

# REAPPROPRIATING URBAN SPACE THROUGH COMMUNITY GARDENS IN BRAZIL

**Claudia Visoni**  
Urban farmer and journalist

**Gustavo Nagib**  
Doctoral geographer, University of São Paulo



The entrance gate of *Horta das Corujas*, the first community garden in São Paulo, is never locked and allows access 24 hours a day to any citizen - ©Gustavo Nagib

Claudia Visoni is a journalist, environmentalist, urban farmer, and co-state legislator as a member of the collective *Bancada Ativista* (Activist Caucus), a group of nine people who submitted a collective candidacy for the legislative assembly of the State of São Paulo in 2018. Claudia collaborates with several permaculture and political initiatives and volunteers in the *Horta das Corujas* community garden. She also dedicates a portion of her time to articulate urban agriculture activist networks in São Paulo.

Gustavo Nagib is a geographer pursuing his Ph.D. within the Human Geography Program at the University of São Paulo (USP), a visiting doctoral student at Sciences Po Paris, and a founding member of the Urban Agriculture Study Group of the Institute for Advanced Studies of the University of São Paulo (GEAU-IEA-USP).

Academic research on communitarian urban agriculture explores its role as an available alternative to make a different urban model come true, fostering a better environmental and social balance. Vegetable garden initiatives in public spaces can help expand the discussion about community actions, which tend to promote deep changes locally by making urban space management more democratic and signaling the transformation into an “edible city,” where food can actually be produced. This view has contributed to the increasing emergence of community gardens across the developed world, but also in developing economies. This is the case, for instance, in São Paulo, where many community gardens have been created in the past few years by communities themselves as an expression of activism aimed at transforming public spaces and the city. This tendency was pioneered by the 82,000-member online network *Hortelões Urbanos* (Urban Horticulturists), which started off as an information-sharing platform for people gardening at home. The community eventually mobilized to create the *Horta das Corujas* (Garden of Owls) in 2012, the first community garden in Brazil’s largest metropolis. Despite the difficulties in obtaining approval to build the community garden and the lack of legislation governing the use of public space, *Horta das Corujas* was successfully implemented and is still managed by volunteers, standing as a symbol of community-led initiatives that democratize public space and transcend traditional barriers to social integration.

## INTRODUCTION

The urban environment has become the main center of inequality growth and the place where numerous families with an income of less than US\$1.25 per day reside<sup>1</sup>. Urban agriculture is a mechanism for fighting socio-spatial inequalities, fostering the social economy, spreading new principles for food production and feeding people (mainly based on agroecology and permaculture). It is also a way of promoting different types of use and occupation of public spaces, assuring the right to the city and implementing activism, as well as transforming socio-spatial relationships at a local level in a way that might result in larger-scale future impacts. The focus of the current analysis is urban agriculture as an activist expression and community action at the local level in a metropolis. Community gardens have been spreading in several cities as a result of environmental activism aimed at restructuring the urban space, especially when it comes to taking over public areas and promoting different uses for them. In São Paulo, *Horta das Corujas* is a pioneering example of the type of activity that comes into being once local activists and communities come together to take action.

<sup>1</sup> SANTOS, M. A urbanização desigual. São Paulo: Edusp, 2010.

## URBAN AGRICULTURE AS ACTIVISM

Long considered as a primitive, temporary, deteriorating or inappropriate activity, the beginning of the 21st century has shown that urban agriculture has become the basis for an essential activity for improving the material and nutritional perspectives of urban populations while having a direct impact on urban environmental quality<sup>2</sup>. It is a broad concept, and its specifics vary as per the activity's context and location. The types of urban agriculture that can be found within a city and within different cities vary depending on the players, locations and relationships established in the urban space: from gardening to market-oriented farming activities both in intra-urban and peri-urban areas. Therefore, it is safe to say that each territory has its own type of urban agriculture, but what differentiates it is the fact that it is part of the urban socioeconomic and ecological system<sup>3</sup>. Among this diversity, urban agriculture can be practiced in the form of community gardens, which are pieces of land (private or public) that are cultivated collectively by a group of people.

In many cities, community gardens have spread as a result of community activism. Historically, in 1649 in the county of Surrey (England), fabric salesman Gerrard Winstanley gathered a small group of followers and took over the land on a hill for food production at a time of political turmoil and crisis in supply. Known as “diggers,” these activists demanded from local authorities over the course of a few months the right to cultivation, inspiring similar movements in the region<sup>4</sup>.

However, it was only in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the emergence of counterculture movements in the USA, that urban agriculture grew to become an activist movement known as “guerrilla gardening.” Here, “guerrilla” refers to the occupation of public areas without obtaining previous consent, where communities take over abandoned or unused land. The ideological foundation for this radical action model is to challenge the socio-spatial order in place. It is an alternative to urban crises, as well as an expression of how urban space can be permeated by farming areas<sup>5</sup>.

Environmental concerns related to urban agriculture include political and activist efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the relocation of food production (bringing it closer to large population groupings), lower fuel expenses for the transportation of food and raw materials, and its

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Panoramic view of the community garden *Horta das Corujas*  
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educational role, among other aspects. Concurrently, it flourishes from the urban population concerned about food matters – particularly the origin and quality of available food – as well as about new forms of public space occupation, the enhancement of local cultures, and claiming the urban space from a social and political perspective.

Community gardens promote the transformation and enhancement of public space with the purpose of fostering social solidarity and integration. The purpose of these initiatives is not always to promote food self-sufficiency for its volunteers. They promote a collective reflection about the urban space as an actual

space for permanent food production. In public spaces, community gardens encourage heterogeneous and horizontal (instead of hierarchical) social relations, serving as an inspiration for other types of activism and as a public policy lab. These purposes and forms of action take full form in the example of the Horta das Corujas community garden and its supporting online network.

## HORTELÕES URBANOS, AN URBAN HORTICULTURIST NETWORK

Since 2010, the streets of São Paulo have experienced the emergence of community gardens, a new form of activism that redefines the conceptualization of collective space, creates and strengthens communities, and reclaims

<sup>2</sup> SMIT, J.; NASR, J.; RATTA, A. Urban agriculture: food, jobs and sustainable cities. Vancouver: The Urban Agriculture Network, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> MOUGEOT, L. J. A. Urban agriculture: definition, presence, potentials and risks, and policy challenges. Ottawa: IDRC, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> REYNOLDS, R. On guerrilla gardening: a handbook for gardening without boundaries. London: Bloomsbury, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> NAGIB, G. Agricultura urbana como ativismo na cidade de São Paulo. São Paulo: Annablume, 2018.





A day of collective work in the community garden *Horta das Corujas*  
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chemical-free food. It is also deeply related to new forms of collective organization, such as online networks.

The creation of community gardens within the city of São Paulo actually started with the creation of an online network – a knowledge-sharing platform – through a Facebook group called *Hortelões Urbanos*<sup>6</sup>. It was co-created in 2011 by Claudia Visoni and journalist Tatiana Achcar, who had farmed across the USA and New Zealand.

Eight years after its creation, the Facebook group now has 82,000 members. The exchange of experiences about home and community gardens takes place every day of the year, 24/7. Seven moderators take turns approving posts and moderating debates. In times of political divergence, “fake news,” and spam diffusion, virtual communities tend to succumb to torrents of irrelevant or opportunistic posts. However, the group’s managers, who voluntarily give their time to support the cause, have acted to maintain *Hortelões Urbanos* as a space where learning is shared. It is a valuable form of online activism. All coordinators also cultivate community and home gardens in São Paulo, Porto Alegre (in the south of Brazil) and Manaus (in the Amazon forest). Its members are scattered throughout the entire country, covering all states and thousands of cities, including some Brazilians living abroad and Spanish-speaking members from other countries. Members seek guidance in the improvement of urban garden management and obtain immediate,

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constructive responses. Over the years, the group has been able to support not only the individual training of fruit and vegetable gardeners but also to inspire and coordinate the establishment of community gardens in public spaces, as well as in closed compounds and other private spaces.

## THE BIRTH OF *HORTA DAS CORUJAS*

Eventually, the question of whether the group should mobilize to create a community garden was posed. Shortly thereafter, it was decided that two work groups were needed: one would be in charge of an online mapping of gardeners, requiring inputs available in towns for urban agriculture; the other would be in charge of coming up with a community garden plan.

The first group ended up inspiring an initiative that became known as *Cidades Comestíveis* (Edible Cities) led by André Ruoppolo Biazoti, an important urban agriculture activist and researcher. The second group started preparing a comprehensive report that would be delivered to São Paulo’s local government, listing the numerous benefits of urban agriculture, as well as describing the operational details and the potential benefits of having an urban garden in a green area known as *Praça das Corujas*, located in an upper-middle-class neighborhood, close to the bohemian district of Vila Madalena.

Getting approval from local authorities to start a community garden proved to be a complicated task. However, a member of the regional environment council helped with getting in

<sup>6</sup> *Hortelões* (horticulturist) had become an obsolete word in Brazil, where it is used to refer to someone who takes care of an orchard.

touch with the regional mayor to obtain approval for the project. Regional city hall clerks visited the park to check where the activists envisioned starting the garden and gave their informal permission. It is important to note that urban community gardens in public spaces were neither prohibited nor regulated in the city of São Paulo – and that is still the case today.

An informal group started a series of preparatory activities, which included putting signs up at the park and posting on social media calling for volunteers to attend a meeting on July 14, 2012. On July 29, the first joint effort took place: the community garden's temporary boundaries were set, and a water tank was set up in the wettest area, where a budding water table was detected.

Municipal workers surrounded the area with a wire fence about 1 meter high to prevent dogs from entering the garden and the gates are closed with a string. However, access is free to all. The launch of *Horta das Corujas* reflected the popularity of the initiative, as 300 participants attended the event, reflecting a strong will to grow food as a community. Only two weeks after that, another community garden, known as *Horta do Ciclista* (Garden of the Biker), on Avenida Paulista, the city's most famous avenue, was launched with the help of Claudia Visoni.

At first, city dwellers demonstrated mixed attitudes in regard to *Horta das Corujas*. A lot of people came to the community garden, asking questions and admiring the space, sometimes even joining the activity. However, a small part of the local population found the garden ugly and untidy and feared it would attract “bugs, cockroaches, rats and beggars,” as once said by a woman who visited the park regularly. Over time, resistance to the garden decreased and the flow of visitors increased. Although thousands follow the Facebook posts on the work organization of the community garden, fewer than 10 people actually do the daily maintenance work. Tens or hundreds of people come on specific occasions to help. Moreover, an unknown number of people act in a predatory manner, stealing plants, tools, and even compost. The group of volunteers has learned how to deal with a large amount of work and the stolen items by adopting a more detached approach and coming up with strategies such as planting mainly non-conventional plant foods (NCPF), which are less known and commonly mistaken for regular weeds, thus perceived as less desirable.

In addition to gardening activities, workshops, hands-on lessons and talks, social gatherings and a lively community life take place in the garden. It is open to all visitors, regularly frequented by schools, families, and groups of friends, as well as by students of all ages, and researchers from all over the world. The initiative has also received considerable media attention, by hosting interviews and photoshoots that help spread information not only

about this specific initiative but also about community gardens in general. The 800-square-meter area also serves as an example of environmental regeneration (several springs have appeared), as well as a native stingless bees' sanctuary, and where planting techniques involving proper water management are implemented. Over 200 types of plants are cultivated there, many of which are rare, and its microfauna has become increasingly diverse and abundant.

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## CONCLUSION: THINK GLOBALLY, ACT LOCALLY (DO IT TOGETHER)

Over the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a new type of urban activism has stood out with regard to the occupation of public spaces in the city of São Paulo: community gardens have become a new category of urban amenities in public parks, and they redefine the layout of the collective space, allowing for greater community integration based on growing food that is free from pesticides and other chemical products in intraurban areas. *Horta das Corujas* is a pioneering example of this community-driven type of activity.

Urban agriculture is not necessarily a new concept, but this approach sheds a new light onto it as a citizenship action aimed at rethinking the current urban-industrial lifestyle. Considering the urban production model and its resulting contradictions, this type of activism focuses on alternatives at the community level. This effort to occupy public spaces for food production, breaking down the individualistic tendencies of contemporary society, is a good example. From this perspective, urban agriculture becomes an important tool for challenging and transforming the urban model that prioritizes individuality and socio-spatial segregation.

This activity must be included in the urban reform agenda as a tool for democratizing urban space planning and management. Urban agriculture in public spaces meets the needs of different social groups and inspires the establishment of creative public policies that foster social integration. Today, in São Paulo, it is also an example of taking the lead in terms of alternatives to official planning and a mechanism that compels new urban utopias.

Thus, urban community gardens help democratize urban space, allowing the population to exchange information and experience the city, also offering more leisure options. This type of urban agriculture has improved socio-spatial integration by reducing social isolation. When community gardens such as *Horta das Corujas* are located in areas accessible to all citizens, including those not working directly in planting and maintaining crops, they allow a more intense urban experience based on the collectivization of the land.