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THE ART OF GREEN MAINTENANCE
Future-Making in Urban Gardening

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Urban gardening plays a major role in how sustainable futures are imagined and envisaged, but the focus on its innovative potential tends to obscure the diverging logics at play. We draw upon ethnographic fieldwork at the community garden *Onkraj gradbišča* in Ljubljana, which was conceptualized primarily as a social and cultural innovation. Yet, it continuously called for maintenance and care practices in which the organizers and the gardeners had to engage to make it last. We argue that maintenance labor is crucial for sustainable urban future-making practices.

Keywords: urban gardening, socio-nature, innovation, maintenance, future-making, Ljubljana

Introduction

When Anna, one of the authors, approached the premises of the urban community garden *Onkraj gradbišča*, which is only a 5-minute walk from the central railway station in Ljubljana, she saw a woman get off her bicycle, open the entrance gate, and go inside. The woman entered the garden situated on a slightly crater-like, overgrown piece of land tucked between blocks of flats. Established on an abandoned construction site (hence the name, *Onkraj gradbišča*, "Beyond the Construction Site"), it was surrounded by a fence on all but one side; on the fourth side, a five-storied house acted as a wall. The remains of the children's treehouse were still visible from the main street, *Resljeva cesta*. Two obsolete water tanks stood closer to the building.

It was October afternoon, and there was still quite a lot of daylight, but the garden was colored in subdued green and grey, partly because of the autumn season. The heap of broken children's toys in the garden's near corner, the bright orange net separating it from a newly built block of flats, and the blue slide opposite these were

the only bright patches. The author followed the woman, rightly guessing she was one of the main organizers. She was opening a shed in the back corner of the garden when the author approached her, and although it was their first meeting, the woman greeted the stranger as if they had known each other forever, not at all surprised, but very open and friendly.

Polonca Lovšin, one of the garden's founders,[1] an architect and artist connected with the Obrat Culture and Art Association (*KUD Obrat*), was the first to arrive on the second day of a plant giveaway. In spring 2022, the City of Ljubljana had decided to build on the site where the *Onkraj gradbišča* garden had been functioning for twelve years. The garden was established in the summer of 2010 as part of the cultural festival *Mladi levi/Young Lions*, run by the non-profit organization Bunker, and was initially financed from the Interreg project *Sostenuto* (Bunker s. a.). The garden was unique in its formula and widely discussed in the media and artistic and scholarly circles (e.g., Vodovnik 2012; KUD Obrat 2012a; Lovšin 2014; Poljak Istenič 2016, 2018, 2019; Ehrlich 2018; Chardronnet 2019; Jurman and Lovšin 2021). It was deemed an excellent example and a role model for community-based green initiatives (cf. Brecelj 2015; IPoP 2020; Dovolj za vse s. a.). Moreover, it was considered an innovative and successful endeavor of urban greening and was even included in Ljubljana's European Green Capital Program in 2016 (cf. Poljak Istenič 2016). But now, with a change of market trends from bear to bull, the municipality was eager to develop this piece of land right in the city center. After all these years, the garden was slowly coming to a close.

Much could be written about the failure to protect *Onkraj gradbišča* from closure. However, this article's focus is not on the garden's disappearance but on its surprising persistence – its lifespan was longer than that of many similar projects in Slovenia and beyond (cf. Drake and Lawson 2014; Maćkiewicz, Puente Asuero and Pawlak 2018). Moreover, we consider the community garden meaningful beyond its immediate confines because we perceive it as a prism to grasp the crucial processes negotiated and debated in late-modern cities. Urban gardening has many faces, forms, and functions. Not only does it serve many purposes, but it also offers solutions to many problems linked to late modernity (cf. Poljak Istenič, Šmid Hribar and Kozina 2023). It is situated between society and nature and poses the question of how the two relate in urban settings.

In a similar vein, *Onkraj gradbišča* was not solely dedicated to gardening. First and foremost, the organizers focused on community-building aspects and the importance of green spaces in the city. Unlike allotment gardens or reclaimed green city spaces (e.g., Zukin 2010; Karge 2018), *Onkraj gradbišča* was inscribed from the outset in the framework of temporary use of space, or temporary land use, as a mode of participatory urbanism (Poljak Istenič 2019) and inclusive urban governance (e.g., Cvejić et al. 2015). Its lifespan turned out to be longer than initially antici-

1 Throughout the article we use the words "founders," "organizers," and "initiators" interchangeably to refer to *KUD Obrat* members involved in the creation and maintenance of the garden; they most frequently referred to themselves as "initiators."

pated: the contract for gardening at *Onkraj gradbišča* was renewed several times, and the site effectively lasted more than twelve years, exceeding most urban gardening initiatives claiming to be innovative. Thus, on the one hand, *Onkraj gradbišča* had been planned as a socially innovative future-making practice, and its purpose went way beyond the actual garden. On the other hand, the garden's perseverance over the years developed a life of its own, exerting a particular type of influence on the socially innovative framework of the project and its future-making potential.

We thus claim that it is crucial to include the garden's agency in the analysis of the urban community garden as a political and social project. We propose that its agency stems from its socio-natural qualities (e.g., Gandy 2022), institutional layout, plant- and earth-based materiality, and the pragmatics of human relations that made it run. We follow Classens' claim that "urban gardens exist at an increasingly relevant interface between 'nature' and 'society,' and thus provide a productive site – and an important one – from which to interrogate this relationship" (Classens 2015: 231). We argue that the materiality of the community garden as a particular type of socio-nature must be taken seriously. In this article, we first present the methodology, frame urban gardening as a future-making practice, introduce our case study, and then use it to demonstrate how the case of *Onkraj gradbišča* brings to the fore the importance of maintenance labor for sustainable future-making practices in cities.

Methodological note

The article results from the long-term involvement of Saša Poljak Istenič (e.g. 2016, 2018, 2019) with urban initiatives in Ljubljana including in the framework of the Urban Futures project (2020–2024), Alexandra Schwell's project *Urgency, Priorities, and Imaginations of the Future* that she conducted in cooperation with Saša Poljak Istenič and Anna Horolets in 2020 and 2022 respectively, and intensive fieldwork that all three researchers carried out in October and November 2022. Field visits included participant observation and photo documentation of the *Onkraj gradbišča* site, as well as a public discussion about the *Onkraj gradbišča* experience and the future of green spaces. Other sites were also visited to place *Onkraj gradbišča* into a comparative frame.

We conducted interviews with the garden initiators, gardeners, experts, municipal officials, and members of other organizations that are essential actors in the field of urban gardening in Ljubljana. A total of 15 interviews were conducted in Ljubljana (9) and online (6). One interview carried out in Slovene was translated into English. We use the original wording of our interlocutors in the quotations and we use pseudonyms for most interlocutors, except for the initiators, who are publicly known by their real names. Desk research allowed us to supplement the data collected in the field with policy documents, press articles, podcasts, and the like related to this particular site and urban gardening initiatives in Ljubljana more broadly.

Urban gardening as a future-making practice

For over a century, on both sides of the Atlantic, urban gardening in the Western world has been a complex socio-natural phenomenon that, on the one hand, responded to social changes and upheavals such as rapid urbanization or wars (Lawson 2005). On the other hand, urban gardening was itself a motor of social change and a laboratory for testing the new ways of urban living, civic engagement, empowerment, and community building (von Hassell 2002; Nettle 2014). It took the form of centrally planned large-scale schemes such as Dig for Victory (UK, Australia), Victory Gardens (USA, Canada), school gardens, or working-class allotments governed by local authorities, associations, or factories (Ward and Crouch 1988; Bellows 2004; Keshavarz and Bell 2016; Poljak Istenič, Šmid Hribar and Kozina 2023). But urban gardening was also carried out on abandoned vacant lots, informally and spontaneously, often in the form of guerrilla gardening, with the goal of political resistance to the state's oppressive power and the market. Therefore, Certomà and Giaccaria (2023) propose considering urban gardening a flagship manifestation of social innovation. Innovation in this sense implies not only the creation of the novelty or "alternative ways of 'doing politics,' but also […] the different futures configured through specifically located material practices" (Suchman, Danyi and Watts 2008: 4).

Here, the future is perceived either as something that is yet to come towards which one moves, or a trigger for changing the world (cf. Appadurai 2013; Salazar et al. 2017; Bryant and Knight 2019). Notably, the former is an attitude and a practice employed to make sense of the present and everyday life. Knappe et al. (2019: 891) specifically underline urban gardening projects as a transformative future-making practice which can "become powerful tools for creating (new) orders, empowering, or excluding actors, and even for preserving or transforming fundamental values such as those that determine what people perceive as the 'good life' or a desirable future." In this context, researchers primarily analyze the "community" form of urban gardening as "an expression of active and progressive appropriation of urban spaces by citizens and thus of 'grassroots urbanism' that oppose state-centric as well as neoliberal development" (Rosol 2018: 136). As experts in the "art of possible" (von Hassell 2002: 153), urban community gardeners find that gardens empower them to "plan and design their own [urban] futures" (Appadurai 2013: 267) – either in line with the official (city's) vision or offering the alternative and critique (Willow 2021). In this sense, future-making is a process that imbues individual experience but also defines strategic visions of a particular city's development, generates concrete official tools and measures for achieving it, or provokes alternative civil activities to oppose it, contest it, or support it (Gulin Zrnić and Poljak Istenič 2022a, 2022b).

Urban gardens are often interpreted as a model for a sustainable future, and their environmental impact is considered predominantly positive. Authors emphasize mitigation of the urban heat island effect, carbon sequestration, preservation of urban biodiversity, and the role in climate resilience (Lin et al. 2015; Wang and Clark 2016; Cabral et al. 2017). Even though these and other positive features of commu-

nity gardens have been widely acclaimed, the academic literature review also reveals the presence of the critical perspective. Some authors perceive community gardens as a new form of "sustainability fix" (McCann, McClintock and Miewald 2023) and "government through community" (Rosol 2012; cf. Rose 1996), emphasizing the way they are (ab)used as a means to compensate for neoliberal failures.

Among these lines of criticism, we found one argument that resonates with our ethnographic material most soundly. It suggests that many problems community gardens face result predominantly from the fact that they are treated by policymakers and gardeners alike as "means to an end" (Lawson 2005; Drake and Lawson 2014), and thus their natural and pragmatic features are undervalued, backgrounded, or ignored. In response to this criticism, we propose to focus on a particular community garden as a natural and material (pragmatic) reality. We consider this approach vital to better understand the complex mechanisms at play when community gardens are harnessed into the project of urban future-making.

Onkraj gradbišča as a socio-nature

The modernist view considers nature as unruly, something people should fear, control, and conquer (Kaika 2005; Smith 2010). Yet, gardens play an essential role in imaginaries of the good life in modern cities, supposedly balancing the harmful effects of city growth and promising the reconciliation of modernity with the moral good (e.g., Conan 1999; Hondagneu-Sotelo 2010; Picard 2011). Despite differences between them, these traditional meanings (tamed nature, paradise, leisure, even luxury) are questioned by the new meanings ascribed to urban gardens, especially community gardens: resilient community building, subsistence/self-sufficiency, responsible citizenship, child de-alienation, and the good life as a more socially and environmentally just life closer to natural reproduction cycles.

The interconnectedness of nature and society in (urban) gardens is reflected in the concept of socio-nature, which "asserts that social relations are inherently ecological and that ecological relations are inherently social" (Alkon 2013: 663). Urban gardening as a socio-natural practice has been so far misrepresented in academic literature, as it failed, in most cases, to frame "nature" and "society" as connected realms while at the same time unreflexively treating "nature" as universally "good" (Classens 2015: 230). To bridge this research gap, we analyze nature as a vital actor in urban gardening, which produces urban nature in "a simultaneous process of social and bio-physical change in which new kinds of spaces are created" (Gandy 2006: 62).

Despite a clear link between gardening and the production of urban nature, *Onkraj gradbišča* was conceived first and foremost as a social and cultural innovation. It was described as "a unique spatial, ecological and community experiment [which] transformed a long-dormant construction site in the center of Ljubljana into a community space intended for gardening and everyday contact with nature in the city, socializing, education and culture" (*Onkraj gradbišča* 2022, authors' transla-

tion). It aimed to provide a space for non-commercial socializing and to serve for the "revival" of community life, which was allegedly on the decline and in need of resuscitation (cf. Bunker s. a.). In the words of one of the two key initiators, Polonca Lovšin, it was supposed "to test various forms of co-existence, different ways of designing spaces, the creation of alternative values, and a positive vision for the future of city residents" (Lovšin 2014: 9).

KUD Obrat, the NGO that initiated *Onkraj gradbišča* in 2010, established the garden with a future-oriented, distinctly artistic, and innovative approach. Explaining what *KUD Obrat* offered to the organizers of *Mladi levi/Young Lions* festival, Urška Jurman, the other key initiator of *Onkraj gradbišča*, said: "…so basically what we could offer them was the image of the empty land as a kind of space of imagination, space of future possibilities, you know, so this is how it started …"

She contrasts the vision they had in mind with a more standardized architect's thinking that requires visualizing the projected spaces and anticipating them in terms of the ready future forms. *KUD Obrat* had started from an artistic vision in which the emptiness was rich in potentialities and in which a goat could plan on par with – or even better than – professional architects. We return to this point below. Yet, as time passed, their daring innovation met two obstacles: the potential participants did not settle on a shared vision of what to make out of an empty space, and the project leaders needed to offer something more tangible to attract people to the garden. Simultaneously, the project logic called for the justification of the use of public funds. The initiators thus needed to shape the garden in a way that resonated the most with the people involved as well as to produce more or less conventional cultural content and the structure of tasks and events (concert, communal work action, film screening, charity fair, lecture, and the like) to attract participants and account for their work. The garden got "projectified."

After the garden was established, initiators and gardeners faced a new challenge, brought upon them not by the funding system but by the "unruly" nature (Dean 2014). The seasons, weather, uncultivated flora and fauna, and other factors they had no power to influence required constant work to maintain garden plots and ensure the growing of food and other plants in the area, as Sandra recalls:

> Our garden was totally in the shadow, and it requires a lot of knowledge and a lot of work to do. And I didn't have time, and it was nonsense to have a garden that doesn't … that there is nothing growing there. And there was also this problem with mosquitoes because mostly I had time in the afternoon when they have their active time – at six o'clock … [Sandra]

On the other hand, the garden maintenance also required maintaining the community working on the plots. While the initiators did the bulk of the work to motivate and support the gardeners, coordinate joint activities, and involve the neighborhood, the gardeners also had to participate in the efforts, occasionally taking over a coordinating role for a given activity and adapting to the needs and visions of the others. As one gardener explained:

> Rules were really-really changing every year […] you know when there comes a dog who doesn't follow, who goes on the bed, and then you need to re-think everything, so it's constant working, but it's nice, they are nice processes, but they are not easy. [Ida]

From this overview, we conclude that urban nature subjects the gardeners to two competing logics: innovation and maintenance. The dynamics and consequences of the disjuncture between the two logics guide our analysis.

Innovation and maintenance in urban gardening

While innovation has been an important discourse of modernization, in recent years, attention has increasingly turned to the processes that "keep modern societies going" (Graham and Thrift 2007: 1), the processes of maintenance. Likened to the humble work of an earthworm crucial to nature's flourishing, the maintenance of buildings, machinery and roads, computer software, and human bodies, the reproductive labor of dusting and cleaning dishes – all the "…ungrateful and repetitive activities that usually constitute maintenance" (Denis and Pontille 2023: 209) in human societies – have only recently received the scholarly attention (Denis and Pontille 2015; Russel and Vinsel 2018, 2019). The particular rhythm of maintenance, its temporality (Jackson 2016), has been conceptualized as one that "never ends" and requires non-egocentric attentiveness. The subjects performing maintenance work thus have little control over their time, which turns them away from individualistic and fragmented perception to a more collectivist and holistic view. Yet at the same time, it subordinates them to the needs of others, thus encroaching on their individual present and future. Thus, maintenance is strongly intertwined with the ethics of care (Mol 2008; de la Bellacasa 2012, 2017), and the latter determines the transformative and justice potential of social practices, as Kotsila and co-authors (2020) showed for community gardens. Finally, Denis and Pontille (2023: 218) suggest that "maintenance remains difficult to comprehend. […] It takes commitment and attentiveness to realize its presence and understand its value." It is thus placed in the spot of ignorance or not-knowing (Gross 2010) and prevented from articulation. From the perspective of our research material, the "untellability" and "invisibility" of maintenance, as well as its systematic under-valuing, are important interpretative cues that will allow us to develop our argumentation.

The role of maintenance in society has been summed up affectionately: maintenance is "the engine room of modern economies and societies" that "whispers the world into existence" (Graham and Thrift 2007: 19–20). Yet, maintenance is still largely overlooked and undervalued in theorizing future-making (Appadurai 2013; Salazar et al. 2017; Bryant and Knight 2019). There is a bias towards innovation due to the association between the future and novelty (cf. Ringel 2021). However, shifting attention to the maintenance processes can unsettle this vision, and the case of *Onkraj gradbišča* allows us to follow this alternative logic.

We will zoom in on the many heterogeneous actors cohabitating in the garden. Analyzing their divergent rationalities and ways of being in the garden, we focus on the processes of maintaining the plant life in the garden, on the one hand, and maintaining human relations that constituted the garden, on the other. While these kinds of maintenance are closely interlaced in practice, we distinguish them analytically for the presentation in this text. We first focus primarily on the experience of the rank-and-file gardeners, then turn our attention to the experience of the initiators of the garden, and finally introduce a vital yet commonly overlooked actor of urban gardening: urban nature.

Maintenance work by middle-class gardeners

Although the garden was a key idea for *Onkraj gradbišča* from the beginning, the organizers initially left the site intentionally undefined to let potential participants contribute their own ideas. As mentioned, this form of innovation did not attract much bottom-up interest. Therefore, after the festival ended and the initiators wanted to continue exploring what could happen at the construction site, *Onkraj gradbišča* was (re)defined as a community garden, where each participant would have a separate bed to tend and be obliged to participate in joint activities (called *delovna akcija* as a reminiscence of the working brigades from socialist times). This formula proved far more successful: many individuals and whole families applied in the first season, and in the following seasons there was a queue of people who wanted to take care of a garden bed at *Onkraj gradbišča* and participate in its shared activities. While in the beginning, people had come from all over Ljubljana, over time, mainly people who lived nearby became gardeners on a more long-term basis and spent between two and seven seasons tending to the DIY beds.

Figure 1: Onkraj gradbišča in 2011, photo by Suzana Kajba (KUD Obrat Archive).

Over twelve years, well over a hundred people gardened at the site. They came from all life paths, yet, architects, lawyers, translators, physicians, people connected with theatre, teachers, researchers, graphic designers, and artists featured prominently among the gardeners at *Onkraj gradbišča* who defined its material shape and cultural meaning. They belong to a creative middle class with high cultural capital who prefer the "atmosphere" of a community garden, characterized by values such as creativity, sustainability, diversity, and empowerment, over the alleged conservative conformity of allotment gardens (for a critique see Exner and Schützenberger 2018: 182). It is no coincidence that primarily people with middle-class backgrounds were attracted by the idea of inner-city community gardening. The garden catered to the needs of this particular social group that perceives cities as a crucial element of their self-image and their way of life characterized by

> a rejection of the suburbs and their perceived cultural conformity in favor of the more cosmopolitan and permissive opportunities of the central city. If so, then an inner-city home is much more than a functional convenience; for a particular fragment of the middle class, it is an integral part of their identity. (Blokland 2008: 160)

At the same time, the garden itself, its nature, aesthetics, and structure were organized in a way that resonated with inner-city middle-class life. As a result, a homology existed between the garden and the gardeners, providing an example of how urbanization, social class, and nature are entangled, reciprocally related, and result in specific class-produced socio-natures (Domene and Saurí 2007).

For most of these gardeners, *Onkraj gradbišča* was, first and foremost, a recreational landscape. Recreation and leisure are intrinsically class-based (e.g., Rojek 2010). Preferences regarding how leisure is spent are revealing, and they shape the garden's socio-nature in turn, as "gardens are in this way paradigmatic examples of the symbolic dimension of socio-natures" (Exner and Schützenberger 2018: 183). At *Onkraj gradbišča*, many gardeners' ways of using the garden mirror this approach. For middle-class gardeners belonging to the "creative class," gardening was not a means to an end (such as food production or self-subsistence). Instead, it was the practice of gardening itself that sparked their joy and attracted them to *Onkraj gradbišča*. Being there, spending time, and working in the garden gave them a break from their professional activities, filling the voids and relaxing tensions brought about by their way of life as creative middle-class. In effect, recreational gardening embodied the opposite of work while at the same time blurring the boundaries between public and private as well as work and leisure. The garden was a peculiar mixture of public and private: a living room outside that gardeners frequented for a lunch break, a piece of nature close to home that they visited on the way back from work, as Sandra did. She used to come three to four times a week with her children to get some things done in a relaxed way and have a drink:

> We were not ambitious gardeners, you know, we just came there, did little things together, and chat and go home, drink a beer, and… it was an hour

> or two, and sometimes I just come for ten minutes to water and go; […] you know we have this community here, we are doing something, a little bit cultural, a little bit gardening, and I think it's nice, yeh.

Tea, another gardener, told us:

> So we took some food (laughs), like from a takeaway, and went there [to Onkraj gradbišča] to eat it together. He [the husband] came from work, and I was on maternity leave, so we were having lunches there in spring; this is what I really miss (laughs)!

Thus, gardening was not perceived as work, especially not as "hard work," and middle-class gardeners negotiated the workload by choosing low-maintenance plants and a relaxed approach to the outcomes. Likewise, the middle-class interlocutors in Lisa Taylor's research on classed and gendered gardening practices "avoided ever referring to gardening as work. The middle-class gardeners […] tended to gloss over the idea of labor by naming it as some other function, it was always more than just labor as a means to achieve an end" (Taylor 2008: 116). For them, gardening labor was "relaxing," an "exercise," a "means of procrastinating." Her working-class interlocutors, in contrast, would perceive "the almost daily routine of garden labor as hard work" (ibid.), to be performed relentlessly under the controlling gaze of neighboring gardeners.

Similar to Taylor's middle-class research partners (2008: 147), our interlocutors drew a clear line between the idea of gardening and "actual" labor, whether domestic or professional. For them, *Onkraj gradbišča* was not necessary to produce food, nor was it a means to seek recognition from or to keep up with neighbors or other gardeners. For the post-industrial middle-class participants, the community garden was an extension of a creative career and biography, a puzzle piece that complements the good life for a creative middle-class who tends to identify with their work:

> Thus, the role of leisure is not so much the traditional one of providing the physical and mental relief sufficient to ensure a return to work (though this is certainly part of it); and leisure is clearly not designed to enable the negation of work identity ("escaping work," "getting in touch with my real self," "living for the weekend"), but appears more formally geared to actively developing and servicing individual "creative powers" as a strategy for further economizing the body. (Banks 2009: 673; cf. Rojek 2010)

Nature, thus, becomes a resource for what is missing in the quest for the good life. Gardening, then, is not a means to an end (e.g., food production) but a means in itself. The creative middle-class longs for an, often romanticized, version of nature as genuine, authentic, direct, and pure. In this way, there is an interesting resemblance with the bourgeois classes' romantic love of nature and nostalgia for rural folk life in the 19th century (Frykman and Löfgren 1987: 51). Sensory experiences and the stimulation of the senses, as well as the feeling of closeness to nature, make garden-

ing so fascinating for many gardeners. Tea explains that gardening is not about revenue but about emotions and being part of nature:

> I like how things grow; I mean… I don't need to… I get really a lot of vegetables from my mum and my mother-in-law, so I don't need to do it for our homegrown vegetables, but just for the feeling of doing something with your hands, and it's nice to see that something grows that you plant, so this is the thing… that you take care of something, and it's successful, it gives you a really nice… good feeling about yourself and something.

For Tea, the act of gardening and its sensory experience are much more important than the result. The act of gardening contributes to personal fulfillment, to a notion of holistic well-being that one literally takes into one's own hands and in which one comes into contact with one's unmediated and analogous true self, independent of societal and civilizational forces. This illustrates that "…the potential benefit of gardens lies as much in what gardens do to people as what people do to gardens" (Cele 2023: 118).

Against the background of this holistic experience, gardening became an essential educational tool for many gardeners and part of their family life. For the families at *Onkraj gradbišča*, the garden was a safe space: a place where children were protected within a fenced area, where they could roam free and were in contact with nature, its elements, and natural processes. Gardening with children has historically played a prominent role in education and has "been used in schools to teach children about crafts, food production, political ideology, and national identity" (Cele 2023: 120). In addition to its potential to offer a first-hand educational experience of biological processes, parents valued the garden as a safe, educational space, which provided the complexity, diversity, and richness of childhood experiences that would contribute to children's harmonious and positive development. As phrased by Sofia Cele (2023: 123), "children acquire tools to handle the doom and gloom" of the "polycrisis" permeating the current world in systemic transition (Morin 1999; Henig and Knight 2023). The organizers were well aware of the fact that the garden's tamed wilderness attracted these families, as Urška Jurman recalls: "We had a lot of young families with kids, you know, for them it was precious that they can be in this kind of a bit wilder place." They occasionally organized an extracurricular activity, "To the Wild," for children from 7 to 12 years of age, which enabled "rediscovering nature" and "creating a diary of living with nature in all seasons" (Malomerilo and KUD Obrat 2014).

To return to our central argument: according to our interlocutors, maintenance work was a crucial factor that attracted middle-class gardeners to the garden. They did not perceive it as a nuisance one has to endure to be in nature or a necessary and unavoidable obstacle on the way to the good life. Our interlocutors found the joy of gardening precisely in maintenance work in and with (and sometimes against) nature. Yet, the maintenance work they engaged in had playful qualities. It did not support their livelihoods but contributed to a good quality of life. It was playful or

recreational maintenance that many dropped after several seasons, turning to other leisure activities.

The innovative aspect stressed by the organizers, where the garden should bring about a "revival" of community life and provide "a positive vision for the future of city residents" (Lovšin 2014: 9), did not play a significant role for the gardeners at *Onkraj gradbišča*. Mark, asked whether he was keeping in touch with the people he met and hung out with at *Onkraj gradbišča*, said: *"Yes, we keep in touch. Of course, we don't phone each other, but we say hello when we meet in the street."* He did not miss the socializing he experienced in the garden, but the gardening and being in the nature of the garden itself. People were a nice addition and a pleasant pastime, but for members of the creative middle class, for whom the lines between work and social life were already blurring, extending their social network to the urban garden was a side issue. Classens (2015: 232) argues in a similar vein that nature in the city space is "a means of providing reprieve from a too-social world." He continues: "In other words, the benefits of the urban garden are largely understood to exist precisely because they stand in opposition to a too-social world" (Classens 2015: 234).

Gardening at *Onkraj gradbišča* resonates with this desire for fresh air and manual labor, where one (eventually) sees a result of one's work and earns the fruits of one's labor. Tea mentioned that she likes gardening because the results are visible quickly and she can take them home to enjoy the feeling of having made something grow. The gardener receives a prompt response from their counterpart (nature), for better or worse. In a world of creative and intellectual brainwork where discussions and mind games abound, nature confined in the garden boundaries is a refreshing antidote. This confined space, however, cannot last without an engagement that is more committed and less playful than that of the rank-and-file gardeners. We shall thus turn to the garden's initiators to encounter a different type of maintenance work.

Relational garden – *Onkraj gradbišča* initiators as innovative janitors

Interested in participatory art, design, and urban planning, *Onkraj gradbišča's* organisers saw this project as an opportunity to make urban dwellers relate to each other and cooperate through an artistic nature-based project. They saw their own role partly as innovators but mainly as "those who listen" to people rather than tell them what to do or – to use the maintenance-related vocabulary – as "janitors" (cf. Selimović 2018: 37). Yet, the ideal type of a "mediator" or "listener" figure underwent a "reality check" when the first attempts to involve city residents in the project did not immediately prove successful. As mentioned in the previous section, a rather vague formula of "just a garden" had not attracted people, so *Onkraj gradbišča* was revamped as a place where people could garden on individual beds. This hit the right cord with the needs of the urbanites. The allotment-like formula of the garden was enriched with commoning activities (*delovne akcije*), marking the seasons' beginnings and ends or addressing particular tasks such as building a treehouse for children who, as we explained in the previous section, were important members of the

gardening community. These shared activities were occasions for interaction among the gardeners. When the garden membership grew, the organizers started thinking about distributing responsibilities (e.g., individual rank-and-file gardeners were appointed to order water, procure soil, host weekly open hours during the season, organize events, etc.). The initiators emphasized that it was vital for the garden to gradually become self-sufficient and "run by itself" through the distribution of tasks among rank-and-file gardeners.

As it turned out, however, complete organizational self-sufficiency was not attainable. With a relatively high fluctuation in garden membership (due to gardeners' lifecycles, changes of heart, health issues, new projects or interests popping up), the gardeners' involvement in the overall maintenance of *Onkraj gradbišča* was fragmented and patchy, stronger in some seasons, weaker in others. Gardeners, for whom *Onkraj gradbišča* was a pleasant recreational and educational setting and a site for individual biographic/identity building (as described in the previous section), were purposefully downshifting their involvement to be able to balance their presence at *Onkraj gradbišča* with other tasks and goals in their lives. Stefan Doepner, one of *KUD Obrat* members and *Onkraj gradbišča*'s initiators recalls: "One problem was that we were seen as organizers, mama and papa, when something was not working or missing, when there were some bees or wasps, too many mosquitos or whatever, they would write to us" (in Chardronnet 2019).

In this sense, the metaphor of the "janitor" for the role of the garden's initiators acquired a new – more literal – meaning: the initiators became the ones who must be "always present." The garden encroached on the organizers' lives and stopped being just a project when their responsibility stretched much further than the "project rationality" would have it. Indeed, the funding of the project was patchy, primarily from the culture department of the municipality, and predominantly for tangible "results," i.e., the events and "products" such as poetry competitions, concerts, lectures, workshops in beekeeping, a celebration of garden's anniversary, and activities for children. However, the initiators were taking on the tasks and responsibilities "out of care for the garden" and not out of the project work's targets, milestones, and deliverables. As a rank-and-file gardener testified: "… there was a community, there were two persons […] Polona and Urška, they were, ehm … it's not that they suggested, but they were […] ehm, the ones who cared for the communication and everything" [Daniel].

Relations of care had translated into maintaining (i.e., continuing with) the activities when the formal or institutional grounds for these activities were endangered, undefined or volatile, or even ended or expired.

> Yeah, we were always involved; this was also always a question among us initiators, like what is our role, how to pull out or not, or change our function. But we always stayed involved. There was in the last two years again more [work], because we just, we thought we established a good system and then Corona came. But actually, I think things, I don't know which year it says here, uhm,

> there was then like a board of coordinators for this kind of more daily-running things of the garden. But we, as initiators, we were the ones having a contract with the city, and we always were also supporting these coordinators when [it] was needed. [Urška Jurman]

If the garden was to function, some individuals had to persist and ensure that problems were solved when they arose. Thus, the garden, with its natural and social "demands" and "needs," made "the art of maintenance" (Denis and Pontille 2023), practiced by the initiators, their most important creative contribution. The initiators had to be ready for a myriad of seemingly invisible tasks that could not be pre-planned but popped up as the garden was growing and gardeners coming and going. Communication with the gardeners is just one example: it was not only occasional blog posts, brochures, ads, or emails informing of shared activities, but also a flow of communication directed to the gardeners individually:

> ... if your garden is abandoned by the end of June, [...] For me, that was always a sign that something is not okay, you know. Not that you are breaking the rules, but that maybe something is happening on the side of this person, you know, like a sickness or some kind... [...] so that they have no time or no possibilities to [come]. So, this was the communication: I noticed that your garden is still empty, or do you have some problems, like do you need some help? Let us know what is happening. And then usually it was actually the case that the person was sick or had an operation, or moved, or I don't know. [Urška Jurman]

These words clearly reflect the ethics of care (de la Bellacasa 2017). Engagement in care for the garden and the relations in the garden allowed *Onkraj gradbišča* to get involved in the future-making of a new type: not the kind that introduces something strikingly new just for the sake of novelty and flashy effect, but the one that studies the present and past with utmost attentiveness – the one concerned with knowing and keeping what is already there, taking it next step:

> We came to certain places, and we were considerate, you know. Like, first thing that we did was like having a guided tour of what is... already growing here, to understand where you came and to learn about the place itself and to really, we were behaving like some, I don't know, careful guests, you know. And in that sense, we really were [paying] attention to coexist with what is there already, you know, so. [Urška Jurman]

With the metaphor of the "careful guest," the initiators illustrate their attitude toward nature. Their attitude toward the gardeners of *Onkraj gradbišča,* in contrast, could be described as that of "considerate hosts" who understate their effort and are persistent in making sure everyone is comfortable in and with the garden. One of the gardeners, asked if there were any rules, said: "... no, I don't think so... I don't remember any rules (laughs). [...] I don't think there were any rules" [Daniel]. In

fact, rules had been established to ensure the smooth functioning of the garden and the well-being of the gardeners, but they were permanently modified to better fit the garden's and gardeners' needs. Several gardeners recollected that the rule definition and changes were carried out collectively.

There were a lot of maintenance efforts that the initiators (as well as gardeners, especially women) undertook but either were not able to remember them or considered them too insignificant to mention. As argued by Denis and Pontille (2023: 218), maintenance "makes everything happen as if nothing were happening" due to its "repetitiveness and invisibility." The invisibilization of maintenance efforts, their unaccounted-for quality, and the lack of recognition for undertaking them – in the context of their crucial importance for the garden's functioning – resulted in the moments when the initiators' perseverance was tested: as one of the gardeners suggested, *"maybe this enthusiasm from the people who are kind of [the] head of it went a little down"* [Tea]. A similar process was mentioned by a member of another nature-based initiative in Ljubljana and described as a "burnout." It is thus important to emphasize that the initiators' care for the garden continued and that it superseded the "project rationality." Despite being overwhelmed, they did not abandon the garden until its very end, decreed by the municipality. Even then, they put a lot of effort into paying farewell to the garden, allowing the gardeners to say goodbye to the place and each other, finding new homes for the plants, and attempting to influence the site's future use.

Figure 2: Polonca Lovšin and Urška Jurman preparing plants for the giveaway, October 2022, photo by Nada Žgank (KUD Obrat Archive).

Yet, the unaccounted-for care and maintenance effort they invested in it and their unprecedented act of stepping out of the project rationality sheds light on the paradox of *Onkraj gradbišča*: that a hugely successful and innovative urban gardening project was discontinued and not replicated at a different site. Before we get to the final discussion of this paradox, another actor's contribution must be presented to draw a more accurate picture of a community garden as an urban socio-nature. We now turn to the role of natural forces and the materiality of the garden.

Nature as a vital actor in maintenance and innovation

In the case of *Onkraj gradbišča*, the garden as a metaphor and an actual material reality was the key attraction for the gardeners. Even though only a minority was motivated by the wish to produce their own food, the opportunity to grow vegetables and flowers was a source of gardeners' positive emotions and moral satisfaction. Furthermore, most gardeners treated the site as a "living room outside" where they could engage with plants and bring their children closer to nature. Finally, nature at *Onkraj gradbišča* was a source of artistic and craft-related explorations not only for the initiators but also for some gardeners. For example, a gardener who was a fashion designer experimented with growing cultivars that she could potentially use in her projects. There were also more elaborate artistic projects, such as the one by artist Stefan Doepner, one of the *KUD Obrat* members, who in 2021 made an exhibition "about the beauty of humus and soil" focusing on "humus, artificial intelligence and the beauty of decay" (Cirkulacija2 2021). He used two beds at *Onkraj gradbišča* to "study" plants' companionship and plant-soil relations. The process of organic matter decomposing into humus was juxtaposed with culture. The latter was seen as both limiting nature to an aesthetic perspective ("beauty") and seeking to copy or imitate nature ("artificial intelligence"). The point was not to understand the humification process but to contemplate it in philosophical and aesthetic terms.

Artistic projects reveal the tension between the practicalities of engaging with the garden materiality and the language of socio-cultural articulations particularly well. Urban gardens as socio-nature create tensions between the need to attend to plants, animals and soil, deal with temperatures, seasonality, floods, and draughts, and – on the other hand – the need to narrate a garden to its users, neighbors, individual and collective actors who fund, support, or attack it. The latter sometimes creates an anthropomorphic narrative, in which plants are likened to humans to create an emphatic link (cf. Wohlleben 2016). At *Onkraj gradbišča*, these narratives also created the garden's "biography" through occasional publications that visualized and narrated the garden's life, emphasizing its continuity. After the decision of the municipality to dissolve the garden became final, the initiators set up the plant giveaway (as described in the Introduction). They created unique tags with a plant "telling its story" about its origins in *Onkraj gradbišča*. They also tried to maintain the garden within limiting and changing institutional conditions. While institutional rationality tended to background nature or limit it to a declarative domain, nature's own agency was far more pronounced and influential in the garden.

Figure 3: Plants' "biographies" prepared for the giveaway, October 2022 (KUD Obrat Archive).

As mentioned, *Onkraj gradbišča* started as an urban innovation project primarily defined in terms of social and cultural goals such as enhancing social cohesion, developing new forms of cooperation between municipality and NGOs, and re-definition of city aesthetics. Yet, it was also a nature-related project from the outset, as demonstrated by "A Day with a Goat" [*Dan s kozo*] (cf. KUD Obrat 2012b), a performative action that the initiator Polonca Lovšin carried out in 2010. The artist took a goat to the then-empty construction site and followed her throughout the day, meticulously recording her path and activities. The resulting utopian plan for the site, presented in the fanzine celebrating the garden's 5th anniversary (KUD Obrat 2015), was partly used in planning the garden beds in the following seasons. The idea was to demonstrate that a non-human-actor can be included in planning urban space, that indeed they have to be included as partners, and their needs have to be accounted for in cities. Moreover, the performance – described as a "tribute to nature" – was a metaphor and projection of bringing nature to the city that "also showed a sustainable model of maintaining public spaces in today's city" (Lovšin 2014: 142–143).

As an artistic multi-layered articulation, "A Day with a Goat" proved prophetic in several senses, for natural processes have become important mediators and intermediaries in the garden's life. While creative human actors were in control of the overall framework of the process during this artistic action, that was not the case in the ensuing decade of garden life. Nature proved far more unpredictable, unruly, and agentic than the goat, who only acted within the temporal, spatial and functional frames she was assigned to.

The unruliness of nature is best demonstrated through the two simultaneous processes. One was the swift growth of the trees. At *Onkraj gradbišča*, perennials, low-maintenance plants, and volunteer plants were strong long-term actors who gradually took over the site by creating shadows and pushing away some other plants (making them less- or non-productive). These volunteer plants, especially trees such as birch or acer, took advantage of the favorable climatic conditions, and gradually, over a hundred trees and shrubs of these and other cultivars have grown in the garden, some reaching the height of over ten meters and creating a leafy canopy that overshadowed the vegetable beds. The initiators as well as rank-and-file gardeners – many of whom came in close contact with plant cultivation for the first time in their lives – did not feel the need to limit the trees' growth in the first years, so after the five to six years of the garden's functioning the vegetable gardening became increasingly difficult due to the trees' shadow.

The other natural process that affected the garden was what the gardeners referred to as the "coming of mosquitoes." Due to the trees' growth and the presence of rainwater collected for plant watering – potentially combined with external reasons such as the limitations on pesticide use by the municipality – the considerable growth of the mosquito population marked the last years of *Onkraj gradbišča*. During the summer and early autumn months, their presence had become a considerable nuisance, especially for gardeners with children, and another cause for withdrawal from gardening, as Dana explains:

> Actually, they kicked us out, these mosquitoes, five years, ago I suppose, intensively! [...] ... they are the ones that are also very active during the day, starting early... they came I think from Italy [...] And similar thing now here, in the garden... you are just fighting all the time. When you are gone from the garden you just check how many bites you've got, so... [...] and then we were supposed to have open hours, you know, on Thursday, and that was really hard cause it means two hours being there with mosquitoes, and I think last year or the year before I could not manage that, two hours – it was impossible, especially with kids... [Dana]

While dealing with mosquitoes is a complex socio-ecological issue, the overgrowth of the trees highlights a classical dilemma of gardening (Ginn 2017): which species to kill and which ones to leave to flourish. The initiators' decision not to kill tree saplings and their "withdrawal from maintenance" or "neglect of repair" redefined the initial garden's outlook and socio-ecological function. It brought the unintended consequences of making a garden less attractive to some gardeners. However, in terms of biodiversity and ecological services that *Onkraj gradbišča* provided to the city (e.g., CO2 reduction and concomitant air quality amelioration, water retention, heat island reduction), the tree overgrowth was indeed beneficial.

The organizers' and gardeners' response to these changing circumstances was the shift in the selection of vegetable cultivars grown in the garden: for example, they replaced tomatoes that needed more sunlight with wild strawberries that were self-

propagating in more shadowy areas. The initiators also suggested switching from a "vegetable garden" to the "forest garden" model to go along the lines of what natural processes brought about, as Urška Jurman explained. Yet, while the adjustments were made, the trees' dynamic growth and the mosquito population increase also impacted the drop in the number of people who actively gardened.

In this way, nature's agency called for the initiators' vigilance and constant monitoring of the garden's developments and its effects. They needed to adjust to natural processes and deal with their impact on rank-and-file gardeners. Although human relations in the gardens had their own dynamics and needed occasional interventions, we claim that nature at *Onkraj gradbišča* was crucial for engaging the initiators in maintenance. Being not just wilderness but *natura urbana* (Gandy 2022), a complex socio-natural reality entangled in natural and socio-cultural processes, plant life at *Onkraj gradbišča* constantly reminded about and called for maintenance. Gardening followed the annual cycle of seasons, demanding that gardeners adapt their calendar of socio-cultural events accordingly (and not vice versa). At the same time, maintenance efforts in the garden were also subjected to urban-industrial rhythms; in the case of the gardeners with children, the rhythm of the school year. Most garden activities began in spring; in summer, they slowed down due to vacations and heat. Both forced gardeners to communicate with other gardeners or their family members about watering the plants, and not let the garden die due to the lack of care.

We gathered from the interviews and observations that nature's agency has been affective. The garden did not get people involved only through negative associations of being "needy" and "demanding." For the initiators and gardeners, *Onkraj gradbišča* has transformed from a random site into a familiar place, a place of belonging, and a home-like place. The feeling of symbolic ownership has emerged through its physical features (a fence, a gate, vegetable beds to tend, compost box to fill, etc.) as well as through the intertwinement of the initiators' and gardeners' biographies and the lives of the plants, especially the trees and perennials. Children were "born" and "brought up in the garden" (several female gardeners almost literally used such phrasing). The garden became a site of biographies and memories, and the plants – e.g., the successes and failures of their cultivation, the disputes over the right ways of gardening – were not only a part of daily experiences but also of life narratives. Especially for the initiators, the garden evolved from an experimental to an affective site. The maintenance work it required connected them with the garden and "grounded" them in it, creating loyalty. For gardeners, the plants' radical difference from other living beings – their "plantiness" (Head et al. 2014) – paired with the imperative to come into frequent interactions with them, created a welcome alternative to their professional and other free time involvements.

Yet, the "unruly nature" that kept surprising the gardeners and called for more vigilance and flexibility eventually cooled down the garden's attractiveness to most gardeners. Many left, taking the good memories and light nostalgia with them. We want to be clear: the agency of nature was not the force that made the garden come to an end; the reason for that was the municipality's decision to develop housing

on the site. Nature merely "communicated" the need for maintenance to gardeners, the pressure most of them have found excessive and too hard to endure long-term. To be precise, it was not nature as such but socio-cultural expectations towards an urban garden that made the need for maintenance acute. These expectations were coming from the municipality and the gardeners themselves. At the same time, the initiators from *KUD Obrat* tried to creatively manage and negotiate them (e.g., offering a forest garden model was one such attempt to limit the maintenance burden to a minimum).

Conclusion

In the concluding section of this article, we return to our initial question of why a hugely successful and innovative urban gardening project was not only discontinued in a top-down manner but was also not replicated at a different site. We suggest explaining this paradox with the opposing logics of innovation and maintenance. At *Onkraj gradbišča*, both logics constantly worked against each other instead of coordinating in the interest of sustainable urban future-making. The innovative and boundary-breaking potential of maintenance has already been postulated in research on urban art (Sharp, Pollock and Paddison 2005: 17), while this article followed the ambition to articulate a similar argument for critical urban studies and anthropology of the future.

The friction between innovation and maintenance in the experience of *Onkraj gradbišča* can be treated as a "learning opportunity" for urban future-making. Our ethnographic case demonstrates that the friction between the two arises from the inadequate valuation of maintenance. Instead of considering it a pivotal and precious part of initiators' and rank-and-file gardeners' involvement, maintenance remained hidden from the public eye. Neither in a top-down nor in a bottom-up fashion were the venues for its public recognition created. In our assessment, the garden's major innovative strength was its continuity, ensuring it lasted against the odds. Initially, *Onkraj gradbišča* was meant to be a short-term project. Still, it lasted over a decade: it was conceived as a 10-day-long event during the festival in 2010, then prolonged till the end of the calendar year, then for the whole year, then another one, and so on; effectively, it functioned until 2022.

Although this characteristic was shadowed by other vital aspects publicly recognized and praised as innovative (e.g., community-building, neighborhood revitalization, ecological impact, etc.), we argue that the "art of maintenance," practiced by the initiators and gardeners of *Onkraj gradbišča,* should be regarded as the garden's prominent innovative feature. We do not imply that our field site is a unique case – after all, the garden stands for a centuries-old metaphor of care (cf. Ginn 2017). Yet, in this case, maintenance and care were neither privatized (as in a home garden or an allotment) nor institutionalized (as in a public park). They were exercised publicly,

collectively (though the responsibilities were not equally divided between initiators and rank-and-file gardeners), and against the odds. We suggest that the creativity and innovation of *Onkraj gradbišča* lie in surpassing the project rationality in an urban future-making endeavor and in engaging in the ethics of care (for plants and relations in the garden), despite neoliberal structural conditioning of contemporary urban activism.

Furthermore, we suggest that bringing the ethics of care (de la Bellacasa 2017; cf. Sovová, Jehlička and Daněk 2021; Kotsila et al. 2020) into the public domain and exercising the "art of maintenance" (Denis and Pontille 2023) publicly is another non-disruptive innovation, and that the understanding of innovation should be reassessed through this concept. Innovation does not necessarily have to be an invention of something new. Instead, it can be re-conceptualized as being attentive to something that already exists so that its life with its unpredictable features is "whispered into existence" (Graham and Thrift 2007: 20) and given a chance to flourish and surprise. This can refer to the "vibrant matter" (Bennett 2010) of the trees and wild strawberries as well as the liveliness of children growing up in the garden. Notably, "being attentive" should not be conceptualized as effortless or exciting but as involving labor and endurance.

The new meaning of innovation, we thus suggest, should be decidedly presentist (cf. Ringel 2018, 2021) in both temporal and spatial terms. It should emphasize the need for care for what is already there as well as the need for upkeeping and maintenance because "[t]o reproduce the present … [often] constitutes a betterment of sorts" (Ringel 2021: 145). Presentism, in this sense, means that innovation, to be sustainable, should also be "frugal" in that it cannot disregard or surpass the functional processes that already take place and should include maintenance as its unalienable part. The progressive type of innovation – not just shallow "innovation rhetoric" (Russel and Vinsel 2019) – could only be achieved in an "accompanying" mode and should contain attentiveness or mindfulness of the others, of the context in which it operates, and the conditions outside of its own logic and frame. Only such out-worldly (not self-centered and autotelic) innovativeness can be viable for a sustainable urban future-making.

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Umijeće zelenog održavanja. Stvaranje budućnosti u urbanom vrtlarstvu

Urbano vrtlarstvo ima važnu ulogu u zamišljanju i predviđanju održive budućnosti, ali se u naglašavanju njegova inovativnog potencijala često prikrivaju različite logike koje usmjeravaju prakse. U članku se pozivamo na etnografski terenski rad u zajedničkom vrtu Onkraj gradbišča u Ljubljani, koji je uglavnom bio zamišljen kao društvena i kulturna inovacija. Međutim, da bi opstao, taj je vrt bilo potrebno neprestano održavati i brinuti se o njemu, čime su se morali baviti organizatori i vrtlari. Tvrdimo da je rad na održavanju presudan za održive prakse urbanog stvaranja budućnosti.

Ključne riječi: urbano vrtlarstvo, socio-priroda, inovacija, održavanje, stvaranje budućnosti, Ljubljana