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FORMAS



Parco Ort9 Sergio Albani Roma - urban garden and public park in Rome

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Introduction

Ort9 is an urban garden and public park located in Casal Brunori, a residential neighborhood in the outskirts of Rome. Before being turned into a park, the space was used as a landfill. This text tells the process that the local actors (NGO and neighborhood committee) engaged to recover a neglected urban public space and to give it back to the community.

Parco Ort9: place, characteristics, and actors involved

The initiative is implemented in the residential neighborhood Casal Brunori, in the outskirts of Rome, Italy¹. Its institutional promoters are the NGO Vivere In... and the Neighborhood Committee.

The NGO was born in 2006, starting from the initiative of a group of friends who decided to commit themselves to enhance the neighborhood. As reported in a 2018 news story on Repubblica website: “From the cleaning of the green areas to the parties organized to fill the absence of moments of socialization, over the years they have created initiatives to mend the social fabric. In the neighborhood there is a lack of meeting places and while the elderly suffer from the lack of services, families move with their car to other areas of the city, in search of spaces for free time.

Sergio Albani, founding member of the association, had been looking hopefully at one of the large green fields of Casal Brunori, reduced to a landfill, since 2006: among the tall grass there were refrigerators, televisions, even safes abandoned after the thefts. Albani dreamed that instead of decay there were gardens and the Ort9 park is dedicated to him, who disappeared before seeing the idea of him become reality” (De Ghantuz, 2018).

¹ The district extends immediately outside the Grande Raccordo Anulare to the south and is between via Pontina and via Cristoforo Colombo. The total inhabitants are 4,361 and the commercial activities around 50.

The process for the creation of the urban gardens and the public park was slow and gradual. Formally, it began with the sending by Vivere In to the Municipality of Rome, in 2005, of a draft of an architectural project, proposing the creation of the gardens in the space then occupied by the landfill. But it was only in 2015 that the Municipality, accepting a proposal sent by the Council of Culture of the 9th district of Rome, agreed to participate in the Sidig-med European project, which made it possible to obtain the necessary funds for the start of the works in the area, 12,000 square meters. Vivere In... NGO was the operational promoter of the project, and this association was entrusted with the management of the Ort9-Sergio Albani Park in February 2017.

Currently, Ort9 is a public park with 107 individual urban garden plots, in addition to shared plots. The park has an automated irrigation system through driplines, shared mechanical and manual tools, as well as public restrooms, barbecues, and indoor or outdoor socializing areas. The park is always open and it is considered a European Best Practice in urban regeneration (Parco Ort9, n.d.).



1 Ort9 Sergio Albani urban garden. www.viverein.org

The role of the citizenship and the local authorities

The creation of the park would not have been possible without the support of the local authorities, specifically the 9th District, which gave Vivere In NGO the concession for the management of the space, also entrusting the Association with the cleaning of the green area surrounding - service for which the NGO gets no compensation.

Other actors involved are the Council of Culture of the 9th District of Rome, the Local Health Agency (ASL), which uses part of the shared lots for the treatment of people with mental illness or former drug addicts, and some public schools in the neighborhood, which use the plots for practical educational workshops. The Council of Culture of the Rome 9th District played a crucial role especially in the launch of the initiative (see point "timeline").

But the main actors of the whole process are the inhabitants of the neighborhood, who over the years have pursued a common project. As declared by the President of Vivere In, Filippo Cioffi, in an interview to Urlo Web, "these gardens are not the ultimate goal, but the tool to recapture the territory and enhance it. They, even if individually managed, allow people to share a common idea and the use of the spaces allows the neighborhood to be redeveloped". Cioffi also recalled the disappearance of prostitution phenomena, in addition to the evident arrangement of the area, previously hosting an open-air landfill that the citizens themselves have reclaimed. "To speed up a too slow bureaucracy - continued Cioffi - we ourselves took away the abandoned refrigerators and had the land analyzed, two indispensable factors to be able to start the gardens" (Savelli, 2017).

The timeline and the effects of the initiative

2006 - Vivere In NGO presents a draft proposal for the accommodation of the area to the Municipal Administration.

2015 - the Council of Culture of the 9th District presents to the Municipality of Rome, in collaboration with Vivere In and with the involvement of the Casal Brunori District Committee, a project of the Constitution of the "ORT9" Committee of the District IX, to "actively promote a network of associations present in the area, coordinated by the Deputy Presidency of the District IX, as a technical-administrative reference point, functional to the realization of future projects of urban social gardens in urban and peri-urban areas of the Municipality of Rome" (STIFINI, 2015).

The goal was to actively collaborate in the "realization of the ORT9 Pilot Urban Garden of the 9th District, as a model of excellence for the city of Rome, developed as part of the international project

SIDIG-MED, financed by the European Commission, with the aim of developing a model of good governance of urban and peri-urban agrarian/agricultural areas in the Mediterranean, the promotion of social and intercultural dialogue in and between the 4 urban realities involved: city of Rome (Italy), Barcelona (Spain), Mahdia (Tunisia) and Al - Balgua (Jordan)" (STIFINI, 2015).

The 2015 proposal of the Council of Culture to the Municipality of Rome was, in effect, an invitation to participate in the EU tender which would have allowed, subsequently, to obtain the necessary funds for the start of the works.

2016 - the reclamation of the area begins

2017 - inauguration of the urban garden (individual and shared plots)

2021 – expansion of the garden and creation of other facilities (plots for wheelchair users and people with visual impairments; lighting; barbecue area; squares)

The beneficiaries of the initiative

The beneficiaries of the park is the population of Casal Brunori neighborhood in general, who can access a public park that is always open, and more specifically the 110 families assigned to individual urban gardens (originally 107 families and since 2021, 3 families of wheelchair users). School pupils and people subjected to health treatment who use shared gardens are also direct beneficiaries.

The main objectives and values of the initiative

The aspirations with the creation of the park can be summarized in the sentence expressed by the District Committee in its presentation, and which is based on the creation of value for the whole territory: "to bring an example of 'being together', a rediscovered feeling of sharing, a way to regain possession of the territory, an area previously abandoned and returned to people, a rediscovered scent of beauty" (*Il parco*, 2020).

In concrete terms, the goals, which have been achieved, are to recover about 12km² of public space that has become an illegal landfill to return it to the community.

Limits of the initiative

According to Filippo Cioffi, President of Vivere In, the institutional limits have arisen from the distrust of the Municipal Administration to formally allocate areas to social urban gardens even if regulated by the Master Plan in its Articles 75 and 85.

The physical limits are linked to the absence of specific funds for recovery, cleaning and executive planning of the community garden system. In the absence of a precise policy, the practice is to occupy the areas and self-finance its use, which creates uneven and non-homogeneous situations, instead of where the ideal situation of programming a governance model, an essential element for the correct management of spaces and the community.

A critical point mentioned by Mr. Cioffi is that the demand for urban gardens is much higher than the supply. Annual waivers between 10/15% fail to meet the continuing demand for assignments, which have exceeded 100% and continue to grow.

How the initiative engages with climate

(does it tackle mitigation, adaptation, both or other dimensions of climate change?)

From all the testimonies I have heard, and also from the interactions I have had with the people responsible for the care of the Park and the projects carried out by Vivere In NGO, I did not seem to glimpse, in the narratives, a connection between the park or only between urban gardens and initiatives to mitigate or adapt to climate change. On the part of public institutions and promoters of the initiative, there is a call for environmental sustainability, urban regeneration and commons.

The main dimensions that emerge in the stories, as positive points and reasons for the success of the initiative (which has won several prizes as a good practice of urban regeneration), are those relating to the sociality that the Park provides, and to the recovery of contact with nature, as well as the aspects of decorum of the urban space, removed from neglect to be usable again by the citizens of the neighborhood. Further positive effects of urban gardens are related to health and education, due to the partnerships with the Local Health Agency and with some schools.

Therefore, the connection between climate change and the Park can only be made in the context of analysis and interpretation, but it does not seem to emerge from the third sector organizations and from the local authorities involved or from the direct beneficiaries. The reason for this deviation, in my opinion, is that climate change is still seen as a distant concept for most people, especially those who live in urban areas not particularly prone to extreme events. Thus the same local authorities and

grassroots organizations of the territory do not seem to conceptually include urban regeneration initiatives focused on the creation or recovery of green areas in the spectrum of measures to mitigate climate change.

Possible broader changes thanks to the initiative

As Filippo Cioffi explains, “the experience in the management of the Ort9-Sergio Albani Park and the governance model adopted by the Vivere In NGO was recognized as a European good practice in the panel ‘Resilient urban and peri-urban agriculture’ and is now shared, through the Ru:urban EU projects. The NGO participates of several platforms and projects and is a reference point in the community”.

The governance model could be replicated, but it could be constraint by the limits and characteristics of each local community. For sure many inhabitants of Casal Brunori have changed the way to interact with their territory and among each other. The quality of their lives has improved since they have the park and the urban gardens. So I suppose that even if the main promoter actor, Vivere In NGO, suspended its activities, it would leave a more engaged community. Even if the engagement is directly related to climate change, to retake contact with the own territory through participatory activities, even to reach what could appear like small goals (such as an urban garden), could contribute, in time, to create long-term awareness about climate change and its challenges.

Potential replicability in other settings

Urban gardens are an expanding reality in many large European cities and other continents. It is certainly a facility that can be replicated, as there are many residual spaces in the suburbs that could be converted into self-managed green areas for use by the community, which could host individual or shared garden plots.

However, there is a crucial aspect in the creation and management of urban gardens, which is linked to the ownership of the land. While in Rome most of the urban gardens are located on communal lands, the same does not necessarily occur in other cities, and in other countries.

To stay in European territory, in England, it is normal that groups of people or basic organizations interested in creating an urban garden, must negotiate with private individuals, with whom to stipulate an adequate contract (ie allotment, license, lease) in order to create the garden and be adequately protected from a legal point of view (Leases, 2020).

Rome is perhaps a city particularly full of abandoned public places which, with the stubbornness of the grassroots communities, a lot of patience and a bit of luck in identifying and maintaining dialogue with the institutional interlocutor, can be recovered and reintroduced for the benefit of community.

The first challenge, in general, is to find the land (which includes the analysis of practical issues related to the slope, the sun, the presence of water, etc.). Then there are the legal aspects of its management. Not to mention the need to analyze all aspects related to the community's relationship with space. If we are talking about a regulated space (ie not an occupation), it will probably be necessary to set up a legal entity to manage it. The cohesion of the community and its ability to know how to deal with obstacles, to know how to dialogue with local authorities and other stakeholders in the area, is certainly a fundamental question when thinking about the replicability of an urban garden (Da Luz, 2020).

We can find still other differences in urban garden management in a metropolis such as São Paulo, Brazil, a country that presents enormous problems related to land ownership and management, and where family farming and small farmers are relegated to the second category in terms of investment in agriculture and of value perception. One great challenge is to rethink new systems of agricultural production, distribution and consumption, starting from the experiences of urban and peri-urban agriculture that have been taking place for years in the outskirts of the city.

The experience of San Paolo is different from that of Rome, where the growers of urban gardens - normally organized in non-profit associations - are not allowed to sell the crops. Thus, in Rome it remains an activity linked to self-consumption and the urban garden is conceived more like social innovation and urban/environmental regeneration activities rather than a way to overturn production systems.

There are several vulnerable areas in São Paulo where, through urban gardens, a process of recovery of green areas has been triggered, in a process that sees the suburbs at the forefront both in the production of food and in environmental preservation. But in São Paulo there are huge problems with access to land, water and an optimal logistics system for distribution.

An interesting aspect in the experiences of urban agriculture in São Paulo, reported by Fernando de Mello Franco, director of URBEM, is that due to the high cost of land, production must find underused, residual urban spaces. Areas of abandoned oil pipelines and electrical systems, industrial warehouses, empty parking lots, floors of large buildings, re-signify the residues of production and consumption of the city (De Mello, 2020).

In San Paolo as in Rome, the new dynamics bring back the old debate on the dichotomies between nature and culture, which today takes on the contours of the differentiations between countryside and city, between urban and rural, which are increasingly blurred.

Note about consensus: I declare that the President of Vivere IN NGO, Mr. Filippo Cioffi, gave me permission to publish the interview he granted me.

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