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## Urban Forestry & Urban Greening

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/ufug](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/ufug)



# Community gardening and governance over urban nature in New Orleans's Lower Ninth Ward

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 17 July 2015  
Received in revised form  
18 December 2015  
Accepted 7 January 2016  
Available online xxx

#### Keywords:

Right to the city  
Urban political ecology  
Urban agriculture  
Urban food system  
New Orleans  
Political moments

### ABSTRACT

Lefebvre's right to the city (RTTC) framework argues for a renewed politics of inhabitation in cities, which enfranchises urban residents to imagine and create urban space to meet their needs. Another theoretical framework, Urban Political Ecology (UPE) works to "untangle the interconnected economic, political, social, and ecological processes that go together to form highly uneven and deeply unjust urban landscapes" (Swyngedouw and Heynen, 2003. *Antipode*, 35 (5): 898). In this paper, I draw connections between the RTTC framework and literature in Urban Political Ecology (UPE) to consider how their intersection can inform analysis of grassroots urban agriculture initiatives in the Lower Ninth Ward Neighborhood of New Orleans. I argue that community efforts to transform vacant lots into productive gardens and food forests constitute a specific form of claims on the right to the city, and on the right to alter and improve urban ecology. These claims play out at the scale of the neighborhood, rather than that of the city, and are manifested within specific urban sites managed by residents of a particular neighborhood. I characterize specific, neighborhood-scale urban greening efforts as "political moments" (Becher, 2012. *Political moments with long-term consequences*. In: Smith, Michael Peter, McQuarrie, Michael (Eds.), *Remaking Urban Citizenship: Organizations, Institutions, and the Right to the City*. New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Publishers, pp. 203–220), which, despite their locational and topical specificity, offer profound potential for broader urban social change.

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### Introduction

In February of 2013, the Lower Ninth Ward Food Access Coalition (LNWFAC), a grassroots, neighborhood-based organization, released a report and action plan for increasing access to what they deemed healthy and affordable food within the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood of New Orleans, which has no grocery stores and very limited access to fresh foods. The release of the "action plan" marked the culmination of ten months' concerted effort toward articulating a plan of action that would both acknowledge and strategically endeavor to overcome the structural barriers to fresh food access within that neighborhood. Central to the plan were urban greening and urban agriculture initiatives, which would serve not only to address the food access problem, but also to immerse young people in community-shared green space. The efforts of the LNWFAC and affiliated community members are notable because of their endemic nature; while the group

strategically mobilized outside resources and opportunities, they consistently demanded that efforts be governed and articulated by and for residents of the Lower Ninth Ward. By claiming their *right*, as citizens of a particular neighborhood, to determine the form, function, utility, and accessibility of neighborhood amenities – and, in fact, to demand equitable access to amenities deemed basic and fundamental for the healthy functioning of a neighborhood and its inhabitants – residents of the Lower Ninth Ward demonstrate claims on the right to the city as the right to inhabit and thrive within vital urban space.

Public green space and fresh food were among the "basic amenities" to which Lower Ninth Ward residents demanded access and control. Therefore, this particular manifestation of the right to the city is fruitfully analyzed here under the broader theoretical framework of urban political ecology (UPE). Drawing from eco-Marxist, eco-feminist and eco-anarchist perspectives, UPE links specific analyses of urban environmental problems – from poor air and water quality in inner-city neighborhoods to a lack of access to grocery stores – to larger socio-ecological solutions, such as policy changes that prohibit waste dumping or incentivize food markets to locate in poor urban neighborhoods (Keil, 2003, p.724). UPE posits

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ufug.2016.01.001>

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that urban environments are socially constructed spaces that can be interpreted as multi-dimensional physical manifestations of political will and structure, of community culture and identity, and of societal relationships with local “nature” (Keil, 2003). Additionally, UPE is centrally concerned with contextualizing urban formations, and focuses primarily on the processes and practices that produce uneven and “spatially differentiated environments” (Braun, 2005, p. 644), making it a particularly useful framework for investigating the discourses and contexts that shape food and land use activism in urban contexts.

This paper addresses a call within this journal for increased attention to issues of governance and power within urban forestry and green space ecologies (Bentsen et al., 2010). In so doing, it draws on existing research published in *Urban Forestry and Urban Greening* that focuses on the motivations and benefits of community gardens (Guitart et al., 2012); the challenges for urban green space planning (Haaland and van Bosch, 2015); the development of complementary frameworks for integrating governance into urban ecological systems (Kattel et al., 2013; Lawrence et al., 2013); and the transformative potential of food gleaning and cultivation for enhancing green space stewardship (McLain et al., 2012). These studies reveal a consistent and concerted interest in the role of local citizens for shaping and managing urban green space, but there is insufficient attention to how governance over that space actually happens, and what implications grassroots governance may have for both social and ecological processes at the neighborhood scale.

## Research context

Post-Katrina New Orleans provides a raw and unique setting for examining questions of power and governance over socio-nature. In August of 2005, a category 5 hurricane wrecked the coastal areas and towns of southern Louisiana and Mississippi, displacing more than a million people, causing at least 1,833 deaths, and incurring over \$108 billion (2005 USD) in damages (GNOCDC, 2012; Knabb et al., 2005; NOAA, 2011). Despite the undeniable power of Hurricane Katrina as a natural disaster, many argue that the extraordinary loss of life and property could have been much less severe, particularly in the city of New Orleans; a dilapidating levee system (long known to be inadequate if confronted by a category 4 or larger storm), government inaction leading up to and immediately following the storm, and a desire to preserve the historic and profitable French Quarter exacerbated the damage and destruction of the poorest neighborhoods of New Orleans (Dyson, 2006). In the days and weeks following the storm, public news stations around the United States and world broadcast images of unmoored homes, whole neighborhoods drowning under ten or more feet of water, people stranded on rooftops with nothing to eat or drink, and the floating corpses of those who could not escape the surge of Lake Ponchartrain. That most of these images captured people of color unsettled the notion that Katrina was a “natural” disaster; on the contrary, the sheer visibility of the violence and death absorbed primarily by poor people of color following the storm has made Katrina a “touchstone for public debates about the relationship between class, race, capitalism, the state and environment in America” (Bakker, 2005: 795). Katrina did not *cause* urban racial and class disparity; it merely capitalized on it and rendered it visible.

Now, a decade after the storm, it is useful to reflect on what Katrina has meant for the urban fabric of New Orleans, and on the ways in which Katrina’s aftermath exposed the fragility of the false dichotomy between nature and society. The years since Katrina have witnessed a demographic shift in the direction of whiteness and wealth, and an array of efforts to rebuild or reimagine the city, including initiatives to address food insecurity among low-income residents. Many scholars and activists have remarked on

the tendency of rebuilding efforts to privilege exogenous ideologies and the interests of capital while disregarding the substantive needs and desires of those residents who have returned home (Hartman and Squires, 2006; Luft, 2008; Klein, 2007; Dyson, 2006; Harvey et al., 2015; Passidomo, 2013). Rather than reiterate their arguments, I pursue a different trajectory in this paper. Using the Lower Ninth Ward neighborhood of New Orleans as a case study, I explore the applicability and transformative capacity of Henri Lefebvre’s concept of *the right to the city* (RTTC) for addressing specific grievances: a lack of fresh food access and a desire for resident-directed governance of public green space. I share stories and observations from a grassroots initiative led by residents of the Lower Ninth Ward to challenge both the systemic and specific circumstances that have circumscribed their access to fresh food, and demonstrate that this activism challenges dominant structures of governance over urban nature. In keeping with this issue’s concern with power and governance, I situate the LNWFAC’s struggle within the RTTC and Urban Political Ecology (UPE) frameworks to address the following questions: How do struggles over governance of urban space reflect a (re)distribution of power within urban socio-ecological systems? How does local knowledge function within these systems, which tend to privilege exogenous knowledge and “expert” ideologies? How can a neighborhood-scale struggle for fresh food access mobilize residents toward broader and deeper claims of self-determination and governance over urban nature? While this study approaches these questions through examination of a particular case, it offers insight into the transformative potential of local governance, and, specifically, to the neighborhood scale as a meaningful site for citizens to engage with questions of and control over urban green space.

To contextualize these questions, I begin with a brief description of the UPE framework, followed by theoretical engagement of Lefebvre’s formulation on the Right to the City. I consider arguments that the RTTC concept is either too narrowly (Harvey, 2008: 38) or too broadly (Leontidou, 2010; Purcell, 2003; de Souza, 2012) applied, and focus on those elements of RTTC that are most salient to my investigation of urban green space governance in a particular neighborhood in New Orleans. Despite its highly theoretical nature, I argue that RTTC has broad applicability “in the real world” when paired with insights from Urban Political Ecology. The UPE framework grounds RTTC discourse within a particular socio-natural context, by calling for small-scale, grassroots governance over urban green space.

Next, I offer an ethnographic portrait of post-Katrina New Orleans, the Lower Ninth Ward Food Access Coalition (LNWFAC), and the latter’s discursive and activist efforts to generate a community-controlled food system. Finally, I utilize an urban political ecology framework to link themes from the RTTC to the rights claims of the LNWFAC, and demonstrate the transformative potential of what Becher (2012: 203) describes as “political moments”: the “intentionally temporary, grassroots organizing around small-scale, specific claims.” I conclude by arguing that one emancipatory vision for the city starts from neighborhood efforts to radically incorporate the human needs for food and self-determination, to challenge corporate domination of the food system, and to collaboratively create useable urban space. One pertinent manifestation of this activism has been renewed access to and control over neighborhood green space, which in turn facilitates deepened community engagement, intergenerational interaction, and enhanced nature-literacy among the youth.

## Theoretical framework

This section engages with theoretical approaches to urban inhabitation and governance found in literature on urban political

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