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Urban Agriculture between Pioneer Use and Urban Land Grabbing: The Case of “Prinzessinnengarten” Berlin

Prinzessinnengarten Berlin is an urban agriculture Project in Berlin. Thousands of volunteers turned a vacant lot into an urban garden that is a multifunctional, semi-public space offering a diversity of social, cultural, educational, and political functions. Faced with the threat of privatization of the land, the founders initiated a successful campaign not only to save this particular garden but also to emphasize the importance of urban open spaces for social and ecological engagement.

Keywords

urban agriculture, social entrepreneurship, interim use, urban resilience, privatization, commons

INTRODUCTION

Prinzessinnengarten¹ is an urban agriculture project located at Moritzplatz in Berlin-Kreuzberg. It primarily serves social, educational, and ecological purposes. It started in 2009 as a temporary project (Figure 1). Hundreds of engaged neighbors worked together to transform a 6,000 square meter vacant lot in the center of the city into a mobile garden. The location of Prinzessinnengarten is special; it sits at a metro station in the inner city district of Kreuzberg, which is known for its social diversity, alternative culture, history of squats as well as an ongoing process of gentrification. Starting the garden as a temporary project, we wanted to explore the potential of urban abandoned and vacant lots to provide social and educational value in addition to their potential as green spaces.



Figure 1. Prinzessinnengarten. On the left, the vacant lot. On the right, the garden in July 2011

Prinzessinnengarten has become more than just a vegetable garden. It is a lively meeting place where neighbors and interested people can participate in a variety of activities. The garden has developed into a multifunctional place running a café and a restaurant on site and hosting various kinds of social and educational activities including workshops on organic gardening, composting, seeds diversity preservation, beekeeping, cooking, bicycle repair for re-cycling and re-use practices, as well as public talks and screenings, artistic interventions, festivals and food events. With an estimated 70,000 visitors and more than 1,000 volunteers per year the garden's appeal extends far beyond the immediate neighborhood. It is an example of a new type of gardening in the city. Over the last decade, thousands of urban gardens and community gardens have been established in different places in North America and Europe. What these gardens have in common, along with a focus on local food production, is that they are community-initiated projects.

In these spaces, gardening is not only understood as a pleasant pastime, with the garden seen as a private retreat. Rather, community driven gardening in the city is concerned with wider societal issues such as alternative use of urban land, self-sufficiency and community development. Through and participatory activities, this new garden movement works on-the-ground to addresses issues such as biodiversity, healthy eating, recycling, environmental justice, and climate change and food sovereignty. The later, a political concept brought forward by the global famers movement “La via campesina”². While Prinzessinnengarten is a platform for different kinds of practical social, ecological, and educational activities, we also address political issues. Developing a wide network with other organizations and initiatives, we often stand together fighting against rising rents, the privatization of public property and the industrialization of agriculture. Recently, Prinzessinnengarten and other urban gardening initiatives collectively wrote a manifesto-

¹The Garden is called Princesses Garden after Princesses Street located near the garden.

²See at <http://viacampesina.org/en/>

“The City is our Garden”.³ By now more than 120 initiatives in Germany have signed it. Amongst other topics, we attempt to span the gap between the urban and the rural. The manifesto advocates a “kind of agriculture which respects nature’s limitations and inherent worth, global justice and fair production conditions”. Within this larger context urban gardens can have a special place- as experimental spaces for a good city life: “We advocate a city worth living in and an urbanity that is future-oriented. A public space without access limitation or the obligation to consume is very important for a democratic and plural urban society.”

Above all, Prinzessinnengarten serves as a place for informal learning. Learning in the garden is learning without a teacher. It is a collective experience. Prinzessinnengarten is open to everyone and anyone can get involved. There are no private plots in Prinzessinnengarten, but there are open gardening days during which anyone can come and exchange knowledge and experience about growing food, organic farming, biodiversity, composting or beekeeping. We work to enhance methods, expand topics, and build local and global collaborations in the field of self-organized and non-institutionalized learning. For this purpose, together with the association “Common Grounds”, the artist Åsa Sonjasdotter and the foundation “Anstiftung”, we recently started the Neighborhood Academy- an open platform for urban and rural knowledge sharing, cultural practice and activism.⁴ One of the project’s activities, an effort to map local potential commons is shown in figure 2.



Figure 2. Project “Mapping the Commons” with Paula Segal of 596 Acres while in Residency in the Neighborhood Academy

A nonprofit organization sustains the garden and its associated activities. So far, we have never received any financial support from the city of Berlin. As a nonprofit, we engage in commercial activities, and any profit that we generate goes towards the non-commercial goals of our organization. With this profit, we pay the garden’s rent, the infrastructure and maintenance costs, the activities in the garden and the wages of 10 permanent employees and 30 temporary employees during the growing season. We run a bar and a restaurant in the garden and build gardens in other locations such as kindergartens, schools and universities

³See at <http://urbangardeningmanifest.de>

⁴<http://www.nachbarschaftsakademie.org/en/about/>

throughout Berlin. Our gardening team helped starting more than 60 of these gardens across Berlin, and in other German cities. In our restaurant we cook organic and vegetarian food for up to 300 people a day. A small part of the ingredients being used comes from our own garden while we get most of the fresh products from small scale organic farms in and around Berlin, thus helping to support alternative forms of agriculture and strengthen urban-rural connections.

GAINING AND MAINTAINING ACCESS TO THE LAND

When we started to plan an urban agriculture project in Berlin, there was still much vacant space throughout the city, especially in the inner-city areas. The prevalence of vacant lots in the city is connected to Berlin's history: the bombings during World War II, the division of the city in half during the Cold War, the deindustrialization and the economic decline that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall, all contributed to the abandonment of land in the city's center. Additionally, the post-war approach to urban planning added to the vacancy of certain areas including Moritzplatz, where the garden exists today. A major driving force of this planning approach was that the city should accommodate for the needs of cars ("autogerechte Stadt"⁵) rather than supporting the needs of the people. In the early 1960s, a major highway was planned close to Moritzplatz ⁶ forcefully pushing through one of the densest neighborhoods in Europe (see plan in Figure 3).



Figure 3. Moritzplatz- the motorway planning. Curtesy of Kreuzbergmuseum.

This plan was never implemented, in part because resistance started to grow within the neighborhood. In the late 1970s, in the gaps of the mainstream planning discourse, a movement of squatting and self-organized remodeling of the deteriorating housing in this socio-economically poor area started to emerge⁷. In parallel, the city's government began to

⁵Hans Bernhard Reichow: *Die autogerechte Stadt – Ein Weg aus dem Verkehrs-Chaos*. Otto Maier Verlag, Ravensburg 1959. For a critique of this concept see also the „New Urbanism“; Peter Katz: *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community*. New York u. a. 1994

⁶The land utilization plans 1965 and 1985 envisaged a crossing of two motorways close to Moritzplatz including massive destruction of the existing housing structures.

⁷Lothar Schmid, *Squatting in Berlin in the 1980s*; berlin 2014. For an overview on urban activism see also: Matthias Bermt, Britta Grell, Andrej Holm (eds.), and *The Berlin Reader: A Compendium on Urban Change and Activism*, transcript 2013.

adopt a new planning paradigm embracing public participation in the planning process and pursuing the idea of “careful urban renewal”.⁸

These historic trends in urban planning throughout Berlin made the garden we have today possible. In late 2008 before we started Prinzessinnengarten, we spent 6 months formulating a concept to combine temporary use of vacant lots, a mobile garden, social and educational activities with a business model, without having a specific site in mind. At this time urban agriculture was not a popular topic of discussion in the mainstream discourse in Germany, although several projects had already started with new forms of gardening in the city.⁹ Our idea of transforming a vacant lot into a garden while making a living from it was perceived by many as a hopelessly romantic idea. After searching for five months and negotiating with different landowners we ended up with the site at Moritzplatz, which was owned by the City of Berlin at that time. To gain access to the site, we signed a contract with the real estate fund, Liegenschaftsfonds, a city-owned company. The Liegenschaftsfonds’s primary goal is to privatize public land.¹⁰ Privatization of formerly public goods like social housing, water and energy was also the predominant neoliberal strategy of the City to pay for its high public debt. Specifically with vacant land, the City sought to sell it to the highest bidder. However, because the real estate market in Berlin was weak at the time, the Liegenschaftsfonds allowed us to temporarily rent the lot at Moritzplatz with a monthly rent of about \$3,000.

Although the garden became successful, drawing media attention and extensive public support, in the summer of 2012, the Berlin Senate decided to sell the land where it is located. Despite the fact that the same Senate has used Prinzessinnengarten as an example for civic engagement and the attractiveness of a “wild and beautiful”¹¹ Berlin, there was no plan to save it. We decided to write an open letter to the Mayor of Berlin and the Senate, combining it with a petition called “Wachsen Lassen!” translated in English as “Let it grow!”. We used the letter to raise awareness for the endangered future of Prinzessinnengarten, but also to foster solidarity with other initiatives being threatened by eviction and to call attention to the ongoing privatization of what used to be “the commons” of Berlin - publicly accessible land that for decades has offered free space for cultural, social or ecological uses without the goal of monetary profit. Global processes and, particularly the economic crisis of 2008, which brought money into the Berlin real estate market, threatened the culture of free open space. We believe that through our fight to keep the garden an open and free space for social-ecological interaction, we are also advocating a strong rejection of the privatization approach to urban planning. We are calling for the inclusion of the value of places of social-ecological experimentation – what we call “pioneer use” - in the decision-making process for the development of urban vacant land. Therefore, one of the important uses of the garden is for public meetings to debate the politics and policies of urban green space and urban agriculture in the city.

The petition we started in 2012 to save the land of Prinzessinnengarten gained more than 30,000 signatures and prompted national media coverage of our fight. We collected the supporting signatures in the garden and through an online petition platform. This support helped us to achieve an agreement with the city government, which had not previously viewed the garden as benefiting a wide population throughout the City. Through this new agreement, Prinzessinnengarten can stay on its lot until 2018. For now, we gained another 6

⁸In 1984, this idea also became the topic of an International Building exhibition; see: „Step by step. Careful urban renewal in Kreuzberg“, Berlin /Internationale Bauausstellung Berlin 1987.

⁹ There is a long history of allotment gardening in Germany. More recently, in the last 20 years, hundreds of what are called “intercultural gardens” have been created mainly by refugees and migrants. Christa Müller (ed), *Urban Gardening. Über die Rückkehr der Gärten in die Stadt*, oekom 2011.

¹⁰For the mission and more information see the website of the Berlin real estate fund: www.liegenschaftsfonds.de

¹¹Quote from the former Mayor of Berlin Klaus Wowereit

years to think about a possible future for Prinzessinnengarten. At the same time, the City of Berlin and the Federal State are still auctioning off public property¹² and the larger question of the city's policy of privatization of public land remains unsolved. There is still an urgent need for mechanisms and policy tools that will allow and promote the integration of valuable social and ecological projects, such as our garden, into the city's long-term planning efforts.

CONCLUSION

The experience of Prinzessinnengarten suggest that cities can learn from the experimental activities that develop outside of "business as usual" planning and development. These experimental activities are important because they both address contemporary issues and anticipate future economic, social, and ecological challenges. Tomorrows Possibilities grow in the gaps of conventional planning processes, nurtured by social desires and needs. At the same time, there is the danger that these places, the movements they represent, and as well the visions, narratives and terms they create will be appropriated by the process of transforming commons into commodities, alternatives into lifestyles and poor neighborhoods into gentrified areas. Recognizing this risk and conscientiously protecting the principles guiding the development of community driven projects like ours, is an important aspect of the work of those who advocate for the transformation of public spaces into open and free urban commons.

At Prinzessinnengarten, we hope that urban gardens not only help to create a vision of a different kind of city, but also bridge the gap between the urban and the rural. The ongoing urbanization has tremendous impacts on the global countryside with the accelerating extraction of resources; often violent transformation of social relationships and ecosystems; migration; environmental damage like climate change; and loss of biodiversity, fertile soil and fresh water. Therefore, we also have to bring communities from the periphery into the conversations around land use, ownership, and protecting the commons. Urban gardens might serve as public places that give room for starting the conversation. Places that help to realize that land is not just another commodity, but a common good that will have to serve the needs of the people and our natural environment several hundred years from now. With this long-term perspective in mind, the image of the unbuilt highway junction can also be read as an image of hope. It shows that what we considered normal and undisputable at a certain time in history, from the perspective of tomorrow, can sometimes seem misguided by wrong assumptions about the future. Hope can grow where strategies that seemingly have no alternative fail and people begin to take over and practice different forms of stewardship of their immediate surroundings.

About the author: Marco Clausen is co-initiator of Prinzessinnengarten (since 2009) and the Neighborhood Academy (since 2015). He contributes to the question of local self-organization in urban and rural areas through lectures, publications, participatory research, international exchange programs, and cooperation with artists and activists. Marco holds a Master degree in Historical and Political Sciences and Philosophy.

¹²A very telling advertisement of the Berlin Real Estate Funds, in which its CEO puts up public property for sale, says: „If you have extraordinary desires: schools, pools, gardens, hospitals, come to us". This almost desperate attempt to sell the city focuses on the extraordinary desires of private investors, and not of the desires of communities for which these goods were originally created and paid by.