



Gardens as Protest

for the right to sustenance
and
the right to the city

an Essay

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It is just after the rain has stopped. I walk down the *Passeio das Fontainhas* past a group of men hanging out in front of a bar. I enter the flyover of the bridge which is full of cars, but instead of passing through onto the empty square, I turn slightly right towards the massive foot of the bridge and take a short steep path down. It is guiding me outside the wall separating the city from the escarpments and the Douro River. I pass through an abandoned former washing house, where the rain has created big puddles on the floor. At the end, only visible when you walk right towards the edge, very steep and wobbly stone steps lead down into the escarpments and into a sudden symphony of sounds. Water is gushing and trickling down the rocks mixing with sounds from the city far away echoing through the valley. Lush and wild nature is growing everywhere and overgrowing remnants of old stone walls. Once I look closely, I can see that these walls used to be houses. Now they are used as vegetable plots. It is starting to rain again. I pass a self-build chair inviting me to sit and enjoy the view, but I make my way upstairs to search shelter underneath the bridge.

In the steep escarpments of the Douro valley, in the east of the city of Porto, a group of people has transformed an abandoned piece of land into a productive and fertile garden. What used to be a landscape of ruins of a former *ilha*¹, overgrown with plants and littered with trash and syringes, is now a beautiful hidden green oasis in the midst of a busy city, providing its gardeners with fresh and organic vegetables, fruit, and herbs. The Bananeira Garden (*Horta da Bananeira*), named after a banana tree, growing in between the ruins since before the start of the garden itself, can be described as a community garden, but in reality, it is a guerrilla garden. It has collectively been created by a group of people with no claim of ownership or fixed identity. In May 2020, during the first lockdown of the Pandemic, they squatted the land, without asking the owner for permission. Through direct action and in joint effort they cleaned the land, prepared the soil and started to plant food for their own subsistence. They are re-qualifying land the city has abandoned, explicitly refusing to recognize the state's authority over the forgotten urban spaces in the city.

¹ *Ilha* means island in Portuguese. The term refers to a typology of low-cost housing that spread in Porto during the industrial development. Today the condition of an *ilha* depends on the landlord. Some are in very bad shape, while others are being gentrified. This typology is often the only possibility for people with a low income to live close to the centre of the city.

The garden is part of the neighbourhood of Fontainhas. Even though it is located right next to the UNESCO-protected historic city centre of Porto, and has a rich history and heritage itself, the municipality is completely neglecting this part of the town, one empty promise following the other. The current administration is solely focused on expanding Porto's brand as a tourist destination, with tourist accommodations and rising prices forcing the local population to the margins of the city. Compared to the city centre and the western part towards the seaside, Fontainhas and the east of the city (Bonfim and Campanhã) have been experiencing a slower gentrification process in the past decades, forgotten and ignored by authorities. This is changing with the mayor's plans to relieve the centre from its immense pressure and expand to the east towards the new transportation hub in Campanhã. This could have consequences for the *Horta da Bananeira*, as it does not have any legal protection and the garden and its surroundings have one of the best views over the Douro in the whole city. Construction for a controversial cycling lane along the old train tracks at the bottom of the garden has already started. If the garden were evicted or institutionalized, the neoliberal system the garden is fighting against would once again take control and erase any alternative questioning its existence.

Squatting as spatial activism is still relatively rare in Portugal, due to the long and strict dictatorship of the Salazar regime. It does occur, however, where individuals or groups see no other way of addressing their most immediate needs. Portugal is still suffering from the repercussions of the financial crisis in 2008 and a growing and marginalized population is struggling to meet their most basic needs. Due to rising prices and limited infrastructure, they are left with little to no access to good quality and healthy food. Many citizens in urban environments have started to grow their own food in leftover spaces around the city. Just like the gardeners in the *Horta da Bananeira*, these individuals have transformed neglected and non-cared-for land into small vegetable gardens. Next to metro lines, highways, and underneath bridges they are occupying and cultivating land. Subsistence is the main reason for this phenomenon but not the only one. Especially in the *Horta da Bananeira*, where a whole group of people has come together to collectively create a space outside of the order of things, the reasons are many and greatly depend on the socioeconomic conditions of the gardeners². Some plant vegetables because they cannot afford them otherwise,

² Rosangela Medeiros He-spanhol, "Agricultura urbana em Portugal: práticas espontaneas e institucionalizadas," *Confins*, 2019, <https://journals.openedition.org/confins/24330?lang=pt>.

others enjoy the green space inside a busy city and take on gardening as a hobby, discovering the fun in eating food they have watched grow. For many a self-sufficient and horizontally organised community garden like this one is a possible alternative to a dysfunctional neoliberal model that provides no answers to climate change and social inequality³ but instead enhances them. Beyond the wall separating the city from the rocky escarpments, the Bananeira garden has become a place for experimentation, creation, and solidarity. In this extra-mural space, the gardeners have created a common place shaped out of their own needs and aspirations without imposed constrictions by authorities⁴. Gardeners re-discover the value of collaborating with the earth and all its inhabitants. Resources (or commons) are created and access is valued over ownership⁵. It is a place where marginalized and excluded actors (humans and non-humans alike) can find refuge, and which is tolerant of differences instead of homogenizing them⁶. Everybody is welcome to contribute in their own way.

The garden is not only addressing climate change and social inequality but it is also drawing attention to real estate speculation and gentrification. The citizens of Porto are frustrated with the politics of the city, favouring the rich and the foreign, with no regard for its local inhabitants. Maximum profit is the only principle and more often than not the mayor is passing permits under false pretences. The real estate market is not made accessible or transparent for the local population to understand. With the act of squatting, the *Horta da Bananeira* is positioning itself in the current discussion about the right to property versus the right to basic necessities like housing and sustenance. The guerrilla gardeners are cultivating neglected property, fulfilling its social and ecological sense⁷, and questioning passive land ownership. They are reclaiming their right to the city fighting for emancipation from a corrupt system. Gardening turns into a political act, a quiet but constant form of spatial activism demanding a more just city. In reality, most of the gardeners do not concern themselves with the theoretical framework that exists around this topic. They are acting out of necessity and frustration, following their intuition. By framing squatting as illegal, the state, however, is ignoring all the structural problems gardens such as the *Horta da Bananeira* are addressing⁸.

³ Olga Mink, Reon Brand (Eds.). *Co-emerging Economies. Exploring Radical Perspectives on Post-Anthropocentric Economies*. (Eindhoven: Lecturis, 2022), 18.

⁴ Stefan Gruber, Anh-Linh Ngo, "The contested fields of commoning," *Arch+ An Atlas of Commoning*, 2018, 4.

⁵ Michiel Schwarz. *A Sustainist Lexicon. Seven entries to recast the future – rethinking design and heritage*. (Amsterdam: Architectura & Natura Press, 2016), 86.

⁶ Elke aus dem Moore, "Commoning the city," *Arch+ An Atlas of Commoning*, 2018, 2.

⁷ John Wriedt (ed.). *Notes from the Underdog. Agriculture for Subsistence in Porto*. (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2021), 485.

⁸ René Boer, Marina Otero Verzier, Katia Truijen (Eds.). *Architecture of Appropriation. On Squatting as Spatial Practice*. (Rotterdam: Het Nieuwe Instituut, 2019), 98.

There lies an urgency in the need to protect this garden from gentrification and real estate speculation. If that place becomes another luxury hotel or apartment block, it will create a ripple effect resulting in an even bigger gap between the local population and their city. The question is: how can this garden continue to exist and continue to resist a profit-oriented government with no consideration for the actual needs of its citizens? How can it be supported in its struggle for emancipation?

This project is an attempt to answer that question. It acknowledges the garden's complexity and its value beyond the garden's borders. The *Horta da Bananeira* has to be understood as an embedded part of a bigger network and its locality is inevitably involving the dynamics, politics, and history of the neighbourhood and vice versa. I believe that the borders of the garden and its relation to its surroundings are therefore crucial to securing its existence. Borders are where different groups of interest meet and interact. After closely having studied the area and its dynamics, I have identified several points of intervention. Together they form a network in and around the garden. All of them are places with a past, many of them in ruin. This makes them vulnerable to falling into the hands of developers. This network of acupunctures makes sure that the border conditions of the garden are secured, fulfilling their social purpose and catering to the actual needs of the neighbourhood. They are designed to facilitate care and solidarity and to bring people together.⁹ Forming a stronger community around the garden will help the gardeners and residents to organize themselves once it becomes necessary. Each intervention enhances qualities that are already there or that have been lost. They all provide facilities and make resources accessible. They do so at very different scales and intensities. Some interventions provide access to resources in a very small and local scale, like hand railings, other interventions, like community spaces connect the garden with the neighbourhood or even the city.

⁹ Vanessa Grossman, Ciro Miguel (Eds.). *Everyday Matters*. (Berlin: Ruby Press, 2021), 138.

The gardeners' approach of caring for and learning from nature and each other is something I applied in my research and design methodology as well. When designing in a specific context I believe it is very important to gradually become knowledgeable about the place before intervening. As an outsider it is necessary to first observe and listen, to uncover the intangible knowledge and memory of a place and its people. This eco-feminist approach is part of a new generation of architects and a new way of working together. During my field trip and the year I have lived in Fontainhas, I have collected many narratives and memories, which I have used to determine the different sites of intervention and which I have assembled and illustrated in one big drawing. With my project, I want to document and archive the social and marginalized practices of the Bananeira garden and recognize their contribution to a more just city.¹⁰ The archive and the project acknowledge that everything is connected across different scales, times, and spaces.

The Bananeira community garden is a phenomenon that could only have happened exactly at that time and location and nowhere else. Nevertheless, community gardens and especially squatted community gardens are a form of spatial activism that happens in cities all over the world in different contexts, but often out of similar reasons. They all seem to propose a possible answer for new ways of being together in the midst of crisis. Their value goes beyond the garden and extends into the realm of the city, with many governments misunderstanding and criminalizing the gardeners. My project, even though it is very contextual and responds precisely to the conditions of the Bananeira community garden, is not a niche project. It demonstrates how to design in a complex and specific ecology by approaching the design in a similar manner: a network of relations and processes across different scales and temporalities, enhancing qualities and supporting interactions. It shows how providing facilities can facilitate new ways of being together. A possible next step for the Bananeira community could be to enter into dialogue with the municipality and demand back agency over their neighbourhood. Even though many of the gardeners do not want to concern themselves with politics, what they are doing is a political act and a silent protest demanding change in a corrupt system. Apart from forming strong networks with other initiatives, a systemic change in policies is the only possibility for sustainable change and a more just city.

I truly hope this special place never ceases to exist and future generations of gardeners continue to care.

¹⁰ Boer, Verzier, Truijen, *Architecture of Appropriation*, 212.

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