Eat a Memory – a tool for urban archival practices to support citizens’ participation in urban development

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ABSTRACT
The work presented in this paper explores the potential of urban gardening communities to be ‘read’ as urban archives and become platforms for collecting, storing, transmitting new and diverse stories about neighbourhoods, and/or communities. The first step of this exploratory study is to create a series of interventions in form of design activities and artistic actions/gestures dedicated to prototype and test how an urban garden can be collected and stored in an urban archive. The series of interventions results in a methodological toolbox containing a set of tools and methods. In this paper the tool Eat a Memory is presented and discussed. The basic idea of this intervention is to explore food and meals as performed memories, and cooking as archival practice. Through the act of cooking and eating, memories are performed, shared and stored in various formats. A joint meal in form of a potluck is applied as a platform to access and record histories of people and places. We suggest that Eat a Memory can be applied as a tool for capturing intangible data of neighbourhoods, and communities, and create a new kind of urban archive which may support and encourage citizen participation, and become a resource in urban development.

2. URBAN ARCHIVING
The Urban Archiving theme specifically explores archives and archival practices in urban contexts, and how archive material and archival practices can become meaningful resources for communities of practices engaging in urban sustainable development.

2.1 Urban gardening communities
To narrow down the research scope we have chosen to focus on the topic of urban gardening, also sometimes referred to as urban agriculture, urban farming, or community farming [6][10]. Due to concerns such as the climate change [7], and the urge to develop new strategies to secure future food production [3], urban gardening initiatives have received an increased attention in cities worldwide [6][8][10].

Besides matters of human survival, also social matters and lifestyle trends have been driving forces behind this movement [1][10][15]. Urban gardens and the establishment of urban gardening communities have in many places become a tool for social inclusion, and a way to support social sustainable development in housing areas by building ‘community capacity’ [1]. Urban gardens are described as places where people may interact with each other beyond generations, cultures and backgrounds, and where a sense of community can flourish and be strengthened.

2.2 Urban archival practices to support citizen participation in urban development
The work reported on in this paper explores yet another potential of urban gardening communities as means to contribute to sustainable cities, namely as urban archives. Our theoretical framework is based upon the assumption that urban gardening communities can be ‘read’ as urban archives, and become platforms for collecting, storing, transmitting new and diverse stories about a particular neighbourhood, or community. The urban garden is perceived as a performed memory expressed through the cultural backgrounds and experiences of the urban gardeners.

The assumption also guiding our research put forward by previous scholars is the claim that the development of socially sustainable cities includes inviting marginalized groups to the discussion, and encourage citizen participation on all levels [4]. Thus, our attention is put on marginalized communities that rarely are invited to have a say in matters of urban development, and that are underrepresented voices in the public debate. The communities

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here referred to as marginalized are not communities considered to be weaker, but as groups of residents that through their practices can inform others about what is possible in a future society.

Returning to the archival discourse; there is a long series of scholars who have been elaborating on the roles of archives both in scholarly and political realms. One examples is Derrida [5], who proposes a reading of the archive as an aim to understand the “drive to collect, organize and conserve the human record” [12]. He also suggests that an archive affirms the past, present and future; it preserves the records of the past and it embodies the promise of the present to the future [5]. The kind of material that cannot be accommodated by the archive is excluded from our historical record. Further on, he argues that “[e]ffective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution and its interpretation” [5]. What if practices of urban archiving can contribute to processes of democratization, creating a holistic view of our cities by inviting the underrepresented to share their stories, and by encouraging citizen participation? Thus, becoming a social resource in the development of public housing, and urban areas.

2.3 Aim and question
The aim of the work presented here is to explore, and prototype tools for urban archival practices for collecting, storing and transmitting urban archives in form of urban gardening communities.

The research question pointing out the direction of our work at this stage is:

How can an urban garden perceived as a performed memory be collected and stored in an urban archive?

The next question to explore is, how such urban archival data can materialize and become useful as social resources in urban development. This part will however not be elaborated on in detail in this paper, but in the future work.

3. RESEARCH APPROACH
Our project is of a multidisciplinary kind and based on principles and methods from the fields of participatory design [2][9][13], and artistic research and practices [11][14].

The participatory design approach has its roots in action research traditions, and can in short be described as a diverse collection of principles and practices aimed at making technologies, tools, environments, businesses, and social institutions more responsive to human needs, inherently also including aspects of sustainable development. One of the central principles of participatory design is the direct involvement of the users in the design process. Instead of designing for the users, the designer works with the user.

Our approach is also formed by artistic practices and research with a focus on interventions in the public realm and critical actions in the making of urban development. Informed by artistic and curatorial practices that suggest alternative models of citizen participation and tools for sustainable urban development, we enhance our knowledge and critical perspectives. In line with Thompson we assume the view that “symbolic gestures can be powerful and effective methods for change”.

3.1 Research process and setting
The first step of our exploratory study is to create a series of interventions in form of design activities and artistic actions/gestures dedicated to prototype and test how an urban garden perceived as a performed memory can be collected and stored in an urban archive.

The series of interventions results in a methodological toolbox containing a set of tools and methods for collecting and storing performed memories. The toolbox is developed together with the communities we are collaborating with, and new tools and methods are added along the way.

In this paper we put a focus on Eat a Memory.

4. DEVELOPING A TOOLKIT FOR URBAN ARCHIVAL PRACTICES: EAT A MEMORY
Eat a Memory is one of many interventions in the process of developing a toolkit for collecting urban archival material. The basic idea of this intervention is to explore food and meals as performed memories, and cooking as archival practice. Through the act of cooking and eating, memories are performed, shared and stored in various formats. A joint meal in form of a potluck is applied as a platform to access and record new and diverse histories of people and places.

To test and prototype the possibilities of using such approach to collect and share performed memories in an organized way we have until now arranged two sessions in collaboration with two communities (in Sweden and in the US). Since our focus is on performed memories in the format of urban gardens, the theme of both sessions was ‘Your grandparents’ garden’.

Excerpt from the invite sent to the participants:

“Please bring a dish from your family memories. An ingredient, a vegetable, a fruit, a soup, a dessert – something that your grandparents (or any other important person from your childhood) served you when you were a child. If they had a garden, bring something that could have grown in their backyard. If they lived in the city, bring something that they got for you in the grocery store. The gathering is about performing memories by tasting flavours from your childhoods, and sharing these memories by sharing a meal together. The meal becomes a performed memory, preserving history, as an archive that travels through time and place, from mouth to mouth.”
At the gatherings the participants performed their memories, i.e. prepared their dish, and served it along with telling the background story. Since the sharing of memories was channelled through more than one sense, it allowed for communication beyond words.

5. CONCLUDING COMMENTS
To return to the aim of this study and intervention: to explore, and prototype tools for urban archival practices for collecting, storing and transmitting urban archives in the format of urban gardening communities. Based on the outcome of our interventions we argue that Eat a Memory can be a supplementary tool for accessing and sharing new and diverse stories about communities, and urban areas under development.

Our experiences from attending the gatherings are that this particular set up created an intimate atmosphere, and encouraged participation in conversations about cultural heritage and belonging in a natural way. Since the set up allows for the involvement of many senses, we argue that Eat a Memory could be viewed as a democratic conversation tool. Everyone gets to ‘speak’, through their food – or via words, regardless level of language skills. To apply potluck as platform also made the participants to contribute to the whole on equal terms, and to get acknowledgement, and an allotted time to present their memory, and cultural background.

Eat a Memory can thus be described as a tool for a more intimate kind of archival practice, and way of collecting data about a community, or neighbourhood in a highly structured, but still personal way. It can potentially be applied as a tool for recruiting residents that are not comfortable in attending formal planning meetings with urban planners, and through that encourage and stimulate citizen participation and civic dialogues on all levels.

To conclude, we suggest that Eat a Memory have the potential of becoming a tool for capturing intangible data about neighbourhoods, and communities, beyond traditional methods in the field of urban planning. The next step in our study is to invite urban planners that work with revitalisation projects in housing areas to test, and re-design the tool in collaboration with residents and us.

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REFERENCES


