

FROM THE INDIVIDUAL

In a time of general insecurity and recession the main components of every sustainable developmental alternative should also include the quality production and use of food. The idea of a local community supplying itself, something that can be realised through urban gardens, is becoming an increasingly developed activity in urban centres.

Urban gardens, balcony planters, fruit parks and tree lanes, gardens on rooftops, water motifs and green borders instead of iron or concrete – with all of the above, self-organised urban groups in many countries of the world are bringing spaces to life and transforming them into new dimensions of public, open, and living spaces, for the creativity and independence of the community.

Community urban gardens represent an economic, ecological, cultural and social challenge to local inhabitants. Besides being a place for gathering, exchanges, interactions, self-supply and learning, they also provide a social and cultural corrective, while re-connecting the lives of people with the direct experience of satisfying human needs. On top of its creative use of and care for green areas, urban gardening lowers transport and storage costs, emissions, and the dependence of residents on the price of petrol, pharmaceutical corporations and trade lobbies. It renews organic material in the city and enables the production of local, seasonal, and live food for households, individuals, and culinary gourmets. The gardens make possible a kind of agronomic literacy and establish a relationship to the earth and the environment, creating a new perception of public spaces. They provide space for children's games, recreation, and relaxation and automatically improve people's health and state of being. The cultural potential of urban gardens raises the appreciable quality of space with the co-creation of green surfaces in the city; they also prevent the creation of illegal refuse dumps and represent an exceptional educational value, mainly for children and youth.



The first prime and comprehensive example of planned individual gardening in Maribor was undoubtedly the Austro-Hungarian organisation of the railway colony in Tabor. The colony took shape in 1863, and was the first settlement on the right-hand bank of the Drava river, where to this day a significant portion of Maribor is still expanding. Living in the colony were workers from the refurbishing and repair workshops of the Austrian Southern Railway, operating services from Vienna to Trieste. Each building had four or eight apartments, and for each individual worker's family there was a small plot with a sensibly organised green curtain of fruit or decorative trees. There was a motif of four trees and a garden with vegetables, which was enclosed by fences of required sizes and shapes.

Families shared the aesthetically made garden sheds, the common tree lanes, the town wells, and the comprehensively designed environment of the village among themselves. This organisation of the colonies in Maribor from the middle of the 19th century, the very beginnings of industrialisation, has been preserved to this day, and represents the historical, sociological, and urban heritage of the wider region.

With the growth of industry and immigration, first from Austro-Hungarian countries and then from the fellow republics of former Yugoslavia, numerous gardens also bloomed. They became an indispensable and recognisable part of the city's urban culture. Already in the 1980's in Maribor an urban plan was designed and accepted. In the Stražunski forest a large section of land was to be comprehensively organised for the purpose of gardening. Though the plan was never realised in its entirety, today – in terms of its environmental, landscape, architectural, and sociological dimensions – it is considered to be by far the most well-conceived example of urban gardening. In the past, in Maribor and the surrounding area, the municipality assigned more than one location for gardens, such as in Pobrežje, and several years ago also in Morski Jarek near Kungota. However, these examples of partial organisation do not satisfy the larger need for gardens, especially if we take into account the fact that the largest gardening colony by Vrbanski Plato is slowly being abolished because of a pumping station for drinking water. This is one of the rare examples of gardens that are organised together into an association. Many residents have thus been left without even a small piece of land, and are thus left to their own resources.

Most of the existing gardens in the city therefore fall into the category of "spontaneously" created, either because of their chosen location, or because of their gardening equipment, which often brings to mind an exhibit of "trash art". Here, within the creativity and resourcefulness of gardeners, recycling takes on both a new meaning and form – one which does not in any way suit the taste of the city's aesthetically minded. In fact, it does not even suit the tastes of many gardeners, who erect their tin-plastic-particleboard sheds with rusty fences mainly because they do not have the chance to design their environment in harmony with their desires and for sustainable use. If a city – and here we mean to say any city – is not able to provide enough space for gardens in places that are otherwise suitable, and in accordance with the needs of its residents, its people will satisfy their needs in those parts of the city where it is at least possible to do so. If the city does not work together with the residents to create basic guidelines for these areas, which should be a reflection of the people's real needs, and also provide adequate resources, the people will subjugate their design to their own individual abilities every time.

For that reason, "unorganised" gardens are not necessarily a consequence of a lack of aesthetic sensibilities, but rather they are a combination of two things: the economic exclusion of those who are trying to establish them, and the permanent threat that these people could be removed from these locations, which they occupy against the wishes of the owners, at any time.

TO THE COLLECTIVELY ORGANISED

The community urban garden was set up by a group of experts and researchers from the Urban Furrows programme section. They worked out and brought to fruition a never before realised idea for an urban intervention, which was accepted in a decree by the Municipality of Maribor in 1986. On the basis of this decree, researchers prepared more than one model case of community urban gardening and, in order to establish good practices, they obtained a hectare of land from the municipality in the city district of Radvanje, at a location near Borova Vas and in direct vicinity to the most densely populated part of the city. The urban garden has been placed by a water promenade which connects the recreational area under Pekrska Gorca, an area with a high population density (Nova Vas, Borova Vas), and the recreational forest Betnava. Working with the residents of the neighbouring blocks since the autumn of 2011, they have been devising a model case for ecological urban gardening, which could easily become its own example of good practices.



During the design phase for a sustainable gardening model, the researchers of Urban Furrows took into account the needs of the local residents, as well as the potential to meet their needs in the long term. Through lectures, educational programmes, and workshops, residents from nearby apartment buildings were given the opportunity to organise themselves into a group of gardeners, the Eco Urban Garden Association, which has taken over management and maintenance for the entire area. During the process, all those who were interested learned how to co-exist and cooperate; how to include their personal interests into the interests of the community; how to produce quality organic food without prohibitive costs; how to take care of the environment and management of green areas in the city; how to preserve the urban garden as an example for other similar endeavours, at home or abroad. They learned how to transfer ideas, wishes, and needs into a form of everyday practice which makes us stronger and connects us with each other. In the course of a year, slowly but surely, a community urban garden began to take shape – in accordance with the principles and guidelines which were collectively accepted by the gardeners at their meetings.

And it is precisely this which is the fundamental difference between individual gardening and community urban gardening. The latter is a community achievement by a larger number of residents or a group of people which goes beyond, inasmuch as this is possible, differences and divisions. Instead of social atomisation or fragmentation we have the collective creation of a community and the communal.

Today, step by step, the Eco Urban Garden Association is already realising needs which go beyond the production of fresh fruit and vegetables, even though this alone is of exceptional importance. At the community urban garden, besides the cherry blossoms, socialising among different generations and cultures is also blooming. Biodiversity is blending with the multiculturalism of the post-industrial capital of culture, and children of different ages are forming new friendships as they play on playground equipment which was installed by their parents and grandparents. The urban garden is a place to grow vegetables, but it is also a place that nurtures relationships which are being hindered and eradicated by our competitive consumer society, and by the exploitation of natural and social resources. In this way, the garden is first and foremost becoming a meeting place and a place for socialising. It is becoming a place where, through work projects, meetings, and celebrations, the fabric of society is once again being woven. From organic production, which benefits both nature and ourselves, to the creation of a community based on mutual assistance, solidarity, group decision making on common matters, the co-creation of a place for creativity, and the guidelines for the work itself.

FOR A HOLISTIC ARRANGEMENT OF THE COMMUNITY GARDEN

The community urban garden at Borova Vas is an example of a holistic arrangement of organised gardening in Slovenia. It is certainly the first example to have certified organic production from its very start. The garden area has been enclosed with a wooden fence. Along its inner side various types of berries (raspberry, gooseberry, jostaberry, currant), hazel, dog rose, dogwood, and mountain-ash have been planted. On the outside of the fence, along the water promenade, there is a tree lane composed of older varieties of fruit trees. The fruits can be enjoyed by random passers-by or by people who take their daily recreation by the Pekrski stream. We sought to create a connection between those making use of the garden and those passing by, and that is why the fruit trees are intended for walkers or random passers-by, but the gardeners are the ones who take care of the trees. With this approach, we are hoping to recall the practice already introduced in Slovenia by Maria Theresa in the 18th century. For the gardeners, inside the garden along pebble paths there are common gardening sheds with pergolas that have older varieties of grapevines (Jurka, Isabella) and kiwi growing on them. All the common sheds offer a space for rest under the pergolas, and they also have a reservoir for rainwater. Even the very youngest can enjoy themselves on the playground equipment or the green areas of the garden, which are intended for common use. There are also raised wooden planters intended for the physically disabled.

To help maintain biodiversity and to preserve older indigenous varieties, at the Eco Urban Garden there is also a little garden set aside for the work of the Seed Library, or the Seed Savers Association. In order to improve the pollination of plants and promote the urban beekeeping, an element of the garden's educational diversification will be handled by the Maribor Beekeeping Association. Among all the various infrastructure related elements of the facilities, without a doubt the most important is the wooden communal building, a place for the gardeners to meet and socialise while doing the common tasks that help to both form and connect the gardening community with one another.

The community eco urban garden deserves the "eco" designation, not only because it is the first urban garden with a group certificate for organic gardening, something which is carefully monitored by the Institute for Control and Certification of the University of Maribor, but also because in its entirety it is following the aim of creating a sustainable plan for the welfare of the local community. With locally produced solar energy devices and a dry compost sanitation system, the garden is self sufficient in terms of its own electrical energy needs and is not a burden to the environment in terms of sewage waste. Similarly, all of the buildings which were erected by the company Eko Hiše (Danilo Gorjup s.p.) are made of wood from the forests in the immediate vicinity of Maribor. The eco urban garden must therefore be seen as a whole, just as was created. And it is still taking shape with the help of gardeners connected through the Eco Urban Garden Association.

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An information day at the garden open to anyone interested from the general public will be held every first Thursday of the month between 6:00pm and 7:00pm, from April to October. On this day you can meet representatives of the association, call them at 041 975 255, or write them at info@ekovrt.si.

