Title
The Urban Garden as Public Space

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4ff0f8nnm

Journal
Places, 6(1)

ISSN
2164-7798

Author
Francis, Mark

Publication Date
1989-10-01

Peer reviewed
Each garden in the Kleingarten, an urban garden in Munich, can be designed to meet the user’s needs and tastes. Photo by Mark Francis.
THE URBAN GARDEN AS PUBLIC SPACE

A garden is a powerful metaphor for our relationship to ourselves, to nature, and to our everyday environment. The urban garden often serves as an archetype—an icon through which people come to identify with and attach meaning to the landscape. When people become directly involved in landscapes, responsible for designing, building, managing, or maintaining gardens, a deeper meaning may be attached to them than to professionally designed and maintained places. The garden becomes an extension of the gardeners and the infrequent visitor or occasional passerby. When the garden becomes part of what Lyn Lofland calls the “public realm,” it takes on significant meaning for both users and non-users. It becomes part of the public life of a neighborhood or downtown, offering important individual and group benefits. The garden takes on a “spirit of place”—a connectedness to the built and natural world.

In recent years, urban garden projects have expanded in influence and importance. They are a central part of what has been characterized as the “community open space” or “urban greening” movement. The growth of urban gardens has been inspired by dual opportunities of enormous areas of vacant land in cities and the failure of traditional open spaces, such as parks and playgrounds, to meet the full range of recreational and community needs.

The impact of the movement has been significant both in number and quality of new gardens created in the past two decades. In New York City more than 600 community gardens totalling more than 143 acres were identified in 1987. In San Francisco, more than 60 community garden projects have been assisted by the San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners with a goal of establishing 100 gardens by 1996. Philadelphia has more than 1,000 community greening projects developed by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society’s Philadelphia Green Program. In some cities the number of community gardens are starting to rival the number of projects included in the official city park system.

The garden has expanded beyond the home to become part of the neighborhood, the park, the workplace, the condominium, the everyday housing project, the school, the prison, and even the hospital and hospice. Community gardens, urban forests, school gardens, nature parks, and wildlife habitat are examples of the expanding community open space movement.
Gardens in Public Life

Our growing public appetite for gardens and gardening is a reflection of the changing nature of public life. Urban gardens result from a reaction to the privatization of public life, from the need for spaces that support social contact and publicness, and from an interest in urban spaces that invite ongoing change and modifications through public stewardship and local involvement.

Urban gardens differ from other types of public open spaces in several significant ways. Gardens are frequently designed, built, or managed by the people who use them. Gardens are valued by their users as places to work, meet people, and socialize as well as places to grow vegetables or flowers. To discourage misuse or overuse, gardens often limit access, using devices such as signs, gates, and locks. Yet the amount of use gardens receive is not substantially different than nearby parks receive, and a greater variety of activities often takes place there. Gardens often take on a diverse and ever-changing set of aesthetics with a greater variety of materials and plants used than in traditional parks and open spaces.

Changing Types of Urban Gardens

Changes in public life have given rise to new and expanded types of gardens, which illustrate the changing nature of urban open space in cities. These projects exist at a variety of scales and in diverse settings, including the neighborhood, the downtown, the workplace, as city-wide networks of open space, as regional gardens, or as arboreta.

The Garden as a Nearby Neighborhood Place: The neighborhood garden is one of the most established and refined forms of urban gardens. With names like El Sol Brillante Garden in the Lower East Side in New York City, the Dogpatch Garden in San Francisco, and the Ron Mandella Community Garden
in Sacramento, these neighborhood projects are now valued parts of their local landscape.

Neighborhood gardens can include a variety of elements, such as individual or community vegetable areas, flower beds, lawns, sitting or socializing areas, areas for ball play, and play areas for children. They range in size from a small lot sandwiched in between buildings to a multi-acre garden. Such gardens often become a valued element in the neighborhood, increasing residents’ attachment to their neighborhood.

The Garden in the Workplace: The “corporate garden” is a new type of urban garden created by corporations that modify their grounds to provide gardening space for employees. Examples include Fireman’s Fund and Ames Life Assurance Company in Marin County; the Hewlett Packard Headquarters in Palo Alto, where more than 450 employees garden on six acres; and the MITRE Corporation in Bedford, Massachusetts, which has 450 garden plots for its employees. According to one employee at the Fireman’s Fund, “the garden is one of the reasons I work here.” St. Reeder’s Digest headquarters in Pleasantville, New York, a vice-president states, “community gardens have proven to be a visible benefit which returns high dividends of employee satisfaction.” While the benefits of these corporate gardens need to be more systematically investigated, they reflect the expansion of the garden into the workplace.

The Garden in the Park: The urban garden also is slowly moving into the public park, with some park areas being made into gardens in which residents plant, maintain, and control space. For example, Chicago Botanical Garden is working with the Chicago Parks Department to transform some areas of city parks into community garden areas. In many cities, “Friends of Parks”
groups have created garden areas within
parks. Imagine the impact on the urban
landscape if city park systems provided
gardening spaces for all residents that
requested them.

The Garden in the Plaza: The garden is
becoming part of some downtown
plazas, where garden elements replace
hardcape elements as the dominant
design form. Many plazas now have
planting areas with seasonal color and
diverse vegetation. There is a potential
to expand the garden into new or exist-
ing plazas by allowing building occu-
pancies to participate in both decision
making and actual gardening.

The School Garden: The garden is
transforming some schoolyards into
green settings for environmental learn-
ing and education. Robin Moore, Susan
Goltzmann, Daniel Jacobson, and Moyna
Quayle have successfully transformed
school grounds into gardens where stu-
dents participate in construction and
gardening. Several European countries
have a tradition of school gardening
programs on school property.

The Hospital in the Garden: Gardens can play an important role in the heal-
ing process. R. C. Ulrich, in one of the
few empirical studies of the relationship
of vegetation to health, studied open-
heart surgery in a Maryland hospital,
comparing recovery rates for patients
who had views of trees from their hospi-
tal windows with the rates of patients
who did not have views. He found that
patients looking out on a natural scene
had shorter post-operative stays,
received fewer negative evaluation com-
ments, and took fewer drugs.4

It may be a wise investment to
reduce hospital and health costs by hav-
ing hospitals surrounded by gardens.
Hospital design could visually connect
rooms with the landscape, providing
green and colorful views for patients.
Plants in containers or small planting
areas could even be provided for
patients who desire to care for plants.

The Garden at Home: Some commu-
nity gardening programs in cities such
as Washington, D.C., Seattle, and New
York, are actively involved in the prob-
lem of homelessness by providing food,
invoking homeless people in growing
food, and even letting people set up
temporary shelter in the garden. Since
the setting of choice for some homeless
people is the vacant lot, transforming
lots into garden homes may be one way
to provide appropriate shelter until liv-
able housing can be provided.

The Urban Garden and its Meanings

The urban garden has different mean-
ings that can be examined along individ-
ual, group, neighborhood, city-wide,
regional, and aesthetic dimensions. On
a conceptual level, urban gardens exist
as democratic space—reflections of local
culture and values. They invite direct
participation for some, while for others
they become valued visual elements
in the workplace or community. Gar-
dens can be democratic reflections
of conflict and change in neighborhood
and urban life.

Gardens also contribute to what
Brower has called "familiar place," a
mark of local identity and pride.
Gardens provide individual benefits,
such as reduction of stress and contribu-
tion to wellness. For example, the activi-
ty of gardening involves exercise, can
result in weight loss, and can contribute
to an individual's sense of peacefulness
or tranquility. Urban gardens also can
provide a recreation resource for people
desiring more active engagement with
the public environment. In our
Sacramento study, we found that while
park users use other parks, garden users
typically do not use parks.

For non-users, people who may only
pass by as outside viewers of the garden,
there may also be important benefits.
Lever House, in New York, is a landmark example of a garden in the workplace. The roof garden is solely for employees of Lever Brothers.

Photos by Todd W. Bressis.
The garden serves as what psychologists Rachel and Steve Kaplan have called a “restorative experience,” or an opportunity to recover from the fatigue resulting from “the everyday demands of living in the modern world.” Gardens offer residents an opportunity for passive engagement through looking at and viewing nature. Part of the high ratings gardens receive from non-users may be attributed to gardens being “curel for places” that communicate a sense of stewardship to outsiders. There is some evidence to suggest that gardens may also contribute a perception of safety for neighborhood residents, especially for children and women.

Finally, gardens offer urban residents a connection to nature. Vegetation of the kind found in community gardens has been highly valued in a number of studies comparing different types of urban form. The people-plant relation, as some call this interaction between nature and people, is an important value of gardens for both users and non-users.

The Future Urban Garden

Gardens as public space raise several critical research, design, and policy issues. One of the most critical needs is for management policies and designs that establish gardens as permanent open spaces. Because many garden projects are not considered part of official open space systems, their long-term future is often in doubt. Increasingly, urban gardens are being recognized as part of the official city park and recreation master plans and policy.

Design has an important role to play in creating meaningful urban gardens. Designers can avoid creating cute and superficial gardens by directly engaging the users of the garden in their design and planning process and providing ways for them to control the sites once they are completed.

An expanded research agenda for urban gardens also needs to be developed and adequately funded. Some of the agenda items for research include systematic investigation of the benefits of urban gardens. By their very nature, gardens are fragile places in need of extra care and loving. How these qualities can be preserved and expanded within the limited resources of garden managers needs to be addressed.

Horticultural training along the lines of that provided by technical assistance groups has proved successful in addressing this need.

I do not mean to suggest that the urban garden become the dominant form of future open space. The urban garden is only one of a number of open space types that will make up the future urban landscape. The complete network of open spaces such as the street, the square and park, the sidewalk, the street corner, and the garden must comprise the open space system of cities.

Urban gardens will contribute increasingly to the quality of future urban life. We will need to continue to examine their meaning. To be successful, they must extend their tradition of inviting use and participation, providing a connection for people to nature and natural processes, and being beautiful places near where people live, work, and play.

Notes


