

**THE COMMUNITY GARDENS AS A NEW FORM OF APPROPRIATION.
THE CASE OF THE URBAN ORCHARDS IN MADRID
FOR THE "EURAU 2014: COMPOSITE CITIES"**

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Abstract

«Increasingly across the globe people have come to live in big cities. And it is in those cities many live that mobile and spatially extensive way of life which is characteristics of modernity. Given this, it is research and action designed to make this modern and urban way of life more environmentally sustainable which contribute most to the cause of sustainability... The real challenge facing us is not one of building eco-villages, but of making the modern city, and the way of life lived in it, environmentally sustainable.» (Downton, 2009)

The tradition of urban agriculture in Spain is very recent when compared to the experiences of other European countries such as Germany, Austria and the United Kingdom.

Nevertheless, urban agriculture is increasingly being adopted as a form of bringing small green zones to areas of the city deprived of them. In a bottom-up process, the local residents find the possible / suitable vacant lot, appropriating the space to fill it's emptiness with a completely new function in physical terms but also with a new meaning, with a novel social connotation.

In the context of the current economic crisis, high unemployment and strong social association these orchards became a diverse piece within the urban fabric of Madrid. With a very particular modus operandi the "RED DE HUERTOS URBANOS DE MADRID" under the umbrella of the "FRAVM - Federación Regional de Vecinos de Madrid" has developed a new model for the representation of the aspiration of a part of the society challenging the traditional system, creating a realm for cooperation, solidarity and social interaction, where strong ties and sense of community are established.

These green areas have contributed to the improvement of the city structure in terms of environmental values, urban setting and landscape fineness, and as a result are increasingly being incorporated in the local urban design initiatives. However is the normative the most difficult step in order to regularize the situation of these, usually spontaneous, activities?

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the prospective of the initiatives like the "Red de Huertos Urbanos" from the planning laws currently in place to understand the viability of urban agriculture within the urban regulation of the city of Madrid.

Key Words: community gardens, multifunctional landscape, resident empowerment, planning laws.

1. INTRODUCTION

Pietro Belluschi defined the city as "a communal artifact produced not by a few intellectuals or specialists but by the spontaneous and continuing activity of the experience". (Rudofsky, 1973)

In reality, currently our cities are defined by very restrictive and paternalistic planning policies that are established to create a highly accomplished consumer product, a work of art, a perfect elucubration reflected on the territory for others to admire.

In the age of globalization, "The generic city", as Rem Koolhaas named it, is depicted in any metropolis around the world. The city's image is now constructed from an agglutination of interventions by "big name architects", making each of them a particular kind of amusement park, at 1 to 1 scale. These urban interventions are generally associated with the design of the contiguous green areas and public spaces, constructing them, as well, as internationally homogenous. This is the institutional city, a "bird's eye" view.

However, in Madrid, although the newest award winning park, Madrid-Rio, can be enclosed in the former described "generic type", when the scale is taken down to the individual urban plot, a rather distinctive public space can be found, where the exchange value as in the conventional market is being increasingly replaced by the value of sharing in a way of a collaborative economy that contribute to a more egalitarian society, as Jeremy Rifkin defines the new economic system based on Collaborative Commons. (Rifkin, 2014)

There is always the matter of how the people appropriates these public spaces and the whether if the government gives to them the capacity to emancipate, i.e. as to decide the type of city they want to inhabit. In Lefevre's terms is the confrontation between the representation of space based on the planning practices versus space shaped by the collective use and imagination, the evolution of small pieces of the urban fabric, a flexible production of the space, understanding the city as a product of socio – economic influences but, moreover, as a space for expression of the individual and collective aspirations.

Therefore the urban structure and the socio-spatial expression become a stage for performances, inter-political, economic and ideological relations constructing a particular association of functions, a physical organization able to qualify the appropriation, identity and needs of its inhabitants. This is largely reflected in the materialization of each of these urban /community gardens.

2. URBAN AGRICULTURE IN SPAIN

There is no culture of urban agriculture in Spain comparable to other regions in Europe owed to the peculiar characteristics of the industrialization and urbanization process of the country. Due to this late industrialization process, the rural-to-city migration dynamic did not start until early 1960. Therefore the Spanish society remained primarily rural until much later than the cities in northern Europe.

During the Franco dictatorship (circa 1945) there was a program that could be equivalent to the European "GARDEN FOR THE POOR" although in the Spanish version it was a program associated to rural settlements nearby small hamlets. The initiative was called "KITCHEN GARDENS" and promoted by the Instituto Nacional de Colonización (INC). The program was not successful due to the obstructionist and speculative positions of the large landowners. The scope was very limited and did not have a great impact neither in stopping the rural exodus nor in lessening the crisis of traditional agriculture. (Morán, 2008-2009)

Is with the PGOU 1985 when for the first time the concept of urban orchards as leisure gardens is introduced and legislated. These gardens were located within the zoning for the green areas of the planning rules, under a rental regime and managed by the city council.

These urban orchard where not included in the next revision of the planning laws for the city of Madrid, the PGOU 1997, currently under review as well.

3. RED DE HUERTOS URBANOS DE MADRID. A BRIEF HISTORY.

RED DE HUERTOS URBANOS DE MADRID is a self-managed initiative promoted by different groups engaged in urban agriculture in the city of Madrid. The sites available for these activities are generally vacant pieces of land which they occupy under very fragile circumstances as the association, in most cases, does not hold the title deeds or legitimate usufruct of that particular piece of land.

The network is formed by 32 urban / community gardens. The first one was set in 1997 (Kybele) in the metropolitan region of Madrid. The second one in 2007 (ÉSTA ES UNA PLAZA) in the borough of Lavapiés, the central area of Madrid. This orchard was dismantled and evicted five months later by the authorities to later receive the provisional approval to settle. Starting from 2010, as the association gets more organized 5 or more new urban / community gardens were set every year. The picture below shows the ones location within the central a rea of Madrid.

In regards of the ownership of the parcel were these orchards are located, their situation used by these orchards, they found themselves in a very delicate situation as shown in graph below from data collected in 2013.

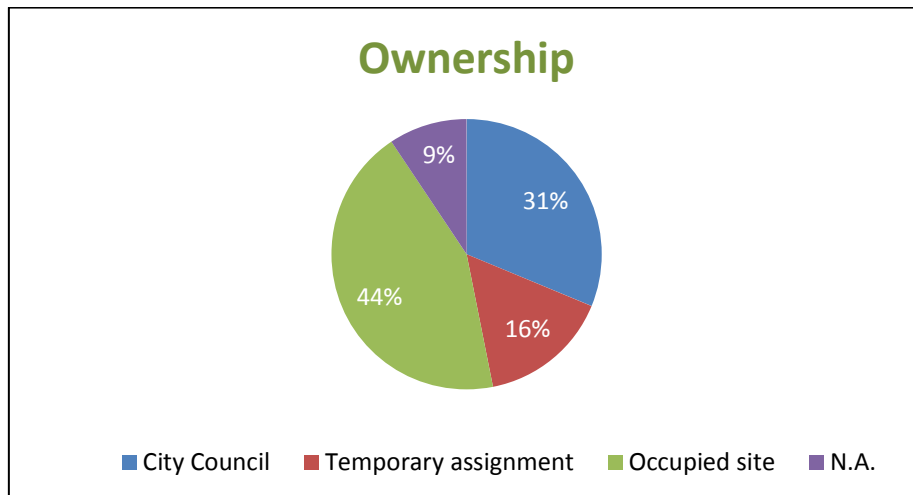


Figure 1. Ownership

Due to the rather small number of urban / community gardens, the atomization of their locations, the fragile legal rights of the sites they occupied and the relatively recent formation, the association decided to create a Network to respond to their needs.

This network is a way to create a meeting point where the situation of each individual association could expose their particular interests, could be represented and their rights protected, to organize common activities, to jointly inform the general public.

Therefore, the Network of RED DE HUERTOS URBANOS DE MADRID is a network of networks

engaged in organic urban farming, and a meeting point for the community.

The value of this initiative was recognizing when the United Nations granted in 2012 the European Good Practice Award to the RED DE HUERTOS URBANOS DE MADRID in the categories of: environmental management. Architecture and urban design, and public participation. Recognition of the importance of this network in building steps to empower the citizens in matters related with to the type of city they want to inhabit.



Figure 2. Urban/Community garden location in Madrid Central Area

4. LEGAL ISSUES

The network of RED DE HUERTOS URBANOS DE MADRID is faced with four major problems:

- the lack of tradition of urban gardens,
- the eviction risk pending on most of them as the majority are located on vacant land without permission from the rightful owner, who often is the City of Madrid,
- the none existence of legislation or regulatory recognition of this use by the planning laws currently in force
- And the activity not being recognized as a suitable or beneficial use of the land, as the return on the real estate investment is null, in terms of pecuniary benefits.

With the intention of averting these limitations and to legalize these uses the members of RED DE HUERTOS URBANOS DE MADRID have engaged with the Department of Environment to design a legal formula that will allow these initiatives to exist. Although a solution has not been reach yet the prospectus is very promising.

Since November 2013 when the talks began, in an effort to regularize this de- facto situation the City

Council has granted orchards to non-profit organizations for a minimum of two years, extendable to four. These entities must submit a brief project and a liability insurance policy; in return the City agrees to condition the plot, i.e. placement of fences, installation of water supply and irrigation drip, etc.

“Since March 2104, regularization has slowed down because there are several administrative reports pending resolution... but it seems that after the summer we will get together to try to regularize the first 14 to 16 spaces, all of them located on plots under the Green Areas zoning in the current planning laws, as the decision over this areas is competence of the Department of Environment. In a later stage we would try to regularize urban gardens settled on plots under Facilities uses and zoning as has not been possible yet” (Pablo LLoberas Serra from the association).

5. PARTICULAR CASES

From the 32 urban / community gardens, three has been selected as they show the implication of the citizens in the decisions to be taken with regards to how they want to live in the city, of what is important to them besides of what is expected or permitted in a particular piece of urban fabric.

5.1 Esta Es Una Plaza



Figure 3. View of the urban garden Esta es una Plaza (madronosfera.a-fondo.com)

This is the first urban garden set in Lavapiés, a working class district in the central area of Madrid. ÉSTA ES UNA PLAZA was born, informally, at the end of 2008, as an initiative of the group URBAN ACCIÓN in the context of urban intervention workshop held in Madrid. Set on a vacant site, unused for more than 30 years, belonging to the City Council, it was evicted five month after its opening. A process of space reclamation was design by the founding group: including working in the neighbourhood, speaking with the media, and at the same time, exploring all possible avenues of negotiation with the City Council. Finally in December 2009 the formal cession of the site was obtained, under the figure of a temporary assignment for five years.

ÉSTA ES UNA PLAZA is a small crowd gathered around a project to create a public space in Lavapiés. The goal is to build an alternative place open to all where eco- friendly and cultural activities can take place. “A community garden where to meet, play, organize events, where to share time and experiences.”

Consist of nine productive organic garden terraces and an extra one for educational activities with children.

5.2 Campo De La Cebada



Figure 4. View of a summer performance at Campo de la Cebada (www.prototyping.es)

The idea of this community garden was developed during the MOVIMIENTO 15M in May 2011, but it was in early 2012 when it finally got built.

In October of 2010 the City Council had demolished the La Latina Sport Centre, the only sport facility available to the neighbours in the Central district of Madrid, resulting in this plot to remain unused until this citizen initiative reclaimed it for their use.

After seeing how interesting it was that this space remain open and could be used and co-managed by neighbours a negotiation with the City council was initiated. CAMPO DE LA CEBADA was then incorporated under the umbrella of RED DE HUERTOS URBANOS DE MADRID, and the association was given a temporary assignment to use of the plot for five years.

Having no natural soil, the garden is arranged in 8 wooden cultivating tables, 1.40 m wide x 4.20 m long and 50 cm deep. Other parts of the site have been planted and landscaped, like the herb garden or the barley (cebada) planted on top of the container which gives the name to the place.

Like all community gardens, besides the traditional agricultural activities, CAMPO DE LA CEBADA is an open space to meet, to discuss, to create, to read, to be enjoyed by everyone. In summer particularly, it is very active and a reference for the alternative cultural events of the city.

5.3 Huerto Zuloaga Tetúan



Figure 5. Building the site, February 2014



Figure 6. The bull-dozer, April 2014

(<http://redhuertosurbanosmadrid.wordpress.com>)

In February 2014 the Department of Arts of the City of Madrid presented the project “Paisaje Tetuan” to the public. This initiative was set to explore the possibilities of the betterment of the urban landscape through artistic interventions. It was part of the government strategies aimed at promoting creativity, public participation and improving the urban scenery in this rather poor part of the city, with high percentage of Latin-American immigrants. Therefore, the project included two main areas: one oriented to artists and artistic activities and another focus on citizen participation.

One of the proposals for “Paisaje Tetuan” was the installation of an urban garden on Matadero street that was a citizen participation success.

On April 9th, the city council brought the bull-dozer in claiming “Visible occupations of municipal plots without permission”.

6. ENDING NOTES

The relationship "city-countryside" has, since ancient times, conditioning the human societies. Enclosed in this relationship, from the ecological point of view the urban / community gardens provide a double assistance:

- The inclusion of nature in the city, contributing to the efficiency of urban metabolism and promoting greater biological diversity.
- The food production in the proximity of the consumption place contributes to the reduction of the ecological footprint and improves the quality of food.

At a social level the benefits reported by the urban / community gardens due to its participatory nature and the connections between citizens are, at this point, indisputable. They have become, in many cases, an ideal place to promote environmental awareness. Furthermore have empowered the people in participatory modes that permit an innovative way to take action on the decisions with regards to the use and management of the city at micro-scale.

Although RED DE HUERTOS URBANOS DE MADRID is now under negotiation with the authorities to regularize the situation of the urban/community gardens, with the actions described above is evident that is not the intention of the current government of Madrid to support this activities at large.

Is a long road for the people to have the empowerment to decide how to use and manage the common property.

The authorities are sitting tight with very strict and paternalistic planning regulations under their arms.

The right to imagine and conceive the physical context where they live belongs to the people.

This is not arguing against the existence of a legal framework to plan the cities, is a petition to create an ample set of tools to address the many different scales of city planning. Certain degrees of flexibility and freedom at a micro-scale, empowering the inhabitants to have a say in the evolution of urban context where they carry their daily activities.

The development of this network of urban / community gardens in Madrid is a cause for celebration in a city that lacks community spaces and where inhabitants are not always considered an important stakeholders when decisions about city development have to be made.

A scenario in which civil society is recognized as the architect of the urban transformations that generate spaces for socialization and learning is drawing new horizons in the appropriation and empowerment process.

“El urbanismo es una dimensión de una política democrática destinada a facilitar el ejercicio de los derechos ciudadanos. Si no es así entonces es que los profesionales son simplemente cortesanos de los gobiernos o de los poderes económicos. El urbanismo no puede cambiar radicalmente la sociedad, pero si hacerla algo más justa.” (Borja, 2014)

“The urban discipline is a dimension of democratic policies to facilitate the exercise of citizen’s rights. If this is not the case, then its professionals are simply courtiers to governments or economic powers. The urbanism cannot change society, but can contribute a little to make it fairer”. (Own translation)

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8. BIOGRAPHY

Architect with working experience in Japan, Singapore and Spain beside her native country, Argentina. Currently a PHD candidate at the Doctoral Program in Sustainability and Urban Regeneration, at Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid. The field of study concerns with the shrinking cities phenomenon within the Spanish context and the planning tools needed to be developed for future scenarios where growing is not the key. There is extensive research done in the American and in the Eastern Europe context but a profound analysis needs to carry out for the Mediterranean cities.