

# Cultivating Civic Ecology

## A Photovoice Study with Urban Gardeners in Lisbon, Portugal

*Krista Harper and Ana Isabel Afonso*

**ABSTRACT:** Urban gardens are a form of self-provisioning, leisure and activist practice that is cropping up in cities around the world (Mougeot 2010). We present the history and contemporary terrain of Lisbon's urban gardens and discuss the cultural values that gardeners attach to the practice of growing food in interstitial urban spaces. We present initial findings from our research with an urban gardeners' association as it attempts to transform informal or clandestine garden spaces into an 'urban agricultural park'. This coalition of gardeners from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds is reclaiming land and using a participatory design process to create a shared space. They hope to grow vegetables and to re-grow 'community' by forging shared experiences in the neighbourhood. We describe how we used Photovoice as a process for exploring residents' motivations in planting informal and community gardens on public land. What visions of sustainability and the contemporary city emerge from the practice of urban gardening? What kinds of urban gardening practices produce 'communities of practice' that cross ethnic, socioeconomic, and generational lines? The Photovoice approach allowed us to examine how gardeners conceptualise their use of urban space as they build new civic identities around gardening and make political claims to gain access and control over vacant land.

**KEYWORDS:** activism, civic identity, community, food, Photovoice, sustainability, urban gardens, urbanism

### **Introduction: Urban Gardens as 'Communities of Practice' in Building Civic Ecology**

Urban gardens are a form of self-provisioning, leisure and activist practice that is cropping up in cities around the world (Mougeot 2010). There are several key frames for efforts to promote urban gardening: ecological sustainability, economic rights, healthy food and social cohesion (FAO 2010). Urban gardens are an important arena for civic ecology, defined as 'local environmental stewardship actions taken to enhance the green infrastructure and community well-

being of urban and other human-dominated systems' (Krasny and Tidball 2012: 268).

Since the 1990s, we have seen scholarly debate on the societal dynamics of community gardens, starting in geography and urban planning and branching out. Levkoe and others see urban gardens as a form of grassroots community building and food justice activism (Krasny and Tidball 2012; Levkoe 2006). Susser and Tonnelat (2013) see urban gardens as one way residents are asserting 'the right to the city' or reclaiming an 'urban commons'.

Clearly, urban gardening inspires high hopes as a form of civic engagement for environmental sustain-



ability. Its critics, however, warn us of the potential for hierarchies of race and class to play out in food movements such as urban agriculture (DeLind 2011; Guthman 2008), or the potential for urban gardens to be co-opted as a form of neoliberal governance, replacing public investment in city services with voluntarism (Pudup 2008; Rosol 2012). We agree that one must cultivate a critical awareness of power relationships in urban gardens. At the same time, urban gardeners' struggle for access to land can lead to community-based interventions in the food system and the urban fabric (DeLind 2002; Sokolovsky 2010; Tidball and Krasny 2007). These shared struggles potentially foster transversal alliances across divisions of class, ethnicity, age, disability as well as other forms of difference (Young 2000). These alliances require ongoing work, not only to build relationships but also to recognise and appreciate difference within the community formed by collective action.

How do such alliances happen in the realm of civic ecology, where efforts to enhance green space and community well-being intersect? Bendt et al. (2012) studied public-access community gardens in Berlin as sites of social environmental learning, drawing from Lave and Wenger's concept of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger 1991). Communities of practice are 'a system of relationships between people, activities, and the world' (ibid.: 98) in which participants can learn alongside one another. Communities of practice depend on three social dimensions: mutual engagement, a feeling of joint enterprise and a shared repertoire of symbols, rituals and stories (Wenger 1998). Bendt et al. (2012) found all three of these elements appearing in different forms in Berlin's community gardens. Gardeners learned from one another – not only about horticulture but also about urban politics, self-management of shared spaces and social entrepreneurship.

We discuss communities of practice operating within an urban gardening organisation in Lisbon, drawing from our participatory action research (PAR) partnership between academic researchers and the members of that organisation. We present the history and contemporary terrain of Lisbon's urban gardens and then discuss the cultural values that gardeners attach to access to land for cultivating food together in the city. What visions of civic ecology emerge from the community of practice of urban gardeners working to establish a permanent space for their activities? We reflexively examine how our own Photovoice research process facilitated discussion of key values within the organisation, closely examining their discussion of the themes of 'clandestinidade and institutional conflicts' and 'sustainability'.

## Case Study: Urban Gardening on the Edge of Lisbon, Portugal

Since 2011, we followed the development of a gardening project under way in Alta de Lisboa, a neighbourhood that until the 1950s was part of the *zona saloia*, a belt of farmlands encircling the city of Lisbon. Alta de Lisboa's history is characteristic of many outer neighbourhoods that grew rapidly in the postwar years. As Portugal industrialised and urbanised, Alta de Lisboa became the site of shantytowns, where migrants from rural Portugal and former African colonies lived. Local residents planted informal gardens on vacant municipal lands to supplement wages, in a practice that is common throughout the city (Luiz and Jorge 2012). This use of land was not illegal, but access to land was precarious in that the city could remove gardens at will. Many urban gardeners interviewed used the term *horta clandestina* for garden spaces in this precarious institutional context.

In the 1990s, the Camara Municipal of Lisbon entered into a public-private partnership with the Sociedade de Gestão de Alta de Lisboa (SGAL) to redevelop the area. The vast real estate development replaced the shantytowns with a housing project of new public housing units for residents of the old shantytowns alongside market-rate condominiums for middle-class residents. Residents complain, however, that the neighbourhood lacks vitality and cohesion across class and ethnic groups, counter to the planners' stated goals of creating a 'social mix' (Cordeiro and Figueiredo 2012). Many residents' *hortas clandestinas* were removed to create the new 'Parque Oeste', a formal green space built on creekside land.

Against this backdrop, a neighbourhood-level NGO called *Associação para a Valorização Ambiental da Alta de Lisboa* (AVAAL) is trying to foster what it calls *ecologia cívica* (civic ecology) through community and school gardens among other programmes. AVAAL came together in response to the destruction of gardens as part of the urban renewal process. It was founded in 2009 by two residents representing Alta de Lisboa's 'social mix': Jorge Cancela, a Portuguese landscape architect, and António Monteiro, a retired resident who is an elder in the Cape Verdean community. Together they gathered a diverse group of neighbours around the common goal of gaining a permanent space for a community garden, at a time when the Lisbon municipality had not yet launched its programme of *parques hortícolas*. AVAAL's proposed *Parque Agrícola de Alta de Lisboa* (PAAL) aims to create a secure, recognised plot of land for residents to cultivate. Cancela and Monteiro identified a vacant

public lot behind a sports centre and next to the highway overpass. They consulted dozens of prospective gardeners, and Cancela integrated those perspectives into a plan for the park, using a participatory design process. AVAAL brought a petition and these architectural plans to the City Council.

After long negotiations and a grant from a private foundation, AVAAL built the first part of the *Parque Agrícola* in 2013 – the *Horta Acessível*, which is the first handicapped accessible garden space in Portugal. The *Horta Acessível*, highly visible at the entrance of the park, provided a concrete symbol of AVAAL's vision of urban agriculture as an inclusive and egalitarian space for all. With the ongoing financial crisis, however, 'public-private' partners put off releasing funds to complete the rest of *Parque Agrícola*. AVAAL's leaders have held their coalition together through several years of delays. The larger part of the *Parque Agrícola* finally opened in April 2015, after six years of community organising and long negotiations with the municipality and private developers to get financial support for construction.

AVAAL interested us not only because it is one of the largest organisations concerned with urban gardens but also because it represents a diverse range of residents and gardeners. There are older gardeners from rural Portugal and Africa and young urban professionals who are interested in sustainable cities, as well as gardeners with disabilities who grow food in AVAAL's *Horta Acessível*. AVAAL's leadership envisions a role for all the different members as they come together: older gardeners from rural Portugal and Lusophone Africa may share traditional ecological knowledge with younger gardeners who grew up in the city and are new to gardening. The organisation is a microcosm of the people and projects that make up urban gardening in Lisbon today. All share a common interest in sharing and using the spaces left behind by the big developers of the city, but they bring different motivations and attach different meanings to the urban gardening community of practice.

### Photovoice: Negotiating Shared Understandings of Civic Ecology in Urban Gardening

We used Photovoice to learn how a diverse group of AVAAL members saw their activist work towards creating an urban agricultural park and fostering 'civic ecology' in the neighbourhood. We have used traditional ethnographic interviews and participant observation to get to know urban gardeners, working with AVAAL and other organisations since 2011. Pho-

tovoice offers a different way to elicit participants' perspectives and to use images to generate discussions. Wang, Burris and Ping (1996) developed Photovoice as a method that combines participant-generated photography, discussions and photo exhibitions to study community concerns from multiple perspectives. We used Photovoice to do participatory action research – an approach to doing research *alongside* participants that aims for negotiation, dialogue and reciprocity in setting the research agenda, collecting and analysing data, and communicating and applying results from the research (Gubrium and Harper 2013).

We recruited eleven active AVAAL members (five men and six women) to participate. The group ranged in age from their twenties to seventies and was varied in terms of education, socioeconomic status, disability and, to a lesser extent, ethnicity. At the first meeting, we explained the Photovoice process and community-based research ethics. We asked which themes the photographers would like to document and explore through photography. After an animated discussion, the photographers covered a large poster board with possible themes. We encouraged them to narrow this list to five key themes by voting and negotiating among themselves. The resulting themes were 'institutional conflicts and *clandestinidade*', 'inclusive agriculture', 'construction of community', 'happiness and agriculture as therapy' and 'sustainability'. At the end of the first workshop, we provided participants with digital cameras on loan and asked them to contribute up to five photos for the next workshop. Six weeks later, the Photovoice group reconvened and discussed the photo collection, which the group viewed as a slideshow at AVAAL's headquarters. Each photographer offered brief framing comments, and we facilitated a general discussion of each photo. We later held a photo exhibition at AVAAL's headquarters as a way of stimulating interest in gardening among neighbourhood residents. AVAAL also used the images produced by gardeners in the redesign of their website.

We used Photovoice to gain insights on how participants perceived the practice of urban gardening and their own efforts to secure a legally recognised space for gardens. For the participants, however, the Photovoice discussions provided an opportunity to reflect together on their organisation's goals and values. Here we focus on two themes related to civic ecology: '*clandestinidade* and institutional conflicts' and 'sustainability'.

#### *Clandestinidade and Institutional Conflicts*

In the first workshop, photographers discussed several themes related to *clandestinidade* and institutional

conflict and, in the end, combined these into a single category. This showed us that AVAAL members supported clandestine gardeners' use of public land even as they were working to create a legally recognised space for gardening. They saw themselves as allies or even advocates attempting to address the precarity of *hortas clandestinas*. Looking at images, people often brought up related stories that cannot be seen in the images themselves, or that are in the background of the image. One photographer, a retiree, contributed an image related to the theme of 'clandestinidade and institutional conflicts'.

that the problem was 'You have nowhere to complain'. Earlier, he had shown pictures of public parks that were in disrepair and spoken about the city's responsibility to maintain green spaces. These seemingly inconspicuous pictures opened up tacit knowledge about the concerns of gardeners working informal plots and discussion of what institutions ought to be accountable for in providing access to green space.

In another slide on this theme, a younger photographer presented a picture of a vacant lot slated for redevelopment in Amadora (another peripheral neighbourhood in the Lisbon Metropolitan Area). In the picture,

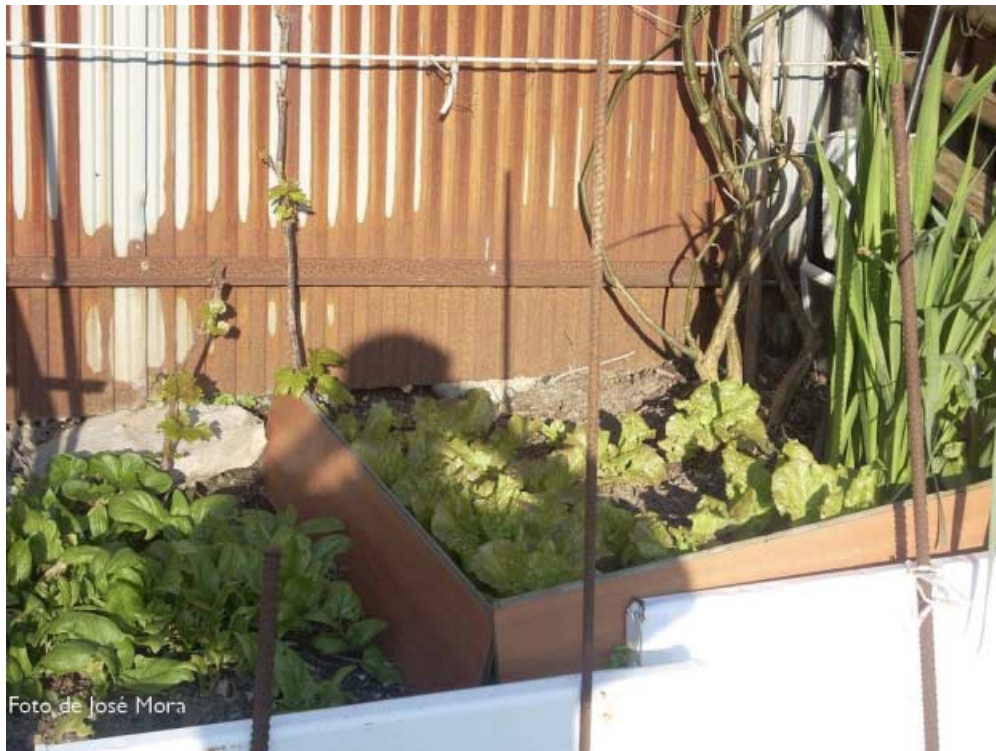


Figure 1: 'Horta clandestina' ('Clandestine garden'), photo credit: José Mora

Although we could see nice lettuces growing in a small plot edged with a strip of rusty corrugated metal, during the discussion the photographer spoke at length about the vulnerability of clandestine gardens:

People come there and start to grow a little garden, but sometimes it happens that they go there and suddenly there's nothing. For instance, when the time comes for harvesting potatoes, thieves make off with the potatoes and leave nothing but the leaves for the gardener. He goes underneath and nothing – no potatoes.

This photographer felt that gardeners would be better protected against theft and vandalism if more space for gardens were legalised by the city – like the proposed Parque Agrícola. Another retiree agreed, saying

informal garden plots extend down a hill behind a large billboard that reads: *Melhoria da qualidade de vida* (Improving Quality of Life). The photographer wondered whether the gardens in the photo would be destroyed by the construction project, and added:

I think that the ones who make decisions should pay more attention to what people really want. When they make those political decisions like 'Now we are going to build here an urban park with nice grass and swings', they should listen to the residents in the community. To the people who will use that space.

In the discussion that followed, participants strongly contrasted residents' perspectives against the developer's top-down view of what constitutes quality of



Figure 2: 'Adaptamos e resistimos' ('We adapt and resist'), photo credit: Elisabeta Serra

life in terms of the management of public space. While for the residents quality may mean having space to grow kitchen gardens, for developers it may mean destroying residents' spontaneous use of the land and building in its place a formal and tidy urban park, ignoring how residents actually use their free time.

Another photographer, a younger professional woman, used the camera to express more abstract ideas through a concrete image of an urban interstice next to the proposed site for the urban garden:

This is next to the *Parque Agrícola* – it's the North-South highway overpass, the boundary of the park. On the one hand, there is almost nothing happening ... it is a desert because it is gloomy, except that the middle zone, which picks up water that falls between the two lanes of the North-South, and there some weeds can grow. So that's a little bit, because we also need to adapt, we need a little light and a little water and goodwill, to have the *Parque Agrícola*.



Figure 3: "Adaptamos e resistimos" "We adapt and resist" (Photo credit: Elisabeta Serra)

For the photographer, this image provided a visual metaphor for the patience and flexibility required to complete the *Parque Agrícola*, after three years of AVAAL petitioning the city and urban development corporation. Speaking of AVAAL, Jorge stated: 'We are not guerrilla gardeners. We *want* to be legal'. AVAAL has organised transversal politics by demanding recognition and resources from the City of Lisbon, linking working-class gardeners' desire for secure usufruct rights (*Clandestinidade*) to middle-class gardeners' vision of gardens as a cure for social and ecological anomie (Institutional conflicts).

### Sustainability

As anthropologists studying urban environmental mobilisations, we were especially interested in learning how AVAAL's most active members viewed concepts related to ecological sustainability. At the first Photovoice workshop, participants listed many themes on the board related to the environment and sustainability, including 'social permaculture', 'local production', 'green agriculture' and more. None of these themes received a majority of votes. We encouraged participants to think of ways of grouping the themes that had attracted votes, like civic ecology and sustainability. In hindsight, we may have pushed them to develop the theme of sustainability because participants good-naturedly joked, 'OK, we'll do it for your sake ...' when we suggested it.

In the end, the theme of sustainability was less generative, in a Freirian sense, than other themes. We learned that although AVAAL members often characterise practices as sustainable in meetings and informal conversations, they found it difficult to represent sustainability visually within the urban neighbourhood. As every ethnographer knows, failures and mistakes are also data because they make visible the gaps and tacit knowledge. Only a few, mostly younger, participants took photos related to it, and overall 'sustainability' photos seemed to generate less interest than others. For example, one young woman showed a picture she had taken in a small village outside of Lisbon as a symbol of a more sustainable way of life. This image did not speak to the group's common experience and so the discussion moved on quickly. Reflecting upon the ways that people did and did not connect with the theme, it might be that sustainability is a secondary motivation for many members of the group, even though it is a stated goal of the association.

One picture representing sustainability did generate discussion and enthusiasm: a photo from the school garden programme in which an older gardener

was teaching a group of children. The photographer explained how the picture related to sustainability:

This is civic ecology because what Sr. António is doing is passing on the learning and knowledge that he has, in this case it's planting basil, but it's also teaching the children that they have to handle things carefully and take care to grow it. And the detail here is the care, because they had to make little holes for various seeds to grow. So I chose this because it is the passage of learning.



Figure 4: Planting seeds in school gardening program (Photo credit: Cristina Morais)

Her discussion of the image linked sustainability to traditional ecological knowledge of older rural Portuguese and immigrant gardeners who learned to grow food before chemical fertilisers and pesticides were widely available – organic farmers *avant la lettre*.

Another photo of a garden was categorised as *clandestinidade* but generated a different sense of sustainability in this exchange between two older gardeners and Afonso:

Senhor J: I do not know if it's the crisis but people ... have economic problems. So they go looking to have a little bit of land, some space to grow stuff.

Senhor A: And there are plenty who no longer buy [food].

Senhor J: I don't buy! Because with the reforms, the people there in the gardens are going around on 200-odd euros a month. With water, electricity and gas, they have to get a supplement. At the same [time] they can feel good about themselves, it serves as gardening therapy, it serves as a leisure activity, while also ...

Afonso: It gives some domestic sustenance...

Senhor J: Some sustainability. Exactly.

We learned that when AVAAL members use the term sustainability, they do so in an expansive, flexible way that encompasses meanings of households' economic subsistence and the social reproduction of traditional ecological knowledge.

Sustainability discourses are used in a variety of political settings from the local to the global to make claims about future pathways for action (Krause and Sharma 2012; O'Connor 1994; Peet and Watts 1996). AVAAL's activists linked the term sustainability to the food security and wellbeing of low-income people in the city who are enduring the ongoing effects of Portugal's economic crisis. Participants also linked sustainability to the passing down of horticultural skills and heritage through practical learning, thus valorising older gardeners' knowledge as a form of ecological stewardship for future generations. These themes appeared far more often than abstract ecological concepts more prevalent in the global environmental movement, such as biodiversity, climate change or peak oil. Activists recast gardening itself as contributing to a 'plural political ecology of knowledge' (Escobar 1996: 65). The connection to global environmental issues is emergent rather than defining for their work.

## Concluding Thoughts

Photovoice discussions provided a space to develop and gain insights on AVAAL members' shared repertoire of ideas related to urban gardens. AVAAL's most active members placed a high priority on lobbying the city for permanent access to public land for gardening – reframing residents' longstanding activities in *hortas clandestinas* as itself a legitimate form of civic ecology. They conceptualised the term sustainability flexibly, placing ideas related to social reproduction, heritage and household subsistence alongside ecological concerns.

AVAAL's members have since moved on from planning and collectively hashing out rules for the community garden to managing a new common green space. Because the process of gaining access to land and funds for the garden took a long time, AVAAL's small group of a dozen core members have had time to develop trust and mutual understanding of varied visions of urban gardening that were expressed in the Photovoice discussions. With the garden complete, there are now 100 members working in the garden and taking part in meetings. The expanded membership do not know each other well, which can lead to disagreements about the purpose and proper form of urban gardening. At meetings to discuss the regulations of the *Parque Agrícola*, we witnessed the

broader membership engaging in debates over rules related to genetically modified seeds, the kinds of containers and small structures that should be permitted, and how to structure the annual fees fairly. Cancela had this on his mind when we interviewed him:

Sustainability for me means 'for a long time', and that's the challenge – what structures of socialisation will appear? How will people organise themselves when problems occur – how will people discuss problems, how will they solve them? ... All the people here will share a common space – but maybe not yet common values ... That's just the diversity of life. But people will have to have a common way of organising themselves.

In the coming years, we will see whether AVAAL will be able to expand its core of activists and to engage the wider membership in the collective project of building transversal alliances for civic ecology. We may see more conflict within the group as it scales up, digs in and starts growing food instead of just talking about it. The sustainability of AVAAL's *Parque Agrícola* will depend in part on how effectively the organisation can scale up their community of practice by working alongside one another, developing a sense of joint enterprise and forging a shared repertoire (Wenger 1998). Photovoice offered us a window onto the way a diverse group of citizens negotiate the meanings of urban space and their own efforts to transform it through gardening.

**KRISTA HARPER** is Associate Professor of Anthropology and Public Policy and Administration at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. An ethnographer who has worked in Portugal, Hungary and the United States, she is co-author of *Participatory Visual and Digital Methods* and co-editor of *Participatory Visual and Digital Research in Action*. E-mail: kharper@anthro.umass.edu

**ANA ISABEL AFONSO** is Professor Auxiliar in the Department of Anthropology of the Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal. A specialist in applied and environmental anthropology, she has published extensively on wind energy debates and rural landscapes. She is author of *Sendim* and co-editor of *Working Images* (with Sarah Pink and Laszlo Kürti). E-mail: ai.afonso@fcsh.unl.pt

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