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CIVIC AGRICULTURE AS A PARTICIPATORY ANSWER TO SPRAWL

Richard Ingersoll

First we have to accept that sprawl has become a historic phenomenon, however, I propose that we think of it instead as something permanent that needs renovation. Civic Agriculture as permanent feature of the urban landscape proposes various participatory strategies that could effect more sustainable practices within sprawl.

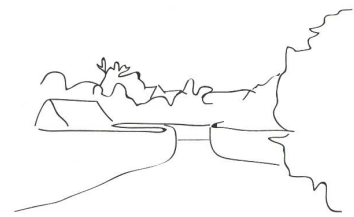
Sprawl, the patchy extension of cities, has surreptitiously replaced the city center as the urban context in most developed countries over the past fifty years. It has generated a new scale of infrastructure consisting of multiple-lane divided highways stretching across vast territories with spider-web-like interchanges, big shopping malls and discounter boxes of companies like Ikea, large arid parking lots and a multitude of indeterminate voids.

Since the 1950s there have been many impassioned but unsuccessful efforts to stop sprawl, from the revival of Garden Cities to New Urbanism. Sprawl, however, has prevailed as the direct expression of the expedient transport of goods and information, and become so deeply intertwined with the post-industrial economy of globalization that if the elements of urban diffusion are forbidden in one place, they will simply crop up in the next. Instead the intention of stopping sprawl, the issue concerning urbanism needs to be restated as stop the unsustainable practices of sprawl. This means restoring, renovating and perhaps reprogramming poorly designed structures, filling in certain areas to obtain urban density, and clearing away others to create better articulated sustainable spaces. I am most concerned with this last issue. It seems to me a way of working in urban regions that could easily increase the sense of participation and contribute to visualizing sustainable practices.

AGRICIVISMO

I call the strategy Agrivismo because it pertains to the Italian situation where I live and where 30 years ago a very successful policy known under this name took root. Agriturismo served as a means of supplementing the rural economy by allowing farmers to include 30% of the hospitality functions in their operations. Roughly translated Agrivismo means 'civic agriculture', a concept that is slightly different from 'urban agriculture', because it implies a greater degree of citizen participation and a social goal. Local agriculture became one of the major victims of sprawl. Speculators sacrificed small farms to make way for subdivisions. Where fruit and vegetables once grew, now consumer culture produced large concrete containers framed with sterile asphalt parking spaces. Fruit and vegetables may still be present on these sites, but only as goods coming from ever greater distances to be sold inside the boxes. In its most reductive manner Agrivismo proposes a strategy of compensation, demanding that 30% of the area of any urban site over 10'000 square meters be left for agricultural functions. Civic agriculture is as old as the ancient city of Ur, but the coordination and programming of it requires a modern approach involving designers, agronomists and sociologists who could make the difference in transforming urban voids both into places of beauty and places of social and environmental recuperation.

Well managed urban cultivation can greatly enhance the beauty of a city at very little cost as most of the labor is provided free of charge by citizen gardeners. Ideally urban territories, instead of carrying the connotation of no-man's-lands, would acquire a new identity as agricultural parks.

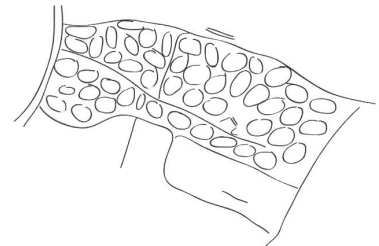


Bund 16 - fig. a
View of the allotments of Theodor Sørensen
Naerum gardens (1950) in Copenhagen.

Bund Siebzehn

PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES

Theodor Sørensen, the great Danish landscape designer, created the most beautiful prototype, the oval gardens of Naerum on the outskirts of Copenhagen in 1950. He surrounded each of the 50 allotments with an elliptical hedge, kept at a uniform 1.4 meter height. Each lot has a standard shed, which can be painted any color the gardener likes. Inside the hedges the gardeners of Naerum do what they please, while between each oval the residual spaces remain public property, treated as a park. Thus a public park was made from private allotments. Most of the allotment gardens in Germany and Switzerland, while they sometimes have the feel of a park, do not leave access to the public. The Schrebergärten (allotment gardens) of Zurich offer a quick example of the participatory type of agricultural use that could result, but a coordinated program of civic agriculture would include different scales of cultivation for various users.



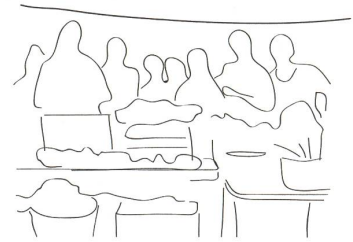
Bund 16 - fig. b
Sketched plan of Theodor Sørensen
Naerum gardens (1950) in Copenhagen.

The Jardin Botanique à la Bastide in Bordeaux, France, by Catherine Mosbach provides another good example. Completed in 2004 on the site of a decommissioned railway switching yard, it includes a didactic greenhouse with plants from all over the world, a seasonal garden with rows of vegetables that are locally in season, a citizen's garden, a reconstruction of the geological formations in the region and a water garden towards the embankment of the Garonne River. The site is surrounded by new housing and the Faculty of Agriculture and begins at a stop of the new tram system. The long thin rows of familiar vegetables, the walls made of piled lumber, the modest water basins placed in staggered formation give the Bastide garden great charm and beauty.



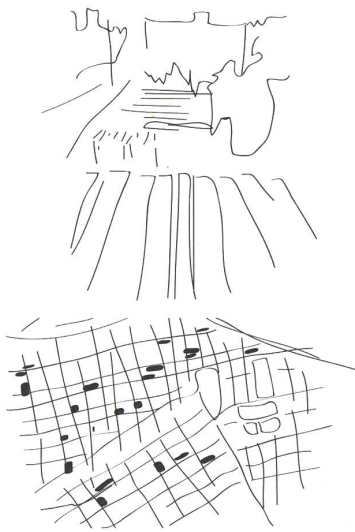
Bund 16 – fig. h-i
Jardin Botanique à la Bastide
showing the mix of uses:
greenhouse, housing,
water gardens, etc.

In East New York, a very poor suburb of Manhattan architects and sociologists from Pratt Institute coordinated the program East New York Farms! working on empty lots where houses had been destroyed by arson and never rebuilt. With the help of a volunteer gardener, they invited 11- to 13-year-old students from the local junior high school, who normally would be prime candidates for youth gangs, to come to work two days a week on farming the site. The students received a small monetary compensation to ensure their presence. Not only did they turn out to be genuinely interested in the gardening process, they were so successful at growing produce they raised enough to sell, and during the third year of activity in 2006, they set up a farmer's market that attracted clients from as far away as Manhattan. Urban farming can thus improve the land, making it safer through the continued presence of creative participants in an otherwise empty and insecure area. It also contributes to the moral fiber of the younger generation by creating a sense of responsibility and by instilling them skills and a feeling of accomplishment.



Bund 16 – fig. g
Young urban people working as gardeners
for the East New York Farms!

In Oxford, UK, about a ten-minute walk east of the university district, a group of sociologists and psychologists started the Restore project. Their garden covers two blocks and is worked on by people who have mental disabilities under the guidance of professional agronomists. They built a coffee shop on Cowley Street that serves as a place to help integrate «normal» people with those who work on the gardens.



Bund 16 - fig. c-f
Before and after view of one lot used as community garden. Empty abandoned lots used as community gardens in the urban grid of Eastern New York. Emblem of the East New York Farms!

During the 1970s on the western edge of Milan, near the Hippodrome, one of Italy's first ecological lobbies, Italia Nostra, created the Bosco in Città (Forest in the City) and the Parco delle Cave, two adjacent public parks with agricultural functions.

Once again the project led to a curious story of social regeneration. This area of abandoned quarries once served as a hot spot for drug dealers and prostitutes. From this negative identity, the recuperation process over the past 25 years succeeded in transforming the quarries into a series of lakes brimming with fish,



Bund 16 - fig. j
Touristic map of the southern agricultural park of Milan.

while the land on the edges of the park was turned into allotment gardens. Each group of 50 gardens has a club house designed by Carlo Masera and his students from the Milan Polytechnic using biological materials such as mud and wood. They worked together with sociologists to assist the associations of gardeners in establishing their own rules for the garden's design and its employment of materials, manure and pesticides. The location of the allotments near the entries to the park acts as a kind of instant social filter as the urban farmers return almost daily to the plots and can visually control who comes by.

These two parks in Milan fit into a larger puzzle known as the Parco Agricolo Sud. The idea to call all of the southern area outside of Milan within a 20-kilometer radius an 'agricultural park' began within the architecture school of Milan Polytechnic in the 1970s. It comprises over sixty different municipalities, not all of which acknowledge the existence of this 'park'. Maps have been posted and signs indicating routes

have been erected in some areas, but in general the park is still an idea waiting to be born. It inspired the planners of Barcelona to study the analyses and develop the similarly conceived Llobregat agricultural park in the 1990s. This park faces similar problems of coordinating many municipalities and convincing farmers to continue to cultivate. The good intention is to conserve agricultural functions so that the rural economy can survive against the pressures of development while making the areas more accessible to the public.

The program for an agricultural park has been easier to manage in smaller cities such as Ferrara, Italy, and Pamplona, Spain. In both cases, the process of restoring the historic walls of the city during the past 20 years has led to the conservation of adjacent parklands that include agricultural functions. In Ferrara there are wheat fields, biodynamic farms and allotments for the elderly. In Pamplona the park includes greenhouses, swimming pools and the bull pens that contain the sacrificial beasts prepared for the yearly festival of San Fermin.

Civic agriculture comprises such things as allotment gardens, rooftop gardens, children's school gardens, therapeutic gardens, gardens for wildlife and parking lots treated like parks. While infrastructure and the replanning of transportation can take decades to achieve and require large budgets and coordinated political backing, citizens' gardens are relatively cost free, involve all walks of life and take less than a year to show results. All of these ways of greening the empty parts of the urban territory increase the participation of citizens, create a better ethic toward environmental issues and improve the look of sprawl.

Richard Ingersoll, born in 1949
 He received a Ph.D. in architectural history from the University of California at Berkeley in 1985. From 1983 - 1998 he served as editor-in-chief of Design Book Review. He has taught design, architectural history, and urban history at Rice University, Houston, University of California, Berkeley, Syracuse University in Florence, Facoltà di Architettura Ferrara, Universidad di Navarra Pamplona, Technion Haifa, Peking University and in 2009 at the ETH Zurich.