Cultivating Liberation: Gardens as Agents of Connection and Empowerment in Havana, Cuba

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The paper below delves into urban gardening in Havana, Cuba, uncovering how these green spaces are more than just places to grow food but hubs of community resilience, cultural preservation, and economic survival, especially in the face of recent global challenges. Through stories of various gardens—private backyard plots, community-centered spaces, and entrepreneurial ventures—this research showcases how these gardens blur the lines between private and public life. They act as informal classrooms, barter markets, and sanctuaries of both tradition and adaptability. Most importantly, Cuban gardeners demonstrate remarkable ingenuity and solidarity despite facing hurdles like resource shortages and climate change by using natural fertilizers, sharing seeds, and supporting each other to create sustainable and resilient green havens.

Cuba is constantly in a state of change. As historian Louis Peréz states, "Change recurs with such frequency in Cuba that it assumes the appearance of a changeless condition."[1] Therefore, studying Cuba can feel as though you are trying to grasp onto air; once you feel you understand something, a new experience shifts this perspective, and you can never quite catch the truth. Paying attention to materiality can make this process a bit easier; people's direct interaction with and influence on material realities, such as gardens, can reveal complex problems and solutions at play.

While urban gardening has long been recognized as a transformative practice in Cuba, fostering sustainability, diversity, and educational opportunities,[2] recent global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian-Ukrainian War, have brought about new challenges and opportunities for urban gardens in Havana.

Urban gardening in Cuba is a communal activity beyond merely producing food. The practice and outcomes of urban gardening reflect diverse values and realities, such as the depth of communal knowledge, the relationships between people and the land, the availability of materials, and cultural preferences in design and food choices. Additionally, through the exchange of locally grown produce, urban gardens serve as alternative forms of currency during economic instability.[3] They provide a practical means of trade and solidarity when either people cannot access currency or the official currency loses its value.

Case Studies:
Since greenery permeates everywhere in Cuba, a lush, tropical island, defining what constitutes an urban garden can be challenging. While scholars have proposed various precise definitions,[4] I have approached this definition by prioritizing the lived experiences and societal contexts of gardening spaces in Cuba. Rather than relying solely on these precise and formal definitions (sometimes coming from the outside), I have included spaces based on whether the practitioners identified the spaces specifically as tools for resistance, liberation, and community building. These definitions have emerged from interactions with the people themselves, providing a nuanced understanding of the significance of gardening spaces beyond technical categorizations.[5]

To create an order of the urban gardening spaces observed, I divided them into three main types, each emphasizing communal aspects. The first category encompasses private homes where gardening activities facilitate public and community interactions, blurring the lines between private and public spheres. The second category includes private spaces that openly welcome public engagement, often hosting community organizations or events. These spaces foster a sense of openness and accessibility, inviting community participation and collaboration. The final category comprises spaces that lack residential presence and resemble more formal or business-like setups. Despite their non-residential nature, these spaces remain

integral to community well-being, embodying a tension between private ventures and more revolutionary ideals.[6]

Part 1: Private Homes

The first example is from Desirada,[7] who lives in Los Pocitos.[8] I got to know Desirada a couple of weeks prior to our interview at a site visit in her neighborhood, where she is the co-founder and coordinator of a community project. I remember the first time I met Desirada because she had intense energy and was very dedicated to the community. She explained to me how determined she was to wake up every day to do her work because many were relying on her.

After a large tour of the neighborhood, Desirada showed us her backyard. She had many different plots and even some pens for pigs. She had different raised beds that used old glass bottles as borders. The typical Cuban practice of turning trash into treasure (known as *resolver*) can always be observed in a garden space. She had strawberries, corn, beans, pineapples, and more, all intertwined and flourishing. Desirada explained that even though this plot was in her personal backyard, her experiences there and her experiences in the community could not be separated. It was an intimate relationship, an ebb and flow between the two, allowing each to exist in harmony. The experience she gained in her garden went directly into helping and maintaining the other 58 gardens in, with, and for the neighborhood. Nothing could be considered a completely personal endeavor around here.

The second example is Vinita. Vinita was also a resident of Los Pocitos. Desirada introduced me to Vinita some weeks after our interview when I was volunteering at the community center. Vinita had a large and diverse home garden where she raised pigs and bees and an extensive fruit orchard and vegetable garden. We knocked on her door to see if we could walk around, and she brought out fresh mamey juice for us. Outside her house, she and Desirada were chatting about getting milk for their kids, which was a typical conversation. I heard many women talking about getting their children milk and how they would figure it out the following week. This interaction, where community members discussed and brainstormed solutions to their problems, happened often around me and was their backbone for survival. After speaking outside her house briefly, I asked if she would mind being interviewed. She quickly agreed and invited me inside. I was pleased to be in her house; she had loving and caring energy. Vinita was fifty-two years old and a *campesina* (farmer); she had her home plot and space in a cooperative. She told me she is originally from a humble peasant family from Santiago de Cuba (in the East), from the Sierra Maestra, but she moved and has lived in Havana since 1998. Vinita was a powerful example of the hope that can be had when one takes their food supply into their own hands. As a home gardener, she felt calm because she had access to an abundance of food grown by her hands; if she had nothing else, she would have food. Through her actions, she wanted to inspire others to gain that autonomy and empower themselves by growing their food. Vinita explains how and why she has done that:

> With the Covid issue[…], it forced me to plant a little more. I didn't plant this much [before], it was just one fruit tree for the year. And [since] Covid I said: in any little piece [of land] I put a plant and we have encouraged many women to reflect on the food issue of sowing your little piece, of sharing with your neighbor, of exchanging experiences[…] So Covid has taught many people today to have everything cultivated and to share[…] At least among us [who have] *patios*[9] we do that.[10]

Vinita's reflection contributes significantly to the overarching theme of cultivating and sharing food and experiences, while also highlighting the disparity in food shortages and experiences between urban and rural areas. Vinita's experience epitomizes urban gardening's role in empowering individuals and communities within Cuban society, showcasing self-sufficiency amidst economic challenges. Through cultivating her own food and sharing resources with neighbors, she embodies resilience and solidarity,

bridging urban and rural divides. Her narrative underscores the transformative potential of urban gardening in fostering autonomy, community cohesion, and resistance to external pressures.

Part 2: Private/Public Spaces

The first person I will discuss in this section is Nalda, who lives in a neighborhood of Havana where many houses are considered "illegal settlements." I later discovered people call this *llega y pon* (arrive and put). When I got there, Nalda's husband invited me into her home, where I was very unexpectedly greeted by twelve children aged nine to thirteen from the neighborhood. They gave me speeches about Cuba and their desire to cure the earth and its people. I soon understood that Nalda, with the help of other community members, ran a project centered around creating food and energy sovereignty in their neighborhood, which included an after-school program for youth and teenagers on various topics related to sustainability, agroecological food production, and much more. They started the project in 2010 illegally, and it was officially approved to exist in 2014. Nalda had an aura around her of love that allowed her to have faith in the future. She spoke of the issues and frustrations clearly but did not let these thoughts discourage her from fighting for her community's survival. She was clear that she and her family did not speak about politics. She expressed she was in no place to speak of them; I respected this wish and asked little about socialism or the government. Through their actions of gardening and organizing, though, I observed they were consciously disconnecting; trying to not rely as much on the promises of socialism and instead create for themselves what they needed. Rather than openly criticizing the government, they expressed their dissatisfaction through actions — demonstrating what they were doing and why, speaking volumes through silence.

Overall, Nalda and her community displayed more faith and hope than I had observed in my previous interactions. They were convinced that, despite their lack of access to material wealth, they could achieve self-sufficiency through gardening and mutual support, believing this would be their path to survival. It was an inspiring micro-community solution. Below is a quote from Nalda, who, before the interview, gave me a tour of her *patio*. She had many plants in her yard, all with a purpose and intricately intertwined to create an oasis of care. She stated:

> As you see, this [mango] is also produced in the yards, not in my backyard, but since we are thirty-five families together, this is produced by a friend, others produce other things […]we exchange. 'Ah, I have mango, [here is a] mango, ah, I have bananas. [Maybe] I don't have [anything], [but someone comes and says] look here's a banana,' and so. And that helps us breathe a little bit. Because the food situation is no secret. It's a little bit difficult for us.[11]

This aspect of community support and solidarity is expressed in the words above. Her explanation of how she can get food for the week through her community's support and her community's ability to get access through her is a direct example of the reciprocity economy. Here, urban gardening serves as a concrete action to try to overcome the vulnerability of the crisis. Nalda was very passionate about providing for herself and not relying on the government or the market for her survival. This reflection exemplifies the collective memories of support these thirty-five families share. When other members of the community were asked how they imagined their future, they wrote me two letters, which I translated and transcribed below:

> I hope that it will be a better world, I hope it will be a better world[…] if we all work with forces we can achieve armies, without many words. And the shortages that exist will disappear, especially in the capital. We want our community and our family to have clean streets and healthy food. We are sometimes in power outages, but [with] the project we want to make renewable energy[…]

> Those of us who are in the communities want our children and grandchildren to have a better future, which is possible if we have the desire and organization.[12]

> If we all take advantage of the land, help each other, and cultivate together, we can offer food between families, [and] communities. All the communities have the right to their own development, freedom, equipment, tools, cages, medicine for animals[…] We are not [just] fishermen; we are surrounded by land. We can exchange. Those of us who cook, make food to feed the family and ourselves. That's what we want to see food development in the place where we live. Resources and freedom to produce, that's what I want.[13]

Recently,[14] I texted Nalda to check in on her and ask her how the project is going. Unfortunately, since I have left Cuba the situation there has worsened with heightening inflation, increased migration, global rising of gas prices, and the ever-present blockade from the United States. She stated:

> Our orchards and gardens are becoming less and less. We continue with the planting of clean, good and healthy food. The seeds here are not easy to find and the state prices are prohibitive. We have a program called: The Seed; which consists of recovering all the seeds of all the fruit trees. We sowed chard from some seeds that some European students brought with them and we ate them and some of them were left in the field for seed, this is the seed that is in the process of drying to sow again. The celery that is in the orchards and gardens today is already sowing, these will be the seeds that we will use and so on. The fertilizers are natural: excrement from rabbits, goats, etc., as well as compost from all the kitchen waste, whether it is eggshells, food collected from the yard, etc. And to fight pests we have the neem tree and the Cardona and other natural repellents. We take leaves and branches and put them to ferment and with that we make fertilizers. Right now, we have Californian worms and we produce our own humus. We don't have many working tools but the exchange between all of us this month helps us and we lend [to each other]. That solidarity among neighbors helps us a lot.[15]

Nalda's story illustrates the impact of urban gardening on community resilience and self-sufficiency in Cuba. Despite socio-economic challenges, she and her neighbors have created a network of mutual support and sustainability that persists even in the harshest of times. Their gardens not only provide food but also strengthen community bonds.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, this example illustrates that to truly understand these spaces, one must engage with the people who cultivate them. The true cultural and relational significance of urban gardening emerges through their stories and the observation of micro-interactions. Nalda's ongoing efforts highlight not only the necessity of community cooperation in overcoming setbacks but also the celebrated ability of Cubans to adapt, persevere, and maintain resilience.[16]

The second example in this section comes from Duaro. Duaro and his wife, Lily, live across the bay in a section of Havana called Guanabacoa, far from the central city. Guanabacoa is one of the oldest municipalities located in the east of Havana. Once I reached their house, Lily offered me coffee; a must when entering a Cuban household (even if it is something they have difficulty getting their hands on these days). I accepted. She sat beside me and joined in discussing their lives and what they do. Her energy was very loving and warm. She showed me a small porch where she kept her bees, and her cat who she picked up and asked me to give it cuddles.

After a little while, they took me out to their project grounds. Together, they run a community project that uses gardening as a tool to support and empower people with mental and physical disabilities. This approach not only helps individuals but also fosters awareness and education about sustainability and disability issues. Their space was beautiful—filled with vegetables, fruits, medicinal plants, worm compost, and their

germination greenhouse. They toured me around, showing me the new baby kittens that had just been born. I remember this space as an abundant paradise within the city, and as they spoke to me, I felt their passion and love for what they do. Duaro was a strong man, as I felt from when I first met him, he was hard-headed and independent but also very loving. He was a dedicated socialist and loved Cuba deeply. He truly embodied the idea that life was supposed to be lived with and for others. He told me:

> We try to educate the children to take care of nature by sowing a plant and watering a plant so that tomorrow the plant will not be [vulnerable]. There are two different visions of life, the one who thinks of being and the one who thinks of having. The one who thinks about being has the possibility to look for the path to happiness. The one who thinks about having will never be happy. That is the consumerist world that we detest. We think of the conservation of natural goods to give to future generations in which we can breathe and live in harmony.[17]

Their community project offers a compelling example of how urban gardens can function as more than just sources of sustenance; they become avenues for social change. By intertwining education, therapy, and environmental stewardship, their initiative creates a holistic approach to community development. Through their dedication to fostering connections with nature and each other, they not only cultivate vegetables and fruits but also sow the seeds of resilience, self-reliance, and collective well-being. In doing so, they embody a vision of urban gardening as a tool for liberation, connection, and empowerment within Cuban society.

Part 3: Businesses

The first example in this section comes from Yosary who lived in the same community as Nalda, yet a different configuration of space. Yosary had lots of land, and she expressed that the main thing she wanted from the land was to make a profit from gardening to benefit the community. She had a guava orchard, many mango trees, coconuts, and small garden plots everywhere. She expressed wanting to have a fruit stand on the side of the road as well as create an agritourism destination to generate profits for reinvestment in the community project.

The second space, located in Vedado, was a garden run by a friend of our professor. He drove us there and introduced us to the caretaker of the garden, Floriano. This garden was fully dedicated to producing medicinal plants, showing the pivotal role of urban gardens in meeting healthcare needs. Traditional remedies are popular amidst medication shortages, with urban gardens serving as essential resources, especially for Santería practitioners. Moreover, integrating urban agriculture into the public health system reflects efforts to address healthcare disparities and promote alternative medical practices amid economic challenges.[18] Floriano explained to us the different plants and the remedies they were used for. He had a small board showing the offers of the day which listed *caña santa* (lemongrass), *menta* (mint), *guacamaya francesa* (candle bush)[19], *masito manzanilla* (chamomile chewing gum), *hierva de la sangre* (blood grass/weed)[20], *verbena* (lemon balm), *halbaca morada* (holy basil), *sabila* (aloe), *rompe camisa* (lantana)[21], *abre camino* (thoroughwort)[22], *siguaraya*[23], *pasi flora* (passionfruit flower), moringa, and oregano. Every single item was ten pesos which was[24] about ten cents (USD), highlighting that while this is technically a business, the emphasis is more on support and exchange rather than profit, as the pricing suggests minimal profit motive.

Conclusion:

I want to conclude with some reflections. The first is the blurred line between private and public spaces in Cuba. As evident in each section, no space is easily defined as either public or private—regardless of certain laws or perceptions. Part of this is cultural, rooted in the Cuban island culture of hospitality, where doors are left open, and people flow freely in and out. The second reason is necessity: in a system marked by

struggle, people increasingly rely on each other, creating an expectation of cooperation. And the third reason? It may very well be the elephant in the room: the Revolution. Yes, there is that—a foundational reason for mass solidarity. Briefly touched upon in the quote from Duaro, the idea of living for others has been ingrained in the Cuban consciousness for over 60 years now. But how has this evolved over time? And how can gardens illuminate this?

Gardeners often navigate complex relationships with government bodies, Cuban NGOs, and community entities to secure and sustain their plots. This process is often precarious, requiring gardeners to continually demonstrate allegiance to revolutionary ideals and communal welfare.[25] Additionally, tensions arise from the differing motivations of older and younger generations. While older gardeners may see their work as a continuation of revolutionary principles, younger participants may be driven more by economic necessity and personal advancement.[26] This intergenerational divide reflects broader shifts in Cuban society, where the legacy of the revolution intersects with modern economic realities. Despite the challenges, Cuba's transition can be seen as a testament to the possibility of moving beyond an exploitative capitalist model toward a more holistic form of well-being.

Every day, as I monitor the exchange and inflation rates on the informal market, I watch the Cuban peso's value fluctuate against the US dollar and Euro, a harsh reminder of the worsening crisis in Cuba. The numbers may signal a decline, but they also reveal the evolving nature of the situation. Since my departure, I've noticed other changes like new cars filling the streets and stores appearing more stocked. These shifts hint at a transformation in the city's aesthetics, suggesting a landscape in flux. To some, my observations seem overly optimistic, but I cannot deny the magical quality of Cuba—forcing you to be filled with hope of an abundant future. Gardens, while a small component of this broader narrative, represent a history of resistance. They are not just green spaces but symbols of an enduring struggle that has shaped and will continue to shape Cuban society—from colonization to independence to the revolution. As I prepare to return to Cuba to further explore and document the evolving role of the food system, gardens being a part of that, I am reminded of a valuable lesson from a mentor: the more you think you understand Cuba, the more confident you can be that your grasp is incomplete.

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[1] Louis A Pérez, *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture* (University of North Carolina Press, 2008), pp. xi.

[2] Carey Clouse, *Farming Cuba: Urban Agriculture from the Ground Up* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2014); Gustav Cederlöf, 'Low-Carbon Food Supply: The Ecological Geography of Cuban Urban Agriculture and Agroecological Theory', *Agriculture and Human Values*, 33.4 (2016), 771–84 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-015-9659-y>; Mickey Ellinger and Scott Braley, 'Urban Agriculture in Cuba', *Race, Poverty & the Environment*, 17.2 (2010), 14–17; Susan Anne Mansel Fitzgerald, *Havana: Mapping Lived Experiences of Urban Agriculture*, 1st edn (New York: Routledge, 2022) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003201410>; Marina Gold, 'Urban Gardens: Private Property or the Ultimate Socialist Experience?', in *Cuban Intersections of Literary and Urban Spaces*, ed. by Carlos Riobó (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011); Sinan Koont, *Sustainable Urban Agriculture in Cuba* (University Press of Florida, 2017); Sinan Koont, 'Urban Agriculture in Cuba: Of, by, and for the Barrio', *Nature, Society, and Thought*, 20 (2007), 311–26; Sinan Koont, 'A Cuban Success Story: Urban Agriculture', *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 40.3 (2008), 285–91 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0486613408320016>; Friedrich Leitgeb, 'Increasing Food Sovereignty with Urban Agriculture in Cuba', *Agriculture and Human Values*, 33.2 (2015), 415–26 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-015-9616-9.>; Ola Plonska and Younes Saramifar, *The Urban Gardens of Havana: Seeking Revolutionary Plants in Ideologized Spaces* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019) <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-12657-5>; Adriana Premat, 'Small-Scale Urban Agriculture in Havana and the Reproduction of the "New Man" in Contemporary Cuba', *Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y Del Caribe*, 75 (2003), 85–99; Adriana Premat, 'Cuban Counterpoint of the Public and the Private: Reflections on the Making of Urban Agriculture Sites in Havana, Cuba' (York University, 2004); Adriana Premat, *Sowing Change: The Making of Havana's Urban Agriculture* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2012); Marina Gold, 'Peasant,

Patriot, Environmentalist: Sustainable Development Discourse in H Avana', *Bulletin of Latin American Research*, 33.4 (2014), 405–18 <https://doi.org/10.1111/blar.12175>.

[3] Cuba has faced significant economic challenges since the early 1990s, beginning with the "Special Period" following the collapse of the Soviet Union, its main ally and economic supporter. This sudden loss plunged Cuba into a severe crisis, marked by acute shortages of food, fuel, and other essentials. The situation has worsened in recent years due to several factors. Long-standing U.S. economic sanctions have tightened, further restricting Cuba's access to international markets and financial resources. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted tourism, a vital source of revenue, leading to further economic strain. Global events like the Russian-Ukrainian war have disrupted supply chains, increasing the cost and difficulty of importing goods. These compounded challenges have resulted in high inflation, widespread shortages, and increased hardship for the Cuban population.

[4] Clouse, pp. 83–134; Koont, *Sustainable Urban Agriculture in Cuba*, pp. 1–29.

[5] Fieldwork for this piece was carried out May-August 2022 in Havana. To clarify, my primary objective in Havana was not specifically focusing on the study of urban agriculture. Instead, I was engaged in the collection of oral histories using the subject of food as a tool for relationship building. However, due to this approach I frequently found myself guided into people's backyards where cultivation spaces were commonly encountered. As such, the findings presented in this paper emerged as an incidental outcome of my primary research. It is important to note that this paper is not a formal or exhaustive update on urban gardening or urban agriculture in Havana. Numerous urban planners are actively addressing such things.[10] Rather, it serves as a testament to the firsthand of a food researcher who interacted with practitioners in the field, supplemented by observations and interactions while immersing oneself in the urban landscape of Havana. Although the method for my broader research was fairly complex and theoretical, placing itself in the field of contemporary history, for the sake of this paper I will simply explain the logistical facts. To get data for the findings and analysis, I mainly utilized an oral history methodology based on the field of food history and memory studies; this meant that although the interviews were not directly related to gardening, the aspects related that came out will be used in this paper. Additionally, there are two spaces included in the last section (Yosary and Floriano's garden) where I did not formally collect an oral history, but instead spent time with practitioners in their gardens, for this reason, no quotes will be used. Each interview and visit were done in Spanish and later transcribed and translated by two Cuban classmates.

[6] Gold, 'Urban Gardens: Private Property or the Ultimate Socialist Experience?', p. 42.

[7] For the sake of safety, all original names or identifiers have been changed.

[8] "Los Pocitos is a marginalized neighborhood of Havana that has been especially hard hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. The community is afflicted by an array of social issues that include squalid living conditions, economic insecurity, and high rates of unemployment. Most of its residents work in the informal market and are not college-educated. Economic insecurity has forced many families to work on the streets to earn a living despite early government recommendations to stay home." 'Proyecto Akokán: A Local Initiative Building the Los Pocitos Community', *EEAbroad* <https://www.eeabroad.com/blog/proyecto-akokan-the-los-pocitos-community-project> [accessed 6 September 2024].

[9] Backyard garden.

[10] Cerkleski, Mallory. Personal interview with Vinita. Havana, Cuba. June 22nd, 2022.

[11] Cerkleski, Mallory. Personal interview with Nalda. Havana, Cuba. June 16th, 2022.

[12] Cerkleski, Mallory. Text from Drawing Created During Personal Interview with Silviana. Havana, Cuba. June 16th, 2022.

[13] Cerkleski, Mallory. Text from Drawing Created During Personal Interview with Verita. Havana, Cuba. June 16th, 2022.

[14] April 14th, 2024

[15] Cerkleski, Mallory. Text message exchange with Nalda (Whatsapp). April 14th, 2024.

[16] This sentiment is not meant to over-romanticize the ability that Cubans have to adapt. In general the idea of resilience in Cuba is over-done, but it also should not be ignored. See Mallory Cerkleski, 'Resolver and Rebusque: The State of Cuban Land and Food Sovereignty in 2022', in *Food Sovereignty and Land Grabbing*, ed. by Gabriele Proglio (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023)., for further exploration of this idea.

[17] Cerkleski, Mallory. Personal interview with Duaro. Havana, Cuba. June 29th, 2022.

[18] Gold, 'Urban Gardens: Private Property or the Ultimate Socialist Experience?', p. 12.

[19] This plant is known for being antifungal.

[20] As insinuted in the name, this plant is used for blood problems in general, respiratory diseases (cough, bronchitis), skin (erysipelas, syphilis, pimples) and gastric diseases among others

[21] Many Cubans buy this for spiritual cleaning purposes, mostly people who practice Santeria.

[22] Many Cubans buy this for spiritual purposes (gaining power), but also it can be used for treatment of circulatory problems, colds and fevers, and diabetes
[23] This is believed to be an Oricha, a force of nature, by people practicing Santeria. They said it can have powers for healing the body but more so, for healing the spirit and soul as well.
[24] In Cuba, there is an official exchange rate and an exchange rate on the black market, if one were to exchange pesos on the black market this would've been the exchange rate. Now (as of May 1st 2024) it would be about 2 USD cents.
[25] Gold, 'Urban Gardens: Private Property or the Ultimate Socialist Experience?', p. 43.
[26] Gold, 'Urban Gardens: Private Property or the Ultimate Socialist Experience?', p. 42.