

GREENING LEGACY CITIES

Recent Research on Local Strategies for Reclaiming Vacant Land

SUPPLEMENT: FUTURE RESEARCH TOPICS

Authors: Megan Heckert, Joseph Schilling and Fanny Carlet

May, 2015

What do we not know? What would we like to know more about? Implications for the Design and Development of Future Research Projects and Collaborations

Any time researchers and practitioners explore the landscape of such a complex and dynamic topic as urban greening our thoughts drift to posing outstanding questions to which existing research does not or has not yet given us clear conclusions. In some fields of inquiry the gap is wide between intriguing intellectual questions and those issues that plague practitioners and policymakers. With respect to urban greening, its practical nature and emerging community of practice has a strong connection between academic inquiry and work on the ground. Below is a list of future research issues and questions that we believe would be relevant for practitioners and researchers to work together to answer. Many of these ideas again are derived from our own research activities and publications along with a few contributions from our colleagues and peer reviewers of this brief. It is neither comprehensive nor complete, but certainly this list could serve as the preliminary foray into developing a more robust urban greening in legacy cities research agenda.

- Characteristics of Successful Urban Greening Projects and Programs: Few studies examine how neighborhood characteristics/dynamics affect results (in other words, do programs have the same effect in all places).
 - What are the critical variables or ingredients to success, both from a technical sense and from a policy and planning perspective?
 - What effect, if any do urban greening interventions have on the longer term trajectory of vacant land? Do they not only stabilize markets or neighborhoods, but do they contribute to the slowing of the vacant land inventory.
 - Are lots that get interim vacant land management treatments (greened), more likely to be redeveloped or used for productive reuse (such as urban Ag or GI) compared with vacant lots that do not get greened?
- Green Jobs and Green Businesses: What kinds of jobs do urban greening initiatives generate? Are they worthwhile investments and can they be taken to scale?
- Land Banking and Urban Greening: How effective or productive are land bank urban greening strategies and interventions? Existing research on land banks tends to focus on the economic benefits from the acquisition and demolition of surplus housing and other types of vacant properties. As land banks, particularly in Michigan and Ohio, seem to be the primary legal entity involved in developing and maintaining vacant lots in legacy cities, practitioners could benefit from new research that compares the environmental and social benefits derived from these land bank greening programs, especially the perplexing policy problem of how to finance and maintain increasing inventories of green vacant lots over time

- Resources for Urban Greening and Green Infrastructure: Within the past several years the federal and state governments have created new avenues for local governments to access dollars for demolishing vacant homes caused by the mortgage foreclosure crisis. While some of these programs, such as the US Treasury's Hardest Hit Funds, provide for post demolition greening and maintenance, they come with fairly prospective eligibility rules and at this point these funds are short term and temporary. In light of the scale of property abandonment, legacy cities certainly need more consistent and flexible resources for demolishing thousands of vacant properties. These resources must acknowledge that in many legacy cities demolition is a precondition to many urban greening strategies and treatment; however, many current demolition funds do not typically support the property maintenance responsibly or urban greening treatments/interventions. Thus, local governments, land banks, and green CBOs would benefit from new research on the funding challenges for converting, maintaining and monitoring vacant lots with green stabilization treatments; perhaps such research might help advocate for reallocating demolition resources to cover such property maintenance costs. Any new research should also explore ways of leveraging private-sector financial resources and expertise to support a range of urban greening projects.
- Comparison and Suitability/Feasibility of Urban Greening Interventions across Different Cities: Urban greening research could create a framework for comparing different urban greening interventions and the inherent tradeoffs that could arise between multiple desired outcomes. From a planning perspective, the research might help communities better understand the goals, potential outcomes and benefits from various urban greening interventions. Not every vacant lot can become a revenue- and food-generating urban farm, thus more research on the design and development of different types (a menu) of urban greening interventions could help communities more clearly articulate the goals/benefits of urban greening strategies at different scales (e.g., regional, city wide, neighborhood) and test the feasibility of such approaches. As part of the [Reimagining a More Sustainable Cleveland](#), Kent State facilitated a working group that developed a preliminary decision tree to help guide city planners and neighborhood leaders in making informed decisions about the what type of urban greening treatment might be best suited for particular properties in particular neighborhood.

By articulating the goals (short-term stabilization vs. permanent installation) and benefits based on existing research, local governments and urban greening intermediaries could strategically leverage their resources and engage the community residents in a more thoughtful understanding about the potential benefits, tenure and placement of urban greening interventions in their community.

- In order to realize the true potential that urban greening can provide, especially to better document the environmental and social benefits, longer term research projects are necessary that can track results over time.

Greening Legacy Cities Supplement: Future Research Topics

- o Comparing similar urban greening programs and policies across cities would better facilitate and solidify a community of practice and facilitate the transfer of lessons learned across cities.
- Urban Agriculture Economic Costs and Benefits: what does the research show on the current and potential economic returns on investment in urban farms and urban forestry businesses as many current farms receive grants and other types of support from foundations and government along with in-kind support from and community groups? Can Urban Agriculture become a productive and economically viable business? Can it help create private sector green jobs? How does Urban Agriculture contribute to the creation/development of jobs in associated regional or local businesses, such as restaurants and food service industries?
- Urban Greening Applied to Suburbia: What are lessons learned from urban greening models that could be applied or adapted successfully to more isolated, poverty-stricken suburban neighborhoods? For example, urban greening organizations, such as Groundwork Trust USA are working on large scale vacancy and abandonment challenges in several suburban neighborhoods that are part of their network of 21 local trusts. Compared with their work in urban communities, they note the lack of a critical mass of people, neighborhoods engaged along with lower community awareness about the benefits of greening vacant spaces; thus, these preliminary greening efforts seem somewhat isolated compared with the high-impact, high visibility transformative projects they have managed in traditional urban neighborhoods. Community based organizations may need to approach urban greening in declining suburbs differently.
- Roles of CBOs and NGOs: New research should explore in more depth the pivotal roles that CBOs are playing in providing local governments and communities with supplemental capacity to organize and lead urban greening initiatives; perhaps develop a typology of CBO models to understand how they are funded, their technical expertise and their linkages to other policy dimensions of urban greening such as the potential for green jobs; use social network analysis to examine cross sector collaboration among institutions, foundations, and urban greening groups in a particular city or across cities.