

TOUCHING THE SOIL, CULTIVATING A COMMON HOME: A LIVED EXPERIMENT IN REGENERATIVE EDUCATION

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Abstract

This proposal recounts the experience of establishing a volunteer-led community garden founded in April 2023 on a university campus in Madeira. Born from a felt need by a diverse group of students and teachers, our aim was to find a physical home for a learning community dedicated to ecological and social issues. The objective is to explore how the campus space can function as a collaborative "third space" that nurtures regenerative agriculture, interdisciplinary exchange, and social cohesion through shared experience. In our weekly co-creation sessions, we meet as a mixed group of students, teachers, and neighbors to navigate a fluid process of learning together. We embrace a horizontal dynamic where research occurs through experiments, failures, and the repetitive act of returning to the same soil every week. Activities range from artistic workshops and practical tasks to the conscious decision to deconstruct the pressure to produce: the garden is a place to work, but also to rest, do nothing, and simply observe. By physically creating this Common Space, we observe the dynamics between environmental care and our own well-being, transforming the garden into a tool for ubiquitous and continuous learning. Reflecting on our shared experience as volunteers, one of our most vital findings is the value of rest and connection. We experience the garden as a safe space where the pressure to constantly produce is replaced by a culture of mutual care. We observe that "getting our hands dirty" facilitates conversations that rarely happen in seminar rooms, as shared manual tasks lower social barriers. Furthermore, the process of regenerating the land and the permission to make mistakes fosters a tangible sense of belonging and purpose. Transversal skills such as observation, patience, problem-solving, and interdisciplinary teamwork are thus cultivated alongside flowers, aromatic herbs and vegetables. With this project, we explore the idea that pedagogic quality does not always require high-tech tools; sometimes, it requires a hoe and compost. Through this lived practice, we embody principles of regenerative education, cultivating sustainability rooted in shared responsibility for our common environment. Ultimately, the garden is not merely an aesthetic choice or a leisure activity, but a supportive instrument for sustainable developments in education, positioning itself as an infrastructure for a resilient, interdisciplinary, and healthy shared future.

Keywords: *Community garden, learning community, regenerative practice, public space, salutogenic design.*

1. Introduction

This paper recounts and reflects on the experience of being part of a community garden, Mãos na Terra (MNT). MNT is a project born of a collective and organic effort, involving the people who have gradually become part of it, each bringing their own perspectives, ideas, and suggestions. Although it originated within a university that supports and backs it, this experience is not an institutional educational program. Instead, it is a space open to both the academic and non-academic community, and open to anyone who wishes to participate, regardless of age or background. It functions as a meeting place, a public space, as well as a shared, free of charge, environment for lifelong learning.

Situated on the island of Madeira, our community is embedded in a landscape shaped by more than six hundred years of resource extraction, from the historical sugar revolutions (Moore, 2009) to the contemporary pressures of overtourism. Today, the ecological precarity of this environment is acutely visible through intensifying cycles of fires and floods. This trajectory has established a profound metabolic rift (Foster, 1999) where societal demands often operate in contradiction to the biological limits of the earth. These limits are particularly tangible on an island (Borgnino, 2022). In the contemporary context, we observe a painful paradox: while the island is marketed globally as a pristine sanctuary where tourists go to rest, residents are increasingly subjected to demands for high-speed efficiency and constant production.

These systemic pressures manifest through a severe housing crisis and growing social isolation. As land prices skyrocket and rural areas depopulate, more and more residents are losing access to the earth. These challenges the boundaries of the island while reaching the limits of human resilience.

Within the university environment, we observe that the exhaustion of the landscape is directly mirrored in the faces of our community. The soil erosion on the steep ravines and the failing crops in local fields serve as biological mirrors for the systemic fatigue experienced within performance-driven educational systems. The metabolic rift in the earth is directly entangled with the physical exhaustion of our own bodies. This condition is a symptom of a systemic imbalance: a perspective that demands infinite growth from both finite soils and finite human nervous systems. When students, neighbors, or teachers experience burnout, or when a harvest fails, we learn to see that these are not personal failures. They are interconnected symptoms of environmental degradation and a cycle of extractive productivity operating at industrial speeds. Recognizing this collective exhaustion reinforces our need to physically come back down to earth, finding a grounded orientation in the soil itself (Latour, 2018). Because human fatigue and ecological collapse are rooted in the same mindset, we recognize that they must be addressed together.

In April 2023, the community garden *Mãos na Terra* emerged as an initiative rooted within the university. We recognized a shared desire among students, teachers, and neighbors to establish a physical home for a learning community (hooks, 2003) focused on ecological inquiry and well-being. The project was founded to create a space where environmental questions could be explored deeply, while simultaneously providing a sanctuary for rest and mental health. Through our ongoing work, the garden has become an environment for our own lived experiments in human connection and ecological care. By opening this porous common space, we sought to build a bridge between the university campus and the neighborhood. This experiment has been characterized by mutual support between the project and the institution, allowing for a shared exploration of what it means to care for a common environment.

2. Methodology: Regenerative pedagogy and ecological mirrors

In response to the shared exhaustion across the campus, city and island, our intention was to cultivate a culture of collective care. We acknowledge that meaningful learning requires periods of stillness and observation. Through the act of planting and sitting with open questions together, we discover that the health of the community is intimately linked to the health of the soil. The physical home of our project is a previously unused corner within Quinta de São Roque, a property owned by the university situated five minutes on foot from the main campus. Until November 2025, when the construction of new student dormitories began, the grounds served as an easily accessible green space for the community. Amidst the noise and the physical reshaping of the wider grounds, our garden project continues to occupy a humble niche within this estate, functioning as a civic pedagogy space on the margins of the institution (Antaki et al., 2024). In this space, our learning community becomes a tangible "third space" where the formal boundaries of the institution soften (Sletto et al., 2024). It serves as a neutral, shared ground where international students seeking a connection to their temporary home can share tools and conversations horizontally with university staff and lifelong neighbors. We operate on a principle of equality of knowledge, observing how the deeply rooted knowledge of the territory meets diverse global perspectives in this shared soil. Building upon our physical presence in the garden, we frame our pedagogical approach through the lens of regenerative cultures (Wahl, 2016). We view agroecology (Wezel et al., 2009) not merely as a collection of agricultural techniques but as a vital social and cultural bridge. Just as companion planting creates mutually beneficial networks within the soil, our shared tasks weave together ecological awareness and cultural exchange. By shifting our focus away from the familiar demands of extractive productivity, we cultivate a practice of regenerative participation. Working closely with the natural rhythms of the seasons teaches us the art of delayed gratification. We learn that placing a seed into the earth is a profound exercise in intergenerational responsibility. Through this integrated approach, the act of tending to the garden simultaneously tends to our shared social fabric. This approach did not begin with a formal academic plan. Instead, it emerged organically from our shared physical routines in the garden, anchoring our learning directly in the local environment (Gruenewald, 2003) and acknowledging that our collective knowledge grows from practical engagement with the living world (Ingold, 2000). We are guided by what can be called the principle of ecological mirrors, allowing the physical realities of the natural world to reflect and inform our social dynamics.

As we work with the earth, we learn to recognize a necessary distinction between sustainability, restoration, and regeneration. Sustainability often seeks to maintain a current baseline, yet we observe that both our soil and our collective energy are already depleted. Restoration implies returning to a fixed point in the past, often communicating the assumption that we know exactly what nature needs. Instead, our shared practice focuses on regeneration, which requires us to actively build fresh capacity within a degraded system. We position ourselves not as commanders of the landscape but as active participants within the

more-than-human world. We find a powerful ecological mirror for this regenerative pedagogy in the practice of syntropic farming (Andrade et al., 2020). Pioneered by Ernst Götsch, this agricultural model actively replaces the logic of extraction with the logic of systemic abundance. On our island, we look to the ancient Laurissilva forest (Fernández-Palacios et al., 2017) as a local guide for these complex dynamics. In a syntropic system, diverse plant species are intentionally placed together not to compete, but to mutually support each other through continuous cooperation. Learning from this ecological dynamic also means that we are actively welcoming spontaneous plants and weeds, gently challenging the urge to strictly control the landscape. We apply this principle directly to our social structure to foster a deep sense of belonging and inclusion. By welcoming students, teachers, and neighbors to work side by side, we cultivate a human polyculture that shapes the garden into a common space. In this shared environment, living in plurality also means embracing unplanned, messy human dynamics rather than seeking a perfectly curated community. Beneath the soil, a healthy ecosystem relies on an interconnected network of roots and fungi to share water and vital nutrients. We guide our shared project through open dialogue, where collective action emerges from being deeply present together. The daily choices regarding our small corner of the estate are shaped collaboratively by those whose hands are actively in the dirt. By allowing decisions to surface organically from the collective conversation, we nurture a shared sense of responsibility that translates our shared reflections into grounded, tactile practice.

3. Lived experience: The messiness of the garden and the right to rest

Putting these regenerative principles into practice requires us to accept that our garden is not a closed, perfectly controlled environment. Our commitment to a tactile methodology is continuously tested by the shifting realities of the campus around us. For example, since November 2025, a construction site has been established on the wider grounds of the property to build new student housing. This new physical reality required us to reevaluate our presence and the frequency of our gatherings. The weekday noise and the activity on the site prompted a shift in our collective rhythm. Just as a plant might adjust its growth in response to changing conditions in its environment, we organically adapted our schedule to maintain the quality of our shared space. We transitioned our activities from weekly Friday afternoons to biweekly Sunday sessions, extending the duration of each gathering to allow for deeper observation and connection. We recognize that maintaining a sanctuary within a changing university environment is an ongoing practice that requires constant patience and a resilience built on responsive boundaries. This subtle shift helps us navigate the friction between the high speed of institutional development and the slow, observational pace of the garden (Maffei, 2014; Orr, 1996). We endeavor to find a balance between these two worlds, attempting to weave the reality of a growing university into our own practice of stillness. When we encounter unexpected disruptions, we try to take a breath and observe what happens before rushing to control the situation. We slowly learn to inhabit a space that is simultaneously a construction zone and a place of rest. We find that the true value of our project lies in this persistence of care (Krasny, 2024), where we do our best to defend a space for reflection while the world around us is in flux. This physical friction with the high-speed development around us naturally forced us to deeply reevaluate our own internal rhythms. In observing the natural cycles of the small piece of land, we recognize that constant growth is biologically impossible. Just as the physical geography of our island possesses clear and finite boundaries, our human energy has strict natural limits. We translate this ecological reality into our social practice by defending an absolute right to rest. We consciously reduce the pressure to perform and produce; instead, we embrace periods of intentional stillness.

In conventional settings, resting is often viewed as a brief pause between tasks. However, when we observe a field lying fallow, we understand that the soil is engaged in deep and vital work, slowly replenishing its nutrients for future seasons. We apply this principle directly to our community by defending the right to sit quietly together without the need to produce a tangible outcome. By accepting the limits of our own influence, we maintain an environment where learning is sustained by mutual care. In this way, the garden organically functions as a space of salutogenic design (Antonovsky, 1987; Peters & D'Penna, 2020). However, we intentionally avoid framing this rest as a clinical tool for mental recovery merely to prepare us for more work. Instead, this stillness serves as the fundamental birthplace of political and ecological imagination. In a world where mainstream narratives often suggest that everything is inevitably violent or already lost (Krenak, 2019), taking the time to rest and imagine together becomes a necessary act for building emotional resilience and a common home.

4. Discussion: The invisible harvest and horizontal knowledge

When we evaluate the outcomes of our time in the dirt, we look beyond the physical plants we manage to grow. In any natural ecosystem, the most vital processes often occur beneath the surface, where

roots and organic matter quietly build the long-term fertility of the soil. We observe a similar dynamic within our learning community, a phenomenon we describe as the invisible harvest. Frequently, our actual crops do not survive due to degraded soil, a plant being in the wrong place, or our own lack of practical experience. However, we notice that these literal losses still provide profound nourishment for our group. The true yield of our shared practice is not measured in baskets of produce. Instead, it is found in the moments of quiet connection, the patience cultivated during a difficult season, and the trust established among our diverse group of volunteers. As we slow down to the rhythm of the earth, we experience a renewed sense of ecological literacy (Orr, 1992). We begin to understand our environmental responsibility not as an abstract theory, but as an embodied reality, recognizing the deep interconnectedness of all life through the lens of interbeing (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2013). This perspective aligns with the work of Arturo Escobar and colleagues (2024), who emphasize that recognizing the deep relational webs of our world is essential for nurturing new ways of living together. We observe how the repetitive act of tending to the earth gently tends to the social fabric of our group. Even when the physical garden remains messy and the visible yield might seem small, this unseen harvest leaves our community more resilient and deeply rooted in the physical reality of Madeira. The island experiences a constant flow of temporary arrivals. Within the structural framework of the university, exchange students often interact with the broader geography of the island primarily through observation. They might treat the surrounding physical landscape as a beautiful but distant background for their academic studies. Our small garden occupies a distinct space where these different realities intersect. It serves as a tangible bridge connecting the transient energy of the campus directly to the soil of the local neighborhood. Tending to the dirt creates an opportunity for a transition from transient to inhabitant (Orr, 1992). When international volunteers gather to move dirt alongside lifelong neighbors, their connection to the island changes. Like a transplanted cutting that slowly extends fresh roots to sense the local soil chemistry, these temporary residents develop a tactile attachment to the place. This observation resonates with what Tim Ingold (2011) notes about inhabiting a world, where true understanding grows from continuous and direct participation in an environment rather than passive viewing.

We learn to see our shared space as a living piece nestled right between the mountains, the forest, and the sea. This growing awareness of the wider ecosystem extends beyond the boundaries of the property when we leave to walk together on group hikes. Moving through the landscape as a collective (Bertolotti et al., 2024; Gros, 2014) helps everyone comprehend how our local soil connects to the larger environmental rhythms of Madeira. As our community weaves international exchange students with local volunteers, our small garden becomes a site for cosmopolitan localism (Kossoff, 2019; Manzini, 2015). People from vastly different academic backgrounds and geographic origins bring their unique perspectives to the same physical space. When these diverse worldviews meet, we often encounter generative friction (Svare et al., 2023). Rather than viewing these moments of disconnect as failures, we approach them through the physical metaphor of a compost pile. In the same way we gather dead leaves and broken branches to slowly decay, we allow our misunderstandings and failed assumptions to break down into something useful. We watch how rigid theoretical frameworks soften when exposed to the daily messiness of the garden, a quiet process of epistemic composting that transforms friction into shared understanding. By letting our expectations decompose together, we engage in our own practice of regenerative participation. It is a tactile process of navigating uncertainty through shared action, where we learn to adapt and grow alongside the garden. We observe how our collective reflections slowly grow in the rich soil of our shared mistakes. This grounded approach functions as a form of transdisciplinary learning, which acts as a key leverage for sustainability transformations (Barth et al., 2023).

5. Conclusion: Soil porosity and the practice of gentleness

As we reflect on the broader educational value of our shared project, we consider how our localized space interacts with the larger institution. To understand this relationship, we observe the biological concept of soil porosity. Healthy soil requires open spaces to allow water and air to flow freely through the earth. We apply this ecological mirror to our relationship with the university. By maintaining a porous boundary, we invite ideas and volunteers to move organically between classrooms and our quiet garden. The university provides the structural support that allows this space for shared dialogue to exist. In return, our practice offers a grounded space for students to experience a different rhythm of learning (Orr, 1996), gently serving as a social infrastructure of care. We observe how careful and deliberate attention to local conditions can create more resilient systems and that a meaningful educational experience often emerges from small, quiet interactions. Like a patch of mycelium that connects specific elements of the forest floor, our community offers a subtle point of connection. When individuals spend time tending the dirt, they often carry that tactile perspective back into their own life. We realize that our goal is not to engineer a rigid solution for the deep systemic issues of society. Instead, we embrace a practice of gentleness, a deliberate choice to step

back, observe, and care for our immediate environment without demanding that it be perfectly fixed. By weaving two distinct modes of learning together, we learn how to live side by side as companions, experiencing together the natural cycles of growth and decay, and deeply feeling that we are an active part of nature. Through this shared presence in the dirt, we ensure that practical care and academic reflection continually nourish one another.

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