

**Intergenerational learning environments in community contexts:
Some historical and contemporary reflections
on 'gardens' in urban spaces**

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Introduction

During my first visit to Ljubljana in 1994, I observed the marketing efforts of Dutch vegetable growers praising their tomatoes and cucumbers in the main square of this beautiful city. Ana Krajnc asked me whether Dutch tomatoes would be better than those she grew on her balcony. I assured her that Dutch tomatoes would be orange and tasteless, while her tomatoes would be deep red and taste like tomatoes should taste. Ana, I hope you are still growing and enjoying tomatoes in your urban space!

This anecdote is a microcosm of global patterns in the production, distribution and consumption of vegetables. Dutch producers are key players in the global marketplace for vegetables. Within the European Union, Slovenia has the lowest level of vegetable and fruit self-sufficiency and is the most dependent upon imported products. According to the Urban Furrows project, based in the city of Maribor, Slovenians are increasingly confronted by the limited availability of fresh, preferably locally grown, seasonal vegetables and fruit. This is a growing global problem particularly for low-income families, unemployed, poor and older people when sourcing their vegetables in urban areas.

This paper examines the historic development of gardens in urban spaces together with the contemporary dimensions of the ‘community gardening’ movement in terms of ‘intergenerational learning’.

Gardens in urban space

Alternative approaches to the production and consumption of vegetables, fruit, and herbs have resulted in the increasing significance of gardening in urban spaces during the past decade. Urban Furrows argues that

“Urban gardens, balcony troughs, fruit parks and promenades, rooftop gardens and hedges instead of iron or concrete fences – all of the above are used by self-organized groups in numerous countries around the world to renew and transform public spaces.” On the hand, urban gardening is a response to the all-too-obvious dangers to health posed by the consumption of high levels of sugar and salt contained in industrially-produced ‘fast foods’, and indeed all ‘processed foods. On the other hand, ‘urban gardening’ is characterised by alternative forms of food production which are intimately linked with more informed patterns of producing and consuming food. Urban Furrows argues that

“Urban gardens represent economic, ecological, cultural and social challenges for the local population. On top of being a place for socializing, exchanges, interactions, self-sufficiency and learning, they also provide a social and cultural corrective, while simultaneously re-connecting life with the direct experience of providing for human needs.”

It is important to identify different historical and contemporary forms of urban gardens. Historically, the ‘**allotment**’ or ‘garden plot’ has been the dominant form of urban gardening. Allotments comprise small areas of land tended by individual tenants and their families to produce food for their own consumption. In the case of ‘**urban farming**’, however, produce is grown by individual tenants, or owners, of ‘market gardens’, which source local food markets on a ‘for-profit basis’. The Trnovo and Krakovo gardens here in central Ljubljana are examples of such urban farming. A ‘**community garden**’ is defined by the American Community Gardening Association as “*Any piece of land gardened by a group of people*”. They focus on a community-based understanding of the social relationships between the production and consumption of food. There are, however,

different types of community gardens as physical and social spaces. They can be spaces, for example, where the entire area is tended collectively for common use. However, community gardens can also source non-profit 'food banks' including the weekly distribution of 'food baskets' for poorer local inhabitants. A variation upon this theme is the 'pick-it' community garden where local inhabitants are encouraged to pick and consume the crops grown by others. However, community gardens can also provide an open space offering opportunities for recreation, exercise, and education while also functioning as therapeutic and healing centres for people with mental and physical disabilities. The common thread is that these different types of community garden are actively maintained by the gardeners themselves for the benefit of local communities. Variations among urban gardens are influenced by different interpretations of both 'community' and 'gardens' in urban spaces. Urban gardens are valuable resources in neighbourhoods and they can transform derelict spaces such as public parks, old factories, vacant building sites, etc. At the intersection of notions of community and garden there are key issues of enclosure, inclusion and exclusion. In the context of this specific ESREA network, gardens can be also examined as urban spaces where 'intergenerational learning' takes place.

Historical roots of urban gardens as 'learning spaces'

Adult educators have tended to ignore gardens as 'learning environments' in the broader landscape of formal, non-formal and informal (adult) learning in urban spaces. Among historians of adult learning, for example, there has been a marked lack of interest in the development of the long-standing tradition 'allotments' for the working class. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, allotments in urban areas manifested a European-wide movement and were known as 'jardins ouvriers', 'Schrebergarten', 'volkstuinten', etc. They were a consequence of industrialization and urbanization during this period of European modernization. Rural populations migrated to towns and cities to find employment and a 'better' life. However, urban working-class families lived under extremely poor conditions with exploitative wages, poor housing, malnutrition, bad health and low life expectancy. In response to the 'social question' posed by the volatile urban working class, philanthropic employers, the churches and local authorities provided open spaces for gardens so that the 'working poor' could grow their own food. Historically allotments have been characterized by social, economic and cultural vulnerability, conflict, and political contestation. Allotments have always been located at a significant distance from 'enlightened' urban spaces such as 'botanical gardens' for the popularization of science, and the genteel middle-class sociability of walks in urban parks in well-to-do city centres. Urban-gardening for the workers was largely located in the margins of industrial cities along railway lines, roads, streams and canals, derelict sites surrounding factories, and, vacant building plots.

'Allotments' were embedded in a social ethic that espoused industriousness, sobriety, respectability, and independence. To the surprise of social reformers, workingmen and their families adopted allotment schemes as their own with enthusiasm and dedication. Individual gardeners rapidly organized themselves in self-organized allotment associations. Allotments throughout Europe were transformed into 'the practice of democracy'. Local allotment associations provided the working class with an unparalleled opportunity for grassroots political participation and gave way to a marked increase in working-class political awareness in many countries.

From the late nineteenth century to the end of the First World War, an overwhelming increase in allotment cultivation was obvious throughout Europe including the Baltic, Central European and Balkan countries. Urban food production became a permanent feature of the lives of many workers and their families. Food production within urban areas, especially fruit and vegetable production in allotments and home gardens, became essential for survival especially in periods of food shortages caused by military conflicts, which resulted in black markets for food and exploitative prices. These phenomena were replicated throughout Europe and were enhanced by the Great Depression, and the Second World War.

Following the Second World War, patterns of working-class participation in allotment gardening significantly diverged in Western and Eastern Europe. In Western European countries, the increasing availability of mass-produced foodstuffs, especially processed foods together with refrigeration, reduced the dependence of the working class upon their own efforts to produce vegetables and fruit. Allotments became increasingly unused, vacant plots became derelict, or they were turned into urban spaces for family recreation rather than production. Since the late 1950s, there has been a major historical shift towards the cultural use of allotments as recreational spaces and locations for social gatherings for families and friends. This often added open space to insufficient family housing in crowded inner-city areas.

Under the communist regimes in Baltic, Central and Balkan Europe, however, there was a marked persistence in the use of allotments to produce food which reflected the efforts of families to be self-sufficient in the face of systematic food shortages. Moreover, there was also an increase in participation in the informal economy of self-sufficiency among those with 'party privileges' and access to land, known as the 'Dacha economy'. The utilization of urban land for food production remained a major household activity until the collapse of communist regimes in 1989. As such, the large-scale urban gardening practised in Central and Eastern Europe raises interesting questions. The key question is how household economies have changed between the communist and post-communist periods. What is the impact upon the persistence of urban gardening as an economic need, or as recreation in 'transition economies'?

Since the mid-1990s, urban gardening for food self-sufficiency has returned to the activities of many families, communities and social movements throughout Europe. In many countries, there are now long waiting-lists for allotments, and community gardens and urban farming are increasingly significant on the sustainable development agenda at national, regional and local levels. Given the ongoing economic crisis since 2008, the economic needs of households, together with mass unemployment, are impacting upon sourcing of food by households, and alternative forms of production and consumption in community-based gardening. There are now competing claims upon urban spaces. Existing urban allotments are threatened by market forces in many cities and towns. Derelict industrial sites and vacant building plots in urban areas are now 'contested spaces' in the struggle to establish community gardens. Illegal sowing of seeds in urban spaces, often at night, is now propagated as a political act by the 'guerilla gardening' movement. The politics of urban gardening today involve struggles between local activists, property developers and local authorities worldwide, and this is also the case in Ljubljana.

Modalities of ‘urban gardens’ as intergenerational learning spaces

In Coimbra and Braga in 2011, I examined ‘intergenerational learning’ in terms of different generations participating in a variety of ‘learning environments’ which involve the communication and acquisition of knowledge, skills and sensitivities. Understanding gardens as ‘urban learning spaces’ suggests that they are quite specific physical spaces, sometimes with fences or hedges, where intergenerational learning can take place. However, these urban learning spaces are also ‘real places’ where the social organization of intergenerational learning is influenced by social, political and economic forces at the local level. They are ‘real social spaces’ for the communication and acquisition of knowledge, skills and sensitivities between generations. This learning can involve the development of ‘trans-generational’ subjectivities and identities at the interfaces between families, neighbourhoods, communities, and public institutions. Urban gardens can be intergenerational learning spaces which work to transform passive ‘consumer’ identities into active ‘producer’ identities. This opens up perspectives on the ‘micro-politics’ of intergenerational learning in terms of the development of inclusive ‘citizenship’ identities through self-organization local and democratically organized communities.

It is possible to identify four modalities of urban gardens as potential ‘urban learning spaces’, and their different contributions to intergenerational learning. I make a distinction here between: a) family spaces; b) service-based spaces; c) shared-site spaces; and, d) contested spaces for intergenerational learning.

Urban allotments as ‘*family learning spaces*’ largely involve older family members, such as parents and grandparents, in the intergenerational transfer of knowledge, skills and sensitivities to young family members. Tenants demonstrate a surprising tenaciousness in continuing to cultivate their gardens and involve their families. Furthermore, allotment gardening is an activity largely passed on from one generation to the next within families. In a study carried out in Ljubljana, for example, 88.6% of tenants come from families that long had an allotment and they were attached to these gardens since childhood. Successful family gardening, however, depends upon passing on knowledge, skills and sensitivities from generation to generation. This can involve informal intergenerational learning through watching, doing, talking and telling stories. Urban gardeners can also learn from each other and use other younger/older tenants as informal learning resources. However, knowledge and skills can become dissipated between generations. Gardeners’ cultivation habits can become accommodated to ‘fashionable’ vegetables sold by global commercial providers. Given renewed interest in seasonal and local food, however, older generations may have retained knowledge about ‘forgotten vegetables’ and be ‘seed banks’ for younger gardeners.

Allotments offer urban residents with opportunities to unwind from stress, interact with other members of their families, and engage in physical activity. The contribution of gardening to a healthy and active life-style is increasingly recognized, especially for the elderly. Although allotments are becoming more diverse in their age, ethnic and socio-demographic composition, the majority of allotment gardeners in most countries are older people. Allotments can make a significant contribution to the intergenerational dimensions of the healthy aging agenda. Older allotment gardeners tend to score significantly better on

all measures of health and well-being than non-gardeners of the same age. Greater health and well-being benefits of allotment gardening for older gardeners may be related to the finding that older gardeners are more oriented towards physical activity rather than passive relaxation.

Older allotment gardeners also gain a strong sense of achievement, satisfaction and aesthetic pleasure from their activities. Moreover, allotment movements throughout Europe have involved self-organization and 'the practice of democracy'. Allotment gardeners organize themselves in associations and pay a small membership fee. These are usually managed and run by the participants themselves through democratic processes of elections and establishing their own rules and regulations. Membership grants them democratic rights to determine the associational constitution, elect a committee, and be candidates. Allotments can be significant learning spaces for the development of citizenship. Gardening associations also play a role in the dissemination and acquisition of knowledge, skills and sensitivities through the organization of systematic non-formal and informal learning activities.

From the 1980s onwards, increasing emphasis has been placed upon urban gardens as '*service-based spaces*' for 'intergenerational learning programmes'. These programmes involve intergenerational learning activities initiated by public and private institutions in the fields of education, health, care and welfare services. This has contributed to the expansion of 'school gardens', where the learning undertaken by children is also intended to influence their parents and grandparents knowledge and behaviour with regard to 'healthy eating' habits. The 'slow food' school garden in Condotta in Italy, for example, is a school-based site for community gardening, where young people are taught how to grow vegetables and fruit by older people. There has also been a proliferation of 'organized gardening projects' which target 'at-risk' categories involving different generations. Such projects are often located in the grounds of local schools, hospitals, psychiatric care facilities, and residential and nursing homes for older people. This type of community gardening projects focuses on providing disadvantaged young people with opportunities to interact with older people as positive role models and mentors. Younger people are encouraged to benefit from participation in stable and supportive community environments, while older people are able to gain satisfaction from contributing to their local communities.

These service-based community gardens are 'intergenerational learning spaces' which focus on therapeutic needs such as social contact, physical activity, mobility, health, eating habits, learning disabilities, rehabilitation, and alcohol and drug misuse. In most cases, they explore how relations with older members of local communities can help the young become more effectively integrated into society. They are informed by intergenerational learning activities in urban garden environments which support behavioural change among the young. As such, these urban gardens are based upon the service-based concept of measurable behavioural outcomes among young people. In the main, they do not focus on targeted outcomes for older participants. For example, findings from evaluations indicate that the project goals of service providers were different from the goals of older adults involved as 'mentors' and 'role models'. They look at gardening activities in terms of

‘wellness’, ‘social capital’ and ‘community involvement’ rather than behavioural change among the younger target groups.

Gardens as *‘shared-site spaces’* for intergenerational learning primarily involve associational contexts in local communities where different generations can learn together, and from each other, in relation to shared concerns. This involves bringing older and younger people together to work on common goals and shared solutions to community problems. Common concerns can be the management of public and cultural spaces such as parks, leisure venues, museums, and libraries, etc. The activities may facilitate discussion between older and younger people about what action should be taken – for example, forums to share points of views about different potential uses of public spaces – or can be more practical – for example, clearing wasteland and turning it into a community garden. Using community and public spaces for intergenerational learning also helps to ensure that community assets are used equally by all social groups. As well as developing solutions to local problems, these types of activities are intended to promote increased understanding between generations.

These non-formal learning environments include a very diverse range of gardening activities based upon voluntary participation in voluntary in associations, clubs, churches, hobbies and local heritage projects. Shared-sites can open up a new agenda for intergenerational learning with an emphasis on mixed-generational housing, mutual caring, and safety in ‘urban spaces’, such as public parks, squares, and derelict sites. Such urban spaces are often poorly maintained, run-down, and regarded by older people as threatening places. Regeneration projects based on intergenerational community gardening can become urban spaces where the generations can learn from each other to their mutual benefit. Shared-site activities involving intergenerational learning can also link community gardens with community arts. This can include intergenerational learning through the plastic and performing arts including sculpture, photography, painting, film, dance, music, singing, and drama. In Portugal, the regeneration of the central park in Aviero as reported at the Braga conference last year is a classic case.

The more than 50 Jardins Partagés (JP) [Neighbourhood Gardens] in Paris serve as another example. JPs are established and animated by local associations on small public plots of land made available by local authorities. The aim of the JPs is quite simply a *‘...way for people to get down in the dirt’*. Through the creation of shared community spaces, they constitute social and cultural hubs, fostering a sense of community between different generations of local residents. They can be major players in the urban renewal agenda, improving environmental quality, as well as re-creating social life in their neighbourhood. Moreover, JPs frequently provide the stages for shows, parties, children’s activities, opportunities to involve other citizens, especially ‘older’ neighbourhood residents. They often contribute to the community garden’s life by donating plants, gardening tools and furniture, offering their knowledge and skills, and sharing their memories of the neighbourhood with younger generations.

Urban gardens can be become, however, *‘contested spaces’* with a potential for intergenerational learning. The development of urban gardens as a space for self-organized knowledge, skills and sensitivities between the generations, whether in neighbourhoods,

communities, action groups, and social movements, can bring them into conflict with other stakeholders such as local authorities, land-owners, property developers and other inhabitants. Non-formal and informal learning activities in urban spaces, for example, relate to co-operative activities in relation to issues concerning the environment, housing and homelessness, health, care, transport, safety, derelict buildings, redundant industrial sites, and public spaces such as squares, parks and gardens. Empowerment through intergenerational learning is a process centred in the local community involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring and group participation through which people lacking an equal share of 'public' resources, such as space, and struggle to gain or retain access to these resources.

Ljubljana itself is city where there are ongoing struggles to retain long-standing urban gardens, resistance to designating new spaces for this purpose, and the occupation of derelict land for community gardening purposes. This necessarily involves community gardeners of all ages in processes of social capital building, empowerment, and political struggle with regard to legitimate claims on public and private resources such as land in urban spaces. The JPs in Paris have also become catalyzing places for intergenerational participation in public life at the neighbourhood level. They host debates around local issues and stimulate people to re-appropriate their public awareness and commitment to self-organization. Sometimes, the political connotation is obvious and the JP can become a 'hard' space for social mobilization to retain public green spaces and reclaim derelict land. This can also lead to direct action on the streets to address the needs of older people in the local community who are less mobile, sometimes homeless, and often seek shelter in community gardens. Community gardens can also involve intergenerational activities involved in the empowerment of those from different generations who share sexual orientations such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-gendered action groups.

Conclusion: What is growing in the urban gardens of Ljubljana?

This paper has explored the history of urban gardening in terms of how intergenerational learning in a variety of urban gardens contributes to individual and social transformation. From the early 19th century onwards, urban gardens have been significant intergenerational learning spaces for the dissemination and acquisition of knowledge, skills and sensitivities. This remains the case today. A great deal of learning takes place during in urban gardens. This can involve the dissemination and acquisition of knowledge, skills and sensitivities associated with the individual and collective activities involved in the production and consumption of food. This learning is not limited to the techniques of tilling the soil, sowing and tending for plants, but also includes learning about the active role citizens can play in producing food rather than being the passive consumers of global capitalist products. Furthermore, urban gardening can also contribute to the acquisition of more diffuse competences such as personal development, a sense of well-being, social capital and community involvement. This can include acquiring the knowledge, skills and sensitivities appropriate to the trans-generational citizenship involved in running a community-based democratic organization.

Community gardens are increasingly becoming spaces for political contestation. Competition for use of urban space for gardening, housing and office buildings has emerged as a major problem, and this has been enhanced by the ongoing economic crisis.

Analysis of the use of urban land highlights the significance of politics for grassroots organizations within a market-centric, neo-liberal economic framework. This involves garden advocates of all ages in action to raise the scope of these controversies beyond the scale of individual plots and community gardens to the city level, and beyond to the democratic organization of the state itself. An appropriate motto might be "*If you can dig it, learn from it*".

The seventeenth-century political movement called the "Diggers" did exactly that. We have much to learn from the history of gardening as a social and political activity.