Back to the Land

Chickens are hot.
An increasing number of city-dwellers and suburbanites aspire to lives as corporate hunters by day and egg gatherers by evening. Of course, it doesn’t start with chickens. Tomatoes are often the gateway crop — people start with an innocent container on the deck, then graduate to basil, and before long, the Rhode Island Reds are coming home to roost.

In addition to supplying fresh eggs, chickens provide a living, squawking metaphor for new attitudes about the city. Buried in reports about neighbor skirmishes and fevered examinations of agricultural restrictions in zoning codes is the sense that we still haven’t found the right model for the city, that the old ways of isolating nature through green ghettos (variably called parks and playgrounds) aren’t working for us anymore. When we stopped thinking of Mother Nature — an entity — and started thinking about the environment — a condition — we realized that tree museums and flower zoos weren’t enough.

The interest in sustainability and the related attention to food sources, organic agriculture, and “slow food” are obvious reasons why so many city-dwellers are suddenly listening to their inner farmer. But larger cultural forces are at work, too. ArchitectureBoston has in the past explored the trend away from classification and hierarchy that defines our era (“Hybrid,” November/December 2008, and “Blur,” November/December 2004). It makes sense that we would now think in terms of smudging the line between city and country that has existed since Roman times.

Striding into this new territory are landscape architects. Theirs is a profession long misunderstood by the public, if indeed the public knows anything about it at all. But theirs is a profession that was also long misunderstood — and certainly underestimated — by the building community, including architects and owners. That is no longer the case. Landscape architects are claiming new turf: anything that’s not a building is theirs.

The new prominence of the profession coincides with the shift in our perception of the city and in the ways we define its relationship with the natural world. We have moved from a two-dimensional treatment of surfaces through plant and paving selections to a three-dimensional understanding of space — whereby every HGTV host now blathers about “outdoor rooms,” — to a four-dimensional understanding of cities as systems.

The urban-agriculture movement is only one part of the new attitude about cities. But it has introduced the concept of the productive landscape — a landscape that is somehow useful, as opposed to all those layabout ornamental gardens and lawns. Food production is the core of the idea, but with it has come the notion that the landscape can do more, that it can serve multiple roles, mitigating environmental damage, restoring habitats and wetlands, managing stormwater, even producing biofuels, compost, and wind energy. We are at the frontier of thinking in terms of the productive landscape and of reconciling previous conceptions of the “built” and “natural” landscape. What if we overlay digital technologies on the landscape — can it produce information and new experiences? What if cities are no longer built to contain the natural world but instead are formed to respond to it?

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The latter question is at the heart of the “landscape urbanism” movement, which has caught the attention of city planners and policymakers and brought fresh energy to the landscape-architecture profession. Want your kid to grow up to design cities? Forget Legos. Think mud puddles.

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