

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH CENTRE AGROPOLIS:
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**MOVING BETWEEN THE PLAN AND THE GROUND:
SHIFTING PERSPECTIVES ON UA IN HAVANA, CUBA**



Author: Adriana Premat

Ph.D. Candidate in Social Anthropology, York Univ.
601 Palmerston Ave., Toronto, Ontario, M6G 2P8

Tel: 416-531-1835, email: apremat@yorku.ca

Academic Supervisor: Margaret Rodman Chair

Department of Social Anthropology, York Univ.

Tel: 416 746-5007, FAX: 416 736-5768, email: mrodman@yorku.ca

Field Supervisor: Armando Fernández Soriano

Fundación de la Naturaleza y el Hombre Antonio Nuñez Jimenez

Email: funapro@cubarte.cult.cu

Abstract

The original intent of this research was to identify socio-cultural factors that inform people's varied participation in, and perception of, urban food production in Havana, Cuba.

The research proposed to go beyond the customary macro perspective of other studies on urban agriculture by choosing instead an ethnographic approach, examining the phenomenon as it is perceived and/or practiced by people occupying different social locations within the field of urban agriculture and the urban environment in general.

Included in the study were state officials, urban planners, agricultural researchers, agricultural extension workers, environmental activists, and resident farmers in Havana. Library/archival research, interviewing, and participant observation carried out in various "sites" in this city constituted the main research methodologies.

Preliminary analysis of the data shows that professional status, institutional affiliation and degree of direct involvement in agricultural work significantly influence the manner in which actors define urban agriculture's "proper" domain, activities and functions. Specifically, a gap that may contribute to ineffective or misguided policies was found to exist between the perceptions of those who officially plan, support, and regulate urban agriculture, and UA practitioners.

By raising awareness about the nature of these perspectival differences as well as what they might signify for the long-term maintenance of urban agriculture in Havana, this research is directly relevant to the work of those currently engaged in the promotion of this practice in Cuba's capital. Given that the identified gap in perspective between those who plan and those who practice urban agriculture may not be particular to Havana, or to Cuba alone, the research also contributes to establishing a possible research agenda for other contexts where a disregard for the multiple meanings and experiences of urban agriculture might equally jeopardize the success of urban agricultural projects.

Acknowledgements

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I. Introduction

The current global trend toward ever-increasing urbanization, on-going food insecurity, and environmental degradation – particularly in countries of the so-called South – makes it imperative to study and understand urban agriculture as a food provisioning alternative that addresses the nutritional needs of city-dwellers while potentially contributing to the environmental health of cities and their surrounding territories, and to the overall well-being of their residents. Although numerous valuable studies have been conducted on various dimensions of urban agriculture (UA), the vital question of its sustainability from a socio-cultural perspective has received little attention. My research project attempts to address this gap through a case study focused on the city of Havana, Cuba, which explores how socio-cultural differences shape people's perceptions and experiences of UA in a manner that may significantly impact the long-term fate of the phenomenon.

As a country recognized as a world leader in alternative organic agriculture (Rosset and Benjamin 1994), including UA (Murphy 1999), Cuba presents an ideal site for the exploration of my research interests. Although Havana is not the only Cuban city where UA flourishes, a number of factors made it an especially promising site for this study. First, there was the centrality of the city within the country's UA movement: Havana has not only been repeatedly praised vis-à-vis other Cuban cities for its UA performance, it is also the place where most UA-related research, decision-making, and support networks are based. Second, as the capital city and the most "urbanized" area of the country with a population of 2,185 076 inhabitants, Havana also affords an optimal opportunity to explore the intersection of urbanity and agriculture. Third, as the densest urban area of

the country, this city represents the best site to explore the limitations and potentials of UA as a means of addressing food insecurity while ensuring the ecological sustainability of the urban environment. Fourth, my previous research experience had provided me with contacts in this city that would greatly facilitate my research.

UA became particularly important in Cuba under the conditions of the Post-Soviet economic crisis that began in 1989 and resulted in, among other things, great food insecurity. Although primary food production practices were not unknown in Cuban cities prior to this period,¹ the intensity that these practices acquired then and since was indeed unprecedented. Cuban cityscapes were re-drawn as plantains and chicken coops took the place of rose bushes in home gardens, and as previously abandoned city lots were sown with food crops of all kinds. Today, nation-wide UA efforts account for 60 percent of all Cuban vegetable production and the average production outputs exceed the daily dietary vegetable intake recommended by the FAO (Ministry of Agriculture 2001 Report on UA). In the area of food animal production, results have been equally impressive, even when considering small spaces such as patios that by the year 2000 were said to have excelled in poultry production with 326.9 million eggs and 7.7 tons of meat (Ministry of Agriculture 2000 Report on UA). In Havana, UA sites occupy 12 % of the territory; involve over 22,000 producers; contribute from 150-300 grams per day per person of vegetables and fresh condiments (Cruz and Medina 2001: 7); and are reported to have met up to 30 percent of the subsistence needs of entire neighbourhoods (Murphy

¹ My current research has uncovered data that indicates that urban farming, particularly so-called “Chinese” family-run vegetable gardens, were common in some areas of pre-revolutionary Havana. As for post-1959 Havana, notwithstanding the ambitious 1967 Havana Greenbelt project which was intended to make the city self-sufficient in some comestible products, the extant literature suggests that there have always been individuals within the city who have engaged in farming practices as a way of maintaining family traditions and/or as a means to supplement government rations (see Butterworth 1980, pp. 22-24 and pp. 81-83; Cruz and Murciano 1996).

1999). In a relatively short time, then, UA efforts in Cuba appear to have successfully reduced food insecurity for a considerable portion of the population and, according to some (Cruz and Medina 2001:7), have even contributed to the amelioration of environmental problems through the elimination of abandoned lots which tended to be used as garbage disposal sites.

There is no doubt that the success of UA in Cuba has been greatly facilitated by extensive government support. This support has taken various forms, including the allotment of state lands to be used as garden lots in usufruct; the promotion of research on sustainable technologies; the dissemination of related knowledge through agricultural delegates appointed to every level of government; and the provision of affordable agricultural inputs to urban farmers through the *Tiendas Consultorios Agropecuarios* (TCA, Agricultural Inputs and Service Stores). Yet in spite of this support, the future of UA in Cuba is uncertain.

As the Cuban UA movement has consolidated over the last decade, practitioners and researchers alike have, while praising its triumphs, raised concerns about its long-term survival – particularly with regard to the possibility of expanding, improving on, or even sustaining the achievements made to date. Foremost among the concerns expressed – and of particular interest to me as a social anthropologist – have been those involving factors of a socio-cultural nature. It has been suggested, for example, that there is an anti-agricultural bias within the population at large and within the decision-making sector in particular which might conspire against the continuing growth and permanence of

primary food production in Cuban cities (e.g. Cruz 1996 and Murphy 1999). Moreover, it has been claimed that a widespread and long-established faith in the superiority of “modern”, high tech agriculture may result in producer’s reluctance to embrace fully more sustainable practices and hence the small-scale, low-technology production typical of urban agriculture (Metropolitan Park Report 1996). It has further been suggested that the purportedly rural background of many urban farmers might lead to practices that clash with urban aesthetic sensibilities, reinforcing non-practitioners’ attitudes about the inappropriateness of this activity in an urban environment (Cruz 1996). Finally, established gender roles which consider agriculture a male domain, as well as the gendering of certain agricultural activities (i.e. gardening and raising animals in the home), may not only keep women from becoming involved as urban farmers but may make those women who are involved invisible to service agencies and organizations interested in promoting the practice (Premat 1998).

The current research used as a departure point the exploration of some of these socio-cultural obstacles that, while mentioned in the literature, have remained largely understudied.

This paper begins by reviewing the questions, concepts and methodology guiding the research, noting necessary revisions made as the project progressed. It continues with a discussion of preliminary findings, impacts and benefits, and concludes with some final remarks on the significance of the research in terms of its current relevance to practitioners and to researchers working in this field.

II. Concepts, Questions, and Methodology

The two key concepts that frame this research - namely, “UA” and “socio-cultural factors” - while seemingly self-explanatory, merit a detailed definition.

The wider literature defines UA broadly to include a range of activities that extend beyond the production of food or edible products (e.g. UNDP 1996, Lock 1998). While, as shall be seen, such a wide-ranging definition is also present in the Cuban context, for the purpose of clarity and consistency, the term UA will be used here only in reference to the cultivation of edible crops (e.g. fruit trees, vegetables, medicinal and culinary herbs) and the raising of food animals within the urban or peri-urban area for the purpose of auto-consumption or sale to other same city-residents.

Socio-cultural factors here refer to socially or culturally constructed and maintained axes of identity such as those associated with gender, generation, education, profession, occupation, and family background (e.g. being of peasant or urban stock). All of these variables were prioritized for exploration in the initial proposal but as the research progressed, the list was modified somewhat. Multi-disciplinarity was found to be very common in Cuba, with urban planners, agropecuarian engineers and architects working side by side everywhere from the Ministry of Agriculture to the Department of Urban Planning. Since, in this context, institutional boundaries and visions appeared to be more closely guarded and more influential than disciplinary ones, institutional affiliation was added to the list of prioritized variables.

Based on the hypothesis that the above-mentioned socio-cultural factors shape people's perceptions and experiences of UA and therefore will play a significant role in determining the long-term success or failure of UA in the city of Havana (as elsewhere), the research explored the following questions: First, how is urban farming seen/practiced by various differently-positioned actors within the city of Havana? Second, what might these differing perspectives imply for the future of UA in this city? While these questions remained unchanged throughout the research, their specific focus shifted as new insights were gained.

Overall, the research followed the methodology outlined in the original proposal. Archival and library research was conducted at public libraries, city archives, and institutional documentation centres, to identify official, "expert", or other publicly influential Cuban perspectives on UA and the ideal of the city produced since the beginning of the economic crisis in 1989. Sites regularly visited to carry out this phase of the research included the Cuban National Library and City Archives; the Centre for the Americas Library; The Ministry of Agriculture Library; The Information Centre of the Group for Holistic Development of the Capital; and The Special Collections Library at the Foundation of Nature and Humanity. Resources consulted included: (a) books or scholarly articles describing past or current practices of primary food production in the city of Havana; (b) city maps, urban plans, government legislation and state newspaper articles pertinent to UA; and (c) publications, in-house reports and records produced by Havana-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in the area of urban food production. Heeding the advice of both Harley (1988) in reference to maps, and of

the Comaroffs (1992) in relation to archival material in general, the analysis here went beyond the examination of "textual traces", "audible ideologies" and "visible institutions" in order to uncover the ideas hidden behind "silences" and omissions.

Due to time restrictions, city residents with no connection to UA, although initially considered part of the target population, were excluded from the study. Following the initial plan, however, interviews were carried out with urban farmers, as well as with professionals from governmental organizations and NGOs whose work and visions impact on the practice of UA. The interviews were designed to gather information about the interviewees' pertinent life experiences, their conceptions of "the city" in general, their knowledge and opinions about the current urban agricultural system (i.e., the set of official governmental bodies and NGOs whose mandate is to support and regulate the practise of UA), and their views on the appropriateness of using various spaces (such as neighbourhoods, parks and households) as sites for growing edible crops or raising food animals. With urban farmers in particular, information was also sought with regard to their place of residence, as well as the type of land tenure (e.g. private, state-owned, usufruct) and physical characteristics (e.g. open to the street or closed to public view, proximity to residence) of the agricultural space where they work.

Following insights gained during the research, the sample involving urban farmers was restricted to those producers associated with patios or *parcelas* (agricultural plots). These sites, which include rooftops, house alleys, and abandoned city lots, are generally located within the urban fabric; do not exceed 1,000 square meters; are exploited by a family or individual with the goal of self-provision; and may be state-owned or privately owned

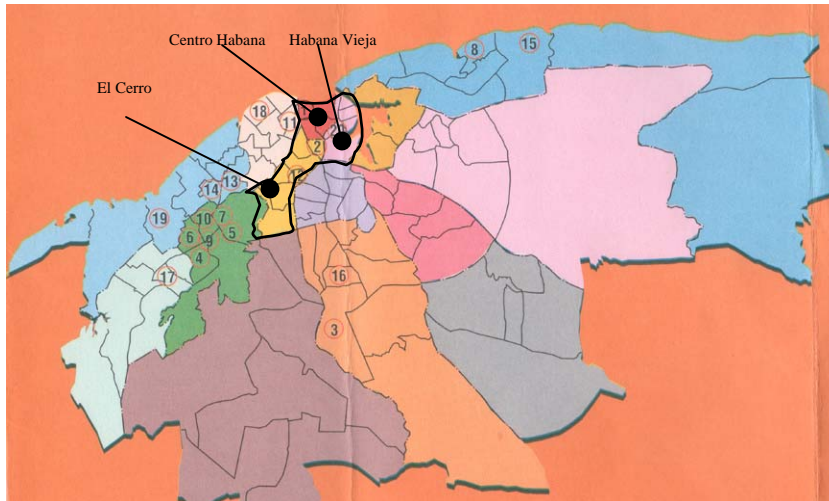
(Cruz and Medina 2001:40). They were selected for attention for a number of reasons. First, because they represent the most extensive and popular expression of UA in Havana, which currently has 7,944 officially registered patios and *parcelas* occupying 1030.14 ha and engaging 16,869 producers (Cruz and Medina 2001:40).² Second, with an average production rate of 4,989 kg of vegetables per producer per year (Cruz and Medina 2001: 48), these sites are the UA spaces most closely linked to household food security. Third, they are the most centrally-located instances of UA: the most organically integrated into the urban physical and social environment. Fourth, in spite of their significance, these spaces have been the least studied.³ Fifth, they - particularly those involving privately-owned spaces - also represent the most spontaneous, independent and free-will – as opposed to governmentally guided and regulated – individual expressions of UA in the city, an expansion of expressions long present in Havana. Any concern for the sustainability of UA in the city, therefore, arguably need place special value on these expressions. All the more so considering that these expressions of the practice might reasonably be considered the most distant from state initiatives and thus the most difficult to serve through the formal UA system. Hence, these sites were considered optimal for an exploration of the experiences and perspectives of the most common of UA producers; the sustainability of UA practices at the basic level of the household; the compatibility of

² These sites were even more common at the height of the economic crisis; in 1996, *parcelas* in the city of Havana numbered 26,600 (Chaplowe 1996, Cruz 1996). Some Cuban urban agricultural professionals consider this decrease in *parcelas* a reflection of the economical recovery of the country, as well as a shift by some successful farmers to larger-scale, commercially-oriented forms of agricultural production. As will be discussed later, it may be that a shortfall in services addressing the needs of small-scale producers is also a factor here.

³ More studied have been the larger scale, more productive, higher input *huertos intensivos* and organoponic gardens, geared towards commercial production, spaces which, incidentally, were not readily accessible to an outside researcher.

urbanity and agriculture; and the reach and effectiveness of the current state-promoted Cuban UA system.

The sample of farmers was drawn from three neighbourhoods located in different municipalities; namely, Habana Vieja, Centro Habana, and El Cerro (see [Map I](#)).



Map 1

Municipal territories of Havana.

The municipalities included in the study are those marked off by the black line.

These territories were chosen because, in spite of having some commonalities (e.g. a deteriorating old housing stock), they offer interesting contrasts in relation to patterns of land use (e.g. availability of open spaces and patios), agricultural history (e.g. past and present recognition by authorities of their agricultural function), and resources available (e.g. alternative sources of livelihood such as tourism). The two most densely populated of these municipalities, Habana Vieja and Centro Habana, have few open spaces and no large-scale UA production sites. According to a census carried out by the Agricultural Inputs Enterprise (ESA) in 2001, the former had 37 officially registered small productive patios and *parcelas*, and the latter had 49. The main difference between the two territories is that the former, Old Havana, is a well-developed tourist site where few vacant lots escape the demand for tourist developments. On the other hand, it is also a

territory where at least a portion of tourist revenues has been earmarked for community development projects that sometimes – particularly on the municipality’s periphery - can involve “community” gardens. The municipality of El Cerro contrasts with the two others in that it not only enjoys a long history of agricultural production but has, within its territory, a number of high output agricultural sites, such as *organopónicos* (organoponic gardens).⁴ Its small-scale agricultural activity is also impressive by comparison with the other two municipalities as the ESA census reports a total of 1329 registered productive patios and *parcelas* for this territory.

A total of 30 farmers were interviewed (19 men, 11 women). With the exception of one neighbourhood where the researcher had previously established contacts during her M.A. research in 1997, the initial interviewees were contacted through the Foundation of Nature and Humanity.

The professionals included in the study were selected, as planned, to reflect different positions in the decision-making hierarchy, as well as a diversity of institutions involved in regulating or promoting UA in Havana. In total, 41 interviews (with 21 women and 20 men) were conducted involving representatives of 27 official bodies, including agencies of the state and NGOs. Included were the Ministry of Agriculture, the Institute for Fundamental Research on Tropical Agriculture (INIFAT), the Agricultural Supplies Industry, the Agricultural Goods and Services Stores, the Ministry of Housing, the Ministry of Public Health, the Ministry of the Environment, the Committees for the

⁴ *Organopónicos* in Cuba are high yield gardens, ranging from 2,000-5,000 m², which are located on non-agricultural state-land and employ a modality of row vegetable farming that officially relies on organic inputs.

Defence of the Revolution (neighbourhood-based organization), the municipal assembly of Popular Power (government body), the Cuban Association for Animal Production (ACPA), the city's Peasant Sector, the Revolutionary Armed Forces (FAR), the Provincial Urban Planning Office (DPPF), the Group for the Holistic Development of the Capital (GIDIC), Habitat Cuba, the Foundation of Nature and Humanity (FNH), the Cuban Council of Churches, the Ministry of Alimentary Industry, the Office of the City Historian, the Cuban Botanical Association, the Wine-makers Club, the Community Food Conservation Project, the Environmentalist Group of San Isidro, and the Community Patio Project of El Cerro.

As originally proposed, field investigations emphasized multi-sited ethnographic research (Marcus 1995, 1998) prioritizing first-hand experience, observation, and detailed description (what anthropologists call participant observation) in various settings, from primary food production sites to institutional meetings. I observed and participated in the everyday farming practices and/or other relevant activities of interviewees. With farmers, I attended to their ways of dwelling in the city, the neighbourhood, and the household, as well as to their relationships to services available through the UA system. To gain insight into the "culture" promoted by different institutions/groups involved in UA, I sought participation in their planning meetings and workshops. These included a permaculture course and numerous working meetings organized by the FNH, as well as meetings and social gatherings organized by the botanical association, the environmentalist group of San Isidro, the wine-making club, the Ministry of Agriculture, and mass-organizations such as the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution.

The only adjustment made to the initially proposed data gathering techniques (as noted in the interim report submitted to Agropolis), was the decision not to use “counter-maps”. While successfully used by researchers in other settings (Gould and White 1980, Peluso 1995, Rocheleau et al. 1995), this technique was abandoned as inappropriate in the Cuban context because interviewees considered disclosing knowledge of private neighbourhood land use to be tantamount to informing on others. Instead, farmers were asked to subjectively describe their garden/animal raising spaces and the larger territories within which these were located (neighbourhood, municipality, and city). Maps were only gathered when available from official institutions.

Regarding the validity of the findings, a preliminary analysis of the data gathered highlights the value of employing participant observation to complement and cross-check findings derived from more standard methods of data gathering, such as archival/library research and interviewing.

III. Preliminary Findings

Preliminary analysis of data gathered indicates that a significant disjuncture exists between the perspectives of those who officially plan, support and regulate UA in Havana and those who practice it.

In general, UA professionals’ primary concerns and discursive practices reflect a strong “bureaucratic” bias. UA professionals have in common a concern with defining, counting, formalizing and ordering – practices which Foucault (1991) considered

disciplinary technologies associated with a desire to control and influence a population's behaviour through the deployment of knowledge at the service of power.

Important silences were noted in the discursive practices of UA professionals. First, although, when pressed, many included the raising of food animals in their definition of UA, their discourses tended to submerge this aspect of the activity, equating UA primarily with the “proper” exploitation of the soil and the less controversial activity of gardening. When mentioning animals at all, most carefully pointed out that the aberrations that took place at the height of the Special Period (e.g. raising pigs in the core of Havana) were no longer in existence. In this sense, their discourses mirrored what is “proper” according to the law, not necessarily what is done (or is known to be done) – a practice researchers in other settings (re: Foote Whyte 1984; Hammersley and Atkinson 1990) have linked with the production of a “normative picture” and with official records that more often than not are intended to reflect the competence of the incumbent authorities. Second, when recounting the development of UA in the core of Havana, most UA professionals emphasized its novelty, tracing its origins to the economic crisis of 1989. In this manner, they “silenced” its prior, albeit more modest, existence while defining it as an exception needing redress. In fact, UA professionals coincided in opining that, now that the food security crisis has been attenuated, there is an urgent need for re-ordering UA spaces - applying expert knowledge against the sometimes unreasonable, and ill-informed behaviour of lay citizens.

In spite of these shared characteristics, significant differences in perspective were also found to exist within the “professional” group. Data gathered via interviews with - and at various meetings involving - architects, urban planners, geographers, and agricultural professionals suggest that differing perspectives on UA within this group were not linked to differences in age, race, gender, education, profession, or personal (urban/rural) background.⁵ Rather, these differences seemed to be closely connected with institutional affiliation. The mandate and resource investment of the professional’s institutional base appeared to be important factors in shaping her/his perceptions of the practice of UA, particularly in terms of its “proper” place and function.

To illustrate, consider the professionals in the Urban Planning Sector and the Ministry of Agriculture – both with official authority to act on and influence the practice of UA in the city of Havana. Employees of the Urban Planning Office have the authority to approve or disapprove the location of UA practices in the city. In keeping with their Sector’s mandate to promote economic growth while maximizing the efficient use of state investment and resources, professionals in this Sector are concerned with how UA might best be inserted into the urban context: what resources the activity requires, as well as how it competes with other urban functions such as housing and industry.⁶ Hence, urban planning professionals divide the city into broad, internally homogeneous areas that are

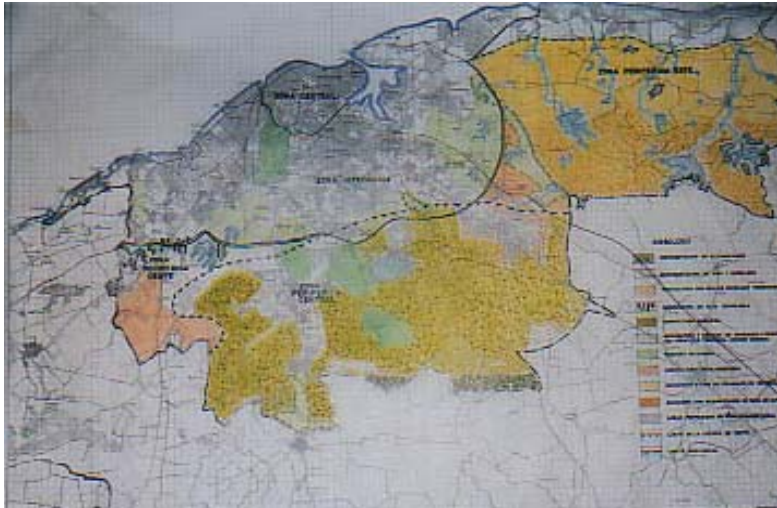
⁵ This in spite of the fact that variables such as gender seem to be linked to one’s location in the UA system. For example, women are few in the higher echelons of the decision-making hierarchy of the Ministry of Agriculture but abound in the technical sector and particularly in the profitable Agricultural Input Stores.

⁶ The analysis that follows is based on the opinions of six individuals working in relevant areas of the urban planning sector, including the Office of National Planning, the Provincial Headquarters of Planning and Architecture. Also included, because linked closely with the Sector, were three employees from the Group for the Holistic Development of the Capital.

considered to have a differential “vocation” for agricultural activities. While conceding that agriculture has a place in the city, people interviewed in this Sector felt that its optimal location is not in the core municipalities, which are densely-built and lacking in appropriate water resources and soil availability. Such sentiments are condensed in the official *lineamientos* (guidelines) on UA, put out by the Provincial Urban Planning Office, which unequivocally state that the central zone, which encompasses two of the municipalities included in this study (Old Havana and Centro Habana), “can only support silviculture in front yards and urban parks.” These guidelines locate the most suitable zone for agricultural activity in the city’s periphery, and consider the intermediate zone, which includes the outer districts in the municipality of Cerro, suitable for activities ranging from *organopónicos* and *parcelas* to poultry and rabbit raising. Such a totalizing vision of the place of UA in Havana reflects what some theorists of space (e.g. De Certeau 1988; Lefebvre 1998 [1974]) have identified as a typical planner’s or decision-maker’s gaze, guided by the metaphor of the map which re-creates a univocal and abstract space governed by the laws of the “proper”, a space where difference and specificities are often erased.

While the Urban Planning Office’s official map on the current agricultural landscape of Havana notes the presence of UA in the core in the form of a few large-scale, high-investment endeavours such as *Casas de Posturas* (seedling houses) and high yield *organopónicos* (organoponic gardens), smaller-scale efforts in this area go unrecorded. Moreover, it is clear from other maps that the inclusion of these larger spaces is seen as a temporary concession. Thus, the planners’ vision of the future of UA in Havana, reflected

in Map 2, does not accommodate even these more high output expressions of UA, not even in the intermediate zone where a number are currently located. Agricultural activity has been localized in the outskirts of the city – an indication of the entrenched anti-agricultural (i.e., food producing agriculture) bias alluded in the literature (Cruz 1997, Murphy 1999).



Map 2

Areas in colour identify the proposed location of UA activities in Havana. The thick black lines mark the boundaries of the central and intermediate zones.

Source: Provincial Headquarters of Architecture and Planning

The predominance of this bias is particularly evident in the discourses of those working within the urban planning sector. An analysis of the discourses of urban planners speaking of UA, during interviews and at meetings, identified only two references to food security, whereas terms such as *verde* (green) and *medioambiente* (environment) are employed by these same professionals in their every mention of the practice, reflecting a tendency within this sector to accept UA in the city, particularly its core, only for the purpose of “greening” through the addition of trees and ornamental plants. This perspective was underscored by an agronomist at the Provincial Urban Planning office who explained that core urban spaces are fit at best for only an “ornamental” type of “non-comestible” agriculture, to beautify the environment.

The Ministry of Agriculture (MINAG), officially in charge of promoting and overseeing UA for at least a decade, presents a different perspective. For Ministry people,⁷ particularly those involved in promoting UA since the early 90s and who self-identify as a kind of vanguard, the story of agriculture in the city has been about struggling against entrenched attitudes - attitudes which they feel they have partly succeeded in changing through perseverance and hard-work.

In contrast to those in the Urban Planning Sector, when speaking of UA people in the MINAG consistently emphasized the food security dimension of the practice, rather than its greening effects. While most acknowledged that UA can make a positive contribution to the environment (*medioambiente*), they often added this as an afterthought – a position also reflected in the Ministry’s literature, such as a recent brochure entitled “Basis of the System”, which lists ‘environment’ last in the list of the 28 subprograms to be promoted.

Not surprisingly, the criteria used by MINAG staff in the selection of model urban agricultural sites (chosen every year for every form of production at the various territorial levels) focuses primarily on the quality and quantity of outputs and on the technical aspects of the food producing practice. They do not take into consideration how the site

⁷ The analysis that follows is based on data gathered from eleven individuals positioned differently in the institutional hierarchy of the MINAG. Included were Provincial delegates, Municipal delegates (for each of the municipalities in the study), *representantes* working at the neighbourhood level, and employees of the Agricultural Input Enterprise and the Agricultural Inputs and Service Stores.

may or may not fit in the community that surrounds it - a position harshly criticized by those in the Urban Planning Sector (re: Cruz and Medina 2001).

Given the Ministry's concern with food security, it is not surprising to find that Ministry people consistently highlight the importance of high-output UA spaces such as *organopónicos*, often equating these gardens with UA as a whole - a practice also found in the urban planning sector when the subject of food security and UA was specifically brought up for discussion.⁸ This does not mean, however, that less productive spaces are disregarded.

The Ministry's vision, until recently, largely regarded municipalities like Habana Vieja and Centro Habana as unsuitable for UA for the same reasons given by urban planners. However, the data gathered suggests that this outlook has been changing. Thus, while Ministry staff interviewed consistently acknowledged the difficulty of developing UA in these municipalities, all but two did not rule them out as sites where food production – albeit of a minor scale – could be practiced. The recent appointment of a delegate of agriculture to the two core municipalities of Habana Vieja and Centro Habana, which - unlike other city municipalities - had been without such a delegate for years, further reflect this change and underscore the way in which Ministry staff differ from professionals in the urban planning sector in terms of what they consider suitable spaces for UA.

⁸ Incidentally, this vision has been especially promoted in official media coverage of UA since the mid 1990s. Pictures of *organopónicos* often accompany articles on UA. Previously, the image of the *parcelero* (plot holder) was the symbol of UA.

More importantly, all but one of the MINAG staff interviewed coincided in identifying other municipalities in the urban planners' central zone as viable candidates for food production. An example often given to illustrate this involves the municipality of Plaza de la Revolución which, in spite of being the civic centre of the country, possesses a number of successful *organopónicos*. Important to note here is that the same ministry staff consistently highlighted the importance of smaller-scale producers working in these areas, particularly those associated with the less publicized UA sites of patios and *parcelas*.⁹ The launching by the MINAG in 2000 of the Patio and *Parcela* movement is one indication of the Ministry commitment to the promotion of these spaces. The intention to increase the number of TCAs (Agricultural Inputs and Service Stores) in the city is another indication that for the Ministry smaller-scale UA activities do count. That TCAs, while permitted to sell ornamental plants, are obliged to carry a stock of vegetable seeds, underscores the fact that the Ministry's promotion of cultivation seeks to achieve more than the mere greening of centrally-located municipalities.

On the subject of food animal raising, the majority of those interviewed stated that this was practiced minimally in the core of the city and limited to the keeping of a few chickens or rabbits. They neglected to comment that the support system is lacking in this respect and, for example, while TCAs carry vegetable seeds and gardening implements, they do not offer comparable inputs for food animal raising.

⁹ It was indeed this Ministry that, from the beginning of the post-Soviet economic crisis, was given the authority and resources to encourage this type of food production which led, among other things, to the creation of the TCAs.

Finally, the vision of the MINAG in relation to the main beneficiaries of UA is reflected in the Ministry slogan - reproduced in brochures, reports and public signs - that UA is “of the neighbourhood, by the neighbourhood, and for the neighbourhood.” In this way, it is not just the citizenry in general but territorially-bounded communities which are seen to reap the benefits of the practice.

The data analyzed to date indicates that the producer, who is directly engaged in the activity of primary food production, perceives and experiences UA very differently than do professionals. Interviews with producers indicate that most of them are less concerned with definitions and claims about the novelty of UA than they are with more practical problems. Most do not self-define as urban farmers unless they see an advantage to doing so (e.g. to gain access to services or resources). Also, most commented on the continuity of the practice, tracing it to familial or neighbourhood precedents prior to the 1989 crisis. Their creative use of space for food production suggests that there are few spaces they consider unsuitable for this end. Even when they acknowledge that certain settings present considerable constraints, this does not deter them. The now well-established gardens in previously abandoned lots of core municipalities of Old Havana and Centro Habana (See Illustrations 1 and 2), as well as gardens created where no soil used to exist (See Illustration 3), illustrate the extent to which their view of appropriate spaces for UA differs from those of people in the urban planning sector. In this respect, the UA space



Illustration 1

View from urban garden in Habana Vieja whose proximity to the city core is underscored by the figure of the centrally-located 'Capitolio' (Capital) building in the background.



Illustration 2

Two views of an urban garden created out of a previously abandoned city lot in the centrally-located and densely-built municipality of Centro Habana.



Illustration 3

Urban garden in the municipality of El Cerro illustrating the creation of a cultivable area on top of a cement patio through the use of recycled truck tires

of producers is equivalent to what De Certeau considers the typical space of those without formal power who, while lacking the authority to tabulate and impose their own vision of space, can “insinuate their countless differences into the dominant text” and reveal through their everyday practices the ambiguity of the space conceived as abstract and univocal by the planner’s map [1987: xxii].

Among the food producers interviewed, those who spoke of a commitment to organic agriculture were few – which hints at the faith in “modern” agricultural methods noted in the literature.¹⁰ Those who spoke of the positive impact of UA on the environment and the immediate community were equally few, and these few generally expressed this view only with regard to gardens associated with community projects. Contrary to expectation, far from being grounded in space through the activity of gardening, the majority of gardeners interviewed expressed a desire to move to better parts of the city.

Far from claiming a pronounced sense of belonging to the local community, most producers felt the opposite; many described their gardens or animal-raising spaces as a refuge from the social tension and/or physical decay of the surrounding neighbourhood. This situation contrasts sharply with the findings of Cuban scholars studying the role of UA in the development of neighbourhood-based community movements in the district of Santa Fé in the Havana of the early 90s (Dilla et al. 1997; Fernández Soriano and Otazo

¹⁰ This position, which contrasts with that of most UA professionals who seem convinced and committed to sustainable practices, may be connected to generational and educational differences between professionals and producers, with the former being predominantly young (mostly in their 40s) and university educated and the latter having at most a secondary level education and being older (in their 50s and 60s). Of course, other more practical considerations – such as the fear of losing an entire season’s work and its associated benefits may be at play in producer’s willingness to look for “modern” solutions (e.g. the application of chemical pesticides) to production problems.

Conde 1996; Fernández Soriano 1997 and 1999), and may be explained by a change in historical circumstances, as well as by the uniqueness of the community and effectiveness of the leaders in question.

Producers interviewed in this study saw themselves primarily as sacrificing for their immediate family, not for their neighbours. While sharing of UA products and knowledge does take place, it does not necessarily happen according to pre-conceived notions of a territorial community; rather, it often involves the crossing of neighbourhood as well as municipal boundaries. In this sense, the practices of urban farmers would seem to contradict the MINAG slogan that UA is “of the neighbourhood, for the neighbourhood, by the neighbourhood”.

During interviews, most producers identified the greatest value of their UA efforts to be the important contribution it provides to the family diet; some even calculated the concrete savings facilitated by the practice. Thus, a small patio owner told me that the plantain bushes in his garden gave him 2400 plantains in a good year. With each plantain selling for about 1 peso in the agricultural market, this amounts to a savings of 2400 pesos a year (the equivalent of about nine average monthly salaries). Another producer, who raises rabbits for family consumption and who at the time of the interview had 50 rabbits in a small roof-top area, commented that his family of five eats at least one rabbit a week. Considering that a small rabbit of 7 lbs., not available in the formal market except in restaurants, sells for approximately 140 pesos (more than half an average monthly salary), this represents quite a weekly saving, even when considering the high

cost of feed. The contribution to household food security is even more impressive when one considers that most producers diversify their efforts. Thus, the mentioned rabbit raiser also had 60 chickens on his roof top, while the mentioned gardener's cultivation also included root crops like yucca; vegetables such as tomatoes, lettuce and a Cuban variety of spinach; and a slew of medicinal and culinary herbs such as parsley, basil, ginger, oregano, rosemary, tumeric, mint and aloe. Notwithstanding impressive official statistics on the subject, then, it is evident from these few examples that UA practices make an important contribution to the food security of city households, particularly when one considers that state ration stores meet only minimal dietary needs and prices at agricultural markets – and even at *organopónicos* - are still high for a large portion of the population.

The raising of food animals, which tends to go unmentioned by professionals, seems to be particularly important to most producers who identify this practice as a source of much needed protein - considered a necessity in most Cuban's ideal diet (see [Illustration 4](#)).¹¹ Some complain that, in spite of the importance of the practice, the support of governmental institutions is uneven. Lack of resources needed for this activity – from fodder to cages – was a particular focus of comment. Thus, while the MINAG, for example, makes chicks available to the population at accessible prices, official venues for

¹¹ It is interesting that, contrary to the literature, my research data so far indicates that while gardeners may often be of peasant background, animal raisers, the most controversial of urban food producers, are primarily of the city; i.e., neither they nor their families originate from the countryside.

acquiring feed are non-existent and hence most producers end up paying exorbitant prices for feed in the black market.¹²



Illustration 4

A family of proud rooftop animal raisers in the municipality of El Cerro

With regard to other benefits associated with these practices, producers further mentioned that while requiring work, UA brings pleasure, satisfaction and even health - not just for its output but for its creative and recreational dimensions, an issue which is only partly addressed by the view of urban planners of UA as a “greening” element that raises the quality of life of city residents.

As well as their output potential, the importance of production sites for those involved has a symbolic dimension to do with the meanings producers attach to these spaces as they construct them. Particularly with gardens located in close proximity to the

¹² It should be noted that this shortcoming of the system is acknowledged by some in the MINAG and that the Cuban Association for Animal Production, a Cuban NGO closely associated with MINAG, is making efforts to address the needs of at least some animal raisers in the city.

producer's residence, production spaces become an extension of the home, a site for cultural accumulation and display of individual or family identities, intertwined with acts of home-making as well as identity-making – a characteristic noted of gardening practices more generally in various parts of the world (e.g. Chevalier 1998; Mukerji 1990). This is vividly illustrated by the garden of an artist who, following his creative



Illustration 5

Gardener posing in his garden in the municipality of El Cerro depicting some decorative touches such as hanging bicycle bell and tin plate.

urge, has hung, among the vegetables, pieces of coloured glass, discarded toys, and even a tea cup given him by his last lover (see Illustration 5). While in such cases the garden's design emphasizes the farmer's individuality, in others it can also underscore his/her connections to the larger society. In particular, spaces open to public view or gardens that have been purposely opened for public viewing, such as those of gardeners connected with community projects, appear to lose their individual quality, becoming almost absorbed by dominant space, even displaying official iconography (e.g. prominently displayed pictures of revolutionary heroes).

These preliminary findings point to a number of social-cultural factors (especially

professional status, institutional affiliation, and direct involvement in production activities) that largely impact on the practice and perception of UA in Havana.

Professional status and institutional biases, such as those illustrated here, influence decisions regarding which UA spaces and practices are considered possible, legitimated, and addressed by service-providers. Although caution should be taken when interpreting the silences of official maps and discourses, such omissions often translate into real exclusion – social and economic. What gets mapped is what is noticed and acknowledged. This applies even to research agendas which, echoing official maps, have tended to exclude the less formal practices of UA taking place in private home spaces. Considering that these spaces are predominantly administered by women (Premat 1998), such an omission leads to gender-based exclusion.¹³ In the long run, non-acknowledgement translates into a deficiency in needs identification and hence a corresponding lack in the development of needed services. Moreover, rigidity in the way UA spaces are conceived can preclude the long-term persistence of certain practices (e.g. animal raising in the city core) by relegating them to the realm of the illicit and therefore of the temporary.

To promote only one or another institutional vision of what UA spaces, activities, and functions ought to be often alienates those producers whose practises do not fit the vision.

The permanence of UA – with its environmental and food security benefits, and the jobs

¹³ My research suggests that women also play significant roles as co-producers with men, a finding also supported by data collected by Cuban researchers in another part of the city and in a very different production site (re: Cruz and Medina 2001).

that have been created through its development - depends on more than the official institutions that promote it. It depends on those who do the actual work: the urban farmers. If UA in Havana is to remain sustainable, and the functioning of state supports are to be effective, the views of producers – particularly those associated with the small-scale sites discussed in this paper - have to be considered and their specific, multi-dimensional needs must be taken into account.

IV. Contributions to the Field of UA and Field Research Impacts

This study has made a number of contributions to the advancement of knowledge in the field of UA. Through the close investigation of a particular case (Cuba), the research has initiated a grounded exploration into important issues such as the existence of an anti-agricultural bias within decision-making groups - issues about which only broad generalizations have been made in the existing literature. The research has also raised questions about the representativeness of certain Havana-based UA experiences depicted in the literature which equate the practice of UA with the creation of a territorially-based community, usually anchored in the neighbourhood.

On a conceptual and methodological level, this work can also be seen to expand the established frontiers of UA research. First, the focus on the impact of socio-cultural factors addresses the existing imbalance in UA scholarship that tends to have a “hard science” bias and overemphasize the technical dimensions of the phenomenon.¹⁴ Second, the use of a multi-sited ethnographic approach to the subject of UA constitutes a methodological innovation in a field that has usually focused on isolated sites and actors

¹⁴ This research also contributes to expanding the scope of social sciences like Anthropology, which – although incorporating work on urban environments for decades –have largely ignored the subject of UA.

rather than on the interrelationship between these actors and sites as part of a cultural system.

To date, the research process and its outcomes have had a number of impacts which merit mention.

In terms of my own professional development, during my research, I had the opportunity to participate in a permaculture course offered by my hosting NGO, the Foundation of Nature and Humanity (FNH). This course was attended by an average of 10 people interested in UA, who met daily over a period of 3 weeks. It not only provided me with important research contacts but also imparted to me valuable knowledge on technical aspects of sustainable agriculture that, given my training in social anthropology, I was lacking.

The research process allowed me to both establish and strengthen ties with local Cuban institutions such as the FNH and the Casa de Altos Estudios Don Fernando Ortiz (CAEFO, an advanced academic institute associated with the University of Havana). The formal partnership established with CAEFO greatly contributed to my knowledge base through delivery of a history course that allowed me to better contextualize current UA practices. In spite of this organization's lack of direct involvement with UA, CAEFO's contact, the late historian Dr. José Tabares del Real – an original member of the revolutionary 26 of July movement - was instrumental in helping to schedule interviews with high-level officials whose work has been central to the UA movement. The

Foundation of Nature and Humanity – an organization with which I had collaborated prior to this research - supported my work in a number of ways, including through the writing of formal letters of introduction that facilitated my access to various data sources (e.g. the Cuban Television Network, the National Library, the Casa de las Américas Library) and made it possible for me to interview some high-level decision-makers. Staff at the Foundation furthered my work by including me in relevant activities (UA-related fieldtrips and workshops) and by willingly sharing relevant literature, field contacts, and their accumulated knowledge and experience.

The impact of the research process on institutional capacity strengthening was most clearly reflected in my direct involvement with Cuban NGOs generally and in particular with my host organization, the FNH. At an informal level, my almost daily conversations with employees at the FNH about my findings positively influenced their work “on the ground” by making them aware of practitioners’ felt needs for services and support. More formally, I had the opportunity to share findings from my current and past research at a number of venues, including a workshop organized by the Foundation to introduce its staff to a Data Base Program designed to monitor the development of UA sites; and at a series of five more formal workshops, attended by between twelve to twenty UA professionals each, in which the writing of a book on UA in Havana was debated. I also copy-edited and gave written feedback on the same book, which was recently published by the Foundation with the support of IDRC. For my contributions - which highlighted methodological gaps and challenged preconceived ideas (particularly regarding the issue

of gender and participation in UA) - the authors of the book, as well as other members of the Foundation, expressed their appreciation both privately and publicly.

Besides contributing to the work of my host NGO, I also advanced and promoted the work of other Cuban institutions and groups involved in UA. Having as I did the luxury of access to meetings and events organized by various groups and institutions throughout the city, I willingly acted as bridge between them – bringing to their attention each other's on-going projects and/or available resources. I assisted groups with the translation of funding proposals and the promotion of their work in international circles, sharing with them information on funding possibilities overseas, including those offered by Agropolis and IDRC. In the case of the Community Patio Project of El Cerro, my assistance led to their securing financial support from a Dutch NGO for a small video project.

I anticipate that the research findings will assist Cuban UA professionals in addressing problems of a practical nature in their everyday work. More specifically, the findings will likely influence the FNH's future plan of action and research agendas by helping that organization to evaluate the effectiveness of its existing UA programs and projects. Aside from the FNH, people from the Provincial Urban Planning Office in Havana as well as the Ministry of Agriculture have expressed an interest in the findings of my research. Once these are compiled, it is my intention to make them available to these organizations.

No publications have yet resulted from the research, this paper representing the first attempt to summarize preliminary findings. The writing of articles and conference presentations will follow full analysis of the data.

V. Conclusions

The research data discussed above present insights of relevance to those interested in UA in Cuba and beyond. At the most general level, findings to date underline the importance of socio-cultural factors in shaping people's experiences and perceptions of UA, drawing attention to the likely implications in terms of the perpetuation of UA practices beyond emergency situations of food insecurity. More concretely, the research points to a perspectival gap between UA professionals and actual producers, a disjuncture of visions that is likely not limited to Cuba. At both levels, this study suggests possible research agendas applicable to other contexts, indicating as it does the need for and possible benefits of studies of UA that go beyond the technical and macro view usually taken by governments or service agencies.

In terms of findings more specifically relevant to the immediate case study, the insight that professional status, institutional affiliation, as well as degree of direct involvement in UA account for significantly different – and sometimes incompatible – perceptions of the phenomenon in the Cuban context, hints at a potential obstacle to the long-term consolidation of UA practices that should not be ignored. The identification of these problems will hopefully allow for constructive interventions within Cuba. For example, with respect to the conflicting mandates and/or needs of various institutions and practitioners, one action which could be taken is the conscious encouragement of

initiatives that bring together - and encourage the exchange of ideas among - the diverse actors involved and/or concerned about the practice of UA. This process has in fact already been initiated in Havana through the workshops organized by the FNH and facilitated in part by IDRC funding, but needs to be sustained and expanded.

Finally, and related to this last point, it should be noted that not all differences in perspective among the actors involved represent immovable positions. Even long-entrenched socio-cultural values are susceptible to reconsideration and change; this is perhaps especially true in a country such as Cuba where radical change seems intrinsic to people's lives.

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