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Common Goods from a Landscape Perspective



Coordinators and Guest Editors:
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Carlo Magnani (University I.U.A.V. of Venice)
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Agricultural Soils. A Fundamental Common Good in Urban Areas: a Strategy for Recovering Their Identity

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Abstract: Good agricultural soils are a scarce and exhaustible resource, essential for providing regular food production to societies and to the idea of sustainability. The protection of these soils is particularly important in Mediterranean landscapes, where there are strong natural and cultural contrasts and the fertility of land is based mostly on human activity.

In Portugal, law protects soils since the early 1970s and in 1982 good agricultural soils were classified and safeguarded by law as National Agriculture Reserves (RAN) – non aedificandi – areas particularly suitable for agriculture. Even private land is considered of collective importance, protected by heavy restrictions in use and management. Nevertheless, once land is required for urban development, it is reclassified as urban soil and included in urban areas.

The reflection on Common Goods from a Landscape Perspective, leads us to the idea of a functional conversion of agricultural soils in urban areas, sustained in the valorisation of these exceptional resources as productive functions in urban areas. This implies the maintenance of these soils as RAN in urban areas and the development of an evolutionary dynamic, reinforcing the idea of a common good – the return of the best soils to agriculture in urban areas – expressing the ecological, social, historical-cultural and ethic values. It is a request to recreate the notion of common identity based on land, lost in the meantime but possible to recover through the promotion of urban agriculture.

Keywords: agricultural soils; urban areas; common identity; functional conversion; urban agriculture

The concepts

Soil is the superficial and relatively unstable layer of the earth's surface and is defined as the natural environment for plant growth, being constituted by non-consolidated aggregated materials

of mineral and organic material, water and air (Costa, 1985). Multiple functions are associated with soil (support, regulation, filtering, storage, recycling, habitat and biomass production) as well as several uses (urban or rural, agricultural or forestry, among others) developed by the various qualifications well established in planning.

Our focus is on *agricultural soils*, those best for biomass production and particularly important from an ecologic, economic and social point of view, the result of an integrated dynamic between physical agents and human processes.

Common good is the combination of material and spiritual conditions that provide to the human community a harmonious development of its individuals. So, common good is more than individual good; it is a community good, a universal value perceived in the well-being of the community of individuals as a whole (Filho, 2000). An equivalent to the concept of *public interest*, as a relationship between society and the common good, pursued by that society through the authorities – governors, public administrators, magistrates, etc. (Filho, 2000).

The emphasis of our research is on dignifying the *natural common goods*, given by nature – e.g. air, soil, water, plants and animals. Being a part of a holistic natural whole, natural common goods were considered the goods of 'no one', being intensively and over exploited, transformed and destroyed (Donadieu, 2013).

Associated with natural common goods are universal values, imposing respect by through protection and valorisation, after the principle of public interest. For their universal value, their recognition, respect and valorisation are an obligation of law and states (Donadieu, 2013). Several authorities, at different levels, such as the United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Council of Europe (CE), States, and Governmental and Non-governmental Organizations, have the responsibility to adjust their concerns to the time and options that law establishes to the improvement and promotion of the common good.

The value of 'agricultural soil'

The greater value of soil results from its multiple functions and from inherent pressure and vulnerability. Despite severe constraints on its use, its destruction is meaningful all over the world (Azevedo, 1997; Cortez, 2007), with massive soil destruction by edification – in the whole world, 25% of cultivated soils have been lost, around 100 000ha per year destroyed by edification (Magalhães, 2001). There is an increasing need to preserve soils with better capacity of biomass production, keeping them free of construction and other uses not compatible with the maintenance of their fertility.

For agriculture, soil is naturally the main raw material. There is a need to provide an adequate agricultural use and management that improves agricultural activities but also integrates the several soil functions – economic, social and ecological, crucial to maintain landscape equilibrium. The fast transformation of landscape in the last century often meant the collision between the functions of soil and the ecological functions of landscape.

In the last century, an increase of scientific research and the awareness of such a reality led to the idea of the global valorisation of soil, expressed in a wide range of legislation for its protection. Soil is seen as a rare, sensitive and scarcely renewable resource and concerns for its protection arose, namely in planning for rural and urban areas (Magalhães, 2001). States (or their organizations) produced political initiatives and measures for soil protection – as examples, the Soil Map of the World (FAO/UNESCO, 1971-1981), the European Soil Charter (CE, 1972) or the EU Directive (CE 2006a); in Portugal, the Dec-Law 365/75 protects the best agricultural soils and, later in 1982, their classification and safeguarding as National Agriculture Reserves.

The protection and valorisation of soils is particularly important in Mediterranean landscapes, of significant natural and cultural contrasts, with intensive human pressure. The fertility of soils is

mainly a result of human activity. In Portugal, this is evident in a singular landscape pattern – a complex mosaic determined by unique conditions of relief, climatic, vegetation and human activity. A combination of natural and cultural conditions favoured agriculture as a dominant way of living and determined the establishment of human settlements associated with the fertility of land (Ribeiro, 1992).

Recent data (CE, 2006b) confirm this fragility, singularity and importance, particularly in the South of Europe. In Portugal, around $\frac{3}{4}$ of the territory has degraded soils, and only 12% has privileged edaphic and climatic conditions (Araújo, 1976).

National public policies and agricultural soil

As said before, in Portugal, the main public policy on soil protection is the National Agriculture Reserve (RAN) law. The aim is to protect soils with a high capacity of biomass production and the most agricultural potential, *non-aedificandi* areas allocated exclusively to agriculture. At the municipal level plans, it is mandatory to classify these areas as RAN, in order to guarantee the sustainable use and management of rural areas.

The exclusion of this type of soil from this classification, is sustained in the requirement of these areas for housing, economic activities, equipment and infrastructures. Thus, the same law determines that soils included in the so-called urban perimeter, defined in the municipal plan, are not classified as RAN. It is the territorial planning that determines the purpose of land, supported in the differentiation between rural and urban soil (DGOTDU, 2007): the first integrates soils with capacity for agriculture activities, farming, forestry and mining, and natural areas of leisure and protection; the second integrates urbanization areas, including the existent urbanized areas, the ones expected to be urbanized and those to integrate an urban ecological structure.

From the moment a municipality defines an urban perimeter, the soils integrated in it are urban

soils, since the development strategy requires them – regardless of their characteristics, qualities and capacities, that is, regardless of having characteristics to be included and classified as RAN (Freire and Ramos, 2013).

As stated before, the establishment of human settlements were associated with better agricultural soils. In the last decades, in these areas one can observe a significant increase in urban areas at the expense of rural ones.

Agricultural soil in urban areas – proposals for its defence and creation

Agricultural soils in urban areas are meaningfully associated with urban agriculture. In Portugal this dynamic is increasing, meaning the creation and promotion of vegetable gardens by the municipalities and/or civil society institutions, integrated programs, conferences and scientific articles, dissertations and dissemination platforms (Freire and Ramos, 2013). A return to the productive functions in urban areas, however, is not a novelty – such productive areas have always been there, in areas considered belonging to no one (such as bands along the roads), in private yards and in soils classified as urban but agricultural until their edification.

The development of urban vegetable gardens is sustained by environmental, emotional, social and economic reasons: improving the health of urban agglomerations (important qualities of vegetation in the city); as a link between man of the city and nature (an answer to spiritual and psychological needs); an associated economic value to support family economy; a stimulus to local economy; and a social value by improving quality of life through social interaction, health benefits from physical activity and providing for more diversity of food (Telles, 1957, 1997). Moreover, situated in empty or degraded spaces, are essential components of the ecological structure in the urban landscape, providing continuity at the ecological, social, aesthetic and cultural levels.

Recently, there are echoes of these dynamics at the planning level, with proposals and recommendations including these agricultural areas in the development model of cities, emphasizing the relationship with other urban components, bringing out functions beyond production, and economic, social and environmental benefits.

More ambitious is the proposal to *introduce a new function in the city – the agricultural one* – as a programmed answer to the demand for urban vegetable gardens, still growing, taking advantage of their benefits in urban areas (Pinto, 2007).

In order to operationalize a *functional conversion* in urban areas, focused on the reestablishment of areas with good agricultural soils, a return to the productive functions in the following types of areas must be advocated (Freire and Ramos, 2013):

- Inadequately used with functions that are no longer needed, recovering permeable areas – e.g. areas for housing, industry and commerce, abandoned or in a degradation process;

- Planned for urban growth, but not yet built up. It means the destruction of such areas and a change of their functions; the development of a new type of soil qualification – with the inevitable conversion of urban soil to rural; and adapting the urban perimeters or other way to provide their use as agricultural areas – namely their classification as RAN.

Conclusion

As landscape professionals, our approach is based on a comprehensive and humanistic point of view, on the integration of multiple components and dynamics – ecological, aesthetic, cultural and ethical. The valorisation of soil as a common good is supported in this holistic perspective but reinforces the ethical questions – for nature and culture – that are fundamental today (Freire, 2011). Therefore, great significance must be given to soil as a common good – a natural and landscape resource to promote and value in urban areas.

The return of agriculture in urban areas is a proposal based on recent dynamics in cities, changing the paradigm of massive edification with no personal identity, disregarding natural characteristics and creating fragmented landscapes.

A new paradigm based on an evolutionary dynamic, reinforcing the idea of common good and recreating the notion of common identity based on land, was lost in the meantime but is possible to recover through the promotion of urban agriculture.

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