

The Institute for Food: a University Small Farm Living/Learning Community as Transformative Idea and Utopian Ideal

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photo by elisa.serra@landscape.choreography

Summary Statement

This paper describes the first year of an ongoing project in support of the development of a university farm and environmental education center at the Austin-Magie farm, the centerpiece of the Institute for Food at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio. In its first year the project has engaged more than eighty students from architecture, interior design, graphic design, and other arts & sciences disciplines. The results have been putting a first acre into production, modifying a shipping container for tool storage and vegetable processing, envisioning the Institute's multifaceted physical infrastructure by eight student teams, holding a historic preservation workshop and engaging in a range of other teaching and learning experiences.

A particular focus of this presentation is an experience practicing *Landscape Choreography* with Elisa Serra, Architect, and Emanuele Braga, choreographer and activist. Landscape Choreography recognizes that the power of community rests in deeds, not only words, and that in bodily action it is possible to build community strength and unifying vision. In contrast to the aims of utopian vision, community building through Landscape Choreography recognizes the perfect society is neither a likely nor desirable outcome but that together we can begin where we are and improve on what prevails.

The purpose of this paper is to query the tension between the semantics and optics of the idea of utopia and the realities of community. In this sense any community-building project contains within it the ideal of utopia. Words such as *community*, *nature*, *spirit*, *sustenance*, *food*, *health*, *history*, and *farm* represent aspects of a contemporary utopian vision in the sense that they point to a better or more perfect society. How do such words and concepts help? How do they hurt? The goal of this visual and verbal presentation is to engage the ACS membership to answer these critical questions to help frame the idea of "The Farm."



ben jacks photo

Scope

The Institute for Food (IF) Design Studio took as its starting point the design of the landscape and physical infrastructure for a 35-acre university organic vegetable production farm and living/learning community and experiential education center to be constructed on exceptionally fertile and historic agricultural land owned by Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. The undergraduate students in the studio designed the farm site to accommodate a series of elements including organic produce fields with moveable hoop houses (for four-season organic leafy greens and vegetable production), native pollinator prairie and apiary, permaculture plantings, a produce processing building, a 50 student living-learning community, a demonstration kitchen, the restoration of a significant Federal style 1841 brick farmhouse (the Austin-Magie Farm and Mill District, on the National Register of Historic Places), and anything else the students might dream up in a robust process with the client, the Institute for Food, in mind. In a parallel studio students built a solar shade, vegetable wash line, and interior storage system for a shipping container to be put to immediate use. Students had to accept that the project was much larger than any single individual working on it, and that it involved short-term immediate needs and long-term envisioning. This was a “real” studio project in the sense that it was partially funded and seeking further funding, and some components of the ambitious scheme were likely to be built.

In sharp contrast to the Institute for Food plan for the Austin-Magie farm site was the possibility of the expansion of a university sports facility complex including extensive parking lots, a golf driving range, putting greens, and indoor and outdoor tennis courts. Through their own research students became aware that a casualty of this sports facility project would be the historic National Trust farmhouse and the surrounding landscape that contains traces of an old millrace and, potentially, American Indian burial mounds. A decision to erase these traces of history would seem misguided, especially on a site that boasts several extraordinary assets that make it ideal for farming and the proposed living/learning community and experiential education center, including: the highest quality productive soils in the region (Genesee and Ross Loams) and abundant creek water; a historic legacy linked to the surrounding county’s rich agricultural history; community value—because the site is adjacent to a new community recreational path and a park that preserves a fine and beloved 19th century covered bridge; and further value because of proximity to an established university environmental research center with a symbiotic mission. In contrast to this rich potential, the sports facility plan seemed torn from the pages of Witold Rybczynski’s *Last Harvest*, and would be especially disheartening in the face of global warming, food insecurity, chemical threats to health, bee colony collapse disorder, and a litany of other ills related to misuse and misunderstanding of the natural environment.

The Client

The Institute for Food at Miami University is a collaborative initiative to engage diverse communities around issues of food, health, and sustainable agriculture. The Institute for Food's goal is to build an interdisciplinary curriculum, and the organic university farm and experiential education center to promote greater awareness of food systems that support individual health, resilient communities, and agricultural sustainability. Fostering local knowledge about food in global context, the Institute for Food's leadership believes access to nutritious, affordable, sustainably produced food provides for healthy individuals, healthy communities, and a healthy planet.

The Institute for Food brings together students, faculty, and staff from the College of Arts and Science, the College of Education, Health, and Society, the School of Business, the College of Creative Arts, and the College of Engineering and Computing, and builds on a number of established programs including the Institute for the Environment and Sustainability, the Ecological Research Center, the Department of Global and Intercultural Studies, Nutrition and Dietetics, and Social Justice Studies. The Institute for Food is dedicated to supporting collaborative research, experiential education, sustainable policy, and community partnerships to facilitate transformative learning and new knowledge about food, health, and farming.

The driving force behind the Institute for Food centers on one central question: Are we adequately educating students, generating new research, and preparing future leaders to sustainably and equitably feed a world which is estimated to reach a population of 9.5 billion people by 2050? The Institute for Food's leadership believes this is one of the most pressing issues of our generation. It encompasses far-reaching concerns related to individual health, agricultural sustainability, and food security.

With this question in mind, the Institute for Food's goal is to explore and address a series of overlapping issues:

- Sustainable agriculture, biodiversity, and resilient ecosystems
- Food security and food sovereignty in local and global contexts
- Fair production practices and equitable access to nutritious and affordable food
- New food markets and food-related social entrepreneurship
- Intercultural knowledge centered on food; awareness of diverse cultural traditions, practices, and identities linked to food
- Sustainable design practices and landscape management that promote pollination, soil and water conservation, and localized food production

In the face of the Institute for Food's robust vision and action, it would seem a "no-brainer" to choose this vision and yet it faces a number of obstacles, some of which spring from the assumption that such a project is inherently utopian and therefore unrealistic.

Case studies

this presentation will show:

- 1) Student designs for the 35-acre organic university farm and related projects that were developed in studio this Spring semester.
- 2) A discussion of Landscape Choreography as practiced by Elisa Serra and Emanuele Braga with our students on the farm.

Intended Conclusions

This project involves numerous individual initiatives, and it has entered public discussion in the small-town university community in which it is located. George Lakoff, in *Metaphors We Live By*, *Don't Think of an Elephant*, and other books, has given democratically minded citizens the tools to frame debates. The organization *ecoAmerica*¹ is at the forefront of cutting edge research on mainstream Americans to understand motivating metaphors for people, politicians, and organizations seeking climate solutions. I intend to show and describe the Institute for Food project to the ACS community in the hope of engaging discussion around the theme of utopia, particularly as it shows up in the particular keywords surrounding the project. I am seeking the help of ACS members in thinking about how questions of meaning such as spiritual and utopian values engage the world.

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¹ See <http://ecoamerica.org/> and <http://ecoamerica.org/research/#Let'sTalkClimate>