

# THE COMMUNITY GARDEN – MEANS OF LANDSCAPE AND HUMAN REHABILITATION

## GRĂDINA COMUNITARĂ – MIJLOC DE REABILITARE PEISAGERĂ ȘI UMANĂ

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**Abstract.** *The gardens of a communitarian nature have at their origin various motivational motors, fuelled by political, economic, social, humanitarian, educational, psychological, technological, ecological or relaxation-occupational reasons, freely or constrainedly manifested over the last 200 years. Usually located on ground within or next to the city, under the property and management of local or private authorities and offered for individual use or the use of some groups of people, community gardens are today a saving formula for many counties. The ground assigning practice is adopted both in countries with a developed economy (England, Germany, the Netherlands, USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand), and in those that are in an economical difficulty (Cuba, Vietnam, the Philippines, Venezuela). In this paper, the study of their evolution over time generates conclusions in comparison to our country.*

**Key words:** community gardens, urban horticulture, urban orchard

**Rezumat.** *Grădinile cu caracter comunitar au la origini diverse motoare motivaționale, alimentate de condiții politice, economice, sociale, umanitare, educaționale, psihologice, tehnologice, ecologice sau recreativ-ocupationale, manifestate liber sau constrâns în ultimii 200 ani. Amenajate de regulă pe terenuri din perimetrul intra sau peri-urban, aflate în proprietatea și gestionarea autorităților locale sau private și cedate spre folosință individuală sau unor grupuri de oameni, grădinile comunitare reprezintă azi o formulă salvatoare pentru multe țări. Practica alocării de terenuri este îmbrățișată, atât în țările cu economie dezvoltată (Anglia, Germania, Țările de Jos, SUA, Canada, Australia, Noua Zeelandă), cât și în cele aflate într-o oarecare dificultate economică (Cuba, Vietnam, Filipine, Venezuela). În această lucrare, studierea evoluției lor în timp generează concluzii comparative cu țara noastră.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** grădini comunitare, horticultura urbană, livada urbană

## INTRODUCTION

The combination of satisfying some vital life needs with the existence of urban and peri-urban areas, degraded or not, but neutralized, carried out under public or private control and administration, is a simple and practical form of landscape and human rehabilitation.

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## MATERIAL AND METHOD

To draw up this paper, we have carried out study on the evolution of community gardens on world-wide scale during the last 200 years. Stress was laid on, and we have underlined the distinct periods on dominant historical factors that have led to the implementation of the concept, carrying out an eloquent evolution graph in the end „The Cuban experiment” is presented as an exception, one that is remarkable through its authenticity, evolution and international appreciation. As research methods we have used: *systematic and independent observation, the case study method, analysis and synthesis*.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The evolution of community gardens has had its ups and downs due to the numerous influences it had, and there can be identified several relatively distinct development periods: the period from the beginning until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up to the First World War; the period between the two World Wars, the period after the war, the immigration and reconstruction; the modern and post-modern period after the Second World War; and the meta-modern period from the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**The beginning period** stands out in Great Britain (year 1830, St. Ann's site, whose orchard still exists today, with patrimony value Nottingham, (Clover, 2008), in Germany (year 1860, Leipzig, Saxony, where the „Schreber Movement” came alive with the help of Prof. Dr. Moritz Schreber paediatric physician, who has advocated the education of children in nature, his ideas being adopted and applied by other German-speaking countries, Austria and Switzerland (Poole, 2006) and in Denmark (community gardens setup outside the fortifications of cities, in year 1778, in Fredericia (Jensen, 1996), a practice also adopted in Switzerland, Norway and Finland. Countries like Spain, Italy, Portugal and Russia have not approached such experiments during this period.

The community gardens of that time have common traits, being divided in lots and rented for symbolic prices. The donors were either from the aristocratic society, the rich landowners or state and culture organizations, and the beneficiaries were usually poor families with many children.

During **the period of industrial development at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century**, this practice gains an unexpected popularity. The industry brings well-being in a certain way, but it also brings problems, such as the segregation of social classes, urbanisation and excessive agglomeration, pollution, the degradation of health, the increase of tomorrow's risk. Within this context an ever increasing number of people want an escape oasis, with the price of physical labour and symbolic wages, but one that is certain to insure their living. With the demand, the regulations occur: one lot /family, a fixed surface (which in time got increasingly smaller, so as to please more requesters), cultivation restrictions (fixed constructions not being allowed, not even today), the enforcement of common use areas with various destinations (storage, rest, sanitary areas). Indicative is German's attitude, that appreciates *“the positive aspect of food*

safety”, but also imposes the setup of “*relaxation areas and social meeting areas*) (Senate Department for Urban Development and the Environment of Berlin, 2012).

In Sweden (Stockholm, 1904), the aristocrat Anna Lindhagen, renowned social-democrat leader fought for this concept and its implementation, writing that “*for a family, a lot of land represents a strong union connection, in with all family members can meet, working and relaxing together*” (A. Lindhagen, „*Om kolonitradgardar*”, Stockholm, 1905).

**The period of the two World Wars** has brought on this concept several modifications imposed by the rough conditions following the degradation of the normal living conditions that have climaxed with the general post-war disaster. The number of lots, and the number of those caring for the lots varied a lot, depending on the land, the demographic movements, the defeated or defeating state. In the end, because Europe was buried in disaster and misery, these gardens provided by authorities or benefit institutions, have been the only hope for poor people.

Following the evolution of the war, it is easy to observe and guess how these have been evaluated and perceived. In Germany, for example, before the First World War, community gardens received little interest, largely due to the country status, with major influences on the economic, political and psychological field. Right after the war, and between the two wars, owning a lot in a community garden represented the “essence of survival”. England, shaken by both wars, has seen in the practice of assigning lots to people from the urban community represented the possibility of “*rising from the knees*” for the population on the brink of disaster. Thus in 1943, the number of assigned lots reached 1,4 millions (Poole, 2006).

**The period after the Second World War** is that of reconstruction, economic development, migration of the population of African and Asian origin coming from colonies, but also the segregation of Europe in two totally different ideological blocks.

The soviet influence block has not liked this idea of community gardens, and the concept of holding and using a land, be it rented, donated for a precise purpose, had no echo. On the other hand, the countries with a tradition in this practice have continued to evolve.

The first decades after the war have brought serious problems to different governments due to the low-educated, poor immigrants with high crime potential. On the whole, the total number of lots from the community gardens has lowered, as did their surface, this was largely due to the more stressing need for urban areas destined for urban construction and development. A series of laws and regulations to govern their proper distribution have been adopted. The local authorities have been largely involved in the issue, imposing regulations and order criteria, drawing up waiting lists for future applicants, favouring those with social and integration problems. On the other hand, the new society in West Europe needed a “green” movement. The effects of pollution, urbanization, city stress, unhealthy eating habits, sedentary lifestyle and physical isolation between city walls were already starting to be felt. The movements for an active lifestyle started to have

more influence on the old people and children and the interest in community gardens started to grow. Since in countries like Germany, England, the Northern Countries and Lower Countries human rights were strictly observed, pressures have been made on the waiting lists, so that unfavoured people, such as the retired, students, women with children in case were registered as priorities.

**The period at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century** brings new technologies and modern communication means, and also higher requirements, so that the practice of lots assignment becomes global. Some developed counties take on from the experience of others (The United States, Canada, Australia New Zealand), and a part of the counties under economic and social difficulties (Bolivia, Congo, Venezuela) are helped by European countries through FAO.

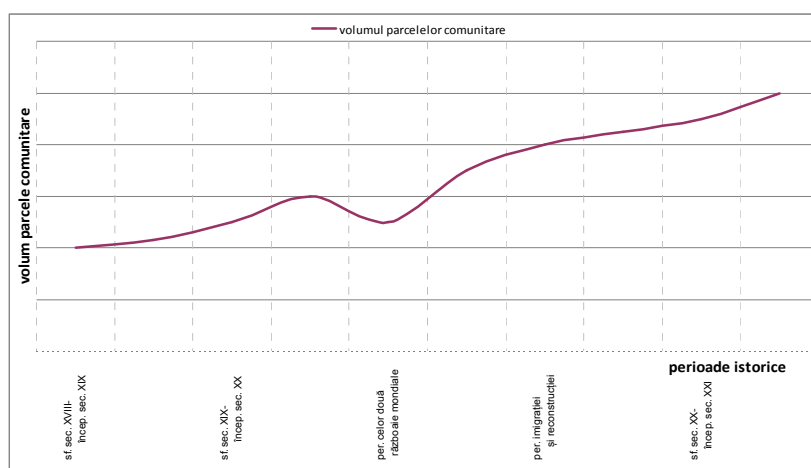
The movement has gained momentum mainly due to the organizations for the defence of the environment and life: in states like the United States, community gardens have a pregnant ecological and protection character, stress being laid on the humanitarian factor, the helping of the self and the others, and on voluntary actions. Thus more factors came to be involved in the community garden: physical and mental health, nourishment, outside movements, the feeling of useful work and respect for nature and the initial values, socialization, relaxation, hobby, irrespective of age and social belonging. The waiting lists and assignments are made centralized, on the national level ([www.cityfarmer.info](http://www.cityfarmer.info)). Amateurs as well as specialists are involved, and the gardens have become useful, aesthetical and more and more demanded.

**„The Cuban experiment”** is an exception in the field of community gardens practices. Though it is more than 50 years old, though it has been „induced” by the great world powers (U.S.A. and Russia), though nobody has anticipated this evolution, the way Cuba attracts the admiration and respect of international organizations, starting with the environmental and ecological ones and ending with that with economic and financial attributions, is more and more remarkable. The embargo imposed on the 60s by the Americans have turned communist Cuba into an less perceptible “island” economically anchored in the old Soviet Block, through the sugar and tobacco trade, against petrol and food. The economy thus constrained has functioned until the 90s when the Soviet Block collapsed drawing Cuba down with it. The life of the every-day Cuban, without basic resources, food and petrol, has become a severe, generalized problem. The only solution, though it represented a great compromise, has been the opening of the borders for the tourists (except for the American ones) and allowing the access of the currency coming from the thousands of immigrants who fled the country. The great problem that was quickly identified was that this beautiful country was no longer of tourist interest because of the famine. Salvation came from an amble movement started at the highest level and influencing the simple Cuban: the assigning of any plot of land, possibly tillable, to any citizen who wanted to get involved, for his/her own benefit. The action involved the lack of taxes or symbolic taxes, without any pretence from the state, but it was well regulated so as to please the majority. The result has been quick and spectacular, the urban

gardens, cultivated with vegetables, fruit, and ornamental plants, start popping out everywhere in urban areas, and Havana becomes a model. Degraded and polluted lands were recovered as communities got involved in their retrieval and improvement. Another detail, the lack of petrol, made the mechanized and chemically fertilized system be impossible, and replaced with a simple, rudimentary but ecological and durable one. „*Organopónicos*” is the Cuban term used for the system of ecologically grown Cuban garden system.

The action has turned into one of national level, so that Cuba receives more than 2 million tourists annually, that is about 20% of the country’s population and Havana is supplied up to 90% by urban community gardens (Staten, 2003).

Despite the fact that the embargo is still valid, it is no longer a burden, and the way the Cubans have risen through this desperate initiative is considered today to be a model of economic sustainability, as FAO presents it in the Havana event on 14-17 May 2012 - „*International seminar on urban and peri-urban agriculture*”.



**Fig. 1 - Evolution of community gardens**

The study of the evolution of community gardens over time can be graphically synthesized, evidencing the tight connection between its historical evolution and human needs (fig. 1).

Though both factors have been variable, the request and interest for the land assigned for individual and family benefit, in community regime, is increasing, and it can be observed that during the last years stress has been laid on ecologic cultures.

## CONCLUSIONS

The process of implementing the community garden concepts, with its utilitarian, aesthetic and ecological values greatly improve the image of the urban landscape in highly developed countries, and to a lower degree, that in the countries that are less developed. Sadly, in Romania, this subject does not raise

the interest of the Government or city officials. Looking for the reason why Romania has not adopted this concept, there are some indications that must be considered, most due to our historical reality. We haven't had an explosion of the industrial development that resulted in overcrowded urban areas, and the two world wars have not destroyed Romanian cities at a scale comparable to that in Great Britain or Germany. We've never had waves of immigrants since the communist regime has completely excluded this idea. Then there is the question why this community gardens concept has not materialized after the 90s, the years of the democracy, the integration and adopting of western values. Analyzing the arguments that have led to the creation of western community gardens, we notice in our case a new row of eluding reality: unhealthy diets and sedentary life, though problems that are more and more discussed, remain at a statistical level, without any remedy actions; the educational institutions do not request "files" with extra-curricular or voluntary activities for registration, they only request the results of the theoretical education; voluntary work is not encouraged, there is no real implication of the authorities or the civil society; the family is more and more indifferent and exhausted, and socialization and communications have abruptly shifted to the virtual environment. The benefits brought to man and landscape by the community gardens are remarkable, and even if their beginning in our country are so far virtual, at the level of informative sites, excessive urban development will have to eventually be stopped by using this ecological, sustainable alternative.

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