

Preface

This book was written as part of the activities of the Research Network “Sustainable Development of Cities: the Relationship between City-Dwellers and Nature”.¹ It is based:

1. on the results of research conducted in Russia and France since 1999 on “The Use of Urban and Suburban Soils for the Sustainable Development of Cities”.² It was realized from October 2009 to September 2012 thanks to an agreement signed with the GESSOL programme of the French Ministry of Ecology, Energy, Sustainable Development and the Sea (MEEDDEM)
2. on the initial results of research conducted since October 2013 on the countries of the European Union entitled “The Relationship Between City-Dwellers and Soils: How to use Urban and Periurban Soils to Face the Urban Challenge?”, thanks to an agreement signed with the Snowman Network³.

This research is currently being conducted in Paris at the Mixed Research Unit (UMR) 7206 “Eco-Anthropology and Ethnobiology”, which brings together researchers from the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS) and the National Museum of Natural History.

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Heal the World

“But let us cultivate our garden”, concludes Voltaire’s *Candide* in 1759. The period conveyed the image of a universe given over to chaos. The earthquake that destroyed Lisbon on 1 November 1755 killed between 50,000 and 100,000 people.

¹ <http://www.latio.org/index.html>

² <http://www.gessol.fr/content/l-utilisation-des-sols-urbains-et-periurbains-pour-le-developpement-durable-des-villes>

³ Snowman Network - Knowledge For Sustainable Soils. The others participants in this research are the Soil and Water Systems Department of Gembloux Agro-Bio Tech (University of Liège, Belgium) and the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (Netherlands).

The Seven Years War (1756–1763) was ravaging parts of Europe. Serfdom persisted in Europe and slavery in the colonies. In France, the absolute power of the king remained, as did religious intolerance and the Inquisition.

The philosophers of the Age of Enlightenment explored the ways of a different world. They believed it necessary to look for truth through the free exercise of reason, to change modes of government, to emancipate the people, and to organise life differently.

Having travelled the world, seen all the insults, Candide meets an old man and his family in Turkey. They live peacefully without worrying about the goings-on in the capital. “I have no more than twenty acres of ground”, said the man, “the whole of which I cultivate myself with the help of my children; and our labour keeps off from us three great evils—idleness, vice, and want.” Candide’s conclusion that we must cultivate our garden refers both to effort and to the way towards a better life.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Russia also conveyed the image of a universe given over to chaos: the First World War spilled over into a civil war, religious and political repression, the destruction of the peasantry, deportations, gulag, famine, the Second World War, and further famines. It is in this context that the particular form of urban agriculture developed that is known as the urban allotment garden.

The old man met by Candide cultivated twenty acres. Russian urban gardens are smaller. They cannot meet all a family’s needs, but help survival in periods of economic hardship and crisis. The old man and his family spent their entire lives far from world affairs. Russian families stay in their garden a part of the weekends and holidays. Cultivating the garden requires efforts that are perceived differently according to individuals and the period of life. But for those who dedicate themselves to it, the garden and dacha help to relieve stress, encouraging relaxation and improving the quality of life. A new civil right won under the Soviet regime, this form of urban agriculture heals the wounds of the past, strengthens social resilience, and contributes to building a peaceful world. It thus contains a universal significance in that it supplies references to healing the world.

The current world is affected by many evils and threats. All societies are unsettled by mutations of a scale and a speed that is exceptional in history: population growth, urbanisation and destruction of the peasantry, the rise of major ecological challenges, globalisation of the economy, finance, organised crime, terrorism. Nobody knows whether food production will keep pace with the increase in the population of the planet, whether the current global economic crisis will be overcome, or whether it will be possible to control the environmental and social consequences of climate change.

Developing urban agriculture may be one way to cope with these troubles and threats, as it has been in Russia since the Second World War. It is not a question of trying to transpose the Russian urban gardening model, notably allotment gardens, to all countries. This model grew out of a very specific history. But by studying this phenomenon and drawing comparisons with other national experiences such as that of France, we can see far and wide, to formulate audacious proposals.

These proposals are based on a new understanding of the natural needs of apartment dwellers. They prompt a critical look at how to develop the relationship between urban living and nature in the modern city, especially in major metropolises. They underlie several proposals for advancing the theory of urban agriculture that has been built since the Brundtland Report entitled “Our Common Future”, written in 1987 by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development.



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Lessons and Prospects

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