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Research informed gardening activism: steering the public food and land agenda

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Abstract

Drawing on the authors' personal experience in the Edible Public Space project (Leeds, UK), this paper explores the 'spheres of influence' and contradictions that shaped the project's trajectory. We identify and analyse the dynamics and contradictions at play in the formation of an urban gardening group grown out of a coming together of scholarly and committed action ambitions and aim to capture learning elements for scholarly activism, political gardening and radical urbanism.

We explore the action research intervention with a focus on the role of spatial interventions in fostering social innovation in the public food and land agenda. We structure our discussion in a threefold conceptual framework: (i) a discussion on shifting planning arenas and their understanding in social innovation; (ii) an overview of the role of political gardening practices, in particular of food commons/food sovereignty initiatives, in envisioning and implementing alternative urbanism; and (iii) a discussion on the action research nexus, through a thick case study description in which we also unpack our own engagement and positionality. Doing so, we aim to contribute to the creation of an active memory of political gardening. The paper will speak in particular to a rising number of researcher-gardeners-environmentalists, and aims to problematise the links between research-informed strategic thinking and actions, and the vocation of critical urban theory to provide and make visible alternatives for social change.

Key words: political gardening; alternative urbanism; activism; public space; food; action-research

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1 Introduction

In Leeds, West Yorkshire (UK), ongoing and recent collective gardening experiences provide groups of people with the necessary ingredients allowing them to discover the taste to work together on imagining and building a different city. In many cities in the global North, urban food growing initiatives indeed shape spaces that bring together people from a vast array of backgrounds and seem to offer an antidote to the risk of civil apathy at a time when omnipresent surveillance, the commodification of leisure, the increasing policing of public space, and the corporate control and manipulation of genetic and biological heritage are being progressively normalized.

Edible Public Space (EPS) is one of the Leeds-based political gardening projects in which a coalition of people, including the authors of this paper, consciously linked the opposition to two of the main conditions of neoliberal urban societies with the creation of the sort of material conditions and social relations that approach their vision of a different city. The first condition is the shrinking freedom in the use of public space. In the British realm particularly, public space is increasingly associated with raising surveillance, commodification and enclosure (Minton 2012, Hodkinson 2012). The second is the almost complete subjugation of civil society to an industrialised food system, which has naturalised the disconnection between food growing and eating and marginalized the possibility of finding or growing food on the earth (Viljoen et al. 2005, Heynen 2010).

Modernism-informed planning practices, amplified by the restructuring needs of capitalism under the most recent neoliberal agenda, contributed to both the normalization of shrinking freedom in the use of public space as well as to the dominance of the agro-industry in the cities of the global North (Steel 2008, Tornaghi 2014). In the name of order, aesthetic canons, efficiency and public health, the practice of urban zoning and sanitation, which undoubtedly brought a number of advantages to urban settlements, came with regulations and blueprints which did not contemplate food growing or animal

breeding within and in between dwellings, leisure or commercial areas. While the history of urbanization could be seen as a linear process of emancipation from a life of primary production and subsistence, it is mostly in the last six decades that citizens have been almost completely disconnected from the practical experience of, or exposure to, small-scale urban food growing and cattle breeding. Neoliberal urbanism has increased pressure on interstitial cultivated pockets of land which are seen as appealing for development, while equally 'residual' small family-run agricultural businesses are strangled by the politics of large retail distribution coupled with land grabs and industrial agri-business. The resulting disconnection between food eaters and food growers in turn decreases the ability of urban populations and farmers to criticise the status quo.

Within this framework, the EPS project aimed to take a stance towards these trends while also making concrete proposals for ways forward. The project sought to instigate a process of learning-through-doing that would not only have created tangible evidence for an alternative design and use of public space (as building block for an alternative urbanism) in order to trigger the imaginations of planners and public land managers, but would also enable the exchange of skills among project participants and the consolidation of a group able to handle the various aspects of a 'food-including' urban realm. In short, the project idea was born out of an activist's desire to challenge the shrinking freedom in the use of public space and the subjugation of all "eaters" to an industrialised food system.

A mini-grant from an action research project shaped its form. During 2010-2011 several action researchers in the UK and Belgium received a small grant from a transdisciplinary research project^[1]. Confronted with the observation that a broad consensus on the importance of spatial quality underpins the urban design and planning fields while different users, professional and research communities tend to have very different views on what makes a particular organisation of space 'qualitative' or not, the Spindus project aimed to develop a relational and integrative understanding of spatial quality (Khan et al. *forthcoming*). With that purpose in mind it provided small grants aimed at documenting and reporting

on spatial interventions aimed at identifying and enhancing spatial quality in a co-productive way. In Leeds it turned out to provide the little push needed to bring together social researchers and long-term environmental campaigners in the gardening project referred to as EPS.

The participation in scholarly meetings on food growing as well as gardeners' gatherings brought us in contact with a number of scholars that have opted for a path of both studying gardening practices and being politically active. This choice entails a continuous process of negotiating the conflicting demands of political engagement and academic performance (Pulido 2008). The way scholars engage with activist work will, as Pulido (2008, p 349) states, directly influence the type of scholarship they engage in. The forms of engagement with scholarly activism, she continues, come from different spheres of influence that relate both to larger political events and personal dynamics. The aim of scholarly activism is to shape the social struggles that scholars engage with. How this has to be done, and its consequences, is the subject of continuous debate (e.g. Gibson-Graham 2008, Brenner 2009, Marcuse 2009, Piven 2010).

With this paper we aim to contribute to the literature on political gardening and radical urbanism, while simultaneously addressing some of the questions that arise from the combination of being involved as both scholars and activists in gardening issues. Within the current neoliberal urban landscape, we consider urban food growing initiatives as liberating experiences which confront us with questions of how to capture and unravel these 'events' to build the knowledge that can push us beyond the known and into experimentation. David Vercauteren (2011) points to the need of creating memories of experience. Such memories make us aware of being part of a history with a past and a future, and according to him, the feeling of 'being preceded' may give people the strength to continue to experiment in ways of doing. The creation of an 'active memory' (Stengers 2005) of the political gardening movement, or the documenting of precedents of success and failure, we argue here, also builds a community of scholar activists that are both actors and authors in the narrative of these

learning experiences. How to critically act in the creation of these learning spaces, and how to tell research-informed stories from below are questions that remain to be debated.

As part of that research effort, this paper explores the spheres of influence in shaping the trajectory of the EPS project: we identify and analyse the contradictions that are present in the specific formation of an urban gardening group grown out of a coming together of scholarly and committed action ambitions and seek to capture learning elements for scholarly activism, political gardening and radical urbanism. The experience we draw upon, describe and untangle is the story of the creation and running of a small gardening site in Leeds, the 'Buslingthorpe Walk edible public garden'. Both the authors of this paper have been directly involved in this project since the onset as, respectively, member of the coordination team of the SPINDUS research project (Van Dyck) and the co-coordinator of the 'Public Space Public Produce' group that promoted the EPS project (Tornaghi).

In what follows (section 2) we lay out a theoretical and conceptual framework for the paper. In section 2.1 we draw on literature on urban agriculture and community gardening, to give an overview of the role of political gardening practices, and in particular of food commons/food sovereignty initiatives, in envisioning and implementing alternative urban settings. In section 2.2 we discuss shifting planning arenas within the social innovation literature. In section 2.3 we introduce a discussion on the action research nexus, through a 'thick case study description' in which we also unpack our own engagement and positionality. In section 3 we then unfold the making of political gardening in the EPS project, applying the analytical concepts identified in section 2, before ending with some concluding notes on learning elements from and for researcher-gardeners and on the way social change is experimented with in practice and research.

2 Creating the conditions for insurgent planning arenas to emerge

2.1 Political gardening as insurgent planning arena

In the last decade, urban gardening and farming have become very popular activities across cities of the Global North. Grassroots-initiated community gardens have been mushrooming, from vacant plots in Detroit to rooftops in London, New York and Chicago, adding to the already existing range of collective gardens hidden behind the walls of health, education and social care institutions (i.e. school yard vegetable gardens, healing and therapeutic gardens within hospitals, etc.). While agriculture is not a novelty for western cities (Steel 2009), the discontinuity of this practice since the end of WWII (or sometimes longer) has been deep enough for a society to have almost completely lost memory of it as an ordinary practice in daily life, to the extent that it is celebrated today as an extraordinary novelty. The current resurgence of food growing is generally celebrated as a rediscovery of the “community” (Hou et al 2005, Holland 2004, Glover et al 2005, Firth et al 2011), a sign of a reconnection with food (Garnett 1996, Howe and Wheeler 1999) and a manifestation of healthier lifestyles (Armstrong 2000, Milligan et al 2004, Wakefield et al 2007, van den Berg 2010).

While this proliferating landscape of gardening practices is by no means free of traps, such as new forms of gentrification and displacement (Dooling 2009), garden-led speculative redevelopment or opportunities for corporate green wash (Jackson 2009), much of the recent interest in urban gardening is perhaps due to the claims associated with (some of) these practices, and in particular the potential of political gardening for enacting a “politics of possibility” (Gibson-Graham 2006), challenging the neoliberal logic that rules urban life and shapes the urban form, enabling alternatives to emerge.

A growing number of gardening initiatives, in fact, are not simply new leisure initiatives, but rather explicit attempts to inspire new behaviors, show alternatives, influence policy, take care of aspects of production/social reproduction, and experiment with governance and decision-making settings. By re-articulating the relationship between local communities, food and land use, for example, these gardening initiatives become political devices that enact forms of food sovereignty on different

scales, thus undermining a pillar of neoliberal capitalism. So, while a number of scholars are rightly directing our attention to the necessity of critically assessing these practices (Pudup 2008, Saed 2013, McClintock 2013, Tornaghi 2014), political gardening is increasingly analysed as an insurgent practice.

We can identify at least three main strands within this literature, where food growing and urban gardening and farming are conceptualised as a political act impacting on the ecology of space.

The first looks at the individual sphere, where individual forms of back (or front) gardening and animal breeding are understood as forms of self-provisioning (Irvine 1999) claims of independence from the agro-business and supermarket-driven diet, and contestations of the dominant meaning and shape of urban space. Food growing in the private home garden can be seen as an individual act, contesting and reverting the (class dominated) aesthetic of the lawn (Robins and Sharp 2003) and land politics, with their planning-enforced division between dwelling and farming (Bartling 2012), an act of production of a home ecology that claims a right to the city as a right to contribute to urban metabolism (Shillington 2013) or, as Tom Hodgkinson put it, a food provisioning self-liberating practice, where “digging is anarchy, anarchy in action” (Hodgkinson 2005, p.67).

The second strand looks at the solidarity economy, alterity and a new place-embeddedness of food (Harris 2009, Marsden and Franklin 2013). Rooftop farms, peri-urban smallholding, new market gardens etc. are increasingly networked into alternative food networks, also called “food hubs”, which link growers, distributors and consumers. These are new articulations of the relationship between community and place that takes shape by reworking the economic relations, socio-environmental ethics and place-embeddedness related to food. Food hubs aim to create and empower short supply food chains, supporting market demand for small local food producers by re-embedding food production and consumption into the local geography of place, and by deliberately contributing to food justice in the form of fair pay for food growing workers, and a more responsible use of environmental resources.

The third strand looks at urban food growing as a form of rebuilding the Commons. A number of food growing projects, part of the pan-European Reclaim the Fields constellation (for example the British 'Grow Heathrow') as well as a number of LandShare projects (see for example the Canterbury Transition City Allotment in Pinkerton and Hopkins 2009) and grassroots community gardens, are set up with the explicit intent of sharing ecological resources, creating food commons, and in so doing contributing to food sovereignty. The link between urban food growing and food commons has been tentatively explored in a handful of recent articles, although much more substantial engagement is needed in this respect (Caffentzis 2010, Eizenberg 2012, Tornaghi 2012).

All these three categories represent examples of insurgent urbanism, forms of reappropriation of the right of people to shape their own living environment both through direct acts on the materiality of space as well described by Jeffrey Hou (2010) in his edited collection, and through what Faranak Miraftab (2009) describes as counter-hegemonic, transgressive and imaginative planning practices.

EPS, with the intent of challenging the institutional prerogative of defining, designing and regulating public spaces, by creating a 'public abundance' and making food openly accessible, would fall into the third broad family of political gardening sketched above.

2.1 Transcending plan-build-use logics

The perspective on political urban gardening developed in this paper starts from thinking about space not as something finished but as possibly emerging from and through social interaction (Massey 2005): it adopts a relational ontology that includes physical and social phenomena and the relationships with one another (Lefebvre 1991). It brings together analytical approaches from sociology and human geography with the projective and action-oriented approach of urban planning and design. In articulating the built environment, the environmental and the social, the approach also builds on the social innovation literature that engages with questions of socio-spatial transformation. Social

innovation is understood as processes that facilitate collective agency to address non-satisfied needs and the building of empowering social relations (Moulaert et al. 2013). These include active institutional experimentation to transform the ways in which decisions about land and urban development projects are made and who is involved.

The coming together of a diverse range of people - researchers, growers, environmental activists, policy makers around the issue of producing edible public space and its role in fostering the conditions for what could be seen as the emergence of an insurgent planning arena is a central question in this paper. Insurgent planning is broadly understood as “radical planning practices that respond to neoliberal specifics of dominance through inclusion” (Miraftab 2009, p. 32). More precisely, it refers here to finding ways of leveraging community involvement to determine the direction of public space development. The interest in “shifting planning arenas” stems from the observation that urban development processes typically involves a separation between those who plan, those who build and those who use these very spaces. As a result, plans and projects do not necessarily reflect the needs, dreams and desires of diverse urban communities. Occasionally, however, the boundaries of the design/plan-build-use logic are transcended. We argue that the rise of political gardening initiatives points to potentialities in terms of leveraging the capacity of actors that are formally not invited to sit at official planning tables to transcend boundaries in defining and negotiating spatial agendas (Le Strat 2004). Political gardening has produced promising spaces to weave in desires, introduce new temporalities and rethink the relationship between people and their environments in urban planning proposals (see e.g. Petcou and Petrescu 2008). Political gardening initiatives indeed have been identified as tactic for addressing multi-scalar issues and questioning salient consensuses and working towards wider [political] goals in different urban domains (racism, food growing, community building, access to land,...). They involve revisiting or reinterpreting existing infrastructures for alternative purposes. Including people’s experience of place on the ground has implications for participatory planning processes (Wortham-Galvin 2013). It can help

“inspire action because people are motivated to seek, stay in, protect, and improve places that are meaningful to them” (Manzo 2006, p 347). Discrete but tangible actions on a constrained space allows people to develop affective bonds with places and move forward from there towards addressing broader societal issues in ways that are less dependent on wider political alliances, policy agendas or economic ventures. Reinterpreting public space puts a different light on what seemed familiar and allows people to recognise themselves, legitimises their ways of living and puts them back inside planning processes as place makers rather than as passive consumers.

Critical notes on the emancipatory power of such small initiatives is necessary (Andres 2012). Claire Colomb (2012, p.147) for example notes that despite the hopes and intentions of scholars and activists for fostering empowerment, work in/on the margins inevitably encounters top-down planning as soon as a site becomes valuable for more conventional forms of urban development and even becomes instrumental in “paving the way for profit-oriented urban redevelopment processes” and displacement. Nevertheless, thick descriptions of what is actually going on in the margins have shown that, occasionally, transformative power does emerge from the cracks or interstices (Lévesque 2002, Jamar 2012, Mariani and Barron 2014). This paper aims to contribute to this literature that focuses on the opening up of new possibilities in creating the ecological and social conditions of urban environments.

2.3 Scholar activism: reflexivity and learning

As critical scholars, our participation, and indeed our key role in the case of a political gardening initiative has not come without concerns and self-awareness. We have been in constant tension (Pulido 2008) between our role as activists, who experiment with transformative practices and face the risks of their co-option (Colomb 2012), and our role as researchers, vigilant but also engaged with the challenge

of providing tools for alternative practices (Brenner 2009, Marcuse 2009). Is this tension a contradiction? This paper aims to problematise the links between research-informed strategic thinking and actions, and the vocation of critical urban theory to provide and make visible alternatives for social change (Marcuse 2009, Brenner 2009). To accomplish this task we unpack the contradictions and tensions between critical analysis and activist-research, based on thick case description with particular regards to issues of distance and engagement. This exercise is an attempt to contribute to the collective effort of mapping experiences of critical action and scholarly involvement with all its contradictions. It is not our intention to come up with guidelines.

Our trajectory of reflexivity and learning is three-pronged. Firstly, it relates explicitly to how we aim to contribute to building a memory of the gardening movement and is inspired by the conviction and the desire to shape “performative practices for ‘other worlds’” (Gibson-Graham 2008, p 613). Isabelle Stengers (2005, p 998 and cited in Doucet 2011) proposes the concept of the *creation of an active memory* to document experiences that were promising and turned out to be “failures, deformations or perversions”, or on the contrary that made a difference (Vercauteren 2011). Building an active memory by revisiting decisions and experiences is a way to show what works and what doesn’t with the ambition to allow the enactment of our concerns and possible futures. Edible Public Space’s ambition of envisioning and implementing a radical urbanism is one worth documenting. By making visible the choices that have been made, they can also be repeated or altered in a subsequent experiment that seeks to challenge urbanism, based on a gardening initiative.

Secondly, we reflect on *commitment*. A critical element of scholar activism is commitment in the sense of being there (in the movement) when needed. Commitment is what can give rise to tension between scholarship and activism, when scholars don’t just develop critiques but try to advance the ideas and interests of dissident, marginalised or voiceless groups (Piven 2010). Commitment probably starts with making political alignments or worldviews explicit. Commitment is also about finding a role in

the movement (Pulido 2008), and bringing in skills which can range from making coffee to analysis. This requires a close attention to the needs and standpoints of groups. Researchers thus, become actors amidst a number of others around particular issues or questions. Gardeners in turn are not considered subjects of research but knowledgeable participants in the research project. Our interest in the analysis of commitment relates to what Ruth Gilmore (1993, p. 71) referred to as “organic praxis”, and which was extended by Laura Pulido (2008, p 342) as a “talk-plus-walk” approach or the “organization and promotion of ideas and bargaining in the political arena”. This type of commitment also includes writing about the experience both for and beyond academic audiences, as well as forms of connection with the movement or practice based on reciprocity and solidarity. Where reciprocity can materialize in a range of ways: from ongoing practical and intellectual exchange, to political bargaining, facilitated networking, or shared resources/infrastructures.

And thirdly, our trajectory of reflexivity and learning on the work of scholar activists is about *distance*. Distance, or rather lack of distance is, what gives rise to probably the most widespread critique on pursuing scholarly work at the service of social struggles. Proximity and emotional involvement enhances the risk of developing overly positive arguments and politically instrumental conclusions at the expense of the ability to keep the required social complexity (Hale 2008). The critique does not start from the premise that theory building in itself is social action. Activist scholarship is one way of “forming, testing and improving knowledge” (Hale 2008, p 13) that requires methodological advancement from knowledge communities. If orthodox social sciences start from a separation of the sciences and society, it is time to find ways of validating knowledge and ways of knowing that recognize proximity and emotional involvement. This brings the additional responsibility for scholars “to recognize their constitutive role” in the worlds that exist or might come into being (Gibson-Graham (2008, p 614).

Starting from these insights, we embrace a performative approach and analyse the EPS knowledge production process as part of a critical action. This implies not only questioning how our

work as researchers contributes to the opening up of possibilities, but also to be attentive to how the coming together of people with different backgrounds around the issue of edible public space allows researchers, community organizers, environmentalists or policy makers to see their work and worlds differently.

3 Edible Public Space: Performing political gardening

Leeds is a city of approximately 800,000 inhabitants. The food growing community, despite not being as wide and active as London's, is quite varied. Leeds is home to the British Permaculture Association, and of one of the key hubs of Groundwork and TCV (formerly BTCV), the two largest environmental charities in the UK engaged with environmental protection and education.

To capture the crucial elements that explain the emergence of Edible Public Space as a learning platform, in section 3.1 we first identify a number of initiatives, events and projects that may be seen as EPS's predecessors or inspirers and which constitute the historical and spatial context of the project. We then unpack the micro-composition of the EPS-group, to come to the ways in which EPS impacted on ways of seeing and ways of doing for the persons involved closely, as well as for gardeners, researchers and policy makers following the project from a distance. In section 3.2 we then proceed by critically reflecting on the visions, choices and events that connote EPS as a case of political gardening. In section 3.3 we focus more specifically on the way EPS represents a case of insurgent planning arena, and in sections 3.4 and 3.5 we unpack and discuss the dynamics of scholar activism that unfolded through the project.

3.1 Stirring imagination to move the boundaries of the possible: the genesis of EPS

The idea of connecting issues of public space, access to food and urban development, was initially presented to, and refined together with, people with knowledge of horticulture and conservation (TCV), media, landscape design and permaculture before being opened up to a range of gardeners and people in September 2010, with the organisation of a public meeting in a community room in Leeds city centre.

Chiara Tornaghi, the Leeds based researcher-activist-gardener, was at that time exposed to and engaged, on a personal basis, with a range of loosely connected projects that were symptoms of a changing 'territorial' sensitivity. *Back To Front* was important in that respect. The NHS funded pilot project in the deprived neighbourhood of Harehills aimed to promote ethnic and black minorities social engagement and health, through the encouragement of food growing in the front gardens of homes. One key aim of the project was to challenge the aesthetic of the grassed - or most likely concreted-over - front gardens, and normalise the existence and sight of vegetables and their beauty. While *Back to Front* was looking into what gardening small private spaces can bring to the community as a snowball effect, other groups in Leeds were exploring issues of engagement and public space more directly.

Tinwolf, a subgroup of Transition City Leeds, was experimenting with the initiative of sharing private gardens for food growing (*LandShare*) and therefore exploring forms of reconnecting the local community by increasing/strengthening relations, sharing resources (knowledge, land and food) and fostering re-skilling. However, the transient student populations (leaving the house in the middle of the growing season) or the very enclosed form of houses and gardens (making it difficult to access gardens unless owners are at home and willing to engage with the guests) did not help to ensure the success of the project and its continuity.

Make-Pla(y)ce is another defining project in the genesis of EPS. *Make-Pla(y)ce* more directly reinterpreted and transformed the sense of place –and in particular of public space- , through playful

sessions, improvised play with whoever would turn up at the fortnightly meetings, and an intentional rediscovery of all the human senses to feel the city. Food and nature were two among the themes explored in these sessions. Elegant dinner parties with crystal glasses and candles were improvised in interstitial neglected places in the city centre, offering opportunities for conviviality. Similarly, countryside-inspired picnics were improvised in front of the city Art Gallery, where food rescued from skips was shared and eaten among the participants. While these ephemeral events were a great source of inspiration, the projects helped to mature, in some of its participants, the desire to experiment with more tangible and long lasting interventions in the public space of the city.

In that period, members of the *Leeds Permaculture Network* were developing interesting ideas and practices. An allotment, for example, was cultivated using permaculture principles, and opened once a month for free learning and skill exchange opportunities. Although the garden was for most of the time gated, and the produce was never explicitly in shared ownership, the site acquired very similar features of a public space during those open days. Other members of the same network engaged in the locally run Permaculture Design Diploma and produced plans for permaculture landscaped edible gardens in various greens and pieces of land scattered around the city, as part of their training for the Diploma, but with no obvious intention to make these plans become reality. The only exception to this was the plan for a forest garden in a woody and secluded piece of land that started at the same time as EPS. One member of the permaculture network was even occasionally providing professional services to support the creation of edible gardens in community centres without however engaging in direct attempts to upscale edible landscaping across the city.

Chiara Tornaghi, who at that time was involved in almost all of the above initiatives, brought together some of the people engaged in these projects and started imagining what could be possible if they joined forces and how such cooperation could actually work.

3.2 Edible Public Space as “unexpected on the ground”: a tool for acquiring ways of seeing the city

The first EPS meeting was an opportunity to discuss visions and qualities of an edible public space, and discuss initial steps to move from concepts to practice. The meetings continued two to three weeks apart for a few months, and included urban explorations, bicycle excursions, site evaluations, visioning and planning meetings, convivial and playful community events, and negotiations with local government officers until when, in April 2011, EPS was finally granted permission to create the “Buslingthorpe Walk edible public garden” in Chapeltown, a neighbourhood in the north of Leeds.

The site selection came out of a series of meetings in which the participants identified places to visit; went on site for an exploration; further researched the history of the pre-selected sites; and finally undertook a post-visit collective evaluation. Criteria for the evaluation were organised in a matrix which included, among others: soil quality and aspect, existence of local claims for land, and the possibilities of connecting to a wider ecological system.

While discussions among the members of the rather fluid group, and the negotiation of the land with the Council took almost eight months, the creation of the garden was relatively quick. The garden is located in the corner of a long and narrow grassed strip of land known as Buslingthorpe Walk, a place with a long history of neglect, fly tipping and drug dealing. The community garden is very different from the most usual individually allocated allotments or the enclosed/gated community gardens run by other organisations: located on public land, openly accessible and collectively looked after, the key principle is the non-ownership (or rather the collective ownership) of seeds, plants and produce. Everyone can plant and everyone can harvest. The driving aim of the project has not been to have a harvest or some produce in the short term, but rather to contribute to food and land justice in the long term.

From the early meetings, it soon became clear to the EPS participants that, despite the variety of existing food growing projects in Leeds, at least two issues were not at the core of any of these other projects. The first one was “public space”: there was not a food growing project that was mainly set in a public –and publicly accessible- space. Edible Public Space wasn’t just a community garden, EPS was claiming the right to the city as a right to food, right to forage, right to shape urban space and right to use it in a convivial, non-commodified way, while doing gardening.

The second one was the lack of a city wide urban agricultural project, which aimed at increasing production and distribution of local food. Many of the participants, in fact, were more than just passionate gardeners, but rather shared an environmental ethic that recognised the need to shorten food supply chains and coordinate a more sustainable and localised food system. While EPS was not explicitly aiming to substantially produce and distribute food, discussion around EPS allowed this point to emerge, and the awareness that this goal could only be achieved through a wide involvement of local groups and the development of a large community organisation with entrepreneurial capacities. With this long term view in mind the EPS project defined itself as a learning ground for reclaiming public space and urban food systems.

The first meetings revealed the ideas that were feeding the imaginaries of the participants. CPULs, or Continuous Productive Urban Landscapes, for example, was a model for ecological intensification via urban agriculture, developed by architects Katrin Bohn and André Viljoen, both founders of a European group of sustainable food planners. Their homonymous book (Bohn and Viljoen 2005) was becoming fairly known within and beyond academia, and was a reference point at least for the academic component of the group. At the same time, in the small town of Todmorden, a couple of committed growers started to do guerrilla gardening in unusual places, including in front of the police station, and received quite a lot of media attention. While the conditions of a tiny town with little more than 14,000 inhabitants is hardly comparable to that of a city sixty times larger, the project undoubtedly

helped to make the idea of claiming ownership of public space less alien. Nonetheless, EPS's strategy differed from guerrilla gardening in its approach to claiming land. While direct action was in the realm of possibilities, the main adopted strategy was to take the 'legal way'. This was due to both the diverse range of groups members –not all keen in contravening rules, or engaged in labour relationships with the council they did not want to put into danger – as well as to previous experiences of guerrilla gardening that perished under (likely ignorant) grass mowers unaware of the edibles they were destroying.

The project was therefore phased following council rules for the organisation of a street event, raising public awareness and community engagement for preparing a successful land negotiation with the council, which would hopefully lead towards a long term, sustainable, urban agricultural project.

Reflecting back on the early days of EPS reveals how much has been symbolically condensed into the project: claiming and transforming publicly owned land, establishing an edible garden far away (conceptually) from a gated allotment and right in the middle of a busy green thoroughfare, playing food-related treasure hunts with local kids, betting on the positive reaction of a too often stigmatised neighbourhood.

It is probably this density of different meanings and components that made it easier for each member of this varied group of participants to find a role, unique and indispensable, and a space in which to play it. Looking at the project in retrospect, it is clear that the coordination of very different and unique capacities was so smooth and so effective, that in a later moment setting larger ambitions seemed natural and within reach. When a few months later the core members of the group - wearing the different hats of the various projects they have been involved with - found themselves in the boardroom with the Head of Leeds City Council's Parks and Countryside sector, they felt empowered to represent the community of local gardeners. Their common experience gave them the symbolic and

practical baggage and networks to become more ambitious and play a different and leading role at city level. *Feed Leeds* was the newborn. Roles and division of labour in EPS were in a large part replicated in this new group. At about that time Tornaghi also obtained a much larger grant^[2] for an action-research project on urban agriculture, adding a new layer of dynamics and opportunities for nurturing the learning process of the group.

EPS ideas started to travel quickly from the early inceptions of the project, both in the neighbourhood and elsewhere. At least four different participants started to look at land close to their homes to bring it into cultivation with their friends. So, while their involvement had been intermittent, showing that a gardening project itself doesn't necessarily rebuild communities – or at least not in the short term, inspiration permeated through the group's boundaries. One of them reclaimed a disused green roof on her housing estate and created a rooftop garden together with her neighbours. Another gardener started to question the ownership of some neglected land adjacent to the nursery of her child to transform it into a gardening space with other children's parents. Two more people inquired about EPS's methods, with the intention of developing similar initiatives on council green spaces elsewhere in the neighbourhood. EPS thus helped to see and enhance the realm of the possible. Spots of neglected land became an object of attention. People acquired new ways of looking at the ordinary spaces surrounding them.

The buzz the project created also led to journalists inquiring and reporting about EPS in magazines, blogs, on the radio and the BBC and certainly contributed to the perception of food growing gaining momentum in Leeds. The symbolic power of EPS is unquestionable. The initiative however, and despite the EPS collective's awareness of this risk, did not manage to involve new people living in the surroundings of the garden. Local residents remained a minority in the composition of the group, and despite consistent manifestations of interest and curiosity on the part of new individuals, passers-by and locals, the group never really grew substantially and new members didn't take ownership of the project

–or take on a proactive role - and once the key players moved on to other projects the group vanished. Some of the reasons for this are now clearer: the nature of grassroots, spontaneous and small size initiatives make them more exposed to the contingencies in their participants' lives. Changes in family commitments, workloads, and health conditions have a great impact on projects that rely on the commitment of a handful of people. Some of the events that actually impacted on the specific spatio-temporality of EPS were unpredictable, such as different, but in all cases limiting, health and family conditions of three core members that were supposed to hold regular gardening days at the site, therefore depriving the project of reliable contact points and visible, consistent presence in the life of the neighbourhood. Other limiting factors are perhaps due to the specific course of action that was deliberated by the group.

3.3 Food growing to shape urban planning agendas

As much as EPS has not been successful in involving new people, it has been successful in creating a community of food growers that managed to bring food growing as a local strategy onto urban planning agendas. The experiment, in fact, turned out to be fertile in developing much needed tools to bridge the divide between grassroots groups and policy makers in urban planning. The power of agenda setting in urban planning has been recognized in the literature on public participation and social movements (Lake 1994, Van Dyck 2011). Rather than affecting policy outcomes directly, the importance of the Leeds case is in steering policy attention towards food growing as planning strategy through the appropriation and animation of an indeterminate sideway of a public footpath. The 'in-between' position of the space was crucial in creating a temporary 'margin of manoeuvre' and for the improvised mode of action to take root (Tonnelat 2008). EPS also showed that community groups, with little resources, can question land use, negotiate land access and as such transcend boundaries of plan-build-use logics. Starting from a collective reflection on people-place relations a group of citizens succeeded in

first questioning and then transforming the use and management of underused grassed areas surrounding infrastructure. This made other systemic contradictions more visible. Despite a heavily regulated system to simply gain permission to use the space for a convivial event, the group has never been asked to stipulate a written agreement to create raised beds, neither was it monitored. Was it just due to trust in the people involved in the project who had working relationships with the council? Or actually a sign that heavy regulation in reality goes hand in hand with a porous system of land control?

While we can only speculate about this, we have to question whether the decision to go for a “legal way” in reclaiming the land has somehow impacted on the strategies adopted for gaining local support and engagement. For example, the search for council support and the decision to avoid the use of more radical confrontational forms of struggle that could have helped us to be identified with the other thousands of residents expropriated of their right to the city. This, as well as the socially constructed expectation of not normally having the right to influence or intervene in public space design (unless involved in ‘the government’), or our embodied identities (white, highly educated ‘better off’), might have contributed, as Kobayashi would put it, to be “constructed as others” (Kobayashi 1994, p. 75). So, while the project can be regarded as an example of insurgent urban planning, that has provided the space for a fluid group of people to let their vision take shape and materialize, there is nonetheless a need to expand social learning within the community. A much wider discussion within existing public arenas in the local community –aimed at naturalising the right to shape public space, might have helped, perhaps, to make these windows of opportunity intelligible and open.

Despite these limitations, the confident and solid group grown out of the EPS experience contributed to the formation of a new umbrella organisation called Feed Leeds (www.feedleeds.org), linking food growing projects across the city. Supported by an ongoing social platform bringing policy makers and activists together, Feed Leeds has grown in its ability to steer change. The group has become a reference point for community groups seeking support for land access, and is in dialogue with

various sectors of the Council to promote food growing across the city. The Parks department, for example, has agreed to make 37 council parks available for experimental food growing projects, where community groups can take responsibility for setting up and managing a community garden. The Housing sector has asked for support to expand food growing in council housing estates; the Planning department has considered a proposal to allocate agricultural land within an area under regeneration as an eco-settlement; and the Public Health department is currently helping the group to gain political support for the establishment of a working group on sustainable food planning, and the commitment of dedicating council officers, across sectors, to work towards this goal.

3.4 Organic praxis in urban food growing

Being engaged as researcher in an activist group surely means to contribute with specific analytical skills, and the role of being a reliable community member requires a provision of energy, commitment and reliability throughout the duration of a project.

However, the 'walking' part of the "talk-plus-walk" approach (Pulido 2008) for a researcher belonging to the Leeds political gardening community also meant to enter into the sphere of bargaining in the political arena. Specifically, it implied contributing with ideas about the expropriation of public space and the need to access it to make room for food growing practices, defending these ideas and negotiating them with community members and council officials. In the initial stages of EPS, addressing the question of what spatial quality could signify when reflecting on it from a political gardening perspective lead to the collective identification of qualities important for public space. During a workshop, the collective identified five main characteristics of spatial quality that should drive the project: edibility, sustainability, learning, joy and social interaction. These became guiding principles in the creation of the garden in Buslingthorpe Walk. From then on the coming into being of the garden as well as its contribution as a learning platform became a shared responsibility.

The freedom to improvise, awareness of the immediate snowball effect – with local groups asking how to do the same in public patches of land near to their homes – and the joy of conviviality among a diverse range of people, all contributed to team building, through getting to know each other, understanding individual's skills and limitations, building trust and ultimately allowing for individual creativity to emerge. As has been analysed in detail on the basis of critical work with collectives (e.g. see Starhawk 2012, Vercauteren 2011), group building, understanding group dynamics, responding and mediating to individual needs in the group, setting up and changing the pace of the project, finding different ways of engaging members, on the basis of their skills, while balancing the need for novelty and the need for a space of confidence, is crucial. The embeddedness of the researcher in a plethora of activities and projects that preceded EPS, helped with “knowing the other” (Routledge 2004), and in playing out the role of facilitator and activator of group dynamics that constituted the capacity to make an impact.

The multiplication of claims, showcasing of EPS across venues, conversations with councillors and the two page policy brief that was circulated (that included ideas on how food growing in public space can help to promote educational and re-skilling activities and how local authorities can support community projects), all added up to stir in the council's member of the executive for Environmental policies, the decision to look into community food growing and alternative ways to manage public land. It was a time when planning policy in England was changing under the influence of the Localism Act promulgated by the (Conservative/Liberal-Democrat) coalition government, together with the prospect of ongoing job and funding cuts in the public sector. These meant that fewer resources would have been available to manage public land, while the legislative framework was making it possible to transfer public assets under the responsibility of ‘the Big Society’. While the original council's apparent intention of setting up a network of food growers for exploring asset transfers has progressively disappeared alongside the changing members of the executive, and a Feed Leeds' identity in-the-making has

developed into one of “lobbying group”, this option remains dormant while different planning arenas slowly take shape.

The Feed Leeds group (FL), which was originally perceived as a “council partner” has progressively gained independence and elaborated an identity which reflects one of its key aims of lobbying for policy change. This has sometimes made discussions and advocacy work around the interpretation of food growing as ‘leisure’ versus ‘food sovereignty’, and the consequent policy deliberations, somewhat difficult. While an analysis of the fluctuating identity of a pressure group is beyond the remit of this paper, what is important to stress here is the need to remain vigilant about the risk of serving the council’s interest in outsourcing responsibilities to the community in the name of a neoliberal agenda, rather than one of empowerment and justice. Tornaghi’s commitment and proximity is manifested in an ongoing critical engagement with the local policy context through active participation in the committee boards of FL, which nurtures an ongoing learning exchange and makes it possible to monitor the risks of instrumentalisation of local communities.

3.5 Framing the narrative: too close to see?

The embeddedness of activism in a research project, and the belonging of researchers to a gardeners’ movement, generates tensions and questions about distance. Our direct involvement in practices of both insurgent urbanism and in food sovereignty initiatives gives us a deep understanding of the issues at stake and an embodied understanding of hidden conflicts. Commitment in the movement is based on a normative view on social and ecological justice. One of the moral responsibilities in struggles for justice is to learn from what has been done at other moments and places. The creation of a collective memory is a tool that allows one to go back to choices that were made in order to understand what provoked interesting changes or to reflect on how decision-making could have been done

differently. What may seem futile details – for example the recollection of people involved and the various sources of inspiration - are the backbone of the construction of what we have called ‘an active memory’ of the gardening movement. Through these details, positions and perspectives are put at in context. In adopting an approach that seeks to write stories from below, and to learn by keeping track of and retracing decisions that were made throughout our experiments we left behind notions of objectivity and instead took the research context and political goals of knowledge production as a starting point.

The articulation of the action research project and a critical action has generated productive dynamics with regard to the tensions of being too closely involved to provide analytical insights versus that of being a distant observer having difficulties grasping the finer details of the issues at stake. The joint analysis and writing of two authors who have been respectively closely and distantly involved in EPS has allowed for an interesting exchange on what elements to identify and give importance to when trying to grasp what made EPS into an ‘event’ that changed the Leeds food growing scene. This analytical exchange, made of storytelling, cross-questioning, mapping of trajectories and events, is materialized in this paper. It has enabled us to see EPS as an event with a ‘before’ and an ‘after’. The EPS experience altered the Leeds food growing scene in its relation with the city council. It is precisely this realization that we believe it is worth sharing, for its generative potential.

The issue of being too close to see also refers to time. Making a comprehensible analysis of ‘a movement’ in the making is quasi impossible as its agenda and strategy evolves continuously. Writing from both within the case (in time and location) and from watching it remotely, has mixed up the roles of acting, telling the story and framing it. This has challenged, but also sharpened our ability to distinguish what EPS intended to do, and what it stands for today.

4 Concluding notes

Aware of the growing and largely advocating literature on urban agriculture, this paper aimed to unpack the contradictions and tensions between critical analysis and activist-research in a case of activist gardening, and to explore its power of public agenda setting through an active memory of political gardening.

We started this trajectory by posing ourselves a question: is the tension between our role as activists that experiment with transformative practices and their risks of co-optation, and our role as researchers, vigilant but also engaged with the challenge of providing tools for alternative practices (Brenner 2009, Marcuse 2009) a contradiction? Where do we draw the line between *urban agriculture advocacy*, intended here as an undisputed commitment to reclaim the 'goods' of place re-appropriations for food growing purposes, and *food sovereignty activism*, less concerned with place and more alert to the relational and political sensitivities of producing change? And should we? A number of discussions in the academic community are relevant to this reflection, for example debates around beautification and gentrification, uncritical advocacy and critical pessimism, and more in general around the capacity of neoliberal capitalism to colonise, semantically (Caffentzis 2010) and practically, new spheres of life, of which the 'ecological turn' seems to be a manifestation (Hodson and Marvin 2009, Whitehead 2013).

A way to answer this question has been the unfolding of the analytical trajectory based on a thick description that we have presented in this paper. Here we have analysed the project's role as activator of empowerment dynamics, public agenda settings and long term social change, and considered our role throughout this trajectory. Our "living activism" and on-going engagement has generated research material beyond the life of the project, and has therefore allowed for an experience-based writing able to link the innovations and shortcomings of the projects, with its longer term empowering effects. The method of presenting EPS as part of a history that builds upon other experiences, and that is the beginning of other stories, represents our way to deal with the constant

tension of our hybrid identities (as activist-scholars, or militant-researchers), our practices (as advocates, as activists, as researchers) and the risks of co-optation that punctuate the future. We know we can only take this tension with us on the trip in the struggle for social and ecological justice. A struggle which belongs to the never-ending journey of social change.

We see a form of deeply committed scholarly activism (“organic praxis”) in political gardening as one option among many that will help to enrich the spectrum of resources needed to confront the challenges that urban food systems encompass. We sketched one path of how the combination of research and political engagement have been mutually enriching. We offered insights into how this relation changed over time and showed how a political gardening initiative was a blend of political commitment, research practice and political context. The case showed how scholarly activism is not merely a matter of reaching out or feeding into a movement’s struggle. It demonstrated how a continuous moving back and forth between different commitments, rationales and temporalities led to a particular way of doing both social science and activism. Involvement in the movement led to defining research problems that matter, and thus give more public importance to the scientific work. Participants in EPS were challenged to look at a tiny gardening project as an action that is part of a global effort of building cities and food systems differently. This awareness in turn, helped in moving forward when practical obstacles obscured sensemaking .

We presented a hopeful perspective on the possibilities of critical action. Writing about EPS as the heir of an emerging political gardening movement could rightly be criticized for being overly positive in its approach. A critique that we voluntarily accept. The idea of writing from below was also, and going back to Vercauteren (2011), part of a collective effort of providing the air needed for other experiments to breath. Being committed in social movements, we believe that telling engaging and inspiring experiences to which one can relate is a much-needed practice in reaction to the hegemonic of favoring the plausible over the possible.

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