Growing Public Spaces in the City: Community gardening and the making of new urban environments of publicness

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Abstract

The demise of public space in cities across the global North has received considerable scrutiny from urban scholars in recent years, with accounts of the loss, privatisation and increased regulation of public space prevalent within the academic literature. This paper seeks to complicate these dominant narratives of public space transformation by exploring the complexities of existing public spaces and the emergence of new spaces of publicness in the city. It uses a case study of community gardening in mundane and everyday neighbourhood spaces to provide a more nuanced and progressive reading of the relations between publicness and space in the city. Drawing on empirical materials from recent research on community gardening projects in 15 cities in Australia, Canada, the UK and the US, the paper highlights how community gardening is creating new environments of publicness across public, private and in-between spaces that both complicate the end of public space discourse as well as conventional understandings of public space within urban studies.

Introduction

"A creeping encroachment in previous years has in the last two decades

become an epoch-making shift culminating in multiple closures, erasures,

inundations, and transfigurations of public space at the behest of state and

corporate strategies." (Smith and Low, 2006: 1)

"We must wonder if the idea of an 'end of public space' can be upheld if we

shift our focus to the 'banal spaces' of the everyday residential

neighbourhood." (Langstraat and Van Melik, 2013: 432)

The transformation of public space in cities across the global North, and North

America in particular, has been subject to considerable scrutiny during the last three

decades (see Banerjee, 2001; Bodnar, 2015; Goheen, 1998; Madden, 2010; Mitchell,

2017; Sorkin, 1992). Using a variety of case studies, drawn largely from the built

environment but also including municipal parks, a consensus has emerged of a

widespread assault on urban public spaces. This assault has been discussed in relation

to the neglect of public space on the part of the state, the increasing

commercialisation of public spaces and the imposition of new regulatory regimes to

control access to public space (Davis, 1990; Low and Smith, 2006; Mitchell, 1995,

2003). Within this body of work, particular attention has been given to the growth of

quasi- or pseudo-public spaces (Banerjee, 2001; Neméth and Schmidt, 2011; Pratt,

2017), consisting of privately-owned public spaces that provide the appearance of

publicness but where access is restricted and behaviours controlled, often in

subterfuge ways.

These attacks on public space have been positioned within the broader context of neoliberal urbanism, with the relations between public and private space viewed as being deliberately altered by the local state through projects of urban redevelopment in order to serve the needs of capital in more efficient ways (Smith and Low, 2006). City governments have become more entrepreneurial in nature (MacLeod, 2002; Madanipour, 2019), competing against each other in order to attract new forms of private capital, high end businesses, tourists and more affluent residents to their areas. In doing this, the redevelopment of public space has provided an opportunity to recast the morphology, image and social practices of the city in more neoliberal terms (Loughran, 2014). Such entrepreneurialism has accelerated in recent years due to the ever-tightening grip of austerity politics in many global North countries. Efforts to cut public spending and shrink the public sector have created a series of fiscal crises for city governments. In these more challenging financial contexts, public space has been increasingly viewed by the local state both as a financial liability, particularly in terms of its maintenance costs, and as an asset that potentially provides additional financial resources to plug funding gaps. Consequently, public space has come to be managed in more commercial ways, increasingly privatised – in full or in part - or transferred to third sector organisations to generate additional revenue or reduce costs (see Christophers, 2018; Madanipour, 2019).

Such transformations have largely been discussed in negative terms due to the political and social significance attached to public space (Cattell et al., 2008). Public

space is widely recognised as an important site for the expression of citizenship, providing a 'politically and psychologically meaningful place in the ordinary lives of citizens' (Di Masso, 2012: 124, emphasis in the original), as well as for the functioning of democracy and the promotion of social justice (Marcuse, 2005). Indeed, it is argued that public space constitutes 'not only the space where the right to the city is struggled over; it is where it is implemented and represented' (Mitchell, 2003: 235). Public space also provides an important setting for social interaction, 'bring[ing] together people from different communities who have diverse sets of knowledge, values, and interests' (Chung et al., 2005: 100), as well as facilitating cultural expression and performance (Orum and Neal, 2010). It is this combination of social and cultural attributes that Madanipour (2003) claims gives public space its particular significance as a 'site for display and performance, a test of reality, an exploration of difference and identity, an arena of recognition, in which representation and difference can lead to awareness of the self and others' (see also Goheen, 1998; Neméth and Schmidt, 2011).

My intention with this paper is to both engage with and complicate notions of the demise of urban public space. While not denying the significance of recent assaults on public space, I want to suggest that public space needs to be approached in more sophisticated ways and that more varied case studies need to be drawn upon in order to make better sense of its shifting socio-spatial composition (see also Neal, 2010). Doing this involves thinking more critically about the multiple forms, understandings and experiences of public space. It also entails acknowledging the presence of and undertaking research in other / othered public spaces within the city for, as

Langstraat and Van Melik (2013) argue, the demise of public space narrative may be less secure when the focus shifts to more banal neighbourhood spaces positioned beyond the city centre. Additionally, it involves expanding research on <u>public spaces</u> to engage with a broader array of <u>spaces of publicness</u>, giving more attention to how publicness is enabled and enacted in a variety of ways within a range of public, quasi-public and non-public spaces.

The paper utilises a case study of community gardening in several global North cities to engage with and unsettle the demise of public space narrative in a couple of important ways: by thinking more critically about the relations between publicness and space; and by exploring how community gardens are developing new and different forms and spaces of publicness in local neighbourhoods in various cities. It is structured around three sections. The first provides a broad critique of conventional framings of public space, with attention given to the increasing blurriness of public - private boundaries, the messy realities of public space, the neglect of mundane[1] public spaces and the complexity of relations between publicness and space. The focus in the second section turns to urban community gardens and, more particularly, the myriad ways in which community gardening has been shown to generate new forms and spaces of publicness in the city. These themes are then explored in greater depth in the third section of the paper. Based on an analysis of empirical materials from a study of community gardening projects in 15 cities in Australia, Canada, the UK and the US, consideration is given to how these projects are creating new

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[1] The term mundane is used in relation to dominant <u>social</u> meanings of space. It is recognised that socially mundane spaces may represent sites of ecological significance (see Newman and Dale, 2013).

environments of publicness in public, private and in-between spaces that only unsettle conventional understandings of the changing complexion of urban public space.

Reassessing public space transformations in the city

Recent scholarship on (urban) public space has begun to question some of the key assumptions underpinning the demise of public space discourse. In this section of the paper I discuss four critiques of conventional understandings of public space in an effort to develop a more nuanced account of the changing spaces of publicness in the city. The first critique concerns work that has sought to categorise space according to its degrees of publicness or privacy. Within these categorisations, reference is often made to the ownership, function and usage of space, with the publicness of the street and the privacy of the home typically positioned at the opposite ends of a continuum of public – private spaces (see Marcuse, 2005). What is clear from such work, though, is that almost every space contains both public and private components albeit in different combinations. Elements of people's private lives and spaces are subject to considerable regulation on the part of the state (Miller, 2007) and aspects of public life often take place within the 'privately owned, managed, and regulated elements of the public sphere' (Smith and Low, 2006: 5). Consequently, space needs to be approached as a mix of public and private situations, 'where many semi-public or semi-private spaces can be identified, as the two realms meet through shades of privacy and publicity rather than clearly cut separation' (Madanipour, 2003: 239).

It is claimed that this blurring of the boundaries between public and private space allows for broader and more progressive understandings of publicness in the city (Kohn, 2004). Indeed, Zukin (2010) claims that privately produced public spaces often constitute more important sites of / for social and political action than state operated sites, given that the latter are often regulated in terms of permissible social actions and forms of behaviour. In determining the public qualities of space, attention also needs to move beyond its forms of ownership and modes of regulation to embrace a wider set of socio-cultural attributes (Parkinson, 2012). Chung et al. (2005), for example, contend that public space should be understood as any setting that is associated with cultures of public identity, sharing and collective action, while Bodnar (2015) suggests that it is the quality of social interaction that should determine the publicness of space.

Second, questions have been raised about the preoccupation of recent work with the identification of what constitutes the ideal public space and the subsequent neglect of some of the historical and contemporary complexities of such space. Loughran (2014) points to a tendency within research to contrast the imperfections of contemporary public space with an idealised past, but, he argues, this historical ideal never existed, with public space always existing in a state of becoming and continually forged through processes of public debate and political struggle. As Mitchell (2017: 538) asserts, the making, re-making and unmaking of public space needs to be approached as an 'ongoing history' (emphasis in the original; see also Bodnar, 2015; Miller, 2007; Mitchell, 2004; Paddison and Sharp, 2007). What is also apparent within recent scholarship is its tendency to underplay the contemporary inadequacies of

public spaces. Public space cannot be expected to satisfy the needs of all users all of the time. Indeed, it is claimed that 'spaces that attempt to do <u>everything</u> will often fail to do <u>anything</u> well' (Németh and Schmidt, 2011: 9, emphasis in the original). In addition, it should be recognised that the 'actual, day-to-day, public spaces that make up the great majority of our cities fall short, often woefully short, of the kinds of ideals espoused in the urban cannon' (Koch and Latham, 2011, 515).

A third critique relates to the rather narrow spatial foci of urban public space scholarship. Not only has academic attention been largely directed to public spaces in North American cities (Allen, 2006) but within these cities particular types of public space have received disproportionate attention. These have been the prime and spectacular public sites of the city centre that have been recast – both physically and metaphorically - through regeneration projects to emphasise the neoliberal credentials of cities in an era of increasing urban competitiveness and entrepreneurialism (MacLeod, 2002). In these respects, then, it can be suggested that researchers have focused their case studies on precisely those urban spaces that tend to reinforce the 'end of public space' discourse.

In an important intervention, Paddison and Sharp (2007) argue that most public space 'functions in a more banal way, integrated with the routines in which everyday life is conducted in the local neighbourhoods making up a city' (88). It is also the case that communities in such neighbourhoods have actively contested some of the meta-narratives of the neoliberal city in an attempt to reclaim their rights to local public space (Crossan et al., 2016). Local communities have identified opportunities to work

within the 'cracks of neoliberalism' to create spaces of resistance and hope (Cattell, et al., 2008; Milbourne, 2012; Nettle, 2014). Indeed, Banerjee (2001) challenges urban scholars to ask whether such mobilisations within local neighbourhoods represent 'the beginning of a movement to reclaim the public realm at the local community level' (17). Regardless of the answer to this question, public space researchers could do more to engage with other neighbourhood spaces in the city as well as the ordinary and everyday actions taking place within them, given that the ways public space 'becomes used and valued through mundane practice, are at the core of the political processes surrounding its definition and contestation' (Paddison and Sharp, 2007: 91; see also Edensor et al., 2014).

A fourth critique of public space scholarship moves beyond the blurring of public - private spatial boundaries to propose more nuanced understandings of the relations between publicness and space. In an important intervention, Qian (2020) argues that publicness can never be approached as a pre-existing identity or condition associated with a particular space; rather, it should be understood as 'improvised, reflective of situated sensibilities, interests and encounters' (79). Publicness exists in a continual state of fluidity, 'emerging from relations and interactions between bodies, objects, environments, practices, meanings and affects' (ibid. 79) that occur in specific time-spaces. For Qian (2020), places of publicness also need to be approached as complex and seemingly contradictory spaces, associated with structural processes and grassroots agency, inclusionary and exclusionary practices, and actions that (re)create senses of commonality and difference. As such, they represent ambiguous spaces, within which '(co-) presence is characterised by plural means of appropriating space

and making space meaningful, creating affordances, manoeuvrability, but also uncertainties for the achievement of specific goals' (80).

Others have also provided alternative approaches to making sense of the relationship between publicness and space. Han et al. (2019), for example, propose the notion of 'spatial publicness' to encapsulate the myriad spaces that are accessible to the public and the various forms of publicness that occur within them. Focusing on this broader conception of spatial publicness, they suggest, requires increased sensitivity being given to issues of 'diversity, communication, cooperative relationships and consensus processes of participants'(13) bound up with acts of place-making. For Mantey (2017), a key task is to consider the degrees of sociality provided by particular spaces. He uses the term 'gathering places' to indicate the many conventional publicly accessible spaces but also the 'various types of spaces spontaneously "appropriated" by defined groups of users with little accessibility for others' that are able to 'stimulate local social life and thus make it less exclusive' (2). The notion of 'civic space' (Edwards, 2006) has also been proposed as a useful means of transcending traditional boundaries between public and private space. Yu (2017) contends that civic space offers the opportunity to enact actions that fuse 'elements of openness, sociality, mutual recognition, and common orientation' (85), allowing people to develop their intersubjectivity and providing the 'possibility of expressing to one another some shared aesthetics, concerns and ethics embodied in the social etiquette of these places' (85).

Changing public environments in the city: From the decline of municipal parks to the possibilities of community gardens

Recent years have witnessed increased interest in the transformation of green public spaces and, more particularly, large municipal parks in city centres. Initially developed in industrial cities in global North countries to provide regulated spaces of nature for the burgeoning urban working-class populations, public parks were viewed for much of the 20th century as 'tools facilitating social reform and public health benefits' (Dooling, 2009: 631). From the 1970s, though, municipal parks began to be drawn into political debates about urban inequalities and the uneven distribution of public green spaces, particularly in American cities where an environmental justice movement had begun to develop. In more recent decades, this uneven development of public parks has accelerated. City governments have invested in spectacular green public space developments in city centres – what has been termed environmental, ecological or green gentrification - in an effort to attract businesses, tourists and middle-class residents, whilst austerity politics has led to the neglect of many smaller public parks located in more peripheral and lower income urban neighbourhoods (see Anguelovski et al., 2019; Dooling, 2009; Loughran, 2014; Pearsall, 2010; Quastel, 2009).

Moving beyond these accounts of the demise of the publicness of municipal parks, it is possible to identify different narratives of green public space transformation in the city. Community gardening provides one such alternative narrative. Positioned between formal public parks and domestic gardens, community gardens are

collectively organised horticultural projects, often working on neglected spaces in low-income areas, whose aim is to grow food and flowers in order to bring about a mix of ecological, environmental, political or socio-cultural benefits (see Milbourne, 2018; Rosol, 2018; Tornaghi and Certomà, 2018). From largely being a feature of North American cities in the twentieth century, community gardening has expanded considerably during the last couple of decades and now has a presence in many cities around the world. Writing more than a quarter of a century ago, Hester and Francis (1990) argue that many community gardens were established as a 'growing reaction to the privatization of public life and the need for spaces that support social contact and publicness' (5). In the US, there was also a justice dimension to the early community gardening movement, with groups looking to provide green spaces as well as opportunities to grow fruit and vegetables in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Lawson, 2005). The more recent expansion of urban community gardening can also be seen as a response to the absence, loss or neglect of public green spaces in the city, with community gardeners intervening in urban neighbourhoods in an attempt to develop more ecologically, environmentally and socially meaningful spaces (Milbourne, 2012).

These interventions have been constructed by some in progressive terms (see Tornaghi and Certomà 2018), working against the forces of neoliberalism to create 'counter-hegemonic spaces' (Dirlik and Prazniak, 2001) in the city. As Nettle (2014) comments, community gardens constitute one of the 'millions of ripples or "cracks" created by micro-resistances' (178), chiselling 'spaces with a degree of autonomy from the logic of the market and the state' (204). Others argue that community

gardening represents a further example of 'roll-out neoliberalism' (Peck and Tickell, 2002), with gardeners not only working on behalf of the state to plug social policy gaps resulting from welfare reform and austerity but also reinforcing individualistic discourses of self-help (see Pudup, 2008). Perhaps the best way of conceptualising community gardening is as a political hybrid (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014; McClintock, 2014), that both resists and reinforces the imposition of neo-liberal policy in different measures in particular spatial contexts (see also Baron, 2016; Milbourne, 2018; Rosol, 2018).

In relation to the themes of this paper, community gardens have been described as 'third spaces' that form 'part of the public domain and are the sites of many functions conventionally equated with the private sphere' (Schmelzkopf, 1995: 379). They may be located in public space that is being managed by local groups or in private space that has been converted into public usage. In the course of creating these 'third spaces', it is claimed that community gardening is able to generate new senses of publicness:

> "as places of community gathering and collective actions, community gardens can help reconstruct the 'social commons' – a shared space at the heart of the community that in recent history has been undermined by the sprawl of low-density simple-use development and the privatization of public space" (Hou et al., 2009: 188-9; see also Linn, 1999 and Stravrides, 2016).

It is also the case that community gardening is largely practised in mundane

neighbourhood spaces. These are spaces that are attached significant meaning by local people within their everyday lives – as remaindered spaces (Whitehead, 2009) that act as powerful symbols of the neglect of their local neighbourhoods. In working in and on these spaces, community gardeners have not only brought about physical and environmental improvement, but also created new spaces of identity, sociality, empowerment and hope in these neighbourhoods (see Baron, 2016; McClintock, 2014; Milbourne, 2012; Nettle, 2014). It is claimed that these complex spatialities of community gardening and the myriad ways in which gardeners are cultivating new spaces of publicness demand more detailed examination both within and across different cities (Milbourne, 2018). The intention of this paper is to provide both a broader and a deeper account of the spaces of community gardening, and, in so doing, explore the contributions that community gardens are making to publicness in the city.

Almost all previous research on community gardening has focused on individual gardens located in single cities in North America. This paper draws on materials from a major international study of community gardening that not only includes multiple projects across individual cities but also cities in several countries. In doing this, the paper provides a much broader and more nuanced geographical perspective on the relations between community gardens public space - considering multiple urban and national contexts - than has hitherto been possible. Four countries were included in this study – Australia, Canada, UK and US - with these selected to reflect the particular development of community gardening in the global North as indicated by

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the academic literature[2]. The case study cities and projects were identified following analysis of data held by national community gardening associations and contextual interviews conducted with key personnel within some of these associations and community gardening co-ordinators in particular cities. The intention was to include gardening projects based in cities of different population sizes, gardens located in low- or mixed-income urban neighbourhoods, and a variety of projects in terms of size, longevity and land ownership.

A total of 51 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with coordinators of individual community gardens and city-wide community gardening coordinators in 15 cities (see Table 1). Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were analysed using conventional qualitative methods of thematic coding and sorting (Miles et al., 2013; Roulston, 2014). The analytical framework was initially constructed from the key themes of the interview schedule. Following close readings of the transcriptions, codes were allocated to the interview materials with these codes then brought together and named on summary coding sheets to produce a set of recurrent themes and sub-themes that were used to structure the empirical section of the paper.

Growing new environments of publicness in the city

[2] A decision was made to restrict this study to global North countries in order to engage with the types of academic themes being discussed in this paper. This is not to deny that community gardening has a presence in global South cities and remains a topic worthy of further research (see WinklerPrins, 2017).

<u>Spatial formations</u>

Looking at how the selected community gardens had been established, three main

routes can be identified. The first, accounting for about one-fifth of gardens, was

through guerrilla gardening (Reynolds, 2008), which involved small groups of

concerned citizens coming together to address the perceived neglect of their

everyday environments. These gardeners had lost faith in their city governments to

intervene in their neighbourhoods and had sought to make improvements without

waiting for the permission of landowners. Several of the long-established gardens had

been formed in this way. As a coordinator of a large community garden in New York

City (3[3]), established in the 1970s with a social justice objective, explains, 'there was

lots of garbage and junk and abandoned cars and stuff…We started cleaning up and

gardening that lot and then it sort of sprang to other lots in the area'. For the

coordinator of another large project in the same city, which started as a guerrilla

garden in the 1980s, the demolition of abandoned buildings created what she termed

an 'empty space', within which 'my neighbours and I just started making plots with

the debris…and we organised it along the lines of everyone gets a grave size plot and

you grow what you want on that plot individually' (New York City, 2).

Other guerrilla gardeners had been prompted by the inadequate condition of the

local 'natural' environment, seeing this as either neglected, often by the local state, or

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[3] To protect the anonymity of research participants, each community gardening coordinator is
referenced by the name of the city and an interview number.

just a 'boring space' (Sydney, 6[4]) that had the potential to provide much more for local people. Whether working on the built or natural environment, it is interesting to note that while these projects had begun as acts of resistance involving guerrilla gardening, most had gone on to develop constructive relations with the local state, with coordinators reporting that city governments had expressed interest in working with them to meet mutually beneficial policy goals, provided them with advice and financial support, and encouraged them to develop further initiatives. Such arrangements would appear to reinforce the idea of community gardening as a hybrid activity that fuses elements of radicality and neoliberalism (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014; McClintock, 2014), with gardeners doing what they consider to be in the best (practical) interests of their gardens whilst still holding on to their original (political) objectives.

A second route to establishment involved working with or in place of the local state, which accounted for around two-thirds of gardens in the study. The political hybridity of community gardening again emerges in relation to this route. The actions of city governments were viewed by several garden coordinators in progressive terms, with some having introduced planning frameworks to protect emerging networks of community gardens and others working with third sector organisations and citizens to identity sites for local groups to develop community gardens in neighbourhoods lacking accessible green spaces. By contrast, in certain cases, urban gardening appeared to be being used to reinforce the entrepreneurial city narrative. In London

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[4] This is an open access communal garden with 25-30 members established in 2009 in a city-centre public pocket park.

and Vancouver, for example, spectacular city-wide community growing initiatives were linked to the hosting of the Olympic Games. It is also clear that austerity is threatening the future of some public spaces (and services) in these cities, and that community gardens have been mobilised to fill gaps left by the withdrawal of the local state. However, several participants pointed to the opportunities this was creating for gardeners to reshape local environments. As a coordinator of a small non-profit permaculture gardening organisation established in the 1990s in New York City comments, 'the Parks Department don't have any money for gardeners and that's why I get to go over and take control of that real estate and do what I want with it' (7). In addition, it was reported that some city governments were actively working with local groups to help them develop community gardens on (ex) public sites that, for mainly financial reasons, could no longer be maintained by the local state. In other cases, though, groups had been forced to organise against their city government to prevent local public facilities from being transferred to the private sector.

A third group of gardens had been established through more eclectic collaborations with private and third sector actors. In most cases, private landowners had provided community gardeners with pockets of land – free of charge or at very low rents - to develop their gardens, although some of these were often based on short-term leases, which created problems for the gardeners in developing sustainable projects. Others were based on land owned by local churches that were keen to utilise their estate to bring together diverse groups in the local neighbourhood, and in one case (Toronto, 2) a garden had secured its site through a corporate donation, with a large

company having worked with the city government to identify a site in a

neighbourhood where a local group was looking to establish a community garden.

Cultivating spaces of publicness

The community gardens occupy an assortment of public, private and in-between

spaces. As might be expected, the vast majority are situated on publicly owned land,

with city governments in several places coordinating networks of community gardens

on public sites. Although these networks can be read as an indication of how gardens

are being used by the local state to pursue its own policy objectives, coordinators

claimed that city governments tended to act more in facilitative than regulatory

terms, creating the 'empty spaces' for community gardens to be designed by and for

gardeners and local citizens. For example, the city-wide community gardening

coordinator working for the city government in Vancouver states that:

> "…individuals have just built and we give them a permit, we don't actually give
>
> them too much support. Like here's the land, this is your area, do what you
>
> like with it. I think there is some water along there and that is about it. But it
>
> really depends on the garden and like I said we are sort of hands off on the
>
> licence agreement and how the garden is managed." (6)

It could also be argued that the transfer of public space to community groups for the

purposes of gardening is taking this space out of the public realm - and thus

reinforcing the end of public space narrative - but the intention behind such transfers

appears, in most cases, to be more progressive. According to a number of garden coordinators, city governments were striving to make existing public space provide wider public benefit by using community gardening as a mechanism to improve the physical, environmental and social conditions of particular neighbourhoods. In this sense, it was claimed not only that public land was being passed to engaged groups of citizens in order to enhance spaces of publicness, but that these transfers were promoting the development of more fruitful relations between the local state, citizens and public space. As the coordinator of a large community garden on public land in Vancouver, established as a guerrilla gardening protest project in the late 1970s, explains:

> "we were one of the first community gardens in the city, and I think we influenced the city too, by showing that if they turn public spaces over to the citizens, something good could come out of it. And initially, you know, there was this feeling that you had to control what happened on public land, and the only people who could do that was civil servants, paid employees. And so, being one of the first community gardens in the city, we changed that attitude anyway." (3)

Turning to issues of access, it is the case that most of the community gardens established on public land contain fences and gates, meaning that they do not remain truly open to the public. While some would argue that these forms of enclosure strengthen the loss of public space narrative, engaging with more open and critical accounts of spatial publicness allows for other readings of this situation. For example,

both Mantey (2017) and Qian (2020) suggest that a degree of closure, exclusivity and privacy is required to promote openness, inclusion and publicity within spaces of publicness. Furthermore, the empirical materials suggest that the decision to enclose a garden was usually taken not for political reasons but to respond to more prosaic issues - to do with animals having damaged plants, previous incidences of vandalism or for insurance purposes, with someone from the garden being required on site when open to the public.

Beyond these practical concerns, several coordinators also commented that the previously neglected state of the public space they now occupied had meant that most people did not either value its publicness or make use of it. Through the creation of these gardens, it was argued that public space was being enriched to make it more attractive to wider publics. Indeed, there was a strong shared vision of producing public benefit through gardening. A coordinator of a London garden, formed in the 1990s to support asylum seekers but now working with people from diverse backgrounds, referred to her 'vision of drawing in the outside' to the garden (1), the New York City 3 coordinator talked about a desire 'to be a community space that's open to the public' and the coordinator of the Vancouver 6 garden commented that 'public property is what the garden is, you know open and welcoming to anyone who wants to come into the garden and enjoy the space'. Perhaps one of the best illustrations of these sense of publicness was provided by the coordinator of the Sydney 6 garden:

"I must admit that [the openness] is one of the things that I really love about it, that people can just walk around and have a look and you know get some herbs for their dinner and so on. I mean when I was watering the other day a couple of contractors for the council came in and the guy just asked me, do you mind if I just pick some lettuce for my lunch, and it's like, no go for it…yeah it's really good that people just can come and use it as a resource." (6)

Even when gardens were not open to the public, it was suggested that they could still provide public benefit. As a coordinator of a Melbourne gated street garden, established on derelict public land in 2004 with the support of the city government, explains:

"I think it connects to the community even when the gate is closed…Our garden has the longest exposure to a sidewalk of any of the other gardens here in the neighbourhood and it's a very busy avenue, people walk by constantly. I think people enjoy the fact that they're walking past plants and trees instead of buildings. I really think this has a big effect on just you know the quality of life for everybody." (1)

Other gardens are working in or on privately owned space in their efforts to create new environments of publicness in the city. Typically, this involves a landowner allowing a piece of derelict land to be used for the purposes of gardening. Although providing a relatively straightforward way of establishing a community garden, the uncertainties of tenure meant that some projects had decided to end this type of

gardening after witnessing the demolition of their gardens. Others had adapted to this uncertainty by developing mobile gardens that could be moved from one space to another. As the city-wide coordinator in New York City comments about one such project: 'they knew going in that it was a temporary thing and they really accepted that idea and so they constructed the garden on shipping pallets so that the beds could be moved to some other location' (6).

In the UK, several projects are utilising another form of private space, that of domestic property, in order to improve the feel of public space in the neighbourhood. In London, one project is working with residents of public rental apartments lacking gardens to bring plants to their balconies and, in so doing, its coordinator considered that it is improving the public aesthetics of the surrounding streets. In a similar way, a second project in Manchester is working in an area of small terraced housing lacking domestic gardens, attaching containers of flowering plants to the fronts of properties in order to bring nature to the public streets of the neighbourhood. A third community gardening group in Bristol, working to improve neglected patches of land within their area, has developed a project with local residents to encourage them to improve the state of their domestic gardens adjoining the street in an effort to enhance the public feel of the neighbourhood:

> "I mean there are still some grotty [front] gardens full of rubbish...but there are some very good ones as well and we think that this process has drawn people's attention to it [the front garden]...It's the idea of walking around and feeling some ownership of the public space even though it's not technically

public spaces. It's space that's in the public [arena] as it were…and it makes the place feel like a community." (2)

It should also be acknowledged that publicness took on different forms across the community gardens. Only about one-third of gardens are truly communal, with all gardeners working on the same shared space of the garden. The largest group – accounting for approximately half of all gardens - are hybrids of communal and personal interests, actions and spaces, combining plots worked on by individuals with collective spaces used by all gardeners for community growing activities and as an informal meeting places for the gardeners and / or the public. Within a handful of such gardens, tensions between their public / communal and private / personal roles were apparent. For example, the co-ordinator of a large community garden in New York City - established in the 1980s through guerrilla gardening on derelict land - reports that some participants 'seem like they're more interested in having this kind of personal secret garden' rather than working for the collective good (1), while another coordinator in San Francisco comments that he had to remind some gardeners that the aim of their project was less to do with cultivating individual plots and more with 'address[ing] the real issues in the neighbourhood through the mechanism of agriculture' (1[5]). An incident was also revealed of tensions between one gardening group and its local community in relation to the acquisition of public space, with the city-wide gardening coordinator in Sydney mentioning that some local people initially accused the garden of 'having taken space away from walking the dog

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[5] A small community garden situated in a parking lot of a church that was reactivated in 2013.

or playing a ball game, and the garden group seeing it as their garden not as the community's'.

Growing spaces of sharing and caring

Although the initial intention of many of the gardens has been to improve the physical and environmental state of neglected, 'boring' or 'empty' neighbourhood spaces, the gardening has produced some important socio-cultural outcomes for gardeners, local residents and wider publics. As the Sydney 6 coordinator remarks, 'our garden is a big social experiment as well as a gardening experiment'. In this final section, I want to discuss four socio-cultural consequences of the community gardening projects that can be seen to be enhancing senses of publicness. The first concerns the ways in which the gardens are creating new meeting places for the gardeners as well as for others making use of these spaces (Edwards, 2006; Mantey, 2017). A recurrent theme throughout the interviews was how community gardening has not only brought different people together but also improved the quality of their social interaction. As the organiser of a small communal garden established in 2004 in one of the suburbs of Sydney states, 'it's activated the area as they say, it's kind of made it much more of a focus where people come and you know sit...and have their lunch or chat or whatever' (3). The gardens have become an important social space, representing 'the community's place and they give a rip, they show up, you know, this is like, they belong to something' (Madison city-wide community garden coordinator).

In the words of another coordinator, the garden is 'our space, it's kind of a gathering space…like a community centre, in a way (Portland, 2[6]).

Second, many of the gardens are located in ethnically mixed neighbourhoods that have witnessed high levels of immigration during recent years. Some of these gardens have deliberately sought to bring different groups together as part of their projects, while others have attracted a more diverse membership during the course of their gardening. In Southampton, for example, an international peace garden was established to integrate people from different faith groups. In other cases, gardening has helped to connect people from different countries, with food growing and food story-telling integrating immigrants within their new home cities. As one co-ordinator asks 'what are people going to learn from gardening, what's going to support their own cultures, like what is going to celebrate the culture that they come from. What gives people common ground, that kind of thing?' (Toronto, 3, city-based non-profit community gardening network). Another example of the integrative role of gardening and food was provided by the city-wide coordinator of community gardening in Portland:

> "…just recently we had some new people, Bhutanese and Korean refugees came to the garden, and so we had this work party with three different translators and...we're doing introductions and eating food and just sort of talking about where everybody was from and how they came to the US, and

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[6] This medium-sized garden was formed in 2012 on parks department land and consists of individual and collective plots.

why they liked to garden, or what they hoped to get out of the garden, and really learning about each other's cultures...and kind of being able to relate to the immigration struggle...and then also talking about food." (1)

Third, and related to these issues of cultural integration, several of the gardens are providing spaces of care and support for vulnerable groups. Some are working with people experiencing mental health issues, providing them with a safe space as well as opportunities to meet with others. In the words of one of these coordinators, the garden represents 'a place where people can meet who don't usually get to meet one another...I think it helps reduce the stigma of people with mental health issues and learning disabilities' (Birmingham, 2[7]). Other projects are operating to provide safe spaces for asylum seekers and refugees. In the following interview extract, the city-wide coordinator of community gardens in Sydney describes the beneficial role of food growing in supporting refugees:

> "we do have a garden for refugees, and it's predominantly to support them, so they've got the opportunity to grow produce that they are used to growing...and people do talk a little bit more sometimes when they are focusing on what they are doing in the garden and getting through some of that trauma that has occurred to [them]." (2)

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[7] This project was established in 1997 as a therapeutic garden following a successful campaign by a local group against the closure of a city government environmental studies centre and its proposed sale to the private sector.

Lastly, community gardens constitute important spaces of sharing. As the coordinator on a non-profit gardening network in Boulder comments, 'we have had some pretty amazing experiences through gardeners coming together…to share what they have been able to grow with each other' (2). This sharing of foodstuffs also extends beyond the boundaries of the garden with gardeners 'connecting with neighbours and building positive relationships with people that may have initially been sceptical [about the garden]' (Portland, 1, community gardens coordinator, city government). In addition, several gardens are sharing their produce with those in situations of need. Some gardeners are themselves from low income households and 'gardening food that they cannot afford to buy' (Vancouver, 1[8]). Others are reaching out to lower income groups in their neighbourhoods. As a coordinator of a small church-based vegetable garden in Melbourne states, 'we do have a sign there saying, you know, please feel free to pick what your family needs for today and look after the plants' (4).

Several gardens are also engaging with people in need by donating food to a variety of emergency food programmes. For example, the Boulder garden network coordinator states that 'for years and years we have worked with local pantries and providers of food to people who are chronically ill or home bound and encouraged gardeners to donate produce' (2). Donations most frequently are made to a local food bank, with some gardens choosing to set aside part of their site for the growing of food for donations, while others that are part of city-wide gardening networks have agreed to donate a certain proportion of their produce. An example of such an

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[8] This garden, established in the mid-1990s, consists mainly of individual plots and covers a block-long area running alongside a now disused railway line.

arrangement was provided by the coordinator of a temporary garden recently established on an abandoned lot in New York City:

> "I've been able to supply the soup kitchen with fresh vegetables, you know salad stuff, I give them tomatoes for salad. I give them herbs to cook the food. You know, I've given them zucchini to make a veggie dish…and it's part of our agreement that 30 per cent of what we grow is given away. So if you have a plot, you know, you're growing your things, 30 per cent of what you grow we give away" (4).

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to bring new perspectives to urban studies on the changing nature of public space and the emergence of new spaces of publicness in the city. Whilst recognising the significance of assaults on certain types of public space and attempts on the part of the state and corporations to reshape the public landscape of cities in neoliberal terms, the paper has used a case study of community gardening in urban neighbourhoods to provide a more nuanced and spatially sensitive account of the relations between publicness and space. In this concluding section, I want to discuss four contributions that key findings from this study make to urban scholarship on spatial publicness.

First, the research lends weight to recent calls for the development of more critical understandings of the relationship between publicness and space. In particular, it highlights the importance of moving beyond a focus on <u>public spaces</u> to engage with a wider array of <u>spaces of publicness</u>. This involves less emphasis being placed on the technicalities of the ownership of and conventional access[9] to space, and more on how disparate actions in a variety of spaces are creating new forms of publicness in the city. It also entails recognising the imperfections and complexities associated with (new) spaces of publicness. It is clear that the public features of community gardening discussed in this paper resonate with key themes emerging from recent critical scholarship on publicness and space. The gardens have been designed and are functioning as 'civic spaces' (Edwards, 2006; Yu, 2017) and 'gathering places' (Mantey, 2017), with gardeners creating quasi-public spaces that are able (re)activate social life, enhance senses of publicness and develop 'shared aesthetics, concerns and ethics embodied in…these places' (Mantey, 2017, 85).

Also apparent within the community gardens are the types of ambiguities, hybridities and contradictions associated with spaces of publicness described by Qian (2020), with the gardens displaying elements of commonality and difference, inclusion and exclusion, openness and closure, and externally imposed structure and grassroots agency. While these complexities have been used as points of criticism about the (limited) publicness of community gardens, connecting with these more critical approaches to spatial publicness allows community gardens to be viewed as precisely

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[9] It is not being suggested here that the relationship between access to and the publicness of space should be downplayed but that conventional understandings of access to space may need to be considered in broader and more critical ways.

the types of fluid, spontaneous spaces of shared values and sociality that are being discussed as alternatives to conventional readings of public space. Building on this theoretical work and the empirical findings from this study, I also want to suggest that the community gardens are creating new <u>environments</u> of publicness. As well as producing new green spaces that provide broader public benefit, the gardens are expanding people's senses of publicness through engagements with nature. Whether these engagements are passive, involving moving alongside, passing through or sitting in the garden spaces, or more active in terms of working with nature in the gardens, they are able to create more meaningful spaces of togetherness, with the shared relationships between nature and society able to downplay or overcome existing social, cultural or ethnic divisions.

A second contribution concerns the role of ordinary actions in (re)shaping and (re)claiming spaces of publicness. Many of the community gardeners are providing new meanings for and uses of the ordinary landscapes that feature so prominently within people's everyday lives. Their actions are (re)engaging citizens and providing the possibilities for alternative futures for previously mundane (public) spaces. The work of the community gardeners also raises important questions about who has the right not just to occupy public space but also to repurpose it for the collective good (Brawley, 2009). Public space has to be more than space that is open to or managed on behalf of the public; it needs to be a space that is actively moulded and controlled by and for the public (Mitchell, 2003). Many of these community gardens have done just this; taking public space previously controlled (but often not cared for) by city

governments and redesigning it in more imaginative and purposeful ways to meet the needs of local citizens.

Third, the study confirms community gardening's rather ambiguous position in relation to neo-liberal structures and processes of governance (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014; McClintock, 2014). Indeed, it is apparent that many of the projects do not lend themselves to neat categorisation as either radical or neo-liberal in terms of their aims and actions. Some of the early guerrilla gardeners have joined with city governments to protect, enhance or extend their activities. Those community gardens established through the actions of city governments operating within a neo-liberal policy agenda and / or within the fiscal constraints of austerity, can be viewed as plugging gaps left by the local state's withdrawal from particular services and spaces. However, some garden coordinators claimed to be operating within the 'cracks of neoliberalism' to develop more meaningful spaces for themselves and local communities, as well as to carve out more relevant (political) relations between gardeners, citizens and the local state. Garden organisers also referenced progressive and mutually beneficial relationships that had been forged with city governments, with the local state securing sites to allow local groups to create gardens in neighbourhoods lacking public parks, encouraging engaged groups of citizens to take control of public green spaces in their areas, and providing advice and support to projects to enable them 'to do their own thing'. In these senses, neo-liberalism and radicalism begin to blur somewhat, prompting more careful thinking about how more autonomous spaces bound up with 'non-capitalist, egalitarian and solidaristic forms of political, social, and economic organization' (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006, 330)

should be positioned within urban neo-liberalism (see Brawley, 2009; Crossan et al., 2016).

Fourth, the study findings should encourage new questions to be asked about the depth of social interaction within spaces of publicness. The community gardens are acting as a facilitator for the getting-together of different groups with a shared interest in gardening: neighbours who had never really talked with each other prior to gardening; wider publics drawn into the enchanting spaces of the garden; migrants, refugees and asylum seekers engaging with more established groups through the shared narrative of food growing; and different faith groups using the secular space of the garden to recognise the mutual significance of nature and food to their lives. The gardens can also be viewed as acting as important arenas for the provision of care, not only providing safe spaces for groups that were unable to access or perhaps did not feel comfortable within the grand public spaces of the central city but also addressing sets of 'remedial injustices' (Sen, 2009) through, for example, the distribution of locally grown food to those in need. In these respects, community gardening is not just adding to the spaces of publicness in the city; it is creating spaces that are arguably more meaningful in terms of the quality of social interaction, social responsibility and political activism than in the more obvious public spaces of the city. Indeed, it would appear that community gardens may be able to (re)politicise and (re)activate spaces of publicness in ways that some have claimed are not possible in more conventional urban public spaces (see Bodnar, 2015).

Moving beyond these four contributions, it should be recognised that the research upon which the paper is based was designed to provide broad coverage and a comparative account of community gardening projects across cities in several global North countries. In doing this, the main focus has been on the viewpoints of garden coordinators, which may have produced more positive and consensual narratives on how gardens are creating new environments of publicness than amongst other groups interacting with the gardens. Moving forward, it would be useful to explore the themes raised in this paper through further in-depth study of community gardening projects in order to consider how other gardening participants and those living around and / or making use of the gardens understand their contributions to spatial publicness.

Whilst this study has looked beyond individual cities in North America, it remains the case that it has continued the focus of community gardening research on a rather limited number of global North countries. It is clear that a need exists to extend such work to other countries and cities in the North where community gardening may be less developed, takes on other forms and is shaped by different urban processes and structures. In addition, it would be helpful to examine the themes of this paper in the context of urban agriculture in global South countries, which has tended to be discussed in different and, arguably, less progressive ways (see Milbourne, 2018). There are some early signs of the development of such North – South comparative accounts (see, for example, WinklerPrins, 2017), but there is much more to be done to provide a more geographically balanced account of how community gardening is creating new forms and spaces of publicness in different countries across the world.

Acknowledgements

Table 1: The number of interviews undertaken in the case study cities

Country	Cities	Number of interviews
Australia	Melbourne	4
	Sydney	7
Canada	Toronto	6
	Vancouver	7
UK	Birmingham	2
	Bristol	1
	Cardiff	1
	London	4
	Manchester	2
	Southampton	1
US	Boulder	2
	Madison	1
	New York City	8
	Portland	2
	San Francisco	3
Total	15	51

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