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Towards a sustainable community-supported green space system for Budapest

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Keywords: participatory planning, community-supported green spaces, urban green spaces, landscape architecture education, social justice

Introduction, theoretical base

The idea of social justice as being intrinsic to landscape architecture can be traced back to Frederick Law Olmsted, who perceived urban parks as sites of egalitarian mingling of the classes, and fresh air and green space as a basic human right. Olmsted's ideas were radical for his time; in the 21st century, in an increasingly urbanized world with a growing rich-poor gap, they are nothing short of urgent. The presence of accessible, safe, quality green space offers people the opportunity for active recreation, for enjoying clean air in an oasis far from city noise and traffic, and for outdoor socializing. Because property values and quality/quantity of green space are invariably strongly linked, shortage of green space is most frequently an issue in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Thus, shortage of green space means restricted opportunities for healthy outdoor recreation or social interaction, which means a lower quality of life for those who cannot afford neighbourhoods with significant private or public green space. Therefore, the question of how to increase the quantity and quality of green space in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods becomes, by nature, a social justice issue.

The ownership and control of urban green space falls into three categories: private, public (municipal) and semi-private. This third category refers to shared urban green spaces, such as community gardens and courtyard commons. While these spaces may be designed with professional assistance, the initiative, sustainability and long-term maintenance are the responsibility of the residents who use the space. These spaces are semi-public in the sense that multiple families or groups use them, but semi-private in the sense that the user group is restricted either to the members of the organization who started the garden, or in the case of a courtyard common, the residents of the building. We can refer to this category as community-supported green spaces (CSGS), and they supply specific and important benefits to the urban population that are not provided by private or public green spaces. These include stronger social capital, improved health as a result of more time spent outside in active garden work, reduced crime, a higher level of stewardship and responsibility on the part of residents towards their environment, and more stable urban neighborhoods. Because of the interactive, participatory nature of both their planning and their ongoing maintenance and use, the gardens present a unique opportunity for citizens' participation and democracy. CSGS can also be an innovative way of increasing the quantity of green space in neighbourhoods such as some of Budapest's inner districts where per –person green space can be as low as

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half a square meter. My work since 2005, has been focused on making community-supported green spaces not only an integral part of Budapest's green space system but also a core element of landscape architecture education. The three key theories:

By employing methods of participatory planning and community-based design, landscape architects are in a unique position to significantly improve the quality of life in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. Given the increasing gap between wealthy and poor and the rapid urbanization affecting the world's population, addressing the significant difference in green space quantity/quality between rich and poor neighbourhoods is critical.

Community-supported green spaces, such as community gardens, are inherently sustainable because their creators and users have a strong sense of ownership and responsibility towards them that they would not have for a public green space designed and built in the traditional top-down manner. CSGS have lower incidence of vandalism and also offer active ongoing uses – for instance, urban agriculture – not traditionally available in public parks. Participatory planning also gives a voice to populations not traditionally part of the decision-making process, and further contributes to building a democratic, transparent society.

Implementing community design projects and theories of social justice in landscape architecture at the university level sensitizes the students at an early stage to contemporary urban planning and social issues, and enhances their planning skills. Learning participatory planning techniques, participating in real fieldwork involving community-based design and/or working with minorities, the economically disadvantaged or populations with various disabilities enhances their communications skills, strengthens their sensitivity as designers, builds critical thinking skills, and improves the quality of spaces they produce. Participatory planning then becomes a natural, seamlessly-integrated mainstream element of their approach as landscape architects, instead of an experimental, alternative methodology. The added social dimension also contributes to the profession's overall value. Social justice as a dimension of landscape architecture education is slowly becoming part of many landscape architecture programs in the U.S., most notably the University of Washington's design-build program and the University of Colorado Denver's Learning Landscapes program. Many European landscape architecture faculties begin to take this approach as well, including the International Master's of Landscape Architecture carried out jointly by Weihenstephan University of Applied Sciences and other institutes. In summer 2009, for example, the IMLA students carried out fieldwork at a Roma community in Slovakia.

Connecting the three above theories: Landscape architecture education that includes participatory, community-based curriculum and fieldwork improves the quality of design and enhances the landscape architecture profession itself. It elevates the significance of the landscape architect's role in the community, as well as improving the health, environmental quality and livability of our urban neighbourhoods through community-supported green spaces.

Literature review

The more significant and recent research in this area has been primarily in the U.S. and focused on the effects of community-supported green spaces on various aspects of urban quality of life as mentioned above. Francis (1987) has established that semi-public spaces such as community gardens represent a completely different, and higher, value for residents than public parks or other large-scale green spaces, Marcus (2001) has defined the unique social benefits of shared outdoor spaces such as community greens. Newman (1996) developed the pioneering concept of 'defensible space,' a comprehensive approach to planning common spaces with the goal of ensuring functionality and individual stewardship by involving the users and assigning them individual elements of the site for care and upkeep. Brink and Yost (2004) show, through the Learning Landscapes project, how a successful design-build collaboration between landscape architecture students, professors, teachers, students and parents can effectively transform the community's entire perception of the role of the school playground as a community green space and open-air learning site, as well as provide the students with an invaluable educational experience that could not have been replicated in a lecture hall.

Methods

The author's ongoing research approach has included:

1. Determining the quality and effectiveness of existing common green spaces through interviews with a representative sample of residents in blocks with significant common green courtyards. One research site was an 8800 square meter garden in District VII, which has one of the lowest green space allocations of any district in the city. As Pest's smallest and most densely-populated district, District VII has nearly 80,000 residents dwelling in about 35,000 homes in an area of just over two square kilometers. The proportion of green space is also the smallest in the city, at 1% or, by one estimate, less than .4 square meter per person. The study site was the subject of a pioneering 1980s block rehabilitation, which demolished six buildings and the interior wings of three more to create a large common garden for the residents. The objective of the research was to assess the flaws in its original planning, how its residents perceive it, and how it could be rehabilitated as a community-supported green space. District VII has a high cultural and touristic significance and includes, for example, the UNESCO-recognized Jewish Quarter. The research includes survey interviews with a representative sample of the blocks' residents, landscape architectural inventories and drawings of the sites' conditions and facilities, observational visits to the blocks to assess use, site photographs, aerial photographs, a survey of relevant municipal legislation, and interviews with local officials. A representative sample of the population totaling 10% or more was chosen based on census data. Residents were approached in their homes or in passing in the hallways. The results of the surveys were evaluated by

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tabulating the answers and assigning them percentage points. Each case study was carried out over approximately three months. Regular visits to the block at varying times of day included making a detailed assessment of the garden's condition, number and type of users, and conducting interviews with park users.

2. Assessing the current approach of Budapest's 23 municipal governments to increasing per-person green space in their districts by promoting and fostering CSGS (primarily through courtyard gardens) and, using successful models in other cities as comparison, building a proposal for what would make an effective, sustainable approach instead of the current *ad hoc* approach that the districts employ.
3. Creating and teaching Community-Supported Green Spaces, an elective course for third-year landscape architecture students, now in its ninth semester. Each semester students participate in an actual community design project, partnering either with an NGO, a residential community or other group, utilizing participatory design methodologies and producing a functional preliminary design for the 'client.' Working in the role of landscape architect with residential groups to design and build community-supported green spaces in Budapest courtyards and schoolyards, with followup research to determine garden's use, maintenance quality and effect on quality of life for the local community.

Results and outlook

1. The District VII research produced a number of telling and useful conclusions. Only a third of the residents use the garden on a regular basis, a fifth never use it at all, and the majority perceive it as an unsafe no man's land. The majority felt that the garden's main functions should be as a leisure garden for adults and a playground for children. Considerable conflict existed between dog owners and non-dogowners, and fears ranged from crime to vandalism to dangerous playground equipment. Ambiguity and uncertainty about the site's ownership (it is municipally-controlled) contributed significantly to the residents' alienation from the garden. Nearly all the residents would be willing to contribute physically or materially to the gardens renovation, with more than half willing to contribute to the maintenance on a regular basis. Four principle flaws point to why the common garden's success is so weak. First, it lacked a participatory design process empowering the residents and reflecting their vision for the garden, with ongoing effective communication from the municipality. This is why the functions of the garden do not reflect the residents' wishes. Second, it lacked an organizational structure involving the residents that produced a sustainable maintenance plan involving the residents, with supplemental municipal support. Third, it lacked a clear sense that the site was for residents' use only, with securely closed gates and appropriate legal

arrangements to ensure its control and access. Fourth, it lacked a design of a manageable, human scale that fosters individual stewardship and reflects Oscar Newman's principles of defensible spaces. The design, with long fixed rows of benches and large monotonous shrub beds, is more institutional than residential. Any future plans for common gardens should take all these factors into consideration

2. The current approach of Budapest's municipal governments to developing community-supported green spaces is erratic, ad hoc, random and inefficient. Of the districts surveyed, one of the most efficient was District II. In spring 2009 the district offered a maximum of 1.6 million forints per condominium association to create courtyard gardens, with only 10% cofinancing. This is compared to, for example, District VII, which offered 500,000 forints with 50% cofinancing. District II also offers an instructional publication created by a landscape architect, featuring sample budgets, designs, technical drawings and plantlists. One of the most significant deficiencies in the districts' greening programs is the complete absence of any incentive for the residents to take a hands-on approach to the garden's construction or maintenance. In-kind contributions such as labor cannot be counted into the cofinancing. Furthermore, there is no forum, such as a website or publication, that enables the grant recipients to share experiences or best practices, and there is no comprehensive citywide approach to community greening. All of the above would be essential if Budapest is to develop an effective community-supported green spaces model.
3. Approximately 180 third-year landscape architecture students from 10 countries have participated in Community-Supported Green Spaces. The course's language is English, to enable interaction among students of various nationalities and also acquaint students with a body of significant professional literature available only in English. The course consists of approximately 10 core lectures on the following subjects, modified to support the semester's fieldwork project: defensible spaces theory; the community gardens and allotments model; the community greens model; social justice in landscape architecture; healing gardens and therapeutic landscape design; participatory design methodology; place-based public space design, and the aspects of a great public space. There is heavy emphasis on literature in the course, particularly focusing on methodologies, case studies and research, to provide students with practical tools for the fieldwork. Students are expected to read more than 22 journal articles, book chapters and monographs provided on the above topics. Each semester's fieldwork project has been different from the previous one, and the majority of them have been actual, funded projects that will be realized after the designs are completed. Particularly because the students come from a number of different institutions, design skills vary widely. Because of the experimental nature of the course, each semester has resulted in a number of lessons learned – equally for the instructor as for the students. This is in

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diametric opposition to the traditional charrette projects of the landscape architecture curriculum, in which students merely measure the site and plan strictly according to the site's physical conditions with no knowledge of or interaction with the site's users or their visions for the site. Examples of projects to date:

GreenLeaf program: This project, funded by a major developer through the Clean Air Action Group, provided small grants to schools, building associations, churches, museums and other groups and institutions to create community gardens on their property. We paired Erasmus students with Hungarian students to minimize language problems with the partners. Students made site visits to the sites with the instructor and made progress reports. The small scale of the sites as well as the small, strict budgets helped students develop their practical design skills as well as try to find low-cost creative solutions.

Roma Parliament: After the landmark building housing several Roma advocacy organizations and the country's only Roma art collection was threatened with demolition, an informal coalition of Roma rights groups, urban preservationists, environmentalists and local activists worked together to present the case to the national cultural heritage authorities and the municipal government. The objective was to secure legal protection to prevent the building from being demolished to make way for a new condominium complex, and also to establish the country's first national Roma cultural center. This project was also a first in the sense that students were paired with architecture students from the Budapest Technical University's Saint Joseph Collegium community design program. Even though the project was not yet funded, and there was no certainty that the designs would be actually implemented (and in the case of the architectural students a licensed architect would be required to complete the work), the students' designs were intended as visual arguments for the preservation of the site. The project presented multiple challenging situations that provided the students with valuable, if difficult, learning experiences. Multiple conflicts arose from the fact that there is no tradition of architecture and landscape architecture students collaborating on a project, the partnerships did not function very smoothly. The architectural students frequently failed to perceive the landscape architecture students as equals, and often neglected to effectively communicate their plans with the landscape architecture students, which meant that in some cases the final plans were not in perfect harmony. Furthermore, shortly after the plans were completed, it emerged that, in spite of the project's considerable support and media exposure, the city government had been collaborating with a different Roma NGO to establish a cultural institute in a different location. Such negative, unfair or difficult situations can create negative or even bitter feelings among the students; still, managing and learning from such a situation is a valuable experience that can provide the students with a professional advantage later on.



Figure 1. Landscape architecture students present preliminary designs to participants in a community-design project in District VIII, Budapest, April 2009.

Nehru Park: The park, located in District IX on the Danube, is the subject of a major renovation in the near future. Students were assigned with interviewing and surveying park users to determine how they perceive the park in its current state and how they envision its renovation. The gathered information was processed into a comprehensive report for the city government, which will incorporate it into its 2010-2011 plans for renovating the park. The fieldwork was intended for students to develop keener observation and communications skills and integrate this knowledge into their planning approach.

Green Belt Program: The project, funded through the Environmental Partnership for Sustainable Development, entailed designing community green spaces in 22 primarily rural communities. Students each made several trips to two assigned sites, creating a plan drawing, planting list, budget and concept for each site. Students were also asked to describe exactly how they communicated with participants from the local community and how they used the information in the planning process. The process gave students new experiences in planning public green spaces for rural communities as well as in participatory methodology and budgetary planning.

International Pető Institute: For the spring 2010 semester, students are designing a therapeutic landscape for the residents of the institute's dormitory. The institute works with children with serious motor difficulties caused by conditions such as cerebral palsy or spina bifida. The task is to create a garden that helps the children reach their developmental goals and provides challenges or creative opportunities for the children on a daily basis. We hope with this to sharpen the students' empathy and sensitivity towards people with disabilities, and think boldly and creatively about how landscape architecture can contribute to integrating them better into society.

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