



Right to food, right to the city: Household urban agriculture, and socionatural metabolism in Managua, Nicaragua

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ABSTRACT

The 'right to the city' has been understood as the right of urban inhabitants to produce urban spaces, and has generally drawn on Henri Lefebvre's work on the social production of urban space. This paper examines the *socioenvironmental* aspects of the right to produce urban space. The aim of the paper is to draw on and contribute to the literatures on urban political ecology and the right to the city by exploring the concept of the right to urban metabolism through an analysis of everyday food production and consumption in homes in an informal settlement in Managua. The article argues that the ecologies of informal household urban agriculture (primarily the cultivation of fruit trees) are a key way that marginalised urban inhabitants in Managua appropriate and produce urban space, and consequently, demand their rights to urban metabolism. Through the production of home ecologies based on physiological necessities and cultural food practices, households simultaneously challenge their exclusion from urban spatial practices and address the increasing insecurity of access to food in Managua.

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1. Introduction

From the balcony of the restaurant *Intermezzo Del Bosque*, situated on a hill just south of Managua, the city's landscape is overwhelmingly green. The urban forest seems to bury the buildings (albeit, few of the buildings in Managua are over six stories). For a city with few large parks and over 1.5 million residents, it is considered the greenest city in Central America. The rich urban forest in the city is not an accident, nor is it necessarily part of official city planning (although the environmental programme of the City of Managua includes planting trees in public spaces, especially schools). The majority of trees are found in the patios of homes throughout the city. Interestingly, many poor households in the city have more trees than wealthier homes.

The trees in the patios of many 'marginalised' households serve multiple purposes in the ecologies of home, providing food, shelter, comfort, and income (Shillington, 2008).¹ Trees in these patios are central to the ecologies of informal household urban agricultural systems. Along with many other urban dwellers in the global south, urban agriculture in Managua plays a significant role in food security, income and home-making (Altieri et al., 1999; Companioni et al., 2002; Mougeot, 2005; Nugent, 2001). Studies have shown that urban agriculture is also important in sustaining social networks (in Brazil

see WinklerPrins and de Souza, 2005; in Namibia see Frayne, 2004); for women's empowerment, such as through commercial ventures (in Botswana see Hovorka, 2006); and can contribute to urban sanitation systems (Lydecker and Drechsel, 2010). In Managua, informal urban agriculture is central to creating 'home' and assists households in dealing with environmental uncertainties, such as unreliable water supply, lack of proper sanitation and food (Shillington, 2011).

Urban agriculture has become one way through which many inhabitants claim their right to the city. Drawing on the literatures on urban political ecology and the right to the city, I use a case study of barrio San Augusto² to analyse how the cultivation of fruit trees allows residents, especially women, to claim their right to urban metabolism. While these trees are only one component of a diverse patio ecology (which I have discussed elsewhere, see Shillington, 2008), they are the dominant species and therefore shape what else grows in patios. These home ecologies are produced through complex relations within and between home, community, city and globe. Desires and needs of/at home compete with the aspirations of urban planners, international development organisations and governments. In San Augusto, households struggle to make the homes liveable and comfortable according to their needs and wants, while at the same time governments and international development organisations attempt to improve living conditions according to measurable criteria that may or may not correspond to the desires of households. Home is an important space where such competing ideals are played out.

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¹ I use marginalised to refer to inhabitants who are excluded from many basic urban services such as water supply and sanitation, lack secure employment, have limited or no access to education and health care, and live in precarious housing conditions.

² Name of barrio has been changed.

I focus on domestic spaces – the home patio – because ‘home’, as the most mundane and everyday space of the city, is central to the production of urban space (Lefebvre, 1991). It is through the home that our everyday lives revolve, and it is in the home (and for a home) that many struggles begin. As feminist geographers have long pointed out, everyday life and domestic social relations are important for understanding broader relations and processes (Domosh, 1998; Marston, 2000; Massey, 1994; McDowell, 1999). In this sense, home has to be understood in three broad ways. First, home is a material space where social reproduction takes place. Second, the home is shaped by broader social and socio-natural relations. The ways in which men and women interact with each other as well as with ‘nature’ in domestic spaces is shaped by relations produced in other socio-spatial arenas, such as the urban, nation-state or global (Kaika, 2005; Robbins, 2007). Third, the everyday socio-natural relations of home also shape broader socio-spatial organisation. Everyday domestic practices, such as eating, bathing, and planting suburban lawns for example, produce urban space(s) and accordingly, urban metabolism.

With this in mind, this article explores everyday domestic relations with food in the home and the ways in which it shapes urban metabolism and space. Food is not only implicated in the most intimate and necessary human–nature relations within the home, but also the ways in which food is accessed, produced, and consumed in cities are entangled in the socio-natural production of urban space at different scales. Simultaneously social, cultural, economic, political and natural (Whatmore, 2002), food is implicated in the socio-natural production of multiple spaces: body, home, city, and beyond. At the corporeal scale, the consumption of food contributes to the production of our material, emotional and cultural bodily spaces; it “plays a role in the differentiation of bodies and identities” (Mansvelt, 2005, p. 95; Valentine, 1999). Food is an important part of producing our socio-natural bodies. It enables us to survive and labour, and is necessary for social reproduction and the maintenance of everyday life. Most certainly, food is an essential component of the means of existence (Katz, 1993). And as Valentine (1999: p. 338) notes “Food is one... object that is crucially implicated in [the] work of social reproduction”.

It is at the scale of the household where decisions about food are made. What food to buy, how it is prepared, and who consumes what quantities is determined for the most part at home. We also consume the majority of our food at home. In this regard, the home serves as a space through which food rituals, food cultures, and identities are continually (re)produced. In most households, women are responsible for making decisions around food – what and where to purchase, cultivating subsistence crops, and preparation. Domestic food rituals are shaped by and shape gender relations in the home. Moreover, such decisions are not made in isolation: they depend on broader socio-economic and environmental processes. The cost of food (fluctuating markets), availability, and (changing) food cultures shape food practices of home – all of which are intimately linked to processes of urbanisation and globalisation.

Along with the importance of food at the corporeal and household scales, food has been at the heart of social and ecological transformations at the scale of the city and nation. The production of food itself relies upon transforming ‘nature’. Agriculture involves the ecological transformation of so-called first nature to second nature (Smith, 1990). Moreover, food is a large part of the urbanisation of nature. Urban inhabitants are dependent on the rural areas to provide food. Cronon’s (1991) brilliant account of wheat in the Midwest shows how one food product transformed not only the countryside (from ‘wild prairie and forest’ to ‘tame’ nature), but also the material, social, political and economic landscape of Chicago and in turn, the nation. The urbanisation of Chicago was predicated on the transformation of nature in the surrounding

prairies. Cities depend on a constant supply of food. Food is not only a critical part of bodily metabolism, but it is also an important part of a city’s metabolism (as I will discuss shortly).

Gandy (2004, p. 374) sees urban metabolism as the “circulatory processes that underpin the transformation of nature into essential commodities such as food, energy and potable water”. As part of the urban circulatory processes, food enters the city as either raw resource to be transformed or as already produced, ready to consume and later discarded. Food, thus, flows through economic and social process as well as the physical infrastructures (e.g. sewers) of cities.

This article focuses on the role of urban agriculture in producing liveable urban spaces in San Augusto and in challenging urban social and environmental problems, such as lack of clean water, sanitation, and garbage collection. I focus my discussion on the cultural practices of domestic urban agriculture, and the ways in which these practices are shaped in part by the imperative to meet the physiological needs of the household. Through the practice of urban agriculture, households create particular ecologies that assist in asserting their rights to the city, or more specifically, their right to urban metabolism. The informal urban agriculture in marginalised households produces particular home ecologies that allow residents, especially women, to claim their right to produce and appropriate urban space.

2. Methodologies

This paper draws on research undertaken during 2005 and 2006 in barrio San Augusto, one of Managua’s poorest barrios. The research was part of a collaborative urban agricultural project with the local Nicaraguan non-governmental organisation, Fundación Nicaragüense Pro-Desarrollo Integral Comunitario (FUNDECI). FUNDECI began working with the barrio in the mid-1990s assisting the settlement of the area. Since then they have continued to advocate for urban services (water, sewage, roads, schools, medical clinics). The objective of the urban agriculture project was twofold: first to examine the importance of urban agriculture in lower-income households, and second to identify potential areas of support for household or community urban agriculture. Participants for the current research were recruited at FUNDECI’s introductory workshops about the collaborative urban agricultural project. The workshops were advertised at community meetings, in the medical clinic, and through word of mouth. Attendees at the workshops were asked if they would be interested in participating in interviews and mapping, and over 50 agreed to participate (40 women and 10 men in total).

In this paper, the data are primarily from participatory mapping and interviews with 25 women and five men. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather basic information about the households and their patios. These interviews were then followed by mapping the participants’ patios. Participatory mapping had two aims. First, it served as a way to create an inventory of existing plants and trees in the patios. Second, and more importantly, mapping was used as a tool to provoke in-depth discussions about patios, plants, trees, and homes. The mapping exercise involved walking around the patio, letting the participant lead and decide what was put on the maps. The act of walking around the patio to observe and collect stories of the patio ecologies became, as Hitchings and Jones (2004, p. 9) suggest “...a springboard for methodological investigations”.

The participants guided the mapping, deciding which plants and trees to map on a sketch map of the house and patio. Some participants mapped and talked about almost all the plants and trees in their patios, in other cases only half of the plants and trees were mentioned and mapped. The participant plotted the plants on

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