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RESEARCH ARTICLE

RESHAPING SPACES & RELATIONS

Urban gardening in a time of crisis

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ABSTRACT: This article studies urban gardening as a form of social resilience. It analyses its role and impact on society in a context of social and financial crisis through the lens of the debate about the commons on the basis of three case studies conducted in Brussels in 2013. The study connects the specificities of the current social and economic context with the new wave of urban gardening from a people-centred perspective. Both the motivations and the outcomes of this form of activism are analysed and led to the conclusion that being involved in urban gardening represents not only a way to cope with economic and social threats but also a tool to rebuild and reshape social bonds.

The paper aims to contribute to the current debate about the commons, intended as a form of resilience and a tool of social change rather than a simple alternative economic model. It aims to do so through the analysis of urban gardening practices, which are more commonly studied from the perspective of urban agriculture, food production, access to land and urbanism.

KEY WORDS: Commons, Urban spaces, Gardens, Social relations, Brussels

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1. Introduction

The current crisis in Europe tends to strike urban populations from a double perspective: on the one hand it affects the financial situations of individuals, because of the increase in unemployment and debts, and on the other hand it carries strong social components relating to general living conditions and the lack of positive social relations.

Symbols of modernity, speed, pollution, development and growth, cities might often lack of social life and push individuals towards relatively isolated condition. Most of the bottom-up reaction to this situation take into account both social and economic aspects of urban life; among several possible grassroots resilience experiences aiming to encourage active citizenship and social change a primary role is given to urban-gardening. Urban-gardening combines social activism, ecological citizenship and urban reshaping and represents a very specific, though relatively little studied, case of social resilience. The interaction between resilience and the commons is being increasingly studied, both in discussing traditional commons (i.e. common-pool resources) (Mosi-mane et al. 2012) and common property systems (Colding, Barthel 2013). However this link is most strongly established in most recent approaches to the commons (Linebaugh 2008, De Angelis 2010, Federici 2010, Mattei 2011, Bollier and Helfrich 2012, Marella 2012, Dardot and Laval 2014, De Angelis 2014). The role of the commons as an agent of resilience is also clear from the discussions hosted by websites such as *The Wealth of the Commons* (www.wealthofthecommons.org)- related to the homonymous book (Bollier, Helfrich 2012) and web-journals such as *The Commoner* (www.commoner.org.uk), which also represent a platform of exchange between scholars and activists.

This article aims to develop an analysis of urban gardening from the perspective of resilience and to establish a connection between this kind of experience and the debate about the commons, stressing components of re-appropriation of spaces, social and citizen participation and cooperation. The debate about the commons is used as a key to the interpretation of the peculiarities of the new wave of urban gardening from a people-centred perspective in Europe (with a relevant increase of gardening experiences since 2000) and of urban gardening's possible impact on society in the framework of the crisis, through its effect on both political and ecological issues.

This paper is based on three case studies conducted in Brussels through an analysis of different features, motivations and outcomes of these forms of activism considering both differences and commonalities. It will demonstrate how, considerable differences in terms of political commitment and background notwithstanding, some basic aspects

of urban gardening remain constant and represent the core values behind these experiences. Engaging in urban gardening, whatever the specifics is not only a way to cope with economic and social threats (such as loss of social security, welfare, economic crisis and more generally austerity measures), but also a way to rebuild and reshape social bonds.

The paper will describe the main components of the debate about the commons and the specificities of urban gardening experiences, in general and in the case of Brussels, before presenting and discussing the findings of the case studies through the lens of the commons. The rationale for studying urban gardens in the framework of research about the commons is manifold: even though several studies on urban gardening exist, the vast majority focus on Australia and United States (Schmelzkopf 2002) and deploy the theoretical framework of urban agriculture (Tornaghi 2014) or property-rights (Colding et al. 2013). Furthermore some existing studies are relatively old (Neimark 1988), and there is limited research on urban gardening in connection with the economic and social crisis (Feenstra, McGrew, Campbell 1999, Wilson, Weinberg 1999, Hopkins 2000, Federici 2011, Tornaghi 2014). However, the social and economic crisis strongly influenced existing experiences and increased the amount of gardens , producing important consequences for individuals and communities. According to a map of gardens around Europe by N. Lopez Izquierdo (2014), recently published by *Cartografare il Presente*¹ on the Internazionale website and based on Eurostat, Cost-action urban agriculture Europe, Guerrilla Gardening and on the Supurb Food project data, urban gardens are present almost all over Europe with a particular concentration in the UK, France, Italy, Germany and Belgium.

However, as previously underlined, urban gardens have been analysed mostly from an ecological perspective and their social components have often been overlooked. Compared with other grassroots experiences promoting solidarity-based actions - such as alternative currency, social housing, self-help groups, occupations of spaces and degrowth economic models - as recently described by Castells, Caraca and Cardoso (2013) - urban gardens present a lower level/smaller scale of political engagement,(Federici 2010, Lopez Izquierdo 2014). However they are actual alternatives to the current social and economic model (Tornaghi 2014, Lopez Izquierdo 2014).

As for the use of the commons as a lens to analyse urban gardens, this is something

¹ *Cartografare il Presente* is a joint programme born in 2006 on the initiative of the Bologna International Committee for the Cartography and the Analyses of the Contemporary World. Maps and geopolitical analysis are published on their website (<http://www.cartografareilpresente.org/>) . Often these maps are also published on the website of Internazionale. The map mentioned in the text can be found here:<http://www.internazionale.it/atlante/agricoltura-urbana/>

quite new as well. Although the debate is gaining more and more attention within social movements, at European and Global level it is not homogenous and urban gardens are rarely analysed from this perspective. However, having demonstrated the impact of urban gardening on experiences of community life and people's responsibility in making decisions concerning the place they live in, it will become clear that the very action of reshaping urban space builds a new perspective on social interaction. Creating a garden where there was once something else (or even an empty space) also contributes to creating a community of reference. While this would admittedly be far from the ones studied by E. Ostrom (1990), it could be considered an example of governing the commons in a changing world (Goldman 1998, and Dietz , Dolsak, Ostrom, Stern 2001): in fact commons (or common pool-resources) described by E. Ostrom and her team were physical places, often isolated, strongly related to natural resources management and food production and part of traditional systems. The commons studied in this paper, as many other "new" commons are much more flexible and even undefined, not (necessarily) related to a traditional or customary management and, furthermore, explicitly oriented to produce some sort of social and/or economic change.

The study conducted in Brussels through interviews and participatory observation (see below for further details on methodology) demonstrates that creating a community of reference is not necessarily an intentional process and it is not only a matter of the place itself. Not all examples of commonisation are the consequence of a process of commoning, but they cannot happen without the creation of linkages between people.

The choice of Brussels is accounted for the peculiarity of this city that hosts several gardens, regulating their existence and supporting some of them, and therefore providing different models and cases to be studied. Compared with other cases in Europe, urban gardening in Brussels is able to influence the social and economic lives of the people involved even without constituting an action directly against established power: in fact none of the gardens are squatted , as it is very often (but not exclusively) the case in Spain, Italy and Greece. Interests and approaches may vary from vegetable production (i.e. cheap organic food) to avoiding hyper-urbanisation; from sustainability and re-use to integration and social change; from environmental/ecological issues to re-shaping of urban spaces—and to define a common framework for these experiences where certain aspects are recurrent. The most relevant common denominator is that all these experiences consider themselves to be an alternative (from a social and economic perspective) to the status quo, and that each of them produced an increase in social interaction inside the community involved and in members' engagement in

political and social life.

2. Commons, new approaches to an old concept

During the last ten years “the commons” are coming back as an increasingly relevant topic (Coriat 2013) with a strong acceleration during the last years. The commons are increasingly present in the vocabulary of social movements, civil society organisations’ and even some some international organisations. Philosophers, economists and legal scholars (among others) have started publishing about them, academic seminars are dedicated to the topic, political parties and political institutions have begun mentioning them in their speeches and programs.

Even though the debate dates back to the seventies (G. Hardin 1968, Ciriacy-Wantrupp and Bishop 1975 and Ostrom 1990) the recent wave of attention is particularly interesting, especially in two non-English-speaking countries, Italy and France, where Ostrom's masterpiece was translated relatively late (2006 in Italy and 2010 in France). While keeping a connection with Ostrom's work, new approaches in the study of the commons are emerging both in the field of political economy (Coriat 2013) and in political ecology (De Angelis 2010 and 2014) and different disciplines are getting involved in the debate. Indeed the commons themselves are now something different, something more than just common-pool resources.

The topic is becoming relevant for legal scholars (Marella 2013 and the studies of S. Rodotà in 2007 in Italy and the creation of a *Costituente dei Beni Comuni*), political philosophers (Negri and Hardt 2009, Dardot and Laval 2014) and independent researchers (Bollier and Helfrich 2012). The topic it is also entering the political debate at the European level. Some studies were carried out, led by the Social Cohesion Division at the Council of Europe (Sciurba 2013), and in December 2014 after a 2 year process, of an intergroup on the commons was created within the European Parliament, which is expected open a debate on a European legal framework for the commons.

Indeed activists and scholars around the world are building a dialogue about this topic (for example, in the case of the *Ex Colorificio in Pisa*²). Disciplines and approaches are mixed, as emerge from several seminars and workshops held in the last five years

² The experience of the *Ex-Colorificio Liberato in Pisa*, also renamed as *Municipio dei Beni Comuni* has been described, in the broader framework of the debate about the commons in a joint publication involving activists and scholars (Barbato, Berdini, Colosimo, Corradini, Di Pietro, Gallo, Gesualdi, Gualtieri, Marella, Mattei, Pascali, Settis, Soscia, Stampacchia, Veneziano, Viale 2013)

such as the first International Commons Conference³, an Occupying the Commons project launched by the Common Sense platform⁴, a series of academic seminars held at the EHESS⁵, a citizen forum on water and the commons in Europe⁶, the Economic and Commons Conference⁷, an academic/activist workshop on Commons and Democracy⁸ and one on Commons and Socialisation⁹). This huge variety in approaches and visions is exactly what makes the topic fascinating.

The theoretical framework is not only different between different disciplines: as mentioned above the vocabulary concerning the commons may vary a lot, according to the cultural and economic context. In fact, depending on the background and even on the specific feature of the commons analysed various nexuses emerge with different semantic nuances. It is important to underline this variety because it represents a core component of the debate and contributes to explain the huge diversity of what can be considered a commons. The most used expressions are protecting the commons, securing the commons, caring for the commons, (re)claiming the commons, (re)shaping the commons. .

What they share, beside the main point of considering the commons external to the public/private dichotomy, is that they are all actions. What varies is the pre-conditions of the commons: pre-existing vs newly created. In the first case, it is a matter of taking care of them against an external force which represents a threat to them; it is a defence effort. The second case is more proactive: based on the recognition of the potentiality or the need of something to be a commons it can be created as such. This second option implies extra efforts from a theoretical and practical point of view and it can take different shape case by case. Actions under the second category belong to the idea of commoning (as extensively developed by De Angelis. Among others see De Angelis and Harvie 2014)- 20?).

This explains a certain level of ambiguity which characterizes the debate. On the one hand there are what we can define “traditional” commons (those studied by E.Ostrom) which represent the standard model and feed the debate with specific keywords. The most relevant are: social organisation and cultural dimension, both related to the idea

³ http://p2pfoundation.net/International_Commons_Conference_-_2010

⁴ www.commonssense.it

⁵ <http://cenj.ehess.fr/index.php?376>

⁶ <http://www.euroalter.com/past-events/forum-citoyen-quel-futur-pour-leau-et-les-biens-communs-en-europe>

⁷ <http://commonsandconomics.org/>

⁸ <http://www.political ecology.eu/news/item/re-commoning-democracy>

⁹ <http://www.transform-network.net/fr/blog/blog-2014/news/detail/Blog/socialization-and-commons-in-europe-how-to-build-an-alternative.html>

of a community of reference, neither market nor State, defined borders, collective agreements, monitoring, progressive sanctions and conflict resolution systems (Ostrom 1994).

On the other hand there are the “new” commons, where the concept is re-imagined through a fruitful interaction between theory and practice. These can have a revolutionary role in a society undergoing crises but being more diverse and lacking of a standard definition the awareness of their variety becomes crucial. Indeed their definition involves equally, disciplines such as law, economics, politics, social sciences and different combination of these. Furthermore material practices contribute actively to this definition; but they vary a lot: indeed fighting against deforestation, occupying a factory or planting a garden may all be practices of “commonisation”, as an opposite of commodification.

New inputs are therefore added to the list of key words: rights first of all (as the commons are seen as a tool against poverty and towards more fair and just societies where people can enjoy their social and economic rights (Sciurba 2013), but also the dichotomy between access and property. This dichotomy can be seen as part of a list of opposites that includes public vs private, Market vs State. However in this case it is not possible to describe an alternative because of a relevant lack of legal recognition in Europe, worsened by the existing differences among legal systems (with no relevant connection with the correspondent practices) and because no consensus exists on this aspect amongst activists. This dichotomy may be summarized as follows: some consider the definition of property regimes as fundamental for the recognition of the commons, while others consider access more relevant, or at least more useful, for the current debate. A debate which is further complicated by the voices of those challenging the idea of access¹⁰ in itself as even applicable to the matter. However, even though this dichotomy remains unsolved and still crucial for the debate, the importance of access is generally recognised.

Keywords from the past and new inputs and practices strongly interact. The need for a flexible and functional legal framework was already recognised by Ostrom (1990) and contemporary ideas, such as reciprocity and responsibility, have a very old story, being already present in the Latin *res communis* as well as, to a certain extent, in *res publica* (Cangelosi 2014).

The current debate, made up of theoretical analysis and practices, is actually undertaking a rewriting of the concept of commons without losing the connections

¹⁰ It is in particular the case of R. Petrella, economist and leading figure of the association Monastero del Bene Comune. (Petrella 2010)

with past. But pinpointing its components across disciplines and approaches is a difficult exercise, in a context confused by the previously mentioned lack of legal and political recognition and the extremely high level of variety of practices. As a consequence rewriting the concept of commons is an ongoing, multiform process which involves many different actors and contributes to reshaping spaces and social relations.

The actors involved also vary a lot and a distance may exist between those involved in the elaboration of a theoretical framework (including legal aspects and legal implications) and activists; with the bizarre result of a gap where people involved in the practices of the commons are rarely aware of the social, economic and political literature dealing with the topic. In some cases, as the three analysed in this paper, the actors involved may be even barely aware of such a debate. Nevertheless an closer interaction is slowly rising, at least in some countries, as demonstrated by Marella (2013).

The three case studies of urban gardens presented in this paper represent such a complex and diverse framework, and offer an interesting insight into the connection between spaces and relations and practices concerning the commons. In fact urban gardens not only clearly modify the urban spaces through the creation of a green area or the regeneration of an abandoned space but also establish links among members of the community (Federici 2010). In some cases these gardens can be a concrete form of resilience against the economic and social crisis (both in terms of food production and mean of socialization). What further emerges from this study is that these practices may produce unplanned and unforeseen commonisation.

3. Reshaping urban spaces in Brussels

This paper is focused on urban spaces implementing practices of commoning - similar to Dublin's Independent Spaces recently studied by a group of activist researchers (Bresnihan, Byrne 2014) - but with a relevant difference in terms of context, approach and outcomes. In order to describe the gardens of Brussels that have been the object of this research, some preliminary aspects must be described both about urban gardening in general and about Brussels' specificities.

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.

Furthermore the situation of gardens in Brussels is quite different from other

countries (because of specific support and high awareness of this topic shown by the City).

The survey demonstrates an a high level of commitment and a strong impact on the community, but a third component also need to be stressed: the debate about the commons is much more developed in UK, Ireland, France and Italy than in Belgium. This is way the practices described in this study might rather appear as a commonisation, a fact, rather than a conscious action of commoning.

Before taking a deeper look into these aspects and describing the gardens, a few words on the technical and methodological aspects of this study are necessary

4. 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 "PotagersUrbains", 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 PotagersUrbains.

Therefore 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.

5. Urban community gardening: a long history of good practices

From a historical and social perspective the idea of “green shaping” a city or any other urban conglomerate dates back to the late XIX Century Howards (1902) writes about the “garden cities of tomorrow”. However, no chronological evolution can be traced to modern urban gardens. Even though approaches and intents are different, the idea of a need for greener cities remains the same. At some point “food-oriented” gardens appeared because of specific needs: the most famous are the Liberty and Victory Gardens established in the United States and the United Kingdom during World War I and II. In some cases plots originally part of the garden-cities (well developed in France and Belgium, where known *cités-jardins*) or used as Liberty/Victory gardens kept being used by the neighbours to produce food.

However, urban gardens as we currently know them (i.e. a plot, with a variable size, nestled in a highly urbanized area, sometimes appearing out of the blue in between

two buildings) have their origins in the seventies; thanks to a mix of ecological movements, citizen participation and resistance against pollution and over-urbanization. The oldest one is the Liz Christy Garden which aimed to restore an abandoned area of New York City and was established by the grassroots” action of Liz Christy¹¹, a local resident of the neighborhood and a group of green activists named the Green Guerrillas.

While a focus on food production could be expected as a main motivation for creating an urban garden, other key reasons motivate the choice of participating in or establishing an urban garden; such as environment, health, and the reshaping of urban landscapes. The latter gained more and more relevance during the last few decades.

US and Australia-based gardening experiences present, for example, a strong interest in health-- increasingly related to attention to organic food. Some of the gardeners are therefore particularly motivated by an interest in organic consumption, but at a lower price. However, restoring green spaces in the cities remains a particularly relevant motivation. Educational, social and/or cultural issues are quite present as well, both in the United States and in Europe.

However, as already mentioned above, the social component of urban gardens is less studied than those related to ecology and food production; nevertheless it deserves an increasing attention in the framework of contemporary practices of resilience.

6. Which gardens?

Although all these sites share the relevant characteristic of being urban-based gardens, experiences around the world present substantial differences mainly concerning the most relevant component of the garden. As is the case for the commons, these differences are expressed by the definitions used and are influenced by the cultural background and by the language used. There is, for example, a different distribution of the words “community” and “urban”: some informants define the garden as urban while others prefer to call it community-garden. These two specific features are recognized as the most relevant ones because of the role of community involved and of the location of these plots. .

Although they are often combined, the manner in which these two adjectives define different features of a garden and their distribution is anything but uniform around the world. “Community gardening” is the favored term in United States, Canada, Australia

¹¹ For further information about the Liz Christy Garden see: www.lizchristygarden.us

and New Zealand¹².

Furthermore, similar differences exist in Europe. For instance, in Spain they are called “huertos urbanos”, “huertos sociales.” and huertos comunitarios¹³ In French, (with slight differences between Belgium and France) two definition options exist: “potager”, literally “vegetable garden”, and “jardin” , literally “garden” can be combined with three possible adjectives: collectif (collective), urbain (urban), and partagé (shared). Finally, in Italian there are “orti urbani”, “orti collettivi” and, more rarely, “orti sociali”. These gardens may vary one from the other depending on specific features. These differences, although very subtle, reflect variety in the practical organisation and theoretical inspiration of these gardens: a difference in structure corresponds to a difference in gardeners’ approaches. The three gardens studied in this paper present, indeed, three approaches and therefore three structures but this variety makes the similarities among them more interesting from a social perspective.

As perfectly showed by the previously mentioned map by N. López Izquierdo (2014) individual motivations, , organisational structure, location and aims of each single garden may vary a lot; however in general urban/community gardens are connected with one or more of the following categories: environment and food, education and learning, social bounds and city-life. Hover in most of the cases these categories are strongly connected.

As for environmental and food issues, the importance of eating organic and healthy food is interrelated with the ecological approach dealing with local production as a reaction against land exploitation. As for the educational aspects, the agricultural skills are cited along with the recuperation of ancient local traditions and with more general topics dealing with multicultural exchange and integration. The latter provides the link towards the third category; which includes various ideas from the sharing and/or redefinition of urban space, to collectivism to social inclusion and creation of bonds among neighbours. Recently, with the effects of the economic crisis becoming more and more serious, the idea of reacting thanks to such a form of autonomous farming is becoming increasingly present.

Consistent with the role of gardens as places that create links among people, these experiences are increasingly interconnected on a local as well as on a regional or national scale. The scope of such networking can be various: exchange of competencies, seeds and ideas, technical and logistical support, media coverage and interaction with public authorities; but specific features of each network change from

¹² For US community Gardening experience see: http://treebranch.org/community_gardens.htm

¹³ More information about urban gardens in Barcelona and Madrid are available at <https://huertosurbanosbarcelona.wordpress.com> and <https://redhuertosurbanosmadrid.wordpress.com/>

one Country to another.

7. Brussels and its gardens: bureaucracy and funds

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.

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 Region¹⁴) and other calls for projects in the framework of “Quartiers Verts”¹⁵ (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.

¹⁴ www.bruxellesenvironnement.be

¹⁵ www.bruxellesenvironnement.be

The “Contrat de Quartier” (whose proper name is “Contrat de Quartier Durable”¹⁶, 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”¹⁷ and for the Fondation Promethea with the Prix Broucella¹⁸. 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”¹⁹ (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

¹⁶ www.quartiers.irisnet.be/fr/contrats-de-quartiers-durables

¹⁷ www.kbs-frb.be

¹⁸ www.promethea.be

¹⁹ The city of Brussels is divided in *communes* geographically comparable with neighborhoods but having a relatively high level of autonomy.

vary according to the specificity of the garden.

An overview of Brussels gardens, confirmed by the data collected in the three cases, demonstrates a connection between integration of the garden within the neighborhood, 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).

8. 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 syndrome²⁰ ; 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 Koekleberg 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 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

²⁰ 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.

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.

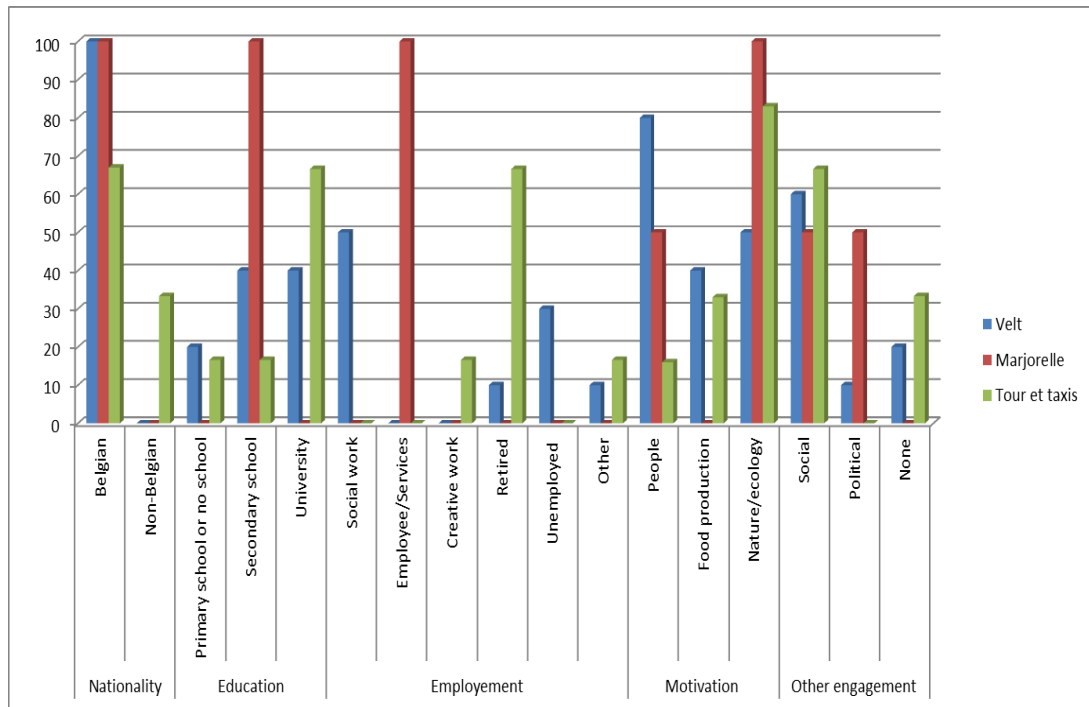
Some of the gardeners indeed live close by, but many others live far from the garden, where they normally go on Sunday (which is also the day the garden is open to visitors).

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.

Figure 1 – background of the informants



9. Discussion

The importance of people

The study shows substantial differences among the three experiences. These concern political engagement of participants, the role of the Municipality (from the relevant role played in the case of Marjorelle to the absence of any role in Tour et Taxis), composition (inhabitants of a couple of buildings, of a neighbourhood and people from all over the city), internal structure (individual, shared, collective parcels), main aim (food production, enjoyment of nature, social cohesion). One could say these three gardens have very few things in common, but there is a commonality that emerges from the interviews and it explains why these three cases can be analysed in the perspective and in the framework of the debate about the commons.

This commonality is the relevance of social interactions as one of the main motiva-

tions and positive aspects: the opportunity of meeting people, regardless if from the same neighbourhood or from other part of the city, is appreciated more than the possibility to grow vegetables.

More in depth friendship, interaction with neighbours, reciprocal learning, cultural diversity and networking constitute approximately half of the motivations mentioned for joining the garden and more than two thirds of the concepts used in describing the garden itself.

In theory, the great importance given to the “people” compared with the vegetables (which are often mentioned however) could be explained by considering that none of the three gardens studied produce a sufficient amount of food to actually make the gardeners independent from other forms of distribution. However, in all the cases, meeting the neighbours and learning are mentioned as the main reasons for joining the garden and as positive aspects of the experience regardless of the amount of food produced or the system adopted (shared, collective or individual parcels).

The theory that people are more important than vegetables because food production is not enough, must therefore be disclaimed. Rather, it can be affirmed that people and food are equally important both in terms of motivation for joining and in terms of outcomes and impact.

According to the data collected, the perspective of better knowing the neighbours, of establishing cultural exchanges (beside technical agriculture competencies to be shared, some said they wanted to practice Arabic while others plan to improve their French) as well as the opportunity for inter-generational exchange and for creating a different social dynamic are predominant. This is also consistent with other statements related to social interaction (educational aspects, citizen participation and social projects) and external factors such as the location of the gardens in very urbanized and often socially sensitive parts of the city.

Nevertheless the importance given to the opportunity of meeting people is fundamental.

Why is this connected with our reflections about the commons? Because when gardeners talk about their motivations they are in fact talking about sharing, reciprocity, and mutual responsibility. Sharing the place and the experiences, reciprocity in interactions and responsibility to other gardeners and to the plot itself.

Creating a community

Compared with other communing experiences (see for example Bresnihan, Byrne 2014) the idea of the commons is almost never mentioned spontaneously. 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 remained at a very theoretical level; neither involving 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.

Consistently the survey demonstrate that commoning was not the primary goal of the gardener but the outcome of their actions is nothing but a commonisation. 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 . They created a common through the creation of a community, and this is a side effect of what they had planned to do.

10. Conclusive remarks

In the current situation of ecological, economic and social crisis, urban gardens are solid alternatives to over-urbanisation and lack of social bonds within communities. Educational, economic and ecological aspects appear strongly interrelated with a more relevant need to gather together and build new ties inside the community. Practical skills and theoretical elaboration are needed to do so. What happened with these three gardens in Brussels is simply that they created a system to deal with this complex management, through a mix of on reciprocity, trust and responsibility.

While most of Ostrom's cases were examples of ancient, customary rules of common governance of a resource (based on local traditions and established and proven methodologies) in urban gardens rules and mechanisms of functioning are to be built together on case by case basis. For this reason the study of these experiences can offer a significant contribution to the debate and to the elaboration of possible models of governing the commons. If in "Governing the Commons" we find examples of traditional and customary rules, urban gardens experiment modern mechanisms and new practices for conscious, responsible and participatory management of resources and spaces, which also make them reproducible.

Irrespective of the level of theoretical elaboration, the commons appear as a practice and a social, self-organised and grassroots response to the crisis. On the basis of what has hitherto been described, it can be said that these gardens are part of processes of creating the commons even if they didn't explicitly engage in a process of commoning.

Uses and functions of the garden are redefined by the community, which is itself self-defined. The most relevant step in this mechanism is the recognition of the change having occurred in terms of function or, more rarely, the re-establishment of a previous function neglected in recent times.

Property status paradoxically represents a minor issue (as confirmed by all the three cases): in making something common the crucial point is about management tools, use, access and participation of the community. The process of "commoning" is first of all a process of creating a community. These gardens perfectly fit with a context of crisis where societies are evolving towards the creation of an aftermath where a new

interaction between society and the political system will be based on the creation of new paradigms (Castells et al. 2013).

A community of reference (whose size and composition is defined case by case) is essential to govern and manage the commons and creating this community is what made these three gardens creating a commons. Even though these three communities appear somehow pre-established, since agreements on the use of the space are made with the formal owner, what is particularly relevant for the analysis is that in all of the cases the creation of a community of reference comes from an actual practice. Creating a community is in itself is a practice of resilience based on re-definition, re-appropriation and re-imagination of urban spaces that independently from their property regime are somehow given back to the community.

These three cases reverberate the theoretical debate for what concerns the discussion about property regimes, management and commoning. However the practice may prevail over the theory, at least in some cases, and a complex elaboration does not seem necessary: urban gardens not only change the face of cities but reshape relations within communities, and can even create artificial new ones. Regardless of their theoretical background they do that as a form of resilience and this is a practical, and reproducible, example of “commoning”.

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