



June 2022

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## Urban agriculture and the right to the city in Paris and Alès

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### **Abstract**

This article proposes a reading of urban agriculture in the 21st century through the prism of the right to the city. Urban agriculture is understood here, on the one hand, as a social practice that responds to contemporary urban problems, through which those problems can be critically analysed, and on the other, as a potential instrument for the emergence of a fairer and more inclusive city. To this end, the article focuses on the practices of gardeners that characterise two different urban contexts and two typologies of urban agriculture: community gardens in Paris and allotment gardens in Alès. Vegetable gardens in both cities are spaces where exchanges largely fall outside the sphere of commercial exchange. They constitute a way to reappropriate vacant spaces for both individual and collective purposes. These shared initiatives are vehicles of change in day-to-day urban life. Despite the differences in territorial conditions, gardening activities in these two cities can offer a form of response to the limitations of the neoliberal city by fostering the development of certain dimensions of a common and shared right to the city.

**Keywords:** urban agriculture, right to the city, community garden, Paris, Alès

## Résumé

Cet article propose une lecture de l'agriculture urbaine au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle au prisme du droit à la ville. L'agriculture urbaine est ici comprise, d'une part, comme une pratique sociale répondant à des problèmes urbains contemporains et permettant leur analyse critique, d'autre part comme un instrument potentiel de diffusion d'une ville plus juste et inclusive. Pour cela, il se concentre sur les pratiques des jardinier·ère·s qui caractérisent deux contextes urbains différents et deux typologies d'agriculture urbaine : des jardins partagés à Paris et des jardins familiaux à Alès. Dans les deux cas, les échanges qui y ont lieu échappent en grande partie aux logiques marchandes et permettent une réappropriation des espaces vacants à des fins tant individuelles que collectives. Ces initiatives partagées sont des vecteurs de changement de la vie urbaine quotidienne. Malgré les différences de contextes territoriaux, les activités de jardinage de ces deux villes peuvent apporter une forme de réponse aux limites de la ville néolibérale en permettant de développer certaines dimensions d'un droit à la ville commun et partagé.

**Mots-clés :** agriculture urbaine, droit à la ville, jardin partagé, Paris, Alès

## Urban agriculture: a tool for the production of space

Urban agriculture in intra-urban and peri-urban zones can take multiple forms, such as community gardens, allotments, allotment gardens, domestic gardens, school gardens, market gardens, medical herb gardens, flower gardens, etc. Its benefits are multiple and diverse (Duchemin, 2012). In its different forms, it can be a way for citizens to appropriate vacant spaces (Demailly, 2015), to defend urban biodiversity and to better manage flows of materials and energy (Mayol and Gagneron, 2019). It also offers opportunities for environmental education through awareness raising and through the empowerment of marginal populations (Granchamp-Florentino, 2012). It can also lend itself to the propagation of political commitment for agricultural projects with an activist dimension (Ambrosino and Andres, 2008; Laurens, 2015). It also performs a function in the social and health spheres by stimulating outdoor physical activity, by providing leisure spaces and connections creating new social bonds (Nahmias and Le Caro, 2012), and by encouraging improved dietary practices (Mougeot, 2005). While urban agriculture in the Global North tends to be studied through the prism of social and environmental services, it takes markedly different forms in the countries of the

Global South. Here, where rapid urbanisation processes are taking place (Santos, 2010), it is perceived as a real tool of economic and social resilience, with the capacity to improve food security for the poorest families (Thornton, 2020). In short, urban agriculture has numerous functions, and can contribute to domains as diverse as urban planning, environmental management, the development of new economic and social networks, and in certain conditions acts as a real tool against precarity and poverty (Manier, 2012).

The aim of our approach here is to understand urban agriculture in the 21st century through the prism of the “right to the city” (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2015). While farming has always been present in urban areas, the challenges of urban life constantly evolve (Cabannes, 2012). The production of the urban can be considered as a mechanism that is driven entirely by the capitalist system (Harvey, 2015). The city enables the coexistence of different interests whose material concentration in space leads to interdependence between people and activities. At the same time, the city is a space of conflict characterised by permanent confrontation between contradictory interests and forms of organisation and social reproduction that contribute to structural inequalities (Lefebvre, 2000). Given a historical context in which private ownership governs how places are organised and used, spaces are perceived and produced as just one commodity among many according to market logics and through intersectoral investments driven by urban actors (*ibid.*; Harvey, 2012).

From this perspective, urban agriculture can be an interesting possibility to the total commodification of urban space. Indeed, the civic processes involved in the emergence of urban agriculture in the form of vegetable gardens in public spaces have come to present a form of opposition to the current economic order, as well as offering new conditions for the democratic use and practice of community spaces. Conceived and implemented in this way, urban agriculture constitutes a real tool of appropriation which enables city dwellers to enjoy “a collective right not only to that which they produce, but also to decide what kind of urbanism is to be produced where, and how” (Harvey, 2012, p. 137).

The main objective of this article is to analyse the capacity of urban agriculture to restructure urban spaces and the realisation of what some authors call the “right to the city” (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2012). Urban agriculture is employed here as a tool for studying contemporary urban problems and as a potential instrument for the emergence of a fairer and more inclusive city. To this end, we propose to concentrate on the actors practices within community gardens in Paris and allotment gardens in Alès. The article is based on two separate pieces of research, conducted in these two cities. Since they reflect different urban conditions (a global metropolis, on the one

hand, a mid-sized city in decline, on the other), our wish in this article is to examine how urban agriculture is a social practice that can form the basis of an in-depth critical analysis of the production of the urban. The aim of our contribution is therefore to embed urban agriculture initiatives within the contemporary debate in France on the right to the city, recognising the practical and utopian potential of such agriculture for conceiving urban spaces in a new way in a context of social and environmental crisis.

Broadly speaking, approaching urban architecture as a practice that is transformative of urban space steers the discussion towards its political dimension. According to Peter Ladner (2011), integrating food production into urban space can give citizens greater control over what they eat and how they live, and thereby contribute to a new perception of urban space, which demands new political readings of urban territories. Specifically for the French case, the urban landscape is thus presented as a political experience (Rancière, 2020), as an object that can help us to redefine how urban spaces are conceived and produced. Urban vegetable gardens have the capacity to give an agricultural dimension to the city, to enable families to grow their own food and come closer to nature, to (re)create social bonds in the city or else to help produce new urban spaces that become integral parts of the politics of the city (Aubry et al., 2014; Scheromm, 2015). In other words, contemporary urban agriculture can form part of a critique of the existing model of urban and industrial society.

### **Urban agriculture: a way to rediscover the right to the city**

Analysing urban agriculture as a possible mechanism for changing urban and social spaces brings into play the concept of the right to the city. Formalised in 1968 by Henri Lefebvre, the concept of the right to the city has been highly influential both in academic and critical thought and in new approaches to urban planning, and has been employed at times in both civil society and government discourses.

Coined in the spring of 1968, in a political context where criticism of the capitalist model was catalysing intellectual thought and social movements, the right to the city argues for an "inclusive and radical approach to urban production" (Demazière et al., 2018), which would foster the emergence of "these 'successful' spaces favourable to happiness" (Lefebvre, 1969, p. 100). The author then envisaged the building of a city around two interdependent processes: the appropriation of spaces by inhabitants for cultural, social and ecological purposes, and the emergence of new forms of participation in political decision-making (ibid.). These two linked dynamics with the single objective of changing how the city is inhabited and contributing to the erosion

of the recourse to market logics alone in the manner in which the city is conceived and experienced (Arslan, 2018).

The concept of the right to the city has had a big influence on urban thought in the English-speaking world. Employed by influential authors like Edward Soja or David Harvey, it gave rise to critical readings of the methods of making the city, while trying to highlight alternative dynamics of action such as urban squats, the appropriation of urban wastelands, neighbourhood councils, big urban protest movements like that of Seattle in 1999 or the Arab springs of 2010, participatory budgets, and more generally, different civil society structures inspired by ideas relating to spatial and social justice (Garnier, 2014). Recently, the concept has also been adopted by international organisations keen to give it real political impetus in society. In the 2000s, institutions like the UN, UNPD and UNESCO organised events to establish guidelines for the inclusion of the right to the city in international political agendas. The right to the city was perceived at the time as a strategic tool for inclusive urbanisation across different levels of wealth and different social classes (UN-HABITAT, 2017). All in all, contemporary uses of the right of the city have prompted a proliferation of heterogeneous, not to say contradictory discourses, in which some authors have pointed out the risks and excesses: the concept has become highly malleable and adaptable to every type of urban situation, increasing the difficulty of arriving at a precise definition and making it a coherent and targeted political strategy (Kuymulu, 2013).

Despite the proliferation of definitions and analytical approaches, the interpretive framework surrounding the right to the city remains relevant today to understanding alternative and anti-establishment modes of urban living. In a recent collection of essays (Erdi-Lelandais, 2014), the authors identify a diversity of situations, ranging from the urban resistance of Roma populations in Istanbul to forms of participatory urbanism, in which the use of the concept of the right to the city highlights processes of resistance to the neoliberal city, both in the discourses and the spatial practices of city dwellers. What is interesting about these analyses is that they show that the right to the city, because of its versatility, can be used to elucidate localised situations that correspond to specific issues and largely emerge outside broad anti-establishment movements (*ibid.*). Indeed, while the arresting events of the Arab Springs or the Seattle riots enabled analysts of the right to the city to prove that powerful and nonviolent claims could generate significant media coverage, those arresting events, which brought together hundreds of thousands of people, also proved ephemeral (Rousseau, 2014). While for a few days they raised hopes of a shared future, they finally gave way to a routine return of the capitalist market and its underlying systems of oppression. And when they brought about real significant

changes, as in the case of the Arab springs, authors have shown that those changes entailed a distortion of citizens' speech: the political parties adopted distorted versions of the protesters' public demands (ibid.). Behind the appearance of listening to citizen demands, the underlying political changes were simply an attenuated and distorted version of the initial discourses (Spivak, 2009).

This gives rise to a question: how can a coherent right to the city be conceived through gardening experiences without perverting the actions and speech of citizens? To this end, a "return to the ordinary" (Chauvier, 2017), as proposed in the collection "*Understanding the City: Henri Lefebvre and Urban Studies*" (Erdi-Lelandais, 2014), would seem appropriate. Indeed, behind the ordinary appearance, the day-to-day actions of city dwellers are magnificent spaces of creativity and of resistance (Loftus, 2015) In his masterwork *L'invention du quotidien*, the historian and sociologist Michel de Certeau (1990) analysed ordinary acts as a permanent production of culture and sharing. In his view, city dwellers are not content simply to consume: they produce and invent everyday life through innumerable creative mechanisms and by the constant reinvention of social practices. To borrow Claude Lévi-Strauss's expression (1990), city dwellers "tinker" with the spaces where they spend their time and the constraints of a social model to invent a life path that is substantially chosen and contributes to their emancipation.

It is therefore possible to analyse citizen transformations based on new links with nature: collective processes of reconnecting with natural cycles, a move away from the strict logic of the market (Demailly and Darly, 2017). In this sense, the collective act in gardening initiatives and the introduction of farming practices into the urban environment has an exploratory content that can be understood as a negation of the perception of nature as an exchange value or a commodity, in which nature is associated instead with values that revive the notion of community life (Lefebvre, 1968).

Urban gardening can be an instrument for the reclamation of public space, where people come together around something of common interest (Schmelzkopf, 2002). Looking at urban gardening through the prism of the right to the city also turns the spotlight on the models of citizen organisations that stress solidarity, relations of reciprocity and citizen engagement around small-scale garden production on available plots of land in the city (Purcell and Tyman, 2014). Among the different contexts and typologies of urban agriculture that are described here, there is continuity in processes of socio-environmental change in cities (Shillington, 2013), where the right to garden is an activity that anchors collective and communal practices in urban space (Purcell and Tyman, 2014).

All this explains why it is interesting to approach urban agriculture from the perspective of the right of the city. Indeed, in addition to places of food production, gardens can often be associated with an activist dimension (Nagib, 2018). They can be a tool for the repurchasing of urban spaces as places of social gathering and renewed connections with nature, two factors that are directly linked with the political dimension of the collective occupation of urban spaces (Demailly and Darly, 2017). A recent study (Deville and Brondeau, 2017), at the heart of the *murs à pêches* (peaches walls) of Montreuil, showed that in a single space containing urban agriculture initiatives, different ideologies are telescoped together, giving rise to conflicts of uses and interests. In Detroit, gardens are spaces for the dissemination of individual and collective identities that reinforce feelings of community belonging and, in that environment, foster the spread of an urban justice targeting oppressed communities (Paddeu, 2016). In a more ordinary way, a garden is an act of creation and production, and can therefore be considered as a means of appropriating the urban (Demailly and Darly, 2017). In allotment gardens and community gardens alike, people thus make use of urban wastelands (Ambrosino and Andres, 2008; Laurens, 2015) suitable for functional changes in urban space. Gardening consists in part in the creation of a space and the creation of vegetable beds, in the making of tools and even buildings, in working with the living world and with oneself (Duchemin, 2012). A creative process that has the capacity to modify “the aestheticism of the city” (Blanc, 2008) and to contribute to the renewal both of urban representations and of everyday ways of inhabiting the city.

The forms of urban agriculture vary enormously from one city to the next depending on the specific conditions of each territory, the ideologies espoused by the project’s initiators, and the relations built between a farming space and the city proper (Deville and Brondeau, 2017). Each territoriality thus has its own models of urban gardens, which makes it all the more difficult to apply a clear and generic definition of the social and spatial processes at work. Nonetheless, we adopt the generic definition employed by Luc J. A. Mougeot (2005): according to the author, more than the location, it is the fact that urban agriculture initiatives—including gardens—are part of the social, economic and ecological system of the city, which defines them as “urban”. However, no definition makes a clear distinction between entrepreneurial gardens intended to generate income and maintain revenues and jobs, and more civic initiatives pursued for social and ecological purposes.

Yet these practices, sometimes seen as belonging to the same dynamic, can be very sharply opposed in their ways of conceiving and producing the city. Whereas entrepreneurial projects sometimes sacrifice environmental and social values on the altar of economic competitiveness, many citizen initiatives are founded in an activism

of disruption, practising new appropriations of public space and promoting heterogeneity and diversity in the uses of the city (Nagib, 2018). Moreover, a historical comparison of certain urban agriculture initiatives, in particular community gardens and allotment gardens, shows that domestic production can become a source of provision that enables city dwellers to cope with potential shortages of food and financial resources (Mok et al., 2014).

### **Community gardens in Paris and allotment gardens in Alès: spaces of appropriation and mobilisation**

Community and allotment gardens are particularly interesting initiatives through which to look at the social and political factors that motivate city dwellers to practice agriculture. Starting from the hypothesis that in the majority of cases urban vegetable gardens are vehicles for forms of expectation linked to the right to the city, we wished to tackle the following question: to what extent are the allotment gardens of Alès and the community gardens of Paris part of a civic reappropriation of urban spaces?

To answer this research question, we selected different garden spaces in Alès and Paris and conducted interviews there over the years 2018 and 2019. In this article, the emphasis is placed on the practices of transformation of urban space. This means that the aim is not to establish a tabular comparison between Paris and Alès, but to compare the motives and practices of urban gardeners. Indeed, while conditions in the gardens are different in the two cities, we found similar motivations in the discourses and practices of the gardeners: in both Paris and Alès, they place hope in their gardens for improvement in their living environment.

According to Cyrielle Den Hartigh, "shared 'community' gardens [...] are places of sociability, of communal life and of contact with nature, often at a fairly small scale" (2012, p. 11). For their part, allotment gardens, "directly derived from family gardens, are divided into individual plots and are mainly cultivated for food production and the enjoyment of a small private garden" (ibid.). The "social development allotment gardens are present in areas where the populations are usually poor or exposed to social difficulties. They are community projects, developed in consultation with residents, with a social purpose" (ibid.). As a general rule, urban agriculture also offers opportunities for interpenetration between the rural and the urban (Poulot, 2015), the infiltration of the countryside into the city (Robert-Bœuf, 2019) and for relations between city and agriculture (Salomon Cavin, 2012), where previous political approaches had tended to keep the spaces separate (Le Goff, 1997).

In Paris, we made the entire capital (inner Paris) our field of study. The official register of all the community gardens produced by the city of Paris was our initial framework. Neighbourhood organisations were then contacted and a total of 129 community gardens were finally listed. We were able to visit half of these, a sample that covers all the *arrondissements* of Paris. Through qualitative research based on interviews with the gardeners and participant observation, we were able to conduct meetings and analyse the different gardening realities over a period of a year. This methodology enabled us to observe the specificities of each garden, but also to analyse the day-to-day lived experiences of the gardeners. By drawing on this sample of gardens and the interviews, we wanted to move away from individual approaches to identify a sociospatial practice that would be common to all the gardeners: the political dimension of citizen engagement around the collectives that are created in gardens and the discourses that underpin the practice of gardening.

In Paris, the socioeconomic profile of gardeners is disparate. On the basis of a sample of people (n=12) who agreed to provide this information anonymously, each associated with a different garden, we found that the socioeconomic diversity of the participants was substantial, from “economic class” D1 to D7<sup>1</sup> (INSEE, 2018). The majority of people in this group were women (n=8) aged 30 to 65. However, in addition to these data from this 12-person sample, informal discussions in situ extended to a much larger group, and we recorded personal accounts from at least 30 different gardens (details given below). It is important to be aware that there are also civil society organisations that support gardeners as part of a social integration process aimed at increasing socioeconomic diversity.

In fact, each garden attracts a mixed population, depending on the neighbourhood. Although the age ranges of the gardeners also varied, young people aged between 12 and 20 only attended one-off activities and workshops provided throughout the year, and do not take part in the day-to-day work of the gardens. The sporadic educational activities observed in the course of the research always coincided with visits by groups of children up to, but not beyond, the age of 10. On the other hand, older people (over the age of 60) and retirees were very present, because of the time that this population category has to devote to gardening activities. We also observed women over the age of 45 and generations of young parents who frequent the gardens with their children. Interviews and observations on the ground revealed a certain level of environmental awareness: the gardeners often stressed the importance of green spaces in the city for biodiversity, as well as the need to move towards

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1. Average annual family income of €13,630 for D1 economic class; €17,470 for D2 economic class; €21,120 for D3 economic class; €25,390 for D4 economic class; €30,040 for D5 economic class; €35,060 for D6 economic class; €41,290 for D7 economic class; €49,350 for D8 economic class; €63,210 for D9 economic class (INSEE, 2018).

gardening practices associated with permaculture and agroecology, and the need for urban populations to reconnect with nature.

Focusing on community gardens also helped us to explore the social engagements around the use of public spaces (squares, parks, etc.) motivated by the city of Paris's *Main verte* (Green Hand) programme. We observed a dialectical relationship between public policies and citizen engagement, with the city responding to the growing anxieties of resident by creating food gardens in Paris, while at the same time encouraging inhabitants in their gardening practices through the *Main verte* programme, which allows the use of public space for purposes of non-commercial urban gardening.

In Alès, there are no community gardens. However, the city—formerly a centre of industry—saw the development of working-class garden plots in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century which subsequently became allotment gardens that still exist today. Developing on non-constructible land, they have managed to survive over time. Though sometimes visible from the street, these gardens are sometimes hidden behind imposing gates, so we used satellite tools to reference all the allotment gardens in the city. Three forms of gardens were referenced: allotment gardens managed by community groups and governed by the federation of allotment gardens, allotment gardens on non-constructible private land, which usually belong to the people who cultivate them, and finally more recent allotment gardens developed in the 2010s by the municipality in the social housing districts in the north of the city. We then conducted participant observations and semi-structured interviews with gardeners from the three types of garden (n=25). Through these interviews, our aim was to understand to what extent the allotment gardens, although inherited from the past, are in dialogue with contemporary issues regarding the reappropriation of the city by the gardeners and constitute responses to the social and environmental challenges it faces.

The sociological profiles of the gardeners in Alès differ from those observed in Paris. The majority of the gardeners are men (n=20) and aged over 50 (n=23). They are all in working-class occupations and often on low pay, or else live entirely on active solidarity payments (RSA). The rapid shutdown of the region's industries made access to employment difficult for people with few qualifications. Having experienced recurrent periods of unemployment, receiving little income or small pensions, the gardeners of Alès are characterised by low levels of financial capital. The gardens of Alès originate in the history of family and allotment gardens: while some are a recent creation, others are a legacy of the gardens that crisscrossed working-class neighbourhoods at the height of the mining boom in Alès in the interwar years. All the

plots are therefore individual, some of them large. While the gardens recently allocated by the municipality provide 50 m<sup>2</sup> per family, the gardens inherited from the industrial era can measure as much as 800 m<sup>2</sup> for a single gardener.

Despite different typologies, the community gardens of Paris and the allotment gardens of Alès are expressions of urban agriculture that constitute a new civic prism through which to interpret community life in the city. In the rest of this article, we offer an interpretation of the gardens of Paris and Alès through the theoretical framework of the right to the city. By means of this analysis, we can try to determine the extent to which gardens are spaces that embody a critique of the dominant model of city production and to what extent they institute new forms of social relations at the scale of the city.

### **Paris and Alès, different spaces but the same production of the urban**

For the purpose of this study, we chose to compare two different contexts: on the one hand, the metropolis of Paris, and, on the other hand, the mid-sized town of Alès. While the geographical and socioeconomic conditions of the two territories might at first sight seem extremely different, both of them today are caught up in the same neoliberal policies of development. Indeed, according to the geographer Guillaume Faburel (2018), the territorial policies pursued in recent decades are clustered around a single ideology: the push for international competitiveness and attractiveness. Every territory, every giant metropolis, every mid-sized town is encouraged to develop high-potential economic sectors usually associated with the digital economy and start-ups, along with tourist attractions and research and development hubs in fields perceived as promising (Bouba-Olga et al., 2017). The result is an exhilarating urban dynamic (Faburel, 2018) that constantly generates new processes of urban insecurity.

In the big cities, concentration has led to the emergence of new forms of ill-being as areas develop at different speeds (Donzelot, 2009): inner-city areas gentrify, the middle classes move to larger houses at affordable prices in the suburbs, whereas the most vulnerable populations are banished to intermediate zones, areas of “relegation” characterised by social and spatial injustices (ibid.). Paris is one example of this process. Indeed, there is an ambiguity in public actions there concerning social housing policy and the democratisation of urban spaces. New public developments, cultural policies and the emphasis on green spaces can drive gentrification in areas where the most working-class populations are still hanging on (Clerval and Fleury, 2009). By improving a living environment, gardens can contribute to those same

gentrification mechanisms (Quastel, 2009). In this respect, zones of nature are incorporated into the neoliberal management of the city (Kotsila et al. 2020), and become a commodity that increases the added value of certain places (Lefebvre, 1968; McClintock, 2018).

The construction of a three-speed metropolis produces winners and losers, but above all significant spatial segregation. Between gentrified neighbourhoods, and relegated neighbourhoods, the big city offers narratives that differ widely between life trajectories, as well as a social and landscape split between contrasting social worlds with differing resources. Whereas poverty rate for the most prized districts in Paris stand at around 10%, from the 1st to the 11th *arrondissements*, they exceed 20% for areas such as the 18th, 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> *arrondissements* (Insee, 2022a). In general, Paris continues to be dominated by very top-down hierarchical approaches to urban production (Faburel, 2018). According to Harvey (2012), the growing polarisation of wealth and urban power is an integral part of the spatial construction of cities, many of which are breaking up into a multiplicity of fragmented and fortified spaces, gated communities and public spaces kept under permanent surveillance. All in all, city dwellers are regularly deprived of spaces of collective appropriation that would make it possible to transpose forms of well-being and social justice into the experience of inhabiting the city (ibid.).

These dynamics are often found very extensively in mid-sized towns, which are also impacted by highly competitive policies. France's urban system is shaped and driven by the hierarchical relations between cities (Santamaria, 2012). Under these circumstances, mid-sized towns are often considered in terms of their functions as adjuncts to the big cities, making it particularly difficult for them to achieve autonomy in their development processes. Even more important, France's rapid transition to a service economy has led many mid-sized towns to economic relegation (ibid.). In addition, the effects of industrial restructuring are much more devastating in towns that have grown over decades through major dependency on a single industrial activity or even a single company. This transition has sharply increased insecurity in cities formerly dependent on an industrial fabric production, but has also created new inequalities in access to jobs: whereas working-class unemployment stands at 14.4%, the level is 10.3% among clerical workers and "only" 3.7% for senior executives (Depraz, 2017).

The town of Alès is a good example of France's industrial divide. Specialising in the mining and metallurgy industry in the interwar years, the town attracted workers both from its hinterland and from abroad. The closure of its industrial activities led to a sharp rise in insecurity. These difficulties, combined with its relative geographical

isolation and metropolitan competition from Montpellier, Toulouse, Lyon or Marseille, made it particularly hard for Alès to maintain its attractiveness. While young people head off to places with more job opportunities, the town now has to accommodate to a former working-class population still of working age but hard put to find employment in the local area. Today, Alès has unemployment and poverty rates of respectively 27% and 29%, 15 points above the national average and 10 points above the regional average (Insee, 2022b; 2022c).

In France, therefore, cities seem subject to insecurities, both symbolic and economic, that originate in policies of inter-territorial competition. This situation is an opportunity to develop new dialogue between territories, in varying urban conditions, on the potential of urban gardens.

### **Gardening from Paris to Alès: changing one's life to change the city**

In Paris, Graine de Jardins is a network of community gardens set up in 2001. As an institution recognised by the municipal council, its goal is to bring together civil society and institutional actors to develop gardening initiatives in Paris. Sharing, respect for the urban environment, and solidarity are the common values that govern each garden in the network. Graine de Jardins organises annual membership campaigns and runs a website that covers the different community garden initiatives in the Paris metropolitan region.

The city of Paris also encourages the development of urban agriculture and measures to stimulate planting on terraces, balconies and roofs. This is notably promoted by the Main Verte charter, which contributes to the creation and licensing of community gardens (in 2019, 129 gardens were listed), and by the Parisculteurs programme, which seeks to develop new agricultural production enterprises in the city (such as urban farms). The urban agriculture policies pursued by the City of Paris also seek to develop permanent ecological corridors to allow biodiversity to be developed freely across the metropolitan region.

The gardening initiatives are thus expanding under relatively favourable conditions. While the objective of most of the Paris initiatives is not to produce food on a large scale, they offer new ways of using space within the city. The garden is experienced as a communal space where new social and horizontal relations can emerge. In addition, community gardens—by seeking to foster a rapprochement between people from different social backgrounds—stimulate the sense of community at local level. While certain gardens can generate “one-of-us” dynamics with people from the same social background (Mestdagh, 2016), other community gardens are run

by civil society organisations that undertake integration activities or educational programmes. There are several examples of Parisian gardens that rely on a social mix to create a lively space. These notably include: jardin du Monde (14<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*) which reflects all the cultural diversity of the Cité internationale universitaire; Trèfle d'Éole (18<sup>th</sup>) with its objectives of community integration and diversity; jardin sur le Toit (20<sup>th</sup>) used by the integration association and local people; the community gardens of the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> *arrondissements*, which the schools use for activities with the children; and a wide range of gardens in spaces located in city squares where interaction between the users of the green spaces is frequent, such as Le Poireau agile (10<sup>th</sup>) or jardins d'Abel (13<sup>th</sup>).

The conversations, in these gardens, very often go well beyond the subject of gardening itself, and many issues specific to urban life are regularly raised by the gardeners, creating a locus of democratic exchange. This is confirmed at weekly meetings on planting, maintenance, irrigation and harvesting, with discussions on a variety of subjects, spontaneous conversations about current affairs, advice on the best way to plant a vegetable, the collective management of the composter, the organisation of seasonal parties with the sharing of food and drink, or else occasional meetings between friends. In public spaces, these events and places of encounter are visible to everyone and are an invitation to public participation, acting as a mechanism to mitigate the lack of interaction between people who visit the gardens. This interaction can be observed in particular when passers-by stop by the garden to look at the beds, to identify plants or begin a conversation with the gardeners and ask for advice on growing or cooking. These spontaneous exchanges can obviously be occasional, but it can also be a way of demonstrating the interest in creating new (lasting) ties of friendship and involvement with the garden (the desire to act). Since the goals are not productivist, the willingness to maintain the garden raises a possibility of learning, both to share vegetables and small plots of land, but also to meet new people or spend more time with acquaintances or friends. In all the gardens we visited, organic production (applying permaculture or agroecological principles) was mentioned. The issue of food quality was raised not as a productivist objective, but as a tool of transition towards a more sustainable model for community food growing and for managing nature in the city. Although the municipality bans all use of pesticides in the gardens, the prohibition is not something imposed by the government but reflects the ecological concerns of residents, who are proud to practice agroecology: in all the gardens we visited, the importance of growing chemical-free produce and maintaining urban biodiversity was invariably emphasised.

The community gardens are therefore tools for the creation and cultivation of a shared space. In order to formalise their gardening practices, as required by law, people

often form civil society organisations. They perform the role of managing community life by defining a baseline of rules and methods for democratic participation. If the creation of formal structures is an obligation imposed by the city of Paris, no community garden can be maintained without the commitment of a group of gardeners. The existence of an organisation also ensures that the garden constantly pursues social and educational values shared by this group and helps to revive connections with nature. In Paris, urban agriculture is therefore both a tool used by the authorities to plan urban space and a source of new spatial appropriations for citizens.

The mobilisation of a collective of gardeners and interested people is in fact a condition of the existence of a community garden. While the city has a specific programme for this purpose and supports the practice, the garden only survives locally when residents decide to make a daily commitment to it. The desire to garden is the fundamental condition of the existence of a community garden. Our field observations revealed the presence of gardeners at least once a week in situ. The actual involvement in collective garden activities varies between participants, enabling the groups to designate "local contacts" among people who commit the most time to the gardens, in so far as they are associated with the capacity to maintain gardening activities over time. Knowledge about the living world, about seeds and about gardening techniques vary widely between gardeners, another source of interchange between novice and experienced gardeners. These different factors that govern a garden's capacity to survive, the maintenance and running of community and allotment gardens, tend to favour models of direct participation in which the right to the city is employed as a condition for the reproduction of materialities that fall outside market mechanisms (Lefebvre, 1968).

What can be observed in Alès is the coexistence of two discourses in the way the gardens are perceived and valued by the local actors. The authorities, keen to make their city more attractive through investment in high-potential sectors and a real policy of beautification, value the gardens as a tool that contribute to the aesthetic enhancement of the city and its living environment. On the municipal website, as well as in various local authority communication media, gardens are part of a eulogistic discourse which is primarily intended to maximise the city's attractiveness.

The individuals who cultivate the plots granted by the municipality are more interested in strategies of economic and social adaptation. Our surveys show that for them the gardens are spaces of production that give them access to a more varied diet, but also to leisure spaces. If residents had little ownership of places that were not in the immediate vicinity of their homes, the gardens offer a space of appropriation. Nevertheless, the activities of the gardeners are closely overseen by the authorities

who allocate dedicated staff to managing the site, and are perceived by the gardeners as an instrument of surveillance and regulation. Many of them speak of their desire to do things differently, to have a larger plot, to feel freer in their day-to-day practices, while acknowledging the opportunity made available by the municipality. In Alès, in the vegetable gardens run by the municipality, a dialectic between the gardeners and the authorities has been established: between trust and distrust, the vegetable gardens are places where gardening strategies are tested out, a mix of respect for the rules and individual appropriation of a space where those rules can be partially bypassed. Some gardeners, for example, use the bins in the gardens to conceal scrap equipment, equipment which they use surreptitiously in order to get round the partial ban imposed by the municipality in its efforts to maintain the aesthetic qualities of the gardens.

In the non-municipal gardens, whether private or run by associations, the gardeners seem freer in their gardening practices. The gardens are sometimes very large (up to 800 m<sup>2</sup>) and are used in multiple ways by the gardeners: they constitute inhabited spaces where each plot is to a large degree part of the gardeners' identity. Depending on the background and life trajectories of each gardener, therefore, the plots may contain a variety of seeds: strawberries and pumpkins, beans and mint for gardeners with North African roots, or else tropical seeds for people of West Indian origin. The gardens are also refuges where—more than plants—each person cultivates their own personality. This takes the form of relaxation spaces created on each plot, dedicated to leisure, rest, barbecues between friends, the construction of an unusual shed which each gardener decorates according to their taste: a poster of a favourite landscape, domestic devices (fridge, icebox, coffee jug), a small oil lamp in reference to the town's mining history, an old hat, a piece of farming equipment that had belonged to an uncle, an aunt, a relative.

To claim a personality is also to express it. In the vegetable gardens of Alès, practices and knowledge are disseminated and shared. Now as in the past, the urban gardens are a mirror of social status. The gardens are places where conversation and solidarity are common currency (the gardeners constantly exchange seeds, advice and know-how), and where interchanges are even encouraged by the office of the Alès Association of allotment gardens, which regularly seeks to organise regular communal events while making each gardener responsible for maintaining the collective spaces. They are also places of unseen competition where the size of the plants, the quality and originality of the vegetables, the neatness of the plots constitute a constantly adjusting hierarchical grid. So for example, a gardener who shows great care and success on their plot will enjoy a particular reputation in the garden and will be considered as a resource person by the others. Finally, although the gardens are also places where all the ins and outs of societal codes can be found, they are nevertheless

produced by a collective space that has been returned to its residents in a place where the municipality, because of the difficulties it faced, had many vacant spaces.

In Alès, therefore, the gardens are a vehicle of the right to the city. Indeed, they are places of creativity for populations who tend to be neglected in public policies, places where gardeners can bypass public action to meet their needs. The gardeners partly arrange the space as they wish, develop new social relations, give life to the gardens through different events, whether by bringing their families onto their plots or through new encounters made possible by the community life that emerges in allotment gardens. In so doing, the gardens contribute to the production of urban character, in the sense that they prompt a new spatial structuring of space, as well as modifying the local social fabrics that they generate. They are tools that enable each citizen to participate in the invention of the city and to mobilise resources, to create spaces of new animation for the men and women who enjoy them on a day-to-day basis.

In Paris, as in Alès, gardens also become places of sharing and of mobilisation which, though they reflect different conditions, are similar in their production of the urban: by the creation of spaces and by the practices that emerge, this production shapes dynamics that reflect the demand for a new way of appropriating urban space and instilling life into it from one day to the next.

## **Conclusion**

Whether in Paris or in Alès, shared allotment gardens have the capacity to produce new geographical and social spaces. Empirically speaking, they open the possibility of developing a more in-depth debate today on the right to the city. This means that they prove to be means whereby individuals organise to develop and manage garden spaces as an everyday practice. These spaces fulfil aspirations such as access to nature, social encounters or the desire to achieve a degree of autonomy in food supply. They are also spaces where exchanges largely take place outside market systems. They offer a way to reappropriate vacant spaces for both individual and collective purposes and foster the emergence of new social practices in the city.

Despite the diversity of the sociological profiles encountered and the differences in territorial conditions, we suggest that each gardening activity constitutes a response to the limitations of the neoliberal city and a way of re-appropriating and producing spaces within the city.

While the gardens we observed and the gardeners we surveyed are not understood as the (re)producers of practical activism (or anti-establishment political discourses), their farming practices have the capacity to profoundly alter the ways in which individuals experience the city and the atmosphere of urban environments.

These findings lead us to conclude that urban gardening is an instrument for propagating the right to the city, which is practised here in forms of spatial and social mobilisation, i.e. the creation, maintenance and management of gardens. These gardens therefore have the capacity to produce new spaces that effect a transformation in how the city is experienced and in this respect have the potential to contribute to the social and ecological transition of cities.

### To quote this article

**Deville** Damien, **Nagib** Gustavo, « L'agriculture urbaine et le droit à la ville à Paris et à Alès » [“Urban agriculture and the right to the city in Paris and Alès”], *Justice spatiale / Spatial Justice*, n° 17, 2022 (<http://www.jssj.org/article/lagriculture-urbaine-et-le-droit-a-la-ville-a-paris-et-a-ales>).

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