



Public Gardening and the Challenges of Neighbourhood Regeneration in Moscow

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Abstract: *The popularity of public gardening in post-Soviet countries has arisen quite recently along with the penetration of neoliberal ideas. Public gardening not only visually improves the environment, but it also creates a range of public spaces and “other” places in which urban citizens can come together; eventually it could help to enhance the image of distressed neighbourhoods. Such community initiatives can be divided into sanctioned intervention and unauthorised intervention (“commoning”); unauthorised intervention is when residents are displeased with their surroundings and attempt to improve their environment in their own way. This paper explores the limitations of the practices of commoning as a source of regeneration and compares its cultural dimensions. In this paper I discuss the initial results of an ongoing research project focused on the expectations of people involved in these forms of participation. During this process, the differing typical understandings and perceptions of urban gardening in public and semi-public spaces will be applied.*

Keywords: public gardening; neighbourhood regeneration; commoning.



Introduction

Traditionally, the practice of gardening in urban space implies either a public garden (with participants having a range of gardening skills) as a collection of plants for public education and enjoyment or a community garden as a piece of land gardened by a group of people, utilising either individual or shared plots on private or public land. This classification, however, is quite conditional. The current trend is from planned public gardening towards partnership based on the quarter, city and territory. There are attempts to transition from formal organisations for public gardening planning to an approach in which attention is paid to a rooted connection, close forms of social assistance and cooperation and self-awareness.

The problem of this study is that common initiatives on greening are still extremely rare. This is despite the fact that public gardening in Moscow has been declared as a significant indicator of public health; furthermore, there is a general trend of approximation of the developmental strategy of public horticulture at the local level.

This paper presents the main results of the pilot project whose task was to identify problematic areas when assessing the viability of a conceptual model of community horticulture in Moscow. This stage of research was aimed at helping to clarify the following questions. What are the characteristics of project participation in public gardening in Moscow? What are the main causes of lack of interest in the development of local unauthorised initiatives? How do different modes of involvement manifest in the interpretation of public gardening in Moscow?

The purpose of this study is to explore the opinions of active participants regarding the possibility of expanding on unauthorised public initiatives within the public horticultural movement. The main challenge to our research is a number of social and cultural characteristics that hinder the promotion of public gardening from gentrified areas to the Moscow suburbs to residential districts. I have conducted six interviews with experts from the field of public horticulture and 17 in-depth interviews with respondents that have participated in various projects of amateur gardening.

Public Gardening as Consuming and as Commoning

Over the last twenty years, there have been significant changes regarding the localisation of social groups. New symbolically valuable spaces were created in the process of social and property stratification, and lower social strata were displaced outside of these spaces. In Soviet times communal apartments were located throughout a large part of Central Moscow. In the early '90s, apartment residents gradually began to resettle. The government has provided tenants with separate apartments in new buildings. In the majority of cases, communal apartments were privatised and the new owners settled in. Because of this, some central areas of Moscow are composed of relatively homogeneous neighbourhoods in terms of social status (Badyina and Golubchikov 2004). Regeneration of the historical centre brings challenges, including gentrification, in which short-term, lower-income residents are displaced by new arrivals.

However, most of the Moscow agglomeration is composed of the so-called dormitory suburbs. Such areas like “Khrushchyovka” are often old having been built half a century ago. During the



1950s and early 1960s, there was a brief period when the government invested in uniform housing for ordinary people. These three to five-storied buildings lack an elevator; the living space is very small; and there is not a courtyard nor is there parking near the building. The porches have a small plot where in Soviet times flowerbeds were arranged usually by the tenants. Another type of housing being forced out of symbolically valuable space is new residential areas located on the outskirts of Moscow. The level of comfort of such homes is much higher. Homes have a fenced in area for parking and have playgrounds. Nevertheless, the public space in these districts is reduced to territories adjacent to the network of hypermarkets. These spaces cannot be considered symbolically valuable due to their lack of cultural dominance. A hybrid type of social space also exists here, where social distance is reproduced inside of the neighbourhood. This is termed infill development, when in place of a vacant lot and green zones, a new house is built; it sticks out in this environment not only in height but also with its surrounding infrastructure: closed guarded territory, underground parking and separate playgrounds for children. All this creates not only visual but also social dissonance.

Potential resources for urban greening could be vacant lots and roofs of residential buildings. Today's Moscow is densely built, while about 2% (a total area of 2.15 hectares) of it is vacant. However, it should be noted that in the case of underutilised vacant plots, parking, rather than urban gardening, is given priority. Roofs, as well, are not being utilised as a space for horticulture in Moscow even though the tradition of gardening on roofs was established there during the last century. Almost all of these gardens were destroyed during the Second World War, and the concept of green roofs has not been revived in the postwar period. At the beginning of this century, there were attempts to revive the practice of roof gardening. In 2001, the Moscow Committee for architecture issued a "Guide to gardening and landscaping operated roofs of residential and public buildings", but no significant public projects in this area were ever organised.

However, when it comes to neighbourhood regeneration, not only are vacant plots essential but also a social organisation that would "have knowledge of their resources and be able to agree on how, when, by whom and for what they can be used" (Fournier 2013: 438). In relation to these same resources, the urban dweller may be regarded as a user, consumer or actor. The difference is in understanding the terms *common* and *public*. In the context of modern Moscow, public gardening focuses primarily on the user when referring to the revival of historic parks; it focuses on the consumer as well since many projects offer services of a recreational and educational nature. Educational projects for gardening began in major Moscow parks which have undergone significant renovation in recent years. This is mainly a program for children of school and preschool age (for example, "Green school" or "Green nursery" in Gorky Park). Additionally, a part of Perovsky Park in Moscow was reserved for garden beds. This initiative took place in the summer of 2016 in the framework of the project "Dacha in the City". All participants were given free seeds, tools and check boxes to indicate who planted the flower bed. A gardener in this case is regarded as a consumer created by someone's services. Public gardening is not only an organic approach to a nutritional system as well as beatification of the local environment but also a form of spending free time. Respondents noted that over the last decade, opportunities for personal growth increased significantly. Education, self-education, tourism and travel all take on a significant role. For the younger generation, public gardening is associated with hipster's play and is associated with emotions of joyful escape from a world of survival to the more attractive world of edutainment. This largely explains the popularity of



workshops and lectures. At this stage, a recognition and understanding of the social nature of such interactions and learning from the experiences of other countries plays a role. Gardening in this case can be seen as merely new goods for consumption.

Dormitory suburbs require a different approach and suggest a deeper involvement of the participants. Regeneration programmes can claim some success in terms of the physical renewal of public space. One of the forms of regeneration (the term “revitalisation” has been adopted in Russian) would be the development of public (community) gardening based on do-it-yourself techniques and practices of commoning. Lynch connects this type of regeneration to the formation of “the very local unit, within which people are personally acquainted with each other in reason of residential proximity, where size, homogeneity, street pattern, identity of boundaries, and common services, may play a definite role in promoting control, present fit, and stability” (Lynch 1981; 246).

Commoning is the establishment of control by a social group or organisation over the functioning of the space’s infrastructure in the interests of the social group (Ostrom 1990). Joining involves playing a subjective role in creation, management and maintenance operation. Nice neighbourhoods, safety, cleanliness, visual appeal: all of these intangible assets can be created by district residents. The environment, in this case, is transformed from public to communal. Yet if the consumer version of the script is predetermined, then there are a number of contradictions evident with this subjective form of active participation. It should be noted that the idea of commoning is quite controversial. An ideologist of commoning, historian P. Linebaugh, compares the active movement of urban gardening with “autonomous communism” (Linebaugh 2008: 280); at the same time he expresses concern that “capitalists and the World Bank would like us to employ commoning as a means to socialise poverty and hence to privatise wealth” (Linebaugh 2008: 279).

The Challenges of Commoning in Neighbourhood Regeneration

Gardening as a part of everyday life is concerned to some extent with the interaction of other people or, in other words, in the “elementary architecture of life together” (Thévenot 2007). The intensity of engagement is much higher than in the case of consumption or use. There is a need to explain, primarily to oneself, why one does something or refuses to. The internal argument is extrapolated to others. When speaking about the challenges of the development of community gardening in Moscow, informants analyse the “appropriate preparation of the environment”.

The first thing I focused on during the interviews of participants is the lack of motives uniting people with others within an informal organisation. Values associated with separation are the most important. People do not want to encounter each other in public places, and on the contrary, do everything they can to avoid one another. The “communal” was achieved in Russian society not as a result of the voluntary association of people living together within varying degrees of socialised personal property, but by a purely coercive manner. Reluctance to join a commune or collective and informal enterprises is the most common reason people aged 30 to 50 (the main audience for such kind of activities) do not participate. Among young people under 25, only 6% would like to spend their free time engaged in gardening and caring



for plants (Nuksunova 2010). Study participants under the age of 30 prefer not to associate with their neighbours and rather seek out interest groups within their social networks, potentially implementing some projects at a future time. Public gardening in this case is an affirmation of their own status in the eyes of others. This status, however, is not approved of in the local living environment. Interviewees noted that the blurring of social determinism of the environment negatively affects the ability of the community to develop. The turnover of tenants is so fast, so it is difficult to establish stable connections in such circumstances because “neighbours may be more remote than strangers” (Bourdieu 1985: 169). A similar trend was noted by the Canadian urban researcher R. Bailey, who investigated the receptiveness to change in the field of urban gardening in China. His respondents replied: “We had 30 years of trying to get rid of the neighbours. We had communism, its neighbors were oodles, and now we again were herded into communes?!” (Bailey 2011). Respondents from Moscow explained their reluctance to unite not only because of weariness from forced communality but also because of the need for a long-term relationship. These relationships may not be always pleasant and in a metropolis are rarely possible.

In addition, if we want to get involved in public initiatives, a significant question is in what capacity. What associations arise in connection with gardening? In this case, the myth of the Russian dacha as a place for idle pastimes, intelligent conversations and creative entertainment, is in direct opposition to the memories of the actual experiences of ordinary people (Caldwell 2011). This form of spending free time cannot be considered as strictly entertainment especially when it was seen as additional “work” or the supplementing of a poor livelihood. As a result of social transformation, elements of the middle class lifestyle have penetrate the lower class. “The Russian poor are afraid to be caught in poverty and struggling to be rich” stresses the study of “Russian society: transformation in the regional discourse (the results of 20 years of measurements)” (Rossijskoe obschestvo 2015). Horticulture is associated with lifestyle elements of the lower strata. There is a differentiation between the forms of spending free time according to income level. Representatives of the top income group prefer leisure and entertainment, while the representatives of the lower group are focused on sustenance.

Study participants note that people grow vegetables in dacha allotments less than during Soviet times. Vegetable production requires a lot of time, money and effort. Participants are convinced that a dacha should be used for recreation. Vegetable gardens are considered a place for pensioners who became accustomed to the Soviet practice of harvesting vegetables. For younger participants, the key features of a dacha are a grass plot, flowers and a barbecue. This type of garden can, therefore, hardly be seen as a reaction to the industrialised food system, let alone an attempt to create an alternative food system.

Respondents argue that the complexities of the legal system and the national character can explain the weakness of community gardening initiatives. There are no suitable places and conditions for the convergence of people in the field of horticulture. The main argument concerns the lack of a clear interpretation of the term “public place” in Russian legislation; it is not clear what actions need to be implemented in order to address this issue. Socialistic and capitalistic characteristics of property can exist at the same time. Verdery even introduces a special term, “fuzzy property” which characterises the situation in post-Soviet countries (Verdery 1999: 55). Respondents note that they do not know who owns the abandoned areas and what the consequences of cultivation of this land may be. Study participants with Soviet



experience in public horticulture note that previously they felt that the land next to the house belonged to everyone; residents could plant flowerbeds, shrubs, trees, place benches outside and hang clotheslines. Now the situation is different. Even if the plot is abandoned, there still is the fear that all of a sudden the owner of the site might come and destroy the nascent public initiative. There is a risk that the investment will be wasted. People prefer private allotments as opposed to community gardens. Community gardening is seen as unsustainable. Pessimistic rhetoric is to some extent present in all interviews. Referring to the experience of other countries, where big cities have public gardening, does not work. The environmental conditions in Paris, New York or London seem more favourable: the climate is warmer and milder and security technology is more advanced. Provided there is a plan of action for improving and landscaping a space that seems attainable and useful, small-scale agricultural practices are still considered useless and dangerous.

Conclusion

Engaging residents in neighbourhood regeneration is a difficult task, because voluntary participation is based on established socio-cultural attitudes. It should be noted that the implementation of public gardening within the models of use and consumption is quite effective. Active unauthorised interference, however, is hampered by a number of subjective cultural positions. One of the main reasons is the predominance of the values of isolation as a reaction to the experience of Soviet forced collectivism. High mobility does not allow for the establishing of stable local connections. Study participants noted that the situation is gradually changing, although all sorts of activities related to gardening are currently associated with poverty and old age. People justify inaction with a high level of environmental negativity.

Consumer and user policies can gradually lead to real action. Clearly further research is needed in order to understand how this transition from a model of consumption to that of action can occur.



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