

Creating peace gardens

A story by Burcu Eke Schneider

I was born in Ankara. The streets of the neighborhood I lived in were wide capital avenues with linden and chestnut trees surrounding us with their shade like a roof in summer. In winter, these popular trees swayed from side to side with their majestic shapes, touching the sky. These great giants were friends who made it possible to breathe. The trees supported our mental health, and our ecosystems and made our city more inhabitable.

I fought for the protection of the last trees on a central square in the city of Istanbul in 2013, during the Gezi Park movement. Representatives of politically oppressed, vulnerable, and marginalized people, who had come out of the ghettos, were starting to join in. Our protest became the sound of the city, seeking real transformation. We were protesting against the damage done to our souls and bodies by cities made of concrete, and against the oppressive order that neo-liberal politics had brought upon us. It was a non-violent resistance for peace, justice, and for “us” against an increasingly authoritarian regime. In the following years, segregation in the society increased. But at least the trees are still there.



Following the protests, I was invited to become a student in a newly founded Peace and Conflict Studies MA Program in Istanbul. While writing my master’s thesis, I moved to the city of Wuppertal in Germany, where more than half the population have a migrant background. When I arrived, the city was becoming a home to thousands of Syrian friends fleeing the war. Social injustices caused by ghettoization, isolation, and marginalization are very present in Wuppertal.

Hardly any connection was drawn between science and the real world in scientific transformation literature in Europe at that time. I carried out a conflict analysis which led me to new ideas and scientific solutions for urban transformation on a micro level.

By creating a dialogue with various actors in the city, we implemented a Peace Garden with diverse friends from Bosnia, the Czech Republic, Syria, and some local representatives of a marginalized Alevi community. All these communities had experienced war, violence, or the destructive effects of communism. In order to heal the traumas passed down from generation to generation, the idea of creating a peace garden was born. We wanted to reduce violence in the urban environment – with the help of nature.

The opening of the Peace Garden in a community center was celebrated in spring 2020. The Peace Garden uses a “nature-based approach” as a dialogue method for a sustainable and just future in an urban context. All actors involved are able to meet at eye level – a prerequisite for any transformation.

Over time, the Peace Garden became an educational platform for out-of-school methods. Here, we exchange knowledge and learn from each other thanks to intercultural and interreligious

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dialogue, while growing organic vegetables, fruit and herbs, and learning about local biodiversity. The city of Wuppertal suffered severe damage due to climate change in a storm in July 2021. The same year, I witnessed simultaneous forest fires while visiting my family in my homeland, Turkey. I believe that everything in the world is interconnected. We need to unite both for the sake of humanity and nature. For all these reasons, the story of the Peace Garden has set out to heal our cities, reminding us of our relationships and the interconnectedness between humans as well as between humanity and nature.

While writing these lines, the drums of war were being beaten once again in Europe. This is not a world we can accept. We have to invest in peace through all kinds of new methods. This peace story was written with the hope that the cities we live in will turn into spaces where we can grow sunflowers, love and humanity instead of sowing violence.



Burcu Eke Schneider is a peace worker from Ankara, Turkey, with a background in journalism and peace and conflict studies. Burcu created the “Urban Gardening Peace Project” in Wuppertal, a nature-based micro-level peacebuilding project which received attention in both the media and research. She cares deeply about a shared understanding of mutual respect.



