New Transition: Community Gardens and Civic Engagement in the City of Zagreb

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INTRODUCTION

Community garden literature is a growing field, especially since the 2000s. It marks new grassroots sensibilities regarding the city and the environment, as well as awareness of and engagement in alternatives to the dominant (neoliberal) capitalist world framework. The studies address the contribution of community gardens and gardening to food security and environmental justice; greening the city; enhancing health and recreation; raising neighbourhood safety; promotion and building of social networks, inclusion, solidarity, and cohesion (Armstrong 2000; Glover 2004; Gottlieb and Joshi 2010; Kingsley and Townsend 2006; Firth et al. 2011). The community building process – which in many urban initiatives goes hand in hand with gardening – has further empowered urbanites to negotiate other

contested urban issues (such as the shrinking of public spaces or neoliberal urban governance), fostering, in this way, gardens as sites of collective social action and political activism (Krasny 2012; Nettle 2014).

In Zagreb, community gardens became an issue in 2012. A series of public debates and lectures have occurred in the last several years, and a number of civic associations and initiatives have been created, all focused on promoting and organizing urban gardening and shared ecological topics. City-run community garden projects were established in Zagreb in 2013, as well as in some other Croatian cities, together with various community and guerrilla gardens, art gardens, therapeutic gardens, and school and university gardens in subsequent years. Scientists, gardeners, activists and artists have produced papers analysing, interpreting, or commenting on the recent social, ecological and political phenomenon of "the gardens of our city".[1] We, the authors, have participated in various ways over the years, in public discussions, research and civic activism.[2] In this paper we are focused on three examples of urban gardening initiatives: their actors, their structures and the aims of the established gardens. The article begins by introducing the practice and perception of the illegal gardens that have existed on vacant plots for decades. The changing contexts of urban gardening within the last few years are discussed next. Three ethnographic examples indicate the variety of organizing and actors involved, the types of communality and solidarity, as well as the negotiation and debate about discursive, structural and governance issues. The analysis aims to examine the heterogeneity of gardening communities and to illuminate the dynamics (changes and modifications) of various relationships that are constituent of the phenomenon. The article concludes by considering the politics of space, particularly the transformation of urban public spaces, and the potential of gardening initiatives in the sphere of contemporary politics and strategies of urban governance.[3]

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1 The majority of these texts was collected in the volume "The Gardens of Our City: studies and notes on the practices of urban gardening" which may be accessed electronically (in Croatian) (Rubić and Gulin Zrnić 2015).

2 Tihana Rubić was motivated by civil engagement in establishing community gardens and participated in the initiative *Parkticipacija* from its beginnings in 2012 in various ways, from preparing the community garden project and organizing and participating in public discussions, to civil actions. Valentina Gulin Zrnić previously carried out research on transformations of public urban spaces, which from 2012 onward particularly focused on urban gardening. In 2014 and 2015 our interests combined within the politics of space framework as part of the ethnological and cultural-anthropological research project on "citymaking" (www.citymaking.eu).

3 The paper is based on research undertaken as part of the scientific project "City-making: space, culture, and identity" (2014-2018). which was funded by the Croatian Science Foundation (project No. 2350).

ILLEGAL (WILD) GARDENS IN SOCIALIST AND POST-SOCIALIST ZAGREB

Gardens - called "wild" by the locals - have been spreading for decades on urban derelict and vacant plots. These gardens were not legal, but the municipal authorities tolerated them. Wild gardens were fenced by decorative bushes or waste materials (such as bed slats, clothes dryer stands, metal frames or plastic blinds). Improvised doors secured the entrances to these garden plots, and some of them were locked by similarly improvised (wooden or metal) contraptions or even padlocks. The fencing clearly indicated the feeling of "private property", regardless of their illegal status. Moreover, it signalled the intent to remain isolated, rather than to be incorporated into the gardening community – the aim of the new and recent garden initiatives. However, some gardeners jointly invested money into water pumps (for several gardens on the location), indicating that specific issues were recognised as collective. However, they did not develop any type of formal organization or cooperative.

Wild gardens exist even today although they are fading due to the new financial powers investing in the city. They are generally cultivated by the older generation of local residents who had been growing food there for decades. All of them explain the motivation for gardening in contrasting arguments, such as of being in nature vs. flats, socialising vs. alienation, beautification of the space vs. dereliction. Many gardeners talked about economic reasons for growing food in the city, while others mentioned recreation and fun (Gulin Zrnić 2009: 129-132; Biti and Blagaić Bergman 2014). Gardeners were mostly seen as "people with rural origins" or "peasants in the city". However, long-term research sheds light on a significant discursive shift towards viewing gardening in ecological and sustainable communitarian terms.

Since the turn of the millennium, much of the neglected land was turned into construction sites, and wild gardens abruptly dwindled. The loss of wild gardens was not questioned in public since it was not regarded an issue in the new post-socialist city, which was guided by deregulation in planning, private investment and a consumerist lifestyle. However, one architect and sociologist voiced a rare opinion on urban gardening, stating in 2002 that, "urbanistic, communal and ecological interest for Zagreb gardens is not evident". The author proposed that some current (wild) garden lots might be maintained in the urban landscape and "could be combined or incorporated congruently into the newly planned Zagreb parks" (Kritovac 2002). To our knowledge, this is the first public comment showing a different discourse on

urban gardening, contextualizing it as a European gardening practice and considering gardens as parts of urban fabric. The comment anticipated issues that have become current ten years later, and referred to in ethnographic studies.

GARDENS IN THE NEW CONTEXT: RE-SEMANTIZATION OF TRANSITION

The last decade has brought to the fore "small" civic initiatives, direct action and self-organizing as means to social and political changes. It has been a reaction to the hierarchical manner of state and local governance as well as to global crisis. Gradually, critical and semantically different relationships towards consumerist lifestyles and neoliberal markets have emerged in Croatia. The discourse of sustainable development has become more prominent. Some concepts and terms like "shared", "public" or "communal", which were previously burdened with socialist ideological inputs and neglected in the 1990s, have become reaffirmed. A reassembling of meanings has been under way.

In such a context urban gardening popped up as an issue in 2012 when wild gardens in the housing estate Travno were destroyed following the decision of the municipal authorities. A newly formed civic initiative, together with existing branches of green activist groups, started advocating urban gardening as a necessary strategy for sustainable urban development. The initiative was a reaction to the current local situation but also correlated with various practical European urban initiatives that were aimed at changing established consumerist consciousness and life habits. Such initiatives are, for instance, organizing skill-sharing, groups of community-supported agriculture, permaculture courses, seed distribution, local currency, time banks, and "do-it-yourself" (DIY) workshops. Such approaches are at the core of the global *Transition Movement*, a reaction to the global ecological crisis, a reaction of particularly local communities to climate change and shrinking supplies of cheap energy.[4] In Croatia, "transition network" is focused on "advocating of social change in accordance with resilient and strong local communities with minimal ecological footprint" (Dragičević and Maljković 2013).

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4 *Transition Network,* http://www.transitionnettwork.org (accessed in August 2014)

The notion of "transition" requires thus a radical re-semantization, especially in the context of Croatia and other post-socialist states. Previously, it referred to a fundamental change of the political, economic and social system, while now it refers to the fundamental change of *consciousness* and *practices;* previously, the transition was run from *"above"* (the government) and now it connotes engagement from *"below"* (active citizens). Moreover, the previous notion of transition implied that changes are inevitable and citizens were only transition-bearers. The new notion of transition is proactive, requires initiative, is constructive and citizens are *transition-builders.*[5] The next part of the article describes the actors, structures and dynamics of relationships in three urban gardens in Zagreb.

ETHNOGRAPHY OF ZAGREB URBAN GARDENS

Travno

In April 2012, in only a few days, the wild gardens of the housing estate Travno were "cleared" with dredging machines. This was the decision of city authorities who explained that the lot was planned for a designed public park. This situation provoked the start of the civic initiative *Parkticipacija* (park + (par)ticipation), pressing for formal community gardens in Zagreb. The nucleus of the initiative consisted of 15 people in their thirties, from all over the city, highly educated and already engaged in various alternative initiatives (Right to the City, Green Action, and Urban Guerrilla). They criticized the municipal government for destruction of gardens and stressed the importance of growing food in the city. They also criticized city authorities for governing public spaces exclusively from "above". During the spring of 2012 *Parkticipacija* started a public campaign for establishing community gardens as newly organized public spaces, and for the new active role of citizens. It organized the signing of a petition for the first community garden in Zagreb and developed the idea of community gardens into a constructive and applicable project with recommended locations (vacant lots owned by municipality).

After ignoring the requests, actions and proposals for the community gardens for a year, the city authorities finally responded. In the

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5 Here we refer to and paraphrase the idea of "culture-builders" developed by Frykman and Löfgren (1987).

spring of 2013, just as the election campaign for mayor had begun, the mayor of that time presented the project on "City gardens" and criteria for gaining garden plots. From 6 locations in 2013, "City gardens" grew to 10 locations with 2000 garden plots on over 20 hectares at present (mid-2016).

The implementation of the city-run garden project grew out of a civic initiative on gardening, although it followed a different conceptual framework than that which was proposed in the original initiative. Many ecological, social and sustainable elements of the civic initiative idea were annulled and ignored and the city-run garden was a hierarchical top-down project strictly administered by the municipal government (Municipal Office for Agriculture and Forestry).

However, the interest for city gardens was huge and many citizens became gardeners. In talking with gardeners, the difference between *old gardeners* and *new gardeners* became evident.[6] In contrast to wild gardens which were fenced by recycled materials, the new gardeners built with bought and ready-made materials. The interviews also reveal the generational differences: "wild" gardeners are people of an older age whereas new gardeners are generationally a mixed group; even children are present while accompanying their parent-gardeners. Old gardeners grew food in various ways but the new gardeners are contractually obliged to grow organic food. Furthermore, old gardeners did not develop their gardening practice in conjunction with the ideas of sustainability and community. These concepts are discursively prominent today, particularly within the framework of community gardens, and modestly within city-run gardens. The new gardeners create some forms of networking and community, particularly among younger people, although we have also heard comments about gardeners who do not communicate even at the level of greeting.[7]

Urban gardening is a *process* on every level from the ground to the administration. It has its dynamics, its formalizing phase, contested issues; it has its advocates as well as strong critics. Gardeners sometimes react to problems of infrastructure and inadequate design. According to the municipal officials who were interviewed, they work on solving problems and discuss proposals which come from the gardeners themselves. They occasionally go on field trips and try to adapt the "City gardens"

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6 *Old* and *new* gardeners are categories used by gardeners themselves. The third category that we introduce in the next chapter is *guerilla gardeners*. We use the terms *old* and *new* gardens/gardeners (as well as *guerilla* gardens further in the paper) as heuristic vessels throughout the text.

7 Compare with the research of Slavuj Borčić, Cvitanović and Lukić 2015.

model (in governing and equipping) to particular circumstances in each garden. The garden thus becomes "an experiment" (Dobrić 2015), not only for gardeners but also for municipal employees.[8]

Prečko

In the spring of 2013 a group of citizens in the neighbourhood Prečko sent several requests for establishing gardens to the municipality. Having no reply, they cleaned an unauthorized dumping ground on municipal land and started growing food there. Citizens have thus unintentionally become *guerrilla gardeners*. By the end of the year the civil initiative *EkoEkipa Prečko* had 70 gardeners. The group was generationally mixed and connected by personal relations and social networks within the neighbourhood. Some of the activities they organized included skill-share and knowledge-share, cooperation with the local school and composting. They also installed a small street library in a recycled bookcase.[9] In several TV and radio broadcasts all these activities were presented as positive examples of strengthening the community and fostering the intergenerational interaction.

The case study of Prečko points at the comparison of various types of gardeners' engagements within the city, namely the new, old and guerrilla gardeners. Although the old gardeners (in wild gardens) also applied the squatting strategy on vacant and derelict lots, using the land without the owner's permission – a characteristic of guerrilla gardening – the significant difference rests in the political potential which characterizes guerrilla gardeners: i.e., the straightforward initiative for self-organizing and social and civil engagement that goes beyond the gardening itself. With new gardeners (those in the city-run garden project), guerrilla gardeners share the orientation to ecological and social sustainability, however, there is a huge difference in the type of approach. New gardeners are a group of people who are selected for gardening by municipal authorities through an application process and they need to develop basic networking and social capital. Guerrilla gardeners conversely found their activities in existing social capital (personal relations, local and international social networks). New gardeners are given ready-made gardens and

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8 Ethnographic examples are also presented in the interactive map of the "Citymaking" project showing various contemporary experiences of gardening in the city of Zagreb, http://www.citymaking.eu/mapa/.

9 This garden community and its dynamics over more than two years were also described by an insider – Radovanović 2015.

many of the organizational problems (preparation of land, division of plots etc.) were already solved, and therefore, the self-organization is something that could potentially be developed in the future. The guerrilla gardeners start with self-organization at the outset. Furthermore, in contrast to old gardeners who did not have a strong position in the fight against the destruction of their gardens, guerrilla gardeners hold strong ecological, political and economic arguments when confronting the municipality. New gardeners are of various standpoints and some of them share the idea of radical change, but this heterogeneous group (which is also under a certain "control" of the municipality, the formal owner) is not genuinely characterized by activist engagement, as are guerrilla gardeners. In comparison to old and new gardeners, guerrilla gardeners incorporate the idea of community building through which they implicitly react to ecological crisis, inadequate municipal governmental strategies and crisis of consciousness in order to create some new models of activity (at personal and group levels), constructing thus a new *transitional* reality.

Savica

The third example of urban gardening is a reaction to the concept of the city-run gardens, but it also shows how the local (neighbourhood) community can be empowered by the active engagement of its citizens who are guided by their various goals that address the municipal government and its projects. In the summer of 2013, the self-organised residents in the neighbourhood Savica – the initiative *Čuvajmo naš park!* ("Save our Park!") - started to protest against the plan for a church building within a neighbourhood park. They signed a petition against the location of the church in the park and gathered in various leisure and recreation activities on the park meadow. The protest was supported by a number of NGOs and it was covered by the media, which interpreted their movement as a protest for green public spaces in the city.

A month later the municipality started to clean a terrain which was partially derelict (green, bushy and with a significant number of birds), but also, for decades, the site of wild gardens. The Savica gardeners sounded the alarm to gardeners in other neighbourhoods, local residents, civil organizations and media about the unexpected construction work and destruction of wild gardens. They thought that the lot was allocated for the church, instead of the one in the park. The gardeners became very active in demanding answers from the municipality, researching planning documentation and the legal status of the land. The local initiative "Save our Park!" in Savica cooperated with

local gardeners and a number of garden workshops and gatherings were organised jointly to address the threat to their wild gardens. They also demanded that the gardens should be saved on the existing location, not according to the city-run garden model, but arguing for the legitimacy of gardens on the basis of several decades of gardening practice on the same location. They also stressed that existing gardeners wanted to build the gardens themselves, take care of infrastructure and organization, make decisions, and introduce programs for education.

In the end, the gardeners stayed there and the church building was not built in the park. The wild garden location with its old gardeners was incorporated into the "City garden" project with new gardeners on the encompassing ground. Self-organization of some 15 old gardeners, aided by civil organizations and media pressure, presented themselves as active participants in disputes with the municipal government over the gardens and green areas. They strive now to build a strong local community out of a generationally and socially mixed group of people, connected mostly by their interest in gardening.

The comparison of old, new and guerrilla gardens illuminates that Savica gardeners are a kind of *melange* and incorporate and modify various practices and discourses. New gardeners are organized by the municipality, guerrilla gardeners act outside of the municipal model, while Savica gardeners resisted the municipal gardening model. Savica gardeners are old gardeners who adopted new discourses and benefited from the already existing gardening social network, other existing local self-organized initiatives and the established position of the civil green associations and initiatives, which have all grown stronger in recent years.

Maintenance of wild gardens and, consequently, their "defence" against the advances of the municipality, present the success of old gardeners and even represent a benchmark of how to oppose the still traditional hierarchical (top-down) manner of governing the city. However, this could also be seen as a kind of deconstruction of such a hierarchical relationship and an opening up of some new possibilities for negotiations and decision making, which could be based in a more participative approach.

THREE FACETS OF GARDENS: COMMUNITY, GOVERNANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY

In the 1980s, the ethnologist Dunja Rihtman-Auguštin characterised wild gardens in the newly built Zagreb housing estates as an example

of "alternative urbanization". The use of space in estates was totally planned, and Rihtman-Auguštin (1988: 96-101) valued new practices like gardening as a deviation from abstract and normative urbanization, as a spontaneous, undisciplined and creative intervention in urban space. Furthermore, she understood such interventions as having the potential for creating an estate's community and a sense of belonging. However, the general vision of the modern city in the second half of the 20th century did not include agriculture – and wild gardens were perceived as anomalous in the urban fabric. Recent reviews and re-evaluations of gardening practices in the world throughout the 19th and 20th centuries reaffirm them as "informal urbanization", and "an important dimension in development of the city from the bottom up", thus valuing gardening as "the *radical strategy* of hands-on urbanism" (Krasny 2012: 11).

The analysis of Zagreb gardens illuminates three concomitant dimensions – *community, governance* and *sustainability* – and how they work together in a local context. We argue that the three dimensions are actually processes of building (community), shaping (governance) and living (sustainability) with various intensities and interactions. In the rest of the discussion, we suggest a few more topics for further research.

In these particular ethnographic cases, community building illustrates different dynamics of social networking and social capital. In other words, gardens might be "a consequence or a source of social capital" (Firth et al. 2011: 564), which might lead to two different categories of communities – "place-based" and "interest-based" (Firth et al. 2011). Prečko and Savica gardens are "place-based" communities; they are internally driven, initiated and guided by local residents whose social networking is not only focused on gardens but also on other local developmental affairs. Travno garden is "interest-based" – it is initiated by municipality and gardeners gathered there through the application process. Gardeners come from various neighbourhoods and some even from quite remote, other city districts. Travno garden is an opportunity to develop and/or enhance social capital, which could further be of benefit for local communities in the area. Furthermore, communities reveal themselves as contested spaces internally (such as disputes over organic food) and externally (management and relationships with the municipality over governing urban spaces). This particular research shows how gardens are heterogeneous communities and spaces; they should be understood as "plural, complex, and tension-filled cultural spaces", specifically when some new perspectives are opened, for example by feminist or political

ecology frameworks (L'Annunziata 2010). One of the problems that gardeners face is the transient character of gardens – wild gardeners, new gardeners with two-year contracts or guerrilla gardeners – their lots are all under the threat of being destroyed and jeopardized by new urban investors. In other words, "urban land values being comparatively high, agriculture will always compete with other uses" (Katkin 2012).

The issue of governance includes two basic types of top-down and bottom-up initiatives, establishing and managing the garden. These three ethnographic examples show various and even hybrid approaches in Zagreb. There are authors who argue that community garden projects could be an important way "for a municipal government to engage citizens in addressing the social problems in their neighbourhood" (Henderson and Hartsfield 2009: 13) and that, through garden activities, people "produced themselves as aware, involved and undismissible urbanites" (Eizenberg 2012). However, although Western municipalities open up spaces for increased participation of their citizens in urban affairs – which is interpreted as "the democratization of urban governmentability" – the same steps might work "as a mechanism for further neoliberalization of cities and as a means to suppress possible resistance from below" (Eizenberg 2012: 106). This calls for nuanced research on the dynamics of urban governance and policy-making processes, and the interaction of various actors (political parties, local politicians and administration, groups of citizens and civil initiatives, NGOs), to find out whether the shift from traditional forms of urban governance to alternative governance really occurred, and particularly, how much and in which ways do current urban gardening initiatives challenge and reconstruct existing power relations while addressing public spaces (cf. Häikiö 2007).

Finally, a note on the issue of sustainability. Many European cities view urban gardening as an indispensable part of their long-term urban developmental strategies, particularly those that are instructive examples of urban sustainability (for example Helsinki).[10] In Croatia, the concept of sustainable development has been primarily affirmed in the public by civil initiatives and associations (Green Action), and it is discursively included at present in various national and local programs and strategies. Although some changes can be seen in Zagreb, it seems that stronger shifts towards sustainability practices should be made, for example in implementing modes of

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10 Compare *Helsinki City Plan. Vision 2050,* http://www.hel.fi/hel2/ksv/julkaisut/yos_2013-23_en.pdf (accessed in August 2015).

sustainable transportation or changing urban consumerist infrastructure.[11] It is on the State and municipal governments to provide the most effective ways for developing various sustainable living practices which would be the basis for new forms of "environmental or ecological citizenship" (Turner 2011). Urban gardening has "the potential to promote physical, ecological, socio-cultural, and economic sustainability" (Stocker and Barnett 1998 according to Turner 2011: 511). Liisa Häikiö (2007) argues that prominent actors of urban sustainable development[12] from above (municipality) and from below (groups of citizens), as well as intermediary NGOs, all use the same discursive grounds (themes of expertise, representation and the common good) in their struggle for gaining legitimacy in urban policy-making. Consequently, this provokes some contested questions on how much the discourses from above and below are actually opposed, and how much are certain arguments adopted and adapted by the various actors.

The ethnographic examples from Zagreb, as well as relevant literature, call for further detailed research of entangled community building and the shaping of governance and urban sustainability in local contexts of urban gardening. This would provide us with deeper insights into the structural and discursive background of the (re) making of political and cultural identities, practices and values.

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11 An instructive example of decisive shift towards urban sustainability is Ljubljana in recent years (Poljak Istenič 2016).

12 Häikiö's research relates to Tampere, Finland.

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