

Improving the Quality of Life in Urban Regions Through Urban Greening Initiatives – EU URGE-Project

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Abstract

This workshop reports on the results of a three-year European research project (URGE-Project) funded under the EU Fifth Framework, which examines means of improving the quality of life in urban regions through urban greening initiatives. Urban greening is examined by taking a multidisciplinary approach, looking at the planning, economic, ecological and social aspects to describe the theoretical basis that underpins the work and to develop a set of criteria which serve as a foundation for developing evaluative tools applicable throughout Europe. Work was undertaken by a consortium of 12 partners and data gathered from 15 case study cities. Outputs include a practitioner manual, which reports on the findings, and practical tools, which allow critical evaluation of urban green at both city and site scales.

Keywords: Urban green space; green space performance; multidisciplinary criteria

1. Introduction

Urban green spaces provide a wide range of outputs but due to their multi-functional characteristics, the development and management of parks and green spaces is becoming an increasingly complex planning issue that needs careful consideration if green spaces are to be successful places, accepted and appreciated by citizens, without placing an undue financial burden on local planning authorities (DTLR, 2002). The development and implementation of appropriate management strategies demands a comprehensive and, above all, an interdisciplinary base of knowledge, which informs us about the complex interplay of factors that are linked to many green space issues. To provide such a base and to contribute to the ideals of sustainable urban development, the URGE-Project – Development of Urban Green Spaces to Improve the Quality of Life in Cities and Urban Regions – was initiated in order to investigate the nature of the complex interactions that occur between different urban green space functions and to develop an integrated point of view which was able to deal with the future multi-demands being expected of urban green.

2. The URGE-Project and its Goals

URGE was a 38-month long research project funded under the Fifth Framework Programme of the European Commission, within the Key Action 4 “City of Tomorrow and Cultural Heritage”. The project consortium consisted of 12 partner institutions from six European countries under the overall co-ordination of the Department of Urban Regions at the UFZ – Centre for Environmental Research Leipzig-Halle in Leipzig. Six scientific institutes were included in the consortium: the Leibniz Institute for Ecological and Regional Development in Dresden; the University of Helsinki; the Free University Amsterdam; the University of Central England in Birmingham; the Institute COMETT Li. Sa. in Genoa; and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences in Budapest. Together they formed teams of researchers representing the disciplines of ecology, economics and sociology as well as urban and landscape planning. Four local authorities, with their supporting planning departments, completed the consortium

– the Region Liguria and the cities of Leipzig, Birmingham and Budapest, their primary role being to audit and test the scientific results for their applicability. Each of these partner cities selected two green spaces as case studies. These case studies were used to develop, test and refine the concepts and tools developed by the project. The experience of 11 reference cities, selected from across Europe, further enriched the project in providing additional information about the status of their urban green spaces and their green planning activities.

The central objects of investigation within the URGE-Project were public urban green spaces. In order to have a common understanding about urban green spaces, the URGE-Consortium agreed on the following definition - Urban green spaces are understood as public green spaces located in urban areas, mainly covered by vegetation (as opposed to other open spaces) which are directly used for active or passive recreation, or indirectly used by virtue of their positive influence on the urban environment, accessible to citizens, serving the diverse needs of citizens and thus enhancing the quality of life in cities or urban regions.

Figure 1. Urban green spaces as defined in the URGE-Project

Previous research projects concerning green issues have tended to analyse the potential roles and benefits of urban green according to a single discipline, eg ecological, economic or social aspects. As a result, the body of knowledge in the field is disciplinarily separated at both an academic level and in the development, planning and administration of green space strategies (Lerner et al, 1999; EC, 2004; 1990). Such a situation emphasised the need for interdisciplinary research involving academic institutions in an active collaboration with city partners and this largely defined the way in which the URGE-Project was organised. Because of this collaboration, it was possible to realise the major objective of URGE, to develop instruments which could be used to help improve the provision of urban green spaces, both qualitatively and quantitatively, thus moving towards the project's overall aim of enhancing the quality of life of the urban population and contributing to the sustainable development of European cities (see Figure 2).

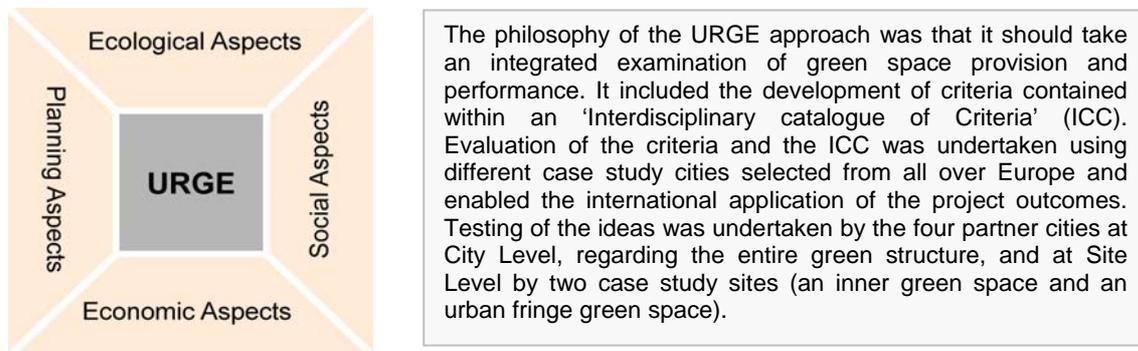


Figure 2. Interdisciplinary approach of the URGE-Project

3. The Manual

Making Greener Cities – a Practical Guide provides interdisciplinary assistance to the user presenting a range of information and specific tools, intended to form a resource for academics, professional planners, local governments and citizens interested in developing and managing urban green spaces throughout Europe (see Figure 3). This manual presents the main experiences, results and recommendations of the URGE-Project. Rather than prescribing any specific model, the manual describes and guides the user through the process of how to improve the urban green space situation by using the URGE-Toolbox, facilitated by interdisciplinary analysis, the evaluation of good practice examples and by considering

recommendations and visions for a ‘Green City of Tomorrow’ (Hough, 1990). Besides its function as a ‘planning assistant’, the manual is also intended to act as a “tool to get people talking” – as a method to advance and strengthen communication, to allow us to start (re)thinking and learning about the complex interactions between the needs of citizens and the supply of urban green spaces, and as a catalyst for the delivery of scientific and technical knowledge and ideas to the user.

The Manual MAKING GREENER CITIES consists of the booklet and an annexed CD-ROM

- The Booklet provides a general overview of the URGE-Project as well as instructions on how to handle the respective tools, including the presentation of good practice examples for the improvement of green spaces and the vision for a future Green City.
- The CD-ROM “Tools” gives detailed information of the suite of tools, including the files and templates that facilitate the practical application of the URGE-Methodology, all of which can be downloaded. It also presents additional valuable project information, the addresses of URGE-Project partners, contact persons, a glossary of the project, the URGE-Homepage off-line, and posters.

Figure 3. The structure and content of the URGE manual

URGE took a dual approach in its research and analysed issues and made recommendations for the provision of green in respect of a whole city as well as the quality of individual green spaces and their specific interrelations with their surroundings. Using this approach it was possible to differentiate between City Level and Site Level (see Figure 4).

CITY LEVEL - the entire urban green structure of a city within its administrative borders is considered. Other green spaces such as private green, including allotments, cemeteries, brownfield sites, street trees and agricultural land, are included at this level as far as their ecological and structural functions within the urban context are concerned.

SITE LEVEL - at site level URGE analyses and evaluates all individual urban green spaces that are available for public use in relation to their surroundings and their urban context.

Figure 4. City and site levels of open space performance

4. The New Instrument – The ICC

URGE provides strategies for the development and management of urban green spaces by means of an interdisciplinary approach. As an early output, the project consortium compiled a catalogue of standardised interdisciplinary criteria regarding urban green, which formed the basis for the so-called Interdisciplinary Catalogue of Criteria (ICC). Criteria for the ICC were developed from the multi-perspectives of ecology, economics, social science and planning. The ICC integrates ecological, economic, social and planning aspects of urban green spaces organised through an interdisciplinary set of four criteria groups. It is intended to give assistance to a wide range of practitioners, particularly those working in the field of urban green planning, and can be used as a monitoring instrument.

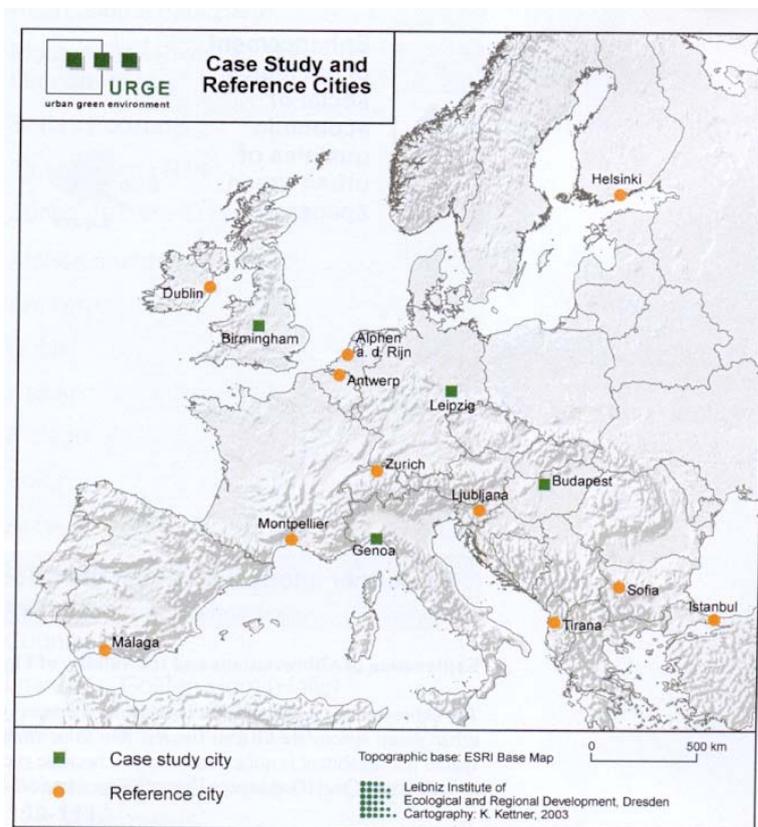
5. Developing Good Practice – Toward a Vision of the Green City of Tomorrow

The network of participating cities (see Figure 6) placed the URGE-Project in a unique position to assess the ways in which urban greening is approached across European, and in doing so, to identify good practice. European cities show a highly diverse pattern of urban green reflecting their various histories and policies (Albers, 1997). Many of the cities examined face problems regarding the weak statutory position of urban green and the loss of

sites due to development pressure, but also show huge potential in what can be done, and how sites can be managed and financed (URGE-Team, 2004).

- The ICC is one of the tools developed by the project consortium which allows a critical evaluation of green space performance at city and site scales or at any scale in between. As such it forms a highly flexible analytical tool applicable to any group that wishes to carry out an audit of their local green spaces, in assessing the overall performance of a sector of the city, making city wide comparisons, developing regional policies or for application in urban regeneration projects.
- The ICC contains four criteria groups: a) Quantity of Urban Green, b) Quality of Urban Green, c) Use of Urban Green, and d) Planning, Development and Management of Urban Green.

Figure 5. The ICC toolbox



Case study examples are examined under the key topics of –

- **Improvement of the provision of urban green spaces**
- **Enhancement of ecological, social, and economic qualities of urban green spaces**
- **Enhancement of stakeholder participation and public involvement**
- **Development of innovative and multiple financing strategies.**

Figure 6. Network of cities forming part of the URGE-Project

Best practice examples suggest that the basic condition for a successful green space planning and management process is the development of an explicit, well-defined and publicly accepted strategy. In particular, this requires the definition of citizens' future demands plus the development of appropriate objectives and priorities, it being crucially important to involve stakeholder views at the very start of the process of defining the city's strategy. In the process of developing and managing urban green, it is suggested that planners should also pursue alternative ways of moving towards a Green City. For example, when considering the redevelopment of a part of a city it is appropriate to analyse the existing situation using the ICC at City Level, since it allows a critical audit of the green space provision.

The provision of urban green spaces has to be planned and realised together with the planning of other urban functions like housing, transport, infrastructure, etc. The process of urban green planning must be seen as one part of an integrated overall city planning process where the implementation of the strategy becomes easier because it is accepted both by the municipality administration and the citizens. The challenges cities will face in the near future are likely to place greater emphasis on the multiple roles of green spaces, especially regarding the expectations of citizens regarding the quality of life. This will require robust ideas for strategies and places considerable demands for improved national and European green space policies (see Figure 7).

- The development of urban green spaces has to be recognized and promoted as an important pillar of sustainable development and this importance has to be reflected in a more appropriate and stronger legal framework, which also identifies funding needs.
- The implementation of criteria to assess the green situation of cities and of individual green sites needs local or national benchmarks.
- The development of benchmarks is necessary for the European-wide comparison of cities and their green spaces and for the implementation of instruments for the promotion and development of “Green Cities of Tomorrow”.
- The establishment of appropriate (multi-disciplinary) training and an improvement in the education of those destined to be involved in the field of urban green planning (landscape architects, geographers, town planners, ecologists and sociologists etc.).
- The inclusion of urban green space issues as part of other disciplinary training, in recognition of its wide role within the urban agenda, and particular relevance to the disciplines of housing, tourism, economic development and community health.
- The closure of the training and skills gaps and appropriate salary levels that equate with the importance of urban green to help guarantee the employment of motivated and skilled people in the creation and maintenance of urban green spaces.
- Research on urban green spaces should continue to be supported by future national and also European funding programmes.
- There is an ongoing need for experts – scientists and practitioners – who deal with urban green issues, to exchange knowledge and to undertake further research.
- It is the responsibility of all those involved in urban greening to contribute to the development of new programmes.

Figure 7. Demands for national and European green space policies

Key Concluding Points

The URGE-Project workshop gives an opportunity for participants to:

- Understand the nature of the project – its aims, objectives, the partnership, approach and outcomes, and its workings; understand its approach; and evaluate its potential as a tool for green audit and training, applicable to a range of organisations and disciplines.
- Consider the scientific findings and the multidisciplinary approach, including the theoretical basis that underpins the work.
- Consider the development and range of criteria that describe and serve as foundation for developing evaluative tools.
- Gain information regarding the state of green space across Europe.
- Consider the Interdisciplinary Catalogue of Criteria that is one of the key tools developed by the consortium, including the use of universal indicators in assessing green space performance.

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