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## **Informal planning in transactive governmentality. Re-reading planning practices through Ghent's community gardens.**

### **Abstract**

This article addresses a new mode of planning that involves collaboration between State, private and community actors in the context of growing urban gardening movements. It questions the view of urban gardening as a manifestation of citizens' dissensus toward administration's institutional planning, and expression of urban "counterplanning" whose aim is to resist the consequences of neoliberal governmentality. Although this interpretation of urban gardening is to a certain extent true, it doesn't completely explain some current developments in socio-spatial planning practices. In order to fill this gap, the paper advances a theoretical analysis of the emerging governmentality generated by an intensified relationship between institutional, private and community actors. The theoretical analysis is complemented by the example of representative urban gardening projects in Ghent, a dynamic and inspiring mid-size city in Belgium, providing an ideal context for exploring the transformation of planning practices and their socio-political underpinnings. The paper concludes that urban gardening practices exemplify an emerging informal mode of planning supported by a new transactive governmentality, which may lead to co-creative transformation of public urban space.

**Keywords:** informal planning, governmentality, urban gardening, neoliberal city, counterplanning, Ghent

### **Introduction: Digging deep in urban gardens planning**

This paper questions the broadly accepted understanding of urban gardening as a practice of counterplanning aimed at public space re-appropriation by contrasting institutional planning with autonomous citizens-led actions in the "right to the city" tradition. Our argumentation starts with the analysis of the character of neoliberal urban governmentality, followed by considerations on urban gardening as an exemplary countercultural practice in the city.

From the 1970s onward, urban gardening have been interpreted in the wave of alternative counterplanning culture as a manifestation of the "right to the city" claim (Staheli et al, 2002; Schmelzkopf, 2002). Together with other creative practices (e.g. city art, eco-communities,

alternative cultural networks...), it is regarded as a gentle political gesture (Crouch, 2011) able to revert the power geometries of neoliberal planning and to empower people in alternative uses, forms and functions of public spaces (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Hardman and Larkham, 2014; Tornaghi, 2014).

However, we suspect that this perspective, while offering an important interpretative key, does not allow an in-depth appreciation of the phenomenon. Behind the character of spontaneity and self-organization producing cooperative, environment-friendly and inclusive practices, planning modes adopted in urban gardening projects require a more nuanced understanding. This raises the following question: is it possible to provide a different interpretation of urban gardening by avoiding the stereotype of both counterplanning and the mark of a neoliberalized practice? What kind of socio-cultural context explains this alternative interpretation (i.e. what kind of governmentality does it build upon)?

In order to provide some food for thought, in the second part of this paper we put forward a more nuanced understanding of planning as an informal practice, by considering the example of community gardening projects in Ghent. These offer us some insights for proposing a critical reading on the relationships between top-down and bottom-up processes, and suggest the existence of a more collaborative relationship (though entailing a certain degree of antagonism) between institutional, private and community actors. It is nonetheless important to specify that, in our understanding, informal planning does not represent the climax of the liberatory power of alternative urban culture, neither the consequence of a progressive inclusion of alternative practices in neoliberal, institutional urban planning; rather it is the expression of emerging and transactive governmentality.

## **1. The current interpretation of urban gardening in neoliberal city planning**

### ***1.1 The neoliberal city planning and the emergence of urban counterculture***

In the past decades the consequences of public space shrinking have been denounced by authoritative scholars (Lefebvre 1996; Relph, 1987) as affecting the very possibility and capability for urban dwellers to collectively and democratically commit with urban space shaping (Mayer 2012; Amin and Thrift 2002) by effectively addressing matters of space ownership, distribution and use (Castells 1983; Harvey 1989; Soja 2000). Following social scientists' denounce of the

commodification of public space, more recent contributions in urban studies showed how traditional public spaces are undergoing processes of privatization and commodification (Sennett, 1970; Zukin 1995), which can be regarded as manifestations of neoliberal governmentality (Harvey, 2005; Hardt and Negri, 2000; Barry, Osborne & Rose 1996). References to Michel Foucault's analysis of governmentality are unavoidable, despite, for the sake of this paper argumentation, it can be only briefly defined as the result of the interplay of technologies of the self and technologies of domination (Foucault, 1982; Pløger, 2008). In Foucault's reading governmentality entails diffuse structures and procedures of control and disciplining for shaping people's mentality (Pløger, 2008) ranging from governing the self to governing others (Lemke, 2000) in the way that the State and the individuals co-determine each other's character (Foucault,1982a). By enlarging the classic sphere of government, thus, governmentality characterizes power as not merely pertaining the State, but also emanating from heterogeneous social formations (Lemke, 2000); and it is defined by the relation between the political order and the rationality underpinning it (Foucault, 1991). Neoliberal governmentality, unlike the liberal principles that prescribe to minimize governmental interventions in the market, requires the government to "facilitate the infiltration and regulation of society by the market" (Hofmeyr, 2011, p.18). This penetration is first and foremost realised through social internalization of norms of conducts that make people behaviour a constitutive part of the neoliberal governmentality itself so that the "individual's capacity for self-control is integrally linked to forms of political-economic exploitation" (Hofmeyr, 2011, p.19). In practical terms, neoliberal governmentality is backed up by a particular exercise of power and tasks distribution among different sectors of society (Torres, 2013; Certomà, 2014) that produce an understanding of planning as a technology of control and legitimation of specific rationalities (Flyvbjerg, 1998) - "a kind of gospel for technocrats" in Lefebvre's words (2014, p.204).

Since the 1970s the critical reaction to the global diffusion of neoliberal governmentality has been largely inspired by the lefebvrian "right to the city" discourse (Lefebvre, 1996; Holston, 1989), calling for the realization of spontaneous initiatives performed by citizens to re-appropriate privatized or abandoned spaces (Purcell, 2002; 2013; Staeheli et al, 2002). A large number of these initiatives has been labelled as expressions of urban informality, and include do-it-yourself mechanisms of housing provision and settlement (Becker et al, 2013); everyday urbanism producing accidental city configurations (Powell, 2012); self-organization of governance processes (Nuissl and Heinrichs, 2011). They are generally described as counterplanning practices contesting

neoliberal institutional planning and extensive urban redevelopment programmes (Shatkin, 2004), by advancing self-restoration projects for public use of abandoned infrastructures; squatting buildings for cultural and social services provision; re-appropriating interstitial spaces or residual brownfields for community enjoyment and similar.

Some of these urban informality practices recently transformed into more organized informal or vernacular planning practices that focused on the re-invention of urban (public) spaces *through* planning, rather than *by avoiding* it. While not necessarily advancing brand new forms of autonomous spatial organization, the novelty of this *informal way of planning* resides in its being conceptualized as collective re-interpretation and re-elaboration of the society and space relationship *via* grassroot-based planning practices (Roy, 2005). By upgrading the spontaneous spatial configuration emerging from everyday practices (de Certeau, 1984), they re-interpret and re-fashion public or semi-public space in absence of legal definition, guidance and funds provided by the public or private sector (Vestbro, 2013; Corsín Jiménez, 2013; 2014). Unlike traditional counterplanning practices pointing out the failure of institutional planning, the emerging informal planning practices establish a rather ambivalent relationship with it, shifting from seeking legitimation (Donovan, 2008) to open contestation (Mitchell, 2008).

This relationship is worth to be explored as it may provide relevant insights on the transformation of planning governmentality in the contemporary cities.

### ***1.2 A socio-political interpretation of urban gardening***

In the varied panorama of informal planning initiatives, urban gardening deserves a special place for its pervasiveness and innovativeness.

Almost everywhere in Europe since the 19th century, historical allotments were characterized by a quasi-missionary objective as they were intended as self-help tools for poor and disadvantaged people (Crouch and Ward, 1997; Seghers and Van Molle, 2007). With the rise of the social justice movement and the urban counterculture in the 1960-70s, social scholars demonstrated that the production of space impacts social groups and their opportunities (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1989; Harvey, 1990). Allotments have been then flanked, complemented or in some cases replaced by different forms of urban gardening with a clear socio-political and contestative inspiration (Green Guerrilla, 2013; Lamborn and Weinberg, 1999), so that the new urban gardening projects were also described as materializations of the “right to the city” (Purcell, 2013).

A classification of the diversified panorama of urban gardening is almost impossible to provide, because different countries, traditions and contexts generate vastly different gardening practices, however most common categories include:

- allotment gardens (i.e. portions of public land provided, planned, designed and regulated by the local authorities);
- community gardens (i.e. areas of public or abandoned private land here citizens' plan and run gardening projects aimed at community building and at advancing socio-environmental values). While in some circumstances agreements with local administrations are reached, they can also be planned in open contrast with institutions and lead to occupying initiatives.;
- guerrilla gardening, a voluntary activity of cultivating "someone else's land" (Reynolds, 2008, p.16) which is "generally portrayed as attempting to beautify neighbourhoods and increase biodiversity in areas which generally suffer from neglect" (Adams et al., 2015, p.2). Guerrilla gardening actions do not envisage a real planning activity, as they are political gesture intended for bringing public attention on the need for more green and accessible areas.

Urban gardening initiatives are often regarded as positively influencing the environmental and social quality of city space and people's life (Tornaghi, 2014) as they are intended for education, leisure and socialization (Wekerle et al, 2009); for contrasting food insecurity (McClintock, 2008; Pinkerton & Hopkins, 2009; Milbourne, 2012) and social disadvantages (Emmet, 2010; Agyeman & Erickson, 2012; Schmelzkopf, 1995); for community-building (Beckie & Bogdan, 2010; Been & Voicu, 2006) and health promotion (Barker, 2000; Wakefield et al 2007); for involving marginalized social groups (Tracey, 2007; Flachs, 2010); and for advancing environmental commitment (Miller, 2005; Hou et al, 2009; Certomà, 2011). Building upon shared ideals, gardeners often establish links with other informal planning initiatives, including alternative economic networks (Kurtz, 2001), transient cities or urban green renovation programmes (Pagano & Bowman, 2000), or projects for accessibility of disadvantaged people (Ferris et al, 2001). In most of the literature urban gardeners are reported to collectively design, organize, realize and take care of public green spaces (Reynolds, 2008) through a broad array of non-formalized practices; by contrasting the consequences of neoliberal governmentality (e.g. the erasure of public spaces, the decrease of social cohesion and solidarity links...), these practices transform urban voids and neglected spaces into pleasant, engaging and vibrant places (Hou, 2010). Most of the literature on urban gardening

adopts an advocacy approach (Tornaghi, 2014) and it is quite common to find references to urban gardening initiatives as forms of “contested spaces” or “right to space” (Schmelzkopf 2002), “actually existing commons” (Eizenberg, 2013), resistance initiatives contrasting rigid social doctrines (McKay, 2011) or even means for addressing social injustices (Reynolds, 2014).

It needs, however, to be mentioned that an opposite perspective on urban gardening describes it as a neoliberal manifestation of individual and quasi-autarkic citizens’ action (Pudup, 2008; Weisman, 2009), able to determine controversies and injustices including new forms of enclosures or gentrification (Tornaghi, 2014). In some cases, urban gardening initiatives in the global North<sup>1</sup> are promoted by administration themselves for stimulating dispossessed people to engage in restoration of derelict urban spaces that are of no interest for private investors (Smith and Kurtz, 2003); or they are promoted by corporation as a greenwashing strategy. However, while it is true that in some circumstances the social-egalitarian aims of gardening have been initially advanced by educated and wealthy people (Schmelzkopf, 1995), the interpretation of urban gardening as a neoliberal practice has been criticised for broadening the distance between subsistence gardening for poor people and leisure gardening for wealthy people (Johnston, 2007; Quastel, 2009) as it flatters deprived people’s interests as only consume-increasing strategies, and denies their socio-environmental commitment (Flachs, 2010). In general, while dissonant voices exist and there is an increasing interest for the relationship between urban gardening (particularly community gardens) and neoliberal planning (Rosol, 2010; McMichael, 2012), it is equally evident that they are broadly understood as expression of citizens willingness to take the lead or at least add their voice to decision on urban space destination and planning.

From a planning perspective, despite in most cases the establishment of new urban gardens has been mediated with the city council and private owners in order to come to an agreement for citizens to garden green areas, urban gardening practice is, nevertheless, often *understood* essentially as a spontaneous and grassroots phenomenon anchored in urban counterculture. In fact, from the one side, the social engineering model of historical allotments (fig. 1, model A) was historically characterised by institutional, top-down planning processes (despite complexities

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<sup>1</sup> Significant differences exists between urban gardening practices in the global North and South whose exploration is however out of the purposes of the present paper. For a detailed analysis see Obosu-Mensah, 1999; Mougeot, 2005; Redwood; 2008; Tornaghi 2014; and Certomà 2015.

often emerged in their practical realisation), and it is still largely adopted today.<sup>2</sup> From the other side, the 70s political turn in urban gardening (McKay, 2011) determined the emergence of the community garden model (fig. 1, model B).

**Fig.1 Two models of urban gardens planning. The square boxes include agents involved in gardening planning and planting; the circular boxes specify the kind of gardens whose agency is directed toward. Arrows indicate the temporal sequence for different elements involved in the process.**

While the first model envisaged local administrations (often suggested by existing associations) to take the initiative in designing allotments sites and assigning plots on a redistributive policy-basis; the second describes formal or estemporaneous citizens' associations appropriating abandoned public or private (uncultivated) green areas for the common design of new gardens - with a possible later support by the administration. Model B is generally understood in the counterplanning tradition as a bottom-up approach reversing of the traditional understanding of planning, and marking the increasing power of alternative urban culture against the neoliberal governmentality and the technicalization of planning (Schmelzkopf, 1995).

Nevertheless, inspired by the considerations on governmentality, this paper claims that the reality of informal planning is probably so not black or white, A or B; rather it is more nuanced.

## **2. Gardening (and) governmentality**

### ***2.1 The emergence of a new governmentality in Ghent***

The example of Ghent's community gardens, we think, may offer interesting insights to venture beyond the stereotype of urban gardening as traditional counterplanning practice and to unveil the relationship between urban gardening, emerging governmentality and informal modes of planning. Ghent is large enough to provide a breeding ground for several allotment and community garden initiatives to take place (AMRP, 2007); at the same time, it is small enough to easily detect the agency of networks of policy makers, private organizations, associations and citizens based on proximity and informality, and on a particular political constellation. This can help in advancing our theory building process (Flyvbjerg 2004) by showing how contrasting

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<sup>2</sup> See cases reported in COST Action TU1201 "Urban Allotment Gardens in European Cities" <http://www.urbanallotments.eu/index.php>

meanings and visions on urban gardening are associated with the transformation of public space planning and its rationality. Moreover, despite presenting context-specific features, Ghent's community gardens conveniently unveils some general trends in planning and governance.

The emergence of a new governmentality in Ghent has been supported by two specific aspects as a result of a historical process that is going on for over a century and generated a specific planning rationality: first, an urban renewal policy that reinforced the identity of Ghent as a mid-size city and second, the accommodation of the city for the middle class (Notteboom 2012).

Since the early 20th century, Ghent consciously adopted a self-image of a mid-size city characterized by a "tempered" experience of the modern metropolis (Capiteyn, 1988). In today's urban renewal projects and city marketing this image is further confirmed. The expression "pocket size metropolis" used by city advisor Richard Landry in 2011 perfectly describes the ambition of all kinds of urban renewal projects in Ghent (Landry 2011). Historically, the profiling of Ghent as a provincial town was paired with the rise of the middle class and the attempts to attract it to the city and to create an urban space where every social class would find its place (Notteboom, 2012). Today's middle class consist largely of what Landry calls "the creative class" (in the above mentioned report he describes Ghent both as "non cosmopolitan" and as "open and creative") (Landry, 2011). An increasingly number of young and highly educated people, often nicknamed *bobos* (bourgeois-bohemian), leftist individuals or families that profit from a high cultural level (and mostly a double income), but at the same time are interested in a sustainable lifestyle in contact with nature (Brooks, 2000) is populating Ghent. Often grown up in a non-urban environment, these new city dwellers like to live in the city for the array of possibilities it provides on the level of work and recreation, but they also bring with them rural or suburban expectations, among which the desire for a garden (Borret et al, 2000).

This specific rationality produced by a new type of urban dwellers (concerned with economical as well as social and ecological issues) is reflected in in the city's political order and underpins a new governmentality. Differently from what happened in other Flemish cities, Ghent government since the late 1980s, saw the socialist party to firmly keep the power in a coalition with the liberal party (i.e. economically liberal), and since the elections of 2012 a large fraction of the green party entered the coalition (Boone et al, 2010). The result was that economic policies at city level (such as the commercial transformation of the city centre) were paired with concerns for social issues (e.g. gentrification, housing policy, the run-down 19th-century belt around the city, etc.) and ecological issues (e.g. the reinforcement of urban green infrastructures) (Koopmans et al, 2013:

13; SPA et al, 2012; Stad Gent, 2012). This socio-political context creates a specific type of transactive governmentality that is referred to as “green-socialist-liberal”. Such a peculiar condition can be, nonetheless, read as a sign of our time in which somehow unexpected coalitions share political responsibilities on the base of purpose-oriented agenda and negotiate common priorities regardless their different ideologies.<sup>3</sup> Ghent represents a forefront example of a change in global political rationality and governmentality generation processes, in which institutions are informed by a network of multiple actors (including citizens, private organisations, associations, etc.), which constitute a new source of decision-making out of the traditional State-citizens dialectic. On the issue of gardening in the city, for example, the *Urban Agriculture Platform* and *Ghent in Transition* are two platforms that assembles all the actors who work on urban agriculture initiatives from below and civic society, working as a mouthpiece with Ghent’s administrations and policy makers.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, many of the participants have multiple roles in the city life (e.g. they work in the city administration and take part in a community garden project).

## **2.2 Ghent’s urban gardens**

Just like other cities in Belgium, Ghent counts different types of urban gardens (see par. 1.2) whose planning and realization is characterised by different rationalities and organisational models. The history of urban gardening in Belgium starts in 1899 with catholic and socialists associations pressing on local government for the establishment of allotment gardens (Van Molle, 2007). The allotments functioned as socio-economic correction instruments till after the World War II, when they acquired social integration and recreational function (Goethals et al, 2007; Hermans, 2007).<sup>5</sup> Since the 1990s the demand for new gardens coincided with the growth of vacant areas in the 19th-century industrial belt and in the periphery, due to the migration of manufacturing industries (Boone et al, 2010). Local administrations and private investors defined

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<sup>3</sup> This raise of such a post-political condition has been extensively and critically described by post-marxist political thinker Chantal Mouffe (Mouffe, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> See *Urban Agriculture Platform* <http://stadslandbouwgent.wordpress.com/> and *Ghent in Transition* <http://gentintransitie.com/>

<sup>5</sup> Traditional allotment gardens are still very popular today, and Ghent host a number of them (the largest are the *Volkstuinen Slotenkouter*, *Volkstuinen Gentbrugge* and *Volkstuinen Gent-Assels*, whose gardeners informed us about them), each of them counting more than 100 plots and having long waiting lists (see [www.volkstuinenslotenkouter.net](http://www.volkstuinenslotenkouter.net), [www.volkstuinen-gentbrugge.be](http://www.volkstuinen-gentbrugge.be) and [www.volkstuinen-assels.be](http://www.volkstuinen-assels.be)).

redevelopment plans for these sites. At the same time, inspired by the socio-political ideal of urban gardening, young citizens striving for a healthy and sustainable lifestyle in contact with nature (i.e. the “bobos”) aggregated around the projects of participatively planned, organic, and self-managed community gardens. Community gardens have different aims and a different organizational structure than the allotment gardens, focusing more on social and ecological goals and originating in local neighborhood groups. Perspective gardeners increasingly demand public authorities for new land or directly negotiated with private owners about the access to abandoned areas, or with private companies and economic actors in the city for getting material and financial support. These requests are often expressed in a quite practical form through the performance of guerrilla gardening actions or temporary gardens that occur in spaces where renovation plan are envisaged. In most of the cases, given the character of the Ghent administration, these temporary actions are approved by the city and/or the owner of the land (e.g. a temporary urban garden on the vacant terrains of *Dok-Noord*, a former industrial area waiting to be redeveloped). Although the city hasn't got an official urban agriculture strategy, the long tradition of allotment gardens certainly played a role in the willingness of the local administration to support new gardening initiatives. Even today the municipality, together with the Flemish government, sponsors many allotment garden complexes by means of subsidies, by making grounds available and by providing the support of social worker.<sup>6</sup> Knowledge-exchange, resources provision and collective production of governance processes is recognised as a distinctive character of the city (De Rynck et al, 2010) and the very terrain for the green-socialist-liberal governmentality to deploy its power. In what follows we will take a closer look at the interaction dynamics and negotiation (including tensions and conflicts) between different actors, and the interplay of institutional programs and informal processes with specific focus on community gardens in Ghent. This may lead us to appreciate how the complexity of the counterplanning model of garden planning (i.e. the “model B” in fig.1) at the light of the emerging transactive governmentality.

### **2.3 A closer look at Ghent's community gardens**

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<sup>6</sup> For example, in the early 1990s the process of moving the existing *Sint-Baafskouter* allotment garden to a new location required the intense cooperation between the allotment garden complex and the city, creating expertise about how to deal with juridical procedures concerning ground occupation and ownership (Goethals et al, 2007).

Among other community gardening projects in Ghent, *De Boerse Poort*, *De Site* and *'t Landhuis* rely on distinctive socio-political rationalities that easily turned them, in a relatively small city, into catalysts for different networks and generators of different narratives. The three selected projects share some common traits: they all include at least some vegetable plots, common areas and facilities, and foresee participatory decision processes; they are all located on not central (fig. 2) and formerly industrial (in some cases also polluted) areas, with the aim of facilitating ecological restoration; local people are engaged (including cultural minorities and economic disadvantaged people). Moreover, it is interesting to note that housing pressure in the city is quite high and the administration engaged private companies in redevelopment of a number of brownfields. As a consequence, despite formerly industrial or polluted, the areas where community gardens emerged in Ghent were nonetheless object of important renovation programs for housing or infrastructures provision. Gardening initiatives have been officially admitted in Ghent despite they emerged in areas of the city that have an immediate interest for the real estate market for their recognised capability to restore derelict areas and increase their market value (Voicu & Been, 2008).

Information and data provided in the description of Ghent's community gardens results from a six months-long desk-based research and fieldwork, in which we analyzed the urban context and the relevant scientific and grey literature.<sup>7</sup> In order to complement our desk analysis we interviewed some key members of urban gardening projects (founders, group leaders, responsible of key sectors). Particularly we choose to interview at least one of the promoter per project (i.e. someone who inspired or actively took part in the project since the beginning and is still daily involved in management activities) and –where appropriate- one or two further members responsible for key sectors (e.g. the bee-keeping project leader in *De Boerse Poort*) or committed in bringing about innovative operations (e.g. the food transformation process leader in *De Site*) (see Annex I). We used semi-structured interview (about twenty hours in total) inspired by the rapid appraisal approach with open questions on a list of pre-defined topics including the birth and development of the project; the social, environmental and political conditions where the project took place; and the relationship with the city at large. Transect walks provided the occasion for multimedia material collection.

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<sup>7</sup> The above-mentioned platforms *Urban Agriculture Platform* and *Ghent in Transition* are very active in organising public discussions and information sessions on urban agriculture in Ghent. Apart from that we consulted, among others, master theses (Prové, 2013; Vincke et al, 2013) and studies ordered by public institutions (Danckaert et al, 2010; Koopmans et al, 2013).

## **Fig 2 Location of investigated urban gardens in Ghent (annotated Google map).**

Selected cases diverge, however, in terms of generation process, planning modes, management and work organization, networking and political inspiration. They range from initiatives run by middle-class people; to socially-oriented gardens for unemployed, ethnic minorities and marginalized individuals; up to squatted gardens to introduce alternative social life in the suburbs.

### *2.3.1 De Boerse Poort*

*De Boerse Poort* is located at the intersection of two working class-neighborhoods, mainly inhabited by migrant people, Malem and Brugse Poort,<sup>8</sup> and the nature reserve Bourgoyen. While walking in the garden, Sophie, one of the promoters of the *De Boerse Poort*, pointed out that in the past the area was used as a waste disposal area and that it is close to a Roma camp. When the newly constituted *Boerse Poort association* suggested the city administration to use it for promoting an ecological lifestyle, the administration committed to provide the logistic, financial and manpower support for restoration works (I1). Today it is a community garden of about 2 hectares, including common spaces scattered across the area (kitchen and toilets, waste disposal and seeds exchange location, working and meeting places, a rain water irrigation system, a green energy production system, a bee hives area), about 90 individual plots, and 13 collective plots run by local associations (school teachers and pupils, permaculture, disabled people, music association etc.). All ecologically oriented infrastructure has been designed and been autonomously build up by the members of the *Boerse Poort association*, who also committed the administration to get rid of the top layer of the earth and partly replace it with sound ground and a geo-textile creating a buffer for the historically grown pollution. The area is now property of the administration which rents it out to the *Boerse Poort association* on a life loan for 33 years for a very low amount of money.

The gardening works started in 2012 with a call for associations willing to engage in managing collective plots, and one year later for individual plots distribution (fig.3). A high number of candidates applied and the parcels were assigned on the first-arrived first-served base, taking into account a “90% local inhabitants” rule.

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<sup>8</sup> *Boerse Poort* (Farmers’ Gate) comes from a words game with *Brugse Poort* (Bruges’ Gate).

Many of the promoters and most active members of *De Boerse Poort* associations, explained Maarten, a university researcher passionate with gardening, have actually good connections with the political, entrepreneurial and creative class in Ghent (including being part of this very class themselves), and this resulted in a great advantage for the popularity of the project and its capability to attract further support,<sup>9</sup> and to establish relationships with other alternative urban culture groups in the city (e.g. the *Ecoplan Ghent* etc.)<sup>10</sup> whose work fits in the context of new governmentality in Ghent (I2).

Tom, leading the bee-keepers group (Fig.3), explained how all the rules<sup>11</sup> have been defined in meetings open to all the gardeners in the perspective of producing a non-commodified laboratory for local food production out of the conventional market-based production and consumption chain (I3). He added: “Facing others’ viewpoint is the most difficult thing, but also the very important for the creation of a solidary and environmentally-responsible project” (I3). Speaking passionately about the radical environmentalist ideal of the project, Tom confirms the planning rationale is not so much generating means of survival, but rather materializing the idea of Ghent as a progressist and green city: “This way of producing is so important for establishing a connection with what you eat, however it is not only a matter of eating but rather of being in contact with the rest of the world” (I3). He explains that *De Boerse Poort* project has a double impact; at an individual level “people start thinking why they are acting this way and why they don’t try to make things in a different way (e.g. getting my food from the land rather than from the supermarket, n.d.r.)” and at a collective level “it seems that everything becomes possible (...) by bringing people doing things together” (I3).

### 2.3.2 De Site

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<sup>9</sup> Including financial support by the *Vlaamse Landmaatschappij* to start up communal gardening; *Wijk aan Zet*, a city council-generated funding organism supporting neighborhood initiatives; and the *Koning Boudewijn Stichting* granting the Boerse Poort Beekeepers.

<sup>10</sup> See *Ecoplan Ghent* <http://www.ecoplan.be/themas/ecoplan-gent>

<sup>11</sup> These include, for instance, presence of gazebos, hedges, and individual lawns, the need for the entire area needs to remain public and visible, the plot ranges (from 50 to 200 m<sup>2</sup>), and the annual renting fee (ranging between 50 and 150 euros, and further reductions for people benefitting social welfare).

*De Site* (The site) project covers a one-hectare brownfield surface in the North-West of Ghent, in the Rabot-Blaisantvest neighborhood. The area was a former industrial site definitely closed in 2006 and partially demolished (Fig. 5), but the soil is severely contaminated by industrial wastes. While showing us the neighborhood streets, Dimitri, one of the promoters of the *De Site* project, explains that the former industry owners have built up the neighborhood at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for providing basic housing facilities for blue-collar workers and their families. Rabot-Blaisantvest is now considered a poor area and it is mainly inhabited by low-income people and migrant families (especially Turkish), most of which having no knowledge of Dutch at all (I4). When the industrial plant was closed, the entire area became property of the administration and important works of recovery from heavy metals contamination started (RabotSite, 2014). At that time the city council committed the *Tondelier Development* building company to design a sustainable mid-class residential housing plan. As the preparation of the masterplan and the preparatory work for the renovation process was expected to take more than ten years, the community development association called *Samenlevingsopbouw* (Community Building) asked local residents to indicate priorities for the area and a garden turned out to be the most common choice. Jannes, one of the organisers of community activities, explained us that this temporary gardening initiative started with door-to-door involvement of local people in open discussion, visits to the site, collective design and focus groups; “they have no gardens, no living spaces. This is a major issue in the area” (I5). As a second step *Samenlevingsopbouw* requested the city council for the permission to start a temporary planning process in the area with the support of the *Stadsontwikkelingsbedrijf Gent* (The Ghent Public Development Company), a public-private partnership involving construction companies and the administration of Ghent (I4). The city council positively answered the request and negotiated with *Tondelier Development* some temporary restoration works to secure the area from soil contamination and to provide a basic water irrigation system. The community garden project started in 2007 and aggregated in time a number of public and private local supporters (such as local retailers, social and cultural associations, gardening and farming companies) (I6). It gained a large popularity amongst different ethnic communities in the area and today it includes a common area for assemblies and courses, 160 family plots (about 4 square meters each), recreation and barbecue areas, an oven for baking bread (mainly used by Turkish community), some sporting areas (bmx, football and skating areas), food transformation facilities and a greenhouse, playground and small barns. Compared to *De Boerse Poort*, *De Site* is more decisively inspired by social justice values and advances restitutive

measures for disadvantaged and low-income people. As Jannes notes; “the philosophy of the project is to develop a sense of community in this poor area to avoid potentially dangerous behaviour and social marginalization” (17). He also adds that the overall idea is to contribute to making the Rabot greener as people are encouraged to shift toward renewable energy supply sources, plant and care street flower beds and to use public transport (15). This is realized in partnership with a neighborhood currency initiative envisaging the possibility for people volunteering in *De Site* or taking care of the neighborhood to gain credit in local currency, the *Toreken*.<sup>12</sup> This can be used in many shops, restaurants, cinemas and in *De Site* itself for buying extra vegetables; and it allows unemployed or low-income people to take part in community life and improve their quality of life.

Moreover, the success of the initiative induced the city council and the *Tondelier Development* to reconsider the development plan by asking the *Samenlevingsopbouw* to take part in the participation trajectory of the planning process. This means that the temporary community garden experiment will probably turn into a permanent project integrated in the building plan. While it is not sure whether this participation trajectory will be able to mitigate the gentrification process that the *Tondelier* project will probably induce, it will lead to an interaction between the new project and the existing neighborhood.<sup>13</sup>

### 2.3.3 't Landhuis

't Landhuis [The country house] is a one-hectare squattered eco-anarchist community garden on a large private estate (formerly used as herring smokehouse) located in Ledeborg, the densest residential area of Ghent, close to the highway entrance. Since 2000 it has been run as an organic farm by the non-profit organization *Ateljee*, which in 2010 moved to a different location. The estate owner was happy with the continuation of the farming activities, and accepted to have a small group of young people from all over the city to move there. They started a radical, socio-ecological-oriented gardening project called *Autonome ecologische volxtuin* (Autonomous ecological allotment garden). Differently from *De Boerse Poort* and *De Site*, the 't Landhuis gardeners wanted to be completely autonomous from the local administration. So, while the first two gardens exemplify a community garden planning process characterised by a proactive

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<sup>12</sup> See *Toreken* project <http://www.torekes.be/>

<sup>13</sup> See *Tondelier* project <http://www.tondelier.be/themas/inspraak-participatie/>

commitment of the public authority since the very beginning of the project – and thus partially overlap with model A (fig. 1); *'t Landhuis* more clearly exemplifies the model B (fig. 1). Nevertheless, the counterplanning vocation of *'t Landhuis* was in time mitigated by the search for recognition by the local community (both administration and neighbourhood people). This especially happened after 2011, when the City of Ghent – pressured by some liberal politicians - expropriated the estate and organized anti-squat initiatives, destining the area to new sport facilities for the football society *Koninklijke Atletiek Associatie Gent*. This first open conflict made explicit the tension, which is unavoidable even in informal planning processes taking place in open contexts such as Ghent. John, one of the promoter of the project, claimed: “We are not against football but as the project will take a long time to be realized, we can just stay here in the meanwhile [...] I just said to the city council members: “Come and see what we are doing”, but nobody came - except the police! The point is they want us to leave from here for starting a gentrification process in the area” (17). In response to administration pressures, the *'t Landhuis* gardeners presented a petition signed by 800 citizens for the preservation of the green area (about 50% of the one-hectare garden is maintained in a wild State). They organized (strictly organic) gardening works by creating individual plots for the local inhabitants and included a collective vegetable gardens with a greenhouse, while the existing building was used for cultural events and the roof served as a shelter for homeless people (Fig. 6). The aim was to make explicit the socio-cultural value of the project for the entire neighbourhood. In fact, John explained: “We think theory comes after practice (...) so squatting houses means using empty spaces for something useful, taking care and producing food from the land means contrasting the economy-based society, and keeping people together to create a more autonomous collectivity” (17). In fact, *'t Landhuis* also serves as an open venue for socio-cultural initiatives and activities, including workshops, information evenings, concerts, open markets, popular kitchen, seeds exchange events, a recycle store and a bike repairing center.

In 2012, thanks to the change in the composition of Ghent city council (and, particularly, the support of the green Council Member for the Environment), the *'t Landhuis* squatters and gardeners came to an agreement with the administration. Community garden project was framed in a broader renovation project including the realization of a single football camp, the transformation of the existing building into an organic restaurant, and the restoration of the natural areas and the watercourse with permaculture techniques. On the one hand, the proposal raised some critiques (see *'tlandhuis*, 2014) as it has been clearly perceived as an attempt to

expand the green-socialist-liberal governmentality, by uprooting the most radical energies from the city. On the other hand, however, this also fuelled the community gardening project with new means (as the restaurant will use, for instance, products from the garden). The agreement, finally, was defined on the 't Landhuis' blog as an "obvious" decision for a red-green-liberal administration and commented as "a perfect example that citizens' action and cracking can indeed contribute to the whole society" ('tlandhuis, 2014).

### **3. A new transactive governance supporting informal modes of planning**

The example of Ghent's community gardens suggests that a new mode of planning, out of the dichotomy between official planning and counterplanning, is actually taking place. However, this is not an isolated case as research on citizen-led participatory planning processes testifies.<sup>14</sup> Informal planning activates role-mixing between different social actors (people, administration, associations, business, individuals...), all required listening to others' positions and negotiating their own. For instance, despite owing a lot to the alternative urban culture, urban gardening initiatives often became an integral part of the institutional planning strategy, not because they are *flattered* by it, but because they *transform* it through continuous, non-linear and networked relationships (including cooperation, antagonism, opposition...).

As a consequence, the concept of informal planning leads us to reconsider the post-lefebvrian critique of planning as a tool of domination and it suggests that planning *per se* can be a co-creative process, empowering citizens in self-producing public space. In order for this to happen, planning processes need to be supported by a governmentality characterised by a distinctive rationality able to gather together a network of heterogenous actors. For example, planning rationality in the *De Boerse Poort* garden is different, and the garden is a product of the *bobos'* image of Ghent as a modern, inclusive, progressist, grassroot, and environmental-friendly. It is a well-situated garden run by a majority of gardeners looking for healthy food and lifestyle out of the conventional market-based solution and entertaining good relationships with political, entrepreneurial and creative class in the city. In *De Site*, the *Samenlevensopbouw* organization promotes community gardening as a form of welfare provision involving marginalized communities, deprived and ethnic groups coming from rural areas and complementing their

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<sup>14</sup> See cases documented by the COST Action "People-friendly cities in a data-rich world" <http://www.people-friendly-cities.eu/>

modest income with self-cultivated food. *'t Landhuis*, on its turn, gathered people from the extreme left-anarchist urban counterculture for autonomous reappropriation of city space inspired by the desidered of operating autonomously from local administration; and it evolved today to part of broader renovation project.

Our analysis suggestes that instead of simply opposing the power of public and private lobbies in urban space, actual planning occurs in a more nuanced form, turning power into something to be negotiated with citizens. Advanced innovative solutions for spatial transformation seem able to compete with institutional urban redevelopment plans.

Foucauldian studies on neoliberalism (Barry, Osborne & Rose 1996) already pointed out that governmentality is a nuanced effect of social interaction. Lemke, for instance, pointed out (2000) that resistance towards neoliberal governmentality does not take place in the interval between programs of government (i.e. rationalities) and their realization (i.e. technologies), but they are already part of the program itself. This kind of “planned distortion” contributes to reaching compromises and fixing incoherences by moving from formal to informal techniques of government (Lemke, 2000). The point resounds with some of the literature on informal planning, demonstrating that insurgency acts are often entangled with the formal system (Holston 1998; Miraftab 2009), rather than directly challenging the hegemonic power. Most neoliberal governmentality itself imbues these acts in systems of meanings and practices (deploying the language of citizenship, civil society and democracy) that obscures real differences and conflicts and produces a “perverse confluence” between participation and neo-liberal projects (Dagnino, 2007). Particularly, it has been already suggested that urban gardening practices may represent the intersection between informality and government support (Hou 2014) in the North American context; however in the European one, the phenomenon assumes its own characters at the light of recent regional policy-makers’ efforts to incentivate public-private partnership in the management of common goods, including public space (Sutherland, 2011).<sup>15</sup> Neoliberal governmentality studies addressed the bipolar State-citizens dialectic and the role of private organisations (including business companies, but also associations) is often described only in terms of lobbying on institutional decision-making processes. While it is in fact true that neoliberal governmentality itself encourage active intervention in the social fabric by stressing autonomous

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<sup>15</sup> See the European Commission website informing on Public-private partnerships [http://ec.europa.eu/growth/single-market/public-procurement/partnerships/public-private/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/growth/single-market/public-procurement/partnerships/public-private/index_en.htm)

interventions, however, it is becoming increasingly clear that actors can activate independent connections to take mutual advantage of unexpected partnerships. By reversing the arrow of traditional participatory processes, they are changing neoliberal planning itself. As a result the new transactive governmentality (which in Ghent has been defined as “green-socialist-liberal”) generated by such a dynamic, fluid and temporary purpose-oriented networks, is able to generate a variety of informal modes of planning.

## **Conclusion**

In the light of our theoretical reflection and the example of Ghent’s community gardens, we suggest that the commonly accepted interpretation of urban gardening as an essential counterplanning, contestative phenomenon pointing out the failure of institutional planning needs to be carefully reconsidered. While the opposition between planned and non-planned urban space has been probably an appropriate framework for describing the emergence and the first diffusion of urban gardening in the 1970s, it is nowadays evident that a mere oppositional interpretation is no more adequate.

In order to fully appreciate the pervasiveness and evolution of urban gardening it is necessary to consider the diversification and complexification of the phenomenon. The example of Ghent’s community gardens shows how the very planning of urban gardens emerges as an effect of social networking both involving institutional and informal planners. This informal mode of planning does not necessary require the contestation of institutional planning (despite in some cases this may occur); it rather complements, transforms and contaminates it with alternative solutions, by also involving private organisations.

The results and future research suggestions of this paper can be listed in the following points:

- urban gardening is a forefront initiative for defining, equipping and establishing a new informal mode of planning;
- there is a close relationship between this informal mode of planning (exemplified by urban gardening practices) and the emergence of new governmentalities;
- the informal mode of planning can in general be regarded as a collaborative approach endorsing the creative, participative and politically-relevant potentialities of planning practice.

The introduction of the concept of informal planning as a dialogue-seeking alternative represents a novelty in the panorama of space-claiming initiatives. It is not an attempt at legitimising the public sector planning, neither at supporting the progressive fall of public space in the hand of real estate companies. Rather it claims that an alternative mode of understanding and practice planning is possible (and actual). This can suspend the conventional geometries of power and thus reconfer its role and meaning to planning in the public debate, and re-establish the relationship with collective agency.

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Annex I: Quoted Interviews in Ghent's community gardens

Community garden project	Interview number	Name	Role	Date
De Boerse Poort	I1	Sophie	promoter	27 Jul 2013
	I2	Maarten	promoter	15 Jul 2013
	I3	Tom	leader of bee-keepers	3 Sept 2013
De Site	I4	Jannes	promoter	24 Sept 2013
	I5	Dimitri	responsible of key sector	24 Sept 2013
	I6	Karolien	representative at Samenlevingsopbouw	20 Jul 2013
't Landhuis	I7	John	promoter	3 Oct 2013