

Community Gardens in Budapest, Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

Community gardens have a long history worldwide. They offer an opportunity to reconnect the urban fabric ruptured by vacant plots, foster social connections, build community spirit, and promote sustainability. However, they have to face several challenges and obstacles like legal procedures, financial support and the changing engagements of the local communities. This trend appeared in Hungary relatively lately, about a decade ago. The paper focuses on vacant inner-city plots in Budapest. We analyse the situation and follow the story of four existing community gardens. We decipher the challenges they go through, especially their temporary status, the changing political circumstances and the accepting or rejecting attitude of the local population. On the other hand, we present the crucial role of NGOs and local communities in keeping these projects alive and raising awareness to improve their impact, improving city life.

Keywords: Budapest, Challenges, Community Garden, Landscape Urbanism.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Urban gardens are a rapidly growing phenomenon in many parts of the world. Cities recognize the benefits of creating public gardens within their limits, and often, urban gardens are seen as a way to combat urban sprawl. This practice typically encompasses various gardening activities and usually meets the needs of diverse community members. They are fertile ground for urban rehabilitation and environmental preservation. They offer an opportunity to reconnect people with their local environment, foster social connections, build community spirit, and promote sustainability. This environment creates an atmosphere suitable for social activity and collective decision-making, as urban gardens are often considered a meeting point for groups resisting urban development plans.

The governmental side is usually interested in investing in projects that benefit the economic state of the municipalities. Researchers are proving that urban gardeners can be crucial in bottom-up initiatives that oppose the authorities' plans and claim the "right to the city". Urban gardens have been found to play a role in increasing fruit intake by children living near them and improving the physical fitness of adults who use them. They act as gathering points for residents during times of trouble and as sources of food security when other forms of grocery shopping fail. Additionally, they can provide gardeners employment opportunities and help reduce crime rates in surrounding gardens.

II. A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Urban agriculture or urban gardening has been analyzed by urban sciences, human geography and sociology since 2000. Researchers led back the emergence of community gardens – in their present form – to the Green Guerillas' actions in the 1970s, New York (Haydn & Temel, 2003:250-253; Lawson, 2005). The trend arrived in Western Europe around or after the millennium (Overmeyer, 2007; Attili, 2013; Tornaghi, 2014; Demailly & Darly, 2017). Over time, urban gardening initiatives were changed, and the different examples and situations discovered various aspects. Demailly and Darly lead back urban gardens in Paris to the community initiative and interpret the collectively grown plants and food as social activity by the participants instead of being produced individually. They also mention the "right to the city" aspect of some informal urban gardening actions in the city (Demailly & Darly, 2017). Other researchers concentrate on the social benefits and social integration potential of urban gardening. However, this aspect takes on a primary role in East Asian or post-socialist in lower developed countries. (Hou, 2017; Korolova, 2018).

Social and community aspects are often also connected with ecological concerns, like creating green islands in the cities and growing vegetables for own consumption. However, while both can be attractive

goals, the result may only be formal. They "look into food security and food self-sufficiency not with a view to making a fairer use of the planet's resources" but rather divert attention from the global problem of a growth-oriented economy, as a researcher remarked (Tornaghi, 2014:560). A few pages later, she moves to the right to land and to re-politicize the role of urban gardening in the urban structure. (Tornaghi, 2014:563). This question is also raised in the thematic issue of the ACME Journal, that urban gardening can be linked to the crisis and the resulting volatility of land markets in the neoliberal cities. (Darly & McClintock, 2017:226).

III. URBAN GARDENS IN HUNGARY AND BUDAPEST

The urban gardens trend started in Hungary in 2010 with multiple lecture sessions for locals and stakeholders held by the Center of Contemporary Architecture. (Kortárs Építészeti Központ, KÉK) and other NGOs. The theme was "How to make the city more livable", as Mónika Kertész, responsible for the community garden project in the organization, mentioned during an interview held on September 27th, 2021. The organization has cooperated in establishing many communities and school gardens and operates several throughout the country. Their programs aim to spread the word about such concepts as city heat islands or to decrease our carbon footprint, which is relevant to urban life. In the beginning, municipalities were not very open to the idea of addressing legal issues and confrontation with the city master plan. However, the private sector showed considerable interest in the concept. Garden management deals with hotels and big companies like IBIS and Telekom, and more private land owners were responsive positively to the idea. In 2012, significant efforts led by KÉK had been made, mainly based on volunteer work, to find the owners of vacant areas and raise awareness about the benefits of urban gardens. More demand was noticed for this service. Taking care of buildings' courtyards and transforming parcels into community gardens became an occupation. After getting exposed to this new dynamic, municipalities started to get involved by collaborating with KÉK, offering some plots and delegating garden management work.

There have been around 46 community gardens in Budapest since 2010, 35 of which are currently active. According to Mónika Kertész, five of these gardens are well established and entirely operated by KÉK.¹ Due to the increased demand, the KÉK team is also working on opening new community gardens throughout the city in cooperation with municipalities and collaborating with elementary schools to create school gardens, plots, and educational programs. This relatively large amount of community gardens is sustained thanks to the collaboration of many parties where decisions are made collectively by inhabitants, NGOs and the municipality, and evaluation is also made collectively by a yearly poll. Mónika Kertész confirmed that community gardens should transcend the trend phase as a response to the urban void and be used as a strategic step to improve life in the city which would involve political will and allocated budgeting. As a contributor to the majority of urban gardens in Budapest, the roadmap to their vision would start with mapping all the empty lots in the city and preparing a database by getting in touch with the land owners and stakeholders, then begin to prioritize and negotiate offers with the mediation of the involved parties. Given the long experience of KÉK and good examples and results, Mónika Kertész expresses a great deal of confidence as nowadays is a better time than before for creating urban gardens.

Urban gardening in Hungary has a history of just over ten years; consequently, their research material is weak. The first research came out in 2015, but as it focused on urban green spaces of Budapest, it mentioned only community gardens as closed spaces and only accessible by permission (WUR Consultancy, 2015:8). A detailed analysis based on all Budapest community gardens was presented in a PhD dissertation accepted in 2017 (Fáczányi, 2017). The author mentioned offering green space and food production among their advantages, but she mainly emphasized the social, community and recreational aspects. The latest research on community gardens in Hungary was published in 2020. The survey intended to cover the whole country, though the researchers finally reached only 37 gardens from ten different cities. They concluded that most of the explored gardens had a top-down or top-down with community help governance approach. Though Hungarian community gardens are motivated by community building, the researchers warned that community gardens are used to outsource public space maintenance tasks (Bende and Nagy, 2020).

IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: AIMS AND METHODS

In this paper, we analyze four urban gardens in Budapest, selected from the several urban gardens in the Hungarian capital. Their standard features are all four situated in the inner city on an empty building plot. These districts were built from the late 19th century to 1945: a period of intensive capitalist development.

¹ The Kerthátr Community Garden (at the intersection of IX/XX. Soroksári út - Határ út), the Csárdás Garden (XI. Csárda u. 2.) in the property area of a large multinational company, the municipality-owned Kisdiófa Garden (VII. Kis Diófa u. 4.) downtown, as well as the IBIS Community Garden and IBIS Healing Garden (therapeutic demonstration garden) in the wonderful park of IBIS Citysouth in the 9th district awaits city dwellers who want to garden and are dedicated to the environment.

Consequently, the territory is very dense: narrow streets and small courtyards, resulting in problems like air pollution and a lack of green areas and public spaces. Our main goal is to understand the *modus operandi* of community gardens in Budapest and get to conclude the dynamics of such projects, the challenges and the activity of these spaces that used to be vacant.

We rely on primary data from the online collection of Hungarian community gardens, field research and personal interviews with leading representatives of the initiatives. We analyze the dynamics of their functioning, their impact on social and recreational activity, and the environmental and food production aspects. The analysis is based on a matrix of four study cases and quantitative and qualitative factors that impact their workflow, such as the owner, project manager, stakeholders, size, location, history and development of the project.

Finally, we present the challenges of urban gardening projects in the inner city of Budapest.

V. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

A. Kisdiófa Community Garden

Owner: Erzsébetváros Municipality
Professional Partner: Center of Contemporary Architecture KÉK
Year of Foundation: 2016
Operator: Center of Contemporary Architecture KÉK
Address: 1077 Budapest, Kisdiófa street 4.
Total Floor Area: 700 m²
Cultivated Area: 450 m²
Number of Plots: 48
Size of Plots: 6-7 m²



Fig. 1. Lots distribution of Kisdiófa Garden (<http://kozossegitertek.hu/garden/kisdiofa-kert/>).

Since the opening of the Kisdiófa Garden, 44 individual/family plots have been developed. This green space is located in the middle of the so-called "Party District" and is home to many social, professional and cultural events, including a market point. There are also four study plots in the garden, where in addition to the students of the Kertész Street Eco-School, foreign trainees also take care of their plants and can apply for a thematic competition every year.

Although the active status of Kisdiófa Garden, Mónika Kertész, the garden manager, mentioned the lack of teachers for guided garden tours and gardening sessions during the interview. From a sustainability perspective, the gardeners do not use chemicals and tend to use compost and weeds to replenish, improve and protect the soil. Besides the residential compost, the garden hosts insects' habitat, some bird feeders and drinkers, and the natural habitat of pollinators such as beehives and flower beds. A small garden pond is designed to create more biodiversity. Water-saving cultivation is essential in the garden, given that people can collect rainwater from the adjacent building used for watering. The commonly cultivated plants are spices in raised beds, edible flowers, herbs, and ornamental plants. At the events organized in the community garden, knowledge sharing helps the gardeners and the public as conscious urban dwellers, individuals and local communities. These public events include community events, presentations, and lectures.



Fig. 2. Social activities hosted in Kisdiófa Garden (<http://kozossegitertek.hu/garden/kisdiofa-kert/>).

B. Auróra Climate Garden

Owner: Józsefváros Municipality
Professional Partner: Auróra Civil Center
Year of Foundation: 2019
Operator: Auróra Climate Garden
Address: 1084 Budapest, Auróra street 9-11.
Total Floor Area: 480 m²
Cultivated Area: 200 m²
Number of Plots: 1



Fig. 3. Climate Gardens are different in their dynamics from regular community gardens with no clear separation of lots. (Author).

The area was hosting the ruins of a demolished building when Auróra, a civil organization and a social enterprise, rented the property alongside the building next to cover the debris and use the space as a parking lot. Being barely used, the organization decided to transform a corner of it into an exterior open-air kitchen as a part of a project of reusing supermarket waste to feed the homeless. Consequently, they needed a composter to degrade the kitchen's food waste, so the garden project was born in 2018 with a compost bin and portable pots for plants. After spreading the word about the compost opportunity, many people from the neighborhood started to bring in green waste to compost and brown manure, which made it possible to create arable land. The garden was aimed to be a climate garden as opposed to the regular community "food-oriented" garden where members of the community reserve different parcels to cultivate plants for their consumption. The concept of a climate garden was unusual, but a strategic vision was behind it. According to Mark Richards, the head composter and manager of Auróra garden, climate gardens, by definition, are bound to remain and not be replaced; otherwise, they will lose all their efficiency and benefits.

Besides, planting specific trees and vegetation will make it lawless to cut down. This orientation had two main results: budget and logistics were not a big issue since the garden is based on volunteering and recycled materials. Being new to this concept, many people were not seriously committed to actively contributing to this project. Auróra center is a cultural and community place, a well-known site of the city's underground music and art scene. It also serves as a hub for Hungarian NGOs. So, as a part of its premises and activities, the garden serves as a social space for artists and hosts workshops about gardening, permaculture, and climate issues. As a private investment, the land acquisition was not legally problematic. Nevertheless, they were sometimes bothered or "harassed" by the authorities. They were also sued several times for minor issues, such as hanging a sign without permission and installing a bicycle locker in the exterior wall. These problems decreased with the municipal election in 2019. However, the remaining challenge is to create an impact significant enough to convince the municipality to renew the 5-year lease contract of the center.

C. Rózsa Garden

Owner: Terézváros Municipality
Professional Partner: Center of Contemporary Architecture KÉK
Year of Foundation: 2021
Operator: Terézváros Municipality
Address: 1064 Budapest, Rózsa street 51-53.
Total Floor Area: 850 m²
Cultivated Area: 144 m²
Number of Plots: 36
Size of Plots: 4 m²



Fig. 4. Rózsa Garden as a community hub (Author).

Initially, the municipality wanted to build welfare housing and a pulmonology care center on the plot. However, further conciliation is needed with the Municipality of Budapest Metropolitan Area. On the initiative of deputy mayor Szilvia Temesvári, for the period of mediation and amendment of the regulations, a temporary community garden was opened in June 2021, named Rózsa Garden. On this plot in Rózsa street, in the middle of the district of Terézváros, 32 high beds were installed where community gardeners can grow vegetables, herbs and flowers. There were 80 applicants for the 32 places of various groups

representative of the population, those with children and limited financial capacity were given priority. The community garden/park fulfils several functions: it serves as a modern urban space for community events, helps fight climate change, and promotes environmental protection, health, education, and community culture. The initiatives of the new district management included green aspects as a priority to make a more livable city center, help residents adapt to climate change, and create green islands in a densely populated city. The expert partner in operating the garden and community organizing KÉK.

In the operation of the garden, the professional supervisors of the Contemporary Architecture Centre promote water saving by using mulch, conscious watering and soil improvement (e.g., fungus composting). The vegetables, herbs and flowers are grown without using chemicals, and besides high beds, they are also considering installing a vertical garden. The gardeners have made a drinking station for birds from waste tiles and planted bee-friendly plants, promoting biodiversity. Green waste is composted; from spring to autumn, they also receive compost material from neighbors. In the meantime, they try to garden plastic-free.



Fig. 5. Composting is an essential function of the Rózsa Garden (Author).

As the gardeners received their plots indefinitely, it was difficult for new participants to enter the program. However, there is a constant flow of applications. The applications are registered, and the plots are given to new applicants on a first come, first served basis. The municipality fully funds the community garden. The property was vacant for a couple of years and is for temporary use. The change of status must be initiated and approved by the council members. Long-term plans include welfare housing and a pulmonology care center, but there are no definite plans yet. The municipality has also installed an instructional plot for the neighboring kindergarden.

Shortly after installing the community garden, the high beds, the watering stations, the toolshed and the compost frame, the municipality also established a recreational park on the front part of the plot with benches, tables, and flowerbeds maintained by the gardening department of the district. Although people visibly started to use the park last year, the social impact of this is yet difficult to assess. In the community garden, there were more applicants than available plots. The municipality made groups of the applicants' representative of the population, i.e., their proximity to the park, age, family status or motivation. The gardeners were given their plots for an indefinite period. The objective was to organize a community with various backgrounds via urban gardening. Another aim was to increase cooperation, joint responsibility, environmental awareness, and respect towards each other.

Under the professional guidance of KÉK, the gardeners produced a significant number of vegetables, and the interest in plots to hire remained continuous. As the gardeners can use the plots for an indefinite period, only very few plots are available from time to time. There are only five so far this year where gardeners want to give back their properties. The municipality believes the garden sets a good example and contributes to the microclimate of the urban dwelling space while spreading an environmentally conscious, sustainable lifestyle.

The municipality officers must monitor the healthy operation of the community garden and, if necessary, intervene. Sometimes, they must leave the community to operate autonomously. The garden should also become an identity-forming entity in the district. It is an excellent example to follow and a model for further such initiatives in the neighborhood and capital.

Péter Lapos, an active municipality officer, interviewed online about the history and development of Rózsa Garden on behalf of vice mayor Szilvia Temesvári, affirmed the constant interest of new applicants most probably earmarked by the continuous pull of new applicants for the plot. The gardeners' chosen

representatives show the community's success, which started to operate as a live community. Students from the art faculty nearby also chose the garden as a temporary creative space.

According to Péter Lapos, "Community gardening can only be successful when the participants also pay attention to the plots of the others". A specific example is shading, which can be a nuisance. The sun's direction must be considered when designing one's plot, as higher plants in one field can shade the fields of others. Crops that are not looked after properly can cause problems because of pest and plant diseases, endangering the produce of others. Therefore, appropriate communication between the gardeners is essential.

D. Tolnai Garden

Owner: Józsefváros Municipality

Professional Partner: Rév8 Zrt

Year of Foundation: 2014

Operator: Józsefváros Management Center.

Address: 1084 Budapest, Tolnai Lajos street 23.

Total Floor Area: 600 m²

Cultivated Area: 40.5 m²

Number of Plots: 11

Size of Plots: 2-3 m²



Fig. 6. Schools are booking plots in Tolnai Garden to involve students in urban gardening (Author).

Tolnai Garden was founded as a community garden but soon became underused; only the nearby seniors' club visited it. In 2021 Rév8 Ltd, owned by the Budapest and Józsefváros Municipality as the main proprietor started to work on the plot; thus, land acquisition is not part of the project. A few months after, it was opened to the public. The municipality has decided to utilize the plot as a community garden and a public park for the foreseeable future. Before the decision, the owner and the professional partner intended to collect feedback on how people see the park and what functions they would like to have there. An online survey ran for almost four months, ending in March 2021. They put a suggestion box in the garden to gather feedback offline and set up a Facebook group for the same purpose. With the third wave of covid-19 hitting in the spring of 2021, the communication went entirely online and focused on the Facebook group. The online survey ended with 107 responses, and the primary interventions suggested were more seats, greenery, and compost containers. Using recreational purposes besides gardening, many rules and guidelines like fences and allowing pets were voted on online forums and put into practice for a trial period. Rév8 has summarised the pros and cons, and the municipality decided at the end of the process.

The main intention was to preserve the garden's character with minimal intervention and do the renewal step by step with the neighbors' involvement. First, they launched a call for neighbors who wanted to use the raised beds. (From the 11 beds, nine were adopted, and two were disassembled). They also organized gardening days in July and October, where more than 200 plants were planted, and new plant beds were made. Other initiatives were the exhibition opening and a birdhouse building workshop. More infrastructural interventions took place between February and March 2022. The garden was closed during this time. Now there is a new pavement so people can access the seating areas, a shed was put up, and two picnic tables and a drinking fountain were added.



Fig. 7. Tolnai Garden's transformation from winter 2021 (a) to Spring 2022 (b). (Author)

Tolnai garden is in the middle of the dense Csarnok quarter, where green space is hard to find. The site is quite hidden, as it is in a primarily residential area. As the fence has been closed for years, few people knew about it, even though the garden offers an opportunity for people living nearby. When the park was first opened, dog owners usually used it because they could close the fence. Others came to sit down and enjoy the relatively quiet surroundings.

It isn't easy to evaluate the garden's success as it is still in renewal. The park has significantly improved, is more comfortable to spend time in, and is unique. The potential is for many people to discover it in the future and that it will be a lively place. Tolnai Garden is a mix of a community garden and a public park. For both of these, the main success criteria are usage and sustainability: whether people use them and like to spend time there, how they can sustain the community and onboard new members.

VI. FINDINGS AND RESULTS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

When the gardens are cross-examined, many intersections appear beyond the fact that the research covered a specific city centre area. The table below shows the matrix allowing the comparison between the analyzed gardens:

TABLE I: THE STUDY CASES COMPARISON MATRIX

	<i>Kisdíófa Garden</i>	<i>Auróra Garden</i>	<i>Rózsa Garden</i>	<i>Tolnai Garden</i>
History	Plot of a demolished building Vacant area 2016- community garden	Plot of a demolished building Parking lot 2019- climate garden	Plot of a demolished building Vacant area to host housing and a pulmonology care center. 2021-community garden	Plot of a demolished building Playground for a kindergarten 2014- community garden Unused area 2021- community garden and open park
Initiator	KÉK (Contemporary Architecture Center)	Auróra Civil Center	6th district, Terézváros Municipality	Rév8 Ltd
Contributors	NGOs + Volunteers + Local community	Experts + Volunteers + Local community	KÉK + Local community	Rév8 Ltd + Local community
Implementation	Smooth transition from the previous function of 2014 Regular events Strategic vision	Started with small pots and mobile boxes Organic increase of contributors Strategic vision	Funded by the municipality + cooperation in the management and educational aspect with KÉK	Funded by the municipality + cooperation in the management and educational aspect with Rév8 Ltd
Current situation	+Adoption and regular usage by the inhabitants +Hosting events and workshops -Recreational	+Adoption and regular usage by the inhabitants +Hosting events and workshops -Recycling hub -Recreational -Artistic events	+Adoption and regular usage by the inhabitants +Hosting events and workshops -Recreational -Artistic events	+A mix of a community garden, a public park with picnic tables and a water fountain, plus a dog park
Challenges	+Temporary status +Coordination +Social adhesion +Engagement	+Temporary status +Political change in the municipality +Coordination and communication with the authorities and neighbors +Engagement	+Temporary status +High demand for plots +Coordination and communication among the plot owners +Engagement	+Temporary status +Communication between the different users +Engagement

VII. CONCLUSIONS

According to the observations and analyses collected from different sources, community gardens present a few challenges. The first is that community gardens must contend with the challenges of space. In busy urban areas, it can often be difficult to find space for a garden. The scale of the plot limits the types of plants that can be grown and limits the amount of space that can be used for gardens. In addition, community gardens must sometimes contend with a lack of funding. Despite the many benefits community gardens offer, they often struggle to receive the financial support necessary to keep them running. The managers interviewed expressed a fair amount of uncertainty regarding the future of these gardens. The responsibility is relatively pointed to the authorities for not having a clear legal framework and the community for the

varying level of commitment they tend to show. As for the factors of leisure, food and social impact, some of these gardens outperform others. More extensive gardens with more plots and beds (e.g., Rózsa Garden) tend to produce more food and aromatic plants, while climate gardens are more prone to foster biodiversity. Hence, they provide more types of products even though the quantity is not the main asset, as it is shown in Auróra Climate Garden.

Nevertheless, gardens monitored by NGOs are more impactful socially and create more community integration and interaction, as is the case with gardens operated by KÉK. Smaller gardens are found to be most suitable for recreational purposes. As for the environmental factor, every patch of greenery plays a vital role in combatting global warming. However, the garden size significantly reduces the urban heat island effect, given that all the analyzed cases are located in densely urbanized areas.

The garden's success/failure depends on numerous external factors, for example, the timing coinciding with the covid situation, which was a setback. Besides, every participatory project has ups and downs, as each site is different and needs time to get appropriate. How to address the local community dramatically impacts the garden project's success, successfully involving those genuinely interested and wanting to be part of it. Persistence is vital; if people see something regularly, they are more likely to get on board.

The presented and analyzed community gardens in Budapest's inner districts have different characters and offer various activities. Even though they face common challenges, they are created for temporary use. The analyzed gardens are all situated on infill plots. Although the district municipality owns them, they are threatened if the owner sells them to an investor. The community gardens have to calculate another challenge: if the users of the plot can live in peace with each other, and the participants keep their awareness, they should be ready for communication. Finally, we should believe in the initiators' engagement.

APPENDIX

The interviews were conducted with the managers of the gardens as follows:

- Interview with Monika Kertész (Kék) – 27/09/2021.
- Interview with Mark Richards (Aurora Kert) – 22/02/2022.
- Interview with Péter Lapos (Rózsa Kert) – 18/03/2022.
- Interview with Lilla Gerencsér (Tolnai Kert) – 30/03/2022.

The interviews were based on the following questions:

- What are the history and current state of the garden?
- How can you describe the garden's impact on the neighborhood and the community?
- How do you evaluate the success of the garden?
- What can impact the success/failure of such a project?
- What are the criteria for a successful community garden?
- How to proceed to get permission for land acquisition? What are the opportunities and challenges? Collaborators and funding?
- What were the previous functions of the site? Was it a vacant lot? Is this a temporary use, or is it aimed to stay for the long term? And who gets to decide?

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