Designing Allotment Gardens?
What can be learned from experiences of Slovenia.

Understanding the situation:

When discussing urban allotment gardening from the urban and landscape design perspective we have to understand all the particularities and characteristics of this type of an urban green space. In this respect, it is very important to take into account the prevailing rural character of the urban allotment gardens’ areas, especially for the areas with predominantly food producing functions that are characteristic for Slovenian reality.

Entering the rural to the urban context may raise a number of important issues from both sociological, and spatial and perceptual aspects. Sociologists point out that the Slovenian society is characterized by preferences for rural way of life even within the urban settlements. This rejection of the urban lifestyle, or »Antiurbanity as a Way of Life” as they call it (Urišč, M. Hočevar, M; 2007), is also reflected in relation to urban green spaces. The most passionately expressed needs and preferences of the use of urban green areas in recent years is certainly a need for allotment gardens.

So for Slovenian urban designer the challenge is how the rural image and symbolic perception of allotment gardens is affecting the urbanity of the cities and what does it mean for identity of place? What kind of design intervention is needed to keep the urban character of this type of urban green space but still keep it understandable and accepted by users?

Like all urban green spaces are also allotment gardens strongly subjected to the influence of natural processes and seasonal changes, but due to their purpose, this correlation is even more noticeable. Without being designed with the idea to mitigate or guiding these changes for creating a certain spatial quality these areas represent a kind of instability of appearance and attractiveness of the whole area.

It is also very important to understand that the visual appearance of the allotment garden strongly depends upon type of gardening. There is a big difference if the gardening is based on permacultural and organic farming with extreme diversity of plants within one plot, or on classical agriculture with one plant type within one vegetable bed. There is completely different spatial structure in terms of perception of order, readability and identity of place (especially for those who are not familiar with different food growing concepts).
And last but not least the priorities of users of allotment gardens are influencing a lot the spatial character of these spaces. If the users have a priority to get as better crop as possible (what is the case of the most allotment gardeners in Slovenia although it is nowadays changes from quantity to quality), all their attention and energy is focused on the process of growing vegetables and fruits and visual appearance of the area or its attractiveness and pleasantness for other inhabitants is of secondary importance. Also the aspects of leisure, recreation or social interactions are are subordinate to functionality, financial and spatial rationality and personal interests. The place is developed primarily due to the need to protect the area from intruders, storing work tools, water collection, composting, joined by the desire for the possibility of weather protection and short stays within the garden area.

This situation can be very clearly observed in Slovenia. Many allotment gardens in Slovenia are unplanned, pop up gardens in different more or less abandoned public or private green areas inside neighbourhhoods, areas along urban rivers and streams, railway lines, under power lines, on former farmlands and simillar. That are areas that people with interest in food growing for self-suply and personal preferences for rural lifestyle, develop by themselves, renting them from farmers or municipalities, but manytimes also occupying illegally. Majority of such allotment areas are completelly unstructured, heterogenous and individually developed places of chaotic apperance without any urban place quality. They are completely non-planed and un-designed, without any regulations. Besides vegetable beds, the most common elements of such gardens are small summerhouses or sheds, composed of different materials and residues and variety of other un-designed elements for water collecting, storage, waste, shelters, fences... Such places are not only without any spatial quality but also quite problematic from ecological aspects. But on the other hand those places have strong communities behind and strong personal touch and attachment of the gardeners.

![Typical »unplanned« allotment gardens in Ljubljana](image)
*Photos by: Leon Vidic/delo; Roman Šipič/Delo, Bojan Erhartič*

What this situation on no design, no planning, no regulation really means? And how to approach to it? People who are gardening there usually like it a lot, other people living in the nearby areas usually see it as a degradated, upleasant, even dangerous area, urban designers wish to change it, design and plan it in a way to be appropriate for the context and an added value for all inhabitants, city administations wish to regulate and control it.
Recent trends in developing the allotment gardens in Slovenia are going in two directions:

Planned, designed and strictly regulated urban allotment areas:

On the one hand the cities are trying to regulate and improve the situation. In Ljubljana for example the mayor has decided to remove and destroy all the allotment areas on unsuitable locations due to their urban context, cultural or ecological importance. The new, more suitable areas were planned and included into the city spatial development documentation, with policies and ordinances to regulate, supervise and direct their development and appearance. As a basis a typical design of allotment area of 1 ha size was prepared and also implemented in some parts of the city.

Even though it was designed by the city architect, there is very little attention in the design of dedicated to the spatial quality and “urbanity” of the green space itself. The design is very formal and functional with strictly regulated elements resembling a lot a rural food productive character. Each plot has its own shed that is built by the city in advance; available plots are of different dimensions but all in a very strict grid order. At the entrance there is also a small common area with small playground and/or meeting place, parking places and other functional elements, but the majority of the area is only of functional characteristics for food producing. Although the area is owned by the city the use is limited only to gardening and gardeners as users of the area. Other inhabitants are excluded by design already.

The reactions from people were mostly negative – they felt it too formal with too much order, unhuman, unnatural... although with time, when nature takes over the design of place, things change a lot...
Urban community gardens and other new forms of urban gardening

There is quite a strong movement of young intellectuals of different professional backgrounds for developing different kinds of community gardens. This is bottom-up projects with lot of elements of guerilla gardening which are gaining different kinds of official public support through time. Particularly interesting is the fact that the initiators of such actions are usually distinctly urban lifestyle oriented people, as opposed to rural lifestyle –oriented “traditional” allotment gardeners. Their gardens are a kind of representation of modern values linked with the environmental awareness, health and wellbeing and quality of life. Garden design is based more on the strong and comprehensive ideals private interests of the food production and leisure. The places are socially inclusive and usually have a strong identity that is closer to urban environment.

A typical example of such practice is a Community-Based Garden Intervention in a Degraded Urban Space in Ljubljana named “Beyond a Construction Site” (Onkraj gradbišča/ http://onkrajgradbisca.wordpress.com/) Its location is in the very city centre, among the residential buildings of high density and near the main train station, so the context is very urban. The project was initiated by Culture and Art Association, “KUD Obrat” (http://www.obrat.org/) in 2010, in collaboration with another non-profit organization for the realization and organization of cultural events Bunker (http://www.bunker.si/eng). Their action was a kind of “guerrilla gardening”. Together with neighbourhood residents and other interested people, they occupied and started to transform a long abandoned and fenced building plot of the city ownership for urban gardens but also with strong emphasis to socializing, educational, and cultural issues.

The site is designed and un-designed at the same time. No professional landscape design project has been prepared for the area, but there was an art event of a young Slovenian architect and visual artist Polonca Lovšin, named “A day with goat” that resulted in a draft plan for the spatial organizing of the site. Other design interventions have followed as a kind of bottom-up design that is still in progress, changing and developing all the time by users.

![Development of the project through time](http://onkrajgradbisca.files.wordpress.com/2013/03/onkraj_gradbisca_3d_2010_final-iw.jpg)
Currently around 100 people take care of ca 40 gardens and take part in different public and community based events.

“Onkraj gradbišča”: view from the window; common area; entrance. Photos by: Drago Kos/Onkraj Gradbišča; Igor Zaplatil /Dokumentacija Dela; http://onkrajgradbisca.wordpress.com/

**Does allotment gardens need to be designed? And by who?**

From professional point of view this question is for sure a very challenging one. To appropriately include the areas of allotment gardens in the urban context it is for sure very important to find a good design and planning approach that is not only functional and rational for food production but also inclusive and responsive to the local and wider urban environment. But on the other hand Slovenian experience calls attention to the fact that urban gardening (regardless the type) is predominantly a bottom up activity, and so users are also very important (co) creators of the form and structure of the site. So where to find a balance between clearly defined and flexible enough?

What to define and what to leave for bottom-up creation?

When trying to understand where the design interventions are possible and needed, we should take into consideration different levels:

- designing the area of allotment gardens
- designing an allotment garden itself (a plot)
- and designing elements of allotment gardens

One of possible answers is to design a strong frame that corresponds with the environment and create the image and identity of place and leave the content inside for flexible, personalized development.

Among the best examples of such approach is still design of Naerum Allotment Gardens in Denmark (Carl Theodor Soerensen, 1952)

Other possibilities are related to design of elements of allotment gardens that can be quite distinctive for structure and form of the place. Especially elements characteristics for alternative types of gardening as raised beds can be also used as a designing tool for achieving a recognizable and connecting spatial form.

Bibliography and sources of photographs

- [http://onkrajgradbisca.wordpress.com/](http://onkrajgradbisca.wordpress.com/)
- [http://www.delo.si/clanek/74922)](http://www.delo.si/clanek/74922)