

GARDENING COMMUNITIES AS URBAN ARCHIVES AND SOCIAL RESOURCE IN URBAN PLANNING

DESIGN AND APPROACHES FOR SUSTAINABILITY

(ELISABET M. NILSSON, MALMÖ UNIVERSITY
ELISABET.NILSSON@MAH.SE)

(VERONICA WIMAN, TROMSØ ACADEMY OF CONTEMPORARY ART
MAIL@VERONICAWIMAN.NET)

ABSTRACT

This exploratory paper presents initial thoughts on a research theme described as *Urban Archiving*. The aim is to explore potentials of urban gardening communities both to be read as urban archives and to become platforms for transmitting knowledge and connecting different communities of practices that engage in urban development and societal change (e.g., design communities and urban gardening communities). Issues to be explored concern how practices of urban archiving can contribute to a more holistic view of our cities, including urban gardening communities that engage in urban sustainable development but are seldom invited to influence matters of urban development.

INTRODUCTION TO LIVING ARCHIVES

Living Archives¹ is a multidisciplinary research project that analyses and prototypes how archives and archival practices in a digitised society can create cultural awareness, and become a resource meaningful to specific communities of practice, such as the design community engaging in urban development and societal change. One of the aims of the project is to create design activities dedicated to exploring, prototyping and testing relevant possibilities for future digital archives and archival practices.

¹ Project website: livingarchives.mah.se.

There are various research themes explored within Living Archives, such as somatic archiving, open data and cultural archiving, datascares, and histories of immigrant women. The research activities and work-in-progress presented in this exploratory paper focus on the theme described as *Urban Archiving*.

RESEARCH THEME: URBAN ARCHIVING

The overall aim of the Urban Archiving theme is to explore archives and archival practices in relation to urban development. In this wide research scope, we narrow down the window of exploration by initially focusing on the phenomenon of urban gardening. As a means to attain urban sustainability, urban gardening has in the most recent years of climate changes (see, e.g., Gerst, Raskin & Rockström 2014) gained an increased attention, which also makes it an interesting area to look into in relation to our field of interest.

Within the project, we explore in what ways urban archiving practices can become a tool that supports design practitioners who engage in sustainable urban development that is in contact with basic human needs and conditions. We explore how practices of urban archiving could contribute to a holistic view of our cities, including marginalised communities that engage in urban sustainable development (such as urban gardening communities) but seldom are invited to have a say in matters of urban development. What we refer to as ‘marginalised communities’ are communities not necessarily considered as weaker but as underrepresented voices in the public debate. As emphasised by Ehn, Nilsson and Topgaard (2014), among others, to strive for a sustainable city also includes inviting marginalised groups to the discussion and encouraging citizen participation on all levels.

SET THE SCENE: URBAN GARDENING

The first step in this exploratory study has a focus on urban gardens, which lately has received increasing

attention in cities across the world (Gorgolewski et al. 2011). The practices of urban gardening—also called urban agriculture, urban farming or community farming—are, however, not new (Dziedzic & Zott 2012). These practices have been a part of human history since the start of urbanisation. When industrialisation decreased the ability to produce food close to or within the city, urban people became dependent on food production taking place in rural regions miles away (Gorgolewski et al. 2011). This organisation of mass food production has become a necessity in today's world, but what happens if the global food industry collapses and food becomes inaccessible?

UN's Climate Report 2014 (IPCC 2014) places emphasis on the vulnerability of food supply and calls for alternative actions to ensure food security. It is also argued that the separation between cities and food sources is directly linked to many of the big problems of today, namely, climate change, obesity, pollution, hunger and poverty (Gorgolewski et al. 2011). In response to these emerging circumstances, many cities around the world have taken action by starting to plan for food production sites and by undertaking actions to support urban gardening. Urban gardening is talked about in new terms, as a strategic and infrastructural action, and cities are increasingly viewed as places for food production (ibid.).

Along with strategies for human survival (including food supply as well as climate change), social matters and lifestyle trends have been driving forces behind the urban gardening movement (Anderson 2014, Wiman 2014). Gardening has become a means to reconnect with and to understand the many aspects of food that have been lost in the urbanisation process, such as how food grows, what crops grow best given the local conditions and how to harvest. These aspects are part of urban citizens becoming better informed as consumers and gaining a greater appreciation for food and where it comes from.

Urban gardening has become a tool for social inclusion and is promoted as a way to establish social sustainability through building so-called community capacity (Anderson 2014). Municipalities around the world have recognised the power of urban gardening communities and their potential both to become meeting places, mixing diverse groups within a neighbourhood, and to develop a strong sense of community. Urban gardens are intended to be places where people can learn how to interact with people who have different backgrounds and cultures and who come from different generations (ibid.).

URBAN GARDENING COMMUNITIES AS URBAN ARCHIVES

The project presented in this paper explores yet another aspect of urban gardens as a means to contribute to sustainable cities—marginalised communities that engage in urban gardening. The marginalised communities we are referring to are communities not considered weaker but as groups that through their practices can inform others about what is possible in a future society.

Our conceptual model to start thinking about these matters is based on the assumption that an urban gardening community can be 'read' as an archive. In this model, the urban garden is perceived as a performed memory expressed through the cultural background and experiences of the gardener, potentially serving as a source of knowledge. As opposed to a seed bank (which might be an obvious subject of study in research on urban gardens in relation to archives), our archive is the community, the people who garden. Further, another point of departure is research in the Third World claiming that in urban gardening communities women use their land to cultivate produce for their families and thus play a crucial role in the development of a sustainable future (Danso et al. 2004). Women who engage in urban gardening networks results in reduction in poverty, improvements in the livelihoods of individuals and families (Marteleira 2014).

Derrida (1995), who has had a major influence on the archival discourse, proposes a reading of the archive as an aim to understand the 'drive to collect, organize and conserve the human record' (Manoff 2004, p.11). He also suggests that an archive affirms the past, present and future: it preserves the records of the past, and it embodies the promise of the present to the future (Derrida 1995, p.29). The kind of material that cannot be accommodated by the archive is excluded from our historical record. What is excluded and included in our traditional kinds of archives, and who is invited to contribute? In our project, we explore in what ways an urban gardening community can be read as an archive, can become a platform for transmitting and storing knowledge and can contribute both to a more fair representation of society and to democratic societal structures. What if urban gardening is perceived as an archival practice that collects, organises, preserves and provides access to historical account, one that can become a social resource for communities of practices that engage in urban development and societal change?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

We enter this exploratory study with open-ended questions, but to keep focus we have formulated some initial research questions that will be scrutinised and further developed by the urban gardening communities we collaborate with. Each site and community will provide and request specific contextual variations of interventions and results.

To summarise the discussion thus far, the overall aim is explore the potential of urban gardening communities both to be read as urban archives and to become a platform for transmitting knowledge and connecting different communities of practices that engage in urban development and societal change (e.g., design communities and urban gardening communities).

Our two initial questions are as follows.

- How can an urban garden perceived as a performed memory be materialised and visualised?
- In what ways can the urban archive become a social resource in the process of urban development and societal change?

RESEARCH APPROACH

The research interventions conducted within this project are based on principles and methods from the fields of participatory design and artistic practices and research. The participatory design approach has its roots in action research traditions and can, in short, be described as a diverse collection of principles and practices aimed at making technologies, tools, environments, businesses and social institutions more responsive to human needs (see, e.g., Simonsen and Robertson 2013). The design processes often take the form of iterative experiments providing a toolbox of different practical techniques to engage users (e.g., methods for doing mock-ups and rapid co-operative prototypes). Participatory design practices also typically include ethnographically inspired studies of the practices, as well as interviews and dialogue (Björgvinsson et al. 2010, Halse et al. 2010).

Further on, we will undertake and create artistic practices and research with a focus on interventions in the public realm and critical actions in the making of urban development. The research team will learn from and collaborate with artists operating at the intersection of art and cultural activism who have developed new forms of collaboration with diverse audiences and communities (Kester 2014). Informed by artistic and curatorial practices that suggest alternative models of citizen participation and tools for sustainable urban development, we enhance our knowledge and critical perspectives. Through transdisciplinary actions and explored ongoing practices, empirical material is gathered and further used in critical analyses of space and social relationships. The research process is developed through the conceptual framework 'Living as Form' (Thompson 2012) and socially engaged art practices as activism. Our argument aligns with Thompson's claim that 'symbolic gestures can be powerful and effective methods for change' (ibid. p.18).

PREVIOUS RESEARCH INTERVENTIONS

Since the start of the project, in September 2014, a series of research interventions and experiments have been conducted, and collaborations have been initiated

to identify essential angles to explore within the scope of the project.

In collaboration with master's students in media software design, we have been exploring how digital archival practices and open data could support urban gardening practices. The students were running interactive co-design processes together with a group of urban gardeners and developed two design concepts, which could be described as 'tools for urban archiving'. These concepts will not be further discussed in this paper; they are mentioned since the knowledge gained serves as an important foundation for the work we are about to launch in the coming series of research interventions.



Figure 1: Prototyping at a design workshop with the urban gardeners.

Eat a Memory is a series of interventions within the project where eatables from urban gardens are part of exploring food and meals as performed memories and cooking as archival practice. 'Your grandparents' gardens' was the theme of the first session; the participants were asked to bring a dish they remembered from childhood. It could be an ingredient, a fruit, a soup, a dessert—something based from their grandparents' gardens. The evening was about performing memories by tasting flavours from their childhoods and sharing these memories by sharing a meal together. Through the acts of cooking and eating, memories were performed, materialised and shared. All dishes, stories and recipes were collected and stored in a public digital archive.

The Greenhouse Artist Talks is a series of public lectures organised as a part of the project. In the series, local and international artistic practitioners were invited to explore and present work related to urban gardening and archives. The program served as an important meeting place for artists with an interest in urban sustainability. A result of the gatherings is a network of practitioners who also will be engaged in coming phases of the project.

COMING RESEARCH INTERVENTIONS

Based on the experiences gained so far, the next step is to establish collaborations with four specific urban gardening communities in four different cities (two in

Scandinavia, one in central Europe and one in the US). The members of these communities are already engaged in practices of urban gardening, and these communities will serve as our case studies. It will be not a representative selection but a selective selection based on relationships and connections previously established in the project.

The design process and exploration will evolve in an organic process and will be the result of dialogues—us encountering, prototyping with and learning from the communities and their practices. The outcomes from the first intervention will inform the next intervention, which will inform the next, and so on. Through this organic process, we will not only develop an understanding of how to materialise and visualise the urban garden as a performed memory, we will also build new urban archives and the theoretical filters to be used to further analyse the outcome.

CLOSING WORDS

In this exploratory paper, we present the initial stage in researching urban gardening perceived as a performed memory expressed through the cultural background and experiences of the gardener. We launch the idea that urban gardening communities can be perceived as urban archives that have the potential to become a social resource for communities of practice engaging in urban development and societal change, such as the design community.

The project is still in a phase of preparation, but we soon expect both to start prototyping and experimenting with archival practices for urban archiving and to analyse the role of this urban archive (i.e., the urban gardening community) from a societal and democratic point of view. As Derrida argues, ‘there is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution and its interpretation’ (Derrida 1995, p. 4). What if practices of urban archiving can contribute to processes of democratisation, create a holistic view of our cities, and become a social resource for communities of practices that engage in urban development and societal change?

REFERENCES

- Anderson, Mallory (2014) *Building Community Capacity through Urban Agriculture : A case study of Malmö and Minneapolis’ use of Community Gardening for Social Sustainability*, Master thesis, Lund: IIIIEE, Lund University.
- Björgvinsson, Erling, Ehn, Pelle and Per-Anders Hillgren (2010) ‘Participatory design and democratizing innovation’, *Participatory Design Conference*, Sydney.
- Danso G., Cofie O., Annang L., Obuobie E. and Keraita B (2004). ‘Gender and Urban Agriculture: The case of Accra, Ghana’. *Main streaming in Urban Food Production and Food Security*, Accra, Ghana.
- Derrida, Jacques (1995) *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression trans*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Dziedzic, Nancy and Zott M., Lynn (2012) *Urban Agriculture*, Farmington Hills: Greenhaven Press.
- Ehn, Pelle, Topgaard, Richard and Nilsson, Elisabet M. (Eds.) (2014) *Making Futures: Marginal Notes on Innovation, Design, and Democracy*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Halse, Joachim, Brandt, Eva, Clark, Brendon and Binder, Thomas (2011) *Rehearsing the Future*, Copenhagen: The Danish Design School Press.
- Gerst, Michael D., Raskin, Paul D. and Johan Rockström (2014) ‘Contours of a Resilient Global Future’, *Sustainability 2014*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp.123–135.
- IPCC (The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) (2014), *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability*, Cambridge, UK, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Kester, Grant H. (2004) *Conversation pieces: community + communication in modern art*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- [URL/project web site](#). (Accessed 2015-01-21)
- Manoff, Marlene (2004) ‘Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines’, *Libraries and the Academy*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 9–25.
- Marteleira, Michelle (2014). A Snapshot of SUCO in Peru: Gender Equality and Urban Farming for Sustainable Development. SUCO. suco.org/suco/a-snapshot-of-suco-in-peru/?lang=en (Accessed 2015-01-21)
- Simonsen, Jesper and Robertson, Toni (2013) *The Routledge Handbook of Participatory Design*, New York, NY: Routledge.
- Thompson, Nato (Ed.) (2012) *Living as form: Socially Engaged Art From 1991-2011*, New York, Cambridge, MA: Creative times books, MIT Press.
- Wiman, Veronica (2014) ‘Approaching Urban Gardening/Farming: Initiatives by Citizens, Municipalities, and Governments’, *Podium*, vol. 8, *Universitetet i Tromsø, Det kunstfaglige fakultet*.