

Urban Countrysides

by Matthieu Calame

The renaturation of cities offers several advantages in terms of healthcare, urban planning and economics. But urban gardens can also become a Trojan horse for gentrification. Is cultivating them really all that counter-cultural?

Reviewed: Flaminia Paddeu, *Sous les pavés, la terre. Agricultures urbaines et résistances dans les métropoles*, Paris, Seuil, “Anthropocène” collection, 2021. 448 p., €22.

Urban-rural connections have become more and more fashionable among architects and urban planners, as demonstrated by the large number of books written on this topic in recent years¹. These books reflect the increasing interest displayed by municipal authorities in the renaturation of spaces, whether their aim is to adapt to climate chaos by creating a Sponge City, reducing air pollution thanks to trees and urban forests, improving citizens’ eating habits, and/or even, in some of the most bold (and wild) projections, managing to create a self-sufficient city².

Urban agriculture is part of this movement, which has seen the multiplication of projects to set up urban gardens and urban farms in the heart of the most dense

¹ There have been very many of them in recent years. We will only mention *one*, which seems to us to explore the topic in most depth: Sébastien Marot, *Taking the Contry’s Side*, Triennale d’architecture de Lisbonne, 2019, on <https://drawingmatter.org/review-excerpt-sebastien-marots-taking-the-countrys-side-2019/>

² See André Fleury, Roland Vidal, <https://laviedesidees.fr/L-autosuffisance-agricole-des.html>

metropolitan areas, if need be on the roofs of buildings in new developments, which often aim to green their roofs in order to continue greying out the surface of the city.

Urban Vegetable Gardens

Through her three test cases – Detroit, New York and Paris – Flaminia Paddeu takes a benevolent but critical look at the phenomenon of urban gardening. The latter, as is often the case with “new” phenomena, actually has a long history, which is well-known to historians if not to the collective consciousness.

Indeed, urban vegetable gardens are as old as the industrial revolution, and even as the emergence of big cities. In the 16th century, the Venetian adventurer Niccolo Manucci praised the cleanliness of the streets of Ispahan, whose residents would carefully collect animal excrement – there were many beasts of burden in the city – in order to enrich their vegetable gardens. From this perspective, it is the city as conceived by Le Corbusier, divided up into unifunctional spaces, which constitutes the exception, and not the rule.

But since mass urbanisation is a recent phenomenon, it is indeed the spirit of the Athens Charter which has shaped our urban fabric over the past half century. As such, the return to favour of urban vegetable gardens seems to constitute a counter-culture.

However, the author encourages us to draw a distinction between two social phenomena. On the one hand, we have an anti-establishment movement, whose founding act in 1973 is the birth of guerrilla gardening, a movement launched by the artist Liz Christy in New York. These were the days of flower power, and the first activists threw seed bombs over the fences of vacant lots in order to claim for themselves the management of abandoned urban spaces, thus reclaiming them. This movement tended to be driven by white populations with high social and cultural capital, even if these populations might be financially embarrassed or in precarious situations due to rises in real estate prices and job insecurity.

On the other hand, we have a movement with much more ancient roots, of seeking subsistence through the self-production of foodstuffs, in particular fresh ones, and which is often driven by working class groups with still-recent rural backgrounds, who still have a strong connection to producing their own food. In Detroit, the first

Gardening Angels in the 1980s were older Afro-Americans, who were perpetuating a family know-how imported by their ancestors during their migration towards the industrial North from the rural and segregationist South. In New York or in the Paris region, we are dealing here with workers' gardens being renamed "family gardens".

From Renaturation to Gentrification

However, this movement has been a victim of its own success. Urban agriculture, in all its forms, never develops on choice plots of land, but rather on abandoned ones. Marginalised populations – marginalised in terms of their power – occupy local marginalised spaces. Their immediate preoccupation, when they occupy a wasteland conducive to rubbish dumping and disreputable activities (drug trafficking, prostitution), is to improve their living conditions and environment, by self-producing food and restoring their environment.

In so doing, they contribute to getting rid of poverty, to restoring value to a neighbourhood, or even to laying the foundations for its gentrification. Both private landlords and municipal authorities have well understood this phenomenon, and frequently use urban agriculture projects as a temporary means of avoiding the degradation of a space before improving it. This improvement often leads to the "skeddaddling" of the players involved, not just from the urban agriculture lots that are destined to be built on, but sometimes from the whole neighbourhood when, the latter having been made "trendy", housing prices shoot back up. Urban agriculture can, in some cases, become the Trojan horse of gentrification.

Gentrification and the precariousness of urban agriculture thus raise the question of property and property rights. In these terms, Detroit and its abandonment, and New York and Paris and their extreme property pressure constitute two opposing poles. Nevertheless, even in Detroit, many projects remain precarious and thus at the mercy of the trend being reversed.

To protect themselves against this, promoters of popular and civic urban agriculture tend to develop partnerships, mainly with municipalities, in order to try and ensure the durability of their investment. When they can, they tend to choose the formula: "A happy life is a quiet life".

Agri-Start-Up

It is however very difficult to escape from the pressure of rising property prices, especially when the latter become objects of speculation. Sooner or later, a garden will give way to a “green” property development. The great anthropologist Goscinny, in the Asterix album *The Mansions of the Gods*, gave Caesar the project of “razing the forest to the ground to set up a natural park”. We couldn’t put it any better.

Even when promoters try to give urban agriculture projects a social purpose, it is difficult to escape one’s bubble. The collective discipline necessary to look after a garden, the limitations of opening them up to the general public, which tends to bring with it a certain amount of degradation and incivility, often risk encouraging a privatisation for the benefit of a small collective – one that is frequently very culturally homogenous. There is a fine boundary between appropriation by residents and privatisation by a small club. The inclusive dream does not always survive its encounter with reality, which can be a problem when it concerns public spaces.

One last avatar: urban agriculture, which has become trendy, constitutes a new field of investment, and we are seeing a proliferation of high-tech start-ups striving to produce hydroponic strawberries on roofs or even in cellars using LED lamps. One may rejoice to see cannabis being replaced by mint. But we are a long way here from the social or ecological functions of urban agriculture.

Will the commons save the soldier Liz Christy ?

In order to avoid bad money driving out good and ensuring that urban agriculture keeps its transformative or even subversive character, the author suggests we resort to the theory of the commons and institute a “right to land” in cities. Such a right would however have far more power if it were accompanied by rigorous fiscal policy to prevent speculation and foster collective action once more.

Flaminia Paddeu’s book is informative, and its analyses are of a high quality and on the whole free of jargon. It is of course contingent on its limited object of study: three specific geographical areas. It therefore does not put forward an overall synthesis of the phenomenon at the international level, in particular in the cities of Asia, Africa

or Latin America, where urban agriculture still plays an important part in the food supply, something which has been increasingly well documented by the FAO.

The book does not address global ecological issues either, or uncertainty regarding the durability of cities. Its argument remains socio-political. The author introduces the tensions around urban agriculture into a wider framework – gender, liberalism, racism etc. – with the risk that is always involved in overusing these concepts as keys to explaining every issue at hand. It sometimes feels like they are being artificially superimposed on reality. But this is doubtless the object of a healthy discussion between sociologists.

The present reader did have one regret, however: the length of the book and its numerous redundancies. The author and her editor did not take the time to be concise. This is a shame. The essay risks losing the readers its argument deserves.

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