The Commons
Participatory urban neighborhood, Vienna, Austria

Summary and appraisal by the jury

Located in the city of Vienna, Austria, the project identifies a set of rules for establishing a sustainable urban neighborhood based on democratic principles of governance, communication, and participation. Instead of proposing a pre-designed urban tissue, the strategy lends a collective pattern through a grid of gardens that structure the area. The gardens function as a framework for physical and social development, outlining a porous fabric with low environmental impact and a collective space – programmable in time, while furthering ownership capacity-building. The area will self-operate as an urban park, a matrix of gardens is inserted around existing trees. Gradually the district grows around these gardens and the shared open space. The approach establishes a minimal invasive intervention that will develop over time according to the needs of the society at every step – a continuous process of small scale growth and appropriation, with autonomy at every stage.

Sustainability concept

The Commons project calls for an alternative to the conventional suburban free space that is emphasized not only in environmentally-friendly construction practices, but also in economic and social sustainability of the whole process. Therefore, our proposal for the ten hectare site area is a minimally-invasive intervention that will develop over time according to current societal needs, but never compromising the necessities of future generations.

Initially, the area will function as an urban park; we preserve the precious trees, and insert the matrix of gardens. A wide variety of actors (from large companies to individuals) can colonize these “autonomous” plots proposing a multi-rational urban development. As colonization, the initial structure of gardens reduces the scale of action, as well as the environmental impact on the existing landscape. We keep the nature we find in there, promoting it and its buildings and their surrounding open spaces, in order to promote the micro-identity with the natural environment, equal citizenship and social responsibility. Participation is a cornerstone for the sustainable and democratic development of the area. We understand urban planning as an open collaborative process in which everyone can be represented.

In subsequent stages, the district will gradually grow around the gardens, configuring itself over time. It will always work as a pedestrian area on the inside, leaving road traffic outside, and always be connected to alternative mobility trains, buses, bikes, car sharing, and so on.

The aim is to minimize the consumption of the site land, so the gardens and the alleys (common land) will be the main characters, and take more importance in human relationships and wellness. A porous city. The alleys are a shared open space for the community with self-sufficient and sustainable centralized management. Since it will consist of green surfaces, it reduces the environmental impact, and it is a low cost maintenance space. But it is also a space full of significance: it’s a reprogrammable space with appropriation capacity, which will turn into a symbol for the neighborhood, with communal identity and use involvement as a basis for the production of urban development.

The new district involves citizenship in the management of its buildings and their surrounding open spaces, in order to promote the micro-identity with the natural environment, equal citizenship and social responsibility. Participation is a cornerstone for the sustainable and democratic development of the area. We understand urban planning as an open collaborative process in which everyone can be represented.

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Project data

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Client: ARE (Austrian Real Estate)
Background: Private commission
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The jury especially commends the focus on questions of procedures, including stakeholder participation and its effectiveness in physical form. Particularity interesting is the changing relationship between built and un-built areas that is constantly negotiated and re-negotiated in a process that engages a range of relevant parties. The proposal offers a method for a step-by-step urban densification, combining both bottom-up/top-down and formal/informal practices – to create an urban commons.