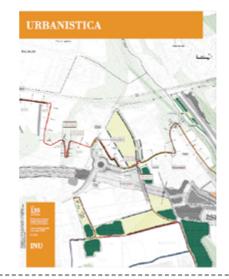# Urbanistica n. 139
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Urban green spaces and sustainability: the GreenKeys approach

Carlos Smaniotto Costa, Monica Bocci,

*Ernesto Marcheggiani*i

Throughout the world cities are experiencing rapid change as a result of strong processes of urbanisation that harmfully affect the whole urban system and the surrounding natural and-or historical cultural landscape that has been converted to development at a still accelerating rate. This rapid change has significant implications for planners and politicians who are in charge of guaranteeing quality life standards and improving environment in urban areas.

In this context urban green spaces play a crucial role in providing ecological diversity and delivering important structural and functional benefits that make cities more liveable places (Urge-Team 2004). Deficits in quantity and quality of urban green spaces require appropriate strategies.

Planning urban green spaces: the challenge
The procedural and normative bases and planning tools that rule the functioning and the development of most of our cities are currently lacking in conceptual assumptions and paradigmatic approaches. Thus not allowing them to be fully functional and unable to keep up coherence among the general urban policies' whole and appropriate strategies dedicated to urban green spaces development and improvement.

This lack of vision points out a dangerous underestimation of potentialities and benefits, provided by the green network at several spatial scales and it is due to several reasons:

Incompatibility between the time scale of ecological cycles and the duration of the electoral mandate, the eco-tissue of a green structure is a patchwork of interacting ecosystems tuned by complex processes and interactions. This often implies an overlap of cycles that evolve during wide time intervals. Therefore, in order to see the benefits of an intervention to improve the consistency or the quality of urban green spaces, often intervening time intervals deemed incompatible by the political actors who tend to maximize the results of their actions within the duration of their electoral mandate.

Propensity to free benefits: the simple presence of a green area allows everyone to enjoy the benefits without having to fight for them. This induces an underestimation of the value of the green structure.

Quality design, too often urban green spaces are designed with little attention paid to quality standards: the equipment is obsolete, the accessibility is limited, ecological value is low, and so on. The better the care taken with the quality of design the greater the people's affection to the place is.

Degradation and reduced functionality, unlike most of the structural elements of the urban landscape, the green areas can be functionally degraded although from a purely aesthetic point of view they may seem pleasant places of beautiful scenery. Such limitations imply higher cost of maintenance and reduce the amplitude of benefits and are difficult to be perceived, inducting often in error even technicians and green keepers, even if not particularly expert.

Sensitivity to the surrounding conditions, cities only rarely are in a steady state and their administrators are often taken up by urgent issues: speculation, security and crime, waste management, pollution, etc. In such an operating environment they rarely show propensity to engage action in favour of green areas, considering it of secondary importance;

Cities are places where intense anthropogenic structures and functions focus at the highest levels, a suitable system of urban green spaces (high quality, properly de-signed and fitted with appropriate equipment, safe and easily accessible) can mitigate many adverse effects and represent an opportunity to redevelop the interior and suburbs. In fact, green areas not only provide habitat for plants and animals but are also recreational places for people and mitigate the urban stress factors: noise, smelly environments, air pollution and noise, etc. If we will not be able to effectively highlight the role played by green spaces to both the quality of urban environment and to the benefits provision to society as a whole, the price to be paid will be the marginalization, in political agendas, of priorities relative to green spaces development and their promotion.

The GreenKeys approach
The project GreenKeys-Urban green as a key for sustainable cities was co-financed by the European Community Interreg III B Cadses fund and supported by the German Federal Ministry of transport, building and urban affairs. The project was conducted by office of Urban green and waste management of Dresden (Germany). The scientific coordination was entrusted to Leibniz institute of ecological and regional development. In such context, twenty institutions from seven different european countries: Bulgaria, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Poland and Slovenia, have been involved in an interdisciplinary team whose purpose was to foster green space projects in cooperation with twelve cities and eight scientific institutions. That has allowed investigating the key issues that, in the european context, influence the green system to the urban scale.

For the definition of an European urban green space strategy GreenKeys proposes a methodology specifically designed to support decision makers in the definition of a strategy devoted to Urban green spaces. The strategy's key issues are geared to: safeguard the future of green spaces, improve the quality of urban areas and suburbs, attract more resources, and boost the welfare of local people.

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There is no standard strategy that fits all situations. Every city is different from others, and such heterogeneity is at the highest level expressed if we consider the whole european context. Many cities often fail prematurely to develop a rational green spaces strategy due to a low technical expertise and scarce consultancy: since early stage obstacles are deemed insurmountable even to initiate the process.

In this context the GreenKeys methodology aims to facilitate a process of adaptive selection among potential steeps. Each city is led to express its optimal strategy patterns independently but within a general framework. This allows maximizing the participative approach and lazy people point of view and at the same time providing the constant reference to a core of principles generally suitable at the broad european context.

Following the aforementioned approaches, by means of appropriate tools and thanks to the support, even financial, to specific projects GreenKeys has intended to spread this innovative approach based on the monitoring of ongoing action and constant exchange of experiences.

Outputs and conclusion

We believe that following all GreenKeys results, particularly the improvements made in green spaces in 12 different cities with the implementation of the pilot projects; the kicked off process of formulation and consultation of the Urban green space strategy and the knowledge and experience exchanged and transferred, help has been provided and awareness and interest raised to enable city administrations to address and deal with their green space in a more comprehensive and intensive way.

The proposed GreenKeys methodology and tools are recommended as a means of identifying the drivers and establishing a system and working approach for developing, adopting and monitoring the implementation of urban green space strategies. Through this documentation, GreenKeys supports the creation of a shared vision to give strong, sustainable identities to the futures of our cities.

The project outputs are compiled in the Manual GreenKeys @ your city. A guide for urban green quality, which is designed in the hope that it will prove to be an inspiration in the spirit of GreenKeys: Improving green space is a commitment for an investment into the future.

It provides ideas about ways to solve problems rather than recipes or dictates to be strictly followed. The target groups for GreenKeys @ your city are practitioners searching for solutions for solving specific problems in their cities and the scientific community: obtaining inputs for scientific discussions and ideas for further research.