Urban Agriculture

By Juliana Torquato Luiz, Uschi Cristina Silva, e André Ruoppolo Biazoti

The term Urban Agriculture (UA) does not just refer to agricultural production in urban spaces. These are social, political, cultural, economic, and ecological relationships established in urban and metropolitan territories, which involve agriculture. It is an agriculture that exists on multiple scales and, for the most part, is associated with living spaces. UA is claimed, in a variety of contexts, as a possibility of building the right to the city and healthy and adequate food. Urban land is its main ground, and a diversity of subjects gives multiple meanings to the practice of UA. It is through a systemic and polyvalent vision that a reading of what UA is proposed. Central issues are shared that place it in a field of historical disputes. Contributions from the National Collective of Urban Agriculture (CNAU) are also valued, a movement composed of a diversity of actors that advocates UA as a possibility for a path of broader social transformation and in dialogue with the principles of agroecology, and which has accompanied a process of attempting to construct a national urban

agriculture policy, triggered within the framework of the context of socio-political participation around food and nutritional security in Brazil.

Urban agriculture: a concept under construction

The development of agriculture is directly related to urbanization and city life. The inseparable relationship between food production and ways of constituting cities, where they are able to feed themselves through what they produce, is verified in documents and studies on ancient civilizations such as the Incas, Mayans, and Aztecs. As is the case of "Las Chinampas", today located south of Mexico City, an ancestral type of agriculture that combined ways of occupying land next to lakes with urban structures. Studies carried out in Ghana, Pakistan, India, Iraq, and China also demonstrate that cities produced their own food and had complex irrigation, soil management, and organic waste treatment systems (Van der Ryn, 1995; Smit; Nasr; Ratta, 1996).

During the 20th century, UA experiences gained prominence in different historical and geographical contexts, especially after the Second World War. These experiences express a multiplicity of practices, scales, spaces, subjects and vocabularies closely linked to their contexts.

For Almeida (2015), the concept of UA is an open and disputed field. The author argues that urban agriculture should bring to light the reflection on the historical relationships between agriculture and the city, as well as on the connections between relevant issues in today's world, with the relationships between the rural and the urban, between society and nature. (Almeida, 2015, p. 53)

From this perspective, especially in the last 30 years, urban agriculture has been reflected in a multiplicity of issues, often inseparable, depending on the context in which it occurs: food security and sovereignty; issues in the world of work; resilience and access to natural resources in the city such as land and water; housing conditions; biodiversity, urban planning, environmental education, collective health, mental health, close marketing circuits, metropolitan agri-food systems, agroecology, among others.

Considering this perspective, the conceptual construction of UA dynamically presents itself and is also located in agendas of the struggle for the right to a democratic city, in opposition to the hegemonic model of urbanization,

appropriation, and production of urban space. The practice of UA can, therefore, represent concrete actions that interfere with the mercantile logic of city spaces and reveal virtualities of urban space, opposing capitalist dynamics and urban planning when built from top to bottom.

In the field of agroecology – as a science, movement, and social practice – the integration of AU agendas is recent, from a historical point of view, although many existing experiences in different contexts reveal that agroecology is also a structuring paradigm of practices that converge with historical struggles of movements for urban reform. Examples, in the Brazilian context, are experiences recorded mainly in recent years within the scope of movements such as Brigadas Populares and settlements of movements such as Landless Workers' Movement (MST) and Sem Teto in urban contexts.

From the subjects' point of view, the UA also comprises a diversity of social groups: women, fishing communities, family farmers, indigenous groups, quilombola communities, riverside communities, among other traditional communities in urban contexts, young permaculturists, among other groups that give life to different forms and expressions of urban agriculture; the field, the vegetable garden, the backyard, the farm. They are practiced individually, within the family, collectively (through community or associative bases), and by social movements. These are initiatives that reveal traditional practices of growing food, medicinal plants, ornamental plants, and animal husbandry for immediate consumption by the family and the nearby neighborhood. But they also reach, like family farming scales, their own local markets (fairs, distribution of baskets with fresh products), and more complex structures, like processes that include producer-consumer relationships, in addition to institutional markets.

At the spatial level, UA is practiced in residences – houses and apartments, backyards, slabs, terraces, roofs, farms, farms, vacant lots, sides of roads, streets, squares, gardens, and public areas not occupied by buildings. It is also common in institutionalized environments, such as schools, daycare centers, nursing homes, penitentiaries, health centers, universities, and associations, among other public or private institutions. The composition of spaces occupied by UA can even contribute to the recovery of ecological green corridors and be integrated into urban forest systems, among other spatial typologies characterized as green areas. Land and property occupations whose social

function is not fulfilled also constitute UA spaces. Considering this context, it is understood that agriculture is practiced in different urban spaces with the possibility of multiple reaches, simultaneously, not only with the objective of meeting the food demand of cities, although it highlights the unequivocal contribution of UA to food and nutritional security and to rescue the cultures and knowledge of communities. The UA is understood as part of a broader defense process of another societal project, based on democratic values, social, environmental, economic, and cultural justice.

In this way, agricultural practices in the city are guided by agroecological and popular bases. This conception invites us to a dialectical approach to the facts that emerge from urban space, including experiences that have always existed and resisted using the natural resources available in urban contexts and politically recognizing the ecosystemic and social contribution of different social subjects made invisible and marginalized by an unequal system of society.

Urban Space and the Right to the City

In Brazil and in many contexts of the Global South, urbanization occurred differently in relation to Northern countries, as Singer (1985) points out. According to the author, the urban problems that arise in the South are related to the lack of adequate housing, inefficiency in urban services such as piped water supply and sewage, failure in the health and education systems, among others.

The city acquires a reductionist concept of a production center, made up of policies, governments, factories, and markets. In contrast, the countryside was determined as a place for food production and a place for nature. The city is separated from these functions. There is a paradigmatic change and a break in community ties, a break in relations and the organization of communal lands and local traditions and institutions focused on agricultural community structures. There is then the defense of private property and the free market guided by supply and demand.

The Brazilian industrial process that began in the first half of the 20th century attracted a large number of workers to the cities on the Rio de Janeiro – São Paulo axis. A critical view of Brazilian urbanization originates from the

perception that the migratory movement of rural workers gave rise to a process of socio-spatial transformation. Peasants uprooted from rural areas became marginalized in urban space to be transformed into an industrial reserve army (Singer, 1985).

The complexity of the production of urban space and the growth of cities is related not only to industrialization but to the growth of the services sector, which was structured as a typically urban mode of accumulation. It is in the urban space where a new exploitation of these workers takes shape, as informal work expands, the cost of reproducing labor decreases and workers seek their reproduction and survival at their own expense. These workers also play the role of consumers necessary for the establishment of the industry and the vast service sector that is structured on its margins (Oliveira, 2013).

The increase in urban demand for products, including food, gave Capital the opportunity to penetrate the Brazilian countryside through larger-scale agricultural production. On the other hand, it allowed for greater specialization of spaces, with very demarcated economic functions. These historical processes circumscribed in urban space deepened the country-city/rural-urban dichotomy, fragmenting the relationships between society and nature to the extent that it attested to a fractured vision of life and spaces (Kois; Morán, 2015).

However, the production of urban space is not just the result of the intervention of the owners of the means of production, land owners, real estate developers, and the State. Marginalized subjects also produce space in the city (Corrêa, 2016). Movements fighting for housing, settlements in metropolitan regions, favelas, tenements, and occupations in the city center are concrete examples of everyday struggles and the production of space.

In these places, the practice of UA redesigns space and the urban landscape. In place of idle land, community gardens, squares, and leisure areas. Around these collective processes, debates emerge about the right to healthy and adequate food; which city you want and how to build the right to the city; urban violence in the outskirts; urban mobility, and environmental sanitation. In the symbolic field, there is an appreciation of ancestral knowledge and memories; from popular cuisines, from Creole seeds; medicinal plants, and supportive relationships.

These experiences in cities are islands of re-existence that inscribe other ways of life in the urban space that are contrary to the imposition of the capitalist system. If, on the one hand, the capitalist mode of production caused the swelling of cities and the emptying of the countryside, breaking the metabolic relationship between human beings and nature (Foster, 2012), generating imbalances and excess waste in the environment, on the other, the practices of the subjects who carry out UA point us towards the construction of spaces that value the reproduction of life in all its manifestations, reconnecting urban society with nature.

The possibility of recomposing relationships between society and nature via urban agriculture

The previous debates also denounce a vision of the city devoid of its ecological composition when treated by the logic of the capitalist economy. On the one hand, an intact image of nature is perpetuated and spaces of contemplation are artificially reproduced where society is separated from nature and see it as an "object" to be dominated, explored, and conserved for the purpose of reserving natural resources. On the other hand, consumer culture, created within the capitalist system, causes waste of natural resources and high levels of pollution and environmental degradation.

This environmental inequality is also expressed as social inequality. The poor population is the most exposed "to the risks arising from the location of their homes, the vulnerability of these homes to floods, landslides and the action of open sewers, affected by air, water and soil pollution" (Acselrad, 2000, p. 2).

The various UA experiences present in the territories have demonstrated that urban contexts are not only places of consumption and waste production but can also be spaces for agricultural production guided by agroecological principles where these practices recover the dimension of nature as part of the city and the production of urban space.

One example is the recognition of the city as a producer of nutrients that become an important input for agriculture – whether in the countryside or the city – through the treatment and management of urban organic waste. The new paradigm of no longer treating waste resulting from organic materials as garbage, but as part of a cycle – it came from the earth, returns to the earth –

is an ecosystemic principle that starts from the conception advocated here of urban agriculture.

The subjects who produce food in the city, organized around UA movements, challenge the reductionist and dualist vision between society and nature and demand its overcoming through democratic processes where agri-food crops in the urban space contribute to the recomposition of the relationships between beings humans with nature and the production of abundance (Biazoti, 2020).

Governments and civil society must assume the multisectoral and welcoming character of the AU and materialize policies aimed at good living. The possibility of agriculture for life being able to feed the cities again, in partnership with the countryside, will depend on these recoveries that engender another possible urban environment.

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