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From heaps of rubble dumped near industrial brownfields in the east end, the Leslie Street Spit has been transformed into an urban wilderness haven for wildlife and birds that's the envy of all North America. But pressure for development is on the rise. C

## news



Our urban gardens feed some, but other cities pay citizens to plant herbal meds.

Photo By David Laurence

## TURNING WASTE WATER INTO GOLD SEEING FECES AS POLLUTION WASTES A PRECIOUS URBAN AGRO COMMODITY

By WAYNE ROBERTS

Montreal – sometimes it takes stories from afar to jar the ecological imagination. Sitting in a classroom in McGill University's architecture department recently, listening to reports on Canadian government-supported urban agriculture projects in Sri Lanka, Argentina and Uganda, I got a tiny foretaste of the possible future of all cities.

Here's what it looks like: urban recycling and city agriculture will become the twin peaks of a new city economy that reclassifies waste. Already, you can see that the big concerns on today's city agendas and budgets are garbage, sewage and stormwater runoff.

People in this room like Luc Mougeot of Canada's International Development and Research Centre, a federal think tank on development in the colonial South, are calling this "the brown agenda." This new colour scheme, a step above the "green agenda,"

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Buttermilk, swans and encounters with beer-bottle pickers keep me cool in the dark

was developed by the United Nations to deal with the housing and sanitation needs of over a billion of the world's poor who suffocate in cities from pollution and waste.

But efficiently disposing of waste water, food scraps and excrement is all about developing agriculture where the majority of people live – in municipalities. Pollution, according to brownthink, is good resources in the wrong place, since the problem is that there's no place to put them to work in the farm-less city.

"I'm as interested in the inputs of urban agriculture as the outputs," says Mougeot, a reference to the fact that city crops can be irrigated with washwater and fertilized with humanure, while city livestock can convert kitchen food scraps into protein and manure that produces energy from biogas.

This colour-coded agenda may have its origins in the needs of developing countries, but it has the potential to remake our cities as well. We use our eighth-of-an-acre yards to grow Kentucky bluegrass and petunias, but these are vast fields compared to the baskets hanging from rafters or walls set with trellises used by Third World farmers in teeming cities.

One-sixth of Toronto's airspace is flat roofs, a virgin prairie for over-the-top agriculture. That, plus a portion of backyards and a few roadway conversions, could put us ahead of the curve.

Consider what use can be made of tiny opportunities in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Several urban farmers from this city have come to Montreal along with reps from Rosario, Argentina, and Kampala, Uganda, to meet with architecture students who design low-cost homes for city farmers.

We are told that 46 per cent of people in Colombo are crowded onto 12 per cent of the land, "squatting" in shantytowns built on floodplains, near garbage dumps or under power lines. Access to running water, flush toilets or sewers is rare. But the city has gone out to promote planting.

Dr. C. D. Palathiratne, the chief medical officer, oversees a project to provide income opportunities, low-cost nutrition for families and herbal remedies that affirm Sri Lanka's Ayurvedic healing traditions.

He encourages people to grow five plants rich in protein, minerals and vitamins – ginger and wild asparagus are the most recognizable to Westerners. These are species that don't need ground space and can creep up walls and fences or handle the cramped quarters of window boxes or containers on ledges.

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The leaves of some of these plants are ground into porridge or cooked as a survival food to prevent malnutrition. Some leaves are bought by the city itself to be processed in 20 municipal dispensaries into herbal medicines that are given free to the poor, saving the medical system from paying for expensive imports of Western pharmaceuticals.

Agriculture is also a growing sector in the industrial central Argentine city of Rosario, to which many farmers who've lost their land have migrated. About 800,000 people, almost two-thirds of the city's population, live below the poverty line, and about 120,000 live in desperate shantytown poverty. Diseases caught from eating food from garbage dumps are a major public health threat.

A reform-minded city government supports urban ag. The aim is to support "barrios productivos," which, a city brochure explains, "generate participatory forms of food production, using ecological techniques" and provide "social integration" for slum residents, especially women, who can't find steady jobs in the formal labour market.

There are 791 community gardens in Rosario, agronomist Raul Terrile tells the Montreal workshop, feeding about 10,000 families. Wherever there's unused land, a garden sprouts. Growing space is also created on what are called "productive streets," a Sesame Street-style conversion of wide roads into garden plots and housing constructed so there is space for gardens.

About 160 gardeners grow enough to sell fresh food in city-organized farmers markets. With assistance from the local university's chemistry and pharmacy departments, about 30 gardeners process their crops into soap, shampoo and cosmetics. The city is building a factory to process more of these local products.

Kampala, too, demonstrates the productivity of making every surface count. Roofs on new low-cost, income-creating houses (a nice shift from the conventional paradigm of "low-income housing") store water from the rainy season.

The poster farmer for Kampala is Edith Chiswal, who composts manure from her cow and stores it in a shed where it hosts oyster mushrooms. The single mom sent two daughters to university with sales of her oysters and "black gold" from manure that once contaminated local water supplies.

Half the world's people live in cities, says McGill architecture prof Vikram Bhatt, director of the Minimum Cost Housing Group, and the recent

Western taboo against growing food in cities is obsolete. Most of the world's ancient religions depict paradise and sites of contemplation as places with fruit-bearing trees, he says, and "this is going to be our future."

Nice to know that the feds' International Development and Research Centre kick-started all three of these projects with funding to the tune of \$600,000. But more interesting to think Canadian cities could twin with such municipalities, offer some of our comparatively lush resources and get an infusion of new ideas about how governments closest to the nitty-gritty of life should have the broadest mandates for making cities better. @  
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