

THE ROLE OF THE LOCAL COMMUNITY IN THE PROCESS OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract: Urban green space developments have a key role in urban development processes, they are shaping the urban green infrastructure and enriching ecosystem services, providing an equal benefit to the physical and mental health of residents. Green space development is a complex planning and implementation process that, without proper communication and cooperation, often leads to unexpected conflicts and this obstacles to project implementation. However, public involvement and its various tools can contribute to the success of development. In this paper we present a case study of the increasingly common tools of community engagement in green space development and their examination in the light of the theory of public involvement. To present the case of a community development project at the Blessed Sándor István Park in district III., we draw on our own fieldwork, interviews and municipal data collection.

Keywords: green development, urban green infrastructure, public involvement

1. INTRODUCTION

Co-author Zsuzsanna Fácányi applies the insights from her doctoral research *Community Gardening in Budapest. Analysis with Methods of Urban Sociology and Landscape Architecture* [1] to the master's program in architecture at the Ybl Miklós Faculty of Obuda University, where she teaches. Within the framework of the Community and Urban Planning course, she and also PhD student Blendi Lleshi contribute to numerous design projects that integrate aspects of social participation. Co-author Andrea Keresztes-Sipos worked between 2014 and 2017 in the Urban Renewal Group of the Budapest Mayor's Office, mainly on the community-oriented TÉR_KÖZ project, since 2017, for the Óbuda-Békásmegyer Urban Development Nonprofit Ltd. (hereinafter: ÓBVF Ltd.), where public involvement and community planning are in focus, leading to her doctoral research *Public Involvement in open space development* [2].

1.1. Aim of the study

The role of urban green spaces, and their qualitative and quantitative development, is an evident community interest; however, the community itself is still often overlooked in city development projects. In this study we introduce the theoretical background of community involvement, followed by the introduction of a successful community planning project in Budapest - as we consider it crucial to spread community engagement's potential to ensure that community consultation does not remain neglected and displaced by the interests of developers and operators.

During community planning, the needs and ideas of users are brought to the forefront, these collaborations have often proven to have a tension-relieving and place attachment-strengthening effect. Successful green space developments contribute not only to improving the urban microclimate and enhancing rainwater retention [3] but also offer significant educational opportunities. During community planning processes, urban planners, landscape architects and designers can share knowledge with residents about these aspects, thereby fostering a more informed and conscious public attitude towards the challenges posed by climate change. It can be suggested that successful case studies, along with comparable examples, illustrate a notable intensification of public usage post-renovation, attributable primarily to substantial financial investment by the municipal authorities after a long period of abundance. However, there are also numerous examples where, despite such renovations but missing community consultation, the interests of the local population are compromised. Although the number of users may increase, residents do not necessarily feel a sense of ownership over the space. Moreover, tensions between interest groups - such as dog owners and families with small children - often persist or even intensify.

1.2. Methodology

This analysis is grounded in the authors' professional and research work on community participation. Two main contexts are introduced to understand the broader background of community involvement. Leaned on this we present a case study to illustrate the potential of local micro-communities in urban development, in relation to theories of community participation referred to by the literature review. The development of the Blessed Sándor István Park is analysed based on the doctoral dissertation of Andrea Keresztes-Sipos, using her developed evaluation methodology. Conclusions were drawn by comparing the case study findings with the theoretical insights.

1.3. Context 1 - Community Gardens as Form of Community Involvement

Community gardening is one form of community involvement related to urban open green spaces. Co-author of this study Zsuzsa Fácányi stated in her PhD research [1], that the nearly 40 community garden sites in Budapest, established over the years 2012-17 reflect a significant level of interest and urban demand. Compared to international examples, a distinctive feature of community gardens in Hungary are associated with housing estate developments, as 'soft elements', gardens can contribute to the success of housing estate rehabilitation programs by complementing technical renewal with social and green infrastructure development [4]. Community gardens have also been established in transforming inner-city areas, where they may be viewed as outcomes of ongoing gentrification processes [5].

The value of the community garden function is well documented in numerous studies, e.g., [6] [7] [8]. In the context of the Hungarian society, which is strongly atomized [9], the impact of community gardens is significant in fostering small-scale communities and shaping residential environments through collective action. Furthermore, the new phenomena of community-managed open space use were introduced through these gardens [10].

1.4. Context 2 - Public Participation in Municipal Open Space Development

Co-author Andrea Keresztes-Sipos presented in her PhD thesis [2] the landscape architect-designer's role in the municipal participatory planning process. In 2018, a comprehensive study titled *Monitoring of Municipal Developments II* (KÖFOP-2.3.4-VEKOP-15-2016-00002) was conducted on Hungarian local municipalities. The findings confirmed the hypothesis that there is a positive correlation between higher levels of citizen involvement and the overall success of municipalities [11]. One of the key indicators of a municipality's commitment to inclusive governance is the frequency with which residents are involved in the preparatory phases of decision-making processes.

It is in the interest of municipalities to implement practices of public participation, particularly in the case of larger cities such as Budapest, where it is advisable to rely on formal procedures involving multiple stakeholders. In the context of open space development, public participation typically involves collaboration between the municipality, landscape architects, facilitators, and affected community members. Through mutual learning and cooperation, this process aims to produce plans that more effectively address local needs. Based on mutual trust—which requires continuous, two-way communication—the tools of public participation can be significantly more effective, engaging a broader range of people. This, in turn, positively influences both the quality and sustainability of green space developments [12]. As former mentioned through participatory processes, local communities can be mobilized in support of green infrastructure initiatives [13], to the extent that they may even take part in the temporary or long-term use and maintenance of abandoned urban areas [14]. As natural green spaces become increasingly important to urban residents [15], a strong support base can emerge, further enhancing the effectiveness of such developments.

2. CASE STUDY BLESSED SÁNDOR ISTVÁN PARK

2.1. Context of the Development

The choice for the case study was influenced by the fact, that during the development of Blessed Sándor István Park in the III. district, the integration of a multidisciplinary team throughout the planning process yielded several notable benefits. Communication experts played a critical role by conveying information in accessible, non-technical language, thereby improving public comprehension of the proposed designs. A particularly advantageous aspect of the project was the involvement of a local representative, whose familiarity with the community enabled the accurate representation of residents' interests and provided valuable guidance in aligning the designer's concepts with local needs and expectations.

2.2. Planning Process and Implementation

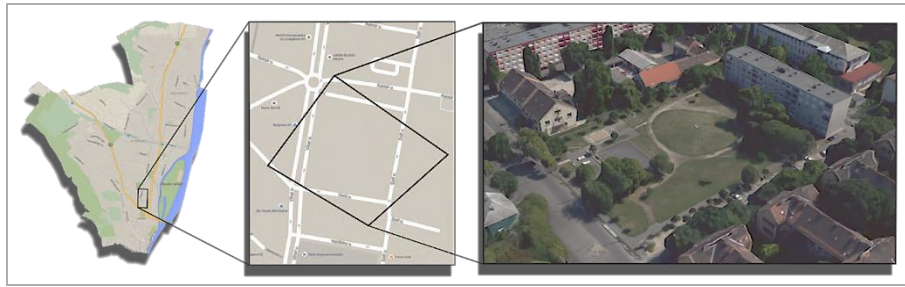


Figure 1 Location of Blessed Sándor István Park in the district (source: ÓBVF Nonprofit Ltd.)



Figure 2 The Blessed Sándor István Park before the development (source: ÓBVF Nonprofit Ltd.)

The development of Blessed Sándor István Park (formerly referred to as *Derű Street Park* in the original project documentation) received funding through the 2016 *TÉR KÖZ* grant program of the Municipality of Budapest. At the time of submission for the grant, the project had already passed the design phase: following public consultation, the construction plans had been finalized. The park spans 8,350 m², of which 4,700 m² are green spaces. It is owned by the district municipality and is bordered by Szél Street, Derű Street, Vihar Street, and the Buda site of the National Directorate General for Disaster Management. Despite its modest size, after the development the park accommodates a variety of functions, including playgrounds, sports facilities, a dog park, and recreational areas [16].

The planning of Blessed Sándor István Park began in 2015, incorporating input from local residents through a three-session community design process. The construction plans were finalized in 2017, and implementation was completed with an official inauguration on April 27, 2018, celebrated through a community picnic. As in similar projects in the district III., three key actors were: Platinum Group Ltd., responsible for landscape design; ÓBVF Ltd., in charge of project coordination and community engagement (with the author of this text participating as an employee of ÓBVF Ltd. and thus having direct insight into the process); and Pannon Park Forest Ltd., the construction contractor. Blessed Sándor István Park was the first project in the district for which ÓBVF Ltd. managed the entire community planning process independently. While the landscape architect was not assigned a facilitative role, their presence at the community design sessions was required.

2.3. Concept

The municipality aimed to create a sports park looking for a location and found the park, where there was already disused asphalt pitch. The proposal for a site was published in the local Óbuda newspaper (flyer, newsletter) and an online survey "What should the sports park in Derű Street be like?" was launched (website), which received 180 responses. The results showed that local people not only envisioned the area as a sports park but also wanted to use it with dogs and small children. Thus, the municipality, at the initiative of the residents, decided to open up the area to more functions.

2.4. Planning

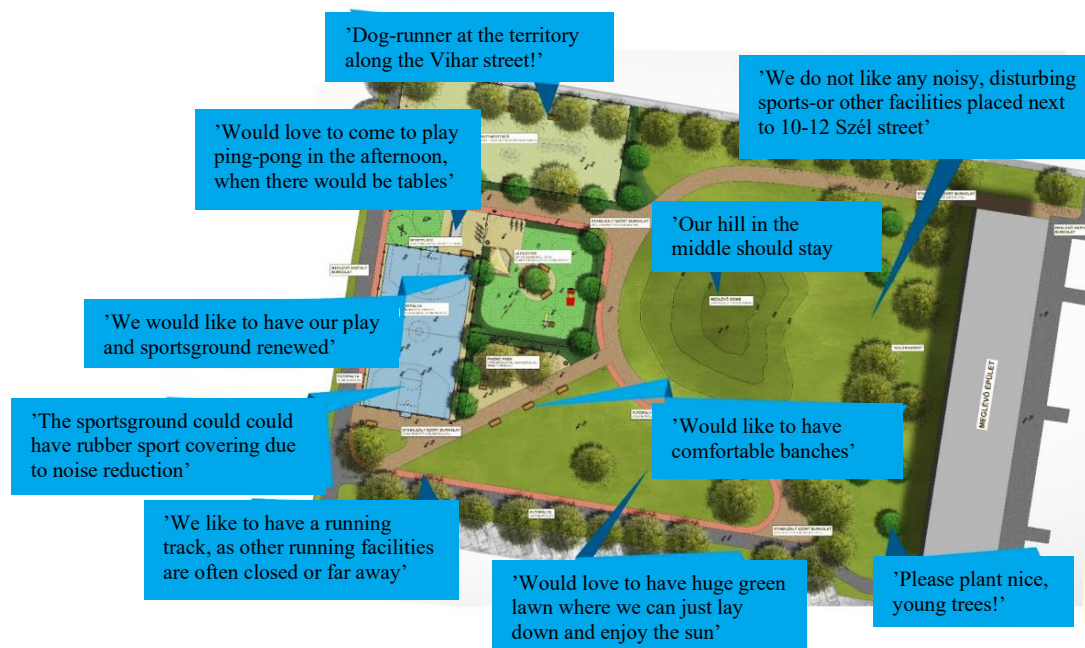


Figure 3 Conceptual plan with requests of the residents (source: ÓBVF Nonprofit Ltd., Platinum Group Ltd.)

As part of the process, community-based planning was also implemented, which took place over three sessions. The first event was held on-site and involved three stations located on the streets surrounding the park. These were named “Serenity” (positive topics), “Storm” (problematic topics), and “Wind” (areas of conflict). The stations functioned in a carousel way, and at each table, a facilitator guided discussions with participants regarding the development-related issues. (on-site planning event). The event was highly popular (with approximately 60–70 participants), as it successfully addressed a location and topics that elicited diverse viewpoints. For example, the hill and its surrounding area in the park had previously been an open space for dog walking, but the proposed development would have entirely excluded dogs. Additionally, the running track, part of the proposed sports park, was to be located beneath residential windows, therefore rejected by local residents. The issues raised were addressed during subsequent planning sessions, through emotionally charged and long negotiations, which ultimately led to a compromise: although operators initially opposed it due to limited space, a dog park was eventually included in the plan, and the running track was redesigned with a smaller curve, avoiding the area beneath the windows. By the end of the planning process, consensus was reached that the sports field, green lawn, hill, and designated dog area were all essential components of the renewed park (community engagement).

2.5. Implementation

From the outset of the project, a variety of communication tools were employed by the local government, including flyers, posters, a dedicated website, and a Facebook page (social media). To support image-building efforts, a project logo and a short promotional film were also produced. The park was ceremonially named Blessed Sándor István Park, and a statue of its namesake was erected. Residents were involved in drafting the park’s new code of conduct (community regulations), and a community-based tree and shrub planting event was also organized (community implementation). The construction phase concluded with an opening ceremony, which featured a community picnic with children’s activities, handicraft workshops, and dog-friendly programs (community events).

2.6. Afterlife of the Project

Following the inauguration of the park, the local government organized various sports and community events. Consultations were conducted with the local dog-owner community (needs assessment) regarding the dog park, with the aim of incorporating feedback into future municipal developments. To strengthen community bonds, the municipality also initiated dog-related social programs (community-oriented social initiatives). Unlike earlier stages of the project, the implementation was not outsourced; instead, it was carried out by communication professionals from ÓBVF Ltd. who possess expertise in dog-related topics.

In connection with the park’s namesake, the Salesian Society organized a series of family and children’s programs under the title Salesian Courtyard, held on-site with the aim of introducing the order’s mission and activities. Community engagement and communication related to the park remain ongoing; for instance, schoolchildren have participated in tree-planting activities (community implementation).

Following the completion of construction, feedback regarding the park continued to emerge. Several residents expressed concern that the stabilized gravel paving of the walkway was being blown into nearby apartments by the wind. Additionally, despite the installation of a considerably more stable fence structure, the basketball court was still considered excessively noisy, with the sound of the ball striking the backboard clearly audible inside adjacent residences. Numerous discussions were held concerning this conflict, and it was ultimately confirmed that the residents' complaints were justified: a noise-dampening component had been omitted from the backboard's support structure during construction. As in a former case of Holdudvar Park, the issue of the gravel surface reemerged; however, now, efforts were made to address the problem through communication tools, highlighting the surface's advantages.

To illustrate the practice of community involvement, we briefly present the key tools used during the process, also in tabular form.

Tools of involvement	Development of the Park			
	Con- cept	Plan- ning	Imple- ment.	After- life
Public				
Flyer, newsletter	X		X	X
Posters, billboards			X	X
Publication	X	X	X	X
Website, Application	X	X	X	X
Social media			X	X
Film			X	
Image building		X	X	
Forum, workshop		X		X
Organisation				
Bringing local forces together				
Local project office				
Local cooperation				
Setting up an association				
Community rules			X	
Involv. of external experts				X
Planning				
Use of existing knowledge		X		
Needs assessment	X	X		X
Residents' ideas competition				
Design competition				
On-site planning opportunity		X		
Poll				
Community involvement		X		X
Action				
Testing, modelling				
Community implementation			X	X
Sports event				X
Art events				
Community events			X	X
Mobile equipment				
Message boards				
Programme				
Urban education				
Community - social prog.				X
Cultural programmes				X
Environmental programmes				
Local history programmes				
Urban regeneration prog.				

Table 1 Key tools of public involvement at the stages of the development (source: Andrea Keresztes-Sipos)

The table of the key tools (Table 1) illustrates well that the effort made by the local municipality and the planner is impressive. – but only needed during the development process. Experiencing the everyday use (Fig 4) of the park proves the result of the invested work.



Figure 4 source Use of the renewed park, (source: Site of the Don Bosco Salesians Hungary)

3. CONCLUSION

Despite the limited spatial scale and modest investment cost of the project, the Blessed Sándor István Park succeeded in generating substantial public discourse, thereby drawing significant attention and attracting an unprecedented number of participants to the planning sessions. This case illustrates in accordance with the relevant literature that involving the local community is beneficiary, furthermore the necessity of involving the local population cannot be determined solely by the scale or financial scope of a given development. Site-specific conflicts likewise warrant the initiation of a comprehensive public consultation process. This instance also demonstrates how the involvement of local residents can contribute to enhancing the quality of a development. In the present case, also a construction flaw was brought to light when complaints arose regarding the noise emissions of the basketball court's backboard.

The disadvantages include the time-consuming nature of the process and the need for a competent mediator or facilitator, which does not adversely affect the result, but the process. So, the balance is positive. That is why it is a requirement in international urban development charters, worth not only formally fulfilling, but also treating as an indispensable tool - e.g. the New Leipzig Charter, which encourages the involvement of the general public in policy making and it also focuses on 'deprived neighbourhoods' within cities as having particular priority when it comes to working towards social and physical cohesion [17].

It remains a longstanding debate whether community engagement should primarily serve the planning process or function as a means of fostering interpersonal connections. However, the issue is far from straightforward: participatory processes involve a multitude of parallel dynamics, where diverse interests and intentions intersect, resulting in inherently complex outcomes. Our experience thus far suggests that - even when tangible results are not immediately apparent - engagement is nonetheless meaningful. It compels political actors to communicate more openly and to genuinely listen to and serve local residents. Simultaneously, as inhabitants gain insight into municipal and planning processes, they tend to become more considerate and patient.

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