

SeedBroadcast



agri-Culture Journal

Cultivating Diverse Varieties of Resilience #9

FRUIT FUTURES

FRANCES WHITEHEAD

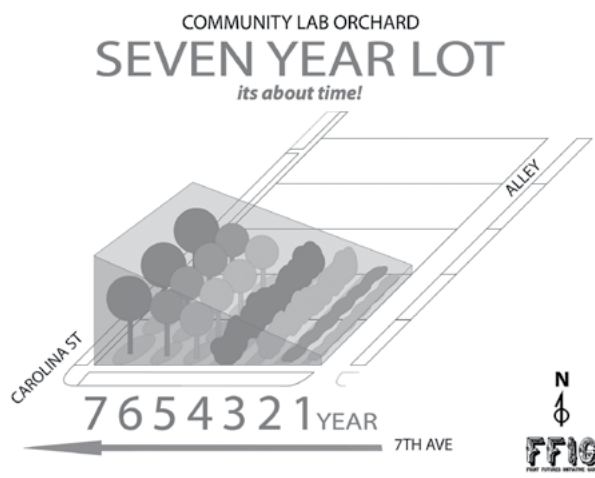
Fruit Futures Initiative Gary (FFIG) is an experimental community orchard project under development with the Emerson community of Gary, Indiana. These multipurpose landscapes of fruiting trees and shrubs aim to engage, educate, and express the creative aspirations of the community. The growing of fruit trees has many dimensions: fruit can contribute to food access, social cohesion, participation, and neighborhood beautification in an underserved community. And the fruit trees can be the focus of thematic festivals and youth programs. Fruit tree blossoms are visually compelling and temperature sensitive, and are a valuable tool for climate awareness. And, the fruit trees can be, over time, the beginning of small businesses; a new fruit economy and culture is possible from this modest start.

However, as art and artistic activism, this initial tree-planting project is aimed at changing perceptions, at making manifest new possibilities with the community of Emerson, and moving outside the inertia of conventional (and so far failing) strategies of typical urban "re-development". The project reopens the question of "beauty" and of "the commons" and explores the potential of multipurpose flowering landscapes to catalyze a new participatory "Art of the Everyday", a new imaginary.

Perched at the south end of the Chicago Metro Area, Gary was founded in 1909 by US Steel and has suffered the predictable fate of company towns. The neighborhood of Emerson is an extreme example of the distress suffered by the city as a whole. The past four decades of Gary's history are largely a story of disinvestment and marginalization, exacerbated by racism, and by the failure of city planners in the 1950's and '60's to prepare for the impacts of suburbanization. Today Emerson lacks the basics: steady population, employment, affordable housing, and public safety. The closing of Emerson school, the focal point and social "glue" of the residential neighborhood severed the last remaining community ties of many long-time residents, who followed the mass emigration out of the city and abandoned their properties. Repeated conventional urban re-development efforts have not altered this population loss and economic decline, and none have benefited the lives of the ordinary residents of Emerson. In spite of a deep-seated love for the neighborhood among residents, Emerson now faces a dimension of disengagement and inertia that is challenging to overcome. This disengagement is coupled with very low population density, creating an atmosphere of desertion and vacancy that is reinforced visually and spatially. Now the stigma of dysfunction has added to these conditions.

How can we ask new questions, and find other possibilities for Emerson? Other than conventional re-development strategies, what potentials are there to increase quality of life in Emerson?

Gary's economic history and its identity as an industrial center have obscured the fact that Gary has the same soils and microclimate as the famous Michigan "fruit belt" just to the east. In spite of a growing interest in fresh local food access, no one has considered large-scale fruit growing. Seen in this context the vast available land in Emerson offers an opportunity to re-imagine the once-residential fabric of post-urban Gary and rethink the future character of this place. Co-op orchards are often shared assets, re-establishing the commons and creating value outside commercial development.



This experimental civic approach is part of an emerging type of critical art practice where artists intervene into urban planning. The "artist urbanist" is a new kind of problem solver, a new kind of urban planner. Here planning is culturally-driven, and co-created with community. FFIG embraces the emerging spatial character of Gary's east side. This speculative post-growth creative and economic strategy has the potential to narrate a different story of land stewardship and community engagement. FFIG, revalues invisible community assets, challenges conventional assumptions of race and place, and models a radically multifunctional approach to culture change, creating diverse value and growing community capacity through cooperation and culture.

On a visual and visceral level, we want to see whether the compelling beauty of spring flowering fruit trees might catalyze curiosity and engagement in the harsh urban fabric of the vacated Emerson streetscape. The stunning natural beauty of flowering fruit trees and productive landscapes reveal that the open space in Emerson can be the key to belonging, the key to inclusion and cooperation.

The initial FFIG project is the Community Lab Orchard, which emphasizes the values of curiosity, cooperation, engagement, and beauty. In the Lab Orchard, neighborhood "fruit explorers" learn a wide variety of innovative and traditional growing techniques and become acquainted with favorite and forgotten small fruits. Embracing the vibrant oral traditions well known in the neighborhood, this hands-on fruit-growing will be accompanied by "Jams and Jellies" cultural programming for greater inclusion and enhanced quality of life.

The Lab Orchard is being developed collaboratively with a wide range of community leaders, organizations and partners. These include Orchard Collaborative co-founders Walter Jones and Deb Backhus, the Rev. Curtis Whittaker, founder of Faith Farms urban ag site, the Neighborhood Spotlight planning process run by the Legacy Foundation, Andrew Hart, the US Forest Service Community Tree Liaison, and many others. These efforts are supported by the City of Gary Departments of Environment and Green Urbanism, and Planning/ Redevelopment. To facilitate the operation of FFIG, and secure the orchard site into the future, we have formed a civically oriented community land trust, The Gary Commons.

This first orchard prototype will inform the long-term work of FFIG towards a network of community orchards and a conversation about cultural futures beyond re-development. As soils are readied and public imaginations engaged, community driven productive landscapes and experimental orchards allow low-density neighborhoods to contribute to foodshed resilience, grow civic pride, and collectively evolve new creative foodways, linking place, identity and environmental justice.

FRANCES WHITEHEAD IS A CIVIC PRACTICE ARTIST BRINGING THE METHODS, MINDSETS, AND STRATEGIES OF CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICE TO THE PROCESS OF SHAPING THE FUTURE CITY. CONNECTING EMERGING ART PRACTICES, THE DISCOURSES AROUND CULTURALLY INFORMED SUSTAINABILITY, AND NEW CONCEPTS OF HERITAGE AND REMEDIATION, SHE DEVELOPS STRATEGIES TO DEPLOY THE KNOWLEDGE OF ARTISTS AS CHANGE AGENTS, ASKING, WHAT DO ARTISTS KNOW? . SHE IS PROFESSOR OF SCULPTURE + ARCHITECTURE AT THE SCHOOL OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO.

Liberar nuestras semillas



Semillas como bienes comunes