

March 3, 2006

Mayor Antonio Villarraigosa
Los Angeles

Dear Mayor Antonio Villarraigosa,

I grant you that this is too long a letter, but I cannot sleep tonight (3:40 am) thinking about the fate of the South Central Farm and the larger, dreadful implications of its potential imminent dismantling. Therefore, in strong defense of the Farm, I offer you these reflections, formulated on the basis of four theoretical constructs—the notions of making history and making life (Flacks, 1988); invented spaces of citizenship (Miraftab, 2004); the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1968, 1996); and the post-justice city (Mitchell, 2001). Trusting your reflective nature, I hope that they provide you plenty of ‘food’ for thought so as to halt the Farm’s eviction and find a satisfactory solution to this challenge that *both* preserves the Farm *and* appropriately compensate the land owner or transfer his development rights elsewhere.

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- Making history *and* making life (Flacks, 1988)

Flacks (1988) made a productive distinction between ‘making life’ and ‘making history’ events and processes. Life-making processes, in his view, are equivalent to everyday-life practices. The term emphasizes the reproduction of quotidian life. Yet, when there are ruptures in ongoing life-making processes, events may become transcendental and attain a level of history-making. The South Central Farm, however, allows for the distinct possibility of *both* making history *and* making life—and you have the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to prominently *make history* while allowing its farmers, and their relatives and friends, to *make live* in the midst of this splendid Farm.

- Invented spaces of citizenship (Miraftab, 2004, Miraftab & Wills, 2005)

Miraftab’s (2004) calls for the “recognition of the full range of spaces within the informal arena where citizenship is practiced” through the interaction of the “mutually constitutive concepts of ‘invited’ [term from Cornwall, 2002] and ‘invented’ spaces of citizenship”:

‘Invited’ spaces are defined as the ones occupied by those grassroots and their allied non-governmental organizations that are legitimized by donors and government interventions. ‘Invented’ spaces are those, also occupied by the grassroots and claimed by their collective action, but directly confronting ... the status quo. While the former grassroots actions are geared mostly toward providing the poor with coping mechanisms and propositions to support survival of their informal membership, the grassroots activity of the latter challenges the status quo in the hope of larger societal change (ibid.: 1).

The South Central Farm particularly underlines the significance of invented spaces of citizenship in the quest for more inclusive and just cities. These are the “spaces that are chosen, demanded, and seized through collective action from below” (Miraftab & Wills, 2005: 209). They are “a result of the practicing agency of the citizens struggling to expand the public sphere” (210). The South Central Farm is an instance of an invented space of citizenship created, used, and appropriated by people whose ‘invited’ spaces of participation do not allow them the assertion of all their constitutional, human, and cultural rights. Furthermore, the South Central Farm is an invented space of citizenship that is generously offered by the farmers to all Angelinos, in a process that both asserts and expands our collective rights to the city. Saving the Farm would honor your personal history of raising from poverty and your professional and political history of struggling for justice.

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- The right to the city

Henri Lefebvre's seminal work on "the right to the city" (1968, 1996) refers to the rights to inhabit and make use of the city and 'the right to have rights' regardless of one's legal status. Purcell has carefully analyzed the concept's transformative potential:

Lefebvre offers a radical ... vision that entirely upends the social relationships that currently govern urban politics. He argues that urban inhabitants, rather than capital interests and the state, should take a direct and central role in making the decisions that produce urban space. Because Lefebvre (1991) maintains that space is implicated in all elements of social life, the right to control the decisions that produce urban space implies the right to determine the full scope of everyday life in the city. Lefebvre's right to the city thus envisions a thoroughgoing democratization of urban politics. He insists that decision-making about urban space should be guided by the principle that use value should always trump exchange value—that above all other considerations urban space should be produced to meet the everyday needs of those who inhabit it (Purcell, 2005: 200).

... Lefebvre's right to the city not only champions the right to act in existing urban space, it also involves the right to determine how that space is produced. Lefebvre interrogates and rethinks the decision-making structures that produce the city, and so introduces a much more radical democratization of the city ... not just the right to speak in public space, but to decide the geography of public space; not just the right to be housed, but to decide the geography of affordable housing (ibid.: 201).

The right to the city must be seen "as an opening to a new urban politics" (Purcell, 2002: 99). In Harvey's words, the right to the city should not be "merely a right of access to what the property speculators and state planners define, but an active right to make the city different, to shape it more in accord with our heart's desire, and to re-make ourselves thereby in a different image" (2003: 940).

Defending the South Central Farm, the farmers, and with them and/or through them the whole community of Los Angeles, are pushing for the expansion of their rights to the city. However, the democratic and liberating use value of this space enacted by the people contrasts with the exchange value of private property that has prevailed in the legal deliberations about this case. The right to defend, maintain, and expand the use value of some key irreplaceable spaces in our city, such as the South Central Farm, can thus be a constant struggle. In order to defend the right to the city, nonetheless, you need to be both aware of conditions that attempt against the use value of extraordinary spaces such as the South Central Farm, and committed to redress them.

- The post-justice city (Mitchell, 2001)

Urban elites frequently implement mechanisms that effectively prevent or control the spatial practices of Others that deviate from the ethos of a 'consumerist citizenship'. They do so, for instance, through the privatization of open space, the criminalizing of immigrants, and the disciplining of insurgent groups (MacLeod, n.d). These trends are so common-place and unapologetically pursued in some cities, that Mitchell has called this the era of the 'post-justice city' (Mitchell, 2001), in which citizenship rights are taken away from the ones who cannot partake in the neo-liberal economy. Amidst these global trends, the South Central Farm is evidence of a counter space, community, and process that offer real hope for the future of the just city. We trust your leadership for enacting both the repudiation of the 'post-justice city' and explorations of alternative models of development and conviviality in Los Angeles. How fortunate we all are that the South Central Farm is providing us a fabulous model to emulate in this ever-more-difficult quest for the just city!

Let me move on now to my conclusion, because I do not want to distract you any longer from *acting* to save the Farm. As I hope the reflections above have illustrated, the relevant question is not whether this urban farm should be preserved. This is the wrong question and one that diminishes the stature of your office and the trust we have invested in you. The question is, rather, how can we best help multiply urban farms like this one throughout Los Angeles and cities of the Americas and the world. As the era of oil inescapably comes to an end, we are going to be faced with the need, whether we like it or not, to live more compactly, thrifty, cooperatively, and in more direct connection with, and responsible for, the production of our own food. In this context, not only does the South Central Farm not constitute a backward use of land in one of the largest and more prominent and modern cities of the world. Instead, it is a model for the future (and the future is now), one that can support the survival of our growing urban civilization. Maintaining the South Central Farm, Los Angeles and you as its mayor have the unique opportunity to become world visionaries and trail breakers.

Lastly, let me appeal to your personal heart, acknowledging the profound passion and social-mindedness that you devote to your work. I respectfully invite you to close your eyes for a moment and ask yourself the following questions: What is it about these farmers, that they have sustained this long and wearing struggle to save this space, putting so much passion and effort into it, and risking so much personal, familial, and communal trouble in the process? What is it about all their supporters, that they have been leaving the comfort of their homes and even in cases risking their jobs or academic standing to spend days and nights offering their pro-bono work and solidaristic friendship to these farmers and their families? And ultimately, what is it about this piece of land, the warmth of its earth and the flavors and aromas of its produce, that it is so profoundly meaningful, fulfilling, and even redemptive to all these people? And after you make these reflections, I further invite you to quietly go to the Farm, without the media and without public speeches, unencumbered by your mayoral gown, and allow yourself to *feel* the Farm. Then, I am sure, you would not tolerate its disappearance.

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