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Floating Gardens in the Urban Landscape

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Floating Gardens in the Urban Landscape

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Urban agriculture has been the focus of many metropoleis around the world as a way to reintroduce the right to the city in tandem with the land. These initiatives, while covering an extensive range of methods and possibilities, come up against a common snag: the negotiation of aesthetic experiences and values in a highly-contested, multi-use landscape. The chinampas in the UNESCO designated Xochimilco borough of Mexico City, commonly referred to as floating gardens, provide a striking example of an urban agricultural system that continues to resist rapid urban sprawl.[1] Their very existence, some scholars argue, hinge upon not only their value in agricultural yield and revenue, but also the profound implications of a place where landscape and cultural memory intertwine.[2] For the average Mexico City dweller, these pre-Hispanic artificial islands dating back to the early 1500s, lay claim to a historical precedent for the future of sustainable agricultural practices in the city. Personally, I view them as one model of a centuries-long initiative to continuously remap the spatial-temporal locality of urban agriculture. Iterative in nature, it is done in order to arrive at an aesthetics of adaptive integration in an often totalizing urban context.

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Sunrise along the Xochimilco canals, 2019. Photo © Estefanía Barriga Fernández. Used with permission. Courtesy of the agro-ecological cooperative Lum K'inál.

Drawing from the ideas of the post-colonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha around relational thinking, sustainable practices provide a road map on which to lay the foundation for a future, or futures, suspended in an ecological balance.[3] Chinampas are positioned along this “momentary equilibrium,” a concept the Italian politician and philosopher Antonio Gramsci utilized to describe innovation.[4] Their history combines with their role in shaping the social and cultural contours that line the network of canals, which weave through the encroaching land development. Riding along, whether on a small canoe as a chinampa farmer or on a multi-colored *trajinera* as a tourist, the procession of the boat propels the aesthetic experience forward and outward across what remains of Lake Xochimilco.[5] In the Anthropocene, this lacustrine—or lake-situated—method is under pressure from new agricultural technologies, groundwater extraction, and increasingly, the abandonment of the chinampa tradition in search of more promising economic opportunities.[6] Although twenty percent of fresh produce in Mexico City is grown locally, profits remain quite limited. It becomes clear, then, why these agricultural systems persist: the chinampa is able to float in both the perceptible realm and the imaginary.



An established chinampa, 2020. Photo © Estefanía Barriga Fernández. Used with permission. Courtesy of the agro-ecological cooperative Lum K'inál.

The architect Andrea Branzi, in his “Ten Modest Suggestions for a New Athens Charter,” calls for the need to rethink the city in “cosmically hospitable” terms.[7] By that, he means to suggest a place with permeable boundaries, which promotes the synthesis of micro-projects that lead to greater transformations. He posits that “the only possible reform of the city has to be found within the interstitial spaces, in the home economies, in the human relations; within our minds.” To such a degree, urban agriculture resides in the space between a city of material growth and a fundamental need for the signs of sustenance. Embedded in these food production areas is a vision of ecological balance, per the human tendency to interpret a landscape according to one’s affective experience.[8] This response is elicited by a care aesthetic, often associated with agricultural landscapes, as well as a metropolitan landscape where multitudinous vernacular accounts invoke intimate details of a place in the minds of many.

To be sure, the argument that memory and landscape are inextricable is not new. However, the unique conditions that give way to urban agriculture are always at the forefront of a cutting-edge negotiation to integrate the past and the present, urban expansion and healthy ecosystems. In this manner, the chinampa, dotted with maize, chili peppers, amaranth, and flowers, continues to float above the water. There is one other garden hovering just above the chinampa’s surface—the

buoyancy of one's relationship with the land rising up to greet the morning sun.

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Endnotes

[1] A chinampa, from the Nahuatl term *chinamitl* meaning "in a reed enclosure," is an artificial, rectangular plot of fertile land formed by interweaving reeds between stakes driven into a shallow lake bed. The underwater enclosure is then packed with soil and aquatic plants until the top soil emerges above the lake's surface. The chinampas of Lake Xochimilco were popularized in the early 16th century by the Aztecs; however, it is thought that the practice was first implemented by the Toltecs (CE 800-1150) in the present-day Mexican state of Hidalgo. <https://www.gob.mx/agricultura/es/articulos/la-agricultura-en-chinampas>. Accessed 14th September 2020.

[2] Hans Dieleman, "Urban agriculture in Mexico City; Balancing between ecological, economic, social, and symbolic value," *Journal of Cleaner Production*, 163, 1 (2017: Supplement), 156-163; ref. on 156.

[3] The Indian English scholar Homi K. Bhabha, whose work in post-colonial studies is considered to be seminal, contributed this essay to a collection of works. The resulting book was part of a project at Harvard University's Graduate School of Design on the sustainability of cities. Homi K. Bhabha, "Mumbai on My Mind: Some Thoughts on Sustainability," in *Ecological Urbanism*, ed. Mohsen Mostafavi and Gareth Doherty (Zürich: Lars Müller Publishers, 2016), pp. 78-83; ref. on p. 78.

[4] K. Bhabha, in beginning his discussion on sustainability, relates the ideas of the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) to innovation: "a momentary equilibrium of cultural relations ..." Antonio Gramsci, "Philosophy of Praxis" and "Intellectual and Moral Reformation," in *A Gramsci Reader: Selected Writing 1916-1935*, ed. David Forgas (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1988); ref. on p. 353.

[5] A *trajinera* is a traditional flat-bottomed watercraft with a multi-colored floral arch that can seat up to 20 people. They serve as weekend getaways and places to celebrate significant events among locals, and constitute one of Xochimilco's main tourist attractions. <http://www.xochimilco.cdmx.gob.mx/los-embarcaderos/>. Accessed 14th September 2020.

[6] Dieleman, p. 169.

[7] The Italian architect, artist, and designer Andrea Branzi first presented his manifesto of ten principles for city planning at the 12th International Architecture Exhibition in Venice, Italy. The title is borrowed from three previous documents: "The Charter of Athens 1933" by the Swiss architect Le Corbusier, and more recently, "The New Charter of Athens 1998," and "The New Charter of Athens 2003" by The European Council of Town Planners (ECTP). These documents outline a set of principles and a shared vision for city planning. Andrea Branzi, "Ten Modest Suggestions for a New Athens Charter," *Idea Journal*, 10, 1 (2010); ref. on p. 12.

[8] Paul H. Gobster, Joan I. Nassauer, Terry C. Daniel, and Gary Fry, "The shared landscape: what does aesthetics have to do with ecology?," *Landscape Ecology*, 22 (2007), 959-972; ref. on p. 967.Vi

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