



## The conference

### URBAN GREEN SPACES - A KEY FOR SUSTAINABLE CITIES

April 17 – 18, 2008 – Sofia/Bulgaria

The two-day conference, organised as a closing event of the GreenKeys Project, provided a forum for academics, researchers, practitioners, policymakers and young professionals to reflect critically on relevant aspects for the future of cities and urban green spaces. 150 participants from 18 different countries attended the conference and were able to listen to 'state of the art' presentations and participate in lively debates about topics of common concern: green spaces and their role in cities where our children will live.

The conference scientific committee invited 6 keynote speakers and selected 29 papers out of 68 submissions to address the three topics:

Topic 1 – POLICIES AND STRATEGIES FOR URBAN GREEN SPACES

Topic 2 – SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF URBAN GREEN SPACES

Topic 3 – THE USES AND THE USERS OF URBAN GREEN SPACES

**Alexander Cappos** (Municipality of Halandri, Greece) moderated the conference. The opening programme featured messages and welcome speeches from **Petr Dikov** (Chief Architect, Municipality of Sofia), **Detlef Thiel** (Head of the Urban Green and Waste Management Office, Dresden, Germany) and **Ulrich Graute** (Director of the Joint Technical Secretariat, INTERREG IIIB CADSES).

Keynote speakers addressed the conference topics in the plenary sessions:

- **Carlos Smaniotto Costa** (IOER, Dresden Germany) and **Ina Suklje Erjavec** (UPIRS; Ljubljana, Slovenia) summarised the approach of the GreenKeys Project and its outcomes. Special focus was given to the process of building Green Spaces Strategies in the GreenKeys partner cities.
- **Nicola Mathers** (CABE Space, London) focussed on a review of the strategy building process for green spaces in the UK. She emphasised the need to optimise the value of urban green spaces as places for people and highlighted the importance of these spaces as a key element in the infrastructure of a city.

„The value of most benefits rises with the quality of the spaces – expenditure on maintenance is an investment which pays increasing dividends,“ she said. At the same time she underlined the point that the situation has not always been understood in this way. Nicola also addressed the need to tackle the growing problems in our urban society: the increasing obesity, especially of teenagers and how green spaces can mitigate the consequences of climate change.

- Such problems can be tackled more satisfactorily, as **Peter Wilkinson** (Parks Service Manager, Bristol) highlighted, by developing an approach for both the short and the longer term, which plans and coordinates actions, creates local quality and adopts new planning and service standards. In his presentation on the Green Spaces Management in Bristol, Peter stressed the importance of adopting a strategic approach so as to direct and use resources to reach peoples' needs. He considered that these tasks can be better accomplished through the adoption of measures that embody strategic thinking, as has occurred in Bristol's Parks and Green Space Strategy.
- **Maja Simoneti** (LUZ, Ljubljana, Slovenia) stressed the fact that the growing numbers and variety of green space uses and users (resulting from the diverse natures of our lives) will never really correspond satisfactorily with the available funds for design, management and maintenance of urban green spaces. It is quite apparent that the involved professionals, politicians, investors and everyday users do not share the kind of common vision and value system that would lead to the adoption of good participatory planning and management practices. Maja suggested that efforts should be made through the adoption of formal and informal educational practices to reach adults, children, different professionals, politicians and the general public. Through these efforts peoples' hidden talents and latent 'funds of knowledge' would be activated so as to become a base of society's knowledge and skills to achieve better levels of performance in the future. By doing this a demanding green space user of tomorrow will become the best guarantee for achieving a quality of urban green. She called for an active involvement of professionals and users to share values and knowledge.



- **Paschalis Arvanitidis** (University of Thessaly, Volos, Greece) brought an interesting viewpoint to the conference on the economic aspects of urban green by exploring the perceptions and attitudes of people about green space. He said that although the economic value of urban green is not observable (since there is no conventional market for such spaces) this is reflected in the emphasis that individuals place on these goods or assets over others. Based on a study made within the 12 GreenKeys partner cities Paschalis highlighted the fact that there is a strong demand for urban green, although attention should be paid on quality as well as quantity issues. Interestingly, his study shows clearly that people consider local authorities should primarily bear the costs associated with the provision and maintenance of green spaces. He thought that there is a considerable body of people who may be willing to accept some financial responsibility for the provision and improvement of urban green. Evidence is also provided that urban green space contributes to the economic development of cities.
- **Milena Deneva and Veliana Naydenova** (Green system Directorate, the Municipality of Sofia) presented details of the current open and green spaces structure of Sofia and introduced the main targets of the new municipal master plan. The political changes in Bulgaria since 1990 have affected various issues, both at the national strategic and the local municipal levels. Despite the generous green spaces legacy in the city, Sofia is currently suffering (because of quick development changes) a considerable loss of green spaces. This is due to land restitution processes, the sale of municipal park areas or through permissions awarded to private investors to build on parts of the open spaces. The speakers

stressed the need for the imposition of strict controls on building in park areas and called for a prohibition on the alternation of functions in existing green areas.

In addition to the keynote addresses the participants attended the 9 sessions of the debate arenas. These offered the opportunity for different speakers to present their ideas and works. After each session there was open discussion. The results can be briefly described as follow:

### Policies and Strategies

Cities are facing a variety of challenges and obstacles to overcome which differ both in their magnitude and the approaches required for their solution. The legislation and planning systems that have resulted from the political changes in Central and Eastern Europe have tended to aggravate the problems as, for example, is evident in the case of Sofia. In this city many of the problems are related to the new ownership situation and the continuous pressure to build on the urban green areas. The development of green areas must be able to adapt to new circumstances so as to be really effective. The present experiences show that both strategic thinking and the use of integrated approaches with clear visions are very helpful and may lead to more effective safeguarding and development of green spaces.

Demographic, structural and economic change impacts on the urban fabric and this in turn affects both the quality and quantity of open spaces. Young professionals, in particular, share the opinion that new types of green spaces are needed to fulfil the demands of today and the changing situations. Abandoned spaces are pointed out as providing new challenges for urban planning. To cope with these challenges speakers at the conference have called for sufficient space to be left within the open urban fabric to allow





for the fulfilment of more creativity and spontaneous actions. There is the need, therefore, to accept new planning approaches in which temporary or 'additional' green spaces, such as roof gardens, vertical gardens etc. are accepted as a component of the green space structure.

In addition to calling for advancement in awareness of the economic benefits of green spaces it was pointed out that the question of financing is important. This cannot, however, be regarded as the only challenge as solutions are also required to the problems which arise from the lack of ideas, strategies and political support.

It is very important to improve public awareness and participation in many aspects of green space development and management. The more demanding users lobby politicians and require improvements in the ways green spaces are developed.

There is common cause and agreement which can be derived from the fact that not only are new planning approaches and strategy documents important but even more so may be the experiences, skills and knowledge gained during the process.

### **Sustainable management of urban green spaces**

The importance of facilities and their state of use is associated with an uneven distribution of resources. The lack of resources was stressed under this topic. Green spaces development depends upon public money which is getting increasingly scarce everywhere. This resolution of this situation requires proactive management, with multi-sourced, non-conventional financing being of increasing importance. There is a need for a more flexible type of management and a greater regard for the users and their needs. It is of crucial importance to connect

management with the needs of the users and the natural patterns of use. Additionally, management should strive to reflect upon and provide for the local indigenous peculiarities.

Speakers called for more attention to be given to the social dimension of urban green space management and the requirement to accommodate the needs of minorities and promote social integration.

In Europe there is the need to address green space management with individual regard to the specific situations of cities: there are growing as well as shrinking situations. The role of monitoring was stressed as being crucial for the readjustment of policies and implementation programmes and for optimising the application of a green space strategy. Different aspects were discussed including the sustainable management of water for irrigation purposes in areas of water shortage (a growing issue in and around many cities) and the conservation of natural spaces. Evidence was provided of the limited opportunities that exist for concurrent contact with nature and recreation. The effective use of spaces and their sustainable management plays an important role that should be undertaken in partnership with users and interested parties. Several speakers highlighted the problems and potentials that exist with water management, forests and woods in seeking to cope with a loss of biodiversity in urban areas. Brownfield sites, in particular, are regarded as a good opportunity to improve biodiversity and cope with environmental problems.

It has been proved that both the number and variety of users and uses of urban green spaces are growing; we need to develop the sense of belonging so that users can be regarded as partners in the future management of our cities.





### Users and uses of green spaces

The demand for increases in the quantity and quality of urban green spaces is independent of age, gender, education or income characteristics. Urban society requires green spaces and there is an especial need to cope with the current trends that arise from increasing cultural and ethnic diversity, new life styles and demographic changes. Urban green spaces remain, despite the technological improvements, as important areas in the public domain for individual fulfilment and public interaction. People need places where they feel attracted and committed. Cities should, therefore, provide places where users can enjoy a healthy atmosphere: places free from noise and pollution.

In many of the presentations public involvement was emphasised as being one of the most important aspects of the green space development process. There is a requirement to secure a better understanding of the needs of the population with regard to how they use and what they expect from urban green spaces. This, in turn, calls for the better preparation of stakeholders so as to articulate their points of view and also of planners so as to be better able to understand these. The increasing diversity in society has to be mirrored in green space planning and the designs of spaces should leave freedom for individual expression and activities.



The **Conference Reader** can be downloaded from the conference website at [www.greenkeys-project.net/conference](http://www.greenkeys-project.net/conference)

### Final conclusions

The variety of presentations and debates experienced during the conference show how different people are working towards similar targets using a range of methodologies. All, however, are seeking the same overall aim: To improve the quality of our urban environment and especially to provide better conditions for people living in urban areas.

Green space problems can be found in any urban environment and some are common in almost all cities.

Resources are the biggest problem due to the lack of finance for development and maintenance. Other problems occur at the individual level such as the lack of supportive legislation. An increase in the limited public and political awareness of and empathy with green space issues is, however, considered to be of paramount importance in putting green spaces development forward. Other challenges need to be properly considered such as climate and demographic changes, and increasingly the diversification of life-styles.

There is a need to acknowledge the fact that the cultural expectations of parks can influence both the values people place on different green space attributes and the patterns of preferred use. Both are of vital importance to the further development of our urban environment. This may, on the one hand, be a case of addressing and overcoming specific barriers to full use and enjoyment of urban open space. On the other hand it may be the taking of positive steps to allow multi-cultural influences to break into public spaces and to accept the temporary nature of spaces and their users.

A large number of studies and ideas were presented at the conference but there are still gaps to be bridged in order to address the four elements mentioned by Nicola Mathers that a green space strategy brings together:

- The **landscape** cities care for;
- The **people** who use it;
- The **resources** employed; and
- The **policies** to be followed.

The informal sessions provided opportunities for networking, interaction and face-to-face discussions among the conference participants. It helped participants to connect with each other, discuss ideas, share information and perspectives and learn from experts in the field. This process in itself is one of the best opportunities for added value that a conference organisation team can plan for as one of its targets.