

GARDENING AND CULTIVATION AS COMMUNAL PRACTICES

PELIN TAN

en conversación con / in conversation with

ANDREA BAGNATO

Keywords

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Cultivation and gardening practices imply an attachment to the land. Since they entail collaboration, belonging and care, they can boost communality at a local level. However, with the industrialization of agriculture and the neoliberalization of urban land, these practices became the opposite of small scale and local culture. The exploitation of land replaced the care to it. The Gardentopia project – which this conversation addresses – is an attempt to reclaim the commonality of those practices.

ANDREA BAGNATO: Pelin, maybe we can start by hearing about your Gardentopia project in Matera, Italy.

PELIN TAN: This project was already initiated by cultural managers in Matera before 2018. It was about creating with the people bottom-up and socially-engaged community gardens in the city. Matera is in the south, somewhat east middle of Italy, and it's a historical city. It reflects on the Italian social history of ruralism, poverty and the conflict of modernism. So, it's an important city but somehow forgotten in terms of cultural production and tourism. And as a European Capital of Culture – as Matera was for the year 2019 – the city started to develop some art projects, mainly proposals that empower urban citizenship, urban citizens, and communities. This was the main reason for Gardentopia.



Gardentopia Matera
2019, *Community
garden in Montemilone*
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I was invited as a curator in 2019. The cultural managers of Matera Cultural Foundation wanted to have socially engaged art and design and needed a curator for Gardentopia. When I arrived in Matera, there were some gardens already established in the neighborhoods of the city, with the people working together. So, I was trying to understand the project that was being conducted there. I mean, Matera had very few transformations. With the urban modernization in Italy, people living in the caves at the end of the nineteenth century were moved into modern housing units in the 1950s. This was one transformation – a first stage of modern lifestyle, let's say – and also a trauma because the people of Matera were in their natural environment, natural housing, very much in symbiosis with animals, goats, in caves, and stones, and so on. However, such a habitat was deemed as 'underdeveloped'.

In the 1970s, the second wave of modern housing was initiated, with the ideas of prominent thinkers, designers, and architects of Italy, such as Adriano Olivetti and Giancarlo de Carlo. Matera started a series of experimental architecture projects for housing units like La Martella and Spine Bianche. Again, aiming to modernize the rural, modernize the south of Italy, and civilizing – because 'modernizing' means 'civilizing.'

Matera went through that kind of spatial-production process, and is now a touristic city; its identity is that of tourism. But later, there is another further marketing strategy to transform the city into a cultural one that

may compete with Napoli or Lecce. So, that is why Matera was selected as the cultural capital for 2019. One part of this cultural look is cultural production in a city. What is cultural urbanism? The first step is bottom-up community empowerment.

“Gardentopia: Cosmos of Ecologies” consisted of 32 community gardens in both Matera city center and the region of Basilicata. So, when we speak about the history of Matera, it’s also a little bit the history of the area of Basilicata. This region is very rich, personally speaking, with many narratives. For me, it was very shocking to see those villages. The mayors of the area wanted to start community gardens and to collaborate with us. One reason was that many of those villages are in degrowth; there is not so much economic production there, nor economic income, the population is shrinking, and mostly older people are living there. Also, refugees are arriving from the Mediterranean to Sicily, traveling by bus to Basilicata region, and working as seasonal agricultural workers. So, there are many villages, like Irsina, hosting refugees. The nice thing is that the mayors are very welcoming. It was so lovely to see such local, very religious people welcoming foreign refugees and trying to make a society.

I was learning the architectural history of Matera and Basilicata through archives. And, as part of my curatorial practice and research, I was trying to understand what kind of infrastructure those villages needed. I mean, do they need a new garden? Do they need the garden for cultivation? Do they need the garden for the co-existence of their community? How should a Garden Utopia be achieved? How would this garden be instrumentalized through that? So, I invited many artists working with cultivation practices, radical gardening, socially engaged art practices, and socially engaged designers. But also local architects that were trying to operate or develop the heritage of Basilicata with other kinds of design practices and in agro-ecological architecture – I don’t know if there’s a term like that.

AB: The question of what a garden can do in that context is central because people’s relationship to the land has changed so much in a short lapse – less than a century. The expulsion of the population from the old city of Matera happened in the 1950s and 1960s. It’s something that people still remember. Like Turkey, this part of the world used to have a largely peasant population – and they were landless peasants. They were working the land but were exploited and prevented from owning their own means of production. Matera was a peasant city, a peasant capital. In the 1950s, the shift was to a land without peasants, which happened by moving people into a different type of dwelling. Agrarian reforms sought to move people away from the fields, so that they would go work in the factories in northern Italy. I guess this is a history that resonates around all the Mediterranean. Today, the situation is that we have all this land that no one cultivates anymore. So, what does it mean to

have a garden in this context? The people who still live here are almost survivors.

PT: I think the concepts of garden, gardening, and cultivation, metaphorically, designates the question of property, of commonality, of sustainability in the future, because, if you don't take care of the garden, the garden dies. And if there's a property issue, this is about describing your relationship with the land. For Basilicata and Matera, as you said, it was a very short lapse so people still remember. There was a kind of colonization of land by the north, by the Italian government, in the 1950s and the 1970s. At the time, the industrialization of agriculture just destroyed agriculture. We can see it right now: only one village in Basilicata, San Mario Forte produces 98% of agricultural products, while the rest don't make anything, nothing, not even a cucumber. These peasant villages and lands are being destroyed by big infrastructure projects, highways, gas.

When I was curating the exhibition "De-Archiving Dwelling: Community, Movement(s), Harvest" with the artist Liam Gillick – which was another project led by the Matera Foundation – my co-curators and I went through the agricultural archives and learned that there is a cut in the architectural history between housing and designing the lands and living in the land. There is a break with architectural history. The memory of space is being frozen, cut out, or forgotten. For instance, people who live in the modern housing unit that was built in the 1950s Spine Bianche don't remember natural stone or natural materials anymore. I interviewed some people, and they just forgot about it. They remember a little about their collective courtyards in Matera, their everyday cycle, and so on. This also creates a problem of establishing a collective space with natural materials and designing it. They're not able to think of it anymore. When you do a garden, they bring those plastics, they bring those things bought in the store, but there are no seeds, you have to find the seeds. I mean, you're in a very rural area in Basilicata, where you want to organize and design a garden, but you don't find any authentic information and knowledge about it anymore.

AB: It is like starting from scratch.

PT: Yes. That's why I invited Volumezero, an architecture studio from Basilicata. They have devoted themselves to

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Basilicata traditional architecture; ‘traditional’ means not like a historical artifact, but rather a traditional dwelling with local materials, housing materials, and symbiosis. So, for example, the gardens they did in some villages are really collectively designed, with the people working together, with inhabitants together, taking into account what they want, and bringing the natural material back.

‘Garden’ is a problematic term in contemporary architecture. It’s a very neoliberal topic in architectural design. I saw some garden designs in urban space – like the famous one in New York, The Highline – and I’ve come to realize that creating an artificial garden is one of the main strategies of neoliberalism right now. So, when you say that I’m in a “gardening project,” sometimes I have to explain it because what I’m doing may look very neoliberal. How to approach the garden in the right way of design vision and architectural vision? I think this is a very important question. Landscape architecture is really advanced right now. When you design a house or an urban project, the designers and landscape architects can create a swamp; they can design everything, a lake, and so on. So, the design are very important, also engaging the inhabitants and adapting the soil and the land.

AB: Something that I find powerful in your work is precisely this attempt to reclaim the practice of gardening. First of all, you reclaim it from a history in which cultivation was always a way of modernizing. As we know, under the myth of ‘fertility’, hyper technologized and centralized agricultural practices were imposed all around the world. And they were designed precisely to destroy, to break localized knowledge. In the second place, you reclaim gardening from its current neoliberal use that is so prominent in architecture – filling in the gaps between real-estate developments with a little bit of green to win competitions.

PT: This is really present in architectural competitions now, especially during COVID. I was advising two competition projects, and I saw that putting green spaces is super ‘in’ right now. And there has to be a discussion, a redefinition of the rural, a redefinition of cultivation, a redefinition of gardening: radical gardening, communal gardening, anarchist gardening, artificial gardening.

In Gardentopia, I also worked with existing gardens. That kind of garden is a public space already designed, it was in the village’s plan, it was active. Also, some villagers had some spaces, leftover spaces, in the village as municipal property, and they wanted to turn those into a public space. Another example is the Archaeology Museum in Irsina, which has a beautiful garden, and the mayor wanted to do something there with the citizens. So, the garden is making the public space public again. Another garden was inside a religious building, in which the artist Rirkrit Tiravanija worked to redesign the space and proposed an intervention inside as a courtyard.



Gardentopia Matera
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Some gardens were attached to historical buildings; some were totally wild spaces, ready to design and cultivate; and some were like normal public spaces and parks. I made a chart of categorization: which village had which kind of garden, and dealt with three different categories. First, I developed this categorization and then appointed artists and architects according to these categories. I made a list and sent all the information of the artists and architects to the mayors, to the communes, because in this kind of project there's a gap: the people, the inhabitants, the citizens don't know about contemporary artists, contemporary architects, they don't know them. So, I had to introduce socially engaged art, socially engaged design, and explain that they were going to work together with the artist, architects, and curators. But I also let them choose, and they said, "this artist really fits us." I helped them make a choice and mediate. Then I made a list, so that each artist or architect had two villages or two gardens.

We had many advantages and also some disadvantages. One of the advantages was that Basilicata has a very rich rural topography, and using this topography allowed very creative proposals. Secondly, there were old and young people who didn't leave the village and were keen to develop its identity. So making a garden and an architectural project or an art project was a way to expand and help them find a new cultural vision, a new cultural identity for the village. This was the aim for them. And you can see how art and design can foster, develop, and contribute to the future vision of a settlement or a village.

AB: This is important because, I think, the problem with the kind of places we are talking about – small rural towns, where the population is a couple of hundred or a couple of thousand people, and which

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have been drastically de-populated during the last century – is that they found themselves on the wrong side of neoliberalism. These are the places that lost out from neoliberal development. If there is a lack of identity, it's because they have *lost* their identities in the process, and no longer know what they are good for. Today, what is the point of a small town a couple of hours away from a big city? What is the point of agricultural land if no one cultivates it anymore? As you said, almost everything we eat is grown on huge farms with exploited migrant labor. I also try to think in my practice about how one engages, as an architect, with rural space. There's been a lot of talking about the 'rural' and the 'non-urban,' but when you actually go on the ground, how does the landscape look like? What are the problems? What are the challenges? Who owns the land? No one is asking these questions.

PT: And you have worked and written a lot about Italian landscapes.

AB: Yes, and it's very related to your work in Basilicata. I was looking mainly at the island of Sardinia, where you have kind of a similar story: a territory that, from the nineteenth century, started to be portrayed as backward or primitive. But when you begin to look at the people who said this, you realize very quickly the real agenda was always to introduce a different type of agriculture, a different type of economic regime in the island – because Sardinia had been based on subsistence agriculture and shepherding. The agenda was to replace subsistence agriculture with market agriculture, which also entailed turning shepherding toward export rather than internal consumption. Sardinia was also massively reconfigured by land drainage and land reclamations: basically, what we see everywhere. In Sardinia, a lot had to do with disease control; in these places, you often have malaria because you have swamps, rivers, and so on. And public health was a very powerful way to advance a modernizing, capitalist agenda. Politicians, engineers, and landowners would say, “well, we're here to fight

malaria,” but behind a certain idea of health and hygiene, there was much more going on.

What I am trying to do is to make sure that Sardinia is not the endpoint of my work. As you say, Turkey has a very similar history. In 2019 I did a public talk with Jumana Manna, and her work concerns similar histories in Palestine, Syria and Lebanon. Of course, there are significant differences between countries and localities, but there are also really important shared points. So, how do we make this into a compelling global argument? That’s my question: how do we make a place like Basilicata or Sardinia resonate with other parts of the Mediterranean and the world? There is often a victimizing tendency, at least in Italy, to think that your situation is unique, that no one has had it as bad as you. I think it is a fairly natural reaction to being marginalized. That’s why it is crucial – and that’s what you do so well – to create these threads between places that are far away.

PT: I think that what you say is so important in terms of the Mediterranean. When I first came to Basilicata, everyone was saying how local they were, how far away they were from Rome, Italy, and other parts of the world. In Gardentopia, I tried to make them realize that the scale that we were talking about was not about Basilicata, but rather it’s about the Mediterranean, about a larger region. Italy is a country, but Basilicata is a shore of a Mediterranean region; it’s part of the seashores of the Mediterranean and the whole countries around it. In Basilicata, people are living with refugees from Nigeria and learning how they are seeding and how they are using the okra seeds in different kinds of temporaries of soil, and cultivating them, and trying them together. This is like bringing the information, the data, of seeds from Africa through the sea, or human trafficking, arriving in Sicily, and then, by bus, arriving at Basilicata and start living in those little cities, little towns. This whole network, or the scale’s network, is very connected to the whole heritage, imagination, and knowledge of the Mediterranean.

I invited some Greek architects and artists from Athens, called the Errands group. They are a collective who are working with this kind of threshold architecture. I invited them to Metaponto, a village near the south of Basilicata, not so far from the sea. When I was reading about those villages, I realized every one of them has a history. This village, in particular, was one of the first Greek colonies in ancient times. Pythagoras, the Greek mathematician, died in Basilicata, Italy. He was born near my hometown, established a mathematical school after he went to Basilicata, lived there, and died in Metaponto. Thus, there was a kind of Greek heritage, very kitschy, but some kind of relation. So, I was thinking, “how can I make something original out of that?” When I invited the collective Errands, they brought their seeds, plants, and trees from Athens, crossing the sea from the Balkans, arriving in Bari, and going to Metaponto. And they designed a garden with the children, with the people

there, which they called ‘Epicurean Garden,’ referring to Epicurus and his vision about pedagogy and garden.

They organized a tree planting event, which they told me was a Mediterranean tradition: when you have a daughter, you plant a tree. And I’ve heard that some Turkish people in the Black Sea did the same. So, it’s interesting that all the villages concentrated on this revitalization of their heritage, participated, brought their babies, and planted the trees. Actually, families who have sons said, “we want to participate too.” All of them then came. They are all now responsible for this tree brought from Athens. This was one of the strategies that can really engage people because they feel responsible and create a future garden, the future community.

And it comes back to the Mediterranean scales, trying to eliminate this characterization of north and south Italy and stretch it more to Palestine, Nigeria, and larger thinking, like what Édouard Glissant would suggest is more poetic, positive spatial imagination: opacity. So, this gardening, these performances, and this whole space can become a kind of cross-cutting methodology, to understand the sociopolitical and ecological-climate scales of the Mediterranean. As a curator, I wanted to understand how we can be curated as people together while testing the knowledge.

AB: I think that doing away with the north/south division, or at least extending it, stretching it in all directions, is a very beautiful idea. I have a story about that, which I heard from scientists at the Institute of Biosciences and Bioresources in Bari – they have a very important collection of seeds from all over the northern Mediterranean. They told me about this particular type of aubergine grown in Basilicata, a small red aubergine which is considered a hyper-local delicacy as it’s grown only in a handful of mountain villages. It even has Slow Food and DOP marks. I had tasted and enjoyed it, thinking it very typical of the place. In fact, this red aubergine is from East-Africa and didn’t exist in Basilicata until the twentieth century. The seeds were brought back from the people that the Italian government had sent to colonize Ethiopia. As you know, the government would take poor peasants and promise them great wealth if they would go to the colonies and set up farms there. So a lot of people left, and some of them came back with the seeds of these red aubergines and started to plant them in Basilicata. It became a local specialty to the point that it is also used as part of the regional identity – but as with many such things, it is completely made up. Not only that: it’s a direct product of the geographies of colonial exploitation. I think that in this small story you can see so many scales at once. And you can see how the threshold of colonization kept getting pushed further and further south. As the Italian state was transforming Basilicata, it was also colonizing Ethiopia, and things were moving back and forth between these places in unexpected ways.



PT: I think this is the kind of conversation we should have in architecture in relation to vegetation: how seeds move and create landscapes and identities revealing a colonial past; how can we rethink the distinction between rural and urban. And, also, how can gardening be redefined as a practice of thinking, as a non-capitalist, commoning practice, and not just as a neoliberal architectural strategy for greenwashing urban projects and landscapes. We should not forget why it is important to keep the opacity of Mediterranean cross scales. **ARQ**

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Cosmos of ecologies.
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Pisciotta

Pelin Tan
<pelintan@gmail.com>

Sociologist, Ankara University, 1997. PhD in Art History, Technical University of Istanbul, 2011. Post-doctoral studies in artistic research, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2012. Her research focuses on urban conflict and territorial politics, gift economy, and the conditions of labor. She co-curated the exhibition "Adhocracy" (Istanbul, 2012; New York, 2013; Athens, 2015). She has lectured in different universities across the world, and her texts have been published in *Promiscuous Encounters* (2014), *Adhocracy reader* (2015), *2000+: The Urgencies of Architectural Theory* (2016), among others. She is currently a Senior Researcher at the Center for Arts, Design and Social Research, Boston, at the University of Thessaly, Greece, and is Professor of the Fine Arts Academy, Batman University, Turkey.

Andrea Bagnato
<andrea.bagnato@me.com>

Architect and researcher. He started the project Terra Infecta in 2013 to study the spatial and ecological history of infectious diseases. He was head of publications for the first Sharjah Architecture Triennial and teaches at Willem de Kooning Academie in Rotterdam.