



# Creative Natures. Community gardening, social class and city development in Vienna



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## ABSTRACT

In Vienna, community gardens have multiplied rapidly since 2010, when the city government declared its support for these initiatives. Although of marginal importance in terms of surface and total size of membership, they are highly visible in policy and media discourse. On the contrary, allotment gardens, which cover large surfaces and have a very large membership, barely appear in policy and media discourse. Both types of gardens are managed collectively, but allotment gardens, which are more often located at the periphery, have larger and fenced plots with houses, in contrast to community gardens. Furthermore, community gardens are often associated with ascriptions of diversity, place attachment, communication, creativity, self-responsibility and ecology, which are prominent in the policy and media discourse on Viennese city development as well, while allotment gardens are not. By using photo elicitation and ethnographic methods, our study explains this paradox by interpreting the construction of community gardens as class-based socionatures that express social distinction against allotment gardeners. The results from six representative community gardens with a random sampling of gardeners and comparative interviews in allotment gardens indicate that community gardens are post-Fordist spaces, which are primarily shaped by and attractive to parts of a “creative class”. Allotment gardens are remnants of Fordist spaces that undergo privatization. Our findings can be best put into the context of garden-historical studies by conceptualizing gardens and parks as paradigmatic spaces of the symbolization of socionatures.

## 1. Introduction

As in many other cities, community gardens have drawn much interest in Vienna during the last years. The first community gardens in the city were established in the 1990s, and they have experienced a boom since the government started to formally support them in 2010. Community gardens are managed by groups of gardeners, who may work together in a formal organization or informally. Individual plots are often small and never fenced. Some beds and facilities may be shared collectively. Many of these gardens are located in inner city districts, with surfaces of mostly about 500–1000 m<sup>2</sup>, but some are larger, and situated towards the periphery of the city.<sup>1</sup> They are frequently mentioned in city development guidelines and other documents issued by authorities, as well as in the mass media. They also constitute an important field of activity for semi-public bodies responsible for organizing participation in the design of public space, especially Urban Renewal Offices (*Gebietsbetreuung*) and Local Agenda 21 groups. As

recent policies show (see below), community gardens are particularly valued by city development agencies, especially in the form of initiatives shaped by the municipality through semi-public bodies (Exner and Schützenberger, 2015; cf. MA 25, 2014). Grassroots community gardens are more controversial because of their “wild” aesthetics. The municipality neither initiates nor supports such gardens financially or materially (Exner and Schützenberger, 2015). Grassroots community gardens are, however, not suppressed, but sometimes are showcased in public relations material of the municipality, too. For allotment gardens, the situation is completely different, although they also include communal elements (which were, however, more pronounced in the past).<sup>2</sup> These gardens were partly inspired by the *Schrebergarten* movement that established family gardens in view of health and educational purposes (Schindelar, 2008), and date back to the beginning of the 20th century in Vienna. They are institutionalized in a layered system of governance from the garden to the national level, involving both private and public bodies, specific legal regulations

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., garden data on <https://gartenpolylog.org/gardens>, and own observations.

<sup>2</sup> It shall be noted that the term community garden has a much broader meaning in the USA, where gardens resembling European allotment gardens also fall under this rubric (Lawson, 2005). Allotment gardens in Europe are mostly distinguished from community gardens (see, e.g., Exner and Schützenberger, 2017), but also display internal variation as a group.

(*Kleingartengesetz*) as well as aspects of self-organization (Schindelar, 2008). Practically all of them are located at the city periphery. The basic characteristics of allotment and community gardens are identical: a group of gardeners managing a shared space with individual plots and some communal facilities. However, allotment gardens have distinctive features. Besides the specific historical context of their emergence the most important general differences are that individual plots are fenced and much larger in allotment than in community gardens, and that almost all allotment garden plots include a house for temporary or permanent residence (subject to strict regulations), which is forbidden in community gardens (see further below). Correspondingly, allotment gardens were not intended to allow for the intensity of interaction as community gardens are. Not only the aesthetics of allotment gardens, but also their imaginary is quite different from community gardens. Hence, allotment gardens are absent in the current city development plan (MA 18 2014) and are barely touched upon in other important city development documents (e.g., MA 18 2015). Allotment gardens are hardly, if ever associated with any of the prominent goals highlighted in Viennese policy and media discourse with regard to community gardens: self-responsibility, empowerment, diversity or social integration, communication, participation, creativity, ecological awareness and vegetable production. This imbalance is not easy to understand at first sight, since many of these ascriptions could also be associated with allotments, which are much more important than community gardens in terms of membership and surface. Our paper attempts to elucidate this paradox by a political ecology approach. We investigate the specific political ecologies of community gardens in Vienna by analyzing the class character of their constituency and how members of such gardens construct socio-natures in both symbolic and material terms. We argue that the discursive and political imbalance between community gardens, on the one hand, and allotment gardens on the other has one of its most important roots within the hegemony of the social class that predominately shapes community gardens.

After a brief introduction into garden research with a political ecology lens, referring to select landmark publications of particular importance for our own approach (Section 2), and a clarification of the notion of the garden in a political ecology view, which is sensitive to social class and power (Section 3), we use two main approaches to reach a detailed understanding of community gardens in Vienna. Firstly, we describe their variability in terms of spatial practices, how space is structured and aesthetically designed. This is done in comparison to allotment gardens (Section 4), as these turned out to be a central reference for identity construction within community gardens (see Section 6). Secondly, we analyze the symbolic meanings community gardeners attach to their spatial practice in terms of gardening as well as to other such practices, and ask, how these meanings relate to each other in order to understand how garden practices contribute to identity formation. In this way, we establish a link between spatial practice and meaning, which sheds light on the construction of socio-natures (Section 6). Investigating the relation of the meanings of garden aesthetics to social situatedness (cf. Bourdieu, 1979) helps to explain, how community gardens relate to city development (Sections 7 and 8).

## 2. The political ecology of gardens

A proper account of garden research is beyond the reach of this paper. Instead, we would like to briefly refer to some landmark studies that are relevant to our approach to connect, first, the more culture-oriented, conventional research on gardens focusing on aesthetics with, second, a political ecology perspective sensitive to social class and power relations, and third, the recently evolving field of community garden research. These three dimensions have seldom been connected. Thus, many studies of gardens and parks relate their history to developments in art as connected to wider social changes (e.g., Wimmer, 1989; Baridon, 1998; Brown, 1999; Hobhouse, 2002; von Trotha, 2012). The dominant lenses in this type of garden study have been

architectural design (“garden planning belongs to landscape architecture”), the visual arts (“gardens are similar to paintings”), and poetry (“gardens are to be interpreted as texts”) (Salwa, 2013). From this literature, a certain strand of investigation can be distinguished by its more explicit focus on power relations and a more analytic than descriptive approach (see, e.g., Cranz, 1982; Rosenzweig, 1983; Schuyler, 1986; Rosenzweig and Blackmar, 1992; Rotenberg, 1995; Strassel, 2000; Young, 2004). This focus has recently been located explicitly within a political ecology perspective. In this vein, Gabriel (2011) introduced the concept of socio-natures into the study of parks, transcending the separation of nature and society in social science (see also Classens, 2015, with regard to gardens). This perspective allows discussion of how the construction of nature and city disables and enables practices, excluding certain social groups and expressing the aspirations of still others.

The topic of contemporary urban gardens, however, has been largely absent both from more traditional garden and park research within the humanities, as from the more power-sensitive approach of political ecology (e.g., Robbins, 2007). Among contemporary urban gardens, community gardens have drawn most attention in the social science literature (e.g., Lawson, 2005; Eizenberg, 2012; Drake, 2014; Follmann and Viehoff, 2014; Drake and Lawson, 2015; Barron, 2017; see Draper and Freedman, 2010; Guitart et al., 2012, for reviews). Besides rather affirmative approaches highlighting a broad range of alleged benefits, in recent times, more critical views have emerged. Most of them are centered around the relation of community gardens to neoliberalization in terms of governmentality and exploiting voluntary labor (e.g., Pudup, 2008; Rosol, 2012). Much of this literature is focused on the question of whether or not community gardening or urban agriculture is politically subversive or functional to the neoliberal city (Certomà and Tornaghi, 2015), or how both tendencies amount to an inherently contradictory character of such practices insofar as they have been seen to arise “from a protective countermovement, while at the same time entrenching the neoliberal organisation of contemporary urban political economies through its entanglement with multiple processes of neoliberalisation” (McClintock, 2014, p. 147).

Within this critical type of reasoning, the concept of a political ecology of gentrification has highlighted socially exclusive effects of urban gardening in the context of neighborhoods (Quastel, 2009), but has also drawn attention to specific constructs of nature as performed by such practices, depending on the class position of gardeners (Domene and Saurí, 2007). Rotenberg (1995) showed in his study on parks and gardens in Vienna, published shortly before the first community gardens appeared in the city, that different types of parks and gardens expressed different strategies of specific social classes that aspired to hegemony against the oppression by the powerful classes. Ascending classes were pursuing such spatial practices not only to create and symbolize class-bound normative ideals of subjectivity, but also to appropriate and shape public space to let their ideals appear “natural” in the sense of being unquestionable. Rotenberg also demonstrated that different types of parks and gardens must be understood in relation to each other. The meaning of each type is part of a wider web of symbolizations constituting meanings for contemporaries and subsequent generations, though not in exactly the same way: “What the Viennese know about their landscape (...) is that urban space is filled with ideological messages. Each of these gardens justified its model of the relations of dominant and subordinate power groups through a legitimating concept of nature. Contemporary landscape echoes fragments of meaning from even the oldest among them”, Rotenberg stated (1995, p. 316), so that “[o]rder or chaos, as geometry or natural growth, came to symbolize groups struggling to define their identity in the political landscape” (Rotenberg, 1995, p. 316).<sup>3</sup> The newest form of gardening

<sup>3</sup> “Designers of various intellectual inheritances”, Rotenberg noted, “were employed to create links between garden forms and ideas, recontextualizing the forms in each

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