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1123 | COMMUNITY GARDENS AS TEMPORARY USES FOR VACANT LAND REVITALIZATION: THE CASE OF RIGA

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ABSTRACT: As some European cities are undergoing economic and population decline, at the same time showing urban sprawl, the number of vacant land inside the city centers is rapidly growing. Under complicated construction regulations, development of vacant land inside the city center is often related to high construction costs and time investment, forcing land owners to postpone site development. Vacant land in the city center, providing space for garbage collection and even affecting increase in crime, results in neighbourhood degradation.

Concerning common uncertainty regarding future development of vacant land, temporary uses appear to be a good solution to outdoor space revitalization, helping to improve quality of life of local residents. As shown in various case studies from different European countries, community gardens appear to be a common solution for the temporary use of vacant land. According to previous research data, community gardens contribute to social cohesion, promoting integration and strengthening sense of neighbourhood belonging. Moreover, gardening positively affects people's physical health and wellbeing, reducing one of the major risk factors of noncommunicable diseases.

Nowadays, Riga, being a shrinking city, is facing population decline and as a result, a reduction in land development investment and construction. Integration of temporary projects, in particular the creation of community gardens, can help to promote sustainable development by creating livable outdoor spaces where people want to spend their free time. However, as community gardens do not appear in any construction and land use legislation, as well as concerning the special status of Riga's city center included in the UNESCO World Heritage Protection list, the research focuses on possibilities of introduction of temporary uses, in particular community gardens under the legal framework.

In-depth interviews conducted with city's Construction Department representatives and representatives of city's institutions involved in development of Riga city development plan, development of land use mapping, cultural heritage and green area protection, as well as interviews with local schools' authorities were chosen as a tool to analyze the current situation of legal framework and possible development of new guidelines to promote introduction of community gardening in the city center.

The results of this research show which particular construction regulations and land development plans should be completed to ensure legal framework under which community gardens in the city center can be developed, promoting easier and quicker temporary land use approval.