

CONTROVERSIAL GREENSPACES

Urban Renaturalisation

In 2022, the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology (ICTA) of the Autonomous University of Barcelona conducted a study of the causes of gentrification in 28 cities in North America and Western Europe. The conclusions of the comparison were calculated using a multivariate analysis that showed different trends on the American and European continents. Whereas the former showed a greater preponderance of rising rental prices associated with environmental improvements, other causes such as the creation of new metro infrastructures, new residential developments or the promotion of the tourism industry had a greater impact on the old continent. Two Spanish cities took part in the study: Valencia, where gentrification is associated with the arrival of the high-speed train, among other factors,¹ and Barcelona, where environmental improvements associated with traffic calming measures in certain neighbourhoods are said to have influenced the variation in housing prices.

According to ICTA, this and other studies² are alerting us to the need to incorporate socio-economic and multicultural factors into urban policies for environmental improvement in order to mitigate undesired effects such as gentrification.

This controversy surfaced during the question and answer round at the *Behatokia 5: Renaturbanizar*³ event sponsored by *Urbanbat* and *Azkuna Zentroa* at Bilbao's Ibaieder Park. At that time, we were only able to address the problem to a limited extent. We would like to take advantage of this paper to now delve deeper into this issue, using our experience with the Seville Urban Garden Network (SUGN)⁴ as a basis for reflection. SUGN is a research and planning project carried out in a city where the horticultural tradition is kept alive today through a mosaic of urban gardens located on old waterways, now transformed into public parks, where plants, educational projects and cultural experiences are organically cultivated. The city currently has 13 urban gardens that have been converted into islands of biodiversity. They are sustained by a kind of communal management of public space which contributes to the coexistence and integration of different genders, generations and nationalities. These values, together with the high demand among the citizenry⁵, led the Seville City Council to promote the SUGN Plan⁶ in 2017, aimed at creating a Public Network of Urban Gardens that would allow this activity to expand without causing imbalances or gentrification.

With this objective in mind, a research and design process was carried out that led to a series of strategies, some of which we believe could be useful for illustrating and rethinking certain controversies that have arisen around the idea of urban renaturalisation.

¹ Green gentrification in European and North American cities. Anguelovski. I et al. 2022

² Greening plans as (re)presentation of the city: Toward an inclusive and gender-sensitive approach to urban greenspaces. Anguelovski. I et al. 2023

³ <https://www.azkunazentroa.eus/es/actividad/urbanbat-behatokia-5-renaturbanizar/>

⁴ SUGN is a project promoted by Seville's Urban Development Department. We were lucky enough to work on it with Pepa García Jaén, Raúl Puente, Ana Zarandieta, Miriam Navarro, Daniel García and Antonio Bonilla between 2016 and 2017.

⁵ Data extracted from the survey conducted in September 2016 by Commentia: 93% of those surveyed viewed the existence of urban gardens in the city positively, 91% supported the City Council's initiative to extend the network, and 84.5% thought that this initiative would improve the quality of life in the city.

⁶ Bases and Strategies for the creation of the Urban Garden Network in Seville. [2017](#)

Urban Garden Network in Seville

An opinion poll was conducted in the city of Seville in 2016. 93% of those surveyed viewed the existing urban gardens positively, 91% supported the initiative to extend them to other neighbourhoods throughout the city, and 84.5% also thought that this initiative would improve the quality of life in Seville. There were no neighbourhoods where the willingness of citizens to cultivate a plot of land fell below 20%.

Since the urban gardens up to that time had been concentrated on the outskirts of Seville, the first proposal under the plan was a more fair and equitable distribution of gardens throughout the city in an attempt to mitigate this imbalance. It was proposed to increase the number of gardens from 13 to 31, which would increase coverage from 0.39 to 0.7 m²/inhabitant.

The logic behind this proposed distribution was not based exclusively on the needs of humans, but also those of other urban dwellers and processes. Therefore, just as the urban gardens arose from the occupation of spaces on public land pertaining to old watercourses, priority was given to extending the network using the same logic, with the intention of preserving and restoring the continuity and functionality of the old watercourses and ecological corridors, to the extent possible, thereby promoting the creation of spaces for coexistence between species.

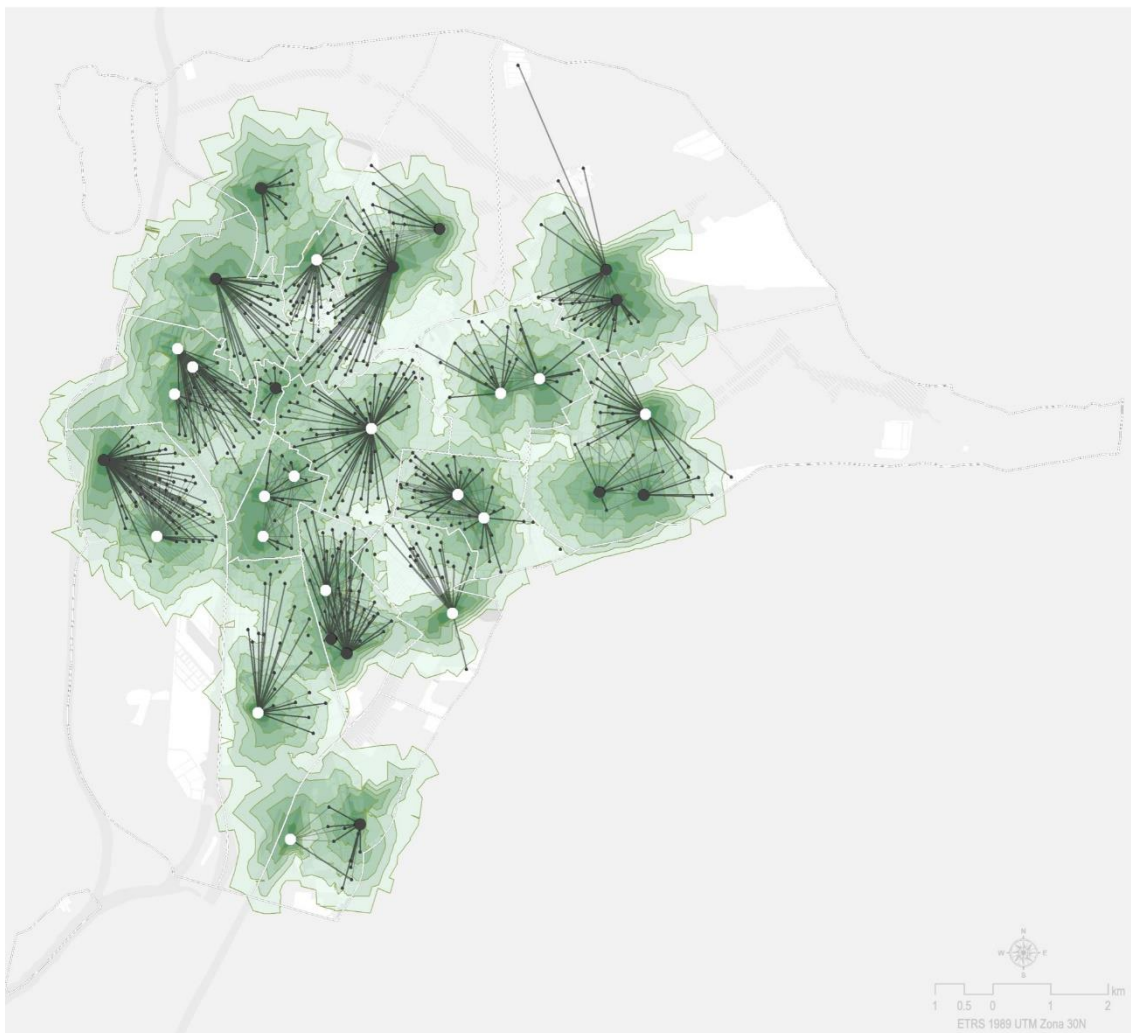


Figure 1. Map of the expansion of urban gardens according to population density in different districts of Seville. Pre-existing gardens (black dots) / Proposed gardens (white dots) / Urban districts (black microdots). SUGN plan. Seville City Management. 2017 (author photo: Nomad Garden)

If ecological corridors present an opportunity to promote ecosystemic emergencies, one might ask what kind of urban infrastructures could promote socio-cultural emergencies in these spaces.

With this question in mind, two complementary strategies were considered during the development of the plan:

The first consisted of prioritising access to the gardens by sustainable mobility as opposed to motorised mobility. To that end, it was proposed that the new gardens would be positioned such that they could be reached by residents within 30 minutes on foot or 15 minutes by bike using existing lanes.

The second focused on selective pedestrian zones connecting these infrastructures with other public buildings such as schools, libraries, hospitals or civic centres - via nearby streets with the greatest number of trees. A rhizomatic infrastructure that would connect the schoolyards to the gardens, or the hospitals to the parks. Not only would commerce and tourism reap the added benefits of the pacification of the streets, but so would public health and cultural infrastructures.

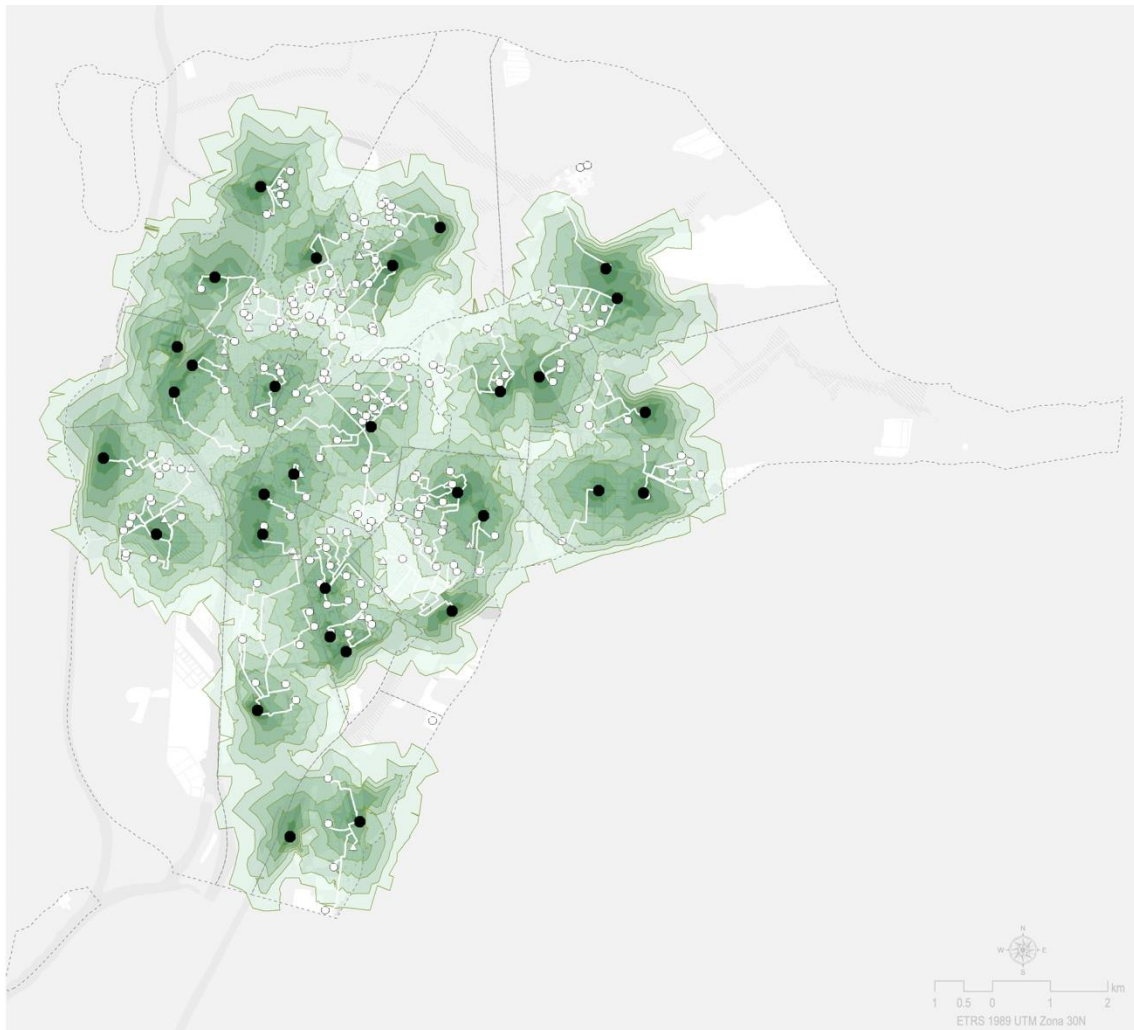


Figure 2. Urban parks (black dots), public buildings (white dots), distances (colour gradients), pedestrian connections (white lines). SUGN Plan. Seville Urban Development. 2017. (author photo: Nomad Garden)

Interestingly, this connection between gardens and culture is not just a trace on a map or an idea for the future. At the time of the very first experiences we see grass roots mobilisation - such as the efforts of the “*Huerta de las Moreras*” association of market gardeners in Miraflores - which was not limited to growing food but rather sought to transform these places into open spaces for relationships, education or culture. Aspirations that, over time, have seen the emergence of these places as laboratories of contemporary creation, where the city’s scientists, artists, architects, musicians, filmmakers, designers and chefs have had the opportunity to cultivate specific works with and/or for the gardeners and neighbours⁷.

We believe that the ability of urban gardens to involve local residents in the co-production of their own living environments regardless of age, gender, nationality or employment status is the most valuable lesson we can learn from the urban gardens in Seville against gentrification.

⁷ *Luces de barrio* is a choral project sponsored by the Seville Institute for Culture and the Arts (ICAS), curated by Nomad Garden in collaboration with Surnames narradores transmedia and El Mandaito producciones that has been taking place since 2015 in more than 25 locations in Seville with the participation of more than 100 artists. The mission of this initiative is to ephemerally illuminate urban spaces that are cultivated and cared for by civic groups and that embody the age-old link between society and nature.



Figure 3. Collage of artistic interventions in the gardens of Seville by different creators during the "[Luces de Barrio](#)" festival in 2016.

- a. Sound intervention by David Cordero with the Parque Alcosa community (author photo: Nomad Garden)
- b. Intervention by Motoreta, Estudio Mal and Proyecto ele with the Hacienda San Antonio community (author photo: Nomad Garden)
- c. Intervention by Darío Mateo and Luciano Furcas with the Huerto del Rey Moro community (author photo: Dario Mateo)
- d. Poetic intervention by Lugadero + Mansilla y los espías with the San Jerónimo community (author photo: Juan Duque Oliva)
- e. Intervention by María Cabeza de Vaca, Teatro a Pelo, Anna Jonsson, Rocío Guzmán and Eloísa Cantón with the Triana community (photo author: Nomad Garden)
- f. Intervention by Ctrl+Z, ScenotekniaB, Ernesto Ojeda, Pelicano Mecánico and Raúl Cantizano with the IES Romero Murube community (author photo: Nomad Garden)



NOMAD GARDEN

Nomad Garden strives to rethink alliances between society and nature, developing projects and tools to showcase them. We view urban landscapes as emergent systems with the capacity to readapt through the interaction of their own elements. We believe that other more sustainable interactions are possible in cities, since they are already happening spontaneously. Gardens are spaces of dialogue, laboratories of coexistence between the potential of humans and non-humans.

We like to think of these projects as opportunities to discover latent potential and to design actions and devices that allow us to consolidate those more creative and resilient tendencies.