

SNAPSHOT - LEIPZIG: GREEN FOR VIBRANT URBAN COMMUNITIES



KEY POINTS

- Communal green spaces are beneficial for both urban regeneration and social integration
- Several key factors are essential for community participation
- Communal use rights, low hierarchies, and governance supporting collaboration and learning are key
- Sustainability of greenspace projects depends on long-term use rights and reliable funding
- Over-reliance on voluntary engagement places communal NBS projects at risk

ABOUT THE PROJECT

NATure-based URban innovATION is a 4-year project involving 14 institutions across Europe in the fields of urban development, geography, innovation studies and economics. We are creating a step-change in how we understand and use nature-based solutions for sustainable urbanisation.





Sustainability challenges and opportunities

The sustainability challenges faced by the City of Leipzig are related to its changing socio-economic and political fortunes over the last few decades. These include: environmental legacies of industrialisation, the consequences of economic recovery and population growth after decline, rising inequalities, increased pressure on land, traffic-related air pollution, predicted extreme heat, the loss of natural habitats, and decreased biodiversity.

Leipzig has recently re-established itself as a major economic and cultural centre in the eastern part of Germany. It is currently the largest city of the German Federal Free State of Saxony and Germany's tenth largest city. A key aspect of change in Leipzig has been its ***"landscape transformation [...] manifested in the development from an energy landscape to a leisure and natural landscape."***¹ Amongst its semi-natural assets are extensive urban woodlands, alluvial forests, municipal parks, and garden colonies in easy reach of the city centre, as well as a varied system of rivers, brooks, and recently re-opened canals. However, some of the environmental gains made as a result of tackling industrial pollution, renaturing post-industrial landscapes, and regenerating urban green spaces are placed at risk today by increasing pressures on land.

Solution story and key actors

Citizen-led green space initiatives have formed a key part of municipal and community-based schemes to revitalise Leipzig's East Quarter, which is one of the city's structurally most disadvantaged, yet culturally most vibrant areas.

Facilitated by municipal measures to manage vacant plots, by public investments, and by collaborations between the city, NGOs, citizen groups, local businesses, and land owners, a range of nature-based solutions have recently been implemented to help revitalise the area. These have included citizen-led initiatives to use vacant plots as communal gardens, such as *Queerbeet* and *Bunte Gärten*, and a larger-scale project to build a green mobility corridor: *Parkbogen Ost*. The latter aims to stimulate growth as well as social integration and green mobility in the area, while the community garden projects focus on offering opportunities for urban gardening, providing space for social interaction, and support informal environmental learning.

"We don't just constantly work until we break our backs, but also sit and chat over a cup of coffee. That's when people talk about their wishes and problems, where we can help. For instance, when [refugee members] have problems with the bureaucracy or don't know something, it gives us an opportunity to help."²



Governance strategies

NBS are incorporated into the city's wider planning processes and managed across different municipal departments, including the Office of Green Space and Water, the Office of Environmental Protection, the City Planning Department, and the Office for Urban Renewal and Housing Construction Subsidies.

A dedicated section for citizen participation organizes overarching projects that form part of the city's long-term planning cycles, while municipal officers and urban quarter managers organise consultation events and visioning workshops as part of every planning process, while also advising citizens and other stakeholders on an *ad hoc* basis.

Key to successful collaboration between city administration-led and citizen-led NBS initiatives are factors such as personal engagement and proactiveness, high levels of trust and mutual respect, low hierarchies, regular networking opportunities, and the accessibility of council staff and locally-based "urban quarter managers." One of our interviewees thus commended her former *"district mayor who was [...] very pragmatic and wanted to change something, too."*³ Where citizen activists face obstacles, such as the need for specialist knowledge on ecological issues, legal or planning requirements, or funding routes, opportunities to access the expertise of municipal staff can be a great facilitation tool.



Business models

Larger-scale NBS in Leipzig are mainly funded by federal, state, and EU sources, while smaller citizen initiatives rely mostly on small city funds, donations (e.g. crowd funding and foundations), independent income generation, and in kind contributions (mainly voluntary work).

Amongst the three citizen-led initiatives examined here, *Parkbogen Ost* has benefitted the most from public funding, such as the federal programme "National Projects for Urban Construction", the joint national initiative "Improving Regional Economic Structures," and EFRE funding for urban reconstruction in the East Quarter. *Parkbogen Ost* also benefitted from Leipzig's innovative plot management system and from developers' legal obligations to fund compensation measures for ecologically harmful projects. Of the smaller initiatives, *Queerbeet* has *"wherever possible [...] tried to receive funding from public schemes, and otherwise via donations and voluntary work,"*⁴ while also offering cultural events to the wider public to generate income. *Bunte Gärten* has received some funding from the city for recultivating fallow garden plots. Otherwise, they have mainly drawn on donations (e.g. via crowd funding) and income from flea markets. A key risk for initiatives such as these is the temporariness of permitted use rights and the strong reliance on citizens' voluntary engagement.



Citizen engagement

Citizen engagement in Leipzig has many of its origins in the revolutionary movement of 1989-90, when Round Table talks were used to unite different interest groups and enable more direct input into political decision making.

Environmental sustainability was amongst the key issues that citizen groups sought to address. ***“People who had been engaged in the ecological movements since 1988 [...], or after the peaceful revolution [...] wanted to change something through discussions. [They] wanted [...] that the environment gets more attention and that [...] it gets better.”***⁵ However, it has only been fairly recently that public engagement has become more formalized in the development of strategic plans and projects, involving visioning workshops and organised discussions with local stakeholders and community representatives as key instruments. There has been a shift towards appreciating the significance of citizen involvement for making sure that projects meet diverse needs. However, formal consultation processes frequently include only representatives from local associations and NGOs. There is thus a risk that citizens who are not active in an association fail to gain access to these processes and that perspectives of marginalized groups are excluded.



Innovation pathways

One of the most noteworthy innovations in Leipzig has been the setting up of a plot management system by the city, including a “plot register.”

Both *Parkbogen Ost* and *Queerbeet* have benefited from this system, which was set up to direct investors and communal users towards vacant plots for intended projects and to help the city find suitable sites for environmental “compensation” measures.

In Leipzig, we have further seen that it is possible to reconcile divergent interests where governance structures and processes are developed that encourage collaboration, knowledge sharing, and a lowering of hierarchies. This reconciliation draws on (and benefits from) the expertise of both specialists and citizens who bring ideas, knowledge, and an interest in achieving positive change through active participation. This can, in the best of cases, encourage ***“a kind of feeling at home, a sense of belonging to the city. It is no longer anonymous. And that is something special.”***⁶ These possibilities are easily placed at risk by clashes in interests, lacking trust, hierarchical planning approaches, and the difficulty of reconciling different needs and responses to the wider range of sustainability challenges.

^{1, 3, 5, 6} Municipal officer, City of Leipzig, 2017; ^{2, 4} Garden representative, 2017; Photo credit: