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Contested urban green spaces in the compact city: The (re-)negotiation of urban gardening in Swiss cities

Simone Tappert*, Tanja Klöti, Matthias Drilling

Institute for Social Planning, Organisational Change and Urban Development, School of Social Work, University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland, Thiersteinerallee 57, 4053 Basel, Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

Since the intensification of the search for sustainable urban planning, the ideal of the compact and green city characterized by high density, mixed land use and attractive green infrastructure, has become a desirable urban form at global scale. Urban greening, including urban gardening, has experienced a resurgence of interest. Within the frame of the compact city, the meanings, forms and functions of urban gardening have been re-evaluated for their contribution to urban sustainability, turning those spaces into a contested subject of negotiation. This qualitative study, conducted in the Swiss cities of Basle, Berne, Geneva and Zurich, investigates how the meanings of urban gardening are discursively (re)produced in political negotiation processes and how different rationalities of space produce a hegemonic order, constructing urban gardening sites as contested spaces. The findings demonstrate that urban growth strategies within the frame of the compact city, aiming at an efficient and resource-saving (re)organization of urban space, are discursively rationalizing current transformation processes. While so-called traditional forms of urban gardening are closed down, displaced to locations with less significance for urban development plans, or transformed in spatial and functional terms, new forms of urban gardening commensurate with the current ideals of urban landscapes and are emerging in the inner-city areas.

1. Introduction

Since the publication of the 1987 Brundtland Commission Report *Our Common Future,* local authorities in developed countries have increasingly embraced concepts enabling sustainable urban development. The compact city ideal has been widely advocated as key to creating livable and sustainable cities and, thus, has become a desirable urban form at global scale (Jim, 2004; Lang, 2014; Zimmermann, 2001). Green spaces in the compact city are recognized as valuable for maintaining or facilitating high quality densification of urban settlements, and the practice of greening cities, especially the upgrading of dense urban areas with greenery, has become a widespread approach within the urban sustainability agenda. Thus, urban green spaces are undergoing a re-evaluation of their contribution to urban sustainability in terms of their meaning and role within the urban tissue, re-conceptualizing their form and function in congruence with the principles of the compact city ideal. They are characterized by multifunctional land-use, providing a range of benefits, adaptive and flexible forms, and high accessibility for urbanites (Pincetl & Gearin, 2005).

Within this frame, urban allotment gardens have experienced a resurgence of interest and are increasingly the object of urban sustainability policies. It is claimed that urban gardening creates social, ecological and economic benefits for the city and its residents, strongly contributing to the development and maintenance of quality of life in the city (Kingsley & Townsend, 2006; Lang, 2014; Lossau & Winter, 2011; Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999; Turner, 2011). However, urban green spaces, including urban allotment gardens, compete with other uses of urban space, such as housing or business, and are often perceived as a land reserve for housing constructions and other urban development projects (Eizenberg, Tappert, Thomas, & Zilans, 2016; Jim, 2004). Thus, densifying urban areas may also be related to a loss of green space or a declining per capita green space provision (Haaland & Konijnendijk van den Bosch, 2015). In order to be able to provide sufficient and high-quality green space to urban residents, local authorities are increasingly in search of new, adaptive and flexible forms of urban gardening, characterized by high accessibility and hybrid functions (Klöti, Tappert, & Drilling, 2016). This has several implications for existing urban allotment garden spaces and newly created urban gardening infrastructure. While newer urban gardening practices fitting the desirable compact landscape in terms of form and function

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: simone.tappert@fhnw.ch (S. Tappert), tanja.kloeti@fhnw.ch (T. Klöti), matthias.drilling@fhnw.ch (M. Drilling).

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and, thus, feeding into the sustainable urban development agenda, are increasingly recognized and promoted by local authorities, traditional forms such as urban allotment gardens have been problematized as seemingly incompatible with the requirements of green space provision in the compact city.

2. The compact city and its hegemonic character

2.1. Compactness meets sustainability

Over recent decades the concept of urban sustainable development has become a meta-narrative shaping present ideas of what constitutes the 'good city' and desirable urban planning policy (Drilling, 2013). "It has shifted from being a variable to being the parameter of the debate, almost certain to be integrated into any future scenario of development" (Campbell, 1996:301). As such, the successful meta-narrative of the sustainable city "not only describes but prescribe[s], organizing meaning and action across different discursive modes and their institutional and social contexts" (Brand, 2007:624).

Urban sustainability may be described as a vision of ecologically, economically and socially responsible urban planning, a holistic vision or a triangular model that enables sustainable urban development through the reconciliation of the different (ecological, economic and social) interests in a city (Campbell, 1996). It is observable across cities that urban sustainability is neither a singular concept nor a unified or coherent approach. It rather constitutes a contested concept that is first and foremost ideological and shaped by the policy environment in which it is operating (Zimmerman, 2001).

In the search for sustainable urban development, there has been a growing concern about the development of urban form, especially urban sprawl which is characterized by urban settlements with low density, suburbanization, spatially segregated land uses and extensive commercial strip development (Dieleman & Wegener, 2004). In the course of the 1990s critics stated that urban sprawl "ate up open space, was racially and economically homogeneous, socially deadening, poorly designed, automobile dependent and environmentally destructive" (Hagerman, 2007:288). Since then, the use of the term 'urban sprawl' has become pejorative and it has turned into an inherently negative signifier (Kirby, 2013). More importantly, urban sprawl became a foil for sustainable urban development. Even though the idea of the compact city predates the debate on sustainable urban development, there has been growing support from local governments for compact city theories and policies embodying an ideal response to urban sustainability challenges (Scheurer, 2007). The compact city approach is marked by high density, mixed land use, pedestrian-oriented habitation, the utilization of development reserves for construction projects and the structural transformation of former industrial areas or fallow land into service or residential areas of high quality, enabling the "creation of both resource efficient systems and good, engaging design for attractive cities with good quality of life" (Haaland & Konijnendijk van den Bosch, 2015:760).

However, critical studies of urban sustainability have suggested that the correlation between compact settlements and urban sustainability is not as clear as previously assumed, and a number of claimed advantages have not yet been empirically proven (Chen, Jia, & Lau, 2008). It has been shown that higher density may also lead to traffic congestion, local air pollution, increased energy demand, overcrowding linked to poor health, increased poverty and crime, and the bad neighbor effect, as well as the loss of urban green or open space to development projects (Burton, 2002; Jenks, Burton, & Williams, 1996; Rudlin & Falk, 1999; Tony, 1996).

The concept of density plays an important role in the controversy on what is the ideal urban form to enable sustainable urban development. In this paper, density is understood as a conceptual idea of thinking the city. As such, it constitutes a contested concept that is continually negotiated and (re)defined by different actors, interests, norms and values (Hirschberg et al., 2012).

2.2. The role of urban green space in the compact city

Within the broader urban sustainability debate, there has been a growing concern or awareness about the interdependence of human (settlements) and nature, shaped by an increasing sensibility towards nature as a resource contributing to the livability of cities. This rather functional understanding of nature creates an understanding of urban green space as a resource for post-industrial ways of working and living (Petrow, 2012). At the same time, it implies a shift from nature as compensation for the ills of the city, to nature as an integral part of the city, attempting to overcome the manifest duality between humans and nature (Talen & Brody, 2005).

This so-called 'green turn' (Tornaghi, 2014:560) in the urban development debate has produced a resurgence of interest in greening cities and urban green spaces. While perceived functions and meanings of urban green space have changed over time, and while its meanings are not fixed or fully established but rather multiple and contextual, over recent decades urban green space has been increasingly recognized for its ecological, social and economic importance (Horwood, 2011). Green space is considered to form a fundamental part of urban sustainable development, based on the argument that it contributes to the urban ecosystem (through air purification, water and climate regulation, carbon storage, biodiversity, habitat for wildlife), provides benefits to urban residents (recreation, social interaction, community building, health benefits, subjective wellbeing, aesthetics) and produces economic value by increasing the quality of landscapes (its location, scenic setting, livability, recreational value, image, level of identification, and cultural heritage).

Simultaneously, postmodern lifestyles, marked by a diversification of leisure and recreational behavior (jogging, cycling, skating, etc.) and changing attitudes to nature, have generated new demands and, consequently, reshaped urban green space. Even though realized to different extents in compact cities, greening strategies have become an idealized vision of universal appeal (e.g. Singapore as 'city in a garden'). According to Jim (2004:311) "a city with high-quality and generous green spaces epitomizes good planning and management, a healthy environment for humans, vegetation and wildlife populations, and bestows pride on its citizenry and government".

The resurgence of interest in urban gardening is representative of these shifted meanings and functions of green space within the sustainability agenda and its predominating paradigm of urban densification (Nikolaidou, Klöti, Tappert, & Drilling, 2016). It is argued that urban gardening promotes social inclusion, community cohesion and collective empowerment. By providing spaces for food production, it solves problems related to food quality and affordability, and also increases biodiversity and improves micro-climatic conditions in urban areas (Kingsley & Townsend, 2006; Lang, 2014; Pothukuchi & Kaufman, 1999; Turner, 2011). With its combination of social and environmental aspects, urban gardening has been increasingly recognized as a productive and socially inclusive use of urban green spaces. Thus, it is not only perceived as contributing to the ecosystem, but also to the amelioration of urban living conditions and the development of urban livability in resonance with sustainability goals. Additionally, urban gardening spaces may generate economic value by enhancing the quality of the urban landscape and the attractiveness of the city within the context of increasing city competition (Lossau & Winter, 2011). Through the adoption of spatial planning strategies and green space design that aim to optimize the green space configuration within a city (creation of green networks, development of green space database for planning processes), the integration of adequate green space in the compact city may be enabled (Jim, 2004).

Nevertheless, densifying urban settlements as a principle for sustainable urban growth has exerted pressure on urban green spaces. The increasing competition between global cities has led to a commodification of urban space and to an optimization of land for economic benefit, producing an understanding of urban green space (including

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