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A kitchen garden in the middle of concrete: UFRGS research analyzes the

Ana Clara Aparecida Alves de Souza has spent two years accompanying the Collective Ant Farm (Horta Coletiva da Formiga), located in the Historic Center of Porto Alegre. The thesis approaches the urban agriculture in the contemporary world as a complex and multifaceted movement

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By Nicole Trevisol

A community farm at the side of General João Manoel stairs way, the [Collective Ant Farm](#) can be reached by climbing the stairs all the way through Fernando Machado Street or going down through Duque de Caxias Street. Right in the heart of the Historical Center of Porto Alegre, this steep terrain is surrounded by buildings, traffic and passersby that go up and down the stairs – which are historically used by homeless people looking for shelter.

Renewed, the access to the farm now has colorful stairs and, in order to get there, you just have to stop at the shell and turn to the left (for those who are going up the stairs). The scenery is beautiful, the walking under the afternoon shade is agreeable and the place is safer.

In the popular imagination, when you hear about a kitchen garden, you think of a plain terrain, flower beds filled with cabbages, carrots, green spices, some fruitful trees, without fences and in the open. At the time you get to the Ant kitchen garden, this ideal falls apart. In order to get access to the space, one has to open a padlock, head into a narrow hallway and walk the pavement. The space, assigned for use through contract of lending made between the Ant Farm and the family owner of the area, was the study object of Doctor Ana Clara Aparecida Alves de Souza in her doctoral thesis that was defended in March 2019 at the [Graduate Program in Administration](#) (in Portuguese, PPGA – Programa de Pós-Graduação em Administração) of UFRGS.

Ana's line of research was Innovation, Technology and Sustainability. The goal was to investigate how main agents in an urban collective kitchen garden conciliate the inherent contradictions of this social field.

The thesis "The conciliation of inherent contradictions to the practice of collective urban agriculture" (*A conciliação de contradições inerentes à prática coletiva da agricultura urbana*, in Portuguese) approaches the urban agriculture in contemporaneity as a complex and multifaceted movement. For the author, cultivating a kitchen garden in an urban area is far more than planting and harvesting, it is developing a social laboratory. In her research, many aspects emerge as fundamental factors in defense of the urban agriculture: sustainability, resilience, rescue of community bonds, revitalization of idle spaces, public and private, reconnection with nature, food cultivation, occupational therapies, recreative and educational dynamics, disease treatments through medicinal plants and even the discovery of non-conventional edible plants.

"Urban agriculture is the practice of cultivation in cities or more densely populated spaces. It is not a new phenomenon, however in the contemporary world it has reached visibility. It grows, especially, with the migration of people from the countryside to make a living in the cities and it can be set up considering multiple questions: sustainability, resilience, right to the city, nourishment, reconnection or the first connection to the land, among other things," explains her.

This complex mechanism may involve parties as broad as public and private areas, organized communities and the unpretentious individual whose goal is to be in contact with the land work, a combination of synergies that makes of a community farm a not-so-easy task. Other pivotal points get into the discussion that are related to the cities and that need to be faced if one wants to build this connection/reconnection with the land. "There are people that seek these spaces as a way out or as a recollection of the past; others want the first contact with the land, or to make their children know where the food comes from, so they know how to enjoy an organic consumption. On the other hand, some concerns intrinsic to urban spaces are still in the way: the occupancy of this land by homeless people that are in need of a house, residents of the neighborhood that may be against the activity at the farm. In other words, the fact that the kitchen garden may occupy a private terrain poses a series of structural and social challenges that come first", says the researcher, who accompanied for two years, *in loco*, the Ant Farm.

Immersed in this universe, Ana sought to understand the organizational dynamics of the Ant Kitchen Garden, a project of collective urban agriculture, understanding its formation and its conception through a joined inquiry. The main question justifies a study in Management, since the objective was to investigate how the main characters of the farm conciliate the contradictions inherent to the social life and to the movement, ensuring that this movement remains. "My research looked at that group, who was aware of these contradictions, and studied how they mobilized themselves," Ana says. Supported by literature, the researcher points out that agriculture may be thought either in a more commendable way or in a more critical way, which seeks to assist a community and fulfil a social demand while it contradicts itself. "We stayed in this double movement: the farm grows inside a preexistent complex and contradictory social structure, and at the same time creates a solution to an urban issue and the possibility of a gentrification. This is a double faceted characteristic of urban agriculture that needs to be discussed," highlights Ana.

This contradiction is shown by the need of a padlock at the gate at the kitchen's garden entrance. These are concerns that happen at the day-to-day life of social interaction, inherent to our structure, and that are questioned by the P.h.D. researcher. So, the Ant Kitchen Garden is defined in the research as a social field, on Pierre Bourdieu's perspective, in which a relational analysis is made in this field without letting aside the relations of power and domination established. "There is a social dynamics, and I sought to identify how the conciliation of contradictions happens. I believe that scientific knowledge exists for this, to question, because you cannot move forward in knowledge through certainty, but through doubt. The farm showed that it goes beyond that terrain: there is a series of city concerns that surrounds it and that needs to be discussed," adds the researcher.

The scholar on the debate of the social conflict

The contact with homeless people and drug addicts, the fight against drug trafficking, the acceptance or rejection on the part of residents in its surrounding area, the occupancy of an idle urban area, among other conflicts, surrounded the creation of the Ant kitchen garden. In the end, a healthy relation between everyone was established through dialogue, donations, and the admission of people in joint efforts.

Research projects like Ana's have the potential to analyze these areas and take contributions to society. In the Ant Kitchen Garden case, it was possible to list a series of prospective concerns. "We have to think in a macro perspective to understand the phenomena; the scientific thought serves this purpose: I take part in that social movement, and I think. It is not about joining a perfect kitchen garden, but a social laboratory of inspiration and reflection," she says.

In these two different universes that dialogue with each other, there is the urban agriculture factor which goes beyond planting and harvesting, to effectively take social, communitarian and collective roles. Management is present in this space in the form of organization of the social organism, showing the researcher the problems present there, the social concerns. "The farm built the doctoral thesis, and I was transformed during the process, I was rebuilt as a citizen and as a researcher, says Ana.

Bringing this debate to UFRGS allows people to think of Management as an element of social life organization, which is a trend – like, for example, the management of the life of an individual. The main addition of the doctoral thesis is to think of the social movement from an organizational perspective and to analyze how these concerns on the social movement work and how people organize themselves to solve a problem.

To the PhD researcher, researchers need to be open-minded in order to see what the field is showing, what the problem is and how to think about it. "I remain in the kitchen garden as a volunteer and I analyze in which way I can take this life experience to the academic field, trying to promote this connection: academic life and outreach," concluded Ana.

Translated into English by Marina Benites da Rosa Ibaldo, under the supervision and translation revision of Elizamari R. Becker (PhD) – IL/UFRGS.



Picture: Rochele Zandavalli/Secom-UFRGS

