

Cultivating and countering sustainability capital in Portland and Vancouver: Urban agriculture governance, mobilities, and contestations

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As a “sustainability fix” (While, Jonas, and Gibbs 2004) central to development of the green, neoliberal city, urban agriculture (UA) enjoys a prominent role in municipal governance of sustainability. But as new gardens crop up at a furious pace, many community activists are questioning who UA serves and further claiming that it spurs gentrification and displacement. In response, some UA activists are now linking their efforts to broader struggles for social justice, and in some cases, their concerns over equity are actually filtering into municipal food policies that are framing sustainability in new ways.

A “relational comparative approach” (Ward 2010) can help us understand how and why UA has fast become a site of contestation over urban sustainability and flashpoint where tensions between exchange value and multiple, often divergent use values come to a head along class and racial lines, as well as within and across municipal agencies. In this paper, we present some preliminary results of a new NSF-funded project to critically examine UA and related policy-making in two cities renowned for their commitment to sustainability and “greenness” – Portland, Oregon, USA and Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Both cities, for example, have embraced UA as a means of furthering their sustainability and resilience goals in ways that both promote and manage urban food production. At the same time, in both cities, UA is increasingly squeezed out, both in terms of economics and space, as a result of a municipal commitment to increased building density (McClintock and Simpson 2016). To understand how UA can both produce and resist contradictions arising from sustainable development (McClintock 2014), our project tackles three interrelated research questions:

- 1) *How do various forms of UA, the motivations of urban agriculturalists, and engagement with UA advocacy and/or policy-making, differ socio-spatially within and between Portland and Vancouver?*
- 2) *How have the institutionalization and operationalization of municipal food policies contributed to and/or perpetuated this socio-spatial differentiation of UA?*
- 3) *How have Portland and Vancouver learned and borrowed UA policy models from each other and how has the enactment of these “mobilized” policies in the two cities opened and/or closed spaces for political engagement and equity-oriented “counter-sustainabilities”?*

Preliminary evidence suggests that the roots of UA in both cities not only trace back to their common histories of environmental activism and a shared green imaginary, but also to the mobility of sustainability and food policy between the two cities. As we might expect in a neoliberal context, their learning engagements with each other and associated sharing and borrowing of certain policies and practices with other cities around sustainability are also tinged with a compulsion to compete (McCann 2013). Attention to urban policy mobilities can help us understand how UA is shaped by a dialectical tension between its apparently contradictory role in both cultivating and contesting sustainability capital. Such an approach emphasizes the role that “best practices” models from elsewhere play in both the legitimation and contestation of new policies as they are implemented in specific localities (Baker et

al. 2016; McCann 2011; McCann and Ward 2010; Peck and Theodore 2012). In this paper, we observe that UA's formal institutionalization in municipal policy (often under the auspices of sustainability initiatives) is part and parcel of the relational construction of a sustainability orthodoxy and sustainability fix among cities via the circulation of UA best practices. Understanding UA projects in particular places as parts of wider networks, however, also reveals how local activists are sometimes able to use formal policy-making institutions as sites of political mobilization (Davidson 2009; Martin and Pierce 2013). In Portland and Vancouver, some activists have begun to insert new discourse around equity and social justice into policy discussions. They thereby subvert, appropriate, and/or rework dominant, globally circulating eco-centric conceptions of sustainability and enact existing counter-sustainabilities that stand in contrast to the larger trends towards neoliberal restructuring. Our study thus sheds light on UA's complex and contradictory contributions to urban sustainability within specific cities and across networks of inter-city interaction, illustrating how the circulation and "mutation" of policy not only mediates processes of neoliberal urbanization, but also acts in progressive, transformative ways.

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