Design of Urban Farming Community: Strategies for Vacant Lands in Detroit Urban Neighborhoods

Project Collaborators:
- Christ Community Development Corporation
- City of Detroit Planning Department
- American Coalition of Black Farmers

AN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS

Practical Design Issue or Question:
Detroit’s vacant lots threaten the economic and social vitality of the region. Despite the lack of infill developments initiated by various agencies to deal with such a crisis, the positive impact is minimal because they arekoasequential and not well coordinated.

Nature of the Proposed Research
In response, we developed a proposal for designing urban agriculture communities in test sites through master plans that feature farming education centers, micro farms, community gardens, greenhouses, community markets, and supportive mixed-use development. This provides a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to the vacant land crisis.

Research Method:
The first component of the research was to consult with key collaborators to fully comprehend their objectives and to identify two potential project sites in Detroit: one near a main commercial thoroughfare and one in a residential section of the East Warren community. We added two more sites after consulting with more project participants. This was done to consider carefully the characteristics of several significant areas in East Warren. The second component was to create two student design teams from my home university’s community outreach studio to generate a design. Since more sites were added, we created four teams. The third component was to conduct periodic reviews of the design research with the partnering agencies in order to verify compliance with their development goals and to gather feedback from all interested parties. The fourth component was to generate exhibition boards and scale models of the design research for public presentation. All project participants, Detroit City planners and other officials, and residents participated in our final presentation and public exhibition at the Detroit Museum of Contemporary Art.

Key Findings and Conclusions:
The final research results include the following: (1) Feedback from various project participants and interested parties suggest that urban farming is a viable strategy for vacant land to promote reactivation, sustainability, and public health. (2) An urban agriculture, health, fitness, and lifestyle center is proposed as the main facility of an urban farming community to promote agriculture, sustainability, and healthy lifestyles through various services. (3) East Warren has four significant areas, each of which has unique characteristics in terms of land use and physical features. Thus each site (test site) requires a different type of agricultural development. In regional four models in urban farming community design are proposed to deal effectively with the four unique sites: an industrial district model, an open space development model, a community garden model, and a sustainable model. We anticipate that this research will provide the basis for developing an appropriate design and implementation strategy. Our recommendations include (a) incorporating our present research efforts into the ongoing community garden developments, and (b) developing a comprehensive design guide book for urban farming community based on our master plans so that different entities can apply them to various situations.