

Society for Urban, National, and Transnational/Global Anthropology

Jayne Howell, Contributing Editor

At the New Orleans meeting, SUNTA sponsored a garden tour organized by Kathleen Bubinas (U Wisconsin–Waukesha). We are fortunate to have a report on the experience from Sandra McLean, one of the 34 AAA members who participated in this Inno-vent.

Farming the Crescent City Tour

By Sandra McLean Sandra McLean (Slow Food NYC)

Farms are farms and vegetables are vegetables, yet we urban agriculture enthusiasts experience feelings of unexplainable joy whenever we enter an edible garden. After spending last year starting Slow Food NYC's first Neighborhood Farm in Brownsville, Brooklyn, I liken the experience to the elation I felt when my husband and I had our first child. No kidding. Thus, spending the morning touring the urban vegetable gardens of post-Katrina New Orleans was a privilege that I was looking forward to with more than a tiny bit of excitement.

We boarded the bus with Pamela Broom as our tour guide. Pam is member of AAA and the Executive Director and Founder of the Women and Agriculture Network. A New Orleans native and avid gardener, she conveyed to us the great sense of loss that New Orleans experienced (and is still experiencing) after Katrina. At the same time, she shared with us the sense of renewal and community that the Urban Gardens are bringing to the Ninth Ward and other areas hit hard by the hurricane.

Our first stop was the Hollygrove Market and Farm. There we met Paul Baricos, the master farmer, who told us that the farm provides over 125 families with weekly boxes of produce and offers classes and hosts other events for community members. The immaculately maintained site has a store, two fields measuring about 3,000 square feet and several community garden plots which are offered to those who live nearby.

From there we traveled on to the Wise Words Garden, the inspiration of Joseph Brock. His runs a for-profit venture while at the same time bringing a sense of community to the mid-city neighborhood. Brock has put his entrepreneurial stamp all over this garden. He designed the space to be utilitarian, community building and welcoming. It was there that I saw the most ingenious and simple water catchment system I have seen up until now. This spring, we will try it ourselves in our garden.

From there we traveled into the Ninth Ward where we witnessed some of the real devastation that Katrina wrought. Where once there were tightly knit neighborhoods jam-packed with the vernacular shotgun houses, there is now block after block of open space. Here and there, a single crumpled house remains. We briefly stopped at an elementary school where an edible garden funded by Common Ground Relief enables teachers to integrate health and wellness into the curriculum on a small scale.

The most eye-popping part of the tour was a stop at the Make it Right Foundation. There we toured the neighborhood where Brad Pitt's project has been funding the rebuilding of a particularly ruined section of the Ninth Ward. Along with several architects of note, Pitt has designed and built over 30 highly controversial, new houses whose style relates to, yet is distinct from, what one expects to see in the neighborhood. Although one can easily understand why some locals might be up in arms, I found the houses to be both whimsical and welcoming. There, we took a quick tour of a small non-sanctioned garden where the community is working together to create access to fresh food in a neighborhood where very little is available.

As I sit here in my Brooklyn apartment mid-January, I spend these cold days inspired by what we saw in New Orleans. I hope to bring the same sense of renewal to our under-served neighborhoods here in New York City.

Jayne Howell is the contributing editor and secretary of SUNTA. If you have any news or photos for this column please contact her at jhowell@csulb.edu.