

Introduction

Store Meat in the Bellies of Your Brothers and S

If every square foot of Chicago's land mass of just under 150,000 acres* was cultivated (assuming the land was clear of all built structures, people had moved to the suburbs so the entire 150,000 acres of the city was used for intensive farming, the soil was safe and fertile, there was adequate rainfall and there were no droughts, floods, insect plagues or diseases, there were working teams of people who were very proficient in the combined skill set of growing-processing-storing-distributing, and everyone converted to strict vegetarianism), the landmass of Chicago would only be able to produce enough food to sustain 18% of its current population.*

In 2010 I was hired by one of the many celebrities that got involved in earthquake disaster relief in Haiti to work on an ecologically sound sanitation plan for an encampment of 3,000 people. I worked in Port-au-Prince for several weeks and after I came home I had many dreams of disaster being superimposed onto Chicago, and specific visions about how my neighborhood of Little Village could be best reorganized as a more resilient, true self-sustaining village—one in which culture was built on shared complementary practices instead of detached hierarchical economies. My imagination was fueled by the way I had seen the Haitians navigate their devastated landscape and communities. There, in the midst of so much displacement, grief, and rampant chaos and violence, I watched a group of five men spend many days in 100-degree heat sorting building rubble by to size and restacking the resulting “grades” into useable piles. Their performance was markedly the most farsighted and sustained public performance I have seen anywhere in a long time. After several days of this, they moved their makeshift tents to camp around the piles, and claim their new “materials yard.”

* This calculation is based on John Jeavon's biointensive research that 4,000 square feet are needed to produce a balanced and high-calorie vegetarian diet for one person. This area also includes land to grow crops that replenish and build the soil from the extraction of this food.

These individuals were united in creating communities with their natural capital—their skills. This small crew of brilliant people had each followed specific principles and practices. Their sources were broadly defined; they recognized the industrial relics they harvested stored the value that had been built from, and that their value could be created through exchange. I had understood my species' reliance on soil materials, but these new stonemasons built through 20 years of my thinking, and I started turning my attention to soil.

The same year I went to Haiti, I received a grant from The Annenberg Foundation for a city-based composting project, “The Ground Rules.” The foundation wanted me to launch it in Philadelphia. I travelled to Philly and scoped out what would be a decent community partner, and hired my first staff. In eight months I travelled on a monthly basis forth from Chicago to Philly to train my staff and turn the legs of the project. The Ground Rules was both a success—we made a lot of connections and had a lot of conversations on a local and broad scale—and it was a failure. We were working in a city that was too poor to charge for our services, our corner was lackadaisical, and our funding was cut after we had gotten our engines whirring and efforts to a “pilot.”

For three years after returning from Philadelphia, I worked with others in Chicago to propose bills to change Illinois state laws around organic waste handling and composting. I attended countless meetings to propose a new compost ordinance for the city of Chicago. I also tried to get The Ground Rules off the ground in my hometown. I talked to nonprofit agencies and agencies partnering with me. I offered intermediate-level classes around the city on composting techniques and soil health. It was a lot of work that didn't get me anywhere. But when the land I was partnering with was sold (Humboldt Park, discussed on page 18), I saw an opportunity. With zero project funding, The Ground Rules began in Chicago, because, frankly, it was the only place if no one else knew it. But shortly after it was launched into the dark, I realized that the project's existence actually had been a healthy incubator for making The Ground Rules and what it has done for the wait.

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These individuals were united in creating new economies with their natural capital – the waste around them. This small crew of brilliant people haunts me still. They followed specific principles and practices followed. Resources were broadly defined; they recognized that the industrial relics they harvested stored the energy they had been built from, and that their value—if not inherent—could be created through exchange. I have always understood my species' reliance on soil for food and materials, but these new stonemasons blew a hole right through 20 years of my thinking, and I started seriously turning my attention to soil.

The same year I went to Haiti, I received a grant from The Annenberg Foundation for a new community-based composting project, “The Ground Rules.” The foundation wanted me to launch it in Philadelphia, so I travelled to Philly and scoped out what seemed to be a decent community partner, and hired my field crew. For eight months I travelled on a monthly basis back and forth from Chicago to Philly to train my crew and build the legs of the project. The Ground Rules Philadelphia was both a success—we made a lot of compost and had a lot of conversations on a local and broader city level—and it was a failure. We were working in a neighborhood too poor to charge for our services, our community partner was lackadaisical, and our funding wasn't picked up after we had gotten our engines whirring, reducing our efforts to a “pilot.”

For three years after returning from Philly, I worked with others in Chicago to propose bills to change Illinois state laws around organic waste hauling and processing. I attended countless meetings to write and propose a new compost ordinance for the city of Chicago. I also tried to get The Ground Rules off the ground in my hometown. I talked to nonprofit agencies about partnering with me. I offered intermediate and advanced classes around the city on composting technologies and soil health. It was a lot of work that didn't seem to be getting me anywhere. But when the land where a garden I was partnering with was sold (Humboldt Park's El Parquito, discussed on page 18), I saw it as an opportunity. With zero project funding, The Ground Rules began in Chicago, because, frankly, it was time, even if no one else knew it. But shortly after the project (re)launched into the dark, I realized that the years of dormancy actually had been a healthy incubation period, making The Ground Rules and what it has to offer others richer for the wait.

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The conservation strategy known as “source reduction” aims to take a bite out of our waste stream by assessing inputs and processes at their start. This is commonly one of the goal of most businesses: They want to minimize costs both at the production end as well as at the pay-as-you-throw end. This is admirable, and definitely a good beginning, even if it is mostly economically driven.

However, waste reduction is the goal of municipalities. Our cultural relics are many and there is cash to be made by cacheing them and in downcycling them. Lately, as citizen consciousness has changed, waste haulers in Chicago and elsewhere have found cash in creating another wing of their operation—an industrial compost site out past city limits where they receive a tipping fee for delivering and depositing landscape, food, and agricultural wastes. These “regenerative landfills” produce compost of different grades that is sold to retail and wholesale customers and used everywhere from municipal- and state-driven projects to community gardens and backyards.

An example: Portland (of course). Portland’s much-lauded compost program is a two-hour drive from the city limits. I had the privilege of going there as part of a tour during the Biocycle Conference a few years back. The operation was simple: dump a city curbside compost collection truck, grind the whole of its contents, scoop the resulting steaming pile into trucks to be driven 90 miles away to load and bounce on a conveyor belt, be mixed with wood scraps, and laid into windrows built onto a serrated pipe with chimney releases. Three humans ran the entire operation with a few front-end loaders and a truck. Leachate flowed from these piles across the compacted pad and somehow not into the adjacent waterway, because filtration tubes were put into place. Unlike at the city bay, there were no patrol falcons at the site, and no visible bird or rodent pests—thanks to the “ecoservices” of the local coyote clan, who ate or deterred hungry mice, rats, seagulls, and possums.

This is all well and good, and definitely can be categorized as an acceptable sustainable practice, but what if we, as individuals—or maybe even as motivated col-

lections of citizens—were to take a different approach and own our waste, even value it as a food source and choose to not pay to cart it off? If we value it enough to grapple with it and all its rotting chaos ourselves, in one ever-transforming pile in our backyard or maybe in our neighborhood? Ah ha! This is where it gets interesting. This would require us to don the perceptive lens and dexterous fingers of human scavengers. And if a collection of citizens saw themselves as such resourceful (and hungry) animals, we would create this economy. We would own this wealth. We would form a scavenger society and realize our relics store the energy they were built from and reestablish this energy flow. After all, investing in soil has a practical redeemability. Whether it is the soil within us or the soil known as earth outside of our bodies, soil is our true wealth.

If the monetary system collapses, what would you want your dollar backed by? Pork bellies? Gold? Oil? Soybeans? Or... (you fill in the blank). If the monetary system doesn’t collapse, isn’t the question the same?

And so I ask you: Do you know the soil outside your front or back door? Do you know its fertility? Its degree of disturbance? Its level of contamination? Its social history? How is your body connected to that which is underneath your feet and supporting your every step?

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Uncovering and articulating the environmental history of any urban place is no easy task because it hasn’t been written and the histories and stories need to be written by us. The Ground Rules team has done our best to get you started on your journey with this manual.

Good luck, connect with us, and share your findings and your work. And remember, this is just the beginning.

*Nance Klehm
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