ASPHALT-Y TOURS

Urban farms around America are breaking through concrete and hitting sustainable paydirt
[SLIDESHOW]

by Breaking Through Concrete team 6 Aug 2010 4:00 AM

From mid-May through July, Grist readers followed along as a writer, photographer, filmmaker, and farmer hit the highway to visit a couple dozen urban farms across America. The Breaking Through Concrete team are back to sum up their trip and share some of Michael Hanson's most indelible images from it for our Feeding the City series.

Months before we actually left Seattle in our grease-powered short bus, Edwin Marty, cofounder of Jones Valley Urban Farm in Birmingham, Ala., and I, a Seattle-based writer, had proposed a book idea. We wanted to tell the stories of the American urban farm -- documenting the best, often under-publicized examples of people and organizations growing food and providing services to their communities by way of the city farm plot.

We put together a list of 15 farms from Seattle to New Orleans to Detroit. A publisher bit: University of California Press. Uh oh. As often happens with big ideas, when they actually become real, things get scary.

Photographer Michael Hanson is very good at shooting people and landscapes, and he happens to be my brother and housemate. So I asked him to come along -- two months on the road total, with two days at each farm location. We'd have to go bare-bones, as we have often have on our collaborative projects. He agreed, as usual. A few weeks later I remembered our friend Charlie, whom we'd met in Ethiopia during a project in 2009. He was in his first year of graduate-level documentary film school at NYU. I asked if he'd join us as videographer. He agreed.

Finally, though we had the book deal, we needed more funding for the trip. Edwin had recently met Brooke Smith of WhyHunger at a food-security conference. WhyHunger is a New York-based nonprofit supporting efforts to cure hunger around the world. Brooke was looking for new-media ways to tell the story of "food deserts" - urban...
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Roots for Refugees Farm, Kansas City, Kansas

As the sun rises above Kansas City, two employees harvest vegetables at this diverse farm.

Common Good City Farm, Washington, D.C.

Spencer Ellsworth harvests vegetables at this farm in a low-income neighborhood in Washington, D.C.
Shelby, Mississippi

A young man stands in front of his small garden plot next to his trailer home. He's been growing corn, tomatoes, arugula, and beans in his backyard for many years.

Village de l'Est, New Orleans, Louisiana
Hurricane Katrina wrecked Village de l'Est in 2005, but this community's ability to grow food in their own backyards and community spaces made recovery rapid. Father Luke holds produce as an older woman continues to harvest her plot.

Greensgrow, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Mary Seton Corboy, director of Greensgrow, an urban farm and nursery in Philadelphia, smokes the boxes before inspecting the bees.
Fairview Gardens, Santa Barbara, California

An employee holds a bed of plants while another picks strawberries. More than 100 years old, Fairview wasn't always an urban farm. Years of sprawl crept in, and what was once a rural farm is now the only working production farm in the Goleta Valley outside Santa Barbara. A handful of families have lived on the property for decades, working the fields and enjoying the urban oasis.
Roots for Refugees Farm, Kansas City, Kansas

A refugee from Burundi tends to her individual plot on a sunny afternoon.

Catherine Ferguson Academy, Detroit, Michigan
At the Catherine Ferguson Academy in Detroit, teenage mothers get their education in the classroom and outside at this urban produce and livestock farm. Here, students learn to build a small greenhouse.

The Breaking Through Concrete team is taking a 21st century road trip to document the American urban farm movement, visiting 14 diverse projects that are, in distinct ways, transforming our built environments and creating jobs, training opportunities, local economies, and healthy food in our nation’s biggest cities. The team is proud to have WhyHunger as a major sponsor of the tour.

Who we are:

David Hanson (text) — David is a freelance journalist living in Seattle. He was the founding travel editor for Cottage Living Magazine and current Editor-at-Large for Coastal Living.

Michael Hanson (photography) — Michael shoots for The New York Times, Outside, Patagonia, Coastal Living, Budget Travel, NPR, Sunset, among others. He recently won American Photo Magazine’s first prize in portraiture for his series on Ethiopia’s Omo Valley tribes.

Charlie Hoxie (videography) — A documentary filmmaker and freelance multimedia journalist living in New York City, Charlie has worked on projects for PBS and the Biography Channel, as well as feature documentaries with Academy Award-winning director Alex Gibney. He is currently an MA candidate in the News & Documentary program at NYU’s Arthur L. Carter Center for Journalism.

Edwin Marty (farming) — Edwin is founder and executive director of Jones Valley Urban Farm, a non-profit, education and working production farm located in downtown Birmingham, AL, that has grown from a single vacant lot into a city-wide farm with 28 acres in production.

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