



SPACES OF DIALOG
FOR PLACES OF DIGNITY:
Fostering the European
Dimension of Planning
11 - 14 July 2017 Lisbon



BOOK OF PROCEEDINGS



Authors: José Antunes Ferreira; José Manuel Simões; Sofia Morgado; Eduarda Marques da Costa; João Cabral; Isabel Loupa Ramos; Jorge Batista e Silva; Miguel Baptista-Bastos.

Editorial Support: Carlos Freitas; Inês Fonseca.

Publisher: Lisboa, Universidade de Lisboa

ISBN: 978-989-99801-3-6 (E-Book)

ID 1639 | COMMUNITY GARDENS AS TEMPORARY USES FOR VACANT LAND REVITALIZATION: THE CASE OF RIGA

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1 INTRODUCTION

As some European cities are undergoing economic and population decline, at the same time showing urban sprawl, the number of vacant land inside the city centers is rapidly growing. Under complicated construction regulations, development of vacant land inside the city center is often related to high construction costs and time investment, forcing land owners to postpone site development. Vacant land in the city center, providing space for garbage collection and even affecting increase in crime, results neighbourhood degradation.

Concerning common uncertainty regarding future development of vacant land, temporary uses appear to be good solution to outdoor space revitalization, helping to improve quality of life of local residents. As show various case studies from different European countries, community gardens appear to be common solution for the temporary use of vacant land. According to previous research data, community gardens contribute to social cohesion, promoting integration and strengthening sense of neighbourhood belonging.

Moreover, gardening positively affects people's physical health and wellbeing, reducing one of the major risk factors of noncommunicable diseases.

Nowadays, Riga, being a shrinking city is facing population decline and as a result reduction in land development investment and construction. Integration of temporary projects in particular creation of community garden, can help to promote sustainable development by creating livable outdoor, where people want to spend their free time. However, as community garden do not appear in any construction and land use legislation, as well as concerning the special status of Riga's city center included in the UNESCO World Heritage Protection list, the research focuses on possibilities of introduction of temporary uses, in particular community gardens under the legal framework.

In-depth interviews conducted with city's Construction Department representatives and representatives of city's institutions involved in development of Riga city development plan, development of land use mapping, cultural heritage and green area protection, as well as interviews with local school authorities were chosen as a tool to analyze the current situation of legal framework and possible development of new guidelines to promote introduction of community gardening in the city center.

The results of this research show which particular construction regulations and land development plans should be completed to ensure legal framework under which community garden in the city center can be developed, promoting easier and quicker temporary land use approval.

1.1 THE PROBLEM OF VACANT/UNUSED LAND

Currently facing shrinkage and economic decline, number of vacant plots in many European cities remains to grow. The vacant/underused land problems have raised already in the first part of the 20th century in the economically depressed years, however, widespread attention this fact gained in the late 70's early 80's (ed. Pacione, 1999; Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012). So, for example, in UK concerns about the negative impact of vacant land in the inner city raised already in 1976-1977 (Home, 1983). This fact, however, proves that there is a need for new approaches and strategies to deal with this problem.

Existence of vacant undeveloped territories in the center of the city is often promoting degradation of the neighbourhood plots and even promotes crime. As according to De Biasi (De Biasi, 2017), the bad condition of undeveloped/unused lots often has negative influence on individual's social, mental and physical health. Yet, considering all the negative features, in recent years vacant land started to be perceived as a possibility, not a problem.

In order to deal with the vacant / underused land in the inner cities, various approaches are developed. Being first seen as a problem, vacant land can also offer a range of opportunities (Nemeth and Langhorst, 2013). The vacant land can work as a room for various kinds of different temporary uses, enabling community activities, positively affecting air quality, even helping to reduce crime and providing space for recreation.

1.1.1 METHODS

Combining the temporary uses and urban gardening approaches for dealing with the vacant land, the research focuses on possibilities to implement various community gardening forms under the legal framework of Riga. Being in the list of UNESCO heritage protection zones, the historical center of Riga and its protection zone/area needs specific approaches for vacant land temporary uses.

In order to find out which types and functions of community gardens would be appropriate to introduce on the vacant land in the historical center of Riga, in-depth interviews with City's Construction Department's, City's Development Department's representatives and representatives of cultural heritage and green area protection agencies were conducted (9 interviews in total). Interviews with local school authorities and authors of previous projects related to urban gardening helped to find out which inhabitant groups are interested in gardening in the center of the city (5 interviews in total).

Field studies showed the number of vacant land and land used for temporary car parking in the protection zone of the historical center of Riga.

2 THE CASE OF RIGA

Riga is a shrinking city, and this process is especially affecting the center of the city. According to the census data in 2010 number of inhabitants in Riga was 673433, shrinking to 639630 in 2016 (Census data, 2017).

As defined in various planning documents, Riga's historical center and its protection zone is a multifunctional territory, providing livable, flexible and sustainable environment. Analysis of the Riga Territory Plan shows that the chosen territory consists of various land development groups. Water bodies (17,9%), streets (16,9%) and squares (24%) are taking the largest territories in the historical center of Riga. Mixed housing and business land development groups are the most common functions in the current development plan. Distribution of these functions is unbalanced, leading to the coexistence of housing and night club buildings and so negatively affecting the quality of life.

Underused/vacant land makes 4,3% of the territory in the historical center of Riga and its protection area and includes vacant land, underused built-up territories as well as declined territories. Furthermore, these numbers do not include extensively used areas with the development which allows further construction. Some of these territories are functioning as car parking, which is defined as a temporary use. As showed field studies there are 32 vacant and 17 temporary car parking plots in the protection zone of the historical center of Riga (Fig. 1 a,b).

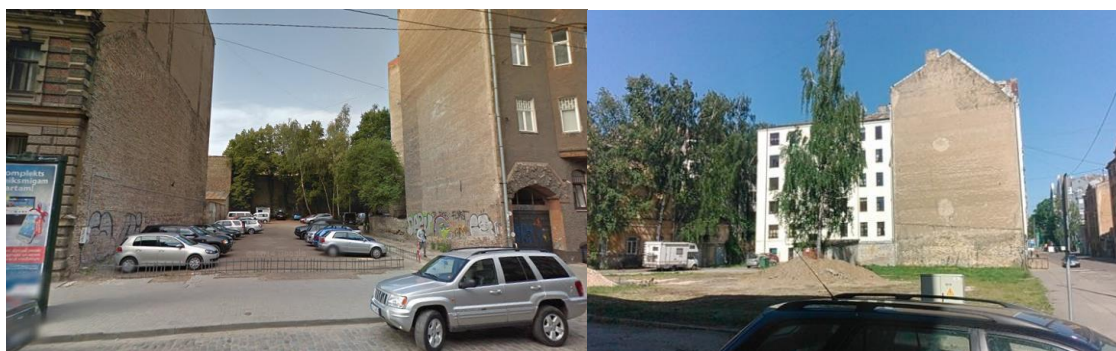


Figure 1 a, b – Vacant land with a temporary car parking, vacant/unused land (protection zone of the historical center of Riga)

According to the aims defined in the development strategy for the historical center of Riga and its protection zone, revitalization of degraded or underused territories is to be reached with new construction development (Riga's sustainable development strategy till 2030). This fact, however, does not support flexible and fast revitalization, on the contrary it results more complicated and slow process of revitalization. In the context of a shrinking city new construction development might cause even more fragmentation, negatively affecting residents' quality of life.

As shows the evidence from other cities in Europe, inhabitants prefer to see community gardens or other community supporting temporary uses, rather than vacant land or temporary parking. Community gardens often start as guerilla initiatives, as for example in the case of Todmorden, UK. However, in the case of the historical center of Riga unplanned actions might lead to penalties and dismantling of the garden. That is why to ensure the development of community gardens as a temporary use for vacant land, the legal garden approval process needs to be simplified.

Research on the previous urban gardening related initiatives showed that authors usually avoid development of a garden project, preferring creation of an „event” or „campaign”, which is easier to approve in planning institutions. However, it allows to set up garden only for a very short period of time, requiring also detailed „event” programme. In depth interviews with authors of urban garden related events showed that the idea of growing in the center of the city is supported by different inhabitant groups. So, the commercial urban garden, which functioned as a cafe and the advertisement point for the household

equipment, attracted attention of young families and middle-aged people (Fig. 2 a). The vertical garden located on the market place encouraged attention of children and seniors (Fig. 2 b). This evidence confirms Riga's inhabitants' interest in urban gardening and proves the necessity in development of easier, people-friendly regulations concerning installation of temporary community gardens in the center of the city (Interview data).



Figure 2 a, b – Urban gardening related events in the center of Riga

At the moment, creation of a community garden on the vacant land requires not only land owner's permit, but also a detailed project. Taking into account absence of guidelines or regulations related to development of community gardens, common regulations as for landscape design or urban amenities project are implemented. In order to introduce new guidelines or regulations, and to ensure the quality of the proposed guidelines in terms of community garden in the historical center of Riga, various institutions should be involved. In depth interviews with representatives of The City Development Department, The Construction Department (Architects), The Construction Department (Landscape Architects), Country's Cultural Heritage Protection Agency and „Riga Forests” Agency showed which particular aspects should be taken into account when creating new guidelines. Examples from different European countries show that community gardens can be introduced not only on the vacant land, but also in green areas (parks, garden squares), school or nursery school courtyards and residential housing courtyards. Location of the community garden affects also the main function, preferably introducing educational garden at schools, and promoting physical activity and social integration, as well as providing free time spending possibilities in parks and residential housing courtyards. Taking into account these differences, interviewees were asked to consider best matching function for community garden on the vacant land. As a result, representatives of different institutions reached common ground on community garden as a free time activity for seniors and as a revitalization tool for vacant/underused land. Some experts considered also promotion of physical activity and social integration (Table 1, Interview data).

As differs the function of community gardens, differs also the design or the visual appearance. Considering type of community garden on the vacant land in the historical center of Riga and it's protection zone, preferable are container and vertical garden. Creation of raised-bed garden might be supported only in protection area of the historical center. In addition, all interviewees arrived at a common view on the importance of design, considering necessity to insure visual appearance of high quality.

	The City Development Department (2 people)	The Construction Department (Architects) (2 people)	The Construction Department (Landscape Architects) (1 person)	Country's Cultural Heritage Protection Agency (2 people)	„Riga Forests” (2 people)
Vacant land for community garden	yes	yes	Yes/No	yes	yes

Container gardening	✓	✓	-	✓	✓
Vertical gardens	✓	✓	-	✓	✓
Raised-bed gardens	-	✓	-	-	
Supported function of the temporary urban garden	Free time activity for seniors Social integration As an areas revitalization tool	Free time activity for seniors Promotion of physical activity As an areas revitalization tool	-	Free time activity for seniors As an areas revitalization tool	No specific preferences
Current requirements for container gardens	-	-	Project with the detailed description, photo evidence, topography, plan and detailed description of the planned beds/containers/structures, description of the planned plants	-	-
Desired Requirements	Insured safety and maintenance. Common maintenance requirements for all gardens.	Visualisation, to ensure visual quality of the garden. Assurance of maintenance		Design and plan of the garden. When working on design local traditions should be respected, however, contemporary design solutions are welcome to be introduced. Special attention on the choice of planted species.	Visualisation, to ensure visual quality of the garden. Special attention paid on design.
Integration of community gardens in the city's development strategy	✓	✓	-	✓	✓
Separate regulations on community gardens	✓	✓	Integrated in the general construction regulations		✓

Table 1 – Interview data

3 CONCLUSION

According to in-depth interviews' data, use of community gardens as a tool to revitalize vacant/underused land is supported. Positive impact of urban gardening on people's health and well-being, and the free time spending possibilities garden gives to senior residents, has also been considered as an advantage. Considering the type of community garden, container and vertical garden were chosen as more appropriate. However, considering legal framework and creation of new guidelines all interviewees came to a common conclusion that in case of the historical center of Riga and its protection zone, special attention should be paid to garden design. It is recommended to have separate or integrated regulations which would ensure high visual quality of the community garden. In order to prevent vandalism or any other problems, the maintenance should be insured. Introduction of community gardens in the city's development strategy is advisable by all interviewees.

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Interviews of research participants (14 in total)