
Exploration of Values through the 'Urban Farming Cultivation Generator'

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Abstract

This project combines a focus on values and norms regarding a phenomenon: urban farming, with the practicalities of growing vegetables. We have developed three prototypes: a dystopian, a sweet and soft and one oriented towards foodies and food culture.

Author Keywords

Sustainability; Urban Farming; Values in Design

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous

Introduction

For the past two years we have been conducting field studies of urban farms and farmers in various cities in various countries (Sweden, England, Germany, Poland, and Estonia). In our definition of urban farming we are interested in the cooperative nature of these groups and the lack of ownership. We have come to view urban farmers as early adopters of future food practices that are more sustainable and that act out ideas about the urban environment. We have, however, also noticed some challenges in the urban farms we studied and we have derived those to knowledge exchange and motivation for the involvement in urban farms.

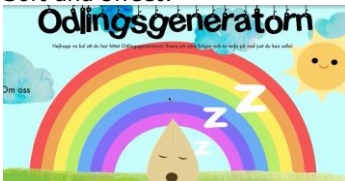
From interviews:

"Then we pulled off a pretty big project right away. Because we understood that... But I didn't realize then that there are so few who can grow crops. But I thought huh fun, we knock on the neighbors doors [and ask them to participate], and they were all in, [which was] great fun, but the first year, it was a shock that people were so ignorant in cultivation. Not only that, but people do not know that you should fertilize or water in certain ways, and things like that. So there were very many insights there."

Dystopia:



Soft and sweet:



Food culture:



Design explorations

Based on this result, we wanted to explore how design could be instrumental in supporting the practical work as well as the values surrounding the movement. We had two points of departure:

- Difficult practice
- Difficult to keep engagement when results, i.e. crops, are scarce or absent

One of the reasons for the difficulty to keep up the engagement is the vague goals of some of these groups within the urban farming movement. Here we identified three types of motivation for urban farming:

- Sustainability and/or social activism
- Food production
- Recreational/lifestyle activity

The most successful farms we studied turned some deliberate attention towards on the outcome, i.e. food produce. We wanted to compare various design ideas to express different values as well as provide some practical help on what to grow based on personal prerequisites. Hence, the idea was not to solve a problem but use design as a research tool for understanding how design can be motivational and support the movement. The functionality aims at suggesting what vegetables that can be grown based on the users' specific circumstances.

The **dystopian** prototype is designed to be irrational, dysfunctional and somewhat annoying in its graphic expression. It tries to break with conventions of convenience and utility. It connotes darkness and emptiness, both in terms of scarceness in food and of people populating the world it operates in. The dystopian prototype operates in the domain of guerilla gardening, but moves away from "nature", rather, it is focused on food and the access to food.

The **soft and sweet** prototype elaborates on and plays with the view of growing as romanticized practice for recreational purposes, growing as something endearing, clean and simple, as opposed to the actual practice, which is also hard and dirty. The visual expression is soft and sweet to the point where it is childish and childlike. It follows a growing seed in the soil, moving upwards in the dirt. Growing is the goal in itself, not food production, and growing is used as a lifestyle marker in this design.

Lastly, the **food culture** prototype explores growing for cooking purposes. The urban farming is a means to produce food; the final result is good quality food on a plate. The user gets a suggestion on what to cook, from the prerequisites given to the Urban Farming Generator. The visual expression of the food culture prototype is borrowed from a traditional restaurant expression, the bistro.

Preliminary Results

These designs have been used as discussion pieces with various user groups. Above all we have been interested in the values that the users read into the designs. We have used a 'reverse persona' method to collect data, i.e. providing the design and ask users to write a persona. We have also asked them to do mood boards. The analysis is ongoing, but so far, we notice that:

- The three designs generate quite different narratives about urban farming although the functionality is the same.
- The users interpret the designs in relation to previous understanding and ongoing discourses in society.
- Through contrast, the three designs help to articulate how design can reproduce and destabilize norms and values.

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