

Grow Your Own: Space, Planning, Practice and Everyday Futures of Domestic Food Production

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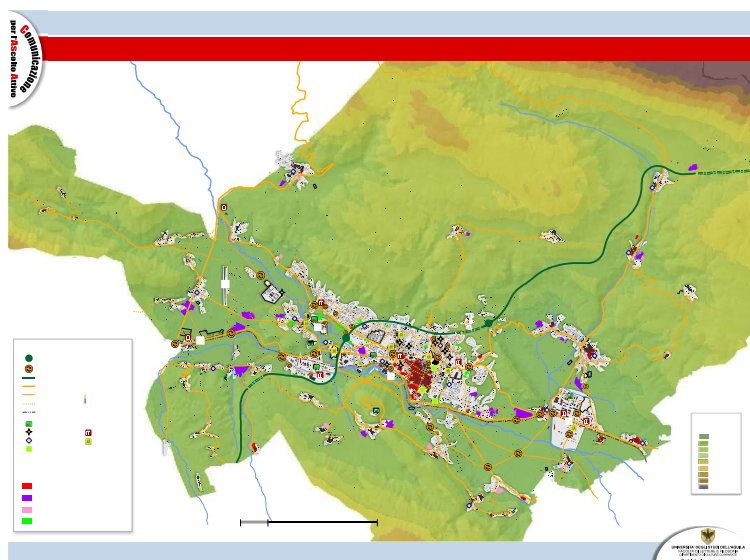
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Abstract

The essay explores the relationship between space, planning and everyday practices, focussing on futures of domestic food growing spaces and practices in Italy and the UK. The first case looks at the recent inclusion of the 'community garden' in the eco urban housing model in L'Aquila, Italy, and traces the relationships between planning, space and practices as this model is imported into a rural community. The second case explores a longer national trajectory of allotments (plots of land rented for growing vegetables) in the UK. Over time, the allotment becomes endowed with different social and cultural meanings, as its position within policy, systems of provision, urban infrastructure and everyday practices changes. Through considering these examples from past and present, we reflect on anticipated food growing futures in different times and places, and ask how these various 'experiments' of policy, planning and practice, are best conceptualised.

Rural Gardening and the Urban Garden in L'Aquila Region, Italy

Drawing on research from Marcore's PhD thesis, this case focuses on the rebuilding of L'Aquila (Central Italy) after a major earthquake that hit the province capital and the neighbouring villages in 2009. Immediately after the quake the Italian Government, led at that time by Silvio Berlusconi, decided to build 19 developments from scratch (new towns) in order to give comfortable shelters to the quake's victims. Camarda, discussed below, was one such development.



Pic. 1: 19 New-Towns (Red spots)

Please use the following format if you wish to cite this essay:

Marcore, E. and Spurling, N. (2016) Grow Your Own: Space, Planning, Practice and Everyday Futures of Domestic Food Production. In: Spurling N. and Kuijer, L. (Eds) Everyday Futures. Lancaster: Institute for Social Futures. <http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/everydayfutures/essay-collection/>, pp.32-40

Immediately after the quake, the Camarda rural area, where the C.A.S.E. blocks (Anti Earthquake Sustainable and Ecological Housing Scheme) were built, was possessed by the State under emergency regulations. In picture 2 it is possible to observe that, before the possession¹, the area was cultivated and fragmented in many lots, mainly for farming. It is commonplace in this mountainous region of the Apennines to find agricultural areas spatially close to historic centres with access to fresh water.



Pic.2: Aerial photograph of cultivated lots on the periphery of Camarda

In this area, big parcels of land for low-scale food production were private property. Sometimes land is also given for free by friends, family or neighbours in a “loan for use” contract (not always written). Inhabitants of Camarda used to grow plants and raise animals in this fragmented field.

After the quake five blocks of flats were built in this area. In this way the Government made an infrastructural transformation and also changed the function from agricultural to urbanised land.



Pic.3 The new C.A.S.E. site (at the front) and the old town (behind)



Pic.4 A representation of the Camarda C.A.S.E. project

It is interesting to notice that, as a part of the new development, a small parcel (at the bottom in Pic. 4) called “polivalente” (multi-purpose) was provided for leisure activities, where inhabitants had to share outdoor public life. The Italian Civil Defence provided not just the infrastructure but also furniture; a semi-permanent large tent where birthdays, marriages and meetings are celebrated. Close to this large tent, an allotment has also been organised. This space for growing plants is explicitly referred to as an “Urban Garden” as shown in picture 6.



Pic. 5: On the left side the large tent and to the right side the garden



Pic. 6: Information plaque with the names of people authorised to use the allotment in 2014. The allotment is explicitly referred to as “Orto Urbano” (Urban Garden).

The “Ente Parco” (the institution that manages the protected area of the Gran Sasso National Park) prepared this allotment mainly because of the number of old people forced to leave their damaged houses and move to the new flats. The general idea was to give a sense of continuity to their previous lives. In the quake’s aftermath many inhabitants tried to stay close to their uninhabitable homes so that they could maintain and feed their vegetable garden and animals. The planners viewed the urban garden as fundamental to preserve this practice. However the garden was not used in the anticipated manner. As noted, the newly introduced urban garden was installed in a farming area where cultivation already existed, with many implicit rules and meanings of garden and gardening. In particular, the vegetable garden as a private and personal, rather than a shared, daily task was central. Gardens provide an exclusive source of food for individuals or families (which could be also redistributed in a second moment) and they are not cultivated in common.

Researchers in Urban Gardening (Bowman Pagano 2004, Mogk, J. E.; Kwiatkowski, S; Weindorf, M. J. 2010) point out the bottom-up creation of collective spaces in cities as a form of re-appropriation of vacant space from neighbours for more sustainable and healthy reasons. Indeed urban gardening is usually considered as a political-economical reaction with social and ecological purpose. Thus in an urban context sharing is really important; the focus is on the appropriation and use of vacant land as a kind of “commons” (Ostrom 1990). On the contrary, the concept of “share” is unusual for cultivation in this mountainous area because vegetable gardening and private property (but also labour) are in close relation.

The urban garden project had initial success as local inhabitants, mainly retired people but also housewives and immigrants, spent part of their day in the garden. It is interesting to notice that farmers who were not dispossessed of their land continued to cultivate their own vegetable garden rather than cultivating the new area. A peasant who had lost their garden, and who had the right to cultivate the urban garden but didn’t take it, explained the reasons why, saying that “he felt like a prisoner there”. The Urban Garden model, though aiming to enable vegetable gardening actually conflicted with practices of gardening in the region. The small plot of shared land implied that gardening was a leisure activity to be shared, rather than a part of an individual’s daily productive activity.

It is, therefore, necessary to distinguish between the Urban Garden (as a model) and what is understood as Rural Gardening (as a practice). The vision of planners, which focussed on giving local inhabitants a space for gardening as leisure, and as a way to avoid boredom and overcome the trauma they had experienced needs to be criticized. National institutions have misunderstood. Domestic food growing in a rural settlement is not leisure, but a dedication and form of labour which contributes food to the home, as well as addressing issues of food safety and quality. Vegetable gardening is inserted in everyday life and viewed as a productive task, as part of 'work'.

In 2014 the Garden was almost abandoned, and as a result the L'Aquila city council closed the public water faucet in 2015. Picture 7 shows the condition of the garden today.



Pic. 7: September 2016

There are several key points on the relationship of policy, planning and everyday practice which should be taken from this case. The first is that importing the urban model, which has a practice of community gardening embedded in it, does not necessarily mean that this practice will simply emerge. In this case, the space provided, and the assumptions of practice inherent in it, undermined and patronized the traditional gardening practice. Such universal models always need to be considered in relation to particular localities, within which different practice-specific histories and envisioned futures already exist.

Second, the lack of consideration of local pre-seismic everyday life afforded the introduction of a top-down model of urban gardening into a rural area. Planners imagined the new life of dwellers from an urban viewpoint that forgot the local and the pastⁱⁱ. The garden was already part of the pre-seismic daily life and as such needed to be included in the package provided within the housing project. The space provided, though appearing to provide for the continuation of food growing practices, actually wrote traditional practices out of the future. Local gardening, as a daily practice and relation with the land, needed a more place-based and intimate context in order to flourish again.

Snapshots from Allotment History in the UK

In this case we turn to a different country, the UK, and look at snapshots of allotment history between 1900 and 1950. These snapshots reveal the allotment and allotmenting as relational spaces and practices positioned at intersections of everyday life, national policy, systems of food provision, and urban planning. Across the first half of the 20th century, imagined futures of domestic food production changed with remarkable frequency. This section focuses on three moments of the allotment: as system of provision for the urban poor; as an essential part of national food security; and as the answer to unemployment and austerity.

Domestic food production and the urban poor

Though sources are limited, Acton (2015) and Foley (2014) suggest that during the late 19th and early 20th Century, allotment gardening, far from being a hobby, had a central role in the system of food provision, keeping the labouring poor from starvation and supplementing the diets of the working class. Comprised of rural peasants who had migrated to cities, this labouring class had the skills to cultivate the land (Foley, 2014). Building on previous policies that had made it essential that allotments be provided for rural peasants dispossessed of their means of subsistence by the Enclosure Acts (17th and 18th Century), similar policies were applied in early cities. For example, the 1894 Local Government Act created local councils, and gave them powers to obtain land for allotments, and industrialists such as the cotton mill owners in Lancashire provided allotments to supplement workers' wages (Acton, 2015). Privately rented allotments were also common, and these could make a profit for land owners at the time, though this soon changed as cities developed.

As more people moved to the towns from the countryside the demand for allotments increased. But so too did the demand for housing and factories. Allotment sites became part of a different set of land value relations and private land owners put up rents. Still a vital component of food provision, the Government responded with The Small Holdings and Allotments Acts of 1907 and 1908 which placed obligations on local councils to meet allotment demand at affordable rates. The 1908 Act also included a clause that the cost of land (to the local council) should not be more than can be recouped from the rents (which were to be kept affordable). Though logical at the time, this had unforeseen implications in years to come. It enabled the logics of capitalism to determine the pattern of use of urban allotment land, and made it impossible for some local authorities to meet their obligations of allotment provision, for example, if land values were high for an entire council area, such as some London Boroughs.

Although Local Councils were obliged to provide sites, these were unprotected by law. Thus as cities developed, existing sites were taken for building. Other temporary sites were provided, which themselves would later be developed. Similar to the Italian example, allotmenters' relationships to and investments in the land (through cultivation which improves soil quality) were overlooked. The incompatibility of allotmenting with insecure tenures led to the formation of various societies which obtained, and campaigned for, land as permanent sites.

Domestic food production and national food security

The trajectory of urban development and temporary plots was halted with the start of World War 1. From 1914 to the early 1920s, allotmenting became essential for national food security and allotments were given top priority in policy. The Defence of the Realm Act (DORA) 1914 allowed the Government emergency powers to requisition (rather than pay for) land for use as allotments. Every spare piece of land was turned into a growing space. Horticultural societies were set up which provided educational leaflets, seeds and equipment, and in some cases even delivered manure. It is estimated (Acton, 2015) that the number of allotments increased from 570,000 plots in 1914 (at the start of World War 1) to 1,400,000 by the end of the war (1918), others suggest there was one allotment for every 5 households by 1918.

When the war ended, allotments had become embedded in the system of food provision, and were viewed as an advantage to community and nation. This new position was written into policy. The 1922 Allotments Act stipulated that Councils holding more than 400 allotments had to appoint a Statutory Allotments Committee to ensure they were properly managed, and the 1925 Allotments Act legislated that allotments must be part of every town planning scheme. Under this Act, land specifically acquired for allotments became protected by statute. This shifted the position of allotments in relational space, giving them privilege over the logics of capitalism and protecting prime urban land as growing space, some of which still remains today.

Though the interwar years saw a decline in the number of plots, there was a second 'peak' of 1,500,000 allotment plots in the early 1940s (mid world war 2). In very similar circumstances the National Government campaign '[Grow More Food: Dig for Victory](#)' was launched in October 1939, which called for every man and woman to grow their own food (bbc online, Acton, 2015). Defence Regulation 62A empowered local authorities to take possession of land, and convert any land in their possession (e.g. parks, playing fields) into allotments. By the end of 1942 it was estimated that 10% of Britain's food was 'grow your own'. Once again national policy further inscribed allotments into policy after the war, allowing local authorities to use compulsory purchase orders to acquire land. However, just a small number of cities and towns took advantage of this.

Domestic food production and austerity

Going back to the interwar years, there was another 'moment' for the allotment', in which it was framed as a solution to unemployment. A lack of international competitiveness of UK coal in the 1920s led to an economic depression, and mass unemployment, especially of mine workers in the UK (Foley, 2014: 167). During this period allotments were looked on as providing unemployed men with the opportunity to feed their families, keep up their morale, and stay healthy, as well as quelling any potential upsurge of communism that mass unemployment might invite. Although eventually part of a National Government's strategy for dealing with mass unemployment in the coalfields, The Quaker Society of Friends played a major role in this 1920s increase in allotments.

In response to the hopeless situation that was emerging in the coalfields, the Society of Friends campaigned for the uptake of allotments, building on histories of allotmenting in the coal-mining communities. They campaigned for allotment provision from local councils and obtained money from the Lord Mayor of London's fund to pay for seed potatoes, fertilizer, lime and tools which were sold on at half price to the unemployed (Foley, 2014:167-168). As with the wartime experiences, this success became written into National Government policy. Impressed with success of the scheme, in the early 1930s national government, with support from all political parties, set up county committees to increase the number of plots and provide further resources. The 1931 Agricultural Land (Utilisation) Act allowed for the Minister to provide financial assistance to Local Authorities for allotments and small holdings for the unemployed or those not in full-time employment (Acton, 2015).

These three snapshots of UK allotment history illustrate that food growing spaces and practices are always relational. They exist in relational systems of land use value, which have implications for the profitability of allotment tenures, and for priorities of land use planning. They also exist in relational systems of food production, in the early 1900s they were an essential part of the national food strategy for the working class, and similarly in the 1930s for the unemployed. In wartime periods they contributed to national food security and defence. Finally, allotments exist within relational systems of national policy, at different times addressing issues of social welfare, health and nutrition, urban green space, and more recently relaxation and wellbeing. In each period, depending on its position in systems of land value, food production, and policy, different futures of domestic food growing are imagined, with elements of these imaginaries leaving traces in urban spaces and in town planning, agricultural, land use and unemployment policy

Discussion and Conclusion

Through considering these examples from past and present the paper illustrates some of the specific relationships between food growing practices and spaces, and highlights the broader relational characteristics of these spaces and practices. Both aspects have implications for futures of domestic food growing.

The first point to note is that practices don't just happen in objective space, rather space is intrinsic to, made in and reproduced through practice. Indeed, the traditional practice in the L'Aquila region has an important one-to-one relationship between the person (the gardener) and the land, however the urban model

emphasises the relationships between people, and the land is secondary. According to the institutional viewpoint, urban gardening had the capability to provide the substratum for building new social relations helpful for community consolidation after the quake. But the case study demonstrates that this undermined the personal relation between gardener and land, making it impossible for practices of food growing to continue. We can imagine that over time, as food growing is no longer reproduced in practice, its associated knowledges and skills will wane rather than being passed to the next generation, tools will become obsolete, and domestic food growing practices will be a part of history rather than part of the future.

Our second case shows that food growing space and food growing practices are always relational. It is relational to other spaces, within a system of land use and value underpinned by capitalist logics. It is relational to other forms of food production within local, national and global systems of provision. Finally, it is relational within policy domains, being (re)framed in a variety of ways at different moments as the solution to a range of social problems. Depending on the political dispositions and problems of the time, and the imagined futures associated with these moments, food growing spaces and practices come into competition with different agendas, with implications for where and how domestic food growing can happen. Traces of these different utopian moments remain in physical space, in policy and in practice, with both anticipated and unanticipated implications for the future.

On this final point, we argue that although ‘experiments’ of planners and policymakers in one sense reflect particular utopian moments that are ‘of their time’ and disconnected from one another, in another sense such planned space prefigures futures, all be it in unanticipated ways. The example of the community garden being abandoned in L’Aquila demonstrates the difficulty of introducing an abstract urban imaginary into specific places with their own histories and cultures. Although unsuccessful in L’Aquila, such a space and the practices associated with it would develop in different ways in other places. In the historical work on the UK, a part of the tale not told here, shows allotment sites prefiguring future urban infrastructures across the decades. As automobility and electrical infrastructures were built and wired into cities, allotment sites provided essential infrastructures of space near to dwellings for electricity substations, pylons, garages and car parks.

Finally, in an era where domestic food production is once again on the rise, the legally protected infrastructure of allotment practice provided by statutory sites, provides a place where not only land, but also knowledges, skills and relations with the land, as well as local varieties of vegetables have, through practice, been preserved. This reproduction suggests openness of domestic food growing futures which might not exist in other places.

Endnotes

ⁱ The Italian government makes compulsory possessions in many rural areas for public interest due to emergency reasons.

ⁱⁱ According to this reasoning, victims of the quake had no histories but just needs from an Institutional point of view.

Acknowledgements

The case about L’Aquila Italy is part of Enrico Marcore’s PhD research at the Department of Social Anthropology, University of Aberdeen, which focuses on ‘Ways of dwelling after the L’Aquila earthquake’. The case on history of allotments in the UK is part of Nicola Spurling’s ongoing research on the relationships of policy, planning, social practices and futures of everyday life.

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