

Affecting Change Through Insurgent Architectures

TIMOTHY GRAY

Ball State University

As pointed out by Wes Janz and Olon Dotson in their paper “Distress Road Tours”, like many rust belt cities, Indianapolis is a place of extremes. Tremendous investment has led to a resurgence of the downtown, and affluent suburbs thrive and grow. In stark contrast the historic neighborhoods that ring the city, the fabric of the place, continue to struggle with significant challenges. There is too much crime and too little neighborhood organization. High drop-out rates lead to low incomes. Poor access to health care exists alongside easy access to low nutrition foods. Like many cities in the region and throughout the world, an eroding manufacturing base, marginal public schools, high crime rates, among other pressures, have all contributed to significant attrition.

While many see only the challenges in the blighted neighborhoods, others see opportunity as a range of interesting energies are emerging. Among these, a growing number of urban farmers are beginning to create a new urban economy putting vacant property to use and making temporary improvements. Income is derived through farmer’s markets, CSA (community supported agriculture) shares, and sales to restaurants dedicated

to a farm-to-table fair. Community members are empowered to participate, to benefit, to learn from, and often to expand these efforts. In many “rust belt” cities, including Indianapolis, urban agriculture has emerged as a productive reuse of vacant land resultant from economic decline, population loss and home foreclosures.

These types of farms are often small in scale, economically challenged, and are often located on marginal sites where conventional structures might not be allowed. The urban interventions required to support the expansion of farming operations on borrowed or vacant land present certain challenges, requiring development to find creative and diverse avenues of approval. Neither guerrilla architecture (operating completely outside the law) nor fully legal, our insurgent architectures navigate within the seams between the temporary and the permanent and populate the voids left through attrition and abandonment.

This poster presents three student design build projects completed over the last six years on urban farms in inner city neighborhoods involving a range of community and professional partners which respond to these conditions. The projects bring together

business, school and community around the concept of reclaiming impacted urban space and turning it into a working farm and urban greenspace. The projects provide facilities to support farming operations, but also provide classroom and lab space for working tours and education and outreach initiatives. Each of the projects use repurposed materials and incorporate a range of sustainable building strategies intended to extend the discussion of sustainable food and sustainable lifestyles to that of the built environment.



**AFFECTING CHANGE THROUGH INSURGENT ARCHITECTURES:
STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN SUPPORT OF URBAN FARMS**

Indianapolis inner city neighborhoods report close to 10,000 vacant properties with 640 demolished in 2010 alone. Like many cities in the region and throughout the world, an eroding manufacturing base, marginal public schools, high crime rates, among other pressures, have all contributed to significant attrition. Interesting energies are emerging from these challenging conditions. Among these, a growing number of urban farmers are beginning to create a new urban economy putting vacant property to use and making temporary improvements. Income is derived through farmer's markets, CSA (community supported agriculture) shares, and sales to restaurants dedicated to a farm-to-table fair. Community members are empowered to participate, to benefit, to learn from, and often to expand these efforts.

This poster documents three projects focused on supporting the efforts of urban farmers in the Indianapolis area. The projects were all designed and fabricated by groups of architecture students working in partnership with broad ranges of professional, community and business partners. All are legal but navigate within seams in the building code distinguishing between the temporary and the permanent. The projects bring together business, school and community around the concept of reclaiming impacted urban space and turning it into a working farm and urban green space. The projects provide facilities to support farming operations, but also provide classroom and lab space for working tours and education and outreach initiatives. Each of the projects use repurposed materials and incorporate a range of sustainable building strategies intended to extend the discussion of sustainable food and sustainable lifestyles to that of the built environment.

Among the lessons discussed will be the reciprocal relationship between the University Students and the community members. In addition to learning a host of skills associated with ambitious design build projects; collaboration, construction skills, managing budget and schedule; students gained insight and empathy for community members living, surviving and often thriving in less than ideal conditions. Students entered the process often intending to teach, to share knowledge and expertise, and often left with an understanding that they had much to learn.

