

Reinventing urban agriculture: Experiencing the senses at the *Koningshof* in Utrecht, the Netherlands

This paper is based on a study of urban agriculture initiatives in the city of Utrecht, the Netherlands. The appearance of urban gardens is not limited to the Netherlands, but the meaning of urban gardening practices does specify to the local context. Through the story of one of the gardens, the “Koningshof”, I will explore the meaning that urban agriculture holds for the city of Utrecht, but also to a more general shifting ontological perception to human dwelling. By engaging with both above- and below-the-surface meanings of gardening, I will analyze everyday life practices and cultural moralities at the same time. The question underlying this research is what urban agriculture can tell us in an age of reason, capital and acceleration, the ‘modern’ age? In this paper, initially based on a three-month fieldwork but influenced by ongoing participant-observation, I will argue that urban agriculture in Utrecht is part of a countermovement to an everyday life shaped as a factory for accumulation. Instead, in the urban gardens sensorial experiences combine body and mind in the reinvention of enskilment and deceleration of the environment.

Introduction

It is a sight that summons questions and joy, a hen wallowing in a hole of dirt. Do chickens do this? It seems more like a pig’s habit. But the hen enjoys it and so it puts a smile on my face. I have seen documentaries where big machines shovel hundreds of chickens around in overcrowded barns of factory farms. This hen, however, will see no such future, for it is walking and playing around on the urban farm at the *Koningshof* in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Together with her fellow chickens she shares a chicken coop, but because the coop is always open, her terrain entails the entire farm. The eggs they lay are eaten by the gardeners of the *Koningshof*, but the chickens do not have to worry about being fattened and butchered, they live here. I recognize myself in the hen’s lightheartedness, for it is in the ambience at the *Koningshof*. Both the hen and me here enjoy a spacious environment where we learn and develop, all in accordance with our own pace. The fruits of our activities derive from the quality of our experiences. Where chickens are not machines for eggs and meat, humans are no cogs in a machine for infinite accumulation. This lesson is learned while working in the urban gardens in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Technological developments should improve quality of experiences instead of taking them away. However, it is not the technology that decides how it is used, it is human choices that determine our acts. For this reason, studying how people shape their physical environment and social practices reveal the direction our society is moving towards. Why do

we see urban gardens appear, not only in Utrecht, but globally? Why, in a society where preparing food can be cost- and time-efficient, do people chose to engage with the slow process of production in their own gardens? In this paper I will argue that, just like the hen, human beings are unfit as robots of production and efficiency. As a response to ‘modern’ society, which is built on such premises, people reinvent ways to experience their senses. Urban agriculture contributes to a contemporary movement that revitalizes this worldview by balancing the urban landscape’s efficiency-oriented design with oases for sensorial experiences.

Towards ‘modernity’ in *urban and agriculture*

That food has become separated from the urban landscape is due to both technological development enabling mass production and the domination of a capitalist ideology of accumulation, transforming non-urban areas to spaces for industrial production (Harvey 1978, 115; Barthel, Parker and Ernston 2013, 1322). But let us first take a step back and understand how this landscape of efficiency evolved into its current shape. For the purpose of my argument, the shaping of this landscape traces back to the age of Enlightenment which laid the foundations for what we now call ‘Modernity’. During the Enlightenment and onwards into Modernity, the Western civilization developed an ontology in which nature is mastered by humans, passion by reason, and the body by the mind (Harvey 1989, 12). With the growing dominance of capitalist market strategies of commodification and commercialization in the twentieth century, this process of ‘modernization’, which now entailed a subjection of the physical (both human body and natural resources) to the hegemonic idea of ‘growth’ (Tsing 2013, 24), accelerated. Due to a logic of competition, individuals were pushed to distinguish themselves from others and sell their uniqueness on the market (Harvey 1989, 22). With this process, everyday life became subject to constant processes of marketization, reducing all life to a logic of capital (Rigi 2007, 56). Since the Industrial Revolution, cities’ populations boomed globally (Smart and Smart 2003, 265), the number of people living in urban areas today even exceeding the amount of people who live in non-urban areas. Hardt and Negri (2000, 294) explain how industrialization triggered mass migration towards factories or harbors as areas of labor concentration, wherefrom many cities grew or emerged. Interestingly, factory-work has for the most part become outsourced from Western cities to other countries and continents in the twenty-first century (Ong 2006), whilst still the urban population in the West keeps on growing. Hardt and Negri argue that physical labor has become decentered and the urban space is increasingly dominated by a *network* economy focused on social interaction and characterized by displacement of production (Hardt and Negri 2000, 295). Where the process of industrialization resulted in a homogenization of physical labor along conveyor

belts, the shift towards an 'information society' is characterized by the increase of desk-jobs behind a computer, further evolving towards flexible place-less jobs behind a laptop. What this shows is that physical occupation is being reduced to the minimum with computer-navigated work gaining more significance. To come back to Harvey's analysis of a mastering of nature by human, I follow Annemarie Mol (2013, 387) by arguing that the current society is dominated by a typical Western notion of controlling the 'barbarian' body's desires by the 'sacred' rationality of the mind. At the same time, I will argue below that there are movements that oppose this notion. But first, let me contextualize the dense analysis above to the case-study of this paper, the urban farm called the "Koningshof".

In his book about the urban food landscape of the city of Utrecht¹ from its first settlements until now, Frank Stroeken (2012) explains how the process of urbanization of the agricultural areas surrounding Utrecht accelerated only about 150 years ago, due to a growing urban population. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the areas surrounding the historical city became part of the urban area (Stroeken 2012, 69). This was the period of the Industrial Revolution in which the mechanization of agriculture created a fundamental shift in the food supply chain of the West, and the Netherlands specifically (Van Otterloo 2013, 60). It is since this moment that local agricultural business started to decline as a result of growing international trade. This does not mean that there was no international trade before. Stroeken (2012, 60) points out that international trade is of all times. However, in earlier days international goods were more expensive due to transportation costs and taxes, therewith the local economy was preferred in order to maintain economic independence. Tables turned when technological development in transportation and mass-production in the second half of the twentieth century bypassed the efficiency and appreciation of the local economy. Together with technological developments a cultural shift took place of what 'quality' food meant. Besides existing ideas of food quality, new measurements like hygiene, nutritional value, and a long 'shelf life' became important. In this transformation we once again see the shift from bodily pleasure towards rationality. Van Otterloo states that food was now valued through its *convenience* (2013, 64), a material instead of a sensorial approach. In her book *The Hungry City* (2009), Carolyn Steel makes a similar argument. She states that in the eighties and nineties, British cities were overtaken by (eventually multinational) supermarket chains replacing local stores. This again shows a preference of efficiency over experience, because with the disappearance of local stores the social function of food as a medium for bonding with people and place was destroyed: "Supermarkets today are impersonal filling stations: pit stops designed to service the flow of life" (Steel 2009, 115).

¹ Utrecht is both a city and a province in the Netherlands. In this paper, the mentioning of Utrecht refers to the city at all times.

The urban garden the “Koningshof” in Utrecht is a living proof of the above outlined shift in the Western, and Dutch, society:

For over two centuries the Jongerius family maintained their horticulture farm in the East of Utrecht. On a land of about eight hundred square meters Robert, Jos and generations before them cultivated a diversity of crops to feed the people in the city of Utrecht. Although from generation to generation traditions of cultivation have been taught from father to son, with father Jos and son Robert things have been handed over slightly different. Jos grew up sitting on the back of his (grand)father’s tractor going to the regional market or auction to sell their harvest. He tells me that they used to sell their harvest at what is called the ‘Jaarbeurs’ [trade fair]. Instead of its function as a trade fair, nowadays the Jaarbeurs is known for its big cinema, and for hosting events. Its history of food trade however is carried on by the names surrounding the area: The street named ‘Veemarktplein’ [livestock market square] and the restaurant ‘Korenbeurs’² [grain exchange] remind of earlier days. Jos explains how in the seventies their harvest would determine what people would buy and eat. It is during his youth that this producer-consumer relation gradually started to shift. Food supply chains and industrial farming boomed and small-scale farmers like the Jongerius family had to compete with low-cost foreign produce, responding to consumer-driven demands for food. From the 1970’s onward the situation worsened and for a while Jos could keep his head up by shifting from horticulture to selling flowers. Eventually, around the turn of the new millennium, he had to let go of his farm and shift occupation. Until 2012 the farm lay fallow when his son Robert, together with four friends who met each other at university whilst studying landscape architecture, decided that this land and its identity needed to be revived. They started the foundation “Koningshof”³ and aimed to reconnect the area, local citizens and anyone who was interested with the historical identity of the farm or the food. By doing so they aimed to raise awareness of the unsustainability of the ‘modern’ food system and educate people on the meaning of and engagement with natural resources like plants, insects, animals and the elements. Hardly thirty years ago the growing of local food proved to be unfeasible in a globalized food system, nowadays there is a waiting list for citizens who want to pay to grow local food themselves. What has changed?

Food production almost entirely disappeared from the urban landscape of Utrecht with the industrialization of agriculture. Thorsten Gieser (2014) has studied horticulture in Great Britain and concluded that this ‘craft’ and the process of learning it, *enskilment*, is often inhibited because it is considered too time-consuming in contemporary society. The process of modernization in Western

² At the time of writing, the restaurant Korenbeurs has been sold and will probably change its name.

³ The name “Koningshof” refers to the street where the farm is situated, ‘Koningsweg’. They replaced ‘weg’, which means *road*, by ‘hof’, which means *yard*.

society is accompanied by an acceleration of the pace of life (Rosa 2003, 3), which leads to everyday rhythms shifting from attention for skilled practices towards maximizing time efficiency (Gieser 2014, 143). Step by step knowledge and presence of agriculture as part of the city have been replaced by an industrialized global supply chain. However, as a form of social resilience, *urban agriculture* initiatives ridicule this process of efficiency and industrialization. Stroeken published his book on Utrecht's foodscape history in 2012, mentioning the farm of the family Jongerius as one of the last existing sites of former agriculture near the city (Stroeken 2012, 69). This coincided with the initiation of the "Koningshof" project in 2012, aiming to revive the agricultural identity of this area. In the following paragraphs I will consider the revival of the Jongerius farm as a sign of citizens reinventing urban food practices.

Beyond dichotomies: Holistic gardening

"I won't eat that, it was lying on the ground!"⁴

On a Saturday morning I leave my home near the central station, at the heart of Utrecht, to cycle towards the Koningshof. A ten-minute ride brings me to the brink of the city where I park my bike next to the farmer's house and walk towards my garden. Passing the fruit orchard and picnic area I greet Roeland and Robert who are standing outside making quiches with fresh picked vegetables for lunch, and Akke who is in the kitchen area inside the greenhouse. Two of my fellow gardeners have already started to weed and hoe the 'legumes section' of our fifty square meter garden, which we have divided into six sections to maintain an organic crop rotation system. As has become our habit, we proudly observe our sunflower which has now grown over a meter tall, even though Matthias accidentally planted it too early in the season. "That won't last" Jos assured us. Since then it has become Matthias', and our, project and pride. Although we are proud that our sunflower has survived our early enthusiast mistakes, we take Jos' advices to heart. Most Saturdays at the garden involve a chat with Jos, asking for his opinion of our garden and resulting in a critical analysis of our, and others', gardening habits. "I see people drown plants in water, whilst you should tease them, otherwise they get lazy", Jos explains us, "if a plant feels it is dying, it will think of reproduction to maintain its existence. So, what do you think happens? It gets energetic to produce an offspring, which serves us with the parts we want to eat". Once again, I am astounded by the logic gardening entails, "why do you think a carrot grows large? It searches for water deeper in the ground. If you keep the soil moist at the surface, do you think it will have to dig deep to get water?" The logic of

⁴ Robert quoting a child; informal conversation 31-03-2018

plants is so obvious, one might even say natural, that it makes me aware of my lack of understanding of such ecological processes.

In his article about industrial gardening, arguing a contemporary inhibition of enskilment due to time pressure, Gieser (2014) observes a current lack of interest in caring and learning. Today's generation is concerned with 'doing what we are told to do' as quick as possible so to have spare time after the task has been finished (Gieser 2014, 143). A confronting analysis considering my own research at the Koningshof. A year ago, I did a three-month fieldwork as a volunteer at the Koningshof in their garden inside the greenhouse. Now that I have my own garden I realize how little did I learn from last year. I just did what they told me to do and was merely concerned with doing research, less with caring or learning about gardening. Now that I have my own garden I need to take the lead myself, need to understand the processes of plants, soil, seasons, weather, animals, humans and the most important: their harmony. In another urban garden in Utrecht, one of the gardeners tells me a story that reveals the importance of understanding this harmony:

When Mao Zedong was ruler of China he ordered all sparrows to be killed since they ate too much of the grain. His order was followed, and the sparrows extinguished from the land. However, this created an imbalance in the ecology of the land. As a result, insect populations were disturbed and now there is a lack of bees and other pollinators. Consequently, people now have to pollinate orchards by hand.⁵

Gieser draws a line between 'industrial gardeners' and 'enthusiastic expert gardeners'. The latter cherish and care for plants, develop relationships throughout their engagement. The former is concerned only with finishing a task and have a 'temporal horizon' (Gieser 2014, 146). Gieser mentions the interpretation of Tim Ingold (2011) who argues there is a shift in society from appreciating the continuity of the process towards an aim for completion of work. The mentioning of Ingold should not come as a surprise. Throughout his career, Ingold persists to deliver a fundamental message which ever seems to grow more important: that there is no distinction between human and nature, and that *life* is a continuity, a process without beginning or end (Ingold 2005, 504⁶). Through the practice of gardening, the process of enskilment, such ontological lessons are learned. Nothing of this is *told*, it is *experienced* in the practice. Whereas the idea of fulfilling a task has created a linear mindset, through gardening people experience life as circular: "Eating food from the garden feels like

⁵ This story was shared with me by a garden coordinator at one of the other urban gardens in Utrecht; informal conversation 18-04-2017

⁶ Whilst I here draw from a single work of Ingold, it is worthwhile to mention that any of Ingold's essays deliver this message in which each work is complementary with its own touch and context.

going back to the basis of what it means to be human, it feels like a closed circle”, one of the gardeners from another urban agriculture initiative explains to me.

This paragraph started with a quote shared with me by Robert. On Saturdays, the Koningshof is open for visitors to buy food from the Koningshof’s garden. Their idea of “Koningshof to Go” is to let people walk through the Koningshof’s own garden and greenhouse and harvest their own products, which they can then weigh and pay with Akke or Robert. By doing so, people see where the food comes from, how it grows. This quote illustrates the relevance of this form of engaged shopping as an educational process for current generations, for it is the response of a child who went shopping at the Koningshof when he realizes the lettuce he and his mother just harvested from the ground will be served to him at dinner. In the previous paragraph I explained how the period of Enlightenment laid the foundations for our ‘modern’ interpretation of humans and reason dominating nature and passion. This ontology is built on dichotomies which according to Ingold (1993, 156) are impossible to make. That this is the latent, or below-the-surface message of urban agriculture in the Netherlands is exemplified by Henk Oosterling (2014) who initiated the “Skillcity” project. Skillcity is an educational program in Rotterdam (the second-largest Dutch city) which integrates social and ecological processes into an *ecosophy*, breaking through oppositions of human and nature, and calling for a ‘second Enlightenment’ to counter Western rationality and interweave the social and ecological (Oosterling 2014, 270). Although there is no direct connection between these two projects, the following paragraph will reveal how the integration of social and ecological, of body and mind, is the fundamental lesson taught at the farm.

Appreciating sensorial experiences

“I don’t know that much about plants, but I learn more here than I could have ever learned from any book”⁷

The theory of social innovation emphasizes that transformative initiatives and practices do not occur randomly but appear from what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call *rhizomatic* structures. In other words, innovations can be traced back to a meshwork of tacit dynamics in society (Hillier 2013). As mentioned above, the Western (and Dutch) society is subject to processes of acceleration. Hartmut Rosa (2013) argues that social acceleration is a key feature of modernization in which an obsession with *time* and *speed* have colonized our experiences. Thus, in line with Gieser (2014), he states that everyday life is measured by quantities of time, a process that correlates with the massification of

⁷ Informant from different garden than Koningshof; recorded interview 01-04-2017

production in the global supply chain, which is based on efficiency to accumulate as much value in as little time possible (Rosa 2013, 11). The impact of this acceleration becomes visible in the Netherlands by an increasing number of burnouts and depressions resulting from the intensifying pressure to constantly pursue higher time efficiency (Oosterling 2014, 281; Griffioen, to be published, 2). Jean Hillier's (2013) theory of social innovation claims that people respond where societal structures fall short to fulfill essential needs. In other words, societal *lacks* are remedied by a responsive society. I would argue that the appearance of urban agriculture in the Netherlands is a response to social acceleration and the dominance of *efficiency* over *sense* in experiencing the everyday. Interestingly, in the Anglo-language 'sense' means both 'embodied feeling' and 'reason' at the same time. It stresses the collaboration between the body and the mind through sensorial experiences⁸. Following Scheper-Hughes and Lock (1987), who argue that the capitalist ideology dominating Western society has alienated the rational mind from the material body (1987, 22), I argue that urban gardens in Utrecht respond to a lack of balance between mind and body and reconnect them by providing a holistic experience of the senses.

When someone signs up for a garden at the Koningshof, it is not just a piece of land that is rented. The idea behind this initiative is to provide the gardeners with a "Workshop Koningshof". This entails that from the beginning of the season at the end of March, every Saturday throughout the year Robert, Joris, Roeland, Gijs, Akke and Jos, the six of them leading the initiative, invite the gardeners to come to their plots and spend the day together. At the opening day there is a presentation of the farm, its history, and some first suggestions on how to start gardening. What they offer to the gardeners is a place, material and knowledge. First, place is both physical and social. Physical in the form of the personal plot, one that is fertile, plowed and private, or the Koningshof's own land where anyone can volunteer or pick and buy. Besides that, the entire farm is a social place where people connect and share (knowledge, seeds, plants, food, etc.). Second, the Koningshof provides the gardeners with the required materials in the form of tools like shovels, wheelbarrows, spades and more. But also with water, compost and every now and then some seeds, plants or food. Third, knowledge is continuously transferred to the gardeners in multiple ways. As part of the workshop, the Koningshof organizes events that people can attend either free or paid with a discount. For instance, at the beginning of the season there is a moment to write up and receive feedback on a garden plan. If Joris is present, there is the possibility of joining him in going to the beehives. He is a beekeeper by training and is passionate to teach people about anything that has to do with ecological processes. There are workshops in fermenting to preserve your harvest, making liquors to show the variety of uses for plants, there is wine tasting, chef-made dinners, and more. But

⁸ <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sense> last accessed at 4-7-2018

besides these events, first and foremost there is a continuous flow of direct knowledge provided by the initiators of the Koningshof through conversation, but also by looking at the Koningshof's own practices. The greenhouse is typically called the 'KasLokaal', referring to the 'greenhouse' location ('Kas'), 'local' ideology and identity ('Lokaal') and the idea of transferring knowledge in a 'classroom' ('klaslokaal'). Because the KasLokaal is beneath glass and thus warmer, the process of growth is about a month ahead of the personal plots which are outside. Therefore, the gardeners can observe and learn inside the greenhouse the process they will have to go through themselves.

The Koningshof initiative provides a place where people learn by doing. First of all, the embodied practice in a personal garden enables the gardeners to engage with the process of gardening and develop their own skill. At the same time the farm's community, both the initiators and fellow gardeners, share knowledge and practice and hence teach and learn together. In her conceptualization of *enskilment*, Cristina Grasseni (2007, 11) uses both an embodied and social dimension to explain its meaning. The process of *enskilment* is embodied in "material and social learning experiences" whilst the social dimension of apprenticeship gives practices and experiences a contextual meaning. The integration of both body and mind into skilled practice is emphasized by Ingold who says that "skilled practice entails the working of a mind that, as it overflows into body and environment, is endlessly creative" (Ingold 2018, 159). The acquisition of knowledge through *enskilment* is well described in Gisli Pálsson's (1994) ethnography on Icelandic fishers. He explains how body and mind interact in the skill to *read* the landscape and *see* the fish, something Icelandic skippers have learned through both practical engagement with the environment (1994, 910) and by working as apprentice with an experienced skipper (1994, 917). At the Koningshof a similar process of *enskilment* applies through personal engagement with plants, soil and elements, whilst at the same time farming experiences are transferred in an apprentice-teacher relationship.

Fishing in Iceland in the twentieth century became subject to involvement of capitalist mass-production entrepreneurs and as a result had to adapt its mode of fishing to the new circumstances (Pálsson 1994, 909). Similarly, urban agriculture has developed itself to adjust to the dominant global food supply chain. Whereas by now it is clear that the Jongerius farm fell into decay due to the industrialization of the food system, it has revived, albeit in a different shape. David Sutton (2001) in his 'anthropology of food' discusses the contemporary deskilment in society when it comes to food-related practices. With technology increasingly replacing human practice, bodily and cognitive skills are being lost. Opposed to cooking with machines like blenders or microwaves, is the cooking of food with *feeling*. In line with examples given by Sutton showing how a "disdain for technology here goes with a disdain for measurement and precision, seen as part of the alienation of modern life" (Sutton 2001, 133), I would say that urban agriculture is about reengaging with *feeling*, or rather *sensing*, the

process of food production. In the following, conclusive paragraph I will continue this statement by arguing the reinvention of urban agriculture as opposing practice to an accelerated society.

Urban agriculture: Reinventing food practices

“The green and tranquility work therapeutically, they create an oasis in the desert”⁹

We should not underestimate the social impact of the disappearance of agriculture and food production practices from our everyday practices. Food is an essential element of life and with an increasing outsourcing of practices to technology people lose the skills to grow or prepare food, consequently losing autonomy to those who wield production machines (Sutton 2001, 132). At the same time however, its gravity should not be overestimated either. Similar to Scott-Cato and Hillier’s study of Transition Towns as spaces of hope and change (Scott-Cato and Hillier 2010, 882), the study of urban agriculture is one of opportunity, for it demonstrates how society adapts to remedy its fallacies. These urban gardens embody social resilience and citizenship to counteract constant acceleration and its consequences. Urban agriculture on the one hand is a *reinvention* of agriculture in the urban space, through the adaption of agriculture practices to a different physical and social environment (Grasseni 2013, 40). On the other hand, in line with other case-studies of urban agriculture (Premat 2009; McIvor and Hale 2015; Barron 2017), I argue that urban gardening contributes to a wider cultural movement of contestation and empowerment against dominant ideologies of efficiency and acceleration.

Multiple times now I have mentioned the oneness of body and mind, citing various academics who have claimed the importance of seeing both as inseparable elements of the human being. The quote at the start of this paragraph signifies the contribution of urban gardens to the reintegration of the separated body and mind into appreciating them in their harmony. I obtained this quote in a different garden in Utrecht than the Koningshof, but many people have responded with comparable statements. It is by studying landscape that we can see evolution and development. In his ethnography of the urban space in Bangkok, Claudio Sopranzetti defines the urban landscape to the ethnographer as a *canvas* on which one can see the layeredness of the urban space (Sopranzetti 2017, 36-37). Several types of architecture that can be recognized in the urban space of Utrecht tell stories of different periods in human history. For instance, remnants from the Roman period tell about the first settlers, whilst the medieval Cathedral and parts of the city wall trace back to the beginning of its urban formation. There are typical tiny houses and areas from the nineteenth

⁹ Informant from different garden than Koningshof; informal conversation 18-04-2017

century whilst at the same time entire neighborhoods of concrete apartment buildings from the sixties shape the surrounding urban areas. Nowadays in the station-area shining high-rise office buildings are being built by the dozen. Each of these architectural developments signify societal transformations. For the person who gave me the quote at the beginning of this paragraph, the 'desert' consisted of the tall, concrete and dense structure of the city on the one hand, and its demanding and rushed atmosphere on the other. For this reason, the garden served as an 'oasis', the converse environment. At the same time, gardening works 'therapeutically', underlining the sense of mindfulness by being in a physically different environment. This experience symbolizes the function of the urban gardens, which now have carved themselves into the canvas of the urban landscape by contrasting it with a spacious, colorful and sensorial environment, signifying yet another movement in contemporary transformations of society.

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