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ACTIVE RECREATION SPACE 'FOR ALL': FAMILY GARDENS IN POLAND

Key words: active recreation, healthy lifestyle, space 'for all', family gardens.

ABSTRACT

Allotments, as a part of urban tradition and history, have been present in the Polish landscape for over one hundred years. In the 19th century allotment gardens were located in the suburbs, on the outskirts of Kraków, Poznań, Warsaw and Silesian cities. At present allotment gardens located close to the city centre are often under threat to be overtaken by developers. A growing interest in active everyday recreation, healthy lifestyle, diverse urban space and urban ecology leads to the idea of saving allotments from demolition by developers. It has been widely recognized that allotment gardens not only improve the urban climate (like any other green open spaces), but also encourage various recreational, healthy outdoor activities such as gardening. Moreover, in Poland for thousands of low-income families allotments are essential as a source of fresh fruit and vegetables and also a possibility to enjoy free holidays. Thanks to purpose-built facilities and improvements in allotments, disabled gardeners can grow their greens in comfort, get to know people and socialize. Present-day allotments are a great attraction to members of many social groups, not only to low-income families but people of all walks of life seeking healthy outdoor recreation, social contacts, fun and relaxation. What is the present role of allotments in the contemporary green urban space and their meaning for urban inhabitants? What is the present statistical situation of allotments in Warsaw? Are they accessible for the disabled? How can they contribute to the socio-physical heterogeneity of public urban space? What are the local community comments about strategies for urban development when allotment gardens are considered? This paper is based on 12-month research project carried out by the Institute of Tourism and Recreation of the University of Physical Education in Warsaw in the course of which allotment gardens in Warsaw were surveyed (2008-2010).

INTRODUCTION

Allotments, as a part of urban tradition and history, have been present in the Polish landscape for over one hundred years. In the 19th century allotment gardens were located in the suburbs, on the outskirts of Kraków, Poznań, Warsaw and Silesian cities. At present, allotment gardens located close to the city centre are often under threat to be overtaken by developers. A growing interest in active everyday recreation, healthy

lifestyle, diverse urban space and urban ecology leads to the idea of saving allotments from demolition by developers. It is widely recognized [4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 15] that allotments not only improve the urban climate (like any other green open spaces), but also encourage various recreational, outdoor activities such as gardening. Moreover, in Poland for thousands of low-income families allotments are essential as a source of fresh fruit and vegetables and also a possibility to enjoy free holidays.

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The popular meaning of an allotment is a small plot of urban or sub-urban land rented by an individual. The main purpose of allotment gardens is cultivation of flowers, fruit and vegetables for domestic use, but one cannot contradict their significant role as outdoor recreation sites or contribution to the improvement of urban ecology. Paul Clayden explains that the word ‘allotment’ (as used by lawyers) means a share of land ‘allocated or allotted to an individual as the result of an enclosure award’ [Clayden 2002, pp. 1-2, 10]. Allotment has a long history dating back to the medieval processes of replacement of the open-field farming system with enclosures of common fields. As early as at the turn of the 18th and 19th century the modern meaning of ‘allotment’ appeared, which signified a small plot of land let out for non-commercial cultivation, often as charity offered to poor workers’ families. It was connected with the rapid industrialisation and urbanization and migration of the population from the countryside to growing industrial towns.

In Poland the practice of allotments dates back to the 19th century. In the mid-19th century concern for the poor in industrial towns led to the idea of allotments provided by the local authorities, private landowners and charities. The first formally registered allotment garden was the Grudziąc Family Garden ‘Sunny Bath’ founded in 1897 in Grudziąc. Its broad social, especially recreation and sport programme was based on the concept of German allotment gardens. The first allotment garden was established by Doctor Moritz Schreiber in Leipzig in 1864. Today, the Deutsches Kleingärtner Museum in Leipzig commemorates a site where the first allotment in Europe had come into being. In Warsaw, both private companies (e.g. Wedel Chocolate Factory) and government institutions (e.g. Polish State Railways) provided initially land for such use. The first allotment legislation was introduced in Poland in 1928, encouraging local authorities to provide allotments. In the same year the Polish Allotment Association was founded which is still active today. Since then the local authorities in Poland have been responsible for providing allotments, wherever demand was proven in urban areas. This demand increased during the severe economic crisis of the 1930s and later during World War II, when for many urban families allotment gardens were the only source of food (Fig. 1). Literature was published to help educate novice gardeners on the

cultivation of crops, building wooden shelters and recreational facilities. By the end of the war there had been about 1.6 million allotment plots in Poland [11, 12].



Figure 1. Author’s family in a suburban allotment garden, Warsaw (about 1930)

The forecasts in the first post-war years – according to which the demand for gardening plots was to decrease in time – did not come true, and interest in allotment gardening remained high long after the war. In the early post-war years the productive and economic aspects were considered the main functions of allotments. However, by the 1960s these functions had been steadily decreasing and were overtaken by the recreation needs, more important than food provision. At the time of post-war rebuilding of destroyed towns and rapidly growing new housing estates, the lack of green areas for outdoor recreation, scarcity of houses with own gardens made many inhabitants of multi-family apartment blocks seriously dream of having their ‘own’ gardens. Allotment gardening became an essential feature of many households, also of the Polish middle class which adopted or continued this working-class tradition. The number of allotments increased when the local authorities, empowered by the central government, used vacant land (requisitioned by Law Order in 1946) as allotments. After 1990 the number of allotment gardens declined, as the requisitioned sites were returned to their previous owners, or most attractively situated allotments were demolished by developers and the land was built with new houses. In Poland today there are about 1.0 million of allotment gardens [3].

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHOD

In Poland the local authorities are responsible for the provision and management of allotments; however, the waiting lists of prospective allotment tenants are usually very long (several years in Warsaw). What is the role of allotments in the contemporary urban space and their significance for urban inhabitants? What is the present statistical situation of allotments in Warsaw (plot totals, plot size, infrastructure, water provision, security fencing, facilities for the disabled, ownership and status, waiting lists and vacant plots ratio)?

The present study is based on a 12-month research project (DS-114/AWF) carried out by the Institute of Tourism and Recreation of the University of Physical Education in Warsaw (2008-2010) in the course of which all formally registered allotment gardens in Warsaw were surveyed. In addition, a local case study in the Żoliborz Borough ("Dolny Park Family Garden") was undertaken on specific themes such as history and tradition of the family garden, sense of place for its tenants, active recreation activities, cultural events, social interactions, safety, pressures for change, proposed strategy of renewal (with allotments' tenants interviewed). We were interested both in the users' diverse preferences, their expectations of recreation infrastructure and management improvements, and also in formal policy and legal possibilities of the local authorities to fulfill these needs.

Methodology

The urban environment can be considered in terms of a wide range of architectural, environmental, social and cultural factors, and many theoretical perspectives, concepts and research methods could be used. This all implies a complex approach to the study of allotment gardens, which are an integral part of the urban green landscape [5, 6, 14]:

1. General statistical information: history of allotment gardens in Warsaw, number of allotments in Warsaw, location, plot size, ownership and status.
2. Allotment characteristics (field studies, participant observations, interviews): location, history of gardens, ownership status, social picture of tenants, number of allotments and their size, electricity and water provision, security, facilities (toilets, communal house,

waste removal and sewage, facilities for the disabled), management and maintenance, consultation procedures; accessibility for the disabled.

3. Lifestyle and preferences of tenants (structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews): characteristics of owners, plot arrangements, technical state, size and interior design of garden shelters and plot arrangement.
4. Accessibility for the elderly and disabled, possible improvements of accessibility for wheelchair users.
5. Ecological dimensions of urban environment, legislation, allotments in spatial planning.

CASE STUDY: 'DOLNY PARK FAMILY GARDEN' (WARSAW)

The 'Family Garden Park Dolny' allotment in Warsaw was founded soon after the Second World War (1946), on the site of a former public park demolished during wartime air raids. At present it has about 300 plots, occupying the site of 11,000 sq m. The average size of individual plot is 366 sq m. Water and electricity are supplied to each plot, there are footpaths, roads and a parking site, provided by the 'Park Dolny' Family Garden Association. Close to the main entrance a communal house, sport area and public toilets are located. The 'Park Dolny' Family Garden Association Board, based on the tenants' community, is responsible for management and maintenance of the site as well as contacts with the local authorities (Żoliborz Borough Local Authority). The Board is also responsible for calling public monthly meetings for the purpose of discussing questions related to the 'Park Dolny' management and for publishing annual activity reports, including budget schemes (Table 1).

Table 1. The ROD "Park Dolny" family garden ownership structure (users and social status)

Ownership (users social status)	Percentage
Retired citizens	59%
Working class	10%
Middle class	11%
Unemployed	5%
Others	5%

Source: ROD "Park Dolny" family garden field studies, ds – 114 AWF Warsaw (September 2009)



Figure 2. Typical allotment chalet built by a professional company with the use of wooden pre-fabricated units. Allotment sheds come in different sizes and designs, although the local authorities do not regulate their appearance – even though the limit of floor space (30 sq m) has to be strictly obeyed (Anna Pawlikowska-Piechotka 2008)



Figure 3. Although allotment gardening is an activity dominated by senior men, more and more women become active allotment garden tenants (Anna Pawlikowska-Piechotka 2008)

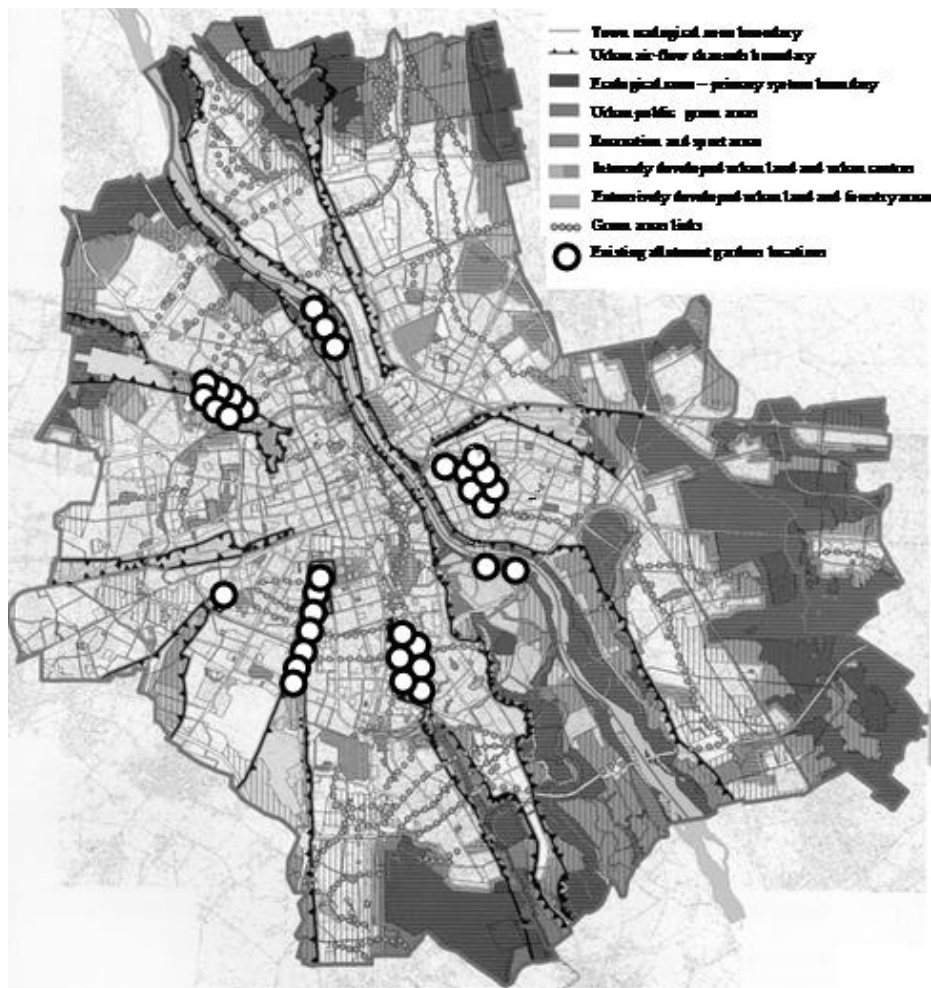


Figure 4. Location of ROD “Park Dolny” and other contemporary ‘family gardens’ in Warsaw and their links with open recreation and sport areas (source: drawings by Anna Pawlikowska- Piechotka, Maciej Piechotka 2011)

Charter accepted by 'Park Dolny' tenants underlines the pro-environment protection issues, such as respect for nature, social and spiritual needs, family values. The allotment tenants are encouraged to take responsibility for plots aesthetics and good use of land, and to implement organic and biodynamic methods (growing own seeds, composting green waste for garden, sustainable planting). According to the community accepted resolutions, all tenants should be energy-consumption conscious. To enhance public safety everybody should contribute to a community watch (participate in patrols, organised seven days a week, covering 3-4 hour duties). The community members are obliged to take part in social events such as sport competitions, parties, cultural events and lectures. Sharing information is also one of important issues. The 'Park Dolny' Allotment Association Board tries to improve facilities for elder and disabled members (smooth and wide pathway surface, accessible toilets, possibility to park cars close to the plot). The 'Park Dolny' tenants are encouraged to grow flowers and evergreens. Any commercial use (sale of surplus products) or keeping livestock are against the rules. Sometimes the tenants obtain permission to keep pets (dogs, rabbits and cats). All tenants are obliged to leave their cars outside the garden, unless they have special permission to park motor vehicles inside the allotment garden area (it refers to wheelchair users and elderly members of community) (Fig. 2, 3, 4).

THE DISABLED AND GARDENING – IMPROVEMENT PROPOSALS

Gardening can be an excellent pastime, active recreation and a form of rehabilitation for the disabled and the elderly; however, several improvements are necessary to make it fully possible. The height of raised flower beds suitable for wheelchair users should be about 60 cm (with knee space underneath) (Fig. 4, 5, 6), but they should be individually adjusted. A restriction of the width of flowerbeds to 120 cm is recommended in order to provide a comfortable work area. Flowerbeds for the elderly and the disabled should be hard paved around, to make the footpaths safe and stable for wheelchair users (loose gravel, cobbles must be avoided). The recommended surfaces should be of distinctive texture, which may

be helpful for the elderly with sight impairment, not interrupted by steps or sudden changes in level (max slope: 1:12; min width 120 cm). A parking space should be provided as near the garden plot as possible, preferably next to the entrance gate. As the turning space for a wheelchair is about 150 cm, a disabled driver requires parking space of min 500 cm x 330 cm (Fig. 5, 6, 7).

MAIN FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The survey results showed that contemporary allotments could supply many complex urban community needs (climate improvement, active recreation, meeting place, landmarks), when the principal objectives (environment protection, social needs, economy) are considered key factors in the urban development concept, which are integrated into sustainable planning, design and maintenance [1, 13, 16].

1. In 2006 the Polish government established a committee to examine allotment policy and suggest any necessary changes in legislation. As a result, the allotment legislation was updated. The term 'allotment' was replaced with 'family garden', which reflected the contemporary change in allotment use. Consequently the Polish Allotment Association has changed its name into the Polish Association of Family Gardens. Today in Poland there are 5,000 allotment gardens (with 966,000 plots), occupying 44,000 ha. Almost 1 million Polish families make use of 'family gardens', which means that about 10% of Poland's population (about 3.5 million) take active part in this programme. At present the demand for allotment gardens (family gardens) has generally declined but, for example, in Warsaw, sites with a good location and adequate facilities are eagerly sought after. The average garden plot size is 300 – 500 sq m in towns (77.3%), and over 500 sq m in the countryside. The average tenancy payment is 12 grosz (3 cents) per 1 sq m (about 12 Euro/per month/per plot of 300 sq m). In present-day Poland allotment gardening seems to be very different from the days when it was used to provide food for poor workers' families. With the rising economic status of the Poles the reason for having an allotment has also changed. Today, when fresh fruit and vegetables are easily available, allotment gardening is regarded as a leisure pursuit, an opportunity for fresh air, relaxation, exercise and family recreation.

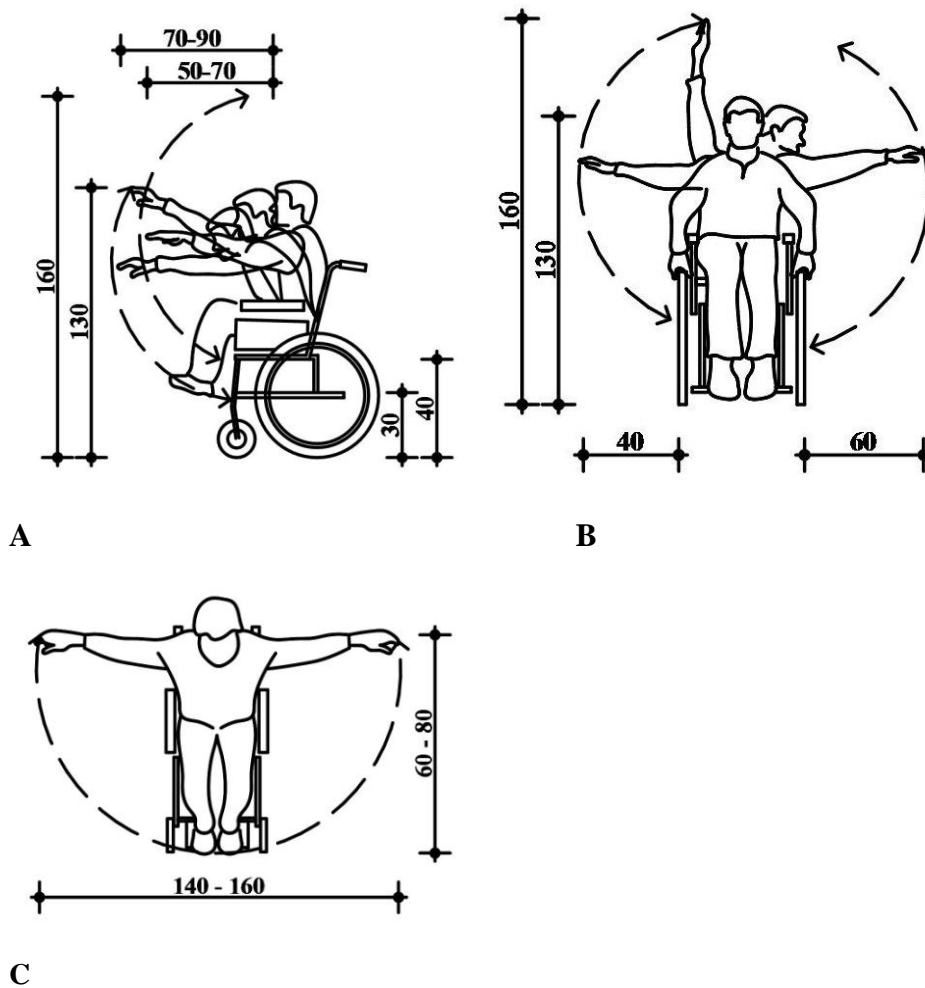


Figure 5. A, B, and C. Considering the diverse needs of people with disabilities (wheelchair users) ergonomic and comfortable improvements such as raised flowerbeds in the gardens are necessary. The modifications must not only consider averaged anthropometric parameters, but also individual dimensions of the body and the extent and efficiency of the upper body (also the type of wheelchair). In each case, to meet the safety and convenience requirements, a number of factors should be taken into account (source: drawings by Anna Pawlikowska, Maciej Piechotka 2011)

The traditional image of the allotment users (poor working-class family, retired couples) has been gradually changing, as more young people and middle-class families take on gardening plots. Although allotment gardening is rather a senior male dominated activity, more and more women also become allotment tenants.

2. In Poland allotment sites are mainly provided and managed by the local authorities, although a few have been founded by government institutions (e.g. the Polish State Railways, coal mines, shipyards). In practically all cases management responsibilities have been delegated to allotment association boards (based on sites,

selected from among allotment tenants). These associations are usually very active as their members now expect a greater level of provision (security features, parking spaces, communal house, access to running water and toilets, roadways). These associations provide literature and organise lectures that aid new plot-holders help with planning their crops, promote recycling and a healthy life-style and provide other useful advice (usually planned as winter activity programme). More opportunities to socialize are offered in the summer season (concerts, parties, dancing soirees, third-age university, and different kinds of competitions).

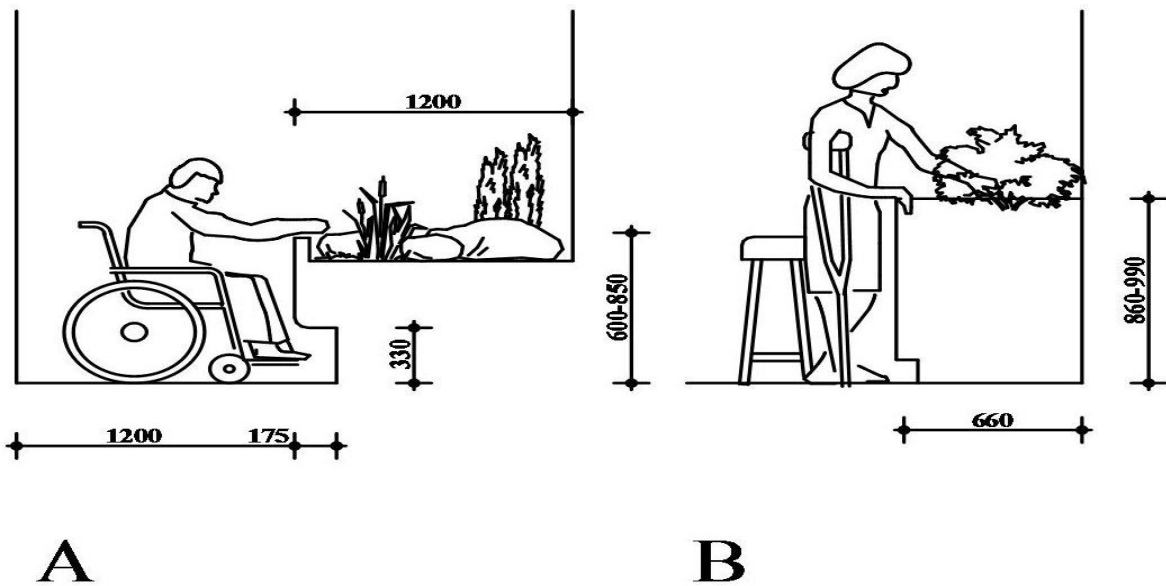


Figure 6. A and B Preparation of allotment gardens for people with disabilities. For wheelchair users, it is necessary to raise the flower beds to an appropriate height (about 60-80 cm), allowing enough space under the knees of a sitting person (A). For people who cannot bend, the flowerbeds must be at a height of about 85-100 cm (B) (source: drawings by Anna Pawlikowska, Maciej Piechotka 2011)

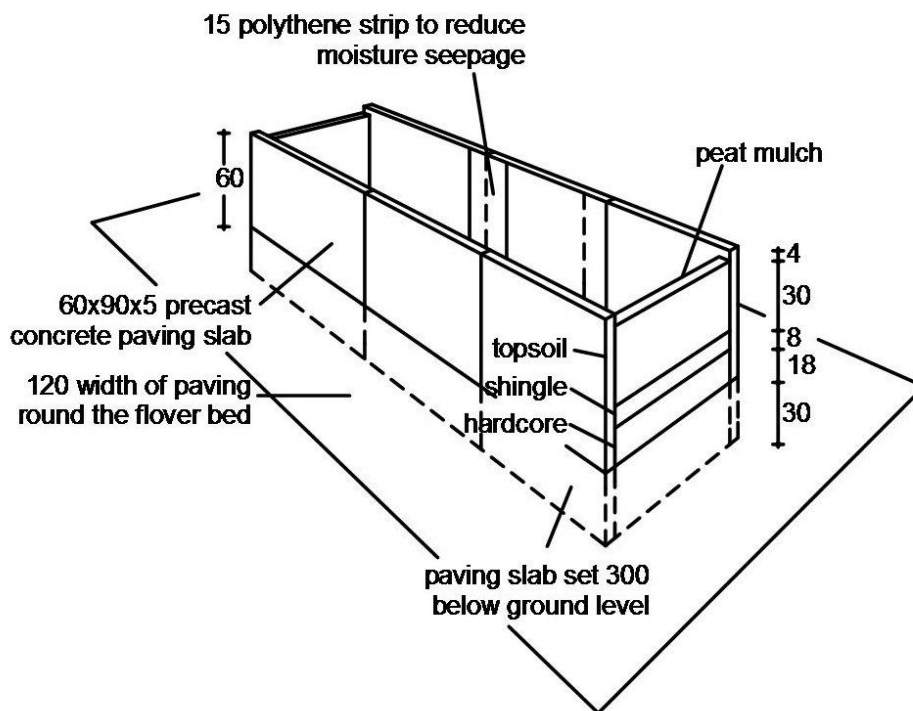


Figure 7. Safe and comfortable 'raised garden' – design proposal for flower-bed accessible for the disabled (source: drawings by Anna Pawlikowska, Maciej Piechotka 2011)

3. In each allotment garden there are some vacant plots, although no more than few per site. These cause problems such as weeds seeding into neighboring plots or poor landscape. Neglected plots often encourage vandalism and antisocial behaviour. It is necessary to underline that vacant plots are likely to appear rarely and only for one season as usually there are some potential plot-holders already registered on long waiting lists. Today the tendency is to endorse the organization of 'leisure gardens' with typical garden features, e.g. sheds in the form of romantic chalets, fountains, sculptures, playgrounds etc. Quite often formal restrictions limit some 'indecent' types of crops (tomatoes and potatoes are discouraged). On the other hand a great emphasis is put on well-tended plots: ornamentation, flower growing, fruit trees, evergreens and caring landscaping around sheds. Although permanent residence in garden chalets is not permitted, they are often used for occasional overnight stays. At most the local authorities have not much to say in terms of appearance and design, but the limit of floor space (30 sq m) in all cases has to be strictly obeyed. At present there are numerous building companies specializing in constructing wooden allotment chalets (often using prefabricated units). The new approach to the idea of allotment gardening has attracted the attention of big home products companies such as IKEA, which has provided an allotment section, offering goods and advice on how to arrange plots and decorate the interior of chalets. Not to mention numerous magazines and professional journals focused on questions of not only gardening but also all other aspects connected with the contemporary style of 'leisure gardens'.

4. Unfortunately, in the surveyed allotments we have not traced any purpose-built facilities for the disabled (raised beds suitable for wheelchair users or for people who can stand but cannot bend) [10]. Knowing how many elder gardeners are tending their greens, we are positive that in the future the Polish Allotment Association would be expected to provide facilities for disabled gardeners to make easier for them to tend flower or vegetable plots. A successful allotment gardening project which has been recently completed in Oxford showed that raised beds could be an improvement that opens up the enjoyment of allotments to people in wheelchairs [2]. Possibly grants could be available from a variety of sources for such community enhancing work. One could expect that

most councils appreciate that they have a duty to ensure that disabled people can also enjoy allotment gardening just like any able-bodied person. Hopefully, the Polish Allotment Associations will not see disabled people as a threat. On the contrary, they may well bring benefits to the Association by raising the profile of allotments in a positive way and by attracting grants which could result in improved access and facilities for everyone (Fig. 5, 6, 7). Moreover, an allotment that provides enjoyment and positive health benefits for disabled people will be the allotment under special protection and is least likely to be developed for construction purposes.

Although the demand for allotments has slightly fallen, the distribution of allotment sites within local authorities' jurisdiction does not always match demand. In Warsaw alone about 1000 families wait for tenancy possibilities, usually people who live in apartments (Fig. 4). They expect 'leisure gardens' with appropriate facilities (club house, play areas, technical infrastructure) and organized activities than any traditional allotment. Hopefully, in the future it will be seriously treated by the local authorities as allotments do form an important part of leisure provision in the urban space and this needs to be reflected within a local authority's Leisure Strategy (obligation underlined in the Local Agenda 21 initiatives). To ensure the availability of quality public outdoor recreational spaces of the right type and in locations close to the housing estates is one of the responsibilities of local planning. Moreover this informal space can perform other important functions in the contemporary urban space such as:

1. Urban environment of significant quality, improving quality of life for local communities, providing informal recreational space and aesthetic landscape (green space) close to the housing estates.

2. Promotion of a healthy life-style, active recreation, opportunities to people of all ages for informal (everyday) recreation, sport for all (walking, Nordic Walking, cycling).

3. Habitats for flora and fauna in the urban space, enriching biodiversity, providing potential eco-corridors.

4. Contributing to enhancing community identity, creating places for congregating, holding community events and periodic activities (concerts, sport competitions, fetes, fairs, education activities).

5. Enhancing family values, as common gardening in these enclaves of rural tranquility is regarded by family members as a perfect pastime (parents with children, sometimes grandparents).

6. Aesthetic values, positive element of the urban landscape, open space of public function.

In the light of the above mentioned principles and arguments it seems that the role of contemporary urban allotments should be revised. This particularly refers to the healthy life style opportunities and everyday active recreation possibility within the urban space. Undoubtedly, there are considerable difficulties to provide new gardens in already densely populated and developed urban areas. However this problem must be solved (both from the social and ecological points of view) also through strict and consequent protection of already existing gardens.

According to the sustainable urban development road map and promotion of healthy lifestyle, outdoor recreation areas are not the 'unnecessary luxury' but the vital necessity. Accepting the recreation function of contemporary allotments as the leading one, some general spatial recommendations can be formulated:

- family gardens are an integral part of proper and comprehensive spatial development of the built-up areas;
- family gardens should be treated as "open for all", public urban space (as any other urban green areas) and should be furnished with necessary recreation and sport facilities, e.g. children's playgrounds;
- family gardens should be located close to multi-family housing estates (within a walking distance of about 2,000 metres, or with provision of a good public transportation connection);
- family gardens should respond to the new legislation (Polish Building Act, 1994) meaning that local authorities and other public bodies will have to think proactively about disabled people's access to allotments; the necessary improvements make it easier for people with disabilities to tend vegetable plots and could allow more people enjoy allotments.

It is a fact that in the past 150 years of allotment gardening tradition, the demand for gardening plots has not decreased. On the contrary, in Poland it has grown. It is true that in the last two decades the increase in car ownership has been responsible for the development of non-urban

'family gardens' (used on weekends and in summer months), but this did not diminish the permanent demand for urban gardening plots, which enable daily recreational activities in a healthy environment, conveniently situated not far from permanent residential sites. All in all, the contribution of allotment gardens to the socio-physical integration of urban space and to its diversity is undeniable, and family gardens should be seriously accounted for in urban development strategies as an important aspect of the vital, healthy, diverse city space for outdoor recreation for all members of the local community.

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