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Cultivating alternative spaces – Zagreb's community gardens in transition: From socialist to post-socialist perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of community gardens in a (post)socialist setting during a time of key changes in their perception and management. Community gardens in Zagreb emerged in two specific economic and socio-cultural contexts and a diachronous approach to the study of urban gardens offers a unique insight into differences and similarities reflecting and contrasting those periods. Semi-structured interviews and non-participatory observation were employed. Results show that community gardens in Zagreb are multilayered places which satisfy diverse needs of the urban residents, including home grown food, socializing, recreation, contact with the nature, and supplementation for low pensions. They can also be seen as examples of heterotopias or alternative spaces during both examined periods. In the socialist period they were secluded, private, pseudo-rural places in a semi-authoritarian, communal, and (supposedly) urban and industrial society. In post-socialist Zagreb, characterized by an uncontrolled and unplanned spatial context reliant on neoliberal market-oriented principles, social insensitivity and exclusion, the new gardens are depicted as beacons of communal involvement, grassroots movements, and the ability of citizens to stand together and make their voices heard.

1. Introduction

> *"What are the chances of urban residents leading lives different from what they were doomed to by this environment? Can they overcome what it prescribes them to be? Are there other opportunities hidden in the city of a different urban experience?"*
> [Eizenberg (2013)]

Community gardens have been a well-established practice in the city of Zagreb for quite a while now. Their beginnings can be traced to the increased influx of population during Zagreb's rapid industrialization in the late 1970s and 1980s and the building of new apartment blocks that accompanied it. Those first gardens started springing up spontaneously on unused land near the new buildings, a result of the new tenants' own initiative. Some plots that had been categorized as construction plots in urban plans weren't built upon right away, mostly due to lack of money. There was no official effort to landscape or to provide any other sort of content on them either (Gulin Zrnić, 2012). These "alternative urbanizations" (Rihtman-Auguštin, 1988) of public spaces were conducted outside of the official framework of the local authorities. The allotment garden model used in many other countries (e.g. Germany, Russia, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia) was nonexistent. Although a present and very visible mark in the urban landscape, these gardens were never officially recorded or included in spatial planning documents. As far as the local authorities were concerned, these gardens did not, and today still do not, officially exist. This partly changed in April 2013 when Zagreb's mayor Milan Bandić decided to establish the "Urban Gardens" project, mostly in different, new locations. This u-turn by the local authorities did not come without warning, it was preceded by months of lobbying conducted by numerous non-governmental organizations who were trying to alert public and local authorities to the benefits the gardens provide to individuals and to the local community. The City decided to legalize this long-standing practice through the project by officially leasing land plots owned by the City to individuals demonstrating an interest in urban gardening. However, the old illegal gardens remained mostly outside the scope of this new project. The only difference was that they are now partly recorded and mapped.

As opposed to Croatian scientific literature, where the subject of community gardens is minimally researched, foreign literature abounds with research on this phenomenon. Community gardens have been discussed from many different perspectives and theoretical approaches which has revealed the multilayered nature of these spaces. So far they have been mostly praised for their

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positive outcomes in relation to the individual and society. Many studies have reported benefits including increased access to the following: open green spaces, fresh, safe and culturally appropriate food, job opportunities, education and training for youth and adults (Evers and Hodgson, 2011; Crossney and Shellenberger, 2012; Baker, 2004; Wekerle, 2004; Reynolds, 2014; Schukoske, 2000). Community gardens have been praised for their role in social capital building, neighbourhood revitalization, urban sustainability, alleviation of poverty, health promotion, and for their environmental benefits (Armstrong, 2000; Firth et al., 2011; Alaimo et al., 2010; Turner, 2011; Glover, 2003, 2004; Glover et al., 2005a, 2005b; Kingsley and Townsend, 2006; Wakefield et al., 2007; Dhakal and Lilith, 2011; Kurtz, 2001; Holland, 2004; Ferris et al., 2001; Stocker and Barnett, 1998; Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny, 2004). Furthermore, urban gardens play an especially important role for food security in developing countries as urban agriculture appears to be associated with greater dietary diversity and calorie availability. Studies show that urban agriculture is predominantly an activity practiced by the poor households in developing countries. Having direct access to a wider variety of food via urban agriculture can help protect the poorest of urban citizens (Zezza and Tasciotti, 2010; Moyo, 2013; Ashebir et al., 2007; Simatele and Binns, 2008; Maxwell et al., 1998). Additionally, community gardens are recognized as contested spaces and spaces of grassroots activism through which citizens can claim rights to their city (Schmelzkopf, 1995, 2002; Staeheli et al., 2002; Follmann and Viehoff, 2014; Smith and Kurtz, 2003; Eizenberg, 2012a, 2012b; Lawson, 2007) as well as a response to roll-back neoliberalism and the withdrawal of the local state apparatus from service provision (Rosol, 2010, 2012). It is only recently that scholars shifted their attention from exclusively positive outcomes of urban agriculture to some of the negative aspects lurking under the surface. The Ghose and Pettygrove (2014) study on Milwaukee community gardens showed that citizen participation in the context of neoliberalization can simultaneously empower and challenge citizens. They argue that community gardens reinforce the neoliberal tenet that citizenship should be earned through active participation, which, in this case, is only accessible to individuals with the physical abilities, knowledge, and time to volunteer. Reynolds (2014) noticed that race-based and class-based disparities exist in New York's urban agriculture system. She found that farmers and gardeners experiences with obtaining financial resources varied widely in terms of the amount of funding and the strategies used to raise funds (community groups with white leaders reported raising larger amounts of funding than did groups led by people of color). The dominance of white people in community group leadership and alternative food movements are documented by other authors as well (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014; Meenar and Hoover, 2012; Slocum, 2006, 2007; Guthman, 2008). Findings from all these studies remind us that community gardens are not isolated spaces, unconnected with their surroundings, rather multilayered sites which reflect, replicate and contest dominant social values and norms.

The research on community gardens differs vastly, not only based on the different approaches and perspectives, but also on the areas where it was conducted. Papers published in the USA, Canada, Australia and Western Europe, are the most numerous, at least among those written in English. A review of literature revealed that the research body on the development and characteristics of community gardens in Eastern Europe is less extensive. Studies conducted in former socialist countries often give us insight into the historical perspective of the development, and the attitudes and dominant social values assigned to the urban agriculture (e.g. in Poland, (Bellows, 2004); in Russia (Moldakov, 2000; Zavisca, 2003; Boukharaeva and Marloie, 2015). It is interesting to inspect the topic from this angle because of the vast and comprehensive socio-economic changes that followed the collapse of the socialist system. These full scale alterations mirror themselves in the vernacular landscapes of urban and peri-urban gardens. However, there are notable differences even within (post)socialist countries themselves. The Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, unlike the overwhelming majority of former socialist and communist countries in Europe, did not have any legal regulations pertaining to urban gardening. Urban gardens were created spontaneously, as individual actions, but also in response to certain social and political processes. With its specific economic development which differed significantly from countries of the former Soviet Sphere, the case of Yugoslavia demonstrates that (post)socialist countries have their own specific characteristics regarding urban agriculture that are worthy of our attention. Therefore, this study attempts to present experiences from community gardens in Zagreb. Zagreb was selected as a case study because in socialist Yugoslavia it was the largest and the most important industrial center of the whole country. Its development after the Second World War reflects best all the processes characteristic for Yugoslavia: rapid industrialization, a strong influx of people from rural areas, and large-scale expansion of apartment blocks throughout the city. Such processes in Zagreb were accompanied by the emergence of community gardens - tiny patches of cultivated land within the city's fabric.

Taking into consideration the broad-scale changes that occurred throughout Eastern Europe after the collapse of socialism and communism, this paper aims to provide insight into those community gardens from two perspectives. On one hand we wanted to record the experiences of those participating in their creation before the 1990s – during the times of socialism in Zagreb before the break-up of Yugoslavia and the major socio-economic changes that followed it. On the other hand we wanted to show the perspectives of the new gardeners who took up community gardening with the creation of the new urban gardens – in the scope of a neoliberal city undergoing transition. Additional information was gathered from representatives of local authorities directly involved in the creation of the "Urban Gardens" project in order to gain an insight into their view on the subject of community gardens. All aspects related to the gardens were studied from a "then-now" perspective in order to discover potential differences as well as similarities.

2. Methodology

The aim of this research was to produce a rich, in-depth description and understanding of the community gardens in Zagreb during a time of key changes in the perception and management of these areas. Our intent was to analyze the past and present of the gardens, i.e. to study the subject through a prism showing the past (before the 1990s) and the present (after 2013 and opening up the first gardens by the local authorities). In the period from the 1990s to 2013 there have been no considerable changes. The old gardens continued to exist (some were abandoned due to ageing of the gardeners, others were "inherited" from older gardeners) and the new gardens had yet to be established (in 2013). The pre-1991 period was a time of socialism, with Croatia being one of the six socialist republics of Yugoslavia. The social and economic circumstances of the time were vastly different from those after the 1990s. The transition from one socio-economic system to another has left its mark on both the space and the people. We believe that a diachronous approach to studying the gardens in Zagreb would reveal the differences as well as similarities reflecting and contrasting those two very different periods.

Qualitative methodology was employed in this research by using semi-structured interviews and non-participatory observation. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with twenty-six urban gardeners (12 respondents in old gardens on