

Community Engagement and Self-Management in Liquid Times: the Case of the Container Garden at the School of Management and Economics of the University of Turin

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Purpose – The paper presents the case of a small (about 200 m²) container garden created in a neglected space within the premises of the School Management and Economics of the University of Turin. The project is part of the framework ‘Proposal for Citizen Engagement’ of EIT Food Cross-KIC New European Bauhaus. ‘L’orto della SME’ is an example of ‘self-governance’ (Fournier, 2002), as well as a multi-stakeholder engagement hub for students, academics, local elderlies and professional gardeners to work together and share self-produced vegetables. This autoethnographic study aims to investigate how self-managed, recovered green spaces can lead to increasing social cohesion, sustainable production, and bottom-up community engagement.

Design/methodology/approach – The research follows a qualitative methodology, presenting an exploratory case study, complemented by autoethnographic elements, stemming from the direct involvement of the authors in the project.

Findings – Findings show that container gardens are rather inexpensive and instruments of social inclusion, equality and sustainable consumption to be scaled-up and applied to different contexts. Moreover, the exchange of good practices between different communities helps empowering the parties and creates an intergenerational knowledge flow. Sustainability therefore becomes key for redeveloping spaces.

Originality/value – The study is one of the very first ones conducted on the New European Bauhaus and shows the value of European-funded cultural initiatives in regenerating neighbourhoods and promoting sustainable practices.

Keywords – Container Garden, New European Bauhaus, Community, Liquid Modernity, Urban Regeneration

1. *Introduction*

The COVID-19 pandemic has added gloominess to already gloomy liquid times (Bauman, 2007), characterised by an ever-growing cultural individualisation of society (Bauman, 2001a). However, Bauman calls for a bottom-up approach, where citizens themselves can recreate a space like the agora, and tackle issues of public interest (2000). Fournier (2013) points out that today's individuals are less inclined to create community, lacking the willingness to make joint efforts. However, she stresses that 'commoing' still remains an efficient and sustainable way to manage resources.

This paper analyses autoethnographically the case of 'L'orto della SME', a small but multi-stakeholder container garden, set up in a recovered outdoor area within the School Management and Economics (SME) of the University of Turin. 'L'orto della SME' is the result of a winning bid to EIT Food Cross-KIC New European Bauhaus, within the framework 'Proposal for Citizen Engagement'. We employ Bauman's framework of Liquid Modernity (2000, 2001a, 2007) to analyse the case and to make several theoretical and empirical contributions. First, we wish to further contribute to discussion around liquid modernity and organisations (Izak, 2015; Torchia, 2016; Kostera & Kociatkiewicz, 2014). Second, we link stakeholder engagement for urban regeneration (Seo, 2020; Biondi *et al.*, 2020; Jung *et al.*, 2015; Aureli & Del Baldo, 2022), with bottom-up organisational forms (Fournier, 2013; Parker, 2002; Parker *et al.*, 2014).

To reach these goals, we pose the following research questions:

- RQ1 What are the challenges for self-managed recovered areas to increase social cohesion, create community and fight cultural individualization?
- RQ2 Can regeneration initiatives run through bottom-up stakeholder engagement practices be successful, despite being centrally funded be successful in managing those different needs?

2. *Literature review and theoretical foundations*

2.1. *Liquid Modernity and its consequences*

Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has long discussed the implications for society of modernity and post-modernity (later redefined as liquid modernity). Approaching the new millennium, Bauman defined modernity as solid, where wealth and success were measured according to size and volume. Mankind tried to make the world homogeneous, by conquering space and routinising time (Bauman, 2000). Solid modernity failed because

it cannot be made permanent in a world in perennial change (Beilharz, 2001). Then, solid modernity naturally made way to a liquid state that leaves social and economic structures fluid.

Bauman sees liquid modernity as a post-Panoptical age (2000), where the constant obsession of individuals with ends is supported by light capitalism that, on a surface, offers almost unlimited opportunities. Collectivity is replaced by an alienating and vulnerable individuality (Bauman, 2001a), encouraged by liberalisation. Under these conditions, individuals can no longer convert (individual) issues into common problems, failing to become citizens ‘de facto’ (2000). The outcome of this is a society that no longer relies on people’s collective and shared achievements, and that loses its autonomy too. Critical theory’s emancipatory agenda must be therefore set on helping individuals becoming citizens ‘de facto’, active in the public sphere. On this matter, Bauman (2000) advocates a return of the ‘agora’, where private problems manage to become public issues.

In a liquid modernity, community is a declining idea, and all that is left are volatile ‘cloakroom communities’ (Bauman, 2000), which cannot help creating citizens ‘de facto’. This type of community is argued to be both cause and effect of the disorder of our times. However, more optimistic scholars like Elliot (2007) and Atkinson (2008) argue that liquid modernity is not unescapable and all encompassing, and Jensen (2014) sees individuals as innately curious, potential agents of change.

2.2. Stakeholder engagement and urban regeneration

Critical Management Studies (CMS) have recently started re-exploring the value and the potential of the ‘alternative’ as an urgent matter (De Angelis and Harvie, 2013). For instance, Fournier (2013) stresses the value of ‘commoning’ as a resilient form of social organising, which can ‘provide efficient and sustainable ways of managing resources’ (p. 241). Here, we focus on the regeneration of neglected spaces through urban gardening that features common use of resources and production.

Biondi *et al.* (2020) analyse the dynamics surrounding Participatory Cultural Initiatives, which can stimulate co-creation of value in the regeneration of urban spaces. The scholars emphasise how investing in cultural resources can benefit the overall socio-economic welfare of cities and regions. Moreover, the related cultural experiences might stimulate the creation of joint identities, but they also highlight that culture-driven participatory initiatives often require several and diverse stakeholders to come together, which might change over the project life-cycle. Biondi *et al.*’s research (*ibid.*) acknowledges the difficulties in managing multiple

actors and multiple values (Campanale *et al.*, 2021), accounting for the possibility that the project can become hierarchical and bureaucratic, potentially jeopardising its participatory ethos and communal goals.

Looking at the Asian context, Hung *et al.* (2015) underlines the seminal role of local communities in the success (or failure) of projects, and how crucial it is to involve stakeholders early in regeneration initiatives. Here we contend that, to ensure a fairer representation, an early involvement of stakeholders should be coupled with a relational stakeholder perspective (Rowley, 2017). Seo (2020) further explores the specific role of local communities in culture-led urban regeneration initiatives. The author argues that real problem-solving in urban regeneration initiatives can happen only if inclusion is not superficial and that, in many cases, bottom-up interventions strongly rely on some top-down forms of management.

Looking at cultural initiatives as heritage, Aureli and Del Baldo (2022) call for participatory governance to ‘pursue the common good’, stating that bottom-up initiatives truly represent the needs and feelings of citizens and communities. However, they emphasise the necessity for an integrated approach to urban regeneration, based on participatory governance, to make sense of the disconnection between the state and individuals and find solutions to move forward.

3. *Method and case study description*

3.1. *Research method*

From a methodological point of view, this research can be categorised as a qualitative exploratory case study (Yin, 1994), but adding autoethnographic features, especially in the articulation of insider knowledge of cultural experience (Jones *et al.*, 2016), with the goal of creating different narratives than what other people might do. Our group, made of academic staff of the University of Turin, has been involved with the project from its conceptual, to the bidding and operational phases, directly engaging with all the stakeholders involved.

In terms of data collection, most data comes from participant observation, given our direct involvement in designing and planning the activities, as well as those related to the garden maintenance itself. We also had a multi-stakeholder focus group and a multi-stakeholder workshop and forum. Finally, we also created a very active group on Telegram, to further cementing the community around the garden.

3.2. Case study description

In 2021, as part of the EIT Food Cross-KIC New European Bauhaus (NEB) call for projects 'Proposal for Citizen Engagement', the University of Turin, in collaboration with the Municipality of Turin, presented a project and obtained funding for the creation of an urban container garden of more than 200 m², then called 'L'orto della SME'. The garden is finalised at fruit and vegetable production for ready consumption, to benefit all users, from the university citizenry to local stakeholders.

The project is rooted on the principles of social inclusion and equality, the production of healthy food in urban areas to promote sustainable consumption, the exchange of good practices between different communities, to favour their empowerment and encourage an intra and intergenerational flow of knowledge, and sustainability as a place regeneration strategy. In addition, according to NEB principles, the project has been rooted to pillars such as: 'Inform and exchange', 'Inspire and aspire' and 'Engage and co-create'.

Fig. 1 – The area identified during the first exploration of the area



4. *Project implementation and preliminary results achieved by 'L'orto della SME'*

The project officially kicked off in August 2021, with a WebEx online meeting held by several stakeholders of the University, to set the project up and to start mapping the potential other project stakeholders. It was followed by an internal call to select internal and external participants, and then by a focus groups among all the stakeholders involved.

September 2021 was a month full of meetings and initiatives. We started in September 22 by meeting the City of Turin Disability Services and the Consulta per le Persone in Difficoltà to present the project, check on their interest to get involved, and get feedback from them. In parallel, we met with the Director of a local kindergarten, 'Il Micino' (The Kitten), who showed a great will to explore with us the interplay between children and nature, telling us that already had similar activities in their teaching plan. For the Director, the benefits for children to be in outdoor spaces like our garden, can be found in the establishment of a direct relationship with nature, by appreciating its seasonality and in the removal of the physical boundaries of the classroom. In the same afternoon, as a group of diverse stakeholders, we visited two European funded projects with a similar ethos to ours: VOV 102 and Orti Generali, which were seminal to share ideas on stakeholder engagement, as well as for asking technical questions. A few days later, on September 27, we visited the neighbouring garden 'Oasi', and spoke at length with two of the elders that manage it, who gave us a masterclass on cultivation techniques, and told us how the area developed in the last 50 years.

On October 15, we held a co-design workshop at the SME with a multitude of stakeholders, aimed at designing the container garden and at community building. The first part of the meeting focused on providing design ideas and imagining the space, while also thinking at sustainable solutions, and data were inputted to carry out a SWOT analysis. In the second part, we conducted a focus group to devise specific solutions for all the matters regarding accessibility, garden management and social relations (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 – Multi-stakeholder forum and co-creation workshop



Another milestone towards the opening of our garden, was the “CleanUp the SME” event, held on November 26. Helped by the university citizenry and Amiat Gruppo Iren (Local multi-utility), we cleaned up 860kgs of waste (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3 – CleanUp the SME event



On December 17, we finally inaugurated ‘L’orto della SME’, with an event attended by over 50 stakeholders actively involved in the garden. Symbolically, seeds were planted at the end of the event, in what has now become a fully harvesting garden that offers, among others, potatoes, sage, borage, spinach and flowers (Fig. 4).

Fig. 4 – Inaugural event of the container garden



2022 has brought beautiful flowers and vegetables, but also a solidification of the communities around the garden. For instance, the kindergarten teachers have brought children to the garden regularly every two weeks; students have held several events, as well as becoming regular visitors for their lunch breaks and revision sessions in the newly added benches and tables. Moreover, the garden has become one of the main stages of the 2022 Researchers' Night for the University of Turin, hosting events on sustainability and on health and wellbeing, in collaboration with the Association Mandala. The expansion project is currently under bidding, showing the community and regeneration potential of the garden.

The garden contributed to requalify the neglected outdoor area of the SME, in terms of its aesthetics (including the dumping situation) and accessibility (for mobility and visually impaired, as well as children). The project also received lots of media coverage, including RAI (the Italian national TV), several donations from citizens and continuing interest for events from the university citizenry. However, it also faces several critical issues, like regulating the use of the space, surveillance and access, and how to generate more visibility.

In terms of impact there are several aspects to consider. Community-wise, the coming together of different university figures at all levels, increased collaboration and it was further enhanced by the encounters with citizens and pensioners. The production of food is influenced by the vital contribution of retired gardeners, who can also serve as intergenerational links to teach techniques and inspire passion in the students. The project also helped creating connections with similar projects in Turin, in other Italian cities, and abroad.

5. *Discussion and conclusion*

The call for this project invites European funded initiatives to strive for sustainable solutions for society and the environment. The top-down element of the project did not take away from the participatory governance of the container garden, to stimulate stakeholder engagement and pluralistic decision-making (Mouffe, 1995).

RQ1: What are the challenges for self-managed recovered areas to increase social cohesion, create community and fight cultural individualisation?

In less than a year, the orto has become an intergenerational, multi-stakeholder space for the university citizenry and local stakeholders. The garden has also promoted the idea of 'commoning' (Fournier, 2013), in

terms of common effort for production and maintenance and for the shared identities created around the garden. This was also made possible by a stakeholder engagement process that started early, with events aimed at pushing people's imagination towards a fruitful co-design of the space, and further strengthened by adopting a relational stakeholder perspective (Rowley, 2017), effective in creating cohesive networks.

RQ2: Can regeneration initiatives run through bottom-up stakeholder engagement practices be successful, despite being centrally funded be successful in managing those different needs?

The main challenge was to match the institutional logic with the self-management spirit of the initiative, with the former that can help maintaining a certain degree of control and drive the project to meet NEB's targets, founded on the principles of experience, sustainability and circular economy, inclusion and aesthetics. Finally, in the case of a project expansion or duplication, potentially organisational and managerial issues might arise, or a more commercial logic that can negatively impact on the ethos on which the garden was set up.

To conclude, this paper has presented the case of an urban container garden realised at the School of Management and Economics of the University of Turin, and funded by European programmes aimed at promoting sustainability and inclusion. The study shows the potential for small urban regeneration projects to help creating solid and resilient communities, bringing together a multitude of stakeholders, different values and even different generations. Moreover, the garden helps creating a positive mindset towards nature and sustainable production.

This research provides empirical elements to assess community re-solidification, which are in antithesis to Bauman's individualisation argument, by showing that relational stakeholder engagement approaches and a participatory governance can determine the success of such initiatives on several levels. Further research is needed, as time progresses, to see if the effects on community, democracy, sustainability and inclusion are long-lasting or more volatile.

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