

Designing an Open Space for Social Inclusion

An Intercultural Garden Project at the University of Tsukuba

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1. Background

Creating an inclusive society within developed countries is essential with the increasing movement of migrants and refugee flows. Living with those who come from different cultures can lead to misunderstandings, which can result in societal conflicts. At the same time the Government of Japan is trying to attract and encourage outsiders to work within the country, owing to serious workforce shortages caused by an aging society. However, the Government has no specific policies indicating how to integrate immigrants into local communities. For example, there is evidence of existing conflict between local residents and newcomers¹⁾. Within universities, which are regarded as being more international than other places, Japanese students hesitate to communicate with international students owing to a lack of time for intercultural exchanges and anxiousness regarding talking to people from diverse cultural backgrounds. This suggests that space and the opportunity to promote communication is needed²⁾.

The concept of intercultural gardens was developed in Germany around 2000, to promote the social inclusion of immigrants and refugees³⁾. The garden represents a space where individuals and families from different cultures can work together with mutual respect. Communities, church groups, or dedicated private individuals often take the initiative to manage intercultural gardens and immigrants, commonly with a refugee background, are involved⁴⁾. Activities at the gardens encourage various learning processes and facilitate new ways of interacting between diverse cultures beyond conventional concepts like assimilation and integration⁵⁾. This type of space has the potential to help Japanese society in forming inclusive communities.

Intercultural gardens can be regarded as part of community gardens. Indeed, Guitart et al. (2012, 364) define the term 'community garden' as 'open spaces which are managed and operated by members of the local community in which food or flowers are cultivated'⁶⁾. The authors also reviewed several journal articles on community gardens, with many of these discussing social issues. Nevertheless, the cases were mostly limited to English speaking countries, where there are historically more immigrants mixing with native people. Countries that expect to receive more immigrants in the future, such as Japan, should therefore consider the effectiveness of intercultural gardens for social cohesion. The number of community gardens, including intercultural gardens, in Japan is limited. Accordingly, the authors established an experimental intercultural community garden project, which was followed by action research.

2. Purpose of the garden project

From April 2016, the authors launched an experimental project to create an intercultural garden at the University of Tsukuba. The purpose of the project is to manage the garden as a space

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where people from various countries can regularly connect in their everyday lives, and to examine the extent to which the garden can promote communication and mutual understanding. Founded in 1999, Muse Garden was selected as the project site. The total area of the garden is approximately 700 m², which is mainly lawn (Figure-1). There is gardening space to grow vegetables, herbs and flowers. There is also a supply of water and electricity. The main entrance is located at point (1), which is labelled in Figure-1. However, most people enter at point (2) and pass along the route indicated by the arrow.

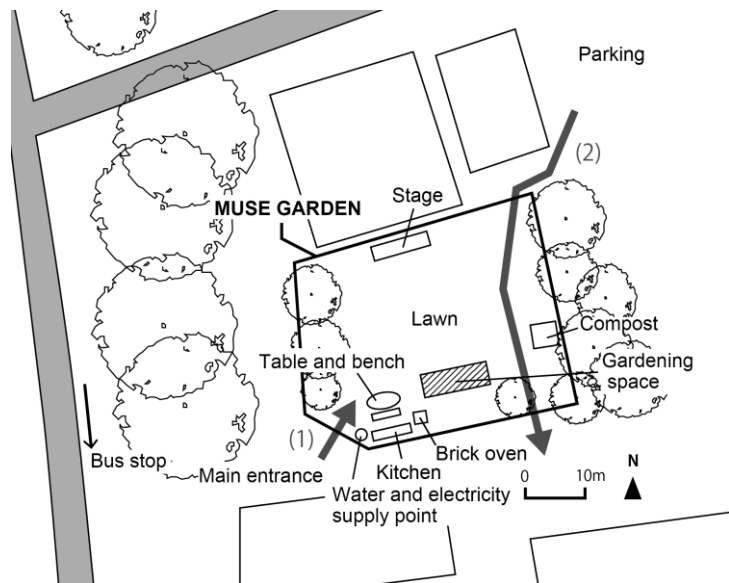


Figure-1 Spatial plan of MUSE GARDEN

In the Department of Policy and Planning Sciences, an educational course was proposed to students who demonstrated an interest in managing an intercultural garden. Students worked as facilitators to design the space, organize the daily activities, and arrange occasional events freely. The group consisted of 13 students, which included eight Japanese students, four Chinese students and one Syrian student. This core group subsequently invited other students, researchers, and local residents to participate. The common language was Japanese and students who could not understand this received support from the other students. The authors also assisted by holding an event to attract more people when the students appeared to be inactive.



Figure-2 Regular gardening work

3. Activity log in 2016

To promote internationalization in daily life and to facilitate regular communication between Japanese and international students, frequent tasks such as mowing the lawn area, weeding and watering the gardening space were vital (Figure-2). Therefore, the normal working day was set for Thursdays, between 15:00-17:00 hours during the summer semester. Throughout the summer vacation period, this was changed to Wednesdays from 17:00 to 18:00 hours, with daily watering carried out by members.

Some occasional events were organized by the students to attract newcomers. The Welcome Party, which also means *ueru* (planting), was held in June. This involved both the planting of vegetables and flowers as well as a potluck party to enjoy conversations after the garden works. A total of 15 people attended the party including individuals from Ukraine and Canada. The second event was the Starry Film Festival in October. About 30 people visited the garden to make pizzas, with herbs grown from the garden, using a brick oven (Figure-3) and to watch a movie



Figure-3 Use of a brick oven



Figure-4 Morning-yoga

projected onto the wall of an adjacent building. The participants included individuals from China, Jamaica, Chile, Peru, Italy, Spain, and France.

Specific cultural events were also organized by the authors and students, providing an opportunity to highlight and promote understanding of minority issues. As one example, the authors proposed a Glühwein party, which involved collaboration with the German students' community. Glühwein, a German-style mulled wine, was prepared and served at the event. Twenty-six people including students from Germany, Russia, the USA, and Jamaica joined the evening. Additionally, since October, morning yoga has been held in the lawn area each week by a Japanese student, who completed a yoga course in India (Figure-4). The instructions were conveyed in English when a Filipino individual participated.

Reflecting upon these activities, one challenge has proved to be setting effective strategies to involve newcomers with regular garden work after their first visit. Individuals have enjoyed the events; however, those from outside Japan would not regularly come to the garden afterwards. To understand others with different backgrounds, regular contact and

communication is required. The project therefore needs more efficient rules and a promotion strategy to attract and engage people in the ongoing work. Spatial viewpoints should also be emphasized as it seems few people on campus recognize Muse Garden due to its poor visibility, with well-grown trees surrounding the garden. The position of the main entrance is also less popular than the other unintended entrances. Consequently, garden design should be reconsidered to include more people.

4. Conclusion

The pilot garden project described above demonstrates the possibility that an intercultural garden space can attract both Japanese and non-Japanese individuals on campus. Muse Garden has become a platform to accommodate various needs, and to successfully stage events based on these. However, additional effort and effective approaches are required to promote daily communication between Japanese and other people. Hopefully, the project will accumulate knowledge as it continues to run.

Indeed, the project has continued in 2017 as an educational course of the Department of Policy and Planning Sciences at the University of Tsukuba. New Masters students contend with the internationalization of daily life through activities at Muse Garden. To eventually become a facilitator in society, students must independently develop their own ideas. Therefore, what is planned may be dissimilar from the previous year. Community gardens, including intercultural gardens, should be regarded as an excellent resource to enhance the creativity and responsibility of students, especially those studying urban planning.

In terms of implementation in broader society, a concrete research plan is required to elucidate how intercultural gardens can contribute to encouraging the social inclusion of migrants. Based on the precedent knowledge obtained through the pilot project, the authors plan to facilitate more activities. Subsequently, how participants' feelings change towards others from a different culture will be examined based upon interview surveys in relation to the degree of commitment to the garden. The interview data will be transcribed and analyzed using inductive coding methods. This analysis will examine whether intercultural gardens can encourage people to understand each other and what spatial design or activities contribute to this. Furthermore, to consider the wider applicability of the project, participants from the local community outside the campus will be sought.

Keywords:

urban gardening, community garden, migrants, public open space management, education, action research

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