

Christa Müller

Intercultural Gardens. Urban Places for Subsistence Production and Diversity

Published in: German Journal of Urban Studies, Vol. 46 (2007), No. 1
<http://www.difu.de/publikationen/dfk/en/welcome.shtml>

Abstract:

Self-supply is once again gaining ground in cities, even in the wealthy North. It not only provides access to healthy food and meaningful activities but also gives underprivileged people scope for civic engagement in the field of sustainable urban development. In Germany intercultural gardens have been causing a stir in recent years. They are considered successful integration projects because they encourage participation and provide scope for formative action. Not only the soil but also the heterogeneous social community, the neighbourhood where the garden is situated must be turned over and refashioned. This centrifugal development in time and space envisioned by intercultural gardeners promotes integration in the real sense of the word, in which participants negotiate their reality with others and appropriate the new developments that arise in the process.

Urban Subsistence Production – A Contradiction in Terms?

Subsistence production in the city – at first glance this combination of concepts seems contradictory. Large cities, characterised according to sociologist Georg Simmel, by relations between “strangers who encounter one another in an aloof and indifferent manner in the public space,” are considered the very opposite of rural regions where people know and are familiar with one another, perhaps economically dependent on one another. In the clear, dichotomous distinction between the “modern age” and “tradition,” any transitional zones between these two poles of societal organisation are considered past history. In brief, subsistence production belongs in the country and has no place in the modern metropolis.

But does this modernisation theory stance reflect reality? Today the humanities, especially contemporary civilisation theory, are increasingly calling for the modern age to be seen as a sort of cumulative period, a period in which preceding epochs are by no means over and done with but still very much alive and kicking. Hartmut Böhme sums up this position as follows: “Although the modern age sees itself in opposition to all of history (otherwise it would not be modern), at the same time, and more than other epochs, it incorporates the present of all times (otherwise it would not be).” (Böhme 2006, 29)

As far as concrete space is concerned, such an “other theory of the modern age,” means that the worldwide use of urban land for agricultural purposes can be interpreted not as contradictory or anachronistic but as an “authentically” and thus genuinely urban phenomenon. Especially since urbanisation continues to advance apace not only at the mental and cultural levels but also on the material and spatial plane, it must be asked whether there is any justification for still positing the existence of “province.” In recent times, urban sociologists have even begun to claim that the history of urbanisation is at an end – they now see only city, everywhere in the world. There is talk of the “transnationalisation of urban life” (Eckardt 2004, 10).

In spite of the uneasiness that the notion of totalised urbanisation arouses, a complex understanding of urbanisation processes can identify seemingly opposing phenomena in the spectrum of societal trends, like urban subsistence production. Social reality, too, shows that the often disdainful dismissal of subsistence-economy activities as a rejection of “the past” now seems itself to be a thing of the past. On the contrary, subsistence activities like micro-agriculture, not least of all in the city, are becoming more of a lifestyle issue for a young, urban milieu for whom autonomy is not only a political tenet but something to be experienced materially (cf. Baier/Müller/Werner 2007). This is one side of the coin.

Urban Subsistence Production: Supply Resource, Self-Help, Empowerment

The other aspect of urban subsistence production is its function as a supply resource based on self-help and empowerment and which in many cities of the world must take on supply functions the failing state and the just as frequently failing market cannot perform. This is demonstrated by the thousands of huertas comunitarias in a Buenos Aires torn by crisis and by the several hundred community gardens in New York City or Toronto (cf. Arndt/Haidle 2004; Rosol/Weiß 2005; Meyer-Renschhausen 2004). For the urban poor – in the metropolises of the South and North – allotment gardening close to home has also offers an opportunity for obtaining high-quality food.

For example, the community gardens in the Canadian city of Toronto are integrated into a network of organisations combating hunger. As the Berlin urban planners Marit Rosol and Julika Weiß have shown in a study, the cause of hunger in Canada is not any scarcity of food but a lack of money among the growing number of the economically underprivileged. Low wages, high rents, and massive cutbacks in social security benefits mean that more and more people are going hungry in one of the richest countries in the world. People with very low incomes pay the proportionately highest rents – what is left is often insufficient to cover the cost of food.

“Non-profit organisations complain that the poor face the doubtful choice ‘pay the rent or feed the kids.’ That this is no publicity-grabbing exaggeration is shown by a study conducted by the Ontario Food Bank Association: 65% of food bank customers spend more than 65% of their income on rent (Food and Hunger Action Committee 2001)” (Rosol/Weiß 2005, 5).

Community gardens are hence an increasingly important tool in combating hunger. However, the researchers rightly warn against instrumentalizing them as a substitute for basic social security. In large cities of the South, too, like Nairobi or Havana, a considerable proportion of the essential food supply is cultivated in the urban area – for home consumption and specifically to supply local markets (cf. Bakker et al. 2000). There, as in London and Los Angeles and in innumerable places around the world, NGOs, as well as local government institutions provide gardeners with infrastructure, initiate educational activities, network projects, and organise knowledge transfer. Such institutions, like GreenThumb, a section of the New York Department of Parks and Recreation, or the USA-wide umbrella organisation American Community Gardening Association, are outcomes of politicisation of the community garden movement, which began in the 1970s. In New York it was the vacant lots, often the result of arson, in run-down and written-off parts of town that became inner-city oases through the engagement of the poor, points of departure for revitalising neighbourhoods – which paradoxically put them at risk of becoming more interesting as building land owing to the attractive greenery and social harmony they introduce into the area (cf. Meyer-Renschhausen 2004, 145 ff.).

Hundreds of New York community gardens were razed and redeveloped at the climax of neo-liberal urban policy in the 1990s. Nevertheless, American urban policy is now unthinkable without such gardens. All big cities have meanwhile recognised that the gardens not only alleviate poverty but also bring greenery into urban neighbourhoods, improve air quality, and create room for civic engagement among the underprivileged.

Intercultural Gardens: Social Spaces for Communication and Integration

In Germany, intercultural gardens have been causing a stir since the mid-1990s. These social spaces, new in the German project landscape, not only serve urban recreational purposes and supply organic fruit and vegetables but quite deliberately pursue a further aim: intercultural communication and integration on the basis of a resource-oriented approach.

It was not by chance that the intercultural garden movement in Germany had its beginnings in an immigrant centre. In 1995 Bosnian refugees found themselves stranded in Göttingen, awaiting the end of the war in their home country, women unaccustomed to idleness who missed their big vegetable gardens. Together with the Ethiopian agrarian engineer Shimeles, they went in search of suitable land to cultivate even in exile. This was the start of a success story (Müller 2002; Shimeles 2002). The “Intercultural Gardens Network” coordinated by the Stiftung Interkultur (Intercultural Foundation) has now assembled more than 60 such garden projects in Germany alone, and about the same number are being developed (status: spring 2007; www.stiftung-interkultur.de)

Intercultural gardens bring together Germans and immigrants – very often with a refugee background – from all strata of society to cultivate fruit and vegetables, exchange seed and recipes, build small, wooden community houses and clay baking ovens, cook, organise barbecues, and celebrate. Working the soil together, which has allowed many to use their knowledge and abilities for the first time in Germany in an international context, also creates a field of learning that goes far beyond planting and harvesting garden produce. Especially in the winter months, the repertoire of a “well assorted” garden extends to language and computer courses, arts and crafts, sport, theatre workshops, intercultural environmental education, neighbourhood networking, music, lectures and counselling, many activities for children, further education in nutrition and gardening, factory tours and excursions.

Intercultural gardens do not look the same as the accustomed, traditional allotment garden areas. Generally there is at most one garden hut per project, and trimmed hedges or fenced-in plots are lacking. Discreet boundaries are the rule between the ten to eighty square-metre beds.

Sometimes they are demarcated with shoes, sometime with rope, or, often indiscernibly for outsiders, only by different species of plant. Fences are rarely erected, only as protection against rabbits, dogs, and sometimes against young local troublemakers.

Apart from the private plots, all gardens have large common areas with a fireplace, sometimes a wooden building, playground apparatus, perhaps a site trailer for the children, and, in favoured areas, even a glasshouse where seedlings can be raised and winter vegetables grown for the market stand. The common areas are important for communication, for eating and drinking together, for play, and for the parties to which the gardeners regularly invite guests.

More women than men are to be seen in intercultural gardens. Because gardening is a female domain in many parts of the world, it is mostly women who take responsibility for the work and the socialising. They do so in keeping with their own ideas, and this is not the only reason why women benefit particularly from such gardens. It begins with the use of the German language, a must because it is the smallest common denominator. Moreover, the gardens offer women and children an escape from often cramped housing conditions. They are seen as a welcome extension of living space and scope for enterprise. They not only contribute to the family income. The gardens are places where one’s own experience, cares and joys can be shared with other women. Many women can thus build self-confidence, often helping them to hold their own in family conflicts and to cope with the rapid development of society, which they mostly face in concentrated form in their children’s consumption of the media.

Not least of all for this reason, many participating parents are happy that intercultural gardens offer many amenities for children. In many projects, children have their own vegetable and flower beds. They, too, learn to negotiate about land, to understand complex interactions between animals, plants, and human beings; they observe the processes of nature and take part in excursions into the forest, to farms, and to environmental facilities. Like adult activities, child activities in intercultural gardens are based on personal initiative and on integrating the child’s knowledge into new fields of experience.

Not only plants grow in the garden. A Göttingen schoolgirl who had grown up in the Göttingen International Gardens described it as a “a great stroke of luck” that her mother had helped created this place. It had given her the opportunity to re-constitute her widely scattered family of origin.

“I was in the garden from the age of about three or four. Just about all the members of the Göttingen International Gardens are my ‘aunts and uncles.’ It’s like a second home. You see each other here all the time. When we’re in town, you notice how many people know me, give me a smile or greet me, or stop for a chat. And most of them know me from the garden.”

International elective affinities not only substitute for family ties, they also enable new insights, for instance, into what it means for refugees in Germany to be able to supply their own needs, to give away surplus produce, to be givers and not dependent solely on handouts, to experience and “squander” abundance instead of always having to manage with meagre resources. At an early age, the Göttingen schoolgirl learned to taste the difference between homemade and bought, between high-quality organic vegetables and supermarket goods imported from afar. She experienced what it means to prepare meals in a public space, she listened to stories about zucchini and purslane, chickpeas and peppermint, tales from childhood, songs from many home countries, which blossom anew for a brief moment in the gardens, beautiful songs, sad songs.

What do immigrant children do with themselves if they lack these opportunities? Children who have the impression their parents have no say in the public sphere? Who see their often unemployed parents merely awaiting developments, unproductive, not fully occupied? Parents waiting in vain for their chance in life. What models take root in the minds of these children, and what value do they place on their origins?

Concern for Others and Other Things

Even if intercultural gardens offer no gainful employment – they at least offer many opportunities to take care of oneself and others and to contribute to the greater good, for example, to the future of our cities. Not least of all, the commitment of many intercultural gardens to sustainable urban development, ecology, and integration, to health and nutrition means that many gardeners recognise they are working not only for themselves. Thus a Kurdish gardener stated that her engagement in the association enabled her to do something for others, allowing her to lead a meaningful life:

“If we think only about industry and making money, that gets us nowhere in the end. We come to a point where you have everything but it’s no longer a life. Nature is life. I’m proud to be an active member of an association that takes care of derelict sites and cultivates them instead of this building, building, building without end. And that, through the work of our members, at least in summer, we can harvest clean vegetables, not sprayed. That’s very, very important. Most couldn’t afford organic vegetables and fruit at all otherwise.”

Strengthening Diversity

The gardeners come from all over the world; in some projects more than 20 nationalities are represented. This diversity is deliberate. The statutes of most garden projects stipulate that as many national and socio-cultural backgrounds as possible are to be represented to avoid the cultural dominance of any one group. For one phenomenon is to be observed in every garden: all would prefer to bring in people close to them – and this often means members of their own ethnic group.

The monitoring research conducted by the Intercultural Foundation shows that the network now covers a broad range of organisational forms and characteristics. Each garden project sets its own main focus. Some concentrate on developing intercultural methods in environmental education work, other specialise in therapeutic work with traumatised civil-war refugees, others again focus on vocational training and the development of micro-firms in the fields of horticulture and catering.

Immigrants do not initiate all projects. Community or church groups, or committed private individuals often take the initiative. The motives for setting up intercultural gardens also differ from project to project. In some places it is the wish to resuscitate an old school garden, elsewhere the desire to create open spaces specially for Muslim women and children, to enjoy the healing powers of a garden, to provide greenery in a dormitory city, or a place in the city where people can find an occupation and come together.

As varied as the underlying motives are the forms of organisation, reflecting differences in the self-conception of the individual projects. Although some of the more recent projects have learned from the experience of such undertakings as the International Gardens Göttingen with its grass-roots democratic organisation, each project develops its own form independently. The spectrum is broad. Some projects first set up a charitable association (the Intercultural Foundation provides standard statutes in the context of its practical counselling), others emerge from existing associations or cooperate with such groupings to integrate the intercultural garden project into the larger organisation. Others initially do without a formal, written framework.

The Approach: Participation and Resource-Oriented

Founding an association usually proves to be the best path. Not only because registration as an association allows the projects to solicit funds. Registered association status, which endows the organisation with legal capacity, and the statutes drafted and adopted by garden members themselves are a guarantee for co-determination and participation, two key “side-effects” of community gardening. It is usually worth the effort to take the bureaucratic hurdles to setting up a registered association. Satisfactory practical experience in many projects with participation,

conflict management, and activation is also a reason why the resource-oriented, socially inclusive intercultural garden approach has attracted growing attention in the search for convincing integration concepts.

Germany is a country of immigration. After many years of “wait-and-see,” of ignoring the issue, this fact has finally filtered through to all sectors of society. Having re-defined itself, the country now faces the question of how to meet the challenge in concrete terms. What needs to be done to meet the demands of a plural society? How can growing diversity be recognised, appreciated, and mediated while repeatedly establishing and promoting elements of a common basis? These maxims are all the more important in times when it is no longer possible to rely on an institution that had always played a key role in integration in the past: gainful employment – a life-long institution that forms identities, provides social security, and a high degree of social inclusion. The increasing precariousness of formal employment is accompanied by a seemingly opposing trend: the hitherto scarcely perceived informal life and working worlds that had always existed alongside the formal markets for labour and goods are now becoming more and more important for identity formation and for societal inclusion processes. These processes, it must be stressed, will increasingly affect not only immigrants alone but also a growing section of the population who, although “native” to the country, are constantly on the brink of exclusion.

Social experience in intercultural gardens shows that it makes sense to develop and test integration concepts that involve immigrants from the outset on a footing of equality. The focus is not on keeping people in the “safe custody” of multicultural tearooms or “discussing” the problems of everyday life but rather on engaging in joint activities and giving shape to the immediate environs. In the case of gardens, it is the soil that first needs to be turned over and planted. But shape and vitality must also be given to the heterogeneous social community that gathers on the terrain – and to the neighbourhood community in which the garden is embedded. This centrifugal development in time and space promotes integration in the real sense of the word, in which participants negotiate their reality with others and appropriate the new situations that arise in the process. Resources in the form of tacit knowledge, social competence, and the willingness to learn gain a new locus and are modified as they connect up with novel circumstances, e.g. with the environmental debate in our latitudes. This means that picking up with the past, with what has been left behind, is subject at the moment of realisation to social differentiation through integration. The measure for the success of this process is the degree of involvement without – and here lies the real problem with many “integration measures” – participants feeling under pressure to abandon their identities as demanded, for instance, under the assimilation concept.

The task is rather to find new access to one's own identity and to negotiate it with others in a subtle communication process. Perhaps for this very reason, intercultural gardens are attractive not only for people with an agricultural background. On the contrary, they attract both former farmers and urban intellectuals. Such gardens are places where different languages, different classes, and different political leanings meet. Diversity cannot be reduced to ethnic difference; conflicts are inevitable. The difficult task facing the projects is to discover common ground. For this reason, no garden works “of its own accord.” The people who are “thrown together” artificially in this manner do not get along without further ado. But the framework facilitates the ambitious plan: to give shape to a piece of land together, to watch something of one's own grow, and to compare with others, to exchange views on the growth of plants and about one's own successes and failures – these are the big and the small possibilities that a garden offers.

The Stiftung Interkultur – International Networking and Coordination

In unexpected ways, the idea of intercultural gardens is spreading in Germany, and now in many countries of Europe. Thus the International Gardens Göttingen were selected in the spring of 2007 by the London Sustainable Development Commission (LSDC) as one of eight international projects to be studied in the quest for inspiration for the urban policy of the future. In the course of its monitoring work, the Intercultural Foundation had had intensive contact with Britain at an early date, with the British Black Environment Network, and with the community gardens movement in the USA.

Extensive reports in the international, regional, and national press and on television, as well as in a growing number of academic publications coordinated by the Intercultural Foundation in the

Intercultural Gardens Research Network have focused attention on the micro-worlds of intercultural gardens. Only a few years after the birth of the idea, there are now local authorities that propagate and promote intercultural gardens (in Berlin, for example, the Senate has adopted a measure under which district authorities may designate land and provide start-up equipment and materials), and Local Agenda groups, environmental associations, urban and landscape planning authorities, neighbourhood managements, and church organisations such as the Diakonie and Caritas have discovered the new social spaces.

The Intercultural Foundation, the national coordinating organisation of the Intercultural Gardens Network advises the actors involved on setting up gardens, provides succinct information on the experience of other projects, issues news letters, organises knowledge transfer with politics and science, publishes research results in its own and the specialised media, supports projects financially, and organises networking meetings and conferences. The Intercultural Foundation is also currently involved in a European learning partnership under the EU GRUNDTVIG programme (framework for action under the European educational programme SOCRATES II). The tremendous growth in public interest is justified. Intercultural gardens have now gained a trend-setting reputation as far as the consistent application of empowerment and resource orientation are concerned. Integration effects can be achieved with this method in other contexts, too. Intercultural gardens encourage participation and endow people with the power for formative action – these will in the long run prove pillars of an inclusive and plural immigrant society, which can become a reality only by activating all its members.

References

- Arndt, Christoph/Haidle, Isabella (2004): Urbane Gärten in Buenos Aires, Diplomarbeit an der Technischen Universität Berlin.
- Bakker, Nico/Dubbeling, Marielle/Gündel, Sabine, et al. (eds.) (2000): Growing Cities, Growing Food. Urban Agriculture on the Policy Agenda, Feldafing.
- Baier, Andrea/Müller, Christa/Werner, Karin (2007): Wovon Menschen leben. Arbeit, Engagement und Muße jenseits des Marktes, München.
- Böhme, Hartmut (2006): Fetischismus und Kultur. Eine andere Theorie der Moderne, Reinbek.
- Eckardt, Frank (2004): Soziologie der Stadt, Bielefeld.
- Meyer-Renschhausen, Elisabeth (2004): Unter dem Müll der Acker. Community Gardens in New York City (ed. by Stiftung Fraueninitiative), Königstein/Ts.
- Müller, Christa (2001), Women in the International Gardens: How Subsistence Production Leads to New Forms of Intercultural Communication, in: Bennholdt-Thomsen, V./Faraclas, N./v. Werlhof, C. (eds.): There is an Alternative. Subsistence and Worldwide Resistance to Corporate Globalization. London, p. 189-201.
- Müller, Christa (2002): Wurzeln schlagen in der Fremde. Die Internationalen Gärten und ihre Bedeutung für Integrationsprozesse, München.
- Müller, Christa/Werner, Karin (2003): Stiftung Interkultur. Ein neues Modell für ökologische und transkulturelle Kooperation, in: Elsner, W./Biesecker, A. (eds.): Neuartige Netzwerke und nachhaltige Entwicklung. Komplexität und Koordination in Industrie, Stadt und Region, Frankfurt/M., 309–323.
- Rosol, Marit/Weiß, Julika (2005): Community Gardens in Toronto und Seattle – interkulturell, ökologisch und ernährungssichernd, München (SI-Skripte zu Migration und Nachhaltigkeit Nr. 1).
- Shimeles, Tassew (2002): Projekt Internationale Gärten. Ein Beitrag für sozialen Frieden, in: Orth, Gottfried (Hrsg.): Die Erde – lebensfreundlicher Ort für alle. Göttinger Religionsgespräch 2002 zur Umwelt- und Klimapolitik, Münster, 79–88.
- Simmel, Georg (1992, 1st ed. 1908): Soziologie. Untersuchung über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung, Frankfurt/M.