Moment
HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY FACULTY OF COMMUNICATION
JOURNAL OF CULTURAL STUDIES
ISSN: 2148-970X
www.momentjournal.org

2023, 10(1): 30-47
DOI: https://doi.org/10.17572/mj2023.1.3047

Articles (Theme)

URBAN GARDENS VS. COMMUNITY GARDENS: TENSIONS AND TRAJECTORIES FOR URBAN AGRICULTURE IN ISTANBUL

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Abstract

Through a discussion of Yedikule Bostanları and Kuzguncuk Bostanı, this paper analyzes the convoluted position of urban and community gardens vis-à-vis the food initiatives in Istanbul. The paper argues that the gardens are critical for generating community and suggesting alternative uses for urban spaces, such as food production. However, the gardens do not – and to a certain extent, cannot - seek to respond to the challenges of the food system. This is because the communities established and cultivated through the gardens tend to be communities that aim to tackle and resist various development efforts and conserve the gardens; they do not necessarily prioritize urban food issues – even when those issues may be affecting the neighborhoods in which the bostans are located.

Keywords: Istanbul, urban gardens, community gardens, urban agriculture, the food movement

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Geliş Tarihi: 25.01.2023 | Kabul Tarihi: 11.04.2023

KENT BAHÇELERİ VE İSTANBUL'DA KENT TARIMININ ÇELİŞKİLİ YÖRÜNGESİ

Öz

Bu makale, Yedikule Bostanları ve Kuzguncuk Bostanı üzerinden, İstanbul'daki kent ve topluluk bahçelerinin gıda girişimleri ile karmaşık ilişkisini analiz etmektedir. Makale, bahçelerin topluluk oluşturmak ve gıda üretimi gibi kentsel alanların alternatif kullanımlarını gözetmek için önemli olduğunu savunmaktadır. Bununla beraber bahçeler, gıda sistemine yönelik zorluklara yanıt vermeye çalışamazlar ve bir dereceye kadar bu zorluklarla başa çıkamazlar. Bu, bahçeler aracılığıyla kurulan ve geliştirilen toplulukların genellikle kentsel dönüşüm ve yapılaşmayla mücadele etmeyi ve bahçeleri korumayı amaçlamasından topluluklar olmalarından ve kentsel gıda sorunlarını öncelikli olarak ele almamalarından kaynaklanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İstanbul, hobi bahçeleri, kent bahçeleri, kent tarımı, gıda hareketi

Introduction

Istanbul is home to a number of vigorous food initiatives. Aiming to counter the throttling hold of the intermediaries[2] over the consumers as well as the producers (particularly the small farmers), residents of the city have set up consumer cooperatives through which they do bulk purchases directly from the farmers. In addition, they have established civil society organizations[3] and have been running 4 (Bakırköy, Şişli/Feriköy, Kartal, Şile Yeryüzü Pazarı) farmers markets featuring certified organic produce sold directly by the farmers themselves[4]. Following the trend, recently, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (*İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi*- IBB) has opened 2 new farmers' markets (Kadıköy, Ulus) that consist exclusively of

[2] Corporate grocery retailers and wholesalers who buy the produce from the farmers and sell it to the consumers.

[3] For example, Buğday Association for Ecological Living, and Slow Food Convivia (Slow Food Fikir Sahibi Damaklar, Slow Food Yağmur Böreği and Balkon Bahçeleri)

[4] I should note that in its early days, the farmers markets affiliated with the Buğday Association featured exclusively small farmers producing certified organic produce. Today, however, this policy is no longer enforced. Intermediaries and farmers' representatives vend alongside small farmers.

farmers from the city's peripheries.[5] For those consumers unable to go to these markets or visit the coops, there are websites like *Açık Gıda Ağı* (Open Food Network) and *Good4Trust* that provide direct access to farmers selling a variety of fresh, dry, and processed foods (pickles, sauces, jams, pastes, etc.). There is also a wide range of social media platforms (most notably, Instagram) where younger farmers congregate to showcase and sell their produce, raise public awareness about the state of agriculture and farming in Turkey and connect with like-minded producers and consumers. Interested Istanbulites can also reach these farmers and supply their food needs directly from them via the platforms. While none of these alternatives work seamlessly for all involved, their diversity and increasing numbers show that food initiatives are gaining momentum in the city. That said, for most of these initiatives, the city features as a space of consumption and the residents as consumers – albeit eco-conscious and well-off enough to sustain struggling small farmers by opting to shop from them. Producers, on the other hand, and production itself – that is, agriculture and farming – are resigned to the countryside. And the relationship between the two – the city and the country, the producers, and the consumers – is established through commercial exchange. In other words, the value of the goods exchanged – food – is determined through the market.

Yet not everyone in the city can afford to be *only* a consumer. Some have to, and others may choose to, produce at least a portion of what they are going to consume throughout the year. For food insecure[6] households in particular, food production might be critical for provisioning at least some of the annual need. It may also be sold or bartered to meet other needs. Production may take place in the privacy of home gardens, balconies, or even in pots hanging off of the windows, or it may be in public spaces – formally set aside for such activity by the local municipality, or informally along the curbs of the highways, the streets, or on empty lots waiting to be developed. Casting the city purely as a space of consumption and residents solely as consumers, however, ignores these practices and de-prioritizes the residents' claim to urban space as a space *also* of food production.

In this paper, I look at 2 urban agriculture initiatives in Istanbul that complicate this conceptualization of the city as a space of consumption and residents solely as consumers: Kuzguncuk Bostanı, which functions as a communal hobby garden for the residents of the neighborhood; and Yedikule Bostanları,

[5] Unlike the previously mentioned Buğday Association-affiliated farmers markets, these IBB-affiliated farmers markets do not require the produce to be organic. Their aim is, rather, to bring the small farmers operating at the city's peripheries into the city and enable them to sell their produce directly to the consumers. IBB thus aims to remove the intermediaries and enable small farmers to increase their market share. To do so, IBB offers further support to these peripheral small farmers by providing them with free stalls, storage space, and transportation as well as seeds and seedlings.

[6] According to FAO, "food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO, 2023). While FAO does not provide clear data on food insecurity in Turkey, the available statistics do show that the prevalence of obesity in the adult population as well as child malnutrition are on the rise. For more, see: FAO, 2023.

which are urban gardens cultivated for fruits and vegetables by resident gardeners for profit.[7] I argue that these initiatives are significant for cultivating community and "challeng[ing] the dominant regimes that structure how urban space is produced and used" (Purcell & Tyman, 2015, p. 1132) by fostering food production in the city. In other words, from a food systems perspective, both initiatives are critical for showing that one, urban spaces can also be – and indeed, were - spaces of food production, and two, the city need not solely be a space of consumption. As such, they signal that a different food system is possible. That said, as urban agriculture initiatives, their primary focus seems to be conserving the urban gardens as urban green spaces; they do not necessarily seek to respond to the challenges of the food system, such as the disconnect between the producers and the consumers, the financial burden intermediaries put on consumers and producers, or for that matter, the ecological implications for transporting conventionally produced foods across long distances. In parallel, the communities established and cultivated through the gardens tend to be communities that aim to tackle and resist various development efforts and conserve the gardens; they do not necessarily prioritize urban food issues – even when those issues may be affecting the neighborhoods in which the *bostan*s are located.

The paper proceeds as follows: In the next section, I review the literature on urban agriculture in Istanbul, focusing in particular on the decline of urban gardens and the rise of community gardens. I also juxtapose these experiences with other urban and community garden examples from the literature, emphasizing differences and similarities from a food system perspective. Before I move to discuss Yedikule and Kuzguncuk, I describe methods of data gathering that lead to the analysis I offer in this paper. Then, in the section titled Discussion, I show that in Yedikule and Kuzguncuk, the local municipalities (Fatih and Üsküdar, respectively) repeatedly attempted to destroy the gardens, which generated a strong backlash and gave rise to communities of resistance. In Yedikule, the resistance involved gardeners, environmentalists, scholars, and activists, whereas in Kuzguncuk, it was primarily the neighborhood residents. Moreover, in Yedikule, for-profit urban agriculture practiced by private gardeners (*bostancı*s) was the target of conservation efforts, whereas in Kuzguncuk, the bostan was established in resistance and it is operated collectively and non-commercially. As such, while both spaces are significant for spotlighting the possibility of urban

[7] Throughout the paper, I use community gardens to refer to publicly owned, and publicly maintained urban green spaces with designated lots that are allocated either by lottery or rented out to interested residents for cultivation. These are usually established on vacant or open land in the city. Land may be along railways and roads, under power lines, on the grounds of community centers, churches, and in public parks and other green areas. Some shared gardens or small plots are also found on rooftops, inside apartment complexes, or in other denser contexts. Food products such as vegetables, fruits, herbs, and occasionally small livestock are produced for home consumption, leisure, health, and educational purposes, or within the context of community development programs. Communal gardens involve poor as well as higher-income families, individuals, older people, and recent migrants, among others. (FAO, Rikolto & RUAF, 2022 p.16)

Urban gardens, in turn, refer to privately owned fields or gardens that are cultivated commercially. As such, they may "range from small family-based growers (sometimes just one individual works part-time) to faster-growing companies (often in peri-urban areas) that leverage outside financing and operate slightly technical, controlled-environment agriculture operations at multiple sites" (ibid). *Bostan*s may fall under either category depending on how they are owned and run. Kuzguncuk, for example, like the hobby gardens established and maintained by the municipalities, features as a community garden. Yedikule, in comparison, is a commercial garden with professional farmers and/or gardeners (*bostancı*s) cultivating the land for profit; as such, it is not very different from other urban gardens and farms operating, for example, at the city's peripheries.

agriculture and cultivating community, the kind of community they foster and the type of urban agriculture they espouse to conserve are different. I conclude by suggesting that the initiatives need to pay attention to how these different kinds of communities and different types of urban agriculture respond to structural problems of the food system. The paper thus contributes to food systems, particularly food sovereignty[8], discussions that focus on (and often champion!) community or neighborhood-scale urban agriculture initiatives, by offering an assessment of the trajectories of two cases from Istanbul.

Literature Review and the Historical Development of Urban Gardens, Community Gardens, and Urban Agriculture in Istanbul

Urban agriculture, roughly defined as "the production of crop and livestock goods within cities and towns" (Zezza & Tasciotti, 2010, p. 265) is not foreign to Istanbul. The city, in fact, has been known as the city of gardens, with urban gardens (*bostan*) adorning relatively packed neighborhoods in the older quarters and fishing villages along the Bosporus alike (White, Shopov, & Ostovich, 2015; Bilgin, 2010). Historical evidence shows that the production in these urban gardens was mostly private. Farmers residing in the neighborhoods worked the lots and then sold the produce to the residents. The Sultan and the royal family as well as the upper-level bureaucrats of the Sublime Porte also had private urban gardens from where some of their provisioning needs were supplied. Surplus (if there were any) was also sold to the residents at affordable prices. The production in the city (even including the peri-urban areas), however, was not always enough to feed the city. As such, Istanbul – at least throughout its Ottoman years – had to rely on food coming from elsewhere (mostly peripheries of the Empire; and imports in the 19th century). Even then, urban gardens and urban agriculture remained critical for disruptions in the supply lines due to wars and irregularities in production. Plus, for perishables like fruits and vegetables and dairy, urban gardens provided the freshest options – pretty much until refrigeration became widely available in the 1970s.

Urban gardens began to disappear around the 1950s as the city underwent a series of transformations triggered by changing agricultural policies and increasing mechanization in agriculture. Throughout the next 5 decades, more people left rural areas for the cities (Keyder & Yenal, 2014; Keyder, 1999a). Istanbul was one of the prime destinations. Some moved into units that became available from the middle class fleeing

[8] The International Peasants' Movement, La Via Campesina, describes food sovereignty as a "radical overhaul" of the food security discourse that has dominated the civil and policy conversations until the early 21st century. According to La Via Campesina, food sovereignty recognizes people and local communities as the principal actors in the fight against poverty and hunger. It calls for strong local communities and defends their right to produce and consume before trading the surplus. It demands autonomy and objective conditions to use local resources, calls for agrarian reform, and collective ownership of territories. It defends the rights of peasant communities to use, save, and exchange seeds. It stands for the right of people to eat healthy, nutritious food. It encourages agroecological production cycles, respecting climatic and cultural diversities in every community. Social peace, social justice, gender justice, and solidarity economies are essential pre-conditions for realizing food sovereignty. It calls for an international trade order based on cooperation and compassion against competition and coercion. It calls for a society that rejects discrimination in all forms – caste, class, race, and gender – and urges people to fight patriarchy and parochialism. (2021)

to the new suburbs (Keyder, 1999b). Others squatted over public lands at the city's peripheries, setting off an urban expansion that continues to this day (ibid.). Most of the peripheral areas that previously supplied Istanbul thus succumbed to urbanization, with squatters and developers continuously pushing peri-urban agriculture ever more out by either taking over farmlands or making incomes generated out of agriculture simply insufficient to cover the rising living costs (Tekeli, 2013; 2014). Meanwhile, in the older quarters, politician-backed-developers raced to develop every lot they deemed 'unoccupied' or 'available'. Unsurprisingly, urban gardens were among the first to go.

Urbanization in the peripheries and from the 1980s onward, in particular, urban transformation in the older quarters and squatter neighborhoods has had mixed effects. On the other hand, many of the squatters who were pushed even further out by urban transformation usually had small household gardens. While these were not enough to feed the whole family throughout the year, they did help with some of the household food needs, provided relief for tight budgets, and invigorated a sense of community by enabling a small, very local barter economy within the neighborhood (Kaldijan, 2003). The gentrification that followed the urban transformation in some of the older quarters brought in a demand for more green spaces in the city, which usually involved the conservation of already existing parks and urban gardens (as in the case of Yedikule Bostanları, for example) and conversion of remaining vacant public lots to green spaces (as in the case of Kuzguncuk Bostanı). Ironically, however, these two dynamics never really met and blended in to form cross-class solidarities as they did in Toronto (Baker, 2004), Glasgow (Crossan, et. al., 2016), New York City (Smith & Kurtz, 2003) and Copenhagen (Roy, 2019).

Unlike urban gardens, community gardens tend to be publicly owned and collectively farmed. They are not intended to generate profit, though they may (and do) contribute to livelihoods and food security in other ways (Zezza & Tasciotti, 2010; Blair, Giesecke, & Sherman, 1991; Alaimo, et. al., 2007; Meadow, 2013; Poulsen, et. al., 2015; Gallaher, et. al., 2013; Binns, Maconachie, & Tanko, 2003). Equally importantly, they constitute meeting spaces for the community, where residents can engage in civic activism through gardening (Crossan, et. al., 2016). Though not always successful, resident gardeners "can change the production of urban spaces by advocating the use of public land, changing investors' decisions about buying particular parcels, and working with policymakers to create legislation to increase space for gardens" (Glowa, 2017, p. 235). In other words, "by actively shaping their community, connecting cross-culturally, and being drawn into broader social movements (…)" (Baker, 2004, p. 305), they transform themselves into "soil citizens" (qtd in. Baker, 2004, p.305).

In Istanbul, the rise of community gardens coincides with the disappearance of urban gardens and the expansion of food initiatives. As I mentioned above, urban transformation in the older quarters and urbanization in the peripheries were followed by calls against further development and conservation of

green spaces in and around the city, including remaining urban gardens, public parks, and peripheral farmlands. Such calls were usually not successful, as urban gardens were privately owned and gardeners were often more than willing to sell their land in return for a few flats, for example, which they could then rent out and generate an income much higher than what they would through agriculture. Around the same time, discussions around food and agriculture began to attract attention, particularly among the middle classes moving into those older quarters undergoing transformation. Emphasizing the growing distance between producers and consumers, falling profits for farmers, and expansion of unsustainable farming practices, farmer and consumer cooperatives were sounding the alarm on the intermediary-dominated agro-food system that made tracing where one's food comes from almost impossible. They suggested, instead, re-connecting producers and consumers, re-embedding food into social relations, and raising awareness about agroecological production practices and conservation of farms and farmlands. Community gardens, in turn, responded to both calls: On the one hand, they were green spaces, promised to be open to all where the neighborhood residents could gather and socialize; and on the other hand, they were enabling residents to produce food for themselves and /or collectively.

Yet, other than Kuzguncuk Bostanı, they remain mostly municipal initiatives. Some municipalities offer memberships for which interested residents pay an annual membership fee (which is, as of 2021, half of a month of minimum wage salary), plus other, per-use fees, like water, fumigation, weeding, etc.[9] In other cases, municipalities do a lottery among interested residents to allocate lots.[10] They also provide fertilizer, water, pesticides as well as gardening tools for free, though for some services (like fumigation) gardeners are required to put in a request and call in qualified municipal personnel (usually a senior gardener) to assess and provide the service – also free of charge.[11] Given the municipal force behind these initiatives, they may be criticized for "dilut[ing] normative notions of public space by facilitating the particular interests of *a* group" (italics in original (Crossan, et. al., 2016, p. 940)) – that is, those of 'food citizens' (Baker, 2004) - and promoting "private activity in a public realm" (Rosol, 2011, p. 249). However, at the same time, they offer residents an opportunity "to work against the *alienation* (…) from their labor, from other people, from food, from ecological processes, and from urban space – and (…) to *reappropriate* food production, urban ecologies and urban space" (italics in original, Purcell & Tyman, 2015, p. 1138). As such, they play a critical role in connecting the residents to each other, to the neighborhoods they live in, and to the food they eat.

That said, again except for Kuzguncuk Bostanı, most community gardens are located in the newly urbanizing peripheral areas of the city, and not in more densely settled older quarters. Therefore, they do not

[9] See for example, (Arnavutköy Belediyesi, 2021)

[10] See for example, (Beylikdüzü Belediyesi, 2021)

[11] Ibid.

necessarily “occupy well-used public spaces” (Crossan, et. al., 2016, p. 940). Instead, they re-purpose lots that have so far remained either vacant or undeveloped. In this sense, Istanbul is different from “archetypical post-industrial cit[ies] that [have] undergone both deindustrialization and various attempts at regenerating and reimaging” like Glasgow (Crossan, et. al., 2016), Milwaukee (Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014), Toronto (Baker, 2004), Berlin (Rosol, 2011), New York City (Smith & Kurtz, 2003; Purcell & Tyman, 2015; Eizenberg, 2012), the Bay Area (Glowa, 2017) and Los Angeles (Purcell & Tyman, 2015). Unlike resident-initiated gardens in these other cities, community gardens in Istanbul (again except for Kuzguncuk Bostanı) are carefully curated and managed by the municipalities. As such, they are not “created by users according to their own needs and ideas” even if “they are aesthetically and functionally different from traditional parks” (Rosol, 2011, p. 240). Consequently, it is difficult to say that community gardens help resident gardeners “enact place-based collective identities and assert claims to space” (Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014, p. 1099).

Finally, given the intricate links between urban transformation, urbanization, and the rise of community gardens in Istanbul, the discussions on community gardens being “coopt[ed] to the neoliberal project” (Tornaghi, 2017, p. 782) or “represent[ing] forms of empowerment and liberation in a number of spheres colonized by neoliberal relations” (ibid.) seems particularly relevant for Istanbul. Drawing from a variety of cases, Ghose & Pettygrove (2014), McClintock (2014), Rosol (2011), among others, have shown that community gardens can indeed be complicity in the construction of neoliberal hegemony. In response, Crossan et. al. (2016) have suggested that, while there is evidence to support such a reading, gardens can also offer “possibilities of a counter-hegemonic and autonomous community politics evolving from community garden work” (ibid, p. 938). Underlining the contingent condition of most gardens, however, Tornaghi (2017) has argued that “the residuality and precariousness of the large majority of these projects show that they remain inadequate answer to the failures and injustices of neoliberal urban environments and food markets” (p.782). Moreover, although gardens can connect spatial, environmental, and food justice and “counteract specific mechanisms of neoliberal localization” (ibid.), as Agyeman & McEntree (2014), following Guthman (2007) and others, have pointed out, localization itself can be a neoliberal strategy.

In Istanbul, however, involvement of the municipalities in instituting (in some neighborhoods, even without vocal public demand in the first place), managing, and maintaining the community gardens suggest that the local dynamics are fundamentally different from the cases studied in the literature. For example, it is difficult to say that the community gardens are intended to fill the gaps left from a retreating welfare state, or for that matter, they are “responses to diminished local urban food environments and high levels of urban land vacancy” (Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014, p. 1092). In fact, to the very contrary, Istanbul’s community gardens seem to be municipality-initiated responses to residents’ demands for green spaces in the context of low levels of urban land vacancy. Yet, municipalities could have built public parks. Interestingly, however,

they have opted for community gardens. Though, the reasons for this choice remain unclear. Similarly, it would be a stretch to say that the gardens are manifestations of "a distinct political rationality which aims at passing on state responsibilities to civil society" (Rosol, 2011, p. 240). Perhaps there are elements of "DIY citizenship" (Crossan, et. al., 2016) or "soil citizenship" (Baker, 2004) in residents' participation in the gardens. However, given that much of the participation is mediated through the municipality, it is difficult to say that "gardeners are challenging conventional ideas of urban planning and design, working on community-development projects, engaging with place-based social movements, and creating alternative food systems" (Baker, 2004, p. 306).

The two cases I discuss below constitute exceptions to the dynamics discussed above. Yedikule Bostanları, for example, are "state owned property (*hazine arazisi*) or foundation land (*vakıf arazisi*) (…) under the jurisdiction of the municipality" (Zerner, 2020, p. 54) though they "have been managed by generations of peasant farmers who migrated to Istanbul from areas throughout Turkey and beyond, seeking employment and deploying their farming and gardening skills on land they obtained and occupied as leaseholders" (ibid.). Produce from the gardens is sold for a profit; and the gardens "are not commons, (…) they have an atmosphere of commons" (qtd. in Zerner, 2020, p. 54). Kuzguncuk Bostanı is also on foundation land, and as such, also under the jurisdiction of the local municipality. Unlike in Yedikule, however, in Kuzguncuk, the garden is established, managed, and maintained by the neighborhood residents. Produce is for private (personal and/or communal) consumption; and even though the place is fenced off – unlike Yedikule - Kuzguncuk is a public, not a private space. As such, while as exceptions, Yedikule and Kuzguncuk expose structural problems in the other community garden and urban gardens and reflect resident-led activism to conserve urban agriculture and green spaces in the city, their success in mediating the effects of urban food insecurity and linking the consumers and producers back remains quite limited.

Methods and the Data

The discussion in this paper derives from a larger research project that aims to assess the impact urban and consumer-dominated food initiatives have on the local (urban, peri-urban, and peripheral) producers. One of the critical tasks of the project has been to identify nodes of conflict and cooperation between the producers and the initiatives, which includes consumer cooperatives, for-profit (companies), non-profit, non-governmental, and governmental (municipalities) organizations that establish and run alternative food networks, farmers' markets, and specialty food stores. To do so, a 5-month long fieldwork involving field visits and semi-structured interviews was conducted. Overall, 7 farmers from 3 village-neighborhoods[12], 5 members from 3 consumer cooperatives, 4 members of 3 farmers cooperatives, 3 activists from civil

[12] Per the *Büyükşehir Yasası* (no.6360), passed in 2012, villages at the peripheries of major cities falling under the metropolitan area designation, were converted to neighborhoods.

society organizations, and 2 activists from 2 initiative affiliated specialty food stores were interviewed. References to urban agriculture initiatives during these interviews led the participant pool to be expanded, and consecutively, 3 gardening enthusiasts who rent and garden at municipality-established hobby gardens, 1 for-profit and 1 non-profit roof and indoor urban gardening organization representatives, and 4 activists who are/were affiliated with resistance and conservation efforts at Yedikule and Kuzguncuk were interviewed. All the interviews lasted between 40 to 120 minutes, were recorded and later, transcribed, and coded.

During coding and analysis, it became clear that finding, establishing, and/or maintaining 'community' was a significant reason for joining and remaining in the initiatives for all the interviewees – with the notable exception of farmers. It also became clear that what interviewees meant by 'community' differed significantly. At this point, further fieldwork was planned to explore whether and how 'community' could be constitutive of and/or mediate cooperation and conflict; however, due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it could not be conducted. Instead, the research design was revised to include digital methods, and the scope of the project was narrowed down to focus on urban agriculture initiatives. Data, in the form of formal interviews, personal accounts, and opinion pieces, was collected from websites, blogs, and databases that detailed the various urban agriculture initiatives in Istanbul, including the resistance and the conservation efforts at Kuzguncuk and Yedikule. Secondary literature as well as newspaper and magazine articles that cite interviews with activists, gardeners, and urban planners, and promotional texts publicizing the municipal hobby gardens, for-profit and non-profit indoor and roof gardening initiatives were also included in the dataset. Once digital data collection was completed, data was coded following the previously used code system. The arguments offered in this paper rely on the analysis of the data collected in the second phase of the project.

Discussion: Yedikule and Kuzguncuk Bostanları

The most studied among Istanbul's urban gardens, the trajectory of the famed Yedikule Bostanları follows Istanbul's uneven urbanization and later, urban transformation (White, Shopov, & Ostovich, 2015; Bilgin A., 2010; Bilgin İ., 2018; Kaldijan, 2004; Zerner, 2020; Turan, 2015; Kanbak, 2016; Kut, 2010; Shopov & Han, 2013; Şahin & Kahraman, 2021). While the gardens were managed for generations by immigrant gardeners, the ownership of the lands they were on was transferred from charitable foundations (*vakıf*) to the public domain and was placed under the jurisdiction of the municipalities in the 1980s (Zerner, 2020, p. 54). Their proximity to the Theodosius Walls, which are on UNESCO World Heritage List, made them an attractive spot for development – public or private. Indeed, throughout the 80s, 90s, and 2000s, areas under cultivation decreased (Şahin & Kahraman, 2021). In 2010, for example, "a gated community, Yedikule Konaklar, was built (..) directly over the site of a former bostan" (White, Shopov, & Ostovich, 2015, p. 37). Most famously in

2013, IBB declared a new "Tarihi Yedikule Bostanları" project in which, in alliance with the local Fatih Municipality, IBB would destroy the bostans and build a public park (Bilgin İ., 2018). After many public protests, IBB announced that it would leave some space for the bostans, convert some of the bostans into a public park and open the rest of the space for development (ibid.). As protests ensued, attracting strong national and international backlash, IBB let the project go – only to restart the removal of the gardens again in 2016 (ibid.). After much public protest yet again, in 2017, IBB declared "Kentsel Tarım Parkı Rehabilitasyon Projesi" intended to conserve the bostans and the local culture around bostans and to ensure transmission of local gardening culture to new generations (ibid.). As of writing, municipal attempts to remove the gardens seem to have stopped and production continues.

As Zerner (2020) underlines, neither the attempts to destroy the bostans nor the protests in resistance to those attempts happened in a vacuum: In May 2013, that is roughly two months before the gardens in Yedikule were assaulted, Istanbul was raging with a much larger cohort of protests. Environmentalists, LGBT activists, leftists, and others in opposition had come together to protest against PM-initiated efforts by the IBB to take down yet another public park, the famed Gezi Parkı in Taksim, for development (ibid, pp. 52-3). Gaining a lot of national and international traction, and right at the heels of the Arab Spring, Gezi Protests continued for weeks and generated shock waves in national politics. As such, the assault on the bostans 2 months later seemed like a petty attempt to reclaim part of the damaged reputation in the face of failed development plans for the Gezi Parkı. Consequently, the resistance to the assault also "referenced and echoed the public struggles in Gezi Park and Taksim Square" (ibid, p.53).

Then, what makes Yedikule Bostanları exceptional has been their ability to unite the public – national and international - for their conservation. Their status as historically significant urban gardens as well as the public demand for more public green spaces and conservation of existing ones have carried the bostans to the spotlight. As agricultural spaces, however, they are replete with problems. To begin with, most bostans are relatively "small, 1-20 *dönüm* (decare) operations" (Kaldijan, 2004, p. 287) whereas "as many as 30 dönüm may be necessary to support a household without relying on external sources of income"[13] (ibid.). Gardener households, then, must allocate some of their labor to another job to make ends meet, or alternatively, they must raise the prices of their produce. As the excerpts cited by Zerner (2020) and the interviews by Oda Projesi (2010) indicate, the former has been preferred over the latter. Consequently, production decreased and turned towards supplying the gardeners' households (Kaldijan, 2003). As such, it is difficult to say that they mediate the effects of food insecurity for the urban poor or for that matter, of the working classes (as they did historically (Kaldijan, 2004)). Secondly, bostans are located on the side of a major avenue that carries heavy traffic throughout the year; as such, pollution from traffic is a significant

[13] This was in 2004 when Kaldijan was writing. Today, this number is higher.

problem. While more research is necessary to assess how much of a food safety threat the pollutant residue on the produce presents for the consumers, it is at this point difficult to claim that the produce is all natural and/or organic even as the gardeners claim that they farm without pesticides and artificial fertilizers. Lastly, bostans do little to re-connect the producers and consumers. Gardeners do not participate in the IBB-initiated farmers' markets; and because gardens are not certified for organic production, their produce cannot be sold at the civil society-initiated farmers markets. Consequently, as food production spaces, their contribution to the consciousness-raising efforts (on agroecology, for example, or local food) remains minimal.

Kuzguncuk Bostanı constitutes an interesting contrast, although the trajectory of the bostan similarly follows Istanbul's urbanization and urban transformation. As in Yedikule, the land on which the bostan is located is a foundation land (*vakıf arazisi*)[14], and again similarly, throughout the 80s, 90s, and 2000s, it was frequently under the threat of development (Dayanışma Mimarlığı, 2017). Unlike Yedikule Bostanları that rode the wave of Gezi, in Kuzguncuk, the neighborhood residents have managed to put out a collective effort and thwart, in a more or less contained and unified manner, each development attempt. To do so, they organized festivals in the bostan space, took the development plans to court, and used the press (and later social media) actively to draw attention to the bostan (ibid). In 2014, when the most recent attempt to develop the area was yet again met with resistance, the local municipality (Üsküdar), in agreement with the residents, finally decided to turn the bostan into a collectively managed, collectively farmed community garden (ibid).

Another critical difference between Yedikule and Kuzguncuk was that, unlike Yedikule, Kuzguncuk had long lost its gardener (Yürük, 2017, s. 8). It was more of a green space at the heart of the neighborhood and was present as a bostan more in the public memory. As such, there was not much of a for-profit agricultural activity in the bostan space. Lack of regular gardener presence and infrequent farming activity had left this neighborhood green space open for development assault. Urban agriculture offered the resisting residents a way to utilize the space collectively while keeping it as a green space. Indeed, today, bostan functions as a community garden that enables the residents to grow food noncommercially, to come together to hang out, exercise, and hold neighborhood events (ibid.). There are about 100 4×6-meter lots, of which half of them are managed by the municipality (which in turn leases them out, free of charge, to a nonprofit it chooses) and the rest are distributed via lottery to the residents interested in gardening (Dündaralp, 2017, s. 14). In addition, bostan space is utilized for educational purposes. Adults are provided training in permaculture and there are classes on food and farming for kids (ibid.). Helping raise awareness and thus turning consumers into producers (albeit on a small scale), Kuzguncuk Bostanı plays a critical role as a community garden.

[14] For a detailed description of how the bostan space changed ownership, see: (Tunç, 2015)

What sets Kuzguncuk Bostanı apart, then, is that even though it started as an urban garden-turned-neighborhood green space, it became a community garden through collective resistance. Moreover, unlike other community gardens in the city, its establishment, management, and maintenance have been community – not municipality – initiated. In fact, in opposition to the other community gardens discussed above, Kuzguncuk Bostanı was established as a community garden despite the local municipality's effort to remove it and develop the space. As such, it features as an active and activists' food production space, unlike Yedikule which has been individually farmed, for-profit urban gardens for much longer.

Conclusion

Passidomo concludes her analysis of the food justice and food sovereignty movements in post-Katrina New Orleans with a recommendation for cross-fertilization of the right to the city and food sovereignty discourses. Moving from Lefebvre, Passidomo underlines that the right to the city characterizes "urban inhabitance as active participation in the decisions and actions that impact (city) life" (Passidomo, 2014, p. 395), and as such, she "expressly articulates with food sovereignty's demand for self-determination" (ibid.). Concomitantly, she suggests that "both food scholars and activists may do well to consider 'food itself' not as an object of analysis [("as a commodity to which people deserve access") (ibid.)], but rather as a lens through which more basic (and more trenchant) structural inequalities may be made visible" (ibid.). These recommendations are difficult to disagree with – not just for New Orleans, but also for Istanbul.

Indeed, in Istanbul today, consumer-initiated, and consumer-focused food initiatives seem to be directing the conversation on what the priorities should be: Removing the intermediaries, establishing a local food system, buying directly from farmers/producers when possible, raising awareness about the structural problems of the dominant agro-food system and generating community among likeminded producers and consumers. Urban gardens and community gardens – in other words, urban agriculture practiced collectively or individually – fit neatly and perfectly with these priorities. In practice, however, there are major contradictions: While urban agriculture emphasizes the use value of urban land, it challenges neither the property regime nor the allure of the rising exchange value that renders the gardens vulnerable and precarious. It is, as such, no surprise that so many urban gardens have been lost to urbanization and urban transformation since the 1980s. Moreover, local municipalities and the IBB that have benefited from the 'development' of the gardens set out to establish and run community gardens to supply (or appease,

depending on one's interpretation of the events) the residents' demands for green spaces. As such, most community gardens in the city are today established and run by the municipalities[15].

The two cases I profiled here, Kuzguncuk and Yedikule Bostanları, are exceptions in that they are civic initiatives (and for now, supported by the municipalities they are in the jurisdiction of), and they have managed to generate communities around efforts to resist previous attempts of garden-destruction. That said, in both cases, the communities the gardens generated have been more focused on protecting the gardens as green spaces than engaging with them as food production spaces. In Yedikule, for example, gardeners cannot generate enough income from the gardens and the gardening to continue cultivating. Gardener households are moving away from urban agriculture and actively seeking employment elsewhere. As such, as of now, the future of neither the gardeners nor the gardens is clear. Alternatively, in Kuzguncuk, the community garden was established to signal that the bostan space was not vacant and that it was being utilized as a garden. Production is non-commercial, participation is voluntary, and the garden also functions as a community event space. While it seems like food production will continue for now, there is no guarantee for the future: As a green space, it can as easily be utilized for something else.

Neither Yedikule and Kuzguncuk, nor the municipal community gardens, nor for that matter, remaining urban gardens at the peripheries necessarily indicate that urban agriculture is out of the picture for Istanbul. In fact, the very opposite might be true – if one looks at kitchen gardens in lower-income, squatter neighborhoods. Always green and regularly tended year around, these gardens are foundational to what I call 'alternative provisioning networks' – that is, practices and conduct that lower income households engage in to supplement their provisioning needs from outside the dominant agro-food system. Cultivation practices are usually agroecological even though the gardeners may not describe them as such. They may be within the squatters' lot, or they may be in shared spaces, and they may be individually or collectively tended. Most importantly, the produce that comes out of these gardens can be consumed personally (as in by the household) or collectively (as in, it can be shared, bartered, cooked, or processed for collective consumption during a special event or a ritual between neighborhoods and/or relatives). As such, gardens generate communities that not only cultivate them but also rely on them. Food initiatives, however, rarely recognize these gardens or celebrate them as urban agriculture practices. The welfare, interests, and constraints of their food-insecure gardeners are similarly unacknowledged. Yet, these gardens can constitute the future of urban agriculture in Istanbul even as – and perhaps, despite– the threat of urban renewal projects. Indeed, the "radical and transformative potential" (Passidomo, 2014, p. 395) of cross-fertilization between food sovereignty and the right to the city Passidoma recommends for New Orleans lies precisely at this point for Istanbul.

[15] Even the famed Fatih municipality that has attempted to eradicate Yedikule Bostanları multiple times has a community garden: (Fatih Belediyesi, 2021)

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