Urban agriculture in Havana

As the saying goes: “Necessity is the mother of invention.” When Cuba found itself abruptly cut off from trade with the Soviet bloc in 1989, the country faced an economic crisis of unprecedented severity. Already sidelined from international trade due to U.S. embargoes, Cuba became, almost overnight, a country detached from the rest of the world.

Along with the evaporation of food imports, Cuba lost access to the animal feed, fertilisers and fuel that had sustained the island’s agricultural efforts. Presented with a near collapse of its food provisioning system, the Cuban Government responded with an overhaul of agriculture on the island, prioritising organic farming methods, the production of useful, edible crops and the use of peasant labour.

In urban areas, guerrilla gardening initiatives blossomed into new state-supported urban farming programmes, with widespread voluntary participation. These farming efforts produced what some have described as “the world’s largest working model of semi-sustainable agriculture”. Havana has become an exemplary model of this new self-provisioning, a precedent that demonstrates both the opportunities
for, and obstacles to, the transference of urban agriculture to other regions.

A city of more than 2 million people, Havana provides an example of a systematic approach to rethinking urban landscapes for more productive means: food production infrastructure has been woven into the city fabric, with interventions that range in size from backyard gardens to large peri-urban farms. A combination of top-down state support and ground-up citizen participation has proved wildly successful. Economist Sinan Koont estimates that “more than 35,000 hectares of land are being used in urban agriculture in Havana”.

The urban agriculture practised in Havana provides an important model for any city transitioning towards food independence. As climate change intensifies and energy, land and water reserves diminish, many see the value in a return to local economies and the development of more resilient food systems. Cuba’s model — affordable, accessible, comprehensive, and de facto organic — could be particularly instructive for other nations seeking improved food security.

The full article can be read in *The Architectural Review*: www.architectural-review.com/archive/cubas-urban-farming-revolution-how-to-create-self-sufficient-cities/8660204.fullarticle

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