

Urban Agriculture and Multispecies Commoning in Public Housing Regeneration: Rethinking Ecologies of Care in Scampia

Augusto Fabio Cerqua

University of Naples Federico II, Department of Architecture
augustofabio.cerqua@unina.it

Abstract

In an era of planetary crisis, urban planning must move beyond extractive models toward regenerative approaches grounded in care and multispecies coexistence. This paper explores the contradictions and potential of embedding urban agriculture within public housing regeneration, focusing on Scampia (Naples), a district marked by socio-spatial marginalization. Analyzing the ReStart Scampia project, which proposes a system of cultivated fields, urban forests, and collectively managed green areas, this study reframes urban agriculture as a tool for multispecies commoning rather than a symbolic greening strategy. Drawing on urban political ecology and post-growth theory, the paper interrogates governance structures and asks: can urban agriculture foster socio-ecological justice in marginalized neighborhoods? Can it support post-anthropocentric planning practices through bottom-up land stewardship and care? The case offers insights for rethinking ecologies of care in public housing.

Keywords: urban agriculture; public housing regeneration; open spaces; multispecies commoning; care ecologies

1. Introduction: Beyond Greenwashing in the Age of Crisis

In the context of climate emergency, deepening inequalities, and growing social disconnection, urban planning is increasingly called upon to rethink its tools and paradigms. Recent years have witnessed the proliferation of discourses on care, regeneration, and ecological transition within policy and planning frameworks, yet the operationalization of such principles often remains superficial. In particular, urban greening strategies promoted in public housing neighborhoods tend to instrumentalize ecological rhetoric while maintaining extractive, top-down governance models.

This paper addresses these tensions through a critical reading of urban agriculture as a field of both appropriation and potential resistance within regeneration processes. Focusing on the district of Scampia in Naples, Italy—long stigmatized as a marginal territory yet undergoing a major transformation—the study reflects on the contradictions and opportunities arising when agriculture is mobilized as a tool for regeneration. Drawing on the ReStart Scampia project, it interrogates the extent to which urban agriculture can activate new ecologies of care, enable multispecies forms of commoning, and challenge the growth-oriented logic embedded in redevelopment plans.

To do so, the paper draws from the fields of urban political ecology, post-growth urbanism, and critical planning studies, proposing a situated and relational approach to public housing regeneration. It explores how urban agriculture may contribute to the reconfiguration of urban metabolism and the emergence of regenerative socio-spatial practices—particularly in territories historically marked by structural neglect and speculative planning. The aim is to offer both a critique and a possible reframing of the role of agriculture in post-growth urban transitions.

2. Theoretical framework: Post-growth urbanism and multispecies care

To critically engage with the promises and limits of urban agriculture in regeneration contexts, this paper situates its analysis within the frameworks of post-growth urbanism and urban political ecology. Post-growth thinking calls into question the centrality of economic expansion in urban development, advocating instead for regenerative, care-based alternatives (D'Alisa et al., 2015; Latouche, 2009). This perspective aligns with critiques of mainstream sustainability, which often fail to challenge extractive logics or engage with the socio-political dimensions of ecological transformation.

Urban political ecology offers a complementary lens by foregrounding the power relations embedded in the production of urban nature (Heynen et al., 2006; Swyngedouw, 2004). Within this field, urban agriculture emerges as a site of contested governance, capable of reproducing existing inequalities or opening space for alternative socio-ecological relations.

Building on these perspectives, the paper introduces the notion of multispecies commoning as a critical tool to reframe urban agriculture beyond anthropocentric and managerial paradigms. Drawing from Massimo De Angelis' work on the commons as sites of social cooperation outside capital (De Angelis, 2017) and Laura Centemeri's concept of ecological care as a relational and situated practice (Centemeri, 2015), multispecies commoning foregrounds the entanglements of human and non-human actors in the production and stewardship of shared environments.

This approach resonates with feminist and post-humanist theories of care (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Haraway, 2016), emphasizing interdependence, vulnerability, and the material conditions necessary for living together in damaged worlds. In this sense, urban agriculture can be reimagined not only as a source of food or greenery, but as an infrastructural practice through which ecologies of care and non-extractive relationships are cultivated. The next section outlines the methodological approach adopted in this research, grounded in situated knowledge, critical engagement, and a commitment to interrogate institutional narratives from within.

3. Methodology: Situated urban political ecology and critical engagement

This research adopts a situated and critically engaged methodology, drawing on the author's direct involvement in the ReStart Scampia project as a researcher and planner. Rather than claiming external objectivity, the study embraces a reflexive stance, recognizing the complexities and tensions of operating within institutional frameworks while maintaining a critical perspective.

Data collection combined ethnographic observation, informal interviews, and document analysis. Fieldwork was conducted intermittently between 2022 and 2024, with particular attention to public meetings, design workshops, and moments of negotiation between planners, local actors, and municipal institutions. As such, the methodology integrates both emic and etic perspectives: it considers the internal logics and aspirations of the project while foregrounding its political and socio-ecological implications.

This embedded approach allows for an analysis that is both grounded in practice and theoretically informed. It also reflects a commitment to what Haraway (1988) terms "situated knowledge": knowledge that is partial, embodied, and accountable. Rather than offering a universal assessment of urban agriculture, the paper focuses on the specific configurations, conflicts, and imaginaries that emerge in the Scampia context—viewing them as entry points to broader questions around commoning, care, and post-growth urbanism.

Beyond its epistemological implications, this methodological positioning can be understood as a political and performative act: a way of "staying with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016) rather than escaping into abstraction. Engaging with urban transformation from within entails embracing uncertainty, ambivalence, and the everyday negotiations that shape socio-ecological realities. In this regard, method becomes more than a tool for knowledge production—it becomes a terrain of situated intervention, echoing Stengers' (2018) call for "slow science" and Shotwell's (2016) invitation to cultivate "imperfect solidarities." By remaining attentive to the frictions, alignments, and silences encountered in the field, the research aims not only to interpret but also to modestly interfere with the conditions of possibility for more just and livable urban futures.



Figure 1 - Schematization of the project by levels.

The ReStart Scampia project, which constitutes the primary empirical basis of this study, is the outcome of a collaboration between the Municipality of Naples and the Department of Architecture (DiARC) at the University of Naples Federico II. The project was developed as a technical and economic feasibility plan for the redevelopment of the “Lotto M” in Scampia, where the last remaining buildings of the infamous Vele complex are located. The DiARC team—led by Enrico Formato and composed of Marianna Ascolese, Eduardo Bassolino, Gilda Berruti, Alberto Calderoni, Pasquale De Toro, Gianluigi Freda, Giuseppina Mari, Federica Palestino, Michelangelo Russo, Ludovica Battista, Luca Boursier, Augusto Fabio Cerqua, Nicola Fierro, and Bruna Vendemmia—proposed a vision that reactivates the area’s historical rural identity through a new system of fields and open spaces. This design aims to transform the degraded landscape of the Vele into a more fertile, socially sustainable, and livable environment.

This situated approach also reflects a broader commitment to engage with space not merely as a neutral container but as a terrain of rights that are enacted through embodied practices. As Formato (2023) argues, rights in the city do not pre-exist spatial practices but emerge from them—a process of claiming and shaping space through everyday gestures of care, resistance, and transformation. In this sense, gardening in Scampia is not only ecological but also political: a form of commoning that produces alternative ways of inhabiting and regen-

erating urban territory.

4. Contested Regeneration: Scampia between Ecological Rhetoric and Commoning Practices

Scampia, a district in the northern periphery of Naples, has long epitomized the contradictions of modernist public housing and the socio-spatial marginalization it often engenders. Designed in the 1960s as part of a utopian vision for urban expansion, it became globally infamous for its failed megastructures, institutional abandonment, and stigmatizing media narratives. In recent years, however, Scampia has been at the center of an ambitious regeneration effort, culminating in the ReStart Scampia project, a strategic framework that seeks to transform the area through a combination of demolition, new housing, and ecological requalification.

ReStart Scampia includes a proposal to reconvert open spaces into a system of urban agriculture fields, forestation areas, and collectively managed green commons. While the inclusion of urban agriculture signals a shift toward ecological sensibilities in planning, it also raises important questions about the role of such interventions in shaping new territorial imaginaries. Are these cultivated landscapes meant to function as genuine infrastructures of care and commoning, or do they risk reproducing a sanitized, greenwashed version of redevelopment?

Drawing from direct involvement in the planning process, this section unpacks the internal tensions within ReStart. On one hand, the project attempts to foreground community participation and environmental restoration; on the other, it remains embedded in bureaucratic procedures and aesthetic logics of urban decorum. The agricultural component, in particular, oscillates between symbolic landscaping and the potential for more radical, situated experiments in land stewardship. Design workshops and participatory meetings reveal divergent expectations: while some institutional actors frame agriculture as a beautifying tool or social inclusion device, grassroots groups and informal gardeners express a more grounded interest in autonomy, food production, and environmental justice.



Figure 2 - General project plan.

These frictions expose the limitations of institutional planning when it comes to nurturing regenerative practices from below. ReStart Scampia thus becomes a field of negotiation where the possibilities of multispecies commoning must contend with the constraints of technical planning, fragmented governance, and limited political imagination.

5. From Urban Greening to Commoning: Negotiating Agriculture in Public Housing

Beyond formal plans and institutional frameworks, a multiplicity of informal gardening practices already inhabit the open spaces of Scampia. These gestures—often modest, ephemeral, or spontaneous—enact a relational and situated form of care for the land. They also materialize what Formato (2023) defines as “diritti che si producono nello spazio”: rights that are not granted from above but created through embodied, everyday engagements with space. By cultivating small plots, reactivating unused land, or informally organizing green commons, residents perform acts of spatial claim-making that challenge extractive paradigms and articulate a politics of regeneration from below. These practices resonate with the notion of multispecies commoning, as they involve entanglements with plants, animals, and soil in the production of shared ecologies of care.

In the ReStart Scampia project, urban agriculture is framed as a central element of the regeneration strategy. The masterplan envisions the creation of cultivated fields, food forests, and community-managed green areas as tools for activating social inclusion and ecological transition. However, the integration of these elements within a broader institutional framework reveals tensions between symbolic greenwashing and transformative commoning.

On one hand, the agricultural vision embedded in the project is unprecedented for Naples' public housing contexts, signaling an institutional openness to rethinking the urban metabolism and fostering new forms of ecological engagement. The plan explicitly moves beyond ornamental greening, recognizing the productive, relational, and educational potential of cultivated land. It also references concepts such as circularity, biodiversity, and soil regeneration, suggesting a shift from static landscaping to dynamic socio-ecological systems.



Figure 3 - Axonometric design view.

On the other hand, the actual governance model remains largely centralized. While the project mentions participatory management and local stewardship, the mechanisms for such involvement are vague or postponed to future implementation phases. This creates a disjuncture between the transformative narratives surrounding the project and the persistence of technocratic planning logics. The risk is that agriculture, instead of becoming a tool for commoning, is absorbed into a managerial apparatus that maintains control over land and decisions.

These ambiguities have concrete implications. During public meetings and workshops, local actors—residents, associations, informal gardeners—expressed both enthusiasm and skepticism. While some embraced the idea of reconnecting with land through structured initiatives, others questioned the feasibility and sincerity of institutional proposals, especially in light of past failures. Moreover, the spontaneous gardens and informal cultivations already present in the area are largely overlooked in the official design, raising concerns about erasure and displacement.

By situating agriculture within a commoning framework, this paper argues for a more radical rethinking of public housing regeneration. Rather than inserting predefined green infrastructure, urban planning should recognize and support existing ecological practices, enabling a shift from green compensation to collaborative, multispecies stewardship. This implies reworking the planning process itself—its timelines, governance structures, and epistemologies—toward more open-ended, caring, and accountable models.

6. Commoning beyond participation: informal practices of care and cultivation

The promises of participation and community involvement often invoked in regeneration discourses risk being co-opted into top-down planning agendas. In the case of Scampia, while the ReStart project formally integrates participatory components, its institutional framing still reflects the asymmetries of power and expertise characteristic of conventional urban development. However, alongside and beyond these official processes, a range of informal practices has emerged—suggesting alternative ways of inhabiting and cultivating space that do not rely on formal recognition.

Field observations and conversations with local residents revealed a number of grassroots initiatives involving the appropriation, cultivation, and care of small plots of land, often without authorization. These acts—ranging from self-managed gardens to the planting of fruit trees and spontaneous composting—constitute a dispersed but significant ecology of commoning. Although modest in scale, they express relational modes of engagement with the soil and with more-than-human life, offering a quiet but powerful critique of neglect, abandonment, and technocratic planning.

Such practices align with what Centemeri (2015) describes as “ecological care”: a form of everyday engagement that emerges from lived experience and local knowledge rather than from formalized sustainability agendas. These gestures may be invisible or illegible to planners, yet they point toward different regimes of value and stewardship. They also reflect what De Angelis (2017) calls the “commons” as a space of social reproduction—where value is generated through cooperation, not extraction.

In this light, urban agriculture becomes a contested terrain, where institutional designs and spontaneous experiments coexist, overlap, or come into tension. By paying attention to these frictions and to the knowledge embedded in informal practices, planners may begin to reimagine regeneration not as the implementation of a predefined plan, but as a process of learning with and from situated forms of communing.

7. Conclusions: Toward situated ecologies of post-growth regeneration

This paper has argued for a situated and critical understanding of urban agriculture as a potential catalyst for post-growth regeneration in public housing contexts. Moving beyond the dominant paradigms of greening and participation, the case of Scampia illustrates how agriculture can become a terrain of both conflict and care, institutional design and informal experimentation. Rather than merely implementing green infrastructure, the challenge lies in recognizing and nurturing the situated ecologies—human and more-than-human—that already inhabit these spaces.

By foregrounding the notion of multispecies commoning, the paper has sought to expand the conceptual and practical horizons of urban regeneration. Drawing on local gestures of ecological care, it suggests that alternative forms of value, cooperation, and stewardship may emerge from below, offering a counter-narrative to technocratic or growth-driven approaches. These informal and often invisible practices, while fragile and fragmented, embody a different politics of urban space—one grounded in relation, attention, and interdependence. Planning for post-growth cities demands not only new tools but new sensibilities. It requires planners and institutions to engage with the messy, contested, and affective dimensions of urban life—to see regeneration not as a linear process of improvement, but as a terrain of negotiation, translation, and collective inquiry. In Scampia, the soil tells stories of abandonment and extraction, but also of resilience and imagination. Listening to these stories, and allowing them to inform our practice, may be the first step toward more just and regenerative futures.

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