



# Urbaniahoeve: Event-based practice and Urban Agriculture

Debra Solomon and Mariska van den Berg, Urbaniahoeve

*Urbaniahoeve Social Design Lab for Urban Agriculture* was established in the Netherlands in 2010. In Dutch, ‘Urbaniahoeve’ means, ‘the city (as a) farmyard’. We initiate and coordinate structural forms of urban agriculture in public spaces by creating a contiguous, resplendent, fertile and, of course, edible ecological framework in the existing greens of the city. Collaborating with the local population in all its diversity and roles, *Urbaniahoeve* transforms (visually) green spaces into social spaces, and as well produces a source of *free*, organically grown fruit, herbs, flowers and vegetables. Our contextual framework lies in spatial planning and public space, and we see ourselves as producers of (food system) infrastructure, creating park-like, food-bearing ecosystems.

*Urbaniahoeve* comprises artist Debra Solomon (artist/art director), art historians Mariska van den Berg (writer/researcher of bottom-up public space infrastructure) and Annet van Otterloo (producer and project coordinator of artist-initiated urban regeneration). Between us, we have considerable experience utilizing event-based practice, supported by municipal policy, to realize artists’ interventions in public space and urban regeneration propositions.

Our work asks how a collectively set up *foodscape* can function for a neighbourhood, and whether the local community can maintain it. Can artists and designers coordinate with local food entrepreneurs to infuse new life into a tired urban outdoor market? Can an elementary school maintain its own edible landscaping as a learning platform?

Our project *Foodscape Schilderswijk* in The Hague is an example of infrastructural, experiential, agrarian, material, social and ecological event practice. In the context of art, we refer to our work as a ‘critical spatial practice’. It demonstrates the empirical application of a holistic approach to the human–city–nature complex, a qualitative reconsideration of the *real and actual* city’s public

space, rather than the objective application of a statistical and quantitative enquiry on its usage.

The project can trace its roots back to 2005, when reading *Continuous Productive Urban Landscapes: Designing urban agriculture for sustainable cities*. Debra was inspired by the notion the book put forth: that the city could seed its green spaces with productive greens and grow these spaces like ink spots into corridors to feed the city. She remembers reading:

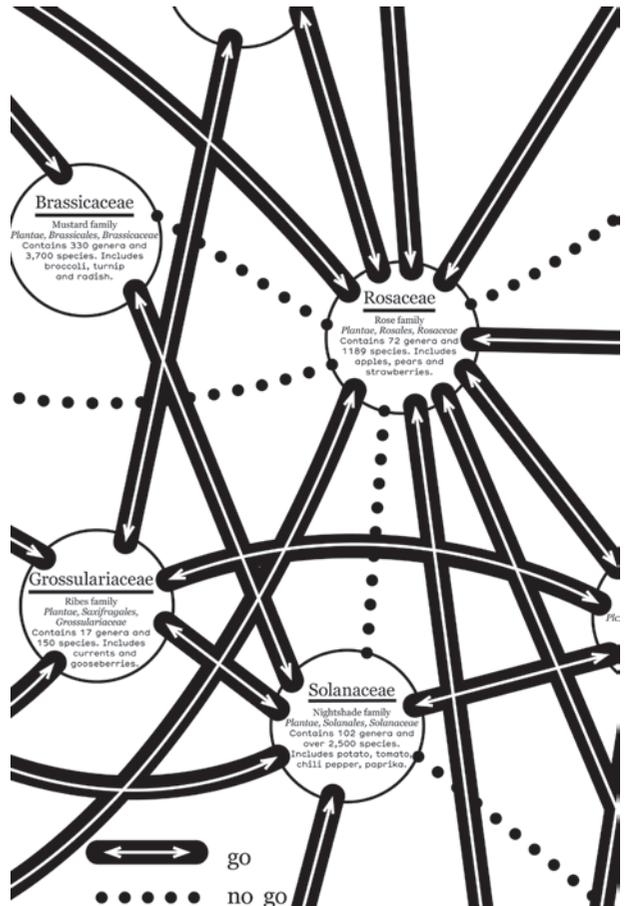
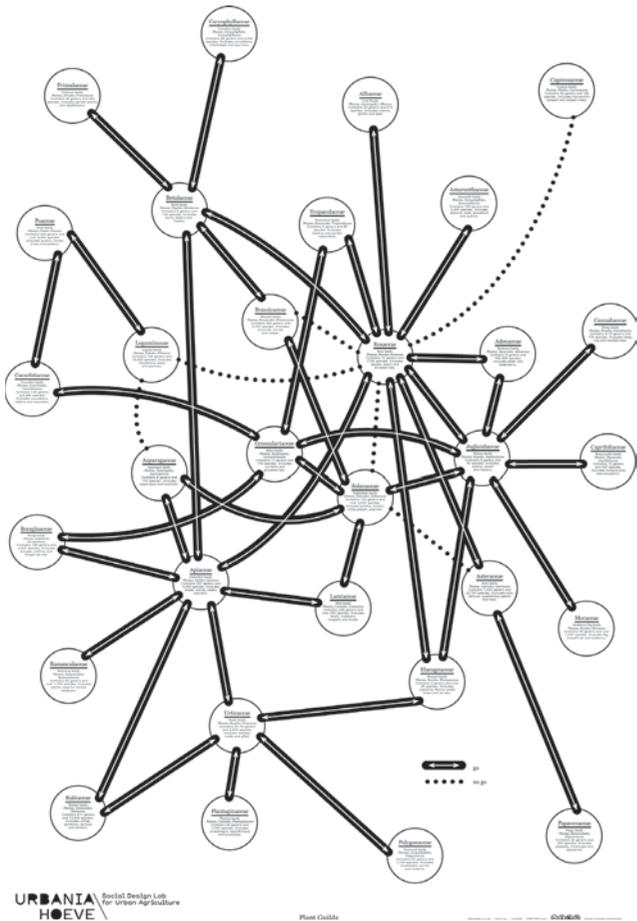
*CPULs do not yet exist.  
In type, they will be new,  
in type they will be productive.*

and thinking, “CPULs must soon exist”. In 2007, Debra was fortunate to be the food domain expert and part of the design team *DOTT 07 Urban Farming* that cooperated with *Bohn&Viljoen Architects* to initiate a temporary CPUL sketched with planters filled with soft fruit and vegetables for an urban farming project in Middlesbrough, England.<sup>1</sup>



**Fig 1: Foodscape Schilderswijk.** Section of densely layered planting including espaliered semi-dwarf fruit trees (e.g. plum), raspberry bushes, nectar plants (e.g. phacelia), and perennial herbs (e.g. lavender).





**Figs 3 and 4: Plant guilds.** Diagram showing collaborative relationships between various food and nectar producing plant families. (image: Debra Solomon and Jaromil Roio for Urbaniahoeve and DYNE.org, 2012)

a garden club. Expanding the CPULs' *landscape* into a *foodscape* could also accommodate an intricate layer of existing urban programming comprising diverse forms of social work at the neighbourhood level. In the meantime, CPULs do in fact exist, because *Urbaniahoeve* and The Hague borough Schilderswijk have been building one in the public space since 2010.

From 2010 onwards, and in close collaboration with the art and architecture centre *Stroom Den Haag*,<sup>3</sup> the *Urbaniahoeve* team have worked on *Foodscape Schilderswijk*, a continuous productive landscape in the existing green infrastructure, built with the borough's

neighbours and organizations. *Foodscape Schilderswijk* is a series of public space orchards, installed and maintained by numerous and varied local groups within the municipality. It is a classic case of *event practice* for the sort of urban agriculture that *Urbaniahoeve* promotes, namely collectively installed public space edible landscapes that, in time, form an *ecological framework* within the city. The harvest from these locations (fruit, berries/soft fruit, artichokes, rhubarb, perennial herbs and flowers) is public and free for the picking. The more "abstract" harvest of this project, i.e. public space programming, increased social cohesion and community solidarity, and a radical and steady

increase in biodiversity and conviviality, is also free for the community to enjoy.

'Realistic utopianism without irony' is one of the slogans emblazoned on the *Urbaniahoeve Foodscape Schilderswijk* project posters. This tongue-in-cheek expression underscores our intention to cooperatively implement edible landscapes that form a working example of the sort of urban agriculture that we actually desire, namely: in public space, park-like and an important foundation in a city's ecological framework.

### *Urbaniahoeve* Social Design Lab for Urban Agriculture

The Hague's Schilderswijk was designed in a 1980s wave of Dutch urban renewal and is populated with a demographic that supports and would utilize a well-programmed public space. The design of the existing public greens is primarily "defensive", e.g. fencing, monocultures of landscaped barriers. For an urban agriculture event to be successful in the Schilderswijk, it must positively impact resilience at ecological, social and nutritional levels. Our team's practice and experience in neighbourhoods in Schilderswijk and Amsterdam<sup>4</sup> has taught us that growing nutritive food crops and the social landscape that can support them is far more valuable to a neighbourhood than the production and sale of consumer-grade food products. The *Foodscape Schilderswijk* community (read also Amsterdam Nieuw West, Amsterdam Noord, Rotterdam Afrikaanderwijk)<sup>5</sup> possesses neither the means nor the ambition to benefit from buying organic produce. In these neighbourhoods, the awareness of the value of locally grown fruit and vegetables, of a healthy biotope, of a healthy relationship with one's neighbours, will come readily when that "product" is free for the picking, both in terms of consumption and participation.

The project participants of *Foodscape Schilderswijk's* planting, harvesting and cooking activities are diverse. Participants include children (aged 8–12), together with their mothers directly after school, high-school students, a fathers' group, and even once or twice per year an expert group of municipal greens gardeners interested in *espalier* pruning. Aside from the *Urbaniahoeve*

project coordinator (local, highly experienced in artist-initiated urban regeneration), we work with a social worker (local, specialized in social permaculture, and a beekeeper) and a local project permaculture expert.

Although it would be a stretch to say that Schilderswijkers are motivated to participate in *the foodscape* due to their interest in or knowledge of urban agriculture, deep ecology, imminent resource depletion or even a desire to access locally produced organic fruit, the child-participants do seem to be aware of these issues through their elementary school curricula. Early in the project, we chose fruit above vegetables as the primary planting, because (the eventuality of) a neglected orchard is, at worst, poetic; a neglected kitchen garden, on the other hand, is a mucky disaster. Yet, it is the fact that these fruit crops require so little maintenance that the core team can steadily initiate new, adjacent locations to secure and establish community engagement. Two years into *Foodscape Schilderswijk*, the orchards thrive with and without care, and should anyone decide to make a go at a cottage perfume or essential oils business this year, the locations yielded enough lavender to consider this a viable endeavour. The rhubarb harvest was so large that we conducted cooking classes to teach the new Dutch teenagers from the participating high school how



**Fig 5: *Foodscape Schilderswijk*.** Child participant prepares signs alerting neighbours and passers-by to 'Let the plants be, they have been planted by the neighbourhood children. Greetings from Safia, Youssef, Oumaima and Sara'.

to prepare it, and *Foodscape Schilderswijk* distributed recipes to encourage its consumption. By the third year we expect to not only have a copious crop of berries, but enough berry bush cuttings that we won't need to buy plant stock for the newest locations. That's nice about rhubarb, berries and artichokes: once you get the plants into the neighbourhood you can propagate cuttings for next year's locations!

An important element that contributes to the success of *Foodscape Schilderswijk* is our healthy working relationship with the parks and greens department *Groen Beheer*.<sup>6</sup> In the coming season, we will further strengthen this relationship by producing administrative templates for work/planting packages, encouraging further cooperation between our organizations. Not only can we support each other with plant material, labour and technical knowledge, *Groen Beheer* has proved a valuable ally in convincing sceptical bureaucratic parties during the early phases of *Foodscape Schilderswijk*. *Groen Beheer* provides us with local, strategic advocacy.

Part of the protocol maintained with *Groen Beheer* is that *Foodscape Schilderswijk* may begin work at any public space location as long as we can show that we have sufficient constituency to finish and maintain the planting. After researching a potential project location and developing contact with neighbours and in-situ institutions, we simply discuss (yes, verbally) the project with *Groen Beheer* and then proceed to get on with our work. Our contact is generous with suggestions regarding plant engineering and is facilitating with regard to works requiring machinery. By now, we are well acquainted with the municipality's ambitions and timetables for the *Schilderswijk*, just as *Groen Beheer* is acquainted with *Foodscape Schilderswijk's* ambitions and landscape language.

### Public reaction

Not all *Schilderswijk* neighbours react positively to the *foodscapes*. A non-participating, vocal minority greets each new location with a negative attitude towards the possibility that a participatory landscape in the public space could affect civic behaviour. Along the southwest

facing wall of the *Hanneman Hoek*,<sup>7</sup> adjacent to a sanctioned dog-poop zone, mothers and children from the elementary school planted a collection of pear trees flanked with currants, abundant and over-productive rhubarb and artichokes. The local high-school biology class planted aromatic tread-plants to overpower the nearby poop along the dividing fence. In one year's time, the *Hanneman Hoek* has flourished with a significant, albeit rhubarb-rich, harvest for the neighbourhood and increasing numbers of ad hoc visits. Neighbours who once vocally eschewed the edible landscape now openly agree that the location is a success and focus their abundant negativity towards our rhubarb recipes.

In the spring of 2012 we planted a new location with large fruit trees (apple, pear and plum – donated by *Groen Beheer*) on the way to the dog-poop zone with a group of 36 local enthusiastic child-volunteers. Although four months later some of the plants have been stolen and some dog owners still allow their dogs to poop on the strawberries, we are certain that, within a year, this behaviour will change for the better as it did at every other location. And in the event that the bad civic behaviour doesn't change (enough)? We'll simply replace the strawberries with bee forage or a soft fruit that crops a little higher up. Although a minority of vocal sceptics may think otherwise, in our experience, the presence of food appears to encourage generous behaviour. We want to emphasize that *Urbaniahoeve* produces both examples and vocabulary (that is, event practice) of community-installed edible landscaping as a sorely needed tool for community agency. Although each new location is met with scepticism, to date, and within one year of completion, each *Foodscape Schilderswijk* location has been adopted, accepted and appreciated.

### The structural problem with small-scale, event practice Urban Agriculture infrastructure

After two years of financing *Foodscape Schilderswijk* largely through the cultural sector, the time came for the municipality to invest in the continuity of its *foodscape*. As of this writing, *Urbaniahoeve* has spent more than four months to secure funding for 2013 and in so doing has hosted more than 60 MPs and local politicians on site during working hours. In a particularly

grim funding search episode, three different parties (a local political party, a social work funding platform for the Schilderswijk and the local housing corporation) proceeded as if to cover our budget equally among them. After months of discussion, honing the proposal and the budget, we discovered that two of these parties were planning on tapping the same, rather inadequate fund that represented a mere one tenth of our total budget. This process squandered our time (not to mention our spirits); a pity considering that urban agriculture infrastructure production activities are season-bound. Now, six months later, *Foodscape Schilderswijk's* project continuity is uncertain.

The contextual and financial bubble of artist autonomy that was a strong agent for culture-driven urban agriculture and urban regeneration in the Netherlands burst when, in 2011, the Dutch minority cabinet announced draconian funding cuts to culture. Like other contemporary 'bottom-up infrastructure producers' in the era of the partially dismantled government, *Urbaniahoeve* now operates in precarity. We have since prioritized forming strategic alliances at the nexus of the ministries of culture, agriculture, infrastructure and the environment in the hope that searching higher, rather than lower, will yield the continuity that our vision of urban agriculture requires.

*Urbaniahoeve's* vision of the urban public space as a *foodscape* posits a productive, socio-natural city. However, aside from network actors such as the aforementioned Groen Beheer, who maintain the city's green spaces, and the local educational framework (environmental education (DSB/NME), and the public school system), the institutional framework with which *Urbaniahoeve* currently works is inadequate in its understanding of our vision, let alone its ability to sustain the inherently long-term aims that we adopt. In times of austerity, when true socio-environmental costs remain hidden, an urban agriculture event practice can provide a platform to develop new forms of long-term support frameworks, promoting a deepened dialectical foundation for urban agriculture; not exclusively a producer of urban food infrastructure, but a generator of new notions of socio-environmental relationships, horizontally produced urban infrastructure, and 'innovation under austerity'.

#### Notes

1. for project details see: Social Design Site (2007) *DOTT07 Urban Farming Project*, Online: <<http://www.socialdesignsite.com/content/view/150>> (accessed 10 Apr 2013).
2. for project details see: Culiblog.org (2008) *Lucky Mi Fortune Cooking*, Online: <<http://culiblog.org/category/lucky-mi-fortune-cooking/>> (accessed 10 Apr 2013).
3. for details see: Stroom Foodprint Programme (2009) *Stroom Den Haag Foodprint Weblog*, Online: <<http://stroom.typepad.com>> (accessed 10 Apr 2013).
4. for project details see: URBANIAHOEVE projects (2010) *Urbaniahoeve Social Design Lab for Urban Agriculture*, Online: <<http://www.urbaniahoeve.nl/project-locations/?lang=en>> (accessed 10 Apr 2013).
5. Amsterdam Nieuw West, Amsterdam Noord, Rotterdam Afrikaanderwijk are low-income, culturally diverse boroughs by Dutch standards. These boroughs represent different demographics and urban typologies.
6. *Groen Beheer* is a Dutch term describing a (municipal) parks and greens department.
7. *Hanneman Hoek* is a multi-level polyculture orchard planted by schoolchildren with their mothers, and it is part of *Foodscape Schilderswijk*.



**Fig 6: Hügelbed.** DemoGarden volunteers fabricate a 'Hügelbed' from in-situ wood litter and local cardboard waste. The advantages of growing urban food on Hügelbeds include contact mitigation with potentially contaminated (or poor) urban soils, radical increase in growing surface, carbon and water sequestration, and a wonderful use for abundant urban waste streams. (image: DYNE.org for Urbaniahoeve, 2012)