

DREAMING UP SPACES:

Pioneer gardening for integration and environmental activism in Bolzano, Italy.

The Orto Semirurali Garten is a community intercultural garden, located in a densely populated zone of the city of Bolzano, Italy. It was established in 2010 by half a dozen people on a 300m² piece of land. By 2015 it has become a 2000m² area cultivated by more than 80 people from 11 countries and a wide variety of cultural and social backgrounds. At the onset of the project, the Association Donne Nissà (the organisation responsible for the management of the project) paid rent to the local council for a piece of abandoned land, without water. In 2012, the Association no longer had to pay rent to the local council, but were offered the space free of charge. And in 2015 the local council offered an additional piece of land rent-free to the Association in order to extend the garden. This piece of land was pre-prepared for the Association, with the council providing soil, water and even a small garden shed. This demonstrates both acknowledgement on behalf of the council of the social and community-building services provided by the project as well as a policy change regarding the use and management of public green spaces.

The Orto Semirurali Garten is a pioneer project that has had to confront much resistance and criticism in the traditionally focused and conservative Province of South Tirol, Italy. The paper will present the slow but steady progress the project has made, not only to be accepted but also then to be used as a flagship by the local council.

The paper will also examine the garden as a project of integration (as already mentioned the members of the group are from 11 different countries and a range of ages and social contexts. More than 50% of its members are from Bangladesh). It will investigate the role of the garden as a means of enabling integration, not only within the internal space of the garden between group members, but also in relation to the external space, that is with the neighbourhood population, who observe attentively the activities of the garden and its members. The paper will evaluate the process of facilitation used with group members in order to improve the coordination of this highly heterogeneous group and reinforce its capacity to deal with internal and external relations. Finally, the paper will critically analyse the challenges of managing a pioneering project that has the double role of environmental activism and community integration.

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