



## Mutual Aid in New York

Mary Mattingly

At the beginning of the pandemic, speculations swirled and millions of urban-dwellers found themselves in the position of having to respond to evolving governmental instructions and media recommendations as well as a radical transformation of the workplace. Travel between certain states was (and still is) restricted, information and conjecture was viral.

With an autoimmune disease that demanded a hospital visit during the early stages of the pandemic, I arrived to Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan for surgery, and while in a waiting room overlooking the mezzanine awaiting an appointment, received a call from the surgeon urging me to postpone. Mount Sinai's lobby was predictably chaotic but the large mezzanine was silent with a long line of people standing six feet apart, wearing hospital gowns with their heads covered in bags. This was before doctors had as much of an understanding of this virus as they do now, however, it reflected the confusion of a largely unprepared city in panic, with rates of sickness and later a death toll that would quickly rise.

In the US, the pandemic has become politicized. Coupling the public politicization is the advertising and media-related stress on the individual to make choices—choices with suddenly life or death consequences—feeding fear about what was being stockpiled and unavailable, how people should self-isolate, and how to safely conduct basic interactions, if at all. While there exists the ever-present threat of a surveillance state gaining ground (as happened after 9/11) basic safety measures were and are widely contested as if a slippery slope to a pervasive monitoring of a person's every move is now possible. As of September, 265,000 New Yorkers have moved either temporarily or permanently to various places around the US, for reasons ranging from disrupted education to possibilities of remotely working to entire industries closing down.

The inadequacy and precariousness of the social safety net in the US is a felt reality for many around the city and country who were already struggling financially before the virus hit. Re-focusing on enlarging these safety nets for neighbors has been the resounding response to the pandemic in New York. With people in many (deemed) non-essential industries still out of work, mutual-aid groups took main-stage in New York City and cities around the country, and reached new levels of (a network-based) organizational sophistication.

The pandemic has been the place where old and new pains meet. Access to clean air, water, and healthy food varies for city dwellers at uneven rates often depending on



income and forms of systemic bias including redlining (which is the discriminatory practice of avoiding investment in communities with what the industry considers unfavorable or high-risk demographics, typically with large minority populations). The pandemic has made the multiple crises of lack of stable, affordable housing, access to healthy food, green spaces, guaranteed health care, and sustaining jobs visible to everyone. It has been a reckoning for cities, and simultaneously made many renew their appreciation for being in close proximity to one another and the services they need.

Of utmost importance for everyday mental and physical health has been access to verdant spaces, which I believe will force cities to change land use by increasing access to public parks, and will force school designs to include flexible indoor/outdoor space whether utilizing rooftops or modifying buildings, will encourage cultural centers to provide outdoor space, will change the way sky rises are built while increasing demand for low-rise buildings without HVAC (Heating, Ventilation, and Cooling systems) that are harmful to the environment and human health, and can be solved with solutions-based architecture that naturally heat and cool structures. Future designs will eschew glass boxes and rather demand that windows can actually be opened.

As we see more sidewalks and streets being turned over to restaurants, residents will build momentum around the introduction of greenbelts (on less-used roads) and re-wilding concrete spaces to build wildlife corridors that can be used for walking and biking to different areas in the city, and simultaneously I believe there will be a concerted effort to begin producing more essential goods in cities, to offset the demand on supply chains sourcing from across the world at times of emergency.

Building towards a goal of increasing availability of public food through edible forestry, in 2016 I launched a project called *Swale* in a city where over one-third of the population lives in what is considered a food desert. Here, picking plants in public space has been illegal for 100 years, and is considered destruction of property. *Swale*, a public artwork installed on the Bronx River from 2016-2019, uses the 'common law' of the water as a loophole to accomplish what has been illegal on public land. A floating food forest built atop a 5,000 square foot barge, *Swale* travels to public piers in New York City welcoming visitors to freely harvest herbs, fruits and vegetables on a floating edible forest. Were the food supply chain to break down, urban dwellers need to develop a multitude of alternative food sources.

Intensive industrial farming and forms of extraction like logging and mining have long contributed to degenerative ecosystem health that affect both urban and rural communities. Created in cities reliant on outside sites of extraction, *Swale* has worked closely with residents in collaborative design processes, emphasizing a commons-based traditional ecological knowledge that has endured in Indigenous cultures worldwide.



Neighbors at docking locations exchange practical knowledge around soil, water, and the edible and medicinal qualities of local, diverse perennial plants. Beginning with these forms of engagement, *Swale* builds supportive coalitions of neighbors in order to urge city agencies to legalize food foraging on public parkland.

In 2017, New York City repealed an ordinance that regarded foraging as destruction of property by launching its first “Foodway” in Concrete Plant Park in the Bronx. In a city with only 100 acres of designated community garden space (that aren’t public) versus 30,000 acres of public parkland, the “Foodway” is a place where anyone can come twenty-four hours a day and pick fresh foods for free. The growing *Swale* team continues to work on shifting policies that will increase the presence of edible public lands through petitions and partnerships with stewardship groups in local parks. Because it’s easy to ignore something that doesn’t affect you directly, *Swale* tackles food and income disparities by opening up options for more people to get involved in the fabric of the city in unique ways. In a country bound by a powerful shift towards privatization of public spaces, infrastructure, and services, Projects like *Swale* increase access to public food and land, and stem from a desire to put principles of mutual aid into practice. During the pandemic in NYC, cooperation through mutual aid is about making sure everyone can take time off work, stay hydrated and wash their hands, not feel alone or abandoned, receive health and self-care, have a home and enough food.

Mutual aid is not a new concept, but it hasn’t been activated here on this scale before, and with the help of digital tools that simplify complex coordination. The history is rich, from the Diggers in England in the 17th Century to Russian philosopher Peter Kropotkin’s 1902 essay *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* that explored the need for community cooperation for human survival. He states, “Practicing mutual aid is the surest means for giving each other and to all the greatest safety, the best guarantee of existence.” His writing has been pivotal for community organizers and social thinkers ever since. In the United States, mutual aid networks have appeared in the absence of economic opportunity and institutional support. The Black Panther Party famously practiced mutual aid in the 1970’s through the free breakfast program for children, as did the Haight-Ashbury free clinic in San Francisco. Mutual Aid has a long history in many marginalized as well as many faith-based communities. The pandemic has demonstrated that only by looking out for each other will we be able to lessen the amount of sickness, death and emotional suffering, and until more people value cooperation as a principle, the virus will continue to spread. While “physical” distancing, hand washing, and mask wearing are necessary tools to help stop the spread of this virus, they are only effective when grounded in an ethics and practice of social solidarity and collective care. Mutual Aid networks have been strengthened by the pandemic and many have committed to these groups for the long-term, working across urban housing and food-justice issues. These networks with their new swell in enrollment will be here to stay in post-pandemic cities.