

PILING, MENDING, REASSEMBLING: AESTHETIC AND POETIC OF THE SUBALTERN LANDSCAPES

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In 1982, Agnes Denes' pioneer project *Wheatfield* shone a light on the disruptive meaning of planting and harvesting within the city. It stood as a symbol, a universal concept, representing food, energy, commerce, world trade, and economics while also alluding to issues of mismanagement, waste, world hunger and ecological concerns. Forty years later, *Wheatfield* still stands as a paradigm of ecological resistance in the city, where market-driven real estate developments continue to spread, reiterating and spatialising forms of intersectional inequalities and exclusion. Nevertheless, alternatives are emerging to reclaim a profound connection between the city and its inhabitants. These alternatives aim to foster the development of civic institutions for collective resource management, in line with De Moor's *Silent Revolution* framework † (2008). This paper theorises that grassroot forms of urban mobilisation give rise to landscapes of informality- microcosms where social practices of environmental care are creatively produced, established and nurtured. These subaltern landscapes are made of piled waste, mended objects and fragile assemblages of man-made devices and botanical subjects. It signifies the emergence of a new spatial poetics, moving beyond the "wilderness in the city" concept theorised by Metta and Olivetti (2019) which draws from the biological and formal self-determination of the living species. In fact, subaltern landscapes arise from new collective imaginaries, they result from collaborative processes informed by a spatial vision. This vision entails a preliminary, yet adaptable, design agency. Due to their inherently low-tech nature, these subaltern landscapes propose a semantic approach to define an urban "terrarium," invoking a material attachment to the earth, the terrain: greenhouses, rainwater tanks, phytopurification devices, solar energy and biogas technologies, aquaponics crops, seeds libraries, scarecrows, anaerobic digesters, moss walls. Inhabitants of the subaltern landscape engage in everyday practices of growing, seeding, planting, ploughing, weeding, harvesting, composting, fermenting, cooking, and eating. These practices contribute to reshaping the imagery of our urban environments. Thus, the urban terrarium becomes an embodied geography materialising the interactions between humans and non-human factors that co-produce non-commodified forms of landscapes (Fig 01). This proves that collective life and agency can persist and emerge within the interstices of capitalist systems (Tsing 2015). Despite their apparent disorder, the spatial composition and anthropized devices found in the subaltern landscape suggest that the ideal of a meticulously planned and ordered city was flawed, likely to result in a fragile and constrict-

tive urban environment (Sennet 1970). Instead, processes of collective mobilisation can generate alternative urban landscapes that challenge traditional hierarchies:

“less a politics dominated by a framing imagination of linear progression (and certainly not singular linear progression), and more a politics of the negotiation of relations, configurations” (Massey 2005, p. 147).

The discussed theoretical stance can unfold into various spatial configurations, each necessitating distinct and contextually tailored design interventions. These, guided by diverse collective aspirations, yield a diverse array of alternative urban settings: this is precisely why I opt to employ the term ‘landscapes’ in the plural form. One paradigmatic example is the instance of collectively managed urban agriculture initiatives (Fig 02), wherein the profoundly relevant notion of food production within the city becomes intertwined with the urban environment.

The urban agriculture landscape engenders contemplation regarding alternative conceptualizations of agrarian life and ecological sustainability, both of which come to the fore within the subaltern landscapes. In *The Wretched Earth: Botanical Conflicts and Artistic Interventions* cultural theorists Gray and Sheikh (2018) notice that grassroots forms of urban agriculture encompass not only the transient process of uniting individuals but also the conscientious utilization of raw materials and resources, devoid of exploitation. Consequently, the subaltern landscape, which can serve as a host to informal grassroots agricultural practices, reveals a distinctive spatial configuration and material geography. Within these microcosms, creatively repurposed tools, low-tech irrigation methods and ecological apparatuses abound, giving substance to a collective imagery that subverts established aesthetic norms and forges novel spatial poetics. In truth, community-driven urban agricultural initiatives can be viewed as small-scale alternatives to the Plantationocene, as defined by Haraway: a geological epoch marked by the radical disruption of humanity’s capacity to care for place (2015). In the Plantationocene, “plants play as mediators of habitability in a landscape” (Barua 2023, p. 13). In these instances, the emphasis rests on inter-relational expressions of ‘caring,’ positioning a ‘caring-with’ ethos ahead of a ‘caring-for’ approach. This perspective envisions an enduring sequence of caring acts wherein we oscillate between the extremes of giving and receiving, occupying different positions within this spectrum (Tronto 2015).

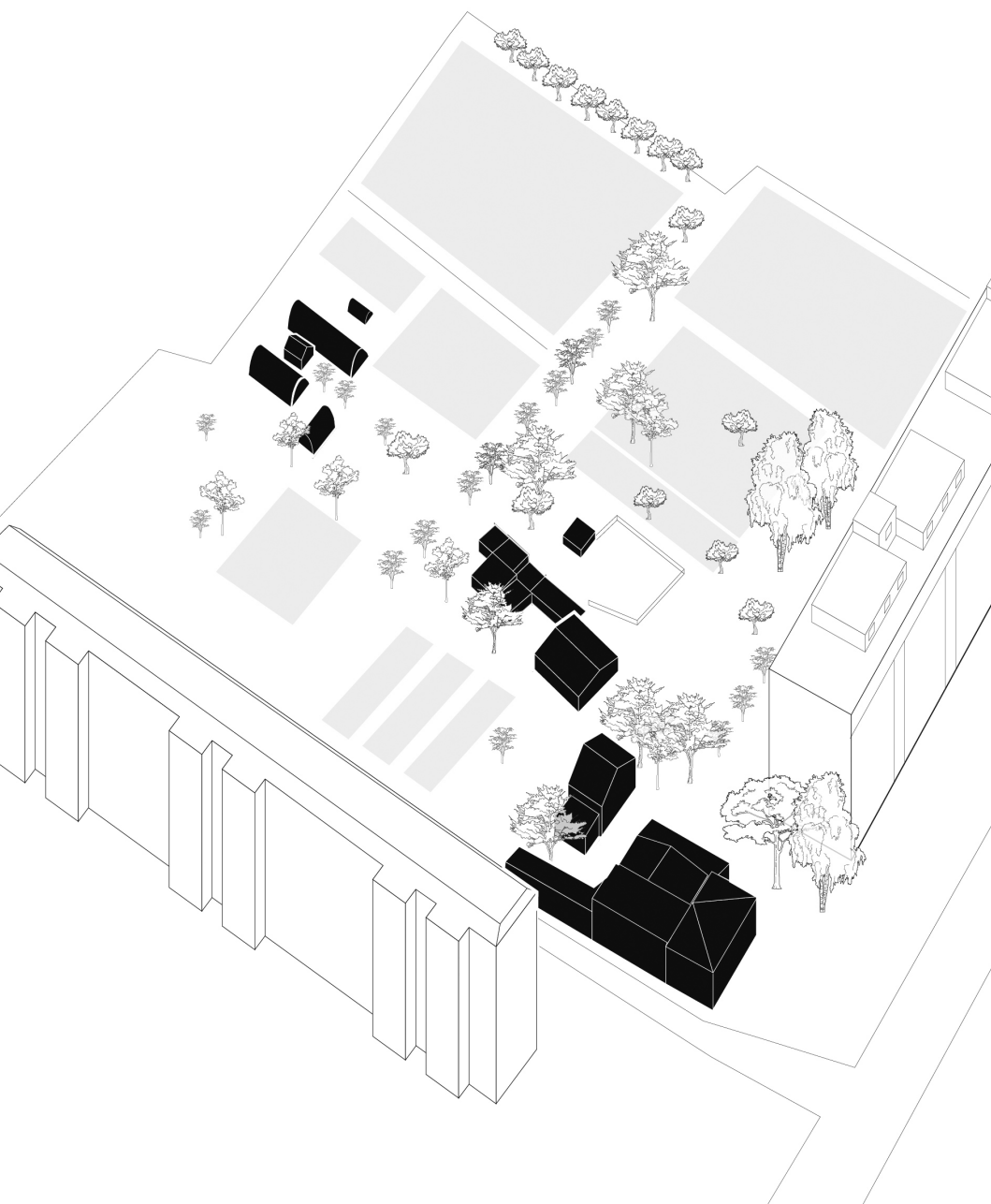
As mentioned previously, subaltern landscapes encompass a diverse spectrum of planning and design.

They can be entirely informal, adapting to contingent con-

Fig 01 View of *Comunità delle Piagge*, Florence.
Drawing by Nadia Bertolino, 2023.



Fig 02 *Fattoria dei Ragazzi*, collectively managed urban farm at Isolotto social housing neighbourhood, Florence. Drawing by Nadia Bertolino, 2023.



ditions, expanding or shrinking through iterative, incremental or decremental processes. However, they can also arise from a precise, site-specific design approach stemming from architects' engagement with local contexts and processes. An interesting recent instance is the Holy See Pavilion by Studio Albori titled *Social Friendship: meeting in the garden* at the XXVIII Architecture Biennale in Venice (Fig 03) (Fig 04). A lemon treehouse, a chicken coop, a seed store, and the parasols: these are entirely crafted from waste materials collected from a former construction site, then repaired, upcycled, re-assembled to create a communal garden and orchard. The botanical elements engage in a dialogue with the architectural components scattered throughout, engendering a sense of intimacy and inviting social interaction.

The subaltern landscapes under consideration, whether they emerge as spontaneous outcomes of collective labour or as deliberate design interventions, foster multi-species microcosms wherein novel, occasionally fragile, correspondences take shape. Their thresholds can range from hazy and permeable to well-defined, yet in all cases, they delineate the borders of unforeseen spaces: the urban terrarium evolves into both a reservoir of collective life and a venue for experimental ecology simultaneously. Such thinking and practices showed the extent to which environmental thinking needs to take into account nature's absolute non-anthropocentric status, and to raise questions about the technological instrumentalization of natural systems. Armed with these enduring political frameworks, we can unveil the intricate political, material, and temporal relationships that have led to the designation of our era as the 'anthropocene'—a geological epoch characterized by the significant impact of human interference on the planet's ecosystems. This comprehension facilitates the development of optimistic and sustainable futures, addressing various levels of society, from the built environment and urban landscape to the human, corporeal, and biological realms.

Fig 03 Detail of the sitting area in the communal orchard designed by Studio Albori as part of the Holy See Pavilion "Social Friendship: meeting in the garden" at the XXVIII Architecture Biennale in Venice.
Drawing by Nadia Bertolino, 2023.

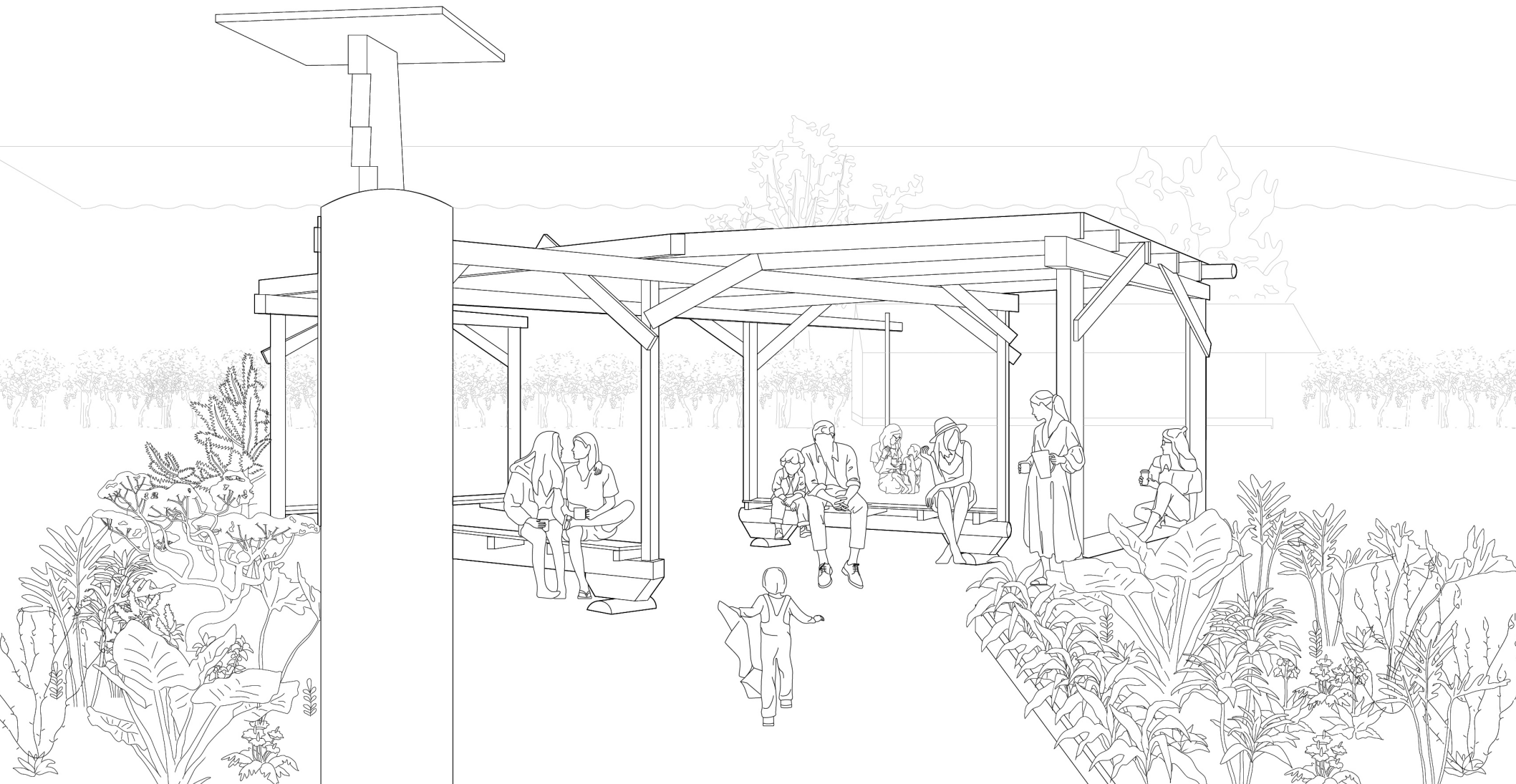


Fig 04 Detail of the communal orchard designed by Studio Albori as part of the Holy See Pavilion “Social Friendship: meeting in the garden” at the XXVIII Architecture Biennale in Venice. Photo by Nadia Bertolino, 2023.



In her guest lecture at the Sheffield School of Architecture in November 2014, Peg Rawes defined Agnes Denes's Wheatfield as a paradigm of what she describes as a “relational architectural ecology.” Rawes emphasized that within this site-specific artwork, various subjects are encompassed, including geometry, economics, urbanism, history, crisis, resources, and aesthetics/colour field (referred to by Denes as ‘amber field’). According to Rawes, relational architectural ecologies “are the diverse concrete and ephemeral spatiotemporal habits, patterns and rhythms of daily life which individuals, communities and societies develop within their cultural contexts and milieus. They are the critical, poetic, political and ethical strategies and imaginaries through which new spaces and places of occupation and inhabitation can be constructed. They are the economic, technological and material constructions of western culture, of digital and global organization, and in this respect they are not always necessarily positive relations.” In P. Rawes (edited by), *Relational Architectural Ecologies. Architecture, Nature and Subjectivity*. Routledge, London 2013, p. 11.



On the relevance of the *Silent Revolution* conceptual framework to understand the role played by grassroots movements and the civic society in shaping the urban environment, see also N. Bertolino, *Architects of the “Silent Revolution”: Empowering Local Communities through Commons-Based Resilience Strategies*, in “New Geographies: Commons”, Vol. 12, Harvard University Press, 2022.



The pioneering project in this case is “*R-Urban*” by Atelier d’Architecture Autogerée in Paris: a bottom-up strategy that aims to enhance the capacity of urban resilience by initiating a network of resident-run facilities. R-Urban sets up locally closed agricultural and, more broadly, ecological cycles that will support the emergence of alternative models of living, producing and consuming. See also: C. Petcou, D. Petrescu, *Co-produced Urban Resilience: A Framework for Bottom-Up Regeneration*, in “Architectural Design”, 88, 5, 2018, pp. 58-65.