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Soft Territories: Potted Plants as Aesthetic Interventions in Urban Space

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Abstract
This paper takes potted plants as an analytical lens to explore the everyday production of "territory" in contemporary urban contexts. In contrast to "hard territories" defined by property rights and legal boundaries, soft territories emerge through movable, small-scale, and replicable practices that generate permeable and negotiable boundaries in transitional spaces such as doorsteps, balconies, and street corners.
Drawing on Lefebvre's theory of the production of space and Soja's concept of the "Thirdspace," and introducing a more-than-human perspective of agency, the paper argues that potted plants function as interfaces between representations of space, representational spaces, and spatial practices. Through aesthetic-political micro-interventions, they foster spatial re-appropriation and the emergence of informal publicness.
By examining cross-domain cases in architecture (SANAA), contemporary art (Weinberger, Blazy, Finley), and residents' DIY gardening, the study demonstrates that potted plants, as perceptual interfaces and cultural mediators, link institutional logics with lived experience at the micro level. They reveal both a potential for subtle resistance and a risk of assimilation into governance discourses. The article proposes incorporating potted plants into the analytical framework of urban territorial production, thereby expanding everyday dimensions of spatial justice, subjectivity, and ecological imagination.

Keywords: Urban territory; Potted plants; Production of space; Thirdspace; Artistic intervention

1. Introduction

Contemporary urban space is not a static container delineated by property lines or planning boundaries, but rather a process continuously shaped and negotiated through everyday actions, perceptions, and aesthetic practices. Plants often play a role in this process by marking boundaries, signaling ownership or occupation (Barth, 1956; Godelier, 1978). Within the framework of urban social ontology, Kukla (2021: 42) defines "territory" as a field in which individuals exercise authority and spatial agency. In this sense, territory can be understood as a dynamic socio-material network rather than a fixed boundary. Taking potted plants as a micro-scale entry point, this paper investigates how they generate "soft territories" in the interstices of the city, characterized by permeability and negotiability.

In contrast to traditional studies of territory centered on state sovereignty and legal borders, recent scholarship in the social sciences has emphasized moving beyond anthropocentrism, focusing instead on how plants participate in territorial practices through growth, migration, and community formation (Besky and Padwe, 2016: 9). Foregrounding vegetal sociality and botanical subjectivity has proven to be an inspiring analytical approach (Kohn, 2013; Irigaray and Marder, 2016). This trajectory resonates with Latour's (2005: 63–86) "objects, too, have agency" and Bennett's (2010) theory of distributive agency, providing essential theoretical foundations for understanding how urban space is produced through more-than-human actions.

At the same time, Lefebvre's triad of the production of space and Soja's concept of Thirdspace highlight that social space is not reducible to binary oppositions, but is instead continually produced in the interplay between material and representational, formal and informal, private and public (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996, 2010). Yet few studies have brought together the agency of plants and the micro-negotiations of Thirdspace to reveal how the practices of potted plants reshape boundaries in transitional urban spaces. This gap provides the point of departure for the present study.

To address this gap, the paper employs a cross-domain comparative approach and conceptual mapping. It draws on cases from architecture (SANAA), contemporary art (Weinberger, Blazy, Finley), and residents' DIY gardening (with examples from Montreal and beyond). Materials include scholarly literature, exhibition archives, interview transcripts, policy documents, and media reports, which are analyzed to distill mechanisms of negotiation and their limitations.

The paper makes three main contributions. First, theoretically, it connects the more-than-human agency of plants with the Lefebvre–Soja framework of the production of space/Thirdspace, placing micro-scale, replicable practices at the center of territorial studies. Second, methodologically, it operationalizes the concept of "soft territory" through three analytical dimensions: flexible visibility, shared sensoriality, and seasonal reproduction, providing observable indicators for future empirical research. Third, in practice, it reveals the dual character of soft territories: while they may foster informal publicness and spatial justice through micro-interventions, they are equally susceptible to co-optation and neutralization within governance discourses of "livability" and "sustainability."

2. Literature Review: Territory, Space, and Vegetal Agency

In traditional contexts, "territory" is commonly associated with state sovereignty, boundary demarcation, and spatial control, maintained through mechanisms of power and law. Weber famously defined the state as the "human community which within a deined territory successfully claims for itself the monopoly of legitimate physical force" (Weber [1919] 2004), underscoring the close relationship between territory and sovereignty. Yet, as Elden (2010) has argued, precisely because of its "apparent obviousness," territory has long been underexplored and undertheorized within social theory.

Since the twentieth century, spatial theory has gradually moved beyond state- and institution-centered frameworks. Lefebvre (1991: 33) proposed the triad of the production of space: spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces. He emphasized that space is not only constituted through material everyday practices but also through symbolic and institutional processes. Building on this foundation, Soja (1996, 2010) advanced the concept of "Thirdspace," insisting that space must be understood as open, hybrid, and dynamically produced—continually interweaving public and private, real and imagined, formal and informal dimensions. Similarly, Antonsich (2017: 1) suggested that territory should be seen as a concept that evolves historically, geographically, and socially, rather than as a fixed boundary. Raffestin (1980: 129) argued that space becomes territorialized when actors occupy or represent it—"the actor territorializes the space." Turco (2007) further deconstructed territorialization into the processes of naming, materialization, and structuring, stressing that territory is a site of belonging and identity formation. In this spirit, Magnaghi (2022: 16) introduced the "principle of territory," calling for the reconstruction of the complex relations between inhabitants and their territories through the idea of "territorial communities." He emphasized rebuilding local consciousness and autonomy by means of shared rules, cultural practices, and ecologically rational techniques. Collectively, these studies underscore that territory is a dynamic, relational socio-spatial process, not a static demarcation.

From a historical perspective, plants have long been intertwined with territorial formations. Colonial botany was not only a scientific endeavor but also a tool of imperial expansion and resource extraction (Schiebinger and Swan, 2004). This highlights the embeddedness

of plants in power–knowledge regimes and provides a genealogical background for their contemporary spatial agency.

In recent years, growing scholarship has examined how plants contribute to reshaping publicness and social relations in contemporary urban contexts.

In sum, existing research has revealed two key insights: first, territory is generated through social practices, symbols, and institutions as a relational space; second, plants are not passive backgrounds but active participants in the production of space. However, little scholarship has brought these two strands together to examine how small-scale, mobile, and everyday plant practices—such as potted plants—generate flexible boundaries in the gray zones between private and public, formal and informal. By introducing the concept of "soft territory," this paper addresses this gap and aims to demonstrate how potted plants, as micro-aesthetic and political practices, contribute to the reshaping of urban spatial order.

3. Theoretical Framework: Soft Territory and Spatial Theory

This article defines "soft territory" as a form of spatial boundary and order generated through the placement, care, and mobility of plants—especially potted plants—in transitional zones such as doorways, balconies, and street corners. Its characteristics include: (a) the flexible visibility of boundaries, (b) the shared nature of sensory experience, and (c) the openness of continual reproduction through time and seasonal cycles.

As Lefebvre (1991: 33) argued, space is the product of social processes. He distinguished space into three interrelated dimensions:

Spatial practice: the everyday use and maintenance of order in perceptible space (e.g., placing potted plants at a doorway to demarcate micro-boundaries);

Representations of space: the spatial logics inscribed by planning, policies, and regulations (e.g., municipal greening policies, land-use norms);

Representational spaces: lived spaces imbued with emotions, symbols, aesthetics, and memory (e.g., the personal identity or remembrance embedded in potted plants).

Potted plants, therefore, are not mere decorative objects but function as "interfaces" across these dimensions: constructing flexible boundaries at the level of practice, bearing affective and symbolic meaning at the representational level, and generating new forms of social space beyond institutionalized logics. Lefebvre (1991: 27) further emphasized that social space must be distinguished from both "mental space" and "physical space." Space is neither a mere aggregation of sensory data, nor an empty container awaiting occupation, nor reducible to abstract form. Rather, it is the outcome of ongoing social construction and negotiation—"the locus where social relations leave their imprint" (Lefebvre 1991a: 129; Soja 1996: 58). In this sense, the potted plant may be understood as a concrete manifestation of social relations within the interstices of the city.

Both Lefebvre and Soja insist that social space cannot be comprehended through simple binaries. Lefebvre's "trialectics" introduced a "third term"—otherness or Thirdspace—designed to break rigid dualisms and reconceptualize space as an open, dynamic, and generative process (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996: 77–78). Building on this, Soja (1996: 93) proposed the concept of "Thirdspace," which arises from the deconstructive critique and reconstructive reimagining of the binary between "Firstspace" (objective, material space) and "Secondspace" (conceptual, representational space) (p. 102). Thirdspace is simultaneously material and symbolic, historical and emergent—a negotiable "gray zone" that accommodates difference, contradiction, and new social possibilities.

In addition, Clément's (2022:10–15) tripartite distinction offers a valuable lens for understanding potted plants:
Landscape: subjective experiences interwoven with perception and memory;
Environment: the scientific and data-oriented definition of living conditions;

Garden: a liminal zone between humans and nature, where vitality and aesthetic practice converge.

Accordingly, the potted plant may be viewed as a "miniature garden": it transcends the fragmentation of landscape and the abstraction of environment, while organizing aesthetic–political "soft territories" within transitional urban spaces. In doing so, it enables residents to reconstruct their relation to nature in the cracks of the everyday and provides a new interpretive lens for understanding the territoriality of plants in cities.

In sum, Lefebvre's spatial triad illuminates how potted plants operate simultaneously across practical, representational, and affective dimensions; Soja's Thirdspace highlights their capacity to generate negotiable orders within the gray zones of private and public space; and Clément's distinctions underscore the aesthetic and political significance of pots as "miniature gardens." Taken together, these perspectives provide a robust theoretical foundation for "soft territory," allowing us to recognize seemingly trivial plant practices as crucial interventions in the reconfiguration of urban spatial order.

4. Case Studies: Architecture, Art, and Everyday Gardening

In contemporary urban space, plants—particularly potted plants—are not merely ecological or aesthetic supplements, but mediators in the production of soft territories across architecture, art, and everyday practices. Whether in architectural design that blurs the boundary between inside and outside, in artistic interventions that reveal spatial power and social justice, or in residents' everyday gardening that reshapes publicness, plants participate in the reproduction of urban space at multiple scales.

The architectural duo SANAA (Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa) has consistently emphasized the interchangeability of interior and exterior spaces. Through strategies of transparency, extension, and non-hierarchical design, their buildings become "extensions of the garden." As Nishizawa himself stated: *"I think we can use gardens and architecture to encourage a more open lifestyle. We are able to maximize this tradition of living with nature, and bring it into the heart of the city"*(El Croquis Editorial, 2008).

For example, House A (Tokyo, 2006) incorporated abundant planting within its main spaces, with portions of the glass roof that could open directly to the sky. Similarly, Garden & House (Tokyo, 2006–) layered platforms to achieve a coexistence where "room" and "garden" are treated equivalently. These practices reveal the structural isomorphism between architecture and potted plants: both deploy flexible boundaries and permeable interfaces to embed nature into everyday life, thereby generating new spatial orders.

In the field of contemporary art, plants are frequently mobilized to interrogate tensions between ecology and society. Weinberger's *Portable Garden* (1984–1992) placed wild grasses and potted plants in urban cracks and transitional areas, questioning institutionalized greening. His *Wild Cube* (Documenta 9, 1992), with spontaneous growth confined within a fence, parodied the rigid logic of "control and boundary." Artist Michel Blazy's installation *Collection de Chaussures*(57th Venice Biennale, 2017) used discarded shoes as containers, allowing plants to grow beyond their confines, highlighting dynamic processes of transgression. In Los Angeles, Ron Finley's "guerrilla gardening" addressed the "food desert" by transforming abandoned lots into community gardens—initiatives that shifted from "illegal" to legally recognized, symbolizing spatial justice. These practices demonstrate that plants are not passive aesthetic objects but active artistic media that create soft boundaries while exposing tensions between power, ecology, and publicness.

In post-socialist and global urban contexts, residents' DIY gardens have emerged as spatial strategies that combine publicness with political expression. In Montreal, the *jardins communautaires* program was established in 1975 and decentralized to boroughs in 2002. Today, it encompasses nearly one hundred gardens and attracts around 12,000 participants (Bach and McClintock, 2020: 4). Yet, long waiting lists and strict regulations limit its potential (Provost, 2015).

Since the late 1990s, residents have initiated *jardins collectifs*, grassroots projects that directly occupy street corners, vacant lots, or sidewalks. Managed collectively by neighbors, these gardens emphasize decommodified food production and environmental sustainability. They not only improve the local environment but also foster new social ties, creating informal forms of publicness.

This logic of "re-appropriating space" is not unique to Montreal. In Florence, Italy, the urban community garden project *F'orti* (Editorial Staff, 2024), along with the community vegetable gardens in Sesto Fiorentino (Comune di Sesto Fiorentino, 2025), exemplifies similar practices by operating under the principle of a "territorial community," foregrounding sharing and environmental sustainability. In China, residents of cities such as Beijing and Shanghai repurpose idle land and temporary containers for spontaneous planting, embodying soft forms of urban reproduction. In the United States, First Lady Michelle Obama's White House Kitchen Garden (Lee, 2009) elevated urban agriculture to a national public issue, emphasizing nutrition, health, and educational value.

Across these cases, three interlinked mechanisms emerge: containerization, mobility, and seasonal reproduction. Together, they constitute the dynamics through which flexible boundaries are generated. Building on this, the following section turns to the political tensions and normative limits of soft territories.

5. Discussion: Soft Territories and Spatial Justice

The above cases demonstrate that boundaries are not solely defined by institutions but are continuously rewritten through everyday micro-practices. The arrangement and maintenance of potted plants subtly reorganize accessibility and a sense of belonging in transitional spaces, thereby generating concrete situations of sharing and cooperation. This process both echoes Lefebvre's claim that "social relations must leave their imprint on space" and affirms Soja's notion of "Thirdspace," in which space is understood as open, dynamic, and continuously produced.

DIY gardening in global cities further illustrates how soft territories carry both critical potential and risks of absorption. For example, in Montreal's *projets citoyens*, residents created small gardens in street corners and vacant lots, re-appropriating public space. These gardens constitute both an everyday resistance to "abstract space" and an opening of "differential space" (Lefebvre). At the same time, they disturb and renegotiate existing orders, embodying what Rancière describes as democratic practice. Yet such initiatives may also be absorbed by governance discourses such as "livability" and "sustainability," transforming them into compliant image projects. Soft territories thus remain caught in a dual tension: at once a form of gentle resistance and a potential object of co-optation.

Urban justice requires that residents maintain some control over their environments, often articulated as a territorial demand. Yet the inherent dynamism of cities inevitably produces conflict, manifested in "turf wars." As Monaghan (2025: 522) points out, this tension essentially concerns the normative question of "what constitutes legitimate spatial control and its limits." Potted plants and gardening practices occupy precisely this interstitial zone: they respond to residents' desire for environmental control, but through their flexibility and non-coerciveness, they avoid the exclusionary tensions of rigid boundaries. They thereby provide insight into balancing control with mobility.

Across architecture, art, and everyday practice, examples consistently reveal the political potential of "everyday aesthetics." SANAA's "gardenized architecture" extended buildings into gardens through transparency and permeability; Blazy's waste-based installations broke down the boundaries of artworks through spontaneous plant growth; Finley's guerrilla gardening converted food production into an act of public justice. A common thread unites these practices: rather than relying on grand narratives or institutional arrangements, they enact sensory, repeatable micro-interventions that quietly transform urban landscapes and social relations. Within cities dominated by functionalism and capital logic, such modest actions disrupt spatial uniformity and indifference, cultivating new experiences of sharing and micro-publicness.

In sum, soft territories, as a logic of spatial production, illuminate an alternative pathway toward spatial justice. Rather than being established through law or large-scale planning, they emerge through the joint practices of residents and plants, continually produced, negotiated, and renewed in urban interstices. Even the smallest greenery can, at the micro level, open up new political and ecological imaginaries.

6. Conclusion

Through the lens of "potted plants—soft territories," this article has examined the multiple meanings of potted plants in contemporary urban space. In contrast to "hard territories" centered on nation-states, property, and institutions, soft territories embody a micro-scale and flexible logic. Through everyday practices of placement, care, and aesthetic engagement, they establish effective boundaries in transitional spaces and, in turn, reshape social order.

Theoretically, potted plant practices embed within Lefebvre's "spatial triad," traversing practice, representation, and symbolic dimensions; they resonate with Soja's "Thirdspace," which highlights openness and multiplicity; and they align with Kukla's social ontology by demonstrating individual authority and agency at the micro-spatial level. Potted plants, therefore, are not merely aesthetic objects or ecological supplements but function as aesthetic–political tools for producing soft territories.

The case studies further reveal the spatial potential of potted plant practices at multiple levels. In everyday life, they generate flexible boundaries and shared micro-spaces. In art and social activism, they serve as media for reflecting on power relations and spatial justice (e.g., the practices of Weinberger, Blazy, and Finley). In post-socialist urban contexts, DIY gardens demonstrate how residents reclaim space and pursue legitimacy through informal forms of publicness. Taken together, these practices suggest that potted plants, through small but sustained actions, produce urban orders distinct from rigid territorial boundaries.

Accordingly, potted plants should be understood as crucial cultural mediators of space. They bring plants back into the foreground of urban perception, provide channels for residents to reconstruct belonging and shared experience, and, at the micro level, contribute to the emergence of both spatial and ecological justice. Future research may proceed in three directions: first, cross-cultural comparisons of potted plant practices to reveal diverse pathways of soft territoriality; second, explorations of vegetal imagery within virtual and digital spaces to assess the post-anthropocentric potential of soft territories; and third, situating potted plants within the contexts of climate change and urban transformation to evaluate their roles in sustainable cities.

In conclusion, soft territories are not marginal or fragmented phenomena but integral components of contemporary socio-spatial production. They remind us that spatial justice is not generated only through macro-level institutions and distributions, but also quietly unfolds through the smallest of everyday practices.

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