MESH Leaf III.3
Project Reports from the Environmental Humanities
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"Creoling" Residual Spaces

Creole Gardens was part of the *Multispecies Storytelling Pop-up Exhibition* on October 19, 2024 in Cologne, Germany. The exhibition featured the works of participants in the Autumn Academy for Planetary Wellbeing organized by MESH, EUniWell, and BRIDGES.

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Enmeshments

The project presented here navigated ideas that explored multispecies conviviality in urban more-than-human environments, with a view to enhancing planetary wellbeing as a whole. Imploring a multidisciplinary approach, we used the group's varied expertise in the fields of Special Needs Education (Katrin), Philosophy (Daniel), Geography (Thomas), Environmental Humanities (Solveig & Charlotte), as well as English Literature & Multi-/Intermedia (Yağmur) to guide us during the process.

Creative Process

From the beginning, we considered garden concepts around conviviality and adaption for our project, as well as the various interactions in gardening, mainly around food production and the mixing of cultures and species, which could showcase the potential of gardens to serve as sites of cultural exchange and ecological diversity. We thought about how different spaces reflect our heritage and identity, linking them to diasporic communities and their unique relationships with the land, the importance of diverse ecosystems in shared green spaces as well as the themes of responsibility and sustainability going with it.

Different ideas of community gardens were discussed, focussing on what would make our concept unique and culminating in our final idea to spotlight human and non-human diversity, expressed through combining the concept of Creole Gardens with Residual Spaces. Following a brief description of both main concepts, our thinking together of them as well as our thinking further through an inter-

active, participatory presentation of our ideas will be explained.

Creole Gardens

The origins of Creole Gardens are deeply rooted in a combination of agricultural traditions. They draw from the practices of the Caribbean's Indigenous peoples — Arawaks, Taínos, and Kalinagos — who engaged in shifting cultivation and extended fallow periods to maintain soil fertility. These techniques ensured sustainable food production while preserving ecological balance. During the colonial era, enslaved Africans, relying on agricultural knowledge carried from their homelands, cultivated small plots of land granted to them by colonizers. These gardens became essential for supplementing food rations and providing medicinal plants, fostering resilience and self-sufficiency within enslaved communities. Over time, Creole Gardens evolved into complex agroecosystems, shaped by diverse influences and adapted to local environmental and social conditions.

Initially developed as subsistence gardens, Creole Gardens now serve multiple purposes: they function as sources of food and medicinal herbs, as well as communal gathering spaces. Beyond their practical utility, they also hold ornamental and protective functions, with specific plants used to delineate space and sometimes imbued with symbolic or spiritual significance.

With rural exodus and increasing urbanization, a notable shift has occurred, resulting in a fragmentation between the traditional rural Creole Garden and its urban counterpart. Nevertheless, contemporary movements are working to restore these agricultural practices. Community-driven initiatives, such as the association *Lasoté* — which promotes collective land cultivation — reflect an emerging desire for cultural and ecological reclamation.

As the French Overseas Territories continue to face ecological and economic challenges, the resurgence of Creole Gardens represents a crucial step toward reclaiming sovereignty over land and food production. These gardens, once relegated to the margins, now stand as vital spaces for resilience, adaptation, and cultural continuity.

Residual Spaces

Cities are a complex arena of interactions, movements, and social changes. While the usual urban design approaches focus on macro-transformations which require time and important investments to be finalized, there is

Figure 1

another dimension of small transformations that can rely on reclaiming parts of urban land. This presents an important opportunity for cities to engage local communities and implement bottom-up strategies.

Such reclaimable land parts are generally referred to as Residual Spaces, being defined as a category of open spaces that exist in our urban context but are rarely considered by urban designers (Dagher et al., 2022). Despite the general associated idea of places of degradation and dirt, those places can be framed in a strategy of requalification of the city itself, greening, and community bonding.

Having said that, in Winterbottom's studies on Residual Spaces, as stated by Khalil and Eissa (2013), three main types of such spaces can be identified, providing a broad overview of how these spaces are categorized and how they can be used. These types are "non-spaces," "leftover spaces," and "dual-use spaces." The defining characteristic of "non-spaces" is their close proximity to movement corridors, such as median strips and rights-of-way along highways and roads. "Dual-use spaces," on the other hand, are urban areas that serve a specific function at certain times but remain underutilized at others, such as parking lots that are largely vacant after business hours. Lastly, "leftover spaces" refer to unplanned or unstructured areas that are disconnected from their surroundings, including irregularly shaped spaces near intersections, setback frontages, and traffic islands.

Figure 2

Focusing on the issue of green spaces, the need for greenery is increasingly recognized as a crucial element of urban wellbeing as the urban population grows. In that way, through a bottom-up strategy, the use and reappropriation of urban "leftovers" can turn into an important engine of re-greening the city, while improving the sense of community and creating a series of positive effects in the entire neighbourhood. Residual Spaces can therefore be a popular element in town without even being recognized as such. Using these resources in a fruitful way can be an important vehicle for cities to improve their green public areas, while fostering community engagement and social responsibility.

Participatory Presentation

Walking through the city of Cologne, we looked for such overlooked, un- or underused spaces (Figures 1 & 2) and imagined how they could be differently used or transformed using the concept of Creole Gardens. We used the latter concept to emphasise cultural diversity through species selection and community building, stressing accessibility and inclusivity, and the concept of Residual Spaces to focus on biodiversity and human-nature-relationships. We wanted to reclaim lost spaces to benefit local populations, transforming them to enhance multispecies as well as human mental wellbeing. Imagining "feeding" into wellbeing, we wanted to create spaces for every being and need. This included feeding the mind through cultural awareness, perception, and spatial understanding of flora and fauna, fostering empathy toward our surroundings and providing shared

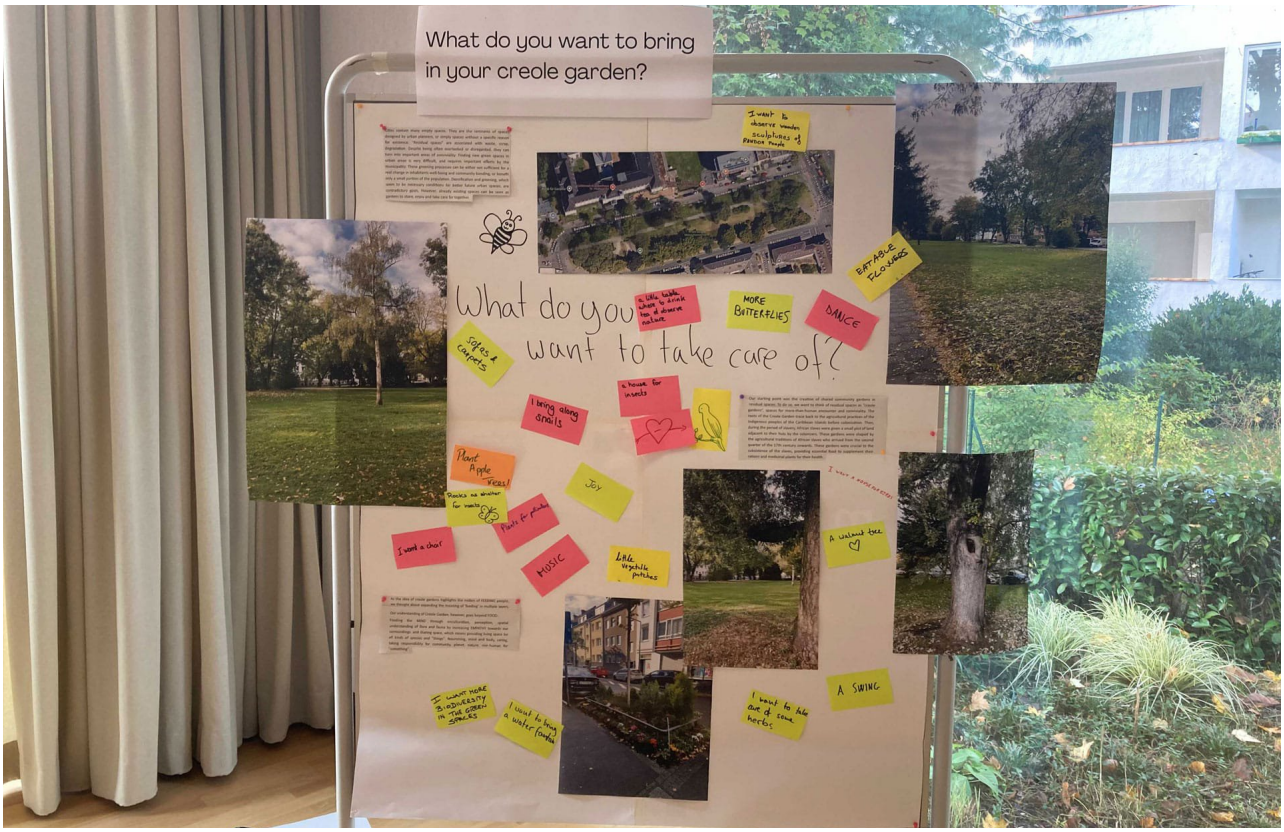

Figure 3

spaces for diverse species — species selected based on diverse cultural heritage and geographical belonging, creating a homely space for everyone. It was also about nourishing responsibility for community, planet, and non-human life. The ultimate goal was to invite people to imagine what they would like to do with these spaces, what they would care for. This participatory approach, expressed through an interactive presentation of our idea (Figure 3), encouraged collective reflection and community involvement to foster a sense of belonging and to encourage a deeper connection to the land.

"Creoling" urban Residual Spaces in coordination with local residents and their needs as well as multispecies conviviality thus seems a promising approach to enhance the mental and physical wellbeing of all beings involved, making it worthy of further thought and study in the future.

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