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# From Temporary Spatial Practices to Permanent Architectural Forms. The Case of “La Terenuri” from Mănăştur Neighborhood, Cluj-Napoca

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Cluj-Napoca is the second largest city located in the north-western part of Romania, with a university profile and a strong economic hub of the country. Mănăştur, its largest district, hosts one third of the city’s total population and it is a typical socialist housing complex planned and built as a working-class dormitory starting with the 1960s. This mass housing development was planned to supersede the old homonymous village that it partially replaced. Its inhabitants were therefore a mixture of old villagers resettled in new dwellings and people coming from the surrounding villages and small towns, attracted to work in the newly developed socialist industries.

Like in many other neighborhoods in Romania, in the 1970s and 1980s, the residents began gardening in their free time using the land between the buildings. Two communist laws enacted the obligation for the dwellers in the housing estates to take care of the green spaces around their buildings<sup>1</sup> and to produce food for personal consumption and for the market and the state stock supply.<sup>2</sup> This phenomenon is of great interest for the *production of space*<sup>3</sup> in those large socialist housing estates, as the communist state successfully used the skills of rural residents to complete “socialist utopian projects” when the necessary resources to properly arrange the spaces between blocks were insufficient. Therefore, by using temporary *tactics*<sup>4</sup> inspired by their rural background, the residents improvised common meeting places for daily use.<sup>5</sup> In the process, they created strong, lifetime lasting community groups (e.g., gardeners).<sup>6</sup>

## Urban Gardening in “La Terenuri” Area

Located near a forest and a stream, the “La Terenuri” area (meaning “at the playgrounds”, as the locals use to call it) was originally a meadow with agricultural plots in the village of Mănăştur.

- 1 Marea Adunare Națională [The Great National Assembly], “Legea nr. 37/1975 privind sistematizarea, proiectarea și realizarea arterelor de circulație în localitățile urbane și rurale. Modificări” [Law no. 37/1975 Concerning the Systematization, Design and Construction of Roads in Urban and Rural Localities].
- 2 Marea Adunare Națională [The Great National Assembly], “Legea nr. 13/1980 privind constituirea, repartizarea și folosirea pe județe a resurselor pentru aprovizionarea populației cu carne, lapte, legume și fructe” [Law no. 13/1980 Concerning the Establishment, Distribution and Use of Resources by Counties for Supplying the Population with Meat, Milk, Vegetables and Fruits].
- 3 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).
- 4 Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).
- 5 Doina Petrescu, “Being-in-relation and reinventing the commons,” in *Feminist Futures of Spatial Practice: Materialisms, Activisms, Dialogues, Pedagogies, Projections*, ed. M. Schalk, T. Kristiansson, & R. Mazé, (Baunach: Art Architecture Design Research): 87–95.
- 6 Gabriel Troc, “‘După blocuri’ sau despre starea actuală a cartierelor muncitorești” [“Behind the blocks,” or about the present condition of collective housing], *IDEA Magazine* no. 15–16 (2003): 154.

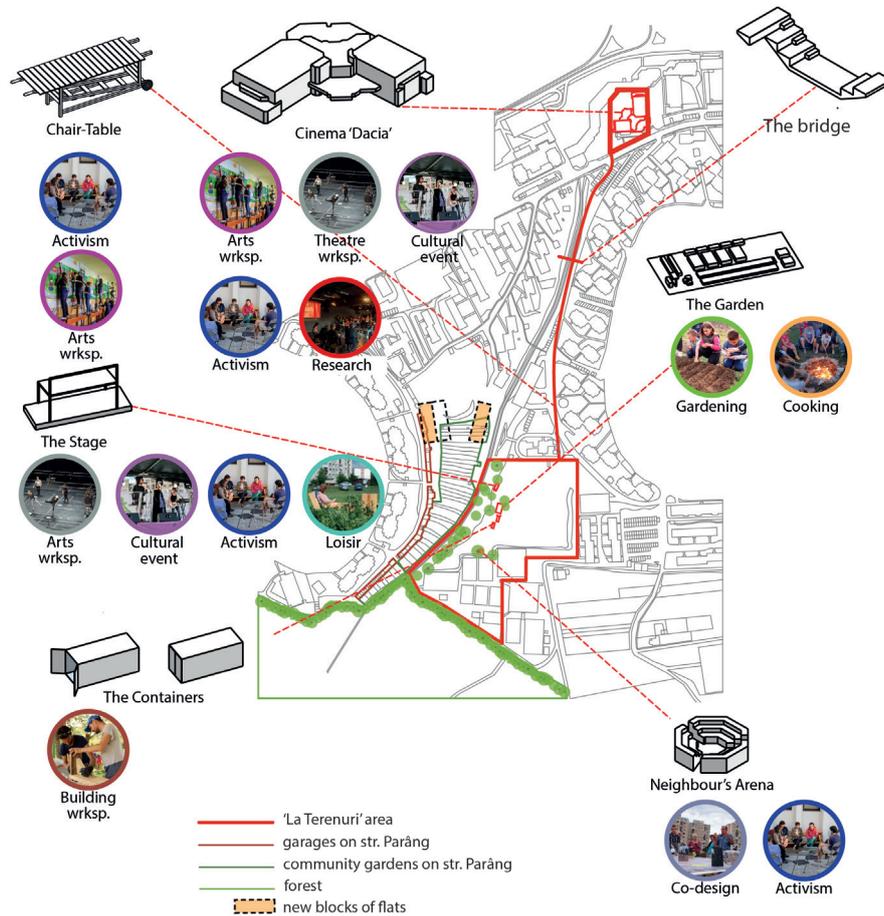


Fig. 1: Diagram of "La Terenuri" area showing the community gardens on Parâng street, activities and temporary installations from "La Terenuri" civic initiative.

Under the socialist regime it was planned as a green space, public service, and sports area,<sup>7</sup> but this was never put into practice, except for some sports platforms. Instead, the area has become a fertile ground for the development of informal urban gardening since the mid-1970s, when the first buildings on the nearby Parâng street were occupied by the residents (Fig. 1). Some groups of neighbors living in these buildings began to use the land next to their homes for leisure activities, food production and gatherings. Focus groups and interviews with the initial gardeners revealed that they took pride in feeling helpful in their new living place.<sup>8</sup> For over 45 years (1975-2022), using temporary practices and their gardening expertise, they developed what we nowadays call *urban commons*.<sup>9</sup>

7 Emanoil Tudose, "Ansamblul de Locuințe Mănăștur II" [Mănăștur II Mass Housing Complex], in *Cluj-Napoca În Proiecte. 50 de Ani: 1960-2010* [Cluj-Napoca in Projects. 50 years: 1960-2010], ed. Eugeniu Pănescu (Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2016): 242–51.

8 A series of interviews and discussions held in fall 2020, spring of 2021 and summer of 2022 with some of the initial gardeners.

9 Emre Akbil et al., *Urban commons handbook* (Barcelona: DPR, 2022).

“Commons” refers to a pool of resources that are collectively managed, following collectively agreed rules of governance by a community of “commoners.”<sup>10</sup> The gardeners’ group of commoners in “La Terenuri” area managed to set their own rules for using the available space: they used local resources (mostly recycled apartment waste materials), improvised tables, benches and tool sheds for the common use, and utilized water from a communal well. Thus, they used minimal resources to create a common space. This process is known as *commoning*.

One of the main issues regarding urban commons is the land tenure, which in this case had two distinct periods: until 1989, when the land was public property (it was owned by the state), and the post-communist period, when the land occupied by these gardens was claimed by the old inhabitants of Mănăştur village. According to Foster and Iaione, urban commons must be enabled and recognized as such by local governments in order to survive and thrive.<sup>11</sup>

In the first period, the communist state recognized and promoted these urban commons practices as catalysts for space and local food production, but in the 1990s, the local government enacted a local law that incriminates vegetable gardening as an act of green space vandalism.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the phenomenon of urban gardening in Cluj began to be perceived as an undesirable relic of the past, a rural practice with no place in the city. Additionally, those gardens occupied valuable private properties, even if only potential properties, as the property was contested in court). Moreover, the vocation of urban green spaces in many Romanian cities transformed from productive to aesthetic, or even to that of profit-generator.

Once the retrocessions proceedings were over, and the land became private property once again, the urban commons came to be under a constant threat of disappearance. The gardeners also changed their role from active actors in completing the initial communist utopia into an inert position of contemplation, while waiting for a regeneration project. They started to feel alienated from the space, constantly threatened with eviction.

### “La Terenuri” Initiative

In 2012, when the retrocessions were still in process, the “La Terenuri” area had been largely untouched since its inception in the 1970s: a large green space, next to the forest, with several sports fields and a dozen community gardens. All these spaces were intensively used not only by the residents, but also by people coming from other areas: groups of kids, sunbathers, dog owners, sports enthusiasts, or residents of Parâng street. Apart from a few gardens that were destroyed by the local authorities in the late 2010s, these gardens — and many others in the city — resisted despite being prohibited by local law. But their public perception was not favorable. Due to the improvised, recyclable, and seemingly messy aspects of the gardening process, policymakers, the city Planning Commission and many other architects considered these gardens “un-aesthetic” and “rural,” thus recommending their demolition.<sup>13</sup>

Against this context of public disregard and bad reputation of urban gardening, new urban actors appeared in Cluj, interested in the rehabilitation of these commoning practices in the city. The authors of this paper were directly involved in this new approach, initializing and coordinating the “La Terenuri” initiative (Silviu Medeşan together with Laura Panait) and organizing

10 David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, *The wealth of the commons. A world beyond market and state* (Amherst: Levellers Press, 2012); Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Elionor Ostrom, *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

11 Sheila Foster and Christian Iaione, “The City as a Commons,” *Yale Law & Policy Review* July (2016): 326.

12 Consiliul Local Cluj-Napoca [Cluj-Napoca City Council], “HCL 575/2007 - Hotărâre privind modificarea și completarea Hotărârii nr. 311/ 1998”, [Council Decision no. 575/2007 Regarding the Amendment of the Decision no. 311/1998] (September 11, 2007).

13 A private architectural company in charge with a master plan in the area for building a residential estate is comparing them with “favelas” as an argument for their demolition.



Fig. 2: Inhabitants from „La Terenuri” area giving feedback on the Participatory Scale Model.

opposite page:

Fig. 3: Neighbors Arena used as a meeting place.

Fig. 4: Wooden bridge built by inhabitants and architecture students.

Fig. 5: Gardeners and volunteers making chairs from recycled materials, the COOP chairs.

self-building workshops (Diana Galoș). The cultural and activist initiative “La Terenuri” started as a local partner of a European funded action, and continued with several other projects funded by the municipality, cultural national funds and private funds, between 2012-2018; in 2019 the local community organized by themselves the Days of the Neighborhood.<sup>14</sup> The aim of this initiative was to raise public awareness of this specific case and to stimulate people’s participation in decision-making, by creating a green meeting place in the area. The initiative involved residents as well as students in designing and producing urban space, by organizing different activities, like gardening, cultural events and workshops, bringing together people of different generations and backgrounds, encouraging them to work on common goals in order to improve the existing urban practices in the area, to create new ones and to advocate for integration of urban commons in the future planning of the area (see activities and objects from Fig. 1).

Therefore, “La Terenuri” initiative ran counter the mainstream direction of that moment — the opinion that temporary gardening practices and urban commons are relics of a past that should disappear, an opinion shared by local policy makers and planners, who failed to take into consideration the perspective of those directly affected by their decisions: the end-users.

### The Participatory Scale Model

In order to explore the residents’ vision of how the “La Terenuri” area should evolve, we developed a method of participation called the *participatory scale model*. This method used different land use scenarios that were physically represented by models of temporary urban

<sup>14</sup> For the whole evolution of the project, see Silviu Medeșan, *Forma urmează situației. Orașul contemporan anticipat de situaționiști* [Form Follows Situation. The Contemporary City Anticipated by the Situationists] (Bucharest: Ozalid, 2020): 98-99.





Fig. 6: Final plan of the sport base project.

installations placed on a satellite map of the area (scale 1:100). The idea was to create an artefact that could be easily understood by non-architects and quickly adjusted on the spot, after collecting people's feedback (Fig. 2). Originally designed by activists, architects, and landscape designers from the core team of the project and based on the specific needs identified by sociologists and anthropologists through interviews with residents,<sup>15</sup> the model was presented to the residents (including the initial gardeners). The design proposals were further adjusted based on their feedback. To test these scenarios on an urban scale, the required objects were built by residents and architecture students in full-scale installations made with cheap materials; these were a meeting place configured as an amphitheater – Neighbors Arena (Fig. 3), a wooden bridge over the stream in the area (Fig. 4) and some elements of urban furniture (Fig. 5). The goal was to examine not only their functionality or aesthetics, but also their spatial configuration and how they create different urban situations.<sup>16</sup> Designing new urban arrangements can stimulate new behaviors, new ways of occupying and using urban space, thus ensuring that the city is co-produced according to the needs and imagination of its inhabitants. At the same time, by placing them on a land with no clear destination, we succeeded in redefining the space, according to the temporary uses commonly agreed. In many ways, the tactic we used was similar to what the local gardeners did after the 1990s, when continuing to farm even though it was officially banned. Urban commons are challenging the legislation, being critical with the status quo of an area. In case it is possible to integrate these processes in the urban planning phase, then planning would become more comprehensive and user friendly.

### Influencing Planning: The Sports Complex Project

Our tactics and strategies had worked quite well and in 2019 the first version of a masterplan meant to transform the “La Terenuri” area into a sports facility with green spaces appeared. This project came after seven years of cultural and activist works (2012-2019) and for us, as initiators, this was an opportunity to materialize the ideas we had tested through the previous temporary experiments in a more permanent urban form. By intervening in public consultation phases, we were able to influence the form of the initial project, despite its original lack of contextual qualities.

On the one hand, several elements from our scenarios were introduced in the design: bridges on the stream, an amphitheater, spaces for teenagers and a multifunctional green space. Openness and inclusiveness were key features of our scenarios, so we argued and convinced the Planning Commission that the fence separating the project from the rest of the neighborhood needed to be removed and more green space had to be added to the initial plan (Fig. 6). Additionally, we contacted the architects in charge and managed to convince them to add a permanent version of the *Neighbors Arena* — the amphitheater — for it could be used both as stage for local events and daily meeting point and agora for neighbors, thus fostering local culture and social interaction. (Fig. 7)

On the other hand, we failed in drawing enough attention to the need to preserve and protect the urban gardens that emerged under communism, and some were demolished in 2020 to make place for a real estate redevelopment project. This project became possible when the retrocessions trials came to an end and investors bought the land from the various owners. However, some of the gardens remained in place, thus demonstrating the power and adaptability of temporary practices.

15 Anca Chiș and Marina Mironica. *Cercetare sociologică: Zona “La Terenuri” din cartierul Mănăștur și raportarea cetățenilor la spațiul public*. [Sociological Research: “At the playgrounds” Area of Mănăștur District and the Relation of Citizens to the Public Space] (Cluj-Napoca, 2018).

16 Medeșan, *Forma urmează situației*.



## Conclusions

This paper deals with how rural-inspired commons can encourage the creation of new urban commons adapted to current city lifestyles. In the process of commoning, different temporary practices appear and evolve — gardening, recycling, upcycling, debating, creating local cultures etc. While these activities can create strong lasting communities and a vibrant livelihood, the local authority is in the important position to legally encourage or prohibit these practices. Ultimately urban commons will always exist in the city, in physical or immaterial form and we must acknowledge and address them.

While urban commons have a regenerative social character, they do not only create new spaces and functions that complement planned ones, but also help with building communities and social links. Also, they make cities and neighborhoods more lively, surprising, and diverse. By explaining to architects how they function and transmit real needs, they could be integrated in urban planning and become more inclusive and improved in their appearance (the fence and huts could have a pronounced “urban” appearance; alleys could host public for events like farmer markets, small concerts etc.). However, architects and policymakers still fail to understand and accept urban commons. More urban activism and advocacy is needed to integrate them into mainstream urban planning practice.



Fig. 7: The amphitheater built as a permanent infrastructure, the landscape design of the stream, and the remaining community gardens next to the blocks on Parâng street. Photo taken in 2022.

In this sense, “La Terenuri” is an example that this integration is possible, even if the success was partial. The project showed how temporary practices and urban commons can adapt to current lifestyles and aesthetics of the city, how visions for the city can become more democratic, and how decision-making can be shared among residents, politicians, planners and urban activists.

The aim of the “La Terenuri” initiative was to intervene in an area next to the gardens through participatory and advocacy methods and to demonstrate the need to integrate such practices into urban design practices. The methods used in the cultural initiative were based on users’ needs and they followed user interventions that further adjusted the permanent form of the infrastructure project promoted and built by the local administration. Temporary practices like planning and co-building prototypes with residents and students can bring on the table new ways in which the city can be planned and seen. In this way new social behaviors and diverse urban spaces are tested. Therefore, the planning can be informed and situated not only spatially but also socially.

As we have seen, a temporary initiative can influence an infrastructure project. In the case of “La Terenuri”, the activists were reactive to the permanent project. They had to fight for their ideas to be implemented. By working together, activists, residents, planners, and policymakers can be more proactive, and the ephemerality of urban commons can be better integrated in the conception of a neighborhood.

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