

14. Owls' community food garden



Type: bottom-up (grass-roots initiative)

Region: southeast

State: São Paulo

Biome: Atlantic Rainforest, cerrado
(Brazilian savannah)

City of São Paulo

Population: 12 176 866 (estimated 2018)

Area: 1528.5 km²

Elevation: 760 m

Coordinates: 23.557386 S / 46.737778 W

HDI: 0.805 (2010) ¹²⁶

Context

São Paulo is the capital of the state of São Paulo, and the centre of the largest metropolitan area in South America with 21.2 million ¹²⁷ inhabitants. The city has expanded over the landscape with the eradication of the original ecosystems, and burying most of the creeks, with larger rivers straightened and canalised. Nature is restricted to some parks, mainly in the peripheral areas. Agriculture is located in the countryside or in the urban fringes, far from most of the population.

Objectives

- Convert a lawn (known as green desert) ¹²⁸ into a high-performance landscape.
- Introduce food production in the heart of a metropolis, reconnecting people to food sources, biodiversity and natural cycles.
- Restore natural cycles of water and biodiversity.

126. <https://cidades.ibge.gov.br/brasil/sp/sao-paulo/panorama>, accessed: 8.11.2018.

127. <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/biggest-cities-in-south-america.html>, accessed: 8.11.2018.

Actions

The small park Dolores Ibarruri, 48 000 m², is known as Springs Square, named after the river that crosses the low area in a canal. The park received a new landscape design in 2010. It was the first project of a local green infrastructure composed by rain gardens and bioswales to slow the storm water that flows down the hill ¹²⁹. The slopes were all covered with lawns that require high maintenance.



Figure 70. Owls' Square slopes covered with lawn in 2011.

Stakeholder involvement

The planting and appropriation of the areas followed the principles of permaculture and agroecology. Claudia Visoni and Tatiana Achcar started the movement and citizens started to participate in planting and caring for the new urban productive space. Claudia Visoni, a journalist, started to plant in the public space in 2011, using social media to invite people to collective plantings. In 2012, a group of 50 people who attended a first workshop of agroecology by Claudia and Tatiana opened a Facebook page called Hortelões Urbanos (urban farmers) to reverberate the need to plant food locally. The Facebook group now has more than 80 000 members from different places. They help people start their own food garden, create opportunities



Figure 71. Owls' Square with the Owls' Food Garden in 2017.

to exchange experiences, promote the placement of new community food gardens and organise the exchange of seeds and seedlings and other events in the garden ¹³⁰.

The Regional Council for Environment, Sustainable Development and the Culture of Peace of the Pinheiros District (Conselho Regional de Meio Ambiente Desenvolvimento Sustentável e Cultura de Paz, da subprefeitura de Pinheiros) has supported the actions and practices.

128. <https://www.ecobeneficial.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Replacing-the-Green-Desert.pdf>
Ignatieva, M. and Ahn, K., 'Biodiverse green infrastructure for the 21st century: from "green desert" of lawns to biophilic cities', *Journal of Architecture and Urbanism*, Vol. 37, No 1, Routledge, 2013, pp. 1-9, available at: <https://journals.vgtu.lt/index.php/JAU/article/view/4243/3602>

129. http://elzaniero.com.br/urb/praca_corujas.html, accessed: 9.11.2018.

130. <https://hortadascorujas.wordpress.com/sobre-a-horta/#surgiu>

Implementation

This is a continuous process that started in 2012. The district mayor gave informal authorisation to start food planting in the area, but there are no formal partnerships or external funding. The resources come from volunteers.

Outcomes

- The food garden is a social ecological experience, where people reconnect with nature and learn about nutrition, and reconnect with their community.
- The agroforestry techniques applied to restore the soil have brought back water springs that are now stored in small built ponds and are used during drought periods to irrigate the planting.
- The slopes that used to slide in heavy rains are now stable thanks to the ecosystem restoration that avoids erosion. In areas where there is no planting, the soil leaks down the hill.
- Over the years the food garden has enabled thousands of people to transition to a new lifestyle: from consumerism to local food planting and other sustainable habits, such as learning how to value non-commercial plant species to maintain a healthy life with a low-cost local organic diet.



Limiting factors and risks

- Not enough committed people to work on a regular basis in planting and management.
- People can damage or steal plants, tools, seedlings and compost.
- Many people interfere in the garden without knowing how to properly manage the vegetation. Also, people deposit materials that they believe to be useful to the garden but that are not suitable for the ecological garden, such as tyres and plastic items.
- Many people come to ask about the garden, but don't participate in the daily work required to maintain the garden.

Success factors

People are responsible for the successes. Volunteers participate in the collective plantings and cleaning efforts and maintain the garden. They organise seed exchange and learn with each other about their own planting and nutrition experiences.

Lessons learnt

An open democratic planting in an urban space must deal with a diversity of people. Education is key to make them understand that ecological aesthetics are different from an ornamental controlled garden that most of them are used to recognising as a beautiful place. The Owls' Food Garden has given the opportunity to shift the paradigm from low- to high-performance landscapes with high levels of biodiversity that offer multiple ecosystem services. The repercussions are wide and have spread far beyond the borders of the city and food production. The garden is helping to transition to a new vision of a more sustainable, resilient and just society.

The 800 m² Owls' Food Garden has become nationally known and recognised by UN Food for Cities. It is a reference and has inspired many others in the city and around the country.

Contacts

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Selected references

http://elzaniero.com.br/urb/praca_corujas.html

<https://hortadascorujas.wordpress.com/sobre-a-horta/#surgiu>

Outline of the benefits of biodiversity in combating mosquitoes that transmit dengue and other diseases, available at: <https://g1.globo.com/sao-paulo/noticia/moradores-da-zona-oeste-de-sp-tem-ajuda-de-sapos-e-peixes-contram-mosquitos.ghtml>