



The Botanical City

Journal:	<i>Urban Studies</i>
Manuscript ID	CUS-1243-20-11
Manuscript Type:	Book Review
Discipline: Please select a keyword from the following list that best describes the discipline used in your paper.:	
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The Botanical City

Matthew Gandy and Sandra Jasper (eds.)

2020

Berlin: jovis Verlag GmbH

324 pp.

€32.00 Softcover

ISBN 978-3-86859-519-2

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This edited volume offers a radical re-imagining of the city as a botanical field, which is achieved through the bundling of a wide range of essays that cut across disciplinary boundaries. When readers open *The Botanical City*, they should not expect to encounter texts on conventional sites of urban greenery such as domestic gardens, public parks, or community growing projects. Instead, this book's kaleidoscopic voices draw the reader into the world of spontaneous plant life at cracked pavements, neglected cemeteries, urban forests and wastelands, and through their critical and creative approaches let one see urban nature differently.

The book is structured into five parts: histories and taxonomies (1), botanizing the asphalt (2), the art of urban flora (3), experiments in non-design (4), and cartographic imaginations (5). Apart from the introduction the volume contains thirty texts, two interviews and five visual works. Berlin is of clear interest to the editors, yet the volume's mapping of the distinctive geographies of urban botany stretches far beyond that city, and its selection of essays offers an international perspective. What is more, *The Botanical City* is rich and diverse in its approaches to urban nature, and rather than attempt to straitjacket the different contributions into clearly delineated segments, the editors seem to have chosen, in the spirit of its subject, to let the different seeds of thought scatter freely and flourish throughout the volume. Whilst reading the volume a critical field of inquiry emerges through the editors' introductory text and their careful selection of contributions, yet some of the key conceptual advancements made in the volume could have been articulated further in an afterword or coda.

The volume critiques, often still colloquially used, terms to describe plants as 'weeds' and/or 'invasive species' and offers alternative readings and new perspectives on urban nature, landscape design and maintenance, urban development and decay. Instead of prevalent

problematic framings of plants as native versus invasive, the editors make a significant contribution to the field of urban studies and ecology by introducing an alternative terminology for understanding encounters with plants in cities, as they propose to differentiate between: “remnant,” “constructed,” and “adaptive” kinds of ecological assemblages’ (pp. 7–8). Quickly after they have set up this framework, they point towards examples that blur this new threefold distinction, and thereby they underline their endeavours to critically reflect upon the classification of plant life. One of the main achievements of this edited volume is, then, its rethinking of the histories and mobilities of plant life in cities, as the essays bring across the ways in which seeds travel, find new grounds, and escape categorisation by botanists and city planners. Just to illustrate the richness of this volume’s plant trajectories traced, one can discover that seeds travelled, both intentionally and accidentally, with and along a Jesuit priest, ants on a garden city housing estate, dates in the beak of birds, railway lines, soldiers’ boots, intra-urban construction site soil movements, and international cargo shipments. In his essay, Seth Denizen argues that ‘modernity was always a botanical project’ (p. 43) and continues by citing Donna Haraway ‘My definition of modernity is that it is the period of the intensified transportation of seeds and genes’ (2000, p. 88), and these words speak back to the edited volume as a whole.

The contributions espouse a shared effort to offer a postcolonial critique of botanic knowledge production and imaginations of the urban environments. In their texts, authors shed light on the contested histories of how scientists have seen and continue to see plants, settler colonialism and its extraction of plants and exploitation of livelihoods, and the silencing of indigenous communities’ plant knowledges (see for instance the contributions by Henrik Ernstson and Bhavani Raman). The book studies the afterlives of the connections between the metropole and the colony—the botanical garden often featuring as a not always intended portal of plants and knowledges—and it proposes new ways of understanding the cosmopolitan assemblages of plant life in our cities today. Such a critical disposition of plant life across milieux brings to mind Stuart Hall’s characterisation of a turn in the conceptualisation of culture as ‘not of roots, but of routes’ (2018, p. 76). Hence, the book’s various engagements with seed journeys displace ‘notions of purity, fixity, and biological or cultural authenticity’ (Ezcurra, p.123) often associated with urban nature, and this approach resonates with Hall’s (and cultural studies’) diasporic mode of interpretation.

Another thread that weaves these essays together is a particular approach towards conducting urban research that is perhaps best invoked by Matthew Gandy when he rethinks the transect¹ as a kind of ‘ecological loitering’ (p. 165). Gandy queers the transect and posits it as an embodied, multi-sensory engagement with the city that in its slowing down—inspired by Isabelle Stengers’s (2017) plea for the ‘ralentissement’ of scientific practice—allows to account for the nuance and complexity of the urban. In this respect, I found Bettina Stoetzer’s idea of the ‘sharpening of the peripheral vision’ (p. 88) especially poignant. In her essay on the spontaneous growth of the Tree of Heaven in Berlin, Stoetzer argues that studying ruderal ecologies involves cultivating a mode of attention ‘that utilizes chance and gleaning’ instead of ‘focusing on bounded units, predictable political economies, and coherency’ (p. 88). In contrast, several contributions in the volume also testify the importance of the structured mapping of urban flora and the roles that citizen science (Seitz) and professional urban ecologists play in this meticulous and enduring process. Botanist Peter Del Tredici’s essay introduces the concept of ‘pre-adapted plants’, which relates plants’ ‘natural habitats’ to their new found urban environments, whilst arguing for an understanding of the spontaneously grown pavement vegetation as cosmopolitan. In other words, *The Botanical City* offers methodological approaches, which move across the continuum of ‘ecological loitering’ and its attentive multi-sensory engagements to structured large-scale, long-term mapping projects. In doing so, it shares a diverse toolset for scholars in urban studies to reimagine urban natures.

This edited volume also enhances urban studies’ debates on the particular linkages between urban formation and botany. Nigel Clark, for instance, shows the intimate connections between early city formations and the cultivation of grains, when he thinks through urbanization’s implication in climate change in his provocative and poetic essay on planetary thresholds. Livia Cahn’s tracings of knotweed through the intra-urban movements of construction site soils of Brussels is another evocative example of how urban formation is entangled with plant life. Following on, the volume addresses processes of displacement driven by urban developments and the specific role that botany can play within this. When Sandra Jasper directs our ears towards the singing skylarks on a former airfield in Berlin, she points out how this urban greening project also led to increased rents and land speculation,

¹ The transect is a method used in conducting ecological surveys that ‘involves tracing a line through a designated area, typically on foot, in order to systematically record what can be found’ (Gandy, p. 162).

which is displacing local low-income residents. TJ Demos not only describes similar processes of environmental gentrification in Houston, but also connects it to race in his discussion on the environmental apartheid in a city shaped and intoxicated by its petrochemical industry.

Continuing the theme of the links between ecology and economy, the volume renders visible how various spaces of economic decay provide fertile grounds for new assemblages of plant life. These contributions resonate with what Anna Tsing (2015, p. 6) calls ‘looking for life in ruins’, cultivating an attentiveness towards the new ecologies emerging out of disturbed landscapes. This focus on urban wastelands and their ruderal ecologies is of particular interest to the volume editors, and I highly recommend watching their film *Natura Urbana: The Brachen of Berlin* (Gandy, 2017) in conjunction to reading this book, as it draws the viewer into these marginal, fragile, yet lively multi-species spaces. This reinterpretation of wastelands also introduces the question of landscape design and maintenance, and the volume takes a closer look at multiple experiments in ‘non-design’, altered maintenance practices, and the entanglements between human and more-than-human labour. Marion Ernwein, in this respect, shows how within the context of local authorities’ budget reductions, giving way to ‘maintenance-sparing’ (p. 240) plants at a cemetery in Geneva actually required more design labour and a revaluing of observational work by council gardeners. Mathilda Rosengren (2020), in her essay on the becoming of an unplanned forest in Gothenburg, brings forward how the current biodiversity of its multispecies life that flourishes on dead wood life can be linked back to 1920s Swedish welfare reforms reducing the local poor residents’ reliance on the forest as a resource for firewood. These texts thus highlight how the intricate connections between ecology and economy, development and decline, design and neglect, control and spontaneity, reconfigure urban nature landscapes.

The Botanical City will be of interest to academics and professionals across the fields of anthropology, (landscape) architecture, botany, fine art, ecology, cultural geography and urban planning. Not hindered by the formal constraints of academic journal articles, the bundled essays are a joy to read, even more so because of the rich set of images and its sharp graphic design. The volume is an important contribution to urban studies, as it invites the reader to see urban nature differently. The editors’ invocation of Walter Benjamin on the modern flaneur as the ‘one who goes botanizing on the asphalt’ (1973, p. 36) captures the spirit of this volume as it tells the stories of the botanical traces encountered on urban drifts and connects these to a wider set of socio-ecological entanglements.

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