Sixth International Conference of EAUH, European City in Comparative Perspective, Athens 27–30.10.2004
Session: Green spaces in cities

URBAN GREEN SPACE IN HELSINKI 1900-1950: roles, implications and functions

Katri Lento, University of Helsinki, Finland

Green space in a city has many functions and many of them are similar in cities all over the world. For example green areas are almost without exception seen as possessing aesthetic as well as health-promoting functions. It is also space that is often reserved for recreation and leisure, such as e.g. parks and sport fields. However, green space can also be seen as politically charged space or as space that has economic importance since a "green" urban environment often means higher land value and property prices. I will here look at the roles and implications of urban green space in the Finnish capital city of Helsinki during the first half of the 20th century. I will concentrate on some of the different types of green areas in the city and on the roles they had in the urban environment. I will also investigate the interest groups that controlled urban green space and the possibilities the so-called ordinary citizens had in influencing their urban environment before urban civic activism gained power in the 1960s.

Green Space for Leisure, Living and Food Production

Helsinki's first municipal measure concerning green space came when a city parks department was founded in 1878. The office of city gardener was founded eleven years later in 1889 at the same time as the first municipal park policy was implemented. Helsinki at that time was the capital city of autonomous Finland under Russian rule with a little less than 54 000 inhabitants. In spite its relative smallness, the early arguments in favour of parks, in addition to emphasizing the advantages of green areas for preventing the spread of fires, were to refer to foreign examples. If Paris, London and Berlin had parks and green boulevards so should Helsinki. The aim was to create an illusion of a metropolis. Walking along the Esplanade, the fashionable city centre public promenade completed in the 1890s with its carefully arranged flowerbeds and prestigious stone buildings on both sides, one should almost believe oneself in any European capital city. Another type of park in Helsinki, the so-called People's Park was meant for the working class population and had less strict norms on behaviour and appearance. They were located in the city's fringe areas and on the forested islands in front of the city. The municipality as well as different voluntary societies encouraged educational play and sports at the People's Parks as social rearing played an important role in them. People's

Parks were seen as especially advantageous for the urban population that had recently moved to Helsinki from the countryside.

In the early 20th century the ideal lifestyle progressed from visits to the park to actually living in the midst of nature. The international garden city movement had a strong impact on Finnish architects planners and the first experiments influenced by it were started already during the first years of the 20th century. Brandö garden community (Ab Brandö Villastad–Kulosaaren huvilayhtiö Oy) was founded in 1907 with private investments on an island outside the city borders. A share-holding company financed it, with the shareholders also becoming inhabitants of the island.[1] Brandö garden community was not the only private garden community in Helsinki at the time and there were several privately financed attempts at greener communities. One of them was Vanda park city (Ab Vanda Parkstad–Vantaan Puistokylä Oy), a private housing project planned by a group of idealistic upper class architects and businessmen for the working class population.

It took some time for the city to start their own experiments in garden communities and healthy living environments. An effort towards greener housing at the municipal level came when the first municipal housing society Helsingin Kansanasunnot Oy was founded in 1916. Helsingin Kansanasunnot Oy (Helsinki Municipal Housing) was a shareholding company with half of the shares owned by the city of Helsinki, and the rest by an insurance company and a progressive housing society called Asuntoreformiyhdistys (Housing reform society) which aimed at building healthy and affordable housing on city-owned land. In 1919 Kansanasunnot decided to build Helsinki's first municipal garden suburb. In Puu-Käpylä (Wooden-Käpylä), influences were taken from English garden cities. The Helsinki Building Commission had visited Letchworth and Hampstead garden suburb the same year and had been impressed by these model communities. The main architect behind Wooden-Käpylä, Akseli Toivonen, became a member of the building commission in 1920.[2] Käpylä was the Finnish adaptation of a garden suburb, which can be seen in the building material (wood) and it had similarities with traditional wooden housing areas in Finnish small towns. The new suburb also had a strong educational element of civic improvement. Emphasis was put on families having their own gardens and growing not flowers but their own vegetables. As home gardens were not a common feature of Finnish working class housing, a garden consultant, a woman named Elizabeth Koch, was hired to teach the Käpylä inhabitants how best to grow their own vegetables.

According to Riitta Nikula, Finnish architects, planners and city officials shared a desire to create prestigious areas for the newly independent nation's capital city as well as to make social housing into high profile architecture.[3] These aims were realised in Uusi-

[1]The architects behind the Brandö garden community were well aware of the international trends in planning and were more in agreement with the international discussion on housing than with Helsinki's municipal policy. The Brandö garden community can be seen as an upper middle class protest against the city's lack of providing them with what for them meant better standard housing, a greener living environment, and thus forcing them to form their own societies; Laura Kolbe: Kulosaari – Unelma paremmasta tulevaisuudesta. Kulosaaren kotiseuturahaston säätiö, Helsinki 1988.

[2] Bengt Lundsten: Edelläkävijä - Puu-Käpylä. In Rakennettu aika. Icomosin Suomen osasto 25 vuotta, Icomos 1992, p. 75.

[3] Riitta Nikula: Yhtenäinen kaupunkikuva 1900-1930. Suomalaisen kaupunkirakentamisen ihanteista ja päämääristä, esimerkkeinä Helsingin Etu-Töölö ja Uusi Vallila. Societas Scientiarum Fennica, Helsinki 1981.

Vallila, (New-Vallila) a working class district northeast of central Helsinki. The building of the district was ambitious and resulted in a housing district where many new ideas concerning hygiene and health were tested for the first time.[4] Spacious interior courtyards were designed for recreational use, as there were only a few parks in the mainly working class district of Vallila. Uusi-Vallila's most praised courtyard belonged to quarter 555 and the building attracted considerable public attention.[5] The building project of the quarter started already in 1916, but after several changes to the original plan the quarter was completed in 1929.[6] The only unchanged idea in the different plans was that of a large, green central yard. One section of the yard was reserved for a kindergarten, and the rest with trees and flowerbeds was meant for the recreation of the people living in the quarter. However, the actual use of the yard areas was restricted. A former inhabitant growing up in the quarter in the 1930's remembers how stepping on the lawn was strictly forbidden for children, and another how the caretaker put barbwire around the lawn to prevent anyone from walking on the grass.[7]

One important factor behind the building of Käpylä and Uusi-Vallila had been the strict state regulations on building property for rent. It made building houses financially unattractive for private enterprises and the state and municipality were left providing this kind of housing. After the rental regulations were abolished in the 1920s, the private sector practically took over the building of rented housing and development shifted mostly to more densely populated areas of the city, nearer to the city centre.[8] So the two social housing experiments, Puu-Käpylä and Uusi-Vallila, did not result in a new general standard for housing

The allotment garden movement arrived in Finland from Germany in the 1910s. Women's, youth societies and garden societies were active in pushing the idea forward, stressing its educational value for the working classes. In 1918 the Helsinki Board of Social Services suggested to the City Council the idea of founding a garden allotment area, principally to help deal with the food shortage in Helsinki. To sell the idea to the City Council many international as well as Finnish examples of successful allotment gardens were presented.[9] The notion was accepted and the first allotment gardens were created in the Helsinki district of Ruskeasuo in 1918, to be followed by several more during the 1920's. The economic depression of the early 1930s increased the number of allotment gardens and the amount also grew rapidly during the war years. Home gardening was considered to have such importance still in the 1940s and 1950s that special urban land was allocated for it. It was only during later years that allotment gardening became fore mostly a leisure activity. During the first decades in Helsinki gardening strongly recommended by the municipality (or the government during war years) for producing additional food supplies. Another benefit was seen in the healthy effect of working the land and thus being close to nature. In either case, allotment gardens were highly regulated space with rules controlling the use of them. For example permanent residence on the allotments was strictly forbidden.

---

[4] Ibid. 54.

[5] See e.g. Arkkitehti 1930, pp.65-66.

[9] Kertomus Helsingin kaupungin kunnallishallinnosta (Helsinki Municipal Year Book) 1918. Kaupungin yleisten töiden hallituksen vuosikertomus, p.18.

National and International Exchange of Ideas

What is typical of Finnish planning has been its openness to foreign models and innovations, as well as an active search for ideas.[10] The Union of Finnish Cities (Suomen Kaupunkiliitto), founded in 1912, considerably increased the Finnish discourse on urban issues on a professional and municipal level. Members of municipalities from all over Finland met regularly to discuss issues concerning Finnish cities. The union also acted as an advisory office for municipalities in matters concerning cities. The Union of Finnish Cities had close contacts with the International Union of Cities that had its central office in Brussels. Through the Brussels office information was distributed to the different countries and national unions sent delegations to conferences and on tours abroad.[11] The union's office also received printed municipal publications from some of Scandinavians most important cities, as well as had a library with an extensive collection of international literature and journals.[12]

Stockholm was the most frequently visited destination for the Finnish Union of Cities and most contacts were with the Swedish Union of Cities. There were also several visits to Britain, Germany and the Baltic states. During the 1920's, visits to foreign cities – almost without exception – included a tour of a garden suburb or a garden city. Similarly, delegations coming to Helsinki were taken to Käpylä and to one of the city's allotment garden areas. International contacts like these had a major impact on open space developments in Helsinki; they were extensively written about in the Finnish media, and so introduced the wider public to urban issues and planning outside Finland. For example, in 1924, the union sent two delegations to Stockholm to learn about how the housing question was being resolved in Stockholm. The focus was on the Swedish garden suburbs and cities and Ålsten, Enskede, Smedslätten, Äppelviken and Skarpnäck were visited; Stockholm's allotment gardens were also of interest. Both visits were written about in Finnish national newspapers, as well as in Sweden.[13] The Swedish achievements in planning garden cities were greatly admired. "The garden cities were excellently, or even superbly organized", director Rieti Itkonen was quoted as saying in the newspaper Suomen Sosialidemokraatti (Finland's Social Democrat). What he especially admired was that one of the garden suburbs had started to build an old people's housing area where detached cottages and gardens would be given to elderly inhabitants.[14] The Baltic States got positive publicity too. In 1929 a delegation of the Finnish Union of Cities toured Riga, Liepaja and Tallinn.[15] The extent and quality of

[10] Marjatta Hietala: Innovaatioiden ja kansainvälistymisen vuosikymmenet. Vol.1. In the series Tietoa, taitoa, asiantuntemusta. Helsinki eurooppalaisessa kehityksessä 1875-1917. Suomen Historiallinen Seura ja Helsingin kaupungin tietokeskus. Helsinki 1992.

[11] The exchange of ideas also worked the other way round. For example, Eliel Saarinen's Munknäs-Haga plan was sent via Brussels to the Philadelphia-based journal "American Institute of Architects" to be included in their publication on contemporary planning; Uusi Suomi 11.8.1921

[12] Yrjö Harvia: Suomen kaupunkiliitto 1912-1937, Kunnallisen keskustoimiston julkaisuja, Helsinki 1938. p.35.

[13] Dagens Nyheter 13.4.1924; Sosiaalidemokraatti 2.9.1924; Uusi Suomi 4.9.1924.

[14] Sosiaalidemokraatti 2.9.1924.

[15] See Sosialisti 8.6.1929; Kansan Lehti 10.6.1929; Työn Voima 12.6.1929.

green spaces in urban centres were yet again stressed. The newspaper Työn Voima reported from the union's trip to Riga: "When it comes to gardens this city beats Helsinki hands down. The traveller is delighted by the city's vast and well-tended gardens."[16]

The exchange of ideas was active throughout Europe. Not only did the Nordic countries adopt ideas from other European countries or the United States but ideas travelled the other way round. Visits to the Nordic countries were popular, particularly among architects and planners looking out for new ideas. In 1930 the British Garden Cities and Town-Planning Association made a tour of the "Northern Capitals". A group of fourteen men, mostly municipal planning professionals, toured three of the Nordic countries over eleven days and examined solutions to the housing question in Bergen, Oslo, Stockholm and Copenhagen. The British delegation, although recognizing the value of comparisons with other countries, was only moderately impressed by the Scandinavian capitals:

> "In the first place, it is an undoubted advantage that those with a common interest in housing should meet together in regular intervals to discuss developments and exchange views. ....yet England has nothing to learn in the way of Garden Cities in the true sense of the word, and ... Letchworth and Welwyn still defy comparison with anything seen abroad as far as lasting improvement in the housing situation is concerned."[17]

Discussing Green Space

Finland gained its independence from Russia in December 1917. The year 1918 was important because of the new law on a general and equal municipal voting rights came into force. This marked the change in the power settings of municipal government as the new voting system brought new decision makers to the municipal forum, opening up new opportunities for more democratic municipal decision-making. The public discussion as well as the decision-making concerning urban planning was, however, still mainly conducted on two levels: the state and municipal level, and the expert professional level. The state and municipal levels were the levels at which the official decisions were made and where the official decision-makers acted. At the municipal level, the parks department (established in 1920) dealt with issues on green space. As green areas become included in planning, the municipal discussion widened. As green areas became an increasingly social issue, the social service department also joined in the municipal debate on urban green space. The expert level consisted of architects and planners. The Architect Club (Arkkitehtiklubi) had been founded in 1892 to maintain contacts between Finnish architects. Another important discussion forum for architects and planners was Arkkitehti, the monthly journal that was founded in 1903. The official decision making process was intertwined and the dividing line between experts and officials often unclear. This was the case especially with architects during the early decades of the 20th century when, in addition to their professional interest, they were also often involved in city

[16] Työn Voima 12.6.1929.
[17] Garden Cities and Town Planning, vol. 20 No 8. September-October 1930, p 235.

planning at the decision-making level. It was typical of Finnish city planning and architecture that a very small closed group dominated it.[18]

Urban dwellers were less active in voicing opinions about the urban environment. Before the First World War even active users of green areas rarely took part in public discussion, not to mention official decision-making. Upper and middle class people may have had personal links with planners, architects and politicians and may have discussed ideas about open space informally at dinner parties and social gatherings, but most ordinary people living in Helsinki, especially the working class, figured more as objects of discussion than as participants. However the rapidly growing number of participants in the socialist, temperance and especially sport organizations and societies in the 1920's and 1930's meant an expansion of organized use of the city's green areas. These societies had a major influence on the use of open and green space in Helsinki as activities such as sporting events, concerts or gatherings were often organized in a park or open area. However, the voluntary organizations were hierarchically organized and the influence of ordinary participants was limited. Helsinki's urban green space was often a politically charged question. For example Socialist newspapers tended to complain about the lack of parks in workers' districts, as in an article in Työmies (The Worker) in 1913 which observed how the parks were fewer and not as well kept in the working class district of Kallio as opposed to the upper class district of Eira.

A new forum for inhabitants to express their views on their urban environment came with city district societies in the 1940s. Even though only small organizations at the beginning, city district societies can be seen as early forms of organized civic urban activism in Helsinki. They also marked the strengthening role of urban dwellers and the eventual decreasing of professional and municipal control over urban space. The first city district society was founded in 1940 in the first municipal garden suburb, Käpylä.[19]

Conclusion

During the first half of the 20th century there was ambitious planning and building in Helsinki aimed at increasing the volume of planned green space in the city. Starting with the Brandö garden community founded by private citizens, the mostly municipal projects of Wooden-Käpylä and the rental housing experiments in Vallila show that Finnish planning actively sought new forms and ideas for including green areas in housing. However, the actual group of planners and architects responsible for many of these developments was small, and the most influential ones were involved in multiple projects in the city. In the decades after independence, as it had been the case also under Russian rule, the agenda for green values in planning was often set by a handful of key figures. Architects were part of the cultural elite, and were often Swedish speaking with close connections to the Scandinavian countries. The groups that influenced green space

[18] An example of this was that Helsinki's city planning architect, Swedish-speaking Bertel Jung, the man behind the plans for a central park and Greater-Helsinki, had also been one of the key figures in the Brandö garden community and later on acted also on behalf of the Käpylä garden suburb. He was also involved in the planning of Uusi-Vallila. Moreover, Bertel Jung was an active writer for Arkkitehti until his death in 1946 and he had been the first editor of the journal 1903-1904.

[19] After Käpylä-Society city district societies increased their number. In today's Helsinki, in a city of about 560 000 inhabitants, there are altogether 61city district societies of most are very active.

planning were in close contact with each other through societies. Finnish architecture and planning debate followed the international discussion as is shown in the articles in Arkkitehti. As we have seen, contacts with colleagues from abroad, for instance through the Finnish Union of Cities, through participation in international conferences or exchange visits were frequent.

The rhetoric around green space included emphasizing the wholesome and healthy effect of nature and green space, and at the same time, warning about the ill effects of urban life. Green space was often used for social purposes and demands for a greener Helsinki were often based on protecting both the mental and physical health of its inhabitants, particularly those who had recently migrated from the countryside. At the same time the vision remained one of regulated green space whether in the new worker's blocks in Vallila or in the garden allotments. Allotment gardening was encouraged and promoted, but at the same time the use of the allotments was strictly controlled, with many regulations including forbidding permanent residence on them. All in all, local residents mostly participated only on the margins of the debate.