

Measuring Urban Agriculture for Sound Policy in a North American City

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Recent policy amendments permit residents to raise small livestock and grow food in backyards, however residents of multi-family rental units face continued challenges securing land access rights.

To date, many closely followed urban agricultural efforts in the United States have focused on its largest cities – but because of their scale, these efforts are not necessarily applicable to midsize cities (population: 50,000-250,000), which characteristically operate with fewer resources and exert far less global influence. Midsize cities account for the majority of America’s urban landscape, and it is in these cities that urban agriculture (UA) may be most impactful by building on unique and individual stories of place and promoting an inclusive and participatory process. This story follows the case of one midsize city: Brockton, Massachusetts.

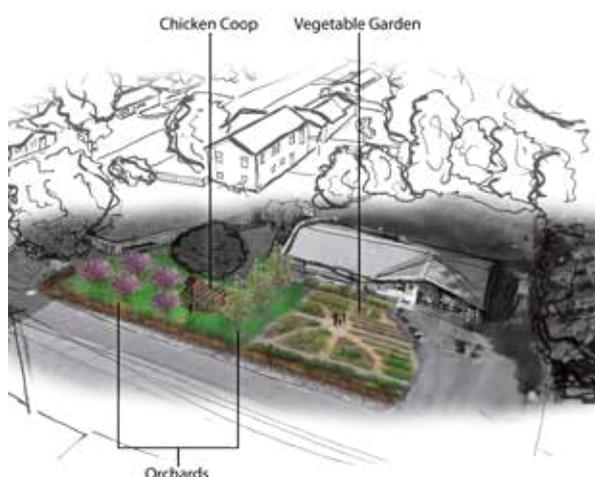
Industrial legacy

Brockton, a post-industrial city in the north-eastern US, is challenged by a declining tax base, environmental degradation and systemic issues of corruption and inefficient governance. Over the past 100 years it witnessed the rise and fall of a major shoe manufacturing industry and subsequent residential and commercial development, and consequently possesses many vacant parcels and commercial and industrial buildings. Brockton is also home to a large immigrant population, including among the largest Cape Verdean and Haitian communities in the nation. Especially

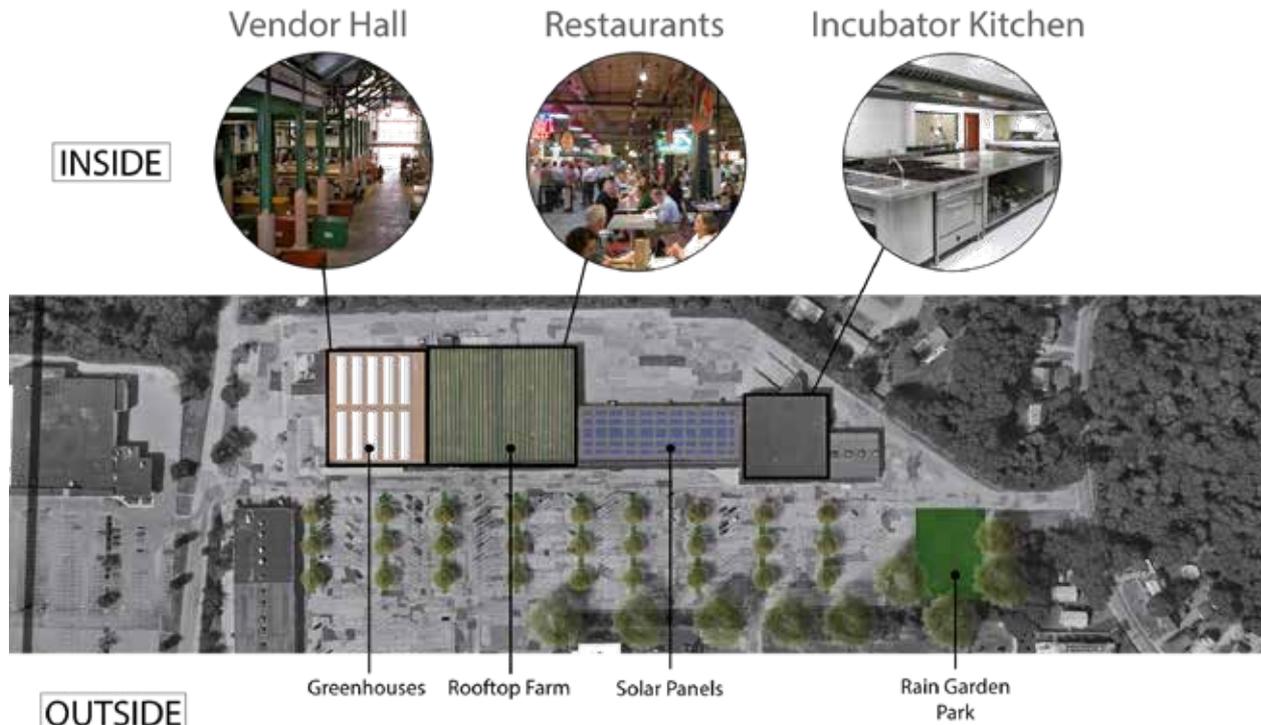
since city government lacks equal representation from its 95,000 residents, Brockton’s limited resources have negatively impacted social and economic equality and community wellbeing, including food access.

Chicken frustration

Brockton’s exploration of UA began when frustrated residents were vying for the right to raise chickens in their backyards. Previous efforts to bring these frustrations to the City Council, Board of Health and Planning Department were unsuccessful since Brockton had no policy sufficient to address agricultural production. Beginning the winter of



A majority of residences in Brockton resemble single-family residences. Policy allowing food growing on privately-owned properties may contribute a change to a majority of urban landscapes in the U.S.



Reusing vacant commercial sites in Brockton for food production, processing and distribution was explored as part of solutions to stimulate UA enterprises and economic development.

2017, the Brockton Department of Planning and Economic Development engaged a student team from the Conway School of Landscape Design to devise a long-term policy solution in an Urban Agriculture Master Plan.

The Urban Agriculture Master Plan outlined a working definition of UA, existing conditions in Brockton and five core recommendations for supporting UA in the city. These recommendations underscored that if any UA project is to be successful, it must emerge from an inclusive planning process that reflects community needs and desires. Bridging the existing divisions between city government and the public would be a necessary part of this process. The plan also recognised that, as UA research is in the early stages of development, there is much to be learned about how urban planning and policy, public and private infrastructure and community decision-making can increase access to local and nutritious food.

One step forward

The master planning process led Brockton to adopt policy supporting UA – including allowing residents to raise backyard chickens. Efforts to incentivise urban agricultural enterprises, including zoning amendments allowing UA as an accessory on vacant commercial and industrial parcels, are also taking shape. Concurrently, Massachusetts is developing statewide policy supporting UA. These steps are coupled with community-driven action; in Brockton, the interfaith community and healthcare sector have led support for UA.

Since Brockton's UA efforts are in the early stages, it will be possible to study them from their inception. This is critical,

since many midsize US cities are similarly developing UA. Brockton is thus an ideal candidate for the study of urban agricultural development and effective and replicable planning and policy efforts.

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