

Reclaiming public green space: community gardens

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Isolation from nature and its prosperities, such as living in healthier environments with direct access to organic vegetation and benefiting from the calming effects of natural landscapes have been the main deficit of urban areas of our times. In today's rapidly and radically transforming and growing urban areas, in contrast to enlarging diverse amount of good and services, many open public spaces has been shrinking and even lost for the sake of growth and transformation. Unfortunately, public green spaces are one of the most prominent examples of these spaces. This shrinkage in public green spaces results in environmental and social complications in urban dwellers' lives and decreases the quality of life in urban areas. At the focus of environmental deficits lies the inability to cope with environmental sustainability. Along with the acceleration of global warming and its effects becoming visible at urban scale, public green spaces attain a vital role to cope with these issues while their conservation and revitalization needs further attention. In addition to decreasing chance of benefiting from the natural facilities of public green spaces and a way to cope with environmental crisis, urban dwellers also lose one of the main public spaces where they can meet, socialize, express themselves freely, engage with the other members of the society and create urban culture.

As a reaction to public policies that result with the shrinkage of public green spaces, many NGOs and urban dwellers started to reclaim their 'common' green spaces by making efforts to protect and vitalize these vulnerable areas that are under the threat of fast paced transformations and uncontrolled growth. Although being small

in scale, 'community gardens' became one of the significant green spaces that became the locus of the reaction against these policies where citizens reclaim their rights on public green spaces and transform these spaces on their own. Hence, as a 'tiny but mighty' public green space, 'community gardens' function in various aspects. Community gardens function as a tool for environmental sustainability as they are part of the green infrastructure in urban areas; a tool for social cohesiveness since they are a platform that foster community engagement; a tool for fostering public participation both at the decision making and implementation stages; a tool for recreation of urban residents; a tool to provide healthy environments since working with nature and being close to nature has many positive effects; and also a tool for economic development of local communities.

In the Turkish case, 'community gardens' has long roots as far as to the 'bostan's in the Ottoman era. However, we can claim that community gardens have been rediscovered by the urban dwellers in the recent years. Many community gardens are formed in the neighborhood scale or within university campuses while existing ones that are mostly at the danger of being lost are revitalized with the support volunteers from local residents and community at large and especially in self-organized ways. At this point, it is also important to note that these reactions on Community Gardens gained strength with the 'Gezi' incidents in 2013 which was an urban social movement, reclaiming urban public space against public policies that leave public open spaces vulnerable against urban development and leave no room for public opinion.

In this context, the aim of this study is to put forth the significance of community gardens as a 'natural' reaction to the undesirable environmental and social effects of uncontrolled urban growth and urban transformation projects that prioritize growth while leaving public green spaces vulnerable. In this regard, primarily the various roles of community gardens in urban areas are discussed with a special emphasis on the environmental and social aspects in order to create a comprehensive understanding of the notion. Secondly, prominent historic and recently formed community gardens in two of the major cities in Turkey; Istanbul and Ankara are briefly introduced. Later, these community gardens are classified regarding the history, formation, use and management characteristics, in order to put forth different models. By examining



diverse models of community gardens/bostans that are formed and transformed recently in Turkey, it is aimed to offer insights for the further implications in Turkey and at a global scale.