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► **To cite this version:**

Thalia Marou. Symbiotic Atmospheres. Following the Actors in the More than Human Network of an Urban Home Garden. Proceedings of the 4th International Congress on Ambiances, Alloaesthesia: Senses, Inventions, Worlds, Réseau International Ambiances, Dec 2020, e-conference, France. pp. 172-177, 10.48537/hal-03220346 . hal-03220346

HAL Id: hal-03220346

<https://hal.science/hal-03220346v1>

Submitted on 14 May 2021

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Symbiotic Atmospheres

Following the Actors in the More than Human Network of an Urban Home Garden

Thalia MAROU¹

Abstract. The practice of urban home gardening has become popular in recent years in the city of Volos. In this practice, habits and cultural deposits meet with contemporary environmental concerns and ethics. But how actors and their agencies are networked in an urban home garden of a medium-scaled Greek city today? How is this nature-culture mapped? With theoretical pillar the work of Bruno Latour and the Actor Network Theory, this research explores the symbiotic atmospheres of human and nonhuman entities, ideas, values and perspectives, as they form pockets of biodiversity, interdependence, care, cultural expression, and present a different face of the city in the Anthropocene era.

Keywords. Urban Home Garden, ANT, Nature-culture, Human, No Human, Care

Urban Home Gardening and ANT

In Volos (Greece), especially during the last years, urban home gardening has become a widespread practice. By this practice, the habits and cultural deposits of the population merge with modern environmental concerns and ethics (Marou, Kotionis, 2019). Taking as a starting point the notion of the “social” as it emerges through the work of Bruno Latour (1993, 2005), the potential of Actor Network Theory (ANT) is applied in order to examine the urban home garden, approaching it as a “quasi object” (Latour, 1993) a “nature-culture” (Latour, 1993; Haraway 2003). Additionally, it is also applied in order to trace its “social” characteristics beyond any existing dualisms such as society/nature, subject/object, and rather to focus on characteristics that describe the interaction among human and non-human. Applying the ANT terminology, we will study how actors, intermediaries and mediators (Latour, 2005) may affect, contribute to shaping the complexity of the urban garden and ultimately its atmosphere.

This research is based on seven semi-structured interviews and walks/conversations in the garden. Interlocutors were chosen while an on-site research was conducted in order to map home vegetable gardens in the urban area of Volos. They were 3 men and 4 women - one of the men and one of the women are a couple - living in detached houses in different areas of the city. In this qualitative research, through the sample's spatial distribution across the city areas, an attempt was made to represent the existing diversity in terms of gender, age, ethnic origin and culture.

As Hinchings (2003) suggests, ANT reminds us that the way we approach the world, is always influenced by our non-human environments.

¹ Ph.D.candidate, Department of Architecture, University of Thessaly, Greece, thmarou@uth.gr

By adopting this approach and through our interlocutors' discourses, we drew upon the interconnections among the human and the non-human as they shape and give substance to the gardens, who in their turn become central within the city network, affecting both its ecology and resilience. This work focuses on some of these interconnections regarding the cohabitation of humans and non-humans, living and non-living, material and immaterial.

Space, Soil, Water, Microclimate

Space is an essential factor for the creation, scale and typology of domestic urban gardens (Cameron et al., 2012). Four of our interlocutors cultivate within the private space of their own house, while the other two use a conceded space at the opposite or next to their houses.

The garden area, when private, includes additional functions, such as entertainment, eating, resting, children's playing, as well as parking.

According to the interlocutors, space scale affects plant diversity, soil and its management. Its urban character renders watering practices dependent upon the urban watering system or in some cases, or avoiding the cost, requires the transportation of water from peri-urban ravines with the car. In terms of the city's microclimate, all interlocutors refer to a difficulty in dealing with the high temperatures occurring in the city during summer.

Plants

One of the basic characteristics of urban home gardens is the big variety of plants (Mitchel & Hanstad, 2004). The origin, diversity, production and needs of plants, as well as the methods used in order to deal and satisfy plant needs are factors contributing to the arrangement of domestic urban garden morphology, its ecological resilience, but also its contribution to the environmental, spatial and social characteristics of the urban space. All our interlocutors referred to the diversity of vegetables being cultivated, of tree fruits too, while in the garden of one interlocutor there were also flowers. They recognized an interrelationship between plant diversity and space availability.

They use with great pride words such as "everything" in order to describe the plant diversity of their gardens. Plants bring abundance, joy, self-respect. The diversity, development and fecundity of the garden plants became a material manifestation of the gardener's abilities and identity, enriching the garden atmosphere with satisfaction and pride.

Symbiosis

The gardener's actions in the urban home garden aim at preventing the acts of other entities/ organisms thriving in the same garden. Plants and animals, as they perform their lives' functions and their role in nature, may oppose the gardener's plans. Gardening practices aim at 'ensuring' the garden development along with its cultivated plants according to human wishes, but also at 'protecting' domestic animals from the competitive relationships among them, but also between them and other animals of the urban ecosystem.

Most of the interlocutors talk of a "good weeding" being the necessary prerequisite for the garden's success. The belief that one has to kill weeds as they hinder the development of cultivated plants is emerging in most of their discourses.

Correspondingly, for the protection of the henhouse from ‘intruder’s’ invasions, a puppy has been adopted and has been growing up in the garden in order to become its future guardian. With the help of special constructions/relevant housing the interactions among cats and dogs hosted in the garden have been regulated. Ultimately, the gardener/human uses, but also intervenes in the relationships of animals in the food network in order to adjust garden ecology.

The symbiosis of humans and non-humans within the urban home garden includes relationships of competition, depredation, reciprocity. Humans, plants and animals cohabitate and despite the fact that humans are proved to be in many occasions the orchestrators behind such cohabitation, still they cannot force other entities into ‘discipline’ or how they will relate with each other. Nevertheless, human actions, which according to Myers (2017) correspond to biopolitical regimes, attempt to control life within garden limits. At the same time, non-living materials and constructions also intervene in the act of cohabitation and its preconditions through the implementation of certain practices. Some examples include the synthetic geotextile covering the soil in order to discourage the growth of weeds, the fence (either metal or wooden) protecting the animals and the chicken, the wooden house for the cats.

Sustainable Growing Practices

Our interlocutors describe environmentally friendly, ‘ecological’ practices, as well as innovative solutions they come to implement, in order to save natural resources and money. Manos, refers to garden pest control practices by saying: “I am trying not to use chemical pest control preparations, and as a result the only thing I spray is thio-calcin and sometimes my own preparations, such as soap diluted in water and alcohol.”

Roula, respectively, uses a liquid feed made of nettle, ashes and manure. Vera, who raises hens in her garden, tells us: “Because we have the hens, we use manure and chicken droppings. It’s very good, strengthens the plants a lot. We do not add any fertilizers.”

Relevant practices were described by all the interlocutors who refused to use pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

Environmental consciousness within the garden space is being embodied through the gardening practices. The latter are actions playing a crucial role in the shaping of the urban home garden, its production, composition, form and finally its influence upon the urban ecosystem. Culturally constructed and originating from family habits and paradigms, carried by urban gardeners along with their rural descent and the memories of their families into the city, they bridge the city with the rural areas. Through them, interlocutors express their environmental concerns and care, as they strive to provide healthy, quality products for the family table (Marou, Kotionis, 2019), while co-producing scenes of rural urbanity.

Material Objects

The material objects we find in the urban home garden, are contributing to its spatial, ecological and anthropological shaping. They are the mediators of the actions, through which the overall character of the urban home gardening practice is generated.

These tools, constructions, utensils, technologies, in some cases vehicles too, have been recorded through personal observation during the visits to particular urban home gardens, and through the interviews. With their own words, our interlocutors make apparent the mediation of the actions, as it is performed by “things” (Latour, 2005).

The soil preparation, as a practice of urban home gardening, is mediated by tools as the rake, the manure fork, the hoe, the tiller. The watering respectively, is mediated by things as the water hose, the water tap, the automatic watering system and the city water supply network. In some cases where water is transported from distant places, portable tanks, plastic bottles, barrels and the private car are mediating the transportation and simultaneously the watering. The seedling production is mediated by plant pots, little cooking pots, small fruit containers, nylon films and generally household objects which are reused in urban home gardening. The action of fastening and protection of plants is connected by our interlocutors with objects such as the rope, but also with natural materials such as reeds and fern leaves. Reused materials and objects such as old closets, mediate the storage in the garden, while pallets and old wooden surfaces help to enclose and protect domestic animals. Some objects are mediators for more than one action. As the grill for roasting meat for meals in the garden, but also the production of ashes for the fertilization of plants. We should also mention some things that we encounter in the urban home garden or are described by our interlocutors, which mediate rest, companionship, recreation, dinner in the garden, along with other actions of urban home gardening. These things are old tables, old chairs sometimes been moved from the interior of the house, and installed outside in the garden, or they are light garden furniture.

The presence of all these objects and materials in the garden, we have mentioned above, and their role as mediators of the actions of urban gardening, as it is presented in the words of the interlocutors, renders visible the importance of “things” for the performance of urban gardening practices and the management the urban home garden space.

Ethics of Care

Tronto (1993) defines care as “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible.” According to the author, our ‘world’ refers to our bodies, ourselves and our environment. Everything that seeks to coexist as a whole, a network of “co-woven” life. According to Laugier (2015), the interrelationship between care and the environment can take place when we re-orientate ourselves towards everyday ecological activities, behaviors and practices - either private or public - which will be inspired by a respect to the environment. She emphasizes how environmental care addresses the immediate, familiar space - the garden - as well as the distant, unfamiliar space or even the planetary macrocosm.

While describing practices applied in the context of urban domestic gardening, our interlocutors often refer to notions of looking after, giving attention, taking responsibility, expressing affection - thus they describe practices of care.

Vivi cares for, attends to her plants: “I spent my days here, I spend my nights here. And if I have no time to go the garden, days when I am busy, I make a round to see who is thirsty, I will make a round to water a little bit at least. [...] My soul, I will go water them and then I will leave. To protect them from the heatwave.” Caring for the plants in the garden is the first thing to do for Roula: “First I must come here, to see my garden, how it’s doing, how things are and then get into it. First, I must make a round. To see how the peppers over there are doing, if flower has turned to fruit, I will go there, I will look around...”

Zina describes how “you wake up in the morning and tell yourself, I have something more to take care of, you see it grow, you enjoy it, you see others enjoying it for what you have. You see your children being happy.” According to her, the plants need her maternal care as much as her children.

The ethics of care is revealed to be a substantial element of the domestic urban gardening. Our gardeners talk about practices aiming at the conservation of traditional varieties of seeds, about ecological practices, about health as mediated through the family table. They talk of caring for the all the living beings cohabiting the domestic garden - plants and animals alike. They talk about their families and how the garden ensures a healthy and qualitative nutrition. They talk of the soil, the water, biodiversity. They care for the human and the non-human, they care for the web of life.

Discussion

The ethnographic material of this research renders visible the 'social' nature connecting humans, non-human organisms, environmental factors and natural phenomena, material objects and artefacts, but also immaterial elements, cultural aspects, habits, beliefs, practices, thoughts, emotions - what in three words could be described as an urban home garden. Thus, emerge the atmospheres of an urban home garden. Atmospheres composing the 'rural' as a way of life, not as space. These are atmospheres of care and environmental ethics, cooperation, satisfaction and abundance, of symbiosis, but simultaneously of biopolitical control of the non-human lives by humans.

By emphasizing on this networking, the interactions between the urban home gardening as a practice and the environmental, cultural and social characteristics of the urban everyday life are understood. Similarly understood are the possibilities offered to confront the separateness from the earth and its practices, characterizing the urbanized human, and also the everyday life in the anthropocenic city.

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