

Research on Community Gardens in Vienna´s Communal Housing Nachbarschaftsgarten Roda Roda Gasse - Summary

This research project commissioned by the Council of Vienna, department for Housing (MA50, Wiener Wohnbauforschung), will discuss the possibilities and conditions for community gardens in Vienna's Council Blocks based on the experiences in the neighbourhood garden Roda-Roda Gasse. This pilot project in the Oscar-Helmer-Hof in the 21th district in Vienna is the first community garden in a Council Block of the City of Vienna. On a previously unused lawn a community area and flower and vegetable beds were created, which are managed by 25 tenants and their families. The project was financed by "Wiener Wohnen" and the Department for Integration and Diversity (MA17). The construction of the garden and the support of the gardeners were provided by Verein Wirbel.

Neighbourhood gardens are places that offer a group of interested tenants of a Communal Block the opportunity to enjoy working together in a garden. Via the activity of gardening social processes start emerging that can have many various positive effects on the participating people, the gardening community and the whole Block of Communal Flats. The garden with its events and possibilities to get active offers the opportunity of physical and social occupation of space. In recent years Austria has seen the development of various projects in quite a few counties all focusing on very different aspects: permaculture, intercultural dialog, environmental education, assistance for refugees and women's gardens.

Vienna is also a place where individuals, groups and care facilities are looking for space and the right of use. To help the idea of the community garden spread wider in Vienna there is a need for a top-down strategy in addition to the self-initiative of the gardeners.

Besides the political good will towards Community gardens in principal it is necessary to support the wider development of Community Gardens with advice, guidance, specialist knowledge and financial help.

The results of the research project show that neighbourhood gardens have many positive effects on the gardeners and are an important contribution to the neighbourhood.

The Community Garden can have a preventive effect on conflicts within the Council Block, when the learning process of sharing and working together in the garden is put into action by the gardeners in normal day to day life.

As part of the research project a guideline for neighbourhood gardens was created. These guidelines are based on the experiences gathered during the project on the neighbourhood garden in Roda-Roda-Gasse in Vienna's Strebendorf and a number of intercultural gardens in Vienna and Germany. The guidelines give general conditions that are vital for the success of neighbourhood gardens and offers additional information for expansions of a neighbourhood garden project.

The most important contents of the **guidelines** are summarised in the below paragraph.

The **spatial conditions** are dealing with the position of the garden within the block of council flats and its inner organization in beds and communal areas.

The position of the garden within the building complex that will aid a successful neighbourhood garden is: sufficient distance to the buildings, good visibility, proximity to water and electricity supplies and good gardening conditions. To cater for the different needs of the interested tenants

there should be an assortment of bigger and smaller beds. In addition to the beds the neighbourhood garden needs to have a communal area that should at least occupy one third of the garden or in smaller gardens have a certain minimum size to allow communal activities such as parties and assemblies.

It is advised that the communal area should provide paths to the beds, open spaces, seating areas, fruit trees, a garden shed, water and electricity supplies and if possible a composting area. Fencing at the boundaries of the garden is recommended due to liability issues. In specific spatial situations, for example very small neighbourhood gardens in sheltered positions a garden without fencing at the boundaries will be better.

It is advised to seek landscaping advice for the installation of a garden within a complex of council blocks to ensure that the spatial conditions are determined from the beginning.

The **social conditions** relate to several levels. The bigger the group, the more diversity will be found within the community, but communication within will become more complex. A maximum of 25 participants (excluding family members) is recommended as a group size. With regards to the composition of the group it is important that the gardening community represents all different groups of tenants and is composed of a good mixture of different people. This is very important when it comes to coping with conflict situations within the gardening community but also with conflicts that exist within the council estate.

A neighbourhood garden thrives on the interest and the commitment of the gardeners. Initiatives of interested tenants should be supported while encouraging other tenants to join in. A garden can also be initiated by an external initiative.

It is important to understand that neighbourhood gardens are not a solution to existing conflicts within the council estate and therefore should not be created where there are major problems.

External support is for many projects important. At the beginning of the project the support will focus more on horticultural advice. The support needs to provide an educational strategy for the negotiation of common goals and practices that lead to the self-organisation of the gardening community, jointly agreed rules and more constructive ways of dealing with problems. Foreign language skills within the team should be utilized as it is important to understand that cultural differences can become more apparent in the garden.

Language skills within the team can help to avert problems.

For the success of a project it is important that the tenant association, Mieterbeirat (if existing) and the KDZ (Kundendienstzentrum) of Wiener Wohnen are won as supporters. Important core issues of the neighbourhood garden are social processes. Life in a council estate follows very clear rules that are created from the outside. The neighbourhood garden offers the tenants to participate in shaping a co-existence with negotiation processes.

Problems that cannot be dealt with in the normal life within the council estate can be worked out in the neighbourhood garden in a secure environment.

The professional guidance to find new ways of communication and problem solving makes the creation of a group easier and allows a gradual development to self-organisation.

The **legal frame work** for a neighbourhood garden in a council estate in Vienna under the present conditions was created during the pilot project.

The contractually secured use of a certain space within the grounds of the council estate for the gardening community is of central importance. It is furthermore important to create a set of conditions for the creation of neighbourhood gardens in council estate without tenant association. Depending on the situation and the composition of the gardening community different models of support are possible. As organizational structure the formation of a association or club has proven very successful. It offers a democratic decision process and makes it possible for the support team to hand over responsibility for the self-organization of the gardening community. A liability insurance of the garden project operators for damages to third parties is required.

The **financial conditions** necessary for the creation and maintenance of a neighbourhood garden in a council estate are very dependent on the specific situation.

How high or low the cost is depends on the spatial situation, the involvement of the participants (manual and social skills, contacts and membership fees), the possibility of finding sponsors or the ability to use synergies, and the level of external support needed. No cost should be incurred by the council estate as a whole. All costs for creation, maintenance, and support have to be carried by the garden project. It is advisable to involve the gardeners financially via a contribution that is low enough so that no one on the council estate is unable to afford to participate.

Neighbourhood gardens are governed by certain **ground rules**. Some rules were taken over from other neighbourhood gardens and introduced to the pilot project Roda-Roda-Gasse by the support team, others developed during the first 2 years of the project based on day to day experiences and social processes in this garden. The following ground rules and principles are recommended for garden projects in council estates.

- Considerate treatment of soil and plants. Organic gardening.
- Considerate and caring treatment of each other is a central requirement for a good community.
- Everybody contributes to the garden according to their abilities and opportunities.
- Communal areas and communal activities are very important for a community.
- To work towards acceptance and understanding of each other's cultural differences and ways of life.
- Promotion of egalitarian structures through participation in democratic processes.
- Independence of the individual with regards to the arrangement and use of their beds.
- Conflicts are welcome opportunities for development.

The ground rules and principles should be made clear to everybody. Only like this is it possible for all the participants to claim their own space and at the same time commit to a strong community. Especially key figures (such as support team, executive committee and advisory council) should follow these principles and make sure they are the basis the community is built on. Structures and functions should be very simple and transparent so that bureaucracy can be kept to a minimum and participation is as easy as possible.