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► **To cite this version:**

Karla Berrens, Laura Calvet-Mir. Urban garden's ambiances as a key to understand urban space. Ambiances, tomorrow. Proceedings of 3rd International Congress on Ambiances. Septembre 2016, Volos, Greece, Sep 2016, Volos, Greece. p. 587 - 591. hal-01414023

HAL Id: hal-01414023

<https://hal.science/hal-01414023v1>

Submitted on 12 Dec 2016

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Urban garden's ambiances as a key to understand urban space

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Abstract. *In this paper we explore how can urban gardens foster the otherwise lost relationship with our sensual bodies and connect us back with our senses. Hence enabling us to re-visit the spaces of our everyday life and bringing a new flair to our ways of thinking and inhabiting place. Our case study focuses on urban gardens in Barcelona. Our fieldwork included a combination of qualitative methods, comprising participant observation (e.g. participation to garden events and assemblies), informal conversations with gardeners, and an ethnographic approach called shadowing. The ambiances that are produced in urban gardens enable us to better understand our own making of place in the city and of our ways of inhabiting it.*

Keywords: *urban gardens, ambiance, sensorium, inhabit, space*

Introduction

The body has long been forgotten in our relations to the city. We move from our departure point to our arrival as if we were robots, making the journey disappear into the routines of our everyday lives (Perec 1973 in Highmore 2002) and the sensual ambience fade once conquered by the music blasting from our personal stereos (Bull 2007). We rarely stroll around the city, ready to imbue ourselves with its ambience, letting it permeate through our bodies. Revisiting our ways of navigating the city, rekindling with the flâneurian wander (Benjamin 2002) may bring the ambience back to the forefront of our urban perception. However, what if our interactions with our surrounding enabled us to regain the consciousness of our sensuality and in doing so connect us differently with our environment? In this paper we are exploring the ways in which urban gardens can enable the lost relationship with our sensual bodies to re-flourish again and connect us to our senses. Then, in turn re-visiting the spaces of our everyday life and bringing a new flair to our ways of thinking and inhabiting place. From skin to nostrils, our whole bodies are ambience gatherers (Thibaud 2002; Amphoux 2003; Rhys-Taylor 2010; Chelkoff 2004) in fact, they are our gateway to the outer world (Rodaway 1994), and let the environment permeate so we can make sense of it. Connecting with our sentient bodies, opening ourselves to sensation and perception (Berrens 2015) may wake us up from the automatism of our every day life. Since ambiances are relational (Amphoux 2006),

they connect us to one another and to the spaces we inhabit, they are the relationship to the world and therefore, yield the key to its understanding and conception. The positive relationship we establish both bodily and mentally to urban gardens has already been explored (Kaplan 1995; Fieldhouse 2003; Hawkins et al. 2011). However, in this paper we aim at expanding the scope of this relationship through examining how does this positive effect of urban gardens impact the perception and 'feel' we have of the urban space.

Methods

Our case study is Barcelona, Spain, where urban gardens have mainly emerged only in the last 20 years; mainly since the early 2000s through top-down and bottom-up processes. We focus on bottom-up self-governed gardening initiatives started by different social movements and groups; most of them were originally squatted. We conducted research on two of these gardens from January to April 2016. Fieldwork included a combination of qualitative methods, comprising participant observation (e.g. participation to garden events and assemblies), informal conversations with gardeners, and an ethnographic approach called shadowing. Shadowing (Jirón 2011) consists of a practice where the investigator becomes the shadow of the participant and continues its daily routines to collect routine and mundane interactions of users with gardens. This practice also invites the participant to become aware of their routines and, bring the mundane into the sensational (Perec 1973 in Highmore 2002). We conducted four shadowings lasting 2 hours each, all of them were recorded. We followed Charmaz (2006) and coded relevant text passages from the voice records and the field notes focusing in the relationship with the ambiances in the urban gardens and its influence in the urban spaces perception by gardeners.

Results

In our preliminary analysis we have identified three major discourses in the relationship of our participants with the sensible environment.

Firstly, the participants identified the urban garden as a break from the aggressive nature of urban space. Participant 2, for example, feels the urban garden enables him to break away from this urban chaos where, because he is a cyclist, is not respected on the road, 'I want them to respect me'. He counterpoises it to the garden as calm and organised. In addition, for Participant 1 the urban garden is a hiatus from the urban frenzy, however, he finds any green space within the city can adopt this role of parenthesis from the accelerated urban ebb and flow.

The second discourse revolves around the perception of pace and calm provided by urban gardens. Participant 3 expressed this feeling as 'sense of liberty' from the city's pressure, as the latter is sensuously too active. He found in the urban garden a space to unwind, not only sensuously but also personally. Through working the earth and being in the urban garden, he finds a moment to breathe and relax from the stress of the city and its interpersonal relations, all too fast. Similarly, Participant 4 found in the urban garden a new pace, he found another way of sensing and in turn, he started to sense the city differently. No longer bothered by finding another job,

he decided to slow all of his life to the rhythms he found in the garden, both in terms of getting away from the frenzy and hubbub of the city and also of those who focus all of their relationships and merit around their job's achievements. For him, the benefits of having started going to the urban garden have extended into all realms of his life.

Last but not least, we identified a relevant aspect of the corporeal and sensorial relations with the urban garden, the pleasure of seeing plants grow. Participant 1 focused on this idea of biophilia and why for so many urban gardeners, the produce that stem from their work are not really the goal but instead how their focus and pride is on seeing the plants they have sowed from seed grow and produce fruits and vegetables. It is the process more than the end result that matters for them.

Discussion

Our results show that the emancipatory potential of urban gardens to escape the aggressive nature of urban space refers to the feelings of being away, being one of the important aspects of restorative environments (Kaplan 1995). Urban gardens, in that sense, can function as any other green space such as urban parks (Scopelliti et al. 2016) or other urban and peri-urban green areas (Carrus et al. 2015) that are perceived to have restorative properties.

The perception of urban gardens as a break from the stress of the city and the pressure of interpersonal relations is also linked to the restorative experiences that urban gardening can offer (Fieldhouse 2003; Hawkins et al. 2011). Several authors have also identified urban gardens as place to relax and recover from stress (Calvet-Mir et al. 2016, Camps-Calvet et al. 2016). In addition, urban gardens offer a space for socialising (Mason and Conneeley 2012), and for increasing the social integration of groups of social-exclusion (Anguelovski 2013).

Indeed, urban gardening responds to the satisfaction of seeing the blooming of life in the gardens in line with the biophilia hypothesis (Kellert and Wilson 1993); the people's inborn affinity to seek contact with other living things such as plants is also reported by Camps-Calvet et al. (2016) who found it was one of the most valued benefits people (n=201) attributed to urban gardens. Beyond the possibility of producing something, accompanying a cycle of life along with the possibility of observing the seasonal change call upon our sensible selves to observe beyond the visual, sensing the plants as they grow. This multi-sensory engagement rekindles the urban garden user with her sensuousness. Through being in contact with the urban garden and periodically be involved in its bodily intense labour, the urban garden user revives her relationship with her own sensuous body. In turn, this reflects into her ways of perceiving and inhabiting all her environment, both in and out of the urban garden.

Therefore, we can argue that the ambiances produced in urban gardens enable us to better understand our own phenomenological making of place in the city (Agnew 2011; Csordas 1994; Degen 2014; Merleau-Ponty 2002). Through providing a

space where our sensorium is not so overloaded and there is an emphasis placed in sensing the earth we labor, urban gardens enable us to regain our sensuous consciousness and relate back to our corporeality (Smart 2007; Bates 2011). The sensuous body becomes more in tune with the sensuous relations involved in the ways we inhabit our environment and how the latter is produced.

We conclude that giving attention to the sensuous possibilities and ambiances of urban gardens is not only an asset, is it necessary to understand their articulation with the making of place in the city and the evolution of its spatial and social configuration.

Acknowledgements

We thank all the gardeners that participated in our study for their kindness and interest.

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