

CHAPTER 3

The Aesthetic Value of Vernacular Gardens in Ukrainian Cities. A Case Study from Rusanivka Residential District, Kyiv

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Abstract: This paper addresses the aesthetic value of vernacular gardens in a Ukrainian urban environment. By introducing the case of a makeshift garden on the Rusanivka Channel in Kyiv, Ukraine, I discuss how private spatial practices can match a dynamic and alienated urban landscape. To examine the problem of the aesthetic evaluation of the garden, I shall resort to ideas coming from the framework of the philosophy and aesthetics of everyday life and the aesthetics of engagement. The concepts of aesthetic experience, private practices in the urban space, native and foreign places, landscapes, and the garden as an object of aesthetic perception form the basis for my investigation in the aesthetic import of vernacular gardens.

Keywords: Aesthetic Appreciation, Aesthetic Experience, Aesthetic Value, Everyday Aesthetics, Post-Soviet Urbanism, Urban Anaesthetics, Vernacular Garden

1 Introduction

This research constitutes a new area of investigation, which emerges from the attempt to explain the phenomenon of vernacular gardens in Ukraine. By introducing the case of a peculiar district in Kyiv, the city in which I reside, I hereby raise the question of the possibility and criteria for an aesthetic appreciation of vernacular gardens and aim at outlining the challenges arising from an attempt to answer this question. This question remains open and can be solved only through the integration of historical, social and cultural perspectives and observations, as I will try

to do in the course of my analysis. The paper is structured as follows.

First, I provide a theoretical and conceptual framework for highlighting the peculiarities of this case. I begin with a brief history of the Rusanivka district and its distinctive features, and I proceed with a description of the garden itself and the reasons for its emergence. I outline three major aspects of the sociocultural context determining the emergence and development of this type of garden that will help us solve the problem of their aesthetic appreciation. The first is the tradition of Soviet horticultural practices and, in particular, the phenomenon of summer cottages or, as they are commonly called, dachas, a suburban area of land (usually six acres in area), which the Soviet state allotted to its citizens from the 1950s. The second is the tradition of Ukrainian peasant life, including folklore and gardens, which is clearly reflected in the work of the Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko. The third is an appeal to post-Soviet modernity, and particularly to the existence of a split in contemporary society: those who reproduce Soviet practices and those who deny them and want to forget. Finally, I will articulate the problem of aesthetic appreciation of these gardens in the context of the aspects I have listed and discussed: the specifics of such practices in the post-Soviet urban space.

2 History of the Rusanivka Channel

Until the middle of the twentieth century, the area of Rusanivka remained an untouched corner of nature. In 1961, with Khrushchev as the general secretary of the USSR, it became necessary to develop the city on the left bank of the Dnipro River as part of the next wave of urbanisation in Kyiv and the construction of new enterprises. Rusanivka is the first residential area in the world to be located on an alluvial sand bed with an artificial water channel.

In 1962, Rusanivka turned into an island. Then, in 1963, when the Channel was almost finished - separating the district from the strait by only a small soil cofferdam - the first inhabitants began to appear on the massif, and a road bridge was built across the Channel. From that time, the Rusanivka Channel has become very popular and has been the pride of local residents. In the winter, people skate on the Channel and play hockey. Still in the Soviet times, every summer, a floating rental station of boats and water bicycles operated on the Channel for residents and guests of Kyiv. At the beginning of the season or in the fall, a marathon was organised for rowing and sailing athletes (Shevchenko 2016).

With time, the island turned green and blossomed, thanks to the care of its residents. Since it was mainly the ‘intelligentsia’ - people of creative and respectable professions, such as scientists, sportsmen, artists, moviemakers and outstanding people in various fields - who were settled here, many libraries were opened in Rusanivka to maintain its cultural level.

After the collapse of the USSR, however, the first generation of residents of the district either died, emigrated or sold real estate. The district has progressively lost the unity of its population and the community. Today, many residents of the area and houses near the Channel come there at night to drink alcohol and often damage public property (benches, waste bins, etc.) and the newly planted trees. The city authorities do not allocate a budget for the complex maintenance of the Channel and the surrounding area. The Channel requires cleaning and updating the irrigation system of the slopes, which are rarely cut.



Figure 1: The Rusanivka Channel, Kyiv, Ukraine.

Source: Photo by the author

The vernacular garden was planted by locals on the coast of the Rusanivka Channel in spring-summer 2020. The following list includes some key characteristics of the garden: the locals are dissatisfied with the passivity of utilities; the gardeners are mainly women aged 60-75 who

retain the desire and physical ability to work on the land in their free time; the garden is a mixture of flowers, berries and vegetables, which follows the practice of post-Soviet gardening in the dachas; and the gardeners' children (now 30-45 years old) are reluctant to work on the dachas, spending their time growing vegetables and fruits, preferring to buy dachas to use as a place for a suburban vacation. Gardeners admit that they garden as a leisure practice, as there is no possibility to do so in the suburbs. Therefore, gardening can be characterised as non-utilitarian, despite the fact that vegetables are grown in the garden (melons, pumpkins, zucchini, tomatoes, cucumbers, etc). The main goal is indeed not the harvest but the chance to contemplate the results of one's own labour, although this does not exclude the possibility that in the future, with the expansion of the garden area, the harvest will be large enough and of significant interest to gardener

3 The Vernacular Garden

The first thing to notice is that the local community seems to have a positive experience with the place; they gather and communicate around the gardening area. The women gardeners bring their grandchildren there, showing them and teaching them how to grow flowers and vegetables. Also, the neighbours bring their young children to watch the gardening process. When observing these gardens, a person from the 'post-Soviet space' immediately recognises a typical way of organising and decorating the dacha's yard. During the existence of the Soviet Union, the state could not fully provide the urban population with food, and since the time of Khrushchev, it had been giving people the opportunity through subsistence farming to independently provide their family with food for a whole year: in spring and summer with fresh vegetables, berries and fruit, and in winter with canned varieties of the same foods.

The techniques and methods of 'subsistence farming' became even more important during and especially after perestroika (in the second half of the 1980s) and after the collapse of the Soviet Union when many people lost their jobs or did not receive wages and could provide their families with food only through work on the dachas. Thus, a dacha, a garden and a kitchen garden have always been a condition of stability and independence for people in an extremely unstable situation in a state characterised by a lack of trust in the government. It is a symbol of internal emigration, accompanied by tendencies towards suburbanisation.

Another important aspect characterising the garden is the use of furniture and improvised means, which were collected from garbage dumps to decorate the suburban space. In the Soviet times, people had no opportunity to purchase additional furniture and equipment for a dacha. Therefore, they turned to their imagination and created details for decorating the dacha garden and the interior of their country house in a do-it-yourself manner by using objects found outdoors.



Figure 2: The vernacular garden, Kyiv, Ukraine.
Source: Photo by the author

A further important aspect concerns the fact that a small land plot of a garden near a house bears a symbolic meaning in Ukrainian rural culture, which is also represented in the work of the Taras Shevchenko and, in particular, in the first line of his poem ‘Evening’: “A little cherry garden around the house...” written in 1847 in the casemate of St. Petersburg where he was a political prisoner. A garden is a place of Ukrainian peasant unity with the earth, which is a basic need for survival as well as for aesthetic pleasure. I cite here the Ukrainian writer and translator Volodymyr Dibrova (2019):

A ‘little garden’ is something private, it is a space that should not be encroached upon by neighbours or by the state. In the categories of Marxism-Leninism, Ukrainians were and remain ‘small owners.’ Even now,

when long-urbanised Ukrainians have the opportunity to get a piece of land in a country cooperative, their ‘earth genes’ wake up.

Dibrova focusses here on Ukrainians’ attitude toward their land: at the beginning of the twentieth century, most Ukrainian peasants lived through the process of collectivisation, when, in fact, the Soviet state took away their land, livestock and tools for cultivating the land in order to transfer the land into common use within the framework of collective households. Many refused to give up their land and because of this they were repressed and killed. Despite the next seventy years of collective farming, Ukrainians retained a reverent attitude towards their land in their culture and life (Shevchenko’s poem is a symbol of this attitude), and after the collapse of the USSR, most of them privatised their plots of land. Within the framework of Soviet ideology, such an attitude towards private property was assessed negatively, and in the minds of a city resident, owning land for cultivating edible crops was perceived as something rural and provincial.



Figure 3: View of the vernacular garden and the Rusanivka channel, Kyiv, Ukraine.
Source: Photo by the author

In this context, the vernacular garden of Kyiv is of particular interest, because the love of horticultural practices has led to the unauthorised planting of a garden in a public urban space for which it was not

originally intended. The cultivation of such a garden in a post-Soviet urban space may be interpreted by urban dwellers as alien and inappropriate.

The third aspect that needs discussion is the modern conditions of social life in Ukrainian cities. Neglected public spaces are one of the main urban concerns for the Ukrainian capital. In Kyiv, the presence of no man's land is extremely common, even though these public spaces should play a key role in the interaction of citizens and the city. However, Kyiv residents rarely take on the responsibility of arranging their adjacent territories or public places, as inhabitants consider them to be the duty of public utilities. Nevertheless, the city's authorities do not pay enough attention to this, and the adjacent territories are abandoned. This problem may run deeper: there is likely a general loss of a sense of community. Ukrainian people seem to have lost the importance of coexistence and the feeling of a shared responsibility for public spaces (Salizhenko 2014).

4 Case-Study Analysis

In view of the above, I now address the question of the possibility and the criteria for an aesthetic appreciation of vernacular practices in urban space. This type of garden appears to be paradoxical, given what I have argued above. The paradox lies in the muddling between the private and the public: a garden is cultivated in a public space yet in the tradition of a private natural economy. In addition, one should also bear in mind the collective trauma of Ukrainian peasants who survived massive collectivisation in the 1920s and 1930s. Analogously, one has to consider the drama of the Soviet people who were forced to oppose their private dachas in favour of public urban space. Public urban spaces were integral to the socialist ideology of the Soviet people but did not provide an opportunity to eat regularly or provide food of high quality. Finally, it is also important to pay attention to the modern indifference and commercial exploitation of public space by urban residents. All of these issues found the problematic nature of a combination of public and private, which manifests itself in vernacular gardens in a very peculiar way.

Nowadays, the problem of aesthetic evaluation has received substantial attention from scholars, especially within the approach of the everyday aesthetics. As Adrián Kverkačka (2020, p. 274) remarks, "Gaining importance of everyday aesthetics can bridge the gap between the scientific discourse and our daily practice." Particularly, the aesthetic

study of objects such as the urban space elements, and, in particular, the garden, have become widespread. For instance, the issue of urban landscape evaluation is raised by such aestheticians as Arnold Berleant, Pauline von Bonsdorff, Arto Haapala, Thomas Leddy, Stephanie Ross, Yrjö Sepänmaa and many others, whose ideas are presented in *The Aesthetics of Human Environments* (Berleant and Carlson 2007).

When it comes to a vernacular garden created in an area that used to be a failed socialist project, however, we must re-raise the question of the possibility of aesthetic evaluation and, specifically, the grounds for it. The observations made are based on the experience of contemplating such a type of garden and the attempts to evaluate it aesthetically leads indeed to an internal contradiction: a private practice, which represents a concern for a common space, penetrates the urban public space, which for decades has not been developed and has become a space of alienation. An aesthetic impression of the space is formed: it looks eclectic and even chaotic, but everyone is free to carry out any activity on this territory; someone could destroy and corrupt and someone could care and decorate.

The problem of the contradiction between the private and the public in considering the aesthetics of the everyday can be solved with the help of the approach suggested by Arto Haapala (2005), who addresses the concept of ‘place’ in his analysis. In Haapala’s view (2005, p. 42), ‘place’ is a concept that combines physical and cultural characteristics and that, presenting itself as an everyday object of aesthetic evaluation, becomes a reference point for understanding the cultural landscape: “When a place has a genius, a spirit – both words we understand metaphorically rather than literally – then we assume a much larger and a very different context than the mere physical space. A place in this sense does not necessarily have to be a cultural milieu, although it often is.”

Haapala (2005) distinguishes two types of places and corresponding landscapes, which he calls familiar and strange places. The basis for opposing these concepts is how much the subject knows and is accustomed to this or that place of living:

The aesthetic standards differ when considering strange versus familiar surroundings. One major difference stems from the ontology, or from the existential structure of the place [...]. The aesthetics of place is stamped by our existential structures; in one sense of the word, it is more subjective than the aesthetics of unfamiliar surroundings (Haapala 2005, p. 50).

From Haapala's perspective, the case of the vernacular garden on the Rusanivka Channel can be interpreted as a combination of the notions of familiarity and strangeness being reunited in the same space. While the post-Soviet area and its elements have become an object of aesthetic alienation during the independence of Ukraine, the garden itself, in this case, serves as a way of integrating residents into the alienated landscape. If we consider the Channel as a combination between "familiar" and "strange" elements, then the garden is an object that contributes to making this place more familiar through an initial vivid aesthetic impression (characterised by surprise, attention, and positive appreciation), and then through a number of calmer and subtler sensations (daily observation of the gardeners' work, pleasure from contemplation of flowering, caring, etc).

'Experience' is also a central concept in the attempt to substantiate a way to evaluate the vernacular garden aesthetically. Richard Shusterman (2008, p. 79), one of the most prominent contemporary researchers and interpreters of the concept of 'aesthetic experience', analyses the history of this concept in the aesthetic discourse and arrives at the following conclusion: "Experience displays the same double-barrelled objective-subjective character [...] the object of experience (what is experienced) and the way (or "the how") that object is experienced by a subject [...]. It can refer to a completed event (or product) but also to a continuing process of experiencing."

The focus on the interrelationship between the subject and the object of aesthetic experience entails the analysis of diverse – including negative – experiences, which depend not only on the subject and its overall personal cultural context but also on the cultural context of the landscape and place as objects. In this way, we can arrive at the possibility of shaping an aesthetic appreciation based on this complex and even contradictory experience: the vernacular garden can be appreciated as a way to transform alienated urban space into collaborative gardening practices, which qualifies as an aesthetic experience of the familiar.

Aesthetic experience can certainly be fragmented, dissonant, disrupted, and incomplete [...] Experiences of fragmentation, dissonance, and breaking off can, however, also be positively appreciated aesthetically (for example, if they have certain qualities of novelty, complexity, meaning, and interest), even if such value cannot always be explained in terms of pleasure in feeling these qualities or in overcoming them (Shusterman 2008, p. 86).

In line with these words, the analysis and evaluation of the vernacular garden give us the opportunity to understand aesthetic experience in its incompleteness, fragmentation and fundamentally contradictory aspects (for it is neither negative nor positive), which also reflects the peculiarity of the cultural and aesthetic perception of the modern Ukrainian urban resident.

In considering such an aesthetic experience, I would like to link it with the concept of spatial practice as an object of aesthetic appreciation. Michel de Certeau (1984, p. 96) contrasts it with the collective urbanistic system of control and order:

One can analyse the microbe-like, singular and plural practices which an urbanistic system was supposed to administer or suppress, but which have outlived its decay; one can follow the swarming activity of these procedures that, far from being regulated or eliminated by panoptic administration, have reinforced themselves in a proliferating illegitimacy, developed and insinuated themselves into the networks of surveillance.

Within the framework of spatial practices and urbanistic system opposition, private spatial practices (among which we can include vernacular gardening) are a prerequisite for the subject to undergo an aesthetic experience based on the location where such a person resides. Such practices make the city district a familiar place laden with relevant aesthetic qualities. These considerations imply that the object of aesthetic appreciation is not primarily the garden, but rather the practice of gardening in its continuance, incompleteness and dynamism. To continue with Certeau's analogy, in the Rusanivka district, spatial practices stand not for the urbanistic system, but rather the absence of this system, due to inconsistent urban planning and administration.

To analyse the experience of the landscape as a strange or familiar place, as a result, I focus on the experience of the gardener as the main subject of the aesthetic evaluation of the urban landscape and its elements as an object. A number of aestheticians place the gardener's experience as the object of their research. Stephanie Ross (2007, p. 267) draws attention to the subject of aesthetic perception and evaluation of the garden in its complexity – the gardener who experiences 'the pride of possession, the challenge and engagement of an ongoing project'. Pauline von Bonsdorff (2005) focused on the concept of 'agricultural work', which is perceived as a part of 'both engagement and participation, and to use two key terms of Arnold Berleant, of a human being in the landscape'. American researcher Victor Rivera-Diaz (2020)

raises the question of the aesthetic appreciation of urban agriculture in the context of an eclectic urban landscape:

Urban agriculture resides in the space between a city of material growth and a fundamental need for the signs of sustenance. Embedded in these food production areas is a vision of ecological balance, per the human tendency to interpret a landscape according to one's affective experience. This response is elicited by a care aesthetic, often associated with agricultural landscapes, as well as a metropolitan landscape where multitudinous vernacular accounts invoke intimate details of a place in the minds of many.

In my opinion, care is the keyword here. A feeling of caring is what can be found in analysing the aesthetic experience of vernacular gardening in an urban space. The gardener's experience has been analysed in this paper from the historical, cultural and social context of a specific place (a micro-district in Kyiv) and a specific practice (gardening in a post-Soviet city), behind which, foremost, the attitude of the gardener's care to the lived place is hidden. Looking more closely at the plants, flowers, berries and fruit trees being grown there, one can trace the gardener's desire to transform an alienated area into a place of affection.

5 Conclusion

Raising the problem of the aesthetic appreciation value of vernacular gardens considering specifically the practice of gardening in the post-Soviet urban space, I have attempted to elucidate the complexity and contradictions of this phenomenon. This has allowed me to analyse this object using the well-developed tools advanced by the philosophy and aesthetics of everyday life: the aesthetics of engagement and urban aesthetics, as well as the discourse regarding the aesthetic experience of being in a dynamic urban space. The analysis of these aesthetic approaches allows for a reconceptualization of the aesthetic evaluation of the vernacular gardens considered in the context of a post-Soviet urban space. The aesthetic value of this type of garden arises from the joint experience of the gardener and the observer, who are united by being in a common space and by a shared desire to overcome alienation and transform this space into a familiar place.

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