Citizen gardens
Saturday 31 May 2008, by quattrolibri

This is a companion post to a talk given at Jardins Jardin on May 31st.

How can gardens contribute to policies to fight climate change?
What insights can we learn from previous production modes?
How do urban policies place gardens in schemes for new cities?
Finally, how can local communities maximise the benefits of their gardens?
Gardens are bigger than they look.

Garden boundaries far extend their land surface. Bees cover a 3km radius and tell us a lot about the gardens they reach. Olivier Darné has set up a range of bee-projects, including his "Miel de Beton".

Miel de Beton is the produce of bees located in and around Paris. Beehives located at the same time at the top of the Centre Georges Pompidou and in a city in the Eastern suburbs of Paris yielded honey in a 1 to 5 ratio: the town centre beehives were more productive.

Miel de Beton is also a regular winner of top quality awards (gold, silver or bronze medals awarded in every single competition it entered since 2001). 300 pollens have been identified in the miel de beton, making it one of the most flavourful types of honey.

Why so?

Scientists have poured over this counterintuitive phenomenon. Olivier Darné contends that Saint Denis (its original base) as a land of immigration provides a very rich cultural diversity, with inhabitants bringing in seeds from afar. Cities are also far less subject to pesticides and insecticides, unlike the intensive culture around the "test city". There's more than grass around houses.

Putting gardens into our cities?

Urban gardens are part of our culture, heritage. Names and city features provide traces: think of Orchard Street as a street where… an orchard was. At times of great necessity, urban spaces has been reconverted to productive use (remember how Britain increased its food autonomy from 120 days to 160 days between 1939 and 1944 by using "every piece of land" for cultivation).

Now that space has become at a premium in cities, due to a massive urbanisation process (for instance, 75% of France's population is now urban), it's easy to discount the idea of an urban garden.

It's time to think vertically.

William McDonough, architect and author of Cradle to Cradle, has designed a scheme setting up gardens on the roofs of Huangbaiyu, a new city built in China. This is an illustration of close-loop design.

Cutting down on transport, increasing resilience

Urbanists take a second look at gardens, as a means to increase the biological resources available within a city and therefore increasing the city's resilience. Relocalisation is key to increasing resilience, reducing transport needs and increasing local activities. Local consumption has a direct impact on the wealth retained locally.

If 80% of revenue leaves the territory (energy, remote suppliers, taxes…), 100£ spent on day 1 leave just under 1£ after 3 transactions

100£ leaves 20£ locally at the first transaction…
…which leaves 4£ on the second transaction…
…and 0,80 £ at the third.

Jaime Lerner talks of a city like a Tortoise and its shell: living and working together.
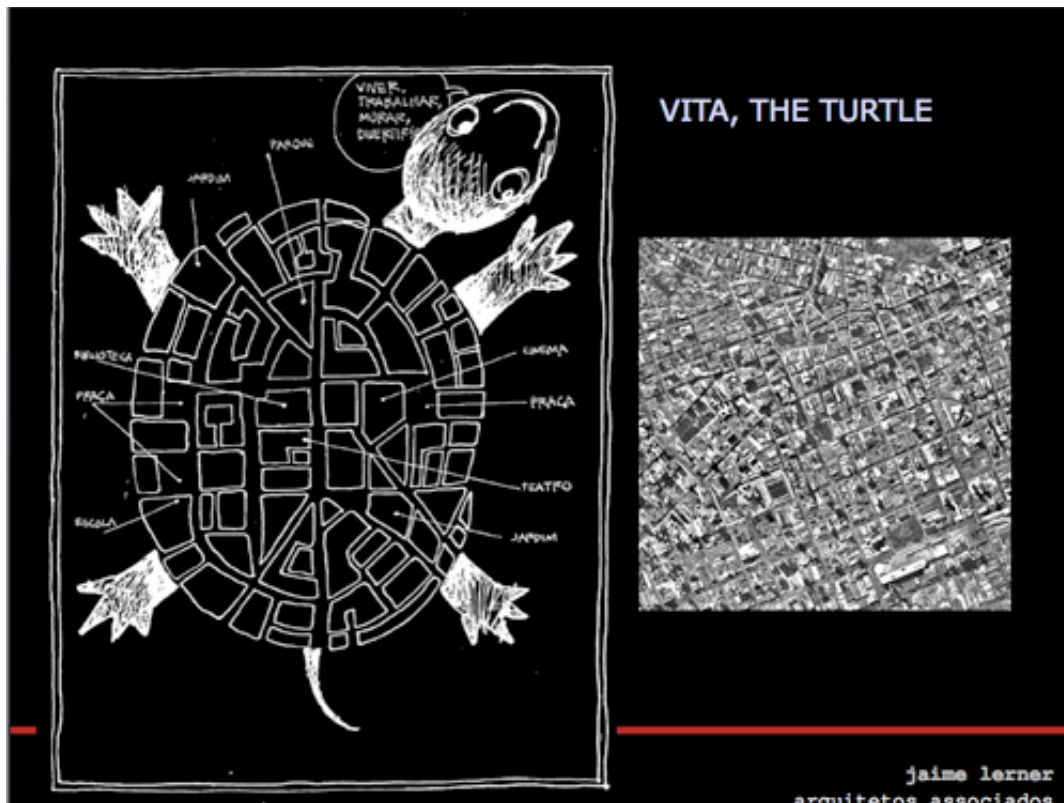
The architect Jaime Lerner has developed a concept of "urban acupuncture", which he implemented as mayor in Curutiba in Brasil. The Bus Rapid Transit, a core element of urban organisation deployed first in Curitiba, has been reproduced in Los Angeles (USA) and Bogota. Here is the video of Jaime Lerner's presentation of this slide show at TED (Technology Entertainment Design). He starts off with the posture that a city is not a problem, it is part of the solution.
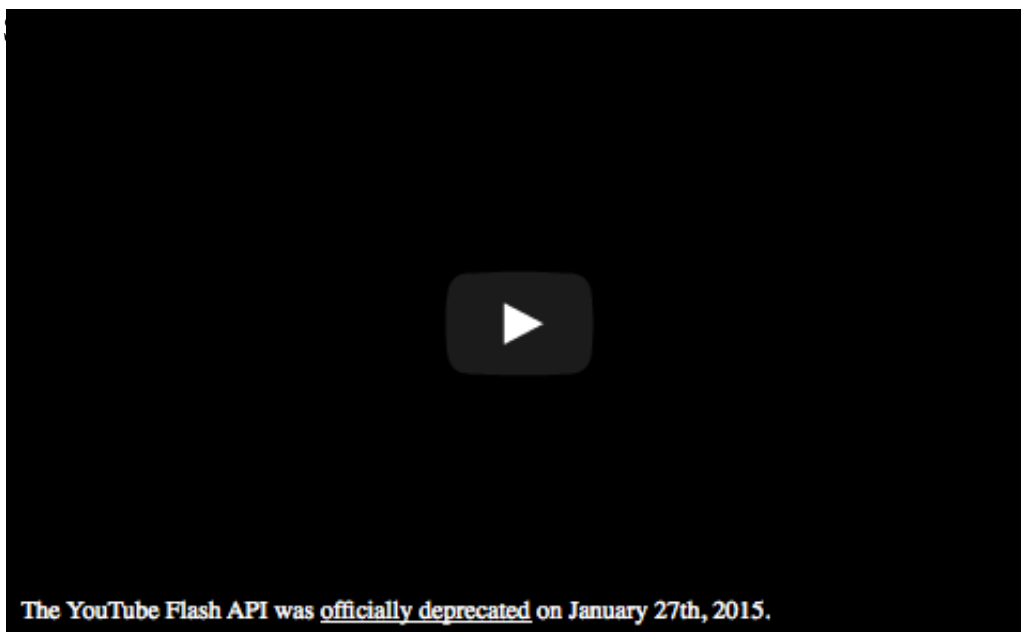
Citizen gardens: We the people…

The Transition town movement set up in Britain is showing an efficient model, rapidly growing as the "grass roots movement" based on the success of the first Transition Town, Totnes, in Devon.

Transition Town started as a project of urban organisation planned ahead of a reduction (and eventual elimination) of oil and its sub-products in our daily lives, both for economic reasons (oil is getting scarcer and more expensive) and for climate change reasons (avoid using oil so as to reduce carbon dioxide emissions).

Its scope far exceeds transport (though 74% of oil is used for transport and 98% of transport fuels were oil and its derivatives), and includes eco-housing, materials, culture, agriculture. The premises are that an Energy Descent Action Plan (first set up in Kinsale) is required to "transition" from one mode of organisation to another one.

Unlike previous schemes, this is a hybrid approach, which aims to take communities and local businesses on board and planning for a sustainable, economically viable organisation.

A list of "official transition towns" is maintained here (with Bristol, UK and Boulder, Colorado as notable examples), French initiatives are coordinated here, while maps of the "mullers" show the reach of the ideas.

Food as a lever

Relocalisation is also a matter of cutting "food miles" into "food feet". AMAPs in France, Slow Food in Italy are similar "grass roots" (pun intended) initiatives.

AMAPs stand for Association de Maintien de l'Agriculture Paysanne. The model establishes yearlong contracts between farm producers and urban dwellers (less than 100km away from each other), whereby customers subscribe to a weekly delivery of season produce. Farmers gain visibility in planning their production and optimise their delivery, with a single transport between the farm and the pick-up point in the city centres, where customers gather.

The Slow Food movement was founded by Carlo Petrini in Italy as a knee jerk reaction to the implementation of a McDonald's restaurant on Plaza Di Spana in Rome (both a symbol of the arrival of Fast Food in one of the heartlands of gastronomy and of a difficult visual integration in a cultural landmark). The Slow Food movement focuses on promoting local produce, local recipes to sustain local tastes. The Slow Food movement has now an established base with 80 000 members worldwide, a university for gastronomic sciences and a model for spreading "convivia":

> They build relationships with producers, campaign to protect traditional foods, organize tasting and seminars, encourage chefs to source locally, nominate producers to participate in international events and work to bring taste education into schools. Most importantly, they cultivate the appreciation of pleasure and quality in daily life.

And for the close, a 20 min video by Mark Pittman, food critic and writer for the New York Times: "what's wrong with what we eat".

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