

Green Productive Spaces

The Role of Urban Farming in Urban Regeneration

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1 Productive Tasks and Urban Agriculture in Low Income Shelter Areas Development

The development of shelter areas for low income social sectors is focused in reducing costs, so they can be economically accessible to the poor. The high urban growth rates have overflowed long time ago the capacity of town and city governments in developing countries to provide housing for all the urban dwellers (Tannerfeld & Ljung, 2006). This has caused, in several cases, that large housing urban projects have been carried out in a hurry, and with the single target of providing as many housing units as possible¹, regardless of other basic needs traditionally attached to the Neighbourhood concept, instead of trying a holistic approach trying to give infrastructure to the different dimensions of a neighbourhood. The social sphere has been ignored completely, especially in low income areas, where it is most important, due to this income group being in big

¹ “For the past 30 years, over 6.5 million apartments have been built in Korea, which proves that when the urban development occurs in Korea, it is concentrated on building new houses and on production efficiency. Especially, mass produced apartment housing was built very fast.” Lee, Lim & Kim, 2009.

Although this is a very particular case analysis, referring to Korea, I believe there are some parallelisms in the approach that urban development has had in all Asia, and probably worldwide, so I still consider it a valid reference for my case in the Philippines, as we could see that some of the projects visited during the studio trip in Manila had a similar approach though, luckily, not all responded to this description.

danger of social exclusion (Johnny Åstrand, 2010). Poverty, poor waste management programs, difficult access or not access at all to what are considered basic needs (health care, sanitation, education, food and clean water), disconnection from mainstream society (UN-Habitat Agenda, 1996) and a lack of means to reconnect with it make the poor find themselves engaged in an atmosphere which pulls them down, as they don't have control over the factors that shape their lives. Cynism, rejection to take responsibility and desperation are more likely to grow among the citizens in these conditions, which leads to many other problems, like crime and violence rates rise and unsafe cities.

The main ideological premises of this paper is that taking in count the social needs of the inhabitants and providing them a way to expand themselves through community oriented productive tasks can stop and invert this process, giving the poorer of the poor the opportunity to recover their dignity and reconnect with society and not find themselves excluded. Productive tasks could give training as well, if oriented as educational activities, and be used, in the long run, by the inhabitants as a livelihood activity. If this kind of tasks were implemented as part of the community life, this healthy environment that productive tasks generate would be extended to the public space, which is the space that belongs to the community. It would also encourage the community to face the problems and statements in their neighbourhood, and empower them to deal with them.

I have decided to focus my research in a single productive task and study its impact in urban regeneration processes in low income areas. That will be Urban Agriculture.

Urban Agriculture is an old practice that has grown bigger in connection with fast urbanization and rural exodus processes as a mean to secure the food consumption in urban areas and/or to complement the household's income (Madaleno, 2000 and references therein). Indeed, Jamal already stated, in 1985, that urban farming activities are a critical factor in stabilizing household food security (Jamal, 1985 through Maxwell, 1995). During the sixties, this practice started calling the attention of planners and scientists, that started studying the phenomenon and its implications, and "during the 1980s international development cooperation institutions promoted community and home garden practices in developing countries all over the world" (Madaleno, 2000).

Studies reveal that Urban Agriculture is a practice that gives opportunities to underemployed and unemployed workers, retired workers and housewives, as well as improving health conditions, having nutritional benefits², beautifies the city and prevents soil erosion and even landslides. It is, as well, a mobile activity, that can easily adapt to the evolution of the city. Also, if connected to waste management, there are many possibilities to reuse and recycle garbage into planting pots and compost production and water waste can be used for irrigation (Madaleno, 2000; Tannerfeldt & Ljung, 2006).

Urban agriculture, as part of urban farming exploits the commons more than rural agriculture (Smit 2008), because “what sets an urban farm apart from a garden is that farm food production is at some kind of community scale- beyond the family to the neighbourhood” (Robinson through Johnson, 2005).

Despite all the benefits, urban farming activities have remained in the illegal and informal sector. Luckily, the trend started in the 1980s has continued during the 1990s and 2000s, and more and more local urban agriculture and farming projects are being implemented in developing countries.

2 Factors that have made Urban Farming and Agriculture the way it is

As stated before, production based public spaces are not a major concern in the urban shelter design process, as the projects are focused on one single objective which is providing housing, so the spaces for this kind of community activities are under designed, if designed at all. The oblivion of the social ambit is the big failure of one-sided neighbourhood design.

In the specific case of Urban Agriculture and Farming, is a banned activity in many countries (Tannerfeldt & Ljung, 2006), as it is considered a “rural life artefact” that does not belong in cities, “a public health nuisance” and “perceived as of marginal importance to urban economy” so in most part of the cases it is an activity that relies on informal means (Maxwell, 1995 and references therein).

² There is a “statistically significant association between farming in the city and improved children nutritional status”. (Maxwell, 1995)

Rapid Urbanization and Rural Exodus have been crucial factors in shaping Urban Farming and Agriculture the way they are. The migrant urban dwellers have continued their rural traditions of growing their own food and breeding their own livestock, and for it, they have taken advantage of all the free spaces they have found, including urban open spaces, inner courtyards, rooftops, small strips, vast plots in the edges of the city, in junctions and in river banks, and even vertical plantations (Maxwell, 1995; Madaleno, 2000).

The character of the cultivation is that of a partial coverage of fruits and vegetables demand, and there's not expectances of it satisfying the cereals and tubers supply (Madaleno, 2000).

Also, studies state that the lower the household income, the less successful result the attempts to grow food on a regular basis (Madaleno, 2000). This is why carrying it out at a community level would be more effective, as training could be afforded, and production would be closer to constant. A good example of this implementation could be the Holy Spirit Barangay's community cultivating lands, in Quezon City, visited during the field trip.

Main constraints to Urban Farming activities are the lack of land, it's uses and it's capacity to be arable and fertile. But the most important, the property of the land. The insecurity of tenure present on informal settlements in the cities applies as well to the informally cultivated land (Maxwell, 1995; Madaleno, 2000; Tannerfeldt & Ljung 2006).

Urban Farming and Agriculture implementation presents big challenges, but it has great benefits too, that should encourage the professionals in different fields to consider it as a multidimensional solution for urban regeneration processes.

3 The Role of Architects in Introducing Urban Farming and Agriculture in Urban Regeneration projects.

In a way, the informal sector has already come up with the better and most versatile solutions it could, so I think it is the planners and architects role to provide the communities with the adequate spatial infrastructure to develop this kind of activities, trying to get inspiration from the current cultivation spaces and

techniques already used by urban dwellers, and redesign them through a formalization and quality assuring process.

Architects should not forget how important is the participation of the community in this kind of project, in which their common space might be transformed, because if the community do not accept the design, then maintenance would become a burden they wouldn't want to put up with.

But the most important task is abandoning one-sided design approaches. When facing urban regeneration processes the architect, as well as all the other agents taking part in the process, must understand that a deteriorated neighbourhood doesn't also mean inadequate and outdated housing. There are many physical, economic and social issues going on in very low income neighbourhoods and informal settlements, and it's not one of them, but all of them together that cause the exclusion danger in which these branches of urban society live. Not only the built space must be taken in consideration, but also the free space in between buildings, and treat it in these projects the way it is treated in any other, as Public Space, and give it uses that can help the community grow in dignity and identity, help build livelihoods and neighbourhood self-management, that is it, productive and recreational uses. All of them can be tools for empowerment helping the community to take control over their own reality, which is what they lack now, and fight exclusion (Lee, Lim, Kim, 2009).

In the case of Urban Farming and Agriculture it is about creating a community-produced food security foundation, but other kind of activities based on production can be taken in count, like community based waste management programs, artisan crafting, workshops for building playground devices and urban furniture, etc.

It is also important to not ignore the capability this single activities have when combined. Solid waste management programs can provide urban farmers with compost and materials for planting pots, and to crafters with prime matter to create from, as we saw that happened in Smokey Mountain and the Holy Spirit Barangay, for example. Water waste management programs can help recycle water while providing irrigation to plantations, and so on. It is not about creating the possibilities to develop one activity for the people to recreate themselves; it is

about giving the infrastructure for building a steady and connected community life.

4 Design of Sustainable Shelter and Neighbourhoods

Next, as a conclusion, I propose a series of tools and design criteria's that come directly from the facts and ideas already exposed in this article and are intended to give more specific guides to architects and planners for transforming these ideas into tangible spaces.

Sustaining (or even improving) the life quality, as well as the culture and future changes, of the people in a neighbourhood during a urban regeneration process is a way of working towards minimizing the effects of social exclusion (Lee, Lim, Kim, 2009). And it is clear that these standards cannot drop down through what is understood as an improval process, because that would mean a failure of the project. This requires an integral intervention with what is called a Holistic approach, which attacks the urban regeneration process through different perspectives.

To put a good example, in the "Ballymun Regeneration Project" in Ireland, five different dimensions were considered for improval: physical, social, economical, cultural and environmental. There were as well, different aims targeting the different dimensions like providing housing with a minimum quality standard, creating job opportunities, education and professional training programs improval and promotion, building up the neighbourhood identity through providing it with national and community infrastructures and creating a real town center, a hot spot. Then, more than two hundred projects were selected to be carried away and cover the aims; an analysis during the project's process reveals that the projects Major Achievements were associated to more than one of the five Dimensions at the same time (Lee, Lim, Kim, 2009). This analysis and its results highlight the holistic character of the management, in which different projects help to the regeneration process in more than one dimension, creating a regeneration process in which every intervention chains together the whole result, making it more solid.

Productive activities, if analysed through their impact in these same five dimensions proposed in Ballymun's project, happen to influence more than one at a time too. Taking the case of urban agriculture, it is proposed in the first place as

an Economic activity, either through selling the products or saving the households part of their food expenses. But its been already stated in this paper how its existence in a low income household was related to children presenting a better nutritional status, so it also has an influence in the Social dimension. If practiced at a community level, in the public space, and in a legal and controlled way, it contributes to the greening of the city, both at a Physical level and an Environmental level.

Another important criterion when designing is the essential need of mixed uses in the urban mesh. If we really want to give access to farming land to the urban poor, zoning policies must be changed (Maxwell, 1995), because that kind of policies set farming land far away from the people who exploit it. The urban poor need this uses in the neighbourhood so they can feel close to the activity they are developing and can see straight away realised the consequences and material products of their effort.

A very positive consequence of a de-zonification process would be that even the Center, the Public Space, would be mixed with the rest of uses too in the urban grid. “Central”, in this papers context should be considered as a quality of the urban space, rather than a specific location³. If the center is considered in such way, it would be desirable to have this quality arrive to as many points in the urban layout as possible. If the center is concentrated in just one point of the layout, it’s influence will as well be focused on that point, but if the center spreads out, mixing with the rest of the uses, infiltrating in the urban grid, more places will be “affected” by this urban quality that, in low income areas, can result regenerative. With this kind of spread out public space, the implementation of urban farming is perfect, giving the neighbours in the community challenges of a size they can handle, conforming a net of small urban plantations serving the community all along the neighbourhood, giving it an urban scale unity.

³ [...] in which very different activities, public and semiprivate, are going on at the same time, where exchange between goods and money takes place, but also where meetings between different people occur, for the good in the most part of cases. This quality of “central” gives a space different uses and activities at different points of the day, and gives it, in consequence, a feel of community watched space.

Mixed uses, spread out public space, and urban agriculture and farming, all of them are already part of some informal settlements and low income areas⁴, in which the neighbours have grown them naturally, trying to complement and increase the households income through the informal sector in many cases. Considering this, my main recommendation is to insist in working with the community to formalise their activities, lifestyle and livelihood means in a way that fits them, and not trying to make them fit into a new design that does not take in count the community's background. Sometimes can happen that professionals refuse to learn from reality, and stick to their general theories, which then give, as an outcome, general design that does not target specific problems. The architect should, in all cases, have the last word about the direction a project must take, but must never ignore the lessons to be learnt from a specific area when trying to upgrade it.

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⁴ Many projects and areas during the studio trip in Manila showed this spaces and activities; in some they were built in an infrastructure, in others, like the project site in Damayang Lagi Barangay, they had grown spontaneously with the grid, and in others they were there, despite the lack of infrastructure, like in the Smokey Mountain area.

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