

Neighbourhood farms as new places for participation and grow-your-own

An interview with Heike Brückner and Jan Zimmermann, conducted by Mai Anh Ha, Meret Batke and Dr Bastian Lange

The neighbourhood farm (Quartierhof) project was developed with the 'Urban Farm Dessau' in the Dessau neighbourhood 'Am Leipziger Tor'. The idea behind the project is to test strategies for creating local food supplies and grow-your-own approaches for healthy food and renewable energies. The aim is to create an urban farm that also serves as an innovative place of learning where economic value creation is linked to education and social work.

www.urbane-farm.de

Heike Brückner is a landscape planner who focuses on post-industrial cultural landscapes and productive urban landscapes. Since 2010 she has been researching post-fossil urban and regional development and initiated the 'Urban Farm Dessau' project. Among other things, she brings knowledge on permaculture to the project.

Jan Zimmermann is a qualified horticultural engineer and owner of a company offering ecological garden services in Dessau. Since the beginning of the project he has been involved as a leader, gardener and visionary.

What is the 'Urban Farm Dessau'?

Jan Zimmermann: In Dessau we have green areas that we're trying to make usable. There are various options here, e. g. food production or the production of renewable energies. A most important point with the Urban Farm is education, which plays a role because of course we're not doing it just for us but also for interested people and children who want to learn something and need education.

What is characteristic of the project?

Jan Zimmermann: The area's directly surrounded by five-storey prefabricated buildings. We're on open meadowland in-between. The project grows a little every year as the area is enlarged a bit every year. As to what grows there, for example vegetables, herbs or potatoes.

Heike Brückner: We like to talk about our project as a 'neighbourhood farm' – a kind of urban farm that is collectively worked by neighbours and people from the neighbourhood. We ask ourselves what we actually need to supply ourselves with food or renewable energies in the city. So how, e. g., a cycle of soil improvement can be organised or how a waste management cycle can be created. We tried out the latter with children in an educational project by fermenting leftover food in a mini biogas plant. We use the gas to boil water for tea and the leftovers from this mini biogas plant are used to fertilise the beds – a simple way to celebrate and demonstrate such circular approaches.

What is the spatial extent of the neighbourhood farm?

Jan Zimmermann: There are a number of separate segments that together make up a cultivated area of about 500 to 600 square metres.

Heike Brückner: I would describe it as a decentralised farm, one that's not necessarily traditional with a farmhouse in the middle from which beds and fields are then cultivated in rays or rings. But rather according to the principle that wherever a stakeholder starts to cooperate with us, like for instance the adjacent *Volkssolidarität* [People's Solidarity] or the women's centre, something's created – for example, a raised bed, an orchard or the potato field.

How does the network of the neighbourhood farm work?

Jan Zimmermann: From the very beginning we organised a gardening meeting that's held for two or three hours every Wednesday afternoon. One of us is present and various, very different people come – ranging from retired people to children who drop by on their way to and from school. Participants are people from the neighbourhood but also some from the suburbs. They join in because they think that the project's exciting and want to be part of it.

Heike Brückner: Between about 3 and 13 people participate. In winter there are somewhat less but then in summer there are sometimes about 15 to 20 people.

Do you own the area?

Jan Zimmermann: We use it in consultation with the owner without a complicated set of contracts.

Heike Brückner: The advantage for the owner is that the area is cared for.

Is the project based on the idea of a commons?

Heike Brückner: Yes, we focus on the principle of a commons in terms of a collectively farmed area. Decisions about what's farmed where or, e. g., where the soil should be improved are made collectively. Which projects do we want to support together? Should animals be included and who will look after them? We discuss all these and other questions collectively.

Jan Zimmermann: An association was founded to bear responsibility for the project. But also primarily so that it's not a loose network and to make it possible to apply for public and private finance.

What effect does the regional context of Dessau have on the project? What is the spatial context that the project refers to?

Jan Zimmermann: In Dessau we have the phenomenon that there's been a great deal of demolition and that means that a lot of brownfield sites have emerged without anyone knowing what should be done with them. Especially where neighbourhoods still exist, the demolition of houses led to open areas that then became overgrown, which was not really to the liking of the residents. That's how we developed the idea of making use of these brownfields. Then with the implementation the question of what is actually possible emerges. The idea of making a vegetable garden is simple but then really implementing this on a brownfield of this sort is something completely different. That's what I would describe as the specific Dessau context, that we have a lot of areas available and that demolition has led to the emergence of new open areas.

What is the background against which the project developed and what resources does Dessau provide?

Heike Brückner: The background consists of the themes of shrinkage, shrinking cities, and how you can plan and manage cities with no growth. Between 2002 and 2010 the Bauhaus Dessau tackled this issue, focusing especially on what instruments were required. In the course of the 2010 *Internationale Bauausstellung (IBA), Stadtumbau* [International Building Exhibition Urban Redevelopment], we developed an instrument to encourage people to cultivate vacant areas. With reference to the gold-mining times in bygone America, we named these areas 'claims'. People could adopt 400 square metres of open space for an interim use or in the form of a concession agreement. That was fairly successful. The urban farm can be understood as a further development of the claims project. Then, of course, there are the big social issues. For instance, that sourcing organic food from far away is outrageous when Dessau has the potential to produce it locally. Or when, on the one hand, young people don't know what they want to do professionally in the future and, on the other hand, we see what a desperate need there is for a new generation of gardeners who can work with ecological cycles. These are the wider social contexts that also motivate us here.

What is the relationship between the region and your neighbourhood farm?

Heike Brückner: We notice that a structure like the neighbourhood farm is relevant when you think about transformation strategies for working towards a sustainable, post-fossil society. What we are testing here is also relevant for cities that are in economic growth. Our experiences are also transferable to other contexts like that. Every neighbourhood, every municipality needs a neighbourhood farm of this sort. A neighbourhood farm as an infrastructure that allows people to participate, to learn a future profession and to practise ecological cycles. Gaining the know-how and the practical experience that we need for the future.

Are you transferring this project approach to other regions?

Jan Zimmermann: The topic of urban farming, local supplies and grow-your-own is definitely relevant in many areas. Whether in Berlin, Leipzig or Hamburg, everywhere there are people who are interested in producing their own food in a different way. Often there isn't enough space, which means that the implementation varies. But no matter whether in a vegetable crate, a potato sack or on the balcony... the idea that there are alternatives to the supermarket offerings of conventionally produced food that's been transported over great distances, that idea is there already. Lots of people come to us who want to see how we've done it, who are inspired by it and who then create their own development path.

What connections are there between your project in Dessau and projects in other cities?

Heike Brückner: A special feature in Dessau is that we understand the project as a structuring element in a spatial reorganisation of the entire city. We have adopted the image of an 'urban garden realm' here, a landscape with islands of urban development.

Nuclei for local supply and grow-your-own initiatives of this sort are developing in many places, for instance the *Stadtgärtnerei Annalinde* [Urban Gardens Annalinde] in Leipzig or the various initiatives of the *Solidarische Landwirtschaft* [Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)]. The link is cre-

ating small urban units and productively using the landscape in between so that cycles of local supply and grow-your-own can develop.

What is the relationship of the neighbourhood farm to the historical idea of the 'Gartenreich' ['Garden Realm']?

Heike Brückner: The link can be found in the idea of productivity. The *Dessau-Wörlitzer Gartenreich* has the guiding principle of combining utility and beauty. But people often forget that behind this aesthetic landscape was an economy. Decentralised farms were scattered throughout the countryside, cultivated the landscape and made it useful.

Is there a specific link between the individual projects?

Heike Brückner: I think that overall this allows a negotiable space to emerge, a new commons. If people can relate to how their food is produced, then an understanding develops of how a cycle is organised etc. That's certainly the connecting factor between the various projects in the different places.

Is the project being copied in the region?

Heike Brückner: This effect, that we trigger a kind of activating impulse, that is occurring. But we haven't yet got the potential to fully duplicate the project. You always need people who can then implement the idea.

Jan Zimmermann: A student project has been founded and has led to a garden being developed, one that's collectively used. At the university there's also a demand for raised beds which will be used for growing food. Or in childcare facilities. We already have quite a presence in Dessau. In talks with a range of people we discover that they know and appreciate what we do. That's an interesting observation, but of course you never know what influences have led to any specific idea.