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Critical Urban Gardening

In recent decades, two contrasting forces have caused corresponding transformations in urban landscapes. On the one hand, massive construction investments, supported by neoliberal trends in city planning, have compressed public space and extended the city to peri-urban areas. On the other hand, proliferating grassroots movements in cities—particularly gardening movements—have begun to reclaim public space and the right to produce local food. Flower and vegetable gardens are blossoming in city spaces worldwide, climbing the walls of derelict buildings or popping out the top of newly built skyscrapers, whose planners' eco-friendly attitudes are demonstrated by the provision of cultivable flower beds on the roof. Along with providing urban inhabitants with colorful and life-affirming experiences, gardens highlight pressing contemporary political issues. They also contest neoliberal urban planning strategies, food governance structures, and the global geographies of power and resource distribution. Furthermore, by bringing people together in collective gardening initiatives aimed at utilizing public space for the enjoyment of nature and the production of food, urban gardeners actively take part in local political decision-making processes.

Critical Urban Gardening

Critical urban gardening (also called political or radical gardening) includes various informal activism practices that encourage people to garden and cultivate flowers, trees, and vegetables in any available city space to demonstrate an alternative to the current conventional use of space and the system of food production, distribution, and consumption. The origins of (critical) urban gardening can be traced back to the 1970s in New York, when communities re-appropriated green space for building projects and the enjoyment of nature. Neglected brownfields, vacant lots, and interstitial areas have subsequently been appropriated with the aim of offering beauty and tranquility to marginalized and impoverished areas of cities. Around the world, the phenomenon has grown in the last two decades and has taken the form of a spontaneous, decentralized, and subversive grassroots movement. Scientific literature exploring the objectives, methods, and results of urban gardening initiatives continues to grow. Case studies

include the production of fresh vegetables in "food desert" districts, the provision of open space to elderly people in privatized areas of the city, the establishment of youth centers in derelict neighborhoods, the commitment of immigrants as part of multicultural politics, improvements in public health, and new spiritual engagements with nature.[1] Urban harvesters, guerrilla gardeners, community growers, and land-sharers—to mention but a few—are reinvigorating the concept of cities as laboratories for political experiments. The range of motivations expressed in the micro-politics of garden activism is diverse: self-sufficiency in order to escape the transactions of capitalism; the promotion of community empowerment; involvement in environmental planning; the search for environmental justice; the provision of education for dealing with the Anthropocene; and the reconstruction of people's relations with nature to counteract the "extinction-of-experience."[2]

Urban gardeners constitute a complex and heterogeneous political movement aimed at focusing public attention on crucial issues including the scarceness and poor quality of public spaces, the lack of green infrastructure, the need for more and better social relationships, the urgency of providing marginalized social groups with dedicated spaces for self-improvement, the contestation of existing food production, and trading regimes.

Critical Urban Gardening and Urban Farming

It is important to distinguish between different critical urban gardening practices with regards to food issues. Urban gardening includes both flower and vegetable gardening, in public space (vacant lots, abandoned interstitial areas, flower beds, traffic islands, etc.) and private space (terraces, roofs, indoor gardens, etc.).

A related phenomenon—often overlapping with critical urban gardening—is the urban farming practice. This includes food production and animal breeding in urban and peri-urban areas on the basis of the availability of public land and people's willingness

1 Steve Hinchliffe and Sarah Whatmore, "Living Cities: Towards a Politics of Conviviality," *Science as Culture* 15, no. 3 (2006): 123–38; George Barker, *Ecological Recombination in Urban Areas* (Peterborough: The Urban Forum/English Nature, 2000); Mary Beckie and Eva Bogdan, "Planting Roots: Urban Agriculture for Senior Immigrants," *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems, and Community Development* 1, no. 2 (2010): 77–89.

2 James R. Miller, "Biodiversity Conservation and the Extinction of Experience," *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 20, no. 8 (2005): 430–34.

to produce food. Especially in recent years, it has attracted the interest of municipal and national authorities (particularly in the Global South) and of international institutions.[3] Urban farming, in fact, is seen as providing a number of benefits. It helps to address the mandate of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) on the provision of adequate access to nutritious food for growing urban populations. It helps to integrate urban and peri-urban areas with rural areas. And it helps to drive agricultural practices towards sustainability targets.

Urban food production has a long tradition in many countries, and the United Nations Development Program has estimated that urban agriculture produces 15–20 percent of the world's food.[4] It plays an important role in enhancing food security and nutrition standards, in promoting local economic development, in alleviating poverty, and in improving the situation of socially disadvantaged groups. These effects are particularly important given the growth of cities and the increase in population density at a global level. Approximately 50 percent of poor people live in urban areas.[5] Cultivating urban lands helps those urban poor who cannot afford to purchase adequate quantities of food, and it provides fresh vegetables, dairy products, and poultry during times of crisis. It also offers productive employment in a sector with low entry requirements and secures income for urban dwellers.[6] Furthermore, it increases the efficiency of agricultural production by bringing producers closer to consumers and largely eliminating the need for storage and delivery infrastructure.

There are various noteworthy concerns around the expansion of this type of local food system. Concerns arise, for example, over the likely competition for resources (such as land, water, labor, and energy) and the smells, noise, and water pollution that make gardening incompatible with some urban areas. In fact, despite the fact that horticul-

3 Jac Smit, *Urban Agriculture: Progress and Prospect, 1975–2005*, Cities Feeding People Report 18, (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 1996); Jac Smit, Annu Ratta, and Joe Nasr, "Urban Agriculture: Food, Jobs and Sustainable Cities," *Publication Series for Habitat II*, Vol. I (New York: UNDP, 1996); FAO, "*Urban an Peri-Urban Agriculture*," Committee on Agriculture, COAG/99/10, accessed 24 May, 2013, http://www.fao.org/unfao/bodies/COag/cOAG15/X0076e.htm; Luc J. A. Mougeot, *Urban Agriculture: Urban Agriculture: Definition, Presence, Potentials and Risks, and Policy Challenges,* Cities Feeding People Series Report 31, (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2000), http://idlbnc.idrc.ca/dspace/bitstream/10625/26429/12/117785.pdf.

4 ETC, *Annotated Bibliography on Urban Agriculture* (Leusden: Swedish International Development Agency, 2003).

5 World Resources Institute/United Nations Environment Programme/United Nations Development Programme, World Bank, *World Resources* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

6 Axumite G. Egziabher, Diana Lee-Smith, Daniel G. Maxwell, Pyar Ali Memon, Luc J.A. Mougeot, and Camillus J. Sawio, *Cities Feeding People An Examination of Urban Agriculture in East Africa* (Ottawa International Development Research Centre, 1994).

tural species, unlike other food crops, have a considerable yield potential, the impact of urban agricultural expansion—especially where demand for natural resources is already high[7] — may become a critical issue. As rural sociologist Henk de Zeeuw writes:

> Food produced in or near cities may be detrimental to human health if soils or irrigation water are contaminated by industries (heavy metals), if untreated urban wastewater is used for irrigation of food crops or fresh solid organic wastes are used as fertilizer, or if hygiene is lacking in the processing and marketing of food. Traffic may have a direct polluting effect on urban crops (lead contamination). Cultivated areas and livestock in cities may attract or provide breeding grounds for rodents and flies and thus can contribute to the spread of diseases they may carry if proper precautions are not taken. Urban agriculture may contaminate local water sources if high input levels of fertilizers and pesticides are used. Neighbors may complain of the dust, smell, and noise created by urban farms.[8]

As a result, the optimization of land and resource management achieved through concerted action of municipal administrations and urban farmers is generally seen as a necessary precondition for sustainable agricultural activities in urban areas.

It is also worth noting that urban farming, as a particular form of urban gardening, is also practiced in the Global North, where it presents different characteristics, probably determined by the different social, environmental, and economic context.[9] Besides the common case of private farms that operate in peri-urban areas, in the Northern cities urban farming is principally regarded as an alternative to the mass production, distribution, and consumption of globalized food.[10] Indeed, in describing their motivation, urban gardeners generally point to the fact that our food system is based on the availability of cheap oil, the maximization of short-term profit, the destruction of local food systems, and the adoption of sustainability-threatening practices. Critical food gardening is thus based on socio-environmental values, aiming to provide accessible public space and free vegetables. The in-

7 Frank Ellis and James Sumberg, "Food Production, Urban Areas and Policy Responses," *World Development* 26, no. 2 (1998): 213-220
8 ETC, "Annotated Bibliography," 13–14
9 Lucy Jarosz, "The City in the Country: Growing Alternative Food Networks in Metropolitan Area," *Journal of Rural Studies* 24 (2008): 231–44
10 Josh McDaniel and Kelly D. Alley, "Connecting Local Environmental Knowledge and Land Use Practices: A Human Ecosystem Approach to Urbanization in West Georgia," *Urban Ecosystems*, 8 (2005): 23–38; Michael L. McKinney "Urbanization, Biodiversity, and Conservation," Bioscience 52 (2002): 883–90

trinsic political value of urban gardening is evident when we consider that gardening does not merely propose an alternative to existing urban food governance but also addresses issues of land reclamation, the rebuilding of urban commons, and self-governance.[11] Local food production is a largely consistent practice in Northern cities,[12] but when compared with urban agriculture in most Southern contexts, it presents some remarkable differences: vegetables are not generally viewed as a source of revenue, nor are they the only available food; cultivated lots are intended to remain public and not to be appropriated by gardeners; products are not for sale but for personal consumption or sharing; gardening is a voluntary initiative put forward by citizens with no economic motivations.

The rapid and pervasive diffusion of critical urban gardening can probably be attributed to its ability to address relevant problems in people's everyday lives by constructing the world they would like to live in. One of the slogans adopted by the international movement is the Gandhian maxim: "Be the change you wish to see in the world."[13] Gardening is a way to change the future by changing the space of the present. Although some local administrations or private organizations manage very large projects, gardens are generally public, and everybody is able to take part in their realization and maintenance.[14] Based on the idea that a well-kept bed of lettuce is the best way of inviting others to join and to refrain from vandalism, urban gardening philosophy does not encourage the construction of fences to prevent violent disagreements. Rather, it asks everybody to adopt simple means to discourage them, such as always keeping the garden clean and readily repairing damages.[15] The patient, sometimes modest or unnoticed—but always-enthusiastic—work of critical urban gardeners is helping to change post-modern urban life.[16] Abandoned spaces and previously unnoticed wastelands become public places of civic renaissance.[17] Producing food and helping interstitial nature to flourish is a way of helping people to meet basic life goals. The project provides adequate and nutritious food, a large, unpolluted space for personal and social enjoyment, and an equal opportunity to advance positive social relationships in one's own space.

11 Chiara Tornaghi, "Urban Food Justice," accessed 24 May 2013, http://www.urbanfoodjustice.org/
12 Tamzin Pinkerton and Rob Hopkins, *Local Food: How to Make It Happen in Your Community* (Devon: Transition Books, 2009); Food Urbanism, accessed 24 May, 2013, http://www.foodurbanism.org.
13 Rita Verma, "Be the Change: Teacher, Activist, Global Citizen" (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010).
14 Catherine Phillips, "Cultivating Practices: Saving Seed as Green Citizenship?" *Environments* 33, no. 3 (2005): 37–49
15 David Tracey, *Guerrilla Gardening: A Manualfesto*, Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2007; Transition Network, accessed 24 May 2013, http://www.transitionnetwork.org/.
16 Monica M. White, "Sisters of the Soil: Urban Gardening as Resistance in Detroit", *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 5, no. 1 (2011): 13–28.
17 "Transition Network."