

Town's land. Social experimentations of urban agriculture in Milan¹

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Urban agriculture is not an exclusive matter of the latest urban development. However, in the recent years we can observe a renewed attention to the theme, together with the multiplication of researches in various disciplinary circles, and the rise and consolidation of a lot of experiences in the field, promoted by public policies and social actors.

Of the wide subject about the relationship between urban and rural life, that of shared gardens seems us an interesting case, which has a certain diffusion and importance. From the theoretical point of view, also in Italy, the attention to this practice is renewed in many disciplines: landscape design and public art highlight it as an opportunity for reflecting on the forms of the contemporary city with an accent on collective spaces (ZANFI 2008; AA.VV. 2012); sociological approach and policy analysis emphasize its social relevance with new organizational forms and a new idea of public space and of urban retraining (INGERSOLL ET AL. 2007; AA.VV. 2011; BERGAMASCHI 2012); literature on movements and self-organization dwells upon utopian content and characters of resistance of these experiences (BUSSOLATI 2012).

Even if with very different patterns and dynamics, similar initiatives are common in many countries: the community gardens of Anglo-Saxon school are the model of reference for most of European cases (McDONALD 2009; HARRIS 2010); in France, the recent organization of jardins partagés recovers and updates the tradition of *jardins ouvriers* (UTTARO 2009); in Argentina e USA, after the peak of 2001 crisis, urban agriculture is exploited as strategy for the social and economic growth (CALORI 2009; COGNETTI, COTTINO 2009; COPPOLA 2012).

In Milan, in the last years, next to few consolidated cases, the projects based on this form of urban agriculture, have been multiplied, in line with other experiences in Italy²: gardens tied to association of social promotion in the quarters; didactic gardens in the schools; therapeutic gardens; flowerbeds in abandoned spaces; small gardens for self-production in social spaces, but also cultivated areas in several city parks; and finally the institutional support given by the "Rules for entrusting shared gardens" issued by the Town Council of Milan in May 2012.

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² Blog Ortodiffuso <<http://ortodiffuso.noblogs.org>> (last visit Feb.2013) , dedicated to the promotion and diffusion on line of experiences of urban agriculture, set-up a project of interactive mapping of cultivated areas in Rome and Milan, registering about 50 cases.

As introductory remark, we can affirm that the Milanese shared gardens stand out from conventional urban gardens due to a number of specific reasons.

The first reason is their "community character": in fact, in many cases it is not just matter of "gardening": we observe experiences able to create a relationship, in variable extent, between the practice of cultivation and the construction of shared patterns for life. It deals with places looking like "new buds of life in common, where it is possible to grow the pleasure of conviviality and mutual exchange" (UTTARO 2012).

The second difference refers to the demand they pose, in terms of public space and urban green; they express the need to transform - actively and collectively - the green areas of the town, and not just watch and use them.

The gardens become the scenery of practices of appropriation, shaping themselves as "local micro-processes" (BERGAMASCHI 2012), which bring out new forms of urbanity, with the direct involvement of people and therefore new political spaces.

The third reason has to do with their consistency in terms of space and position: the image emerging from the composition of these events is a 'map of voids', located at the borders and at the center of the city, like varying spots. The origin of these voids is manifold (agricultural, industrial, urban, of reclaim) and recalls the existence of a "third landscape shelter of the diversity" (CLÉMENT 2005).

On the contrary of what happens for many of the practices exploiting the urban interstices, generally interested to hidden places to maintain their invisibility, the cultivation of abandoned or marginal areas plays on the overturn of this condition: from soil excluded from the main processes of building and transforming the town to "place-poster" (COGNETTI, CONTI 2012).

The fourth reason of the specificity of Milan city gardens recalls the town politics and the possibility through these experiences, to develop answers to a number of urban problems. In fact, in addition to being localized physical transformations, these processes show some potential of effective innovation in the treatment of public issues.

In this sense, they affect not only the geography of places and relationships, but also the public dimension, posing themselves as "public policies of fact" (BALDUCCI 2004) or "public policies from the bottom" (PABA 2010).

Thanks to the re-use of forgotten spaces and their restitution to the city, or through small episodes of dissent, or by setting up projects of care and learning, these initiatives open opportunities of participation that in the meantime show forms of treatment of the space- permanent or temporary- and of experiment of politics.

1. Cultivated spaces, common spaces. A taxonomy

In the attempt of framing systematically a phenomenon actually rather opaque, because changing and fragmented, we tried to identify a few families of initiatives that could highlight the relations between spaces and practices, starting with the deployment of what we could somehow define as community lifestyles. The process of definition of a taxonomy aims at composing an overall view that could deliver a possible scenario, with the typical imprecision of contents of this kind of representation, but also with its own evocative power.

1.1 *The garden of my neighbourhood*

A first category includes the life of small urban communities. "The garden of my neighbourhood"³, following the example of British and North American *community gardens*, could be considered a quite commonly acknowledged model: the idea at the basis of this kind of initiatives entails a synergy between effects of regeneration on the urban space and the empowerment of sense of belonging and responsibility. Exploiting the ease of approach to this kind of activity and the spatial closeness it requires, community gardens use explicitly the act of cultivation as a social aggregation and integration tool in delimited spatial environments. This cluster includes the collective experiments where agriculture and gardening aim explicitly at recovering abandoned areas, symbolic or identity spaces, or at a local wide-spectrum recovery. With this purpose, inside the *Parco Trotter*, premises of the historical school complex *La casa del Sole*, the association devoted to safeguard and promotion of the park itself has elaborated and realized, since 2009, a plan for the relaunch of the school's farm. This has led to the birth of a *community garden*, now available as meeting point for the residents of one of the more socially heterogeneous, and to some extent more problematic, zones of the whole city. Through the organization of meetings, parties and other miscellaneous initiatives the *Giardini del Sole* (this is the name given to the *community garden*) proposes the ideal role of the *neighbourhood gardener*, devoted to cultivate relations on the territory, in opposition to the mainstream political thought that tries to hide and sedate its tensions.

On the other side of town, in the *Corvetto* zone, a small group of parents has given birth to a didactic vegetable garden in the primary school of their children with the willingness of the school head. This first improvised experiment, started in 2009, gave to its participants the instruments and the enthusiasm to establish themselves as an official association and realize a plan of urban gardening aiming above all to promote proximity relations in their neighbourhood. Thus the association *Piano Terra*, settled in in the same complex in the backyard of a secondary school under refurbishment, seeded and took care to a 'neighbourhood garden' around which its members intertwined several collaborations (with the school itself, with other association of the zone, with other experiences of urban agriculture) with the long-term objective of building a space for sharing of experiences where the commitment on the education of children becomes a meeting chance for different local groups.

1.2 *The garden in the backyard*

The reuse of spaces is a shared characteristic between neighbourhood agriculture and experiences gathered under the definition "*The garden in the backyard*"⁴, where we include projects somehow close to the well-known *guerrilla gardening* practices. The definition of *guerrilla gardening*, established starting from local experiences in the USA in the 70es, identifies initiatives of dissent where green spaces are used as an issue for claims and demonstrations (PASQUALI 2008). Through these actions the care for neglected parcels of urban soil becomes the political manifesto of a possible way to transform those spaces and others of a similar nature. It's not by chance if the

³ Groups that can be assigned to the category "My neighbourhood garden" are: *Piano Terra* group; the *Giardini del Sole* community garden; the vegetable garden of *Cascina Cuccagna*; the neighbourhood association *Ortinconca*; the vegetable and botanic garden in *Via Montello*.

⁴ Initiatives we assigned to this category are: the *Critical Garden* movement; the *Landgrab* group, the Italian branch of the *Guerrilla Gardening* movement; the *Playground* garden; the vegetable garden of the farmhouse squat *Torchiera*.

preferred ground of *green attacks* are urban space fringes. "Buildings have a front and a rear, despite the efforts made by architects to transform them in round-shaped sculptures" (LYNCH 1992, 58). The rear is the place where life expresses itself more easily, because its more concealed position let life escape the respect of the order ruling on the front. Therefore in the rear a straighter link can have place between the space and its use, quite free from influences of traditional functional division of the built environment. *Guerrilla gardening* initiatives fully exploit this intrinsic potential of grey areas, that the (partial, temporary) lifting of some rules of control turns into the habitual shelter for a multiplicity of practices not allowed elsewhere, but also into the fertile ground and reservoir of materials for experimentation of new organisational arrangements (CONTI 2010).

In Italy *green guerrilla* practice spreads only in recent years developing specific characteristics. Unlike other countries, where it takes the forms of a real opposition movement, in Milano it is studded with disconnected episodes, which don't care about mixing with less dissenting experiences.

Since the end of 2009 the *Ortodiffuso* project, conceived by the agronomist Mariella Bussolati, records and monitors the state of urban vegetable gardens managed by independent groups or individuals and, most important, connects them through the *Rete Libere Rape metropolitane-Ortodiffuso* (RLRm-O), which manages a very popular mailing list and organizes meetings for exchanges and confrontation) and tries to be a link between pure activism and its integration in the planning of a more and better "cultivated" city. In the stream of other characteristic experiences of the Milanese and Italian panorama, the focus of the initiative is on the practice of cultivation in itself, in every form, in front of which all expressions of dissent and all demonstrative actions are considered as tools to be used following their utility case by case.

Projects participating to the RLRm-O are very different one from the other; some, as the one proposed by the Collective *Landgrab*, operate in a uncommonly active context and use coherently the practice of green guerrilla as a way to open spaces for participation and ownership.

In the Isola zone, preferred stage of *Landgrab's* initiatives, the group, born in 2005, has realized several initiatives (the so-called *Serpentone*, later embedded in part of the construction site of the *Porta Nuova* project, the *Transgarden* in Via Restelli, at the feet of the new administrative complex of Regione Lombardia, the planting of a flowerbed in Piazza Archinto, ...). Although their contents are explicit positions or claims related to the massive urban transformations their neighbourhood is undergoing, also for the *Landgrab* collective the urban independent cultivation is above all a chance to experiment and learn different way to use and reuse the city (its spaces, material and the consistence of its inner relations).

1.3 The garden for the others

In the category "The garden for the others"⁵ we gather projects where the labour on the ground is mostly a chance to aim at objectives of a different nature. The qualities of urban agricultures such as accessibility and ease of use turn the cultivation projects into potential activation devices for further evolutions beyond the mere agricultural activity.

In this perspective some initiatives exploit explicitly the effectiveness of the garden "device", giving priority to the instrumental aspects that are implicit in this kind of

⁵ Among all the cases analyzed, groups we assigned to this category are: *Cascina Bollate*; *Il Giardino degli aromi*; *Rete delle Libere Rape Metropolitane*; the *Libero Orto* project; *Orto in città*.

activity. In this group are gathered, e.g., initiatives assuming intentionally the act of cultivation as a therapeutic or formative instrument, like projects focusing on the involvement and integration of people coming from states of need or social exclusion. Besides, in this category are active some more 'institutional' experiences, where the concreteness of the garden and of its fruits is functional to other learning objectives (ZAVALLONI 2010). As an instance the initiative "Orti didattici" (educational gardens), born in March 2011, thanks to whom the municipal administration has realized new agricultural parcels in 30 schools in town, fosters a project of environmental education addressing teachers and students. In this case the garden in itself is certainly exploited as a specific learning tool and moment of game, but it represents also a didactic instrument in a wider meaning, through which culture, meanings and relation skill can be channelled.

With similar objectives the project "*Orto in condotta*", promoted by the international ngo Slow Food and operating in Italy since 2004, addresses municipal administrations and educational institutions to foster dietary and environmental education for kids, parents and local communities. In this case the the garden is meant to be the tool able to turn a little potential consumer into the co-farmer aware of his/her own resources, conscious of the value of his/her food choices and of their consequences on the territory and on its community. The project, in its three-years breakdown, intends the municipality to make the land, the tools and the necessary financial backing available to the action; each single school takes charge to put the garden in place; Slow Food takes charge of the training of teachers and parents. There are six school in Milano currently adhering to this project.

In a totally different setting the social cooperative *Cascina Bollate* proposes cultivation as an integration and inclusion mean for the detainees of the Milano-Bollate penitentiary. The project, operational since 2007 after an initiative of the penitentiary board in collaboration with Susanna Magistretti's association *Attraverso il giardino* ("Through the garden"), includes: a plant nursery inside the prison, where external and detained gardeners cooperate to the cultivation of herbal species; a small shop - also inside the correctional facilities - for the sale of nursery products; an educational garden, in the prison's external ground, where the cooperative carries on trainings and meetings. At *Cascina Bollate*, the vegetable and botanic garden are the mean of communication and hybridization between the 'inside' and the 'outside', through the training of professional and qualified gardeners to re-enter the labour market, but also thanks to the opening of a breach to give visibility to an usually hidden environment..

2. Green objects, practical activity, incremental processes.

The Milanese context shows a certain richness and variety of cases dealing with the themes of urban agriculture, with some common characters as described below.

They start-up with the social activation of formal and informal groups, which in different ways take care of the promotion, design and maintenance of an open space, usually of public property. From the tradition of the urban gardens in Milan they keep the dimension of informality, but emphasizing the collective nature of the experience: we rarely find individual gardens; on the contrary, the lack of subdivisions and internal fences is a tangible and symbolic element highlighting the common character of the space and the possibility that more people can take charge of it.

A further confirmation of this character is given by the impression - coming from the direct observation and during the interviews carried out by the authors - that the production is almost never the main concern, only in a few cases the interest is motivated by the need of finding new models of production and consumption.

More often, the project pays attention to the construction of the place itself (it seems, with more emphasis on the idea of a common area to enjoy rather than a production place), or to aspects apparently less important than cultivation, such as building relationships, discussing about social problems, education, teaching, dissent.

This behavior seems also related to the profile of the main promoters of these projects: urban middle class in search of social and territorial ties for a better quality of life; residents without particular problems of economic nature intending the shared garden as a new place of "making politics", of maintaining public areas, of producing public goods (will this condition change if the crisis will continue?).

Within these experiences, despite the emphasis on the size of the process, a significant capacity is developed - often with limited or no money - in orienting the activities to obtain a transformation. In these experiences, cultivation and its tangible results, acquire experiences the importance of the first goal, become a concrete display of actions (and not just intentions).

The attitude of the promoters is indeed very "action-oriented" (CELLAMARE 2011): the start-up of the experience (the oldest were born in early 2000s) is associated with 'small things', with bricolage experiments (WEICK 1997), with reuse and recycling of materials, often without of a long term plan.

What seems important to them is not so much the soundness and the durability of what they do (also if the short life of the projects does not help to make an assessment on this aspect), but the chance to see the direct impact of their activities and practices, in terms of physical transformation, increase of urban quality, improvement of the social cohesion, sense of ownership.

The centrality of a practical activity is linked to the "ability to cooperate making easier the accomplishment of things, while making up for any individual lack" (SENNETT 2012). Although under conditions of uncertainty, the availability of a finished and visible product, the presence of a 'green object' - a tangible and usable sign - and the start-up of a transformation that is also territorial (even if very small), are the points that feed the content of these experiments.

The concreteness of the object returns the sense of fulfilment typical of a craft (SENNETT 2008) and the same agricultural activity reserves its unexpected gifts:

put the hand, but also taste, eat, feed, work hard, get dirty, implies a openness to the contamination between different spheres of sensitiveness, [...] it can be a remedy, an interesting therapy from which something may occur, whose full consequences can not be foreseen (NICOLIN 2012).

One of the issues remaining in the background of this experience is the role of the institutions: what emerges is a geography based on projects 'from the bottom'. They pose different hints and questions about the broader issue of the government of the phenomenon and the tools that a more comprehensive policy should put in place. In this direction, an evaluation of the outcome of municipal regulations on shared gardens is premature. But it is surely interesting the path taken by the City of Milan to facilitate the consolidation and the proliferation of these activities, perceiving them as an important common heritage.

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Abstract

The paper suggests a possible interpretation of the increasing interest towards urban agriculture in Milan as supported by a desire to revive the city design and, at the same time, by a concrete attempt for its realisation.

The construction of a taxonomy of experiences intends to compose a hypothetical scenario of a 'cultivated Milan', centred on those initiatives that highlight the use of cultivation not only as a practice of individual satisfaction or environmental reflection, but as a tool to approach urban issues and the organization of common life. In this sense the English definition of 'community gardens', even placing maybe too much emphasis on community aspects, appears to be more appropriate than the usual Italian 'urban orchards' to indicate this kind of experiences: even in different ways, all the observed projects aim at rediscovering urban common space, physical and relational, through the practice of small projects, apt to return a tangible and immediate satisfaction while, implicitly, look towards wider horizons.

Keywords

Urban orchards, Community gardens, Milan, Urban movements, Urban agriculture.

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