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MICROSPACES. ROD SECRET GARDENS

Review paper

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Abstract

The article is a form of a short walk through the ROD allotment gardens. Drawing on examples of such allotments not only in Poland, but also in various parts of Europe, it describes the phenomenon of the functioning of the allotment garden, treating it as a specific kind of intimate space, very close to human, a place for satisfying their various needs. The article considers as one of these needs the human desire to create, to build, to annex space according to their own rules and principles. The allotment garden, as a place outside the official zone of the city, away from normal everyday life, offers its user the possibility to create a new spatial reality of their own, unhindered by any barriers. The gate to the ROD allotment gardens becomes a place of 'transition' to another reality, allowing you to forget your everyday problems and move into another, tame dimension.

Keywords

space, privacy, sharing, use, humanization, human needs, escape, proxemics, feeling, distance, seclusion, city, community, senses, microspaces, social bubbles, safety, social contact, pandemic, COVID-19

She put her hands under the leaves and began to pull and push them aside. Thick as the ivy hung, it nearly all was a loose and swinging curtain, though some had crept over wood and iron. Mary's heart began to thump and her hands to shake a little in her delight and excitement. The robin kept singing and twittering away and tilting his head on one side, as if he were as excited as she was. What was this under her hands which was square and made of iron and which her fingers found a hole in?¹ [...]. The sun was shining inside the four walls and the high arch of blue sky over this particular piece of Misselthwaite seemed even more brilliant and soft than it was over the moor. The robin flew down from his tree-top and hopped about or flew after her from one bush to another. He chirped a good deal and had a very busy air, as if he were showing her things. Everything was strange and silent and she seemed to be hundreds of miles away from anyone, but somehow she did not feel lonely at all.²

Gate to the ROD allotment gardens

Allotment gardens hold a special place in my personal collection of 'special' phenomena and curiosities related to the space in use. When I cross the gate of the ROD (pol. Rodzinny Ogród Działkowy = family allotment garden), I am almost always accompanied by a feeling of wonder and a sense that I have found myself in a completely different world. The space I enter is unreal, functioning in parallel with the world left outside the high gate. It is a world in miniature, divided by narrow streets that have their own names, with number plates fixed to the walls of the micro-houses. This world is governed by its own laws, an internal social code and a particular aesthetic that differs from the rest of the world. It was precisely this aesthetic that captured me the most, initially inspiring horror, then acceptance, and finally interest and desire to explore its origins.

When I found myself on my feet, I looked about me, and must confess I never beheld a more entertaining prospect. The country around appeared like a continued garden, and the enclosed fields, which were generally forty feet square, resembled so many beds of flowers. These fields were intermingled with woods of half a stang, and the tallest trees, as I could judge, appeared to be seven feet high. I viewed the town on my left hand, which looked like the painted scene of a city in a theatre.³

Passing through the gardens' outer gate, one can indeed feel like Gulliver in the land of the Lilliputians. Narrow alleys, low hedges and fences, small gates and, finally, allotment houses pretending to be small villas, often two-storey, with balcony, terrace, arcade. Everything made in a micro scale, scaled down to an appropriate size that fits within the guidelines included in the garden regulations. The cottages are immersed in lush greenery abundantly watered by allotment holders dedicated to their gardens. The gardens, mostly separated by a simple border, hide personal worlds created by their users. These are spaces built from their materialised desires and dreams, created as a place where one can be at least for a moment in the real centre of one's own imagination. And the imagination, when it comes to allotment gardens, knows no limits. Moorish palaces stand out among the multicoloured flowers, forest hideaways and Tyrolean chalets hide nearby, and passers-by can admire the open-air exhibitions of rubber sculpture, often represented by swans frozen in an elegant pose, conjured up

1 F.H. Burnett. *Secret Garden*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/113/113-h/113-h.htm> [accessed: 04/07/2022].

2 Ibidem.

3 J. Swift, *Gulliver's Travels into Several Remote Nations of the Worlds*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/829/829-h/829-h.htm> [accessed: 04/07/2022].

from tyres painted in glossy white enamel. A watchful visitor can sometimes catch a small pond with live red fish, a Mexican ranch-style site, wooden wells, cottages hidden in the branches of fruit trees. Between them, mysterious figures in colourful dungarees stroll and pour copious amounts of water over the luscious greenery and, hiding under the wide brims of their hats, celebrate happy moments snatched from everyday life.

Self-made architecture is not only an expression of the need to satisfy needs even with limited economic opportunities, but also an expression of the pursuit of self-expression of individual expectations and visions of happiness, well-being, personal and cultural identity.⁴

Private paradise on state-owned land

It is worth recalling that the ‘allotment holders’ so often treated with superiority and irony are not a phenomenon limited to the Polish society. The National Allotment Association belongs to the International Office of Allotment and Family Gardens, which brings together individual national associations from 15 countries: Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Norway, Germany, Slovakia, Switzerland, Sweden, UK and Poland. The office of the International du Coin de Terre et des Jardins Familiaux, based in Luxembourg, has represented 3 million European allotment gardeners since 1926, ensuring that the socio-cultural and economic functions of urban gardens are preserved. The office is in constant communication with the Council of Europe and works for the development of the allotment movement in the European Union. In Paris alone, there are around 6,000 allotment gardens, almost one million ‘allotments’ have been recorded in Germany. In Poland we have more than 5,000 allotment gardens, which cover almost 44,000 hectares of land and have become a refuge for 966,000 active allotment holders. The most appreciated role of allotment gardens is their contribution to the pro-environmental development programmes of particular countries. Gardens create green islands in urban agglomerations, reduce temperatures and provide shelter for wildlife and insects. Moreover, they have an impact on the integration of the local community, enable older people to maintain a good quality of life and have a positive effect on internal family relations.

The distribution of gardens in the space of the modern city also has a clear impact on its sanitary condition. Gardens support the city’s ecological system as part of the urban green system, reducing atmospheric and noise pollution. They regulate humidity and air temperature, thus influencing the creation of a favourable microclimate of urbanised areas.⁵

Allotment gardens also respond to proposals launched by Jan Gehl, which have been eagerly promoted in recent years, and which claim that the city should be a place for people, their proper development, the space closest to people, a place for satisfying various needs. This Danish urban planner points

4 A. Bańka, *Architektura psychologicznej przestrzeni życia. Behawioralne podstawy projektowania*, Poznań 2016, p. 12.

5 P. Lewandowski, „Proces urbanizacji miast w Polsce a rodzinne ogrody działkowe”, *Przegląd Budowlany*, 9 (2019), p. 85.

to a clear division of the activities people undertake outside their homesteads into three basic categories. According to Gehl, each of them requires a completely different environment and a different development of urban space. Optional and social activities are most dependent on the surrounding space.⁶ In order to get out of home and undertake any action, people need to have a clear excuse, to feel comfortable in their surroundings. Allotment gardens thus fit in with the idea of a city for people.

Allotment gardens blended into the residential, commercial and industrial developments form together with them one common urban organism. They fill a spatial void and have a positive effect on the urban physiognomy. The users' care for their parcels transformed former wastelands, rubbish dumps and undeveloped areas into colourful places teeming with life. Users introduce interesting architectural solutions, often expressed in original shapes and forms of gazebos.⁷



Fig. 1. There are probably around 25 million dwarves in German gardens. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/berlin/kleingarten-als-bauland-weniger-gaerten-fuer-einzelne-mehr-flaeche-fuer-alle/26020012.html> [accessed: 28/02/2022].

Circular gardens in Naerum

One of the most original allotment gardens in Europe is the garden located in Copenhagen's Naerum district. It was designed in 1948 by the Danish landscape architect Søren Carl Theodor Marius Sørensen, considered one of the best specialists in this field in the 20th century. It is a set of oval gardens measuring approximately 15 × 25 m, surrounded by evenly trimmed hedges, forming a coherent whole. You can stroll between the gardens, using the designated paths or wandering between them on the short-mown lawn. The users of this site at the time of its creation were given basic guidelines by the designer, but the interiors of their own gardens could be developed in the individual way. These original principles still apply today.

⁶ See J. Gehl, *Życie między budynkami. Użytkowanie przestrzeni publicznych*, transl. M.A. Urbańska, Kraków 2009.

⁷ R. Szkup, *Użytkowanie rodzinnych ogrodów działkowych (ROD) przez społeczność wielkomięjską. Przykład Łodzi*, Łódź 2013, p. 231



Fig. 2. Oval gardens – an attraction of Copenhagen, Flickr/Ben ter Mull, <https://brightvibes.com/2357/en/the-story-behind-the-unique-oval-community-gardens-of-copenhagen> [accessed: 28/02/2022].



Fig. 3. Circular Magic, Facebook, <https://www.f7dobry.com/unikalne-owalne-ogrody-wspolnotowe-w-kopenhadze/> [accessed: 28/02/2022].

English ‘French’ gardens

The oldest allotment gardens in the UK date back to the late 18th century. At that time, they were established for the poor, enabling them to obtain cheap food. English allotments for most of their functioning had a legally defined size and had to be used primarily for the production of fruit, vegetables or flowers by the allotment owner and their family. Over the years, allotments have evolved into the places of relaxation. Although English allotments are primarily vegetable gardens, their holders pay increasingly more attention to their functional development, as well as to the aesthetic features. French *potager* is the term used to describe the design of a sophisticated vegetable, herb and flower garden. It comes from the Renaissance and Baroque periods (*un jardin potager*). It aims to combine the beauty of ornamental plants with the utility of edible plants in one small space, and to upgrade gardening into a kind of art. Urban vegetable garden fits in with the idea of creating self-sustaining,

ecological cities that counter food security threats, combat climate change and protect pollinating insects.



From left: Fig. 4. Allotment in England – arranged in the ‘potager garden’ style, <https://ealingdean.co.uk/events/2016/potager> [accessed: 28/02/2022].

Fig. 5. Allotment gardens in the UK near Middlesbrough, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allotment_\(gardening\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Allotment_(gardening)) [accessed: 28/02/2022].

Marie Antoinette in an allotment garden



Fig. 6. Marie Antoinette’s vegetable garden, Hameau de la Reine in the Petit Trianon grounds, Versailles, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hameau_de_la_Reine#/media/File:Ferme1.jpg [accessed: 28/02/2022].

Perhaps one of the first users of an allotment garden was actually Marie Antoinette. Strolling around, dressed as a shepherdess, the young queen, grazing geese, feeding little lambs, picking ripe raspberries and lettuce leaves, embodied a dreamlike carefree character. The most important thing for her was to be able to get away from the daily problems left behind in the huge palace. Her small country house looked like a dwarf’s cottage against the backdrop of the huge Versailles estate. A similar impression is created by contemporary gazebos installed in small gardens located in city centres. The contrast between the real life going on outside the ROD allotment gardens’ fence and the interior of these small private worlds is astonishing. Emerging from behind a hedge, the lumps of concrete

skyscrapers seem soulless compared to the colourful buildings speckled with multicoloured vegetation. Leaving the space of their own fairy tale, the allotment holders return to the outside, real world through the ROD gate which is a kind of passage between the two realities. They leave their uniforms, in which they proudly stroll through these enchanted gardens, in the allotment premises. The gazebos hide the dungarees, cowboy hats and wellingtons along with dreams of moving to another carefree dimension.



From left: Fig. 7. Allotment in the city centre, photo: Kuba Kamiński, <https://www.rp.pl/nieruchomosci/art4585691-ogrodki-dzialkowe-wracaja-do-dawnych-wlascieli> [accessed: 28/02/2022].

Fig. 8. Garden of the Familiengärten am Hummelweg association in Niederuzwil <https://www.tagblatt.ch/ostschweiz/wil/niederuzwil-blick-ueber-den-gartenzaun-ld.458092> [accessed: 28/02/2022].

ROD allotment gardens – an extraterritorial space

The last two years of the ongoing pandemic were specific for the allotment gardens. Never before were these inconspicuous gardens the object of such an interest. This was driven by the fact that, according to the introduced legislation measures, sanitation procedures obligatory in the cities did not have to be followed in the ROD area. Once you passed through the gate, you could leave the world of pandemics behind, you could move around the entire garden area without wearing a mask, and there was no need to observe social distance. No wonder, then, that allotments became the dream of entire urban families isolated in their flats. They became the only way to spend time outdoors together, to move around in the fresh air, to enjoy nature. The famous popular joke about holidays spent on RODOS (Polish acronym for ‘family allotment gardens surrounded by a fence’) thus came true, and the opportunity to spread out a deckchair on the grass unfortunately became an unattainable dream for many. Prices of allotments sky-rocketed, demand outstripped supply by many times, and happy garden holders began to appreciate the opportunity to enjoy their own piece of land, allowing them to survive safely the worst moments of isolation.



Fig. 9. Gossau elders using allotment gardens during the pandemic, <https://www.tagblatt.ch/ostschweiz/stgallen/gossauer-senioren-lassen-sich-ihr-paradies-nicht-nehmen-schrebergaerten-mooswiesen-werden-zu-m-zufluchtsort-in-der-coronakrise-ld.1207211> [accessed: 28/02/2022].

Author's open-air exhibition

Allotment garden is a place where people shape on their own a different kind of interaction and their presence in the space than elsewhere. I was interested in the 'allotment' as a form of artistic expression by the user, a kind of self-presentation space, often taking on the function of an 'author's exhibition space'. Allotment garden very often becomes the realisation of particular personal needs, allowing the holder to express their desires and ideas about a welcoming space. It thus becomes a space of complete detachment from reality, often transporting its user into a world of fairy tales and fantasy. We often look with regret at plaster dwarves, artificial flowers and fancy micro-buildings.

The inadequate aesthetics of ROD allotments is, along with their limited accessibility, one of the main reasons for their negative image. Over the years, people have enjoyed more and more freedom in arranging their individual plots of land, which is not conducive to improving spatial order in the allotment gardens.⁸

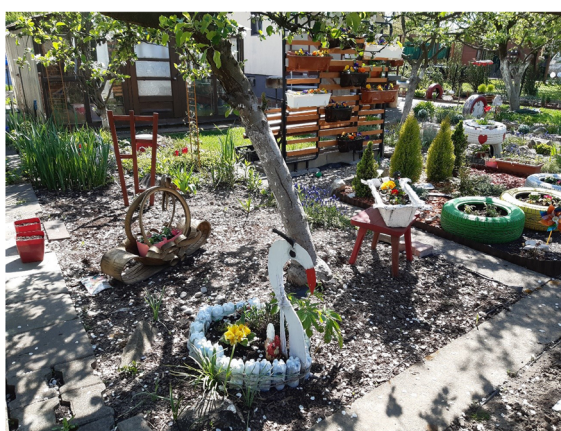
Looking at it from the other side, however, we can discover unlimited fantasy emerging in the allotments in a bizarre way. Allotment holders, who surround themselves with typical objects, live in typical flats and work in unified offices, feel happy and relaxed in these bizarre spaces, which are organised against the generally recognised rules of aesthetics. Perhaps we can consider that as an escape into the realm of childhood fantasy, a dream, an attempt to move to another dimension like Gulliver, to create one's own enchanted garden to help overcome everyday difficulties. A low hedge or mesh fence separates completely different worlds, which, in the area of an allotment garden, can coexist in harmony. Different aesthetics, impossible to reconcile in everyday life spent in shared use

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Summary of a research on the condition of allotment gardens published in: D. Dymek, L. Bednorz, „Zagospodarowanie rodzinnych ogrodów działkowych (ROD) na przykładzie ROD im. Józefa Chociszewskiego w Poznaniu”, *Studia Miejskie*, 25 (2017), p. 145

spaces, do not offend anyone in allotment gardens and are not forbidden there. The only limitations are the basic dimensions of length, width and height. The ‘artistic’ part depends entirely on the author of the concept. Each allotment is a different planet with its own inhabitants who create a new reality on their own terms.

Construction law is increasingly taking away the right of ordinary people to decide about their own home, its value. Professionalism limits the freedom of the individual who nevertheless pursues their dreams. How to assess the value of an architectural space when it is subjectively different in the psychological sphere of the owner’s life and in the ‘objectified’ knowledge of the professional?⁹



From left: Fig. 10. L. Zieleniewski Workers’ Allotment Garden No. 2 – Łęg, photo: author of the article.
Fig. 11. Fancy arrangement of an allotment.



From left: Fig. 12. Kraków – Łęg, photo: author of the article.
Fig. 13. A palace from a thousand and one fairy tales, photo: author of the article



From left: Fig. 14. The magic of blue, photo: author of the article.
Fig. 15. No trespassing, photo: author of the article.



From left: Fig. 16. Exotic corner, photo: author of the article.
Fig. 17. Pond with red fish, photo: author of the article.



From left: Fig. 18. A splash of colour, photo: author of the article.
Fig. 19. Allotment in a German style – garden dwarves and barbecued sausages, <https://www.welt.de/icon/article143753689/Die-liebenswerten-Zwaenge-in-deutschen-Kleingarten.html> [accessed: 28/02/2022].

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