

Photo by Jean-Marie Clarke

Homo hortensis in the Anthropocene

What gardening teaches us about the future

Gardening is always a local activity and at the same time the embodiment of relationships that aim at the general.

- Gardens encourage planning for the future, providing a well-defined environment where people can play with and express a particular idea.
- Professor Astrid Schwarz of Brandenburg University of Technology in Germany describes a type of human of the garden, *Homo hortensis*, who exists in contrast to the human of technology, *Homo faber*.
- The adaptability of the garden and the gardener offers insight into improving resilience in the face of the challenges presented by the Anthropocene.

Gardens are created with the future in mind, providing an experimental setting to plan the desired composition of the garden, learn about and adapt to environmental changes, and also enjoy what the garden can offer. Gardens are both art and nature. They are created from people's ideas and actions and understood through interpretation; at the same time, they are dependent on nature's cooperation.

In the age of the Anthropocene, significant changes to the environment due to human activity impact people and the planet – one such example is climate change. With this in mind, Professor Astrid Schwarz of Brandenburg University of Technology in Germany describes a new type of human concerned with the garden and gardening practices: *Homo hortensis*. Their socio-technological approach to nature and the world around them promotes adaptability to the challenges increasingly required during the Anthropocene.

Gardens: an outdoor laboratory

Gardens do not exist independently of the world they inhabit. As such, they can provide an experimental setting from which local knowledge of environmental changes can be obtained, informing suitable actions and best practices. In this sense, the garden exists as an outdoor laboratory where people can learn to adapt to changes in the environment, becoming transformative. For example, an area of interest for gardeners

Gardening practices enable people to design and understand complex systems, similar to designing an experiment.

is how gardening practices can influence climate change. Such knowledge could provide a better understanding of the role of gardening and its impact on the environment to yield greater benefits for both people and the planet.

Moreover, a particular garden can present a specific environment where generalisations can be made, creating a truth spot where what holds true in the garden can be applied elsewhere in nature management. Such truth spot gardens can reveal the technologies, values, and actions that may provide a better understanding of the role of humans in reorganising their environment. The garden provides a model environment for individual yards, entire landscapes, at the national or international level to develop policies mitigating and adapting to environmental challenges.

Modified from Schwarz A. (2019). doi.org/10.4324/9781835170246

Role	Animal laborans	Homo faber	Zoon politicon	Homo hortensis
Mode of action	working	producing	enacting	assembling
Nature imagery	necessities of nature	disposition of nature	beyond nature	co-operation with nature
Products	consumption objects	objects of utility	codes of conduct	composed / combine
A garden is ...	not necessary for survival	an object in transition	a socio-political construct	an experience of otherness

The first three modes of action (purple) were developed by Hannah Arendt in her book *The Human Condition* (1958). The fourth mode of action (yellow) was developed by Dr Astrid Schwarz.

As with laboratory experimentation, garden works are a product of people’s conceptualisation and actions. They are a well-defined space requiring maintenance, interpretation, and repetition. Gardening practices enable people to design and understand complex systems, similar to designing an experiment. They also encourage participants to be more engaged with sociopolitical issues and discussions

and their underlying values. An example can be seen with edible cities, where citizens produce their own food and, in doing so, have a greater awareness of what they eat, where it comes from, and how it is made. In this way, they develop a better sociopolitical understanding – for example, through collaborative decision-making regarding issues like choosing appropriate seeds for the local area.

the gardener’s choice of sight lines, views, noises, and smells all serve to contribute to this narrative.

Through gardenworks, the nature of the world can be presented, with the different objects and features representing the existing patterns, systems, and relationships we are familiar with. Gardens can be used to make a specific statement to the viewer, such as encouraging an exploration of the relationship between humans and nature and representing a changing environment.

A new type of human

The Anthropocene is an age characterised by humanity’s impact on the planet, something that we can see through the effects of climate change. In this age, Schwarz describes a particular type of human, *Homo hortensis*, or the person in the garden. In contrast to *Homo faber*’s (or the person of technology) approach to sustainability, *Homo hortensis* addresses environmental issues with a sociotechnological approach, correcting harmful behaviours and encouraging more productive ones. Since gardens are a manifestation of the ability to adapt to unfavourable climatic conditions, they could be used as a valuable resource in establishing a more balanced relationship between humans and the environment. Gardening practices direct people in their desire to do something against negative environmental impacts, redirecting this desire towards future-oriented actions.

Gardeners show concern for the impact climate change has on the garden and how gardening practices might influence the local climate. With this in mind, *Homo hortensis* is able to reflect on both the local and historical situation influencing the garden and its surroundings and promote care, responsibility, and attention in gardening practices. They can develop unique perspectives and strategies that put emphasis on the resilience of certain features in their environment and respond to environmental transformations in an adaptive and co-creative manner. This adaptability is a valuable characteristic in the age of the Anthropocene, where conditions are increasingly unfavourable.

Blurring the art–nature boundary

Like works of art, gardenworks are formed from the ideas and imaginations of people and interpreted by the gardener and viewers. Gardens, as an art form, exhibit features of migration, domestication, colonisation, settlement models, and economic systems. But they are also a product of nature, relying on co-creativity with nature, and they exist at the boundary between nature and art, incorporating and blending elements of both. As such, they provide a medium to express knowledge and ideas,

In contrast to the prevalent technologically focused approach to sustainability, *Homo hortensis* addresses environmental issues with a sociotechnological approach.

experimenting with combinational and compositional techniques in a collaborative and cooperative way.

In particular, movement can effectively present the concept behind a garden’s composition. Movement is experienced intuitively, meaning garden works can be perceived without the need for an explanation. As the viewer moves through the garden, they are able to perceive the objects within it and how they exist in relation to each other, with movement revealing the narrative created by the garden’s composition. A combination of

Personal response

What inspired your exploration of gardening practices and garden works?

I was highly irritated by the talk of gardening management in the debates on large-scale experiments in geoengineering to technically control global climate change. This drew my attention to the idea of the gardening of the world in the sense of an economic exploitation of resources, be it space, soils, water, deep layers of earth, human labour, plants, or animals. In this approach, gardening is understood primarily as a tool for controlling and mastering nature. With my concept of gardening, on the other hand, I suggest that gardening can be used to question one-sided technology-oriented action and to use the knowledge embodied in garden works all over the world to bring forward a more self-critical man-environment relationship.

How were you able to develop the concept of the human of the garden, *Homo hortensis*?

The philosopher Hannah Arendt inspired me to think about a concept of action and an alternative positioning towards nature that would contrast her *Homo faber* and supplement the concepts of the *Animal laborans* and the *Zoon politicon*.

How would you like to see this knowledge utilised?

In a scientific context as a contribution to the debate on resilient, participatory environmental design and ecological aesthetics. In a socio-political context, I would like to encounter *Homo hortensis* in as many geographical locations as possible with the most diverse practices that promote local gardening and the associated self-empowerment in times of complex transformations. In my team, we have started to work on this issue looking at urban agglomerations, such as Accra or Teheran, but also rural areas, such as in Eastern Germany. Another issue is to study gardening practices in the context of education, or also therapeutic approaches, including educational tools on ‘walking with nature’ or ‘walking and thinking’. This led to questioning neuroscience models and how they might adequately describe, for example, the change of perception in urban parks through body-mind interactions. Finally, we have just started to look at the intersection of gardening practice and robotics in home gardens, and we plan to pursue this further on other garden types and scales as well.

Details



Photo credit: Andrea Capella

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Bio

Astrid Schwarz is Professor of Technoscience Studies at Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus-Senftenberg. With her research and teaching, she contributes to the philosophy of technology and environmental anthropology. Currently, she questions the nature–culture divide by investigating gardening practices at different scales, from garden earth to the balcony garden.

Further reading

- Schwarz, A, (2023) *Homo hortensis – der technowissenschaftliche Mensch im Garten*. In: Liggieri, K, Tamborini, M, (eds) *Homo technologicus*. Anthropologie – Technikphilosophie – Gesellschaft. J.B. Metzler, Berlin, Heidelberg.
- Schwarz, A, (2022) *Composing and combining: opposing constructive principles?* *Technology and Language* 3(4), 160–174.
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(†) Deceased



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