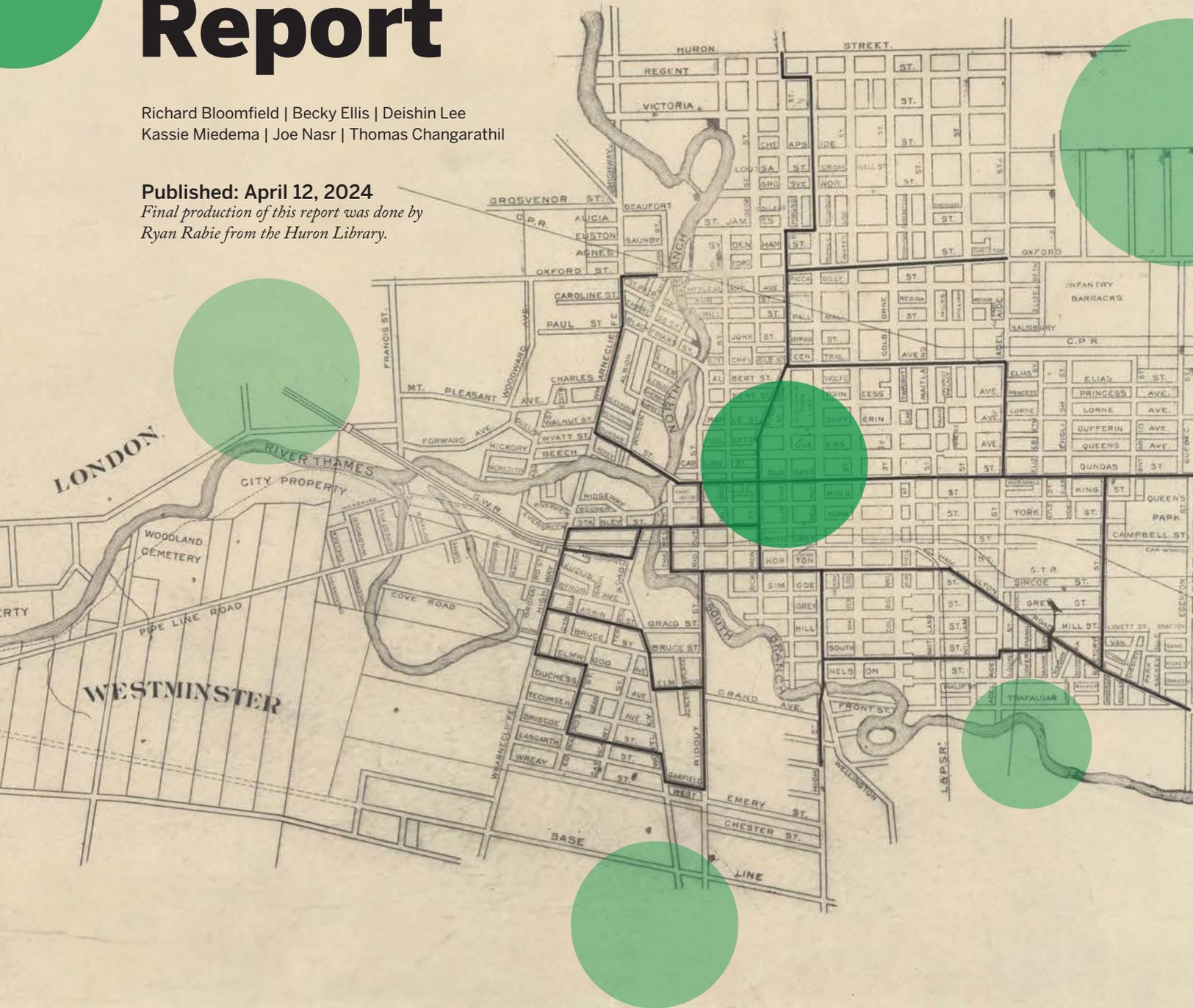


Urban Agriculture Workshop Summary Report

Richard Bloomfield | Becky Ellis | Deishin Lee
Kassie Miedema | Joe Nasr | Thomas Changarathil

Published: April 12, 2024
*Final production of this report was done by
Ryan Rabie from the Huron Library.*



URBAN AGRICULTURE WORKSHOP | FEBRUARY 10, 2024 | LONDON, ONTARIO

This report is distributed under the Creative Commons License, Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0).

Executive Summary

This summary report aims to capture the essence of the discussions, insights, and ideas generated during the workshop, providing a strategic roadmap for advancing urban agriculture (UA) in London, Ontario, towards a more sustainable, equitable, and just future. This workshop convened 41 stakeholders from diverse backgrounds, including community organizers, urban planners, policymakers, and environmental advocates, to collaboratively explore the current state, challenges, and future aspirations for UA within the city. The workshop's activities were structured around the Three Horizons Framework to facilitate a structured yet imaginative dialogue on transitioning towards a more sustainable and equitable UA system. Key areas of discussion included the identification of existing urban agriculture practices, barriers to their success, potential and emerging innovations, and strategies and creative ideas for creating a just and inclusive food system by 2050. The insights gathered from the workshop underlined the importance of collective action, innovative policy-making, and community engagement in realizing the vision for UA in London's future.

Context

This workshop is one part of a larger research project focused on exploring UA in London, Ontario. The City of London released one of Canada's first UA strategy reports in 2017 and implemented policies to support that strategy in 2019. The broader research is focused on identifying patterns of success or failure of UA initiatives, and how the strategy report and policy changes have affected UA in London since their release and implementation. The goal of this research is threefold: research findings will give municipal governments a better understanding of the effects of urban planning and policy development decisions on UA; research activities will identify ways to increase public and community involvement in UA through policy creation and engagement strategies; and research synthesis will identify patterns and best practices for success for UA practitioners.

This work is being done through key research activities including a literature review, in-depth expert interviews, and the Three Horizons workshop. At the time of writing this report, the research team is conducting an ongoing literature review, 25 experts have been interviewed, and 41 participants attended the workshop held in February of 2024. We are currently analyzing and synthesizing the qualitative data gathered from our research activities to date.

Our ultimate goal is to support the development of research on how the uptake of UA initiatives in Canadian cities can be understood in the context of a broader movement toward sustainable and just local food systems. To that end, this workshop summary report is one of many efforts to share our insights with UA practitioners, community members, municipal government, academics and students, the general public, and, most importantly, the generous participants of this research effort. Thank you for sharing your time, wisdom, creative ideas, and knowledge with us.

Scope and Objectives

The objectives of the workshop were to identify and strategize around emerging patterns, barriers, successes, best practices, and challenges in UA implementation in London, Ontario, in the light of recent policy frameworks and the broader context of food justice.

Horizon 1 ●

Facilitate a Shared Understanding of Current UA Landscape: To achieve a collective insight into the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) associated with the current state of UA in London, thereby laying the groundwork for a unified vision of its future.

Horizon 3 ●●●

Visioning an Ideal Future for Urban Agriculture: To engage stakeholders in envisioning an ambitious, ideal future for UA in London by 2050, incorporating limitless capital, technology, political support, and social commitment, thus defining what could be the most 'impossible' goals worth pursuing.

Horizon 2 ●●

Develop Concrete Steps Towards a Desired Future: To delineate actionable steps, identify potential innovations, and strategize on overcoming barriers that could move London towards the envisioned future for UA, emphasizing collaboration, community engagement, and policy reform.

The workshop ended with a call to action, encouraging participants to commit to individual or collective actions that align with the workshop's insights and contribute to the gradual realization of the ideal future for UA in London. To create a lasting impact beyond the workshop the research team documented and disseminated its findings and recommendations, thereby inspiring ongoing engagement, innovation, and advocacy among stakeholders toward realizing the vision of a sustainable and just UA system in London.

Outcomes

Horizon 1 - SWOT of Current Context ●

During the workshop, several strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats were discussed by each group during the first breakout session. Some common themes emerged in multiple groups and are described below.

In London, there has been substantial support for the new green bin composting program run by the City of London, which many participants identified as a strength; participants suggested that the pilot program could be expanded to include composting in high-rise buildings. Other opportunities were identified for further expansion of supporting UA initiatives, such as pollinator-friendly spaces.

Climate change and concerns over contaminated water and soil are clear threats that participants expect UA will face, and potentially mitigate. While there is an established informal network dedicated to the grassroots efforts of UA in London, participants in many groups recognized the need to formalize these structures. Fragmentation and duplication of efforts within the UA community are seen as significant weaknesses, possibly stemming from a lack of formalization and compounded by a lack of inter-organization communication. Related to this, competition for funding in the non-profit sector seems to exacerbate these challenges.

Additionally, there was tension regarding whether City of London staff effectively listened to community input. For example, many participants noted that while staff were very receptive and supportive when approached, turnover of staff creates a significant threat to the continuity of information and progress in implementing the UA Strategy.

Finally, almost all group discussions noted that access to land is a major weakness, compounded by zoning regulations. These barriers pose a significant limitation to the expansion and success of UA initiatives. Moreover, participants noted that given the current affordability crisis affecting both the cost of food and housing, there can be conflicting priorities for policymakers when considering land use in the city, suppressing progress for more UA initiatives.

Overall, while there are strengths and opportunities to leverage, there are also clear weaknesses and threats that need to be addressed for the successful implementation of the UA Strategy in London.

Horizon 3 - Future Aspirations ●●●

The second task of each breakout group was to think about what UA could look like in 2050, with no limitations. That is, an exercise to envision an ideal world and to describe what it would look, feel, and smell like. Three key themes emerged across the participant groups.

Food as Collective and Public Responsibility

Recognizing a future where food is a collective responsibility and a fundamental human right, led many participants to consider the intersection between food and medicine or healthcare, as well as the importance of culturally appropriate and affordable food. Further, the importance of publicly funded education surrounding food and its production was deemed essential across all levels of the education system (primary to university) to achieve this imagined ideal future. This concept would also encompass promoting food sovereignty, increasing local food production, and creating adaptable and flexible UA models.

Ecological and Economic Care

There was an emphasis on promoting more nature-centric and biodiverse approaches to city planning, akin to the principles seen in ‘Blue Zones’, to reverse climate change, foster healing, and establish stewardship of land and water resources. Participants envisioned a future where urban agriculture is fully integrated into the urban landscape, including green roofs, vertical farms, community gardens in every neighborhood, and urban farms that cater to local food needs. Participants indicated this would include embracing ecological living practices and leveraging both high and low-tech interventions to enhance the relationship between humans and nature, while also emphasizing a more circular model of economics.

Equity and Collaboration

Equity and collaboration were also key themes across participant groups, necessitating a cultural shift towards more socially oriented values to achieve the desired future. This includes recognizing and integrating culturally appropriate food and Indigenous knowledge into UA practices. Concepts such as Indigenous land repatriation prompted discussions about who truly deserves access to essential resources like food, housing, land, and connected to the theme of food as a collective responsibility. Finally, establishing robust food infrastructure within each neighborhood was highlighted as crucial for ensuring access to nutritious food for all community members. Participants envisioned a future where UA plays a central role in empowering communities, enhancing food security, and ensuring access to healthy, locally grown food for all, especially in underserved and food desert areas.

Horizon 2 - Transition from Current Context to Future Aspirations ●●

In the final session of the workshop participants connected their envisioned ideal future (Horizon 3), with the current landscape (Horizon 1), to map ways of reaching an ideal future for UA.

Education and Awareness

There was a strong emphasis on the role of education at all levels—from primary schools to professional, post-graduate programs—in promoting understanding and appreciation of UA, food production, nutrition, and environmental stewardship. Encouraging broader public engagement and awareness about the benefits of UA and sustainable food practices was seen as crucial. This included leveraging technology, social media, and community programs to reach wider audiences. Additionally, broader community-based learning infrastructure like agriculture parks were suggested as a necessary resource.

Community Governance and Local Policy

There was a consensus on the need for better coordination and communication among UA stakeholders to reduce fragmentation and duplication of efforts. This includes creating more networks and platforms for collaboration among individuals, community groups, government entities, and educational institutions. More specifically, community food hubs, localized to individual neighbourhoods, were seen to be more desirable than larger-scale food banks. Formal coordination from the City of London was also a common theme. The need for a paid staff member with the responsibility to enact the UA strategy and even to act as an extension agent for training new growers was seen as critical to increasing participation in UA. Further, the paid staff member could aid in providing zoning clarity and potentially help update zoning bylaws that prohibit or discourage UA.

Long-term Direction

Participants were also clear about long-term and higher-level policy and government support for UA. There was a consistent call for harmonization among various levels of government to ensure coherent and coordinated efforts. Establishing a clear action plan grounded in UA strategy locally was seen as crucial, however, it should be accompanied by mechanisms for government accountability, including defined goals, measurable metrics, and appropriate regulations. Furthermore, many participants believed that urban development plans and developers must be incentivized to incorporate UA into planning processes which would require Provincial as well as Municipal government support. Finally, securing long-term funding and planning commitments would be essential to sustain and scale UA initiatives over time, ensuring their viability and impact within communities.

Philosophical Tensions

There was noticeable tension between recommendations that focused on quick incremental wins versus pushing for large paradigm shifts within UA policy. In some cases, this could be the result of competing cultural values that centre on self-sufficiency and independence versus collective responsibility. This tension was also situated within a broader context, where external perspectives (those not actively engaged with UA) range from indifference to disbelief in UA and its benefits. These differing viewpoints could be related to broader perspectives on the impacts of climate change, further complicating the discourse surrounding the direction of UA efforts. Many participants called for more political advocacy and action to address systemic barriers to urban agriculture, including challenging corporate dominance in the food system and advocating for policies that prioritize sustainability, equity, and community well-being over profit.

Next Steps

In the coming months, our research team will continue to analyze data from interviews conducted as well as the workshop and are committed to sharing any information in as accessible a way as possible. This will include future reports, open-access publishing, and a variety of conferences. We also plan to design a family activity to connect people with the wide range of UA initiatives in London.