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Visions of the urban green: interrogating urban renewal in Turin's periphery

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Interrogating Urban Renewal in Turin's Periphery.

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Introduction

- 1 Using photographs of the transformation of a nature park (Parco Piemonte) into an urban green project in a peripheral area of Turin (Italy), we discuss the different 'skilled visions' (Grasseni 2007) that social actors developed over this changing urban landscape. In 2019, a sizable portion of the park was transfigured into a gardening project (Orti Generali) aimed at regenerating the area, proposing collective activities and attracting new food gardeners. Following a visual approach to the study of urban spaces (Krase 2012) the authors' photographs as well as social media and archive images provide an account of this process and its aesthetics from the different perspectives of the social actors involved.
- 2 Grasseni chose Turin as one of three European cities for comparative ethnographic investigation in the *Food Citizens?* project based on her previous investigation of urban transformations: Turin was one of the case studies in *Luoghi Comuni* (Grasseni 2009), on the visual anthropology of places, and the nascent Urban Ecomuseum of Turin featured in *Ecomuseo-logie* (Grasseni 2010). Turin is also the Italian city with the highest density of solidarity economy networks with an urban network of more than 80 Solidarity Purchase Groups.¹ As a member of the *Food Citizens?* research team, Maria Vasile conducted 16 months ethnographic fieldwork in Turin over the period December 2018–August 2020, while Grasseni visited the field in February and August 2019, August 2020, October and December 2021. Our investigations of the city are thus longitudinal in complementary ways: while Grasseni observed its transformation from a distance over

about a decade, Vasile did an in-depth, longitudinal fieldwork with participant observation in several sites concerning urban foraging, short food chains and food governance in the city, conducting about 80 interviews including video-elicitations and group interviews. Our combined perspective contextualizes ethnographic evidence within historical and visual anthropological analysis and, in this case, we collaborate to deliver a critical outlook of diverse and conflicting visions of participation and engagement in ‘community gardens’ and of the transformation of public urban green spaces in the city.

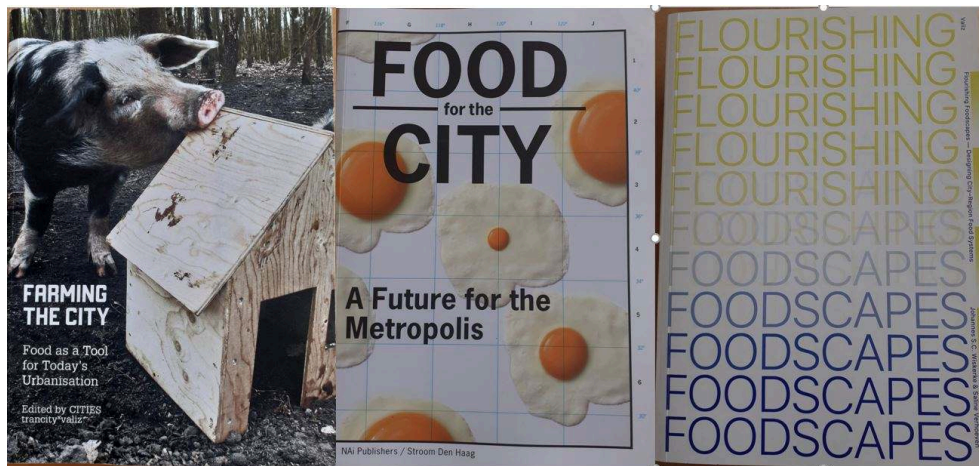
- 3 After contextualizing the project as part of a new global aesthetic as well as Turin’s historical transformations, our step-by-step photographic analysis reflects on what this renewal entailed over time (longitudinal comparison). Looking at the evolution of the area of Mirafiori Sud and Parco Piemonte in particular, we reflect on what was removed, what remains, what was added, and on what basis. We argue that the transformation of the landscape mediated new visions, roles and power relations that came to play in the park and that are part of broader urban renewal processes. What became visible were new criteria through which the area was reorganized, corresponding to international models of urban sustainability and their aesthetic grammar as much as in opposition to some pre-existing local practices.
- 4 Secondly, we reflect on the positionality of vision bringing the aesthetics of the project through a comparative lens: what is shown and what is not? What do gardeners, volunteers and project developers visualize from different perspectives? How is our attention as ethnographers and project developers differently focussed?
- 5 Thirdly, we point out the ways in which these different visions framed collaboration in the gardens and influenced our relations with the project organisers, both facilitating and challenging our being together in the field, as planners and anthropologists (Crawford 2020). We argue that these differences speak of our different *skilled visions*, thus not only views or opinions, but forms of engagement with the natural, material and relational environment.

‘Designerly’ Aesthetics for Urban Farming

- 6 As visual anthropologist Francesco Faeta argues, ‘all landscape construction, in the western tradition in particular, lies in the dialectic between order and complexity... through the defining input of the sense of sight’ (Faeta 2009: 11). He bases his observation on the work of Rudolf Arnheim on landscape architecture, which appeared in 1966 under the title *Order and complexity in landscape planning* in an edited volume dedicated to the psychology of art (Arnheim 1966). In our case, we are interested in how visual methods can enhance our understanding of ‘urban vernacular landscapes’ namely spaces shaped by a particular local organization, customs and relations (Krase 2012: 22). How do considerations of order and aesthetics inform urban agriculture projects? What makes a green space pleasing to the eye, and to whom? And how do diverse positionings, opinions and practices shape answers to these questions?
- 7 ‘Designerly’ aesthetics put the visionary intervention of design thinking at the centre (Cross 2019). This seems to frame the way in which international literature and planning practice on urban agriculture investigates potential transformations of post-industrial cities (usually of the northern hemisphere) into sites of sustainable food practices and social improvement (with relevant aspects of innovating and curating

social involvement). Cosmopolitan and interdisciplinary scholarship proposes transitions in (life)styles and patterns of food consumption, showcasing social experiments in collective urban spaces, often authored by landscape architects in collaboration with rural sociologists, technology developers and urban planners. Redesigning the food field as a space for artistic and activist intervention, they focus on the urban space to develop innovative food economies, food communities and food topographies, addressing the issue of sustainable food transition through specific aesthetics, models and interventions for urban farming. While steeped in local networks of design and technology (in figure 1, we have selected three examples profiling Dutch cases), they profile multiple international urban case studies, including Italy.

Figure 1. Books on urban (re)development



These books resulted from funded projects about urban (re)development such as Stichting Doen and Creative Industries Fund NL (Miazzo and Minkjan 2013, Stroom Den Haag 2012, Wiskerke and Verhoven 2018). For example, *Farming the City* is prefaced by renowned architect Carolyn Steel and presents photographic case studies from Rome, Milan, Berlin, Rotterdam, Amsterdam, Stockholm, Helsinki, London, Washington DC, New York, Portland, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Singapore, Melbourne, amongst others.

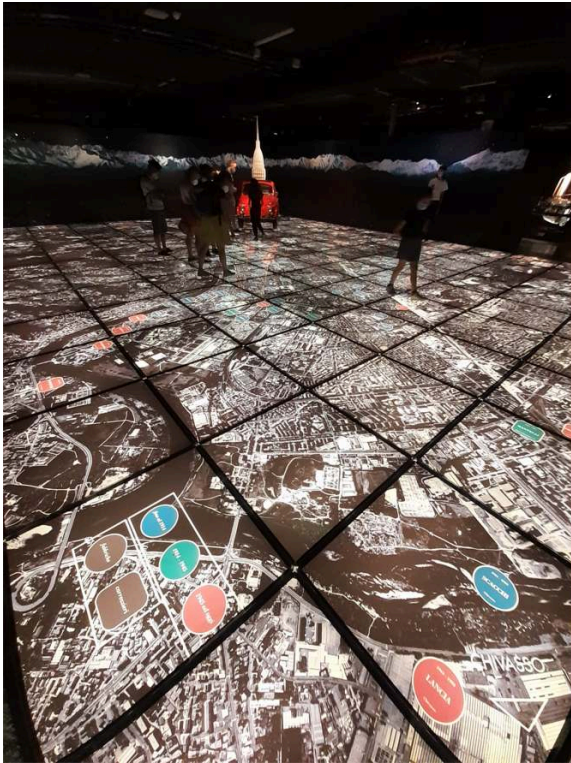
- 8 These books deserve aesthetic analysis in themselves as they are often image-driven, typeset and curated using high-quality graphics (including colour photographs, maps and infographics on photographic paper). They are designed to be appreciated not only for the content they communicate but also for their aesthetics. We have selected them to draw attention to the diversity of canons and disciplinary discourses around the transformation of urban spaces. While we believe that (visual) transformations of urban landscapes should be studied in their own terms and in the logic of their specific historical and social context (Krase 2012), we also realize that cosmopolitan grammars of visual and aesthetic representation play a real part in imagining, shaping and governing urban transformations.

Why Turin?

- 9 Turin displays the traces and scars of continuous processes of re-designing its urban fabric, especially during distinctive urban development phases such as industrialization and more recently de-industrialization (epitomized by FIAT's downsizing of local

operations). Since the first half of the twentieth century, (car) factories had shaped the culture, geography and everyday life of the city (Jalla and Musso 1981). Each neighbourhood kept its own identity, however, often with their own markets (Jalla 1982: 84). Among the landmarks of contemporary Turin, in fact are the first FIAT factory (1898), the new hospital (1920) and the fresh fruit market (1934). A good visual representation of this fluid process and how it is conversant with ongoing, sometimes contradictory aesthetic practices of finding a human dimension in the city, is this installation at the Museum of the Car (MAUTO) in Turin:

Figure 2. Floor installation at MAUTO. August 2021



A topography of the city with the location of the various factories directly or indirectly involved in car manufacturing within the urban fabric of Turin.

Photo by Cristina Grasseni.

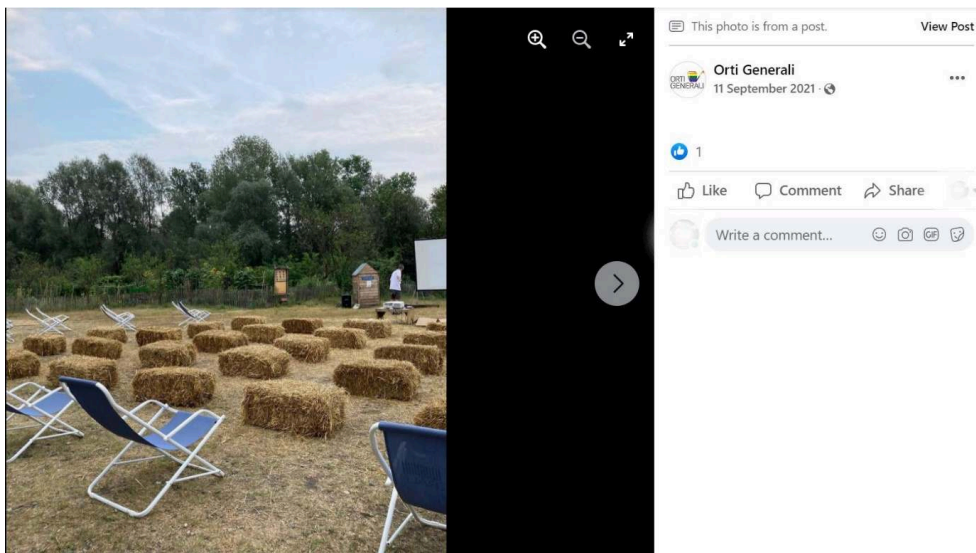
- 10 The arteries of the city reached out to porous borders with a 'peri-urban' countryside, urbanized between the two world wars and then again after the second. Near one such porous border, to the southeast of the Mirafiori FIAT factory complex (an area of two million square meters crisscrossed by 20 kilometres of railway lines and 11 kilometres of underground roads), lies a peri-urban area and one of Turin's most renown interventions of urban green renewal²: Orti Generali. This urban gardening project started in 2019 after several months of cleaning and reorganization of the area, thanks to the support of many volunteers. Orti Generali was created by the organization Associazione Coefficiente Clorofilla and received funding by the 'Smart Cities and Communities and Social Innovation' allocated by the Ministry of Education, University and Research³, the foundation Compagnia di San Paolo⁴, the European Union's Horizon 2020 project 'ProGireg', among others.

- 11 Orti Generali offers 160 individual allotments for rent (for between 25 and 45 euros per month⁵) as well as shared gardening and recreational spaces, including a didactical farm and a café⁶. The aim of the project is to create a sustainable and inclusive environment, where urban dwellers can reconnect with nature while enjoying and taking care of the space through gardening, volunteering or simply consuming quality products (figure 3 and video). The project also collaborates with several NGOs and is part of the neighbourhood solidarity networks: for example, it distributes food to social canteens and welcomes vulnerable groups in the shared garden.
- 12 Gardeners at Orti Generali include inhabitants of the neighbourhood Mirafiori Sud, a working-class area of the city historically inhabited by workers of the car industry (e.g. Vasile and Pisano 2021). Today the area has an ageing population which increased by 14.5% between 1991 and 2011. The area also attracted new immigrants, who represent 9.94% of the local population, which is less, however, than the city average (data from 2015)⁷. Gardening has long been part of the habits of the local population – for recreational and subsistence purposes – also considering that in the area the average yearly income amounts to just under 14,000 euros (data from 2009). Orti Generali also attracts dwellers from other areas of the city such as young families, people interested in sustainable agricultural practices and environmental activists.

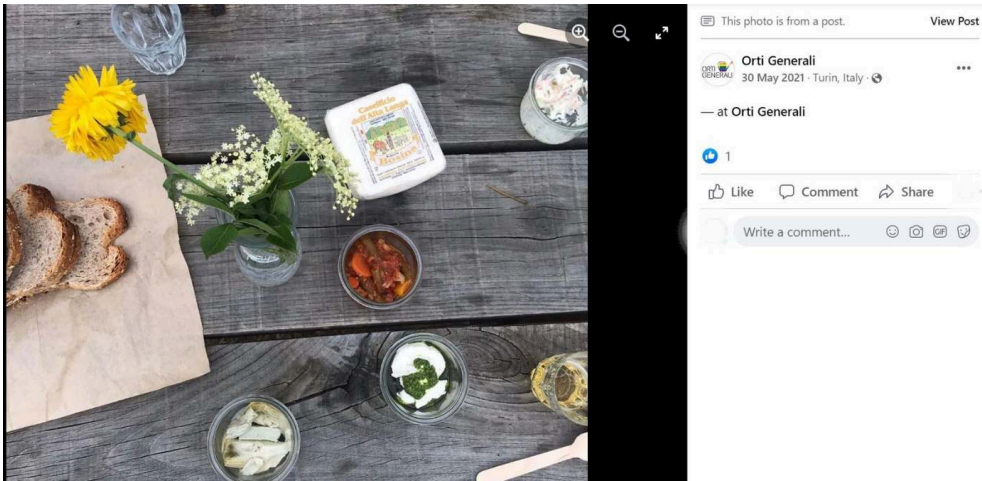
13 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document <http://journals.openedition.org/anthrovision/6812>

- 14 Video link: https://www.ortigenerali.it/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/ortivideo2019.mp4?_1

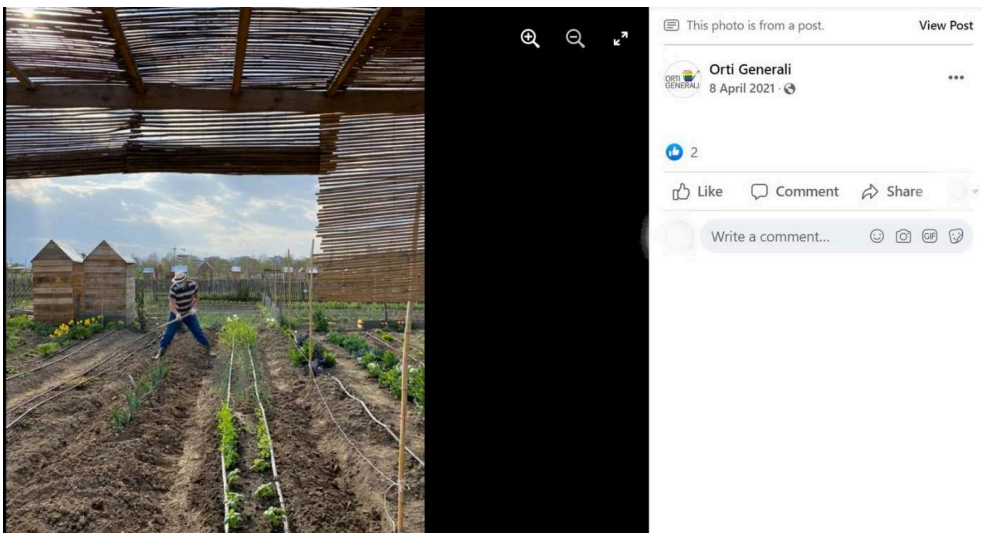
Figure 3. A selection of images from Orti Generali's Facebook page



Link: <https://www.facebook.com/ortigenerali/photos/4142552072465508>



Link: <https://www.facebook.com/ortigenerali/photos/3848746755179376>



Link: <https://www.facebook.com/ortigenerali/photos/3697284923658894>

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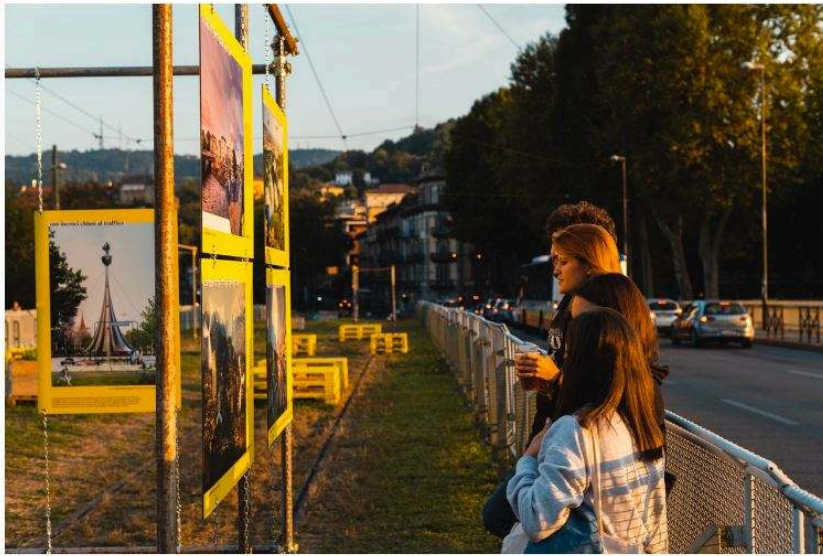
- 15 The landscape architect Donadieu (2011) ⁸defines ‘urban countryside’ (*campagne urbaine*) as sites that have become ‘rurban’ places, namely not fully urbanized areas, which are however impacted and crisscrossed by urban activities and stakes, such as industrial sites, commuting and food provisioning. While Donadieu proposes ‘agri-urbanism’ or ‘agri-utopias’ to qualify such ‘urban countryside’, we try to bring to the fore how they are embedded into historical sedimentations of anthropological practices, governance styles and power relations.
- 16 Turin has experienced numerous reinventions. Especially since de-industrialization, the city and its landscape are being repackaged to attract a more varied economy including large-scale events (such as the 2006 Winter Olympics), culture and services. Strategies of ‘place branding’ (Vanolo 2008) involved a variety of actors beyond the city administration, which included the international private sector (such as hotel chains, property developers, architecture firms), local non-profit organizations, and ‘the citizens’, who were called upon to actively participate in the figurative and physical transformations. Designers, architects and artists were involved in projects such as Torinostratosferica, which since 2017 organised yearly workshops and a festival to

develop utopic future images and narratives for the city⁹. Urban greening is central in these imaginative exercises, which can also transform into real initiatives such as in the case of 'Precollinear Park' (figure 4)¹⁰.

Figure 4. 'Precollinear Park' was developed along former tramway tracks in June 2020

L'unico ponte con un parco sopra

Dal ponte Regina Margherita, uno dei sei ponti sul Po in città, si può sempre godere della brezza e della spettacolare vista sulle Alpi, sulla Basilica di Superga e sulle colline torinesi. All'imbocco del ponte Torino Stratosferica ha posizionato un container giallo brillante che funge da info point e da bar durante gli eventi. Attualmente il ponte ospita anche la mostra "Visioni da Torino Stratosferica", che presenta 40 immagini visionarie sul futuro della città e i suoi luoghi. L'exhibition è visitabile tutti i giorni, gratuitamente e senza vincoli d'orario.



Link: https://torinostratosferica.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/FSM_0599.jpeg

Thanks to the support of local volunteers, the park was furnished and decorated following a consistent visual identity (such as yellow frames, wooden DIY benches and a container) and has hosted several events. In this picture, visitors are looking at visionary images of the future of the city as part of the exhibition 'Visions of Torino Stratosferica'.

See: <https://torinostratosferica.it/precollinear-park/>.

- 17 To render the city landscape readable through an orderly grammar is not an entirely novel ambition, as noted by Arnheim and Faeta (above). For example, MuseoTorino¹¹, an urban open-air museum launched in 2007, aims to be:

'Characterised by a set or system of goods, places, buildings, spaces, sites, elements of the landscape whether natural or human-made, that are coherent and consistent, for physical or historical proximity, namely placed in an explicit relation between each other and interpreted and communicated as one unitary system, through tools that can ensure their identification, accessibility, intelligibility' (Jalla 2007: 177).

- 18 In other words, the city and its representation come to coincide in new forms of museography. While these processes share the ambition of re-designing the urban fabric with perspicuous interventions, they are premised on values and standards derived from global imagination exercises. While considering specific features of the city, these also relate to global urban trends (see also Dines 2012). In what follows, we visually document in an analytical manner how the global aesthetics of urban regeneration gradually took shape on the ground in Mirafiori Sud, thanks to stepwise

and deliberate interventions both in the physical landscape of Orti Generali and in its virtual packaging through social media communication.

Urban Gardens at the Margins of the City

- 19 Orti Generali developed within a broader process of renewal, planned for the urban green along the Sangone River in Turin's southernmost neighbourhood Mirafiori Sud. Crossed by a border between two municipalities (Torino and Nichelino) and profoundly incised by the torrent Sangone, this area presents both the traits of the urban periphery (with dense and popular high-rise housing) and marginal rural land, albeit increasingly encroached by road and commercial infrastructure. In the public park Parco Piemonte, already appropriated by various actors such as spontaneous food gardens, homeless migrants and one transhumant shepherd, Orti Generali established its gardening, didactic farming and sustainable leisure project.
- 20 During Turin's industrialization (FIAT opened its factory in Mirafiori in 1939), its peripheries turned into production sites and workers' dormitories. Working-class families used the river for bathing and sailing, escaping from both the Fordist factory and the cramped high rises. The riverbanks were also a rural-urban frontier, a 'rurban' border space, accommodating residual farming, herders and shepherds.

Figure 5. 'My parents on a boat on the Sangone River'. 1950



Loredana Vecchi was one of the volunteers whom Maria Vasile encountered at Orti Generali during the land rehabilitation works. In an interview and also through recurrent informal conversations, Loredana narrated her perspective on the history of Mirafiori Sud, where she grew up. She recalled the central role of the factory in the residents' daily life, the years of workers' protests as well as these riverbanks, mentioned as rare sites of leisure. Loredana referred to this picture in a conversation and later sent it to Maria.

Courtesy of Loredana Vecchi.

- 21 The industrial pollution of soil and waste deteriorated the riverine landscape, until bathing was eventually forbidden in the 1960s. The riverbanks were progressively abandoned to wild vegetation as well as to industrial and domestic waste, such as iron poles, plastic containers and car wheels, which accumulated over the years. As discussed by Barchetta (2019), who studied two other nature parks and riverbanks in Turin, in this city nature is tied to its industrial history and ruins. Similarly to other anthropologists investigating marginal landscapes (e.g. Lai and Breda 2011), Barchetta comments on the temporality of urban nature and collects ‘stories’, through which its social and environmental forces are ‘felt, imagined, negotiated, lived, narrated and reworked in institutional realities and everyday life’, such as those framed in the discourse of urban decay (*degrado*, Barchetta 2019: 124).

Figure 6. The Sangone riverbanks. January 2020



Maria explored the Sangone riverbanks during her participant observation at Orti Generali. While taking a break from the land rehabilitation works, she wandered around and discovered these neighbouring sandy areas by following paths made by former occupants. She also went back with volunteers to collect reeds and wood for the new gardens' structures.

Photo by Maria Vasile.

- 22 The urban regeneration of the Sangone riverbanks had been on the Turin administration's agenda for several years but its implementation was delayed due to the high costs of land rehabilitation and cleaning up¹². Some portions of the riverbanks were converted into public parks, such as Parco Sangone (inaugurated in 2007) and Parco Piemonte – where Orti Generali now stands. There, walking paths were developed and maintained, and tree-shaded areas with basic infrastructures such as railings were introduced. The administration then further contracted out the renewal of Parco Piemonte. The project Orti Generali was developed here by the local association Coefficiente Clorofilla, which won a 15-year land concession and start-up funding in 2014. Due to delays, the land rehabilitation and construction works could only start between 2018 and 2019 thanks to advance payments and volunteer work.

Figure 7 Entrance of Parco Piemonte. January 2019



From the busy street Strada del Castello di Mirafiori, one enters the park following this walking path. The agricultural field to the right of the path was converted into Orti Generali's individual allotments. At the end of the field, one can turn right and follow a path along the trees or continue straight, going down directly towards the Sangone and the area which became Orti Generali's collective gardens.

Photo by Maria Vasile.

- 23 Over the last few decades, some of these areas were used and maintained by urban gardeners who autonomously created plots for cultivation. This form of land appropriation is a widespread practice, often in marginal areas, along rivers and railways. The phenomenon developed in the 1970s, with the increase of the urban population and the industrialization of city peripheries, at a time of tumultuous internal migration (Tecco et al. 2016). The new factory workers were mostly coming from rural southern Italy and developed urban gardens at the city margins for both subsistence and recreation (Baldo 2012; Crespi 1982). Nowadays in Mirafiori Sud, these gardens are frequented by a variety of people including elderly men, novel immigrants, and unemployed residents - and in some cases through a complex system of informal transactions between acquaintances. The plots often include small cabins and an array of second-hand equipment and materials. Gardeners cultivate not only food but also long-term affective relationships with the space they take care of. For example, some of them had been cultivating the same plot since the 1970s: the garden was for them a place where to spend time with family and reconnect with their agricultural family background. As also underlined by Briceño-Leon (1989) in relation to self-made housing based on traditional knowledge, such forms of self-constructions become, in the case of poor and marginalized groups, a means for increasing self-confidence and gaining a sense of control over one's own life. Moreover, as pointed out by a gardener, and former metal worker, all spontaneous gardeners develop zero-costs solutions. Urban waste is re-used in creative and functional ways: for example, doors are assembled from

residue wooden boards, plastic containers are used as water receptacles, and bed nets as fences.

Figure 8. A spontaneous garden at Strada del Drosso. October 2020



In this garden, bed nets and plastic shutters are re-used as fences. Iron poles and ropes are converted into sticks to separate different lines of the vegetable garden and support the taller crops.

Photo by Maria Vasile.

- 24 These plots are *de facto* appropriated by marginalised city inhabitants, and are generally regarded as illegal, dirty and inappropriate. Unauthorized forms of gardening in public spaces are termed as ‘spontaneous’ (*orti spontanei*) by those who do not wish to criminalize this practice, such as some researchers, social workers and employees of the non-profit sector – including the managers of Orti Generali. On the other hand, the most common expression *orti abusivi* is loosely translatable as ‘illegal’ or ‘unlicensed’ gardens and often used by local inhabitants, journalists and public servants. The widespread practice of *abusivismo edilizio*, namely modified or newbuilds without proper licensing, is heavily connoted, associated with tax-dodging, environmental abuse or mafia-related money laundering. So to use the word *abusivo* underlines the illegal side of unlicensed gardening, namely as the undue appropriation of public land.
- 25 Spontaneous gardeners’ ‘creative agency’ plays a role in (re)shaping urban landscapes through everyday practice (Newman 2015). Along the Sangone, some stepped and levelled the steep terrain into terraces. Others carved cave-like devotional chapels in the canyon-esque steep riverbank. More than 30 years ago, Italian anthropologist Amalia Signorelli (1989) studied entire spontaneous neighbourhoods in the peripheries of Naples. Traces of citizens’ self-management remained visible in these areas, in the forms of ‘complex overlapping and intertwining elevations, divisions, fillings, demolitions, connections, separations, additions [...]’ (Signorelli 1989: 14). Like spontaneous gardens, such forms of self-management can be regarded as a form of resistance to social and economic marginality, lack of appropriate living environments and long-term inattention to local needs by the city administration. These were framed as illegitimate with urban renewal interventions and the development of social housing, which, as Signorelli (1989) argued, could be seen as a form of ‘forced

acculturation' reflecting a planner-inhabitant division, urban power relations, and class and cultural differences.

Figure 9. Unlicensed garden near Orti Generali. February 2019



During her visit to Maria's field, one of the unlicensed gardeners took Cristina and Maria for a tour of the Sangone riverbanks with spontaneous gardens. He had terraced the terrain for garlic beds and built steps out of concrete. However, the plot had been washed out by a particularly devastating flood. Photo by Jonny Hankins and Cristina Grasseni.

- 26 Planning the renewal of these areas along the Sangone did not include considering the preservation of spontaneous gardens. In most cases, it contemplated dismantling the plots and evicting the gardeners without compensation. Local administration and media narratives around the future of these areas developed in the name of legality and of a more 'appropriate', 'shared' and 'clean' use of green spaces in opposition to spontaneous practices. Examples can be found in news articles (Coracciolo 2018) but also in the visual narration of the development of Orti Generali. Among others, a video created in 2021 as part of the MediActivism project (coordinated by the European Cultural Foundation and in which Orti Generali participated)¹³ depicts the transformation of the area as a progressive pathway from abandonment and illegal practices to inclusive processes of citizens activation and community building. While Orti Generali did attempt to integrate some of the area's spontaneous gardeners into the project, only a few remained. The project redefined and standardised gardening habits, spaces and materials, aspects on which we dwell in detail next.

New Aesthetics

- 27 The making of Orti Generali started with the transformation of this urban space in winter 2019. The clean-up and construction works relied on the mobilization of local volunteers and future gardeners, who engaged in this together with the gardens' managers and contracted specialized workers such as agronomists and electricians.

Maria Vasile participated too, learning to appreciate the diverse visions at stake around urban renewal, its function and aesthetics. The latter unfolded in decision-making processes such as what to remove, reuse, maintain, or develop, and on which criteria.

Figure 10. Sign board in the making. February 2019



Photo by Jonny Hankins and Cristina Grasseni.

- 28 Volunteers mobilised weekly to clean overgrowth and collect waste found on and under-ground, separating it for appropriate disposal. Piles of material had been abandoned and accumulated over the years: plastic boxes, glass bottles, cloths, metals parts, cars' parts and domestic equipment.

Figure 11. A pile of waste removed from the area. January 2019



Photo by Maria Vasile.

- 29 During the process, volunteers blamed former spontaneous gardeners for the pollution of the area, while they represented themselves (and were represented¹⁴) as working cohesively in the name of urban decorum and citizens' reappropriation of deteriorated areas. As also discussed by Muehlebach (2012), contemporary volunteer work revolves around a shared 'postwelfarist public morality', which gives citizens a central role in the delivery of public goods and services - especially in the context of economic crisis and austerity. As Muehlebach (2012) stresses, this moralising discourse should be problematized in the context of neoliberal urban planning, which cuts public social services, increases service privatization or transfers its onus to non-profit organizations and volunteers. At Parco Piemonte, volunteers were mostly part-time workers, unemployed or retired. They talked to Maria about their collaboration with Orti Generali in terms of the importance of getting directly involved and doing something for their neighbourhood. They thus reinforced the morality of active citizenship (opposed to self-managing citizens such as spontaneous gardeners) in their narratives and practice.

Figure 12. Volunteers extracting a washing machine from the ground. January 2019



Volunteers spent several hours digging around and lifting it out, using whichever tools available and their physical strength.

Photo by Maria Vasile.

- 30 Orti Generali managers and volunteers dismantled the spontaneous urban gardens that had been recently abandoned after their gardeners had been informed about the project. This work consisted of undoing the gardens and constructions as well as collecting material and tools that could be reused in the project, such as gardening tools, ropes, and wooden boards but excluded all plastic containers, which were considered too ugly, damaged and unsustainable. The regulations of Orti Generali would in fact soon completely prohibit the use of plastic material in the new allotment gardens.

Figure 13. A recently abandoned spontaneous garden about to be dismantled. January 2019



Photo by Maria Vasile.

Figure 14. Wood collected from the spontaneous gardens. January 2019



While some pieces of wood were thrown away, others were put aside for a chicken coop and a hayloft which were constructed by two volunteers, who have carpentry skills and passion.

Photo by Maria Vasile.

- 31 Some of the materials thus became incorporated into the project, and some of their practical and aesthetic standards were also reproduced, in conversation with volunteers (who often had gardening and construction experience) and the few spontaneous gardeners who stayed and took part in the project. For example, reeds and canes used in the spontaneous gardens were inserted as decoration in Orti Generali's storage units (figure 15).

Figure 15. A volunteer making use of reeds from the Sangone riverbanks to cover and decorate one of the plastic containers of Orti Generali. February 2019



Photo by Maria Vasile.

Figure 16. The use of reeds in a spontaneous garden. January 2019



Photo by Maria Vasile.

- 32 The aesthetic vision of Orti Generali was mostly shaped by the project directors, who planned the project for several years, beginning in 2009 with a proposal for the green areas along the Sangone River (Olivari 2009). Trained as a social worker (and sociologist) and a landscape architect (at the prestigious *École Nationale Supérieure de Paysage in Versailles*)¹⁵, consistent with Donadieu's (2011, 1998) vision of the 'urban countryside' as '*agrotopias*', the project directors envisaged the renewal of these public areas in terms of social engagement, beyond private gardening. Critical of plans for urban peripheries - such as Mirafiori - that would not consider their agricultural vocation, Orti Generali developers wished to prevent privatizations of green areas and commercial developments. Instead, Orti Generali was promoted to residents and the municipality as a sustainable project, closer to the original function of the area, but also innovative, legal, beautiful and open to all. The plan began with action research among the spontaneous gardens in Strada del Drosso (Mirafiori), together with other members of the *Associazione Coefficiente Clorofilla*, to evaluate with local inhabitants the feasibility of transformations for environmental renewal, to develop legal gardens and raise awareness (Olivari 2011).
- 33 Orti Generali share similarities with a case analysed by Guano (2020) in the post-industrial urban peripheries of the Bisagno Valley (Genoa, Italy). Here, local activists (artisans, young and old residents) were critical of the proliferation of shopping malls, megastores and parking lots, described as a 'cement flood' (*alluvione di cemento*, Guano 2020: 8). Instead, they called for a new aesthetic sensibility beyond the frequent divide between the beauty of Italian city centres and the 'cementification' of their peripheries. While their activities (such as group walks, maintenance of the urban green, petitions for the official recognition of local heritage) allowed them to have a say in the future of the valley, Guano also elaborates on the ambiguity of their attention to aesthetics, which she suggests is to be analysed in relation to 'the neoliberal template for the aesthetic consumptions of cities' (Guano 2020: 21). While Guano nuances the processes that can occur around the aesthetic consumption of cities (showing how it can be used by local inhabitants), she also maintains that the only way to have these alternative development projects accepted and supported was to comply with shared standards of urban aesthetics such as the cultivation of 'beauty'.
- 34 At Orti Generali, the focus on aesthetics became apparent during the implementation of the project, with specific styles of organizing the land use and preference for specific materials. The ensuing canon was the emergence of a new, curated landscape, including straight lines between plots and cultivations, tool sheds and fences, which stood out in comparison with the previous spontaneous environment of the park. For example, new gardening infrastructure included wooden fences specifically imported from France called *ganivelles*, that were planted by volunteers to organize the gardening plots.

Figure 17. Orti Generali's directors and volunteers working together to set up the 'ganivelles'. February 2019



The work included learning to rethink and divide the urban space in terms of exact dimensions and geometries.

Photo by Maria Vasile.

Figure 18. Orti Generali in the setting-up phase. February 2019



The *ganivelles* are being set up to separate the individual allotments. At the same time, they create clear alleys to allow people to walk all around the allotments.

Photo by Jonny Hankins and Cristina Grasseni.

Figure 19. Entrance of allotment gardens at Orti Generali. October 2020



Photo by Maria Vasile.

- 35 These fences created a sense of order and homogeneity, which soon was extended by installing identical looking sheds provided by the organization in all gardens. The gardeners were allowed to construct greenhouses, however they were required to follow specific rules and standards: they should be aluminium and polycarbonate structures 185 cm wide and 195 high (Orti Generali, 07/01/2021 regulations). More generally, constructions in the gardens (e.g. fences, forcing tunnels) were required to be low and transparent, and the material used for the likes of pergola, small sheds, decorations should be only wood or iron. Such detailed regulations clearly differentiate the new allotments from spontaneous gardens.

Figure 20. Regulations posted at Orti Generali. October 2021

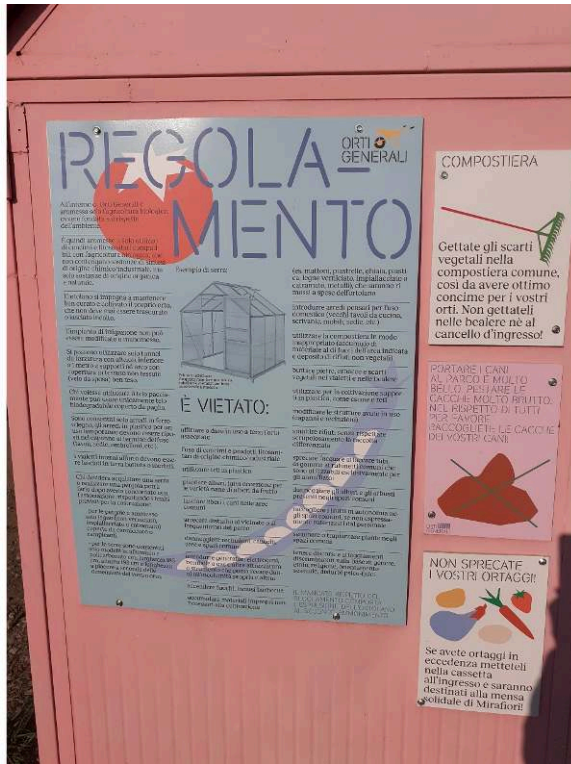


Photo by Cristina Grasseni.

36 The emphasis on transparency and consistent materials contrasts with the high, often closed fences created by spontaneous gardeners, and with the reusing of all kinds of material. Orti Generali’s new and visible gardens soon became an integral part of the visual showcasing of the neighbourhood – and the city more broadly. In fact, soon after the official opening of the gardens, Orti Generali increasingly appeared in the media as an example of innovative urban practice (Cignini 2021) and attracted projects to the area, for example an international short film festival (Ortometraggi)¹⁶. The project directors were invited to talk at several events, including European-level discussions on urban gardening and activism¹⁷. Orti Generali also won new funding through calls for projects such as the campaign ‘*Segnali d’Italia chiama Torino*’ promoted by private companies in collaboration with the newspaper *La Stampa* and the patronage of the municipality of Turin¹⁸.

Figure 21. The poster of Orti Generali. August 2021



Orti Generali is one of three winners (together with the Precollinear Park project mentioned in figure 4) of this campaign for social innovation. Orti Generali appeared in the form of public street posters: it appealed also to outsiders, such as city centre residents and tourists. In fact, the poster was to be found at several crossways in the city including in a prominent position under Turin's iconic Mole Antonelliana monument. The full image of the poster is also accessible on Orti Generali's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/ortigenerali/photos/4042248365829213/>

Photo by Stefano Murgia.

- 37 Throughout this campaign, the new aesthetics of the gardens expanded beyond the neighbourhood, to become iconic of the city's post-COVID-19 renaissance. The broader, educated public it targeted was potentially more familiar with the cosmopolitan, 'designerly' aesthetic grammar that we introduced at the outset, than some of the residents of Mirafiori themselves. Curating aesthetics beyond the gardens' physical existence and experience is also important in Orti Generali's communication material (sign boards, gadgets such as t-shirts, publications, videos and website), which displayed bright colours and consistent fonts, according to one single visual identity, as it is standard practice in the communication design of corporate branding.
- 38 In other words, the gardens are meant to be the object not only of food production and consumption but also of aesthetic consumption (e.g. Harvey 1989). In fact, the new shape and aesthetic of the common area of Orti Generali, through the planting of fruit trees, enlarged paths and new services such as recreational activities and a café offering local quality products, also target city-dwellers, beyond gardeners and volunteers. We associate the increased importance of aesthetics in urban gardening with the 'designerly' aesthetic standards discussed at the outset. This raises questions worth debating relating to the space remaining for participatory decision making: what space is left for local gardeners, their opinions and habits? How do they relate (if at all) to the new aesthetics of the area? Which shape do collaborations between project

directors, gardeners and volunteers take, in a context framed by the logic of this aesthetics?

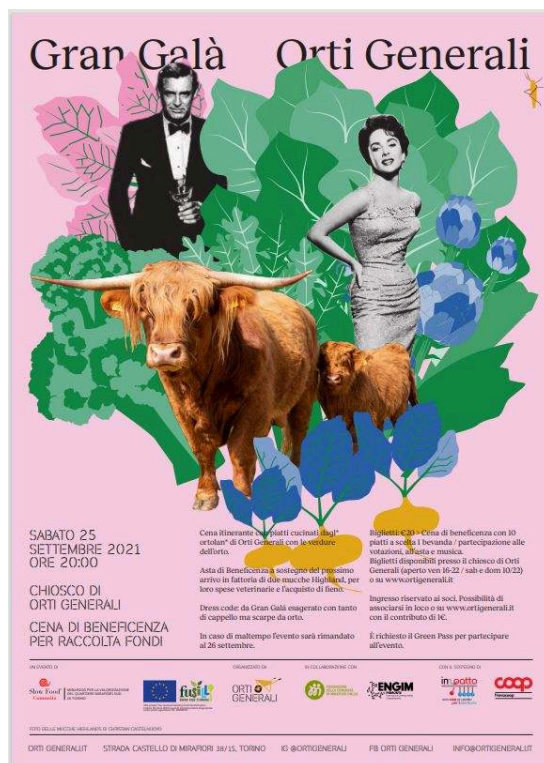
Framing Collaboration

- 39 Urban renewal and 'beauty' are highly politicized tropes, even when they do not appear as such: 'they form part of a wider political discourse about citizenship that intersects questions of power, control, belonging, rights, obligations and social justice', as argued by Dines (2012: 2) in relation to the transformation of the historic centre of Naples (Italy). Anthropologists studying the transformation of urban spaces have argued that the existence of a dominant aesthetic is related to a hierarchy of values and unequal social relations and can stand in the way of grassroots governance (e.g. Herzfeld 2017; Herzfeld 2004; Signorelli 1989). Michael Herzfeld (2017) has exemplified how, in the case of Bangkok, the beautification of urban spaces often comes at the expense of the social needs of the poorest inhabitants, who may suffer eviction, the destruction of 'vernacular architecture' in the name of development and modernity (Herzfeld 2017). Beautification can also be related to historical conservation and the concept of heritage, which can be among the factors leading to gentrification (Herzfeld 2010).
- 40 At Orti Generali, the globally recognized aesthetic grammar chosen by the project directors gave a framework for the participation of gardeners and volunteers. The diverse visions of the gardeners and volunteers (which reflected different social positions, ways of gardening and desired spaces) did not always find a space for expression in this framework. Opening up for consultations with everybody seemed to counter the need to make some headways with the project, so the project directors prioritized their plans and choices in the name of their expertise and long-term ownership of the project. As a consequence, the collaboration with gardeners and volunteers remained hierarchical and participation was only allowed within this framework.
- 41 As mentioned, this became evident during the supervision of the volunteering activities, in the regulations for individual allotments, and through the cultural agenda of Orti Generali, which is another entry point into the relation between aesthetics and the promotion of a new, cosmopolitan culture for this space. For example, a fundraising event called Gran Galà was organized in the communal area of the gardens. The gardeners cooked products from their plots for the charity dinner, while non-residents and members of partner organizations including Slow Food visited the gardens for the first time. A special dress code for the event was to wear suits and elegant dresses with gardening boots, resulting in an ironic juxtaposition (as in the posters below) of chic and rural.

Figure 22. Posters of the Gran Galà event 2020 and 2021



See: CENA DI BENEFICENZA PER RACCOLTA FONDI MIRAORTI.....TUTTO ESAURITO! - ORTI GENERALI (accessed July 28, 2022)



See: https://www.ortigenerali.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/OG_Gran-Gala%CC%80_2021_A3-1_compressed.pdf (accessed July 28, 2022)

The posters specify program (fundraising dinner and auction), costs (20 euros), dress code and co-organizers of the event (including other European funded projects and local foundations).

<https://www.ortigenerali.it>

- 42 Fabio Dei (2015) has argued that a dichotomous distinction between high and low culture can be nuanced by understanding new forms of production of difference, also in relation to the ways in which agricultural practices, traditions and landscapes are studied. In this perspective, the Gran Gala attempted to blend different practices such as gardening, cooking, charity dinners and elegant clothing. Similarly, the posters juxtapose images of elegantly dressed actors, vegetables, animals and gardening tools in a collage. At the same time, as this event was designed *a priori*, the needs, preferences and taste of the gardeners and the working-class history of the area were not taken into account. Some of the volunteers' work did not gain much visibility or recognition (for example that of some elderly women from the area who took care of preparations). While one can infer that volunteers take pleasure in their participation, filling and diversifying their free time, thinking with them about their role and preferences could possibly help to develop peer-to-peer collaborations and '*mixité sociale*' – one of the key terms of the project (Olivari 2011: 18).
- 43 The agenda of 'urban ecomuseums', introduced to Turin in 2000, for example, attempted to invite and enable citizens' participation in the representation and revaluing of their own neighbourhoods as forms of heritage, involving the local administration, existing associations and volunteers. In the spirit of Hughes de Varine's new museology, these initiatives aim to showcase undervalued local resources, focusing on residents' and neighbourhoods' memories and needs (for example for use of collective spaces or for shared heritage). However, some of these projects find it difficult to guarantee continuity of funding, stakeholders' involvement, and visibility, so the resulting landscape of initiatives can be uneven¹⁹.
- 44 As observed in other parks and public spaces (e.g. Dines 2012; Newman 2015; Da Costa Oliveira and Fausto 2021), users and inhabitants often create their own margins for creativity and space for everyday planning, decision making and implementation of aesthetic preferences. At Orti Generali, for example, gardeners and volunteers also designed their own spaces in their individual plots. For example, some introduced pergolas, hammocks, or flags, while some also introduced hail-protection nets. The project directors reacted with one-to-one discussions, individual exceptions to the rules or the order to remove what they considered as inappropriate according to their standards – including trees above a certain height.

Figure 23. Garden details, Orti Generali, August 2019



Photo by Jonny Hankins and Cristina Grasseni.

Figure 24. Francesco in his garden. September 2020



Photo by Maria Vasile.

- 45 In particular, in order to deal with an increasing number of hailstorms that damaged plants and harvests in the summer of 2021, the gardeners autonomously built hail protections. In this case, the project directors first established and proposed a model for hail protection structures. As written in a message to the gardeners: 'it is a big change for the microclimate of the gardens as well as for the impact on the landscape therefore it is not possible to act individually, we have to do it as a community which takes care of a public park, coping with climate change with wise and shared choices'²⁰. This text sums up the rationale with which landscape-related aesthetic choices frame decision making: wise solutions are defined as shared not because they were taken through participatory decision making, but because they should be adopted by all. However, due to the scarce adoption of their proposal (costing around 290 euros per garden in total) and diverse feedback received by the gardeners, the directors agreed to think along with some of the gardeners to develop an alternative prototype, based on their experimentations.
- 46 While in this case the management of publicly viewable space became a process of negotiation and compromise, in other occasions, issues around collaboration and decision making at Orti Generali also led to conflicts among gardeners and project directors. For example, in the autumn of 2019, one of the gardeners called for the adoption of more sustainable practices such as not using motored tools for the maintenance of shared spaces and paying more attention to the quality of life of the animals of the farm. He highlighted that the attention to aesthetics was hindering the environmentally transformative potential of the project. Speaking from an environmental activist point of view, he underlined that he was being asked to collaborate in the maintenance of the area but had no say in the decision making.
- 47 We argue that these different, potentially conflicting positions speak of different 'skilled visions', namely not only 'views' or 'opinions', but rather ways of envisaging expert practices as forms of engagement (with the land, with animals and materials, and with each other), which carry normative and aesthetic expectations about what the outcome should *look like*, and whose often divergent premises may be tacit, or left inarticulate (Grasseni 2009). While power relations are part of urban renewal processes, not only in Turin, this kind of aesthetic engagement encompasses more than a political dimension and is therefore personally felt in microscopic, everyday lived practices. As a third-party *observer* who nevertheless *participates* in and literally *sees* both points of view, namely their visions and premises, the ethnographer's position can play a role here.
- 48 During her participant observation at the gardens, Maria Vasile was asked by the project directors to moderate two meetings addressing these frictions, during which both sides presented their reasons. Having a position herself, Maria also proposed to organize and facilitate a larger meeting between some volunteers, gardeners and the project directors. On these occasions, and recurrently in exchanges with the project directors, Maria underlined the importance of developing a systematic and active involvement of local gardeners and residents in decision-making processes, inviting the project directors to think of a governance model that would help voicing and considering different visions for the area, beyond the resolution of one-to-one negotiations or conflicts. This resulted in frank conversations. As Maria underlined tensions and contradictions to the project directors, based on her conversations with new and old volunteers, some of whom began to participate less, voicing a sense of

displacement, they in return pointed out how her ‘vision’ was that of an external researcher and not of a practitioner, idealizing spontaneous gardeners and the will and ability for people to decide for the best.

Conclusion

- 49 As urban greening and sustainability became a central governance theme in Turin’s city administration, the regeneration of riverbank areas such as Parco Piemonte was increasingly discussed as a priority. Cities such as Cape Town, Detroit and Paris offer similar examples of the way in which post-industrial peripheries are reshaped through greening and urban gardening projects (e.g. Newman 2015; Draus *et al.* 2014; Gould and Lewis, 2016). Our visual journey reveals how skilled visions and power relations are interrelated in both the transformation of (green) infrastructures and notions of participation (Newman 2015). Newman argues that processes such as those of greening Paris can be contextualized as part of a global ‘green turn in urban policy, planning, and design that is swiftly becoming ensconced as a global orthodoxy guiding the ways cities are being built, reimagined, and inhabited’ (Newman 2015: xv).
- 50 Similarly, to those processes, and in line with the international literature we outlined at the outset, some of the urban renewal projects at the peripheries of Turin aim to promote not only a reclamation of natural spaces but also new services, forms of citizen engagement with the public space as well as aesthetic consumption experiences. With a photographic diary, we highlighted how diverse and sometimes conflicting *visions* of the urban green emerge in the practice of urban green renewal. We discussed the tensions between aesthetics, social inclusion and participatory governance, connecting them to the possible role of the ethnographer.
- 51 Crawford (2020) argues that planners need anthropologists to highlight the contradictions that are part and parcel of the planning practice, as planners can become stuck in particular ways of doing, constrained by funding needs and implementation timing. The international sustainability literature does not usually dwell on how to incorporate time and open-endedness in successfully funded projects, thus lacking models of (and ways of assessing) participatory governance that recognize the importance and diversity of visions. Having the possibility to delve in and compare different ‘skilled visions’ (Grasseni 2007), ethnographers gain a deeper understanding of the ‘experts’ social roles and questions of ‘professional intimacy’ (Herzfeld 2020: 19). This means taking into account the political but also emotional, cultural and social aspects of the (professional) lives of those whom they engage with, and one’s own.

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Precollinear Park. <https://torinostratosferica.it/precollinear-park/>

NOTES

1. Solidarity Purchase Groups (Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale, G.A.S., in Italian) are collectives procuring food and other commodities as much as possible directly from producers, see Grasseni (2013).
2. We use the terms 'urban renewal' and 'urban green renewal' to discuss what is, in Italian, referred as *riqualificazione urbana*, *rigenerazione urbana* and *rigenerazione del verde urbano*. While urban regeneration is also used in English, we decided to use the same terminology as Newman (2015), which investigates similar processes and is one of the anchor points of our analysis.
3. Ministero dell'Istruzione. 2012. <https://www.istruzione.it/archivio/web/ricerca/smart-cities-and-communities-and-social-innovation.html>
4. Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo (FCSP) <https://www.compagniadisanpaolo.it/en/the-foundation/about-us/>

5. Costs vary according to the size of the plots. They are reduced for 25 plots reserved for gardeners under 35 and 15 plots for people in vulnerable socioeconomic conditions - who are also required to engage in volunteering activities.
6. Orti Generali also organizes several courses around sustainable agriculture, apiculture as well as yoga, film screenings and creative activities for children, see <https://www.ortigenerali.it/corsi-e-attivita/>
7. This and the following data were retrieved from the infographics of the exhibition *Mirafiori Dopo il Mito*, visited by Maria Vasile in October 2019. These infographics were mostly based on statistical analyses of the Rota reports on Turin. Centro Einaudi 2021 <https://www.rapporto-rota.it>
8. Pierre Donadieu | Campagne urbane [IT] | festivalfilosofia 2011 - YouTube
9. <https://torinostratosferica.it/en>
10. <https://torinostratosferica.it/precollinear-park/>
11. <https://museotorino.it/>
12. This emerged throughout various conversations and interviews with residents and the project directors at Orti Generali. It was also confirmed during interviews with a representative of the local administration (Office for Public Greening). See also Barchetta (2019, 51-68) for a more general account of the history, transformations and promises of the regeneration of Turin's riverbanks.
13. Mediactivism. 2021. Orti Generali - Right to the Green City <https://mediactivism.eu/media-archive/video/2732-orti-general-right-to-the-green-city>
14. See for example the videos mentioned in footnotes 4 and 9.
15. The webpage of Stefano Olivari showcases the different gardens he developed as a landscape architect. These include private as well as public projects, including art initiatives and participatory planning combined with innovative, sustainable and ecological objectives, emphasizing links between culture and agriculture, see: <https://www.stefanoolivari.it>
16. <https://filmfreeway.com/OrtometraggiFilmFestival>
17. For example, the online conference about urban gardens in Turin, Rome and Tuscany, promoted by the urban green department of the municipality of Paris on June 6th 2021. <https://static.apidae-tourisme.com/filestore/objets-touristiques/documents/210/137/9800146.pdf>
18. Quotiano Piemontese. 2021. <https://www.quotidianopiemontese.it/2021/05/13/precollinear-park-orti-general-e-cibofficina-food-pride-vincono-il-bando-segnali-ditalia-chiama-torino/?cn-reloaded=1&cn-reloaded=1&cn-reloaded=1>
19. For example, the website of the Ecomuseo Urbano Torino (<http://www.comune.torino.it/ecomuseo/index.htm>) refers to localized activities in each of the 10 administrative components of the city of Turin. Of these, seven provide links to relevant websites of Centres for Interpretations and Historical Documentation, but their documented activity is uneven.
20. Message written by Orti Generali's directors in summer 2021 in the gardeners' WhatsApp chat. The message was shared with Maria by the project directors via email on 20/08/2021. Original text: "È un grande cambiamento sia per il microclima degli orti e sia per l'impatto paesaggistico quindi non è possibile agire individualmente, dobbiamo farlo come una comunità che ha in cura un parco pubblico, facendo fronte ai cambiamenti climatici con scelte sagge e condivise".

ABSTRACTS

The article investigates urban gardening in Turin with ethnography, historical analysis and photography, using both the authors' photography and sources from social media and private archives. The authors collaborate to analyse 'community' gardening through a critical anthropological perspective which centres on the hegemonic power of aesthetic assumptions about the urban green. As a post-industrial, multicultural city, Turin illuminates the dialectic of gentrification vis-à-vis socioeconomic and cultural diversity, which is a crucial dynamic of many urban renewal trends towards 'green cities'. We highlight the homogeneity of an aesthetic regime vis-à-vis the diversity of 'skilled visions' of social actors and its restraining effects on participatory governance. We contribute to ongoing debates in urban anthropology and visual studies, concerned with urban regeneration agendas in the de-industrializing cities of the Global North.

L'article interroge le phénomène du jardinage urbain à Turin par le biais de l'ethnographie, de l'analyse historique et de la photographie, en utilisant à la fois les photographies des auteurs et celles issues des médias sociaux et d'archives privées. Les auteurs collaborent pour analyser le jardinage "communautaire" à travers une perspective anthropologique critique qui se concentre sur le pouvoir hégémonique des postulats esthétiques concernant les espaces verts. En tant que ville postindustrielle et multiculturelle, Turin met en lumière la dialectique de la gentrification vis-à-vis la diversité socio-économique et culturelle : une dynamique au cœur de nombreuses interventions de renouvellement urbain vers des "villes vertes". Nous mettons en évidence l'homogénéité d'un régime esthétique global par rapport à la diversité des "regards compétents" des nombreux acteurs sociaux impliqués et aux limites que celui-ci pose à une gouvernance partagée de ces espaces. Nous contribuons ainsi aux débats en cours au sein de l'anthropologie urbaine et des études visuelles, qui s'intéressent au renouvellement urbain dans les villes désindustrialisées des pays du Nord.

El artículo investiga la jardinería urbana en Turín a través de la etnografía, análisis histórico y la fotografía, utilizando tanto fotografías de los autores como fuentes de los medios sociales y archivos privados. Los autores colaboran para analizar la jardinería "comunitaria" a través de una perspectiva antropológica crítica que se centra en el poder hegemónico de los postulados estéticos sobre el verde urbano. Como ciudad postindustrial y multicultural, Turín pone en evidencia la dialéctica de la gentrificación frente a la diversidad socioeconómica y cultural, que es una dinámica crucial presente en muchas tendencias de renovación urbana hacia las "ciudades verdes". Destacamos la homogeneidad de un régimen estético frente a la diversidad de "visiones cualificadas" de los actores sociales y sus efectos restrictivos sobre la gobernanza participativa. Contribuimos a los debates en curso en la antropología urbana y los estudios visuales, preocupados por las agendas de regeneración urbana en las ciudades desindustrializadas del Norte Global.

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Palabras claves: Turín, etnografía, fotografía, renovación urbana, ciudades verdes, jardines urbanos, estética, visiones cualificadas, gobernanza participativa

Keywords: Turin, ethnography, photography, urban renewal, green cities, urban gardens, aesthetics, skilled visions, participatory governance

Mots-clés: Turin, Ethnographie, photographie, renouvellement urbain, villes vertes, jardins urbains, esthétique, regards compétents, gouvernance partagée

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