

Urban gardens, commons and communities

Introduction

This paper focuses on urban gardens as a commons. In particular, it focuses on the utility that the idea of the “commons” bring to the urban arena and how do urban commons emerge or are produced.

Based on specific cases from Brussels, compared with data coming from other European cases this paper presents urban gardening as new *commoning* experience as well as a way to reshape cities. Furthermore, urban gardens also play a relevant role as a form of social resilience.

Commons are more than a simple alternative economic model; they are a form of resilience and a tool of social change. It is also the case for urban commons and its role in reshaping the cities and the interaction between citizens.

In order to analyze these cases it is worth to focus first on the debate about the commons and its characteristics, and then the specificities of gardening experiences.

Indeed the definition of the commons is not unanimous, and the debate involves several disciplines and approaches.

When we talking about the commons someone focuses more on economic aspects, someone on legal definitions, in some cases the main interest is how they are managed, in other how they are built; the attention may be paid to the role played by the community or to what is considered as a commons.

Some scholars are particularly interested in analyzing the “history” of the commons, while others would rather focus on their innovative component as factors of change.

For sure between Ostrom’s common-pool resources¹ and the defense of digital commons² there as many concrete differences as conceptual similarities. To further complicate this context we must notice that, without any doubt, the use of the idea of commons is constantly increasing and the debate is enlarging.

Whatever the approach applied more and more researchers are confronted with this idea. The commons permeated the debates about democracy, culture, citizens’ participation, occupied spaces, recuperated factories, social economy, social innovation, arts, free internet, health, while still being relevant in the area of natural resources.

Introducing the idea of the commons in some of these areas is in itself an innovative process. Discussing about the commons in the cities implies thinking at the role of citizens as proactive actors of a complex community. However, the variety described above must be taken into account to avoid misunderstandings on the topic discussed.

For the analysis of the cases described in this paper, three elements are taken into account: the interaction within the community, the system of management and decision taking and the role played by the garden as tools for change.

This paper focuses on urban spaces implementing practices of *commoning*. These practices are similar to those implemented in other places, but mainly with an artistic, cultural and political component. In the case of urban gardening, and in particular in Brussels, contexts, approaches and outcomes are significantly different and particularly interesting.

A short overview on urban gardening

Urban gardens have a long tradition in Europe and are very much developed in the United States, Canada and Australia, as well. In fact urban gardens belong to a long history and tradition of good practices (mainly developed in Anglo-Saxon Countries) which, as mentioned above, were barely connected with the commons movement.

Urban gardening practices, however, are mostly studied from the perspective of urban agriculture, food production, access to land and urbanism; but several cases show that they are particularly relevant from a commons perspective.

¹ Ostrom 1990

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The current economic and social crisis has increased the amount of gardens and influenced previous experiences. The creation and management of these urban commons have a positive influence on individuals' and communities' lives. It can be considered as a reaction against the current socio-economic model, without necessarily being an action against the established power. In this framework this paper connects the specificities of the current social and economic context with the new wave of urban gardening from a people-centred perspective.

These gardens are different one from the other from a variety of perspectives. Reasons for getting involved, interests, goals and approaches include vegetable production (i.e. cheap organic food), avoid and escape hyper-urbanisation, sustainability, re-use, integration, social change, environmental issues and re-shaping of urban spaces. However certain aspects are recurrent, but the most interesting one is that all these experiences consider themselves as an alternative (from social and economic perspective) to the status quo and produced an increase in social interaction inside the community involved and in members' engagement in political and social life.

The paper analysis how these urban gardening experiences are experiences of commoning, beyond any specific and explicit connection of the current debate on the commons. It describes how the the creation of these urban spaces become a co-creation of a commons and how these experiences shape interaction within urban communities.

What emerges is that reshaping the urban space not only creates a new perspective on social interaction, but also contributes to the creation of a community of reference, which, while definitely far from those originally studied by E. Ostrom (1990), represents an alternative social and economic model. Urban gardens are a perfect examples of creating and governing the commons in a changing world (GOLDMAN 1998; DOLSAK, OSTROM 2003), because they take into account two key aspects: active role of the community (based on co-responsibility) and social change.

Reshaping urban spaces in Brussels

The city of Brussels is particularly interesting from a urban commons perspective, since it presents a mix of public and private support (through the municipality or foundations) and high level of citizens activism.

Brussels is a particularly interesting case, presenting a mix of guerrilla gardening/self-organized grassroots actions, associations focusing on gardening from ecological or social perspectives, international involvement (for example with the Supurb food project) and active involvement of municipalities.

There are about 30 urban gardens in the city of Brussels and in the Wallon Region, and many other similar experiences exist in Flanders. Since 2006 their presence is constantly increasing and more and more systematized, thanks to a stronger coordination with associations dealing with the topic and to a productive interaction with public authorities and institutions.

Compared with other countries (with only the exception of the UK), the connection and in some cases the collaboration between urban gardeners and institutions appear much more established. This was actually developed in different forms: one of most interesting and recent examples of this collaboration is an urban garden on the roof of the Bibliothèque Royale connecting culture and cultivation, launched in 2013 as a joint experiment using special pots to cultivate out of an actual plot of land; and now also serving as a cultural space.

The association called "Début des Haricots" provides logistical and technical support for the creation of urban gardens (including proper agricultural advices and follow-up), coordination and facilitation support inside the groups of gardeners as well as in networking processes. The latter activity also includes forms of political support and mediation with institutions.

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On the institutional side different possibilities for supporting the creation or maintenance of urban gardens exist: the “Contrat de Quartier”, some calls for projects funded by Bruxelles Environment (public institution for Environment and Energy for the Brussels-Capital Region³) and other calls for projects in the framework of “Quartiers Verts” ⁴ (joint project of the Ministry of Environment and Inter-environnement Bruxelles). All are related to the Municipalities themselves, as part of the activities of their Department of Sustainable Development (Services de Développement Durable) and in the framework of Agenda 21 funding procedures.

The “Contrat de Quartier” (whose proper name is “Contrat de Quartier Durable”, i. e. Sustainable Neighborhood Contract) is very characteristic and commonly used. It is a plan of action, limited in time and space, that aims to develop good sustainable local practices in a specific neighborhood, which involves the Region, the Municipality (Brussels is divided in 19 Municipalities) and the inhabitants of a neighborhood and establishes a program of interventions to be realized with a predefined budget. Among these actions, urban gardening, of course, often has a relevant role.

Beside Agenda 21, Bruxelles Environment, that since 2011 has funded projects of urban gardening (for one year) and the Quartier Verts project (having existed for 12 years), some private or semi-private foundations sometimes support urban gardening in the context of specific projects. This is the case, for example, for the Fondation Roi Badouin, with the project “Quartier de vie” ⁵ and for the Fondation Promethea with the Prix Broucsella⁶. Different small organizations and ASBL (i.e. associations sans but lucratif) offer other kind of support for the creation of urban community gardens.

Most of the urban gardens in Brussels are in fact officially recognized and have signed a “convention d'occupation” with the owner of the plot, either a private or a public entity. Furthermore, a “charter of the garden” describes the rules, duties and functioning of the garden itself, and gardeners are required to sign it in almost every case.

The three gardens studied well represent the variety of organizational options of Brussels urban gardening. A garden can be shared (partagé) or collective (collectif). In the first case, the gardeners share the land but they have individual parcels; while in collective gardens there are no individual parcels. Of course, this produces a difference in terms of access to the vegetables produced.

Sometimes only the inhabitants of the neighborhood can be accepted as participants, and the garden is therefore defined as jardin de quartier. Rules concerning the limitation of garden membership to neighbors apply more or less strictly depending on if they are part of an agreement with the “Commune” ⁷ (municipality) or not; the connection with the municipality, in fact, can be more or less strong according to various factors. Although almost all the gardens are open to the public and visitors, many of them have precise rules about the acceptance of new gardeners; , the vast majority of the gardens are locked in order to avoid vandalism and access to keys may vary according to the specificity of the garden.

An overview of Brussels gardens, demonstrates a connection between integration of the garden within the neighbourhood, level of collective management and openness to other participants and activities, from both a practical (more people who have the keys, more moments in a week when visitors can come in) and a social perspective (higher level political of engagement, also on other issues such as integration and education).

³ www.bruxellesenvironnement.be

⁴ www.bruxellesenvironnement.be

⁵ www.kbs-frb.be

⁶ www.promethea.be

⁷ The city of Brussels is divided in *communes* geographically comparable with neighborhoods but having a relatively high level of autonomy.

Methodology

This research was conducted during the spring of 2013 and focused on three gardens selected on the basis of their specific features that make them representative of different kinds of urban gardening. Indeed a first selection was based on information available on websites of the Brussels gardens' network, "Le début des haricots" and "Potagers Urbains", through which some of the focal persons for the gardens have been contacted. Following of their reaction a second criterion of selection was the amount available informants. However one of these three gardens emerged as relevant during a meeting hosted by the activists of another garden, while an originally selected experience was eventually discarded because the gardeners were not interested in taking part in the survey.

The specificities of each garden were taken into account during the selection process to ensure different typologies of gardens (and gardeners) were represent. An overall idea of the characteristics of each garden was made through the website/blog of the garden (when available) and using the information provided by Potagers Urbains.

Even though the in-depth research involved only these three cases, other particularly interesting gardening experiences in Brussels, such as the Jardin sur les toits de la Bibliotheque Royale, launched after the research was concluded, have been taken into account when drawing the conclusions of this specific paper.

In fact the outcomes of this research are based on the interactions of the available information by the activists "officially" provided through their websites, the data collected and information about urban gardening in Brussels.

The study is a qualitative one, not only because of the low number of informants available but also because of the kind of questions prepared and approach used. During the survey phase all the people involved in the gardens were contacted and interviewed during a visit to the garden. In one case, since the garden was under construction when the research began, it was also possible to participate in its inauguration.

A total amount of 20 people were interviewed (not homogenously). Despite differences in numbers (also related to the different size of the three gardens) in all the cases "founders" of the garden were interviewed.

The questionnaire used was set to obtain information on personal background, the structure of the garden, the perception of the garden and motivation for involvement. Furthermore a free association exercise was conducted about four key words crisis, growth, sharing and commons. Even though for the purpose of this paper only the data concerning the idea of sharing and of commons was used, some information derived from discussions generated by comments about growth and crisis contributed to this analysis.

The personal information provided (gender, age, nationality education, working situation) allowed me to group informants according to various criteria. A balanced amount of women and men were interviewed, most of the informants are Belgians (with a predominance of Marocco as other national influence), the average education level is secondary school (with a highest concentration of people holding a University degree in one single case) and the working situation (including retired) is highly mixed.

Levels of involvement (in terms of time – hours per week and length of involvement- and of modalities – responsibilities taken, participation in decision making processes and public roles) to the garden were also investigated while discussing the structure of the garden, and it can vary from 2 hours a week up to every day. The motivation may also vary a lot and it includes both ecologic and social factors, as it will be further explained in this paper.

Three case studies:

Velt Koekelberg - Koekelberg

Velt Koekelberg is a neighbourhood community garden in a highly urbanised and multicultural area of Brussels. It is closed off by a gate which most of the gardeners have the key to. For the time being it involves about 50 people, but it has an impact on a higher number of individuals (such as other family members, with a considerable number of children). All of the gardeners belong to the neighbourhood since they are the only ones who can sign the charter and actively participate. Two options are available: private parcels and shared parcels; but they can be combined. Food production is extremely relevant in this case and influences the choice of the gardeners about the use of the parcels.

Although recently established as the result of a long process which began in 2011 under the pressure of a group of citizens, Velt Koekelberg garden combines personal and community interests. It is located in a highly urbanised area where most of the buildings are council houses. In order to avoid the creation of a ghetto the Commune promoted social cohesion by offering the possibility of the right to rent or buy apartments in that area at lower rates to people not having such a lodging. The result was that people from other areas of the city, belonging to specific social categories (young professionals, families, mainly with a leftwing political vision), moved to this part of the city.

In 2011 one of the new inhabitants discovered that a new building was to be built...exactly in front of her window! Therefore she decided to propose an alternative plan to the Commune. In order to do so she began talking with other neighbours trying to figure out what this new plan could look like: that's how the idea of a garden arose. At first sight and at the very beginning this garden could be considered a consequence of the so called nimby syndrome⁸; however, the actions taken in that direction started a process of involvement and cooperation. In fact, the first step was to convince the Commune to stop the building project through a sort of petition among the neighbours, who then had to present an alternative project (*jardin de quartier*) for that area. Bureaucratic steps were covered in about two years but in the meanwhile, and this is interesting from our perspective, the neighbors involved began having frequent meetings, planned the structure and the management of the future garden, and some even got involved in parallel environmental projects. In April 2013 they obtained the keys to "their" garden, but during the previous two years the project was already influencing their lives.

Jardin Marjorelle - Moelenbeek

The Jardin Marjorelle is a unique experience because of its story, context and features. Compared with Velt Koekelberg it is smaller and less food-oriented. In fact, this component is considered more instrumental rather than a goal in itself. Created in 2010, it is the final step of a long process begun in 2005 whose goal was conceptually quite far from the one of creating a garden.

In fact a group of families was looking for better housing options and, thanks to some local organisations, they got involved in a project of passive building. Because of bureaucratic and technical complexity it took 5 years for the families to take possession of the passive building, named

⁸ Nimby stands for Not In My Backyard and is used to make reference to advocacy activities whose aim is to stop a building project (buildings, airports, infrastructures...) affecting oneself neighborhood or even its own place. It is sometimes criticized as a selfish behavior.

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Residence L'Espoir. The group is mixed and diverse: it includes ten different nationalities out of fourteen families; for a total amount of 78 people, 49 of which are children. The neighbourhood in which the passive building is situated is very multicultural as well and, being built on state-owned land, it is in front of a council house.

This location is part of the reason that led to the creation of the garden: on the one hand they simply wanted to better use a small piece of land in between the two buildings, but on the other hand they also felt the need to create a connection with people living in the council houses. In fact these latter were, not without reason, disappointed because of the remarkable difference between their grey, tall and sad building and the new coloured and fancy one.

In fact, the garden was created as a sort of virtual bridge between the two buildings. The leading role of the inhabitants of L'Espoir notwithstanding, the garden actually also involves people living in the council houses. And it eventually became a center of attraction for many activities in the neighbourhood and beyond.

Despite its small size in terms of land, and medium size in terms of participants, (basically people living at L'Espoir – between 20 and 30 individuals - plus some others from the neighborhood (five families more or less) its social role remains predominant in such a context.

This garden cannot be properly considered a *jardin de quartier* because it involves inhabitants of only two buildings; but on the other hand, it does not remain exclusive: people from other parts of the city are in theory welcome to take part to the project either as gardeners or just as occasional visitors.

Jardin Collectif de Tour et Taxis

Substantially different from the previous two, this garden offers a third perspective on urban gardening. It was created in 2008 by a group of people who, by chance, found an abandoned plot of land in a semi-peripheral once industrial area of Brussels. It presents a higher level of diversity in terms of social background and range of age of the participants and is open to everyone with no restriction.

Some of the gardeners indeed live close by, but many others live far from the garden, where they normally go on Sunday (which is also the day the garden is open to visitors).

People of different backgrounds (including various, mainly European, nationalities) and age are involved in the project but, as a general consideration, the level of educational and professional attainment, as well as the level of political and social engagement, is higher among these gardeners than among the participants in the experiences presented above.

Although more oriented towards food production than Marjorelle, this aspect cannot be considered the exclusive one; as the garden contains a large portion only dedicated to flowers. Furthermore, it is by principle collective so there are no individual parcels.

It is built on a privately owned plot so the “*convention d'occupation*” is in this case signed by the gardeners and a single individual. The Municipality is therefore not involved except for some bureaucratic aspects.

Conclusion

Compared with other communing experiences (see for example Bresnihan, Byrne 2014) the idea of the commons is almost never mentioned spontaneously by the people involved in the urban gardens studied. Even in conversations oriented by the explicit question about such a topic, people replied with examples, often of goods, that would be more properly defined as public (such as transports, health systems, parks), or by referring directly to their garden as “a common”.

The ideas that emerged through the brainstorming may be grouped as follows: those related to nature and food (organic vegetables, parks, trees), those related to services (transport, health), those about exchange and community (for ex. sharing, responsibility, trust), those about organisation (for. ex. management, co-ownership) and positive attitudes towards society and other people (for ex. joy, justice, beauty, happiness).

The few abstract concepts mentioned were remarkably consistent with theoretical debates about the commons: reciprocity, joint management and shared responsibility being the most relevant. This happens to be even more interesting since the current debate about the commons appeared to be almost unknown among the participants in the survey.

However, with very few exceptions, such as the idea of co-ownership, the discourse never mentioned or involved any practical nor legal arrangements. Nevertheless about one third of the participants in the survey mentioned practical issues - highlighting, for example, how problematic managing something in common would be. Some respondents also suggested that trust, responsibility and good organisation skills are essential for governing the commons.

The full list of key concepts mentioned in the survey such as sharing, participation, social inclusion, reciprocity, responsibility and eventually leisure appear perfectly consistent with the general debate about the commons. Indeed they fit both with the idea of commoning, as proposed and supported by the Social Cohesion Division of the Council of Europe (Sciurba 2013) and studied by De Angelis (2010, 2014, 2015) - a process through which a good (or a place) changes its status from public (or private) to ‘common’- and with the analysis of Ostrom (1990, 1994, 2001) about governing the commons.

In fact, urban gardens are practices of collective, communitarian and participatory management; even if gardeners don’t take active part in the debate, these experiences could be compared with the common-pool resources studied by Ostrom (1990) (where there wasn’t any strong political and theoretical thinking either) since they implement mechanisms, tools and rules built case by case by the community involved.

From an , alternative and socially relevant, urban planning perspective the creation of such gardens represents a way to shape relations within neighborhoods, through an approach to society embedded in the idea of reciprocity and sharing. Even though the survey demonstrated that *commoning* was not the primary goal of the gardener, the outcome of their actions was however clearly in line with the creation of urban commons.

In a small-scale experiment, these gardeners found a way to govern a resource in common, notwithstanding the difficulties in the interaction with public authorities and in internal relations among the groups, and to integrate it in the city space. They created a common through the creation of a community where people become active actors of urban change, through establishing new dynamics in the social fabric.

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