

FOLLOWING TRACES

Familiengarten Altstetten

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Allotments, little gardens of citizens, play an important role in a city's green space. Nowadays they are mostly used for leisure activity, yet that hasn't always been the case and its use has changed over time. Allotments were established as result of the poor living situations in industrialized cities. During World War II the Plan Wahlen was implemented by Swiss authorities for the purpose of producing food in order to reach more self-sufficiency, meaning in allotments vegetable had to be planted. Today these little gardens function as extended residential environments, portraying places to relax, enjoy and experience nature. Gardening has evolved to a valuable hobby and outdoor activity. In addition, allotments are of ecological importance as well and foster a larger biodiversity within the city. They are also places of social exchange, supporting intercultural and intergenerational contacts. Since allotments are mostly found at the edge of cities, expansion plans put enormous pressure on them.

The communication between the general public and the private garden owners is difficult and for strangers it is not easy to get insight in this mysterious world between garden gnomes and cabbages. This project creates a mental map of this multicultural mosaic of city gardens and tries to collect some memories and recent developments of this continuously changing ground. To document the different realities in allotments of Zurich Altstetten we asked some tenants to tell us their stories. By showing how this place is of personal value to each individual tenant, we bring awareness to this seemingly unknown and curious place and wish for it to be added to the discussion about the worth of things.

This place is a step out of the city. The highway as a humming sound echoes at the fringe of the city.

There is no welcoming sign, no main entrance. Instead, what you find at every gate leading into the family garden is a list of rules and signs underlining the fact that you are being watched in this very moment.

THE SINGLE SEAT



Dora, my wife, and I were married for 20 years. One day our Dog, it was more hers than mine, died. She got so furious that, without giving it a second thought, she sawed our balcony bench into two. After that, she told me to pack my things and leave, which I did. Before I closed the door to the apartment for the very last time, she shouted after me: “Don’t forget your stupid bench.” That bench, that stupid bench, is the only thing I have left of her now. I’ve added another metal armrest. It has had its place in front of my red house in my little garden ever since. It seems to be an everlasting memory of how she quite literally sawed our relationship into two single pieces.





FULL MOON



We used to have a small lot here. We are quite a big family. The garden always seemed to burst. One cold autumn evening, we had a bonfire. Radiators are not allowed in here. It all turned out to be a disastrous night, a dreadful night. The dry grass caused everything to light up and burn down. All that was left laying bare to see were our terrace floor tiles and some plants in pots. I woke up in the middle of the night, must have been full moon. I had this urge to go back to the place that we once called our home, our safe haven. The moonlight was guiding me along the path, but not just me, it seemed. Approaching the lot, I heard a scratching sound, a sound of pots on tiles. I saw many shadows at work. I was stunned, too terrified to intervene. We all came back the next day. There was nothing left to see but burnt grass. I still hear this scratching sound once a month, always at full moon.

A statue, which seems to belong to no one in particular. Walking past it feels like crossing its path, being in its way, although it's a stationary object.



UNCONVENTIONAL BELIEFS



I've nearly been converted. It was last year in early spring. I was invited over for dinner by a family I've met during a board meeting we have to attend every once in a while. We exchanged lemon pie recipes and our personal secrets of how to prepare lemon curd. I felt like I was going to have a big harvest of lemons that summer. After finishing my second cup of very strong coffee, it was too strong, they quickly placed all the used dishes on the table in front of their garden house. Their swift movements seemed like a daily routine. The huge stack of plates on the table confirmed my assumption. Having expressed my interest in their system of clearing up, they introduced me to their religious beliefs about objects. Objects can only ever be used once unless they've been cleaned by the gods. They have to be cleaned by them giving rain for at least three days in a row as a form of gratitude. Imagine what their table must look like during the summer months, imagine a long period of drought. After that I never visited them again.

From afar, one can already notice an empty area – only grass, some old pipes. It's a gaping void in the very midst of the allotment garden.

The main road leads to the community center, which, to everyone's delight, has a small kiosk, serving drinks – a refreshing pleasure.

The privateness is still a heavy weight, even the cats are closely watching intruders.

THE DUMPSTER



There's an illegal dumping activity around here. The recycling station is nearby, and people have a certain unwillingness to pay for their garbage. Our containers get accompanied by old sofas, prehistoric looking TVs or toilets seats with a yellowish glow. My lot is fairly close to the waste containers, so I get to observe this fashion on a regular basis. There once was this woman, a woman dumping her shady looking bags. She instantly caught my eye, for she was rather good looking. I noticed her coming back many times more. And always, was I so fascinated by her, not able to stop thinking about her afterwards. It was a crucial moment in my life, leading me to discover the interest in my own sex rather than the opposite. As remembrance of this total stranger, who nevertheless left a huge imprint in my life, I kept one of her garbage bags. I hung it in my living room, framed of course.



GENERATION: TRENDY



Every day is a new beginning they say, or it looks like one, at least in my neighbor's garden – every day another frame, another part of her garden in focus. Every day something is newly arranged. Jessica came here two years ago. During the first three months I remember her working very hard on the garden, but only partly thought – always just a little, not effective. After some days her plants either drowned or were dried out. In her second year she hired a gardener who looked after her vegetable weekly. I started to see Jessica less and less. And when she was there, I only ever heard her voice. At the beginning I thought she spoke to me, but no, she was babbling, holding her camera to her face. This year I haven't seen her. I heard she said something about traveling. Every now and then some strangers drop by and ask for her and her sustainable self-regulating watering concept.





RIVALRY

Living in such close proximity to one another is always very interesting. Whenever you take a break from the hard garden work, you can't help but look around at what everybody else is doing: drinking beer number 2 – it's not even noon yet – chopping fresh tomatoes for the first sugo of the season or preparing small meat bites for their carnivorous plant. I go back to weeding my garden. My neighbor was doing the same thing already. It's always a struggle, a never-ending fight about who will be in charge of the weed where our lots meet. He also owns a reptile. One is not allowed to hold animals - he must keep it in secret. On one particular day when our new chairman introduced himself to every tenant, he was taken by surprise when he saw my neighbor taking his reptile for a walk. He was very strict, ruthless even. He gave it to an animal shelter. To give him comfort as he has just lost his closest friend, I gave him a snail of mine. I told him to hide it in his lettuce.



The smell of the sewage plant competes with the sound of the lorries of the garbage station. Zürich needs to stay clean of course.



MONOCHROMATIC DAYS

It was her blouse, the one with delicate lace at the top, her unmistakable velvet hairband and I think her purple umbrella as well. There is this elegant woman, must be in her forties, five allotments further down in south direction. She is very well-dressed but with a strange twist to it. We call her the monochromatic women, only ever wearing one color a day. Monday: orange, Tuesday: red, Wednesday: blue, Thursday: green, Friday: yellow and Saturday: purple, Sunday: no one knows - maybe she is wearing nothing. It was on a Wednesday. I was on my way to the library to rent new books about my tulips when he caught my attention. At the beginning I couldn't quite place him but soon after realized that who I've seen was our new neighbor two plots away in north direction wearing her blouse. I wasn't puzzled by the fact that he was wearing women's clothes I've seen someone else I know wear before. More so, was I perplexed by the fact that it was not a Saturday.



SALE OF INDULGENCE



Some years ago, I forgot to pull out a blue flower in the flowerbed where only red ones were supposed to grow. It took the guard less than a week to find me. The following day, I found a green sheet at my door. That stupid green sheet, a sign that the guard will make your life hell, a sin around the garden. They tend to cut your fresh water supply and the whole neighborhood would gossip secretly about you. My only way out was my next-door neighbor, the priest, a friend of the guard. Besides offering his weekly church service, he would also sell letters of indulgence. Pay him 50 Swiss francs and your sin will be forgotten.



POISONOUS TEASING



My neighbor, the one who owns the lot opposite mine, clearly has never read our rules. He's Turkish. I once saw his many children playing, more like wild dogs fighting with each other. They do that a lot. Suddenly, I heard one of them cry out horribly. I just caught a glimpse of how one of the elder ones took a bucket and fully dumped its content, some kind of liquid, over the head of one of the smaller children. Later, I realized it was some sort of fertilizer, but one of the poisonous ones. Normally they are not allowed around here.



A finely woven fabric, one lot next to another, it seems to be filled with a sense of sharing. Yet, everyone sticks to their own lot, their individual possessions. Sharing only seems to happen when people have a common aim, one guiding mutual intention, leaving behind personal interests. But it may only fully work, if possession is no more.

MISSING APPRECIATION



It is Sunday again, but no cake. Every Sunday before, there was always cake. I've been given a cake by my neighbor every single Sunday for the past three years now. I don't know why, yet redcurrant cake every single Sunday. It used to be my favorite cake with its thin layer of clotted cream, a soft and fluffy sponge and redcurrants beautifully placed on top with a glossy finish. I can't eat it anymore, because of the same redcurrant cake every single Sunday. I can't say a word, too polite. I just keep on accepting it, but don't eat it – every single Sunday. It is Sunday again, but no cake. No explanation, nothing, I start to wonder. It was my favorite cake after all.



GESTURE OF APPRECIATION



It was a Sunday when I took over this tiny piece of garden three years ago. My neighbor was very kind, giving me redcurrant seedlings as a welcome gift. I was thankful having such nice people around me. I love to bake. I am a baker, that it my gift. His warm gesture makes me think about him every single Sunday, him being the reason for the lovely fruit in my garden. I think it shaped our friendship. It's almost like a ritual now, every single Sunday a redcurrant cake on his doorstep. I enjoy making someone happy. It is Sunday again, yet all my redcurrants gone, taken by the storm. I can't say a word, too polite, too embarrassed. I didn't comment it. It is Sunday again. I told my other neighbor on the other side about it. My neighbor was very kind, giving me blueberry seedlings as a replacement. I was thankful having such nice people around me. From now on I can finally think about my neighbor every single Sunday again. And there will be cake on Sunday again.





EVICTIION TIMES TWO

Isn't it nice, the little playground over there? My daughter still loves to play here, especially the swing she often uses. She always envied her friend on the other side of the big street. I remember my princess wide-eyed when she came here on her 4th birthday and found the exact same playground standing on our plot – and I literally mean the exact same one. You must have heard about the planned freeway ramp in order to reduce the noise pollution in the area. It is planned on the other side of the big street. They had to clear their plot in a very short time, but my husband and I were faster. The playground wouldn't have found a place in the communal green space of their new apartment block anyways.



The area is sliced into two by the highway, a scar within the landscape. An underbridge is the only way to get to the other side.

A GAME OF CHESS



The family garden is a place for manual activity. While most people use it to grow their own food, I use it as a studio space - much cheaper than anywhere else in the city. I am a sculptor, loving to craft outside. I sometimes feel like a plant. I don't mind rain or snow. I work all year round. Sculpturing has become the central activity in my life, helping me to understand the world. Whenever I have finished one or two of them, I place them somewhere around the garden, letting them talk - to me, to others, to the world. One day, I forgot to take it back to my lot. The day after I noticed, that it had appeared somewhere else. I then deliberately left the new ones where I placed them. And I waited. It has now become a kind of endless chess game, without rules, without winner or loser. I would love to know who my opponent is.



A man is digging, not noticing anything else. He seems to stroke the earth.

BACK TO SILENCE



She was young, very young, I mean 24 years young. She was tall, blond, her moves graceful. She was the youngest women in the allotment garden, with a typewriter and single. She used to plant roses, lavender, hydrangeas, Chrysanthemums...– all of light pink color like the fresh and natural glow of her skin. Of course, lots of men would give her looks and overwhelm her with compliments or even invite her for a glass of homemade red wine, hoping to seduce her. But there was this thing about her having an awful taste in music. She started to write articles for the garden newspaper. She was good at it, but still, the music – always so unbelievably loud, too loud. There were certain rules only allowing music to be listened to with earphone, trying to prevent the chaotic orchestra of radios and foreign music within the allotment area. She had to leave although she was beautiful. Years later we found out that she was almost deaf.





FISHING FOR ISOLATION

We have this checkup every once in a while. The chairman of the garden, being awfully proud of himself and his duty, sneaks around and controls, if everyone acts within the set rules. One could call it strict, but necessary is what I think. My neighbor has very specific views on respecting boundaries. He constantly has a certain need to push things back such as my oh-so annoyingly overgrowing grass or tree branches pointing into his private part of the air, the space above is lot obviously. I am already trying my best not to bother him, but apparently it is not enough. One summer he built up a fence, four meters high, seven meters wide, and funnily enough, retractable as well. All this effort in order to avoid the controlling gaze of the chairman. This construction is not only ugly but also gives one the feeling of being in a prison. And worst of all it also kills birds; they sometimes hang in there like dead fish in a net. Maybe I should hand him over to the chairman. He would love his case.



WATCHING AND BEING WATCHED

Some nights will haunt you the day after. I spent the night of September 6, 2002 on my bench next to my chamomile beds. I loved those warm and crystal-clear nights just looking into the stars. I can't see them from my balcony in the city. It was a starry night. I was laying there covered by a colored plaid, listening to the sound of the night, the plants, the sleeping animals. There was this man, a bit confused it seemed, always restless, casting out every footstep ever found in his garden with concrete, a way of convicting intruders. I wondered if he might be a good candidate for the detective school, but no it was simply the paranoia of being followed. He stays overnight a lot, to watch over his garden. He can't have cameras - digital surveillance, is what he is terrified of. That night, I saw him sleepwalking.





Dinosaurs are to be found here and there. At least they have something to sit on. Does no bench mean there's no room for strangers to rest, a way to keep intruders out? It feels like walking through a Zoo, where each garden is a cage housing a different species, a different individual with a different reality. Can they tell when one doesn't belong here?

It's far out at the edge of the city – at the edge of everything, although there is no clear ending to be seen. The highway is as infinite as its sound, dissolving the city far beyond its physical boundaries.

LAYERING UP

Some people might say I suffer compulsive hoarding, but I prefer to say I'm a collector. It is true that in my flat there is hardly any room for one person to sleep. On a very cold day in late January I met the love of my life. She sold me my 5th toaster just in case my other ones break down. We went on a date and she wanted to stay the night. I try really hard to keep my allotment nice and clean, so I decided to take her there. You are neither allowed to insulate your house nor to have a heater, the city's method to prevent overnight stay, it seems. We spent an amazing night there, but she caught a cold. A week later she died. From now on I make sure to always wear at least five layers of jackets when I stay here over night.





Cages become castles. Or is it the other way around? Either way kings need flags to support identity and mark territory – an agglomeration of the same flags. For in set groups is where we feel the most secure. Lots become places of gatherings. Is this what is needed to ground one's feet in this society? Or is sharing the simple pleasure of gardening and manual labor enough to do so?

So many dos and don'ts, it's bursting one's head. Are they necessary? Is that the closest one gets to freedom? One could wonder what driving force there really is behind this need to own a patch of land.



THE SUFFOCATING GIFT

There's this Armenian family. Thankfully, there's some distance between their plot and mine. It's not because of their nationality, trust me, they're quite nice. Our kids even play together. Their lot on the other hand is rather questionable though, one recognizes it right away. It is overgrowing with the Armenian blackberry. It's an invasive plant, the authorities tell us so. I wonder why nobody is acting against it. The family, on the other hand, is quite happy about it. They got this plant sent in a small pot by the Turkish state, as a gift of course. They were told to not give out too many details about what is happening in their home country. They did not seem to mind. At least they have nice blackberries now.





LEFTOVERS FROM ANOTHER ERA

In the seventies we used to have a rather small hippie community. They were outsiders within our little harmonious Swiss community. They lived off their land, trying to live fully autarch, stereotypical for such people. Their aim might have been similar to ours, striving for self-sufficiency, yet everything seemed to be more out of conviction and their relation to nature rather than out of necessity, they said. They were different, strangely different, but I guess one would call it relaxed today. To further affirm their differences, they put dinosaur figures at the entrance of their lots. Someone told me, that apparently, they believed in the end of humanity and the return of such creatures; maybe due to all the atomic waste, responsible for mutation of the birds? Now all of them have left; maybe the endless wait was too much and our end didn't come soon enough? One can still find their traces in some of the gardens. Kids like to play with their leftovers.



Individual lots are shaped by an open attitude towards improvising and a need to do things with one's own two hands. The notion of do-it-yourself or hand-me-down seems to stand above buying new and constantly consuming. Maybe the people here are experiencing a better hierarchy between the need and the want, which today is seen as a synonym. The want used to belong to the gods. But are they in fact trying to question society's model of consumerism or is it a behavior that comes natural to them?



RED OR BLUE?



There is this old man living not at the beginning of the allotment are, also not at the end - in the very midst of it, I would say. He might be one of the oldest tenants, still growing vegetables and fruits in a really old manner, self-providing himself. He is a very warm and friendly man. He also has other days, where he is all grumpy and angry. You can tell from his hat; Red for the good days - everybody is welcome; Blue for the bad days - dare you interrupt him. His garden was known all around the allotment, known as a place to come together, drink, eat, laugh - just delightful! Of course, one would also always look for his hat first. The colors were faded out already, greyish and pinkish, but that doesn't matter. For some month now, there are no more gatherings. He has a new hat - a straw hat.



NOT THAT BAD AFTERALL

There are many things I like about my garden: my cabbage, my garden lounge, the breeze of the fresh air after a long day working at the bank or my wife bringing me a cold beer whenever I ask for it. But of course, there are also things I don't like about it: snails snacking from my cabbage, racking up the leaves and my numerous Portuguese neighbors who replaced most of my Swiss friends and talk in a language I don't understand a single word of. I don't talk to them at all. I don't interact with people who are not Swiss.

It happened on a very hot summer evening. A sudden thunderstorm burst out with hailstones the size of tennis balls. I was fighting against the wind to cover my vegetable patch which I was afraid to lose. All of a sudden, a handful of my migrant neighbors came to help. Since they only ever eat food, they get from Aldi they didn't have a thing to worry about, not a single thing of their own patch to protect. From that day on I started to acknowledge them by a simple wave over my garden hedge on a regular basis. Sometimes we even exchange very few words.



The resemblance of this place from afar lets one expect an endless repetition. An abrupt stop is what one gets. One sees a construction structure peek through the sky, resting on the remains of what used to be a family garden. There, laying bare on the ground is the hope of a better way of living, slowly losing the fight against the very thing it questioned. Is its worth not sufficient enough?

