Great Topic (Urban Agriculture) and Good Start (to Academic Career)

The first step in the research process is to select a good topic. Coming up with a fresh subject for a dissertation or first published article can make or break an academic career. Think of UCLA professor Donald Shoup, FAICP, on parking or University of Virginia professor Timothy Beatley on sustainability. Both have made quite a name for themselves through focused research. Virginia professor Timothy Beatley on career. Think of UCLA professor Donald Shoup, FAICP, on parking or University of

Isles Community Garden, Trenton, New Jersey

For the new academic, there are both advantages and disadvantages to picking a popular topic. Among the advantages is the ready-made audience of motivated readers. It is also easier for a journal editor to find peer reviewers for an article on a common topic. And the reviewers themselves may have more to offer in the way of constructive criticism. Finally, an article on a popular topic is likely to be cited frequently.

Now for the disadvantages: The scholars who will be asked to review your work may have a proprietary interest in the topic and thus may be more critical of your treatment. Journal editors look for new slants in articles on oversubscribed subjects. Under a former editor of the Journal of the American Planning Association, for instance, we had a policy of rejecting otherwise adequate papers on travel and the built environment simply because the journal had already published a lot on that topic.

I personally would like to see more diversity in research topics. The purpose of research is (according to my favorite source, Wikipedia) to search for knowledge, solve new or existing problems, prove new ideas, or develop new theories. I have to believe that urban planning researchers add more to the knowledge base of our field by writing about something fresh and new than by being the 200th researcher to explain household travel choices in terms of built environmental variables.

Here’s an idea

Against this backdrop, consider the topic of urban agriculture or urban farming. It is certainly underresearched. Earlier this year, one of our graduate research assistants at the University of Utah reviewed issues of JAPA and the Journal of Planning Education and Research going back five years, and found only one article dealing with urban agriculture, and even then in a very limited way (“Using Land Inventories to Plan for Urban Agriculture: Experiences From Portland and Vancouver,” JAPA, Autumn 2008). This is a topic ripe (so to speak) for academic research, one that has already captured the public imagination.

Last year, a Memphis judge ordered a local schoolteacher to remove a vegetable garden from his front yard. The judge ruled that the garden was a public nuisance. The ensuing public outcry grew as quickly as the earliest spring peas. The story was picked up by dozens of reporters and bloggers (it even made the Washington Post), with headlines like “You say tomato, I say code violation.” More than 8,000 people signed an online petition supporting the teacher’s right to maintain his garden.

Here’s an example of a topic with legs (or sprouts). Everyone, it seems is interested in urban agriculture, neighborhood community gardens, farmers markets, and backyard vegetable plots. The urban agricultural movement complements other movements, including food security, sustainability, and “local food.” In cities saddled with decades of population losses, where property abandonment and decay are rampant, access to nutritious foods meets an extant need, particularly in low-income neighborhoods. In response, dozens of cities—Kansas City, Seattle, San Francisco, Salt Lake City, and others—have rewritten their zoning codes and regulations to enable urban agriculture.

In the Autumn 2012 issue of JPER (already available through OnLineFirst), Joel Thibert of the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University explores the planning and policy implications of the urban agriculture movement in Detroit, Montreal, and Toronto. Given an underresearched topic and a dearth of published data, he is forced to rely mostly on interviews with community leaders. He notes that challenges to the movement are as much cultural as technical or legal, observing that even in the most depressed cities, large-scale gardens tend to be viewed by low-income residents as regressive rather than innovative.

The urban agriculture movement is not a panacea for urban decay, Thibert concludes, but it does hold promise as a community and economic development strategy—so long as it is integrated into a city’s comprehensive plan and zoning code.

This is a great topic for a planning researcher just starting his career, like Thibert. He may be the next Shoup or Beatley in this novel area of study. Even that Memphis judge got into the spirit, declaring at a later hearing on the schoolteacher’s garden, “I’ve always encouraged environmental activists, sustainability, going green, and blight reduction.” In the end, he allowed the garden to remain.

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Ewing is a professor of city and metropolitan planning at the University of Utah and an associate editor of JAPA. Past columns are available at http://cmpweb.uchicago.edu/research_projects/research-you-can-use. Joel Thibert’s article is available at http://jios.ualberta.ca/content/early/recent. Also see “Zoning for Urban Agriculture” by Nina Mukherji and Alfonso Morales in APA’s Zoning Practice (March 2010).