Journal of Organizational Ethnography

Urban gardens as inclusive green living rooms? Gardening activities in Gothenburg, across and within social divides

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Received 20 October 2023
Revised 29 March 2024
15 May 2024
Accepted 9 August 2024

Abstract

Purpose – This study explores the social conditions for sustainability practices, addressing the processes whereby associational gardening practices in a highly segregated context may or may not create connections and capacities across urban social divides.

Design/methodology/approach – Based on organizational ethnographic fieldwork, the article explores urban gardens as potential meeting places in a segregated city, Gothenburg, focusing on collectively organized gardening projects in different socioeconomic and socio-spatial settings.

Findings – The study identifies the unintentional encounters embedded in the immaterial act of gardening, that is, digging, planting and actual gardening practices regardless of the harvest. Such practices were found to be important for social sustainability practices beyond the continuous reproduction of silos, at least in multicultural settings. Nevertheless, many urban gardeners create a green living room for themselves and their neighbours, and engagement with those outside their silos often becomes more of a symbolic act of global solidarity, especially in more culturally homogeneous areas.

Originality/value – The article fills a gap in the research by focusing on the social conditions for sustainability practices in urban segregated areas. By showing how gardening practices often reproduce cultural similarity, the study highlights the importance of revealing practices and places that facilitate unintentional social "bonus" interactions that nonetheless occur in two of the gardening environments studied. Unintentional encounters are identified as important dimensions of social sustainability practices.

Keywords Organizational ethnography, Social sustainability, Urban gardening, Segregation, Social divides

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Urban gardening can have multiple functions in contemporary urban environments. It can provide green infrastructure and social meeting places for local citizens across social boundaries and status divides (e.g. Alaimo *et al.*, 2010; Christiansen *et al.*, 2018). Urban gardens can also create a space for urban citizenship (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014), new ways of

The author would like to thank the two anonymous referees for their thoughtful feedback which has helped improve the article. Also, comments from the research team (especially Prof Kerstin Jacobsson) on the earlier draft of the article are much appreciated.

Funding: This work was supported by *FORMAS – A Swedish Research Council for Sustainable Development* [2019-01894]. The study design, research process and analysis were performed independently within the research team, including Prof Kerstin Jacobsson (project leader), Dr Agnes Gagyi and Dr Ioana Florea, University of Gothenburg.

Disclosure statement: There are no competing interests to declare.

Journal of Organizational Ethnography
Emerald Publishing Limited
2046-6749
DOI 10.1108/JOE-10-2023-0057

practising solidarity (Müller, 2017) or resistance to urban development (Stehlin and Tarr, 2017). In a time deeply affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, indoor meeting places such as libraries, cafes and office areas have been radically restricted. In such times of crisis, local networks of trust and collaboration often become essential (Boström, 2012). Although social connections in larger cities can be decisive in addressing various ecological or social crises, crisis management remains greatly influenced by social stratification related to class, "race", and other factors (Tierney, 2006, p. 109). Thus, urban gardening can be important in building social capacity, yet gardeners gather in culturally homogeneous settings that reproduce similarity. As argued herein, social meeting places that allow relationships to develop across social divides may be crucial for social sustainability practices. Nevertheless, we know little about how these social collaborations are conditioned and shaped by processes of urban social stratification or factors that enable and discourage collaboration across social divides such as class, "race" and age.

The present article fills a gap in existing research by focusing on the social conditions for sustainability practices considered important for achieving social and environmental sustainability. The overall aim is to explore the role of urban gardening activities in shaping such practices and collaboration across social divides in the Gothenburg area, focusing on processes that counteract the effect of social stratification. It is argued that a bottom-up ethnographic approach to studying urban gardening associations is important to understanding what constitutes social sustainability in the built urban environment. Empirically, the article focuses on urban gardens as potential meeting places in a highly segregated city, Gothenburg, focusing on collectively organized gardening projects in different socio-economic and socio-spatial settings. Urban gardening practices in the Gothenburg area have been promoted as a social right, whereby all inhabitants have an equal right to nature. The study examines informal practices (i.e. who is invited to these gardens, and who uses them), which are important to understanding how such green, common urban areas are formed in practice, ranging from visions of exclusive green living rooms on public land to potential green common areas for all, bridging social divides.

The article begins with a description of Gothenburg, providing a contextual understanding of the gardening practices in focus. This is followed by the conceptual framework, fieldwork, and methodology. After that, the findings are presented and analysed. Finally, findings are summarized and discussed in the conclusion.

The case of Gothenburg

Sweden has a long history of organized urban gardening practices dating back to the early 20th century. During wartime, wealthy people from the bourgeoisie started implementing allotment gardening in urban areas for social justice and to create healthy citizens and save them from idleness (Furås, 2019). After World War II, the number of people living in urban apartment buildings increased, and gardening activity was then referred to as a universal entitlement, emphasizing citizens' right to nature (Mack and Scherma Parscher, 2016; Langa, 2020). Dimensions of inclusiveness can also be seen within the Swedish housing policy. However, the country has faced significant challenges with housing provision in urban areas, particularly for residents with irregular income (Bengtsson and Grander, 2023). As for the opportunity to lease a piece of municipal land, it has indeed provided a chance to create a garden for those who cannot afford private housing.

The present study focuses on gardening plots, that is, smaller allotment areas organized through gardening associations with a relatively low membership fee, described as inclusive for anyone living in urban areas to join. In Gothenburg, urban gardening in municipality-owned areas is a popular activity supported and promoted by institutional actors such as the municipality, the Swedish Union of Tenants, the Swedish Church, and public housing associations (Averdal, 2014). Many current gardening activities in the Gothenburg Municipality

were initiated as part of the city's general investment in organic gardening, that is, top-down. However, the city of Gothenburg has for decades been affected by gentrification and segregation (e.g. Hertting *et al.*, 2021). Therefore, it can be assumed that the location of the allotments in Gothenburg plays a major role in shaping the organisational context, and therefore also shape the social connections developed through these gardening activities. As argued herein, the socio-spatial location creates different visions, needs and participation patterns.

In Gothenburg, the Million Programme (Swedish: *Millionprogrammet*) was introduced in the 1960s to supply attractive, affordable housing opportunities for the influx of inhabitants into urban areas. However, the apartment buildings produced through the programme need comprehensive renovation. A lack of investment in rental housing and the subsequent decline in production caused an emerging phase of "gentrification through renoviction" (Thörn and Thörn, 2017, p. 294). This development thereafter shaped the urban and suburban areas. Meanwhile, Gothenburg has worked hard to brand itself an "event city" by attracting capital and tourism on a par with the capital, Stockholm (Hertting *et al.*, 2021). Entrepreneurial governance began in the early 1990s, when the Ministry of Housing was abolished, and the subsequent re-regulation of the public housing market led to marketization and increased privatization. Consequently, an increasing number of people were evicted from municipal housing, causing a surge in homelessness (Thörn, 2011). Since then, housing construction has not kept pace with ongoing population growth, and Gothenburg has a lower urban construction rate of municipally owned housing companies than Malmö or Stockholm (Grander, 2020). Over the past decade, many campaigns have focused on ways to transform public urban spaces into a "common living room", where people should feel "at home" and take responsibility for keeping the city clean. These campaigns, advertised all over Gothenburg, portrayed only white middle-class people wearing expensive clothes (Thörn, 2011, p. 996). The campaigns could be seen as an indication of the kind of "home" that was being shaped and for whom.

This segregation is echoed in the Gothenburg area's urban gardening strategy. The strategy was initiated in 2012 to encourage various gardening activities and address discrepancies in residents' opportunities to practise an environmentally friendly lifestyle. At the time, the municipality actively promoted gardening in urban areas to disseminate information on organic gardening and biodiversity to new groups of people interested in gardening (Averdal, 2014). According to a civil servant working at that time, a rather vague political commitment was formulated as follows: "to start developing and encouraging urban gardening" among citizens. This directive came with funding, but "practical implementation of the directive was yet to be developed" (a quote from a civil servant employed at the Real Estate Office). The "Gardening in the City" project (Swedish: *Stadsnära odling*) was introduced, and two permanent officials from the Real Estate Office were charged with identifying and recruiting active inhabitants interested in gardening in urban areas. Gardeners seeking the right to garden and council funding had to organize themselves as members of a gardening association with a membership fee and specific rules for members to follow (Averdal, 2014). Thus, unlike many other large municipalities in Sweden at the time of the study (e.g. Stockholm, see Bonow and Normark, 2018), urban gardening in Gothenburg was not a temporary activity largely reliant on informal advocacy but rather formed part of the city's ordinary activities, given institutional actors' great political interest in that matter. Nevertheless, owing to the city's segregated urban patterns (Thörn and Thörn, 2017), organizational conditions such as the capacity for resource mobilization vary extensively depending on socio-spatial location.

Conceptual framework

This analysis of four gardening associations draws on the concept of social sustainability to explore the social conditions for collaboration across social divides in various gardening

practices. The article uses relational theories to understand the collaboration patterns in these urban gardening settings and their relationship with socio-spatial location and segregation.

Since the 1980s, the idea of "sustainable development" has been characterized by conflicting views on achieving sustainability and what needs to be sustained (e.g. by and for whom). Along these lines, Agyeman (2013) developed the concept of *just sustainabilities*, acknowledging that sustainability is not only about environmental practices and access to and preservation of green areas, but is also about socially sustainable societies. The plural form "sustainabilities" acknowledges that the concept has a relative, place-bound nature that cannot be universalized. To achieve a sustainable environment for everyone, environmental sustainability must be acknowledged as a social practice, so it cannot be separated from social sustainability. Through its direct and indirect effects on the environment, collective learning and social inclusion, urban gardening has been recognized as a potential contributor to social and ecological sustainability (Bergame, 2023; Bonow and Normark, 2018; Certomà and Giaccaria, 2023; Morrow, 2019). Nevertheless, despite a growing interest in urban gardening as a sustainability initiative at the institutional level, implementation often includes non-sustainable practices and contradictory moments (see McClintock, 2014; Bergame, 2023). Therefore, it is important to focus on events on the ground – the social conditions within local urban gardening projects in different socio-spatial settings.

Urban gardening provides a context where people from different backgrounds, who do not usually meet, can collaborate while interacting for a common purpose (Amin, 2002). However, as shown in a study in a Norwegian urban context, people did not join gardening associations primarily to socialize and make social contacts; these only became important later when they developed social ties and started caring about each other (Nordh *et al.*, 2016). Despite emerging social contacts, conflicts may still occur: Aptekar (2015) identified conflicts between gardeners' visions; for example, gardeners may see themselves as owners of the plot and thus turn the area into *private property*, contradicting other visions of turning the area into a more open, green, and accessible *community space*. Other gardeners had clearer visions about converting the area into a *farm* for local and internal food production, so that protecting the area from trespassers became important. The latter vision was often held by young middle-class people interested in food justice and transitionary lifestyles. Even if gardeners with opposing visions developed close contacts and enduring relationships, middle-class gardeners had more success garnering support from institutional actors to achieve their visions (Aptekar, 2015). Thus, conflicting visions between groups in a segregated city may make one group more likely to achieve its visions than others.

However, when people with opposing visions do not need to meet, the social dimension of sustainability practice becomes exclusionary. Similarly, Lamont (2018, p. 434) discussed a moral dilemma in contemporary Western democracies/public spheres related to the "silo" mentality (or "recognition gap"), where people mainly gather in groups with shared values and visions, with social media encouraging such socially divided encounters. A potential concentration of like-minded people in public gardens, which are supposed to be accessible to everyone, could produce a "silo" mentality, an act and mindset that negatively affects people's ability to communicate across axiological divides. Despite social policy efforts to include socially marginalized citizens in urban planning strategies, those citizens may still be excluded because myths of national sameness based on "productiveness and cultural homogeneity" often influence how the city is formed, planned, and organized (Jensen and Söderberg, 2022). Clearly, such patterns are not consistent with Agyeman's (2013) idea of just sustainabilities and the development of socially sustainable societies.

A relational approach to marginalization requires focusing on the shared meanings of urban places – meanings that "facilitate social interaction rather than laying out verifiable facts about individual lives" (Tilly, 1998, p. 498). Thus, this paper argues that the

organization of city life is connected to institutional interactions between welfare systems (in this case, municipalities) and citizens, as well as to the less formal relations shaping patterns of marginalization and social networks. Socially sustainable societies require local meeting places where differences are bridged, and trust and community are built. Social sustainability is thus linked to democracy in that cohesion, cooperation, reciprocity, and widespread participation in decision-making processes are considered to build social capital (Bridger and Luloff, 2001; Morrow, 2019), connecting social networks and contacts beyond family and friends. At a time when our lives increasingly take place digitally, or through social media, it can feel quite easy to maintain direct social contacts. Yet, such contacts may not facilitate actual cooperation between people (Sennett, 2013). To understand urban gardening as a relational practice, this article examines informal gardening practices in formal gardening associations and local patterns of urban segregation. Ethnographic approaches to studying everyday life in the city provide possibilities for exploring informal organizational practices, collaborations, understandings, and relations as social capacity-building processes in different socio-spatial locations.

Fieldwork and methodology

This article draws on organizational ethnographic fieldwork conducted in four local gardening associations in the Gothenburg area. The research includes a triangulation of research methods; expert interviews (with municipal stakeholders responsible for public gardening activities), ethnographic walks and informal interviews combined with research diaries after participatory fieldwork at the gardening areas (along with Kostera and Harding, 2021). The objective was to provide a spatial perspective on associational gardening activities with a low entry fee. These activities highlight the uneven opportunities in segregated cities due to factors such as class, "race", and age (Pauwels, 2023).

As fieldwork was conducted in a particular organizational place/space, gaining access to participate was crucial (Kostera and Harding, 2021). The four projects were chosen after initial fieldwork, during which all existing associational gardening activities under the municipal project initiated in 2012 were mapped. This was done in close dialogue with active members who invited us to participate in official gardening events, prioritizing embodied practice and empathetic engagement with gardeners' material and social world (Calvey, 2021). To get a contextual understanding of the events and practices taking place there, we also observed ongoing conversations within associational Facebook-groups. Participation in gardening allowed for a sensory experience of the activities taking place in the gardening areas, beyond just seeing and hearing. This multisensory ethnography provided an opportunity to include not only what was outspoken but also the organizational silences, noises, and smoothness (e.g. Pauwels, 2023) often present in the gardening environments. Additionally, we conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with gardening association members, with four to nine members of each association.

The fieldwork and interviews focused on members' motives, expectations, and experiences of gardening in their respective associations and locations. They also explored members' views on the association, social activities, communication, cooperation, division of responsibilities, and potential challenges. These insights became particularly evident due to the comparative potential of conducting organizational ethnography in different gardening environments simultaneously.

The associational fieldwork was conducted separately or jointly by two project members (x1 and x2) in close dialogue during analysis; however, x1 conducted most interviews and fieldwork. All four associations garden on municipality-owned land, often for an indefinite period. We have anonymized the associations and classified them (1) according to their socio-spatial position in the segregated city of Gothenburg, and (2) according to the people

constituting the associations (*Mixed-class City*, *Multicultural Low-income Suburb* (*MLS*), *White Middle-class City* (*WMC*), *Multicultural Middle-class Suburb* (*MMS*)). The term "Multicultural" refers to the multi-ethnic representation in these suburban environments, as well as among participants (Dahlstedt, 2005).

Most field visits and interviews occurred during the 2021/2022 gardening season (April–November). Thus, fieldwork occurred both during and after Covid-19 restrictions. It included 25–35 h (approx. three hours at the time) of active and informal participation in gardening during the official allotment workdays throughout the season (usually on weekends) and attendance at some internal meetings, for example, with special interest groups/subgroups and public meetings for recruiting potential members. Most meetings were held at the allotments, on nearby premises or digitally via Microsoft Teams. In addition, we also attended social gatherings and activities beyond gardening held at one of the allotment areas (*MLS*).

The Swedish Ethical Review Authority approved the organizational and personal data management. Consent to conduct participatory observations was obtained through oral and written presentations of the study at annual meetings in 2021 and at each location. All interviewees provided written informed consent to the conditions for participation. In most cases, the interviews took place in the gardening area, but owing to COVID-19 restrictions and rainy weather, some interviews were conducted digitally via Zoom. All interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min. Interviews conducted in the gardening area often continued after recording, and these informal conversations combined with gardening work and/or walks were described retrospectively in the interviewer's field notes. Finally, several informal interviews were conducted with members of the four gardening associations, all were summarized in detailed field notes and memos. Quotes from interview transcripts and field notes were translated from Swedish to English, except for three interviews conducted in English. All interview transcripts include minor corrections to improve readability and maintain anonymity. Data analysis was iterative. Fieldnotes, memos and transcripts were re-read, along with an abductive two-stage theoretical coding practice. The comprehensive analysis aims to understand the reasons and mechanisms behind the aspirations for a green living room in all four gardening associations. It examines the circumstances under which these patterns arise and, more specifically, their implications, such as who was invited to these gardens and who utilized them. The empirical analysis identified two gardening associations where social collaboration emerged *within* the local gardening environment, whereas in two other associations it emerged *beyond* the local context. This division corresponds to differences between the associations regarding members' social class. Therefore, the analysis presents two comparable associations in each section.

Collaboration beyond the local area

To begin with, the analysis focuses on the two more harmonized middle-class settings, where members' visions of the area were quite similar. Here, gardening was often performed for symbolic reasons, hence not for the actual area of living in the first place.

Becoming self-sufficient: Multicultural Middle-class Suburb (MMS)

The first garden was initiated in an outer suburb, rather isolated from neighbours and passers-by. Even if the area is outside Gothenburg city limits, most members live in Gothenburg Municipality and thus must commute to this dynamic location where people grow and harvest organic food collectively. In *MMS*, many members garden as a form of green rehabilitation instead of going to a gym or engaging in other physical activities. Gardening and harvesting provide physical and psychological well-being, in addition to

opportunities to socialize by (to quote a member) "imitating others' gardening practices". The lunch breaks were often described as important; members gathered and socialized at lunch, chatting about gardening practices and sharing knowledge and experiences. Informal practices and gardening and harvesting know-how are also shared during these lunch breaks.

It is worth noting that the informal, dynamic, and transparent mode of organizing the gardening work did not feel transparent for all members owing to their lack of proficiency in Swedish. Consequently, there seems to be a threshold to understanding the conditions of their activities, that is, how things turn out the way they do. Socializing through gardening is important for making visible routines and practices, but COVID-19 restrictions and the infection risk prevented people from coming on weekends as frequently as previously. Therefore, their gardening became lonelier as members came during the week instead of participating in official workdays. In the gardening area, some members socialized and sought contact, while others were more introverted and mainly focused on the practical side of gardening. Nonetheless, members' shared interests in common visions about farming for improved global sustainability through self-sufficiency were often cited to explain why conflicts rarely occur. Moreover, even if many members emphasized the importance of socializing during gardening at *MMS*, they still underlined that socializing and making new friends was *not* their main reason for joining and remaining. Rather, socializing and meeting other members came naturally. In contrast to other parts of society, it was expressed as "a bonus":

> It's the gardening work; that's the main reason why you come here. Even if the social part is important, you seldom come here to meet someone. The social part comes with it automatically. I think this is quite a pleasant way to spend time with others; it's quite natural compared with sending text messages to people as you do otherwise. You just need to go to a place where you want to be, and there are people who also want to be there. (Member 1, *MMS*)

The ongoing trend of growing and harvesting in urban areas has resulted in a larger mix of gardeners with more varied gardening experiences and competencies than was the case several years ago, when all members were "highly educated lifestyle gardeners with a great deal of previous gardening experience" (Member 6, *MMS*). Therefore, the threshold competencies for becoming a member have been lowered. Nevertheless, as one member stated, "Most of us have a convenient and comfortable job; we share the same educational background, and we think alike. All of us vote for the Green Party" (Member 7, *MMS*). Moreover, according to another active gardener, the increased number of members from the Spanish-speaking community is understandable. The association attracts members via social media or through "friends of friends". Thus, recruiting new members of *MMS* is a relational practice among inhabitants with shared visions about the urban area, facilitating social interaction, informal communication, and cooperation.

Imagining a new green world: White Middle-Class City (WMC)

The second urban gardening association studied is a centrally located and segregated white middle-class area where many previously rented houses have been turned into privately owned buildings and communities. The area is tidy and well taken care of. The allotment association was founded in 2012 because of the city's emphasis on supporting gardening activities (Averdal, 2014), which were promoted in this area owing to the vast number of residents interested in developing ecological lifestyles and food resilience individually. The shared allotment area at *WMC* is surrounded by tenant-owned apartments, even if the general area includes popular rental housing facilities with long waiting lists. Moreover, one clear difference from *MMS* is that most members live locally, within several hundred metres of the gardening plots:

> I believe that if it were further away, I couldn't have walked or biked there; if it had been on the other side of town, I simply wouldn't have joined. But in this case, it also felt special that it was so close . . . it was part of my local area. (Member 2, *WMC*)

At *WMC*, members often mentioned their food production as the main reason for joining the association, as eating healthier and more locally produced food was seen as a step toward a greener and more sustainable world. However, their interest in a new, greener world was not primarily connected to local sustainability practices; their frustration with social inequalities was more connected to a wider and global perspective. Many members of *WMC* reported feeling very privileged, saying they did not want to live in their own "bubble" without contributing to change. Instead, gardening at *WMC* was a way to connect to more grounded ways of life from which they felt alienated because of their work and/or urban residential area. In informal talks with members, it was clear that most enjoyed gardening as a *symbolic practice*, rather than a practice for self-sufficiency. After one interview, one member spoke more freely about her job as a civil servant at one of the larger governmental authorities. She stated that her involvement with the *WMC* community was an important connection to society. She claimed that without her engagement outside of work, she would "vanish totally": "Through her commitment to the global South, for example, as a board member in an international civil society organization, she gets a feeling of belonging and connection with people who live in a less privileged part of the world (i.e. the global South)" (*WMC* field note, Sept. 21).

Given the members' perceived privilege, local food production did not seem important for its own sake but more symbolically for people in other parts of the world. As another member stated, "Gardening for my food self-provision is not important for me personally but on a global scale . . . it's an extremely important thing. We eat and get fat while others are starving. It's disgraceful" (Member 4, *WMC*). Thus, *WMC* members expressed a more global perspective on sustainability practices.

In *WMC*, most members were native Swedes interested in growing organic food and meeting other people from similar backgrounds. Board members even emphasized that "in order not to lose new members, we recommend that you search within your networks. It's easier to attract members who want to be collectively engaged and participate if one of us already knows them" (*WMC* field note, Oct. 21). In this way, *WMC* actively sought new members but also stipulated who these members should be (i.e. people who are "like us"). In addition, members who "do their own thing" (or act selfishly) without integrating their practices into "the collective understanding" seemed to be perceived as a problem for the *WMC* association. Thus, members who did not act and think alike were expected to feel this difference and leave of their own accord. Even though everyone who wanted to join was officially welcomed, members needed to adapt to the implicit norms and practices.

Collaborating via informal norms and practices

There were many similarities between *MMS* and *WMC*, not only because they organize the gardening area and harvest similarly but also because their members are highly educated, most having academic degrees. Thus, even if *MMS* may be considered a mixed social setting in terms of its members' places of residence, country of birth and age, members still seemed to be highly educated and aware of the democratic principles involved in the shared and consensual approach to organizing activities that was unique to *MMS*. Furthermore, even if all members of *WMC* shared responsibility for gardening and harvesting, they still arranged their activities in a rather conventional way with a governing board that makes all decisions formally and instructs members on matters such as *how*, *when and what* to harvest. In contrast, *MMS* perceived harvesting as self-regulated and informal; many members

harvested frequently at *MMS*, and the problems raised in meetings were rarely connected to harvesting principles.

The situation at *MMS* was quite different from that at *WMC*, where members live nearby and can easily visit and harvest. Nonetheless, the board and (to quote a member) "the core members of three to four individuals" of *WMC* expressed frustration over the lack of harvesting activity; members seemed afraid of harvesting too much. Instead, much of the food production from *WMC* was discarded or poached by passers-by, and most members seemed to receive only a small amount of their food supply from their *WMC* allotments. Even if board members tell *WMC* members to harvest much more, they dare not, and many crops need to be discarded.

In summary, both *MMS* and *WMC* represent informal norms concerning behaviour connected to members' similar reasons for joining and remaining, either for farming and food supply (*MMS*) or to connect to a more general vision of global sustainability practices beyond a local commitment, in this case, making their food supply secondary. Instead, gardening activities provide a refuge from anxiety over environmental problems and global inequality (*WMC*, see also Langa, 2020), albeit with the effect of creating a green living room exclusively for members. In *MLS*, members had a culturally heterogenic background, and this seem to facilitate unintentional encounters through immaterial practices of care for the garden. In more culturally homogenic *WMC*, members were more left to themselves, and thus connected more with the "global south" than actual people nearby. In the other two gardening associations studied, *MLS* and *Mixed-class City*, gardening visions are more closely connected to the local area of living.

Collaboration within the local area

The analysis now focusses on the two settings where members had different views on responsibility and access to the urban gardening area. Here, visions were addressed more locally; members wanted to create something different in the local environment.

Nature and greenery for the local community: Multicultural Low-income Suburb (MLS)

In 2012, the *MLS* gardening association emerged, slightly further from the city centre. According to Boverket's Segregation Statistics, this area is classified as an "area with great socio-economic challenges" (Boverket, 2023). Accordingly, members of *MLS* had lower income levels than those in the other areas studied. Furthermore, the area was often described in local and national media as a poor suburb facing numerous social challenges, reflecting the social conflicts emerging in the city. Class-based and racialized urban divisions were caused by school segregation (Sernhede *et al.*, 2016) or a lack of organizational support and premises for civil society organizations in such areas. These patterns positioned the district among those with less access to institutional resources than more affluent areas.

In *MLS*, allotments were located among tall apartment buildings and other tenanted housing, and the small allotment oasis with tall trees and surrounding greenery stood out from the concrete. Visitors were welcomed by a sign informing them of the right to public access, meaning everyone could pick berries and fruits. Everyone's right to green spaces is one of the main reasons Swedish-speaking members committed to gardening there. When the *MLS* gardening association was initiated ten years ago by activists from local civil society organizations (such as the Swedish Church and library associations), they aimed to create a safer community and a more attractive environment by turning this "abandoned" green area into an open green living room for local inhabitants. The idea was to provide a place where locals could meet "across generations, cultures, religions and ethnicities to prevent local children from joining criminal gangs" (Member 1, *MLS*). These "driven" members wanted to

feel proud of their area despite school segregation and the inhabitants' wish to relocate to other neighbourhoods.

Given the area's many challenges, many members wanted to reduce the vulnerability of local community members rather than produce locally grown organic food. The more active members prioritized reducing the costs of individual allotments by seeking financial solutions and applying for funding, receiving free manure or benches from the municipality. This work seems to pay off. During our fieldwork, we found that gardeners had highly varied backgrounds and there was great interest from people who wanted one of the allotments in the area. However, unlike many gardening associations in more privileged areas of Gothenburg, there seemed to be neither a functioning wait-listing system nor transparency regarding access to available allotments. As one member explained, "It's a bit of first come, first served; there is no waiting list system. You must be on your toes" (Member 4, *MLS*). A few of the non-Swedish-speaking members expressed that they would move away from the area if they could, reflecting the existing difficulties for people with irregular income to "choose" their residential area (Bengtsson and Grander, 2023). As many people moved in and out, the non-functioning queuing system seemed to be less of a problem.

Because allotment areas seldom became officially available to new members, a small allotment area available "to everyone" was introduced. Moreover, a joint workshop was organized where "new and old" members could construct "their own" gardening boxes at a very low cost. Fruit bushes surrounding the allotment area were planted to "give the local children something to enjoy and eat from, so they don't start harvesting from the rest of the area inside the berry bush hedge" (*MLS* field notes, Jun. 21). Some, however, felt frustrated when members of the public harvested and ate from the "private allotments that members pay for themselves" (*MLS* field notes, Jul. 21) situated inside the hedge. Nonetheless, there is a fair degree of acceptance and understanding of why forbidden fruit picking occurs: "Many residents are quite poor, and I believe many who come here and harvest our crops don't have access to food. You must take that into account" (Member 5, *MLS*). In addition, it was reported that local inhabitants might be unaware that the gardening area was "exclusively for members of *MLS*" (Member 7, *MLS*), given the sign indicating the right to public access and the gardening being conducted on municipality-owned land.

As *MLS* members stated, very few residents had access to their own gardens, and there were few public areas such as playgrounds. Therefore, it is understandable that active civil society associations thought it important to create common green areas and increase gardening opportunities for local inhabitants. Given the poverty of many community members, some gardeners in *MLS* saw gardening as a way of obtaining *cheap* food instead and were less interested in becoming involved in a shared garden where people could meet and socialize. Nonetheless, the outcome defied expectations. Because the allotments were quite small, the harvests were sparse, and theft of crops was common.

Sorting and cleaning the locality: Mixed-class City

While the three gardening spaces discussed above were initiated based on existing activities and local interest, the municipality initiated the fourth gardening association from above. Members of *Mixed-class City* were white Swedes with a diverse class background living close to the allotment area, owing to the cheap and attractive public housing available locally. Officials had identified problems with homeless people "taking over" an attractive city centre area frequently visited by tourists, which was protected and delimited. To attract members interested in urban gardening, officials published an advertisement in the local district's newspaper in the spring of 2012. This strategy was intended to create a safe area by preventing drug dealers, guerrilla gardeners and homeless people from spending time there.

With the assistance of civil servants, residents with previous civil society experience wrote association statutes permitting them to establish gardening boxes paid for by the municipality and erected by municipal employees. However, the rather controlled form of gardening activity supported initially by the municipality and maintained by a formal gardening association led to the diffusion of responsibility. Ten years after *Mixed-class City* was founded, responsibility for and maintenance of the whole area was mostly in the hands of its board members, as members were mostly interested in maintaining their own boxes, growing, and harvesting independently.

Despite the association's strict participation rules, members often reported spending little time at *Mixed-class City*. During informal talks, many members said their initial reason for joining the association was to create "a green living room where I can bring my coffee on Saturdays, read my newspaper, and socialize with my neighbours" (*Mixed-class City* field notes, Jun. 22). Generally, members usually went there when they had to, either for mandatory workdays when attendance was noted down or to water and maintain their own gardening box. People who seemed to spend time there were mostly members of the public, and several members felt it was terrible that the area had become a leisure centre for youths who left their rubbish behind (beer cans or joint stubs). As many members lived across the street, they watched the allotment area from their apartment windows. Instead of confronting the loitering youth, they frequently reported bad behaviour to officials. The members believe "they [the municipality] ought to act and do something about the situation in the area" (Member 3, *Mixed-class City*). Thus, despite the presence of the *Mixed-class City* gardening association, which was formed initially to create a safe green area, the "problem" with drug dealers was not reduced. On the contrary, the area became even more popular with local people besides the association members, partly because the area became more enjoyable owing to the allotments. This development further concerns the question of access and social responsibility in and for the area and the local population: who was invited to the area, and who was using it? We address these implications below.

Contrasting views on responsibility and access: MLS and Mixed-class City

Even though everyone has the right to access these municipal gardening areas, members felt different perceived levels of responsibility for the area and the local community. Therefore, the COVID-19 restrictions shaped and changed the local gardening areas differently. Members of *Mixed-class City* visited the gardening area less often than before because the association's strict interpretation of social distancing prevented members from socializing at their annual meetings and on official workdays. The strict restrictions implemented at *Mixed-class City* were often motivated by some members being retired and thus part of a high-risk group. In *MLS*, members instead continued meeting each other; the board members even arranged barbeques and social activities to which members and non-members of all ages were invited. Thus, both gardening areas were frequented by members of the public during and after COVID-19 restrictions, but received a mixed reception.

When indoor meeting places such as local cafes and libraries were shut down during the pandemic, the *MLS* gardening area became an open-air meeting space for locals. An effort was made to maintain social distance, but no formal restrictions were imposed on the number of participants. Nevertheless, this form of inclusion and popularity had consequences: "One challenge is that this is a public place ... if people hang out here some rubbish remains" (Member 2, *MLS*). Despite the increase in rubbish, members were pleased with how popular the area had become, providing a platform for people with nowhere else to go. In *Mixed-class City*, a similar pattern of increased numbers of non-member visitors was seen under COVID-19 restrictions, yet with rather different reactions from members: "I often write an email to the park and nature department when I see ... now there are clothes and furniture, party

tents that people have slept in. Someone built a hut. [. . .]. I do not want random people roaming around here so that the area feels unsafe" (Member 2, *Mixed-class City*). Moreover, members of *Mixed-class City* started to move away benches and tables that were installed near the allotments as they "did not want to invite the general public to hang around in the area" (*Mixed-class City*, field note Sept. 22).

Thus, in both *MLS* and *Mixed-class City*, rubbish is frequently encountered in the gardening areas, but members' reactions clearly differed. *MLS* and *Mixed-class City* members perceive their responsibilities for their areas differently, and they have different ideas about who has access. In *Mixed-class City*, members assume no collective responsibility for the area and nor for youths living in the district. Instead, the municipality is held responsible for maintenance. In contrast, *MLS* members underline the importance of equal access to forest and nature regardless of socio-economic status. Thus, even if the *MLS* area seems to be more affected by local inhabitants' littering and a lack of alternative green environments, they express a greater tolerance for public visitors than do members of *Mixed-class City*: In *MLS*, the gardening area evolved into an inclusive green living room that catered to a diverse group of residents, not just the gardeners themselves. This open, informal, and inclusive urban space was deemed to have significant social value, particularly during the COVID restrictions.

The social conditions for sustainability practices

The organizational ethnographic fieldwork revealed associational patterns that were not obvious at first sight and captured practices beyond the explicit intentions described in interviews. By focusing on informal, relational practices within the four gardening environments as well as the local context where the relations are situated, we could examine what contributes to social sustainability, how it can be achieved and how we can define it. We know that socially sustainable societies require local meeting places where differences are bridged, and trust and community are built through collaboration. Table 1 shows the connection between the local gardening environment, the gardeners' expressed visions and their forms of collaborations.

As shown, a culturally homogeneous setting (*MMS* and *WMC*) facilitates informal practices and social collaboration. Nevertheless, informal expectations may generate conflicts and perceived misbehaviour, which were more explicit in *WMC* where the gardening practices included explicit know-how, such as how and what to harvest. However, compared with *WMC*, *MMS* members tended to socialize unintentionally (as described by Nordh *et al.*, 2016), to some extent combining environmental intentions with social collaboration across divides. That is, people connected who would otherwise probably not meet intentionally (e.g. through common social networks) in the local area. The patterns suggest that the urban context plays a significant role in the development of socially sustainable practices. Gardening, for instance, may foster interactions that transcend perceived notions of belonging (e.g. Tilly, 2005) within the urban area, at least in multicultural settings.

Thus, gardens allow members to practise an environmental lifestyle, for example, by eating locally produced organic food. Nevertheless, even if food is often the stated motive for being there, social capacity-building processes are still to be seen as important for attaining environmental sustainability practices. However, unlike the unpredictability and mystery in gardening (owing to uncertainties about the soil, yields, weather conditions, etc.), social interactions often reproduce cultural homogeneity, which reflects urban segregation. Yet, the quiet forms of gardening – the digging, planting or other activities – may be a good combination to achieve unintentional (and unexpected) practices beyond the reproduction of silos (cf. Lamont, 2018). Such practices go beyond formal organization, associational statutes,

	Location	Visions	Collaboration
Multicultural Middle-class Suburb (MMS)	A rather isolated area in the outer suburb	Gardening for the wider society and food self-provision	Creating a class-based exclusive green living room; socializing becomes a bonus among like-minded people across cultural backgrounds
White Middle-Class Area (WMC)	Centrally located, segregated and white middle-class area. Many passers-by	Gardening for the wider society by imagining a greener world	Providing a refuge from anxiety about global problems. An exclusive green living room for people with similar class and cultural background
Multicultural Low-income Suburb (MLS)	A densely populated area, many low-income inhabitants with diverse "ethnic" backgrounds. Many passers-by	Greenery for the local community	Open to anyone, primary focus on community-building. An inclusive green living room, a "bonus-area" for local inhabitants across cultural backgrounds
Mixed-class City	Centrally located, considered an attractive, yet rather hidden area	A small green living room in the local area	Creating a clean, safe and exclusive area in the local neighbourhood for people with similar age and cultural background. Reporting and managing people who misbehave

Source(s): Authors own work

Table 1. Socio-spatial location, visions, and collaboration within four urban gardening associations

or formal expectations. They include direct action in the local environment, beyond the symbolic act of gardening for global sustainability.

Gardening practices thus symbolized the act of care for nature and the environment in general (*MMS* and *WMC*) or for the local area and its neighbours (*MLS* and *Mixed-class City*). In *MLS*, the local gardening practices created a common, attractive, green space; it brought more nature and greenery to the local community, so members had a high tolerance for people's different interests, activities, and preferences. Therefore, gardening there became a fuzzier activity, enabled by the local inhabitants' more relaxed approach to what and how (means and measures) gardening was organized, not taking the area or the act for granted. Thus, the gardening area became a bonus for *MLS* members, providing an inclusive green living room open to anyone in an area where nature and greenness has not really been taken care for, neither by the municipality nor by the residents. Moreover, the pragmatic interpretation of the COVID-19 restrictions in *MLS* helped gardeners and residents to interact and create inclusive green living rooms, something that was of particular importance in areas where few residents had access to their own garden.

Many gardening members described a search for green urban areas where they could feel at home and connect with nature. Such visions connect to environmental sustainability – a search for greenness, nature, and improved well-being. However, even these gardening activities should be seen as relational practices underlining the significance of shared meanings that may facilitate social interaction and collaboration. Some green living rooms created by the four gardening associations were more exclusive than others, reflecting how socio-spatial segregation shapes relational practices among members and the nearby community (forming part of a green gentrification process; see also Goossens *et al.*, 2020). Consistent with Aptekar (2015), more privileged areas included many well-educated Swedish-born members more adept at mobilizing institutional resources for their gardening

association, whereas less privileged areas relied less on municipal officials. Thus, despite the municipality's general investment in promoting ecological gardening to new groups of interested people, great differences existed between the functions and social conditions of urban gardening across social divisions such as social class. Therefore, creating meeting places across social divides in segregated cities remains a challenge; even gardening associations, with their potential to bridge differences in social capacity, reproduce similarity and existing patterns of inequality.

Conclusion

The present article aimed to explore how social relations and collaboration were formed in four different socio-spatial urban gardening settings and to provide a broader understanding of how social sustainability was shaped in practice. Empirically, the article focuses on the everyday life of urban citizens in several areas connected to their gardening practices, that is, people's activities on the ground, and connects such bottom-up activities to top-down planning and broader socio-economic processes. Hence, this context-sensitive ethnographic research of events goes beyond statements about members' intentions gathered in interviews. Interviewees might not address unintended practices and taken-for-granted behaviours as valuable (or appropriate) information, which shows why such multisensory ethnographies are important. Through organizational ethnography in four gardening associations in different areas of Gothenburg, the study contextualizes and distinguishes what enables and discourages collaboration across social divides, particularly ways to overcome the effects of stratification that have characterized life in the city in recent decades. By highlighting the value of immaterial practices of care in the built urban environment, the article expands Agyeman's (2013) discussion on sustainability as a question of social division, i.e. who "sustainability" may benefit. Immaterial practices of care through collective gardening provide a possibility to combine social and environmental sustainability: Urban gardening may generate social sustainability through the act of care for each other in the built, densely populated urban environment, but also environmental sustainability through the upkeep of green spaces in urban areas. Thus, the symbolic act of gardening, with the potential bonus of socializing, exemplify an important social dimension of sustainability. Meanwhile, gardening to create a green bonus area for the local community, a *public* green living room, can be seen as an environmental sustainability practice. What unites these practices is that the gardeners' actions go beyond direct intentions; that the development of socially sustainable societies may be tied to the value of unexpected practices and encounters beyond silos. Hence, in contrast to Agyeman (2013), there may be universal lessons to be learned in creating an environmental that is sustainable for all.

As shown, physical work, gestures, and practices are important for informal social relations and embodied practices to emerge. Therefore, silos need not to be seen as a prerequisite for fostering cooperation or facilitating genuine interactions (see also Sennett, 2013). However, different (gardening) visions, needs and patterns of participation are often connected to the local people and their social reality. For example, gardening can be viewed as a symbolic act to achieve *global* sustainability via social *exclusion* in the local area or create safe spaces by ousting unwanted local inhabitants and thus reinforcing cultural homogeneity in the urban area. While it is true that the introduction of more green spaces can enhance the aesthetic appeal of neglected areas, the characterization of these spaces as "living rooms" underlines the residents' longing for urban nature and greenery. It suggests that people want these areas to be safe and conducive to social interaction.

To turn public green spaces into a shared responsibility transcending socio-spatial segregation, we must focus on meaning-making and collective stories that are practised and maintained within these urban green spaces. The present study provides a point in direction,

but more playful, multisensory fieldwork must explore how people interact informally and share diverse stories and requirements, not only in formal associational engagement because such encounters tend to reproduce cultural similarities. Besides providing a material beauty through the emergence of flowers and crops, attention should be directed to the informal work and relationships that can evolve from activities such as digging and planting in urban areas. These activities can be seen as immaterial practices of care, for each other but also for the upkeep of green spaces in the built urban environment. To develop socially sustainable societies, conflicts and divergent views about means and measures cannot be feared, held separate and apart, but should be recognized as an obvious sustainability practice of care and desire to feel at home in the city.

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