

# Allotment gardens in Zurich : the joker of participation

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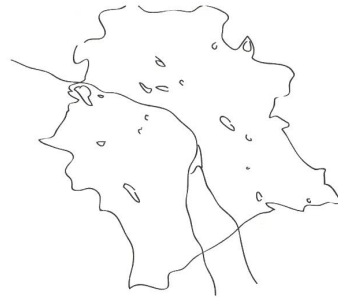
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# ALLOTMENT GARDENS IN ZÜRICH THE JOKER OF PARTICIPATION

Charlotte Malterre-Barthes with Noboru Kawagishi

Aggregated shacks with neither electricity nor toilets, situated between highway and train tracks, on oddly shaped plots; sprawling out over sloping hillsides and cast to the outskirts or outlying industrial areas of a city – the definition of a slum. Or is it? Though densely concentrated, this cluster of shacks constitutes anything but a slum. In actuality, it is a collection of land plot designated for the purpose of garden sharing in a city. These allotment gardens are referred to in Zürich as Schrebergärten.<sup>1</sup> A far cry from slums, these highly coveted little segments of land are outfitted with what are in fact not shacks, but rather garden sheds that often belong to the city's upper crust. Despite – or because of – the attractiveness of these allotment gardens, they are increasingly coming under pressure to justify their existence into today's ever-expanding urban development.



Bund 18 - fig. b  
map of the city of Zurich  
red: allotment garden areas

Zurich's first Bürgergarten (citizens gardens) appeared in 1692<sup>2</sup>, at a time when prices for food were doubling and the city's inhabitants were struggling to feed their families. In response to the situation, the city offered its lower-class residents the 4 acres of land between the Limmat and an area allocated today to railway lines, for the purpose of cultivating fields and planting fruit trees. In return, the recipients were to furnish a prescribed fence. In 1790, additional gardens were provided along the area known today as the grounds of Platspitz Park and Landesmuseum. Although garden sheds were not allowed in this area, the rule was mostly ignored. The Reithalle and the gaz factory pushed these gardens further out into the outskirts of the city.

The earliest Schrebergarten as it is known today has its origins in a concept initiated in Leipzig by the educationalist Dr. Hauschild in 1865, and named in memory of Dr. Schreber, with the intent of serving as a recreational area for youth and families. The first Schrebergarten in Zurich was established in 1907 between Tobelstrasse and Krahbühlstrasse. The 51-plot allotment garden spanned 180m<sup>2</sup> and was sanctioned for the 'freedom of planting'.

In 1909, the Gesundheit und Wohlfahrtspflege der Stadt Zürich (the city's health and human services department), carried out a study that offered the following description of the value gained in maintaining a Schrebergarten: «A healthy and unique lifestyle when the owner and its family goes on Sunday to the garden,

away from the noise of the city, the pollution, in the nature and the works of the garden.» These gardens were not only intended to secure food for the city's impoverished inhabitants, they were also an efficient tool of social control. Engaging unemployed men in purposeful work, it kept them away from cafés and bars, from drinking or fomenting revolutionary ideas. Following World War I, the need for cultivated land led to an increase in the number of gardens. By the end of World War II, the number had climbed to 10,000 following the emergence of the Kriegsgärten (food gardens for defense) in response to the food shortage during the war period.

The 78 allotment gardens operating in Zurich today comprise approximately 6900 plots that cover a total area of 250 hectares, making up 1.6% of the city's surface area<sup>3</sup>. Grün Stadt Zürich (akin to a city's parks and recreation department) presides over the gardens, which are divided among thirteen Familiengartenvereine (family garden associations), each individually responsible for setting their own association rules and safeguarding their own portion of the land. Garden holders pay an annual fee of CHF 300.- to 500.- that includes water costs - certainly the cheapest rent to be found in the city considering the price of urban land.

Some of these allotment gardens are ideally situated. While it is common in France or in Germany for allotment gardens to often be located in residual areas along railway lines, highways, inclines or on

fallow land, a considerable portion of Zurich's garden communities enjoy exceptional locations. In fact, as the city and its infrastructures have expanded over time, and although gardens like Juchhof, Allmend and In oberen Erlen might still be considered a bit remote, others such as Hard and Im Gut are enjoying newfound appeal due to their relatively central location. Similarly, as the asset of a great view increasingly gains importance in luxury home speculation, the panorama view of the city that hillside garden plots offer. For example the location of Höngg or Susenberg is turning these garden communities into prime real estate targets. Tendencies show that gardens are typically displaced and driven to the edges of the urbanized zones in direct proportion to Zurich's urban growth, with a resulting increased growth in these outer areas designated for gardening. The city is obviously drawn to these expansive and ideally situated unbuilt green spaces. The real estate pressure currently being exerted on all available unbuilt urban spaces poses a direct threat for these allotment garden plots. Listed objects such as the Güterbahnhof<sup>4</sup> have lost their exceptional status as protection laws have been lifted in order to make way for building.

In this regard, allotment gardens act as placeholders, a function that city authorities foster to a certain extent. Not only are they valuable because they provide green spaces in the urban territory, allotment gardens are also easy to maintain – privately – and can therefore be justified as serving a communal function. The space occupied by Schrebergärten isn't free land per se. Aware of the value of the gardens, but also of the pressure exerted on them, authorities forewarn: «In some cases, a conversion of use will be necessary.»<sup>5</sup> The last allotment gardens maintained in Zurich's popular Kreis 4 (Aussersihl district) is a good case in point of the fate that awaits

allotment gardens in general. The 44-plot garden that once occupied 3000 m<sup>2</sup> of the Aussersihl-District in the Hard neighborhood is to be wiped away to make way for the construction of a housing project and accompanying small-scale public park. These garden tenants took their dispute before the city council, arguing the value of their gardens and their worth as low-cost social integrators. The city council's response was final and crystal-clear: «Family garden areas are not publicly accessible and benefit the sole tenants; therefore they are not public spaces. (...) Their social function is not location-bounded and can be fulfilled anywhere.»<sup>6</sup>

The recent debate centered on the new location of the ZSC Lions stadium underscores the pervasiveness of the problem.<sup>7</sup> In this particular case, the Familiengartenverein Altstetten (Altstetten Association of Family Garden Holders) is irritated by the fact that 120 plots – about a third of their gardens – would have to be wiped out to make room for the stadium. It is also very likely that the entire lower portion of the Juchhof allotment gardens located next to the railway station would also vanish at some point down the line.

These areas of the city are understandably of minor relevance in the greater scheme of urban development. However, although it might be far-fetched to assume that these gardens can function as real estate challengers, they still contain a potential for serving as collective empowerment tools. The strength of Zurich's allotment gardens is in their very existence: they are already there, there is no land to reclaim, no neighbor's community to sum up, no art to be planted, everything is in arm's reach: The challenge lies in change. How can a gridlock situation bound for disaster – in the very near future – be turned into one of empowerment that enables

these gardens to be regarded as equally indispensable as housing and more coveted than parks?

Few people dare to enter into the customarily closed-off and secluded the so called Schrebergärten, and therefore miss out on the quality and diversity of its vegetation, the heterogeneous atmosphere, the ingenuity shown in skilled vernacular solutions for productivity, and the naïve beauty revealed in a convergence of diverse tastes. Ironically, the primary function of these allotment gardens will need to change if they are to preserve these qualities. Making them more public would be the most accurate response. By becoming public, these gardens secure their future and gain new qualities. For instance, by serving as recreational and leisure parks to the surrounding neighborhoods, community gardens can also evolve into socio-cultural catalysts including ecological and pedagogical aspects.

According to the case study on the Juchhof gardens in the industrial district of Zurich, the multinational users of community garden plots are primarily from the working middle class, older than 50 and quite reluctant to change. But as Beat Locher, president of the Family-garden associations states: «If we want to keep our gardens, there is no way out of an opening towards the public.»<sup>8</sup> In view of these factors, participation should be applied as a subversive instrument toward increasing the public value as well as warranting the continued existence of the community gardens. GrünStadt Zürich, which oversees all allotment gardens and urban green spaces in Zurich, is a decisive agent and stakeholder of this scheme. As the valiant fighter for the city's natural vegetation, the department is devoted to improving the dilemma currently facing the allotment gardens by ensuring their continued existence.



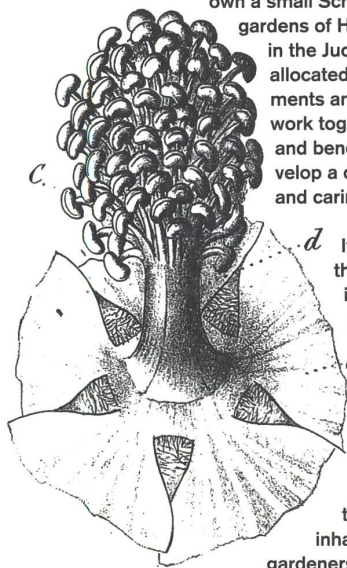
Bund 18 – fig. 9  
View over the city of Zurich  
from the allotment gardens of Höngg

‘THE SOCIAL PLAYGROUND’ STRATEGY:  
A FUTURE FOR JUCHHOF GARDENS

An initial step toward implementing the participation strategy would be to erect a standard playground on a centrally located garden plot at Juchhof Gardens, enabling garden-holding families to regularly meet up with one another and bring along neighborhood kids and their parents as well. This step would be essential to establishing a basis of trust with Schrebergärten garden holders who tend to be apprehensive of change and reluctant to open up to the public for fear of theft.

By attracting nearby residents, the gardens also automatically become ‘location-bound’, thus countering potential displacement – the prime attack angle of the Zurich city council.<sup>9</sup> In a further step, the tool shed could be converted into a small store that sells seasonal fruits and vegetables. In addition to these alterations, smaller-scale interventions could be implemented to draw in urban dwellers less acquainted with the outlying areas of the city. Some garden groups have already integrated paths that cut through their land and bring joggers, bikers and passersby through their gardens. This is an efficient way to draw in the public and make them aware of the quality of the spaces as ‘social playgrounds’.

The next step would involve reaching out to such public institutions as retirement homes, schools and even kindergartens. City authorities are currently showing interest in pedagogic gardening and already own a small Schüलगarten in the community gardens of Höngg. As well, a garden plot in the Juchhof gardens should be allocated for guests to carry out experiments and hold courses. They would work together with a group of innovative and benevolent garden holders to develop a common program for planting and caring.



It is imperative to point out here that the turn-over among owners is an essential aspect of the participation strategy. Although garden holders would generally be capable of dealing with minor changes such as the introduction of a playground, major transformations are likely to be met with greater resistance. The current trend<sup>10</sup> among young urban inhabitants to become allotment gardeners could certainly come to play

a vital role in preserving these gardens. In the Juchhof gardens, a mix of soon-to-be parents, singles and groups of friends from educated middle-class backgrounds are trying their hand at gardening and enjoying the occasional Sunday BBQ once considered too working-class. Mingling with ‘secondos’<sup>11</sup> and older Swiss generations, as well as the latest immigrants from the former Yugoslavia or Turkey, this group of the city’s population is effecting a change in communal gardening. Unaffected by the initial character of the gardens, newcomers might be more responsive to transformations. As residents’ population slowly modifies, further steps in the participation strategy can be implemented by means of ‘the social playground’.

‘The social playground’ could expand beyond its direct function as a communal meeting point in the garden and work in a larger scale as a public forum. Partly self-subsidized by courses or product sales and publicly funded in part, ecologists and botanists could join in on the act. For example, most of the Juchhof gardeners are highly tuned to ecological and ground pollution issues. Such gardeners would readily join a program conceived by means of a participation process and in conjunction with ProSpecieRara<sup>12</sup>, a foundation devoted to promoting and preserving plant diversity through the cultivation of rare species in healthy soil. Surplus produce could then be sold via ‘the social playground’ and attention gained in the public realm due to the benefit of the venture. Another step could involve inviting other urban stakeholders from the design disciplines (e.g., urban planners, landscape architects, architects, artists and designers) to participate in the development and implementation of these social playgrounds.

However, what must not be overlooked in the process are the prevailing rules and regulations as well as the many necessary administrative steps entailed in such an undertaking. Yet, fighting to effect minor change is worthwhile if the outcome means a future for ‘community’ gardens. Divergent social groups, official authorities and various stakeholders will have to work jointly over a period of time in order to achieve change. The shared benefit the family gardens gain by opening themselves to an urban influx of visitors and increased public visibility will warrant against demolition, relocation or faded existence. In the face of ongoing urban transformation, the holders of these endangered gardens should use the joker of participation en route for public accessibility, for retaining their paradigm.

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- 1 Other terminologies such as citizens-gardens, family-gardens or leisure-gardens are in use. However these are not community gardens, as they are all maintained by different holders and not by groups.
- 2 Mathis, Walter: Zur Geschichte des Vereins für Familiengärten Zürich (Blätter zur Geschichte des Vereins für Familiengärten Zürich ; Nr. 24a), Verein für Familiengärten Zürich, 2002. S.399.
- 3 Grün Stadt Zürich: Familien- und Freizeitgärten heute, in: Das Grünbuch der Stadt Zürich, Grün Stadt Zürich, 2006, S.155.
- 4 Weiss, Marcus: Güterbahnhof Zürich: Rückschlag für Gegner des Abbruchs, Zürich, 2007, under <http://www.industrie-kultur.de>, Stand: 14.01.2010.
- 5 idem.
- 6 Dr.Kuy, André (Stadtschreiber): Dringliche Schriftliche Anfrage von Hans Bachmann und 44 Mitunterzeichnenden betreffend Familiengartenareal Aussersihl-Hard, Kündigung im Rahmen des Projekts 'Gebietsentwicklung Letzi', Auszug aus dem Protokoll des Stadtrates von Zürich, Zürich, 07.12.2005.
- 7 Simon, Graf: Bodychecks statt Salat in Altsetten, Tages Anzeiger, Zürich, 26.01.2010, S.60.
- 8 Leutenegger, Marius: Interview mit Beat Locher( Präsident des Dachverbands der Familien gartenvereine), Grünzeit, Ausgabe 24 (11), Zürich, 2008, S.21.
- 9 Dr.Kuy, André (Stadtschreiber): Dringliche Schriftliche Anfrage von Hans Bachmann und 44 Mitunterzeichnenden betreffend Familiengartenareal Aussersihl-Hard, Kündigung im Rahmen des Projekts 'Gebietsentwicklung Letzi', Auszug aus dem Protokoll des Stadtrates von Zürich, Zürich, 07.12.2005
- 10 Faki, Sermin: Grossstadt-Idyll, Die Südostschweiz am Sonntag, Chur, 2009, S.3.
- 11 Foreigners from second generation are sometimes called 'secondos', a non-pejorative term.



fig. a



fig. b









fig. c



fig. d







