

Christa Müller

## The Renaissance of Urban Gardens in Germany

A gardener is kneeling in front of a bed of lettuce. She is surrounded by an ethnically mixed group of children in bright yellow t-shirts. The message her image sends: for me, digging into the soil is fun. She is cultivating the White House's organic vegetable garden and she is the *First Lady* of the United States of America. Michelle Obama's image, sent out by the world press, is, without a doubt, part of a branding campaign in full swing for the trademark Obama.<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, the assumption can be made, that in this case, the brand will not primarily serve the glory of its bearer, but fuel a transformation of society. *Branding* is used for a new – ecological and participatory approach for society. For this, Michelle Obama places herself in the vegetable bed shooting small arrows for her symbolic politics out into the world: Eat healthy! We at the White House do it. Take your destiny into your own hands! Don't rely on multinational seed companies! Grow your own food locally – advice that's even given by the U.S. Department of Agriculture!<sup>2</sup> Get out into the fresh air! Serve others, do something nice together and form new small alliances!

The message sounds good. But it's also ambivalent. On the one hand, it stands for a free society that respects the fact that we are embedded in nature, on the other hand, and especially from a European point of view, it paves the way for a neo-social logic (and maybe behind Mrs. Obama's back) where the wish for self-determination is formulated for restructuring the social agenda and legitimizing and implementing "social reforms" with the help of a proactive discourse.<sup>3</sup>

One has to keep this ambivalence in mind when advocating opening more public space to citizen initiatives and self-sufficiency. By the same token, it is just as important to recognize the potential of urban gardening for a sustainable transformation of western industrialized societies and that's what this article is about. It is in fact the question of why, exactly in Europe, the garden of all things, is the starting point for social policy. Not the flower garden but the vegetable garden, an institution that in recent decades in western societies – particularly in big cities – was only regarded as anachronistic relic. After cities became associated with the post-war "car-friendly" paradigm and were redesigned accordingly, even vegetable growing for self-sufficiency in the countryside was in continual decline at an unprecedented rate in the course of this modernization process. According to this economic paradigm, agriculture for the region or even for self-sufficiency was regarded as quirky relic of times past. Any farmer that wanted to be up to date (and wanted to receive agricultural subsidies), paved over his farmyard, placed his machinery there and installed intensive livestock farming units next to his one-family home and from then on did industrialized food-production for anonymous markets.<sup>4</sup> Hardly anybody wanted to bend his back in a self-sufficiency garden. One went to the supermarket instead, relying on the affordable supply of the world market. Leisure-time society was booming and for a time became synonymous with social progress.

In the midst of this vision of modernization (with a subsequent modification of the diagnosis into "thrill seeking society" for some time now, activists pop up in the public sphere claiming they'd rather cultivate their vegetables themselves. Without asking permission, they plant on the streets where they live, cultivating trees, cleaning up derelict land, taking over the management of city parks and cultivating vegetable beds.

Not just the gardeners but with do-it-yourselfers in general, the attempt to re-discover and cultivate yourself in an all-encompassing, colonizing dominance of the market, especially for younger generations, is emblematic for attempts at self-discovery. Articles promoting possible advantages of a post-Fordist social model in which crafts will have a renaissance and do-it

---

<sup>1</sup> Burros, Marian: *Obamas to Plant Vegetable Garden at White House*, New York Times, 19. 3. 2009

<sup>2</sup> Burros, Marian: *First Lady at Agriculture Department*, The Caucus. The Politics and Government Blog of the New York Times, 19. 2. 2009

<sup>3</sup> Lessenich, Stephan: *Die Neuerfindung des Sozialen. Der Sozialstaat im flexiblen Kapitalismus*, Bielefeld 2008

<sup>4</sup> Müller, Christa: *Von der lokalen Ökonomie zum globalisierten Dorf. Bäuerliche Überlebensstrategien zwischen Weltmarktintegration und Regionalisierung*, Frankfurt/New York 1998

yourselfers are supposed to experience a revolution are legion.<sup>5</sup> Harbingers of a new “do-it yourself culture”, regarded by the authors as the foundation of a self-reflective economy, based on globally negotiated rules of fairness, already promote themselves on websites for self made products, new markets for ecological goods and in the booming open-source and peer-economy or commons-movement.

The new gardens also are increasingly being reflected in this spectrum. It's striking that even phenomena that seem to belong to the opposite side are keen on using gardens as a point of departure. Community or neighborhood gardens, intercultural gardens or guerilla gardening – a form of action in the public sphere that emphasizes the importance of inner city green – are places for crop cultivation as well as for political action. Gardens also can offer a good excuse for learning to know your neighbors, especially those that one would not otherwise meet. Claiming the right for involvement in neighborhood development plans also derives from the garden movement. The new garden activists want to be involved and don't want the urban planners to dictate the utilization of public spaces in their neighborhood. These forms of civil-society self-initiative draw a new picture of the relationship between town and country and show that a city is not by definition a place of passive consumption, but can be an arena for creative re-appropriations offering intangible as well as material dimensions. Due to various socio-cultural situations and fueled by the current financial crisis, a generally increased appreciation for self-sufficiency can be observed. More and more people realize that they are at the mercy of powers they can not control. Money, and with this, the access to material prosperity seems to evaporate before our very own eyes. At the same time, the appreciation for intangible values rises: friendship, the membership in social networks, new experiences of belonging, the ability to relax, to enjoy a good meal or to simply be in the moment. Also the sensual, long term experience of growing and harvesting your own food, observing cycles of growth and to experience being a productive member of a city's natural environment is taking off.

The intercultural garden movement that has been booming for the past several years<sup>6</sup> emphasizes how important the opportunities for design are. In intercultural gardens, people with immigrant backgrounds, together with people with German backgrounds, are cultivating fruits and vegetables in their own little patch of land, exchanging seeds and cooking recipes, baking bread in clay ovens, beekeeping, cooking, barbecuing and celebrating together. People bring their knowledge into the equation; they generate a surplus to give away or barter; in short: they experience themselves as empowered.<sup>7</sup> It is the challenging task of discovering similarities in an extremely heterogeneous space. It is the garden framework that facilitates this ambitious enterprise: shaping a piece of land together, to see your own crops grow and to compare them with other's, to have exchanges about the growth of the plants as well as about one's own successes and setbacks, are the small and big opportunities of a garden.

What it offers, first of all, is the possibility of communication, even though it is not explicitly designed for this – like a meeting center is. You go into the garden to plant potatoes or to sit under a tree. You can speak, but you don't have to. You can just hang out. Or water your own or your neighbor's patch if they are unable to. One can give away the surplus from one's own bed. You train yourself in cooperation – and thereby at the same time seamlessly come into contact with others. The garden is embedded in a wider sense of context, a context of productivity, care, devotion and learning.

Intercultural gardens keep space open by limiting their regulations and guidelines to a minimum. As long as you cultivate your plants ecologically and respect your co-gardeners, you can develop your own patch as you wish. The gardeners with immigrant backgrounds often try to get hold of seeds from their place of origin. They want to see if the plants they know from their childhood and that, like them, have migrated from far away, can grow in Germany too. Do they need less water, more sun or more encouragement? And suddenly you can see the plant doesn't have the same conditions here and maybe doesn't grow as straight and lush as where it

---

<sup>5</sup> Friebe, Holm/ Ramge, Thomas: *Marke Eigenbau. Der Aufstand der Massen gegen den Massenkonsum*, Frankfurt/New York 2008

<sup>6</sup> [www.stiftung-interkultur.de](http://www.stiftung-interkultur.de) (English version available)

<sup>7</sup> Müller, Christa: Müller, Christa: *Wurzeln schlagen in der Fremde. Die Internationalen Gärten und ihre Bedeutung für Integrationsprozesse*, München 2002

comes from, but it does grow. Humans observe themselves in the mirror of the plant. Also the experience of migrants, that their presence gets scrutinized and challenged, is dispensed with in the garden. Nature doesn't evaluate, nature is like a home. This doesn't only apply to immigrants. Native gardeners describe the healing properties of the garden with a great empathy. And that is no miracle. The souls of humans without exposure to nature are threatened with being stunted. The joy that humans feel, when they are in touch with nature, is testament for feeling protected and supported by our livelihood. With this, the core thesis of a new trend in biology is put in a nutshell, reaching the conclusion that losing nature – in everyday life but also the loss of diversity of species – means more than a climate catastrophe. The biologist and philosopher Andreas Weber warns: "Humans are threatened by an emotional loss that is affecting the basis of our being... Because all our qualities, including the "most human" ones, ultimately grow on organic soil, humans can only understand themselves fully, when looking upon themselves as cultural beings in nature. For mankind the greatest risk of environmental destruction lies in scuttling this understanding."<sup>8</sup>

The garden is a place for grounding, of growth and decay, a portrait of human life, where momentarily one can be reassured, even if that is getting increasingly difficult in an utterly economical, efficiently organized hypermodernity. Gardens are also "...spaces for experience and knowledge, perhaps even spaces for wisdom, because they are a wholesome and nurturing counter balance to the rationalistic modern myths like subject/object distinctions and the concept of totally technical control of world events through scientific and technological interventions. Gardens are areas of growth. Therefore they are nonlinear spaces, in which stability, gardening know how and care are rewarded."<sup>9</sup>

The garden acts as a repository with respect to the meaning of life. The modern individual is torn between the wish for freedom and autonomy, for self-determination and independence and the desire to be included in a bigger whole; be it a social community, nature or a meaningful spiritual context. The garden is one of the few places that offers both: to be in connection with nature and at the same time in the midst of a bustling city, to be completely in tune with oneself but also in the world, to create a world of your own and to encounter the stranger, to feel the earth and to discover one's own identity anew.

In western societies that seem to have detached themselves from the sources of supply, by disconnecting food production from direct access to the soil, globalized it and completely attached it to consumption; today it becomes more and more apparent, that it was an illusion to believe one could separate society and nature, reduce humans to the status of consumers and to streamline the world with impunity into a repository for natural resources for the privileged. With the drying up of mineral oil, the thing at stake is industrialized farming. The American journalist, Michael Pollan, said in an interview in Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung from February 16, 2009:

„... we have to look more closely at urban agriculture to better develop the potential for food production in the cities. ... the more scarce oil gets, the more important it becomes to maintain agricultural fields in close proximity to the cities. In the same way, as protected natural preserves are not to be used as building areas, we have to create protective schemes for agricultural lands. ... the notion of transporting our food around the world will soon appear very odd to us.“

That the question of the return of agriculture in our cities is far from just being a matter of resource efficiency, is one of the manifold dimensions that the new gardens are already demonstrating today.

### **Author**

Dr. Christa Müller is sociologist and director of the joint trust of anstiftung & ertomis and Stiftung Interkultur in Munich/Germany.

---

<sup>8</sup> Weber, Andreas: *Alles fühlt. Mensch, Natur und die Revolution der Lebenswissenschaften*, Berlin 2008, p. 18f

<sup>9</sup> Werner, Karin: *Interkulturelle Gärten als Sozialräume der Mikro-Integration*, München 2008: *Stiftung Interkultur – Skripte zu Migration und Nachhaltigkeit*, Band 6, p. 2