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• *Community gardens – Berlin – Urban planning*

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Community Gardens – A Potential for Stagnating and Shrinking Cities? Examples from Berlin

Gemeinschaftsgärten – Ein Potenzial für stagnierende und schrumpfende Städte? Beispiele aus Berlin

With 3 Figures, 1 Table and 3 Photos

In Berlin, as in other German cities, indications of stagnation and shrinking can be found. This leads to abundant empty lots and brownfields which ask for innovative uses. In this context, a special form of community involvement concerning new uses on derelict land, in this case in the urban green space sector, is studied by the author: community gardens. Whilst the tradition of German allotment gardens is nationally and internationally well known, community gardening as a form of collective gardening on public or semi-public spaces is a recent phenomenon in Berlin. To date there is not much research and literature available on this topic. This article gives a general introduction, explains a basic typology of community gardens and analyses three examples. Finally it concentrates on the specific question: What potential offer community gardens in situations of abundance of abandoned lots?

1. Introduction

Berlin, as a stagnating and partially shrinking city, disposes of a high amount of brownfields and empty lots. In the inner city alone, there are about 1.000 empty lots (ca. 150 ha). They can be found especially along railway tracks, on the strip of land along the former wall, and on former industrial estates and graveyards. As a consequence of the economic and demographic change, sites of social infrastructure institutions such as kindergartens and schools are and will be abandoned, especially in districts in the outer city, such as Marzahn-Hellersdorf (Beirat Stadtforum 2020

2005). This is the result of a loss in population, a loss of jobs due to de-industrialisation and global economic and social changes, events which are followed by the demolition of vacant houses, social infrastructure and industrial areas. The abundance of these brownfields calls for uses – be they temporary or permanent.

At the same time there are still substantial qualitative and quantitative deficiencies regarding the provision with urban public green spaces. A study by the Berlin government (the *Senat*) calculates a lack of 210 ha of public, near-residential green space for all of Berlin. This means that 10 % of

what is needed according to official guidelines (own calculations based on ISU 2005) is actually missing. Looking at individual urban districts, enormous differences are manifest. The inner-city districts all lack much of the needed near-residential green, whereas periurban districts sometimes exceed the normative guiding value of near-residential green space (ISU 2005). In addition, these values correlate with an enormous lack of private green space in the inner city, and abundant private green space in most parts of the outer city. These differences show the influence of different built structures and densities on the availability of open spaces. Furthermore, studies on the quality of public green space show a deterioration in both maintenance and equipment in recent years (Konsalt and Ökologie & Planung 2000, SenStadt 2001). This neglect of the public green sector clashes with the enormous social, ecological and economic importance stated in studies about urban green space (e.g. *Bochnig* and *Selle* 1992, *Nohl* 1993, *Selle* 1993).

This situation asks for new and innovative solutions to both the problem of the abundance of empty lots and the lack of public open green spaces. One of a possibly very potential new form of public open space is presented in this paper: community gardens. In the last few years, a number of local initiatives for the creation of community gardens have evolved in Berlin (inspired by those created in New York City), as well as more general approaches for the creation of green spaces on empty lots or brownfields. Still, collective gardening in the form of community gardens is a lesser-known form of creating, shaping and using public space. There has not been much research conducted and literature published on this topic so far. Thus, the benefits, challenges and limitations of community gardens for the gardeners, the neighbourhood, the municipality and urban society as a whole need to be considered. In order to contribute to answering this research question, I conducted a case study of nine community gardens in Berlin researching which types

of gardens exist in Berlin, what motivates the gardeners, what their needs and requirements are and how city staff and local politicians think and act. Especially, this paper looks on where and how community gardens could deploy their advantages. For this reason I will first of all provide general information about the gardens and then present representative case study examples of community gardens in Berlin. I will conclude with an outlook on the very important role these gardens can potentially play in shrinking cities, and by doing so address a highly debated issue (Beirat Stadtforum 2020 2005).

2. Methodology

Information concerning community gardens was mostly obtained from qualitative interviews (*Witzel* 1982) with people from community garden initiatives, local politicians and administrators and external scientists and environmentalists (in total: 44 interviews). The sampling followed theoretical, not statistical logic. Very dissimilar cases of existing, and more or less successfully operating, gardens were selected in order to explore different perspectives (cp. Rule Three in *Kleining* 2001 [1982]). I also used participatory observation and analysed secondary literature.

The search for the case study examples as well as the entire research followed a qualitative, explorative paradigm. Thus, the research design was non-linear but circular. The analysis of one case determined the next step of the research process. The aim of qualitative research is the discovery of new knowledge and connections and not just testing something already known and verbalised. This is only possible through the use of an important principle of qualitative research – openness. This openness, concerning the data, the interview sample, the hypotheses and conclusions (*Kleining* 2001 [1982]), was necessary because, so far, the whole field is widely unknown in both the scientific world and the general public. As yet, only a

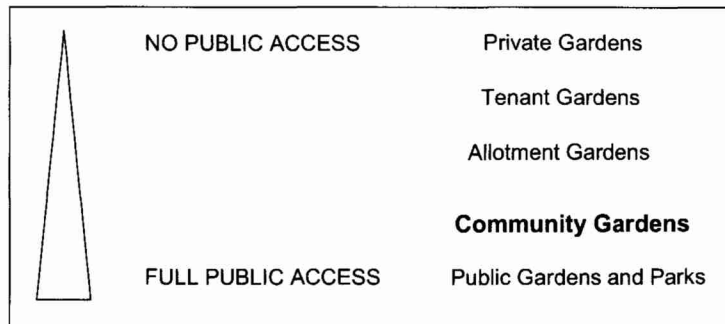


Fig. 1 Community gardens and other types of urban green according to their public accessibility (design: Rosol) / *Gemeinschaftsgärten und andere Formen städtischen Grüns nach ihrer öffentlichen Zugänglichkeit* (Entwurf: Rosol)

few individual case studies or reports in newspapers have been published (i.e. Grünsteidel 2001, Hoffmann and Zehner 2002, Kibler 2001).

3. What are Community Gardens?

Community gardens have no widely acknowledged definition due to the lack of scientific research on the topic. Haidle gives an overview of the international state of the art concerning urban gardening and shows the lack of a universally valid definition (Arndt and Haidle 2004: 31ff.). Nevertheless, we find community gardens or forms of collective urban agriculture all over the world. In Paris, community gardens are supported by the local municipality as a form of interim use (Bauhardt 2004). In the United Kingdom, community gardeners are organised in the 'Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens' (Holland 2004). Community Gardens in Buenos Aires have been described as a response to the recent economic and social crisis (Arndt and Haidle 2004). Moreover, in other cities in North and South America, in Africa and Asia, as well as many eastern European cities, diverse forms of urban gardening exist (Boggs 2000, Gehl 1987, Grünsteidel 1996, Hoffmann 2001, Holl and Meyer-Renschhausen 2000, MacGilvra 1997, Mathéy 2000, Meyer-Renschhausen 2002, 2004, Rosol and Weiss 2005). Most

of these gardens have both an economic (food) and a social function (contact) – independently of the geographical region they are situated in.

Existing German studies are mostly conducted from the perspective of urban agriculture (Stadtacker 2004) or as a specific form of interim uses (BBR 2004, Cet-0 and Studio Urban Catalyst 2004, Eißner and Heydenreich 2004, Hoffmann and Zehner 2002). For my research I developed the following definition for community gardens: A community garden is a space where a group of people works together voluntarily to create and operate a garden or park of public interest.

Thus, in contrast to other forms of urban gardening, the collective and public character of community gardens is essential for their definition. Public interest in most of the studied cases also means full public access anytime. Although some of the gardens are only temporarily open to the general public, they can fulfil important social or other functions which are relevant for a larger group of people or for the whole neighborhood. The question of accessibility helps to differentiate community gardens from other types of urban green spaces.

Different types of urban green space can be identified, ranging from no public access to full public access (see Fig. 1). Some quantitative information

about the proportion of different types of urban green space in Berlin is given below (Fig. 2).

There are no data concerning the number or amount of tenant and private gardens in Berlin. In Figure 2, the space occupied by private and tenant gardens is included in the built-up area of the city. Tenant gardens (*Mietergärten*) are used primarily by tenants of apartment complexes. Most of them have some sort of common space for all tenants, but not for the general public. The 80,000 allotment garden plots, the famous German *Kleingärten*, represent almost 4 % of the urban area of Berlin. With an average size of 400 m², the Berlin allotment gardens are much larger than the average North American allotments. According to planning policies in Berlin, all allotment garden areas are supposed to have a public path system and some common space and playgrounds for the general public. However, many are not inviting, due to tall hedges, bad orientation and lack of seating and facilities for playing (SenStadt 2004, SenStadtUm 1994: 137). Nonetheless, they fulfil important ecological and also recreational functions in big cities like Berlin. Public parks and playgrounds form about 7 % of the land use in Berlin (5,500 ha including playgrounds).

Moreover, one quarter of the surface of the city of Berlin (890 km²) is covered by forest (160 km²) and water (59 km²) (Fig. 2). An additional 42 km² (which is included in the category of built-up and traffic areas in Figure 2) are brownfields and abandoned lots of 1 ha or more, which are not used and maintained, at least not officially. Most, but not necessarily all, of these brownfields and abandoned lots are covered by spontaneous vegetation (ISU 2002). In general, this type of area has the potential to be converted into community gardens, given the required accessibility, absence of contamination and – which is most important – interested neighbours who want to create such gardens. As a matter of fact, most of the gardens studied were created on former empty lots and not in public parks or on other types of open space.

4. Three Case Studies

An overview of the nine gardens investigated for the dissertation is now given. Their location, especially with respect to inner or outer city, is shown in Figure 3. Three of these nine gardens

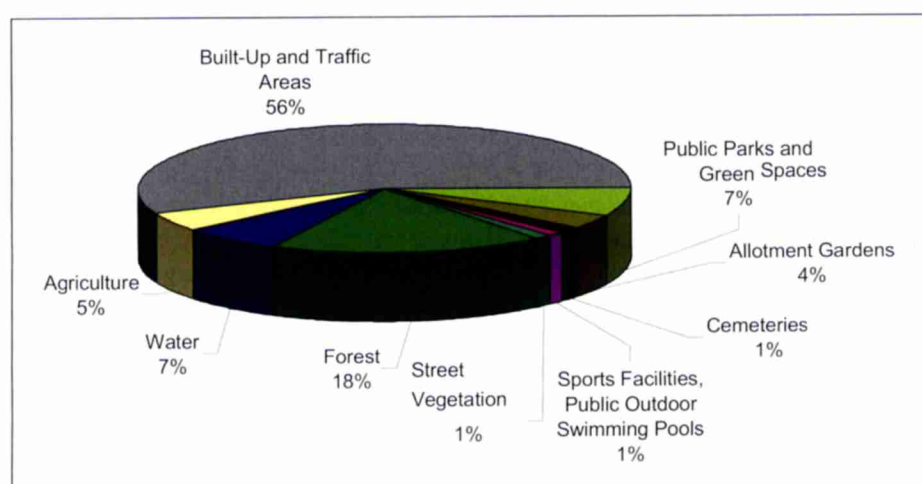


Fig. 2 Land use in the city area of Berlin / *Flächennutzung des Berliner Stadtgebietes* (Rosol based on: Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung I C; Statistisches Landesamt Berlin)

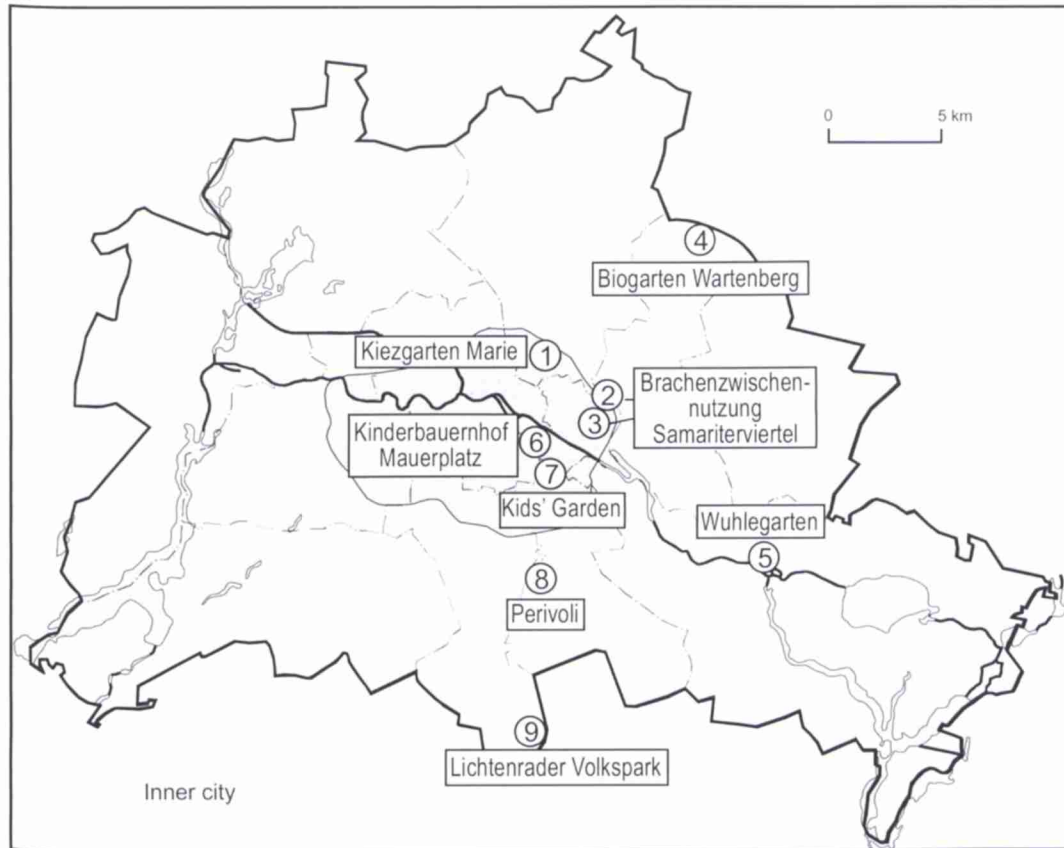


Fig. 3 Locations of studied community gardens (Design: Rosol/Winkelbrandt)
 Lage der untersuchten Gemeinschaftsgärten (Zeichnung: Rosol/Winkelbrandt)

are then described in detail (no. 2/3, 5 and 7); they have been chosen because they were developed almost at the same time, yet represent three different types of community gardens.

As part of the research I developed a basic typology of community gardens (which is shown in *Table 1*): 'Neighbourhood Gardens', 'Thematic Neighbourhood Gardens', and 'Thematic Gardens'. Three of the nine gardens studied – two in the inner city, one on the outskirts – are 'Neighbourhood Gardens', that is, the gardens are operated by people living near by, and they are only important for the imme-

diately neighbourhood. Apart from that, they are not characterised by any specific concept or goal other than to create a nice green space for the neighbourhood. This distinguishes them from the 'Thematic Gardens', which have a specific target group, for instance children, or specific objectives such as environmental issues. Some of the thematic gardens nevertheless have a strong connection to the immediate surroundings, and therefore also function as neighbourhood gardens ('Thematic Neighbourhood Gardens'). In other cases, there is almost no relationship with the neighbourhood, and the gardeners do not necessarily live close by.

Tab. 1 Basic typology and examples of community gardens in Berlin (design: Rosol)
Typologie und Beispiele von Gemeinschaftsgärten in Berlin (Entwurf: Rosol)

	Neighbourhood Gardens	Thematic Neighbourhood Gardens	Thematic Gardens
Inner City	Kiezzgarten Marie	Kinderbauernhof Mauerplatz	—
	Brachenzwischennutzung Samariterviertel	Kids' Garden	
Outer City	Lichtenrader Volkspark	Biogarten Wartenberg	Wuhlegarten
			Perivoli

The assignment of the case study examples to the basic types (Tab. 1) shows that there is no garden which is only a 'Thematic garden' in the inner city. This may be coincidental, but it may also be interpreted by the observation that the lack of green spaces in the inner city is so severe that any community gardening project must necessarily serve the neighbourhood as well.

4.1 Example I: 'Brachenzwischennutzung Samariterviertel' – neighbourhood gardens in Friedrichshain

This example actually consists of three gardens which are situated in an urban renewal area (*Sanierungsgebiet*) in a very dense inner-city neighbourhood dating back to the end of the 19th century, with tenement houses and severe lack of public and private green spaces. The initial idea for this project came from a Neighbourhood Representation formalised in the process of urban renewal (*Betroffenenvertretung*), along with the urban renewal administration of the district (*Sanierungsverwaltungsstelle*) and the urban planning business in charge (*Sanierungsbeauftragte*), *Stattbau GmbH*. Distinct from the other examples, these gardens are located on pri-

vate land. The three empty lots are relics of World War II, each lot is about 800 m² in size. *Photo 1* shows one of the three gardens in Friedrichshain.

For the area concerned, a study about empty lots and their potential interim uses was compiled in 2000 (*Hoffmann 2000*). The study also included experiences of community gardens in New York City, but the potential uses were deliberately not restricted to gardening. The preparation phase lasted for two years. More time than expected was necessary for negotiations with the owners and the municipality, and for clarification of legal and financial issues. This delay was mostly due to the lack of experience with publicly supported interim uses on private land. Finally, in 2002, three groups of neighbours started the self-determined use of the lots. The only restrictions for the gardening groups were the required public access to all gardens and some safety issues such as prohibition of open fires. The three gardens were developed with different priorities and designs. None is used as a vegetable garden or fruit orchard, only shrubs and flowers are grown. The gardeners and others use the small gardens for contemplation, to play with their children and, of course, to enjoy the gardening. The gardens are all fully accessible, only in one case a low fence was erected to keep dogs out.



Photo 1 One of the three neighbourhood gardens in Berlin-Friedrichshain (Photo: Rosol 2004)
Einer der drei Nachbarschaftsgärten in Berlin-Friedrichshain (Photo: Rosol 2004)

The process was accompanied and supported by urban planners. Municipal planning played an active role in initiating the process and also in providing information, assistance and funding. Yet decisions about what actually happened on these lots as well as how to proceed were taken by the gardening group only.

The status of the area as an urban renewal area had a supportive effect because by that more money became available and more attention was given by planners. All in all, the neighbourhood garden in Friedrichshain is an example of good cooperation between neighbours and municipal planners, both parties were willing to break new grounds of interim use of vacant lots. A potential conflict may

arise due to ending of the “only interim use” status of the gardens in the future. Because of a very short period of notice (three months and – in case of a building permit – within just four weeks), the gardens are in permanent danger of being destroyed. That is because the development of the three empty lots is still the aim of the urban renewal process – despite the well-known deficits in the availability of open space in that neighbourhood.

4.2 Example II: ‘Kids’ Garden’ – A thematic neighbourhood garden in Neukölln

‘Kids’ Garden’ is also located in an urban renewal area, in a neighbourhood similar to Friedrichs-



Photo 2 'Kids' Garden' Neukölln (Photo: Rosol 2004)

chain regarding built structures and densities. The Neukölln garden (Photo 2) is also an interim use only, but in this case on public land and with an outlook of at least 10 years. After that period, and in case of sufficient financing, a public kindergarten and a public path connecting two streets are planned for the 3000 m² lot. The idea for the garden also came from the Neighbourhood Representation (*Betroffenenvertretung*), but the project was mostly self-organized by 14 parents' initiatives who run private childcare facilities/playgroups (*Kinderläden*) in this area. Their motivation is to create outdoor facilities for their children, combined with ecological ideas. Children in this dense inner-city environment should have the opportunity to experience nature, to grow their own plants, and to develop creativity while playing with natural materials. The first idea for the 'Kids' Garden' came up in 1998.

Soon a Registered Association (*eingetragener Verein*) was formed and already in 1999 the garden was opened. It has areas used jointly by all groups and also small plots reserved for the individual children's groups. Here the children can grow flowers, fruits and vegetables. The garden is usually locked, and apart from public events it is only accessible for the children, their educators, parents and parents' friends. It is estimated that the garden is used by c. 250 children and 100 adults. Therefore the garden is significant for the whole neighbourhood.

This garden is basically self-organised and financing of operating costs is borne by the parents' association. Planners, working for the district management and the urban renewal institutions, were involved in facilitating the contract, organising soil tests etc. The association hopes to

have the chance to use the lot even after the first contract ends in 2008. This hope is not unrealistic, because the restricted financial situation of the Berlin government means that further development on the site is not very likely.

4.3 Example III: Wuhlegarten – a thematic garden in Köpenick

The last example – an intercultural garden aiming at the integration of migrants in Berlin-Köpenick – was founded without any involvement of planners. The garden (*Photo 3*) was inspired by the experiences of international gardens in Göttingen, where war refugees from Bosnia re-created what they missed most from their homelands – their gardens (*Müller 2002*). After the initial idea in 2002, the garden in Köpenick was established in 2003 by “Förderverein Lokale Agenda 21 Köpenick”, with support of migrant organisations and the district administration. The money for creating the garden was provided by a foundation. The site is public and was originally supposed to serve as a public playground. It is surrounded by allotment gardens. On the 4.000 m² lot, there are a large area for common use and single plots for the 20 user groups from nine different countries. The user groups come from all over the district of Treptow-Köpenick and were not involved in creating the garden; the process of self-organisation of the actual gardeners is only just starting. The garden is open when any of the gardeners are present or public events take place. According to their interest, the gardeners primarily plant flowers, vegetables or herbs, often typical for their countries of origin.

The aim of the garden goes beyond just providing a garden for migrants who often do not have access to other types of urban gardens such as the allotment gardens. The garden is supposed to facilitate processes of intercultural exchange and general communication and activity opportunities for migrants often living a very isolated life in small flats.

Today, more intercultural gardens exist and even more are planned in Berlin, in both the inner and the outer city.

5. Discussion of Benefits and Potentials of Community Gardens Concerning Urban Development in Shrinking Cities

Concerning the surplus supply of derelict land in stagnating and shrinking cities such as Berlin mentioned in the introduction on the one hand and the lack of open green spaces, especially in the dense inner-city districts, on the other hand, community gardens can offer various benefits. These will now be discussed briefly.



Photo 3 Wuhlegarten – Intercultural Garden Köpenick
*Wuhlegarten – Interkultureller Garten
Köpenick (Photo: Rosol 2004)*

Community gardens can fulfil important ecological, economic and social functions like any other open green spaces in cities. They offer green areas to city dwellers and alleviate the lack of urban green in neighbourhoods. In contrast to conventional parks they provide more appropriation possibilities, because in community gardens committed neighbours can use and transform open space self-determinately and collectively according to their wishes and ideas. This is addressed for instance by *Ms Gräfe*, one of the inner city community gardeners:

The success of this is that one can influence what happens there. If that was all maintained by the parks department, (...) then it would look like any other green open space (*Ms Gräfe*, translation: *Rosol*).

At the same time, community gardens present an alternative to private gardens also in dense inner-city districts and therefore offer a solution for the ecological and planning dilemma between the individuals' wish for a garden and the necessary density within cities. In a community garden, the garden as a traditionally very private form of green space can become an experimental ground for urban societies. Moreover, community gardens fulfil important social functions, because they can provide a space to meet and get in contact with other neighbours:

It always sounds very kitschy when you tell someone what is happening on this empty lot. Like in a bad, corny film. But it's exactly like it: It is a meeting point, this place, because we are there and something is happening there (...) And through this a community meeting point is generated, a place where people communicate and you get the feeling that you know each other (*Ms Jansen* about one of the Neighbourhood Gardens in Friedrichshain, translation: *Rosol*).

Similar experiences to those in Canadian or US-American community gardens are reported from the Berlin gardens:

Frequent meetings in connection with daily activities increase chances of developing contacts with neighbours (...). With frequent meetings, friendship and the contact network are maintained in a far simpler and less demanding way than if friendship must be kept up by telephone and invitation (*Gehl* 1987, quoted in *MacGilvra* 1997: 108f.).

The importance of different functions differs according to the needs in the specific neighbourhood. Generally, public accessibility will be more important in dense inner-city districts with a more pronounced lack of public green space, whereas in the outer and periurban areas full public access at all times may not be needed due to better provision with private green spaces and other forms of urban green like forests.

All three case studies are interim uses, two on public, one on private property. Community gardens offer special potentials for urban development as interim uses, because they do not need a lot of investment and do not impede a subsequent edificial use. Therefore especially in shrinking and stagnating cities, where large stretches of derelict land are confronted with a weak interest in using the land for building purposes, community gardens can be a very reasonable use. Especially the (interim) use of private lots in the inner-city districts is suggested here, because that way they can be opened to the whole of the city and can contribute to a city with a higher quality of life. From the perspective of the gardeners, however, interim use may not be satisfying. Gardens need time to grow and cannot just be transferred to another lot in case of building intentions like other interim uses such as a video cinema. Therefore it should be considered whether an interim use as a garden could become a permanent use – provided the gardeners and residents wish it to be.

In sum, community gardens offer an important contribution to a social and ecological urban development.

6. Conclusions and Outlook

The three examples presented in this paper show a wide range of types of community gardens. Since they all represent innovative, small-scale, low-cost, after and interim uses for vacant land, they will probably gain importance for “Shrinking Cities”. In these cities – Leipzig is a prominent example in Germany, and there are numerous others worldwide – the number of brownfields and empty lots will increase (see www.shrinkingcities.com). So far, gardens created in areas of shrinkage in Germany have rather been tenant or allotment gardens. In Berlin-Hellersdorf, for instance, tenant gardens were created on a former school yard (cf. *Eltzel* 2004 among others). But in order to address social questions, not only privatised gardens but also collective forms of gardening should be promoted – beside other creative uses for vacant lots.

Given the ecological, economic and especially social benefits of community gardens and the economic situation of Berlin not only short-term interim use, but also a longer perspective should be considered. This way community gardens can be a promising model of urban public green space for the future.

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Summary: Community Gardens – A Potential for Stagnating and Shrinking Cities? Examples from Berlin

In Berlin, as in other German cities, indications of stagnation and shrinking can be found. This leads to abundant empty lots and brownfields which ask for innovative after- and interim uses. In this article, a special form of community involvement in the urban green space sector is presented: community gardens. General information on community gardens is provided, a basic typology of community gardens is outlined, and three case studies are presented, focusing on the question which potential is offered by this new type of urban open space to cities with an ample supply of derelict land on the one hand, and a lack of interest to use this for building purposes on the other hand. In conclusion, the potential lies in the improvement of the provision with public green spaces in districts with insufficient supply, in the special appropriation possibilities which community gardens offer and particularly in the interim and follow-up character of the use of abandoned sites widely debated at present.

Zusammenfassung: Gemeinschaftsgärten – Ein Potenzial für stagnierende und schrumpfende Städte? Beispiele aus Berlin

In Berlin wie in anderen deutschen Städten zeigen sich Anzeichen von Stagnation und Schrumpfung. Dies führt zu einer großen Anzahl aufgegebener Industrie- und Infrastrukturstandorte sowie anderer Brachflächen, für welche innovative Nach- und Zwischennutzungen gefragt sind. In diesem Artikel wird eine neue Form der Freiraumschaffung und -gestaltung im öffentlichen Raum in Gestalt der *Community Gardens* bzw. Gemeinschaftsgärten präsentiert. Das Konzept und eine Basistypologie der Gemeinschaftsgärten werden erläutert und drei Fallbeispiele werden vorgestellt. Der Beitrag geht dabei insbesondere der Frage nach, welche Potenziale der neue Freiraumtyp Gemeinschaftsgärten in Städten besitzt, in denen ein Überangebot an brachliegenden Flächen einem Mangel an (baulichen) Nutzungsinteressen gegenübersteht. Die Potenziale liegen in der Verbesserung des Grünflächenangebots in Quartieren mit mangelhafter Grünflächenausstattung, in besonderen Aneignungsmöglichkeiten und insbesondere in der derzeit viel debattierten Form von Zwischen- und Nachnutzung aufgegebener Standorte.

Résumé: Les jardins communautaires constituent-ils un potentiel pour les villes en stagnation et en régression ? Présentation d'exemples berlinois

A l'instar d'autres villes allemandes Berlin présente des indices de stagnation et de régression, ce qui entraîne l'abandon d'un grand nombre de sites industriels et d'infrastructures et génère par ailleurs des friches correspondant à des typologies diverses. Ces espaces font l'objet d'une demande innovatrice ayant pour objectif des utilisations ultérieures ou intérimaires. Cette contribution présente une nouvelle forme de création et de réalisation d'espaces verdoyants publics sous forme de jardins communautaires. L'explication du projet ainsi que de la typologie de base des « *community gardens* » est suivie de trois études de cas. Une attention particulière porte sur les potentiels de ce nouveau type

d'utilisation de l'espace dans les villes où l'excédent de friches se bute au manque d'engouement pour leur utilisation (particulièrement en tant que terrain à bâtir). Ces potentiels concernent l'augmentation des espaces verts publics dans les quartiers qui en sont jusqu'alors sous-équipés, les modes spécifiques d'appropriation et plus particulièrement les formes d'utilisation ultérieure ou intérimaire faisant actuellement l'objet d'un ample débat.

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