

"Faced with today's food and energy crisis, how can society improve its well-being?"

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Summary

What humankind used to do the best, is struggling to survive. When necessities are incumbent, then wit takes form in the right place and time. While defending the revolution, in socialist Cuba during the crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union, efforts were made to reach a self-sufficiency that would permit the island to be independent from the rest of the world. The task has not been fully accomplished yet, but so far incredible results have been reached. One of those is the emergence of Urban Agriculture, as answer to the food shortage.

The Pig on the Roof and the Urban Tomato

There is just one metropolis on earth where, in the very center, a privileged pig enjoys from a roof the view of the ocean. It happens in La Havana, Cuba. How this pig arrived so high, is a story that begins in 1989 with the fall of the Soviet Union. After the enactment of the embargo by the United States, Cuba was left to trade mostly with the Soviet block. In times of Cold War, this trade was particularly convenient for the Caribbean country that could sell its sugar, by far its largest produced crop, at very high prices thanks to political and ideological alliances. This trade allowed Cuba to import all that was necessary for sustaining the population, from oil to food. Since this agreement had to finish, Cuba's import dramatically drop and its population went from a consumption of 2.400 calories per day, to 1.200 as average.¹ It was certainly a period of emergency, or "special period", as Fidel Castro named it, and all Cubans were called to participate to the conversion of a monoculture to agriculture able to satisfy all different needs. It was a massively popular movement that arrived into the core of the capital, La Havana. Smartly meeting bottom-up tendencies with top-down strategies, the government allowed individuals to have semi-private property to those who would have cleaned and purified brown fields of the city (such as dumps, unused plots, collapsed buildings etc), and used them to harvest food for the community. Everyone was participating. It was a success, and it surely had an important role in bringing back the food consumption rate to its previous values. Agriculture appeared

¹ Premat, A. "Small scale agriculture in Havana" in "Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe" October 2003, p.87

everywhere was possible. Even on roofs, where our pig is now waiting to become, soon or later, someone's meal.

In western countries we have witnessed the same tendency. During the Second World War, a similar state of emergency affected the western countries involved. In cities the food availability was lower, and governments encouraged whoever could, to harvest; appealing to their sense of responsibility. Some of these gardens had started as depression relief gardens; others were gardens from the First World War. They were no longer just for the poor, or for those who could not feed themselves, but for everyone. Gardening became popular not only for food security, but for the mental and physical health benefits of the individual, and its benefits to the community. For citizens on the home-front this gave them a much needed feeling of productivity. A garden plot feels much more useful, productive, and important than a vacant lot or lawn.

During the war years, Americans discovered and benefited from gardening's many advantages. It was stylish to garden. This didn't last long however. Once the war ended, there was an overall decline in the interest of gardening, as life returned to normal in the US and the baby boomer era began. Many victory gardens were grown on loaned property, which needed to be returned in peacetime. In Cuba, people didn't have the luxury to "go back to normal life", since the emergency never finished, therefore, gardening to survive became a common and accepted practice. Urban Agriculture permanently brought inside the metropolis a second landscape, the rural. A notable effect of the enrichment of the urban experience is the participatory engagement of the population. The already well rooted feeling of community that inhabitants of Havana have, due to the peculiar socio-political conditions of the island, were strengthened. Reaching so astonishing results, Castro managed to write a sensational victory for the Cuban Revolution.

Urban Agriculture has helped Havana (and the entire island) to become self-sufficient in terms of food production, in the face of the debilitating American embargo. Gardening is, in La Havana, a political statement of independency, cultural and productive. In December 2000, "*urban agriculture was included on a general scale and treated as an independent activity of a permanent nature.*"² It became, hence, officially recognized. Its insertion into the Land Management System, in fact, marks the transformation of a temporary phenomenon into an essential component of the city. Compulsorily Havana had to include Agriculture within its boundaries for a period longer than everywhere else. It had beneficial effects, on a landscape point of view, with the insertion of the natural element and from an economical/ecological one,

² Sanchez R. "*Agriculture in the city*" p.165

reaching a state of productive independency and pursuing green policies³. What society can do, to improve its well-being, is carefully look at the model of Urban Agriculture developed in Havana. To consider the decentralization of its production sites would mean to act locally, and to considerably reduce the environmental impact of nowadays production and distribution systems. Havana offers all the conditions for the design of a prototype able to link a urban space with a productive rural landscape in a new typological shape. A marriage that would rewrite the essence of both partners, respecting their functions but rethinking their forms, and whose fruit would be a tomato, born and raised in the city, distributed within its borders and consumed by the local community. A symbol of unity and independence at the same time. In other words, an healthy Urban Tomato.

³ In 1989, in fact, the import of pesticide drop to zero. Biological techniques have, since then, been applied to protect crops from parasites and optimize their growth.