Colin Beavan, known by many as No Impact Man, set out on a year-long journey to find homeostasis, an equilibrium between his consumerist way of life and environmentalist ideals. His goal was deceptively modest: to sustain a simple life in New York City without making any net impact on the environment. To Beavan, that meant "no trash, no carbon emissions, no toxins in the water, no elevators, no subway, no products in packaging, no plastics, no air conditioning, no TV, no toilets. . . ." And it also meant a very different way of eating. Beavan needed to eschew fast and processed foods, and only consume locally raised, organically grown foods to be honest to the No Impact Man project. At the end of his experiment, Beavan realized that "Eating local is a no-brainer if you live in a rich neighborhood with the cool, local-food farmers’ market nearby." Beavan has been criticized that his experiment was bourgeois, and he now understands why. "Not consuming resources is no problem if a life of purchasing power has provided you with most of what you need," he admits. It is quite perplexing that to live a simple lifestyle in America is beyond the financial means of many. It is easy to say that we all should buy more organic, locally grown produce. It is quite another to be able to do so. And as Beavan has discovered, "Nutritious, local food should not just be available to the wealthy while the poor are left with McDonalds and KFC." 

Beavan’s discovery of the conundrum between local, organically grown food and its high cost brings us to another important consideration in food security: public health. We’ve all seen the emaciated bodies of starving people living in countries crippled by food insecurity. It is incredibly oxymoronic that obesity is the result of food insecurity here in America. It is not the inaccessibility of food calories in this country that is problematic. Rather, it is the abundance of cheap calories derived from processed and fast food vis-à-vis the inaccessibility of fresh, wholesome, nutrient-dense foods at an affordable price that is responsible for the poor health of this nation’s citizens.

We have found, through subsidizing grain crops and economies of scale, how to produce fast and processed foods in much larger quantities and cheaper prices than we can produce fresh fruits and vegetables. The bulk of corn produced in this country, for example, does not go to feed people directly. Rather, it is used primarily for silage to feed anything from cows (that produce meat, cheese, and milk), to chickens (meat and eggs) to hogs, and even to fish raised in fish farms. Corn is also processed into corn oil and high-fructose corn syrup, which has found its way into practically all of our baked goods, cereals, soft drinks, juice drinks, and other processed foods. In short, we have become a nation of corn.

Corn—or more specifically, corn-derived food products—has now become the staple in the American diet. But cheeseburgers, soda pop, and snack foods have traditionally been regarded as luxury items, not staples; at least, they are not typically staples in those countries eating a traditional, non-Western diet. And certainly high-fructose corn syrup should be a luxury item or treat, as it is simply a sweetener. But through our subsidized and industrialized system of agriculture, we are able to produce these highly-processed luxury items so that they compete in price with fresh fruits and vegetables, nuts, seeds, pulses, legumes, and other grains; the types of food that should be staples in our diet. Michael Pollan argues that "the surest way to escape the Western diet is simply to depart the realms it rules: the supermarket, the convenience store, and the fast-food outlet. Instead, Pollan recommends eating more food from farmers’ markets and community-supported agriculture groups. Easier said than done for some people. Consider the following: In July 2008, one dollar could buy a large, fresh, organic peach at the farmers’ market, or it could purchase a double cheeseburger from McDonald’s Dollar Menu. The peach has 73 calories and less than one gram of fat. The double cheeseburger has 440 calories, and
Which do you choose if you are hungry, impoverished, and living in a low-income neighborhood, and only have a dollar in your pocket? It is really a trick question, as it is almost impossible to find fresh produce in economically depressed neighborhoods anyway. Fast food, on the other hand, is ubiquitous. It is a harsh reality in a capitalist economy that supermarkets, farmers’ markets, and grocery stores simply do not locate in impoverished neighborhoods, leaving residents with a dearth of food options. Mark Winne calls these areas food deserts—"places with too few choices of healthy and affordable food, and [that] are oversaturated with unhealthy food outlets such as fast food joints." Winne explains that "while the failure of supermarkets to adequately serve lower-income communities represents a failure of the marketplace, the marketplace is functioning rationally (as economists would say) by going to where the money is." The consequential health outlook for people living in these food deserts is quite predictable. Residents of these areas, Winne notes, "tend to be poorer and have fewer healthy food options, which in turn contributes to their high overweight/obesity rates and diet-related illnesses such as diabetes." 38

Huntington, West Virginia, is one such food desert—perhaps the most barren in the nation. Once a proud and fairly prosperous coal-mining town, Huntington now carries the shameful moniker of the unhealthiest city in America. According to statistics from the CDC, almost fifty percent of adults in the Huntington metro region are obese. And that is just the beginning of the city’s health problems. Huntington leads the nation in heart disease, diabetes, and tooth decay. Nearly half of all elderly adults in Huntington have lost all of their natural teeth—an astounding statistic that no other city in the country can come close to. A nurse at St. Mary’s Regional Heart Institute in Huntington notes that many patients are suffering from heart attacks in their thirties. At an age that is considered the prime of life in other parts of the country, people in Huntington are getting open-heart surgeries. Hot dog eateries abound in Huntington. The city has more pizza places than the entire state of West Virginia has health clubs and gyms. "Fast food has become the staple," noted a manager within the state health department, "with many residents convinced they can’t afford to buy healthier foods." A retired policeman blamed the economy, sating it needed to pick up twenty-three grams of fat. 42 Which do you choose if you are hungry, impoverished, and living in a low-income neighborhood, and only have a dollar in your pocket? It is really a trick question, as it is almost impossible to find fresh produce in economically depressed neighborhoods anyway. Fast food, on the other hand, is ubiquitous. It is a harsh reality in a capitalist economy that supermarkets, farmers’ markets, and grocery stores simply do not locate in impoverished neighborhoods, leaving residents with a dearth of food options. Mark Winne calls these areas food deserts—"places with too few choices of healthy and affordable food, and [that] are oversaturated with unhealthy food outlets such as fast food joints." Winne explains that "while the failure of supermarkets to adequately serve lower-income communities represents a failure of the marketplace, the marketplace is functioning rationally (as economists would say) by going to where the money is." The consequential health outlook for people living in these food deserts is quite predictable. Residents of these areas, Winne notes, "tend to be poorer and have fewer healthy food options, which in turn contributes to their high overweight/obesity rates and diet-related illnesses such as diabetes." 43

The city’s mayor underwent stomach surgery to help him lose weight, yet he has no desire to curb the fast-food eateries that proliferate in Huntington. "We want as much business as we can have here," notes the mayor. "As many restaurants as you have, it kind of enhances the livability. Maybe not the health." 44

On the other side of the country, municipal attitudes toward fast-food restaurants are considerably different. In the summer of 2008, the Los Angeles city council garnered national attention when it unanimously approved a one-year moratorium on fast-food restaurants within a particularly food-bleak section of their city. South Los Angeles is one of the more expansive food deserts in America, occupying thirty-two square miles and inhabited by half a million people. Like Huntington, the swelling of fast-food eateries in South L.A. is reflected in the community’s expanding waistlines. This urban area has the highest concentration of fast-food eateries and the fewest number of grocery stores in the city. Thirty percent of South Los Angeles residents are obese, far greater than the 19 percent for the metropolitan region and 14 percent for the affluent area of Westside. 45 Residents of South Los Angeles also have the highest incidence of diabetes in Los Angeles County. To the city council, the need to suspend fast-food eateries is obvious. The health of their citizens is at stake, and the moratorium buys the municipality time to attract healthier food outlets.

As to be expected, restaurant associations and representatives of fast-food chains were dismayed, claiming the moratorium on fast food is misguided, and does not guarantee the emergence of healthier food options. And even if those healthier food options emerge, will they be affordable to the people of South Los Angeles? According to Kelly Brownell, director of the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at Yale University, people will change their diet when different foods are offered, but cost becomes an important factor in poor communities. Curtis English, a South Los Angeles resident who was interviewed by a reporter covering the moratorium, put the food problem in proper perspective. English recognizes that fast food is loaded with calories and cholesterol. But since he is unemployed and does not own a car, he is most concerned with how far he can stretch his food dollar within his neighborhood. English recalled that he ate at a McDonalds within a few blocks of his home twice the day before the city council
passed the moratorium. For a mere $2.39, English had a sausage burrito for breakfast and a double cheeseburger for lunch. While Brownell notes that “Diets improve when healthy food establishments enter these neighborhoods,” the real cost consideration is just how many healthful calories can one buy for $2.39?

A moratorium on fast-food establishments is a good start, but only solves one part of a more complex problem. As long as America is a capitalist nation, it is foolish to assume that supermarkets, farmers’ markets, and restaurants with fresh, wholesome offerings will flock to distressed communities. Even if some pioneering establishments do choose to locate in a depressed area, will the healthy food offerings be affordable to the residents? The real solution boils down to accessibility and affordability. One strategy, and perhaps an effective one, is for the municipality to cultivate a policy that exploits the food growing and distribution potential of public spaces within these communities, to ensure that fresh, wholesome food is, at the very least, as prevalent as fast food, and just as cheap (or preferably, cheaper).

Though the fast-food moratorium is certainly controversial, the efforts of the City of Los Angeles should be lauded, as they illuminate the need for municipal planners and local government to tackle food insecurity in their communities head-on. Many communities across the nation have placed restrictions on fast-food restaurants, but they usually cite architectural design, or preservation of historical character as their reason. Los Angeles may be the only municipality in recent history to cite public health as the reason for its restriction. Though many object to having government interfere with private industry, the municipality’s actions are really just an example of sound urban planning. A moratorium on fast-food businesses is no different from prohibiting a liquor store or an adult book store from locating near schools, for example, or requiring that manufacturing and heavy industry be segregated from housing. As David Zinczenko, editor in chief of *Men’s Health* magazine and the author of several diet books, reasons, “What we’re beginning to see is almost the monopolization of our dietary intake by a handful of corporations. Add to that the financial reality of feeding ourselves today, where a single grapefruit from a corner fruit stand costs two or more times as much as a few Chicken McNuggets, and I think you can begin to put together a case for governmental intervention.”

Los Angeles’s moratorium on fast food demonstrates that municipality’s belief that providing access to healthier food options falls well within the regimen of city planning and local public policy. At the very least, the council’s actions open a dialogue about the specific roles city government can play to protect the community’s health and welfare. Critics will continue to argue that the moratorium limits food choices, though the City of Los Angeles argues the contrary. The choice between fast food or no food is no choice at all. Los Angeles will, I predict, set a new trend in the planning and development of our cities, using food and public health as an organizer of city form.

It cannot be overstated: people living in dire conditions in this country need access to affordable, fresh, wholesome food in order to improve their health. Without regular access to affordable, nutrient-dense foods, our nation’s waistline will continue to expand, and our health decline. The CDC reports that obesity rates across the American population have risen dramatically over the past three decades (a trend that coincides with the increase in availability of processed and fast foods). In 1990, not a single state in this country reported a prevalence of obesity greater than 15 percent of its adult population. In 2007, only one state (Colorado), had a prevalence of obesity less than 20 percent. Among adults, obesity has doubled in this country over the past two decades. Today, one in three adults aged twenty years and older is obese in the United States. What is more alarming is the increase of obese children, from the very young to young adults. Data collected from two National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys (1976-1980 and 2003-2006) illustrate this disconcerting trend. For children two- to five-years-old, the prevalence of obesity “increased from 5.0% to 12.4%; for those aged 6–11 years, prevalence increased from 6.5% to 17.0%; and for those aged 12–19 years, prevalence increased from 5.0% to 17.6%.”

The CDC has labeled American society “obesogenic,” a condition resulting from “environments that promote increased food intake, nonhealthful foods, and physical inactivity.” Because we have created a culture inclined toward a
sedentary, overindulgent lifestyle, the CDC notes that the only way we can halt obesity is through changes in policy and our environment. The CDC’s Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity outlines six strategies to curb obesity, four of which focus on food. In addition to increasing physical activity and decreasing television viewing, the CDC recommends that Americans decrease the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages; decrease the consumption of high-energy-dense foods; increase breast-feeding initiation and duration for newborns; and increase consumption of fruits and vegetables. Only 27 percent of adults in America are eating the recommended three servings of vegetables per day, and only 33 percent are meeting their daily recommendation of two servings of fruit.  

The link between fresh produce and public health is so strong that even health care organizations are devising strategies to increase accessibility to fresh fruits and vegetables. Kaiser Permanente, one of the largest health-care organizations in the country, has recently instituted farmers’ markets on the hospital grounds of many of their facilities. Preston Maring, a Kaiser physician, came up with the idea for a farmers’ market after he noticed the success of the jewelry and handbag vendors hawking their wares in the lobby of the Oakland hospital where he practices. A firm believer of the connection between food, diet, and health, Maring thought a modest produce stand or farmers’ market could be an amenity for patients and staff as well, perhaps even functioning as a form of preventative medicine. In 2003, the first Kaiser Permanente farmers’ market opened outside the lobby of the Oakland hospital. Two years later, two dozen more opened in five states. Today, thirty farmers’ markets operate in the parking lots of Kaiser Permanente, from Georgia to Hawaii. What began as an idea by a pioneering physician in Oakland, California, became a staple for Kaiser Permanente across the country, and a manifestation of Maring’s belief that “Nothing is more important to people’s health than what they eat everyday.”  

A bad diet affects not only physical health, but mental ability as well. According to a study published in the April 2008 edition of Journal of School Health, students with an increased intake of fruits and vegetables fared better on standardized literacy assessments than children on diets high in junk food. For this reason, and others regarding physical health, it is imperative that children have access to a plentiful variety of fresh fruit and vegetables at home, at school, and on their way to and from these places.  

Children are impressionable, and they tend to crave what they see around them. They are especially susceptible to the marketing blitzes of the big processed and fast-food companies. If children see nothing but ads promoting fast-food meals, they will want fast-food meals. A common ploy in supermarket chains is to place the sugary cereals, cookies, and other junk foods at eye level of children. This strategy might be tolerable if the marketing blitz were balanced with equally eye-popping graphics of fictional characters and personified animals touting healthy foods. Such is not the case. According to an article in the New York Times, “Almost three-fourths of the advertising aimed at children is for candy, snacks, sugary cereals or fast food.” Sweden bans all advertising aimed at children under twelve years old. Many other European countries restrict television ads during children’s programming. But in the United States, marketing to “kid kustomers” is big business, as companies hope to snare brand loyalty at a young age, ensuring a customer for life.  

It is doubtful that Americans will pass legislation banning advertising to our kids anytime soon. Until then, healthy foods need to be just as visible and accessible as junk foods, preferably more so. Infusing our public spaces with fresh produce can help mitigate the marketing inundation of processed and fast foods, and actually teach children about the cycles of life, whole foods, and where those whole foods come from. If children really do crave what they see most often, ensuring the ubiquity of fresh produce is a strategy worthy of exploration.  

Poor diet is not the only variable in obesity. Our sedentary lifestyle works to expand our waistline as well, and doctors routinely remind us that proper diet and exercise are the keys to healthful living. It is time to think how our public spaces could improve public health by providing places for exercise and access to healthy food. For example, the CDC states that one effective measure for combating obesity is to seek opportunities for physical activity within the community, such as hiking and biking along trails in parks and sidewalks along city streets. Not only could these public spaces provide opportunities for physical activity, but with the planting of fruits and vegetables, public space can increase
access to the fresh produce that is necessary in (and largely missing from) American diets.

Such an example is already in place in Davenport, Iowa. Genesis Health System, a locally owned and operated health care facility for the Quad Cities, recently added a modern outdoor exercise station within the city’s Duck Creek Parkway. In addition to the greenbelt’s existing bicycle paths, playgrounds, and various sports fields and courts, the new fitness station offers another choice in physical activity. Genesis officials could not have erected their new exercise station in a more propitious location, near the shade of two very large apple trees. These remnants of what was likely a modest orchard provide the only clues to what existed here before the municipality purchased the farmstead and turned it into parkland. But those vestiges of local food production are strong. As the creek trickles by and cyclists silently pedal along its meandering path, people stair-step, push up, flex, and stretch, while red orbs of ripe fruit hang tantalizingly overhead. This active scene in such a serene setting sparks the desire for a healthier, more environmentally enriching lifestyle. Though there is a certain pastoral character to this particular park, the experience is uniquely urban. It is these experiences, rare today, that offer promise of a more bountiful, healthful, food-secure city.

If cities and their citizenry are to sustain, and realize enduring vigor and vitality, local systems of food production will have to be unearthed. As Michael Pollan notes, “The American people are paying more attention to food today than they have in decades, worrying not only about its price but about its safety, its provenance and its healthfulness. There is a gathering sense among the public that the industrial-food system is broken.” Pollan argues that until we address the flawed food system that feeds Americans, food security—and hence, national security—is compromised. James Howard Kunstler’s claims are perhaps more dire. His apocalyptic forecast was easy to dismiss as a doomsday rant when The Long Emergency was published in 2005. But in the short time since, Kunstler’s predictions are proving not only plausible, but imminent. For Kunstler, local food production in the twenty-first century is a simple issue of community existence: Those who produce their own food will continue to exist; those who cannot, will wither and die.

Though Pollan’s and Kunstler’s arguments tend toward hyperbole, their underlying message is grounded and quite lucid. The current agriculture system in America is proving vulnerable, and we need strategies to create a more secure food supply, for the health of our environment, our economy, and our people. Is large-scale agribusiness going away? Probably not. Is it reasonable for Americans to completely return to an agrarian lifestyle in and immediately near our cities? Doubtful. Is it possible to add produce choices and agricultural efforts in our intense urban settings, exploiting the food-producing potential of our current network of underutilized public spaces? Indubitably.

Successful public-space design in this country must respond to the needs and desires of a pluralistic society. The goal of the public-space designer is to ensure that the qualities and components comprising the physical space of the public realm provide the greatest value to all members of the community. When such requirements are met, public space becomes equitable, convivial, and communal. It is only natural that something as universal as the desire to eat healthy be fulfilled in our urban public spaces, and that these places teach us a thing or two about food, the environment, and each other. Nothing is more communal than diverse individuals coming together around food, and perhaps the time has come to consider public space as the community dinner table. Food is largely absent from public space today, but I do not believe there exists a more equitable approach to public-space design that provides the greatest value to its users, while building and strengthening community.
CHAPTER TWO

Public Space, Public Officials, Public Policy

I believe the city should own tracts of land for the growing of vegetables and fruits, where the citizens can see and understand that their real existence comes out of Mother Earth, and that the merchant or peddler is only a means of delivery.

Jens Jensen, A Greater West Park System

In Davenport, Iowa, an edible garden is found in an unlikely place. Roma tomatoes, jalapeño peppers, variegated sage, and thyme are tucked among ornamental grasses and shrub roses in front of the municipality’s Parking Office. This postage stamp-sized garden, barely a hundred square feet, punctuates one of the busiest corners in downtown. Countless people walk by the garden each day, with an occasional pedestrian grabbing a ripe tomato or a few sprigs of thyme. The parking manager, Tom Flaherty, enjoys his public garden, but wishes it had greater appeal to the passerby.

The following year Tom considers a trellis for training gourds, or some other flashy fruit that better announces the intent of his garden: “Public
Produce ... Help Yourself.” He decides pole beans are a good way to attract attention and a good food to offer the pedestrian. Other than pole beans, Tom plants marjoram, sage, rosemary, thyme, three varieties of peppers, and a cherry tomato vine. “I thought about going with the Romas again this year, but I think people were reluctant to pick them and carry them home. This way, people can just walk by, pluck a couple of cherry tomatoes and eat them right on the spot.” He decides to plant the vine right behind a public bench, his logic being this location affords some protection to errant vandalism yet is close enough for people to reach their arm over the backrest if they want a quick snack.

People have asked Tom why he just doesn’t place a sign that plainly states “Please eat our produce.” “The Tragedy of the Commons,” he cites, referring to the influential article written by the noted ecologist Garrett Hardin. Tom wants the public to harvest his produce, but stops short of a conspicuous message that encourages them to do so. He is concerned someone will harvest everything, leaving little for anybody else, and destroy the garden in the process. Instead, Tom prefers a more discreet approach as he believes more people will benefit. As he discovers, however, there is a delicate balance between a showy garden that subtly encourages the passerby to sample the fruit and a blatant invitation to do so. If the message is too subtle, pedestrians walk by without notice.

Tom harvests what the general public does not, giving much of the produce to coworkers and colleagues. On occasion, he sets up a table against a window in the Parking Office, in clear sight of passersby. He uses conspicuous signs on these occasions, inviting the public to help themselves to the various produce items. Supplementing items from his parking office garden with surplus from his home garden, Tom arranges vegetables and herbs on the makeshift produce stand. One week, Anaheims, Poblanos, and bell peppers are placed in a lid from a box of copy-machine paper with a note, “Come inside and help yourself to our...
Parking Office Peppers." Another week, Tom brings in fresh herbs. He bags the different herbs and places sticky notes on each bag identifying the contents: Rosemary, Thyme, Cilantro, Oregano, and Fennel. His modest produce stand proves beneficial to a young man passing by. He stops in and asks if he could have some of the garden items. "Take as much as you like," an employee offers. The young man leaves momentarily and returns with a plastic shopping bag, stuffing it with handfuls of herbs.

The modest interest individuals have shown toward Tom's garden and ephemeral produce stands illustrate a clear need for more food choices downtown. Like many cities, Davenport has struggled for decades to attract a significant resident population back into its downtown. One of the greatest obstacles is the lack of everyday goods and services residents require—namely, food and other grocery items. Yet merchants and grocers are reluctant to locate downtown without a significant population base, creating a confounding circle of frustration. Interest is growing, fortunately, for both residents and merchants, and a few pioneers are staking claim. But the city is still far from providing a bounty of food choices in the downtown. In the interim, Tom tries to fill a need for fresh food, albeit with a very limited selection.

As the parking manager, Tom controls all the city-owned parking ramps and surface lots in the downtown, of which there are many—too many, actually, for the sparse resident and employee population in downtown Davenport. He struggles with one particular lot on the northern edge of downtown. Its area is half of an entire city block—about one acre—yet only a dozen or so cars park there on any given day. The city's planning staff view that parcel as a future development site. But it has been decades since that plot of land had any use more viable than a parking lot, and there are plenty of other properties in the downtown that will pique developer interest long before that acre of surface parking will.

Tom mulls over various strategies for the lot. He wants to maintain some of the area as parking for the few that use it, but what to do with the rest of the space? He decides on a half-acre community garden, hoping to create an amenity for the residents already living downtown, while possibly attracting more. If the resident interest proved low in the garden, Tom figured he could have his existing maintenance staff manage it as necessary, to keep it looking neat and tidy. After all, his staff already devotes a portion of their time maintaining the ornamental landscape around the other parking ramps and surface lots. Tom puts in a request to fund safety and aesthetic enhancements to the parking lot and construction of the garden through the city's Capital Improvement Program (CIP). Though unsure exactly what form the community garden will take, he believes it will meet broad community goals, such as reduce stormwater runoff, assist in neighborhood revitalization efforts, and even become a gateway into the downtown. His project is deemed worthy of funding, and his request is granted by the CIP committee: $370,000 of capital funds are allocated over the 2010 and 2011 fiscal years.

It is clear that Tom derives satisfaction from his gardens, both private and public. But his satisfaction is not that ordinarily afforded to gardeners. Aside from the typical physical and psychological therapy of working the land, getting one's hands dirty, and watching the miracle of nature turn a speck-sized seed into an edible bounty, the derivation of his satisfaction is different. His zeal for public gardening was cultivated once he became a government employee and realized just how much land is under public control. And over the years, he has realized that municipalities are often poor stewards of that land, not only with regard to the environment, but social equity, as well. "We have homeless people here—hungry people—and there has got to be a way to extract more value from our public spaces," Tom exclaims. It is the equitable opportunities of public produce that give Tom his satisfaction, knowing that he can offer people free food. More to the point, Tom would like to give the underprivileged greater access to fresh produce. Tom enjoys growing tomatoes, for example, but doesn't particularly like the taste of them. But he understands the pleasure others derive from consuming vine-ripened, garden-fresh tomatoes, and it seems Tom enjoys giving his produce away as much as he enjoys growing it.

One day as Tom was harvesting Hungarian peppers, cherry tomatoes and green beans from his parking office garden, a middle-aged woman paused and asked what he was doing. Tom offered her some of the produce and she eagerly accepted. I asked if she was a street-person. "No," Tom replied, "but she is headed that way." He wished he could have talked with her more, but deemed
she was not in a proper frame of mind at the time to carry a conversation. Nevertheless, Tom felt he made a positive difference in that woman’s day and admitted, “that makes me feel good.”

A block from the City of Davenport’s Parking Office is the finest eating establishment in downtown: Duck City Bistro. Its owner, Chef Charles, contemplates growing vegetables in the adjoining Kaiserslautern Square, a handsomely designed civic space with a fountain, benches, enriched paving, and landscaping that, unfortunately, sees little social activity. It has been difficult in the past to keep the ornamental landscaping in this public square looking neat and tidy, and at times, the beds look a bit unkempt. Upset about the lack of maintenance and weeds growing in a raised bed alongside his bistro, Chef Charles came up with an idea to plant rosemary, basil, mint (“For mojitos,” he added, “they are very popular”), leeks, and tomatoes for use in various menu items. The benefits of having a garden right next to the restaurant are many, not least of which is a more economical source of produce. Restaurateurs have to keep a careful watch on the rising cost of produce and the effect it has on their profit margins, which are quite slim, even for tony dining establishments. But Chef Charles noted that there were other benefits. “It would have meant more hours for my employees, because they would be the ones maintaining the garden.” It was a point that I had never considered. Most restaurant employees work two jobs, simply because they cannot get enough hours during the work week to make ends meet. By allowing a garden adjacent to the restaurant, Chef Charles could have offered a few additional paid hours during the week to an employee or two.

The sight of a restaurant employee tending the garden, and harvesting produce that would be consumed by customers in a matter of moments, offered yet another benefit to Chef Charles. The restaurant business can be cutthroat, and restaurateurs are constantly seeking ways to distinguish themselves from the scores of other eateries in the city. A garden growing alongside the restaurant offers diners the most transparent form of food production. One can easily see not only where the food is grown, but what is growing, how it is maintained, and when it is harvested. Such transparency has tremendous appeal to the growing number of environmentally minded foodies who seek establishments that source food locally.

The benefits of maintaining a vegetable garden in the public plaza alongside Duck City Bistro were compelling enough for Chef Charles that he offered to enter into some kind of agreement with the municipality, such as a conditional use permit, whereby the city could stipulate that if his garden fell into a state of disrepair, the restaurateur could be fined and his gardening privileges revoked. But Parks and Recreation staff never responded to Charles’s request. Assumedly, they did not want to give up that space, even though it has put an obvious strain on an already stretched maintenance crew. Instead, the Parks Department sent out laborers to rework the bed and plant shrub roses. Though the roses are quite attractive and add a nice touch to the plaza, their addition to the landscaped bed does not solve the ongoing maintenance burden placed on Parks staff, as Chef Charles has no desire to maintain something he cannot use in his restaurant. It seems a win-win opportunity for both the restaurant and the Parks Department was missed.

What often comes to the minds of many when they hear “urban agriculture” is a community garden on a vacant parcel in a distressed neighborhood. The different gardening endeavors that are beginning to emerge in the small Midwestern city of Davenport, Iowa, hint at the variety of public spaces worthy of agricultural exploration, and the role that public officials could play toward implementing such endeavors. What is intriguing about these particular scenarios is that they all occur in the most intensely developed part of the city, where we find the greatest concentration of people and least expect to find agriculture: downtown. A downtown parking lot slated to become a community garden; a restaurateur looking to cut overhead costs while showcasing fresh produce in a downtown square; and a municipal official growing produce outside his office window, for anybody to harvest, on one of the busiest street corners in downtown—these individual efforts exemplify the creative strategies where urban agriculture has potential. The community garden in the distressed neighborhood will likely continue to epitomize urban agriculture. But as urban agriculture evolves in this country, it becomes clear that the diversity of public space within cities presents a diversity of food-growing opportunities.

I should clarify that by “public space” I am referring to those spaces that are freely accessible to the public, whether they are truly public or merely perceived to be. True public spaces include those properties owned and maintained by the
municipality, such as streets and sidewalks, parks, squares and plazas, parking lots, and municipal buildings (libraries, city halls, and police and fire stations, for example, and the landscaped grounds that surround them). Civic institutions not owned by the municipality, but by other government or public agencies, may also be public, such as the grounds around courthouses, universities, and grade schools. Then there are those spaces that are privately owned, but where permission to pass is explicitly stated or implied. Hospitals, business parks, churches, corporate plazas, retail and commercial parking lots are examples of privately owned spaces where the public freely enters, and is often encouraged to do so. Even floodplains and transportation and utility easements, where structures are not allowed to be built, can be great opportunities for food production. In essence, any space where the public can enter throughout the day without being charged an admission fee (even if that space is privately owned and maintained), and that is suitable for growing food, is worthy of inclusion into a network of public produce.

I am not advocating the removal of fountains, benches, paving, sculpture, playground equipment, picnic tables, and other public-space amenities that attract people and make it accessible and comfortable for them for the sake of urban agriculture. Quite the contrary. I am interested in ways of attracting more people, by providing additional reasons for people to frequent public space, namely, wholesome, low-cost sustenance, food education, and a sense of self-sufficiency.

In the design of public spaces, there are many variables that, when properly identified and accommodated for, work together to create vivacity. Food is often one of those variables. This was something the late preeminent people-watcher William H. Whyte recognized almost thirty years ago. In his seminal book The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces, Whyte proffered, “If you want to seed a place with activity, put out food.” That’s because, he writes, “Food attracts people who attract more people.” Whyte was so convinced of the positive impacts food has on the attractiveness of public space that he reiterated, just a couple paragraphs later, “Food, to repeat, draws people, and they draw more people.”

What Whyte was speaking about in particular was food prepared and sold from vendors, which helps make the many street corners and plazas in Manhattan so attractive to the passerby. Nevertheless, it is intriguing to ponder the effects that fresh, publicly accessible produce could have on the attractiveness of public space, and its ability to create a sense of conviviality. Other things being relatively equal, would the plaza with the orange grove or the apple trees be more compelling to people than one without any fruit? And what about produce vendors, like those on the street corners in Manhattan? What if a portion of their selection came from just down the street, in that pocket park or plaza? Would that be more enticing to the consumer?

Regardless if the space is truly public or only semipublic, municipal government is going to have to play a leading role. Programs, policies, funding strategies, and maintenance regimens of any urban agriculture endeavor will be difficult to implement and sustain if the largest land-owner in the city is indifferent. If public officials want a healthier, more prosperous citizenry, and believe that access to fresh, locally sourced, wholesome, and affordable food is good for both the individual citizen and the community at large, then public officials can no longer remain idle. In the face of rising food insecurity and declining public health stemming from a poor diet, public officials need to pursue various methods of providing better food choices in their community.

One of the easiest ways for municipal government to support a system of public produce is to simply allow it. Though attitudes are changing, most public agencies discourage or downright prohibit the planting of edibles in public spaces, largely over concerns about maintenance and perceived mess. (Such judgments are often based on misperceptions, which will be addressed in greater detail in Chapter 4.) These attitudes are especially prevalent with regard to streets, which is quite unfortunate. Streets represent the largest, most extensive network of public space in cities, and thus are significant places to explore edible landscaping, as every person in every neighborhood could be reached. Along many streets, there is a boulevard or planting strip between the sidewalk and curb. Some streets are even outfitted with wide, landscaped medians down their center. Historically regarded as aesthetic enhancements to streets, these landscaped areas are proving fundamental to the popular “Green Streets” movement, which is being implemented in cities like New York, Seattle, and Portland. Using landscaping to capture stormwater runoff, thereby reducing pollution of
our lakes, streams, and rivers, green streets also help moderate air temperature, improve air quality, and provide habitat for urban wildlife. Boulevards and medians offer great potential for incorporating food-bearing plants in the streetscape, especially fruit- and nut-bearing trees and shrubs. These larger plants are not only desired to help define the street, and give neighborhoods character, but can more quickly and efficiently transpire larger amounts of stormwater runoff. Thus, incorporating agriculture along our streets helps communities attain broad equitable—and environmental—goals.

Looking closely at what gets planted in these public spaces, especially along residential streets, one will often find a pioneering homeowner extending his or her garden plot from the front yard to the curb. However, these residents are vigilantes, as almost every city in the nation prohibits fruit bearing trees in the public right-of-way. It is ironic that in places like San Francisco and Berkeley (municipalities that in many ways are leading the charge for better access to healthy, locally produced food), fruit- and nut-producing street trees are outlawed. San Francisco and Berkeley’s urban forestry divisions operate in much the same way as other municipalities with regard to tree planting in the public right-of-way. If you want to plant a street tree, you need to obtain a permit. The City of San Francisco and the City of Berkeley do not plant fruit trees of any kind in the public right-of-way of their streets, and citizens wishing to plant a fruit tree in one of these strips will be denied a permit. Yet it happens anyway, on many streets throughout these two local-food-crazed communities, and municipal staff look the other way. But city government should take a more proactive role than turning a blind eye to enforcement of an unpopular ordinance.

The City of Portland, Oregon, is one municipality that does recognize the food-producing potential of city streets. Staff in that municipality’s Parks and Recreation Department are seeking to codify the acceptance of fruit trees for their use as street trees. Though such a policy falls short of hearty encouragement to plant food-bearing trees in the public right-of-way, at least it absolves the owner of crime (or guilt) for wanting to establish some form of public food production. Even if public officials do not follow Portland’s lead, and cannot be convinced of allowing fruit and nut trees along public streets, medians and boulevards still present excellent opportunities to plant smaller, tidier crops such as herbs and annual vegetables. In older urban neighborhoods, both frontyard and backyard spaces are modest. The strip of earth that separates the sidewalk and street allows residents to extend their garden plots. In some communities, this space is quite wide (five feet or more), providing an ample extension to the home garden. Street medians can be even wider, often measuring ten feet or...
more in width. This generous size and their location in the middle of the street give medians a more communal feel, and thus are great places to establish community gardens, which are easily accessible to everyone on the block.

Prohibitive language for food-bearing plants is not confined to street-tree ordinances. The zoning ordinance for Davenport’s central business district (which municipal planners believe has never been updated since it was adopted in the late 1930s or early 1940s), currently does not allow agriculture (commercial agriculture, specifically) anywhere in the downtown. Yet, these land uses are among those that are permitted: creamery and dairy operations; flour, feed, and grain (packaging, blending, and storing); commercial poultry and bird raising; and fruit and vegetable processing. These point to a time when Davenport was largely centered upon agricultural processing. But the growing of fresh produce, at least for commercial purposes, was never accommodated in the ordinance. It is probable that downtown agriculture would be permitted today if the intent were to have gardens for people to freely forage. Because commercial agriculture is not a permitted land use, however, the ordinance would likely disallow a restaurateur like Chef Charles from growing herbs and vegetables that he then sells to his dining patrons. And it would also deny downtown community gardening groups or small-scale entrepreneurial farmers the ability to sell their produce at farmers’ markets, a trend that is gaining in popularity across the country as a way to promote local produce and help fund various urban agriculture efforts.

At first blush, it seems quite reasonable to discourage agriculture in the downtown. After all, downtowns are for industry, retail, office, dense housing, civic institutions, and traffic—lots and lots of traffic. Obviously, large-scale, row-crop agriculture in the downtown is generally not an appropriate land use, especially if it requires the demolition of buildings. But small-scale agriculture ventures are sprouting throughout many urban areas, and downtowns make excellent places to extend such efforts. Amidst the office and residential towers, there is a great diversity and concentration of both people and public space downtown, making connections between folks and food easier. Squares, plazas, pocket parks, and parking lots abound in downtowns, along with the grounds around (and the roofs above) municipal and civic buildings. Collectively, these spaces could provide a dense network of public produce accessible to the diversity of citizens commonly found downtown.

Of course, microclimatic conditions can be challenging downtown, with high-rise buildings casting deep shade over some areas throughout much of the day—not to mention the turbulent wind tunnels that are often experienced within the urban canyons of downtown. Downtown buildings also generate and reflect a lot of heat, creating a heat island that, while disadvantageous in some respects, especially with regard to energy use, could have beneficial impacts for urban agriculture for the northern climate cities in this country. Annual vegetables, for example, can often be started earlier—and extend later into the growing season—when planted downtown, because temperatures there tend to be warmer than in more remote, less-developed parts of the city. In general, the planting of gardens downtown should be encouraged, as gardens help improve air quality and moderate temperature, absorb stormwater, and provide much-needed greenery, softening the hard surfaces of the concrete canyons. The trick is to find those public spaces where even the most micro of microclimates is conducive to growing food. There are plenty. Even in the street-corner garden outside Davenport’s Parking Office—a space surrounded by mid- and high-rise buildings and buffeted by wind—herbs, peppers, and tomatoes have done quite well (the pole beans, less so; lesson learned). While it may have made sense at one time to prohibit agriculture in downtowns, today small-scale agriculture can give downtowns a vital, life-sustaining vigor that is proving attractive for many urbanites.

Providence, Rhode Island, is not only looking at revising street-tree ordinances, or zoning restrictions in its downtown, but also working to incorporate permissible language for urban agriculture citywide. It is doing so through the strongest and broadest planning documents and policies available to any municipality. Community groups in Providence are working to double the amount of food grown in and around the city over the next ten years. That goal is unrealistic without sweeping revisions to current municipal codes. The Providence Urban Agriculture Policy Task Force recognizes that “If we are to redevelop and strengthen our local food web, agriculture at a variety of scales must be nested into our region. In Providence this requires the calibration of planning and
development policies to allow and promote appropriately scaled food production in diverse neighborhoods. Affecting this kind of change requires new language in Providence’s Comprehensive Plan, followed by corresponding changes to the city’s zoning ordinance, and new practices in affected city agencies.43

The City of Seattle’s Comprehensive Plan could provide a good model for Providence. Seattle’s planners consider urban agriculture an integral and necessary component of the city’s network of managed open space. Within the “urban village” element of its comprehensive plan, the city adopted a goal of “one dedicated community garden for each 2,500 households in the Village with at least one dedicated garden site.”44

The comprehensive plan is the most empowering document available to any municipality. The goals and policies set forth in a comprehensive plan help direct city ordinances, public policy, capital improvement projects, community programs, population growth, and development of land. Seattle’s comprehensive plan demonstrates the municipality’s commitment to urban agriculture, and offers hope of a new mindset for the increasing number of public officials across the country who believe growing food is not only an acceptable land use, but necessary for the health and well-being of the community and the environment.

Indifference among public officials is still pervasive, however, and is the most formidable obstacle to implementing any urban agriculture effort—whether on private or public land. Municipal staff in this country have especially been loathe to accept responsibility for feeding citizens directly. Once that attitude changes, and language is adopted to allow both private citizens and public officials to grow and maintain edibles, it will then be practical to devote time to exploring the myriad public-space opportunities for fresh, locally grown produce, and the roles public officials can play toward satiating the public’s appetite for it.

Many municipalities would rather not repeal or rewrite restrictive zoning ordinances to appease persistent citizen groups seeking to improve their neighborhoods through urban agriculture. Instead, public officials merely grant permission to neighborhood groups to construct community gardens on abandoned lots in troubled neighborhoods. Indeed, vacant-land cultivation represents the standard—and future—of urban agriculture in the minds of many.

While the use of vacant lots to grow food can be an integral component of a successful network of public produce, vacant lots are not what we typically think of as public space, the sorts of places where concentrations of diverse people stroll through, or gather together to recreate, socialize, or simply pass the time. These lots are “public” merely because they have been abandoned, leaving the municipality with no choice but to assume ownership. In function, abandoned property is not public space—just simple open space. But this type of open-space cultivation does share some civic benefits with more traditional public space, namely, helping to build community.

The argument for vacant-lot cultivation is quite sensible: It allows land that nobody is interested in developing (at the time) to return to productive use while lessening visual blight and bolstering community pride. Some community gardens have even helped to reduce crime in troubled neighborhoods, and have raised property values of adjacent structures. These obvious benefits give rise to an ironic new problem: By effectively creating the very situation that a situation is exactly what happened in New York City during the late 1990s. New York City had a long list of active community gardens, some dating back to the early 1970s. Many in the community revered these green spaces, but to public officials, those garden sites were merely placeholders for future housing. In May 1998, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani transferred hundreds of community garden sites from the city’s Parks Department to the Department of Housing Preservation and Development. This seemingly benign act spelled imminent doom for the gardens, as the opinions and public policies of Parks staff are very
different from Housing and Development staff. To help generate revenue, the city's Office of Management and Budget mandated that the garden sites either be developed or auctioned. Mayor Giuliani's administration argued that the gardens were never meant to be permanent. The community argued otherwise, and a bitter green-bean war ensued. Protesters dressed as fruits and vegetables rallied outside the mayor's office, newspapers joined the fray and seemed to side with the gardeners, while Mayor Giuliani taunted, "Welcome to the era after communism." 7

In the end, 113 garden sites were spared from development, but at a hefty cost. Trust for Public Land and New York Restoration, a community-based land trust led by entertainer Bette Midler, purchased the properties from the city for $4.2 million. Community groups declared victory, but, as one garden group noted, "forcing supporters of community gardens to pay the City millions of dollars to secure a future for community gardeners is bad public policy." 8 As New York and other municipalities across the country have learned, using community gardens as economic placeholders for future development is proving to be an unpopular strategy. If a garden site is successful, and has a group of dedicated citizens bent on improving the neighborhood and the lives of its inhabitants, it can be political suicide to try to take that land away.

What if community gardens were to make money? If urban agriculture was deemed a viable business to a plucky entrepreneur, would the city's stance on vacant-land cultivation change? University of Wisconsin professors Jerry Kaufman and Martin Bailkey sought to answer that question, and studied the extent to which entrepreneurial urban agriculture could be established on abandoned property in America. The impetus of their report is intriguing, as they cite the tens of thousands of vacant properties in each of the cities of Milwaukee, St. Louis, New Orleans, Chicago, Detroit, and Philadelphia that could reclaim productivity while establishing food security for these city's food-poor citizens. The examples of the many urban agricultural efforts being attempted within various communities was heartening evidence of a nascent, national trend. In the end, however, Kaufman and Bailkey concluded their analysis with the realization that "City government leaders would like their middle-class residents to stay instead of moving to the suburbs. They wish for more market housing and small businesses located on vacant land. They would like to see a strong back-to-

the-city movement to help fuel revitalization of depressed neighborhoods." The pair could not find much support for their ideas even from venerable, far-sighted planners like Edmund Bacon. Their report recounted an argument Bacon made to the Philadelphia Daily News on his ninetieth birthday. Bacon urged planners and public officials to "wake up" to the amount of land that has been abandoned in their cities, and to find more rational uses for that land. Urban agriculture was not the rational use Bacon proffered, however. Instead, Bacon's strategy was to clear all vacant houses in order to assemble large tracts of obstruction-free land, which could entice suburban housing developers to build new neighborhoods. 9

Kaufman and Bailkey reasonably argue that the middle class exodus continues in many American cities, and that considerable property—particularly that without the virtue of being near the city center or along a waterfront—will remain vacant and unsightly for the foreseeable future. Surely, in these areas, entrepreneurial urban agriculture makes planning sense. Such is the case in Detroit, a city estimated to have forty square miles of vacant land—30 percent of the city's total area. In the 1950s, Detroit's population was two million. Today, it is estimated to be less than half that, and still declining. Community groups have been turning many of these vacant parcels into food-growing opportunities for over a decade, and their efforts have inspired many. In some ways, Detroit is the embodiment of the National Vacant Properties Campaign slogan, "Creating opportunity from abandonment." 9 Now, thoughts are moving beyond the community garden plot to larger farming efforts. Some would like to see Detroit turn eyesore into opportunity by becoming the greenest city in the nation. Indeed, many urban planners see this bounty of empty land as a literal blank slate, with fantastic potential to reinvent Detroit. But even with all the vacant land, with more likely to come in the depressed economy, and amid projections that it would take at least an entire generation before Detroit could be repopulated, policy makers are still pining for the days when Detroit peaked at two million people. The thought of plants taking up space that could be inhabited by houses is a tough pill for some to swallow. 10

Efforts to reinvent Detroit through urban agriculture give reason to believe that vacant-lot cultivation in other cities is a worthy revitalization strategy. However, many city planners and policy makers will likely continue to align
with the planning strategy offered by Edmund Bacon. There is no denying the potential beauty and communal good that is possible with vacant-lot cultivation. But when there is an opportunity (or even hope) to bolster the tax base, create real density and diversity in the community, and revitalize a neighborhood with new homes and businesses, urban agriculture will seldom be seen as the highest and best use of abandoned land.

If a community insists on continued cultivation of vacant land in the face of a reluctant municipality, one option is to enlist the assistance of a land trust. Land trusts will acquire and hold land in perpetuity for the purpose of protecting that land from development. There are many types of land trusts organized for many different purposes. Chicago’s NeighborSpace, in particular, provides a unique land-trust model for municipally supported urban agriculture. NeighborSpace is a community-based, intergovernmental partnership between the City of Chicago, Chicago Parks District, and the Forest Preserve District of Cook County. Staff from each of these local agencies serve on NeighborSpace’s board of directors, and each government partner commits $100,000 annually to acquire titles to vacant land, which they then deed to community groups who spare that land from development. While many NeighborSpace sites are used for parks and ornamental gardens, protecting sites for the production of food is becoming more commonplace. It is this commitment to food production on urban open space and the active involvement and financial investment of local government officials that give promise to the tenure of urban agriculture on abandoned property.

Land trusts like NeighborSpace generally have excellent track records of successfully securing land for the preservation of open space, but there are times when an opponent proves too formidable. NeighborSpace was unsuccessful with one irregularly shaped, city-owned parcel on North Sheffield Avenue in Chicago, for example. It was not the municipality that objected to the proposal for an urban agriculture demonstration project, but the neighborhood. Residents overwhelmingly felt that the site’s highest and best use was housing. In what was certainly a rare example of NIMBYism (a derivative of the acronym for “not in my backyard”), one that might provoke incredulity from many urban planners, neighbors argued that the community’s appearance would be best improved not with green space, but with a building.

There will always be controversy over what constitutes the highest and best use of abandoned property in struggling neighborhoods. During prolonged periods of economic woe, development declines sharply and hunger rises. Growing food for people is arguably the best use for land that lays fallow during such times. Indeed, it often takes such catastrophic collapses for public officials to reassess their public policies. While a few ardent activists have perennially advocated for better options in public transportation, for example, such pleas have historically fallen on deaf ears—until the price of gasoline leaped above four dollars per gallon.

Such is the case with urban agriculture. As we have moved into uncertain economic and climatic times, public officials across the country have taken notice of the nation’s fragile food supply. The interest in growing food on vacant land to help establish food security has not been this strong since the Victory Garden efforts of World War II. But history since has taught us a lesson. That lesson is that the economy is cyclical, and we will witness prosperity again. And when those jubilant times come hence, the land that once laid fallow—that no one but gardeners and food growers would touch—becomes, once again, prime for development. As long as municipalities maintain control over vacant land, or uphold zoning regulations that restrict property to certain types of development, urban agriculture efforts on abandoned parcels will continue to be ephemeral. Only when the municipality relinquishes control of the land, or a long-term lease is agreed upon, will longevity be guaranteed to the community garden.

What could be a more permanent and acceptable strategy—to both citizens and public officials—is to look to other forms of public space in the city for urban agriculture. In any city, there are numerous under-utilized public and open spaces that could be used to produce food. According to Luc Mougeot, an expert
on urban agriculture efforts around the world, "Municipal governments that have mapped their city's open spaces are amazed by how much space sits idle at any given time." He further contends that "Unused urban space is a wasted opportunity—an asset denied to a community's well-being and a brake on the city's development."14

Mougeot believes that urban agriculture strategies perform best when they can be retrofitted onto public and open spaces where other activities are already occurring. "Setting aside areas in or around the city for the exclusive and permanent use by urban agriculture is unrealistic and self-defeating," he argues. "For one thing, it ignores the economic reality of land prices in growing cities. More importantly, it misses out on the interactions that urban agriculture can have (and should have, if it is to prosper) with other urban activities." Instead, Mougeot urges municipal government to take a critical look at the myriad public and open spaces, and to ask probing questions, such as, "How much space in their city is unused, underused, or misused? Where? How much of this could be made more attractive, more productive, and more profitable in social, economic, and environmental terms? How much could be achieved, in the short or longer term, through urban agriculture?"15 Public spaces that are too large for the density of the surrounding development (suburban parks and parking lots); too uncomfortable or uninteresting to attract a sufficient number of users (many downtown plazas); or where development is neither capable nor allowed (street rights-of-way, floodplains, utility and transportation easements) provide great alternative sites to vacant lot cultivation. And these urban spaces, as they are tucked in and around our places of employment, commerce, recreation, and residence, provide that interaction of urban activities that Mougeot believes is necessary in our cities.

The City of Des Moines is one municipality exploring that interaction between cultivation and community on its myriad public spaces. Through the Community Gardening Coalition, a division within the Parks and Recreation Department, municipal staff work with local landscape architects to create edible landscapes throughout the city. In addition to the community gardens that have been established on the various institutional grounds of schoolyards, shelters, juvenile and family centers, food pantries, and libraries, true public space is also being explored for urban agriculture. Drake Park, for example, has an orchard of thirty-three fruit trees at the south end of this neighborhood green space, providing an ample supply of food for nearby residents. The plans for a four-block section of East 12th Street, between I-235 and University Avenue, are particularly innovative: grape arbors marking each end of this edible streetscape; fruit trees punctuating the street corners at each block; and raised beds providing gardening space in the public right-of-way between the sidewalk and curb. There is even a fruit and nut orchard planned along one block, creating an attractive and edible edge to an otherwise unsightly parking lot. These edible plants work in concert with other proposed streetscape amenities, like enriched paving at street crossings, neighborhood signage, and sculpture set within a traffic circle in the middle of one intersection. The aims of these neighborhood plans are beautification and rejuvenation, but the designs go beyond the typical visual enhancements. They help address issues of food security by providing a diverse and abundant supply of fresh, publicly accessible produce.16
The City of Chicago is another municipality exploring local food production opportunities for the sake of its citizens' health and well-being. The city has adopted a pioneering food policy, dubbed "Eat Local Live Healthy," which identifies "food issues that, if restructured locally, could improve food quality, lower its cost and increase its availability for consumers." The policy, authored by the municipality's Department of Planning and Development, identifies a framework of strategies that not only enhance public health, but creates food-related business opportunities and fosters public- and private-sector cooperation. Increasing food production in Chicago neighborhoods; improving access to locally grown, healthful food; and boosting public awareness of the availability and benefits of locally sourced food are just a few of the strategies outlined in Eat Local Live Healthy.

Cities like Chicago are ripe to take the next step in offering choices in locally sourced food on public land. And if the folks at City Hall are going to lead by example, then there is no better, more symbolic place to showcase public produce than City Hall itself. While visiting Germany in 2000, Mayor Richard M. Daley witnessed various aspects of urban agriculture, and was reportedly inspired to implement some of these efforts back home in the Windy City. An incredible opportunity for local food production was found right under his nose; or more specifically, over his head. Today, on the northwest corner of City Hall's roof, a colony of over 200,000 honey bees are churning out sweet rewards for this municipality's local food philosophy.

In 2003, shortly after construction was completed for City Hall's "green roof"—a garden in the sky that helps to insulate the building, reduce stormwater runoff, moderate air temperature, and provide habitat for butterflies and migratory birds—Daley asked two beekeepers from a local honey co-op to erect an apiary. Two hives of Italian honey bees were installed by Stephanie Averill and Michael Thompson, who manage the apiary and harvest its crop. The bees pollinate flowers as far as five miles from City Hall, returning with nectar to produce two seasonal—and two very distinct—blends of honey. During the spring and summer, the bulk of the nectar is collected from white clover, yielding a very light honey with superior taste. In the autumn, goldenrod and white aster nectar produce a darker and richer honey crop, better used for cooking. The honey, which is sold at the Chicago Cultural Center, the City of Chicago Store, and through the Internet is proving popular with locals and visitors alike. The proceeds from honey sales are funneled into the municipality's Department of Cultural Affairs to help support free public programs, such as art exhibits, performances, and other cultural events. Chicago's green roof provides a sterling example of the immense value that can be extracted from a typically forgotten public space. And the honey that is produced and sold proves that buying local food is not only good for the environment, but culture and community as well.

In retrospect, Mayor Daley's directive to construct an apiary atop City Hall was prophetically visionary. Nations today—particularly the United States—are grappling with the startling decline in the honey bee population, referred to as Colony Collapse Disorder. And with the decline in honey bee populations comes a decline in food production. Many vegetable, fruit, and nut crops require pollination from honey bees. Human existence, we are quickly learning, is thus inextricably linked to these busy little bugs. Without bees to pollinate our plants, colony collapse disorder, as author Michael Shacker postulates, could well lead to "Civilization Collapse Disorder." Treating honey bees as pests and controlling their population through insecticides is endangering the health of plants, the planet, and all of its inhabitants. Municipalities nationwide should be following Chicago's lead and erect apiaries to do their part to encourage active, productive honey bee colonies. While colony collapse disorder is still a mystery, and experts work feverishly to find its cause, the best we can do to end this syndrome is garden organically, and to take up beekeeping in our city spaces, so we can better understand—and appreciate—our wild pollinators.

The City of Chicago is unique in its top-down approach to issues of food security. Mayor Daley, with support from high-ranking public officials, is advocating for changes in food policy that have typically been lobbied for by grassroots groups. It seems the mayor and his staff truly understand the relationship between food security, community health, and economic prosperity, and are pioneering strategies to ensure that citizens have access to local, fresh food. In his introductory letter to Eat Local Live Healthy, Daley explains that "Local and fresh food would be most beneficial to our health, environment, and economy. But much of the produce we buy comes from places like California, Chile or
Public Produce

New Zealand. There are global environmental costs of shipping produce so far. And, the farther it is shipped, the less fresh it can be.²⁰

What the City of Chicago succinctly illustrates is that public produce is an amalgam of public space, public officials, and public policy. If public produce is to be truly effective in bolstering the health and well-being of the city’s citizens, municipalities must lead by example. Mayor Daley’s views are not idealistic, in the pejorative sense, but they are no less visionary. His aims are high, but his expectations are reasonable. The mayor recognizes that commodity crops such as corn and soy bolster the city’s economy, but they do not feed people directly. He warns Chicagoans of the need to restructure the city’s food system to provide access to healthy, local table food. What Daley is sensibly advocating for are greater food choices in the community, choices that can improve both the health of his city’s citizens and the health of his city’s economy. The mayor readily admits that, given Chicago’s northern climate, some food items will have to be imported. But in a plain-spoken manner that only Midwesterners have mastered, using the sort of pragmatic logic that is difficult to argue—and hence municipalities across the country would do well to adopt—Daley reasons that “Importing some food is different from importing most of it.”²¹

CHAPTER THREE

To Glean and Forage in the City

Not everyone can afford to eat high-quality food in America, and that is shameful.

Michael Pollan, In Defense of Food

At the end of the 2008 growing season, a farming couple outside of Denver, Colorado, opened their fields to anyone who wanted to gather potatoes, beets, carrots, and onions left over from the harvest. The Millers, owners of the farm, had never made such an offer before, but thought it could be a way to thank their customers while ensuring that perfectly good food did not go to waste. They arranged for the public giveaway to begin at 9:00 a.m. on the Saturday before Thanksgiving, and put the word out to the local media, thinking that over the course of the weekend, five thousand people might take them up on their offer. They underestimated. Forty thousand people—the size of a small city—arrived at the Miller farm to gather free food. People began lining up before dawn. By 8:30 a.m., the Millers’ five-acre parking lot was full, and they had