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‘Jardins partagés’ in Paris – urban gardens in the context of sustainable urban planning

Paris is blooming. For some years now the political and administrative leaders of the French capital have been promoting a considerable number of urban gardens, in French called ‘jardins partagés’. Most of these gardens are temporary projects on vacant lots used by inhabitants in order to create space for collective use. The aim of the project participants is not so much the cultivation of fruit and vegetables for food supply, but rather the creation of social links within their neighborhoods and spaces for human interaction outside the home.

The starting point for these shared gardens – the literal translation of ‘jardins partagés’ – is the idea of sharing public space in a city where green spaces are rare and where the existing public parks and gardens with their prestigious flowerbeds are designed to promote an imposing image. In this context, these shared gardens have come to fulfill a social function for their users, and they give a new importance to previously unused spaces. Because of this revalorization, they have become now part of public policy and urban planning.

The aim of this article is to give an insight into the geographical and social situation of the gardens within the spatial organization of Paris (section 1) and to introduce some types of shared gardens (section 2). Section 3 offers a short presentation of some initiators and groups in charge of garden projects. The activities by political and administrative leaders of Paris to support the gardens (described in section 4) will be connected to the wider context of urban sustainability policies in Paris (section 5).

But first of all some reflections on the term ‘jardin partagé’. Why call ‘shared garden’ a type of social activity widely known as ‘community garden’ in the English speaking world (see e.g. Ferris, Norman and Sempik 2001; Glover, Shinew and Parry 2005; Rosol and Weiß 2005; Meyer-Renschausen 2005)? One might wonder why the seemingly more adequate translation ‘jardins communautaires’ is not employed by the French. This is rather a cultural and political than a mere linguistic question. In order to understand this interesting conceptual shift we will have to make clear the meanings of ‘community’ in English and ‘communauté’ in French. I will do that very briefly here. The scientific and political impacts of the differing concepts are enormous (see Schnapper1998).

The term ‘communauté’ is in French very often identified with the English word ‘community’ and its connotations of ethnic or ‘racial’ origins even though the English term is not restricted to this meaning. Within migration research or identity politics, the English term ‘community’ refers to a concept of society that sees itself as constituted by different groups of immigrants from various cultural or racial origins. The social relations between individuals are considered to be founded by common

historical and cultural bonds of these groups. Ethnic identity is therefore a strong political and social concept in the Anglo-Saxon context.

This idea of societal togetherness of groups is in complete contradiction to the French conception of individual integration into social organization: The premise for being part of the society is to leave behind any historical references to cultural or regional origins as well as group affiliations that could be identified as ethnic. The ideal of the social and political subject, the ‘citoyen’, is the individual without specific marks, gifted with reason and the will to live in freedom – free from assigned group identities.

Thus, the terms ‘communauté’ and ‘jardin communautaire’ as literal translations of ‘community’ and ‘community garden’ would lend themselves to a misleading political interpretation. By the way, this was one of the reasons why the Parisian municipal councilor from the Green Party in charge of urban sustainability rejected the first attempts to create such garden projects: They seemed too closely affiliated to the Anglo-Saxon societal model. The invention of the term ‘jardin partagé’, shared garden, helped to install the first gardens.

1. Paris and the location of the ‘jardins partagés’

Paris can be considered as a rich city with above-average wages and real estate prices. Nevertheless, the economic gap between the top and the low level of the social range is enormous. The only way to afford living in Paris is either to have a high income to buy an apartment or to have access to subsidized housing. “Aisé ou aidé” is the catchphrase for this range of extremes – either be rich or assisted. Speaking on a general level the Western and Southern parts of the city are characterized by high-income households whereas the North and the East comprise more households with lower incomes or no income at all.

Most of the gardens are situated in the North and in the East of the city. These are the historically poorer neighborhoods of Paris that had a greater proportion of working class people in former decades and nowadays are inhabited either by immigrants or by the new middle classes of employees in advertising, media or finance, artists or computer engineers (see Pinçon/Pinçon-Charlot 2004). As in many big cities, the social and economic variation among inhabitants is to be found on the small scale of neighborhoods. People from different social backgrounds and with very different living conditions reside quite closely together – and this in a city with an extremely high density, compared to other European agglomerations: 202 persons per hectare (London: 76, Berlin: 37, Moscow: 96). Considerably higher densities are only to be found in some African or Asian cities (ibid.).

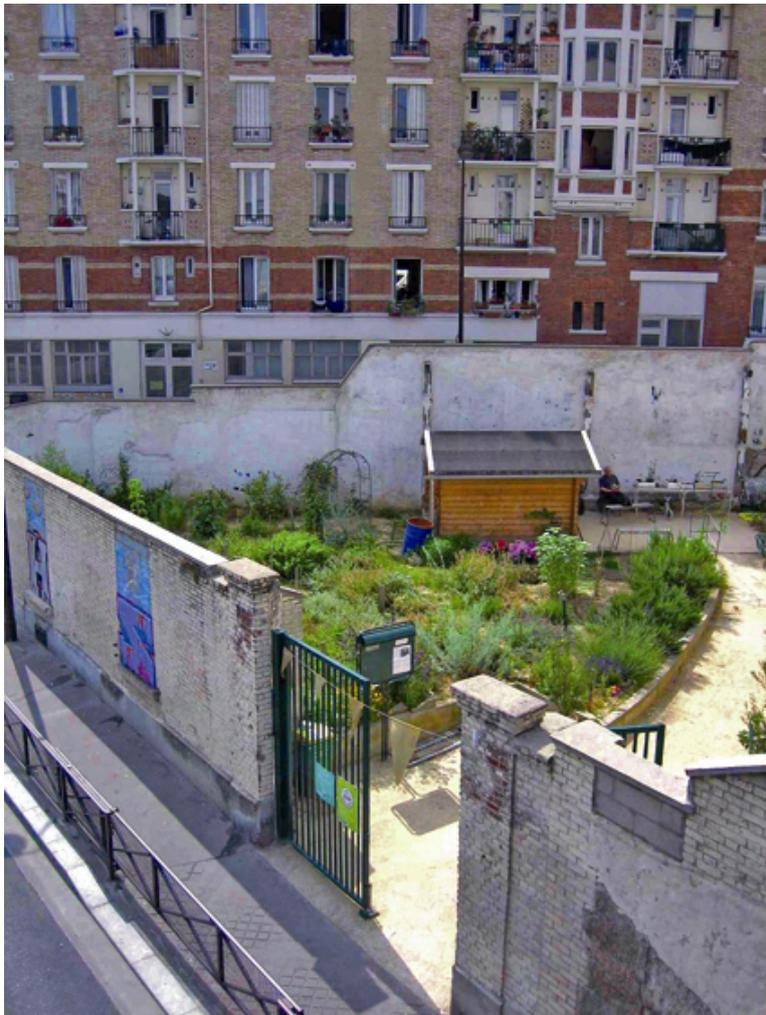


Quelle: Mairie de Paris: Jardins partagés. Programme Main Verte 2006

2. Types of shared gardens

The first garden projects existed already at the end of the 1990's when groups of people involved in social neighborhood work gathered to create green spaces on unused or abandoned urban land. In 2001, for the first time after more than forty years of conservative city government, a coalition between the Socialist Party and the Green party won the municipal elections. At first the Green Party councilor in charge was reluctant to pursue the idea of shared gardens, but eventually the various initiatives won his support.

Some of the gardens have been created in the context of urban rehabilitation and renewal of neighborhoods in East Paris, an area that had been neglected by the conservative administration for decades. In some cases, gardens have been built on parcels of land where uninhabited houses were demolished in order to create more open space in these very densely inhabited neighborhoods. Other gardens are situated in public parks to encourage the sense of responsibility of residents and users for "their" green spot. In some cases, the 'jardins partagés' are part of the municipal management of vacant lots that had been designated for construction at a later date. Sometimes, gardens give a facelift to neglected space within large social housing complexes.





Photos : Christine Bauhardt

The creation of such a ‘jardin partagé’ requires a non-profit association that organizes the garden activities. It is pretty easy to establish an association in France; there are no real administrative barriers to overcome. As soon as the association is established the Department of parks and open spaces evaluates the garden project and decides whether it is viable. This department provides the soil, the water supply and the fences and signs a contract with the association for a space of time between one and five years.

The garden is considered to be a public space and therefore it has to be open to the public at regular intervals; that means at least one day of the week-end and if possible on Wednesday afternoons¹. The Green Thumb Contract, la Charte Main Verte², sets the rules for the use of the garden, which aim primarily to create social relationships and communication in the neighborhood and to protect the environment. It is a basic requirement to respect the environment and the principals of organic gardening in order to contribute to biodiversity.

3. Start-up and maintenance

Some of the garden projects originate as neighborhood initiatives by politically active groups, like for example the association of the “Quartier St. Bernard”. The “Nomad Garden” was one of the first gardens to sign the Green Thumb Contract in spring 2003. This garden plot measures only 273 square meters and is one of the vacant lots in the extremely densely populated 11th district (arrondissement) of Paris. The association’s activities are not limited to the cultivation of the garden. It organizes sports courses for adults as well as dancing classes for girls and soccer training for boys, and there is tutoring for kids with problems at school. In addition, the association is involved with a group of activists struggling for decent housing for migrants and poor people in the neighborhood.

Another kind of association is “Espaces 19” in the 19th district in the North of Paris. This district shows some unique characteristics: In opposition to the general trend of population decline in the other parts of Paris, the population of this district is growing, the density is even higher than the Parisian average, the unemployment rate is higher than anywhere else in the city, the proportion of social housing is 41 per cent (Paris: 20 per cent), and a quarter of the inhabitants are younger than 20 years old. Many of them are descendants of former immigrants. In this district the association “Espaces 19” has been involved for more than 25 years now in community activities and is in charge of several social and leisure centers in the neighborhood. The association runs a number of gardens in the 19th district, specially created to increase the quality of open space in large social housing complexes. Initially, social workers began to transform the neglected spaces into gardens to involve children spending their free time in the local social center. They were joined by women living in the neighborhood who

¹ In France, on Wednesday afternoons there is no school. The idea is that children can spend their free afternoon in the garden.

² The literal translation would be „The Charter of the Green Hand“.

wanted to grow herbs and vegetables they could not find in European stores. In 2004, the association signed a Green Thumb Contract with the city of Paris.

These two examples show that the initiative for a shared garden can take place in a more or less institutionalized framework. The association “Espaces 19” represents the case of community work where social workers discover the potential of a garden for common activities outside the traditional spaces of social work as e.g. the social center. These activities go together with a new appropriation of public space by inhabitants of high rise buildings. The association “Quartier St. Bernard” is the case of individuals gathering around leisure activities which the garden is part of. The gardens then give a facelift to the negative image of the neighborhoods, with their old or neglected buildings. It could be that these gardens are likely to contribute to gentrification processes, but the pressure on real estate prices by market forces in Paris is so high that these processes can hardly be stopped.



In the 11th district



In the 19th district

Photos: Christine Bauhardt

4. Activities to support garden initiatives by the Parisian administration

The city of Paris encourages Parisians to create a shared garden or to participate in existing garden projects. The Green Thumb Contract provides a guarantee to assure that these gardens are part of the city's public space. Even if in nearly all cases there is a fence to protect the gardens from vandalism, their character is public and not private. An employee of the Department of parks and open spaces emphasized in an interview I conducted with him that this was the most important concern for him. Hence, the rules to guarantee public accessibility, to organize common events for the neighborhood and to publish the name of the association and its telephone number are key components of the contract.



Photo: Christine Bauhardt

It is part of the city's objectives to encourage civic life and to strengthen social bonds within the neighborhoods. The principles of urban sustainability – fresh air, economic use of water, consciousness of waste problems – are supposed to be part of the education especially, but not exclusively of kids. The users of the gardens have to practice ecological gardening and adapted water and waste management. The Department of parks and open spaces offers regularly education and training in eco-sensitive gardening. The gardens represent spaces for biodiversity even in a densely populated city, but the growing of food is not promoted officially, nor is it the main reason for the people involved in shared gardens. What they are looking for is open space close to their homes and the chance “to till the soil”, as one interviewee said.

One of the difficulties encountered by politicians as well as by the people engaged in a garden initiative is the moment when a garden has to give way to a construction project. When a garden project is getting off the ground both sides agree to the ephemeral character of the future garden. As noted before, the contract between the city and the users is limited to a duration of five years maximum. The story of the “Jardin solidaire”, the garden of solidarity, in the 20th district exemplifies these problems.

This garden came into being in the late nineties when a group of people – artists, individuals engaged in alternative political initiatives – took over an abandoned plot of 2.500 square meters and transformed it into a wild garden. In 2004, they signed the contract with the city and became part of the officially recognized ‘jardins partagés’. As the site was located in an important urban rehabilitation zone, the Parisian planning administration had already made plans to construct a gymnasium there. It can be easily understood that in 2005, when the construction work was to begin, the people were extremely upset that they had to leave their wonderful garden. In the meantime, the plants had grown and people identified very much with what they had created. After a long and public debate the administration and the association found a compromise and the garden initiative had to move to a nearby public garden where they have begun a new project. But for sure, the neighborhood has lost an exceptional open space – in exchange for a new gymnasium.



The ‘Jardin Soldaire’ in the 20th district in 2004



The construction site in 2007

Fotos: Christine Bauhardt

5. Urban sustainability policies in Paris

Since 2001, when the new city government was elected, urban planning in Paris has made a considerable shift to sustainability. The keystone of this policy is the renewal of public urban space. Great efforts have been made to regain public space for non-motorized mobility and places for people to spend time outdoors. One of the most interesting elements of this policy is the reintroduction of the tramway as a demonstrative symbol for alternative urban mobility vis-à-vis the use of the private car. The improvement of public transport in general is highly significant in a city where traffic congestion is legendary (see Bauhardt 2005). The bus lanes have been widened to ensure more regular service since the busses are no longer stuck in the traffic jams. The city of Paris enhances the use of bicycles by lending them in great numbers and at a low token price. Of course, all these measures take away space for cars and dedicate it to alternative modes of mobility: walking, cycling, buses and trams. The appropriation of public space by people is celebrated every summer with the event “Paris Plage” when the large road alongside the river Seine is closed to vehicular traffic and handed over to Parisians and tourists for leisure activities.

Another important contribution to the development of sensitivity for urban sustainability are public awareness campaigns. The House of Air (La Maison de l’air) is a permanent exhibition on air in Paris, the dangers of air pollution and the essential

role of air for healthy living conditions. Another example of activities fostering awareness is the recent Pavillon de l'eau, the water pavilion, devoted to water quality, water pollution and the history and temporary questions of urban water supply.

Thus, the 'jardins partagés' are part of a cluster of endeavors the political and administrative leaders have undertaken to enhance social responsibility and civic engagement and to improve ecological well-being for the city and its inhabitants. These endeavors are not without contradictions as the example of the 'Jardin Solidaire' shows. Choices have to be made, they require negotiation between different needs and goals within the urban planning process.

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