

Phoenix Rising

Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane

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Stéphanie Nava



Stéphanie Nava, *Garden Cities or Urban Farming? The Crises Bureau (detail)*, 2011-14; An extract from *Considering a Plot (Dig for Victory)*; installation view, Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane © the artist

Stephanie Nava in conversation with Logan Sisley

I wanted to ask you about Dig for Victory overall and your interest in the allotment tradition. Is that a culture that exists in France? What drew you to looking to the allotment and the government programmes that encouraged people to grow their own food?

I guess the start of it all is my interest in gardening; I like to garden and somehow I wanted to do something with gardening and art. I applied in 2004 for a bursary to go to England for a residency in London and I needed a project. It was evident for me that the project I would do in England was going to be related to gardens as gardening is such a prominent part of English culture. Then I thought about allotments because

even though we have this same tradition in France, the worker's garden —*le jardin ouvrier*— the way they're organised make them a bit different than the ones in England. When I was in London, I started researching about the history of allotments for my project and I came across the *Dig for Victory* programme, which I didn't know at all about. It kind of shifted my interest, made it broader and in fact more interesting for me because it wasn't just about horticulture anymore. Suddenly the whole political level of the idea of allotment was unveiled and it became a much more sophisticated and dense subject in which I could dig and bring in a lot of very different things, not just about plants and horticultural matters.

It's something that's grown – excuse the pun – over time. How has your thinking evolved as you've worked?

Well it did grow over time and really the pun is very well put because I actually started the idea to grow my own; the first idea of the project was to have a real garden, a real allotment but of course I was on the waiting list. I guess I'm still on this waiting list... So the idea was: OK, I can't get earth so I'll do it on my own on paper and I started without really knowing where I was going to. I never expected it to be that scale. At the moment I think it's more or less about 400 square metres, it's a huge project. When I started, I just wanted to draw a little garden and draw all the plants that I needed for it. But of course the more I dug into history, the more I looked into all this information, all these layers, all these subjects... there were new boxes opening, new fields to investigate and new things to be added to the garden that made it grow over time.

Also it did grow in relation to the places I've shown the garden in. For example when the garden went to Detroit, I added a whole new extension, *The Crises Bureau*. It had started in Brest with only a few drawings, but once in Detroit, it strongly echoed the problems of the city and the rise of the urban agriculture and took a whole new dimension... Every time I show the piece, I try to make it grow in conjunction with the place it is exhibited in. In Cottbus in Germany, where it was last shown, there's a little museum about pharmacy, so I took that as a starting point for expanding a whole section that I had planned but never had the opportunity to develop. I had in mind a section about the relationship between the body and the plants in terms of medicine, and that appeared in Cottbus because it was in relationship to the city as well.

We have a part of *The Crises Bureau* on display here and you added a drawing of Marino to it for Dublin. In a way by adding *The Crises Bureau* and looking at the city more broadly, you've kind of expanded this notion of growing your own food from the site of the allotment itself. Was that the intention - to expand it from the very local site to the city as a whole?

I think it all came out of researching the place where allotments sit. From the very beginning the idea was that it was going to be an urban garden. An allotment is not this idyllic garden, you know, ideally situated in lush countryside. Of course an allotment can be beautiful and fun but it's set in a tough surrounding, in suburbs, often by railways. You have this idea of nature that has to fight somehow or has to grow against a very grey background or a very industrial background. From the beginning they are also workers' plots; I mean, the bourgeoisie doesn't grow food in allotments. They do now because it's hip, but it used to really only be subsistence gardens: you grow your own food because you can't buy any. It was very important for me from the start to place it within the urban context: the big skyline in the installation reminds you where you are. So its nature and its location made the

connection between the garden and the city, the way it functions within the city is of great interest to me. When I started to look into urban agriculture more precisely for the Detroit exhibition, all the questions about making space for vegetable gardens in the city emerged. Do you put them near homes, far from them, creating clusters of gardens?... It wasn't just about thinking of the planning of a plot anymore, there was a need to reflect on the city planning too. So in a way, the plot is a sort of core that is looked at as linked to a much broader system.

And the idea of crisis, where does that come in? Particularly with Detroit, in the media it's often represented as a city in crisis, but also in the time you've been making this we've had this kind of global crisis. Particularly in Ireland crisis is a word that seems to surround us. What were you thinking in calling it *The Crises Bureau*?

Well, the first thing that got me to this idea of *The Crises Bureau* was prophylaxis. When drawing the vegetables in the plot I always add imperfections and tiny diseases as when you use garden manuals, there's always a section about how to fight disease. Actually, in the *Dig for Victory* programme, there are a lot of leaflets that picture the 'soldier-gardener' fighting the 'enemies of the plot' that are the bugs and the diseases. So I wanted something about the idea of prophylaxis and the idea of how a disease can cause huge damage to the crop and start a real crisis not only in the crop but also beyond, in society. One of the first events I thought about was the potato blight and the Great Famine in Ireland. I didn't know anything about this when I was in France; it's not really a topic that's taught in school in history class. I learned about it during my research in England and was really interested to learn how such a massive crisis could have initiated in a disease affecting one plant only and how it terribly worsened because of all the other - mostly political - factors. It triggered my desire to include a section about crises that initiate with plants, thinking also of the first 'financial' crisis that came with the tulips in 17th Century Holland.

So I started the *Bureau* and I made a part about the Irish Great Famine and another one about the shortage of food during the blitz during the Second World War because that's what had led the government to set up the *Dig for Victory* programme. Before the War, the Brits weren't growing enough food in their own country; they were relying on imports far too much. They weren't self sufficient and as all the ships were used for the war, they couldn't import food anymore, so setting the *Dig for Victory* programme was a way to alleviate the problem. In Detroit, it's another type of crisis, where urban gardening is partly used to fight the food desert that the city has become, and to empower poor, mostly black, people. It was very interesting for me to look at how all this works in a system. When you are in your little garden doing your own little thing on a very individual level, you don't

always realise that you're actually caught in a much wider system and decisions belong to you but also to much broader and bigger groups, especially the political system. In Detroit for example, one problem about the urban agricultural utopia is that there's actually no zoning possibility for agriculture. The city is organised in zones for particular professional activities and you have parks, you have shops, you have everything, but... you don't have agriculture, so it's actually illegal to grow food in a field in Detroit.

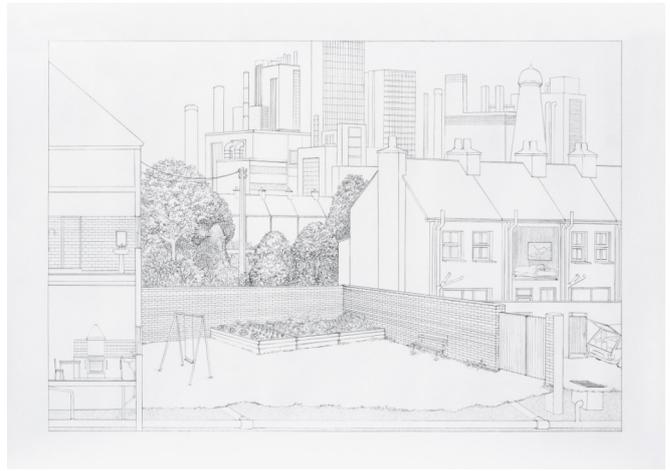
Because it's perceived as rural, I guess; agriculture is something that happens outside the city?

Yes, and when they did the zoning planning for the city they didn't include agriculture because agriculture doesn't belong in the city.

You've reworked a series of plans of cities – both real and imaginary. I guess these maps embody some of the ideology or the thinking or culture around city planning and city organisation. Can you talk through the process of selecting the particular places that you've mapped out and why you were drawn to those?

City planners decide about areas for buildings in relation to areas for parks and gardens, schematically: green space amongst grey space. To translate this relationship I decided on a very basic process: I would do the drawing with the two colours only, green and grey. This enhances the proportion of one against the other very well. You can see how the 'green' can be displayed outside or dotted inside, how much one stands for the other. They become abstractions with questions of composition in a way and this, as a question of drawing, for me is very important for the whole project. In every drawing in the project, every section there are questions of representation, art questions that I ask: how drawing can translate ideas, which technique to use, which size, which structure, etc... For this section, I was of course interested in the garden city movement because of the way they made space for gardens inside cities. I was interested in these utopias, and how it produced some very theoretical drawings and some that are about practical organisation. I looked at Ebenezer Howard's diagrams; some of them I used. And then I looked at what had been made real from these ideas, so I included Bourneville which is the city that Cadbury built, and Port Sunlight which is Lever from Unilever; both cities that had been built around factories for the welfare of the workers. Some of the drawings are completely utopian like that of Broadacre, a project from Frank Lloyd Wright. Other drawings are also projections, like for Detroit I've drawn diagrams of how Detroit could be reshuffled with clusters of houses linked by green spaces, agricultural fields.

The question of representation is there throughout the whole project. At the core is drawing, but



Stéphanie Nava, *Rear Window*, 2014, graphite on paper, Courtesy Galleria Riccardo Crespi, Milan
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it's not simply a drawing on the wall. The drawing creates an installation; it becomes sculptural or spatial. Can you talk through that process and your approach to the way you use drawing in the wider context?

That was actually a question that I didn't think of when I started the project. I started the project in a very silly and straightforward way, like: 'I don't have the land, so I'm going to draw everything' without planning much further! I took my rolls of paper and I started drawing everything... After a while, I had accumulated all these drawings and most of them are very big as everything is drawn real size. Some of them are massive: one metre fifty by seven metres long. They were all rolled in my studio, but thankfully, I was lent a big gallery space in Marseille for the summer in 2007 to try to figure out what to do with them. At first I thought about pieces of furniture to show them, but then, very quickly, it became clear that they had to be in the space as to mimic the space of a real allotment. So I found this solution of hanging them on cables, as if they were on production lines. I don't really know where it came from, I think I was manipulating the drawing and I was just like, 'What can I do to make them not flat and to make them, you know, hang in space and have a presence in space that is not this completely flat land?'...

It also became clear that there was this element of décor that was going to be part of the nature of the piece. It's like a décor but it is an allotment as well, I mean you can go inside it. It has the real size of an allotment and everything is kind of real but fake at the same time. Beside the drawings, I needed to have some volumetric objects to make it work in space and to host some of the smallest drawings, like the little forts I built for the insects, that I started to mix with real objects... Some come from real gardens: there is a small glasshouse, little kind of heating tunnels, a wheelbarrow. This last one, for example, is in use when I install the show. I carry my stuff around in it so it's actually not just there to say, 'Oh, in the garden

there is a wheelbarrow', but it's actually a useful tool for me when I'm 'working in the plot'. Same for the crates that have the stamp 'Dig for Victory' written on them. They look like ammunition boxes; they are props like in a theatre or on a cinema set but at the same time I do use them to carry and store part of the work... One of the objects I really like is the umpire chair from a tennis court that sits in the middle of the installation. When you're on it, you get a sense of the whole plot. I also needed to have a way to look at the garden from above which is actually a view you'd get if you looked at a drawing of a floor plan, a comprehensive way. When you look at it from above, you see all the drawings laid down, like pages opened around you. Its encyclopaedic nature becomes visible; I could say it's a book that you could walk in.

That's a nice analogy. That question of viewpoint is there in the work; there's a drawing that you made in Dublin, *Rear Window*, and the title points to the fact that it's from a very particular view. I wanted to ask you about your time in Dublin when you were resident at IMMA in the artists' residency programme – some thoughts on making that work looking out from Kilmainham across the city, but also your response to Dublin. When you arrive in a place that's unknown, what is the process of getting to know and responding to it?

Well, I applied with a project as for most residencies, and the project was linked to *Considering a Plot (Dig for Victory)*: it was to research further about the Famine, which I did and found other information than what I had expected. I found a lot of things about meteorological, weather data that I'm going to use. I'm very interested in them in terms of drawing, what kind of drawing I can make from them. When I was at the botanical garden, where I found most of these data, I also found out about how much the curator of the garden [David Moore] was very much involved in discovering what the blight was. I got interested in the nature and function of a botanical garden that has this idea of a beautiful garden in which you can come for pleasure, but also is a place for conservation and research. I've got a lot of notes and sketches from my visits there that will be put in use in future works. When I came to Dublin, my idea was to take time, having three months here, not moving much and using that non-disrupted time to resettle my practice and discover the place. I was in a little exhibition at IMMA

with the other residents which opened very, very soon after I arrived. I didn't want to bring pieces I had made before; it wouldn't make sense, so I had to act quickly and in response to my surroundings. I'm interested in gardens, and of course, there's this fabulous garden at IMMA, and this fabulous ceiling in the chapel with all the vegetables hanging. I was also very interested in the fact that Dublin has got all these Georgian houses that are very bland on the outside but exactly decorated on the inside with a lot of botanical ornaments... That led to a small group of drawings I called *Plant as Food as Garden as Ornament as Décor* that is about this garden, its layout, its geometry and plants used in decoration.

You know, I didn't really want to plan things; I just ended up spending time either working in the studio or going around visiting things. You had pointed to the Casino at Marino which I loved and I went to three times. I don't know what I'm going to do but this building is going to appear somehow in my work! When you are in a new environment, you look at everything, a lot. Looking around, noticing things, it's very important and feeds you for when you go back home. So, for me, there had to be things about the views from the museum and from our house. It was not a joke but with Becca Albee, who was another resident, this view that I ended up depicting in *Rear Window*, had become something very important for us. Her bedroom would lead onto that view and she was sitting on a windowsill very often, looking at the view from where she made a little video of a fox inhabiting the garden below. From the bathroom you had the same view and when I was brushing my teeth I would always just stare at this view. I really liked it and I just wanted to catch something about it, to remember it. It became clear, looking there, that it had all the ingredients I'm interested in in my work. It displayed the whole structure of the city between individual dwellings, bigger constructions, the massive factory – the Guinness factory – that you can see from there, that is really included within the city, and green spaces. The little garden had everything: a bench to sit on and relax, a little playground for the kids and a bit of vegetable crop in the corner. I decided to draw it, to draw this idea of the city, reshuffling the view a bit to make it all fit in the page and adding the cross-section of our house. It shows more or less all the ingredients that were there to make a city: live, work, rest, feed and play... in a view of this particular Irish city, Dublin.



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