

The allotment gardens of the Ile de France: a tool for social development

Adalgisa Rubino¹

¹ Phd University of Florence, Italy, Faculty of Architecture, adalgisarubino@hotmail.com

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Abstract

Urban allotment gardens are a tool for social development used for their therapeutic and educational implications and in order to activate social inclusion policies. They are a tool for re-appropriation of places and the building of communities capable of addressing new social demands, the need for natural surroundings and a close relationship with the land and natural spaces. The increasing artificialization of society has highlighted a strong demand for landscape, which has expressed itself also through the quest for new modes of interaction with one's own living environment, actively involving citizens in the production of such places. In this sense, urban gardens truly are territorial laboratories representing an act of appropriation of the space and of the production of landscape, in which the ties with nature reinforce the social ties, enhance personal wellbeing and help overcome people's isolation. These are places creating and reinforcing social relations among people from different backgrounds, thus contributing to integration both intergenerational and ethnic, reinforcing each cultural identity (*jardins familiaux*); they are places for kids to get closer to nature and get acquainted with it (*jardins pedagogiques*) also capable of playing a therapeutic role towards persons with social problems, disabled, mentally ill, unemployed (*jardins de insertion social*).

Urban gardens in the Ile de France

Born in France and Germany at the end of the 19th century, aiming to provide the less privileged classes with the possibility to farm a piece of land destined to families' self-consume, urban allotment gardens quickly spread in different countries, marking the suburban areas of the cities. In the aftermath of WWII, the term *jardins ouvriers* (so called due to their destination to the disadvantaged working class) has been substituted by *jardins familiaux*, shifting the attention from the users to the characteristic of sociality, hence the term "family gardens". Urban gardens quickly spread within most European countries, the United States and Japan,

playing different roles and assuming diverse values in the various contexts.

In the Ile de France, the gardens are at the forefront of the urban and suburban re-qualification policies, due to their multifunctional character, affecting not just the social dimension, but also the cultural, environmental and economic ones. They play a very important environmental role by bringing back nature to the heart of the city, requalifying vacant and residual spaces, contributing to an augmenting of the biodiversity by being richer in species' quantity than traditional green areas, integrate families' income through the farming of produce for family consumption, they play a cultural role by bringing the reality of the living natural

world closer to the citizens and develop a function of professional training aimed at the people with problems concerning their employment or social conditions. The French association “Jardinons” claims that “*the creation of direct wealth for the beneficiaries of an urban garden, is nothing to make light of. Some researchers have calculated this income: the additional, albeit not monetary, is equivalent to an extra paycheck per year. Certainly, this economy doesn’t have an impact on the GNP growth, rather it is an economy giving value to the actions of a number of people not included in the growth indicators.*” (Le Jardin dans tous ses états, 2000).

The urban allotments in the Ile de France also show another interesting peculiarity: that of being treated as *bona fide* public spaces concurring in the redefinition of the image of the contemporary city; places that involve agriculture and leisure time, establishing relations between citizens and urban and rural spaces. Broadly speaking, urban gardens adopt the specific physiognomy of a real urban project. The composition of the allotments, that of the collective areas, the water supply, the architecture of the tool sheds, the functions tied in with sports and play characterize the place into a more or less balanced relation between individual practices and communal life.

In general, it is possible to note a strong aesthetic attention to site planning, also in order to overcome the doubts showed by some administrators towards urban gardens, often perceived as elements of decay and a threat to the image of their administration. On the other hand, the same administrators are less hostile towards the development of the gardens under the condition that they are dealt with according to a logic that one could define of landscaped public space. In every project a tension arises between areas slated for gardening and those needed for the landscaping integration of the site with its surroundings. Communal spaces become real public places, crowded by gardeners but also by the neighbourhood’s residents. The goal is “*to create a local community, to get the gardeners to know each other, to have their families hang around the garden, to have kids get in touch with the land, discover work and the respect of others for it. It is important that the place be frequented by people of all ages and social backgrounds and to give priority to landscape, environmental and social integration*” (Le Jardin dans tous ses états, 1999). They are true gardens in which activities tied in with leisure and relaxation are joined by functions concerning cultivation and the praxis of gardening. Their planning is entrusted to a study bureau, availing itself of a diversified team made up by town planners taking care of the site location’s choice and its infrastructures, landscapers dealing with the spatial articulation and environmental insertion of the site and by architects who exclusively designed the tool sheds. Emblematic in this respect is the case of the urban

gardens within the Department Park *Hautes Bruyères*, where the involvement of Renzo Piano for the design of the tool sheds has quieted the anxieties of the public administration who feared that the *jardins familiaux* could damage the image of the place and ruin the effort undertaken for the park’s planning.



Figure 1 – Tool shed; back view, Haute Bruyère Park.



Figure 2 – Tool shed; front view, Haute Bruyère Park.

In the Ile de France, the *Office International du Coin de Terre et des jardins familiaux* is one of the most active organizations in the planning of urban allotments. It is a nationwide association member of an European network (an organization linking together the German, Austrian, Belgian, Finnish, French, Luxemburg, Norwegian, Dutch, Polish, British, Slovak, Swedish, Czech federations and a non-European federation such as the Japanese. Established in Luxemburg in 1921, its mission is to promote and defend gardening in the world). The Association deals with the planning, management and regulation, establishing the general principles of use and regulating the permitted activities according to the indications of the Rural Code (“family gardens are land allotments slated to privates practising gardening for their own necessities and those of their families, to the exclusion of all commercial purpose. All gardens fitting these criteria, their denomination notwithstanding

ing, are assimilated as family's gardens. The assignation of a lot derives from the contract of membership to the association charged with the management of the group of gardens at hand" Rural Code, L.561 – 1). Every lot is entrusted to a head of family committed to cultivate the garden for self-consumption only and to the payment of a yearly fee. The latter is not a rent, but an expenses' reimbursement. Generally, the fee varies according to the size of the lot, ranging from 70 to 150 € for the larger ones, but can also rise to higher prices in the case of very large tracts. Their dimensions are, in fact, variable and depending on the more or less urban location of the site. On average, it is 100 – 300 square meters, but can range between 20 and 1000 sq. meters as the maximum size exceeding which the job of gardening becomes too heavy for it to remain a non-professional, purely recreational activity. At all rates, urban allotments ensure a varied production in which greens prevail over fruit because the latter, heavy consumer of organic substance, quickly spoils the soil. In fact, it is permitted to plant just one tree per lot; it is allowed to have flowerbeds, meadows and areas more properly slated for leisure, although these cannot account for more than 50% of the total size of the lot.

The experiments

The majority of urban allotment gardens is located mainly within cities or their surrounding suburbia, are placed within areas bordered by railway or road infrastructures (fig. 3 – 5), in residual areas, in front of or nearby social housing projects or again within proper public parks. With regards to the experiments carried out in densely populated areas, most interesting are the examples of Paris XIII and Plessis Robinson. The former is an intervention located in a popular neighbourhood characterized by recent immigration, not far away from the city centre, where a small untended lot



Figure 3 – Urban vegetable gardens along the train tracks, Saint Cloud Ville.

on a sort of urban terrace has been transformed into a multifunctional recreational space with park benches, playgrounds for kids, tennis table for youths and urban gardens for the older people (fig. 6 – 8).



Figure 4 – Allotments along the tracks, Saint Cloud Ville.



Figure 5 – Saint Cloud Ville, from above.



Figure 6 – Urban vegetable gardens and multifunctional spaces, Paris XIII.

A project strongly willed for by the association "Coin de terre", met with a number of problems and difficulties during its realization. The city administrators maintained that there was not a real demand for it and



Figure 7 – The gardens and the city, Paris XIII.



Figure 8 – Social life, Paris XIII.

that it was not going to be accepted by the inhabitants. The association started a course of involvement within the local population, which answered enthusiastically instead, actively participated in the project. Even the yearly fee of 70 € (which was thought to be too steep) did not scare away the people: all the allotments were

assigned and there were not enough to satisfy all the requests. It is a small intervention of 25 micro-allotments, each about 25 sq. meters, which has provided the neighbourhood with a new communal space. The second concerns a more suburban area of the Parisian agglomeration. The gardens, located in an area surrounded by residential buildings for lower income, are real gardens, comparable to the standard public green areas (Fig. 9 – 13). The different allotments highlight a high aesthetic level, true expression of the creativity of the gardeners and a sense of belonging to the place and of respect for others' work.

Even if located in a low income neighbourhood, where vandalism is not uncommon, urban gardens are recognized as important living spots in which the visible usefulness of the work and the effort accomplished by the people justify the respect and facilitate shared usage and fruition rules for the space.

There are also examples of urban allotments in which alternative techniques for water purifying and



Figure 12 – Green areas next to the urban vegetable gardens and houses, Plessis Robinson.



Figures 9 – 10 – 11 – Gardens in the urban yards, Plessis Robinson.



Figure 13 - Urban gardens, Plessis Robinson.

storage are experimented. Particularly interesting are those of Auxerre and Hayes les Roses, that have seen the *bureau d'étude* asking for the involvement of an hydraulic engineer. Together, they have planned a system to intercept the water of the whole neighbourhood and store them in a reservoir placed within the urban gardens. From the reservoir depart canals for garden's irrigation (fig. 14). Very similar is the example of Hayes les Roses, in which the reservoir is located in an area adjacent to that of the urban gardens. It is a very interesting example because it has been planned in such a way as to have different fruition possibilities according to the water level in the reservoir. The reservoir itself is linked to the family gardens by a green area (fig. 15 – 18).

Many are the examples of parks and public gardens in which it is possible to find the *jardins familiaux*. The choice of incorporating urban vegetable gardens within parks doesn't only descend from a social evaluation, but also from an economic point of view. It has been verified that the price of setting up a "conventional" green area ranges between 15 and 70 euros as opposed to a much lower price, oscillating between 20 and 28



Figure 14 – Environmental garden, Auxerre.

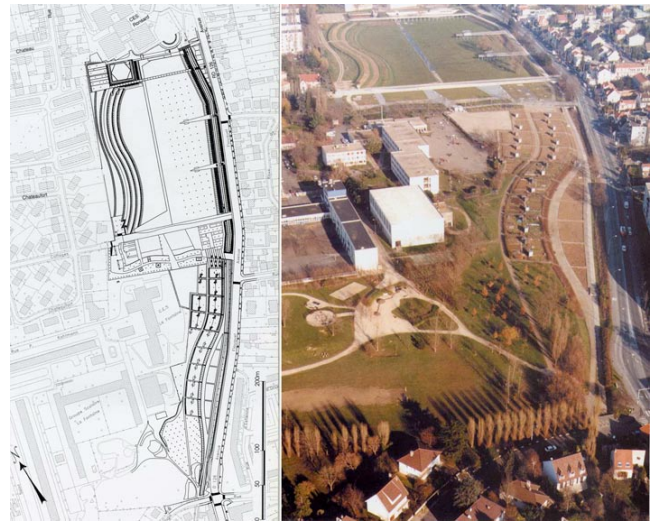


Figure 15 – Map and aerial view, Hayes les Roses.



Figure 16 – The water reservoir during a flood period, Hayes les Roses.



Figure 17 – The water reservoir in a low level period, Hayes les Roses.

euros, for the family garden (Community gardens are even cheaper, with costs ranging from 7 to 22 euros. *Le Jardin dans tous ses états*, 2000). Moreover, further savings derive from the maintenance costs which are almost zero in the case of urban gardens, given that said maintenance (hedges trimming, painting of the tool sheds, etc.) is taken care of by the gardeners of the lots. The urban gardens of the Department Park of



Figure 18 – Urban gardens, Hayes les Roses.

Hautes Bruyères (fig. 19 – 22) or that of Maison Alfort (fig. 23 – 27) are two examples in which the gardens are strictly integrated with the rest of the green areas. Hothouses, fountains, educational and didactic paths in which aromatic plants and herbs are used, and playgrounds intersperse the cultivated allotments.



Figure 19 – A view of the park, Hautes Bruyères.



Figure 20 – Urban gardens and public spaces, Hautes Bruyères.



Figure 21 – Panoramic view of the garden zones, Hautes Bruyères.



Figure 22 – Paths within the park – Hautes Bruyères.



Figure 23 – A new park for Maison Alfort.



Figure 24 – Gardens and free areas, Maison Alfort.

In some parks, we notice the insertion of educational gardens. An example is that of the famous Parc de Bercy, located in the heart of Paris. A recently organized park, almost 70 hectares in size and very articulated, it has an educational garden run by the kids of a local grade school. (fig. 28 – 29).



Figure 25 – Gardens and communal areas, Maison Alfort.



Figure 26 – The hothouse and the educational grounds, Maison Alfort.



Figure 27 – A view of the tool sheds, Maison Alfort.

In general, these gardens are aimed at the school population and serve a very important educational purpose, deemed as important as the computer literacy training programmes, in that they help the kids to socialize, living together with others, develop their artistic sense and to recover a relationship with nature, currently threatened by the urban lifestyle. In these gardens, the kids get acquainted with the natural world,



Figures 28 -29 educational gardens, Parc de Bercy, Paris.

they size up the seasonal rhythms and learn cultivation practices. Gardening, generally practiced in grade schools and kindergartens, has been recognized by the *Ecole Supérieure du Paysage* of Versailles as “one of the fundamental basis for the training of landscapers” (Donadieu, P., Fleury, A. 2003) and re-introduced as subject in study course. The *Potager du Roi*, integral part of the school, is the place where students experiment with and learn the horticultural techniques, farm



Figure 30 - The shop of the Ecole Supérieure du Paysage, Versailles.

and harvest the produce that are subsequently sold to the general public. A small shop has been organized in the university's lobby to commercialize the products of the school: books, magazines, brochures but also fruit, vegetables and marmalades (Fig. 30 – 31).



Figure 31 – Le Potager du Roi, Versailles.

The *Chantier d'insertion*

The *chantier d'insertion* represent another interesting form of public agro-urban green.

The gardening practices and the formats used vary in relation to the illnesses: some centres are aimed at the mental patients, stimulating their creativity and sense of responsibility, others are destined and set up for the blind (easy access to plants, signs written in Braille) or the disabled. Others are aimed at the insertion of persons with severe social and professional difficulties into the milieu of agricultural work, providing them with the opportunity and the necessary know-how to start a work activity.

There are three main types of insertion gardens: the collective horticultural gardens, the urban gardens for social development, collective gardens for social insertion. The former are carried on by the Cocagne network "*Coltivons la solidarité*". The *potager* in Marcoussis (Ile de France) but also the many gardens developed in France in recent years are an example: permanent "building sites" of forest re-qualification, of the housing and the bio-dynamic horticultural approach where the citizens member become co-producers of the agricultural project, shifting from a passive "spectator" role to that of "smart consumers" actively involved in the territorial re-qualification project. The peculiarity is that the produce aren't been sold on the market, but distributed among the participating citizens in the form of "weekly baskets" in exchange for a yearly membership fee.

If the gardens of "*Coltivons la solidarité*" privilege the economic dimension of the insertion, the social gardens (the *jardin collectifs d'insertion*, the *jardin*

familiaux of social development) of the network "*Les Jardin d'Aujourd'hui*" base their re-integration on non-monetary forms of work and exchange. The *jardin collectifs d'insertion*, propose to a group of people with problems to cultivate a single allotment in common and to share the produce for self-consumption. The *jardin familiaux* of social development, are real urban gardens and a tool for economic and cultural safeguard in troubled neighbourhoods. It is very similar to a classic urban garden and offers people with problems the possibility to individually cultivate a lot. Such gardens are destined to a public threatened by forms of social exclusion and are often accompanied by technical and social aid. According to the difficulties experienced by the users, technical and planning devices are used in order to facilitate or allow these people to practice the gardening activity. In the gardens aimed at the blind, diverse strategies are used to facilitate orienteering. The presence of perfumed plants, such as balm-mint and lavender, or the use of bells and carillons, may indicate the main places of the garden: the entrance, intersections, access to lots. Even the change in flooring may be an important element of reference; gravel, for instance, might indicate the presence of a fountain and the diversified use of materials might clearly mark the separation among different spaces. To facilitate orienteering, the paths are designed in straight lines, in a grid pattern. Aside from marking the garden across, they must be traced to mark the border so as to allow circulation and the outer limits must be marked through the presence of hedges of ivy (Fig. 32). These latter are used also in gardens aimed at people with motory difficulties: flowerbeds of variable heights or border walls are used as a support to hang pots from, thus creating a vegetal curtain and a workbench. There are several types of "hanging gardens" as well as the culture tables or tubs filled with dirt (Fig. 33). Their height varies according to the user, ranging from 60 centimetres for persons on wheelchairs to 90 cms. for

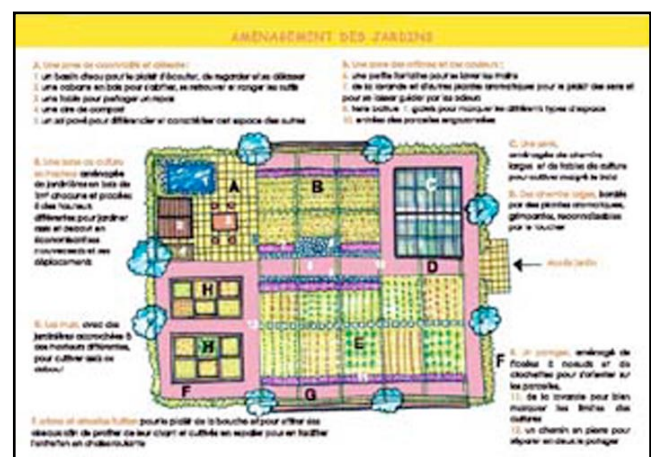


Figure 32 – Distribution scheme for a therapeutic garden, Image taken from Le Jardin dans tous ses états, Jardinons ensemble, network Le Jardin dans tous les états, 2000.

people having trouble bending down. The tables are often used in educational gardens because they allow disabled children to participate with their friends in the gardening and allow schools who do not own a green area to experiment cultivation practices.

They are often used also in traditional urban gardens. Many are the examples in which lots are slated for people with reduced mobility or in which attention is paid to ways to facilitate orienteering of the blind. The goal is to create places for social integration destined to receive people of different backgrounds in such a way as to favour exchange and the creation of a community, places where people with problems might find self-assurance even in the interaction and comparison with others (documentation provided by Dr. J. Clement and Dr. C. Ollivaud, Association "Coin de Terre", Ile de France).

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Figure 33 – Hanging gardens - Image taken from *Le Jardin dans tous ses états*, Jardinons ensemble, network Le Jardin dans tous les états, 2000.