



The Urban Orchard

On City Farming & Avant Garden

The ecological crisis requires urban dwellers to rethink current consumption patterns and food production systems. By going beyond the city to the countryside, an increasing number of socially conscious artists have developed creative strategies to move towards a more sustainable urban ecology and retain connections to rural culture. From orchards to shepherd schools, artists and designers in Spain and America have teamed-up with farmers, gardeners, and engineers to close the distance between the ever more accelerated urban life and the slow-paced rural reality.

text ALEXANDER MCSPADDEN

While finding Gondor, Hobbiton, and Rivendell in the heartlands of Don Quixote's Spain may require a stretch of the imagination, the Little Middle Earth project to convert the Sierra Norte (a mountainous region north of Madrid) into a regional theme park has the support of 22 local mayors. The ambitious venture would recreate each of J.R.R. Tolkien's mystical towns in Sierra Norte's existing towns, taking advantage of similarities in the landscape and medieval architecture. The Little Middle Earth plan proposes that the towns adopt Tolkien's names and customs (clothing, professions, festivals, etc.) to produce the same ambience and 'allow visitors to experience the sensations felt by the members of the Fellowship of the Ring in their journey.'

Urban Migration

The outlandish nature of the project speaks to rural Spain's profound economic and cultural crisis. Due to urban migration only 20 percent of the Spanish population remains in the countryside. An elderly population, lack of technological infrastructure, and decline in family farming has led towns to look to tourism as the only possible solution. Independent family farms, the lifeblood of the rural world, have disappeared due to market pres-

Eagle Street Rooftop Farm
at Greenpoint, Brooklyn
Photo © Adam Golfer



Example of Hobbiton in New Zealand from the Little Middle Earth Project for Sierra Norte (top)

Shepherd Project, Fernando García Dory (above)

Matadero art centre, the city's former slaughterhouse, serves as a platform to support agro-ecological initiatives. In line with the philosophy that the strength of artists is working across disciplines to envision alternative futures, the centre launched the Avant Garden project to reactivate and promote urban horticulture. Though the city's principal river was still lined with lettuce patches until a couple decades ago, 'Madrid's residents have lost a basic knowledge of gardening' laments Jose Luis Matias, a gardener in a municipal landscaping company. The city's temperate climate gave rise to the planting of cherry and apricot trees, but few remain in today's metropolis of six million people. As part of Avant Garden, this past February Madrid Matadero brought in the California collective Fallen Fruit to turn their surrounding neighbourhood into an urban

spaces on producers, a long chain of intermediaries, and adverse European Union economic policies.

In response to a global model of food production in which every step has been industrialised, a growing community garden movement as well as the revival of food cooperatives and artisanal organic markets has caught on in Spain. Madrid

orchard by planting 60 fruit trees in public spaces. The collective set up a base camp in the centre and worked with the neighbourhood residents to determine five different types of native fruit trees to be planted and their locations. The Urban Fruit Action promoted local agricultural knowledge and the resurgence of urban fruit trees. Each tree has been adopted by a neighbour who has committed to its care and harvesting. Similar actions in Los Angeles' neighbourhoods have given residents a sense of ownership and belonging to public spaces. Patricia Estevan, a neighbourhood activist and doctor, hopes that the new trees will also spur the habit of eating locally grown fruits and vegetables.

Virtual Pitchfork

An urban garden cared for by the community, next to Matadero, serves as the Avant Garden incubator to develop, test-out, and showcase innovative approaches for converting unused urban spaces into green areas. The project focuses not just on transforming public spaces, but also on private spaces like balconies or private rooftop terraces. In September 2009, Hernani Dias presented her re: farm the city project developed with free software and hardware to design, manage and monitor personal urban gardens. Once the re-farm system is configured on one's computer, an urban farmer can monitor, modify, and manage gardens in a dynamic way, adapting to variations in temperature, humidity and precipitation. Dias' project illustrates creative ways to compensate for a lack of farming knowledge.



Re-Farm, like Urban Fruit Action, proves successful on a micro-scale, but the challenge remains how to scale-up grassroots activities to create a sustainable food system on a citywide scale. The Living Concrete exhibition, organised by Parsons The New School for Design, takes a more expansive approach involving the entire food system from production, distribution, consumption and recycling the residuals. Each of the projects showcased helps people understand their relationship to food. 'Most people do not have any idea where any of the food comes from. Connecting people to the sources of the food changes fundamentally the way people grow and eat,' argues Living Concrete co-curator Nevin Cohen.

The Corbin Hill Farm project illustrates creative ways to connect rural farmers to urban residents. Through an alternative incremental payment model for farm shares, South Bronx residents receive a weekly bag of fresh produce and gradually build up equity to own part of their food provider. The Bronx farm share members now are communicating with their farmers about what is fresh and abundant and what kinds of vegetables that they want to eat. 'The residents' eating habits are changing with the availability of fresh vegetables at a modest cost,' adds Cohen.

Highlighting New York's civic agricultural infrastructure, a Living Concrete web project, Open Garden Network, displays a comprehensive online inventory of vegetable production at the city's 1,200 gardens. The website, currently in beta version, will enable New

Yorkers to find out which vegetables grow at each garden and the amount of production and the individual facilities available. By mapping out the different components of the food system, Living Concrete sketches out a loose framework for a citywide urban agriculture plan.

With a similar collaborative strategy to Open Garden Network, the activist artist Fernando García Dory exploited the Internet to maintain and preserve local growing habits in Spain. Dory's Seed Network project connected small farmers and technicians working on the preservation of local seed varieties with hackers of Free Software. The Seed Network established an online database to facilitate a free exchange of seeds. The virtual seed bank empowers small farmers to codify who is growing what, where and in what type of conditions. The artist served as a catalyst for the cross-pollination of different social groups (small farmers, hackers, and art professionals) whose coordinated efforts led to the protection of endangered seed varieties. Dory's work, like Living Concrete's projects, emphasises the power of different community members working together as points of resistance to the agro-industrial complex.



Edible Schoolyard, P.S. 216 WORK Architecture Company, New York (top)
A project of Alice Waters' Chez Panisse Foundation and PS216 in Brooklyn, which converts an asphalt parking lot in Brooklyn into a lush edible garden where students plant, harvest, prepare and eat food.

Beehaus by Omlet (above)
Specially designed for beekeeping in a garden or rooftop, Beehaus is inspired by the way bees live in the wild.
Photo © Omlet



BacSac (above)
Flexible plant containers made from double-walled geotextile fabric that is 100 per cent recyclable.
Photo © June Komisar/Joe Nasr and BacSac

Vacant Lot grow bag, 2007
by What if: projects Ltd (right, and far right) How might you meet the demand for 'grow-your-own' within dense urban areas where available land is scarce? What-if: projects together with local residents of an inner city housing estate in Shoreditch have come up with a novel solution: Grow your own greens in a bag.
Photo © What if: projects Ltd

Carbon Orchard, by Parsons students Bless Yee and Rachel Nolasco (top, right)
Photo © Martin Seck

Lower East Side Guide to Sustainable Food (below)
Developed by students at The New School, the Lower East Side Guide to Sustainable Food provides a tour of gardens, markets and restaurants on the LES that are part of the fabric of the sustainable food community.
Image © The New School

Art Meets Artisan

The Living Concrete curators, Nevin Cohen and Radhika Subramaniam, and Dory all advocate alternative models for sustainable urbanism, but they come from different perspectives. While the Living Concrete exhibition focuses on design strategies to bring about a more robust urban food system, Dory's work examines the role of artists to bridge the divide between the agrarian and the urban. As the coordinator of the Art and Culture Commission for Plataforma Rural (an alliance of farmer unions, consumer cooperatives, and environmental organisations), Dory sees artists playing a key role in reversing the decline of the rural environ-

ment: 'Artists can combat the stereotype of the rural as something backward, dirty, and obsolete or the romantic view of the countryside as place for holidays. They can show us that with the economic and environmental crisis there are many cultural values and concepts of sustainability we can learn from the rural world.'

Founding a shepherd school in the Asturian mountains, Dory has put young urban dwellers in dialogue with an elderly dying-out shepherd population. Seasoned shepherds provide practical training including flock management, ecology, veterinary care, breeding, and cheese making, among other skills. The shepherd school aims to revitalise the figure of the shepherd and facilitate generational replacement to ensure the profession's survival.

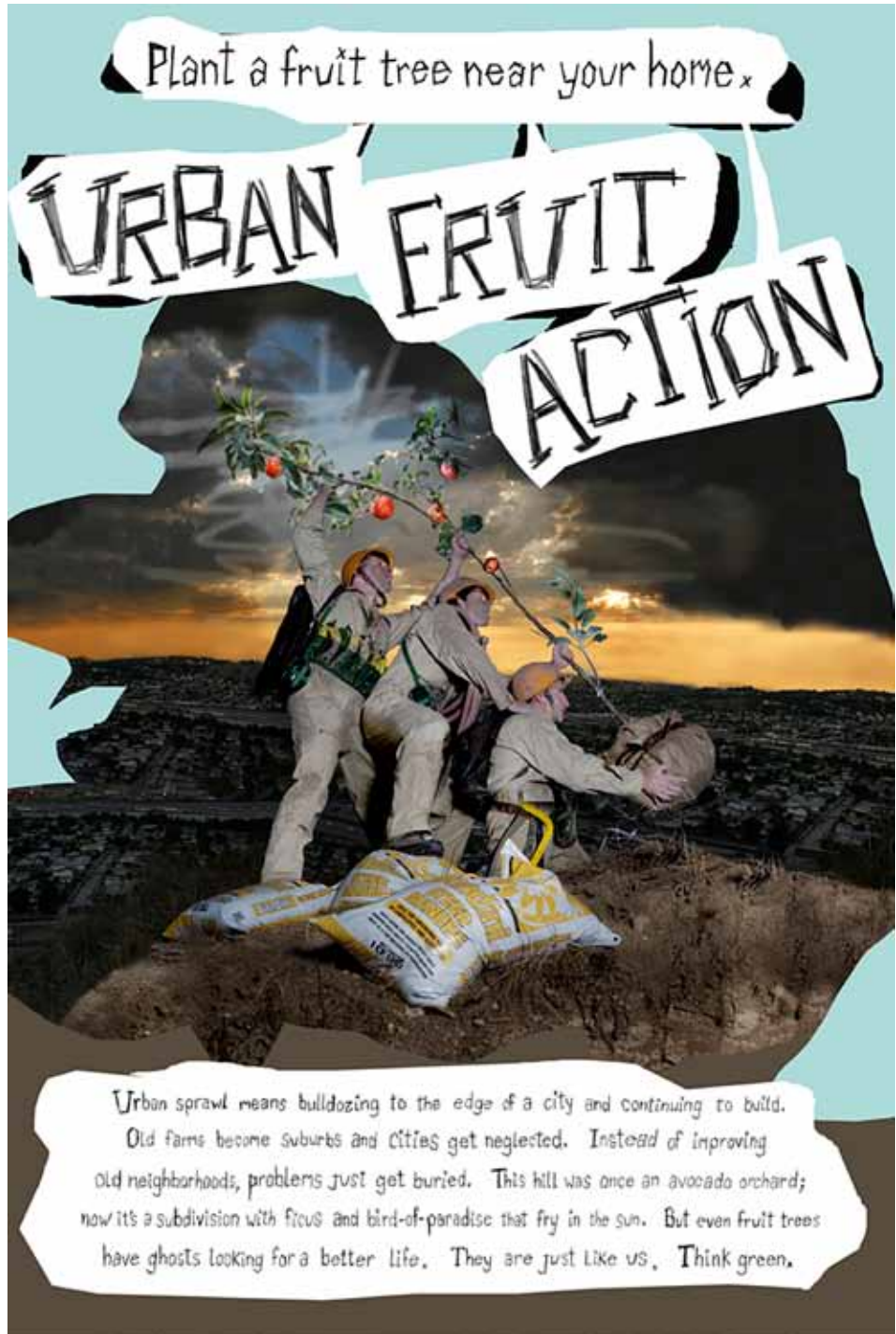
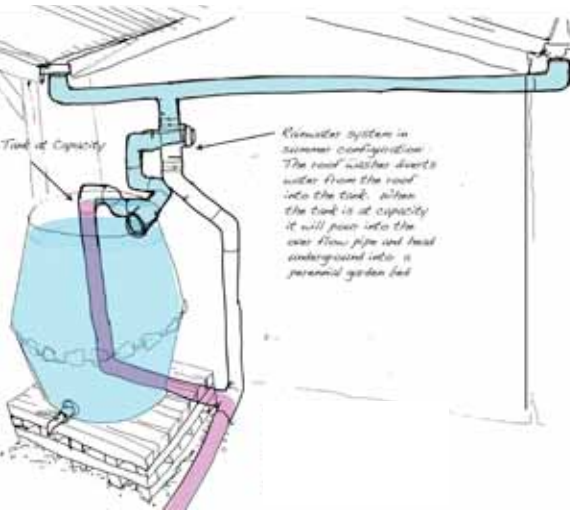
The Shepherd Project consists in rebranding 'shepherding' to young people. In order to rebrand it, Dory recognises the need to upgrade the shepherd's tools and clothing for the 21st century. Instead of being condemned to the nostalgic vision of a shepherd with a staff, Dory proposes to equip him/her with Gore-Tex mountain gear and a PDA for their daily tasks. Through collaboration with engineers and park rangers, the artist has developed a solar powered GPS system that would emit

SMS to the shepherd's PDA to monitor the movement of the flock. The project poignantly highlights the need to change social perceptions of rural life and update agricultural traditions to ensure their survival.

The Shepherd Recast

The title of Dory's presentation of the Shepherd Project at the LABoral Centre, Utopian Micro-Kingdom, suggests the practical challenges of implementing such technologies (bells tend to be less expensive than GPS systems). Nonetheless, the shepherd school has grown to over 100 students and several students have actively taken up the profession. The success of the Asturian mountain school has spawned the creation of similar schools in eight different regions of Spain. The schools recast shepherding as 'a way to sustainably take advantage of our resources and a form of life needed to solve many environmental problems' explains Dory. Recognising the merits of the Shepherd Project and the need to respond to the rural crisis without dressing townspeople like elves, Spain's Ministry of the Environment and Ministry of Culture have sponsored Dory's Inland project to launch a cultural strategy in support of rural life. Inland provides a platform to connect artists, farmers, rural development agents, and policy makers, and bridge the gap between the rural and urban worlds. 'The reencounter between the countryside and the city can be critical for contemporary society to move towards sustainability,' argues Dory.

The three-year project starts with an international conference at the end of October and will evolve into a residency programme and exhibition. By placing the artists in the field and together with grassroots groups from Plataforma Rural, collaborative art projects will emerge and help foster an interpretation of the rural that is far away from folk art. Inland may fall short of creating 'rural creative industries', but it should spark cultural innovation and empower rural communities to reinvent themselves. These communities will hopefully



develop some alternative strategies involving artists instead of ogres, wizards and magical rings.

Avant Garden, Living Concrete, and Inland show how innovative agricultural initiatives can address multiple individual and community desires and needs from employment opportunities to food production to community building. Designers and artists in network with farmers, beekeepers, hackers, engineers, park rangers, and gardeners can help city dwellers slow down and recognise the interdependence between the rural and the urban. #

Living Concrete: Designing for Urban Agriculture exhibition, Parsons The New School for Design, New York, until 15/12
Inland International Conference, Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid, 21 - 23/10
www.pequenatierramedia.es / www.mataderomadrid.com
www.fallenfruit.org / www.refarmthecity.org,
www.proyectopastor.com / www.corbinhillfarm.com
www.newschool.edu/parson / www.campoadentro.es

Urban Fruit Action, Print,
Fallen Fruit (above)
© Fallen Fruit Collective

Drawings of 20 NYC Rainwater Harvesting Systems, 2010
GrowNYC's rainwater harvesting systemU collect rain from nearby roofs or shade structures, reducing demand on the public water supply system and mitigating rainstorm runoff, which can overload storm drains and pollute the waters surrounding the city.
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