



Urban Agriculture as Activism: Common Practices and Discourses in Different Contexts

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Abstract. The present paper addresses the relationship between urban agriculture, activism and the right to the city in three different contexts: São Paulo (Brazil), Paris (France), and Lausanne (Switzerland). Largely based on qualitative research performed between 2016 and 2022 in the three aforementioned cities, relying on a critical approach and field work (participant and non-participant observation), the study has found a convergence between discourse and practice when it comes to intraurban horticulture, with emphasis on issues such as citizen's (re)appropriation of public spaces, strengthening of social bonds, promotion of urban biodiversity, and a new political and cultural contribution to the city-nature relationship. Although each of those cities' institutions respond to urban horticulture in a different manner, with local governments playing a more or less active role in the everyday life of community gardens, such gardens become public space activity hubs of collective experience and prove to be, both materially and symbolically, in all three contexts, a criticism to contemporary cities and an alternative to urban life.

Keywords: Urban Agriculture, Activism, Public Space.

1 Introduction

This paper is based on the concept of *urban agriculture as activism* [1] [2], which refers to a wider spectrum of citizen engagement in community gardening actions and expands the meaning of “activism” to include a series of demands and purposes, such as: (re)appropriating public spaces; strengthening social bonds; promoting urban biodiversity; promoting agroecology and permaculture in urban areas; establishing a new contribution to the city-nature relationship. Meanwhile, turning to *urban agriculture as activism*, more than just analysing the actions of citizens who practice it, also means understanding how the materialities and symbologies of urban agriculture succeed in disputing the materialities and symbologies of contemporary cities.

Here, I will cross results from immersive field research carried out between 2016 and 2022 in a large set of community gardens located in intraurban areas, in three different contexts: Paris, France; São Paulo, Brazil; and Lausanne, Switzerland. The most

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significant difference between those three contexts is the gardens' degree of institutionalization. In Paris and Lausanne, there are specific programmes for them. While in Paris the gardeners form associations and request to the municipality permission to (re)occupy the public space, in Lausanne, the municipality takes the lead in the process of creating and organising community gardens. In São Paulo, on the other hand, there are no public policies for community gardens, nor do gardeners' collectives establish formal associations.

Despite the different degrees of institutionalization and socio-spatial particularities in each of those three contexts, the main results indicate that the gardeners' discourses and practices are similar. *Urban agriculture as activism* thus mobilizes groups of citizens who are reshaping the urban territorial arrangement, as well as making community gardens part of the debate on the right to the city [3] [4].

This paper is divided in three different sections, in addition to this introduction and the conclusion. In the first section, I will address the relationship between urban agriculture, activism and the right to the city; in the second, I will contextualize the three researched cases; finally, I will present an analysis of my findings in these three different contexts.

1.1 Methodology

This exploratory, qualitative research, carried out between 2016 and 2022, is based on a critical perspective [5] and on literature review about political gardening [6] [7], urban commons [8] [9] [10] and the relationship between urban agriculture, citizen engagement and activism [1] [2] [11], where participant and non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews stand out as methodological procedures. The references on which the methodology is based are compliant with participatory research procedures [12], as well as with the theoretical and conceptual framework aligned with a critical analysis of urban agriculture practices [5].

In São Paulo (n=14) and Lausanne (n=15), since the number of community gardens is smaller, systematic observations were carried out in all of them. In the Parisian context, in turn, taking into account the large number of initiatives (n=182), the same was done in at least one garden located in each of the city's *arrondissements* (n=17). It should be noted that, since 2020, the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th *arrondissements* were grouped into just one sector, known as the "*Paris Centre*". Additionally, in the three case studies, at least one gardener from each of those community gardens gave testimony during fieldwork and/or answered questions by email.

In order to participate in collective moments and integrate myself into different contexts, I attended meetings and festive gatherings organized both in the gardens and other environments, such as meeting rooms, coffee shops and restaurants. The analytical strategy is therefore related to systematic observations, as they allow for a better understanding of the set of daily practices associated with community gardens. I also analysed documents and the set of public policies pertaining to the processes of citizen engagement with gardening in common spaces in São Paulo, Paris and Lausanne.

2 About the relationship between urban agriculture, activism and the right to the city

Under the wide umbrella of urban agriculture research and action, a significant aspect regards its activist nature, which leads to one of its expressions occurring in contemporary cities [1] [2] [11].

Although this topic can be researched with focus on several different approaches, in this paper I will examine urban agriculture as the discourse and practice of claiming the actual right to the city. Such approach includes the occupation of public spaces by citizens with the purpose of implementing community initiatives that allow them to take control of the city based on solidary, not market relationships. Such movement allows us to catch a glimpse of new political solutions for urban life [6] [7], in which we can conceive and implement cities with blueprints that are not based on social and spatial fragmentation [13], but on the possible experimentation with new forms of urban commons [8] [9] [10].

Regarding the relationship between urban agriculture and activism, the main demand is to create “edible cities”. That’s its most emblematic radicalization, as, since the Industrial Revolution, the city has been territorially and ideologically disconnected from the countryside, with the establishment of cultural, economic and political boundaries that ensure the city has a central role in the hegemonic system as a political and economic hub in charge of production activities [14] [15].

When urban collectives engage to allocate intraurban areas for growing food, a new spatial appreciation is established, requiring public authorities, private companies and several civil society segments to adopt a different attitude towards a material arrangement that seems anachronic or far-fetched from the current urban lifestyle.

Urban agriculture as activism is more comprehensive than the already popular “guerrilla gardening” actions. This term refers to the act of occupying public or private land for urban gardening purposes without obtaining previous authorization [1] [2]. However, other methods of social and spatial organization and occupation of urban land may also be perceived as activist practice if: a) even in areas where authorization has been obtained, the common purpose continues to be using the urban space for agricultural reasons; b) the collection of citizen actions, focused on transforming the urban area for food production and arising out of participative political mobilization, is set up as activism on a local scale, regardless of the category in which it fits; c) they claim alternative uses and forms of occupation, rejecting those that currently prevail in the system, offering a different ideological and economic reference for production in (or for the transformation of) the urban space; d) they result in new relationships between the people and their urban environments, as well as new forms of citizenship and associated rights.

Based on the discourse of common citizens, regardless of whether they come from a small city or a metropolis, with different levels of instruction and income, gardening initiatives are based on advocating for local engagement as “micro revolutionary” expressions [16]: they involve citizens becoming aware of their role as political players in their own time and space; they are a result of critical thinking about everyday urban

life [17]. We refer, in particular, to initiatives by informal collectives or small associations that, even when little known, aim at setting the foundation for a process of social and spatial transformation that's more independent from the hegemonic system, whether utopically or materially.

From this perspective, *urban agriculture as activism* systematically shows the players involved the extent to which the city is a social product [14], helping individuals to acknowledge and identify their roles in such collective effort. If the right to the city must be expressed as “the right to urban life,” transformed and renewed [18], *urban agriculture as activism* does not play a marginal role in this contemporary debate. There is a claim to re-signify everyday life, accepting the city as a space for diversity, without dissimulation.

3 Three different contexts: São Paulo, Paris, and Lausanne

The present paper includes findings from my PhD research carried out in São Paulo and Paris between 2016 and 2020, as well as from the application of my thesis in a third context, during postdoctoral research carried out in Lausanne between 2021 and 2022. The similarity between practices and discourses of urban gardeners in these three different contexts was revealing, even though the public authorities' responses are clearly different. Each of these three contexts provides an example of different levels of interference by the municipality and forms of civil society organization.

3.1 São Paulo (Brazil)

In 2004, São Paulo created an urban agriculture programme, as the city has a traditional green belt where a large volume of fresh vegetables to serve the metropolis is produced. The municipality aimed at encouraging the transition to agroecological practices. Today, São Paulo has a relevant production of organic food in this peri-urban area.

However, the programme failed to also consider intra-urban agriculture, particularly community gardens, the focus of which is not on commercial production and food supply, but rather citizen engagement with the public space. The turning point, leading to a more widespread discussion in São Paulo about this topic, was the creation of a network called *Hortelões Urbanos*, in 2011, which resulted in the creation of the city's first community garden in 2012 (Fig. 1), followed by other initiatives in different city areas [1]. In 2015, a law was passed to allow these non-commercial community gardens in public spaces, but there still is no specific policy for them, which means that they remain informal.



Fig. 1. *Horta das Corujas*, the first community garden in São Paulo (Brazil), in a public square next to Vila Madalena, one of the trendiest neighbourhoods in the west side of the city. Photo credit: Gustavo Nagib. (January 2020).

To draw attention to the growing wave of urban agriculture practices, activists and gardeners established the *União de Hortas Comunitárias de São Paulo* (UHCSP) in 2018, a new informal network that aggregates and promotes community gardens in the city, making them politically relevant and creating a space for dialogue with the municipality. The UHCSP arises from exchanges that had already been taking place between actors from different gardens; it promotes monthly meetings to outline communication strategies to deal with public authorities and civil society.

Most of the community gardens in São Paulo are a result of direct occupation by citizens in public spaces, a process that continues to pressure the municipality to propose a public policy for them. The *Hortelões Urbanos* network currently brings together over 84,000 people on Facebook. Although not all of them are from São Paulo, it only goes to show that there is a significant number of people interested in urban horticulture. The UHCSP has also been developing activities and political actions to raise awareness among civil society and public authorities, such as cycling tours around the city's community gardens.

3.2 Paris (France)

In 2000, *Jardin Solidaire* was the first community garden established in Paris, an initiative to occupy public land for gardening and artistic activities. It was set up on an unlikely vacant municipal plot of 3,000 m², located in the 20th *arrondissement*, in a popular neighbourhood, between the famous Père-Lachaise Cemetery and Montreuil city limits. In August 2005, the municipality decided to remove the garden for the construction of a public gym. To make up for it, the first community garden located on a roof – the gym building’s roof – was created (Fig. 2). However, some of the pioneering gardeners and activists decided to stop volunteering in the new garden, claiming the anarchist character of the previous action had been lost.



Fig. 2. *Jardin sur le Toit*, the first community garden located on a roof in Paris (France). Photo credit: Gustavo Nagib (February 2019).

Other than this symbolic episode, until the 2000s community gardens were not a common practice among Parisians. It wasn't until the government of Bertrand Delanoë (2001–2014) that a growing number of associations and collectives felt encouraged to file an increasing number of requests before the municipality for the creation of community gardens. In 2003, the City of Paris launched the *Main Verte* program, authorizing the concession of public space plots for the establishment of community gardens. At the same time, the municipality has made urban agriculture in a broad sense a priority among public policies. Over the past few years, the municipality has developed legal

provisions, plans to encourage local food production, participatory vegetation models, a specific program for professional urban agriculture, as well as new urban reform projects that include different typologies of urban agriculture [1] [11].

Paris currently has about 180 community gardens. The municipality makes public space available for their establishment, especially within squares and parks or in the few remaining vacant lots. Each site has soil analysis, drinking water, a tool shed and compost bins provided by public authorities. However, it is mandatory that citizens organize themselves and form an association. This association is then granted the right to implement and manage the community garden, observing *Main Verte* procedures, which dictate organic and permacultural agriculture practices, valuing urban biodiversity and banning the use of agrochemicals.

3.3 Lausanne (Switzerland)

The public policy for community gardens is relatively old in Lausanne. Locally known as “*plantages*” (Fig. 3), they were made official in 1996, after being included in the Local Urban Plan. The purpose was to increase biodiversity in green areas, as well as citizen participation in the process of revegetation and maintenance of such areas. It was not intended to guarantee food self-sufficiency, but to strengthen social bonds, encourage the (re)appropriation of public spaces and promote urban biodiversity on vacant municipal land intended for permanent use.



Fig. 3. *Plantage de Cour*, one of the community gardens in Lausanne (Switzerland). Photo credit: Gustavo Nagib (September 2021).

The City of Lausanne has taken the lead in this process. In 2018, they also decided to adopt the *permis de végétaliser* (“license to vegetate”), common in other European cities, to encourage the occupation of micro green areas, such as flower beds on tree bases or in planters on the sidewalks. Citizen’s initiatives began to emerge in the 2010s, facilitated by participatory budgeting, which opened up opportunities for the submission of small community projects. Neighbourhood associations have also started asking for permission to create community gardens.

The municipality is in charge of organizing and implementing the community gardens. Citizens interested in owning a plot are waitlisted and, when their time comes, they must pay three Swiss francs per square meter per year, plus a one-time registration fee of 20 Swiss francs. Gardeners do not need to form an association to manage the *plantages*, since the municipality takes on this supervisory role, being each plot granted to a duly registered citizen. Associations or collectives may request a plot to cultivate together, but the plot is officially registered to the name of one person in charge.

4 What community gardens reveal in such different contexts

First comes the realization that *urban agriculture as activism* is not ruled by a quantitative principle, but a qualitative one. Regarding community garden initiatives, the important point is not about the measurement and actual utilization of local production, but the fact that they indicate that there’s potential for transforming the public space, neighbourly relations and the city itself. It goes without saying that the act of cultivating food entails an anticipated future satisfaction of being able to harvest and enjoy it, but it means even more to urban gardeners, who appreciate the fact that they can share their production and enjoy pesticide-free food.

In São Paulo, the discourse of "detachment" is recurrent: gardeners advocate for the "everyone can plant and everyone can harvest" principle of self-management of horticultural space. In Paris, the gardens, established as associations, are politically pre-organized structures, with calendars of festivities and moments for sharing what is grown. In Lausanne, as individual plots predominate, exchanges tend to take place on a daily basis during chance encounters in the gardens.

In terms of biodiversity, most community gardens featured countless species cultivated in a non-uniform manner, based on the intercropping method. Inspired by permaculture and agroecology, this method rarely has two lines with the same crop, breaking free from the classical paradigm of commercial horticulture, where rows of the same crop prevail. In the gardens of São Paulo, Paris, and Lausanne, you could often see different vegetables (greens, legumes, bulbs, and roots) mixed with flowers and wild plants (spontaneous species) aimed at boosting insect breeding and making pollination easier. Also common are bug hotels and/or bee boxes. One detail that distinguishes São Paulo lies in the growth of non-conventional vegetables that are generally unknown or that have gradually ceased to be part of the basic diet.

The mere observation of what happens within the gardening space does not suffice to explain the relations among gardeners. Social integration barriers are much more complex, and involve school education, place of residence and life opportunities, which are limited by family or individual financial conditions. However, my field observations have confirmed that gardens have the potential to promote interactions and exchanges between citizens from different walks of life, as well as ethnic and cultural origins. They bring together immigrants from different nationalities (especially in Paris and Lausanne), encouraging people from different city neighbourhoods to be present in public spaces through the promotion of social insertion projects by neighbourhood associations, and are located in permanently open free-access areas.

The number of people that participate in each garden's activities varies widely, depending on the nature of such activities. Not all participants go to the gardens regularly. Particularly in São Paulo and Paris, where the collectivization of plots is more common, the lack of manpower to do everyday work can be a challenge faced by more dedicated gardeners. In gardens with several members, the majority may support the initiative, but this does not mean that there is a group of people committed to daily maintenance activities [19].

The information that follows doesn't intend to be precise and results from field observations on random occasions. However, it's worth noting for its tendency to be similar in different contexts. The age range in gardener groups also varies, although we have not observed the presence of 12 to 20-year-olds, except during specific activities, festivals, and workshops organized throughout the year. On the other hand, worth noting is the presence of elderly and retired people (and it can be explained by the fact that they have free time to dedicate to horticulture and gardening), women who are 45 and over, as well as young parents (who go to the gardens with their small children). In the three cities, there was a wide variety of professions among the gardeners interviewed by this study, thus it was not possible to establish a relationship between the work area and an affinity with urban gardening.

Some aspects of the interaction between the gardeners should be highlighted: a) the use of information media (especially social media) to communicate and form their discussion and action networks; b) interactions within each group of gardeners vary as per local territorial dynamics, their everyday lives being intimately related to the neighbourhood where the garden is located, but they are all similar in terms of encouraging people to grow food in the city; c) the groups reach out to the municipality, since the gardens are set up in public spaces; d) they all present solutions, implement alternatives, participate and interfere directly and actively in government urban planning, which benefits from the original and spontaneous aspect of such community engagement [20].

According to statements obtained in the field, these are some of the main reasons why people join a community garden: to reconnect with nature; because they enjoy gardening; for leisure and to do something with their free time; the possibility to relief daily urban stress in a calmer, more silent place; the desire to vegetalise the city; the prospect of allowing their children to get in touch with soil and plants in an urban environment; a better understanding of natural cycles; knowledge about where food

comes from; the possibility of socializing with neighbours and making friends; the desire to actively transform urban space, materializing the right to the city; and identifying as an “activist.”

However, I should note that identification as an “activist” is not evident. During conversations in the field, some people would immediately adopt an “activist” attitude, as their dedication towards gardening activities have a clear socioenvironmental purpose, either in terms of relationships with neighbours, transformation of the city’s public spaces, or its environmental content. Direct engagement with municipal green areas makes people more optimistic, and they show pride in their daily dedication as gardeners. But there were those who, at first, wouldn’t describe themselves as activists. However, after a process of self-reflection, many of these people end up agreeing that they may be considered activists, if you take into account their engagement with the public space and the fact that they have an environmental concern that leads them to grow fresh, healthy food and conserve urban biodiversity.

In parallel, there was repeated denial of all things “urban” in the discourse and in the statements of several gardeners, which could be described as an “anti-urban imaginary” or “urban phobia” [21], something that might also refer to the *fugere urbem* present in Arcadian literature in 18th century Europe, at a time of great spatial transformations within the context of the Industrial Revolution. More specifically, it reveals a critique to urban society, which, according to Lefebvre [22], results from industrialization. In its utopian essence, there’s a desire to break free from the industrial city and create spaces where its central role is criticized, allowing for a more comprehensive debate about the very theory regarding the boundaries between the rural-urban and the countryside-city duality. The concept of right to the city aims at the materialization of common spaces [9] [10], which emerge as response to a desire for socio-environmental justice, solidarity and respect both for nature and fellow citizens.

5 Conclusion

Community gardens in public spaces imply sharing and unselfishness with regard to the crops. In a collective effort that takes place in a public space, the experience disrupts the logic of private property and exploitation of other people’s labour, eliminating the need to protect the results of such labour [23].

In São Paulo’s, Paris’, and Lausanne’s community gardens, dedication is spontaneous, acknowledged by the community and guided by nature’s cycles [24]. Breaking away from the “do your share” discourse as a mechanism for evading collective responsibility or getting rid of a purported guilty conscience, the existence of a community garden is not focused merely on individual action, since the intention is to strengthen the bond between people and let go of competitiveness (complementing, not competing). The concern with quantity is replaced by quality; individualism, by comradeship; dependence, by autonomy.

The materiality of these community gardens evidences the right to the city as a complaint about everyday life and as a demand for an alternative urban life [17] [18]. These initiatives are a sort of “fixed protest” and their purpose is to be perennial in time and

space. They originate in the neighbourhood, created by common people, citizens who want to assure their political and cultural relevance in public spaces and find meaning in an existence more connected with nature [25].

Under such circumstances, the right to the city is also a right to new social propositions that aim at finding ways out of a crisis of ideas for new democratic production and urban space use perspectives, in which urban agriculture and gardening are inserted. It is, thus, activist.

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