



## Participatory Design Processes for the Development of Green Areas of Large-scale Housing: Case Studies from Budapest and Riga

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**Abstract:** *Large housing estates (LHE) found in CEE countries can be seen as a legacy of socialism. Their endurance in these countries is still evident: the future of LHEs is substantially linked to their physical and social characteristics formed during socialism and their decline in status in Hungary and Latvia. The Western European practice of urban rehabilitation and community initiatives has gained more and more ground (sometimes literally) as of late. Our paper examines this phenomenon by analysing examples of converted green space of LHEs in two former socialist cities - a neglected and underused former “traffic park” in Budapest and a typical LHE “courtyard” overgrown and unused in Riga. We focus on the conversational process and the participatory approach of inhabitants and analyse how the redesigning of green areas involving local communities can lead to inhabitants feeling more at home in this housing structure.*

**Keywords:** Eastern European housing; residential environments and people; comparative housing policy; home ownership.



## Introduction

During the decades of socialism, the majority of state-funded apartments were built within housing estates in Central and Eastern Europe (UNECE 1992). The architectural form and proliferation of large housing estates (LHEs) in former socialist countries can be explained by international trends (Wassenberg 2013), while its massive permeation is more so rooted in the socialist system. The majority of inhabitants moved from the countryside to LHEs in the 1970s and 1980s; many of these new urban dwellers suffered due to a lack of usable green areas and lack of a social network. Over the past 15-20 years, the social status of some LHEs has declined in several countries and some LHEs have even turned into slums (e.g. Luník IX in Košice, Slovakia). The main issues associated with their physical features are similar to those in Western European countries: they are monotonous with abandoned and unsafe green areas and with few meeting places (Van Kempen et al 2005). In spite of these issues, opinion polls (from socialism and today) illustrate that the majority of occupants in Budapest like their apartments, an aspect which could be used to motivate residents to participate in the development of their surroundings. Those, however, who have never lived in a housing estate, definitely do not want to move to one, regardless of whether they are unsure of where to move to (Csizmady 2005). Up until now, LHEs in the Baltic States (including Latvia) have provided a so-called “normal” standard of living acceptable for most of the population. This acceptance of LHEs, however, has proven to be temporary.

The need for the rehabilitation of these spaces became apparent towards the end of the 1990s, but was introduced rather late due to a lack of funding. At the beginning of this process, top-down rather than bottom-up initiatives were employed. Civil society was weak and practices imported from Western European countries did not work effectively (Howard 2002 and Wallace 2012). This, however, slowly changed with time. Nowadays, one of the instruments of social rehabilitation to improve the standard of living at LHEs could be the development of a green infrastructure in parallel with community building and raising resident’s awareness regarding their responsibility towards their environment. Community gardening is one of the recent ideas to appear in the toolbox of local governments (Csizmady and Fácányi 2016).

Within this context, our aim is to compare two participatory rehabilitation processes of green spaces at LHEs in Budapest and Riga; both have a comparable social and environmental status, yet each have taken different courses of action. Our focus is on the role of the community’s contribution to the urban rehabilitation process. We consider the correlation and instruments of bottom-up and top-down initiatives to be important as civic engagement essentially has the potential to improve the quality of green urban infrastructure, although it cannot completely replace centralised development and maintenance (Rosol 2006). We elaborate on a common feature of LHEs in the post-socialist countries and discuss the difference between the use of nature intended by the architects at the time of the construction of the LHEs and the contemporary usage. Subsequently, we will introduce the areas where the case studies take place and describe their developmental process and working methods. Finally, we will generalise our results in order to contextualise our findings.



## LHEs in Budapest and Riga

A common feature of LHEs of former socialist countries is that the vast majority were built in the 1970s and 1980s with panel technology (some estates, however, date back to the 1950-60s). In both Budapest and Riga, LHEs are a significant urban component (Rietdorf et al 1994). The share of inhabitants in housing estates is still around 30 percent in Budapest; more than half of the housing market is located at LHEs in Riga. During the late 1950s to the early 1990s, 115 estates (75 LHEs) were built in Budapest. Thirteen LHEs, as well as a large number of smaller estates, were built in Riga. Urban blocks in LHEs were planned as a complex living environment by providing citizens the necessary daily services as well as leisurely facilities in the direct vicinity of their homes. The green inner courtyard was an important conceptual aspect of housing estates in both cities from the 1950s until the late 1980s.

Green areas occupied 40-45% of the territory of Hungarian LHEs in the 1970s and 1980s and were primarily intended for recreation. Two types can be identified. The first one is an undefined green space that was left undesigned and was simply intended as a common area “belonging to nobody”; as a consequence, however, it was never used. In most cases, green open spaces were neither regularly tended to nor improved upon, a factor which led to their degradation. The reasons for their deterioration are related to social as well as economic aspects. Lately, green open spaces have lost their original purpose; their use is significantly different from the originally intended concept of LHEs. The second type of green concept can be seen in Riga. These detailed landscaping projects in Riga’s courtyards were developed with the aim to provide activities for different age groups and interests. Separate areas of the courtyards were planned for various household functions (e.g. washing drying, waste containers, etc.), as well as for a limited number of parking spaces. Unfortunately, most of the planned outdoor equipment and greenery was never implemented due to a lack of funds. Today green courtyards are often overgrown with random plants and are mostly used for parking and waste bin storage (Treija et al 2012).

**Figure 1: Underused green areas of the case studies (left: Budapest, right: Riga)**



Sources: <http://19.kerulet.ittlakunk.hu/utcak-terek> (left); authors (right)

We have established that these green areas (open and courtyard) which lack a pre-determined purpose have recently largely taken on the appearance of a neglected, unsafe and unattractive environment. The existence of such underused and badly maintained areas could lead to a further decline in social status of LHEs and damage their image as a whole. In order to



maintain or even increase LHE's position on the housing market, the regeneration of green open space in both cities is crucial to ensuring their liveability as a recreational area and as an extension of these cramped living spaces.

## Case Study Areas

LHEs were converted into huge complexes of small private properties with the privatisation of apartments in the 1990s. Due to the change in ownership structure, nowadays participation is the only possible approach for regeneration since owners have to make decisions regarding the future of their buildings. In order to ensure efficient management of housing, it is necessary to communicate with the apartment owners and to educate them in various ways. In this frame, we attempt to demonstrate the process of green area conversion as a possible tool of regeneration.

Our first case study site is in Budapest (Kispest Északi Lakótelep) where the green area was originally designed as a traffic park (a park where children can learn the rules of road safety). After 40 years, the park has deteriorated, the toy-traffic signs and lamps have been vandalised and the vegetation is overgrown; the area is considered by inhabitants to be unsafe (especially for children), and therefore, the space is underused. Based on a municipality survey, some civic initiatives, a student workshop and a participatory design, there is potential for the renewal of the communal green area of the LHE.

The second case study site is in Riga where one of the most problematic topics is the inadequacy of green areas in relation to current needs. The "Courtyard Refurbishment Movement", which started in 2010, aims to enhance inhabitant's involvement in the improvement of their living spaces. Residents were asked to actively take part in the planning of their courtyard in order to turn it into a pleasant place for leisure and recreation. During the entire process, students had the opportunity to work with inhabitants, to communicate with local authorities, to work side by side with design professionals and to take part in the construction plans.

## Case Studies

### The "Kispest Északi Lakótelep" LHE in Budapest

This large housing estate has the physical and environmental problems which are typical more than 40 years after construction. In 2013, the municipality of the 19<sup>th</sup> district named Kispest had conducted a survey (questionnaires) focusing on parking problems and renewal of the green open space in order to gauge residents' views on this area surrounding the housing blocks. In a question concerning the negotiated green territory, residents could vote on prospective functions suggested by the municipality, such as a recreational park, a playing field for dogs, playground or sport facilities (Note that they could choose several options, and therefore, the sum does not total 100%). Most of the residents (85%) voted exclusively for a park; 17.4% voted for a dog playground; around 10% requested to leave the area as is; and



8.5% voted for sport facilities. Another question asked for the respondents' suggestions: 20.76% proposed a resting and service area for cyclists; 11.44% suggested a community garden; and 10.17% proposed an educational garden. Thereafter, in 2014, the municipality moved the former traffic park to a nearby area.

The district at this time had for several years a productive relationship with the Urban Garden Association (Városi Kertek Egyesület - VKE) resulting in the establishment of three community gardens nearby (Csizmady and Fácányi 2016). This fact seemed to be the catalyst for bringing to fruition the idea of a community garden. In the summer of 2015, initiated by a group of residents, the precisely-designed garden "Árnyas Kert" was opened with 29 raised beds and communal spaces located at the north-east corner of the green area. Unexpectedly, during the garden's implementation, there was a protest organised by a group from the neighbourhood, a group which could be characterised primarily by its enviousness and aversion to change. One counterargument was that a group of residents should not be able to monopolise a part of the communal space without asking – this was obviously not the case since the garden was widely publicised before construction had commenced. Dog owners were against the garden because they felt part of *their* territory had been co-opted. Self-organised representation of civic interests is not typical in Hungarian society and if, than it is generally opposed to change – a fact evident from our case study as well. On the one hand, one result of this protest was that the interests of the protesting residents became clearly formulated. On the other hand, the municipality's process which began with the survey received some new momentum.

By acknowledging this strained relationship among the groups of inhabitants, the municipality decided to initiate a design process involving interested residents in order to find solutions that would meet their requirements for this green open space. In spring 2016, students of the Faculty of Landscape Design (SZIU) had the opportunity to tackle this interesting situation by using the results of the previous survey and by providing suggestions for the layout of the area. The primary aim was to fulfil the interests of different age groups while simultaneously resolving conflicting interests. The surrounding housing area is a densely populated one; the large green area could be an excellent recreational resource for the people living here. An important aspect of the design criteria was the multi-functionality of the space's arrangement which needed to take into account the establishment of the different park-like functions, such as community resting areas, thematic playgrounds, fitness and sport facilities and additionally, the demands of dog owners. Vegetation, lighting, benches, drinking fountains, waste bins would need to be designed, while existing trees are to be left untouched. In order to accomplish all of this, the municipality has to find financial support for the complex renewal of the green area. It opted for the TÉR\_KÖZ competition organised by the city council for rehabilitation of community spaces (deadline for submissions was the end of November 2016), a competition being organised by the city council. In September 2016, the district council was calling for a participatory design process in mutual cooperation with a group of experts and interested residents in order to prepare the final plans for the area.



## The “Courtyard Refurbishment Movement” in Riga

In Latvia, one of the activities that have contributed to residents’ participation in the regeneration of the residential environment is the so-called Courtyard Refurbishment Movement. This project aims to encourage people to engage in the improvement of the areas surrounding their housing. The Courtyard Movement was created within the framework of the “Big Clean-up” – a project whose aim was to help people discover their common points of view and to learn how to cooperate. Priority was given to applications that would encourage active participation of local residents during and after the project development of the courtyard landscaping. A wide range of stakeholders was involved in the various activities throughout the process: local residents, students from different fields, professionals as mentors, representatives of local government and sponsors.

**Figure 2: Motivated neighbourhood communities (left: Budapest; right: Riga)**



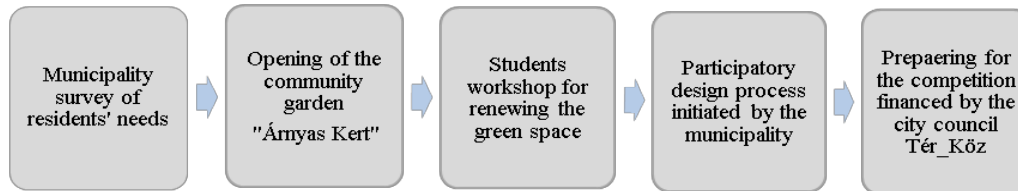
*Sources: authors*

From 2010 to 2015, 19 courtyards in various Latvian cities were regenerated within the framework of the Courtyard Refurbishment Movement. In order to provide complex solutions to various issues, the project organisers (Young Architects Movement and Union of Latvian Landscape Architects) invited students from different fields to cooperate on the project: mixed working groups consisted of students of civil engineering, architecture, design, environmental design, landscape architecture and arts. Student groups carried out surveys and interviews with residents, developed design proposals and implemented the projects in the actual environment. Throughout the entire process students and residents were the main partners for the development of the project’s objectives.

The partners who were invested in the project indicated that the involvement of all relevant actors throughout all stages of the project is a key prerequisite for a successful process and end result. Experience shows that the involvement of students (e.g. students who work with real problems, communicate with real people as well as participate themselves in the implementation of their projects) in this type of project promotes a responsible attitude towards the needs of society as well as contributes to their professional development.



## Scheme 1: Comparison of the two processes of development



*Green development process at Kispest, Budapest*



*Participatory process in Courtyard Movement project in Riga*

*Source: authors*

It is often assumed that residents are rarely active players in the processes related to the improvements of green open space. However, it is clear that a need for high quality space is important to the residents of large housing estates. Residents' initiative and creativity can form a platform for potential participatory activities in large housing estates.

## Conclusion

In this paper we have illustrated how bottom-up initiatives can help the inhabitants of LHEs get closer to nature and, in turn, enhance the standard of living in housing estates. We can draw conclusions from the common evidence of our two case studies as follows: if civil society can keep in mind the relevant physical and social factors of the housing estate and seek professional assistance when introducing the process of community building activities to the residents, projects may very well be successful and help inhabitants to finally feel more at home. In both of our case studies, the participation of students gave the process the necessary "professional" impetus, a dose of creativity and a new way of approaching urban development projects and policy.

Success largely depends on the preparatory work. It is of the utmost importance to determine in advance the characteristics of the LHE and to identify areas that could be used for green open spaces like open fields, playgrounds or closed or semi-closed community gardens. Introducing the new purpose(s) of these green spaces to the largely uninformed social strata of the neighbourhood of LHEs should be part of the preparatory work and should inspire residents to actively participate. Other international examples have demonstrated what a challenge the redevelopment process can be (Wassenberg 2013). The LHE is not an empty piece of land; it is characterised by its everyday use (or unuse) and cannot be divorced from



its original purpose. There are several renewal projects which have not, even in Western European countries, stood the test of time.

The presented case studies indicate a new approach of the municipalities regarding urban development as well. The former top-down decisive role of local government is slowly changing to one of embracing bottom-up initiatives. Moreover, the participatory design projects proposed by district councils are inspiring and take into account civic, bottom-up demands. The results of the cooperation between bottom-up and top-down initiatives efficiently complement each other. It is a very important step for such societies where the tradition of civil movements was largely absent and is practically inconspicuous even today (Ost 2011, Rikmann and Keedus 2013). The Budapest case study highlights the importance of the existence of different interests and attitudes of the inhabitants. In some cases, an initial mediation should be carried out in order to bring the interests of residents to light, because like the community garden in Budapest, the tendency in Hungarian society is not to embrace any change at all. The participatory method of planning activities can result in a decrease of conflicts, can help to find “suitable” compromises among the groups of inhabitants and can create the missing culture of civil society in the long-term; the professional leadership, however, needs to be sensitive enough to appreciate and satisfy different interests. This professional openness is yet to be achieved in every case in Hungary, even though it can determine the success of the process. In Latvia, due to new building law, such projects need to be designed by a certified specialist and approved by the local municipality in a long and expensive procedure. Today, this project is being overseen by the Union of Landscape Architects, although without active student participation.

Both of our case studies - the Courtyard Refurbishment Movement project and the process which took place in Budapest – were instrumental in drawing attention to the problems of green spaces and further demonstrate the power of community. These projects constitute a new environmental aspect and also new possibilities to build on improved social cohesion.

We are convinced that community gardening can be used as a motivational tool. It is highly effective at getting residents to participate in the use and renewal of their surroundings and this namely in former socialist societies lacking community building experiences. Based on the work of our case studies, we propose a change in the motivational tools of the two cities and encourage residents to actively participate in the use and renewal of their surroundings.





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