



Nature-Home-Housing: Greening and Commoning of Urban Space

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In his introduction to *In the Nature of Cities* (Heynen, Kaika and Swyngedouw 2006), Neil Smith points out that one of the most deeply ingrained assumptions of capitalistic societies is the common-sense separation of society and nature. Spatially, this separation has manifested itself as a view of the city as a space divorced from nature, as a space where nature plays only a minor role in comparison to that of humans. In the last decade, however, the issue of the production of urban nature and the deep interconnection between nature and the city has become a growing interdisciplinary field. The aim of this special issue of the “Critical Housing Analysis” is to contribute to this boom in scholarly interest which re-inserts questions of nature into the urban debate by interconnecting it to the thematic focus of housing studies.¹ More specifically, this special issue was devised in order to offer accounts of the changes of the role and shape of urban nature by focusing on the interconnections between nature, housing and homes in the city.

Based on case studies from cities in Central and Eastern Europe (and Tashkent), the four articles – authored by Alexandra Bitušíková, Elena Ivanova, Hikoyat Salimova and the collective around Zsuzsanna Fáczányi – critically assess the role of nature in the city with respect to housing and particularly address the issue of feeling at home in post-socialist metropolises. The production of the urban environment, of which housing as well as nature form closely linked parts, is a political and historical contextual process. In post-socialist cities the urban environment has been modified by the socio-economic and political developments of the last quarter century as well as by trends, ideas and policies coming from Western European countries and the US; furthermore, it has been influenced by the specificities of how the experience of socialism and its tangible and intangible heritage has been approached, exploited, worked with and/or overlooked.

Despite the diverse settings and thematic focus of these four articles, three main themes are inherent throughout and serve to interconnect them. The most evident is the fate of post-socialist or post-communist urban space and an exploration of the changes it has been undergoing on both the material and social levels in various contexts/cities. Large housing estates in Budapest and Riga discussed by Fáczányi et al. as well as those in Banská Bystrica touched on by Bitušíková, parks in Moscow elaborated on by Ivanova or dachas in Tashkent researched by Salimova: each of these articles make reference to the planning policies and housing solutions of socialism’s bygone era. Not only do these articles describe the material remains left behind by socialism and how these remains have been transformed in post-socialist times, but they also concentrate on the diverse and multiple ways in which people living in the discussed cities engage with these spaces, forge relations and attachments to them and in such a way that these spaces end up feeling more like home. On their own terms, the four articles are proof that people tend to invest themselves, their time and energy, in the places where they live while crossing boundaries of the intimately private space of their apartments to the outside, as well as bringing the outside home. Interestingly enough, nature plays a crucial role in the engagement of urbanites of the variously outlying homes. It is this interconnection of housing and (becoming at) home with nature that underscores the material as well as the social developments discussed in this special issue: be it the imprint left from the juxtaposition between Western and traditional

¹ This special issue is the result of an international workshop “Nature – home – housing: negotiating urban space and its development” which took place on 30 October 2016 at the Institute of Sociology, Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague.



lifestyles on the gardens of dachas turned permanent residences in Tashkent; the participatory planning of the future of vacant green spaces in the housing estates in Riga and Budapest; the strengthening of local neighbourhoods in Banská Bystrica by means of community gardening; or the troubles with growing vegetables in fancy or low-income community gardens in Moscow. Throughout the articles, it is the process of “commoning” – the ways of co-creating and co-producing urban space together by taking action in order to bring about change according to common goals – that incorporates engagement with nature and the various ways of greening the city that have the propensity to turn the areas where people are housed into their home. Nature, as the articles suggest, thus seems to play a crucial role in connecting people to the built environment and turning the urban spaces of housing into that of a home. As this special issue suggests, nature along with the politics and practices of its production, sustenance and transformation, deserves much more attention with respect to housing.

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