

AGRICULTURAL LEARNING CENTERS
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

By

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PREFACE

As a Montessori teacher, I taught plant science and horticulture skills to children. With the help of Dr. Seuss, I planted the seed for environmental education through his book, *The Lorax*. As a proprietor of Montessori schools, I yearned for a farm school in hopes of providing children with a more holistic background. As an undergraduate student in Landscape Architecture, I aspired to design outdoor classrooms and urban farm/community centers. When I commenced the graduate program in Community and Regional Development at the University of California, Davis, I found myself pondering the terminology of foodshed and community supported agriculture.

With my original goal of graduate school focused on the development of local food systems within sustainable communities, I was drawn to the study of places that promote agricultural education. What I have coined as *agricultural learning centers* are establishments, both private and public, that provide agricultural education for the entire community. Together with my bright and inquisitive twelve year old son and his Beagle, Tootsie, we set out to explore agricultural learning centers throughout California and the United States. By means of visitation and interviews, photography, observations and ample time to review and reflect, we experienced a broad spectrum of community wide agricultural education.

Traveling five thousand miles throughout the United States has cast a deeper understanding of the income disparity that plagues our nation today. The polarity separating the rich and poor was clearly illustrated between the ghettos of South Chicago and the ski resorts of Colorado. While blighted slums lack food security, elites quest for personal jewelers. Within our current agricultural system, corporate farming has become

the norm while small family farmers are reduced to a life of poverty, if not forced out of farming all together. This is a clear illustration of the need for systematic reform.

Our agrarian roots have been forgotten. Our relationship with the land has decayed along with our connection to nature and ecological systems. Our overall health has been jeopardized along with the global environment. As we face a social crisis, the time is ripe to re-educate and re-connect people to the land for our society and planet to achieve a level of sustainability. Agricultural learning centers are one method of drawing people together for the greater good and can serve as an antidote for the fragile world we live in.

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