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# Being There - Bearing Fruit



## Two Artists Cultivate Community

By Matt Dibble

A SANDWICH BOARD ON 49TH STREET ANNOUNCES “FREE APPLES TODAY” with an arrow pointing down a tidy alley. If you are inclined to meander off the grid, you might stroll to the end where corrugated doors open on the home base of Temescal Amity Works, a multifaceted art project by Susanne Cockrell and Ted Purves. The project’s aim is to “facilitate the exchange of services, favors, stories and everyday desires of residents,” through providing a multipurpose space, a series of free postcards documenting neighborhood history and “The Big Backyard” in which surplus fruit and vegetables are picked and redistributed to anyone who can use them.

Susanne and Ted, who are in their early 40s, married and have a 4-year-old son, have racked up an impressive art exhibition history around the United States and internationally. Ted had just finished several projects in Germany when the Amity Works idea first germinated two years ago. “We really wanted to make our lives more local. So we basically just implicated ourselves into a neighborhood project,” Susanne says. The neighborhood became the project. “We thought what already exists here? A lot of food is growing in this neighborhood. And if we go pick a lemon in a yard rather than buy one at the store, how does that change our thinking about where we live?”

Today, a call has come in from Roger Daniels on 49th Street, who thinks his persimmons might be ready. Ted eases the pushcart, the most visible fixture of Amity Works, out onto the street. Resembling a classic fruit vendor model with a place for a 6-foot ladder, tools and fruit baskets, the cart has been updated to include a child seat, a cup holder suitable for a latté and flame racing decals.

It turns out that the Temescal—an area loosely bound by Telegraph Avenue, Broadway, 51st Street and 40th Street—is practically an orchard. Immigrant families from Ireland, Germany and most predominately Italy, brought their cultivation skills as well as seeds and clippings when they settled here. With postage-stamp backyards, gardeners tended to specialize and then trade their surplus.

Arriving at Roger’s we find the persimmons are not quite ripe, but a fig tree is dripping with fruit. Susanne and an assistant set to work and soon have two baskets full. One is for Roger’s household, and the other goes on the cart, destined to become fig conserve. Meanwhile, Ted has discovered a burgeoning apple tree spilling over the fence from the yard next door. After a knock on the neighbor’s door the Big Backyard has grown just a little bigger. “We’d love to have you pick our fruit,” exclaims Ursula Carrasco, who had been feeling pangs of guilt over the rapidly ripening, and in some cases rotting, apples decorating her backyard.

Wheeling the apple-laden cart back down 49th Street, a man hails Ted. “I think what you are doing is great,” says David Lloyd, who has lived in the house he grew up in for the last 63 years. He doesn’t need any apples today

but is anxious to share neighborhood history with us. “In Mr. Del Pucci’s house, there was a wine press. Everyone would bring grapes and each family had a keg with their name on it. Every Friday the men would come to pick up a jug of wine for the week.” Neighborhood stories like this are collected by Ted and Susanne and sometimes become postcards.

Susanne and Ted are transplants—she is from Woodstock, Vt., and he from Champaign, Ill.—and the project reveals what they’ve carried. Ted grew up picking apples and making cider on weekends. “I hated it. It’s hilarious that I am doing this. I’m really glad now, I’ve just got to say, ‘thanks, Dad.’” Susanne’s father, an Episcopal minister, started a community garden. A geography degree, a stint in a punk band, memories of New England village commons and seed exchanges all are now taking root in their Temescal home. “We’ve talked for years about having some sort of research institute where people could come together. And we always had this romantic notion that it was going to happen off in the woods somewhere, and then it just happened in our backyard.”

Temescal Amity Works is at 482 49th St. It’s open 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. Fridays and noon to 5 p.m. Saturdays. The Weblog at [amityworks.org](http://amityworks.org) has information about the ongoing project and special events.

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