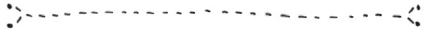


Henrik LeBUHN



As an urban researcher, who's been traveling the United States a lot, Henrik Lebuhn has innumerable stories to tell about cities and their inhabitants. On a small area of wasteland in Berlin, he talks about the blooming of a gigantic community garden, which not too long ago, had been flourishing on an industrial wasteland in Los Angeles, how it became a home to plenty of creatures and then disappeared again.

In 1992, an industrial wasteland located in South Central, Los Angeles, became one of the largest community gardens in the USA: The South Central Gardens. The gardens were huge and compared roughly to the size of nine soccer fields. In my book 'City in Motion' (Stadt in Bewegung), I tell the story of how the gardens came to be and what happened to them. For about ten years, the South Central Gardens provided space for an extraordinary community. However, in 2003 the City of Los Angeles sold them to a private investor, who wanted to build warehouses on the property. In 2006, after three years of grassroots protests, the gardens were finally evicted and destroyed. I am interested in the South Central Gardens, because I believe that we can learn a great deal from these kinds of cases: about the non-commercial, alternative and -- most importantly -- collective use of urban space; but also -- sadly -- about where these kind of non-commercial projects find their limits in today's urban policies.

But let me say a couple of words about the gardens themselves: Imagine a really huge, open green space that is located in a kind of weird place between South Central, a very poor neighborhood, where mostly African Americans and Latinos live, and Vernon, which is a completely industrial neighborhood, a concrete desert. And so there is this enormous community garden with about 300 lots mainly farmed by immigrant families from Latin America, and large communal areas that can be used for neighborhood meetings, picnics, parties and stuff like that. And because the weather is so mild in L.A. and the farmers grow mostly crops, many people can actually live of the gardens -- maybe not entirely, but to a good part.

That reminds me of a funny story. Many farmers were from Mexico and Central America, and before they came to the US, they had been small-scale farmers in rural communities. During one of my visits to the gardens, they told me that when they go and visit their home villages, they collect local seeds and bring them to L.A. to plant them in the South Central Gardens. Of course it is strictly forbidden to enter the US with seeds. They are actually very strict about this at the US-border. But I guess the farmers didn't care. They brought all kind of vegetable and fruit plants -- someone even showed me a huge banana tree from his village on the coast of El Salvador -- and flowers and herbs. Just everything. And so at some point this anthropologist from the University in Seattle did a study about the South Central Gardens and found out that there was not a single place in Los Angeles that could compete with the South Central Gardens in terms of bio-diversity.

But just as important is the social aspect, because the South Central Gardens were organized pretty much completely autonomously. In 1992, the City made the property available for gardening and the farmers paid a little fee for the use of water -- but everything else was pretty much self-organized.

The tragic part of the story begins in 2003 when the City sold the property to an investor who wanted to develop it. Of course he looked at the property in terms of the profit he could make with it. The City argued that they would make money by selling the property, that the development project would create jobs, which would then be taxable, and -- to cut this short -- that especially the poor neighborhood of South Central would benefit from all of this. Which is not entirely wrong -- but it's only one part of the story. The farmers organized a big campaign against the deal between the City and the investor, which, for three years, led to huge grassroots protests and got lots of media attention. At some point, people even squatted the gardens in order to save them. But it didn't help. In June 2006, the gardens were evicted and shortly after the bulldozers came.

Why am I telling you all this? In my book, I am mainly interested in the protest movement and in the conflict between the City, the farmers, and the investor. But you can also learn a lot from this case in terms of alternative use of resources.

Self-organization: If today we talk about the alternative use of resources – the case of the South Central Gardens is about urban space, but I believe we can also take this to electricity and energy -, people usually ask: State or market? Should this be provided by the state or should a private company do the job? But this completely ignores that there are other forms of alternative use of resources beyond state and market! And I am not talking about Nonprofits or a classical Foundation, but about processes of self-organization and self-administration, which are based on strong grassroots participation. For this kind of stuff we need more social creativity!

Non-commercial use: I think the case of the South Central Gardens is interesting, because basically there was no money involved. This was completely not commercial. Ok, one might say this is trivial. But for me this is an important detail. If nothing else, because today you constantly get to hear: If something is for free, people don't treat it with responsibility. Only things you pay money for are valuable. And this really is a dangerous argument. The case of the South Central Gardens shows the exact opposite: A responsible, creative, and sustainable treatment of our resources can be mediated very well socially, and not in a monetary way!

Finally, the case also teaches us that in a market economy these kind of non-commercial and communal projects are always precarious, they always remain conditional. Many community gardens are based on interim use of private or public property, or people rent or lease the lots they use for gardening. But today, cities stand under an incredible fiscal stress. Let's put it that way: Today, the use of urban space needs to pay off in a monetary way, cities need to cover their expenses, cities and their administrations need to act economically efficient and responsible. David Harvey has coined the term 'entrepreneurial city' to describe this tendency. Cities act more and more like private companies with a cost-benefit ratio and some sort of business logic. That's why there is always the temptation to bring spaces, which are organized outside the logic of the state and the market, back into the economic cycle. By selling them, or by renting them out for market price; through commercial use, or by administering them in a profit-oriented way. And so for me this is probably the most important conclusion from this story: If you want to secure a project that aims at the alternative use of resources in the long run, you should not trust in the politics of the day. From the very beginning, you need to think about the legal and institutional strategies to safeguard these little utopias. So that they last, and grow, and that at some point in the future they can take effect on a larger scale and really become the seed for a different society.