

# URBAN RENEWAL THROUGH COMMUNITY GARDENS



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With the rapid urbanisation of Chinese cities, improving urban living quality is a shared priority of Chinese citizens and their government. In cities like Shanghai, with its high-density centre, green areas have seen near zero growth during recent years (Liu, Yin, et al 2017). Innovations across different sectors are needed to build more sustainable and liveable urban environments. The following two case studies from the Chinese context showcase how community gardens can be used as a catalyst for intergenerational interaction, public participation and community empowerment. Our analysis will take the perspective of orgware to illustrate the procedures and outcomes of building community gardens. Although Chinese community gardens are fairly young, their implementation and enforcement mechanisms differ from their Western counterparts developed earlier (Liu 2016). Through the interaction between young and old within the neighbourhoods, child participation and child-friendliness have become a central feature in the practice of community gardens in China.

## PLANTING SEEDS IN PUBLIC SPACES

**KIC Garden** is Shanghai's first community garden (Liu 2016). It was built in 2014 with a floor area of 2,200 m<sup>2</sup>. It is located in a relatively modern, industrial part of the city, which contains a mixture of residences, offices and universities, developed by the renowned Hong Kong developer Shui On Properties. Partly thanks to the local government's ambition of building a new model of open neighbourhood (in contrast to the prevailing gated community), there was great interest for the KIC Garden to be regenerated as a convivial public space. The developer agreed to finance a redesign, and a Chinese NGO, CNS (Clover Nature School) — specialised in environmental education with a focus on children — was chosen to implement the project.

A permaculture design approach is visible throughout the KIC Garden. The garden provides indoor and outdoor services including a tea house, library, playgrounds, edible garden, and community farm which invites residents to exchange horticultural skills and experiences. To host indoor activities, a series of shipping containers were fitted with flexible furniture that can be reorganised for different needs. The resulting space, with its open and communal structure, has drawn the greatest appreciation from the local children and their families. Social organisations work closely with the residents to set up events and public education programmes during weekends and holidays. Meanwhile, due to the scale of the garden, its daily maintenance is still reliant on the developer. However, all stakeholders continuously invest in the shared vision of a self-organising and self-sufficient community garden.

The second case, **Herb Garden**, is situated in a relatively older community from the 1960s, with an area of 200 m<sup>2</sup>. The neighbourhood has a stable population structure, a strong housing association and several notable social gardening organisations. In developing the community garden, local authority Siping Jiedao<sup>1</sup> collaborated with the landscape department of Tongji University. The previous was responsible for providing the core funding, and the latter for designing and implementing the project. Local residents and children were also included in the design team, and a communication platform between the stakeholders was set up from the very beginning. To make sure as many residents' voices were heard, quantitative and qualitative interviews were conducted during the field study, design and decision-making processes. Since then, the Herb Garden's daily operation has been run by the local residents' social organisations, while other communities have been invited to visit and learn.

A common approach in both case studies, is the focus on children's participation. Although both gardens are located in the Yangpu district of Shanghai city, each applied slightly different enforcement mechanisms. The KIC Garden was mainly financed by a private developer while the local authority provided the core funding for the Herb Garden. Then, well-trained design teams led the



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process towards urban regeneration. Public participation and community empowerment were also emphasised throughout the building of both gardens.

These Shanghai community gardens began only a couple of years ago as initiatives born out of collaborations between governmental agencies, private enterprises, social organisations and local residents. This interest in open neighbourhoods and public space signals a new wave in Chinese urban planning and could fundamentally influence the quality of life in cities across the country. Doors are now opening for different professions to help improve the urban built environment through innovative approaches at different scales. In the practice of building community gardens, stimulating participation, mobilising the knowledge of residents across different ages, and accounting for their voices, are the keys to success.

## DO'S

- **Always seek collaborations between government, professional agencies and social organisations**, a win-win strategy for urban renewal projects.

- **Community gardens** can be used in a way to **empower and bring communities together** to improve urban living environments.
- **Children** are one of the most interested groups in the building of community gardens, while **elderlies** have the most time to participate.
- For a successful implementation: **public participation is the core, technology the means, policy the guidance, education the foundation.**
- **Use for instance, the application of social media** to set up online gardening communities, chat groups, blogs, etc. can make communication easier and more effective for all stakeholders.
- **Empowering local residents to become the leaders of the community garden** will help to sustain its development.
- Community gardens build social bonds and reconnect communities **across generations.**

## DON'TS

- **You can't start a community garden before getting clarification of land ownership.** Three key elements for realising community gardens are: approval for land use from the landowner; confirmation of budget; participation of professional agencies.
- **As a designer, don't place yourself apart from the residents or only in favour of your own preferences.** The best community garden design arises when designers position themselves behind the residents who are invited to



participate in the entire process.

- **Don't forget to program physical social activities**, such as farmers markets, plant exchanges and outdoor theatre performances, can strengthen connections between citizens.

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## NOTES

1) Jiedao is the direct management and administration authority body at the local level in Chinese cities.

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## REFERENCES

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