Thirty years ago, I began a project on the meaning of the planted environment in Vienna that became a monograph (1995). I wanted to learn how people use language to construct the natural world in this city. The monograph was organized around the succession of discourses sponsored by the dominant political factions in the city since the late 1600s. These political actors patronized garden designs around buildings and in gardens that symbolized their ideals. This connection between landscape and powerful actors, or ‘aesthetic governmentality’, was controversial among some scholars at the time because it challenged standard approaches to the history of gardens. Within anthropology, the research offered an extended description of how shared values might propagate through an urban population utilizing verbal clichés and institutionally-instilled public practices.

The analysis progressed from a focus on powerful factions governing through gardening to the gardeners expressing their views of nature. Today, anthropologists have rediscovered questions about the ways that nature is understood by people in different circumstances. The residents of Vienna constitute such a circumstance. By returning to conversations with my research partners from 1988-91, I will explore how Viennese gardeners understood the often flexible and shifting boundary between city and nature. I expect to show that they inhabit multiple systems of thought for understanding nature.