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Urban Forestry & Urban Greening

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ufug

Original article

Urban garden as lived space: Informal gardening practices and dwelling culture in socialist and post-socialist Belgrade

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Allotments
Greenery
Everyday spatiality
Non-legal practices
Residential settlements
Serbia

ABSTRACT

This paper considers urban gardens as lived spaces which have an important role in reconnecting with nature in an urban environment, but also as an archive of concepts related to culture and everyday life. In this context, the paper studies the character of three of Belgrade's urban gardens and their contribution to the quality of everyday life in the large-scale socialist residential settlements built during the 1970s. Focus is placed on establishing relations between the dwelling culture, social and cultural needs and changes, and the dominant architectural and planning paradigms of modernism and post-modernism. Belgrade's urban gardens were created and developed spontaneously (most often non-legally) as self-organized citizens' acts. Research presented in our case studies confirms the paper's initial assumption that the urban gardens in Belgrade are still considered marginal and certainly not representative urban practices, overshadowed by the planned urban conceptions and socio-political actions. In this sense, we may notice the lack of a systematic approach to managing these gardens, and complete absence of legislation either provided by authorities, private or public bodies or even associations. Although the urban gardens emerged in socialism outside of any rules and regulations, they promoted the values of an active relationship between the user, dwelling culture and immediate residential surroundings, and contributed to improving the dwelling culture of the "new working class" in the socialist dwelling units. Also, the gardens were not only a place for producing food in financially difficult times, especially during the post-socialist transition of the 1990s, but above all a place associated with socialization and a "sense of home". Recognizing the benefits of urban gardens and accordingly raising awareness about this concept in the city, together with the adoption of appropriate regulations, would certainly be of immense relevance to urban gardening and generally landscape quality in Serbia.

1. Introduction

This paper studies the character and history of Belgrade's urban gardens and their contribution to the quality of everyday life in large-scale socialist residential settlements. Special focus is placed on establishing relations between the dwelling culture, social and cultural needs and changes, and the dominant architectural and planning paradigms of the analyzed period. The paper presents three case studies of informal urban gardens used by the residents of socialist settlements built in Belgrade during the 1970s under the influences of modernist and post-modernist principles in architecture and urbanism. The assumption behind this study is that urban gardens have brought numerous benefits to the socialist settlements in Belgrade, not just as a means of occupying green areas but also as a concept that increases the quality of urban living (socialization, developing a sense of place and identity, developing representations of "home" etc.). The paper questions the further

development of urban gardens in Belgrade, and generally Serbia, in terms of regulation and legislation, and the systematic improvement of their design aspects.

The first part of the paper presents the theoretical background of the research, as well as the history and status of urban gardening and greenery in Belgrade after the Second World War. The paper relies on Lefebvre's assumption that if space is a product, our knowledge about it must reproduce and interpret the process of production, i.e. the focus of interest must be moved from things in space to the current production of space (Lefebvre, 1991). Urban gardens are, therefore, studied not only as landscapes but also as lived spaces. Thus, the paper is based on a hypothesis that the form and function of Belgrade's informal urban gardens are directly linked with the dominant influences of socialist ideology and post-socialist transition, and that study of the mentioned links opens the way to understanding the complex combination of political, economic, and social processes that shape and reshape urban

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ufug.2017.05.014>

Received 1 October 2016; Received in revised form 24 May 2017; Accepted 24 May 2017
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landscape and urban greenery. Such an approach relies on the studies of urban gardens as constantly changing networks of relations and activities between man and culture. The urban garden is considered as lived space, which has an important role in reconnecting with nature in an urban environment. The second, empirical part of the paper analyzes the chosen case studies of informal urban gardens used by the residents of socialist settlements built in Belgrade during the 1970s. Each from a unique perspective, the case studies presented here examine the ways in which socio-cultural processes occur in landscapes due to not primarily economic needs but the people's need to develop a sense of place and identity, social connections and feelings of belonging, to re-imagine the landscape, and develop representations of "home". Hence, urban gardens in the socialist context are studied as "small" life territories to which residents are attached. The users can work in these spaces and transform, adopt, and personalize them according to their own needs. The final section of the paper discusses the results of research from the aspects of relations between the specific dwelling culture and political changes, and more precisely from the aspect of the potentials and problems arising from the marginal, informal and non-legal character of these practices in the socialist and post-socialist society. Also, the benefits of these gardens are discussed in the sense of improvement of the living environment in these residential settlements, and the possibilities for their advancement by means of including them into planning regulation and adopting positive, both European and regional experiences. Accordingly, with a view to enhancing the quality of life in the city, "contributing to 'green' the image of the city", as well as "meeting the urban dwellers' needs for community building" (Costa et al., 2016), the paper stresses the importance and necessity of the strategic planning of urban gardens as lived spaces in the densely-populated urban fabric. Also, the paper underlines the fact that as long as gardening remains an informal and non-legal practice, systematic improvement of the design aspects, i.e. of the spatial characteristics of urban gardens will be impossible, despite their remarkable contribution to social, economic and ecological benefits in the city.

As no systematic research on urban gardens has been done so far in Serbia, they are treated only as marginal urban occurrences. There has been no scientific classification or systematization of these gardens and their characteristics in Belgrade, or Serbia in general. Concerning the typology of the analyzed case studies, due to their characteristics, they may best be defined as allotment gardens. Though all the gardens are divided into individual plots, the gardeners are under no obligation to pay an affiliation fee and/or rent. Also, what is certainly important and should be stressed is the informal character of the emergence of these gardens. In this sense, we may notice the lack of a systematic approach to managing these gardens, and complete absence of legislation provided either by authorities, private or public bodies, or even an association. In view of their informal character, they share some common characteristics with community gardens, in which, by definition, "the peace of ground is obtained, often by informal or non-legal means, and the garden space and cultivation as well as management activities are shared among the gardeners" (Adams and Hardman, 2013). These gardens are also often smaller, found within denser urban areas on brownfield sites and may be temporary (Bell et al., 2016). When speaking of garden typology, however, while it is easy to recognize this type in its pure form, in the specific socio-political and cultural context of socialist and post-socialist Belgrade, these urban gardens and the processes by which they were founded or managed, their location and overall characteristics may certainly be described as hybrid.

In this regard, the paper aims at interpreting the so far rarely studied and generally unknown informal gardening practices in Belgrade, i.e. at presenting the specific character and context of their creation to a broader international public. Actuality of this study is also confirmed by the renewed and growing interest in urban gardening which is driving the emergence of new spaces and multiple ways of expression in many different spatial configurations and contexts (Costa et al., 2016), especially as a form of city living in sustainable and developing

societies.

2. Background of the research

2.1. Theoretical context

Urban gardens are spaces that enhance creativity and activity, provide identity, a sense of place, and attachment to a specific environment (Crouch and Wiltshire, 2005). Very early in history, gardens used to represent an image of man's beliefs, convictions, and values (Francis and Hester, 1990). They contribute to liveable urban environments (Guitart et al., 2012) as an important factor of ecological and social urban development (Ernwein, 2014). Accordingly, in this paper we refer to the space of an urban garden not only as a location, but primarily the occupation of a location, sense of belonging or, more precisely, a specific lived space. In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre defines the triad spatial model as "the three moments of social space" – the perceived, conceived, and lived space, proposing it as an analytical tool for the process of production of space (Lefebvre, 1991). Social or lived space is, according to Lefebvre, "third space" and it is directly lived through associated images and symbols. Also, it should be emphasized that this "third"/lived space embodies both "first space" (physical space/perceived space) and "second space" (mental space/conceived space) without being reducible to either one of them (Lefebvre, 1991). Urban gardens, specifically allotment gardens, have been depicted in many respects as "third spaces" (DeSilvey, 2003) because of their unspecific spatial and perceptual position in the urban landscape. Soja argues that "third space" is a social product or, in other words, a space created by a society under oppression or marginalization that wants to reclaim the space of inequality and make it into something else (Little, 2014). It is also important to stress that Lefebvre began to observe lived space as a bridging concept capable of solving the conflict between the urban and rural elements of everyday life. Contemporary theories acknowledge a series of different approaches to the study of the notion of everyday life (Bennett and Watson, 2003; Chaney, 2002; Gardiner, 2000; Highmore, 2001; Silva and Bennett, 2004). Regarding the subject of the paper, it should be emphasized that culturology views everyday life as a proving ground for studying the problems of political and cultural construction of identity and meaning (Hartley, 2003). This paper focuses on De Certeau's approach and his work *Practice of Everyday Life*, which relates to the role of man in a society (De Certeau, 2002). De Certeau problematizes the practices and tactics employed by individuals based on their everyday activities and argues that every act of "consumption" is, in fact, a form of "production". Also, symbolic consumption–use is not apolitical, since it embodies the constant struggle between two global sides: one trying to impose certain meanings that it finds useful because they support the status quo (dominant groups, the system, and power structures), and the other resisting them (the oppressed, weak, everyday participants) (De Certeau, 2002). The translation of cultivation into urban tactics, or what De Certeau calls the "art of the weak", represents the radicalization of the garden (Atkinson, 2007). Such an approach sees contemporary urban practices as a way seeking to disrupt the hegemony of capital at the level of the everyday. The alternative use of public spaces may also be regarded as part of the counterculture of the 1970s that opposed institutional plans (Harvey, 1989; Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Schmelzkopf, 1995; Anderson, 2015; Harvey, 1990; Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1989; Wilson and Weinberg, 1999). In a critical climate, which moved away from the idea of space as a natural reference toward Lefebvre's space as "social morphology", cultivation provided a rich field for utopians interested in everyday spatial practices—the activities of users and the patterns they create in lived space (Atkinson, 2007). In his community-gardening manifesto "Avant Gardening", Wilson states:

"Cultivate your own garden" sounds today like hot radical rhetoric. Growing a garden has become—at least potentially—an act of

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