

RESTORING
LAND
AS
PLANETARY
COMMUNITY
PRACTICES

↳ Erika Mayr AND Meike Schalk IN CONVERSATION
WITH Constantin Petcou AND Doina Petrescu

In 2010 Lungomare invited us to initiate an intercultural urban gardening project in cooperation with the association Donna Nissà in Bolzano for *Summer Drafts*.¹ In our project Cultural Landscapes, we considered urban gardening as a way of caring for nature and for communities at the same time.² As visiting artists – a gardener and beekeeper, and an urban researcher – our practices have been engaging in gardening and beekeeping in art contexts, and in the developing of new roles for and relations between practitioners, different communities and institutions in art projects that question and intervene in the making of urban public spaces.

2010 *Summer Drafts* focused on questions of migration. With Donne Nissà, we developed a garden on a fallow site of the city district of Don Bosco in Bolzano which was known for its ‘semirurale’ houses that had been built in the course of Mussolini’s resettlement policies, which brought Italians from Southern provinces as workers to new factories in the German-speaking South Tyrol. The two story detached houses with gardens offered the newly arrived a home at the edge of the city and the possibility to survive on growing their own food. The popular houses were torn down during the 1970s, except for two, to give way to a denser city development.

Together with Donne Nissà, we wanted to connect to the history of migration and gardening of the site while enabling a dialogue on and with urban nature to highlight its biodiversity. Plants, bees, and other species carry an old knowledge about strategies of survival. We argue that connecting to this old knowledge can sensitize our thinking, and influences

1 2010 *Summer Drafts* was curated by Valeria Graziano and Paolo Plotegher. *Summer Drafts* started in 2008. It has brought together practitioners from various fields who engage in questions of community, participation, relationality, and dialogues, among other themes. Guests were invited for a residency in Bolzano and given the opportunity to develop a project with the support and in conversation with a local civil society organization. Read more on the platform’s homepage, <https://summerdraftsarchive.wordpress.com/summer-drafts-2010/>, accessed 18 June 2023.

2 See our garden blog Kulturlandschaften, <https://kulturlandschaften.blogspot.com>. The Semirurali Garden in Bolzano became the first intercultural garden in Italy.

not only our view of the world but moreover our daily actions. By this, gardening as a cultural production revitalizes knowledge on the sites’ history and connects it to current debates on migration as well as to environmental and civic practices. Since 2010, the garden has grown and become part of a local community, and an anchor point for social and ecological activities.

To reflect upon the garden and gardening as a mediator further, we spoke with the founders of atelier d’architecture autogérée – AAA, Doina Petrescu and Constantin Petcou, about “planetary gardening,” resilience, and TERRRA, their most recently started project in Romania involving a piece of rural land, owned by a cooperative with the focus on restoring the land and establishing a school for planetary gardeners following the thinking of the French landscape architect Gilles Clément.³

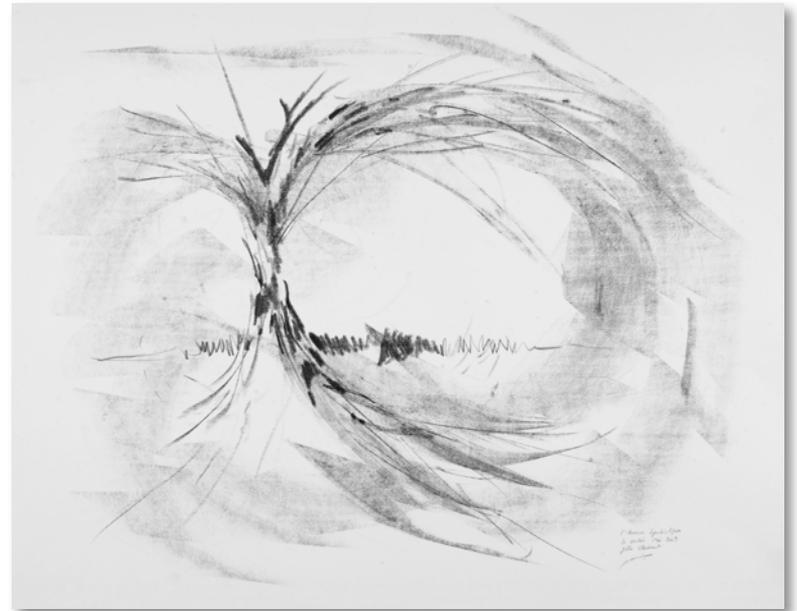
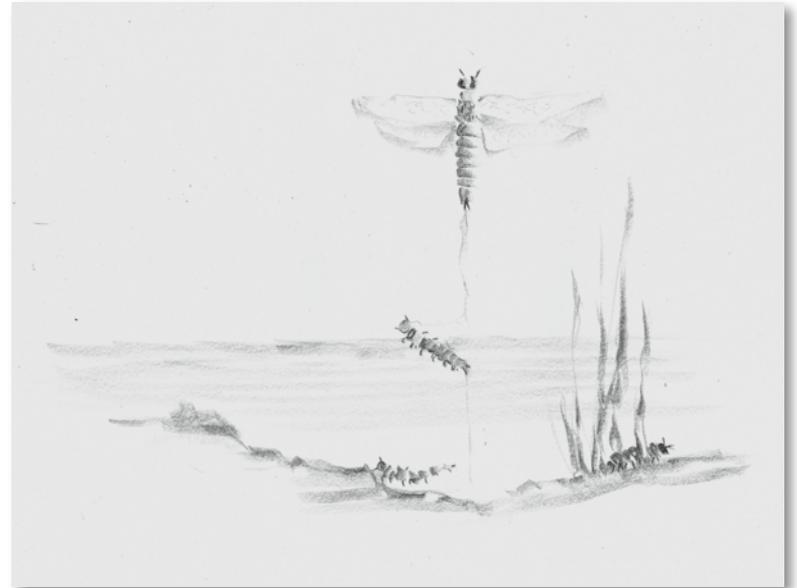
ERIKA MAYR & MEIKE SCHALK What does the concept of ‘planetary garden’ and ‘planetary gardeners’ mean to you?

CONSTANTIN PETCOU Gilles Clément’s concept is in a way very simple. It refers somehow to the closure a garden needs in order to allow us to organize, observe, and understand how nature works. Because a garden originally means ‘a limited, closed space’. For him the planet itself must be understood as a garden in order to be preserved and continue to remain an area for living. For me the concept of care is very important in this. Because having a garden is not only to use and exploit a natural system, it is to take care of it. Our impact on the planet is so strong that nature is not strong enough to continue to function any longer. A planetary garden is a space to be used with care and a long-term vision in order to ensure the future.

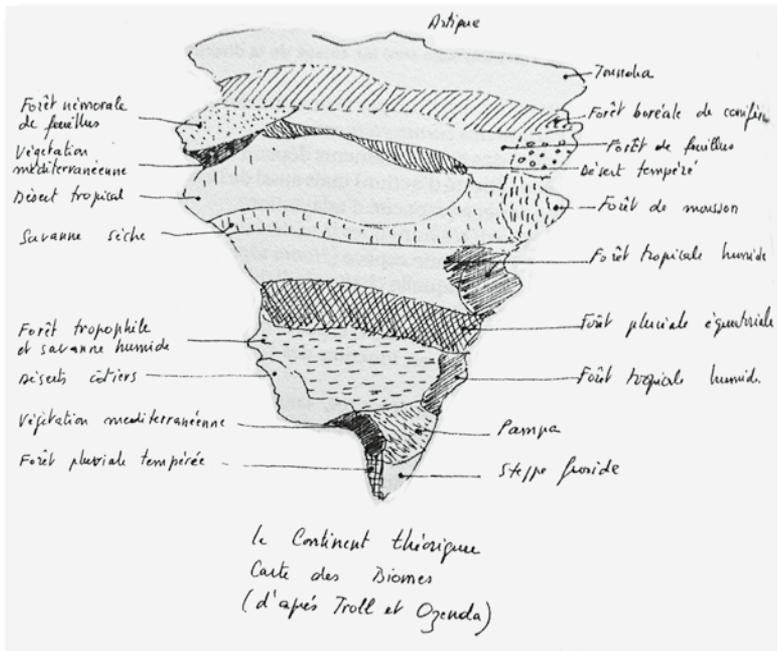
DOINA PETRESCU In addition to the concept of the ‘planetary garden’, it is the idea of ‘planetary gardeners’, the people that are supporting and maintaining the ‘planetary garden’. Because the people who are usually specialized in doing the

3 See Gilles Clément, *The Planetary Garden and Other Writings*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015.

work in a 'garden' do not necessarily have the skills that are required for a 'planetary garden'. We are in need of people who have other skills that have more to do with ecological repair and who have another understanding of nature, not only on a local level but also on a global one. Therefore, he set up a school for planetary gardeners. There are already a few branches in different places in France. We propose to set up a branch in Romania, in Brezoi. We discussed with him the profile such a school might have based on the fact that there is a local knowledge, a peasant knowledge that we can find in the region which has this ecological dimension already. This is reflected in the ways of laboring the soil and maintaining the forest. Therefore, there is the idea that the peasants will be the teachers in the school. The trainees will be youngsters, students in landscape design, agriculture, and all other people that are developing a special interest in engaging with nature but missing out this dimension. So, this school would be both supporting the tradition that is getting lost just now (with the last generation dying) and the new generation that will perpetuate this knowledge.



Gilles Clément, Interchange, year?, drawing, courtesy of the artist



Gilles Clément, Interchange, year?, drawing, courtesy of the artist

EM & MS In your works you have been employing the notion of resilience, since more than 20 years, very specifically and far beyond narrower technoscientific understandings. How do you enact resilience and to speak in your terms ‘R-Urban’ practices?

DP We set up our R-Urban strategy and hubs where the R comes from Resilience and from many other ecological R-s and also from ‘Rural’ because we wanted to act in these suburbs where people (who originally came from rural backgrounds) have lost their connections to land. There is a population which now, a few decades after having moved into the suburbs has a very high rate of unemployment, has economic and social problems. For us resilience means dealing with this condition but also addressing the challenges of the future, there where the people live. The right to resilience is not only for the ones who are aware of climate change, but also for those that do not have the means to be aware, for those that are not ecologically literate but who are the first to be affected by the effects of climate change. So, these eco-civic hubs that are run by the residents themselves, would be a resource for the neighborhood, a place to learn, to practice and to start transforming daily life in order to adapt to the future, to learn how to practice. But one of the conditions is to do it collectively. For this reason, the operational concept of resilience in this case is rather the idea of co-resilience. ‘Co-’ means collective but it can also mean commons and commoning. It might also mean an extended community in which nature and the non-human aspect are also included, being understood as a partner, as a ‘member’ of the community.

For example, in the case of Colombes, a commune in the northwestern suburbs of Paris,⁴ when one of the R-Urban hubs was demolished, the gardened land and the life which started on it were almost more affected than the community

4 The R-Urban Hub in Colombes was one of the first urban labs that AAA set up to test their strategy of urban resilience. Read more here: <https://www.urbantactics.org/projects/rurban/rurban.html>, accessed 18 June 2023.

itself. It was a very aggressive situation. Soon after starting to use this farming hub in Colombes, a new mayor of the city was elected, it was a right-wing woman, her partner was a developer, she reclaimed the farming site back for real-estate 'development'. So we were forced to leave the site. We decided to relocate the hub because we knew from the beginning that it will have a temporary condition and we have consequently built it to be able to be dismantled and reinstalled in a similar way. We did find a new location in a neighboring city, at a walking distance from the initial location, so that the users were able to continue to use the hub. But we also looked back at what remained in the initial site after the relocation. In Colombes, we worked on improving the quality of the soil for a number of years, depolluting and adding compost. At the end we obtained a very good soil that was able to sustain the life of plants and insects. All this life was destroyed, because the mayor just poured tarmac on all of it!

So yes, we can speak of co-resilience also in situations of resistance to political factors. I think the idea of 'gardening' is somehow a metaphor for co-resilience – and we have to always remember that we do live in a world which is a capitalist world, which is used by extracting and exploiting it aggressively on all levels. So we need to include this into all dimensions that we take into account when we talk about resilience.

CP Resilience is not only the capacity to bounce back from a stress situation but also to do it together. Working on this we hope to explore a collective way which forges a new social mentality.

In the 20th century the population was dominated by Modernism, Economic Growth, and Consumption. And in the actual situation our society must invent a new collective imaginary about how to restore, at the same time with restoring the soil, the nature, how to restore ourselves, and the society, because we are more and more in a crisis, a big scale crisis which concerns the climate, democracy, and wars. It is very important to be able to restore at the same time the capacity to deal with democracy, with ecology, and with justice, and this is very difficult because in this crisis situation, there are not many tools or institutions, and not enough institutional capacity to

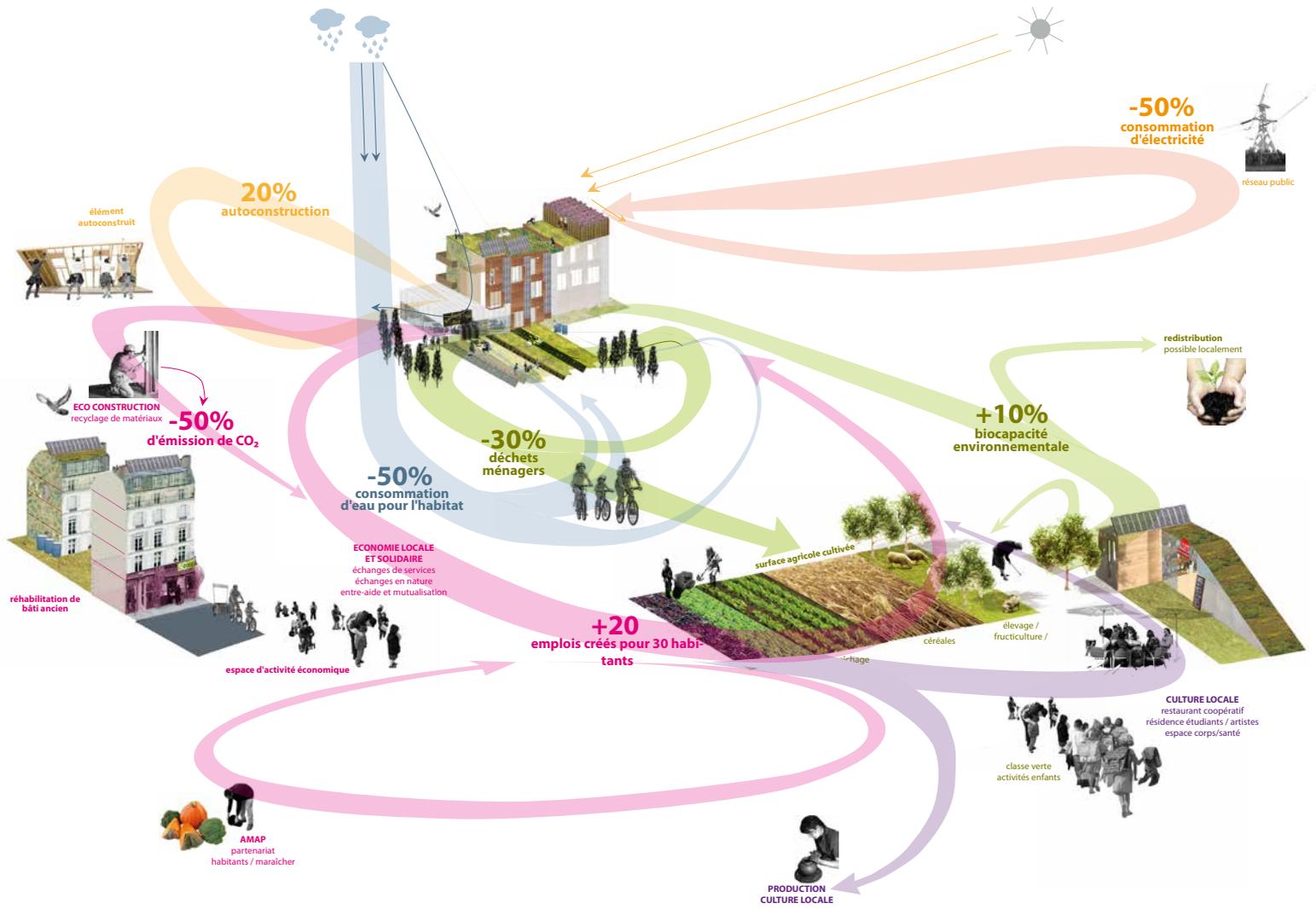
encourage and support such radical change, the society seems very fragile at the moment from this point of view.

EM & MS How can we understand possibilities for urban and rural commoning on public and private land? And, how can we protect new types of contemporary commons with and without contracts?

DP In urban areas we have adopted a process and protocol. We start with a temporary contract for public land use, an annual lease, that would be renewed periodically with the city. However, more recently for one of the R-Urban sites that we were occupying in this way in the city of Bagneux in North France, we have established a contract, through which we have passed on to the City the custody of the two hubs that were built on the site belonging to the city with the condition (marked in a Charter signed by the City) that they will remain forever 'common goods', and as such be protected as commons, by the city itself. There is as such a legal (and political) guarantee that they will always be used for commoning activities. WCP Enclosures happen all the time with the commons, with public space, with all these spaces that are not protected by law but are dependent on political will, the risk is that common use is interrupted by a political change, as it was the case in Colombes. Commons are fragile, this is why, as Doina said before, we signed this Charter with the municipality in Bagneux, afterwards, in order to keep the use of the space in the future with these commons-rules, in all political situations. But it is just a protective measure, we just tried it hoping that it will work.

In Brezoi, TERRRA has been currently established on private land, partially owned by a cooperative of around 25 researchers and activists from six different countries. In the future it will be in full cooperative use, but open to the public and the municipality to occasionally use it. The idea is to create an open TERRRA-commons and start to build a network with it.⁵

5 Read more on TERRRA here: <https://www.c4r.info/en/actions/brezoi>



AAA, *Circuits courts résilients à différentes échelles territoriales*, Resilience diagram for R-Urban including a Recycling and Eco-construction Unit, an Ecological Cooperative Housing Unit, and a Civic Agriculture Unit

DP Well, the TERRRA hub is already part of a network, the R-Urban-network of civic hubs that have started to spread across Europe. But also setting up this hub in Romania, was a trial and error exercise, it was an occasion to prototype a new thing: there we will test how commons could sometimes emerge on private land. We need to claim for commoning not only public land but private land as well. For us this is also an attempt to explore the multiple possibilities that a civic hub can take on in different contexts, directly depending on the conditions and opportunities of the context.



Erika Mayr and Meike Schalk, Summerdrafts, Urban Gardening Workshop, Bolzano, 2010, photo by Meike Schalk

When we met the future gardeners of the Semirurali Garden 2010 in Bolzano during our workshop to lay the foundation of this garden, we learned that the reasons to start common gardening are as diverse as the people who have a passion for it. Gardening not only enables us to grow and harvest our own fruits and vegetables, but it also brings individuals together to share knowledge, tools, the work, their products, and enjoyment, as well as the responsibility for the soil, matter and materials, and the production processes they entertain.

In parallel to the workshop, we formulated a list of basic suggestions for the making and maintaining of urban gardens as a strategy for their survival which, considering the weak legal situation of urban gardens and the rising pressure of real estate development we have experienced during the recent years, we find it more relevant and urgent than ever today. We propose its points here once more as a guide for introducing planetary gardening as community practices. They can be summarized as follows:

Prepare for common meals and vision workshops to enable the making of a common space.

Read the site, value, and incorporate found elements on the plot for connecting the garden's ecological past and future.

Collect knowledge about gardens and gardening, concerning their legal status, layouts, and geo-technical data by exploring existing examples and talking to other gardeners.

Document different gardening practices in a garden diary or blog which can work like a manual or guidebook for the garden. In a blog or open diary, you can keep a record of intentions, practices, and developments. Others can learn from this example. Good public relations are important for maintaining the garden, for requiring funds, donations, and support. Establish friendly relationships to your neighbors for exchange and support.



Semirurali Garden, 2023, photo by Kseniia Obukhova

Through giving and taking seeds, plants, flowers, berries, vegetables, fruits, tools, advice, help, and information the urban garden will blossom.

For revealing knowledge of the garden – its species and economic networks – printed information can be displayed which communicates history and stories of the garden to newcomers and visitors.

Use the garden in as many ways possible to make it publicly accessible. Talking about the garden will anchor it as an important public place in the neighborhood and for the city, extend its lifespan, and consequently protect it from eviction.

Beside collective practices of everyday life, regular educational activities and special events such as seasonal garden parties, performances, and common food experiences will publicize and inscribe the garden into the social and ecological life of the city.

↳ Erika Mayr

is a trained landscape gardener, horticulturist, and urban beekeeper. Her work and research are focused on aspects of urban beekeeping, as she acknowledges the potential of informal urban nature sites for the world of bees and for human inhabitants. In 2007, she started her own beekeeping enterprise *stadtbi-
enenhonig* for small-scale productions of urban honey. In 2011, Mayr co-founded *Stadthonigfest*, where she organised a yearly honey market in Berlin-Kreuzberg until 2018. Mayr shared her expertise in the book *Die Stadtbiene* (2012), which inspired many people to start with bees. In 2015, she was invited to become a “Bee-Ambassador” at the German Pavilion *Be(e) active* at the EXPO in Milan. Mayr relocated to Rome in 2020, where she transforms the green areas at the Accademia Tedesca Roma Villa Massimo towards a more bee-friendly and sustainable garden.

↳ Constantin Petcou

is an architect and semiotician. Since 1996 he has been teaching in various schools and universities, including ENSA Malaquais, the University of Paris 8, Harvard and MIT Massachusetts. With Doina Petrescu, he co-founded Atelier d'Architecture Autogérée (AAA) – an architectural practice that received awards in France, the USA, Romania, Belgium, and Japan. Petcou coordinated several research projects together with AAA and initiated the *Rhizom network* and *R-Urban*, a strategy for urban resilience in European cities. He contributed to numerous publications and coedited *Urban/ACT: a manual for alternative practice* (2007) and *Trans-Local-Act: Cultural Practices Within and Across* (2010).

↳ Doina Petrescu

is a professor of Architecture and Design Activism at the University of Sheffield, UK. Her research focuses on issues of co-design and civic participation, gendered practices, political ecology, co-production, and resilience in relation with architectural and urban design. Petrescu conducted several research projects and is the author of numerous publications including *Urban Commons Handbook* (2022); *Architecture and Resilience* (2018); *Learn to Act* (2017); *The Social (Re)Production of Architecture* (2016); *Agency: Working with Uncertain Architectures* (2009); *Altering Practices: Feminist Politics and Poetics of Space* (2007); *Architecture and Participation* (2005).

↳ Meike Schalk

is an architect and associate professor in Urban Design and Urban Theory at the KTH School of Architecture in Stockholm, Sweden. Her transdisciplinary research on architecture and urban issues combines critical inquiry into discourses of social justice in planning with practice-oriented research methods and equality, diversity, and inclusion policies and practices in architectural education. Schalk's recent projects and publications include *Between Technologies of Power and Notions of Solidarity* (with H.S. Kajita, J. Mack, and S. Riesto, Lars Müller, 2022); *Species of Theses and Other Pieces* (with T. Lange et al., transcript, 2022); *Feminist Futures of Spatial Practice* (with T. Kristiansson and R. Maze, AADR, 2017).