

# Plants as a Tool for DIY Urbanism: between Guerilla and Institutionalisation

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## Abstract

*In a context of growing interest for sustainable urban development, citizen gardening actions take an increasingly important place in urbanism. Community gardening on vacant lots has now become an accepted practice responding to concerns of ecosystemic services, food production and social interaction in dense cities. This article based on field observations in New York City and Paris explores the rise of a comparatively little studied practice: citizen greening and natural resources stewardship on the public right-of-way. The on-going study underlines the capacity to transform the relationship to the usually transient territories, as well as the relationship between citizens and municipal institutions, and their respective roles in the creation and maintenance of urban public space.*

## Keywords

*Citizen action; gardening; public right-of-way; institutionalisation; urban space*

## Introduction

DIY urbanism is an answer to Henri Lefebvre's idea that city space should be shaped by those living in it, and to the Situationists' declaration that it should be alive, ever-changing, and its components *détournés* by those using them because “everything can be used” (Debord and Wolman). Micro-phenomena, local and spontaneous initiatives, whether outright illegal or simply unorthodox, can prove to be powerful tools of resistance and subversion of the existing urban order; they can foster emulation, improvements, exchanges of ideas and practices, even influence policy, or at least instil new ideas in the way our cities are governed. This article proposes to focus on the use of plants as tools for such practices aiming at changing the way we perceive and use public urban space. Plants are a powerful tool to create “lived spaces” (Lefebvre 1974) because they are cheap or free, easy to put into place by a wide variety of people, and are seemingly harmless. Yet, they do effectively transform urban landscapes, practices, and relationships between people and their living environment; they do raise issues of “right to the city” and of a common project for the future of a predominantly urban world (Baudry). By now, community gardening and other forms of collective urban agriculture have been studied in many countries, and from many angles, including that of the right to the city and the battle around public space (Schmelzkopf; Mitchell). This type of collective urban gardening is being increasingly accepted, thus not as challenging to the urban order as it was in the 1970s, although it still says a lot about citizens' capacity to influence policy and the discourse regarding the urban environment. The next step in understanding this capacity is the study of citizen greening practices in

the public right-of-way. It is not simply a matter of changing locations and scales — street gardens being typically much smaller than traditional community gardens – but also of shifting the issue onto a very specific type of public space. The public right-of-way is an ambiguous space: very public by nature, it is invested by multiple users for various and sometimes competing uses: walking, driving, taking the dog out, sleeping, people watching, garbage dumping, etc. (Terrin). It is also a liminal and transient space: it often serves as a border between the privacy of the home and the publicity of the street, and is considered by many as merely a corridor enabling them to walk, bike or drive from one place to the other. For this reason, it are not always easy to claim and the sense of belonging or ownership it might elicit presents other challenges than in the case of other, better defined public spaces. Yet, in many cities, residents are legally responsible for the maintenance of sidewalks. This dichotomy between private responsibility and public ownership makes it hard to figure out who is allowed to do what on the street, and even who should feel concerned, and who they should turn to to address such concerns. This is true of all aspects of use and maintenance of the public right-of-way (safety, cleanliness), including natural resources, whether they are spontaneous or managed; this explains for instance the occasional reluctance regarding street tree planting, if residents feel the City is invading their space, or is expecting them to shoulder more responsibilities (Rae et al.).

The issues raised by citizen greening on streets are both more and less acute than those raised by gardening in empty lots. On the one hand, tree bed gardens or planters on sidewalks are entirely open to public use and misuse. They cannot be fenced off like many community gardens are nowadays in big cities such as New York or Paris, so that everyone can enjoy them equally, but it also makes them more vulnerable to lack of awareness or outright malice. On the other hand, the space they occupy is, in most cases, so small as to be negligible at the scale of a metropolis. Those spaces are also non-buildable and thus not seemingly subject to debates on the best possible uses of urban space – as opposed to community gardens, which have been accused of taking the place of much-needed low-rent apartment buildings, for instance (Raver). Yet, they do question the right of citizens to act on public space, and, as all actions on public space, they might be construed as either working in favor of the greater good, or as representing a way for a handful of urbanites to claim land which is not rightfully theirs, thus depriving others of their freedom to use that same land for their own enjoyment – or, as is often the case with tree bed plantings, the enjoyment of their pet.

The greening of the public-right-of-way by citizens goes from the now-famous guerrilla gardening, throwing seeds into vacant lots and small neglected spaces and letting them grow (Reynolds), to the informal gardening of tree beds or the desasphalting of sidewalks to accommodate flower beds, and so far as government-sanctioned, even government-led initiatives of urban natural resources stewardship on public space. Because of that large array of motivations and circumstances, the study of public right-of-way gardening can tell us much more about contemporary life in dense cities than the scope and size of the individual experiments might seem to indicate. Indeed, as opposed to other types of DIY urbanism, the use of plants and of environmental discourses in the attempts to shape urban space does find its place in the increasing focus on sustainable development in the management of cities. But, whatever its shape and scope or its degree of institutionalization, this article will argue, through examples from France and the United States, that citizen greening of the public right-of-way changes urban space not only by turning it into “lived space”, but by effectively creating space out of “non-spaces”, neglected by usage as well as perception.

## **Context of the research**

New York City is emblematic in terms of citizen greening, both in vacant lots and on the street. Although they were by no means alone in their endeavor at the time, the Green Guerillas and their seed bombs (Guerrilla Gardening) put citizen greening as a mean of protest on the map in the 1970s. The success of community gardeners in protecting their right to using urban public space, despite sometimes violent setbacks, is remarkable in that it succeeded in changing the City's perception of its own role, from increasing financial profit to increasing livability for all. In Paris, the demand for gardening spaces led in the early 1990s to exchanges with New York City and Montreal, and to the writing of an urban gardening charter still in effect today, thus influencing municipal policy to the point that all new public parks now include a collective garden (Baudalet, Basset, Le Roy; Scapino). Actual street gardening still operates relatively under the radar and is practiced informally and on a small scale, except in transition towns, which are still very few (Chatterton and Cutler; Hopkins). This explains the limited amount of research on the topic, both because of lack of awareness of the phenomenon, and because of methodological hurdles — it is harder to get in touch with citizens acting individually, sometimes illegally, within spaces which are not always clearly defined, on projects which might be ephemeral, by design or circumstances. This article contends that street gardening is a valid and non-redundant research topic; it can both help further the understanding of issues raised by community gardening in empty lots, and underline other urban issues specific to the public right-of-way.

The data and hypotheses presented here derive mostly from field work in Paris — especially the 20th *arrondissement*, which happens to be a test district for the new municipal biodiversity plan — and New York City. The one-year research funded by the *Région Île-de-France*, including one month spent in the American city, is the main source for this article, but other examples are taken from scientific literature, newspapers, personal observation, etc. in order to clarify and develop certain aspects of the analysis. The field work in both cities consisted in interviews with citizens, elected officials and City employees, as well as participant observation whenever possible. This was complemented by literature on the history of collective urban gardening in both cities. At this stage, most results and hypotheses are mere suggestions for further lines of research.

### **Why and how act on the public-right-of-way?**

It has been shown that, before the search for enhanced ecosystemic services, or even the need for food production, the unsanctioned creation of community gardens in New York City vacant lots in the 1970s expressed a desire for a more equitable right to the city; they also enacted the concept of squatter's right: the land should belong to those who use it (Schmelzkopf; Ferguson). The same logic applies to citizen street greening; interviews and field observations show that, despite the current dominant doxa of sustainable development and the need to protect biodiversity, street gardeners are mainly motivated by the desire to beautify their daily environment and take advantage, in hyper dense contexts, of any and all spaces perceived as underused and undervalued<sup>1</sup>. Simply by using the street to go about the city, or by being “the eyes on the street” which, according to Jane Jacobs, play a crucial part in urban well-being, some urbanites make it part of their own personal world just as much as their work place, their children's school or playground, etc. The success of Block Associations in New York City and *conseils de quartier* in Paris (Dablanc) demonstrates this attachment to the very local. In any case, for those

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1 This is a result from field interviews conducted in both cities from March to September 2012.

who view “their” street as more than a corridor for mobility to and from home, there can seem to be a certain lack of amenities designed to foster conviviality, comfort, the desire to stop and enjoy that public space. The lack of sitting options on the public right-of-way has often been deplored, even pointed out as a strategy to discourage loitering considered as improper, for instance by youths or the homeless (Davis; Whyte). The point of acting directly on the public-right-of-way then becomes for citizens, as Soulier puts it, a way to shift from institutional sterilization processes to a — literal, in this case — fertility apt to promote creativity and exchanges.

In this context, greening the street, with or without institutional support — or even authorization — offers several benefits. The motivation most often mentioned by street gardeners is beautification. This refers to the state of mineralization, but also the plague of garbage, used wrappers, cigarette butts, dog excrement which litter many city streets. The strategy to fight that plague is two-fold: the mere occupation of space by flowers, in the hope that not only beautification, but obvious signs of care, will deter practices of neglect. Still, the flowers often require the support of signs pointing out that the space is being gardened, revealing that, out of ignorance or malice, vandalism and destruction still occur (Illustration 1). In New York City, signs warning off dogs are particularly numerous, symptomatic of a recurring conflict of use, especially in tree beds. Another benefit of street gardening is that it represents a static activity, and thus potentially allows for encounters and conversations. When a Block association in Manhattan organized a work day to plant and maintain flowers in tree beds on a particularly hot July day, children passing by on bikes stopped to ask what was happening and offer their help to water, weed and plant. This effectively turns the street back from a transient space into a lived space. The choice of gardening to affect one's living environment, as opposed to graffiti, makeshift building, squatting, etc. is significant in that the practice itself is easier for most people, cheaper and can show immediate results (Illustrations 2 and 3). Besides, many street gardeners are also community gardeners and use the street to expand their practice. What is not clear yet is whether they view the sidewalk as extra space for their own agenda, or their gardening as a way to turn sidewalks into gardens from which all can benefit. In any case, by reintroducing nature into the city and citizen action onto public space, these practices might be considered as micro-utopias which truly offer a new way to view and use urban space with the aim of enhancing quality of life for all.



*Illustration 1: A hand-made sign informs street users that the tree is being taken care of by local residents. July 2012.*



*Illustration 2: A local worker transforms an empty tree pit into a flower garden. July 2012.*



*Illustration 3: A few minutes later.*

Stemming from this desire to reclaim the streets, several techniques have been identified. The aforementioned guerrilla techniques are still in use today, making vegetation sprout in neglected spaces all over a city, often under cover of darkness. They are mostly political statements about what cities should be, and for this reason are not necessarily practiced close to the gardeners homes, since the point is to have all urbanites benefit from the plantings, and they do not usually entail long-term maintenance — the Green Guerillas in New York City actually advocated throwing seeds into fenced-off vacant lots, which made maintenance effectively impossible. But more permanent options, requiring longer-term management, are being chosen, each with advantages and drawbacks. The practical upside of cultivating tree beds is that the soil is already present, and these are already spaces of nature. They also happen to be one of the main spots of accumulation of litter, broken furniture, etc. Exactly for that reason, tree bed plantations are more susceptible to destruction, but are also less in the way of other sidewalk users — except for dog owners and cyclists parking their vehicle (Illustration 4). Another option is installing planters and pots on the sidewalk; this ensures a certain degree of protection, at least from unintentional vandalism, since they more clearly indicate an intent to garden. But they do need to be built or bought, soil must be brought, and they take up actual space on the sidewalk, which might be used by pedestrians, thus possibly incurring the disapproval of other users or the City itself (Figure 5). Finally, a more drastic and symbolically charged option is “depaving”. Urbanites take up hammers, jack-hammers, crow-bars to take off the asphalt and replace it with soil and plants, usually along the foot of buildings. Those plantations are often less space-consuming than planters and, like tree bed plantings, they occupy territories usually either not used, or used for littering, urinating, parking bikes. They might also already harbor spontaneous flora. But the act itself is much more difficult to perform technically, and can conceivably be construed as actual vandalism against City property, and the presence of underground networks (gas, electricity, etc.) also makes it dangerous (Figure 6). Yet, as will be illustrated by several examples, even this drastic measure can be supported by local policies.



*Illustration 4: Tree bed garden, Manhattan. June 2012.*



*Illustration 5: Sidewalk planters, Paris. February 2012.*



*Illustration 6: Desasphalting along a house's wall, Rennes. February 2012.*

In all cases, the actual gardening can be supplemented by other activities and creations. In Paris, a “Trame verte” (greenway) project started with having children paint brightly-colored flower pots during the summer, thus creating an activity for children in a largely low-income neighborhood. The pots were then placed on a semi-pedestrian street at regular intervals and flowers and grasses planted in them. Each will henceforth be maintained by people working in the stores on that street, as well as by community gardeners. The project thus joins school-children and their parents and local business-owners around a common goal on the street they share daily. In a creative departure from the three options described earlier, the pots were placed over bollards; they thus manage to add nature and color to the drab mineral landscape while neither occupying extra space, nor provoking a conflict of use,

since the bollards retain their role of stopping cars from parking on the sidewalk. Engaging different users of public space and avoiding use conflicts is a good strategy to ensure the protection of the original action — although, a week only after the inauguration, some plants had already been cut off.

### **What place in municipal projects and policies?**

One particularity of street gardening as opposed to other forms of citizen action on public space such as graffiti, is that it fits the current zeitgeist about sustainable cities and citizen participation. And yet, the actual implementation faces a number of practical and ideological hurdles, which illustrates the variety of motivations and expectations of the many stakeholders. As mentioned before, the main stimulus expressed by gardening urbanites is beautification, a way to rectify their daily urban landscape while making it their own. This does not mean that other impulses are completely absent, at least from discourse, especially when a justification is required, either to protect an action or to obtain funds to start and maintain one. What can be observed nowadays in cities such as New York or Paris, is a manner of back-and-forth between institutional and citizen practices and discourses.

Once again, the current relationship of municipal institutions with citizen greening initiatives on the public right-of-way mirrors the first stages of community gardening in the 1970s. Some initiatives are sufficiently under the radar to forgo all thought of how to deal with legal and institutional issues, much like Puerto Rican gardens in New York City at their beginning (Ferguson). In this regard, it is important to note that the geographic location of such actions plays a fundamental role in their chances of survival: several practitioners have confided that they would never even think of gardening in touristic spots highly valued by the municipality and patrimonial, such as Times Square or the Quartier Latin, where surveillance and demands of “propriety” and “cleanliness” are high. Whereas in residential neighborhoods, especially the least wealthy ones, City services are less present, thus less likely to detect citizen actions, and “improprieties” are more likely to be tolerated even when detected, since they will have little to no impact on the appeal of the city for paying visitors, and might even be considered as successfully compensating for the City's shortcomings. There is thus, besides a variety of types of toleration depending on the nature of the activity, the personalities of the individuals involved — citizens as well as city officials and employees — a gradient of types and intensity of perception of citizen greening depending on the nature of the space. Just as community gardens are more likely to be tolerated, even encouraged on sites and at times with little to no real estate pressure, public-right-of-way gardening today will be more likely to go undisturbed by the authorities if it occurs in spaces with little to no competition of use or ideology. In Paris, the discrimination between types of spaces or neighborhoods is typified by varying rules concerning tree pit cover — historic cast-iron grilles in touristic neighborhoods, stabilized soil in much-used streets such as those with open markets, and vegetation in residential neighborhoods — based on concerns of durability — vegetation would most likely be trampled in open markets — as well as aesthetics and attractiveness — “weeds” do not fit central Paris' worldwide image as a touristic place. These choices in turn influence the sheer feasibility, and arguably the ability to be tolerated, of tree bed plantings.

Because of all these criteria, several types of interactions between gardeners and the City — in cases when the City indeed acknowledges the existence of gardening practices — can be observed in the field. The most radical is outright hostility. It can be based on matters of security: plantings or tree guards may hinder the circulation of pedestrians, in particular those with strollers or wheelchairs; flowers can also be perceived as the tree's competitors for nutrients and water, as pointed out by one

Tree service employee in Paris<sup>2</sup>. But that hostility may also often stem from a sense of what can and cannot be done by citizens on the street, which in most cases belongs to the city. This brings back the “right to the city” argument largely developed in the fight to protect community gardens: even when urbanites do not own the street or the sidewalk, the fact that these make up their daily environment should give them certain use and design rights. This represents a clash between two opposite visions of public space as either City property which can thus only be properly designed and maintained by professional urban planners and City services, or as shared space in which all possible uses should at least get a chance to co-exist. For example, in Paris, on a street where residents had put planters, an employee of the street maintenance services reported it as an improper use of the sidewalk and asked the residents to remove the planters. It turns out that these posed no security or maintenance issues, since the sidewalk was broad enough to accommodate them without bothering pedestrians, but the City employee's objection was based purely on the idea that sidewalks are his service's responsibility, and people should not use them as they please without authorization<sup>3</sup>. This hostility can also be simply the result of lack of awareness, as in this other Parisian example, when a street cleaner cut off a hollyhock planted by a resident because he had been told to cut off all vegetation and was not equipped to acknowledge varying statuses among plants growing on the sidewalk<sup>4</sup>. This, of course, is the main inconvenient of the protection tactic consisting in not advertising nor asking for permission for your actions for fear it might attract negative responses.

The next type of response is tolerance. Tolerance in the case of little-used streets or neighborhoods neglected by city services has already been mentioned, but there is another, more closely-monitored type of tolerance geared towards experimentation. Many Cities are trying to develop more sustainable ways of functioning, which often require increased manpower — for instance when replacing the use of herbicides by manual weeding — and new types of knowledge. The Cities themselves often cannot afford their own ambitions in the matter, and might be willing to rely on more unconventional solutions. They may thus tolerate innovative citizen practices as long as they are not too invasive or potentially destructive, so that they can evaluate their impact and the potential benefits they can bring. Tree bed gardening and sidewalk planters are ideal experiments because, as confessed by a Paris City employee, they generate minimal disturbance and can easily be gotten rid of in case of conflicts or lack of proper maintenance<sup>5</sup>. This is how blatantly illegal activities, known to local authorities, can be allowed, as in the case of chickens raised in a Parisian community garden against the municipal law forbidding the presence of livestock in public space. Local officials willingly admit their interest in the project, which might turn into a change in policy if the results are convincing. Street plantings are also better accepted in areas where biodiversity conservation efforts have led the City to encourage the free growth of spontaneous flora. This new type of management is not easily accepted by urban residents, and the concurrent presence of gardened flora in the same types of spaces might make “weeds” more acceptable by changing the whole attitude towards urban nature (Pellegrini, Baudry).

This experimental tolerance can end up leading to actual integration into policies. This can operate as a form of cooptation, in which the City takes over the novel ideas and practices as its own and imposes upon them rules and regulations which might prove counterproductive if they end up hindering the freedom and creativity of gardeners, thus discouraging them, as has been deplored in the

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2 Personal communication, February 6, 2012.

3 Personal communication, October 1, 2012.

4 Personal communication, September 13, 2012.

5 Personal communication, October 1, 2012.



case of community gardens (Baudry). But the reality is usually a mixture of encouragement and monitoring of these practices, thought to benefit urbanites as well as the urban environment and the municipal policies. Such encouragement can take the form of workshops, tools donations, mini grants or contests. Such is the case of the Greenest Block in Brooklyn, initiated by the Brooklyn Botanic Garden as part of its Making Brooklyn Bloom program which includes all manners of citizen greening within and without gardens. The contest, started in 1994, aims at beautifying whole city blocks, with an emphasis on community cooperation — often advertised thanks to banners painted by children —, sustainable practices and a coherent landscape including tree beds, sidewalks, but also private stoops and window boxes. Offering no monetary incentives — but free plants and bulbs once a year —, the contest is surprisingly successful and includes several categories: residential, commercial, store front, tree bed, window box, and community garden streetscape. These categories express a new and integrative vision of urban gardening, effectively attenuating the often too-rigid physical and mental boundaries between public, private and community spaces. The contest thus offers, through the use of plants, a radically novel way of perceiving urban space as a continuum, as opposed to the segmented vision of various spaces dedicated to specialized uses and owned and maintained by different people. In this vision, the street becomes actual space, and not merely a corridor (Figure 7, 8 and 9).



*Illustration 7: An award-winning street participating in the Greenest Block in Brooklyn contest. June 2012.*



*Illustration 8: Banners made by children on the same street.*



*Illustration 9: Gardened tree beds and flower pots.*

In this particular case, citizen stewardship on streets is encouraged and legitimized by a local institution. The “Greenest Block in Brooklyn” signs ensure that the plantings will be safe from municipal condemnation. Yet, they do remain a rather unofficial activity without proper status. But, often thanks to the perseverance of one person or a small group, Cities can actually condone greening activities to the point of giving them a legal existence in the form of a charter, a permit or other formal agreements. For instance, in San Francisco, an architect managed to convince the City to create a brand new “Sidewalk Landscaping Permit” in addition to the much more expensive “Minor Sidewalk Encroachment Permit”, thus expressing the government's recognition of the particular status of gardening as a public space use (Bishop). In French cities such as Rennes and Lyon, local residents who decided to take off the asphalt along the foot of their buildings in order to plant flowers convinced their municipal governments to draw up agreements, not only making the practice legal, but offering the help of City services in opening up the sidewalk (Denis). In Paris, two types of charters have been written, although they are very much under-used, one for tree bed planting and the other one for the right to put planters on the street. This type of legitimization, although it recognizes the value of citizen greening practices as well as the right of urbanites to fashion their environment, poses a question relevant to all types of DIY urbanism and citizen action: to what degree can institutional approval be accepted without risk of losing the virtues and creativity of community involvement?

Yet, as mentioned before, street greening can fit in the increasingly numerous sustainability plans and thus be included in already existing municipal plans, as in the case of Million Trees New York City, a program monitored by the Parks and Recreation Department. In 2007, Mayor Bloomberg launched his PlaNYC2030 ([New York City Government](#)), aimed at equipping the city for a foreseen population increase of one million. Many improvements concern environmental matters, water, health,

etc. These include planting one million trees because of the many benefits they provide, as explained on the Million Trees website:

“Trees help clean our air, and reduce the pollutants that trigger asthma attacks and exacerbate other respiratory diseases. They cool our streets, sidewalks, and homes on hot summer days. Trees increase property value, and encourage neighborhood revitalization. And trees make our City an even more beautiful and comfortable place to live, work, and visit.”

In this case, the purpose of the City is very clear, very ambitious and very costly, in terms of money as well as manpower. It also faces the challenge of street tree mortality, despite the efforts made to choose varieties adapted to specific urban threats. Contrary to the new trees planted in parks, those planted in streets have no official caretakers, and dedicating Parks Department employees to their maintenance is impractical given the current budget. The City thus decided to enroll citizens into the effort. They can for instance volunteer to help plant trees on public space, or receive free trees to plant on private property. The Parks Department also put into place the Stewardship corps and the Adopt-a-Tree program, through which urbanites can officially declare taking care of a tree by watering, weeding, mulching, pruning, building or installing a tree guard, removing litter, putting up a “Curb Your Dog” sign, preventing harmful waste being poured into the bed, planting flowers in the tree bed. The City offers tree care workshops and free tools all over the five boroughs, as well as mini grants which can be used to buy plants, tree guards or signs. Some workshops are also dedicated to learning how to get other people involved. So far, still according to the website, of the 612,625 new trees planted — though not all on streets — 5,416 have been officially adopted. Field observation, though, shows that many trees are being taken care of without any official registration. Further interviews reveal that not all street gardeners are aware of the program, and some even still doubt their own action is entirely legal<sup>6</sup> ; others simply find the term “adopt” too much of a responsibility and fear it will require a long-term engagement they might not be able or willing to commit to<sup>7</sup>. It is likely that still other gardeners, in the guerilla spirit, simply prefer steering clear of all institutional involvement.

Still, there is little doubt that the program's success, and the trees' survival, depend heavily on the prior interest of urbanites in such activities (Boyce). The care of the tree itself does not seem to be a major concern, at least at first, and yet, it is effective thanks to the cleaning, watering and anti-dog signs required for the care of the flowers. Thus, the beautification goal of citizens and the tree-protection goal of the City actually complement each other through tree bed planting, and studies have shown that street trees receiving some type of stewardship — if only through surveillance and the detection of disease — are three times less likely to die (Ibid).

## Conclusion

The primary hypothesis at the beginning of this research was that street gardening by citizens was likely to represent a shift in the perception of public urban space and of the right to use it. And indeed, the public right-of-way offers opportunities to act on one's daily environment, subvert the ordinary

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6 Personal communication with a Manhattan gardener, July 7, 2012.

7 Personal communication with Parks Department employees, July 5, 2012.

order of urbanism by creating these micro utopias — the rearrangement and rebranding of micro spaces in order to better one's existence. The hypothesis goes as far as to surmise that these activities actually create new spaces by using neglected territories which usually go unnoticed by passers-by because they are considered as unusable. Tree beds and small strips at the foot of buildings become gardens, and the street itself becomes actual space in which social interactions can occur, when it used to be a corridor dedicated to mobility. A substantial part of the research which still needs to be done is the assessment of the impact of these practices on the perception of the public right-of-way by none gardeners. Do they notice the new practices? Does it influence their own perception of what can be done in the street, even if they have no interest in gardening?

But the research itself revealed another subversive aspect of street gardening: a shift in the relationship between institutions and citizens, and in their respective roles regarding the making of the city. Because of the current consensus on the need for a more ecological management of cities, to reintroduce nature in urban settings and to develop shorter circuits of food distribution, types of DIY urbanism involving such elements are more likely to be met with interest by local governments — not least because they represent a free and risk-less opportunity to experiment with new, necessary ways to face increasing environmental challenges. So far, it is possible to argue that even institutionalized versions of street greening such as those included in the Million Trees New York City program still qualify as DIY urbanism, since they rely heavily on citizen involvement and creativity and recognize the need not to impose too many restrictive rules. But a longer-term perspective will allow one to appreciate the scope of such changes in the perception of the right to the city, and the choice of a path between cooptation and cooperation.

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