Practicing Commons in Community Gardens: Urban Gardening as a Corrective for Homo Economicus

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“In these times of ever more blatant marketing of public space, the aspiration to plant potatoes precisely there – and without restricting entry – is nothing less than revolutionary,” writes Sabine Rohl in her book review of Urban Gardening.1 Indeed, we can observe the return of gardens to the city everywhere and see it as an expression of a changing relationship between the public and the private. And it is not only this dominant differentiation in modern society that is increasingly becoming blurred; the differences between nature and society as well as that between city and countryside are fading as well, at least from the perspective of urban community gardeners.

In the 1960s, as the economy boomed, people in West Germany had given up their urban vegetable gardens, not least for reasons of social status; many wished to demonstrate, for example, that they could purchase food and no longer had to grow and preserve it themselves. Today, in contrast, the “Generation Garden” has planted its feet firmly in vegetable patches in the midst of hip urban neighborhoods, the “young farmers of Berlin-Kreuzberg” are creating a furor, the German Federal Cultural Foundation stages the festival “Über Lebenskunst” (a pun meaning both “On the art of living” and – spelled Überlebenskunst – “The art of survival”) and people need not be ashamed of showing their fingernails, black from gardening, in public. What we observe here is a shifting in the symbolism and status of post-materialistic values and lifestyles. Do-it-yourself and grow-it-yourself also means finding one’s own expression in the products of one’s labor. It means setting oneself apart from a life of consuming objects of industrial production. Seeking individual expression is also a quest for new forms and places of community. If the heated general stores and craftsmen’s workshops were the places where Germany’s social life unfolded in the postwar years, today’s urban community gardens and open workshops seem to be developing into hothouses of social solidarity for a post-fossil-fuel urban society.

In recent years, people of the most varied milieus have been joining forces and planting organic gardens in major European cities. They keep bees, reproduce seeds, make natural cosmetics, use plants to dye fabrics, organize open-air meals, and take over and manage public parks. With hands-on neighborhood support, urban gardening activists are planting flowers as they like at the bases of trees and transforming derelict land and garbage-strewn parking decks into places where people can meet and engage in common activities. The new gardening movement is young, colorful and socially heterogeneous. In Berlin, “indigenous” city dwellers work side-by-side with long-time Turkish residents to grow vegetables in neighborhood gardens and community gardens, pick-your-own gardens and farmers’ gardens are forming networks with one another. The inter-cultural gardening movement is continuing to expand in striking ways, as seen on the online platform Mundraub.org, which uses Web 2.0 technology to tag the locations of fruit trees whose apples and other fruits can be picked for free (Müller 2011). Such novel blending of digital and analog worlds is creating new intermediate worlds that combine open source practices with subsistence-oriented practices of everyday life.

1 Berliner Zeitung, April 5, 2011.
Urban Gardens as Knowledge Commons

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 amount of knowledge in productive ways. Since there are usually no agricultural professionals among the gardeners, everyone depends on whatever knowledge is available – and everyone is open to learning. They follow the maxim that everybody benefits from sharing knowledge; after all, they can learn from each other, relearn skills they had lost and contribute to bringing about something new.

Communal gardening confronts the limited means of urban farmers – whether in soil, materials, tools or access to knowledge – and transforms them into an economic system of plenty through collective ingenuity, giving and reciprocity. In urban gardens, both opportunities and the necessity for exchange arise time and again. A vibrant atmosphere emerges where the most varied talents meet. In workshops, for example, people can learn to build their own freight bicycles, window farming or greening roofs; they can learn to grow plants on balconies and the walls of buildings, and use plastic water bottles for constant watering of topsoil. There is always a need for ingenuity and productivity, which often come about only when knowledge is passed along, which in turn releases additional knowledge.

Thus, the creative process in a garden never reaches an end. The garden itself is a workshop where things are reinterpreted creatively and placed in new relationships. One thing leads to another. It is not only the inspiring presence of the various plants that provide for a wealth of ideas, but also the ongoing opportunity to engage oneself and be motivated by the objects lying around (Müller 2011, p. 31ff).

This is how a real community that uses a garden emerges over time. One of the most important ingredients for success is that the place is not pre-defined or overly restricted by rules. Instead, the atmosphere of untidiness and openness makes it apparent that cooperation and creative ideas are desired and necessary.

A New Policy for (Public) Space

When the neighborhood people of Berlin-Neukölln tend their gardens on the site of the former Berlin-Tempelhof airport in plant containers they crafted themselves, bringing together people of many different backgrounds and generations and supported by the Allmende-Kontor, a common gardening organization, this is first of all an unusual use of public space. The garden consists of raised beds in the most varied styles on 5,000 square meters. Plants grow in discarded bed frames, baby buggies, old zinc tubs and wooden containers assembled by the gardeners themselves. But more than an unusual public space, the Allmende-Kontor gardens underscore an important political dimension of urban gardening. The commons-oriented practices enable a different perspective on the city. They both require communities and at the same time create communities. People come together here, but not under the banner of major events, advertising or the obligation to consume. Instead, their self-organized, decentralized practices in the public realm implicitly express a shared aspiration of a green city for all. Yet no grand new societal utopia -- “the society of the future” -- is being promoted. Instead, simple social interactions slowly transform a

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2 Window farming is vertical gardening on a windowsill. Plants are grown in hanging plastic bottles, which also provide greenery for the windows.
concrete space in the here and now, building an alternative to the dominant order based on market fundamentalism (Werner 2011). In other words, the policy preference for the small-scale as a rediscovery of one’s immediate environment is by no means based on a narrowed perspective. On the contrary: the focus is precisely on the overuse, colonization and destruction of the global commons, and for this reason, the local commons is managed as a place where one can raise awareness about a new concept of publicness while simultaneously demonstrating that there are indeed alternatives – common usage in place of private property; local quality of life instead of remote-controlled consumption, as it were; and cooperation rather than individual isolation.

Managing the “Internal Commons"

The new focus on the commons in urban community gardens is not only a political defense of public space for its use toward the common good. At the same time, it is also a reclaiming of people’s internal consciousness and a rejection of the ascriptions of *homo economicus*, an image of humanity that reduces us to competition-oriented individuals whose attention is focused solely on their own advantage. This overly simplistic model has been under constructive attack for some time, even in the field of economics. In particular, the social neurosciences have confirmed that people’s willingness to cooperate and need for connectedness are central elements of human nature. For scholars of the humanities, this is surely no new insight, yet it is still good to know that there is substantial scientific evidence showing that the existence of a boundary between mind and body, which is often used to justify hegemonic domination, is artificial, and that the interrelationships between body and mind are highly complex. For example, we know today that social or psychological experiences leave physical traces – even in our genes, as shown by epigenetics. Joachim Bauer considers this insight to be the decisive breakthrough regarding our concepts of humankind (Bauer 2008).

This has two consequences for the subject at hand: for one thing, a practice of the commons such as community gardening enables the gardeners to discover their bodies, the experience of having two hands and being able to create things with them. Such sensory experiences are directly connected to one’s grasp of the world. For another, the garden is the ideal place to learn how to cooperate. When designing a system to capture rainwater for the beds, for example, the experience reveals an aspect of being human – namely connectedness – that is just as important as the experience of autonomy (Hüther 2011, p. 46).

In this sense, commons are a practice of life that enable even the highly individualized subjects of the 21st century to turn their attention to one another, and not least to slow down their lives. After all, time, too, is a resource to be conceptualized in the community. Experiencing time means being able to pursue an activity as one sees fit, enjoying a moment or spending it with others. By accelerating time to an extreme degree, digital capitalism has subjected virtually everyone to a regime of efficiency, with the result that people’s sense of time is determined by scarcity and by the stress people subjectively feel to “fill” time with as much utility as possible. Time is “saved,” leisure hours are regarded with suspicion, and the boundaries between work and free time are increasingly blurred.

The garden is an antidote that can be used as a refuge by the “exhausted self” (Ehrenberg). The garden slows things down and enables experiences with temporal cycles from a different epoch of human history, agrarian society. Small-scale agriculture, which is being rediscovered in many urban gardens, is cyclical in nature. Every year, the cycle begins anew with the preparation of the soil and with sowing.
People who farm are exposed to nature, the climatic conditions, the seasons and the cycles of day and night. For city dwellers whose virtual lives have taught them that everything is always possible at the same time, and above all, that everything can be managed at any time, these dimensions of time are highly fascinating. Gardening enables the insight that we are integrated in life cycles ourselves and that it can have a calming effect to simply “give oneself up” to the situation at hand. In other words, managing the commons creates not only valuable experiences, but also social relationships with far-reaching effects. And, one might add, they are valuable for achieving the transformation of an industrial society based on oil and resource exploitation, into a society guided by premises of democratic participation that no longer “lives” on externalizing costs but, to the extent possible, avoids creating them in the first place. Processes of reciprocity and an “economy of symbolic goods” (Bourdieu) are just as important for highly differentiated modern societies as for premodern ones (Adloff/Mau 2005). Old and new practices of the commons offer inspiring options for action.

Urban Agriculture: The New Trends
Agropolis is the title of the planning concept of a group of Munich architects who won the Open Scale competition with a “metropolitan food strategy” in 2009. The concept for an “urban neighborhood of harvesting” places growing one’s own food, the valuation of regional resources and sustainable management of land at the center of urban planning. Harvests are to become a visible part of everyday urban life. If the city implements the model, fruit from the commons and community institutions that exchange, store and process the harvest could create the basis for a productive collaboration on the part of the 20,000 inhabitants of the new neighborhood.

The Citizens’ Garden Laskerwiese is a public park managed by the citizens themselves. A group of 35 local residents transformed the previously garbage-strewn, derelict land in Berlin, into a park. They concluded a contract with the district authorities, agreeing that the citizens’ association is responsible for services such as tending the trees and the lawns on the site. In return, it can use parcels of land and beds for growing vegetables free of charge. Such new models that help cash-strapped municipalities shoulder their financial burden and expand the opportunities for people to shape public spaces require a lot of time and effort for communication on both sides.

The Allmende-Kontor (roughly: Commons Office) is an initiative of the Berlin urban gardening movement that has been tending community gardens on the site of the former airport Berlin-Tempelhof together with local residents since 2011. Raised beds of the most varied styles are being created on 5,000 square meters. The Allmende-Kontor considers itself as a garden for all – and at the same time as a place for storing knowledge, for learning and for consulting and networking Berlin community gardens. The establishment of a pool of gardening tools and a seed bank available for unrestricted use are being planned as well.

References
Homo economicus, or "economic man," is the characterization of man in some economic theories as a rational person who pursues wealth for his own self-interest. The economic man is described as one who avoids unnecessary work by using rational judgment. The assumption that all humans behave in this manner has been a fundamental premise for many economic theories. The history of the term dates back to the 19th century when John Stuart Mill first proposed the definition of homo economicus. He defined the economic actor as one "who inevitably does that by which he may obtain the greatest happiness." Urban gardens can promote economic development and tourism. The gardens will attract businesses and residents and are catalysts for business development and promotion of city life. In studies of urban agriculture, it was determined that they improve the desirability of residential and commercial areas and increased value of the property. Urban agriculture can also create local employment and income. Increased security: Crime reduction has been observed in communities that have urban gardens. People who have spent their time in urban gardens are reluctant to commit the crime. Urban gardens also provide a safe environment for the residents, especially children. Homo economicus (entry prepared for the Handbook of Economics & Ethics, Edited by Peil, Jan and Irene Van Staveren, Edward Elgar Publishing, May 2009)