

# Urban farming as a community building tool

How can different forms of urban farming and gardening build community and add a sense of belonging?



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## 1 Introduction

During my field trip to Metro Manila in Philippines, I experienced a completely new reality from what I am used to and took for granted. Most of the areas we visited is very dense, littered, polluted, impoverished, unorganized and with few public green areas in comparison to, for instance, the Million Program in Sweden that I grew up in that are very green and relatively clean. But even in the most impoverished and informal housing areas in Metro Manila, one could see traces of humans growing plants, both edible and for decoration. Usually, in-between unprogrammed spaces, corners, walkways were crowded with plants, both decorative and edible. The human urge to cultivate, be closer to nature and control a piece of land were very apparent. Maybe it was for solely practical reasons – to have something to eat, or maybe it was also for stress relief and the joy of it.

The phenomenon of urban gardening fascinates me and have in many ways proven to be a common tool for urban planners, organizations, municipalities and tenant's own initiative to add a sense of place, recreation and beauty in connection to their homes. In this paper, I would like to *discuss how it relates to the problems of urbanity.*

I believe that the urge for implementing gardening and farming in urban areas reflects on various neglected needs of humans. Also, I also think that urban gardening & farming can alleviate these and therefore it is an interesting phenomenon. The purpose of this paper is



*Picture 1: A vertical micro garden in a social housing neighbourhood in Pasay City.*

to examine different forms of urban gardening/farming and discuss how it builds community and adds a sense of belonging and what the strength of these are.

## 2 Literature Review

### Background literature

**Urbanization and Development World Cities Report 2016** by UN-Habitat is a report that comprehensively describes the current urban situation and its challenges with poverty, unsustainability, inequality and lack of access to resources and affordable quality housing for the urban poor. It describes trends of governing, management, urban planning and urban growth the last decade and what the consequences are. But to each problem, they describe solid solutions on policymaking and planning priorities. (UN-Habitat, 2016)

**Garden Cities of To-morrow** written by Ebenezer Howard is a publication that starts the Garden City movement which is a revolutionary vision and ideals for urban planning. Modern-time urban gardening and many city principles stems from the ideas of Howard. Some of these, is that he wanted to decrease the alienation between human and nature and reduce the unorganized dirtiness of urbanity by surrounding and integrating towns with greenery. He wrote that the towns should be designed to be self-sustainable ecologically, which means that it should be able to produce its own food and handle its own waste. This idea goes hand-in-hand with today's efforts to establish urban gardening. (Reference) Paradoxically though, his vision advocated for the idea that the city should be much less dense than they are today, but this aspect of his ideal are put aside due to there being an unprecedented global population growth and urbanization since his book was written, 1902. But other aspects of the Garden city ideal still echoes in modern city planning and alleviates its' inhabitants of urban life's worst stresses. (Howard, 1902)



Picture 2. Welwyn Garden City, that was completely designed after Howards principles and the Garden City movement.

**The Urban Garden City** written by Sandrine Glatron and Laurence Granchamp is a research-based publication that defines and discusses how urban agriculture

and gardens shaped cities historically. The authors also describe, discuss and analyzes a few case studies that lead to some relevant conclusions. In the analysis and conclusion of the chapter “Typology of the Shared Gardens: Case of Strasbourg” they highlight that it’s not enough to just add planting boxes and it will be a successful urban farming. It is also about how it’s spatially organized, the governing, defined boundaries of ownership, coordination and user participation/involvement. A challenge of low-income areas is that many inhabitants come from a wide variety of cultural backgrounds and habits, which means social cohesion needs to be considered when mixing in a shared urban farming space. Defined boundaries of ownership and a gardener’s organization would be important to favor the social cohesion and management. (Glatron & Granchamp, 2018)

### **Topic-specific literature**

**On guerilla gardening** by Richard Reynolds is a book that is partly a description of a movement but also a handbook for a phenomenon with the same name as the title of the book. It’s a global movement with its’ networks online that transforms “leftover spaces” in the city with unclear ownership or non-permitted ground into beautifying pocket gardens or food farming place. The book explains that there’s many motivations to why they are doing it, some are for instance being rebellious and question ownership of land, some just do it out of necessity to get food and some do it because it will quickly provide a recreational area for the inhabitants. By definition, guerilla gardening is never permitted to begin with, but it can be a part of the process as an individual to convince the landowner to be legitimized or prove a point about the need for more green and beautiful public places. (Reynolds, 2008)

**Växa & gro – stadsodling som demokratiworkshop** by Julia Linder and Sara Nelson translates to **Grow and germinate – urban farming as a democracy workshop**. This is a manual from an organization that works with establishing community gardens and urban farming and in the book, they share their knowledge. They divide the book into 6 chapters which I think reflects on what are the essential ingredients to make an urban farming successful; what it does for sustainability, how it increases democracy, advice on project organizing and

managing, practical knowledge of agriculture, play & creativity and to eat & taste the crops. (Linder & Nelson , 2015)

**Kolonilotten – Världens trädgård** by Karine Mannerfelt translates to **Allotment – Garden of the world**. In Sweden, it is common with **allotments** which is a small patch of land that people can rent and garden/farm on, and usually it's a part of a bigger grid of fifty to hundred allotments. The book is a compilation of interviews and photos of various allotment owners from immigrant backgrounds, highlighting that they bring parts of their own home culture to the allotment as a way to placemake, feel a sense of belonging. (Mannerfelt, 2009)

### 3 Discussion

#### **Challenges linked to urbanity**

As described in “Urbanization and Development World Cities Report” (UN-Habitat, 2016) urbanization is something that occurs in most countries and at an uncontrolled, rapid pace. Urbanity serves many possibilities, economic opportunities, livelihood, cultural innovation and economic innovation. It brings together heterogeneous groups of people, which both accommodate creativity and innovation both also social conflict and inequalities. Poverty, exclusion, loneliness, inequalities, and the gap between rich and poor are magnified in developing countries and contains the mentioned challenges but also many opportunities.

#### **Change in community dynamics**

Besides the economic and ecological aspects of the inequalities in urbanity, I will focus more on discussing the social aspect of urbanity. Rural areas and villages are characterized by strong social bonds, social control but also supporting each other and being open towards everyone who is included in the group. Also, they are usually quite homogenous because of the social control and similarity in ethnicity, language, and culture. When people move to a city, the city is too big to have a community that includes all inhabitants, so less formal medium-sized communities are formed. The problem shows up when there is no understanding or medium to understand other communities' cultures and ways of reasoning, which creates conflicts and suspicion between different groups. Something we learned from our study trip to Metro Manila, was that a bond of coming from the

same village or place was a strong basis for creating a community within the urban poor and that suspicion naturally arises towards people who you're unfamiliar with. This is a universal human trait but aggravated by feelings of insecurity and inadequate living conditions and lack of common playing ground. Another consequence of these displaced rural communities is that the former condition of everyone living in a village automatically being included in the community is no longer applicable. Not everyone who lives in one place is included in the social networks. The chance of loneliness, lack of social safety net, and lack of community is a big challenge in many urban cities.

### **Drastic move from rural control of spatiality**

I believe that the quick displacement from their former rural home leads to a lot of problems. For instance, losing their ways of controlling their surroundings socially and spatially is one drastic change. What I mean with losing control of surrounding spatially is that there's restricted space for extending a house, taking a piece of land for doing whatever you want to it or farm on it and you won't have as much influence on how things will be and look like. On rural land, there is endless access to free space and natural green elements that can act mentally soothing on humans. In a city, free space and greenery are usually lacking, especially in slum areas. I think that many urban dwellers miss the opportunity to be able to control their surroundings and being surrounded by soothing nature.

### **Stress of urban life**

Other aspects of the problems of being an urban dweller are that for many, because of lack of community and control of space, one does not feel a sense of belonging and the need to care for their place. Also, if you live in a slum or social housing that is already poorly managed and deteriorating the disconnection increases. Urban life is stimuli wise stressful both mentally and health-wise. It can be loud, insecure and pollution harms the human body and mind. For the urban poor there is no way to combat this due to having low access to recreation and greenery. I believe that urban farming is one way to alleviate the mentioned problems such a lack of control, community, recreation, greenery, and money. Therefore, in my design project related to this theory course, we are exploring urban farming and in the next segment, I will discuss the different forms of identified urban farming.

### **A peaceful war of land use and uneven distribution**

Reading “Guerilla Gardening” (Reynolds, 2008) it states that the definition of a guerilla gardener must be that the gardening/farming needs to happen on illicit ground. The reasons are many, but most importantly, people who do this do it partly for pleasure and partly as activists. Guerilla gardeners who view themselves as a part of the movement are activists. Activists that garden as a way to oppose the unfair distribution of land and resources, neglect and deterioration of spaces,



*Picture 3. A miniature garden grown in a pothole by “The Pothole Gardener”, a gardener who is a part of the Guerrilla movement.*

lack of recreation, and community spaces. They oppose the lack of spaces, community spaces, and recreation that does not cost to be able to enjoy. They clearly show frustration over these problems and defiance to being controlled. The activists show many examples of where they have convinced a municipality or landowner what a good idea it would be to transform an unloved place to a loved place for community gatherings, recreation, and beautification. After one successful project in the book that leads into a permanent community garden, the guerilla gardener asked the landowner if they would have agreed about transforming an unused lot into a community garden if they would have just asked beforehand, and they said no. Without the rebellious act of guerilla gardening, the change would not have happened.

What I find interesting about the Guerrilla gardening movement, is that it is a direct answer to all the problems of urban life. They are opposing problems closely related to urbanity and its control and its legal boundaries regarding land use. Guerilla gardening as a practice happens everywhere in rapidly growing developing cities by the urban poor, but with no political agenda. I believe that no matter the agenda, today’s governing and distribution of land and resources do not reflect on the need of the people and the greater good. Rather, it is very much skewed to be profitable for the affluent than it is for the common people.

### **Guerrilla Gardeners transform neglected space into beloved place**

Most importantly, the **strongest** reason to why people were guerilla gardening and “beautifying spaces” was that they thought it was too bad to be surrounded by unloved, uncared, neglected spaces. A neglected space is not fertile soil for the growth of a community. A cared-for place is, and encourages bonding and identifying with a space, thus making it into a place. A place is a space that contains culture, identity, humanity, and community. A neglected space lacks these values. What guerilla gardeners are doing, are transforming them into places, first temporarily and sometimes permanently.

### **A worldwide virtual urban farming community**

To illicitly garden and grow eatable plants are a widespread and common activity, but most are not part of the Guerilla gardening movement. It is not a big movement, but remarkably interesting because it is a modern phenomenon that is enabled by the age of the internet and anonymous communication platforms. Ideas and projects can be discussed cross-nationally and there is nothing that brings together people like having a common goal and enemy. Guerilla gardening is a virtual community, and a way to get social bonds, exchange knowledge, and get new friends. I believe that “building community” is not only about the physical world and physical community space, but in modern times the virtual world is integrated with the physical world. Virtual contacts lead to real-world friendship and actions which sometimes results in physical community gardens, a flowerbed, or some crops.

### **Diverse individuals within allotment community**

In the book “Allotments – Gardens of the world” (Mannerfelt, 2009), you will meet many human destinies where people who immigrated from every corner of the world are telling their story about why they have an allotment, and describe what they are doing there. The common reasons are that they view it as an oasis from the urban stresses, recreation, a source for exotic crops that are not commercially sold in Sweden and a way to be a part of a community. There are many stories about people coming from farmers' backgrounds, wanting to do something real, peaceful, slow-paced that brings them back to their home country.

### Cultural identity within allotments

The interviewer has documented the interrelation actions between people from different ethnic and national backgrounds. One story is a Filipino woman, Delia, who learns how to cook with more spices from her Thai and Ethiopian allotment neighbors. Another one is about Said, who is an Assyrian Christian refugee who is retired due to disability, who spends his whole summer growing



Picture 4. Delia with her daughter, eating in their allotment.

vegetables and friendships with other people in the allotment, giving him meaning to life. The allotment owners share knowledge of how to grow crops, have barbecues, share tools, crops, and plants. They unavoidably create an active, friendly, and unusually social community in an otherwise lonely and cold country. Bonding through something as intimate, personal, culturally integrated but also universally well-liked as food is a good arena for getting to know people from other cultures. If a neglected street is a non-place, void of identity and culture, allotment are the straight opposite, a humane place.

Most of the interviewed people have added a very personal touch to their allotments. One person has designed their garden elements after Persian symbols because of their Persian background. Some experiment and grow vegetables with seeds they extracted themselves from the best vegetables, and many grow crops from seeds sent from their home countries with techniques learned from their parents. The biggest value in this practice is that even in a country with a strong cultural and homogenous norm, one can keep their own cultural identity and create their own piece of land within the country in an allotment. Many immigrants seem to view their allotment as their free zone through where they can find meaning, feel a sense of belonging and connection to their new culture and the people within. Everyone can embrace their own individualities and friendships can flourish within the community even though everyone comes from quite different backgrounds.



Picture 5. Nazrul and Lillemor speaking over the fence. Lillemor helps Nazrul to tell off partying teenagers who are too loud because they do not always respect people with immigrant background. (Mannerfelt, 2009)



### **Personal territoriality and allotment policies**

The precondition to allow an allotment community to succeed are clear rules, norms, and boundaries that everyone follows. Also, enforcement is needed if rules are not followed. I want to elaborate on how the policing, rules, clear spatial boundaries are pre-requisites to how open and friendly people are to others who are not like themselves. I think allotments are successful in bringing together differences because every person is in control of their own land and there are no conflicts in what to do with it. Every person who rents or buys an allotment knows what rules there are and needs to abide by these. One can enjoy the company of others without having your own intentions and habits intruded on. Also, I think that deciding that an allotment area should be 50-100 allotments and plot sizes of around 100 square meters encourages a good community, there are enough people to make it feel like a small village and the plot sizes are small enough to be manageable for the common person who perhaps have a full-time job or a senior who have limited mobility. In the bigger picture, I think that establishing an allotment community on a strip of land that cannot be used for much else is an intelligent and humane distribution of land that gives a lot of life quality to its inhabitants. It is an example of a successful urban policy.

### **Urban farming as educational tool**

The project of Grow & Germinate (Linder, Nelson, 2015) is intentionally designed, structured, and managed to achieve a few goals. Through a shared urban community garden, they want to educate children and teenagers about ecology, sustainability, democracy, and creativity. They purposely use food and cooking to create interest in growing food, learn by playing and create interest, and question how democracy works. They want to modernize democracy and work towards a fairer world. The book is divided into 6 chapters, and all of them are as important in the project. The 6 chapters are Urban farming, democracy development, project management, agriculture, play, and tasting.

I would define the project as an educational organized community garden. If Guerilla Gardening is about challenging conventions and political change, and allotments are recreational and a strategy to keep inhabitants healthy, Grow & Germinate is a project that's not primarily focused on spatially changing a place

or building relationships but focused on the long-term effect of educating children. It is very well-thought-out, structured, and has a goal to spread the practice. It is not as concerned with relations between humans and creating withstanding community space, but it creates a temporary community that builds skills. This is another approach of urban farming, where the crops or the created garden are not in focus. I think it is very smart to use urban farming as an educational tool and to create farming interest for a younger generation who may not have a relationship with how food is grown.

### **Conclusion**

In all these different forms of urban farming, the kind of structure of how, when, and who defines what the outcome is and what kind of act it becomes. In the same way, architects should not only be concerned with the form of the building but also the policies, how, when, and who to successfully create a positive change in society.

Urban farming takes many shapes and forms but is usually concerned with the individual's culture, identity, sustainability, food, relationship with other people, cooperation, and change in society. Every human has an intimate relationship with food, it reflects humane values and brings people together. Depending on how urban farming is structured and managed, it can be a way to challenge society to make better use of land and turn it into a pleasant place for people. It can also be an oasis from the stresses of being displaced from your home country and a new way to relate to others. And lastly, it can educate younger people to be knowledgeable about democracy and sustainability. But most importantly, people who dedicate themselves to urban farming are enjoying what they do, become happier, and naturally create bonds and communities which benefit society. Therefore, my verdict is that urban farming, if well structured, is a great tool to combat many inadequacies of urban life and increase the sense of belonging and happiness of the inhabitants of a city.

## **4 Urban Shelter Design**

As early mentioned, having well-defined ownership of different urban gardening forms and coordinate it with an engaged, involved, and organized user group is crucial. I think that the best approach when there is limited land like in our design

project, a mix of household-privately owned planting box and shared common farming area is the best alternative. It adds a lot of value to an area. Also, to design with the idea that urban agriculture can have many levels – a public, semiprivate, and private. This could be in the form of a common ground garden, planting boxes on exterior walkways, their own terraces, and utilize the rooftops and fill them with planting boxes. The planting boxes on walkways and rooftops could be defined as private use (for households) or could belong to the different floors of the building to enhance the community within a floor. To combine agriculture with a garden would also be a good idea to increase both the recreation and quality of leisure. Urban farming should be a part of a cyclical, more self-sustainable bigger picture that benefits the neighborhood.

## 5 The Role of Architects

In the study “The Urban Garden City” (Glatron & Granchamp, 2018) it is apparent that community and user usage does not appear from only form. For a community garden to be successful, clear rules, structures and a management plan needs to be implanted. It is the architect’s role to define boundaries in a way that responds to the context and the needs. Also, to implement a suitable organization together with the future users is also a good idea. The goal is to find a structure and distribution where users can manage the urban gardening and shared space by themselves. This is similar to a lesson I learned from the experiences and lectures that I took part of in the field trip in Metro Manila. That structure, management and continuity was the one most important factor to create a successful community in housing projects. It is important to have a multi-dimensional approach where one must consider aspects of design, sustainability usage, organization and user involvement, both when it comes to a providing houses and other projects that involves humans.

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#### Images:

Picture 1: Vertical garden. Photographer: Author, taken 2020 March

Picture 2: Weldyn Garden City. [http://medias.photodeck.com/92008120-3248-11e1-b2bb-67a4f77d757b/Ann2.East-6634\\_xlarge.jpg](http://medias.photodeck.com/92008120-3248-11e1-b2bb-67a4f77d757b/Ann2.East-6634_xlarge.jpg) [2020-05-01]

Picture 3: Miniature Pothole Garden.  
<http://landezine.com/index.php/2012/02/guerilla-activities-of-the-pothole-gardener/> [2020-05-01]

Picture 4: Delia and daughter in allotment. Mannerfelt K., 2009. *Kolonilotten Världens trädgård*. Halmstad: Bulls Graphics. Photographer: Eriksson A.

Picture 5: Nazrul and Lillemor speaking. Mannerfelt K., 2009. *Kolonilotten Världens trädgård*. Halmstad: Bulls Graphics. Photographer: Eriksson A.