

ARTICLE

Urban oases and spatial injustices: Community gardens in the Cape Flats through a Lefebvrian lens

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Abstract

This study explores how community gardens in Cape Town's marginalised Cape Flats area enact spatial justice through everyday practices. I draw on Henri Lefebvre's ideas on the social production of space, especially the spatial triad (space as perceived, conceived, lived), to unpack how physical, ideological and symbolic dimensions of space intersect in these urban gardens. The findings underscore how community gardeners physically transform otherwise neglected land into 'perceived' spaces of cultivation, asserting spatial agency despite insecure tenure and limited infrastructure (water access, soil quality). In terms of 'conceived' space, gardeners negotiate and subvert top-down planning logics by repurposing school grounds and municipal reserves. Finally, gardens as 'lived' space emerge as sites of cultural reclamation and social cohesion, where crops, seed exchanges and collective action sustain memory and identity in the face of apartheid's legacies. However, persistent challenges, such as tenure precarity, resource scarcity and competing land-use pressures, threaten each garden's longevity. These findings are based on semi-structured interviews with representatives of 34 community gardens and key state actors, supplemented by documentary analysis of planning and policy frameworks. Gardens function as urban oases of resistance and resilience. Addressing urban gardens in the largely overlooked Global South context fills a critical gap in urban justice scholarship. High-impact urban planning should aim to help community gardens secure land tenure, embed them in formal spatial frameworks and recognise their multifunctional role in enhancing food security, cultural preservation and equitable urban transformation.

KEYWORDS

Cape Flats, community gardens, Global South, Lefebvre, social production of space, spatial justice

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Urban community gardens constitute dynamic socio-spatial assemblages where intersecting social, economic, ecological and spatial forces unfold (Ferrari et al., 2023; Rosol, 2018). These spaces play a pivotal role in enhancing urban resilience by bolstering local food production, improving environmental sustainability and mitigating the adverse effects of urbanisation. The provision of fresh, locally sourced produce reduces dependence on industrial food systems and long-distance transport networks, curbing carbon emissions and fostering ecologically grounded food practices (Mishra et al., 2024). The cultivation of diverse plant species also contributes to local biodiversity, supports urban ecosystems and mitigates the urban heat island effect, which is an increasingly pressing concern in climate-stressed cities (Khanpoor-Siahdarka & Masnavi, 2025).

Community gardens are also vital social infrastructures, cultivating community, solidarity and political possibility (Larsson & Nygren, 2024; McClintock et al., 2021). They are inclusive spaces that foster social interaction among residents from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, strengthening social cohesion and fostering reciprocal networks of mutual support (Rosol, 2012). They also function as living classrooms, offering experiential learning on sustainable agriculture, environmental stewardship and nutrition while cultivating agency and critical environmental consciousness (Egerer et al., 2024). Moreover, the embodied practices of gardening have been linked to improved mental and physical health, therapeutic benefits and overall well-being (Ferrari et al., 2023). At a broader urban scale, community gardens reclaim underutilised or marginalised land, transforming it into sites of collective value and everyday activism by subverting neoliberal urban logics (Eizenberg, 2012; Harvey, 2006). In this way they critique the commodification of urban space and open possibilities for more just and equitable urban futures.

While urban community gardens in North America and Europe have received considerable scholarly attention (Barron, 2017; Schmelzkopf, 2002), much less is known about how these gardens function in postcolonial, racially segregated and institutionally fragmented contexts in the Global South. Therefore, this study is rooted in Cape Town, a place where the material and symbolic stakes of spatial justice are particularly acute. It contributes to wider efforts to decolonise urban theory by foregrounding spatial practices from the Global South. The Cape Flats offer an empirically grounded and theoretically rich site for community gardening in a marginalised urban context. This historically disenfranchised region was shaped by apartheid-era forced removals and enduring socio-spatial inequalities. The Cape Flats are marked by insecure tenure, limited service provision and fragmented urban development (Rodina et al., 2024). In this context, community gardens serve as sites of spatial agency and transformation, where residents reassert control over land, resources and identity through everyday practices of cultivation.

To interrogate these dynamics, I apply Henri Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space, specifically his spatial triad (i.e. perceived, conceived and lived space). Lefebvre's framework allows for a multi-dimensional analysis of how community gardens simultaneously operate as physical spaces (perceived), as products of policy and ideology (conceived) and as symbolic environments imbued with meaning (lived). This approach offers a critical reading of how everyday gardening practices mediate broader struggles over space, power and urban citizenship. I also draw on David Harvey's (2006) relational interpretation of spatiality to further elucidate the fluid and contested nature of these processes.

To extend Lefebvrian thought to the specificities of the Global South and offer new insights into the everyday geographies of resistance and resilience, this article asks (1) how do urban community gardens in the Cape Flats contribute to the social production of space, (2) how do they challenge spatial injustices and institutional spatial logics and (3) how is Lefebvre's spatial triad reflected in gardeners' spatial practices and experiences? I employed a qualitative design involving semi-structured interviews with community gardeners and policy actors, accompanied by a document analysis of planning frameworks. The following sections outline Lefebvre's framework, expand on my methodology and then discuss my findings as they relate to each element of Lefebvre's spatial triad. The conclusion offers recommendations for practitioners and policy-makers.

2 | THE SPATIAL TRIAD

This study is rooted in Henri Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space. Lefebvre (1991) argued that space is not a neutral container or fixed backdrop but a socially produced and contested entity shaped by spatial practices, representations and lived experiences. His spatial triad (Table 1) comprising perceived space, conceived space and lived space provides a powerful framework for unpacking the complex spatialities of community gardens as sites of everyday resistance, transformation and resilience in marginalised urban contexts.

TABLE 1 Lefebvre's spatial triad.

	Perceived space	Conceived space	Lived space
Subjects	The working class, society in general	Urban planners, engineers, scientists, architects, technocrats	Passive users, general society
Objects	Locations, transport routes, undesirable and desirable spaces	Theory, plans, maps, ideology, images, signs, codes, knowledge	Art, culture, symbols, memories, images, social life
Activities	Daily activities, social relations	Planning, calculation, representation	Daily activities

Source: Adapted from Lefebvre (1991).

Lefebvre's theory is widely lauded for its ability to reveal the relational and political nature of space and how it is produced through interactions between material practice, dominant representations and lived experience (Fuchs, 2019). Several scholars have applied this triad to urban community gardens, albeit in Western contexts. Schmelzkopf (2002) employed the framework to understand how community gardens in New York City emerged as counter-hegemonic spaces contesting neoliberal redevelopment. Barron (2017) used it to explore how gardens cultivate spatial subjectivities and community resistance, while Eizenberg (2012) positioned gardens as 'actually existing commons' where lived spatial practices challenged dominant property logics. Larsson and Nygren's (2024) work linked Lefebvre's triad and Soja's concept of Thirdspace to foreground how allotment and community gardens in smaller Swedish cities become lived spaces imbued with personal meaning, transformative life events and socio-spatial norms. These studies demonstrate the triad's utility in revealing how spatial resistance unfolds through everyday practices in ostensibly apolitical spaces. However, this thinking remains notably absent on Global South contexts, where urban spatial production is deeply rooted in colonial legacies, informality, state neglect and socio-economic inequality.

Lefebvre's perceived space (spatial practice) refers to the material and embodied experiences of space, the tangible dimensions that structure daily activities, rhythms and social interactions (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33). Spatial practice is anchored in the physical, sensory experience of space and includes activities such as land preparation, planting, watering and harvesting. In the Cape Flats, this dimension manifests in how gardeners physically transform marginal or neglected land into productive and social spaces, thereby enacting their right to the city (Purcell, 2002; Carp, 2008). As a spatial practice, gardening provides a counter-narrative to state-defined land use, embedding community-led spatial meaning in formerly undervalued terrain.

Conceived space (representations of space) involves abstract, top-down systems of knowledge and control that regulate space through planning, zoning, policy frameworks and bureaucratic discourses (Stewart, 1995). These representations often prioritise the interests of capital, order and governance and marginalise everyday spatial practices. In Cape Town, conceived space is visible in the historical planning legacies of apartheid and in contemporary urban policies that frame community gardens primarily as subsistence interventions (rather than legitimate spatial claims). This study interrogates how community gardens negotiate and subvert these dominant spatial logics, exposing the contradictions within institutional frameworks that formally support urban agriculture but restrict its transformative potential.

Lived space (representational space) denotes the symbolic, affective and imaginative dimensions of spatial experience. It is the space of memory, identity, resistance and cultural meaning shaped by emotion, symbols and non-rational elements of social life (Lefebvre, 1991). In the Cape Flats, gardens are lived spaces where identities, cultural practices and collective memories are reproduced through cultivation. Gardeners draw on rural traditions, shared histories and embodied connections to land to resist the alienation of urban life. These symbolic practices align with Eizenberg's (2012) assertion that urban gardens can serve as counter-spaces to capitalist abstraction, places where alternative spatial imaginaries are realised.

The triad is not a static categorisation but a relational and dialectical system: the three dimensions of space dynamically interact (Harvey, 2006). The physical transformation of land (perceived space) disrupts institutional zoning logics (conceived space), while gardeners' embodied and cultural practices (lived space) challenge neoliberal narratives of land commodification. Harvey's relational reading strengthens Lefebvre's triad by underscoring the spatial struggles embedded in everyday acts of cultivation and care, particularly in the context of enduring urban inequalities in the Global South.

This study extends the triad along three analytical axes. Firstly, the question of spatial agency versus structural constraints considers how gardeners assert agency, despite their insecure land tenure under neoliberal policies. Secondly,

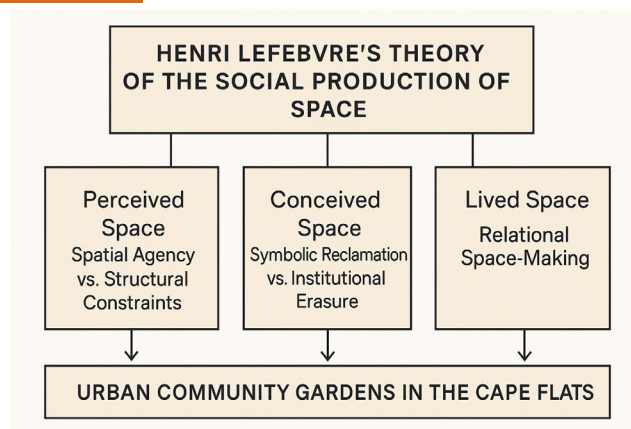


FIGURE 1 Adaptation of the spatial triad for urban community gardens.

symbolic reclamation versus institutional erasure examines how gardens preserve cultural memory, even as formal planning marginalises them. Finally, relational space-making captures the dialectical interplay in which daily cultivation disrupts zoning logics and collective cultural practices contest commodification. This framework allows for an integrative analysis of how these gardens not only reshape physical landscapes but also reconfigure social relations, contest dominant urban planning ideologies, and produce alternative spatial meanings (Granzow & Shields, 2019) (Figure 1).

One of this article's main interventions is the extending of Lefebvre's triad to a historically marginalised urban setting in the Global South. While the triad has been effectively used to theorise community gardening in Northern cities, its application in Cape Town reveals novel insights into how space is appropriated, symbolised and contested under conditions of post-apartheid urban governance. This effort not only provides a more nuanced understanding of the spatial politics of urban gardening but also investigates the broader utility of Lefebvre's theory in contexts shaped by colonial legacies, informality and urban injustice. The triad shows that community gardens in the Cape Flats operate as relational spaces shaped by both inherited spatial marginalisation and emergent grassroots practices. These gardens, on institutionally sanctioned land (such as school plots), operate as sites of spatial contestation and reappropriation albeit different from gardens situated in more contested urban redevelopment zones (e.g. Follmann & Viehoff, 2015; Schmelzkopf, 2006).

3 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 | Research site

In 1950, the apartheid government passed the Group Areas Act, forcibly relocating people of colour from central Cape Town to outlying eastern areas like the Cape Flats (Engel & Anja, 2019). The troubled history of forced removals and social dislocation was closely linked to the development of gangsterism and other social challenges within Cape Flats communities. The area has also historically suffered from a lack of recreational, social, industrial and commercial amenities (creating a need for urban agriculture).

An estimated 6000 urban gardeners cultivate in the Cape Flats, with many operating collectively. These gardeners often work on school or municipal land under insecure tenure conditions, receiving essential support (e.g. infrastructure, inputs and training) from civil society and the state. While no national policies explicitly focus solely on urban agriculture, several documents reference it indirectly. For instance, the White Paper on Agriculture of 1995 and the Discussion Document on Agricultural Policy of 1998 mention urban agriculture as a potential strategy to alleviate food insecurity among urban populations (Crush et al., 2011). Similarly, national policies like the White Paper on a National Water Policy for South Africa (1998) and the White Paper on Spatial Policy and Land Use Management (2001) acknowledge urban agriculture's role in enhancing food security (Thornton, 2008). Despite early policy developments like the Urban Agriculture Policy (UAP) of 2007, which aimed to enhance food security and economic opportunities through urban agriculture, subsequent policies, such as the Food Gardens Policy of 2013, have evolved to better address community needs.

Local initiatives and policies in Cape Town represent more focused efforts to address food security challenges through community-based agricultural projects. At the provincial level, the Western Cape Department of Agriculture (DOA) has actively supported urban agriculture through strategic planning initiatives since 2013. These efforts recognise urban and

peri-urban agriculture as vital for improving local food security and nutrition (Kanosvamhira, 2019). The Department's Urban Renewal Programme and its contributions to the Integrated Food Security Strategy of South Africa further underscore its commitment to supporting household food security through initiatives like community and school gardens. The Municipal Spatial Development Framework (MSDF) also integrates urban agriculture to promote inclusive and sustainable urban development. Municipal and provincial urban agriculture projects alleviate some poverty and food insecurity in low-income areas, but are generally seen as self-help programmes (Kanosvamhira, 2024). Policy-makers often overlooked how urban household food security primarily hinges on income, not agricultural production. Crop cultivation policies must be accompanied by efforts to promote economic growth to address food insecurity in urban settings. While community gardens outwardly promote objectives like food security and income generation, beneficiaries also mobilise for broader goals.

3.2 | Research design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to investigate the lived experiences, perceptions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) and spatial dynamics of urban community gardens in the Cape Flats from 2020 to 2021. The methodology aligns with Lefebvre's theory of the social production of space, which underscores the need to understand space as a socially constructed and experienced entity. The qualitative methods captured the multi-dimensional nature of community gardens as perceived, conceived and lived spaces.

Collaboration with civil society actors was essential given the sensitive nature of community gardens, particularly those situated in marginalised townships. I partnered with a prominent non-governmental organisation supporting urban farming initiatives in the area to facilitate initial access. Snowball sampling was then employed to expand the pool of gardens beyond those directly linked to the organisation. This sampling technique proved effective at identifying additional community gardens in the Cape Flats via referrals from garden leaders. Ultimately, 34 urban community gardens were identified and engaged for the study, representing a diverse cross-section of the Cape Flats region (Figure 2).

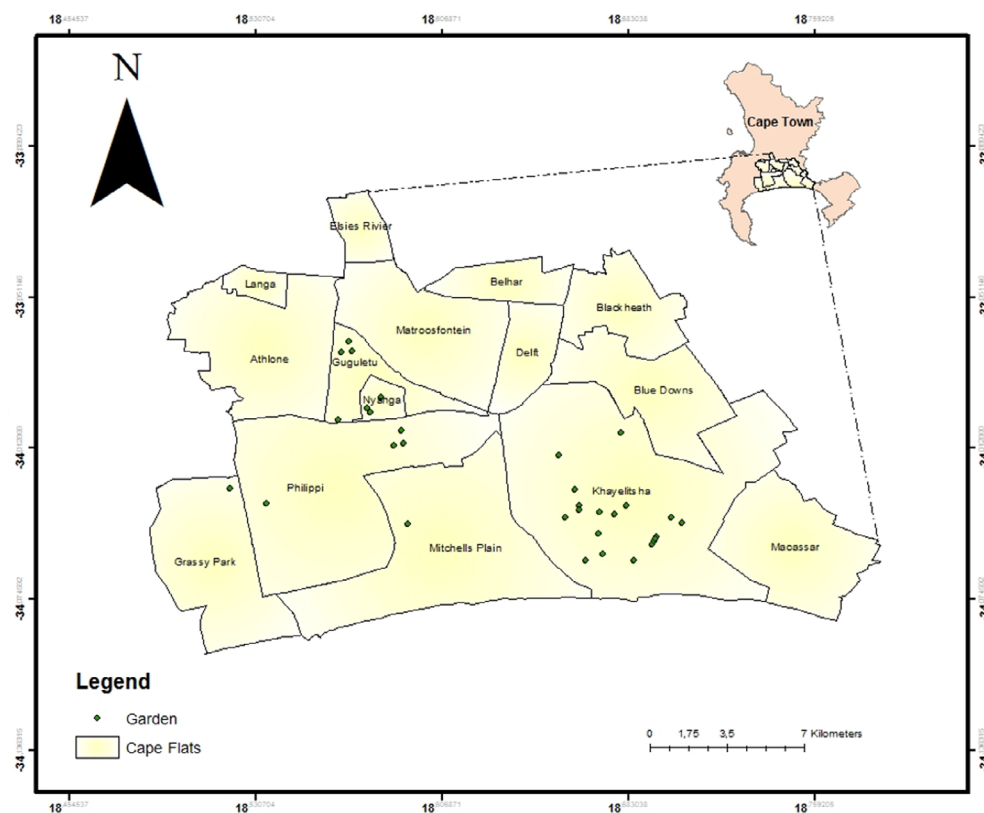


FIGURE 2 Location of surveyed gardens in the Cape Flats.

Each garden was approached through its lead representative, who was briefed on the study's objectives, methodology, and ethical considerations prior to participation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with garden leaders who were knowledgeable about the gardens' operational dynamics, challenges and spatial experiences. Given the fluctuating lockdown conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, some interviews were conducted remotely via phone or digital platforms. The researcher maintained flexibility in scheduling interviews and engaged participants multiple times to ensure thorough data collection. Interviews were also conducted with representatives from the City of Cape Town, the Department of Agriculture and the National Development Agency.

The interview guides followed Lefebvre's spatial triad, posing questions that targeted each of the three dimensions of space. I asked about spatial practices, including how participants physically interacted with the garden, their daily activities and how the physical layout shaped social relations and community engagement (perceived space). I also investigated representations of space, such as how external actors (e.g. government agencies and civil society organisations) conceptualise the gardens and how official policies, plans or ideologies govern them (conceived space). Finally, I also considered representational space, including how participants experienced the gardens in their social and cultural lives and the meanings, memories and symbols local communities attached to these spaces (lived space). All the interviews were recorded with participant consent and transcribed.

I also undertook document analysis to assess how broader urban policies and planning frameworks influenced the spatial development of the Cape Flats. Policy documents, urban plans and reports from relevant governmental and non-governmental bodies were analysed to understand how these frameworks shaped, constrained or supported community gardens as sites of resistance and resilience. Thematic analysis followed Willig et al.'s (2017) six-stage process: immersive familiarisation, deductive and inductive coding (framed by Lefebvre's triad), identification of key themes, iterative review and refinement, precise definition and naming of each theme and final synthesis into a coherent narrative addressing the study's aims.

First, I repeatedly read transcripts and field notes to gain a deep familiarity and identify preliminary patterns in the data. Next, initial coding generated both deductive codes derived directly from Lefebvre's triad categories and inductive codes that emerged organically from participants' narratives. These codes were then examined for similarity and difference, leading to the development of provisional themes that encapsulated how gardening practices (perceived space), policy frameworks (conceived space) and affective experiences (lived space) manifested in the Cape Flats context. Each theme was subsequently reviewed and refined by cross-checking coded excerpts against the full dataset, ensuring consistency and relevance to the study's aims. Themes were then defined and named with precise language that reflected their theoretical underpinnings, such as 'negotiating policy logics' for conceived space and 'cultivating community identity' for lived space. In the final stage, these themes were synthesised into a coherent narrative about how daily garden practices both respond to and resist broader spatial regimes to elucidate the dynamic interplay among Lefebvre's triadic dimensions.

The research adhered to ethical standards, as outlined by the University of the Western Cape's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee. Ethical clearance (Reference Number: HS19/9/2) was obtained prior to data collection. Participant anonymity and confidentiality were prioritised throughout the research process, with all personal identifying information removed from transcripts and reports. Participants were fully informed of their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study at any stage, and written consent was obtained before each interview.

4 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 | Socio-demographic profile of the urban community gardens

The socio-demographic profiles of the surveyed urban community gardens in Cape Town reveal a diverse landscape of participation and tenure. The gardens were predominantly located in Khayelitsha, Gugulethu, Nyanga and Philippi Browns Farms, with some in Emfuleni, Mitchells Plain and Ottery. The sites ranged from 150 to 10,000 m² and had an average membership of 3.9 people. Memberships sometimes overlapped across multiple gardens within the same community. The oldest garden dated back to 1997, though many gardens were created between 2016 and 2020 (and particularly in 2020 due to the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic). None of the gardens held title deeds for the land they occupied; instead, they relied on lease agreements, mainly with schools and some public open spaces. The challenges around land tenure underscore the precarious nature of their land-use arrangements and the need for supportive urban policies to sustain these vital community assets.

4.2 | Unpacking urban community gardening projects and the social production of space

This section undertakes a thematic analysis of spatial practices using Lefebvre's spatial triad, supplemented by three analytical axes derived from empirical interviews and observations. It elucidates how the gardens functioned as multifaceted spatial forms (i.e. material, symbolic and relational) through which gardeners exercise agency amid structural constraints, symbolically reclaim cultural memory in the face of institutional erasure and engage in relational space-making that challenges regulations and fosters collective identity. These dimensions underscore gardens as dynamic sites of resistance, community cohesion and spatial reconfiguration within marginalised urban environments. Table 2 illustrates how each component of Lefebvre's triad manifests in Cape Town's urban community gardens. It depicts the interactions between subjects (urban gardeners and stakeholders), objects (physical locations and ideological constructs) and activities (cultivation, planning and daily interactions) that shape perceived, conceived and lived spaces. These gardens serve as sites of resistance, community building and contestation against broader socio-economic injustices.

4.3 | Reclaiming the margins: Spatial practice and material production

Lefebvre's perceived space concerns spatial practice, the everyday, embodied experience of space as both physical and political (Harvey, 2006, p. 292). The gardeners' work exemplifies this type of perceived space: it links the material occupation of land with broader political dynamics. They do more than manage a garden; they 'produce, manage and sustain' a new commons out of marginal urban space. The embodied practice of gardening remains a potent exercise of spatial agency, transforming vacant lots into socially meaningful places and reframing what counts as valuable urban space amidst neoliberal planning and state control (McClintock et al., 2021).

In the Cape Flats, community gardeners perform a continuous, bodily appropriation of vacant lots: clearing debris, tilling soil, raising beds and fences and maintaining crops. These material acts literally produce space, in Lefebvre's sense of the actual environment to be perceived as a medium through which the body lives out its life. In other words, by spending days working the land, gardeners assert a form of spatial agency that makes the unused land legible as a garden and as a site of community life. The gardeners actively manage these spaces according to their needs and perceptions. As one male informant cultivating on public land with a verbal lease agreement noted, 'This garden is more than just a place to grow food. It's a place where we meet, talk and share ideas. It keeps the community together'. This reinforces Lefebvre's argument that space is produced through active occupation (Lefebvre, 1991). Gardening imbues once-vacant spaces with new social, economic and ecological value, transforming them into multipurpose community assets. This everyday labour feeds the gardeners, but also reshapes social relations and shared routines, weaving an image of the urban commons through collective practice (Eizenberg, 2016).

All of the gardens suffer from precarious tenure, with approximately 80% located on public land (Table 3) with nearly half of these without any formal lease, leaving them vulnerable to shifting policy agendas. Urban planners typically reinforce their institutional marginality by framing gardens as temporary uses or tools for behavioural reform (Follmann & Viehoff, 2015). Without formal tenure or economic viability, spatial agency expressed through everyday use remains precarious and rarely translates into secure land rights. For instance, one garden currently on open space had been recently relocated:

TABLE 2 Adapting Lefebvre's spatial triad to urban community gardening practices in Cape Town.

Aspect	Perceived space (spatial agency vs. structural constraints)	Conceived space (symbolic reclamation vs. institutional erasure)	Lived space (relational placemaking)
Subjects	Urban gardeners on the Cape Flats	Urban gardeners, municipality, provincial government, schools, etc.	Urban gardeners, general society
Objects	Garden locations—school land, open space, municipal land, etc.	Stakeholder ideology, training programmes, funding requirements, etc.	Art, culture, symbols, memories, images, social life
Activities	Cultivation, social relations	Planning	Daily garden activities

TABLE 3 Public and private land forms ($n = 34$).

Land form	Frequency	Percent
Public (or state) land		
Public school land	13	38.24
Open space	11	32.35
State institutions (municipal buildings, old age homes)	3	8.82
Private land		
Private land	7	20.59
Total	34	100.0

We started [the garden] in 2006, just behind the police station on municipal land. There was no formal agreement, just a verbal understanding that we could use the space, and so we did. We grew vegetables there for years, over a decade. But then, in 2019, the city said they had plans to develop the area, and we had to move. That's how we ended up on the school grounds. It wasn't easy, especially since we never had anything in writing. Everything we built there was based on trust.

This ambiguity reflects broader planning regimes in Cape Town, where land use is largely temporal and not guaranteed for public or collective use.

However, gardeners' daily routines also represent acts of spatial agency, effectively claiming the land through the persistent tending of plots. As one elderly lady indicated, 'This garden is more than just a place to grow food'; for her, it was a site that embodied social and political meaning for the community. Every moment watering, weeding or driving fence posts was an act of claim-making. She asserted that, 'We have a right to be here and to shape this place'. This echoes Lefebvre's insight that spatial practice carries a utopian impulse; it is a medium through which the body lives in interaction with other bodies to reveal and reconfigure social relations.

The garden's material production and communal stewardship reframe officially marginal land as a site of collective care. These everyday practices also knit social bonds and shared knowledge (e.g. teaching younger gardeners, pooling scarce resources), producing a locally owned commons. In this way, the gardeners weave a new 'lived space' that imbues the place with meanings of solidarity, self-reliance and rights to the city (Eizenberg, 2012). Importantly, this spatial agency operates within and against structural constraints. The sheer persistence of cultivation transforms empty lots into defended, populated places. There was a broad sentiment among informants that they could continue cultivating, despite the uncertainty of verbal consent. As one elderly woman explained, 'This is the only land we have. Even though it's been reduced in size because of the new community hall, we'll keep planting here. What else can we do'. By publicly and consistently working the land, gardeners expose the contingency of formal land control. They assert a stake to the land in miniature ways, claiming urban space through usage and practice instead of waiting for permits or title deeds.

Community gardens are often either framed as sites of contestation against urban inequality or as controlled spaces shaped by neoliberal agendas (Corcoran et al., 2017; Eizenberg, 2012; Follmann & Viehoff, 2015; Schmelzkopf, 2006). In Cape Town, the pressure is acute as neoliberal policies undermine stable community control and land-use plans threaten to revoke garden tenure at any time, potentially rendering gardens passive. Yet, the gardens materialise a critique of neoliberal land-use logic: they supply a non-commercial, non-state vision in the city's margins that challenges official hierarchies of land value. As Eizenberg (2012) observed elsewhere, community gardening can contribute to wider urban contestations, whereby space is utilised to fight for alternative socio-political arrangements. In the Cape Flats, some gardeners use everyday gardening as a form of quiet resistance: they not only reclaim land for food but effectively re-signify it as 'ours', a concrete assertion of belonging and justice (Kanosvamhira & Tevera, 2024).

4.4 | Lived (representational) space: Symbolic reclamation versus institutional erasure in Cape Flats gardens

Lefebvre's notion of lived (representational) space concerns how symbolic meanings, memories, and identities are inscribed upon the urban landscape. In the Cape Flats, community gardens operate as terrains of cultural continuity and insurgent spatial claims, despite their precarity. Urban gardening is articulated as a radical intervention,

embodying the pursuit of the ‘right to the city’ through spatial practices that contest marginalisation and exclusion. However, this spatial struggle unfolds amidst neoliberal governance frameworks that marginalise grassroots initiatives. Guthman (2008) cautions that market-oriented, consumer-focused urban agriculture may even obscure underlying political contestations. Consequently, Cape Flats community gardens exist in tension between symbolic reclamation, where cultivation acts as cultural revival and solidarity and institutional erasure through eviction, insecure tenure and bureaucratic neglect.

The everyday acts of planting, nurturing and harvesting in Cape Flats community gardens are performative gestures of cultural memory and identity production. For many, the gardens are places saturated with personal and collective memory, cultural practice, and social identity (Kanosvamhira, 2024). Some gardeners are particularly intentional about what they grow (e.g. organic food or Indigenous and traditional crops that enact a form of living heritage preservation). For instance, one of the projects in Ottery focuses on indigenous herbs and organic vegetables to ‘bring awareness of sustainable living through knowledge and seed exchange among local residents’ (garden informant). This approach reconstitutes social bonds and historic solidarities fractured by apartheid spatial planning and forced removals. As one gardener, originally from the Eastern Cape, shared, ‘working with the soil reminds me of home. It’s not just about food; it’s about connecting with our past and keeping traditions alive’. Cape Town’s community gardens also cultivate solidarity that transcends the physical boundaries of the garden itself, especially for vulnerable women (Slater, 2010). This aligns with Eizenberg’s (2012) framing of urban gardens as spaces of cultural resistance and memory, where cultivation is not only a survival strategy but a way to reclaim identity amidst alienating urban processes.

Urban gardens are representational spaces, embedded with counter-narratives against dominant socio-spatial orders. They operate as sites of collective action, where gardeners share resources, labour and produce, fostering social cohesion. Like urban community gardens elsewhere, they function as spaces of participatory democracy, where marginalised communities engage in alternative governance and resource management (Purcell & Tyman, 2015).

Gardeners intervene in local food systems through seed exchanges, organic farming, and produce sales to improve local food security (Table 4). Gardeners convene regular seed-swap gatherings where seed varieties are exchanged alongside stories of their provenance, fostering both genetic diversity and cultural memory. They employ organic agroecological practices, mulching with green waste and companion planting to build soil fertility and reduce dependency on synthetic inputs. Finally, their partnerships with soup kitchens redistribute fresh, affordable greens.

While community gardens challenge neoliberal processes of privatisation and individualisation, they are still constrained by the broader neoliberal context. They function as ‘experimental commons’ rather than fully established commons, limiting their transformative potential (Kanosvamhira et al., 2024). Cape Flats gardens remain precarious, with insecure land tenure and limited formal recognition. Municipal policies nominally support communities accessing land for gardens, but implementation is often fragmented and inconsistent. Many gardens operate informally, rendering them vulnerable to displacement. The institutional neglect is evidenced by gardeners’ reliance on NGO support and self-built infrastructure, such as compost and water harvesting systems (Kanosvamhira, 2024). Improvisational techniques like

TABLE 4 Selected responses from interviewees about gardeners’ strategies for intervening in and transforming local food systems.

Respondent	Quote	Key themes
6	‘Through seed exchanges, we share knowledge and resources, ensuring that our gardens are diverse and resilient. It’s not just about food; it’s about community’	Seed exchange, community-building
2	‘Organic farming is our way of taking back control. We do not rely on expensive inputs from companies. We grow naturally, and it’s better for everyone’	Organic farming, autonomy from corporate systems
24	‘Selling our produce locally means we keep the food in our community. We are building a local economy that prioritises our needs over corporate profit’	Local produce sales, local economy, resistance
4	‘In these gardens, we’re creating something sustainable. It’s a small form of resistance against the food industry that only cares about profit’	Sustainability, resistance against the neoliberal food regime
30	‘The food system is broken, and these gardens are our way of making it better. We produce what we need, share with others and don’t depend too much on supermarkets’	Local food security, independence from supermarkets

mulching and worm-farming compensate for poor soil, but reveal systemic gaps in urban governance relating to sustainable food systems. The marginalisation of gardening initiatives reflects a wider socio-political context wherein state agencies fail to integrate community gardens into formal urban planning frameworks, thereby exposing grassroots initiatives to neoliberal pressures and co-optation.

This tension between community self-reliance and minimal political support is articulated in gardeners' frustrations with government inaction. As one informant lamented, 'the government is not progressive... people have lost all sense of reliance on themselves and nature, yet the soil is there to give us food'. Such perspectives illuminate the dual role of gardens as sites of resistance and survival in a neoliberal urban context that privileges consumerism and formal property relations over communal provisioning. Academic critiques similarly note that without secure tenure or political recognition, gardens risk being co-opted as apolitical green spaces (not transformative challenges to socio-spatial injustices) (Bach & McClintock, 2020; Eizenberg, 2012).

Community gardens in the Cape Flats articulate a form of symbolic spatial reclamation that enshrines memory, identity and social solidarity. They embody Lefebvre's call to de-alienate the everyday through alternative spatial practices (Lefebvre, 1991), particularly within the realm of lived space (i.e. experience, symbolism and social meaning). These gardens are lived, felt and cultivated through everyday practices that affirm cultural memory and local belonging. Yet, this reclamation is constrained by institutional erasure manifested through insecure tenure, a lack of formal recognition and neoliberal governance that marginalises grassroots spatial claims. The gardens' embodied histories and collective solidarities rooted in lived experience underscore the ongoing contestations over urban space and the unfinished project of achieving spatial justice in Cape Town's peripheries.

4.5 | How community gardens shape conceived space in Cape Town

Conceived space refers to the mental constructs and formal structures that influence how space is understood and utilised (Lefebvre, 1991). Relational space-making describes the dialectical interplay between formal planning paradigms and everyday spatial practices (Lefebvre, 1991). Gardeners' cooperative, non-market practices subtly rework zoning logics and state spatial imaginaries through the negotiated use of institutional land. They not only address immediate needs for food security, but also challenge and reshape the perceived and conceived spaces within their communities. The gardens enact cooperative land use on school grounds or municipal reserved spaces originally designed for different institutional functions, exposing the limits of planners' rigid land use categories.

The key informants spoke of a need to normalise gardening activities as legitimate, everyday practices (not informal or temporary arrangements) to more firmly embed gardening in the cultural and spatial fabric of their neighbourhoods. As one female gardener explained, 'We need to show that gardens aren't just hobbies, they are important. People need to see them as part of how we live and survive here'. Another echoed this sentiment, saying, 'If it's [the garden] in every street or open space, then maybe they'll stop seeing it as something temporary or informal. It's part of us now'. These perspectives reveal how community members actively reclaim and redefine space, turning gardens into lived expressions of identity, resilience and spatial justice.

Nevertheless, the broader environment has a profound impact on community gardening activities. The Cape Town municipal authorities have historically eyed land in lower income areas as underutilised sites for potential commercial development (Reuther & Dewar, 2006). As one city official indicated that, 'there is always competing demand for land and these are largely for housing purposes', highlighting the state's role in privileging commodified land over communal provisioning.

Historically, the state has always significantly influenced absolute space by shaping conceived space through laws, regulations, and sometimes coercion. In Cape Town, this manipulation has been profound, particularly under the apartheid regime, which entrenched spatial inequalities by forcibly relocating specific populations to the city's periphery, creating areas with inadequate service delivery and persistent socio-economic issues. The apartheid government's use of policing and violence enforced these spatial laws and fragmented the population. Contemporary local governments and planners continue to influence conceived space. Neoliberal policies have only exacerbated the divide between affluent and impoverished communities, leading to increased spatial and social segregation (Lemanski, 2007).

In the immediate post-apartheid period, urban agriculture received little recognition. Gardening was perceived as a rural, unsanitary activity (Moller, 2005; Thornton, 2008) and municipalities even destroyed crops to deter urban farming (Rogerson, 1993, p. 25). Cape Town has made strides in supporting urban agriculture through policies such as the now defunct Urban Agriculture Policy of 2007, the Food Gardens Policy of 2013 and the Municipal Spatial Development

Framework (MSDF). These documents reflect a commitment to a more inclusive and sustainable spatial vision. The state continues to play a pivotal role in determining where urban community gardens emerge. Securing land for cultivation remains a formidable challenge, compelling community gardening projects to seek alternative sites such as school land. Many gardeners avoid open, vacant areas due to the anticipated difficulty of accessing land tenure rights and resources. This institutional conditioning reinforces the notion that land for urban agriculture is scarce and unintegrated into spatial planning models. This influences cultivators' lived experiences, sometimes even discouraging them from pursuing gardening (Modibedi et al., 2021).

The state also shapes representations of (garden) space by framing urban agriculture as a livelihood strategy for the urban poor. This perspective reflects a broader failure to grasp the complexities of food systems (Battersby, 2012) and a dedication to neoliberal policies that emphasise capitalist profit accumulation and individualisation. In a neoliberal context, the state promotes urban agriculture as a self-help mechanism for people in economic distress, even as it neglects the systemic flaws of the neoliberal food system. Urban agriculture is promoted as a secondary, individualised solution, not an integral component of comprehensive urban planning.

For their part, community gardens challenge these conventional views by repurposing neglected spaces into productive and educational environments. Relational space-making is particularly evident in highly visible gardens: passers-by witness cultivation, workshops and communal seed exchanges, practices that destabilise official land-use imaginaries by demonstrating viable non-market land uses. These gardens influence public perception, drawing attention to the benefits of urban agriculture and potentially inspiring similar initiatives. An interviewee from one such garden indicated, 'their visibility allows the community to witness what we are doing and support us where they can, but importantly the garden is for the community'. In this way, community gardens seek to alter conceived space through their everyday practices and social activities. The gardens also actively shape public understanding and awareness by hosting workshops, participating in local events and engaging in educational outreach (see Follmann & Viehoff, 2015). As relational space-makers, gardeners translate formal policy into lived demonstrations, showing planners and residents alike that alternative land uses can co-exist with institutional frameworks. For instance, some Cape Flats gardens have long-term ambitions, such as 'turning the neighbourhood into a green forest', cultivating environmental consciousness and influencing community attitudes.

Moreover, community gardens demonstrate practical, real-life benefits of sustainable living. The surge in new gardens during the pandemic highlights an increased awareness and interest in community gardening, facilitated by the gardens' role in spreading knowledge and fostering community engagement. Community gardens also advocate for urban gardener needs and participate in lobbying networks for better support and resources. Cape Town's gardeners seek to influence policy and shape the future of urban agriculture through bottom-up land-use management. The gardens' existence and activities reflect a significant shift in how conceived space is negotiated and redefined, illustrating the potential for community-led initiatives to challenge dominant spatial narratives and advocate for more equitable urban environments.

5 | CONCLUSION

This Lefebvrian analysis examined how urban community gardens in the Cape Flats operate as multifaceted sites of spatial practice, symbolic reclamation, and relational space-making. I traced gardeners' embodied labour (perceived space), cultural and mnemonic engagements (lived space) and negotiated incursions into formally zoned land (conceived space) to show how everyday acts of cultivation not only produce food but also sustain community identity, contest neoliberal planning logics and enact a modest 'right to the city' in a Global South context. This approach offers a provisional template for examining similar initiatives elsewhere in the Global South using Lefebvre's triad. The findings underscore an urgent need to secure land tenure, integrate gardening into formal planning instruments and recognise these spaces as crucibles of social resilience, cultural continuity, and collective agency in marginalised urban landscapes (not merely as subsistence plots). Future research could pursue comparative analyses across multiple Southern cities, employ longitudinal designs to track gardens' evolution under changing policies and critically engage with complementary spatial theories (e.g. postcolonial, feminist and decolonial perspectives).

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Not applicable.

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