

# Urban gardens: sowing the cities of tomorrow

Interview by Kito Nedo

End of September 2012: a late-summery autumn day at Moritzplatz in Berlin-Kreuzberg. Just a few years ago, this place was a wasteland, a roundabout with discount markets in an urban no man's land. Then, in 2009, the Prinzessinnengarten sprouted on an urban brownfield and everything was different.

The city has decided to sell the Prinzessinnengarten plot to the highest bidder, causing a big stir not only in the neighborhood. An open letter was circulated on the Internet and was signed by over 30,000 people in the first weeks. Kito Nedo met in the autumn of 2012 with Prinzessinnengarten co-founder Marco Clausen in a small grove of robinias, to talk about the Berlin garden whose name has spread to Shanghai and New York, and why it's worth fighting for its preservation right now.

Mr. Clausen, since 2009 you and your colleagues have operated an open urban garden initiative at Moritzplatz in Berlin-Kreuzberg. At the end of August 2012, you started a petition to save the garden - why?

Marco Clausen: We learned that this city-owned plot is to be sold by the Property Fund to investors from the creative industry in the near future. Due to the short sales period, we had to assume that we have no viable future here. Based on this situation, we have written an open letter, in which we refer to the already precarious conditions of the garden – but also what this garden has already achieved for the district and the city as a whole. We emphasize the need to create long-term planning perspectives for this and other places of neighborly involvement.

## Is it just about the Prinzessinnengarten?

The many responses to our letter not only show the popularity of the Prinzessinnengarten, but also that many people in Berlin currently asking, generally: How can we ensure that we still have what the Mayor of Berlin, Klaus Wowereit, once called the "beautiful and wild Berlin" in ten years time?

That means: How can we establish open spaces for this type

of social commitment, for new forms of urban life together, in the long term? How can we protect such places of collective producing, of exchange, of learning and shaping the city?

Originally you founded your urban farming project here on a 6000-square-meter brownfield as a mobile company: with transport logistics and movable raised beds. Why do you suddenly want to stay at Moritzplatz?

We do not necessarily want to remain here forever. That is not our core demand. When we started the Prinzessinnengarten in 2009, almost no one believed that it could work. Urban agriculture was not a topic at the time. It wasn't only a few who told us: "nice idea, but actually complete nonsense." It was only through our work here that we realized what it means to be a pioneer – you don't really know what you're getting yourself into. So we ourselves were surprised by the success of Prinzessinnengarten.

## In what respect?

This success is not only measured in the thousands of visitors who come here or in the hundreds of volunteers. Success is also reflected in the feedback we get, particularly from the field of alternative urban development and urban studies. In the meantime, we have been represented in many exhibitions. In dealing with many different partners, we have sensed the potential that lies in the Prinzessinnengarten when contemplating tomorrow's cities.

## What do you mean?

It comes down to the question of how to support the social context in our neighborhood – how to care for a specific mixture and for exchange, and how to establish new forms of education. These are important fields of experimentation. Another question is: How can you prepare the city for the upcoming changes, which we know will come, but we don't yet know what the consequences will be, or how we will react to them. Among these are such issues as climate change, scarcity of resources, the increasing cost of oil, demographic change, social displacement, such as in access to housing, access to adequate health care and education. That's why we're no longer talking about temporary use, but of pioneer use.

### What is pioneer use?

We're sitting here in this grove of robinias: this is so-called pioneer vegetation. It is characterized by the ability to grow on very barren ground and get by with a little, thus creating the conditions for something that will follow. We say: an urban garden like the Prinzessinnengarten is something like a pioneer use, because it shows what is possible in such places. It also shows what kind of social needs exist, which may not have been perceived so clearly before. Such a place can open paths for a certain way of thinking about the city.

The potential that we have developed here should not simply be covered up with concrete. We even should really ask how this development can be taken up in a way that continues to support what has been achieved here. For us, such a development should include, for example, a very strong neighborhood-oriented approach – that you can't continue to tear apart the social context here, but must instead try to understand and engage the diversity of the neighborhood as an opportunity. Therefore, we demand citizen participation, not only formally, but as a serious discourse with the local people, their needs, their ideas.

In a short time, the Prinzessinnengarten has become known and admired beyond the city. You have an average of 50,000 visitors per year, you were invited to the project at the Expo in Shanghai, a book has now been published by a major art publisher – the politicians must surely appreciate you as an integrative model project?

The symbolic pat on the shoulder is not lacking. The value of the garden and the international reputation, which reflects on Berlin, is unquestioned. We are displayed in the brochures of the City Council when they talk about the sustainable use of green spaces. The city uses us to promote itself on tourism sites on the Internet. The question that arises is: how can this be converted into long-term planning security for us?

We are not alone with this problem – just think of the Allmende-Kontor, a large communal garden on the Tempelhof airfield. We have to get past a pure image policy, and understand projects like the Prinzessinnengarten, which successfully explores new possibilities, as part of urban planning.

## What could enable this shift in policy in Berlin?

There is a general lack of interfaces between grass-roots initiatives and the administration. There's actually no means of communication. We do not talk to each other, because that is not intended – that people take part in developing their own city.

There is a certain fear that people will just do things themselves: which is effectively unregulated, uncontrolled and not standardized or professionally approved. This has to change, because we know that cities, especially when they are broke, tend to go in completely the wrong direction. The land on which a functioning project works is simply to be sold off. That's how to lose the options for shaping the city in the long-term. If you want to retain such options in the face of tight budgets, however, you have to include the people who are active in the city. It is the job of politicians to find instruments for this. With the Prinzessinnengarten, there is now the chance to try it out.

Recently, the Berlin Senate announced a new approach to property policy. Now the sale of city land should not merely go to the highest bidder, but urban policy objectives are to be taken into account. How do you assess such announcements?

Here, the policy did not move – it was moved. Decisive for the present willingness for discussion was the initiative from people in the most different of positions, who said: What you are doing here is selling out the city – and we urgently need to change that. Whether the planned "transparent property policy" actually means a departure from pure budgetary policy in urban development will have to be demonstrated through its concrete implementation. These are still merely announcements

# What do you demand?

A demand of many initiatives is that the people who are actively committed locally must be involved in the allocation of land. As a first step, there is a round table on property policy with representatives from civil society and politics. There must be an instrument for future exchange and cooperation, with clear rules. Currently, only the short-term financial needs of the city are the decisive factor in what will eventually lead to enormous costs in the long run. To tear apart the social context of a city - to have no green space, no more places for education: such developments will be cost much more in future, for the city as a whole, than the revenue received in the short term for the sale of property. There are people who say that the revenue from the sale of city land only just covers the cost of interest. In other words: in ten years time, having sold off 5500 plots of land, there's not a penny less debt, yet only a few spaces which can be decided over democratically.

