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The Role of Community Gardens

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**The Social Functions of Community Gardens: A Study of the Contexts That Inform Function in
Florence, Italy and New London, Connecticut**

An Independent Study for the Environmental Studies Department

Advised by Professor Black

Written by Julia Thomas

Introduction

With the rise of alternative food movements, and a desire for green spaces in urban areas, community gardens are becoming increasingly popular across the globe (Turner et. al, 2011). In Europe, gardens have always held a cultural significance as places for “urban food production, recreation, and social interaction” (Keshavarz et al., 2016; 8). This became particularly important for urban dwellers during the World Wars, when urbanites were cut off from their food sources in the countryside (Tei and Gianquinto, 2010). Similarly, the United States, community gardens have been around for centuries, dating back to victory gardens during the World Wars, and even earlier in some cities like Detroit (Fernandez 2003). For the most part, these spaces were designed to produce food and boost morale (Gowdy-Wygant, 2013). Today, community gardens have evolved to adapt to the needs of the communities that they represent. In recent years, with the emergence of a modern community garden movement, there has been a resurgence in participation at these sites (Nettle, 2014). The community garden itself can take different shapes, ranging from small patches of herbs and flowers cultivated on abandoned plots, to large organizations that integrate the gardens into other municipal programs. The reasons for which people choose to participate in these gardens also varies, depending on factors such as geography, demographics, and the food systems in place in the broader community.

In the past year, I have spent several months at different community gardens both in the United States, as well as in Italy. Through the observations that I made while working and volunteering at these locations, I found that the community gardens served a very important social function for the surrounding community. At Orti Dipinti, a community garden in Florence, Italy and FRESH New London, a community garden in New London, Connecticut, the cultural contexts in which they were situated informed the ways they connected the community, and what the purpose of the gardens was. This paper seeks to examine the ways in which community gardens provide specific social functions to their communities. Through examining the two case studies of Orti Dipinti and FRESH New London, I will identify the different purposes they embody, including land reclamation and beautification, education, food production, and a shared space for individuals in their respective communities to interact. The similarities and differences that occur between these two case studies

Literature Review

Community gardens have been utilized by populations across the globe since the World Wars. At the time, these spaces served as an alternative source of food production, as rations limited the amount of food that could be purchased at stores (Rosan and Hamil, 2017). Since this time, community gardens have evolved to meet the needs of the communities in which they serve (Hynes, 2004). While food production continues to be one of the tenets of their mission, community gardens have developed to fulfil a variety of social needs that are presented by the people for which they benefit. As these social functions have been observed, there has been an increasing wealth of literature that has been published regarding this topic. In this section, I will discuss what has been written about community gardens as vehicles to promote change through social movements, the reclaiming of space through gardening, and the benefits of the social interactions that come from this gathering of community.

One of the ways in which community gardens play an important social function is through their ability to advance the goals of social movements that are related to food and the overall betterment of communities. While gardening with fellow peers may not look to be an obvious way to enact social change, there are many movements that are enhanced by the digging of soil and conversations had over piles of compost. Claire Nettle, in *Community Gardening as Social Action* (2014), writes that “Community gardens grow in the fertile intersections between food politics and agrifood studies, environmentalism and urban social movements, policy and planning, social work and social action,” meaning that they are spaces where, at the local level, people are able to address issues that they see in their community through the collective actions of the participants (Nettle, 2014; 3). By having this collective, these people are given more clout, and are then able to enact change on a greater level. In that way, community gardens often serve as a stepping stone to enact structural change, by creating a space to develop ideas, and foster change that can be applied at a greater scale. Nettle observed this in her research of the Australian community garden movement. In the case studies that Nettle explores in her book, she discusses how many of the gardens that she visited were aligned with the movements like food ethics and environmental justice, and were used as a means to reclaim space in cities to be used to actualize these

Historically, community gardens have been linked with victory gardens, and what they were able to provide communities during times of hardship. Coined during the World Wars, the term victory garden refers to land that was cultivated, typically by middle-class women, during times of food insecurity as a way to mobilize women during the war efforts (Gowdy-Wygant, 2013). These gardens were able to provide additional food for people, primarily in urban areas, where strict rations limited the number of food that could be purchased at stores (Gowdy-Wygant, 2013). Victory gardens were very successful in rallying citizens, while at the same time providing a necessary service to communities, and were implemented again during World War II in both the United States and England (Gowdy-Wygant, 2013). In Italy, these gardens were called “orti di guerra” (gardens of war), and were created for the same reasons as in the United States, but differed slightly in that they were cultivated in public spaces to create an image of a cohesive and proud front (Volani, 2012). In addition to providing these services, they also broke conventional class and gender norms that were associated with agriculture up until this period in the United States, that were highly exclusionary towards women apart from the “English garden” narrative (Gowdy-Wygant, 2013). In this way, these early beginnings of community gardens were places that invoked social change, as they allowed women to have increased participation in agriculture, as well as the middle class. In Italy to this day, women are often excluded from professional forms of gardening and agriculture. In her novel on food activism, Carole Counihan recounts that while the women involved in food activism that she interviewed in Sardinia did not experience any overt sexism, they did report that “There is a male hierarchy (una gerarchia maschile) in the world of work,” revealing that these are still obstacles that women are forced to overcome (Counihan, 2019; 5).

In recent years, one of the movements that has frequently been associated with community gardens is the food justice movement. Individuals involved in the food justice movement, both in North America and Europe, aim to address the inequity that causes vulnerable populations to be at a disproportionate disadvantage when it comes to access to food by targeting the many different things that prevent this access (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010). The goal is to raise questions about the current food system that is in place, challenging the parts that cause these disparities, and ultimately alter the structure so that it is more equitable to all people (Gottlieb

(Counihan, 2019; 3). In the United States, the goals of food justice are pursued in different ways as a result of them existing in a different cultural context. These gardens are often spaces where youth are educated about growing food, empowering these individuals by showing them that they have the ability to make their own food (Tornaghi, 2017). When people are empowered, they are more likely to continue to learn, and then share what they know, paying it forward (Tornaghi, 2017). This sustenance of the system is what contributes to the ultimate goal of food justice and food sovereignty, where all people have access to healthful and sustainable food that is also culturally appropriate (Holt-Giminez, 2009).

Apart from their role in social movements, community gardens are also created in an effort to reclaim a space, which can add both aesthetic and social value to the space. This can be done through established avenues, or at the whim of an individual. The latter is often done through guerilla gardening, or the unpermitted gardening in unmaintained spaces, either as a means of taking a political stance, or for one's personal reasons (Black, 2013; North, 2013). In both of these cases, however, areas that were once neglected, and often the sites of unsavory activity, are transformed into places that have flowering plants and produce (Rosan and Pershall, 2017). This also acts as a point of social interaction, as these spaces attract the attention of other individuals in the community, who at times follow suit, creating a ripple effect across the community, and something that creates a connection (North, 2013). These connections can advance the political agenda for those who guerilla garden as a form of activism, or could just be a way to socialize with members of the community in a space that they have claimed as their own (Black, 2013; Certoma, 2013; North 2013).

Not all community gardens housed in reclaimed spaces, however, are created by guerilla gardeners, but are created through established networks. This option can often be more difficult because of the bureaucracy that comes into play when working with local governments. Unlike guerilla gardening, where individuals choose a spot and start their cultivation when they please, the process of acquiring land to use for a community garden can be a long and expensive process, requiring a well laid out plan (Rosan and Hamil, 2017; Marcus and Morse, 2008). Even when a well-drawn plan is presented, there are times when the local government will opt for a more lucrative way to develop the abandoned plot, like constructing an apartment complex (Rosan

transforming a formerly dilapidated area into one that not only cultivates crops, but community. One of the most successful instances of this was documented by Claire Nettle through her work in community gardens in Australia (Nettle, 2014). An organization based out of Melbourne, called Cultivating Community, worked with the Department of Human Services' Office of Housing in order to provide community gardens for the people living in public housing high-rise apartments in the city (Nettle, 2014). While the organization was able to expand to develop gardens in seventeen different housing developments in Melbourne, it also collaborated with local schools and Veteran assistance programs to educate students about food, as well as provide fresh produce to a marginalized population (Nettle, 2014). This is one of many success stories of community gardens being able to work with other established organizations in the community to provide a resource for a variety of different individuals.

It is important to note, even briefly, that the creation of these spaces can come with some negative consequences. Many urban environments have very few greenspaces that are accessible to city dwellers. More often than not, the green spaces that are available are placed in affluent areas, making access to low income populations more limited. The creation of community gardens in one of the ways that was mentioned above is a way to bring green spaces into low income communities. A problem that does occur, however, is that when green spaces are placed in low income communities, it can lead to the gentrification of the area, driving out all of the people that would benefit from the green space the most because of the raise in property value (Reynolds, 2016). This is another obstacle that can dissuade people from establishing a community garden in their area, and what often separates the middle-class community garden movements from their grassroots counterparts, which will be discussed further in this paper.

Lastly, one of the most highly touted benefits of community gardens is the sense of community that they bring to populations of individuals living in the same space that may, or many not, have interacted as a community before. Upon my own visits to community gardens in both the United States and Italy, when prompted about the use of the space in their gardens, I got a variation of the same response every time; the organizers all want to provide a safe space for the members of the garden and the community to interact among

culturally appropriate foods that they bring into their own kitchens (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010; Hite et. al, 2017). In other instances, community gardens serve as a place for the bringing together of people from different backgrounds, who are then able to connect through a shared interest in gardening, acting as a basis to build more connections, alleviating racial tensions if they are present (Shinew, 2004). In more middle-class areas, community gardens can serve more of an aesthetic purpose, where people will get together to study or take a lunch break, and the garden itself is more ornamental than utilitarian (Hite et. al, 2017). These interactions have even been proven to benefit the health of the individuals who partake. This is not only because the individuals are interacting outside in a space where they are able to keep active, a definite boost in serotonin, but also because it is more likely that these people will be consuming fruits and vegetables that they have grown, benefitting their physical health (Twiss, 2003; Kingsley et. al, 2009). Because of the positive association with the space, it also means that people are more likely to come back, fostering a sense of community that does not end after a single visit.

The two case studies that will be discussed in this paper, Orti Dipinti in Florence, Italy, and FRESH New London, in Connecticut, serve a variety of these social functions. The functions of these two community gardens are informed largely by the communities in which they are embedded. On an abandoned track in the heart of Florence, Orti Dipinti is a place where people looking to escape the tourist filled streets near the Duomo can find a beautiful herb garden dotted with shaded tables and chairs for a leisurely afternoon in nature. Located across the street from two New London elementary schools, FRESH. New London provides a space for the culturally diverse community to grow their own food, snack from the communal lots, and learn and interact with the other people in their community. Having the opportunity to spend time at both of these places has enabled me to gain a very diverse view of how much community gardens can offer their members, and how they express what the community needs.

Orti Dipinti: The Urban Oasis

The first time that I visited Orti Dipinti I was a ball of nerves. It was my first day reporting to my

gates at the entrance were closed and locked, so I took a short walk to the closest café and ordered a green tea and sat down, garnering raised eyebrows from every other person standing at the bar, drinking espresso. When I finished my tea I factored in the thirty-second walk back to the garden and came to the conclusion that I was the appropriate amount of early and started back up the street. At just before 9:00 in the morning, the streets were starting to bustle with people on their commute to work, and tourists setting out on their long days of sightseeing. As I approached the gates this time, one side of the heavy wrought iron was pushed open, exposing a shaded path. Trees flanked the pebble path that ran through a small garden lined with trees and shrubs and benches. At the end of the path was another, smaller gate, which framed Orti Dipinti.

Situated less than a mile away from the Duomo (1.3 km), Orti Dipinti, or ‘Painted Gardens’, is a community garden that specializes in growing herbs, fruits and vegetables. As can be seen on the map (fig.1), the garden is slightly removed from the city center and the densest concentrations of tourists.

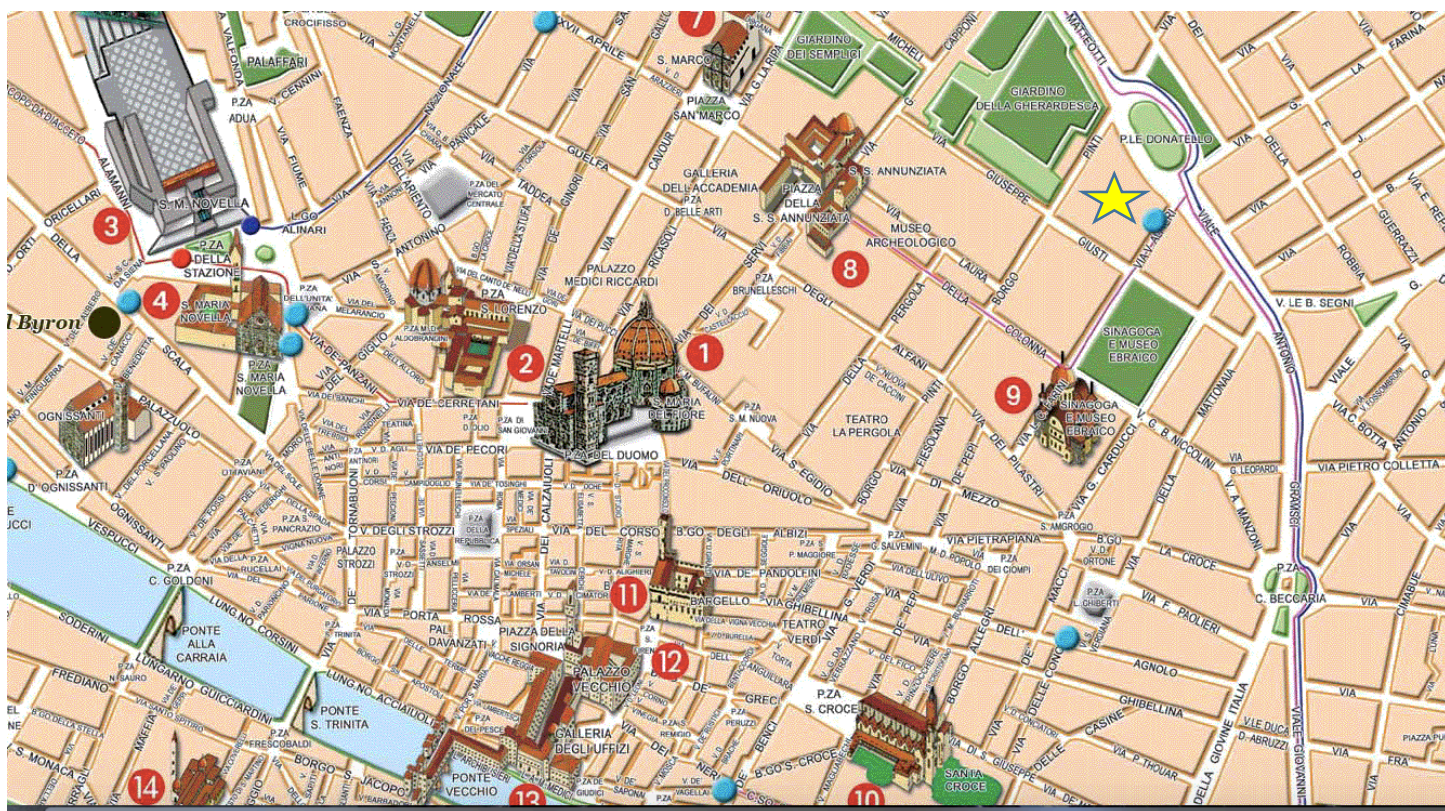


Figure 1: Map of Florence with Orti Dipinti marked by a star

It is located across from a Four Seasons hotel, and near some of the many universities in Florence, so it does receive a mild amount of foot traffic. The garden was founded in 2010 by Giacomo Salizzoni, the manager of



Figure 2, Orti Dipinti, Summer 2019, Florence, Italy, Pictured by Author

people who were interested in transforming the abandoned race track where Orti Dipinti now stands. Salizzoni, who studied architecture, thought that this plot could be utilized as a green space that was open to everyone, since many of the gardens that are located in the surrounding area are private or have an entry fee. His application was accepted, and since then Salizzoni has been cultivating a space meant for community interaction. As seen in (fig. 2), raised beds brimming with herbs take up the majority of the space, with seating areas that are flanked on each side by more raised beds housing fruits and vegetables. Salizzoni made these beds himself, painting them vibrant colors to reflect their namesake. While the space is open to the public on weekdays for their general exploration, Orti Dipinti holds many events that bring different types of people in the community together. Salizzoni himself also offers lessons to groups, mostly students, who learn about the different ways in which sustainability can be fostered in an urban garden like Orti Dipinti, and explore and

I was fortunate enough to work in this beautiful environment for eight weeks during the summer before my senior year of college. As an intern, I was given any task that needed to get done, so what I did varied day to day. Some days were mostly maintenance, watering the plants, weeding the beds and sweeping the track. Other days, I would be working with plants, transplanting new crops that we were trying out or propagating herb varieties that we were looking to cultivate for visitors to take for donations. Some of the most exciting days were those when I was making items to be offered for donations. Because Orti Dipinti is a public garden, the money that is used for maintaining the space is largely acquired through donations and from people who rent out the space for events. I learned how to make soaps, tea, aromatic salts, seed “bombs”, lip balm, and hair balm all using herbs from the garden, and other natural ingredients. My favorite days were when there was an event. While I spent the majority of the time either prepping food, refilling herb-infused water containers, and helping with the cleanup that was required afterwards, I was able to witness the garden being used as a place for the community to come together.

There was one event in particular that I felt captured the essence of Orti Dipinti, and the community that it fostered. In the beginning of the month, Giacomo would typically pull me aside from my daily activities to brief me on what the schedule looked like for the month, and some of the larger projects we would be working on. At the beginning of June, he told me that on June 28th, he was having a party and to clear my schedule. Having only worked there for a couple of weeks, I was humbled by the invitation to what I thought was a gathering of his friends. As the month went on, and we continued to plan, two things became apparent; firstly, my presence at the party was not as a guest but as someone to help, and secondly, the invitation extended to a much larger portion of Florence. Throughout the month, as I would go about my tasks, I could hear Giacomo on the phone with different business owners in the surrounding area, organizing the food that would be feeding the people at the event. A few of Giacomo’s friends that are in a band also stopped by the week before to talk to Giacomo and see how the space had transformed since the last time that they had been there in late fall when things were not nearly as verdant.

around the garden, interspersed between raised beds of assorted crops. Giacomo arrived later than usual, as he spent his morning running errands, he asked me to help him make Gazpacho, a recipe that the woman selling jewelry at the party had given to him that day. We got to work, blanching the tomatoes and peeling their now malleable skins, and peeling, deseeding, and cubing cucumbers. The heat was so oppressive that day that I had to sit for a while, fearing that I would faint from all of the activity in the humid, 99-degree weather. During my respite I questioned Giacomo if people would come if it was so hot out. He had a feeling that they would.

I left later than usual that day, peeling three crates of tomatoes takes longer than I anticipated. Giacomo told me to come back after I had showered and rested taking care to reset before the party. A few hours later, I made the descent back down into Florence, and walked the short distance from my bus stop to the garden. The space seemed enchanted in the warm evening. The string lights that usually remained unlit during the day twinkled with the setting sun. I arrived at the same time as the local business owners did, hauling their food and



goods to the stations that we had set up for them earlier. I was in charge of arranging and manning the wine station and finished just as people started to float in and peruse the different stands that littered the garden. The warm weather definitely did not dissuade people, as a steady stream of people filed in even until I left at 10:00pm. The atmosphere felt just as warm; adults imbibed and joked with each other and danced to the music, trying different foods from local businesses as they went around. Their kids ran around in the back playing hide and seek behind the herbs, and finding the toys that Giacomo kept in the shed for when his own son and his friends came to play. It was amazing to watch all of these people interact in a space that I associated with sweeping and harvesting herbs, be used as a place for people to connect with local businesses, their patrons, and their friends in a shared space that allowed for this type of interplay. Figure 3 encapsulates the night for me. In the foreground are two people who met at the wine stand having a passionate conversation while enjoying the night, as me and my boyfriend watch with smiles on our faces from the background. I left at 10:00pm when all the wine ran out, but when I came to work on Monday Giacomo told me that he had to start kicking people at 3 in the morning, because they just did not want the night to end.

In Italy, there is a phenomenon that is embedded in both the tradition and the culture that was evoked by the guests at this party called the “*passeggiata*.” Directly translating to the “walk” or “stroll,” the *passeggiata* refers to the performative nature of outings in Italy, where there is both a performer and a spectator (Del Negro, 2004). Often times, the way in which a person performs is indicative of what they see as their place in society, varying with factors such as gender and class (Del Negro, 2004). While in the past this could be done in a formal promenade in the central square of an Italian city, applied in a more modern setting, it looks a lot like this party. All of the guests were dressed for an evening in which they knew that they would be viewed; in a small setting like a community garden, there are sure to be spectators. Additionally, vendors who are trying to brand themselves as a specific type of business, whether it be an all-natural, organic restaurant, or a high end jeweler, would play up this facade in order to send a specific message to the rest of the attendees. Even though this was done in a place that is less public than in the past, it reflects the way in which urban environments have changed throughout the years, and how traditions such as these can be held in spaces that

Additionally, this party reflects some of the social functions that community gardens are able to provide its patrons. Because Orti Dipinti has employees that are hired by the city of Florence, the community aspect cannot be fostered through the actual gardening on a wide scale. This is something that sets Orti Dipinti apart from many of the community gardens that are typical in the United States, where community members are responsible for their own plots, and are able to interact through their shared goal of growing food. While Orti Dipinti does receive volunteers, they are usually infrequent, and mostly befriend Giacomo and the three resident staff members. That is why there is an effort by Salizzoni to create a space in which people can connect while appreciating the environment, even if the events for which they are congregating may not be directly related to gardening or sustainability.

Even if these events were not catered specifically to the advancement of Salizzoni's goals for sustainability, at every event that I attended at the gardens, whether it be a yoga festival or a dance performance, people would come up to me and ask me about the space, what it was used for, and what I did there. So even when visitors came to have a glass of wine, practice yoga, or enjoy a performance, they were also learning about how gardening can transform an urban space into a green space, and seeing the potential that these locations hold for the larger community. It has been shown that "individuals participating activities in green space may feel more connected to nature in the longer run," and the more that individual attends events, there is a higher likelihood that they will develop a "sense of environmental identity" and exhibit behavior that is more environmentally friendly (Kruize et. al, 2011; 5). For this occasion, Salizzoni went beyond just connecting the visitors to each other and the space they were in, but also allowed the attendees to be exposed to local business through food, goods, and even music. By adding this extra layer, people were not only able to socialize with groups of other people that they had not possibly encountered before, but also encourage further community engagement by initiating a connection between the people and local businesses as well.

Not every instance of Orti Dipinti's ability to foster community was as apparent as the party, but there were smaller, quotidian ways in which people used the garden for its social purposes. Every day that I worked

looked after her blonde headed grandchild who would sometimes stop by and teach him new words like ‘albicocche’ [apricots] or ‘carciofi’ [artichokes]. These people usually kept to themselves, married to their daily routines. My favorite visitors, however, were people who stumbled upon the garden for some reason or another, and were experiencing it for the first time.

There is one interaction that I had in particular that always sticks out in my mind. In the middle of June, Giacomo took a week off to go visit his brother in Milan, so the work that myself and my coworkers were doing was mostly maintenance. It was also one of the more temperate days, with a temperature in the low 90s, so more people were venturing out during their lunch hours for walks. On this day, I was sweeping up the dirt that had escaped from the beds during the rain the night before, when a man pushing a stroller walked into the garden. He was tall with brown hair and wore business casual attire, and was talking fervently into his phone, so I assumed that he was on his lunch break from work. As I continued to collect dirt to add back into the soil in the beds, the man paced back and forth through the rows, peering intently at the names of the herbs that were scrawled across the crates and identified the plants. He circled around the entirety of the small track a couple times, each time admiring the plants as he walked.

After about fifteen minutes he got off of the call and reticently approached me, not wanting to disturb me in my work. I assured him that it was fine, relaying the information about the relaxed week that we were all having. The man asked me some of the typical questions that I received while working there, wondering how long we had been here, what we did with the food that we grew, and where I was from (much to my dismay, I always wanted to blend in with the Italians). It was hard not to be excited by his genuine curiosity and wonderment at the gardens, as well as by the sleeping baby in the stroller. What I thought was most notable about the conversation was the man disclosed to me about his experience with the garden. He confessed that he had been living in Florence for nearly a decade, and did not even know that a place like this existed, and this was his first time visiting. “È come un paradiso,” (‘It is like a paradise,’) he said, “in the middle of the crowded streets of Florence.” When Giacomo came back the following week, I told him about what this man said, thinking that he would be pleased with the praise. Apparently this was an adjective that was used to describe

While this encounter was very different from the experiences that I had at events while at Orti Dipinti, I feel that it equally demonstrates the social importance that the space holds for its community. Specifically, I think that it reflects a concept that Ray Oldenburg discusses in his book *The Great Good Place* (1991). In this book, Oldenburg describes the spheres of social interaction to occur in three different spaces with the first place as home and the second place as work (Oldenburg, 1991). The third place, Oldenburg argues, is a public space that is neutral and inclusive, and acts as a place where individuals can gather and have discussions (Oldenburg, 1991). While in this exact situation the man that I spoke to only made conversation with me (and his colleague on the phone), his multiple perambulations around the garden indicated to me that this was a space that he was there to enjoy. Even this small interaction, in a place that is separate from home or work, is something that occurred because of the nature of Orti Dipinti, and the fact that it aims to serve as a space for people to get away from their first and second places.

By reclaiming an abandoned track, Giacomo was able to make a formerly underutilized space a place that is frequently described as a paradise. Giacomo's actions are not isolated, and are actually supported by the local governments. In recent years, the Tuscan Regional government has implemented a project called "Centomila Orti in Toscana" (One hundred thousand Gardens in Tuscany), which aims to revitalize small plots of land to reconnect Florentine's with nature and become a place of cultural connection (Bagnoli, 2018). The organization describes a community garden as "un'area di aggregazione, di scambio sociale ed intergenerazionale, di didattica ambientale e di crescita culturale" (an area of aggregation, of social and intergenerational exchange, of environmental education and of cultural growth) (regione.toscana.it). Giacomo is successful in creating such a space through Orti Dipinti. This beautification of the space is something that is meaningful to those who visited, as is evidenced by the man that I spoke to, but also by the people who live in the surrounding residential buildings. While most of the time my eyes were only drawn up to the balconies when someone was airing out a carpet, every time I did look up I would see someone just sitting on the balcony, gazing at the garden. While I never had the chance to speak with these people, I imagine that the flowering plants were a welcome change to the empty, rust colored track. The act of transforming an

to facilitate urban renewal, for Orti Dipinti, situated in a relatively affluent area of Florence, it is a place where community can gather and sustainability and culture is celebrated (Hou, 2010).

Orti Dipinti fulfills the purpose that it serves to the community of Florence. In a city that is thick with tourists for the majority of the year, providing a public green space that is a perfect distance from the center of the city is what many of the people that visit the gardens crave. If they want to get more involved, they also have the ability to volunteer just like I did. It also serves as a space for people to become more connected to other individuals in the community that may have similar interests through events that also expose them to the possibilities that community gardens provide in terms of cultivating crops in an urban environment. Since the surrounding fertile hills of Tuscany provide the vast majority of the food consumed by the people in cities, Salizzoni does not harvest the majority of the crops, but instead allows them to reach maturity. This is because for this community, education about this aspect of food is something that is in a greater need than a place in Florence that produces food for consumption. The Florentine context heavily influences these social functions, which are vastly different from those in other places in Italy, and in the United States. I experienced this first hand when I returned home to New London and started becoming more involved with F.R.E.S.H.

FRESH New London:

Coming back to the United States from Italy was a culture shock. After a summer spent buying my groceries from the Central Market in Florence and getting my hands dirty at Orti Dipinti, I was now returning to my reality of registering for my final year at college. When registering for classes, I looked for courses that would satisfy my major requirements, but would also satisfy my interests. A new course entitled “Sustainable Agriculture,” promised to be hands-on, so I decided to register. This, I thought to myself, would be a perfect way to satisfy the yearning to garden that had been created when I left my internship.

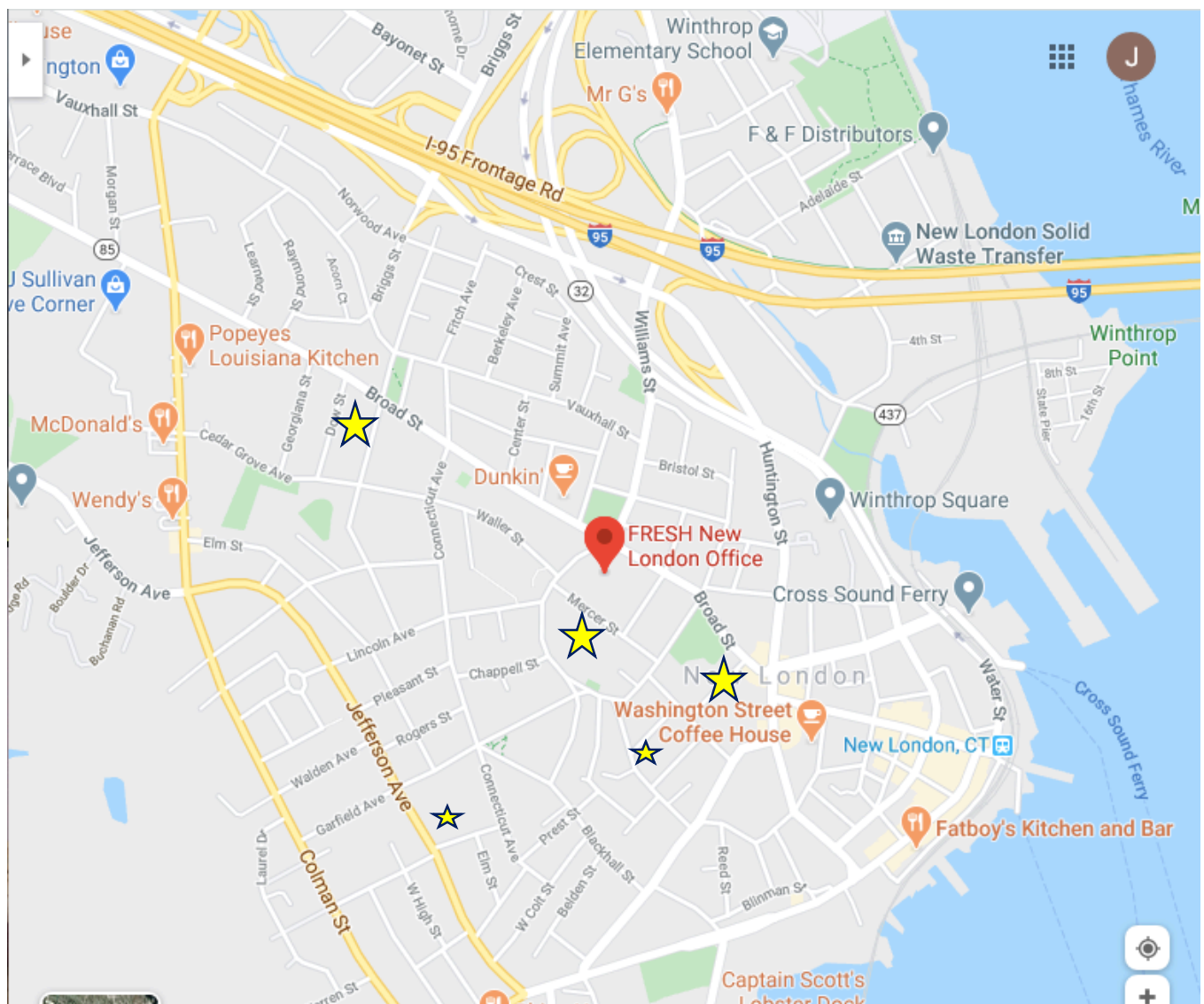
My professor, Eric Vukicevich (who insisted we refer to as Eric), was a recent transplant to New London. In order to better acquaint himself with the area, and educate our class on the state of the local food systems, Eric dedicated a large portion of our class to field trips to local food producers. This included

Agriculture (CSA) program, Noank Oyster Co-op, where we learned the intricacies of aquaculture and sustainably raising oysters, and many visits and workshops with FRESH. New London.

While these trips allowed us to see some of the more sustainable resources that the surrounding community had to offer, the realities of the food system in New London were more harsh. In New London, there are high rates of unemployment and poverty, which impacts individual's abilities to nourish themselves with healthful food (Caron, 2013). In 2010, 11.7 % of New London was food insecure, and this percentage rose to 16.9% when focusing just on children (Caron, 2013). This is interesting when you consider that also in 2009, 23.3% of the adult population in New London was considered obese (Caron, 2013). The fact that there is such a vast number of individuals that are food insecure as well as obese, shows that there is not only a problem with access to food, but particularly access to healthful foods. Additionally, of the towns and cities in New London County, the city of New London is one of the three municipalities with the highest number of non-white residents, which creates a racial inequity between the city of New London and the surrounding white communities (Caron, 2013). In their book, *Food Justice* (2010), Gottleib and Joshi define food justice as righting these inequities and struggles that are felt by the most at risk populations, like the community in New London, and challenging the larger political and agricultural systems that perpetuate these inequalities. This is where FRESH comes into the picture.

Founded in 2004, FRESH New London started as a community garden that provided a space to empower community members, and facilitate environmental stewardship. On their website, FRESH's mission reads, "Since 2004, FRESH New London looks to build momentum for food system change through community based agriculture and youth empowerment. We are a community farm and educational hub dedicated to building a healthy and just food system. We use food to connect the community, encourage stewardship, inspire leaders and incite change" (freshnewlondon.org). FRESH executes these goals in a variety of ways and locations throughout the New London community. Since their foundation, FRESH has expanded to six locations across the city of New London where community members can access fresh fruits and vegetables, and learn more about the way that their food grows, as well as the larger systems that dictate what

nutritious treat. As can be seen on the map (fig.4), these locations are spread out around the center of New London. One is located at an elementary school, others are in areas that were used as sites for dumpsters, and some in places that receive high foot traffic so that food that is grown is easily accessible. Similar to Orti Dipinti, a lot of the spaces that the FRESH locations inhabit were previously underutilized by the city, or were spaces that were unusable for the residents of New London. By reclaiming this space as a place for education and cultivation, and not turning it into another development, FRESH is revitalizing the urban area in a way that is conducive to its community's needs (Hou, 2010). This map also shows the close proximity that these spaces share with a variety of fast food restaurants, which highlights the reason for which FRESH aims to create spaces that grow fresh and healthful food.



The two people who I interacted with the most were Alicia McAvay, the executive director, and Julie Garay, the youth organizer. Garay grew up in New London, and became involved with FRESH when she was in high school. Since then, she has dedicated her time to educating the young people of New London. With the goal of empowering the young people of New London to make informed decisions about the food that they choose to consume, Garay conducts workshops in schools and at FRESH that inspired her to become involved when she was in high school. For her first two years at FRESH, McAvay worked as the Farm to School Coordinator, but since then has worked as the Executive Director. With a background in community organizing, McAvay further connects FRESH to the rest of the community by contacting local organizations and businesses to support and get involved with the gardens. Both of these women are extremely passionate about engaging with the community through the cultivation of food, as well as educating and the next generation of New London youth, and it is apparent through every event that they curate.

My first time volunteering with FRESH was noteworthy because I was able to experience firsthand the feeling of accomplishment and fellowship that comes with completing an arduous task. Eric had informed our class that FRESH was looking for volunteers who were interested in preparing a space that FRESH intended on making into another garden. I immediately volunteered, eager to get in any extra time in the dirt outside of our class. At the end of September, the crisp fall air was starting to creep into early mornings, and my fingers were frosty on the steering wheel as I made the short drive from my school to Cottage Street, where the space was being set up. There was a group of about fifteen people congregating at the base of a property that was attached to a sizable lot. The space had three distinct levels: a ground level covered with grasses and clovers, a second level that was being used to cultivate a few tomato plants, and precipitous incline leading to the top level where we would be working. Originally a wooded area, this space was littered with rocks, tree stumps and branches, and remnants of the stuff from the previous owners of the space. I was very interested to see what work we would be doing here today, and made sure I brought my water bottle as I got out of my car and made my way

We waited for a couple of minutes after 9:00am to see if there were any stragglers, and then McAvay and Garay began our day. The whole group was informed to make a circle so we could all see each other. In an effort to familiarize ourselves with the group, we would go around the circle stating our names, pronouns, a number out of ten describing how we were feeling that day, and a crop that we wanted to see planted in this space. As we went around, I recognized a few familiar faces, students, faculty and staff from my school, but was interested to learn the names and interests of those I did not know. From the start, I could tell that this was meant to be a space for the volunteers to connect with each other. When we made it fully around the circle, McAvay began to explain what our goal was for the day, and what we hoped this space would look like in the future. Our task was to clear the space, removing any debris, raking the dirt so that it was an even plain, and then dispersing seeds to plant a cover crop to enrich the soil over the fall and winter. In the future, they hoped to make this their biggest garden to date, with raised plots and solar panels to finish the space.

Minds filled with images of what this spot would one day become, our group got to work doing the first steps that it would take to transform the space. As the sun came out, we all started to shed our sweatshirts and layers as we were hard at work, sorting through the rocks, twigs, and assorted trash that we deposited in their designated piles. While I worked, I chatted with the other volunteers, learning about how they ended up in New London, and what brought them to FRESH. I deeply enjoyed talking to one of the library staff members, who told me all about his home garden and canning tomatoes and what he had learned through helping out with FRESH. Being able to have a discussion with someone that I saw every day at the Reference desk at the library about our respective involvement with FRESH and gardening in general was a departure from the typical “Hello, how are you?” conversations that we would usually have as I found my seat in the library. Working together to remove large rocks with other people really is a bonding experience. After the long struggle, commiserating about how slippery and heavy the big rocks were, we were brimming with a sense of accomplishment that was shared among everyone that was helping out.

After a short break spent rehydrating and snacking on tomatoes from the existing plants on the property, we got back to work with some of the more fun tasks that we had to get done. Each of us were

rest of the group used the back of our rakes to cover the newly deposited seeds, sending good thoughts that the seeds would grow into strong plants. As can be seen in (fig.5), it really was a group effort getting this space in a condition that made this possible.



Figure 5, Volunteer day at Cottage Street, Pictured by Betsy Torruella

When we finally finished covering the last seeds at the edge of the property, we all sat back and admired the work that we had done. In a matter of hours, we were able to take a space where not even weeds could thrive, into a place where rye was sprouting in only a couple of weeks. We all descended onto the first level again, coming back into a circle to take the pulse and see how our moods had changed after completing our task. Every single person in the group reported that their number had risen, except for those who already started at a ten. I had gone into the day excited about the work that I was going to do but stressed about the

ready to take on the rest of my day, feeling proud of what I had accomplished along with my fellow community members. At Orti Dipinti I felt the sense of community by watching people interact in a space dedicated to food, but at FRESH I felt invigorated and connected to the other people by working with them to accomplish a common goal. Both spaces were able to bring people together, but approached the project in a different way based on the community that they were serving.

The feeling that I experienced as a result of working with members of my community to pursue a common goal are not foreign to members of community gardens. In her experience working at community gardens in New York City, Margarita Fernandez also noticed that the gardens provided a space for community cohesion and social empowerment (Fernandez, 2003). For Fernandez, community cohesion is the gathering of individuals from different parts of the community that do not typically interact, and facilitating a connection in a positive environment (Fernandez, 2003). While this can be seen through the easing of racial tensions between two parts of a neighborhood, I saw members of Connecticut College connecting with the larger community of New London (Shinew, 2004). As someone who recognizes the implications of an affluent, predominantly white, institution being located in a very culturally diverse city that has high rates of unemployment and poverty. I think that by facilitating these interactions, FRESH is able to create more of a sense of community cohesion between two populations with different backgrounds. Additionally, in terms of social empowerment, Fernandez defines this as “the ability of an individual or group to effect positive change” (Fernandez, 2003; 28). By feeling a sense of accomplishment like I did when accomplishing seemingly daunting tasks like clearing a debris ridden field, it empowers individuals to enact positive change elsewhere in their lives, because it gives volunteers a renewed sense of pride and competence that motivates further positive action (Kearny, 2009).

Another moment that I feel highlights the important role that FRESH New London plays in their community was during a workshop that I attended during my Sustainable Agriculture class. Eric wanted our class to experience what it was like to attend a workshop with FRESH, and learn about their mission. Specifically, we were part of a workshop that McAvay and Garay would give to the young students that

months, this was something that brought me closer even with my fellow students as I learned about how they were doing that day and also what place they associate with food and culture.

After we established how we were doing, and what our personal experience was with food and culture, McAvay and Garay started with a PowerPoint presentation that explained to us what they do, and why they do it. While I had experienced firsthand the ways in which they build community through volunteer experiences, this PowerPoint focused majorly on the underlying issues that inspire the work that they do. We learned about how access to nutritious food is not proportional throughout the United States, and that low income communities and communities of color are more likely to be denied access to these foods. McAvay explained that there are systemic reasons for this disparity, including the historic roots of colonization and the commodification of land, that has led to structural racism and the misuse of land. She then discussed how FRESH tries to combat these problems and effect change on a local level, through education programs and creating an environment at FRESH that is supportive and safe. Both McAvay and Garay emphasized the importance of self-determination, food sovereignty, resilience, power over land and resources, choice, and celebration as tools that they try to foster in individuals to try to overcome injustice.

When we finished the PowerPoint, we moved on to interactive activities that would highlight what we learned about the different aspects of food justice that were featured in the presentation. First, we walked around the room, reading different excerpts that revealed parts of the larger food system that fuel these disparities. Some were focused on historical inequities that dated back to the first Thanksgiving, others showed graphs that revealed that only a few major corporations own the majority of food brands that are sold in supermarkets across the United States. Afterwards, we reflected on those that were the most striking to us, and heard what our peers had to say about the inequity that the excerpts were highlighting. Second, we had a fishbowl discussion where we were given prompts that made us think more critically about the issues that we had read about in the excerpts. Being in a room full of people who were very passionate about the food, but all came from different backgrounds, gave an interesting perspective to the conversation, and McAvay had to cut us short so that we had enough time to complete our last activity.

split into groups where we were required to design a community garden that had a specific goal in mind. For my group, we had to create a community garden whose specific goal was to provide culturally appropriate food for the members and larger community. The term culturally appropriate is usually used to describe food that is a staple of nutrition in the diet of one group, but can be deemed as inappropriate or taboo for another (Anderson, 2005). This is very important for communities that have very diverse populations, like New London, as well as communities who have a large immigrant population. Gottlieb and Joshi write about the significance that this holds for the Puerto Rican population in Mount Holyoke, Massachusetts, who were able to cultivate a sense of community through providing food for the people that they could not easily find in their local grocery store (Gottlieb and Joshi, 2010). This same principle applies to any population of people that are removed from the food that tastes like home to them. Even though we were granted unlimited resources in our exercise, trying to work out how to be the most sustainable, as well as creating a space that was accessible and provided food that fit the demographic of the surrounding community was something that took a lot of thought, even in an ideal situation. When we all finished, we presented our ideas to the rest of the class, and saw their designs for a community garden that met their goals. This exercise both emphasized all the great things that community gardens could bring to a community, and also the difficulties that come with creating an organization that is made to accommodate all individuals.

The time that I spent with FRESH New London following my summer in Florence showed me how many purposes community gardens can serve. Both organizations created gardens in spaces that were previously underutilized, and enhanced the beauty of the city. They also both served as spaces for community members to connect on a greater level. The ways in which they went about this, however, were catered to the ways in which the community needed them to function. In the case of FRESH, being in the city of New London, where a significant portion of the population faces poverty and food insecurity, being able to provide an example of an alternative food system that engages community members is very important. FRESH works hard to provide an environment for the community where they are able to connect through the shared experience of cultivating the land, and accomplishing something through hard work and collaboration.

have. In New London, having a space that empowers individuals, specifically young people, is a way to provide fresh, healthful food to the community, as well as educate individuals to the reasons for which this unequal distribution of food occurs.

Conclusion

I believe that both Orti Dipinti and FRESH New London reflect the argument that community gardens are places in urban areas that are utilized for their social functions, and that these functions are dependent on the community, and cultures, in which they are situated. In Florence and New London, there was a need to transform spaces that were seen as an eyesore in the communities, and so both Orti Dipinti and FRESH were able to reclaim spaces in their respective cities. By doing this, these organizations gave vitality to a space that most likely would have been developed into a housing structure or similar building. By opting to create a community garden, both of these spaces were able to bring the community together in a space that is neither their work or home, and allow for the formation of relationships through casual conversations, events, and educational workshops.

While these gardens accomplished this common goal in the urban spaces in which they are located, it is because of the demographic of individuals in the areas where Orti Dipinti and FRESH are located that account for the differences that I observed. Positioned relatively close to the center of Florence, Orti Dipinti mostly serves an affluent community. Because of this, the production of food is not done through a food justice lens, but more to showcase the possibilities of what can be grown in an urban environment. This demographic also dictates the social interactions that occur in this space, which are either casual, and experienced by individuals looking for a space for relaxation, or for cultural events that allow the community to be seen in a common space, and communicate with others that are there for the same purpose. In contrast, New London has a very diverse population of people, many of whom experience food insecurity and the health consequences of not having appropriate access to healthful food, like obesity. Situated in this context, FRESH New London looks to educate community members about the health and nutrition of the food that they consume, with the garden as a

individuals of the community to make informed choices about food, and reflective of their aspirations for food justice. Through this research, and the time I have spent in these gardens, I have realized that there is no right reason for which a community garden is established as long as it reflects the needs and aspirations of the communities in which they are placed.

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