

HORIZON

Sowing Change

The Making of Havana's Urban Agriculture

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spaces. Despite these tensions, by 2000, when material conditions had improved and the state had managed to recuperate some of its economic power, a coherent discourse and set of practices appeared to be emerging. Most institutional actors coincided in reasserting a previously hegemonic understanding of the ideal organization of space that emphasized order and central planning, reaffirming the ultimate power of the state. Sometimes, this power was reasserted in reference to the primacy of revolutionary ideals that underscored solidarity with the broader community, while at other times, it was mere adherence to official regulations and rules that appeared to matter most.

As will be seen, producers working in this field understood these expectations and, whether out of conviction or as a result of political maneuvering, in their own public practices and discourses reproduced the ideal of solidarity with the wider community, adherence to officially endorsed agricultural practices, and their ultimate allegiance to *la revolución*. Still, as illustrated in the following chapter, for producers associated with patios and parcelas, involvement in food production was generally driven by personal and mundane desires and objectives. Their practice was largely private, and their politics was, above all, a politics of necessity shaped by shifting landscapes of power that left them feeling marginalized from a rapidly changing Cuban economy. Their perspective on patios and parcelas spoke of a lived experience of these sites seldom acknowledged in official discourses.

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Place-Bound

Becoming an Urban Farmer in Havana

I was first introduced to Manolo, a rabbit breeder from the humble municipality of El Cerro, in early 2001, when Havana was changing so rapidly I never knew what to expect on each visit. Every time I returned someone I knew had left Cuba in search of a better life overseas; new hotels, restaurants, and hard-currency stores had appeared in places where none had existed before; and the old American cars that once dominated the roads seemed increasingly outnumbered by new imports. Among the few things that remained constant for me over the next decade were Manolo's hospitality and the decor of his sparsely furnished living room: his bike parked in a corner, a hard sofa, and a couple of rocking chairs placed in a semicircle to one side; on one wall, a large framed picture of Jesus; on the other, two pictures from his fishing days.

One afternoon, as we chatted about life, he pointed to the fishing pictures and told me that he had owned a boat for many years and, had he wanted to, he could have left Cuba but, he explained, "I am not interested in leaving. I am not interested in living elsewhere, particularly not the U.S. I would like to go to Canada but the climate is too harsh." He laughed and continued: "Spain, I don't like it either. Besides, I don't have to go anywhere; my neighbors, my neighborhood, this is my family. The neighbors have known me since I was a child. Do you understand? Why would I want to go anywhere where people don't even know who I am? Here everyone knows me and I am a popular guy."

Manolo did not mention any hardships at the beginning of our conversation, but later he did touch on the issue of food scarcity several

times. When he discussed why people had, since the early 1990s, turned in greater numbers to cultivating vegetable gardens or breeding rabbits at home in a place like Havana, he summed up the situation with the following words: "Household heads in particular feel the necessity of feeding their young. So it is they who sacrifice themselves by entering this world [of urban agriculture]."

Although some Cubans—aided by new lucrative work in the tourist industry, remittances, or new work and study opportunities overseas—were able to fend off (or altogether escape) the worst effects of the still lingering crisis, not everyone was so lucky.¹ For many Havana residents, the "new" global sense of place mentioned in the Introduction was paired up with feelings of scarcity, despair, and isolation. For many of the people I worked with, their world shrank rather than expanded as Cuba supposedly opened to the world; their feeling of being rooted in place was not erased but ironically amplified as myriad transnational flows of people, ideas, capital, and goods increasingly crisscrossed national boundaries. While in some ways the urban farmers I worked with appeared to be quintessential postmodern subjects that "have entered into a new condition of neighborliness, even with those most distant from [themselves]" (Appadurai 1990, 2), they remained remarkably place-focused and, most of all, place-bound.

This chapter sketches how small-scale urban agriculture practitioners associated with parcelas and patios experience their neighborhood, and their production sites, and how this experience, in turn, connects to citizens' experience of changing material circumstances during the Special Period. So far as this chapter considers the everyday, nonpublicized, and even underground narratives and experiences of small-scale producers pertaining to the spaces they inhabit, it not only begins to reveal the lived dimension of parcelas and patios but also throws light on the perspective of a segment of civil society seldom given a voice in official narratives within Cuba and also largely ignored in the international literature that celebrates Cuban urban agriculture.²

The analysis reveals common, as well as divergent, perspectives among practitioners on the significance of parcelas and patios and their ideal relationship with the broader community and the state. In addition

to illustrating the privatization of public spaces involved in the making of parcelas, the analysis shows the impact that the gardens in general have on producers' sense of well-being and their feeling of connectedness to the world around them. These feelings, as will be seen, often contrast with producers' experience of the surrounding human community and physical environment.

In contrast with prior chapters that focused on public narratives and official practices pertaining to urban agriculture sites, which explicitly underscore their political significance and supposed role in a changing socialist Cuba, this chapter focuses on the individual and lived dimensions of these sites and their connection to personal and mundane needs. From this perspective, parcelas and patios emerge as distinctive spaces that allow for the pursuit of personal rather than political or national projects—although it would be wrong to assume that these two need to be exclusive of each other. Indeed, as subsequent chapters will show, projects that are primarily personal and have no explicit political agenda do converge with state projects and, on occasion, partake in reproducing ideals previously promoted by the socialist state.

Enclosing Scales and the Practice of Urban Agriculture

Manolo finished his commentary on people's recent involvement in urban agriculture by saying, "Besides, now, household heads do not go out anyway; now, there are no buses to go anywhere; there are no places to go out to, so they keep themselves entertained this way [by becoming involved in primary food production at home]." Manolo was not exaggerating. Not only had recreational places still accessible to Cubans greatly deteriorated, but transportation to them was limited. For the majority of urban farmers I worked with, moving even short distances within the city was, until recently, an onerous and uncomfortable task.

During the initial years of the economic crisis, Havana experienced acute shortages of gasoline and replacement parts for motor vehicles. Car traffic, which had always been fairly limited in postrevolutionary Cuba (Schweid 2004), dropped by a third from its pre-1989 levels. Havana's

public transportation system, which had once consisted of approximately two thousand buses that moved four million people a day, came to a near halt and recuperated too slowly in subsequent years to keep up with demand.³ By 2001, when Manolo made his comment, buses were too crowded and the lines for them too long to make them a viable option for many people. The great majority of those I worked with moved around on foot or by bicycle—a mode of transportation that had become common at the peak of the economic crisis.⁴ Their limited mobility was reinforced in most cases by their status as retired or unemployed people who, no longer obliged to go out to work, spent most of their day at home or nearby.⁵

Provisions through the state-subsidized ration stores located in every neighborhood had previously adequately covered basic food needs, but now they met only 55 percent of an individual's nutritional requirements (Díaz Vázquez 2000). Although since the beginning of the post-1989 crisis new food supply venues had opened up throughout the city, access was far from universal. Above the ration quotas, common items, such as chicken and eggs, generally had to be purchased in dollar stores—opened in 1993—at prices that were still high for most people. For example, chicken legs were sold for a dollar a pound, which then equaled approximately one-eighth of an average monthly salary.⁶ The variety and quality of produce available at *agromercados*—the agricultural markets where, since 1994, independent farmers and members of cooperatives have been allowed to sell directly to the population—varied from one neighborhood to another, with those located in more affluent areas better stocked. In general, most *agromercados* offered root crops like cassava, fruits like plantains, and meat such as pork and goat, but prices for these items remained high for average peso-earning citizens, sometimes costing them ten times the price they would have paid for the same through the ration. Some animals, such as rabbits, were not sold at *agromercados* but instead at a few expensive restaurants in well-to-do neighborhoods.

Small-scale urban agriculture, practiced in home patios or neighborhood vacant lots, offered people access to rabbits, chickens, eggs, and a range of vegetables they could not easily get otherwise. From this per-

spective, engagement in primary food production was understandably experienced less as a choice than, as Manolo put it, a necessity experienced by those lacking the required financial resources or mobility to take advantage of existing food venues. Here, the practice of urban agriculture emerged not as an action taken in defense of *la revolución*, or even the nation, but as a personal choice for survival in a context of uneven food access.

Partly originating out of restricted mobility, urban agriculture itself also resulted in increased immobility for practitioners as the activities involved in properly caring for plants and animals required them to remain in place. While small-scale urban farmers told me they found pleasure in their food production endeavors, they also described the work involved with terms such as *mucho sacrificio* (much sacrifice) and *un trabajo esclavo* (an enslaving job), emphasizing how their work tied them to the production site (usually located in or near the home), preventing travel for long periods of time.

Being restricted to life in the barrio was experienced negatively by some of the producers. Their descriptions of their barrios—particularly in the core municipalities of El Cerro, La Habana Vieja, and Centro Habana, where I conducted the bulk of my research—betrayed a sense of feeling enclosed within a decaying physical and social environment that was perceived to have deteriorated particularly as a result of the economic crisis and general lack of resources available for construction, urban development, and employment opportunities. The physical surroundings were often described as “decaying” and “dilapidated” and as lacking in pleasant public spaces. While producers did interact with their neighbors and, as indicated by Manolo’s words, were close to some of them, they considered themselves to be different from most barrio residents.

Producers defined themselves as “hardworking,” “honest,” and “law-abiding” people who minded their own business and were easy to get along with. Although most, like Manolo, had trusted friends in their neighborhood, it was not uncommon for producers to describe the majority of residents in the barrio as being of dubious character. Speaking of his neighbors, Roberto, a self-employed mechanic in his midthir-

ties who had been raising chickens and rabbits with the help of his wife on the rooftop of his childhood home, went so far as to say: “To be honest, I prefer a total stranger to the Cuban next to me because it is the latter who is harming me; he is the one who wants to steal my animals, who gossips about me buying feed [illegally]. Since they do not have much to eat, they speak ill of you behind your back. These things bother you because you are sacrificing yourself, working hard, and they are gossiping behind your back.”

In addition to highlighting awareness of growing inequalities in the area of food access and the tensions arising from that situation within the neighborhood, this and other narratives underscored the uncomfortable feeling of “being watched”—a feeling related to a history of surveillance formally embedded in nationwide, neighborhood-based civic organizations such as the CDRs, whose functions included reporting on counterrevolutionary or “antisocial” activities. The CDRs, located on every city block, have in recent years reputedly become less effective at monitoring the activities of neighborhood inhabitants. Nevertheless, some residents—based on prior experience with this organization—continue to feel that each neighbor is a potential state informant. In this sense, some of the producers seemed to experience the small territorial unit of the neighborhood as a sort of “public stage” where they could not afford to be totally open and had to manage their image. Whether they were buying agricultural inputs on the black market or breaking some known rules regarding food production in the city, most producers felt neighbors had the power to get them into trouble with authorities, potentially leading to the halting of their agricultural practices. While in this respect producers felt they had to be mindful of what they did at their production sites, they also felt safest and most at ease when they were there. This is not surprising considering that most of these sites, even those located on state land, were treated and experienced as private spaces.

Creating Private Places on State Land

Sitting in the crowded bedroom-studio of his tiny three-room house in El Cerro, about six blocks from Roberto’s house, Pedro, a man in his late fifties, succinctly recounted how he and his neighbors had created four gardens on a demolition site adjoining their residences on Dawn Street. He recalled, “We took out all the garbage and sealed the façade of the building so that no one could dump garbage into the site.” This “sealing off” made the gardens both inaccessible and invisible from the street (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2). In addition to the obvious practical reasons for this enclosure (preventing vandalism and theft, damage by animals, etc.), this action effectively excluded surrounding community members from a space that had previously been open to everyone. In this sense, the fence-

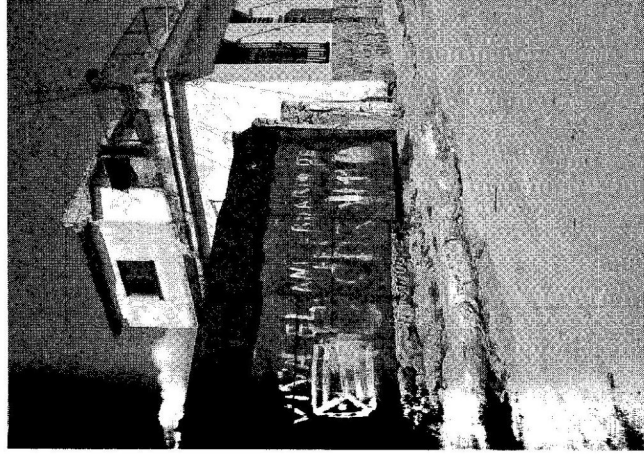


Figure 3.1. Makeshift facade for garden site on Dawn Street (view from the street).

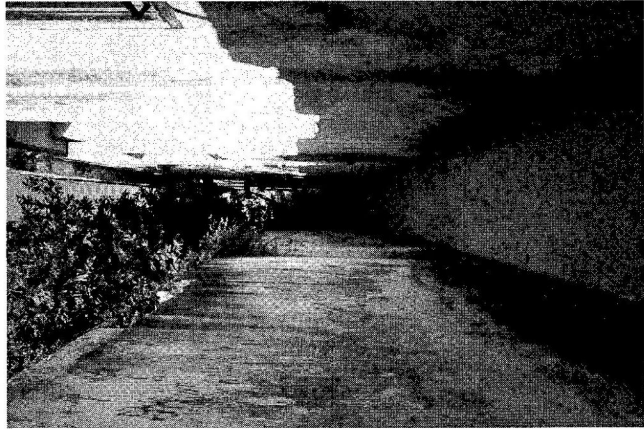


Figure 3.2. Location of garden site on Dawn Street (view from the alleyway).



Figure 3.3. Private gate for one of the gardens on Dawn Street.



Figure 3.4. Another private gate for one of the Dawn Street gardens.

ing of this and other parcels in the city signaled the *de facto* appropriation of a public, common space by private citizens.

This “privatization” of public land through its conversion into parcels was further underscored by the creation or placement of physical connectors between the garden sites and the private residences of their caretakers. Thus, in Pedro’s alley, each garden doorway was specifically carved out to more or less face the entrance doors of the private residences of the gardeners located a meter away across the alley (see Figures 3.3 and 3.4). Beyond the obvious convenience of this arrangement, this positioning of doorways and even windows (see Figure 3.5) spatially underscored the intimate relationship understood to exist between the caretakers’ residences and the gardens. That the latter were experienced as an extension of the domestic space was evident in the way in which parcela caretakers or *parceleros* often referred to these sites as their home

patios. Thus, Román, a neighbor of Pedro’s described his residence to me by saying: “My house is composed of a small living room, a kitchen, a washroom, a room I built upstairs, and my patio [referring to the parcela]. . . . I opened a little door there in the patio right across from mine so that, although it is in a separate lot, it is really part of my home.” Pedro had gone even further in spatially marking the parcela as part of his property. Taking advantage of the fact that his home was the last one in the alley, he placed a wooden fence not just across the garden’s doorway but across the alley itself, effectively enclosing his residence and the parcela opposite to it into a single spatial unit.

Physical markers like this, which spatially denote the incorporation of the parcela into the producer’s private home, were not uncommon in the city. Although they are impossible with parcels located far from the producer’s residence, when physical proximity permits, such links are often made. Thus, a parcela in Habana Vieja that adjoined the back wall of the producer’s residence, although the entrance was on a parallel street one block over, was symbolically marked by a dangling string of aluminum cans functioning as scarecrows, which stretched from the producer’s home terrace to the garden lot below. The planned addition of permanent fixtures in many of the parcels I visited, as well as the plant-



Figure 3.5. A view of Pedro’s garden from his home window.

ing of long-term crops, further suggests a sense of ownership rights on the part of parceleros.

These private claims are also reflected by the presence of furnishings and objects that further incorporate these places into the domestic sphere of the producers. Parcelas are often used by the caretakers and their families to store private household goods or for activities like hanging the laundry to dry. They also contain furniture, such as tables and chairs, used for private social gatherings and for playing domino games with friends. It is also not uncommon for parcelas to be decorated with personal touches that reflect the individual tastes, history, and identity of the caretaker. Thus, in Pedro's garden one finds, hanging among the vegetables pieces of colored glass, discarded toys, and other artifacts of personal significance (e.g., a teacup given to him by his last lover). In this sense, parcelas become sites for the display of individual or family identities, intertwined with acts of homemaking and ultimately experienced as private spaces consciously marked off from the world without.⁷

The Garden as Personal Refuge

By the time I met Pedro, his garden had been photographed numerous times by representatives of governmental and nongovernmental institutions and by curious foreigners like me interested in Havana's urban agriculture sites. As he proudly told me, his garden had even been featured on a television program so that strangers now greeted him on the street as "the squash man"—a nickname that alluded to one of the most characteristic features of his garden: the vertical cultivation of squash (see Figure 3.6). In spite of this relative fame, Pedro's garden remained an unseen and unknown space for most people, except for a few institutional visitors, his immediate neighbors, and his close friends. This relative invisibility was fine with Pedro since he valued his privacy.

I met Pedro in 1998 but became close to him later, during my doctoral fieldwork, when I spent many afternoons or mornings in his cramped residence debating all sorts of topics, from Latin American politics to gardening. I knew Pedro had a few friends he occasionally



Figure 3.6. Pedro's garden in full season.

visited, but for the most part he spent his days alone in his three-room home, engrossed in creating paintings using recycled materials. We usually sat close to his drafting table in his bedroom studio (his kitchen resembled a corridor with standing room only, his small dining room was full of boxes, and piles of books and papers were everywhere, including on the table and chairs). Except for a few playful portraits of himself in his garden (see Figure 3.7), which hung in his living room by the entrance door, the rest of his works, while also brightly colored, were filled with skeletons and portrayed a gloomy vision of the world and the future (see Figure 3.8). I knew from our conversations that Pedro had recently experienced the painful end of a relationship and that he felt generally disenchanted with the revolutionary process in which he had once enthusiastically participated. Both factors seemed to have contributed to his bouts of depression in recent years. It seemed as though he had lost hope and had decided to cut himself off from the world.

As I talked to Pedro about his daily life, it became evident that, along with his art, the garden had facilitated this personal separation from the surrounding world. In particular, his vertical cultivation plan not only provided a "hiding place" from the harsh reality without but also allowed



Figure 3.7. Pedro's self-portrait in garden.

him to create a restful space for himself—a space that he connected to an idealized past, when he was hopeful of a better future.

Pedro first described his vertical cultivation plan, which imitated “a forest-like environment,” by emphasizing its practicality. The design, which incorporated several levels of crops, not only allowed him to work in a place that was not initially well suited for agricultural production but also maximized the productive capacity of his eight-meter-square parcela. The inspiration for his “tropical forest” design, as he called it, was derived neither from a recent permaculture workshop offered by the FANJNH nor from his prior agricultural experiences in Cuba.⁸ Instead, Pedro traced his practices back to a small village in Ukraine that he had visited as a young man while on a scholarship to study engineering in the Soviet Union. Despite the years that had passed, he vividly remembered this rural Ukrainian village, where every house had its own vegetable garden plot and where he had seen “the most beautiful garden one could ever imagine,” cultivated by the principal of the local secondary

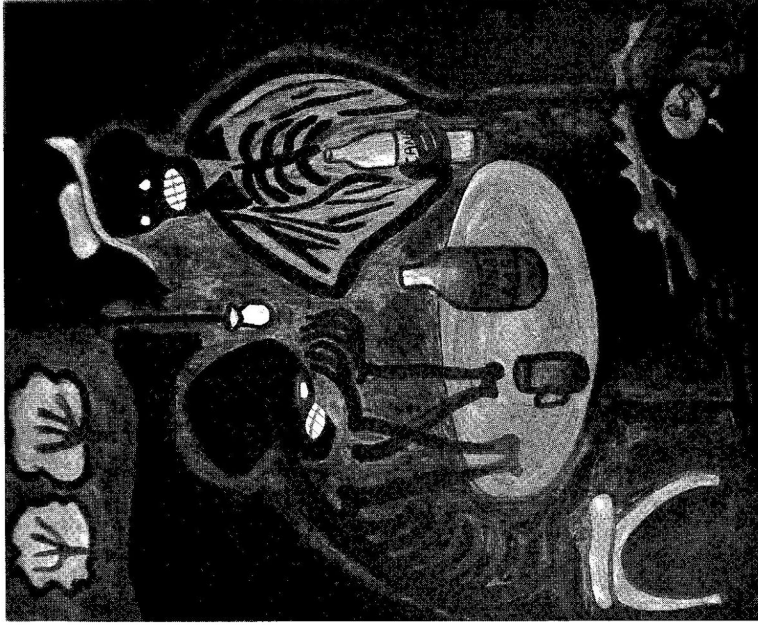


Figure 3.8. Pedro's rendition of his neighborhood bar.

school. He recounted: “That was a real beauty! I had never seen anything like it. It was intensive cultivation on three levels. On the ground level he had vegetables that needed shade. On the third level he had grapes, melons. On the other level he had potatoes, beets, tomatoes, cucumbers. The school principal told me that with that little lot he sustained himself all year round!” It was not just the productive potential of the garden but also its therapeutic powers that had impressed Pedro. He explained: “That was the first time in my life I heard it said that plants were sensitive, that they were grateful and knew who looked after them, that they emitted a smell imperceptible to our consciousness but which nevertheless is responsible for our sense of well-being in a garden. That school

principal told me how the garden served him as entertainment and as a break from problems at the school." Indeed, this role of the garden as a "refuge" from daily problems and grueling routines seemed vital to Pedro, who spent time in his lot not only tending to his plants but also meditating.

Under the squash plants, in an area of the garden so enclosed by vegetation that it allowed for the presence of only a squatting person, Pedro had placed a small stool. It was there, he told me, that he went when he needed to relax. He insisted that I try out the spot, but he first explained what it meant to him and how I should experience it:

Of course, if you look at this spot from your normal height, you see nothing. It is like trying to see the Amazon from a plane: you see nothing, just a green mass. You have to get into the forest, with the Indians, so to speak, in order to experience the fear of the anacondas and the beauty to be found in the forest. When I sit in my garden in that particular spot, on a small stool, close to the ground, I really feel I am in the middle of the forest and away from everything!

In that spot within his garden Pedro felt he could commune with nature, as if in a forest, away from the world. He could relax because he felt distant from worldly turmoil, and because he had made himself invisible to the world by hiding himself in his "tropical forest."

Pedro was not alone in experiencing his garden as a "refuge." Gabriela, his sixty-eight-year-old next-door neighbor and her seventy-five-year-old husband, Fulgencio, who for years had cultivated vegetables and raised chickens in the lot next to Pedro's, spoke similarly about their garden. After telling me that she would often break into song or poetry while in her garden, Gabriela explained: "I feel happy there, it is a field of peace. . . . As I told you, I find nature wonderful." Fulgencio, for his part, told me: "I find much entertainment, exercise, and breathing space [in the garden]. There I spend the most restful times of my day." Considering that this couple, much like Pedro, experienced their surrounding neighborhood as a hostile place, characterized by noise, social disorder, and a decaying physical environment, it seems that their feeling of relax-

ation while in the garden derived not only from contact with nature; just as important was the feeling that they had created a separate place of beauty, solace, and tranquil isolation from a world they felt increasingly excluded them. This experience they also shared with another group of nearby neighbors, who attended a daytime clinic for the elderly in the municipality of El Cerro.

This group of elderly people had been working a garden lot that the clinic had created as part of its depression therapy regime, following a FANJNH permaculture workshop offered to patients. Those who participated in the garden had first been drawn to the clinic by a range of circumstances, including the death of a loved one and their inability to cope with an unstable world at a time in their lives when they needed serenity and stability. Although these people participated in other activities at the clinic, they spent most of their time working or contemplating the parcela they cultivated with the assistance of Rafael, a permaculture enthusiast, also from the municipality of El Cerro, who was temporarily hired by the clinic to assist the group in their gardening endeavors.

There were about five patients committed to the garden. Among them was Ramiro, a man in his early seventies who was named a "garden activist" for his enthusiastic participation in the project. He and other participants recounted to me how the garden had reinvigorated their desire to live by connecting them with nature and, importantly, to each other.

During a conversation with Ramiro, I mentioned having seen him on a television program. His eyes lit up with pride as he repeated the sentiments he had expressed during that interview regarding his work at the garden: "I told her [the journalist]: Nobody puts a gun to my head to tell me to come here every morning. I come of my own accord. Could I charge money for this work? Never! I would be a mercenary if I charged for this, after all the help I received. And I am not a mercenary, not even in my most private of thoughts." Volunteering in the garden "free of charge" meant a lot to this group of elderly people who, like Pedro, regretted what they described as the recent *metalización* (slang for commodification) of life in Cuba, where everything, including love, now appeared to be up for sale in a hard-currency economy that alienated and

excluded them. For them, the garden was not about money, or food, or creating a private place for reflection. Instead, it was about the healing power of the group and the possibility of people having the compassion to care for each other in difficult times. This sentiment was nicely captured in their unanimous decision to plant a bed of spinach in the shape of a heart. While they took produce and herbs from the garden home to share with their families, they were especially proud of the contributions the garden made to the clinic, providing it with herbs and condiments to make meals and herbal infusions for patients like themselves.

As I spent many afternoons and mornings with them, I could not help but think that in their intentions and actions they far surpassed Fuster's expectation of a mere balance among "brain, heart, and pocket." What mattered most for these elderly gardeners, at the end of their life, was friendship and the hope of recuperating a sense of belonging to a caring community. For them, the garden offered solace not in solitude but in company.

Clearly, the impulse of Pedro and his immediate neighbors to cut themselves off from the rest of society was not universal among producers, many of whom saw connection rather than detachment as necessary and desirable. This was the case regarding not just the broader community but also the state and its official programs. While some producers were all too happy to remain distant from state institutions, others sought to connect their garden more closely with the state.

Seeking Recognition in a Fast-Changing World

At the turn of the twenty-first century, some parts of Havana, particularly municipalities frequented by tourists, like La Habana Vieja, appeared to be veritable construction sites, with new hotels, restaurants, and even residences being renovated or constructed at amazing speed with the help of foreign capital. Just a decade earlier, in the same municipalities, gardens had been created by average citizens working with meager resources on many vacant lots where planned construction had been halted because of the state's lack of financial capital (see figure 3.9).

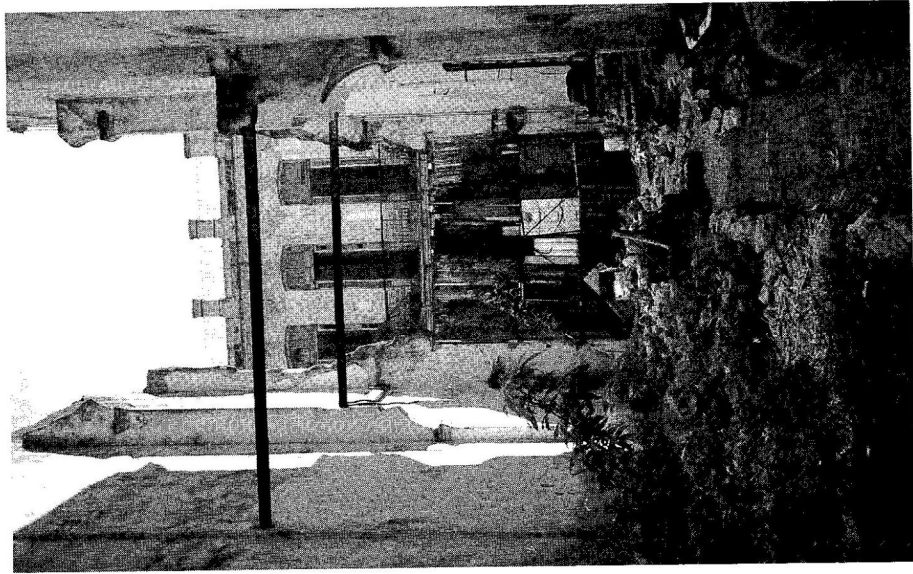


Figure 3.9. Vacant lot in Centro Habana after conversion to agriculture.

As already mentioned, these parcelas, as well as the productive patios that were created around the same time and since then, in private courtyards, corridors, and rooftops throughout the city, were much celebrated at the beginning of the Special Period, yet over time they appeared to have fallen off the list of official government priorities. By 2000, most patio and parcela producers in core municipalities felt that their efforts,

while recognized and celebrated by some NGOs and foreign visitors, had become invisible, even irrelevant, to state actors. This was indeed the perception of Ina, an elderly woman who, along with other retired women from her barrio, had been tending a garden on state land in the central municipality of Centro Habana. The garden had been started with the guidance and mediation of an Australian named Liz who lived in the area and was then in Cuba working for the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), assisting the FANJNH with their permaculture program. The resulting garden was admired by many in the vicinity and was even included as one of the featured stops in the FANJNH's tour of model gardens at the end of its permaculture courses. Given this relative fame, Ina was outraged when, upon attending a government meeting in 2001, she found out that the government appeared to be unaware of the site's existence. At the meeting, officials had been discussing the upcoming national gathering of parcelas and patios at which model city gardeners would receive a certificate in recognition of their efforts. When one of the officials in attendance made a remark about how vegetable gardens were nonexistent in places like Centro Habana, Ina could not restrain herself. She told me she not only publicly corrected the misinformed official but also told him that he might as well start preparing the certificate of recognition for her garden since it was one of the few and the most impressive in the municipality. As she told me the story she added indignantly, "Imagine, they don't even know my garden exists!"⁷⁹ An active member of her CDR and a self-declared revolutionary herself, Ina felt that it was not a good thing for these small-scale gardens to have fallen below the radar of the state and to have suffered such relative neglect. As she talked about this incident, her experience of having been overlooked by the pertinent level of government in this enterprise resonated with other stories of similar feelings of disconnection, abandonment, and neglect experienced by the broader population at the time.

In the end, Ina succeeded in getting the attention of the pertinent state officials. She was personally invited to attend the First Annual National Meeting of the Patio and Parcela Movement, where her garden was awarded the title of model garden for her municipality, and she even received a small prize—a shovel—for her accomplishments. She

was pleased with this recognition, as were many other gardeners who attended this meeting and other, similar gatherings.

From a certain perspective that holds at bay the visions and plans of decision makers and focuses instead on the personal dimensions of patios and parcelas for those who inhabit these spaces, urban agriculture appears to be less about consciously struggling to save *la revolución*, as some officials claim, than about personal survival in a context of scarcity; less about a well-integrated community than about the marginalization of certain sectors of the population and their attempts at reconnecting to each other and the broader society. Public recognition of their achievements seemed to be a special source of pride for many of the producers.

While marginal in relation to the most dynamic sectors of the Cuban economy and suffering from relative neglect from official state actors, parcelas and patios and their associated producers do not represent autonomous spaces and actors that can (or necessarily want to) exist independently from the sociopolitical context in which they are embedded. Even in cases like that of Pedro and some of his neighbors, who expressed a desire to disconnect, total disconnection and autonomy from "the world outside" are neither a possibility nor something deemed ideal.

As the next chapter will illustrate, patios and parcelas—like other similarly marginalized spaces—are grounds that breed debate and reflection about recent and prior government policies in a way that directly connects to ongoing debates in society at large. Dwelling in these spaces entails, at a minimum, reflecting on the ideal organization and use of space and on who should have ultimate authority over it. It further encourages reflection on questions pertaining to food production and food provisioning in Cuba. These reflections, in turn, underscore the changing sensibilities of a population that has become increasingly aware of the flaws of previous models of development (and governance) in Cuba and is ready to voice its opinion on what might constitute a better alternative for the country and even for the survival of *la revolución*.