The Urban Orchard

On City Farming & Avant Garden

The ecological crisis requires urban dwellers to rethink current consumption patterns and food production systems. By going beyond the city to the countryside, an increasing number of socially conscious artists have developed creative strategies to move towards a more sustainable urban ecology and retain connections to rural culture. From orchards to shepherd schools, artists and designers in Spain and America have teamed-up with farmers, gardeners, and engineers to close the distance between the ever more accelerated urban life and the slow-paced rural reality.

While finding Gondor, Hobbiton, and Rivendell in the heartlands of Don Quixote’s Spain may require a stretch of the imagination, the Little Middle Earth project to convert the Sierra Norte (a mountainous region north of Madrid) into a regional theme park has the support of 22 local mayors. The ambitious venture would recreate each of J.R.R. Tolkien’s mystical towns in Sierra Norte’s existing towns, taking advantage of similarities in the landscape and medieval architecture. The Little Middle Earth plan proposes that the towns adopt Tolkien’s names and customs (clothing, professions, festivals, etc.) to produce the same ambience and “allow visitors to experience the sensations felt by the members of the Fellowship of the Ring in their journey.”

Urban Migration

The outlandish nature of the project speaks to rural Spain’s profound economic and cultural crisis. Due to urban migration only 20 percent of the Spanish population remains in the countryside. An elderly population, lack of technological infrastructure, and decline in family farming has led towns to look to tourism as the only possible solution. Independent family farms, the livelihood of the rural world, have disappeared due to market pres-
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turn their surrounding neighbourhood into an urban dero brought in the California collective Fallen Fruit to remain in today’s metropolis of six million people. As rise to the planting of cherry and apricot trees, but few scaping company. The city’s temperate climate gave residents have lost a basic knowledge of gardening’ la-lettuce patches until a couple decades ago, ‘Madrid’s project to reactivate and promote urban horticulture. artists is working across disciplines to envision alter-natives. In line with the philosophy that the strength of serves as a platform to support agro-ecological initia-tives. In line with the philosophy that the strength of artists is working across disciplines to envision alter-native futures, the centre launched the Avant Garden project to reactivatate and promote urban horticulture. Though the city’s principal river was still lined with lettuce patches until a couple decades ago, ‘Madrid’s residents have lost a basic knowledge of gardening’ la-ments Jose Luis Matias, a gardener in a municipal land-scaping company. The city’s temperate climate gave rise to the planting of cherry and apricot trees, but few remain in today’s metropolis of six million people. As part of Avant Garden, this past February Madrid Mata-dero brought in the California collective Fallen Fruit to turn their surrounding neighbourhood into an urban orchard by planting 60 fruit trees in public spaces. The collective set up a base camp in the centre and worked with the neighbourhood residents to determine five differ-ent types of native fruit trees to be planted and their locations. The Urban Fruit Action promoted local ag-ricultural knowledge and the resurgence of urban fruit trees. Each tree has been adopted by a neighbour who has committed to care and harvesting. Similar actions in Los Angeles’ neighbourhodues have given residents a sense of ownership and belonging to public spaces. Patricia Fierman, a neighbourhood activist and doctor, hopes that the new trees will also spur the habit of eating locally grown fruits and vegetables.

Virtual Pitchfork

An urban garden cared for by the community, next to Matadero, serves as the Avant Garden incubator to de-vlop, test-out, and showcase innovative approaches for converting unused urban spaces into green areas. The project focuses not just on transforming public spaces, but also on private spaces like balconies or private rooftop terraces. In September 2009, Hermani Dias presented her re: farm the city project developed with free software and hardware to design, manage and monitor personal urban gardens. Once the re-farm system is configured on one’s computer, an ur-ban farmer can monitor, modify, and manage gardens in a dynamic way, adapting to variations in tempera-ture, humidity and precipitation. Dias’ project illus-trates creative ways to compensate for a lack of farm-ing knowledge.

Re-Farm, like Urban Fruit Action, proves successful on a micro-scale, but the challenge remains how to scale-up grassroots activities to create a sustainable food system on a citywide scale. The Living Concrete exhibition, or-ganised by Parsons The New School for Design, takes a more expansive approach involving the entire food system from production, distribution, consumption and recycling the residuals. Each of the projects showcased helps people understand their relationship to food. ‘Most people do not have any idea where any of the food comes from. Connecting people to the sources of the food changes fundamentally the way people grow and eat,’ argues Living Concrete co-curator Nevin Cohen.

The Corbin Hill Farm project illustrates creative ways to connect rural farmers to urban residents. Through an alternative incremental payment model for farm shares, South Bronx residents receive a weekly bag of fresh produce and gradually build up equity to own part of their food provider. The Bronx farm share mem-bers now are communicating with their farmers about what is fresh and abundant and what kinds of vegeta-bles that they want to eat. ‘The residents’ eating habits are changing with the availability of fresh vegetables at a modest cost,’ adds Cohen.

Highlighting New York’s civic agricultural infrastruc-ture, a Living Concrete web project, Open Garden Network, displays a comprehensive online inventory of vegetable production at the city’s 1,200 gardens. The website, currently in beta version, will enable New Yorkers to find out which vegetables grow at each garden and the amount of production and the indi-vidual facilities available. By mapping out the differ-ent components of the food system, Living Con-crete sketches out a loose framework for a citywide urban agriculture plan.

With a similar collabora-tive strategy to Open Gar-den Network, the activists artist Fernando Garcia Dory exploited the Internet to maintain and preserve local growing habits in Spain. Dory’s Seed Network project connected small farmers and technicians working on the preservation of local seed varieties with hackers of Free Software. The Seed Network established an online database to facilitate a free exchange of seeds. The virtual seed bank empowers small farmers to codify who is growing what, where and in what type of conditions. The artist served as a catalyst for the cross-pollination of different so-cial groups (small farmers, hackers, and art profession-als) whose coordinated efforts led to the protection of endangered seed varieties. Dory’s work, like Living Concrete’s projects, emphasises the power of different community members working together as points of re-sistance to the agro-industrial complex.
Sustainable Food provides a tour to the Carbon Orchard, by Parsons School of Design, Shoreditch. The ingenious Vacant Lot grow bag, 2007, by What if: projects Ltd, is 100 per cent recyclable. The single-wall geotextile fabric is double-walled. bacSac, by What if: projects Ltd, is 100 per cent recyclable. Flexible plant containers made from recycled, doubled-walled geotextile fabric that is 100 per cent recyclable. bacSac (above). Flexible plant containers made from double-walled geotextile fabric that is 100 per cent recyclable. BacSac (right). What if: projects Ltd (right) and (left) How might you meet the demand for ‘grow-your-own’ within defined urban areas where available land is scarce? What if: projects Ltd, together with local residents of an inner city housing estate in Shoreditch, have come up with an innovative solution: Grow your own greens in a bag. Photo © What if: projects Ltd.

Art Meets Artisan

The Living Concrete curators, Nevin Cohen and Radhika Subramaniam, and Dory all advocate alternative models for sustainable urbanism, but they come from different perspectives. While the Living Concrete exhibition focuses on design strategies to bring about a more robust urban food system, Dory’s work examines the role of artists to bridge the divide between the agrarian and the urban. As the coordinator of the Art and Culture Commission for Plataforma Rural (an alliance of farmer unions, consumer cooperatives, and environmental organisations), Dory sees artists playing a key role in reversing the decline of the rural environment. ‘Artists can combat the stereotype of the rural as something backward, dirty, and obsolete or the romantic view of the countryside as place for holidays. They can show us that with the economic and environmental crisis there are many cultural values and concepts of sustainability we can learn from the rural world.’

Founding a shepherd school in the Asturian mountains, Dory has put young urban dwellers in dialogue with an elderly dying-out shepherd population. Seasoned shepherds provide practical training including flock management, ecology, veterinary care, herding, and cheese making, among other skills. The shepherd school aims to revitalise the figure of the shepherd and facilitate generational replacement to ensure the profession’s survival.

The Shepherd Project consists of rebranding shepherding to young people. In order to rebrand it, Dory recognised the need to upgrade the shepherd’s tools and clothing for the 21st century. Instead of being condemned to the nostalgic vision of a shepherd with a staff, Dory proposes to equip him/her with Gore-Tex mountain gear and a PDA for their daily tasks. Through collaboration with engineers and park rangers, the artist has developed a solar powered GPS system that would emit an SMS to the shepherd’s PDA to monitor the movement of the flock. The project poignantly highlights the need to change social perceptions of rural life and update agricultural traditions to ensure their survival.

The Shepherd Recast

The title of Dory’s presentation of the Shepherd Project at the LAtoral Centre, Utopian Micro-Kingdom, suggests the practical challenges of implementing such technologies (bells tend to be less expensive than GPS systems). Nonetheless, the shepherd school has grown to over 100 students and several students have actively taken up the profession. The success of the Asturian mountain school has spawned the creation of similar schools in eight different regions of Spain. The schools recast shepherding as ‘a way to sustainably take advantage of our resources and a form of life needed to solve many environmental problems’ explains Dory. Recognising the merits of the Shepherd Project and the need to respond to the rural crisis without dressing townspeople like elves, Spain’s Ministry of the Environment and Ministry of Culture have sponsored Dory’s Inland project to launch a cultural strategy in support of rural life. Inland provides a platform to connect artists, farmers, rural development agents, and policy makers, and bridge the gap between the rural and urban worlds. ‘The reconciliation between the countryside and the city can be critical for contemporary society to move towards sustainability,’ argues Dory.

The three-year project starts with an international conference at the end of October and will evolve into a residency programme and exhibition. By placing the artists in the field and together with grassroots groups from Plataforma Rural, collaborative art projects will emerge and help foster an interpretation of the rural that is far away from folk art. Inland may fall short of creating ‘recreational industries’, but it should spark cultural innovation and empower rural communities to reinvent themselves. These communities will hopefully develop some alternative strategies involving artists instead of ogres, wizards and magical rings.

Avant Garden, Living Concrete, and Inland show how innovative agricultural initiatives can address multiple individual and community desires and needs from employment opportunities to food production to community building. Designers and artists in network with farmers, beekeepers, hackers, engineers, park rangers, and gardeners can help city dwellers slow down and recognise the interdependence between the rural and the urban.