

PUBLIC SPACES FOR COMMUNITY CAMPUSES AND UNIVERSITIES

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Vegetable gardens to “feed” the bond between city and university. A case study from Murcia, Spain

*Giulia Luciani**

Introduction

University campuses can be described as microcosms that, while having their own spatial and social boundaries similar to those of an “urban organism”, are part of a larger macrocosm, that of the urban system. University open spaces serve multiple functions simultaneously and, in the case of public universities, belong both to the academic community and to the city. One of these functions is to foster socialization among students and other members of the university community. Additionally, university spaces play a key role in promoting the psychological and physical well-being of those who use them (Hongrui et al, 2024), not only students, but also workers and family members. These spaces can also serve as environments for educational activities that cannot take place within traditional university classrooms.

A specific type of space found in many university campuses is the university vegetable garden, often created through the initiative of professors and students interested in agroecology, a subject not always included in the academic curriculum. Examples of vegetable gardens activated with

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this scope include the University of Veracruz in Mexico (de la Cruz-Elizondo et al., 2024), the Complutense University of Madrid (Universidad Complutense de Madrid, n.d.), Yale University in the United States (LaCharite, 2016), and others.

This text focuses on a case study from Southern Spain, which connects both to similar international experiences and to the specific character – spatial, cultural, and socio-economic – of its local context. The first two paragraphs introduce the theme by focusing on the role of the vegetable gardens as peculiar educational spaces and on their role of public spaces that establish a relationship between the campus and the city. The third paragraph describes the Eco-Campus vegetable gardens case study, from Murcia, while the fourth delves into the special bond that these gardens have with the Murcian territory. Finally, the last paragraph collects some considerations on the role of the Eco-Campus gardens within the university and the city, emphasising their interconnectedness with multiple spaces, practices and societal groups.

University vegetable gardens as educational spaces: learning agroecology

University vegetable gardens have been spaces for unconventional learning practices, especially related to agroecology, a transdisciplinary science that emerged in Latin America in the Eighties (Méndez et al., 2014; Fontalvo-Buelvas et al., 2024) and is quite under-represented in European curricula (Egea Fernández et al., 2014). Agroecology examines agro-food systems with a particular emphasis on the sustainable management of natural resources involved in food production and the intricate relationship between agriculture and society (Altieri, 1980; Francis et al., 2003). In the context of agroecology teaching, university vegetable gardens serve as a unique form of educational space, which provides opportunities for interactive and practical learning beyond conventional classroom environments. This distinctive learning model highly values interdisciplinarity, integration of theory and practice, and dialogue among various bodies of knowledge and actors, such as students, faculty, and the wider community, a collaborative learning approach that points towards what can be defined as a “learning community” (Kilpatrick et al., 2003). In learning communities, emphasis is put on two aspects: “the human element of communities, and the profits that accrue from building on the synergies of individuals in common locations or with common interests” and “curricular structures (i.e. an inanimate structure) as the means to developing

‘deeper’ learning” (ivi, p. 2). This is especially true for the Latin American experiences (McCune and Sánchez, 2018). Such an approach to teaching and learning can be traced back to the roots of agroecology in social movements, as well as in science and practice (Wezel et al., 2009).

Collaborative learning in these spaces is not limited to human actors but involves interactions with the broader ecological system. It can be interpreted as a form of multi-species learning (Meijer 2023), as vegetable gardens are co-managed by humans, animals (for instance, pollinators such as bees), and plants. Students, therefore, not only learn about sustainable farming practices but also experience the relationships between humans and nature. Awareness of the interconnectedness of human activities within the web of life not only fosters a deeper understanding of the ecological processes involved in food production but also highlights the interdependencies among various life forms.

University vegetable gardens as public spaces: between campus and city

University gardens act as important sites for community engagement, where dialogue can take place among various stakeholders, including academics, local communities, and organizations. These spaces can foster a sense of building and working together in community, recognizing the importance of forming learning and practice communities in which diverse forms of knowledge and practices are acknowledged and discussed. This creates an opportunity for a necessary connection between educational institutions and society at large (Fassi, 2020).

This aspect leads us to better define their role within the socio-spatial structure of campuses and cities. University gardens, in fact, are not just open-air classrooms, but can function as true public spaces. They enhance the liveability of the campus by providing access to green spaces, fulfilling the need for environmental accessibility that is often lacking in urban areas (Cimini et al., 2024). Furthermore, they enhance physical well-being by offering opportunities for open-air, physical activity, which is one of the key roles of public space in contemporary cities and society (Sepe, 2023). Engaging in the physical labor of gardening—whether through planting, weeding, or harvesting—provides individuals with regular opportunities for exercise, promoting better cardiovascular health, strength, and flexibility. Beyond the physical benefits, gardening offers mental health advantages by reducing stress and anxiety, fostering

a sense of accomplishment, and resulting in improved physical, psychological and social health (Soga et al., 2017). University gardens also promote health in another sense, as they help build knowledge and skills for healthier lifestyles and food models, both for individuals and for the environment. Furthermore, these spaces depend on the care of those who use them, and this mutuality fosters a sense of belonging.

Different configurations of garden spaces and management approaches can either enhance or weaken these positive aspects. Additionally, they can impact the level of openness of these spaces towards the “micro-city” of the campus and the broader city.

A case study: Murcia Eco-Campus

The University of Murcia, in southern Spain, launched an initiative called *Huertos Eco-campus* within its Espinardo Campus, as part of the environmental management program “Sustainable and Healthy Campus” (*Campus Sostenible y Saludable*). The program’s main objective is to achieve proper management of natural resources from the social, environmental and economical perspectives. One of the strategic action lines of the program is precisely agroecology.

The initiative features two types of vegetable gardens, the individual parcels (*Parcelas Individuales*) and the community garden (*Huerto Comunitario*). The aims of the first initiative are to learn how to produce healthy food based on agroecological principles, preserve endangered genetic resources, encourage social interaction within the university community, promote learning in areas not covered by academic curricula, such as agroecology, food sovereignty, and ecological economics, through workshops, talks, courses, seminars, and meetings. Additional goals in the case of the community garden are to encourage horizontal engagement among members of the university community (students, faculty, and staff), as well as between them and their families, friends, and the broader Murcia society, promote associationism and forms of civic organization that enable responsible and supportive participation, facilitate the exchange of knowledge and expertise, foster social and personal relationships among users of different ages and cultures (Universidad de Murcia, n.d.).

The individual parcels

The Eco-Campus vegetable gardens were launched in 2010. They included at first 28 slots located in a very visible, accessible place, nearby the main campus access and adjacent to the main square Plaza de la Sostenibilidad, where a public information office and some cafes are also located. Later on, in 2015, new community gardens were added (Egea Sánchez and Egea Fernández, 2017), with 18 new plots in a separate area, next to the ESIUM Integrated Services Building. Today, the community gardens consist of 46 agricultural plots available to the university community (students, administrative staff, and faculty). The plots, each approximately 20 m² in size, are equipped with an irrigation point connected to the campus's main water network. Additionally, an area has been set up near the plots for communal tools and other equipment useful for gardening or maintenance. Two of these plots, one for each community garden area, are reserved for university-related activities, while the rest are distributed through an annual lottery among the campus community members who wish to participate (Universidad de Murcia, n.d.).

To be eligible in the lottery, the only requisite applicants must fulfil is to belong to the university community: students, faculty and staff all have access to the lottery. If they are assigned a plot, they must use ecological management techniques. The rules of the lottery of the two garden areas have some differences. While for the first area no priorities are established for the ranking, except for a priority accorded to applicants who have never been assigned a plot, in the second area priority is given to applications presented by a member (or more) of the university community and an elderly person who has cultivated the traditional vegetable gardens of Murcia throughout their life, in order to promote intergenerational exchange and the transmission of the traditional farming culture of the peri-urban Huerta of Murcia, which is at risk of being lost (Egea Fernández et al., 2014).

While the single plots are managed by the contractors, the whole garden system is managed by the Technical Unit of the university, which is also responsible for monitoring the correct use and management of the shared gardens.

The community vegetable garden

The community garden covers an area of 255 m², bordered by a pathway that provides access to the centre of the plot. The land will not be divided into individual plots, although one area may be designated for the cultivation of species and varieties representative of other culinary cultures, if there is sufficient interest (intercultural garden). The garden is open to all interested members of the university, including students, faculty, and administrative staff, as well as external social collectives that wish to participate. More than a space for production, this garden is a space that fosters social interaction, knowledge exchange, and learning about sustainability and eco-friendly agricultural practices.

The garden is self-managed collectively by the users, with key decisions, such as the types of activities to undertake or which species to cultivate, made through monthly assemblies, with tasks and responsibilities collectively distributed among participants. The planning and decision-making process is democratic, with all participants having a voice in determining what crops to plant, how to organize work, and which educational and social activities to host. This cooperative model ensures that the focus of the garden remains on building a sense of community and learning rather than solely on agricultural production.

A coordinating group, elected by the participants through a voting process, is responsible for managing, planning, and organizing garden activities, in line with the decisions of the assembly, oversees the activities, and ensures smooth communication between users and university authorities. The group's role includes organizing collective workdays, open garden events, and social activities such as communal meals (Universidad de Murcia, n.d.; Egea Fernández et al., 2014; Urban Nature Atlas, 2021).

Huertos and Huerta: campus and campo

The vegetable gardens of the Espinardo Campus at the University of Murcia are not only linked to the academic community but also to the broader territory of Murcia. The peri-urban landscape of Murcia is historically defined by the Huerta, an agricultural region of approximately 11 000 ha characterized by a complex irrigation system which dates back to the 9th century, branching from the river Segura, enabling the cultivation of vegetables and fruit trees in an otherwise semi-arid area (Cánovas-Molina et al., 2021). The land structure of the Huerta is composed of small plots of land intersected by a dense network of pathways ("caminos de la huer-

ta”), which are heavily populated and closely connected to the city in a reciprocal relationship (Mata and Fernández, 2010). The Huerta of Murcia is one of the few surviving landscapes of its kind in the Mediterranean. However, this agricultural system has been facing significant threats since the second half of the 20th century, including uncontrolled urbanization, which has already consumed nearly half of the agricultural land, the declining competitiveness of traditional farming, the parallel rise of industrialized agriculture, which is transforming the landscape of Southern Spain with serious consequences for the environment (Arbonès et al., 2024), and a lack of generational renewal. In response, various community-driven movements and initiatives have emerged to protect the Huerta, not only to preserve its cultural values but also to promote its model of local, sustainable agriculture and biodiversity conservation.

The university gardens are an integral part of this active effort to protect the Huerta. The University of Murcia has in fact contributed to this process by supporting several initiatives, such as *Del Campo al Campus*, a responsible consumption program launched in 2010 within the framework of the Sustainable and Healthy Campus program and in collaboration with Biomurcia S.L. This initiative allows small Huerta producers to sell their products directly at the Espinardo campus twice a week. Another key initiative is the *Banco de Semillas Locales*, created in collaboration with the Red de Agroecología y Ecodesarrollo de la Región de Murcia (RAERM). As a result of ecological farming courses, seeds from local varieties at risk of extinction have been multiplied, contributing to a seed bank stored at SEAF. Since 2015, RAERM’s activities have been channeled through the Agroecology Classroom at the University of Murcia as part of the Sustainable Campus program (Egea Sánchez and Egea Fernández, 2017).

From the campus to the city, and back

The vegetable gardens on the University of Murcia’s Espinardo Campus serve as a pivotal point that connects the campus, the city, and the surrounding territory, acting as a *rotula* that articulates relationships across multiple scales. Through agroecological management, these gardens form a bridge between the diverse levels of agricultural space, creating a public, identitarian space for the city of Murcia. The place identity (Sepe, 2013) is related to the campus spatiality and culture but simultaneously links to broader identity and spatiality, that of the city-huerta system, in a context – in space and time – where destructive change is accelerating and long-term identity and meaning are being lost.

If it is true that “by shaping that built environment, urban designers influence patterns of human activity and social life” (Carmona et al., 2010, p.133), university campuses can be key agents in driving transitions, since they can introduce, test and nurture innovations – in this case, retro-innovations (Stuiver, 2006) in agriculture, in food consumption, lifestyles, place values – in protected niches, from where they can then spread to the outer world (Colding and Barthel, 2017).

As a public space, the gardens are strategically placed in a nodal area of the campus — which is significant given the campus’s limited access points, due to the highway that isolates it from the city. This placement ensures that the gardens are among the first public spaces people encounter when entering the campus. The gardens are also integrated into a larger signalled network of paths (*rutas de senderismo*) that echo the *caminos de la huerta*, enhancing their visibility and accessibility (Universidad de Murcia, n.d.).

From the social point of view, the Eco-Campus vegetable gardens serve as bridges between various social groups, creating an open environment where perspectives and experiences can be shared. Through their design and communal structure, they help strengthen ties between the campus and the urban and periurban context, encouraging collaboration across various sectors of society. Within the university, they promote an alternative learning and practice relationship between students, faculty, and staff, fostering a sense of community that transcends university roles. Beyond the university, the gardens engage with the wider community, involving multiple generations, local residents and producers, and various associations dedicated to preserving the agroecological, social, and historical values of the *Huerta*. As garden users work together, they form bonds that extend beyond the confines of academic life, reinforcing a sense of belonging both within the university and within the larger urban context. This dynamic highlights the interconnection between the needs of students and the wider city. The gardens illustrate how academic institutions, traditionally seen as isolated from their surrounding environments, can instead become active participants in the life of the city. By meeting the needs of students for spaces to learn, socialize, and relax, while also addressing the health and environmental challenges facing the city, the university gardens function as key instruments in strengthening urban resilience.

In Murcia’s Espinardo Campus, the individual garden parcels, which are shared by members of the university community, and the community

garden, open to the wider public, offer distinct yet complementary functions within the broader framework of public space. While the individual parcels are primarily used by students, faculty, and staff — creating a more intimate and localized space for cultivating agricultural knowledge and fostering personal engagement with sustainable farming practices — the community garden serves as a larger, more inclusive venue that extends the benefits of these agroecological practices beyond the campus boundaries. The community garden in a way enhances the social, environmental, and cultural opportunities provided by the individual plots, allowing for a broader spectrum of public interaction, opening the “learning community” to a wider range of actors and networks and thus multiplying the synergies that enrich the learning process.

This interaction reinforces the idea that agricultural practices are integral to the identity of the city and its cultural and social fabric. The community garden’s role as a public, open-access space thus becomes a critical point of intersection which reinforces the symbiotic relationship between the university, the city, and the territory at large. By amplifying the collective experience of agroecology, it also strengthens the sense of belonging and social cohesion, creating a shared space where environmental sustainability, cultural preservation, and community empowerment can thrive in unison.

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