

## **Backyard to Bountiful**

### **Temescal Amity Works: Telling a Community's Story**

*By Romney Steele*

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Fruit trees, berry bushes, and gardens abound in North Oakland's Temescal neighborhood. Originally planned as an orchard suburb in the 1920's, and once a major center for Italian immigrant life, the neighborhood has an abundance of older fruit trees that continue to produce. In some cases the trees are still tended by descendants of the original families. Yet with busy homeowners unable to manage a harvest and a decline in urban community farming, many of these trees go unpicked leaving a large surplus of fruit to fall to the ground.

Enter Susanne Cockrell and Ted Purves, both artists and teachers who moved into the neighborhood in the late 1990s. Interested in the economics of place, they set out to meet their neighbors by sharing fruit from their own tree and by making jam to give away. "We are interested in how a community works," said Cockrell and Purves, "thinking about food surplus and how a community deals with it." As a response, they created Temescal Amity Works in collaboration with the Temescal Merchants Association. What began as neighborliness, turned into social investigation of space and an opportunity to tell a story. Whether it is about the harvest, making jam, or recording family history, the project becomes a "a huge process of storytelling."

Temescal Amity Works describes itself as a community art project that "facilitates and documents the exchange of backyard produce". Known as The Big Backyard, this crop-sharing project seeks to redistribute surplus fruit and vegetables from neighborhood backyards, and to document that exchange. Money is not part of it—the activity is a means for interaction and discovery.

Amity Works even offers to harvest neighbors' fruit for them, arriving on foot with a small team of pickers and the Amity Works harvesting pushcart. This far-out wide bottom contraption is narrow in the front with big bicycle wheels on the back end. It resembles a go-cart, albeit one enhanced with a sunny roof made from fanciful oilcloth, a holding slot for a ladder, and enough space to carry several bushels of produce. The cart not only is the vehicle by which produce is collected and redistributed, but is a noted "visible and public" piece of art, as Cockrell and Purves describe it.

In a society where most people shop for their food, rather than grow it themselves, there is often a disconnect between what is growing in the front yard and the fact that it can actually be used in the kitchen (or eaten on the spot). We all know of trees in our neighborhoods that are laden with fruit that falls to the ground because it isn't getting picked. Paying attention to the dynamics between store-bought fruit and surplus on the

tree became a practice of “what’s here, what are they, and what do we do with them,” says Cockrell, an articulate and thoughtful curator of The Big Backyard. Making jam, swapping recipes, and sharing in the harvest—this all “becomes a mechanism of how to meet people,” she says, emphasizing that so much of this project is about participation and giving back to the community.

Produce sharing is not unique to Amity Works. In Oakland there is also the 44th Street collective, home to several families who knocked down the fences and removed the asphalt between their buildings to create a large urban farm complete with a graywater recovery system and chickens. In Berkeley, there is Village Harvest, an organization that similarly picks fruit from local trees, giving it to homeless shelters and the Second Harvest Food Bank, their largest recipient. Last year alone Harvest Village picked and donated over 80,000 pounds of fruit.

In Temescal, Purves and Cockrell get plenty of help with collecting the produce and sharing the bounty. They have a small group of volunteers and some students who regularly help with harvests and they continue to forge alliances in the neighborhood. They also host walks and artist talks as a part of their broader mission. In an area that has a history of urban gardening, a vibrant mix of immigrant communities, and a decidedly aware group of newcomers and young families, the ideas that propel Amity Works seem ripe for the picking. Purves and Cockrell mentioned an older Italian gentleman in the neighborhood who grows only fava beans and has done so for generations. Why? Because that is what he has always done and sharing is part of it—you share your tomatoes, I share my favas. It makes a lot of sense and seems a reasonable and viable way of always having enough to go around.

Amity Works now maintains a storefront/gathering space called the Reading Room a sparse but pleasant space at the end of a non-descript alley just off of Telegraph. The space houses a small library of books, videos, and films loosely related to gardening, art, and community history. It also serves as an art residency space where the most recent resident made drawings and cutout models of neighborhood shops as part of a more extensive mapping project.

As part of the larger project, Amity Works produces a series of free postcards that profile community goings on and the local harvests, revealing intimate yet mundane details of community life. One is a watercolor image of fallen fruit called “Plum on the Sidewalk.” Another is a close up of the composting bin in late November. One card, a modest backyard setting with a large prosperous lemon tree, is titled “A tree story from Avon Street, as told by Gordy Slack.” Apparently, Gordy smuggled the tree in a ladies corset all the way from Italy, as she didn’t want to leave it behind.

The Big Backyard certainly is about story telling. It is no doubt about the fabric of a community held together by cultivating gardens and sharing crops—about being good neighbors and lending a hand. Pull up a chair in the Reading Room and Cockrell and Purves will give you a jar of marmalade made from the fruits of a neighborhood tree. They will talk with you about art, about how to make lemon pickle, and about the

exchange that happens over a shared batch of jam and a basket of plums. They will invite you in and ask nothing in return. It is truly a project about giving, about sharing what we have and finding how to give back from our bounty.

The Temescal Amity Works is located at 482 49th St. and is open most Saturday afternoons on a drop-in basis. Look for the harvesting pushcart and an Amity Works sign. Anyone who would like to participate in the produce sharing or get on the mailing list should send email to [bigbackyard@amityworks.org](mailto:bigbackyard@amityworks.org). Stay tuned for harvest dates, community walks, and other neighborhood art happenings at [www.amityworks.org](http://www.amityworks.org).

Note to publisher: Amity Works sent us a couple of low-res photos in a message that I will forward to you and they say there are more on their website.