

The Urban Foodshed Collaborative

Overview

The *Urban Foodshed Collaborative* (UFC) aims to provide a space and structure for New Haven youth and Yale FES students to connect to the potential of the land around them right in New Haven, and to realize the potential in local, collaborative solutions. It does so through the transformative act of growing food within an entrepreneurial model. I founded UFC in the spring of 2009 in response to a number of trends that I hoped would allow it to succeed: the desire of restaurants and markets to source locally-produced, community-enhancing produce, the many vacant lots that could be turned into productive space, and importantly, the continued need for urban youth to have valuable experiences that also pay a deserved wage. This paper examines the first summer of work of UFC, looking at some of the groups we partnered with, some of the lessons learned, and of course, the context in which it was founded. Alternative solutions to new challenges illuminated during this first summer of work will be evaluated. Further, I have developed a guidebook that will be used to welcome in the next generation of urban farmers to the Urban Foodshed Collaborative.

Who I am – Explaining My Own Entrance into UFC

As the founder and everyday manager of UFC in the summer of 2009, I reported to Colleen Murphy-Dunning, the Director of the Urban Resources Initiative (URI), a Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies (FES) affiliated not-for-profit that took UFC under its wing. UFC became one of URI's *Greenskills* initiatives. I hired and managed four New Haven teenagers, who ranged in age from 15-18, with two having just graduated high school. This job represented my first summer in New Haven and first consistent foray into the landscape of New Haven beyond the immediate vicinity of FES.

Previous years spent working on small, diversified farms had readied me for the physical tasks of growing vegetable crops for market with small tools and no pesticides. I also had considerable experience working with educational programs before beginning this pilot program. I had built up experience with on-farm education in urban neighborhoods through work at the Red Hook Community Farm in Brooklyn, New York and through a program I piloted for the Yale Sustainable Food Project in the spring of 2009.

Previous on-farm jobs with Added Value and Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture had readied me for working with chefs who were interested in sourcing locally. I had learned through these experiences what they valued – unique products, a story behind their food – and also what to warn them of

upfront – potentially inconsistent production and changing quality of goods throughout the summer.

Why I Started UFC – What were the Conditions and Trends?

Trends

Briefly looking at some of the trends before looking at the participants in New Haven's urban food landscape will help set the context in which they operate. All of these trends are widely known to the organizations with whom UFC ended up partnering. Yet whether it is because of binding mission statements, lack of personnel, or territoriality, these trends have not ever been incorporated fully, and thus this policy problem has not been seen and acted upon as an opportunity.

The Continued Existence of Vacant Lots

There are a high number of vacant, unused lots in New Haven, and there didn't appear to be any workable, scalable strategy for productively using them. The number of vacant lots is not being decreased by current attempts, and the number may increase with the foreclosure crisis.

Lack of Food Access and Food Security

New Haven scores as one of lowest towns in Connecticut (166 of 169) for many of the measures of Community Food Security, defined by the USDA and Connecticut Food Policy Council as:

“Community food security supports the development and enhancement of sustainable, community-based strategies to improve access of low-income households to healthful nutritious food, to increase the self-reliance of communities in providing for their own food needs and to promote comprehensive responses to local food, farm and nutrition issues.”

Other results from the study showed that New Haven residents lacked access to fresh food, largely because of a lack of public transportation.

Lack of Jobs for Teens

There is a continuing lack of jobs for New Haven teenagers. Half of the 2,500 New Haven Youth who applied for a job with the City-funded Youth at Work Initiative in the summer of 2009 were not hired.

Markets for Local Produce are Thriving

Farmers markets have found a foothold in New Haven, and more and more restaurants are looking to source their produce from local farms. Of the four

restaurants I approached about UFC, each of them let us know that they would love to source produce from us.

Who We Worked with: Participants, Perspectives, Values, Strategies

All of the trends pointed to an opportunity for a program like UFC to thrive. There was a landscape full of potential farms, folks who could work the farms, and a market for the produce. But who else was operating within this space? What were they seeing when they looked out at the landscape? What were their values and what means were they using to achieve them? In entering into the fray, I sought to check in with the current participants, find areas for potential collaboration, and yet not get sucked in too deep to be able to critically evaluate what UFC was doing. One quote now rings especially true – “...clarifying common interests is not an easy task for the participants or any would-be analyst (Clark, 2002).” I had to retain enough distance from the process to be able to process how it needed to change after its pilot stage.

New Haven Youth

There is incredible diversity amongst all of the youth in New Haven. My trying to pin down any values or perspectives for all of them -- besides a general search for respect -- would be a lesson in unfair generalization by an outsider. However, I can speak to some of the values voiced to me by the Youth crew of UFC this past summer, and share a few of their stories. From there, extrapolating to other youth in similar situations might be more fair and accurate.

Firstly, it is worth noting where the youth were coming from; the youth I worked with were from all over New Haven – I picked them without knowing who they were, but tried to get students from different neighborhoods. One was from Newhallville, another two from Fair Haven, and a fourth from the Hill. They ranged in age from 15 to 18. Two were African-American, two had spent part their lives in Puerto Rico.

What motivated these youth? All of the youth I worked with were very excited by the time payday came around – acquiring some disposable income was important to them. Money, power, and respect – they all came together, and all were important, I was told repeatedly. But UFC also allowed them to fulfill other values – they were given verbal respect from neighbors and parents. They told me repeatedly how “well they slept” after a hard day at work with UFC – that they felt satisfied to be doing something responsible.

However, in general, New Haven youth are the participant group that is most completely left out of the official social and decision processes when it comes to how to use vacant lots in New Haven. This is due in part to the fact that they do

not usually enter into the official arenas where the ownership and use of the lots is decided, but also because of the stigmas attached to being young without money in an already somewhat-gray area, like a vacant lot.

The informal interactions of youth with the lots is referred to often, and usually, it is referred to in a negative manner – shady dealings, drugs, vandalism. These were some of the phrases that were repeated to me by community adults this summer when asked what happened with the overgrown lots.

Merely making a greenspace from a vacant lot in a community does not guarantee a change in how youth will interact with it. Who creates it and maintains it is of importance. At one point this summer, the UFC team and I spent an afternoon cleaning up a URI greenspace (park) called Arch St in the Hill neighborhood. Besides picking up trash, we tried to fix stone bench tops that had been knocked off their bases, and in some cases, broken in two. One of the members of the youth crew, who was from the neighborhood, explained that he probably knew who exactly had broken them – other teenagers who were jealous of this clean, nice space. URI does exemplary work in incorporating community into its Greenspaces program, including youth – indeed that is the goal of the program. This incident merely highlighted the need for more opportunities for youth to become involved, to become the stewards of their own community spaces.

The four youth who worked with UFC were among the 1,200 who were able to get a job through the Youth@Work program this past summer. The New Haven register's article help illuminates how the funding for these students ended up in the city's hands:

“...among some 1,200 city youths ages 14-24, who are working this summer, despite all the funds for the program — about \$400,000 — being axed in the state budget. Luckily, federal stimulus money of about the same amount, and some city funds, saved the program. Officials had counted on both state and stimulus money, hoping to serve 2,000 kids this year, but are grateful they could hire 1,200, about the same as last year. (McLoughlin, 2009)”

There were moments this summer that emphasized just how foreign the day-to-day activities of UFC could feel to the youth – and led to lessons in how to manage them. At one point, two girls were added to the group through late Youth@Work hirings. They didn't like the work from the first minute – complaining that they were “allergic to plants” and the “outside.” Their attitudes brought the whole group's spirit down – the youth felt uncomfortable being enthusiastic when these girls were saying how much they disliked it. After their first day, Colleen and I told them over the phone to come back with entirely new attitudes or not to

come back at all. We made it clear that this was their decision. They didn't come back, and the rest of the group expressed relief at this.

Livable City Initiative

My initial research that led up to the forming of UFC identified vacant lots as an opportunity to create urban farms, and focused on one type of lot in particular that seemed to be primed for use. These spaces, termed "sliver lots", are too small to build on or are deemed otherwise unsuitable for development. Most lots are located in residential areas and are adjacent to people's homes. They have been acquired by the city chiefly through tax foreclosure (Bailey, 2009). While the number of sliver lots has fluctuated over time - counts have ranged from as low as 300 to as high as 800 during a given period - approximately 550 sliver lots are currently owned by the City of New Haven (O'Leary, 2009) and managed by the Livable City Initiative (LCI).

LCI is a part of the New Haven city government. They are in charge of the vacant lots that the city owns. However, how to use sliver lots is an area of debate within the New Haven city government. The main focus is on the sliver lots being purchased and put to use. As the city currently must maintain the land, no tax revenue is generated by the properties, there are liability concerns with the space, and the areas can take away from the stability of a neighborhoodⁱ (MacMillan, 2008). The city Economic Development Department envisioned the spaces being used as driveways or yard extensions by contiguous property owners, but the current climate of economic recession has largely inhibited new purchases, and the foreclosure crisis has shifted the trend of the list to a growing inventory (Bailey, 2009).

LCI's goal is to get the lots back onto the tax rolls. Frank D'Amore, the deputy director of the LCI has remarked that it has been increasingly difficult to find buyers, even with prices as low as 25 cents per square foot (MacMillan, 2008). The most recent proposal, suggested in the spring of 2009 by LCI, is to give sliver lot properties away for free to adjacent homeowners. Legal constraints may require that the city charge a dollar for a sliver lot property; this technical issue is still being addressed. For the first 10 years, the buyer would pay no taxes; following this period, the taxes would then be phased in over the next five years (Bailey, 2009). The city hopes that this will encourage their acquisition and use by neighborhood landowners; however, there is uncertainty as to whether this incentive will produce the desired effect. Logic and low past procurement patterns seem to point towards this initiative not fully addressing the needs and means of the communities where these lots are the most common. Lower income neighborhoods don't want the taxes, and are less likely to own the houses they're living in; there are fewer adjacent homeowners to buy up the lots.

Since 1996, the City has only sold 245 lots, according to Mayoral spokeswoman Jessica Mayorga (Bass, 2009), for an average of less than 20 lots per year. With the number of sliver lots now owned by the city, it is clear that a change in strategy is needed.

In my discussions with LCI, they offered to let UFC use as many sliver lots as we could. We wouldn't have to lease them, we wouldn't have to buy them – we just had to leave them in the same condition we found them in if they were sold by the city. They were very excited and supportive of the idea of productive use of the sliver lots, and put together a list of 15 sites that they thought might have good sun exposure.

The lots were very big, much bigger than I thought they'd be. If we could use them, we could grow a lot of food. This was an exciting time for the project – and LCI was excited that we might use the lots. It would certainly reflect well on them. I quickly realized however that the lots lacked water access – I had hoped that as former sites of homes they might still have water spigots. The methods of getting water onto the sites were either too expensive (actual establishment of water access to city water lines) or too variable and dependent on neighbors and weather (such as rain-barrels that collected water from their roofs.)

The UFC would have to change its original idea for land access in the short term, and try to come up with some new ideas until water procurement could be dealt with. With that in mind, I began to approach non-profits and companies that might have land they needed help measuring – but where they had already established water.

New Haven Land Trust

The New Haven Land Trust (NHLT) is a small, New Haven-based non-profit that runs a number of nature preserves and importantly to this paper, 49 community gardens. There is one full time employee, and an active Board of Trustees. Through my conversation with individuals who were knowledgeable about New Haven nonprofits, I was told that while well-intentioned, NHLT was understaffed, and sometimes lacked the person power needed on some of their properties – in other words, a potential partner.

While setting up UFC months before, I had wanted to touch base with NHLT, just to make sure they knew I was thinking of doing this venture, and wanted to do it collaboratively. In no way did I want to step on their toes. But maybe there would be chances for collaboration, I had told them. Now that the situation had arisen where I was in need of land, they were more than happy to look over their gardens and see if there was potential for partnership.

Apparently, they had multiple plots which were not being used actively by their gardeners, but which they had leased from the city and on which they had paid multiple thousands of dollars to install water access. They would be happy for us to take them for the duration of the summer, they said. They would have a productive garden that they hoped could attract members of the community back to the garden. UFC would have lots (with water) on which to work. Importantly, the movement for urban gardens was strengthened as a whole – rather than having an empty, overgrown lot with a big, permanent sign saying “New Haven Land Trust” next to garden being worked by local youth, we could combine the two efforts.

The relationship between the NHLT and LCI is one that has more complexity than the following quotation indicates, but it is worth looking at nonetheless. In it, Chris Randall, president of the Land Trust, is responding to reassurances from Frank D’Amore (of LCI) that the potential sale of a community garden to developers is not going through –

“That made me feel better, but the fact that that garden was even on that list for consideration, to me it’s a little disturbing,” said Randall. “I let [D’Amore] know that if they did try to sell a community garden, we wouldn’t let it go without a fight. (Bailey, 2009)”

From talking to Chris about the gardens that UFC ended up working – which were in danger of being unused to the point where the city could take them back - I realized that the NHLT’s model, which called for putting in permanent raised beds of soil and establishing water access, left them fighting for the continued use of their lots in cases when a developer made a better offer for them, or even when the communities that had originally used them had lost interest or moved. When lots are converted with annual plants, such as gardens are, they need constant care.

On one of the lots where UFC worked this summer, in the Hill neighborhood at the corner of Davenport Ave. and Ward St., I heard the tale of how that garden was abandoned. Apparently, a school had been built, and eminent domain had been used to clear out a row of houses near the garden. Kids from a local lead-safe house had originally been the primary drivers of the garden, but now that they had been dispersed, the garden had fallen into disuse. This type of tale is not uncommon.

Yale Sustainable Food Project, City Seed, Common Ground

There were other organizations that were already involved in food system-related work in New Haven, and I sought to make connections with all of them before beginning UFC. I wanted them to be aware of UFC’s desire to collaborate in

whatever ways possible. Though they are all organizations run with similar values and missions, I had already witnessed one small territorial dispute in the spring of 2009 between the Yale Sustainable Food Project and Common Ground that had arisen because of a lack of communication on education programs.

All three of the organizations provided some advice or resources after I made contact with them. City Seed, a non-profit that runs New Haven's farmers markets, offered up advice on how to get food from the gardens to restaurants while staying within the health code. Common Ground, a sustainable agriculture school, arranged for me to speak to some of their students about joining the project. The Yale Sustainable Food Project's farm manager let UFC use tools that summer that we would not otherwise have been able to afford, and gave copious advice.

Chabaso Bakery and Atticus Cafe

The farm educator at Common Ground put me in touch with the owner of Chabaso Bakery in Fair Haven – apparently Chabaso was looking for some advice on how to run a garden next to its bread factory, but Common Ground didn't have the extra hands to do it. So, I touched base with the owner, and a partnership was built. This one, I reasoned, would give the youth crew a unique fork-to-plate-to-cash-register experience. They would work in the garden at Chabaso, grow basil and tomatoes, learn to cook and make pesto with the chef there, then help bring the pesto to Atticus in downtown New Haven where they would see their fresh pesto incorporated into beautiful sandwiches. They ended up meeting with the store manager who explained to them – in very stark terms - why this partnership worked for him. He wants to do good, he explained, but he also has a financial bottom line to watch. Our program allowed him to do both at once. People want to buy things that you grow, he told the youth crew. When they left that meeting, they couldn't stop talking about the need to expand the program, how successful it could be, how many friends they could recruit.

Yale Divinity School

We also ended up partnering with the Yale Divinity School, who had just started a small student garden, but needed a team to help manage it for the summer. A perfect fit from an unexpected partner – and with stewards built in to take over the garden in fall.

Miya's Sushi

UFC also needed to find a restaurant to support us – to deal with the potential inconsistency of our product that first year – but still value our product and what it represented enough to pay us a fair price for it. Miya's Sushi ended up being a perfect fit for us. We delivered to them weekly. Miya's is run by a New Haven-born chef who not only wants the freshest food to end up on his customers'

plates, but wants to give back to the community in tangible, visible ways. His business, he explained to me, survives off of the loyalty of its customers. Because of the somewhat eccentric menu, Miya's needs to form a bond with the customers who like it. One way to form that bond for him is offer food with a story. Working with UFC would give him that chance, and give UFC a buyer for its produce.

What's next? – Alternatives & Recommendations

The summer of 2009 was the pilot run of UFC. This represented a real-time analysis of the status quo decision-making process while running an alternative to the existing policy problem. It was a success in many ways, but as emphasized throughout this paper, there are aspects of the program that will be changed in future iterations of UFC.

We need to craft a plan that continues to build between the many efforts within New Haven, and fills in not only the physical gaps in the city's food access points, but also seals them between organizational efforts. Perhaps UFC can act as a convener, in a neutral, mission-aligned meeting spot (like a vacant lot or rotating around the various urban farms in New Haven) – bringing together the many groups who work on these issues to find common ground and shared goals.

We will need to work with LCI's offer of the sliver lots. But to do so, we will need to construct mobile garden beds. These beds should be able to be moved, when necessary, to other lots, if the lots they are in get sold. These beds need to be able to catch and hold their own water beyond what falls onto the soil. To this end, we have put together some initial designs (see Appendix B) that have little "wings" that will fold out, catch water, and hold it in bladders that will allow water to wick up to the beds when needed. The fact that we won't require installed water access will allow to move when needed with our newly designed, light weight beds. We can also move the beds to areas where there is more interest, if need be. This will lower the potential friction over land use between LCI and UFC.

Eventually, the youth crews will not only be responsible for working the land, but will also help locate vacant lots in areas of particularly high opportunity - where there are many youth who need jobs, who need to be shown respect and given the opportunity to earn some wealth. This is information that they have, and will be able to contribute. They will be advocates for these lots' use with City officials – they will be part of the decision-making process.

Acknowledgements:

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Appendix A – Calculations of Potential Urban Agriculture Benefits and food access gap analysis conducted in *Urbanization, Global Change, and Sustainability*, a Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies course in Spring 2009.

Urban Agriculture Benefits

	Sliver Lot Area (acres)	Total Crop Yield (lbs)	Total Food Grown (\$)	Total Investment (\$)
AMITY	1.64	13118.3	\$50,013.52	\$8,335.59
ANNEX	0.06	464.9	\$1,772.44	\$295.41
BEAVER HILLS	0.00	0.0	\$0.00	\$0.00
DIXWELL	2.95	23639.1	\$90,124.08	\$15,020.68
DOWNTOWN	0.21	1664.8	\$6,346.87	\$1,057.81
DWIGHT	0.55	4373.9	\$16,675.40	\$2,779.23
EAST ROCK	0.15	1174.4	\$4,477.35	\$746.23
EAST SHORE	3.43	27448.9	\$104,648.92	\$17,441.49
FAIR HAVEN	4.35	34815.9	\$132,735.61	\$22,122.60
FAIR HAVEN HEIGHTS	3.01	24097.9	\$91,873.32	\$15,312.22
HILL	2.46	19697.2	\$75,095.74	\$12,515.96
NEWHALLVILLE	3.50	28025.3	\$106,846.40	\$17,807.73
PROSPECT HILL	0.68	5448.6	\$20,772.87	\$3,462.14
QUINNIPIAC MEADOWS	0.03	204.5	\$779.58	\$129.93
WEST RIVER	0.61	4901.7	\$18,687.78	\$3,114.63
WOOSTER SQUARE	0.00	0.0	\$0.00	\$0.00
NEW HAVEN	23.63	189075.4	720849.9003	120141.6501

Key For Following Diagrams



= Census blocks with grocery store access



= Existing Community Gardens



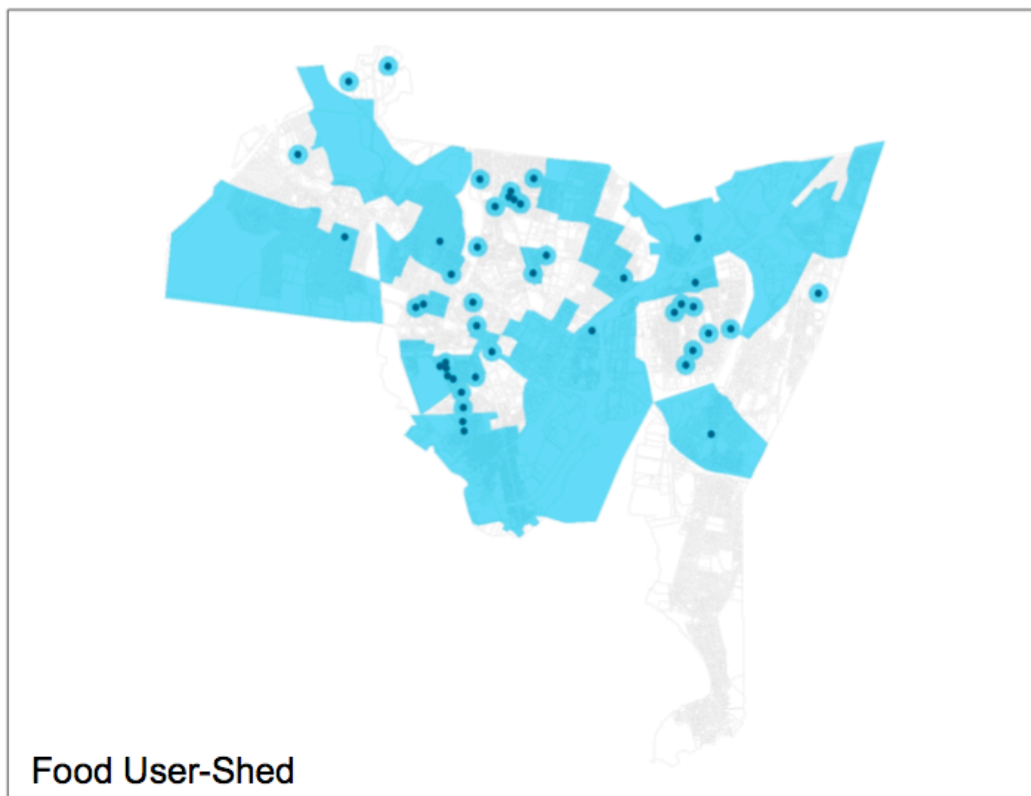
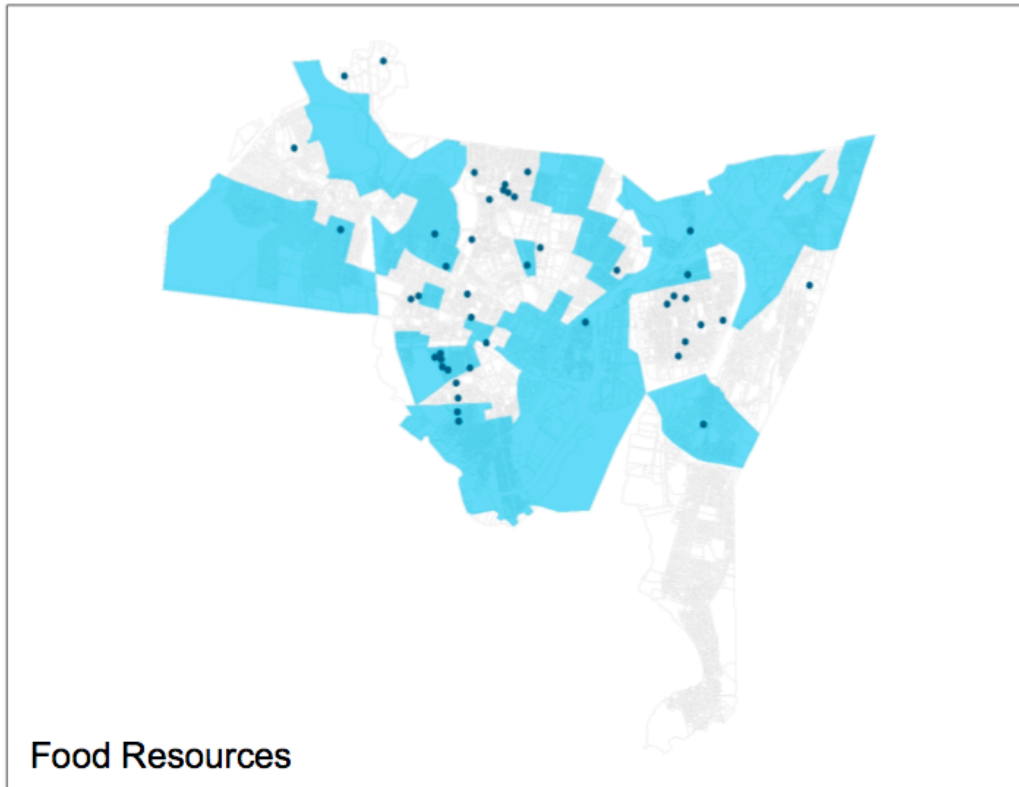
= Theoretical Access from exiting community gardens

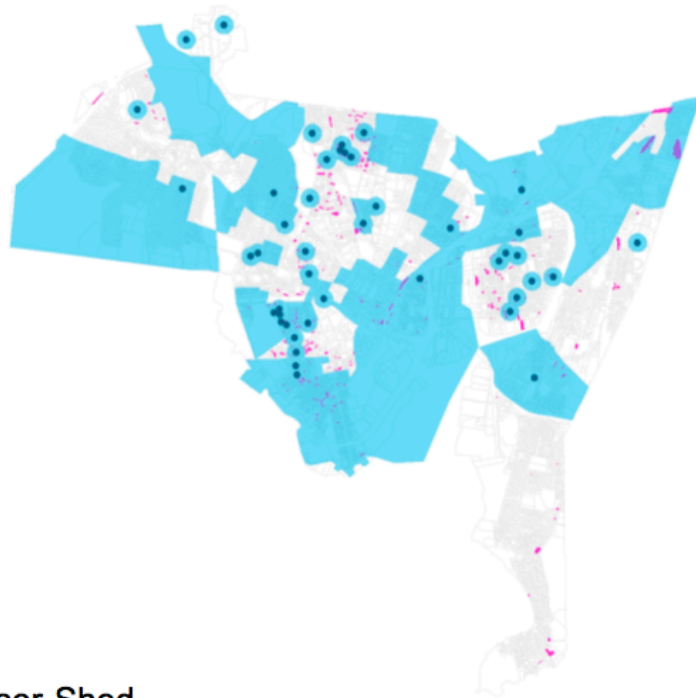


= Sliver Lots

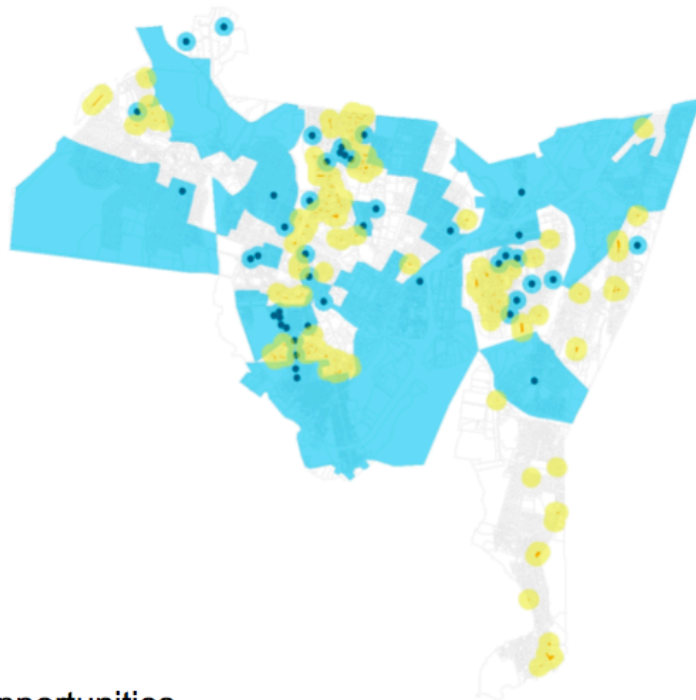


= Access from Sliver Lot Garden





Food User-Shed



Food Opportunities

Appendix B – Initial design of moveable garden bed

