

Article

Intervention to public space: New Urban gardening in New York and Berlin

Christa Müller¹

Abstract

The paper discusses self-determined, cooperative interventions in public space regarding aspects such as food access, care and social justice. It takes a comparative perspective on community garden activities in Berlin and in New York as well as on traditional and contemporary ways of community gardening. New urban gardening is distinguished from community gardening in the following six ways which will be discussed in more detail below: upcycling of everyday materials, guerilla tactics, reinterpretation of spaces, mobility and sociability of gardens and gardens as hybrid spaces. The paper points out the differentiated landscapes that have developed over urban gardening in the city - and how strongly the social background of the actors as well as the social structural conditions contribute to the diversity of the gardens. Definitely the new community gardens react to other social developments and urban challenges than the community gardens of the 1970s did.



Picture 1: Brooklyn Grange, New York
(Credit: Christa Müller)

New York is widely regarded as “the place of origin” of the urban gardening movement worldwide. For a long time I have wondered whether there is any empirical evidence for this assumption. First, an inventory: I have been doing research on community gardens in Europe since 2000 (Müller 2002, 2011, 2012; Baier et al. 2013). During a study trip in summer 2016 I visited community gardens in Brooklyn,

¹ **Dr. Christa Müller** is a sociologist and committed to research on postmaterial lifestyles and on sustainable concepts of prosperity. She was awarded a PhD in sociology by the University of Bielefeld in 1997 and received the Research Award for Ecological Economics in 1998. She has undertaken fieldwork in Costa Rica, Mexico and Germany. Currently she is director of the research foundation “Anstiftung” in Munich. She teaches at different Universities. Her latest book: “Die Welt reparieren. Open Source und Selbermachen als postkapitalistische Praxis” (with Baier/Hansing/Werner; Bielefeld 2016: transcript).

Queens, Manhattan and the Bronx - I talked to gardeners and I talked to several representatives of governmental and non-governmental organizations. In New York City community gardens seem to be everywhere, especially gardens of the “traditional type”, which were established in the 1970s. Many of the members have grown old in them. One finds community gardens of the traditional type in all five boroughs. Their number is estimated at 600

(<http://www.greenthumbnyc.org/gardensearch.html>, last download at 03/31/2016).



Picture 2: Smiling Hogshhead Farm, New York (Credit: Christa Müller)

Differentiating Community Gardens and New Urban Gardens

Many observers consider the New York community gardens as the origin of a new type of gardening that has arisen in European, especially in German cities from the early noughties on. I say, however, that American community gardens cannot be seen as prototypes or even as an inspiration for the new urban garden movement neither in Western Europe cities like Berlin, Leipzig, Paris or London, nor in New York itself. And this for some important reasons: One of the most striking is, of course: different lifestyles, age and

social class positions of the actors in the field. Especially members of the young environmental movement believe that it is time for new forms of interaction regarding dichotomies and hierarchies between humans and non-humans, urban and rural lifestyles or consuming and do-it -yourself.

For them the dichotomy „rural life versus the big city” has definitely run out of meaning. Activists do not want to do away with the city, they want to “enrich and develop” it by investing in productive green spaces and in communities built

around common farming and exchange. They take over public spaces – often

neglected or derelict areas – and create something new. They want to



Picture 3: Allmende-Kontor, Berlin (Credit: KD Grote)

determine the conditions of use themselves, whereas the city administration of New York supports and manages the traditional community gardens conditionally: opening times must be respected, a fence is indispensable, smoking and drinking alcohol is not allowed, etc. The city administration views gardens as belonging to the same category as libraries or swimming pools, that is as public spaces or public goods - and therefore subject to municipal control. However, the new urban gardening movement develops its own rules - namely by Commons viewpoints (Müller 2012).

Open source is the central guiding principle in all community gardens; the participation and involvement of the neighborhood are essential principles. The gardens are used and managed as

commons even if the gardeners do not personally own the land. By encouraging people to participate, urban gardens gather and combine a large body of knowledge in productive ways.

More or less at the same time (around 2009) a new type of gardening began emerging in Berlin as well as in New York. It is a type that deliberately avoids given rules, rejects fences, explicitly understands itself as political and experiments with an “independent-do-it-yourself approach” and with upcycling, the process of giving new value to items that are worn out and worthless according to industrial logic. This means that e.g. the Berlin Prinzessinnengarten cannot easily be compared with a community garden in the Bronx, as the media and even scientists have done, but rather with projects such as the Smiling Hogshhead Farm in Queens

which was illegally established on an abandoned railway land of the MTA and was then legalized with the help of the non-profit 596 Acres.

Activists of a new informal urbanism are reclaiming cities all over. In urban gardening, the focus is on self-sufficiency

regarding food issues, on sharing, do-it-together, re-appropriating and re-interpreting manual skills and crafts, opening up designs, breaking up objects and spaces, creating common land and rediscovering the commons (Müller 2011).



Picture 4: Pale Blue Door, Prinzessinnengarten, Berlin (Credit: Marco Clausen)

Initially, these new expressions of informal gardening can constitute a visual irritation. Not infrequently, one finds oneself on a wasteland in the heart of a city, wondering what exactly it is meant to be: a temporary dumping ground for euro pallets, rubber tyres, water containers, seedlings and “upcycled” industrial tarpaulin? An open-air workshop? Or maybe a garden? One thing is clear: spaces such as these, in which fragments of different contexts are mixed with great abandon, are definitely a new sight. A few examples: a DIY-village-square on the tarmac of the former Berlin airport Tempelhof, a group of shopping trolleys filled with plants by the entrance of an underground railway station, an old-fashioned Italian ice-cream cart in the middle of some home-made raised beds in Leipzig, an Outdoor kitchen constructed out of scrap wood in New York, euro pallets planted with vegetables on the grounds of a former brewery in Cologne, which is covered by red tennis court sand because of suspected contaminants in the soil. Yet this bricolage of pallets, crates, bushes, planks, wood, bags, buckets and barrels in fact provides a carefully framed commentary on the end of the industrial age. The urban gardening movement takes up this vital challenge and collectively addresses it in a previously unseen pragmatic fashion.



Picture 5: Moving a garden: Rosa Rose, Berlin (Credit: Susanne Quehenberger)

The urban vegetable gardens are more reminiscent of art installations made out of crates and milk cartons than traditional farms. They are located in unusual places such as inner-city wastelands or on the roofs of car parks. This indicates that we are dealing with a novel approach to the use of open space – an approach which in Germany prominently appeared on a rubbish-strewn wasteland in 2009 in the Prinzessinnengarten in Berlin. Here, people from different generations, cultures and

social environments plant local organic vegetables, eat together, make music, and above all: work together. The founders of the place describe themselves as two amateur gardeners who intentionally “curate” rather than “farm” the land, who do not have a master plan but rather have created an open process in which local people and anyone else who wants to join in can be involved (Müller 2011:38).

Characteristics of New Urban Gardens

We are dealing here with a number of different phenomena unknown in traditional gardening. Firstly there is the idiosyncratic use of old everyday materials from the surrounding urban environment. These materials are given new functions, such as a freight container donated by the Port of Hamburg, now re-purposed as a

garden bar. These re-purposing’s are a reflection of the fact that urban farmers have limited funds and have to use what funds they have as creatively as possible. Simultaneously, re-purposings are a comment on consumer society. The consumer role does not correspond to the self-perception of most DIY activists in

urban garden projects. They see themselves not primarily as consumers, but as makers, blenders, finders. The search, they dig, they take away, they continue using objects they have found.

Secondly the use of guerrilla tactics should be mentioned. Wastelands and the areas around tree roots are planted up without the gardeners first asking permission, seed bombs are thrown into barren land, vertical greening is experimented with. Guerrilla gardening brings the viewer up short and challenges habitual perceptions. However, unlike with previous generations, there are only a few protests and slogans demanding this form of co-determination and participation. Current political discourse no longer relies on the power of words or slogans – but rather on the virtue of sending out signs or symbols. Jean-Francois Lyotard (1978) called this “the collapse of the grand narratives”.

A third phenomenon is the hacking, the breaking up and reinterpretation of spaces: wastelands, industrial roofs or rail-wastelands and other neglected areas are transformed into green, liveable environments. Growing vegetables is particularly important here as a way of calling into question, changing and commandeering the industrial production of foodstuffs and the retail chains. Learning how food grows, what conditions and ingredients it needs and what can be done with it, is part of the process of self-empowerment. It also raises fundamental questions such as who the land belongs to, and what ideas about participation and prosperity it should serve in the future.

The fourth phenomenon is the emphasis on mobility. Because of the poor soil quality, many gardens are mobile. The

spatial arrangements, typical of the industrial age, have been altered – boxes and containers can be moved in order to green other spaces. Such moves are not always voluntary. The Berlin neighbourhood garden “Rosa Rose”, situated on formerly occupied land, was removed by force in 2009 to make way for the construction of a residential building. Rather than moving on quietly, however, Rosa Rose paraded through Berlin to their new site, transporting the vegetable plants, bushes and fruit trees on home-made delivery bikes, wearing flowers in their clothes and hair. They thus turned the transportation of the plants into a major public event (Werner 2011, p. 65). This, if nothing else, reveals how different the new urban garden movement is from the traditional gardens: it is profoundly performative.

In the above mentioned Prinzessinnengarten, forgotten varieties of rare crops are grown in reused rice sacks, plastic crates and split-open cartons. Despite the dubious quality of the soil, this farming method underlines and aestheticises the mobile nature of this urban agricultural landscape. Moreover, it is congruent with the playful, artistic approach of urban gardening. A particularly striking example of the play between art, re-purposing and upgrading is provided by the temporary installation constructed in the Prinzessinnengarten by a group of artists from London. The artists call themselves nomads, travelling to different cities around the world and turning the detritus of modern civilisation into temporary places to stay. They create places that come to life thanks to the interaction between many different element - not just people - and then after a time

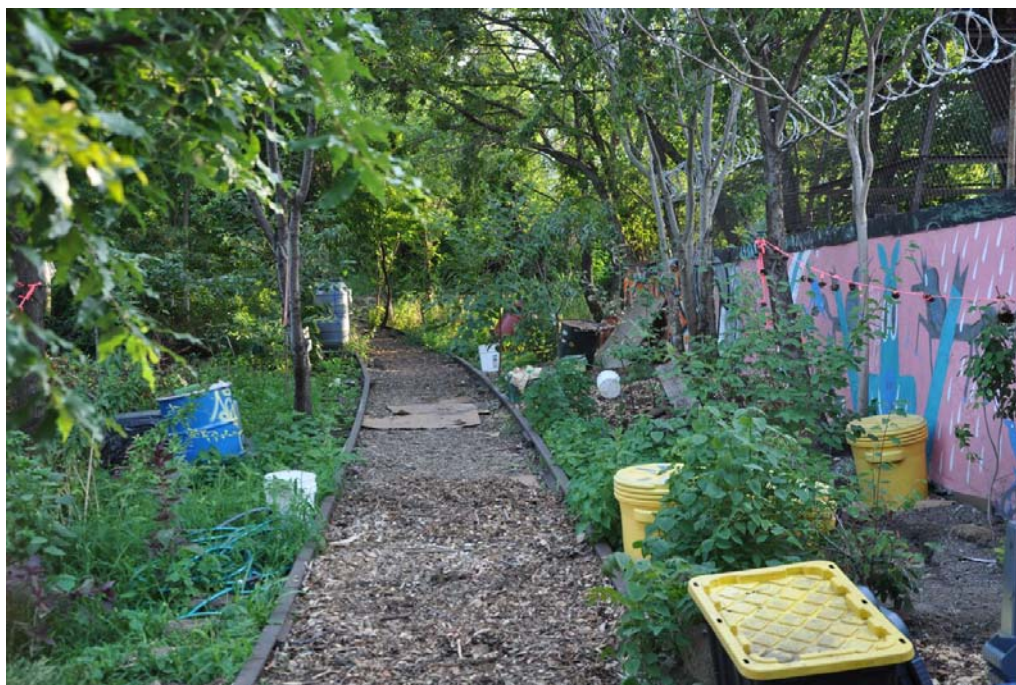
decay. In Berlin the artists built a nomadic restaurant in the form of seven tree-houses made out of old wood and window panes they had collected themselves. The poetry of the tree-houses was a striking interpretation of temporary housing and hospitality. The travelling artists brought nothing with them except what they needed for themselves and their van, and yet they were soon in a position to entertain guests. Guests or hosts? The difference is levelled out. The only other thing they brought with them was a pale blue door for the installation of the same name (Nomadisch Grün 2012:88-89). It is obvious why nomadic is so attractive right now: it promises a situational independence from the multitudinous pulls, impositions and imputations of ubiquitous economism.

A fifth phenomenon is the codification of the social in new urban habitats. Community gardens are radically inclusive. They aim to use the multiple physical settings to appeal to as wide a diversity of people as possible, bringing them together. Many projects are explicitly conceived as learning and educational spaces populated by amateurs, places for working together and learning from each other. Knowledge-sharing forms a precondition and basis for social intercourse which is not so much about speaking to each other, however: those involved want to *do* something jointly – to create, alter, break up or reconstruct a space.

A sixth phenomenon that indicates the innovative nature of urban gardening is that these projects encompass hybrid spaces. The actors do not worry about

mixing the aesthetics of the big city and of smallholdings. Vertical farming structures sit side-by-side with smallholdings. Vertical farming structures made from empty plastic bottles sit side-by-side with seedlings planted in old rice sacks and disused boxes.

Similar to “land art”, where temporary works of art are created and then left to decay in the natural environment, urban gardening sacrifices a certain amount of artistic control over what is created. It does so willingly, however, in order to leave the space open for forms of curatorship in which everyone can be involved. Closely related to urban gardening is the emergence of a type of space that re-unifies not only production and consumption, but also connects the private and the public. It is a type of space which enables interaction and exchange not only between people but also between human beings and urban nature; it therefore creates free space in order to renegotiate the social relationship towards nature. In an urban garden one can see plants and things in space-material arrangements which contain a civilizing promise. They are neither only and primarily aesthetic spaces and therefore art, nor they are primarily and exclusively educational spaces, or mere kitchen gardens: they combine contents from different social systems and connect them in a meaningful way. The atmosphere provides alternative visions of a city. Here plants and animals are no “resources”, but actors who have a right to appropriate environments in urban society (Latour, 2010).



Picture 6: Smiling Hogshead Farm, New York (Credit: Christa Müller)

The “garden generation” curates its own landscapes and architectures, generally without reference to official town planners. Through its rediscovery of manual skills and crafts it makes itself less “governable” in the Foucauldian sense, and less identifiable as far as creatorship is concerned; we do not always know exactly who planned, designed and built the space in these garden projects. The design emerges “in the doing” and in the permanent engagement with the materials. Rather than an individual signature, we see a collective design process that never reaches an end. It represents a new political culture that breaks with the democratic concept of the 20th century and can be seen as a “switch”, to (still “unfinished”) new forms of direct democracy: people take things into their own hands and design their surroundings. This shows a new understanding of politics and democracy, a belief that one's own actions can contribute to processes of social transformation.

Modernity Expanded

Because of the irritation and friction it intentionally causes, the urban garden movement is currently at the forefront of the “attention economy”, which has already caused culture-industrial usurpation. Gardening and subsistence, topics for decades closely associated with the discourse on shortages and dualistic ideas of modernization, have been completely relaunched. The image archive of modernity has been expanded to include subsistence activities that in past decades were encumbered with ideas of poverty, backwardness and a miserable existence far removed from the world of progress.

This is thanks to the Internet generation (Howe/Strauss 2000), a generation that not only wants to garden but to produce images at the same time. It knows how to feed and manipulate the media society's addiction to images. It knows that for the existence of its projects

to receive recognition and affirmation, such projects must first receive visual representation in media. In the words of systems theorist Niklas Luhmann, "What we know about our society, indeed about the world in which we live, we know through the mass media." (Luhmann 1996:9; translated by the author)

Reflection in the media also significantly increases the attractiveness factor of the gardens; this, in its turn, affords an opportunity to bring a real diversity of people together: elderly people from the neighbourhood, urban hipsters, bottle collectors, immigrants, seasonal farm hands and other passers-by. Community gardening creates open spaces in the genuine sense of the word.

For many members of the garden movement, gardening is also an explicitly political act. Many of the actors in community gardens are searching for fulfilling ways of life that may go beyond competitiveness and consumerism. They participate in the debate about the democratic use of public spaces, sustainable urban development, industrial food production and the treatment of non-humans.

Whether the issue is land grabbing, biodiversity or participation, the garden acts as transmitter, accelerator, medium and platform at one and the same time. The community gardeners sow, harvest, cook, propagate, raise hens, and keep bees. In so doing, they make statements. For them, seasonal food might require effort, but it also offers the chance to enter and experience new culinary territory. For them, cheap hybrid seeds can be bought at the garden centre, but using old varieties gives a feeling of autonomy and might create a

connection to the protests by peasant farmers in the global South.

Drawing on collective intelligence and in the process setting communalisation processes in motion is another opportunity offered by urban gardening. Community is created through shared use and collective work. The cultivation of the urban natural environment is accompanied by the cultivation of the social. Urban gardens are open to everyone and, as such, gather and combine a large amount of knowledge in productive ways. A library goes with almost every garden. Since there are usually no agricultural professionals among the activists, everyone depends on whatever knowledge is available – and everyone is open to learning.

In the heart of our cities, which are shaped by the structures of global production and consumption, highly visible parallel structures of subsistence are thus appearing. These structures can partly be explained by growing individualisation processes. But they also stem from a virtualisation of reality. People are looking for tangible experiences and authentic encounters. Community gardens offer them a wide range of opportunities for this, more perhaps than any other place. However, it would be wrong to claim that the gardens are an analogue alternative to virtual spaces. Rather, Web 2.0 is a catalyst in a process in which the analogue and digital worlds increasingly overlap and the line between them becomes more and more blurred.

All six dimensions mentioned for gardens of the new type are applicable both in Berlin and in New York. Gardeners in these projects focus on the localization of the production of unprocessed foods, on experience of urban nature, for a freer and

more and self-determined access to urban land for all and against the privatization of public space.

Comparison with Black Urban Growers

While the young ecological urban movement is playful and has less focus on self-sufficiency than on co-designing the cities, another population group in the US postulates gardening as a survival issue of urban poor: the Black Urban Growers (<http://bugs.nationbuilder.com/>). A crucial difference to the situation in Western Europe is the lack of social policy, which is complemented by extreme inequality. In the last few years, and this is a new phenomenon, too, Justice Activism has focused on community gardens as places for empowerment, especially for the black communities - racism in the US is still a key issue. Also in New York community gardens are often formed, directed and determined by white upper middle class academics. German activists attempt to deal with this misrepresentation, which also exists in Europe, for example through the intercultural gardens approach. In this type

of garden, developed from the late 1990s onwards, many refugees from different countries and backgrounds have tried to “put down roots again”, and through this process are able to negotiate a new understanding of “self” and “other”. Unexpected forms of identity formation beyond border thinking are being created through planting food together. (Müller 2002)

Meanwhile, in the United States, a particular organization of African-American gardeners has established: the “Black Farmers and Urban Gardeners” was founded in 2009. This NGO criticizes the urban sustainability discourse for being pure white as well as for assuming that People of Color are not interested in ecological issues. The “Black Farmers and Urban Gardeners” try to awaken historical consciousness and break up the traditional reservations about agricultural work, which is still negatively archived in the collective memory of Black communities as slave labor on cotton plantations.



Picture 7: Conference 2016 (Credit: www.blackurbangrowers.org/)

In their study “Beyond the Kale” Reynolds and Cohen emphasize that urban gardens are credited with improving well-being in low income communities and communities of color by reducing inequitable food access. However they also say that urban agriculture does not inherently lead to changes in the structures at the root of food system and environmental inequities (Reynolds/Cohen 2016:5-6). Apparently “Black Farmers and Urban Gardeners” do not want to wait for deep change anymore. Currently, they are connecting the debate on police brutality against blacks, known under the slogan “Black lives matter”, with urban ecology and subsistence. Urban gardening serves as a platform for empowerment. Collective self-sufficiency is reframed and thwarts the previous tales of agricultural labor. Such a relinking may well engender a feeling of strength in the current discussions regarding the still rampant racism.

The Black Urban Growers have begun organizing and hosting a series of community events with the purpose of starting a conversation around food: Where does it come from? Who is providing it? Why don't we see more black farmers at the markets? What is the relationship between our individual health and the health of our communities, and why does it matter? (<https://www.linkedin.com/company/black-urban-growers>, last download 10/17/2016)

The call for the 6th Annual Black Farmers and Urban Gardeners Conference 2016 in Harlem can be seen as almost paradigmatic: „Through education and advocacy around food and farm issues, we nurture collective black leadership to ensure we have a seat at the table. (<http://www.blackurbangrowers.org/>, last download 10/02/2016). What amazes at this discourse is the fact that self-sufficiency,

which is commonly associated with powerlessness, is taken as the starting point for self-authorization. The conference calls on the black communities to take responsibility for food issues and thus gain power to act. Karen Washington, co-founder of Black Urban Growers, proclaims: “To grow your own food gives you power and dignity. You know exactly what you're eating because you grew it. It's good, it's nourishing and you did this for yourself, your family and your community.” (<http://womeninislam.org/portfolio/karen-washington/>, last download 10/10/2016)

The comment of a gardener at the Conference Website shows how strong Urban Gardening is charged with reference to ethnic identity politics: “We need to support each other. Be more self-sufficient! When people realize we don't need to go to them for anything they start showing a lot more respect. God bless the child who has his own!! We done heard our mothers and grandmothers say this so many times before!! Be proud of your black life!! So support another black life!! Because black lives matter!!” (<http://www.blackurbangrowers.org/>, last download 10/02/2016)

Both the semantics and the visual design of the Black Urban Growers movement echo the unique power of the discourses of the 1980s. By “post” is no trace to be found. It might be the hopelessness of the social situation in American cities that demands such an unexpected unambiguity – and it shows that access to urban land can be shaped in quite different ways.

Conclusions

In conclusion, comparing the Black Urban Growers and the new urban garden movement, two different forms of self-empowerment through subsistence

production are clear: a concrete material, as is evident in the voices mentioned above, and a more playful, experimental form, which does not focus on urban poverty, but wants to contribute to a degrowth perspective.

The renaissance of subsistence production in the food sector thus has comparable dimensions in European cities and in New York – but also shows significant dissimilarities caused by the different welfare state regimes.

It is not easy to give a forecast on the further development of the new movements in the city. We observe a steadily growing variety of small, agile, event-related movements and actions emerge. They leave a spatial trace by recording places and spaces and thereby changing them. Their addressee is neither the politics nor the market. Their actions address a civil society public, which is no longer waiting for the big solutions to be brought "from above". This applies to the young environmental movement as well as to the black self-sufficiency movement. Only in retrospect will the effects of the new movements on social transformation be perceptible, both as related to the climate change problem and to the struggle for social and racial justice.

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