beneficial to the project design. Because we were not able to meet with the students, or have an in-depth discussion with the teacher assigning the project on-site at the school, there was some ensuing confusion between the students receiving the signs, “planting” them, and recording their findings. It may have been important to explain--and take questions--from the students about the way the technology worked because they may not have had a thorough understanding of the logistics of the text message database and the process of taking the picture, emailing it to the Tumblr email, and the end product on the website. Had our schedules allowed, or had we connected with the teacher earlier on in the process, we could have made time to go to the school and explain the project before we handed it off to the students.

Going with the students during the activity could have been helpful in clarifying any questions they may have had, but the assignment was given out as an individual unguided exercise.

Once they received the signs, they were expected to follow instructions they may not have understood. However, going out with the students to guide them would have presented logistical complications necessitating permission slips and other parental approvals.

Recommendations

Conclude with some future strategies/recommendations based on what you were able to implement. Given the project you were able to develop, what would you have done differently in the future.

If time constraints were not an issue, meeting with any possible participants would be ideal. Opening up the design to include other images may have further engaged students as they would possibly take more ownership of the project. Possibly having focus groups and physically walking the neighborhood with them could yield different results that would be worth exploring.

To satisfy The Design Trust's initiative, FARM THIS helps create a conversation between citizens and the built environment in which they live, encouraging people to identify spaces that could be better utilized, and beneficial for the whole. Although no hard metrics were gathered from this phase of the project, it could be relaunched in a more contoured way. The results could further help achieve The Design Trust's goals of assessing what farms are where, what they are growing and who is (or is not) benefiting from the resource.

APPENDIX

1 Visit your local urban farm.



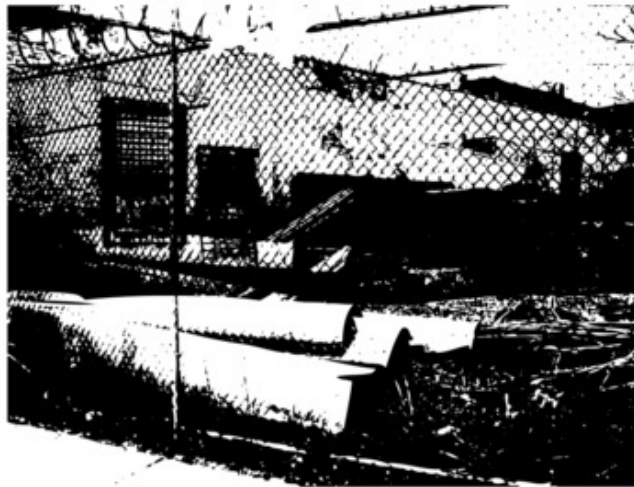
What makes this a great community place?

2 Walk your neighborhood.



Are there spaces lacking the qualities you liked about the urban farm?

3 Identify an underused space.



Where is this space located?

4 Plant your farm.



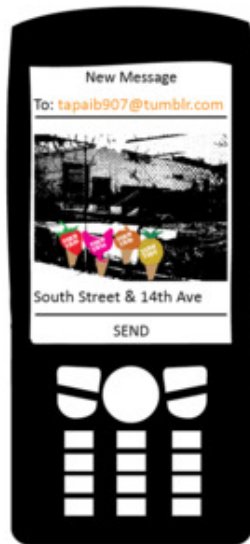
Stake your "Farm This" signs in the space.

5 Take a photo.



Make sure to get both your signs and the space in the photo.

6 Share your photo.



Text or e-mail your photo to tapaib907@tumblr.com.
Don't forget to include the location of your farm.

7 See other farmed spaces.



VISIT
WWW.FARMTHIS.TUMBLR.COM

Check out different places that others have farmed.