



Challenging the Urban Edge: Controversial Garden Landscapes and Trajectories of Urban-Edge Agriculture Policy as a Method of Urban-Rural Separation

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At a moment when shifting housing markets have called into question orthodoxies of urban development and growth, we find renewed motive to examine the way that landscape ideologies and practices have played out – often outside of, and in tension with, the explicit policies proposed by ‘smart’ planning policies and approaches of specific times. This paper considers the theme of strategies for separating urban and rural land uses and a series of twentieth-century transformations that urban edge policies have undergone. Using Canterbury New Zealand, Ontario Canada, and Minnesota USA as case studies of different philosophies for urban edges, this paper considers the relationship between different forms of urban-edge land use planning legacies and ideals, and the way they play out as cities spread.

Moments of urban reconfiguration have been associated with urban residents’ reconsidering the urban-rural relationship. In the case studies in question, various forms of agriculture activism have influenced the containment of urban land uses, both to keep them from causing undue pressure on rural land uses, and also to encourage the inclusion of traditionally rural land uses in urban spaces. I review discourses and practices of residential land use planning across different sites to explore broad themes in the way that people are using environmental ideals that relate food and housing in the landscape.

I examine the historical development of urban edge policies, focusing on the recurring theme of separating urban and rural land uses at the urban edge. I use land use policies, oral histories, and archives of political meetings around the development urban edge and urban garden policies to consider categories of challenges that have been posed to the establishment of boundaries to guard against the problems perceived in urban-rural mixing. I am particularly interested in the histories that are often used to support the contrasting stories supporting anti-sprawl activism and urban agriculture, and use these historical sources to consider useful parameters for examining the claims made for justifying urban-rural separation—and for challenging this separation.

Specific focus points of this study include the establishment (and renovation) of urban growth boundary strategies, such as the (1970s) Christchurch urban fence, Toronto’s (early twenty-first century) Greater Golden Horseshoe Greenbelt (and earlier 1970s Parkway Belts), and the (1970s) Minneapolis Metropolitan Urban Services Area (MUSA) line. These strategies are considered particularly in the context of related urban agriculture movements, such as vacant lot and victory gardening in the early twentieth century (associated with the city beautiful movement), back-to-the land movements of the postwar era, and garden-related exurban amenity migration associated with the real estate bubble of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Urban agriculture has helped to challenge and transform the meaning of the urban edge, and these case studies illuminate the tensions between urban-rural separation philosophies and agricultural land use practices that push the boundaries of what is defined as urban.

KEY WORDS: Urban sprawl, urban containment, landscape history, peri-urban planning history, urban agriculture.